

Reflecting Non-Verbal Cues in the Context of Crisis: The Fist and the Open Palm in Zimbabwe's Political Crisis

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The Zimbabwean political landscape has given rise to many interpretations. Violence, intimidation, and propaganda have been part of this crisis leading to serious economic and social problems for the ordinary person. The two main political parties in the country have used party signs and symbols to assert their ideology. This paper employs the semiotic theory to explore how the ZANU PF (Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front) party sign or symbol the clenched fist as well as the MDC T (Movement for Democratic Change—Tsvangirai)'s open palm, the same hand but communicating two conflicting political ideologies as non-verbal cues reveal party ideology and identity and in some cases become the cause of either conflict or harm on party followers. Semiotics offers us a platform to theorize as well as gain semantic realizations of signs and symbols as used to communicate in various contexts. Because non-verbal cues of various nature are in fact signs and symbols largely decoded by the eye, semiotics allows us to give attention to even non-verbal cues which they themselves have received less attention in communication studies yet they are found to be 60% responsible for meanings realized in any communication situation.

Keywords: fist, palm, semiotics, non-verbal

Introduction

The turn of 21st century saw Zimbabwe reduced almost to a political and economic rubble. The LRP (Land Reform Programme) dubbed “Third Chimurenga” driven by the revolutionary political party and the ZANU PF (Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front) led by Robert Mugabe. The new opposition political party, the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change) led by Morgan Tsvangirai, was also viciously advancing the regime change agenda against the failing political and economic policies employed by the ruling party, ZANU PF. The country realized two political ideologies viciously conflicting for almost a decade from 1999 when the MDC was formed to 2008 when a GPA (Global Political Agreement) was put in place. The period 1999-2009 saw two hostile political camps battling ideologically and politically to control the land between the Zambezi and the Limpopo rivers through either nationalism in the ZANU PF nationalist style or regime change as driven by the MDC.

The effects were felt by the ordinary person in the streets in the form of a chronic economic crisis characterized by shortages of fuel, food, bank notes, medicine, and various public services. Agriculture was disturbed and Agro business also received a huge knock but the two political parties soldiered on for political dominance.

The most disheartening realizations were propaganda, violence, and general human rights violations. Violence for example was noted in all its forms, physical in all its magnitude, psychological, and intellectual. Amnesty International (2005) reported that:

For the past five years, elections in Zimbabwe have been characterized by an escalation in human rights violations. These violations take place before, during and after elections. The majority of victims are members and supporters of the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), including opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) and opposition candidates. The perpetrators have largely been supporters of the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), and members of the security forces.

This report summarizes the dire situation not only of MDC sympathizers but of ZANU PF and non-aligned members of the Zimbabwean society at the time. People were even forced to migrate from places of political battlefields—mostly the remote areas for the better-safe areas such as the city. But there they were followed by OM (Operation Murambatsvina) too, which was described by Vambe (2008) “in official circles as a crackdown by government agents on vendors; innocent men and women doing their business” (p. 1). Mahoso (2008), however, was quick to point out that OM was “something treated in most of the world as a routine event, namely slum clearance” (p. 160). More importantly, however:

Murambatsvina targeted people in both rural and urban areas; ZANU PF supporters, MDC supporters and the non-aligned. This sent a strong message to many Zimbabweans, which is that in the course of protecting power, a chicken, a goat, a cow and even a human being can be sacrificed. More was at stake than simply dividing the masses in terms of ZANU PF and the MDC. (Vambe, 2008, p. 3)

And an increased number of people decided to leave the country with the highest influx of boarder jumpers and Zimbabwean economic and political asylum seekers flocking to neighboring countries like South Africa and Botswana. For economic reasons, most ordinary Zimbabweans found themselves in purported safe, economically and politically stable countries around the world, mostly USA (United States of America), UK (United Kingdom), and other European and Asian countries.

Human rights violations and the economic crisis were realized largely, because people were caught up between two conflicting and hostile ideologies which were popularized through party slogans and party philosophies. The party symbols of both ZANU PF and MDC became an important mark for not only one’s political identity but also affiliation and even economic survival. The ZANU PF’s party symbol, the clenched fist raised somewhere close to the forehead, identified one as a ZANU PF cadre, a Youth Brigade or “Green Bomber”, or War Veteran. The MDC open palm identified on the other hand that one was “democratic” and an opposition member, a change force, progressive, and so on. These two symbols ceased to be simply political party symbols, but became signs from which one party would siphon individuals for punishment, political re-orientation or fish out non-aligned members of the community into submerging into either one of the two. It was as if one had to be a ZANU PF or MDC supporter or symphathiser. Periods led to elections, for example, ordinary people were in some cases forced to assume ZANU PF or MDC political identity in accordance to the political demands and context in which they found themselves. Amid “Green Bombers” or War Veterans, one assumed a ZANU PF identity, and amid MDC supporters, one had to be a “Chinja” (a Changer).

Political identities and affiliations were reduced to everyday life of individuals with simple greetings by handshake for example becoming a politically driven mode of communication. Some ZANU PF affiliated cadres

would greet using clenched fists in contrast to the socio-cultural norm of the handshake. If one brought an open palm in this scenario, he/she would have communicated easily that he/she belonged to the opposition, therefore the handshake was given a political meaning and a number of people found themselves being assaulted due to this. It is important therefore to investigate how these non-verbal cues helped push such issues and party ideologies ahead.

Theorizing Non-verbal Cues

Semiotics & Non-verbal Communication

Semiotics allows us to understand sign systems we use in our everyday lives. Saidi and Pfukwa (2011) found semiotics as a “science that studies the life of signs within a society” (p. 136). Semiotics as a theory can be credited to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American philosopher Charles Peirce (1839-1914). For De Saussure (1915), language is not an event but a system of signs that “expresses” various “ideas” (pp. 66-67). The expression of these ideas through language could be read as simply the enaction of various semantic realizations in communication set-ups in a given context. In other words, the various meanings we generate from use of signs we use in a communicative environment allow us to express our deep seated notions and to even achieve various communicative goals.

De Saussure’s (1915) triangular diagram (Saidi & Pfukwa, 2011, p. 137) reveals the relationships that exist between the sign, its signifier, and the signified. The relationship, as De Saussure advanced, was arbitrary for there was no direct link between linguistic units and the objects they referred to. While De Saussure (1915) was focusing on the linguistic sign, an inference can be made which may help explain the case at hand. The idea of arbitrariness explains how non-verbal cues as semiotic signs are in their own arbitrary, in that there is nothing in the clenched fist which directly produces what it represents in ZANU PF neither is there anything directly connected to the MDC ideology from its open palm semiotic sign. Therefore, these non-verbal cues as semiotic signs are conventional and social (Culler, 1994, p. 26). The ZANU PF founding fathers and the party simply agreed that they would use the clenched fist as their party semiotic sign or the non-verbal cue. The meanings realized therefore point towards revolution, rule, victory, popularity, heroism, and consequently Pan-African nationalism. The MDC, on the other hand, decided on the open palm, which is in direct opposition to that of ZANU PF. Semantic realizations one gets for the MDC open palm are freedom, opposition, democracy, and transparency.

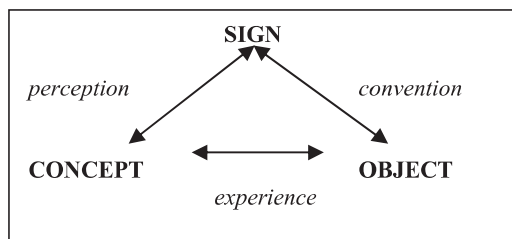


Figure 1. Semiotic model.

De Saussure’s (1915) triangular diagram shows the relationship between sign, signifier, and signified. The triangular diagram thus gave rise to a semiotic model which over the years has been made visible by various scholars as summarized by Figure 1.

In the semiotic model (see Figure 1), De Saussure’s SIGN cognitively occupies the defining triangular

position and is still something which is perceived or can be seen (psychologically, physically, or otherwise) and standing for something else in the world. The CONCEPT¹ becomes the thoughts and various meaningful images brought to mind due to the perception of the SIGN. This is the “thing” (De Saussure, 1966, p. 65, as cited in Manghani, Piper, & Simon, 2006, p. 105) or “something” (Manghani et al., 2006, p. 107) De Saussure and Pierce respectively refer to which is in the world to which the sign refers. For a speaker or user of a SIGN, the CONCEPT is realized by the user’s perception where CONCEPT and OBJECT are connected by the user’s existing knowledge of the world which is this case experience. SIGN and OBJECT are given life by the socio-cultural conventions within which the user is an active member. The semiotic model thus reveals the important connections from which meanings arise and are created in a communication set-up.

De Saussure (1915), apart from his contested triangular diagram, came up with two other pairs of terms, namely, the “*syntagm*” which refers to a set of signs strung together to express or convey various meanings. The other term is “*paradigm*” where same semiotic signs of the same *syntagm* can belong to different paradigms. In this case, political semiotic sign (non-verbal cues) qualifies as a *syntagm* but belongs to different or oppositional political ideologies (*paradigms*). This is a case in point we observe in the relationship between ZANU PF and MDC’s non-verbal communicative cues. The clenched fist and the open palm both are clusters of the same *syntagm* but belong to a different *paradigm* whose difference actually brings untold suffering to the ordinary person in the country as explained by Merjory Banda in 2005 arriving at an MDC rally as follows:

As soon as she was in the stadium, Merjory Banda reached into her bag, pulled out a T-shirt with the open-palm symbol of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and slipped it over her head.

“I am afraid,” she said. “If the Zanu PF people catch me wearing this, I am in trouble. We are not free.” (Phiri, 2005, p. 1)

Indeed this marked a different direction in the history of Zimbabwe.

Pierce (1966) was credited for the tri-sign typology which he noted as ICON, INDEX, and SYMBOL. ICON and OBJECT share a degree of quality, for example, a map or a photo. The icon created in the mind of the user what Pierce (1966) found as a more developed sign by virtue of characters of its own and what it possessed whether such object exists or not (as cited in Manghani et al., 2006, p. 107). The INDEX denotes its object through physical linkage, effect, or attachment to it. A good example is smoke which could be read as an index of fire. The smoke has a physical relationship or is given effect by the fire. Pierce (1966) noted that indices had no significant resemblance to their objects and they referred to single units, individuals, or single collections through directing attention “by blind compulsion” (as cited in Manghani et al., 2006, p. 108). Psychologically, the actions of indices hence depend upon association by contingency and not association by resemblance or upon intellectual operation (Manghani et al., 2006, p. 107). SYMBOL is conventionally realized, that is, it is defined by socio-cultural convention and symbols are ideologically based. Communicative goals are thus obviously linked to or rely on the use of symbols or symbolic cues for communication hence room to assign meanings based on the notion of social and cultural convention.

De Saussure was accused of being structuralist in his semiotic theory, hence Martella (2003) chose Peirce’s *cognitive* semiotic theory of signs and found it more appropriate for a semiotic culture citing that Peirce’s theory “does not require a sign to be intentionally sent and artificially produced as necessary conditions in order to be

¹ De Saussure’s (1915) signifier.

defined as such” (p. 3). This automatically works in negative effect to this researcher’s view as sign systems under discussion are intentionally used and their artificial production are the very conditions that give them communicative meaning. If we are to choose Pierce and De Saussure’s semiotic systems, both semiotic views partially carry the day and hence a fusion of the two semiotic systems gives us a better understanding than one which Martella (2003) advanced although Pierce’s semiotic programme is rather found to be applicable than that of De Saussure based on “cognitive and creative processes” (Martella, 2003, p. 3).

Van Leeuwen (2005) called signs “semiotic resources” which were “the actions and artifacts we use to communicate” (p. 3). These artefacts are the nucleus of varying meanings realized in a contextualized communication set-up. Van Leeuwen (2005) found that these semiotic resources did not have fixed meanings, that is, the meanings realized were not already given as they may be assumed, but convention and context came into beefing up the meaning. This was why he (2005) spoke of semiotic resources having what he called “meaning potential” (p. 5) traced back from Halliday’s (1978) concept of meaning potential. People are found to be try(ing) to fix meanings during communication.

The central issues brought about by semiotics are that meaning and context are the pillars of our communicative endeavors. The contextualized meaning is brought about by the patterned forms of language and in this case the use of signs as symbols for political advancement and survival. Against this background semiotics can then be viewed as a theory of meaning in that it involves production and interpretation of meaning. Meaning arises during the communicative process itself. When we create socio-cultural meanings via cultural artifacts we produce practices specific to a society of community. If a sign stands on its own it is devoid of meaning. It can only assume meaning the moment it is deliberately brought into a context where it then begins to play a part in relation to other signs. De Saussure (1915) argued for this relation/idea.

The Clenched Fist and Open Palm as Semiotic Symbols

The raised clenched fist and the open palm can generally be classified under gestures. Krauss, Chen, and Chawla (1996) presented a typology of gestures. They highlight how the typologies abound in non-verbal behavior literature about their distinctions as necessary and useful. Following Kendon (1983) (as cited in Krauss et al., 1996), “The different types of hand movements that accompany speech... arranged on a continuum of lexicalization—the extent to which they are ‘word like’” (p. 4). Symbolic gestures which are of interest in this paper are “gestural signs—hand configurations and movements with specific, conventionalized meanings” (Krauss et al., 1996, p. 5). The trio identifies the raised fist, bye-bye (open palm—waved) as “familiar symbolic gestures” (Krauss et al., 1996, p. 5). Of significance, however, is the notation that these symbolic gestures are used “intentionally and serve clear communicative function” (Krauss et al., 1996, p. 5). We get a comprehensive insight as follows:

Every culture has a set of symbolic gestures familiar to most of its adult members, and every similar gesture may have different meanings in different cultures. ... Although symbolic gestures often are used in the absence of speech, they occasionally accompany speech, either echoing a spoken word or phrase or substituting for something that was not said. (Krauss et al., 1996, p. 5)

This works in agreement with Kendon’s (1983, p. 27) that “Gesticulation... is important principally because it is employed, along with speech, in fashioning an effective utterance unit” (as cited in Krauss et al., 1996, p. 7).

Every sign, therefore, conveys or expresses a distinction or difference for the simple reason of achieving a communicative purpose. Of significance is that humans communicate more through non-verbal means. Researchers (Steinberg, 2007; Cleary (Ed.), 2004) estimate that the so-called body language accounts for 65%, 70%, and even 90% of human communication. Non-verbal cues are bound to culture, and according to Martella (2003), culture is “*the ways in which the individual relate to the environment and other human beings*” (p. 7, emphasis original). And here culture is taken as a context, in other words, as something within which the “objects can be described in legible ways” (Martella, 2003, p. 7). Because of the different cultural underpinnings of non-verbal cues, the discussion of the clenched fist and open palm should be studied under a socio-cultural and political context in which we find them. Effective communication demands that we observe the role of non-verbal behavior as a dimension of communication competence.

Clenched Fist and Open Palm’s Conceptual Framework

The clenched fist (or raised fist) is believed to be a sign system that universally symbolizes resistance and unity and is part of a broader genre of “hand” symbols. The clenched fist usually appears in full frontal display showing all fingers and usually integrated with other images for example a peace symbol or tool (Cushing, 2006). Cushing (2006) traced the history of the clenched fist but the course of its usage in various contexts gave rise to the militant fist which can be said to have been co-opted by the ZANU PF from its inception before the independence to date. Because of the clenched fist’s universality, Cushing (2006) pointed out that the reference to context is crucial to understand its meaning.

The raised fist is also traced back to the trade unions around the globe from which solidarity and unity with the suffering or the oppressed people are the connotative meaning. This has been realized somewhat as a “salute”. In USA and even beyond it has been found to be or known as the “black fist” or sometimes known as the “black power fist”. Against this background, one reads association of the clenched fist with black nationalism as well as to some degree socialism. Contrary to this is the white power symbol which although uses a fist either holding a flower (which is very rare), the red-kind of hand is usually depicted with a flat palm. This easily places ZANU PF clenched fist and MDC’s open palm at logger heads as the former is aligned to self-empowerment, Pan-African nationalism, solidarity, unity, and siding with the suffering and oppressed majority of Zimbabweans. On the other hand, the MDC, though driven by black elite, sides with the white supremacy ideology, white loyalty under the guise of democratizing the nation-state which is between Zambezi and Limpopo. Cross (2011) traced the origins of the MDC open palm and said the following:

In 1998, a small-scale farmer took a bus from his home in the Masvingo province, and after alighting in Mbare, he walked several kilometres to the headquarters of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, where he asked to speak to its secretary-general, Morgan Tsvangirai... his secretary went to him and he agreed to see the visitor without an appointment. The old man told Tsvangirai that he felt he had a vision from God. He said he had been told in that vision to tell Tsvangirai that his party symbol should be an open hand, palm outwards, depicting openness and non-violence.²

For Cross (2011), the MDC palm is from God given to the MDC leader by a peasant which should symbolize openness and non-violence, that is, transparency and humane.

² Eddie Cross’ “Winds of Change” article which appeared in *The Independent*, October 4, 2011, retrieved from <http://www.theindependent.co.zw>.

Reflecting on the Clenched Fist and Open Palm

The ZANU PF's Clenched Fist

Because of these two contrasting positions, the ZANU PF's clenched fist has a long history that captures even the generality of the suffering and the burden of the black man in the world against capitalist drive in the form of slavery and colonialism (and even apartheid); which are two separate but identical capitalist Western driven systems that subdued the African, physically, psychologically, culturally, historically, politically, and economically. The opposite stands the white supremacy drive, disguised as democracy, transparency, equity, human rights, and notions of rule of law to which the MDC readily stands aligned. This is the base or platform on which ideological differences were noted in Zimbabwe and from which the battles between the two camps were drawn to the point where the suffering and oppressed ordinary Zimbabwean citizens felt even more oppressed. It was the women and children and the old and the hungry in the rural and urban areas that had to carry the burden of the two political parties' non-verbal cues as their respective ideological standings.

The ZANU PF clenched fist has had two realms of meanings over the years. During the colonial period, the raised clenched fist symbolized solidarity with the oppressed African populace in Zimbabwe. It stood for a fight for freedom, a fight for a vote, and a fight for equity, recognition, and participation in the economic fortunes of the country mainly through equity land distribution, dismantlement of racial segregation, access to education, and so on. The fist stood firmly for unity of purpose with regard to self-rule, recognition, and dignified towards the writing of a people's history and embattled past. It stood for inspiration, courage, sacrifices, and continued fight for the realization of a King's (1963) kind of dream. The clenched fist symbolized as it were a nationalist ideology, logical at the time, against the Western capitalist imposed rule and control.

After April 1980, the ZANU PF's clenched fist assumed yet another meaning, victory over white supremacy. Not even Ian Smith's declaration³ had stood the test of time. The clenched fist further stood to cement the essence of victory and symbolized a Pan-African salute and became an emblem of possibilities as well as a drive for reconciliation. Mugabe even said:

... If yesterday I fought you as my enemy, today you have become a friend and ally and with the same national interest, loyalty, rights and duties as myself. If yesterday you hated me, today you cannot avoid the love that binds you to me and me to you the wrongs of the past must now stand forgiven and forgotten. (Huyse, 2003, p. 34)

The raised clenched fist was a salute of promise; an expression of victory and success explained largely by the successes of the ruling ZANU PF government in education, infrastructure development, to mention a few. Its success earned the country identities like "The Jewel of Africa", in some cases "The Bread Basket of Africa". Zimbabwe's success story became part of the black man's success against white supremacy in the whole world. One cannot deny the ugly scenes, however, of the atrocities during the *Gukurahundi*⁴ era which Mugabe, though brought to an end by the 1987 Unit Accord, should not have dismissed as simply a moment of madness.

By the beginning of the 21st century, the clenched fist began to assume a different meaning from that of past years. Eyer (2001) observed that the ZANU PF's clenched fist lost its traditional meanings in the new millennium

³ Ian Smith once declared that the black man in the then Rhodesia was never going to rule himself not even in a thousand years, ironically after less than 14 years of his declaration Zimbabwe gained independence from colonial rule.

⁴ Literally meaning rains which wash away the chaff after harvest but metaphorically used to refer to the Zimbabwean government crackdown on elements perceived to be counter-revolutionary in Matebeleland and Midlands Provinces in the 1980s.

for traditionally the clenched fist had been “a gesture of defiance and now signified oppression and crushed hopes when contrasted with the freedom and openness of the hand held flat and overhead” (p. 25). Thus the MDC open palm presented “an implicit contrast with the ZANU PF symbol” (Eyer, 2001, p. 25). This time, the opposition, civil society and majority disgruntlement with misplaced policies, corruption and other acts of repression, even the unsolved *Gukurahundi* saga as well as the land question, drove ZANU PF to resuscitate its symbolic years of revolutionary success and victory through the use of the clenched fist in its campaigns and political drives. ZANU PF’s post-war achievements and standpoint were now driven not through solidarity but this time being by intolerance. As such the clenched fist as the years went by gradually began to wear away in terms of the positive aspects of the fist in its history and took a radical, no nonsense, and militant salute. It ended up with becoming an open symbol for violence, and the enactment of repression as well as physical act of silencing those who had decided to openly oppose its stance. Operation *Murambatsvina* (Operation Restore Order) viewed in Moore’s (2008) perspective can be evidence of repression, violence, and an open act of silencing and punishing the majority of Zimbabweans who had openly decided to oppose ZANU PF’s stance as evidenced from the loss to the 2000 Referendum and increasing popularity of the opposition party, the MDC. Moore says of OM that:

Operation Murambatsvina should be seen as an almost logical extension of the techniques of a party that has consistently failed to rule Zimbabwe through consent rather than force or its possibility. Indeed, closer inspection and historical analysis of the ruling party itself suggests that the leading elements within it rarely reach even a position of “minimal hegemony” (i.e., agreement within members or factions of a ruling group). This lack of consensus spreads throughout the party and into society in manifestations of violence. (as cited in Vambe, 2008, p. 22)

Election periods were characterized by violence and the ZANU PF was found to be the culprit with highest numbers of offenders and having the least numbers of victims (see also Sachikonye (2011) for statistics on violence). Human Rights Organizations, Civil Society, and the International Community came up with a lot of reports on violations including the Tibaijuka 2005 UN report. In 2005, Amnesty International reported that “Perpetrators have largely been supporters of the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF)”. Political identity and affiliation became a central notion for survival as the clenched fist was taken to the very core of everyday life even to a simple greeting. Ordinary Zimbabweans lived fearful lives and had no sense of social security as either one would easily be subjected to ridicule by ZANU PF sympathizers or physically assaulted for waving the hand. MDC in 2005 had the highest number of victims (Sachikonye, 2011).

The ZANU PF leadership also drove notions of violence in their discourse while lifting the clenched fist as a non-verbal cue from which it could cement their meanings. The leader of ZANU PF is without blame in this case. The media, both state and independent, quoted him several times pinpointing towards a violent resistance to regime change. Nkatanzo (2009) reported that Mugabe while addressing voters during the 2008 presidential election campaign is quoted as having said his party symbol of a clenched fist was evidence that “we can box” and “displaying a grasp of Ndebele repeated ‘*Thina inqindi silazo, siyanqinda futhi* (we have the fists, and we can box)” (Retrieved from www.newzimbabwe.com). This public and open declaration of violence signified by the clenched fist which one hoped should have signified solidarity, deviance, and a fight for Black nationalism influenced members and even state organs to victimize anyone deemed to be an opposition member.

The MDC Open Palm

The MDC’s open palm was also not without its problems. If we are to consider the meanings assigned to it

against the universal symbolic meanings one would think that the MDC is identifying with the notion of white supremacy ideology and loyalty. As such the MDC's purported stance to fight and usher a new era in Zimbabwe was wound up by elements of disregard and intolerance for the revolutionary party and against it. The drive for democracy, rule of law, and fight against corruption was driven by the regime change agenda which was powered by desire to exterminate and even delete ZANU PF from the face of Zimbabwean history. The use of the open palm therefore stood radically opposed to that of ZANU PF. Interestingly, they opted to use the same hand (right hand) but having a radical difference in the sign itself. It stands closely linked to De Saussure's (1915) notion of difference where we cannot have good without bad or white without black.

Even as ZANU PF critics blamed ZANU PF for the violence, ordinary Zimbabwean recount how MDC supporters were also responsible for the thuggery and human rights violations with the hope that ZANU PF which already used a clenched fist purported to be signifying violence and whose leaders claimed to have "degrees in violence" (Meredith, 2007, p. 241) would easily shoulder the blame. The following confession is observed.

It's funny I got in trouble from the MDC members who were in the streets yesterday singing and chanting slogans but they suddenly started beating people and much worse stealing from people found on ATMs. I really was disappointed especially to be assaulted by my party people... But some are saying they are ZANU-PF youth purporting to be MDC. But I really wonder coz they were also beating up members of the police force, soldiers, prison service, and anyone putting on ZANU-PF T-shirts. (Moore, 2005, p. 13)

Moore (2005) went on to reveal how MDC was responsible for human rights violations like ZANU PF by noting that:

Many MDC and civil society advisors say only *action in the streets* will dislodge Mugabe, or persuade the Bretton Woods institutions to maintain their sanctions on a ZANU PF led Zimbabwe until a "government of national unity" is forced down both parties' throats. The MDC is caught between the false petards of social movement activism and "pragmatic" constitutionalism. Its leader is accused of vacillation. (p. 13, emphasis the author's)

One wonders what this "action" was for even Tsvangirai was quoted while addressing a rally by both the state and independent media asking Mugabe to leave office peacefully failure of which he would be removed violently. Could it not be the action reported by a victim above who was assaulted by the MDC youths with the hope of having every violent act blamed on the clenched fist? Even the open palm in this regard was found responsible for the destructions of the livelihoods of ordinary people, acts which made the international community "maintain their sanctions on a ZANU PF led Zimbabwe" (Moore, 2005, p. 13), and sanctions which continue to hurt the economy of this country even in the era of a GPA (Global Political Agreement)⁵. It is important to note that the MDC's ostensible stance has been to usher in a new era, yet their stance has been marked by an intolerance denigration and denial of what ZANU PF stands for.

The MDC symbol makes one read a number of meanings. These are transparency and democracy, different like the five fingers but united in the same transparent purpose. It stands for a difference, a new direction and new way to policy making and self-rule. It stands as if the party and what it represents stands for no hidden agenda as by clenching a fist it looks as if there is something hidden. The delayed announcements of presidential election results in 2008, for example, seem to have made ZANU PF at the verge of reliving its hidden and

⁵ GPA of 2008 which ushered in the Inclusive Government after the heavily disputed Presidential election in the same year.

misrepresentation and cheating stance.

Kahuni (2011) reacted to the open palm symbol adding his voice to how Jonathan Moyo, then the Information and Publicity Minister, took MDC to court over the use of the open palm symbol, citing that it was encroaching the everyday life of people. Jonathan Moyo lost the case (Kahuni, 2011). Kahuni (2011) had this to say of the open palm:

The waving of an open palm in a church sermon is a sign of passing a Godly message denoting peace. The open palm is used, internationally, at bus stops, airports, roadsides, and at the end of family yards to bid farewell to friends on a journey: indeed on a good journey for that matter. An open palm in Christianity denotes submission to God, showing him our willingness and readiness to be spiritually served. The open palm is also used for welcoming or greeting people as they shake hands and hug.

One appreciated the open palm's meanings in the church or social context but the MDC used the same politically and whose meaning should therefore be seen within a radical political context from which then Kahuni (2011) saw the open palm as having been abused in terms of meaning, and he said:

However, this symbol that denotes peace, stability and hospitality has been hijacked from places of worshiping, places of bidding farewell, places of welcoming, and places of greetings to the streets of violence by the MDC-T who has tried to use it in a treacherous fashion to bid farewell to our sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

This explains why human rights violations in the country not only by ZANU PF but by MDC as well, either in defense or otherwise affected the image of both parties, their followers, and the non-aligned. The point of conflict became not the use of these differing symbols but the ideology behind the symbols from which neither party was ready to accept and respect the other. This is why even the other contexts which Kahuni (2011) spoke of (where the open palm was used) ended up with being interpreted politically and as such political reactions and actions were used to make a party superior than the other. Election observers in Zimbabwe especially in the 2000 and 2002 elections concluded that the election (mostly the 2000 parliamentary elections) had become an election of the clenched fist—ZANU-PF's symbol—versus the hand held open, that of the MDC (Johnsson, 2000).

Thomas Mapfumo (as cited in Eyer, 2001, pp. 25-27) pointed out that during his concerts leading up to June 2000 elections, fans would spontaneously raise their hands in the MDC salute. Therefore, these concerts became informal rallies for the MDC as they used the open palm hoping to have meant a salute to the musical guru, his music, and a general celebration of the rhythm of life. Among the fans, one observes that not all were for the MDC and some were even non-aligned. For Mapfumo, to conclude that the raising of the open palm was in the MDC salute means his concerts became politicized, and one realizes how even a social gathering and an attendance to a musical concert became an indirect political participation. One would then conclude that by attending a concert like that of Mapfumo, an individual was participating in the MDC affiliates. In contrast, those who did not attend or decided not to attend perhaps meant that they were not affiliated to MDC but to ZANU PF even in music. The populace was therefore divided into two camps in most structures of life, even in cases of musical taste.

The media was even quick to popularize situations where the open palm was used especially by media houses hostile to the ruling party. Tongai Moyo's (see Appendix 4) salute to his fans with open palms peppered

by the red⁶ guitar and shirts of his band dancing members at the background was used in this case in a political sense, as if he was advancing the MDC agenda. A similar scenario was also captured by *The Daily News* in 2000 just before the 2000 election in which the First Lady Grace Mugabe arriving at a ZANU PF rally waved the open palm, and at the same time Mugabe saluted the crowd with a clenched fist. The photo was placed on front page generally sending a message of lampooning the Mugabe family as united in matrimony but divided in political affiliations. It was as if Grace was emphasizing the MDC political agenda when one could read a genuine salute and mob greeting by waving.

The same could also be said of a ZANU PF supporter celebrating victory with Mugabe (see Appendix 1). The message one gets here is simply a genuine celebration by lifting both hands and the clenched fist was raised in this case to indicate victory for ZANU PF. But getting into the hands of ZANU PF's media opponents, the same photo could give a different interpretation which aims at downplaying the revolutionary party, and its leader gives that Mugabe himself is being brushed in celebrations by the open palm in the photo. Appendix 3 is another image used to accuse ZANU PF of violence and thuggery. The photo appeared in the independent media carrying the headline which reads "Captured on Camera: Zanu PF thugs beating MDC-T supporter" (Retrieved from www.nhandaradio.com). There is nothing in the photo which identifies anyone captured as either ZANU PF or MDC (MDC-T for that matter). But interpretations and its usage have been used to justify and identify ZANU PF as the obvious offender and MDC, especially MDC-T⁷ as the victim. One assumes that the Bretton Wood institutions could have maintained their economic grip and stifled the Zimbabwe economic life citing continued human violations by ZANU PF which they have failed to extinguish from the corridors of history and power in Zimbabwe. Such misrepresentations by the media have led to political polarization in the country and have actually made the Zimbabwean country a nation characterized by violence, unsafe, dangerous, and resulting in general isolation at the international level not only economically but even socially as well as making Zimbabwe as a nation and its people unable to effectively take part in development issues. The dignity of the nation and its people received a huge knock over the years with some even concluding that Zimbabwe had become a failed state.

Eyer (2001) also spoke of a petition which circulated in Bulawayo churches drafted by a preacher stating in part that it had become difficult for everybody to wave hands at one's loved ones or for praise worshipping as they would be associated with the MDC. The open palm thus penetrated the core of Zimbabwe's social life subjecting the use of the open palm symbol for praise in church, celebration of victory or genuine salute in musical concerts by fans and musicians to political scrutiny. In 2001, ZANU PF legislators even took a bold move by proposing to parliament the banning of the open hand symbol but were not successful.

The Clenched Fist, Open Palm and Social Life

It is the opinion of this researcher that the open palm used by the MDC apart from having popularized the MDC became politically justified in raising the people's concerns against the ZANU PF led government's failed policies and rising corruption. And this actually was a cause of the euphoria the majority had that for the first time in the history of Zimbabwe a robust force had risen to question ZANU PF's position. The MDC's open palm

⁶ The MDC also uses the red colour to signify send-off in the soccer/football style in which a referee who shows a red card to a player means he/she has been disqualified from playing in that match.

⁷ MDC split into two MDC-T (led by Morgan Tsvangirai) and MDC-M (led by Arthur Mutambara) (now MDC-N led by Welshman Ncube).

amid this euphoria also became an object of repression and oppression for the ordinary person in Zimbabwe especially during election periods. Nyaira reported in *The Daily News* that “the hand waving gesture has been ritually enforced at music concerts and football matches, much to the chagrin of the ruling ZANU PF” (as cited in Eyer, 2001, p. 26). Such an observation therefore exposed music and football fans and even church goers to the wrath of the ZANU PF who felt they had nowhere else within the social lives of its people from which they could advance their own political agenda. Eyer (2001) concluded that “Displaying an open hand... became dangerous, cause of severe beating if the wrong person saw you do it” (p. 26).

Even children understood the implications as exemplified by the rural children whom a state university lecturer interviewed by this researcher confirmed that in her rural home, Mberengwa, children are now crippled from their childhood pastime games of waving to passing vehicles and they now do so using clenched fists. Sometime in 2000, *The Daily News* also carried a cartoon in which the rural people seating around a fire on cold nights warmed their hands with clenched fists instead of the usual one in which one does so with open palms. The message driven by such cartoons indicated how daily social life became unbearable for the ordinary Zimbabwean even for children who if seen waving an open palm would put their parents in possible danger.

When Simba Makoni broke away from ZANU PF and formed his “centrist party, Muvambo Kusile Dawn (MKD)” (Onslow, 2011, p. 14) in 2008, the party gesture was a two-palm symbol in which two hands were brought together and raised overhead which signified peace and unity. Jonathan Moyo contesting in the 2005 Parliamentary Elections had also ended his political marriage to ZANU PF and stood as an independent candidate used the “V” finger symbol for peace. These two gestures while having a place in Zimbabwean political arena did not cause mayhem, suffering social, religious, and even economic discomfort to the general populace in Zimbabwe. Only the clenched fist and the open palm were a danger to identify with for economic, religious, and political gains.

Conclusions

It is apparent that non-verbal cues have power in themselves. They can make or break a society. In the Zimbabwean political context as has been noted the two non-verbal cues, the clenched fist for the ZANU PF and the open palm for the MDC both carry political ideologies which may even be read as difficult to reconcile. The reactions of ZANU PF and its verge to rubber stand the continued existence of the black salute were largely against the MDC’s open palm largely aligned to notions of white supremacy, democracy, and transparency in a manner that stung the revolutionary party. As such the two ideological battles were disseminated to the ordinary person in the streets even if it meant using every means available for example state organs in the case of ZANU PF or a call for international economic isolation as campaigned by MDC’s so-called targeted sanctions. The economy of the country suffered due to the country’s isolation, disturbances in economic activities (mostly agriculture), and attention instead of giving to politics. The social and religious lives and even children’s games that used open palms exposed children and their parents to agony and inability to live normal lives. Even musical concerts and sport attendances mostly football became a political arena and battlefields from which the media captured moments of political and ideological battles between ZANU PF and MDC.

Semiotics as a theory and discipline offers us an opportunity to understand the sign systems that surround us as people and how we can therefore use sign systems ideologically or intellectually for the good of humanity and for constructive communicative purposes where tolerance and the idea of difference do not make the powerful or

the weak objects of extinction. It is in the hope of this researcher that this paper may contribute in the rebuilding of the nation as well as inform directions in the doldrums of national healing and reconciliation. Further studies can also be made in this direction.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Source: <http://www.assatashakur.org/forum>.



Appendix 2. Source: <http://www.assatashakur.org/forum>.



Appendix 3. Source: <http://www.nehandaradio.com>.



In this picture from the *Daily News* members of the notorious ZANU PF Chipangano group can be seen assaulting an alleged MDC-T supporter during the opening of Parliament in Harare on Tuesday. (Picture by Annie Mpalume) [Caption original].

Appendix 4: Tongai Moyo performs at the NAMA Awards earlier this year (March, 2009) (fungaifoto). Source: <http://www.zimbojam.com/lifestyle.html>.

