

# Role of Arts & Culture in Political Transpormation

HOW IT SHAPES PUBLIC DISCOURSE

*The past and present centuries have been awash with artistic productions and cultural practises that speak towards political life- whether dynamic or static. Arts and culture have played a big influence and role in influencing society and public discourse and participation in politics. The arts and culture have been catalysts for positive social change and transformation.*

They represent the ideals, norms and standard acceptable group behaviours with which a people identify with and are obliged to comply for the sake of social harmony and co-habitation - crudely understood as social order. It is the idealism of a normative world that artistic and cultural acts seek to raise by exposing socio-economic and political ills. From a crude understanding one would define culture as the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society. Many a times it is these ideas and customs that regulate human interaction and form the basis of our political system. John Street in his cultural determinist interpretation of politics asserts the inextricable nexus between culture and politics arguing thus 'if we fail to take popular culture seriously, we impoverish our understanding of the conflicting currents and aspirations which fuel politics.'

In this article I seek to reinforce the credible role that arts and culture play in fostering public awareness and positive political transformation towards an idealised society.

## Culture is a peace keeping phenomenon

Culture, for instance is a peace keeping phenomenon that undermines conflict re-configuration by giving emphasis to solutions on specific social or political ills while moulding or reasserting group identities - e.g the popular expression of the spirit of Ubuntu. Identity emanates through the expression of artistic skills that are unique to our own society sometimes known as cultural relativism. In conflict scenarios culture tends to be the stringent to further harm or violations as it teaches us to tolerate one another and humanity is thus promoted. In this regard culture can be said to be that emphasis to live and observe a set of moral etiquette. The principle of morality in politics is one which this paper will devote some effort to. Liberation political movements often find their niche in political conflicts by rallying people around morality and cultural progression. It is the mention of moral lessons of life that distinguishes right from wrong, oppression from freedom and anarchy from order.

## Conceptual Conflict

Global politics has always been a sphere of conceptual conflict over the role that arts and culture play with radical Universalists arguing for cultural erosion into a global entity, it is cultural relativism that remains safeguarding national sovereignty and preservation of identities. What is of interest is that political universalism has also tended to derive part of its legitimacy to morality - governments that violate human rights are seen as immoral.

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June 2014

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The discourse on human rights itself derives from natural law which emphasize morality in political organisation. Natural law becomes an aspect related to Culture - which envisages an ideal society.

#### 'Coming of the Dry Season'

Numerous artistic plays have been produced over the years to challenge oppression or suppression of rights of citizens or challenge a specific social construct such a play would be Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet which challenged the vagaries of societies built around a caste system - divisions based on wealth. In Zimbabwe, Charles Mungoshi's "Coming of the Dry Season' is one notable play that exposed the excesses of British colonialism while rallying the youth to take up a leadership role as a vanguard of the liberation movement. In post-colonial Zimbabwe the piece serves as a reminder of the principles that rallied national independence. It is indeed indispensable that arts and culture would give young people or a society an opportunity to introspect on social and political structures that they had not been inclined to.

Arts and Culture can be expressed through music or play which is also known as protest arts often popular in closed societies. Protest artists use the banner of entertainment to trigger critical thinking among audiences on particular issues using riddles as a modicum of communication. There are many politically charged pieces of fine art - such as Picasso's Guernica, some of Norman Carlberg's Vietnam War-era Work, or Susan Crile's images of torture at Abu Ghraib. In contemporary times Tafadzwa Muzondo is one such artist with his painting and plays, the Zimbabwe Poets for Human Rights have also exposed the vagaries of dictatorships and misgovernment through poetry. Social movements produce such works as signs, banners, posters, and other printed materials used to convey a particular cause or message. Often, such art is used as part of demonstrations or acts of civil disobedience. These works tend to be ephemeral, characterized by their portability and disposability, and are frequently not authored or owned by any one person - such as the famous

anonymous authors. The various peace symbols and the raised fist are two examples that highlight the democratic ownership of these signs. Protest art also includes (but is not limited to) performance, site-specific installations, graffiti and street art, and crosses the boundaries of art genres, media, and disciplines. While some protest art is associated with trained and professional artists or musicians, an extensive knowledge of art is not required to take part in protest art. Protest artists frequently bypass the art-world institutions and commercial gallery system in an attempt to reach a wider audience.

It has long been established that some aspects of Arts and Culture e.g. music, play a significant role in promoting health, social cohesion and uniting society. Schools with strong fine arts departments have, according to recent studies, achieved higher grades than those without. This is often alluded to the emphasis on critical thought. To this end Arts and Culture enhance and change life for the better.

#### The Importance of the Arts and Culture in the Democracy Debate

Zimbabwe is a classic case of a nation that has evolved over time experiencing changes of different magnitude often facilitated by arts and culture. This paper will explore narratives, tracing back to the 14th century, early years of colonisation, Zimbabwe's war of liberation and post-independence. The importance of the arts and culture in political transformation cannot be underestimated especially in the democracy debate of any society.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> Century

During the 14th century, a classic piece of art/architecture, the Great Zimbabwe was constructed by the Mutapa people south-eastern hills of Zimbabwe near Lake Mutirikwe and the town of Masvingo. It was the capital of the Kingdom of Zimbabwe during the country's Late Iron Age. Construction on the monument by ancestors of the Shona people began in the 11th century and continued until the 14th century.

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It was a cultural heritage and until today it plays as one of Zimbabwe's best tourism a site which has thus led to the booming of the tourism in the industry in Masvingo.

Masvingo now boasts of several hotels and thus created employment for the locals. The artistic value of the great Zimbabwe is also seen in the eight Zimbabwe birds carved from micaceous schist (soapstone) on the tops of monoliths the height of a person, until this day the bird is part of national insignia on our national flag. It is this artistic creation that has become the symbol of nationhood not to underestimate the importance that it played in the liberation struggle from colonial bondage. Nationalist struggles were equally driven by the desire to protect and preserve national heritage and culture. Many are privy of how Nehanda and Kaguvi mourned the westernisation project on African soil and the elderly would dramatised narrate stories of how colonial incursion had led to an assimilated western culture. These artistic and cultural expressions were to be the rallying point of the decolonisation project and equally the same tune sung by the early nationalist movements dominates post-colonial Zimbabwe's political discourse though now dominated by a mantra of hatred meant to stall democratic dialogue and progress.

#### **Significant Role of Music and Play...**

Zimbabwe has had a long history of a protracted war of liberation during the colonial era where music and dance played a significant role during that time. To a greater extent music was a powerful tool in driving the war of liberation. The power of art has deeper effect and emotional therapeutic effect in any society. Some scholars have since argued that indeed the war was won through song and dance, drama and poetry. Those who participated during the war had left their homes, their beloved wives, children and parents in pursuit of one goal, to liberate the country from the yoke of colonialism. In a war environment there is a lot of emotional stress resulting from the deaths, injuries, and violence and above all the stress of living in the bush away from the comfort of one's home and away from

their beloved ones. There had to be ways of dealing with stress, ease tension as the war was progressing.

Music, song, dance and drama became a common phenomenon in the war of liberation. As one scholar said: "Music plays a powerful role in society. It plays a prominent role in the ability to create associations to place and to cause emotional impact. Music has the potential to influence emotions and to positively express the sense of belonging to a specific group; it can also communicate antagonistic attitudes towards other groups." [Grant et al. 2010: 185].

Zimbabwean music has played a major role in social identity formation. In the everyday life of the people, Zimbabwean music threads throughout the society. It not only predates colonialism but also links to Zimbabwean historical and cultural processes. Many of the songs are about the problems of the poor, and most of the musicians live in the same locations as their listeners. "Music was a central part of Zimbabwean society, e.g. in times of war and peace at workplaces, in the home and outdoor, in religion and social ceremonies (rain-making, collective labour, religion, marriage, death or love, for instance) [Mano 2007: 67]."

This article traces the role music and other forms of art during and after independence, and the present day. It will highlight how music has continued to play influence in either shaping political discourse of social transformation. The extent of influence and importance come in different ways which will be explored in this paper.

#### **Pre-Independence-Music and the War of Liberation**

Zimbabwe's war of liberation started in 1966 which marked the second Chimurenga (war of liberation). During that time guerrillas used to do night vigils known as 'pungwes' and these were gatherings which were meant to provide entertainment, relieve stress and it was again a platform to boost morale and inspire the fighters.

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Songs that were composed during that time mirrored the trials and tribulations of the oppressed masses. It gave society hope and the zeal to fight oppression and most of the compositions were in the vernacular language, mainly to create a language barrier with the whites because the some of the lyrics were insulting.

Music and poetry were tools and forms of social commentary that were used to move the masses to act. Several talented musicians emerged in the bush, and composed music that inspired the guerrillas.

Musicians like Dickson Chingaira better known as Cde Chinx, LMG Choir, ZANLA Choir, composed inspirational songs that drove the war of liberation. Songs like 'Maruza imi' (You have lost) suggesting that the Rhodesians have lost the war became anthems during pungwes and they gave the fighters hope that indeed the war will be won. Other compositions merely played a unifying role as it created a strong bond amongst the fighters who were drawn from different tribal, geographical backgrounds. Songs like 'nzira dzemasoja' (A soldier's code of conduct) were songs that guided the conduct of the guerrillas in the bush it spoke how a soldier must behave, to obey rules and regulations, not to exploit or rob the masses, return anything confiscated for military reasons. Music was also used as a mobilisation tool to recruit fighters.

### Thomas Mapfumo

There are other musicians who were not necessarily in the battlefield but whose music inspired the struggle and the masses of this country. One such outstanding musician is Thomas Mapfumo, who sang about politics, social injustices, poverty and chooses highly emotive lyrics. He championed the plight of the rural masses by singing protest songs which criticised the colonial regime. Before independence he did compositions such as 'Hokoyo' (Watch out), 'Pfumve paruzevha' (Hardships in the rural areas) which depicted the plight of the rural people at a time when the freedom fighters were in battle with the Rhodesian army.

Songs like, 'Tumira Vana Kuhondo' [1977] (Send Their Children to War), were meant to mobilise young men and women to join the war of liberation. To show the extent of influence in Mapfumo's compositions in the society, the state banned his songs from being played on radio and he was arrested on several occasions as a result.

### Oliver Mtukudzi

Another musician whose music had great impact and influence during that time was Oliver Mtukudzi. He recorded 'Dzandimotera' which was inspired directly by Zimbabwe's 1970s war of liberation. The song depicted the black man's life struggles under the minority white settler regime; it was a troubled man's prayer for redemption.

Oliver's compositions were about people's power, freedom and hope. He also did 'Mutavara,' a song was about a man bidding farewell as he leaves home to take up arms. After the country attained independence from British colonial rule in 1980, Oliver released his fourth album, titled 'Africa' which carried hits like 'Zimbabwe' a celebratory song for majority rule. The title track to the album 'Africa' symbolized the people's determination for self-rule.

Before independence and during the colonial period, Oliver's lyrics spoke against white supremacy rule under the Rhodesian regime. Mtukudzi's music carefully spoke against oppression and the repressive regime and how the black people were suffering because of colonisation. As for poetry, liberation war poets like Christopher Magadza, Freedom Nyamubaya and Thomas Bvuma focused on the fighter's experience of the war, although the former transcends this by offering an inclusive nationalist and trans-nationalist perspective. All three poets question the direction the postcolonial state has taken.

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Magadza, despite the conservatism of form and diction, uses language of indictment associated with African oral literature to castigate cultural and political defilement, and short national memory in his poems 'Ghosts in the Maize Fields' and 'Quiet Diplomacy'. It is not just bodies that are eliminated and disappear but also the nation's capacity to remember and mourn those destroyed by a revolution that has gone wrong [An Overview of Zimbabwean poetry 2008].

### Post-Independence

At the dawn of independence, music continued to play a great influence in our society. The main actors were of course Mapfumo and Mtukudzi. In 1980, the government of Zimbabwe invited Jamaican reggae star Bob Marley. Years to come we also saw musicians like Thomas Mapfumo at the forefront singing against corruption especially in 1987 when government ministers were involved in a vehicle scandal called the Willowvale scandal. The government banned the song 'corruption' and Mapfumo became a target as lyrics on his song corruption raised awareness to the nation.

### Leonard Karikoga Zhakata

Numerous other musicians have since emerged exposing social and economic ills - another famous being Leonard Karikoga Zhakata with his 'Mugove' and 'Mubikira' hits. Oliver Mtukudzi's 'Bvuma' was interpreted by society as showing a dented autocrat who continues to cling to power, the song saw legal prosecutions of members of the public who used the song to 'undermine the person of the president.'

The post 2000 era presents an interesting development when political parties scrambling for power used music as a way of rallying their supporters and selling their manifestos, ZANU-PF had its Mbare choir, Tambaoga and Bornfree Crew while the MDC had protest songs from Paul Madzore and Dread Reckless.

What is striking is the realisation that through entertainment political messages can be communicated which have a direct bearing on how people associate with their leadership or challenge a status quo. Civics working in human rights have also (though not exhausted) the use of art and culture in peace building and democratisation processes.

### Conclusion

From the discussion the article has analysed the conceptual and theoretical frameworks around the significance of culture and politics tracing the empiricism of its global use then narrowing down to internal political processes that have been communicated through arts in Zimbabwe. It is therefore indispensable for political and social movements to impact communities by way of art that reignites the cultural foundations of Zimbabwean society as we return to a political normative discourse of a fairer and better future. The evolution of culture and its seemingly global outlook still derives from the Natural School of Law of a just world.

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***Extract from a Book titled 'Arts and Culture in a Changing Society' which will be published by the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation later in 2014.***

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