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*Ngozi* spirits and healing the nation at the grassroots

Diana Jeater

Introduction

Healing the nation is not a new project for Zimbabwe. There have been many moments of national healing – most obviously, perhaps, in 1980, with then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe’s conciliatory television address when he won the election; but also in 1987, with the Unity Accord; and again, in 2008, with the Global Political Agreement which was consummated in 2009 with the inception of the government of national unity (GNU) or the inclusive government. In between, there have been times of drought, political conflict, and economic crisis, all of which have led to calls for national healing. As an historian, I am interested in what “national healing” might mean and how it is differently understood in different historical conjunctures. Specifically, in this essay, I am interested in thinking about *ngozi* spirits, and how they are represented at this historical moment, in the conversation about healing. *Ngozi* spirits *force* people to reconcile, and raise interesting questions about whether coerced reconciliation can nonetheless lead to healing.

National healing is often thought of in terms of justice and unity: The nation will be healed when internal political, ethnic, or religious divisions are healed over. Normally, this requires some form of accounting and reparations for past wrongs. But as Ismael Muvingi, Associate Professor of Conflict Resolution and African Studies at Nova Southeastern University observed at the African Studies Association conference in Washington, D.C. in 2016, war is not over when *violence* is over, or even when some form of justice has been done. War and military horrors continue in people’s minds long after the official end of hostilities, exacerbated for some by knowing too much about where the bodies are buried; and for others by not knowing enough (if anything) about where the remains of friends and family now lie. Healing, then, is also a process of addressing what remains in people’s lives, and particularly in their hearts and minds, when the violence stops. There can be national unity, and even the active construction of peace, without healing. Healing also requires the resolution of trauma, which has often passed down across generations.

Secular and spiritual responses to national healing in post-1980 Zimbabwe

A key question, then, is what creates the conditions in which healing can take place? In the analyses of Zimbabwe in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a tendency amongst left-leaning academics, and those whom they advised, to say that national healing was about social and material matters. Peace could only come with the resolution of the sources of material and economic tension in society (Hayes, 1992). This argument was framed as a rebuttal to a prevalent form of liberal voluntarism – of asking people to be nice to one another – and it was important in drawing attention to real inequalities that were still to be addressed. It was neatly summarised in that quotation from Peter Tosh’s song: “I don’t want no peace. I want equal rights and justice.”

However, this approach meant that peace and trauma healing were not adopted as central concerns by the new government. Instead, advised by a host of international agencies pouring into the new nation, the government’s attention to the economy began to override a concern with either peace or justice. “Development” was to be the mantra to bring peace to the nation. Ministry after ministry added the “& Development” suffix to its name. The advantage of “development” as a goal, rather than “healing,” was that it focused on the future, not on the past; it aligned with Mugabe’s promise in April 1980 that everyone was now equally a citizen of Zimbabwe, united in a shared project; and it did not require old – and destabilising – injustices to be addressed.

Consequently, in the first two decades of Zimbabwe’s government, there was no significant state-led conversation about “healing the nation.” A discourse of “healing” would have required an acknowledgement of ongoing sores in need of a cure. Land redistribution was one such running sore; continuing economic dominance by the white community was another. In addition, there were economic and social issues around gender, sexuality, and generation that continued to foster tensions and violence in Zimbabwean society. And, very slowly, information about the Gukurahundi began to emerge in the public sphere, often presented (and misrepresented) in ways that nudged the long-standing political tensions between ZANU and ZAPU into ethnic tensions. Focusing on a national project of “development” allowed all these issues to be swept under the carpet, at least at the national level.

At the grass roots, however, people were still hurting. After the liberation war, researchers rapidly noted the emergence of spiritual rituals intended to heal the psychic damage caused by war. The churches offered exorcisms and rituals of spiritual renewal. Terence Ranger noted in [1992](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CPaige%5CDesktop%5C15032s%5C15032-3249%20Chitando%5C03%20from%20CE%5CZimbabweReconcil%5C15032-3249-FullBook.docx#Ref_304_FILE150323249011) that, “healing rituals developed in almost all Zimbabwean churches after the war” (Ranger, 1992: 705). Elsewhere, rituals rooted in indigenous spirit beliefs flourished. During the 1980s, Richard Werbner recorded the rise of *sangoma* rituals in urban Matabeleland that paid particular attention to messages from the dead, warning people against forgetting the past. Heike Schmidt noted *ngozi* and *chikomba* rituals in the Honde Valley, which drew attention to the forms of ongoing hurt (Schmidt, 1997, 2013). The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace testimony also noted ex-combatants troubled by *ngozi* spirits, who came to identify the families of those they had killed, to whom they should pay compensation (CCJP, 1997) . Pamela Reynolds discovered that many children were turning to traditional healers for help with postwar trauma and spiritual healing (Reynolds, 1990, 1996).

Ranger situated these rituals, both church and non-church, in a broader concern for national healing. It was not only troubled spirits of the dead, but the troubled spirit of the land in total, that had to be appeased – to be made peaceful:

African Zimbabweans had a different relationship [from whites] to the land which they were fighting to claim as their own. One could fight for it, spill blood on it in a just cause, but thereafter both the fighter and the land itself must be cleansed. The customs and institutions . . . operating . . . to hold together rural African society, could be suspended during a guerrilla war but could not go on being suspended without dreadful cost to individuals and collectivities

(Ranger, 1992: 704).

In September 1992, there was an unofficial but widely-attended healing ceremony for the ZAPU war dead, at the Pupu shrine in Lupane, a site that also marks Lobengula’s vanquishing of the Alan Wilson patrol in 1893. The ceremony became an event of national, as well as individual, spiritual healing, with interventions from mediums representing the voices of spirits commemorating the war dead going back even earlier than 1893. There were hopes that this would become an annual event, but despite the importance of the shrine in nationalist history, there was no further national spiritual healing there.

The state did not respond positively to these initiatives. While on the one hand there was a growing confidence in African culture, on the other hand there was a determination to be seen as a “modern” African state. Those demanding a public and national-level spiritual healing were at best disregarded, as at Pupu; and at worst, treated as hostile to the state. For example, Ambuya Sophia Tsvatayi Muchini, who established herself at Great Zimbabwe as a medium of Ambuya Nehanda in 1980, called for a national ceremony there to thank the ancestors for independence; and a separate ceremony to settle the spirits of the dead comrades and cleanse the surviving veterans. Her calls were ignored, her dwelling at Great Zimbabwe destroyed, and, as a result of the ensuing violent fracas, she and her underage children were all arrested and imprisoned for murder in 1981.

Moving towards African-based concepts of “national healing”

Undoubtedly, there is strong support globally for state-led, nationwide reconciliation and healing initiatives in African nations. But there are limits to how far these initiatives can use African healing systems. There are many indigenous mechanisms for community healing that long predate the European development of human rights and war crimes discourses (Mangena, 2015). Some of these indigenous mechanisms are “traditional” but not overtly spiritual. Some are about spiritual memorialisation, but not engagement with spirits as agents (Zambara, 2015). In general, however, attempts to seek a national *spiritual* reconciliation are problematic. They do not fit comfortably into ideas about post-conflict reconciliation, either within Zimbabwe or internationally. Spiritual rituals are not controlled centrally, which makes the state uneasy; and they violate ideas about “modern” forms of justice (HZT/ZIMCET, 2016: iv; Karimanzira, 2013).

Indeed, the priority from global “post-conflict” experts, who are strongly influenced by Human Rights frameworks, often seems to be not so much “national healing,” but rather some form of justice. The most highly-publicised examples of “culturally-African” state-led reconciliation programmes have been the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa (1996–1999) and the *gacaca* community courts in Rwanda (2002–2012). The TRC was distinctively African in that it sought restorative rather than retributive justice. The *gacaca* courts took this a step further and used indigenous legal forums as well as indigenous jurisprudence. The TRC was a very centralised process, while the *gacaca* courts were devolved to a more local level. Both of these initiatives won international endorsement. However, neither engaged overtly with *spiritual* interpretations of harm or healing, despite these elements being so important to the people whose testimonies were being heard. (Krog et al., 2009, makes this case powerfully regarding the TRC.) In the eyes of the global NGOs, states and institutions that offer assistance (in funds and kind) for national reconciliation projects, spirit beliefs, and rituals are not the proper work of state governments.

In Zimbabwe, the 2013 constitution mandated a National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC). The title of the commission, “*peace* and reconciliation,” was a significant change from the title of the Organ on *National Healing*, Reconciliation *and Integration*, a moribund body formed by the coalition government in February 2009. Nonetheless, the 2013 constitution lists “healing,” and specifically “national healing,” as the first two functions of the NPRC. So clearly Zimbabwe is in a new historical moment, a particular conjuncture, in which “national healing” has been recognised as a project that the state must define and facilitate. This is linked with, but should be conceptually distinct from, calls for truth commissions, national integration, or justice hearings.

Analysis of a conjuncture requires historical contextualising and an understanding of what is specific to this moment, even when it seems to resonate with similar situations in the past. What constitutes “healing” *at this moment*? What is “the nation” that needs healing? “The nation” can be understood in diverse ways. For international agencies, ‘the nation’ is often treated primarily as “the state.” But the prevalence and persistence of discourses regarding ancestors, and unsettled spirits, suggests that “healing the nation” can perhaps be better understood as healing the *people* who constitute the body politic: The citizens, the residents, the *vana vevhu*, the children of the soil.

In other words, while there is a need for national-level initiatives, there is also a need for local acts of reconciliation and healing at the grassroots. Indeed, much of the violence associated with political struggles during the past two hundred years (stretching back to the times of Nguni invasions in the west and east) has been violence by neighbours against neighbours. National-level justice hearings can create community tensions that reopen, rather than heal, those wounds. Moreover, when state-led or national-level reconciliation hearings address community-level tensions, they treat them as a whole and do not encourage local acts of individual reconciliation between families and neighbours.

In the chiShona-speaking communities, local acts of reconciliation and healing often take the form of rituals to appease *ngozi*. Although *ngozi* spirits have routinely been described in ethnographic literature as “vengeance spirits,” they are, rather, spirits that force reconciliation and compensation to take place. *Ngozi* intervene when an injustice or crime is not settled before the victim dies. Then the *ngozi* forces the family of the perpetrator to seek out, recompense and reconcile with the family of the victim. This is reconciliation without time limits: *Ngozi* will persecute the perpetrator’s family indefinitely, across continents and generations, until justice is done through the payment of compensation and spiritual reconciliation between the families. The reparation and reconciliation heals broken relationships between individuals, families, and communities.

The ways in which *ngozi* cases have been understood and the rituals of reparation have changed over time and differ from place to place. The practices that healed in the past, such as *kuripa ngozi* (giving a wife as compensation) won’t necessarily heal today, when both the meaning of marriage and the status of women has changed. Nonetheless, this does not make *ngozi* cases irrelevant to the present, an ahistorical myth. Rather, this is a system of community justice with a deep history and continuing influence. In that history, even if it is incorrect to describe them as vengeance spirits, *ngozi* are not nice spirits: They are angry and ruthless in their pursuit of justice and in enforcing reparation and reconciliation. Yet, as with all traditional systems, there is plenty of room for adaptation to contemporary conditions, without losing the fundamental principles of reparation, reconciliation, and healing (Vambe, 2009: 71). There are many reasons for paying serious attention to *ngozi* as a way to assist national healing at a local level today.

National healing beyond the state

One of the attractions of turning to *ngozi* to address longstanding hurts and injustices between families and neighbours is that it gives agency to all the relevant parties, in ways that state-led initiatives, influenced by European systems of justice and national reconciliation do not. As Everisto Benyera has observed, “transitional justice occurs in Zimbabwe without the involvement of the state” (Benyera, 2014a: 342). At the grassroots, there are fewer boundaries around the issues that can be raised for consideration in national healing. Official national healing initiatives are normally directed towards state-sponsored violence. *Ngozi* cases, however, can also encompass human rights abuses in civilian-on-civilian violence.

Moreover, *ngozi* reconciliation is not limited to addressing state-defined episodes of violence. *Ngozi* cases can, and often do, draw attention to cases going back decades and even centuries. They draw families into addressing many different forms of violence and injustice in the nation’s past, all of which have been festering in the body politic, but many of which fall below the radar of national and international definitions of crises in need of “national healing.”

*Ngozi* cases make a poor fit with concepts of Western justice, not least because they require a degree of belief from those involved in the process. As Fortune Sibanda puts it, “they can be undermined by the formal court system as lacking empirical evidence until the victim of murder ‘fights his/her own war”’ (Sibanda, 2016: 357). As with other grassroots and traditional legal systems, *ngozi* cases evade capture by the box-ticking categories of judicial bureaucracy. They do not create institutional paper trails, align with international human rights standards, or lend themselves to documentation (HZT/ZIMCET, 2016: iv).

But *ngozi* systems have traction precisely because they operate outside state institutions. All those involved have to agree to the process before any healing can take place, and a traditional leader is often brought into the process to confirm that compensation will be paid. But there is no need to wait for a state official or NGO worker to pay attention to these grievances. Spiritual responses to national healing offer people at the grassroots an opportunity to take control of the healing process and initiate it for themselves (Benyera, 2014b).

The state is inherently flawed as a mechanism for delivering national healing and justice, when justice is conceptualised in terms of community, reparation, and spirits. European concepts of human and civil rights limit liability to individuals, whereas *ngozi* cases are both individual and corporate. European justice punishes offenders, rather than recompense and reconcile families. It is punitive, not reparative. Imprisonment of war criminals does nothing to allay *ngozi* cases. Even public truth and reconciliation hearings do not address the need for reparation and spiritual reconciliation as part of the process. TRCs tend to require forgiveness, which is not the same thing as spiritual justice and reconciliation. *Ngozi* cases, by contrast, hold individuals responsible for their acts, but the communities of which the individual is an offshoot take collective responsibility for the reconciliation.

At the grass roots in Zimbabwe, then, there have been doubts about whether the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission understands the prevalence and significance of *ngozi* cases. As one person said to me: “Even the government knows that there are *ngozi*. But the person who has been given the task of National Reconciliation is sitting in the office. He doesn’t want to go to Chipinge, he doesn’t want to go to Domboshawa, to go and tell people that, ‘okay, you’ve got *ngozi* in your family. Please unite as family members to solve this.’ He’s just typing on his laptop while sitting in an office in Belgravia” (Tapfuma, pers comm, 2016). National healing, as it is framed by constitutions, NGOs, the UN, and other mainstream organisations, touches only a small corner of the “nation” and its processes of “healing.”

The state has been reluctant to engage with traditional, spirit-based mechanisms of national reconciliation and healing. Global models of justice, reconciliation, and national healing only permit certain types of rationality. Global ideas of citizenship, rights, and culpability limit the available points of empowerment in national healing. But the lived experiences of Zimbabweans suggests that effective national healing at the grassroots needs to be able to use multiple registers and to empower both perpetrators and victims to find healing as an expression of spiritual life that is both individual and corporate.

While trauma healing tends to focus on individuals, and state/NGO/human rights interventions tend to focus on communities, *ngozi* cases address individual, kin, and community as multiple levels of intervention and interaction (Vambe, 2009: 76; Karimanzira, 2013: 126–127). Because spirits are attached to individuals and kinship groups simultaneously, they allow a different way of conceptualising the social units where reparation, reconciliation, and healing take place. They require the individual offence to be acknowledged, but hold the larger community to account. Individuals cannot hide behind the collective, but neither can the collective wash its hands of culpability (HZT/ZIMCET, 2016: 16).

Conclusion

As an historian, my interest is not only in understanding what *ngozi* meant in the past, but also what *ngozi* means in the present, and how ideas about *ngozi* are currently framed to address a specific moment in grassroots national healing now, in the 2010s. The secular “development moment” of the 1980s has been replaced by a more sceptical relationship with NGOs and a growing confidence in African culture. There is disillusion with both the state and the “West” as sites of justice, human rights, and national healing, alongside a massive turn towards “the spiritual” in the public sphere. The global academy is turning towards the decolonisation of its founding concepts, and African states are turning towards indigenous forms of national healing. In Zimbabwe, both the prophetic churches and the government (at least in the infamous 2007 “diesel *n’anga*” episode) are granting that spiritual forces may have material agency. In these contexts, *ngozi* forms of justice begin to find a place in the chiShona-speaking communities.

Moreover, *ngozi* cases address real concerns about how to implement national healing at a time when political conflict continues to simmer, when there is no trust in the impartiality of the state, and when fragile relationships between neighbours and within families could be ripped apart by focus on past episodes of violence, particularly if other episodes are not given equal priority. They are not bounded by state-defined limitations on what are relevant episodes or allowable evidence. They are not about politics, but about unresolved pain, which may be connected with political events but is not reducible to them.

*Ngozi* cases are not top-down, state-run, western-oriented justice; they are about finding ways to build resilience and deterrence in deeply damaged communities. *Ngozi* cases encompass processes of socialisation and resocialisation, as much as questions of reparation for injustice. Tabona Shoko argues that *ngozi* stories frame communal ethics in chiShona-speaking communities and make future violations less likely (Shoko, 2007: 42; also HZT/ZIMCET, 2016: 16). In contemporary discourses, disrespecting one’s parents is a cause of *ngozi*. Attention to patterns of socialisation and community controls can reveal how young men, in particular, become incorporated into violent enterprises (Beinart, 1992: 481). They acknowledge, as Western systems of jurisprudence do not, that individuals are embedded in communities and collective responsibility. By focusing on the suffering of perpetrators, rather than victims, *ngozi* cases emphasize that both victims and perpetrators are members of their community, and recognise the need to heal both.

For all these reasons, *ngozi* cases are also dangerous, unwieldy, and potentially unjust themselves. The challenge is not how to suppress them and replace them with more formal systems of national healing. It is how to turn this threat into an asset, and to help agencies to work with, not despite, *ngozi* beliefs. If external agencies take on this challenge, however, they should be wary of the dangers of Western taxonomizing and regularising/regulation, as happened with *gacaca* courts: “The mechanisms remain key in ensuring that justice is domestically rooted and owned by local communities for sustainability of peace and justice” (HZT/ZIMCET, 2016: iv). It is precisely because spirits cannot be contained by laws and spirit beliefs are uniquely flexible as a foundation for justice that *ngozi* justice speaks to the present moment.

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