

Remembering a Traumatic Past: The Politics of Memory in Contemporary Zimbabwe

Y. CHIKWANGURA-GWATIRISA

Abstract

This article analyses the narratives of the Zimbabwean genocide commonly referred to as Gukurahundi, how they are perceived as forms of collective memory culture, how they help to explain personal experiences shared by victims of the 1980s genocide in Zimbabwe, and how these experiences become memories. Not only does the Gukurahundi genocide show that individuals remember, but it also demonstrates that remembering and forgetting can be collective endeavours. While individual memory is usually bound to a short time span of human life and disappears with the death of a particular individual, intergenerational and collective cultural memory, on the other hand, is of a longer term and is supported by institutions, monuments and rites. This article acknowledges different types of memories and dwells not only on the collective and cultural memory that honours and praises the heroic deeds of Zimbabwe but also on the painful collective memories of perpetration or guilt. It highlights the importance of documenting events that happened during Gukurahundi. In Zimbabwe, there is state-owned documentation and other documentation, which, in this paper, would be referred to as counter archives. These types of documentation can be regarded as a way that Zimbabweans, especially the Ndebele ethnic group, remember or memorialise the past. Through comparative textual analysis, this article examines the Zimbabwean memories and remembrances of Gukurahundi, taking evidence from novels, newspapers, autobiographies and articles.

Keywords: Gukurahundi, memory culture, peace, reconciliation, trauma, violent crimes

Introduction

After Zimbabwe gained its independence in 1980, a problem of armed banditry arose in the southern regions of the country (Ngwenya, 2018). The Zimbabwean state identified the culprits as demobilised members of one of the two liberation armies that successfully fought against the white minority rule of Ian Smith: the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA). The banditry had a strong element of political dissent, which emerged from tensions that festered during the war of liberation. On one hand, there was ZIPRA, the forces loyal to Joshua Nkomo and his Zimbabwe African Peoples Union party (ZAPU), whose strength of support was in the southern provinces of Matabeleland and Midlands. On the other hand, there was the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), the armed wing of Robert Mugabe's ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party. While Nkomo's ZIPRA was predominantly composed of members of the Ndebele ethnic group, ZANLA derived its membership largely from the majority of Shona-speaking communities (Ncube & Siziba, 2017). Ncube and Siziba (2017) explain that in addition to the ethnic polarisation between the parties and their armed wings, the two sides also had different ideological groundings. As the leader of the first post-independence government, Mugabe deployed the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade (also known as Gukurahundi) to quell armed dissident activity in the Ndebele-speaking regions of Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands province. While the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP, 1997) reported that at least 6 000 civilians were targeted and killed by government forces in the crackdown, other human rights observers like Eppel (2008) estimated the number of civilians killed to be between 10 000 - 20 000. In addition to mass killings, the CCJP report documented eyewitness accounts of how civilians were harassed, tortured, maimed and left traumatised (CCJP, 1997). Many houses were burnt, and food deliveries for drought-stricken communities were blocked by the government under the pretext that the villagers were feeding the dissidents (Ndhlovu-Gatsheni, 2011).

Gukurahundi is a Shona word that, when loosely translated, means "the early rains that wash away the chaff [from the previous harvest], before the spring [rains]" (Chingono & Eppel, 2008, p. 1). In other words, this is a reference to the rains which wash away the dirt and chaff from the fields so that

they are clean before the new ploughing season begins. Gukurahundi was also a name given to the Fifth Brigade soldiers, the North Korean-trained unit of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF) that reported directly to the then Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, instead of through the regular ZDF chain of command. This term is also used to refer to the killings, rapes and tortures that took place from 1983 - 1987 in the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces (CCJP, 1997; Ndlovu, 2017).

In the aftermath of such a conflict, the potential for recriminations was neutralised by employing the extensive application of amnesties (Assmann, 2013). Mugabe instituted a nationalist master narrative of unity, advancing the view that Zimbabweans, but indirectly referring to the Ndebele, should forgive and forget to build the nation together. People should not focus on what happened in the past if they want to live in peace. Mugabe said, "If we dig up the country's history in this way, we wreck the nation and tear our people apart into factions" (Wetherall, 1997, p. 21).

Mugabe's successor, Emmerson Mnangagwa, followed the same mantra in respect of revisiting the human rights abuses under his predecessor by stating, "Let bygones be bygones". In his inaugural speech on 24 November 2017, Mnangagwa pleaded with his compatriots:

We must never remain hostages to our past. I thus humbly appeal to all of us that we let bygones be bygones, readily embracing each other in defining a new destiny. The task at hand is that of rebuilding our great country. It principally lies with none but ourselves (Ndlovu & Mlotshwa, 2022, p. 285).

According to Mnangagwa's sentiments, the people of Matabeleland and Midlands should leave the massacres, maiming and rapes in the past. This, unfortunately, negates the well-being of the victims, and their need for restorative justice (Ndlovu & Mlotshwa, 2022). It does not help people to heal, reconcile and have peace.

The novels, autobiographies and newspaper articles in this paper are counter archives that help the victims of Gukurahundi to remember the past. The counter archives provide a therapeutic discourse of memory/remembering, where there is a shift from perpetrators to victims. Memory culture in this paper is seen not as a means to hate, revenge, sow resentment or division, but as a "re-valued therapeutic and ethical obligation" (Assmann 2013, p. 61). According to Assmann (1999), there is a thin line between remembering and memory. Whereas remembering may refer to personal experiences and reflections related to culture and history, memory refers to groups, what brings the groups together, and what they remember as groups. This does not mean that they have the same memories about the same event; individuals can have different memories that make up a memory of one event. In this case, there are diverse accounts of Gukurahundi from different people from different parts of Matabeleland and the Midlands. All these accounts form part of a collective memory of the people of Matabeleland and Midlands.

This article examines innovative ways in which fictional texts have countered the collective amnesia imposed by the ruling ZANU-PF. It shows how the victims of Gukurahundi have dealt or are dealing with the traumatic events in their history by rebuilding and remembering objects that cue memories of a past they wish to forget through artefacts, writing, and painting which help memorialise their history. The analysis of narratives embedded in novels, newspaper extracts, documentaries and autobiographies from people who experienced and survived Gukurahundi forms the basis of this article. As media of cultural memory, the article analyses *House of Stone* by Tshuma, the poem "Bhalagwe Blues" Chingono & Eppel (2011) and eyewitness accounts as recorded or reported by

Alexander et al. (2000), and the CCJP (1997) report. They express in different ways the mnemonic functions of imaginative creation of events and the actual events from the past and convey images of history. Through their works, the authors convey emotional and cognitive responses to trauma, violence, and disaster, which they depict on an individual or collective level. Also of importance are the ways in which other nations, like Germany, have dealt with post-war conflicts and issues to do with peace and reconciliation.

Theoretical underpinning: General Memory Process

Atkinson and Shiffrin (1968) devised a cognitive theory that explains how memory is processed through the information processing theory. They developed a multi-store model that explains that human memory has three separate components namely: a. A sensory register where sensory information, sounds, and sights enter memory. This kind of memory is usually easily forgotten. b. Short-term memory is where the information from the sensory register and the long-term memory is held. d. Through maintenance and rehearsal, the memory is then stored in the long-term memory. According to Atkinson and Shiffrin (1968), sensory memory is easily forgotten, short-term memory is forgotten through decay or displacement and long-term memory is forgotten through interference or retrieval failure. This research concentrates on the long-term memory of the victims of Gukurahundi, who, in a bid to counter forced collective amnesia, are (re)telling their stories that have been stored in long-term memory and they do not want to forget such information. Assmann (1999) explains memory and how people, especially those who have experienced traumatic events, store information.

It is worth considering at this juncture how people create memories and remember them. Assmann (1999, p. 43) explains three formations of memory in which she explains that memory and history are not opposites but are entangled in each other. History exists in two forms: there is history as science and history as memory. The latter is further differentiated into three types of memories namely communicative memory, collective memory, and cultural memory.

On the first level, there is the *communicative* memory. Halbwachs (1992) states that a person cannot have a memory unless he or she communicates it with others. People usually share their experiences with others, but if it is a generational memory, the communications usually stop or fade away after about 40 years. According to Assmann (1999), this type of memory can be called a short-term memory of society. Memory can also be *collective*, and this form is higher than the communicative one. It is a more intense, social long-term memory, which, in contrast to communicative memory, is characterised by a strong reduction and homogeneity of content (Assmann, 1999, p. 44). Collective memory entails the amalgamation of individual experiences into a memory of a group. On the one hand, it is about the identity of a group that needs to be protected against revisionists, those who tend to rewrite history to suit what they want. This then becomes a collective political memory. Collective memory brings the past and the future together in such a way that there is a clear orientation for action in the future. Collective memory is, therefore, an instrumentalised and politicised memory (Assmann, 1999). The third formation, *cultural* memory, is built up from media and artefacts such as texts, pictures and sculptures, as well as spatial arrangements such as monuments, architecture and landscapes, and temporal arrangements such as festivals, customs and rituals.

The historian Koselleck (1994) asks and answers the following question:

What will change when this generation of contemporary witnesses no longer speaks? With generational change, the object of observation also changes. The experience-saturated, present past of the survivors becomes a pure past that has withdrawn from experience. [...] With the dying out of memory, the distance not only becomes greater, but its quality also changes. Soon only the files speak, enriched by images, films and memoirs (p. 117).

Koselleck goes on to say that memory will be colourless, lost and eventually fade. To become colourless, to lose, to fade - these are paraphrases of an inexorable process of detachment in which memories are separated from living people and transferred to material data carriers. Assmann disputes this and gives an example of the Nazi Holocaust, which, so many years after it happened in the 1920s and 1930s, remains etched in human memory: it has neither become colourless nor has it been lost nor faded. Koselleck (1994) attests that people collect or hear about the past from the people who have experienced it, and when these people die, society is left with only photographs and memoirs of their experiences. This paper concentrates more on the cultural memory of the Gukurahundi massacres, whereby what people remember about Gukurahundi is written in novels, newspapers, articles, autobiographies, fictional and documentary films, as well as interviews of the victims and witnesses carried out by researchers (Alexander, et al. 2000; CCJP, 1997). According to Assmann's definition, Gukurahundi should be categorised under collective memory. However, in past years, people could not freely talk about Gukurahundi. It was a subject that was politically suppressed, with both the Mugabe and Mnangagwa regimes accusing those who raised the issue of trying to divide Zimbabweans (Ndlovu, 2017). It is for this reason that it has been easier to produce novels, academic texts, and other forms of media on the Gukurahundi rather than to interview people, or have victims of Gukurahundi talk about their experiences freely without being victimised. The literary works discussed in this paper represent the memories that the victims and their descendants have about Gukurahundi. They portray how people are living in the post-Gukurahundi era and how the atrocities that were committed during that time still haunt them and their descendants. These literary works remind the reader of the collective memory of the people affected by the events of 1983 - 1987.

Methodology

The researcher analysed Novuyo Rosa Tshuma's *House of Stone* and John Eppel's poem, *Bhalagwe Blues*. These two literary works were chosen because they vividly describe what happened during Gukurahundi and how traumatic it was for the victims and their descendants. Using Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on close textual analysis, was used to analyse the language used to describe the events of Gukurahundi and how it reflects the cultural or collective memory of the people of Matabeleland and Midlands provinces. Tshuma and Eppel have used language to allow the reader to see the hidden stories behind Gukurahundi. Through the characters and voices, the authors have exposed the manipulation of people in high powers in trying to cover up Gukurahundi. Both the novel *House of Stone* and the poem *Bhalagwe Blues* reveal what the state was trying to hide from the people by publishing stories of 'dissidents' without publishing what the Fifth Brigade soldiers were doing to ordinary people. Through critical discourse analysis, the researcher unpacks the hidden truth about Gukurahundi.

Analysis

During the period of Gukurahundi, only the state-owned newspapers, *The Herald* and *The Chronicle*, offered any coverage of the genocide within Zimbabwe. These newspapers published carefully framed

articles that reported attacks and other crimes attributed to the “dissidents.” These reports include the capture, trial and judicial execution of a number of dissidents, angry insinuations by Mugabe and members of his cabinet that the rebels were financed and directed by Nkomo’s ZAPU party. What was not covered, and yet has since been widely documented (e.g., CCJP, 1997; Chingono & Eppel, 2011; Ndlovu, 2017) are the accounts of the victims of Gukurahundi pointing to atrocities by the Fifth Brigade and other state agents. These newspapers, documents and literary works present what this paper refers to as counter-archives, are not as easily accessible to the general public as the literary works on Zimbabwean history, but they are equally important because they recorded the events that happened in Zimbabwe, which are a collective memory of Zimbabweans in the Midlands and Matabeleland regions.

Importantly, this other side of the story was picked up by foreign news outlets even as it was happening. Newspapers like the *Daily Mail* (London) and the *New York Times* began to report in early 1984 of mass killings of unarmed men, women, and children by government forces (Chingono & Eppel, 2011). The reports from the *Daily Mail* and *New York Times* were vehemently denied by Mugabe’s government (CCJP, 1997). Local politicians in Matabeleland also spoke to foreign media outlets about drought relief food being denied to people, especially in their province, whose voters still remained solidly behind Nkomo’s ZAPU. These reports act as memory sites for Gukurahundi, for they capture the events during the time they happened.

In the Zimbabwean context of Gukurahundi memory culture, victims have said they want the events that happened during 1983 - 87 in Matabeleland and Midlands to be acknowledged by the government and individual perpetrators so that there can be some form of restorative justice (Ndebele, 2021). Rasch et al. (2021) argue that there has been more diverse and robust literature and other media material critical of the Gukurahundi campaign since President Mnangagwa deposed Mugabe in an army-backed coup in 2017, with books, articles, and documentaries calling attention to the massacres and victims still waiting for justice.

Counter archiving has also come in the form of literary texts such as Novuyo Tshuma’s novel, *House of Stone* and poetry like John Eppel’s *Bhalagwe Blues*. Though the novel and the poem are fictional, they bring out the stories of the people who have been marginalised and offer a space of resistance to the system. Rasch (2021) says:

Repression fosters resistance. When a regime like the Zimbabwean one attempts to control not only people’s lives but also how they understand the past, other stories will seep up through the cracks. Such counter-narratives, whether in the form of private conversations, activism or published texts, are often praised for their subversive character (p. 817).

The story of the novel *House of Stone* focuses on the protagonist-narrator, Zamani, who is a child born out of rape. His mother was raped by the commander of Gukurahundi called Black Jesus. In the novel, he is staying with Abednego and Mama Agnes, whom he calls surrogate parents. While Zamani did not experience Gukurahundi, he was its product, and so he remained curious about its events, and about what happened at the notorious Bhalagwe concentration camp, where many civilians – including his mother – were forcibly taken by soldiers, never to be seen alive again. He had been told of his mother’s fate, by whom she was raped, and where she was killed. He also wanted to meet his father, Black Jesus, who now, years later, had thrown off his *nom de guerre* and was a member of the high command of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces. Although *House of Stone* is a fictional story, the author portrays what a post-traumatic family looks like and the struggles they face in their daily lives.

There are people who were born during Gukurahundi, some of them too young to remember anything, who grow up hearing such traumatic stories repeatedly and want to find answers or explanations as to why it happened and why people were killed. Zamani, in this case, represents the generation that never experienced Gukurahundi, and the author has done this skillfully.

Through the narrations of Zamani and his adoptive parents, the reader is given an intense and personal account of the events of Gukurahundi, and how survivors struggled to recover their lives after peace came when Mugabe and Nkomo signed a unity accord, and Nkomo joined the government as Vice President. I find the name Zamani interesting considering what he does and his role in the novel. The Ndebele name is a verb in the imperative and means “try” and in the novel, he and other characters “try” to remember Gukurahundi.

From the prologue “I am a man on a mission. A vocation, call it, to remake the past, and a wish to fashion all that has been into being and becoming” (Tshuma, 2018, p. 8), Zamani shows how unsettled he was with the past he never experienced and how important it was for him to know what really happened before and soon after he was born. The prologue prepares one of the “moments of repression and resistance” that Rasch et al. (2021, p. 740) describe. Tshuma’s *House of Stone* presents characters who are struggling to deal with the past, their present identity and belonging as citizens of a country that brutalised them, and their budding resistance to remaining silent about the past.

Dumo is another character in the novel who, like Zamani, did not experience the horrors of Gukurahundi. But like others of his age, he has heard the stories and fulminates against the state for rewriting and manipulating what happened. It is easy, says Dumo, for people to believe the state narrative instead of believing the truth from living eyewitnesses:

“Dumo warned me about this, about how the state apparatus hijacks our histories, appropriates them, rewrites them, edits out the wrinkles and then feeds back to us some real sweet-tasting shit” (Tshuma, 2018, p. 60).

The author makes it clear how the state sells its side of the story, dismissing eyewitness accounts to promote amnesia among the victims. By writing about it, the author tells the reader that even the victims and their descendants are aware of the state's cover-up and want to bring out the truth, which cannot be found in the public sphere.

Yet when Zamani suggests that those who know the truth about what happened during the Gukurahundi era should speak out, Dumo sarcastically tells Zamani that the truth is illusive:

‘What we need,’ I said to Dumo, (...) ‘is to expose the truth.’ He threw back his symmetrical head and guffawed. ‘What is truth?’ ‘Well, the truth is—’ ‘There’s no such thing as truth, mfana! Truth is optics. And there are so many options out there, these days it’s all about choosing your flavour. You like your truth blackberry-cherry or you like it lemon-lime? There’s even a zero-calorie truth!’

Tshuma shows how the victims think and how they wish the truth could be told, but in the case of Gukurahundi, the victims' truth may never be "officially" known. The government decides what is and is not to be known about Gukurahundi.

But the truth of Gukurahundi isn’t optics!’ I cried. ‘What happened to my mama isn’t optics.’ ‘You’re going to have to be smarter than that, if you’re going to survive in this world,’ Dumo snapped. ‘What we are trying to do is to seek justice for our people and what they experienced

under the Gukurahundi genocide at the hands of the state apparatus. To say, look, I'm a human being, and what happens to me matters! Everyone out there in the world is holding a megaphone, mfana, and it's the most dazzling one that gains audience. And the audience is power. Audience is freedom! We are aiming to latch onto a loud megaphone. To add some flavour to our truth, to attract some moths, you understand. We're trying to own the truth. (Tshuma, 2018, p. 60ff)

Since the state does not acknowledge the victims' side of the story, the victims in this fictional story have taken it upon themselves to fight for their truth. The author has given her characters the space to speak out and talk about their grievances, a space that is denied to real victims by the state.

These words coming from a person who has not experienced Gukurahundi, but has relatives who experienced it, show that memory, especially of an event, becomes colourless, lost, and fades with time. The further people move away from Gukurahundi, the closer this event, the memory of the crime comes to them. This, in other words, means that even though the temporal distance from the event is getting wider, the event is becoming more and more prominent. In the case of Dumo, although he did not personally experience Gukurahundi but intensifies his will to seek justice for the victims of Gukurahundi. This shows that the Gukurahundi genocide did not or is not only affecting the people who experienced it but also a generation or two after it. Hirsch (1997, p. 22) coins the term 'postmemory' to demonstrate the transmission of such memory which Zamani has or is trying to get from his adoptive parents. Hirsch explains that "While those who actually live through trauma are often left with gaps, holes or distortions of memory, the second generation receives traumatic memories differently: 'Postmemory –often obsessive and relentless – need not be absent or evacuated: it is as full and as empty, certainly as constructed, as memory itself.'

As one reads from *House of Stone*, the victims of Gukurahundi, Mama Agnes and Abednego are living with the scars of memory, gaps, amnesia, distortion, revision, or even fugue states or intrusive flashbacks. To this, Schwab (as cited in Assmann & Shortt 2012) asserts that "the recipients of transgenerational trauma need to patch together a history that they have not experienced by employing whatever props they can find, including photographs and stories or letters", (p. 18) and this is what one sees in the characters of *House of Stone*. Abednego, Zamani's adoptive father, could not revisit the past sober-minded; he had to be inebriated to be able to talk about his bitter past. It was traumatic for Abednego to talk about Gukurahundi sober-minded.

Yet, piece by piece, Zamani re-members the stories of other people who experienced, and narrated, scenes from the Gukurahundi era:

Black Jesus gripped the boy with one hand. Raised the other. Slapped her across the face with the back of his hand. Punched her in the stomach. She doubled over. Hugged her belly. He grabbed a clump of her mfushwa hair. Yanked her back up. Slapped her. Spat. Raised his hand. In his hand was a scythe. The scythe sliced through the air. It sliced into her belly. Sliced her belly open. She staggered. Clutched her belly. Her belly was spilling. Spilling her intestines, her colon, her stomach. Spilling her spleen, her pancreas, her liver. Spilling her foetus. Thandi lay in the dirt. Beside her spilt belly. Beside her intestines, her colon, her stomach. Beside her pancreas, her spleen, her liver. Beside her twitching foetus. Her abdomen was bloody. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head (Tshuma, 2018, p. 122).

The name “Black Jesus” and the way the author describes the whole scenario go hand in hand with what has been documented by researchers who have interviewed Gukurahundi survivors (Ndebele Documentaries, 2021). Tshuma captures and graphically describes these events to show the vivid memories of the survivors and how those who never experienced them were also affected by the events of Gukurahundi. One will not find this graphic information in any official document.

Tshuma’s descriptions are important in creating vivid images of Gukurahundi. The way she describes the sequence of actions (raised his hand, sliced her belly, clutched her belly, spilling her intestines) keeps a conspicuous focus on the actions perpetrated on the victims. It seems that at a pure sentence construction level, the perpetrator is removed from the violence. What we see is the devastation of the victim. This stylistic device helps us to appreciate the extent and the gravity of the pain that was exerted on victims, as well as the trauma the witnesses were going through. Tshuma’s work is trying to bring to life the traumatic experiences that people endured during Gukurahundi. Not even pregnant women and their unborn children escaped the ruthless violence inflicted by servicemen in what was supposed to be a “defence” force. When such events are captured in novels or documentaries, they re-awake a dark past about which talking publicly was for so long a taboo.

In the poem *Bhalagwe Blues*, Eppel (Chingono & Eppel, 2011) uses powerful diction to portray the inner world of the victims of Gukurahundi. Bhalagwe is a place in Matabeleland that was used as a base camp by members of the Fifth Brigade, to which villagers were frog-marched and where many of them met excruciating deaths (CCJP, 1997). From the title, one can foresee a poem evoking feelings of melancholy. The repetition of sentences gives the poem a musical rhythm, which also goes hand in hand with the genre of Blues music. Blues music is melancholic, and the title and rhythm of the poem reflect how remembering Bhalagwe is itself a melancholic exercise.

Ncube & Siziba (2015) analyse the poem thus:

The fact that the poem is called “Bhalagwe Blues” has a direct effect on the structure of the poem. Like classical Blues music, the poem is composed of three-line verses in which the first two verses are identical (AAB). This blues structure plays a pivotal role in fortifying the ideas carried in the two initial lines of each stanza (p. 241).

The poem has the first person “I” and the plural collective form “we” and the third person plural “they.” “I” and “we” show a distinction between individual and collective memory (Ncube & Siziba (2015). Individual memory, according to Assmann (2009), is based on personal experiences while the “we” which represents the collective memory is characterised by individual memories from different people being shared in a group for it to become collective memory. In this case, Gukurahundi as embodied by what took place at Bhalagwe presents the collective memory of the people of Matabeleland South which these citizens amongst themselves communicate over time. In this way, they have reassured themselves of an identity that is extended along the intergenerational identity.

The first stanza sarcastically talks about the kidnappings that took place during the time of Gukurahundi in which the government was blaming ZIPRA members and ZAPU supporters for the crimes. The government made sure that all state-owned newspapers, *The Herald* and *The Chronicle*, published every crime that the “dissidents” were committing and at one point, the government publicly blamed ZAPU and its leaders for it. The poet comments and provides insight into social issues as they happened during Gukurahundi hence acting as a counter archive to the “official information” that was being published by the state.

The poem goes on to explain the day-to-day activities that the victims were made to do at the Bhalagwe camp. They cleaned the soldiers' shoes, cooked for them, were tortured in various ways and were made to dig their own graves. *Bhalagwe Blues*, which borrows its title from one of the Gukurahundi torture camps, Eppel relives the misery of detainees:

We dig many graves every day in the sun,
we dig many graves every day in the sun,
they tease us then kill us, they do it for fun (Chingono & Eppel, 2011, p.126).

The collective remembering (we) of events shows the historical trauma of collective victimisation. Digging graves knowing that they will be thrown in there is the most gruesome way of torturing people. The poem makes one visualize how ordinary people suffered during Gukurahundi and this is also recorded as true events that happened during Gukurahundi. CCJP (1997) reports the following:

5 Feb 1984: Eight people were reported murdered by Five Brigade after first digging their own grave. On the same day, villagers found drinking at Shashane River Store were shot by Five Brigade...On the same day, 13 people were severely beaten, and then thrown down a disused well shaft (p. 248).

Literally texts in this case are not merely fictional stories but are used to reflect what happens in a society. The events that happened during Gukurahundi are presented the way they happened as described by the survivors.

Alexander et al. (2000) record interviews mainly with people who experienced the tortures of the Fifth Brigade and decided to flee for protection but decided to come back as dissidents to fight against the Fifth Brigade:

My mother told me the Gukurahundi was here and [had] told her she should report my presence. And my mother said another neighbour's son had returned from Jo'burg and she had reported. The Gukurahundi had shot him. My uncle was the first person killed by the Gukurahundi in my area. Nine members of my uncle's family were killed on one day in Nemani, Tsholotsho. This uncle of mine was killed at a school where everyone was gathered. They shot him in the toilet. They saw someone who was mentally disturbed from my uncle's home and shot him, then they shot my elder uncle and his son. Some were running away. Another uncle with his wife, having heard his brothers were killed, wanted to go to give condolences to the grandmother and they ran into the Gukurahundi on the way and were all shot dead. The Gukurahundi could never discuss, only shoot you. In some parts of Tsholotsho, they could put people in one room and light the roof (p. 195).

This is a first-person description of the genocide as it occurred, as captured by Alexander et al. (2000). That is an interview she had with Saymore Nkomo on 26 September 1995. From his narration, it is clear that the Fifth Brigade was following Mugabe's command to destroy "these harmful pests and their deceitful mentors" (CCJP, 1997, p. 144). In the Catholic Commission for Peace and Justice (CCJP) report, interviews were carried out where victims narrated their experiences and pictures of some victims are shown in that report. Many of the victims suffered permanent paralysis of the forearms and some were buried in mass graves in Tsholotsho (CCJP, 1997, p. 144). Other witness/victim accounts are now available on YouTube (cf Ndebele, 2021), where the victims talk of their painful experiences. Most of these accounts are in Ndebele and have no English subtitles.

Conclusion

Memory culture has become an important issue in the current discussions on Gukurahundi, as the truth is directly related to the collective and cultural memory of a society. Through counter archives, the hidden truths about Gukurahundi are brought to light as a way of fighting collective amnesia and also documenting the events of Gukurahundi not from the perpetrator's side but from the victims' side. The counter-archives have given the victims a voice to speak about their traumatic past, a voice that the perpetrators of Gukurahundi have denied them. This article has brought out critical information to the understanding of memory culture in the Zimbabwean context of Gukurahundi. More importantly, it has brought to light eyewitness accounts and biographies that explain and expose the Gukurahundi atrocities and has brought out the historical truth about the political crimes of the past from interviews, novels and autobiographies, which now act as counter archives and oral testimonies of the Gukurahundi victims, as well as how other nations that faced almost similar atrocities dealt with their situations. Furthermore, the article highlights the importance of acknowledging and addressing past atrocities in order to promote healing and reconciliation within Zimbabwean society. It also emphasizes the need for accountability and justice for the victims and their families, as well as measures to prevent such atrocities from happening again in the future.

References:

- Alexander, J., McGregor, J. & Ranger, T. (2000). *Violence and memory: one hundred years in the 'dark forests' of Matabeleland*. James Curry.
- Assmann, A. (2013). *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention*. C. H. Beck.
- Assmann, A. & Shortt, L. (Eds.). (2012). *Memory and Political Change: Introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies. P 1 - 14.
- Assmann, A. (1999). *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. C. H. Beck.
- Atkinson, R. C. & Shiffrin, R. M. (1968). Human memory: A proposed system and its control processes. In K. W. Spence & J. T. Spence, *The psychology of learning and motivation: II*, 89-195. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0079-7421\(08\)60422-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0079-7421(08)60422-3)
- Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) (1997). *Report on the 1980s Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands*. CCJP.
- Chingono J. & Eppel J. (2011). *Together: Stories and Poems*. 'amaBooks.
- Eppel, S. (2008). *Matabeleland: Its struggle for national legitimacy, and the relevance of this in the 2008 election*. http://ibt.afrihost.com/boellor/files/zim_dossier_shari.pdf
- Eppel, S. (2020). How Shall We Talk of Bhalagwe? Remembering the Gukurahundi Era in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe. In: K. Wale, P. Gobodo-Madikizela & J. Prager, (Eds.), *Post-Conflict Hauntings. Palgrave Studies in Compromise after Conflict*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39077-8_11.
- Fairclough, N (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. In *Language in Social Life Series*. Longman, inc
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hirsch, M. (1997). *Family frames: Photography, narrative, and postmemory*. Havard University Press.
- Koselleck, R. (1994). Some Reflections on the Temporal Structure of Conceptual Change. In W. Melching & W. Velema, (Eds.), *Main Trends in Cultural History. Ten Essays* (pp. 333 - 339). Rodopi.

- Ncube, G. & Siziba G. (2015). (Re)membering the nation's "forgotten" past: Portrayals of Gukurahundi in Zimbabwean literature. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 52(2). DOI:10.1177/0021989415615646
- Ndebele, Z. (2021, February 4). The Breakfast Club with Zenzele Ndebele: Gukurahundi Diaries. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwjDbZifaCg>
- Ndlovu, M. (2017). Speaking for the dead: testimonies, witnesses and the representations of Gukurahundi atrocities in new media. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 30(3), 293-306. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2017.1359084>
- Ndlovu, M. & Mlotshwa, K. (2022). Zimbabwe: Music, performance, and political lyrics as "cure|" for post-Bhlagwe trauma. In U. Onyebadi (Ed.), *Political messaging in music and entertainment spaces across the globe* (pp. 279-302). Vernon Press.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2011). *The changing politics of Matabeleland since 1980*. Solidarity Peace Trust. <http://www.solidaritypeacetrust.org/994/the-changing-politics-of-mate-beleland-since-1980/>
- Rasch, A. (2021). Subversion or Identity Work? Tracing the Reception of Zimbabwean Counter-Narrative Memoirs, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 47(5), 817–834
- Rasch, A., Niemi, M. J. & Alexander, J. (2021). Editorial Reading Repression and Resistance in Zimbabwean Literature. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 47(5), 735–744
- Tshuma, N. R. (2018). *House of Stone*. Atlantic Books.
- Wetherall, I. (1997). The Matabeleland report: A bit to hide. *Southern African Report* 12(3), 21–30.

About the Author

Dr Yemurai Gwatirisa is an adjunct lecturer of German in the Department of Education and Language Skills at Botho University in Gaborone, Botswana. She holds a Ph.D. in German Studies from the University of Nairobi (Kenya), and a Double-Master Degree in German-Mediavistics from the Universities of Bremen (Germany) and Porto (Portugal). She also holds a BA Special Honours Degree in English (UZ) as well as a BA Degree in English, German and Religious Studies (University of Zimbabwe, UZ). She completed a post-doctoral fellowship on the Zimbabwean memory culture with Rhine-Westphalia Technical University of Aachen (RWTH) in Aachen, Germany. Her research interests are in memory culture, cross- and intercultural studies, the teaching of German as a foreign language, gender and literary studies. She is a co-author of a textbook for German language learners in Africa called *Und jetzt WIR*. Her work has been published in journals such as Iudicium Verlag GmbH, eDUSA Deutschunterricht im Südlichen Afrika, Weidler Buchverlag Berlin, Peter Lang Verlag, Springer Nature and Journal of African Indigenous Languages and Literature, Weaver Press among others.