

“A Tale of Three Dinner Plates” – forensic, narrative and psychological truths and the challenges facing human rights researchers in Zimbabwe

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Human rights reporting in Zimbabwe has been extensive in the last few years, and civics have played a monumental role in keeping Zimbabwe in the public eye – but human rights reports have a very specific mandate and a very moral intent. It is their task to keep track of what could be called “forensic truths” - the essential facts of what happened such as might be raised in a court of law - for lobbying purposes. Human rights reports are not intended to document history as it unfolds in all its nuanced realities, but to be the sledgehammer that may change world opinion, that may make it easier for refugees abroad to get asylum, that will give a voice to the voiceless and raise funds for medical and legal aid for those at the receiving end of state violence, and that will keep the record that may one day contribute to redress and prosecution or compensation. When being confronted by the shocking reality of tortured people day after day, there is neither time nor inclination to whimsically debate the relativity of narrative truths, or how subjective, partial or biased the story being told to you by the person bleeding on the floor might be. Human rights organisations work urgently and against deadlines – to get something together before the next SADC/AU/EU/UN meeting, to keep Zimbabwe in the public eye and to counteract endless ZANU PF propaganda. Zimbabwean civic groups have compiled an unassailable record of the systematic and brutal methods by which ZANU PF has remained in power since 1980. Much of this evidence relies on medical findings and lawyers’ reports, thus meeting the necessary criteria to stand as forensically accurate: somebody either has a hundred welts on his/her body consistent with being whipped with a raw hide whip or s/he does not; a lawyer either had to represent 200 peaceful protestors in police custody, or s/he did not.

All the same, over the last fifteen years of interacting in direct and practical ways with tortured communities, our team has been reminded time and again that truths are often relative, the stories told to us are sometimes partial or highly selective - or are culturally and psychologically true, but empirically false – and that this sometimes only becomes obvious over months or years of returning and working in the same villages and regions. Human rights reports have some of the same limitations attributed to truth commissions, which “have tended to disaggregate the collective nature of social struggles” and that “foreground forensic evidence in the service of a historical narrative [that] marginalizes the experiences

of the victims”.¹ This “microscopic approach” means that human rights reports sidestep what Grandon and Klubock refer to as the “historian’s problem of analyzing the relationship between structure and experience, between individuals, individual events, and broader socio economic and political processes.”

While the moral and actual responsibility of senior ZANU PF office bearers and officials is unequivocal for the terrible abuses that have taken place in Zimbabwe since 1980, at the village level the edges can blur quite significantly as to who the “good guys” and “bad guys” are. People who have been shockingly tortured in one era of violence, may become the perpetrators in another. The national and political narrative we use to explain our actions influences our perception of how right or wrong they are. If you genuinely believe that you are defending the nation against recolonisation and defending the land, if you are following orders from powerful people from outside your village who have given you impunity, do you have diminished responsibility or not? How does this influence your own and others’ perceptions of your guilt? As we will see in this story, the tendency to generalise about who deserves to be punished – all ZANU PF supporters, or all MDC supporters, depending on which side of the fence one sits – can lead to innocent bystanders on both sides becoming victims. If somebody who has been sorely provoked by ZANU PF then attacks a ZANU PF supporter who was not among his own persecutors, will the MDC community perceive this as acceptable street justice, or as an offence? This blurring of guilt and responsibility at the village level has its advantages in my opinion because we are (hopefully) starting to look towards an era in which we may have increasing space – and certainly a desperate need – to begin the process of national healing, particularly in rural villages across the nation. To illustrate the many, many thousands of blurred, fascinating and forensically rather complicated tales that have not yet been told in Zimbabwe in relation to the current violence, I am going to tell a story in which three dinner plates play a significant role.

The dinner plates first came to our attention when a colleague of mine – Peter – was in Gomoza, a remote rural area in Lupane, Matabeleland North, a few weeks ago. Gomoza was the scene of some of the most intense violence in Matabeleland during the upsurge of violence in April, May and June 2008. Matabeleland was actually comparatively “peaceful” with less than 10% of all violence this year occurring in these three western provinces. However, Gomoza became a hot bed of trouble during June. It became very clear to those of us documenting events as they unfolded that – as elsewhere in Matabeleland – the violence was being perpetrated not just, or even predominantly, by ZANU PF, but by

¹ Greg Grandon and Thomas Miller Klubock, *Editors Introduction*, in *Radical History Review* 97: “Truth commissions, state terror, history and memory”, Winter 2007

MDC too. In the rest of Zimbabwe, ZANU PF violence has been far in excess of MDC violence, by around 90%²

ZANU PF of course started the violence – in fact where Matabeleland is concerned they “started it” in the 1980s with Gukurahundi (or possibly in 1963 for daring to break away from ZAPU). In the 1980s to be ZAPU supporting was to be a target of atrocities committed by the ZANU PF aligned 5 Brigade. However, the era ended in 1987 with the Unity Accord, and overnight, the victimised ZAPU group became subsumed into the structures of their persecutors, becoming themselves henceforth ZANU PF. Since 2000, in Matabeleland the majority who were ZAPU and then by default ZANU PF have become MDC, and have found themselves targeted in the last 8 years by those who were once ZAPU victims but remained within ZANU PF post 2000.... The issue of political affiliation and victim hood is complicated in Matabeleland – and became more complicated in the last few weeks, when those ZAPU still within ZANU PF announced that they are once more ZAPU and broke away from their national structures. It seems likely that a contributing factor for support at the grassroots for this recent breakaway is unease at the way in which ZANU PF has (once more) used people at the village level to attack their neighbours, and has now retreated and left local structures to face ostracism and retribution, although this claim needs to be explored more fully.³ In any event, this recent development certainly poses an interesting dilemma for ZANU PF, and may have significantly shifted ZANU PF’s capacity to instigate community based violence in Matabeleland in the future.

The violence of 2008 at village level across the country did not arise spontaneously: it was a highly organised exercise, driven and overseen by the Joint Operational Command. Very systematised instructions and structures of command were set up in every district across Zimbabwe.⁴ Gomoza had been entirely without political violence since 2002, but the deliberate setting up of a war vet base in April this year, in accordance with a ZANU PF master plan to “win” the presidential run off, resulted in the immediate escalation of tensions in the area. The bulk of the rest of our story will not be concerned with the national context, but with the lived experience of violence at the village level in this area.

Gomoza has mass graves from the 5 Brigade massacres, and people in the ZANU PF structures ruthlessly exploited this fact during the so-called run off campaign period of April and May, holding rallies at which people were reminded of these graves and told that on the day after the second

² Solidarity Peace Trust, “Desperately seeking Sanity”, July 2008, for details of this year’s violence, which has resulted in several thousand torture and assault cases and over 100 deaths, predominantly in rural Mashonaland, and with ZANU PF and JOC implicated in over 90% of these. By comparison in Matabeleland there have been a few score of serious assaults and no political deaths.

³ Conversation with an ex ZIPRA cadre involved in the resurrection of ZAPU, November 2008, Bulawayo.

⁴ Solidarity Peace Trust, “Punishing dissent, silencing citizens”, 21 May 2008, for detailed account of process by which rural strategy of violence was set up.

presidential vote, there would be “one MDC vote, one bullet” in the vicinity of the local polling stations, and that new mass graves would be filled on this day. Lists began to circulate – we shall come back to lists later - of those whose houses were to be burnt, whose wives were going to be kidnapped to the bases, or who were going to be killed. At this stage, we started to get our first stream of the displaced from Gomoza in to Bulawayo, where the churches and others worked hard to place families within other families in the city, and to keep people fed and blanketed in the cold winter months.

The violence began at the base, with beatings, and then there was a beating at a homestead of known MDC supporters. This violence by ZANU PF peaked in mid June, when three MDC supporters were so severely beaten that they had to be hospitalised with broken limbs and other injuries. Those in the MDC structures became extremely angry and afraid that if they did not begin to retaliate, this process of escalation of violence would continue.

Firstly, the MDC supporters went to the local police and tried to insist that cases of assault were opened against the well known perpetrators. Predictably, the police refused to do this, saying the assaults were “political” and their hands were tied. The MDC then organised themselves into a gang, calling in MDC reinforcements from St Paul’s Mission, in the neighbouring ward of Lupane. That Saturday, the ZANU PF governor of Matabeleland North called a huge rally nearby, and the MDC gang decided it would be a good day to waylay lots of ZANU PF supporters on their way back from this rally. They set up an ambush by a little bridge, and that evening, after dark, as ZANU PF supporters made their way back to Gomoza along this dirt track, the MDC gang thoroughly and viciously attacked scores of them. The MDC gang had axes, spears, sticks – real weapons of intent – and several ZANU PF supporters ended up hospitalised with severe injuries. Furthermore, those who were beaten had also not necessarily been among the perpetrators of the preceding ZANU PF violence, although some of them had been. Those attacked included women and even children.

Also around this time, MDC members went to attack the war veteran base where much of the violence had occurred, and the few people sitting around there fled as they advanced. One war veteran that they captured was beaten very badly, after which they trashed the base, including destroying all the cooking utensils – pots, dinner plates, spoons etc. Among the items that were destroyed, was *the first dinner plate* of our story. It was the dinner plate brought to the base by a senior ZANU PF woman, as her offering to the setting up of the base in April.

After this, many of the MDC perpetrators fled into Bulawayo to hide – and the churches took them in as victims of political violence and looked after them – whether they were aware that some of these men were responsible for axing their neighbours and that is why they had run away, is not clear.

Those who did not run fast or far enough, were of course caught and handed over to the police, often after being tied up and severely tortured at the ZANU PF base first. Those handed over were not necessarily those actually responsible for the violence, simply being known MDC supporters who had not run away. They were then beaten again in police custody, and moved from one police station to another, in freezing weather and without access to food or legal support, until the Bulawayo MDC office eventually located them in Hwange and was able to send food and lawyers. Their cases currently still sit before the courts, with endless tedious and stressful remand dates in far away Hwange.

Meanwhile, back in Gomoza, ZANU PF was now on the rampage again, and one of the sources of their self righteous anger was the destruction of property at their base. People in the ZANU PF structures therefore went from MDC homestead to MDC homestead, beating whoever they found there and also stealing utensils to replace those destroyed. This brings us to the *second dinner plate* of our story. This was the dinner plate that the senior ZANU PF lady stole from her MDC supporting nephew, while he was being beaten, and it was this second dinner plate that we heard about first.

On a day in October – four months after the worst of the violence in Gomoza, there was an attempt by traditional and church leadership from the area to hold a meeting to discuss the recent violence and what to do about it. However, as people were trickling in to this very tense meeting, a man suddenly started to shout – “I want my dinner plate back! That woman stole my dinner plate and she cannot attend this meeting until I have my dinner plate back!!” There was a general uproar as this man advanced threateningly on his aunt, who hastily retreated in fear of her safety, along with other ZANU supporters, and the meeting disbanded in chaos.

My colleague Peter, on hearing that a dinner plate had effectively destroyed a meeting in the area, was intrigued and went to discuss the matter with the accused woman. She confirmed that yes – she had stolen her nephew’s dinner plate, but that it was to replace her own. In the course of a long discussion, she admitted she did not know for sure if her nephew had been among those who had attacked the base, or that if he had been, whether he in fact was the one who destroyed her dinner plate. She only knew that he was MDC and therefore was considered responsible by association at that time. She also said that she was now prepared to apologise and replace the plate, but was terrified of approaching her nephew directly in case he attacked her or rejected her offer, after which it would be difficult to proceed.

This brings us to *the third dinner plate*, which is the one that we must now identify and use in an act of restorative justice to heal the rift in this family and to start healing the rift in the community at large. As long as these two very influential people – one ZANU PF and one MDC - are not prepared to be seen in the same place at the same time, their respective political parties have no way to move forward constructively. As nobody knows what has happened to the actual second plate, the aunt will find a decent, third dinner plate and offer it to her nephew in restoration.

However, before this happens, Peter will have to spend time with the nephew and find out whether he is ready for this act yet, and establish what other issues need to be brought to the table in relation to the recent violence before this gesture can indeed have a positive effect. This will inevitably be a far more complicated matter than we are yet aware of – the dinner plate is what we might call a “presenting symptom” but is undoubtedly not the only issue causing pain for this man, considering all that has happened in Gomoza not just this year, but over the decades. This man actually wants his self respect in the eyes of the community back, he wants a public retraction of his humiliation and the humiliation of others – he does not simply want his plate back. However, the desire of at least some in the community is that the *dinner plate issue* is resolved, and therefore this must now be utilised to the full, as an opening to work in Gomoza in a way that will defuse some of the conflicts and help rebuild some kind of coexistence at least. The day on which the third dinner plate may be formally handed over could be many months away yet, and it is important that the day is not forced on these two prematurely, or it will not do its job of restoring some sense of justice.⁵

The point about this tale of Gomoza is that the truths of what happened are very confused and confusing. What we might call the “psychological truth” is comparatively straightforward: nobody will admit to having been a perpetrator, or if they do, it was only because *they* were *fully* justified in what they did – although what happened to them was *not* justified - and *everybody* is a victim in one way or another.

With regard to collective narrative truths, the ZANU PF supporters begin their narrative of 2008 violence with what happened on the bridge after the rally on 21 June – the mayhem, the way innocent women were attacked in the dark, the raid on their base etc etc. For many ordinary ZANU PF supporters, the violence in terms of their own exposure to it, did begin on this day with the attack on themselves – while all were aware of the violence and intimidation at the base, not every ZANU PF supporter had

⁵ The “dinner plate” is not the only route in to the very complex conflicts in Gomoza – for one further example, Peter is also dealing with the case of the man whose worst humiliation was being forced to robe himself in a length of fabric covered with Mugabe’s portrait, and then being forced to shout ZANU slogans and dance while being laughed at: this man has sought expensive help from a traditional healer to deal with the resulting insomnia and anxiety, and wants these bills paid in compensation – but that is another long story.

been party to it, and many still choose not to admit that it happened. MDC wants to begin the narrative with the threatening rallies and beatings, and the failure of the police to mete out justice by arresting their persecutors, leaving them with no option but street justice. And most people on both sides of the divide refer to previous histories of violence spanning many decades or generations when trying to explain, or justify, or be outraged by what has happened in 2008.

The violence of Gomoza has already spilled over to Johannesburg, where sons of Gomoza's MDC families have already severely beaten the son of one of the Gomoza ZANU PF families, who is alleged to have sent from Johannesburg a hippopotamus hide sjambok so that his ZANU PF father could whip MDC members. "The battle of the Gomoza bridge" is an international affair at this stage! And there is a real danger that over the Christmas period this year, there will be violence in Gomoza as those in the Diaspora come home with their weapons from the streets of Hillbrow and seek vengeance for the events of June.

As human rights documentarists, we are supposed to arrive at forensic truths, and place them nicely in tables with totals at the ends of the columns, saying how many did what to whom, where, when, and what with. But in fact, if you go back down to the ground, these forensic truths can sometimes become a great deal messier. It is a very challenging experience to try to understand the layers and nuances of political violence and memory which, in the dark forests of Matabeleland go back more than one hundred years.⁶

A further important issue to be raised is that NGOs in pursuit of the truth, or following their mandate to deliver humanitarian aid, sometimes do this in a way that creates new conflicts or false expectations. There have been new areas of conflict in Gomoza in the post violence period since June – and they have been caused by well meaning NGO and church personnel who are trying to deal with what happened as if it is simply something that can be reduced to lists and who are not aware of the complexities of the situation. Firstly, there is a wide spread perception among the MDC supporters, that some of their colleagues have already been unfairly picked out and rewarded by the NGOs. In their perception, those who bravely sat it out in Lupane and were beaten and terrorised and maybe even jailed, have not been materially "compensated", while those who showed the least courage, and fled before the violence even began, or who ran away faster than them after the MDC- instigated violence - *were* materially "compensated". What is being referred to here is the fact that those who were displaced into Bulawayo, all received blankets, second hand clothes and regular food parcels for the duration of their displacement, and have since returned to Gomoza with these donated goods. Several of those who

⁶ With acknowledgement to J Alexander, J McGregor and T Ranger, who first pointed this out in their book "Violence and memory: a hundred years in the dark forests of Matabeleland"; James Curry, Oxford, 2000.

received NGO “compensation” were among those who brutally attacked ZANU PF in the incident at the bridge – and ZANU PF is outraged that these perpetrators have received material reward! Furthermore, without adequate awareness of the problems their system has already inadvertently caused, some of the hosting churches recently stated that they were going to make a day trip out to Gomoza and drop off more food, fertiliser and seed packs – but only for those MDC “victims” that they already had on their very incomplete lists – where in fact many of these so-called victims are widely regarded as perpetrators by many of their neighbours! They were persuaded not to do so, unless they were prepared at this stage to provide seed for every family in the violence affected area. In the poverty stricken and starving context of rural Zimbabwe, it would have fuelled tensions disastrously if this very selective group had been favoured at the exclusion of others, considering the complexity of what really happened.

This brings our story back to the issue of “lists”. Lists are extremely dangerous and value laden items in most of rural Zimbabwe. Lists dominate almost every aspect of people’s lives. Lists are compiled to decide who should receive food from the World Food Programme; lists decide who can buy food from the Grain Marketing Board; lists decide who is eligible for social support with regard to school fees (although this is now a distant memory!), and lists decide who can do “food for work”. In short, if your name is on the list, you benefit, and if it is not, you do not. He who compiles “the list” is powerful indeed.

In times of political tension, lists become ominous: in Matabeleland, the 5 Brigade often travelled with lists of ex-ZIPRAs, and those on the list were killed – and if they could not be found then their wives or fathers or sons or whoever else were killed instead. ZANU PF have become masters at compiling lists – lists of what order you must stand in behind your headman on voting day; lists of who is in the MDC structures and must therefore be forced to surrender their cards and be tortured; lists of who was an MDC polling agent and who therefore can never again buy food at GMB – etc. To be on these lists is to be in line for some kind of punishment or deprivation.

It is not surprising then, that further confusion was created and false expectations raised in Gomoza when one of the churches went out with piles of forms – under instructions from their umbrella body to get that neat forensic truth about the violence - and began going homestead to homestead asking who did what to whom, when and with what? Within a few hours the news got around that the Church was compiling lists – and as this church is a benign force in this area, this was clearly a good list to be on, and was surely about compensation. Thereafter, several families fraudulently claimed to have a family member that had been beaten and property that had been lost, completely confounding the so called forensic truth! The church then decided to have a public meeting to discuss the issue and to verify the

information they had collected. Predictably, this degenerated into total chaos very quickly, as neighbour was expected to stand up and denounce neighbour in the pursuit of some “truth” - in a situation where people are emotionally nowhere near ready to conduct mini truth telling sessions! Tempers and accusations flared into shouting matches and the church hastily shut down the meeting and fled, leaving tensions and divisions at renewed boiling point! The so-called forensic truth around events in Gomoza remains elusive, if we are thinking in neat column and table terms!

To summarise the main point of our story of the ZANU PF dinner plate, the MDC dinner plate and the dinner plate that will restore some kind of equilibrium among neighbours – I hope their time is coming. I long for the day when we can stop writing reactive, sledgehammer reports and start to write more considered and nuanced histories of the many decades of structural violence and the lived realities of what it has done to our communities. There is an entrenched political culture of violence in Zimbabwe: ZANU PF and Mugabe have boasted of their degrees in violence, and violence is the strategy of choice for them whenever political control is threatened, as events of this year have amply shown. MDC, too, has a history of intra and inter party political violence, although this is on a small scale compared to ZANU PF violence.⁷ However, we need to face, understand and deconstruct the phenomenon of political violence wherever it is, if we wish to create a different political culture in a future Zimbabwe.

To understand the lived experience of violence and repression, we need to tell the story of the Mugabe wrap around skirt and the traditional healer who healed the damage it caused; the story of the children in Binga who actually did not starve to death after all, even though they could have, or should have, or surely will; the story of the raped virgin who turned out to have a four year old child; of the young man whose handcuffs were struck off his wrists by a bolt of lightning sent by his ancestral spirits, thus enabling him to escape from his captors in Nkayi. We need to acknowledge and explore the personal and cultural experience of politics and violence and how these events have been interpreted and integrated into the local histories – because this will undoubtedly influence how future violence takes place and is in turn perceived. These are complicated stories that do not meet the criteria of forensic truth, and that you will never see in any human rights report – but these stories give us fascinating routes in to understanding what it is that violence does to people and the way they interact. More importantly, they give us routes in to working with communities in Zimbabwe that are already – hesitantly, anxiously and with few resources to help them, battling to find each other as neighbours because they know they have to, if their communities are going to survive in the extremely harsh world that is Zimbabwe today.

⁷⁷ There have been three internal commissions of inquiry into MDC violence, in 2001, 2004 and 2005.