

The Language of the Gukurahundi Genocide in Zimbabwe: 1980-1987

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Summary

The Gukurahundi genocide in Zimbabwe claimed more than 20 000 lives in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of the country at the hands of the state and its militia for political and tribal reasons. This article seeks to demonstrate how language, through hate speech, naming, symbolisation, dehumanisation, and classification, justified and rationalised Gukurahundi. While the linguistic conventions used by state actors before and during Gukurahundi did not cause genocide, it created two social climates, one that legitimised tribal and political hatred, thus eliminating any social sanctions preventing genocide and the other that unmasked the state-sponsored genocide clothed as a necessary military exercise against dissidents. This article employs Allport's (1954) Scale of Prejudice and Stanton's (2016) eight stages of genocide as a tool of making sense of the social processes that create society's progression from prejudice and discrimination to genocide; how through language conventions, the unthinkable becomes acceptable through the erosion of moral, social, religious and rational boundaries. Linguistic conventions show how power is enacted through discourse, how language acts prepare and maintain the way for physical and material acts, and how the same language conventions generate permissions for Gukurahundi, the Rwanda genocide and the Holocaust, amongst others. To demonstrate the permissibility conditions for non-linguistic behaviours like Gukurahundi, this article addresses the metaphor of Gukurahundi, the dehumanisation of the victims, political and religious constructions and the re-construction of the 'other'.

Opsomming

Die Gukurahundi-volksmoord in die Matabeleland- en Middellande-provinsies van Zimbabwe het meer as 20 000 lewens geëis. Dié volksmoord is gepleeg deur staats- en verdedigingsmagte om politieke en stam-oogmerke te behaal. Hierdie artikel poeg om te toon hoe taal, deur middel van haatspraak, naamgewing, simbolisering, verontmensliking en klassifisering, die Gukurahundi kon regverdig en rasioneel kon maak. Hierdie linguïstiese konvensies word aangewend om te toon hoe taal gebruik is om mense se volksidentiteit af te baken terwyl dit ander se volksidentiteit afgemaak en bevestig het. Die linguïstiese konvensies wat voor en ná Gukura-hundi deur die staatsrolspelers ingespan is, het nie volksmoord veroorsaak nie, maar dit het twee maatskaplike klimaat geskep: een wat stam- en politieke haat wettig maak, en dus enige sosiale sanksies wat volksmoord sou verhoed, uit die weg ruim; en 'n ander wat 'n volksmoord wat deur die staat goedgekeur en bevorder word, en wat voorgehou word as nodige militêre optrede teen andersdenkendes, aan die kaak sou stel. Hierdie dokument gebruik Gordon Allport (1954) se Voor-oordeleskaal (*Scale of Prejudice*) en

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Gregory Stanton (2016) se agt stadiums van volksmoord om sin te maak van die sosiale prosesse wat dit vir die samelewing moontlik maak om van vooroordeel en diskriminasie tot by volksmoord te vorder. Dit kyk hoe taal-konvensies meebring dat die ondenkbare aanvaarbaar word deur morele, sosiale, godsdienstige en rasionele grense te ondermyn. Linguistiese konvensies werp lig op die wyse waarop mag deur diskoers bepaal word, hoe taal-handelinge die weg voorberei vir fisieke en wesenlike handelinge, en hoe dieselfde taalkonvensies verloop gegee het dat die Gukurahundi, die Rwandese volksmoord, die Jodeslagting, en-sovoorts kon plaasvind. Hierdie artikel gebruik die metafoer van die Gukurahundi, die verontmensliking van die slagoffer, politieke en godsdienstige konstruksie, en die rekonstruksie van die "ander" om te toon wat die toelaatbaarheidsvoorwaardes vir nie-linguistiese optrede, soos die Gukurahundi, is.

Introduction

The Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe were sites of the Gukurahundi that left an estimated 20 000 Ndebele speaking dead and thousands raped, tortured and starved during food embargos (Catholic Justice and Peace Commission's Report (CJPCR) 1997). From January 1983 to 1984, the government, led by Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, deployed militias and the North Korean trained Fifth Brigade troops in what is known as the Gukurahundi. The mainly chiShona speaking Fifth Brigade, which was supported by the CIO and the Police Internal Security Intelligence (PISI), was publicly mandated to eliminate dissidents. However, the targets of elimination were mainly ZAPU leaders, supporters and the people of Matabeleland and Midlands as they were perceived to be sympathetic to the ZAPU political party (Gatsheni-Ndlovu 2012). The focus of this article is not to engage with the Gukurahundi genocide as a whole, but to specifically look at how language acts were deployed by genocidists to dehumanise the other and denigrate the social identity of the victims as to rationalise Gukurahundi and to escalate the killings without assuming any sense of responsibility.

Language acts are central to any genocide (Donohue 2012). The Nazis referred to Jews as rats during the Holocaust; the Hutus called the Tutsis cockroaches in Rwanda, the Janjaweed referred to their victims as black donkeys. Gukurahundi was no exception as speech acts were used to define and dehumanise the perceived enemies, thus rationalising cruelty and genocide. The language used by the ZANU government officials removed all inhibitions that people normally have against treating other people as unpeople. The linguistics practices eroded protective norms and allowed for inhuman and prohibited actions to be carried out (Semelin 2003). Allport's Scale of Prejudice and Discrimination (1954) and Stanton's (1996) eight stages of genocide are the systematic processes of how the language of prejudice creates the slippery slope that leads to genocide. The approaches of these two provide one with a theoretical grounding in understanding the language of Gukurahundi and how speech acts allow for the permissibility of violent non-linguistic behaviours. In discussing the Rwandan genocide,

Tirrell (2012) explains the role of linguistic violence in setting the social conditions for a genocide (Tirrell 2012: 176):

... linguistic violence, itself constituting psychosocial and cultural harm to its targets, also created permissions for the very acts of physical violence they sought to avoid. If we take seriously Wittgenstein's view that a language is a way of life, then we must examine the broader Rwandan social context in understanding how linguistic practices contributed to the genocide.

Linguistic violence allows or justifies the enactment of violence as it classifies the targeted out-group from start to finish which is an intrinsic part of the genocidal process (Donohue 2012). Tirrell adds that language alone does not lead to the commission of genocide, "but the infusion of linguistic violence into the social body engendered a breadth and depth of physical violence that went beyond war and into genocide" (2012: 200). The article proceeds to look at the scale and stages of genocide put forward by Allport and Stanton before applicable speech acts are discussed.

Scale and Stages of Genocide

Allport's (1954) Scale of Prejudice and the eight stages of genocide by Stanton (2016) contextualises how language has been used to justify, rationalise and sometimes give impetus to genocide. Since this study focuses on language, the other levels and stages in the scale of prejudice and genocide will not be applied, as this study is limiting itself to language aspects of scales and stages.

Allport's Scale of Prejudice has five scales in this order; antilocution, avoidance, discrimination, physical attack, and extermination. Antilocution is when an in-group freely purports negative images of an out-group. Antilocution includes hate speech that sets the stage for prejudice, discrimination, and dehumanisation. The dehumanisation of the Gukurahundi targets through speech acts and how language is used to deny people their human-ness is discussed at length in this study as part of the antilocution stage. The second scale, avoidance, is where members of the in-group actively avoid people of the out-group with possible psychological harm due to isolation being the consequence. The third level is discrimination. This is where the out-group is discriminated against by denying them opportunities and services such as Matabeleland and Midlands people being deliberately denied food during the drought period during the time of Gukurahundi (Cameron 2018). Discrimination includes behaviour that disadvantages the out-group by preventing them from achieving goals, getting an education or jobs, etc. The penultimate scale is the physical attack where the in-group carries out violent attacks on individuals or groups, and this entails physical harm. The last stage is extermination, where the in-group seeks extermination or removal of the

out-group. Examples of this last scale are the tribal hygiene motivated Gukurahundi genocide in Zimbabwe, the Cambodian genocide, the Darfur genocide, the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, and the Rwandan genocide, among others.

What is interesting is the role played by the language of Gukurahundi in the antilocution scale that fuelled the killing of the 20 000 people in Zimbabwe soon after the country achieved flag independence. Allport (1954) explores how prejudice and discrimination operate and how they led to the growth of anti-Semitism in Germany in the years leading up to World War Two. The scale has been used to analyse segregation in America, South Africa, and the genocide in Rwanda. Allport demonstrated how the unthinkable becomes acceptable through the erosion of moral and rational boundaries. In the dehumanisation of the victims through speech acts and other rhetoric strategies, this article will show that the Zimbabwean ZANU government created the enemy and devalued the targets of Gukurahundi, thus rationalising and fuelling the atrocity. In antilocution, language acts manifest prejudice. If these acts go unchallenged, they are seen as permissible by some people that discrimination is acceptable, and some people will act just as the Rwanda Hutus were encouraged to call the Tutsis cockroaches and the Janweed in Darfur calling the “other” dogs and black donkeys just before the genocide.

In eight stages of genocide, Stanton (2016) agrees with Allport in how language acts are a slippery slope towards genocide, starting with the classification of people as them and us. The classification is mainly based on race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. Gukurahundi was based on ethnicity as the victims were from the Ndebele ethnicity and aligned ethnicities (Cameroon 2018). This stage is followed by symbolisation, where names and symbols are given to classifications. Before and during the Gukurahundi, the ZAPU political party and its leader, Dr Nkomo, came to symbolise anything Ndebele, and these symbols were associated with hate and banditry by the ZANU government. The third, which is dehumanisation, is the denying of the humanity of the other, where the members of the out-group are reduced to vermin, insects, animals, and diseases. The first three stages are the basis of this study, and they link with Allport’s scale of antilocution and discrimination and the language of Gukurahundi. The following stages in Stanton’s eight stages are organisation, polarisation, preparation and extermination, and denial, where victims get blamed for their victimhood. The study proceeds to look at how language, including naming, was used for prejudice, dehumanisation, and othering of people for genocide purposes.

Gukurahundi

Gukurahundi was the code name for the Fifth Brigade soldiers. This army was sanctioned by the then Prime Minister and later President of Zimbabwe,

Robert Mugabe, to dismantle ZAPU and the defected military wing Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) officials (CCJPZ 1997: 45). The term Gukurahundi has also been simultaneously used to refer to the genocide of the 20 000 Ndebele speaking people and the government-sanctioned dehumanising acts in Matabeleland and Midlands regions between 1980 and 1984. Naming the genocide Gukurahundi is of interest here as it is part of the genocide speech acts. Gukurahundi is a colloquial Shona expression meaning "the early rain that washes away the chaff before the summer rains" (Sithole & Makumbe 1997: 133). At face value, the term is a positive one as it refers to the rains that wash away the old in preparation for a new beginning. However, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) points out that although this rain opens the way for new ecological order, at times, this early storm also destroys crops and weeds, huts and forests, people and animals. When used in reference to people, it becomes a term that denotes a brutal washing away of unwanted people to set a new order. In this case, the new order was the setting of a ZANU-PF one-party state.

Former President of Zimbabwe, Mugabe, declared that he was suspicious of people who did not wish to join ZANU-PF or attend its meetings. Mugabe could not "understand the intentions of people who refuse to join the party that was responsible for the independence and freedom of Zimbabwe" (Phimister 2009: 473); hence these Matabeleland and Midlands people who were treated with suspicion were the dirt that had to be washed away (Ngwenya 2018; CCJP 2007; Meredith 2008). During the pass-out parade of the North Korean trained Brigade, Mugabe is reported to have said that "the knowledge you have acquired will make you work with the people, plough and reconstruct" (Ngwenya 2018: 25). Not to be outdone in extending the dirt and cleaning metaphor, on 5 April 1983 in an article from *The Chronicle* newspaper, headlined "Nkayi Povo denounce Nkomo", Mhangagwa, a State Security Minister at the time of the massacres and the current President of Zimbabwe, is reported as saying the Fifth Brigade had "come to Matabeleland like fire and in the process of cleansing the area of the dissident menace had also wiped out their supporters" (*The Chronicle* 1983). The Gukurahundi became a metaphor and a political strategy of annihilating all those opposed to the Chimurenga ideology and ZANU-PF hegemony. Genocide was used to settle a political problem as "violence was embraced as a legitimate tool of resolving political questions and issues" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012: 7).

The people of Matabeleland and Midlands as the chaff were Fanon's (1963) "wretched of the earth"; Mamdani's (1996) "subjects" rather than "citizens" and Mignolo's (2009) "dispensable and bare lives" that Gukurahundi had to cleanout. The people of Matabeleland and Midlands became the unpeople who are "the modern equivalent of the "savages" of colonial days, which could be mown down by guns ... in circumstances where the perpetrators were hailed as upholders of civilisation" (Curtis 2004: 2). The people characterised as chaff have no human dignity and are subjected to the

inversion of human rights (Moyo 2017). Just like the Holocaust, the Darfur, and the Rwandan genocide, the victims were collateral damage, and their demise was deemed necessary for setting new humanity afoot without the unpeople.

The open embracing of Gukurahundi as a strategy within ZANU-PF is traced by Gatsheni-Ndlovu (2012) to 1979, a year that was declared “Gore reGukurahundi” (The Year of the Storm) (Sithole & Makumb 1997). However, the strategy was used since the formation of ZANU in 1963. The strategy is an embracing of violence as a political tool directed towards the real and perceived enemies. The Gukurahundi was the “gun idea” that was used to clean the rot (Gatsheni-Ndlovu 2015). From the onset, Gukurahundi had a political goal of destroying the white coloniser and the “internal settlement puppets,” the capitalist system, and all other obstacles to ZANU-PF ascendancy (Gatsheni-Ndlovu 2012).

As a “policy of annihilation; annihilating the opposition (black and white)” (Makumbe 1997: 133), Gukurahundi in pre-independence was deployed against ZAPU structures inside Rhodesia (Moore 1995) and ZIPA cadres within ZANU. Gatsheni-Ndlovu (2012) states that Gukurahundi was designed to deal with sell-outs and counter-revolutions that needed to be liquidated. The internal discipline included prolonged public beatings to the extent that the victim soiled themselves (Mazarire 2011). The violent streak of the Gukurahundi is further evidence in the words of Robert Mugabe in 1977, who celebrated the violent destruction of Zimbabwean People’s Army (ZIPA) in these words: “We warned any person with a tendency to revolt that the ZANU axe would fall on their necks ...” (quoted Gatsheni-Ndlovu (2012). Soon after attaining flag independence, the cleansing rain was unleashed by ZANU-PF upon ZAPU, ex ZIPRA, and the population of Matabeleland and Midlands to maintain a one-party rule. The aim of the Gukurahundi extended beyond political enemies to those that embody linguistic and cultural difference as one of the dissidents attested that (Alexander, McGregor & Ranger 2000: 200):

The Gukurahundi wasn’t a good fighting unit. It was trained to reduce the Matabeleland population, it was killing civilians. The Gukurahundi weren’t soldiers, where do you see soldiers who sing when on patrol? They were looking for civilians not other soldiers, so we would come across them singing and we would take cover. Soon after you’d hear people crying in their homes ... [W] e’d clash with them, but instead of following us, they’d call for the villagers. That’s where you’d hear bazookas and AKs firing into homes.

The deliberate and gruesome actions of the genocidists were based on the self-conceited and self-righteous work of cleansing the land of the unpeople in the form of PF-ZAPU, ex-ZIPRA, and Ndebele speaking people. Naming the genocide Gukurahundi not only seemed to justify the cleaning of dirt but also displays how the lives and bodies of the victims were reduced to mere chaff and collateral damage of a larger grand scheme.

The following section on dehumanisation builds on Allport's and Stanton's language of prejudice as the victims were continuously portrayed as unhuman. The naming of Gukurahundi set the stage for future dehumanisation and prejudice against the Ndebele speaking people, for these people were not human, but chaff and dirt, thus making it permissible to commit the unthinkable, that is, state-run genocide.

Dehumanisation and Rhetoric of Enmity

The speech acts by the political actors of the time served to dehumanise the Ndebele-speaking people and the followers of the ZAPU political party. All genocides in history have tended to dehumanise or remove the humanness of the other as to normalise their killing (Donahue 2012; Tirrell 2012; Smith 2011). Dehumanisation has many interpretations, and in this context, Smith provides a befitting explanation of what dehumanisation is (Smith 2011: 26-27):

When we dehumanise people we don't just think of them in terms of what they lack, we also think of them as creatures that are less than human. To make this clear, it's useful to contrast my concept of dehumanisation with its most common alternatives. It's sometimes said that people are dehumanised when they're not recognised as individuals. This happens when they are treated as numbers, mere statistics, cogs in a bureaucratic machine, or exemplars of racial, national, or ethnic stereotypes, rather than as unique individuals. This isn't what I mean by dehumanisation. Taking away a person's individuality isn't the same as obliterating their humanity. An anonymous human is still human.

Denigrating people is not the same as denying their humanity, as much as relegating people to inferior beings is still not dehumanisation in the context of genocide as inferior human beings are still human, but dehumanised recipients of genocide are subhuman animals. The appearance of being human does mean that one is human; hence dehumanised people appear human but are seen as subhuman (Smith 2011). Being human goes beyond the physical appearance to include complexities of hierarchy, race, culture, notions of value, and cosmic order. Daniel Goldhagen states that "the term dehumanisation is rightly a commonplace of discussions of mass murder. It is used as a master category that describes the attitudes of killers, would-be killers, and larger groups towards actual and intended victims" (2010: 191) while Stanton (1996), in eight stages of genocide, notes that in genocide "one group denies the humanity of the other group. Members of it are equated with animals, vermin, insects, or diseases. Dehumanisation over-comes the normal human revulsion against murder. At this stage, hate propaganda ... is used to vilify

the victim group”. To dehumanise in genocidal terms is to construct the other as the sub-human, the non-human, or the antihuman collective.

Dehumanising the other is critical in starting and fuelling genocidal acts like Gukurahundi, and this is done through speech acts. Dehumanisation through speech and linguistic acts is not a way of talking but a way of thinking. Thinking leads to action or fuels existing action, and thinking of others as less than human opens the doors to genocide (Smith 2011). Smith notes that dehumanising speech acts are a scourge that acts as psychological lubricants and limits inhibitions, and inflames destructive passions. Tirrell (2010) mentions that in the case of Rwanda, Leopold Twagirayezu, a convicted génocidaire from Bugasera region, told of how in one moment they socialised with Hutus, shared meals, and participated in social gatherings and never at one point did he ever think it will be possible to kill fellow Tutsis, it was unimaginable. However, that changed as the Tutsis were normalised as cockroaches, snakes, and tall trees that needed cutting. The dehumanising speech acts empowered the victimisers to perform gruesome acts that, under normal circumstances, would have been unthinkable. This is not to say language acts caused the Rwandan genocides or the Gukurahundi; however, language acts make genocide possible and normalise the unthinkable. The unthinkable becomes thinkable as the victims and potential victims are no longer humans, and moral considerations that are generally accorded to human beings do not apply. The stripping of would-be victims of their humanity was necessary, just as Smith states that (2011: 4-5):

Now, take someone and imagine that their humanity has been stripped away from them. What’s left? When the founding fathers dehumanised their slaves, what remained of them? When European colonists dehumanised Native Americans or Nazis dehumanised Jews, what remained? In their eyes, what was left was a creature that seemed human – had a human-looking form, walked on two legs, spoke the human language, and acted in more-or-less human ways – but which was nonetheless not human.

Reducing the victims of Gukurahundi to chaff that had to be cleaned away and cockroaches that needed pesticides was more than a symbolic reference to Ndebele speaking people as likesubhumans, but this meant that they were literally subhumans. Smith (2011) further explains how dehumanisation works in opening the doors for cruelty and genocide. He explains that through dehumanisation, some beings, who later become victims, are made to appear human, but beneath the surface, they are not human, and it is this beneath the surface that matters. A few cases of genocide will illustrate this point. Before and during the Holocaust the Jews were called the *Untermenschen* (subhumans). The appearance of being human on the part of the Jews was a façade. Hitler was convinced that the Jews were leeches that posed a threat to all that was noble in humanity and its civilisations. In 1943, he proclaimed that “today, international Jewry is the ferment of decomposition of peoples

and states, just as it was in antiquity. It will remain that way as long as peoples do not find the strength to get rid of the virus” (McFarren & Iglesia 2013: 560). Thus, the Holocaust was a response to a pestilence.

Emmerson Mnangagwa, on 5 March 1983, at a rally in Victoria Falls, in the same dehumanising language as in the Holocaust, likened ZAPU followers and the Ndebele speaking population in general to cockroaches and bugs who posed a threat to the good of the country hence government had to bring “DDT” pesticide to get rid of them. The suggestion of harsh a pesticide to deal with perceived cockroaches underlines the gravity of the solution needed to annihilate the problem people. The cockroaches and bugs were supporters of ZAPU and the people of the Matabeleland and Midlands. The cockroaches are popular symbols in genocidal communication, and Tirrell says this of cockroaches (2011: 200):

What are some of the inferences we can make about calling a person/human A “cockroach”? Common inferences include that cockroaches are pests, dirty, ubiquitous, multiply rapidly, are hard to kill, ought to be killed, show emergent tendencies when in groups, are resilient, carry diseases, can go long periods without food or water, tend to only emerge at night when they are hard to see.

The cockroaches and the bugs as vectors of contagion and parasitic organisms are not accorded any moral and human rights, thus making it easier to exterminate 20 000 of them. As Smith (2011) states, it is wrong to kill a human being, but it is permissible to exterminate cockroaches and bugs. This explains the impunity that characterised the extermination of the victims, which included raping of women, torture, and brutal killings. The common modus operandi was to rape women so that they can conceive Shona children, thus genealogically limiting the spread of cockroaches (Ngwenya 2015; Alexander et al. 2000). Just as the gas chambers and the Einsatzgruppen were a response to the Jewish sub-humanness, DDT became a metaphor informing the brutal killing. It is such dehumanisation that gets aroused, exacerbated, and exploited by victimisers to achieve tribal hygiene in Zimbabwe.

Mugabe referred to the ZAPU, and its leader Joshua Nkomo, as a Cobra in a house, and the only way to “effectively deal with a snake is to strike and destroy its head” (Nkomo 1984: 2). Nkomo and the perceived ZAPU supporters were reduced to a cobra snake that needed to be hunted and killed as it is a threat to human life (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Mpofu 2017). The same snake symbolism is common in the Rwandan genocide as Tutsis were also referred to as snakes (*inzoka*) that had to be killed. Very few communities like snakes, and Smith observes that the use of this snake symbol was meant to fuel violent action against the other (Smith 2011: 200):

This use of “inyenzi” is also action-engendering. Calling someone “inyenzi” was signalling that they were to be killed. Calling them “inzoka” (snake) often

brought about dismemberment of the person's limbs and death by exsanguination.

Such demeaning and derogatory rhetoric legitimised actions like assault and murder. It is such speech acts by Mugabe that rationalised genocide and tribal hygiene.

A ZANU-PF Minister of Manpower Development and Planning, Edgar Tekere, not to be outdone in the thingification of ZAPU and its perceived Ndebele followers, stated that "Nkomo and his guerrillas are germs in the country's wounds and they will have to be cleaned up with Iodine. The patient will have to scream a little" (Astrow 1983: 167). The medicinal imagery of Iodine, which was meant to clean germs, reflects the continued dehumanisation as the "guerrillas" were no longer humans, but pathogens and screaming a little seemed a small price to pay for tribal and political hygiene. By reducing a group of people to some nasty germ, the government persuaded itself that the other is not human, and therefore it is legitimate to murder them.

A few other examples will highlight that the dehumanising Gukurahundi speech acts were not unique but part of a worldwide genocidal trend. In 1937, following the capture of China, Japan committed atrocities for six weeks in the city of Nanjing in December, where Chinese people were butchered, tortured, and raped. Of this genocide, Honda Katsuichi recalls one former staff sergeant telling him of innocent babies thrown into boiling water and "of soldiers disembowelling pregnant women and stuffing hand grenades up women's vaginas and then detonating them". This cruelty was made possible through the dehumanisation of the other through the catalyst "*chancorro*", the term which the Japanese gave to the Chinese, a broad term for bugs and animals with one person who participated in the genocide stating that "But ... I thought of them as animals or below human beings." (Smith 2011: 23)

The Communist Party of Kampuchea (Cambodia) in the 1970s embarked on massive ethnic cleansing that wiped out, like pigs and dogs, a fifth of men. At the same time, women were mainly persecuted and imprisoned (Jacobos 2014). In Rwanda, the *Kangura* magazine published an article that referred to the Tutsi as despicable subhuman creatures, and this was a year before the genocide. *Kangura* published a notorious article describing the Tutsi as vile subhuman creatures. The article "*A Cockroach Cannot Give Birth to a Butterfly*" stated that (Sinema 2015: 27):

It is true. A cockroach gives birth to another cockroach The history of Rwanda shows us clearly that a Tutsi always stays the same that he has never changed. The malice, the evil is just as we knew them in the history of our country. We are not wrong in saying that a cockroach gives birth to another cockroach. Who could tell the difference between the inyenzi who attacked in October 1990 and those of the 1960s? They are all linked ... their evilness is the same. The unspeakable crimes of the inyenzi of today ... recall those of their elders: killing, pillaging, raping girls and women, etc.

Dehumanisation was pivotal in this genocide as the Tutsis called inyenzi/ cockroaches, rats, vermin, flesh-eating monsters, disease, snakes, and weeds that needed to be cleaned up through “operation insecticide” (Human Rights Watch 1997). In Darfur, the Janjaweed referred to their victims as sons of dogs, black donkeys, and dirty inhumans (Hagan & Raymond-Richmond 2008). By referring to the ZAPU supporters and perceived Ndebeles in general as chaff, cockroaches, bugs, germs, and snakes, the Zimbabwean government rationalised the atrocities by removing the humanness from its victims and allowed for the slippery slope towards genocide as seen in the Allport and Stanton scales and stages of genocide.

Of Religion and Deification

The Christian Bible, symbolic of religion, is said to be replete with moral truths. However, during Gukurahundi, the Christian scriptural readings, parodies, and metaphors were used to sanction the genocide. History is littered with evidence of biblical scripture being used to justify cruel acts. Paul’s defence of slavery, patriarchy, and imperial power is used to sanctify an unjust status quo. German Reformation leader Martin Luther’s condemnation of the Jews as a “whoring” people, the Spanish Crown’s justification of genocide against Indians in the Americas, and authoritarian, xenophobic supporter of slavery, Andrew Jackson’s defence of chattel slavery, and the Indian Removal Act of 1830 are just a few examples of perverted biblical interpretation. The Zimbabwean government used spiritual metaphors and parody to rationalise gruesome killings and to sanitise genocide.

In 1983, Mnangagwa stated that “Blessed are they who will follow the path of the government laws, for their days on earth will be increased. But woe unto those who will choose the path of collaboration with dissidents for we will certainly shorten their stay on Earth” (*The Chronicle* 2016). Sutherland Howard (2009) states that the beatitudes are meant to deliver people from violence and anger. The ZANU-PF government, through the manipulation of the beatitudes for genocidal objectives, assumed a messianic status and could grant both blessings and deaths. Religion has been used to unmask the evilness of genocide and to sanction as God ordained (Van’t Spijker 2006). The use of biblical allusions by ZANU-PF on the decimation of the Ndebele speaking population assumed a higher moral authority, that of doing God’s work by cleansing the land of those who lacked the characteristics of worthy disciples.

One of the Gukurahundi’s military leaders is on record as referring to himself as “Jesus” and “one of the leaders of the Gukurahundi” (Moyo 2012: 243). “Jesus”, speaking in chiShona while someone translated to isiNdebele, went on to say he had come to kill the Ndebeles because they were dissidents (Phimister 2009: 474). Those that were victims of genocide were worthy of

being punished, as they failed to adhere to the messianic desires and aspirations of ZANU-PF. The Gukurahundists always saw themselves as appointed and answerable to God with the former President Mugabe, declaring in a political rally in 2018 that “Only God, who appointed me, will remove me – not the MDC, not the British. Only God will remove me!” (Geoghegan 2008: 1). The deification of Mugabe and his ZANU-PF as only answerable to God, if not God himself, only brought hell as opposed to heaven on earth (Chitando 2020).

Referring to ZAPU followers and Dr Joshua Nkomo as a cobra snake in the house that must have its head destroyed (Nkomo 1984: 2), Mugabe justified the atrocities committed. Nyanda (2017: 333) explains that this metaphor of striking the serpent to destroy its head makes one envision Mugabe as a “god” who mercilessly pronounced his “first punishment against mankind in the Garden of Eden after man’s first act of sin. This god-like quality of Mugabe meant that his word was final and could not be challenged; hence, the violence that followed led to the deaths of thousands of people”. Nyanda links pronouncement of this punishment with Mugabe’s 1982 address to Parliament that warned that “some of the measures we shall take are measures that 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”.

Religion has always been part of ZANU-PF’s struggle liberation ideology since the days of the armed struggle. Gatsheni-Ndlovu notes that (Gatsheni-Ndlovu 2012: 3):

When ZANU-PF embarked on an armed liberation struggle beginning in the late 1960s, it harkened back to the primary resistance of 1896-1897 as it formulated its sought oracular blessing from the Shona religion, and claimed to be continuing the unfinished liberation struggle that had begun in the late nineteenth century.

Classification Language

As part of language acts, naming of people, places, or events is more than mere labels as they help “structure and nuance the way we imagine and understand the world” (Peteet 2005: 153). Naming and the ability to name are powerful political tools due to the power relations involved. In naming, one assigns characteristics to what is named, and these characteristics legitimise or delegitimise what is being named (Lunch 2017; Parkin 1998). During Gukurahundi, ZANU-PF named its perceived ‘enemies’ as dissidents and Dr Nkomo as the Father of Dissidents. Gukurahundists used naming to denigrate the social identity of anyone associated with PF-ZAPU. PF-ZAPU was named as a murderous organisation by Minister Nkala, thus delegiti-mising it as a genuine political party. Nkala is on record stating that (CCJP 1997: 60):

We want to wipe out ZAPU leadership. You've (sic) only seen the warning lights. We haven't yet reached full blast ... the murderous organisation and its murderous leadership must be hit so hard that it doesn't feel obliged to do the things it has been doing.

The term "dissidents" was extended to include any ZAPU member and any Ndebele speaking people from the regions of Matabeleland and Midlands. While the public discourse was that the Fifth Brigade was hunting the dissidents, the then Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, state that they could tell between the dissidents and helpers of the dissidents (*London Times* 1983):

We must deal with this problem, ruthlessly Don't cry if your relatives get killed in the process Where men and women provide food for dissidents, when we get there, we eradicate them. We don't differentiate when we fight, because we can't tell who is a dissident and who is not.

The crackdown on 'dissidents' in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces was indicative of the narrowness of the reconciliation policy in terms of its definition and goal, as it was taken to mean reconciliation between ZANU-PF and the Rhodesians to the exclusion of other political parties, some of which were conceived in ethnic terms, like ZAPU (Marongwe, Mawere & Duri 2018). Mnangagwa also referred to the same Ndebele-speaking people as dissidents and bandits. To build on what has been argued earlier, *The Chronicle* newspaper of 5 March 1983, reported that the minister (*The Chronicle* 2016):

Likening the dissidents to cockroaches and bugs, the minister said the bandit menace had reached such epidemic proportions that the government had to bring "DDT" [a now banned popular pesticide] (Five Brigade) to get rid of the bandits, "the minister went further to tell the audience at a Victoria Falls political rally that, 'The government had two options to deal decisively with the dissident menace. One was to burn down all villages infested with dissidents, and the other was to bring in the Five Brigade', The government chose the latter" before adding that "it was necessary to destroy the infrastructure that nurtured the bandits".

Dr Joshua Nkomo, who was forced into exile in 1983, was labelled the "father of dissidents". In 2001, Nkomo was posthumously named as the Father of the Nation, and "Umdala Wethu" as he was recognised as the symbol of Unity because of the Unity Accord signed in 1987 (Muchemwa 2010; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). The same ZANU-PF that hunted him as the "father of dissidents" called him "Father of the Nation". Enos Nkala called Nkomo a tribalist, self-imposed and "self-appointed Ndebele King", and Nkala saw his life calling as "to crush Nkomo and forget about him" (*The Chronicle* 1980). In his final years, Nkala said his statements were nothing more than political gimmicking with no malicious intent.

Pettet asks, “What is the relationship between naming and action? Do rhetoric and particular forms of naming and renaming inform particular kinds of actions?” (1996: 158). Naming, representations, discourses, and imagery engenders, legitimises specific actions because it occurs in the institutional context of power, in this case, the Gukurahundi genocide. Pettet (1996) further states that carefully calibrated naming, rhetoric, and war of words often precede actual military conflict and portending action. However, in the Gukurahundi context, the naming rhetoric sanitised and fuelled the genocide. The ideological invocations of such naming saw the Ndebele people and ZAPU leaders as tribal outlaws and politically non-conformists. The moral lexicon deployed by the ZANU-PF gave moral superiority that rationalised the killing, maiming, and raping of the people of Matabeleland and Midlands.

Conclusion

Language that classifies and dehumanises while clothed in religious parody and metaphors signals the slippery slope towards genocide. Schaba (2000) noted that the road to genocide in Rwanda was paved with hate speech, and Munyandamusta (2007) adds that “words have killed my country” in reference to the Rwandan genocide. However, such speak is true of the Zimbabwean Gukurahundi genocide. Allport (2009) and Stanton (2011) observed that in all genocides, language acts had played a role in rationalising and sanitising atrocities. The ZANU-PF government used language to dehumanise the other; religious metaphors, parody and allusions were marshalled into morally justified atrocities. At the same time, the Gukurahundists assumed the role of a “god” who dispenses blessings and curses depending on one’s political and tribal leanings. Naming and labelling the other as “dissidents”, “snakes”, and cockroaches have the powerful effect of alterity beliefs and licencing inferences about those to whom those speech acts are directed to. It is such dehumanisation rhetoric that encourages, legitimises, and maintains violent action against the other. Thus, Language played a role in licencing the Gukurahundi genocide.

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