

## **BUILDING PEACE IN THE ABSENCE OF PEACE INFRASTRUCTURE: EXPLORING THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE JOSHUA NKOMO COMMEMORATION IN ZIMBABWE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Post liberation war Zimbabwe has not known peace since attaining independence in 1980. The country's political leaders have for a long time promised to deliver peace to the citizens of the country. Peacebuilding efforts have however been uncoordinated and haphazard and the pace has also been very sluggish. Without a comprehensive peace infrastructure they have been literally putting the cart before the horse. In an effort to bridge the gap between the political elite and the common people, memorialisation through the use of commemorative symbols seems to have become a peacebuilding strategy of choice. In this regard, this paper seeks to explore the social configurations and the implications of the commemoration of Zimbabwe's late Vice President Joshua Nkomo through the erection of a statue and the renaming of a street and an airport. Using the context of the immediate past Government of National Unity and the envisaged Peace and Reconciliation Commission in the 2013 constitution, the paper adopts a Lederachian perspective in the exploration of the issues. The paper argues that in creating memorials that are meaningful for the victims it is important that authors are speaking to and with the victims and not just for and/ about them.*

**Key words:** *Commemoration, Memorialisation, Peacebuilding, Peace Infrastructure, Zimbabwe*

## **Introduction**

Zimbabwe has its work cut out in terms of laying down the foundations of sustainable peace. The 2013 Global Peace Index puts Zimbabwe at number 149 out of 162 countries which is clearly not a flattering position to be in. The peacebuilding pace has always appeared to be sluggish in the absence of a comprehensive peace infrastructure. This is not to claim however that nothing is being done. The recent erection and commissioning of the Joshua N. Nkomo statue, renaming of Main Street and Bulawayo International Airport on 22 December 2013, are important milestones in the country's peacebuilding efforts. Place-naming and commemoration involve complex and intertwined sets of social and political relations that change over time. Thotse (2010) posits that in recent years, a dynamic literature has emerged, on the political struggles that surround commemorative practices and the locational dynamics underlying these struggles with some works highlighting the politics of heroic commemoration. The complexity of commemoration at times involves issues of scaling as was experienced during the initial stages of the Joshua Nkomo commemoration. Scaling of memory usually presents challenges. Concerns were raised about the size of the statue by the family and local civil society organisations, and the first statue that had been erected had to be taken down. After much consultation and deliberation the final scaling was acceptable to most of the people. The scaling of Nkomo's memory revolves around the importance of the street he was named after, the size of the commemorative statue, and the importance of the Bulawayo International Airport which was named after him. The purpose of this article is to examine the social configuration of the Joshua Nkomo memorialisation and to provide a theoretical context within which it can be understood. This paper also explores the possibility of utilising the Joshua Nkomo commemoration as a stepping stone towards successfully building peace in Zimbabwe.

## **Historical background**

The Second *Chimurenga/Umvukela* liberation war which ended in 1980 saw the birth of the country and a subsequent recognition of its heroes. Since memories of the liberation struggle dominate public and social memory in Zimbabwe; when one talks of national heroes such names as Josiah Magama Tongogara, Lookout Masuku, Robert Mugabe, Dumiso Dabengwa, Joice

Mujuru and Joshua N. Nkomo will always come up. Like in any other country such heroes have been immortalised through various means such as the erection of commemorative statues, renaming of streets, buildings and residential areas. The practice of setting up statues of political leaders on public sites was introduced into Zimbabwe by the British, who installed statues of explorers and heroes of the settler regime. After Independence, the practice was continued with the installation of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, at the newly set up National Heroes Acre. Many streets, buildings, schools, hospitals and other institutions were named after liberation heroes. The late Joshua Nkomo's statue is however the first statue of a political leader to be erected in the post colonial era.

Joshua Nkomo was born on June 17, in 1918 in Semokwe reserve of South West Matabeleland, and was educated in South Africa (Nkomo, 1987). Throughout his political career he earned the respect of all his countrymen, earning himself respectable names like *Chibwechitedza* and Father Zimbabwe. Despite his fallout with the ZANU PF led government in the early 1980s, by the time of his death he had regained his status as the country's father figure. In line with restoration as a national leader, the Zimbabwe government decided to honour the memory of the late Nkomo by renaming the Bulawayo International Airport and Bulawayo's Main Street after him. In addition, a statue was erected along Main Street now known as Joshua N. Nkomo Street. The three were commissioned on December 22 2013, a day on which the country commemorates the Unity Accord signed in 1987 between Nkomo's ZAPU and Mugabe's ZANU to form a united ZANU (PF).

Since its erection the statue has attracted hundreds of onlookers on a daily basis. It has become a centre of attraction in the city. Plans are underway to erect an identical statue of Nkomo in the capital city, Harare and such a development will essentially re-establish him as a true national figure (Chinobva and Makwati, 2014). The full significance of the commemoration can only be realised when the socio-political context is taken into consideration. It is therefore important to note that the commemoration took place against a backdrop of a polarised and politically volatile environment. The commemoration took place at a time when the country was emerging from a bruising election which saw the demise of the Government of Unity and the return of ZANU PF

to power as the sole ruling party. One of ZANU PF's trump cards was its promise to deliver peace and unity to a traumatised nation. The commemoration of the late vice President Joshua Nkomo can therefore be viewed as one way of living up to the electoral promise of delivering peace and unity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The authors of this paper regard Zimbabwe as a conflict transitional state. The relative peace (although to a large extent negative) that the country is enjoying is a result of top-down approaches to peacebuilding. The top-down mediation process that ushered in the Government of National Unity and the subsequent dispensation under a new constitution (GNU) cannot be regarded as a guarantee for sustainable peace in the country. Taking such a stance, the paper makes use of Lederach's (2005) model which can be adopted as a prism through which current peacebuilding efforts are being implemented. Lederach (2005:854) contends that "while negotiations may broker unique opportunities that take the form of peace accords and agreements, ultimately these opportunities are given flesh and life to the degree they create social energies and spaces that sustain change processes in people's relationships and communities." In this regard, it is our contention that commemoration and memorialisation can provide that flesh that Lederach (2005) alludes to. Lederach (2002) has advocated an approach to transforming protracted social conflicts which is primarily aimed at improving relationships between conflicting groups, principally because 'relationship is the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution' (Lederach, 2002:26). Thus, the commemoration and memorialisation of an iconic leader such as Nkomo is one way in which citizens can be given an opportunity to form and retain positive relationships based on trust and respect rather than fear and hatred. Because peace-building measures involve all levels of society and target all aspects of the state structure, they require a wide variety of agents for their implementation. These agents advance peace-building efforts by addressing functional and emotional dimensions in specified target areas, (Maiese 2003). It is contention that commemoration and memorialisation is one such way.

Lederach's model provides a shift away from top-down approaches to holistic and inclusive peacebuilding programmes. The model calls for the participation of different levels of society in

commemorations (Nagle 2008). Lederach describes commemoration as a social space in which narratives of the past and future can meet and become singular. He goes on to posit that there is need to approach commemorative not as events but processes. The Joshua Nkomo commemoration can therefore be viewed from the Lederachian perspective as a project with a lot of potential to create sustainable peace in Zimbabwe.

Lederach (2002) states that a successful peacebuilding strategy must reach all components of society and not just be focussed on high-level political actors:

“If we are to move beyond settlement and toward reconciliation or toward what I refer to as sustainable peace processes, we must not limit our lenses to only the highest level of political actors and the peace negotiations they forge. I have graphically depicted this as a pyramid that describes three related but different processes. The first process is a top-down negotiation conducted by a few representative and usually highly visible leaders. The second is bottom-up approaches that involve the forcing of understanding and peace at local levels according to the unique characteristics of those local settings. The third is middle-out approaches that can support both of the other two in unique ways and that often provide linkages vertically in the society and horizontally across the lines of conflict.” \*

Lederach invites us to think of a conflict context in the same way we would as a biological ecosystem; one which is dynamic and inter-related. Peace processes cannot be achieved in isolation in one part of society without simultaneous activities at other levels if the process is going to be truly transformative or indeed sustainable, given the pressures and temptation to revert to violence that are often placed on the system.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The notion of peacebuilding is a complex and continuously changing term. Peacebuilding itself has several key characteristics, including the long-term nature of the process, the

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\*Lederach, John-Paul., ‘Civil Society and Reconciliation in Crocker’, A., *Turbulent Peace, The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*, p 843.

interdependence of the actors, the multidimensional nature of the process and its concern with the consolidation of peace. It is practiced in many conflict-torn nations throughout the world. However, the term peacebuilding does not have a set definition. Peacebuilding is a very widely used term and it differs according to the individuals and contexts. Different writers and organisations have different opinions on what peacebuilding is and what tools it encompasses. According to Boutros-Ghali (1992) in *An Agenda for Peace*, peacebuilding consists of a wide range of activities associated with capacity building, reconciliation, and societal transformation. On the other hand, Lederach (2005) identifies the moral imagination he sees as the essence of peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is identified with the human capacities to envision new and dynamic patterns of relationships and engagement, as well as with the courage to pursue the concretisation of that vision in the world. In pursuit of wide-ranging social change, peacebuilding draws primarily upon human creativity, to transform the largely unfamiliar, entrenched patterns of peace into the norm.

### **Commemoration**

In an era characterized by increased loss of identity, the need for the erection of commemorative monuments can never be overstated. From a peacebuilding perspective monuments can be viewed as rallying points for a shared common memory and identity. They are the material signifiers of ideas that are intended to be immortalized (Osborne 2001). Collective memories can be personalized by erecting statues of individuals who managed to capture the imagination of the communities especially through their sacrifice towards the attainment of community aspirations. The ritual of the commemoration of the dead is an example of social habitual memories. Abousnnouga (2012) argues that studies in anthropology and archaeology reveal that wars and battles have been followed by a desire to socially commemorate the events for many centuries. It therefore comes as no surprise that the Government of Zimbabwe decided to immortalise the memory of the late Joshua Nkomo.

According to Abousnnouga (2012) there are basically three approaches that facilitate the understanding of the politics of commemoration. The first approach is what is referred to as the ‘top- down’ approach. It is an approach that takes the perspective of commemoration as an

exercise in power, involving the social institutions and elites using a ritualized form that allows them to promote their own particular memories. The second approach is the social agency approach, which puts less emphasis on the role of the state. This approach concentrates on accounts of experiences as expressed by ordinary people, rather than an official top-down form of commemoration. The third approach they identify takes a view from ‘below’; meaning the individual’s, rather than the establishment’s perspective; this involves a popular memory approach that explores personal experiences. Citing Danzer (1987), Abousnnouga (2012) acknowledges the importance of taking a systematic approach to the analysis of monuments. A systematic approach to the analysis of monuments calls for the examination of key elements of the memorial under investigation which include its history, design and site.

### **Memorialisation**

Traditionally, memorialisation is used to denote only deliberate action to preserve the memory of a violent past, rather than *ad hoc*, spontaneous acts of memorialisation that emerge after violence (Robins, 2014). However, with time, memorialisation has emerged as an important feature of post-conflict societies, countries emerging from violent conflict, and of what has hitherto been termed transitional justice. Though practiced for centuries as an almost instinctive reaction to violence, more sustained attention to memorialisation has only recently gathered pace, with the process gradually democratised over the course of a number of years. Local, national and international actors are now frequently part of the development and implementation of memory initiatives that are intended to serve a number of purposes after violent conflict. Commonly understood in terms of commemoration, the non-recurrence of violence and symbolic forms of reparations, research now demonstrates that memorialisation must be considered beyond these traditional understandings and as contributing in much more dynamic and diverse ways to attempts to deal with a violent past, including truth and justice. In this respect, more profound participation in memory, struggles over history and debates about the relationship between the past and the present have dramatically increased.

An awareness and understanding of context should be key to any intervention after conflict. In this regard, context denotes mindfulness to a number of essential factors that directly relate to the

violence that was perpetrated, but also those factors that are idiosyncratic of the particular society or culture. Context thus implies consideration of the different contextual layers within a society, including the traditional and local, the regional and international, as well as recognising the actors involved and the roles that they play. Context also denotes recognition of the importance of societal norms and socio-cultural traditions, having regard to the inherent differences that exist within societies.

When engaging in memorialisation it is even more essential to be conscious of these factors than when becoming involved in mechanisms such as criminal justice. Memory initiatives are often much more value-driven and moulded by the idiosyncrasies of the individual context, rather than restrained by external procedures. Given the choices that will have to be made in decision-making on memorialisation, this comprehension will lead to better understanding of the potential of memory initiatives to positively contribute to dealing with violence and the risks associated with involvement. It will also avoid attempts to transplant models from one context to another, termed ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches.

### **The symbolic significance of commemoration**

In a country where peacebuilding is a topical issue such a move as the erection of the Nkomo statue should be taken within a peacebuilding framework. The fanfare involved in the official opening of the statue and the renaming of Main Street to JM Nkomo Street really make it one of the most prominent political symbols in Zimbabwe. In the interest of peacebuilding there is a need to take advantage of the erection of the statues and broadcast a message of national unity. This will help in the fight against negative regional identities which have the potential to destroy the relatively peaceful atmosphere prevailing in the post 2013 election period.

Nagle (2008) describes commemoration as being Janus faced. He posits that it evokes a feeling of continuity with the past while at the same time serving as a rite to signify a break away from tradition. Nagle further argues that commemoration can assist the process of ‘acknowledgement’ in so far as the physical and symbolic acknowledgment of the suffering of victims and help bereavement or the trauma experienced by survivors of human rights abuses. Commemorative practice can achieve this by facilitating a mechanism through which the bereaved and survivors



of human rights abuse can simultaneously mediate their grief or trauma and provide a map to work towards an inclusive future. Many people especially those of Bulawayo now live under the shadow of the Joshua Nkomo Statue which now dominates the symbolic-cultural landscape of the city. The statue provides an opportunity for critical thinking around history and civic engagement by opening up opportunities for dialogue about peace and unity.

According to Anderson (1983) political symbols play a major part in the way a nation is depicted and fed into the imagination of its citizens. The recent literature has explored the various ways historical landscapes, monuments, and museum have been used to broadcast specific historical messages in the effort to create a selective memory that serves specific political or economic interests in the present (Cameron, 1999; Delle and Smith, 1997; Handler and Gable, 1997; Shackel, 2001).

Peace practitioners in Zimbabwe need to see beyond the erection and commissioning of the statue, renaming of the street and airport by coming up with deliberate policy and programmes that will ensure the long term survival of positive social memories associated with the monuments. Effort should be made to ensure that memories of both the elite and the grassroots are captured in the memorialisation. If left only to the elite who are the more powerful group, memories can be abused by perpetuating structural violence. In the hands of the subordinate group, narratives if not checked, can be used to undermine peace efforts for instance through the creation of centrifugal forces of separatism around the monument.

The need to be proactive in issues of commemoration can never be over emphasised in a country like Zimbabwe where social cleavages are still very much visible and memories of violence are still very fresh in many people's minds. Lebel, (2009) and Gill (2005) have recognised the dangers inherent in the issue of memorialisation. They argue that significant dissonance can exist between authorised historical ideologies and popular memory. They further posit that various segments of a given society can select themes of particular interest to them and use these to frame an alternative collective memory that sometimes contradicts authorised accounts of the past. This contradiction between collective memory and official authorised accounts can be a source of conflict especially in a context of political polarisation. This is very true of the current

Zimbabwean scenario where the country's history especially with regards to the participation of Nkomo and his ZIPRA needs to be revisited.

Swart (2012) echoes Thotse (2010) by positing that awarding a street name can be a powerful expression of political change. Swart suggests three functions of renaming of streets; as a vehicle for and as a way of constructing a politicised version of history. It will be argued here that whereas the first two functions are positive and relatively uncontroversial functions, the political function of constructing history through name changes is prone to manipulation and should therefore be viewed with caution by everyone concerned. Thotse (2010) in a study on commemorations uses Budapest as an example of how place names and statues undergo similar processes as political discourses are created and sedimented through practices of inclusion and exclusion.

Another cautionary word comes from Shaheed (2014) who argues that memorials address issues that can be very divisive. He maintains that states and other stakeholders must decide which particular narrative to promote, at which point in time and where exactly. Such issues may be particularly controversial in societies which have seen conflicts and those in which indigenous peoples, minorities or other groups have been excluded from the memorialisation processes. Shaheed (2014) further argues that although the commemoration of events, during or following conflict and the mobilisation of collective memory, can convey messages of peace, recognition, reconciliation and community solidarity, they also have the potential to result in cases self-victimisation, thirst for revenge and martyrdom. With Zimbabwe moving into what generally can be termed virgin territory, that of the commemoration of political leaders through the erection of statues it is important to frame such activities within a broad peacebuilding framework. Symbolic reparations also aid the restorative process. Museums, monuments, memorials, public literary and artworks, days of commemoration, new historical narratives, and revised history books all can play a role in re-humanization and national healing (Minow, 1998). It is hoped that the Zimbabwean initiative starting with the commemoration of Nkomo will in the long run serve a similar purpose. However, what Minow emphasises on, i.e. revision of history books needs not be reemphasized in the Zimbabwean case. The authorities would do well to commission a history

rewriting process to acknowledge the sterling job that Nkomo and his ZIPRA did towards the liberation of Zimbabwe.

A lot has been built around the memory of the late Joshua Nkomo some of which is based on historical fabrications or myths. It is therefore imperative that stakeholders in Zimbabwe manage the memory of the late vice president by creating a sense of authenticity in the visions of the past. A balance should be struck between the authorised public memory and social memories. The author of this paper advocates for the transmission of memories that can reinforce positive visions of the past which are commensurate with the current national peacebuilding agenda.

However, the memorialisation of Nkomo has to be followed within the context of the government's overall attitude to reconciliation and peacebuilding initiatives. In this regard, in a case akin to the proverbial putting the cart before the horse, the state has always appeared obsessed with memorialisation before it had established the truth. The norm in justice and reconciliation is that, reparation (where applicable) and reconciliation precedes memorialisation. The state initiated a series of new memorialisations, particularly after the formation of the GNU. Chief among these was a Presidential Proclamation published in the Government Gazette Extraordinary of 15 July 2009, General Notice 92 of 2009, in which the President proclaimed that:

In the spirit of the Interparty Political Agreement, I do hereby declare, set out and dedicate the 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, and 26<sup>th</sup> July 2009, as a period during which the nation may dedicate the Inclusive Government, our new found peace, our freedom, our new spirit of nation building, National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration to inspire the nation going forward (Government Gazette Extraordinary, 15 July 2009, General Notice 92 of 2009).

The state's lack of commitment is also evident in the use of phrases such as, 'the government *will ensure...*' (GPA Article 7.1 (a) and (b): 2008). Key words such as *justice* and *reconciliation* are missing in the wording of the Article, with the word reconciliation appearing only in the name of the Organ on National Healing. There is general lack of clarity as conflicts from different governments and episodes of gross violation of human rights are lumped together and

not individually acknowledged or addressed. All these however have been conducted in an environment where reparation and reconciliation have not been instituted.

Article 7 of the GPA was littered with examples of unwillingness and lack of government commitment, which bordered on casting a blind eye on impunity. For example, Section 7.1(c) stated that the government *shall...in consideration*. If something is in consideration, it implies that the resultant action or lack of action is acceptable and failure or lack of action will be equally acceptable. Section 7.1 9 (d) stated that, ‘the government *will strive...*’ Again, striving to end intolerance and politically motivated human rights violations implies that the government was prepared to fail in its endeavours to end violence and intolerance.

### **Preserving the memory: Who is in charge?**

Prospects for peace in Zimbabwe lie in the recognition by the constitution of the importance of institutionalising peacebuilding. The constitution calls for the establishment of a National Peace and Reconciliation Commission. The importance of the establishment of the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) as provided for by article 12.20 of the constitution of Zimbabwe can never be over-emphasised. Article 12.21 clear shows that the issue of promoting national healing and unity is the responsibility of the NPRC. One immediate task for the NPRC would to bring closure to a past characterised by violence. Nagle (2008) argues that commemoration can possess the therapeutic power to heal social and psychological wounds of individuals and communities. By healing wounds opened by conflict, commemoration acts as a final break from a nightmarish sense of history. The Joshua Nkomo commemoration is therefore a step in the right direction. However its therapeutic qualities can only be realised if properly done and managed.

It is important to highlight the fact that the NPRC cannot go it alone in peacebuilding. From a Lederachian perspective there is need to adopt the principle of indigenous empowerment as part of the peacebuilding strategy. The NPRC strategy must envision, include and promote local human and cultural resources (Lederach and Appleby, 2010). The perspective highlights the need

for a multi-sectoral approach that brings in local actors and Non Governmental Organisation actors to create sustainability (Keating and Knight, 2004).

An essential element for successful commemoration is collaboration between the authorities, citizens and civil society, especially representatives of those directly affected by past events. The State has a key role to play for example by developing national strategies. Civil society has the capacity to mobilise groups of population, and generate public debates. The ideal situation would be one in which a vibrant peace infrastructure would take responsibility of fostering peace through commemorative and memorialisation programmes. The situation in Zimbabwe calls for urgency in the establishment of peace promoting institutions. With the Organ on National Healing and Reconciliation and JOMIC facing a natural death the momentum created by the commemoration of the life of Joshua Nkomo can easily be lost.

The establishment of a comprehensive peace infrastructure in Zimbabwe spearheaded by the NPRC as provided for by the constitution will ensure participation by all sectors of the society. From a Lederachian perspective, successful transformative commemorations hinge on bottom - up approaches. Although the commemoration of the late vice president Joshua Nkomo appeared in the eyes of many to be a government driven exercise room should be provided for the participation of people from all walks of life in future events. This would be helpful because many modern forms of commemorative practice work seem to function best when they include a space in which individuals can make symbolic exchanges, gift-giving to and with the dead. Forms of symbolic exchange can include flowers, flags, letters, poems, photographs, clothing items, and other offerings. Within a peacebuilding framework the Joshua Nkomo commemoration should not be an end in itself but a means to an end. A lot of peacebuilding mileage can be achieved from the process.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the significance of the Joshua Nkomo commemoration to the peacebuilding agenda in Zimbabwe. The major argument is that the commemoration should not be viewed as an end in itself but as a means to an end. It should be viewed as a stepping stone in the country's efforts to attain sustainable peace and unity. The paper also adopted a Lederachian

perspective by calling for a bottom-up approach to commemoration and memorialisation. The paper argues that in creating memorials that are meaningful for the victims it is important that authors are speaking to and with the victims and not just for and/ about them. Also highlighted is the need for the establishment of a vibrant peace infrastructure in Zimbabwe.

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