

# THE REPORTAGE OF LAND AND OWNERSHIP IN SELECTED PRIVATE MEDIA IN ZIMBABWE

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to scrutinise how the concepts of land and land ownership were discussed in the private media in Zimbabwe during the Zimbabwe land reform exercise – dubbed ‘the third Chimurenga’ that took place in the period 2000–2008. Using textual analysis, the article argues that ownership of land, according to the so called ‘private or independent’ newspapers in Zimbabwe was supposed to be accorded to the farmer or person, regardless of the racial bias, who was more productive on the land and who was contributing more to the economic well-being of the nation (Zimbabwe). Accordingly, the private newspapers in Zimbabwe regarded land as belonging to, or as the rightful property of the white commercial farmers/settlers because they perceived them to be more productive on the land than the native people of Zimbabwe who were ultimately seen and labelled as *invaders* on the so-called white commercial farms. In order to substantiate the above claims and arguments, a number of *The Daily News* stories of the period were purposively sampled and are used as examples.

**Keywords:** productivity, land, ownership, private media, Daily News, Zimbabwe

## THE DAILY NEWS NEWSPAPER AND ITS INFORMING IDEOLOGY

*The Daily News* is regarded in Zimbabwe as a private or independent newspaper because it is independent of the government. This means that it is not funded, controlled or influenced ideologically by the government. However, it is dependent



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on advertising revenue and on individuals who represent narrow class interests and is aligned with corporate interests. In terms of content, *The Daily News* aims to inform as well as challenge conventional opinion. The newspaper is guided by neo-liberal ideology and plays a watchdog – or Fourth Estate – role. The term ‘watchdog journalism’ refers to forms of investigative activist journalism aimed at holding accountable public personalities and institutions whose functions have an impact on social and political life (Wasibord 2000). It can thus be characterised as exposure journalism in the public interest.

## FRAMING OF THE CONCEPTS OF LAND AND LAND OWNERSHIP IN *THE DAILY NEWS*

According to Ogendo in du Plessis (2011), land in the African indigenous land tenure system is and was seen primarily as a transgenerational asset. Secondly, it is and was managed on different levels of the social organisational structure and, lastly it is and was used in function-specific ways. Ogendo (ibid) furthermore avows that access to and control of land depended on an individual’s place in the social order of the community. In view of the above, the African indigenous law in property was more concerned with people’s obligations towards one another in respect of property than with the rights of people to property. It saw relationships between people as more important than an individual’s ability to assert against the world his or her interest in property. Entitlements to property were more in the form of obligations resulting from family relationships than a means to exclude people from the use of certain property (Bennett in du Plessis 2011:49). Property in pre-colonial Africa can thus be said to have been ‘embedded’ in social relationships rather than giving rise to an individual’s exclusive claim over it as a private possession. Consequently, as du Plessis (2011) argues, the concept of ‘ownership’ was particularly problematic due to the fact that – before ‘ownership’ – all things were held in common with everybody having equal rights to them – in other words, all things belonged to nobody. Bennett in du Plessis (ibid: 49) emphasises that, ‘... before the concept of individual ownership emerged, only rights of use were protected’. The implied message here is that, for short periods of time while a resource was in use, other people could be excluded, but that this protection was needed for short periods of time only. The chief was the custodian of the communal land under his chieftainship. In addition to the above, boundaries were not shown by demarcations such as fences, but each chief knew where the land under his chieftainship started and ended – and so too did the community and all the people within the communal area. Bakare (1993), however, states that the removal of Africans from their traditional communal lands was indeed not a terrible thing in the eyes of settlers because these communal lands were not fenced or clearly marked – and, for the British, the fact that land was unmarked meant that it was not owned. It is from this perspective that the African traditional/communal concept of the land tenure system was taken advantage of. It is therefore

clear from Bakare's (ibid) language that the two divergent views on land ownership systems – held by Africans in general and by the Native people of Zimbabwe in particular, on one side, and by the British settlers on the other side fuelled the British occupation of the Native or African people's land and served as the major root cause of the three revolts, namely the First, Second and Third liberation struggles in Zimbabwe. The private media in Zimbabwe perpetuated the British notion of land not marked or fenced as belonging to nobody, and hence the use of productivity as the benchmark or index of the 'rightful owner' of any particular piece of land.

In *The Daily News* story 'Ex-fighters defy High Court Order' dated 20 March 2000, the reporter, Wallace Chuma characterised ex-combatants as 'invaders'.

# Ex-fighters defy High Court order

## More farms in Middle Save and Centenary invaded

**By Wallace Chuma**

EX-COMBATANTS invaded more farms in the Middle Save and Centenary areas over the weekend in defiance of Friday's High Court order requiring them to vacate within 24 hours all the commercial farms which they have seized.

The latest move by the former freedom fighters appears to have been buoyed by the unexplained attitude of the police, who seem to have developed cold feet over enforcement of the order which clearly empowers them to move in on any ex-combatants illegally occupying white-owned commercial farms, 24 hours after the court order.

Centenary farmer Jonathan Palmer said yesterday: "They are still present on the farm. They came on Friday, after hearing about the High Court ruling, threatening to close us down. There is a lot of movement now as they are carrying their belongings to the areas they have pegged."

Richard Amyot, the deputy director of the Commercial Farmers' Union, said farmers were unhappy with the failure of the police to act.

He said: "We were expecting the police to do something over the weekend, and it appears nothing has happened. I have received reports from a Middle Save group of farmers saying the war veterans actually moved over to invade their farms early on Saturday morning."

Police spokesman, Wayne Bvudzijena, yesterday confirmed that nothing was being done to stop further disruptions to farm operations.

He said: "We haven't done anything, and I will not say more than that. The position now is that we will not say anything for public consumption as yet."

The Minister of Home Affairs, Dumiso Dabengwa, said he did not have any power to enforce the High Court order because he is a member of the executive cited in the court application.

He said: "This issue does not concern me. The order states that reference is not supposed to be made to the executive, so how do you expect me to interfere when it doesn't concern me?"

Dabengwa said he would keep his hands off the issue, and referred all questions to the police.

The High Court on Friday ruled that the war veterans, who started invading white-owned commercial farms last month, should vacate the farms within 24 hours.

Justice Paddington Garwe told Mashonaland Central Governor Border Gezi, war veterans' leader, Chenjerai Hunzvi, and the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans' Association not to allow, encourage or otherwise participate in any demonstration in protest against the holding of any farm or ranch in Zimbabwe.

**Please, turn to Page 2**

**Figure 1:** *The Daily News* article 'Ex – fighters defy High Court Order', dated 20 March 2000 (Retrieved from the National Archives on 30 April 2012.)

## PREFERRED READINGS

The simple message that the story 'Ex-fighters defy High Court Order' (reproduced above) intended to convey to readers was that war veterans were entering commercial farms which, by rights, did not belong to them. These farms were unequivocally portrayed in the story as rightfully belonging to white commercial farmers. War

veterans were therefore regarded as ‘invaders’ – as reported in another story in *The Daily News* headlined ‘Farmers, workers join hands against invaders’ and dated 23 March 2000. War veterans – who are seen as ‘invaders’ in the story – were therefore required ‘to vacate within 24 hours all the commercial farms which they have seized’ War veterans were constructed in the language of the story ‘*Ex-fighters defy High Court Order*’ as invaders because they had entered which, according to *The Daily News*, did not belong to them but were owned by whites. A similar sentiment appears to have been captured in the story ‘*Redistribution of land must be done in an orderly fashion*’ by Father Oskar Wermter SJ dated 10 March 2000. With regard to land and ownership Wermter (ibid) says that:

Farmers, who are productive and contribute to the economic well-being of the nation, could be said to have earned the right to their land, even if the original occupation of the land by their great grandfathers was morally and legally defective.

In view of the above citation, ownership of land was therefore determined by productivity. If a farmer, whether black or white, was more productive on the land, he or she became the rightful owner of that land. Conversely, if a farmer, across racial grounds, was perceived to be unproductive then that piece of land ceased to be his or hers. What is implied in this story as regards the ownership of land is that land or farms that Zimbabweans claim to be their own also belonged to white commercial farmers because they were using it more productively. Father Wermter – a priest – thus delegitimised the land struggle for which more than 50 000 people died at the hands of whites. That *The Daily News* was able to recruit opinion-shaping voices from the religious community revealed the vested interests that some religious figures had in wanting to see the status quo of inequality between races maintained after independence in Zimbabwe. Once Father Wermter had racialised the land issue in favour of whites he became the voice of white commercial farmers who, for more than 90 years, had refused to share fertile land with blacks.

The message that war veterans should vacate white commercial farms was also underscored in *The Daily News* story titled ‘*Nyambuya after my farm, says Bennet*’, dated 29 January 2004, and in which Bennet saw himself as the rightful owner of the farm because he was using the land ‘more’ productively. *The Daily News* of 13 January 2003 also featured a story by Takaitei Bote headlined ‘*Sabina Mugabe, sons grab farms*’.

A photograph of Sabina Mugabe appeared as part of the story so as to authenticate the assertion that she was a usurper. Bote’s reading of the situation was that the Native people of Zimbabwe were seizing farms and other land that did not belong to them. The fact that the Native people of Zimbabwe were the rightful owners of the land and that land reform was meant to restore land to its rightful owners can be seen, therefore, to have been regarded by *The Daily News* as a political gimmick. A further *Daily News* story, ‘*Ex-fighters raid minister’s farm*’, printed on 8 March 2000 and

accredited to 'Staff Reporters' characterised land reform as revenge directed towards commercial farmers.

The said *The Daily News* story 'Ex – fighters' raid minister's farm' (8 March 2000: 1-2) reported that:

Mugabe has supported the invasions, arguing that whites – who own most of the large commercial farms – had influenced the electorate to vote against the draft because it contained a proposal empowering the government to seize land without compensation.

The dominant message was that the taking away of land from white commercial farmers was not really meant to restore land to its rightful owners – the native black people – but to 'fix' white commercial farmers who, according to *The Daily News* stories cited above, were the rightful owners, for influencing the electorate to vote against the draft constitution of 1999. The language of the story '*Ex-fighters raid minister's farm*' reduced a historical grievance to a personal vendetta; thereby attempting to diminish the idea that land reform was inevitable and historically inescapable for Zimbabweans. This message of seeing land reform as a political attention-grabber was avowed by Moyo and Matondi (ibid: 62) when they said that, 'Apart from these gross land imbalances emanating from the colonial period, the possibility of electoral failure in 2000 by the government of ZANU (PF) led the government to embark on the land redistribution exercise'. The above point of view was furthermore acknowledged by the Zimbabwe Liberators' Platform in their article titled "*What happened to our dream*" in Barry (2004: 40) when they said that:

When ZANU (PF) lost the constitutional referendum in February 2000, it realised that its popularity had plunged. Faced with parliamentary elections within a few months, the ruling party formulated an election campaign strategy with land as its only trump card. Land helped shift the focus away from the liability of troubled economy. As the whites appeared to be supporting the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, they became the targets. So the strategy was to grab their land by force. The ZANU (PF) leadership used the state apparatus to invade white owned commercial farms, and later invited war veterans to participate in the exercise. With war veterans at the forefront, it would be easy to sell the idea to the Zimbabwean public [that] war veterans were demonstrating against unequal distribution of land. Surely the government would be criticised if it failed to redistribute land to the landless Zimbabweans. After all, the liberation war was fought over land violently seized by white colonialists who had paid no compensation

In an attempt to convey to readers the message that the native people of Zimbabwe, as exemplified by the war veterans, were not the rightful owners of the Zimbabwean land, *The Daily News* reporters carefully selected certain words as demonstrated below.

## WORD CHOICE ANALYSIS

In the *Daily News* story '*Farmers; workers join hands against invaders*' dated 23 March 2000, war veterans were regarded as invaders. The word *invader* is



synonymous with occupier, raider, and attacker. An invader enters – for instance – a farm or other land by force. This act of entering land forcefully can be seen as analogous to robbery or seizure. The inclusion of the words ‘invaders’, ‘grab’ and ‘seize’ in the *Daily News* stories cited above is therefore meant to communicate to readers the message that the native people of Zimbabwe – here, war veterans or ex-combatants – were stealing land that did not belong to them. In the colonial language of euphemism, whites are lawful ‘farmers’ and blacks are ‘workers’ who join hands to fight wars veterans who are depicted as vermin. The voice of poor workers was co-opted to serve the interests of white farmers when this was convenient for the white farmers. That this land did not belong to war veterans was also underscored in the *Daily News* story ‘Nyambuya after my farm says Bennet’ mentioned above. The use of the word *my* in the headline, coupled with the proper noun *Bennet* (Bennet being a white commercial farmer), was ideological in the sense that these words sought to convey to readers the dominant message that the native people of Zimbabwe (*Nyambuya* in the story) were stealing land that belonged to whites (denoted by *Bennet* in the headline) and not to them. The word *my*, as defined by Wermter above, signified that Bennet, who is white, was the rightful owner since he was using the farm productively. Bennet was quoted by *The Daily News* in the story as follows:

ZANU (PF) is using violence and intimidation because it is aware that there is resistance on the part of Chimanimani people because the constituency relies on my estate for a living and they have benefited so much from the projects that I have initiated (*The Daily News* 29 January 2004: 1).

In a nutshell, the reporters selected or made use of the words *invaders*, *grab*, *my* and *Bennet* to convey to readers the messages that the land reform exercise was not meant to restore land to its rightful owners (the black majority) but to steal land from its rightful owners (the white commercial farmers who were using it productively), thus contributing to the economic well-being of Zimbabweans. The fact that the newly resettled farmers were not using their allocated land productively and should therefore not be regarded as the rightful owners of the land was given further emphasis by Father Wermter in his story ‘Redistribution of land must be done in an orderly fashion’ when he said that:

How to get land is only one question. There are many others government has not yet answered: once they have got the land, what do they do with it? One is reminded of the man who, watching a dog chase a bus, says, ‘I wonder what he is going to do with it once he has caught it’ (*The Daily News* 10 March 2000: 8).

In support of Wermter’s anti-land reform stance detailed above, Chinja Maitiro of Mazowe wrote, in a letter to the editor of *The Daily News* titled ‘Say another “No” to theft, corruption, dictatorship’ and dated 8 March 2000 that:

Commercial farming is a business; race has absolutely nothing to do with it. There are black, coloured and white commercial farmers in this country, just as they are manufacturing and commercial businesses owned and operated by entrepreneurs of all races. It may be that the majority of commercial farmers in this country are white, though certainly by no means all are and is extremely mischievous to suggest that. Though the rewards can be high, large – scale farming requires a great deal of knowledge and very hard work. Possibly black Zimbabweans should be more involved in commercial agriculture, but it is up to the individual to buy a farm and run it successfully. Race has nothing at all to do with it. (*The Daily News* 8 March 2000: 9).

The quote above implied that ownership of land was determined not by race but by productivity. Furthermore, the writer says, ‘Now they say that because their “land grab” was thwarted by the “No” vote in last month’s referendum, they must take productive farms by force, because that suits them politically’ (Chinja Maitiro 8 March 2000: 9). The message signified that the ZANU (PF) government was trying to claim ownership by force through the grabbing of land from white commercial farmers who were using it productively.

The above story also suggested that neither blacks nor whites have the absolute right to land ownership. However, a closer scrutiny of the arguments being propounded by *The Daily News* subtly reveals the suggestion that most blacks did not have the right to own land – as opposed to whites who did – because they did not have the ability to use it productively. Thomas Mapfumo commented through the song *Maiti Kurima hamubviri, muchiti mombe munadzo, muchiti gedyo tinaro* (1993) that land or ownership or land rights should be given to people who are really serious and willing to use them productively as opposed to those who have the power, finance or material resources to acquire the land but are not willing to seriously exploit it or who have inadequate resources to use it to its full capacity.

*The Daily News* story, ‘Four years down the line, 7,5m face starvation’ by The Litany Bird (the Litany Bird is the pseudo name of the reporter who comments on the general issues unfolding in society) dated 2 February 2004 says that, when land was given to the ‘black majority’, productivity declined, culminating in hunger and starvation. *The Daily News* moreover said that, ‘What cause for national shame that out of a population of 11.5 million people, 7.5 million Zimbabweans need to live on handouts from the international community!’ Denenga in Barry (2004, 54), however, countered The Litany Bird’s thinking which is in agreement with Thomas Mapfumo’s thinking when he said that, ‘When a man has been trodden upon for too long he thinks he is inferior. He disowns himself and devalues his work. He sees the oppressor as the liberator’.

So in an attempt to communicate to readers certain messages and dominant readings through language or words, *The Daily News* omitted (or did not dwell on) the potential to development that the entrée of more blacks in productive farming and mining might bring to Zimbabwe. The stories presented to Zimbabweans in *The Daily News* were decidedly anti-land revolution. Where the article correctly revealed

the irregularities in the processes of land reform it failed to suggest better ways to solve the problem, except where it insisted that the only way to prosperity was to return land to whites.

## OMISSION ANALYSIS

While reporters may try to contain the meaning of a word in order to communicate certain dominant or certain predetermined messages, a word can communicate other multiple meanings in readers' minds that might be beyond the imagination of the originator of the message or the word (Derrida 1998). In this respect, although the words *invade*, *grab* and *seize* were used in the selected stories above to communicate to readers the dominant messages that land was unlawfully taken away from white commercial farmers, these same words communicated to readers the message that the native people were taking back what rightfully belonged to them – land.

This idea was articulated well by Doctor Vincent Gwaradzimba – an Agricultural Consultant – when he said that:

The land was taken from the former white commercial farmers and given to the landless blacks and that land can never be taken back to the whites it can only be redistributed if we have to go back and then we include those whites who are basically Zimbabweans as well.... so land cannot go back to the white people (The Transition – The Land Question, 2005, 6)

That land can be redistributed only to 'whites who are basically Zimbabweans as well' suggests that land really belongs to the native people of Zimbabwe who, by extension, can include those white people who were born and bred in Zimbabwe. So ownership is by birth and does not depend on how productive one is on land. This information was omitted by *The Daily News*.

*The Daily News* also used the word *my* and the proper noun *Bennet* in order to convey to readers the message that land or farms belonged to white commercial farmers. In the process, the reporters omitted vital information regarding the land issue in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. According to Woddis (1960) the relationship of whites and blacks in Africa existed through acts of robbery – robbery of African land. So with regards to the aspect of land and ownership or tenure, land does not belong to these – white – oppressors because the Whiteman stole the land from the African during colonialism. Muchuri in Barry (2004:9) states that:

If a thief steals, and the goods are found, they are returned to the owner without compensation. As such our land, our cattle and all our wealth must be returned to us without compensation. If a thief sells stolen goods to somebody, those goods if recovered by police, will be given back to their owner without compensation ... our stolen land must return to us without compensation because it is ours



So, if the British robbed land when they colonised Africa, the only prudent thing that the rightful owners of the land [the native people of Zimbabwe] could do is to grab, invade or seize the land the moment they identify the robber and the robbed or stolen land. That land was supposed to be grabbed or seized without begging is avowed by Woddis (1960: 1) when he says that, ‘Both during and since the great scramble for Africa by the Western imperialist powers at the end of the nineteenth century, land-grabbing, has been the central aim. By direct seizure, conquest, pressure on chiefs, trickery, swindling, the repudiation of pledges and promises, by every means open to them, the representatives of the European powers took land’.

What is therefore crystal clear is that land belonged to the native people of Zimbabwe. This belief is in opposition to the ideas propounded by Edwin Munyari of Belvedere in a letter to the editor of *The Daily News* titled “God won’t bless chaotic, hate-driven, racially-fuelled land reforms”. Munyari saw land as belonging only to God and not the native people of Zimbabwe or white settlers. He said that, ‘The Lord says: “The land is mine, because I created it,” or “Nyika ndeyamambo nevaranda vake” You have got it wrong when you sing: “Ivhu nderedu, tapiwa minda isu” (“The land is ours, we have been allocated fields”’) (*The Daily News* 20 January 2003: 9).

While *The Daily News* wanted to convey to readers the dominant or preferred reading that land does not belong to the native people of Zimbabwe, Munyari did not know that he was communicating the message that Zimbabweans are actually the real owners of Zimbabwean land. This message is subtly suggested in the excerpt below. Munyari (2003: 9) says that, ‘Do not ill-treat foreigners who are living with you. Treat them as you would your own brother, and love them as you love yourself. Remember, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord, your God (Lev 19 vs. 33)’ (*The Daily News* 20 January 2003: 9).

The word *foreigners* denote *aliens* or *outsiders*. The simple message that the word *foreigner* therefore communicates to readers is that blacks – or the native people – are the rightful owners of the Zimbabwean land and not white commercial farmers (who are *aliens* or *outsiders* and who actually grabbed the land from Africans). Munyari even said in his letter that the land belonged to the San people. According to Munyari, ‘The Bantu migration, Mfecane and the Pioneer Column make all of us [Zimbabweans and Whites] foreigners in this lovely land. The San could call the Shona, Ndebele and the whites, foreigners’. While other people like Sibanda et al (1982) and Munyari (2003) locate the land issue as emanating from pre-colonial era when the so called native people of Southern Rhodesia (the Shona) ‘... stole the land from the San hunters’; Chihombori in Barry (2004: 16) saw the San as ‘just wanderers ... they were of no fixed abode ... The land belonged to the [Shona] people since time immemorial’.

In that idea land belonged to the native people of Zimbabwe and not to whites is promulgated by *The Daily News* in the previously mentioned story ‘Sabina Mugabe,

sons grab farms' dated 13 January 2003. In the story, Takaitei Bote, *The Daily News* Farming Editor, quotes Patrick Zhuwau, one of Sabina Mugabe's sons as saying that, 'I come from Zvimba and asked to be allocated land in Zvimba. I have absolutely no apologies to make for being given land in Zvimba because we are the Zvimbas' (*The Daily News* 13 January 2003).

The simple message that Patrick Zhuwau delivers – and that the reporter, Takaitei Bote, omitted even though it could have benefited readers – is that, land is a form of identity for people's (Bakare 1993). Identity or uniqueness implies that land is allocated only to its rightful owners and used by only them. This could be the reason why Zhuwau, in the story, says that he has no apologies to make for being allocated land in Zvimba because that is where he comes from and the land is consequently his. That could have been a different case or scenario if he had been given land in a territory which was not his or where he did not belong. The land which they occupied – which is said to be 'around Lake Manyame in Zvimba' and which the reporter sees as strategic – is, by right, theirs. This is also another reason why war veterans had to invade or grab lands which were strategically placed and were occupied by 'robbers' – the white settlers. In this respect, it is therefore the white settlers who were and are actually invaders and grabbers.

*The Daily News* consequently omitted all the information above which could have been useful to readers. Possibly this may be attributed to the way *The Daily News* uses sources. The sources consulted or used by the reporters were mostly in opposition to the land reform programme and did not have a holistic approach to the question of land. *The Daily News*, in turn, limited debate by not reporting both sides of the story.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to critically explore the language through which the concept of land and ownership was discussed in the private media in Zimbabwe, as demonstrated through editions of *The Daily News* published during the period 2000–2008. *The Daily News* saw ownership of land as determined by the level of productivity on the land and not by historical prejudices or by place of birth. In other words, ownership of land, according to the article, was not supposed to be determined by birth but by productivity and the contribution of the farmer to the economic well-being of the nation. Both whites and blacks had and have similar chances of becoming the *rightful owners* of the land provided they make productive use of the land they receive. Thus, either white or black farmers would cease to be the *rightful owners* of the land if they decide to become unproductive on the farms. When ownership or land rights or tenure is stripped off because of farmer incompetence, the government or state assumes ownership or land rights until such time as the land is given to another potential farmer. In addition, the fact that land was owned by specific people was supposed to be reflected in the fencing of each piece

of land. Thus, any unmarked or fenced pieces of land were regarded as belonging to nobody.

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