

MEMORY MEANDERS
PLACE, HOME AND COMMEMORATION IN AN
EX-RHODESIAN DIASPORA COMMUNITY¹

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This is a study about a postcolonial migrant community, white former Rhodesians, who have emigrated from Zimbabwe to South Africa after British colonial rule came to an end and Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980. The end of white rule instigated a settler exodus, one of the last of its kind in Africa. An estimated 100 000 whites emigrated from Zimbabwe during the first years of independence, and the majority of them settled temporarily or permanently in South Africa.

The question I ask in this study is how the ex-Rhodesians—in more or less self-initiated exile—envision, create and reminisce about by-gone Rhodesia as their ‘homeland’. In spite of Rhodesia’s incontestable ending, it is held close by social practices; by thought and talk, artifact and image, and by webs of meaningful relationships. Such social practices connected with processes of remembering together constitute how the community understands itself. My focus is then on the ways in which the colonial past is remembered and reworked, and how Rhodesia becomes meaningful in narratives, compositions of home, public events and other kinds of memory practices for this diaspora group.

My dissertation begins with two quotes that address central questions and positions in this work. I quote from Jo-Ann:

The problem with Rhodesia is that it does not exist anymore. There is no going back. When we came here in 1980, we decided that there was no return. We would try to integrate here. And even if we couldn’t integrate, we would try to find a space to live (...) Rhodesia to us was not necessarily a geographical place. It was an experience within a geographical place.

The second quote is from Ken:

Look, one thing we have to admit is, Rhodesia is over. Rhodesia is over. It doesn’t exist anymore. It exists in the cyberspace, it exists in our memories, it exists in that we’ve got friends that *were* Rhodesians, but note, I say *were*. There are no Rhodesians per se today. There are Rhodesians that were.

These two quotes enunciate the ex-Rhodesians’ understanding of the finality and closure of Rhodesia subsequent to Zimbabwe’s independence. At independence Rhodesia as a political entity expired. When the whites left in numbers Rhodesia became ‘history’: it was sealed off both as a territory and as a way of life in the past. Yet Ken elaborates the ways in which Rhodesia continues to have intrinsic weight in the present lives of former Rhodesians: it connects and embraces a network of dense social relationships upheld through communicative channels in “cyberspace” as well as through active local webs of friendships with others in whose memories Rhodesia continues to matter—with “Rhodesians that were”.

Rhodesia, the hub and nexus of the memory narratives and practices, emerges as more than a place or a territory as emphasized in Jo-Ann’s quote. It is understood as phenomenal

experience, a source and site of knowledge and involvement in the past. The ability to remember and the motivation and determination to nurture and cultivate that experience in the past connect the people in diaspora both vertically to the 'homeland' and horizontally to the world-wide community of ex-Rhodesians within which one's memories are socially sharable and within which one's memories are socially shaped. As Paul Ricoeur (1991) explains, it is in the transmission of such memory narratives that a cultural community comes to be constituted and by which it narratively interprets itself, and thus belongs together.

The vantage points from which I examine how the people in this community reminisce about their former homeland concern ideas and practices related to place, home and commemoration. Reflecting upon the place of belonging and a sense of home, as well as ritually celebrating a common past, are fundamental concerns that speak of the experiences of migratory communities in various localities and social circumstances. Today experiences of constructing homes away from home, as James Clifford (1994) puts it, touch diverse communities all over the globe. So do issues of place, and landscape, and of authority over land. Questions of who has a right to make legitimate claims of belonging to particular territories activate people and motivate political and moral debates the world over. In today's Southern Africa, particularly in the aftermaths of the Truth Commission, controversies of remembering and forgetting are both topical and passionate.

What makes this study unique is that the community in question was formerly the colonial elite of Rhodesia. Although the concept 'colonial elite' might somewhat inaccurately describe white Rhodesians, we may justifiably say that they *did* occupy a privileged position in the colonial society. It is from this entitled position that they once experienced and presently remember colonial Rhodesia. The second contextually significant factor structuring the community's position is the current crisis in Zimbabwe. The whites who have stayed on in Zimbabwe have, until very recently, dominated much of the economy, particularly in the sector of commercial farming, and they have possessed the most productive land in the country. By one estimate, the white minority, comprising less than three percent of the population at independence, has commanded almost two-thirds of the national income. However, the political turmoil concerning the redistribution of commercial, mainly white-owned farmland in Zimbabwe, was heightened considerably during the course of my fieldwork between 1999 and 2000. In 1997 the Zimbabwe government listed about 1500 of the country's 4500 commercial farms for compulsory acquisition. In February 2000 government-backed veterans of the liberation war began to invade commercial farms, which has subsequently led to the forced acquisition of about 95 % of the farmland and generated a new wave of both black and white emigration.

As expressed in Jo-Ann's quotation, the meaning of Rhodesia as a place of belonging, as a homeland, might escape strict geographical definitions; homeland is more about a sense of experience grounded in and emanating from place, a shared idea inseparable from the people in that place and from the way of life it enabled. In the case of former colonials such a conceptualization of homeland is undoubtedly ambiguous. Although homeland is never *just* a geographically describable and determinable place, it is still situated and localized, in this case significantly within a territory over which other people make rightful claims. While the white colonials might have decisively made themselves at home in Rhodesia, the colonial politics of segregation excluded Africans from their ancestral lands, their 'places of

belonging'. Thus, "the problem with Rhodesia" is not only that it does not exist anymore, but that even when it existed, its legitimacy as homeland for the whites could be justifiably contested politically and morally. This double dilemma of sensing a belonging to a place that does not exist anymore, and realizing that the belonging is fraught with disquiet and ambiguity in the first place, was very rarely explicitly articulated as such. Yet, throbbing as a mute presence in the background, this underlying colonial enigma seemed to perpetuate an on-going obsession with the past. It called for continuous affirmation and reaffirmation in the ex-Rhodesian self-reflective understanding of belonging, as exemplified and expressed in the two quotations mentioned here.

The structure of this thesis is as follows. Part I operates as a historical contextualization of the ex-Rhodesian community and as an opening to the sections that follow. I trace the colonial history of Rhodesia very quickly, concentrating on the arrival of the pioneers and the leaving of white Rhodesians at independence. These two periods of time—the beginning and the end of colonial Rhodesia—are constantly and actively talked about; they operate at the nucleus of the community's interpretations of their history.

In Part II, I focus on the processes of symbolic investment that go into understanding place and landscape in Rhodesia (and Zimbabwe) and ask how the once dwelled-in places, iconic landscapes and experiences within places are reminisced about from a spatial and temporal distance. I show how places and their stories operate as mnemonic devices to recall a shared history and to act as moral guides. In Part III, I examine how home—both as a tangible and mundanely organized sphere of everyday lives and as an idea of belonging—is culturally configured, and analyze whether and how homes travel in diaspora. I examine how the past is carried in things, furniture and artifacts, from home, which when reassembled and displayed in the diaspora settings have the ability to metonymically call forth and act as physical reminders of the past wholes of which they once were part, thereby concretizing continuity in spite of diasporic mobility. In addition to such metonymic objects I analyze the displays of memorabilia artifacts, which I have called 'Rhodesian altars'. Compiled into displays, they form a visual memory genre well suited to social circulation and are essential in creating a sense of belonging in the diaspora community.

The final ethnographic section concentrates on commemorative practices. By focusing firstly on the organization of food events by the Rhodesian Association in South Africa and secondly, on the celebration of a centenary of Rhodesia in 1990—I analyze how the diaspora community is constituted, reproduced and transformed by processes of remembering together, through shared social events and through stories they tell about themselves.

I had initially set out to do a very different study. My original idea was to do fieldwork in Zimbabwe and study the contemporary white senses of land and landscape (in a situation where the land question was beginning to heat up) and compare that to my material from Kenya, where I had previously done fieldwork among postcolonial whites. But as anthropologists we know that our original plans seldom materialize. I sent my application for a research permit to Zimbabwe and was given a visiting researcher status at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare. However, the research permit just did not seem to materialize as my application probably sat (and still sits) on a pile in the President's office. Also the political situation in Zimbabwe seemed to be getting worse by the day and that fact compelled me to reconsider whether I could take my family along to the white farms I

intended to study. It got to the stage where I had to do something and go somewhere, since my funding was running out. I was vaguely beginning to consider other possible field sites, when one South African scholar suggested that I would begin my research with the former Rhodesians in South Africa, perhaps comparing the conceptions and ideas of the ones who stayed on in Zimbabwe and the ones that emigrated after independence. So we packed up and left to South Africa to wait for the Zimbabwean research permit to come through. It never did. Eventually I ended up staying in South Africa for nine months and visiting Zimbabwe for just over a week and this became a study of a diaspora community.

This meant that I had to quite quickly adjust myself to a new research situation. Methodologically it meant that I had to rely much more on interviews than I would have preferred to. I had especially wanted to pursue a phenomenological approach to the understanding of meanings of place and landscape. I had wanted to focus on how people are involved with the places they speak about; what people *do* rather than just what they say. It also meant that rather than focus on present activities, my data would consist of memories. I have tried to overcome this reliance on memory narratives, which is what my data largely consists of, and stress that despite the incessant *discussion* of 'our past', the past is present not only through talk. I have sought to examine other spheres of remembering together, which have more to do with being within the past, of embodying the past, rather than just talking about it. So, although memories need to be articulated for them to be social, the articulation need not be realized only in language.

Before I finish this lectio, let me give you one example where I examine how social remembering is not only talk. In the last section of this dissertation I analyze a particular, social event—the celebration of a “Centenary of Rhodesia”. A centenary, I might add, that was celebrated ten years *after* Rhodesia ceased to exist in 1980. In September 1990 more than a thousand ex-Rhodesians in South Africa gathered together to commemorate the centenary of the arrival of the Pioneer Column at Fort Salisbury and the founding of Rhodesia. A temporary pilgrimage site was constructed at a recreational resort, Tshipise, near the Zimbabwean border for a week of commemorative celebrations. The organizers aimed at “recreating a little bit of Rhodesia in South Africa” (Duff 1998: 17), and the site was re-named *Rhodesianaland*, an imaginary land of commemoration. There was a large “Welcome to Rhodesianaland” sign at the entrance, and the green and white Rhodesian flag waved alongside the pre 1994-South African one to welcome the visitors. On arrival, the “residents” passed through “Immigration and Customs”, where they received a Rhodesianaland passport. The roads and walkways of the resort were renamed with Rhodesian place names: Jameson Avenue, Pioneer Street, Lobengula Way and Cecil Square. True to the idea of a nation, a newspaper, *Rhodesianaland Herald*, was also published and delivered early each morning (Morgan 1991: 16; The Settler 1991: 23).

The key event during the week of festivities was a re-enactment of the arrival of the Pioneer Column at Fort Salisbury. The ceremony was “reproduced” as carefully as possible following the many existing historical accounts about the raising of the Union Jack in 1890. The key figures who took part in the original ceremony were represented by men dressed up in period uniforms. The spectators, some of whom were also dressed in Victorian costumes, were in part of the parade. Led by the Column commander, the key figures strode through the dry white grass and took their positions in front of the flag staff. After a prayer, the bugler sounded the Royal Salute, during which the flag was slowly raised. A

twenty-one-gun salute was fired to signify the birth of a new country, akin to the birth of a Royal Prince. The gun-salute, as one commentator wrote, “echoed off the nearby *kopje*, just as the sound 100 years ago would have echoed off nearby Salisbury Kopje” (Morgan 1991: 16). The spectators then joined together in three cheers for Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, and were “so caught up in the historical significance of the moment, they spontaneously rose to their feet” (16).

The celebration of the centenary can be considered as a repetition of key themes central in the pioneer narrative of conquest, of marking and making a new place. Significantly the re-enactment of the founding moment involved the fabulation of an empty land. I have discussed how the formation of the pioneer origin story involved the shifting of natural features, as well as any traces of human involvement, in the landscape, to the background. It entailed the narrative creation of a blank space in which the core action—“the opening up of the country”—could be played out. In the centenary re-enactment, the participants created an ‘empty space’ out of Tshipise. The virtually total absence of black people as significant actors in the centenary events re-enforced the moral core of the origin myth. The re-enactment was, therefore, about the reproduction of a myth underlying the whole colonial endeavor.

The expressed objective in the ritual celebration was the creation of a specific ceremonial site in which people could come together to recall and reflect upon their common past—to uphold that past by retelling the community’s master narrative. But, what I argue here, is that the emotional and evocative power of commemoration does not rest solely upon verbal means such as reminiscing or the canonical re-telling of the origin story. As a memory site, Rhodesianaland was packed with signs and traces of Rhodesia evoked memories in the perceivers meandering in their midst. Playing with names and stressing similarities in the natural milieu served as reminders of past places in the homeland. Those places were transported into Rhodesianaland by imaginative re-presentation in which the past was fashioned vivaciously to reappear. Returning to the experience of the ancestors through ritual performance was at the core of the ceremony. Individual bodily involvement in the re-enactment made the occasion compelling and moving and thus memorable. Re-living that experience through ceremony united the participants in a profound sense, for it spelled out their shared origin, and thus their constitution as a community in the past as well as in the present. By examining diverse ways of remembering integral to the commemorative event I have wanted to emphasize how meanings in compelling and sensuous ways emerge in specific memory practices. Such practices implicitly carry forward phenomenal experiences of the past places; it is through such practices that people not only actively re-enter the no-longer lived worlds, but those worlds re-enter the present practices of people.

By emphasizing and ethnographically examining concrete ways in which the past is held close—such as material displays, social food practices and ritual re-enactments—this work offers insight to the study of social memory. In addition, since there have been relatively few anthropological studies on settler communities, this study, I feel, offers an important contribution to our understanding of colonialism and post-colonialism as particular, culturally distinctive lived realities in Southern Africa.

RESEARCH REPORTS

NOTES

¹ Uusihakala, Katja 2008. Memory Meanders: Place, home and commemoration in an ex-Rhodesian diaspora community. *Research Series in Anthropology*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

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