

Review Essay:

Civil Society Narratives of Violence and Shaping the Transitional Justice Agenda in Zimbabwe by Dr Chenai Matshaka

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Civil Society Narratives of Violence and Shaping the Transitional Justice Agenda in Zimbabwe provides a look back into the past and considers possible futures of Zimbabwean electoral and political discourse. The book discusses and engages with narratives of violence and how they have shaped the transitional justice agenda in Zimbabwe.

Derived from the doctoral work by Dr Chenai Matshaka, this book is a case study on the transitional justice agenda in Zimbabwe. It makes use of a qualitative interpretivist approach, as well as in-depth and structured interviews to explore the narratives of electoral violence in Zimbabwe. The book also made use of content analysis, including reports, statements, and publications between 2000 and 2013, which were a particularly contentious and volatile period within Zimbabwean history. Matshaka specifically focuses on showing the link between the narratives of violence, responses to violence, and the implications that these have on achieving transitional justice in Zimbabwe.

Matshaka's work is divided into seven chapters. In the first chapter, *Background of Violence and Coercion*, Matshaka sets the scene, describing the political and the electoral climate in June 2008. She discusses the multitude of understandings of violence, which are used as a framework for the narratives of violence which are explored throughout the book.

Matshaka then provides the reader with a discussion on narratives: what they are, their importance, and how they can be used to increase or diminish tensions within a state. She explains the influence of narratives, how they affect attitudes, perceptions



and actions, and how they can be used to bridge the past, present, and the future. Matshaka explains how narratives help to tell stories and provide guidance and lessons for states to tap into. Following this, Matshaka begins a discussion into civil society, which is a central pillar of the book. She provides a brief discussion of the nature and existence of civil society organisations in Africa. She also explains the role of civil society organisations and how they fill the gaps in leadership. In closing the chapter, Matshaka encourages the reader to consider whether civil society can be a support or a hinderance to transitional justice to the state.

In the second chapter, *Transitional Justice: Debates, Inclusion and Exclusion*, Matshaka provides key understandings and contradictions of transitional justice within academia and the post-conflict rebuilding space. She specifically focuses on providing an exploration of the transitional justice discourses, particularly those emanating from debates around judicial and non-judicial approaches, truth vs justice debates, and retributive vs restorative transitional justice. In this second chapter, Matshaka provides the reader with an overview of transitional justice, focusing on the historical origins, the development and evolution of the concept. In discussing transitional justice within Zimbabwe, Matshaka explores the contentions and complexity of the transitional justice process. She specifically discusses how transitional justice is viewed as a ‘battleground’ because of the definitional contestations and questions around who should lead the process in Zimbabwe.

The chapter then turns to a discussion on the work of civil society within the transitional justice space in Zimbabwe. She discusses civil society narratives in Zimbabwe, particularly those around human rights and a liberal transformation of the political system. Matshaka describes civil society as an actor working primarily in the governance space, who provides support and assistance in coalition building and navigating violence in Zimbabwe. While this is true, civil society has also been described as having difficulties with fully pursuing transitional justice aims because there is a lack of space within the governance arena in Zimbabwe.

In the third chapter on *Civil Society and Transitional Justice*, Matshaka looks at the intersection between civil society and transitional justice. As with chapter two, Matshaka defines civil society, tracing its origins and thinking. Central to this discussion is the importance of civil society and how it is complimentary to other actors and institutions within the state. While this is the case, Matshaka also points out how civil society has also been incompatible with realities of the state.

Matshaka then discusses civil society within Africa, giving different scholarly perspectives of its nature and existence. More broadly, Matshaka discusses how civil society has commonly been associated with its complicated entanglements and interactions with the state. On one hand, civil society are seen as a key partner, cooperating to establish liberal democracy within the state. At the same time, civil society is often seen as a threat and is associated with a struggle for democratisation and oppositional politics. Matshaka further discusses the intersection between civil society, violence, and transitional justice in Zimbabwe, discussing their nature, behaviour and activity. She focuses particularly on how civil society has tried to redress the legacy of violence in Zimbabwe. This discussion is underpinned by the findings and understandings of the four civil society organisations that Matshaka interviewed.

In chapter four on *The Civil Society Narrative of Violence*, Matshaka develops the crux of her argument — on how memory plays a significant role in shaping the transitional justice agenda. This chapter focuses on a broad discussion on narratives, specifically on how narratives are used within the book and how they are used to describe, think of, and understand events as coherent wholes. Matshaka explains how narratives are important, not only as historical accounts, but as a way to help people to understand progress and provide an account of violence.

Matshaka explains how narratives also refer to memory and the remembrance of particular events. She further explains how this remembrance is contested and interpreted differently. So, while in some respects memory is collective, it is also not homogeneous. It can be influenced by identity, social, and political actions, and is defined by those who tell them. Memory is therefore not static. It evolves and changes with time, interests, and perceptions. More critically, in this chapter Matshaka develops a discussion around dominant and marginalised narratives. She explains how marginalised narratives are suppressed by dominant narratives, and how these can lead to conflict. She further explains how memory and narratives have been used as a political tool to suppress and/or promote the experiences of groups. She contends that civil society should form part of these memory groups, as they shape the transitional justice agenda. Matshaka draws from the experiences electoral violence in the post-2000 period in Zimbabwe, and how memories of this period of violence shaped narratives on political violence in Zimbabwe.

Matshaka then offers her thoughts on civil society and how it shapes narratives on political violence in Zimbabwe. She states that civil society in Zimbabwe has a role in shaping and projecting narratives of violence. Civil society informs, records, and publicises political violence. These actions and narratives are then used to seek justice

for victims and advocate for an end to violence. Matshaka then explains prevalent civil society narratives in Zimbabwe, including:

- how violence is used to retain and consolidate political power
- how electoral violence is used as a way to preserve power
- how organised violence is used to preserve the power of the state
- how violence is used to perpetuate human rights violations against political opponents

In chapter five on *The Shaping of the Transitional Justice Agenda in Zimbabwe*, Matshaka discusses the battlefield of ‘ideas, funding, and influence’ in reference to shaping the transitional justice agenda space in Zimbabwe. She notes how often history and culture are not prioritised in discussions of transitional justice, and how the voices of those who experience violence are frequently silenced. Matshaka instead encourages discussions around norms that influence transitional justice agenda. She also describes how transitional justice in Zimbabwe is not as strong due to an absence of an operating environment.

Dr Matshaka then draws the discussion towards agenda setting, reflecting on how agendas are important. They exist at all levels and are considered as narratives of particular issues. She continues stating that agendas have many layers and so hierarchies become an important way to determine the importance of issues. Civil society becomes an important actor in setting and influencing the agenda because it appeals to social norms and justice. Civil society motivates policy makers, unifies their interests, and reminds them of neglected policies. They bring attention to domestic and international policy issues. According to Matshaka, this book is a way of understanding the agenda setting process. It looks at what is on the agenda, as well as how civil society shapes and influences transitional justice agenda. It specifically looks at the position of civil society, how it interacts with other actors, and how this determines their influence, power, and ability to influence agenda.

In chapter six, *The Transitional Justice Battlefield and Prospects for the Future*, Matshaka explains how transitional justice is a battle between funding, ideas, and norm dominance. Particularly in the Zimbabwean context, this has been based on what is and what is not transitional justice. She reiterates how contestations have been important to the transitional justice agenda and broader narratives on violence. She even explains how these contestations have shown up in the narratives of violence by the four civil societies she interviewed. Matshaka contends that

contestations and differences are not a negative thing but may hint at the necessary nuances needed to widen narratives.

At the same time, Matshaka also provided criticisms for civil society. She states that divisions between civil society in terms of ideology, training, and space are weaknesses. The lack of convergence has contributed to the weakness of civil society in shaping the transitional justice agenda in Zimbabwe. In addition, internal dynamics within civil society can be just as damaging as a repressive state that cannot respond to transitional justice matters. The four civil society organisations interviewed all commented on the fact that dynamics and polarisation between organisations forced a dominance of particular narratives and contributed to misalignments and blocks to transitional justice in Zimbabwe.

Overall, this was a balanced and well-written piece, presenting an overview of Zimbabwe's contentious past and history with electoral dynamics and the pivotal role players. Matshaka aimed to show that an understanding of violence must be based and drawn from the lived experience of those who have lived through violence and not from agendas with specific aims and goals. This is shown throughout the book, especially through the use of accessible language that keeps the reader engaged and interested in the material presented.

As a Zimbabwean and an academic, this book brings intense feelings and memories of challenging moments in Zimbabwe's electoral history. It navigates the intensity of these moments with ease, presenting factual evidence that explains the transitional justice journey in Zimbabwe. For a non-academic, this book provides a good overview of political and electoral dynamics in Zimbabwe. It provides insights into the complexity of Zimbabwean history in an easily digestible format. Readers will gain nuanced understandings of Zimbabwe, ones that may make them the more knowledgeable at a dinner table. While this book specifically focuses on civil society organisations, future studies in similar themes may benefit from exploring alternative actors and their relations with the state, electoral governance, and violence within Zimbabwe.