Playing the Politics of Erasure: (Post)Colonial Film Images and Cultural Genocide in Zimbabwe*

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Summary

Cultural genocide is much maligned and often simply ignored. Yet it is an epistemic condition powerful enough to cause a physical elimination of a targeted "tribe" or group of people. The aim of this article is to highlight cultural genocide and explore how this type of genocide was used in images in European colonial films to destroy or "erase" some important cultural and traditional activities of black people in Africa. It also critically examines how images in some postcolonial films, directed and produced by white film-makers, are used to perpetuate cultural genocide. Special reference will be made to the film *Strike Back Zimbabwe* (2010), produced by white film-makers, which insinuates the possible assassination of Zimbabwe's president. This article will argue that it is critical to study the nature and manifestations of cultural genocide, which is often relegated to the margins, as a way of understanding the genesis of this condition.

Opsomming

Kulturele volksmoord word met veragting bejeën en dikwels eenvoudig geïgnoreer. Tog is dit 'n epistemiese toestand wat so invloedryk is dat dit die fisiese verwydering van 'n teiken-"stam" of groep mense kan veroorsaak. Die doel van hierdie artikel is om die aandag op kulturele volksmoord te vestig en om ondersoek in te stel na hoe hierdie tipe kulturele volksmoord in beelde in Europese koloniale rolprente gebruik is om sekere belangrike kulturele en tradisionele aktiwiteite van swartmense in Afrika te vernietig of "uit te wis". Dit gee ook 'n kritiese beskouing van hoe beelde in sekere postkoloniale rolprente, wat deur wit rolprentmakers geregisseer en vervaardig is, gebruik word om kulturele volksmoord in stand te hou. Daar sal spesifiek verwys word na die rolprent *Strike Back Zimbabwe* (2010), wat deur wit rolprent-vervaardigers geproduseer is, waarin daar op 'n moontlike sluipmoordaanval op Zimbabwe se president gesinspeel word. Daar sal aangevoer word dat dit uiters belangrik is om ondersoek in te stel na die aard en manifestasies van kulturele volksmoord, wat dikwels opsy gestoot word, om sodoende die ontstaan van hierdie toestand te verstaan.

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Introduction: Theorising Cultural Genocide

The word "genocide" was first coined in 1943 by a Polish law professor, Raphael Remkin, using the Latin roots *geno-* (from *gens*, or "tribe") and -*cide* meaning killing (as in "homicide" or "patricide"). Acts and measures undertaken to destroy any nation's or ethnic group's culture and traditions are called "cultural genocide" (Hon 2013). In creating the term "cultural genocide", Lemkin (1944) argued that "genocide" does not only refer to the physical extermination of a national or religious group, but also to its national, spiritual and cultural destruction. Article 7 of the United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (26 August 1994) uses the phrase "cultural genocide" but does not define what it implies. Indigenous people have collective and individual rights not to be subjected to ethnocide and cultural genocide, including prevention of and redress for: (a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct people, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities; (b) Any action with the aim or effect of dispossessing them of their lands, territories or resources; (c) Any form of population transfer which has the aim or effect of violating or undermining any of their rights − for, example, right to life, association, rights to worship, and so on; (d) Any form of assimilation or integration by other cultures or ways of life imposed on them by legislative, administrative or other measures; (e) Any form of propaganda directed against them (Lemkin 1944). European colonisation of Africa did not only imply the physical elimination of those Africans that resisted conquest, but was also a gross violation of the rights of Africans to practise their cultures and traditions, own their natural resources, have freedom to worship their gods, and rights to condemn foreign or alien cultures.

Different arguments have been proffered in defence of the inclusion of cultural genocide in the UN Convention on genocide and crimes against humanity. For example, Hon lamented the exclusion of cultural genocide protesting that "the focus only on physical destruction of life was misplaced because physical genocide is simply the means by which to achieve the end, namely, the destruction of the values and the very soul of a national, racial or religious group − or in other words, a culture" (2013: 9). By implication Hon (2013) suggests that cultural genocide breeds deeper and long-lasting pain because victims are left to live, and yet constantly reminded of their inability to defend their cultural heritage. In this case, cultural genocide becomes "cancerous" or "a silent killer" that eats at the very soul of people's hopes and inspirations − which is what culture is able to rekindle. Although genocide must be explained first in terms of the numbers of bodies that lie dead, also most importantly, it should be explained in terms of the conditions that result directly or indirectly in the "death" of the masses of people (Vambe & Zegeye 2009). The "death" being referred to can also work as a metaphor for spiritual "death" that comes as a result of massive

destruction of a people's source of inspiration − which is culture. Manifesting itself as a violent force, colonialism resulted in the massive displacement of black people from their ancestral homes, pillaging of African resources and desecration of places that were considered sacrosanct. According to Lemkin (1944), this constitutes a clear case of cultural genocide. An emphasis on different factors, actors and colonial conditions provides a broader picture of the "multiple" genocides that were carried out in Africa than the constricting and conflicting definition of genocide proffered by the United Nations in 1948.

Cultural genocide presented itself as the "politics of erasure" and was also meant to wipe out African history so that "past" events and achievements of black people are disremembered. In West Africa, apart from massive displacement of Africans through slave trade, cultural genocide also entailed the destruction of ancient and strong empires such as Asante, Dahomey and Songhai. In Zimbabwe, one is reminded of the controversies surrounding the existence of Great Zimbabwe with Eurocentric theories attributing the building of the great monuments to Europeans. The act of denying the cultural achievements of black Zimbabweans as part of cultural genocide was done for ideological and political ends. Put differently, the denial was meant to underplay the potential of black people to contribute towards cultural development. The supremacist attitude tapped from the master narratives of cultural conquest and assimilation hitherto started by European explorers, ethnographers, hunters and missionaries who acted as forerunners of physical colonialism in Africa. The argument is that there is nothing less in promoting a total destruction of a people's identity than promotion of a physical extermination of the same people (Mayer 2002). A people's culture and identity could be destroyed even if all the members of the group were still alive. An understanding brought to bear is that the crime of genocide is crime against human groups, not individuals. As such, if acts taken to destroy "the tangible and intangible aspects of culture effectively leading to its destruction, then there is no defence against a charge of genocide that the acts committed were not specifically listed as physical or biological in the Genocide Convention" (Hon 2013: 375). The glaring truth is that genocidal intent should not be limited to physical and biological acts of elimination but also to acts of cultural destruction, for example those evidenced through the introduction of colonial languages such as English and French to the colonised African subjects. Referring to the damaging effects of colonial languages, wa Thiong'o (1987) writes that colonialism aimed to control the entire realm of the language of real life and to dominate the mental universe of Africans by instilling in their minds alien norms and values. In other words, the intention to "erase" African historical and cultural narratives is a clear case of cultural genocide. The politics of erasure was also played by European colonisers through film images with an express aim to destroy African cultural values and identities.

Colonial Film Images and Cultural Genocide

The colonisation of Africa in the 1880s by Europeans did not only imply physical colonisation but also cultural genocide. Colonial film images were deployed by colonial administrators as potent cultural tools to control, dominate and shape African mentalities in ways deemed useful to the economic interests of colonial capital. In fact, Western films created myths and cultural stereotypes in which Africa was said to be inhabited by savages and barbarians who "kill indiscriminately as well as boil human flesh in clay pots" (Mayer 2002: 20). Essentialising African identities as part of the grand project of cultural genocide enabled Western powers to impose their colonial systems and consolidate their ideological projects through political conquest that involved physical extermination of black Africans. The gospel on Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation were used by European colonisers to justify their presence in Africa. In a similar fashion, Western filmic representations of Africa such as *Allan Quatermain and the Lost City of Gold* (1986), *King Solomon's Mines* (1985) and *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) were produced with the express aim of reinforcing the master narrative of "whiteness". The cultural and ideological entrapments of the genocidal discourse of "whiteness" brought the power to separate the "self" (white) from the "'other' (black); … power that whites could wield to justify the process of inventing and conquering the continent of Africa and naming its 'primitiveness' or 'disorder' as well as the subsequent means of its exploitation and methods of 'regeneration'" (Steyn 2001: 8). Words such as "inventing", "conquering", "exploitation" and "regeneration" (p. 8) reflected the ideological workings of Western power and fantasies. Western films helped to create wild imaginations that viewed Africa as an "untamed" continent inhabited by wild animals and primitive people awaiting European conquest.

  Further evidence of the ideological workings of cultural genocide is manifest in films such as *Tarzan* (1950*)* and *Heart of Darkness* (1994). The latter is a film adaptation of the novel by Joseph Conrad (1902) which was at pains to describe the so-called African primitivity and animality. In what Mayer (2002: 1) calls the "artificial concoction of Africa", colonial film images also worked in subtle ways to force diverse regions, traditions, and cultures in Africa into one symbolic system dominated by Western stereo-types. For instance, contemporary stereotyping of Africa engendered through film images views the continent as a noxious influence, a dark "viral" force at the borderlines of Western civilisation. In this case, there is less regard for African lives or their cultural representation. Where black cultural narratives were represented through colonial films, blacks would be relegated to the margins playing roles such as cooks, agricultural labourers, scrub women, and docile servants who were portrayed as "baggage carriers". In the jungle, in melodramatic settings blacks were portrayed as

"brutal", "vicious" and "superstitious" (Ukadike 1994: 20). The underlying motive was to completely wipe out the cultural, religious and traditional achievements of blacks by viewing them as barbaric and uncivilised. And this justified and legitimised physical conquest of African land. So far it has been argued that physical genocide that was perpetrated on black Africans would not be carried out in isolation; that is, without assaulting and destroying African belief systems.

In colonial Rhodesia, films based on binary representations such as "good" farmers (whites) and "bad" farmers (blacks) legitimised the expropriation of African land. A plethora of colonial laws such as the Land Apportionment Act (1931), the Land Husbandry Act (1951), and the Land Tenure Act (1969) were enacted to deepen colonial economic grip on land and agriculture as well as extend white cultural and political influence on black people. Colonial laws on land expropriation resulted in massive displacement of Africans from fertile land, and these Africans were forcibly settled in dry areas such Chivi, Gwai and Shangaani that were derogatively called "Reserves", which meant that they were to be viewed as established reservoirs of black labour force that would drive the colonial economy in which agriculture played a fundamental role. Blacks who were settled in arid and unproductive areas suffered immensely as they were confronted with disease, malnutrition, hunger, starvation and death. The scenario distorted the whole life of black people who were forced to become perpetual beggars in an attempt to circumvent hunger, poverty and starvation. In Zimbabwe, therefore, dispossession of a black people's land and resources with the aim of economically and politically subjugating them constituted cultural genocide (Lemkin 1944).

The dispossession of black people's land by colonialism caused spiritual and cultural "death". This condition of helplessness and hopelessness among blacks was also perpetuated through colonial censorship laws that restricted, banned and controlled black cultural expressions. In the field of film, the hastily introduced Obscene Publications Ordinance Act of 1911 and the Cinematograph Ordinance Act of 1912 had negative effects on the rights of black people to express their ideas and opinions about the oppression and marginalisation that they were experiencing in Rhodesia. The Obscene Publications Ordinance Act prohibited blacks from publishing what the colonial authorities perceived as subversive information, while the Cinematograph Ordinance Act of 1912 blocked black people from participating in telling their stories of white oppression through visual images (Patel 1997). To force on Africans political conformity necessary to the running of the new political economy, the white settlers' Department of Native Affairs promoted written publications and films that painted a positive picture of the colonial government while presenting Africans as a people without culture and history. White writers authorised images of Africans as savages in need of perpetual moral and spiritual guidance from European settlers. The

restriction and subjected black cultural expression in Rhodesia, therefore, constituted cultural genocide. It exemplified cultural genocide because the restrictions stifled or muffled the growth of the film industry in which blacks were supposed to reveal their cultural achievements. The pathology of cultural genocide reflected through black non-ownership of film production and has spilt over into postcolonial Zimbabwe where Western-sponsored donors dominate in spreading negative images about the social, cultural, economic and political activities of black Zimbabweans. White film producers in neighbouring South Africa have also jumped onto the bandwagon of spreading cultural genocide by "erasing" positive black achievements in Zimbabwe as well as insinuating the physical elimination of Zimbabwean black leadership to fulfil the "gospel" of "regime change". The film *Strike Back Zimbabwe* crystallises European fantasies and wild imaginations on a possible (re)colonisation of Zimbabwe to regain the biblical "Canaan" that whites lost when they were defeated in 1980.

Imagining (Re)Colonisation of Zimbabwe: The Case of the Film *Strike Back Zimbabwe*

Strike Back Zimbabwe is a film narrative directed by Daniel Percival and produced by Nicki Mousely. The film visualises and rehearses a possible assassination of President Robert Mugabe by a sniper (Masuku) sponsored by imperial Britain. The sniper, a black Zimbabwean, symbolises the destabilising forces that are sponsored from within Zimbabwe to effect a change of regime. This "fictivisation" of a physical destruction of the President that preoccupies British imagination of a possible (re)colonisation of Zimbabwe is pushed by a burning desire to reverse the gains − primarily land – of the liberation struggle. Arguably, the very wish to dispossess black Zimbabweans; and the wish to impoverish blacks feed on discourses of cultural genocide that for centuries have sustained European "appetite" for the colonisation of "other" races viewed as inferior (Fanon 1963). To water down the discourse of (re)colonisation, the film introduces the character of John Porter who is sent on an undercover mission to locate and silence the sniper.

Porter finds himself at the high security prison Chikurubi in an attempt to fish out Masuku who is on official duty waiting for the President so that he can assassinate him. But something goes wrong so that Porter and Masuku find themselves on the run, escaping from various troops led by the "ruthless" Colonel Tshuma. The character of Masuku symbolises all those misguided Zimbabweans who harbour acrimony towards the President to the extent of wanting him to be assassinated. These are the bootlickers who pander to the whims of Britain and America. Once more Britain and America have succeeded in planting self-hatred among some black

Zimbabweans. Meanwhile, Porter and his superior Collinson have their conflicts that date back to the previous missions that they carried out in Africa. Porter rebels against the terms of his mission when he discovers new information about Masuku and decides not to kill him but actually helps him to escape. Collison, upon learning about Porter's plan to alter the original mission, flies to Africa with two objectives, the first associated with the idea of eliminating a South African man who had been working with Colonel Tshuma and the second related to finding Porter and kill Masuku.

The film *Strike Back Zimbabwe* exemplifies the subterranean workings of the master narrative bordering on European supremacist theories. Within the film narrative, there is a clear Eurocentric messianic ideology espoused by the British that are pretending to be saviours of Africans alleged to be "at each other's neck". All attempts by Zimbabweans to come up with alternative methods of bringing peace among themselves are undermined. In other words, blacks are viewed as barbarians or savages that cannot solve their own internal affairs, but need whites for their survival. No attempt is made in the film to explain how the West, particularly Britain and America, have sowed the seeds of discontent and disunity among black Zimbabweans. The "erasure" of these alternative discourses in the film narrative, in favour of Western propaganda focused on "regime change" constitutes cultural genocide. That is, alternative black narratives about how well-meaning Zimbabweans have taken it as their responsibility to defend their own sovereignty and economic resources, are killed or "drowned out" in this white-sponsored film. At this critical point, Gabriel (1982: 46) posits:

> For how long are we, people of colour, going to worship and praise white supremacist ideologies at the expense of our own black aesthetics? Should Afrocentrism continue to suffer because history, literature, great works of art and people who made them have vanished simply because Europe has the power to commit cultural genocide in the face of the UN that purports to be the moral conscience of the whole world?
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> (Gabriel 1982: 46)

These questions raised by Gabriel should act as a wake-up call for Africans to defend their cultures, traditions, resources and national heritage against the backdrop of Western onslaught.

In the film narrative, Colonel Tshuma relies on Little Fox, a white soldier, for his survival. This reveals the "master and slave" mentality that continues to inform white film narratives at a time when blacks should become masters of their own destinies. *Strike Back Zimbabwe* deliberately undermines Zimbabwe's sovereignty by insinuating the assassination of President Robert Mugabe. What is more, there is a lie hinted through the film that views Zimbabwe as having a weak security system that can be penetrated at will by saboteurs. The reality is that Zimbabwe has one of the most disciplined, battle-experienced and tight security systems that has

distinguished itself, militarily, in Mozambique, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and in UN-sponsored European missions in Kosovo. What is clear is that *Strike Back Zimbabwe* is a reincarnation of former "Rhodies" who fantasise the (re)colonisation of the richly endowed Zimbabwe. This colonialist wish to reoccupy Zimbabwe is akin to a "Cry-for-a-lost Canaan" neurosis that has dominated contemporary white writing and imagistic representation of Zimbabwe. Against the backdrop of this white-informed schizophrenia, the film *Strike Back Zimbabwe* ironically awakens in black Africans intensification of narrative acts of countering cultural genocide currently being promoted through the production of negative images about Africa and Africans. This "war" can be fought and won at the cultural front where the "Blackman's burden" is to produce and promote black film aesthetics that celebrate African achievements as well as confront negative images that demonise and vilify African cultures, religions and traditions.

Black Film Aesthetics as Counter-Measures to Cultural Genocide

Black film aesthetics that has been started by progressive African scholars is both a theory and a philosophy. It is a theory in so far as it presents itself as a set of assumptions that can be used to judge the validity of black film productions. Black film aesthetics is viewed as a philosophy when it is used to reflect the thought patterns of blacks; their belief systems, fears, hopes and aspirations. The idea of using film in the process of creating new consciousness among Africans was born out of a colonial paradox that had shown that film can be used to control people. However, contrary to the idea of using film as a tool for control, "cultural imperialism" and "cultural genocide", black film aesthetics is focused on developing new cinematic language that recognises the cultural ethos of blacks, study the psychological dimensions of oppression and underdevelopment. Influenced by the ideas of "Third Cinema" as theorised by two Argentine film-makers, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (1976), the black film aesthetics' transformative character should aim to: (a) decolonise the mind, (b) contribute to a radical consciousness, (c) lead to revolutionary transformation of society, and (d) develop a new film language and positive images in contradistinction to colonial ideas promoted through the Hollywood film paradigm. The last point is particularly important for the purpose of this analysis because it puts an ideological detour to the cultural continuities informed by Hollywood films that denigrate black cultural achievements.

  This is important because some African film-makers and actors are implicated in the crime of cultural genocide by working as accomplices to white film-makers whose job is to "kill" positive black cultural expressions.

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For instance, in most films produced outside Zimbabwe, there has been a tendency to use Zimbabweans and other Africans as actors to tarnish the image of Zimbabwe. Some of these diasporic actors are Zimbabweans who have become "pawns" to "sing for their supper" or do the "unthinkable" so that their self-imposed exile is not jeopardised. Unfortunately this self-hatred and love for the biblical "three pieces of silver" [money] undermines the cultural images of Africans to the benefit of projecting European supremacist attitudes towards blacks.

The film *Strike Back Zimbabwe* uses South African and Zimbabwean actors, and the location is South Africa, that is, faked to appear as if the film had been produced in Zimbabwe. In this regard, one striking feature of post-colonialism is found within the ability of whites to use blacks in order to vilify other blacks. This "black-on-black" cultural violence, implicit as it is in the film *Strike Back Zimbabwe*, points to the reality that representations of Africans through images created by white film-makers are "fixed" or "cast in stone" regardless of what historical epoch the film-makers are dealing with (Mayer 2005). Although a semblance of "change" can be obtained in terms of theme and characterisation in some of the films produced by whites, the ideology, however, remains fundamentally the same − that of wanting to prove that Europe is far ahead in terms of culture. However, as a concept and as a cultural reality, black film aesthetics agitates for indigenous ownership of film production. Understandably, if blacks are able to own their film narratives they can also be able to produce "counter-cultures" (Giroy 1993: 40) to the cultural fixations promoted through white-sponsored film narratives. This can also help to minimise or even put an end to cultural genocide that is currently inflicted on African cultures and traditions by some films that focus on Africans.

Conclusion

This article explores the concept of cultural genocide. It has been argued that although cultural genocide is not included in the UN Convention (1948) on genocide and crimes against humanity, it is one of the "silent" genocides that have been committed on groups considered as weak. While physical genocide involves the actual killing of people, cultural genocide implies the destruction of a people's values and heritage so that they are spiritually, morally and culturally "killed" or degraded. Cultural genocide can set a precedent for the physical extermination of people. So, as this article argues, it is very difficult to talk about physical genocide while excluding cultural genocide. The article shows that film images about colonialism glorify the conquest of Africans and the destruction of their cultural values and heritage, and this constitutes a clear case of cultural genocide. Special reference is made to the film *Strike Back Zimbabwe* to illustrate the point

that cultural genocide can be a violent war in which white film narratives, imagining (re)colonisation of Zimbabwe, have come out from under the "hoods" to openly declare the need to assassinate the President of Zimbabwe. Alternative images that talk about the black people's quest to regain their land and natural resources are "erased" totally in a clear case of cultural genocide. As a way of countering cultural genocide, this article suggests that patriotic Zimbabweans must embrace the politics and poetics of black film aesthetics that celebrate the cultural achievements of blacks while putting an ideological detour to negative portrayal of blacks on the screen. For this to happen, Zimbabwe in particular, and Africa in general needs to invest financially in growing a film industry that circulates cultural images that uphold the question of national and individual sovereignty threatened by Western images of cultural genocide. Additionally, Zimbabwe needs to use black film actors and film-makers, local settings, whose perspectives deliberately counter the hegemonic narratives of cultural genocide authorised by the West and sometimes circulated by imperialism's local front men and women. The crime of cultural genocide is insidious and cannot be underestimated in Zimbabwe and Africa just because it is not given the deserved critical evaluation and prominence it should have in Western film and genocide scholarship.

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