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Goodbye Zimbabwe: Place naming as a cultural arena for symbolic resistance and spatial (in)justice in secessionist politics

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Goodbye Zimbabwe: Place naming as a cultural arena for symbolic resistance and spatial (in)justice in secessionist politics

Abstract: This article explores how secessionists in Zimbabwe deploy place naming to subvert, contest, and resist state-consecrated versions of national identity, belonging and citizenship. Zimbabwe has two super-tribes, Shona and Ndebele. Ethnicity is exceedingly entrenched in Zimbabwean politics. This has resulted in the conflation of ethnic and political identities. Since the formative years of African nationalism in the 1960s, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) has been aligned with the Shona ethnic identity, while the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) assumed a Ndebele identity. Ethnicity continued to cause tensions in the Zimbabwean political landscape. This has generated disgruntlement among the ethnic

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groups from the Ndebele-speaking regions. It eventually resulted in the formation of organisations and political groups advocating for the secession of the Ndebele-speaking areas from the rest of the country. Theoretically, the study deploys the tenets of critical toponomastics to explore how secessionists appropriate place naming in their quest for self-determination. It uses data gathered through semi-structured interviews with the choreographers of secession and cultural and language committees for the different ethnolinguistic groups from Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands. Preliminary findings indicate that secessionists use place names in the symbolic construction of Mthwakazi, an imagined autonomous state.

Keywords: Critical toponomastics, cultural arenas, reparative place renaming, secession, symbolic resistance, spatial (in)justice.

Au revoir le Zimbabwe: La désignation de lieux comme arène culturelle de la résistance symbolique et de l'(in)justice spatiale dans la politique sécessionniste

Résumé : Cet article explore la façon dont les sécessionnistes au Zimbabwe utilisent la dénomination des lieux pour subvertir, contester et résister aux versions consacrées par l'État de l'identité nationale, de l'appartenance et de la citoyenneté. Le Zimbabwe compte deux super-tribus, les Shona et les Ndebele. L'ethnicité est extrêmement ancrée dans la politique zimbabwéenne. Cela a abouti à la confusion des identités ethniques et politiques. Depuis les années de formation du nationalisme africain dans les années 1960, l'Union nationale africaine du Zimbabwe (ZANU) s'est alignée sur l'identité ethnique Shona, tandis que l'Union populaire africaine du Zimbabwe (ZAPU) a assumé une identité Ndebele. L'ethnicité a continué de provoquer des tensions et des luttes dans le paysage politique zimbabwéen. Cela a généré du mécontentement parmi les groupes ethniques des régions de langue ndebele. Cela a finalement abouti à la formation d'organisations et de groupes politiques prônant la sécession des régions de langue ndebele du reste du pays. Théoriquement, l'étude déploie les principes de la toponymie critique pour explorer comment les sécessionnistes s'approprient la dénomination des lieux dans leur quête d'autodétermination. Il utilise des données recueillies au moyen d'entretiens semi-structurés avec les chorégraphes des comités sécessionnistes et culturels et linguistiques des différents groupes ethnolinguistiques du Matabeleland et de certaines parties des Midlands. Les résultats préliminaires indiquent que les sécessionnistes utilisent les noms de lieux dans la construction symbolique de l'État autonome imaginé.

Mots-clés : Toponymie critique, arènes culturelles, renommage réparateur des lieux, sécession, résistance symbolique, (in)justice spatiale.

Auf Wiedersehen Simbabwe: Geographische Namengebung als kulturelle Arena für symbolischen Widerstand und räumliche (Un-)Gerechtigkeit sezessionistischer Politik

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie Sezessionisten in Simbabwe geographische Namengebung einsetzen, um staatlich festgesetzte Versionen nationaler Identität, Zugehörigkeit und Staatsbürgerschaft zu untergraben, anzufechten und sich ihnen zu widersetzen. Simbabwe hat zwei Hauptstämme, Shona und Ndebele. Ethnische Zugehörigkeit ist ein wesentliches Element simbabwischer Politik. Dies hat zu einer Verschmelzung ethnischer und politischer Identitäten geführt. Seit den Anfängen des afrikanischen Nationalismus in den 1960er Jahren war die Zimbabwe African

National Union (ZANU) mit der ethnischen Identität der Shona verbunden, während die Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) eine Ndebele-Identität annahm. Ethnizität verursachte weiterhin Spannungen und Auseinandersetzungen in der politischen Landschaft Simbabwes. Dies hat bei den ethnischen Gruppen aus den Ndebele-sprechenden Gebieten zu Unmut geführt. Sie mündete in die Bildung von Organisationen und politischen Gruppen, die sich für die Abspaltung der Ndebele-sprechenden Gebiete vom Rest des Landes einsetzen. Der Theorie nach orientiert sich die Studie an den Grundsätzen der Kritischen Toponomastik um zu untersuchen, wie Sezessionisten sich geographische Namen in ihrem Streben nach Selbstbestimmung aneignen. Sie verwendet Daten, die in semistrukturierten Interviews mit den Choreografen der Sezession sowie mit Kultur- und Sprachkomitees für die verschiedenen ethnolinguistischen Gruppen aus Matabeleland und Teilen der Midlands gesammelt wurden. Vorläufige Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass Sezessionisten geographische Namen zur symbolischen Konstruktion des imaginären autonomen Staates verwenden.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Kritische Toponomastik, kulturelle Arenen, reparative Umbenennung von Orten, Sezession, symbolischer Widerstand, räumliche (Un-)Gerechtigkeit.

1. Introduction¹

In 2006, David Magagula co-founded a secessionist movement, Matabeleland Freedom Party, with Andrea Sibanda and Philimon Ncube, as a vehicle for fighting for the autonomous status of Mthwakazi. Magagula also published a novel entitled *Goodbye Zimbabwe*, indicating the determined goal of severing ties with Zimbabwe. The title of this novel triggered the author's interest to explore place naming as an arena for an ethnic group's struggle to fight for belonging and propel their socio-cultural visibility. Therefore, the current research's main objective is to examine how secessionists in Zimbabwe have appropriated place naming in their struggle for self-rule. Secession entails the volitional withdrawal from the state by a part of its citizenry who see themselves as a distinct nation, leaving the parent state as a separate entity (Beran 1998). In our case, Zimbabwe is the parent state.

Toponymic commemoration is usually done in a top-down manner because ruling elites would want to communicate their desired version of national identity. Arguing along the same lines, Forest & Johnson (2002: 7) observe that places names, alongside statuary and other mnemonic objects, “reflect how political elites choose to represent the nation publicly”. The way the state configures the cultural landscape defines the parameters of belonging and citizenship in the nation. Schein (2009) emphasises that the landscape is critical in defining belonging because it can award some people while denying others the right to claim belonging. A nation can be discursively invented and narrated. However, this process is usually selective and subjective because the state invents usable pasts that serve present ideologies and agendas. The fact that the dominant and elite social classes usually preside over toponymic commemoration explains why marginalized or subaltern groups' past experiences and struggles are not always immortalised in the cultural landscape (Alderman 2022). This quality of remembering is critical for this study because it reflects how remembering in Zimbabwe produced insiders and outsiders to the national project. Secession in Zimbabwe is a direct result of the process of remembering that excluded other ethnic identities.

In Zimbabwe, nation building was done within the framework of Mugabeism. Mugabeism indexes a systematic political practice of entrenching power, countering criticism, conscious creation of political insiders and outsiders, crushing (ruthless) dissenting voices, dealing with real or perceived adversaries, and scapegoating othered persons (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009c). Robert Mugabe ruled Zimbabwe for close to four decades (1980–2017). His administration crafted a political template that his successor, Emmerson Mnangagwa, has been using in its almost unedited

¹ This post-doctoral research was supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

form since he assumed the reins of power in the aftermath of a military-assisted transition of November 2017.

While national identity is meant to reinforce state ideology, ordinary citizens should not be viewed as mere recipients of elite visions. The public's reception and readership of places of memory can be conceptualised as a continuum that ranges from acceptance to non-acceptance. Subordinate groups often excluded in the national "we" narrative usually contest the state-scripted national identity that acts as a governing myth of the nation (Forest & Johnson 2002). This article, therefore, explores how secessionists use place naming to construct a subaltern myth that subverts the state-constructed national identity in Zimbabwe.

Secessionist politics in Zimbabwe has received interdisciplinary attention from scholars. The problematics of the notion of nationhood in secessionist debates in Zimbabwe's (print) mediascape have been studied (Ndlovu 2012; Thondhlana & Machiridza 2020). Some studies have explored the centrality of ethnicity in political mobilisation in the Mthwakazi secession project (Hadebe 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009a, 2012). Teuten (2015) explores how the genocide that visited the Ndebele-speaking regions in the early first decade of independence engendered lasting impacts in the Zimbabwean body politic, including secession. The genocide is also known as *Gukurahundi* because it was executed by a special military force that had the same name. *Gukurahundi* is a Shona word that literally means the early rain that washes away the chaff before the spring rains. The analysis of place naming in the secessionist struggles has not received attention from previous researchers.

Basing on major arguments in critical toponomastics studies, this article seeks to provide answers to the following research questions: (i) How does place naming constitute an oppositional reading of a national identity? (ii) What are the reparative possibilities of place (re)naming? (iii) How do marginalised ethnic identities appropriate place names in their struggle for belonging and citizenship?

The article has six sections. The first section locates the study within the existing scholarship and spells out the objectives of the study. The second part discusses the methods of gathering data. The article then moves on to discuss the theory used in this study. The historical background to the nexus between politics and ethnicity and the deficiencies of nation-building efforts in post-colonial Zimbabwe that gave rise to secessionist politics is given in the fourth section. The next section analyses the presented data using the theoretical tools outlined above. The penultimate section discusses the study's contribution to critical toponomastics followed by the conclusion.

2. Methods of gathering data

This research is a qualitative analysis of the contested nature of place naming in Zimbabwe.

The historical struggles that the people have faced in the Ndebele-speaking region influenced the proposed toponymy. In order to get a better appreciation of the people's political and socio-historical concerns, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with officials from cultural and language committees for the different ethno-linguistic groups in Matabeleland. This region has the following African indigenous languages: Kalanga, Lozi, Nambya, Ndebele, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Twjao (Khoisan), and Venda. The researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews with them to elicit their views regarding the Mthwakazi secessionist project. He also interviewed information and publicity officials and senior officials of different secessionist political actors in this region.

The study also relied on documentary sources. The websites of these organisations served as documentary sources of information for this study. The organisations have also opened Facebook pages and are active on Twitter. Online observation is one of the critical data collection methods in ethnography. It uses online or virtual communications as the primary source of data to arrive at "an ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon" (Kozinets 2010: 58). This method applies to this study because the Mthwakazi nation mainly exists as an online community. After collecting the data, a critical toponomastics analysis was done by exploring how the naming community's social and ethnic composition, their socio-political struggles, and collective grievances influenced place naming.

3. Theory

The analysis of place naming in the context of secession is responding to the call by Rose-Redwood et al. (2010) for toponymic research to focus on the politics of place-naming practices. Focusing on the "political" has marked a break from tradition in place-name studies. This transition has come to be known as a "critical turn" in toponymic studies (Azaryahu 2011; Rose-Redwood et al. 2018). Traditional approaches to toponymy have focussed on the classification and etymology of place names. Generally, they have "failed to honestly reflect on its own complicity in power struggles over toponymies" (Vuolteenaho & Berg 2009: 6).

Since place naming is a "technology of power" (Rose-Redwood et al. 2018: 6), ruling regimes usually exercise ultimate control over official place naming. The general norm is that the state appoints a body/committee that presides over the approval, standardisation, and dissemination of place names. In South Africa, for example, the state established the South African Geographical

Names Council (SAGNC). Ruling regimes usually regulate the symbols and icons that grace the public space because they want to control what the public consumes. In the process, they manipulate the official place-naming system to inscribe state-sanctioned visions of the past, political meanings, and ideologies into geographical spaces that people interact with regularly. However, subordinate groups may use place naming to challenge hegemonic ideologies (Rose-Redwood et al. 2010). This article deploys the tenets and sensibilities of critical approaches to toponymy in exploring how secessionist political actors use place naming to contest state-centric definitions of the nation, citizenship and belonging. The official place-naming system denied them claims to indigeneity and cast them as an ethnic “other”. Under such circumstances, place naming becomes a cultural arena. Cultural arena is a metaphor that indexes the strife, contestations, negotiations, and debates that characterise place naming (Alderman & Inwood 2013).

Place naming in the context of secessionist politics in Zimbabwe presents an opportunity for viewing toponymy as a technique for spatial (in)justice. Spatial justice “stresses the spatiality of belonging, recognising that social (in)justice does not simply have geographical outcomes; rather, space plays a more fundamental role in constituting and structuring the broader processes of discrimination or equality” (Iveson 2011 in Alderman & Inwood 2013: 213). In Zimbabwe, the discursive construction of national identity using place names has minoritized other ethnic groups, especially the Ndebele. It has defined belonging and citizenship in a restrictive manner. This article interrogates how the toponymic dimension of secessionist activities by the Ndebele constituted “an oppositional politics of belonging in which [...] [the] landscape figure as the practical stage upon and through which citizenship and community can be practiced” (Schein 2009: 811).

Rose-Redwood & Alderman (2011: 2) identify the scalar politics of toponymy and linguistic hegemony as some of the areas that remain under theorised in critical toponomastics. This article explores how the regional and national scales are sources of contestation between the state and secessionist political actors in the Ndebele-speaking regions of Zimbabwe. It also examines how the language of naming places entrenches linguistic and cultural hegemony. Kadmon (2004) introduces an interesting concept of “toponymic warfare” to characterise the toponymic practice by marginalised communities of appropriating place names in their acts of resistance. This can entail developing a new place-naming system and rewriting the maps by inserting the new names.

4. Historical background to secessionist politics

This section gives a historical background of the factors that gave rise to secessionist politics in Zimbabwe. Ethnicity is one of the significant factors behind the oppositional reading of national identity in Zimbabwe and the Ndebele people's general efforts to achieve an autonomous status. Zimbabwe was a British colony named *Rhodesia* for close to a century (1890–1980). Just like any other country in Africa, the Berlin Conference of 1885, which produced arbitrary colonies, created boundaries that define the borders of Zimbabwe up to this day. After occupying the territories and annexing spaces, the colonial administration had to “manufacture national languages to correspond with colonial boundaries” (Brutt-Griffler 2002: 82) for its convenience in governing the colonized populations. Within the borders of colonial Zimbabwe, there were several indigenous ethnic groups. The Southern Rhodesia colonial government in 1929 appointed a colonial commission comprising a Bantu grammarian, Professor Clement Doke, colonial officers, and missionaries to codify and standardize language varieties that the missionaries had observed to have high mutual intelligibility in the regions that came to be known as Manicaland (land of the Manyika people) and Mashonaland (land of the Shona people). This colonial commission decided to give the language it had created through the standardization and codification processes the name *Shona* in 1931, though it had no justification for choosing the name (Makoni et al. 2007). Thus, the name Shona was an arbitrary label for diverse ethnicities that displayed cultural affinity but had no prior unified cultural identity.

The Ndebele group is an offshoot of the Nguni larger group in present-day South Africa. Mzilikazi, one of King Shaka of the Zulu State's trusted advisers and military leader, fled with his people, the Khumalo, during the period of socio-political strife, *Mfecane*, in the early 19th century. In 1939, he led his people and established the Ndebele state in the South-western part of Zimbabwe (Thondhlana & Machiridza 2020). This state had a caste system because categorization of people was based on one's origin. The *abeZansi* (those from the South) consisted of the original Khumalo people, and they constituted the elite group. The *abeNhla* (those from the North) occupied the second tier. These were the Sotho, Tswana, Kora, and Griqua that were voluntarily or forcibly incorporated into the Ndebele nation. The lowest in this caste system was the *Hole* group, consisting of the Rozwi/Lozwi and Leya people who inhabited the place before the arrival of the Ndebele (Bhebe 1973; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009a).

The work of the colonial commission framed a language policy for colonial Zimbabwe because it recommended that Shona and Ndebele should become national languages. It also divided the colony into two major geolinguistic territories, Mashonaland (Land of the Shona people) and Matabeleland (Land of the Ndebele people), to support the idea of the two “invented ethnic identities”. Despite the visibly multilingual character of the two “invented

regions”, the colonial system imposed Ndebele and Shona as the lingua francas for the respective regions.

The Ndebele and Shona imagined super-ethnic identities configured the political landscape politics of Zimbabwe since the formative years of African nationalism in the 1960s. Ethnicity engendered factionalism that saw the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), a predominantly Shona-led political party, emerging as a splinter group from the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), a political party whose leadership was dominated by people who hailed from Matabeleland, in 1963 (Masunungure 2006). Thereafter, Ndebele and Shona ethnic identities became polarised in the nationalist movement throughout the liberation war, resulting in animosity, internecine rivalry, disunity and mistrust between ZANU and ZAPU.

Mugabe’s party won the 1980 general elections. This mandated him to form the first government in independent Zimbabwe. Between 1980 and 1987, Mugabe’s political goal was to institute a one-party state in the country and rule without a strong opposition that could audit its operations.

After winning the general elections, Mugabe invited Nkomo to form a coalition government. However, this was short-lived because, in February 1982, the state claimed to have discovered arms caches on PF-ZAPU properties. Consequently, Mugabe purged Nkomo and other senior PF-ZAPU members from key government posts. The state also laid subversion charges on Dumiso Dabengwa, ZPRA’s intelligence chief, Lookout Masuku, ZPRA’s commander, and four others. The court later acquitted them, but the Mugabe regime ordered their re-detention (Kriger 2003). A dissident insurgency coincided with the discovery of the arms caches and ZANU-PF accused PF-ZAPU of supporting them. The state deployed integrated national security units to contain the dissident insurrection. On the other hand, the state mandated the North-Korean-trained Fifth Brigade, also known as *Gukurahundi*, to carry out an offensive against the ordinary civilians of Matabeleland (Kriger 2003). ZANLA formed the main recruitment base for this special brigade. The unleashing of an armed unit on defenceless civilians demonstrated the state’s intention of neutralising the PF-ZAPU support base by using violence to cultivate a culture of fear in the electorate.

This state-sanctioned violence led to the massacre of an estimated 20,000 civilians in Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands (The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace & The Legal Resources Foundation 1997). The genocide conflated identities because it assumed that being a Ndebele speaker meant that one was a supporter of ZAPU, a dissident or dissident sympathiser (Abrams 2006). Consequently, this violence reinforced a Ndebele regional and political identity because it raised solidarity in the affected communities since they had one common enemy, the state.

Eventually, ZANU-PF successfully cowed Nkomo into submission and entered into a coalition government by signing the Unity Accord in 1987. The

Mugabe regime started to project Nkomo in a positive light as a selfless nationalist committed to nation-building and a unifier who subordinated party interest to nationalist interests after the signing of the Unity Accord. Mugabe would travel with Nkomo to Matabeleland and Midlands regions to persuade the people to view the Unity Accord positively (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2007). This convenient representation of Nkomo was meant to pacify the traumatised communities that desperately needed healing and were seeking justice for the state-sanctioned violence they had experienced in the recent past. However, Nkomo died in 1999. During his funeral, Mugabe described *Gukurahundi* as a “moment of madness” that should be forgotten (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008). This demonstrated that the state had no short or long-term plans to address it. Nkomo’s death removed a “crucial anchor of the Unity Accord and muffler of *Gukurahundi* ‘noise’” (Alexander 2021). Consequently, the Unity Accord hype got weakened, resulting in the emergence of several pressure groups that championed the Ndebele cultural cause in Bulawayo and the first move to revive ZAPU (‘ZAPU 2000’). Concurrently, “calls for a federal state and a rejection of the ‘Shonalisation of Zimbabwe’” grew louder (Alexander 2021: 12).

The state continued to refuse to accept responsibility for and/or address the genocide issue after 2000. This affected the region’s allegiances to ZANU (PF). The region’s general voting patterns in the June 2000 parliamentary elections and March 2002 mayoral and urban council polls showed that it had shifted loyalties from ZANU (PF) to the newly formed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party. However, the region’s hope of being written back into the nation did not materialise because the MDC failed to unseat ZANU (PF) through democratic means. Instead, the party experienced several splits and lost many of its Ndebele supporters and sympathisers in the process (Alexander 2021). This negatively impacted on Ndebele people’s hopes of becoming part of the national narrative. This sad development kindled the people’s mission of achieving national belonging, and they sought alternative ways of accomplishing their mission. In 2008, Dabengwa, a senior PF-ZAPU member, left ZANU-PF when he declared that he was withdrawing ZAPU from the Unity Accord.

Furthermore, victims and survivors of the violence have no identity documents. Children orphaned by the genocide have been rendered stateless because they cannot access birth certificates. In terms of the provisions of the Zimbabwean Birth and Death Registration (BDR) Act, one needs to provide proof of death certificates of their parents to get a birth certificate. The death certificate should clearly state the cause of death of the parent(s). The state refuses to produce such documents for victims of *Gukurahundi* massacres and enforced disappearances because that would be an official acknowledgement of the state’s role in the violence. When Mnangagwa assumed the presidency, he engaged the Matabeleland Civic Society at Bulawayo State House in 2019 over the matter and resolved to expedite the issuance of birth certificates, national identity documents, and death certificates to victims of the mass killings.

However, this has turned out to be another political rhetoric since nothing in that direction has been done up to this day (Mrewa 2022). This perpetuates the affected feelings that the state treats them as second-class citizens.

The state also prohibits victims and survivors of the violence from doing any form of memorialisation of the violence. For example, it remains difficult for such people to erect monuments for those who were murdered during the violence. Memorial plaques erected to honour victims of the Gukurahundi genocide at Bhalagwe in Maphisa, Matabeleland South, and Silobela in the Midlands Province repeatedly get vandalised or “stolen” by suspected state agents (Harris 2022). The latest incident occurred on 4 January 2022 at Bhalagwe on the memorial plaque that had been erected for the third time. These are deliberate steps to silence history and memory. They fight against the spirit of truth-telling meant to achieve closure, healing, and reconciliation. The region also feels that the state marginalises it in terms of infrastructural development. All the above problems the region faces engender a general feeling of exclusion to the Zimbabwean state. This explains the emergence of secessionist political organisations in the region, such as Mthwakazi Liberation Front, Matabeleland Freedom Party, Patriotic Union of Matabeleland, Mthwakazi Liberation Organisation, 1893 Mthwakazi Human Rights Restoration Movement, Mthwakazi Republican Party, among others. These secessionists are advocating for complete secession from the Zimbabwean state. They aim to restore an imagined pre-colonial Ndebele state that they have christened *Mthwakazi*. There is another group of federalist political actors fighting for a federal state that can determine its destiny with little interference from the Zimbabwean government. However, the state resists the requests by the secessionists to partition the country.

5. Data presentation

This section presents the names that secessionists have crafted for the imagined nation, provinces, and urban centres that will fall under the autonomous state. They have adopted *Mthwakazi* as the name for the imagined state. Most groups have the name *Mthwakazi* as part of their nomenclature, as indicated in the above section. Already the imagined state exists as an online community on the internet, with all the symbols of the state, such as a national flag, and coat of arms. The secessionists also call for the renaming of towns (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Map of the imagined nation Mthwakazi. (Source: Mthwakazi News24 online, <https://m.facebook.com/Mthwakazi-News-24-Online-144734862874533/>, accessed 2021-11-26.)

The table below presents examples of names of towns in the imagined Mthwakazi nation:

Table 1: Names of towns

Current name	New name
Gweru	Gwelo
Kwekwe	Que Que
Shurugwi	Selukwe
Zvishavane	Tshabani
Hwange	Wankie

The orthography of the current names, in Column 1, is Shona, while those in Column 2 generally conform to the Ndebele orthography. It is critical to mention that the above names are proposals that secessionists are provisionally

using in their activism. In an interview with the Mthwakazi Republic Party (MRP)'s Secretary for Information and Publicity, he indicated that the party would hold an all-stakeholder meeting to deliberate on the issue of names after secession has been accomplished.

The secessionist groups have invented provinces and assigned them new names, as indicated in the [table](#) below.

Table 2: Names of invented provinces

Name of province	Places covered
Bulawayo Metropolitan	Gwanda, Lupane, and Nkayi
Bulilima	Dete, Plumtree, and Tsholotsho
Mpumalanga	Gwelo, Tshabani, Que Que and Selukwe
Limpopo	Beitbridge and Rutenga
Zambezi	Gokwe, Victoria Falls, and Wankie

Other secessionists prefer to use the name *Ngulukudela* for *Limpopo Province*. Currently, the Ndebele-speaking regions go under the following names: (parts of) the *Midlands*, *Matabeleland North*, *Matabeleland South*, and *Bulawayo Metropolitan*.

6. Analysis: Place naming in Mthwakazi, symbolic resistance, and reparation

The discursive construction of a national identity entails using a selective version of the past to construct a geography of memory. After independence, the triumphant Shona-dominated ZANU-PF leadership exhibited an unbridled appetite for using Shona historical symbols, pre-colonial heroes, and myths as the basis for constructing a national identity (Kriger 1995; Masunungure 2006; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008). Place naming in Harare, the official seat of government and the nation's capital city, celebrates a Shona past to the exclusion of other ethnic identities (Mamvura 2021). Before taking the oath of office on 18 April 1980, Robert Mugabe changed the country's name from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe. The name *Zimbabwe* is derived from a heritage site believed to have been constructed by the Shona, the Great Zimbabwe. The post-colonial state narrated the post-colonial Zimbabwean state as a successor state to some imagined primordial Shona nation.

It is a historical fact that the African nationalist movements adopted the name *Zimbabwe* for the imagined post-colonial state since the early phases of African nationalism, including ZAPU, the Ndebele-aligned party. However, the adoption of the name was not without controversy. The Matabeleland Home Society (MHS) exhibited Ndebele particularism by contesting this position and pushing for the adoption of *Matopos* as the name for the post-colonial state (Msindo 2012). Matopos is an African religious shrine in Matabeleland. Thus, it appears that Ndebele-aligned political actors eventually

made a compromise to use the name *Zimbabwe*.

The cultural landscape is critical for spatialising public memory and defining belonging and citizenship. In discussing the relationship between landscape and belonging, Schein (2009: 819) notes that “[t]he cultural landscape is implicated in the social reproduction of everyday life. The cultural landscape mediates our being in the world. The importance of landscape to belonging is predicated on the place of landscape as materialised discourse precisely through its function as a symbol and its interpretation as representation [...]”.

Place naming is critical in creating a cultural landscape field, on which the state can mount its articulations of national identity. Similar to all other place-representation efforts, place names are “expressive and constitutive of the politics of citizenship, conferring a greater degree of belonging to certain groups over others” (Alderman & Inwood 2013: 2). The Zimbabwean cultural landscapes have deliberately declared that the Shona are the only people with ancestral roots in the country. On the other hand, it has denied an autochthonous status to the Ndebele ethnic identity. Place names that the state used to imagine the Zimbabwean state affected the Ndebele’s feelings of belonging to the Zimbabwean state. It gives the Ndebele ethnic identity a second-class citizen tag because they have been put on the margins of the nation. This idea pervades secessionist activism in Zimbabwe. In an interview with the MRP’s Secretary for Information and Publicity, he indicated that “MRP is a restorationist movement fighting for Mthwakazi’s independence from Zimbabwe. Its main objective is to dislodge Shona institutionalised tribalism in Zimbabwe and cultivate inclusive citizenship in the self-governing state of Mthwakazi”. Another secessionist movement, the Matabeleland Liberation Organisation (MLO), Secretary for Information and Public Affairs chronicles the organisation’s objectives and grievances when he writes: “We are not Zimbabweans, we will never be Zimbabweans and it humiliates us a great deal to be referred to as such. We stand still and firm on our demand for the restoration of Matabeleland state as at 3 November 1893 and our second demand of US\$100 billion as reparations for Matabeleland genocide or its equivalent in the forthcoming digital currency system [...] we further demand that he [Mnangagwa] arranges negotiations to discuss how Matabeleland and Zimbabwe can be separated peacefully without shedding a single drop of blood” (Dube 2020).

Thus, the secessionist actors perceive the name *Zimbabwe* as a beacon and epitome of their exclusion from the nation Zimbabwe. Thus, the name *Zimbabwe* becomes a symbol of toponymic violence that “denies certain group’s social identities, place claims, and historical memories” (Alderman & Rose-Redwood 2020: 131).

People derive a sense of place from a geographical space that communicates their collective experiences. Feelings of belonging and

rootedness are reinforced by symbolic icons that grace the LL, including place names. In turn, if place names that communicate a people's collective experience are not visible in the cultural landscape, people may not identify with the named places. They feel like aliens because landscapes would be unfamiliar to them. Alderman & Rose-Redwood (2020: 130) note that "toponyms constitute and shape people's sense of place (or displacement), sense of belonging (or alienation), and psychosocial well-being". Most of the names that immortalize legendary figures from the Ndebele past are found on the periphery of [Bulawayo]" – which is regarded as an "Ndebele city" – while most of the "streetscapes" of the city "popularize the worldview of the victors during the colonial period and the post-independence era. The Bulawayo cityscape is generally "a statement to the vanquished by the victors" (Dube 2018: 47).

Establishing a new toponymic order by the secessionists demonstrates a determined effort to use place naming in imagining the new nation and present new visions of the past. This demonstrates that secessionists have appropriated place naming in their struggle for self-determination, independence, visibility, and recognition. The naming is a conscious move to counter ZANU-PF/Shona ethnic chauvinism. In the American context, Alderman (2008), while acknowledging that the central government mainly controls and plans official toponymy, indicates that marginalised groups wishing to engrave their political and commemorative meaning onto the landscape and make them audible and visible to the public may appropriate place naming in this enterprise. Secessionists in Zimbabwe have used place naming to boast their self-image by reclaiming an imagined lost past. This is critical in a socio-political context where the state consciously discredits their claims to indigeneity. The secessionists are challenging the top-down place-naming system that the ZANU-PF government had been implementing since it came to power in 1980 by reshaping cultural geographies in the area they claim to be theirs. The new toponymy is critical in the process of self-projection as a people.

Place renaming can take the dimension of resistance when subordinate groups and activists contest a hegemonic place-naming system. The secessionist actors adopted the name *Mthwakazi* to celebrate the antiquity of their imagined nation, its persistence in people's minds, and its imagined future. It counters the singular imagining of the nation fronted by the Zimbabwean government and subverts the state's exclusionary framing of citizenship and belonging. The name *Mthwakazi* becomes a "historical remembrance that disrupts singular narratives of history and allows for the polyphonic nature of historical geography to be heard, celebrated and enshrined" (Short & Dubots 2022: 189). It contributes to the Ndebele's claims of ownership of the named places and reinforces the Ndebele people's rootedness in the newly carved territory. Alderman & Rose-Redwood (2020: 129) poignantly note: "Through the act of naming and using toponyms, we claim places and perform certain social identities and socio-spatial relations [...]. It is therefore important to identify

the physical, social, intellectual, and emotional work undertaken in the naming process that breathes life and meaning into these names”.

The etymology of the term *Mthwakazi* is a subject of debate among historians and scholars alike. It is sometimes traced to Mzilikazi himself. This line of thought believes that Mzilikazi used the term *Muthwa* as a referential label for his non-Nguni or non-Sotho subjects. Subsequently, when this group increased in number to the extent of outnumbering the Khumalo people he had brought with him from the Zulu Kingdom, he decided to adopt the name *Umthwakazi* for his kingdom to acknowledge the fact that Muthwas were in the majority (Mathema 2013). However, Msindo (2012) makes a bold claim that the name *Mthwakazi* is falsely believed to have been the name of the pre-colonial Ndebele state. Despite these counterarguments, the secessionist political actors have adopted the name as a symbolic act of commemorating the Ndebele nation’s foundational myth. Instead of using a restrictive term, Ndebele nation, that frames belonging in the imagined nation along the axis of belonging to the Ndebele ethnic group, the secessionist political actors adopted the term *Mthwakazi* because it reflects the “multi-ethnic” status of pre-colonial Ndebele nation. The primordial state comprised Kalanga, Lozwi, Nambya, Nguni, Shona, Sotho/Tswana, Tonga, Zulu, Xhosa, and Venda ethnic groups (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008: 175).

Secessionists justify their stance by arguing that the Zimbabwean case is a tale of two nations trapped inside one border. They imagine Mthwakazi as “a nation within a nation” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009b: 150). In this case, Mthwakazi is a nation without a state. A nation without a state occupies a geographical space found within the boundaries of another state but claims to have a distinct national identity deriving from a shared past, common philosophy of life of its people. Usually, such a state has the desire to achieve self-determination (Guibernau 1999). Secessionists believe that the colonial system made a monumental error by combining two nations – Mthwakazi and Zimbabwe. They argue that the “two nations” were colonised at different times. The colonial forerunner unit, the Pioneer Column, occupied Mashonaland with little or no resistance by the Shona people in 1890, and later the British South African Company (BSAC) had to conquer Matabeleland in 1893. The Union Jack was raised, at different times, in each of the “two nations” to symbolise total control by the BSAC. At independence, the two flags were also taken down during separate occasions. The hoisting of the new Zimbabwean flag was also done simultaneously in Bulawayo and Harare. The ZANLA commander, Solomon “Rex Nhongo” Mujuru, hoisted the Zimbabwe flag in Harare, while the ZPRA commander, Lookout Masuku, simultaneously did the same in Bulawayo (Hadebe 2020).

In their bid to create a self-determined nation distinct from Zimbabwe, MRP threatened to remove all Shona names from the Bulawayo cityscape. It also gave the city council an ultimatum to remove First Chimurenga Mbuya Nehanda’s statue erected at Mzilikazi Art Craft Centre. This radical secessionist group wanted King Mzilikazi’s statue to replace Nehanda’s (Bulawayo

correspondent 2019). In their schemes, Bulawayo will be the official seat of government for the new imagined state. Currently, it is Zimbabwe's second capital city. The move is a bold political statement for resisting ZANU-PF and Shona hegemony. In turn, it deliberately puts Ndebele heritage to the fore. It poses as a cleansing exercise meant to remove cultural icons of a hegemonic force and replace them with new symbols of statehood that communicate an entirely new political identity. Secessionists want to erase place names that remind them of Shona supremacy and invoke genocidal memories. Thus, the names communicate collective experiences of exclusion and intergenerational memories of trauma among the Ndebeles. Recently, the Mnangagwa government embarked on a nationwide place-renaming process. Part of this exercise saw Mnangagwa's name being assigned to a street in Bulawayo. Secessionist activists resisted this move. MRP member Mbonisi Gumbo said: "Some of us have bad memories of ED Mnangagwa. Having a busy road named Mnangagwa is obviously traumatic. However, we expect the ordinary residents of Bulawayo to be consulted. We have our own heroes like Lookout Masuku, Dr Dumiso Dabengwa, Mqondisi Moyo and others, so we do not appreciate anything imposed on us" (Mabhiza 2019).

Mnangagwa was the state security minister during the Gukurahundi period. The victims and survivors associate him with bad memories and traumatic history of the genocide. Alderman (2022) notes that memorial toponyms may affect the socio-psychological well-being of communities, including the degree to which they index and reproduce emotional or political violence. The move by secessionists demonstrates a fact in critical toponomastics that memorial toponyms are arenas for "reputational politics" where reputations and historical legacies of historic figures and events become subjects of intense debates. The debates transform the landscape into a platform for negotiating the appropriateness of memorialising such figures and events embroiled in controversy (Alderman 2002).

The radical stance that secessionists took of dismantling state-centric narratives produces new ideas of cultural citizenship can be regarded as a form of "symbolic reparation" that aid in "restoring the dignity and public recognition to victims" (Swart 2008: 106). Usually, reparation is perceived in litigation or monetary terms. However, a "broader approach recognises the role of commemoration in making amends for historical injustices and moving toward a more just future" (Alderman 2022: 16). The secessionist naming system is a reparative one that gives visibility to names and a cultural heritage that have been rendered invisible for a long time by the Zimbabwean government and exposing human rights violations in the process. It subverts the hegemonic regime's official storytelling and gives agency and a voice to the Ndebele people who were excluded from the official narration of the nation.

It has been demonstrated above that linguistic hegemony is one of the under-theorised areas in critical toponomastics. The Zimbabwean state place-naming system entrenches the Shona linguistic hegemony in Zimbabwe. The

LL has been crafted in a way that shows that Shona wields more symbolic power over Ndebele. The Shona language takes precedence over Ndebele on bilingual government signs, while in most cases, it enjoys exclusive dominance as the only language the state uses to name programmes that cover the entire nation (Mamvura & Mashiri 2015). The argument in LL literature is that the visibility of language in the LL indexes the symbolic power of the language, while non-visibility indicates that the concerned languages are less powerful. Coming to place naming, the name *Zimbabwe* and the Shona orthography for the names of some major towns such as Kwekwe, Gweru, Shurugwi, and Zvishavane (in Table 1 above) demonstrates the linguistic supremacy that Shona has over all the other language varieties in the country. The naming system confirms that Shona is the sole de facto national language because the LL reflects the real language policy and practices in a nation. Ndebele is conspicuously invisible in the Harare LL, and other contexts that have a national scale. Secessionists deconstructed this language hierarchy by presenting names for five cities written in Ndebele orthography. This was a conscious move meant to contest the dominance that Shona had been enjoying as the language of naming places in Zimbabwe. This reconstructed their self-worth because the LL plays a symbolic function of reflecting the ethnolinguistic vitality of the speakers (Landry & Bourhis 1997).

The secessionists' place-naming system was a form of "toponymic activism" (Alderman 2022: 19). They have used the names to create the imagined map for the autonomous state. Cartography is critical for claiming space because a map is a social construction that serves the interests of its producers.

In Zimbabwe, place naming is just one of the several activist strategies that the secessionists have devised to fight for the autonomous status of the Mthwakazi state. Secessionist actors have written letters to the Zimbabwean president demanding to have keys to the state house in Bulawayo, burnt the Zimbabwean flag in 2018, and supported the revival of the Ndebele monarchy. Secessionist politics also reflects the scalar politics of toponymy. The state ensures that the Ndebele collective experiences are not commemorated beyond the Ndebele-speaking regions. This was a way of monitoring the scale at which commemoration takes place. Alderman & Inwood (2013: 11) have termed this practice "spatial confinement strategy" to denote how naming authorities, in America, want Martin Luther King Jr's namesakes to be in specific locations. It is only in Matabeleland that the state allows the Ndebele past to be immortalised on highly visible places, such as streets in the Central Business District, regional airport, and state institutions of higher education. Harare constitutes a national landscape because it is the capital city of Zimbabwe. Names of ZAPU legendary figures have an insignificant presence in Harare streetscapes and Nkomo's name is commemorated on the city's outskirts (Mamvura 2020). On a national scale, the Ndebele have been rendered invisible since their identity had been provincialized. Through this naming, the secessionists have created provincial and national scales that propel the Ndebele

social and cultural visibility. Their proposed place-naming system seeks to discursively (re)negotiate their collective identity and give it a symbolic textuality and permanence in the cultural landscape. This reinforces their self-worthy and revives their ethnolinguistic vitality that had suffered systematic suppression and marginalisation by the Shona dominated government of Zimbabwe.

Secessionist activists strive to project a national identity that stands opposite to the one associated with the Zimbabwe. They give an impression of a region that has a unified voice for seeking independence from Zimbabwe and fighting ZANU-PF and Shona hegemony. Yet, the Ndebele-speaking regions lack ethnic cohesion and solidarity. There are internal struggles and contradictions relating to the politics of domination and subordination. Diverse ethnic groups display different visions of the past. This lack of a shared past, mistrust, and ethnic rivalry implies different memorial agendas. The groups may not be said to view the Shona as the region's common enemies. It is rather far-fetched to think that they subscribe to secession to gain an autonomous status. Interview data with members of cultural and language committees for the different groups show that they are not supporting secession. They contest the proposed naming of the imagined nation and its provinces and cities because it entrenches Ndebele hegemony in this part of the country. Most language communities are already fighting the dominance of Ndebele (Shona and English). Most ethnolinguistic groups that Ndebele dominates view supporting the secessionist stance as a retrogressive step. Ndebele is the language that dominates the place-naming system in the imagined Mthwakazi nation, as shown in the orthography used for most of the names presented above. This indicates that secession is an idea imposed on them by actors who intend to entrench Ndebele hegemony in the region. The Tonga made it clear that it was absurd that the choreographers of the secession wanted to include them, yet they were never part of the pre-colonial Ndebele nation.

A senior member of the Kalanga Cultural and Language Committee indicated that the Mthwakazi project has no relevance to the Kalanga who were forcibly assimilated into the Ndebele kingdom. To the Kalanga, the Ndebele were latecomers who conquered them and instituted a form of "African colonialism". Secessionist politics in Zimbabwean demonstrates that toponymic resistance should not be conceptualised in binary terms, as a process that involves subordinate groups contesting hegemonic groups' toponymic order because it can be multi-layered since subordinate groups may not have common interests and history.

7. Contributions to critical toponomastics

This research contributes to critical toponomastics at different levels. The tradition in critical toponomastics has been to focus on those moments of political and social control, especially how the names of countries, regions, cities, and streets are used in hegemonic ways to support a ruling regime's ideology, state's framing of identity and citizenship. Less often are there studies that examine the use of place naming as a form of symbolic resistance, a means of subverting and contesting dominant ideas of what and who belongs within the nation and what constitutes a legitimate national past as what has been done in this article.

[Alderman & Inwood \(2013: 8–9\)](#) explain that spatial (in)justice is critical for appreciating “[h]ow King Street naming proponents view and mobilise their cause in spatial terms and how the opposition responds by actively using geography to contest these claims to the city”. This demonstrates that marginalised groups participate in the production of places within a single city. This stems from the tradition in critical toponomastics of confining the oppositional politics of belonging to the same city that has excluded subordinate groups and denied them the right to the city ([Alderman 2022](#); [Alderman & Inwood 2013](#)). This article seeks to broaden the focus of critical toponomastics by introducing the notion of “toponymy of disengagement” where subordinate groups can use place names, and other symbols, to create a different geographical space from the one that entrenched spatial injustice to them. In order to achieve spatial justice for themselves, they can use the newly created spaces to inscribe their historical experiences into the cultural landscape and assert their sense of belonging. The new toponymy that secessionist actors are fronting creates an imagined boundary between Zimbabwe and the new imagined state. It sets the self-determined state as a distinct territory from the parent state, Zimbabwe. This becomes a way of deconstructing and (re)constructing definitions of national belonging, citizenship, and identity.

Most critical toponomastics studies focus on larger cities without paying attention to smaller towns ([Azaryahu 2009, 2011](#)). The burgeoning body of critical toponomastics studies in Africa is a welcome development. However, most of them follow traditions in Europe and North America of focussing on toponymy in major cities.. Consequently, toponymy in smaller towns and the countryside has received scant attention in African critical toponomastics studies. This article adds a voice to the extant critical toponomastics scholarship by exploring the renaming of smaller towns in Zimbabwe.

Existing critical toponomastics scholarship tends to exclusively focus on urban toponymy. The title of an edited volume by leading voices in this scholarship “The political life of urban streetscapes: Naming, politics, and place” tends to confine critical toponomastics studies to urban contexts. It gives the impression that having a “political life” is an exclusive quality of

urban toponyms. This is understandable given that most leading scholars in critical toponomastics studies are urban geographers. Non-urban toponyms may equally exhibit what [Azaryahu \(1996\)](#) describes as “the power of commemorative names”. In the case of this article, the name for the imagined separate state, names of provinces, and smaller towns are politically charged discourses that communicate a people’s wish for self-determination.

The quantitative growth of critical toponomastics studies in Africa should appreciate that naming is a social practice. It is culture-relative because “[t]he principles and social means human societies mobilise in assigning names to places vary across time and space” ([Bigon & Arrous 2022: 7](#)). Thus, realities obtaining in African societies influence place naming. This engenders a naming tradition that may differ from the one in European and North American contexts. Toponymic scholarship is more concerned with official names that can be seen on maps, in gazetteers, and public signs, than with unofficial ones that are absent from the official text ([Bigon & Arrous 2022](#)). The deemed to be absent place names constitute people’s mental maps. The use of alternative and unofficial names is part of the African place-naming system. The corpus of names studied in this article comprises unofficial names because they have not been approved for use by any naming authority, nor have they been standardised. These are proposed names for the imagined future self-governing nation, cities and provinces.

8. Conclusion

This article has discussed the political-ethno-linguistic fracture lines in Zimbabwe in light of the foregoing discussion. It has demonstrated how secessionist groups use place naming as part of their broader political project of gaining self-determination. They have appropriated place naming as key to their larger struggles for belonging, justice, and citizenship. They have appreciated the role that place naming plays in constituting and sustaining a nation-state. Landscape symbolism and public spatial expression are critical in framing belonging and citizenship in a nation-state. The memorial landscape is not cast in stone, despite its assumed stability. Instead, it is subject to revision, recasting, and remoulding to serve the interests of its producers, whether this is done formally or informally. Secessionist groups in Zimbabwe have informally used place naming in the symbolic construction of Mthwakazi as an imagined autonomous state and mounted symbolic boundaries with the parent state, Zimbabwe. The trend in critical toponomastics studies has been that activists and subordinate players fight for inclusion in the same landscape that would have segregated them. However, this article has demonstrated that activists can use place naming to create a distinct place from the one that had been excluding them. They then assert their sense of belonging and foreground their cultural heritage in the new place. Usually, state actors define aspects of the past to be

remembered and the locations for such commemorations. In the process, they invent usable pasts that justify the status quo. This gives heritage work the identity of an elite top-down process. However, this study has demonstrated that secessionists used toponyms as reparative symbols for achieving justice for a suppressed heritage. Secessionists challenge existing state and Shona hegemonic tendencies in defining citizenship, national belonging, and autochthonous status. Secessionist politics in Zimbabwe makes it possible to examine the contestations that characterise place naming when ethnic minority groups' struggle to recast and reconfigure cultural landscapes in ways that reinforce belonging and citizenship. The proposed changes to the toponymic landscapes challenge state-centric modes of operation that thrived on the minoritisation, exclusion and domination of other ethnic identities. Those were the defining characteristics of Mugabeism. It is critical to mention that the state always deploys state machinery to crush secession. Future research on toponymy may consider other contexts that exhibit how subordinate groups contest top-down naming systems.

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