



# 'Where Art Thou?': Ethnocracy, Toponymic Silence, and Toponymic Subjugation in the Harare Commemorative Landscapes During the Mugabe Era (1980–2017)

Zvinashe Mamvura<sup>1,2</sup> 

Published online: 26 August 2020

© The Author(s) 2020, corrected publication 2021

## Abstract

This article explores the post-colonial national identity formation using place names that commemorate the nation's past in Zimbabwe. Place name alterations that the new political elites implemented at independence in 1980 were aimed at disassembling relics of the deposed regime and craft a new national identity. The commemorative landscapes of Harare, as a national capital, constitute a strategic medium in the constitution of national identity. Ethnicity dominated the political landscape in Zimbabwe. The two main political parties, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), have been aligned with the two supertribes, Shona and Ndebele, respectively. The article explores how the ruling ZANU (PF) government whose leadership was largely Shona used a meta-narrative modelled around discourses of exclusionary autochthony and a partial presentation of the liberation war history that projected ZAPU as having made an insignificant contribution to the liberation war to construct a national identity. It concludes that the use of exclusionary definitions of belonging and a one-sided presentation of the war past that projected ZANU as having contributed more to the liberation war entrenched Shona ethnic chauvinistic tendencies and propagated ZANU (PF) political hegemony. Using the theoretical lens of critical toponymy, the article argues that politically motivated place renaming efforts usually select from the past aspects that serve present political purposes.

**Keywords** Cityscape · Toponym · Toponymic silence · Toponymic subjugation · Exclusionary autochthony discourse · National identity

---

✉ Zvinashe Mamvura  
zvinashe.mamvura@gmail.com

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

## Introduction

Zimbabwe attained political independence on 18 April 1980, ending the liberation war that had been raging since 1966. Robert Mugabe became the new leader of Zimbabwe. This political transition opened an opportunity for the new black government to create a new national identity that was consistent with the new political dispensation. When new regimes come into power, they usually alter place names, produce new national flags, and issue a new currency among other attempts meant to ‘perform’ stateness (Dunn 2001, p. 59). This study explores how the Mugabe regime used commemorative place renaming to construct a national identity for the new nation. Political elites significantly impact the way national identity is constructed, projected, and experienced in a country (Charumbira 2015; Van der Waldt and Prinsloo 2019). They enjoy the privilege of making deliberate choices on ‘historical figures that become national heroes and establish the historical incidents that become the formative events of the nation’s identity’ (Forest and Johnson 2002, p. 526). Thus, ruling elites can create usable pasts in constructing a nation’s identity.

Zimbabwe, just like any other country, especially in Africa, is multi-ethnic and multicultural. This complex ethnic and cultural composition poses a challenge for new governments when faced with the inevitable process of constructing an inclusive national identity. It is against this background that leaders of newly independent African states have tried to minimise the effects of tribalism on nation-building efforts by embracing inclusive citizenship policies. The first president of independent Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, popularised the ‘one Zambia, one nation’ mantra while Nelson Mandela declared the Republic of South Africa a ‘rainbow nation’. Samora Machel of Mozambique said, ‘for the nation to live the tribe must die’ (Mamdani 1996, p. 135).

Zimbabwe has Shona and Ndebele as the two major ethnic identities. Missionaries and the colonial system were the protagonists in the creation of two major ethnic groups (Ranger 1993; Chimhundu 1992). Chimhundu (1992) argues that the missionary linguistic politics under the umbrella organisation, the Southern Rhodesia Missionary Conference, created ethnolinguistic maps based on the language varieties spoken in their different spheres of influence. After they failed to come up with a harmonised orthography for the mutually intelligible varieties in the country, they made a recommendation to the colonial government to invite the South African linguistic, Clement Doke, to spearhead the harmonisation of the language varieties. His *Southern Rhodesia: Report on the Unification of the Shona Dialects* (1931) officialised the two supertribes, Shona and Ndebele. It also solidified the nation’s identity as bilingual and bicultural, an imagined identity that persisted throughout the colonial era right up to the present. It generates research interest when the Harare’s toponymic landscape presented a monolithic national identity based on the Shona past, given that the nation had assumed a bipolar identity since the colonial era. Therefore, the study seeks to investigate how and why toponymic commemoration presented such a narrow narrative of belonging and Zimbabweanness.

The above imagined ethnic identities influenced the politics of Zimbabwe since the formative years of the nationalist movement. Factionalism within the Joshua Nkomo-led ZAPU assumed an ethnic and tribal configuration leading to a split that saw the

formation of the predominantly Shona-led ZANU<sup>1</sup> in 1963 as a breakaway movement (Sithole 1999; Masunungure 2006; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008, 2012). ZANU and its military wing, the Zimbabwe National Liberation Army (ZANLA), assumed a Shona identity with ZAPU and its Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) becoming aligned with the Ndebele regional identity. Recruitment into the two nationalist movements and their respective military wings was done along tribal lines (Kriger 2003; Alexander et al., 2000). Tribalism also influenced the deployment of trained personnel to the war front. ZIPRA forces mainly operated in Ndebele-speaking areas (Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands) while ZANLA mainly operated in the Shona-speaking areas (Alexander et al., 2000). Ethnicity continued to engender disunity and internecine rivalry between ZANU/ZANLA and ZAPU/ZIPRA throughout the liberation war era (Sithole 1999).

The tensions continued to influence relations between the two political formations in the post-colonial era. Commenting on the ethnic relations between ZANU and ZAPU in the new Zimbabwe, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008, p. 172) avers that in 'the post-independence era -Zimbabwe has entered its most tribalistic phase where tribalism has somehow become officialised as a legitimate game of politics and power contestation'. The process of constructing a national identity in a country divided along two major ethnic groups and other sub-ethnic groups may be a challenge to state actors in managing ethnic diversity. Research on national identity and nation-building in Zimbabwe has demonstrated that Zimbabwe, as a nation, does not exist (Mpofu 2014, 2016; Masunungure 2006; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009a) because it is based on partisan politics contoured along the lines of ethnocracy. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012, p. 533) defines ethnocracy as an antithesis of inclusive nationalism because it conceptualises national identity in terms of the majority ethnicity, 'leading to a form of cultural despotism which then manifests itself in the elevation of some ethnic histories, symbols, and heroes into national ones'. Given this nature of the nation-building project in Zimbabwe, this study interrogates how the elite-controlled commemorative place renaming system fitted into this ethnocratic scheme of nation-building.

This article looks at the period 1980 to 2017 when Mugabe was at the helm of Zimbabwean politics. It focuses on the commemorative spaces in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. Cities are forums for creating, maintaining, and contesting notions of national identity and belonging. They are conduits for defining classes of citizen, resident, and native, and by extension, creating outsiders and insiders for the nation (Diener and Hagen 2019). If all cities have these qualities, a capital city has a high ideological significance since it is an 'official face of government' (Dorman 2006, p. 1088). The discussion in this article is done using the theoretical lens of critical toponymy. Previous onomastic research in Africa has looked at the creation of national identity in multicultural African states, for example, in South Africa (Guyot and Seethal 2007; Meiring 2016; Van der Walldt and Prinsloo 2019), Kenya (Wanjiru and Matsubara 2017; Njoh 2017), and Democratic Republic of Congo (Lagae et al., 2016). In Zimbabwe, the general trend in onomastic research is to look at place

<sup>1</sup> The party was called the Zimbabwe African National African Union since its formation in 1963. Mugabe rebranded it to Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) before the General elections in 1980. On the other hand, ZAPU contested the 1980 elections as PF-ZAPU. When the two parties merged after the signing of the Unity Accord of 1987, the united formation retained the name ZANU-PF.

renaming as a decolonisation process meant to construct a Zimbabwean identity (see, for example, Chabata 2007; Mashiri and Chabata 2010; Pfukwa 2012, 2018). There is no attempt in the existing Zimbabwean onomastic research to unbundle the nature of the national identity that toponymic commemoration constructed relating it to ethnocracy. This article intends to fill this void in existing onomastic scholarship in Zimbabwe by exploring the political aspects of the exclusionary aspects of national identity and nationalism.

## Critical Toponymy

Generally, toponymy is the study of names for the humanly constructed landscapes and natural landscapes. Place name scholarship has traditionally focused on collecting, classifying, and describing toponyms. It has also regarded 'place' in mechanistic ways as a geographical notion (Azaryahu 2011). Thus, the study of place names was traditionally apolitical. However, the coming on board of critical toponymy at the turn of the century has witnessed a change of focus from the name itself to the political examination of place naming. Critical toponymy also appreciates the centrality of place names in the discursive construction of places (Rose-Redwood et al., 2017). Both issues are critical to the present study. First, place names, together with national flags, colours, and national anthems, constitute a ruling regime's symbols of power. Place renaming is a politically charged process in which state actors decide what and who should be remembered and the location for such acts of remembering (Azaryahu 2009; Alderman and Inwood 2013). Ruling elites usually control commemorative place naming, ensuring that they select convenient pasts to serve present political purposes. The article pivots its arguments on the observation that state-commissioned memory is not a politically innocent act of recalling. Instead, the omissions and silences of certain parts of the past usually characterise the process of creating usable pasts (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Rose-Redwood 2008). These defining characteristics of state-commissioned memory point to its subjective and politicised nature.

Second, the role of place names in the symbolic construction of places is critical because they participate in the formation of what Anderson (1983) has called 'imagined communities'. Kearns and Berg (2002, p. 100) poignantly note that 'such imagined communities arise from the historically contingent and culturally constructed phenomenon of nationalism'. The use of national symbols that are universal to all ethnic groups is crucial for reinforcing social cohesion and solidarity among citizens in a nation-state. For Zimbabwe, this study demonstrates that the Mugabe-led government used place names to create a form of 'ethnic nationalism' that privileged a Shona ethnic identity instead of pursuing a pan-ethnic nation-building project.

The study analyses the place naming strategies that the ZANU (PF) government used through the lens of Harley's (2001 [1988]) notion of *toponymic silence* and Helander's (2009) concept of *toponymic subjugation*. These two notions are not mutually exclusive. According to Harley (2001 [1988]), toponymic silences are omissions and non-inclusion of some names during the process of making maps. Mapmaking involves silence due to the deliberate policies of secrecy and censorship by state actors since cartography is a form of political discourse that ruling elites used to legitimise state power. While the above form of toponymic silence centres on

cartography-aligned place naming, Helander (2008 cited in Helander 2009, p. 256) argues that it is plausible to apply this notion to other scenarios of state-sanctioned place name use. The inscription of commemorative place names on road signs and buildings that this study looks at is an instance of the state-sanctioned use of place names. Helander (2009) applies Harley's (2001 [1988]) idea of toponymic silence on the toponymic strategies of 'othering' the Sámi indigenous toponymy in Norway by those belonging to more powerful groups. The present study analyses how the ZANU-PF government, which was led by the ethnically dominant Shona group, excluded the minority Ndebele pre-colonial historical figures from the Harare cultural geography as a form of toponymic silence.

Helander (2009) also identified 'toponymic subjugation' as another strategy that played a critical role in the Norwegianisation of Sámi place names. Toponymic subjugation is a deliberate hierarchy of majority and minority place names. In this hierarchy, the indigenous place name is subjugated to the majority language place name (Helander 2009). In the Norwegianisation of Sámi place names, toponymic subjugation entailed the bracketing Sámi place names or writing them after or under the Norwegian parallel name. These were deliberate processes of imposing a hierarchy of place naming that saw Sámi place names occupying a second position with Norwegian place names assuming a dominant position. The present study examines how ZANU-PF ensured that names of commemorated heroes from the ZAPU/ZIPRA side remained a type of 'subjugated toponymy'.

## An Overview of Place Renaming in Harare

The Mugabe regime initiated the process of dismantling colonial place names immediately after the declaration of political independence in 1980 with the new nation assuming the name, Zimbabwe. Significant changes to place names occurred during the second anniversary of Zimbabwe's independence in 1982. The robust disassembling of colonial names during this period is reflected in the Names Alteration Act of 1983 and the City of Harare website. The place name alteration process saw places being named in honour of pre-colonial African legends and those who participated in the First Chimurenga,<sup>2</sup> Second Chimurenga,<sup>3</sup> and regional political leaders who had supported the nationalist movement materially and logistically, as presented in Table 1. Mugabe was the only Zimbabwean liberation war icon immortalised in the landscape while he was living. The last two columns have been added from the information obtained from the indicated sources to provide more details relevant to this study.

The City of Harare website has no updated information on the changes made to street names after the ones captured in the Names Alteration Act of 1983. The later changes to place names saw the immortalisation of three African regional leaders in the Harare streetscapes. These are Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sam Nujoma of Namibia,

<sup>2</sup> Chimurenga, also known as *Umvukela* in Ndebele. The term *Chimurenga* carries a sense of eagerness to fight for one's freedom and justice. It was derived from the name Murengasorenzou, one of the Munhumutapa chiefs. It is used to refer to the frontier war that marked African uprising against the colonial system. The First Chimurenga took place in 1896.

<sup>3</sup> The second African insurrection against the colonial system spanned the period 1966 to 1979 when a negotiated transition to independence was reached in what became known as the Lancaster House Agreement.

**Table 1** List of renamed places in Harare

Colonial name	Post-colonial name	Commemorative status	Ethnic/political affiliation of the honoured person
Beatrice Road/Watts/Stuart Chandler Way/Beatrice Road/Stuart Changler Way	Simon Mazorodze Road	Second Chimurenga hero	Shona/ZANU
Baker Avenue	Nelson Mandela Way	African regional leader	N/A
Chaplin Building	Mashonganyika Building	Pre-colonial figure/First Chimurenga hero	Shona
Coghlan Building	Chaminuka Building	Pre-colonial figure/First Chimurenga hero	Shona
Drill Hall	Makombe Building	Pre-colonial figure/First Chimurenga hero	Shona
Earl Grey I	Mukwati Building	First Chimurenga hero	Leya/Ndebele/Shona
Earl Grey II	Kaguvi Building	First Chimurenga hero	Shona
Forbes Avenue	Robson Manyika Avenue	Second Chimurenga hero	Shona/ZANU
Gordon Avenue	George Silundika Avenue	Second Chimurenga hero	Ndebele/ZAPU
Harari Road South	Mbare Road	Pre-colonial figure	Shona
Hatfield Road/Prince Edward Dam Road	Seke Road	Pre-colonial figure	Shona
Kingsway Crescent	Julius Nyerere Way	African regional leader	N/A
Mackenzie Road/Mainway/McNeilage Road	Masotsha Ndlovu Way	Second Chimurenga hero	Ndebele/ZAPU
Manica Road West/Manica Road/Umtali Road	Robert Mugabe Road	Second Chimurenga hero	Shona/ZANU
Milton Building	Munhumutapa Building	Pre-colonial figure	Shona
Moffat Street	Leopold Takawira Street	Second Chimurenga hero	Shona/ZANU
Montagu Avenue	Josiah Chinamano Avenue	Second Chimurenga hero	Ndebele/ZAPU
North Avenue	Josiah Tongogara Avenue	Second Chimurenga hero	Shona/ZANU
Pioneer Street	Kaguvi Street	First Chimurenga hero	Shona/ZANU
Railway Avenue	Kenneth Kaunda Avenue	African regional leader	N/A
Rhodes Avenue	Herbert Chitepo Avenue	Second Chimurenga hero	Shona/ZANU
Salisbury	Harare	Pre-colonial figure	Shona
Salisbury Drive	Harare Drive	Pre-colonial figure	Shona
Salisbury Street	Harare Street	Pre-colonial figure	Shona
Sinoia Street	Chinhoyi Street	African place name	Shona
Sir James McDonald Avenue	Rekayi Tangwena Avenue	Pre-colonial figure/First Chimurenga hero	Shona
Stanley Avenue	Jason Moyo Avenue	Second Chimurenga hero	Ndebele/ZAPU
Umtali Road	Mutare Road	African place name	Shona
Victoria Street	Mbuya Nehanda Street	First and Second Chimurenga heroine	Shona/ZANU
Vincent Building	Mapondera Building	Pre-colonial figure/First Chimurenga hero	Shona
Widdecombe Road	Chiremba Road	Pre-colonial figure	Shona

Government of Zimbabwe (1983); City of Harare website (<http://www.hararecity.co.zw/>)

and Mozambique's Samora Machel. Apart from these African leaders, the Mugabe regime also honoured Simon V. Muzenda and Joshua Nkomo, both departed former vice presidents of Zimbabwe. Muzenda was Shona/ZANU, while Nkomo was Ndebele/ZAPU. It is critical to mention that all the renamed buildings house Government Ministries and/or Departments in the Harare Central Business District (CBD).

## Toponymic Silence, Belonging and the Politics of Autochthony

Commemorative place renaming immortalised African legendary figures from the pre-colonial past in memoryscapes as part of the symbolic efforts meant at reclaiming the autochthonous status of the indigenous peoples that the imperial mission had denied them. The imperial project in colonial Zimbabwe, just like what obtained the world over, viewed spaces in colonies as unpopulated and ready for European exploration. In Australia, the British justified their colonial mission because it was a *terra nullius* ('no one's land') (Pettit 2015). Ian Douglas Smith (1997), discredits indigenous groups' claim to the territory because they were equally foreigners coming to land originally inhabited by 'wandering bushmen' (p. 1).

Given the above nature of the colonial mission, the post-colonial phase provided an opportunity for the post-colonial government to reclaim the black Africans' aboriginal status. Thus, the post-colonial government named places in honour of the following pre-colonial political and religious figures in the Harare cultural geography as an act of symbolically returning to a primordial era: Chaminuka, Chiremba, Harare, Makombe, Mapondera, Mashonganyika, Mbare, Munhumutapa, Rekayi Tangwena, and Seke. All the pre-colonial African traditional leaders immortalised in the Harare cultural geography are from the Shona ethnolinguistic group. Ndebele historical figures such as Mzilikazi, Lobengula, Lozikheyi, and several Khumalo clan<sup>4</sup> members are characterised by toponymic silence because they are conspicuously absent in the Harare's cultural landscape. Thus, heroes of a single ethnic group have been promoted to the level of national heroes.

Given that a nation's identity is constructed according to a presentist political agenda (Osborne 2001), the monolithic version of national identity and nationalism that place naming presented in Harare commemorative landscapes was meant to deny the Ndebele claims to indigeneity, citizenship, and nativity. The naming process sought to declare the Shona ethnolinguistic group as the only indigenous with ancestral roots in Zimbabwe. Yet, the settlement history of Zimbabwe indicates that the Shona, just like any other ethnic group in Zimbabwe, migrated to the territory that was originally inhabited by the hunter-gatherer group, the Khoisan. However, the Mugabe-led government presented a restrictive and narrow version of indigeneity moulded around the concept of 'exclusionary autochthony', which functions as a trope within the process of constituting national identities (Dunn 2009, p. 114). The ZANU (PF) elites consciously edited the Ndebele pre-colonial past from the state-commissioned memory. This is in line with the observation in critical toponymy that place naming is a political enterprise. Alderman and Inwood (2013, p. 2) poignantly note that critical toponymy pays close attention to 'who controls

<sup>4</sup> The Khumalos are part of the Zulu tribe. Mzilikazi, the founder of the Ndebele nation, belonged to this clan. It was, therefore, the royal clan in the Ndebele nation.



the naming process (and conversely who does not) as well as the cultural and political world views that are given voice (and made silent) through the place name landscape' Thus, the Ndebele voice was muffled in the Harare cultural geography.

The place naming system participated in the political economy of knowledge production. Other complementary efforts of imagining the nation also reinforced the exclusive construction of national identity. The Mugabe regime installed the statues of Nehanda and Kaguvi by the entrance to Parliament building. The Zimbabwean state is built around Shona symbols to the exclusion of the Ndebele (Kriger 1995; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008). For example, the stone-carved Zimbabwe bird from Great Zimbabwe, an ancient city associated with the history of the Shona-speaking forebearers, appears on the national flag and coat of arms, as well as currency. The nativist discourses of national identity that were meant to exclude the Ndebele people were integral to ZANU (PF) politics of inclusion, exclusion, and entitlement to the nation's resources. It reflected the broader picture of the general state's marginalisation of the Ndebele people. ZANU-PF had schemed to exclude the Ndebeles in the national project as inferred from their 1979 *Grand Plan* document. In the mid-2000s, it is believed that ZANU-PF generated an undated 14-page document titled 'Progress Review on the 1979 Grand Plan' meant 'for the eyes of the Shona elite only' (Anonymous 2005, p.1). Ncube (2020) observes that this sequel document to the 1979 one was published in 2005. Both documents celebrate Shona chauvinism and classify the Ndebele as invading aliens who came to institute 'Ndebele colonialism', which predated European colonialism.

The above documents were couched in xenophobic language that is consistent with the exclusionary framing of belonging in Zimbabwe that casts the Ndebele as a non-autochthonous ethnic group. This is the same concept that toponymic commemoration in Harare advocated for. This alien tag on the Ndebele people explains the state's marginalisation of the Ndebele-speaking regions. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009b) argues that the Ndebele people have consistently complained against exclusion and marginalisation. This has led to the emergence of radical pressure groups and political formations, such as *Vukani Mahlabezulu* (Wake Up), *Imbovane yaMahlabezulu*, and the Mthwakazi People's Congress. These groups have advocated for the federation of Zimbabwe or even a complete secession of Matabeleland (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009b) to champion the development of their region and fight marginalisation. ZANU-PF consistently deploys exclusionary autochthony discourse whenever it is politically expedient to them. During the land redistribution exercise, the state treated all whites and Zimbabweans of Malawian and Zambian descent as aliens with no entitlement to the land (Muzondidya 2004, 2007). In this refashioned identity matrix, the Ndebele were written back into national history. The complexities and contradictions that characterise citizenship and belonging in Zimbabwe have led Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009a) to formulate the title of his book in the form of a rhetorical question 'Do 'Zimbabweans' exist?' This shows that national identities are always in a state of flux because political elites reconfigure them to serve their sectional interests.

## The Toponymic Subjugation of ZAPU/Ndebele Names

Helander's (2009) notion of toponymic subjugation demonstrates that names from subordinate groups can be accepted in official toponymy, but ruling regimes ensure



that they are subjugated to place names of the dominant groups. Toponymic inscription in Harare created a hierarchy of place names that saw Ndebele/ZAPU names becoming a subjugated toponymy to Shona/ZANU names. The subjugation of Ndebele/ZAPU names is derived from the fact that Shona/ZANU names enjoy numerical strength in the Harare's cultural geography. Out of the thirty-one places named in honour of Zimbabwean legends, only five commemorate Ndebele/ZAPU figures in the table above. The five are Joshua Nkomo, Jason Moyo, George Silundika, Josiah Chinamano, and Masotsha Ndlovu. The case of Mukwati presents a difficult scenario because he was of the Leya origin (Beach 1998). However, he actively participated in the Mwari cult<sup>5</sup> as a priest. Ranger (1967) shows that he assumed the role of a spiritual commander during the Ndebele uprisings of 1893. He was connected to the organisation of the Ndebele war of resistance against the BSAC in 1896, working with another religious leader, Kaguvi, until the death of Kaguvi in 1897. The white settler regime wanted to eliminate Mukwati, and he fled to the Shona people and linked up with Kaguvi to fight against the white settlers. He later died among the Korekore people. The fact that he spent the final years of his life in Mashonaland led the ZANU-PF government to appropriate him to the Shona list of legendary figures. Aeneas Chigwedere also supports the idea that Mukwati was a Shona legendary figure (see, for example, Chigwedere 1991).

As a Shona-aligned political outfit, ZANU (PF) appropriated all the Shona religious figures that actively participated in the liberation war. The state immortalised these ZANU (PF)-affiliated legendary figures in the Harare's memoryscapes. The spirit mediums of Kaguvi and Nehanda were Shona religious leaders who provided spiritual guidance to Africans during the First Chimurenga and the Second Chimurenga. The Mugabe regime elevated these Shona legends to the level of legendary national figures. Comparatively, the Mugabe regime consciously edited out from the mainstream history presented in the cultural geography of Harare all Ndebele historical figures that actively participated in the resistance against colonialism, such as Lobengula and his wife, Queen Lozikeyi. Lobengula established a formidable political system and military force that posed as a hurdle for the colonists to march into Matabeleland. The invading force, the Pioneer Column, avoided Matabeleland on its trip from South Africa since the Ndebele were a 'war-like' who had to be conquered using military force. Lobengula's men engaged in a fierce battle with the white settler forces, but they were defeated. He had to burn down his capital sited in Bulawayo and fled before the columns reached the city (Lindgren 2002). After the departure of Lobengula, Lozikeyi instructed her brother, Muntuwami Dlodlo, to rebuild the *Imbizo* (King Lobengula's regiment). In 1896, she acted as a military commander leading the Ndebele warriors in the fight against land appropriation in what became the First Chimurenga war efforts by the Ndebele people (Clarke and Nyathi 2010). The ZANU-PF government does not acknowledge all these efforts by the Ndebele historical figures. This state's presentation of the past indexed that the Ndebele people did not participate in the early stages of the African

<sup>5</sup> Shona/Kalanga traditional religion regards *Mwari* (God) as the supreme creator, an omnipotent being who is far above ancestral spirits in the hierarchy of spirit beings. This God is approached via mediums stationed at a sacred place called Matonjeni in the Matopo Hills in South-western Zimbabwe (Daneel 1970).

resistance against the colonial regime. This demonstrated that, unlike ZANU/ZANLA, ZAPU/ZIPRA had no predecessors who made any contribution to the liberation of the country. On the other hand, the place naming system projected ZANU/ZANU as a liberation war movement with a consistent history of fighting for the liberation of the country since its Shona ancestors did so during the early phases of colonialism.

The Mugabe regime was reluctant to immortalise Ndebele historical figures in the cultural landscapes in Harare. The Mugabe regime would rather be comfortable with having them honoured in Matabeleland and the Midlands Provinces. This communicates that Ndebele legendary figures were only regional and/or ethnic figures who did not qualify to be immortalised in Harare's cultural geography, where national figures were honoured. Thus, their commemoration should not go beyond Matabeleland's regional borders and the Midlands Provinces, where the Ndebele people are predominantly found. Apart from being found in the Harare's cultural landscapes, national historical figures are also honoured throughout the country. A case in point is Mbuya Nehanda, whose statue is mounted at Mzilikazi Art Craft Centre in Bulawayo.

The place naming system formed part of the official narrative meant to trivialise ZAPU/ZIPRA's contribution to liberation war history of the country (see, for example, Alexander et al., 2000; Ranger 2004). Enos Nkala, a senior ZANU (PF) official and cabinet minister in Mugabe's government, mentioned in his statement that 'they (ZAPU) contributed in their small way and we have given them a share proportional to their contributions'. (The Herald, 7 July 1980). Mugabe's foreword in Martin and Johnson's *The struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* (Mugabe 1981, iii) also champions the monolithic crusade that cast ZANU (PF) as the protagonists in the liberation war which states:

In writing the history of our struggle, the authors are compelled by historical reality to trace the revolutionary process through ZANU's history. This is unavoidable because the armed struggle pace of the revolution was set by ZANU and ZANLA, while credit must be given to ZAPU and ZIPRA for their complementary role. To record these true facts is not bias but objectivity (Mugabe 1981, iii).

This subjective statement projects ZAPU and ZIPRA as having played an adjunct role in the process of liberating the country. Thus, the few ZAPU/ZIPRA liberation war heroes that the state immortalised in Harare was a conscious attempt by ZANU-PF to project a deflated presence of ZAPU/ZIPRA in liberation war narratives. ZANU (PF) wanted to produce a grand narrative that relegated ZAPU/ZIPRA in the nationalist liberation war narrative and celebrated the war exploits of only one liberation war movement, ZANU/ZANLA.

## Legitimation of the Socio-political Status Quo

The deliberate suppression of the Ndebele pre-colonial past and the subjugation of Ndebele/ZAPU names in Harare's memorial landscapes were meant to naturalise the

ZANU-PF political hegemony in post-independence Zimbabwe. The silencing of the Ndebele pre-colonial past in Harare's commemorative landscapes popularised a primordial Shona origin of modern Zimbabwe. A historian-cum-ZANU (PF) politician, Stan Mudenge, also subscribes to this notion. Thus, he writes:

Present-day Zimbabwe, therefore, is not merely a geographical expression created by imperialism during the nineteenth century. It is a reality that has existed for centuries, with a language, a culture and a 'world view' of its own, representing the inner core of the Shona historical experience (Mudenge 1988, p. 364).

This statement projects post-independence Zimbabwe as a successive Shona state. Mugabe himself had made a statement in 1977 that pointed to the existence of a pre-colonial Shona nation when he said:

[t]he distinguishing features of our nation, cultural homogeneity, our biological and genetic identity, our social system, our geography, [and] our history, which together characterise our national identity, also combined in producing out of our people a national, vigorous and positive spirit which manifests itself in the consistently singular direction of its own preservation (Bhebe and Ranger 2001, xxvi).

Mugabe's statement above reinforced the idea that the Mugabe intended to imagine the post-colonial Zimbabwean nation as a new successor state to a primordial Shona nation. It comes as no surprise that official state-commissioned toponymic commemorative efforts foregrounded singular imaginings of the past that suppressed the Ndebele past. It was a conscious process of exclusion of an entire ethnic group in national issues. This fits well into Dorman et al. (2007) characterisation of nation-building efforts as a 'double-edged process of making nations and creating strangers'.

Commemorative place naming is an administrative and political act, one that is presided over by the politically powerful who are in charge of creating the symbolic infrastructure of society by deciding historical figures and events that should be honoured (Azaryahu 1996, 2009). Thus, the selection of a name for immortalisation in the cultural geography is made after careful consideration by state actors who preside over commemorative place naming. In this view, the state-centric discourse of viewing post-colonial Zimbabwe as a successive state of a primordial Shona state positioned the Shona as the new rulers following a tribalised leadership system (Zwangendaba 2008). ZANU-PF, being a Shona-led and Shona-affiliated political outfit, deliberately constructed the Zimbabweanness identity primordially as a way of justifying occupancy of political office and legitimacy from founding myths of the modern Zimbabwean nation. This naming system provided a narrative chain that linked the past with the present. Also, the grand narrative that painted ZANU (PF) as having contributed more to the liberation of the country justified its rule in the post-colonial era. Toponymic commemoration in Harare presented the socio-political status quo 'as the only possible, and hence inevitable outcome of the 'objective' course of history' because 'the historical narrative is constructed of sequential and causal chains that lead linearly to the present' (Azaryahu 1996, p. 319). This political culture by the Mugabe regime of manipulating

the past to justify the present is aptly described in literature as ‘rule by historiography’ (Ranger 2004, p. 224) and ‘uses and abuses of history’ (Ranger 2005, p. 7).

Complementary ways of presenting a state-scripted version of the past, such as historiography, mass media, and popular culture, also legitimated the socio-political order. The ZANU-PF government instituted a systematic exclusion of PF-ZAPU in national memory in the presentation of the past in history books. A case in point was David Martin and Phyllis Johnson’s (1981) *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* which was ZANU-PF hagiography that presented an overly one-sided version of the liberation war. ZANU-PF ensured that the book was distributed for free in the country’s public schools and colleges (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008). State media also promoted ZANU (PF)’s exclusive contributions to the war. Nkomo had to protest this partial presentation of the nation’s past by criticising the state-run Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation for broadcasting ‘rubbish’ (Kriger 2003, p. 75). The above state-commissioned memory points to the subjective and politicised nature of state-scripted memory because the past is selectively recalled to serve present political aims. This deliberate rebuilding of the past to serve present political agendas presents what Huyssen’s (2000) calls ‘present pasts’.

## Conclusion

The reinscription of Harare’s cultural landscape that the Mugabe regime implemented after independence was a representational strategy to imagine the nation. This article has demonstrated that the discursive construction of national identities links the past with the present to shape the nation’s future. National identities are not politically neutral but fashioned in a manner that serves the political interests of ruling regimes. The representation of national narratives in the cultural landscapes is presided over by political elites who want to communicate their political ideas to the public. They ensure that only personalities and historical events contributing to their agendas are immortalised in the cultural landscape. Toponymic commemoration participates in the active creation of national identities. It is done in a way that omits and/or reinterprets some aspects of the nation’s past to consolidate the political power of ruling elites. It has been shown that cultural landscapes in the capital city have a national resonance portraying state-centred definition of the nation. The post-colonial ruling elites in Zimbabwe failed to construct an identity that was reflective of the nation’s pan-ethnic identity. Instead, nation-building efforts pursued a narrow, parochial, and truncated definition of nationhood based on one ethnic group, the dominant Shona group. Since the early phases of the African nationalist movement, ethnicity defined the political landscape in Zimbabwe casting ZANU-PF as a Shona dominated party with ZAPU assuming a general Ndebele identity. The ZANU-PF government imagined the post-colonial state as a successive state of a primordial Shona state. This was part of the state’s mechanisms of constructing a national identity along the axis of exclusion. Excluded in this divisive and exclusionary nativist framing of national identity were the Ndebele people. Thus, the Ndebele people suffered systematic marginalisation at the hands of the predominantly Shona-led ZANU-PF government. Toponymic commemoration of the liberation war was also part of the dominant and hegemonic nationalist versions of history that trivialise the contributions that ZAPU

made to the liberation of the country. Consequently, place renaming ended up presenting ZANU's monolithic history that justified ZANU (PF) stranglehold on power.

**Funding Information** Open access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. This postdoctoral research is fully funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflicts of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Alderman, D. H., & Inwood, J. (2013). Street naming and the politics of belonging: spatial injustices in the toponymic commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *14*, 211–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2012.754488>.
- Alexander, J., McGregor, J., & Ranger, T. (2000). *Violence and memory: one hundred years in the 'dark forests' of Matabeleland*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Anonymous. (2005). *Progress Review on the 1979 Grand Plan* (pp. 1–19).
- Azaryahu, M. (1996). The power of commemorative street names. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *14*(3), 311–330.
- Azaryahu, M. (2009). Naming the past: the significance of commemorative street names. In L. D. Berg & J. Vuolteenaho (Eds.), *Critical toponymies: the contested politics of place naming* (pp. 53–70). Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Azaryahu, M. (2011). The critical turn and beyond: the case of commemorative street naming. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, *10*(1), 28–33.
- Beach, D. N. (1998). An innocent woman, unjustly accused? Charwe, medium of the Nehanda Mhondoro spirit, and the 1896–97 central Shona rising in Zimbabwe. *History in Africa*, *25*, 27–54.
- Bhebe, N., & Ranger, T. O. (Eds.). (2001). *The historical dimensions of democracy and human rights in Zimbabwe, vol. 1: pre-colonial and colonial legacies*. Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications.
- Chabata, E. (2007). The role of place-names in the making of a Zimbabwean identity. *Nytt om namn*, *46*, 13–17.
- Charumbira, R. (2015). *Imagining a nation: history and memory in making Zimbabwe*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press.
- Chigwedere, A. (1991). *The forgotten heroes of Chimurenga I: the archives speak*. Harare: Mercury Press.
- Chimhundu, H. (1992). Early missionaries and the ethnolinguistic factor during the 'invention of tribalism' in Zimbabwe. *The Journal of African History*, *33*(1), 87–109.
- City of Harare website (<http://www.hararecity.co.zw/>).
- Clarke, M. F., & Nyathi, P. (2010). *Lozikeyi Dlodlo, Queen of the Ndebele: 'a very dangerous and intriguing woman'*. Bulawayo: Amagugu.
- Daneel, M. L. (1970). *The God of the Matopo Hills: an essay on the Mwari Cult in Rhodesia*. Hague: Mouton & Co..

- Doke, C. M. (1931). Southern Rhodesia: report on the unification of the Shona dialects. (Carried out under the auspices of Government of Southern Rhodesia and the Carnegie Corporation.) Hertford: Stephen Austin and Sons, Ltd.
- Dorman, S. R. (2006). Post-liberation politics in Africa: examining the political legacy of struggle. *Third World Quarterly*, 27(6), 1085–1101.
- Dorman, S., Hammett, D., & Nugent, P. (2007). *Making nations, creating strangers: states and citizenship in Africa*. Leiden: Brill.
- Dunn, K. C. (2001). MadLib #32: the (blank) African state: rethinking the sovereign state in international relations theory. In K. C. Dunn & T. M. Shaw (Eds.), *Africa's challenge to international relations theory* (pp. 46–63). New York: Palgrave.
- Dunn, K. C. (2009). 'Sons of the soil' and contemporary state making: autochthony, uncertainty and political violence in Africa. *Third World Quarterly*, 30(1), 113–127.
- Forest, B., & Johnson, J. (2002). Unravelling the threads of history: Soviet-era monuments and post-soviet identity in Moscow. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 92(3), 524–547.
- Government of Zimbabwe. Names Alteration Act. (1983). *Chapter 10:14*. Harare: Government Printers. Available at: <http://www.parlzim.gov.zw/acts-list/names-alteration-act-10-14>.
- Guyot, S., & Seethal, C. (2007). Identity of place, places of identities, change of place names in post-apartheid South Africa. *The South African Geographical Journal*, 89(1), 55–63.
- Harley, J. B., (2001 [1988]). Silences and secrecy: the hidden agenda of cartography in early modern Europe. *The New Nature of Maps*, 83–107 (originally: *Imago Mundi*, (40), 57–76).
- Helander, K. R. (2009). Toponymic silence and *Sámi* place names during the growth of the Norwegian national state. In L. D. Berg & J. Vuolteenaho (Eds.), *Critical toponymies: the contested politics of place naming* (pp. 253–266). Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Hoelscher, S., & Alderman, D. H. (2004). Memory and place: geographies of a critical relationship. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 5(3), 347–355.
- Huyssen, A. (2000). Present pasts: media, politics, amnesia. *Political Culture*, 12(1), 21–38.
- Kearns, R. A., & Berg, L. D. (2002). Proclaiming place: towards a geography of place name pronunciation. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 3(3), 283–302.
- Kruger, N., (1995). The politics of creating national heroes: the search for political legitimacy and national identity. In N. Bhebe & T. Ranger (eds.), *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's liberation war. volume 1* (pp.139–162). Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications.
- Kruger, N. (2003). *Guerrilla veterans in post-war Zimbabwe: symbolic and violent politics 1980-1987*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lagae, J., Boonen, S., & Dibwe, D. D. M. (2016). M(g)r. De Hemptin(n)e, I presume? Transforming local memory through toponymy in colonial/post-colonial Lubumbashi, DR Congo. In L. Bigon (Ed.), *Place names in Africa: colonial urban legacies, entangled histories* (pp. 177–194). Cham: Springer.
- Lindgren, B., (2002). Power, education, and identity in post-colonial Zimbabwe: representations of the fate of King Lobengula of Matabeleland. *African Sociological Review*, 6 (1), 46–67.
- Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Martin, D., & Johnson, P. (1981). *The struggle for Zimbabwe: the Chimurenga War*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber.
- Mashiri, P., & Chabata, E. (2010). A country of four names: Zimbabwe's name changes and their significance. *Zambezia (special issue)*, 16–28.
- Masunungure, E. V. (2006). Nation-building, state-building and power configuration in Zimbabwe. *Conflict Trends*, 1, 3–8. Available at: <https://www.africabib.org/http.php?RID=P00035983>.
- Meiring, B. (2016). South African identity as reflected by its toponymic tapestry. In L. Bigon (Ed.), *Place names in Africa: colonial urban legacies, entangled histories* (pp. 159–176). Cham: Springer.
- Mpofu, S. (2016). Making heroes, (un)making the nation?: ZANU-PF's imaginations of the Heroes' Acre, heroes and construction of identity in Zimbabwe from 2000 to 2015. *African Identities*, 15, 62–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2016.1175920>.
- Mudenge, S. I. G. (1988). *A political history of Munhumutapa*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.
- Mugabe, R. G. (1981). Foreword. In D. Martin & P. Johnson (Eds.), *The struggle for Zimbabwe: the Chimurenga war* (pp. iii–vi). Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.
- Muzondidya, J. 2004. 'Zimbabwe for Zimbabweans': invisible subject minorities and the quest for justice and reconciliation in post-colonial Zimbabwe. In B. Raftopoloulos & T. Savage (eds.). *Zimbabwe: injustice and political reconciliation* (pp213–235) Harare: Weaver Press.
- Muzondidya, J. (2007). Jambanja: ideological ambiguities in the politics of land and resource ownership in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33(2), 325–341.



- Ncube, E. (2020). *Robert Mugabe, Kcb: black supremacist*. New York: Xlibris Corporation.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. (2008). For the nation to live, the tribe must die: the politics of Ndebele identity and belonging in Zimbabwe. In B. Zewde (ed.), *Society, state and identity in African history* (pp. 167-200). Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies (FSS).
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2009a). *Do 'Zimbabweans' exist?: trajectories of nationalism, national identity formation and crisis in a post-colonial state*. Bern: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2009b). *The Ndebele nation: hegemony, memory and historiography*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2012). The death of the subject with a capital 'S' and the perils of belonging: a study of the construction of ethnocracy in Zimbabwe. *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies*, 26(4), 525–546.
- Njoh, A. (2017). Toponymic inscription as an instrument of power in Africa: the case of colonial and post-colonial Dakar and Nairobi. *Journal of Asian African Studies*, 52, 1174–1192.
- Osborne, B. S., (2001, November 1–2). Landscapes, memory, monuments, and commemoration: putting identity in its place. A paper commissioned by the Department of Canadian Heritage for the Ethnocultural, Racial, Religious, and Linguistic Diversity and Identity Seminar. Halifax, Nova Scotia, pp. 1–48.
- Pettit, E. J. (2015). Aborigines' dreaming or Britain's terra nullius: perceptions of land use in colonial Australia. *Iowa Historical Review*, 5(1), 23–60.
- Pfukwa, C. (2012). Taking to the streets: an onomastic analysis of selected suburbs of the city of Harare, Zimbabwe. *Nomina Africana*, 26(1), 113–130.
- Pfukwa, C. (2018). (Re)writing an urban landscape: Street names in Harare's CBD after 1980. *Nomina Africana*, 32(1), 37–45.
- Ranger, T. O. (1967). *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-7: a study in African resistance*. London: Heinemann.
- Ranger, T. O. (1993). The invention of tradition revisited: the case of colonial Africa. In T. O. Ranger & O. Vaughan (Eds.), *Legitimacy and the state in twentieth century Africa* (pp. 62–111). London: Macmillan.
- Ranger, T. O. (2004). Nationalist historiography, patriotic history and the history of the nation: the struggle over the past in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30(2), 215–234.
- Ranger, T.O. (2005). The uses and abuses of history in Zimbabwe. In M. Palmberg and R. Primorac (eds.), *Skinning the skunk—facing Zimbabwe futures* (pp.7–15). **Nordic African Institute**.
- Rose-Redwood, R. (2008). From number to name: symbolic capital, places of memory, and the politics of street renaming in New York. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 9(4), 432–452.
- Rose-Redwood, R., Alderman, D., & Azaryahu, M. (2017). The urban streetscape as political cosmos. In R. Rose-Redwood, D. Alderman, & M. Azaryahu (Eds.), *The political life of urban streetscapes: naming, politics, and place* (pp. 1–24). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sithole, M. (1999). *Zimbabwe: struggles-within-the-struggle (1957-1980)*. Harare: Rujeko Publishers.
- Smith, I. D. (1997). *Bitter harvest: the great betrayal: Zimbabwe and the aftermath of its independence*. London: John Blake Publishing Ltd..
- Van der Waldt, G., & Prinsloo, B. (2019). Perspectives on national identity: the case of emerging intelligentsia in South Africa. *Politikon*, 46(1), 82–103.
- Wanjiru, M. W., & Matsubara, K. (2017). Street toponymy and the decolonisation of the urban landscape in post-colonial Nairobi. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 34(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2016.1203518>.
- Zwangendaba, N. M. (2008). *ZPRA: Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army*. New York: Xlibris Corporation.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

## Affiliations

### Zvinashe Mamvura<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of African Studies, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt University of Berlin, Berlin, Germany

<sup>2</sup> African Languages Research Institute, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe