
SEARCHING FOR ‘AFRICAN’ PERSPECTIVES IN SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA’S DISCOURSE ON ZIMBABWE’S CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The year 2000 witnessed an aggressive displacement of white farmers by Zimbabwe’s war veterans in pursuit of an unfulfilled African struggle for land repossession usurped by British colonialists led by Cecil John Rhodes in the 19th century. This turn of events received international media attention. Both in Africa and abroad, the media attacked Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe and called for Mugabe’s removal from power. Pressure was exerted on the Southern Africa Development Community-appointed mediator, Thabo Mbeki, to drop “quiet diplomacy” and adopt an aggressive and uncompromising approach to Mugabe. African leaders, including Mbeki, saw the media’s attitude as pro-Western and anti-African. This article, utilising Afrocentricity as theoretical framework, examines how the South African newspaper City Press, a self-proclaimed “distinctly African” newspaper, handled the Zimbabwean crisis, with particular reference to the land issue and taking into cognisance traditional African culture’s stance with regards to land ownership.

Keywords: African culture, *City Press*, Zimbabwe, land ownership, quiet diplomacy, media, Afrocentricity

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2000, Zimbabwe's liberation war veterans forcibly entered and occupied about 70 white-owned commercial farms (Hanlon, Manjengwa & Smart 2013: 75; Makunike 2000: 11). Iden Wetherell (2000: 12), the *Zimbabwe Independent* editor, observed that this development was President Robert Mugabe's "move to unleash ex-combatants of the liberation war onto productive farms to punish their white owners for helping to reject his constitutional proposals". This turn of events caught the media's attention as "headlines around the world reported the invasion of Zimbabwe's largely white-owned commercial farms in dramatic terms" (Scoones *et al.* 2010: 1). These "dramatic terms", Scoones *et al.* (2010: 1) further observe, characterised the veterans' actions as "Mugabe's land grab" carried out by an "unruly, violent mob" supported by Mugabe's "thugs". Scoones *et al.* (2010: 1) argue that this "story is far more complex than the generalisations of the media headlines". Even though 14 years have passed since that incident, Zimbabwe continues to be the subject of intense and emotive debates both locally and internationally (Mbeki 2013; Chikane 2013; Hanlon *et al.* 2013; Scoones *et al.* 2011; Blair 2011).

In August 2013, following the announcement of Zimbabwe's July 31 election results, former South African President Thabo Mbeki (2013: 61-62) expressed concern that African intellectuals were failing to give African perspectives on contentious African issues. Mbeki's observations were informed by what he regarded as "a very intense and sustained campaign to discredit the elections before they took place". In his view,

clearly ... the intention was in the event that the elections resulted in a victory for President Mugabe and Zanu-PF, they would obviously be unfair. In the event that they resulted in the election of Morgan Tsvangirai and the MDC, then they would be free and fair (*ibid.*).

Mbeki further argued that although Zimbabwe

has been a major issue on the international media and politics ... Africans still have not quite understood Zimbabwe. I think it is your task to change that, so that we understand ourselves better (2013: 61-62).

Moving from the premise that journalists constitute the intellectual class, this article interrogates whether or not South Africa's *City Press*, a self-proclaimed "distinctly African" newspaper, has given "African perspectives" on Zimbabwe, as opposed to the Euro-American hegemonic views. By "African perspectives" the author refers to notions and perspectives that are cognisant of African history and culture.

Informed by Bennett's (1995: 294) observation that to speak of the political role of the media is not an abstract undertaking, and that this can be done "only through a study of the role played by the media in concrete, historically determined political conjunctures", and that to study these, "it is necessary to deal not only with the media but the political issues at stake in those conjunctures", this article was inspired by a need to identify and study major political issues and challenges in the first decade (1994-2004) of South Africa's democracy. Crime (common and political), HIV/Aids and the Zimbabwean crisis were identified as the major political challenges that received widespread media coverage during the 20 years of democracy (Calland 2006: 190-191; Sparks 2003: 85; Jacobs & Calland 2002: 2-4). However, in this article attention is paid to the Zimbabwean crisis in which Mbeki played a central role as a mediator between the conflicting ruling party, Zanu-PF, and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

While reference is made to some South African newspapers that reported and commented on Zimbabwe's challenges, the focus of this article is on *City Press*. Qualitative content analysis (seeking meaning, not frequency of the message) was applied, studying *City Press'* editorial comments and individual black journalists' columns and opinion pieces focusing on the Zimbabwean crisis. Editorials and opinion pieces serve as guidelines to the publication's norms (Bennett 1995: 303). By doing a content analysis of the editorials and opinion pieces, the objective was to establish *City Press'* official and political stance on the Zimbabwean crisis. It was also hoped that columns and opinion pieces by *City Press'* individual black journalists would shed light on their stance on this issue.

The *City Press* content studied covers the years 2000 to 2004, the period when the Zimbabwean crisis began, and the end of South Africa's first decade of democracy. Subsequently, books specifically dealing with the Zimbabwean crisis since it began, up to the year 2014, are referred to. The article begins with a brief history of *City Press* as a contextualisation and rationale for choosing the newspaper as a case study. This is followed by a brief historical background to the genesis of the Zimbabwean crisis, and how *City Press* responded. This is then followed by the analysis of the handling of the Zimbabwean crisis by *City Press*, using Afrocentricity – which will be defined later – as a theoretical tool of analysis. The article ends with concluding remarks.

***City Press* – a context and rationale**

City Press was established in 1982 (Whitehead 2007: 6) with Phillip Selwyn-Smith as the first editor. Percy Qoboza succeeded him in 1983, until his death in 1988. Archbishop Desmond Tutu's hope, that "*City Press* would interpret reality as blacks know it and express their aspirations", indicates that there were expectations that its story-telling would be informed by African experiences and realities

(Mbhele 2003: 8). In response, the newspaper identified itself with the struggle of the oppressed by positioning itself as “the voice of the voteless masses” (Sibiya 1992: 1). It “fought for the poor and the underdog” and “fearlessly” took up cudgels against government, the military and the police, when necessary (Blow 1992: 6). Consequently, the newspaper was “harassed, threatened with censorship and on numerous occasions … faced closure by the authorities” (Sibiya 1992: 1). When he took over the driver’s seat, former *City Press* editor Vusi Mona (2001: 8) noted that *City Press* was a “quality, serious black newspaper which tries to reflect on issues of substance”. In October 2004, the newspaper’s motto changed from “The People’s Paper” to “Distinctly African” (Tsedu 2004: 1). In launching the “distinctly African” *City Press*, the then editor, Mathatha Tsedu (2004: 1) stated that among the challenges facing South Africa in its first decade of democracy was the country’s relationship with the rest of the continent. Tsedu said that South Africans, having been “indoctrinated with the belief” that they were different from the rest of the Africans on the continent, internalised this belief and saw themselves “not as Africans, but as South Africans”. To address these challenges, according to Tsedu, a “distinctly African” approach would mean that in South Africa the issues that enhanced and threatened the African identity would drive *City Press’* coverage. Considering that Mbeki argues that African intellectuals are not telling the African story, this article interrogates the extent to which *City Press* told the Zimbabwean story in a “distinctly African” way. But in order to appreciate the Zimbabwean crisis, a background to the crisis needs to be given.

THE ZIMBABWEAN CRISIS: BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To appreciate the Zimbabwean war veterans’ invasion of land belonging to white farmers in 2000, it is useful to revisit incidents that preceded the move. Early in 2000 the Zimbabwean government made constitutional proposals, contained in a draft constitution prepared by a commission appointed by the government, meant for adoption before elections scheduled for April 2000 (Hartnack 1999: 8). Among these proposals was the Zimbabwean government’s intention to redistribute “millions of hectares of white-owned land” (Sapa-AFP 1999: 4). The draft constitution “adopted a clause, likely to spark an outcry, allowing the government to seize land for resettlement without paying compensation”, the compensation to be paid being only for buildings and other structural improvements (Mandizvidza 1999: 4). Before the draft constitution was presented to the public, critics argued that the process was flawed and open to manipulation by the ruling party (Sayagues 1999: 15). When objections were raised, the government promised to offer Zimbabweans a chance to reject the draft in a referendum (Sapa-AFP 1999: 4). When a referendum was held in February 2000, the government’s draft constitution was rejected – 55% voted against it, while 45% voted for it

(Sayagues 2000: 6). The “No vote”, according to Sayagues, was an indication of “the end of Zanu-PF’s yoke over the country”. The results were “hailed by many as the beginning of the end of Mugabe” (Pretorius 2000: 11). Makunike (2000: 11) observes that on the day of the referendum, white Zimbabweans, who had “always stayed aloof of political involvement since independence in 1980 – thronged the polling stations to protect their interests and property”. That was because, according to Makunike, for white Zimbabweans a “No” vote was the only way they could protect their privileges.

The Zimbabwean referendum was followed by the presidential elections, which were also contested by the opposition MDC, led by Morgan Tsvangirai. When Mugabe won, *Mail & Guardian* (2002: 22) reported that Mbeki’s response to the outcome of the elections had to “confront the reality that Robert Mugabe is back in power and should not be there”. According to *Mail & Guardian*, Mbeki had to “appreciate that it is vital that Mugabe absent himself, or be removed, from government in Zimbabwe as quickly as possible”. The call for Mugabe to “be removed” was an echo of the call by Western countries for “regime change” in Zimbabwe. Alluding to this in his autobiography, *A journey*, former Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair (2011: 229) states:

People often used to say to me: If you got rid of the gangsters in Sierra Leone, Milosevic, the Taliban and Saddam, why can’t you get rid of Mugabe? The answer is: I would have loved to; but it wasn’t practical since in this case, and for reasons I never quite understood, the surrounding African nations maintained a lingering support for him and would have opposed any action strenuously.

The African leaders’ resistance to “regime change” – instigated by the West – which Blair “never quite understood” was driven by resentment, Chikane (2013: 108) observes, of

any activity that suggested that someone, particularly Western countries, wanted to tell them what to do with their lives. What united them most was the ‘regime change’ obsession of the US and Britain that threatened the very existence of these leaders or the positions they held. If the major powers could determine who should be part of the government of Zimbabwe then all of the countries in the region were vulnerable.

With reference to the “regime change” discourse, Chikane (2013: 104) notes that

[a]nother challenge was that the media, which had chosen to bid for the ‘regime change’ allowed no room for contrary views on the issues. Any dissenting voice was silenced by the dominant voices that were given the space to articulate their views.

Thus, Chikane (2013: 95), states,

the campaign made ‘regime change’ not just the desired outcome for the facilitator but the ‘right’ one. In a sense, this became their measuring stick for success. Anything else was not acceptable. That is why even shaking hands, holding hands or smiling with President Mugabe when the facilitator was received at the airport made headlines and was seen as reprehensible.

The “facilitator” that Chikane refers to is Mbeki, a task that was given to him in March 2007 by the Extraordinary Summit of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Heads of State and Government, mandating him to facilitate negotiations between the Zimbabwean government and the opposition (Hanlon *et al.* 2013: 96). To appreciate the shaking of hands and smiles cited by Chikane, it is best to refer to veteran South African journalist Allister Sparks (2003: 268):

[a]s international outrage mounted at this wilful destruction of a once-promising country, Mbeki and some other leaders of the 14-nation Southern African Development Community (SADC) flew to the Victoria Falls to meet with Mugabe. The following night I cringed as I sat in my Washington apartment watching a CNN newscast that showed Mbeki standing beside Mugabe holding his hand and smiling ... The sickening scene appeared on screen again and again over the following days and weeks as CNN rolled over its news items the way 24-hour news channels do. I know African men hold hands, it is a cultural thing the way Frenchmen kiss cheeks, but here was Mbeki with his British education and sophisticated understanding of the Western world, the super-diplomat and skilled persuader, allowing this impression of smiling support for Mugabe’s outrageous actions to be broadcast globally.

Mbeki did not accept calls to put pressure on Mugabe. Instead, after a week of silence, he accepted Mugabe’s victory (Forrest & Pressly 2002: 7). In May 2003, Mbeki along with the then Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo, and the then Malawian President, Bakili Muluzi, met with Mugabe and Tsvangirai in a bid to resolve the Zimbabwean crisis (Kindra & Masunda 2003: 2). Remarking on Mbeki’s continued efforts on Zimbabwe, Wetherell (2003: 15) said that the visit “failed to shift Mugabe from entrenched positions, thus exposing the much-vaunted New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) as a toothless totem”. In response to charges that his mission to Zimbabwe was a failure, Mbeki (2003: 31) charged that his “detractors” were “firm in their conviction that we have some divine right to dictate to the people of Zimbabwe”. He also pointed out that his “detractors” believed that if South Africa issued “instructions” to the political

leaders of Zimbabwe, this leadership would obey what the “baas” (an Afrikaans word for “boss”) across the Limpopo told them. Mbeki rejected such a position.

Mbeki’s “quiet diplomacy” was condemned by *Mail & Guardian* (2003: 32), and dismissed as “a national disgrace” by *Sunday Times* (2003: 20). A *Mail & Guardian* editorial (2001: 26) criticised Mbeki’s approach as a singular failure. Instead of confronting Mugabe’s “crude, brutal and idiotic” rule, *Mail & Guardian* argued that Mbeki had shown a timid approach. According to the newspaper, Mbeki should have pursued a more “robust policy towards Mugabe”. *Mail & Guardian* (2000: 20) held the view that since South Africa supplied “most of Zimbabwe’s electricity and fuel”, Mbeki’s government could close Zimbabwe down in a month. Mbeki resisted the media pressure, preferring to carry out the SADC’s mandate to facilitate negotiations. His facilitation culminated in the signing of the Global Political Agreement in 2008, which saw the MDC leader, Morgan Tsivangirai, becoming Zimbabwe’s Prime Minister, and Mugabe President in 2009. In 2013, elections were held, and Mugabe was declared the winner. Considering the concern of Mbeki and other African politicians that the media did not take into consideration “African perspectives” on the Zimbabwean crisis, and that *City Press* had a record of a pro-liberation struggle, and later identified itself as “distinctly African”, this article’s major research question is: How, if at all, did the coverage by *City Press* of the Zimbabwean crisis consider “African perspectives”? Below, the coverage by *City Press* of the Zimbabwean crisis is outlined.

ZIMBABWE – AN AFRICAN PROBLEM REQUIRING AFRICAN SOLUTIONS

After noting that Mugabe had supported the war veterans, and also arguing that their action was a justifiable protest against the unfair ownership of land by the country’s minority whites, *City Press*, in an editorial (2000a: 14), objected to what it perceived as Mugabe’s encouragement of lawlessness. The newspaper further argued that Mugabe himself was partly to blame for the crisis because he allowed land reform to be delayed by 20 years after Zimbabwe’s independence. The editorial also blamed white Zimbabweans, noting that they had “made little effort to reciprocate [Mugabe’s] outstretched arm of friendship” and added that “[i]n fact, some of them still think of themselves as Europeans first and Zimbabweans second”, something which “generated a lot of disappointment and resentment on the part of black Zimbabweans”. Mona (2000a: 12) saw the forceful eviction of white landowners not only as a reflection of resentment on the part of black Zimbabweans, but “as chickens coming home to roost”. Mona (2000a: 12) further argued that “commentary about the current land invasions in Zimbabwe is informed by an arrogant and pathetically ill-informed understanding of the history of that country”. In Mona’s view, a “reflection of where Zimbabwe has

come from becomes necessary” because “an impression is created that the black Zimbabweans who have invaded white-owned farms have sunk to the lowest level of human existence – and this in a manner unique to indigenous Africans”. As “[o]utrageous as the invasions are”, Mona noted that “the truth is that similar or worse incursions happened in that country a century ago” (*ibid.*). This was in reference to the land dispossession of Zimbabweans by British settlers led by Cecil John Rhodes. Mona also stated that at the Lancaster House Conference in 1979, in negotiations between the then Rhodesia’s rulers and Zimbabwean freedom fighters, Britain undertook, among other things, to raise money to buy white-owned farms which were to be used for land redistribution once the new government came into power, an issue which “Britain now has a dim recollection of”, which “Mugabe has not forgotten” (*ibid.*).

Supporting Mbeki’s diplomatic approach to Zimbabwe, *City Press* (2000b: 12) endorsed the SADC decision not to publicly condemn Mugabe, arguing that the problems in Zimbabwe “would require great diplomatic skills”. Against this background, echoing its support for Mbeki’s diplomatic approach four months down the line, *City Press* in another editorial (2000c: 8) argued that the African continent had its “own unique problems, different from those of Europe”, adding that “Mbeki understands his continent much better than those who have one foot in Africa and another in Europe”. The *City Press* editorial (2002a: 8) further made it explicit that it subscribed to a view that Zimbabwe was an African problem needing an African solution.

This view was expressed on the occasion of a deal, brokered by Nigeria’s Obasanjo, between Zimbabwe on the one hand, and Britain and other unspecified European countries on the other (Seepo 2001: 2). The agreement reached in September 2001 entailed a commitment from the Zimbabwean government to halt the land invasions, whilst Britain and other European countries undertook to pay the cost of compensating white farmers (*City Press* 2002a: 8). Commenting on this development, *City Press* (2002a: 8) in an editorial stated that “Obasanjo, mandated by other African governments to enter into discussion with Britain in an effort to halt the land invasions, has done Africa proud”. This was because, the editorial further noted, Obasanjo had “shown the rest of the world the commitment of African leaders to bring about lasting peace”. In *City Press’* view, “[t]he Zimbabwean accord clearly shows that African leaders can work towards providing African solutions to African problems”.

Almost two years later, the then *City Press* deputy editor, Khathu Mamaila (2004: 18), recalled that the “west conspired to overthrow former Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba and imposed a despot Mobutu Sese Seko”, a man who was “corrupt and plundered the wealth of the Congo, but he remained in power for almost three decades because his puppet regime did not threaten the interests

of the west". Mamaila (*ibid.*) further pointed out that the Angolan President, Jose Eduardo dos Santos, was running a corrupt and undemocratic regime, milking the country dry while "enjoy[ing] his millions in America" with no negative reaction from the United States because Western interests were not threatened. It was for these reasons, Mamaila noted, that the readers of *New African*, a London-published magazine, had voted Mugabe "the third greatest African of all time". It was also for these reasons, Mamaila stated, that Mugabe received a thunderous welcome at Orlando Stadium in South Africa when he attended the funeral of the ANC leader Walter Sisulu. Mamaila (*ibid.*) argued that Mugabe represented "the anger of many Africans against the west, in particular colonialism in all its forms". He represented "tenacity, the undying and unconquered spirit of those willing to die on their feet rather than live on their knees". The view expressed by Mamaila had been expressed three years earlier by *City Press* columnist Sonti Maseko (2001: 9) who said:

Mugabe has certainly struck a chord among people and gained the recognition as the icon and champion of the struggle for land rights. And as an African leader who can stand up to western influence and interests.

The support for Mbeki's diplomatic approach in Zimbabwe on the part of *City Press* was, however, not synonymous with the support for Mugabe's tactics.

Supporting Mbeki, not Mugabe

When Mugabe's Zanu-PF party won the national elections in March 2002, and South Africa accepted the outcome, *City Press* (2002b: 8) in an editorial called Mugabe's victory "problematic". The newspaper said this amid reports of intimidation and violence in Zimbabwe. But, unlike "some western leaders like Britain's Tony Blair" who laid all the blame on Mugabe, *City Press* (2002a: 8) added that the violence had emanated both from Mugabe's and Tsvangirai's supporters. Although supportive of Mbeki's approach, *City Press* (2001: 8) argued that "[o]ur approach to the Zimbabwean crisis – that of quiet diplomacy – sometimes creates a perception that we apply double standards" because South Africa had a "tendency to denounce Mugabe's dictatorial grip on power and later we heap praises on the man for 'the perfect way he handles the controversial land issue'". According to *City Press* (2001: 8), "[t]his perception was reinforced by statements from the SADC – of which we are a part – who visited that country to assess the state of affairs".

When SADC objected to the Commonwealth Heads of Government's decision to extend the suspension of Zimbabwe, *City Press* (2003a: 18) in an editorial criticised it, arguing that the Southern African body gave the "impression that it is a regional 'boys' club' in which its members are intent on defending each other and, at all costs, will avoid rebuking the conduct of one of their own". The newspaper further

argued that “[w]hile Mbeki has in the past few months pursued a policy of quiet diplomacy in an effort to steer Mugabe towards a path of democracy, there is nothing to suggest that this policy has worked”. *City Press* (2003b: 18) asserted that “[q]uiet diplomacy seemed to be playing into Mugabe’s hands” because “[o]ur strategy of quiet diplomacy appeared to have been misunderstood – rightly or wrongly – by Mugabe to mean support for his political excesses”.

Revisiting Mbeki’s approach to the Zimbabwean crisis, *City Press* (2004: 18) in an editorial stated that while it was “fine” for South Africa to choose “the path of quiet diplomacy – or non-megaphone diplomacy – in its dealings with the increasingly dictatorial regime of Robert Mugabe”, the approach “however, cannot be an excuse to obfuscate when wrongs are being done”. The editorial was referring to the deportation of a Cosatu delegation that visited Zimbabwe on a fact-finding mission. The delegation had met with the MDC in Zimbabwe. *City Press* asserted that the expulsion of the Cosatu delegation was “tantamount to saying to those Zimbabweans that they are not free to meet with whoever they wish to” and that the move should be seen in the light “of a government hell-bent on oppressing its own citizens”.

Having considered how *City Press* approached the Zimbabwean crisis, the next section deals with defining Afrocentricity, the theoretical framework that has been utilised in this article as a tool of analysis.

AFROCENTRICITY

Afrocentricity is “a theory rooted in the history, culture, and worldview” of Africans (Okafor 1993: 201). Culture in this context is understood as a “total way of life of a people” with surface structures and deep structures (Myers 2003: 122). The “surface structure”, Myers (*ibid.*) further points out, refers to the level of sensory observation, which is “subject to relatively rapid change, constrained by time and space”, while the “deep structure” refers to the “philosophical assumptions” which “can be preserved in the conceptual systems”. In terms of African culture, Myers (*ibid.*) states, the deep structure refers to “what is persevered and developed” and considered the “essential qualities of the African worldview, a view concerned with metaphysical rather than purely physical interrelationships”. Reference to “essential qualities” on the part of Afrocentricity provokes charges of “essentialism” (*ibid.*). Responding to this criticism, the leading theorist of Afrocentricity, Molefe Kete Asante (2003: 45) argues that while he “may answer to being essentialist, I am not an *immutabilist*”. The difference between the two, Asante (*ibid.*) argues, is that in the case of the former is the recognition that there are “certain essential characteristics that identify the contours” of the African community, while in the latter there is a denial of dynamism and change. While some changes may and do occur in culture, Asante, like Myers cited above,

argues that “cultures do exist and in fact persist for centuries with many basic characteristics hardly changed” (*ibid.*). This article recognises that among Africans there are different ethnic cultural practices, but simultaneously common African cultural practices that cut across ethnic lines. It is the common cultural features which are referred as “African culture”.

Afrocentricity was chosen because of its emphasis on the need to take into cognisance African culture and history when examining African issues. It embraces both Myers’ and Asante’s argument about the resilience of African philosophical worldviews.

In the next section, using Afrocentricity as a theoretical framework, the author examines whether or not *City Press*’ editorial columns, individual journalists’ columns and opinion pieces took into cognisance African history and culture in their commentary on Zimbabwe’s struggle for land repossession. This is done by examining Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle and African culture’s position with reference to land. Reference to “African history”, in this article’s context, means examining whether the media’s discourse on Zimbabwe has been sensitive to the history of dispossession of Africans in Zimbabwe by the British, and Africans’ struggle to regain their land. Reference to “African culture” means examining whether or not, in scrutinising the Zimbabwean crisis, the media has been sensitive to traditional African culture with regards to land.

Zimbabwe’s struggle: An Afrocentric analysis

Beginning with the land occupations that took place in 1997, Hanlon *et al.*’s (2013: 72) narrative dispels the notion that Mugabe was behind the war veterans’ occupation of white farmers’ land. They point out that the

government strongly opposed the occupations, sending state and Zanu-PF vice president Simon Muzenda to Svosve to try to persuade the occupants to leave. At Goromonzi, police were sent to evict the occupiers, burn their temporary shelters, and arrest the leaders of the war veterans (*ibid.*).

Even in 2000, when war veterans led Zimbabwean nationals to occupy more land, “they were driven out violently by anti-riot police in late 2000; even war veterans were beaten” (Hanlon *et al.* 2013: 76). Hanlon *et al.* (*ibid.*) further note that

[r]realizing the scale of the occupation and the farmers’ unwillingness to move, Zanu-PF was forced to accept. But this was not a Zanu-PF initiative – it was the war veterans in opposition to Zanu-PF.

So, claims by Wetherell that Mugabe unleashed his forces as retaliation to the “No vote” in the referendum are false.

City Press, to a certain extent, showed appreciation and sensitivity to the history of Zimbabwe with reference to the conflict about land in that country. It was due to this that Mona (2000b: 10) argued that “commentary about the current land invasions in Zimbabwe is informed by an arrogant and pathetically ill-informed understanding of that country”. What this meant, therefore, was that Mona was calling for commentary on the Zimbabwean crisis that was based on a historical context. Not only did Mona call for such an approach, but led by example by reminding his readership that the 1979 Lancaster House Conference, where negotiations between the Zimbabwean liberation forces and the Ian Smith government took place, concluded with an undertaking by the British government to raise money to buy white-owned farms, which were to be used for land redistribution so that Zimbabwean blacks could own land.

At the Lancaster House Conference, against the liberation movement’s will, a provision stipulating that the land could be acquired by the government only on a “willing seller, willing buyer basis” was inserted into the new Zimbabwean constitution (Ankomah 2000: 15). That provision was to be in effect for ten years – from 1980 to 1990. This meant that the Zimbabwean government could only acquire land from the white farmers if they were willing to sell any piece of land. While Mona, the then editor of *City Press*, in his personal capacity endorsed Mugabe, the newspaper was cautious. It appreciated the land question as a legitimate issue around which Zimbabweans rallied, but it regarded the delay in addressing the land issue as Mugabe’s fault, pointing out that Mugabe waited for 20 years after independence before addressing the issue. On this score, *City Press* failed to appreciate the historical developments in Zimbabwe.

There is, according to the former Secretary General of the African Union, Amara Essy, a historical factor that played a significant role in the delay to resolve the land issue in Zimbabwe (Essy, in Ankomah 2002: 27). According to Essy (*ibid.*), when the ten-year period of the Lancaster House Conference agreement had expired, “it was African heads of state who told him [Mugabe] to be quiet, because we were fighting against apartheid in South Africa”. Essy (*ibid.*) notes that the African heads of state prevailed on Mugabe to delay his land reforms so as not to “scare the white people of South Africa”, since at the time there were serious negotiations taking place between the liberation movements and the South African government.

In his biography *Thabo Mbeki – The dream deferred*, Mark Gevisser (2007: 445) alludes to this historical reality. But in the book, unlike Essy, who singles out African heads of state for asking Mugabe to delay dealing with the land question, Mbeki singles out the ANC as having persuaded Mugabe “to defer land reform so as not to scare white South Africans away from agreeing to majority rule”. *City Press* failed to make these connections between Mbeki’s approach to Zimbabwe and this

historical background. *City Press* also failed to contextualise the land issue within African cultural value systems.

African culture on land and human relationships

Emphasising that Mugabe has “never said that white Africans cannot own land or property in their country”, Osabu-Kle (2001: 47) states that what Mugabe has been saying is that “land ownership has to be compatible with African culture”. In Osabu-Kle’s view Mugabe’s move on the land question was an act of “only enforcing an African culture without which he cannot be accepted as an African” (*ibid.*). The question then is: What does African culture say about land ownership? Mqhayi, (1974: 12-13), a South African historian and poet, explains that land among Africans was never sold but belonged to the nation as its treasure. Williams (1987: 171), an African-American historian, having observed that according to African culture “the land … cannot be sold or given away”, further says that African culture held the view that the

land belongs to no one. It is God’s gift to [hu]mankind for use and as a sacred heritage, transmitted by our forefathers [forebears] as a bond between the living and the dead to be held in trust by each generation for the unborn who will follow, and thus to the last generation.

Abrahams (2000: 374-375), a South African poet and novelist, echoes this:

For Africans for instance, land will always be more special than for most other people: land is their life, given by God in trust to sustain the tribe and the community. Man [humankind] cannot own land in the way Europeans see ownership. If it mothers all who depend on it for life, how can anyone see it in terms of exclusive ownership?

Remarking on the land question, Rodney (1981: 41), an African historian, points out that where

a few people owned the land and the majority were tenants, this injustice at a particular stage of history allowed a few to concentrate on improving their land. In contrast, under communalism every African was assured of sufficient land to meet his own needs by virtue of being a member of a family or community.

In calling upon his government to “go back to the African custom of land holding”, former Tanzanian President, Julius Nyerere (in Shivji 2000: 42-43), argued against the sale of land, reasoning that

in a country such as this, where, generally speaking, the Africans are poor and the foreigners are rich, it is quite possible that, within eighty or hundred years, if the poor African were allowed to sell land, all

land in Tanganyika would belong to wealthy immigrants and the local people would be tenants. But even if there were no rich foreigners in this country, there would emerge rich and clever Tanganyikans.

In other words, Nyerere was saying that the African law on land was to protect the poor against abuse by the rich. In arguing that this is an African worldview on land is not the same as saying that Africans still practice it. They do not, and this is due to their disempowerment through colonial dispossession. The invocation of this African value system is recognition of an independent traditional African philosophical outlook before the colonial conquest. This African cultural perspective on land was missing in *City Press'* editorials, black journalists' columns and opinion pieces. While *City Press* showed an appreciation of the historical context on the Zimbabwean issue, it also exposed a lack of appreciation for the African cultural context in Mugabe and Mbeki's personal relationship that impacted on their political relationship. Gevisser (2007: 439) observes that Mugabe and Mbeki had a father-son relationship, the same way Mbeki had that kind of relationship with Zambia's former head of state, Kenneth Kaunda. Mugabe, according to Gevisser (*ibid.*), treated and cared for Mbeki as if he were his own son. This story was told by Mbeki himself to Gevisser, according to the author. Gevisser (*ibid.*) observes that the “context in which Mbeki was telling me this made its implications clear: his latter-day appeasement of Mugabe was rooted at least in part in an acute sense of the role the two men had played” in Mbeki's personal and political life.

CONCLUSION

This article's point of departure was to interrogate whether or not *City Press* took into consideration the history of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle for land, and African cultural values on land. This was done in response to the observation by the former South African president and mediator in the Zimbabwean crisis, Thabo Mbeki, that African intellectuals, with particular reference to the Zimbabwean crisis, were not giving African perspectives on African issues. Applying the Afrocentric theoretical framework, which posits that any analysis that deals with Africa and Africans must take into cognisance African history and culture, this author analysed, by means of content analysis, *City Press'* editorials and its black journalists' opinion pieces and columns to examine whether African history and culture – in search for “African perspectives” – were taken into cognisance. The author concludes that while this was done – to an extent – on Zimbabwe's history of the liberation struggle for land, analysis of African cultural values on land was completely missing. Failure to do this on the part of *City Press* is failure to fulfil the media's role to educate.

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