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Joost Fontein: The Politics of the Dead in Zimbabwe, 2000–2020: Bones, Rumours and Spirits, Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: James Currey 2022, 349 pp. [e-book].

Reviewed by
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In this monograph, Joost Fontein investigates the complex political implications of human remains in post-independence Zimbabwe. He takes the reader to various sites of resurfacing bones and cases of restless spirits and describes how corporeal and immaterial human remains are exploited by political actors, on the one hand, and exercise their own agency, on the other hand. He conceptualizes this as the “politics of the dead”, offering a new lens to look at Zimbabwe’s violent post-independence politics. The book covers the time period between 2000 and 2020, with a primary focus on the years until 2015. Based on rich source material, Fontein’s work engages with a variety of cases, ranging from the ongoing exhumation efforts of victims of the Gukurahundi genocide in the 1980s to post-electoral violence in the 2000s and prominent political deaths in the 2010s. Apart from making a significant contribution to the growing research

field on the anthropology of death, it also speaks to memory politics and the politics of commemoration as well as the literature corpus on nationalist historiographies in Southern Africa.

The monograph consists of 349 pages and is divided into an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion. In the introduction, Fontein outlines the book’s main arguments, which centre around (1) the “agency of things” – human remains impact on politics – as well as (2) the “power of uncertainty”, which is attached to both bones and spirits and creates opportunities for political instrumentalization. In chapter 1, Fontein discusses the legacy of the liberation struggle and how it continues to shape contemporary Zimbabwean politics via spirit mediums and “chimurenga politics”.^[1] Chapter 2 examines the work of the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), a central actor in Zimbabwean commemoration politics. In particular, it explores the tensions between professional practices, contested national histories, and the demands of marginalized communities in commemorative and heritage processes. Chapter 3 describes the widely publicized and politicized Chibondo exhumations, a case where over 700 bodies dumped in a mine shaft by the Ian Smith regime were discovered in the early 2000s. In chapter 4, the author investigates the “suspicious” death of the

politician Solomon Mujuru from the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in 2011, a particularly high-profile case in a string of “political accidents” surrounded by rumours and speculations that characterize the “unfinished nature” of death in Zimbabwe (p. 182). Chapters 5 and 6 then delve into the (political) significance of ancestors and spirit mediums by detailing the highly publicized “diesel n’anga” case as well as the largely unknown story of Mai Melissa, a medium for the restless spirit of her late father, a Mozambican migrant. The final chapter explores the politicking around Robert Mubage’s burial in 2019. Fontein concludes by proposing future cases of inquiry, including deaths related to HIV, cholera, and the Covid-19 pandemic. The book comes full circle by sketching the current debate on restituting the spiritual leader Mbuya Nehanda’s (alleged) skull from the British Museum, an example in which the political potential of uncertainty becomes especially salient. It is these uncertainties and the “incompleteness” of death that continue to be “politically productive” (p. 282).

Fontein’s analysis spans across a variety of interesting cases, from the returning spirit of Nehanda, who opposed British colonialism and was executed in 1898, to the state-sponsored violence of the ZANU-PF regime post-1980. His case selection includes both material and spiritual remains, “dry bones”, and “tortured bodies” (both p. 35) and compellingly undergirds his central argument that it is not only politics impacting on bodies, but also bones and spirits, the “excessivity of human remains” (p. 121), that are impacting on politics. Although the ruling party tries to make

use of human remains and to “manage” their transformations, the “unruly dead” (p. 3) do not always serve the ruling party. The richness of the material is one of the great strengths of this book. Fontein makes use of existing anthropological literature (e.g. chapter 2), parliamentary debates and newspaper articles (e.g. chapter 4), interviews (e.g. introduction), and ethnographic field notes of impressive detail (e.g. chapter 6). This diversity of sources makes the book very easy to read. Fontein shows a special interest in institutional actors, such as the NMMZ and the Fallen Heroes Trust (FHT). He describes NMMZ staff as sitting uncomfortably between two chairs, as professionals caught up in politics. They are under substantial political pressure, but “against all odds” and as opposed to other civil servant structures they are described as having remained committed to the cause (p. 301). He draws an empathetic and complex picture of this central institution and of the people making it up. Moreover, he describes the tensions between “vernacular exhumers” (i.e. the FHT as war veteran group) and the NMMZ and how politics of commemoration in Zimbabwe are often shaped by narratives juxtaposing “international” (or “Western”) practices with “African” ways of doing things (p. 123). This also highlights the challenging task of disentangling the study of cultural practices from the external (European, colonial) gaze and the ongoing pushback processes that take the form of (re-)Africanization. While new and important insights into the NMMZ as a key actor in the liberation heritage project are provided throughout the book, chapter 2 also offers a specific section on institutions tasked with reconciliation –

namely the Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration (ONHRI) and its successor, the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC), two hitherto under-researched institutions.

The author writes without trivializing or essentializing the communities and the (politico-)cultural practices he describes. Notably, he takes spirit encounters seriously and does not reduce them to their “social functionality” (p. 192). Fontein describes individual fates with much care, such as the death of Gift Tandare, a young member of the opposition who was killed by police in 2007 in Harare (chapter 2). Taking into account both the politico-structural dimension as well as the family-related and cultural dimension of how his death was handled, Fontein carves out “competing” and often “inter-meshing” attachments to the dead (p. 45), which highlight the complexities of death in Zimbabwe. Indeed, the author reflects on the challenging task of writing about “fleshy, leaky” bodies; soft tissue damage; and “disrupted bodily boundaries” on several occasions (e.g. on p. 111). The topic is naturally uncomfortable for the reader, but the author manages to treat this delicate subject matter with great sensitivity.

It is one of the cornerstones of anthropological epistemologies to be context specific and not to venture into generalizations. However, at times it would have been helpful for the reader to have a more comprehensive overview of similar (or different) practices across the region in order to contextualize the described observations and carve out potential specificities related to the Zimbabwean context. Although there are references to other cases, for example Malagasy and Rwandan practices around

death, they remain limited. References to countries in the same subregion would have been especially enriching in this regard, particularly for researchers interested in the transnational and regional dimensions of memory politics. ZANU-PF’s reflections on how to turn former guerrilla camps in Mozambique and Zambia into places of commemoration (mentioned briefly on p. 301) may provide one interesting vantage point for future research.

To summarize, *The Politics of the Dead* is an important and innovative contribution to the literature on Zimbabwean post-independence politics as well as the interplay between cultural and political practices around death. It provides a fresh perspective on the second half of the Mugabe era and a bridge into the post-2017 political milieu, where hopes for change following Mugabe’s ousting have quickly dissipated. This monograph is an essential read not only for researchers and students working on the anthropology of death and memory politics, but also and especially for those who are trying to make sense of the violence of post-independence Zimbabwean politics.

Note

- 1 The author cites Panashe Chigumadzi, *These Bones Will Rise Again*, London 2018.