

Ndebele cultural heritage of the fore in
'Mthwakazi Republic':
Place naming, heritage, and contestation in
Zimbabwe
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Zimbabwe, just like any other country, especially in Africa, has diverse ethnic and cultural groups. This multi-ethnic and multi-cultural identity poses a challenge for the new government to construct an inclusive national identity. Research on nation-building and inclusive national identity shows that Zimbabwe is a nation still in the process of becoming (Mlambo, 2013). This is partly because it is based on partisan politics contoured along the lines of ethnocracy, an antithesis of inclusive nationalism that conceptualises national identity in terms of the majority ethnicity, promoting the heroes, symbols, and histories of dominant ethnic groups into national ones (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012). In Zimbabwe, missionaries and the colonial administration created two super-tribes, Shona and Ndebele (Ranger, 1993; Chimhundu, 1992). The above imagined ethnic identities influenced the politics of Zimbabwe since the formative years of the nationalist movement. Ethnicity generated tensions and rivalry in the nationalist movement

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throughout the liberation war era and in the post-independence era.

Zimbabwe attained political independence on 18 April 1980 with Robert Mugabe becoming the Prime Minister. Just like many other post-colonial ruling regimes, the new black regime embarked on a conscious process of dismantling colonial symbols and identities from the landscape. The Mugabe regime invented the nation on the basis of exclusion and creation of outsiders. It promoted Shona ethnic symbols and historical figures to become national ones (Kriger, 1995; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008). In addition, the new nation adopted the stone-carved Zimbabwe bird from Great Zimbabwe as a national symbol. Place-naming, especially in Harare, the national capital, also celebrated legendary figures from the Shona past and ZANU liberation war. This place naming system is aimed at the exclusionary framing of belonging by casting the Ndebele as a non-autochthonous group. The Ndebele believe that their region has suffered systematic marginalisation since the dawn of independence. This unfortunate scenario has propagated Ndebele particularism as a product of a coalescence of grievances and a resentment to the Shona triumphalism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008). This has manifested in the creation of secessionist pressure groups and political organisations that fight the creation of a separate Ndebele state called *Mthwakazi*. Extant research on secessionist politics in Zimbabwe has examined factors that led to the formation of pro-Mthwakazi groups (Hadebe, 2020; Mpofu, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; 2012). Some of the research has focussed on the groups support for the restoration of the Ndebele monarchy (Thondlana and Machiridza, 2020; Msindo, 2012). This research contributes to this body of knowledge by examining the proposed place naming system in the imagined state. Such place names are part of the imagined nation's symbols of power and identity. The pro-Mthwakazi groups also advocate for the replacement of

Shona/ZANU names in the imagined state so that the place naming system reflect the Ndebele identity. The entire place naming system is a symbolic form of resistance to the perceived Shona ethnic chauvinistic tendencies, and ZANU (PF) political triumphalism. Place names are critical linguistic units that carry a people's heritage and collective historical experiences. However, it should be noted that the region covered by the imagined state is populated by different ethnolinguistic groups. The idea of a separate Mthwakazi state presumes that all these groups are in support of this idea. My preliminary findings show that most of the ethnolinguistic groups share different views because they perceive the project as entrenching Ndebele hegemony in the region.

This research deploys Alderman's (2008) 'naming as symbolic resistance' theoretical paradigm in analysing place-naming contestation in Zimbabwe. This theoretical framework is part of Critical Toponymies, a broad theoretical approach to place naming. Critical Toponymies constitutes a 'critical turn' to the study of place naming. It goes beyond the etymology and taxonomy of place names in traditional approaches to discuss politics involved in place-naming processes. State-commissioned place naming processes are usually not politically innocent. Even though the theoretical paradigm is grounded in a specific empirical context of the United States of America, Alderman (2008) advances that they have relevance beyond the study of place naming systems in a single country. While this theoretical paradigm demonstrates that place naming is a political exercise that often reveals the power dynamics at play, subordinate groups can challenge the hegemonic order presented by dominant groups and polities in place (re)naming processes. This study uses Alderman's notion of symbolic resistance in exploring the varied ways in which the pro-Mthwakazi groups contest the Shona elite place naming system in Zimbabwe.

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