

Owen Maseko and Gukurahundi

One of the charges against Zimbabwe's brilliant visual artist, Owen Maseko, is that his forcibly closed exhibition at the Bulawayo Art Gallery offended a particular ethnic group. The ethnic group that he allegedly offended are the Shona people. The subject of Maseko's exhibition is Gukurahundi, during which a particular ethnic group was massacred - in their thousands. These were the Ndebele people, and they were massacred by the Fifth Brigade who answered to "nobody but Mugabe,"¹ and who were almost entirely Shona soldiers. It's one thing being offensive, entirely another being genocidal. Maseko is a satirical artist, kindly satirical (Horatian) in his colourful depictions of township life, viciously satirical (Juvenalian) in his bleak depictions of government oppression. No person belonging to the Shona ethnic group should be offended by this exhibition – unless he or she is in denial of those terrible events in Matabeleland and Midlands, which began with Mugabe's exhortations to the Fifth Brigade, resplendent in their red berets, to "plough and reconstruct."² This sinister mixed-metaphor is echoed in the word, "gukurahundi", which literally means "the rain which washes away the chaff before the spring rains". Here's another irony: the report which exposed ZANU PF's intentions in Matabeleland in the 80s was compiled by yet another ethnic group, one sardonically described by Mugabe as "Blair's kith and kin".

Those who would rather the events of the 1980s remain shrouded in secrecy [read Yvonne Veras's novel, *The Stone Virgins*, where mixed-metaphors abound] will claim that discussing them will reopen old wounds. However, it was clear during the interviewing procedure that, for thousands of people, these wounds have never healed: people still suffer today [1997], physically, psychologically, and practically, as a result of what they experienced in the 1980s. Far from "reopening" old wounds, the victims' being allowed to speak out and having their stories validated by a non-judgmental audience has begun what is hoped will be a healing process, after more than 10 years of people suffering in fear and isolation.³

It is now 27 years since Gukurahundi, and when, at last, someone has the courage, the moral conviction, to speak out, he is arrested, imprisoned in a filthy overcrowded cell, and charged under POSA for inciting disrespect of the president, inciting violence, and offending a particular ethnic group, race or religion. Owen Maseko is a young man, too young, possibly, to have any conscious memory of Gukurahundi, but he grew up among those who witnessed or were victims of the atrocities, and he is part of the collective memory of a people who have, if not died socially and emotionally, become paralysed.

The academic, Brilliant Mhlanga, was not too young to witness Fifth Brigade atrocities. Here is an account of what happened to one of his relatives, from his essay: "On the psychology of oppression: blame me on history!"⁴

¹ *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace*, published by The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and The Legal Resources Foundation, p. 46

² Ibid, p. 45

³ Ibid, p. 4

⁴ Published in *Critical Arts*, Volume 23, Number 1, 2009, Ed K.G. Tomaselli, p. 108

This time a betting game was hastily arranged. Two soldiers moved the motion that the foetus in her womb was male, while the other two argued that it was a girl. This argument continued for about five minutes. They each produced 10 cents and gave it to an adjudicator who then ordered that her womb be ripped open to prove which group was right. Eventually she died of excessive bleeding and pain. The foetus too, later succumbed.

The foetus was seven months old.

When Tabitha Khumalo (MP for Bulawayo South), responding in parliament to a heated debate on the Delta Gallery photographic exhibition⁵, suggested that they extend the debate to Gukurahundi, both parties flippantly suggested that they go back to the 1890s. This is a form of denial. Describing the post-Independence period of the 80s as a civil war is also a form of denial. The ZIPRA uprisings at Entumbane in November 1980 and February 1981 were quickly crushed. The Fifth Brigade massacres, under the leadership of Perence Shiri, began early in January 1983. The largest number of dead in a single killing, 62 young men and women, took place on 5 March, 1983, on the banks of the Cewale River near Lupane. Zenzele Ndebele of Radio Dialogue gave the appropriate response to those parliamentarians, MDC and ZANU PF, who invoked the First Chimurenga: if there was anybody in parliament who had been tortured in the 1890s, let them come forward and say so!

The Second Chimurenga, a real civil war, which took place in the 1960s and 70s, is a different matter. But while the perpetrators of offences in that war were not individually held accountable, “many documents exist, including a substantial body of academic books and memoirs, ensuring that this part of the nation’s history is accessible to those who wish to know it.”⁶ When the names Nyadzonja and Chimoio are mentioned, the whole of Africa and much of the world know about the terrible killings that took place there, perpetrated by the Rhodesian armed forces. You can read about these guerrilla camps in David Caute’s book, *Under the Skin*, or D. Martin and P. Johnson’s, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe*, or in Emmanuel Ngaru’s celebrated poem, “The song of a child who survived Nyadzonja”. Here is a sample:

I looked at my mother.
She lay peacefully, quiet, not crying.
I called, I got no answer.
I looked at my mother again.
There were only holes where eyes should have been
And exposed flesh where nostrils should have been.

There are many other accounts available to the public, of these massacres. But how many people outside Matabeleland and Midlands are aware of the terrible significance of a name like Bhalagwe?

⁵ These photographs record the violence against MDC supporters in the run-up to the so-called Presidential elections of 2008

⁶ *Breaking the Silence*, p. 4

Owen Maseko's exhibition, courageously supported by the curator, Voti Thebe, was arranged so that people in the street, people he affectionately depicts in his paintings, could see some of the displays without having to go into the gallery. That is why, when the exhibition was banned, the police papered the windows over with copies of the government's mouthpiece in Bulawayo, the *Chronicle* (chronically subservient to its masters in Harare). Maseko's exhibition is made up of installations, cartoons, and graffiti. One installation depicts the 1987 peace deal, which led to the so-called Unity Accord, and which totally emasculated the founder of Zimbabwe's Liberation Movement, Joshua Nkomo. It depicts Nkomo slumped over a table with blood pouring out of his back; next to him, ramrod straight, stands Mugabe, and behind the dictator, shadowy figures in dark glasses – the ubiquitous CIO.

Another installation depicts a toilet bowl with one of those old fashioned cisterns with a chain attached. Someone wearing dark glasses and a suit is pulling the chain to flush the toilet. There is a ballot box over the bowl. Some poor guy is trying to post his vote, which is covered in blood, and has the word "Ndebele" printed on it. This is sledge hammer satire.

The cartoons are no less angry. There is one of eight singing faces with agonised expressions, and the words: "They made us sing their songs while they tortured and killed our brothers and sisters". Another, part of a sestych (sextych?), depicts heads wearing berets dripping blood, and the words, "The red of their berets ran across the land." Yet another depicts tiny people cowering between two pairs of giant boots, with the words, "They have walked all over us and kicked us but we still survive."

The walls of the gallery are painted red, with chalk left around for people to respond to the exhibition. Among the graffiti, Emmerson Mnangagwa's infamous parody of the scriptures stands out: "Blessed are they who will follow the path of the government laws, for their days on earth shall be increased. But woe unto those who will choose the path of collaboration with dissidents for we will certainly shorten their stay on earth." At another rally he referred to the dissidents as "cockroaches" (shades of Rwanda) and the Fifth Brigade as "DDT"!⁷ At the time, Mnangagwa was minister of State Security, and in charge of the CIO.

But what did the minister mean by "dissident"? Did he mean the few hundred ZIPRA defectors infiltrated by South African backed, so-called Super ZAPU, and so-called pseudo-dissidents like the notorious Gayigusu, who murdered some hundreds of citizens including all the whites (37); or did he mean the entire Ndebele people, not excluding those in high office like Joshua Nkomo, Dumisa Dabengwa, Lookout Masuku, and Sidney Malunga? Here is what *Breaking the Silence* says about dissident numbers in the 80s:

...probably no more than 400 at their zenith. The attrition rate was very high, with approximately 75% being killed, captured, injured or fleeing to Botswana. At their peak, dissident numbers in Matabeleland South were about 200, but by the amnesty

⁷ *Breaking the Silence*, p. 54

they were reduced to 54. In Matabeleland North, dissidents numbered about 90 at most, but again, by the amnesty, only 41 remained. In Western Matabeleland, dissidents numbered 90 at their peak, and about 27 at the Amnesty. Ultimately only 122 dissidents would turn themselves in, countrywide.⁸

Is this the stuff of civil war?

Why (as I write) is it that, after 27 years, almost no one will speak publicly about the Gukurahundi massacres? Why haven't the so-called free press in Harare said anything about Maseko's arrest and imprisonment? Why has not one Harare human rights organization condemned it? Is it because you haven't finished crying over the Delta Gallery banning? Where is civics, for God's sake? When *Breaking the Silence* was published in 1997, the then curator of the Bulawayo National Art Gallery, Yvonne Vera, refused to place it in the Gallery craft and book shop where all her own books were on prominent display. The denial continues.

1605 words

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⁸ P. 37