

Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: An Epistemicide and Genocide

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Summary

That in political conflict and war the truth becomes a casualty that is sacrificed on the altar of expediency is an observation that is traceable to the ancient Greek tragedian, Aeschylus. It is no accident that it had to be a student of tragedy and the workings of evil who noted how truth and knowledge are the first to be murdered before individuals and populations of human beings are slaughtered in armed operations by those that seek to conquer, dominate and rule others by hook or by crook. The Gukurahundi Genocide of 1983 to 1987 in Zimbabwe began with the desire by Robert Mugabe and his Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) political party for one-party state rule under a life presidency. For that dark goal to be achieved the political opposition in shape of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) had to be eliminated. All manner of political constructions, naming and labelling were conducted to create the conditions for and justification of an armed operation against ZAPU and its leader, Joshua Nkomo. The political and human identities of those that had to be eliminated were changed to enemies, dissidents, snakes and chaff itself. On the Gukurahundi Genocide, scholars have prevalently dwelt on controversies surrounding the numbers of the dead and the enduring effects of the killings. This article is a consideration of the assassinations of the truth and knowledge, the epistemicide, which preceded, accompanied and followed the Gukurahundi Genocide. Truth and knowledge die before, during and after genocide.

Opsomming

'n Wysheid wat teruggevoer kan word na die ou Griekse tragikus, Aischulos, is dat die waarheid tydens konflik en oorlog, 'n slagoffer word wat op die altaar van dienstigheid geoffer word. Dit is nie per ongeluk of toeval nie dat dit 'n tragedie-student en 'n waarnemer van bose handeling was wat opgemerk het hoe die waarheid en kennis opsigself die eerste is om vermoor te word, voordat individue en menslike bevolkings afgemaai word in gewapende krygsverrigting deur diegene wat ander ten alle koste wil verower, oorheers en regeer. Die Gukurahundi-volksmoord van 1983 tot 1987 in Zimbabwe het begin met die begeerte van Robert Mugabe en sy politieke party, Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), om 'n enkelparty-staatsbewind onder 'n lewenslange presidentskap te bewerkstellig. Om Mugabe se lewenslange presidentskap en ZANU-PF se enkelparty-staatsbewind te verwesenlik, moes die politieke opposisie in die vorm van Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) uitgeskakel word. Om die leierskap van Mugabe en sy party te opponeer, is beskou as 'n misdaad wat met die dood strafbaar is. Alle vorme van politieke konstruksies,

naamgewing en etikettering is toegepas om die omstandig-hede vir, en regverdiging van, gewapende krygsverrigting teen ZAPU en hul leier, Joshua Nkomo daar te stel. Die politieke en menslike identiteite van diegene wat uit die weg geruim moes word, is verander na vyande, dissidente, slange en kaf. Selfs die volksmoordenaar kan nie die moed bymekaar skraap om mense in getalle uit te moor nie – hy moet eers hul identiteit wysig en hulle ander dinge en moorbare voorwerpe noem. Wat die Gukurahundi-menseslagting betref, het akademië, joernaliste en aktiviste oorwegend gefokus op twispunte oor die sterftegetalle en die blywende gevolge van die slagting. Hierdie artikel is 'n oordenking van die uitwissing van die waarheid en kennis; die kennismoord, wat die Gukurahundi-volksmoord voorafgegaan, dit vergesel, en daarop gevolg het. Waarheid en kennis sterf uit voor, tydens en na afloop van menseslagtings.

Introduction

It is an ancient piece of wisdom traceable to the Greek tragedian Aeschylus that in every conflict and war itself the truth and knowledge become the first victims. Aeschylus, as one who pondered tragedy and the nature of evil, could not but make the observation that truth, knowledge and justice are frequently the casualties that are crucified on the altar of expediency when those that seek to conquer, dominate and rule others by hook or by crook have arrived. The Gukurahundi Genocide of 1983 to 1987 in Zimbabwe began with a desire and also a design by Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF political party for one-party state rule and a life presidency. For the life presidency of Mugabe and the one-party rule of ZANU-PF to be achieved, political opposition in shape of Joshua Nkomo and ZAPU had to be eliminated. Students of Zimbabwean history and politics, Masipula Sithole and John Makumbe (1997: 122), described how before and after Zimbabwe's independence from Rhodesia a "one-party state psychology" possessed Mugabe and ZANU-PF turning the leader and the party into vigorous proponents of a one man rule and one party political regime in Zimbabwe where the political opposition became unwanted. Nkomo and ZAPU, under that tyrannical one man and one party political climate, came to be constructed as enemies and other undesirable objects that are legitimate candidates for elimination. Mugabe and ZANU-PF, Martin Meredith (2002: 60) observes, created what was a "one-party mantra" that was strong and brooked no debate or opposition. Any individual or organisation in Zimbabwe that gestured towards multi-party democracy became an enemy that could not only be called names but was supposed to be eliminated from the political landscape. Instead of understanding Nkomo as a legitimate political opponent whose rights were to be guaranteed Mugabe took him as "a self-appointed Ndebele king" who needed to be "crushed" (Mugabe in Meredith 2002: 60). The reduction of Nkomo to a self-styled Ndebele king was at once a political insult and an effective metaphor that was meant to reduce an opposition leader from the nation of Zimbabwe to his tribe; the Ndebele, it was to expel him from national politics to the village. Another ZANU-PF stalwart, Edgar Tekere, put it more tellingly and more

picturesquely, “Nkomo and his guerillas are germs in the country’s wounds and they have to be cleaned up with iodine. The patient will have to scream a bit” (Tekere in Meredith 2002: 60). The truth and indeed the historical knowledge that Nkomo was another Zimbabwean freedom fighter and political leader was replaced with the damning condemnation that he was national pathogen that like any contagion had to be eliminated from the national body-politic by use of painful disinfectants and antiseptics. The genocidal wish is in actuality a desire that other people, as individuals and organisations, did not exist. If they exist, as Nkomo and ZAPU did, the determined desire becomes not only murderous but epistem-icidal. The human identity of the individuals, their organisations and populations is altered to that of objects and other undesirable organisms. The truth and the knowledge die when people, on the basis of their political identity or historical origins, are reduced to killable and disposable objects. Of the Gukurahundi Genocide, much like other genocides, scholars, journalists and activists prevalently discuss the human dead and pay little or no attention to truths and knowledges that die before, during and after the genocide. This essay is a consideration of how, in the Gukurahundi Genocide, truth and knowledge were the first and continue to be the victims as the perpetrators and beneficiaries of the large scale killings continue in denialism and impunity.

The Violence of Epistemicide

Perpetrators of genocide as non-revolutionary violence struggle to justify their acts that are otherwise not understandable. Mahmood Mamdani (2003: 132) observes that genocidal violence is “violence that does not make sense, it is violence that is neither revolutionary nor counter-revolutionary” but is just evil and self-interested. Perpetrators of the Gukurahundi genocide had to work hard to give their acts some revolutionary air. Well before, and immediately after the independence of Zimbabwe from Rhodesian colonialism Mugabe and ZANU-PF vigorously advanced the idea of a one-party state under a life president. Mugabe in particular suggested that Zimbabweans needed to unite behind one nation, one party and one leader that would not have to suffer the inconveniences of multiparty democracy (Mugabe 1998). The one-party state under a life presidency in Zimbabwe was a partisan political desire that could not be marketed to the world as such. It was a political desire that did not sound revolutionary nor did it resonate with global aspirations of democracy. Joshua Nkomo and ZAPU could not have been persuaded or pressured to exit the Zimbabwean political landscape to allow the unfolding of a one-party state regime under the life presidency of Mugabe. It was not going to make any revolutionary or democratic sense to dissolve a whole opposition political party for purposes of erecting one-party state rule.

An image and knowledge of ZAPU and Nkomo as undesirable and evil had to be constructed to justify their punishment. Before Nkomo and ZAPU were physically conquered and dominated they had to be given a bad name that justified the violence against them. The truth and knowledge about Nkomo and ZAPU as legitimate political realities in Zimbabwe had to be assassinated and another image and political identity for them manufactured to justify their violation. Grosfoguel (2013: 73) explains how the genocides of conquest that preceded colonialism of the Global South in the Sixteenth Century employed epistemicides where the knowledges of and about the natives that were conquered had to be distorted if not destroyed. Those that were eventually conquered and colonised were not called people, human beings and legitimate citizens of the earth but barbarians, primitives and uncivilised personages whose domination and exploitation was not such a crime. Before the Gukurahundi killings began, one of Mugabe's ministers, Enos Nkala (2002: 60) declared that "as from today ZAPU has become the enemy of ZANU-PF". ZAPU and its leader, Nkomo, had to be constructed as an enemy and Zimbabweans were mobilised to join the hatred, opposition and attack on this opponent. Genocide is not only the killing of people in large numbers but it also is the murder of truth and knowledge. Both creativity and destruction accompany genocide in the way old political identities are destroyed and new ones created to create rational and justifiable conditions for the mass killing of those that have been constructed as enemies. Emmanuel Eze (2005: 115) is correct to observe that no matter how evil and base perpetrators of genocide are, they invent an "ideology behind them" that seeks to give justification to their actions. What Eze (2005) calls the 'epistemic conditions for genocide' is the active production of ideologies that are erected to give respectability to what actually is mass-murder and evil. Genocidists invent and perform themselves as patriots and gallant revolutionaries. There is the violent work of concealment and erasure of knowledge that accompanies and also becomes part of the very identity of Genocide. Mamdani (2002: 7-8) identifies three silences that are part of the genocidal moment; the silence of history, of agency and of geography. There is a way in which historical origins and productions of genocide are concealed. The tribal hatred of the Ndebele people in combination with the desire for a one-party state under Mugabe's life presidency in Zimbabwe are part of the history that is silenced in the prevalent attempts to understand the Gukurahundi Genocide. The agency of ZANU-PF led by Mugabe and that enjoyed popular support of a part of the Zimbabwean population is silenced when the Genocide is reduced to a crime by a rogue political party and its leader not a popular movement. Scannerchia (2011) notes the international geography of the Gukurahundi Genocide where the United States of America and the United Kingdom, in the main, permitted the Genocide by continuing to give financial and political support to Mugabe and ZANU-PF even as the human rights violations and killings escalated in Zimbabwe. An international political and social climate existed that permitted

the killings of political enemies with impunity when superpowers that could have stopped Mugabe and ZANU-PF did not only look aside but enabled them to kill political opponents in large numbers. Scannerchia (2011) notes how Nkomo, his party and political supporters within the Zimbabwean population had become politically friendless to the extent that they had become dispensable in a country, region of Africa, and world that had other priorities than to stop a genocide.

Much like the colonised and the enslaved, victims of genocide are not killed as other legitimate human beings but are killed as abandoned and neglected objects. This essay demonstrates below that Nkomo and his supporters were attacked not as other legitimate Zimbabweans and political subjects but as other things that included those that were constructed as dissidents and snakes. A new language and knowledge of naming the victims had been constructed and was deployed. Roger Burbach (2003) narrates how in the massacres that followed the coup in Chile, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet avoided referring to his victims as people but gave them names of objects, animals and other undesirable or negligible things. Naming the victims after undesirable objects and negligible things is itself the alteration of the truth, distorting of the humanity of those to be killed, and production of new knowledge and political identities that enable victimisations and killings. The lives of the condemned of genocide become what Judith Butler (2009) calls “ungrievable” lives whose termination, otherwise, is acceptable if not understand-able. Before they are physically dispossessed, displaced and massacred, victims of genocide like the colonised and the enslaved are epistemically reconstructed and reduced into disposable objects that, otherwise, should not be grieved.

What is notable here is that the genocidal impulse, which is the determined desire for the elimination of others, does not only produce many dead bodies but constructs a rationality of itself, and of its victims. It is in equal measure a destructive and constructive impulse that builds a political and social universe where it is understandable and justified. The “epistemicide” of colonial conquest that Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) describes about the way in which the West destroyed knowledges of the Global South in its march towards global domination is a telling example. In order for Euro-centrism to be the rationality of the world, other rationalities of other parts of the world had to be discredited as falsehoods and superstitions. The languages and knowledges of the conquerors and new rulers of the globe became the languages of humanity. Since languages, histories and knowledges of peoples do not exist and walk on their own legs but are embodied by living people, their destruction also becomes a destruction of the people that carry them. Epistemicide and genocide work together and fulfil each other. In the Gukurahundi Genocide, besides severe beatings and rape, “villagers were then forced to sing songs in the Shona language praising ZANU-PF while dancing on the mass graves of their families and fellow villagers killed and

buried minutes earlier” (Meredith 2002: 67). Forcing the Shona language on villagers that spoke other languages including Kalanga, Ndebele, Tonga, Nambya and others was the violent work of epistemicides that accompanied the genocide. Some decades after the genocide, the people of Matabeleland and the Midlands are complaining of the distortion and marginalisation of their languages and culture in Zimbabwe. The combination of genocide and epistemicide kills people and their culture, and seeks to replace them with another people and culture, to create a new world in the absence of political opponents. Further, epistemicide produces intentional ignorance of the truth and insulation from ethics and justice for the perpetrator of violence. To imagine those that are being violated as, not people but things and undesirable objects, gives the genocidist some political and moral comfort. Deliberate ignorance of the truth and justice in the scheme of epistemicide becomes an epistemology on its own where ignorance is produced as a knowledge of not seeing and not knowing the crimes that are being done and those that have been done. In the important discussion of “the ignorance contract” where perpetrators of apartheid injustices in South Africa contracted themselves to ignorance about their crimes and in that way participated in “epistemologies of ignorance”, Melissa Steyn (2012: 8) observes how criminals and beneficiaries of the crimes against humanity insulate themselves from guilt. Steyn illustrates the workings of ignorance contracting by use of a truth that circulates in the form of a joke about how in the whole of South Africa one can never meet a single person that agrees to have practiced or benefitted from apartheid discrimination and other injustices. Denialism is the true refuge of the criminal against humanity. In that comic but also tragic way apartheid in South Africa becomes a crime against humanity that has no criminals. Epistemicide through the epistemology of ignorance makes intentional and convenient ignorance the refuge of the guilty. There is no government official or soldier in present Zimbabwe that admits to have been a perpetrator of the genocide. “Breaking the silence” is part of the title of a report on the Gukurahundi Genocide published by the Legal Resources Foundation (LRF) and the Catholic Commission of Justice and Peace (CCJP). The title of the report bespeaks the strong silence that the Mugabe regime imposed on the subject of the Gukurahundi Genocide where officially there has been no communication or accountability on perpetrators and justice for the victims. The genocide was called a “closed chapter” by Mnangagwa (2011: 1), the current president of Zimbabwe, that was the Security Minister when the mass killings happened. Spoken by a key architect of the genocide, the metaphor of a “closed chapter” dramatises the determined official silencing, and epistemicidal killing of the truth about the crimes against humanity. When the truth and knowledge about the genocide cannot forever be silenced or denied, the genocidists can blame insanity itself. Mugabe publicly called the genocide a “moment of madness” (Holland 2008). He explained the killings as having been what “was an act of madness. We killed each other and destroyed each

other's property. It was wrong and both sides were to blame. We had a difference, a quarrel. We engaged ourselves in a reckless and unprincipled fight" (Mugabe in Meredith 2002: 74).

To blame the genocide on madness and to include the victims as part of the wrongdoing was Mugabe's way of cushioning himself from censure and guilt by distributing the blame and evening it out to the victims as having participated in and therefore being partly to blame for their victimisation. Officially closing the chapter on the genocide, blaming it on madness and implicating the victims, has been the official way in which Mugabe and his party have sought to murder and victimise the truth and knowledge about the Gukurahundi Genocide. Activists that pestered Mugabe about the truth and justice were severely blamed for attempting not only to open old wounds but also for the crime of attempting to dig up dirty history in order to divide the nation. "If we dig up history, then we wreck the nation ... and we tear our people apart into factions, into tribes" (Mugabe in Meredith 2002: 74). The grand ideals of national unity and peace are mobilised by genocidists to condemn their victims to silence about justice. The local and international media participated in silencing the truth about the genocide. As people were being raped, killed and their homes burnt, "none of this was reported by the government controlled press; radio, or television, foreign press reports on the violence were dismissed as fabrications. Evidence of atrocities collected by churchmen, doctors, and aid agencies and submitted to the government was ignored" (Meredith 2002: 67). The reports by Amnesty International that highlighted the atrocities that were taking place were dismissed by Mugabe as a "heap of lies" and the international human rights organisation was renamed as "Amnesty Lies International" (Meredith 2002: 73). From the Gukurahundi Genocide of Zimbabwe we can observe that genocide does not get called genocide by the perpetrators. Other more palatable names for it are invented and circulated. The genocide itself is invented through excuses and pretexts that are concocted to justify it and also conceal the atrocities and other crimes that accompany it.

Inventing a Genocide

Much like other genocides before it, the Gukurahundi Genocide of Zimbabwe was not unfolded as the crime against humanity that it was. It was dressed up in a national security cause and presented as just. Of the genocide of the Herero by the German colonialists in Namibia between 1904 and 1908, for instance, Mamdani (2001) notes how the genocide was constructed as administration, discipline and civilisation of rebellious and ungrateful natives. The Mugabe regime in post-independence Zimbabwe fashioned itself as a just administration that had duty to God and to the nation to eliminate political opposition that was constructed in enemy terms. Mugabe and ZANU-PF,

notes Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012: 1), “sought to inscribe a nationalist monologic history in Zimbabwe in order prop up its claim to be the progenitor and guardian of the postcolonial nation” and “since its formation in 1963, it has worked tirelessly to claim to be the only authentic force with a sacred historic mission to deliver the colonized people from settler colonial rule”. Entitlement to and ownership of the country, the history and the land of Zimbabwe is what the regime sought to claim. This is the same way in which Mamdani (2001) describes how the Hutu first constructed the Tutsi as foreigners and settlers in Rwanda before the outbreak of the mass killings in 1994. To achieve the goal of being owners of the country, the nation and the land, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012: 1) states that “ZANU-PF has deployed the ideology of Chimurenga in combination with the strategy of Gukurahundi as well as a politics of memorialization to install a particular nationalist historical monologue of the nation”. While Chimurenga is the name of the struggle that was waged against the settler colonialists, the Gukurahundi political strategy that gave birth to the Genocide was deployed against the native political opposition that had to be constructed as a threat to the state and the country and an alien entity. Strong excuses and compelling pretexts are needed to create strong reasons for constructing a part of the population as an enemy of the state and the country. The Tutsi in Rwanda and the Ndebele in Zimbabwe are an example of such victims.

The discovery of weapons of war that were stashed in some of the farms owned by ZAPU was effectively used by Mugabe and his government to construct a compelling narrative that Nkomo and his party intended to overthrow the constitutional government and seize state power by force. Mugabe made the whole world know that “these people were planning to overthrow and take over the government” (Meredith 2002: 63). Joshua Nkomo (1984) admitted that ZAPU had arms that were stored on behalf of the African National Congress’s Umkhonto WeSizwe armed wing of South Africa. Meredith notes that it was a known truth that arms caches belonging to both ZANLA and ZIPRA were a well-known fact since independence (Meredith 2002: 63), but the Mugabe regime was determined to criminalise Nkomo and ZAPU to justify the deployment of the Fifth Brigade under the pretext of a counter-insurgency operation. Joshua Nkomo insisted that “the arms were not the real issue” they only became “the trigger-point of a political move against me, for pushing ahead the one party-state and for removing certain obstacles” (Nkomo in Meredith 2002: 64). Nkomo complained that even the numbers of the weapons found was manipulated by state security agents that added more weapons to create a picture that Nkomo and ZAPU had enough arms to overthrow a government.

At the same time six tourists that were on a visit from Europe were kidnapped and murdered by alleged dissidents that claimed loyalty to Joshua Nkomo and ZAPU. This incident was also effectively used by Mugabe and ZANU-PF to maximise the international propaganda against Nkomo and

ZAPU. An international image of ZAPU as a terrorist organisation was constructed by ZANU-PF that sought to discredit Nkomo and isolate ZAPU from the world. Only the tourists from Europe were killed, the Zimbabwean women in their company were released by the alleged dissidents. Nkomo responded by accusing state security agents of kidnapping the tourists and murdering them to soil his name and that of ZAPU. Nkomo (1984: 234) argued that “one of the cars seen by the released women passengers to have been involved in the ambush was later used by the police I really don’t believe in dissidents who drive about in private cars that are later used by the police”. The counter-allegation that Nkomo was making is that state security agents were impersonating ZAPU dissidents and committing crimes to discredit the name of his party and justify the deployment of the Fifth Brigade in the region. In concert with Nkomo’s counter-allegation, Kevin Woods, who was a member of the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) at the time, notes that Fifth Brigade soldiers had a tendency to impersonate dissidents. “Fifth Brigade were not shy when it came to dressing up like dissidents, visiting a rural homestead for food, and then returning the following day to check if any strangers had been around” (Woods 2007: 70).

Without denying the existence of dissidents it can be observed that the dissident problem was, like the stash of weapons, added onto to construct ZAPU as a terrorist organisation that was bent on overthrowing a constitutionally elected government. Woods’s observation is corroborated by Blessing Miles Tendi who notes that “CIO and 5Brigade sometimes posed as dissidents and committed human rights violations that included murders” (Tendi 2020: 198). What shows that the state was determined to deploy the Fifth Brigade in the ZAPU strongholds of the country is that the brigade was trained well before the dissidents appeared. Daniel Compagnon recorded that “the Fifth Brigade began training as early as August 1981, purportedly to deal with the then ‘non-existent dissidents’” (Compagnon 2020: 25). The aim was to punish ZAPU supporters and eliminate ZAPU as the political opposition in the country. “[F]rom 1983 to 1984, 5Brigade supported by CIO and the Police Internal Security Intelligence (PISI) employed strong violence in an attempt to make ZAPU supporters in Matabeleland transfer their support to ZANU-PF” (Tendi 2020: 197). That some dissidents existed cannot be disputed, what can be disputed is whether their existence warranted the reaction that the state gave; the dissident problem was a reality but it was smaller than the government contended (Meredith 2002: 66). Tendi (2020) suggests that ZAPU had no direct leadership of former ZIPRA guerrillas that were operating as dissidents in the Matabeleland and the Midlands provinces. The state, however, was interested in linking the dissidents to the party. Mugabe insisted in linking Nkomo to the leadership of the dissidents, “the dissidents are operating in the name of the Father of Zimbabwe (Joshua Nkomo), Father of dissidents” (Mugabe in Tendi 2020: 190). Woods (2007) adds that some dissidents such as the infamous Gayigusu were moved around in state security

vehicles and instructed to commit robberies, rapes and murders in the region of Matabeleland and the Midlands to build a picture of a region under dissident siege. Gayigusu presents the case of a typical state security agent that pretended to be a ZAPU dissident.

The paradox is that, besides the state agents like Gayigusu that pretended to be ZAPU dissidents, Mugabe and ZANU-PF had their own dissidents. Well before the independence of Zimbabwe, the ZANLA commander Rex Nhongo instructed some members of his guerrilla army not to report to the Assembly Points but remain at large in the bush. “Nhongo instructed thousands of ZANLA guerrillas to remain outside the APS” (Tendi 2020: 144) and not join the rest of the ZIPRA and ZANLA guerrillas that were formed into the national army. These ZANLA “guerrillas went on the rampage in the North-east. But Mugabe chose to emphasise the role of ZIPRA deserters” (Meredith 2002: 60). There were ZANLA guerrillas that operated as dissidents in the country and were deployed around by the government but Mugabe chose to blame ZAPU for all acts of dissidence and banditry that were reported. There was also a group of armed dissidents that called themselves Super-ZAPU and were a creation of the apartheid regime in South Africa for purposes of destabilising Zimbabwe (Tendi 2020: 191) as the regime did not want a stable neighbouring country that would support the South African liberation movement. In that way, Mugabe and the Apartheid regime of South Africa came into a conspiratorial political alliance of convenience against ZAPU in Zimbabwe and the ANC in South Africa.

Some former ZIPRA guerrillas that eventually became dissidents were soldiers that were forced out of the national army by persecution. Former ZANLA commanders in the national army persecuted former ZIPRA soldiers and killed others, “fearing for their security, some ZIPRAs took matters into their own hands and deserted from the ZNA, which partly spawned the dissident activity in the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces” (Tendi 2002: 179). It is in this way and many other ways in which the government invented and produced the dissidents that it used as an excuse to carry out a military onslaught in the areas of the country where ZAPU enjoyed popular support. The Fifth Brigade itself was “a special partisan army divorced from the national army” for “the possible imposition of a one-party state” (Meredith 2002: 60). Especially trained by the North Koreans the brigade was fanatically loyal to Mugabe and hailed from the Shona ethnic group (Moorcraft 2012), and was therefore not designed for nationalist purposes. Mugabe himself confirmed that the brigade “was trained by the North Koreans because we wanted one arm of the army to have a political orientation which stems from our philosophy as ZANU-PF” (Mugabe in Meredith 2002: 66). In other words the Fifth Brigade was a partisan militia that belonged to ZANU-PF and Mugabe, not to the nation of Zimbabwe. The brigade reported directly to Mugabe (Tendi 2020: 198) not to the structures of the national army. A minister in Mugabe’s government, Dzingai Mutumbuka noted that “we never

sat down as the Executive Committee or even as Cabinet to decide whether to send 5Brigade to Matabeleland. Mugabe only informed us when he had already sent 5Brigade to Matabeleland” (Tendi 2020: 204). There was a clear design to, outside the operations of the national army, wage a war against a part of the country. The Mugabe regime had an agenda that could not be publicly defended, an agenda of a one-party state under a life presidency.

The Banality of Evil

The Gukurahundi Genocide was committed in a planned and dutiful manner as if it was that stately and patriotic work that had to be done without any choice. Hannah Arendt (1963) in the discussion of Adolph Eichmann and the Holocaust describes the execution of evil planned by man and then executed as God’s will as the banality of evil. Perpetrators desire and plan the elimination of their enemies and victims but do it as if they are commanded by nature and cannot ask questions about their own actions no matter how diabolic. Mugabe planned the genocide with a few chosen elites within ZANU-PF and the security sector within which there were former Rhodesian securocrats that he had integrated into what Paul Moorcraft (2012: 1) calls “Mugabe’s killing machine”. It is already noted above that the brigade itself was not part of the regular Zimbabwe National Army but a special crack force designed for the kind of operation that was desired and planned. Mugabe had for a long time grown and developed personal hatred for Joshua Nkomo and contempt for ZAPU that he could not conceal. An incident is reported where Julius Nyerere, the leader of Tanzania, was trying to mediate between Nkomo and Mugabe and get the two leaders to talk and foster unity in the country. Nyerere invited Nkomo first into the room. After the talk Nkomo was asked to leave so that Mugabe can have his turn. Mugabe refused to sit where Nkomo had sat and said “if you think I am going to sit where that fat bastard just sat, you will have to think again”. The Tanzania leader was utterly shocked (Moorcraft 2012: 20). To Mugabe, Nkomo as a person and all what he stood for, had become so dirty and despicable that he could not sit where he had just sat. The genocidal impulse feeds on hate and contempt. The victims are constructed into dirt before they are violated. It soothes the conscience of the genocidist to convince himself that his victims are not other human beings but dirt that can be disposed of. Nkomo (1984) narrates how he had to flee the country for exile when the killings started. His house in Bulawayo was attacked and some of his security details were murdered by the Fifth Brigade and the CIO.

When the Gukurahundi Genocide is discussed in the media and in the academy, the politics of naming and that of numbers dominates the debates. There are still questions about whether it was indeed genocide or just massacres. The numbers of the dead are estimated as low as 13 000 to as high

50 000 which leaves the figures open to further research (Tendi 2020: 97). What cannot be doubted is that Mugabe and his elite inner circle planned and knew that they were committing crimes against humanity. Mugabe is recorded, for instance, addressing the nation before the genocide stating that “Some of the measures we shall take are measures which will be extra-legal ... an eye for an eye and an ear for an ear may not be adequate in our circumstances. We might very well demand two ears for one ear and two eyes for one eye” (Meredith 2002: 65). Gukurahundi became not just the revenging and the settling of scores of political rivalry between political parties but a military attack on largely unarmed civilians that supported Nkomo and ZAPU. Mugabe knew that unarmed civilians, not the dissidents, were going to die in numbers and addressed the nation to that effect, “don’t cry if your relatives get killed in the process When men and women provide food for the dissidents, when we get there we eradicate them, we do not differentiate who we fight because we can’t tell who is a dissident and who is not” (Meredith 2002: 68). The burden to prove who was a dissident and who was not was delegated to the victims that were all considered enemies and legitimate targets of attack. They were guilty until proven innocent, and the only innocence available was supporting Mugabe and ZANU-PF.

The attempt to cover the genocide as national and state duty to combat armed insurgency frequently fell to the ground when key ministers addressed the public. The speeches exposed the hateful and angry intentions of the perpetrators. In one address Minister Enos Nkala disclosed that “we want to wipe out the ZAPU leadership, you have only seen the warning lights, we haven’t yet reached full blast, I don’t want to hear please for mercy. I only want encouragement to deal with this dissident organisation” (Meredith 2002: 72). The intention was to punish Nkomo and ZAPU and create a one-party state under the life presidency of Mugabe in the absence of any opposition political party. The Fifth Brigade used tribally charged language and when they raped women they told them to fall pregnant and give birth to Shona children (Moorcraft 2012). Pregnant women were bayoneted and their stomachs opened up because, the soldiers said, they were pregnant with dissident children. The Ndebele people as a tribe and ZAPU as a political party came under attack and became targets of elimination, Christopher Hope notes how the aim was for Mugabe’s soldiers to liquidate the political will of the Ndebele people and bring ZAPU as the political opposition to an end:

The real aim was to break the will of the Ndebele people to resist – and it worked. His soldiers killed, and went on killing, until Joshua Nkomo capitulated. In 1987, Nkomo signed something called a Unity Pact, he was appointed vice-president and thereafter ceased to matter in Zimbabwean politics. His physical death was a formality.

(Hope 2003: 26)

In other words the genocide achieved its intended political aim of eliminating the political opposition and creating a one-party state even as it became a de facto one. The idea of unity between the two political parties on the outside looked like a noble idea but inside it was a step towards the effective consolidation of tyranny and realisation of the goals of genocide. Up to today the fear that the genocide instilled in the victims is still politically usable by ZANU-PF that now only needs to remind the people what happened to them in order to force them to docility and obedience. Even when not explicitly reminded, the people themselves remember what the ruling party is capable of and they toe the line. The genocide created a deep wound in the victims, a wound deeper than that created by the war of liberation, a village headman whose people had been killed remarked that, “this wound is deep, (the war of) liberation was painful, but it had a purpose, it was planned, face to face, the war that followed was much worse. It was fearful, unforgettable and unacknowledged” (Meredith 2002: 73). The perpetrators have refused to acknowledge the genocide as such, blaming it on momentary madness as Mugabe did and reducing it to a closed chapter as Mnangagwa has done. The refusal to acknowledge the truth of the genocide is part of the systemic epistemicide, the killing of the truth that accompanies genocide and other forms of large scale violence.

The design to destroy ZAPU and Nkomo had been announced by Mugabe in one of his fiery speeches before the genocide, “the dissident party and its dissident father are both destined not only for rejection but utter destruction as well” (Norman 2004: 95). Nkomo, who was called Father Zimbabwe for his pioneering nationalist leadership, was reconstructed as Father of the dissidents. Mugabe reconstructed Nkomo to a “cobra in the house” and declared that “the only way to deal effectively with a snake is to strike and destroy its head” (Meredith 2002: 63). The man who was figured in the metaphor of the father of the country had become symbolised as a snake that has intruded into the nation and had to have its head crushed. The name “Gukurahundi” itself that was given to the military operation is a Shona reference to the early rains that wash away the chaff in the fields before the new rainy season. The targets of the genocide had become imaginable as chaff that must be washed away and the nation of Zimbabwe purified of their presence as national pollutants and not legitimate citizens. The genocidists comfort themselves and insulate their consciences from guilt by performing and believing the construct that they are not criminals against humanity but dutiful patriots that are cleansing the nations of pollutants.

As those that had been reduced to chaff and other things, besides being killed, the victims were cruelly punished. A scorched earth policy was implemented where grocery stores were closed and transportation of goods and services to the areas of Matabeleland and the Midlands banned, apparently to starve the dissidents, but actually to cow the population and suffocate its political will. People were reduced to “eating grass seeds and

insects” out of starvation during the blanket curfew (Meredith 2002). A Fifth Brigade soldier is recorded telling a group of starving villagers that “first you will eat your chickens, then your goats, then your cattle, then your donkeys, then you will eat your children and finally you will eat the dissidents” (Meredith 2002: 70). Life itself was being squeezed out of the people as the people were being squeezed out of the nation itself for the crime of their political identity and will. The Gukurahundi Genocide became a performance of evil at its banality, carefully planned as a crime but performed as incidental duty about which the perpetrators had no choice. What were killed before, during and after the mass killings are the truth and the knowledge. The continued refusal of the perpetrators to acknowledge and account for the genocide is only a continuation of the epistemicide that was always part of the Genocide.

Conclusion

Before, during and after the genocide truth and knowledge were systematically concealed, erased, silenced and denied. The cause of the genocide was a political desire by Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF of a one-party state regime under a life presidency in post-independence Zimbabwe. Joshua Nkomo and his ZAPU political party had to be eliminated from the political landscape and, for this to be achieved; excuses had to be constructed to justify the deployment of the especially trained Fifth Brigade into the Midlands and Matabeleland regions of Zimbabwe where Nkomo and ZAPU enjoyed popular support. Those that were to be eliminated were constructed as enemies, reduced to objects and other undesirable things whose physical elimination could be understood if it was not justified. Before the human victims of the genocide were eliminated their human dignity and political identity were withdrawn and the truth about them silenced. The continued explanation of the Gukurahundi Genocide by the perpetrators as a “closed chapter” and what was momentary madness and not the evil and crime against humanity that it was, is only a continuation of the epistemicide. Truth and knowledge, and history, do not exist on their own but are carried by human bodies. When these human bodies are eliminated, their truth, history and identity are killed alongside them. Genocide and epistemicide function together when large scale violence is deployed against political enemies.

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