

# Zimbabwe: Critiquing the Challenges of Cultural and Religious Concepts Such as *Ubuntu* and the “Forgive and Forget” Approach to the *Gukurahundi* “Genocide”.

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**Abstract:** This article explores the challenges which emanate from the discourse of reconciliation in Zimbabwe as it relates to the *Gukurahundi* atrocities of the post-independence Zimbabwean era. Since most of the efforts to address this nation’s ugly past have been influenced mainly by cultural (African) and religious (Christian) concepts such as the Bantu concept of *Ubuntu* and the Christian religion approach to conflict resolution which is based on the “forgive and forget” concept, this article will critique these concepts, demonstrating their unviability in bringing reconciliation in Zimbabwe. The article argues that without legal frameworks which can facilitate justice as a primary vehicle to reconciliation, the cultural and religious approaches may not make much impact in reconciliation efforts in Zimbabwe. For instance, it is not clear how the cultural concept of *Ubuntu/ Unhu* should be implemented to establish a *formal* and *structured* way of dealing with the issue of *Gukurahundi*. Among other issues of concern, the “forgive and forget” approach also poses its own problems, one of them being a too *simple* and *casual* approach to a much disturbing issue which has affected thousands of lives up to this day. With the aid of an example of how the post-World War II West Germany under the leadership of Willy Brandt addressed the issue of reconciliation and the history of holocaust, this article argues that justice should be the primary vehicle of the *transition* to reconciliation.

**Keywords:** *Gukurahundi*, Zimbabwe, Ubuntu, conflict resolution.

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## Introduction: Historical Background

After a protracted struggle which lasted from 1964 to 1979, Zimbabwe gained liberation from the colonial rule of Rhodesia in 1980. The *Gukurahundi* (a *shona* word for “the rain that washes away the dirt”) atrocities are generally taken as an occurrence of

the post-independence Zimbabwe period. However, if carefully examined, their roots go back to the period of the struggle for independence, where two main revolutionary movements namely ZANU (PF) and (PF) ZAPU were used as vehicles of combating the colonial regime. The contestations of power and influence between these two main revolutionary movements have been highlighted by several historical narratives on the struggle for independence in Zimbabwe, for instance, by Chung (2005) in her memoir. As Chung notes, confrontations between ZANU (PF) and (PF) ZAPU began in 1963 when the formation of ZAPU broke apart to produce ZANU (PF) and (PF) ZAPU. These movements began to occasionally target each other rather than targeting the colonizer. Despite efforts to reconcile these two movements between 1963 and 1979 which were ultimately demonstrated by choosing a combined team to represent the Patriotic Front (PF) at the Lancaster House conference, the decision by ZANU (PF) to contest in the first “democratic” elections of 1980 as an independent political party dashed these efforts. Furthermore, when ZANU (PF) eventually won the 1980 elections, it decided to deal with dissent voices and cower all efforts of creating opposition politics. Kriger (2005) observes that:

*In the aftermath of the election, despite the official policy of reconciliation, the ruling party's one-party mentality was evident in its political discourse and use of coercion. ZANU (PF) used the state media to promote only its war contributions and war songs, and used its party slogans and symbols at the first celebration of Heroes' Days and at the viewing of the first two national heroes' bodies. At rallies, ZANU (PF) slogans denigrated ZIPRA, ZAPU, and Joshua Nkomo and their role in the armed struggle, including denouncing them as 'oppressors' (p. 5).*

It is this background which culminated to the violent assault of civilians and former members of (PF) ZAPU which lasted from 1982 until the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987. The Unity Accord therefore, ended the *Gukurahundi* atrocities but did not bring peace and reconciliation. It became an “amalgam of silence and denial” (Mashingaidze, 2020: 4). The assault aimed at rooting out dissent voices in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe left over 20,000 people dead (The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and the Legal Resources Foundation, 2007).

In terms of terminology of this study, the reader needs to be aware of the conundrums (within debates on the issues of peace, justice, resolution, and reconciliation) associated with terms such as “restoration”, and “reconciliation” among others. For instance, there is usually an uneasy nexus between *restoration, justice* and *forgiving*. Questions usually arise as to whether perpetrators of injustice can be forgiven without the processes of justice and restoration (see for instance, Chamburuka & Chamburuka, 2016). The example of the history of holocaust in Germany which is provided in this study demonstrates that justice can indeed clear the path to “restoration” and “reconciliation”. Furthermore, it remains hazy as to how “restoration” can be fully attained in cases of

death and grief. Can material compensation bring restoration of a parental *love* which is no longer there, or can a jail term of the “living” perpetrator be enough to cover this gap? These questions, therefore, demonstrate problems associated with these terms and how they are applied in discussions in the field of justice, peace, reconciliation, and restoration. For instance, Ganiel and Tarusarira (2014) explore the application of the term “reconciliation” to Zimbabwe. They note for instance, that there has been debates on whether besides rebuilding relationships, reconciliation should also involve public truth telling and acknowledgement of guilt. Furthermore, in the context of Zimbabwe, they observe that Mugabe’s inauguration speech is usually referred to as the “hand of reconciliation”. Mugabe’s speech is analyzed in detail in the fourth section of this article, where its “contribution” to reconciliation in Zimbabwe is analytically explored.

### **The Discourse on the *Gukurahundi* Atrocities**

Since the Unity Accord did not silence concerns over the *Gukurahundi* atrocities, questions on justice, reconciliation, and restoration have always crept up in the Zimbabwean society. Various personalities ranging from scholars (those in the academia), to traditional leaders, journalists, religious leaders, and politicians have raised concerns over the burden of the *Gukurahundi* history as “a stain on the wall” of Zimbabwean independence.

### **Contribution by the Academics**

Since the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987, various scholars, both within Zimbabwe and in the diaspora, have written extensively on the issue of the *Gukurahundi* “genocide”, addressing various aspects of this grim past such as its suitability to be called a “genocide” or just a civil war and its socio-economic effects on the victims and their relatives. Troubling, however, is that most of these scholars are either in the diaspora (such as Sabelo Ndlovu- Gatsheni) or are from the region affected by the *Gukurahundi* such as the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces of Zimbabwe (Terrence Mashingaidze and Professor Ngwabi Bhebe are good examples of academics from the Midlands province who have demonstrated some interest in this subject). Failure to recognize this subject as a national problem may be a concern which may hinder its progress within the academia.

### **Concerns of the Traditional Leaders**

Among traditional leaders in Zimbabwe, the most vocal on the issue of the *Gukurahundi* are traditional chiefs from the Matabeleland region especially those from Matabeleland South who are chaired by Chief Senator Masendu Dube Sindalizwe and chiefs from Matabeleland North who are usually led by Chief Nhlanhlayamangwe Ndiweni. In an interview and conversation with Trevor, Ndiweni (2021) has stressed the need to bring to book those responsible for the *Gukurahundi* atrocities as the first step to reconciliation. He stresses that without doing this, reconciliation cannot be achieved.

## Voices of religious leaders

The role of the church in bringing peace and reconciliation in post-independence Zimbabwe is already a debatable issue, as such most political atrocities in the country have not received a convincing attention and unveiled reprimand from the religious circles. Since most Pentecostal church leaders have concerned themselves more with the “prosperity gospel” than political injustice in the country, the ruling party has always tried to woo leaders of the apostolic sects to support its policies and agendas. However, some churches organizations especially those from *protestant* churches have raised concerns over national healing and reconciliation. The International Religious Freedom Report for 2019 states that:

*Multiple church organizations, including the Churches Convergence on Peace, ZCC, and Catholic Bishops' Conference, released letters appealing for tolerance, national unity, peace, reconciliation, healing, and stability while calling on the government to uphold the constitution and protect citizens' political rights* (US Department of State, 2019, p. 5).

However, as compared to the engagement of religious leaders in matters of justice and reconciliation in South Africa, as exemplified by the work of the late Desmond Tutu (Crompton, 2007), religious leaders in Zimbabwe have not demonstrated much enthusiasm and interest of actively engaging the problem of political injustices and human rights abuses such as the *Gukurahundi* atrocities. Commendable and isolated cases of religious intervention against human rights abuses in Zimbabwe, come from the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe. The contribution of the Catholics includes the report released on the *Gukurahundi* disturbances which was released in 2007 (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, 2007) which has provided primary data on the nature of the Matabeleland atrocities. It also includes the intervention made by the Catholic bishops who in 2020 wrote a letter of protest highlighting their displeasure in the military's “reign of terror” in post Mugabe Zimbabwe.

Perhaps the church's passive stance towards human rights abuses in Zimbabwe (especially the *Gukurahundi* atrocities) is not only complicated (as also observed in the case of academic contribution) by ethnical interests but also by the observation that in Zimbabwe, religious groups “that have an alternative ideology to that of the ruling party are treated with antagonism, and various strategies are used by the regime to silence dissenting voices” (Dube, 2021: 2). Furthermore, it needs to be noted that instead of waiting for the church to engage with Zimbabwe's grim past and the issues of human rights abuses, some church leaders have addressed these issues as *academics*. A good example is that of Reverend Dr Isheanesu Gusha of the Anglican diocese, who authored an article titled: “Memories of *Gukurahundi* Massacre and the Challenge of Reconciliation” (2019). In this article, Gusha (2019) explores the possible factors which may explain the failure of the project of reconciliation in Zimbabwe. Gusha cites amnesia

(which he defines as an officially imposed form of forgetting) and lack of truth as the main culprits of this failure.

### ***Ubuntu/ Unhu: Ncube (2021), Chemhuru and Shizha (2012)***

The concept of *Ubuntu/Unhu* (humanity or being human) is an African ideology which is entrenched in communal understanding and the production of a harmonious living environment. It is therefore, a philosophy that is based in the importance of a community (Ncube, 2021), and which recognizes that to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others, and on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them (Samkange, 1980). It therefore, fosters cultural values such as love for one another, brotherhood, and respect of life (Chemhuru & Shizha, 2012).

Chemhuru and Shizha (2012) focus on how the *Unhu/Ubuntu* concept can be promoted through education and thereby ensuring that it becomes part and parcel of our African cultural heritage, and a resource that can be used to promote reconciliation and peaceful communication among members of the society. They state for instance, that "education for reconciliation through *unhu* reflects on the relationship between the concepts of reconciliation and *unhu*. It must be an education that fosters respect for the community and other individuals" (p. 23)

In the same line of argument, Ncube (2021) has underscored the value of *Ubuntu* as an "Afrocentric" model of bringing restorative justice in Zimbabwe. However, unlike Chemhuru and Shizha (2012), Ncube does not demonstrate an interest in the long path of cultivating the spirit of *Ubuntu/Unhu* through the educating system. His argument is that it is the mandate of the government to consider and be guided by *Ubuntu* in resolving conflicts and effects of atrocities such as the *Gukurahundi* "genocide" in the Zimbabwean society. He concludes for instance, by stating that:

*The failure, by consecutive ZANU-PF governments, to identify the salience of ubuntu has led to the persistent marginalization of ethnic minorities and also the violent impunity of governance characterized by human rights abuses, rampant corruption and absence of rule of law* (p. 138).

This "great expectation" of the government to be "humane" and the emphasis on this important mandate is also evident in Chemhuru and Shizha's (2012) analysis of the role of *Ubuntu* in reconciliation. Like Ncube, they conclude by highlighting this mandate of the government of Zimbabwe:

*The Government of Zimbabwe should use education must foster sustainable development and active and effective global and local citizenship, as well as contribute to strengthening democracy, dialogue, mutual understanding and the peaceful resolution of conflict, while preventing the promotion of all forms of extremism and violence (sic)* (p. 25) (personal emphasis).

However, putting all this burden and mandate in a political institution which is guided, to quote Ncube (himself) by the “foreign Dutch-Law” is to expect a miracle is resolving the misdeeds of the past in Zimbabwe. This is important to understand especially considering that most of the alleged perpetrators and interested occupy senior positions in the government. To expect the alleged perpetrators to be driven by the spirit of *Ubuntu* and hand themselves to the mercy of the justice system in Zimbabwe would be trivializing the complex matrixes of the political arena, especially the African political arena where holding on power for as long as it takes, and whatever it takes is an enticing vision for most politicians.

### **“Forgive and forget”: A religious approach**

In general terms, the Christian biblical text discourages vengeance which it allots to God alone (English Standard Version Bible, Deuteronomy 32:35). However, it is contentious to equate justice to vengeance. If, for instance, calling for justice can be taken (from this biblical perspective) as an act of being vengeful, then all the systems of justice and the judiciary will be rendered unnecessary. Without these systems of law and order, societies will degenerate into chaos where criminality will flourish, and accountability vanish. Hence, to a certain extent, the justice system promotes accountability. Without it, the issue of the *Gukurahundi* “genocide” may amount to a troubling simplicity: a case of forgiving and forgetting, and leaving vengeance to God. However, this does not mean that the very same system of justice is not susceptible to manipulation, especially by those who possess material and political power. Evidently, despite the right to life being enshrined in the Zimbabwean constitution, in the case of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities, the Zimbabwean justice system has so far failed the victims of these atrocities.

Although the terms “forgive and forget” are common in biblical discussions associated with reconciliation, they are not found in one sentence or verse. Some texts emphasis on forgiveness, while some on forgetting (not becoming vengeful). Interestingly, however, used together in a single sentence, these two words are evident in Robert Mugabe’s inaugural speech (as Prime Minister) which he made on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March 1980:

*I urge you, whether you are black or white, to join me in a new pledge to forget our grim past, forgive others and forget, join hands in a new amity, and together, as Zimbabweans, trample upon racism, tribalism and regionalism, and work hard to reconstruct and rehabilitate our society as we reinvigorate our economic machinery (p. 3).*

Clearly, at this time, Mugabe’s vision of the new Zimbabwean society *seemed* to be inspired by the biblical approach to conflict resolution: the “forgive and forget” approach. However, how the ZANU (PF) government handled issues of conflict soon after they gained power betrayed this speech and approach. Considering that they have been described as “ethnically” inspired (see for instance, Katri, 1996), the *Gukurahundi* atrocities

are the first evidence of betraying the “brotherly” love he pledged in his speech, through encouraging Zimbabweans to “join hands in a new amity, and together, as Zimbabweans, trample upon racism, tribalism and regionalism” (p. 3). The second major betrayal of the “forgive and forget” belief is evident in his campaign of “correcting” the injustices of colonialism by taking land from the former colonizer and giving it back to the majority black Zimbabweans. The land Reform of 2000, can therefore, be deemed as “corrective” and an evidence of the fact that the injustices of the past have not been *forgotten*. One will, therefore, wonder why the “forgetting” needs to be selectively applied depending on who commits the injustice.

Within the scholarship of religion (Christianity in particular), the “forgive and forget” approach is sometimes entrenched in what has been referred to as the *Jesus’ ethics* of non-resentment (Chamburuka & Chamburuka, 2016). For instance, Chamburuka and Chamburuka (2016) explore *Jesus’ ethics* of non-resentment in the context of two schools of thought: the first one which suggests that non-violence ethics should be applicable *unconditionally* and the second school which argues that these ethics should be accompanied by *confession, truth* and *justice*. In relation to Zimbabwe’s socio-political violence of 2008 and 2013, Chamburuka and Chamburuka (2016) conclude that Jesus’s ethics can only be applicable productively when guided by truth, confession, and justice, suggesting that they do not subscribe to the first school of thought which supports an “unconditional” application of Jesus’s ethics of non-resentment. These views, therefore, augment the argument expressed in this article that reconciliation can only be considered when preceded by a process of justice. This process should be mainly provided for in “internal” legal frameworks (in consultation with the Zimbabwean constitution) and in consultation with international legal frameworks such as those provided for by the International Court of Justice).

### **Willy Brandt’s *Kniefall*: Lessons Learnt**

It is usually difficult to discuss issues related to human rights violation, conflict, justice and reconciliation without making reference to the national socialist terror of the *Third Reich* which took place between the years 1933 and 1945. Beside the ultimate crime of plunging the “world” into the Second World War where many lives were lost, it is the holocaust, the “slaughtering” of Jews in concentration camps (sometimes referred to as the “death camps”) such as the Warsaw ghetto in Poland which paints a vividly grimmer picture of the atrocities of the nationalists.

Although the Nazi regime fell in September 1945, its burden of crimes against humanity remained on the shoulder of every German, on both sides of the divided Germany (1949–1989/1990) and even after the 1990 reunification of Germany. The need to address this burden is adequately addressed by the German literary historian Wolfgang Emmerich (2015) who notes that in their formation, the post-World War Two German nations (the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany) were forced to ad-

dress the burden and memory of “fascism” as a basis of their new identities. According to Emmerich, while East Germany distanced itself from the Nazi atrocities and claimed that the remaining Nazis were in West Germany, West Germans embraced the fact that Nazis were indeed Germans and that as Germans they had to share the admission of guilty. While this admission was not clearly vivid when the Christian Democrats (CDU) being chaired by Conrad Adenauer were in charge of the chancellery of West Germany, it became more vivid when the socialists led by Willy Brandt took over the chancellery in October 1969. The socialists rebranded the foreign policy of West Germany basing it on *Ostpolitik*, a focus on re-mending relations with the Eastern part of Europe.

With the effects of the Nazi terror and the holocaust more pronounced in the eastern part of Europe especially in Poland where the fascists had created one of the largest concentration camps the Warsaw Ghetto, the holocaust memory was always going to be a stumbling block to the *Ostpolitik* campaign. Hence, the need to come to terms with it and the humble gesture of visiting a memorial site of the Warsaw Ghetto was a significant work towards reconciliation. However, it was not just this visit which moved the survivors of the “camps of death” and the world at large, but rather his humble gesture of kneeling down (famously known as the *Kniefall*). It became a symbol of atonement which projected the German society as a repentant sinner. It therefore, had some religious connotations and influence. To demonstrate the significance of this act, a plaque showing Brandt kneeling in front of a wreath of flowers was erected at the site.

What is significant to note from Brandt’s *Kniefall* and his *Ostpolitik* in general is that this process was necessitated by the clearance of political impediments which might have complicated if not hindered it from happening. The path to the reconciliation with the east (and indeed with the world at large) was firstly cleared in 1945, when the Nazi Germany collapsed allowing for the process of *denazification* to begin. This process of cleansing Germany of all known Nazi elements was twofold, firstly it involved bringing the former Nazi perpetrators to justice. This happened mainly through the Nuremberg trials which took place from 1945 to 1948. The second part involved partitioning Germany into administrative zones of the four allied powers (France, United States of America, Great Britain and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). Consequently, the German territory was divided into two states which were founded in 1949. East Germany which was an administrative area of the communist USSR, and West Germany which was an administrative area of the other three “capitalist” powers. Hence, by putting Germany under administration, the allied powers ensured that the Nazi elements are stifled and discouraged in the German society. The German society was therefore, rid of the perpetrators of Nazi atrocities and thus reconciliation processes could begin. When the *Kniefall* took place in 1970, the German society was at a better position to come to terms with its past. At this stage, any cultural or religious approach to reconciliation was now feasible, hence Brandt’s biblical posture of a repentant sinner, who kneels and looks down in shame and self-reproach.



There are a number of lessons drawn from the German experience which may aid in explaining impediments of reconciliation efforts in Zimbabwe. First, the Zimbabwean community needs to identify the machinery which engineered the *Gukurahundi* atrocities, and evaluate whether it has been properly dismantled to create a platform of restoration and reconciliation. Clearly, the ZANU (PF) government which masterminded the “genocide” is still the ruling party in Zimbabwe, and one of the active participants of this politics of turmoil, Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was the leader of intelligence at the time occupies Zimbabwe’s upper chair. The Zimbabwe National Army, from whose loins the “murderous gang” of the Fifth Brigade came has undergone not much reformation to bring to book those involved in the *Gukurahundi* atrocities. Hence, under the current political administration, to expect a replica of the Nuremberg trials in Zimbabwe will be taking a very long walk to justice and restoration in Zimbabwe. This has been further complicated by the increase in the power to meddle in internal politics that the “civilian” Zimbabwean ZANU (PF) government has given to the army. By engineering the removal of the “feared” former president Robert Mugabe, the Zimbabwean army has demonstrated no tolerance to those who threaten not only its leadership but also its political interests.

Secondly, it took Germans two and half decades to address their grim past, and to show atonement. It took a different generation, a generation with no direct link to the atrocities of fascism to address the issue of restoration in a progressive manner. It took the effort of the socialist party (SPD) to consider reconciliation, not only with the wronged neighbors but among the Germans themselves (East and West Germany). As a result of the efforts and policies of the SPD, reconciliations treaties were signed which included the Treaty of Moscow (USSR), Treaty of Warsaw (Poland), and the Basic Treaty of 1972 with East Germany (formally known as the German Democratic Republic). Hence, if “restoration” and reconciliation can be achieved in Zimbabwe, it would likely take a different generation to do this. A generation which has no direct link to the *Gukurahundi* atrocities and is not a beneficiary of them. Considering the fact that the youth seem to be the backbone of the opposition politics (the revisionist politics of change) in Zimbabwe, and also considering the first point raised above, it is this young generation of Zimbabwean politicians which is better positioned to revise the sins of their forefathers and bring about reconciliation.

Lastly, as demonstrated by Brandt’s “biblical” gesture of kneeling down, cultural and religious intervention can only be important at the final stages of the reconciliation process, after the process of justice. Political impediments cannot allow religious and cultural intervention to act as a vehicle of reconciliation. Such intervention can only be feasible after the removal of these impediments through constitutional means. With political reform being a concern of most Zimbabweans, especially those interested in addressing the issue of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities, cultural and religious intervention will not bring much progress towards reconciliation in Zimbabwe.

## Conclusion

This article explored the challenges which emanate from the discourse of reconciliation in Zimbabwe, demonstrating the need to foster justice and accountability before considering the role that cultural and religious concepts such as *Ubuntu* and the “forgive and forget” approach could play in the process of reconciliation. In order to shed light on the need for justice as a path to reconciliation, the article made reference to the case of West Germany, where it highlights how (following years of *denazification*) Willy Brandt’s SPD led administration engaged in a campaign of reconciliation with the former victims of fascist terror (especially in the eastern part of Europe). Thus demonstrating the need for justice to open the path to reconciliation. Considering their challenges, cultural and religious concepts can only play a supportive (and secondary) role in the process of reconciliation in Zimbabwe. While it is not clear how *Ubuntu/ Unhu* should be operationalized to established a *formal* or *structured* way of dealing with the a grim past such as that of the *Gukurahundi*, the “forgive and forget” approach poses its own problems, one of them being a “too simple” way of dealing with this grim past of post-independence Zimbabwe. Without much thought on the long-term effects of these atrocities, the latter presents two words as a solution to this visible deeper problem: just *forgive* and *forget*. Such “simplistic” analysis is also evident in Robert Mugabe’s evaluation of the atrocities as merely a “moment of madness”. Through these lines of argument, the article demonstrated the challenges that cultural and religious concepts may face when proposed as primary vehicles of reconciliation in Zimbabwe. The paper therefore, argued that these may only be proposed as supporting concepts especially in addressing psychological effects of the trauma caused by the *Gukurahundi* atrocities. *Political reforms* which will remove the remnants of the *Gukurahundi* machinery and Justice provided through the constitutional law should be the primary vehicle through which the case of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities is addressed. A progressive engagement with this case can be an important yardstick with which the *independence* and *non-prejudiced* position of the justice system in Zimbabwe can be evaluated.

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