

Citizen, Witch or Non-person? Contested concepts of personhood in political violence and reconciliation in Zimbabwe 1978-2008.

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[Please note that this is an initial draft to meet the 31st May deadline! The ‘reconciliation’ section promised in the abstract has been omitted because I ran out of time.]

The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) – often referred to as the ‘main opposition party’ in Zimbabwe, despite having been a partner in government since 2008 – appears to be in trouble. Its support seems to have stalled. Even at the height of its popularity, when it won a majority of parliamentary seats in 2008, it struggled to gain clear majorities in the rural areas. Conversely, Robert Mugabe’s party, Zanu-PF, which took power at independence in 1980, has managed to retain its political legitimacy in large parts of the country, despite a prolonged economic nightmare and longstanding and incontrovertible evidence of political violence and human rights abuses.

In the same way that the NATO powers seem puzzled by the failure of Muammar Gaddafi to shut up shop and leave Libya, there is evident international puzzlement and frustration at Mugabe’s ability to retain power in Zimbabwe. Outside of academia (and even within it), there has been little significant conversation about how his party has remained in place: coercion has been the explanation consistently offered. And yet, it is clear that Zanu-PF did not lose popular support in many rural areas, despite the violent (and apparently rigged) parliamentary election of 2000 and presidential election of 2002. Neither partisan, oppressive behaviour by the state, nor unprecedented economic collapse, significantly undermined rural people’s willingness to vote for the primary perpetrators of the political violence, Zanu-PF. The MDC, meanwhile, found its platform defending citizenship, civil society and property rights seemed too often to fall on fallow ground. Why has the MDC not been able to build up a stronger sense in Zimbabwe of the citizen and a citizen’s rights *vis-à-vis* the state?

Citizenship

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 MDC, growing from an alliance of trades unions and 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 concept of citizenship defines the person as an abstract category in a constitutional relationship with the state. As Marx pointed out long ago, in ‘On *The Jewish Question*’, the formal idea of citizenship, with each citizen enjoying equal status *vis-à-vis* the state, obscures the material inequalities sanctioned and reinforced by that state, and alienates the abstract ‘citizen’ from his/her concrete experiences as a member of civil society: “the imaginary member of an illusory sovereignty is deprived of his real individual life and endowed with an unreal universality.” Nonetheless, this abstracted concept of the citizen as generally understood does at least endow certain rights. The ‘unreal universality’ of citizenship places upon the state a duty to uphold the rule of law without

prejudice or privilege. When a state fails to do this, the international community responds as if it had a right to condemn that state for 'betraying' its people or for 'failing' in its obligations. Sanctions such as expulsion from the Commonwealth or condemnation by the United Nations provide an expression of this sense that citizens have a right to claim equal treatment under the law.

The purely formal rights of constitutional citizenship were the product of liberal revolutions against state systems based on status-rights. However, in the liberal rhetoric of these revolutions, the 'rights of citizens' were conflated with the 'rights of man'. During the second half of the twentieth century, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the notion of citizenship became formally bound up with the notion of human and civil rights. A 'free' state not only acknowledged the formal citizenship of its members, but also guaranteed their human and civil rights.

However, unlike liberal political rights, human and civil rights were deemed to exist even when a state would not acknowledge them. The 'unreal universality' of citizenship was extended to a global universalism, rooted in a shared humanity but requiring the framework of the state to have formal expression. Civil rights, in particular, blurred the distinction between the citizen and the member of civil society. The state was required not only to guarantee formal equality of treatment before the law, but also to guarantee freedom of association and freedom of speech. These rights were deemed to exist even when the state did not recognise them. Those who asserted their rights peacefully were acknowledged as 'prisoners of conscience'; those who resisted violently were often acknowledged as 'freedom fighters' and accorded a moral – and political – legitimacy by advocates for human rights.

The category of 'citizen', then, is attractive. It suggests that there are certain rights that must be recognised by the state, including the right to challenge a political party even when it claims to represent the 'nation' as a whole. Citizenship, when married with 'human rights', operates as a praxeological category, underpinned by logical imperative. It suggests that (regardless of whether the state or political party perceives or acknowledges it), there are moral/political truths that have *a priori* status as preconditions of human existence. As human beings, we'd like to believe this. Surely (thinks anyone other than a dictator or, perhaps, a leader of the 'free world'), torture and extrajudicial murder are just Wrong? Are they not violations of our human rights? As thinkers, too, it is difficult to imagine contemporary politics without the category of 'citizen', and its corollaries of human and civil rights, having meaning. 'Citizenship' appears as a necessary category for making strategic as well as normative judgements.

But as an historian of southern Africa, it is difficult to identify any indigenous form of these imperatives. There are powerful abstractions and political categories that, just as with the idea of citizenship, protect the foundational morality of the community and guarantee the security of individuals and families within those communities. But the 'unreal universality' of the category of citizen is absent: other personhoods are available.

Citizenship and the MDC

Nonetheless, the category of citizen clearly has meaning in Zimbabwe, even in rural areas. Of course, Mahmood Mamdani has noted that, in colonial Africa, the rights of the individualised person/citizen were a peculiarly urban dispensation, and has suggested that rural people still relate to the state via community rather than individual status.¹ As Bill Freund has put it, Mamdani was aware that:

the "civil society" movements aimed at authoritarian regimes in Africa have been heavily based on the urban middle class. Demands on their part for elections, a free press, constitutional guarantees, are significant but it is less clear how they can have an impact on impoverished rural people²

Mamdani saw local communities as subject to 'decentralised despotism', where the state's obligations to its rural citizens were mediated through local rulers, who had no comparable obligations to their 'subjects'. The Zimbabwean state has never easily fitted into Mamdani's analysis of 'decentralised despotism', given that its 'communal' farming areas inherited a system of direct rule by the central state in partnership with local leaders; but for precisely that reason, it inherited a conflicted sense of citizenship and community membership at the rural grassroots. Local systems of hierarchy and control, which for the state guaranteed stability, undermined the autonomy of the women and young men that the state needed as its partners in rural development. As William Munro put it in 1998:

both the late-colonial regime and the as-yet insecure postcolonial regime found it difficult to penetrate and stabilize rural society, while also securing reliable political allies in the countryside. The result was a consistent predilection for control that inhibited the restructuring of local, colonially entrenched power structures and the dissemination of new national conceptions of citizenship.³

It was in this context, of tensions within local communities about how state clientage was constructed, that demands for individual civil rights seemed meaningful, even in areas where community membership might have framed political thought.

The MDC argued for individual civil rights throughout Zimbabwe in the 2000s. At heart, the MDC was fundamentally a civil rights movement. It was formed out of an alliance between both trades unions and civil rights groups, but it was the civil rights organisation, the National Constitutional Assembly, which created the initial grassroots activism that led to the party's formation. In May 1997, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches initiated a meeting with other NGOs to discuss a programme of civic education and discussion about the constitution. This led to the official launch, in January 1998, of the National Constitutional Assembly. The National Constitutional Assembly's proposal for a new constitution was initially treated with interest by the government, and a national debate about the constitution followed. The government drafted its own proposals for new constitutional powers, including powers to reallocate land. The NCA considered that the government's proposals threatened civil liberties, and led the opposition to the proposed new constitution. The (ultimately

¹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996)

² Bill Freund, 'Democracy and the Colonial Heritage in Africa: Revisiting Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject*', *Left History*, vol 7, no 1, 2000, p102

³ William A. Munro, *The moral economy of the state: conservation, community development, and state making in Zimbabwe*, Ohio University Press, 1998, p348

successful) campaign against the constitutional reforms provided a focus for more general opposition to the government. Trades unions, churches and civil rights groups formed an alliance during the campaign against the constitutional reforms, which was formalised into a political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), at the end of 1999.

The MDC was closely allied with the NCA's programme for 'human dignity and social justice'.⁴ The NCA's platform is for: "free and fair elections; observance of and respect for fundamental human rights; respect for the rule of law; accountable and responsive government; sound economic management and employment creation; respect of human rights; access to good education and health facilities; and equitable wealth creation and redistribution."⁵ (In a much-edited document, it is noticeable that 'respect for human rights' appears twice!) The MDC was lionised by 'western' governments as a model of a modern liberal democratic party, advocating the rights of citizens against oppressive governments. Given that the government had lost the constitutional referendum in early 2000, it seemed likely that Zimbabweans would vote for the MDC in the parliamentary elections later that year. Confident that its horse would win, the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office provided funding for the MDC, via the Westminster Foundation for Democracy ('the UK's leading democracy-building foundation', according to its website).⁶ The Zimbabwe government published details of these payments at the end of 2002.⁷ It itemised seventeen payments from UK political interests to support MDC campaigning, totalling £191,591, as well as significant payments to other opposition and civil rights bodies.

These payments from the Westminster Foundation to the MDC were a massive error of judgement. The Zimbabwean government justifiably interpreted them as an unwarranted interference in its internal affairs. Since 2000, the Zimbabwean government has consistently vilified the UK as the ejected colonial power, asserting that the UK is funding the opposition in an attempt to regain control over the land and the state. All forms of political opposition have been represented as serving neo-colonialism and as threats to national independence. For example, in 2001, the President, Robert Mugabe, was reported as referring to:

a much wider terrorist plot by internal, and external terrorist forces with plenty of funding from some commercial farmers and organizations like the Westminster Foundation, which we have established beyond doubt gets its dirty money from dirty tricks.⁸

Already we can see that alignment with western political discourse of citizenship could be presented as something alien, imposed from outside by neo-colonial powers.

⁴ Until 2008. In 2008, following a period of unprecedented violence during the presidential election, a Global Political Agreement was made between MDC and Zanu-PF. It was predicated upon creating a new constitution that would provide the framework for new elections. The NCA considers the constitution-making process provided by the Zanu-PF/MDC agreement to be fundamentally flawed and is campaigning against it.

⁵ 'About the NCA', 12th January 2007, www.ncazimbabwe.info

⁶ Details of this support used to be publicly accessible at the Foundation's website, www.wfd.org, and were apparently removed following embarrassment at complaints from the Zimbabwean government about the payments.

⁷ Zimbabwe Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'UK Policy on Zimbabwe', 12th December 2002, accessible at www.zimfa.gov.zw/current/004.pdf

⁸ *NY Times*, 18th November, 2001

'Othering' the opposition

In his lecture to the African Studies Association UK conference in Oxford in 2010, James Muzondidya tried to explain why the MDC had failed to make a significant impact on politics in Zimbabwe's Shona-speaking rural areas.⁹ He argued that unresolved *racial* inequalities in Zimbabwe's economy, which should have been addressed in the 1980s, had left the white population enjoying manifestly inherited privilege. This led to the political and economic crisis of the late 1990s taking on racial dimensions. It became easy for Zanu-PF to scapegoat local whites, because of the unresolved racial tensions. So Zanu-PF was able to *externalise* the roots of the nation's problems and present itself as a victimised black government, able to maintain political legitimacy on that basis:

Without the political legitimacy ZANU-PF was able to build through its skilful but opportunistic articulation of the Zimbabwe crisis as a racial and imperial problem, ZANU-PF could have struggled to prolong its stay in power simply through coercive means.¹⁰

By allying with the white farmers in support of civil rights, property rights and the rule of law, the MDC failed to recognise that citizenship – the 'unreal universal' – took on a racial dimension in the 'real' world. It avoided confronting and acknowledging the significance of race in mobilising support for Zanu-PF.

Muzondidya's development of this argument elsewhere makes direct parallels with the tactics and ideologies of the Nazis:

Once an enemy has been defined and branded as an alien or belonging to a different race, its violation and elimination is viewed as not only justifiable (in defence of national interests) but also as redemptive (cleansing the nation of impurities)... While the enemy was the 'unpatriotic Jew' bent on sabotaging the nation at every opportunity in Nazi Germany... in Zimbabwe the enemy was the 'white farmers' conspiring with the British, Americans and local black puppets within the MDC¹¹

Muzondidya's argument draws attention to the alienating impact of the MDC's alliance with white farmers. The MDC was presented as 'other': necessarily unpatriotic and dangerous.

However, the political violence of the 2000s was not predominantly directed against whites, nor even against those who worked most closely with white farmers. It was directed against those, particularly in rural areas, who supported the MDC. While the victims were accused of wanting to keep the people in thrall to imperial interests, it was their *political allegiance* that mattered; not their race.

⁹ James Muzondidya, 'The Zimbabwean Crisis and the Unresolved Conundrum of Race in the Postcolonial Period,' *Journal of Developing Societies*, Vol. 26. No. 1, 2010; also as Mary Kingsley Zochonis Lecture, ASAUUK, Oxford, 17th September 2010.

As Jocelyn Alexander pointed out in response to Muzondidya's lecture, the largely siNdebele-speaking areas of Matabeleland North and South (which had experienced mass murder of local people by government forces in the early 1980s), tended in both urban and rural areas to vote MDC, as a protest against Zanu-PF. Of course, this was not clearly evidence of strong support for MDC *policies*.

¹⁰ Muzondidya, 'Unresolved Conundrum', p27

¹¹ Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and James Muzondidya, eds, *Redemptive Or Grotesque Nationalism?: Rethinking Contemporary Politics in Zimbabwe*, Peter Lang AG, 2011, introduction.

Moreover, in discussion after the lecture, the topic rapidly shifted from questions of race to questions of ancestral spirits and rights to the land. Rather than examining the racial dimensions of the MDC's alliance with white farmers, their lack of alliance with ancestral spirits was raised. It was asked, does Zanu-PF have a more 'natural' affinity with ancestors? Clearly such questions were rooted in a long-established argument that local legitimacy in Zimbabwean rural areas depended upon recognition by the mediums for the founding ancestral spirits, the *mhondoro*.¹² It was acknowledged that grassroots members of the MDC in Matabeleland made as much use of ancestral discourse as Zanu-PF; but it was in chiShona-speaking areas, where Zanu-PF had previously held sway in the name of the 'sons and daughters of the soil', that the most extreme violence was unleashed. This was a long way from the more 'respectable' discussion of Nazi ideology and the denial of full citizenship to 'racial' others. While Muzondidya, an African academic, focused on analogies and intellectual frameworks drawn from European history, the UK-based academics seemed more relaxed in examining indigenous African concepts.¹³

Similarly, although it was not mentioned at the time, the category of 'witch' has long seemed to me to be significant in interpreting and contextualising political violence in Zimbabwe. In making this observation, I am not suggesting that political violence was not motivated by political concerns and political allegiances. Rather, I am trying to understand the form and nature of that violence; and why it did not turn large numbers of rural voters towards the MDC, with its clear stance on human rights and the rule of law. I am also trying to understand the un-coerced affinity with Zanu-PF still felt in many rural areas, which seems rooted in something more visceral, or perhaps more spiritual, than political affiliation alone.

Of course, the meanings (and 'modernity') of witchcraft in modern African politics are much contested, and there is not space here to go into detail with that debate. However, it remains clear that the accusation of 'witch' can be a way of suggesting that someone is an outsider, or, perhaps, the wish to establish that person as an outsider by redefining boundaries of community membership. This is, of course, similar to the racial/ethnic 'othering' identified by Muzondidya. However, I think it is important to distinguish the contexts and meanings of a witchcraft accusation from the contexts and meanings of ethnic othering. For example, Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Muzondidya note that:

the gruesome violence and killings of African migrants by black South Africans in the 2008 xenophobic attacks, which included the burning of victims' bodies, was a culmination of years of their construction in post-apartheid discourse as *makwerekwere*—alien enemies infesting the nation with diseases and crime. These anti-African immigrant public discourses, sought to project African immigrants not only as an alien threat to the South African national being but also, as a culturally different alien race.¹⁴

However, discussing the same events, the anthropologist Joost Fontein noted:

¹² The role of these mediums is found in many texts on Zimbabwe's history, from Terence Ranger's canonical *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, Heinemann 1976, via David Lan's much-criticised *Guns & Rain*, James Currey, 1985, to more recent analysis such as Marja Spierenburg's *Strangers, Spirits, and Land Reforms*, BRILL, 2004

¹³ This raises concerns for me about how knowledge is validated within the globalised academy, but here is not the place to discuss them!

¹⁴ Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Muzondidya, eds, *Redemptive Or Grotesque Nationalism?*, introduction

widespread rumours about diaspora Zimbabweans returning from South Africa with not only money earned there, and food/goods purchased there, but also witchcraft 'familiar' such as *tokoloshi/ chikwambo/undofa*. At the same time, the growing numbers of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa may...have led to growing instances of witchcraft accusations against 'foreigners', mirroring broader patterns of exclusion and 'xenophobic' violence against African migrants in that country.¹⁵

In other words, an ethnically-based 'othering' of migrants to South Africa was only part of a larger process of 'othering', drawing on much more deeply-rooted ways of defining outsiders.

Witchcraft accusation in Zimbabwe's history¹⁶

Some years ago, I recognised that there was a 'submerged' history in the court records of the early years of the Southern Rhodesian state, which indicated a sophisticated and complicated system of evidence and due process allowing African arbiters to identify serious witchcraft accusations, and distinguish them from trivial insults.¹⁷ An important part of this process was some form of ordeal to extract a confession from the 'witch' (*muroyi*). The accuser was supposed to be in similar jeopardy, should the accused pass the ordeal.¹⁸ Clearly this complex parallel system of criminal justice continued independently and discreetly alongside the state system until at least 1948.¹⁹

It is significant that in *muroyi* accusations, there was always room for ambiguity and fluidity. The severity of the accusation depended, in part, upon what happened afterwards. The response to the accusation could help to determine whether the accusation should be taken seriously, or treated as merely an insult. A set of processes for 'confirming' the accusation – the handing over of tokens, in particular – created space for meanings to be recreated and reinterpreted, and for reconciliation to take place. The outcome of an ordeal could have a retrospective impact on the nature of the original accusation. The process of accusation was situational and fluid: a long way from a concept of 'blind justice' found in the formulation of the rights of a citizen.

Witches in this legal system were conceptualised as people whose malign influence threatened the entire community. The punishment for irredeemable witches was sometimes death, and sometimes banishment. In both cases, the motivation was the same – witches cannot be tolerated within a community because they threaten its well-being in a fundamental way.

¹⁵ Joost Fontein, unpublished paper on witchcraft in Zimbabwe, 2010

¹⁶ The discussions that follow focus on the chiShona-speaking communities.

¹⁷ Diana Jeater, "'I am willing to pay for the damage done": parallel systems of criminal law in white-occupied Southern Rhodesia, 1896-1923', conference on Crime in Eastern Africa: Past and Present Perspectives, organised by the British Institute in Eastern Africa/ Institut Francais de Recherche en Afrique, KWS Training Institute, Naivasha, Kenya, 8th -11th July, 2002.

¹⁸ I am currently in the process of researching the use of ordeal in witchcraft accusations. They are a standard feature in discussion of witchcraft accusation in Rhodesian ethnographic publications throughout the twentieth century, as well as being reported regularly in court cases.

¹⁹ Roger Howman, 'Witchcraft and the Law', *NADA* (the Internal Affairs Dept house journal), vol 25, 1948:7-18

Treatment of witches has varied since the late nineteenth century, but a fairly constant response to witches has been the need to 'chop'. 'Chop', is, of course, a translation. The word can mean physical chopping, with a machete. It can also be metaphorical, meaning to cause harm with witchcraft, or to disarm a witch through supernatural means. For example, in one case from the early twentieth century, a witness stated that 'She charged him with having called her a witch, burnt her hut, & chopped her with an axe'.²⁰ This was a literal description of a serious assault. In other case, however, where a man left a horn containing powerful ritual *muti* in a woman's hut, and in the ensuing panic he was shot, the village headman had berated the woman in words translated as 'could you not have left it until I came when I could have gone to the man & asked him why he chopped me'. In this case, as the clerk had to point out, 'chopped' meant 'left the horn thereby injuring me'.²¹ The continuing use of the word 'chopped' in witchcraft cases can be seen in the Supreme Court Law Reports of 1971, where a man is reported as admitting to 'having chopped and killed the deceased. He cut off her head so that she could not rise up again and bewitch him; and he severed her hands because they had handled the "muti" (medicine: with which she had caused the death of his two brothers)'. In cross-examination, he clearly used the phrase 'I chopped her', rather than 'I killed her', despite the fact that the word 'killed' was used throughout by the other people in the court.²² Whether metaphorical or real, there is a strong sense that if a witch is not 'chopped', then the witch will 'chop' first.

In treating witchcraft, 'chopping' once again appears as an important part of the process. A standard form of herbal treatment involves cutting open the body and inserting *muti*. In witchcraft cases, such treatment need not be voluntary, and will necessarily be accompanied by spiritual intervention. The letting of bodily fluids is also important, because fluids and bodies are conceptualised as having spiritual potency.

²⁰ R vs Ndirwenyu, 27th August 1900, D3/3/1.

²¹ R vs Masezi, PE 24/1898, 12th September 1898. D3/3/1.

²² The South African law reports: decision of the Supreme Courts of South Africa, volume 2. Supreme Court, SA; High Court, Zimbabwe; Supreme Court, Namibia, Juta & Co., Johannesburg, 1971, pp321-2

Witchcraft and politics

There is an extensive debate amongst Africanists about the circumstances in which societies are more likely to make witchcraft accusations against strangers, or against close kin, particularly affines. Accusations of witchcraft in Zimbabwe have, historically, been most frequently directed against 'insiders' with whom tensions have arisen: insiders exerting a malignant influence, who must be neutralised or ejected. The accusation converts the accused from being a trusted member of the community to being 'other': an 'insider' who has become a danger.

It is a small step, then, from accusing someone in the community of being witch to accusing them of being a 'sell-out' or a 'traitor'. In Zimbabwe's guerrilla war, traitors posed a genuine and terrible threat to the well-being of communities. Both guerrilla armies and government forces were capable of extreme violence against civilians, and were constantly seeking intelligence about the extent to which communities were collaborating with the enemy. One of the abiding scars of the guerrilla war is the knowledge of the gruesome treatment of 'sell-outs' by the nationalist forces.²³ The treatment of these 'traitors' had clear resonances with the treatment of witches – both were insiders whose malignant behaviour rejected the norms and values of community membership and threatened the well-being of the community as a whole. The use of ordeal, the demand for confession, and the violent, 'chopping' forms of death, all have older resonance. Indeed, one informant told me: '*muroyi* and "sell-out": they mean the same thing.' In drawing this parallel, I am not suggesting that 'sell-outs' were being accused of witchcraft. The point is rather to suggest that ways of understanding and responding to internal threats drew on established conventions, both emotionally and in terms of the justice meted out.

The threat to communities posed by informants to armies was real, in the sense that physical retribution and tragedy could follow. But accusations of witchcraft were linked to politics outside a war situation since 1980. For example, Marja Spierenburg noted that in Dande district in the 1990s, centrally-directed land resettlement programmes created divisions between recent settlers in the area and more established residents. The *mhondoro* spirit mediums who had, in the past, mediated tensions between these communities, confined their interventions to interactions with the state. The 'internal' struggle, meanwhile, took the form of witchcraft accusations. Here we see clearly the difference between a 'citizenship'-based response to land resettlement, and a more visceral response against 'insiders' who had become a threat.

²³ See, for example, Irene Staunton's powerful collection of the oral histories of women during the war, *Mothers of the Revolution*, Baobab Books: Harare, 1990; Lan, *Guns & Rain*; Norma Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices*, Cambridge UP, 1991; Richard Werbner, *Tears of the Dead*, Edinburgh UP, 1991; Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor & Terence Ranger, *Violence & Memory*, James Currey, 2000

The violent responses to MDC supporters can also be understood in this way. While there are no systematic attempts to characterise MDC supporters as 'witches', the parallels that may have influenced the treatment of 'sell-outs' in war of the 1970s also seems to have carried over into the political struggles of the 2000s. To illustrate this point, I would like to present two accounts of ordeal. Both involve young women, and are in their own words. The first is from a legal statement:

They dragged Muzondo and me out of our house, and the other three out of theirs, they blind folded us and lead us into the bush. We walked for about an hour; I was blind folded so I did not know where we were going. They then put each of us in a huge oil drum, full of cold water. Our legs were tied and we were left in there all night. They told us they were waiting for us nearby if we tried to escape, but our legs were tied and it was impossible to climb out. It was a cold night, and I was very scared. They came back in the morning; they untied us and told us to go. [Another time] He tied our legs and our hands to the stakes where the goats were held, forced us to eat hot chilli (and threatened to put it in our eyes if we did not eat it), and said we should be treated as goats as *we were not really people*. He left us there for the night and in the morning he came and released us. (my emphasis)

The second is from a criminal court case:

Tshingwenje...said that if I did not confess he would tie a stick on my head. That evening...Tshingwenje came to me at our shelter with a split stick. He caught hold of me in the presence of Timiri and tied the stick round my head...The stick on my head caused me great pain [that night]...Next morning just before sunrise Tshingwenje took the stick off my head. He said "I take off the stick. You have said nothing. Go to your hut."²⁴

The first is the evidence of a young woman accused of MDC membership in a strongly ZANU-supporting district of contemporary Zimbabwe.²⁵ The second is from an assault case of 1916, describing an attempt to get a witch to confess. The pattern of a night-long ordeal is the same in both cases.

The resonances with witchcraft accusations were perhaps seen most powerfully in the horrifying violence of the presidential election of 2008. The violence centred on rural districts that had previously been thought of as safe seats for Zanu-PF. When some of these districts failed to show solid support for Robert Mugabe in the presidential election, leading to a close result (apparently at least partially rigged) and an extended 'run off' period, a terrible campaign of violence was unleashed against them. The 'How did you vote?' campaign precisely targeted 'traitors': communities of people who were supposed to vote for Zanu-PF but, instead, voted for the MDC. The extent of 'chopping', and not in a metaphorical sense, was extreme. Indeed, the form of violence was noticeably uniform, and noticeably involved the chopping/opening of the body. While it is not being suggested here that the violence was *explicitly* drawing on the means of ridding communities of witches, the cultural resonances cannot be ignored.

²⁴ R vs Jirayanengwe & Tshingwenje, PE 114/1916, 18th March 1916, D3/3/5.

²⁵ I cannot identify the source for reasons of confidentiality.

Conclusions

It seems that the MDC supporters were thought to have lost their 'personhood' in attempting to 'sell out' the country to international financial interests and white commercial farmers, preventing the much-needed land redistribution. The human rights-based discourses that condemned the political violence failed to recognise that there was more than simple barbarism in the treatment of those accused of being MDC 'sell outs'. Indeed, by espousing a rigid political rhetoric that posited people primarily as 'citizens' rather than as members of spiritual community, and by speaking in terms of 'unreal' universals rather than the ambiguities and flexibilities inherent in lived experience, the MDC failed to connect with more fundamental senses of personhood.

It seems that the fixed and legalistic language of citizenship, while playing well internationally, nonetheless has weakened those who use it. This putatively *a priori* category necessarily excludes other categories of personhood and non-personhood: notably the category of 'witch'. Zanu-PF draws on the language of contamination and the 'enemy within' far more effectively than conventional discourses of citizenship and constitutional rights can manage. Powerful metaphors of bodily fluids and chopping/opening of the body to combat the contaminating influences of witches provided an unexpressed foundation for the violence of recent times. This visceral and situational language has proved much more potent in defining political persons than the legalistic notion of citizenship.