

Contestation of hegemonies through propaganda theatre in post 2000 Zimbabwe: The case of *Madzoka Zimbabwe* and *The Coup*

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the state-) citizen contestations in Zimbabwe and examines the role of theatre in legitimising and/or resisting state hegemonies in the context of the post 2000 Zimbabwean cultural struggle. Using the theory of hegemony, the paper argues that, after) the repossession of land by the majority of the black population in 2000 and the constitutional referendum held in February 2000, whose “No” vote challenged the hegemonic discourses and patriotic history of the ruling ZANU PF party, what followed was a largely polarised society split between the pro-hegemonic civic society such as ZNLWA on one hand, and an equally vociferous anti-hegemonic civic society that supported the ruling cultural formations (Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2009; Ravengai 2008). The pro-hegemonic (agree) civic society sought to stabilise and legitimise state authority and its discourses on sovereignty, land reform and the removal of sanctions, while counter-state hegemonic actors such as ZimRights agitated for the respect of human rights, constitutionalism and democracy. Individual theatre practitioners took a cue from these opposing civic society bodies and critically dialogued among themselves, thereby creating some form of binaries characterised by those who also sought to stabilise and maintain the prevailing status quo on one hand, and those that resisted and questioned the legitimacy of the prevailing hegemonies on other hand. In this paper, the polarised state of the theatre is represented by two opposing agitational propaganda performances, *Madzoka Zimbabwe* and *The Coup*.

Keywords:

hegemonic actors, hegemonies, contestation, civil society, state, theatre, *Madzoka Zimbabwe*, *The Coup*

Introduction

Since white settler rule, Zimbabwe has always been a polarised society, mainly along racial lines. However, at independence the polarisation which had been significantly reduced following the Government of Zimbabwe's adoption of the policy of unity and reconciliation, metamorphosed from racial to one of party allegiance in post 2000 Zimbabwe. This polarisation heightened after a series of events that included the legitimate but sometimes violent land reform programme; the 2000 constitutional referendum whose result was a "No" vote; and the contested post 2000 Presidential elections, culminating in the harmonised elections in 2008 in which none of the three presidential aspirants, President Robert Mugabe, Morgan Tsvangirai and Simba Makoni got the required threshold in the vote tally. What followed was a contested re-run between the incumbent, President Robert Mugabe of ZANU PF and Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). President Robert Mugabe won the June re-run after opposition challenger, Morgan Tsvangirai pulled out of the race, citing an uneven playing field and violence on his supporters (Sachikonye 2002; Raftoupolos 2006).

The sum total of these unfolding events in the post 2000 Zimbabwe made many civic society groups (not in a functionalist sense) challenge the prevailing status quo. Theatre, alongside civic society groups such as the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), *ZimRights*, Coalition Crisis and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR), among others, fought hard to confront and challenge the status quo. The emergence of the largely anti-hegemonic establishment was matched by an equally vociferous and tenacious state-authorized and occasionally state-sponsored pro-hegemonic civil society, that manifested itself in bodies such as the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWA), the Zimbabwe Liberation War Collaborators Association (ZLWCA), the Mbare based Chimurenga choir, and the intellectual or patriotic elites (Tendi 2008), among others.

Individual dramatists and theatre practitioners took a cue from the civic society bodies and came out in the open to question and interrogate the legitimacy of certain societal values in the home, the state and to an extent the role of the outside world in Zimbabwe's affairs. Various written drama and theatre or performances critically dialogued among themselves, thereby creating some form of binaries characterised by practitioners who supported the policies of the new black government on one hand, and those that did not on the other hand. Clearly, the levels of ideological contestations became variegated and tiered. Written drama and performances therefore, worked to interrogate, challenge, expand and democratise cultural spaces at national and international levels, (agree) as much as it questioned disparities in domestic spaces such as the home and the family. If the pre-2000 Zimbabwean drama text and performances were largely muted and silent on contentious state-society relations, preferring instead to contest the dominant ideology at local or domestic family level, the post 2000 period saw a large influx of dramatists and theatre practitioners that turned to writing and performances as an expression of their alarm and frustration over the perceived betrayal of the aspirations of the struggle at various levels of the society. Theatre practitioners as part of the oppositional cultural

formations spoke the truth to power in the home, nationally and internationally with a brute force and unprecedented vigour and colour. In the words of Kershaw (1992: 17) drama and theatre became the battle ground or a “public arena for collective exploration of ideological meaning”. Ironically, state authorities as representing an important centre of power, also authorised and encouraged its own version of drama that consolidated its social, political and economic policies. Furthermore, the fact that the oppositional dramatists hailed from different ideological perspectives, added another dimension to the contestation of hegemony so that there was not one hegemony that was being fought, but numerous and at the same time.

Theatre activities both for and against state hegemonies became evident as both sides sought to consolidate their positions in the fight for hegemonic and/or cultural dominance. In Gramscian theory (Gramsci 1971), the ZANU PF-aligned theatre activities became part of the hegemonic civil society and the oppositional cultural formations became the counter hegemonic civil society. Despite having a large number of theatre activities as part of the oppositional cultural formations, the period also witnessed a growing number of theatre activities, among them the William Majuru-led Bindura-based theatre group, Swerongoma and the Justin Marange and Alice Masungurudze-led theatre group, entirely made up of war veterans. These social actors, alongside the other pro-hegemonic civic groups, aligned themselves with the state for many reasons, among them the perceived benefits from the patronage system and, more importantly, the belief that there was a need to defend the gains of the liberation struggle and progress made in re-dressing the colonial land imbalances. To many in this camp, it was a legitimate means of ideologically consolidating and fortifying the defence line against the West’s machinations and desire to re-colonise Zimbabwe, as echoed by President Mugabe’s nationalism mantra that “Zimbabwe will never be a colony again” (Vhutuza & Ngoshi 2008; Vhutuza 2011). This contestation between the two broad camps of different social actors with variegated positions vis-à-vis state hegemonies, is the background that informs the two performances, one, a state-authorised and sponsored 2003 television drama, *Madzoka Zimbabwe*; and also *The Coup*, a political satire that premiered in Zimbabwe at Theatre-in-the-Park, from 21 February to 12 March, 2012.

Theoretical framework

It is deliberate that the topic of this paper suggests the contestation of hegemonies – not hegemony. Contestation of hegemony would have implied a unidirectional flow of contestation which could have been too simplistic and a distortion of the complex and multi-layered contestations at play in Zimbabwe. Howlett (2005) explains this by arguing that the so-called hegemonised are also active and not passive receivers of ideas and attitudes. In this sense, Howlett (2005) argues that hegemony forms a discourse controlled by more than just the powerful in society. Therefore, what ensues is more than simply the dominance of subordinate classes and groups. Morton (2007: 116) supports Howlett’s view on hegemonies and further suggests that Gramsci’s (1971) notion of a “state” went

beyond a “government of functionaries” with the top political leaders and personalities with government responsibilities. The state went beyond the military establishment and a political party to include the civil society made up of the church, media, educated elite, drama and theatre, among other institutions. More importantly, Morton (2007) argues that even within the state itself, there are fractions of classes that are contradictory, and so the outlook is not homogeneous. The same contradictions also apply to the broad anti-hegemonic coalition. Thus, the paper’s focus on two diametrically and ideologically opposed theatrical pieces or performances to be analysed in this paper, is not intended to deny the complexity of Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony. Neither is the juxtaposition of the two a simple confirmation of the existence of binaries in society. Theatre practitioners and dramatists among the so-called independent theatre practitioners and dramatists and/or state sanctioned artists, oscillate between consent and dissent even within the same broad category of pro- or anti-hegemony label. The two theatre performances are discussed as two broad representations of both the pro- and anti-hegemonic actors that emerged in the post 2000 Zimbabwean era. The essence of the paper is to highlight the fact that written drama and theatre groups critically dialogued among themselves, thereby creating some form of binaries characterised by practitioners who supported the policies of the new black government on one hand, and those that did not on the other hand. Even within these two broad groups opposed to each other, the levels of ideological contestations still remained variegated and tiered. But for the purposes of this paper, which seeks to highlight the polarisation that characterised the period, the two performances will be analysed as if they were in binary formations.

Definition and persistence of agitational propaganda

“Agit-prop” is a combination of two words, agitation and propaganda, and according to Rabkin (1964) is a theatrical genre intended to appeal to large masses of people at rallies and labour meetings. True to a rally, the language used in agit-prop performances should work towards the arousal of emotions in the imagined listeners. Agit-prop largely originates from Russia in the 1920s where it was used to rally the largely illiterate population against the ruling establishment and the dominant hegemonies and once the new government was in power, the genre was used to prevent any possible confrontation and challenge to the prevailing hegemonies (Innes 1972). In fascist Germany, it was used against the ruling fascists by organised groups of dissidents and later by the now new state actors to spread its own propaganda. In colonial Zimbabwe, agit-prop was used to whip up the Black Rhodesians’ emotions against the white settler regime during the all night song and dance meetings (*pungwe*) punctuated by sketches, singing, dancing, slogans and speeches (Kaarsholm 1994)..

Rabkin (1964) and Epskamp (1989) argue that agit-prop is an elite project that is carefully choreographed and managed to inculcate in the ordinary person, the ruling class’s dominant ideology. They further argue that the aim of propaganda theatre is largely to conceal the real causes of conflicts in a given society. Since propaganda theatre is aimed

at the ordinary person, it should make use of simple plots, properties (props) and stage set-up, which is true of the two performances under discussion in this paper. Both plays do not use elaborate costumes, stages, props or scenery. Agit-prop is targeted at the ordinary people. Thus, actors should be prepared to stage a performance with a minimalistic or bare stage. In some instances, it can be performed on the street corner, as long as there are people gathered to constitute the audience. However, in the case of the two performances, the venue and medium of expression did not necessarily follow this trend. In the case of *Madzoka Zimbabwe*, the performance had state sponsorship and thus (agree) could afford to be shown on national television. *The Coup*, produced by Rooftop's Gaves Guzha, was performed in Theatre-in-the-Park, a centrally located venue that is, however, out of reach of the poor who live in high density suburbs such as Budiro and Glen-View.

By all means, both performances *Madzoka Zimbabwe* (Marange & Masungurudze 2003) and *The Coup* (Makuwe 2012) may be considered to be pieces of agitational propaganda (agit-prop) used in the context of the post 2000 Zimbabwean socio-economic and political crises to appeal to the audience's intellectual capacities and, more importantly, the arousal of emotions. The scripts have not been published to-date and so the year indicated against the two performances is an indication of when the respective performances were (first) performed before a public audience, either on television or the stage. *Madzoka Zimbabwe* was a television drama and *The Coup* was staged in Theatre-in-the-Park. True to agitational propaganda plays, the two scripts are simple and short, as they are intended to be used by ordinary people who should find it easy to learn and internalise the lines. In the case of *Madzoka Zimbabwe*, the performers were made up of ordinary war veterans who had had no training in theatre. However, *The Coup* was performed by a cast of professional actors that included Zenzo Moyo, an award winning actor. Whereas *Madzoka Zimbabwe* had a wider audience since it was shown on national television, *The Coup* was performed in central Harare's Harare Garden at Theatre-in-the-Park. To widen its appeal and bring it to the ordinary people in the high density suburbs and outlying towns, the producer Daves Guzha took it to places such as Gweru and Bindura. Unfortunately, the performances outside of Harare's Theatre-in-the-Park were stopped by the police (Guzha 2012). The performances did not last long. *Madzoka Zimbabwe* lived up to this as it was allocated a thirty minute slot by ZBC TV. The script of *The Coup* is also short and can be performed within half an hour. However, Daves Guzha added some aspects to the simple script to suit the audience that frequents the venue. Because Theatre-in-the-Park is frequented by state operatives, he had to change some sections of the plot. For example, although the President of the unnamed country dies in the script, in the performance he does not die and the reason, according to Daves Guzha, was to avoid treason charges from the state (Guzha 2012). So, in the end, the performance of *The Coup* lasted more than the half an hour, since it was run on commercial lines. One does not ask the audience to pay five dollars to watch a performance for twenty to thirty minutes only. However, if the performance becomes too long, then the audience could be bored. Thus, as in a rally, agit-prop should not last forever, otherwise the audience will troop out of the performance venue or in the case of *Madzoka Zimbabwe*, switch off the television.

Propaganda theatre for or against the dominant hegemonies is one of attack, and because it promotes a narrow view it could be monologic. In the case of the state-sponsored and authorised theatre, its promotion of “patriotic history” (Ranger 2004) does not allow for dialogue, as it is a monologue. Ranger (2004: 215) defines patriotic history as one that is a “highly selective and streamlined version of the anti-colonial struggle. It is a doctrine ... it has no time for questions or alternatives. It is the doctrine of violence because it sees itself as doctrine.” Ranger (2004) further argues that patriotic history is highly selective. He also confirms the assertion that agit-prop is a theatre of attack used by the elites to attack oppositional cultural formations and that if it fails to achieve the intended goal on its own, then true to Gramsci’s (1971) theory of hegemony, coercion will be used on the oppositional cultural formations using state machinery such as the police, army and prison. However, initially, the desire is to use persuasion.

State-sponsored and authorised propaganda theatre

The theatre group that produced the performance, *Madzoka Zimbabwe*, was predominantly made up of war veterans living in and around Glen View high density suburb, a large, sprawling black township in Harare. The group is not known as a consistent or professional group in Zimbabwean theatre circles, and it could have just met to work on this state-sponsored propaganda television play as a once-off activity. At the time, 2003, the state (dominated by the ZANU PF party) was known to sponsor cultural activities that supported their hegemonic dominance. Such (agree) cultural formations included Tambaoga, a musician who composed a song, *Blair*; the key lyrics of which were, “The Blair that I know is a toilet”. This was an apparent jab at the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, whom he likened to a Blair toilet. This came at a time when the relations between Britain and Zimbabwe were at its lowest ebb after hundreds of Britons during the land reform exercise lost prime farming areas they had grabbed at the onslaught of colonialism. Tambaoga, among other pro-hegemonic civic society groups, that included musicians, patriotic intellectuals and writers of propaganda novels such as *Living Dreams* by Masundire, constituted a largely pro-hegemonic civil society that worked towards blocking any interrogation of the prevailing hegemonies.

Madzoka Zimbabwe, literally meaning “You are back, Zimbabwe”, alludes to the land that has now been reclaimed by its rightful owners. The plot traces the history of the liberation struggle and celebrates the land reform exercise as Zimbabwe’s triumph over the imperialist West. The aim of the performance is to whip up the emotional feelings of ordinary people to support the land reform programme, a programme that has to date generated controversy because of the manner in which it has been carried out (Raftoupolos and Mlambo, 2009). In the performance, the land redistribution exercise is glorified as a victory for the ordinary person. Reminding one of the negritude movements in both America and Africa, the performance glorifies the liberation struggle and the land reform and deliberately obscures and essentialises the complex relationships and conflicts that existed and still exist around the liberation struggle and the land reform exercise. *Madzoka Zimbabwe* is therefore an attempt to conscientise the people about the need to celebrate

the land reform programme and to use Plastow's (1994) words; it is part of the nationalist project before and after independence in Zimbabwe, meant to promote the nationalist ideology. The play borrows its tenor and flavour from propaganda performances such as *Katshaa: the sound of the AK* (1986), *Samora continua* (1988) and *Mavambo: first steps* (1986), performances that served an ideological function of celebrating unity and solidarity among Africans as they fought colonialists across Africa in the era of the "Frontline States" (agree). It does not surprise anyone that the Robert McLaren-led drama and theatre group, *Zambuko/Izibuko* was privileged to be invited to state and even Pan African events.

Using African traditional theatre forms such as song, dance and slogans from the war era *pungwe* theatrical genre, *Madzoka Zimbabwe* as propaganda theatre was used as an ideological tool to conceal the corrupt and exploitative politicians' activities (Crow and Banfield 1996). History shows that politicians have used national cultural galas and other cultural institutions to create an illusion of an organic connection with the ordinary people. Malawi's late Kumuzu Banda is a case in point. Banda tapped into Malawi's cultural activities and village rituals for his own sake and in rural communities in Malawi, each village headman was asked to stand with his people as they sang songs and danced in his praise. The all-male Nyau or Gure cult and the Malawi Young Pioneers took leading roles in these cultural activities. The late Mobutu Sese Seko also used his Africanisation programme that included changing British names to African names as a tool to propagate his grip on power. In other words, there was no organic connection with the people that the "culture elements" were supposed to serve. Thiong'o Ngugi wa's *Petals of Blood* demonstrates this political opportunism through the character of Nderi wa Riera. As the people's representative in government, he steals funds intended for a water project for the community he represents. Despite this he is known for promoting "African culture" and "black authenticity". Thiong'o Ngugi wa (1977: 63) writes:

Nderi wa Riera remained a strong advocate of African culture, African personality; black authenticity: If you must wear wigs, why not natural African and black wigs? He insisted on most of the companies of which he was chairman or director dropping their European names and taking names like uhuru.

Advocating African culture, African personality and black authenticity was a cover to further the leader's own selfish interests at the expense of the ordinary people. Mda (1993) buttresses this view and suggests that despite the fact that propaganda theatre is highly political with its slogans, chants, song and dance, it rarely expresses genuine views and feelings of the artists themselves and the imagined audience. Many of the artists used in propaganda theatre are drawn from among the poor, although the ideas are generated from the top leaders. This may not be the case across all theatre groups, but in an interview with William Mujuru, the leader of Swerongoma theatre group which has been sponsored by the state, he argues that sometimes they are told what to perform by the party (Majuru 2012). William Majuru has a long history in "hegemonic" theatre and according to him, he started performing in 1988. He has also collaborated with the late State Minister, Elliot Manyika in some of his musical videos such as *Norah* and *Shaira Mabhuzu Mana*. The music of Elliot Manyika and his musical videos also enjoyed a lot of free play on both radio and television.

The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation TV (ZBC TV) involvement

According to war veterans, Justin Marange and Alice Masungurudze, *Madzoka Zimbabwe* was their brain child. After coming up with the play they say they approached the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC TV) and worked with Dorothy Chidzawo, the then drama producer for ZBC TV (Marange 2012). However, the ease with which this play was commissioned shows that indeed it answered to the state narrative of patriotic history. ZBC TV is the only television station in Zimbabwe. It is so difficult to get a slot on it to the extent that even opposition parties' paid advertisements have been turned away if the broadcaster felt the product offended and/or questioned the legitimacy of the status quo. The drama was accepted because it echoed the state narrative in its messages on the liberation struggle, the land reform programme and the rhetoric on the West. Because the performance was shown on television without the war veterans paying a cent, *Madzoka Zimbabwe* can be said to be an example of state-sanctioned and state-sponsored theatre. Its stance on the land issue, Zimbabwe's sovereignty and the attack on the imperialist West, made it a favourite to get prime-time viewing on national television.

State-opposed propaganda theatre, *The Coup*)

This is the counter hegemonic theatre that emerged to contest the state narrative as articulated in state-sponsored (agree) theatre such as *Madzoka Zimbabwe*. This performance is also typically propaganda theatre crafted to rouse people to question the dominant ideology. The play was written by Stanley Makuwe, a New Zealand based Zimbabwean who has written another political satire, *His Excellency is in love*. Both *The Coup* and *His Excellency is in love* remain unpublished to date (agree). According to Makuwe (2012) in 2011, *The Coup* was shortlisted among (agree) only 14 out of the over 1000 play scripts submitted from across the world to the BBC's International Playmaking competition. In Zimbabwe, the performance was showcased at the Harare theatre venue, Theatre-in-the-Park (agree) from the 21st of February to the 12th of March, 2012.

The play is a rare plot of dead bodies in a public hospital mortuary that take matters into their hands to liberate themselves from the double suffering they are going through. Apart from being food for rats, flies (agree) and maggots, they are overcrowded, decomposing and denied the basic right of a dead person, a decent burial. After discussions among the decomposing corpses they identify the source of their double suffering as the repressive, corrupt regime led by an equally corrupt and materialistic dictator. They stage a coup and kill (agree) the dictator and his henchmen, the latter (agree) who even in death attempts to bribe his way into heaven, but fails. Later the late president's soul is allowed into Satan's palace but again the corpses drive him off to everlasting hell. According to Stanley Makuwe's introductory note in the undated unpublished play script, writing it was inspired by the 1996 state of the economy in Zimbabwe, especially the collapse of the health system that had been aggravated by the crippling strike by health profession-

als. As a student nurse then, he saw pain and suffering all around him and one day, as he was “dumping” one of the corpses in the mortuary, he asked himself these questions, “What if the souls would talk?”, “what would they say?” and finally “who would they hold responsible?” (Makuwe 2012: 3).

Clearly this is the background that informs the playwright, a mental health nurse in Middle-More hospital in New Zealand. The performance is clearly theatre for social change and interrogates a system that denies people – even in their death – basic necessities such as a decent burial. In an interview with the playwright, he claimed that he writes to “make a difference” (Makuwe 2012). With a mortuary as the stage, the performers have one message that if the living will not fight for their political and economic rights, open up democratic spaces and stop corruption, then the dead will. Led by the corpse of the young teacher, they criticise the government that disregards the poor while simultaneously exposing a “rotten” system, both metaphorically and literally that rewards politicians whose major concern is to line their pockets and drive the world’s most expensive cars.

Despite having less of *Madzoka Zimbabwe* in terms of song and dance, the simplicity of plot and language is clearly one to arouse and whip up people’s emotions. The message itself, like that of *Madzoka Zimbabwe*, is simplistic and essentialist. To the corpses in the mortuary, the root cause of their double suffering is the corrupt dictator, (agree) and killing him will solve (agree) all their problems. This is the agent-centric narrative that Zuckerman (2008) cautions against in the context of the Zimbabwean crisis. Yet the play seems to suggest that the root cause of all the problems that the living and dead confront can be traced to the leader of the country. The script fits well into a trade unionist’s speech, rallying his members against the “evil” employer who should increase the workers’ wage, notwithstanding the employer’s capabilities and other operational challenges. The constraints that may face the employer in meeting this demand are never an issue. This is typical of any advocacy activity, as what is important is putting across the represented constituency’s demands on the table, (agree) no matter how unreasonable the demand is. As Innes (1972) argues, agit-prop can be used as an instrument for effective political persuasion and in this case, Stanley Macule can as well be a Political Commissar of the opposition party agitating for ZANU PF’s demise.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that agit-prop as a theatrical genre thrives more in a period of extreme political conflicts, which is fertile ground for propaganda as competing ideologies fight for supremacy among the hearts of the ordinary people. In light of this observation, Zimbabwe with its plethora of socio-economic and political problems has seen resurgence in propaganda performances during the period under review. More importantly, the juxtaposition of two different and opposing theatre case studies was not meant to be reductionist, (agree) as explained in the theoretical framework in this paper. The juxtaposition of *Madzoka Zimbabwe* and *The Coup* was meant to be representative rather than a discussion of clearly defined pro- or anti-hegemonic (agree) theatres as

strait-jacketed endeavours. The diversity of the subaltern classes means that not all forms of agency are progressive in resisting the status quo. Likewise there are contradictions within the dominant classes and so the outlook is not always homogeneous on both sides.

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