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**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. and Willems, Wendy (2010) *Reinvoking the past in the present: changing identities and appropriations of Joshua Nkomo in post-colonial Zimbabwe*. [African identities](#), 8 (3). pp. 191-208. ISSN 1472-5843

DOI: [10.1080/14725843.2010.491619](https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2010.491619)

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# Reinvoking the past in the present: changing representations of Joshua Nkomo in Zimbabwe<sup>1</sup>

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## Original citation:

Ndlovu-Gatssheni, S. and Willems, W. (2010). Reinvoking the past in the present: changing identities and appropriations of Joshua Nkomo in post-colonial Zimbabwe. In: *African Identities* 8(3): 191-208.

## Abstract

*This article discusses the histories, narratives and representations that have been produced by and on former ZAPU leader and Vice-President of Zimbabwe, Joshua Nkomo. We focus on the multiple identities and subject positions that Nkomo came to inhabit in the way in which he was represented in ZANU-PF's discourse of the early 1980s; his self-representation in Nkomo's 1984 autobiography *Nkomo: the story of my life* and subsequent appropriations of Nkomo by different political actors in the early 2000s. In line with Stuart Hall's 1996 description, we consider identities not as essentialist and fixed categories but as positional, multiple, constantly evolving and constructed through difference. We argue that the changing identities of Nkomo served the purposes and interests of a variety of political actors, ranging from the ruling party ZANU-PF to the opposition MDC. Against the background of a mushrooming of popular historical narratives evidenced by both the publication and republishing of biographies, autobiographies and significant reports, and the serialisation and recirculation of these texts in newspapers and through websites, we also argue that the many uses and appropriations of Nkomo demonstrate the continued relevance of the past in the power struggles waged by different political actors in Zimbabwe.*

**Keywords:** Zimbabwe; autobiography; Joshua Nkomo; identity; representation; media

## Introduction

The 'cultural turn' in the humanities and social sciences inaugurated what has been termed 'new historicism' steeped in the postmodern deconstruction of master-narratives and singular versions of history (Vesser 1989; Fox-Genovese 1989). This 'new historicism' took the form of a rejection of universalising theories of causality and recognition of ideology as all-pervasive in the depictions of 'reality' and 'truth' (O'Tuathail 1996; Sutherland 2005; and Gun 2006). New historicists have concentrated on re-writing and re-interpreting recorded histories as part of their protest against hegemonic, unitary, and objective histories as offspring of a small group of intellectuals rich and powerful who dominated political and socio-economic spheres of life (Vesser 1989). The work of new historicist is both deconstructive and constructive as they are determined to deconstruct the dominant discourse and exposure of instrumentalities of power and critiquing the ideological motivations of those historians whose versions are readily reproduced, legitimised and circulated for public

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the *African Studies Association of the United Kingdom (ASAUK) International Conference: The Presence of the Past? Africa in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, United Kingdom, 11-13 September 2008.

consumption. After deconstruction, the new historicist rebuilds on the platform of a new alternative story of history—one that advocates for justice, empowerment, tolerance, inclusivity, plurality and social change. In short, ‘new historicism’ seem to represent what Michel Foucault (1980) termed ‘subjugated knowledges’ as well as the poor, the marginalised, excluded and dissenting voices.

Within this context, historiography was viewed as always involving the promotion of certain historical versions and the neglect of others (Eley 1996 and Norval 2000). The field of subaltern studies that emphasised the way in which the voices of the ‘colonised’ have been ignored in colonial histories is one version of ‘new historicism’ that was ranged against those histories that focused on elite activities at the expense of the masses (Guha 1982; Arnold and Hardiman 1994). The intervention of new historicism led to a paradigm shift from what history was or what it should be, to an emphasis on how history worked, how it was produced and how it was deployed in particular ways for particular purposes (Trouillot 1995). It became clear that histories were produced with an immediate goal in mind: ‘they are partisan histories, narratives about the past designed to help win arguments and political struggles’ (Friedman and Kenney 2005, p. 1). This led Michael de Certeau to argue that, ‘history endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice’ (1988, p.36). It is within this context that history assumed the character of representations, regimes of truth and perspectival lenses than rigid objectivity and singular narratives.

Our intervention draws from both new historicism and the recent interest in auto/biography as a lens through the making of history; identities and even imaginations of the nation could be further understood, deconstructed and reconstructed. Both new historicism and the recent surge of academic interest in biography and autobiography grew out of postmodernism which questioned teleologies of class and nation and elevated the focus on individual agency in history. In this study we engage with an autobiography of one of Zimbabwe’s leading nationalist actor who at death was reinscribed into the national pantheon as the ‘father of Zimbabwe.’ While an autobiography is a useful entry point into issues of self-representation, individual self-portrayal, and resistance to some external representations, it remains a polemic in which the self is suppressed (Vambe and Channels 2009). In Zimbabwe, major nationalist political actors have used autobiographies to continue the competition for power, making them more of sites of power rivalries that must be used with care. In his analysis of Nkomo’s autobiography, Maurice Vambe (2009) noted that we learn more about Robert Mugabe (another leading nationalist) rather than about Nkomo himself.

It is important that we briefly analyse the evolution of Zimbabwean historiography within which our case study is situated particularly how it reflects the impact of the ‘cultural turn.’ Zimbabwean historiography has undergone a number of turns beginning with increasing deconstruction of older versions that installed ‘praise-texts’ by David Martin and Phyllis Johnson (1981) that set the stage for the official history of the liberation struggle. Martin and Johnson became the earliest willing ‘commissar’ intellectuals who helped to produce official nationalism as they served nationalist power instead of critiquing it (Robins, 1996; Chomsky 1967). These ‘commissar’ intellectuals became ‘willing scribes of a celebratory African nationalist history that profoundly shaped official accounts of Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle’ (Robins 1996, p. 76). In this mould of history, one also found the early work of Terence Ranger (1985), David Lan (1985) and the recent work of Ngwabi Bhebe (1999) providing heroic narratives of nationalism at times reducing nationalism to the liberation struggle only. This made their work easily appropriable by the ZANU-PF regime for its hegemonic and regime legitimating purposes.

In short the majority of the works produced within the postcolonial euphoric period assumed the format of ‘praise texts’ that accepted the victor’s version of history and ignored the activities of such nationalists as Bishop Abel Muzorewa, Reverend Sithole, James

Chikerema, George Nyandoro and others who were active in the nationalist struggle throughout the 1970s but failed to come into power in 1980. It was mainly in the 2000s that state sponsorship of a narrow and fetishised history of the liberation war provoked robust deconstructions of this master-narrative (cf. Bull-Christiansen 2004; Ranger 2004; White 2003; Moore 2005).

Ranger began to explore how the rise of hegemonic Marxist-Leninist-Maoist nationalist politics of the 1970s erased and eradicated the evolution of pluralistic political traditions of the pre-1960s period (Robins 1996, p. 80). In 2003 Ranger mounted one of the most robust deconstructions of nationalism that was initiated by Norma Kriger in 1992 and blamed it for a host of postcolonial problems ranging from authoritarianism, personality cult, commandism, violence and militarism. A burgeoning 'revisionist' approach to nationalist history saw Louise White (2003) interrogating various and differing accounts or perspectives on the murder of Herbert Chitepo who was the chairman of ZANU in exile until 1975. White was not interested in the historical truths and fallacies of Zimbabwean historiography but instead she aimed to show 'how narratives about the past are produced and reproduced and how power is produced and reproduced by these narratives' (White 2003, p. 2). She sought to highlight the purposes for which different narratives were used and how these perspectives were competing for 'truth.'

The climax of revisionist historiography is the current tearing apart of all of the old certainties in Brian Raftopoulos and Alois Mlambo's *Becoming Zimbabwe* (2009) and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's *Do 'Zimbabweans' Exist?* (2009). The common thread is that of democratising historical knowledge, liberating it from dominant and hegemonic nationalist historiographies of the 1960s and 1970s that provided raw material that enabled monopolisation of national histories by a single political party and few political elites who claim to have 'died' for all Zimbabweans (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). Therefore our analysis of the changing representations of nationalism as manifested in the life, times, death and after-life of Joshua Nkomo are built on the burgeoning revisionist historiography. We discuss different histories, narratives and representations that have been produced on Nkomo and highlight what purposes these served in different periods of Zimbabwe's history.

### **Nationalism and the making of Joshua Nkomo as a politician**

Nkomo was one of the early educated elites who used their education in the service of nationalism.<sup>2</sup> His nationalist baptism of fire is traceable to the time of his studies in South Africa where he met such figures as Nelson Mandela and Sir Seretse Khama who eventually became leaders of independent South Africa and Botswana respectively. When he returned to Bulawayo in 1948, he became an active participant first in trade union politics at the Rhodesian Railways where he worked as welfare officer. He later on became active in the 'manufacturing' of nationalism. The process involved careful re-constructions and mediations of ethnic, regional and national identities for the nationalist cause. Making nationalism was a very delicate task in the environment of the 1940s where ethnically-based associations such as the Matabele Home Society, the Kalanga Cultural Society, the Monomotapa Offspring Society, the Mashonaland Cultural Society and many others dominated. Enocent Msindo (2004, p 218), in his discussion of ethnicity, and specifically the Ndebele-Kalanga relations, concluded that '[I]ocal identities were thus stronger than regional, let alone territorial identities' during this period.

However, Nkomo found a way in which to balance and synthesize these different cultures and identities into a broader territorial nationalism. He successfully drew from

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<sup>2</sup> Nkomo studied at TjoloTjolo Government Industrial School in the then Rhodesia, at Adams College in South Africa and Jan Hofmeyr School of Social Work in Johannesburg in South Africa and he came back to Rhodesia in 1948 as one of the best educated and most travelled young men.

African traditional resources, mobilizing graves of kings, monuments, religious shrines and pre-colonial history in order to reconstruct and manufacture an inclusive form of nationalism. Ranger (1999, p. 211) described Nkomo as a ‘great synthesiser’ who synthesised Kalanga, Ndebele and Shona identities into national ones. He worked hard towards syncretising various histories and spoke proudly and positively about pre-colonial political and religious figures such as Chaminuka, Mzilikazi, Lobengula, Mambo, and Monomotapa (Munhumutapa)—all of whom he presented as respectable African leaders who founded nations. He made efforts to transform the grave of Mzilikazi at Entumbane into a national monument (Ranger 1999, p. 211).

Nkomo’s first visit the United Kingdom in 1952 made him realize how the British valued their past through the graves of their past kings at Westminster Abbey (Nkomo 1984). When he came back he intensified his mobilization of traditional religion in the formulation of nationalism, including making a pilgrimage to the Dula Mwari (Mwari is Shona and Mwali is the Kalanga) Cult Shrine in 1958. He later took the whole executive of the National Democratic Party (NDP) to Matopos in order to plan the struggle for liberation (Nkomo 1984). From 1958 onwards, Nkomo modeled himself simultaneously as a cultural nationalist and a modernizer, as someone who worshipped at a shrine in Matopos with the peasants, as someone who transcended ethnic identities and who saw nationalist value in both Kalanga, Ndebele and Shona historical relics and symbols.

The years 1957 to 1963 were a ‘golden age’ for Nkomo as a nationalist leader as he was elected into the pinnacle of Southern Rhodesia African National Congress (SRANC), the NDP and the Zimbabwe African People Union (ZAPU), all of which enjoyed mass support in spite of the increasing colonial political repression. It was during this period that he was showered with praises and given nicknames such as *Chibwechitedza* (slippery stone) which symbolized the way in which he had managed to evade colonial repression. During this period Nkomo also enjoyed popular support from both Mashonaland and Matabeleland and his leadership was endorsed by such Shona leaders and veterans of the First Chimurenga (1896-1897) as Nyamasoka Chinamora (uncle to Chief Chinamora) who in 1962 offered him a ritual war-axe, sword and knobkerrie, urging him to fight to the bitter end.<sup>3</sup>

But during this same period nationalist actors began to secretly compete for traditional ritual blessing as personal ambitions propelled them to challenge Nkomo. Nkomo’s visit to the Matopos shrines provoked some nationalists like Simon Muzenda and others from Mashonaland to make a similar pilgrimage to Great Zimbabwe during which they offered beer to ancestral spirits in 1962 (Fontein 2006, p. 106). But traditional leaders continued to recognize Nkomo as a leader to the extent that Chief Sigombe Mathema of Enqameni in Wenlock also ‘presented assegais, a knobkerrie, a shield, a feather head-gear and armbands of feathers to Mr. Nkomo and said these things were very essential for him to have in his warrior fight for political rights.’<sup>4</sup>

However, these representations of Nkomo as a unifying, national leader of both Mashonaland and Matabeleland were short-lived. In 1963, a split in ZAPU resulted in the formation of a new breakaway party, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) which was dominated by Shona-speaking politicians. The split within ZAPU resulted in open competition for leadership of the imagined Zimbabwe. Nkomo exuded and cultivated a myth of him as the divinely ordained leader with a ritual blessing to lead all black people into independence. It only took the courage of the intellectuals who broke away from ZAPU to

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<sup>3</sup> *Daily News*, 30 July 1962.

<sup>4</sup> *Home News*, 9 August 1962.

begin to de-ritualize and de-mythologize Nkomo, exposing some of his weaknesses as a leader.<sup>5</sup>

The 1963 split inaugurated a period in which Nkomo was increasingly represented by ZANU as an inconsistent and indecisive politician who offered weak leadership. Besides accusations of being a coward, Nkomo was represented as not willing to embrace confrontational politics (Shamuyarira 1966, pp. 173-177). ZANU intellectuals avoided the issue of tribe and power as a cause of the split and argued that it was because of ideological differences that they moved away from ZAPU. They represented ZANU as a party that was more dedicated, more revolutionary and more prepared to confront the white repressive regime. Nkomo (1984, pp. 109-119), on the other hand, singled out tribalism as the main cause of the 1963 split in his later autobiography.

In order to maintain and justify their separate identity, ZANU and ZANLA consistently had to 'other' leaders such as Nkomo and movements like ZAPU as less revolutionary, less committed to the armed struggle and as inconsistent. The existence of 'Others' is crucial in defining the 'Self' and in locating one's own place in the world.<sup>6</sup> It was partly to maintain a certain identity that active nationalist politicians engaged in labelling others as stooges, sell-outs, dissidents and counter-revolutionaries. ZAPU had its own way of identifying ZANU as a new-comer in the nationalist struggle and as a tribally-based party not committed to national unity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008, pp. 58-60 and Vambe 2009).

Up until independence in 1980, Nkomo continued to be cast by those in ZANU as a weak and prevaricating politician. Despite the fact that ZANU and ZAPU negotiated at the 1979 Lancaster House Conference as a united Patriotic Front (PF), their long-standing antagonism did not vanish. The PF had been formed in 1976 mainly as a counter to the moves by Ian Smith and moderate 'internal' nationalists led by Bishop Muzorewa and Reverend Sithole towards a negotiated internal settlement which excluded ZAPU and ZANU. Regardless of ZANU-ZAPU cooperation in the negotiations, Nkomo continued to be seen as a compromiser by ZANU as is highlighted by Edgar Tekere (2007, p. 113)—a long-time ZANU Secretary General who said Nkomo was a heavy political burden to bear in the PF and a great compromiser at Lancaster House Conference. In her recent memoirs, ZANU activist Fay Chung (2006, p. 61) also argued that Nkomo was often criticized for relying heavily on white advisors such as Terence Ranger, John Reed, Leo Baron and Peter MacKay and ignoring his black colleagues.

While this section provided background to the way in which Nkomo positioned himself in the broader politics of nationalism in Zimbabwe and how others framed him in this regard, the next section discusses in more detail the way in which Nkomo was represented in the period 1980 to 1987.

### **Joshua Nkomo as 'Father of Dissidents'**

ZAPU and ZANU participated in the elections of 1980s as separate political entities as with the former adopting the Patriotic Front-ZAPU (PF-ZAPU) and the later ZANU-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) (cf. Shaw 1986; Laakso 1999; Cliffe et al. 1980; Sithole 1986; Kriger 2005). In his election campaign, Nkomo represented himself as 'Father Zimbabwe' in order

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<sup>5</sup> *The Battle Cry: Official Organ of the Zimbabwe African National Union of Southern Rhodesia*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (27 November 1963), p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> The term has been used extensively in existential philosophy, notably by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* to define the relations between 'Self' and 'Other' in creating self-awareness and ideas of identity. The concept of the 'Other' has also been widely used in postcolonial theory. Their definition of the 'Other' is rooted in Freudian and post-Freudian analysis of the formation of subjectivity, most notably in the work of the psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Jacques Lacan.

to remind the electorate of his pioneering role in the nationalist struggle and to project his seniority in nationalist politics. Nkomo also emphasised that PF should be considered as ‘one liberation movement with two parties’. ZANU-PF politicians, on the other hand, saw this in a different light and considered the cooperation as a marriage of convenience that had served a specific purpose.<sup>7</sup> However, Nkomo’s campaign strategy failed to appeal to the electorate beyond the provinces of Matabeleland and the Midlands. Although many expected Nkomo to win the 1980 elections, it was ultimately Mugabe who obtained the majority of votes. This could be explained by the fact that ZANU’s armed wing (ZANLA), had covered more ground during their military operations (including the densely populated areas of Mashonaland, Manicaland and Masvingo), whereas ZAPU’s armed wing (ZIPRA), mainly operated in the thinly populated areas of Matabeleland, the Midlands and smaller parts of Mashonaland (Rich 1982).

But exigencies of nation-building forced ZANU-PF to pursue a policy of national unity after the party’s election victory in February 1980 in order to unite black people through a government of national unity (GNU). Nkomo and PF-ZAPU largely supported the GNU and represented ZANU-PF’s victory in the elections as a victory of the PF over settler colonialism. Nkomo urged its supporters to see themselves as part of ‘one tribe called *MaZimbabwe*’. However, despite these efforts, the GNU did not last beyond two years and ZANU-PF increasingly began to exclude PF-ZAPU from the nation-building process.<sup>8</sup> Msindo has argued that ‘Nkomo’s efforts to unite the nation at this point were met with non-cooperation from the government, perhaps because of official suspicion of his aims and also because of bitter relations between ZAPU and ZANU’ (2004, p. 265). He added that ‘ZANU would not allow Nkomo, an opponent, to be a living hero and to be on front of nation building’ (Msindo 2004, p. 265).

The new government saw nation-building as the exclusive terrain of ZANU-PF. This attitude was further elaborated by Kriger who argued that ZANU-PF aimed at building a ‘party-nation’ and a ‘party-state’ which excluded all other actors and histories except those belonging to ZANU and ZANLA. This was demonstrated in the continued use of specific party slogans, party symbols, party songs and regalia at national ceremonies such as Independence Day and Heroes Day (Kriger 2003, p.75). As Msindo has argued, ‘[t]he nation was defined along ZANU-PF’s philosophy of unity which meant one-partyism as opposed to multi-party democracy; and Shona tribal dominance as opposed to nationalism’ (2004, p. 265). While PF-ZAPU was still part of the GNU, ZANU-PF increasingly framed the party, its leadership and its former military-wing (ZIPRA) as ‘dissidents’. Because of PF-ZAPU’s loss in the elections and its refusal to disband and be swallowed by ZANU-PF, Nkomo, his party, his supporters and ex-ZIPRA members were ‘othered’ as enemies of the new republic.

Nkomo and PF-ZAPU did their best to cooperate in the postcolonial nation-building project. They served in the Joint High Command (JHC) which aimed to integrate ZANLA’s and ZIPRA’s military forces into a single Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) (Chitiyo and Rupiya 2005). But Mugabe and his party were offended by Nkomo’s refusal to accept the ceremonial post of being the first ceremonial president of Zimbabwe with Mugabe as executive Prime Minister. Nkomo preferred a more active post as Minister of Home Affairs. In political terms, Nkomo’s acceptance of the ceremonial post would have meant that PF-ZAPU had no leader as it was going to be difficult for him to head the nation and to be the leader of opposition at the same time. Suspicions arose that PF-ZAPU and Nkomo were not committed to nation-building and still harboured ambitions to unseat ZANU-PF from power. ZANU-PF increasingly began to reconstruct PF-ZAPU and Nkomo as enemies of Zimbabwe.

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<sup>7</sup> *Moto*, 19<sup>th</sup> of April 1980.

<sup>8</sup> *The Chronicle*, 30 June 1980.

The use of inflammatory political language which disparaged Nkomo, PF-ZAPU and ZIPRA as 'unheroic' actors gradually resulted into a major breakdown in the GNU. The initial marks of this crisis were isolated cases of post-election lawlessness and misbehaviour of some armed men who went out of Assembly Points (APs) with their guns and ammunition.<sup>9</sup> The ZANU-PF government took advantage of this situation and began to 'other' PF-ZAPU and ZIPRA as dissidents bent on subverting the will of the people by fighting the legitimate government of Zimbabwe.

Between 1980 and 1982, Nkomo and his party found themselves hard-pressed to rebut accusations of disloyalty and to counter the label of being dissidents. For example, the Minister of National Supplies, Enos Nkala, labelled Nkomo as a 'self-appointed Ndebele King.'<sup>10</sup> During a rally at White City Stadium in Bulawayo, he stated that PF-ZAPU and Nkomo were in government 'by the grace of ZANU' and that they 'contributed in their own small way, and we have given them a share proportional to their contributions.' At the same rally, Nkala reinforced his framing of Nkomo as a 'tribal king' likening him to Ojukwu of Biafra, Tshombe of Congo, Harry Nkumbula of Zambia, and Odinga Odinga of Kenya 'who tried to appoint themselves as tribal leaders.'<sup>11</sup>

It was partly these inflammatory speeches that caused panic among some ex-ZIPRA forces within the ZNA and contributed to clashes with ex-ZANLA forces in APs such as Entumbane.<sup>12</sup> After what has become known as the 'First Entumbane War', Mugabe reacted by sacking Nkomo from the post of Home Affairs Minister and made him a Minister-Without-Portfolio. This further incensed ex-ZIPRA members and rank-and-file PF-ZAPU supporters, and culminated in the 'Second Entumbane War' which pitted ex-ZANLA and ex-ZIPRA members in a heavy exchange of fire (White 2007).

A witch-hunt was launched against those ex-ZIPRA members who had integrated themselves into the ZNA. The few ex-ZIPRA forces that fled back to the bush did so involuntarily in order to escape the threats and realities of persecution, just like their political leadership which was increasingly demonized by ZANU-PF and forced out of GNU (Alexander et al. 2000; Alexander 1998, pp. 151-152). Kriger (2003, pp.133-137) documented how the eradication of ex-ZIPRA forces within the ZNA became frenzied during the post-Second Entumbane War. Ex-ZIPRA members were increasingly framed as dissidents and, as Msindo (2004, p. 264) pointed out the definition of a dissident was a 'political, a product of the politics of power and the capacity to name. Nkomo hated the term and preferred that the lawless men be labelled bandits, which was less politically charged.' The GNU ultimately collapsed when in 1982 arms caches were discovered in PF-ZAPU-owned properties around Bulawayo (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003).

Following this discovery, Nkomo was completely removed from government and former military heads of ZIPRA, Dumiso Dabengwa and Lookout Masuku, were detained and accused of treason. Ironically, the arms caches were 'discovered' barely a week after PF-ZAPU rejected a forced unity with ZANU-PF which Mugabe desperately needed in order to establish a one-party state (Shaw 1986).<sup>13</sup> Mugabe's desire to create a one-party state became increasingly clear from his political statements in which he imagined 'one state with one society, one nation, one party, one leader'.<sup>14</sup> *The Chronicle* of 25 January 1982 quoted

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<sup>9</sup> *The Chronicle*, 10 May 1980.

<sup>10</sup> *The Chronicle*, 7 July 1980. Nkala added that the 15 PF-ZAPU MPs were a group of tribalists that he was going to crush into submission to ZANU-PF rule.

<sup>11</sup> *The Chronicle*, 7 July 1980.

<sup>12</sup> Leo Hatugari 'Hell Breaks Loose in Bulawayo,' in *Moto*, 15 November 1980.

<sup>13</sup> J. Nkomo, 'Letter to Prime Minister Mugabe, 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1983.

<sup>14</sup> *Moto Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 4, (August 1982).

Mugabe asking ZAPU to join ZANU stating that ‘because that is what united people should do. They should be one party, with one government and one Prime Minister.’<sup>15</sup>

This discovery was used to justify ZANU-PF’s increasing clampdown on Matabeleland. In order to deal with the problem of ‘dissidents’, the government sent an elite unit of North Korea-trained soldiers, known as the Fifth Brigade, into Midlands and Matabeleland provinces where PF-ZAPU drew its major support from. The government justified its intervention by referring to the threat that ‘dissidents’ or ‘bandits’ posed to national security. The military intervention resulted in major killings of civilians which brought suspicion to the government’s plan to crush and flush out ‘dissidents’. What became known as *Gukurahundi* (literally refers to the early spring rains which separate the chaff from the wheat) resulted in the massacre of an estimated 20,000 Ndebele-speaking people (cf. Alexander et al. 2000; CCJP and LRF 1997; Werbner 1991; Worby 1998; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003). Although some dissidents were involved in acts of violence, human rights groups have estimated that 98 percent of the victims of the violence were killed by government (CCJP and LRF 1997: 156-157).

The *Gukurahundi* campaign was less concerned with military engagement with the so-called dissidents but ultimately sought to de-legitimise Nkomo and ZAPU which is also evidenced through ZANU-PF slogans that were used at the time such as ‘Down with Joshua Nkomo’ and ‘Forward with Mugabe’ (CCJP and LRF 1997; and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003, pp. 81-90). These slogans were followed by attempts to eliminate Nkomo physically after Mugabe described him as a ‘snake’ in his house. After the Fifth Brigade invaded Nkomo’s residence and killed his guards, he was forced to escape into exile via Botswana to the United Kingdom in 1983 (Nkomo 1984, p. 2). While in exile, ZANU-PF continued to portray Nkomo negatively and he was often represented as a coward and a politician who had failed the nation by leaving Zimbabwe. The direct threats Nkomo received from the ruling party were silenced in these representations. ZANU-PF mocked Nkomo’s escape by focusing on the fact that he had left the country disguised as an old woman.

### **Representing the Self: Nkomo’s autobiography *The Story of My Life***

In an attempt to counter ZANU-PF’s negative representations of him, Nkomo started writing his autobiography while he was in exile in the United Kingdom. His autobiography was eventually published in 1984. Whereas ZANU-PF had constructed Nkomo as ‘Father of Dissidents’ and a threat to Zimbabwe, in his autobiography Nkomo emphasised his contribution to the liberation of Zimbabwe as a clear rebuttal to criticisms levelled against him by his opponents. Nkomo emphasised his political seniority in the nationalist struggle, and justified why he deserved the title ‘Father Zimbabwe.’ He described how he committed himself to liberating Zimbabwe through enduring ten years in detention and in exile commanding ZIPRA and prosecuting the armed struggle. What emerges from the autobiography are different positive self-representations that include Nkomo as the authentic African leader; as the originator of the liberation struggle and as a symbol of unity; as the committed nationalist and pan-Africanist; and as the advocate of post-independence unity.

#### *a) Nkomo as the authentic African leader*

In order to articulate himself as someone who was able to speak on behalf of the Zimbabwean nation and Africans in general, Nkomo described himself as a ‘native son’ and provided details on his African roots and his attraction ‘to the traditional religion of our people’ (Nkomo 1984, p. 12). Nkomo modelled and presented himself as a cultural nationalist and a man of the people, who cherished traditional cultural norms, leading Ranger

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<sup>15</sup> *The Chronicle*, 25 January 1982.

to describe him as a 'cultural nationalist' (Ranger 1999). His pilgrimage to the Dula Mwali cult shrine in the Matopos Hills in 1958 was to seek legitimacy. This shrine had been used by pre-colonial leaders as a source of legitimacy and was consulted for divine advice, particularly on military matters and war.<sup>16</sup> Nkomo's visit was to ask *Mwali* (God) to assist them as nationalists in order to reclaim the country back from the colonialists and to get blessings for the prosecution of the nationalist struggle.

Nkomo wrote that for thirty years he kept the ritual secret of what he was told at Matopos shrine to the effect that 'a long and costly struggle' was to be waged before the achievement of political independence in 1980. (Nkomo 1984, p. 14). To solidify his claim to be 'Father Zimbabwe', Nkomo even sought ritual powers so as to mystify himself as the true inheritor of a chain of power that was disturbed by colonial rule. Nkomo portrays himself here as a keeper of national ritual secrets that other nationalists were not aware of.

Until his death, Nkomo associated himself with the Matopos shrines and carried a traditional short knobkerrie wherever he went. These shrines were and are still revered by traditionalists who believed that Ngwali/Mwari (God) resided there (Ranger 1999). In times of crisis, they are visited for divine consultation. Nkomo presented his struggle for independence as sanctioned by these shrines and when he came back from exile in 1980, he went back to report on the fruits of the struggle and to get further divine advice on the way forward.

#### *b) Nkomo as the originator of the liberation struggle and symbol of unity*

On the first pages of his autobiography, Nkomo re-presents himself as someone who actively participated in all phases of the liberation struggle, as an unwavering nationalist deeply committed to both independence and national unity. This is how Nkomo (1984: xii) introduces his autobiography:

This book is not a history - one day, if I am spared, I may contribute to the writing of one with a happy ending. Instead it is the personal record of a life that played a part in history, and it is also the work of an active politician who wishes to see things change for the better in the lives of the ordinary people in his country. I have been called 'Father Zimbabwe.' Whether I deserve that title is not for me to say. But by a dozen years in prison and half as many in exile I believe I have earned the right to speak for freedom while it is still endangered - this time not by far-off colonial rulers, nor by a settler population who will, I hope, now play their full part as citizens of a new nation, but by former colleagues in the liberation struggle.

Whereas ZANU-PF at the time did not recognise Nkomo's contribution towards the liberation struggle, Nkomo here clearly spells out that he was legitimised to speak as someone who has been important in the history of his country. Nkomo asserted that he 'fathered' the nation, stressing the ways in which he consistently struggled for freedom, whether from the colonial regime or from fellow liberation party ZANU-PF. Nkomo presents himself as someone who is motivated by efforts to promote freedom.

In his book, he does not only describe himself as a freedom fighter but as someone who to a large extent originated the liberation struggle in Rhodesia. For example, he explains his involvement in sourcing the first guns for the struggle from Egypt in 1962. The weapons acquired by Nkomo comprised of 24 semi-automatic assault rifles, with magazines, ammunition, plus some grenades. To him these weapons marked the first ever step in the direction of an armed struggle. Nkomo's detailed description of the guns sought to counter ZANU-PF claims that they inaugurated the armed struggle in Zimbabwe through their

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<sup>16</sup> Dula shrine has a different purpose from Njelele shrine that is renowned for rain-making. Dula deals with war. It was visited by Mtwani Dlodlo in 1896 to get blessing for that war. He was given a red axe as a symbol of support by the shrine for the war.

frequent reference to the death of seven ZANLA guerrillas at Sinoia in 1966 as the beginning of the armed struggle.

Elaborating on the 1963 split in ZAPU that gave birth to ZANU, Nkomo explains this development on a purely tribal basis and by referring to the interference of Julius Nyerere who, as Nkomo argued, 'had a special problem with me personally' (Nkomo 1984, p. xii). He squarely blamed Washington Malianga and Leopold Takawira for influencing younger politicians like Robert Mugabe to split the party (Nkomo 1984, pp. 109-119). In other words, Nkomo projects himself as a symbol of unity and portrays his opponents as tribalists who were just power hungry. In the last sections of his autobiography, he detailed how he worked for unity and how Robert Mugabe frustrated all the efforts. He bemoaned the untimely death of General Josiah Magama Tongogara whom he saw as firmly committed to unity like himself (Nkomo 1984, p. 210).

The popularly held view is that Tongogara was a victim of political assassination by ZANU. Through Nkomo's openly expressed admiration of Tongogara, he implicitly constructs both Tongogara and himself as benevolent advocates of unity who ultimately end up as victims of ZANU-PF violence. ZANU-PF is then represented as a party that was not truly committed to unity but sought to destroy those who did not toe the party line.

By discrediting the dirty tricks within ZANU-PF, Nkomo projected himself as a real statesman and a true nation builder who was – like Tongogara - also a victim of power hungry politicians. This projection is evident in the following excerpts of his book: 'To me the most important fact appeared to be that we had fought the war on the same side, negotiated as one, and been victorious. It seemed a great disservice to the people of Zimbabwe to launch their independent history divided by party quarrels, not united by national feeling' (Nkomo 1984, p. 203). He added that 'the leaders of the party that won (by unquestionable means, but let that pass for now) our first elections believed that I symbolized the national unity that they rejected. So I became the focus of their anger, perhaps of their envy' (Nkomo 1984, p. 203).

Nkomo was aware that he had gained considerable recognition in the popular consciousness of Zimbabweans, and realised that ZANU-PF was doing everything it could in order to crush this popularity. Ironically, as we will say later in this article, it was precisely Nkomo's call for unity which ZANU-PF began to emphasise to represent Nkomo in the changed political dispensation after his death in 2000.

### *c) Nkomo as the committed nationalist and Pan-Africanist*

While ZANU-PF represented Nkomo as a weak and compromising figure, throughout his book Nkomo reminds his readers about the many years he spent in detention. Countering ZANU-PF's accusation that he was a coward who always avoided arrest by spending time overseas, Nkomo wrote the following: 'I have often been criticised for being too fond of travel and for spending too little of my time at home. But that was not how I would have chosen to spend my life. It was the work I set myself, because I thought it was essential if my country was to get her freedom. In that I am sure I was right' (Nkomo 1984, p. 86). Nkomo emphasises that the endless travels were part of his commitment to the nationalist cause. During his trips abroad, he gave publicity to the Rhodesian problem: 'The cause I stood for needed friends who were not automatically committed [...]. And I needed to visit capitals of those countries, to win the support not only of their diplomats but of their decision-makers' (Nkomo 1984: 86). He argued that it was him who had to do the travelling because as he pointed out, by 1957 'I was still the only ANC leader with a passport' (Nkomo 1984, p. 75).

Nkomo presents a picture of a politician who was committed to both negotiations and armed confrontation and who saw these as two complimentary methods to achieve

independence. This is demonstrated by the following quote from his autobiography in which Nkomo (1984, p. 163) described his use of both methods:

Now, with full-scale war facing us, I had to learn to be a military commander. I was immensely proud of my men; it was my task to see that they got the backing they deserved. I carefully left the day-to-day command of the men to our own senior officers. But I regularly visited the training camps and bases to explain just what was going on, and to raise morale. When negotiations broke down, I went to the soldiers and said I had done what I could; it was up to them now. I emphasized that they were not fighting to do me a favour, nor I them: we were in it together for our country. I was doing my best to keep them supplied with material to fight with, and to see it was fairly distributed. It was up to them to put those supplies to good use.

While ZANU-PF represented Nkomo as a leader who preferred to negotiate with the Rhodesian regime instead of more confrontational approaches, he portrayed himself as supportive of both approaches. When negotiations did not seem to work out, he considered the armed struggle to be perfectly legitimised. Apart from being committed to the liberation of Zimbabwe, Nkomo also projected himself as a supra-nationalist and a pan-Africanist who brushed shoulders and worked together with other luminaries of the broader African struggles for independence. His autobiography includes details of his acquaintances and the contemporaries he met and worked with in the struggle against colonialism. The list includes Kwame Nkrumah, Tom Mboya, Nelson Mandela, Sir Seretse Khama, Holden Roberto, Kenneth Kaunda, and many others.

By highlighting how he rubbed shoulders with these leaders, he implicitly sought to legitimise his leadership of Zimbabwe just like other continental leaders who had assumed power after the departure of colonialists. So while ZANU-PF was keen to see Nkomo as a half-hearted nationalist and bedfellow of the Rhodesians, he firmly rebutted these images in his autobiography and emphasised his commitment to the liberation of both Rhodesia and Africa in general.

#### *d) Nkomo as the advocate of post-independence unity*

After Nkomo returned from his first period of exile in January 1980, he modelled himself as a real statesman as he began to talk of the war that was over, the need to forget the past, to reconcile and to collectively build the nation. Even after he lost the 1980 elections, he refused to be the 'Savimbi of Zimbabwe,' telling his angry ZIPRA forces the following: 'Our nation had gained its independence by years of sacrifice. Any bickering now would inflame passions, divide the people and encourage the enemies waiting on our borders to destabilize the country' (Nkomo 1984, p. 211). In his account, Nkomo was careful to distinguish between the new ZANU-PF government and ZANU-PF as a party. While he criticised ZANU-PF as a party for trying to kill him, Nkomo (1984, p. 1) remained committed to the newly independent government:

Robert Mugabe had decided to have me out of the way, and he evidently did not care what method was used. But I hold the legitimate government of Zimbabwe innocent of this atrocity. Mugabe was acting not as prime minister, but as leader of his party, ZANU [...]. As leader of ZANU he acted outside the law: but the law and the constitution of Zimbabwe remain in force, and I hold the ruling party, not the lawful government, responsible for the attempt on my life.

By arguing that it was particularly ZANU that challenged his position, he also ultimately represented the party as uncommitted to promote unity and determined to get rid of the opposition ZAPU. Despite ZANU-PF's efforts to associate him with 'dissidents', he did not compromise his nationalist credentials. As he emphasised in his book, '[t]he ruling party could not provoke me to disloyalty towards the nation I had struggled to liberate' (Nkomo

1984, p1). In the last chapter of the book, Nkomo (1984: 252) expresses his firm commitment to the process of building a Zimbabwean nation:

It is not too late to change all that, to muster the collective energy of our people and build the new Zimbabwe we promised all those long years of suffering and struggle. During my brief exile in 1983 I appealed in this way to Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, calling as a start for a national conference of all the country's interest groups, under his chairmanship, to begin the process of reconciliation. He did not answer then. Perhaps in the interval between writing this book and its publication he will change his mind and reply constructively. For my part, I shall continue working to that end.  
Long Live Zimbabwe!

Nkomo's autobiography is a robust rebuttal to the criticism levelled against him throughout the history of liberation and beyond. Through his book, Nkomo wrote himself back into the history of the liberation struggle and appropriated to himself a heroic niche not only as deserving of the title 'Father Zimbabwe' but also as the inaugurator of the armed liberation struggle, the populariser of the Rhodesia problem across the world and a statesman who desired to see his country not only independent but also united.

### **Nkomo as 'unifier' or 'sell-out' of the nation (1987-1999)?**

When Nkomo finally came back from exile in 1984 the unity negotiations which had collapsed in 1982 resumed. A final agreement between ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU was reached on 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1987 when both parties signed the Unity Accord (Chiwewe 1989). The Accord paved the way for a 'united' ZANU-PF but the popular perception was that PF-ZAPU had effectively been swallowed by ZANU-PF after heavy and consistent subjection to violence and harassment for over seven years (Sithole 1988).

While in the early 1980s, Nkomo was portrayed as the 'Father of Dissidents' by ZANU-PF, the newly united ZANU-PF party now represented him more positively as a selfless nation-builder and unifier who put the nationalist interest above the party interest. This was a convenient representation for both Nkomo who wanted to be remembered as an advocate of unity and Mugabe who did not tolerate any political challenges and who was still committed to establish a one party-state in Zimbabwe. Mugabe perched himself on the success of the unity accord and travelled together with Nkomo to Matabeleland and Midlands regions to sell the unity accord to the people. Mugabe also wanted to be recognised as a nation-builder and a statesman committed to nation-building.<sup>17</sup>

After the signing of the Unity Accord, Nkomo and other PF-ZAPU leaders seemed to be satisfied by being accommodated in ZANU-PF and government. In the immediate post-Unity Accord period, Nkomo was first given the position of Senior Minister. When PF-ZAPU and ZANU-PF structures were finally formally merged, he became co-Vice-President of the republic together with Simon Muzenda (Ncube 1989). Nkomo avoided talking about the immediate political past that led him to escape into exile in 1983. While for the victims of the violence of the 1980s the Unity Accord was important because it managed to end both dissident and *Gukurahundi* activities in Matabeleland and the Midlands regions, there were no other post-conflict rehabilitation measures to help heal the wounds (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003, pp. 24-30). What followed was a dead silence and no official apology was made by government to the victims.

Within this terrain of politics, a new discourse began to emerge in the Matabeleland and Midlands regions in which Nkomo and former PF-ZAPU leaders were seen as having

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<sup>17</sup> This was clearly demonstrated by the effective use of the picture taken after the signing of the unity accord in which Mugabe and Nkomo grabbed each other's hand and raised them high. This picture was used in the 1990 elections representing Nkomo and Mugabe as 'the stars of Zimbabwe.'

sold-out their followers for personal political gain. The official government was that the past of those atrocities had to be forgotten for the sake of national unity. When CCJP) and LRF Report broke the silence in 1997 through the publication of detailed human rights abuses by the Fifth Brigade, Nkomo immediately reacted to the report by storming into CCJP offices in Harare wanting to confiscate all the copies of the report, stating that it was going to divide the nation.<sup>18</sup> Mugabe also reacted to it by emphasising the need to forget the past (CCJP and LRF 1997; Werbner 1998).

Instead of dealing with the troubled past, Nkomo became engrossed in debates over land redistribution and black empowerment. He became an important voice for the emerging black middle-classes and aspiring black bourgeoisie (Raftopoulos 1996). He consistently warned about the inevitability of land wars in Zimbabwe as long as the unequal patterns of land ownership continued. In 1993, he warned white commercial farmers as land owners that they would soon be challenged by blacks over their citizenship as long as they refused to share strategic resources like land with blacks.<sup>19</sup>

But not all Zimbabweans celebrated the signing of the unity accord as a national achievement and the swallowing of PF-ZAPU as wise decision on the party of Nkomo. By 1990 a small party emerged that called itself Zimbabwe Active People Union (ZAPU) that tried to claim the political vacuum left by PF-ZAPU. The party blamed Nkomo for selling out his own people after they had been massacred by ZANU-PF.<sup>20</sup> While this party was insignificant it symbolised a counter politics that saw the unity accord as not only a surrender document but also Nkomo as a sell-out rather than a selfless nation-builder.

### **Nkomo as ‘Father Zimbabwe’**

After Nkomo died at the age of 82 on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1999, he continued to be represented as a unifier. Following the burial of Nkomo, Mugabe addressed the nation, thanked the people for demonstrating a spirit of oneness and stated that Nkomo’s last words were ‘Unity, Unity, Unity.’ He argued that Nkomo’s life story ‘is in large measure the story of our nation, yes, the story of you and me as our destiny took a painful and tortuous meander towards self-rule and full nationhood.’<sup>21</sup> At Nkomo’s burial, Mugabe also described the atrocities of the 1980s as having happened during a ‘moment of madness’ and took time to assure the people from Matabeleland that the Unity Accord was going to be respected despite the fact that the ‘great unifier’ was no longer present.<sup>22</sup> But apart from a nation-builder, Nkomo was posthumously also given the title of ‘Father Zimbabwe’ by ZANU-PF. Nkomo was suddenly reconstructed as a hero. For example, Mugabe announced Nkomo’s death as follows: ‘The mountain has fallen,’ and further added that ‘[i]t is a loss so keenly felt by all of us, by all Zimbabweans who saw in the Vice-President a father-figure, a founder of our nation. The giant has fallen and the nation mourns.’<sup>23</sup> ZANU-PF’s official publication, *Zimbabwe News*, inscribed Nkomo in the line of pre-colonial religious and political leaders:

The death of Cde Joshua Nkomo must give birth to national rededication to those ideas that made him a national hero. To act any otherwise would be betrayal of not only Cde Joshua Nkomo, but

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<sup>18</sup> *The Sunday Mail*, 22 July 1997.

<sup>19</sup> *Financial Gazette*, 28 January 1993.

<sup>20</sup> This insignificant party finally joined ranks with Edgar Tekere’s Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) that contested the 1990 elections on the platform of resisting a one-party state in Zimbabwe.

<sup>21</sup> *The Herald*, 10 July 1999.

<sup>22</sup> ‘President Thanks the Nation for Support,’ in *Zimbabwe News: Official Organ of ZANU-PF*, Vol. 30, No.6, (July 1999), p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> L. Ndoro, ‘The Day the Giant Fell,’ in *Zimbabwe News: Official Organ of ZANU-PF*, Vol. 30, No.6, (July 1999), p. 3.

all those in whose footsteps he walked such as Ambuya Nehanda, Sekuru Kaguvi, uMzilikazi kaMatshobana and Lobengula the Great.<sup>24</sup>

All this happened against the background of ZANU-PF's fading legitimacy. Nkomo became useful in a number of ways. He proved crucial to provide legitimacy to ZANU-PF's main campaign issue in the 2000s, the unequal distribution of land. ZANU-PF frantically tried to justify their determination to correct the land imbalances through the fast-track land reform programme as part of fulfilment of the last wishes of Nkomo (Mugabe 2001 and Sachikonye 2003). The programme was explained in terms of Nkomo's last words: 'Land, Land, Land' as reported by Mugabe after his death. A blue print on land reform which Nkomo had written in 1981 as PF-ZAPU's guide on land reform was republished by SAPES Publishers in 2001. Nkomo's emphasis during his time as Vice-President on black economic empowerment and a resolution to the land issue made it possible for the ZANU-PF government to represent him as a major champion for land reform.

Furthermore, in the new context of the emerging opposition MDC, Nkomo's willingness to sign an agreement with ZANU-PF enabled government to depict him as a visionary who saw the value of national unity, an issue that suddenly had obtained a new urgency in the face of an increasingly popular opposition party. For example, during an official ceremony to commemorate Nkomo in July 2002, President Mugabe stated as follows:

We remember him as the Father of Zimbabwe, as the one who pioneered the struggle and one who was committed to the very end to liberate his people and after liberation wanted the people to get their land. We also remember him as father of the family and politically, as father of all of us. But what's important now is that we should follow his steps on those things that he showed us as virtues and that he wanted done. And the things he emphasised most were, firstly, the unity of all Zimbabweans. That unity is important as the basis on which we can put our minds together, our energies together, and work as one and for the good of us all, the good of our children. The second issue is land and this issue must be resolved in the interests of the people of Zimbabwe. Therefore imperialism must never be allowed to thrive and prosper in Zimbabwe.<sup>25</sup>

By associating Nkomo with major ZANU-PF campaign issues, the party sought to gain support in Matabeleland where the opposition MDC had become increasingly popular. In order to drum up support, the ruling party equated voting for ZANU-PF with giving support to Nkomo and opting for MDC was represented as abandoning Nkomo's belief in unity. For example, in a speech during a visit when was the visit? to Joshua Mqabuko High School in Matobo District, Matabeleland (where Nkomo was born), Mugabe criticised residents for having given their support to the MDC in previous parliamentary and local elections:

You gave your school the name Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo on your own volition. On the other hand, you say you want the MDC and Tsvangirai. What contradiction is that? Do you still have Nkomo in mind? Do you have him in your heart? I heard the schoolchildren here singing a tune that says Nkomo is still alive. That is as it should be. However, we should show that he is still alive in our hearts, in our minds, in our whole lives [...]. He taught us to be united. He also taught us to be the owners of our land and to suffer for our land; to defend our land so it is not sold to the enemy.<sup>26</sup>

The revival of Nkomo's legacy and the silence of the ruling party's treatment of Nkomo in the 1980s was expressed most strongly in the introduction of the *Umdala Wethu* Music and Cultural Gala ('Our Father' in isiNdebele) which was launched in Harare in July 2001 and

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<sup>24</sup> 'Farewell Dear Father' in *Zimbabwe News: Official Organ of ZANU-PF*, Vol. 30. No. 6, (July 1999), p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> 'Follow in the Footsteps of Father Zim', *The Herald*, 2 July 2002.

<sup>26</sup> 'Remain United: President', *The Herald*, 30 November 2004.

from then on served as an annual commemoration of Nkomo's death. After the Harare launch in 2001, the gala rotated annually in different provinces such as Manicaland (Mutare) in 2002, Midlands (Gweru) in 2004, Matabeleland South (Beitbridge) in 2005, Bulawayo in 2006 and Mashonaland East (Marondera) in 2007. The rotation of the event in provinces throughout Zimbabwe served to reinforce Nkomo's status as 'Umdala Wethu' (Father of the Nation).

The galas were generally announced weeks in advance on television and radio through numerous advertising notices a day. State newspapers such as *The Herald* published special supplements about Nkomo's life. Clips of Nkomo were shown on television repeatedly, illustrated with music from ZAPU's choir, the Light Machine Gun (LMG) Choir. A significant amount of LMG choir recordings were destroyed by government officials in the early 1980s and ZBC did not allow their music to be played during the 1980s because government feared it would help mobilise support for ZAPU.<sup>27</sup> However, against the background of the rising popularity of the opposition party MDC in Matabeleland, Nkomo's legacy suddenly became useful for the ruling party in efforts to gain support from those who had supported Nkomo in the past but had switched to MDC after his death in 1999.

In television clips shown in the weeks before the 2004 edition of the gala in Gweru, Joshua Nkomo was portrayed in four different ways: Joshua Nkomo as statesman; Joshua Nkomo as freedom fighter; Joshua Nkomo as nationalist and Joshua Nkomo as the unifying force. These identities which the ruling party emphasised were convenient for its own purposes and served to mask the way in which Nkomo was viewed by the state in the early 1980s. ZANU-PF government's framing of Nkomo as a national hero in 2000s differed sharply from its construction of Nkomo as 'regional dissident' in the 1980s.

While in the 1980s, Nkomo was considered as a threat to the nation, he was celebrated as a hero in the changed context of the 2000s, and reinscribed into the nation. This reconstruction should be understood against the background of political changes occurring in the country. While Nkomo passed away in July 1999, it was only in July 2001 that the musical gala was introduced, reinforcing the idea that political motivations were behind introduction of the gala. After ZANU-PF's loss of a significant number of parliamentary seats in the June 2000 elections, the gala was introduced in 2001 in order to gain support from Matabeleland voters.

## Conclusion

Using the various representations of Joshua Nkomo as a nationalist politician, this article has demonstrated how nationalism was not only a terrain of contestations but how nationalist actors competed to represent each other in particular ways at different times for purposes of political expediency. Our choice of Nkomo as entry point into the politics of representation was influenced mainly by the fact that his life story was in large measure intertwined with the historical tapestry of the evolution of Zimbabwe from a colony to postcolonial nationhood. His story is that of an active politician and transcends colonial and post-colonial divides of Zimbabwean political history. Our interest was not in systematic cataloguing of events around Nkomo's life but to capture the changing ways in which other nationalists represented his role in Zimbabwe's political drama and how Nkomo rebutted some of those representations through his autobiography. We were interested in competing nationalist regimes of truth in the broader context of production and reproduction of power through political narratives and rhetoric. These representations are significant as another way through which one could understand the consistent underlying competitions for dominance among

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<sup>27</sup> Sibanda, Maxwell, Music central tool in Zimbabwe election, 29 March 2005, available from: <http://www.freemuse.org/sw8620.asp> (last accessed: 24 March 2008).

key nationalist actors throughout the struggle for Zimbabwe. It is a window into struggles-within-the struggle and struggles-after-the-struggle.

Our article has proven that nationalist politicians had permanent political interests rather than permanent opponents. Through use of political rhetoric they built enemies and through the same process they rehabilitated those enemies as long as it was convenient to their political stakes of the day. We have managed to demonstrate how in the life and afterlife of Nkomo, he continued to be a subject of appropriation, use and abuse. After his death, Nkomo continued to be of service to ZANU-PF's drive for hegemony, for political survival and for permanent reinscription into the political landscape of Zimbabwe, leading Eddison Zvobgo, a veteran ZANU-PF politician to argue that '[i]t is true that all of us die, but some truly don't die. It will never be possible for Joshua Nkomo's name to vanish from our history. Josh will never die'.<sup>28</sup> Nkomo will only die on the day that he is found to be useless to the agenda of politicians. It is only then that he will be freed to rest in the annals of history. That would happen only when the history of the liberation struggle and the whole nationalist project ceased to be reconstructed as an ever present and living reality that defies time and space.

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<sup>28</sup> 'Farewell Josh' in *The Financial Gazette*, 8 July 1999, p. 8.

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