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Historians and Nehanda of Zimbabwe in History and Memory

Ruramisai Charumbira

Beginnings

In continental and diasporic African popular memory, there is a powerful narrative that says the warrior woman Nehanda of Zimbabwe defied the British Empire when it came to her corner of the world. The warrior woman commonly known by the honorific *Ambuya* or *Mbuya* Nehanda, or simply Nehanda, was born Charwe, into the Hwata family of the Eland clan in the Mazowe Valley, c. 1862.¹ Oral traditions tell of Charwe as a lifelong resident of Mazowe, initiated for an *Mhondoro* (royal spirit) at a young age. When she came of age, like most young women of her ages, she married, had children, and lived the life of a revered *mhondoro* (medium of a royal spirit) of the legendary rain goddess Nyamhita Nyakasikana of Handa (the first Nehanda).² This rain goddess is the one who was supposed to rescue the oppressed Africans from colonial rule through its medium Charwe when the British arrived. Instead, the British rendered Nehanda a piddling goddess, and Charwe a commoner who could not escape the British empire's noose at the gallows where Charwe met her death with courageous rage.³ Charwe, as the Nehanda medium in the Mazowe Valley, initially welcomed the new Europeans thinking, like most people in her time, that they were after gold and other material resources and would return to their native lands.⁴ The Portuguese were in that part of Africa since the early-to-mid 1500s, although they had not overrun the place with settlers as they did elsewhere in Africa around the world. Relations between the Africans and the new Europeans soured and deteriorated in the Mazowe, as the British increased immigrants in the African interior, culminating in September 1890 when the Union Jack was officially planted on the territory that became Southern Rhodesia.⁵

The British empire planted that Union Jack by way of Cecil John Rhodes's British South Africa Company (BSAC), a mercantile company granted a royal charter by Queen Victoria in 1889. With that charter, the British Empire effectively outsourced the colonization of southern Africa's interior to business interests. The outsourcing of imperial brutality to ruthless business interests was nothing new in imperial history, British or otherwise. What was particular to the BSAC was that it was one of the last chartered companies in late imperial Britain that gained enough power to rival imperial France whose chartered companies had helped carve a large chunk of northern

and western Africa. More importantly, the colonization of what became Northern and Southern Rhodesia (today's Zambia and Zimbabwe) entered British imperial and colonial lore through a popular narrative that claimed the empire was enlarged in Africa without a penny from the British taxpayer. No matter that the taxpayer (and especially the colonized peoples) had paid for the structures and infrastructure of empire that afforded the BSAC its charter and a large pool of immigrants from which to choose future settlers for the Rhodesias.⁶

The BSAC made good on its charter, sending a mercenary army—the British South Africa Police (BSAP)—into the African interior. It arrived in kwaHarare on September 11, 1890, a place christened Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia shortly afterward. The attempted erasure of the African place name kwaHarare with a new name that memorialized a British aristocrat of the British Empire is a critical element in the fuel that burns in the popular narrative of Nehanda of Zimbabwe's defiance of the British Empire. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the woman popularly known as Nehanda of Zimbabwe was (and is) a symbol of African resistance against European settler colonialism as well as an example of the power of memory over history. Indeed, the story of the warrior woman Nehanda is a compelling narrative popular with anyone seeking a memorable figure in telling the story of African resistance to European hegemony in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. As will become obvious below, the Nehanda story has been bottled like holy water and passed on from hand to hand in books, from mouth to ear in poetry performances, and from mind to body in musical and theater performances.

The importance of the Nehanda spirit and its (mostly female) mediums among the peoples of southern Africa is similar to that of the Dalai Lama among the Tibetan people. Although the name Nehanda is now associated with one woman, Charwe, it is actually a politico-religious title held by many women before and after her. I use the analogy of the Dalai Lama to also highlight the fact that, among other things, there are similarities in the processes of selecting a new Dalai Lama or Nehanda. A new Nehanda, often a child, was chosen through an elaborate collaboration between the living and the dead.⁷ Once chosen, that child was then raised with the knowledge that they have to carry on the legacy of their spirits, which, all things being equal, leads to the realm of self-realization. Most people in Zimbabwe and elsewhere do not often recognize the historical name Charwe wokwa Hwata, as they know her as *Ambuya* or *Mbuya Nehanda*, or in English, as Nehanda of Zimbabwe. Professional historians, on the other hand, have filled many gaps in popular memory, but, as will become clear in the rest of the chapter, in the process, they have also participated in making her larger than life as a warrior woman in the histories of Zimbabwe and southern Africa—a symbol of African resistance to colonialism.

Given the contrast between popular memory and professional history, the question that guides my historical analysis is: How do historians (broadly defined) contribute to the restoration, preservation, or making of warrior women in national and global histories? To answer this question, I analyze some key texts from literature and historiography of the 1950s to the 2000s to show the ways historians have consciously and unconsciously viewed Nehanda as nationalist or feminist warrior heroine. I have written at length on Charwe and the legend of Nehanda of Zimbabwe in my book *Imagining a Nation: History and Memory in Making Zimbabwe*, and will refer to that

text where necessary to avoid repeating what I have already written on the subject there and elsewhere. My own work on Nehanda-Charwe has left within me a need to have a conversation with other historians about the toll (to the mind and soul) of prolonged exposure to primary sources detailing gruesome and traumatic events. The effects of this prolonged exposure, to my mind, invite a reconsideration of the lives of historians as humans with souls, too.

The texts I have chosen to answer the first question are Solomon Mutsaers, *Feso*; Donald P. Abraham, "Early Political History"; Terence O. Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*; Yvonne Vera, *Nehanda*; David N. Beach, "A Woman Unjustly Accused"; and Ruramisa Charumbira, "Nehanda and Gender Victimhood."⁸ These texts are not all that has been published about Nehanda-Charwe, but I chose these particular texts because they represent the changing representations of her by prominent historians over time; sometimes agreeing on the subject, sometimes differing markedly in sharp, albeit veiled, terms. The inclusion of my own work is not to say this is the last word on the subject and I hope not self-indulgent. Rather, I see this as an important moment to pause and reflect on a topic of enduring fascination in popular memory and professional history.

A Brief History of the Legend of the Original Nehanda

In chiShona orature, the name Nehanda is attributed to Nyamhita Nyakasikana, daughter of Mutota. Mutota was the man who, with his wife, founded the dynasty that spawned the Mwene Mutapa or Munhumutapa Empire (Mutapa for short) c. 1400–1902.⁹ Although historians do not agree on whether the Mutapa Dynasty spawned a state, a kingdom, or an empire, I would argue that the Mutapa spawned both a kingdom and an empire, in part because of the durability of the legend of the Ne-Handa at the heart of that kingdom-empire. The Mutapa was a kingdom whose leadership was bolstered by bloodline, and succession politics insisted on that bloodline, although outsiders sometimes contested and breached that biopolitics.¹⁰ The Mutapa was also an empire in the sense that its tentacles reached out to neighboring kingdoms with varying degrees of imperial success. This is analogous to, but not the same as, the British Empire with the UK at its center and in that center the English as the first among equals. I make this assertion about the Mutapa as kingdom-empire not to valorize empire, African or otherwise, but to highlight the fact that the terms Mwene Mutapa, Munhumutapa, and Mutapa loosely translate to *conqueror*. Understanding the historical context of the Nehanda within the powerful politico-economic entity of Mutapa helps us understand why the legacy of the warrior woman has endured.¹¹ Reimagined over time and space, the Nehanda legend has been preserved within the narrative of an African kingdom's imperial center and handed down as a powerful female spirit determined to live beyond the fog of history.

Donald Abraham, a professional historian interested in African-centered and African-articulated history in the 1950s and 1960s, collected orature on the Mutapa in northeastern and central Zimbabwe.¹² It is noteworthy that his research emerged at the same time as a mission-educated African elite who was writing and publishing

in African languages, mainly in chiShona and isiNdebele (elaborated in the next section). Some of those (academic and literary) writings found their way into the Native Affairs Department Annual (NADA), first published c. 1923. The Native Affairs Department was something similar to the US Bureau of Indian Affairs, a settler colonial arm catering to all indigenous peoples' matters, and administered by the settlers. NADA was initially part chapbook, part magazine, and later became an amateur and professional journal on "native" life in Southern Rhodesia.¹³ The orature that Abraham collected became important evidence that many inside and outside the academy relied upon to augment Portuguese records that were and still are the main primary sources for studying that part of Africa from the 1540s to the mid-1800s.¹⁴

Included amongst the narratives that Abraham collected of the founding of the Mutapa Kingdom was the legend of Nehanda, who appears as the first holder of that title and whose birth names included Nyamhita Nyakasikana, the daughter of Mutota and the founder of the patrilineal Mutapa dynasty. In today's chiShona language (cognizant of regional/dialect differences), the prefix or article *Mwene/Ne/ne* (and *Nya/nya*) means "of," signifying ownership, rulership, or guardianship. *Handa* is also the plural word for lace (from the singular *ruhandu*). The word *mhita* means a bead used as currency, and the word *kasikana* means young maiden or girl.¹⁵ Furthermore, the word *nehanda* could also mean a young girl dedicated to being (or to) a rainmaker, or, paradoxically, the son-in-law of a chief. While historians have not puzzled over the meanings of these names, they are important to our analysis because among vaShona and most African societies of the past (and present) names have deeper meanings and often embody important contemporary and historical details. To that end, I believe it is important to analyze the name Nehanda and in the process gain an appreciation of the fact that the name has endured for at least five hundred years in some form.¹⁶ And though the meaning of those words may have changed over time, it is important that in recent memory they still hold within them ideas of ownership or guardianship of a people's wealth: *mhita* as symbolizing beads as currency; *handu* symbolizing lace, for the veil between the living and the dead; and last but not least, *handu* as representing a geographic place in the eastern corner of the Mutapa kingdom.¹⁷

The name Nehanda, then, might have been spelled Ne Handa or Ne-Handa, or NeHanda as this rendition signals two things: *Ne* and *Handa*, rather than the contemporary Nehanda now associated with one person, Charwe. As I have argued elsewhere, the histories and memories of the original Ne Handa and all other Nehandas are complicated by the fact that they are histories and memories that often isolate and deprive them of their womanhood and the company of other women. We must reconsider the Nehandas within the culture of women's lives infused into the larger society. More importantly for our purposes here, considering Nehandas as women living within a female culture would clarify the warrior status of the original and subsequent Nehandas. But all told, Abraham's work brought African orature to the fore as an important primary source in the telling of African histories in colonial Zimbabwe read widely by other academics and those within settler society who sought to understand African histories and traditions.

Africans, on the other hand, turned to the few writings by emerging African writers rather than to Abraham's. Among the most popular was the poet, novelist, and cultural

nationalist Solomon Mutswairo, the author of the popular novel *Feso*. Born in 1924, he belonged to the bridge generation between the old ways and the new—the generation that came of age in colonial mission schools and had not known any other system of government other than the settler colonial one. In fact, Mutswairo was born after the self-governing referendum of Southern Rhodesia in 1922 that came into effect in 1923, separating Southern Rhodesia from the Union of South Africa.¹⁸ The political climate in Southern Rhodesia, the place where Cecil John Rhodes's last remains are buried, could not be more imperial, as Rhodesians beginning in 1910 sought self-rule in the fashion of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the Union of South Africa. It was in this political climate that the retelling of the legend of Nehanda and especially the story of Nehanda-Charwe and her contemporaries' resistance to colonialism took root as an ethnic memory among certain segments of the African population. As will become clear below, the fledgling African nationalist groups found in Nehanda a compelling anchor for their narrative of righteous indignation against European imperialism and colonialism.

Nehanda and Nehanda-Charwe in the 1950s and 1960s

Feso was first published in chiShona in 1957 by the Rhodesia Literature Bureau (RLB). Ironically, the RLB was an arm of the colonial government that often sought to control and limit African access to Western education, which would have engendered competition with new European immigrants settling in the colony at the time. As Donald Herdeck, the novel's English language editor, wrote in his introduction: "Mutswairo's *Feso* became at once the most popular novel and a bestseller, capturing the imagination of many students in [colonial] Zimbabwe from grammar school to the university."¹⁹ More importantly, where Abraham's oral narrative told of a Nehanda trapped in linear time, Mutswairo's Nehanda was a goddess who collapsed time, fusing the past and present. Those who read *Feso* projected the nineteenth-century woman of the Mazowe Valley, Nehanda-Charwe, into the Nehanda of Mutswairo's historical novel, who may or may not have been Nyamhita Nyakasikana. It was the elegiac poetry of *Feso* that

became particularly popular and was widely anthologized in [Shona] texts. The fact that a recent Nehanda had actually been hanged by the British during the rebellions of 1896–97 ... no doubt added some salt to her namesake's appearance in the novel. Two poems which appear in *Feso* invoke, then, the spirit of the ancestral "*Nehanda who speaks for the oppressed of all times and places.*"²⁰

Mutswairo's *Feso* catapulted the legend of Nehanda from ethnic history and memory to national myth, bound together with the figure of Nehanda-Charwe. Mutswairo's writing was so powerful that even though Nehanda was not in the novel's plot, his poetry coiled memory tightly around history, making it easier for people to project Nehanda-Charwe, who lived in the near past, back into the longed for, golden African past where the gods and ancestors could not and did not abide their people's oppression and exploitation.

Ironically, outside Zimbabwe, it was through the English language that the legend of Nehanda gained a wider Pan-African and even global audience. Mutswairo translated his famous novel into English while living in the United States. The book gathered more fans not only because a critical mass of “native Rhodesians” lived in exile in the United States at the time, but also because of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements with their spirit of Pan-African solidarity. Indeed, in the 1960s, the intellectual movement of Afrocentricity gathered steam in the United States, and one of its most visible remnants today is the celebration of Kwanzaa—a celebration of African heritage and pride in the African diaspora. This, of course, is not to suggest that the legend had not previously made its way across the Atlantic and beyond by word of mouth. Rather, what I am suggesting here is that though *Feso* was both legend and protest novel, it was perfectly attuned to the male-centered nationalist narratives of both African and Pan-African nationalisms whose rallying cries were often for the black man’s freedom—literally using the word “man” rather than the more inclusive term “human,” which would include black women. And to this day, both in Africa and the African diaspora, women have to fight and insist on their rights to the same privileges that nationalism promised and promises to all but tends to deliver only to men.

Thus, although Mutswairo’s politics in *Feso* was radical for 1950s and 1960s Southern Rhodesia, its radical potential was limited when it came to imagining African women—past and present—as equals. Indeed, Mutswairo could not be blamed as the only sexist male writer; it is obvious in reading *Feso* that his Nehanda and the women of his novel were not much different from those in Western classic literature—until Western women wrote women’s histories. After all, in Homer’s narratives women often appear in service to men’s heroic external journeys to and from war as well as their internal journeys of self-discovery. In literature, women make men’s ambitions possible at their own expense—for the sake of the tribe and the nation.

In *Feso*’s case, Nehanda’s (male) children needed her in their hour of desperation so liberation could return them to an idyllic past where their masculinity was not challenged by foreign invaders. Indeed, for all its radical ambition as political manifesto, Mutswairo’s *Feso*, especially in its English translation, valorized masculinity by invoking a Nehanda-Nyakasikana devoid of her femininity and womanhood, a goddess without a female culture around her. This echoed common practices in nationalist movements at the time—the practice of shunting women and their priorities and needs for freedom to the back burner of nationalist politics.²¹ All said, however, it is indisputable that Nehanda, the warrior woman of Zimbabwe (Nehanda-Charwe) owes her popularity in national and global consciousness to Mutswairo’s elegiac poetry (to Nehanda) in *Feso*.

Charwe as *the* Nehanda in the 1960s and 1970s

The next decade saw the legend of the warrior woman Nehanda grow. This time it was because more guild historians took it upon themselves to write African histories from the colonial archive to prove that the colonial project was real, and Africans were its undisputed victims, African cultural translators and collaborators notwithstanding.

I am not alone in arguing that the late historian Terence Osborne Ranger, the doyen of Zimbabwean history for many decades, did more for the study of African resistance in Zimbabwe than any other European Africanist scholar in the 1960s and 1970s. Ranger was not, of course, the only historian at the time. What I am arguing here is that his work raised the profile of Charwe wokwa Hwata to heroine status as *the* Nehanda of Zimbabwe. Intentionally or not, Ranger's African-centered historical research into African resistance to European colonialism in Southern Rhodesia was a study that also fell into the center of a growing interest in differentiating between primary nineteenth-century and secondary post-1945 African resistances to European imperialism and settler colonialism.

Ranger's now classic text *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* was published in 1967. His preface and acknowledgments make clear that in the process of researching and writing that book he made lifelong friends with Africans who held not only Nehanda-Charwe, but also the people of her period, in the highest regard.²² The Africans, Ranger shows in his study, resisted European settler colonialism because of their own outrage at their oppression. More importantly, the power of the high ancestral spirits fostered the emotional state of the people. Although 99 percent were male spirits or men, the exceptional female spirit was that of Nehanda and her female medium Charwe.

Where Mutswairo's *Feso* had inspired the masses and the nationalists with its Nehanda-Nyakasikana, Ranger's text inspired nationalists and scholars with its deep research in the colonial archive. Most importantly, Ranger's monograph carried a guild historian's argument based on written evidence (colonial written evidence, no less) doing more for the legend of Nehanda and Charwe than had been done by Abraham who relied on orature to tell the history of the original legend and later relied on Portuguese sources as well. To most readers at the time, Ranger's text brought forward the narrative of the Nehanda of popular memory, the Nehanda everyone seemed to remember, because that was the Nehanda who was slowly becoming one nationalist movement's matron saint. She was being pushed forward as the ancestor who would come to rescue, not just the nationalists fighting for liberation, but the ordinary people laboring under an oppressive settler colonial regime. Ranger's Nehanda fit in with the period in which the book was published, showing the ways in which historians also respond to their contemporary moment even as they labor to write objectively about the past and its peoples.²³

Ranger's *Revolt* has the design of a microhistory, but it tells a macrohistory of African resistance. Moreover, although Ranger's history was African-centered, it tended to boost the history of the majority ethnic group among the oppressed, neglecting everyone else. As historian Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga wrote in his essay memorializing Ranger (who passed away on January 3, 2015), although *Revolt* stood out as African history representing African voices, Ranger's body of work on Zimbabwe was, until later in his life, "Shona history," at the expense of most other ethnic groups and, indeed, Zimbabwean history writ large.²⁴ While I agree with Mavhunga's assessment, I also see Ranger's work as emanating from his (Ranger's) own history, some of which he elaborated on in his memoirs.²⁵ To my mind, Ranger had an affinity for the underdog and at the time he wrote *Revolt*, the Shona were the underdogs in much of colonial and

settler historiography. Given his background, Ranger consciously and unconsciously took on the cause of the oppressed. And who does not like a delightful story of triumph even if that triumph is death itself?

Now, more than fifty years after *Revolt* was first published, one can see Ranger's passion for the disenfranchised, although seemingly from a position of power as he projects himself as the champion of the voiceless—the white savior complex, some might argue cynically. I say this not to defend or to besmirch the legacy of a towering figure in African (and Zimbabwean) history, I say this because Ranger himself had the capacity for self-reflection which most historians eschew in the name of objectivity. I also write this to show the ways historians are themselves shaped (and sometimes trapped) by the time(s) they live in and how their own personal histories and passions influence their work. To this last point, it matters even more to our understanding of *Revolt* and the Nehanda therein, that Ranger's doctoral supervisor at the University of Oxford was none other than the infamous (or famous, depending on who you ask) Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, the man most quoted for his bigoted remarks on the (non) existence of African history.²⁶ Trevor-Roper, it would seem, took courage from Hegel's work that describes Africa, and especially Africans, as beneath the serious study of the past, an attitude that still affects even the most astute of scholars who do not ask where terms like sub-Saharan Africa originated and use them with a sense of righteous indignation to champion the underdog "Black Africans."²⁷

It also makes sense, to my mind, that Ranger wrote *Revolt* to rebel against the British Empire whose brutal colonial history he investigated when he wrote his dissertation on land issues in Ireland. In Africa, Ranger found in the Shona people's history not only fascinating politics, but also the captivating religious history that introduced the dazzling figure of the high, royal spirit of Nehanda. That was the same Nehanda whose memory was resurgent through Mutswairo and Abraham's work, a memory the colonial government was trying to thwart in an attempt to terrorize the Africans into abandoning their gods and their ways of knowing and of being. The memory of Nehanda that Ranger resuscitated and validated through his archival research added mystical and righteous fire to the nationalists' fight for freedom. As a British citizen and a British-trained historian from the University of Oxford, Ranger gave Nehanda-Charwe a credibility denied her by colonial reports, colonial historiography, and settler propaganda beginning in the 1890s. Ranger's *Revolt* and most of his research and writing on Zimbabwe and southeastern Africa influenced a generation of now illustrious historians, many of whom wrote moving obituaries and tributes when he died in 2015.²⁸ Many of Ranger's former students have become leading historians themselves, and far fewer have done work centered on African religious and spiritual practices inspired by the kind of religion and spirituality represented by Nehanda-Charwe.

Nehanda-Charwe as Feminist Nationalist in the 1980s and 1990s

The most prominent response to Ranger's *Revolt* in the 1990s came from someone who was not Ranger's student, but who became his dear friend, the late literary

scholar and novelist Yvonne Vera. Even before she met Ranger, Vera took *Revolt* and, to turn a phrase, revolted against his historiographical rendition tied to the colonial archive. Instead, in an elegiac and triumphalist novel titled *Nehanda*, she presented a feminist nationalist Nehanda-Charwe. Elegiac because it mourned the cultural and economic plunder of colonialism; triumphalist because the Nehanda in Vera's book was Charwe, the Nehanda of popular memory. She was a Nehanda that resonated with the rise of many women's organizations from the late 1980s to the late 1990s in Zimbabwe and southern Africa. In that time period, Nehanda-Charwe had almost become the exclusive nationalist property of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF),²⁹ and used as a blunt instrument that nationalists, especially men, used to silence women who questioned the exclusion of women from the nation's founding myths—even as Nehanda-Charwe's statue was installed within the courtyard of then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's offices, a stone's throw away from the nation's Parliament.³⁰ The masculine nationalist concept of Nehanda had ceased to be the radical champion of freedom and, instead, had become a domesticated saint that all people, especially women, had to emulate postindependence.

Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* was published in 1993. Once published, the book set her reputation as a rising star in Zimbabwe's literary circles, and the book as an important addition to the canon of Zimbabwe's literature, and postcolonial literature more generally. By my reading, her first novel *Nehanda* is a homage to both Mutswairo's and Ranger's Nehandas. In her rendition, however, she explores more than just the mystical and political figure to tell the story of a female and womanly Nehanda, one surrounded by other women and, yes, in a patriarchal culture no less. Vera's *Nehanda* is a nationalist in the spirit of Mutswairo's nationalist *Feso*, and she is a patriot in the spirit of Ranger's nationalist and patriotic *Revolt*. Vera's *Nehanda* taps into the mythology of a Nehanda born knowing that she has a rendezvous with history and memory.

It is also significant that Vera's *Nehanda* was first published in Toronto where she was studying at York University earning her doctorate in English Literature. She was an active participant in the larger circle of postcolonial writers who gave voice to the histories of their countries of origin. These were places that were once colonies with few spaces for native or indigenous writers with no connections, writers who then found welcoming audiences and platforms abroad. The irony does not escape me, of course, that places like Canada and the United State were where most postcolonial thinkers, academics, writers, and artists (myself included) found acceptance, and were (and are) also places that made (and make) little to no space for the dispossessed First Peoples of North America. Broadly speaking, Native American writers have had to insist that their voices be heard above the din of immigrant voices wanting to be seen and heard in a white, racist Canada or United States. It is, therefore, quite ironic that the telling of global women warrior narratives, like those of Nehanda of Zimbabwe in North America, reached mass circulation before we could read of similar kinds of women and communities from the First Peoples of the Americas as told by a critical mass of indigenous historians, scholars, poets, and writers of all kinds. But, I digress; the point is that the Nehanda that Vera (and even I) wrote about is a figure with equivalents among the First Peoples, women we could see as

universal archetypal warrior women, rather than singular nationalist and national figures representing particular ethnic or national histories. What Vera's *Nehanda* did that was different from all that had been previously written about her was to signal to the preceding generations that the new generation was claiming history for itself, with or without archives—and that history would be for all, an inspiration to resist any form of colonization. Women, children, and all those marginalized peoples who had a right to claim Nehanda's legacy and that of their ancestors could do so in this brave new world brought to light by the new generation of historians and writers.

Vera's *Nehanda* firmly established Nehanda-Charwe of Zimbabwe as a warrior woman, a warrior ordinary women could relate to as role model for their own rights now that it was obvious that the Nehanda of (black male) nationalists was a Nehanda who favored her (grand)sons over her (grand)daughters. Vera's *Nehanda* evoked a mystical Nehanda rooted in African ways of knowing and being. She was also performing African feminist-nationalist-speak, some of which was emanating from women's memories of war, especially female ex-combatants. Those women found out the hard way that the hero of war has a male body and face, not a female one, or bodies gendered otherwise.³¹ And by gendered otherwise, I mean the ways in which gender operates in African societies, not always gendered by sex, something most have forgotten in the binary gender wars.³² In *Nehanda*, Vera imagined a woman of uncompromising principle, a woman willing to die for the land of the ancestors, but one who retained her humanity, dignity, and individuality.

The warm international reception of Vera's *Nehanda* happened at about the same time when many women's organizations were forming in the second decade of Zimbabwe's independence. These organizations were often funded by Western national funding agencies, such as the (then) Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Dutch Hivos (Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries), and private nonprofit women's organizations such as the US Global Fund for Women, to give just a few examples. Thus, although as singular as Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* was for its time, it also emerged out of an activist postindependent women's movement in Zimbabwe and southern Africa (except for apartheid Namibia and South Africa until 1990 and 1994, respectively). Vera's *Nehanda* presented to many a truer model of the warrior woman in Zimbabwean history. This personal hero was one each woman could claim and hold unto herself, whereas before, many were afraid to claim Nehanda out loud and in public because that Nehanda belonged to the nationalists, especially men. This was because by the time Vera's *Nehanda* was published, the memory of Charwe as Nehanda had effectively become the ruling party's (ZANU-PF's) Nehanda, a Nehanda no one else had a right to claim. The irony is that by turning an archetypal figure and heroine of resistance into the exclusive property of the dominant nationalist party, the party and the government were simultaneously micromanaging the legacy of a popular figure. In fact, Vera's *Nehanda* came in the wake of the ruling party actively trying to silence any other Nehandas that emerged post-1980 so they could claim the exclusivity of the memory of Nehanda-Charwe as matron saint of the ruling party.

Nehanda as Archetypal Heroine of Resistance Abroad

Internationally, many women, especially black women in the diaspora saw Nehanda-Charwe and other warrior women as role models to be emulated in the fight against the patriarchy in racist societies in the West. Vera's *Nehanda*, much like Ranger's *Revolt*, appeared at a particular moment in history and became a touchstone text that spoke of not just Nehanda-Charwe, but African histories and traditions—and especially the fight for liberation from mental and spiritual colonization in the West. Internationally, before Vera's feminist nationalist *Nehanda* came along, many people had accessed the story of Nehanda through David Sweetman's (now out of print) *Women Leaders in African History*.³³ Sweetman's little book is a collection of mini-biographies of famous African women across the whole continent—most of them, warrior women—against some form of European colonialism. Those with limited or no access to Zimbabwean historiography or patience with academic tomes took to Sweetman's book as the go-to source for a profile of Nehanda and her singular story of defying the British Empire. The effect was that many women, especially black women, took Nehanda as an inspiration, a personal and collective role model of resistance.

Two prominent examples come to mind. The first is that of rap musician Nehanda Abiodun whose birth name was Cheri Laverne Dalton. She fled from the United States to Cuba, where she currently lives, but I do not know enough to comment on her case and its parallels to the historical Nehanda-Charwe.³⁴ Suffice it to say, she was a black woman, an African American woman who took on the name of another black woman to signal the similarities of their lives being handled by legal systems steeped in capitalist, white supremacist patriarchy, to borrow a phrase from bell hooks. The other prominent example of Nehanda-Charwe in the African diaspora is the Nehanda Black Women's Organization based in London. The organization seems less active now but was quite active in the early 2000s when I met its founder while doing doctoral dissertation research in the UK. Nehanda was the name the organization chose because the founder, a Caribbean woman, had made a personal connection to a Zimbabwean woman in London. The organization's founder, being that she was from the older African diaspora (the older diaspora being those descended from enslaved African people in the Americas; vis-à-vis the newer diaspora whose migration is by "choice"), relished the idea of a historical continental African woman defying the mighty British Empire. In this, the women's organization was reaching for the archetype of the strong black woman that Nehanda-Charwe represented. Nehanda became the lead name of the organization and her image became their symbol. Nehanda-Charwe had triumphed again in British history, this time through popular memory.

The growing profile of Nehanda on the international stage as well as at home drew a contrarian position from none other than the prominent Zimbabweanist, the late British historian David Norman Beach. I contend that Beach found the Nehanda of popular memory troubling and sought to correct what he considered to be misconceptions about her through an article published in 1998. In that piece, Beach argued that Nehanda-Charwe was a "gender victim." The article sought to reexamine, in his words, "the historical basis of the legend" of Nehanda.³⁵ The gender

victim argument was accompanied by what I call a classic historian's instinct to bicker when memory trumps history. Beach's argument, to be sure, was also a longstanding argument against Ranger's *Revolt*. In the contemporary moment, it was also an argument against Robert Mugabe's ruling party and government's stranglehold on the narrative of Nehanda and its bid to use the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe to memorialize the places where Nehanda and her comrades had fought the British in the 1890s. That exercise was prompted by the realization that many years after political independence most monuments in Zimbabwe were honoring Rhodesian colonial and settler history—even Great Zimbabwe that had been a subject of great archaeological controversy in the history of archeology as a discipline.³⁶

No less important to Beach was the popular memory that flooded the streets, including the urban legend of the *hanging tree* in the Avenues neighborhood of Harare.³⁷ Beach pointed a subtle accusatory finger at Ranger's *Revolt*. Mavhunga's previously mentioned essay better articulated Beach's accusatory finger, a finger, I would add, which was also pointed (by Beach) at most of those who had written about Nehanda as warrior woman of Zimbabwe. Suffice it to say, the stance Beach took as an objective historian in his 1998 article sought to show that others were trying to create a heroine out of thin air. He asserted that the archives did not show Nehanda-Charwe to be a heroine. Instead, he argued the documents showed she was a victim of a patriarchal society (the Shona) and a male-dominated colonial legal system (the BSAC on behalf of the British Crown). Given those gender disparities, Beach argued, Nehanda-Charwe was no heroine; rather, she was a gender victim, and the only reason she rose to the forefront in historical memory as a heroine is because she was the only woman in a sea of men.

Ten years later I published an article refuting that argument in the same journal.³⁸ There I argued (and still argue) that, though a careful historian who had done much for Shona and Zimbabwean historiography and for southern African history more generally, Beach's women's and gender history, while coopting the language of gender, did not provide a rigorous gender or gendered analysis to show how Nehanda-Charwe was a mere victim and not a real agent of and in history. Instead, I argued that Beach's article and much of his historical research seemed more intent on taking down a heroine than providing a real understanding of not just Nehanda-Charwe, but African women in the 1890s generally and those in the resistance movement to colonial rule specifically. Moreover, Beach's gender victim argument did not consider men and their gendered ways either. Unfortunately, Beach was not alive to continue the historical debate, but his article highlighted the tensions embedded in about five decades of a historiographical interrogation of Nehanda-Charwe—mostly in praise of her but sometimes in contestation.

Endings

The legend of Nehanda turned nationalist and feminist icon as discussed in this chapter brings us to an important conclusion, the uses and abuses of that history and historiography by Robert Mugabe's ruling party (ZANU-PF) and his government

(1980–2018). ZANU-PF, as indicated in this chapter, had a stranglehold on the historical narrative of Nehanda-Charwe, a stranglehold that alienated many people as the 1896–97 African resistance became more politics than history lesson. Nehanda-Charwe, in ZANU-PF hands became a very gendered grandmother, and her title as Ambuya/Mbuya became a literal interpretation of her role as the psychic enforcer of patriarchal values intended to put and keep women in their (subordinate) place. Nehanda-Charwe ceased to be the radical woman who defied the British Empire that offered her and her fellow prisoners (mostly men) Christian conversion in exchange for commuted sentences of capital punishment.³⁹ Nehanda-Charwe in history was defiant and would not hear of converting to foreign religions, even if for her own freedom. Indeed, as I have written about, she adamantly refused Catholic conversion and that refusal bolstered her credibility as a freedom fighter, the warrior woman defying the British Empire with all its furious gun-powdered cannon power. Thus, when the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe was curating African memory places of resistance to British imperial colonization, which included the Mazowe where Nehanda and her comrades had fought the British in the 1890s, her place in the Mazowe became overt political work than historical monument making and preservation, which often eschews big P politics.

The role of historians in the making of Nehanda-Charwe the warrior woman brought forth a response from Terence Ranger as it became obvious that his scholarship and activism in the 1960s, especially in *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, rather than be a resistance History book as intended in the settler colonial era (1960s), it had become elite political weapon for silencing dissent in the postsettler rule period. In his essay “Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe,” Ranger sought to re-argue the place of the historian in the making of History and its heroes and heroines considering how ZANU-PF was using his earlier works.⁴⁰ Yvonne Vera’s historical novel, *Nehanda*, and her body of work more generally, democratized the legend of Nehanda-Charwe and what history means in a former colony deeply marked colonization that still lives in the minds and souls of the former colonized. My own work on Nehanda has brought forth the conversation of not only how the past affects whole societies, but what it does to individual memory, including the memory of the historian whose mind (and soul) is deeply marked by the gruesome details of frontier history. This chapter, then, shows the ways historians can, consciously and unconsciously participate in the making of real and imagined historical figures.

Notes

- 1 It is worth pointing out from the outset that the honorific *Ambuya* or *Mbuya* Nehanda that often goes with her name (and its equivalent, *Sekuru* for men) is a title that signals respect for an ancestral spirit as well as for the medium as a respected elder. The honorifics are also used when addressing mere mortals, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and any wise people in the community.
- 2 There is no definitive scholarly biography of Charwe nor of the legend of Nehanda, the varied works, in English, include: David N. Beach, “An Innocent Woman,

- Unjustly Accused? Charwe, Medium of the Nehanda Mhondoro Spirit, and the 1896–97 Central Shona Rising in Zimbabwe,” *History in Africa: A Journal of Method* 25 (1998): 27–54; Ruramisa Charumbira, *Imagining a Nation: History and Memory in Making Zimbabwe* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 22–27; Stanislaus I.G. Mudenge, *A Political History of Munhumutapa c. 1400–1902* (Harare, 1988); David N. Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe 900–1850* (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1980); David Lan, *Guns and Rain* (Harare: James Currey and Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985); Solomon Mutswairo, *Mapondera, Soldier of Zimbabwe* (Harare: Longman, 1983).
- 3 Ruramisa Charumbira, “Nehanda and Gender Victimhood in the Central Mashonaland 1896–97 Rebellions: Revisiting the Evidence,” *History in Africa* 35 (2008): 103–131. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25483719> (accessed October 13, 2019).
 - 4 See C.G. Chivanda, “The Mashona Rebellion in Oral Tradition: Mazoe District,” in *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896–7: A Study in African Resistance*, ed. Terence O. Ranger (London: Heinemann, 1967), 390–394.
 - 5 Charumbira, *Imagining a Nation*, 27–40.
 - 6 See among others, Charumbira, *Imagining a Nation*, 77–137; Alois Mlambo, *White Immigration into Rhodesia: From Occupation to Federation* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2002).
 - 7 For the Shona process, see David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985); and for the Tibetan process, including on the current Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, whose birth name is Lhamo Thondup, see Alexander Norman, *The Secret Lives of the Dalai Lama: The Untold Story of the Holy Men Who Shaped Tibet, from Pre-History to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2008); and Robert Thurman, *Essential Buddhism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).
 - 8 Solomon Mutswairo, *Feso*, ed. Donald E. Herdeck (Harare, Zimbabwe: HarperCollins, [1957, 1974] 1995); Donald P. Abraham, “The Early Political History of the Kingdom of Mwene Mutapa, 850–1589,” in *Historians in Tropical Africa* (Salisbury, Rhodesia: University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, 1962): 61–90; Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896–7: A Study in African Resistance* (London: Heinemann, 1967); Yvonne Vera, *Nehanda* (Toronto: TSAR, 1993); Beach, “An Innocent Woman,” 27–54; Charumbira, “Nehanda and Gender Victimhood,” 103–131.
 - 9 Abraham, “The Early Political History”; Mudenge, *A Political History*; Charumbira, *Imagining a Nation*, 22–25.
 - 10 See especially Mudenge, *Munhumutapa*, chapters 1–3.
 - 11 For more, see especially Kingsley Garbett, “From Conquerors to Autochthons: Cultural Logic, Structural Transformation, and Korekore Religion Cults,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 31 (July 1992): 12–43.
 - 12 I borrow from Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s definitions of orature, expressed in many writings, especially: “The Language of African Literature,” in *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 4–33; and “Oral Power and Europhone Glory,” in *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 103–128.
 - 13 The 1950s and 1960s also saw the rise of African and Area Studies in the Western academy and, in the process, that rise built a critical mass of Africanist and Area Studies experts, those outsider-insiders.

- 14 For Portuguese primary sources that yield some fragments on the Nehanda and other royal women, see George M. Theal, *Records of South-Eastern Africa Collected in Various Libraries and Archive Departments in Europe*, vols. 1 & 2 (London: William Clowes & Sons Ltd for the Government of the Cape Colony, 1898–1903); and *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa, 1497–1840* (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Histócos Ultramarinos; Harare: National Archives of Zimbabwe, 1989), vols. VII & VIII.
- 15 Here I only refer to one Shona dictionary, but there are several others; M. Hannan, *Standard Shona Dictionary* (Harare, Zimbabwe: College Press, 1987). The work of historical linguist Herbert Chimhundu is highly recommended for a critical assessment of Hannan's work on the Shona dictionary.
- 16 I define the word, not so much to demystify the mystery of the sacred for those who might consider this blasphemy, but rather to affirm its historical meaning so it can be better appreciated. I imagine this to be the same that any decent scholar of the life of, say, Jesus of Nazareth would do when defining the name Jesus and his form of enlightenment as "the Christ." I imagine that scholar is not intent on merely knocking down a puffed-up god, but engaging in honest scholarship that helps us understand the enduring legacy of not just a man, but an idea of transcending the mundane life humans encounter on this planet.
- 17 An excellent map of this location is in David Lan, *Guns and Rain*, 33; from that map, the interested reader can proceed to less detailed old maps such as the eighteenth-century map of Rigobert Bonne, "Carte du Canal de Mosambique" (1780), Stanford University, *Maps of Africa: An Online Exhibit: A Digital Collection of African Maps at the Stanford University Libraries*, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/maps-of-africa> (accessed October 13, 2019).
- 18 See most recently, Abraham Mlombo, "Southern Rhodesia's Relationship with South Africa, 1923–1953." (PhD dissertation, University of the Free State, 2017), 54–55.
- 19 Donald E. Herdeck, introduction to *Feso*, n.p. Mutswairo translated his own work and Herdeck was the editor, not the translator.
- 20 Ibid., emphasis added.
- 21 There is a sizeable historiography on women asserting their rights within nationalist and guerrilla movements in Zimbabwe and southern Africa more generally; here I will only reference ex-combatant women's oral narratives, mainly because some make reference to Nehanda-Charwe as inspiration: Zimbabwe Women Writers, *Women of Resilience: The Voices of Women Ex-Combatants* (Harare: Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000).
- 22 Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, ix–xii.
- 23 For a critical assessment of Ranger as participant and historian in colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe, see Luise S. White, "Terence Ranger in Fact and Fiction," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 44, no. 2 (2011): 325–331.
- 24 Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Many Terence Rangers," *Africa Is a Country* (January 29, 2015), <https://africasacountry.com/2015/01/many-terence-rangers/> (accessed October 13, 2019).
- 25 Terence O. Ranger, "From Ireland to Africa: A Personal Memoir," *History Ireland* 14, no. 4 (July–August 2006): 46–49; and Terence O. Ranger, *Writing Revolt: An Engagement with African Nationalism, 1957–1967* (Suffolk, UK: James Currey, 2013).
- 26 Ranger, *Writing Revolt*, 4.
- 27 Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener, ON: Batoche Books, 2001), 109–112.

- 28 See, for example, an obituary in *The Guardian* newspaper and a collection of obituaries and tributes in the *Association of Concerned Africa Scholars Review* 89 (Spring 2015), <http://www.concernedafricascholars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/rangerbulletin1.pdf> (accessed October 13, 2019); as well as some by Zimbabweans such as Mavhunga above and Percy Zvomuya published online at *Africa Is a Country*, <https://africasacountry.com/> (accessed October 13, 2019).
- 29 For a recent take on the founding of ZANU-PF, see among others, Eliakim Sibanda, *The Zimbabwe African People's Union 1961–87: A Political History of Insurgency in Southern Rhodesia* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005).
- 30 For other ways the ZANU-PF Party, and government utilized the iconography of Nehanda-Charwe, see among others, Ruramisai Charumbira, "Gender, Nehanda, and the Myth of Nationhood in the Making of Zimbabwe," in *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents*, ed. G. Bouchard (New York and London: Routledge), 206–222.
- 31 For a fuller articulation of a feminist nationalist in Vera's *Nehanda*, see Desiree Lewis, "Biography, Nationalism, and Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*," *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* 30, no. 1 (2008): 28–50.
- 32 See West African examples in Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987); Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making African Sense of Western Discourses* (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- 33 David Sweetman, *Women Leaders in African History* (African Historical Biographies) (London: Heinemann, 1984).
- 34 Bret Sokol, "Exiled in Havana," *Miami New Times*, September 7, 2000; she has since died in Havana, Cuba. "Nehanda Obiodun, 68, Black Revolutionary Who Fled to Cuba, Dies," *New York Times*, February 8, 2019.
- 35 Beach, "An Innocent Woman," 27.
- 36 Bruce Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 130–135.
- 37 That tree has since died. See Ruramisai Charumbira, "Zimbabwe's Hanging Tree," *Not Even Past*, <https://notevenpast.org/zimbabwes-hanging-tree/> (accessed October 13, 2019).
- 38 Charumbira, "Nehanda and Gender Victimhood," 103–131.
- 39 Fr. Richartz, S.J., "The End of Kakubi and Other Condemned Murderers," *Zambesi Mission Record* 1, no. 2 (November 1898): 53–55; "The High Court," *Rhodesia Herald*, March 9, 1898.
- 40 Terence O. Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 215–234.