

FLAME

Notes for Viewing the Film

Before the film . . .

Read the essay on the film [Flame](#). Note that this film features a rape as well as images of wartime killings.

[Flame](#) is a film designed to recover and reinterpret history, specifically the Zimbabwean liberation struggle. At the same time, the intense controversy that surrounded this film's release should remind us that there is no one history, only histories. Our account of the past must inevitably reflect our position in the present. Historical interpretation can become a powerful weapon in the political battles of the present.

Therefore it may be especially useful for viewers to screen [Flame](#) in its larger historical and political context. Centuries before the British colonists arrived at the end of the 19th century, this region had been the site of a great civilization centered on the stone citadel of Great Zimbabwe. While the majority of the population remained African, white farmers settled in what was then known as Rhodesia, to a greater extent than in other areas of East Africa, such as Uganda or Kenya. When the British were ready to grant independence and majority rule to Rhodesia in the mid-1960s, the white minority settlers staged a putsch and established an illegitimate regime led by Ian Smith. This regime was condemned by Britain and most other countries and was isolated by United Nations sanctions.

Two opposition guerrilla movements emerged to fight the white minority regime - ZANU, the Zimbabwe African National Union and ZAPU, the Zimbabwe African People's Union. The white settler army launched a brutal counterinsurgency campaign against these two guerrilla movements and the civilian African population. By 1975, when [Flame](#) begins, the neighboring country of Mozambique, had already won its independence from the Portuguese and had become a refuge for guerrilla fighters. The Zimbabwean liberation movement, or *chimurenga*, coupled with international support, eventually forced the white settler regime to capitulate to majority rule in 1980.

ZANU won the subsequent election and has ruled the country under Robert Mugabe since then. Although Zimbabwe inherited an unusually high number of college graduates and a developed infrastructure, the country has faced increasing problems. Land has still not been redistributed to black farmers, although corrupt politicians have received land from the large white farmers. Urban workers have protested declining standards of living and what amounts to a one-party government has attempted, not always successfully, to crush dissenting voices.

The events in [Flame](#) span the period from the height of the liberation struggle in 1975 until roughly 1994, 15 years after independence. The director and primary writer of the film, Ingrid Sinclair, is an English woman who after years of support for the *chimurenga* finally became a citizen in Zimbabwe. She decided to focus her film around the role of women in that struggle and began a seven-year long process of assembling stories from female participants. She discovered that while women were proud of their contribution to national liberation they were reluctant to discuss gender inequality in the guerrilla forces on camera. Out of necessity then, Sinclair decided to make a fiction feature, which would include both the heroic and the infamous.

As a result, [Flame](#) became one of the most controversial films ever made on the African continent. To understand why, we must remember that film has played an important role in nation building - providing a counter-history to that of the colonizers and a unifying vision of the country's origins and purpose. Flora Gomes' [Mortu Nega](#) for example, tells a parallel story about the liberation of Guinea-Bissau from the Portuguese. [Flame](#) was the first film about the liberation of Zimbabwe and as such was bound to arouse intense scrutiny from all segments of society.

The producers of the film, two white people and one black person, all living in Zimbabwe, passed the script before the relevant government review boards before beginning production. When the Veterans Association of Zimbabwe screened a "rough cut" of the film, they condemned it as "full of lies," and were especially incensed by the scenes showing female combatants abused by male soldiers. This provoked the government to send the police to confiscate the entire film on the grounds that it was both subversive and pornographic. After a worldwide campaign, the film was returned to its producers and went on to be selected for the 1996 Cannes Film Festival where it received international press coverage. Passed by the government's censors, [Flame](#) broke box office records, becoming the number one film of that year in Zimbabwe.

It may be helpful to remind viewers at the outset that the film is told largely in a flashback from a moment 15 years after independence when Flame is returning to Harare to look for Liberty. Although the opening narration is by Liberty (Nyasha), the film will center on the experiences of Flame (Florence).

After the Film . . .

1. This film opens like a documentary with sepia photos taken from Zimbabwean history. What do you think the filmmaker was trying to achieve here in short hand? What aspect of that history is emphasized?

2. You may want to ask viewers to discuss the following three quotes generated by the controversy surrounding the film. Who is right? Are they all right given their point of view?

"If this film is not stopped, it will give the wrong picture to people. The rape scene detracts from the lofty goals of the struggle for independence. What should have been emphasized was the rape and torture of civilians by the white Rhodesian soldiers."

- Richard Chirongwe, Deputy Secretary General of the War Veterans Association of Zimbabwe

"I was raped and that is the truth. A society which denies the truth cannot develop or move forward. Saying the truth out loud is a kind of therapy and should be accepted."

- female ex-combatant

"Women went to the war to fight . . . If the war was about rape we wouldn't have fought or won."

- another female ex-combatant

3. How are the roles of women and their lives portrayed in the film? Women are sometimes portrayed heroically, but also become involved in petty bickering amongst themselves; men can be respectful of women as combatants yet feel entitled to use them as "leisure women." Viewers may want to discuss the "sexual politics" of the film. In particular, they may want to ask themselves how credible it is that Flame's rape could be followed by a romantic relationship with Comrade Che? Do you think the filmmaker was bowing to anticipated criticism? Or was she trying to symbolize the ultimate unity among the freedom fighters?

4. Ingrid Sinclair, although she has good credentials as a long-time supporter of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, originally came from England and is white. Those who opposed the film were openly hostile to the fact that the first film on the *chimurenga* was made by a foreign white woman. Sinclair responded: "The first question I asked each of the women I interviewed was, 'Do you think it's legitimate that I, a white woman, should make this film?' The answer was always that they found it easier to talk to me than a black Zimbabwean who, they felt, would have many more preconceived ideas, prejudices or political views than I did as an outsider. They were one and all delighted that anyone should be interested in their stories as nobody had ever had any interest in them before. The

general view was that since I had the means to make a film and they did not, they should make use of me to tell their story."

What do you think about "an outsider" making this film and how do you think it may have affected the final film? Do you think that Ingrid Sinclair is being a bit disingenuous about Zimbabwean women's failure to criticize her for undertaking the project? Why do you think Ingrid Sinclair had "the means to tell their story" while none of these women, indeed, no Zimbabweans did? Does an outside observer, for example a reporter for the news media, always have a more objective point of view than a participant? Is it possible to have an "objective" point of view, a point of view that does not somehow reflect the viewer's history or present position and self-interest?

5. In some ways, the last fifteen minutes of the film are the most crucial and are at the center of what it is trying to say. Flame (Florence) returned from the war with no skills other than that of a guerrilla leader to a rural setting, where conditions for women remained largely unchanged. In contrast, Liberty (Nyasha) acquired office skills during the war and could take advantage of the new urban opportunities opened up for educated Africans by independence. Is the film suggesting that a class divide now exists between an elite and middle class and the average Zimbabwean? How would you characterize the current Zimbabwean leadership, at least as they appear on television?

6. At the end of the film the ex-combatants exchange the revolutionary greeting "A luta continua", Portuguese for "the struggle continues." Once the anti-colonial struggle has been won, what new issues emerge? Beyond, independence what goals can a new nation set for itself? What sorts of problems are likely to persist?

Country facts in brief:

ZIMBABWE

Location: Southern Africa, northeast of Botswana

Capital: Harare

Independence: April 18, 1980

Population: 11,044,147 (1998)

Ethnic groups: African (Shona 80%, Ndebele 19%), European, mixed race and Asian 1%

Languages: English (official), Shona, Sindebele or Ndebele

Economy/Labor: Agriculture (70%), mining (5%), and manufacturing industries (25%)

GDP per capita: \$2200 (1996)