

NEHANDA OF ZIMBABWE (RHODESIA):  
THE STORY OF A WOMAN  
LIBERATION LEADER AND FIGHTER.

by

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*Introduction*

In Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), African women have traditionally shared equal responsibilities and duties in public administration, political affairs and national defense. In the military service, women, like men, were involved in combat duties. During the Mwenemutapa Empire, for example, some of the best combat regiments in the Imperial Army were made up only of women soldiers. These battle seasoned regiments were commanded and led by capable and competent women military officers. The regiments were made up principally of young and un-married women. A number of the Emperors of this wealthy and powerful empire had great faith and confidence in the fighting capabilities of their women soldiers because many of them had distinguished themselves in battle by their courage and bravery.<sup>1</sup>

This great military tradition has been maintained in Zimbabwe and has surfaced in various forms and intensity since 1890 when the country was formally colonized and subjugated by the British settlers. Because of the growing military and racial confrontation between the Zimbabwe Liberation Army, the Military wing of the African National Council, and the forces of the white racist minority regime of Ian Smith, a number of African women of Zimbabwe are being recruited to serve at various levels in the army of liberation.

The woman who is generally recognized by many Zimbabweans as the greatest military leader and freedom fighter in recent history was Nehanda. Nehanda was a powerful and influential woman who achieved her religio-political fame and military greatness during the 1896 to 1897 Mashona-Matibele<sup>2</sup> war of national liberation against the oppressive and dehumanizing forces of colonialism and economic exploitation in Zimbabwe. This great and historic war of national liberation was waged against the British settlers who had annexed the country as a British colony in September 1890.

*Zimbabwe and British Imperialism*

The British colonization of Zimbabwe was accomplished with the financial backing and military support of Africa's greatest racist and most notorious imperialist - Cecil John Rhodes. On October 30, 1888, Rhodes' imperial agents, Charles Rudd, Rochfort Maguire and Francis Thompson, with the connivance of the Rev. Charles Helm of the London Missionary Society, tricked and deceived King Lobengula of the Matebele to sign a mineral concession whose contents were not fully and truthfully explained by the missionary who spoke Sindebele, the Matebele language. This concession became known as the Rudd Concession. In return for granting this mineral concession to Rhodes, the Matebele King was supposed to receive about \$300 per month for an unspecified period, 11,000 Martin-Henry breech loading rifles and a steam gun-boat to be stationed somewhere on the Zambezi River about 400 miles from the Matebele capital of Bulawayo. How Rhodes or his agents were going to take the gun-boat up the unnavigable Zambezi River has never been explained. At any rate, King Lobengula never received from Rhodes the money, the guns nor the gun-boat.

In 1889, Rhodes used the Rudd Concession to acquire the Royal Charter from Queen Victoria which gave him the right to colonize Zimbabwe and subjugate its people. A few historians and scholars, including the author, doubt the authenticity of the Concession used by Rhodes to acquire the Royal Charter for a number of good reasons, the most important being that the document is not stamped with the Matebele Royal Stamp-the Elephant Seal. All the official documents signed by King Lobengula carried the official stamp of the Elephant Seal. Since the Rudd Concession presented to the British Queen did not have the official stamp, it is suspected that this document was a forgery.

At any rate, in June 1890, Rhodes recruited 200 white soldiers in South Africa to be the vanguard of the imperial and colonization process in Zimbabwe. This military force of occupation was financed and equipped by the British South African Company, Rhodes' giant financial company which was built by the excessive exploitation of African mine workers.<sup>3</sup> Each recruit was promised by Rhodes a 3,000 acre farm on the land of his own choice and 15 gold claims anywhere in Zimbabwe. In addition, each recruit carried a special document which stated that any amount of "loot shall be divided half to the British South Africa Company and the remainder to the officers and men in equal share."<sup>4</sup> The large-scale rape of Zimbabwe had already been planned before the force left South Africa.

The British colonial settlers arrived at Harare, (in central Mashonaland on September 12, 1890.) Harare has since been renamed Salisbury in honor of the British imperialist Prime Minister Lord Salisbury. The following day, the British Union Jack was hoisted with ceremonious pomp and Zimbabwe was formally annexed as a British colony. The administration of the new colony was assumed by the British South Africa Company which appointed magistrates, district commissioners and civil servants.

Many of the Mashona rulers who lived in the surrounding areas of Harare were alarmed and angered with the ruthless swiftness with which the British settlers confiscated their cattle and land on a very large scale. In addition, many Mashona women found themselves subjected to sexual abuses by the white settlers who did not have their white women with them. The sexual violation of the Mashona women infuriated the rulers and their subjects because they held their women in a very high esteem. Moreover, the racial arrogance of the white settlers further angered the Mashona. The colonial settlers, impregnated with racist beliefs and theories, considered the indigenous people "primitive, barbaric, superstitious and uncivilized." <sup>5</sup>

In reaction, the Mashona rulers viewed the presence of European colonists in their midst as a threat to their political power, authority and independence. The most outspoken ruler was Kadungure Mapondera who resided in what is now the Mazowe district. Terence O. Ranger, writing about Mapondera, states that "when the Pioneer Column [ a euphemism for the colonial settlers ] and the British South African Company administration arrived in 1890, the proud Mapondera found the closeness of the white men intolerable. Between 1890 and 1894 there were a series of incidents in his part of the Mazoe valley and one of his brothers was jailed for the killing of a white man. In 1894, Mapondera totally refused the Company's demand for tax." <sup>6</sup> The political rulers were joined by the religious leaders who also strongly opposed the establishment of oppressive European rule in their country. Many of the religious leaders became the most vocal opponents of colonialism. One of these religious leaders was Nehanda.

#### *The Politico - Military Rise of Nehanda*

Nehanda was born around 1862 in what is now the Chishawasha district located in central Mashonaland. The names of her parents are not really known except that they were hard-working farmers. Nehanda's family was large and very religious. The religiosity and spiritualism of the family was later reflected in Nehanda. She had a secure and happy life

because she was surrounded by a loving and understanding family. As she matured into womanhood, she showed remarkable leadership abilities and organizational skills. She was a compassionate woman with a very strong moral and ethical character. People who lived in her community regarded her as a woman of strong principles, a woman of wisdom and a woman with vision.

At the time of the arrival of the British settlers, Nehanda was one of the two most powerful and influential religious leaders in Mashonaland; the other religious leader being Kagubi. She was an active member of the powerful Mashona religious priesthood, occupying an important and influential position within the top religious order hierarchy. She is the only woman known to have risen to such a significant position during the 19th century. She rose up the religious ranks because of her competent spiritual leadership and in-depth knowledge and understanding of the Mashona religious dogma and theological philosophy.

The Mashona had a monotheistic religion which was complex and sophisticated in terms of its religious beliefs and practices. The God of the Mashona was called *Mwari*. He was the Creator of the universe and everything in it both animate and inanimate.<sup>7</sup> According to the Mashona's theological philosophy, *Mwari* only communicated with mankind through the ancestral spirits who acted as intermediaries. And these in turn communicated with the priests and priestesses. Prayers - *Mhinamoto* - and sacrificial offerings and gifts - *Kudira* - *Mudzimu* - were used to communicate with *Mwari*, as sometimes happened, and the ancestral spirits.

The Mashona believed that after death the spirit of a person entered into a spiritual world in which it lived a life closely bound to the earth. The spirits of their dead relations were found everywhere. The links between the living and the dead were very close, much closer than in European society. The Mashona loved, respected and revered their dead and, in time of great need, turned to their ancestral spirits in the same way as the Christians turn to their God.

There were five major spirits in the Mashona religion, some were more important than others, but each had its own significance which was taken into account. These spirits were: *Mhondoro Spirits* - ethnic spirits, *Midzimu Spirits* - family spirits, *Mashawe Spirits* - the alien and patronal spirits, *Ngozi Spirits* - the aggrieved spirits and *Waroyi Spirits* - the evil spirits of witches. The headquarters of the Mashona religion was located in the Matopo Hills in what is now Mate-

beleland. The Mashona Chief Priest and his top associates, about six in number, resided in the Matopo Hills. Sacrificial gifts - black cows - were brought to this religious headquarters from many parts of Zimbabwe.

Nehanda's membership in this male dominated Mashona priesthood was an unprecedented and remarkable achievement, considering the number of religious aspirants to this noble profession which carried immense prestige, power and influence, especially in a society as deeply spiritual and religious as Zimbabwe. Religion permeated all the departments of life and every human activity was religious in nature and character.

Nehanda opposed the oppressive British colonial rule from the day it was established. Besides opposing their rule, she also believed that white people were evil, inhuman and destructive. According to Lawrence Vambe:

*She saw the white men, filled with hate and fear, kill her people as if they were game or vermin and she asked the spirits of the ancestors again and again why they had brought this evil curse on her people.*<sup>8</sup>

Nehanda viewed the presence of the British colonists in her country as the greatest threat to the survival of the Mashona social, political, religious and economic institutions. To her, the preservation of these traditional institutions was of utmost importance to the cohesive stability and survival of the Mashona society.

As more British settlers and Boers from South Africa poured into the country, lured by its rich agricultural land and mineral wealth, Nehanda became extremely concerned and worried about the social, political and economic future and well being of her people. She witnessed her people being forcibly removed from their ancestral homes and land by Company colonial administrators to make room for the new settlers. She also observed many of her people being subjected to racial and political oppression, economic exploitation, dehumanizing forced labor and debilitating physical tortures by the settlers.

The Mashona, finding their political and material conditions unbearable, began to look for leaders who could extricate them from their depressing situation by any means necessary. The logical leaders were the religious leaders who commanded nation-wide support and had a very large following. It was the existence of active religious branches in every village community that led to the development of such a mass-based religious following. On the other hand, the

direct: "The local whites were...[to be] attacked and killed."<sup>14</sup>

*Nehanda and the Armed Struggle*

Prior to the outbreak of war in Mashonaland, Nehanda had devoted a great deal of her time and effort in organizing, mobilizing and training those people who had volunteered to fight under her command and leadership. Nehanda trained her forces at night:

*The war-song was sung, accompanied by Mbira music; a goat or other sacrificial animal was offered to the dead ancestors who had been warriors in their days, and the war-dance would go on throughout the night, usually in the thickets and forests, preferably near a mountain, far from the village. Nothing was more effective than this all-night sacrificial war-dance in working up in people the mood of war.*<sup>15</sup>

Because of her effectiveness in training and mobilizing the people for armed struggle, Nehanda emerged as "the most powerful wizard [religio-military leader] in Mashonaland and... [had] the power of ordering all the people... and her orders would be in every case...obeyed."<sup>16</sup> When Nehanda received her war orders from Mkwati, her soldiers were ready to fight against the evil forces of colonialism and economic exploitation.

When the war was about to break out in Mashonaland, Nehanda established her military headquarters at Husaka in the Mazowe district. Husaka was an impregnable mountain fortress with a network of "caves...with plenty of water, some stored grain, kraals for cattle, and was inaccessible except through the narrow and dangerous passages."<sup>17</sup> Well armed and trustworthy guards were stationed at all the entrances to this mountain fortress. Nehanda was to direct her war efforts from Husaka. Her military commanders were two brothers named Chidamba and Chiweshe who were to distinguish themselves in battle.

Nehanda gave orders to her soldiers to attack and kill white settlers in different military codes. For example, "rather than say 'white people must be killed', messengers were to say 'Nhapi! Nhapi! . . . and the general idea . . . conveyed was that people should talk of . . . [killing] white men as though they were talking of going for a big hunt."<sup>18</sup> The soldiers who carried out these orders operated in the

power and influence of political leaders was limited in that it was regional and localized.

It was not long before the people began to ask the religious leaders for political direction and military leadership. Nehanda was one of the first religious leaders to answer the distressing call of the masses. Shortly thereafter, not only the common people, but also "the chiefs and headmen brought their troubles to Nehanda and she in turn reported to Kagubi at Mashayamombe. She said her people were ill treated and were ready to fight.. Messages..were exchanged between Nehanda and Kagubi, by messengers travelling mostly at night."<sup>9</sup> It was then that Nehanda, Kagubi and other religious leaders decided to organize and mobilize the masses of their followers for war against the European settlers and the oppressive Company administration.

The most important task of planning and laying the ground-work for war was under the leadership and direction of Mkwati, the Mashona Chief Priest, who resided at Taba Zi Ka Mambo in the Matopo Hills. In 1895, Mkwati summoned to his headquarters the religious leaders. Nehanda, Kagubi and other top Mashona leaders sent their representatives-Chiwa, Bonda and Tandi-because they were busy organizing and mobilizing the masses for war. From Matebeleland came Umlugulu, Siginyamatshe and Mpotshwana.<sup>10</sup> After the first preliminary meetings, Mkwati then summoned "The Matebele indunas, the Mashona chiefs...to hammer out with them the [final] tactics of rebellion" <sup>11</sup> against white rule. Also present at these meetings was Tengela, the wife of Mkwati. She hated white people with a passion and openly advocated their extermination.<sup>12</sup> This was calculated to discourage any more colonial settlers from coming to Zimbabwe.

At one of the meetings, Mkwati strongly urged the Mashona and Matebele leaders to "move out of the limitations which... were implied by their connexion with the specific past political systems, and to speak to all black men"<sup>13</sup> of Zimbabwe. Mkwati realized the critical importance of political and military unity between the Mashona and Matebele in their impending armed struggle against colonialism and imperialism.

Finally in March 1896, Mkwati, after being informed that the Mashona and Matebele military forces were ready to fight, ordered the Matebele forces to first launch the war of national liberation. In June, the Mashona forces also launched their armed struggle against the white settlers and the Company administration. The anti-colonial armed struggle started at different times because of strategical and tactical considerations. The war orders issued by Mkwati were simple and

Mazowe, Lomagundi and Bindura districts. Nehanda's chief military targets were white settlers, their farms, mines and trading posts as well as policemen and Africans who cooperated with the colonists.

From June to August of 1897, the war raged throughout Mashonaland with the Mashona forces in complete control of the rural areas. The European survivors of the attacks were confined to fortified laagers established in the towns. Because of the seriousness of the anti-colonial war, Britain decided to intervene by dispatching from England and South Africa 500 Imperial troops under Colonel Alderson. This British force fought most of its battles against the forces led by Kagubi and Mashayamombe in western Mashonaland. The Imperial troops proved ineffective against the Mashona forces and were withdrawn unceremoniously.

Nehanda was a dedicated and disciplined commander and she expected her soldiers to be well disciplined also. She led highly motivated soldiers and she prohibited them from looting because she did not want to see her soldiers distracted from their major military objectives. Guns and other weapons were a different kind of loot because they were needed for fighting the war. Nehanda, on some occasions, accompanied her forces to the battle-field. It is not known whether she took part in actual fighting.

Most of the gunpowder used by Nehanda's forces and other Mashona forces were of domestic manufacture. According to A. Atmore, J. Chirenje and S. Mudenge, the Mashona had a war industry that manufactured:

*Gun powder from local materials, and for ammunition they used almost any missile that the particular gun could fire. These ranged from lengths of telegraph wires, nails, and glass balls from soda water bottles to ordinary stones. Since lead was a heavy commodity and gunpowder required careful handling, traders could carry only limited quantities. This meant that unless they could make their own munition . . . [the Mashona soldiers] were bound to run out from time to time.*<sup>19</sup>

As for guns, the Mashona forces were supplied from four major sources; the Portuguese gun traders, the South African gun graders, the Mashona police defectors who brought their guns with them and from stealing guns from the British settlers.

As the war raged in intensity throughout Mashonaland,

Nehanda performed a number of other important functions such as giving valuable information of the whereabouts of the white forces as well as keeping up the morale of the fighting forces by predicting military victories and providing them spiritual fortitude. She relayed the vital piece of information about the whereabouts of the white forces to her forces in the field after receiving the intelligence from three sources, spies, informers and fire signals. For example, the departure of a white force under the leadership of Captain Judson Nesbitt from Salisbury was made known to Nehanda because "signals of fire were seen from hill to hill right to Shamva" <sup>20</sup> in the Mazowe district.

The war in Mashonaland began to turn in favor of the white forces by the middle of August. Three reasons have been advanced to explain this turn of events. First, the anti-colonial war had come to an end through negotiations in Matebeleland, making it possible for the white forces to be shifted to Mashonaland and putting the Mashona forces on the defense for the **first time**,<sup>21</sup> second, the increasing fire-power of the white forces was no match for the African forces armed with antiquated guns, and third, the problem of re-supplying the Mashona forces with war materials.

In December, Nehanda was captured in the Dande district and was brought to Salisbury in chains and under a heavy guard. On January 12, 1898, she was charged for instigating rebellion against white authority and murdering the Native Commissioner Pollard.<sup>22</sup> On March 2, she was "tried and found guilty" and was sentenced to death. The day of execution was set for April 27. The capture of Nehanda as well as that of Kagubi brought the anti-colonial war to an end in Mashonaland.

After receiving her death sentence, she was coaxed and cajoled for several weeks by the Rev. Father Francis Richarts of the Chishawasha Mission, in the Salisbury prison, to repent, be Christianized and die fortified with all the last rites of the Catholic Church. But she adamantly refused to be converted to a foreign and alien religion. She had a deep commitment to her own religion. On the day of execution "Kagubi [Kagubi] showed fear . . . but Nehanda, began to dance, to laugh and talk so that the wardens were obliged to tie her hands and watch her continually as she threatened to kill herself."<sup>23</sup> At the scaffold, Nehanda is known to have somehow defied death. It is said that the first two attempts to take her life failed. She was finally killed on the third attempt.

The execution of Nehanda and Kagubi produced a feeling of relief among the white settlers. Father Richartz commented that "everyone felt relieved after the execution, as the very

existence of the main actors in the rebellion, though they were secured in prison, made one feel uncomfortable." <sup>24</sup> Immediately after the execution, "their bodies were buried in a secret place so that no natives could take away their bodies and claim that their spirits had descended to any other prophetess or witch doctor."<sup>25</sup> So passed from the scene Zimbabwe's greatest female fighter and leader.

#### Conclusion

Nehanda was a woman of very strong principles and character. Her defiance of the oppressive white rule, racism and economic exploitation to the last day of her death is evidence of that fact. She was a true and dedicated nationalist and a committed freedom fighter. She sacrificed her life because she wanted her people to live in peace and controlling their own political destiny and way of life. Nehanda is a heroine and a historic figure to the people of Zimbabwe and one hopes she will be honored as one of our greatest fighters when the country is freed from white racist domination and control.

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#### Footnotes:

1. Filippo Pigafetta, *A report of the Kingdom of Congo and of the Surrounding Countries*. (London: Frank Cass, 1970 reprint), pp. 118-119. The Mwenemutapa Empire comprised the modern states of Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Botswana and half of South Africa. The author has recently completed writing a history of the Mwenemutapa Empire from 1400 to 1800, which he hopes will be published soon.
2. The Mashona and Matebele constitute the two ethnic groups of Zimbabwe. The Matebele originally came from what is now South Africa.
3. The money used for Rhodes Scholarship is blood money because it was acquired through the blood and sweat of African miners. Many lost their lives in the mines owned by Rhodes.
4. Suzanne Cronje, "Rhodesia and the African Past" in *New Africa*, July/August 1966, p. 14.
5. See Hugh M. Hole, *The Making of Rhodesia* (London: Frank Cass, 1967 reprint), pp. 148-188.

6. Terence O. Ranger, *The African Voice in Southern Rhodesia* (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 4.
7. See Charles Bullock, *The Mashona* (Westport: Negro Universities Press, 1970, reprint), pp. 116-142, Michael Gelfand, *Shona Religion* (Cape Town: Juta & Company, 1962), *Shona Ritual* (Johannesburg: Juta & Co., 1959). These two last books deal in great detail about the Mashona religious beliefs and practices as well as spiritual and theological concepts.
8. Lawrence Vambe, *An Ill-Fated People: Zimbabwe Before and After Rhodes* (Pittsburg: Pittsburg University Press, 1972) p. 120.
9. Quoted by Terence O. Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-7* (London: Heinemann, 1967), pp. 391-392.
10. The Matebele had adopted the Mashona religion around the 1860's. King Lobengula was converted to the Mashona religion before he became King of the Matebele in 1870.
11. Oliver Ransford, *The Rulers of Rhodesia* (London: John Murray, 1968), p. 269.
12. A 10/1/2, Prestige to Chief Native Commissioner, April 24, 1896.
13. Terence O. Ranger, " 'Primary Resistance' and Modern Mass Nationalism", in *The Journal of African History*, Vol. IX No. 3, 1968, p. 450.
14. A 1/12/11, Colonel Beal's Evidence, July 1896.
15. C.G. Chivanda, "*The Mashona Rebellion in Oral Tradition: Mazoe District*," *History Honors III: Seminar Paper No. 9* June 23, 1966, The University of Rhodesia, Salisbury, p. 9.
16. N 1/1/9, Native Commissioner Campbell's Report, January 1896.
17. C. G. Chivanda, "*The Mashona Rebellion*", p. 10.
18. *Ibid.* p. 8.
19. A. Atmore, J. Chirenje, S. Mudenge, *Firearms in South Central Africa*," in *The Journal of African History*, Vol. XII, No. 4, 1971, pp. 553-554.
20. C. G. Chivanda, "*The Shona Rebellion*", p. 20.

