

Art, Censorship & the Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe

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Sokwanele

This article is the first in a series that will look at forms of freedom of expression in Zimbabwe. Politics has so infiltrated our lives that the personal, social and cultural are all political, and as always with Zimbabwe, it is impossible to talk about one without referencing the other. What we hope to do is to encourage people to think beyond the minutiae detail of political immediacies, and to debate who we are as people in this maelstrom, how do we define ourselves, where do we want to be going, how can we get there, and is there space for this richness of identity to be defined and celebrated in Zimbabwe today?

We start by looking at the way 'freedom of expression' is dealt with in the Global Political Agreement. We then turn to a discussion of how 'freedom of expression' in Zimbabwe is sharply curtailed by Zanu PF's 'Patriotic History' programme. This has serious implications for artists in Zimbabwe, and Owen Maseko's case is used to outline what happens to artists and their art when their work dares to challenge Zanu PF's Patriotic History. Maseko's recent exhibition – now banned from being shown in Zimbabwe – focused on the Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe; so we also discuss how the truth of the Gukurahundi has been suppressed for decades and, if Zanu PF get their way, will continue to be suppressed for the foreseeable future. We ask whether 'now is the time' to discuss our past. Finally, we consider the future implications for art in Zimbabwe in the light of the Owen Maseko case.

Freedom of Expression and the GPA

The Global Political Agreement (GPA) signed on this day, 15 September, in 2008 includes a section on 'Freedom of Expression and Communication', (1) but this all-encompassing title is distilled to a few points. In essence, it agrees that new radio stations and newspapers need to be allowed to register and operate in Zimbabwe, and that radio stations operating from outside Zimbabwe should be asked to cease their operations and to return home and their 'external funders' asked to stop funding them. The GPA also agrees that the state-controlled media "provides balanced and fair coverage to all political parties for their legitimate political activities" and that the public and private media will desist from perpetuating intolerance or hate-speech.

The GPA is the final product of a tensely negotiated agreement, heralding a power-sharing 'inclusive government' for a transition to new elections to resolve the political crisis. Its purpose, as well as the explosive context within which it was drafted, means it is understandably brief when dealing with expansive and important concepts such as 'freedom of expression'.

The clauses in the GPA for 'freedom of expression' focus on 'freedom of political expression and political communication'. There are two points to make: first, there is an inherent contradiction in the use of the word "freedom" alongside a clause that seeks to shut down existing forms of communication (this refers specifically to the agreement to "call upon the governments that are hosting and/or funding external radio stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe to cease such hosting and funding"). Second, that the focus on political freedom of expression, to the exclusion of all other forms, suggests that once people/the media can express themselves freely with regards to politics, that all good things will flow from there. But is this true? Or is it possible that this diminution of 'freedom of expression' perpetuates the type of logic and thinking that has informed and controlled our understanding of freedom of expression for decades, including the pre-Independence era?

Zanu PF's social engineering project

Czeslaw Milosz, a poet writing within the constraints of Polish post-war communism, argues that individuals and human societies grow and discover new dimensions, often unconsciously and unintentionally, by direct experience. This experience, he says, is influenced by "the direct pressure of History with a capital H" revealing itself through events and evidence of things that have happened; for example, "invasions by foreign armies, or ruined cities". But experience is also affected by things that are less tangible and sometimes intensely personal; for example, "a detail of architecture in the shaping of a landscape".⁽²⁾ Individuals, located within a constantly flowing stream of history are bumped by political, social, cultural and personal experiences, all of which gel together to define their sense of self and identity in a place and time – their 'history'. This contributes to who they are in the world and how they function in their unique contexts.

Zanu PF, a party obsessed with political dominance and political survival understand this construction of self identity and experience all too well. Its efforts during the 1980s to establish a one-party state extended a nationalist agenda that had began during the liberation war, and went on to lean heavily on legislation left behind by the Rhodesian Front government. Shortly after the Rhodesian Front's Unilateral Declaration of Independence on 11 November 1965, freedom of expression and communication was sharply curtailed with propaganda and censorship; in fact, the Censorship and Entertainment's Act still used by the Government of Zimbabwe today dates back to 1967. This suppressed information in Rhodesia led the Johannesburg Sunday Times to scathingly describe the white Rhodesian population as "the most brain-washed group in modern times";⁽³⁾ but, as Zanu PF demonstrates, political 'brain-washing' goes hand in hand with a desire to retain absolute political control.

Zanu PF showed its true colours very early: perceived threats to Zanu PF's political dominance from Joshua Nkomo and ZAPU were brutally dealt with during the Gukurahundi of the 1980s, and misinformation and misperceptions about this time still have currency today. Shortly after this, Edgar Tekere (Zanu PF's former Secretary General, cast out of the party in 1988 and lambasted for straying from the revolutionary path) formed the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) and challenged Mugabe at the 1990 polls. State television adverts with the same menacing overtones so familiar to Zimbabweans today portrayed the choice between Zanu PF

and ZUM as a matter of life or death. In one advert shown on national television, the shattering of glass in a car accident was followed by a voice coldly warning: “This is one way to die. Another is to vote ZUM. Don’t commit suicide, vote ZANU-PF and live.”(4)

All of these are precursors to the intense social engineering programme that Zanu PF sought to refine after its defeat at the constitution referendum polls in 2000. This programme encompasses both the formal visible structures of information and expression (e.g. the media), as well as the less tangible cultural aspects that are equally as critical to achieving the party’s primary aims.

Zanu PF has determinedly set out to re-write and re-model ‘History, with a capital H’ as patriotic nationalism, what Terence Ranger calls ‘Patriotic History’. Patriotic History seeks to “proclaim the continuity of the Zimbabwean revolutionary tradition”; it resents “disloyal questions” and considers any history that is not political or useful to the party’s main political objectives to be “irrelevant”. (5) Raftopolous explains: “In this project the media and selected intellectuals have been used to provide a continuous and repetitive ideological message, in order to set the parameters of a stable national identity conducive to the consolidation of the ruling party”.(6)

Zanu PF’s domestic agenda has no qualms about resorting to crude measures when rhetoric and propaganda fail: overt intimidation, direct threats, assault, torture and imprisonment. As a result, the Zanu PF project has been carefully contextualized for regional audiences within an ‘anti-imperialist’ narrative, one aimed at securing the support of regional powers, and very importantly, to limit regional criticism of local human rights abuses: “By doing this, the regime has been able to represent the fundamental human and civic rights questions placed on the Zimbabwean political agenda since the 1990s, as marginal, elite-focused issues, driven by western interests, and having little relation to urgent problems of economic redistribution. As a result, many radical nationalists in the wider African continent and the diaspora have averted their gaze from Harare’s repressive domestic policies”.(7)

In 2008, Zanu PF’s use of political violence was so extreme that it threatened to derail its regional gains: “the party was forced to deal with fact that it had undermined its own claims to sovereignty and legitimacy, and faced deeper isolation not only from the West, but in the region if it refused further regional intervention.”(8) That regional intervention led to the power-sharing government we have today, a period of time that will undoubtedly be recorded in future texts as a significant milestone in Zimbabwe’s ‘History, with a capital H’.

But what of the more intangible social and cultural elements that are equally important in shaping our understanding of our place in history – where human societies also grow through their relationship to memory, culture, beauty and experience? This is the domain of the personal and the creative imagination: in Zimbabwe it is a space where artists, writers, poets and playwrights “operate at the interface of culture and politics”, sometimes “exposing the perhaps less visible and less measurable, yet vital ways in which artists continue to contest culturally specific notions of politics”.(9)

Zanu PF has sought to control this space too: its 'Patriotic History' agenda has been solidly backed up by a "profound cultural nationalist project" (10) where art and culture have been cynically exploited to popularize 'Patriotic History'. Dissenting voices have been silenced using an arsenal of repressive legislation, including the Rhodesian 'Censorship and Entertainment Act', to block out any narratives that might undermine or question the veracity and purpose of 'Patriotic History'.

The case of artist Owen Maseko

On 25 March 2010, Owen Maseko's (11) provocative exhibition of paintings, graffiti and 3D installations was opened at Bulawayo's National Gallery. His work focused primarily on the Gukurahundi era, but also challenged Zanu PF's political oppression in recent years. Both he and Voti Thebi, the gallery's Director, were arrested the following day and the exhibition closed to the public. Maseko was charged with violating Section 33 of the Criminal Law and Codification Act, a law that punishes anyone who "insults or undermines the authority of the President". He was also charged with Section 42 (2): "Causing offence to persons of a particular race, religion, etc": "Any person who publicly makes any insulting or otherwise grossly provocative statement that causes offence to persons of a particular race, tribe, place of origin, colour, creed or religion, intending to cause such offence or realising there is a real risk or possibility of doing so, shall be guilty of causing offence to persons of a particular race, tribe, place of origin, colour, creed or religion, as the case may be". Both these crimes carry a penalty of either a fine or a prison sentence of up to one year in jail.

On 27 August 2010 a special government order was issued formally prohibiting the exhibition.(12) According to the Gazette, Maseko's work has been censored for a very specific reason: "(1) The showing of DVD clips showing effigies, words and paintings on the walls of the Bulawayo National Art Gallery by Owen Maseko prohibited, and (2) The exhibition at the Bulawayo Art Gallery of effigies, paintings and words written on the walls portraying the Gukurahundi era as a tribal-based event and as such is prohibited" [Emphasis added].(13)

It also stated that the art was banned in accordance with Section 13 (1) and (2) of the Censorship and Entertainment Act, which stipulates the different circumstances under which materials can be banned: " (2) A publication, picture, statue or record shall be deemed to be undesirable if it or any part thereof— (a) is indecent or obscene or is offensive or harmful to public morals; or (b) is likely to be contrary to the interests of defence, public safety, public order, the economic interests of the State or public health".(14)

There is nothing in the Act that prohibits art that is a "tribal-based event". It has to be noted that the Board of Censors is allied to the Ministry of Home Affairs, and it is a point of intense concern that this bizarre censorship instruction was issued under the Inclusive Government from within the Ministry of Home Affairs co-chaired by Theresa Makoni (MDC-T). Makoni subsequently told SW Radio Africa that she was "unaware" of the order issued by Melusi Matshiyi, her Permanent Secretary, banning the work, but she has said little more on the subject.(15)

Maseko's problems did not end there. The State subsequently tried to change their initial charges to Section 31 of the Criminal Law and Codification Act, which prohibits "Publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the State". Section 31 is far more serious, carrying either a fine or a prison sentence of up to twenty years in jail if Maseko were to be found guilty. On 13 September 2010, the State was forced to drop all the charges against Maseko after his lawyer argued that "there is no procedure which allows the State to substitute a less serious charge for a more serious charge".(16) The matter is not entirely resolved, because the State is still contemplating bringing the new serious charges against Maseko and his art is still banned. In fact, the National Gallery in Bulawayo has had its main ground floor hall closed to the public, its windows papered over, while the exhibition is held in situ as evidence in the trial.

Maseko's case is a clear illustration of what happens when 'art' and 'freedom of expression' come together to challenge Zanu PF's 'Patriotic History' project. It reveals how the rule of law in Zimbabwe has been crafted and subverted to support the Zanu PF party's ideological priorities. The evolution of Maseko's case demonstrates that the Zanu PF party remains deeply committed to its social engineering programme, regardless of the GPA.

The Gukurahundi as a "tribal-based event"

Ordinary Zimbabweans outside Matabeleland know very little about what actually happened during the Gukurahundi, and what they do know has been carefully controlled by the Zanu PF government who were in power at the time.

During the conflict, the state-controlled media consistently portrayed the minority Zapu party as the aggressors, blaming them for instigating an insurgence against the government, supposedly out of anger that they lost the 1980 elections. At the same time, Zanu PF and all the government security forces were portrayed as righteous defenders of independence, democracy, and law and order. The state-controlled media categorized 'The Enemy' in sweeping generalized terms, leading to a dangerous perception amongst Zimbabweans outside Matabeleland that part of the responsibility for the troubles in this region rested with a troublesome civilian population:

"Although such representations rarely explicitly alluded to ethnicity; they were underlain by an implicit ethnic explanation due to the association between the Matabeleland region, Zapu and Zipra. The Zanu government and state-controlled media blurred distinctions between the armed 'dissidents', the civilians among whom they lived, and Zapu supporters. All these groups were marked subversive and dangerous, and all of them were concentrated within the 'Ndebele' region of Matabeleland. The frequent blurring of political, ethnic, regional and insurgent categories in the media played an important role in the popular understandings of the violence as 'tribal' in regions outside Matabeleland". [Emphasis added](17)

If outsiders were deliberately led to believe that Ndebele civilians were inextricably associated with a political insurgency, the non-combatant Matabeleland civilians themselves very quickly realised that they were victims of a political war where Zanu PF was primarily seeking to destroy its political opposition. The term 'Gukurahundi'

means ‘the first rains that washes away the chaff after the harvest’,(18) and many civilians took this to interpret themselves as the ‘chaff’ or “rubbish”.(19) Their military tormentors confirmed this for them with both their actions and their words: 5 Brigade commanders at rallies invariably expressed the conviction that “all Ndebele were dissidents”, and said their orders were to “wipe out the people in the area”.(20)

Testimony from a dissident, a person supposedly the direct target of this massive military operation, gives insight into the focus and function of the Fifth Brigade (also known as the ‘Gukurahundi’): “The Gukurahundi wasn’t a good fighting unit. It was trained to reduce the population, it was just killing civilians. The Gukurahundi weren’t soldiers. Where do you see soldiers who sing when on patrol? They were looking for civilians, not other soldiers, so we would come across them singing and we would just take cover. Soon after, you’d hear people crying in their homes...” (21)

Mugabe himself went so far as to identify the entire region – civilians and dissidents – as justifiable military targets. Donald Treford, editor of *The Observer* (UK) in 1984, recalled an interview that he had with Robert Mugabe where he asked Mugabe whether he would ever consider a political solution to the Matabeleland issue rather than the military one. Treford describes Mugabe’s response to his question as ‘blunt’ and ‘chilling’: “The solution is a military one. Their grievances are unfounded. The verdict of the voters was cast in 1980. They should have accepted defeat then ... The situation in Matabeleland is one that requires a change. The people must be reoriented.”[Emphasis added] (22)

This is why the description and banning of Maseko’s images of the Gukurahundi as a “tribal-based event” has such potency in 2010. If an acceptable ‘tribal-based event’ is one where Patriotic History defines the Ndebele population as ‘the enemy’ and Zanu PF as having moral right on their side, then it follows that an unacceptable ‘tribal-based event’ is one that suggests the reverse – where Ndebele civilians are portrayed as victims and Zanu PF as aggressors.

Stanislaw Baranczak, a Polish poet, writer and literary critic argues that, “The controllers of culture are by no means interested in eliminating expression altogether; on the contrary, they sponsor and promote it, provided it serves their goals”. (23) The Patriotic History narrative codifies people like Maseko who dare to think beyond the boundaries established by Zanu PF as ‘disloyal’ and ‘unpatriotic’. Accordingly, Maseko’s work is not offensive to the Zanu PF censors because it is ‘tribal-based’: it offends because it contradicts the historical narrative they have spent nearly three decades insisting is the only acceptable version of events.

‘The past is the past’ and ‘Now is not the time’: A question of timing and relevance

The argument that ‘the past is the past’, and we should forget about it, put it to rest, and move forward is one view that often comes up in social discussions about Maseko and his exhibition. Those making this case, fail to understand –especially in relation to the Gukurahundi – that the past is very much a part of the today. It exists in the memories of the people of Matabeleland, in the way it has influenced and shaped their lives since the events, but also in very real tangible ways. Just last month *NewsDay* reported that wild animals were digging up the bones of thirteen

people massacred and buried in a mass grave in Lupane; and as the bones surfaced, so did the horror and the truth: “The 13 are said to have been employed by the Forestry Commission when they were massacred [...] No explanation was given for the killing. [...] “The first to be gunned down were nine forestry workers [...] They were shot for no reason. After that, we were told to bury them in shallow graves and their remains have remained there since.” [Headman Sikhonzi Nyathi] said the soldiers ordered the villagers to bury the nine bodies in one grave before they went on to indiscriminately shoot at four others. “There was nothing that the villagers could do to resist the orders as they also risked being shot,” Nyathi said. “The villagers carried out the orders and buried them in one grave”. (24)

Others have argued that while Maseko’s work is worthy and important, it is perhaps ill-timed given the context of a fragile Inclusive Government that has yet to fully implement the GPA a full two years on. It begs the question: who decides when the time is right and on what grounds? Who is going to tell the artists, musicians, sculptors, poets and writers that they must suppress their impulses to create, or worse, to censor themselves by conforming to non-threatening ‘art’ based on the terms and conditions dictated to Zimbabweans by the Zanu PF party?

There are many social, political and cultural events with the potential to rile an incaltrant Zanu PF, all of them posing extra challenges for the power-sharing relationship: the constitutional outreach programme is just one of them, the anticipated referendum another. Zimbabweans will be asked to participate, and asked to support specific positions, despite the fact that these moments make Zanu PF uncomfortable. For those who think ‘now is not the time’ for freedom of expression among artists and cultural innovators, are we to assume that they consider freedom of expression today to only be important and timeous when it confines itself to the ‘political’?

At the start of this article we asked whether it was possible that this diminution of ‘freedom of expression’ to ‘political freedom of expression’ continues to perpetuate the type of logic and socio-cultural thinking that has informed and controlled a Zimbabwean understanding of freedom of expression for decades? Has Zanu PF’s Patriotic History programme been so effective that some amongst us –including members of former opposition parties and activists – have unconsciously assimilated the view that the writing of Zimbabwean ‘History with a capital H’ in 2010 should be exclusively and narrowly pre-occupied with the ‘political’. Have they come to believe, as Zanu PF believes, that all other events and moments influencing historicity are “irrelevant”? (25)

Implications for healing and for cultural and artistic freedom of expression in Zimbabwe

Banning Maseko’s work has very troubling implications for national healing, reconciliation, and integration in Zimbabwe. One of the initial charges against Maseko (now dropped) was that his art caused “offence to persons of a particular race, religion, etc.” The only ethnicity explicitly identified in Maseko’s work are the Ndebele victims of the Gukurahundi, and it is highly unlikely that they would be offended by his efforts to expose the truth. Maseko’s work also clearly identifies those who are accountable for the crimes committed during this time: they are

Robert Mugabe, members of the political elite, and the Fifth Brigade. And while these individuals may be 'offended' by this accusation, they, as a group of predominantly Shona people, do not constitute or represent all Shona people.

It's worth remembering that Zanu PF's targeting of the Ndebele people in the 1980s had very negative consequences for 'integration': the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace report into the atrocities noted that "the 5 Brigade 'war' hardened ethnic differences" and "struck at the root of people's most cherished social and political identity".(26) It follows then that the casual blurring of the distinctions between the elite and all Shona people – inferred from the initial charges against Maseko and the description of the art as a 'tribal-based event' – is tantamount to inflaming tensions between different groups in Zimbabwe. How does this aid healing or integration in our country today?

On the same day the government attempted to charge Maseko with "Publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the State", Patrick Chinamasa announced that he would be tabling a Bill in parliament that would enable the Human Rights Commission to investigate human rights abuses. But Chinamasa's Bill will have a 'get out of jail' clause designed to protect the Zanu PF party: "This commission will not investigate the alleged violations which occurred before the enactment of the amendment number 19 unless the violations have continued after the enactment but anything that happened before they will not have power to investigate".(27)

This means that all human rights abuses committed before December 2008 will not be investigated: it affects not only the Gukurahundi, but Murambatsvina, violence carried out in the farming communities over the last decade; the political violence that has accompanied every election, and the horrific glut of torture and violence that was at its worse in 2008.

Will there be a time when art that attempts to focus on these events will, like Maseko's art, also be subject to censorship by the state? How can art in Zimbabwe thrive if a swathe of topics that make the government uncomfortable are declared 'no-go areas'? And how can art in Zimbabwe be taken seriously if the first question asked of a challenging exhibition is "*Does this art conform to Patriotic History?*" instead of "*Is this art good?*"

It is a shame that almost all of the discussion pertaining to Owen Maseko's exhibition has been corralled by political imperatives. Zimbabwean artists work at a challenging interface between the social / cultural and the political; but as artists, they are also positioned within the broader discipline of 'Art', a field unconstrained by national boundaries and rigid definitions of 'sovereignty'. The controversy surrounding Maseko's exhibition has effectively cast him as a 'political activist' and fails to give due recognition to the fact that he is also, quite simply, an Artist.

Stanislaw Baranczak, writing about the impacts of communist control on artists, argues that an "artist's self-restraint" is one step further on from State censorship. He calls this "progressive censorship"; it occurs when an artist's "creative compromise" and "self-correction" renders the State's open interference needless.(28)

If artists and cultural innovators voluntarily restrain their creative impulses to avoid political acrimony, then there will be no need for Zanu PF to ban and censor works. When this happens, Zanu PF will have deemed the cultural objectives of their Patriotic History project to be 'successful': rather than having 'freedom of expression', artistic expression will be carefully controlled leading to a further narrowing of the cultural field in Zimbabwe, with absolutely devastating consequences for the future of 'Art in Zimbabwe'.

On 4 August 2010, The Herald wrote about an 'Artists' Charter for Zimbabwe', a document drafted by a group of artists for inclusion in the constitutional outreach discussions.⁽²⁹⁾ The Charter asks that "the rights and interests of the artists of Zimbabwe and their language communities be recognized and protected in the new constitution" and it lists eleven points they want guaranteed. Significantly, the word 'freedom' is glaringly absent from the Charter: i.e. there are no demands for 'creative freedoms' to be protected. The closest the Charter comes to referring to 'freedom of expression' is when it recognises "the right of every citizen [...] to enjoy the arts in their diverse expressions". And despite the fact that censorship is a massive threat to artistic creativity and expression, the word censorship is not even remotely referred to in the Charter.

It isn't possible to know exactly what informed the drafting of this Charter, but the fact that the state-controlled media was happy to champion it is a sign that the guarantees it seeks do not threaten the Zanu PF patriotic project. Do the limitations of the 'Artists' Charter for Zimbabwe' indicate that Zimbabwean artists are already sensitive to, and aware of, the need to conform to political imperatives that define artistic boundaries within Zimbabwe?

Maseko's experience suggests that this is possibly true: interviewed by SW Radio Africa on 14 September 2010, he commented on the artistic community's reaction to his experience at the hands of the state: "I was surprised that the artists are the only community that has not really truly supported me. I don't know, maybe it is something to do with fear. Maybe they are scared or worried that if they associate with me they might also get arrested. Artists are aware of how, whatever the outcome that can happen to me, can greatly affect them, but taking a stance of running away is not really a helpful one because whichever way they look at it they will still be greatly affected".⁽³⁰⁾

Maseko is right: if the State is allowed to ban critical works that investigate and challenge the state's role in history, and if they are allowed to intimidate and harass artists who dare to think beyond state-controlled boundaries, then all artists will find themselves unable to truly be 'artists' in the fullest sense of the word.

It is not only artists who will be affected: all of us are affected by this attitude to criticism. We need to ask ourselves if we really want to live in a country without truth? Do we really want to be a people whose identities and experiences are defined by the State? Finally, we need to ask ourselves this important question: if artists are not allowed to express themselves freely, what makes us think that we will ever be allowed to express ourselves freely either?

This article, with all references included, will shortly be available online at www.sokwanele.com/articles/art-censorship-and-the-gukurahundi-in-zimbabwe

To see images by Owen Maseko see [Sokwanele](#) and [Solidarity Peace Trust](#)

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TAKE ACTION!

The Board of Censors operates from within the Ministry of Home Affairs. Please email The Honourable Theresa Makoni, MDC-T co-Minister of Home Affairs, and ask her to immediately reverse the ban against Owen Maseko's art exhibition.

The Honourable Theresa Makoni: teresamakone@gmail.com

Please also email Senator David Coltart, Minister of Education, Sport and Culture, and ask him to do all he can to protect freedom of expression as it relates to art and culture. Ask them both to prevent further persecution of the artist Owen Maseko, for daring to question and tell the truth.

Senator David Coltart: david@davidcoltart.com