



## THE PHILOSOPHY OF NAMING AMONG THE NDEBELE OF ZIMBABWE. A STUDY OF CHILDREN'S NAMES BORN BETWEEN 1970 -1982

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### ABSTRACT

*This article is an analysis of the naming process of the Ndebele people of Matabeleland South province of Zimbabwe. The study provides a semantic analysis of the Ndebele names derived from the colonial experience and those given to children to celebrate independence and its aftermath. The article studies names given between the periods 1970- 1982. An examination of these names encapsulates how the Ndebele understood the impact of colonial rule and the changing circumstances brought about by political independence. The article is classified into two major parts where in the first part the authors provide a semantic analysis of names given to children during the colonial era (1970-1979). The second part investigates names given after independence (1980-1982). Data collected is from a variety of sources including oral interviews held with parents of children born during the period under study and the authors' personal knowledge as native speakers of IsiNdebele.*

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**Keywords:** Naming, Ndebele, Zimbabwe, Colonialism, Post colonialism.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Birth and naming are important and cherished processes in the African culture. Giving birth is viewed as a blessing from the ancestors and as a way of the continuation of one's family or clan. In general, naming is regarded as an act of giving or bestowing an identity to an individual. This is an identity that they would carry throughout their lifetime. Among the Ndebele, as is the case with most cultures in Africa, the concept of naming actually mirrors the Ndebele people and their environment which is, but not limited to, their experiences, fears, worldviews and philosophies. In

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ISSN(e): 2224-4441/ISSN(p): 2226-5139  
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addition to that, naming among the Ndebele is like a statement and that statement should be addressing a particular subject. It is also further believed that name giving is like praying and that prayer is a reflection of the namer's beliefs.

Naming a child among the Ndebele has a huge significance because children in this society are given names circumstantially. The circumstances are as diverse as could be imagined, but it is noted that dominant prevailing natural and human engineered circumstances at the time of birth or during pregnancy play a significant role in determining name choices. This observation is confirmed by (Ladzekpo, 1985) who states that "historically African people of all persuasions can identify and recount past events by naming children in accordance with the event or circumstance at the time of birth." Guided by the above observation, this article makes a semantic analysis of the Ndebele names derived from the colonial experience and those given to children to celebrate independence.

## **2. NAMES GIVEN TO CHILDREN DURING THE COLONIAL ERA (1970-1980)**

Colonialism in Zimbabwe refers in general to the period between 1890 to 1980, during which the then Southern Rhodesia now Zimbabwe was occupied by the British South Africa Company (BSAC) on behalf of the British government. In many ways, the occupation of Zimbabwe was characterised by depersonalization and dehumanization of the indigenous blacks. The greatest onslaught was land dispossession, plundering of natural resources, economic marginalisation, and imposition of taxes, labour exploitation and cultural dislocation of the African mentality. The impact of imperial design on the Ndebele people is best captured by Ndlovu- Gatsheni (2009a) when he notes that imperialists;

Imposed their own rough, partial notions of rights and justice on the Ndebele. They arrogantly alienated Ndebele land, appropriated Ndebele property such as cattle, abused the Ndebele as tenants and labourers, were ruthless, brutal and unfeeling, rude and insensitive, and enthusiastically resorted to open violence whenever the Ndebele raised their heads. Over and above this they deprived the Ndebele of their primary means of subsistence, which had underpinned their pre-colonial state.

This state of affairs created tension and antagonism between the coloniser and the colonised which also forced the Ndebele to register and document their grievances through the naming of children born during this era. An examination of naming patterns reveals the horrors, sense of despair and anger towards the brutality of the conqueror and the zeal to fight for their freedom as well. They further reveal that the liberation process and decolonization was a violent, brutal and a psychologically castrating process. The naming processes then became an avenue to register all the anger and resentment brewed by such torture. This view is also expressed by Magudu (2010) when they note that:

... the indigenous people used the naming process as an informal political dialogue to express their antagonistic relationship that characterised the interaction...., it became a dialogue as the Africans became conscious of the significance of names in expressing resentment to white rule.

Among the Ndebele of Zimbabwe such names as *Siphilanzima* (we are surviving hard/we are living under harsh circumstances), *Zwelinzima* (the country is hard/burdensome), *Senzeni* (what did we do) and *Phephelaphi* (where do we seek refuge), *Sifelani* (why are being persecuted/why are being killed) as mentioned by the informants were names created and popularized during the liberation struggle as protest names. In general, among Africans protest names are traditionally given during times of hardships and distress. Under the circumstances of colonial oppression the names such as the above reflect feelings of bitterness, seeming angst and helplessness. But in reality were a quest and an indefatigable yearning for a solution to their sordid existence. These names became discursive space where local people came to understand their condition. Their basic philosophy was that colonialism as a system of governance was and still is destructive, evil and inhuman. According to these names, colonialism disrupted and brought chaos to the lives of indigenous people. All the institutions that they respected and believed sustained their lives were undermined. Thus it can be argued that they felt like people left to their own devices by the deities that they had long trusted and yet the new system's worldview and cosmology ensured that they remained subaltern, mere objects of convenience in their own land.

Conflict to the Ndebele was not novel to them at that time, the extent and direction of the conflict changed its itinerary when people could no longer call the land their own, when they were displaced from the place of their ancestors that they revered so much. At that time they had lost control of their future and what they valued most, and if one could not control their future, one would have lost the fundamental nature of life and their spirit as well. During colonialism there was a fragile link between people, their land and their ancestors. The Ndebele then viewed themselves as shadows that were just roaming a land they no longer understood because it left them torn between loyalty to their indigenous material wealth and tradition and a foreign tradition. To them colonialism then embodied restlessness, terror and horror.

They then found a need among them to invoke a spirit of togetherness that would assist them to combat the enemy. We then see the names that persuaded the Ndebele that nationalism and war were irresistible forces. This made the local people realize that a war was necessary for Zimbabwe to be liberated. Names such as *Mpiyabo* (their war), *Mpiyezwe* (war of the nation) and *Mpiyamabhunu* (war of the Boers) value resistance or see liberation as an arm or product of resistance. According to Pfukwa (2007) names with the root *impi* (war) are 'a...reflection of the state of war that the country was in; and taking such a name was a constant reminder of the armed conflict.' In other words, the naming pattern supported the armed struggle as a decisive trajectory towards the liberation of Zimbabwe from the claws and shackles of colonialism. Giving names such as *Mabutho* (armies/soldiers), *Butholezwe* (army of the nation) *Mayihlome* (let's take up arms), *Melimpi* (stand up for war), *Thulilwempi* (the dust of war), *Dumolwempi* (the ubiquity of war), *Hlaselani* (you should attack), *Qoqanani* (organize yourselves) militarized and radicalized everyone as every person came to be viewed as a soldier. In addition, these names perceive violence as a means to securing freedom.

The understanding of violence as a liberation instrument is also appreciated by scholars who view it as a liberatory, emancipatory and redemptive tool Ndlovu- Gatsheni (2009b). Wa Thiongo (1972) views it in a similar way when he writes that violence is necessary in order to change an intolerable and unjust social system. The act of taking up arms, suggested by the names that

glamorize violence, is an act of insisting upon one's humanity, a resistance against 'thingification', because according to him it purifies man. Violence becomes an outlet for man's fury and anger. It becomes a cleansing ritual for unjust systems. Writing about the utility of violence in national decolonization, Fanon (1963) observes that:

National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.

Since the formula for decolonization was a long, gradual and painful process, those who joined the struggle as guerrillas to fight white minority rule were inspired by names such as *Dingilizwe* (looking for the nation), *Zwelethu* (our nation), *Mayibuye* (let it come- independence), *Zibuseni* (rule yourself), *Mbuso* (kingdom) and *Sithandilizwe* (we love our country) *Sibangilizwe* (we are fighting for our country).

These names legitimized the Ndebele presence and participation in the war. They further gave the Africans determination, courage, zeal and vigour to liberate themselves despite numerous challenges they encountered during the liberation struggle. These are names brimful with optimism that indeed their land will and should be brought back through the process of waging a war to unsettle the settler.

They carry the wish that with the war won, their dignity, humanity and way of life will be restored. But they are also an insistence on the fact that their land will not be handed to them through pious moralism, instead they have to make sacrifices

## 2.1 Names That Celebrate the Coming of Independence (1970-1980)

Zimbabwe attained its national independence in 1980 after many years of struggle against colonialism and almost two decades of bitter and protracted armed struggle. This hard won freedom was ushered in amidst a great deal of celebration, jubilation and ecstasy by black Zimbabweans. The raising of the Zimbabwean flag also brought euphoristic expectations as it was time of great hope, great promises, and great desires of attaining freedom. The celebrations and the optimism that punctuated the immediate post independence era is succinctly captured and justified by Mlambo (1997) when he notes that;

The independence era was ushered in amidst a great deal of rejoicing by an African population that was brimful with optimism that the country was in the threshold of a new future that would be both prosperous and peaceful. They had every confidence that, now that a people's government was in power, the inequalities of the colonial past would be redressed.

Most names that are adopted or given to children after independence do not only echo the political struggle for emancipation and black self rule but they symbolize and embody unity, peace, ownership and independence.

The names generally draw and represent the black population which was previously excluded from such and self determination. It is the reason why one would find names like *Zimbabwe* among the Ndebele yet *Zimbabwe* is originally a Shona name meaning 'house of stones'. These names also

mark a changing political, economic and social landscape from bondage to freedom. The freedom is dramatized in all facets of life which include the expected political, social, cultural and the economic wellbeing of the black majority. In other words, these names ‘not only resonate with the political struggle for freedom and full democracy, but also represent proud ownership and independence’ (Neethling, 2010).

This is clearly illustrated by the following names,

*Nkululeko*(freedom)

*Nonkululeko*(mother of freedom),

*Sibakhulule* (we have liberated them)

*Sikhululekile* (we are free)

*Silithethe* (we have taken it- our country)

*Zwelethu*(a new nation)

*Thokozani* (*celebrate*)

*Thabani*(be joyful)

Busani (rule)

This elation was also inspired by the manifestos of the two liberation movements ZAPU and ZANU which all pointed towards a socialist state.

To the majority, socialism meant peace, democracy, equity and it also marked an end to capitalist tendencies or idiosyncrasies, revolutionary changes and finally the return of the lost land. Chinyowa (2001) points out that;

Commitment to socialist transformation would ultimately lead to the creation of an egalitarian society based on Marxist and Leninist principles. It is, therefore not surprising that the immediate post- independence period was characterised by slogans castigating imperialism and hailing the ideology of socialism.

To capture the socialist ideology we find some children named *Mqabuko* after the late Joshua Mqabuko Nyongolo Nkomo, a renowned leader or father of mass nationalism in Zimbabwe as a way of acknowledging the role that Nkomo played in liberating Zimbabwe.

Among the Ndebele, Nkomo is a true nationalist in the sense that he was anti tribal, anti racial and championed equal opportunities and equal distribution of land among whites and dispossessed blacks. It is expected that the name Mqabuko will trigger powerful passions and emotions among the people of Matabeleland and Zimbabwe in general because he remains a towering figure in the nostalgic memories of most Zimbabweans and, as such, the name bearer is expected to resemble the larger than life character of the former.

Due to the prevalence of the name Mqabuko in the villages and the cities, the Ndebele had to give alternative names that captured this quality of Joshua Nkomo in the Matabeleland naming iconography. Hence the name *Mkhululi* (the liberator). This was to capture the heroic exploits of those who took part in the war, in particular the cultic Mqabuko, the leader of the nationalist party based in Matabeleland, ZAPU who it was felt was a liberator *par excellence*.

This therefore, reflects that names are a communicative tool. As communicative tools the owners feel obliged to act as their names demand. Agyekum (2006) notes that;

Names are seen as communicative events belonging to a bigger class of social activities that go beyond the linguistic expressions and utterances to socio-cultural domains. Naming conforms to both performance and participation for the labels may dictate how the person behaves and how s/he participates in social circles.

These names also reveal the essence of naming from an African perspective where experiences are always shared. The motivation behind a name is not always a private matter because at this time the shared and public discourse was about freedom and nationhood hence we observe that these names that are national in outlook. It can also be deduced that Ama Ndebele *kawazikhangeliwona* (the Ndebele were not only concerned about their own welfare) but also cared for the good of others as well.

### 3. CONCLUSION

This article set out to explore the semantic analysis of Ndebele names given to children born between 1970 and 1982. From the discussion it is clear that the Ndebele used names to express the oppression and the brutality they were going through and at the same time to express their course of action as well.

The names reflect a need to mobilize and act with a unity of purpose to free the nation from the colonial yoke. It is further observed that immediately after independence the names celebrate these achievements as a lot of euphoria engulfs the country. Thus it can unambiguously be stated that the philosophy of naming among the Ndebele is governed by the politics of circumstantialities.

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