Post-2000 revitalisation of Shona place names in Zimbabwe: recovering voices from the past

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This research article, which falls within the post-1990s critical turn in the study of place names, examines, in the context of Zimbabwe's post-2000 land reforms, the revitalisation of precolonial Shona place names. The overwriting of local names by colonial ones in the 90 years of Zimbabwe's colonisation effaced the rich legacy of precolonial Shona social and ethnic organisational information, anecdotal historical information, Shona spirituality and indigenous knowledge. This erasure of local indigenous names by English colonial place names silenced multiple narratives of the local people. The post-2000 land reform programme (Third Chimurenga) revived part of the repressed narratives of the local people through the revival of precolonial Shona place names. However, the revitalisation had to contend with negative attitudes towards indigenous names, official cartography and the superior position of English as a global language. Despite their numerical inferiority, the revitalised toponyms are symbolic of the restoration of agency to the indigenous Africans. This study confirmed that toponyms play a critical role in the revitalisation and preservation of African indigenous knowledge systems. The study employed qualitative methodology, while postcolonial theory's concept of onomastic erasure and language ecology provided the theoretical underpinnings.

Introduction

Toponyms (place names) are a critical component of a people's intangible heritage. Place names reflect the social, economic, religious, economic and historical aspects of a community. It has also been noted historically that once a particular group of people is subjugated by another, the toponyms of the subjugated people gradually vanish. This is because the naming of the landscape is a symbolic demonstration of political power. In Africa, colonisation led to the overwriting of a considerable portion of indigenous African place names. A similar trend was noted in the case of the aborigines of Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The end of colonial rule in Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe, presented an opportunity for the restoration and revitalisation of cultural practices (including place names) that were overshadowed by the culture of the colonialists. The revitalisation of indigenous cultures, particularly in the area of place naming has also been evident in Canada, New Zealand and Australia among other places (Carter 1987). For several reasons, some of which will be discussed in the next section of this article, the revitalisation of place names in Zimbabwe has been a progressive and sporadic exercise.

This article examines the revitalisation of indigenous Shona place names in a particular area of Gutu District in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. It starts by outlining the historical context and then presents the theoretical framework, methodology and findings and discussion before giving the conclusion and recommendations.

Objective of the study

The study sought to examine the impact and meaning of revitalised precolonial Shona toponyms in Gutu, Zimbabwe. The following research questions guided the investigation:

1. What indigenous knowledge is carried by the revitalised names?
2. What are the trends of the revitalised names?
3. How significant was the revitalisation of place names in Gutu, Zimbabwe?

Historical background

The revitalisation of place names in the post-2000 period in Zimbabwe is in line with the land reforms of the same period known also as the Third Chimurenga (Chimurenga means "the war of liberation" in Shona). These post-2000 land reforms started as unorthodox, chaotic and largely violent displacements of white farm owners by indigenous Zimbabweans before the government moved in to restore nomalcy (Alexander 2006; Chung 2006; Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2008; Jenjekwa 2018). These "invasions" were purportedly as a way of correcting the historical injustice of colonial land seizure (Alexander 2006; Chung 2006; Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2008; Jenjekwa 2018). Accordingly, the political discourses that emerged during and after the land reforms were largely anti-colonial and propagandist. As the white farmers were forcibly displaced and their farms subdivided into communal pieces of land for the indigenous people, new place names emerged. Among the emergent names were the revitalised precolonial Shona place names which had been overwritten by colonial ones. The unresolved issue of land commonly known as "the land question" is a result of the protracted contestation over land ownership in Zimbabwe since the coming of white colonists. To understand it fully, there is a need to briefly outline the history of Zimbabwe from the precolonial to postcolonial periods.

Zimbabwe's post-2000 land reforms (Third Chimurenga): Historical context

Precolonial Zimbabwe was under the control of ethnic empires (Mudenge 2011). The majority of the people spoke Shona, a Bantu language. Within the empire, some chiefs and sub-chiefs led particular tribal and ethnic communities. The precolonial Zimbabwean communities were hunting, gathering and subsistence farming communities. Vast tracts of land were under the control of chiefs and sub-chiefs. The tribal boundaries were conveyed by an oral cartographic map that had features such as rivers or mountains (Jenjekwa 2018). The place-names made up a complex map which showed ownership. In the precolonial period, with a few exceptions, each forest, mountain, river, rock or veld had a name. These names reflected the social, economic, political, and religious aspects of the precolonial Zimbabwean indigenous communities. There was no land which was "ownerless", a repudiation of the myth of *terra nullius* ("nobody's land") peddled by colonialists to occupy African land (Carter 1987; Zvobgo 2009).

In 1827, the Ndebele under the leadership of Mzilikazi came to Zimbabwe and settled in the west of Zimbabwe. Using his military capabilities, Mzilikazi immediately pronounced control of the rest of Zimbabwe. As a result, when the colonists came, they negotiated with Lobengula (Mzilikazi's son who took over after his death in 1868) culminating in the signing of the Rudd Concession in 1888, which was deceitfully used by Cecil John Rhodes, a proxy of the British government, to colonise Zimbabwe in 1890 (Alexander 2006; Zvobgo 2009). The country was subsequently named Rhodesia in honour of Cecil John Rhodes.

The colonial rule which spanned from 1890 to 1980 in Zimbabwe saw the displacement of indigenous communities from their homelands. There was a transformation of the land use pattern from the communal subsistence model to a commercial one. Farms were progressively pegged and doled out

to colonists. It should be realised that these farms were pegged on land that already fell under the authority of local chiefs. Once the land was demarcated as a farm, the locals became trespassers; the colonialists gave the farms and any other features therein new names and these names invariably displaced the precolonial indigenous names (Fisher 2010; Mamvura 2014; Jenjekwa 2018).

The indigenous people, both the Ndebele and the Shona, rose against the colonial administration in 1896 in what is now known as the First Chimurenga to push out the colonisers and reclaim their land. They were, however, defeated, leading to the consolidation of settler authority (Alexander 2006; Zvobgo 2009). As the colonial government consolidated its power, the communal land use pattern was gradually replaced by a European English system of farms. From 1890, the process of the takeover of the land followed the promulgation of successive pieces of colonial legislation on land. Most of the farms in the delimited area, except for early farms such as Felixburg, were pegged following the 1930 Land Apportionment Act and the draconian Land Tenure Act of 1959 (Alexandar 2006; Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2008; Zvobgo 2009). The Land Tenure Act pushed most locals off their land into overcrowded reserves and made cattle destocking mandatory. The colonial authorities also engaged in a systematic renaming of the landscape. As farms emerged, most of the indigenous names were overwritten by the new Anglophonic names, which were officialised and supported by cartography.

Many years of repressive colonial rule resulted in the rise of nationalism and the armed struggle that eventually brought the nationalists and the Rhodesian government to the negotiation table at Lancaster House in London for what is now popularly known as the Lancaster House Conference (Alexander 2006; Chung 2006; Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2008; Zvobgo 2009). The conference came up with the Lancaster House Constitution which had to be used by independent Zimbabwe without changes for ten years. On the contentious land issue, it was agreed that the new government should proceed on a willing-buyer, willing-seller basis and that for the following ten years, the duration of the Lancaster House Constitution, the farm ownership status quo would remain as such (Palmer 1990). On 18 April 1980, the Union Jack came down in Zimbabwe to signal the birth of a new Zimbabwe under the leadership of the late Robert Gabriel Mugabe of ZANU-PF as executive prime minister of Zimbabwe.

After independence, many reforms were implemented in terms of land but these could not address the land issue conclusively. For example, soon after independence, the government acquired land on a willing-buyer, willing-seller basis. However, most white farmers did not offer their land and those who did, offered land in regions with conditions averse to farming or could not agree with the government on the price (Alexander 2006; Chung 2006; Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2008).

The Third Chimurenga was a precipice of numerous challenges whose solutions the post-independence government could not effectively deal with. By 1997, the government of Zimbabwe faced numerous challenges on the economic and political front. A long-time ally of the government, the veterans of the Chimurenga war who had successfully pressured the government to pay them gratuities ignited the emotive issue of restoration of land to the local indigenous people. In 1997, sporadic reports of communities that "invaded" white farms claiming that they were their ancestral lands were carried in the press locally and internationally (Alexander 2006; Chung 2006; Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2008). Pressure on the political front, where the largest local trade union, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), had successfully led to the formation of a labour backed party, the Movement for Democratic Change, pushed the ZANU-PF government to turn its attention to the land question in propagandist political craftsmanship. As a result, in April 2000, an amendment to the 1992 Land Acquisition Act was passed, apparently to speed up the compulsory acquisition of white-owned farms. This was also an act of retribution against white farmers who were accused of supporting a "no" vote in the 2000 constitutional referendum by financially bankrolling the opposition to campaign for its

rejection. The Land Acquisition Act Amendment Number 16 (Government of Zimbabwe 2000) now included Section 16B whose sub-section C states the following:

> C – the people of Zimbabwe must be enabled to reassert their rights and regain ownership of their land and accordingly –
>
> I. The former colonial power has an obligation to pay compensation for agricultural land compulsorily acquired for resettlement, through an adequate fund established for the purpose; and
>
> II. If the former colonial power fails to pay compensation through such a fund, the Government of Zimbabwe has no obligation to pay compensation for agricultural land compulsorily acquired for resettlement.

Armed with the amended Act, the government legalised the largely violent programme which saw some white farmers being murdered in cold blood. Many white farmers were pushed off their land violently. In September 2005, the government of Zimbabwe further amended the Act by passing Constitution Amendment Number 17 (Government of Zimbabwe 2005). This amendment nationalised all farmland in Zimbabwe and there was no provision for legal recourse to contest the Act or claim compensation. Once an acquisition notice was gazetted, it implied that the ownership of that land had been transferred to the state. As a result, some white farmers who resisted were immediately served with eviction notices and others were arrested (Alexander 2006; Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2008).

Most of the former farms gradually got transformed into villages with the landless indigenous people being allocated subdivisions of the farms. Some farms were owned wholly by influential members of society, particularly those who had powerful political positions in ZANU-PF. This change of ownership and land use pattern saw the emergence of new place names. While most of the new names recast the Chimurenga narrative (Jenjekwa 2018), a considerable number of the names were revived precolonial Shona names associated with the places where the farms were demarcated. This article critically examines the impact of the revitalisation and establishes any significant patterns and meanings of the place names.

Theoretical framework

Onomastics is a relatively new area of study. Because of the multidisciplinary nature of the study of place names, there is no clear-cut theory for its study. While scholars such as Gorter (2006) and Spolsky (2009) propose linguistic landscape as a theory to study the language in the public space, this study used postcolonial theory, particularly the concept of onomastic erasure and Fishman's language ecology theory. Such an eclectic theoretical lens is consistent with the study of place names considering its multidisciplinary nature, and this theoretical eclecticism has previously been adopted by scholars such as Carter (1987) and Mamvura (2014), among others.

Postcolonial theory

Postcolonial theory, according to Said (1994), examines how Western Europe "othered" Eastern Europe and Africa through several well-calculated strategies to erase the colonised from history. Postcolonial theory is a theoretical position that seeks to account for the post-independence scenario in countries that were formerly under colonial rule. Of particular importance to this study is the colonial tenet of erasure.

Erasure

The concept of erasure is propounded by Derrida (cited in Chung 2010) in his deconstructionist theory which proposes that the meanings of words are better perceived when the conventional meanings

are first "erased". This concept of erasure was borrowed and elaborated on by Carter (1987) in his postcolonial analysis of how indigenous identities carried by toponyms were erased and replaced by colonial toponymy, driven by the fallacy of *terra nullius*, in New Zealand. Erasure explains how the landscape got transformed by ambivalent exotic discourses. It seals the removal of agency from the colonised. The concept of erasure was also borrowed by Pfukwa (2007) and Pfukwa and Barnes (2010) in the discussion of the use of pseudonyms by Zimbabwe's liberation fighters in the 1970s anti-colonial war. By adopting a new name, the fighter erased their previous personality to adopt the new personality of a freedom fighter.

Language ecology

Language ecology is a concept originated by Haugen (1972) to explain the interrelationships of languages as a result of language contact. It is "the study of interactions between any given language and its environment" (Haugen 1972: 57). The theory, being a metaphor of the natural biological environment, views the role and status of language(s) in a community as being subject to such social environmental factors as politicsa and economics, among others.

Data collection methods

The approach to place names research has been in constant evolution. A critical approach to the study of names emerged towards the end of the 20th century to complement the traditional focus on extant typologies (Tent 2015). The post-1990s period is associated with the emergence of place name studies that applied critical social theory. This was driven by the centrality of place names in geo-linguistic inscriptions in post-revolutionary situations (Kadmon 2004; Rose-Redwood et al. 2010; Azaryahu 2011). It was realised that place names in post-revolution spots across the world resulted in the re-inscription of the geo-linguistic landscape. It also became increasingly evident that place names do more than denote places, but are part and parcel of the creation of those places. The symbolic, political and ideological role of place names attracted the application of critical social theory to the analysis of place names by scholars from a diverse range of disciplines. This article, therefore, is a worthwhile contribution to the growth of place name studies.

The delimited area for this study are two rural wards in the northern part of Gutu District, Zimbabwe. A ward is approximately 100 km^2 and is a subdivision of a constituency. A constituency is a subdivision of a district and a single constituency might have 10 wards in Zimbabwe. Accordingly, a ward has approximately 10 villages. This study was carried out in two wards, namely Ward 1 and Ward 7. This area was conveniently sampled by the researcher for accessibility and representativeness in terms of common features with other wards. This is acceptable in qualitative research as argued by Patton (2002), Yin (2004) and Creswell (2014). Ethical considerations were observed in line with expected standards of confidentiality, safety and informed consent.

Interview

This study made use of semi-structured interviews to probe and clarify answers. Interviews are invaluable to qualitative research because they give voice to the marginalised and silenced groups, who share their worldview and lived experiences in their own words under conditions set forth through co-membership in the research endeavour (Ponterotto 2005). The interviewees for this study were selected based on purposive sampling. Knowledgeable elderly participants who witnessed the displacement of locals as a result of colonial legislation in the 1930s onwards were identified. It is also worth noting that the post-2000 land reforms were executed mainly through the active involvement

of veterans of Zimbabwe's Second Chimurenga, traditional leaders and rural people. The leading role was assumed by the war veterans who had support and encouragement from the central government. In addition to knowledgeable elders, four participants from both the war veteran group and traditional leaders were interviewed. The interviews were guided by a flexible interview protocol derived from the research questions.The questions mainly focused on the meanings of the revitalised names.

Document study

Document study pertains to the examination of all written communication relevant and authentic for the study. The documents made use of in this study are a Shona dictionary of place names by Kahari (2017), local maps of the farming area before and after the post-2000 land reforms as well as official lists of new place names from relevant government departments.

Observation

Observation is regarded as a systematic way of watching, listening and documenting a phenomenon (or phenomena) as it takes place (Creswell 2007). Observation was complemented by field notes and photography because photographs capture certain situations and important non-verbal cues for future analysis, making it easy for analysis, comparison or contrast to take place. I observed the features denoted by the revitalised names in terms of flora, fauna and any other relevant features around the places. I also observed the day-to-day use of the revived place names in communication by the participants.

Findings and discussions

The study uncovered valuable sociohistorical information from the revitalised place names. It should be noted, however, that the revitalisation of precolonial Shona place names did not totally erase the Anglophonic colonial names, mainly because the names were and continue to be part of the official cartography. These colonial names are, therefore, indispensable indicators of particular pieces of land without which it would be difficult for the administration of the resettlement areas (Jenjekwa 2018). The study also established that, despite its colonial origin and the anti-colonial rhetoric associated with the post-2000 land reforms, English is generally considered a language of both economic and social advancement in the delimited area. The revitalised names uncovered by this study are in the form of names of natural features, namely forests and plains, mountains, and rivers. The names of forests are *Chipesa*, *Chamandere*, *Guzuve*, and *Rutamba*. *Nyororo* is the generic name for wet veld grasslands. *Rwamavara*, *Rwamatendera*, *Svikire*, *Zvivingwi* and *Zoma* are mountain names, while *Chivake*, *Dewure*, *Nyazvidzi*, *Murezi*, *Mutirikwi*, *Pokoteke*, *Shuchire*, and *Nyamaungwe* are revitalised river names.There are also names of places associated with particular events in the precolonial and colonial times. These are *Dingane*, *Garasadza* and *PaDhibha*. The specific toponyms are discussed under two categories in this study, namely revitalised toponyms as geographical indigenous knowledge, and revitalised Shona names as historical anecdotes. The findings of this study, as discussed in the sections and sub-sections below, expose a rich legacy of place names as a repository of African indigenous knowledge. In the revitalised names, indigenous knowledge on climate, the environment, Shona spirituality and Shona anecdotal history is stored.

Revitalised Shona toponyms as geographical indigenous knowledge system (IKS)

The findings of this study confirm that the Shona people were able to transmit, preserve and communicate indigenous knowledge about their environment and social circumstances through

toponymy. Valuable scientific knowledge about the interdependence of human beings and the environment was conveyed by place names. The Shona people had, among others, scientific indigenous knowledge on the sustainable and conservative use of environmental resources as evidenced by the names discussed below.

Names of forests and veld grasslands

The revitalised place names uncovered in this case study are *Chipesa*, *Chamandere*, *Guzuve*, *Rutamba* and *Nyororo*. The name *Chipesa* is a precolonial name for a forest on Widgeon Ranch. According to informants, the forest was and is still believed to be the sanctuary of ancestral spirits. In Shona, the name *Chipesa* means "that which makes people lose their way" because it had a history of making those who strayed into it or those who broke interdicts and edicts of expected behaviour get lost in it. In Shona grammar, the stem of *Chipesa* is *-pesa* which means "to cause to get lost", whereas *chi-* is a class 7 commentary prefix which denotes something that is relatively small but carries connotations of praise. The name personifies the forest, a confirmation of its dense character and the Shona people's belief in its mystic character owing to the perceived presence of ancestral spirits. *Chipesa* provided game meat, edible insects, timber, firewood, fruits as well as traditional herbs for use by traditional healers. The name was revitalised by having a school named after it. According to Jenjekwa (2018), the naming of schools after revolutionary and indigenous names was an effective strategy of inscribing the landscape with the ideology of the post-independence government. In these rural communities, a school name, because of the centrality of schools, has the power to dissolve into the mundane discourses of a particular community and even beyond. The revitalisation of *Chipesa* was aided by the visual display of the name on the signpost for the school.

Another forest name is *Chamandere.* It is the name of a forest on Felixburg Farm. The farm had a lot of *Coleoptera Eulepida* (known as *mandere* in Shona), a species of local edible insects used as a relish. The name is suggestive of the presence of *Brachystegia Spiciformis* (*Musasa tree)* and *Julbernadia Globiflora* (*Mutondo)* trees because the *Coleoptera Eulepida* (*mandere)* feed on the leaves of these trees. The same trees are used for multiple purposes such as herbs, timber and firewood. The *Zimbabwean Gardener* (2018) confirms the richness of such forests by stating that "[w]ell developed Msasa (*Brachystegia Spiciformis*) woodlands are amongst the richest habitats in the world, full of seeds, insects and fruits and visited yearly by myriads of birds from thousands of kilometres away". Names such as *Chipesa* and *Chamandere* indicate that the Shona had a well-detailed, oral map from precolonial times about where they would get natural provisions for food, medicines and timber, among other purposes.

Rutamba is another forest name. It is a generic name given to a place populated by African pomegranate trees. The name had been overwritten by Widgeon Ranch before the post-2000 land reforms. The revitalisation of the name brings a sense of restoration to the people now resettled in and around it. The community named a post-2000 cattle dip tank *Rutamba* to effectively make the name part of the community's linguistic landscape.

Another revived name is *Guzuve*, which was given to a post-2000 school on Widgeon Ranch. It owes its origin to yet another forest on Widgeon Ranch. The name is opaque because its semantic sense is not clear. It is this opaqueness that might tend to render the name "hollow", but it should be realised that place names are not always meant to have semantic or connotative meaning since the "meaning" of the name is mainly in the denotation of a particular entity. In addition, the Shona phonology in *Guzuve* is unmistakable. From oral records, *Guzuve* is believed to be the name of one of the ancestors of the Gutu chieftaincy who reigned in the area before the colonisation of Zimbabwe

by the British. The revitalisation of *Guzuve*, just like that of *Chipesa*, *Chamandere* and *Rutamba*, was through the naming of a local school after it and, subsequently, through the conspicuous visual display of the written name on a signpost as shown in Figure 1.

In addition to the revitalised names of forests, there was also the revitalisation of the name *Nyororo,* a generic Shona name for a wet veld grassland. Though *Nyororo* was the official name of a farm owned by Keith Harvey who bought the farm in 1954, it was largely referred to as KwaHarvey until its takeover in the post-2000 land reforms when *Nyororo* became prominent. The name *Nyororo* is a Shona name derived from the fact that the farm covers the wetland at the source of *Shashe* River, a relatively big river in Zimbabwe. There was no farming allowed in wetlands by the Shona to preserve water sources and the habitat of birds and other animals. As a recognition of the Shona indigenous knowledge, the wetlands were declared a World Heritage Site (Mabhachi 2015). *Nyororo* is also used to refer to the source of *Mutirikwi*, one of the big rivers in Zimbabwe, which is discussed later in this article.

Even though climate change and deforestation have taken their toll on the forests, there is still a significant interrelationship between people and the environment. This relationship is punctuated by conservative dependence and preservation of the forests and veld grasslands. Local communities still get edible insects, firewood, timber, honey and herbs from the forests, underscoring the vitality of Shona IKSs. The revival of the names underscores the timeless vitality of African indigenous knowledge. This vitality is also observed by Maroyi (2012: 109) who argues that there is still a "dynamism and significance" of African indigenous knowledge systems in the conservation of the environment after a study in Nhema communal lands in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe.

Names of rocks and mountains
From this study, Shona indigenous knowledge is also evident in the revitalised names of rocks and mountains. The names of the rocks and mountains were derived from the appearance of the rocks and the animals found there. They were also alternatively derived from important historical or social activities associated with the feature. These names constituted a shared oral cartography of the pre-literate Shona communities which was transmitted orally from generation to generation.

Figure 1: A signpost to Guzuve Primary School

The names of five mountains, namely *Rwamavara*, *Rwamatendera*, *Svikire*, *Zvivingwi* and *Zoma* were revitalised. *Zvivingwi* is a name of a mountain considered sacred on Blythe Farm. In the precolonial period, *Zvivingwi* served as a warning to would-be travellers or hunters about the dangers posed by leopards which had the mountain as their habitat. As of today, the name *Zvivingwi* is a historical reminder of the time when there were leopards because very few leopards are still on the mountain. There are, however, sporadic attacks on livestock by the few leopards that are still there. *Zvivingwi* was and remains a citadel of the local chieftaincy, a symbol of the reign of the local leadership because it is believed that some of the local chiefs of the Gutu chieftaincy are buried in its caves. To confirm the revitalisation, a direction sign shown in Figure 2 was also erected on the main road which links Gutu and Gweru, thrusting the name into wider social communication.

The name *Rwamavara*, the name of a rock, is another revived place name. Its revival is a result of the transformation of the Fortress Farm into smaller plots for local people. *Rwamavara* ([rock] of many colours) is descriptive of the assorted colours (*mavara*) of the rock. *Rwa-* is a Shona possessive prefix which in this case is suggestive of the rock. The description is vivid enough to make sure that those who use it as a reference point for navigation can easily identify it.

Rwamatendera (the place of the Southern Ground Hornbill – *Bucorvus Leadbeateri*) is the name of a relatively small mountain on Fortress Farm. At the time of the study, the Southern Ground Hornbill was a common sight around the mountain justifying the suitability of the name. The name confirms that the Shona precolonial society existed nearby and in harmony with both flora and fauna. The name implies that over the years, the local people allowed the birds to "own" the mountain as their sanctuary without disturbance. Evidently, the name and the current presence of the birds are both indicative of the effectiveness of Shona traditional environmental preservation.

Another revived name is *Svikire*. *Svikire* is the name of another relatively small mountain on Fortress Farm. The mountain, in the precolonial period, was a shrine for traditional rituals. The name refers to a spiritual sanctuary where the spirit(s) interfaced with the living. It implies the residence of svikiro (spirit medium) as an incarnation and medium of the spirit(s). The day-to-day existence of the Shona people was underwritten by a belief in the active involvement of the spiritual world in the life of the living. Accordingly, Shona traditional worship of ancestral spirits, spirits of people buried in the soil and

Figure 2: Tariro and Zvivingwi direction sign

secret caves always produced a mystic relationship between the dead and the living. Interestingly, the environmental features such as forests and rivers were often personified to capture this mystic belief that the ancestral spirits resided in natural environmental features. The dead were believed to abide in thick forests, deep pools in rivers, and high mountains. This view transformed critical environmental areas into sacred sanctuaries worth of preservation. This was a witty management of the environment where the local people were not supposed to over-collect fruits, cut down trees wantonly or to cause uncontrolled veld fires. According to Andreucci (2016),

> [i]n African philosophy, plants, trees, and flora did not just occupy geographical spaces but social, spiritual, religious, narrative and industrial spaces within our body of traditional intelligence. Our ancestors understood and respected the co-habitation, co-existence and inter-dependency that is to say: the stewardship of the environment; preserving it for future perpetuity.

In the absence of a writing culture, the spiritual edicts and interdicts served as undisputed guidelines in the relationship of people and the environment.

In Shona traditional customs, the dead are referred to as *Vari Pasi* (those who are in the soil), hence the ancestral burial sites in the forests and mountains became sacred shrines worthy of protection. The need to reclaim ancestral burial sites was one of the major reasons why the post-2000 land reforms in Zimbabwe were triggered by the *Svosve* people who wanted to occupy the burial sites of their ancestors which were on a particular white settler farm (Mlambo 2000; Raftoupoulos and Mlambo 2008). The resuscitation of the name *Svikire* is, therefore, on another level, a statement of the revival of traditional ancestral worship. This is so because, in the political discourse of the Third Chimurenga, the restoration of the land to the ancestral spirits, the spiritual custodians of the land, was emphasised. The revival of the name *Svikire* somehow gives a sense of the total restoration of the land to its original owners.

The last mountain to be discussed in this study is *Zoma*. *Zoma* is a mountain on Felixburg Farm. As defined by Kahari in Jenjekwa (2018), *Zoma* is a precolonial dance by young women. By implication, Zoma is a place where the cultural activities of the Shona people who resided in the area were performed. It is probable that the dances by the young women accompanied some important cultural or traditional spiritual activities. In this regard, *Zoma* captures the cultural history of the Shona people. The name points to the Shona people's occupation of the land well before their forced displacement to give way to Felixburg Farm. For a long time, *Zoma* was overwritten by Felixburg Farm only to be revived after the post-2000 land reforms.

Names of rivers

Just like forests, rocks and mountains, rivers played and continue to play a critical role in the life of the Shona people. Rivers among the Shona people were believed to be sanctuaries of the river gods known as *Njuzu* (mermaids). Precolonially, river names were chosen carefully after a study of the river in terms of its size and flow or after an important event involving the river. Climatic knowledge was also encrypted in the river name in a way that made the community members appreciate the nature of the river and the ecological conditions more. This was important because precolonial Shona communities had to ford rivers in the absence of modern bridges. The rivers in this study are *Chivake*, *Dewure*, *Nyazvidzi*, *Murezi*, *Mutirikwi*, *Pokoteke*, *Shuchire* and *Nyamaungwe*.

Dewure is a relatively big river whose source is in the northern part of Gutu District. Oral accounts say that the river's name is derived from its violent floods which would wash away (*kuteura*) anything big or small. From the verb *kuteura*, the noun became *dewure*. The name also referred to being dragged into the water by crocodiles. The river flows down into the Save (Sabi) River, one of the bigger rivers

of southern Africa that flows to the Indian Ocean. It was and remains dangerous to cross *Dewure* when in flood. However, in the colonial period, the name was not erased completely but transphonologised to *Devuli* and its name became the name of half of Gutu's farm areas for both locals and settlers.

Another interesting name which was revived in terms of usage is *Nyazvidzi*. *Nyazvidzi* River which starts on Eastdale Ranch to the east is also a tributary of *Dewure* River. *Nyazvidzi* could not be pronounced properly by the settlers and a new transphonologised version emerged as *Inyatsitzi*. The addition of the *I-* apart from adapting the word to English phonology also resembled isiNdebele nouns which start with an *i*. Oral sources indicated that most early settlers were comfortable with isiNdebele because of their prior exposure to isiZulu in South Africa. The farm where the river starts got to be named *Inyatsitzi*. This farm name is still used for official records even though in spoken communication among locals, *Inyatsitzi* is almost non-existent. Locals now use the original name, *Nyazvidzi* to refer to the river.

Another significant river name is *Mutirikwi*. The same transphonologisation which affected *Dewure* and *Nyazvidzi* also affected *Mutirikwi* because it became *Mtilikwe*. *Mutirikwi*, according to Kahari (2016), refers to the waterfalls which characterise portions of the river. The name has now been resuscitated through the use of the correct Shona version. *Mtilikwe* is now non-existent except perhaps in some versions of old cartographic maps.

The other previously subdued river names, which got revived after the Third Chimurenga are *Pokoteke*, *Shuchire* and *Nyamaungwe*. *Pokoteke* (that which violently washes a person away) is known for its steep gradient and flooding. In 1991, a bus full of people was washed away by it, confirming its violent flooding. *Shuchire* (that which washes down sand) is a tributary of *Pokoteke* and starts in the sandy soils of Edinar Farm. The name means that the river washes sand (*musheche)* and indeed there is evidence of siltation in the *Pokoteke* River into which the *Shuchire* River flows. Siltation, as implied in *Shuchire,* indicates the presence of sandy soils at the source of the river. Accordingly, no farming or wanton cutting down of trees was done close to such a river to prevent siltation. According to interviewees, the preservation of rivers was also aided by the Shona cultural practice of burying babies in the river banks. This cultural practice made the rivers be regarded as sacred and not supposed to be defiled by unnecessary human activity. *Shuchire* River was largely unknown before the land reforms because it starts and ends on the farms. Its revitalisation is indeed a recovery of voices from the past.

The name *Nyamaungwe* (that which washes away litter) is derived from the Shona word *maungwe* (litter made of rotten grass, leaves and logs) and *Nya-*, a possessive prefix. The river flows down to *Shashe* River from its source on the rich plains of Felixburg Farm. Like *Shuchire, Nyamaungwe* was almost forgotten until the white farm owners were displaced by the post-2000 land reforms.

Notably, the river names communicate certain traditional ecological knowledge. The names subtly advised people to keep away from the rivers to avoid being washed away or being attacked by crocodiles. By implicitly referring to flooding, waterfalls and siltation, the river names confirm an ecological fact of relatively high rainfall received in the precolonial times. Though climate change has caused tremendous changes in the rainfall patterns, some of the features, for example, flash flooding, associated with the names are still evident in the rivers today.

The mountains, forests, veld grasslands and rivers played a critical role in in the life of precolonial and colonial Shona people. At the heart of Shona environmental conservation lay the spiritual belief in the supernatural, the invisible omniscient presence of the ancestral spirits in the veld grasslands, forests, rivers, rocks and mountains. The serene forests and the rolling plains punctuated by wetlands were believed to be the sacred sanctuaries of the supernatural. This explains the personification,

reverence, conservation and protectiveness that characterised the Shona people's interaction with the environment.

Revived Shona names as historical records

The revitalised names also bring to the fore the Shona people's use of names to inscribe historical events. The revitalised place names in this study are anecdotal historical records, particularly the history of colonisation. These place names are anecdotal historical records of the early contact of the Shona and the colonisers which were overshadowed by settler farms, and yet, they communicated a rich history about the colonial and precolonial history of the Shona people. *Dingane*, *Garasadza* and *PaDhibha* are names of specific areas in this study. The names carry a rich toponymic history which reveals information about the earliest contact of the settlers and the indigenes.

PaDhibha, a place on Grasslands Farm, shot to prominence after the Third Chimurenga as the number of people who interacted with the place increased because of the land reforms. *PaDhibha* is the name of a bus station at a place where a road branches from Harare Road to Felixburg Farm. It is a place infamously known by the elderly in the community for an infamous colonial cattle dip tank. *Dhibha* is a Shona corruption of dip tank. The name emerged when the colonisers set up a dip tank in the area to ensure the dipping of all cattle and, most importantly for them, to destock the herds of the locals (Alexander 2006; Zvobgo 2009).

Garasadza (*gara* – sit and *sadza* – mealie meal porridge/pap) means "sit on mealie meal porridge/ pap". According to Jenjekwa (2018), the place was named after a colonial incident involving a police officer who had come to arrest a suspected offender. The offender was found at a collective farming gathering and the locals insisted that he be arrested after his meal, but the policeman would have none of it. The locals allegedly attacked the policeman and he fell on a plate of pap and the place immediately earned the name *Garasadza*. While *Garasadza* chronicles insipient resistance against settler authority, *PaDhibha* is a record of the colonial construction of a catle dip tank, an infamous development during the colonial period because dipping cattle enabled the colonial authorities to monitor stock and to implement the draconian destocking measures (Jenjekwa 2018).

Dhingani is another interesting name of a place on Eastdale Ranch at a point near the border with Mashonaland East Province. It is believed that the place was a recreational and worship spot for white settler farmers in the early days of colonisation. According to oral sources, it happened during those days that an African man lost his way and wandered into the gathering and the settlers are said to have asked the man in isiZulu by saying "*Uyadhingani*?" (what are you looking for?). And being Shona-speaking, the man only picked up *Dhingani* and he went home and told others. The place became *Dhingani* up to this day and it has no other meaning except that it is a shortened form of "*Uyadhingani*?"

PaDhibha, *Garasadza* and *Dingane* confirm that the revitalisation of Shona names brings alive voices from the past. These place names were overshadowed by colonial farm names for over a century. The revitalisation of the names identified in this study does not imply that these were the only place names in precolonial Zimbabwe in the specific places. From the interviews and observations, most geographical features such as mountains, forests and relatively small rivers and veld grasslands no longer have known names and yet they were part of a well-annotated oral map precolonially. This erasure of most precolonial toponyms constitutes an irreversible loss of a significant chunk of Shona cultural heritage.

From a postcolonial perspective, the revitalisation of Shona precolonial and colonial place names witnessed in the post-2000 land reform, barring the extent of the success, was an act of decolonisation, a significant step towards the restoration of agency in the former colonised indigenous people and

the continuation of the struggle to rid the landscape of vestiges of colonialism. The act of colonisation and the subsequent overwriting of indigenous Shona names amounted to an act of erasure. The revitalisation mirrors a shift in the language ecology of language on the post-2000 landscape.

The revitalisation of the place names is an indication that the concerned communities appreciate the use of indigenous names. However, going forward, concerted efforts to document the names and their etymologies should be made by the responsible offices of the government. The user communities should also be encouraged to use more of these revitalised names to protect this intangible heritage from erasure. Where possible, plaques with a brief history of the name(s) could be erected at schools or institutions to enlighten the communities, particularly school children, on the significance of place names in their communities.

Conclusion

This study has endeavoured to show that the post-2000 revitalisation of Shona place names was a symbolic strategy to portray that the land was now restored to the original owners. Even though maps have not been easy to change, in mundane communication the resuscitated names have been revived and they have effectively carved a new postcolonial discourse of restoration in the identified places. Indeed, indigenous voices which are more than a century old were recovered.

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