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## **“I Am as Fit as a Fiddle”: Selling the Mugabe Brand in the 2013 Elections in Zimbabwe**

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*Robert Mugabe’s dominance in Zimbabwean politics post-independence has led critics to argue that politics in Zimbabwe is personal and patriarchal. Mugabe’s ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU PF)’s alleged use of violence, violent discourse, and other unorthodox power retention strategies have been used to justify claims that Zimbabwean politics is the politics of chaos. In this post-colonial (mis)reading of African politics, ZANU PF and Mugabe discourses have been labeled nativism, patriotic history, Mugabeism, grotesque nationalism, etc. However, these studies have either been uncritically pro- or anti-ZANU PF (Moore 2012). The paper, through an analysis of ZANU PF’s rebranding of Mugabe in the July 2013 elections, suggests a new multitheoretical approach to overcome this uncritical reading of Zimbabwe’s political branding practices. The suggested approach utilizes insights gleaned from sign theory, political branding and/or advertising theory, post-colonial theory, and decolonial theory.*

*KEYWORDS Election campaigns, Mugabe, Political advertising, Political branding, ZANU PF, Zimbabwe*

Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) are perhaps the most widely studied phenomena in Zimbabwe post-2000 (Chibuwe 2016). This is due to their ability to, through allegedly unorthodox strategies, cling to power in the face of western-imposed economic sanctions and stiff opposition from the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), civil society, and western governments. It is argued that ZANU

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PF uses violence, intimidation, constituency gerrymandering, vote rigging, and enactment of restrictive laws, among others, to retain power (see Scholz 2004; Masunungure 2004, 2009; Kriger 2005; Magaisa 2008; ZESN 2008; CCJP 2009; Muzondidya 2009). However, located at the extreme opposite end of the spectrum is a scholarship that celebrates ZANU PF and Mugabe (see Rwafa 2014). To overcome this divide, this paper suggests a multitheoretical approach in the study of ZANU PF election discourses that utilizes insights gleaned from western theory (specifically political advertising and/or branding theory and sign theory), post-colonial theory, and decolonial theory. The intention is to show how such an approach may, as suggested by Chibuwe (2013, 2016), yield newer insights into political communication practice in Zimbabwe. They are insights that may, in significant ways, undercut the celebratory scholarship of pro-regime critics (cf. Moore 2012; Rwafa 2014): western theory and post-colonial theory's abyssal reduction of ZANU PF discourse to "typifying adjectives" such as Mugabeism, nativism, grotesque nationalism, patriotic history, nationalist historiography, bankrupt nationalism, and character assassination (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003a, 2009b, 2011; Ranger 2004; Kebonang 2012). The approach suggested here is an attempt to find Appiah's (1997) elusive middle-of-the-road approach between the western and the indigenous.

The paper explores, through a multitheoretical approach, how ZANU PF advertisements for the July 2013 elections rebranded Mugabe. The question that this paper seeks to answer is how ZANU PF rebranded Mugabe in the face of opposition attacks on his age and health. The elections were supposed to bring to an end the Government of National Unity (GNU) that was inaugurated in February 2009 following the disputed March 29, 2008, presidential election and the discredited June 27, 2008, presidential runoff election. The presidential runoff election was marred by violence forcing MDC's Morgan Tsvangirai to withdraw (Masunungure 2009). The election outcome was rejected by the international community including the Southern African Development Committee (SADC). This forced ZANU PF to agree to a power-sharing deal with the opposition. At the time of the July 2013 election, Robert Mugabe, the incumbent and the ZANU PF presidential candidate, was 89 years old. His critics argued that he was too old and frail to continue leading the country (see Mukwazhi 2013; Maravanyika 2014). In response, Mugabe defiantly declared that, "I am as fit as a fiddle."

## THE MUGABE BRAND POST-2000

Mugabe has been the face of ZANU PF and Zimbabwean politics since independence in 1980. He is usually branded in ZANU PF discourse as "*baba*" (father), a revolutionary, a benefactor, and a godly being (see Chitando 2005; Magaisa 2008). The Mugabe brand is, like any other brand, made up of fragments of information (see Smith 2009), such that a picture

of Mugabe or the sound image “Mugabe” may trigger memories of a “father” (*baba*), a revolutionary, a godly benefactor (see Chitando 2005; Magaisa 2008), or a dictator (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003; Meredith 2011). Mugabe’s omnipresence and centrality to the staying power of the ZANU PF brand has led to the argument that politics in Zimbabwe is personal (Kebonang 2012) and patriarchal. The Mugabe “... brand is one of the key assets of [the] organization” ZANU PF (Smith 2009, 210). Mugabe, as party leader, is the core and unifying factor of the political product: party, candidate, and policy (Downer 2013, 5). It is thus arguable that any damage to the Mugabe brand will also negatively affect the party’s electoral fortunes (see Downer 2013).

Post-2000 ZANU PF branded Mugabe a revolutionary, a pan-Africanist, and a patriot while negatively branding Tsvangirai a sellout and stooge of whites (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003; Mazango 2005). Demonizing “... its key opponents as reactionary, subversive, and ... stooges of whites and/or foreigners” is a tactic ZANU PF has utilized since 1980 (Kriger 2005, 2). In contrast, the opposition post-2000 used Mugabe’s long stay in power and alleged dictatorial tendencies to dissuade Zimbabweans from voting for him (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003). On one hand, some critics labeled ZANU PF discourse as Mugabeism, patriotic history, nationalist historiography, character assassination, nativism, or grotesque nationalism (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003, 2009, 2011; Ranger 2004). But on the other hand, others praised Mugabe and ZANU PF as revolutionaries (see Rwafa 2014).

The above readings are simplistic, as they are merely polarized into pro-regime and anti-regime interpretations (see Moore 2012). For example, the western and post-colonial readings of the omnipresence of discourses about Mugabe as Mugabeism (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003) or as evidence of personalization of politics in Zimbabwe (Kebonang 2012) are oblivious to the fact that in political marketing, the party leader is the core and unifying factor of the political product (Smith 2009, 210; Downer 2013, 5; Kolovos and Harris n.d., 3). Acknowledging this truth is necessary for a fuller understanding of ZANU PF discourse. This paper’s intention is not to celebrate Mugabe or castigate western theory but to show that, used independently of each other, western theory, decolonial theory, and post-colonial theory inhibit a fuller understanding of Zimbabwean political branding practices.

## THE SUGGESTED MULTITHEORETICAL APPROACH

This paper, through an analysis of the ways through which ZANU PF rebranded the aged Mugabe in the July 2013 electoral campaign, argues that if we are to gain a deeper understanding of African political branding practices, there is a need to adopt a multitheoretical approach that acknowledges that both the South and the West were tainted by the colonial encounter (Zezeza 2006); the emergence of the local does not mean the total disappearance of

the colonial (Nakata et al. 2012); and it is simplistic to view the post-colonial as a mere mirror image of the colonial, as if no changes have taken place in Africa since the end of colonization (cf. Mafeje 1971; Ahluwalia 2001). This calls for the abandonment of post-colonial theorists' tendency to view the post-colonial as an extension or reflection of the colonial (see Ahluwalia 2001; Moyo 2004; Scholz 2004; Tekere 2006). This essentialism is a result of post-colonial theory's reinscription of that which it seeks to undo: western theory's abyssal (mis) reading of African politics as incomprehensible, irrational, and beyond the pale of humanity (see Houtondji 1997; Ahluwalia 2001; Mbembe 2001; Zeleza 2006). The post-colonial reinscription of the colonial has inevitably led to the argument that the change from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe was "change without change" (Moyo 2004), as it was characterized by continuity rather than change (Masunungure 2004; Tekere 2006; Chimedza 2008). The liberation struggle, it is argued, was a rebellion and not a revolution (Scholz 2004).

The above characterization of post-colonial politics as a mirror image or "simulacrum" of the colonial state (Ahluwalia 2001, 56; Kebonang 2012, 32) is misreading. It is arguable that if one were to study ZANU PF's rebranding of Mugabe from a post-colonial position, she or he will inevitably reach the conclusion that politics in Zimbabwe is personal and patriarchal. However, characterizing Africa as an extension of the colonial state creates the illusion that the continent is static and no change has taken place in Africa since colonialism (Fanon 1963; Mafeje 1971; Mamdani 1996; Scholz 2004). But viewing the West as the source of the South's problems leads to scholars praising anything and everything from the south. For example, Rwafa (2014) uncritically labels Zimbabweans opposed to ZANU PF as misguided stooges that pander to the whims of the West despite the genuineness of some of their concerns.

To overcome the divide, the paper argues for a multitheoretical approach that does not treat western theory, post-colonial theory, and theory from the South as mutually exclusive. This is because treating the theories as mutually exclusive has the effect of obfuscating the reality that both the colonized and the colonizers were tainted by the colonial encounter (see Zeleza 2006). In order to not be as simplistic as the abyssal post-colonial and western scholarship and the celebratory Afrocentric (mis)readings of the African sign system (see Houtondji 1997; Ahluwalia 2001; Mbembe 2001; Zeleza 2006; Appiah 1997; Nakata et al. 2012), I utilize insights gleaned from sign theory, political advertising and/or branding theory, post-colonial theory, and decolonial theory. The intention is to fill the glaring gap in literature where the tendency has largely been to ground the study of ZANU PF electoral discourse in either the abyssal western and post-colonial theory (see Chibuwe 2013, 2016) or the simplistic "decolonial" pro-regime scholarship (cf. Appiah 2010; Moore 2012; Rwafa 2014). This approach, it is hoped, will shed newer insights on the scantily available literature on political branding practices in a post-colonial African setting. The study is also an invaluable addition to the largely American- and European-dominated broader study of political marketing.

This paper argues that understanding that the sign is murderous and/or discriminatory (Baudrillard, Lovitt, and Klopsch 1976; Baudrillard 1981, 1983) and operates through difference (Descombes 1994) is central to a fuller understanding of ZANU PF's rebranding of Mugabe. Difference or discrimination is central to the process of (political) branding, the essence of which is creation of maximum possible positive differentiation over the competition (Jain n.d.) to gain votes (Dickson and Ginter 1987; Butler, Collins, and Fellenz 2007; Downer 2013). The signs attached to the politicians are intended to gain voter appeal at the expense of the opposition (see Irvine 1989; Butler et al. 2007; Goldman n.d.; Jain n.d.). It is arguable that in political marketing the discriminatory nature of the sign manifests through attack advertising or comparative advertising (Jasperson and Fan 2002; Meirick 2002; Pinkleton, Um, and Austin 2002; Waldahl 2005; Lilleker 2006; Kaid 2012), the intention of which is to question the credibility of the opponent.

In this paper, I argue that there is a need for a reading that is neither abysal nor celebratory, a reading that locates African political communication practices in local, "global and historical perspectives" (Ahluwalia 2001, 4; Zeleza 2006, 1; Mamdani 2009, 3; Nakata et al. 2012). It is a reading that has the potential to significantly undercut the characterization of Zimbabwean politics as anarchical (Kebonang 2012); as a Hobbesian state of nature in which life can be nasty, short, and brutish (Reeler 2004; Masunungure 2009); and as violent and despotic (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003; Masunungure 2004; Scholz 2004; Tekere 2006). Locating African political communication practices in both the local and global contexts enables one to borrow insights from western theory, post-colonial theory, and indigenous knowledge systems in the study of ZANU PF advertisements. Utilizing indigenous knowledge systems is significant because western theory treats non-western knowledge as the other (Houtondji 1997; Mbembe 2001). However, this paper acknowledges that assuming that the emergence of the local leads to the disappearance of the West is simplistic (Nakata et al. 2012). It also notes that some attempts at presenting decolonial theory or theory from the South have tended to simplistically praise anything and everything from the South (Nakata et al. 2012) so that they have merely presented theory from the South as the antithesis of western theory (Appiah 2010, 50). It is hoped that the approach that the paper suggests—an approach that is cognizant of the post-colony's realities: historical, global, local, traditional, and economic—will overcome the noted divide.

## METHOD

I gathered data through archival research, collecting all the mainstream Zimbabwean weekly and daily newspapers from July 21, 2013, the day that the first print advertisement appeared, to July 31, 2013 (see Murchison 2010).

I identified and purposively selected the ten ZANU PF advertisements that were placed in the privately owned *Daily News*, *Newsday*, *The Standard*, and *The Patriot* newspapers of July 21 to July 30, 2013. These were the advertisements that had the answers to my research questions (Krippendorf 2004, 119; see Tongco 2007, 147). The state-controlled print media did not carry any political advertisements during the campaign period.

I analyzed the advertisements using a combination of semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis to unravel ZANU PF's Mugabe rebranding strategies. It is indisputable that the study of advertisements and all texts is best tackled by sign theory (Stokes 2003; Metro-Roland 2011) and critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA, as Fairclough (2001, 121–122) notes, generally encompasses semiosis, that is, “all forms of meaning making—visual images, body language as well as language.” This is confirmed by Mazid's (2010, 434) observation that “a discursive-semiotic, multimodal version of CDA seems to be necessary in handling many modern and contemporary media texts ...” Combining the two to expose the ideological work that texts do and how power is used and dominance exerted, inequality and injustice enacted, initiated, confirmed, maintained, legitimated, concealed, reproduced, and transformed within specific economic, historic, and political contexts (Van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 1995; Clark and Ivanic 1997; Alvesson and Karreman 2000; Stokes 2003; Krippendorf 2004; Deacon et al. 2007; Mazid 2010) in Zimbabwe is useful. However, the CDA that I utilized is informal.

#### ZANU PF ADVERTISEMENTS IN JULY 2013: A SHORT DESCRIPTION

ZANU PF advertisements for the July 2013 elections sold the party, its virtues, its policies, and the presidential candidate Robert Mugabe with Mugabe as the key product. The picture of a younger-looking Mugabe appears in all ten ZANU PF advertisements. However, a bigger picture of a “younger” Mugabe appears on the left-hand side of the call to action in three of the ten advertisements. Three of the ten advertisements have two pictures each of President Robert Mugabe: one on the left-hand side of the call to action and another in the four- or five-column table (the column resembles a ballot paper) that appears at the bottom of the advertisements. Mugabe's name and picture appear in all the advertisements as part of the call to action “Vote Cde Robert Gabriel Mugabe for President. Vote ZANU PF.”

But his totem “gushungo” appears once in the “Gushungo 8” advertisement. The Great Zimbabwe monuments appear in all the advertisements as part of ZANU PF's emblem.

Mugabe also appears in some advertisements as part of the main product being sold. In these advertisements, his qualities as a presidential candidate are sold. For example, in an advertisement headlined “Chamisa's



secret Mugabe praise note,” which appeared both in the *Daily News* and *Newsday* on July 26, 2013, ZANU PF sells Mugabe’s greatness, special and agile golden mind, wisdom, and deftness “in dealing with matters of state.” The advertisement features a note allegedly written by then–MDC organizing secretary, parliamentary candidate, and then–minister of information and communication technologies in the GNU Nelson Chamisa. The note reads:

When greatness shall be measured, the man in the chair (referring to President Mugabe, who chairs cabinet) shall be one among a few. I am impressed by his wisdom and deftness in dealing with matters and affairs of the state. I wonder who, among the aspirants, possess even a [one-quarter] of what he possesses. He is a great man. A man of a golden mind, agile and special in many ways. Meetings are different with him. It explains why I have not attacked him for a long while. My bone is with ZANU PF now.

The advertisement included pictures of Chamisa and a picture of the note to buttress the claim that he authored it.

In another advertisement headlined “Gushungo 8” that appeared in *The Standard* of July 21–27 and *Newsday* of July 27, 2013, the Mugabe brand is used to sell youth. It is used to appeal to the youth by “giving Harare back to the youth.” The advertisement presents eight youthful ZANU PF parliamentary candidates who were to contest seats in the largely pro-MDC capital city Harare.

ZANU PF did not pay attention to its parliamentary, senatorial, and council candidates. Out of the ten ZANU PF advertisements, only the “Gushungo 8” advertisement mentioned parliamentary candidates. However, it only featured 8 out of 210 parliamentary candidates and did not mention any of its senatorial candidates. The emphasis was on youth, not on the individual parliamentary candidates.

ZANU PF also used football discourse with the slogan “*bhora musedhi-ibhola egedini*” (score the ball) and the sponsor identification notice “Team ZANU PF.” Mugabe was Team ZANU PF’s captain.

#### MUGABE: A YOUTH-LOVING, PHYSICALLY FIT, AND MENTALLY ALERT LEADER

The branding of Mugabe was used by ZANU PF to rebut the opposition’s claims that “Mugabe was too old.” The advertisements positively branded Mugabe as youth-loving, fit, mentally alert, and an expert in statecraft. For example, the “Chamisa’s secret Mugabe praise note” advertisement rebutted the “Mugabe is too old” discourse. The advertisement implied that Mugabe’s old age and longevity in power were the source of his expertise and wisdom. This is plausible considering that African moral philosophy associates old age with wisdom and expertise. ZANU PF does not deny that Mugabe is very old,



but it denies that he is unfit to rule by instead pointing out his mental state and wisdom. To validate its claim, ZANU PF used images of a younger-looking and physically fit Robert Mugabe in its advertisements. The use of pictures of a younger-looking Mugabe as well as Chamisa's picture and the note he allegedly wrote confirms Harris' (1996) observation that advertisers plunder the past for images, lift them from their contexts, purify them into signs, and attach them to new objects with new meanings. In this advertisement, the pictures and the note were lifted from their original contexts. Chamisa's picture and his note, if indeed he authored it, were never meant to be part of this advertisement. It is conceivable that the pictures—and indeed all pictures in the ZANU PF advertisements—were not taken with the intention to use them in political advertisements. The images that are turned into signs constitute what Baudrillard (1983, 1994) calls the signs of the real. These precede and outlive the real. The use of Chamisa's picture and the note he allegedly authored were arguably meant to create among opposition MDC supporters the impression that their leaders were not sincere in their criticism of Mugabe as they privately admired his wisdom and expertise in statecraft.

ZANU PF advertisements also branded Mugabe as youth-loving. For example, in the "Gushungo 8" that appeared in *The Standard* of July 21–27 and *Newsday* of July 27, 2013, Mugabe is used to appeal to the youth by "giving Harare back to the youth." The advertisement presents eight youthful ZANU PF candidates who were to contest seats in Harare, an area known to be largely pro-MDC-Tsvangirai (MDC-T). The youths have been criticized for lacking knowledge of ZANU PF's liberation history and have been labeled as lost since they are thought to be sympathetic to the opposition, allegedly due to their lack of revolutionary knowledge. This assumption led to the introduction of compulsory (patriotic) history in schools post-2000 (Ranger 2004; Chimedza 2008). Ironically, residents of Harare and all urban areas have been labeled as sellouts by ZANU PF post-2000 due to their consistent voting for the MDC-T (cf. Freeman 2005; Mazango 2005). In the 2013 electoral context, ZANU PF sought to give Harare residents back their citizenship. It is a citizenship that the urban-dwelling African has always been denied from the colonial period (see Mamdani 1996). During the colonial era the African middle class was in limbo, but post-2000 it was this previously marginalized middle class that was now marginalizing other Africans.

However, in 2013, courtesy of lessons from previous elections in which it always lost the urban areas to the opposition MDC-T, ZANU PF sought to make the urban dweller a citizen once again. Mugabe and the party were presented as having done the youths a favor by giving them back Harare, which all along had been in the hands of opposition MDC legislators. Instead of youths, as voters, having the power to give Harare back to ZANU PF, it is ZANU PF that inverts expectations by claiming to be doing the opposite when in effect it did not have the power to do so. It was an attempt by ZANU PF to hoodwink the youths and all the other voters to vote for its candidates. It was also an attempt

to portray Mugabe as a benevolent leader who gives the youths a chance at leadership. It was meant to rebut the opposition message that “Mugabe is too old” and the discourse that ZANU PF was a party of very old people.

Following on the foregoing, it is arguable that youthfulness in the July 2013 electoral context in Zimbabwe—a context in which the opposition comparatively presented the “energetic” and “youthful” Tsvangirai (60 years old at the time) against an old, allegedly tired, and frail Mugabe (89 years old at the time)—became a “hot” and profitable sign that political parties competed for. ZANU PF deliberately associated Mugabe and ZANU PF with youths and youthfulness in order to sidestep opposition criticisms that Mugabe was too old and ill to continue ruling Zimbabwe. The advertisement could have been targeted at the youths, specifically Harare youths, who are believed to be largely pro-MDC-T because of the high rate of unemployment and the alleged lack of opportunities for youths to ascend to leadership positions in ZANU PF. The headline of the advertisement “Gushungo 8” suggests that the eight young candidates are Mugabe’s protégés. The headline implies that they are “Gushungo’s” children or disciples. “Gushungo” is Mugabe’s totem, and in Zimbabwe among the Shona, addressing someone by their totem is a sign of both respect and affection. The advertisement was aimed at creating the impression that the ZANU PF leader and presidential candidate was committed to empowering the youth.

The foregoing discursive mutations show that ZANU PF and Mugabe are slippery signs whose discourses constantly change to suit the here and now of an election. ZANU PF discourse is not static, as implied by the labeling of the discourse as nationalist historiography, nativism, grotesque nationalism, Mugabeism, and patriotic history (cf. Alexander, McGregor, and Ranger 2000; Ranger 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009, 2011).

#### “GUSHUNGO” THE INDIGENE AND DIVINE APPOINTED LEADER

ZANU PF advertisements branded Mugabe “Gushungo,” his totem. In Zimbabwe, allies affectionately call him “Gushungo.” In Zimbabwean Shona cultures, addressing a person by his or her totem is a sign of respect. The use of Mugabe’s totem could also be understood in the context of persistent post-2000 opposition claims that Mugabe was of Malawian origin (see Mapuwei 2009). In this context, using his totem was also a way of underlining Mugabe’s authenticity as an indigenous Zimbabwean. The totem (*mutupo*) “Gushungo” connects Mugabe directly to ancient times and to the Great Zimbabwe (whose significance is discussed in later paragraphs). The totem is an identity marker that also talks about origin. The totem is as follows:

*Maita Gushungo* (Thank you Gushungo)  
*Vokwanzungumbokoto* (Those of Nzungunhokoto) ...

*Tatenda varidzi venyika* (We thank you owners/rulers of the land)  
*Vakabva Guruuswa* (Those who came from Guruuswa<sup>1</sup>) ...  
*Maita vokwaZvimba*<sup>2</sup> (Thank you descendants of Zvimba/Thank you  
 those from Zvimba)  
*Vazere muChakona* (You who populate Chakona) ...  
*Vakapangura nyika ino* (Those who took over this country)  
*Ichakatsikwa nezamu* (When it was still full of milk) ...  
*Aiwa mwana waZvimba* ... (Child of Zvimba)  
 (Adapted from: [http://www.pindula.co.zw/Tsiwo\\_Gushungo](http://www.pindula.co.zw/Tsiwo_Gushungo))

President Mugabe's Gushungo totem thus links him to ancient Zimbabwean societies. It proclaims that not only is he an indigene but his forefathers were the legendary people of Guruuswa who constructed the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, the majestic architecture of which confounded even the white colonialists. Guruuswa is a place of origin and great ancient Zimbabwean states, such as the Torwa state, the Mutapa state, and the Rozvi state, trace their origins back to Guruuswa or Great Zimbabwe. In this light, Mugabe is thus not just an indigene but he is a descendant of "*varidzi venyika*" (the owners of the land). Given this myth of origin (cf. Baudrillard 1983), Mugabe's right to rule is therefore his birthright and is by divine right. Probably, his descendants also have the right to claim the "throne" (the presidency), not through democratic processes but through heredity. Gushungo's rule is given the illusion of being dynastical since he traces his origins back to Guruuswa and he is a descendant of the owners of the land.

Given the contestations around citizenship in Zimbabwe post-2000 in which the ZANU PF regime stripped descendants of migrants from Malawi and Mozambique of their citizenship, and with it their voting rights, the totem Gushungo is an identity marker. The descendants of foreign migrant workers became aliens and their national identity cards were labeled as such. They were not authentic Zimbabweans, Malawians, or Mozambicans. They became stateless and their citizenship was only restored by the new Zimbabwe constitution that was adopted in March 2013. But this stripping of citizenship gave rise to opposition claims that Mugabe himself was of Malawian origin (see Mapuwei 2009). In this context, "Gushungo" was arguably a way of rebutting the discourse of Mugabe as a foreigner. It became a way of legitimizing Mugabe's presidency. "Gushungo" became a way of proclaiming that the ZANU PF candidate was an indigenous Zimbabwean and a descendant of the ancient rulers of Guruuswa and consequently his leadership of ZANU PF and Zimbabwe was legitimate.

## MUGABE THE FATHER

"The Gushungo 8" advertisement also has connotations of the ZANU PF discourse of Mugabe as father ("*vaMugabe ndibaba*"). The headline "The

Gushungo 8” creates the illusion that the eight “youths” are Mugabe’s children. It is intended to legitimize Mugabe’s leadership of ZANU PF and the country as he is “the father.” Deploying Mugabe as father and his wife as mother was a way of managing internal ZANU PF divisions in the same manner it was intended to induce people to vote for Mugabe. It is a strategy that appears to confirm scholars’ claims that African politics is personalized and is characterized by father figures (White 2008; Kebonang 2012; Mkandawire 2013). However, such a reading misses the religious–cultural significance of the sign Mugabe as “father.” Society and/or culture presents advertisers, both political and commercial, with valorized symbols which they raid and attach to their products (see Williams 1993; Harris 1996). “*Baba*” (father) is one of these valorized cultural–religious symbols that advertisers utilize in their selling messages.

It is often claimed that Zimbabwe is a Christian nation, and in election campaigns ZANU PF people often quote the Bible and prophecy to justify Mugabe’s rule. Voters are often encouraged to vote and respect Mugabe, as leaders come from God. Furthermore, they are often told that an ancient prophet and founder of one of Zimbabwe’s biggest independent African Churches, Johanne Masowe, prophesied long ago that Mugabe would one day rule independent Zimbabwe. This claim of Mugabe’s rule as God-ordained and not citizen-ordained ironically obfuscates the significance of the vote in a supposedly modern and democratic post-colonial Zimbabwe. From this perspective, the paper argues that the use of culturally and religiously significant signs—“Gushungo,” “*baba*” (father), and “*amai*” (mother)—confirms the claim that cultural domination paves the way for political domination. It induces consent and/or gets people to vote for Mugabe and ZANU PF in the same way that signs are used in commercial advertisements to lure people into consumption of goods (cf. Williams 1993; Harris 1996; Goldman n.d.). Mugabe and his wife become religious–cultural symbols in ZANU PF discourse. From a cultural and Christian perspective, children are supposed to respect “thy father and thy mother” so that their days on earth could be many and blessed. Implied here is that those who are loyal to Mugabe will live long and have plenty.

The focus on Mugabe should thus be partially understood in the July 2013 electoral context, in which Mugabe as leader was also viewed as “*baba*,” both literally and metaphorically. ZANU PF political communication’s focus on Mugabe was an attempt to avoid the “*bhora musango*” (kick the ball out) campaign of 2008 in which ZANU PF officials fed up with Mugabe’s refusal to step down urged voters to “kick the ball out,” that is, vote for opposition presidential candidates. In this context, the advertisement was a continuation of the “*vaMugabe chete*” (Mugabe only) discourse of post-2000. In this discourse, Mugabe was the only person who was competent and had the legitimate right to rule Zimbabwe. Opposition to Mugabe was thus treated as unwelcome, even sinful, since Mugabe was God-chosen. The

advertisement was a sign of respect and loyalty to Mugabe, as it was also a way of rebutting opposition jibes that he was not an authentic Zimbabwean. It was also a way of appealing to the urban youth who are perceived to be largely sympathetic to the opposition.

The discourse of Mugabe as father implied in the advertisement also has connotations of African moral philosophy, as noted earlier. In the run-up to the March 2008 election, I was based in rural Manicaland, which also happens to be my place of origin. I witnessed campaigning firsthand in Chimanimani West Constituency and had the privilege of listening to discussions between opposition MDC-T and ZANU PF supporters daily. In response to opposition jibes that Mugabe was too old to rule, ZANU PF supporters responded that one cannot reject one's father just because he was very old. From this perspective, one deduces that in ZANU PF moral philosophy, age is not an issue as long as one is still fit and interested in continuing to lead. The discourse of Mugabe as father thus justifies Mugabe's continued stay in power and it also delegitimizes any opposition to him since it is implied that we all become his children. If we are all Mugabe's and his wife's children, challenging him becomes unacceptable, since children are not supposed to challenge or reject their parents because they are old. It is considered shameful, un-African, and un-Christian to question one's parents.

Furthermore, in indigenous Shona cultures a person has to respect their elders, even those who are not one's relatives. Well-mannered persons ("*munhu ane bunhu*") are those who respect elders. This is because old age is associated with wisdom. Rather than discard the elderly, the younger generation is always encouraged to tap into their wisdom; no wonder the "Chamisa's Mugabe secret praise note" advertisement talks about Mugabe's expertise and wisdom. This thinking, including political advertising theory's focus on the party leader as the core and unifying factor of the political product (Downer 2013), partly explains ZANU PF advertisements' preoccupation with selling Mugabe. It also partly explains why they paid no attention to the party's parliamentary, senatorial, and council candidates. These candidates were supposed to benefit from associating with the Mugabe brand, the ZANU PF brand, and its policies. These and other associations such as ZANU PF, the liberation struggle, indigenization and economic empowerment policies, and the fast-track land reform program were going to be activated from memory by the mere presence of the image of Mugabe (see Smith 2009, 212).

### MUGABE: A PROFITABLE AND DISCRIMINATORY SIGN?

Following the above, this paper rejects the tendency by critics to only interpret the centrality of Mugabe in Zimbabwean political discourse from the perspective of African politics as patriarchal and personal (cf. White 2008; Kebonang 2012; Mkandawire 2013). The fortunes of the leader are

closely linked to the party's fortunes (Downer 2013), while the intention of political branding is to "differentiate [the party and/or candidate] effectively from its competitors, [capitalizing] on its distinctive strengths to deliver better value to its customers" (Jain n.d.). ZANU PF's distinctive strength was Mugabe who, despite his advanced age, still commands popular support among voters, especially the rural electorate. This logically makes Mugabe ZANU PF's key asset, especially considering that in Zimbabwean presidential elections winner takes all.

The distinctive qualities of Mugabe as a sign were intended to differentiate him and ZANU PF from the opposition (see Baudrillard, Lovitt, and Klopsch 1976; Baudrillard 1983, 1994). It is because of the party leader's centrality to the fortunes of the party that ZANU PF actively sought to divert voters' attention from Mugabe's advanced age by using images of a younger-looking Robert Mugabe. The party plundered the past for images of a younger Mugabe, lifted them out of their original context, and purified them into signs attached to new objects (cf. Harris 1996, ix). Using pictures of a younger-looking Robert Mugabe was an attempt to rebut opposition political parties' attacks on his advanced age. It was an attempt to produce Mugabe as youth and youth as Mugabe (cf. Goldman n.d.). In the political production process of Mugabe as ZANU PF product, the party's advertisements simultaneously produced "Mugabe" the product as the sign "youth" and the sign "youth" as the product "Mugabe." The paper holds that the sign Mugabe is violent, discriminatory, and murderous; it delegitimizes other presidential candidates and opposition political parties (Baudrillard, Lovitt, and Klopsch 1976; Baudrillard 1983, 1994; Sonderling 2013, 2014). Its mere presence automatically displaces other signs such as Tsvangirai and Welshman Ncube, the opposition presidential candidates in the July 2013 election.

Since it was impossible for ZANU PF to reject that Robert Mugabe was very old, they instead tried to undermine "the Mugabe is too old" discourse by creating the impression that age is just a number and Mugabe was still "as fit as a fiddle." The old but recent-looking pictures of a younger-looking Mugabe sought to create the illusion that he was still physically fit. To buttress this illusion, the pictures were not retouched. ZANU PF deliberately did not directly address the issue of Mugabe's advanced age, instead choosing to use said picture. The use of the old but recent-looking picture could also have been intended to use nostalgia and/or a sense of roots to sell Mugabe (cf. Packard 1957). Pictures of old are a source of nostalgia about the good old days. The image was meant to conjure up past images of a physically fit Mugabe to dispel current opposition discourses about Mugabe's alleged old age-induced frailty.

The use of these pictures is a confirmation of Baudrillard's (1983 paragraph 15, lines 1–2) argument that, "when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of secondhand truths, objectivity[,] and



authenticity.” From this viewpoint, the paper argues that creating the impression that Mugabe was still younger and fitter than he actually was in 2013 is secondhand truth. It was an illusion intended to hoodwink the voters to think that Mugabe, the ZANU PF presidential candidate, was still the same energetic Mugabe of old. It was meant to bring forth associations of Mugabe in his heyday as an energetic president. This manipulation of signs confirms Baudrillard’s (1983 paragraph 15, lines 1–2) further argument that, “when the real is no longer what it used to be ... there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential ...” In this case, the image, as argued earlier, “murders” the reality that Mugabe is very old while also discriminating against the opposition candidates by focusing on his state of mind and expertise in handling matters of state. The real has been “murdered” by simulation, and as Baudrillard (1983 paragraph 6, line 6) argues, simulation “threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary.’”

The ZANU PF advertisements threaten the difference between the truth that Mugabe is old and the falsehood that he is still very fit in the same manner the Byzantine gods threatened the existence of God (see Baudrillard 1983). They threaten the difference between the real—Mugabe the person—and the imaginary—the image of Mugabe that appears in the advertisements. The image of Mugabe looks like Mugabe but is not Mugabe and in the context of July 2013 it had the effect of creating a distorted image of how old Mugabe was in the minds of the voters. It was simulation because it broke the link between the image (a picture of a younger-looking Mugabe) and the referent (a very old Mugabe). This confirms Falkowski and Cwalina’s (2012, 10) observation that “... modern[-]day democracy has found itself in the age of manufactured images.” From this observation, it is arguable that simulation is a key tactic in political branding and/or advertising. This is because through simulation, political parties seek to influence brands, namely, “memory about a particular object [candidate, policies, and the party itself] that is held in the memory of consumers [voters]” (Keller 1993, cited by Smith 2009, 211). In the July 2013 election, ZANU PF engaged in simulation; it sought to divert voters’ attention from Mugabe’s advanced age by using images of a younger-looking Mugabe and by focusing on his expertise and mental agility. The advertisement was thus a rebuttal of the opposition political parties’ attacks on Mugabe. It was also a not-so-veiled attack on the opposition leaders, as Chamisa questions the other presidential aspirants’ ability to match Mugabe. It is plausible to argue that ZANU PF’s simulation shows that it is neither a dictatorship nor a democracy; it is just a means to an end. It is a means to eliminate the opposition from the language game. It is a means to retain power, to win the consent of the electorate especially considering that language is central to this process of retaining power (Deacon et al. 1999, 2007). Simulation is part and parcel of the process Bernays (1947) calls the engineering of consent.



On account of the foregoing, this paper shares the belief of Baudrillard, Lovitt, and Klopsch (1976) and Baudrillard (1983) that the sign by its very nature is discriminatory and is “murderous.” In these ZANU PF advertisements, the sign of Mugabe and images of Mugabe discriminated against opposition presidential candidates and parties. The signs also “murdered” the reality that Mugabe is very old. Further, reference to Mugabe’s totem and state of mind confirms Rice and Waugh’s (2001, 179) observation that, “identities are events in language and are articulated in differences.” Mugabe is presented as different to the other contestants because he is of the “Gushungo” clan; “*varidzi venyika*” (rulers of the land Zimbabwe); he has a golden mind, has incomparable wisdom, and is deft in statecraft. It is these differences that legitimize the product Mugabe. Legitimation, as Mazid (2008) argues, also works through differentiation and proximization.

Because the sign is “murderous,” it is arguable that it can be used—as Mazid (2008) notes—both as a weapon and a shield. This was the case, for example, in the advertisement “Chamisa’s secret Mugabe praise note.” The advertisement sought to legitimize Mugabe’s continued leadership as “natural” and commonsensical through “denial” (cf. Van Dijk 1993, 263) of his old age by using images of a younger-looking Mugabe. The advertisement thus sought to naturalize and reproduce Mugabe’s leadership by creating the impression that even opposition politicians acknowledge that he is great. ZANU PF’s claim in the advertisement that Chamisa stated that the president was “deft,” skillful, and clever in dealing with matters of state was intended to delegitimize opposition leaders and to dismiss the “Mugabe is too old” discourse.

ZANU PF advertisements sought to create maximum possible positive differentiation (cf. Jain n.d.; Downer 2013) for Mugabe while inflicting harm on opposition brands. For example, Mugabe the sign invested ZANU PF with its value in the same manner the adjectives that Chamisa allegedly used to describe Mugabe invested Mugabe, the political product, with his value. Mugabe is produced as “skillful” and “special,” with a “golden mind” (Mugabe = “skillful,” “special,” “golden mind,” “wisdom”), and the attributes are produced as Mugabe (“special,” “golden mind,” “skillful,” “wisdom” = Mugabe). Here, the product Mugabe is produced simultaneously with its false need: the ability to rule (cf. Baudrillard, Lovitt, and Klopsch 1976; Baudrillard 1983). These differential signs and/or adjectives employed by ZANU PF gave both Mugabe—the political product—and ZANU PF value (cf. Irvine 1989, 257; Goldman n.d.), while simultaneously giving *the vote* for Mugabe and ZANU PF “its full exchange value” (Irvine 1989, 258). In this regard, when Zimbabweans were voting for Mugabe and ZANU PF, they were voting “for the chain of authoritative statements” that accompanied the two political products (Irvine 1989, 257). On the basis of the foregoing discussion on how signs were manipulated by ZANU PF, it is arguable that the party’s electoral discourse or the signs it produces in an electoral context are just a

means to achieve electoral hegemony. The signs are simulation and just a way of maintaining ZANU PF's grip on power.

The signs or images produced by ZANU PF were, as argued earlier, not only meant to positively brand Mugabe but also a deliberate attack on the opposition candidates, specifically MDC-T's Morgan Tsvangirai, who was Mugabe's main challenger in the election. For example, the use of a note allegedly written by Chamisa in the advertisement under discussion was designed to show that even top officials in the Morgan Tsvangirai-led MDC did not have confidence in their leader. However, it was "imaginary" and "false" that Chamisa was referring to Tsvangirai and other opposition leaders when he allegedly said that none of the aspirants to the presidency possessed a quarter of the wisdom and expertise Mugabe has in managing state affairs. This was simulation (cf. Baudrillard, Lovitt, and Klopsch 1976; Baudrillard 1983, 1994; Mbembe 2001). ZANU PF's intention was to erase the distinction between "truth" and "falsehood," between "real" and "imaginary" (Baudrillard 1983, paragraph 6, line 6).

Whereas in western neoliberal democratic theory, lying or exaggerations may be unacceptable in political contestation, indigenous Shona moral philosophy justifies, in certain circumstances, lying as a means to an end. In Shona ways of knowing, lying is morally justifiable under certain circumstances. For example, the following Shona proverbs justify deception:

- *Rume risinganyepi hariroori* (a man who does not lie to a woman when proposing love should not expect to marry).
- *Rinyonyenga rinohwarara rinozosimudza musoro rawana* (he who proposes to a woman lies only to reveal his true colors after marrying the woman).
- *Muromo kapako kekubwanda nako* (the mouth is a tool for concealing one's true intentions).

In Shona moral philosophy, deception is a key tool of relationship management. Lying, in the context of love relationships, may be permissible if not doing so will result in one losing the girl he is pursuing. It is arguable that political advertising is a key tool of relationship management in politics. From this perspective, the political products that parties and candidates present to the electorate are akin to a proposal whose acceptability by the electorate lies in a candidate's or a party's ability to convince the electorate that they stand to benefit from the relationship. But the complexity of Shona moral philosophy is also evident in the contradictory saying: "*Rina manyanga hariputirwi*" ("a lie can never be eternally hidden"). From this contradictory perspective, one has to persuade ethically in order to avoid problems in future when the deceit is eventually revealed. However, in the context of politics, the deed would have been done and voters would have to wait for another election. Indigenous ways of knowing, it is arguable,

constitute part of the context and lens through which political branding practices in the post-colony have to be understood. This is a confirmation of Kaid's (2012) argument that outside the United States, the study of political advertising has to grapple with different contextual and cultural concerns that include "differences in governmental structures, political party organizations, media systems, regulatory constraints and, above all, *language and culture* [emphasis added]." This is because signs, including political advertisements, are contextual (Deacon et al. 1999, 140; Fairclough 2001, 122; Metro-Roland 2011, 2) and any attempt to grasp their meanings should be located in the appropriate context. The sociocultural-political beliefs of a society are part of this context, and so is the broader sign system that includes indigenous knowledge systems.

This paper argues that rather than using the ZANU PF electoral discourse to argue that the post-colonial is a mirror image of the colonial or to argue that ZANU PF is dictatorial, it is arguable that the sign is "murderous" by its very nature (cf. Baudrillard et al. 1976; Baudrillard 1983, 1994). From this standpoint, it can be proposed that arguing that the post-colonial is a mirror image of the colonial on the basis of the ruling elite's messages and symbols obfuscates the fact that the sign is violent and it works by difference. From this perspective, this paper argues that the criticism of ZANU PF's political communications as character assassination (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003) fails to acknowledge the "murderous" and/or discriminatory nature of the sign. The sign Mugabe is violent.

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of the foregoing, it is compelling to argue that the appearance of Mugabe's name in all the advertisements as part of the call to action "Vote R. G. Mugabe, Vote ZANU PF" creates the impression that Mugabe is ZANU PF and ZANU PF is Mugabe. This is because the level of importance that is placed on the party as the product is similar to the importance accorded to Robert Mugabe, the presidential candidate, as a product. This seems to confirm the claim that the political party leader is the core component of the political product. The same is also true of African political communications, especially considering that in the African political context the party leader's popularity and charismatic leadership determine the fortunes of the party he leads in an electoral context. Furthermore, even in western politics it is argued that if the party leader is considered "damaged goods," the fortunes of the political party might also plummet. This paper concludes that even though it is plausible to argue that Zimbabwean politics is personal, there is compelling evidence suggesting that in the context of an electoral campaign, the predominance of Mugabe in ZANU PF messages cannot be used to argue that politics is personal. From this perspective, the paper

disputes post-colonial theory's tendency and western neoliberal democracy's tendency to use the predominance of images of the African leader in the system of signs to argue that African politics is personal and patriarchal. The paper concludes that a multitheoretical approach that uses insights borrowed from sign theory, decolonial theory, post-colonial theory, and political advertising and/or branding theory is useful if one is to gain a full understanding of African, particularly Zimbabwean, political communication practices and systems. Finally, the paper concludes that if opposition political parties in Zimbabwe are to weaken ZANU PF's discourse, they have to raid society for valorized indigenous symbols. In effect, they should raid those symbols ZANU PF has monopolized and make them their own. It is hoped that the findings from this study will go a long way in addressing the dearth in the literature and theorization on African political marketing practices.

## NOTES

1. Guruuswa was the area around Great Zimbabwe. Historical accounts say the people of Guruuswa were the builders of Great Zimbabwe and in present day Zimbabwe's Masvingo, the area around Great Zimbabwe is ruled by the Mugabes. President Mugabe has often referred to this area as the place of his uncles and forefathers. It is a place of origin and the most prominent of pre-independence Zimbabwean states: The Torwa state, the Mutapa Empire, and the Rozvi Empire trace their origins back to Guruuswa.

2. President Mugabe comes from Zvimba in Mashonaland Central.

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