

Legitimising the Status Quo through the Writing of Biography: Ngwabi Bhebe's *Simon Vengayi Muzenda & the Struggle for and Liberation of Zimbabwe*

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Summary

Simon Vengayi Muzenda & the Struggle for and Liberation of Zimbabwe (2004) is a biography written by historian Ngwabi Bhebe in honour of illustrious Zimbabwean nationalist and politician, the late Vice President Simon Muzenda. The book calls for debate on the way it was constructed and its assumptions about the writing of biography and the larger questions concerning national identity and unity. Human society is differentiated along various variables such as social classes, ethnic and racial groups, gender, age and even geographical environment. Individuals and social groups hence are heterogeneous due to these variables. The individuals and social groups have differing, often conflicting, needs and interests and occupy different and at times dissimilar positions of socioeconomic and political power and status. These groups have values, opinions and attitudes towards other individuals, groups and the world that they articulate or express in literature and the media. These expressions can reveal different types of individual and group differences. Due to these differences, each act of expression by an individual or group, or each act of writing, is a potential site of struggle because there are competing needs and interests, as well as competing systems of values and work meant to justify the needs and values.

Opsomming

Simon Vengayi Muzenda & the Struggle for and Liberation of Zimbabwe (2004) is 'n biografie wat deur die historikus Ngwabi Bhebe ter ere van die vermaarde Zimbabwiese nasionalis en politikus, wyle Visepresident Simon Muzenda, geskryf is. Die boek is 'n oproep tot debat oor die wyse waarop dit saamgestel is en die aannames wat dit maak oor die skryf van 'n biografie sowel as die groter vrae oor nasionale identiteit en eenheid. Die menslike samelewing differensieer sigself op grond van verskillende veranderlikes soos sosiale klasse, etniese en rasgroepe, geslag, ouderdom en selfs geografiese omgewing. Individue en sosiale groepe is dus heterogeen as gevolg van hierdie veranderlikes. Die individue en sosiale groepe het uiteenlopende, dikwels botsende behoeftes en belange en bekleed verskillende, en soms ongelyke posisies ten opsigte van sosio-ekonomiese en politieke mag en

status. Hierdie groepe het waardes, menings en houdings jeens ander individue, groepe en die wêreld waaraan hulle uiting gee of wat hulle artikuleer binne die raamwerk van letterkunde en die media. Hierdie gevoelsverwoordinge kan verskillende tipes individuele en groepsverskille openbaar. As gevolg van hierdie verskille is elke uitdrukking deur 'n individu of groep, of elke skryfaksie, 'n potensiele worstelings-terrein aangesien daar mededingende behoeftes en belange, sowel as mededingende waarde- en werkstelsels is wat bedoel is om hierdie behoeftes en waardes te regverdig.

All types of writing are a “site of struggle”. Historian Ngwabi Bhebe’s biography of the late Zimbabwean nationalist and Vice President Simon Vengayi Muzenda challenges several key issues about social and political contestation (Clark & Ivanic 1997). These issues include the “art” of writing biography as a genre and its ideological purpose; the writing of biography has implications for discursive narratives of all types. The second key issue is how Bhebe attempts to build a popular sense of national identity through the person and image of Simon Muzenda. The above-mentioned issues inevitably demand the enunciation of the role of biographer and all imaginative creative narrators in constructing discourses of nation-building, the promotion of particular class and ideological positions, and to legitimise the hegemony of the ruling ZANU (PF) political party to which Muzenda belonged and was party Vice President. There are instances when the reader becomes curious to know the relationship between the biographer Bhebe and Muzenda and the ruling ZANU (PF) to better understand the way Muzenda’s story – and by extension the history of Zimbabwe – is constructed.

Among the challenges of political development cited by Chazan, Ravenhill & Rothchild (1992: 15-16) are the one of identity, that is “fostering a common sense of purpose among diffuse groups”; and legitimacy: “arriving at a consensus on the valid exercise of power”. Through writing this book Bhebe contends with these crucial issues. He eulogises Muzenda and minimises the significance of the former statesman’s transgressions and, at times, outright criminal activities such as when political contestant and Muzenda’s rival in the Gweru Parliamentary election of 1995, Patrick Kombayi, was maimed by gunfire. Bhebe sympathises with the ruling ZANU (PF) and its controversial land reform programme. In constructing a favourable, benevolent, humane and father-figure portrait of Muzenda, he simultaneously promotes the general policies and interests of ZANU (PF) and the Mugabe regime.¹

Whether one supports ZANU (PF) politics or not, one should acknowledge that all writing is located within the wider socio-political context. Writing and the values and philosophies attached to it, and systems and

1. I attended events where Bhebe spoke frankly about his support for the land reform programme.

mechanisms concerning its distribution to audiences and other media such as newspapers, radio and television, are essentially political and linked to the way in which a social formation operates (Clark & Ivanic: 1997: 20). *Simon Vengayi Muzenda & the Struggle for and Liberation of Zimbabwe* (2004) was officially launched at the first government organised “Mzee Commemoration Bira” in Gweru graced by top government and ZANU (PF) officials such as Minister Mnangagwa and Midlands Province Governor Cephas Msipa. The *Biras* and other musical festivals, popularly called “galas”, are organised and sponsored by the Ministry of Information and Publicity and largely viewed as propaganda and entertainment musical occasions intended to spruce the party’s image and promote ZANU (PF) hegemony.

In his lifetime Muzenda, also popularly known as Mzee or Cde Mzee, was a Zimbabwean living hero. Bhebe chose to write about Muzenda while the latter was still alive, and the choice was probably motivated by the latter’s extraordinary socio-political and cultural achievements. Simon Muzenda is a descendent of the great Rozvi dynasties of the *moyo/moyondizvo* who are reputed to have ruled over precolonial Zimbabwe and built the legendary Great Zimbabwe monuments. Bhebe retraces Muzenda’s family tree over several centuries. The first two chapters are primarily about Muzenda’s lineage and how white colonialists systematically dispossessed his people of land and not about Simon Muzenda himself. This is not an unnecessary diversion, neither are the long sections in the biography that focus on the general history of Zimbabwe and other political luminaries without directly referring to Simon Muzenda. Such sections, rather than distract the reader from understanding the life of the national hero, provide a broader social, political and cultural context that can only clarify Muzenda’s actions, opinions, values and sensibilities at a given time. For instance, the background information about Muzenda’s Rozvi lineage is vital in understanding the power that Muzenda wielded in contemporary Shona traditional/cultural circles. At one time in Zambia, when ZANU (PF) cadres needed to be airlifted to Mozambique, spirit mediums² of such important cults as that of Ambuya Nehanda among them refused to board the plane. They believed flying was sacrilegious for the mediums. Muzenda told Bhebe in a 1999 interview how he had convinced the spirit mediums to board the plane:

We told them that it would be wise to appease the ancestors so that they could board the plane and when we got to Tete (in Mozambique) we would brew beer and persuade our ancestors to bless the trip, by telling them that they boarded that plane against their wishes They knew that I was a Rozvi descendant, who was supposed to know that boarding a plane was

2. In Zimbabwe spirit mediums are believed to be living people who are capable of mediating messages from the ancestral spirits.

against the will of traditional spirits. I agreed with them but claimed that it was possible to ask the permission of the ancestors to do the normally forbidden things.³

(Bhebe 2004: 202)

Muzenda's nickname, Mzee, is a short derivation of his full surname, but could also be taken in its Kiswahili sense meaning wise elder. During the liberation war ZANU (PF) had bases in Tanzania where Kiswahili is widely spoken, and cadres picked up some words and phrases that they imported to Zimbabwe at independence in 1980. Soon these words were in use and circulation amongst common Zimbabweans. The biography presents Muzenda as a wise elder and statesman, and as a shrewd, diligent and compassionate man of action. It narrates how Muzenda struggled to gain education in a racially discriminatory environment; how he quickly got involved in community and development work to improve the standard of living of black people, and how he rose through the ranks of nationalist parties until he became the first Deputy Prime Minister in independent Zimbabwe before becoming Vice President.

Bhebe ostensibly delves into the intimate social and political secrets of some prominent nationalists, and the result is that some politicians look vulnerable, fallible and mortal. For instance, was Muzenda in spite of his status in the party and status as an elder statesman a factional leader at provincial level? Did the late Michael Mawema⁴ sell out Emmerson Mnangagwa⁵ to the Rhodesian government for £1500? Did Ndabaningi Sithole, the first President of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), finally give in to the pressures of prison life and struggle partly because the Rhodesian regime had planted a story about his wife's infidelity? There is also the fight in jail between Enos Nkala⁶ and Edgar

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3. In an attempt to follow the so-called "African traditions" and "authenticity of culture", some people would avoid "contamination from the so-called "Western culture" including foods such as onions. This was common amongst spirit mediums.
 4. Michael Mawema was the first President of the National Democratic Party formed in 1960, before Joshua Nkomo took over leadership.
 5. Emmerson Mnangagwa has served as cabinet member in post-1980 Zimbabwe, is a member of the ZANU (PF) Politburo (the ruling party's highest executive organ), and was Speaker of Zimbabwe's Fifth Parliament.
 6. Enos Nkala is Zimbabwe's former Minister of Defence disgraced during the car scheme scandal of the late 1980s popularly known as the Willowgate scandal.

Tekere⁷ in which the latter was pummelled into submission. Mugabe had advised other prison colleagues not to stop the fight, saying, “If you leave people to fight it out, they release their anger completely” (Bhebe 2004: 150).

In the national struggle and the pre- and post-independent period, Muzenda did not remain unscathed. He endured the hardship of detention and prison life, lost a dear daughter, Theresa, during a 1977 Rhodesian raid at Chimoio in Mozambique. He was accused of factionalism and tribalism. Indeed, by the time he died he was still viewed as a godfather in the Masvingo Province where his faction was pitted against Eddison Zvobgo’s.⁸

Bhebe glosses over Muzenda’s weaknesses in an attempt to create a likeable grand personality of national importance around whom everyone regardless of race and ethnicity can emulate. Nonetheless, anyone who knows about the attempted murder of Patrick Kombayi and the at times violent factionalism in Masvingo Province will have certain reservations about the painted personality. The question arises whether Bhebe is deliberately deceptive in glossing over his subject’s shortcomings, so as to further a politically expedient ambition of nation-building and one common Zimbabwean identity. His grand project is the creation of national history, heroes, traditions, legends and “patriotic” consciousness. Patriotism in this case means accepting Muzenda, Mugabe and their policies.

The late Vice President of Zimbabwe who died in August 2003 has been described as “The Soul of the Nation” by the country’s mass media. Ngwabi Bhebe’s authorised biography tries to justify why Simon “Comrade Mzee” Muzenda deserves such an honour. According to Bhebe, for example, on several occasions during very trying times, Muzenda proved to be the indisputable conscience of the nation during both the armed struggle and the postcolonial period. He intervened on behalf of the younger Emmerson Mnangagwa when he was court-marshalled and sentenced to death by his ZIPRA colleagues in Zambia. Mnangagwa’s crime was that he publicly criticised the ZAPU president, Joshua Nkomo, through the Zambian press. The liberation party did not take lightly to such impertinence, and even while it was fighting against Rhodesian despotism, it paradoxically did not espouse total democracy and freedom of speech.

Once again, Bhebe says in Mozambique Muzenda convinced his comrades to spare the lives of dissident coup plotters within the party. Hence people such as Rugare Gumbo (now a government minister), Crispen Mandizvidza and Henry Hamadziripi were saved from summary execution

7. Edgar Tekere is a former Secretary General of ZANU, and in post-independent Zimbabwe he was Politburo member and cabinet member before he was expelled from the party.

8. The late Eddison Zvobgo was a Politburo member and cabinet minister.

and their sentences commuted to imprisonment. They were only released in time for Zimbabwe's first post-war elections.

Two years after independence the factionalism and bickering that characterised much of the history of the Zimbabwe nationalist movement again reared its head. While there are other dynamics that were responsible for conflict and tension in the nationalist movement, the popular pro-government perception is that manipulative white interests were largely to blame because they set the ZANU (PF) government upon the opposition ZAPU (PF). Double-dealing white agents working underground with top officials informed ZANU (PF) authorities about arms caches on ZAPU properties. The discovery of these heightened tension and strong tribal sentiments between the two parties,⁹ with ZAPU (PF) and ZANU (PF) ostensibly representing Ndebele and Shona interests respectively. The oft-spoken-about civil war in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces that caused untold suffering, misery, death and destruction was only inevitable. The role of ethnicity and "strong tribal sentiments" cannot be underestimated in fuelling the violence, and so was apartheid South Africa's manipulation and sponsorship of rebels. Muzenda lamented the loss of innocent lives, therefore made plans for Joshua Nkomo, the ZAPU President, to engage in peace talks with Mugabe (Bhebe 2004: 258-259). After the excesses of that war which continue to haunt the political imagination of the Zimbabwean nation today, the two major nationalist parties merged through the historic Unity Accord of 22 December 1987.

Bhebe has written a book that gives us a close glimpse into the operations of ZANU (PF) both before and after independence. Bhebe writes about backstabbing in the party, the schemings and rumour mongering. Names are mentioned. For instance, the late ZANU (PF) strongman Maurice Nyagumbo is alleged to have schemed to discredit Mzee as a tribalist and coup-plotter. Together with Edgar Tekere and Enos Nkala, Nyagumbo allegedly schemed Muzenda's downfall. Nyagumbo was bitter because Muzenda was a more powerful man in independent Zimbabwe because of his elevation to the position of party Vice President in Chimoio Mozambique. Prior to Chimoio, Nyagumbo was Muzenda's superior in the party, but the former's incarceration meant that he could not actively participate in the armed struggle when stakes were redistributed.

Bhebe extensively interviewed several ZANU (PF) politicians such as Emmerson Mnangagwa, Eddison Zvobgo, Richard Hove, Muzenda, Frederick Shava, Rugare Gumbo, and Henry Hamadziripi. Nonetheless, the biography's main weakness is the exclusion of voices of former ZANU (PF)

9. There is a corpus of history on the conflicts, factionalism, assassinations and coups within the nationalist movement stretching back to the liberation struggle (cf. Sithole 1979, Martin & Johnson 1981). However, the dominant discourse amongst nationalists tends to blame white capitalist interests for all these problems with minimal self-blame or self-criticism.

members who are now out of favour or those expelled from the party for so-called dissident activities. Even for former “dissidents”, such as Rugare Gumbo and Henry Hamadziripi, whom Bhebe interviews, the use of their voices is kept to a minimum. There is a sense in which Bhebe endeavours to maintain political correctness by abundantly using voices of Eddison Zvobgo and Emmerson Mnangagwa who have been arguably consistent and resolute ZANU (PF) cadres since the colonial times. Disgraced ex-ZANU (PF) cadres Edgar Tekere¹⁰ and Enos Nkala¹¹ are still alive and would have provided alternative views to the narratives of cadres who remained powerful and favoured in the party. Those men alleged to have practised tribalism and regionalism and plotted unsuccessful coups against both Mugabe and Muzenda, are alive and can still speak for themselves. Again there are no opinions and testimonies by members of PF ZAPU which united with ZANU PF in 1987. Bhebe’s “selective” omission of voices of dissidents and the minimisations of narratives by those “rehabilitated”, such as Rugare Gumbo, endorses the current party and government leadership. In that sense, Bhebe becomes an official historian. Bhebe intimates that he was very close to Muzenda and was treated as a family member. In the “Preface and Acknowledgements” section of the book Bhebe says, “My late brother Byron Hove was the first to bring me close to *Mzee*. Byron was very close to Muzenda and the whole family. Whenever in Mozambique during the struggle, Byron had stayed with *Mzee*, who had recruited him into Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). As a lawyer, Byron also attended to the Muzenda family legal affairs” (Bhebe 2004: iv).

This closeness to Muzenda partly explains Bhebe’s rather “partisan” approach. Writing itself is never a neutral endeavour as some social scientists may want to claim. Absolute objectivity is never possible. When Bhebe reveals the intra-party contradictions, tensions and struggles, the narrative legitimises the victors and infers the losers were in the wrong and counter revolutionary. This sensibility is eventually created in spite of the work’s conscious attempt to present a multiperspective approach that accommodates diverse ideas of the different Zimbabwean political actors. Bhebe strives to show that there is no homogenous/monolith discourse or narrative of the Zimbabwean story. However, the slight sense of triumphalism, moral uprightness if not outright vindication, found in the final words

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10. Edgar Tekere is a former ZANU (PF) Secretary General, and founder of the opposition party, Zimbabwe Unity Movement.
 11. Enos Nkala was Defence Minister after independence but fell out of favour after a scandal involving the purchasing of motor vehicles. He was also Defence Minister during the early 1980s when there was ethnic cleansing in Matabeleland, an episode now commonly known as Gukurahundi. Muzenda supposedly played a major role in stopping the feuding ZANU (PF) and ZAPU (PF) mass killings.

by those whose way of thinking emerged as triumphant from the various factional squabbles, brings the same danger of homogenising the Zimbabwean story.

In a Gramscian sense (1971 and 1978) Bhebe supports and promotes the dominant views of the ZANU (PF) government and its allies. He is actively engaged in the production and reproduction, just as the Zimbabwean mainstream pro-government media is, of ideas, values and attitudes sympathetic to the government through the creation of the personality of one of its prominent figures, Simon Muzenda. Bhebe's *reproductive function* involves the conscientisation of the mass population through the biographic narrative to a particular level of technical, cultural and moral development which corresponds to the needs of production as defined by the dominant social groups; he reproduces hegemonic rule and the status quo which are in the interests of the dominant ruling party and its allies. That Bhebe's writing serves the ideological and other interests of specific groups is not unusual. Clark and Roz (1997) have aptly observed that writing matters: "All writing is located within the wider socio-political context; this means that issues concerning writing, the values attached to it, and its distribution in society, are all essentially political and bound up with the way in which a social formation operates" (p. 20).

One marked absence in the biography is Muzenda's participation and responses to the rapid socio-political changes in the late 1990s and the early twenty-first century manifested by the growth of vigorous counter-hegemonic civil society (e.g. the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, the Law Society, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) and an opposition political party of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Growing state authoritarianism and the emergence and repression of dissent especially by urban-based civic groups have been noted in historical narratives on contemporary Zimbabwe (Masunungure 2004, Feltoe 2004, Raftopoulos 2004.)¹² Surprisingly, these are not accounted for in Bhebe's biography. However, it is a fact that by 2000 these counter-hegemonic struggles were remarkably pronounced: firstly, the government's proposed new constitution was rejected in a referendum that marked ZANU (PF)'s first defeat in the postcolonial era; and secondly, the opposition MDC scored massive votes in the parliamentary elections especially in urban and peri-urban constituencies. In 2002 ZANU (PF)'s Robert Mugabe and MDC's Morgan Tsvangirai fiercely contested the presidential election. Mugabe was declared the winner but Tsvangirai challenged the results in court. The period is also marked by political

12. The chapters cited were published in the same year as Bhebe and therefore, I assume, long after the manuscript had been completed. Nonetheless, they are there to validate the point made.

violence and repression, rampant inflation, allegations of corruption and the isolation of Zimbabwe by detractors of its policies on land and its human rights record (Melber 2003, Harold-Barry 2004, Raftopoulos 2004). All this is absent even though Bhebe reveals he “started serious work on Muzenda’s biography in June 1999” (Bhebe 2004: iv). In fact, focusing on memories of the liberation movement days of Muzenda’s life is a way of legitimising ZANU (PF) rule in the postcolonial era (Dansereau 2003: 24). Underplaying the postcolonial is a way of strategically avoiding what is politically uncomfortable and not reassuring in contemporary Zimbabwe. Bhebe tries to pre-empt criticisms about his glaring omissions by writing in the “Preface and Acknowledgements” section: “I am conscious that I have not exploited all the relevant sources” (Bhebe 2004: iv-v).

Bhebe’s problem may be that he is an academic and a university administrator whose fortunes are directly determined by those who are currently in power. It would therefore be unseemly for him as a government-appointed vice chancellor to be critical enough of his erstwhile bosses. Bhebe and a number of his lieutenants at the university have been beneficiaries of the land redistribution programme and the farm mechanisation programme.¹³ Ironically, writing is always a political act, and the writer and historian is a witting or unwitting political actor (Clark & Ivanic 1997). Probably a much more confident use of reflexivity would “exonerate” Bhebe if as a producer of history, he would also declare his own interests in the construction process so that the ultimate nature and form of the cultural product would easily be understood. Partisanship itself is justified when the objective it aspires to is a better standard of living, economic empowerment and humanism. The historian, like any other cultural practitioner, ought to reveal, systematically and vigorously, both his-/herself as individual practitioner, and his/her methods of accumulating data, processing it, and transmitting the final product (Ruby 1977, 2000: 152). Reflexivity entails a heightened awareness of self and the process of construction of cultural products. Reflexivity is perhaps what Paulo Freire (1993: 60) has conceptualised as “consciousness as consciousness of consciousness”.

Historian Luise White rather iconoclastically notes that “history is a messy business” which has no “perfect closure” to any event, and each fact about the event contains “inborn absences specific to its production” (2003: 2). She writes:

Not everyone is included in historical texts let alone when those texts are joined together to make a narrative of the past. But the very messiness of the lived past, the very untidiness of the closures, means that all that has been omitted has not been erased. The most powerless actors left traces of

13. I write here as an insider at Midlands State University headed by Professor Ngwabi Bhebe.

themselves in contemporary accounts, just as the most powerful actors crafted versions of events that attempted to cover their traces or to leave traces of their reinvented personas Historians, and political activists, do not give all historical accounts equal weight or equivalent readings. In this, historians and political activists ignore some traces and silence other interpretations of events. Traces are not legible in and of themselves, but they assert that no event – and no text – is ever alone. Events have rough and complicated antecedents, and each has an afterlife, often in the form of more texts it generates, both days and years after the event [T]here can be “a real competition” between political and historical texts which claim to represent the past. Texts compete by claiming (and proclaiming) their truth. Looking at how texts compete, at what they compete over, and what is at stake in their competition, is a way to articulate the relationship between them.

(White 2003: 2-3)

This lengthy quotation explains a lot about Bhebe’s book and the context within which it was produced. Already, in true attestation of the messiness of history, untidy closures, omissions, witting or unwitting (structured) absences and distorted facts about actors, former ZANU (PF) stalwart and now opposition politician Patrick Kombayi has already sued Bhebe and informant Shava for defamation in the Muzenda biography. It is possibly gross unethical practice and poor research methodology that Bhebe failed to cross-check facts with Kombayi regarding Fredrick Shava’s allegations, even though the university Bhebe heads is less than twenty minutes’ drive from Kombayi’s hotel premises where the latter is found nearly on a daily basis. The ethical implications arise when one considers the role and practices of a writer who is a part of a system of patronage, “an agent of the state”, so to speak, and has no desire to interview outspoken opponents of the current ZANU (PF) leadership as Kombayi.

The furore¹⁴ over Edgar Tekere’s (2007) autobiography that criticises Robert Mugabe as self-serving at a time when the dominant official narratives glorify him, is a striking example of how narratives do not essentially present “closed” undisputed statements about both personalities and historical events. The contestation of versions of the narratives is not unusual in Zimbabwe. Colonial versions often contested with nationalist

14. The state-controlled daily *The Herald* and the weekly *The Sunday Mail* tried to discredit Edgar Tekere’s book as full of falsehoods and therefore historically unreliable. Some privately owned newspapers also suggested that ZANU (PF) stalwarts who attended Tekere’s book launch were also in trouble for not defending the party and President Mugabe on the day. Tekere himself was banned from ZANU (PF) at the behest of his home province Manicaland’s application. His major misdemeanour was denigrating Robert Mugabe in his book. Tekere had just been readmitted into ZANU (PF) after his last expulsion in 1989 when he went on to form the opposition party Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM).

accounts of history over, say, who built the Great Zimbabwe monuments (Garlake 1973). Within the nationalist and liberation movement itself historians have competed against each other for the “truth” of the causes and results of prominent events and episodes. There are now several theses on the assassination of Herbert Chitepo, former ZANU chairperson (cf. White 2003, Sithole 1979, Martin & Johnson 1981). These apparent contradictions reveal the constructedness and arbitrariness of history and any other narrative, and also show the futility of attempts at claims to make grand narratives on any subject matter, including biographies.

Bhebe’s work gives a comprehensive outline of contributions made by Muzenda to Zimbabwean culture and the arts. Muzenda’s traditional dances and recitals of excerpts from *Julius Caesar* and Solomon Mutswairo’s *Feso* (1958) are well known by Zimbabweans. Indeed, it is the public recital of Mutswairo’s poem “Nehanda Nyakasikana” found in *Feso* that led to Muzenda’s first arrest on political charges. The old man, who is remembered by most Zimbabweans for his love for song and dance, saved himself during the defence when he sang a traditional song in court that also contained the controversial word “*Pfumojena*” (white spear). For Muzenda, art, dance and culture are not neutral but could be used to provide the nationalist movement with solid background and underpinnings in order to win the hearts and minds of the African people. In short, for Muzenda all art serves.

Muzenda made an invaluable contribution to the development of the Shona orthography working alongside the now defunct Literature Bureau in the 1950s. This is the orthography that until its revision in 1966 facilitated the publication of Shona classics such as Patrick Chakaipa’s *Karikoga Gumiremuseve* (1958), Bernard Chidzero’s *Nzvengamutsvairo* (1957), and Herbert Chitepo’s *Soko Risina Musoro* (1958). Muzenda was a founding member of the Shona Cultural Society in Bulawayo, which made contributions to the Advisory Committee on Shona orthography. Bhebe says, “[O]nce the orthography was agreed upon, the Shona Society started to encourage people to write books” (Bhebe 2004: 120).

According to Louis Smith “life writing” or biography is an empirical exercise that feeds on data drawn from letters, documents, interviews, etc. Biography, like history, thrives on the organisation of human memory, and the assemblage of documents, interview material, etc., are bits and pieces of that memory (Smith 1994: 291). A lot of archival material is used in biography to complement the interviews and other documents. Stylistically Bhebe does not pretend that his work is value-free and absolutely “objective”. There is occasional authorial intervention. For instance, when showing the depraved ways in which the Rhodesian regime broke Ndaningi Sithole’s revolutionary spirit, Bhebe is reflexive: “Since I am writing this book sitting in London, at a time when America and Britain and their allies are killing Iraqis for oil and are not making a secret of it, I am suddenly reawakened to the level of depravity to which our white brothers and sisters are capable of sinking” (2004: 153).

Whether Bhebe and his political cronies have the moral authority to make such judgements is debatable, but in the battle for the “hearts and minds” of the people such holier-than-thou claims are justifiable.

Clifford (1970) suggested five types of biography on a continuum. These are the “objective biography” which is “a factual collation, usually held together by a chronology, with minimal biographer interpretation”, that is, “the facts speak for themselves”, so to speak. Next follows the “scholarly historical” type that exhibits a heavy factual emphasis and a strong chronological outline but with increasing historical background as a main feature. An intrusive author is beginning to construct a form with context. This type is popular with academic biographers. The “artistic-scholarly” type involves exhaustive research, but the biographer assumes the role “of an imaginative artist, presenting the details in the liveliest and most interesting manner possible”. Then there are also the “narrative biography” and the “fictional biography” that also have their distinctive constructive and structural attributes.

The book makes good reading as an “artistic-scholarly” type of biography (Smith 1994: 292). Advancing on J. Clifford’s (1970) classification of different types of biographies Louis Smith (1994: 302) notes that the biographer’s major decision lies in the form or type of biography to be attempted. The underlying dimension of a biographical type or form is the degree of objectivity to subjectivity of the work, or the degree of intrusion of the author into the work.

In the true fashion of an artistic-scholarly biographer Bhebe creates an atmosphere and mood around Muzenda that makes him likeable in spite of his shortcomings. Bhebe engages the emotions and attention of readers, creating recurring motifs to reinforce certain special attributes of the subject. For instance, Bhebe tries to prove that Muzenda indeed was the wise, lovable, venerable “soul of the nation” with remarkable humanism and compassion for the country and the common people. He strives to endear him to the reader as the old nationalist.

Authorial intrusion and subjective, if not glorifying, presentation of Muzenda’s life is clear in the following quotations:

The people of Gutu, as the author witnessed when he went to observe (Muzenda), count themselves lucky to have produced a Vice President and a Vice President of the simplicity, approachability, humility and down-to-earth personality of Muzenda. People come to see him with their problems and he listens and tries to offer solutions As a result, Muzenda is immensely respected.

(Bhebe 2004: 261)

And on Muzenda receiving an honorary degree from the University of Zimbabwe, as well as the Freedom of the City of Masvingo, “Muzenda not only deserves these honours, but they also come at the perfect time, when he

is at the end of his career and he is being rewarded for a job well done” (Bhebe 2004: 267).

When concluding the biography, Bhebe celebrates:

Once that *African salvation* was attained, Simon Vengayi Muzenda, the elder statesman of Zimbabwe, could call it a day and then go into a well-deserved retirement. With the economic indigenisation programme now well under way and the fast-track land resettlement programme completed, Muzenda is ready to take his rest. It is wonderful to write a biography that ends with the subject fulfilling his life-long ambitions.

(Bhebe 2004: 272)

From the quote above it is evident that Bhebe believes the land reform programme was a good thing, although some critics view it as chaotic and destructive. Once again his partisanship and political philosophy appear to be pro-government, which in itself is not condemnable and sinful as long as there remains a quest, even mistaken, that what is being done is for the betterment of a large number of the people. While “the people” are marginal in this biography, the conclusion of the book and other sections attempt to show that Muzenda was a “man of the people”. Bhebe interestingly avoids delving into the bitter dynamics of the land reform programme. Land invasions of white-owned farms by peasant communities started in the late 1990s, and war veterans soon joined especially after the ZANU (PF) government had lost in the referendum for a new constitution. A diplomatic battle between the Zimbabwean government and its former colonial power, Britain, followed. Sanctions were imposed on Zimbabwe. Nothing about these developments is mentioned and Muzenda’s role is not presented. Possibly the old man was now out of politics due to ill health,¹⁵ and was not worth writing about even when he died in 2003, three years after the invasions and the thunderous referendum, parliamentary and presidential elections of 2000 and 2002 that nearly uprooted ZANU (PF) rule.

In its partisan way Bhebe’s book enthralls while providing a profound understanding of Muzenda, the complexities of the liberation struggle and some challenges of post-independent Zimbabwe. Bhebe’s book is a classic case of how biography can be used to build public consensus about rule by a regime. The effectiveness of the use of biography or any other media in creating legitimacy popularly acceptable amongst the citizenry is not the subject of this paper. The construction of the Muzenda biography is done expediently to suppress voices that are contrary and threatening to the current leadership. The “land issue” is the understated leitmotif of the descriptions of individuals and historic processes. According to Bhebe the desire for land wrest from black Zimbabweans by European colonists, first and foremost, inspired people such as Muzenda to liberate themselves, and

15. Vice President Muzenda never formally retired from politics till his death.

the land reform programme in the postcolonial era is only a culmination of a mammoth historical process.

Although the book is highly readable and enthralling, the glaring “absences” in it on the lives and contributions of some politicians and social groups might suggest that Bhebe has tried to skilfully deceive readers, especially those who have no other alternative sources of the history of Zimbabwe. Voices of dissent both from the opposition camp and of former ZAPU (PF) cadres are missing, even though such voices can enhance ZANU (PF) hegemony through projecting the party as tolerant of criticism and as having divergent views within an “orderly” society. The exclusion might be an attestation that the civil groups and opposition Movement for Democratic Change had nearly toppled the ruling government in the 2000 and 2002 elections, thus drastically undermining the existing hegemony. Considering Bhebe’s political leanings it would have been prudent for him not to have written about these opponents’ views of Muzenda’s personality, since these were uncertain times and ZANU (PF) hegemony was shaky and vulnerable. Writing such views during a time of crisis could ultimately be self-defeating; it might be an unwitting promotion of such individuals’ and groups’ views. Depending on the public’s political preferences, there is the possibility that the public might read Bhebe’s book oppositionally. The Muzenda biography as it is might then be a masterly piece of deception to create an impression of unity and supremacy of the ruling party where there is negligible opposition and very little dissent. In times of political normalcy occasionally representing the views of the opposition is a technique of confirming the success of the hegemonic project. This type of construction of biography is a deliberate choice and a blatant political act. The biography becomes a discursive project that demands inevitable attention to issues about knowledge and power and their production and dissemination, and issues about truth, objectivity, deception and falsehoods, as well as ethical considerations.

However, Bhebe’s biography could survive criticism of gross intellectual deception and propagandist manipulation when he is seen as a writer with a political agenda and mission that he sincerely believes is a panacea for Zimbabwe’s problems. He can still retain authorial integrity and be spared outright condemnation of his work since his efforts are specifically directed. The book cannot be hastily dismissed or condemned as mere “propagandist writing” and an uncritical eulogy of party and personality. In its “un-objective” manner the book is reinventing national personalities, recreating events and building a national sense and consensus for many people and generations to come. A project has been embarked on; a national hero endorsed in written history. This is “manufacturing consent” as E.S Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) would say. Bhebe’s story, if well distributed in schools and homes, could become the dominant story on Muzenda and the history of Zimbabwe. The political correctness of the book then is read in

the popular imagination as “patriotism”. Critical perspectives on “absences” and exclusion of voices may eventually not matter at all, with the “official” texts dominant due to wide circulation despite their shortcomings.

Once again, Clark and Ivanic have aptly summarised the ideological significance of printing and publishing written material. They say, “The power of the written word derives primarily from its permanence; written words can be kept, pored over again and again, passed from person to person intact and compared with other written works” (1997: 25).

The biography was written with the anticipation that Muzenda was about to retire from public political life. Bhebe notes that with the implementation of Zimbabwe’s fast-track land resettlement programme and economic indigenisation programmes Muzenda was happy to take a rest (Bhebe 2004: 272). Sadly, the book was only published after Muzenda’s death. The biography was launched during the public commemoration of the first anniversary of Muzenda’s death. There is nothing uncontested in Zimbabwe, not even the criteria used to officially choose and declare national heroes. The selection of national heroes is the preserve of ZANU (PF)’s Politburo.¹⁶ The opposition parties, radical intellectuals and the privately owned media have often questioned the credentials of the heroes and their purported huge contributions to the development of Zimbabwe, especially to the armed liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Quite often a considerable section of the Zimbabwean public has expressed their outrage at the denial of national hero status to personalities such as Ndabaningi Sithole and James Chikerema, or non-politicians such as philanthropist Jairosi Jiri and national poet Solomon Mutsaers. They have also questioned where the ZANU (PF) top leadership gets its mandate to proclaim hero status rather than leaving that duty for parliament. In spite of the controversies associated with Muzenda, his hero status and “soul of the nation” (Bhebe 2004) image were hardly publicly disputed even by the most damning critics of government. This public response may “redeem” the omissions made by Bhebe on Muzenda’s shortcomings. It may be an “African” way of honouring a revered elder – a benevolent tribute to Mzee, “the wise old man”!

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16. The Politburo is a Soviet-styled inner and bureaucratic leadership organ which ostensibly makes decisions on behalf of the Central Committee – a much more representative and larger organ that is elected by the party members.

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