

## **Influence of an African Language on European place names in Zimbabwe: Is it language corruption, language development or resistance?**

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### **Abstract**

The main focus of the paper is on the English place names in the southern parts of Zimbabwe that have been transformed or modeled along the phonological, morphological and semantic patterns of the Ndebele language. Most English place names have followed the levels of linguistic analysis of Ndebele which happens to be the dominant language in the Matabeleland region and is accorded an official language status alongside Shona. The paper scrutinizes the term creation strategies in transforming these place names from English to Ndebele from the linguistic and social perspective. Emphasis is put on whether there is a relationship between some social aspects and term creation. As the paper develops the discussions revolves around the following key questions:

- Why are the English names modeled along the linguistic patterns of the Ndebele language?
- What yardsticks are used in coming up with the resultant name?
- Which term creation strategies are used in coming up with the resultant names and what are the implications of such strategies?
- What sort of controversies result in such kind of creation of the place names?
- Are there any effects on the referents when considering the names that were there prior to the European ones?

After the above questions have been answered the paper will then conclude by showing the interplay between socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-economic, socio-linguistic, socio-historic and term creation.

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### **Introduction**

The paper focuses on European place names in the Southern parts of Zimbabwe where Ndebele is predominantly spoken. Ndebele alongside Shona are the two main national languages that have recently been upgraded to official language status in Zimbabwe for use in public domains. The existing scenario with regards place names in Zimbabwe is that the European place names are officially recognized and gazzetted and remain the official record for use on maps, signs, registry documents and even on voters' roll. These European place names are exogenetic in nature and they carry along with them a very strong foreign origin. Most of these names being names of former British monarchs, missionaries, founders, explorers, and commissioners as well as names of transposed European landscapes. Despite what appears as official record, there exists a localised parallel nomenclature for these European names that has been created by the Ndebele user community as a way of creating their own social, cultural as well political narratives and worldview. It has to be noted that while the remodeled localised versions of the European names are not yet official record, they are fast becoming tools of re-assertion and control by the Ndebele user community.

This paper therefore makes a comparative analysis of the original European names and their parallel and localised Ndebele versions. It assesses the extent of the transformation and attempts to explain whether the variation that results is corruption, language development or resistance. The paper begins by tracing the background of the colonial names as a way of establishing the factors that brought the Ndebele people in contact with the Europeans in their zone of influence. The paper explains the importance of a language and its status through place naming by examining the reactions that came as a result of contact between European and African languages in the Zimbabwe. The paper further investigates the contribution of

socio-historical, socio-political, socio-cultural, socio-economic as well as sociolinguistic factors to the shift in the transformation of European place names into the localised Ndebele versions. The paper also shows how power can be wielded through a language in the naming and use of place names at any given time. It concludes by proffering an alternative epistemology that can be adopted for understanding and further conceptualising the politics and debates that surround toponymic practices in post-colonial African communities.

### **History of the european occupation of zimbabwe**

The first Europeans, the Portuguese in particular appeared in Africa in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in an attempt to colonize south-central Africa. However, the attempt failed and thirty years later the Europeans arrived as explorers, missionaries, ivory hunters and traders.

The first European to visit Zimbabwe was a German geologist, Carl Mauch in 1871 who came to explore what is today known as the Great Zimbabwe monuments.

In November 1893 Lobengula ordered that his kraal in Bulawayo (today known as Old Bulawayo) be burnt down after sensing a defeat from the settlers. A day after the burning down of the kraal, a British South Africa Company flag was raised from a tree branch. The flag signifies the power and control and that raising of the British symbolised the rise into power of the settlers and the fall of Lobengula's kingdom. Just a few kilometers from Old Bulawayo a fort named Fort Usher was established and it was named after Usher, one of the prominent figures within the British South Africa Company.

Alexander et al (2000:20) point out on the clashes between Lobengula's army and the British army whose intentions were to colonise the land that was under Lobengula's rule. They point out that:

December 4, 1894 was the day on which King Lobengula's Ndebele warriors killed to a man the members of the Alan Wilson Patrol at a place called Pupu, deep in the forests of the Shangani. That same day King Lobengula disappeared, never to be seen again. Lobengula had fled north from the Ndebele state's capital, Bulawayo, following its occupation by troops of the British South Africa Company and imperial forces.

The disappearance of Lobengula weakened the Ndebele people as they remained with no leader. This showed that the Ndebele were now being overpowered by the white settlers.

Ranger cited by Alexander et al (2000:21) says that:

After 1893, the Ndebele were treated as a conquered people. The entire Ndebele heartland on the highveld around Bulawayo was alienated to white settlers; Ndebele cattle were looted on a grand scale.

It was Doctor Leander Starr Jameson who was in charge and who also sanctioned the looting of the Ndebele people's cattle, land distribution among the white settlers and unleashing the war on the Ndebeles. Although the Ndebele did not worry much about being alienated from their land, the looting of their cattle brought much anger among themselves. Some of the Ndebele cattle were decimated in 1896 following the outbreak of rinderpest in February 1896 (Alexander et al 2000). The Ndebele people's economy hinged on cattle. The importance of the cattle among the Ndebele is also evidenced by the clashes that broke up between Tshaka king of the Zulu and Mzilikazi who later on escaped from Zululand and traveled northwards

until he settled in what is today known as Zimbabwe. Another war broke up in 1896 after the Ndebele were angry about their cattle that were looted and some shot and killed by the white settlers. The Ndebeles did not win this war this time again but they surrendered by the end of that year.

In 1894 the territory was named Zambesia and others called it Charterland (Nyathi 1996). It was Jameson who later suggested that what is today known as Zimbabwe be named Rhodesia. Zambia which was also under the British South Africa company was named Northern Rhodesia while Zimbabwe was Southern Rhodesia. Rhodesia was the name that came after Cecil John Rhodes since he was regarded as the founder of the territory.

Most influential areas in the then Rhodesia were named after some prominent British leaders. The capital city of Rhodesia was named Salisbury after Lord Salisbury, the head of the England government between the years 1886 and 1892. Victoria Falls and Fort Victoria (today known as Masvingo) were named in honor of Queen Victoria, the queen of England. It is clear then that Rhodesia was also being governed from Europe as naming some of the places after the powerful figures of England at that time clearly suggests that.

### **Localisation of european names**

Given the etymology and exegesis of the European place names projected in the preceding section, this section of the paper assesses the extent of the transformation that occurs when the localised nomenclature is created and also investigates the factors that contribute to such a language shift

### **Socio-historical factors**

Some place names in Matebeleland came to be labeled along the linguistic patterns of the Ndebele language because of some historical factors. The early encounters between the Ndebele people and the Europeans were never pleasant ones. The Ndebele were still trying to politically establish themselves when the Europeans arrived. The Europeans turned to be a serious threat to the Ndebele because their agenda was to also advance themselves politically and economically.

Because the initial encounter between the Ndebele and the Europeans was unpleasant, the Ndebele resisted the Europeans' dominance by deliberately trying to remodel the European place names into the local Ndebele language.

### **Socio-cultural factors**

Culture as an aspect also contributed to the influence of Ndebele on place names that are in the European languages. Wa Thiong'o (1981) asserts that "language is a carrier of culture." Since language carries culture the speakers of a language will seek to know the meaning of a term that signifies a concept or any phenomena within their culture. Robins (1989:396) asserts that:

...languages are not mere collections of labels or nomenclatures attached to preexisting bit and pieces of the human world, but that each speech community lives in a somewhat different world from that of others, and that these differences are both realized in parts of their cultures and revealed and maintained in parts of their languages.

Cultures differ and the names that we find in any society have etymologies that can be traced to certain historical experiences or concepts. So when the Ndebele were met with complex

European terms they tried to model them along their own linguistic patterns so that they represent particular concepts in their culture. Littlewood (1984:30) is of the view that “In order to get the required meaning across... [one] may then resort to matching language items to the situation in any ad hoc way that will solve his immediate problem”. When a place is named in a foreign language those local people who talk about that place will in most instances turn it into their own language and in the process making it sound like another term that is found and representing a particular concept within their society.

A number of place names in Matebeleland that are in European languages have been changed in conversations to be the same as those that signify certain concepts or phenomena in the Ndebele culture. The name **Maconville** which is the name of a farm that was named after its owner has been changed into **Makhovula**. *Amakhovula* in Ndebele is mucus. **Saw Mills**, a place named so because it is where there is abundance of timber and is where timber is cut has been changed into **Somizi** in Ndebele. *Imizi* are reeds that are found at river banks or in swampy areas.

### Socio-political factors

When two languages meet, they fight for space. A foreign group that arrives in an area that belongs and is controlled by another group that is different from theirs will try to establish itself by naming the area in which they arrive in their own language. The names that are given to places where they try to settle are usually those that are for places where they come from. When the Ndebeles arrived in Zimbabwe in the first quarter of the nineteenth century they named the place where they settled Bulawayo because the area where they settled in Zululand was called Bulawayo. The Europeans also brought a number of European names into Zimbabwe. Although issues such as nostalgia also contribute to such situations, political reasons remain the key factors. The language, in which a place name is in, plays a key role in political establishment.

### Linguistic Configuration

The syllabic and the phonological structure of European and African languages is different. This is one of the reasons why some of the European place names have been modeled by the Ndebele people into their own phonological and syllabic patterns. The penultimate phoneme in any Ndebele syllable is a vowel which is not always the case with the European languages. In cases where a Ndebele syllable does not end with a vowel, a deliberate attempt would have been made to elide that vowel.

The name **Sternmore** changed into **Sitenimowa** after being modeled along the syllabic patterns of the Ndebele language.

The differences in phonemic sequencing that exist between English and the Ndebele language has also seen some of the English place names being modeled along the linguistic patterns of the Ndebele language. The /st/ cluster does not exist in the Ndebele language and thus the vowel *-i-* is used to separate the cluster when being changed into Ndebele resulting in the name **Sternmore** becoming **Sitenimowa**.

Some place names have been changed into the Ndebele language as a quest for modeling them along the phonological patterns of the Ndebele language. There are some phonemes that are believed not to exist in the Ndebele language but existing in the European languages. The phoneme /br/ does not exist in the Ndebele language and thus it is normally replaced with /mb/ as in **Van Brek** into **Fambeki**.

Ndebele is an agglutinative language like many other African languages especially when it comes to proper names. Ndebele unlike English and Portuguese does not allow two words to stand independently in a single term which in this case is a place name. Such examples include **Fambeki** from **Van Brek** and **Kholomboni** from **Collen Bawn** among many of such names.

Another reason is that which has to do with language acquisition, language learning and articulation. The psycholinguists point out that language acquisition is most effective between the ages of one and five years. Beyond the age of five it is no longer language acquisition but it becomes language learning. When language is learnt, articulation of some of the sounds of a new language can never be as perfect as the way in which one whom the language in question is his or her first language. When a second language is being learnt especially by an adult the influence of the first language manifests itself in the phonological patterns. Littlewood (1984:17) puts it as follows:

Whereas the first language learner is a novice so far as language habits are concerned, the second language learner already possesses a set of habits: his native language. Some of these habits will help the new learning tasks. Others will hinder it.

Littlewood (1984:25) calls this transfer and he goes on to say that “In the case of transfer, the learner uses his previous *mother-tongue* experience as a means of organizing the second language data”. When adults make errors in terms that they incorporate their own language the children who are in the stage of acquiring the language through socialization will realize the mistake at a later stage if ever they get to be exposed to the language that the corrupted term has come from. If children are exposed to such terms that adults corrupt they are in a better position to articulate them accurately because “adult L2 (second language) do not have available the same innate knowledge that the child has” (Brown et al 1996:72). When errors become permanent in a language, Littlewood calls this fossilization. Littlewood (1984:34) notes that:

...fossilization is most likely to occur when a learner realizes (subconsciously) that the error does not hinder him in satisfying his communication needs (at the functional or social level).

It is apparent that when errors are fossilized then they become a normal part and parcel of a receptor language.

As such some of the place names became modeled along the Ndebele language because the Ndebeles could not pronounce them properly. It is this reason why names such as **Van Brek** were changed to **Fambeki** and **Glengary** to **Ngelengele**. Such terms were too specific to be pronounced by someone whose first language was Ndebele and had no knowledge of the English language.

There are some other social factors which are linked to language that have had an influence in the way in which the English place names have been modeled along the patterns of the Ndebele language. There is a history of hatred between the Shona and the Ndebele where the two groups derogate one another. Where there are similarities between the two languages Ndebele uses /l/ where the Shona use /r/. By that difference Shona became regarded as to be synonymous with /r/ while /l/ is regarded as to be peculiar to the Ndebele language. The Ndebele therefore have always avoided using /r/ even where it is necessary and the Shona have avoided the use of /l/. This has had an impact on English names when they are being

modeled into Ndebele. The name **Glengary** has been called **Ngelengele** while **Conbury** has been called **Khwabhila**. If it was not for denigration between the Shona and the Ndebele, then **Glengary** could have been called **Ngerere** while **Conbury** is called **Khwabhira**.

### Religious Influence

Also to consider as having contributed to the influence of isiNdebele on the European place names is the bible. The missionaries came with the bible earlier than the colonial master. Their objective was to urge the Ndebele people to shun their traditional religious practices and adopt the Christian religion. So when the colonizers came the Ndebele already had little knowledge about the bible. The name **Sauerdale** of Rhodes's farm now called Matopos Research Station came to be called **Sodoma** by the Ndebele people. They changed **Sauerdale** to **Sodoma** because they already knew about **Sodoma** from the bible. The two terms sound the same and thus resulting into turnover to the already familiar term.

### Towards an alternative epistemology of understanding the politics of place naming

In this section, the paper searches for and contributes an alternative conceptualisation paradigm that accommodates those language actions during place naming that go beyond the traditional focus on etymological and classification issues that seems to have permeated Name Studies and previous research into place names. The earlier sections of the paper did engage on these traditional aspects when we linked the history of European occupation in Zimbabwe to the naming of places there. This was done as way of providing the necessary historical information and background that we use in this paper to further problematize issues of language contact and language shift during the place naming process. The thesis of our argument in this paper is that in order to fully understand the politics behind the creation of the localised version of the European names there is need to go beyond the obvious and search for those transcendental cues that take us beyond social, cultural and linguistic domains of place naming. The reason for doing this is because of the critical turn in the study of place names that is currently taking place. The study of place naming or toponymy, has recently undergone 'critical reformulation as scholars have moved beyond the traditional focus on etymology and taxonomy by examining the politics of place naming practices' (Rose-Redwood, Alderman and Azaryahu 2010:453). This is the path that this paper has taken in initiating a critical turn in understanding the politics of place naming in Zimbabwe. The epistemic thinking being proffered here is a critical reformulation of the existing ideological thinking that embodies the study of place names. The paper aims at expanding the conceptual horizon of understanding the place naming practices in post-colonial African communities and Zimbabwe is used as a case study.

Why have the Ndebele come up with a parallel and localised version of the European place names and re-modeled those names within their own linguistic, social and cultural worldview? We argue that this language act has gone beyond mere linguistic and social parameters and should be viewed as a political act of resistance by a subaltern group. The thread that we take from here forth is the theoretical approach that views the localised nomenclature as a search for recognition and social justice through resistance. The paper identifies discursive language actions and cues that lead to the fact that place naming in this community has now become a contested spatial practice aimed at re-assertion and social justice. We see a subordinate population fighting for re-assertion by employing a competing informal system of geographical nomenclature rather than follow an authorized system of naming (Yeoh 1992, Bigon 2009). This act of reclamation through place names in a way shows the Ndebele user community using the localised nomenclature in trying to control, negotiate and contest the existing European place names. Using their language to bestow a

name to a place is a way of identification and self-assertion. By calling a place *Sodoma* instead of Sauerdale for instance, they have created their own worldview and narratives about the place that do not link them directly to transposed and imposed foreign landscapes. *Sodoma* no longer carries with it the exogenetic influence associated with Sauerdale. The Ndebele user community has transformed those names into new symbolic forms that carry new cultural and social meanings. We argue therefore that renaming of place names becomes a non-confrontational type of resistance, a symbolic resistance as it were. *Symbolic resistance* involves the ‘appropriation of certain artifacts and significations from the dominant culture and their transformation into symbolic forms that take on a new meaning and significance for subaltern groups’ (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987:99). Symbolic resistance through place names can also come disguised in ‘alternative pronunciations for established names’ (Kearns and Berg 2002:286), especially when we consider post-colonial place naming politics. Therefore when the Ndebele provide an alternative pronunciation for Glengary as *Ngelengele*; this is not just failure to pronounce properly or a sign of illiteracy all the time but it should also be seen as an intentional renaming strategy for self or group identity – a non-confrontational symbolic resistance by the group. Even educated members of the community, who can easily pronounce the English names resort to the localised version for the reasons cited above. Pronunciation of a place name is seen as a social act of narrating identity and constructing and positioning the Self in relation to Others. (Kearns and Berg, 2002: 298). Remodeling place names is indeed a way of resisting dominance of a group that is in control in the area as well as other forces that the group perceives as threats. This is what Kadmon (2004) calls *toponymic warfare*. He uses *toponymic warfare* to describe the extent to which marginalized minorities and linguistic communities within countries have appropriated and rewritten place names as part of a resistance campaign (Rose-Redwood, Alderman and Azaryahu, 2010). We therefore conclude that place names become sites of contest, debate and negotiation and we see social groups competing for the right to name.

## Conclusion

This paper has tried to debate the politics of place naming practices in post-colonial communities and has used the Zimbabwean situation as a case in point. It has shown that apart from linguistic and social factors there under underlying political factors that result in the change from the original pronunciation of place names to the localised Ndebele nomenclature. What has to be noted again is that the Ndebele localised versions of the place names do not appear on any official and legal document. This existing state of affairs led us in this paper to argue for paradigm shift that will extend the horizon of understanding place names to include the informal language actions in place naming. The thesis of our paper is best summarized by Withers (2000) who projects that attention to a place name alone on the grounds of a historical map (or what is officially gazette) runs the risk of concerning itself with ends and not the means. This calls for an ideological and paradigm shift to look at other alternative non-formal and discursive toponymic practices if we are to fully understand the politics of place naming. Corruption and renaming of place names in Zimbabwe far transcends the more obvious linguistic and social parameters. A lot of what may pass as informal and ungazetted nomenclature is very symbolic and highly political.

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**APPENDIX****EUROPEAN PLACE NAME**

Saw Mills  
Glengary  
Mount Edgecombe  
Van Brek  
Victoria Falls  
Serlbone  
Fort Usher  
Fort Rixon  
Collen Bawn  
Maconville  
Sternmore  
Mr Tylor  
Conbury  
Essexvale  
Shiloh  
Queens Mine  
Bushtick  
Saurerdale  
Mvutch

**NDEBELE VERSION**

Somizi  
Ngerengere/ Ngelengele  
Jikombe  
Fambeki  
Folosi  
Solobhoni  
Fodasha  
Fodrekiseni  
Kholomubhoni  
Makhovula  
Sitenimowa  
KoMsitheli  
Khwabhila  
Sikisiveli  
Tshayile  
Khwinisi  
Bhositiki  
Sodoma  
Mvutsha