Burying Bob

By Joost Fontein

The death of Robert Mugabe, or 'Bob' as he was irreverently known by many Zimbabweans, was always likely to be something of an event. Having ruled Zimbabwe for 37 years, and as nearly the last of a whole generation of African liberation leaders in the region, Bob was in equal measures revered, feared, respected and despised across his country and beyond. For many across the wider region, he remained a respected figurehead of anti-colonial struggle, perceived as a welcome thorn in the side of 'Western' and global interests, and an icon of widely-resonating struggles for land and economic re-distribution. On the other hand, many ordinary Zimbabweans (those living in Zimbabwe and the millions etching out precarious lives in its diaspora) held a different opinion. After two decades of relentless economic crisis, political polarisation and numerous failed attempts to replace him electorally – often at enormous cost in terms of the violence unleashed against any perceived political opposition – Bob's death in office had long been anticipated as the only way that things were ever going to change, the only way that Zimbabwe's social, political and economic problems could ever be resolved.

Meanwhile, for a hard core of ZANU PF loyalists, across different sides of its complex and fiery internal factionalism, Bob remained very much the 'hallowed' father of Zimbabwean independence, as indeed those responsible for 'Operation Restore Legacy' – the 'soft' coup that unexpectedly pushed him out in November 2017 – have been at pains to maintain since taking over the presidency. For all these reasons, his death was always going

to be significant, albeit in different ways for different people. It was also long-anticipated: he was 95 and, until 2017, one of the world's oldest serving presidents. Since the early 2000s, when I began fieldwork in Zimbabwe, people had been expecting, and maybe hoping, that he would kick the bucket soon. There were endless recurring rumours about his ill health, and his many expensive trips to see doctors in Singapore. Yet he often seemed to rebound, fist waving and strong, still masterly manipulating ZANU PF's rivalries and factions, so that Zimbabweans grimly joked that maybe he would never die. It only became harder to conceal his evident frailty in his latter years.

In many ways, Bob himself was responsible for much of the anticipated significance of his death. Ever the ideologue, Bob had – since independence – constituted, politicised and instrumentalised the national commemoration of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle through a system of district and provincial 'heroes' acres' across the country, with its zenith at the National Heroes' Acre in Harare (Werbner, 1998). A deeply partisan and much-contested process – long criticised for its narrow version of liberation history and for its marginalisation of so many other contributions to Zimbabwean independence – the 'national heroes' system had become increasingly central to what some called 'Mugabeism' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015), or ZANU PF's 'chimurenga politics' (Chigumadzi, 2018). The historian Terence Ranger called the system 'patriotic history', especially in the wake of land reform and deepening political and economic crises in the 2000s. ZANU PF's controversial control of commemoration and the selection of its 'national heroes' is a key part of what I think of as Zimbabwe's 'politics of the dead' (Fontein, 2009). Every year, Bob would lead annual 'heroes' day' celebrations and an increasing number of state funerals at Harare's National Heroes' Acre (as more and more of the liberation generation passed away). These were opportunities he apparently relished a great deal, as he rambled and ranted at tedious length, endlessly recanting his own revised versions of history, over the deceased bodies of ZANU PF's designated heroes, to bored bussed-in audiences or on national television broadcasts. Among the many hundreds of other graves, some Great Zimbabwe-style walling, and some fairly garish North Korean sculpted monuments, Bob's supposed burial spot had already long been marked out: on a top terrace next to Sally, his late first wife.

Given all of this anticipation, and indeed preparation, it is therefore notable that the first announcements of his death in Singapore, on 6th September 2019, were met with notable ambivalence among many Zimbabweans. Some of this ambivalence was predictable for a leader as controversial and polarising as Mugabe. A seemingly endless stream of obituaries, statements and commentaries by politicians, journalists, commentators and scholars quickly emerged. These could be categorised into three groups. Firstly, there were those who continued to valorise Bob's liberation past, including respected international figures like Graca Machel, spouse to Samora Machel and, later, to Nelson Mandela. Secondly, there were those who, for very good reasons, continued to vilify him, both for the economic mess Zimbabwe has endured for almost two decades, but even more so for the political violence of that period, including the atrocious, unresolved crimes of the *gukurahundi* massacres in the 1980s, when an estimated 20,000 civilians in Matabeleland and the Midlands were killed by the North Korean trained Fifth Brigade. Thirdly, there were those who sought to construct a middle path between Mugabe's 'heroic' liberation past fighting against extreme Rhodesian belligerence in the 1960s and 1970s, and his markedly mixed postcolonial record. Some of these accounts point to the positive, enduring legacies of Bob's expansion of free education and health care in the 1980s, whilst others frame his complex past in a familiar narrative of 'hero turned villain' under the global pressures of neo-liberalism, or in the context of a wider disillusionment with the postcolonial dispensation across the region. Sometimes,

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such commentaries appealed to the necessity of ‘not speaking ill of the dead’ to euphemise their biographies and obituaries. While the injunction to not speak ill of the dead has particular, and powerful, cultural connotations in a Zimbabwean context (which I return to below), others – such as Ruth Murambadoro (2019) – countered that there is no such thing as an injunction against speaking of the dastardly deeds of someone like Bob.

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Given how long Mugabe had been expected to die in office, as he (and those around him) had often implied, and for how long it had been assumed that this would be the moment of long-awaited political change, perhaps it was his unexpected removal from office two years earlier – and his demise into political irrelevance soon afterwards – that led to his death not being as big a deal as many had long expected. In a sense, he was already dead politically, regardless of the continuing activities of the so-called G40 faction ousted with him in November 2017, and the suggestions that Bob had switched his support to the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) opposition in the 2018 elections. Moreover, as the new regime’s claims to offer a more tolerant ‘open for business’ kind of politics rapidly lost credibility with new outbreaks of state-sponsored violence and killings in August 2018 and January 2019, amidst a new wave of disappearances, and as the economy again faltered, any promise that Mugabe’s demise would offer meaningful change had already evaporated. Conversely, for some, perhaps only a few, Bob’s death could even be construed as meaningful only in so much as his successor has been shown to be even worse, with all of Bob’s violence and intolerance, and none of his eloquence. If this kind of ambivalence can be represented, then perhaps it was best expressed in satirical memes that circulated on social media in the weeks after Bob’s death, reflective of a particularly caustic political humour. My favourite is an image (entitled ‘Pastor Lukau has done it again’) of Bob photo-shopped onto a now famous photograph of a man sitting up in a coffin, surrounded by a church congregation, having allegedly been brought back to life.

This kind of ambivalence, bordering on resigned indifference, seemed to be confirmed by reports that suggested that Mugabe’s lying in state at two stadiums in the capital – and later at his rural home in Zvimba – were marked by poor attendance and a lack of public interest. It is therefore notable that other reports, particularly in the government press, were keen to emphasise the large numbers attendant at the airport to welcome his remains home and at various public vigils, as well as the number of international visitors who flew in to take part in the state funeral in September 2019. The actual numbers involved in these events were always likely to vary, and are hard to measure. There is a history of inflated figures for such events, and of people being bussed in by the ruling party, as well as of people gate-crashing funerals simply for the promise of food or drink. More intriguing is the possibility that Mugabe’s death being a non-event for a disinterested Zimbabwean public might not

have passed muster for those for whom his death presented political opportunities too good or too problematic to ignore.

But if that was the case, there was no need for concern. The shenanigans that quickly emerged after Mugabe's state funeral, about where and how to bury him, ensured that his death would, after all, become a memorable and controversial event, fitting of the 'politics of the dead' that Bob himself had done so much to foster. These burial controversies reflected what scholars working elsewhere have written about in terms of the 'political lives of dead bodies' (Verdery, 1999) or a reinvigorated 'carnal fetishism' across the region (Bernault, 2006; Cohen and Odhiambo, 1992). Mugabe's burial turned out to be far more intriguing and revealing than the initial sense of general ambivalence and disinterest had promised, suggesting indeed, as my favourite meme also implied, that it was Bob himself who had 'done it again' – ensuring that, in death as much as in life, Zimbabwean politics would continue to circulate around him.

It was always likely that the new political regime of Emmerson Mnangagwa – also known as ED or the *'ngwena'* ('crocodile') – would be keen to ensure that Mugabe was interred at the National Heroes' Acre, and appropriately enshrined as one of independent Zimbabwe's foundational heroes. Although Mnangagwa has been at pains to be seen to be creating distance from the previous regime (by seeking to re-engage the international community, by claiming to promoting fiscal discipline and political tolerance, and even by promising to deal with the unresolved legacies of the *gukurahundi*), the truth is that his politics do not radically rupture from Mugabeism. Even the 'soft coup' itself was carefully presented as an effort to preserve Bob's and ZANU PF's liberation legacy from the young miscreants gathered around him, including his deeply-disliked and vitriolic second wife, Grace. This was not just about needing regional legitimacy from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU), although that did matter. It was more because – as key lieutenants in forging the ideology and political stylistics of 'Mugabeism' – the new leadership has always been invested in ZANU PF's 'chimurenga politics': a politics that can be markedly gerontocratic and misogynistic, as clearly demonstrated in the vilification of the former vice-president Joice Mujuru by Grace Mugabe (leading to Joice's removal from office in 2014), and later of Grace Mugabe herself by the regime that ousted her husband. The new regime's determination to preserve its claim on the legacies of Mugabeism explains the great care that was taken to ensure that Mugabe, his wife and his family were well-cared-for and given a very generous 'retirement' package after his removal in November 2017. This is also why efforts were constantly made to publicly reconcile with Bob and Grace following his ouster, even if Bob himself was not so keen to play ball. In short, Mnangagwa's government were deeply invested in ensuring that Mugabe took his place at the National Heroes' Acre, in order to bestow his liberation legacy, ideology and legitimacy onto the new regime. Even as arrangements for Bob's funeral and burial were being discussed, Mnangagwa presided over the burial at the National Heroes' Acre of another senior ZANU PF and military commander – Major General Trust Mugoba, who had coincidently died on the same day as Mugabe – illustrating Mnangagwa's commitment to continuing the narrow politics of ZANU PF-controlled commemoration that his predecessor had forged.

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But it seems Bob had anticipated that his former ZANU PF underlings would try to make use of his death in this way. Bitter and resolute, Mugabe apparently indicated before his death that he did not want to be buried at the National Heroes' Acre, preferring instead to be buried at his rural home in Zvimba, as indeed is common among many who have rejected burial at the National Heroes' Acre. The ironies reverberate here. Mugabe himself had presided over the burials of many former ZANU PF stalwarts who, having fallen out with him in life, had publicly refused to be buried

at the National Heroes' Acre before their deaths, but were subsequently interred there anyway. This reflects, as I have discussed elsewhere, ZANU PF's tendency to instrumentalise and contain in death those who had defied them in life (Fontein, 2018). Through his will, and what he allegedly told his relatives in August before he died, Mugabe was doing the same. Understanding well how these politics worked, he was not prepared to allow his former comrades – who had so unceremoniously removed him from office less than two years before – to use his body to prop up their ideological cause, however much he himself had been an author of this style of politics in the first place.

Almost as soon as Mugabe's body touched down at Harare airport, if not before, reports began emerging of a dispute between the government and Bob's relatives, especially his wife Grace. The freneticism of the plans for the viewing of his body in two stadiums in Harare, and its journey to Zvimba for memorial services and body viewing there, seemed to reflect the unsure direction in which his burial would proceed. At first, the tension about where he should be buried appeared to be, rather simply, between the government who wanted him interred at the National Heroes' Acre, and the family – headed by Grace and supported by community and clan elders and chiefs in Zvimba – who wanted him buried according to his own wishes, and according to local traditions, amongst other 'chiefs' in a secret cave near his rural home. Many recognised Bob's wishes as a deliberate last snub to those who had ousted him, aware that ZANU PF would find it difficult to impose its will, having already publicly committed itself to respecting Mugabe's and his family's wishes. Evocative statements from some relatives – especially from Leo Mugabe (his nephew) – that Mugabe had been hounded to an early death by the way ZANU PF had treated him after the coup (later repeated by South Africa's fire-brand Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader Julius Malema, when he visited to pay his respects) clearly upped the pressure on the ruling party.

It was therefore with some surprise that news was received a few days after his funeral that the family had, reluctantly, agreed to allow Mugabe to be buried at the National Heroes' Acre. The negotiations must have been tense and acrimonious, especially because the agreement

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arrived at was that Bob would not be interred in the long-vacant spot next to Sally, his first wife, but rather in a new, still-to-be-built 'mausoleum' to be hastily constructed at a spot on the summit of the small hill at Heroes' Acre, identified by some of his immediate relatives. This would take some weeks to build, and many began to wonder how long Bob's body would be lying in state, or ferried between Zvimba and the enormous, garish 'Blue Roof' mansion in Harare where he and Grace had lived.

According to common cultural beliefs and practices related to death in Zimbabwe, the period between someone's death and their burial is often seen as a particularly anxious and unsettled period, because the spirit of the deceased is believed to hover around the body dangerously. Grace Mugabe spent much of this period under a heavy black veil, maintaining a vigil around her late husband's corpse. Many mused that Grace must have managed, in some way, to get her way by refusing to allow Bob to be buried next to his still-popular first wife. Others either applauded or strongly critiqued the decision to build a new separate and elevated mausoleum for Mugabe, as either befitting of his unique legacy, or as an obvious extenuation of ZANU PF's long-running politics of distorting Zimbabwe's liberation past by privileging some legacies and contributions, and denigrating others. Indications of the pressure that Mnangagwa's regime must have placed upon Grace and Bob's relatives became clearer when it emerged a few days later that the title deeds on the Blue Roof and another Harare house owned by the family were listed in ZANU PF's name, but would now, out of concern for the former first family's wellbeing, be transferred into their name. Suggestions that the threat of withholding these title deeds had been waved over the family's heads, in order to get their approval, revealed the extent

Harare,Zimbabwe,18 November 2017.Protesters showing a sleeping -Mugabe during anti-Mugabe rally in solidarity with the military intervention.

to which ZANU PF were invested in ensuring that Bob would be interred at Heroes' Acre.

Soon, however, the politics surrounding Bob's burial became even more complex, after it emerged that Grace had wanted Mugabe buried at the Blue Roof mansion in Harare, but the city authorities had refused permission, citing city by-laws. Not only is it likely that the city authorities could have succumbed to ZANU PF pressure to refuse this request, but this detail also suggested that Grace, Bob's children and the rest of Bob's family, let alone the chiefs and community elders in Zvimba, were not necessarily speaking with the same voice at all. This was later confirmed when it emerged that several Zvimba chiefs had fallen out with Grace, and were forcibly ejected from her ongoing vigil around the corpse, because they had sided with ZANU PF, and argued that Bob should in fact be interred at Heroes' Acre in Harare.

The controversies deepened further soon after. With building work on the mausoleum already proceeding, it was suddenly announced – on September 27th 2019 – that plans had changed again, and that Bob would now be buried in Zvimba after all. Robert Mugabe was then hastily buried one day later in a specially-designed casket and a cement-lined grave at the centre of his family homestead. The event was a private, guest-list-only affair, which Mnangagwa did not attend. The causes of the family's change of mind remain open to speculation, although the role of Julius Malema, and his outspoken critique of ZANU PF's pressure on Grace and her family, was quickly identified by some as a key factor. That Mugabe was buried in the centre of his homestead, and not in a special and secret burial location for Zvimba elders and chiefs, as had earlier been suggested, confirmed that Grace and the family had indeed likely fallen out with local community elders, as well as with the ruling party. It later emerged that

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Leo Mugabe – self-styled family spokesman – had also been excluded from the family burial, amid rumours that he and Grace had fallen out after Grace accused Leo of taking bribes from ZANU PF to ensure Bob’s burial in Harare. Whatever family intrigues were at play, however, the end result was a kind of double ‘fuck you’ to Mnangagwa and his new regime, with the half-built mausoleum at Heroes’ Acre affirming that Bob was not only better than any other ZANU PF hero, but that he had also managed to defy his ousters till the very end. It will be curious to see what the longer term fall-out will be, but it is likely that a furious Mnangagwa will find some appropriate way to respond.

As if all of this is not enough, there is yet another dimension to the controversies surrounding Bob’s burial that is worthy of comment. After the burial, reports and rumours soon began to emerge that throughout the troubled negotiations between Grace, the family and ZANU PF, great concern had been circulating about ensuring that Bob’s body was protected from any nefarious attempts to tamper with his corpse, or to remove his body parts. This, some suggested, was the reason for Grace’s apparent refusal to allow Bob’s body to be held at any city morgues or at One Commando barracks, where national heroes are usually kept preceding burial. And it was this concern which fuelled (rumours suggest) Grace’s exhausting (but well-performed) mourning vigil, and her insistence that Bob’s body could only be kept and displayed under careful guard at her home in Harare, and later in Zvimba. According to Leo Mugabe, Bob had himself been concerned that his enemies might want to steal and make use of his body parts for nefarious rituals to accrue ‘occult’ power. These suggestions fed rumours circulating in the press and on social media about the number of different coffins that Bob appeared to have been displayed in during the weeks since his death, as well as reports that a special ‘tamper-proof’ coffin had been constructed for him to be interred in. Reflecting the duplicity that is common to such rumours, Grace’s long and tortured vigil performance later sparked suggestions that it was she herself who had sought to make nefarious use of Bob’s potent corporeality.

There have long been whiffs of the ‘occult’ to ZANU PF’s style of politics, and to its internal factionalism. This dimension of Zimbabwean political life is as broad and diverse as religious and spiritual life in Zimbabwe in general. It ranges from the long-term association of some strands of African nationalism with spirit mediums, ancestral practices and so-called ‘traditional religion’ (which has been well-discussed in the literature), to increasingly spectacular overtures towards new charismatic Pentecostal movements in recent years. It extends to include both the ridiculous – such as the much-mocked involvement of Mugabe’s top ministers with the fraudulent ‘Diesel N’anga’, who claimed to procure refined diesel from rocks in Chinoyi, in 2007 – to the downright malicious, such as the accusations of witchcraft that Grace Mugabe levied at two previous vice-presidents (first Joice Mujuru, and then Mnangagwa who replaced her in 2014), as part of the intensifying factional politics of Mugabe’s latter years in office, which led to both losing their positions. Conversely, the statements, rumours and claims associating Mugabe’s rule with some kind of divine, ancestral, or even occult providence have often contributed to the aura of totalising, all-encompassing power and supremacy that was weaved around him. Although sometimes the cause of ridicule, these dimensions of ZANU PF politics are extraordinarily effective and affective. This derives from their uncertain duplicity: both their ability to cast any perceived opposition into an over-determined position of absolute malevolence and, conversely, in making Mugabe appear transcendental, omnipotent, and untouchable. Seen in this light, there is nothing particularly unusual or ‘exotic’ about this stylistics of power. It is with this in mind that we should seek to understand the corporeal politics of the dead that circulated around Bob’s cadaver, which Grace performed so magnificently.

There are deep cultural aspects of Zimbabwean beliefs and practices to do with bodies and the

dead, which cross over religious tensions and transformations between regional ancestral cults and different kinds of churches (older missionary and African Independent churches, and more recent Pentecostal movements). A central belief is that corpses are dangerous between death and burial, both for the often-unhappy spirits of the dead (who during this period are said to 'hover' around them), and for the troubling potential potencies of their corporeal substances. Indeed, a system of funerals, burials and memorial services, culminating in *kugadzira* (Shona) or *umbuyiso* (Ndebele) ceremonies a year or more after death (through which, in more 'traditional settings', it is understood that settled, benign sprits are 'returned' to the homestead from a period of 'exile' in the bush) can be understood as processes of managing the transformation of life into death, of dealing with and containing the dangerous corporeal substances that death involves, and of making people safely and benevolently dead. This is why an injunction against speaking 'ill of the dead' has particular potency in a Zimbabwean context, as dead people are considered dangerous before burial, and before this process is complete. Indeed, there are many cases of relatives of murdered people deliberately not burying their dead in order to force compensation or some kind of response from those deemed culpable, who might become haunted by the dangerous unsettled spirits known as *ngozi*. The fact that Mugabe himself was often rumoured to have been haunted – by the unsettled spirits of people whose death he was said to have orchestrated – illustrates how such cultural beliefs around death can be politically salient. It is also in this context that the long delays around Bob's burial were already politically affective and anxiety provoking. Similarly, it is also common in Zimbabwe for people to be anxious about protecting the graves of recently buried people, because witches and those who practice witchcraft are often believed to eat human flesh. Considered in some respects (and certainly morally) as 'anti-human', witches are understood to demonstrate and substantiate this through consuming the dangerous substances of decaying corpses. It is therefore very common for people to check graves for any signs of disturbance during the days after a funeral. Likewise, grandiose and cemented grave mountings – as have become increasingly common throughout the region – serve to function not only as a way of monumentalising the continuing memory of the dead, but also to keep them contained and secure. Indeed, these two things reinforce each other: a highly monumentalised grave covered in concrete reinforces the power of a dead person as someone not only to be remembered, but whose corporeal substances are themselves potent and dangerous, and in need of being contained and protected.

It is in this context that we can understand how the controversies surrounding where and how Bob was to be buried, which I have discussed above, were aligned with this other more corporeal kind of politics – that is, that the rumours that Grace's exhausting vigil, his tamper-proof coffin and the cement-lined grave, unusually placed in the middle of his rural homestead, were all a response to Bob's own fears that his body parts would be the target of nefarious interference by malevolent interests aligned against him and his family. These rumours and performances all served to reinforce Bob's (and perhaps Grace's) omnipotent salience and corporeal presence in Zimbabwean politics, just as the refusal, then acceptance and then refusal again, to bury Bob at the National Heroes' Acre had ensured that his death and burial would become as eventful and talked about as they were always supposed to be. Bob had indeed done it again. ■

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