

## Memories of the Future

*From the early colonial displacements of the 1920s to the independence celebrations of 2010 – in an Interview with AfricAvenir on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2010 Ivan Marowa (University of Harare) presents a social historian's perspective on contemporary Zimbabwe and highlights the impact more awareness of social memories could have on the future of the country.*

**AfricAvenir :** In international media the recent history of Zimbabwe is usually rather simplistically explained in terms of an economic breakdown linked to the character of President Robert Mugabe. As a social historian from Zimbabwe, which are the themes you concentrate mostly on in your work?

**Ivan Marowa :** The areas that I am currently focusing on are dealing with social memory and how people remember past experiences in the present. The past is never gone, it continues to live with us every day and the way we interpret it is very much affected by the present situation. In most cases one finds in these interpretations a steady growth of myths about the past. Therefore what I do is trying to understand how experiences in contemporary Zimbabwe are represented in the memories of the people.

**Are there any particular events in the history of Zimbabwe that you would especially point because of the way they have affected the social memory of Zimbabweans?**

There are a lot of those episodes. For example the colonial displacements that started in the 1920s and 1930s and continued all the way into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Later there were political differences that arose between different parties after independence in 1980 as well as the change in the economy and more radical changes in the political situation, all these periods gave lasting memories. But at the moment I am not focusing on the political changes after the second millennium I am still looking at colonial displacements and how people interpret this experience in the present time. For instance many people link the failure of the current government to provide certain services to what they perceive used to be good in the past. That is where in some instances politics comes into play.

**While many African nations celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence, in Zimbabwe 30 years have passed since the liberation from the white minority regime. How did you perceive the celebrations in April as a historic event?**

This year's independence celebrations were quite different in that for the first time since the formation of a political opposition [the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)] to the ruling party [the Zimbabwean African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF)], former enemies were sitting together celebrating Zimbabwe's independence. For the first time they were listening to each other as they both delivered speeches about the road that the country has travelled. They also spoke positively about Zimbabweans burying their differences and coming together once again. It was quite a touching moment.

**How did Zimbabweans relate to the event? Was it still a reason to celebrate for them?**

Before it appeared as if the celebrations were not at all national in the sense that Zanu-PF would say "we are here to celebrate the independence that we fought for!", with the 'we' here only emphasizing Zanu-PF's role in the liberation history which is not very correct, whereas others were more cautious and argued that we should first correctly define what sort of independence we are talking about. In 2010 I think for the first time people who could not attend the celebration in the main national sports

stadium would listen to the speeches on their TV or radio at home whereas in the past they would just switch off.

**Was that the case because they did not want to listen to the same story being told over and over again?**

Yes, what they were seeing until then was nothing but a propaganda forum to them. Personally however, I have not missed any speech on such an event simply because as a historian I need to listen to the voices from both sides. This is how history is being made after all. The differences in the discourses is what we concentrate on, the silences in official narratives is what we bring to the people.

**With the 2010 independence celebrations apparently being a changing moment on a political level do you see a single narrative of Zimbabwean history emerging?**

There will never be one narrative there will always be several narratives. That is partly due to the fact that during the time of the liberation struggles we had many different political parties, like Zanu and Zapu [Zimbabwe African Peoples Union] and others that worked hand in hand with the colonial government. Their narratives are all entirely different and after independence other narratives were coming up with the formation of the opposition. Its attitude was very different as to how the benefits after independence should be shared and how the government should proceed. Consequently historic narratives in Zimbabwe will never be the same. If you go to the workers they have their own story to tell, if you go to the politicians they have their own and if you go to the man on the street, he has his own. These are the difference that separate social and political historians, this is how we get put into these categories.

**How did you see the 2008 elections and the formation of the Government of National Union which was widely perceived as an indicator of positive tendencies in Zimbabwe?**

The harmonized elections on the 29th of March 2008 were quite interesting. From my point of view the environment was free and open. In the time towards the polling day people were sending text messages to each other, making fun about the political situation and the presidential candidates. Even on national television MDC and Zanu-PF were both presenting their views! So there was a complete change in the political environment, it was a lot more open all of a sudden. On the day of the 28<sup>th</sup> people voted peacefully and the following day they woke up as early as five o'clock to go and check the results. Everybody was excited and was calling each other from different regions of the country to inform each other about which candidate had won in which district. In the afternoon there were celebrations in the streets of Harare and that positive climate brought new hope to Zimbabweans. With the new government this hope has not entirely disappeared, it continues to live up until this day.

**So you would not completely agree with the dominant story about contemporary Zimbabwe as a country where life has become unbearable and where misery is irreversible?**

Once you get to Harare you'll see a different environment to the one that the media presents sometimes. I'm not saying that what the media says is entirely wrong, however sometimes they are overdoing it. In the period up to 2008 there was a lot with suffering, things just were not ok. However, what has been mistaken in the world was that if Zimbabweans spoke of billions of dollars it didn't mean that you had to push a wheelbarrow to carry this money. In this time even if you had 10 billion in your pocket you couldn't buy anything, all these zeros simply didn't matter anymore.

**How did the new government manage to control the inflation that reached such incredible heights?**

The government came up with a solution of treating these huge amounts of money in 2008-2009 when workers received their salary in US-dollars. Shop owners then started to supply commodities again because they could use the US-dollar to import commodities and customers could also buy using dollars. The problem of inflation could be solved in this manner, at least temporarily, and right now we are talking about an inflation rate of about 4-6% and no longer about percentages up into the millions that we used to have. However, people still do not have enough money to cover up all of their basic needs.

**Not so long ago German newspapers printed pictures of empty Zimbabwean supermarkets to show how severe the situation was, how did you experience the difficult times before 2008?**

Yes, the supermarkets were empty that is true. This was another problem that was linked to the inflation. At one point I was in South Africa where I saw a local product of Zimbabwean sugar while in Zimbabwe we didn't have any sugar. So you had to buy Zimbabwean sugar in South Africa and bring it back to Zimbabwe! How can this be possible? This was at a time when the government introduced a price control that fixed the price for bread at 100 billion Zimbabwean dollars whereas the retailers would argue that the bread should be sold for 300 billion. It is that difference that made the supermarket owners remove all their items from the shop. From that moment on we bought all the groceries mostly the supermarket workers' houses in the suburbs. If I wanted sugar I had go to a specific household, if I needed cooking oil I had to go to another. Even before 'Dollarization' we were buying these commodities in US-dollar or in South African Rand. So when the government finally decided that we should adopt the US-dollar we had already started that process a long time ago. It was a central part of our local survival tactics.

**Because of the radical socio-economic changes people were forced to be one step ahead of politics?**

Exactly, we always had to find a new a solution to adjust to the circumstances. Of course sometimes it was difficult and there were times when we didn't have the five dollars to buy a maize meal which is our staple food but then there was always help from relatives in South Africa or the UK. Especially for those with relatives in South Africa it was relatively easy because they would just call and tell them which groceries they needed. With the bus drivers from South Africa the food could just cross the border. At that time these drivers were doing good business because they could charge an extra 50 Rand (approximately 5 Euro) to take a package of groceries to Zimbabwe.

**In speeches of President Robert Mugabe the theme of the opposition being controlled by white neocolonial interests used to play a dominant role, which position does the concept of 'race' hold in contemporary Zimbabwean society?**

In 1980 when Robert came into power he agreed to a reconciliation policy. That came as a surprise because amongst the two parties that were fighting the liberation struggle Zanu-PF was considered an extreme party. When he all of sudden started talking about reconciliation many whites who had already fled the country at the moment when Robert won the first elections were shocked. Even those who stayed didn't believe what they were hearing. But the President showed everyone that there could indeed be a way of addressing reconciliation in Zimbabwe. And until the late 1990s he tried to follow the "Lancaster House Agreement", so as to how to equitably redistribute the land between the white minority and the state. It was only when the political situation started changing against his party before 2000 that he made a retraction from his initial position of peaceful coexistence to position himself for the upcoming elections.

**The land reform that took place after 2000 is one of the most controversial political topics of Zimbabwean politics, what is your opinion towards them?**

The whole land reform issue wouldn't sound that bad if you have had the opportunity to look at the situation when some white farmers used to have more than two farms. On that basis it was good to redistribute the land. However, the problem was how that process was done and how some of the people close to Mugabe took advantage of it. Today there are some people in Zanu-PF who are having more than two farms themselves, yet they are the same ones who were saying that whites were not allowed to take more than two farms. Race has not been a critical topic apart from its reference to British interference in Zimbabwean politics. Still, the argument that Mugabe is deciding along racial lines would be simplistic because in that case he could have instantly told all the whites to go out of Zimbabwe. What his government did instead was to tell everyone to choose one particular nationality. That was nothing against whites since it applied and still applies to black Zimbabweans as well. Even today if you want a Zimbabwean citizenship you can't also have a South African or a British citizenship at the same time. The government is very strict on that.

**Your account of Mugabe's policy decisions sounds different to a prominent western perception that tends to see Mugabe as an 86 year old President who been in power for too long and consequently lost his mind.**

I think for Africans it is quite difficult to say that an old person is no longer capable of thinking rationally. In Zimbabwe, and possibly in Africa in general, we say the older you get the wiser you become, so old age and wisdom go hand in hand. Those who believe in that proverb don't see a problem with the President's age. On the other hand, those who are trying to go along with the new idea that as a political leader one should leave office to make space for others to come, they think that he has overstayed. There are always these two dimensions to this matter and the answer to the question lies with one's affiliation or disposition.

**As a social historian, how do you see your role in the society of Zimbabwe and which perspective does your discipline offer to change its current situation?**

When you look at social history and social memory you find that today we have something we have termed "national history", which appears to be a rather homogenous construct. Yet what we as social historians are saying is that there are different dimensions to this social history. For example the way experts usually define development in our society is very different to how the uneducated in society conceptualize development. We are trying to capture the voices of those who might not be educated in policy formulation but are nevertheless participating in what is happening in that society. Therefore we need to capture what they think and how they explain their livelihood. What we advocate is basically an explanation for the road of life we have travelled. If we, for instance, try to explain a conflict in the past it can just as well help to explain the conflict in the current situation. We are linking the present with the past and that should help to develop our national policies.

**Since April you have been based at the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS). What is the research project you are currently working on?**

I am currently researching on environment and social memory in a particular community in the Zambezi Valley in northern Zimbabwe. They were displaced in 1958 because the government wanted to build a game reserve. However, today these people are not benefitting from this game reserve. I am now trying to look at what myths they use in explaining their situation, how they explain change and how they want development to occur so that if the government is taking such a decision it first has to take into consideration what the people are thinking.

*The questions were asked by Moses März*