

# NONE BUT OURSELVES

*The history of reggae in Zimbabwe echoes far beyond Bob Marley's historic concert in the earliest days of the country's independence.*

*Percy Zvomuya crawls the web of influences that makes up not only the sonic cartography of a revolution fuelled by chimurenga music and reggae, but which are the very foundations of today's Zimdancehall.*

**SOMETIME IN APRIL 1980**, a chartered Boeing 707 plane landed at Salisbury's airport from Gatwick, London. This, in itself, wasn't unusual, for in the months preceding this charter, with the official end of the war, the airport experienced more air traffic. Even some people who had escaped the country as "border jumpers" – most prominent being Robert Mugabe, who arrived on 27 January 1980 in a plane load from Maputo, Mozambique, after five years in exile – were returning to Southern Rhodesia.

Lord Christopher Soames, Winston Churchill's son-in-law and Southern Rhodesia's last British governor, had also arrived in the weeks that followed the Lancaster House Agreement of 1979, which had restored the country to the Commonwealth, shredding Ian Smith's 1965 Unilateral Declaration of Independence, before the elections which would bring majority rule.

On this particular Boeing 707 were lighting and sound equipment, technical crew and Mick Carter, a name which outside of reggae annals doesn't mean a lot. Mick Carter was a tour promoter for Bob Marley and the Wailers and had arrived in Salisbury in the role of the herald, the prophet who would smooth the path of the coming king, reminiscent of the function John the Baptist played for Jesus Christ. "Prepare ye the way of the LORD," Isaiah wailed, "make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

## This is when the template for Zimdancehall was set down. Tobias Areketa is the harbinger of Potato and the herald of Major E; Tobias Areketa is the ancestor of Winky D.

The journey into Salisbury, the capital of the formerly renegade state of Southern Rhodesia, which for years had been at war, was a flight into the unknown and Carter thought to arrive in religious garb, an *Exodus* tour jacket: "The people in customs hadn't a clue what to do, how to deal with us. What got us and everyone through was a huge bag of Bob Marley T-shirts that I had sensibly persuaded Island to give me before I left. These were liberally dispensed all around. And it also helped enormously that I was wearing an Exodus tour jacket, which was my passport to everything."

**BOB MARLEY** would be the first show by an international act since 1972, the year American soul man Percy Sledge performed in Southern Rhodesia, the year in which the guerrilla war against white minority rule began in earnest. (My mother, a fan of Percy Sledge's music, was

at the show and when I was born a few years later, she named me after him.)

Bob Marley and the Wailers arrived on 16 April and, on the morning of 17 April, the day Marley performed at the independence gig, a dry and functional story appeared in *The Herald*, the country's biggest daily newspaper: "Top Jamaican reggae artists Bob Marley and the Wailers and an entourage of more than 20 arrived in Salisbury from London yesterday." The report continued: "the band was warmly greeted by a small but enthusiastic crowd of supporters and representatives from the local recording industry."

**IT WAS 1980**, the long brutal bush war had ended and rushing in was the future. In this future, even terrorists like Robert Mugabe and their sympathisers like Bob Marley were now welcome. So blinding was the light cast by this tomorrow that no one paid attention to the warning in the song "Zimbabwe":

*Every man gotta right to decide his own destiny,  
And in this judgement there is no partiality.  
So arm in arms, with arms, we'll fight this little struggle,  
'Cause that's the only way we can overcome our little trouble.*

A couple of stanzas later, Bob Marley sings:

*No more internal power struggle;  
We come together to overcome the little trouble.  
Soon we'll find out who is the real revolutionary,  
'Cause I don't want my people to be contrary.*

Even though about 50,000 mostly, black people had died, the new nation under the leadership of guerrilla fighter Robert Mugabe was keen to move away from that past. Instead of vengeance and justice, as the thousands of whites who emigrated in the months leading to independence on 18 April 1980 expected, Robert Mugabe signalled national reconciliation: "[T]he wrongs of the past must now stand forgiven and forgotten... It could never be a correct justification that because whites oppressed us yesterday when they had power blacks must oppress them today because they have power."

**BOB MARLEY GOT TO ZIMBABWE** – the country he had helped sing into being – against the odds. The new government had no money to bring him to perform. But that was a small matter. Bob Marley would pay from his own pocket for the gig, as his gift to the people of Zimbabwe. But even if the new government did have the means to bring the Rastaman to Salisbury, Marley's namesake was no fan of his music. Robert Mugabe preferred Beethoven, Bing Crosby, Jim Reeves and others, and was no fan of the hairstyle. "The men want to sing and don't go to colleges. Some are dreadlocked," he spat, later. In the 1990s, in outrage at the popularity of dreadlocks, Robert Mugabe had urged Zimbabweans to imitate his hairstyle, not Marley's. So, Mugabe had to be persuaded to invite the Rastaman, whose

songs had been listened to with reverence on battery operated wirelasses in the guerrilla camps in Mozambique.

Mugabe's attitudes towards the music filtered among the elites of Zimbabwe and its judicial and administrative institutions. Dambudzo Marechera, who many mistook for a Rasta man because of his dreadlocks, wrote in *Mindblast*, his 1984 sketches of the writer as *bohème* in Harare: "I cannot account for the national paranoia about Rastafarians. They invite a lot of Rasta musicians to the main centres of the country yet at the same time, in the whorehouse bars and hotels... in the government corridors and in the squatter settlements – everywhere it seems – the Rasta man and anyone who remotely looks like him is abused verbally, physically, historically, socially, psychologically."

Zimbabwe's love for Bob Marley was quite by happenstance. Fred Zindi, a scholar of educational psychology, music critic, and writer, was at the 1980 independence show. "We started off, in the 1970s, with Jimmy Cliff (whom Robert Mugabe preferred to Bob Marley), Desmond Dekker and Johnny Nash; those are the artists we knew here until Bob Marley came in 1980," he told me at his office at the University of Zimbabwe, where he works as a Professor in the Faculty of Education.

Desmond Dekker? Why Desmond Dekker?

"He had a hit," said Zindi, and then hummed the tune of "The Israelites".

Since my return to Zimbabwe in 2014 after a decade in South Africa, I have been digging in crates, looking for records, trying to trace Zimbabwe's sonic cartography through what has been discarded in flea markets, dusty SPCA, shops and what people are selling. Desmond Dekker is a rarity. Forty years after the Rhodesians' affair with his music, there is almost no trace of his records. What you find a lot is Bob Marley. Bob Marley in pristine condition; Bob Marley without sleeves and pockmarked with scratches; Bob Marley with sleeves and in reasonable condition.

"I met Bob Marley after the show and he said: 'you must teach them people to love my music, man. The people were standing like stoogies,'" Fred Zindi recalled. And then Bob Marley asked a company man to give Fred Zindi some records, about 50 of them, which he then gave to Mike Mhundwa, a DJ at Radio 3, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation.

In *The Herald* report a spokesperson for the Wailers said: "[W]e will be here until next Wednesday but may have to stay longer. It depends on how the people feel." When someone speaks a truth without realising its full spectrum, the Shona say one is speaking as if they have medicine in their mouth.

Bob Marley left Zimbabwe a few days later and would be dead within a year, but his sound remains and can be said to be part of the Zimbabwean psyche and landscape.



Bob Marley performing at the Zimbabwe Independence celebration, Rufaro Stadium, Harare, 18 April 1980

**THOMAS MAPFUMO**, the co-founder of chimurenga music (with guitarist Jonah Sithole), is also the godfather of Zimdancehall. In the person of Thomas Mapfumo is to be found both reggae and chimurenga music, the sonic with the closest connection to the mbira and the drum, Shona metaphysics and ritual, a way of being criminalised by both church and state since colonial conquest in 1890.

In a *Moto* interview in August 1990, Thomas Mapfumo was asked: “You are known widely as chimurenga king. How do you yourself define chimurenga – is it the rhythm or the message?”

“I don’t want to hair-split issues. We cannot separate the two (message and beat). Chimurenga music is that traditional beat of mbira, rattles and drums played at important gatherings for our ancestors. So I would not outrightly agree that I am the founder of the beat but rather just [someone] who inherited, improved and perfected it and managed to present it using modern electrical instruments and made it to be liked by more people in these high tech times,” was Mapfumo’s response. This was 1990, by which time Thomas Mapfumo had released albums including *Mabasa* (1983), *Chimurenga for Justice* (1985), *Zimbabwe–Mozambique* (1988); *Varombo kuVarombo* (1989), *Chamunorwa* (1989) and *Chimurenga Masterpiece* (1990).

Of interest to the story of reggae’s evolution in Zimbabwe is *Chimurenga for Justice*, a five-track album on which a mainstream Zimbabwean artist first attempted the sound. In that same year, Misty in Roots, a British reggae band that had repatriated to Zimbabwe in 1982, also released an album, *Musi–o–tunya*, the name the Tonga people, who had lived for hundreds of years by the Zambezi, called the Victoria Falls before it was discovered by David Livingstone. The personnel on that album include Walford Tyson Poko on vocals, Delbert McKay Ngoni also on vocals, Joseph Munya Brown on drums, D. Briscoe Tawanda on keyboard, Dennis Augustine Tendai on rhythm guitar, Antony Henry Tsungirai on bass, Crossfield Kazwai on guitar, and Delvin Tyson

Tafadzwa again on vocals. The last names, all Shona, are those the musicians added to their given names after relocation to Zimbabwe.

“Mugarandega,” Shona for “the person who lives alone”, is Thomas Mapfumo’s sonic riposte of a celebrated motif in literature in Shona and English. Much romanticised in Shona oral traditions is the brooding and solitary figure. This stock character – laconic, “without family and friends”, and who prefers the company of his dogs – appears as a spectral presence, first as Samambwa in *Waiting for the Rain*, Charles Mungoshi’s 1975 classic, and as Mhokoshe in *Strife*, a 2012 novel by Shimmer Chinodya.

While it is in Zimbabwe’s English literature that this character gained a rugged charm and currency, outlines of this figure were, in fact, first set down on the page in *Tambaoga*, a 1968 novel about courtly intrigue and ambition by Giles Kuimba. The Shona classic, which partly borrows from *Hamlet*, features a central character, Tambaoga, the son of a king who has been murdered and who beseeches his son to avenge his death and the usurpation of the throne by his brother. Tambaoga literally means “play on your own” but should be understood to mean “keep your own company.” This name forms a loose association with other Shona phrases, words and names like *zai regondo*, (the eagle’s lone egg), *karikoga* (only child) and *mbimbindoga* (the head strong person).

On “Mugarandega”, Munya Brown – who would later be the mainstay of the legendary Zimbabwean reggae band, Transit – after playing for a while with the popular group Ilanga, was on drums, and Dennis Augustine played keys.

**WORD REACHED FRED ZINDI** that Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited, who were on a tour of Europe, were in London for a series of shows and the recording of a new album. So, Fred Zindi took a bus to Addis Ababa Studios on Harrow Road and on arrival met the chimurenga man, who said to him, “I hope you have come to help us. We are trying to record an album which we will call *Chimurenga For Justice*.”

Zindi has written elsewhere that the band was not used to multi-track recording, preferring to record all instruments at once: “Together with the Misty In Roots, we advised Mapfumo to lay down the tracks one-by-one, starting with the drums and bass, until all instruments were recorded. This would bring perfection to the sound as you monitor it track-by-track.”

Tobias Areketa, normally the band’s backing vocalist but who on the day would share the main podium with Thomas Mapfumo, as he had been tasked with doing the Jamaican style chanting, would go into the studio last. “Does that mean I have to wait until tomorrow to do my vocals? In Zimbabwe, we all record together at once.” Zindi explained to him that in the motherland, things were done that way because the record companies wanted to shorten the time bands spent in the studio.

Thomas Mapfumo could have asked Munya Brown or Dennis Augustine – or any of the Misty in Roots crew with a West Indian heritage on the mixing desk – to do the auto-mythologising chants. Instead the chimurenga man asked Tobias Areketa.

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**WITH LOVE YOU KNOW** from *Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited*,  
*The only man to sing all freedom songs during the struggle for Zimbabwe*  
*Our motherland you know;*  
*So me say, talk about the man and his beautiful ways*  
*So me say, so me say, so me say,*

*He is a true man African*  
*He is a true man African*  
*He is a true man African*  
*He is a true man African*  
*I say the man is the Thomas*  
*I say the man is the Thomas*  
*I say the man is the Thomas*  
*I say the man is the Thomas.*

*Dem a put him in jail*  
*What?*  
*Dem a put him in jail*  
*Why?*  
*Dem a put him in jail*  
*Why?*  
*He was singing culture*  
*He was singing culture*  
*He was singing culture*  
*He was singing culture*

*You know one day them police men, you know, during Smith regime,*  
*They took Thomas Mapfumo, you know,*  
*Because he was singing culture*  
*Culture for the motherland*  
*Zimbabwe*  
*What you say?*

*I said I love Mr Thomas*  
*I said I love Mr Thomas*  
*I said I love Mr Thomas*  
*I said I love Mr Thomas*  
*He is a true man African*  
*He is a true man African*  
*He is a true man African*  
*He is a true man African.*

*So let’s love one another*  
*Let’s love one another*  
*Let’s love one another*  
*Let’s love one another*  
*To love the man Mr Thomas*  
*To love the man Mr Thomas*  
*To love the man Mr Thomas*  
*To love the man Mr Thomas*  
*He is a true man African*  
*He is a true man African*  
*He is a true man African*  
*One love you know.*

*continued on pg. 6*



## NONE BUT OURSELVES

continued from pg. 5

This song, “Mugarandega”, from *Chimurenga for Justice*, was also issued as a maxi single with side two as a dub version. When, in 1988, Thomas Mapfumo released the hit reggae maxi single, “Corruption”, in which he decried the pervasiveness of graft in Zimbabwe, it also came with a dub version. Later, on *Chimurenga 98*, he collaborated with DJ Yuppie Banton on the song, “Set the People Free.” (Yuppie Banton is part of a clutch of DJs that includes Potato and Major E, who mostly chanted in English in faux Jamaican accents, and featured on popular songs from the 1990s.)

On these three songs – “Mugarandega”, “Corruption”, and “Set the People Free” – Thomas Mapfumo was laying the foundation for the sonic revolution which took shape after 2000, by which time the chimurenga man himself was in Oregon, in a forlorn exile.

A few years ago, from across the Atlantic, Thomas Mapfumo picked a fight with Winky D, by most accounts the star of the Zimdancehall cosmos, which also includes DJs like Toki Vibes, Killer T, Soul Jah Love, Dadza D King Shaddy, Ninja Lipsy and many others. “I listen a lot to what the likes of Winky D are singing and my heart bleeds. People like Winky D are destroying Zimbabwean music,” he stated.

## When the clock struck 12, the public address system rang out: “Ladies and gentlemen, Bob Marley and the Wailers,” reportedly the first words said in the new Zimbabwe.

It’s easy to imagine some ardent traditionalists with their faces in a knot when Thomas Mapfumo first ran electricity through traditional war songs like “Buka tiende” and “Nyama musango”; or when he penned “Hanzvadzi”, a beautiful re-imagination of “Nhemamusasa”, the mbira song said to have been laid down after the Shona first settled in (or from) Guruuswa, the mythical place of origin for the Shona.

In the tune “Gombwe”, the title track of the album of the same name, Winky D is heeding the cry Thomas Mapfumo himself made in “Vanhu Vekwedu” on *Hondo*, an album from

1991. “*Vanhu vekwedu baba havasati vaziva*,” he sang: our people still live in ignorance. The chimurenga man was bemoaning the hegemony of English and American music on national radio and the secondary place local languages occupied in the hierarchy of languages, no doubt because of Robert Mugabe’s own conservative tastes and British pretensions. In that tune, Thomas Mapfumo deftly condensed the polemics of Ngugi’s *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* into just over seven minutes.

On the track “Gombwe”, from Winky D’s eighth album which came out in early 2018, the Zimdancehall champion is beginning to explore Shona spirituality in ways I haven’t encountered in the genre before, reminiscent, in fact, of Thomas Mapfumo’s own trajectory. Mapfumo recalls the 1960s and 1970s Rhodesian music scene: “There was no consciousness among our artists; they were into copyright music, very few of them wrote their own music at the time because that was a British colony. Everything the radio played was foreign and people had to go for foreign music. Politics was very low at the time. People never thought of that. They never believed in themselves. They thought the white man was superior, he was untouchable, he was like God.”

In “Gombwe”, Winky D chants:  
*Mangoma aya ndabva nawo kunyika dzimu*  
*Anga achitambwa navadzimu*  
*Ndabva ndati ndiwaunze pasi rino*  
*Abva avachemedza samariro*  
*Ndini gombwe remangoma gaffa rinobata*  
*matare engoma*

(I have brought these tunes from the spirit world/ these tunes were being enjoyed by our dead ancestor / I thought to bring them here/ they made people cry as if at a funeral/ I am a spirit medium and I hold conferences with the dead ancestor about this sound).

In some ways, Thomas Mapfumo and Chiwoniso Maraire, the late chimurenga chanteuse who updated the mbira sound for the R&B generation, belong on the same sonic, spiritual and modernist continuum, geniuses with gourds in hand, which they use to draw deep from the recesses of Shona metaphysics. If Winky D continues on his current trajectory, the master of the Jamaican-Zimbabwean DJ style might *one* day join this pantheon.

**IN THE 1980S AND 1990S**, in the ghettos and townships to which Ian Smith and his predecessors had relegated Africans, most working class households owned a hi-fi, some of them with so much wood they looked like coffins. In the aesthetics at play in the manufacture of these appliances, the carpenter seemed to be as important as the electronics engineer.

The radio, it’s no exaggeration to say, occupied a central place in the living room of most homes. It was reminiscent of the huva, the raised mound directly opposite the entrance in the round hut used by many as the kitchen, where we kneel to commune with the ancestors and pour libations and perform other sacraments. *Dzangaradzimu*, the Shona word for radio, references *dzimu*, the root for the word for spirit world; *dzimudzangara*, the inversion of that word is a mythical and ghostly creature, said to be so tall that you can barely see its head.

In the 1980s, before the liberalisation of the command economy, salaries were low and foreign currency was scarce, and it’s no surprise that very few households in the ghettos had televisions. But the radio was everywhere. In the Supersonic and WRS hi-fis, Zimbabwe’s small electronics industry managed to successfully clone the technology to compete with the big boys: Philips, Sony, Aiwa and Telefunken.

Most of these coffin radios played only records, not compact cassette tapes, the technology which towards the late 1980s and early 1990s bridged, in the parlance, materiality and the digital. Whatever the compact cassette lacked in durability, it more than compensated for in portability and, most importantly, by placing into the hands of whoever held it, the power of the recording engineer.

In the early 1990s, as Apartheid fell and men lost their jobs due to the introduction of neoliberal reforms to economy, enterprising Zimbabwean women stepped into the breach. They would venture to South Africa to sell doilies, curios and other wares. On their way back, these women would buy small radios, televisions and groceries for resale in Zimbabwe.

On Thursday and Saturday nights, multitudes of teenagers like myself would sit by these small radios, a blank tape or an “original” inserted,

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHIMURENGA AS A COMMUNAL LABORATORY

continued from pg. 3

Did vedzimbahwe derive kutora mhuka sevanzhu (treating animals as people; anthropomorphism in Western parlance) from the animals themselves, or did they map human characteristics specific to their society onto animals? It seems the answer is both. In any case, respect for the animal as a person or humanising other creations was much better than kubata vamwe vanhu semhuka (treating other human beings as animals) – the worst form of inhumanity in chidzimbahwe, and the project of European colonialism was exactly that. This suggests that it is impossible to reckon with the human or animal separate from each other. What happened when animals were taken away through arbitrary European colonial laws creating game reserves in 20th century Rhodesia?

### A TRANSIENT WORKSPACE OF SELF-LIBERATION

Poaching is always political – it is not merely about a craving for meat. To the local inhabitants, Gonarezhou National Park was ancestral lands from which they were evicted at gunpoint. Their shrines and ancestral burial grounds, the venue of the hunt, and multiple forest resources they had relied upon, were now behind a fence.

In circumstances like these, poaching became a political critique through defiant action. The forest was a sacred space; it belonged and would always belong to the ancestors. MaTshangana and vaShona around Gonarezhou had felt this way since before the declaration of the proposed game reserve, during the time when district commissioner Allan Wright was ruthlessly disarming them of their guns. It was then that an important event happened: the national ferment of resistance

against colonial rule merged with local grievances, turning poaching into a transient workplace of anticolonial resistance.

It started far away from Gonarezhou, in the cities of Salisbury, Bulawayo and Umtali. Invoking the emergency provisions of the Law and Order Maintenance Act (LOMA), Prime Minister Ian Smith had ordered that the entire top echelon of the African nationalist movement be arrested and squirreled away to very remote places, far from the cities where they were inciting urban Africans to violence and acts of civil disobedience.

This followed an escalation of clashes involving the two major nationalist parties, ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People’s Union) and ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union). Having peacefully agitated for independence, these nationalists were alarmed that, instead of granting independence, the white minority regime was instead moving toward declaring independence from Britain and remaining a white governed republic. The gloves came off.

Joshua Nkomo, leader of the now banned ZAPU, was one of those arrested in a pre-dawn raid on 16 April 1964, along with his deputy Josiah Chinamano, his wife Ruth, and countless others. They were flown to Gonakudzingwa, one of several designated “restriction camps”, to cool off. They were thrust into the middle of an ongoing struggle between Chibwechitedza and local maTshangana over Gonarezhou’s forest resources. This was a period in which indigenous institutions were extended to serve as spaces for purveying, hosting, and executing resistance against the colonial settler state.

Inevitably, hunting would not be the exception to general politicisation. Records maintained at Mabalauta Field Station indicate that from 1965 to 1980 saw sustained poaching in Gonarezhou.

Mapocha had a very efficient weapon maintenance and production system in place. Ironsmiths (including those that were also mapocha) were not only repairing guns, but also producing replicas. They ran their own network to monitor the whereabouts of park patrols and animals. The fences that the state meant as boundaries between villages and the game reserve created new hidden highways for mapocha. Kinship-related poaching connections also cut across the border between “Rhodesian” maTshangana and “Portuguese” maTshangana. Patriarchal structures and communalism formed the foundations upon which military-style hierarchy and socialist collectivism were made standard operating procedure. Locals did not come to their own struggle for liberation as spectators.

All journeying, hunting, fighting – life itself – could only be possible if it was spiritually guided mobility, hence the imperative to pray (kupira midzimu) and to ask for guidance (kutungamirirwa) when embarking on journeying and to thank the ancestors after arriving safely. ZANLA actually had a svikiro-in-residence at its operational bases.

As makomuredhi deployed to a new war theatre, they received instructions to head to a specific svikiro (spirit medium), whose mhondoro (lion spirit) would guide their local operations. Throughout the war of independence, makomuredhi were believed to possess the supernatural power to “mystically disappear when confronted by the Rhodesian forces” or “change into lions or chameleons... or even vanish into thin air”. The act of becoming invisible involved calling ancestors to conjure the escape by measuring a portion of buté [snuff] and placing it on

hand hovering over the “record” button, waiting to press “record” on the tune I liked and would love to replay whenever I wanted.

**FOR OUR GENERATION**, Dennis Wilson was one person whose shows were recorded weekly, and endlessly replayed. Dennis Wilson was a Jamaican Briton who had found a job as technician at Posts and Telecommunication Corporation of Zimbabwe, the local telecommunications parastatal. He had started off playing at friends’ parties and had then been invited to play on Radio 3. Back in the United Kingdom, Wilson had been involved in the Downbeat Sound system in Fulham and taken part in the sound system clashes involving Duke Reid Sound, Coxsone, and others.

“People ask me, why Zimbabwe, and I ask them why not? I don’t know where my ancestors come from. Sometimes the way I feel about [Zimbabwe] it could be here,” Dennis Wilson told me in 2016.

Once, the DJ went on a visit to the rural home of one of his friends, a descent into the old country resembling the land from which his ancestors had been kidnapped. There, an old man, referencing the old identities which ceased the moment Dennis Wilson’s ancestors got off that boat, asked him about his totem. It had been a few centuries since Dennis Wilson left and he was at a loss. “What’s that?” Dennis Wilson asked back. They would have explained to him how the Shona tribes have an animal, or part of an animal – the heart, say – or a feature from nature (the river, as was the case with Morgan Tsvangirai) that they hold sacred and that they can’t eat, or with which they can’t be familiar.

When Wilson said he didn’t have a totem, the old man offered to adopt him, to embrace him in his own totemic expanse. “Don’t worry,” the elder had said, “you can have mine.” “That made me feel so accepted. It meant so much to me,” Dennis recalls.

**IN MBARE AND MABVUKU**, Highfields and Kambuzuma (where Winky D is from), and other ghettos in Harare, in Pfupajena, Umvovo and other ghettos in Chegutu, in Senga and Mkoba in Gweru, and in many other towns and cities, young listeners considered Dennis Wilson’s name as totemic and, twice every week, had a date with him.

When Linton Kwesi Johnson chanted that “Inglan is a bitch”, the youths, probably looking at the dusty roads, clogged sewers and cramped conditions they lived in, found the incantations true for them as well. When U-Roy enjoined the massive and crew to dance to “King Tubby skank”, it was in the ghetto community halls Ian Smith had built that the youth danced with the most frenzy. And the “late night blues”, Don Carlos voiced so funereally, were at their most real in the ghettos.

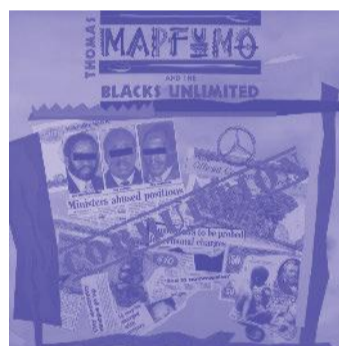
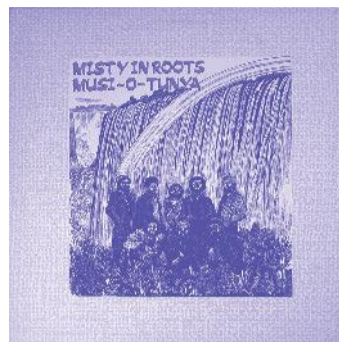
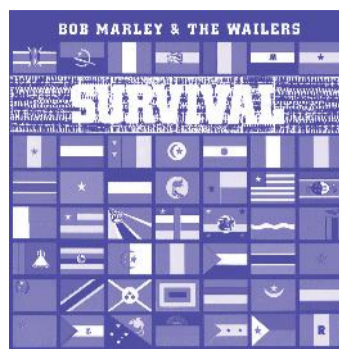
Harare’s spatial politics of ghetto and suburb, rich and poor, crowded and spacious, rugged and polished go back to the foundations of the city itself. Today, the division is marked by Samora Machel Avenue (previously, Jameson Avenue, named for Cecil John Rhodes’s right-hand man and lover, Dr Leander Starr Jameson). The city’s division was once signalled by two features: the Kopje, the small mountain in the south which the white settlers had originally chosen to settle in, in September 1890, and Causeway, in the north east, a nondescript piece of land near a stream which had been drained of water.

An observer quoted in Tsuneo Yoshikumi’s *African Urban Experiences in Colonial Zimbabwe: A Social History of Harare before 1925*, wrote: “[T]he two ends have ever since been playing the monotonous game of ‘pull devil, pull baker’ to the infinite loss of Salisbury itself... Causeway and Kopje have become political terms in their little way, and the thing is so notorious that a Bulawayian orator is said to have recently adjured his fellow citizens not to be as Salisbury, a house perpetually divided against itself.”

So today, via a sinuous route, Zimdancehall looms over all; this sound, which grew and found sustenance in the ghettos, was first voiced in English using borrowed Jamaican accents, which morphed into Shona chants, and now has become the primary tool of Zimbabwe’s reinvention. Urban grooves and hip hop – the sound transmitted in the posh accents shaped in the private schools of the lush northern suburbs of Borrowdale, Greendale, and Mount Pleasant – wilt in the shadow cast by Zimdancehall.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me go back to the beginning.

*continued on pg. 8*



A Zimdancehall genealogy

the ground for the ancestors. Then, as the enemy’s guns blazed, komuredhi beseeched the ancestors to guide him out to safety. Ex-makomuredhi will swear that the mhondoro transfigured them into forms invisible to the enemy.

To fight the coloniser often meant having to live not only like animals in the forest, but also with animals of the forest, sharing caves with dassies, hiding in pools with crocodiles and sleeping in trees, sometimes even with leopards. These are the times when maTshangana and vaShona’s notions of animals as spiritual(ised) beings came to the fore, and when life as guided mobility was ever so apparent. Makomuredhi who saw combat say they never fought alone, as mere vanhu venyama (people-of-flesh), but as spirit(ual) beings, always under the wing of mhondoro.

The local struggle was no struggle in the abstract, or simply a national cause; it was the latest episode of a long-running saga pitting a people aggrieved about the loss of their lands and animals against a state that criminalised their access to that heritage.

The nationalist message gained traction locally through the social networks of kinship, which served as information highways. From Gonakudzingwa or the rally at Chikombedzi, the word was carried in person to the villages, where it was disseminated at spaces like padare/ huvo, at beer parties and nhimbe, at games like dhema, during firewood gathering, at chinyambela, at wells, and whispered in the bedrooms between husband and wife at night.

The indigenous structures of knowledge production and practice became vibrant sites of discussion and organising toward the birth of a new political order. Such were the transient workplaces of anticolonial organising, places where we seldom look when thinking about nationalism or, for that matter, when describing the work of nation building. **CC**

## National Heroes Acre I

*continued from pg. 2*

“My father is both dead and alive,” Matar writes. “I do not have a grammar for him. He is in the past, present and future. Even if I had held his hand and felt it slacken as he exhaled his last breath, I would still, I believe, every time I refer to him, pause to search for the right tense. I suspect many men who have buried their fathers feel the same. I am no different. I live, as we all live, in the aftermath.”

Something cracked after I’d read *The Return*. Hisham Matar’s words chimed in the distance of my consciousness, like a church bell: *I live, as we all live, in the aftermath*. And by chance that October, I met my first ghost. A young man, a taxi driver, in his late-20s, haunted by the violence he’d experienced post the 29 March elections in 2008. A time which now seems so far away, but for him was as close, as present, as the breath in his nostrils.

ZANU–PF had lost the presidential race and its parliamentary majority and in response unleashed a wave of state violence, dubbed “Operation Makavhoterapapi?” (Operation Where Did You Put Your Vote?). An operation presided over by the same army which would remove the president from office hardly a month later. “They are killers, those people,” he said, as he dropped me off, at the intersection of Long and Orange Streets, “Where is Itai Dzamara?” The journalist and political activist abducted from a barber shop in March 2015 is still missing. The question hung in the air as he drove away.

In that moment I felt ashamed. In my desire to forget, I had mirrored the regime’s cruelty: the denial of others’ suffering. What societies, what futures will we build on the back of forgetting? What kind of nations from historical distortions and silences? “What is a just society,” Thabo Mbeki is said to have once asked. His response: “a society that remembers.” Remembering. Remembrance. The refusal to forget. That is what the dead are calling us to do.

And so again I ask:

Who will count the dead?

Where will the names be written? **CC**