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Sites of Struggle: The Reorientation of Political Values in the Matabeleland Conflict, Zimbabwe 1980-1987

1. Introduction

Zimbabwe is currently facing a political and economic crisis. In the presidential elections in March 2002, state measures to undermine and incapacitate the opposition have been commonplace. Legal steps to limit media and avenues of pluralistic expression are pursued vehemently despite national and international protests. Violence is part and parcel of the developments, conducted both by state agencies and different wings of the ruling party ZANU-PF. The pattern of influencing or coercing political allegiance through violent means is not new in the Zimbabwean post-independent history. Elections since independence 1980 have included elements of political violence and intimidation, as has student unrest and other expressions of government opposition. However, the most systematic use of post-colonial political violence and suppression of opposition politics remains the Matabeleland conflict of 1980-1987. This paper concerns this conflict, focusing on power relations, violence and public discourse, with the aim of showing how the ZANU-PF government forcefully attempted to influence and instil certain political values among those they perceived as differently minded.

The paper takes a historical approach, discussing colonial power relations and their impact on the Matabeleland conflict, utilising Mamdani's notion of the intertwining of power and identity, and processes of fragmentation and differentiation in a colonial setting (Mamdani 1996). The paper notes that power competition between Zanu and Zapu both in pre-and post-independence constituted a foundation for how political expressions have been played out in recent history. An evident continuity is the suppression of political ideas opposed to those of the ruling group: during pre-independence the suppression of political opposition against the minority racist government; at post-independence the suppression of Matabeleland civilians' perspectives based on the perception of them carrying 'undesirable ideas'.

Whilst Mamdani's framework includes crucial tools for conceptually understanding power relations, this framework does not give extensive attention to how perceptions of rule operate. To gain insight into actors' decision-making a theoretical construct is added, in order to highlight the emergence, formation and reproduction of perceptions. Whilst Mamdani's framework is here labelled as an 'institutional framework', the added framework to address perceptions is

noted as a 'mental framework'. The central notion of the latter is how memory and socialisation operate in relation to power relations, thereby considering conformity and identity formation in relation to values and beliefs of the ruling elite.

Beginning with a summary of the Matabeleland conflict, the paper subsequently outlines a historical context to conflict developments. Next the institutional and mental frameworks are put forward, whereafter these are used as tools for analysis when examining power relations, state violence and government discourse in the conflict. The paper closes by looking at lessons learned, and by discussing the contested space in which the politics of choice are played out.¹

2. The Matabeleland Conflict

In the new independent state of Zimbabwe, 1980 marked the ending of fifteen years of civil war between the black majority and the governing white minority. In their fight for independence from British colonial rule, the black majority was split into two forces; ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU, and their respective military wings Zanla and Zipra.² Having together (with common aims and goals) but separately (in different organisations) brought independence to the country, the two parties continued to operate after independence. In the 1980 general elections ZANU-PF won an overwhelming victory, and PF-ZAPU became a minority party in the subsequent coalition government.

At the time a great amount of enthusiasm for the future was the most obvious general expression, politically enveloped by the policy of reconciliation. However, tension lingered. Independence brought change—hope for some and uncertainty for others. For the black majority changes meant aspirations and prospects for a better standard of life with all its different components. For the white minority changes seemed to herald loss of security and privileges. The tension which later took shape in military confrontations and took Zimbabwe frightfully near a new civil war, did however not come from the white minority camp where observers feared it would originate. Instead it arose from political competition and lack of confidence between the two parties ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU, and was most urgently felt in the military wings amongst the ex-combatants. The armed clashes with additional related incidents set off Zimbabwe's post-independence history in a direction which would directly affect the country's political, economic and military situation for the coming seven years. It would culminate in what the government called the 'anti-dissident campaign', or what others named 'ethnic cleansing'. Here the dissident activities and the army intervention are termed 'the Matabeleland conflict'.

During 1980-1983 the three contesting armies, Zanla, Zipra and the Rhodesian Security Forces, were amalgamated to form a new national army with a common loyalty and single allegiance. Initially the three forces were located in

separate camps, where the processes of demobilisation and conversion of guerrillas into conventional soldiers took place. The mistrust between ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU was not a sentiment created in isolation by this particular historical moment. It was an old feeling taking on new dimensions in the integration process. Since 1963 when former Zapu members formed Zanu, the two parties with similar political programs remained rivals. Although the two parties were national in character, one of the elements of difference between the two was ethnic support and identification. Zapu, led by Joshua Nkomo, was to a great extent supported by the Ndebele group of people (17 percent of the population), and Zanu, led by Robert Mugabe, had the backing mainly of the Shona group of people (77 percent of the population) (Berens 1988:3).

Due to historical reasons linked to both political and ethnic concerns, the army integration process was a volatile procedure and two armed confrontations took place between the Zanla and Zipra forces. At the end of 1980 Zanla and Zipra troops were transferred from their assembly points to housing schemes near Harare and Bulawayo, in which the two forces came to be located next to each other. Tension due to unsettled pre-independence differences flared and resulted in violence (Alao 1995:109). Two clashes, in 1980 and 1981 respectively, left 222 soldiers killed and hundreds wounded (Auret 1992:132). Concurrently with these incidents, reports of unofficial stockpiling of arms by the guerrilla armies circulated. Government forces located many arms caches, but others went undiscovered. In 1982 a stockpile of arms was unearthed on PF-ZAPU property, after which the government concluded that PF-ZAPU was planning a military coup. This led to the dismissal of Nkomo and three of his colleagues from the coalition government. In addition, two key persons in the Zipra leadership, Dumiso Dabengwa and Lookout Masuku, were arrested, and PF-ZAPU property was confiscated.

These events provoked large-scale defections of former Zipra officers and combatants from the assembly points (Auret 1992:147, Alao 1995:109). The defected soldiers, named 'dissidents' by the government, returned to their home area Matabeleland North and South. For the ruling party's project of national unity and its position of hegemony, the dissidents were perceived as a threat. The dissidents themselves, however, experienced their desertion as necessary to avoid political and ethnic persecution. To emphasise their stance they resorted to acts of destruction and violence.

In addition to the former Zipra combatants, two other groups of 'dissidents' acted in Matabeleland. These were, first, bandits who took the opportunity to commit crimes for personal gains in the name of the dissidents. Second, there were a small number of infiltrated South African trained recruits, named 'Super Zapu' by the Zimbabweans. The Fifth Brigade, consisting of 7000 elite soldiers trained by North Koreans, was tracking these three groups of dissidents. To motivate such a comprehensive military operation, the Matabeleland conflict was given extensive media coverage with the dissidents being portrayed as a

cohesive group, vast in numbers and political and ethnic enemies of the state. The Fifth Brigade's task, capturing dissidents and their sympathisers, was translated into harsh operations perceived as ethnic persecution by many victims. In government discourse the operations were justified by the threat to national unity and security that the dissidents were perceived to pose. However, on an operational level, military activity was geared toward the elimination of Zapu structures executed through army counter-insurgency operations. The crisis was further complicated by the external involvement of the South African government. Some of the dissidents, with political grievances such as the pace of the land reform, were considered an excellent breeding ground for South African influence and control. However, the attempt to infiltrate so-called Super-Zapu elements failed. Nevertheless, for the Zimbabwean government the external security threat allowed an additional justification for its heavy-handed security and military response. A State of Emergency was renewed, and for the following three years major curfew and search operations took place in Matabeleland. The deployment of the Fifth Brigade in Matabeleland resulted in a military intervention in which thousands of Ndebele people were abducted, tortured, raped and killed.

The Matabeleland conflict came to a conclusion in 1987 when ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU signed a Unity Accord, and the two parties merged under the name Zanu(PF). Once the document was signed and the merger made public, violence ceased. An amnesty for the dissidents was declared, army personnel linked to atrocities were given pardons. Politically Zimbabwe was on route to a one-party state, a goal that ZANU-PF had included in its programme since 1977.

3. Power Relations under Colonial Rule

The developments in Zimbabwe 1980-1987 are clearly linked in a historical continuum. In order to understand this point, pre-independence power structures and power relations are briefly outlined here.

In Rhodesia ninety years of colonial power and rule were marked by strategies of separation, both in terms of race and ethnicity. The dictate was social control through an elaborate central and local system, in which settlers had exclusive power and maintained a discriminatory franchise system. Ethnically, the indigenous population was ruled through division and differentiation. Intra and inter-ethnic differences were appropriated and moulded, reflexively, dictated by the political and military aspirations of colonial rule. In this process of constructing difference through institutional power and in the cultural framework of every day life, perceptions of power and ethnicity took form and shaped peoples' understanding of events. Power relations were based on the rulers' right to absolute power. To exemplify the use of fragmentation and control, two of the most influential colonial policies are reviewed here.

In 1962 the Rhodesian government adopted 'Community Development' as a policy. It was associated with Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front government and served as the foundation for the government's entire rural policy. In an attempt to counteract growing nationalism and to legitimise claims for independence from Britain without majority rule, chiefs were reinvested with their two imperative powers lost after conquest. The Tribal Trust Land Act of 1967 gave the power to chiefs to allocate land, and the African Law and Tribal Courts Act of 1969 gave chiefs the powers to judge civil and certain criminal cases. The Secretary for Internal Affairs noted that local government in Rhodesia was 'very much part of the tribal authority' and aimed to identify African councils with 'traditional tribal government' (Bratton 1978:26). However, rather than deciding locally about local needs, the councils became instruments of state power, in which racist policies were 'decentralised' for implementation. Power was in practice tightly held by the principal field agent of the state, the District Commissioner, who controlled council finances, had the right to invalidate decisions of the chiefs, and above all was directed to 'inculcate a proper understanding of the disciplinary and penalising influences of Government in regard to national matters' (Bratton 1978:29). 'Tribal authority' was upheld by the chief, who through his position wielded power in economic, political, social, and judicial areas concerning African life (Bratton 1978: 18-29, Makumbe 1998:20-22).

As military resistance mounted against the Rhodesian government and local support was effectively mobilised by nationalist forces, administrative control over the extensive rural areas became increasingly difficult. The rural areas became the centre stage for both sides: settlers and guerrillas alike fought for the political allegiance of the rural population. To counteract the persisting insurgency government policy underwent a shift. In 1972 the community development policy was effectively dropped in favour of concentrated state control. The executive powers of Provincial and District Commissioners were increased and paramilitary tasks awarded to civil administrators. Collective punishment of the rural population was another administrative response to the insurgency. In 1973 Provincial Commissioners were empowered to impose collective fines, confiscate cattle, and resettle communities by force when contact with guerrillas was suspected. Military action was also taken in the form of collective punishment, as reprisals were meted out against villages seen as 'pro-terrorist'. The death penalty or life imprisonment was incurred by those engaging or assisting in 'terrorist activities', or those who 'failed to report the presence of terrorists'. Civilian administration and military activity thus became complementary and merged (Bratton 1978: 35-38).

Whilst the Rhodesian government increased military pressure, the guerrillas were able to stand their ground and spread. The Rhodesians realised that guerrilla success was dependent on civilian support, causing a change in their military strategy. Originally, the official government line stated that success hinged

on winning the Africans' hearts and minds. However, on the operational level this was continuously overstepped. Eventually the idea was dropped, since – as the Ministry of Internal Affairs insisted – the blacks were 'too primitive' to appreciate such schemes and only 'respected force'. Consequently, in Rhodesian counter-insurgency operations, violence against civilians became a matter of routine. The logic was that civilians who supported terrorists, were themselves terrorists, and as one could not differentiate between 'supporting' and 'neutral' civilians, the guilt and punishment had to be collectively borne.

Pre-Independence Zanu and Zapu relations

The relationship between Zanu and Zapu was influenced by the former being born out of the latter. The Zapu split in 1963, which caused the formation of Zanu, created great tension in the two liberation movements for many years to come. As fighting between Zanu and Zapu supporters raged in 1963-1964, the colonial establishment steered clear of police intervention. The actors of the event, reinforced by the historical baggage of division, were unable to break the patterns of violence, fighting each other with a 'winner takes it all' mentality. This pattern continued during the liberation war, when members of the nationalist organisations at times identified each other as enemies – as two sides with irreconcilable differences – and in which the winner emerged at expense of the other. When political and military developments partitioned Rhodesia into separate Zanu and Zapu areas, coinciding with the ethnically divided geographical regions, a reinforcement of the Zanu/Shona – Zapu/Ndebele dichotomy took place. Despite this ethnic reinforcement, the engine for the dichotomous set-up seems nevertheless to have been intense power competition between the nationalist organisations – and/or between certain personalities within these structures.

Throughout the liberation war external forces, primarily the OAU and the Frontline states, attempted to bridge the gap between Zanu and Zapu. The were several reasons for repeated failure in this respect. First, externally compelled unity agreements no doubt had less chance of being seriously attempted. Second, any type of merger would have caused a shift in power structures. According to Dabengwa, the focus of unity attempts in the 1960s and early 1970s was on the armies rather than the parties, but these were aborted 'as politicians were wary of losing military control' (Dabengwa 1990:4). Thus, a political agenda had little clout lacking the weight of military might, a situation neither party was willing to adapt to. But with fluctuating internal developments in each nationalist party, their political and war achievements altered in velocity and momentum. This allowed for a certain political opportunism. When at a low point, each party at different periods discovered the virtues of a unity agreement. But then the other was not in accord. Hence, another reason for failed unity attempts was power competition, as the one with comparative advantage was unwilling to share its gains. Nevertheless, both parties and their

military wings had unity supporters, particularly regarding an army merger (Dabengwa 1990:4).

The merger that was in a measure successful, the Patriotic Front, was a political conglomerate which was to bring secure election victory to the nationalists and one united army to the new Zimbabwe. However, as in earlier experience, a competitive edge in the power competition caused a break-up. An assured electoral victory for one of the unity partners, without a merged Zipra-Zanla army, would cause tremendous post-war security problems. This fact the armed forces were clear about, judging from Dabengwa's observations. He notes that in 1979, when the PF was under stress, 'the military leaders of both Zipra and Zanla made it abundantly clear that their [the politicians] negative attitude [to unity] would complicate the integration effort after independence' (Dabengwa 1990:4). This insight was later to be borne out by the Matabeleland conflict.

4. Theoretical framework

The impact of colonial rule, and organised resistance to it, set the stage for post-colonial political culture and power relations. To analyse the background of the Matabeleland conflict, a theoretical understanding of colonial power relations is therefore crucial.

4.a. Theoretical Understanding of Colonial Rule and Resistance

A study in which power relations are central is Mamdani's research (1996) on the legacy of late colonialism in Africa. In his framework, colonial power and its institutional legacy, colonial fragmentary dualism, are conceptualised as the bifurcation of the state, separating the rural from the urban and one ethnicity from another. Central to this conceptualisation is the notion of rights. Urban power represented civil society and civil rights – the rights of citizens –, whilst rural power represented community and culture – the rule of subjects. Rights in Mamdani's framework are seen to be attributed to community: in the framework of customary law, the community is defined in ethnic terms, as the tribe; in the case of civil law, the community is the nation. The subjects derived their rights through membership in a tribe, the citizens through membership in the nation. Thus, in this conceptualisation, racial domination in the local state was grounded in a politically enforced system of ethnic pluralism. Ruled by customary law, the African was defined not as a native, but as a tribesperson. Customary law encapsulated the individual in a set of relations defined and enforced by ethnic identity, a law that in turn through colonial mandate was defined and enforced by the tribal leader (Mamdani 1996:18, 22-23, 286).

In Rhodesia, as other colonial experiences, colonial rule rested on force. The exercise of power was organised through division and segregation. In Mamdani's conceptualisation, colonial power was simultaneously both centralised and decentralised. Power was centrally orchestrated, but highly

decentralised through the Native Authority in the local state. In turn, at the local level, power was centralised in the single and fused nature of the authority of the chief. Mamdani notes that 'To the peasant, the person of the chief signifies power that is total and absolute, unchecked and unrestrained' (1996:54). Mamdani also argues that the colonial experience was marked by force to an unusual degree. Day to day violence was embedded in the customary Native Authority in the local state. Falling under customary law, force and violence were perceived as codified and legitimate. Mamdani writes: 'From considering force and African custom, it was but a short step to considering Africans as accustomed to force – as, say, a European may be to reason' (1996:157).

In Mamdani's understanding of colonial resistance, racist exploitation combined with tribal contradictions inherent in the system of local rule caused a dual response: resistance against the racial barriers in civil society, and resistance against the local contradictions caused by the rural form of rule. The site of the struggle became the customary, reproducing the notions of power and ethnic fragmentation within which they were institutionally operating. As ethnicity defined the parameters of rule, it also defined the resistance against it. The tension and contradictions which emerged from the colonial power thus laid the basis for its resistance. Therefore, ethnicity became a dimension of both power and resistance, as well as the problem and the solution (1996:8, 23-25).

What is of essential importance here, in adopting Mamdani's framework in relation to the Rhodesian experience, is how power and ethnicity from the onset of colonial penetration were interconnected. The understanding of local state rule was inescapably linked to that of tribe. Governance of the rural areas was equal to control of natives, in a framework in which ethnic identity and separation were enforced politically. Force and violence became part of the understanding of governance and rule, as both were used by the local and the central state. Resisting colonial rule and its modes of governing resulted in a struggle in which ethnicity was the starting point. Violence was inherently part of the understanding of the governance and the applied method of solution. Thus, perceptions of differentiation fostered through the colonial experience, were linked to tribal belonging and its definition in power and governance.

4.b. Pre-independence perceptions of governance and rule

The perceptions of differentiation fostered through the colonial experience had 90 years to take root in Rhodesia. Generations of Africans grew up, were socialised, functioned, and in turn socialised their children about rule, control and resistance within this framework. For this they needed memories. Memory is an important device in the socialisation process and the moulding of perceptions. Memory, the past, and perceptions are intrinsically linked. This immensely central connection to human existence constitutes a basis for our understanding of our every day life and actions we take, a connection, which became central to how the Matabeleland conflict developed.

By applying Mamdani's framework to the Rhodesian case in examining the basis of perceptions under colonial rule, the picture that emerges is that of power entrenched through all layers of society. Subsequently, the colonial differentiation process, intrinsically encompassing all social relations, inescapably became part of the actors' understanding of the world. This understanding sank into the unconscious level of functioning, perceptions and collective memory, being part of the meaning bestowed on the framework of existence. How does such a process take place?

Tonkin notes that references to the past are continual. When we grasp a historical fact or interpretation we make an extremely complex collection of judgements in doing so. He notes that any representation of pastness is identity-constitutive, and can be shaped and elaborated into an identity support as well. Insofar as memorisations create the sense of a past – whether there is a coherent narrative or disparate individual recollections – they contribute to the experience of present group identity (Tonkin 1992:111). Past events are thus shaped reflexively as a guide to future action, and are notably common to a particular kind of political culture and its associated social structure (Tonkin 1992:123).

Thus, the historical experience of colonial fragmentation and differentiation and resistance against it was a reality for Africans under Rhodesian rule. This reality shaped the understanding of the world, and, using Tonkin's understanding, through memory was 'identity-constitutive'. Applying this understanding to the Rhodesian historical experience, group identity formed in relation to two institutional structures: the racially differentiated rule centrally directed, and the tribally oriented rule through the customary Native Authority. Memory and identity formation in terms of rule had two foci: race and ethnicity.

The political culture emerging from an organisation of society based on oppression was one of force and control, violence and contestation between forces. Examples of power relations where actors functioned in democratic coexistence were scarce. Instead, actors were subjected to rules and perceptions in which the message clearly signalled that power, centrally anchored, must be locally maintained, steered, and controlled. At the local level there was one centre of power: the chief. Power was absolute. How then do actors respond to such a power framework?

Foucault is concerned with the methods of surveillance of individuals, and conceives power as a technique that achieves its strategic effect through its disciplinary character. In Foucault's view identities are shaped and moulded through the exercise of disciplinary power. Foucault argues that people need not be formed through socialisation processes to stop them from pursuing their first preferences – it is enough to shape their beliefs or expectations in such a manner that they consciously abstain from pursuing such a preference due to anticipated consequences (Nordlund 1996:31).

Gaventa also writes about the abstention of preferences. His focus is on the conditioning of reactions, which through indirect means cause psychological adaptations in the subjugated group. In response to continual defeat, perceptions change, and may lead to a greater susceptibility to the internalisation of the values and rules of the powerful. If socialised to compliance over an extended period, an acceptance of the political reality as offered by the dominant group may be cemented. This may also develop into a 'culture of silence', lending the dominant an air of legitimacy (Gaventa 1980:17-19, 21-22, 256).

Applying Foucault's and Gaventa's understandings to the Rhodesian experience, and using Mamdani's historical framework, gives us some insight into how perceptions of governance and rule may have formed. Africans were ruled locally by way of central direction, therefore, conformity to rule took place on two levels: conformity to racial ruling (centrally) and tribal ruling (locally). However, ninety years of colonial oppression did not only cause conformity. Memory and socialisation caused the internalisation of the values of the rulers. Using fragmentation and differentiation as a tool, colonial rulers were able to enforce the historical dichotomy between the Shona and Ndebele groups of people. Rulers particularly in the late colonial period repeatedly reinforced myths and perceptions related to the dichotomy, and over time the internalisation of difference became fixed. Thus perceptions of governance and rule formed over time carried the content of fragmentation and differentiation inherently.

Another important ingredient in Rhodesian colonial history is resistance. How did resistance influence perceptions? Irwin-Zarecka's work on memory and power argues that it is not the absolute weight of historically inflicted pain which matters to those who have suffered. Rather, it is how people perceive the consequences, mostly in terms of justice rendered but also justice attempted (Irwin-Zarecka 1994:97, 137). Brickhill notes that in Rhodesia certain perceptions developed in the cause of guerrilla warfare related to the use of violence. The dual use of violence as a means in the political/military struggle and war, and as a force used under harsh conditions of discipline violence transforms into a 'methodology of mobilisation for war' (Brickhill 1990:18-21). Thus, under the condition of guerrilla warfare where a political goal is central, violence seems partly to gain a level of acceptance among both those affected, and those actively involved in it. Violence for the supported cause is perceived as 'just violence', as opposed to aimless force and brutality with no explanatory markers.

Where does this bring us in terms of the formation of perceptions under colonial rule? In line with Irwin-Zarecka's and Brickhill's understandings, perceptions of governance and rule, violence and resistance, are influenced by the underlying causes. How we perceive inflicted pain and violence is in accordance with the meaning we attach to it. It is the meaning given to an event, rather than the event itself, which is of importance (Irwin Zarecka 1994:49).

Thus, memory and perceptions of violence and resistance are linked to actors' ideological stance. This ideological stance, giving an event its meaning, may override the importance of the event itself, such as 'just violence'.

In sum, perceptions formed under colonial rule carried layers of understanding. Firstly, an understanding of governance and its structure: a strong central state and power infused local Native Authorities. Secondly, there is an understanding of modes of rule. Lastly there is resistance, based on ideological stance. These three layers of understanding regarding colonial power relations were framed by actors' socialisation and memory. Having conceptually separated perceptions linked to colonial power relations, it is important to note that in reality perceptions operate dynamically and interdependently. An understanding of power relations is based on peoples' priorities and ways of making sense of the past in a complex process occurring both consciously and unconsciously. The dynamics and interdependence of perceptions cause contradictions and complexities. For example, whilst there is an ideological resistance against racial oppression, internalisation of values of ethnic fragmentation is simultaneously present – causing resistance to carry ethnic differentiation as an inherent. This fragmentation will work against the primary cause, to resist racial oppression.

In terms of Mamdani's schema, a population functioning under the customary system carried over this mode of reasoning in relation to ethnic identity. Due to the way in which power was organised, power and ethnicity were institutionally and culturally linked. As ethnicity defined the parameters of rule, it also defined the resistance against it.

How is then the aforementioned line of thinking additional to Mamdani's framework? Mamdani's framework is understood as being focused on power relations looking at the '*institutional framework*'. What has here been argued is the influence of colonial power relations on perceptions, memory, and consciousness, thus a '*mental framework*'. Hence, we have adopted Mamdani's conceptualisation of colonial power relations, and with the support of notions of memory, perceptions, and power, we have built on the former framework to show how colonial legacy becomes part of the conscious and unconscious, and how people may experience history. Linking this to the Rhodesian experience, in terms of political culture, this means perceptions of power and ethnic differentiation became firmly cemented in peoples' thinking and consequently acting. Having this historical understanding of the Rhodesian experience, power and ethnicity are inherently linked and embedded in the understanding of everyday life. Fragmentation and ethnic differentiation are, through generations of exposure, entering the subconscious of actors, moulding self-images and identity – inescapably a part of the personal content through which incidents and occurrences pass.

Thus, based on the above we can look at the Matabeleland conflict with the dual understanding of colonial power relations: one institutional framework

and one mental framework. Both understandings have as a minimal communal starting point that the Matabeleland conflict could not have taken place *without* the historical baggage of colonial power relations, and particularly that of ethnic fragmentation and differentiation.

5. Power relations, Violence, and Public Discourse in the Matabeleland Conflict

A historical approach to the Matabeleland conflict opens up multiple angles of analysis, as does the context of 1980s. In this paper the focus is on three areas based on their centrality to how the conflict evolved, namely: power relations, violence and public discourse.

5.a Power Structures and Relations: Continuities and Shifts

Despite major changes in the political landscape at post-independence, certain power related foundations remained. The Lancaster House Agreement stipulated strict rules regarding the acquisition of private land until 1990. Thereby economic power remained intact in settler hands. In terms of political power, nationalist parties were constrained by the provision that settlers retain 20 reserved seats (out of 100) in parliament. Furthermore, the inherited colonial administrative system, and particularly the segregated local government and judicial systems, underwent only peripheral changes in the 1980s. With hindsight, Rambanapasi noted in 1990 that 'there has been little change between the colonial and post-colonial regional policy frameworks even though the post-colonial regime has articulated an ideology of the state which substantially departs from that of the colonial state' (Makumbe 1998:38).³

Thus, despite majority rule and its concomitant transformation of power structures, only a limited alteration in the nature of power took place. In newly independent Zimbabwe there was in most cases no break with the forms of power specific to the formal institutions. Colonial rulers were removed, but replaced by others with similar powers. Continuity was particularly visible as some actors from the colonial institutions merely transferred into the new system. Thus, dissidents were met by state institutions such as the army and the police, using same methods as a few months earlier, though no longer formally 'the enemy'.

The shift from minority to majority rule, and the change of actors in power and in opposition, did however fundamentally transform political dynamics in Zimbabwe. With the legitimacy bestowed through democratic elections, struggles over power became significantly different. The 1980 general elections comprised the first opportunity for power relations between Zanu and Zapu to be openly weighed and measured. The periodical contest in elections opened a new sphere in political power competition, as the right to vote gave space for a qualitatively differently commitment regarding *choice* of political allegiance.

The need to win power through legal, administrative contest thus caused a shift in the competition between Zanu and Zapu. Other factors also influenced the shift. A salient difference was the empowerment the liberation war gave its victors. Both ex-Zipra dissidents and the new government came out of the experience of opposing power structures locally and centrally, having participated in defeating the mighty Rhodesian fire force. Both groupings had gained experience in the military and ideological fight for power. In the new situation however, only the government (and as it was perceived, ZANU-PF) had access to the execution of state power. Thus the empowerment that had accrued to each side was used differently by the contestants in the conflict situation. The government hastened to protect its power, aiming to enlarge the hegemonic project through a one-party state. The ex-Zipra dissidents, unhappy with the army integration process and the Zapu/Zipra persecution, used their initial military empowerment by continuing the struggle as before, through sabotage and contacts with army forces.

The new majority rulers, ZANU-PF, had a history of dealing forcefully with internal opposition as well as fighting the colonial oppressors. The inherited state administration had the legal tools and experience necessary for dealing with 'subversion'. Furthermore, in the Fifth Brigade the new state had at hand a military force to eliminate 'malcontents'. The ongoing dissident activity posed a challenge to development and security, as well as an irritating threat to Zanu's power base. However, the ZANU-PF government did not attempt conflict resolution or mediation during the conflict. Instead government actions had an explicit political purpose: to incapacitate its main political opposition through deliberate civilian targeting. Opposition (real or assumed) had to be eliminated. Applying Mamdani's notions to the Rhodesian case, one may argue that the citizens were white and settlers, and the subjects were black and natives. Independence brought a shift. Colonial rulers were removed, but replaced by others with similar powers. Now the victors (ZANU-PF) were in government and could be conceptualised as having assumed the role of 'citizens', whilst those dissatisfied with unfulfilled liberation war goals, were treated as 'subjects'.

What is central in the 'translation' of Mamdani's notion of citizen and subject to the post-independent era, are the power relation and the perceptions connected to it. Thus, a key for understanding the analytical usage of Mamdani's framework in this way is the dichotomy of rulers and ruled as mirrored from the colonial period, and the methods of control involved. The emphasis here is on the institutional and mental inheritance of the authoritarian use of power and how it was manifested after independence. The transfer of the citizen and subject concept into the post-independent era, is therefore not an argument that ZANU-PF consciously placed Ndebele citizens as their 'rural colonial' subjects. Instead, the analytical usage of the Mamdani framework rather leans on the insight into how from the onset of colonial penetration power, ethnicity, and violence became interconnected. Thus, the ZANU-PF

being conceptualised as 'citizens' relates to the party's power ambitions and historically ingrained perceptions of authority, legitimacy and rule. This is exemplified through the ruling party's attempt to fundamentally suppress the existing opposition – as had the colonial rulers.

We can conclude, first, that no overnight changes took place regarding the structural way of organising power. The *nature of power* had not changed compared to that of the late colonial period. Centrally and locally, power was executed much in the same way as in the late colonial period, although the ideological basis was entirely different as were government ambitions for change.⁴ The modes of rule as conceptualised by Mamdani had been transformed as the racially dominated rule had been replaced. Similarly and subsequently, resistance had also been transformed. *Power relations* between actors, primarily Zanu and Zapu, were distinctly different from pre-independence days. However, central to the understanding of post-independent power relations and the development of the Matabeleland conflict is that whilst power relations had changed, *perceptions* of power had *not* changed. The layers of understanding regarding power relations, framed by socialisation and memory, continued to operate. Thus, conformity to rule, internalisation of values and resistance to that which was perceived as oppressive, were in motion just as before independence. While the actors had changed, the way in which the new actors executed power in relation to opposition had not, as their mental framework remained in the colonial setting. Patterns from colonial rule of 'citizens' ruling 'subjects' were repeated and reproduced.

5.b. *Power and Violence: The Fifth Brigade*

(i) *The 'Pacification of Undesirable Ideas'*

The violence conducted by dissidents and other civil unrest prompted military action by the government. After the Entumbane clashes (1980/1981), military operations were carried out in Matabeleland North and South, and continued in various forms until the Unity Agreement was made public in December 1987. Neither ex-Zipra dissidents nor the government considered mediation and conflict resolution a possibility. The government's choice of a military strategy however caused a backlash. Rather than containing dissident activity the armed clampdown led to more army desertions and promoted further violence.

In 1983-1984 the Matabeleland conflict reached a peak in which the scale of organised violence affected several thousand people. The army conducted unambiguous, indiscriminate and massive targeting of civilians through army counter-insurgency operations in Matabeleland North/South/Midlands provinces. Based on the assumption that the dissidents operated through Zapu political structures, the government attempted by various means to break down the opposition party's organisation. Bearing the colonial and liberation war experiences in mind, control of local structures was crucial. The focus was therefore

not *per se* to eradicate dissidents, as claimed. The government's presentation of events, although possibly lacking in information and overview of dissident intentions, was used in the interest of the ruling party's power position. Since the legitimacy of the dissident cause was linked to the political standing that Zapu had achieved through the years, the threat of a power seizure was argued to be extensive, which in turn was used as a justification for armed confrontation.

The most brutal armed activities were conducted by the Fifth Brigade, which had been trained by the North Koreans to become a highly effective army unit. Having been formed in order to handle 'insecurity' by 'malcontents' and answerable directly to the Prime Minister, the Fifth Brigade acquired a particular status – one directly connected to the power of the state (interview Munemo, 1996).⁵ Upon graduation, the Brigade received instructions to deploy in Matabeleland in counter-insurgency operations. In addition to capturing dissidents, the Brigade's task was politically to reorient Matabeleland civilians. According to Mugabe:

They [the Fifth Brigade] were trained by the Koreans because we wanted one arm of the army to have a political orientation which stems from our philosophy as Zanu (PF). So when we deployed them in parts of Matabeleland North, their approach was not just to use the gun. It was also political, as was their approach during the war. You don't just act against the dissident. You also act with the population so that they can support the government (Five Brigade, 1983).

The Fifth Brigade's political objective regarding Matabeleland civilians proved in practice to be extremely harsh. The Brigade's methods were disclosed by the results of its first Matabeleland deployment (January-July 1983). Within the first six weeks more than 2000 civilians had been killed, thousands assaulted in public mass beatings, and hundreds of homesteads burnt. Most of the dead were killed in public executions. Those particularly selected were Zapu members, ex-Zipra combatants or army deserters. The Brigade pattern of intervention consisted of waves of intense brutality, followed by random incidents of beatings and executions (CCJP/LRF 1997: 23, 48, 50, 80, 83).

Central to the Brigade's military operations was the assumption that dissidents operated interchangeably as civilians/guerrillas and had local backing. Therefore brigade operations could not be solely focused on identifiable dissidents. Civilian targeting was a clear Brigade goal. Once the 'armed element was removed' a new phase followed where contacts were replaced with methods to 'alienate or pacify undesirable ideas still embedded in the local population' (interview Munemo, 1996). Pacification through coercion took place in the form of 'pungwes', using the method of guerrilla political education extended to civilians during the war. The message was to desist from supporting dissidents, to agree that local political orientation was 'wrong', and to accept government authority.

When the Brigade redeployed (September 1983), the pacification campaign was evidently changed to tactics of terror in order to induce extreme fear. This required a political decision, according to Lt. Col. Munemo, as a campaign of such a nature was beyond the authority of the army. The new strategy was of a clandestine character, as operations shifted from the village setting to interrogation camps. Civilians were assembled (without detention orders) and transported in truckloads to makeshift army centres in which conditions were created to induce maximum hardship. Survivors report the use of electric shocks, excessive beating, rape, genital mutilation and fundamentally dehumanising activities where ethnicity and sexuality were central. In addition to torture, detainees suffered food denial and forced labour (such as grave excavating). Corpses were buried inside the camp and in mine shafts.

(ii) *The Militarisation of Ethnic Identity*

An instrumental element in the Fifth Brigade operations was its ethnic stance. Victims' accounts repeatedly emphasise the ethnic discourse used by soldiers, victimising people identified with the Ndebele ethnic group, and stressing Shona superiority. Soldiers often told civilians that their task was to 'wipe out the Ndebeles', one of the reasons being the crimes conducted by Ndebele warriors on Shona ancestors (CCJP 1984:9, Werbner 1991:162, Alexander et al 2000:222). Lt. Col Munemo explained:

The blunt truth is that we are dealing with a situation in which there was a forced feeling of superiority and inferiority complexes between the two tribes, shall we say. That is the truth. A subsequent explanation would be that it was a clear question of settling old scores between the two tribes (Interview Munemo, 1996).

In the Commander's view, when the ruling party claimed the Fifth Brigade as 'its' army, this also translated into an ethnic (pro-Shona) claim, which influenced the brigade's transformation into an ethnically and politically biased unit. Operating under the assumption that local structures supported the dissidents, it pinpointed the Ndebele civilians as justified targets. When orders had filtered down to the operational level, ethnicity crystallised further. According to Lt. Col Munemo, on that level political and ethnic identity had amalgamated into an enemy identification in which the insurgent was firstly of Ndebele origin, and secondly with Zapu as political affiliation. Further, the forms of violence used by the Fifth Brigade had culture-specific tendencies. For example, being aware that burial and mourning where tears of the living release the soul of the deceased were central in Ndebele culture, soldiers refused to allow corpses to be buried. Instead they allowed the dead to decompose publicly, and killed family members who wept. As the Commander admitted, that when it came down to soldiers executing operations in villages, the *modus operandi* 'could not have any sophisticated discourse, it became simply ethnic'. Lt. Col.

Lionel Dyke, who led the first Task Force to Matabeleland at the inception of the conflict, stated the following regarding his successors' tactics:

I support it [the government's strategy to deploy the Fifth Brigade]. I think quite often you have to be cruel to be kind. ... I believe the Matabele understand that sort of harsh treatment, far better than the treatment that I myself was giving them, where we would just hunt and kill if a man was armed – or find a man who was unarmed and seemed to be a terrorist, and take him away to be dealt with legally. That was the Rhodesian way of doing things, and I had been brought up to do. It was, I think, not all that successful. The fact is that when the Fifth Brigade went in, they did brutally deal with the problem. If you were a dissident sympathiser, you died. (Interview Dyke, 1994)⁶

The Fifth Brigade's actions went thus from a policy of pacification to a policy of terror tactics, and from an identification of the enemy as dissidents with local support, to the insurgent as Ndebele. In both instances the Brigade's perspective became simplified and more extreme. How can we understand such a process?

Apter notes that political violence polarises people around affiliations such as race and ethnicity, feeds on divisions and intolerance, and generates extreme loyalties. As Apter formulates it: political violence 'turns boundaries in the mind to terrains and jurisdictions on the ground' (1997:1). This compartmentalisation planted from mind to ground is in Apter's view connected to boundary making and remaking. Political violence is explicitly designated for a reordering purpose: that of smashing the old in order to reset it anew. In the quest to reset boundaries, violence generates its own objects, and 'interior' meanings arise (Apter 1997:1). Apter also notes that once violence has begun, it develops within its interiority and its own rationality. It is divorced and above the rest of society. Apter reminds us that interpretations and explanations need not be convincing to outsiders, only to those involved. The collective's rules become binding, and penetration or violation of boundaries, goals or principles give rise to punitive outrage. Perpetrators invoke their own legitimising principles, aiming at altering boundaries, moral and territorial (Apter 1997:6, 16, 17).

The extreme violence Matabeleland civilians were subjected to in the makeshift interrogation camps cannot be explained solely by dissident destabilisation in the region. The sadistic forms of torture conducted on arbitrarily selected men, women and youth had not much to do with the question whether anyone was sympathetic to dissident activity or not. Adopting Apter's conceptualisation, it was political violence 'designated for a reordering purpose'. The task was to 'smash the old' Zapu political affinity, and to 'reset it anew', into affirming government authority. But as the violence evolved, as Apter notes, it developed its own rationality. Clandestinely conducted in the makeshift camps, 'divorced from and above the rest of the society', the conduct of violence did not need to be understood or seen as justified by anyone other than members of the Fifth Brigade. Driven by the impetus to hate, they 'invoked their own legitimising principles', as Apter has put it. The Fifth Brigade's puni-

tive outrage has been well documented by the CCJP in their report on the Matabeleland destabilisation, which gives many examples of horrifying, humiliating, and excruciatingly painful treatments of Matabeleland civilians (CCJP/LRF 1997).

The ethnic content in the extreme Fifth Brigade violence is also documented. The use of cultural markers in torture was striking. Appadurai, writing on collective behaviour and severe ethnic violence, notes that violence inflicted on the human body in ethnic contexts is 'never entirely random or lacking in cultural form'. A link is made between the forms of bodily violence and the relationship of purity to identity. The body constitutes the material form of the ethnic other, and is in horrible efforts 'exposed, penetrated and occupied' (Appadurai 1997:7).

How can we understand the extreme Fifth Brigade violence and its ethnic orientation from a historical perspective? To gain insight into the occurrences we link back to power and ethnicity in the colonial period. Mamdani notes that without taking into account how in the colonial context power was organised and how it was fought, one cannot understand the *force* with which resistance to the colonisers took place (1996:286-287). In the Matabeleland context, similarly, without taking into account both the colonial experience (how power was organised), and the experience of the liberation war, (how power/authority was fought), one cannot understand the force by which the new government reacted toward the destabilisation taking place. Just as in the colonial experience when resistance, in accordance with the Mamdani conceptualisation, was shaped by the very structure it resisted, in the Matabeleland conflict, the government's response was shaped by the imprint of the colonial mode of rule. Thus, when rule and power were questioned by dissidents, rulers responded through state force. The government opted for the method and strategy used by themselves to fight colonial power (counter-insurgency), but with the power perception previously held by the colonial government. What forcefully came through in the Fifth Brigade activities was the notion that power embedded centrally in government must be enforced locally, and that those who opposed central power must be fragmented, removed, ousted, or exterminated. The method was, as in the liberation war, to erode military capacity partly by destroying the institutional structure. Thus, the Mugabe government's decision to respond with force against civilians (and dissidents), reflects a clear continuity with the Rhodesian government's response of force against civilians (and 'terrorists').

The way the Fifth Brigade's operations simply turned 'ethnic' can thus be seen as a response in which perceptions linked to the past operated dynamically and interdependently in the present. Subsequently the Fifth Brigade created an identity for themselves and another for the Matabele civilians. Here we can return to Irwin-Zarecka's point of how we perceive the meaning of an event. Identity formation, history and a cultural context are only relevant in relation to which meaning we attach to it, the meaning being a result of our perceptions.

Hence, the Fifth Brigade's arrival at the 'ethnic turn' can be seen as a complex process of past and present operating simultaneously, in the context of a war resulting in a crude and unsophisticated formula of ethnic violence.

Although the Fifth Brigade acted in a seemingly isolated manner in the closed-off Matabeleland region, and where soldiers were carriers of individual perceptions of power, ethnicity and violence, it is however imperative to remember that the brigade acted on orders from Prime Minister Mugabe. How detailed their orders were, and how much of the brigade's operational methods derived from their North Korean training, is not documented. The fact remains that the actions that were taken were conducted by a state army, on the basis of a policy and executed based on official orders. The point made here is that whilst members of the government operated with their 'institutional' and 'mental' frameworks as a backdrop to current decision-making, so did the soldiers in the brigade. Thus, the simultaneous effect of a government's set of orders and a brigade's execution of them, both being influenced by 'institutional' and 'mental' frameworks, reinforced the outcome. Subsequently, Matabeleland became an arena in which historical experiences were released, relived and reformatted for current use.

5.c Power and Perceptions: Government Discourse

(i) The Mobilisation of Bias

In government discourse the public was not given much space to react to the state measures. Two issues were seemingly central in the messages presented to the public: to identify the enemy in the Matabeleland conflict, and to create consent for violence as the method chosen by the government to solve the conflict.

A conscious effort to steer public opinion in a specific direction is not an arbitrary affair. To put forward an official message to the public convincingly necessitates both specific strategies and methods. In his writing on political violence, Apter argues that since such violence is interpretative, discourse plays an important role in legitimising it. The discourses are fictive and logical reconstructions of reality (1997: 2,6).

Herman/Chomsky examine propaganda and how to 'manage' public opinion through media propaganda campaigns. They conclude that propaganda can distort, misrepresent, and suppress evidence in conformity with elite priorities (Herman/Chomsky 1994:xiii). Through the media, privileged groups that dominate the society and the state defend their economic, social and political agendas. In this process a 'mobilisation of bias' and a 'manufacturing of consent' occurs through the selection of topics, distribution of concerns, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and through keeping a debate within certain boundaries. In cases of conflict, the authors conclude, the

processing of news fails to place public policy into a meaningful context (Herman/Chomsky 1994: xii, 298).

Throughout the conflict violence stood in the centre of events and interpretations. In media and government rallies government representatives openly stated that the authorities would 'eradicate', 'destroy', 'crush', 'wipe out', and 'kill' all dissidents.⁷ The same line of argument applied to the apprehension of alleged dissident sympathisers. Mugabe reiterated that it was impossible to distinguish between dissidents and their sympathisers, and that both categories were just as guilty of dissident crimes. Therefore both were subject to the same measures. In executing these measures, it was unavoidable that innocent people were victimised in the process. Mugabe explained:

The government is going to track down the dissidents until they are completely wiped out. Those who harbour and support dissidents will too be wiped out. We cannot select, because dissidents have no distinguishing marks (We will, 1983).

Seemingly, the fear of the 'wrath' of the government was intended to be greater than the fear of non-co-operation with the dissidents. The government message echoed past experience. During the liberation war collective punishment was meted out against civilians as the rural population supporting 'terrorists' were themselves seen as 'terrorists'. Subsequently, no differentiation could be made between those presumed guilty and those perceived to be innocent. Thus, the understanding that innocent people were victimised in the Matabeleland conflict allegedly in the process of dissident apprehension, mirrored somewhat the Rhodesian government's understanding of a similar setting during the liberation war, constituting an unmistakable continuity between pre-and post-independence forms of authoritarian rule and abuse of power.

In government discourse, in order to induce fear, create acceptance for violence, legitimacy for military and policy interventions, and minimise other resolution options, a partisan narrative disseminating values of the government was enacted, using the methods of propaganda. During the conflict and particularly at the height of the Fifth Brigade operations, the government enforced a news blockade by which no one external to the region was allowed entrance. A blanket censorship rested over massacres, executions and rapes.

Discourse Past and Present

How can we relate this development to our understanding of the Matabeleland conflict and the 'institutional' and 'mental' frameworks?

The production of authoritative messages with a political content, particularly in a conflict situation, for the purpose of convincing a population, can be conceptualised as the same as the intent to influence and shape perceptions. To overtly distort and suppress vital information can be conceptualised as tantamount to the enforcement of power relations. In both cases the impact on perceptions is crucial as they are the foundation for actors' decision-making.

We come back to our earlier discussion on Foucault's understanding of power as a technique. In Foucault's view identities are shaped and moulded through the exercise of disciplinary power. Individuals falling outside the adopted norm are given a certain identity. For fear of marginalisation and repression individuals conform as stipulated by the ruling elite.

Government discourse in the Matabeleland conflict was a forceful method to instil the hegemonic power relation for which primarily ZANU-PF stood for. It skilfully used propaganda, divided the nation into those who were 'right' and 'wrong', those who were for unity and national security and those who were 'enemies of the state'. The government succeeded, following Foucault's vocabulary, in creating a norm through its disciplinary character. Subsequently, those who feared marginalisation or repression, conformed to the norm. The norm stipulated that government military intervention was legitimate, and the use of violence on civilians was justified.

However, the extent to which adaptation and conformity to norms can be achieved by rulers relates to the historical background, just as do power relations. The Smith government was, particularly during the liberation war, infamous for its propaganda, censorship and distortion of events. Particularly well known were the air-dropped brochures describing the perceived criminality of guerrilla combatants toward rural civilians. Thus, the colonial government created a norm and through its disciplinary character enforced it on its adversaries. However, its success was evidently limited. Zanu and Zapu mobilisation in the rural areas was not seemingly fundamentally affected by the Smith government's discourse. Why was the Smith government's propaganda strategy unsuccessful?

In the liberation war, the conflicting parties' objectives were clear: colonial minority rule versus independence and majority rule. Despite propaganda, distortions, and the suppression of information, taking a side in the war was not ambiguous for either party.⁸ In the Matabeleland conflict however, dissident objectives were neither homogeneous, nor were they disseminated, while government objectives were enveloped in propaganda. However, judging from participation in demonstrations and rallies, and actions taken by the ZANU-PF party, Youth, and Women's' organisations particularly 1985-1987, the government's discourse was seemingly *adhered to*. Why? What constituted the difference between Smith's and Mugabe's propaganda machines? In terms of method, not much. In fact, Mugabe's government reproduced most of the old techniques, including the airdropped folders – this time describing the perceived criminality of dissidents against rural civilians. However, what differed were *perceptions of those who ruled*. Coming out of a 15-year liberation war, many in the newly independent country saw majority rule as a historical accomplishment carried by its liberation movements, who now governed the country. Thus, a widespread perception of credibility for the rulers existed, which helped support a disbelief in eyewitness accounts regarding state

violence in Matabeleland. Furthermore, the use of violence against opposition was historically ingrained – the rulers' legitimacy to act included historically violence both as a method and ideology. Thus, credibility, in addition to distortion and suppression of vital information, historically conditioned conformity to authority, historical legitimacy for violence against opposition, and fear of violence, were all elements at hand to the government.

Through the skilful manoeuvring of these elements the government attempted to induce fear, create acceptance for violence, seek legitimacy for its military and policy interventions, and minimise discussion of alternative conflict resolution measures. Doing so, it reproduced the methods adopted during colonial rule. It utilised citizens' perceptions of credibility inherited from the liberation war resistance against colonial rule, and at the same time adopted colonial perceptions of absolute rule.

6. Lessons Learned: Sites of Struggle in the reorientation of political values

How can we understand the above continuities? Reflecting on the fact that institutions and positioning change, fluctuate and shift, it is important to point out that the Matabeleland conflict developed in non-linear manner. Complex patterns of responses to contradictions carried over from historical experience were played out in the contemporary situation, resulting in a diversity of reactions, based on actors' current goals and objectives. Thus, historical events and meanings attached to them were in a constant dialectic with current events, causing the foundation for the formation of perceptions to be in constant flux. Considering decision-making being based on one's perceptions of events and developments, it is clear that actors at a number of conjunctures made *choices* regarding positioning and which actions to take.

The Politics of Choice

The availability of choice in government policy decision-making during the conflict was an issue seldom stressed by government discourse, nor in parliament. Instead, reference was made to destabilisation as a war situation, and the inevitability of a military response. The state of emergency was extended every six months, without much discussion of alternative routes or methods to those chosen under the emergency situation. Government positioning was presented as *the choice*, whilst simultaneously barring other options from discourse space. The stress on inevitability of certain responses and actions includes an underlying assumption, that of freedom from accountability. How can one be accountable for a decision one was circumstantially 'forced' to make? This is exemplified by Robert Mugabe's reply regarding Fifth Brigade atrocities when he stated 'I won't apologise. This is what happens in a war' (*Tell me*, 1993). Thus during, as well as after, the conflict, there was a tendency to see govern-

ment policy in terms of responses toward destabilisation as a one way street: the motion could only go in one direction on a path irreversibly taken. Such an interpretation of the situation reduced the complex and contradictory to a neat and linear context, in which distinct choices were not available. As Mamdani has argued, despite economic, sociological and cultural constraints, decisions are made. Interpreting circumstances however as a 'noncontradictory whole' may lead to the kind of one-way process referred to here:

It is tempting to read back from an event and to explain it as the necessary outcome of historically evolved circumstances or consciousness. Such a reading back obscures the element of choice that confronted participants at each step along this historical route (1996:226).

Thus, obscuring government choice during the Matabeleland conflict had less to do with real options than with the politics of choice, and had less to do with the 'necessity' of force than with political will.

Hence, contrary to the message that choices were not available, decisions and actions were taken not only by government, but all conflict actors. A myriad of choices were made based on a variety of criteria, such as instructions, group decisions or singular positionings. Decision-making took place in the dynamics of historical understanding and contemporary contradictions. Thus, we cannot understand the Matabeleland conflict without attempting to understand the complex and contradictory context in which it is played out. Within this context there must be an emphasis on choice, rather than decisions being 'necessary outcomes of historically evolved circumstances'. As the conflict was focused on power relations and political positioning, it brings to the fore the choice of political allegiance. The long experience of difference, polarising Zanu and Zapu, became overt in a new fashion after independence. Both Zapu and Zanu wanted state power to execute their programmes. Despite marginalisation and persecution of party members, Zapu made the choice to stay in the coalition government in order to influence decision-making. Zanu used military intervention in order to reorient the political values and beliefs of Matabeleland civilians, to shift political allegiance from Zapu to Zanu. Thus, in the conflict of power relations, the *space of choice* to choose political allegiance was crucial.

The Space of Choice

In his study of late colonial power relations Mamdani argues that the key to alien hegemony was a cultural project of harnessing the moral, historical and community impetus behind local custom. Custom was defined and enforced by traditional Native Authorities in the local state (1996:286). Customary law, unlike civil law, was in Mamdani's conceptualisation an administratively driven affair, for those who enforced custom were in a position to define it in the first place. Custom was, according to Mamdani, state ordained and state

enforced. This led to the customary being more often than not the site of struggle. Custom was often the outcome of a contest between various forces, not just those in power or on the scene agents. The contest took place in an institutional context and framework which was heavily skewed in favour of state-appointed customary authorities (1996:22).

We have used the above understanding explaining how ethnicity and power became inherently intertwined in the Matabeleland conflict. Thus, as a result of resistance of colonial power both within the local state and against the central state, ethnic identity became part of the struggle. Before independence, the site of the struggle was the customary. The Matabeleland conflict on the other hand, took place after independence. Power relations between the major actors had been transformed, circumstances were changed. Elections were a measurement of loyalties and allegiances, and were (formally) the arbitrators of political strength. Actors had a choice when voting for whom to rule, albeit not their policies of rule. Nevertheless, power relations could, compared to Rhodesian pre-independence, be influenced through general elections. The site of struggle was no longer the customary. The contest between forces was not about custom and who enforced it. Where can one then conceptualise the site of the struggle in the Matabeleland conflict?

We noted above that as the Matabeleland conflict was focused on power relations, it caused political positioning and the choice of political allegiance to be central. Within Zanu many saw Zapu as a stumbling block for the party's quest to implement a one-party state. Thus to Zanu's hegemonic project Zapu allegiance, values and beliefs were a hindrance. The space available for formal political choice – elections – gave nevertheless the right for political allegiance to be manifested and legally executed. Thus, to *change* the political allegiance of those who were a hindrance to the hegemonic project became imperative. In the Matabeleland conflict, the attempt to shift peoples' political allegiance is painfully apparent in the Fifth Brigade operations, where the alienation and pacification of 'undesirable ideas' and the enforcement of government authority in terms of a 'new political thinking', were rationales for executing military operations. However, the shift of individuals' political allegiance does not take place through prompted instructions, requests, or violence. In the conflict this is evident for example when Matabeleland inhabitants chose to keep their Zapu membership cards and loyalty, although forced *en masse* to buy ZANU-PF cards and undergo political reorientation efforts at 'pungwes'. In Nkayi, Zapu committees were forced to rename themselves ZANU-PF. However, political allegiance did not shift. 'It was just on paper, we were all Zapu members', remembers a committee member (Alexander et al, 2000:225). In line with this reasoning it is clear, that in the Matabeleland conflict the subjects of the struggle were not the dissidents. They were a subordinate issue in the conflict. The subjects of the conflict were the population of Matabeleland who, despite massive state violence showed in two elections their political alle-

giance to the opposition party Zapu. Noting that the Matabeleland population were the subjects of the conflict, we can further conclude that the site of the struggle can be conceptualised to be the *space of choice* this part of the population exercised in terms of political values and beliefs. Thus, the contested space is the site in which people decided their political preference. What is the content of the struggle at this site? Why does this site propel such forceful reactions?

When conceptualising the site of struggle, we can separate between a 'physical' and a 'mental' site. Whilst the physical site can be understood to concern institutions, the mental site can be comprehended as the space of choice exercised by individuals. The institutional site can be influenced and controlled through administrative measures and changes in structure. For example, the two political institutions Zanu and Zapu united to form one party, causing changes in structure due the merger. Contrary to the physical site, the mental site cannot be controlled and change cannot simply be forged. In the case of the Zanu-Zapu merger, structure changed, but the meaning members attached to this change could not be enforced by party leaders. Thus, the space of choice in terms of the meaning given to the merger could not be controlled. The distinction between the physical and the mental is important. In the Matabeleland conflict the struggle does not concern the right to create democratic institutions, i.e. physical sites. This took place in the previous struggle fought in the liberation war. At post-independence through majority elections, two parties governed and democratic institutions were, in a general sense, in place. Thus, the struggle was not the *choice for creating* these institutions. Instead the struggle was the *space of choice* to democratically *utilise* those physical sites. That this space was utilised is evident as notwithstanding harassment, abductions, torture and murders of Zapu members prior to the 1985 elections, opposition party members did not refrain from Zapu political activism nor from going to the polls to vote for their choice of political party.

From the above reasoning we can conclude that the physical site, involving institutional change, may be forged through power. This is contrary to the mental site, where the space of choice is operative, because change in the mental site cannot be forcefully executed. Perceptions and thought cannot be controlled. Thought can be institutionally framed, influenced, co-opted or finally extinguished, but even in the moment before a thought is finally terminated – it cannot be externally controlled. Yet for rulers to succeed in any kind of political transition, thought – in terms of actors' political positioning, values and beliefs – is imperative, as it is the basis for decision-making. We can now return to our previous conclusion on the location of site, and re-pose the question: what is the content of the struggle at this site? Through our reasoning we concluded that the site of struggle is the space created by the element of choice to exercise free political thought. The content of the struggle at this site is then on the one hand, the attempt to change individuals' political allegiance, and on the other hand, the right to utilise the exercise of free choice. In the

Matabeleland conflict, the government and the ruling party ZANU-PF fought to influence and control this site, forcefully attempting to shift Zanu allegiance to Zanu support. However, as apparent in the way Matabeleland inhabitants reacted, their political choices were not determined by state violence. The mental site is not a sphere that can be controlled. That is why the site of struggle being the space of choice is so powerful, and propels such forceful reactions.

A conclusion drawn by Mamdani is that 'the most important institutional legacy of colonial rule, may lie in the inherited impediments to democratisation' (1996:25). Connecting this conclusion to our above reasoning, we may note that: if the mental site of struggle is the space of choice in terms of values and beliefs, in which the democratically elected government tried to forcefully alter perceptions in favour of its own hegemonic project, then the mental site constitutes an impediment to democratisation. Thus, the legacy of colonial power relations impedes democratic rule, although power derives from democratic elections. Put differently: even though institutionally power has been democratically established, the dialectics of the institutional and mental frameworks with current developments, overpower institutional democracy. Hence, even though in Zimbabwe the post-independent government was democratically elected, the unchanged nature of power inherited from the colonial era, in combination with authoritarian power perceptions, overruled the legally and institutionally established democracy.

Concluding remarks

Fifteen years have passed since the end of the Matabeleland conflict. The brutality of the state's armed forces has not repeated, i.e. systematic public executions and extreme violence against civilians have not been carried out as during the conflict. Continuities nevertheless exist. As the political crisis of Zimbabwe deepens, the government's agenda to maintain power becomes transparent. The authoritarian project of the state cannot be obscured by formal multi-party democracy and the existence of a plethora of civic organisations. Whilst land redistribution takes centre stage on the governments' discourse, the collapse of the rule of law, fundamental economic difficulties, and a crisis of political legitimacy framed by violence against real and perceived opposition, is the context of political existence in Zimbabwe today.

Subsequently, the struggle – as during the Matabeleland conflict – may still be conceptualised to be the space of choice in which Zimbabwean civilians' wish to exercise free political thought and preference of political allegiance. And, as in the 1980s, this site propels strong reactions, as the ruling party fights to influence and control the site, forcefully attempting to shift opposition allegiance to ZANU-PF support. Thus, the critical difference between democratically established institutions and the right of utilisation of those institutions central to the Matabeleland conflict, remains crucial to the Zimbabwean politics of today. The post-colonial project of democratisation remains unfinished.

At the beginning of the new millennium Zimbabwean citizens may arrive at the same conclusion as fifteen years earlier: shifting from an authoritarian rule, change of institutions does not necessarily take place if not followed by a democratisation of perspectives.

Notes

1. This paper is based on 'Uprooting the Weeds: Power, Ethnicity and Violence in the Matabeleland Conflict 1980-1987', Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, September 2001.
2. ZANU-PF: Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front). Zanla: Zimbabwe African Liberation Army, Zanu's military wing.
PF-ZAPU: Patriotic Front-Zimbabwe African People's Union. Zipra: Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army, Zapu's military wing.
3. In Makumbe's view, the central government's reluctance to decentralise power, authority and responsibility to local authorities resulted in democratic centralism, in which 'little, if any, real power, authority and responsibility was transferred from the centre to the periphery' (Makumbe 1998:39).
4. For details on government reforms in the 1980s, see Stoneman/Cliffe 1989:168-175.
5. Lt. Col. Munemo was Deputy Commander for the Fifth Brigade December 1982 – April 1983 under (now Air Marshall) Perence Shiri, whereafter he and Shiri switched roles. Lt. Col. Munemo was the Commander until July 1983, after which he left his position to take up specialised training in Nigeria (interview, 1996).
6. Lt. Col. Dyke's statement highlights existing perceptions linked to differentiation and violence. By stating that particularly *the Matabele* understand harsh treatment, implies a comparison to another group, disclosing differentiation between groups. By stating that the same group understands a harsh treatment 'better' than through corrective measures defined through a court of law, discloses the perception that to 'brutally deal' with the problem is legitimate. Lt. Col Dyke's support of the Fifth Brigade operations also indicates a perception of state power legitimately being absolute: the right to kill dissident 'sympathisers'.
7. For sources for these expressions, see Ministry of Information, 1983:4; Tribal Rule, 1983; Throw Away, 1983; Disarm Now, 1983; We will, 1983; Dissidents Caught, 1983.
8. This is not to ignore or deny the complexities in relation to guerrilla support, recruitment, and authority in relation to rural civilians. See Kriger (1992).

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