

“Healing the dead”: exhumation and reburial as a tool to truth telling and reclaiming the past in rural Zimbabwe.

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ZIMBABWE: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A history of state orchestrated violence, repressive legislation and impunity

Zimbabwe is a nation whose last one hundred years of official history and policy stand as an example of how to ensure that truth and peace do not prevail.

During the last three decades in particular, there has never been a period of sustained peace or genuine reconciliation to the past. We are a nation with a history of unresolved conflicts, including racism rooted in colonialism, and ethnic conflict, which predated and was intentionally exacerbated by colonialism. We are a nation with a poor tolerance of political diversity and a leadership that is committed to never leaving power voluntarily. In the last 40 years, this country has had only two political leaders – Ian Smith, from 1964 until 1979, and Robert Mugabe – from 1980 until the present. Both leaders have ruled more or less in the context of a one party state, and have become embroiled in civil wars to destroy legitimate alternative political voices.

Political repression has been compounded throughout the decades by a pattern of unjust laws and impunity for perpetrators.¹ Sadly, in the post-colonial peace accord era that began in April 1980, there was no concerted, formalised attempt to allow truth telling or to promote reconciliation between the three warring parties – ZANU, ZAPU and the Rhodesians². There was also no comprehensive attempt to repeal laws infringing civil liberties. Zimbabwe remained, in fact, in a State of Emergency from 1965 until 1990, with all the super-legal powers to state officials that this entails.

Since 1979, we have had no fewer than five blanket amnesties, benefiting most on every occasion, those who perpetrated crimes against their fellow Zimbabweans on behalf of the government of the day³. There were amnesties in 1979 and 1980, which benefited predominantly

¹ Amnesty International; *Zimbabwe: the toll of impunity*; London, AI Index AFR 46/034/2002, June 2002.

² President Mugabe did make an admirable speech urging reconciliation at independence, on the “forgive and forget” model of moving forward and not looking back. While there was no truth commission and no official accountability through due process, there have been numerous scholarly publications on the war of liberation and the roles of various parties written from a multitude of ideological perspectives, so that much of the 1960/ 70s history is nonetheless readily available and in the public discourse.

³ Amnesty International, *ibid*, June 2002.

Rhodesian army members, but also pardoned crimes by ZIPRA and ZANLA. Further amnesties in 1988, 1995 and most recently October 2000 have pardoned predominantly Zimbabwe army, police and those acting in the state's interests, such as "war veterans".

The 1988 pardon made the Zimbabwean army unit, the 5 Brigade, unanswerable for the estimated 10-20,000 Ndebeles they massacred during a regional civil war from 1982 to 1987, which effectively achieved its aim of destroying ZAPU as a separate political entity. In December 1987, the leaders of ZANU and ZAPU signed the "Unity Accord", in which ZAPU was absorbed into ZANU. The general amnesty of 1988 also pardoned a handful of dissidents for their approximately 300 murders⁴.

The 1995 and 2000 amnesties again pardoned mostly ruling party supporters from acts of violence carried out against those perceived not to support ZANU, in the context of the general elections that took place in those years⁵. *De facto* impunity since October 2000 remains a feature of the political scene, once more ensuring no prosecutions of state officials/supporters for violence against the opposition.

Furthermore, recent years have seen the enactment of some of the most repressive legislation in the nation's history. These include the draconian Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), both passed during 2002. It is no coincidence that the latest round of repression occurs at the same time as the first meaningful political opposition since 1988 has gained majority support in Zimbabwe – the Movement for Democratic Change. The new laws are aimed at undermining civil society, political opposition and the voice of the independent media.⁶

We currently endure a low grade civil war that has not cost many lives, but has resulted in the internal displacement of around 500,000 Zimbabweans, an inflation rate of 700%, an unemployment rate of 80% and now a food deficit leaving 50% of the population facing starvation for the second year running. Human rights organisations in Zimbabwe have documented around 60,000 victims of human rights violations in the past three years, with around 90% of violations perpetrated by the ZANU government and their supporters; close to nil prosecutions have resulted. Politically selective starvation is our government's latest weapon: members of the political opposition have been denied access to food, including their infants⁷.

Truth telling in times of transition or peri-peace accord situations

We have been through two post accord periods now, in 1980 and again in 1988; yet Zimbabwe, after two civil wars is embroiled once more in a cycle of state orchestrated violence and denial,

⁴ Legal Resources Foundation and Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace: *Breaking the Silence, building true peace: a report on the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980-1988*, Harare, LRF and CCJP, 1997.

⁵ Zimbabwe human rights NGO forum; *Election 2000: who was responsible?*; Harare, ZHRNGO Forum, 2001. Also 2 reports by Physicians for Human Rights, Denmark: *Zimbabwe the Presidential election: 44 days to go*; Johannesburg, January 2002; and *We'll make them run: post election violence in Zimbabwe*; Copenhagen, May 2002, for assessments of who has committed human rights violations in the past two years.

⁶ For the potential implications of the POSA, see Danish Medical Bulletin; *The rule of law, law and the health profession in Zimbabwe*; Copenhagen, August 2002.

⁷ PHR-DK; *Vote Zanu-PF or starve*; Johannesburg, November 2002.

and seems to have learnt very little at the official, national level, in terms of accountability, or of truth telling and peace-building.

The work of the current author could be found by some not to belong in a volume that concentrates primarily on post peace accord interventions and peace building. However, it is reasonable to at least hope that Zimbabwe in late 2003 is in a peri-peace accord situation. Furthermore, this author would believe that the type of information that civil society places in the public domain at this time is crucial, not only for future planning, but even to enhance the likelihood of a peace accord falling into place, and also in order to influence the terms of that accord. The Zimbabwean government has enacted laws and enforced state repression to make access to the “truth” almost impossible on a daily basis within and without Zimbabwe. Yet the international community and policy makers in particular need to know what is happening in order to perceive the urgency of bringing Mugabe and his cohorts to book. Truth telling is therefore vital at this historical moment, and great creativity is needed to find that space both within and without the nation. This is not without its practical, moral and personal risks, not only for those who author “subversive” work - Amani Trust in Matabeleland that pioneered the work discussed in this chapter, was forced to close after being referred to in Parliament as “illegal” in late 2002. Also very vulnerable are the rural victims who tell the stories that are the basis of the work written up here.

Civil society initiatives to promote truth and peace: LRF/CCJP report

While the official picture is bleak, it has been possible in certain moments for civil society in Zimbabwe to find spaces in which to promote truth telling and peace-building activities, sometimes with national impact and in other contexts, at localised levels. At the national level, for example, two major non governmental organisations, the Legal Resources Foundation (LRF) and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), sponsored the researching and writing of a report that documented the massacres of the 1980s in Matabeleland, under the orders of the current Mugabe government. To date, there has been little official acknowledgement of the government’s responsibility in these massacres. Official inquiries were held into events, but the government has never released their findings⁸.

The LRF/CCJP report entitled “*Breaking the silence – building true peace: a report on the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980-1988*” remains the only substantive internally produced historical account of this period. Its findings were based on archival material and key informant interviews, but also on around 1,000 personal testimonies collected individually in the remote villages in which the violence took place. Produced on a shoestring budget and with only one full time and one part time researcher, this report documents in great detail, the village by village impact of the years of 5 Brigade massacres, in two districts. It remains a partial history but gives an indication of the scale and unfolding of the massacres.

In spite of no government response to this report, which has now gone to several editions including a summary in 3 languages, its existence and general knowledge of its findings have

⁸ The Dumbutshena Report of 1982 and the Chidyausiku Report of 1985, which resulted from official inquiries into the political violence, remain confidential to this day, in spite of promises at the time that they would be public documents.

entered the public discourse. The political violence since 2000 has also led to a new understanding of these earlier events; the 1980s violence was regionalised, and only understood in the affected region. The current state violence, in keeping with support for the MDC, affects the entire country, which has meant new, widespread retrospective empathy for those who suffered previously, by those who suffer now.

“Breaking the silence” was not written only with the intention of truth telling. It was also intended to “build true peace”. To this end, the report has chapters that identify current consequences for victims of the 1980s, and makes recommendations aimed at resolving some of these consequences.

Recommendations include: national acknowledgement of events; lustration of perpetrators in positions of authority; altering of existing legislation to allow for state reparation to victims, including the issuing of death certificates for the murdered and disappeared; identification and reburial of human remains; access to mental and physical health care for victims affected by the violence; communal as opposed to individual reparation to affected communities in the form of development; constitutional safeguards. Public national debate and open dialogue around the report findings was a final recommendation.

While this report was entirely NGO-sponsored and produced, it nonetheless has many of the aspects associated with more official human rights reports produced via government or truth commission processes. This includes giving victims a leading role in the writing of the history of atrocities, acknowledging current problems linked to the past violence and the making of recommendations.

While the government has done nothing whatsoever to take up any of the recommendations, prior to the 2000 violence certain NGOs pursued some of these recommendations, and the outcome of one such endeavour will be the focus of the rest of this chapter.

“Healing the dead”: restoring the social fabric through exhumation and cultural ritual

In the wake of the “Breaking the silence” report and in direct response to its recommendations, Amani Trust Matabeleland was established, and worked with torture survivors from 1998 until late 2002 when the Zimbabwean government harassed this NGO into closure.

Amani Trust’s activities in Matabeleland illustrated that it is not necessary to wait for an official “post accord” space in order to undertake peace-building initiatives. Community members proved capable of creating new relationships at moments in history that in the late 1990s had little relationship to the timing of peace accords signed many years and hundreds of kilometres away; they have also proved capable of renegotiating and reclaiming their pasts when their nation as a whole was in a state of repression. It may even be the case that involving communities in experiences that empowered them to claim certain rights and create “positive peace” at a very local level, has increased the likelihood of those communities taking part proactively in democratic processes at the national level. The current state repression can be seen as a direct response to the growing voice of ordinary people.

Those who staffed Amani believe it is of primary importance to work on the problems that the survivors themselves identify, as this is where the existing resilience and energy will be most likely to become apparent. In this respect, we reinforce John Paul Lederach's assertion that peace-building efforts need to engage ordinary people, and not only representational leadership, if new relational patterns and structures are to be generated in an authentic and sustainable way.⁹

Through tracing families and communities involved in their interventions longitudinally over three years, *Amani attempted to do what few studies have tried to do – that is to assess the longer impact of peace-building activities. Has “healing the dead” resulted in sustainable peace at the community level?* Certainly in the first three years after the programme was initiated, dramatic and long lasting improvements were reported and observed (see further in this chapter). Unfortunately since 2002, the violence and repression has left further follow up impossible and has undoubtedly reversed some of the gains painstakingly achieved in previous years.

Amani Trust, Matabeleland, started out in the mould of a fairly conventional health and human rights NGO, with a staff of health professionals and an aim of establishing prevalence of survivors of torture and organised violence (TOV), and putting in place hospital-based counselling services to offer treatment for post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression. This was in keeping with much literature that maintains that TOV survivors can be expected to have a high prevalence of PTSD and other psychological disorders in need of conventional psychotherapeutic treatment.

While symptoms representing these “conditions” could undoubtedly be found if sought¹⁰, Amani staff realised very quickly that survivors themselves do not spontaneously recognise counselling as a basic need in a post trauma situation, and do not always define the worst consequences of violence in terms that coincide with standard psychological diagnostic tools.

What we have also realized is that the impact of the subversion of community values as a result of violence, is felt differently in cultures where individuals see themselves primarily as members of communities, rather than as discreet individuals in the western sense. The corruption of community values and ways of being is what most offends and disturbs our survivors, and it is this loss that is still being mourned years later.

The issue of community destruction as a result of violence is one that has huge ramifications in southern Africa. Destroying the cohesive functioning of communities has been a deliberate, strategic policy by the governments of many African countries, including Zimbabwe - a weak community is a politically compliant one. The legacy of this destruction is still felt today. Apathy, depression and an unwillingness to assume leadership roles are not untypical in our communities. The chances of promoting democratic participation and of people standing up for

⁹ See Introduction to this report by Tristan Anne Borer for reference to Lederach.

¹⁰ Amani Trust conducted an epidemiological survey of 21 primary health care out patient departments in one rural district in 1998; approximately 49% of all attending clients on any day screened positively for mixed anxiety/depression symptoms to a level that in a western setting would be assumed to indicate a need for intervention; 20% of all attending clients had considered suicide within the last two weeks. Furthermore, none of these clients were in the clinics with the hope of receiving psychological help, but were there for somatic disorders such as sleeplessness, aches and pains, etc. There is little understanding of the somatisation of psychological distress in the Zimbabwean health setting, and primary health care workers mostly do not have the skills to counsel.

their human rights in the future are seriously diminished in such communities. The task of speaking out is made harder for survivors when impunity exists. In Zimbabwe, perpetrators of violence are still in powerful positions, and survivors remain silenced and afraid. The overwhelming residues of unprocessed pain, anger, suspicion, and grief remain in the community forum as a negative, silent weight, a dark, even humiliating secret that undermines shared community activities, causing finger pointing and division.

At the same time, central to programmes where violence and trauma has been so widespread, is the acknowledgement that many thousands of people have proved themselves to be survivors rather than victims: while all have suffered terrible damage and while this cannot be minimised or ignored, there is certainly a wide range in ability to cope with such experiences. Patterns of resilience and support need to be recognized and facilitated, and the incredible courage and power of victims to carry on and to find the impulse to try to rebuild, even in settings of total loss, is a central part of the perceptive healer's resource base.

In Matabeleland, most fundamental is the problem of aggrieved spirits and the presence of the murdered dead in unacceptable graves: the primary request to Amani was for an intervention in this regard. The significance of ancestral spirits in Ndebele belief systems is of central importance: it is the spirits of the dead that play essential roles in the lives of every family, guiding and nurturing them. In order for an ancestral spirit to fulfill its true task in protecting the family, it needs an honourable funeral, and even more importantly, another traditional ritual known as "umbuyiso". A spirit that has not been honoured becomes an angry and restless spirit, bringing bad luck to the family and the community at large. Amani has been told of a wide variety of current problems that are linked to spirits of the dead, including bad behaviour in children, failure to marry, illness, drought, floods, crop failure, failure of development initiatives.

To give one example - a family whose daughter was massacred, was left to raise her two very small male children. These two sons, who in 1998 were aged nineteen and twenty, were said to be delinquent, and one was in jail at that time. The family observes that:

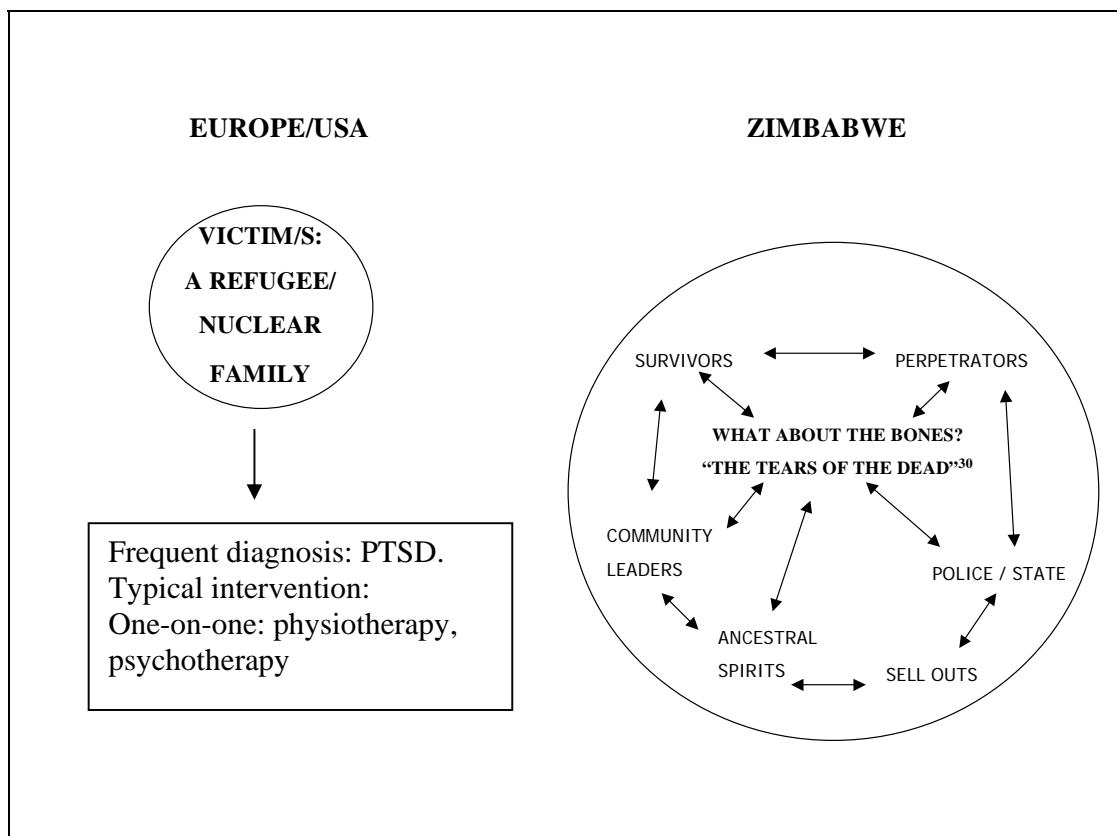
since they were tiny, the two children have been subject to dreaming about their mother. Even as young boys, they refused to do household chores, but would go and sit on the hillside and cry, looking for their mother's spirit. When she possesses them she is angry and makes them behave abnormally, to remind us she is wandering and not at peace. Our daughter needs to be brought home safely, but we do not own the grave, and have no say over how this should happen. [client interview 1998]

The spirit of the mother was referred to as "not resting - she is in the wilderness. She is wandering and was never properly brought home to watch over her children and to play a role in keeping them safe as they grew up."

It was in the pursuit of a solution to the problem of the restless dead that Amani became involved in exhumations, as a necessary step to decent funerals and appropriate cultural rituals. Our work is not about the exhumation of hundreds or thousands of skeletons in a short space of time. We are more concerned in exhuming fewer graves and working closely with the same families and communities over several years, in order to gain a more thorough understanding of how the

process of exhumations and reburials can transform the lives of families and help to restore the social fabric that has been devastated by two consecutive civil wars in our region. We have been working with the same communities in five adjacent villages for three years now, trying to gain through consecutive qualitative community, family and individual meetings, a more complete sense of the community's perception of the need to exhume, and the consequences of reburial, from cultural, psychological, individual and group perspectives.

Illustration: two types of intervention setting



At this stage, our programme is still exploring the efficacy of exhumations as a tool to healing and restoration, and it will be several more years before we can start to translate this into something approaching efficiency, with dramatically increased numbers of exhumations.

The Argentinean Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) have been an invaluable source of help and support to Amani, offering their technical expertise and also their training, to enhance our own ambition of having a sustainable exhumation team. They have made six visits to Zimbabwe, for training and exhumation exercises.

The major difference between our exhumation programme and most other programmes that aim at identifying the dead is that we exhume with the *primary intention of facilitating community healing processes*. In fact, this is the only palpable reason we have for exhuming in a country

that currently offers impunity to perpetrators: at the moment there is no forensic potential for evidence from exhumations. We believe very strongly, on the basis of the work we have done to date, that emotional support to families is an essential component when exhumations are in progress, as is the need for extensive consultation with families to ensure all is done in a way that heals rather than creating further harm. Any more widespread programme we develop in the future will certainly continue to advocate as essential, the profound emotional and cultural significance of reburial, and will have to allow for community support in this regard.

To heal individuals very often has a ripple effect that leads to healing simultaneously at the level of a larger community and its value system. Individuals and families themselves acknowledge this. For example, during a recent reburial exercise in Zimbabwe, the family of one exhumed victim strongly expressed the opinion that it was not just themselves but the whole community that had been offended by their relative's murder and who needed to be included and healed through finding a solution:

That was a public place where he was wrongfully lying, so many people were supposed to witness [the exhumation], it was not supposed to be a secret: his being there was disapproved by the whole community, so they were all supposed to witness the correction of this wrong. [client interview 1999]

Apart from the inappropriately disposed of dead, a further enormous problem in Matabeleland is that of disappearances. A recent survey in Matabeleland reveals that as many as one in four survivors has a disappeared person in the family, the majority of these relating to the 1980s. The problem of disappearances is not unique to Matabeleland or Zimbabwe, and in any culture, the lack of a body to mourn causes serious psychological distress to relatives. As one Argentinean commentator describes it, the disappeared are denied a place among the living and also denied a place among the dead.

All are left to languish in a kind of limbo, and relatives are left with many heart breaking and unanswerable questions in their minds - is the person really dead? If so, at what point did s/he die? Did s/he suffer a great deal first? Where is the body now? Most of all, people are unclear as to what to do next. At what point should the family finally accept the person is never coming back and how should this acceptance be expressed? How does one mourn when there is no body to weep over?

It seems that in Matabeleland, whether the deceased are disappeared or in a mass grave, the cultural consequences for surviving families and the community at large is similar - the spirits are all unappeased and jointly responsible for widespread malaise and natural disasters.

The need for "Umbuyiso"

At times some things do not work well. When we try and find out, it is said my father's spirit is angry over the way he died and the fact that his spirit has remained in the wilderness for so long. [client interview 1998]

Approximately one year after the initial funeral, a second extremely important ritual takes place, known as “umbuyiso”, during which the spirit of the dead is officially brought home and inaugurated as an ancestor. All adults, including teenagers who were parents when they died, have to have “umbuyiso” performed, and the ceremony has to take place during late winter, before the first buds are on the trees. Only the most important family elders take part in this ritual. At nightfall, the spirit of the deceased is conveyed via a goat back to the homestead. At the threshold of the deceased’s homestead, the spirit goes through a ritual of being reintroduced to the living, and of being welcomed as an ancestor. This process brings the person’s soul out of the wilderness and into the home to rest, and to watch over the living.

The next day, the ceremony widens to include the whole community. Everyone in the village will now visit and pay respects to the family, bringing food and beer. The goat is slaughtered in a ritual way to honour the dead person, and is consumed by all those present. If this ceremony does not take place, the person does not really become an ancestor, and it *cannot* take place if the prior funeral has not been conducted in the right way. Sadly, it is almost invariably the case that proper funeral rites were not conducted for the dead, particularly during the 1980s violence, and also at times during the 1970s violence.

Lack of closure - and the need for public witnessing to ensure this

It is clear that my father's spirit was hovering angrily. He had never been laid to rest, but now he has finally been laid to rest. Thus he is now happy and has immediately showered me with blessings. [client interview 1999]

We were told that in times of war in the past, warriors would bring back to surviving families soil from the graves of those who died on distant battle fields, to symbolise the return of the dead to their homesteads. Full funeral rituals would take place around this soil, which symbolically represented the deceased. Some families in our region have tried this process and other symbolic processes in relation to their murdered relatives, but such families are often those most pro-active about wanting exhumation and reburial now they perceive it as a possibility, and claim such symbolic compromises have proved not really effective or acceptable to the spirits.

One could hypothesise that the reason why these recent symbolic rituals have failed, is the *lack of public witnessing* that has accompanied them. Typically, because of the whole secrecy and fear that has surrounded these murders, attempts to perform such symbolic funerals have also taken place almost in secret, involving only some family members and remaining almost un-talked of. This is in stark contrast to the normal traditional funeral, which would involve all the extended family and the community at large. Perhaps what the spirits need is not so much the actual presence of their bones at these events, as the presence of the entire extended community.

One of the primary intentions of funerals in any culture is to acknowledge the life and achievements of the deceased in a public setting - to honour them, and remember the best of them in their lifetimes, before sending them on to whatever spiritual world that community believes in. To confirm their deaths is to confirm that they in fact lived. Failure to go through this

essentially communal event, is thus to deny that their lives and achievements were important to anyone - even to deny that these dead ever lived.

It is no coincidence that politically motivated massacres all too often involve deliberate desecration of cultural needs surrounding death, making the honourable public recognition of these deaths almost impossible. 5 Brigade made a point of forbidding mourning, and on occasions forced people to take part in grossly disrespectful behaviour, such as dancing and singing on the shallow graves of the newly murdered. In other cases people were threatened with death and were in fact killed, if they cried for the dead. Others were forced to leave bodies where 5 Brigade chose to leave them, on pain of death. This could include in ant bear holes, anthills, rubbish dumps and any other handy hole in the ground. Mass graves were very common, where between two and twenty people could share a small grave. Disposal of the dead could also mean forcing villagers to assist in the throwing of bodies down mine shafts, which abound in Matabeleland, in particular in Matabeleland South. It also, at times, meant leaving the bodies out in the open, to be scavenged by animals until the bones were finally removed by 5 Brigade.

Derek Summerfield refers to the need to publicly remember the dead in order to heal people in situations of mass murder:

Those abusing power typically refuse to acknowledge their dead victims, as if they had never existed and were mere wraiths in the memories of those left behind. This denial, and the impunity of those who maintain it, must be challenged if survivors are to make sense of their losses and the social fabric is to mend ¹¹.

It is our experience that even where the burial sites of the murdered are known, the lack of culturally appropriate funerals has left people in a similar state of suspended mourning as in the case of disappearances. While people have certainty about their dead, such certainty at times offers small consolation, tied up as it is with shameful memories of how survivors may have been forced to take part in degrading practices at the time of murder - and there can also be little solace in vivid memories of the brutal ways in which people died. In the quote following, the grandchild of a murder victim speaks at his grandfather's reburial ceremony and contrasts the terrible experience of his grandfather's first burial, twenty years previously, with his reburial in 1999.

I am also personally grateful [for the exhumation] because I participated in the first burial of my grandfather Ben Khumalo. At that time I was a child doing grade six. I was among those forced by the Rhodesian soldiers to remove my grandfather from the dip tank and bury him, still in handcuffs, in that other shallow grave. This was a very painful experience for a young child.... I have always wondered what would be the end result of this, but now this reburial has come as a great relief to me. I can tell you this has been truly healing, it has helped to heal my wounds, which I have had since a young boy. Thank you.

[reburial speech, August 1999]

¹¹ Derek Summerfield; Raising the dead; war, reparation and the politics of memory. In BMJ, volume 311 August 1995, page 495.

The lack of a funeral is thus traumatic both in the case of disappearances and in the case of brutally massacred people, who have been humiliatingly and degradingly murdered and then shockingly disposed of. To leave these dead like that, is to fail to redress a desperately unacceptable situation. In almost any cultural setting it is easy to understand how such atrocious graves allow no peace to the families of the deceased, nor to the spirits of the murdered, and in fact are daily reminders of terrible events. For the entire community, the past cannot become the past - the presence of graves in school grounds, on pathways, in fields where crops are supposed to be growing, are continual reminders of atrocities which have not been redressed.

Breaking the Silence

The murderers did not know that one day there would be such evidence

[extract from prayer, reburial, August 1999]

What is very apparent is that while communities have discussed these issues with Amani Trust, prior to our engagement with any community, in none of these communities had people got together to tackle any of the issues surrounding their histories of violence, and this in spite of the fact that much of the actual violence and murders took place in the form of mass torture of entire villages, all at one time and place. Also within families, parents and children, husbands and wives have more often than not, never discussed these events. Families are fractured and incapacitated by the desire to repress painful and humiliating memories, also by an uneasiness about how to express the unsayable, and a deep seated distrust and suspicion of anyone who comes offering to help.

It quickly became clear to our Amani team that some of these problems could be best tackled by community debate and sharing, rather than by individuals. In view of this, we decided to begin what we refer to as the Focused Community Research and Rehabilitation Programme. We were repeatedly invited to help, by community leaders of five adjacent villages in Matabeleland South where violence was intense in both eras, the 1970s and 1980s, and where there are multiple problems relating to the dead. We have been involved in this extended community of several thousand people, for three years, on a weekly basis, acting as facilitators to empower the community to begin to resolve the present problems left by past violence.

Restoring the social fabric

... the ceremony has lit a lamp that sheds a lot of light, regardless of the darkness around the lamp - and now it has brought a lot of healing to our situation - *now we are a people*.... I do not doubt that we are going to achieve our future goals like we have achieved whatever we have done up to today.

[community leader at community meeting, June 2000]

We hope that by helping to heal community rifts and by promoting improved emotional well-being and removing some of the guilt and pain of the past, we will see the social fabric being

repaired in ways that leave communities in an improved position to take part in all aspects of life, including development initiatives.

A feeling that is often implicit in communities where gross violence has taken place, is that somebody must be to blame, and that somebody in the community itself must have somehow sold out. The perpetual question of *why did this happen* to somebody who was so blameless, is eternally there for families of victims. Sadly, it has been our perception that wherever there has been a political murder, somebody from within the community itself will all-too-often be labelled as somehow responsible. Psychologically speaking, these murders cause enormous amounts of pain, anger and grief, and such overwhelming emotions will inevitably find an outlet. It is very threatening for a torture survivor to put the blame where it belongs - on the armed men who perpetrated the crime, in fear that they might come back and exact further revenge - and so the blame tends to find its way on to the heads of neighbours. This leaves communities where there has been widespread organized violence in a partially dysfunctional state, fractured by long standing - in our experience mostly unsubstantiated - beliefs as to who did or didn't "sell out" in the past. Grudges can be held for decades, with all the resultant negative impact on community functioning and cohesion - and in our experience, such assumptions are usually based on nothing concrete, and are spoken of behind closed doors, so that those accused have no forum for redress.

In one village, a major rift existed between the chief's brother and the community for twenty years, and was only resolved when a funeral service was facilitated for a mass grave of more than twenty adolescents, massacred in his field. This family, wrongly identified as "sell-outs" had been marginalized for two decades. However, after being given a voice at community meetings and co-operating with the desire of families of the deceased to honour their dead, the family has been fully accepted back into community life. In the voice of the now reintegrated family head:

Now people are free to get there [to the mass grave] and do whatever they need. These days they visit regularly, and even during beer drinking, I am a free man.

[Client interview, June 2000]

The following statement is by the son of a murder victim, made one year after the reburial ceremony, in which he reflects on events. What is interesting to note is the way the community's relationship to his family is perceived as having changed post reburial; community acceptance and community reaction to events was given prominence throughout his interview:

All was deteriorating at my homestead. We had totally lost our dignity as a family clan. Relatives were no longer interested in paying visits to our home. But you should see how things are now. We have regained our dignity and status within the community, and people visit us freely....

...I had a great problem. I couldn't get married. Twice I tried and twice I failed. Now I am a happy man. I am married, with all the expected traditions of our culture, which left all the community congratulating me. I slaughtered an ox in recognition of the new glow of success that surrounds our family. Now I have a child and I am so pleased about all this.... I am watching her grow and being the darling of everyone. Everyone sees these developments as a miracle.

[client interview, June 2000]

While there are graves from both the colonial and post-colonial eras, far greater problems are connected to graves of those murdered by the current regime, particularly when in need of exhumation. These graves are very politically sensitive, the fear surrounding them much greater, the exact facts harder to ascertain, and the pain and bitterness surrounding them more intense. It is also particularly in relation to these graves, that people want the truth to be seen by all.

Restoring the true history of events from this denied era of violence would only be possible if all in the community could witness whatever the graves could reveal. The State has repeatedly denied the existence of these graves, and denied that innocent lives were lost, saying those who died were armed dissidents. The silence surrounding these graves and the need to break this and restore truth and cultural values is therefore intense.

A Case Example: Exhumation of the Sitezi Six

... the process of healing, does not occur through the delivery of an object (eg a pension, a monument etc) but through the process that takes place *around* the object. It is how the individual processes the symbolic meaning of reparations that is critical¹².

1. History of the grave

One of the most complex graves we have dealt with, was a mass grave of six who were murdered and buried together in a shallow grave within the vicinity of a 5 Brigade detention and torture centre in 1984.

A 5 Brigade unit was based at Sitezi A1 Rest Camp in north Gwanda district during the curfew of 1984. They turned the rest camp into a detention center. Once the 5 Brigade moved out, the camp was left derelict: it is believed to be cursed, and locals have not removed materials from the buildings there, which is surprising considering the value and expense of building materials. The only additions that have been made, are graffiti on the walls of buildings, saying that 5 Brigade came and murdered the children of the region.

i. A survivor's account

At a community meeting, somebody revealed that he had climbed alive out of a mass grave in Sitezi. His account was very disturbing. He revealed that he and many others had been held at Sitezi Camp and tortured. He himself was accused of being a dissident. He was taken together with eight others to a stretch of land a few hundred metres away from the camp. They were ordered to start digging a pit. The ground was very hard and they could not dig deep. They were then all instructed to lie down in the grave. They were being seriously tortured during this time, and several had broken bones at this point.

The soldiers then ordered the other men to identify our client as a dissident. When they refused to do so, they were beaten. The soldier in charge sliced a piece off the branch of a tree nearby so that he could hang up his radio. He played loud music the whole time he was watching the

¹² Brandon Hamber; Repairing the irreparable; CSV, ??

villagers being beaten, and later, he continued to listen to the radio and lean his elbows on the tree on either side of the radio, while he personally shot the men dead.

On a whim, this soldier allowed two of the nine men, including this survivor, to get out of the grave and run away, and then shot the others dead, one at a time. One other jumped up of his own accord and ran away while being shot at: by some miracle he survived. Our client has had serious emotional disturbances ever since, and suffers from feelings of guilt, as he feels the others died because they loyally refused to label him a dissident. One of the three persons to escape alive from this died a year or two later, as a result of injuries sustained in this incident.

ii. Children of the dead

Our next involvement with this grave, was the arrival at Amani offices of a nurse, who said her father had been murdered and lay in a mass grave in Sitezi. She knew we talked to people about such things, and wanted to let us know how disturbed she was by the fact her father's grave had never been honoured. She wanted to know if there was any chance of getting his remains back. She wept and talked of how his spirit returned to her at Christmas every year, looking unhappy. She had gone on several occasions to the general area, but had been unable to identify this mass grave, and longed to have a place where she could talk to her father when she needed to.

The son of another of the deceased from this same grave followed the nurse completely independently to our door. Tom [assumed name] expressed enormous guilt and anxiety in relation to this history of mass murder. He was an ex-ZIPRA, top of the 5 Brigade's list of wanted people, and he felt his father might have died in his place. The mass murder had left Tom permanently alienated from his rural home; he did not feel safe in the rural situation, away from tarred roads, buses and the anonymity offered by a city. He associated his rural home with insecurity - it was a place where soldiers could come down the road any day, take you away and kill you. In addition, he suffered guilt when he saw his mother, who was beaten by the soldiers the day his father was taken, and who can no longer fend for herself well, or cut firewood or carry water. When he visited home, he had to see how she was not coping, but he could not be there for her every day, or do "women's tasks", so he felt it was easier to stay away and ignore the situation. Yet he did not enjoy life in the city, where he was unemployed and had to do odd jobs, and where it is very tough.

The words of this man expressed to us only too well the complete existential alienation that have resulted out of violence in this family - he couldn't live at home, but he was happy nowhere else. He was trapped in a literal state of "not belonging".

iii. Locating the Grave - pre-mortem data collection

Over time, more details came to light about this grave and the families involved, through community meetings. However, we had problems locating the exact spot. While building the Tuli River bridge nearby, sand had been excavated from the hillside near the grave, which shifted all the land marks and disoriented eye witnesses. A Gwanda informant was finally able to take us to the spot: the sliced branch on the tree for the soldier's radio provided clear evidence, still visible 15 years later, and a small sand-pile behind the grave - the first decisive indicators of the truth to the story were there.

The process of consulting all families was a lengthy one - all families were keen for exhumations to go ahead. We were able to name and speak to five families about this grave. They had vague feelings there might have been others in the grave, but not from their area. However, people were no longer clear on this, and there are other graves in the immediate vicinity of the one chosen for exhumation, so the question of five or more in the grave remained unanswered. It was the Argentinean Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) who would finally reveal that there had been a minimum of six in this grave.

The essential collection of pre-mortem data took place over many months, and provided the catalyst for informal family “testimony therapy” sessions. The process of sensitively asking about the complete history and habits of the deceased, over consecutive sessions and from many members of the family, is perceived by AMANI to provide the opening for a transformational experience, of giving voice to the unspoken and reclaiming the past and the dead as an honourable person - simultaneously empowering and healing. Families are encouraged to recall in every detail the lives and events involving the deceased, and may never have had the opportunity to do this since the death. The actual circumstances of the killings are of course very important, as the positioning of people in the grave or who was shot where may be accurately remembered by eye-witnesses, if only they are encouraged to speak up. Multiple sources and indicators, including such pre-mortem and peri-mortem information, are used after exhumation before any final decisions are made about identity.

The process of speaking out, as individuals, families and as a community, together with its leaders, continued for many months. People were clearly very afraid, but were simultaneously anxious to take advantage of the first offer of help they had ever had to do something about this appalling grave.

2. Exhumation

The complicated process of bringing the expert EAAF team to Zimbabwe to begin a process of exhuming while simultaneously training locals, went ahead, along with accompanying official obstacles: in August 1999, the exhumation of this grave went ahead.

i. Burnt bones- unexpected truth comes to light

We very soon began to turn up evidence of burning, and then of burnt bones. Within an hour of digging, it was clear that there had been gross interference with the human remains here. Charred pieces of femur and other long bones began to emerge, together with cartridge cases and bullets. The grave had been deliberately destroyed. The Argentineans were able to confirm that the type of burning was consistent with petroleum products of some kind having been poured over the remains, with the burning having taken place when there were still soft tissues on the bone - in other words, within a few months at most of first burial. The EAAF considered this grave to contain clear forensic evidence of gross crimes against humanity - of execution accompanied by an attempt to make the grave clandestine.

When the assembled families were asked whether they had ever had any hint that this might have happened, somebody volunteered that they had heard that graves here had been scorched, but had hoped it had not included this one. He said that while it was still the 1984 curfew, a heavy

presence of soldiers had moved into the area at Sitezi, and one night people down wind of the camp spoke of a terrible smell of burning - it was the rotten flesh of the dead being torched by the 5 Brigade.

The families had to adjust their expectations, as had the exhuming team. The chances of assembling fragments into skeletons to return to families were clearly non-existent. This was a disappointment to the team, and a tragedy for the families. However, they expressed that at least they now knew the truth.

The exhumation process now became a sad process of sieving sand in order to extract the bone fragments. Retrieval of a distinctive cigarette lighter and various other personal effects allowed family members to confirm their own deceased were among the dead, and indicated this was the assumed grave. The EAAF were able to confirm, by the presence of 6 right ulnas (elbows) that the minimum number of individuals in the grave was six.

ii. Pitfalls of exhumation - the need for support

This experience of burnt bones served to illustrate to us the potential dangers of exhumation: graves will reveal the truth - and the truth may not always be what we wish it to be, or believe with certainty that it will be. Any tool that can do great good - like exhumation - can also potentially harm: this must be acknowledged. In this instance, the grave revealed burnt bones and took away the expectation, built over many months, that individual bodies would be returned for separate reburials. Other unexpected outcomes when exhuming can be:

- *An empty grave* - this happened in one case for our team: we exhumed an anthill that was claimed to have one person buried in it, and found it empty, and this created huge new anxiety: the deceased became in an instant no longer just dead, but disappeared, with all the contingent pain for the family.
- *Fewer or more individuals than expected* - the Sitezi grave revealed one more than we had known of, which created the need to inquire more, and then search for relatives; we did in fact identify the extra person. If there are fewer individuals, this creates for one family at least, the problem of accepting a disappearance, as in the empty grave case.
- *Pregnant remains* - the loss now becomes at short notice, not just of a daughter, but of a grandchild too, with all the contingent horror at the thought of possible rape followed by murder. Similarly, skeletal evidence can reveal that a woman known to have been -or not been - pregnant at time of detention, has given birth prior to death - the pelvis will show this.
- *Skeletal evidence of great suffering prior to death* - multiple fractures and dislocations can give painful proof of events before death, including half healed fractures which indicate suffering over weeks or months.
- Witnessing the bones forces families to accept the reality of death - they may think they are prepared for this, but discover they are not.

None of the above possibilities means that exhumations should not be done, but that they should be done with due caution and substantial emotional support for survivor families. The potential good resulting from knowing the truth, breaking the silence, being able to mourn publicly, carry out traditional rituals to appease the dead, and at least begin a process towards closure, remain of paramount significance and benefit to the vast majority of families. But families should be forewarned nonetheless of the uncertainties, and should have the continuous presence and

counselling support of people properly trained to help the bereaved, throughout the exhumation process. *Amani would argue that to exhume in the absence of emotional support for families is irresponsible.*

iii. Official interference: an opportunity for empowerment

Officialdom is not ignorant of the great power that exhumed bones may have, to accuse murderers. While permission had been given verbally for the exhumations, once the process was underway, the team became subject to harrassment and the process to several official interruptions. The exhuming of the Sitezi grave was twice interrupted, and the police subjected the community to mental harrassment, accusing them of working with bad people and being involved in an illegal process.

This was a potentially traumatic situation for the families, who in the first intance sat sullen and silent. However, the exhuming team stood their ground with officials and rationally argued in support of the exercise, and showed that they at any rate would not easily stand down nor be intimidated; the team made it clear any stoppage would have to be temporary and that digging would have to resume until the job was done.

The official interference in fact became an interesting space in which the families became empowered, and began to speak out when they heard the exhumation team doing so. Families gradually made it clear that they were siding with the exhumers and not with the police, particularly when the police refused to respond humanely to the argument that to leave the remains of the community's loved ones exposed, was to subject them to potential interference from scavenging animals. This removed any doubt as to whether the police really had the community's interests at heart, as they kept claiming, or those of their political masters.

When it became obvious that digging would have to stop for that day at any rate, one of the widows of the deceased made an extremely moving prayer at the mass graveside, in the presence of the police: this prayer was simultaneously an emotional appeal, and a political statement:

Dear Lord - we thank you for bringing these children to do this great work. What they are doing is what we have always been praying for: it is right, it is not a sin, it is what we have wanted for all of these years. Please, dear Lord, bring them back to finish this great work, so that we can honour our dead, which is what we pray for.

This prayer was made after several hours of police harrassment, and was an astonishing indication of how intense feelings were for the need for exhumation to continue. Interference by the police had become a fertile area for growth, insight and political empowerment. This community had been too scared even to raise the issue of these murders with officials for 15 years, yet once the exhumation process was underway, they found themselves able to stand their ground and make their opinions heard.

It is difficult to imagine any context in which a disenfranchised widow would stand in front of those who represent her husband's murderers, and tell them, "you are wrong, and I am right." It is inconceivable, for example, that any attempt to gather survivors together at a workshop, and ask them to list their needs for lobbying purposes, could result in the passionate appeal made directly by that widow, straight into the face of the perpetrators. Being presented with the burnt

bones of her beloved husband released the anger and energy to stand up and be heard, that could not have been released in any other imaginable way.

iv Protection - from the spirits of the dead

The process was delayed for ten days, while official permissions were once more sought. We were finally able, along with yet more interference, to complete the exhumation. These families provided a useful insight into how we were perceived: this same outspoken widow told the Amani team that when we had failed to reappear in the community for a few days after the police interference, she had become concerned that we had been arrested somewhere out of sight. She therefore came to the grave, undertook a traditional ritual, threw snuff for the ancestral spirits and exhorted them in prayers to protect us and bring us back. In the eyes of the community we were victims in need of their assistance - and not vice versa. She was very pleased to note that this protection had indeed worked - and gave us a lesson on who needs to protect whom in these situations.

4. Funeral of the Sitezi Six

HT, MT, WTN, GD, DN, one unnamed person from Beitbridge.

This funeral was a very special event for the combined communities in the area. There are many in the community were personally detained and tortured at Sitezi. There are also several other mass and shallow graves within a small radius of the one we exhumed, at Sitezi rest camp, which were indicated to us by witnesses during the exhumation and funeral. The official controversy surrounding the exhumation of these remains had also been the most intense. For all of these reasons, there was widespread engagement among the community at large with this entire process, and the funeral had a massive turnout of over 500 people - unprecedented for a normal funeral. Also present, were priests or pastors from several religious denominations, and many community leaders, most notably Acting Chief Madlela, who is the most senior traditional leader of an extensive region of more than one hundred thousand civilians.

i. The funeral procedure and speeches

The ceremony took the form of a multi denominational religious ceremony, with all pastors being given a role in leading prayers or delivering sermons. The Archbishop conducted a Catholic burial mass at the grave itself. A family representative for each of the deceased was then invited to speak to all gathered, followed by laying of wreaths and reading of wreath messages and obituaries for each of the six. The chief also addressed all gathered, as their traditional leader. The mourners then took part in a funeral meal, consisting of a slaughtered ox, cooked and served in the traditional way. While Amani facilitated with resources where necessary, the families and the community itself made all arrangements and Amani staff attended the ceremony in the role of simple mourners paying their respects to the deceased.

The funeral was a very emotionally intense event, and the speeches and prayers were full of anger and pain, and at times, accusations. A striking feature of the speeches was *the emphasis on the importance of at last knowing the truth, at last speaking out the truth, and of witnessing*

together as a community, the truth of what had happened. What follows are extracts of speeches that illustrate the mood and recurring themes at the funeral.

ii. The “criminals of Satan” - and the importance of public witnessing

The Brethren in Christ preacher is here quoted at length, as his prayer evoked a very emotional response from the gathering, who strongly approved his words with affirmative interjections. His words encapsulated the feelings of all present; the anger and pain were tangible, and importantly, blame was being placed where it belongs - on the heads of those who did the killing. They are referred to as the “criminals of Satan”, but the reference to the killings taking place 4 years after the end of the war made it clear to all those present that these were Gukurahundi killings, and that this was a new war, in effect.

Our Father who is in heaven and earth - Here are your people, they are crying, their cheeks are pouring with tears. You wrote in your book that there are many bad spirits on earth. We will know them by their fruits. There are many bad spirits Lord Almighty. We now see their fruits: the war was over, it was four years after the end of the war [1984]. The criminals of Satan, as we have heard in the Bible reading, they came and did this big job of killing these people and others. We have women whose husbands bade them farewell as if they were coming back that evening, but they never came - until today. They left orphans: there is great mourning, My Lord, on this earth. War, which was brought by Satan, left us great sorrow. We see the fruits born from wicked persons. They did this job of which we are witnesses today.

The following extracts from the same prayer acknowledge that it was the process of exhumation and seeing the bones that was an all-important part of reclaiming the truth once and for all. The importance of the Chief himself witnessing the truth is emphasised, as is the need for all community leaders who are not present needing to be informed of what has happened.

We hope our hands reach across the seas to the white hands [the Argentineans] that have enabled us to bury our beloved who were so important. They were killed at a time of darkness, Satan’s angels thought they were hiding, no one could see them...

Our Chief is here, and he is an important witness to this great evidence. These are our leaders given to us, though some could not attend, it will reach their ears. Stay with us mighty God.

Our Priest [the Archbishop] will bless and bury these people, he will bless their grave. Give him strength and courage at this difficult hour. We have witnessed something which we never realised we would ever witness. Speakers have spoken and prayers have been said. We hope these pieces of bones we see today, will one day rise to the blowing of the horn and praise you. We ask everything in your name. Amen

iii. Do not give in - work together

The following extracts are from the Archbishop’s sermon at the gravesite. Archbishop Pius Ncube is a very outspoken human rights advocate in Matabeleland and a powerful person nationally, in that he is one of only two Catholic Archbishops in Zimbabwe, which also has

six other Catholic Bishops. His speech was very forthright. He contextualised the events of 1984 in a bigger socio-historical context, and classified the murders in Matabeleland as akin to apartheid in South Africa. This highlighted the regional understanding of Gukurahundi as being ethnic in origin, with the persecution of the Ndebele people being the motive. Those gathered were reminded that in the end people in South Africa overcame apartheid, and the community was asked to take courage from this. The Archbishop emphasised the need and benefit for all, of working together to promote development in their region. He also drew on the Christian notion that we are all neighbours, all linked together.

We condemn what was done here, and those who did it, did it knowing it was not right, they knew they were doing a bad thing. Therefore I urge you not to give up, no matter what, keep going, do not give up. What these people were doing was to break your spines, so that then they could tread easily on you, but do not give in. All nations are downtrodden at different times - but they should never give up...In South Africa, they tried to tread on them but they failed. If you feel you have allowed yourself to be trod on and have given up, have hope, have the courage to go on, and you will not be trod on.

Beloved, we are comforting you, asking you who lost your relatives, not to lose hope - do not waste time hating each other, looking down upon each other - it is not necessary, let us rather use this energy for development. I am also from this region... in Christianity everyone is your relative, everyone is your neighbour, therefore I urge you not to lose hope, the truth will come out at last and all those who suffered should be assisted to lead normal lives and not stay mourning.

iv. “Bones in the forest”

The Acting Chief also made a speech in which he alluded to traditional beliefs to justify that the exhumations have been a good thing. In local culture, it is necessary in late winter for the elders and headmen in the community to go through the surrounding bush, and to clear away all evidence of carrion, all bones and remains of animals and other indications of death, so that the countryside is clean. If this is not done before the first rains of summer, then bad luck will befall the community, in particular poor rains and harvests. In other discussions with the Chief, he has stated emphatically that the mass graves are the equivalent of “bones in the forest” and are in violation of this cultural norm. Human bones should be properly buried next to homesteads and not scattered in shallow graves in unacceptable places. He has repeatedly stated the need to cleanse the countryside of the mass graves to restore the forest, as required by this tradition.

If we look amongst us, some good spirit has descended upon us, which we do not know where it came from: it descended on us, we have it - I don't know whether there is anyone who has not sensed it. Because of this situation we are in, the good spirits will spread and all the leaves and other debris will be blown away and the soil will remain clean.

We wish that the soil we tread on, we stand on, be clean and that there won't be anything else, because we wish for a good living on this earth which was made for us, where we were created. If we are living on earth and it has been ground down, it should be corrected where it has been ground down and be smoothed in the way it should be.

v. Wreath messages

The family members of the six deceased laid wreaths and messages were read out. Most of these expressed great loss. At the same time, the spirits of the dead were asked to look after the living, and the pain was tempered with gratitude that at least the final resting place of the deceased was now known:

...this sore will never be healed by anyone, we remember you together with your nephew who died with you, because of evil spirits - from your young brother's family.

... from aunts, mothers, daughters in law we say rest in peace our son, this wound will never be erased by anyone: even today we wonder what big sin you committed....

....it was not by your choice to be here, Daniel, Wilson, Sigidini, it is not your choice to be here. I am not only saying to these three but to all of you.

...Beloved father, you refused to disappear forever, we have seen where you lie after fifteen years- our hearts are broken because of what happened fifteen years ago. Anyway rest in peace, look after your children, in life and in everything, from Agrippa and his brothers and sisters.

vi. Implied "sell outs"

The families also reflected on the lives and deaths of their beloved - it was their opportunity to do so with honour, with public witnesses, after all these years. The following obituary is quoted in part, because the relative of one victim gave voice to that all too common need to find somebody to blame, a sellout:

...He was a gentleman who was quiet, he was not involved in the liberation struggle, he did not like those meetings. Just like his sister's son, he also did not like these things too. He just became unlucky when they came for him, he who knew nothing about politics... he never fought with anyone, even when growing up he never caused any trouble... *He was killed because of being sold out, someone would tell the soldiers all the people who were involved with ZAPU and they would look for those people using a list of names. I know he did not die for a crime, it was done by someone who wanted it to be that way.*

The Chief chose to respond to this speech by imploring people to work together, and to overcome the divisions left by the violence. And he appealed to the community not to gossip in destructive ways. He did not attack the speaker directly for talking of sell outs, but exhorted people to read between the lines of what he had said:

...whenever there is a gathering, join in, with your hands, your mind, with every ounce of energy you may have - join in that sorrowful gathering, joyful gathering, join and be one of those who are interested in that. Love your neighbour as you love yourself... let there be no one we gossip about. Ladies and gentlemen, let us not gossip about each other, whatever we say should be the truth, truth builds a person. Lies do not build anyone..... You are being warned, you are not being deserted. A nice child is one who

listens to his parents, but one who does not listen to the parent will be lost. Each of you will think for him/herself and fill in gaps I have not mentioned. I thank you master of ceremony, and all of you who gathered here.

5. One year on - unveiling the tombstone

Their next series of communal gatherings for these families was in the second half of 2000, and was in relation to a request from the families for a tombstone for this grave. The families came together on various occasions, to agree on wording, and then to agree on an agenda for the ceremony. The tombstone - the first ever memorial on a 5 Brigade mass grave in Matabeleland - was unveiled on 3 September 2000, exactly one year after the funeral, in the presence of the chief and the Archbishop.

The change in mood at this ceremony was tangible. The anger and pain were gone - instead, the community was relaxed and although solemn, also very celebratory. The community congratulated itself on having had the courage to see the process through, and to be the first to do so. They expressed pride at their achievement, and also stated the need to look forward now, towards working together as a community on other ventures. Relatives laid flowers, and expressed time and again the importance of knowing where to come when they needed to address the spirits of their dead, or to pray.

The nurse who had first asked for this exhumation two years before, was present, and repeated time and again how much it had meant to her over the last year to know where her father was, and to be able to visit and talk to his spirit. She has felt enormously at peace since the reburial. Amani has also noted marked changes in the outlook of Tom, the son who was existentially alienated from his rural home by his father's murder. Last we heard, in December 2000, Tom was at his rural home, helping his mother to rebuild her bedroom and improve the homestead. The family was feeling united and in high spirits.

Conclusion

In a sense, what psychotherapists in the west do metaphorically with survivors of torture and organised violence, the process of exhumation and reburial does in actuality – encourages clients to delve into the past and explore human dilemmas by linking current experiences to the violent past. For the entire community to witness the exposure of the murdered dead, and to see the returning of the bones, is to restore psychological, emotional and historical truth in the most profound way. This is why we continue to work closely with families and communities post exhumation, as this is perhaps the most crucial point of intervention.

Now that they have faced the truth of the past – what does this mean for future family and community functioning? Are families better equipped to solve problems and to take part in development as a result of the reburial process? Answers to these questions are complex, and the current resurgence of political violence has complicated the monitoring process, but the overwhelming perception of families and community leaders is that the process of exhumation has been healing and progressive, and that spirits that were once restless and destructive are now at peace. While access to communities previously involved in reburials is currently limited,

levels of intra-community political violence in villages where we have worked appears to have been close to nil in the last 3 years. However, there have been violent incursions by war veterans and the impact of government-enforced youth militia training on families. The degree to which this has again reversed community functioning can only be assessed in years to come.

We have seen how facilitating a process of exhumations and reburials can act as a catalyst to begin transforming the lives of families and restoring the social and cultural fabric that has been devastated by two consecutive civil wars in our region. Public witnessing of exhumations and attendance at community meetings has also resulted in requests for help in processing serious problems left by violence that are not linked directly to graves, including sexual torture and social marginalisation of so-called political “sell outs”.

Exhumations and memorialisations have proved to be a powerful route into the community to discuss multiple violence related issues by - in a very real and concrete way – “digging up the past” in order to witness its truth together, and to mourn with dignity, before laying the past once more to rest in the place and manner that the community agrees will allow healing - for both the living and the dead. Amani’s experience has been limited to the Zimbabwean context, and every nation has its own cultural setting. However, death and the intensity of death and mass murder are universal, as is the necessity of mourning. Amani’s experiences can hopefully encourage other NGOs in other historical contexts to consult extensively with local communities, and learn from victims themselves where creative interventions could promote peace building after state violence.

For a while at least, Amani Trust proved that even in a very difficult political environment, in a nation with a history of one hundred years of state sponsored violence, denial, and impunity, it was possible for civil society activists and communities to find spaces in which to reclaim the historical truth, to heal and to move forward, in the face of government opposition.

It is not necessary for truth telling and peace building processes to take place only within official post peace accord space. Without official sanction, justice and financial reparation cannot be achieved, yet truth can be publicly witnessed and reclaimed, and some degree of social reparation can take place. Furthermore, Amani’s experiences using exhumation and reburial as a tool to community rebuilding will serve as a starting point for future peace building interventions once some kind of peace accord is in place.