

# *Gukurahundi*, Media and the “Wounds of History”: Discourses on Mass Graves, Exhumations and Reburials in Post-Independent Zimbabwe

**Mphathisi Ndlovu**

## **Summary**

Graves are central to Zimbabwe's political landscape since they constitute sites of contestation in respect of memory and identity. Given the legacies of the Gukurahundi genocide, it is fitting to examine the debates and controversies surrounding the Zimbabwean government's plans to exhume the remains of victims from mass graves. In 1983 the Robert Mugabe-led government deployed a military unit (the Fifth Brigade) to the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, supposedly to quash a “dissident” movement. The military unit went on to commit unspeakable crimes against civilians. By the time the Gukurahundi genocide ended in 1987, at least 20 000 Ndebele-speaking people had been killed. Memories of these horrendous crimes remain repressed and heavily guarded by the state, though there are increasing calls for justice, as well as calls to commemorate and rebury the victims of the Gukurahundi genocide. Recently, the government has been advocating the “fast-track” exhumation and reburial of Gukurahundi victims. However, some civic groups in Matabeleland are resisting this state-engineered mechanism of exhumation and social healing. Given that mass graves represent “crime scenes” and “wounds of history”, this article investigates the politics of memory triggered by the government's planned exhumation of Gukurahundi victims from mass graves. It explores how discourses on the exhumation of genocide victims from mass graves are mediated and contested in spaces of communication, such as news websites and Twitter. This article, which is informed by Achille Mbembe's theorisation of necropolitics, concludes that mass graves and bodily remains connected to the Gukurahundi genocide constitute symbolic representations of the ongoing political struggles in Zimbabwe. The government's attempt to appropriate, to manage and to control the Gukurahundi exhumations and reburials demonstrates its reaffirmation of necropolitics, which is an effort by the regime to obscure the massacre, to obliterate evidence and to legitimise its sovereignty. However, the government's power is not absolute since there is resistance from civic movements and ordinary people who regard the mass graves as evidence of the genocide, which is crucial to the pursuit of justice and accountability.

## **Opsomming**

Grafte staan sentraal in Zimbabwe se politieke landskap, want dit is setels van geskille oor heugenis en identiteit. In die lig van die nalatenskap van die Gukurahundi-

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volksmoord is dit gepas om die debatte en polemieke oor die Zimbabwiese regering se planne om die oorskot van slagoffers uit massagrafte op te grawe, te ondersoek. In 1983 het die regering, onder leiding van Robert Mugabe, 'n militêre eenheid (die Vyfde Brigade) na Matabeleland en die Middellande ontplooi om 'n sogenaamde dissidentebeweging hok te slaan. Dié militêre eenheid het onbeskryflike misdade teen burgerlikes gepleeg. Minstens 20 000 Ndebele-sprekende mense is doodgemaak teen die tyd dat die Gukurahundi-volksmoord in 1987 tot 'n einde gekom het. Herinneringe van hierdie afgryfslike wandade word steeds onderdruk en streng deur die staat in bedwang gehou, maar daar is toenemende oproepe om geregtigheid, tesame met versoeke dat die slagoffers van die Gukurahundi-volksmoord gedenk en herbegrawe word. Die regering het onlangs onthul dat hy beoog om die oorskot van Gukurahundislagoffers by wyse van 'n bespoedigde proses te laat opgrawe en herbegrawe. Sommige burgerlike groepe in Matabeleland bied egter weerstand teen hierdie staatsgemanipuleerde meganisme van opgrawing en maatskaplike heling. Aangesien massagrafte "misdadtonele" en "wonde van die geskiedenis" verteenwoordig, ondersoek hierdie artikel die politiek van heugenis waartoe die regering se beoogde opgrawing van die oorskot van Gukurahundi-slagoffers uit massagrafte aanleiding gee. Dit ondersoek hoe diskoerse oor die opgrawing van volksmoordslagoffers uit massagrafte in kom-munikasieplatforme, soos nuuswebsites en Twitter, bemiddel en aangevoer word. Hierdie artikel, wat Achille Mbembe se teoretisering van nekropolitiek as grondslag het, kom tot die slotsom dat massagrafte en liggaamlike oorskot wat met die Gukurahundi-volksmoord verband hou, die voortslepende politieke stryd in Zimbabwe versinnebeeld. Die regering se poging om die opgrawing en herbegrawing van Gukurahundi-slagoffers toe te eien en beheer daarvan te neem, dui op sy herbevestiging van nekropolitiek, wat neerkom op 'n poging deur die regime om die volksmoord te verdoesel, bewyse te vernietig en sy soewereiniteit te bekragtig. Die regering se mag is egter nie absoluut nie aangesien hy teenstand kry van burgerlike bewegings en gewone mense wat van mening is dat die massagrafte as bewys dien van die volksmoord wat plaasgevind het, wat uiters belangrik is vir die strewing na geregtigheid en toerekenbaarheid.

## **Introduction**

The question of exhuming and reburial of victims of political massacres is a thorny subject in post-conflict societies (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015; Robben 2015). Exhumed bodies possess "political lives" (Verdery 1999: 1), or "afterlives" (Ferrandiz 2006: 7), as they are assigned symbolic and political meanings in communicative spaces. Graves and human remains are not simply "sites of forensic exhumation" (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 3). Rather, they possess "symbolic capital" (Verdery 1999: 33) as they can be appropriated and used by the living for their political exigencies. Thus, bones and graves are "animated and enacted" (Jahn & Wilhelm-Solomon 2015: 183) in symbolic representations and political contestations in ways that may serve to legitimate, and resist post-genocide regimes. There is a growth of scholarly literature on exhumations and reburials in post-conflict societies (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015; Jahn & Wilhelm-Solomon 2015). The "Forensic Turn" in research focuses on the meanings of human remnants and graves of genocidal and mass violence (Rojas-Perez 2017: 14). In exploring mass graves as sites of ethnographic inquiries, scholarly works provide insights into the meaning

and power of exhumations and reburials (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015; Jahn & Wilhelm-Solomon 2015). In Zimbabwe, bones and graves occupy a central place in the imagination of the nation-state (Fontein 2010; Mpofo 2015). There are growing calls for mass grave exhumations, reburials and honouring of the victims of *Gukurahundi* terror (Eppel 2014, 2006, 2004). However, little scholarly attention has been paid to the role of the media in shaping and framing the discourses on *Gukurahundi* exhumations and reburials. Using data from traditional news outlets and social media, this article delves deeper into the symbolic representations and political meanings of *Gukurahundi* graves, exhumations and reburials.

### ***Gukurahundi* Genocide and the “Wounds of History”**

Although more than three decades have passed since the *Gukurahundi* genocide was orchestrated by the government, discourses on graves, bones and exhumations are symptomatic of the unresolved legacies of the painful past. *Gukurahundi* denotes a genocide that was unleashed by the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), on the people of Matabeleland and Midlands provinces between 1983 and 1987 (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003). The Robert Mugabe-led ZANU PF accused the main opposition party, Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), of instigating a “dissident” movement and plotting to topple the government (Kriger 2003). Matabeleland and Midlands provinces were the strongholds of ZAPU. Under the guise of subduing a “dissident” movement in these provinces, the government deployed a Fifth Brigade militia that killed over 20 000 Ndebele-speaking people. The *Gukurahundi* victims were accused of harbouring and aiding “dissidents” (Kriger 2003). The killings, torture, abductions, disappearances, sexual assaults and other human rights violations committed by the Fifth Brigade on Ndebele communities are detailed in the report produced by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, and the Legal Resources Foundation (CCJP & LRF 2007).

Although the atrocities ended with the signing of the Unity Accord between ZANU PF and ZAPU in 1987, the country remains deeply wounded (Eppel 2004). The government has yet to acknowledge the scale of the genocide and to apologise to the affected communities (Eppel 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003). *Gukurahundi* is regarded as a closed chapter (Ndlovu 2018a) and hence, discussions on this traumatic historical episode tend to be tabooed in public domains (Mpofo 2014). Denialism and forced amnesia are deeply entrenched within this culture of impunity (Ndlovu 2018a; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003). Traumatized communities in Matabeleland have been “forced to live with their silenced memories of horror and fear” (Eppel 2004: 46). Efforts to exhume, rebury and memorialise the victims of *Gukurahundi* mass atrocities

have at times been foiled by the government (Alexander, McGregor & Ranger 2000: 262).

The fall of Robert Mugabe in 2017 brought optimism, in some circles, about the prospects of addressing and resolving the emotive *Gukurahundi* issue. There was a shift in the government's narrative as the new leader Emmerson Mnangagwa, also implicated in the massacres, began calling for an open dialogue on the historical injustices. In 2019, the government announced plans to conduct "fast-track" exhumations and reburials of *Gukurahundi* victims buried in mass graves. The idea of "fast-track" implies conducting exhumations and reburials hastily or hurriedly. Using this rhetoric of "fast-track" reburials as an entry point, this chapter analyses the meanings of *Gukurahundi* exhumations and mass graves that are discursively constructed and conveyed in traditional news outlets and social media. This work draws upon Mbembe's (2003) work on "necropolitics" in order to make sense of the politics of the dead. A purposive sampling technique was used to collect data for analysis. The scope of the study is 2019 to 2020, a period when discussions on the government's "fast-track" exhumations were animated and dynamic. Firstly, data was collected from state-owned *Chronicle*, *The Sunday Mail* and *The Herald* newspapers in order to make sense of the government's narrative on exhumations and reburials. Secondly, news articles and readers' comments were selected from privately owned news sites such as the *Zimbabwe Independent*, *Standard*, *NewsDay*, *umthwakazireview.com* and the *Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE)* in order to capture the counter-hegemonic narratives on *Gukurahundi*. In addition, data was drawn from social media as selected tweets on *Gukurahundi* mass graves were analysed.

Twitter hashtags on *Gukurahundi* were used to harvest and select data on exhumations and reburials. Data harvested from social media sites such as Twitter is perceived to be in the public domain (Williams, Burnap & Sloan 2017). Although Twitter's terms of service permits researchers to use tweets without consent from users (Fiesler & Proferes 2018; Williams et al 2017), this researcher is aware of the ethical challenges of Twitter-based research. Williams et al (2017: 1149) caution researchers on the need to apply a more "reflexive ethical approach" with regards to online ethical issues. Researchers can protect the privacy and identity of users through anonymisation (Fiesler & Proferes 2018: 2). At the same time, researchers can protect the identity of the users by "quoting content" without including "the usernames or pseudonyms" (Fiesler & Proferes 2018: 2). The usernames on Twitter accounts are not published in this research due the sensitive nature of the *Gukurahundi* topic and the need to minimise potential harm. The researcher resolved to quote tweets in ways that would not link the published data to the "real" Twitter user.

Media texts were subjected to a critical discourse analysis (CDA), a method that enables researchers to investigate the intersection of language, meaning and power (Richardson 2007). CDA focuses on the ways in which language

serves to sustain and perpetuate relations of domination (Richardson 2007). CDA scholars also investigate how language use provides possibilities of social change or transformation (Richardson 2007). Given that CDA is a broader movement consisting of various approaches, this research draws the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) developed by the Vienna School (Wodak, De Cillia, Reisig & Liebhart 2009). The emphasis of the DHA is on political and historical topics (Wodak et al 2009).

### **Mass Graves, *Gukurahundi* and the Politics of Dead Bodies**

In Ndebele belief systems, the ancestral spirits play a huge role in the “lives of every family member guiding and nurturing them” (Eppel 2006: 264). A decent funeral is required in order for the spirits of the dead to protect the family (Eppel 2006). Further, for the deceased to enter the ancestral spiritual realm, a traditional ceremony called *Umbuyiso* has to be performed a year after the burial (Eppel 2014: 409). The failure to honour the dead may lead to an “angry and restless spirit” to wander and haunt the family (Eppel 2014: 409, 2006: 264). Bones and grave sites are entangled with memory politics in post-colonial Zimbabwe (Fontein 2010). Eppel’s (2014, 2006, 2004) works highlight the plight of the *Gukurahundi* survivors in their attempts to exhume and rebury their loved ones. She argues that Matabeleland is characterised by the problem of “aggrieved spirits and the presence of the murdered dead in unacceptable graves” (Eppel 2006: 264). *Gukurahundi* victims were buried in unknown graves whilst some were thrown down mine shafts at Bhalagwe Camp (Eppel 2004: 46). The “cultural needs surrounding death” were desecrated by the Fifth Brigade which not only denied the survivors a right to mourn the dead, but also forced them to partake in “grossly disrespectful behaviour, such as dancing and singing on the shallow graves of the newly murdered” (Eppel 2004: 52). Some survivors were forced to leave the bodies of the deceased in the open to be “scavenged by animals” (Eppel 2006: 268). Thus, proper funeral rituals were not performed during the *Gukurahundi* period and, hence, the spirits of the dead are considered to be “angry and aggrieved” (Eppel 2004: 52).

In the late 1990s, Amani Trust, a local non-governmental organisation, was involved in exhumations and reburials of *Gukurahundi* victims (Eppel 2006; 2004). From 1998 to 2002, 14 exhumations were carried out by Amani Trust which involved 20 victims (Eppel 2014: 406). However, there were “official interruptions” and harassment once the process of exhumations was underway (Eppel 2006: 275). The government was aware that the exhumed bodily remains have the power to “accuse the murderers” (Eppel 2006: 275). Amani Trust was closed down in 2002 due to continuous harassment of its members by the government (Eppel 2006: 262).

There are studies that explore the intersection of *Gukurahundi* and the media. Survivors of the genocide are using digital media such as news websites to discuss the *Gukurahundi* (Ndlovu 2018b; Mpofu 2019). Other works analyse the manifestation of hegemonic discourses on online spaces that seek to silence discussions on the genocide (Mpofu 2019; Ndlovu 2018a). While these studies have demonstrated the significant role of new media as sites of *Gukurahundi* memories, there is a dearth of studies that delve into the nexus of media and the politics of exhumations in contemporary Zimbabwe.

### **Graves, Exhumed Bodies and Necropolitics: Theoretical Engagements**

In post-conflict societies, states may exercise power over the dead by governing the processes of mourning, exhuming and reburying the dead (Robben 2015: 72). Mbembe's (2003) concept of "necropolitics" provides a framework for understanding how exhumations, reburials and dead bodies are intertwined with power (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015; Robben 2015). Necropolitics denotes not only the "power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe 2003: 11), but also the "power to decide how to dispose of the bodies of those annihilated on behalf of the body politic" (Rojas-Perez 2017: 233). In other words, it describes the "production and management of dead bodies" (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 3). In post-conflict societies, clandestine and unmarked mass graves are a "manifestation of authoritarian sovereignty" (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 17). Thus, dead bodies express and demonstrate the sovereign's power over life and death (Robben 2015: 55).

Mass graves are utilised by regimes to obscure massacres, destroy incriminating evidence and deny the bereaved a right to mourn and conduct burial rituals for their loved ones (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 17; Robben 2015: 57). In Chile and Argentina, some people were killed and "disappeared" because they were perceived to be threats to "state sovereignty" (Robben 2015: 57). Similarly, Werbner (1996: 13) argues that *Gukurahundi* was a product of ZANU PF's "quasi-nationalism" as the people of Matabeleland and Midlands were regarded as threats to a vision of a singular and unified state. The concept of necropolitics provided a framework for studying the symbolic representations of mass graves and exhumations in Spain (Ferrandiz 2015), Peru (Rojas-Perez 2017), Chile and Argentina (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015; Robben 2015).

Spain is haunted by the "ghosts" of the Civil War (1936-1939) as there are struggles over mass graves (Hepworth 2014; Ferrandiz 2006). Whilst the bodily remains of the victorious Nationalists were reburied and valorised, the vanquished Republican dead were left in "unceremonial burying places" (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 20). In the 21st century, a "new wave of

exhumations” (Ferrandiz 2015: 93) began, spurred by campaigns for the recovery of memory (Hepworth 2014). The graves of Republican war dead are being exhumed as relatives demand proper reburials (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 20).

Exhumations and reburials may also symbolise counter-hegemonic practices. The excavation of mass graves may serve to dismantle the regimes’ “necropolitical hold on society” (Rojas-Perez 2017: 40) by “holding perpetrators accountable” (Robben 2015: 56). As such, mass graves bear witness to the “wounds of history” (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 1; Ferrandiz 2006: 7). The practices of excavating and reburying the physical remains of the victims of political violence contribute to the “recovery of social memory” (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 2). Consequently, exhumations and reburials are interwoven with “human rights discourses and transitional justice practices” (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 2). Thus, the practices of forensic identification may have political and judicial consequences for perpetrators of mass violence (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 18). The following section provides an analysis of media discourses on *Gukurahundi* mass grave exhumations.

### **On “Fast-track” Exhumations and the Management of Dead Bodies**

State-controlled media such as the *Chronicle*, *The Sunday Mail* and *The Herald* published news reports that reinforce the government’s perspectives on the *Gukurahundi*. News articles such as “Government, Matabeleland must work together to bring *Gukurahundi* issue to finality” (*Chronicle* February 24, 2020), and “NPRC prepares for *Gukurahundi* reburials” (*The Herald* October 10, 2019) serve to celebrate the role of President Mnangagwa in facilitating the dialogue meetings. Editorials published by the *Chronicle* signify the newspaper’s position on *Gukurahundi* exhumations. The *Chronicle* argues that exhumations and reburials are important for “national healing/unity” and bringing “closure to the matter” (*Chronicle* April 13, 2019). Lexical terms such as “unity” and “closure” are employed within state circles as euphemisms for impunity and forced amnesia. These discursive strategies of “collectivisation” and “unification” (Wodak et al 2009: 38) serve to sustain the power of the sovereign by suppressing the growing calls for justice and accountability for the *Gukurahundi* crimes. Further, the newspaper celebrates what it perceives as a “new found spirit of unity and openness” between the government and the people of Matabeleland (*Chronicle* April 13, 2019). The editorial was published after Mnangagwa had met with a network of the clergy and civic groups under the banner of Matabeleland Collective in March 2019.

Mnangagwa’s plans to facilitate the exhumations and reburials were announced in early 2019, albeit the process is yet to take place. In August

2019, the government called a halt to the *Gukurahundi* exhumations (CITE August 20, 2019), asserting that a policy needed to be crafted which would guide the process of reburials (*Chronicle* June 14, 2019). In October, 2019, the state-controlled *The Herald* newspaper reported that the exhumations and reburials of *Gukurahundi* victims were to “start soon” (*The Herald* October 10, 2019). Another state-owned newspaper, *The Sunday Mail*, reported at the beginning of 2020 that Mnangagwa was to “fast-track *Gukurahundi* reburials” (*The Sunday Mail* February 23, 2020). However, the private press castigated the government for “backtracking” on its pledge to facilitate exhumations (*NewsDay* January 17, 2020; *Zimbabwe Independent* April 10, 2020) and “taking too long” (*Kubatana.net* February 19, 2020). The state media, on the other hand, were praising the government for laying groundwork for *Gukurahundi* exhumations (*Chronicle* March 10, 2020).

Discourses on “fast-track reburials” demonstrate that human remains of the victims of the *Gukurahundi* episode are appropriated by the Mnangagwa regime and assigned symbolic representations that serve the necropolitical imaginations of the nation-state. The state continues to maintain its hold over dead bodies by dictating how and when the *Gukurahundi* victims are to be exhumed and reburied. As such, the *Gukurahundi* dead accumulate political meanings as the human remains are politicised by Mnangagwa to acquire new significations that legitimate his regime. In this regard, interments can be a “site of political profit” (Verdery 1999: 33) as they are “saturated with meaning and power” (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 3). As such, ZANU PF exercises the power not only to produce and hide *Gukurahundi* dead bodies, but also to conjure up and reincorporate these excluded and forgotten victims into the fold of the “Second Republic”. The *Gukurahundi* bodies that were maimed in the name of the Zimbabwean ‘nation’ are being reclaimed by the perpetrators for necropolitical purposes and in the name of the “Second Republic”. At the same time, ZANU PF “halted” the process of exhumations which reaffirmed its necropower by continuing to deny the bereaved the right to rebury and mourn their dead. The government exercises its absolute power to authorise, and also prohibit *Gukurahundi* reburials. This is akin to what Robben (2015: 67) regards as dead bodies been declared “untouchable”. In Chile, the relatives searching for the remains of their loved ones were held “hostage indefinitely” by the military (Robben 2015: 68). In withholding the corpses of *Gukurahundi* dead, ZANU PF maintains its necropolitical control over the surviving families and the restless souls held in a liminal state.

Perpetrators of genocides are usually concerned about the “discovery of incriminating mass graves” (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 18). The Chilean military engaged in “destructive exhumations” to obscure bodies of the dead and “obliterate incriminating evidence” by air-dropping the bodily remains of the victims of state terror at sea and remote mountain zones (Robben 2015: 66). In prohibiting forensic identifications, the Chilean military was exercising “power over the dead” (Robben 2015: 68). Similarly, a “hurried



partial exhumation” carried out in Argentina in 1984 “destroyed most of the evidence” (Ferrandiz & Robben 2015: 17-18). In Spain, Franco’s regime dug up the graves of the Republic dead and transferred the bodily remains to the Valley of the Fallen (a monument) in 1959 in ways that concealed the killings and obliterated evidence (Hepworth 2014: 471). ZANU PF’s necropolitics is demonstrated in its power to deny the *Gukurahundi* victims proper burials, as human remains lie in “mine shafts where exhumations are problematic and near impossible” (*The Standard* March 15, 2020). Siphosami Malunga asserts that at Bhalagwe Camp, thousands were “detained”, “tortured” and “killed” (*The Standard* May 3, 2019). He adds that “army trucks” full of “bodies” were used to transport these “dead bodies” from the camp on a “daily basis” (*The Standard* May 3, 2019). The language depicting the massacres at Bhalagwe Camp is akin to what some scholars regard as the sovereign’s “fabrication of corpses”, or the production of mass death (Rojas-Perez 2017: 13). In Peru, the bodies of victims of mass atrocity were disposed of “without a trace” as they were dumped in “clandestine mass graves” and thrown into rivers (Rojas-Perez 2017: 233).

The Zimbabwean government’s necropolitics is being undermined and resisted by grassroots movements, civic groups and ordinary people. Thus, the government’s plans to exhume and rebury *Gukurahundi* victims are challenged by those who want to hold the perpetrators accountable for the crimes. Given the presence of countervailing forces, ZANU PF’s necropower should not be perceived as absolute. In his study of mass graves and clandestine burials in Argentina and Chile, Robben (2015: 72) notes that “people possess a natural ability to form groups that can corrode sovereignty”.

### ***Gukurahundi* Graves as “Crime Scenes” and Evidence of the Wounds of History**

Counterstrategies are deployed on Twitter as users invoke and recall memories of the *Gukurahundi* dead to subvert ZANU PF’s necropower. Although a grave is a “sophisticated instrument of terror” (Ferrandiz 2006:7), Twitter users are disarticulating it from its meaning of a site of sorrow and pain, and rearticulating it to signify a human rights tool for bringing the perpetrators to justice. In this way, the *Gukurahundi* graves are constructed as “crime scenes” that contain evidence that genocide was committed. Hastily exhuming bodily remains of *Gukurahundi* victims is denounced as a government’s ploy to whitewash or cover up the wanton killings of civilians. *Gukurahundi* graves are regarded as a source of evidence of genocide.

Tweets posted after the announcement of government’s plans to speed up *Gukurahundi* reburials highlight the contested meanings of exhumations. The users argue that *Gukurahundi* mass graves constitute a “crime scene” and that the government-led process would end up “contaminating the evidence”.

Criminonyms such as “crime scene”, “whitewash”, “cover up”, “evidence” and “contaminating” are part of the transformative discursive strategies that demonstrate that an exhumation practice should have judicial consequences. In the ongoing struggles over the legacy of *Gukurahundi*, the graves not only symbolise a silenced past and suffering, but have subversive potential. Although graves may be used by the perpetrators to “destroy incriminating evidence” of atrocities (Robben 2015: 57), they also have subversive capabilities of proving that “massacres took place and possibly facilitating prosecutions” (Eppel 2004: 57). Interlocutors argue that the “fast-track” or government-led exhumations are not bearing witness to the wounds of *Gukurahundi* history. Rather, the state-sponsored exhumation practice serves to conceal evidence and shield the perpetrators from prosecution.

A Twitter user breathes a sigh of relief that the government won’t be able to “locate all the crime scenes”. *Gukurahundi* graves are constructed as needing to be protected in order to preserve evidence for justice efforts. Some argue that the perpetrators have to atone for the genocide as a pre-condition for carrying out exhumations. A Twitter user asserts that the perpetrators should first “consult the spirit” as exhuming the *Gukurahundi* victims without apologising would be a “violation of the spirit of the dead”. Besides the fear that evidence might be contaminated, another criticism of the “fast-track” *Gukurahundi* exhumations is that the process is led by the “perpetrators and their co-conspirators” (*Umthwakazireview.com* April 11, 2019).

*Umthwakazireview.com* provides a platform for Ndebele secessionist movements such as Mthwakazi Human Rights Restoration Movement (1893 MHRRM) to challenge the state-sponsored exhumations. 1893 MHRRM regards the “fast-track” exhumations as a “perpetrator designed and driven programme” meant to “interfere with crime evidence at mass grave burial sites of the victims of the Matebeleland *Gukurahundi* Genocide” (*Umthwakazireview.com* April 11, 2019). As such, the assumption is that the government-led programme would “tamper” and “destroy” evidence found in mass graves (*Umthwakazireview.com* April 11, 2019). Although the dominant online discourses is that *Gukurahundi* exhumations should not be detached from issues of justice, accountability and truth-telling, other online participants posit that the victims just need a “decent burial”. Siphosami Malunga argues that this “justice-reburials nexus” highlights the question of whether justice should be a pre-condition for reburials (*The Standard* May 3, 2019). Given the cultural and traditional imperatives, reburials may override the demands for justice.

### **Exhumations to Appease the Dead and “Heal the Living”**

A Twitter participant argues that thousands of *Gukurahundi* victims are still “buried in shallow graves” and surviving families want to “give them a decent

burial” and “mark the grave”. In this way, some social actors in the media buttress the topos of “decent burials” in their representations of the exhumations. Another Twitter user adds that: “*izihlobo azilalanga ngoxolo* (the spirits of our dead relatives are not at peace)” and hence, there is a need to perform “*umsebenzi wesintu* (traditional rituals)”. There is a call for *Gukurahundi* victims “buried away from their homes” to be “exhumed and buried at their rightful places” (*Kubatana.net* February 19, 2020) in order to conduct traditional rituals. As such, exhumations are intertwined with cultural needs, rather than merely political demands for justice and accountability. The lexical items such as “shallow graves”, “bush” and “rightful places” not only signify the places of burial for the *Gukurahundi* dead, but are also indicative of the problem of what some term as “bones in the wrong soil” (Jahn & Wilhelm-Solomon 2015) and “bones in the forest” (Eppel 2014). Given the bad deaths of *Gukurahundi* victims, the cultural needs surrounding the burials of those who lie in “unacceptable graves” were not met (Eppel 2006: 263). As such, these “bones in the forest” are supposed to be “properly buried next to homesteads” as this is the cultural norm amongst the Ndebele people (Eppel 2006: 278). The need to perform “*umsebenzi wesintu*” indicates that the spirits of the *Gukurahundi* dead are “angry and aggrieved” (Eppel 2004: 52). Thus, the reburials accompanied by appropriate rituals are regarded as necessary for honouring and appeasing the restless spirits.

The Chairperson of the NPRC, Selo Nare, asserted that the dead should be afforded a “decent burial” (*The Independent* April 10, 2020) in order to “heal the living” (*Chronicle* October 1, 2019). The notion of “healing the living” suggests that the families and communities are haunted by the restless spirits of *Gukurahundi* victims (Eppel 2006). There is a belief that until the aggrieved spirits are appeased, the families and communities may continue experiencing “bad luck” (Eppel 2006: 278) and “multiple calamities” (Eppel 2014: 408). Unappeased spirits are not able to “watch over their living” (Eppel 2006: 267). As a result, the bones of the *Gukurahundi* victims must be transferred from the “wilderness” to their “home” to ensure that the spirits of the dead are “inaugurated” as ancestors (Eppel 2006: 267). In other words, mass grave exhumations are perceived as tools for healing both the dead and the living (Eppel 2006).

## Conclusion

Media discourses on *Gukurahundi* mass graves are multiple, complex and nuanced. News websites and social media are central in shaping and framing our understandings of exhumation and reburials. Although state-owned news outlets such as *The Herald*, *The Chronicle* and *The Sunday Mail* are glorifying Mnangagwa for his plans to speed up the exhumation process, the private press and Twitter provide counter-hegemonic narratives. An analysis of

media discourses demonstrates that the Zimbabwean government intends to use the “fast-track” exhumation programme to reaffirm its necropower and manage the *Gukurahundi* dead. The government exercises its necropolitics through its power to decree, proclaim and outlaw the exhumations and reburial of *Gukurahundi* victims. Through its sovereignty, Mnangagwa’s regime is able to render the bodies of *Gukurahundi* dead “untouchable” as the massacres can be obscured and evidence of the crimes destroyed. However, Twitter engagements highlight that the regime’s necropower is not total, but can be resisted and fractured. Online users interpret *Gukurahundi* mass graves as crime scenes and evidence of genocide. As such, online participants mobilise and evoke discourses on human rights to denounce the state-engineered exhumations and demand justice and accountability for *Gukurahundi* crimes. At the same time, there is a tension between social actors who view justice as a precondition for *Gukurahundi* exhumations, and online users who want exhumations for the purpose of conducting proper burial rituals for their loved ones. Thus, the government has placed the surviving relatives in a quagmire of whether to exhume and rebury their loved ones, or to demand justice as a prerequisite for reinternments of bodily remains. The dilemma experienced by the people of Matabeleland and Midlands demonstrate the various forms and nuances of ZANU PF’s necropolitics. The regime exercises its necropolitical hold over the *Gukurahundi* dead by dictating how the survivors can exhume, rebury and mourn their loved ones. At the time of this writing, the “fast-track” exhumations are yet to be conducted. The *Gukurahundi* graves remain crime scenes and evidence of the wounds of history.

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**Mphathisi Ndlovu,**  
Stellenbosch  
mphathisindlovu@gmail.com