

## The body of the liberation guerrilla war veteran in Zimbabwean politics<sup>1</sup>

*Obert Bernard Mlambo* and *Tavengwa Gwekwerere*  
Institute of African Studies and      Department of Pan-African Studies,  
Egyptology, University of Cologne      California State University, Los Angeles

### Abstract

Since the advent of Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, bodies of veterans of the national liberation war have featured prominently in the southern African country's politics, mainly at the service of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). This article explores the continuum of activities in which veterans' bodies functioned as instruments which ZANU-PF relied upon in consolidating power in post-2000 Zimbabwe. It trains its lens on the agency of liberation war military veterans in the unfolding of the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP), state funerals at National Heroes Acre and provincial heroes acres scattered across Zimbabwe, presidential send-offs and welcomes at Harare International Airport, marches in solidarity with ruling elites, and at ZANU-PF political rallies. In these spaces, bodies of war veterans functioned as vectors of partisan political views, purveyors of state-centric versions of the nation's history, embodiments of an ideology of war and exemplars of state-sanctioned versions of patriotism. Operating in a context framed by the rise of vibrant political opposition to ZANU-PF's political hegemony in the form of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), war veterans in post-2000 Zimbabwean politics served largely to contain forces that threatened the erstwhile revolutionary party's power retention interests.

### 1. Introduction

<1> In the year 2000, Zimbabwe's national liberation war veterans embarked on state-sanctioned expropriations of white-owned land. In the political turmoil fomented by the restive war veterans, combined by the political pressure exerted upon government by political opposition and civic organisations, the governing party Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF)'s hold on power was seriously threatened. To contain the political threat posed by the birth of Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999, ZANU-PF deployed war veterans to expropriate lands owned by white farmers who were identified as the opposition party's sponsors. The alleged collusion of MDC and white commercial farmers' interests occasioned a rather belated post-war land redistribution and resettlement undertaking in which veterans of the war of national liberation (1970s to 1980) would feature prominently. Having functioned as guerrillas in the war of national liberation that culminated in independence from Britain in 1980, liberation war veterans were called upon to see to the operationalisation of a purported revolutionary agenda in whose unfolding they were placed at the forefront as national patriots whose perceived enemies were all political formations that were thought to work against the ruling ZANU-PF party and its self-acclaimed responsibility as the sole custodian of the southern African country's independence. In that capacity, the veterans furnished the ruling ZANU-PF with the vantage point from which to present the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) of the early 2000s, for example, as urgent, legitimate and conclusive, and ZANU-PF's power-re-

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tion interests as synonymous with Zimbabwe's interests. Their deployment evoked memories of the liberation war whose value as a myth of foundational importance to the nation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012:1; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems 2009:945) has always been packaged in patriotic history (Ranger 2004:215) as available for utilisation only by ZANU-PF.

- <2> This article explores the practical and symbolic meanings associated with physical bodies of veterans of the Zimbabwean war of national liberation with a view to framing the multiple and often contradictory ways in which they are intertwined with ZANU-PF's post-2000 power-retention matrix, the FTLRP and political violence meted out on the opposition MDC. It adopts "the political economy of the body" (Foucault 1979:25) as its analytical prism to examine the body of the veteran of the war of national liberation in post-2000 Zimbabwe as "a deeply political medium" (Wilcox 2015:3) that functioned not only as a site for the "redirection, profusion and transvaluation" (Butler 2004:185) of power but also as "a force in its own right" (Wilcox 2015:3). The article contends that the nexus between power and bodies of veterans of the war of national liberation in post-2000 Zimbabwe is critical in rethinking post-2000 Zimbabwean politics. The basis of this contention is furnished by two realisations; 1): how veterans utilised their liberation war background to pursue group goals informed by a sense of entitlement to preferential treatment by the state, and; 2): the exclusionary ways in which the ZANU-PF establishment in post-2000 Zimbabwe framed bodies of veterans of the war of national liberation and the spaces in which they performed their identities and sense of nation and patriotism. Taken together, these realisations evince the need for a nuanced appreciation of the practical and symbolic value of bodies that waged the war of national liberation as critical in demystifying the "self-assuredness of [ZANU-PF] nationalism and its tendency to globalise its influence and territories" (Muponde 2005:126). As this article demonstrates, this necessitates investigating the positioning of bodies of veterans of the war of national liberation as part of "the content and methods of nationalist politics in instilling a popular-based vision of resistance" (Muponde 2005:125) towards the emergence, for instance, of a vibrant political opposition movement. Often, these methods found manifestation in the political agency of bodies of veterans of the war of national liberation as they occupied white commercial farms, disrupted MDC rallies and commanded the masses to attend ZANU-PF political rallies.
- <3> In its articulation of the practical and symbolic value of bodies of veterans of the Zimbabwean war of national liberation, this article reveals that the process by which veterans of the war of national liberation in Zimbabwe map and define themselves is a process of self-construction. This process "is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms" (Butler 2011:xix). It involves the accordance, withholding and/or withdrawal of qualities in order to incorporate into, or exclude from a group. This implies that although veterans of the war of national liberation in Zimbabwe can lay claim to historical provenance, the very reality of their existence necessitates approaching them as an amorphous group held together by qualities and priorities that, in much the same manner as the veterans themselves, exist in a state of constant flux. This is manifest, for instance, in the ease with which liberation war credentials are easily revised to bestow or deny national or provincial hero status upon a veteran's demise in Zimbabwe. In this regard, ZANU-PF categorization of its founding president, Ndabaningi Sithole, as unworthy of national hero status and categorisation of former president Robert Mugabe (himself instrumental in Ndabaningi Sithole's marginalisation) as an agent of imperialism following the November 2017 military coup that ended his 37-year tenure both point to the fluidity of the identities of veterans of the war of national liberation in Zimbabwe. The self-construction of Zimbabweans born just before and after independence in 1980 as veterans adds to the complexity of veterans' identities and necessitates thinking of them not just in terms of participation in the war of national liberation but also the ways in which they identify with its ideology and contributions towards ZANU-PF's power retention interests.

## 2. The concept of the 'body'

- <4> This section was developed from the conceptualization of the physical body of a war veteran in a book entitled: *Land Expropriation in Ancient Rome and Zimbabwe: Veterans, Masculinity and War* (Mlambo 2022). The approach to the body adopted in this book takes into account Foucault's idea of the body and power. According Foucault, power acts on a body and power also forms a body. As Butler notes, the distinction between the two is vexing, since it seems that to the extent that power acts on a body, the body is anterior to power; and to the extent that power forms a body, the body is in some ways, or to some extent, made by power (Butler 2002:13). So how can both alternatives be true? There are two aspects of power in relation to the body to be taken into account. On the one hand we articulate practical and symbolic meanings associated with bodies of Zimbabwe's liberation war veterans, with a view to framing the multiple and often contradictory ways in which they are intertwined with the institution of ZANU-PF's post-2000 power-retention matrix, the FTLRP and political violence meted out on the opposition MDC, and in this context we consider the notion of power as working on and through the bodies of war veterans. On the other hand, we argue that bodies may be analyzed as bodies because there is an operation of power through and upon them. Our approach emphasizes the moment when the relation of power to the body emerges, in which Foucault abandons the subject of power in his 'body and power' analysis. This abandonment, this negation, forms for him the necessary background for an understanding of what power is (Butler 2002:13).
- <5> We focus on materialities and observe how body-types and bodily substances come into play in a wider context. We argue that the very materiality of the volatile environment of expropriations acts on the body of a veteran. This power, said to be acting on a body, is not something belonging to one person exclusively but is part of the system of political relations in which the body exists (cf. Foucault 1979). Taking Foucault's insights as discussed by Mlambo (2022) into account, we conceptualize agency as extending beyond the theory of the isolated subject and including a strategy, which in our case consists of the action of the materiality of the environment of expropriations on and through, and in tension with, the materiality of the body. Thus, the nexus of the body of a veteran and the environment of expropriations provides the condition for power to become redirected, proliferated, altered, transvaluated (Butler 2002). As Butler (2002:15) further argues, the introduction of the nexus, however, is not simply, or exclusively, a way of thinking about power, but it is also a way of redefining the body. The body is not an inert or realisations docile object; nor is it merely a set of internal drives which qualify it as the locus of agency. Therefore, if the 'nexus' is related to power in the presence of a strategy involving activity and dispersion and transvaluation, this implies a new understanding of the body, as that which is a kind of undergoing, the condition for a redirection, active, tense, embattled (ibid.). This article, to some extent, centers on the body, as a political economy and, more specifically, a political technology (cf. Butler 2002:14). This approach enables us to frame our discussion of how being a war veteran involves both physical factors, such as the physical body, and cultural factors— intangible and social realities, such as custom, religion, political affiliation and so on. We highlight how discourses and institutions impinge powerfully upon how war veterans as former soldiers lived through their bodies, emphasizing, in Marxian terms, a dual concern with ideology and the material aspects of the body or, in Foucauldian terms, the discourses and techniques relating to the bodily life of a soldier (Mlambo 2022:xxi). We therefore aim to explore how military veterans claimed and wielded certain types of authority, based on their particular body-type. In this way, the interaction of the body and society may be brought into relief, and the way in which war veterans as humans used and acted on and through their body may be illumined (ibid.).
- <6> As Judith Butler argued, power acts upon the body very specifically in the very formulation of powerful bodily emotion in its self-persistence and knowability (Butler 2002). In our case, power acted upon the body of a veteran very specifically in the very formulation of compelling, powerful emotion, as a mode by which veterans affectively seized upon a fundamental sense of identity and entitlement to land and other rewards. In this sense, the body of war veterans developed

these powerful and compelling emotions as a result of the conditions of reflexivity in which they underwent the norms by which they felt obliged to recognize themselves as bearing the brunt of the liberation war. Thus, war veterans are, as it were, worked upon by many forces or powers, and only through being worked upon did they become disposed to act with their trained bodies in ways which invites our attention to their bodies. At this point we may consider the Zimbabwean veterans' context in so far as the issue of power and land is concerned. Firstly, veterans claim the land because they fought for their country (some were killed, maimed, handicapped etc.) and because of that, veterans are deemed to deserve land. Secondly, veterans claim the land because they can take it by force (and because they have the 'attitude' which comes from having fought for their country). Zimbabwe's liberation war veterans exerted violence against not only the white farmers, but also against civilians, a process which led them to construct their victims as weaker and inferior. As war veterans traversed the breadth and length of Zimbabwe (both in and around farms and villages), they configured spaces of contact between them and non-combatants as, 'fields of forces' (Bourdieu 1977) in which, as this article evinces, veterans vied for dominance, power and material things through expropriation. This article also frames not only the physical body of the Zimbabwean liberation war veteran, but also traditional Zimbabwean culture which is largely steeped in patriarchy and war as the loci for discursive constructions of ideals of power in which we contextualise our analysis of expropriation and possession of land by war veterans. The ideological processes of gender worked through a complex political technology composed of a set of ideas and daily practices describing what it means to be a man. These processes produced a set of truths about who a veteran is and what he could do, based upon his body, cultural disposition and war experiences. With that positioning as 'manly men' inevitably came a host of other social meanings, expectations, and identities. Veterans acted upon these meanings, expectations and identities, adopting and adapting them in the context of their orchestration of land claims and expropriations.

<7> In addition to the theories of Foucault (1979), Wilcox (2015) and Butler (2004, 2011), our discussion is guided by the ideas of Charles Long (1986:2) on the capacity of symbols to “radiate and deploy meanings...[that] create an arena and field of power relationships” between and among groups in a community. It employs this perspective to argue that veterans of the war of national liberation in Zimbabwe are sites of struggle that generate multiple and contradictory meanings on Zimbabwean history, politics, culture and society. These meanings are manifest in the ways in which veterans' bodies bearing scars of the war of national liberation, for instance, served to remind ZANU-PF rally-goers of the brutality of colonialism. They are also apparent in the veterans' commitment to countering colonial brutality through compulsory acquisition of white-owned lands and containment of opposition political parties. In our exploration of these dynamics, we pay attention to the spaces in which veterans of the Zimbabwean liberation war of the 1970s were deployed when the ZANU-PF regime “sought to re-energise its patriotic meta-fiction” (Muchemwa 2010:504) of heroism and indispensability in the unfolding of the country's destiny. These spaces include the FTLRP, state funerals at the National Heroes Acre and provincial Heroes Acres scattered across Zimbabwe, presidential send-offs and welcomes at Harare International Airport, marches in solidarity with ruling elites, and ZANU-PF political rallies. In these spaces, veterans served as vectors of partisan political ideologies, sounding boards of state-centric versions of the nation's history, embodiments of an ideology war and exemplars of state-sanctioned versions of patriotism. These roles found concrete expression in their roles as members of security teams at ZANU-PF political rallies and other political gatherings where they also served as providers of entertainment through song and dance, perpetrators of violence against ZANU-PF's political opponents and as bearers of placards with inscriptions exhorting the British and their allies to “stop meddling in our internal affairs” and reckon with the fact that “Zimbabwe will never be a colony again.” Yet the participation of veterans of the Zimbabwean war of national liberation in these spaces is not to be understood without contending with the contradictory forces and circumstances they had to deal with. Veterans' relationships with ZANU-PF

officials, white commercial farmers, traditional leaders, villagers and the police were complex. In addition to threatening and demanding land and recognition, veterans often had to negotiate, request and even plead. Therefore, we discuss their agency to underscore the fact that veterans did not just “provide a neutral reflection of an underlying reality, but rather create[d] that very reality (Butler 2011:8) through “reiterative and citational practices” (Butler 2011:xii) that enabled them to posit their bodies and the priorities with which they identified as normative.

### **3. Anatomy of the body of the Zimbabwean war veteran**

- <8> The coming of independence had its challenges both to the ruling elite and to the war veterans. This is especially so with regards to the redistribution of land which the war veterans claim to have fought for. In the 1980s, the ZANU-PF government of Zimbabwe adopted a rather soft approach towards land redistribution. This could have been a result of the slow corrosion of commitment wrought by the comfort of modernity experienced after independence as opposed to the harsh environment of the bush where the war of national liberation was fought. However, when political opponents threatened ZANU-PF’s hegemony with the formation of the MDC in 1999, the erstwhile revolutionary party “turned to the already powerful guerrillas and to symbolic appeals to the liberation war” (Kriger 2003a:4) to construct legitimacy and retain power. Shortly before the formation of the MDC, veterans of the war of national liberation had revolted against the ZANU-PF government over their degraded status and abject living conditions which they blamed on its reluctance to support and compensate them for their role in liberating the country from colonial rule. As Kriger (2003c:139) further notes, the veterans’ “subsequent extraction of sizeable lump-sum payments and monthly war service pensions is portrayed as the birth of a new alliance between the ruling party and the veterans.” Thus, in the showdown between ZANU-PF and the newly formed MDC, the body (dead or alive) of the war veteran came to play a leading role in frustrating the political ambitions of the opposition party. This led to the fetishisation of the body of the veteran of the war of national liberation in the country’s historical memory (Fontein 2010:437) which became almost impossible to discuss without reference to the gallantry, heroism and patriotism that the body of the ex-combatant came to be associated with. The fetishisation of the body of the ex-combatant obeyed the logic in 'master narratives' (Primorac 2006:4) of the war of national liberation in which it towers as “larger-than-life, healthy and steely” (Muwati and Mutasa 2011:190). This process ran contrary to narratives of the struggle that were beginning to emerge, shedding light on sordid aspects of the war of national liberation and the identities of those whose bodies were instrumental in executing it. In novels such as Shimmer Chinodya’s *Harvest of Thorns* (1989) and Alexander Kanengoni’s *When the Rainbird Cries* (1987) and *Echoing Silences* (1997) and in memoirs of participants in the war of national liberation such as Fay Chung’s *Re-living the Second Chimurenga: Memories from Zimbabwe’s Liberation Struggle* (2006), representations of the body of the ex-combatant as tormented and vulnerable contrast markedly with its depiction as the yardstick of masculinity and valour in works such as David Martin and Phyllis Johnson’s *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* (1981), Edmund Chipamunga’s *A Fighter for Freedom* (1983), Garikai Mutasa’s *The Contact* (1985) and Mazorodze’s *Silent Journey from the East* (1989), among countless other Zimbabwean novels. In the second set of narratives, bodies of veterans of the war of national liberation come across as indefatigable and undaunted in their commitment to the anti-colonial struggle.
- <9> With the onset of the FTLRP in the early 2000s, bodies of veterans of the war of national liberation were recalled from retirement to assume the leading role in the programme. In this programme, even bodies of deceased war veterans were deployed as symbolic tools in the process of taking land from white farmers (Fontein 2010:423). These symbolic practices shaped the politics of black land restitution by appealing to the agenda of the war of national liberation that claimed the lives of veterans some of whose bodies were exhumed for reburial at the National Heroes Acre and provincial heroes acres in other parts of Zimbabwe. As ZANU-PF’s power

retention matrix has since made clear, manoeuvring of dead bodies in both physical and symbolic terms helps re-write and re-configure national memory. Exhumations and reburials became symbolic acts through which ZANU-PF and the Mugabe regime dramatized recovery of memory and the defeat of invading forces (Mlambo & Chitando 2015:18). Through these practices, Zimbabweans were reminded of the price that veterans paid through loss of life and limb to liberate the country from colonial rule. Yet the liberation that the veterans ushered in was deemed incomplete because land was still in the hands of white farmers. By exhuming and reburying the remains of bodies of deceased veterans, ZANU-PF and the Mugabe regime evoked past atrocities of the colonial regime and channelled the nation's emotions against white commercial farmers, portraying them as beneficiaries of colonial violence. Effectively, both dead and living veterans of the war of national liberation became united once again in the new struggle to expel white farmers and their perceived surrogates. This new struggle would be termed the third *Chimurenga*. This nomenclature captured the veterans' perception of the FTLRP as seamlessly connected to the war of national liberation (second *Chimurenga*) and the primary resistance struggles of the 1890s (first *Chimurenga*) in the development of the country's anti-imperialist tradition. Exhumations and reburials of bodies of veterans of the war of national liberation availed the pedestal on which the ZANU-PF regime would portray this phase of the struggle as foretold and sanctioned by history. Over and above that, exhumations and reburials portrayed the body of the war veteran as unconquered, even by death. The establishment of National Heroes Acre in Harare and miniature versions of it in all of the country's provinces feeds into this myth and "underpins an aesthetics of heroism" (Muchemwa 2010:504) which suggests that even in their physical incapacitation through death, bodies of veterans of the war of national liberation in Zimbabwe embody permanent symbolic value. That value is not only manifest in the honour bestowed upon a veteran's body through burial at these shrines but also in the fact that interment of the same body becomes an occasion for the ZANU-PF regime to lecture the nation on its heroic past and self-proclaimed revolutionary credentials.

<10> In ZANU-PF political discourses of black Zimbabwean people's struggles against colonialism through the first, second and third *Chimurenga* uprisings, the veteran is depicted as an instrument of war. Given that the veterans fought in the war of national liberation, they emerged from it endowed with the authority not only to speak on behalf of the landless, but also to deploy the same authority to expropriate land through militant means. Their bodies, having emerged from the war of national liberation scarred and dismembered, became special instruments in the hands of politicians to whip public emotions against the colonial system and everything that represented it. Veterans themselves acquiesced with such deployment of their bodies in their threats to start another war if the people of Zimbabwe elected the MDC to replace ZANU-PF in government. For instance, in the run-up to the presidential election run-off of the 27<sup>th</sup> of June 2008 Mugabe, ZANU-PF and veterans of the war of national liberation gave Zimbabweans two options only: win or war (<https://youtu.be/vlqN7UorVfM>). The threats about waging another war are paradoxical since the envisaged war would be waged by veterans who, earlier in the 1990s, had claimed compensation for various kinds of war of national liberation injuries on the same bodies with which they intended to fight their new war to keep Mugabe and ZANU-PF in power. Indeed, it is instructive that in their conversations with the ZANU-PF regime, veterans of the war of national liberation cite liberation war injuries as one of the important reasons why they should be compensated. Their protests, marches and rallies depict a significant percentage of their compatriots with amputated limbs and emaciated bodies that make it difficult to contemplate how they can wage a war to keep ZANU-PF in power. Yet it is not so much what these veterans can do in the physical realm but their symbolic currency as exemplars of an imagined version of patriotism to be claimed only by the ZANU-PF regime that makes their utterances and threats instructive in post-2000 Zimbabwean politics.

#### 4. War veterans on parade

- <11> In almost all post-2000 parliamentary and presidential elections, ZANU-PF paraded veterans of the war of national liberation at its rallies throughout the country with a view to “establish[ing] hegemony and claim[ing] legitimacy” (Muchemwa 2010:504). Two basic kinds of parades were relied upon. First was the spectacle of veterans in wheelchairs, veterans on crutches and veterans with various kinds of injuries sustained during the war of national liberation. This complemented the symbolism of exhumations and reburials in which ZANU-PF reminded the nation of the violence of colonialism and the patriotism of veterans of the anti-colonial struggle. Second, the parades took the form of physical manifestation of presence through staging of drills that included marching, dancing, speeches and simulation of battle actions. Marching veterans, for instance, were not so much the reality of ordinary citizens protesting for land as the idealization of soldiers marching to war. Thus, veterans were instrumental insofar as mobilization of support for ZANU-PF was concerned. Given that veterans were deeply immersed in their communities, especially in rural areas, they were instrumental in bringing multitudes to ZANU-PF as a political party and to its rallies. Their alliance with people in rural areas (although there had been tension during the liberation struggle) was a massive bargaining resource in their favor. In order to obscure the broad range of differences and conflicts between rural masses and the class that enjoyed the lion’s share of the fruits of the war of national liberation as the nation’s new rulers, war veterans functioned as occupants of the middle ground on which rural masses and the nation’s leaders could meet. They achieved this with relative success, partly through their willingness to refer to rural masses also as 'heroes' just like themselves. One might well have been an impoverished peasant, farm worker, civil servant or a gardener protesting against colonialism, but they were all allied in fraternity with veterans in the struggle. This alluded to a specious equality symbolically ratified by 'shared' masculinity or bravery and reinforced by songs such as *Zvinoda vakashinga moyo!* (The situation requires those who are brave) which valorize the courage that was perceived as necessary in militarily challenging the colonial regime. The result was the creation of a bond that brought together rural masses, veterans and ZANU-PF at an ideological level. This became clearer when veterans mobilized the language of black freedom and sovereignty to foster active and militant participation of youths who were made to believe that they were spearheading revolutionary action for the sake of posterity.
- <12> Liberation war veterans were also deployed to perform for audiences at political rallies, leadership solidarity marches, burials at National Heroes Acre and all-night musical galas to celebrate independence, national unity and departed heroes of the first and second *Chimurenga*. At these events, musicians who had liberation war backgrounds as combatants and refugees featured as the main attractions. These included Clive Malunga, Comrade Chinx, Marko Sibanda, Simon Chimbetu and LMG Choir, among others. Their songs and performances took audiences down memory lane, reminding them of the brutality of colonialism and contrasting it with the perceived humanism of the post-independence establishment. Their dancers brandished imaginary weapons and simulated battle moves to bring to life a history of military conflict from which veterans emerged victorious to win the right to define the political, economic and cultural trajectory that they desired Zimbabwe to follow. They also celebrated their power and invincibility and that of ZANU-PF as a revolutionary party on the back of songs in which direct reference is made to the gallantry of ZANU-PF and leaders such as Robert Mugabe, Herbert Chitepo, Joshua Nkomo, Simon Muzenda, Jason Moyo, Alfred Nikita Mangena and Josiah Magama Tongogara. Their performances both intimidated and inspired people into supporting ZANU-PF while condemning opposition political parties and their supporters as stooges of western countries that were portrayed as bent on recolonising the African continent. The consciousness associated with performers such as Clive Malunga, Comrade Chinx, Marko Sibanda, Simon Chimbetu and LMG Choir would also be embraced by musicians who were too young to have participated in the war of national liberation but were attracted to its ideology. These included Andy Brown, Brian Mteki, Sister Flame, Brian Tambaoga and others. In their performances, these younger musicians

identified with and reinforced a violent approach that set veterans of the war of national liberation apart in the unfolding of the FTLRP in post-2000 Zimbabwe.

- <13> Veterans' performances buttressed the myth that patriotism is an ideal that can be exemplified only by ZANU-PF in Zimbabwean politics. This ensured, in the process, that those labeled as sellouts remained categorized as 'other' and therefore without entitlement to power and benefits of citizenship and belonging. Thus, it is instructive that some of the songs churned out by veterans threatened MDC president Morgan Tsvangirai with physical violence and intimated that *Tsvangirai ucharohwa chete nevakomana* (You will certainly get beaten by the boys, Tsvangirai). They also associated him with treachery against the country because he was audacious enough to challenge ZANU-PF's political hegemony. In these ways, veterans were used to weed out undesirable elements in the political arena. At the same time, as veterans of the war of national liberation in Zimbabwe monopolised the space within which to portray images of ideal masculinity, they served to ward off the forces which supposedly threatened the sovereignty, dignity and humanity of Zimbabweans who were portrayed in ZANU-PF narratives as liable to recolonisation if veterans were not vigilant enough. Some people were motivated by veterans' performances of patriotism, heroism, masculinity, nationalism and belonging while others had no choice except to pretend as if they were in agreement. During veterans' performances, spectators' morale and hopes would rise and their minds diverted, at least momentarily, from the prevailing realities of poverty, encouraging them to think that together with the veterans they constituted an invincible force to overcome vestiges of colonialism and sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe by the West.

## 5. War veterans and the FTLRP

- <14> Farms occupied by white farmers functioned as Mugabe's laboratories in which he carried out his post-war resettlement experiments. In the implementation of this project, veterans' claims and contestations for land and recognition were both violent and ideological. They relied upon the martial prowess of the veteran to destabilise white commercial farms through physical brutalisation of white farmers and employees who took sides with them. In implementing practical occupation tactics, veterans of the war of national liberation in Zimbabwe were deployed to march in solidarity with the agenda of land redistribution and propagate a deceptive version of radical African nationalism which, apparently, contributed to Mugabe's popularity in Africa during his reign (A. S. Mlambo 2015:45). Notably, bodies of veterans who led the land reclamation exercise were not conceptualized as merely corporeal, flesh and blood bodies. Instead, they were also portrayed as vested with deep spiritual and metaphysical significance. Associated with bodies of veterans of the war on national liberation in Zimbabwe were memories of ancestral promises and prophecies that framed the same bodies as spiritual libraries imbued with declarations made by the great ancestor, Nehanda, who, on the verge of her death at the hands of the colonisers, declared in 1896 that her bones would resurrect and reclaim the land. As Chenjerai Hove shows in his award-winning novel, *Bones* (1988), there exists a strong bond between the body of the veteran of the war of national liberation and the ancestors that it can be argued that the bodies of freedom fighters are not autonomous, free-floating bodies but vehicles through which the ancestors can reclaim land that was taken from them through military conquest. Thus, the body that was inhabited by the ancestors in the anti-colonial struggle and enjoyed a period of rest from 1980 to 2000 is re-occupied by the same ancestors in the post-2000 struggle for land. In both phases, the veteran personifies the national mood. When the nation relaxed and enjoyed the comfort of independence in the two decades that followed the demise of colonialism, the body of the war veteran also rested. However, as soon as the nation returned (or was made to return) to combat mode, war veterans responded accordingly. This, as Achter (2010:49) contends, is because as veterans:

Their bodies are in a sense borrowed by the state for warfare and are central to definitions of national identity. Their health, their deaths, and their wounds serve as metonyms for both the nation's health and for the condition of the war.

- <15> In addition to personifying the national mood, it is also significant that songs and dances of the earlier struggle are reenacted by the same veterans in the post-2000 struggle for land (Mutambara & Sodi 2018:3) in ways that suggest that the veteran's body is essentially crafted for combat that each time it is summoned into action it obliges. This also applies to the ease with which members of the ruling elite can take up leadership positions in society as politicians while war veterans undergo a difficult shift "from being treated with respect and awe during war to being stigmatized and feared in civilian life" (Mogapi 2004:223). The ideological common ground between veterans and political elites ensures that when the politicians require the services of the veterans, they do not hesitate to remobilize them for the next assignment. Thus, in post-2000 Zimbabwe, the war veteran returns to the struggle through the FTLRP, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by land expropriations to reclaim the sense of masculinity (Açıksöz 2014:247) that was lost in the first twenty years of independence. In the FTLRP, the war veteran's body exudes its putative superior masculine outlook by "striking fear into the heart of the white man" (Mugabe 2001:24). It demonstrates ideological significance and heroism by reclaiming the land that had not been fully delivered to the indigenous people by the ruling elite soon after independence as the veterans had expected. In this case, masculinity is associated with heroic action, sacrifice and dedication to the nation to score ideological points in favour of the FTLRP. Meanwhile, women who participate in the land reclamation exercise are exorcized of their femininity and granted honorary membership into the privileged masculine category. The bodies of such women are reconstituted into *varume pachavo* (women who have become men in their own right). While this may create the impression that bodies of veterans of the war of national liberation were mere instruments in the implementation of the FTLRP, veterans actually never lost sight of their agency. They refused to be placated by lofty promises of orderly resettlement by politicians once they had embarked on the FTLRP. In August 1997, they eclipsed Mugabe's speech during Heroes Day commemorations, demanding compensation for their contributions towards the liberation of the country from colonial rule. In the unfolding of the FTLRP, they retained their freedom of enter into strategic alliances with the ZANU-PF regime, individual politicians, chiefs, farm owners, villagers, youths, farm workers and the police. Their agency bears testimony to the fact that "veterans often had their own agenda, distinct from the party's, as they sought power and privilege, both of which were threatened by a change in regime" (Kriger 2003c:140).
- <16> The agency of veterans of the war of national liberation and the urgency of the FTLRP can be illustrated by the ease with which bodies that were in a state of rest from 1980 to 2000 had to be summoned to address the land issue in post-2000 Zimbabwe. The demands of the 1970s war of liberation on the veterans' bodies had been immense. Then, the later veterans were young women and men living and fighting in the bush, without adequate food, clothing and health care. The war left some of them with physical injuries and many were scarred mentally. In addition to the violence of the colonial system (by which we mean the violence perpetrated by the colonialists against the Africans), they also had to contend with violence within the liberation movements in which they functioned as combatants (Mazarire 2011:571). Having been exhausted by the liberation war, their fragile bodies were marshalled to undertake a national task in the form of the FTLRP, as the rhetoric of the elite sought to suggest. In the unfolding of this programme, synergies and tensions obtained between bodies of war veterans and the state on the one hand, between war veterans and peasants on the other, as well as among war veterans themselves. Further, a myriad of other actors joined forces to make the FTLRP complex. Thus, veterans of the war of national liberation, need to be understood alongside other bodies in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of the FTLRP. Their deployment to spearhead the land reclamation exercise sought to justify the undertaking. Here were bodies that had been in the

line of fire during the liberation struggle. Instead of enjoying their well-deserved rest and the gratuities and monthly pensions they had extracted from the ZANU-PF government in 1997, they found themselves having to retrace their steps in order to conclude the revolution. War veterans were, therefore, deployed by the ruling ZANU-PF party ostensibly in the decolonization of Zimbabwe through the FTLRP as embodiments of sacrifice and commitment, in apparent contrast with bodies of so-called stooges and sell-outs in the opposition movement who were depicted by ZANU-PF and its supporters as willing to trade their birthright for a few pieces of silver. Mugabe's campaign messages during election seasons sought to celebrate and immortalize the consistency demonstrated by veterans of the war of national liberation, hailing them and their tactics as the panacea to the land question in Zimbabwe.

## 6. The body of the war veteran in the media

- <17> The re-mobilisation of war veterans in the unfolding of the FTLRP revived the debate on the portrayal of black bodies in the media. This became a major issue since the veterans of the war of national liberation (as well as many young(er) activists who operated under this label) targeted white farmers for attack. The contested images of bodies of veterans played out in both the domestic and global media (Mlambo 2022:9). On the domestic front newspapers such as the *Financial Gazette*<sup>2</sup>, *Daily News*<sup>3</sup> and *News Day*<sup>4</sup> projected negative images of war veterans (Willems 2004:1767), portraying them as bloodthirsty and dangerous. In memoirs of white commercial farmers, veterans of the national liberation war are portrayed as mobs that torched pastures and hay bales on white commercial farms, barricaded white commercial farming families in their homes for days, beating drums, singing and yelling nonstop abuse at them, and defecating on their doorsteps (Harrison 2006, Barker 2007). On the other hand, state-sponsored media in the form of newspapers such as the *Herald*<sup>5</sup>, *Sunday Mail*<sup>6</sup> and *Chronicle*<sup>7</sup> as well as the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation<sup>8</sup> which presently operates one television channel and six radio stations countered such images by celebrating the veterans as brave, principled and inspired working to bring the anti-colonial revolution to its logical conclusion. In global media, veterans of the war of national liberation were made to fit into the trope of black men as thugs and criminals (Smiley & Fakunle 2016:350). Thus, veterans were depicted in global media as marauding blacks who haunted white women and children off their lands, while assaulting and murdering their husbands and fathers.
- <18> In the dominant media images, war veterans were presented as a real threat to the lives of white farmers, as well as to the economic well-being of the country. They were cast as unknowledgeable about farming and as harbingers of disaster for Zimbabwe. The narrative of bodies of veterans of the war of national liberation as threatening and intimidating had a negative impact on tourism (Zhou 2016:12) and other sectors of the economy since they were associated with danger, aggression and economic collapse. This fed into pre-existing negative images of black bodies in general. In Mugabe, however, bodies of veterans of the war of national liberation had an enthusiastic praise singer. Having re-mobilized them to avert political defeat, Mugabe celebrated the veterans and their actions. Although there were disagreements over many issues (their pensions, and even how the country was being run by Mugabe) between Mugabe and the veterans (cf. Sandomba 2008), he sought to project an image of solidarity. Challenging negative media portrayal of the bodies of war veterans, Mugabe insisted that global racism was behind the demonization

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.financialgazette.co.zw/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dailynews.co.zw/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.newsday.co.zw/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.herald.co.zw/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.zbccorporate.co.zw/>

of the FTLRP and the veterans' central role in it (Tafira, 2015:203). For Mugabe, the war veterans deserved to be eulogized and glorified as they represented the ultimate sacrificial persons.

<19> On their part, veterans of the war of national liberation discarded the term 'ex-combatants' (Muche-mwa 2011:128) and insisted on being referred to as war veterans. This was a strategic move. Conceptualizing the veteran of the war of national liberation as an 'ex-combatant' had the effect of confining their agency to a period that had since passed. The gap between that period when they were still active and the 2000s when veterans were recalled from retirement to spearhead the FTLRP had obviously taken its toll on their bodies to the extent that referring to them as 'ex-combatants' would amplify the loss of the physical strength that their new responsibilities as exponents of the third *Chimurenga* required (Mlambo 2022). Furthermore, referring to the veterans as 'ex-combatants' entailed that their bodies would only be associated with 'combat' which is only one aspect of struggle. Such a label would facilitate access to resources in the form of pensions and land as it had the effect of drawing attention to the veterans' capacity to re-mobilize their bodies whenever the situation required them to do so (ibid.). Yet these same bodies were at once autonomous and institutionally owned. They were autonomous to the extent that each individual war veteran made a commitment to serve his or her country, particularly during the 1970s war of national liberation. For example, the song *Moyo wangu watsidza kufira Zimbabwe* (My heart has resolved to die for Zimbabwe) constructs the individual freedom fighter as having made a conscious and deliberate decision to sacrifice their life for Zimbabwe. However, the same body was also owned by ZANU-PF as a political institution. Without discounting their potential role in battle, war veterans were owned wholly, not just as bodies, but also as icons of courage, self-sacrifice, and devotion to honor and the cause. Our emphasis on their physical bodies served to beam a light of analysis on their projection of an image of ultra-masculinity, by which they shamed or intimidated civilians, as they strutted and postured, to make a demonstration of their might. The connection between ZANU-PF and the veteran was forged during the liberation struggle, sustained at independence and reactivated in the FTLRP of the post-2000 dispensation.

## 7. Conclusion

<20> Bodies are not neutral texts. They are repositories of multiple meanings. We examined the significance of bodies of Zimbabwe's war veterans as an integral part of post-2000 Zimbabwean politics. Having served as combatants in the 1970s war of liberation, veterans were regarded as heroes who sacrificed everything in the quest for national freedom. However, upon attainment of independence in 1980, most of them were demobilised and made to face stigma and discrimination. We demonstrated how veterans of the national liberation war were re-mobilised in the FTLRP of the 2000s, a process which we argued to have involved the utilization of their physical bodies to recover their masculinities and significance in Zimbabwean politics. It examined the contradictory depiction of these bodies as both fragile and indefatigable and their parading at ZANU-PF gatherings where evidence of both their exposure to the violence of the anti-colonial struggle and their supposedly unflinching physique served not only to remind ZANU-PF rally-goers of the brutality of colonialism but also their commitment to countering that brutality through compulsory acquisition of white-owned lands. Further, we made clear how bodies of veterans elicited contradictory media representation, noting that whereas critics of the FTLRP presented war veterans as violent and threatening, Mugabe and other supporters of the FTLRP celebrated the same bodies as patriotic, revolutionary, disciplined and inspired. Ultimately, it emerged that as a prism through which to read the history of Zimbabwe and forecast its future, the body of the veteran of the Zimbabwean war of national liberation is amenable to multiple inscriptions and interpretations.

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