



## Deconstructing the Colonial Legacy through the Naming Process in Independent Zimbabwe

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**Abstract.** When Zimbabwe attained national independence from the British in 1980, the new black leadership faced many social, economic and political challenges which needed to be addressed in one way or the other. Immediate attention was given to the need to reverse the colonial legacy of racial discrimination in accessing resources and services but there were other subtle heritages, such as place names, which needed to be addressed if true independence was to be realized. This paper examines the extent to which the change of place names, buildings and other infrastructure has contributed in deconstructing the colonial legacy and rebranding the country to give it a truly Zimbabwean identity. It is asserted however, that the process of deconstructing the legacy of colonial names is still incomplete and a lot remains to be done in this respect for Zimbabwe to reflect its true black heritage.

**Keywords:** Zimbabwe, deconstruction, legacy, rebranding, heritage and identity

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### Introduction

In a previous article, Magudu, Muguti and Mutami (2010) advanced the thesis that the naming process in colonial Zimbabwe was used by both the white settlers and the colonised to conduct a political dialogue between them. However, the settlers had an upper hand in the exercise and the most significant centres and infrastructure in the country bore names that reflected the character and values of the colonisers and where local names were retained, these were corrupted. Hence, when Zimbabwe attained independence in 1980, one of the legacies that colonial rule had bequeathed it with were foreign names which had,

until then, given the country an alien identity. This was a legacy that reminded the new nation of the oppression and exploitation that had been experienced at the hands of the colonisers. This article examines the extent to which the leadership of independent Zimbabwe sought to deconstruct the legacy of colonial names. It argues that, while attempts were made to address this issue, many colonial names still exist in independent Zimbabwe. This implies a persistence of the colonial heritage.

### **The colonial legacy**

Ninety years of colonial rule had bequeathed a number of legacies on Zimbabwe, both tangible and intangible. The tangible heritages were in the form of abject poverty amongst blacks which had been achieved through economic exploitation, political repression and racial discrimination. The new land tenure system that came with colonisation alienated the indigenous people from their land as they were pushed into overcrowded Tribal Trust Lands (reserves) where they could hardly eke a living. The reserves, a concept which was consolidated by the Land Apportionment Act (1930) were largely uninhabitable as they were rocky, inaccessible and tsetse-infested (Bhebe, 1989:54). Land appropriation had been meant, among other things, to deprive the local people of access to means of production in order to force them into wage employment. In towns, mines, white farms and other sectors of the economy, the Africans worked under difficult conditions and were poorly paid. At independence therefore the legacy of impoverishment and marginalisation of the black people was evident and tangible as the African people had been deprived of control of the means of production which rendered them completely dependent and subordinate to the white capitalist economy.

The colonial legacy was also achieved by undermining African culture through Christianity and an education system that demonised and devalued their customs and practices and was meant to purge the colonies of the so called heathen and backward practices (Mapara, 2009). The works of Ngugi and Fanon describe how this intangible heritage had been bequeathed through education. One such experience was the destruction of local norms and values which were

then replaced by European ones. This contributed to a loss of identity by the indigenous people (Fanon, 1965). In most African countries, the colonial educational system was used to destroy the identities and values of the black people by teaching them to hate anything that was local and traditional. For example, children in schools were forced to communicate with each other in English, Portuguese and French (depending on what the official language of the colony was), irrespective of their level. The language had to be passed if one was to proceed with education. The colonial education system gave more value to these foreign languages rather than to the pupils' own mother languages (L<sub>1</sub>) even though it is generally acknowledged that children conceptualise issues better when taught in L<sub>1</sub>. UNESCO cited in Mazrui (1993:531) noted the following about the importance of L<sub>1</sub> to a child:

Psychologically the mother tongue is the system of meaningful signs that in the child's mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.

The black learners were indoctrinated to believe that the foreign languages were more sophisticated than their own indigenous ones. In addition, they were made to believe that the language of the colonisers had the capacity to break down ethnic boundaries and unite the different ethnic groups. The colonisers tended to overplay the ethnic differences among the indigenous people to their own advantage.

To enroll in schools, children were forced to take up foreign names, thus a Nicholas or Francis from Matabeleland or Mashonaland would share a name with children from other provinces. Forcing the local children to assume foreign names deprived them of their identities and heritage, which rendered the blacks a rootless people, without an identity. At independence in 1980, therefore, the new black leadership found it imperative to deal with issues that were likely to undermine the gains of independence. They realised the need to eradicate several vestiges of colonial rule that included geographic names and infrastructure.

### **The naming process in independent Zimbabwe**

A name is an important form of identity of a particular place and at times can tell a story. It could describe the character and attributes of a person, a clan or a nation. It could also be an indication of political change. The naming process in independent Zimbabwe had to reflect the new power relations that prevailed in the nation. It had to demonstrate that the blacks were no longer a subjugated people. In addition, it had to replace a colonial heritage which was meaningless to the black majority.

Psychologically, a name creates a certain mindset. Place names in colonial Zimbabwe had developed in blacks a mindset of a defeated and an inferior people. The names in independent Zimbabwe were therefore supposed to transform this mindset of the black people to that of masters with control over their own destiny. The first significant name change was that of the country which was changed from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe. The process of changing the country's name had started after the Internal Settlement of 1978 when it became known as Zimbabwe-Rhodesia (Thompson, 1985). However, the bestowal of this double-barreled name after that political process could have been an indication that the white minority settlers still had an equal stake with the majority blacks in the country and this was an undesirable arrangement for the black nationalists. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the country attained independence in 1980, the name Rhodesia was immediately discarded because it was a major reminder of colonial oppression and exploitation. The country's new name, Zimbabwe, was derived from the Great Zimbabwe monument which symbolizes the historical greatness of the ancient Shona kingdom. It is important to note that from the 1960s, the African nationalist political organisations in Rhodesia such as the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) had resolved that after independence, the country's name should be Zimbabwe. This explains why they used that name as part of the titles of their political parties.

The process of renaming towns and other significant places started in earnest in 1982. According to Mazarire (1999), a Place Names Commission was set up during the early 1980s under the auspices of the National Monuments

Committee to advise the government on how to dispose of the vestiges of the colonial past. Some of the proposed new names were not new as such but had been used by the indigenous people for centuries. Salisbury, the country's capital city, which had been named after a former British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, was renamed Harare after a Shona chief, Neharawa (<http://www.Britannica.com/search?query=harare>). Fort Victoria, was remained Masvingo (a Shona word for ruins) in recognition of its proximity to the Great Zimbabwe Monument which is a symbol of national pride to the Zimbabwean people.

Other places retained English names, for example, Victoria Falls, Beit Bridge, West Nicholson, Plumtree, Banket, Featherstone, Beatrice, Norton and Birchneough Bridge. Victoria Falls, named after Britain's Queen Victoria, was initially renamed Mosi-oa-Tunya before reverting back to the colonial name. This could be attributed to the international marketing power of place names. Thus the postcolonial leadership adopted a cautious approach to name-changing in dealing with places of tourist significance since they did not want to jeopardise the tourist industry.

Towns which had retained local names but in corrupted form during the colonial era had these corrected to reflect the correct Shona pronunciation and to also restore their historical significance. These included the following:

Gatooma - Kadoma  
Marandellas - Marondera  
Umtali - Mutare  
Gwelo - Gweru  
Sipolilio - Chipuriro  
Shabanie - Zvishavane  
Inyanga - Nyanga

(Source: <http://www.Britannica.com/search?query=harare>)

Infrastructure such as roads, office blocks and streets were partially affected as many of them still bear colonial names. Roads that had been named after prominent settlers and British personalities such as Rhodes, Jameson, Salisbury, Stanley, Speke and others were renamed after liberation war heroes,

nationalists and historical figures such as Kaguvi, Nehanda Herbert Chitepo, Leopold Takawira, Joshua Nkomo, Robert Mugabe, Rekai Tangwena, Jason Moyo, Simon Mazoroodze, Samuel Parirenyatwa and Josiah Tongogara. All the above individuals had contributed significantly to the liberation of the country. Nehanda and Kaguvi were central figures in spearheading the first '*Chimurenga*'. Herbert Chitepo was the ZANU chairman and was assassinated in a car bomb in Lusaka on 18 March 1975 (The Sunday Mail, 2012). Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe led their respective liberation movements, ZAPU and ZANLA into independence. These revolutionary parties successfully waged the liberation struggle against the Ian Smith regime leading to Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 (Far Chung, 2006). Rekai Tangwena, chief of the Tangwena people in the Eastern Highlands, assisted Robert Mugabe and Edgar Tekere to escape to Mozambique 1974 (Chung, 2006). Leopold Takawira was the ZANU vice chairman during the 1960s. Josiah Tongogara a renowned ZANLA Commander-in-Chief and died in a car crash on the verge of Zimbabwe's independence in 1979. Simon Mazorodze had supported the struggle through the provision of medical supplies and other services to the combatants since he was a medical doctor. Jason Moyo was a prominent ZAPU leader during the liberation struggle (Far Chung, 2006). Streets bearing the above names are common sight in towns across the country and are a constant reminder of how these nationalists sacrificed their lives for the country's liberation.

Some streets were named after famous African statesmen such as Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere, Samora Machel, Nkwame Nkrumah and Nelson Mandela. The first three Frontline States leaders had provided guerrilla bases, training camps and training for guerrillas, logistical support, weapons, food, clothing, medicine and sanctuaries for refugees. As correctly observed by Thompson (1985), the Frontline states exclusively carried the major burden in both capital and casualties for their support of the liberation struggle. Cecil Square in Harare was renamed Africa Unity Square, perhaps in the spirit of pan Africanism which had been demonstrated during the African liberation struggles and thereafter. Interestingly, leaders such as Fidel Castro and Mao Tse Tung who had played an important role in the liberation of Zimbabwe and been

portrayed in the liberation war songs as friends of the struggle were not acknowledged through the naming process.

Public buildings, such as hospitals and government office blocks were also renamed to reflect the face of the new political order. These included Andrew Fleming Hospital which was renamed Samuel Parirenyatwa, after one of the first black medical doctors to take an active role in the anti-colonial struggle. He died in a suspicious car accident in 1962 (Fay Chung, 2006). Earl Grey Building in Harare was renamed Mukwati. Some public buildings constructed after independence were given local names, for example, Mnhlahlandlela, a complex of government offices in Bulawayo. However, many buildings in cities and towns still bear colonial names, for example, Tredgold and Rotten Row buildings both of which house Magistrates' courts in Bulawayo and Harare respectively

While there was a general acceptance of name changes by Zimbabweans at large, a lot of controversy surrounded an attempt to rename schools and bestow them with indigenous ones that glorified the country's history rather than that of other nations. This was most evident in 2002 when the then Minister of Education, Sport and Culture, Anaeas Chigwedere, proposed to replace English names of schools, especially of former white schools, with indigenous ones (*The Daily News*, Zimbabwe, 31/05/2002). These schools bore names of 'British imperialists' such as Alan Wilson, Cecil John Rhodes, Prince Edward, Jameson, Hamilton and Queens Victoria and Elizabeth and this explains why the minister was against their continued use. The schools were given an ultimatum to change their names. When most of them failed to come up with acceptable ones, the government tried to impose names of its choice. For example, Chigwedere proposed that Prince Edward School be renamed Murenga Boys High in memory of the Njelele Spirit medium who is believed to have instigated and directed the First *Chimurenga* of 1896-97 (*The Herald*, February 15, 2002). Mount Pleasant was to become Joshua Nkomo in honour of the late Vice President who had pioneered the nationalist movement in colonial Zimbabwe. Warren Park Primary School was to be renamed Chenjerai Hunzvi Primary School after the self-styled Zimbabwean National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA) leader who successfully agitated for the granting of gratuities to 'ex-combatants' in 1997

as compensation for their participation in the Second *Chimurenga*. He was also credited for leading the 2000 controversial invasions of white commercial farms in which a number of white farmers and their workers were killed. Other proposed changes according to The Daily News (24/05/2002) included:

Allan Wilson - Mutapa Boys High

Queen Elizabeth - Sally Mugabe

Milton High - Khumalo High

King George V1 - Lookout Masuku

Queensdale Primary - Safirio Madzikatire Primary.

David Livingstone Junior - Guy Clutton-Brock Primary

Umvukwes Primary - Border Gezi.

The bearers of some of these names had contributed significantly in carving Zimbabwe's history. For example, Sally Mugabe and Lookout Masuku (a ZIPRA commander) had participated in the war of liberation. Safirio Madzikatire, better known as 'Mukadota', was a legendary comedian and musician. Guy Clutton-Brocks, one of the few liberal white Rhodesians had advocated for racial equality and supported the war of liberation. Border Gezi had pioneered the establishment of youth training camps in independent Zimbabwe (*The Herald*, February 15, 2002). Hence, although the bearers of these names were from diverse backgrounds, they had contributed in giving Zimbabwe its unique identity and heritage.

There was determined resistance by some sections of both black and white communities to the renaming of schools as they felt that it was political posturing by ZANU PF whose political fortunes were dwindling. At the time, the Zimbabweans were experiencing serious economic challenges which came in the aftermath of the Fast Track Land Reform Programme in which the majority of white farmers had lost their commercial farms to the indigenous African people. One observer, Grace Mutandwa, had this to say about the changes proposed by Chegwedere:

If he is obsessed with the cultural revolution, he should lead by example and get rid of his first name, start wearing skins and stop being driven in a Mercedes Benz. He must move out of the 'mansion' he lives in and build a mud hut somewhere in the



woods. He must divest himself of all things colonial. He must walk or ride to Parliament on a donkey and should prevail on his party, ZANU PF, to hold its Politburo and Central Committee meetings under a baobab tree somewhere (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/zimsite/message/17345>).

While such kind of thinking reflected how some Zimbabweans felt about name changing at the time, such sentiments could also be considered retrogressive as they gave the impression that African systems were stagnant and technologically bankrupt.

Yet another commentator reacted to Chigwedere's proposal as follows:

Minister, you even have the audacity to call yourself a historian and yet you want to obliterate history. Whether you like it or not those whites you despise so much are part of our history. Our children must know the true history of their country and not a sanitised version of history...Do some soul searching Minister and tell me honestly that the change of school names, school uniforms and names of suburbs will improve our cultural appreciation and our education system, increase employment and put food on our tables (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/zimsite/message/17345>).

It would seem Chigwedere's proposal was ill-timed as Zimbabwe was going through an economic meltdown and people were then more concerned with bread and butter issues. Thus, Chigwedere's critics found little meaning in the renaming process in view of the hardships they were going through (*Daily News*, Harare, 24/05/2002). School administrators and parents were worried about the funding of the name changes. There were also fears that some schools which had traditionally relied on donations from Western well-wishers and sympathizers risked losing this assistance if the name changes were implemented. One observer noted that

Prince Edward thrived and expanded through donations from famous Old Edwardians such as Nick Price and others. I wonder what the feelings would be to the name changing to that of a 'High Spirit' and what the general reaction is going to be. (<http://thechiefbaboon.com/forums/archives/index.php?l=3645.html>).

Following a general outcry from Zimbabweans from all walks of life about the proposed name changes, the government eventually shelved the plan.

Some infrastructure in the hospitality industry retained English names. These included hotels such as Meikles, Jameson, Greys Inn, Rhodes, Victoria Falls, Victoria, Montclair, Churchill Arms, Greys Inn, Selborne, Palace, Waverley and Manor. The places had previously been largely patronised by white colonialists and tourists and were owned by international capital. That their names were not changed could have been, as alluded to earlier on, an attempt to avoid destabilising the tourist industry which is a major foreign currency earner for the country. It could have been meant to avoid antagonising the white community and foster a spirit of national reconciliation (Todd, 2007). However, some lodges and hotels constructed after independence bore local names, for example, paNdari Lodge, paMuzinda Lodge, paNyanda Lodge and Nyuni Lodge. This could have been an indication of the participation of new black players in the industry.

### **Reflections on the role of names in deconstructing a legacy**

The preceding discussion shows that the attempt to rebrand the country seems to have been achieved to a limited extent since some colonial names have largely remained unaltered. Of significance is the fact that the country was named Zimbabwe, a name that the nationalists had always insisted was the rightful one. This, to all, symbolised a victory over colonial rule and the return of the country to its rightful owners and, in a big way, a deconstruction of a legacy bequeathed by Cecil John Rhodes. It was a clear statement to the whole world about the change of guard. It was also a gesture of self-assurance on the part of the new government that blacks were finally politically in charge and could now pursue the goals that had made them wage the armed liberation struggle, for instance, land redistribution.

The name Zimbabwe was of historical significance as this was the name of the ancient Great Zimbabwe Monument located in the south eastern part of the country. There is a general consensus among historians that this structure was constructed by ancestors of the Shona and is therefore evidence of the antiquity and exclusivity of the indigenous people. That the country adopted this name demonstrated that Africans had a history. As noted by Marwick (1970)

It is through a sense of history that communities establish their identity...without knowledge of history we and our communities would be utterly adrift on an endless and featureless sea of time.

Some towns also acquired local names that were meaningful to the indigenous people and those whose names had been corrupted were corrected. Of significance in these towns was the change of street names, notably in the city centres. The bestowal of African names on these streets was a celebration of the heroes who had played a fundamental role in the liberation of the country as well as a celebration of the country's heritage. It was also a clear message that Africans now had freedom to move along these streets unlike during the colonial period when they were not allowed to walk on pavements in city centres. However, it should be noted that many white businesses have moved away from Central Business Districts (CBDs) which a patronized by black masses to exclusive suburban areas where they continue to serve elitist interests. Hence the emergence of such shopping centres as the Sammy Levy Village in Borrowdale, Westgate, Five Avenue Shopping Centre (all in Harare) Ascot (Bulawayo). During 2007 and 2008 when shops in the city centres and high density residential areas were experiencing acute shortages of basic commodities, shops in these affluent suburbs would be fully stocked with not only locally manufactured goods but also imported ones.

The replacement of colonial names seems to have been achieved to a limited extent. The new nationalist government for one reason or another did not go all the way in using names to reverse the colonial heritage. While street names especially in the Central Business Districts (CBDs) of most urban areas were changed, the changes were less felt as one moved out of the city centre into the avenues. For instance, such names as Charter Road, Cameron Street (Harare), Connaught Avenue (Bulawayo) and Robertson, Hughes, Hellett and Hoffmeyer (Masvingo) were not renamed. Furthermore, neutral names such as First, Second, Third, Fourth Avenues remain characteristic of Bulawayo and Harare.

In addition, many of the former white suburbs retained their colonial names, for example, Avondale, Belvedere, Marlborough, Belgravia, Mount Pleasant, Kensington, Windsor Park, Ascot, Bellevue, Montrose, Greystone Park, and

Yeovil. And within them, the old street names have been retained wholesale, for example, such streets as Chelmsford, Harold, Norfolk, Nottingham, St James, Livingstone, George, MacDonald, Clark and Cecil. Interestingly, even some new low density suburbs built after 1980 also bear colonial names, for example, Selborne Park (Bulawayo) and Borrowdale Brook and Mount Pleasant Heights (Harare)]. Hence, the colonial legacy in these areas, both tangible and intangible has remained largely intact. Many of these suburbs, although now largely inhabited by blacks have continued to be enclaves of colonial cultures and values. Black children originating from these suburbs have often been referred to as '*masalads*', meaning that they have a taste for western foods rather than the local traditional foods. They are generally out of touch with the local cultures and seem to be more comfortable with Western and foreign things, for example, the English language as the main medium of communication even amongst an all black gathering, a slavish appetite for western fashion and forms of entertainment, etc. In fact these children are ignorant of the local cultures and often associate it with backwardness and lack of sophistication. It has often been suggested that these children have an identity crisis and that problems associated with this lack of an identity will manifest themselves in their adult lives. For the politicians, the question has been whether these children will ever appreciate what being Zimbabwean means and hence the need to be patriotic.

The whites who still remain in these suburbs have been living in ideological islands. For these 'Rhodies' (as the former Rhodesian whites are often called), nothing has changed as they continue to enjoy the same economic and social privileges as during the colonial era. They still maintain exclusively white social clubs and blacks who venture into these areas are often subjected to racial abuse. Some years back Vice President Joshua Nkomo bemoaned the fact that these whites were never seen at independence celebrations as if they were living in a separate country. Perhaps this is an indication that they never embraced the policy of national reconciliation and are still in denial of the new status quo.

Names of former white schools such as Churchill, Queen Elizabeth, Alan Wilson, Jameson, Milton, Alan, Prince Edward, Hamilton and many others are another vestige of colonial rule. Most of the schools now have predominantly black pupils

as the whites who remained in the country have opened up private schools which charge exorbitant fees and in that way, exclude black pupils. The changes proposed by Chigwedere were really concerned with deconstructing a mindset created by the foreign names. He wanted to ensure that the pupils were aware of the real heroes of the Zimbabwean history and to develop in them a sense of identity. But that goal this is still to be realised since the colonial names of the schools in question have remained in place. It should be noted, however, that the government has limited power to rename privately-owned concerns.

The English language is still given prominence in these schools. Because a language comes with values and a culture, these schools to some extent perpetuate foreign values and cultures (Pongweni, 1989). They continue to silently teach the devaluation of African values and in so doing, the devaluation of African pride and dignity (Mahoso, 2011). Many children from the former white schools are more knowledgeable about what is happening in other countries and continents than about Zimbabwe and Africa. Hence, the inferiority complex that colonialism bequeathed on Africans is an intangible legacy which has persisted in the postcolonial era and has manifested itself through negative perceptions of the African heritage.

Another shortcoming in the naming process is that there are many people who contributed to the history of the country through their participation in the liberation struggle and in civic leadership whose role has not been acknowledged through this process. These include household names like Edgar Tekere, Lookout Masuku, Dumiso Dabengwa, Ruth Chinamano, Victoria Chitepo, and Sheba Gava. In fact, local communities have their own heroes who could be honoured likewise.

It could be further argued that the naming process in independent Zimbabwe has not been employed to adequately celebrate the country's history. One would have expected that the name of one of the founders of Zimbabwean nationalism, Dr Joshua Nkomo, also affectionately known as 'Father Zimbabwe' would have been bestowed on various infrastructure countrywide. Yet it only features twice in significant infrastructure, that is, Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo airport and Joshua Nkomo Technical College. Both these are situated in Matabeleland (his province

of origin), and this raises questions about his recognition as a national figure and the commitment and sincerity of the parties to the Unity Accord of 1987 (Zimbabwe African National Union and Zimbabwe African People's Union) to national unity. This has indirectly promoted regionalism which has made the unity of the different ethnic groups in Zimbabwe rather elusive. Likewise, there were many women who played a significant role in the liberation struggle such as Joice Mujuru, Oppah Muchinguri, Sally Mugabe, Victoria Chitepo and Margret Dongo. Their role has not been given much recognition through the naming process and this implies gender bias in the renaming process.

### **Conclusion**

As evidenced in the preceding paragraphs, the naming process in independent Zimbabwe did not go all the way in reversing the legacy of British names that colonialism had bequeathed on the country. While it can be argued that the legacy could not be wished away, it was however necessary to balance the act so that even in suburbs and schools that had been predominantly white before attainment of independence in 1980, the political changes that had occurred in the country could be reflected. Hence, the new government did not take full advantage of name changes process to mobilise and develop a common identity among the general Zimbabwean populace and the negative effects of this will haunt the nation for generations to come.

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