

# Chimurenga epistemologies: diasporic entanglements, colonial afterlives and the struggle of thinking other worlds

*Epistemologias Chimurenga: complexidades diaspóricas, vidas coloniais posteriores e a luta para pensar outros mundos*

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**Keywords:** Chimurenga  
Anticolonial  
Epistemology

**Abstract:** This paper employs and engages with Chimurenga (the Shona word for the Zimbabwean war of liberation), as a decolonial approach from the Global South. In a move to a more holistic approach to scholarship on museums and heritage in Africa, Chimurenga as a site of resistance in direct response to colonial imposition – is examined in a broader context that expands beyond the limited conceptualisation of Chimurenga as simply political resistance fixed in time or history; but rather, as a philosophy that informs an epistemological understanding, an anticolonial epistemological gesture. Rather than focus on a museum/museums per se, we choose here to utilise indigenous ways of knowing as an approach that can be the foundation from which different approaches to material culture and belongings and processes and histories of museumization can be responded to.

**Palavras-chave:** Chimurenga  
Anticolonial  
Epistemologia

**Resumo:** Este artigo emprega e engaja-se com Chimurenga (a palavra Shona para a guerra de libertação do Zimbábue), como uma abordagem decolonial proveniente do Sul Global. Em uma mudança para uma abordagem mais holística aos estudos sobre museus e patrimônio na África, Chimurenga como um local de resistência em resposta direta à imposição colonial – é examinado além do contexto limitado de ser simplesmente uma forma de resistência política fixada no tempo ou na história; mas sim como uma filosofia que informa uma compreensão epistemológica, um gesto epistemológico anticolonial. Ao invés de focar em um museu/museus em si, escolhemos aqui utilizar formas de conhecimento originárias como uma abordagem que pode ser a base a partir da qual diferentes abordagens à cultura material e pertences e processos e histórias de musealização podem ser respondidas.

Recebido em 7 de outubro de 2024. Aprovado em 03 de dezembro de 2024.

## Introduction

This discussion offers Chimurenga<sup>1</sup>, the Shona<sup>2</sup> word for the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, as an anticolonial epistemological gesture and insurrectionary cognitive territory. To broaden scholarship on museums and heritage in Africa, Chimurenga as a site of resistance in direct response to colonial imposition – is examined beyond the limited context of simply being a form of political resistance fixed in time or history; but rather, as a

philosophy that informs an epistemological understanding. We examine the various meanings and applications of Chimurenga locally, globally and within the context of diaspora experiences; extending the focus from a museum/museums per se, we choose here, to utilise indigenous ways of knowing as an approach that can be the foundation from which different approaches to material culture, belongings, processes and histories of museumisation can be responded to.

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Chimurenga in this context, represents how subjugated heritages and knowledges can re-emerge from a disqualified status within the knowledge hierarchy and become understood in their complexity.

We position, therefore, Chimurenga as a knowledge system in its own right which not only asserts visibility as more than merely a historical event, but additionally functions to reclaim identity as well as forging other possibilities of knowing and imagining the world from a different Zimbabwean, African, and consequently planetary place (at least in the sense of not speaking for or over a planet, but thinking in planetary terms, as well as being located within a wider relationality of planetary geographies and epistemological groundings).

We relate also to the work of (Rodney 1969), Rodney (1972) in the context of transnational experiences of coloniality.

A planetary position recognises the vast and enduring transnational histories of coloniality and how places and spaces across geographies are intertwined and implicated in these relations. Such a recognition also positions Chimurenga not as solely 'local' as will be evident, as it pertains to Zimbabwean history. Chimurenga is a node, a specific instantiation of the impulse towards some form of emancipation, manifest in the African struggles for land, sovereignty and self-determination, yet resonant and echoing throughout the planet for the dispossessed and marginalised, especially those bearing the brunt of enduring colonialities. This planetary position encapsulates, in other terms, where we know the world from, how we know, and thus shapes the claims to knowledge and authority, beyond the binaries of subjective/objective, local/global, amongst others. It is worth reiterating here, that Chimurenga is not in this way indigenous/traditional as it relates to the past, but as it exists as part of histories of resistance and refusal, premised on an appreciation of cosmologies and knowledges that exist and occupy a significant place in the lives of anticolonial thinking and practice in the present.

We argue, following Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, that *vanhu*<sup>3</sup>, as the category of the human in Shona, has always been adequate in

storying experiences of Black life in Zimbabwe. The encounter with the museum as the colonial, however, introduced different categories and conceptualisations that make universal claims of what constitutes the human, displacing *chivanbu*<sup>4</sup> as an indigenous conceptualisation and cosmology of being human in non-linear ways. This coloniality also inserted *vanhu* into a global terrain characterised by hegemonic discourses, dominating and marginalising practices and narratives. In many ways, coloniality also thinned out *vanhu*'s experience of being human, imposing a bureaucratic rationality premised on extraction and expropriation, and ordering the world along the strict boundaries of alienating administrative and biopolitical technologies. This illustrates the multiple levels at which colonisation as a process operates, colonising even the concept of being human, subjecting all aspects of human life to a hierarchical structure which pushed indigenous people to the subhuman category (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Furthermore, as a way of undermining the humanity of indigenous people, coloniality questioned their culture, their practices and their knowledge as a basis upon which to impose their own colonial knowledge. Subsequently, through the coloniality of power, then governing the state of affairs they [colonisers] had created; based on a refusal to acknowledge the co-presence of an established population, the refusal predicated on the paradigm of difference (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). *Chivanhu*, in this process, thus becomes subservient to a coloniality bent on reshaping and deforming the cultural/spiritual, intellectual and epistemic, among others, bases of being and belonging of a people. Zeleza (1992) notes that, in relation to the universalism emanating from colonialism and the borrowings shaping African universities and intellectual positions:

The imported paradigms pervade all social science disciplines from economics and political science to sociology, psychology and history. Western realities, practices and values are taken as the normative standard....

For a long time this universalism also allowed sociologists and anthropologists to place African societies at the lower rung of a unilinear

evolutionary ladder on top of which was Europe (p. 21).

In tandem with Chimurenga epistemologies, Mavhunga advocates for an African self-reintellectualisation, a reassertion of *vatema* as intellectual agents (Mavhunga 2017). This reintellectualisation demands not merely a return to some unblemished historical moment, with the associated romanticisations. It is a centering of the forms of living and knowing, the practices of how the human and non-human are understood to interact, the modes of invitation that cultivate different desirings, and reject imperial taxonomies. A reassertion of *vatema* chimes with Thomas Mapfumo's cry in the song *Vanhu Vatema*<sup>2</sup>, or Bob Marley's in *Africa Unite*, stemming from that desire for transnational solidarities and affirmations of Black life across geographies. Although forging a different path towards other futures, Mavhunga's gesturing towards this reintellectualisation exists in other forms throughout decolonisation, especially in the realm of organised politics in Africa, with varied outcomes. Examples include Senghor in Senegal, Nkrumah in Ghana, Lumumba in Congo, Sankara in Burkina Faso, Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Nyerere in Tanzania and Kaunda in Zambia; the spread of these decolonial thinkers across a range of African countries, an illustration of longstanding and sustained intellectually informed refusals within the region.

The historical attempts at this reintellectualisation and reasserting *vatema* as intellectual agents, do come with a warning of its appropriations and misapplications. To argue for a Chimurenga epistemology is not to legitimise the collapsing of African dreams and livingness conducted in the name of Chimurenga. In terms of ownership and the will to power, Chimurenga, like any other refusal, can become harvested and deployed in the service of further depleting the struggles towards emancipation, and practiced in ways that are neither collective nor liberatory. In the contested terrain of political meaning and credential, histories of liberation and their possibilities can be stymied or recuperated through how they are practiced, for instance in the realms of organised

politics and other such movements. In the words of Bob Marley on Zimbabwe:

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....

To divide and rule could only tear us apart  
In everyman chest, mm - there beats a heart  
So soon we'll find out who is the real revolutionaries  
And I don't want my people to be tricked by mercenaries

Many attempts have since been made at articulating some of the contradictions and disillusionment following the attainment of what was then regarded as freedom, but has on many fronts not turned out to be so. The thrust here, not being to make attributions as to the sources and reasons of the so-called postcolonial crisis, but rather to exemplify some of the substantive walls run into as efforts are made to assert Chimurenga epistemologies. Stanley Nyamufukudza, in *To Skin a Skunk* (Nyamufukudza 2005), argues that

One of the disturbing black holes on the Zimbabwean social-cultural scene, which appears to absorb and completely obliterate all intellectual light, has been the longstanding absence of a serious non-partisan forum for discussion of cultural, social and even political and other issues. It is a situation that enlarges on and panders to our society's capacity for living comfortably with contradictions, lies and even deliberate mystification of perfectly explainable social phenomena.

Nyamufukudza's argument here is of course keenly contested, not least in terms of the idea of the obliteration of all intellectual light, but also the absence of a platform, when the platform may exist in a manner not legible to how it might have been understood historically, or in as coherent a fashion. What is useful for our purposes here is the pointer to larger political and ideological apparatus that shape intellectual currents, and how, in a society deeply shaped by Chimurenga in its various interpretations and appropriations, spaces for refusal and imagining different futures become limited - even as the very ideological and cosmological

foundations of Chimurenga are mobilised. These contradictions here are raised to alert one to the absence of purity, and the material ramifications of epistemological positions. This is precisely why epistemologies of gathering, solidarity and refusal are essential in both negating the deleterious impacts of coloniality and the attendant knowledge structures, and in building other lives. We acknowledge and seek to navigate in this context, the existence of Mbembe's 'negative moment' where new tensions arise while old ones remain unresolved (Mbembe 2015).

As an enduring oppression, coloniality then demands Chimurenga to be similarly enduring, if not as it has traditionally been understood, then as a progressing and adapting desiring of multiple freedoms, and a refusal of knowing the world, seeing the planet, through imperial lens. An act of defiance to perpetually being defined through the perspective of European thought. Chimurenga here also demands a deep discomfort with coloniality as normative knowledge practice, and the attendant hierarchies. A philosophy and practice of refusal must reject containers, and spill over, onto, and beyond. We approach this, as Zimbabweans inhabiting the elsewhere of 'diaspora' and ask: What can a recuperative Chimurenga epistemology offer us, as part of the wider work of resisting coloniality and freedom struggles in the South, foregrounding indigenous ways of knowing and being? Furthermore, advancing a critical theory based on African agency and rooted in the experiences of African people.

The elements of Chimurenga that we seek to explore, for this writing, can be divided into 3 main dimensions. Firstly, the historical, which examines the formative conditions of Chimurenga, the indigenous cosmologies from which it emanates and the fomenting of resistance to colonial oppression, marginalisation and dispossession. What other parallels of the use of indigenous cosmologies solidify the place of Chimurenga, for instance in other African countries and their uprisings against colonial rule. We relate here to other instances of colonial resistances such as; Nongqaquase amongst the Xhosa in South Africa, Maji Maji in Tanganyika

(Tanzania), the Mau Mau in Kenya, the Herero Uprising in Namibia, the Ethiopian resistance against Italian domination, amongst others. Outside Africa, there was resistance in Cuba, Russia, China informing a thinking outside of Anglo-American perspectives, giving insight into the geographies of power. We consider here, examples such as the Zapatista movement, the indigenous conflict in Chiapas, Mexico that not only provoked a domestic awareness of indigenous rights, visibility of the indigenous population as well as their self-determination, but ultimately global appreciation of their plight on matters of land, work, housing, food, health education, independence, liberty, justice and peace (Godelmann 2014). How do these histories as well as the suppressions of these histories continue to shape and inform our modern museological worlds?

Secondly, philosophical insights that accompany or derive from the historical circumstances that produce the current understanding of Chimurenga, especially within contexts of its popular cultural appropriations and commodifications, which may not recognise or extend the transformative and resistance ethos of Chimurenga. In sounding out epistemologies, it is important to explore the more nuanced dimensions of otherwise oversimplified concepts. We seek here to attend to the gap that Mavhunga identifies when he asserts,

None of the literature on Chimurenga grapples much with Chimurenga as idea and laboratory. Instead, it is treated as a specific historical episode (the 1960s–1970s war) in which a few-politicians-liberated everyone else (Mavhunga 2017, p. 46).

The struggles for land in Zimbabwe, and the post-2000 experiences of migration, crisis and difficult recoveries, emphasise the contested meanings of Chimurenga in the 'post-colony'. Again a reminder of the importance of thinking Chimurenga in complex ways that are not solely aligned with a singular politics - narrow forms of nationalism and nativist ideologies that are hidden beneath post-colonial African political leader statements and rhetoric about reversing colonial imbalances (Ndhlovu 2021). We contend that

patriotic discourse on the Zimbabwean war of liberation obfuscates the richness of Chimurenga. Therefore, we ask as a platform to engage with these additional dimensions, what is epistemological/museological, about Chimurenga? Why is it not brought into conversation with other sociologies? These are important questions as they broaden the categories with which we think the world with, away from the hegemonic, post-Enlightenment traditions that locate museums firmly in the habitus of empire. This chapter takes Chimurenga as a space;

from which a different, African story of *ruzivo*<sup>7</sup> (knowledge), *kugadzira*<sup>8</sup> (making), and *kusika*<sup>9</sup> (creating) might be told. Read carefully, there seems no need to burden Chimurenga with externally assembled theoretical frameworks that render it illegible; Chimurenga speaks for itself from multiple indigenous archives of deep *chidzimbahwe* that are also philosophies (Mavhunga, 2017, p. 46).

As a counter-narrative to popular global discourse, Chimurenga creates a new space and possibilities for the theorising of a different form of knowledge that is new and that goes beyond merely countering or opposing Western knowledge, to producing an alternative way of representation that is distinctly merited in its own right. Therefore, not just new knowledge but new ways of producing knowledge and more creative ways of thinking of alternatives. Moving beyond questions of inclusion to centering these worlds as composed of knowledge, as centres and sustained structural shifts. Mapara (2009) links this to identity by arguing that these new insights and ‘new’ knowledge systems go beyond just a quest of a people who want to bring their knowledge to the attention of the global membership, but are additionally about reclaiming identity and asserting visibility.

Thirdly, how does an understanding of Chimurenga inform our contemporary world, future thinking and museum work? In this apocalypse desiring and rendering moment, faced with environmental degradation, increased precarity and the algorithmic life of surveillance, discipline and punishment - can Chimurenga offer us the possibilities not just of refusing this world as it has

come to be, but building alternate ones. How does one resist code? We engage her with other thinkers’ attempts to draw meaning informed by occupying a different position to the dominant narratives (McKittrick 2014, Noble 2018, Nyabola 2018, Benjamin 2019). The colonial, as domination and collapsing of ecologies, must then also be resisted at the level of building different codes, affirming life, and cultivating different desires (Gilmore 2002). What else is there that is not deleterious accumulation, extraction and expropriation, that can gesture towards a different relationality, other forms of solidarity, care, of love as a turning away from, a shifting, an affirmation of (Black) life?

Chimurenga as fecund ground, comes to stand with, and for the different forms of anticolonial practice that endure across boundaries, that skip, subvert, swim across, dance around, the border. Yet again, as epistemic delinquency, a necessary disobedience, masking and unmasking, a masquerade, a play at guerilla knowledge. To also hold close, and secret, for is it then Chimurenga if it is known in its entirety? As Wole Soyinka said of Senghor’s Negritude, a tiger does not claim its tigritude, it pounces! Chimurenga, therefore functions as African/Black method as proposed by (McKittrick 2021), performing the task of creating a liminal space to rethink and undo colonial logics whose purpose was to extract, exploit, exclude and own. Instead to present alternative methodologies informed by rich histories across multiple sites.

## What is Chimurenga to us?

*Chimurenga* is a word in the Shona language which loosely translates to the Zimbabwean war of liberation or revolutionary struggle against colonial rule. *Umvukela*<sup>10</sup> in *Ndebele*<sup>11</sup>, translating to ‘against settler colonialism’. In this context, history records the First Chimurenga (1896-1900) as a resistance against British encroachment that had seen the Ndebele people of the Matebeleland region of Zimbabwe lose their cattle, wives and land. The legacy of this first Chimurenga inspired the Second Chimurenga (1971-1979) which was the struggle for independence against the Rhodesian State. The

word Chimurenga has since been used to describe monumental shifts in Zimbabwe like the fast-track land reform program under Robert Mugabe in the 2000s, sometimes referred to as the 'Third Chimurenga'. Beyond these somewhat surface translations, locked within a specific time period, Chimurenga has much deeper meanings across multiple and complex dimensions.

This paper explores the textured meanings of Chimurenga, its philosophical and epistemic groundings in the context of an African understanding. In so doing, we bring into sharp focus what happens in translation, what elements are lost and more so what erasures occur and with what consequence. In bringing into discussion the multiple elements of Chimurenga we are also pushing back against the colonial construct of dictating that everything should be contained within a single rigid definition. We instead contend that complex concepts should be reflected through multiple definitions. Bleakley and Cleland (2015) in their work on thinking with complexity, posited that complex systems cannot be fully understood by an analysis of their parts as the interactions between these parts and the consequences of these interactions are equally significant. They further outlined that non-linear problems cannot be broken up into little pieces and solved individually to be brought back together to make a complete solution but rather that they must be understood within the context of their complexity. Opara (2021) further affirms that meaning shifts depending on amongst others, sociopolitical, geographical and epistemological positionality. We endeavour therefore to recover and retain the loss of texture and complexity in the translation, going beyond time and space and engaging with multiple disciplines to inform a rounded articulation.

Our discussion is also geared towards the possibilities of museological thinking unbounded from, and by historical centres of what has hitherto been considered universal thought. Thinking the world from the site of Chimurenga implicates us in the historical work and conversations on African and Black world-making, rebellion, revolt, refusal and resistance, indigenous cosmologies and the unfinished nature of liberation. Against this background, we locate our contribution in the larger

frame of conversations on decolonisation, yet simultaneously hesitant to limit the conceptual and material potency of Chimurenga.

## **Chimurenga as a site for resistance in direct response to colonial imposition**

The history of the colonial experience, at least in Zimbabwe, is not a history of acquiescence. The same can be said of other African countries, and in other parts of the world subject to colonial oppression. This is a history of refusal, rebellion and resistance at the imposition of alien ways of life, at dispossession and marginalisation, and the abjection of life as a colonial subject.

Zimbabwe's history of liberatory politics is entwined with aspects of traditional/indigenous cosmology that also function here as epistemic groundings. Foundational to the recognition that the colonial was a project of material as well as spiritual dispossession, *vadzimu*<sup>12</sup>, *svikiro*<sup>13</sup> and the shrines of local religious and political practice became sites for the articulation of freedom dreams, *rusununguko*<sup>14</sup>. This implied the multiple forms of capture, *kusungwa nekusungikana*<sup>15</sup>, forms of arrest and constriction, performed by technologies of everyday bordering, (the keep, reserve, Native Reserves, *kumaruzevha*<sup>16</sup>, and Native Areas, the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 and the Land Husbandry Act of 1951, for instance) that the land and its peoples had been subjected to, collapsing long-standing traditions of human-animal-non-human relations. The legitimization of the colonial structure and its functions also came, unsurprisingly, from the disciplining of the knowledge of the 'native', establishing ordered categories of worlds inhabited by the 'natives', and shaping how they would be understood and understand themselves. The Southern Rhodesia Native Affairs Department Annual (Howman 1954) is an example of a colonial publication that sought to define 'natives' and their function. These kinds of 'knowledge' produce the museological as the colonial, becoming instrumental in how museums (and anthropological/ethnographic) understanding and knowledge develop.

Bakshi, Jivraj et al. (2016) highlights that political independence from colonisers does not mean the end of coloniality; coloniality crucially remains as a 'socio-epistemic formation' that organises knowledge and experience. Socio-epistemic formation refers to how a knowledge environment is structured by various social practices that dictate the acquisition, processing, transmission, and assessment of information (Goldman 2010). Africa, like other places in the world, had its own Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) which served to facilitate societal cohesion and functioned as the communicative processes through which knowledge was transmitted, preserved, and acquired by the community. Altieri (1995) identifies IKS simply as knowledges originating locally and naturally. Mapara (2009) advances this by stating that IKS are bodies of knowledge of the indigenous people of particular geographical areas that have survived on for a very long time, developed through the processes of acculturation and kinship relationships that societal groups form. These are then handed down through oral tradition and cultural practices, such as rituals and rites. The colonial process, however, sought to override the existing IKS by branding them as primitive and backward (Mawere 2010). Spivak (1999) proposed that colonialism was part of a Eurocentric expansion of modes of knowing that claimed universality therefore positioning other knowledge as inferior. The colonisers, in their embodiment of superiority, asserted new social practices that set particular knowledge expectations between members of a community. These new knowledge expectations were then set as the norms that governed the knowledge validation and exchange processes of that community. Furthermore, the colonial context established through its superiority-based hierarchies a system whereby communities were led to draw information from superiors as opposed to acquiring knowledge through directly interacting with a knowledge environment themselves.

The centrality of the land as *animus* for Chimurenga is evidenced, for instance, in the words of Herbert Chitepo<sup>17</sup>

I could go into the whole theories of discrimination in legislation, in residency, in economic opportunities, in education. I could go into that, but I will restrict myself to the question of land because I think this is very basic. To us the essence of exploitation, the essence of white domination, is domination over land. That is the real issue.

Paradza(2021) explores the complex nature of land, making Chimurenga in the context of a fight against dispossession, a struggle across multiple planes. Outside the economic value of land, Paradza articulates the social meaning of land as a place of; belonging, residence, memory, site for ritual performance, interconnectedness with ancestry. From a political perspective, access to land enables participation in decision making, from an economic perspective – an avenue to relieving poverty. In this sense the resistance colonial acquisition of land was with recognition of these layered meanings and values of land.

More importantly, African traditional religions operated in the social system in which the land was an ancestral common, which defined people's cultural identity. In this regard, the implementation of indirect rule and its social injustices led to the contestation of power between the colonial authorities, chiefs and spirit mediums. This ... is analyzed from a social movement theoretical frame—arguing that spirit mediums served as movement intellectuals, who crafted strategies for rebellions against colonialism. (Kaoma, 2016).

These rebellions were compounded by the complex transitions and colonial imposition of taxes, forced labor, land grabs and other oppressive laws. It is important to add that in this cosmological dimension, land carries religious value and meaning. Being the sacred residence of the ancestors, land is a sacred common that links the living to one another, ancestors, other spiritual forces and ultimately to *Mwari - Musikavanhu*<sup>18</sup> (God). In this regard, land is not only the locus of social interactions, but spiritual too. Thus, the expulsion of Africans from their ancestral lands, imposed taxes and rapid social change led to further social and religious insecurity.

We examine also, following Mavhunga, Chimurenga as a legitimate anticolonial struggle and historical genealogy. One of the most interesting features of the precolonial vedzimbahwe<sup>19</sup> concerns their tendency to build their homesteads on hilltops and to fight their enemies from the rocks. The arming of mountains was born out of thorough knowledge of the locale. Passes, caves, and highest points were known, with ambush positions carefully prepared in the camouflaged cliff overhangs overlooking the passes below. The caves were turned into bunkers, stashed with provisions to sustain the occupants for several moons if necessary. The high points were turned into sentinel positions to spot the enemy from afar. It was a common chidzimbahwe practice for chiefs or kings to settle their most trusted vassals—or cowards—on strategic hilltop settlements and near likely enemy approach routes to act as *nbaririre*<sup>20</sup> (Mavhunga, 2017, p.52).

Chimurenga refers to means and ways of defending or fighting among vedzimbahwe (those of the houses of stone, dzimba dzemabwe or dzimbahwe), who since colonial times have been called the Shona. Dzimbahwe (or dzimbabwe, single imba yebwe [house of stone]) are the structure after which the country Zimbabwe (a big house of stone) is named, in homage to Great Zimbabwe, the biggest such complex (Mavhunga, 2017, p.45).

In other words, Chimurenga must be repositioned for enquiry as a site of creative work that did not start in 1896 or in the 1960s. Seen as such, it becomes an interesting space from which to make some critical interventions into the question of innovation.

In addition to Chimurenga being a resistance to colonial settlers, displacement and death; it was a refusal additionally informed by an understanding of the world (reworlding), of indigenous ecologies and balances, of the impact of settler practices on land, on water collapse, on transnational/regional connections. The impact of settler practices also resulted in indigenous peoples encountering the anthropological/ ethnographic as the colonial. If Chimurenga embodies anticolonial refusals and resistances, then we must also ask what it means to rub this against the grain of what museums, culture

and heritage have existed as, within a coloniality of understanding and existence. Much like anthropology, the disciplines as transposed onto many African contexts have sought to construct 'culture', ways of life and knowing and being, and the African peoples as problems, or potential problems to be solved. How do we understand these people and their social issues in order to discipline and govern them (Nhemachena, Mlambo et al. 2016). What would a museology that is founded on a liberatory praxis, a Chimurenga epistemology, seek to theorise and be in concert, even if at odds in moments, with the peoples that have been historically pathologised, and turned into objects or subjects of study? What Césaire (2001) referred to as 'thingification', a loss of personhood resulting in black people being looked upon as non-human.

In other words, how can one wrestle the machinations, conceptually, theoretically and in practice, of disciplining and the exertion of intellectual resource on the cultivation of ideas of knowledge and the world premised on domination and oppression, using Chimurenga as one of the avenues to mobilise desire for different ways of thinking anti-colonially? Coloniality, as moment, condition and ongoing process can in effect then not be countered as solely overdetermining, or capable of being surpassed, but rather as part of the frictions of the present, in how histories and their ramifications in the present are contested. Away from a binary non-meditation on what possibilities Chimurenga may offer us in the first instance.

### **Spiritual and gender dimensions within indigenous cosmologies**

One of the most prominent features of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle was the power of the traditional religious leaders, *vana sekuru*<sup>21</sup> (which literally translates to old/elderly men). They held a special position in the psyche of the freedom fighters. *Murenga* (from which Chimurenga is drawn) represents the value attributed to spirit mediums, a sacred ancestor of the people who mediated on their behalf to the gods (Chung 2006). This practice of connection with the spiritual realm in itself is a refusal to be known in flippant and



disrespectful ways. From the 1890s, when whites first entered the country, traditional religious leaders had opposed colonialism and were instrumental in organising opposition to it. One of the key messages of the spirit mediums was that the ancestral spirits fully supported the struggle to regain the land. Freedom fighters firmly believed that they were protected by the ancestral spirits, because the ancestral spirits were committed to ensuring that the land be returned to its rightful owners.

Even though through direct translation *sekuru* means old/elderly man, there were an equal number of female spirit mediums, as the religion appeared to collapse the gender binaries that might have been practiced as fixed in other aspects of sociality. These spirit mediums, who in everyday life would be regarded as women, occupied positions of power and authority in ways that both made gender, in some sense, 'fluid', whilst also negating the assumed hierarchies, especially in etic positions, that would position women as subservient, and low on a gender hierarchy premised on patriarchal relations. One of the main leaders in the first war against colonialism in the 1890s (first Chimurenga) was Nehanda, a woman of outstanding religious and political leadership (Chung 2006). Following the forcible seizure of land, a woman leader as the spirit medium is seen rising to the occasion inspiring, directing, commanding and leading men in the battle against the enemy. Nehanda Nyakasikana, appears in the war annals of post-colonial Zimbabwe as the first war heroine and martyr. To this day Mbuya neHanda remains one of the most regarded mediums (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2005). She did not lead just a battalion or regional army but a national army in a national struggle for the overthrow of Company rule (British South Africa Company, BSAC, instigated by Cecil John Rhodes, who is yet to fall) and recovery of the land. She was defiant and obdurate to the end, refusing to compromise and subject herself to a process exacting her penitence for a just Liberation War she had proudly, valiantly and justifiably fought.

Nehanda was a distinct and exceptional character who rose to revolutionary ascendancy, not by mere display of leadership qualities such as her command, courage, bravery and planning ability, but by principally her spiritual power as a spirit

medium (Writings and Documents from ZANU and the ZANU Women's League 1974-1979). A famous song reflecting her contribution, still alive in many spaces –

*Mbuya Nehanda kufa vachitaura shuwa, kuti tinotora sei nyika. Shoko rimwe ravakatiudza, tora gidi uzvitonge* (Translation - She died working out a strategy to get the country back to black majority rule and she instructed, take the gun to rule yourselves- be in charge of your own destiny).

Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi were hung in 1898 at the height of the white colonial occupation, which they fiercely fought against (Beach 1998). Their heads were brought to Britain and kept as war trophies in London museums, to date, longstanding and continuous campaigns are still ongoing for their remains as well as the skulls of 27 other early revolutionaries and a sacred talking rod to be repatriated back to Zimbabwe. In 2021, a statue of Mbuya neHanda was commissioned and erected in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe (Gershon 2021) as contemporary recognition of her leadership as part of Chimurenga. The use of her statue to mark a public space, brings the historical struggle into the modern-day space and the political appropriations in the present, against the diminishing of the role of women in the liberation struggle. Mbuya Nehanda's statue and the conversations that it stimulated also serve to evoke a rethinking of resistance and refusal beyond fixed historical moments. It is an exercise in refusing disposability, beckoning different ways of relating and solidarity.

Ndebele Queen Lozikeyi Dlodlo also played a significant role in the Anglo-Matebele war in 1896 as both a leader as well as an inspirational figure to fighting warriors reclaiming land from the oppressive colonial system. These women amongst other liberation heroines represent an entrenching of practices of refusal as processual and ongoing, iterative and founded on ideological foundations around reclamation and notions of futurity. Her contribution and that of other women and spirit mediums, both in person and symbolically reflects the spiritual and predictive elements of Chimurenga

sociologies – a telling not just of the struggles of the past and their character, but of the struggles of the world to come. An account of vision, a seeing of the coming of oppression, and a forewarning.

The colonial system which was superimposed upon the traditional system created for the woman two levels of oppression - that of traditional society as the first level and that of the political and socio-economic system suffered by both the man and the woman as the second level. The grievances generated by the colonial system were shared by all members of the African community. Hence the need that arose for men and women together as equals under oppression to join hands in the common struggle for national liberation. The national struggle, therefore, especially at its higher level, when it became armed national struggle, became as much a process towards the liberation of the nation as towards the emancipation of the woman. Women proved to be more active than men in their political organisational work. In the urban townships, the women and the youth were the most dependable pressure groups for mobilising support showing more determination and resolve (Writings and Documents from ZANU and the ZANU Women's League 1974-1979).

Women continue(d) to have an active role in freedom struggles and freedom dreams, often articulating their struggles through writing (Khan 2018). Within their writing they assert a clear understanding of the enduring nature of coloniality. Although songs and poetry are generically related, the songs from the war served a single immediate purpose of encouraging the execution of the war, while the poems allowed the poets a fair share of individual exploration of both official and unofficial perspectives of people in Chimurenga. Thus, while songs effectively dwell on the immediate business of the war, the poems have the luxury of space to pontificate, establish philosophies and even quarrel with the very idea of Chimurenga itself (Chirere and Mhandu 2008). Freedom Nyamubaya (Nyamubaya 1986), a well-known female operation commander and poet wrote:

Now that I have put my gun down  
For almost obvious reasons  
The enemy still is here invisible

My barrel has no definite target

Now

Let my hands work - My mouth sing - My pencil write

About the same things my bullet aimed at.

## Chimurenga as Genre

Chimurenga manifested as and through music popularised by Africans during the struggle for independence in Zimbabwe in the 1970s. Chimurenga music was the creation of freedom fighters resisting domination through colonialism, an artistic expression of freedom dreams. War songs played a pivotal role during the struggle for independence in Zimbabwe provoking people's thoughts, feelings and mood to fight for the liberation of the country. Slogans, songs and music that were sung and performed during the war of liberation, instilled hope in both the liberation fighters and the masses as they gave them the strength to continue fighting until the attainment of independence. Both male and female combatants viewed the liberation songs as an effective weapon with which to fight the Smith regime because of the song's capacity to mock the oppressive Rhodesian system; to inspire combatants during training sessions; to revive the fighting spirit of comrades; and to articulate the aims and objectives of the armed struggle to the masses (Rwafa, 2011a; Rwafa, 2011b).

The war songs that were inextricably linked to the hard-fought struggle were the bedrock or cornerstone in boosting the fighters' morale. Thomas Mapfumo's<sup>22</sup> words had succored a people wracked by a century of invasion, theft, cultural sabotage, brutality and despotism. During the bloody struggle for independence in the 1970s, Mapfumo's sinewy songs had told Zimbabweans who they were—farmers, fighters and artists, rightful inheritors of a stolen African pastoral (Hove 2016) (p1). Similarly other influential singers such as Stella Chiweshe, Chinx, Kasongo, Mutukudzi, Munhumumwe and Four Brothers, Bhundu Boys produced music that served as inspiration and motivation for resistance to colonial imposition. Songs of liberation dominated Zimbabwean music as expressions of struggle. ZANLA<sup>23</sup> and ZIPRA<sup>24</sup>

Revolutionary choirs (Matiza and Mutasa 2020) and songs such as Maruza imi (you have lost), archive of resistance in music (Pfukwa 2008).

Outside of this specific liberation struggle moment, Chimurenga music was also protest and critique of the oppression of women within African society. Although Chimurenga music emerged in the context of liberation struggles, following independence, Chimurenga music has criticised corruption, poor governance and leadership. Post-independence Zimbabwean singers with varying levels of political consciousness and employing different linguistic strategies have created different ways of naming reality through alternative versions of Chimurenga music (Vambe 2011). Zimbabwean musicians demonstrated that attempts to generate a local discourse of freedom in the era of globalisation and corporate organisations that control the production and distribution of Chimurenga music produce not one version of Chimurenga music, but multiple versions (and sub/versions) of Chimurenga music that confirm, collude, overlap and contradict each other in their ways of naming the post-independence Zimbabwean reality (Vambe 2011). Music was also a site of pan-African solidarity with Congolese artists like Sam Mangwana, bands like OK Success that were in Zimbabwe singing about independence.

Bob Marley also sang Africa liberate Zimbabwe with the first verse;

Every man got a 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

The chorus expressed solidarity with the first for independence affirming with the words *'Brother, you're right, you're right, you're right, we gonna fight, fight for our rights'*

Chikowero (2015) asserts that, "it is this tradition of cultures of resistance that gave us the Chimurenga sensibility and musical genre in Zimbabwe", he traces the roots in his book *African Music, Power and Being in colonial Zimbabwe*(Chikowero 2015) to the moments and

continuums of encounters with the Portuguese and the British colonial mission from the 16th through to the 19th century. He continues to argue that, "the very act of refusing to abandon demonized spiritualities and criminalized musical cultures, and the wielding of the same to fight for self-liberation constituted, a culture of resistance that is a broadly shared African heritage." Song and spiritualities formed unassailable, transgenerational cultural technologies of self-liberation during the long, deep-time anti-colonial struggles, as amply documented during the First, and Second Chimurenga in Zimbabwe. His writing also traces the genealogies of these cultures, which earlier writings had misdated to the 1960s with the popularity of the music of Zexie Manatsa, Thomas Mapfumo, Abel Sithole, Cde Chinx and others, whose compositions emboldened and mobilized the spirit of the armed struggle that gave birth to Zimbabwe in 1980"(Chikowero 2015).

### **Chimurenga as diasporic sense-making?**

The United Kingdom (UK) has a solid tradition of Black intellectual culture, although this may not be recognised or celebrated in equal measure. This culture is a product of a colonial history that leads to the convergence in Britain of Black people who share the experiences of oppression and marginalisation from the former colonies, to the structures and institutions that cultivate marginalisation and discrimination in the UK. Walter Rodney articulates these transnational circulations of anticolonial ideas in his writings – the groundings with my brothers(Rodney 1969).

In thinking these questions of Chimurenga in an elsewhere that is constitutive of relationships of empire and coloniality, it is useful to consider the question of mobility and diaspora. It is also important here to return to the point about refusing linear understandings of what possibilities museums hold. What has mobility meant in bringing varying ideas of other worlds into this supposed centre, and how do we articulate these sociologies of the elsewhere, in this elsewhere? Stuart Hall's cultural studies are formative here in offering different ways of reading identity, race and culture, and the wider

sociologies of race, immigration and belonging in the UK (Hall 1980).

The African diaspora in Britain reflects the diasporic entanglements and contradictions that characterise mobilities. Zimbabwean migration to the UK, against the background of Zimbabwe's socio-economic and political problems, and "international" isolation. Specific African solidarities emanating from liberation struggle, "struggle parties" in Southern Africa, juxtaposed with the obscene and grotesque of the post colony (Mbembe 2006) and the practices of the elites in the periphery. What are the implications, after the supposed independence of an African country having waged Chimurenga, in the aftermath of what was thought as decolonisation, that those hailing from such places head to what has been constructed as the centre due to the collapse of their freedom dreams? Outside armed struggle, what else are we struggling with? Epistemic injustice, poverty, inequality, climate justice, to mention but a few. Chimurenga in this space adopts new meanings as everyday struggle of living Black life in the elsewhere, as restorative, creating openings for a recuperative Chimurenga epistemology.

It is in this space, that Chimurenga music also re-emerges as motivation to resist contemporary dominations that Zimbabweans face within the diaspora. Oliver Mtukudzi - *Dada nerudzi rwako*<sup>25</sup> (take pride in your heritage and roots) particularly speaks to owning your presence and embracing your identity particularly in diaspora spaces, *dande*<sup>26</sup> as mythic home-related to diaspora. The histories and contemporary experiences of African and African diasporic resistance and refusals are also musical experiences - where rhythm, song and sound have functioned in multiple ways to provide soundtracks to the banalities of living with dispossession, and the work of finding beauty and Black livingness even in circumstances of abjection. Music also serves to mitigate the effects of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in his work on decolonising the mind, refers to as a 'cultural bomb' whose purpose was/is to annihilate people from their own identity (Wa Thiong'o 1992). Music also functions as negotiation of the conditions and tensions articulated by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) who identified the impact of colonial matrices of power that produce alienated

Africans socialised into distancing themselves from the Africa that produced them, while attaching themselves to the Europe and America that rejects them.

Sound is ubiquitous, from the cries and yearnings for freedom by the enslaved, to the coded songs of hope and inspiration sung amid colonial oppression and socio-economic and political imperialism. If one of the tasks of colonialism, and consequently the enduring colonialities, is to alienate the colonised from indigenous forms of knowing and expression, as well as from life itself, then music, as spiritual, convivial, joyous and desiring, yet also ardent and strident, refuses to be bowed to these logics of the colonial.

We explore also the role of agency and the contribution of music and sound to agency. The constant adaptation and adjustments that come with diaspora living and how music plays a significant role in the navigation and negotiation of challenging situations, how the spirit of Chimurenga is evoked through music and encourages resilience and affirms identities which are often in flux in the elsewhere. Handley, Sturdy et al. (2006) affirmed that individuals maintain a sense of agency through adopting and adapting different types of participation and identity construction. Agency understood in this way develops from and through a position of constant negotiation of identities and situations. Understood this way, we also wish to consider Chimurenga as agency, as part of diasporic sense making, as anchoring, as struggle, as a method to achieve freedom dreams, as resolve and as community.

### **Chimurenga as an anticolonial epistemological gesture and a knowledge system**

Traditional Eurocentric ideas around what constitutes knowledge, have dictated and continue to dictate how we arrive at what is understood as knowledge. Africans are often not situated within the knowledge and philosophical domain because of a lack of appreciation for the philosophies that inform their practices (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, Chikowero 2015, Mavhunga 2018). Therefore,

Chimurenga is not considered globally as a philosophy that can inform an anthropological understanding (Nhemachena 2017). Chimurenga as insurrectionary cognitive territory can help to reshape the understanding of knowledge within a broader context. How do we gather the fragments of Chimurenga knowledges and practices in forging alternate sociologies? Particularly when the gathering and dissemination of knowledge itself is a Chimurenga. We return to the assertion that knowledge is constructed, not given; contextual, not absolute; fluid and not fixed.

In the context of climate catastrophe and continuing indigenous struggles over land, Chimurenga remains an important site of possibility for cultivating different ways of being and relating. We see how, for example, the spirit mediums in the context of Chimurenga struggle governed over the environment by forbidding the cutting down of trees, insisting on firewood being sought only from dead trees; how killing of wild animals was prohibited (Chung 2006). In this sense, their awareness of issues of sustainability clear way before 'Western' present day championing of sustainability. What Chimurenga historically emphasised, and holds for museological and cultural thinking in the present, is the inextricable link of the ideological, hegemonic functions of coloniality to the materialities that ensue, or that are integral to its production. Coloniality and the attendant corollaries in racism, marginalisation and disposability, demands the cosmological, epistemic confrontation as much as it demands a reckoning with the material conditions engendered, and the converse also being the case.

Thinking relationally in the way Chimurenga invites us to recognise how we are positioned in relation to people and communities and how power is constituted and impinges on us. Conceptually, Chimurenga undertakes the important function of gesturing towards the possibilities of refusing dominant theoretical formulations that operate as if African ways of knowing and being are additional, or should be included as an exercise of intellectual benevolence or reflexivity. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) names this the task of undoing cognitive empire, which in the same way invades the mental universe.

He reminds us that colonialism is not all over but rather that is all over.

## Looking to the future

Where do we go from here? It is easier to offer a bleak ending, a forewarning, as with the vision of the Chimurengas, of tragedy and endings, climatic and otherwise. Particularly prescient in the face of challenges of mobility, global capitalism and inequality. Linda Tuhwai Smith reminds us that research for social justice improves the conditions for justice; it is an exercise of intellectual, cognitive and moral engagement, often fraught, never complete, but worthwhile (Smith 1999). It is also hopeful to be thinking and acting with others in this moment who are committed to working towards different relations and planetary renewal, establishing ways of relating. To take this as an invitation to live into the present embracing multiple planetary sociologies, understanding them as interanimated rather than separate and hierarchised, forcibly recruited into hegemonic structures. Drawing understanding from unlikely sources, outside hegemonic disciplinary bounds. Ngugi waThiongo draws our attention to the richness that results from embracing multiple perspectives when he stated,

When you crush hierarchy, and replace it with network, then the cultures held in the different languages generate oxygen. They cross-fertilize. Cultures are able to breathe life into each other. Every culture should be taught with a nod to other cultures... They are all very exciting and it is not necessary to put them in a hierarchical relationship to each other. Let them network (Tanuj, 2017).

We are in this moment presented with a liminal space - a transformative space, where meanings and established beliefs can be renegotiated (Gruenewald 2003), an opportunity for a transition to new ways of thinking and acting. We position therefore Chimurenga as an active stand against omission and absence to bring about a commitment

to what Mbembe (2015) refers to as pedagogies of presence.

## Notes

- 1 Chimurenga- Zimbabwean war of liberation
- 2 Shona - one of the indigenous languages of Zimbabwe spoken by the majority of the population
- 3 Vanhu – Human beings in the Shona language
- 4 Chivanhu – being Human
- 5 Vatema – black identity
- 6 Vanhu vatema – black people
- 7 Ruzivo - knowledge
- 8 Kugadzira - making
- 9 Kusika - creating
- 10 Umvukela – against settler colonialism
- 11 Ndebele is one of the indigenous languages of Zimbabwe
- 12 Vadzimu - ancestors
- 13 Svikiro – spirit medium
- 14 Rusununguko - liberation
- 15 Kusungwa nekusungikana - Arrest and constriction
- 16 Kumaruzevha – Native Reserves
- 17 Herbert Chitepo led the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) until his assassination in 1975
- 18 Mwari, Musikavanhu - God
- 19 Vedzimbahwe – those of the houses of stone
- 20 Nharire - sentinels
- 21 Vana sekuru – although this would literally translate to old/elderly men, it references in this instance position of traditional and spiritual authority that are not necessarily age or gender based, as evidenced by women and men of younger age occupying these categories
- 22 Thomas Mapfumo is a popular Zimbabwean musician whose music had significant political influence
- 23 ZANLA - Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army
- 24 ZIPRA- Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army
- 25 Dada nerudzi rwako – take pride in your heritage and roots
- 26 Dande – ‘Home’

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