

Whose Democracy?*

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You can teach these things, but we may not want to learn them.

—Minister of Education, Swaziland, 1997

Introduction

I went to Zimbabwe as a Fulbright scholar in 1997 ready to bring progressive education to students preparing to become teachers at a newly forming, pan-African university where I was tasked with teaching and helping to establish a teacher education program. I had wanted to go there since graduate school when I had spent a year in an international education policy class, representing Zimbabwe in class projects. Fulbright scholars are asked to list the areas of expertise they are willing to share with other countries in the area and I had named democracy and education as mine. I felt entitled to so identify myself because I had done my dissertation on John Dewey at Teachers College, Columbia University, and had started progressive schools in Southern California; at the time of my Fulbright award, I was at College of the Atlantic, a democratic college community in Maine. I felt I could bring the principles of democracy and progressive education to Zimbabwe and make them come alive in my classroom there.

I spent a year at the new university, helping to establish protocols for student teaching, arranging school placement sites, and teaching philosophy and sociology of education classes. During the Fulbright application process, prior to my arrival, for six months I was in communication with the

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university, working on the curriculum for the new program with the provost. In addition, I worked closely with one of the leading AIDS pediatricians in southern Africa, supporting a qualitative research project on the plight of AIDS orphans in the rural areas, with my students working for him as research assistants. Halfway through my service, I was called to Swaziland to conduct democracy training for secondary school headmasters. This work brought me to Swaziland four times over the course of three months, preparing and delivering the training sessions.

This article sorts through that experience rather than analyzes any one aspect of my time there. During the writing of this article, the president of Zimbabwe was ousted in a coup, powerful men in Washington and Hollywood were swept from power, and our president continues to erode our standing in the world. The role and prestige of American scholars around the world will certainly be affected by this presidency and its “Make America Great Again” worldview. In many ways, this article is both a casting back across decades, bringing memories to light, and an immediate response to our current historic moment.

At the time I left for Zimbabwe, I had assumed that I could spread a belief in progressive education principles, and not unlike the colonizers before me, who had spread the word of the Bible, I had assumed the message would be welcomed. It had not occurred to me that I might be considered part of a neocolonial wave of Westerners or that few educators would be interested in educational insights from someone whose country was experiencing increasing gun violence in its schools. I had not considered that democracy would mean very different things to my Zimbabwe students and that, for most of them, the question of the role of women in society was at the center of democracy discussions. I certainly hadn’t considered that some of my students would consider it beneath them to have a woman professor. And I certainly hadn’t considered that traditional cultural practices lived alongside Western colonial practices in the minds of my students.

In Our Traditional Culture, We Eat Lunch at 1:00 p.m.

In my first meeting with the dean of education, he surprised me by saying, “Our students are the same as yours; some work hard, some party hard, some are smart, and some are not so smart.” While this statement challenged my postmodern assumptions about difference, it reassured me that I might find common ground with my students. Yet I came to understand just how differently my students viewed the world. I found that their traditional cultural beliefs affected their ideas about education and democracy and that, for

many of them, the position of women in the society was a sign of a deep gender inequality, held in place by the contradictions that surrounded traditional cultural practices in relation to women. These contradictions formed the intersection that would become the focus of all our discussions both in and outside of class. In part, I felt these discussions were coded conversations about the colonial past and the hegemony of Western cultural values and, by extension, a critique of the role of Westerners in their country, of which I was clearly one.

The intersection of traditional culture, education, democracy, and gender is fully explored in an anthology of student writing from my sociology class. *Identity in Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Writings from Zimbabwe Students* (Kralovec and Chitiyo 2009) brings together student analyses of Zimbabwe newspaper articles about school-related events, asking the students to apply what they were learning in class to their analysis. I worked closely with two student editors on the project, Fortune Madzime and Kundai Moyana, who selected chapter topics, identified papers appropriate for the volume, and wrote the introductions to each chapter and the volume as a whole. In addition, for a number of years, I worked on this material with my coauthor, Morgan Chitiyo, who was a student in my classes and is now an education professor in the United States. This book was 12 years in the making, which signifies the complexity of the issues the text deals with and our desire to let the student voices speak for themselves without the imposition of a Western theoretical framework. Chitiyo (2009) writes that in this work, the subaltern speaks, and it is of emerging identities and postcolonial tensions: "Students, in these writings, express a yearning for reaffirmation of their culture. Although they acknowledge that culture is dynamic, there is still a resounding call for a preservation of traditional culture. . . . By reflecting on their own culture students may be able to understand their place in history, which may help to resolve the identity crisis that is reflected in the students' writings" (91). The chapter titles, written by the student editors on the project, reflect this tension: "Trapped Between Two Cultures: Schools, Culture and Change"; "We Want Our Identity Back: Language Instruction in the Schools"; "Undemocratic Schools Create Dull People: Democracy and Change in Education." My students were clearly struggling with how to integrate their traditional cultural beliefs with their emerging identities as university students at an international university, and it was not a new struggle for them: "Although learning English creates opportunities for Zimbabwean students vis-à-vis the global community, imposing the language on the students is a practice which perpetuates the colonial legacy" (Chitiyo 2009, 92). This tension left my students in the terrible bind that pitted their desire to recapture and reassert

their cultural past against their desire to embrace a broader, modern, Western world. In these contradictory worlds, women students found themselves discussing women's rights at the university and serving their fathers on their knees when they went home.

In our discussions, we tried to find common ground. When discussing ethics, we landed on the question of whether it was ever justified to kill someone. This led to my understanding that my students in Zimbabwe were not just like my students in the United States, as I had been told by the dean. My students believed that if a killing were a revenge killing for an ancestor, it was justified. Probing students about this belief led to deep discussions and debates among them about traditional culture in Zimbabwe and the belief system that supports it. I found that I didn't believe or disbelieve what my students were telling me about ancestor worship and the healing power of N'ganas (traditional healers who many thought were better healers of AIDS than Western doctors). A student being taken by water spirits during a field trip didn't even surprise me.

One of the ongoing debates my students were engaged in concerned the practice of having traditionally dressed dancers entertain at the tourist restaurants and resorts in Zimbabwe. My students debated whether this was a form of exploitation and oppression, and they wondered if it was OK to be a dancer at a resort if you needed money for school. Students whose parents were active in the liberation struggle would argue that their parents didn't go through the independence struggle, called the "Second Chimurenga," and survive the bloody massacres that followed independence only to have their children dance now in traditional dress for tourists. My students did speak with one voice on the subject of African dance, which they knew to be a power source for religious and thanksgiving celebrations. Decontextualizing the dance robs it of its meaning: "If we look at the liberation struggle, after the dance people got strong despite the difficulties they faced. The dance is a source of power. Whether or not you are formally possessed and people are clapping hands at you while you sit in the chair with people saying, Makadii Serkuru (how are you ancestor?)" (Madzime 2009a, 77).

In the context of my classes, the traditional culture debate was informed by Freire's (2000) notion of the internalization of the oppressor, which struck a deep chord with my students. In fact, when students went out on strike that spring, they were chanting lines from Freire. Students drew parallels between Fay Chung's vision, outlined in *Socialism, Education and Development* (Chung and Ngara 1985), and Freire's work. Chung was the architect of a new educational system for an independent Zimbabwe and outlined a vision of education with production, a model that would not only integrate

physical and intellectual labor but also indigenize the curriculum. This vision of education was never implemented: a drought and then a financial crisis brought in World Bank and International Monetary Fund policies that were contrary to Chung's educational vision. In addition, parents in the new Zimbabwe wanted the elite English education for their children that was once only an opportunity for white Zimbabweans: "Everyone agrees that the curriculum must be made relevant to changing economic realities in Zimbabwe. Black African parents know that the education their children receive denigrates their cultural heritage and language. But parents, remembering their own limited education opportunities, still see the academic, British-style education as a passport to a better life and indeed it is" (Madzime 2009b, xxi). One of my students, whose parents were involved in Chung's education reform movement, recalled, "Most of the educational ideas in Chung's book are an operationalization of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* on Zimbabwe soil. This kind of education in Zimbabwe was supposed to be implemented alongside economic reforms. Therefore, when the socialist attempt failed, this kind of education also flopped. Many Zimbabweans still view this form of education as one which would have democratized the whole system" (Moyana 2009b, 68).

The pull of traditional culture played out differently for the older Zimbabwean men who were in charge of the university system. Oddly, my dean told me that in his traditional culture, they have lunch at 1:00 p.m., so I could not hold a study group at that hour. At that moment, it was clear to me that traditional culture had deeply layered meaning and significance, depending on the person you were talking with and the context. The dean, who drove a BMW and wore gold cuff links, had to have some other reason for his rejection of my study group request. I suspect it had more to do with my being a woman than his belief in the role of traditional cultural practices in the university. Further evidence for this suspicion came from the fact that it took him six months to realize that my male colleague, whom the dean thought was the Fulbrighter, was actually a volunteer and that I was the Fulbright scholar. At that time there were 24 members of the faculty; I was the only woman considered to be a faculty member—there was a woman lecturer, and the librarian was a woman.

Another Question on Democracy in Zimbabwe Naturally Centers on Gender

The intersection of traditional culture, equal educational opportunity, and the role of women in society presented the conundrum that my students

struggled to untangle. They identified four different approaches to feminism in Africa. The most vocal group of feminists, the Westernized feminists, saw traditional culture as the reason why Zimbabwean women were oppressed while other branches of feminism in Zimbabwe looked to socialism and pan-Africanism as the solution. Interestingly, the fourth approach drew on traditional culture: "Perhaps the largest feminist movement throughout Africa is to be found among the traditional, rural, uneducated women . . . if you are lucky enough to listen to these women, you come to appreciate the existence of a feminist movement without the interference of feminist newspaper columnists and the Western media" (Moyana 2009a, 49).

In our discussions, I came to understand that while many of my students viewed traditional culture as a power source for women's liberation, many believed it to be the root cause of gender-related problems that Zimbabwe faced: "Deep-rooted cultural beliefs seem to be the sources of gender inequality in Zimbabwe. These young Zimbabweans have to balance the demands of a new world order, which includes calls for gender equality, while balancing these deep rooted cultural beliefs. Without this examination, equal opportunity and social mobility for women will remain elusive" (Moyana 2009a, 56). These beliefs affected every aspect of life for young children, with a particularly deleterious impact on the educational opportunity for young women: "Many families, being impoverished, are confronted with a situation of who among their children should be sent to school. Presented with this dilemma, more often than not, the boy child is preferred for schooling and the girl is then obviously pushed into marriage. Although this gloomy situation is improving, it still remains a question for those who see accessibility of educational facilities as a genuine area of educational democracy" (Moyana 2009b, 69).

This intersection of gender issues and democracy surprised me, as did the notion of educational democracy. Democracy for many of my students meant a kind of social equity that they were striving toward; in a sense, it was as idealized a view of democracy as my own. I would talk about a democratic classroom being the foundation for democracy, yet they saw it differently: "The word democracy is used to define a society in which there is fair treatment of each other by citizens and an absence of class feeling" (Moyana 2009b, 69). One student viewed the importance of democracy for schooling as an issue of leadership training: "a democratic atmosphere in a school trains young leaders in the correct meaning of freedom and responsibility" (Shumba 2009, 70). When I questioned them about why democracy training is important for the leaders and not the people, they would often remind me of their president's famous statement, "The parliament is responsible not

to the people who elected them, but to the party which allows them to sit.” Zimbabwe has a parliamentary system with democratic elections for president and legislators, whereas important district governors are appointed by the president. It is widely known that elections are rigged and marred by violence and human rights violations. The recent coup in Zimbabwe speaks to the corruption of the Mugabe regime. My students told me that, before each election, new tractors would appear in the rural areas as gifts from the president, only to be put back in storage in the capital after the election.

Swaziland Headmasters

The intersection of traditional culture, the meaning of democracy, and the role of women played out in different ways during my work with US Agency for International Development (USAID) in Swaziland, which was tasked with doing “democracy training” for headmasters. I was really interested to know what the ideas of progressive education would mean to headmasters in a country on the brink of democracy.

Neighboring Swaziland was embarking on a period of constitutional reform, which culminated in a new constitution in 2006. Nelson Mandela had been freed in 1992, and majority rule was established in South Africa in 1994, so it seemed a time of excitement about emerging freedoms and real political change in the whole region. USAID in Swaziland was involved with the education sector, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations in helping to set the stage and prepare the country for what would be a new democratic form of government.

Swaziland, officially the Kingdom of Eswatini, a sovereign state inside of South Africa, had been part of the British Empire for much of the twentieth century, gaining independence in 1968. I soon learned that there were mixed feelings in Swaziland about democracy and concerns about the possibility of violence during this transition and the loss of traditional culture. During USAID planning meetings for our work there, we were careful to manage these concerns and other concerns about the role of the United States in the development of the new constitution. Directions from the minister of education were to be followed to the letter, and the minister had to personally approve our programs.

For our appointed meeting with the minister, we were eight people in Western dress, ties, suits, high heels, and stockings, waiting for the minister. When the minister arrived, we all rose. His cabinet was dressed as we were, but he was in traditional dress, and I found myself standing before the 28-year-old, spear-holding, leopard-skin-clad minister. I learned that in Swazi-

land, all ministers had to wear traditional dress at official functions, a very different position regarding traditional dress than the one my Zimbabwean students were struggling with. I found the minister was gracious but skeptical. His first question to me was, "What do I have to learn from someone whose country has mass shootings in their schools?" Assuming he meant it rhetorically, I declined to answer. His cabinet members had questions for us about our approach and the length of the training, saying the headmasters would only be available for half a day. We finally came to agreement about the training program, and the minister gave his blessings and left, turning as he left to say, "You can teach this, but we may not want to learn it." This statement seemed a warning about the work ahead, and who was the "we"? I suspected he was referring to the headmasters whom I would be "training."

I had met with the headmasters in most of the secondary schools in Zimbabwe by that point, arranging student teaching placements, and I was pretty sure the headmasters in Swaziland would be similar. Not only did they have similar colonial education systems, but also they shared Zulu and Nbebele ancestry and the southern African landscape. Zimbabwe and Swazi schools were modeled on English education, with students certified by the Cambridge International Examination system; classrooms were run by prefects, who were appointed by headmasters. My students did not have good things to say about headmasters in our discussions. According to one of my students, "A lot has been said about the tendency by headmasters to run the schools as their own personal properties. Many headmasters rule their schools with an iron hand instead of leading them" (Moyana 2009b, 67). Most of my students viewed headmasters as dictators and decried the situation as slowing the development of more democratic schools: "Dictatorship hinders development in a school in the sense that the leader does not accept ideas from teachers or other people in the community and by so doing some people with bright ideas about how to develop a school are not given the chance to air their views" (Bvunzawabaya 2009, 70).

These were the views I had heard from my Zimbabwe students before I found myself in front of a room full of headmasters in Swaziland, "training" them in democratic educational practices. The headmasters were all dressed in suits, ties, and white shirts; there was not a woman in the group. As I began, the headmasters dutifully took notes. My hour-and-a-half talk ended with stories about how US schools use classroom elections to teach the principles and practices of democracy. I talked about the election of milk monitors in kindergarten and weather reporters in first grade, about student government and how it is organized in schools, and about the role of community meetings in progressive schools.

We had a heated discussion about an aspect of democracy that I hadn't really focused on previously. In their eyes, the central problem with democracy was how to make the loser accept the loss. They were certain that having elections in the schools would not teach the Swazi people how to lose elections and move on. The passion that the headmasters brought to this discussion of losing elections surprised me. They had been dutiful students, quietly sitting in their seats, and suddenly, there was shouting and yelling across the room of 100. During conversations at lunch, we settled into friendly discussions about what a democratic classroom in Swaziland would look like, but most greeted the ideas with laughter. In the evaluations that were filled out after my session, the most common comment was, "Lecturer should be home with her family." I had heard the same comment from some of my male students in Zimbabwe, so this did not surprise me. But I also knew from my students that African women were gaining power, and I wondered if having more women headmasters would solve one of the problems I was trying to solve with Freire, namely, the power structure in place in schools.

Conclusion

Today in Zimbabwe, fewer than 10 percent of secondary headmasters are women, 33 percent of women are forced into marriage before the age of 18, fewer than 16 percent of members of Parliament are women, and one woman is raped every two hours (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency 2013). In addition, Stephen Lewis, codirector of AIDS-Free World, states, "The politically-orchestrated and systematic campaign of sexual violence unleashed against women who supported the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) carves yet another chapter in the annals of Robert Mugabe's legacy of depravity" (Action for Southern Africa 2010). The Lewis reference is to the bloody massacres that followed independence in 1980, which left more than 20,000 members of the opposition party dead.

In the 20 years since I was there, it seems that not much has changed for the women in either Zimbabwe or Swaziland. Zimbabwe's new constitution in 2013 promised equal opportunities for women, as did the 2006 constitution in Swaziland. Both countries have signed on to international gender equity protocols, for example, the UNESCO Education for All initiative and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, yet both are identified as having little effective enforcement of the law and little interest in improving the situation of women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women n.d.; Wikipedia n.d.).

And here at home, I worry about the state of our own democracy, where losers now refuse to concede defeat and hanging chads can decide elections, and I remember that Dewey's model for democracy was the New England town meeting, not Facebook. I now see how easy it is for democracy to be trampled as a result of gerrymandering, dark money, voter suppression, outside interference, and fake news. Our most recent election only makes this reality starker. A recent report from the University of California Los Angeles documents the incivility and aggression that have come to haunt American schools since the 2016 election (Rogers et al. 2017).

I have become skeptical of the role Americans can and should play around the world. I believe we have more to learn than to teach the rest of the world, and I now go to international conferences to listen, not to speak. At a recent conference in Finland, where I was the only person from the United States, people wanted to talk about what happened in our recent election. Most did not understand how one person could win the popular vote and lose the election and how the loser would stand for that outcome. I talked to four Arab women who had no confusion about our election: "Well, of course, everyone knows America is the most misogynist country in the world." In a wrap-up conversation, I had talked about the crisis in the United States regarding the new president and had suggested that the United States might lose its standing in the international academic world. In response to that, a Syrian woman suggested that the United States was not in crisis and invited me to a refugee camp in Syria if I wanted to see crisis. A Palestinian woman wondered why Americans ever believed that their government was not corrupt, and she invited us to join the rest of the world that always looks at their governments with suspicion. It was an invitation that made me recoil. Wasn't ours the soundest democracy in the world? Wasn't liberal democracy still our most important export? Didn't we fight world wars to make the world safe for our form of democracy, and don't we invade other countries to bring them our democracy?

In the wake of our recent election, I wonder if these notions of American exceptionalism in regard to our democracy still hold. Is there a difference between false promises during a campaign and delivering tractors to rural areas? Shouts at Trump rallies, "Lock her up," and preelection claims that if Trump were to lose, the election was rigged, challenged my deeply held beliefs about our democratic system and its legitimacy. I now understand how my Zimbabwe students could view their government with suspicion, all the while embracing the necessity of democracy for gender equity and educational opportunity.

Our form of democracy is dependent on habits of mind and attitudes that take a long time to develop. That is why Dewey taught that democracy is

more than a form of government—it is a way of life. It is why he believed democracy must be learned in schools that model democratic communities, that provide opportunities to do real work, and where education is not preparation for life but life itself. And despite everything, I still think that electing milk monitors in kindergarten is necessary to teach the practice and value of democracy. Just the other day in a public elementary school in Los Angeles, I saw a kindergarten class doing just that, and it brought tears to my eyes and reminded me of the profound importance of inserting democratic principles into the daily life of schools. Given the state of our own democracy, it is perhaps the most important thing to teach today.

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