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### **CONTENTS**

'AGAINST ALL ODDS': THE ACADEMIC 'BRAIN DRAIN' AND  
THE 'WALKING DEAD' IN ZIMBABWE BEFORE THE  
GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY

**Munyaradzi Mushonga and Munyaradzi Nyakudya**

MODERNITY AND IMPERIALISM IN AFRICAN WRITING AND  
THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON PEDAGOGY

**Edwin Mhandu**

INTERACTIVE TEACHING METHODS IN NATIONAL AND  
STRATEGIC STUDIES IN TEACHER TRAINING COLLEGES:  
DEFEATING THE MYOPIA OF PATRIOTIC HISTORY AND  
POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY

**Munyaradzi Nyakudya**

RESURRECTING THE TEACHING OF CLASSICS IN  
ZIMBABWE'S SECONDARY SCHOOLS: THE IMPERATIVE FOR  
A NEW PARADIGM IN ZIMBABWE'S EDUCATION APPROACH

**Obert Bernard Mlambo**

IDEAL SOCIO- POLITICAL EDUCATION FOR NATION  
BUILDING IN A MULTI-RACIAL AND MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETY

**Isaiah Munyiswa**

DELINEATING STRUCTURAL AND ETHICAL SHADES OF  
SPORTS ADMINISTRATION IN ZIMBABWE: A CASE STUDY OF  
MASHONALAND CENTRAL'S RURAL SCHOOLS.

**Fainos Mangena**

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AGAINST ALL ODDS: 'THE ACADEMIC 'BRAIN DRAIN' AND THE 'WALKING DEAD' IN ZIMBABWE BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY. <b>Munyaradzi Mushonga and Munyaradzi Nyakudya, .....</b>	<b>1</b>
MODERNITY AND IMPERIALISM IN AFRICAN WRITING AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON PEDAGOGY. <b>Edwin Mhandu.....</b>	<b>13</b>
INTERACTIVE TEACHING METHODS IN NATIONAL AND STRATEGIC STUDIES IN TEACHER TRAINING COLLEGES: DEFEATING THE MYOPIA OF PATRIOTIC HISTORY AND POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY <b>Munyaradzi Nyakudya.....</b>	<b>26</b>
RESURRECTING THE TEACHING OF CLASSICS IN ZIMBABWE'S SECONDARY SCHOOLS: THE IMPERATIVE FOR A NEW PARADIGM IN ZIMBABWE'S EDUCATION APPROACH <b>Obert Bernard Mlambo.....</b>	<b>44</b>
IDEAL SOCIO- POLITICAL EDUCATION FOR NATION BUILDING IN A MULTI-RACIAL AND MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETY <b>Isaiah Munyiswa.....</b>	<b>61</b>
DELINEATING STRUCTURAL AND ETHICAL SHADES OF SPORTS ADMINISTRATION IN ZIMBABWE: A CASE STUDY OF MASHONALAND CENTRAL'S RURAL SCHOOLS. <b>Fainos Mangena.....</b>	<b>71</b>

# 'AGAINST ALL ODDS:' THE ACADEMIC 'BRAIN DRAIN' AND THE 'WALKING DEAD' IN ZIMBABWE BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY.

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## **Abstract**

*This paper discusses the 'brain drain' and what it calls the 'walking dead' in Zimbabwe's institutions of higher learning in the period up to just before the birth of the Government of National Unity in February 2009. In particular, it focuses on the 'walking dead,' that is, those academics who may have been physically present but psychologically absent, yet somehow still managed to keep soul and body together, against all the odds. It uses the University of Zimbabwe as its case study, exploring how the 'walking dead' managed to survive practically, professionally and intellectually in an environment of crisis, uncertainty and desperation during that period. The paper shows how the 'walking dead' managed to make ends meet in order to keep soul and body together. We argue that these academics, at the time, were literally subsidising the institutions that purported to employ them, by channelling their ingenuity towards practical survival strategies. We show where these 'walking dead' were 'drained' to internally, that is, within Zimbabwe and also how the strain of operating in an environment of crisis and uncertainty affected them, both on their persons and in the execution of their triple mandate of teaching, research and community service. The paper also offers an assessment of the calibre of academic staff still at the country's premier university, in terms of their qualifications, work experience and publishing record and shows why some of them, highly experienced and accomplished, have not left the country. The paper closes by suggesting ways of improving the situation, arguing that the best coping strategies are those that address the working conditions, first and foremost.*

## **Introduction**

This paper looks at the academic 'brain drain' with special emphasis on the 'walking dead' in Zimbabwe's institutions of higher learning in the period leading to the inauguration of the Government of National Unity (GNU),

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper that was presented at the International Conference on *Political Economies of Displacement in Post-200 Zimbabwe*, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 9-11 June 2008

and how these have tried to survive practically, professionally and intellectually. The 'walking dead' refers to those academics who were both strained and drained by the harsh socio-political and economic conditions and may have been physically present but psychologically absent and may have succumbed to fate but still somehow managed to keep soul and body together, against all the odds. The politically motivated but chaotic land redistribution exercise in 2000, among other factors, shook all sectors of Zimbabwe's economy, and in some cases destroyed them. Zimbabwe's education system was not spared either. Just like all the other sectors of the economy, the education system was hard hit by the 'brain drain,' that is, the exodus of professionals to local, regional and overseas destinations as several studies have shown (Gaidzanwa 1999; McDonald & Crush 2002; Tevera & Crush 2003; Mlambo 2004; Chikanda 2005; Mushonga 2005; Muzvidziwa 2005; Zindi & Munetsi 2008). The United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia were the main overseas destinations, while South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland and Lesotho were the main regional destinations. Locally, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the private sector and corporate organisations, as well as state security agencies, attracted many academics.

Research studies have shown that poor remuneration, dwindling research and library facilities, poorly equipped laboratories, intermittent strikes and job actions, poor working conditions, declining currency exchange regimes, political instability and repression and run-away levels of inflation were some of the factors that drove academic staff from Zimbabwe's universities. Thus, while we know a lot about the loss of skilled and unskilled labour to overseas destinations and across borders, we know very little about Zimbabwe's academic internal 'brain drain.' This paper, therefore, focuses on the internal 'brain drain,' specifically looking at how the 'walking dead' in Zimbabwe's universities slugged it out under excruciating conditions. While the paper uses the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) as its major case study, it argues that what happened at UZ generally applies to most institutions of higher learning in the country.

In this paper, 'brain drain' is also used to mean the loss of valuable time and energy of those academics that remained in Zimbabwe's institutions of higher learning as they resorted to various means of survival. It shows that the 'walking dead,' were forced to supplement their meagre salaries by any means necessary. Some turned to consultancy work and donor-driven research projects, while others opted for private and part-time work as tutors in private colleges. Others still reduced themselves to petty traders, as well as foreign currency dealers, among other alternative means of trying to keep

body and soul together. Most of these survival mechanisms were outside the scope of academia, and, therefore, had no relationship with the academics' triple mandate of research, teaching and community service. Moreover, most of these 'walking dead' were young, inexperienced and generally "stranded" lecturers who suddenly found themselves confronted with heavy teaching loads, besides the need to balance time between teaching and workable survival strategies.

### **Methodology**

Data for this study were collected in two phases, between April and June 2008, through a survey questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, informal conversations, observation and a feedback seminar held in the History Department, UZ on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2008. In addition, there were follow-up interviews carried out in July 2009. Access to important policy documents was negotiated with the authorities.

### **Sample**

Sixty-two (62) out of seventy-five (75) randomly selected lecturers across the University of Zimbabwe's ten faculties completed the questionnaire. Forty-six (46) were male and sixteen (16) female and the majority of them were aged between 30 and 40 years. Of these sixty-two (62), four (4) were graduate teaching assistants, forty-six (46) lecturers, ten (10) senior lecturers and two (2) professors. This number, 62, represents about 15% of the university's academic staff compliment.

### **Instruments and Procedure**

The results reported in this paper largely come from an open-ended questionnaire that was given to lecturers. Interviews were also used to solicit the views of the 'walking dead,' as well as a feedback seminar. Both the questionnaire and interview questions solicited answers on a number of issues, namely, survival strategies, means of supplementing income, staff title and rank, number of publications and conferences attended and the impact of the Zimbabwean crisis on their work as academics. The data collected were then analysed qualitatively, by reconstructing data into recognisable themes and through interpretive-descriptive analyses.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Discourses about Africa continue to be affected by what P. T. Zeleza (2006)

calls Afro pessimism, the belief that Africa is condemned to backwardness and chaos. Amina Mama (2007:15) also raises the same issue in her article about ethical considerations for the study of Africa, demanding that academics must “address Africa's complicated and contradictory location in the world and ensure that our unique vantage points inform methodological and pedagogical strategies that pursue freedom.” Zeleza and Mama are right to be wary of the negative representation of Africa in intellectual discourses. Sadly though, developments on the African continent do not seem encouraging at all, more so as most of the promises of independence have evaporated into thin air, and instead, decline, chaos, and even collapse have been the order of the day. It is against this background that we need to understand the many challenges and problems faced by African universities, and that the academic 'brain drain' in Zimbabwe is a microcosm of the continent-wide challenges and problems being faced by many African universities. These include the need for adequate funding, good governance and access to equity, among others.

This study is premised on the appreciation of the critical importance of university education in the training and fulfilment of the country's human resource requirements and aspirations. All too often, studies on education as a fundamental national investment focus almost exclusively on all other variables, and most notably, the trainee/learner, at the exclusion of the teacher's needs. Adeyemo (2007: 210-212) argues that job satisfaction for the teacher is very important, not only in carrying out any type of educational reform and for a qualitative teaching-learning process, but also in enhancing productivity (or the outcome of the teaching and learning process). In order for this to happen, he continues, there is need for “organizational commitment” which basically entails the employee's commitment to his/her organisation's “mission, vision and values.” In this endeavour, an environment that promotes this kind of organisational commitment should exist in the educational institution itself; otherwise education standards are bound to collapse. This is the situation in which universities in Zimbabwe found themselves.

### **Results: Clutching at Straws: The 'Walking Dead' and the Politics of Survival**

This section addresses two key aspects of the 'walking deads' politics of survival. The first was their practical survival strategies, and the second their struggle for professional and intellectual survival. In both ways, it touches on the implications for the universities' academic standards and the country's education system.

**a) Practical survival strategies**

The 'brain drain' seriously afflicting Zimbabwe's education system in general and universities in particular was caused by poor conditions of service and a harsh working environment. In an economic environment characterised by galloping inflation prior to the institution of the Global Political Agreement in February 2009, salaries were not being reviewed frequently enough to remain meaningful. For example, at the end of February 2008, lecturers received a net salary of ZW\$1.1 billion which, at the time, fetched R450 while the same salary fetched R200 on the parallel market at the end of March. These figures signal a dramatic fall from the ZW\$14 million that academic staff in state universities earned in February 2005, a figure that translated to about R3 500 at the parallel market rate at that time. On average, university lecturers in Zimbabwe then were earning five times less than what other universities in the region offered, and thirty times less than what universities in America and Europe offered.

As a result of the poor salaries prior to the GNU, lecturers were literally forced to engage in a number of activities to augment their incomes. The academics were constantly worried about the ever rising cost of living. It is interesting to note that only about a third of the respondents (20) supplemented their earnings by engaging in activities that are close to their areas of expertise as teachers, lecturers, tutors or examiners in the many educational colleges in town, while the rest were involved in all sorts of *kukiyakiya*.<sup>2</sup> Six lecturers indicated that they offered private lessons to pupils in junior school as long as they were paid good money. Several others taught Ordinary and Advanced Level students in technical and commercial colleges, as well as in universities that offer open learning like Zimbabwe Open University and Women University in Africa. Only 29% of these academics offered consultancy services within the realm of their professional qualifications, while a mere 25% were engaged in funded projects. Not surprisingly, nearly all those who were into consultancy and donor-funded projects were senior lecturers who had been in the university for no fewer than 15 years.

The reality is that the generality of the 'walking dead' were engaged in non-core activities to augment their earnings. Forty-seven respondents (75%) indicated that they were engaged in the buying and selling of one type of

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<sup>2</sup> A term used for to describe unscrupulous ways of looking for money for purely subsistence purposes. See J. Jones (2007). *Imaginations of Futures among Township Youth, a paper presented at the 'Livelihoods for Transformation and Development' Workshop, Harare, 28-29 June.*

ware or another, both at home and in their offices. Items most cited for sale included beef, sugar, fish, vegetables, eggs, pop corn, fruits, sweets and home made buns. Apparently, trading in food items was a very popular undertaking. Before inflation skyrocketed, goods were sold on credit basis.

Indeed, some of the survival strategies of the 'walking dead' were unscrupulous. For example, the University of Zimbabwe Senior Common Room had become a popular rendezvous for the lucrative but illegal foreign currency deals before the 'dollarisation'<sup>3</sup> of the Zimbabwean economy. A couple of lecturers had become 'cash barons' engaged in the buying and selling of foreign currency. At one point, one office at the university was popularly known as the 'Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe' because of the lucrative foreign currency deals that were conducted there.

Conferences were another means used for income generation by the 'walking dead,' 60% from our sample. The conference honorarium would then go towards buying basic foodstuffs that could last them a month or so, depending on the amount. It was also startling to learn from one of our informants that he was using 'fasting' as a cost-cutting measure. This revelation may partly explain why only 10 out of the 62 respondents could afford three meals every day of the week while about 96% confessed to never having lunch at all, "unless it was provided." Interestingly, all 10 were senior lecturers.

In light of all these hardships, one is forced to pause and ask: why did these academics not abandon ship for 'greener pastures'? For the majority of the young lecturers, and a few other senior lecturers, the answer was simply because they had not yet found more lucrative opportunities locally, or in regional and overseas universities and institutions. As a result, 51 (82%) of our respondents indicated that they did not see themselves working at the University of Zimbabwe in the next three years unless there was a drastic change in their fortunes. However, the majority of the 10 senior lecturers pointed out that they did not see it necessary to leave a university that had, in the past, accorded them the opportunity to flourish. They pointed out that some of them had benefited from sabbatical leave and contact visits, donor-funded projects and consultancies, thereby enabling them to build solid foundations upon which they were standing. Most of them were able to

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<sup>3</sup> The term refers to the use of multiple currencies in the conduct of business, especially the United States dollar, following the establishment of the Government of National Unity in February 2009.



purchase houses in suburban areas, buy luxury cars,<sup>4</sup> establish consulting firms and send their children to reputable universities.

Four of the senior lecturers mentioned another very important source of support for 'walking dead.' They indicated that their children who have settled well overseas support them adequately and, therefore, they did not see why they should get stressed with life in the Diaspora when they are well looked after by their children. This, therefore, explains why some of the most experienced and accomplished scholars are still in the country. They invested wisely by educating their children who, in turn, excelled in whatever academic area and profession they undertook.

Others cited family commitments as reasons for not leaving Zimbabwe. Some informants claimed that it was their traditional obligation to "run around" for their aged parents. Only a few respondents and interviewees pointed out that their commitment to make Zimbabwe "succeed" had kept them in the country because they did not believe "quitting" was the answer. Pressed to comment if those who have left the country were less committed, two informants were forthright that was so. Yet others simply stated that they believed they had an important role to play, pointing out, "we cannot all abandon the home, some have to remain behind to monitor the situation from within", with another one asking, "What will become of our children if we all leave? Who will teach them?"

### **b) To publish or not to publish: The struggle for professional and intellectual survival**

In light of the struggle for survival, the dictum 'publish or perish' seems to have had no meaning to academics in Zimbabwe during this period. A. Mlambo (2002) has shown the difficult environment in under which the Faculty of Arts at the University of Zimbabwe was operating, yet he was, somehow, able to continue publishing *against all odds*. It is equally against this very disempowering environment that this paper looks at how academics at the premier university in particular, and Zimbabwe in general succumbed to

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<sup>4</sup> Bizek Phiri, then a lecturer at the University of Zambia, and now HOD of the Zambia Centre for Defence Studies, says he changed his idea of moving away when the chance arose because the Zambian government implemented the policy of selling some of its houses to staff. For Phiri, the offer was irresistible, as this was "...perhaps the only chance I had of ever owning a property". There are certainly academics in Bizek Phiri's class at the University of Zimbabwe who have benefited from the system, and continue to benefit in many ways.

the nail biting economic and political environment. Because research feeds into teaching, it also meant that teaching was equally suffering. At the University of Zimbabwe, a good number of full time lecturers earned themselves the tag 'visiting lecturers' at their own work place because they were rarely seen on campus and neither were they available for student consultations for reasons that are now clear.

It is clear, then, that most of the survival strategies and activities described above had serious implications for the academics' professional and intellectual formation. Academics that are always on the lookout for a good 'deal' cannot be expected to be intellectually productive. Their professional and intellectual formation was further compounded by heavy teaching loads which made it very difficult to engage in any research. All these had serious implications in terms of quality and capacity building. For instance, in a number of departments, some programmes were suspended. The History Department, for example, has not been able to offer the Master of Arts in War Studies Degree since the last group graduated in 2007 due to severe staffing constraints, while the Master of Arts in Heritage Studies Degree, initially projected to resume in February 2009, has not yet resumed. The Religious Studies Classics and Philosophy Department also officially expressed its lack of capacity to supervise DPhil and MPhil students because of staffing constraints. In fact, many faculties and departments in the university are suffering from the same fate. The most startling, and indeed revealing, is the fact that the College of Health Sciences was granted permission to engage its Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) to "undertake the full teaching load of a lecturer" (Staff Development and Welfare Committee Report, 27 October 2006). It is such stop gap measures that masked the seriousness of the situation and which also explain why the UZ only advertised 133 vacant posts in February 2008 when it was apparent that the vacancy rate was more serious than that.

It is our contention that, while the staffing situation was bleak, quality has suffered even more seriously. For a research university such as the UZ, the best way of measuring success is through research output. However, there was little research taking place at the UZ during those years because of lack of research funds as well as a difficult working environment. The annual Faculty Research Days were no longer held. For the Faculty of Arts, the last known Faculty of Arts Research Directory was published in 1999. The UZ Research Board last made available ZW\$200 billion for research by the entire UZ academic community in March 2008. This was after several years without providing anything. However, the figure was so insignificant that most lecturers did not even bother to apply. Because of dwindling research,

UZ is faced with a dearth of academics with doctoral qualifications.

Lack of enough research funds has also meant a cut in the once vibrant seminars that used to be a regular feature on departmental and faculty calendars. Seminars, workshops and conferences provide the best publishing opportunities. Their absence means fewer publications. Moreover, academics in Zimbabwe are no longer taking seminars seriously for obvious reasons. There is always poor attendance at the few seminars that are still running. One Deputy Dean of a faculty bemoaned this poor attendance and also questioned why universities and institutions in Zimbabwe were not able to organise conferences on many topical issues afflicting Zimbabwe when the world was having a plethora of such conferences. All this partly explains why out of the 62 respondents, only 8 had at least 5 publications since 2000. Another sad chapter to intellectual growth was the banning, by UZ authorities, of the once vibrant student-organised seminars that used to provide a forum for critical engagement and reflection on issues affecting the nation.

In terms of experience, the majority of the lecturers on the ground then were still very junior, both in terms of age and experience. For example, 8 of the 12 lecturers (both temporary and permanent) in the History Department then were all under 34 years of age. Six of these 8 members were only in their second year of lecturing in the university. This is the picture that generally obtained in the whole university as the average age of the 62 respondents to our questionnaire was in the 35-40 years category while the average period of service in the university was 6 years. However, these statistics can be deceiving and mask more than they reveal since there were few senior members who had individually served the UZ for many years. For instance, one lecturer had been with the university since 1982, while 7 others joined the university in the early 1990s. All the same, on the whole, the majority of the lecturers who were on the ground then, particularly at the University of Zimbabwe, did not have the requisite qualifications to teach and supervise research at the postgraduate level. As a result, enrolment was falling in most postgraduate programmes. For instance, while the Faculty of Agriculture had a total of 50 postgraduate students (both DPhil and MPhil) in October 2001, the figure had fallen to 22 in May 2005 and to 15 in June 2007. From May 2005 to June 2007, the Faculty of Science witnessed a dramatic fall in postgraduate students from 37 to 14, a 62% decline (Staff Development and Welfare Committee Report, 27 October 2007). This trend, observed in these two Faculties, does not augur well for a university that projects a 50:50 ratio for undergraduate and postgraduate student intake policy.

## **The Way Forward?**

It is not easy to chart a way forward given the persistent and continuously mutating and complex conditions of uncertainty gripping Zimbabwe. However, any policies that attempt to block the free movement of skilled professionals would be counterproductive. Against this background, one can then ask: what are the best coping strategies and alternatives to deal with the internal 'brain drain' and the related exodus of academic staff from the country's institutions of higher learning? Pundits have argued that the best coping strategies are those that address the working conditions, with an incentives and motivation system as the best antidote. Attractive salaries and better working conditions are key in retaining skilled professionals in their home countries.

To this end, government should therefore play a pivotal role in creating an enabling and conducive working environment for academics. Universities themselves need to look for ways of generating income as a way of reducing their dependency on government. Makerere University in Uganda successfully went this way following decades of collapse (Sawyer, 2004:47). The University of Zimbabwe can adopt, with modifications, the examples of the Midlands State University and The National University of Science and Technology who in 2002/2003 instituted income-generating projects that were meant to boost their incomes (ZWNEWS.com, 24 September 2003). While these and other means may be noble in their intentions, it has to be qualified that what is needed first is to get back the country's entire political and economic systems correct once again.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has shown the nature of the internal 'brain drain' in terms of where most of the 'walking dead' got drained to before the GNU, showing how Zimbabwe's 'walking dead' were struggling to survive practically and professionally. It has shown that some of their practical survival means include the buying and selling of any goods, particularly food items like meat, vegetables, sugar and pop corn, among others, activities that were outside the scope of the academics' professional duties. Still, others were surviving by offering consultancy services, through donor-funded projects and illegal but lucrative foreign currency dealings. The paper has also highlighted the impact of the 'Zimbabwean crisis' (B. Raftopoulos, 201) on the academics' professional and intellectual growth. The paper also offers brief but practical alternatives to addressing the 'brain drain' and the working conditions of the 'walking dead.'

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