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Comment

Trials and tribulations of an artist

Owen Maseko

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My exhibition, *Sibathontisele*, opened on 25th March 2010. The next day it was banned and I was arrested. The Inclusive Government had been in power for just over a year.

Sibathontisele profiled the massacre of Ndebele people by the government-sponsored Fifth Brigade from 1983 until the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987. The bloody campaign was known as Gukurahundi - 'the rain that washes away the chaff' in Shona - and was justified by the government as an attempt to control dissidents in Matabeleland². However, since an estimated 20,000 people were killed in Matabeleland and the Midlands during this period and numerous other atrocities were committed, there is strong evidence to suggest that this was also a targeted attack on supporters of Joshua Nkomo's opposition party, ZAPU³.

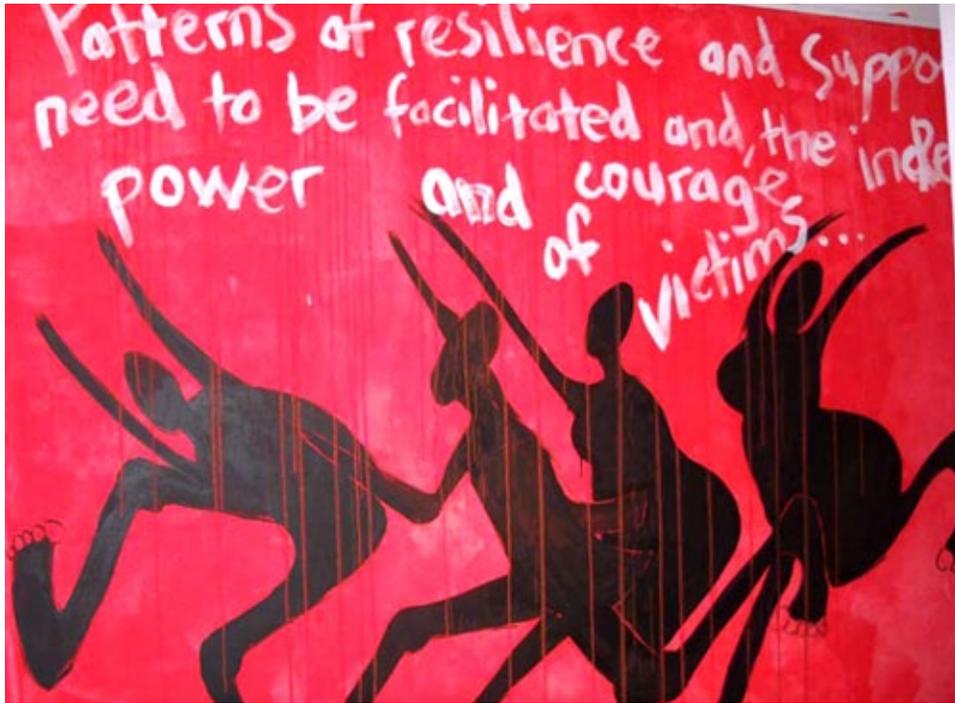


*Owen Maseko is a renowned Zimbabwean visual and installation artist. He was second runner up for the Freedom to Create Prize in 2010 for his *Sibathontisele* exhibition.*



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“One of the most notorious torture techniques employed by the Fifth Brigade – dripping hot, melted plastic on victims”



Sibathontisele, which means ‘we drip on them’ in Ndebele and refers to one of the most notorious torture techniques employed by the Fifth Brigade – dripping hot, melted plastic on victims⁴, sought to expose the atrocities, the sufferings and the legacy of Gukurahundi and so support healing and reconciliation.

Gukurahundi had not been publicly discussed since the signing of the Unity Accord but the signing of the Global Political Agreement (GPA) in 2008 promised a new era of freedom after decades of restrictions. The GPA also sought to initiate a process of national healing, following the widespread violence during the 2008 elections as well as earlier human rights abuses. With the GPA’s commitment to greater openness and the creation of an Organ of National Healing, surely this was the right time for art to address the long suppressed but still burning issue of Gukurahundi?

But when my exhibition opened, the authorities responded quickly. The show was closed down the following day and I was arrested by Central Intelligence Officers and detained for five nights in Bulawayo’s Central Police Station. I was eventually charged with publishing and communicating false statements with the intention of inciting violence, which carries a sentence of twenty years, and also with undermining the authority of the President. With the vital support of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, I filed a pre-trial application for a referral to the Constitutional Court arguing that my constitutional rights to freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression had been fundamentally violated by my arrest and subsequent detention. The magistrate referred the case to the Supreme Court for judgement and we are still waiting for a date to be set for my case to be heard.

And Zimbabweans are still waiting for an opportunity to honestly and openly debate Gukurahundi and start the process of healing.

In June 2010, Genocide Watch declared Gukurahundi a genocide. According to the international human rights group, “Genocide is a special crime against humanity, because it must be intentionally carried out against a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. The Gukurahundi

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meets the definition of genocide because it was carried out by the North-Korean trained, exclusively Shona Fifth Brigade under President Mugabe and it targeted ethnic Matabele people.”⁵

This was a significant acknowledgement of the severity and scale of the massacres but for the victims the issue remains – how can you heal if you can’t even talk about what happened?

Art and social responsibility

I do not view myself as a human rights activist but as a visual artist. However, in my opinion, art, justice and human rights are intimately linked, especially in

an environment of persistent rights violations. And art has a role to play in bringing important issues to the surface, such as Gukurahundi, which has been buried by the authorities for the past 25 years, so that victims have an opportunity to speak openly, to reconcile and to heal⁶.

There is very little documentation detailing the experiences of victims of Gukurahundi so I based my research on the literature that is available as well as many people’s moving personal testimonies – and my own recollections. The exhibition explored the vivid memories that I and many other people have of that time – the sound of the helicopters, the chanting of Shona ZANU-PF songs, the screams of

women being raped, the terrifying sight of red berets (the signature item of the Fifth Brigade), the desperation of people running for refuge, and the crying and the silence that followed the burning of villages and homesteads. I also used quotes that still reverberate in people’s minds – “We eradicate them. We don’t differentiate when we fight because we can’t tell who is a dissident and who is not.”⁷ The exhibition was entirely in red, black and white to symbolise the bloodshed and also the darkness that followed these massacres.

Despite the professed aims of the GPA, my exhibition and arrest resulted in the government amending the Censorship Act to strengthen its restrictive powers – rather than repeal them. My exhibition has never reopened. Indeed, a special public notice was issued in Harare, “The exhibition at the Bulawayo Art Gallery of effigies, paintings and words written on the walls portrays the Gukurahundi era as a tribal-biased event and as such is prohibited.”⁸

The Zimbabwean government has used censorship like this as well as control of the media and rigid restrictions on television and radio as an effective method of repressing free expression, spreading propaganda and limiting access to information for all Zimbabweans for years – as have other dictatorships and oppressive governments through the ages.

However, the government in Zimbabwe has also used an even more effective approach to stifle artistic expression and public debate – by fostering a culture of silence and self-censorship. Much of the artistic community has gradually succumbed to self-censorship and an acceptance that art should not break boundaries. My arrest was met with silence from the broader artistic community. Rather than criticism of the authorities, the National Gallery in Bulawayo was full of whispered comments about the need for artists to be subtle and to avoid being too controversial or tackling overly sensitive issues.

But who defines what issues are sensitive? How is possible to be subtle and remain relevant? I did not court controversy. I simply produced an artistic representation of a very real issue that reflects the memories, stories and nightmares of people in Matabeleland. I certainly do not intend to censor my art at the expense of

the truth or out of fear.

The issue of Gukurahundi has left many scars and a powerful legacy of fear. I believe that people need to tell their stories and need to be given an opportunity to heal – an opportunity that the victims have never been offered⁹. President Mugabe has refused to apologise for the massacres or even consider compensation for the victims or their surviving relatives. Instead he says simply, “It is not unusual for people to die in a war situation.”¹⁰ The GPA’s Organ of National Healing has also not addressed Gukurahundi.

So how do communities recover from a campaign that not only killed tens of thousands but also destroyed the fabric of a society? I believe that art has a crucial

“human rights and art in Zimbabwe cannot be separated without seriously damaging both.”

role to play in providing a voice and ensuring that suffering does not go unnoticed, that leaders are held to account and that people can seek justice for past atrocities and work towards reconciliation. The most important feedback I received about my exhibition was from people I had never met who came to thank me for presenting their story – a story they have never been able to share.

To me it is clear – art has to break boundaries. Art has to move people. Art has to respond to issues and create new stories, new imaginings and new possibilities. When I first decided to produce an exhibition about Gukurahundi, I did not view myself as a human rights activist, but simply as an artist. However, as the space for open debate continues to close around civil society, political parties and the arts, I have realised that human rights and art in Zimbabwe cannot be separated without seriously damaging both.

So for as long as is necessary, art will be a public expression of my human rights and my art will publicly demand human rights. ○



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Endnotes

1. *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A report into the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands. 1980 - 1988. Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, 1998.* 2 & 3. *Ibid.*
4. *Gukurahundi: a moment of madness. DVD produced by Zenzele Ndebele, 2009.*
5. <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-3336-Gukurahundi%20was%20genocide%20US%20group/news.aspx>
6. *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A report into the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands. 1980 - 1988. Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, 1998*
7. *Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, April 1983 from Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A report into the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands. 1980 - 1988. Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, 1998*
8. <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/Zimbabwe-Government-Bans-Offensive-Paintings-101803193.html>
9. *Ibid.*
10. *A Chronicle of Post-Independence Massacre, Africa News, 16th July 1997.*