

# Unjust forgetting? Vosloo's just memory and Mnangagwa's forgetting in violently ruled Zimbabwe



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Robert Vosloo's theological-ethical notion of just memory, derived from Paul Ricoeur, is used to critique President Emmerson Mnangagwa's call to wounded Zimbabweans to let bygones be bygones. The question answered by the article is, in the light of Vosloo's notion of just memory, what should Zimbabweans who have been wounded by Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front's (ZANU-PF's) violence do with their memories of violence? The article argues that, in cases of social injustice, remembrance, instead of forgetting, should be used to confront the unjust context. The article describes the nature of ZANU-PF's culture of violence, and how the party uses the notion of 'forgive and forget' to silence the memories of people who have been wounded. After discussing how forgetting sacralises ZANU-PF's violent patriotic history, the article describes how, in contrast, remembrance confronts the culture of violence. The article closes by describing certain aspects of a theological ethic that fosters redemptive remembrance of past wounds.

**Contribution:** The contribution of the article is providing a theological-ethical framework that can enable victims of state violence to use their painful memories to confront the culture of violence in Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** memory; remembrance; just memory; Zimbabwe; violence; forgetting; Vosloo; Mnangagwa.

## Background and introduction

This article is a Christian theological-ethical analysis of the role of memory, particularly remembrance, in a Zimbabwe founded on violence and ruled by violence. The article critically reflects on the call made by President Emmerson Mnangagwa to Zimbabweans to let bygones be bygones; this reflection is based on the theological-ethical perspective of just memory of the South African theologian, Robert Vosloo. Mnangagwa made the call when he was inaugurated as Zimbabwe's second president on 24 November 2017, when he succeeded the country's founding leader Robert Mugabe after a citizen-backed military coup. Making his call, Mnangagwa proclaimed:

[W]e should 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 (Chronicle 25 November 2017).

Mnangagwa called on Zimbabweans, particularly victims of violence, to forgive and forget the painful past and not to be held hostage by it. However, this call can be traced to Robert Mugabe, to 1980, when he assumed power as the country's first democratically elected leader, when he stated, on the eve of his swearing in as prime minister of Zimbabwe:

'Is it not folly, therefore, that in these circumstances anybody should seek to revive the wounds and grievances of the past? The wrongs of the past must now stand forgiven and forgotten. If ever we look to the past, let us do so for the lesson the past has taught us, namely that oppression and racism are inequalities that must never find scope in our political and social system' (Herald 06 September 2019).

Throughout his reign first as the prime minister and later as the president of the republic, Mugabe consistently maintained his stance that, if one looks to the past, it must not be for the purposes of justice and revenge, but for learning lessons about oppression and racism. When he was confronted to give account of the Gukuruhundi genocide of 1983–1987, he responded by saying:

'If we dig up history, then we wreck the nation, we tear our people apart into factions, into tribes, and villagism will prevail over our nationalism and over the spirit of our sacrifices.' (quoted by Mashingaidze 2010:23).

**Note:** Special collection: Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

Gukurahundi, a chiShona term for the first rain that cleans the chaff before the spring rains, is a code name for a violent military campaign that was conducted in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces on the pretext of flushing out dissident elements aligned to Joshua Nkomo's Patriotic Front – Zimbabwe African People's Union (PF-ZAPU) party. The campaign killed an estimated 20000 civilians (CCJP & LRF 1997). Mnangagwa's call in 2017 to let bygones be bygones replicated Mugabe's belief that the past should not be dug up, unless for pedagogical purposes. However, even if it is done for educational purposes, the problem is that these leaders' vision that the past should be forgotten is not accompanied by a meaningful mechanism for truth telling that would assist both victims and perpetrators to engage meaningfully with the painful past. Furthermore, the state organ that was set up to bring peace, the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission, has limited powers and has not functioned effectively to heal the wounds of the past. Moreover, the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission has not succeeded in persuading Mnangagwa's ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) to abandon its culture of violence.

Although this article focuses exclusively on violence perpetrated by ZANU-PF, because it refers to the agenda set by its leaders, it firmly acknowledges that the main pro-democracy party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (which has changed its name to Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), has also been guilty of both intra-party violence and violence against ZANU-PF members. On several occasions, the CCC has been involved in intra-party violence along tribal and gender lines. For example, angry party members have hurled insults, such as 'prostitute' and 'dissident', at Thokozani Khuphe, a key female member of the party and a former deputy of the late leader of the MDC, Morgan Tsvangirai. Several CCC party leaders have been physically manhandled and maligned as 'sell-outs' for holding a different view to that of the assailants.

The main question answered by this the article is, what should Zimbabweans who were wounded by ZANU-PF violence do with their memories of violence, in the light of Vosloo's notion of just memory? The question is answered by describing how vulnerable memory is to abusive authorities and describing how ZANU-PF leaders attempt to silence and abuse memory, in an attempt to cover up the violent nature of their rule. Vosloo's notion of just memory is discussed in relation to Paul Ricoeur's happy memory to develop an ethic of remembering. After describing how forgetting sacralises ZANU-PF's violent patriotic history, the way remembrance can confront a culture of violence is described. The article closes by discussing aspects of a theological ethic that promotes a redemptive remembrance of past wounds. The contribution of the article lies in its attempt to provide a theological-ethical framework that can enable victims of state violence to use their painful memories to confront the culture of violence in Zimbabwe.

## Memory and its vulnerability to abuse by authorities

Calls by Zimbabwe's president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, and his predecessor, the late Robert Mugabe, to wounded Zimbabweans to forgive and forget their painful past, in the absence of any meaningful process of truth telling and healing, is tantamount to regulating and silencing the memories of the wounded. According to Ricoeur (2002:5), memory is a kind of knowledge, like perception, imagination and understanding, about 'past events, or of the pastness of past events'. Ricoeur (2002) adds that memory:

[I]s committed to truth, even if it is not a truthful relationship to the past; that is, precisely because it has a truth-claim, memory can be accused of being unfaithful to this claim. (p. 5)

Memory is committed to truth in the sense that it generally seeks to recall past events accurately although it is bound by humanity's limited nature – described by Ricoeur (2009:440) as 'the sorrow of finitude'. Thus, although memory may seek to be faithful to truth in its recalling of the past, sometimes, memory can be distorted, which leads to the past being misrepresented. Duvenage (1999:1–2) acknowledges the vulnerability of memory to abuse by asking the question, 'But, how can the dangers of forgetting, on the one hand, and the manipulation of memory or the "truth", on the other, be avoided?' This question emphasises the importance of guarding memory from being manipulated by not just the authorities but anyone who attempts to make a case from a memorial event. In real life, when observing an event, someone may miss or wrongly interpret the details of what they see, resulting in an inaccurate testimony of the witnessed, or even personally experienced, events. Furthermore, even in the best of times, not only is human memory unreliable, it also declines as people age.<sup>1</sup>

However, particularly at a communal level, such as national politics or a tribal identity, memory is vulnerable to the control of authorities, who regulate it and deliberately use it to serve and promote not the truth, but their political and personal agendas, to gain power or remain in power. For example, Duvenage (1999:5) records Jürgen Habermas (1989) complaining about the revisionists' 'apologetic tendencies' in their writing about Nazism of seeing:

[T]heir role as, on the one hand, mobilizing pasts that can be accepted approvingly and, on the other hand, morally neutralizing other pasts that would provoke only criticism and rejection. (p. 43)

As will be shown in the next section, this is the case in Zimbabwe, where ZANU-PF uses memory to justify its violent harassment of citizens. This abuse of memory is what prompted Ricoeur's concern with memory; he says he has 'continued to be troubled by the unsettling spectacle offered by an excess of memory here and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations

1. Following Ricoeur, instead of seeing memory and forgetting as enemies, Vosloo (2017:6) sees them as belonging together because '[f]orgetting is inevitable and therefore memory and forgetting are tightly interwoven'.

and abuses of memory – and of forgetting’ (Ricoeur 2009:xv). In such situations, memory is deliberately unfaithful to truth-claiming, because politicians take control of it and steer it in directions that serve their interests, such as evading accountability, promoting narrow nationalism and excluding other people or groups from national memory.

## Silencing and abuse of memory in a Zimbabwe that was established and which is ruled by violence

The challenge faced by national memory in Zimbabwe is that perpetrators of violence attempt to silence and abuse citizens’ memory of the pain caused by the violence endured by the citizens of the perpetrators. For, despite Mnangagwa’s proclamation of letting bygones be bygones, he has continued to threaten to descend on dissenting citizens with rods ‘treated with salt’ to increase their sting when they strike a person’s body (Star Zim Politics Home of Politics 2019). This threat is in addition to previous threats of violence, such as his 1983 descriptions of the predominantly isiNdebele-speaking province of Matabeleland as infested with cockroaches that need to be sprayed with a dangerous pesticide called dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT) (Allison 2017).<sup>2</sup> The threat became a reality when the ruthless 5th Brigade army unit was deployed and thousands were killed. Furthermore, despite his involvement in the operation, which has been described in terms relating to genocide by some scholars (Malunga 2022; Mpofu 2021a), Mnangagwa proclaims letting bygones be bygones, without having taken responsibility for the deadly episode that occurred when he was the minister of security; he has reportedly referred to it as ‘a closed chapter’ (Bulawayo24 News 2011). He has, however, recently been in engagement with Matabeleland chiefs and civic organisations who are seeking justice and closure over the issue (Kwaramba 2022) and, after much initial resistance, the government has agreed on a programme of exhumation and reburial of the Gukurahundi victims (CITE 24 October 2020). However, the fact that Mnangagwa avoids taking responsibility for the genocidal episode and continues to ban commemorations of the event by civic groups and social activists, suggests that he is involved in mere politicking that is not committed to reaching a just conclusion of the issue. Therefore, a serious problem with Mnangagwa’s call to let bygones be bygones is a lack of commitment to addressing past wrongs committed by himself and his party. This turns the call to let bygones be bygones into a silencing of the victims’ memories of their pain.

Furthermore, Mnangagwa’s call to let bygones be bygones seems aimed at pacifying wounded victims from speaking about their wounds and seeking justice, because ZANU-PF has not ended its culture of violence to maintain its hold on power. While proclaiming let bygones be bygones, the nationalistic

2. It should be noticed that ZANU-PF leaders often use the language of extermination, even against their own party members who hold different points of view, for instance, when the party experienced factionalism in 2014, Didymus Mutasa called members of an opposing faction weevils who needed to be sprayed by a pesticide called gamatox (Newsday 09 June 2014).

ideology of the ZANU-PF party is built on a violent framework – that of a one-party state that claims exclusive ownership of the history of the struggle of the liberation from colonial rule, and one that is violently intolerant of people in opposition parties, who are often regarded as ‘sell-outs’, ‘traitors’ or ‘puppets of the West’ (Mlambo 2013:50, 61). As contended by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012:2), ‘Zimbabwe under ZANU-PF is a leader in terms of intolerance of opposition and deployment of violence against political opponents’. This violent intolerance of opposition stems from ZANU-PF ‘patriotic history’ (Ranger 2004) that projects the party as the exclusive owner of Zimbabwe’s struggle for liberation from colonial rule. Many Christian pastors have authenticated this claim by propagating that ZANU-PF and its leaders have been anointed by God to lead the country (Wutawunashhe 2014). Various scholarly works have substantiated the role of Christianity and traditional religions in the convergence of the state and ZANU-PF (Chitanda 2020a,b; Dube 2020; Magaisa 2019).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012) argues that, since ZANU-PF came into being when it broke away from ZAPU in 1963, it has fostered a patriotic history based on a violent philosophy that is constructed on the *chimurenga*<sup>3</sup> ideology and implemented through its violent *gukurahundi*<sup>4</sup> strategy. With reference to the historian Terence Ranger, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012:3) explains that the term *chimurenga* derives from Murenga, the name of a Shona precolonial religious leader who was actively involved in the 1896–1897 war of resistance (the so-called First Chimurenga) and who provided desperately needed ideological support to African forces fighting British colonial invaders. Concerning the *chimurenga* ideology, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012:3) explains that, when ZANU-PF embarked on the armed liberation struggle in the late 1960s, it formulated its liberation ideology by projecting itself within the First Chimurenga struggle and seeking oracular blessing from the Shona religion by claiming to be continuing the unfinished liberation struggle that had begun in the late nineteenth century. In doing this, ZANU-PF portrayed itself as not only continuing the liberation struggle against British colonialism that began in the late 1890s but also as the only party anointed by heroic spiritual figures of the First Chimurenga, such as Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi. This claim delegitimises any other liberation cadres that fought outside ZANU-PF, because the *chimurenga* ideology is violently exclusionary. It breeds Shona nationalism by giving exclusive prominence to liberation figures in Mashonaland, thereby tribalising the national liberation struggle by excluding liberation figures in Matabeleland, where the armed resistance to British colonists started in the 1893–1894 war and led to the fall of the Ndebele Kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

3. As used in this article, *Chimurenga* (capitalised) is the name of the liberation struggle against colonial rule, and *chimurenga* (small ‘c’) refers to the culture or ideology of resistance to and liberation from colonial rule.

4. In this article, *Gukurahundi* (capitalised) denotes the fifth Brigade military campaign in Matabeleland and Midlands, but *gukurahundi* (small ‘g’) refers to the discriminatory culture of using violence to decimate people with views that differ from those of the party.

5. The exclusion of the Ndebele and Anglo war can be attributed to the war originally starting as a punishment for the Ndebele for its raid on the Shona; it was a precursor of the great war now known as the First Chimurenga.

Not only is ZANU-PF's chimurenga rhetoric exclusionary and does it promote Shona nationalism, it *zanufies* the memory of the black African liberation struggle against colonialism by delegitimising the efforts of cadres that fought against colonialism outside ZANU-PF. As a result, the National Heroes Acre, the national cemetery of heroic figures of the liberation struggle, which ought to stand as a primary site of national memory, has become a testimony to the way ZANU-PF uses its patriotic history to write out of memory cadres who disagree(d) with its ideology. Several liberation stalwarts, such as Ndabaningi Sithole, who left ZANU-PF in the 1970s, and others who left the party in the postcolonial period, such as Thenjiwe Lesabe, have been denied burial places at the national shrine, which writes them out of the national memory of the liberation struggle. In many other cases, ZANU-PF cadres, such as Sheba Tavagwisa, who remained members of the party until their death, were denied a memorial burial at the National Heroes Acre, perhaps because they had been critical of some aspects of the party. Thus, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012:16) comments that there are several events that 'indicate that the National Heroes Acres is now more of a ZANU-PF memorial than a national shrine'.

Concerning the gukurahundi strategy used to implement the chimurenga ideology, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012) explains that ZANU-PF relies on violence to enforce its ideology on the masses. Sithole and Makumbe (1997:134) describe gukurahundi as a Shona colloquial term meaning 'the storm that destroys everything – crops and weeds, huts and forests, the good and the bad, including people and beasts – resulting in a new ecological order'. Concurring with Sithole and Makumbe, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012:4–5) highlights that ZANU-PF used the gukurahundi strategy to annihilate those [both outside and inside the party] who threatened or compromised its claim to being the exclusive custodian of the chimurenga. Doran (2017:10) describes the genesis of the 'internecine violence' that characterised liberation movements of the early 1960s as totalitarian nationalism driven by an exclusivist ideology. According to the exclusivist ideology in totalitarian nationalism, 'legitimacy belonged to a single political party; parallel claims were by definition intolerable – bastard voices to be silenced' (Doran 2017:10). Thus, while the term Gukurahundi, in postcolonial Zimbabwe, is commonly associated with the 1983–1987 genocidal activities of the 5th Brigade in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, the strategy had long been employed by ZANU-PF, which uses it to annihilate those deemed to be enemies of the chimurenga ethos. In 1979, the party declared *Gore reGukurahundi* [The Year of the Storm], with reference to a revolutionary storm that would finally destroy the white settler regime, the 'internal settlement puppets' and the capitalist system (Sithole & Makumbe 1997:134). In essential terms, gukurahundi strategy was 'a policy of annihilation; annihilating the opposition [black and white]', because, in 1979, it was announced with a list of enemies identified for liquidation (Sithole & Makumbe 1997:134). However, the party's official adoption of *Gore reGukurahundi* in 1979 was the culmination of an exclusivist strategy that was employed to fight political and ideological opponents right from the party's

existence in 1963 (Doran 2017:10–11), and it was continuously used internally to discipline comrades suspected of wavering in their commitment to the chimurenga cause (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012:4–5).

The challenge of memory in Zimbabwe is that it continues to be filled with gukurahundi violence, as ZANU-PF continues to react with violence to citizens who oppose its rule and attempt to remove it from power. The party continues to pursue an agenda of liquidating and delegitimising its opponents. While the violent military operations in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces stand as the worst forms of the gukurahundi strategy, post-1987 has witnessed several violent gukurahundi-like military-led operations against citizens for trying to replace ZANU-PF, which, according to ZANU-PF, is the only rightful custodian of the chimurenga. Since 1980, ZANU-PF has continued to use violence and various forms delegitimation, such as accusations of being dissidents, sell-outs and puppets of the West to political parties with large followings, such as PF-ZAPU, Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM), the MDC (now CCC), prominent politicians, civic groups and individuals opposed to ZANU-PF rule. Even when citizens use constitutionally enshrined democratic processes, such as elections and peaceful protests, ZANU-PF has responded with gukurahundi-like military-led operations, such as the 2005 post-election urban clean-up campaign, dubbed Operation Murambatsvina [drive out trash] of 2005, the 2008 post-election Operation Mavhoterapapi [who did you vote for?] and Operation Chimumumu. Furthermore, pre-election violence by ZANU-PF is practiced not only against its opposition but also against its own members, as a foretaste of what will happen should the party lose the elections. The ZANU-PF-led government unleashes these violent operations on the pretext of patriotic history, through which it views itself as the party anointed to rule over Zimbabwe forever. This means that anyone who is opposed to ZANU-PF is denied a dignified place in the national memory of the country.

Interestingly, the dethronement of Robert Mugabe is an example of ZANU-PF's full commitment to the gukurahundi strategy to discipline and quell dissenting voices and to purge not only disloyal ordinary members, but even compromised leaders who have become a liability to the party's chimurenga ideology. Despite being the chief apostle of the system, ZANU-PF used the gukurahundi system against Mugabe, and his comrades toppled him in a military coup in November 2017, in a military campaign dubbed Operation Restore Legacy. Tendi (2020:43) contends that, at the centre of Operation Restore Legacy was Mugabe's 'rising disregard of liberation struggle ethos and actors' and his replacement of them with party leaders with no substantial connection to the war of independence called Generation 40 (G40) (Tendi 2020:51). Thus, Operation Restore Legacy was concerned with the preservation of a particular memory of the past – one associated with the country's liberation struggle ethos and participants in the ruling ZANUPF party (Tendi 2020:66).

Thus, the Zimbabwean national memory is one of violence, as ZANU-PF continues to attempt to implement a party state through the chimurenga ideology, which is implemented through the violent gukurahundi strategy.

## Whether to forget or to remember: A search for a theological-ethical framework of memory in context of political violence

Mnangagwa's call to let bygones be bygones and Mugabe's call to forgive and forget require an appropriate theological-ethical framework for evaluating its merit, given the endemic use of violence by their party, ZANU-PF, to secure and maintain power in Zimbabwe. Brueggemann (2000:20) sounds Elie Wiesel's determined concern that the barbaric reality of the Jewish holocaust should never be forgotten because the truth of the Holocaust is deeply disputed and there are people who argue that it never happened. In this regard, forgetting is not an option because it not only allows the history of the barbarity to silently die away but it also allows denialists to continue discrediting the testimony of the wounded. From a theological-ethical perspective, the importance of remembering is tied to the biblical notion of testimony in which the people of Israel testify about God's act of saving them from their adversaries (Brueggemann 2000).

A useful theological-ethical framework in this regard can be gleaned from Robert Vosloo's theological-ethical notion of 'just memory', which he derives from Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur also uses 'happy memory' and 'happy forgetting' to refer to his idea of just memory. Vosloo, a professor of systematic theology and ecclesiology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, uses the notion of just memory to critique the unjust promotion and glorification of forgive and forget and emphasises the duty to remember situations of historical injustice (Vosloo 2017:14). His basic point is that, while historical injustices can be forgiven, their memory should not be forgotten by being trivialised or brushed aside, but should be remembered in a manner that leads to justice. Vosloo's extensive thought on memory is expressed in his book *Reforming Memory: Essays on South African and Theological History* (2017). His theological-ethical framework of memory is appropriate for the Zimbabwean context because he does not deal abstractly with the question of memory and forgetting, but contextualises it in contemporary South Africa, in the context of the country's colonial and apartheid past, which is filled with pain and violence. For Vosloo, such a horrific past makes it barbaric to speak about forgetting. His theological-ethics on memory is influenced by theologians such as Dirkie Smit and philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur, whose *Memory, History, Forgetting* is an important source of Vosloo's thought on memory. Time and space do not allow for an extensive exploration and discussion of Vosloo's expansive thought on memory and the various sources that form and inform it. Therefore, we will limit ourselves to his notion of just memory, and our reference to Ricoeur will be limited to its elucidation of Vosloo's theological-ethical thought on just memory.

Vosloo's notion of just memory derives from Ricoeur's (2002:11) just memory, which Ricoeur also expresses as 'happy memory' and 'happy forgetting' (2009:494–504). Ricoeur considers the age-old conflict between the 'art of memory' [*ars memoriae*] and the art of forgetting [*ars oblivionis*], and he objects to the idea of forgetting as expressed in the language of death – a 'lethatechnique' that rests on 'rhetoric of extinction: writing to extinguish – the contrary of making an archive' (Ricoeur 2009:504). For Ricoeur (2009:504), lethatechnique is barbarous, and calls for forgetting, as extinction of memory, to be replaced with happy memory, which 'arrange[s] itself under the optative mood of happy memory ... simply add[ing] a gracious note to the work of memory and the work of mourning'. Happy memory, as used by Ricoeur, 'does not intend to forget the past and its evils, but speaks rather of the past without resentment and anger' (Teo 2014:135).

Vosloo (2017:13) endorses Ricoeur's (2002:11) view that there is no strict symmetry between the art of memory and the art of forgetting, and that the duty to remember and the duty to forget are not comparable, because the duty to remember is a duty to teach, whereas the duty to forget is the duty to go beyond anger and hatred. Vosloo's endorsement of Ricoeur shows that Ricoeur promotes a gracious and positive duty to remember that fosters progressive forgetting.<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur creates space for forgetting by affirming the inseparable relationship between memory and forgetting and bonding to the two ideas with justice. In Ricoeur's (2002) view:

'Both memory and forgetting do, however, contribute in their respective ways to what Hannah Arendt called the continuation of action. It is necessary for the continuation of action that we retain the traces of events, that we be reconciled with the past, and that we divest ourselves of anger and hatred. Once again, justice is the horizon of both processes. Let us conclude by saying that at this point in our history we have to deal with the problem of evolving a culture of *just memory*' (p. 11, italics in original).

Vosloo's (2017:14) theological-ethical thought embraces Ricoeur's notion of 'a culture of just memory' and says that in such a culture 'the emphasis should be on the duty to remember'. He expresses suspicion of the rhetoric of forgetting, by saying that forgetting can have harmful consequences in contexts that are permeated by memories of historical injustice (Vosloo 2017:14). He believes that the language of forgetting should be used cautiously to avoid promoting injustice. Vosloo (2017) buttresses his opposition to forgetting by stating that the:

'... language of 'forgetting' cannot be used as an alibi to forget or erase the past, since the past remains in the present; it can only be used and claimed with the healing motive of lifting the weight or the burden of the past'. (p. 14)

Archivally, the past continues into the present and, instead of ignoring it or trying to suppress it, the past should be engaged without resentment and anger. To some extent, this is what

<sup>6</sup>Vosloo (2017:13) states, 'an art of forgetting – if it is to find its rightful place in our discourse – can only find its place on the other side of a critique of forgetting and in close proximity to memory'.

the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa attempted to do.

It must be borne in mind that Vosloo's notion of just memory is opposed to any unhealthy use of remembering. To some extent, Vosloo's notion of just memory is similar to Miroslav Volf's (2006) notion of remembering rightly in a violent world. Asking a critical question, Volf (2006:9) asks, 'How should the one who *loves* remember the wrongdoer and the wrongdoing?' This question affirms that memory is an inescapable part of humanity, even loving Christians must find appropriate ways of remembering in order to deal meaningfully with their wounds. Following a similar part as Volf, Vosloo calls for attentiveness to 'the possible harmful ideological impulses that can hide in a categorical rejection of any attempt to carve out space for a qualified defence of forgetting in all its ambiguity and complexity' (Vosloo 2017:13). In this important statement, Vosloo warns against any ideological attempts to outlaw forgetting, and also emphasises the need to realise that forgetting is an ambiguous and complex reality. He turns to the theologian Dirkie Smit to substantiate the ambiguity and complexity of forgetting. Smit points out that the Bible instructs Christians to *not* forget some things and also instructs them to forget something. He states:

[A] perhaps the Christian tradition can remind societies that 'forgetting' is an ambiguous matter. There is indeed a *Christian instruction not to forget*. The Christian church depends upon this, for many reasons. One is that we must learn from the past, so that it 'will never happen again'. Yet *there is also a Christian instruction to forget*. Forgetting can also be a moral activity. The wonder of the message of the gospel for Christians is precisely that God removes our sins from us as far as the east is removed from the west and never thinks of them. It is one thing to say: we forgive, but we cannot forget. It is another to say: we forgive, but we shall never, we may never, we never wish to, we will never forget. The Christian tradition is ultimately based on the trust that God-in-Christ does not speak to the world like that, and calls us to speak and live accordingly (Smit 1996:116).

In other words, the Bible does not provide a simplistic view of forgetting, because, in remembering, there are lessons to be learnt, and in forgetting, there is the removal of anger and bitterness. By embracing Smit, Vosloo's theological-ethic of forgetting safeguards memory from oppressive ruling elites that use forgetting to silence the memory of their past acts of violence and who refuse to take responsibility for their wrong actions. For Vosloo, whatever theological and moral arguments that may be made for forgetting, ultimately, the need for justice imposes 'a duty to remember ... experiences of historical injustices' (2017:10). While forgetting may be glorified, for Vosloo, contexts such as the horrors of the Holocaust, the brutality of the apartheid – and in our Zimbabwean context, we may add Gukurahundi, Operation Murambatsvina and Operation Mavhoterapapi – 'the language of forgetting seems to be irresponsible, unjust and dangerous' (Vosloo 2017:10). It allows evil despots to perpetrate violence and then silence the memories of their victims by proclaiming amnesty for themselves. In Zimbabwe, many perpetrators of violence-aligned ZANU-PF,

who have committed heinous crimes against humanity, have been saved from jail by presidential amnesty. For Vosloo (2017:13), an art of forgetting 'can only find its place on the other side of a critique of forgetting and in close proximity to memory', which means this language 'should be used with the necessary reserve'. The implication of this claim is that it should be affirmed 'that forgetting can be a moral activity and that we should guard against a fanatical anti-forgetting stance that keep us captives of the past and robs memory of a future' (Vosloo 2017:13). Therefore, the task is finding a way of addressing the past by responsibly remembering it and some form of forgetting that will help the wounded to reconcile with their dreaded past. It can, therefore, be said that the problem observed by Vosloo is that calls for memory or forgetting are often made manipulatively because they shy away from responsibility and are made without sensitivity for the pain of the victims. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that:

[D]iscussions on memory and history – and their interrelation – do not occur in a historical vacuum and they become especially poignant in contexts saturated with narratives of historical injustice. (Vosloo 2017:26)

Vosloo's theological ethic on memory challenges Mnangagwa's unjust call on victims of ZANU-PF's gukurahundi system to let bygones be bygones, by demanding a 'just allotment of memory' that leads to a responsible reflection on Zimbabwe's painful history of political violence.

## Forgetting as the sacralisation of Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front's violent patriotic history

In the Zimbabwean context – that of a state established and ruled by violent force – Vosloo's notion of just memory challenges forgetting, because to forget is to ultimately sacralise ZANU-PF's violent patriotic history. This article argues against the Christian tendency to endorse Mnangagwa's call (and even Mugabe's previous call) to forget all past wrongs and enter into a new future, for to do so without any just and constructive truth-telling mechanism is to sacralise the violence perpetrated by ZANU-PF. The notion of sacralisation describes not just the treatment of something or an action as sacred but also as religiously justifiable and, therefore, right. According to Ranger (2004), patriotic history refers to ZANU-PF's projection of itself as the political party that exclusively owns Zimbabwe's struggle for liberation from colonial rule and, therefore, the only party anointed by the country's ancestral spirits, and ultimately by God, to rule and defend the country's liberation from imperialists and, therefore, the only party with the exclusive right to enjoy the material benefits of the liberation. Indeed, ZANU-PF has commissioned many ideological evangelists and propagandists, among whom academicians, intellectuals and pastors, to preach the gospel of the party being the only divinely anointed one to rule Zimbabwe. ZANU-PF uses the spiritual dogmas of the chimurenga to push its ideology of a

one-party state and to sacralise itself by revoking the names of spirit mediums such as Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi, who are said to have led the initial chimurenga armed struggle against the British colonialists. This religious dogma is captured by the liberation song *Zimbabwe ndeyeropa ramadzibaba* (Chitando & Tarusarira 2017), which means Zimbabwe is a product of the sacrificial blood of the ancestors. ZANU-PF uses the song to project itself as the only legitimate defender of the country's liberation, which was secured by the sacrificial blood of the ancestors and all the liberation fighters who died to liberate the country from the colonialists. It is said that, before her death by execution by colonialists, Mbuya Nehanda prophesied that her bones will, one day, rise again. ZANU-PF essentially projects itself as Mbuya Nehanda's bones, which have risen to complete the struggle she started in the First Chimurenga and to regain what was lost in that war.

The sacral and spiritual connotations in the call by ZANU-PF leaders to let bygones be bygones can be seen in Robert Mugabe's responses when he was challenged about the Gukurahundi. He responded by saying it was 'a moment of madness' (Meredith 2002:74). From an African traditional religious point of view, Mugabe's claim to have acted out of madness sacralised Gukurahundi and made talking about it taboo. In traditional African belief, madness has spiritual causes, which usually include evil spirits and witchcraft. However, it is also believed that, if they are offended, good ancestral spirits can strike people with madness to cause them to act in shameful ways that humiliate the concerned people and/or lead to harsh consequences, such as misconduct at work that leads the person's dismissal from employment. African traditional cultures have their own versions of the saying 'those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad'. Thus, pleading madness is a common strategy in Zimbabwean society to evade responsibility for shameful acts. People simply say, 'I don't know what came over me, I was mad', to suggest that an evil spirit possessed them and led them to commit the disgraceful act. By doing so, the culprit evades responsibility for their actions by sacralising it, for it is a taboo [*kuyera* in ChiShona, *ukuzila* in isiNdebele] in African traditional communities to speak openly about misdeeds attributed to spiritual causes. Indeed, as Alexander (2021:782) reports, filmmaker and Gukurahundi activist Zenzele Ndebele explains that Mugabe succeeded in sacralising Gukurahundi by turning it into a taboo that no one should speak about and made it into an issue only pursued by sponsors of tribalism and national division. In traditional communities, to speak about a disgraceful act that occurred under the promptings of evil spirits means you are inviting those evil spirits back into the community, therefore, silence is demanded as a way of keeping the evil spirits away. The elders silence those who talk about such actions by saying, 'Shut up, do you want to bring to life things that are sleeping?'

Mugabe sacralised Gukurahundi by saying, 'If we dig up history, then we wreck the nation, we tear our people apart into factions, into tribes, and villagism will prevail over our

nationalism and over the spirit of our sacrifices' (Mashingaidze 2010:23). Mpfu (2021a:46) responds to Mugabe's use of national unity and peace to condemn and silence discussions on the Gukurahundi by saying that perpetrators of crimes against humanity employ grand ideas of national unity and peace 'to condemn their victims to silence about justice'. Some of the grand programmes used to silence victims of violence in Zimbabwe include Unity Day, which is observed on 22 December, and the Government of National Unity, which lasted from 2008 to 2013. Unity Day is a result of the Unity Accord of 1987, which was signed by ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU to end the Gukurahundi operation. The Government of National Unity between ZANU-PF and the two MDC factions from 2008 to 2013 mitigated ZANU-PF's reign of terror somewhat when it lost the 2008 elections and halted the party's disastrous economic policies that impoverished the entire nation. Both these events made it quasi-blasphemous to demand truth-telling and accountability for the violence that preceded the events.

The way ZANU-PF uses sacred language to silence wounded victims is similar to the classical Greek custom of amnesty laws that prohibited citizens from evoking the memory of past evil or what was considered bad; citizens had to pledge never to recall such events (Ricoeur 2002:11). Mnangagwa's let bygones be bygones effectively pronounced an amnesty on all past wrongs by his party, by demanding victims of ZANU-PF's policy of violence to forget their wounds and live as if they were never wounded. In fact, it was an amnesty that demanded wounded victims to ignore the ongoing pain in their bodies and to relate with ZANU-PF as if it had never wounded them.

## Remembrance as a confrontation of violence in Zimbabwe

Therefore, instead of seeing remembrance as an enemy of national unity and progress, this article argues that remembrance must instead be viewed as a confrontation of the culture of violence in Zimbabwe. Remembrance is a tool of national unity and progress by calling for justice for the wounded victims. The Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel (1990) argues for the duty to remember to preserve the integrity of the wounded victims. Vosloo's notion of just memory, which he derives from Ricoeur, emphasises that, in situations of injustice and violence, forgetting aids tyranny and, therefore, critical remembrance must be exercised. The current Zimbabwean context of unjust violence is a context where remembrance, and not forgetting, must be encouraged. The primary reason for rejecting Mnangagwa's call to let bygones be bygones and Mugabe's call to forgive and forget is that ZANU-PF leaders use the notion of forgetting to cover up their violent nature, to hide their refusal to be held accountable for their violence and to conceal their continued reliance on violence to rule Zimbabwe. To forget without any truth telling and political reformation, as demanded by Mnangagwa and Mugabe, involves not only forgetting ZANU-PF's crimes against humanity but also to forget ZANU-PF's sworn commitment

to use gukurahundi strategy as a tool to enforce its rule and remain in power in Zimbabwe.

There is a deep-rooted culture of violence in ZANU-PF that needs to be confronted and addressed through remembrance. Mnangagwa's threat to beat owners of overcharging shops – a threat which, by wider implication, is directed to all who oppose his policies – with painful rods laced with salt to make it more painful (Star Zim Politics Home of Politics 2019) arises from this deep-rooted culture of violence and stands against any form of forgetting the past. Mpfu (2021b) records Mugabe's 1976 declaration that:

'Our votes must go together with our guns. After all, any we shall have, shall have been the product of the gun. The gun which produces the vote should remain its security officer – its guarantor. The people's votes and the people's guns are always inseparable twins' (p. 232).

This statement demonstrates the extent of ZANU-PF's reliance on and use of violence to enforce its policies. As an example, Mugabe reportedly threatened gory violence against the opposition after ZANU-PF lost March 2008 parliamentary and presidential elections to the MDC. In preparation for the re-run of the presidential election that was to be held on 27 June 2008, as Tsvangirai had failed to win the required threshold of 50% of the presidential vote, Munoriyarwa (2021) records Mugabe being cited in *The Sunday Mail* of 24 April 2008 declaring:

'We have degrees in violence ... and its time we should make our numbers count ... by striking fear in the hearts of the white men and his running dogs of imperialism.' (p. 225)

In this statement, Mugabe effectively urged his party to use violence to win the elections. This valorisation of violence and the gun mitigates against Mnangagwa's notion of letting bygones be bygones and Mugabe's earlier call to forgive and forget, because, while the wounded may forget their wounds, the perpetrator's disposition towards violence remains unchanged and, when asked to account for the violent action, the perpetrator invokes an amnesty that anathematises talking about the grim past. There is no demonstration of commitment to peace or resolving past violence.

Therefore, remembrance confronts violence by demythologising ZANU-PF's projection of itself as a peace-loving and peace-seeking party. The statement, 'Forward with peace' – *Phambili lokuthula* in isiNdebele, and *Pamberi nerunyararo* in chiShona – features prominently in ZANU-PF sloganeering. Speaking at the burial of Air Marshall Perence Shiri, the former commander of the infamous 5th Brigade that carried out the Gukurahundi, Mnangagwa proclaimed:

'We need peace, peace, perfect peace for national development. Let us shun strife, violence and disunity. Proponents of such divisive and ruinous acts must be rejected and exposed' (CGTN 2020).

Such proclamations are common from ZANU-PF leaders, which gives the impression of a deep commitment to peace. Yet, the same proclaimers of peace also valorise using violence

and guns against those who disagree with them. Therefore, remembrance of past acts of violence removes the myth that ZANU-PF is a peace-loving party. In this case, remembrance functions as a means of challenging the party to reform, to denounce its culture of violence and to change its ways.

Furthermore, remembrance challenges the ZANU-PF chimurenga rhetoric, namely that the purpose of its violent acts is safeguarding the gains of the liberation struggle and defending Zimbabwe's sovereignty. The rhetoric is demythologised by a villager recorded by Meredith (2002:73), who mourned the impact of the Gukurahundi by saying, 'The liberation war was painful, but it had a purpose, it was planned, face to face. *The war that followed was much worse. It was fearful, unforgettable and unacknowledged*' (italics added). In the statement, the villager not only laments the ruthlessness of Gukurahundi but also questions the political administrative legitimacy of the genocidal military campaign. The villager's remarks show that the operation was not about the security of the country, but a sheer evil show of power with tribalistic and selfish interests. The myth that ZANU-PF is protecting Zimbabwe's gains of independence is exposed not only by the Gukurahundi but also post-Gukurahundi atrocities, such as the shooting of Patrick Kombayi in 1990, allegedly by state security agents linked ZANU-PF, and the many incidents of torture, disappearance and murder of opposition members that remain the order of the day in contemporary Zimbabwe; the violent and inhuman destruction of people's homes and businesses in Operation Murambatsvina (in 2005); the post-election violence of Operation Makavhotera papi (2008) and the killing of six civilians by the army in Harare in post-election violence in August 2018. Therefore, remembrance stands against the pervasiveness of the gukurahundi as ZANU-PF's political strategy of governance in Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, remembrance desacralises ZANU-PF's patriotic history that promotes violence. Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front projects itself as ordained by the national ancestors of Zimbabwe and God to be the only ruling party over the country. However, certain statements by ZANU-PF leaders clearly show that their interest is not the people of Zimbabwe, but their own personal self-aggrandisement. Their interest is not serving the people and the country but maintaining power and gaining control of the country's wealth. For instance, Masunungure (2011:56) records a chilling warning in 2008 by Major General Engelbert Rugeje to people who intended voting for the MDC party: 'This country came through the bullet, not the pencil. Therefore, it will not go by your X [voting mark] of the pencil.' Masunungure (2011) also reports that soldiers in the same election warned villagers by saying:

'We fought for this country, and a lot of blood was shed. We are not going to give up our country because of a mere X. How can a ballpoint fight with a gun?' (p. 56)

These statements show that the violence perpetrated by ZANU-PF has nothing to do with defending the sovereignty of Zimbabwe or the welfare of the citizens. Rather, the goal is to foster a one-party state, so that the party can continue to

exploit the country's resources for its own personal gain. These statements show that it is not about the will of the ancestors, or God's will, or the will of the people, but ZANU-PF's own will.

Furthermore, remembrance desacralises ZANU-PF's patriotic history by showing that some of the figures celebrated as national heroes and buried at the National Heroes Acre are not really liberation icons, but villains who ruthlessly committed crimes against humanity. Therefore, remembrance remains necessary, because of the gratuitous nature of the violence perpetrated by ZANU-PF, to remind those who continue to commit political violence that their acts will be remembered; the victims will not forget.

Ultimately, remembrance is necessary because ZANU-PF leaders have never accepted responsibility or apologised for their past violence against defenceless citizens. To forget implies complicity with the perpetual denial of justice to the many people wounded by ZANU-PF's *gukurahundi* strategy.

## Towards a theological ethic that upholds remembrance

The question is, can a theological-ethical argument be made for remembrance, in opposition to Mnangagwa's letting bygones be bygones and Mugabe's forgive and forget? Our answer to this question is guided by Vosloo's already stated affirmation, that 'forgetting can be a moral activity and that we should guard against a fanatical anti-forgetting stance that keeps us captives of the past and robs memory of a future' (Vosloo 2017:13). The argument of this article is that President Mnangagwa's call to Zimbabweans to let bygones be bygones should be accompanied by justice and the Zimbabwean church should not be swayed by a call for forgetting that tramples on justice. Because we are not interested in an ideological anti-forgetting that keeps victims enslaved to the past and deprives memory of the strength to face the future, an appropriate theological ethic of remembrance must be one that empowers victims of ZANU-PF's violence to redemptively hold the party accountable for its violent conduct and lead to the creation of a state ruled by peace instead of violence. This is a form of remembering defined by Volf (2006:12–13) as remembering *rightly*. Volf (2006:126) says, '[r]emembering rightly is work. It requires commitment and discipline' to emphasise a remembering that does not just recall the painful past but recalls it in a responsible, redemptive and constructive manner that seeks to empower the wounded to find healing and reconciliation. Therefore, this article argues that in a Zimbabwe founded and ruled by violence, Mnangagwa's policy of letting bygones be bygones without justice for the wounded must be replaced by empowering the wounded with tools of constructively remembering their wounded past. The wounded must be equipped with means and strategies of calling ZANU-PF to account for its ruthlessness and also to end the use of violence as an instrument of governing the country.

A theological guiding principle for the ethic of remembrance in a Zimbabwe ruled by violence is God's justice, which demands that wrongdoing by leaders and those in power against the poor and powerless people should be taken seriously and addressed. Primarily, the biblical declaration that 'Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you' (Ps 89:14) means that churches should engage in politics from God's perspective of justice – not party partisan patriotism. The demand by the prophet Micah (6:8) on God's people of Judah, 'To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' is corroborated by Matthew's calling to be the salt and the light, which demands that the church in Zimbabwe be on God's side, by standing with the oppressed.

However, many Zimbabwean church leaders are easily swayed by ZANU-PF's narrow nationalism and Pan-Africanism, which lacks justice and stomps on the rights of citizens. Instead of empowering the victims of violence to find just closure for their pain, such pastors prevail on wounded believers to forgive and forget, although they do not apply the same pressure on ZANU-PF to account for its crimes of violence and to reform by pursuing genuine peace.

The promotion of a remembrance instead of forgetting emanates from Mnangagwa's notion of letting bygones be bygones being premised on what Dietrich Bonhoeffer characterises as 'cheap grace'. According to Bonhoeffer (1959):

'Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate' (p. 47).

As proclaimed by Bonhoeffer, cheap grace warns against Mnangagwa's let bygones be bygones, in which he proclaims forgiving and forgetting but is unwilling to repent from this violence and does not provide justice for the wounded. The elements of the Church that have embraced Mnangagwa's gospel of let bygones be bygones in a Zimbabwe that continues to be ruled by violence need to awaken the warning about cheap grace. Instead of making light of the wounds of the wounded by telling them to embrace Mnangagwa's piecemeal programmes of national reconciliation and healing, they should, because of justice, 'keep alive the memory of suffering over against the general tendency of history to celebrate the victors' (Ricoeur 2002:10).

## Conclusion

Robert Vosloo's theological-ethical notion of just memory, which he derives from Paul Ricoeur, challenges the calls by President Emmerson Mnangagwa to wounded Zimbabweans to let bygones be bygones, and former President Robert Mugabe to forgive and forget. Just memory is not an ideological refusal to forgive and forget but a quest for forgiving and forgetting to take place fairly in a healing and transformative manner. The notion of forgetting propagated by ZANU-PF leaders promotes injustice and should be

rejected until it is accompanied by truth-telling and just reconciliation. The memory of the wounded must be preserved by just remembrance that seeks fair address of the past. Remembrance of the past is promoted when victims remember their unjust wounds when they call on their perpetrators to take responsibility and make things right. By holding on to their pain, those wounded by ZANU-PF are not necessarily seeking revenge but a just closure to their pain and the integration of their memory into the national memory of Zimbabwe. By their remembrance, they refuse to have their rights violated by ZANU-PF on account of their differing political beliefs and tribal origins.

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