

Zimbabwe's 'New Clothes'

Identity and Power Among Displaced Farm Workers

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“One day, two swindlers came to the emperor’s city; they made people believe that they were weavers, and declared they could manufacture the finest cloth to be imagined...The swindlers, therefore, were commissioned and pretended to be very hard at work, but they did nothing whatever on the looms... The emperor marched in the procession under a beautiful canopy, and all who saw him in the street and out of the windows shouted, “Indeed, the emperor’s new suit is incomparable! How well it fits him!” “But he has nothing on at all”, said a little child at last. “Listen to the voice of an innocent child...the emperor has nothing on at all”, cried the whole people”.

–Hans Christian Anderson, “The Emperor’s New Suit”

Introduction²

This article will examine the role ‘identity’ plays in defining the fate of farm workers in Zimbabwe, as well as the potential of this marginalised group to reframe public rhetoric and accepted notions of power. The identity invented for others may define the rules of engagement, but not always the way the marginalised define themselves, or the limits of their expression.

Questions of identity are central to Zimbabwe’s current crisis. ‘Identity reform’ of the nation is reflected in the destruction of ‘white agriculture’ and previously accepted internal ‘domestic governments’; the eviction and persecution, by members of the ruling party, of marginalised farm workers whose previous economic function as labourers for white farmers now represents reminders of ‘colonialism’. Farm workers in Zimbabwe are chosen as a focal point not only because they have suffered tremendously under the ruling party’s ‘reformation’ of the nation, as many international commentators have noted, but also because they challenge international definitions meant to protect and assist the world’s most vulnerable. The inability of farm workers, as a group, to fit within the internationally accepted frameworks that define vulnerability, along with their overwhelming ‘invisibility’ within the political and cultural contexts of the state, complicates any analysis of the situation today.

Zimbabwe’s identity is under construction. White farmers have left the farms, if not the country; landless peasants are subjected to violent ‘turf’ wars between local politicians;

veterans of the liberation struggle are bickering over land to which they feel entitled; and farm workers find themselves even more politically, economically and socially disenfranchised than ever before. By exploring the identity of farm workers, as defined for them by the international community, the Zimbabwean government and the communities in which they live, we will focus on how they reflect these perceptions and how they defy them. The consequences of misperception and the ramifications of predetermining peoples' role in society will be discussed. Emphasis will be placed on how farm workers, then, define themselves through actions that both passively accept and actively resist the mantle of expectation and judgment placed upon them.

Identity crucially shapes action and reaction. A misconstrued identity can, and sometimes does, alter the way in which crisis is addressed. Look at the example of how Rwandan refugees fleeing the genocide in the land of a thousand hills were defined in ways that extracted international sympathy for the misbegotten and vulnerable. Meanwhile, that same group, of war-torn and destitute *misérables*, was dominated by *genocidaires* in sheep's clothing who used international pity to mount successful surprise attacks against international aid workers and Rwandan Tutsis within the region. Refugees could no longer solely be identified as victims. This complicated the definition of the 'marginalised', who became a powerful force bent on undermining security and altering regional dynamics in order to protect themselves against a perceived threat to their lives, as well as their identity. In a similar vein, the case of farm workers disputes the international legal and political frameworks being applied to Zimbabwe. These parameters do not reflect the depth of the crisis with any accuracy.

A series of questions constitutes a starting point for any analysis of the situation of farm workers in Zimbabwe. Who are these people? What factors have made them vulnerable to displacement? How are farm workers constructed in public discourse? How do they then react to this persona fashioned for them by others? Furthermore, do farm workers define themselves, and if so, by what methods and means? Lastly, do identities incorporating 'victimhood' or 'threat', and notions of power politics, social and economic constructs involving land, farm and nation, perpetuate violence within Zimbabwe?

Background

Farm workers have been marginal citizens; some would even say "quasi-citizens" (Schou, 2000). They are citizens whose claims to belong to Zimbabwe have been treated with suspicion by the government and many other Zimbabweans because of the history of labour migration and, more importantly, the form of administration under which they fell. The former meant that many farm workers in the colonial period were foreign-born, while the latter has meant that they have been closely linked to white farmers and not necessarily the postcolonial nation. This construct and the perceptions embedded within it further alienated farm workers from the inner political and social circles of the community and the state.

Colonial administration and governments ensured that European farmers became important economic and political actors in the colony shortly after formal British colonialism began in 1890. This domination continued up to Independence in 1980. A racialised, so-called "dual" colonial rural political economy emerged. It consisted of comparatively

productive white commercial farmers, along with generally less productive black petty commodity producers whose livelihoods were crucially linked to non-farming activities (Moyo, 1995). Such a political economy created vast inequities in access to land and means of production, and was implicated in a particular concatenation of land, citizenship, and the nation (Worby, 2001; Hammar and Raftopoulos, 2003).

During much of the colonial period, white farmers relied heavily on foreign workers, largely coming from colonial Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique. Farm workers were prohibited from acquiring land in the native reserves (although some did) and were configured in policy, laws, and general arrangements to only be part of the landscape of white farms.

By the 1950s, farm workers were being administered differently from other African subjects. Farm workers fell under the state-sanctioned authority of the European farmer and his family, to form part of the “domestic government” of European farms – “domestic” in the dual sense of promoting the ‘private’ over the ‘public’ domain, and of valuing paternalistic, family-like relations between male workers and farmers, and between male workers and their wives and children (Rutherford, 2001). Colonial labour relations officials had minimal interest in improving working conditions; up to the 1970s, corporal punishment was common and even officially condoned. Domestic government firmly anchored the claims of farm workers to that of serving white farms as opposed to serving the nation (Rutherford, 2003, 2004).

Administered by the state-sanctioned authority of white farmers, farm workers were viewed by many to be apart from the other Africans in the colony. This meant, for example, that during the guerrilla war of the 1970s, African nationalist guerrillas often saw farm workers both as Africans exploited by whites and as people whose loyalties lay more inherently with their white “baas” than, say, with those struggling against colonial rule (Rutherford, 2001). This ambiguity surrounding the identity, and therefore ‘loyalty’, of farm workers continued throughout the postcolonial period.

Since Independence in 1980, farm workers as a group, though suffering from a crisis of a politically ambiguous identity, did have their economic identity ostensibly normalised at the national level. They were covered by the same labour regulations as other workers and were represented by a trade union in a national employment council. However, these codified rules that covered working conditions for all labourers in Zimbabwe were viewed with great scepticism by farmers and their representatives. Indeed, there had been a strong effort by many white farmers (the majority until 2000, despite the end of legislated racial segregation at Independence) to prevent ‘outsiders’ – be they union officials, government officials, or politicians – from entering into their farms to interact with their workers. This trend was often reinforced by government officials and politicians, who did not readily include farm workers as citizens who should partake in the expansion of the social welfare state during the 1980s (Rutherford, 2001).

The guerrilla war, the national liberation in the 1980s, and the aftermath of independence, became closely identified with a peasant struggle incorporating notions of entitlement to land and ZANU (PF) policy prescriptions for a just redistribution of it (Moyo, 1995; Werbner, 1998). By default, farm workers found themselves to be still politically and economically dispossessed and socially and culturally marginalised. Those possessing ambivalent identities

within the dominant discursive configuration of the nation were vulnerable. Violence increased, as was the case when ZANU (PF) faced challenges,³ and when the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change) emerged as a credible challenge to the ruling party during the build-up to the 2000 parliamentary elections. The targets of this animosity were those deemed to not properly belong to the nation. Domestic law was open for interpretation as ZANU (PF) leaders began to decipher what rules applied, and to whom. Their aim was to ensure that farm workers and farmers voted for ZANU (PF) in the upcoming parliamentary elections; those associated with MDC were seen as a threat and labelled as such.

In the aftermath of ZANU (PF)'s (disputed) electoral victory, national and international pressure mounted on the government to enforce its laws. Land demonstrations coalesced into the 'fast-track' land resettlement program, and violence continued under the label of the "Third Chimurenga",⁴ often increasing towards electoral competitions and mostly carried out by ZANU (PF) and its supporters. The political crisis quickly merged into an economic crisis. Productivity in the agriculture sector, Zimbabwe's critical economic sector, rapidly declined while donors and investors largely froze or withdrew their funds. In this context, the ambiguous citizenship of farm workers was foregrounded, with largely grim consequences for them and their dependents.

Identity Framework

Marginalisation of farm workers and intolerance of the opposition reached an apex after fast-track land reform. Anyone deviating from the 'identity' of those who held authority were assumed to be potential threats to that power. Mistreatment of farm workers, then, became justified through labels connoting opposition (MDC supporter); or betrayal (*vatengesji*/"sell-outs"); or foreignness (outsider). These definitions have been, in large part, accompanied by violence as farm workers are targeted as enemies of the state, or marked as denizens intending to deny livelihoods to more 'worthy' citizens.

The divisive notions of identity, preached by the government, resonate with a significant proportion of the population for reasons of fear and/or agreement. Farm workers, by virtue of their colonially inscribed identity, have largely been denied access to land while simultaneously been subject to various forms of violence (Sachikonye, 2003). These definitions serve to undermine a wider cohesion and alliance-building, while encouraging a violent competition for resources. Within this context, farm workers are left to passively accept political and social invisibility, or actively resist these definitions and re-define themselves and their role within Zimbabwe's crisis.

The uncertainties that once existed within the borders of the commercial farms still exist for farm workers, but are exacerbated by an equal or greater threat that permeates the public sphere. What does it mean for farm workers, defined by a combination of colonial identity formation and ZANU (PF) agendas, to act against or be perceived as acting against the state? The loss of employment and the security, however tenuous, of "domestic government" and its inherent system of representation for farm workers at the level of the state, has led to difficult choices and dangerous consequences.

As has been observed (Chabal and Daloz, 1999:80), "The whole of the parallel economy of African countries rests on the operation of vast national, regional and even

international networks, the functioning of which demands both protection from violence and access to the threat of coercion against competitors". Evidence of this parallel existence is easily found in contemporary Zimbabwe. Many young male farm workers join terror gangs, be they formal youth brigades known as Green Bombers, who are 'educated' in government camps, or youth leagues at various levels of the ZANU (PF) political structure. There are also gangs being used by individuals seeking to promote their own agendas of political power. Farm workers, then, be they physically displaced and/or dispossessed of their livelihoods, are incredibly vulnerable to political entrepreneurs who increasingly use violence in their disputes with competitors within ZANU (PF) or with members of the MDC.

In addition to the changing identities of young males in rural areas, many women are redefining themselves within the context of the crisis. Many are turning to prostitution as a survival mechanism. Although this was always a common livelihood strategy for some women on farms, particularly those who were not living with a male worker, the greater scarcity of wage jobs in agriculture has increased the number of women resorting to prostitution. Prostitution is one way in which women earn a bit of money, along with selling vegetables and other products they can find. This, though, subjects them to potentially extreme levels of violence. Male youth gangs, political entrepreneurs, and even frustrated unemployed farm workers will often 'take' without compensation in order to claim 'territory' or assert authority. What happens in peacetime is only exacerbated in the midst of crisis for women in rural areas (Zimbabwe Institute, 2004). "It is not surprising that ordinary men and women will seek to devise alternate strategies for coping with arbitrary force. As is the case in all disordered and poorly regulated societies, where crime is endemic, the very management of violence turns into a resource for some" (Chabal and Daloz, 1999:77).

Many Zimbabwean and, especially, international organizations have recorded the adverse situation of farm workers. They have written about the discrimination against farm workers in terms of acquiring land under the fast-track land resettlement activities, food security, voting, health and education, violence, and overall vulnerability. Although there have been a number of recommendations and demands placed upon the government of Zimbabwe and the 'international community', there is uncertainty about how to situate farm workers. We argue this is due in part to the problematic use of narrowly defined categories and assumed identities which often dictate policy and action. Furthermore, this grave misunderstanding of marginalised groups perpetuates violence, disrupts development and makes nations, regions and the world incredibly insecure and unstable in the long run.

The Marginalised

The world's marginalised can be covered through the classic definitions of an internally displaced person or population (IDP),⁵ or that of a refugee (individual or population)⁶ when defining 'vulnerability'. These groups can equally be defined as 'terrorists' and 'criminals' when failing to adhere to an internationally accepted definition of 'victim' and posing as an oppositional threat to an authoritarian regime. Global statistics estimate the number of uprooted people existing within their own country's borders to be nearly 25 million; compared with 10 million refugees worldwide. Numbers for Africa point to 13 million internally displaced people.⁷ What remains disconcerting is that these numbers might be

even greater, as statistics on the internally displaced remain inaccurate because they are never registered, or in some extreme cases, the displaced do not meet a strict definition but still represent the spirit of that definition.

In the game of semantics, Zimbabwe is, perhaps, an extreme case. Zimbabwe's internally displaced population is difficult to define as well as estimate in numbers. This ambiguity in how to accurately measure those most affected by the crisis begins with a displaced population one cannot even define. Farm workers play the pivotal role in the identity and numbers game. The simple fact that many still exist on commercial farms, despite the loss of the farm infrastructure and their subjection to extreme levels of violence, excludes them from an 'identity' that would bring them security and assistance. Identity, then, becomes a trap for those marginalised not only by internal power struggles, but also by homogenised definitions the international community seeks to apply to complex emergencies. The U.S. Committee for Refugees (2003) lists estimates of displaced peoples at 100,000 while Norwegian Peoples' Aid (2003) estimates IDPs at 150,000. Refugees International (2004) also suggests that the number stands at 150,000 individuals, noting that the majority of farm workers are not displaced but rather "internally trapped" on their former places of employment. At a minimum, unemployed farm workers reflect numbers of 210,000 to 245,000 (out of an estimated 320,000 to 350,000 workers in 2000 and a total population, including dependents, to be between 1 and 1.5 million; see Sachikonye, 2003), a group larger in number even than those persons deemed 'vulnerable' by international standards.

To add fuel to the fire, the UN in its Consolidated Appeals Process for Zimbabwe (2004) makes no direct reference to IDPs at all, reflecting the Zimbabwe government's position that internal displacement does not exist (Global IDP Project, 2004). Zimbabwe's "clever weavers", in this case, have the approval of an international organisation, woefully blinded by limitations that identify the vulnerable according to pre-determined models, rather than evolving identities. Thus former and current farm workers, some of whom constitute a percentage of the displaced population within Zimbabwe, and all of whom remain highly vulnerable to the consequences of being labelled as criminals, foreigners, sell-outs and opposition, are without international mechanisms that could potentially secure assistance and protection for them. Not a refugee, not an IDP, the farm worker is often paralysed on commercial lands and often unable or unwilling to cross the limits of the farm, let alone an international border. In many cases, there is nowhere to go. The complex nature of the farm worker's stagnation, in the midst of persecution, rather than movement (i.e., being "internally trapped") is not accounted for in international law and policy that focuses on protection and assistance.

How, then, are farm workers to be defined in order to most appropriately show the urgency of their situation? Do any international mechanisms exist that can offer protection and assistance to Zimbabwe's marginalised, without forcing them into the classic pre-existing definitions of refugees or internally displaced persons? Should farm workers continue to live vulnerably under threat of, if not actual, expulsion from their place of residence; dismissed without international protection or assistance, because they have not crossed Zimbabwe's borders to seek a safe haven in another country? Such uncertainty about large masses of

marginalised people within a society impedes not only an understanding of the depth of an existing crisis, but also threatens to challenge the social, political and economic institutions meant to develop and stabilise a country facing mounting insecurity.

Farm workers have no government protection or security where their lives and livelihoods are concerned, because they do not qualify as 'citizens'. Certainly those identified as 'citizens' will be served first, while those who are not may not be served at all. In addition, farm workers are not defined as refugees or internally displaced persons; therefore the international community is not obligated to intervene on their behalf with the government of Zimbabwe. Who holds a mandate that would protect and assist farm workers? The international community acts on accepted definitions that reflect past crises, while the state defines and redefines according to its interests. Both parties are promoting a dangerous environment.

If there is no definition to identify, and therefore qualify, farm workers' immediate vulnerability within Zimbabwe, then those who frame the crisis will stitch together definitions to serve their own interests, ones that more often than not promote and perpetuate violence. In the end, those who are vulnerable will not settle for being 'invisible'. Like many of the marginalised who fight 'invisibility', farm workers are complex actors who have various and sometimes crosscutting political, economic and social survival strategies. Farm workers, therefore, reflect and defy the perceptions levied against them; the choice depends mostly on how these definitions promote or undermine the acquisition of their greatest needs.

Farm Workers Defined

Farm workers are politically, economically and socially identified by power-wielders in the rural areas. Taking the example of several farms in Zimbabwe experiencing land reform since 2000, through interviews with farm workers and those who are in or who aspire to leadership positions within ZANU (PF) structures,⁸ we show that farm workers' identity and the ways in which they express their role in society are now strongly shaped and interpreted by war veterans and political leaders claiming allegiance to ZANU (PF), rather than by previous practices of "domestic government". Violence at the hands of war veterans or the ZANU (PF) towards outsiders is seen as protecting the statutes of the government against, as put by a local ZANU (PF) leader, those people who want to "hijack the process of government".⁹

If 'insider' is defined by the group that visibly controls a society, dictates policy and interprets law, membership is established through like-mindedness and obedience. Where there is insecurity, the suspicion that anyone could undermine the 'insider' group is prevalent, increasing the pressure to define and limit. Those who find no representation for themselves through the needs and interests promoted by the insider group, and do not endorse the interpretation of policy or law as defined by that group, are, by consequence, 'outsiders'. The connotation of being an 'outsider' implies a perceived threat and challenge to the identity and power structure, of the insider group.

With the removal or reduction of Zimbabwean white farmers through forced land take-over and violent intimidation, based both on an identity associated with the despised

colonial past as well as a presumed, and often actual, support of the MDC, ZANU (PF) rhetoric and practice has also targeted other groups who stand in contrast to their objectives. The mentality and practice of identifying the 'other' and forcing these defined notions of 'opposition' to the periphery, whether real or perceived, drives people further into the invisible political, economic and social spaces of what constitutes the rural and urban community.

Farm workers, historically, have been on the margins of the Zimbabwean nation. Their low-status employment, their association with "whites" whose own belonging to the nation has been increasingly questioned by a narrowly defined African nationalism, and their ambiguous citizenship claims define the farm worker in relation to others who comprise the entirety of Zimbabwean society (Rutherford, 2004; Rutherford, m.s.). Economically, 'outsiders' become 'criminals' if the protection of their livelihoods runs contrary to controlled availability, thus promoting illegal methods of sustaining themselves. Socially, they often have to choose between a life of exclusion and persecution, or else one of fraught inclusion in youth gangs, rogue bands and a world of prostitution. Farm workers especially must accept the consequence of being an 'outsider', repent and reform, or, be treated as children in the social hierarchy, i.e., vulnerable dependents meant to accept any punishment inflicted upon them.

The resistance by farm workers on a farm we will call Hondo was one such place where a reframing of farm worker identity had consequences. Farm workers demanded compensation for losing their jobs as settlers started to move onto the farm. Local ZANU (PF) leaders told the farm workers that there was no money coming from the government to compensate them, because the farm owner had retained a portion of the farm. A newly reconstituted alliance, one forged between the Hondo farmer and local ZANU (PF) leaders, left workers with little to no security and no compensation. The farm workers were ultimately forced into submission by being severely beaten by ZANU (PF) youths who had come to the farm and set up a branch office.¹⁰

Hondo farm workers were being defined in political terms; the abuse of their homes and livelihoods justified, thus, on the grounds of state security. As one ZANU (PF) leader argued:

"[Hondo's] farm was occupied by farm workers who strongly support MDC. This farm is in an area where one of the MDC leaders had a stronghold. We fought very hard to win this battle, with axes and sticks. The fight was so fierce; I had to restrain my youths [who included farm workers from other farms] from setting one farm worker on fire. The worker who was about to be set on fire was the most troublesome farm worker. I quickly intervened and restrained the youths before he was set alight".¹¹

The leader politically reframed farm workers' resistance to the establishment of a ZANU (PF) cell as insurrection. As elections, and the perception of choice, enter into aggressively shifting imbrications of land, society and reconfigured politics, 'opposition' becomes an enormous threat. The needs and wants of identified groups such as 'farm workers' (and white farmers, trade unionists, NGO activists), when not in harmony with the goals of those

vying for, or already in, political control, are identified as dangerous to the security of the whole. The local leader who has mastered support of many (be he, or she in a few cases, a war veteran, Councillor, member of parliament, senior ZANU (PF) leader, etc.) is guaranteed most often to win, as people are beaten or starved to death if they do not support him. Farm workers, whose interests are not represented by the particular leader of a given local area, find themselves reaping the consequences of their identity; oftentimes, ironically, at the hands of those who once shared the same identity.

Like other Zimbabweans, farm workers suspected of supporting the MDC were attacked in particular. Farm workers on several commercial farms were beaten terribly for being found with an MDC card. People were warned that if they voted for the opposition, ZANU (PF) youth would be able to track them down by studying fingerprints at the election sites. In addition, many people could not buy maize as the local Councillor was the one who divided the spoils and distributed them among those who were not viewed as MDC members, and who attended ZANU (PF) meetings.¹² As this Councillor declared at his ZANU (PF) victory celebration after winning the 2002 local council elections, "...work hard to bring about unity for the next council elections, so that no opposition will emerge. Winning the election is not enough. The youth must sweep and clean the area of those people who are not working in line with 'us'".¹³

Farm workers always needed to play the 'identity game', even under the "domestic government" system. But there is so much more at stake when identity politics are predicated on stripping a group of their contribution to the state, by reframing their role in society as a threat. The risk of fluctuating alliances and constantly shifting local authorities make farm workers susceptible to losing a fragile hold on land, livelihoods and life itself. Farm workers, like many other Zimbabweans, learn to obey the authority and orders of the ruling party or face the consequences of being labelled *vatenges* to the nation. As a result, there is a fear amongst farm workers to publicly discuss politics or raise vocal complaints about the current threats to their livelihoods (Rutherford, 2004). Thus, farm workers will accept labels of ZANU (PF) supporter, victim, and child in the visible, public sphere, while becoming the criminal, sell-out and opposition force in the invisible, informal spaces. The farm worker's life and livelihood depends on how well he or she can convince the social and political authorities that his or her identity reflects the 'insider's' rules and refutes popular fears that there is a proliferation of the "sell-out" mentality.

As such, farm workers will visibly attempt to politically support ZANU (PF) in order to acquire food or secure employment, not necessarily because they embrace the current political structure, but because they have no choice. Had it not been for hunger, one farm worker stated, he would rather not come to ZANU (PF)-called meetings where they were being treated like schoolchildren.¹⁴ Another farm worker described the intersecting points of redefining herself in politically acceptable terms in order to survive:

"I have been working at Pabasa but this farm was taken by the war vets...When I stopped working at Pabasa in May 2002, I began selling vegetables for a living. In April, I went to register for employment at another farm, but the manager who was present then told me and others that they were not employing former farm workers.

The manager did not tell us why. Yet, there are other former farm workers who are working there...These former farm workers who are working there now are ZANU (PF) youths. To get employment on that farm, a ZANU (PF) card is the major requirement. I do not have a ZANU (PF) card. So, I gave my money to someone to secure me the ZANU (PF) card. It appears, though, that he has failed to get me one".¹⁵

The effects of current political definitions have direct ramifications upon farm workers' economic strategies. It matters less what the actual politics are; perception has become a means to an end. Farm workers' livelihoods depend on their perceived allegiance to the ZANU (PF) party, though many can be found to support the goals and ambitions of the MDC. MDC loyalty, however, does not feed people.

As ZANU (PF) forces move onto commercial farms and replace the "domestic government" system, the definitions the state promotes about farm workers' identities hold greater weight. Farm workers can no longer retreat behind the borders of the commercial farms and try to curry favour with a potential patron in the form of the white farmer (or even a senior foreman or manager) who may decide to represent their interests at the level of the state. The public sphere in which farm workers possess no voice to register their needs and interests has come to the farm, thus moving them further into the 'invisible' space that had previously existed, principally, at the state level.

In addition to definitions with political repercussions, farm workers are defined frequently as criminals. This economic marginalisation pushes farm workers into the spaces occupied by black peasants battling to secure their own tenuous livelihoods in a country wracked by more than 200% inflation and 70% unemployment. This increased competition for resources and limited job prospects results in the group that is in a more precarious social position seeking remuneration through activities that exist outside the accepted, formal economic framework of a community. This parallel sector, referred to as subversive and illegal in many cases, serves to propagate and perpetuate the farm workers' identity as criminal.

As one displaced farm worker observed:

"I have stopped selling *mbanje* because I might be jailed for this, since there are people who are selling us out to the police. We buy and order *mbanje* from people who move around selling whatever they have. We also sell *mbanje* to people of this locality, and from other farms when they come to drink beer here. Apart from selling *mbanje* we also sell small items such as *maputi*, freezits, tomatoes and some matches. We also do not forget to sell *beche* [the vagina]".¹⁶

Forced from the commercial farms where their economic function as labourers was their identity, both men and women farm workers are economically displaced from society, with little means of redefining themselves within the formal structures of Zimbabwe's economy. The business of selling minutiae by the side of the road, or *mbanje* through local networks, or one's body for lack of another material good, creates an informal economic market in which farm workers reinforce the general perception that they are a criminalised

community working in opposition to the development interests of the state. Where heavy controls on the market seek to stop the supply and cripple the purchasing power of those operating in the market, the overall exchange of goods does not stop. People simply create another market, motivated all the more by desperate need of it, thus causing informal or 'black' markets to thrive (West and Wambugu, 2003). If farm workers are disenfranchised to the point where they are stripped from any form of social security, can no longer access a legal means of earning an income and cannot feed themselves, they will naturally seem to reflect the 'criminal' definitions to which they have been assigned.

Furthermore, the political and economic marginalisation of farm workers encourages social exclusion. "Many immigrant farm workers appear to fall outside what can be described as the cultural core group of the Zimbabwean nation; the peasants in communal wards" (Schou, 2000:44). Where black peasants have found political and economic representation and visibility at the level of the state, farm workers have not. Any visibility gained, then, is pejorative and threatening. Farm workers find themselves identified as "sell-outs", betraying the national black peasant majority by their very presence on commercial farmlands, and their perceived allegiance to the white farmers. There are many instances in which the livelihood practices of farm workers are portrayed as 'anti-social'; a label given in part to reflect their presumed 'foreign' ways and societal 'disobedience'. As a recent empirical study suggested, farm workers are not represented by the new, emerging institutions governing the fast-track resettlement areas and there is a "tendency for them to be accused [by the new settlers] of being undisciplined, disobedient and refusing to be governed" (Chambati and Moyo, 2004:26). There is a widespread assumption that farm workers do not 'belong' to the rural, mostly peasant, areas. An older Zimbabwean who worked on the railroads and returned to the rural areas in his latter years, typifies the general perceptions of farm workers:

"If you visit a farm, you will notice that 90% of the people came from outside Zimbabwe and the farm management, in most cases, is of foreign origin. Farm workers are disliked by citizens because they work in closeness to the whites and they are viewed as *vatengesesi* as they report any misdeeds by other farm workers to the whites. Another reason why they are disliked by the citizens of Zimbabwe is that foreign workers do not make any demands from their employers; maybe because they find it difficult to go back to their home, or countries of origin. Workers who come and go, are like passers-by. They do not come to consolidate, because they know that they have nowhere to go. At the moment, the foreign workers have been shaken, because of the land reform. The farms have stopped operating and now they have nowhere to go. Those of us who are citizens of this country, we are interested in the fast-track land reform programs, as most of us claim to be more able farmers than those from Malawi and other countries".¹⁷

There are a number of instances in which new settlers assume that farm workers must work for them, regardless of remuneration and working conditions, because that is assumed to be the farm worker's sole purpose. On some farms there is an "impasse", and thus,

“...a deadlock between new farmers and former farm workers and there are reports that some workers have been chased away from farm compounds for refusing to do contract work...and others have been forced to work in exchange for their continued residency in these areas. Some new farmers have resorted to charging access fees to former farm workers for use of farm resources, such as water, firewood, thatching grass, fishing on farm dams etc...as retribution for their refusal to provide their labour services. Some former farm workers thus live in fear of being evicted from the farm compound” (Chambati and Moyo, 2004:23).

Farm workers, traditionally, were imagined to have one accepted function: labour for commercial farms. The breakdown of this system, then, has left farm workers vulnerable to both assumption and redefinition. In such a context, marginalised groups will learn a system of acquiescence in the visible arena in which they exist, and silent resistance in the ‘invisible’ spaces towards which they are being pushed.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe’s “clever weavers”, reminiscent of Anderson’s tale, continue to form identities from a fabric that historical and current power relations have rendered increasingly complex. Only by looking closely at the weft and warp of what constitutes national identity can those in a position to affect change begin to rework the loom that will tell a different story for Zimbabwe’s marginalised. In the ever-expanding unequal terrain of power and class, where fear and suspicion are palpable, and options narrow from day to day, it is imperative on the international and national levels to critically re-examine the fabric of assumptions contributing to the misery and vulnerability of Zimbabwe’s farm workers.

NOTES

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2. Amy West has nine years of work experience and contact with refugees, IDPs, and asylum-seekers in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and North America. Blair Rutherford has twelve years of research experience in Zimbabwe, in particular on commercial farms and with farm workers.
3. The most glaring example of this is the persecution, mass killings, and rape of anyone identified as ‘Ndebele’ in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces from 1982-1987 by the army and Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO, the secret police). The aim was to root out the rival African nationalist group and political party, ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People’s Union); see CCJP and LRF (1997).
4. *Chimurenga* translates as “struggle” from the chiShona language and in nationalist historiography. The ‘First *Chimurenga*’ refers to the uprising in the mid-1890s by various Africans against the first European settlers; the ‘Second *Chimurenga*’ refers to the armed struggle against colonial rule in the 1960s and 1970s.

5. "Internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border". UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, principle 2.
6. "Any person who as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it". Article 1(2) of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 189 U.N.T.S. 150, entered into force on 22 April 1954.
7. Please see http://www.idpproject.org/regions/Africa_idps.htm, and <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/basics> for statistics (accessed on 11/29/2004).
8. The names of the farms and people interviewed are pseudonyms.
9. Interview, 10 November 2002.
10. Interview, 5 October 2002.
11. Interview, 5 October 2002.
12. Interview, 28 September 2002.
13. Interview, 5 October 2002. See also reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch on the violence in Zimbabwe.
14. Interview, 12 October 2002.
15. Interview, 21 July 2002.
16. Interview, 28 September 2002.
17. Interview, 10 November 2002.

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