

## **Citizen, Witch or Non-person? Contested Concepts of Personhood in Political Violence and Reconciliation in Zimbabwe 1978-2008**

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The citizen, as the political manifestation of personhood, is the bedrock of democratic systems. It is, of course, an abstraction; but one that works as a praxeological category enabling a diverse range of societies to perform the rituals of representative democracy. In international terms, political forms founded on the rights of citizens are a necessary marker of 'respectability'. It is, then, no surprise to find that the Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe, growing from an alliance of trades unions & civil society organisations, is wedded to the language of citizenship; nor that it is thereby regarded favourably by powerful western allies. But this paper argues that, in conceiving politics in terms of citizenship, the MDC has limited its ability to respond to more visceral notions of 'the body politic' from the dominant ZANU-PF party.

The category of citizen - a person with rights *vis-à-vis* the state, even if the state will not acknowledge them - is attractive. Logical propositions demonstrate that some truths exist, regardless of whether they are perceived as truths. Some of these truths may be ethical/political truths. As human beings, we'd like to believe this: torture is just Wrong. And as thinkers, there is something irresistible about human & civil rights, as necessary categories for political thought. But as an historian of Africa, it is difficult to identify such imperatives: other personhoods are available. Clearly, the category of citizen has meaning in Zimbabwe. Mamdani argued that, in colonial Africa, the rights of the individualised person/citizen were a peculiarly urban dispensation; yet the MDC argued for individual civil rights throughout Zimbabwe in the 2000s. Such demands seemed meaningful, even in areas where community membership might have framed political thought.

Rather, I suggest that the language of citizenship weakens those who use it. Such putatively *a priori* categories necessarily exclude other categories of personhood and non-personhood: notably the category of 'witch'.

The paper shows how ZANU-PF rhetoric has drawn on witch-based metaphors, especially contamination/reconciliation & chopping/opening of the body. From the 1970s war, through 1990s reconciliation work, and explosively in the violence of the 2008 election, this language was more potent in defining political persons than the legalistic notion of citizens.