REMINISCENCE TOURS AND PILGRIMAGE SITES
COMMEMORATIVE JOURNEYS IN EX-RHODESIAN DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

The concept of pilgrimage has recently received fresh attention in the social sciences. One reason for this stems from the fact that migrations, diasporas and similar movements are considered constitutive to the conceptualization and understanding of various contemporary social and cultural processes. The notion of pilgrimage seems to capture both the physical as well as the emotional aspects that such movements contain. This essay examines how members of the ex-Rhodesian diaspora community in South Africa 'travel back' to the past in the present in two ways: firstly by concrete heritage journeys to Zimbabwe on reminiscence tours and secondly by constructing memory sites and commemorative venues, where the journeys back to the 'homeland' take the form of imaginative travel. It considers how, and if, such constructions and movements related to commemorative practices may be thought of as pilgrimage given that the people themselves perceive, describe and frame such journeys in these terms.

Keywords: Pilgrimage, commemorative journeys, social memory, diaspora, ex-Rhodesians in South Africa

Introduction

> When pilgrims gather to pay homage to their forebears it's usually at the fountainhead of their race. But what to do if your country has been lost? If you are a Rhodie, you simply create another. (Blades 1990)

The above quotation was the caption to a full page report in a South African newspaper, *The Sunday Times*, which covered the events of a commemorative ceremony that white former Rhodesian emigrants to South Africa organized in September 1990. The objective of the jubilation was to commemorate the centenary of the foundation of Rhodesia, ten years *after* the colonial state of Rhodesia had ceased to exist and Zimbabwe had become independent. The event brought more than a thousand ex-Rhodesians to a South African recreational resort which had been rebuilt by the organizers into a temporary pilgrimage site: an imaginary memoryland re-named *Rhodesianaland*. In my research on this diaspora community, I have asked how these former colonials, in more or less self-initiated exile,[1]

hold on to Rhodesia as their homeland, examining how Rhodesia becomes meaningful in various social memory practices: in diasporic homes, in material displays and in public commemorative events.

In this paper I examine how members of the community regularly 'go back' to the past in the present: firstly by means of concrete return trips to Zimbabwe on reminiscence tours, and secondly by intentional construction of memory sites and commemorative venues, of which *Rhodesianaland* is a prime example. I consider how, and if, constructions, travels and movements related to such commemorative practices may be thought of as pilgrimages, as the above caption, for example, phrases and frames it. Both the composing of memory sites, as well as heritage journeys back to Zimbabwe, are occasions intentionally designed and organized in order to enable the participants to look back and to remember together, 'to make a pilgrimage', as the Rhodesians themselves often say.

The Turners' concept of pilgrimage and its critique

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the concept of pilgrimage in the social sciences. One reason for this is that various forms of mobility—such as migrations, diasporas and other kinds of embodied or metaphorical movements—have begun to be seen as fundamental to the conceptualization and understanding of current social processes and culture formations (Coleman and Eade 2004: 5). The notion of pilgrimage seems to capture both the physical and the emotional aspects that such movements embrace. In the anthropological debates on pilgrimage, Victor and Edith Turner's seminal work *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978) is still the most influential text and often the prevailing point of departure (Coleman 2002: 356; Coleman and Eade 2004: 3; *Etnofoor* 2007: 3). In the Turners' analysis (1978: 34), pilgrimage is examined as sharing some of the characteristics of liminality in rites of passage (as modeled by Arnold van Gennep 1909).[2] Such features include, for example, 'release from mundane structure; homogenization of status; simplicity of dress and behavior; *communitas*; (…) healing and renewal; ordeal; reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values' and, significantly, 'movement from a mundane center to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual, an *axis mundi* of his faith' (Turner and Turner 1978: 253–254). Although the Turners' own focus was on Christian pilgrimage, they open up the concept for other types of intentional or purposeful journeying. The Turners write:

> Both for individuals and for groups, some form of deliberate travel to a far place intimately associated with the deepest, most cherished, axiomatic values of the traveler seems to be a 'cultural universal'. If it is not religiously sanctioned, counseled, or encouraged, it will take other forms. (1978: 241)[3]

The Turners' concept of pilgrimage has also had its critics; Simon Coleman and John Eade, for example, are critical of the attention they pay to the pilgrimage sites, rather than to the physical movement involved in pilgrimage activity (2004: 1). They also question the implication in the Turnerian concept that pilgrimage is an extraordinary event which is isolated from wider political and cultural processes (ibid.: 3–4).[4] This

is also at the core of John Eade and Michael Sallnow's vigorous criticism of Turners' *communitas* paradigm, which, they argue, fails to acknowledge the mundane conflicts and contests that pilgrimage necessarily inheres. Eade and Sallnow argue instead that pilgrimage operates as 'an arena for competing religious and secular discourses' (1991: 2), reinforcing rather than abolishing distinctions between the participants. However, the Turners' *communitas* paradigm and the contestation paradigm of Eade and Sallnow also have some, perhaps unexpected, similarities as Simon Coleman's analysis reveals: 'Both the Turners and Eade and Sallnow create sociological vacuums in order then to fill these gaps with their respective views of what pilgrimage must necessarily be about' (2002: 361). For the Turners this empty space is produced by removing mundane identities and hierarchical roles, thereby producing egalitarian fellowship. Eade and Sallnow, on their part, see the pilgrimage shrine as a religious void open to, and potentially reinforcing, expressions of everyday conflicts and assumptions (Coleman 2002: 361).

The above theoretical review of the pilgrimage notion is of necessity very brief and the concept deserves fuller attention elsewhere. However, there are two things I want to accentuate here that are relevant for my discussion in this paper. Firstly, pilgrimage is a concept used by many people *themselves* to give meaning to their various activities of movement which they conceive as somehow sacred. What then are these people saying by perceiving, describing and framing certain kinds of commemorative journeys in terms of a pilgrimage? Secondly, despite the criticism, I think that there is a strong sense of the Turnerian idea of pilgrimage—with its stress on liminality, *communitas* and transformation—in the ex-Rhodesians' own reflections of what their journeys might mean, something which is worth exploring.

Case 1: Reminiscence tours

In the late 1990s the Flame Lily Foundation (the ex-Rhodesian association in South Africa) organized two simultaneous fifteen-day tours back to Zimbabwe: A Reminiscence Tour and a Rediscovery Tour. The first was intended for those born before 1965, the year of the Rhodesian Unilateral Declaration for Independence: 'You will travel together with others who lived through the good and the difficult times with you. You will be able to reminisce and share your past experiences with one another as you travel around the country' (Flame Lily Foundation 1996: 2). The second tour, as the brochure explains, was intended for the younger generation, those born after 1965, who left the country in their teens in the early 1980s.

> [W]ith the war going on in the rural areas from the mid-seventies, many of you will not have had the chance to travel into the expansive countryside or experience bush life. We are offering you a unique opportunity to visit the land of your birth, not so much as a tourist but as one rediscovering their roots (…) and to visit historical places that form part of your heritage. You will also get a chance to visit the magnificent Victoria Falls and Matopos as well as other places on the tourist route. But we don't want you to feel like a tourist. We would prefer you to enjoy the emotion of 'going home' (…) You will also establish new friendships among young people like yourself—people who share the same roots. (ibid.: 2)

Paul Basu, in his research on Scottish diaspora (2001, 2004, 2005) calls such journeys back to ancestral lands 'roots-tourism', where the travelers desire to 'return home' to get in touch with their pasts. Heritage tours to 'Mother Africa' addressed to African descendants in diaspora, mainly in the United States, is another interesting example of roots-tourism. Edward M. Bruner, for example, examines African Americans travelling to Ghana 'in quest for their roots' and touring sites on the slave route from which their ancestors might have begun their journeys to the New World (1996: 291).[5] For such travelers, as in the above Reminiscence/Rediscovery Tour example, it is significant to make a distinction between ordinary tourists and themselves as pilgrims: there is seriousness and purpose in their travel. According to Erik Cohen (1992: 37), pilgrims and tourists can be distinguished in terms of the direction of the journey undertaken: the pilgrim is oriented towards a sociocultural center (a place or state which is considered to embody intrinsic values), while the traveler moves in the other direction. Implicit in the pilgrim's project is the, conviction that by physically returning to the place of the ancestors, one is also solidly linked-up with the past.

As roots-tourists leave behind the mundane world of their diasporic homes and enter the non-ordinary sphere of the ancestral homeland, they appear, Basu writes, to enter a liminal zone, and many return to their ordinary homes significantly changed (2004: 168). This insight resonates with the narratives many of my informants produced when reflecting on why they keep returning to Zimbabwe, and casts light on Basu's question (2004: 169) about secular pilgrimage: 'If they do not seek God, to what ideals incarnate are these contemporary spiritual odysseys directed?' David, one of my informants who had recently been back to the (ruins of the) farm in Eastern Zimbabwe where he grew up, offers one explanation:

> The landscape (…) just has a very powerful spiritual feel about it. I just have this emotional connection with it. I don't really feel down here [in South Africa] with the land. I seem to be drawn back. Inyanga, it's a very sort of mystical area (…) I seem to be going back more and more often. I think it's the pull of the land (…) My sisters go back with me too. We always go back. We will make this *pilgrimage* back to the farm. They also feel the very strong pull (…) But as I said, in more recent years I find myself harking back more and more, for, I don't know, for Zimbabwe (…) Like my life's gone a circle in a way, and I'm going back to the beginning.

David connects his longing for the land, and his will to make a pilgrimage, to the spiritual feel of the landscape with which he senses an intense emotional connection. Looking over the random ruins of his childhood home, 'the scant wreckage of our past', he first feels 'lost and disoriented, struggling between displaced worlds and identities, the new me and the old'.[6] However, in the end, he finds intense comfort in the permanence and immovability of the mountains, for, as he repeatedly affirmed, the 'mountains had lost none of their presence'. David returns back to his mundane life with a sense of some transformation, feeling that he has somehow returned to the beginning, completing the circle. Thus, despite the secular nature of David's pilgrimage, his is also a journey—a homecoming—invested with profoundly spiritual and transformative elements (see also Basu 2004: 168; Dubisch 2004: 129).

Case 2: Rhodesianaland as a pilgrimage site

Rhodesianaland was a temporary pilgrimage site, constructed at a recreational resort, Tshipise, in the Limpopo Province (then Northern Transvaal) in South Africa near the Zimbabwean border. The aim of the commemorative week organized at the site was to celebrate the centenary of the arrival of Cecil John Rhodes' Pioneer Column at Fort Salisbury on the 12th of September 1890 and hence, the founding of colonial Rhodesia. The organizers' attempt was to transform Tshipise into a site secluded and withdrawn from the 'real world', where the celebration of the colonial occupation would, in many respects, have been dubious and unjustifiable.

The organization of the commemorative week involved a great deal of both planned and spontaneous invention and improvisation. Most tangibly this concerned the transformation of Tshipise into an imaginary memoryland by creative placemaking; for example by appealing to the familiarity of the landscape, and by re-naming the resort's walkways with Rhodesian street names, thereby considering ways in which the past has been objectified in a reconstructed heritage landscape. The commemorative week culminated in a ceremonial re-enactment of the arrival of the Pioneer column and the raising of the Union Jack at Fort Salisbury as a sign of the attachment of the territory to the British Empire. The arrival of the Pioneer Column can be seen as an origin narrative and a founding story of the settler community not only told and re-told, but also re-enacted in various diaspora locations. (For more comprehensive discussion of the event, see Uusihakala 2008a, 2008b.)

Here I want to focus attention briefly on what the event *meant* for the participants: the pilgrims. Despite the inventive, make-believe character of the commemorative site and of the events that took place, for the participants, experiencing *Rhodesianaland* seemed to imply a return. The week of celebration was described as a nostalgia-journey during which the participants sensed that they had traveled back to their homeland and, furthermore, an experience they felt they could share with other people who had taken part.[7]

Two of my informants, Marjorie and Susan[8] had participated in the centenary commemoration at Rhodesianaland and had kept diaries during the week, which they kindly let me read. Both diaries also included photographs, newspaper clippings and other associated papers. In their diaries, in addition to emphasizing a sense of physically 'being home', it was particularly the aspect of mutual sharing that Marjorie and Susan stressed: 'the security in the familiar warmth and easy friendship that was almost tangible', as one newspaper article about the commemoration phrased it (Blades 1990). Again and again, diarists and reporters note how members of the commemorative community seemed to do the same things simultaneously. For example, at a concert held during the week, a famous Rhodesian war-time entertainer performed the unofficial national anthem, and Marjorie, one of my informants, reflects: 'When he sang *Rhodesians Never Die*, everyone, *as one body*, rose to their feet and sang along with him.' Another example of embodied engagement and the sentiments it aroused occurred during a light-hearted attempt to make it into the Guinness Book of Records by packing a record number of people per square meter into a swimming pool. Susan notes in her diary:

> All this took place amidst much laughter and camaraderie—in fact the whole week had been like that. Everyone felt as if they belonged to this 'great big happy family'. It wasn't necessary to be introduced; we were and still are all Rhodesians. I find it very difficult to find words to express the feeling, the atmosphere etc. It was a once in a lifetime experience, which I, for one, will treasure always. (Susan, September 15th, 1990)

> We left Tshipise (…) full of warmth not caused by the sun but by the feelings of friendship, secure in the knowledge that Rhodesia will never be forgotten. (Susan, September 16th, 1990)

The shared laughter, the camaraderie, and the intense corporeal co-presence with strangers—with people un-introduced and thus un-hierarchically positioned, yet people with whom there is a sense of kin-like connection—reflect the Turners' notion of *communitas* as a liminal phenomenon. It combines qualities of 'sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship (…) it is spontaneous, immediate and concrete (…), it does not merge identities, it liberates them from conformity to general norms, though this is necessarily a transient condition (…) it has something magical about it' (Turner and Turner 1978, 250–251).

I have suggested that during the Centenary, the mnemonic power and emotional affectivity of commemoration rested significantly on individual bodily participation in ritual acts. Similarly emotionally evocative were the more mundane events and episodes impelling people to act as 'one body', bringing about a sense of *communitas*. Thus, *Rhodesianaland* as a kind of pilgrimage was a creative invention enabling the participants to re-establish a connection to the homeland as well as to other members in the diaspora, forming a community of memory. Susan expresses this sense of belonging to the community by stating that she feels secure that Rhodesia will not be forgotten, that others will care as much as she does about up-holding the past and about sharing common experiences. In such sharing, in reminiscing, the past is made to live again by evoking it together with others, the memories of one person calling to mind the memories of others (Ricoeur 2004: 38). Reminiscing as a type of remembering, Edward Casey writes, is a matter of 'actively re-entering the no longer living worlds of that which is irrevocably past' (1987: 107). This type of remembering prevails in the ex-Rhodesian practices of pilgrimage, where people are intent on going back to past places—places considered to embody their most fundamental values—in the present.

Both cases I introduced in this paper are about memory journeys, for the places to which the pilgrimages are directed only really exist in the past. Reminiscence tours and root-travels, as well as the temporary pilgrimage site of *Rhodesianaland*, all involve physical, corporeal travel as well as imaginative travel in memoryland. Ex-Rhodesian pilgrimage then could be considered as a moving kind of a way to remember. Significantly these heritage pilgrimages are about remembering together. They are not so much spiritual or metaphorical journeys of discovering oneself as they are journeys of coming home to one's place together with one's people, with people 'who share the same roots'.

NOTES

[1] An estimated 100,000 whites emigrated from Zimbabwe during the first years of independence. It is estimated that during the 1980s about half of these settler emigrants landed in South Africa, a third emigrated to the UK and the rest mostly to Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada (Eaton 1996; CSO Migration and Tourists Statistics, ref. Tevera and Zinyama 2002: 13).

[2] The Turners emphasize, however, that since pilgrimage is a voluntary action and not an obligatory social mechanism, which marks the transition from one status to another in the mundane sphere, pilgrimage can be best thought of as a *liminoid* phenomenon, rather than liminal in a stricter van Gennepian sense (Turner and Turner 1978: 35).

[3] The Turners continue to elaborate what such other forms might be. In the United States, for example, these journeys include travels to battle sites or national parks and forests, the latter, the Turners write, 'partly to renew love of land and country, as expressed by "secular psalms" like "America the Beautiful."' There are numerous examples of how the concept of pilgrimage has been applied to the analysis of secular, purposeful journeying. Juan Eduardo Campo (1988), for example, analyzes American pilgrimage landscapes, such as Gettysburg, Mount Rushmore and Graceland. Nick Couldry (2007) introduces the concept of 'media pilgrimage' to explore journeys to sites associated with media narratives, film locations or the lives of particular celebrities. Jill Dubich (2004) examines an annual motorcycle pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington DC, known as Run for the Wall.

[4] In his research on the Christian pilgrimage site of Walshingham, Simon Coleman is particularly interested in the experience of pilgrims who return to the site year by year. Thus, instead of being considered exceptional, pilgrimage is analyzed as a recurring event. And, instead of being separated from the everyday lives of the participants, pilgrimage can be seen as an integral and expected part of the pilgrims' annual religious activities and routines (2002: 364, 2010).

[5] See also Katharina Schramm's (2004) discussion on similar 'homecoming' journeys to Ghana. She notes that in tourism advertising Ghana addresses African Americans as 'brothers and sisters—long-lost relatives who are welcomed back to the family' (2004: 134).

[6] This is a direct quotation from a newspaper article David had written about his journey back home.

[7] Nadia Seremetakis (1994: 4) explores the etymological origins of the notion of nostalgia: 'Nostó means I return, I travel back to homeland (…) Alghó means I feel pain, I ache for (…) Thus nostalgia is the desire or longing with burning pain to journey. It also evokes the sensory dimensions of memory in exile and estrangement.' This idea of *longing* to journey seems to catch something essential in the *Rhdodesianaland* pilgrimage.

[8] Marjorie and Susan were both in their late forties during the Centenary celebrations. Marjorie had emigrated with her husband and children from Zimbabwe to South Africa in 1981. Susan and her family had immigrated a few years later, in 1983.

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