



Title: The transmogrification of Robert Mugabe

Interviewee: Heidi Holland

Duration: 8 minutes, 42 seconds

About this transcript

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Introduction

In his youth, Robert Mugabe was famous for fighting against Rhodesia, first a British colony and then an unrecognized state in Southern Africa. Within five years of the defeat of Rhodesia and the creation of Zimbabwe, Mugabe continued his fight, only this time it was against his own people.

In this Skype-recorded episode of Bookpod, Heidi Holland talks about *Dinner With Mugabe*, the book she wrote to chronicle Mugabe's transformation from a lonely bookish boy into one of Africa's worst tyrants.

Presentation

I spoke to Mugabe's younger brother, who has subsequently died, and who not many people had spoken to before. It was through him that I had such a strong sense of this lonely figure, you know, even as a child herding cattle, always reading a book, not getting on with the other kids, really not being all that well liked as a child.



And I think as a result, however well intentioned he was, he came to the job with this impractical utopian view of what he could achieve. And implicit in that was his own disillusionment, as he set up policies that didn't work out, as people didn't respond in a book sort of way he thought that they should.

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Over the last ten years, Zimbabwe has gone into meltdown largely because it was an agrarian economy, completely based on agriculture. Mugabe seized the productive land from a white elite and gave it to an unproductive black elite. He seized it ostensibly because he was going to redistribute it to poor people. But, in fact, that isn't what he did.

And so what one has seen over the last ten years in Zimbabwe is this economic meltdown, which has been very, very dramatic and has incorporated the destruction of the water system, the sewerage system, the essential apparatus of daily life. The political elite has made hay, you know, while the sun shone for them.



So, in practical terms, Zimbabwe is a bottomed out country. People have suffered terribly, in addition to which Mugabe has become increasingly unpopular. And in order to hold onto power like all dictators, he's resorted to ever increasingly violent methods of bringing people to heel and changing the election demographics in order that he will win elections. You know, so, it's a sort of classic example of a country that has spiraled into decline to the point where people really are dying from lack of essential services. And Mugabe frankly doesn't care about his people. What he cares about is hanging onto power at any cost.

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After he became prime minister and subsequently president, there was a terrible, terrible massacre of up to 20,000 people known as Gukurahundi, which, of course, is an enduring blot on Mugabe's copybook.

Of course, with Mugabe being who he is today, there's a great deal of testimony denigrating him. But I think one really needs to get to grips with people like Mugabe other than to portray them in simplistically evil terms. I don't really think that helps us to understand where these people



came from.

In many ways, one of the most interesting testimonies that I recorded was from Lady Soames, who is Churchill's daughter, who was the wife of the last British governor in Zimbabwe, you know, who presided over the election that brought Mugabe to power.

Now, she's a very canny woman raised in [an] international, political kind of environment all her life. And she and her husband, Lord Soames, really liked Mugabe. Now, partly that was probably because he has a British background in his upbringing and colonial origins and he's quite snobbish about British aristocracy, so I'm sure he charmed his way into their hearts.

But nevertheless, the relationship with the two of them endured long after they went back to London, and they were genuine friends with him for a long, long time. And she couldn't really understand what had happened to the man that she liked so much, you know, that she had seen so much of both in Zimbabwe and in London.

Another interesting testimony was from the head of the



Jesuits, a black man, very well educated, called Father Fidelis Mukonori who really was an apologist for Mugabe all along, even during the guerilla war. He operated under his cassock, as it were, to effectively be a spy inside the country for Mugabe.

And that was partly, I think, because every man of his generation, every black man, had been oppressed, you know, and had fought for their freedom, and he was just like no other in that regard.

So he tried to explain to me Mugabe's mindset and his principles, you know, even though to me it's quite obvious now that Mugabe is completely unprincipled. It was interesting to have such a prominent churchman continue to make excuses for Mugabe, but also interestingly to explain how he had been in his idealistic form.

And then there were black politicians who had known Mugabe in those guerilla years, who spoke vehemently against him. So I think that I got a range of opinion.

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The essential Mugabe is still there, a very shy, retiring, lonely man. I sensed that at the end of 2007 when I spent two and half hours with him talking to him.

Of course, there was this extremely strong sense of his intimidatory methods, because not only was the interview conducted with all these security people around; he didn't like it when I contradicted him. In fact, I had this impression, melodramatically, that there were sparks in his eyes when he was warning me off, you know. He's learned not to tolerate any sort of opposition or contradiction or conflict. He just can only be right. He can't be wrong.

I also felt that when I saw him at the end of 2007 that he wanted my approval, you know, there's a sort of neediness in him. He's an incredibly lonely person. I mean, not that that is an apologia for him in any way at all. But just at an eyeball-to-eyeball level, you get this feeling of somebody who is really very needy.

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Mugabe is the head of a very corrupt, political elite that has been in power for thirty years. So it's not only Mugabe



that should go. It's that entire political elite.

The question is really how does one get rid of that particular political elite. And the only way you can do is for the opposition to endure, to carry on and to beat them resoundingly at the polls. And of course, that's easier said than done when the way that they've won elections in the past – because Mugabe does pay lip service to democracy – is through violence. And I regret to say I am sure that that will continue.

Valedictory

For more information about Heidi Holland and *Dinner With Mugabe*, visit www.dinnerwithmugabe.com.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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