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## Facing History In The Aftermath Of Gukurahundi Atrocities: New Media, Memory And The Discourses On Forgiveness On Selected Zimbabwean News Websites

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### Abstract

In 1983, the Robert Mugabe-led government deployed a military unit to the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces under the guise of quelling a “dissident” movement. This army unit went on to commit atrocities on the civilians in these south-western parts of Zimbabwe. By the time this violence ended in 1987, at least 20 000 Ndebele people had been killed. This violence is known as Gukurahundi, and remains a dark chapter in the national memory. Given that the regime that committed these atrocities is still in power and the perpetrators have not been brought to justice, it is timely to probe how online participants are employing news websites to recollect and negotiate the memories of Gukurahundi that are repressed in official circles. This paper examines the discourses on forgiveness that are being reproduced and shaped on selected Zimbabwean news websites as online participants attempt to deal with the painful Gukurahundi past. In probing the complexities, ambiguities and limits surrounding the imaginations on forgiveness, this article demonstrates that forgiveness is not always a virtue as some narratives seek to perpetuate state-imposed amnesia and shield the perpetrators from prosecution.

**Keywords:** *forgiveness, Gukurahundi, memory, discourses, news websites*

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# **Facing History in the Aftermath of Gukurahundi Atrocities: New Media, Memory and the Discourses on Forgiveness on Selected Zimbabwean News Websites**

**Mphathisi Ndlovu**

Simon Wiesenthal, in his book *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, provided a lucid and compelling account of an incident that occurred when he was a Jewish inmate in a Nazi concentration camp. Wiesenthal (1998) recalled how a Nazi soldier on his deathbed had contritely confessed to participating in the mass killing of the Jews and asked for his forgiveness. Wiesenthal had been summoned to the German soldier's bedside because the mortally wounded officer wanted to seek absolution from a "Jew" in order to die in peace. Wiesenthal recounted how he could not bring himself to forgive the repentant soldier, and consequently left the room in silence. The writer concluded this chilling narrative by posing a poignant question to his readers on what they would have done in his position. Wiesenthal's account raises fundamental questions about the issue of forgiveness in the aftermath of mass atrocity. What does forgiveness mean? Who has the power to grant forgiveness? Should pardon be offered to repentant (or unrepentant) perpetrators? How do socio-political environments shape the discursive constructions on forgiveness? This article reflects on these questions as it examines the narratives on forgiveness that are produced and shaped on two Zimbabwean news websites, at a particular socio-historical context, and as online interlocutors recount Gukurahundi memories. Gukurahundi is a Shona word meaning the "first rain of summer that washes away the chaff left from the previous season" (Eppel, 2004, p. 59).

In conventional discourses, forgiveness tends to be acclaimed as an antithesis of vengeance (Tutu, 1999). Whilst acknowledging that anger, bitterness and rage can be unjustifiable and impermissible, there is an emerging literature that demystifies and critiques the contemporary understanding of forgiveness (Mayo, 2015; Brudholm, 2008). Mayo (2015) reminded us that "forgiveness must not be idealized" as "not every act of forgiveness is morally valuable and even appropriate" (p. 45). Brudholm (2008) added that there is a need for "ethical reflection on the pitfalls of advocating or encouraging others to forgive" (p. 51). Zimbabwe is confronted with painful past events, as memories of the Gukurahundi massacres continue to haunt the nation-state (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; Eppel, 2004). Due to the unresolved legacies of the past, Rwafa (2012) perceived the country as a "wounded

nation where surviving victims of Gukurahundi are still simmering with anger, resentment and frustration” (p. 323).

This paper employs the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA)—a method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)—to examine the discourses on forgiveness that are emerging on *Newzimbabwe.com* and *Bulawayo24.com* news websites, as online participants attempt to resolve the burdens of Gukurahundi past. Situated in the field of media studies, this article explores how new media narratives on forgiveness are contributing not only to the reproduction of social injustices, but also to the transformation of society. In post-genocide societies that are deeply scarred by historical injustices, such as Zimbabwe, new media can play a pivotal role in enabling subjugated communities to openly narrate their harrowing experiences and demand truth, justice, and accountability.

### **Gukurahundi: An Elephant in the Room**

Gukurahundi denotes the state-orchestrated violence that was unleashed upon Ndebele-speaking civilians in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces between 1983 and 1987 (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; Eppel, 2004). At least 20,000 Ndebele-speaking civilians were killed when the Mugabe-led Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) regime deployed the North-Korean-trained Fifth Brigade militia to Matabeleland and Midlands provinces to quash a dissident movement (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008). These “dissidents” were former Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) soldiers who had deserted the army (Kriger, 2003). ZIPRA was the military wing of the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), a nationalist movement led by Joshua Nkomo (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; Kriger, 2003). Although Nkomo denied any association with the “dissidents,” Mugabe accused ZAPU of engineering this movement to topple the government (Kriger, 2003). In 1983, Mugabe deployed the Fifth Brigade militia, comprised of ex-Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) combatants—a military wing of ZANU—to Matabeleland and Midlands provinces to subdue the “dissident” movement (Lindgren, 2005; Kriger, 2003). This Fifth Brigade, composed of predominantly Shona-speakers, unleashed terror on ZAPU officials, former ZIPRA combatants and Ndebele-speaking civilians who were accused of aiding “dissidents” (Lindgren, 2005; Eppel, 2004). As it meted out violence on Ndebele-speaking people, the predominant Shona-speaking Fifth Brigade militia employed an overtly “tribalist” rhetoric by claiming to be avenging the pre-colonial Ndebele raids on Shona communities (Lindgren, 2005, p. 161). The killings, mass detentions, disappearances, torture, rape, and other gross human rights violations committed by the

Fifth Brigade and other state units were documented extensively in the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and the Legal Resources Foundation Report (CCJP & LRF, 2007).

Although the violence ended with the signing of the Unity Accord between ZANU and ZAPU in 1987, the perpetrators of the genocide have not been held accountable and the truth about these atrocities has remained buried and heavily guarded by the government (Eppel, 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2003). In response to the amnesty, impunity, and official amnesia, there have been growing calls in Matabeleland for justice, compensation, reburials, and commemoration for the Gukurahundi victims (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; Eppel, 2004). The state has thwarted various efforts by Matabeleland communities to commemorate the Gukurahundi victims. In 1997, a public ceremony to commemorate the Gukurahundi victims was called off in Lupane (Matabeleland North) after the villagers were intimidated by state security agents (Alexander, McGregor, & Ranger, 2000, p. 262). In a recent event, Owen Maseko, an artist, was arrested for exhibiting a painting at an art gallery in Bulawayo that depicted Gukurahundi atrocities (Rwafa, 2012, p. 324). As such, a conflict exists between the local communities' efforts to address the Gukurahundi issue and the state actions of repressing the memories of the violence.

There are different interpretations on the motivations of this violence. Firstly, there is a view that ZANU PF unleashed violence on the people of Matabeleland because it wanted to establish a one-party state by destroying an opposition party, ZAPU (Rwafa, 2012; Vambe, 2012). Secondly, some Ndebele communities perceive Gukurahundi as ethnic cleansing (see Lindgren, 2005; Alexander et al., 2000), and are accusing "the 'Shona' in general of killing the Ndebele" (Lindgren, 2005, p. 158). As a result, the bitter memories of Gukurahundi have heightened Ndebele ethnic nationalism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; Lindgren, 2005).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2003) identified the flaws of the Unity Accord as its failure to address issues such as the compensation of Gukurahundi victims and the prosecution of the perpetrators of these crimes. Ngwenya (2016) employed the Tree of Life (TOL) healing approach to ascertain whether Gukurahundi survivors could heal themselves through this participatory research project. Ngwenya (2016) concluded that while the TOL was useful to participants, social healing is problematic because the regime that committed the atrocities is still in power and has not publicly acknowledged the injuries inflicted. In her study on the discourses of human rights in Zimbabwe, Morreira (2016) examined how notions about

justice and reconciliation are enacted and imagined. Focusing on Harare communities in the wake of political violence, Morreira (2016, p.58) identified transitional justice, the Tree of Life approach, and justice of the ancestral spirit as some of the models for imagining reconciliation and justice. This article argues that social media can also provide an arena for communities coming to terms with a violent past to imagine and discuss the meanings of justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

A number of scholars have lauded new media as emancipatory spaces that enable the people of Matabeleland to commemorate, preserve, and keep alive the memories of these atrocities (Mhlanga & Mpofu, 2014; Mpofu, 2014). Mpofu (2014) noted that taboo issues such as Gukurahundi are now being openly debated in online media. Mhlanga and Mpofu (2014) added that online spaces such as the *Forum* mailing list enable the people of Matabeleland to commemorate the Gukurahundi victims and express Ndebele nationalist sentiments. However, there is a gap in literature that examines the place of the media in producing, shaping, and circulating discourses on forgiveness. This particular article addresses this neglect in scholarship by probing the kinds of meanings that are assigned to “forgiveness” and reflecting on how these understandings help to reproduce, sustain, or transform the status quo. Anchored upon an assumption that new media are empowering the affected communities to openly speak about Gukurahundi, this article interrogates the politics of forgiveness as online users confront the legacies of this violent past. However, this article acknowledges the centrality of socio-historical, political, and cultural settings in shaping the uptake and usage of digital technologies.

### **Social Constructionism, Memory, and Forgiveness**

This paper is predicated on a social constructionist theoretical assumption that meanings of reality (or social world) are socially constructed, fluid, flexible, and shifting, rather than fixed and natural (Burr, 2003; Crotty, 1998). Anchored in this social constructionist understanding that there is no “objective fact” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42), this paper views forgiveness as a discursive construct whose meanings are multiple, unstable, contested, and constantly shifting. As such, this article examines the different interpretations on forgiveness that are shaped on news websites within the current Zimbabwean political environment.

This paper further views the media as “memory agents” (Zandberg, 2010, p. 5) that narrate, interpret, commemorate, shape, and circulate our knowledges of the past. More specifically, new media are conceived as “technologies of memory” (Sturken, 2008, p. 75)

that have transformed the ways in which historical memories are recollected, stored, and disseminated. Against the backdrop, this article examines the discourses on forgiveness that are being shaped by cyber-communities as they negotiate, mediate, and contest their memories of Gukurahundi on *Newzimbabwe.com* and *Bulawayo24.com*.

“Forgiveness,” as a discursive construct, is fraught with contested meanings, nuances, and ambiguities. This paper draws upon the scholarly works that are critical of the dominant perspective that idealizes forgiveness (Mayo, 2015; Brudholm, 2008; Muller-Fahrenholz, 1997). Mayo’s (2015) work on the “limits of forgiveness” is seminal as it not only identifies the downsides of the contemporary understanding of forgiveness but also provides an alternative conception. This paper views forgiveness as the “restitution of the human” and the “remission of guilt” (Muller-Fahrenholz, 1997, p. 4). The understanding is that the offender asks for forgiveness and the “victim grants it” (p. 4). Sells and Hargrave (1998) regarded forgiveness as the process of “letting go” and “relinquishing the right to retaliate subsequent to injury” (p. 22). Chang, Yeh, and Hsu (2016) argued that forgiveness denotes the process of coming to terms with the painful past, “dialoguing with the offender” (p. 7) and the mending the broken relations. They further highlighted the importance of truth-telling, apology, and justice in forgiveness (p. 7). There are debates concerning the conditions under which forgiveness should be granted (Mayo, 2015). This article rejects the conception of forgiveness as “unconditional” and “unilateral,” but affirms Mayo’s understanding that the wrongdoer’s repentance should be a prerequisite for forgiveness (p. 4). Muller-Fahrenholz (1997) lamented that forgiveness has become “so cheap a notion” as the “element of guilt has almost completely vanished” from its conceptualisation (pp. 3-4). Although repentance is crucial in repairing social relations, this paper views forgiveness as a gift and “not something that even the repentant wrongdoer is in a position to demand” (Allais, 2007, p. 263).

This article is premised on an understanding that forgiveness should not be a substitute for justice (Allais, 2007, p. 255; Muller-Fahrenholz, 1997, p. viii). The discourse on forgiveness can be propagated to entrench collective amnesia, as survivors of mass atrocity are told to forgive and “move on” (Minow, 1998, p. 15). As such, this article concedes, as noted by Allais (2007), that there are “circumstances in which forgiveness would be wrong” (p. 255). Mayo (2015) argued that “not every act of forgiveness is morally valuable or appropriate” as in some cases, victims may be pressured to forgive offenders (p. 45). Focusing on post-apartheid South Africa, Mayo (2015) contended that the victims of

apartheid were pressured to forgive the perpetrators for the sake of building the “New South Africa” (p. 5). Murphy (2008) added that forgiveness is not always a “virtue” as “some wrongs and some perpetrators of those wrongs may be unforgivable” (p. ix). Brudholm (2008; 2006) focused on the victims that are unwilling to forgive perpetrators of mass atrocities, and argued that, in some cases, the refusal to forgive can be permissible.

### **Methodology**

Data for analysis was purposively selected from media genres such as opinion pieces and readers’ comments on selected news websites. With purposive sampling, units are selected non-randomly and consciously by the researchers to address the research goals (Bryman, 2012). *Newzimbabwe.com* and *Bulawayo24.com* were purposively selected because they provide a platform for the discussions and debates on Gukurahundi. Data drawn from these news websites covers a period from 2010–2015. *Newzimbabwe.com* was launched in the United Kingdom in 2003 by “former Zimbabwean journalists” and is regarded as one of the first Zimbabwean news websites established in the diaspora (Mpofu, 2013, p. 116). *Bulawayo24.com* was established in 2010, and its tagline reads: “online news service for Bulawayo.” This news website was selected because it positions itself as serving Bulawayo, which is at the heart of Matabeleland, an area traditionally dominated by Ndebele people. These news websites are part of what is known as “diasporic media” (Mpofu, 2013, p. 115) that offer alternative narratives to ZANU PF’s hegemonic discourses. Bearing in mind that “draconian” pieces of legislation, such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), have been promulgated by ZANU PF to stifle freedom of expression and curtail civil liberties (Mpofu, 2014, p. 119), the emergence of Zimbabwean news websites has widened the democratic space by promoting civic participation.

The search box facilities from the news websites were utilised to select articles for analysis by entering keywords such as “forgiveness,” “Gukurahundi,” and “Matabeleland.” These keywords were employed in order to identify the articles that report on Gukurahundi. However, media texts (news articles, opinion pieces, and readers’ comments) that mentioned Gukurahundi, but did not discuss forgiveness, were excluded from the data collection process, as this article is interested in the discourses on forgiveness. From the 76 articles on *Newzimbabwe.com* and *Bulawayo24.com* that mention Gukurahundi, 10 news articles were selected because they discussed issues of forgiveness in detail. Given that there were over 100 discussants’ comments on Gukurahundi, this article focuses on 16 readers’ comments attached to the 10 news articles, as they capture extensively the issues of

forgiveness. The media texts (news articles and readers' comments) were categorised into five dominant themes (see the analysis section). The process of data analysis was conducted until the point of saturation.

The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), a strand of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), was selected as a method for analysing how language use in media texts serves to reproduce, and challenge, unequal social relations—in particular, socio-historical contexts (Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009). Discourse is understood as a “group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall, 1997, p. 28). CDA is a popular research method in media studies, as it has been employed by various researchers to explore the meaning-making practices in media texts (Richardson, 2007; Fairclough, 1995).

In contrast to quantitative content analysis, which focuses on the systematic quantification of the manifest content (Richardson, 2007), CDA does not place emphasis on the quantitative description of texts and coding of variables. Rather, CDA scholars examine how meaning is constructed in texts in a particular socio-historical context. From a range of CDA approaches, this article selected the DHA that was developed by Ruth Wodak and other scholars within the Vienna School because of its emphasis on the historical context that shape discursive “events” (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 7). The DHA data analysis focuses on three layers/dimensions: thematic topics, discursive strategies, and linguistic tools (Wodak et al., 2009). The selected articles were categorised according to the predominant themes: no forgiveness without justice, no forgiveness without an acknowledgement of the crimes committed, no demands for forgiveness, forgiveness in the name of a “new Zimbabwe,” and invoking the memories of pre-colonial Ndebele raids to implore Gukurahundi victims to forgive. The DHA has been employed to analyse the discourses on Anti-Semitism in Austria (Wodak, 2003), the constructions of Austrian national identity (Wodak et al., 2009), the nativist and xenophobic discourses in Austria's immigration policies (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), and the discourses of silence surrounding Austria's Nazi past (Wodak, 2011).

One of the ethical issues related to my analysis of readers' comments on *Newzimbabwe.com* and *Bulawayo24.com* was whether an informed consent was required from research participants. Although researchers can be accused of “lurking,” Bryman (2012, p. 680) maintained that an informed consent is not required if the information is in

the public domain and no password is required to access it. The following section is an analysis of different perspectives on forgiveness that are reproduced and shaped in opinion pieces, readers' comments and discussion forums on *Newzimbabwe.com* and *Bulawayo24.com* news websites.

### **Analysis: Newzimbabwe.com and Bulawayo24.com**

This article employed the discourse-historical approach as a method for textual analysis/examination of the discourses on forgiveness on *Newzimbabwe.com* and *Bulawayo24.com*. Focusing on five key themes that evoke notions of forgiveness, the research probed the social meanings on forgiveness that are produced, reproduced, and sustained in Gukurahundi debates on the selected websites. The following section is analysis of the five key themes just described above: no forgiveness without justice, no forgiveness without an acknowledgement of the crimes committed, no demands for forgiveness, forgiveness in the name of a "new Zimbabwe," and invoking the memories of pre-colonial Ndebele raids to implore Gukurahundi victims to forgive.

#### **No Forgiveness Without Justice**

The topos of justice is evoked by some online participants as they demanded the prosecution of the perpetrators of Gukurahundi as a precondition for forgiveness and reconciliation. In the Zimbabwean context where the perpetrators of violence are still in power and have not acknowledged their role in orchestrating Gukurahundi, some interlocutors view the government's version of forgiveness as impunity and an erasure of the past. *Bhangale*, a participant on *Newzimbabwe.com*, responds to another interlocutor by arguing that: "You won't wish it away that way. Justice never rots. We are waiting for justice, we will get justice" (cited in Doran, 2015). *Landilani* adds that: "our relatives were killed; our houses were burned. We will never forget that, we want justice" (Cited in I witnessed Gukurahundi, 2014). These online discussants assert that for the society to heal, the perpetrators must be held accountable for their crimes. Macaphulana (2011), in his opinion piece published by *Newzimbabwe.com*, reiterates that the "perpetrators must be brought to book... the victims of justice will extract justice from the perpetrators." *Bhangale* declares that the perpetrators of Gukurahundi will be brought to justice: "at some point when the deck starts crumbling, justice will come knocking at doors. Nazis are still being picked up right now" (Cited in Doran, 2015). The above online comments indicate that forgiveness is imagined as entwined with justice and accountability as citizens are using new media as a platform for demanding justice.

## No Forgiveness Without an Acknowledgement of the Crimes Committed

Other online participants affirmed the notion that the perpetrators' acknowledgement of the atrocities should be a requirement for forgiveness. In an online comment published by Newzimbabwe.com, Mpala (2013) affirmed that:

The majority of the victims are hurting and refusing to forgive until the massacres are acknowledged to their satisfaction. It is one thing to argue forcefully and brow beat the victims to silence, but it's another to have the victims forgive and forget.

The transitivity "hurting" denotes the scars of the victims that are yet to heal. Mpala (2013) argued that the victims will not grant forgiveness until the "massacres are acknowledged." Forgiveness is thus construed as dependent on the perpetrators recognizing and admitting the pain they have caused to their victims. The discourses on forgiveness are imbued with politics, as perpetrators want the Gukurahundi forgotten so that they can escape punishment for their crimes. The transitivity "refusing" not only connotes the pressure placed on victims to forgive, but also their power and agency of victims to deny forgiveness. Such rhetoric reinforces an idea that forgiveness is elective (Allais, 2007), in the sense that it is in the victims' prerogative to grant forgiveness, and they cannot be coerced to pardon the perpetrators. In addition, the term "refusing" suggests that in some situations, the victims' refusal to forgive might be motivated by desires for justice. In the context whereby Gukurahundi atrocities have not been publicly acknowledged and the perpetrators have not accounted for their crimes, the discourse on forgiveness tends to be construed by the survivors as a camouflage for denialism, oblivion and impunity. Morreira (2016) noted that there is a "culture of impunity" in Zimbabwe, which in some instances has led to alternative forms of justice such as *ngozi*, that is, the "avenging spirits of individuals who had died" (p. 57-58). In asserting that the perpetrators cannot coerce the victims to forgive, Mpala's (2013) online comment affirms Minow's (1998) notion that victims have a right to "withhold" forgiveness, and cannot be "commanded" to forgive (Minow, p. 20).

Another online discussant, whose handle is *Sound of blackness* (in Doran, 2015), posits that the victims would grant forgiveness if their injuries were acknowledged by the perpetrators: "it would only be fair and just to those who lost their relatives in that 'moment of madness' to be given an opportunity to know who ordered the killings. You might be surprised that we would forgive them." The "moment of madness" is an expression that was used by Mugabe to describe the Gukurahundi atrocities that he orchestrated (Rwafa, 2012, p. 319). *Sound of blackness* imagines truth-seeking mechanisms and apologies as crucial

elements in the pursuit of forgiveness. Thus, the assumption is that the perpetrators must first apologise for the wrongdoing before absolution is granted. Second, the view that the victims should be granted an opportunity to “know who ordered the killings” denotes the difficulties of forgiving perpetrators who are “unknown, unrepentant, or still a threat” (Mayo, 2015, p. 26). In short, this reader’s post supports the model of transitional justice that foregrounds issues of truth-telling, forgiveness, justice, and healing (see Morreira, 2016, p. 70).

*Bobsled*, another online user, buttresses the conception that forgiveness is dependent upon repentance. *Bobsled* (*Newzimbabwe.com*, 2014) asserts that:

About Gukurahundi, there has never been a question of forgiveness because no one has owned up to the crimes and hence no one has asked for forgiveness. How can one forgive the person who hurt them if that person is such a coward that he will not own up to his misdeeds?

The above comment reinforces a belief that forgiveness should be granted when offenders show remorse and repentance for their crimes. In some cases, forgiveness is taken for granted (assumed), as there is a belief that when the perpetrators confess and show remorse, the victims will automatically pardon them. *Guest*, an online commentator, posits that the 5<sup>th</sup> brigade must “come out” and acknowledge their crimes “so that they can be forgiven” (cited in *I witnessed Gukurahundi torture*, 2014). *Guest*’s comment denotes Muller-Fahrenheit’s (1997) critique that forgiveness is taken for granted as it is generally “expected that the victim will accept the excuse almost automatically” (p. 17).

### **No Demands for Forgiveness**

One of the complexities surrounding forgiveness is the question of who has an authority to pardon the perpetrators. George, an online discussant, posits that Gukurahundi surviving victims should “move on” in the same way as Joshua Nkomo did:

The main actors, Nkomo and others moved on. Yet here you are failing to move on because you have acquired persecutory syndrome. It’s a sad and wasted life. If Nkomo could move on, so should the children of his so called followers. (Seery, 2015)

The discussant uses the phrase “move on” as a euphemism for state-imposed amnesia and impunity. Thus, by imploring the Gukurahundi victims to “move on,” *George* is perpetuating and reproducing the dominant discourse that trivialises, minimises, and suppresses the memories of the atrocities. Nkomo is constructed as a symbol of forgiveness,

and the victims of Gukurahundi are pressured to emulate their nationalist hero and “move on.” Nkomo is venerated as “Father Zimbabwe” in the dominant nationalist discourses, a title he was granted, posthumously, by ZANU PF (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Willems, 2010, p. 197). *George’s* rhetoric of forgiveness fails to condemn the harm inflicted on the victims, but rather evokes the memories of Nkomo in order to shield and absolve the perpetrators of Gukurahundi. It is in this vein that Allais (2007) posited that “forgiving may sometimes be wrong because it may involve a failure to condemn wrongdoing” (p. 258).

In addition, *George* condemns the unforgiving victims for harbouring “persecutory syndrome” and leading a “sad and wasted life.” Thus, the unforgiving victim is depicted as being consumed with anger, bitterness, and resentment. Desmond Tutu, in his thesis that there is “no future without forgiveness,” denounced the victims’ emotions of “anger” and “resentment” as “corrosive” of peace and social accord (Tutu, 1999, p. 35). However, Murphy (2008, p. ix) stated that some “resentments may be justified and healthy.” *George’s* depiction of unforgiving victims evidences Brudholm’s (2008) assertion that “victims who cannot or will not abide with the call to forgive and reconcile are often pictured as ‘prisoners of the past’” (p. 2). Brudholm (2008; 2006) called for a need to acknowledge the value of the victims’ “negative” emotions, instead of simply dismissing them as resentment, anger, and desires for revenge. Thus, a refusal to forgive by the people of Matabeleland can signify what Brudholm (2006) terms a legitimate “moral protest” and hence “worthy of respect” (p. 23).

In the review of Wiesenthal’s (1998) *Sunflower*, Patterson (2006) pondered on the possibility of forgiving crimes in the name of the victims. The question, “in whose name, by whom and with what authority?” (p. 475), illustrated Patterson’s reflection on who can grant forgiveness and with what authority. Online debates on Gukurahundi capture these complexities surrounding forgiveness. In an opinion piece published by *Bulawayo24.com*, Matabeleland People in Diaspora (2014) condemned a priest in Matabeleland who pardoned a former Fifth Brigade soldier for Gukurahundi atrocities:

We are appalled by the behaviour of one priest from Lupane who accepted a nonsensical apology from one Gukurahundist [who] is reported to have gone to Lupane to apologise and ask for forgiveness for his part in the heinous acts of mass and brutal murder, rape, and arson on the people of Matabeleland... The church priests have no powers whatsoever to forgive people who committed genocide.

Matabeleland People in Diaspora (2014) argues that the “Gukurahundist” should not just apologize but also reveal the sites where the “victims were buried” and account for the crime. Through this topos of restitution, Matabeleland People in Diaspora was shaping a narrative that forgiveness devoid of truth, justice, exhumations, and reburials, is hollow. Matabeleland People in Diaspora is one of the pressure groups in Matabeleland advocating justice and commemoration of Gukurahundi victims. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008) noted the rise in Matabeleland pressure groups that are seeking Gukurahundi redress. Brudholm (2008) distinguished between two perspectives on who can forgive wrongdoing. First, there is a notion that only a “direct victim” of an injury can forgive; and second, a view that forgiveness by “proxy” is legitimate in the sense that it can be granted on behalf of the victims (Brudholm, 2008, p. 52). Matabeleland People in Diaspora (2014) propagated the former view as: forgiveness is reconstructed as a prerogative of the surviving-victims and hence cannot be dispensed by an individual or institution, such as the church, in the name of the victims.

Nemane Resident (2015), another *Bulawayo24.com* user, provides a testimony about how he/she has “moved on” in spite of being victimised by a ZANU PF official in the year 2000, and implores Gukurahundi victims to emulate him/her and move on “instead of harbouring bitterness.” *Nicholas*’s response to Nemane Resident’s (2015) testimony is striking as it captures a different understanding of forgiveness:

Nemane Resident are you aware that people are different and that you are not a yardstick for all people to emulate you? Some are forgiving and forgetting like you while some forgive and don’t forget and some never forgive and will never forget. None of the three categories are wrong or right, it’s their choice. Keep your forgiveness to yourself and leave the unforgiving alone.

*Nicholas*’s argument reinforces the view that forgiveness is elective and cannot be imposed on the victims (Mayo, 2015; Allais, 2007). The call to “leave the unforgiving alone” buttresses the discourse that in some circumstances the refusal to forgive may be legitimate and morally justified. However, acknowledging that the refusal to forgive can be legitimate does not in any way deny the possibility that this “preservation of resentment can be pathological and unjustifiable” (Brudholm, 2006, p. 11). This article argues that in this post-Gukurahundi genocide epoch, a binary representation of forgiveness as “good” and unforgiving victims as “bad” is too simplistic, and hence fails to capture the nuances, complexities, and ambiguities surrounding the politics of forgiveness.

## Forgiveness in the Name of a “New Zimbabwe”

The rhetoric of building a “New Zimbabwe” is produced and shaped by online commentators in ways that place a burden on the Gukurahundi victims to forgive and “move on.” The discourse on “New Zimbabwe” is premised on an understanding that the country needs social healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness. Social actors that evoke memories on Gukurahundi seeking justice are perceived as retrogressive and undermining the project of forging a “New Zimbabwe.” First, *Chilo*, a participant on *Newzimbabwe.com*, asserts that:

In the eyes of God there is neither a Ndebele nor Shona. Stop being used by politicians, who divide the nation on tribal lines. Those who kill shall face the law of God. They are on both camps. Let’s forgive and not forget. Let’s focus on the cross and give God time to deal with the murderers in his way. Screaming and shouting on this forum is not going to change anything. (I witnessed Gukurahundi torture, 2014)

*Chilo* evokes Christian metaphors such as the “cross” to implore the Gukurahundi victims to forgive. The participant is perpetuating and reproducing the hegemonic discourse anchored on impunity and forced amnesia, as the surviving victims are being beseeched to abandon their quest for justice and leave everything to the “law of God.” As asserted by Brudholm (2008), the Christian language of forgiveness can create “additional moral dilemmas for victims” (p. 122) in societies where Christianity is deeply entrenched in people’s everyday lives, as the victims may feel pressured to forgive. Further, the transitivity “screaming” and “shouting” depicting the actions of Gukurahundi survivors indicate that negative emotions of anger and disillusionment are condemned in *Chilo*’s conception of forgiveness. However, the condemnation of victims’ anger in the wake of mass atrocity can “create new and justified resentments among victims” (Brudholm, 2008, p. 51).

*Chilo* adds that: “The politicians will apologize in due time. We need to meanwhile move on, we have a crumbling economy that needs our combined ideas.” Thus, Gukurahundi survivors are pressured to sacrifice their pursuit of justice and focus on rebuilding Zimbabwe. Considering that memories of Gukurahundi are evoked to animate and strengthen Ndebele nationalist imaginations (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; Lindgren, 2005), the topic of Gukurahundi is perceived, in some circles, as divisive and a threat to the vision of a “New Zimbabwe.” The notion “move on” constitutes a euphemism for Gukurahundi denial and oblivion of memories. *Shumba*, another cyber user, adds that:

Let's move on from these unfortunate and sad events. My children were born in this era. When I look at them, I hate myself, hate Zimbabwe. I for myself don't want my great grandchildren to know about this, it's embarrassing... Let's move to create a healed society. (Macaphulana, 2015)

The terms “sad,” “unfortunate,” “hate,” and “embarrassing” signify the shame associated with Gukurahundi. It is due to this shame that some interlocutors want Gukurahundi memories to be forgotten. *Shumba*'s imagination of a “healed society” is predicated on national amnesia. In her discussion of the culture of impunity in Zimbabwe, Morreira (2016) argues that as early as 1980, Robert Mugabe's rhetoric on forgiveness was aimed at “forgetting,” rather than “remembering” the past (p. 65). This article affirms Muller-Fahrenheit's (1997) assertion that although forgiveness “frees the future from the haunting legacies of the past” (p. 5), it cannot be used as a basis to promote and entrench collective forgetting.

### **Invoking the Memories of Pre-Colonial Ndebele Raids to Implore Gukurahundi Victims to Forgive**

One of the challenges of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing is the assumption held by some online interlocutors that the Gukurahundi victims should forgive and “move on” because Ndebele people also committed atrocities against Shona communities in the pre-colonial era. Some scholars bemoan that in Zimbabwean dominant discourses, the pre-colonial Ndebele people are portrayed as violent raiders from Zululand who survived by raiding and plundering Shona communities (Barnes, 2004). They also argue that these negative images of pre-colonial Ndebele people were constructed by the colonialists and missionaries to justify the destruction of the Ndebele kingdom (Barnes, 2004). These images of pre-colonial Ndebele brutalities on Shona communities are being summoned and reproduced by some online participants to justify Gukurahundi and pressure the survivors of this atrocity to forgive and “move on.” *Shumba* posits that:

The Shona have a genuine grievance emanating from the 1800 Ndebele raids which saw fathers being killed, women and children abducted, and livestock stolen. This is all in the past and we have evolved, we have to move on as a nation, forgive each other and build a better future for our children. (Cited in Macaphulana, 2015)

Through this discursive strategy of equation—equalizing Gukurahundi with pre-colonial Ndebele raids—*Shumba* uses “crimononyms” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 52) such

as “raids,” “killed,” and “stolen” to argue that Shona people are also victims of atrocities committed by Ndebeles. This discursive strategy of “balancing one thing against another” (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 36) in this case serves to persuade the Gukurahundi victims to forgive and move on. *Jazzy E*, another online participant, adds that: “no one has ever brought you cattle thieves to book for your savagery towards Shona communities before the arrival of the white man. You want to moan about Gukurahundi” (Seery, 2015).

The predicational strategy “cattle thieves” to depict Ndebele people serves to justify Gukurahundi and shield the perpetrators from prosecution. This discursive strategy of “criminalisation” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 51) is meant to discredit the calls for justice. Another online participant, *Abel*, points out that: “the Ndebele feel they were butchered unprovoked so need revenge. They forget what they also did to us in the past” (cited in Doran, 2015). *Joemuda* adds that: “Ndebeles used to raid the Shonas, taking their grain, killing their men and kidnapping their women. Then came Gukurahundi to balance the equation” (cited in Doran, 2015). This idea of balancing Gukurahundi with the pre-colonial Ndebele raids is evident in *Hombarume*’s condemnation of people demanding Gukurahundi redress:

What of the MaShona raids? Why are these issues one-sided? Lobengula and Mzilikazi as well, how is this going to be addressed? How do you address one side of an act when you all know there are two sides? (Cited in Gukurahundi no closed chapter, 2015)

The summoning of the memories of pre-colonial Ndebele raids to justify Gukurahundi in these cyber-debates indicates the challenges of achieving forgiveness in the Zimbabwean society that is troubled by its past events.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the aftermath of Gukurahundi atrocities, there is no doubt that forgiveness is central to the processes of social healing and reconciliation. The online debates on *Newzimbabwe.com* and *Bulawayo24.com* attest to the explosive nature of the unresolved legacies of this post-colonial violence. It is evident that forgiveness cannot be taken for granted as there is a need for a critical reflection on what it entails. Thus, this article is an attempt to critically reflect on and reconceptualise the meanings of forgiveness in the aftermath of Gukurahundi. From the online discussions, it is evident that issues of accountability, justice, and an acknowledgement of the crimes committed are deemed prerequisites for forgiveness by many participants in the social media debate regarding this

issue. There is a call for the perpetrators to account for their crimes before the victims can grant forgiveness. However, with the regime that committed the genocide still in power, the prospects for victims granting forgiveness to the perpetrators look grim. Some participants are pressuring the Gukurahundi survivors to “move on” and focus on rebuilding Zimbabwe. Others evoke memories of the pre-colonial Ndebele raids on Shona communities to compel Ndebeles to forgive the perpetrators of Gukurahundi and “move on.” More importantly, this article argues that the discourse of forgiveness can serve hegemonic purposes of entrenching impunity and forced amnesia. As a result, the refusal to forgive can be a progressive and transformative standpoint in the face of injustice, impunity, and forgetting.

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