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The Mobile Workshop

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Preface: Before We Begin ...

The Mobile Workshop: The Tsetse Fly and African Knowledge Production is a project about African understandings of their surroundings. The archive mobilized is composed of indigenous idioms that are often studied more for linguistic and literary value, rather than, as I see them, as philosophical modes representing knowledge of the majority cultural group in Zimbabwe today, who share the same language, commonly called “Shona.” This is the language I think with.

Zimbabwe (from whence the country’s name came) means “a big house of stone,” and refers to the biggest and most extensive stone-built structures observers appropriately called “Great Zimbabwe.” “Great” here means it is the biggest and most majestic among many other *dzimbahwe*. While *zimbabwe* (*zimbahwe*) refers to a large stone house, an ordinary house of stone is called *imba yemabwe/imba yemahwe* in the family of “Shona” languages that scholars have grouped together as *ChiKaNdaMaZeKo*. This acronym is drawn from *Chi-* (prefix, meaning “the language of”) *-Karanga*, *-Ndau*, *-Manyika*, *-Zezuru*, and *-Korekore*.

Growing up, I used to hear elders greeting each other with the morning salutation “*E, mamukaseiko vedzimbahwe?*” (*E, how did you sleep vedzimbahwe?*). When I asked, my father told me that *vedzimbahwe* is a more culturally appropriate term to describe us instead of “Shona” or *Zezuru*. When being more specific, he said I could refer to us as *Mwendamberi* (“those who always go forward, backward never”), of the *Nondo* totem, descendants of *Chirau*, who hail from *Chirorodziva cheChinhoyi* (the shimmering blue pools of *Chinhoyi*), who settled in the lands of *vaBudya* (the *Budya* people) of *Chihota*. Then again, we were just a part of a bigger confederacy of same-language speakers, first under the *Munhumutapa* and *Rozvi* kings, to whom we paid tribute. Besides the language, what identified us as one people was the stone architecture.

The term “Zimbabwe culture” as deployed recently by Innocent Pikirayi (2001) is what I call *chidzimbahwe*, but with a few caveats. Pikirayi’s focus was on the rise and fall of indigenous states distinguished from archaeological findings according to similarities in stone architectural design, ranging from mighty capitals of kings to humble homesteads. His book borrows its title from a term popularized by German writers of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To these writers, “the Zimbabwe culture” referred to culture displayed in stone buildings and ceramic arts (Hall 1905).

Vedzimbahwe (singular *mudzimbahwe*) simply means dwellers (or those) of the houses of stone. A builder of houses of stone, or any stone structures, is called *ndongamahwe* (arranger of stones); and a *sarungano* (by virtue of building and telling a story) also becomes *ndongamahwe*. Building from the word *dzimbabwe* or *vedzimbahwe*, I invoke *chidzimbahwe* (the language of *vedzimbahwe*), also called *chivanhu* (ways of the people), or *chinyakare* (ways of the past), as a better term in place of the wieldy, meaningless lexicon of *ChiKaNdaMaZeKo*. This is a deliberate move to reintellectualize African terminology—to move away from ‘Shona’ (which means nothing to those of us arbitrarily called Shona by people other than us) and towards restoring the larger economy of knowledge and practices resident in our own terminologies, which during the European occupation reduced to a mere aesthetics of language or means of communication.

Dzimbahwe or *dzimbabwe* is many things. It is not just a house of stone, but the headquarters of the king, built in carefully chiseled and laid stones of the *maware* (granite) type. It is also the place where the king’s deceased body is hidden (*kuvigwa*)—especially in a mummified state—and stood, sat, or rested in a cave, or buried in the ground. *Dzimbahwe* is also the grave, where the remains of the ancestor are laid to rest (*kuradzikwa*), flesh corrupting, but *mapfupa* (bones) incorruptible, and the spirit having left them to be *mhepo* (the air) or *vadzimu* (ancestral spirits), which, after proper ritual returns to possess a mortal kin (*wehama*), speaks through and turns them into a spirit medium (*svikiro*). Every religion has its own myths and legends that people canonize into truths; to be faithful means not questioning whether such spiritualization makes sense when subjected to physics, biology, or chemistry experiments, but to allow such spirituality to be the driving force of life itself.

I bring a different sensibility to matters of faith: I never question anyone’s faith. I would rather deal with someone who has faith in something—in themselves, in a stone, a mushroom, their cat, ghosts, witches, ancestral spirits, Crucifixion and Resurrection, the whole lot. I therefore approach

dzimbahwe not from my perspective, but from the perspectives of the people who made such values and live by them.

Dzimbahwe interests me for an entirely different reason: as a space from which I can initiate a *chimurenga* (rebellion) against always starting from concepts emanating from Europe or North America. Very few scholars from these two regions ever cite Africans in their writing, even when they are writing about Africans. Africans very rarely write about other people; we tend to write about ourselves in the world. I only worry that the way we order our thoughts exhibits a certain inferiority complex; we always want to cite the big names in the North, virtual strangers and at best fleeting visitors to our experience, as if our own ancestors did not think.

Everyday language, as an oral expression of the many transient workspaces that animate life in Africa, constitutes a rich philosophical space from which to initiate a view from the Global South, from Africa, and, here, from Zimbabwe, and to produce a knowledge meaningful and usable to Africa.

Everyday language expresses realities and imaginations at the intersection of African inventions and inbound idioms and thus testifies to the creativities of Africans who strategically deploy them. Language constitutes an archive from which people of Africa can come to knowledge without a sense of intellectual inferiority; the French, British, Germans, Japanese, and South Koreans made their languages the official languages of knowledge production. Language is where the mastery of knowledge is won or lost.

The Mobile Workshop is an experimental space to test new forms of writing the African experience. Specifically, it is an invitation to each of us to go back to our languages, to recover the meanings of things that have come to dominate contemporary life. The book's central analytic is *mobile*—that is, knowledge produced by the mobility of an insect carrying an invisible thing that kills people and their domestic animals. It is a *workshop* in the sense of an experimental mode of writing. At stake is an effort to take vernacular concepts as starting points in writing a narrative of *ruzivo* (what is commonly called *knowledge* or *science*), means and ways to things (*technology*), and the creation of things (*innovation*). Can we not find within our own African languages terms that describe our creativity, the means and ways to it, and how we know and what we know, without enslaving ourselves to other cultures' meanings? Can we take seriously the intellectual forces animating Africa's encounters with things inbound into Africa on one hand, and those animating Africa's intellectual endeavor in the world on the other?

What is required urgently is an intellectual program unlimited by European Enlightenment traditions of analysis and expression, one that takes seriously the concepts people of Africa invent and deploy to talk about their own experiences—in short, treating the realm of living and life as an experiential location from which to approach questions about and meanings of the scientific, technological, and innovative in our own time.

The Mobile Workshop is an attempt to encourage fellow Africa scholars to write a narrative the keywords of which are readily visible to and derived from African tongues, first and foremost, so that the rest of the world is able to learn about us through our own keywords. This is contrary to the prevailing norm, wherein the keywords are foreign (colonialism, capitalism, democracy, technology, science, innovation, entrepreneurship, etc.) and we are forced to understand Africa through them. That we have allowed ourselves to continue using such concepts uncritically constitutes the greatest intellectual laziness (or mischief) of our time. Africans meeting in Africa or overseas, cannot speak and socialize in Amharic, Wolof, kiSwahili, or *chidzimbahwe*; those from Senegal and Zimbabwe, colonized by the French and British, respectively, cannot even talk on the taxi, even while they share so much of everyday life in common. One speaks French, the other English. Why are we doing this to ourselves?¹

I am yet to see any word in *chidzimbahwe* which translates to *colony*, *colonization*, *colonialism*, *colonial*, or *coloniality*, as experienced. It was the European imperialists—in this case, the British—who used the term *colony*, created a *colonial office*, and became the *colonial power*. Later, especially after 1945, African nationalists strategically deployed “colonialism” to analytically demarcate a system of European imperialistic domination that had to be confronted and dislodged. “Colonialism” was a category describing how the “colonial power” exercises agency over those lands and people it sees as having been “colonized.” It is not a category emanating from those on the receiving end of aggression. The idea of “postcolonial” or “decolonial” is first and foremost an acknowledgment of the legitimacy and validity of a top-down category affirming the claims of Europe. Hence, this text moves to a noncolonial language that removes any reference to the *colon* root. Africans cannot continue giving life to a dragon that they have already slayed: Zimbabweans, in particular, defeated the European oppressor through the barrel of the gun. That physical and political independence frees us to focus on slaying even more dragons in our time. For that we need keywords derived from none but our own tongues.

Even the mere mention of the root word *colon*, including what Mignolo calls the *decolonial option*, still retains the Western as the central referent. Do not even *decolonialize* or *decolonize*. I am saying *re-Africanize*. Write other stories—our own stories, our own vocabularies: *chimurenga* vocabularies made possible through epistemologically chasing away the colonizer far into the sea. Even when we talk about the period in which the Europeans were here, let us re-Africanize as much as is possible to re-Africanize. The decolonial option is still a colonial option. It is a distant cousin of what we are trying to do.

In that language, those who appear in the *colon* narrative as “the colonized” have their own categories for who they are. In my *chidzimbahwe* language, they refer to themselves simply as *vanhu* (people; singular *munhu*). What distinguishes them from *mhuka* (animals) or *zvipukanana* (small animals, i.e., insects) is *hunhu* (behavior, being), which often entails respect for *tsika* or *chivanhu* (custom, culture, the last translating to personhood). When they first arrived, “white people” were called *vasinamabvi*—those without knees—because they wore trousers and their knees were invisible.

There is no word for “Europeans” in *chidzimbahwe*. People cared nothing about where these *vaeni* (aliens, strangers, foreigners, or unknowns) or *vasinamabvi* were coming from. What they cared about was *what they looked and behaved like, what they did, and how it felt*. Thus, they looked white (*vachena* or *varungu*; singular *muchena* or *murungu*), whereas *vanhu* (people, those who are familiar, kin, or known) looked black (*vatema*). Before *vachena* came, *vedzimbahwe* called themselves and all peaceful people (neighbors) simply *vanhu* (people); those who raided, who took away the women, children, and cattle, were called *madzviti* (pillagers), in specific reference to the Ndebele (west) and Gaza (southeast). The new strangers were very different; they did not look like *vanhu*. They were *vachena* in a very alien sense.

Vachena are not remembered as “colonizers,” but for what they did to *vatema*. First, they are *vapambi*, those who abducted (our independence), forcibly and murderously seized, plundered, robbed, ravaged, savaged, pillaged, raided, ransacked, raped, looted, or sacked. The prefix *vapambi-* is applied to two things critical to the survival and prosperity of *vatema* that *vachena* pillaged. The first is *ivhu* (land, the soil)—hence *vapambevhhu* (those who plundered and seized the land and turned *vanhu* into *nhapwa* [slaves]). *Vapambi* seized not only the agricultural soil, but the wealth of *vatema*: *zvicherwa* (minerals), *mombe* (cattle), and Africans’ labor value. Hence the second reference, *vapambepfumi* (robbers of our wealth) also includes how *vachena* engaged in *chibharo* (forced labor) to turn the land into mineral

and agricultural wealth. By pulling the labor and intellectual resources critical to *vatema's* existence in the countryside to the mine, farm, and town, *vachena* became *vasvetasimba* (drainers of energy; singular *musvetasimba*). The white man in general was called *bhunu* (*Boer*, an Afrikaans word for farmer), the word denoting the cruelty and slave-driving attitude rather than the farming prowess. *Bhunu* was the *musvetasimba-in-chief*.

Vachena were remembered principally for what they did to *vatema* and how it felt to be treated that way. From this experiential realm, *vachena* became *vadzvanyiriri* (oppressors), the experiential meaning of which is best captured in the word *downpressor* (the one who presses someone down, especially with a boot to the face on hard, rocky ground).² The downpressor also deliberately reorganized human relations so that skin color became a marker of intellect, civilization, access to resources, and human-to-human relations. *Hudzvanyiriri* became *rusaruraganda* (racism; literally, “discrimination on the grounds of skin color”). *Vachena* became *vadzvanyiriri*. All of the looting, downpression, and racism led *vatema* to deploy an even harsher term; they saw their conditions as those of *nhapwa* (slaves) in their own country.

Hence we have the imperative of *kuzvisunungura* (self-liberation) from *hunhapwa* (slavery). *Kuzvisunungura* (untying oneself) refers to *hunhapwa* as bondage. *Kuzvisunungura* is also what this book is about—and *rusununguko* is the state of feeling and being free. Whoever coined the phrase *lost in translation* certainly knew the limits of completely translating the languages of other people into English, French, or German. The erasure of those attributes of *vatema's* naming (usually descriptive of a thing's properties and actions) as *vachena's* names enveloped them constitutes a serious problem that we as Africa scholars have failed to correct.

In this book, readers are forewarned that they will see a lot of *chidzimbahwe* names; these are not just there for show or to annoy the reader, but are used because they restore the intellectual weight removed from them by translation into English. To have written this book otherwise was, quite simply, impossible.³ I think, analyze, and write in *chidzimbahwe*; the hope is that others fluent in *isindebele*, Yoruba, *kiswahili*, and thousands other languages, and all other marginalized knowledges throughout the world, can do the same, so that one day I can also understand the world from their own categories. That way, we enrich the global store of knowledge through diversity rather than with a monoculture of concepts.

There will be moments when I get deeper into describing what the European was doing after turning *vatema* into *nhapwa*, and English became the official language of knowledge. When *vachena's* keywords are used, they are

actor categories (terms *vachena* themselves used); as the mobile workshop gathers momentum, even that imperfect language will eventually be Africanized. For now, it is sufficient to retain only a core set of vocabularies for the main actors—*mhesvi*, *hutachiwana*, *mhuka*, *vachena*, *vatemala*, and so on.

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My career is still ahead of me, but two books later, I realize they were probably right. And so having thanked them in *Transient Workspaces: Technologies of Everyday Innovation in Zimbabwe*, I only repeat: I am deeply honored to have been their student. Outside the committee, I cannot forget the ever-open doors of advice and support from David William Cohen (the “production of knowledge” influence came from him), Kathleen Canning, Michelle Mitchell, John Carson, Paul Edwards, Joshua Cole, Farina Mir, Jonathan Sheehan, and Marty Pernick, Kevin Gaines, and Sean Jacobs, among others.

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The bulk of the research expanding on the tsetse fly theme was undertaken during my tenure-track assistant professorship at MIT. I was privileged to have received the unfailing support of the then dean of the School of the Humanities Arts, Social Sciences (SHASS), Deborah Fitzgerald, and her staff, especially Magdalena Reib. When Deborah returned to the Program in Science, Technology, and Society, her successor Melissa Nobles carried on this support under my Black Bvekenyas and African Chemistry projects. I was honored to have received the SHASS Research Fund (2013; 2016; 2017) and numerous Dean's Fund for Professional Development grants for this research.

A significant chunk of writing happened while I was a fellow and senior fellow in two of Germany's intellectual paradises. I was privileged spend six months of fall 2011 at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, where I completed the polished draft of a book that would have combined *Transient Workspaces* and *The Mobile Workshop*. Working all night in the Rachel Carson Center, drowned by the music from the nearby Immobilien—the decibel increasing markedly when FC Bayern had won!—I emerged in the morning to go home to sleep. For the honor of being in this beautiful space in the heart of Munich, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the center's two directors, Helmuth Trischler and Christof Mauch, and my colleagues, among them Cotton Seiler, Gijs Mom, Riin Magnus, Mao-hong Bao, and many others.

I returned to MIT in December that year, polished manuscript in hand, for submission for my promotion case. But there was one problem: I did not like what I had written. The guns I was writing about were still *vachena's* guns, every trigger-pull, every shot—the language of *Glossina morsitans*, *Glossina palpalis*, and *Glossina pallidipes* and all these funny Latin and English names meant nothing to the ordinary people from whose world I write. What would a book that saw the gun and the tsetse from their perspective, expressed through their keywords, look like?

At that moment, I had a choice between submitting everything I had to get promoted to associate professor without tenure, the first of two milestones to tenure at MIT and starting afresh. I began unbundling the gun and the tsetse fly into two books. It was painful to commit treason to my own handiwork. *Transient Workspaces* was the foundation of the creative defiance that underlines my writing. I wanted technology and innovation to speak in my father and mother's tongue, so that *vatema* like me could be legible in it.

Meanwhile, I was working on *The Mobile Workshop*. I needed a space where I could sit down and write peacefully, somewhere quiet but scenic. If I went to Makuleke or my own village—called Mavhunga Village—I would get distracted by my passion for farming and taking photos and videos of everyday life. I was privileged to be invited as a senior fellow to the Internationales Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie, shortened to IKKM at the Bauhaus, in beautiful, historic Weimar. I wish to extend my sincere thanks to its directors, Lorenz Engell and Bernhard Siegert. Thank you, Christina Terberl, for helping me settle down, open a bank account, and function in a town where everything is done in German. And to Katarzyna Wloszczynska, for your energy and hard work that inspired those of us around you to work even harder. And to all the fellows of the IKKM, whose arrival and welcoming ceremony coincided with my departure, I hope you enjoyed Weimar and IKKM the way I did, because how could you possibly be in the presence of Lorenz and Bernhard and have a bad day?

In my life I have been privileged to work with Solomon Bvekenya, son of the notorious white poacher, Cecil Bvekenya Barnard. Having now finished writing about the tsetse fly, I can now honor my promise to the black families the poacher left in southeastern Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia). In the northwest, I similarly thank Asa Mudzimu, who tirelessly conducted the interviews in Nembudziya, west of a place—Chiroti—where I lived intermittently from 1998 to early 1999.

Since 2001 when I began this research, and now as I publish the book, I have gone from being a father of one to a father of three. I started the project when my daughter, Cleopatra Nyasha, was a year old. When this book is published, she'll have less than two months before entering university. The most enduring memory of this project are the names that always draw a laugh from my children's mother, Mildred. *Glossina morsitans*. *Glossina palpalis*. *Glossina pallidipes*. *Glossina brevipalpis*. *Glossina ...*

This book is in honor of that laughter and the person who found the names so funny, so ridiculous as to compel me to see their role as technologies of erasure, completely covering the tracks of the knowledge so that its source could never be known, never be traced.

