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The Politicisation of Liberation-Struggle Exhumations in Eastern Zimbabwe: Spiritual Evocation, Patriotism and Professionalism

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In recent years, there has been an increase in the exhumation and reburial of remains of liberation-war fighters in Zimbabwe. Since 2011, the Fallen Heroes Trust of Zimbabwe (FHTZ), an organisation established by war veterans aligned to the ruling party, ZANU(PF), has taken a lead in these exhumation projects. Drawing on my experience of working with FHTZ as an archaeologist then employed by the government under the parastatal National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), this article looks at the politicisation of liberation struggle exhumations by FHTZ, focusing on the case of Butcher site in eastern Zimbabwe in 2013. I argue that, during the exhumations, FHTZ deployed spirituality in a spectacular fashion in the service of ZANU(PF)'s 'patriotic history', a narrative through which the party claimed legitimacy, as a means of attacking the opposition party in an election year. This approach sparked methodological conflicts between NMMZ archaeologists and the FHTZ in terms of the speed of exhumation, the tools used in undertaking exhumations and the means by which graves were located and human remains identified. NMMZ was overridden in these conflicts. As a result, the archaeologists were in effect commandeered to participate in and legitimise a political project that used exhumations as a campaigning vehicle for ZANU(PF).

Keywords: exhumations; human remains; Butcher site; patriotic history; spirituality; performance; archaeology; FHTZ; ZANU(PF); NMMZ

Introduction

Over the last 50 years, Zimbabwe has experienced periods of war and of political violence that have resulted in the death of thousands of people within and outside the country, leaving behind a wide range of human remains in different contexts.¹ This article looks specifically at the killings of members of the Zimbabwe African National Union's armed wing, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), by Rhodesian Forces during the last years of the liberation struggle at a detention centre known as Butcher site in eastern Zimbabwe, and at the human body depositional sites that were produced in the form of mass graves. I focus on the politicisation of these liberation-war remains by the Fallen Heroes

1 K. Silika and K. Squires, 'Ethical Issues of Working with Human Remains in Zimbabwe', in K. Squires, D. Erickson and N. Marquez-Grant (eds), *Ethical Approaches to Human Remains: A Global Challenge in Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology* (New York, Springer International, 2019), pp. 583–604.

Trust of Zimbabwe (FHTZ), a war-veteran-led group aligned to the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) (ZANU[PF]). I argue that the FHTZ used exhumations undertaken in 2013 to canvass support for ZANU(PF) from nearby residents of the town of Rusape in the general election of that year. FHTZ members produced and performed what have been called ‘patriotic history’ narratives – that is, narratives that used ZANU(PF)’s role in the liberation struggle against settler colonialism in a variety of ways to claim a right to rule in perpetuity.² The FHTZ’s narratives targeted the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) by telling the electorate that the party was responsible for the atrocities committed at Butcher site owing to its alleged present-day associations with former white colonialists. A vote for the MDC was portrayed as tantamount to a vote to bring back white rule. The FHTZ-led exhumations involved staged, public performances of patriotic history during the process of exhumation itself. Given these strategies, I argue that the FHTZ exhumations at Butcher site were used to make a political argument that legitimated ZANU(PF)’s claim to power.

A second argument made here concerns the dissonant relationship between two kinds of expertise and knowledge as a basis for making authoritative claims about the findings and meanings of exhumations. This played out through the implementation of different methodologies by, on the one hand, archaeologists from the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), who were tasked by the government to participate in and offer professional expertise in regard to the exhumations, and, on the other hand, the FHTZ. The NMMZ’s archaeological practices called for onsite assessment, systematic exhumation and anthropological examination of human remains, while the FHTZ relied on spirit mediums and divination. As a result, there was an uneasy working relationship between the two. Though NMMZ was supposed to be in charge of the exhumations, the FHTZ in practice ran a parallel field organisational structure that disregarded archaeological input.³ Drawing on my experience as one of the archaeologists who took part in the exhumations at Butcher site between March and July 2013, I illustrate how the choreographed spiritual performances of the FHTZ conflicted with archaeological practices.⁴

The Politics of the Memorial Complex

The remains of Zimbabwe’s liberation-war fighters are scattered around the country in mine shafts, mass graves and former detention centres such as the Butcher site. Their politicisation can be read in the light of what Richard Werbner has termed the memorial complex.⁵ In this

2 There is a large literature on ‘patriotic history’. The seminal work is T. Ranger, ‘Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle Over the Past in Zimbabwe’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 2 (2004), pp. 215–34. See also T. Ranger, ‘The Uses and Abuses of History in Zimbabwe’, in M. Palmberg and R. Primorac (eds), *Skinning the Skunk: Facing Zimbabwe Futures* (Uppsala, Nordic African Institute, 2005), pp. 7–15. Explorations of patriotic history in the context of human remains can be found in J. Mujere, M.E. Sagiya and J. Fontein, ‘“Those Who Are Not Known, Should be Known by the Country”: Patriotic History and the Politics of Recognition in Southern Zimbabwe’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 11, 1 (2017), pp. 86–114; and J. Fontein, ‘Death, Corporeality and Uncertainty in Zimbabwe’, in A.G.M. Robben (ed.), *A Companion to the Anthropology of Death* (Oxford, John Wiley and Sons, 2018), pp. 337–51.

3 P. Mupira, ‘Exhuming Forgotten Fallen Comrades at Rusape’s Butcher Site’, *Occasional Papers of the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, Human Sciences Series*, 5, 1 (2018), pp. 149–50.

4 See J. Mataga, ‘Unsettled Spirits, Performance and Aesthetics of Power: The Public Life of Liberation Heritage in Zimbabwe’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25, 3 (2019), pp. 277–97, for more on ZANU(PF)’s use of choreographed performances at exhumations, reburials and heroes’ acre interments to keep its grip on political power.

5 R. Werbner, ‘Smoke from the Barrel of a Gun’, in R. Werbner (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony* (London, Zed Books, 1998), pp. 54–8.

'complex', selected dead liberation-war fighters are publicly remembered through memorialisation processes controlled by the ruling ZANU(PF) party at sites designated as heroes' acres. Notions of power and authority are produced by the memorial complex through the conferring of hero status on the dead by ZANU(PF), which makes the overall decisions regarding who qualifies to be a hero. There is an elitist element to the process, which involves grading contributions to the struggle. Liberation-war fighters who are judged to be more important are buried at the National Heroes' Acre, while others are relegated to the lower level provincial or district heroes' acres.⁶

Norma Kriger and Richard Werbner have mounted detailed critiques of Heroes' Acres, arguing that they enshrine an exclusionary, hierarchical politics.⁷ In his work, Werbner has emphasised that Zimbabwe's memorial complex showed an 'unmistakeable representation of a nation of – in Zimbabwean usage – the *chefs* over the *povo* or masses, a nation of graded levels, subordinating the local to the national, the hinterland to the capital'.⁸ Liberation-war heritage in Zimbabwe has thus been selectively produced at graded heroes' burials in order to legitimise ZANU(PF) rule. This long-established history of manipulating memories of the liberation struggle and using them to gain political mileage remains relevant. The politicisation of exhumations at Butcher site can be placed in this same memorial complex. ZANU(PF)'s patriotic history agenda was served by giving detailed accounts of the liberation war to residents who were visiting the site and by marshalling human remains to convince the residents of their accountability to the dead, who had sacrificed their lives so that they could have freedom, as we shall see further below.⁹

There have, however, been some significant changes to the bureaucratic, expert and legal structures of the memorial complex since Werbner and Kriger undertook their studies. In 1998, full management of all war shrines was transferred from the Ministry of Defence to the NMMZ, a parastatal constituted by an act of parliament and falling under the ministry of home affairs. By virtue of being constituted by an act of parliament, NMMZ is supposed to be answerable to the people of Zimbabwe, not to particular political parties. The same act empowers NMMZ to research and preserve the country's heritage. This has not, however, succeeded in de-politicising memorial processes. Even though NMMZ is empowered by the act to manage all liberation war shrines, real power continues to be situated elsewhere. In regard to the hierarchy of official heroes' acres, this is so because the programme has remained a ZANU(PF) project and NMMZ is actively involved only post-burial, in conserving the graves as national monuments. The political centre thus continues to dictate the ways in which these war memorials are remembered and presented.

While partisan politics remains central to the making of the memorial complex, there are changes too. My argument in the remainder of this article refers to a set of contestations that has arisen as a result of the exhumations at liberation-war-era mass graves. I contend that, through analysing how exhumations at the Butcher site were conducted by the FHTZ, we can see how there is both a continued project of partisan use of the war dead by ZANU(PF), now targeting the MDC's legitimacy, and that there are new tensions and actors in play as a result of the clashing claims to expertise and authority between the NMMZ's archaeologists and the FHTZ's claims to spiritual expertise.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*; N. Kriger, 'The Politics of Creating National Heroes: The Search for Political Legitimacy and National Identity', in N. Bhebe and T. Ranger (eds), *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War* (Harare, University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1995), pp. 136–48.

8 Kriger, 'The Politics of Creating National Heroes', p. 138.

9 Personal observation, Butcher site, 17 April 2013.

Liberation-Fighter Mass Graves and the Birth of the FHTZ

Exhuming and reburying the skeletal remains of liberation fighters in mass graves has taken place at former bases in Zambia and Mozambique since 1980 and culminated in the establishment of shrines at sites such as Freedom Camp, Mkushi, Chimoio and Nyadzonia.¹⁰ Until the Chibondo exhumations of 2011 in Mount Darwin, exercises carried out within Zimbabwe had been on a comparatively small scale and individual basis. Early exhumations were carried out by the engineering department of the Zimbabwe National Army and periodically involved archaeologists from NMMZ. This was because it was feared that some of the fighters might have been buried in mass graves together with grenades, and so the engineers would start by checking the ground and detonating any explosives they found before the exhumation commenced.

In parallel to these processes, the FHTZ was formed soon after independence. It was originally a collective lobby group of ZANLA war veterans whose intentions were to exhume fellow fighters who had lost their lives during the liberation struggle. ZANLA veteran Comrade ('Cde' hereafter, the title usually used to refer to veterans and to ZANU[PF] figures) Jimmy Motsi was instrumental in the formation of the FHTZ. He said his inspiration came from pledges that were made to fellow comrades during the liberation war.¹¹ As he explained, the promise was that whoever made it to an independent Zimbabwe had the obligation of locating, bringing back home and reburying the remains of those killed during the war. Comrades who faced death in battle encouraged others to continue with the war and to return later to take their remains to bury at their homes, after the country had been liberated. Cde Motsi explained his desire to carry out exhumations as follows: 'the spirits of comrades lying in mass graves across the country were aggrieved, restive, and haunting families and the country leading to internecine political and economic turmoil, hence the need to exhume them'.¹² Prior to the Chibondo and Butcher site exhumations conducted between 1990 and 1993, Cde Motsi carried out exhumation and identification processes with a small group of war veterans, mostly in the Mount Darwin area. This group was usually invited to exhume in places where remains thought to be of liberation fighters were accidentally discovered by locals. Cde Motsi held that

it was more of voluntary work for us – we were not paid by anyone to exhume and rebury our comrades. Rather it was a call of duty derived from the pledges that we made when we were still in the bush that we would come back and bury them once the country was liberated.¹³

At the beginning, the exhumations conducted by Cde Motsi and his small group of veterans were thus low-profile and constituted as 'rescue missions'. The politics of this earlier time differed from how patriotic history was invoked at both the Chibondo and Butcher sites; the FHTZ's composition also changed. In its later form, the FHTZ had exhumers, prophets, traditional healers and 10 field officers (one for each province) who worked with spirit mediums in identifying human remains of liberation-war fighters. Their operations were mostly funded by donations, as there is no budget set aside for exhumation programmes by government.¹⁴ In this phase, the FHTZ's veteran leadership was closely tied to the top levels

10 J. Fontein, 'The Politics of the Dead: Living Heritage, Bones and Commemoration in Zimbabwe', *Association of Social Anthropologists Online*, 1, 2 (2009), pp. 1–27.

11 Interview with Cde Jimmy Motsi, Butcher site, 15 March 2013. All interviews for this article were conducted by the author.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

14 Interview with Cde Evelyn Makwembeni, Butcher site, 15 March 2013.

of ZANU(PF). The FHTZ chairman from 2009 to 2017 was the now late Cde George Rutanhire, who was a member of the ZANU(PF) politburo and a celebrated and decorated liberation-war fighter. When he passed away, in 2017, he was himself declared a national hero. Since his death, the chairmanship has remained vacant, with rumours of jostling among war veterans over who should take over. In the meantime, Cde Kagweda, the political commissar of ZANU(PF) for Manicaland province and the secretary for the national war veterans' association, has co-ordinated exhumations such as those at Chiwere mine in Odzi communal lands in 2018/19.¹⁵

The 2011 Chibondo exhumation provided the first grand stage for the appearance of the FHTZ. From the outset, the exhumation was contested. FHTZ claimed that victims of the liberation struggle were buried on the site while the MDC claimed that their own members who had gone missing in different episodes of political violence were buried in this location.¹⁶ At the same time, members of the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), the armed wing of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), which prosecuted the liberation struggle alongside ZANU, claimed that these remains belonged to their former cadres. ZIPRA argued that there were two possible sources for the human remains, one being that they might be of some of their comrades who were killed by ZANLA elements at assembly points where guerrillas were gathered soon after the ceasefire, the other being that they were the remains of victims of Gukurahundi, the period of violent repression aimed at ZAPU and ZIPRA by the new ZANU(PF) government in the 1980s.¹⁷ The ZIPRA claim resulted in a court order that halted the exhumation.¹⁸

Before the exhumation was stopped, NMMZ archaeologists were commanded to go to Chibondo to assist the FHTZ, though they did not have direct control over the process.¹⁹ The narratives of patriotic history were invoked by the FHTZ during this process as community members and schoolchildren were forced into the mine shaft to see for themselves the piles of skeletons, which were portrayed as solid evidence of colonial cruelties.²⁰ The Chibondo exhumation took the form of a disorderly disinterment and reburial of human remains.²¹ FHTZ exhumed an estimated 600 remains. Spirit mediums called out the names of the deceased without any verification.²² ZANU(PF) pushed the view that human remains from Chibondo were evidence of the brutality of the colonial state, while opposition political parties argued that ZANU(PF) was manipulating the haphazard exhumations to gain political mileage.²³

Unlike at the Chibondo site, the identity of remains that were exhumed at Butcher site were not contested among political parties. FHTZ exhumers claimed them as ZANLA combatants and their civilian supporters, while NMMZ exhumers documented material culture that indicated liberation struggle origins, including military uniforms, black power bangles and super-pro tennis shoes, as discussed in detail later.²⁴ In the absence of the controversies over identity that typified the earlier exhumations at Chibondo, the Butcher

15 S. Nyamagodo and P. Chiripanhura, *Chiwere Mine Exhumation Report* (Mutare, National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, 2019).

16 On these claims, see J. Fontein, 'Remaking the Dead', in F. Stepputat (ed.), *Governing the Dead: Sovereignty and the Politics of Dead Bodies* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 114–42.

17 ZIPRA vs Fallen Heroes Trust, Judgment No. HB 61/11, Case No. HC 880/11.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Interview with K.T. Chipunza, chief curator, NMMZ, 28 September 2013.

20 S. Eppel, 'The Heroic and the Hidden Dead: Zimbabwe and Exhumations', in W.J.M. Groen, N. Marques-Grant and R.C. Janaway (eds), *Forensic Archaeology: A Global Perspective* (Chichester, Wiley, 2015), pp. 359–66.

21 Mupira, 'Exhuming Forgotten Fallen Comrades', pp. 149–207.

22 Silika and Squires, 'Ethical Issues of Working with Human Remains'.

23 Mataga, 'Unsettled Spirits'.

24 Interview with Cde Anyway Chinyane, Butcher site, 29 May 2013.

site exhumations were allowed to continue for more than a year until the remains were interred in individual graves at the same location. Members of the senior ZANU(PF) political leadership from the district actively supported the exhumation programme, not least because 2013 was an election year. I recall several high-profile visits to the site by former ZANU(PF) secretary for administration Didymus Mutasa and the former ZANU(PF) minister of finance Patrick Chinamasa.²⁵ FHTZ received financial support during the exhumations owing to the active lobbying efforts of these senior political figures.²⁶ One controversial war veteran, Cde Nathan Mhiripiri, popularly known as Mhizha, coercively mobilised resources, including food, from businesspeople in and around nearby Rusape. Stories circulating in Rusape depicted Mhizha as a brutal killer who had been responsible for the deaths of many MDC supporters in the lead-up to the disputed 2008 election run-off, in which ZANU(PF) violence was widespread across the country.²⁷ During the exhumations, Mhizha made sure that Rusape residents attended the gatherings-cum-rallies, which were addressed by high profile politburo figures such as Chinamasa and Mutasa, by frog-marching residents to Butcher site against their will.²⁸ This provided the politicians with a chance to campaign for ZANU(PF) using the bones of the dead as tools to canvass votes.²⁹ Since the timing of the exhumation coincided with an election year, it was used as a vehicle to sell ZANU(PF)'s version of the past.

The Butcher Site Described and Documented

The Butcher site is believed to have been used as a Rhodesian Security Forces (RSF) secret interrogation, torture and execution base during the latter phase of the liberation struggle – that is, between 1976 and 1980. Before independence, the name ‘Butcher’ was not used, although local residents knew that some people captured by the RSF were killed at the shooting range.³⁰ The name came into popular use during the exhumations in order to depict and present graphically the magnitude of the killings that occurred at this site.³¹

At the time of the exhumations, it was not known when the shooting range had been constructed, but a map drawn by the surveyor general's office in 1972 clearly shows the existence of a 300-metre rifle range running in a north-north-westerly direction and ending near a stream that runs west. An outline of the site and an analysis of old, destroyed buildings suggested that it had a resident court martial. I interviewed a war veteran, Cde Bunjira, a local inhabitant, who gave a vivid account:

the shooting range was an execution area for court-martialled guerrillas, war collaborators and civilians suspected of supporting the liberation struggle. Those who were condemned to death were executed by a firing squad and were used as live and mobile targets. Bodies of the fighters were briefly taken to Rusape general hospital piled in a tractor and displayed so that the community could see, and make them scared to join the war. The dead bodies were then put in black plastic bags and returned for mass burials in shallow graves at Butcher site.³²

25 Personal observations, Butcher site, 2 May 2013.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Interview with Godo, Rusape, 19 April 2013. As fate would have it, Cde Mhiripiri was murdered in 2017 at the height of ZANU(PF)'s own factional fights. His body was discovered at his farm a few kilometres outside Rusape with a bullet in his head. The body was found lying under a tree in a dry pool of blood with a branch covering his face. See the account in the *Manica Post*, Harare, 7 April 2017, a weekly pro-government newspaper that covers news mainly from eastern Zimbabwe.

28 Interview with Fazhi, Rusape, 19 April 2013.

29 Personal observations, Butcher site, 2 May 2013.

30 Interview with Sekuru Gumunyu, Butcher site, 21 March 2013.

31 Interview with Cde Choga, Butcher site, 16 March 2013.

32 Interview with Cde Bunjira, Butcher site, 16 March 2013.

Cde Bunjira narrated this story with tears in his eyes, saying ‘the mass killings at the shooting range epitomise the suffering experienced by my fellow comrades and hence this place qualifies to be called a Butcher/Slaughter site’.³³ Some elderly local villagers who had lived in the area since the days of the liberation struggle confirmed that they had seen dead bodies being transported in a tractor to the site and buried in shallow graves. Sekuru Makoni remembered, ‘we were forced to dig these shallow graves where we buried comrades. The Rhodesian soldiers accused us of supporting the guerrillas and, in forcing us to dig graves, they wanted to send a clear message that we must stop’.³⁴

With time, the shallow graves were slowly exposed owing to erosion. In 1993, efforts were made to rehabilitate some of the mass graves. Subsequently, in 1996, the site was designated a district heroes’ acre at the recommendation of the war veterans in the district. But it was only in 2013 that exhumations were carried out at Butcher site from 16 mass graves. A total of 104 human remains were exhumed, while two skulls were picked up from nearby mountains. In what follows, I describe the archaeological findings of NMMZ. The descriptions of graves and associated grave goods are based on the exhumation report that I compiled and wrote in 2013.³⁵

In mass grave number 1, a total of nine skeletal remains of different individuals were exhumed. They were heavily decomposed, with a number of missing body parts from the hip area to the cranium. Material remains recovered included complete green military uniforms, a shirt, three pairs of pants – one with a black lining and another with blue, black and white stripes – and a brownish buckled belt (about 76 centimetres in diameter). It is possible that these remains belonged to male adults, and the clothing recovered seemed to suggest that they were liberation fighters. The other remains exhumed in the same mass grave were found wrapped in a black plastic bag. Remains were heavily fragmented and fractured with isolated strands of hair found on what would have been the skull. Some of the materials recovered together with the remains included a pink scarf with red and white stripes, green gloves, whitish/reddish socks, eight black power bangles, a bead bracelet with greenish, royal blue, yellow, black and orange beads, and red and white glass beads from the neck area. These remains were thought to have belonged to a woman, because a floral dress with a brown belt, together with a purple jersey, were recovered alongside the fragmented skeletal remains. Bloodstains were also noticed on the left tibia, and the general assumption was that she was shot in the leg. From this analysis, it was deduced that this individual was not necessarily a liberation-war fighter but might have been an ordinary person captured at a *pungwe* (night-time rally) organised by guerrilla fighters.

Exhumations proceeded to mass grave number 2. These were led by the FHTZ and assisted by NMMZ archaeologists. Mass grave number 2 was the biggest of all at Butcher site. It measured a total area of 24 square metres. Twenty-five bodies comprising fragmented skeletal and mostly burnt remains were recovered. Human remains were piled up and laid in a supine position. Some were in white and black plastic bags. The first skeletal remains were uncovered underneath a grey plastic bag at an initial depth of 89 centimetres. Evidence of intense burning in this grave was detected from the consistent appearance of a red layer of soil around the grave’s edges. Furthermore, burnt remains of clothes and shoes augmented the evidence of burning. A live round from an AK-47 rifle, a tub of margarine, woollen socks, green underwear and two medicine bottles were also discovered on the first body in this grave. It is likely that this individual was a ZANLA medical soldier. Two Rhodesian coins were recovered from around what would be the body’s hip area. All the other remains

33 *Ibid.*

34 Interview with Sekuru Makoni, Butcher site, 26 March 2013.

35 N. Chipangura, *Butcher Site Exhumation Report* (Mutare, National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, 2013).

exhumed from this grave exhibited signs of heavy burning, which led to the conclusion that the 25 bodies and materials from this mass grave were buried on the same day and were subjected to intense heat.

In mass grave number 3, a total of six body remains were exhumed. Three of the bodies were facing in an easterly direction and the remaining three faced west. Evidence of burning was again noticed on the northern edges of this grave. The initial depth to the first identified remains was 67 centimetres. Burnt remains of woollen socks, shoes and plastic were recovered from the first body. A wire bracelet was found on the right wrist of the same body.

Eight skeletal remains were exhumed from mass grave number 4. The initial depth of the first recovered remains was 69 centimetres. Evidence of severe burning was again noticed on the eastern edges of this grave. On the first body, charred remains of scorched underwear, tennis shoes, green and brown socks, tattered remains of brown trousers, a dark blue shirt, a woollen hat, and a metal belt buckle were recovered.

Exhumations in mass grave 5 were started at the southern edge, going to the northern edge. Bodies were laid aligned to the western edge of the grave and were piled up. Signs of burning were noticed on the eastern edges of the grave. This came out clearly from evidence of black, ashy remains that occurred all over the grave. A total of 15 piled up skeletal remains were exhumed from this grave.

In mass grave 6, four skeletal remains were exhumed. The initial depth to the first identified remains was 35 centimetres, which shows that the grave was shallow. Burnt shoes, fabrics from clothes, socks and woollen hats were recovered alongside remains.

A total of three skeletal remains were exhumed from mass grave number 7. The initial depth to the first identified body was 85 centimetres. Other material remains identified from the rest of the bodies comprised trousers, t-shirts, pants and soles of hunter's shoes.

A single body was recovered from grave number 8. This body was found at an initial depth of about 90 centimetres. A pair of green socks was found still intact on both legs along with blue underwear with black and white designs. In addition, a brown t-shirt, a blue denim jacket and two soles of a hunter's shoes were found alongside this body.

Three human remains were exhumed in mass grave number 9. Slight evidence of burning was noticed on the eastern edges of the grave. Some of the material finds from the bodies included a pair of khaki socks with red stripes, burnt remains of a belt, tattered maroon pants, and bangles. Other notable finds from this grave were burnt cigarette stubs.

A total of four human remains were exhumed from mass grave number 10. The grave was quite shallow and situated in a waterlogged area. The depth to the first evidence of human remains was just 10 centimetres, while the maximum depth was below 39 centimetres. The four exhumed bodies were covered in white plastic.

Bodies exhumed from mass grave number 11 were at the surface, with an initial depth to the first finding of around 5 centimetres. Twelve bodies were recovered from this grave and were all stashed in white plastic. Some of the material remains on these bodies included green uniforms comprising shirts and trousers, khaki woollen socks, hunter's shoes and some bead necklaces. The maximum depth of this grave after completion of exhumations was 28 centimetres.

Four bodies were exhumed from mass grave number 12. The bodies were all covered by white plastic and were laid facing in a southerly direction. From the evidence seen from the first body, it appeared that the individual was buried naked, because no remains of clothes were found. On body number two, a blue Standard Bank wallet case was found alongside blue trousers, a blue jacket, navy blue underwear and a black power bangle. A green handkerchief with some red flower designs in the middle was found on the decomposed third body. A number of dislocated tooth fragments were identified on the same body. The

last body in this grave had a few bone fragments. There were no material remains on this body. The maximum depth of the grave after the exhumation was 28 centimetres.

One body was recovered in a grey blanket in grave number 13. Material remains that were found on top of this heavily decomposed body included a brown shirt, a brown pair of socks and some black power bangles. It is highly probable that this individual was hospitalised before burial. Bloodstained bandages and a cannular tube were found on the body. The maximum depth of the grave after exhumation was 30 centimetres.

In grave number 14, a single body was exhumed. Material remains found alongside the body included a Chinese bullet belt case (*bandera*), which was green in colour, soles of a hunter's shoes and blue underwear. The maximum depth of the grave after completion of exhumation was 78 centimetres.

Two human remains were exhumed in grave number 15. The first was recovered at an initial depth of 45 centimetres. Material remains and possessions identified on this body included blue denim trousers, a belt, shoes, a pair of cream socks, a yellow jacket and red underwear with stripes. A bracelet made of white beads was also found on the left hand of this body. The second body had green woollen socks, blue denim jeans and a black belt with a metal buckle. Other personal possessions on this body included an array of bead bangles, which were red, yellow and white. A black power bangle was recovered on the same body.

Six bodies were exhumed from mass grave number 16, the last grave. A walking stick was found alongside the first body. Other findings on this body included three black power bangles, a waist arms-pouch, green trousers, a red and white shirt and a grey jersey. The other bodies had possessions comprising a tube of toothpaste, tattered trousers, shirts, shoe soles, belts and socks. The maximum depth of this grave after the bodies were exhumed was 29 centimetres.

Archaeological methods were used during the exhumations and data were captured under the following fields: site name, skeleton number, condition of human remains, probable identity (civilian or comrade), probable sex, type of clothes, completeness of the cranium, pathological inference, grave depth and size.

Methodological Conflicts: Politics, Spirits and Archaeology

In this section, I explore the fraught, intricate working relationship between NMMZ archaeologists and FHTZ veterans and spirit mediums. The analysis is informed by data collected from interviews and my own personal observations during the exhumations. The dissonant nature of exhumations and reburials in Zimbabwe has been succinctly expressed by Joost Fontein, who argues that these processes 'are often subject to the competing contestations of spirit mediums, church leaders, war veterans and others, each with their own perspectives, loyalties, interpretations and practices'.³⁶ Such contestations could be found in the exhumation exercise at Butcher site as well, but there were other points of tension too, most notably between the approaches and purposes of archaeologists and the members of the FHTZ. NMMZ representatives emphasised the use of archaeological exhumation methods, seeing in them a means of ensuring accuracy and accountability, whereas the FHTZ was chiefly concerned with a quick recovery of remains, largely using spiritually sanctioned methods so that they could be displayed publicly in an attempt to instil patriotic history narratives. For FHTZ members, political uses were paramount. As in the case of Chibondo, they brandished detached limbs so that the public would see and appreciate the atrocities committed by the colonial regime.³⁷ They also argued vehemently that a slow, meticulous

36 Fontein, 'Between Tortured Bodies and Resurfacing Bones: The Politics of the Dead in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Material Culture*, 15, 4 (2010), p. 431.

37 Eppel, 'The Heroic and the Hidden Dead'.

exhumation exercise following a rigorous archaeological approach was embarrassing and degrading to both the living and fallen comrades.³⁸ Archaeologists had their arms twisted and were made to accommodate the heavy-handed political approaches used by the FHTZ.

An analogy to the position of NMMZ archaeologists can be made with the role of physical planners during the Operation Murambatsvina (Restore Order) exercise of 2005, in which the expertise of planners was commandeered by ZANU(PF) in the process of demolishing supposedly illegal informal structures and settlements in major cities and towns across the country.³⁹ Many urban residents were thought to be members of the opposition MDC, and some have argued that they were being punished for refusing to vote for ZANU(PF) in the elections of that year. During the operation, expertise from planners was marshalled – a handmaiden of state repression – to justify destroying ‘informal’ settlements in urban areas that often belonged to MDC supporters.⁴⁰ Many planners participated in this vindictive operation: Amin Kamete argues that ‘in the scheme of things in Zimbabwe, weak-kneed local urban planners could not resist the strong and resolute centre’.⁴¹ Similarly, we archaeologists received a directive from our parent ministry (the ministry of home affairs) to go to Butcher site and participate in the exhumation exercise, which had already been started by the FHTZ. Our deployment was intended to give the whole process a professional appearance – and yet this was far from achieved.⁴² On the ground, the FHTZ was in command, and the knowledge of the past that archaeology brings through carefully studying surviving material culture was disregarded. As in the case of the planners, our presence meant that we ended up assisting ZANU(PF) in its political scheme.

The expert knowledge possessed by archaeologists is recognised in the NMMZ Act 25:11 of 1992, which mandates them to conserve and present national heritage in the country. Archaeologists employed by NMMZ have qualifications in archaeology at Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD levels. Training in archaeology is offered by three universities in the country: the University of Zimbabwe, Midlands State University and Great Zimbabwe University. At Bachelor’s up to honours degree level, this training takes four years; at Master’s level it takes two years, and four or more years at PhD level. According to this training, buried human remains should be investigated by experts using suitable archaeological methods, as this contributes to the understanding of cultural and biological history, the reconstruction of past ways of life and to the overall understanding of site-formation processes.⁴³ On the basis of this expertise, I contend that the documentation and recovery of wartime remains should be led by experienced archaeologists supported by anthropologists, pathologists and ethno-historians who undertake field and archival research, autopsies, surveys, oral interviews, photography, video filming and audio recording. Perhaps surprisingly, the expertise of NMMZ archaeologists at Butcher site was recognised by ZANU(PF) politburo member Cde Patrick Chinamasa during one of his numerous visits. He was impressed by the neatly laid out and demarcated test trenches that we had set up to investigate a section that spirit mediums had directed us to excavate. Cde Chinamasa went on to ask us where we had studied for our degrees – he did not know that there were universities that taught archaeology in Zimbabwe. He praised us, saying it was the first time he had seen a properly executed archaeological excavation other than those that he watched

38 Mupira, ‘Exhuming Forgotten Fallen Comrades’.

39 A.Y. Kamete, ‘In the Service of Tyranny: Debating the Role of Planning in Zimbabwe’s Urban “Clean Up” Operation’, *Urban Studies*, 46, 4 (2009), pp. 897–922.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Kamete, ‘In the Service of Tyranny’, p. 920.

42 Interview with K.T. Chipunza, Butcher site, 21 March 2013.

43 F. Powell, D.G. Steele and M.B. Collins, ‘Excavation and Analysis of Human Remains’, in T.R. Hester, H.J. Shafer and K.L. Feder (eds), *Field Methods in Archaeology* (Mountain View, Mayfield Publications, 1997), pp. 253–82.

on the National Geographic television channel.⁴⁴ So he did not know that NMMZ had archaeologists who were properly trained and able to carry out standardised exhumations. His interest at the Butcher site vindicated our work, and we gained a new level of respect from the FHTZ.

The exhumations at Butcher site were, nevertheless, conducted amid a series of contested and negotiated rivalries between the NMMZ archaeologists and FHTZ members. There were huge disparities in methodological approaches implemented by each side, each with its own interpretations and perspectives.⁴⁵ As we have seen, for the FHTZ, spiritual identification methods were more important than meticulous exhumations and, as a result, it became increasingly difficult to pursue an archaeological approach. In their altered state of consciousness, spirit mediums communicated messages from the murdered comrades and gave pointers as to where they were buried. The spirit of the dead was manifested in members of the FHTZ who, during that process, would fall and roll on the ground. Their body positions were interpreted as the actual location where the remains would be found.⁴⁶ Most spirit mediums were women, and they were used as conduits by dead comrades to narrate how they had been killed during the war. Sometimes the dead would speak with these spirit mediums through dreams. In such cases, the dreamer would direct the exhumation programme by pointing out where to find remains based on clues given in the dream.⁴⁷

All these acts were performed in the full glare of the public eye. These were staged spectacles, deployed in the service of ‘patriotic history’, in order to sway the voters of Rusape town (a largely MDC-supporting constituency) in favour of ZANU(PF) in the upcoming general election. In one speech at Butcher site, Cde Musoni told a group of residents:

[t]he freedoms that you are now enjoying, the houses you have built, the cars you are driving and the cell phones you keep on touching even as I speak to you now – all came to you as a result of the sacrifices that the boys and girls who lay here did to free our motherland from colonial rule. So, if you are going to vote for MDC, you would have all betrayed their wishes for a free Zimbabwe because such a vote is just as good as returning the country to white colonialists whom we fought and defeated. As we celebrate 33 years of independence tomorrow, let us not betray our heroes by voting for MDC in July.⁴⁸

In another public gathering, Cde Motsi sent out a clear warning to the assembled crowd:

Vakomana nevasika vamuri kuona varere apa vakaurayiwa nevapambepfumi and ndivo vakatipa rusunguko rwatinarwo nhasi. Iwe ndopaunoda hako kuvhotera MDC kuti varungu vadzoke. Hazvigonis as long as ndiri mupenyu ndochengetedza shuwiro yevamwe vangu ava vakenda kuhondo vakafira rusunguko rweZimbabwe (The comrades that you see here whose remains we have exhumed were killed by white colonialists in their quest to liberate Zimbabwe. They paid an ultimate sacrifice for you and yet you now want to vote for the MDC to bring back the same white colonialists who massacred our brothers and sisters. This will never happen as long as I am alive, and I am going to defend their wishes for an independent Zimbabwe that is ruled by blacks).⁴⁹

Pupils from nearby schools, mostly ordinary and advanced level students, were also bussed to the site to witness the gruesome nature of the massacres.⁵⁰ Targeting this group, which comprised new young voters thought to be sympathetic to the MDC, was a strategy to

44 Conversation with Cde Patrick Chinamasa, Butcher site, 4 April 2013.

45 Fontein, ‘Remaking the Dead’, pp. 114–40.

46 Personal observations, Butcher site, 23 April 2013.

47 *Ibid.*

48 Public address to Rusape residents by Cde Musoni, Butcher site, 17 April 2013.

49 Cde Motsi addressing a gathering, Butcher site, 20 March 2013.

50 Personal observations, Butcher site, 16 May 2013.

sell the patriotic history narrative. In one instance, Cde Mabhiza told a group of schoolchildren:

muri kuona vanhu vese ava vakaurayiwa? Imi mukavhotera MDC munenge madzosa zvakare varungu zvinozokonzeresa imwe hondo because isu hatingatongwe neMDC never!!! (Do you see all these comrades who were killed at Butcher site by the whites? If you decide to vote for MDC, then you will be bringing back war among yourselves because we as war veterans we will not allow an opposition government to lead this country – never!!!)⁵¹

Because of these stark differences in purposes and methodological approaches, NMMZ and FHTZ had a fraught working relationship. Archaeological procedures, which generally require significant time and attention to detail, were deemed to be too slow by the FHTZ. For example, the trenches that were set up in order to carry out meticulous exhumations were disregarded by FHTZ. Systematic trenching makes it possible to document material culture recovered from the exhumation exercise level by level and in their descriptive contexts.⁵² This is usually accompanied by detailed photography of the material before any unbundling or hasty removals. However, the FHTZ insisted on exhuming the human remains without using the trenches set up by NMMZ, and this created problems that later led to a huge commingling of the human remains. The FHTZ's priority was the quick recovery of human remains and their prompt display in tents, where residents of Rusape were allowed to view them and so come to appreciate the gravity of the massacres at this site. Owing to this desire for rapid display and political effect, there were commotions during the exhumation of the first body in mass grave 1, which was literally pulled out of the ground, as FHTZ members complained that preparatory archaeological work was taking too long. Cde Motsi expressed his annoyance with the slow pace: '*mashefu* [ZANU(PF) bigwigs] are coming any day now from Harare to see for themselves the extent of the massacres at Butcher site and we need to quickly get the bodies out of the mass graves. We don't have time to waste by following your by-the-book methods'.⁵³ As a result, archaeological techniques were thereafter abandoned, as the focus turned to getting remains out of the ground in the least possible time. Days after this, Cde Didymus Mutasa visited Butcher site and took the opportunity to use human remains in campaigning for his party.

The use of the archaeological toolkit created another impasse between NMMZ and the FHTZ. Trowels, brushes, handpicks, dust pans and sieves were used by NMMZ to meticulously recover human remains and fragmented skeletal remains before full documentation. However, FHTZ exhumers argued that the use of brushes and sieves was 'un-cultural' and showed lack of respect for the dead. Cde Chipembere, one of the female spirit mediums, strongly opposed the use of brushes during the exhumations:

What you guys are doing is a taboo because you are disrespecting the comrades who were violently killed, and you continue to do so by using your little brushes. In the process you will end up brushing away their spirits. Be careful of the wrath of their avenging spirits – you won't find peace.⁵⁴

We received numerous such indirect threats from restless spirit mediums who wanted to speed up the exhumation process. Mai Moyo was another female spirit medium who tried to intimidate us by saying that the archaeological way of handling the remains would bring bad luck to our families:

51 From a tour and patriotic history orientation for advanced level students from Vhengerere High School led by Cde Mabhiza, Butcher site, 16 May 2013.

52 Powell, Steele and Collins, 'Excavation and Analysis of Human Remains'.

53 Comment by Cde Motsi, Butcher site, 17 March 2013.

54 Comment by Cde Chipembere, Butcher site, 19 March 2013.

Mwanangu [my son], be careful of carrying with you the spirit of the dead because of the way you guys are digging with your small handpicks, trowels and brushes. Your process is very slow, and the dead comrades are complaining to us. *Chenjerei kutakurana nemhepo dzamusingaziwi kuti dzabva nepi zvinozokanganisa mhuri dzenyu* [be careful of getting bad luck from these comrades who want to be exhumed quickly – such bad luck might end up even affecting your families].⁵⁵

These warnings scared most of us archaeologists, but they did not deter us from doing our job. One of my colleagues dismissed these remarks, asking: ‘why would an avenging spirit traumatise us and not those who were directly responsible for their deaths? If anything, these spirits must be very happy that we are doing the right thing in correctly recovering all their individual bones and preparing them for decent re-burial’.⁵⁶ His comment came in response to the fact that FHTZ exhumers preferred to use shovels and picks, and such heavy tools meant that human remains were seriously disturbed and even destroyed during the digging.

Another issue that made the working relationship between NMMZ and FHTZ problematic was the prohibition placed on the colour red by the latter. Participants in the exhumation exercises were not supposed to wear the colour. The reason given was that it would upset the working spirits of the FHTZ exhumers and even infuriate the dead comrades, who, in their operational times at the front, were not allowed to wear red. As one of the FHTZ war veterans explained, ‘red is a bright colour that we were prohibited from putting on even during our days at the front because it offended the ancestors and, in many cases, they would withdraw their protection and leave you to die at the hands of the enemy if you wear red’.⁵⁷ The team of archaeologists did not share these beliefs. The prohibition nevertheless resulted in archaeologists who wore red being expelled from the site. There was a showdown between Cde Chinyane and one of the archaeologists, who was expelled for wearing a red T-shirt. The archaeologist had this to say:

we must let the dead rest in peace by properly exhuming them and giving them decent individual burials. This thing of continuously burdening them with countless beliefs is not doing good to this exhumation process. I don’t see how the colour of my T-shirt will infuriate the dead comrade that I am trying to give a proper burial after having been dumped in a mass grave for more than thirty years.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, since most of the FHTZ members had participated in the liberation war and held the beliefs propagated in it, they insisted that red was not allowed at the site.

The public was also caught up in the ritualistic spectacle of colours, and many were turned away from the site if they wore red. This could also take on partisan political overtones, as the colour red is associated with the MDC. There was drama when an apparently drunk man was apprehended by plainclothes members of the dreaded Central Intelligence Organisation at the site’s gate when he tried to gain entry wearing a red MDC shirt. He was quickly whisked away but he kept shouting, ‘these comrades you are exhuming here died liberating the country for all of us and this process must not be a ZANU(PF) affair but a public event in which everyone is allowed to participate’.⁵⁹ Although drunk, his views mirrored an earlier argument about how ZANU(PF) has long designed a non-inclusive heroes’ memorial complex, reserved for a selected elite and not for the *povo*, who also assisted in a host of ways during the liberation struggle.

55 A conversation with Mai Moyo, Butcher Site, 21 April 2013.

56 Comment by NMMZ archaeologist 1, Butcher site, 19 March 2013.

57 Interview with Cde Motsi, Butcher site, 12 April 2013.

58 Comment by NMMZ archaeologist 2, Butcher site, 19 March 2013.

59 Comment by unidentified man, Butcher site, 16 April 2013.

Statistics of the remains exhumed also varied considerably between NMMZ and FHTZ field records. Sometimes the FHTZ counted remains improperly, such that the fragmented bones of one individual would be counted as two or three people.⁶⁰ This was a common occurrence during the sorting exercise, but NMMZ could not persuade FHTZ members to see that they had made errors because they were concerned with attaining large numbers to increase the public appeal of the massacre story. At Butcher site, the NMMZ's official body count was 104, but the FHTZ had a record of 145 bodies. Coffins secured, graves dug, and reburials done were all based on the incorrect statistics presented by the FHTZ. The inflated numbers came from FHTZ exhumers who were guided by spiritual methods of identification, in which archaeologists were directed to exhume certain areas where they thought human remains were located based on spiritual divinations.⁶¹ In all these cases, apart from known marked mass graves, such exhumations yielded nothing. The recovery of black deep humus soil was none the less interpreted by FHTZ as strong evidence of burnt human remains.⁶² Such erroneous analysis meant that the body count was further exaggerated. Some of the spiritual identification methods deployed by the FHTZ were thus used to magnify the extent of the atrocities committed and to vilify publicly those thought to be associated with white colonial rule in the present – that is, the MDC.

In the next section, I focus on the FHTZ's mode of identifying the dead, which also marked a striking contrast with NMMZ methods, as well as once again being put to political use.

The Spectacle of Staged Spiritual Identification Methods

Spiritual identification was applied at two levels at the Butcher site: identifying the location of mass graves and identifying the names of the exhumed human remains. Both were enacted in choreographed public spectacles.

There were roughly 12 spirit mediums within FHTZ who claimed to have transcendent powers. As we have seen, the person guided by the spirit of the deceased would locate graves by falling and lying motionless on the site where the deceased was supposed to be buried. I interviewed one of them, Cde Chipembere, who was possessed by the powerful spirit of one Cde Mabhunu Mapera. She said:

ever since I was young girl, precisely since when I was eight, there is a voice that kept on speaking to me in my dreams. I told my parents about it, we prayed together, but nothing changed. We even tried to consult traditional healers but still that voice continued troubling me. The invisible person in the voice identified himself as Cde Mabhunu Mapera from Mount Darwin who said he was captured by the Rhodesian soldiers and killed somewhere at a place where the sun rises from. It is only now that I have grown up when I realised that the voice that had been speaking to me all these years had been directing me to come to the place where the sun rises, which is Butcher site.⁶³

Cde Chipembere used these spiritual powers to identify the exact spot where the remains were buried in the mass graves at Butcher site, and since then the voice has stopped visiting her.

Using this case of identification by Cde Chipembere, it can be argued that the interactions with the dead using archaeological practices, which entails meticulous excavations and documentation, can potentially sideline the important role of spirituality in naming the dead.

⁶⁰ Personal observations, Butcher site, 19 May 2013.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Interview with Cde Chipembere, Butcher site, 22 May 2013.

Some have argued that there is a need to combine archaeological approaches with spirituality and divination in order to reconstitute and make the dead known.⁶⁴ Thus Joost Fontein argues that the participation of NMMZ in exhumation projects does not necessarily reflect the coercive hand of ZANU(PF) nor the politicisation of the process, but rather this goal.⁶⁵ The NMMZ Act 25:11 of 1992 has been revised and amended to become the National Heritage Bill (NHB), which recognises the important role of communities in the conservation and presentation of liberation heritage. The NHB defines liberation heritage as the tangible and intangible, movable and immovable inheritance or places associated with resistance against colonial rule between 1890 and 1980.⁶⁶ Mass graves are defined as land or a location containing the mortal remains of more than one victim who was buried or permanently hidden with no respect for the legal regulations and humanitarian values that must be taken into account during interment, and who were buried in such a way as to hide the evidence of a crime committed by an individual, a group or an institution. In recent years, NMMZ has tried to deploy the category of intangibility in the management of heritage. Fontein argues that these efforts can be seen as a new inclination by the NMMZ, geared towards the preservation of intangible and living dimensions of heritage.⁶⁷ I have similarly argued that, while such rituals and spiritual work were previously ignored in early monumentalisation projects by NMMZ, which prioritised the use of expert knowledge to study the surviving material culture of the deep past, archaeology has more recently been deployed as a professional practice that usefully brings the past into conversation with the present.⁶⁸ With regard to exhumations, Fontein argues that ‘archaeology becomes an emotive practice that provokes an experiential sense of the past through its engagement with the materiality of bones’.⁶⁹

While I agree with Fontein’s argument on the importance of the recognition by NMMZ of spirituality as a form of intangible heritage, I argue that what was happening at Butcher site was something different. Specifically, it involved a political manipulation of the exhumations which, from my point of view, rendered the use of spirituality as an indigenous practice questionable or unconvincing. I have demonstrated elsewhere how NMMZ is embracing ‘intangibility’ in the management of heritage sites in eastern Zimbabwe, at Matendera in Buhera and Ziwa in Nyanga through recognising ritual uses of these sites by surrounding communities.⁷⁰ I have looked at how intangible cultural heritage at Ziwa and Matendera is prioritised by allowing communities to use the sites as living heritage with values that transcend the authorised heritage discourse.⁷¹ These cases of collaborative heritage management and inclusion of intangibility come from archaeological sites that I have worked at. They are completely different from how the FHTZ used spirituality during the exhumations at Butcher site. In drawing these comparisons, I want to highlight the

64 C. Krmpotich, J. Fontein and J. Harries, ‘The Substance of Bones: The Emotive Materiality and Affective Presence of Human Remains’, *Journal of Material Culture*, 15, 4 (2010), pp. 371–84.

65 Fontein, ‘The Politics of the Dead’.

66 At the time we conducted the exhumations at Butcher site in 2013, we were still using the old NMMZ Act, and there was no clear definition of liberation heritage and mass graves. The NHB, which is still awaiting enactment by the parliament of Zimbabwe, was drafted between 2014 and 2016 through a series of country-wide consultative meetings led by heritage managers from NMMZ.

67 Fontein ‘The Politics of the Dead’, p. 16.

68 N. Chipangura, ‘The Archaeology of Contemporary Artisanal Gold Mining at Mutanda Site, Eastern Zimbabwe’, *Journal of Community Archaeology and Heritage*, 6, 3 (2019), pp. 189–203.

69 Fontein ‘The Politics of the Dead’, p. 22.

70 N. Chipangura, ‘Cultural Heritage Sites and Contemporary Uses: Finding a Balance between Monumentality and Intangibility in Eastern Zimbabwe’, in C. Waelde, C. Cumming, M. Pavis and H. Enright (eds), *Research Handbook on Contemporary Intangible Cultural Heritage Law and Heritage* (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2018), pp. 379–98.

71 L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London, Routledge, 2006).

difficulties that we face when we invoke the concept of intangible heritage in a highly charged and politicised exhumation project.

At Butcher site, NMMZ was unable to embrace the performative evocation of spirituality as a form of intangible practice. The politicised circumstances under which the exhumations were conducted made it difficult to reconcile tangible archaeological practices and spiritual, intangible practices. All spiritual identification performances by the FHTZ were heightened by the singing of liberation-war songs. The dramatic fall to the ground was violent, supposedly re-enacting the way the comrade lost his life. The name identification process was also dramatised. Cde Motsi periodically announced to the visiting public that he had managed to positively identify remains. One case concerned Cde Six Magora, who was believed to have come from the Mazikana family. Mr Washington Mazikana was said to be the brother of Cde Six, and he supported the war-veteran identification process:

my brother left home when he was in Form 3 and joined the liberation struggle, and after the war he did not return home – that was when we sought the assistance of war veterans to trace his whereabouts. I saw the name of my brother among those who disappeared during the war.⁷²

Two points need to be made clear about this identification in order to understand its theatrical nature. First, Mr Mazikana was working closely with the FHTZ as a spirit medium and hence was part of the plot laid out for the identification. Second, Cde Motsi was reported to be in possession of a book with names of missing comrades. This book had been published by ZANU(PF) in the early 1980s and had a list of comrades who had died or gone missing or whose circumstances of disappearance were unknown. Cde Motsi regularly consulted this book during his spiritual identification moments, randomly fishing out the names of ‘identified’ comrades. Such dubious identification methods made it difficult to imagine these spiritual performances as part of intangible heritage practices that NMMZ should recognise: their purpose was to gain public support and to authenticate patriotic history narratives.

In another incident, a woman named Juliet Chikwanda came to Rusape from Shurugwi in the Midlands province after hearing about the Butcher site exhumations. She explained:

I am a *chimbwido* [female war collaborator] and I was impregnated by one Cde Andrew Maoresa, who was later killed by Rhodesian forces in the Rusape area. I gave birth to my son who is now thirty years and I came with him here to search for the remains of his father. My son has been giving me trouble because he wanted to know about the whereabouts of his father.⁷³

Upon hearing her story, one of the FHTZ spirit mediums claimed to have identified the remains of Cde Maoresa long before their visit. While Juliet was somewhat convinced that her son’s father had been identified, the son was sceptical about the whole identification procedure and admitted that he did not believe that these were his father’s remains. I interviewed him after the identification process was completed, at which time he said:

these guys are playing with my mother’s mind. How come they had to wait for her to narrate how my father disappeared, and yet they are the ones who should have told us everything since they claim to have spiritual powers. This whole identification process is a joke and I don’t believe in any of these tricks.⁷⁴

72 Interview with Washington Mazikana, Butcher site, 3 May 2013.

73 Interview with Juliet Chikwanda, Butcher site, 7 May 2013.

74 Interview with Bonny Chikwanda, Butcher site, 7 May 2013.

Another family, from Honde valley, similarly came looking for their father who had not returned from the war. They were made to believe that some remains recovered from mass grave 16, which were found alongside a walking stick, belonged to their missing father. Earlier on, some members of this family had intimated to one of the exhumers that the deceased used to have a walking stick. This gave the spirit medium a clue which led to them giving this family human remains found alongside a walking stick. Such an identification method was highly problematic given the fact that remains were dumped together in the mass graves and there is a possibility that some of the accompanying objects were randomly thrown into graves. The position in which the walking stick was recovered might not have had a direct correlation with the remains.

Another dramatic method used to make identifications was based on the spirit of the dead emerging out of spirit mediums who would randomly pick remains in the mass graves and give them their *noms-de-guerre* as well as real names, and identify their village of origin and the time they joined the liberation struggle. The production of such specific knowledge seems likely to be aimed above all at making an impact on an audience desperate for information about the dead.

From these observations, it is clear that the spiritual identification methods utilised by FHTZ were dramatised so as to create a politically useful spectacle and were far from credible. The unconvincing nature of the identification process can be further gleaned from Cde Motsi's regular claims that the spirit that gave him the power to correctly identify remains had temporarily deserted him.⁷⁵ In one incident, he publicly announced that he 'suspected that somebody was tampering with spirits so that people could doubt his spiritual powers'.⁷⁶ This in itself showed that within the ranks of FHTZ and in their various choreographed performances there was mistrust, as each one of the members was aware of the tricks behind these performances. It could also be that some members of FHTZ were not war veterans but had been inducted into these performances through their association with men like Cde Motsi. A case in point is Cde Mhandu, who was clearly in his early 40s, which made it impossible for him to have fought in the liberation struggle.⁷⁷ Cde Mhandu was said to be Cde Motsi's nephew and it is on this basis that he found his way into FHTZ and started to personify himself as a war veteran. In a real sense Cde Mhandu was an imposter who worked to perfect the theatricals associated with both the exhumation and identification process. I posit that the FHTZ members were better seen as performers on the ZANU(PF) gravy train whose work was to transmit patriotic history narratives using the remains of dead liberation fighters, rather than as keepers of intangible heritage.

Conclusion

This article has looked at the politicisation of an exhumation exercise of liberation-war remains at Butcher site, in which I participated in 2013 as an archaeologist working for NMMZ. The first argument I presented looked at how FHTZ used the exhumations as a campaigning vehicle for ZANU(PF), in which the residents of nearby Rusape town, a traditional MDC stronghold, were frogmarched to the site and made to appreciate the visible atrocities left on the landscape by white colonial rule. The residents were constantly reminded that giving their vote to the MDC was as good as seeking the return of white colonial rule. This narrative was modelled around presenting the results of this exhumation as gruesome evidence of atrocities committed by the Rhodesians and laying blame in the present on the MDC because of its alleged association with white colonialists. I have also

75 Interview with Cde Motsi, Butcher site, 15 May 2013.

76 *Ibid.*

77 Personal observations, Butcher site, 27 May 2013.

shown how NMMZ archaeologists were invited to play a legitimising function for the FHTZ, which caused a series of conflicts between these two parties, not least over their dissonant methodological approaches. I extended this argument by illuminating that, in trying to invoke patriotic history, the FHTZ used staged spiritual performances in directing the exhumation and identification process. These spiritual methods derived from communicating and connecting with the dead through trance and dreams. From their perspective, the exhumations were sanctioned by the dead through the spiritual realm. These choreographed performances conflicted with the archaeological practices that the NMMZ was using. In the end, the methodological dispute was won by the FHTZ, which had the political power to direct the exhumation and to disregard NMMZ's meticulous archaeological work. The appropriation of human remains by the FHTZ using these spiritual methods cannot, however, be seen as an expression of intangible heritage. Rather, it worked as a proxy for ZANU(PF) politicking and compromised the chances of an archaeological inquiry that might have reconstructed what transpired at Butcher site using the human and material remains recovered.

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