Report on the Workshop on the Cultural Construction of Zimbabwe, 
Harare 20 – 22 November, 2007

The workshop, held in Bronte Hotel, had 24 participants, mostly from Zimbabwe, but also from Botswana, South Africa, Sweden and Denmark. There were 23 papers, divided into 8 sessions according to topics. The first session consisted of a paper outlining a conceptual and theoretical framework by Mai Palmberg from the Nordic Africa Institute, which had invited this workshop. Her paper set out a series of tentative definitions of key concepts such as the division of cultural construction into an official ‘national unity agenda’ and ‘the construction of identities,’ which was seen as an analytical tool. Several views of nationalism were discussed as well as the meaning and use of culture in the national project. The paper provided a framework for containing the various categories of papers and offered an opportunity for discussions and comparisons without forcing a definitive pattern onto the workshop. An initial discussion was sparked about the need to acknowledge that there are several cultural constructions of Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the point was raised that since there have obviously always been various investments in differing cultural constructions of the nation, the conference might, in fact, be more concerned with current ‘reconstructions’ of Zimbabwe vis-à-vis the present crisis in the country.

The division of culture as that which is imposed ‘from above’ (perceived as a nation building project) and that which emerged ‘from below’, (perceived as the unorganized, traditional or spontaneous cultural expressions of the people), and the difficulties in making the two meet, was the topic for the second session, Country without Nation.

Pathisa Nyathi’s paper dealt with nation building from the macro point-of-view: the level of the state. He doubted whether Zimbabwe could be called a ‘nation’, since it lacks the necessary shared allegiance to the state. He saw the country’s development as a ‘litany for missed opportunities’ and stressed the split between ZAPU and ZANU as a decisive and ongoing obstacle to unity. This argument was borne out by the discussion of the present debate about the symbolic insult of ZANU-PF’s reticence to bury the deceased ZIPRA leader Masala Sibanda at Heroes’ Acre.

The following three papers, delivered by members of the History Department at the University of Zimbabwe looked at cultural construction ‘from below’, presented by Anusa Daimon, Joseph
Mujere, and Ivan Marowa. They dealt with minority group or tribal identities, deliberately setting them apart, partly in order to break down the monolith of ‘pure’ Shona culture into smaller and divergent components, and partly to emphasize the disadvantaged position of some of these sub-cultures. This sparked off a lively discussion of the uses and abuses of ethnicity, and there seemed to be an agreement on the statement that what makes one ‘aggressively assert ethnicity’ is its use as access to power. Important as this topic undoubtedly is, it bypassed a discussion about the importance and value of the political message of concentrating on sub-group identities as a means of trying to solve or at least diversify the impact of Shona-Ndebele opposition. Instead, some delegates raised questions about what they called the ‘strong jingoistic concerns’ expressed by the papers.

Another thread of inquiry emerging out of this session looked at the extent to which language and culture determine ethnicity, and, consequently, the extent to which ethnicity determines nationhood. The discussions around these themes laid the groundwork for later discussions throughout the workshop as to the ethnic, linguistic, cultural, historical, geographical and aesthetic lines that sketch the always indeterminate, yet hotly contested, borders of a nation.

The following session, Country Without Nation II continued with a discussion of nation building ‘from above’: the manipulation of archaeological sites and ‘visible aspects of cultural heritage’ in the creation of national monumental history. Ashton Sinamai discussed the colonial appropriation of the ruins at Great Zimbabwe, as well as the fact that ‘with about 75% of the population being of Shona origin and thus directly linked to Zimbabwean culture sites it is possible that the construction of a Zimbabwean identity may end up reflecting an ethnic chauvinism which may not tolerate diversity.’ A question was raised as to whether such ethnic chauvinism was the people’s narrative or that of the government, to which Mr Sinamai responded by considering groups, who lived near Great Zimbabwe, who had entirely their own stories about, and cultural understandings of, the ruins, irrespective of any official use. This point resonated with the history department’s ‘bottom up’ approach to national construction, yet still did not answer questions as to the dangers of ethnic chauvinism, whether nationally sanctified or not.

Paul Hubbard and Robert Burnett’s paper maintained focus on the issue of national unity via a discussion of the use of archaeology to question the cultural myths of Ndebele violence, and the
construction of the Ndebele as a tribe, rather that as a political unit. In this respect Hubbard and Burnett discussed the uses of the site of KwoBulawayo as a founding myth for the Ndebele.

This was an idea picked up on in Deon Nkomo’s paper in which he interrogated the role that linguistics plays in etching the limits of Ndebele identity and the so-called Ndebele ‘nation’. His observation that the national construct of the Ndebele nation, via linguistics, creates a correlative concept that Shona is the ‘authentic’ national language of Zimbabwe, critiqued the myth that a nation should be unified by a single, unified language.

The following session, Cultural Expressions Forming Consciousness centred on the Zimbabwean art forms of stone sculpture and theatre, and brought the discussion back to grass root expressions. Owen Seda asked the question to what extent Zimbabwean stone sculpture was ‘a true and direct reflection of its contemporary environment and to what extent it is “culturally relevant”.’ Seda’s consideration of the tensions between stone and other sculpture as a form of aesthetic (or even of metaphysical) self-expression, on the one hand, and the object value of art for tourists, on the other, moved the workshop beyond easy binarisms between what Joseph Mujere usefully called ‘authentic art and airport art’. The artists’ negotiation between these two poles suggests a more complex and nuanced relationship to these different aspects of aesthetic production.

However, it was felt by the participants that the rich tourist market had too big an influence on art. While this discussion was a protest against the influence of the West on Zimbabwe’s culture, the discussion about theatre focused more on intra-national concerns. Nehemia Chivandikwa saw present Zimbabwean theatre as an expression of ‘formidable voices which called for radical reforms in the governance of the country.’ He also saw the very direct protest exhibited by the plays under consideration as problematic since he felt that such plays were in danger of preaching to the converted and of losing efficacy. The paper raised questions as to how one determines and defines protest in art and started to unpack the complexities of this relationship between art and political dissent or advocacy.

The discussion then turned away from the political aspect of government interference and centred on more specific aspects of theatre, such as the necessity for de-familiarisation and the role of
epiphany. It did, however, touch upon the role of possible foreign money for critical theatre companies and their actors.

The following session Literature Revisioning Zimbabwe continued the discussion of culture ‘from below’, and the pattern of culture from below being in opposition to state sponsored culture was strengthened. Although very different, all three papers in the session came under the heading of protest, but as such they were an illustration of how wide this category is. Kizito Muchemwa described the situation of this wish for counter-cultures as ‘an everywhereness that calls for different performances of identity.’ In his paper he discussed Chirikure Chirikure’s poetry as ‘a rear–view mirror’ of traditional aesthetics, forms and moralities in which the artist frees traditional forms from colonial, neo-colonial and present government misuse. In allowing for a fluid set of meanings that moves us beyond monumental and patriotic forms of history, the poet liberates tradition. The discussion centred on the difficulty of combining this view with what was, at times, a fierce insistence on the specificities of ethnic groups (which gestured back to the second session of the conference) and a tentative compromise was reached, making room for both plural nationalisms and the possibility of a unitary vision.

Muchemwa also ventured a critique of totems as potentially rigid and static and resistant to the type of ‘new possibilities for imagining the nation’ that his reading of Chirikure Chirikure recommended. Enna Gudhanga extended this idea to interrogate how various strategies of othering play out in Shona and English fiction.

Anna Chitando’s paper on Valerie Tagwira’s novel The Uncertainty of Hope described the novel in terms of its wide-ranging protest, targeting both the victims of Murambatsvina and the corruption in the police and political and commercial elite. She emphasized the feminist aspect of the novel and its capacity for creating role models for strong, independent women.

Tendai Marima then introduced the question of women’s capacity to authorize their own versions of history, and thus ‘banish silence’, through the medium of fiction. The paper directed its protest outwards, towards Western feminism and insisted on carving out a special space for African womanism in which motherhood played an all important role. Tendai Marima found in her reading of motherhood, sexuality and feminism(s) in the novels of Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera
that female representation continues to be a contested space. The paper sparked off a discussion about the nature of African womanism and its differences from Western feminism. In both Tendai Marima’s and Ruth Kandawasvika’s papers, so-called Western ‘radical’ feminism was seen to try to demolish existing gender structures including marriage and bride-price, and African womanism was posited as accepting these structures and working to improve them. This broad positing of the dynamics between western and African feminisms, which was largely based on a degree of misunderstanding, required far greater discussion and debate and, unfortunately, the participants did not get beyond a convenient set of absolutes around questions of gender. It would be immensely beneficial for discussions around gender, and the relationship between so-called ‘western’ and ‘African’ modalities of feminism, to be extended so as to negotiate a way through and beyond this impasse.

The overall thrust of the session was protest, in different forms and directed at different targets.

**Representing the Nation**

This session focused on how the nation imagines itself in various representational sites, as well as how the nation is imagined through different cultural forms. Ezra Chitando’s paper considered the trope of the ‘suffering servant’ as a politically efficacious motif in contemporary Gospel music. Mickias Musiyiwa also concentrated on the relationship between music and nation-building, this time with specific focus on ZANU-PF music rallies. Interesting debates emerged around the political positioning of musicians participating in these rallies: it was clear, from the discussion, that these musicians are not spokespeople for the ruling party, nor are they necessarily interested in politics at all. The tensions between the individual artist’s ideological and political beliefs and the popular platform provided by the rallies resonated with previous discussions of the dynamics between aesthetics and ‘authentic’ self-expression and the expedience of utilising the use-value of one’s art. In this instance, of course, the site of aesthetic ‘compromise’, or simply ‘negotiation’, occurs at the intersection of art and the governments public presentation of itself: a significant site of the creation of the national imaginary. The discussion around this point suggested, though, that both the artists and the audiences of such rallies are not uncritical or naïve observers of this process of nation-building, and participation in these rallies does not mean unquestioning loyalty to the ruling party.
Ashleigh Harris’s paper considered the representation of the nation in the rhetoric of ZANU-PF itself: in this case suggesting that the rhetorical ‘othering’ of HIV/AIDS in discourse around Operation Murambatsvina begins to outline a potentially dangerous version of nationhood in which those who ‘belong’ are morally ‘clean’, and thus not ‘tainted’ by the implied moral dirt of HIV/AIDS.

The Media’s Power to Change

In this session discussions about the relationship between the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and local content indicated that a national broadcaster is an important and highly disputed site upon which the national imaginary is formulated, perpetuated and negotiated. Definitional questions around local content returned the discussion to broader issues of borders and boundaries of nationhood, which even in the specific, legalistic definition of the term, as Tendai Chari pointed out, remains very broadly understood: for example, ‘local content’ for the ZBC can include work made not only in Zimbabwe or the Southern region, but throughout the entire continent. Susan Makore discussed the local content system from a gender perspective.

The second part of this session took these matters further in looking at the ways in which the nation of Zimbabwe is formulated and perceived beyond its national borders: from Botswana (in Eno Akpabio’s paper) to South Africa and the commonwealth nations (in Yolanda Taylor’s paper).

Government Phiri’s paper returned to the local dynamics of the relationship between civil society and government in which, as Mr Phiri described, the lines that define friends and enemies of the state, irrespective of their local dimensions, also engage the question of the definition of the Zimbabwean nation more broadly in the global sphere. That is, the ruling party’s current positing of civil society as ‘the enemy’, has consequences for how the party is viewed from abroad.

A common issue running through the session was the danger of delineating social and political meanings in binaristic ways. Such delineations allow for very static understandings of what constitutes the ‘authentic’ and the ‘inauthentic’ nation. The issue of totems were discussed once again, with little consensus as to their value in the process of nation building, and also the restrictive danger of such formulations of nationhood.
Where to?
How can one get beyond definitions of the nation beyond an enforced unity? What kind of genuine unity in diversity is it possible to visualize in contemporary Zimbabwe? These were some of the most pertinent questions that delegates were left with at the close of the workshop: questions which, it was felt, required more thorough analysis, discussion and debate.

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