

GRASS VERSUS HUMANITY: PERSPECTIVES UPON THE PERPETUAL CHILONGA (VATSONGA) VICTIMISATION, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The land has been an issue for concern, battle, and sundry misunderstandings amongst nations, communities and individuals since times unpleasant to recall. Land issues are the major causes of enmity, divisions, racism and tribalism. The Europeans have come all the way to Africa because of an insatiable desire to possess and own land. African nations have fought back and displaced many whites because they have been displaced and ill-treated by having their land taken away by aliens. The paper is an attempt to unpack the heart-rending and inglorious trends enshrined in Zimbabwean land legalities and the politics of its exploitation, apportionment as well as the state of the powers that be. It aims to unveil how the Zimbabwean government, if there is any prevailing, administers the issue of land and its apportionment amongst its citizens across ethnicities.

Keywords— Land Apportionment Act, Lucerne, Xitsonga, Government of Zimbabwe, Chilonga, eviction.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

If someone proposes to give you food and you decline the offer. When the same enforces it on you then that food is not safe, it is poisonous.

(Anonymous grieved Chilonga villager)

The land issue in Africa in general, and in Zimbabwe in particular, has hit excruciatingly, on very sensitive nerves among many citizens who had never dreamt Zimbabwe could be so harsh to its legitimate citizens. The Zimbabwe's post-chimurenga war era once shook out, mercilessly, many of the white minority who had settled comfortably in Zimbabwe. During and after the displacement of the whites in Zimbabwe, the former long-serving present of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, had given an assurance to all Zimbabweans that land belongs to the people of Zimbabwe and not to be monopolized by white farmers.

This temporary phase ushered in some piece of mind to the people of Zimbabwe. However, the unexpected turn of events rocked in when Munangagwa Dambudzo Emmerson assumed his presidency through a formulaic technique which saw Robert Mugabe being forced to resign from his presidency.

The analysis of national critics views on the current president's position reveals that Munangagwa's entrance into high power politicking was hasty, rough and care-free. This position is not only destructive to the nation's resources but hints to a dimly gloom picture of the future, both near and long term, of the entire population of Zimbabwe. This comes from the understanding that Zimbabwe is a fairly resourced country, which, with reasonable leadership, could sustain its citizens better than many African countries. It is sad that the top echelons are the ones who

exploit the country's wealth for the good of those few thingamagigs,

THE COLONIAL/SMITH REGIME: PREVIOUS SIMILAR DISPLACEMENTS

History tells it plainly that the Vatsonga people in Zimbabwe have been victimised for long through governmental instruments of land redistribution/ apportionment programmes that only benefited either the government or a few 'lucky' individuals empowered to abuse the government's power. The Vatsonga have previously been moved from Save to Zaka – a Shona dominated district, paving way for the perforation of identities. These Vatsonga are now identified by the name Tovani, instead of Tshovani, a surname they were identified with when they left their place of origin. Others have also been moved, forcibly, from Gonarezhou National Park, to pave way for animals the benefit of which is highly visible to those in control. Zaba (2021) exploits this nuance by pointing out that the Tsongas were forcibly uprooted from certain places (present day Triangle and Hippo Valley) to give way to sugarcane estates around the 1960s. The writer equates the Ian Smith government with the current Munangagwa government which is also prepared to use armed forces to forcibly evict people from their homes, and to make matters worse, unprepared to create in advance, better leaving conditions where people would be going.

LANGUAGE STRATIFICATIONS: A CAUSE FOR ETHNIC BATTLES

Zimbabwe, despite being a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic country still principally, and especially in practice, maintain the relevance and acknowledgement of three languages, firstly, that of whites – English, and secondly, the Shona and the Ndebele languages. This being the case, and particularly from a gut-politicking perspective, the rest of the 'minor' ethnicities are irrelevantly underserving of the nation's cake. The Shona community, being the most quantified ethnic group in the country has

exaggeratedly high conceptions of ethnic supremacy. This is evident in the fact that the presidency of the country is thought to root from the Shonas, commonly known as Makalanga or Vanyai by the Vatsonga. This biased calculation of their political machinations has instigated perennial hatred between the highly conceited Shonas and the rest of the ethnic populations in the country.

The people from other ethnic groups, also, feel that the policy that previously allowed two languages, Shona and Ndebele to be official and mediums of instructions in schools, evading boundaries where other languages where supposed to be taught was not a product of informed intentions. This did not only give entrance to divisions and ethnic stratifications but also formed a source of depriving other ethnic groups that should also benefit from the nation's share of resources. This understanding has given the victims of the Lucerne insidious project to think of it as a battle of ethnic supremacy, and as a historically sidelined group, they feel that the Shonas have schemed to clear the 'tiny, struggling' ethnic group. However, this can be debated along the lines that many of the Shonas in Zimbabwe have reacted against this decision by the government, and have quoted it as an unjust undertaking for a people who are also on the road, paving way for other people's projects.

CHILONGA: THE ELEVATED NEWSY TOPONYM

The toponym Chilonga, in the context of the pervasive Lucerne project is used inclusively to umbrella the Zimbabwean places that are regarded as ancestral lands for the Vatsonga (Shangaan) people. The desire by the Zimbabwean government to continue the colonial game of displacing the Vatsonga people comes at a time when the victims, after a prolonged period of neglect by the Zimbabwean government, and prior to multiple displacements by the preceding governments, have just devised their own ways of survival, far from the assistance of the government. The region is well recognised as the ignored sector

in Zimbabwe where tarred roads, special infrastructure and any amenities as would be seen in other 'cared for' vicinities are better dreamt of than seen.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The paper envisages the use of the concept of 'involuntary resettlement paradigm' in buttressing the unfolding of the paper. According to the African Development Bank (2015) Involuntary Resettlement Necessity for people affected by a development project to relocate and to rebuild their lives, incomes and asset bases elsewhere. Involuntary resettlement has been reported to cause serious disturbances to the evicted populace. However, it is usually reasonable for the responsible government to take into account the multifarious losses incurred by the resettled masses. Under normal circumstances, baseline data is collected prior to displacement (The World Bank, 2016), providing 'quantifiable information on the size of households, levels of income, and assets as well as qualitative information and analysis about livelihoods and living standards' (The World Bank, 2016: 37). This paradigm also urges the perpetrators to give room to the displaced people to participate in the planning, design and implementation of the strategies to be used in the resettlement exercise, and the whole plan should be in such a way as to facilitate the compensation of the evicted populations, in ways that will see them restored to their former state or even better this is because the 'acquisition affects anyone who owns, resides in, or works in the area taken by the state' (IBRD, 2004: 37). It is also critical that the evicting forces take into consideration the customary laws and resources, as well as to compensate the affected people even if they have no title deeds to their rural settlements (Zaman et. al. 2022: 4). Seen this way, the paradigm shall guide the researcher in exploring how the concept differs from one place to another, and the intended project is worth undertaking or not. The as well as making judgments on the relationship between the potential victims and those intending to displace them. The paradigm will also be a

guiding tool for crafting recommendations basing on the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This part will serve to review literatures written on the Chilonga Lucerne project. It can be conceded that literature on the subject is still scarce since it is a new subject, and much of the information is still communicated through social media platforms and newspapers in which most of the information is persuaded to bend towards political biases in order to win relevance to the authorities. Thus, a rigorous intervention to sift through various readership materials was necessary in the preparation of this paper.

Scoones (2021) describes the nature of the on-going land re-capture continuum in a Zimbabwean context. The paper immediately zeros down on the current and still burning Chilonga issue which has alerted and created tension even within the ruling ZANU PF Party due to its supposedly malicious and inhumane schemes in relation to the land question. It is pointed out that the commotion that disturbed silence across the entire nation has been ignited by His Excellency E.D. Munangagwa's issuance of a statutory instrument that pointed out, in clear terms, that the inhabitants of the Chilonga area should vacate their area with effect from the date of publication of the statutory instrument. This created more than confusion to the helpless and clueless victims who could not tell where to go and how to vacate at too short a notice. The areas identified as under Chilonga, which in the confusion of things, have become sub-areas of Chilonga, are Chilonga, Makosiya, Dzindzela, Chibwedziva and Gwaseche, to mention but a few. The strangeness with which the matter took off is better captured in the following lines:

Chilonga, a small settlement in a dry communal area in Chiredzi district, has been all over the news in Zimbabwe over the past few weeks. A huge controversy over a major new land investment has blown up, with rights groups up in arms. There have been high-

profile visits from politicians of all stripes, a large presence of security agents, court cases, activist protests and much commentary on the legal twists and turns of the case.

It is here indicated that the area has been allocated to a major investment project with the intention of growing fodder grass, known as Lucerne or Alfalfa. The company from Kwekwe involved in the scheme has been identified as Dendairy, and sadly assumed to be heavily connected to the president. The paper points out that many of the inhabitants of the Chilonga eyed-region heavily objected. Some of the reasons given over the objection were their lack of trust upon the president, his party and the current government. Besides having noted that the Chilonga people were victims of ruthless resettlements since the colonial period, Zaba (2021) notes the following:

LAST week government gazetted Statutory Instrument 50 of 2021 to designate 12 940 hectares of communal land in Chilonga, Chiredzi, for Lucerne grass farming for Dendairy milk production purposes.

The newspaper effectively parades how Dendairy's machinations endeavours to deprive the affected communities of their land. It is anticipated that the Kwekwe White farmer intends displace thousands of Tsonga (Shangaan) families out of the land of their fathers. It is also noted that Dendairy's victims is intending to remove rootlessly, people who have for years strived to live on subsistence dry farming without any reasonable assistance from the malicious government (hiding behind Dendairy) to transform and better their livelihoods. Evidence also shows how the Chilonga people relies on farming and rearing of goats and cattle for livelihoods, and this brings grave fear as to whether they are going to be thrown out and deposited where there is enough land for their livestock or there will be very limited pieces of land. This is if at all they will be carried to some place since the first statutory instrument read by the president of the country, Comrade Emmerson Dambudzo Munangagwa indicated that people should just move out without a hint on where they were to go.

Part of the greater challenge exhibited in the statutory instrument is the fact that the President simply directed the affected communities to vacate from their home areas without a pointer to where they were going. This led the inhabitants to challenge the command, telling it plainly that they were prepared to die clinging to their land because vacating leaving their land was not different from dying. This presidential command created, in the people affected, a sense of mistrust that will take years to reconcile. Following the abrupt release of the Statutory Instrument that was confronted, nationally, with disapprovals, the insidious government had tried several types to edit their instrument accompanied by many agents and tricks to hook away the land but things had been buffeting them. This, in a sense, created great confusion since the inhabitants are leaving under great fear and there is therefore, no development taking place in an area 'to be evacuated at any time'.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In 2019, the government of Zimbabwe, through the hand of the current president, has made plans to evict people from several communities in Chiredzi South. The communities are predominantly composed of Xitsonga (Xichangana) language speakers. The news have come to the people largely through rumours and those who were initially send to address the people could not avail full information regarding the nature of the programme, any benefits arising from it or whether there will be any form of compensation for the affected families. Gradually, it became clear that there was no compensation to put in place. The President of the country also commanded through a Statutory Instrument that all the people in the designated communities should vacate paving way for Lucerne farming, but the people were not told were to go and how they were going to start and adapt to the conditions there. This scenario triggered conflicts between the Lucerne project team and the locals who were worried about the fate of their future.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative research design. Data for this paper was collected from the inhabitants of Chilonga area between the years 2019 and 2022, through interviews on purposively sampled community members. According to Thomas (2015), interviews are one of the greatest benefits of qualitative research. They are the richer understanding gleaned from personal interaction. The researcher also elicited pieces of information from social media groups in which the Tsonga community members discuss developmental issues as well as challenges affecting their communities, of which the Lucerne imposed project was key. Cell phone interviewing was another tool which the researcher employed to collect information required for the paper. Data was then screen and analysed thematically basing on research findings.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Zimbabwe is a very dangerous country to carry out studies that do not speak to the dictates of the ruling party. Seen this way, the researcher was constrained by fear and uncertainty of who was to be consulted for the right information without him/her being a sellout. ZANU PF thugs were also feared to have been planted in many corners of the Chilonga communities to solicit information on those rejecting the ostensibly regarded ‘national project’.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is a critical research that will assist in unveiling the socio-political atrocities perpetrated upon the Tsonga people in Zimbabwe in their endeavour to resist their eviction. The paper will also assist in sharing the news with the outside world as well as engaging, in some way, the Human Rights bodies, both in Zimbabwe and outside on how to circumvent and relieve the affected communities. It is also vital in that it

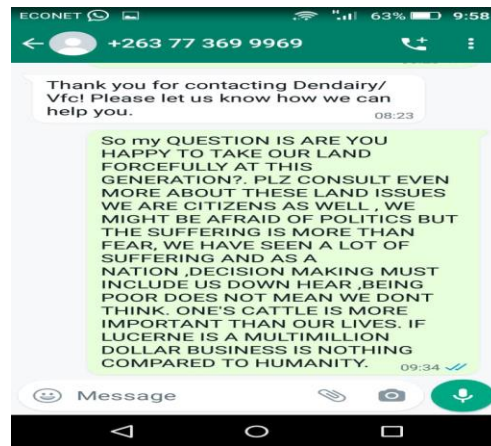
communicates to the wider global community, the true sentiments of the affected communities. This will help to counter the often diluted and skewed news bulletins usually aired by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Cooperation as a strategy to mislead the nation into believing that the Chilonga people have agreed to be evicted – paving way for the grass political project.

THE CHILONGA BRIDGE: DANGERS, PROMISES AND THE LUCERNE PROJECT

The Chilonga bridge has been a perpetual song during campaigns by gut-politicians. Every year, those who would want to be voted into power stupefies the general populace by making them believe that the aspiring candidate will rescue them from the life-threatening dangers at the river. It goes without mentioning that the crossing area is now a black spot. Many people perished as they tried to cross the river. Every year, the bridge claims lives. Nuances from the respondents revealed that those fighting for the project, and obviously, who do possess the powers to change things have indicated that the only way the government can agree to erect a bridge is for the people to agree to be evicted. This will then allow the Lucerne growers to cross freely to their shared portions of land. From an analytic outlook, it would seem as if the government is saying what matters is the grass project not the people.

COLLECTIVE ACTIONS AND THE MULTIMEDIA

The news concerning the eviction of the villagers kindled strong debates, communal ties and ignited the need for collective actions and unity among the villagers inhabiting the communities spanning the affected areas. Grieved locals would communicate with the alleged farmer in some unpleasant ways as indicated below:



Source: Chitakataka WhatsApp group – a grieved villager communicating his concerns to the alleged potential white farmer.

The extracts from a WhatsApp chats with Den Dairy Company were outbursts from members of the grieved victims in Chilonga. Many have been sending messages to the given number to show how much they have been disturbed by the enforced project that is thought to benefit the ZANU^{pf} upper echelons. The Chilonga Lucerne victims have been displaced several times, including the Hippo Valley, Triangle and Gonarezhou National Park displacements. This even harsher form of displacement by an African President will cost many lives and wealth to the people who already bear marks of tribal segregation in a tribally divided Zimbabwe. To this end. Many Vatsonga people associate the purported displacement with the tribal divisions that have led to the seclusion and underdevelopment of the Tsonga land in the country.

THE CONCERNED, UNCONCERNED AND THE NEUTRAL: CHIEFS, MPS AND SUNDRY

Due to the malicious, *gandangist*, and unconstitutional propensity of the ZANU^{pf} Party in Zimbabwe, many traditional leaders and Members of Parliament have developed cold feet, and have no voice. In fact, they are expected, by their leaders, the political thingamabobs, to have no voice since they

should not speak anything against the government, or chief politicians. This shows how the politics of a nation have utterly destroyed the powers of chiefs and other traditional structures for the benefit of a few greedy thingamajigs. Among the Tsonga, a select of Chiefs have been targeted from the start, and have been named as those willing to sell the land for whatever reason; be it out of fear or a craving for some calculated gains.

There seems to be also a gang of people who seem to care about what is happening as well as those who really crave for the project. A good number of those who are mischievous have been identified as strangers (not Tsongas) who have come from other regions to dwell amongst the Vatsonga. These have no roots or passionate attachment to the land, and have no long term plans in line with the Chilonga area. Some, of course, are mere sellouts employed by the culprits to pave way for the Lucerne project. The preponderance of the inhabitants are those praying to see God block the evil scheme by his Mighty hand, and see the demigods convicted of their evil machinations. They are overly stressed to think that their homes, their livestock, their cleared fields and the fate of their families would be diverted and doomed forever.

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

In this research, it was found that the Zimbabwean government harbors' an insidious

intention of ruthlessly displacing the Tsonga people by allegedly preaching the gospel of *Madiridziro* (irrigation) which in essence is not meant for the people but for the key politicians and folk. The research also found that, due to a continued disturbing turbulence of insistence by the pseudo-government (reportedly composed of the president and his surrounding thugs – the demoted Chadzamira, the successor Mavhenyengwa, Masosote and stuff), many Tsonga people are now suffering from hypertension whilst some are thought to have died because of the same. It was also found that the very people who are the key defenders of the land are the general populace. This excludes the Members of Parliament, the Chiefs and other key political figures as well as holding governmental offices that matter. The silence embodied by these key figures gives birth to many connotation, such as the fear of being victimized, the fear of losing benefits like political positions, vehicles and the like, and ultimately a lack of concern for the people who, otherwise have chosen them into the very positions they are occupying. It cannot go unmentioned that many a politician shuts their mouths in order to gain, corruptively, at the expense of the very people they claim to represent. It has also been found that the very people are behind the scheme are criminal liars who distort even the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and some used-to-be-trusted official forms of media by their lies. They have often times lied about the Chilonga people accepting the malicious Lucerne scheme or having members undergoing some Lucerne-related trainings. This, in a sense intensifies the sour relations between the victims and the alleged company.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Zimbabwean government and its structures be concerned more about human life than anything like accumulating riches and the looting of resources for individual gains. It is also recommended that the government reconsiders revising the colonial land apportionment ACT that gives the President all the powers and

freedom to decide on what he has to do with any portion of land, even to exploit it for his personal gains. Another recommendation is that the Zimbabwean president has to consider making decisions within a ‘people’s government’ structure for the benefit of all Zimbabwean, rather than working as a party or with only limited members selected to reinforce him and his desires. It is also a matter of concern and worth of recommendation that if the worse comes to the worst and people suffer displacements, recommendable amenities should be a matter of priority before people leaves their land for any area, and the people must first be satisfied with the conditions where they are going, which in human terms, ‘should promise better conditions that the prevailing ones’. This would indeed mean compensation for the great lose they would have incurred. Lastly, but not least, the neighboring countries, Africa at large and the entire world are invited to consider saving the victims of the Zimbabwean government, who in fact, are victims negligence and malice. Most importantly, let us all pray so that God, the Almighty can alleviate the Zimbabwean situation and restore humanness, sympathy and common sense.

CONCLUSION

The condition of the Vatsonga people in Zimbabwe is an unprecedented one. History records them as perpetual victims of enforced displacements and indeed they are. They have and they are benefiting ‘not-pleasant-for-consideration’ nothing from the Zimbabwean government. Further scrutiny of the issue under consideration gives credence to the fact that the Government or some corrupt thugs in the ZANUPF Party, insist on taking the land, either for Lucerne or any conceived projects. Thus, due to the prevailing situation, the concerned Vatsonga people have lost confidence in the ruling government and its bloody political party. This most thickened when, in its wisdom or lack of it, changed three times, the statutory instrument that was meant to abruptly shove the inhabitants of Chilonga away – without any idea of where they were going.

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