Ndebele Children’s Names as Reservoirs of History and Culture

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the notion of naming as a practice which saves as an archive of culture and history. Naming is a common phenomenon across cultures in the world. This informative onomastic practice plays a crucial role in society because we get to know better what is around us through it. The interesting feature of naming is that it is not usually done from a layman’s point of view but it is endowed with wisdom which is associated with people’s culture, thereby documenting peoples’ history, which is a major aspect of culture. People do not normally name for the sake of naming but they artfully analyse the world around them and therefore intelligently deduce the name which will embrace their circumstances. Therefore, this paper focuses on the intelligence associated with names given to children during and after the liberation war struggle in Zimbabwe and the occurrence of natural hazards as well as post independence experiences. Names in general, are reflective in nature, they picture the reality of a certain incident, portraying how people reacted and perceived it from various angles. One is able to trace back a peoples’ history, their way of living and the challenges they encounter in their lives by just analysing peoples’ names as reflective of their existential and circumstantial realities of that particular area. The paper concludes by indicating that the art of naming plays a key role in society because through naming we get the “uncensored” voice of people, that is, their history by themselves.

Keywords: Ndebele, children, names, reservoirs, history, culture.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Before Africa’s contact with Europe, the history and culture of Africans was not stored and transmitted through books, tapes or computers. It was preserved through the particular people’s oral literature such as poetry, myths, legends and proverbs among other genres. The history was kept alive in people’s languages and naming as an aspect of language was one of the most reliable means of recording and preserving history. One of the privileges enjoyed by the human race is the power to name themselves as they please. This linguistic licence to name oneself has been utilized by the Ndebele people and used to record and preserve their history since time immemorial. Through names, the history and culture of the Ndebele has been kept alive. The capacity to name reflects an attempt to impose control and human agency in a world replete with pain, joy, surprises and malice; it is an attempt to extrapolate forms of identity constructions at particular junctures in their life history.

Ndebele children’s names do not originate from a vacuum. They are shaped and influenced by the socio-political, cultural as well as historical contexts that the Ndebeles find themselves in. Names, therefore, have become tools that people use to record their experiences. Meiring (2010: 96-99) rightly states that naming, “reflects how people see the world around them, how they experience life and what they value and remember”. An interesting aspect about these names is that they are not a passive record of people’s history; instead they are a critical evaluation of that same history. They are a history that has not been censored or tempered with. Hence, this naming practice among the Ndebele people or the world at large is regarded as a highly reliable tool of recording and disseminating information. Through this onomastic practice, the Ndebele socio-political, historical and cultural experiences are relayed and preserved.

This article, therefore, is an examination of how children’s names record the experiences of the Ndebele during the liberation struggle, the post independence era, their encounter with natural disasters as well as their views on their culture at large. The thrilling issue about this naming practice is that names are not subject to censorship hence they represent the authentic voice of a people, thus, the history of a people by themselves.
1.1 Children’s Names during Zimbabwe’s Liberation Struggle

Zimbabwe, like most of its African fellow states, suffered the harsh experiences of colonization at the hands of the British. This experience brought so many changes in the way of life of the indigenous people whose culture, social and political structures were left severely bruised. People’s land rights were taken away, their livestock was drastically reduced and their religion was replaced by that of the coloniser. A lot of things changed during this period which was characterized by a lot of physical and emotional abuse on the colonized by the colonizer (Pfukwa, 2007). While this status quo was tolerated for quite a lengthy period of time, the black people eventually mobilized themselves against their white masters and took up arms in order to free themselves from this colonial rule. It should be appreciated that while the situation was not under their control, the blacks had several ways of registering their feelings, concerns, hopes and even intentions across. One of those ways can be revealed in the way black people started naming their children during this period.

1.2 Names and the Quest for Land

The naming patterns of any given society cannot be underestimated or overlooked as they go a long way in revealing how the society feels, how it is responding to its various situations. In that light, the naming patterns among the Ndebele during the war of liberation can be interrogated to account for the feelings of the people about themselves and about their enemies. According to Pfukwa (2007: 30), “during the armed struggle, individuals had a say in renaming themselves for safety and ideological reasons”. This assertion implies that the names had a role to play in the lives of the people in relation to their harsh situation. Names such as Lizwelethu (our land), Nomazwe (mother of lands), Bhekizwe (looking for land), Dalisizwe (creator of land) among others clearly reflect that black consciousness that prevailed at the time when the black majority had been displaced from the fertile part of the country to the dry and tsetse-fly infested areas was longed for. The names suggest in strong terms the ownership of the land regardless of the fact that the land was not in the majority of the indigenous Africans. In line with the use of names in African societies, Mashiri (2004:32) posits that:

*The name itself is an instrument of solidarity since it encourages members to fight anyone who invades their source of survival.*

It should be noted that names played an important role during the time of the liberation war to conscientise others of the unfair conditions in which they lived in case they were not aware of the implications of being colonised.

1.3 Naming for Black Resistance

The indigenous Zimbabwean people demonstrated so much intelligence by manipulating those resources that were within their reach in order to communicate various messages to each other. Naming patterns demonstrated that although some of the names were odd and unusual, they served as text messages which narrated a story about the liberation war whose main objective was to reverse the status quo which was tilted in favour of the white minority. Pfukwa (2007:21) confirms this in reference to war naming patterns when he says:

*The war name was embedded in the history of resistance that probably is longer than that of the Second Chimurenga...in most African communities, a name is semantically transparent whereas the European counterpart is often semantically opaque.*

This form of resistance is portrayed in Ndebele names such as:

- *Mpiyezwe* - the war of the land
- *Lizwelethu* - our land
- *Sehlulizitha* - we have conquered the enemies.

Apart from the resistance that these names portray, they also go a long way in revealing the emotional feelings that the local people had with regards to their land which has been repossessed by the colonizer. The names also serve to justify that there is a reason for them to fight the enemy in order to free and retain their stolen property. The names also suggest that inward quest for ownership especially of the most wanted entity at that time which is the land, and being the reason why some of the names had the suffix /-ethu/, /-ethu/, or /-wethu/ (ours) just to emphasize that even though the land was not in their hands, it still belonged to the black majority and somehow they felt detached from it hence there was quest for the spiritual, emotional and physical yearning to repossess what they saw as their heritage. Pongweni (1983) in Pfukwa (2007:22) underscores the power behind the names given to children during the liberation war by asserting that:
These names were developed in an environment of conflict and are a vital chronicle of popular resistance. They are a powerful expression of resistance and can encapsulate an experience in the past or can threaten an action in the future.

Colonization by its very nature is harsh and cruel to both the colonizer and the colonized because the pain that is inflicted on one party is meted out somehow to the other party. It is a system which is characterized by enmity, uncertainty and suspicion on both sides so much so that almost anything that is done by either of the parties is done in order to spite the other be it directly or otherwise. It is therefore not a surprise to find out that there are a number of Ndebele children who were born way before the country attained its independence whose names emphasized this enmity between these two races that were at war and which were optimistic in nature. Names such as the following resulted:

/\Ngobizitha/ we have conquered our enemies
/\Sehlulizitha/ same as above
/\Singobile/ we have conquered.

It is ironic that such names of victory were given to children even before victory had been attained and worse still no one knew when the war would end. However, this goes to show the aspirations and the determination the Ndebele people were anticipating that one day they will take control of their destiny. Chitando (2001: 148) alludes to the same idea when he says:

As parents experienced the demand of the war, as well as anticipated the sweetness of victory, they gave their children names that were steeped in Shona (Ndebele) traditions.

There were so many reasons why the black people of Zimbabwe took up arms and fought the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. However, chief among those reasons was the issue of land. The land issue was, and has remained a thorny issue in Zimbabwe even today dating back to the days when Cecil John Rhodes colonized the small Southern African country. When the white man took control of the country, several laws were passed which took away the land rights from the local people and gave all the privileges to the colonizer, for example, the Land Tenure Act of 1969, the Land Husbandry Act of 1951 as well as the establishment of the Tribal Trust Lands Act of 1967 which saw Africans being moved to areas which were uninhabitable for both human and animal life. Peters and Peters (2003:190) speak about these unfair land practices by the oppressor during the colonial era saying:

In an effort to grant protection of land rights to migrant male labour and foster limited African capitalist agricultural production, the settler government of Rhodesia adopted the Native Land Husbandry Act (NLHA) in 1951.

The Ndebele, like all the other indigenous inhabitants of the land were so much attached to their land as a source of life and as such, depriving them of land was as good as denying them of life itself. This attachment to the land can easily be observed from the prevalence of names of children born at that time whose names one way or the other spoke volumes about land. What is noteworthy is the way the structure of the name was crafted to portray the various aspects that relate to land yet most of the names still bore the central issue which is land. The stem /\zwe/ which carries the concept of land characterises the names given to children who were born during that particular era. This can be observed from the prevalent Ndebele names below:

/\zwelithini/ -what is the land saying?
/\zwelibanzi/- the land is vast/wide
/\zwelabokhokho/- our ancestors’ land
/\zwelethu/- our land
/\nomazwe/- mother of lands
/\nozizwe/- same as above
/\zwelinzima/- the land is tough/hard
/\butholezwe/- soldier of the land.

One cannot over emphasize the meaning as well as the spirit that is embedded in those names especially in relation to the situation that was prevailing at that time. What the local people would proceed to do after naming their children this way would be everyone’s guess. The power behind the names of this nature finds meaning in Pfukwa (2007:7) who says that:

Some war names were odd, unconventional and ephemeral but each was a text with a long story about war which was a movement that sought to overhaul a political system that disadvantaged the majority of the population.
1.4 Names and the Optimistic Thoughts on the Forthcoming Liberation

There are certain instances where names given to children were, or at least, sounded not only arrogant and aggressive but also determined. Such names were usually direct and straight to the point and spelled out the pent up anger that the Africans had about their colonial masters. In most cases the names indicated the anticipated post-independence period which people thought would be characterized by equal access to resources and privileges where the once-a-slave would be the master even over the coloniser. Some of the names had similarities with the pseudo names that were being used by the guerrillas who were involved in the actual fighting and they usually spoke of the imminent victory and most anticipated Independence Day. Some of such names are indicated below:

/sobusa/- we shall rule
/busani/- rule over
/mbuso/- kingdom
/velempini/- one who comes from war.

Those which were direct are:

/kozekulunge/- it shall be well
/mabhunu lizaphela/- whites you shall be finished
/silindilizwe/- we are waiting for the land.

These are names which do not show any fatigue on the part of the indigenous people whose determination can be read from the loud and clear message embedded in those names. The change in the naming patterns among the Ndebele during the war of liberation cannot be underestimated as it reveals and reflects the general feelings, aspirations and emotions of the people as well as their determination to free themselves from the bondage of colonialism which they eventually did in the year 1980. It is therefore, not out of line for the writer to conclude that children's names during the war of liberation in Zimbabwe are a reservoir of history and culture for a society and so much can be learned about that society by way of studying the names that it gives to its children.

2.0 THE POST INDEPENDENCE ERA

Ndebele children's names which allude to independence era range from the time we got independence up to the present time; they portray, satirise, and even show hatred and fear on certain happenings of the country.

2.1 The Independence Euphoria

The Ndebele children's names of the post independence generation are a record of the Ndebele people's experiences. They reflect a history full of challenges. They speak volumes about Zimbabwean history as they trace the trials and tribulations that the country and its people went through. These names celebrate, mourn, shame, probe or interrogate depending on the various contexts that people find themselves in. The year 1980 saw the lowering of the Union Jack and the raising of the Zimbabwean flag, a symbol marking the end of a bitter and traumatizing war. Zimbabweans were happy that the war which had changed people's lives in a significant way had come to an end. This celebratory tone was captured in the names given to children born in 1980 and 1981. Such names include, Nkululekoyethu (our freedom), Mkhululi (liberator), Sinqobibhunu (we have conquered the white man) and Zibuse (independence). The people or bearers of these names which were expressing joy, hope and expectations at that time now serve as a plain satiric record. These bearers are now in their early thirties and their names serve as a reminder of how the ruling party hijacked the people's struggle for independence since there is very little or nothing to show that the people have been liberated. By making constant and objective reference to these names, the society can go back and evaluate its progress which should be measured against known principles and promises which were responsible for driving the indigenous people into the war front to try and liberate themselves. In the present context, such names become a form of satire as they laugh and mock the independence we got and the immorality of the leadership.

2.2 The 5th Brigade Era

The independence celebrations in Matabeleland were short-lived as that region was soon engulfed in a puzzling so called "war" that was difficult to comprehend. After the ruling party had claimed that there were dissidents trying to overthrow the government, it deployed a special North Korean trained army known as the 5th Brigade to this area. It was the brutality of this army to the innocent civilians that makes the years 1982-1986 memorable to
the people of Matabeleland. This brutality is captured in the Catholic Commission for justice and peace report quoted by Muzondidya (2009: 179) who postulates that, “the 5th brigade military operations became a bizarre combination of random killing, abductions and torture of PF ZAPU supporters and Ndebele speaking civilians, raping of women and girls”. As the Ndebele were grieving and mourning the slaughter of people in the region, the naming shifted from a celebratory mood to a sombre one. Popular names of children born during this period question the motive behind the war, these include: Sibangani (why are we fighting?), Senzeni (what have we done?), Lisibulalelani (why are you killing us?). A certain child whose father escaped at the notorious torture camp called Bhalagwe and crossed the border to South Africa was named Bhalagwe. It is important to note that this history has not been officially recorded in history books and such names are a way of breaking the silence. Such names interrogate the morality of the leadership that inflicts pain on innocent civilians. The unity accord of 1987 brought this war to an end and a number of children were named after this popular event. These names include Bambanani (unite), Yunithi (Unity), Xolelanani (forgive each other). This goes to show that as the circumstances or the environment changes so do the imperatives of naming to dramatise these exigencies.

3.0 NATURAL HAZARDS AND THE NAMING PRACTICE

Since time immemorial, Ndebele people have used names as a way of recording memories and expressing their experiences. HIV and AIDS, and as well as tropical cyclones have not gone unnoticed among the Ndebele, as this is evidenced from various experience-laden names given to children whenever such disasters occurred.

3.1 Naming in the Context of Tropical Cyclones

The Ndebele economic base is agrarian in nature, so whatever tempers around with their agricultural activities temper around with their souls so to speak. The most crucial factor in agriculture that determines a bumper harvest is rainfall. Rainfall patterns were unpredictable ever since the new millennium when tropical cyclones became more prevalent. Tropical cyclones are intense storms which form over warm tropical oceans. A certain area might receive intensive rainfall or flooding if it is on a windward slope and experience dry spells if on the leeward slope or rain shadow area. The Zimbabwean country has been severely hit by three tropical cyclones whose names are; Eline which occurred in year 2000, Japhet in 2003 and recently Funso in 2012.

Tropical cyclones originated in the western countries and these have found their way to and landed in Africa, with names already attached to them. Western concepts has it that, before the official naming of cyclones in western countries began, significant tropical cyclones were named after annoying politicians, mythological creatures, saints and place names. Since tropical cyclones originated outside Africa or Zimbabwe especially, this implies that the Ndebele people did not have the privilege of naming these tropical cyclones because they were already named by the people of where it originated. Hence the Ndebele people named their children after the severe- felt- effects caused by these cyclones.

Tropical cyclone Eline landed in Zimbabwe on the 21st of February 2000 (Nkala, 2000:28). Nkala (2000:2) highlights that this cyclone was characterised by winds, severe thunderstorms and persistent heavy rains mostly affected areas being Manicaland, Masvingo, Matabeleland South and Midlands. During this season some very arid areas in Matabeleland South, Masvingo and Manicaland received uncharacteristically high rainfalls. This shows that the effects of the cyclone were overwhelming as it caused landslides and flooding, buildings, roads and crops were swept away, and this brought famine to the land. More so, disease outbreaks marking the flood aftermath were severe and these included cholera, malaria among other diseases.

In terms of Malaria, the most vulnerable people where pregnant women and children under the age of five. Nkala (2000) says that treated nets and mosquito insecticides were distributed to these vulnerable people in order to prevent malaria morbidity and mortality among the identified groups at most immediate risk as well as to prevent and control malaria epidemics as a result of the flooding due to cyclone Eline. This kind of exercise bore the expected children names and these were Mosikito (mosquito) though often used as a nickname among other names.

In addition to the above view, Nkala (2000:8) highlights that Beitbridge and Gwanda districts were attacked by floods caused by cyclone Eline at a time when they were still benefiting from Child Supplementary Feeding due to the 1997/98 drought. This made these two districts in Matabeleland south at a very high risk of food deficits. As a result the food aid in form of porridge was given to children under 5 years to prevent an increase in acute malnutrition among these children. This kind of exercise earned these children names like Poyoyo (funny term meaning porridge), Khanasayidi (used when directing tricks for eating porridge while still hot, indicating that, which lies near the plate brim is warm as compared to a hot stuff in the centre of the plate), and some children born during that time were named Bakhosoi (free food), Sinkiwe (we have been given) and Siphathisiwe (we have been helped), because adults were also given food aid by World Food Programme.

Though this kind of aid was rendered to these people, it did not make considerable changes as these were temporary aids. The insignificance of such aids maybe were due to the fact that cyclone Eline coincided
with the beginning of the country’s 10-year economic decline, meaning that meaningful reconstructions to the damaged property were not possible and hence always reminded people of such hard times they experienced.

Such a history was captured in children’s names for remembrance, for example, names like Silobile (we have lost a lot) and Siphetbangani (what will be our ending)?

As though the effects of tropical cyclone Eline were not enough, three years latter Zimbabwe was struck by another tropical cyclone named Japhet. Cyclone Japhet ravaged countries like Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Though tropical cyclone Japhet was not as severe as Eline, its effects were indeed felt and recorded by Ndebele people, as it killed two people and affected 6000 others (IRIN). Crops, livestock and homes were lost in the flooding. Cyclone Japhet earned children who were born during and soon after its effects names such as Siphepho (strong gale), Lindukufa (waiting to die), due to the lost hope of life people had at that time.

Tropical cyclone Funso was another cyclone which struck Zimbabwe, and this was experienced 9 years latter in Zimbabwe, in 2012 and this time it was not all about flooding but the dry spells to the land. The Celestial Convergence - VOA News indicated that these dry spells are caused by dry continental air from tropical cyclone Funso, and has severely devastated Zimbabwean crops.

The Meteorological Services Director, Zinyemba said the tropical cyclone Funso, which has dumping heavy rains on the coastal regions of Mozambique and Swaziland, has ironically brought misery to the south west of Zimbabwe where villagers say their crops have wilted due to a lack of rain (The Celestial Convergence - VOA News). These dry conditions caused havoc in these regions where some fields have been turned into dust bowls and as a result villagers were appealing for food aid following the ruin of their crops.

Zinyemba alludes that, at Gwanda North, Thandeko Zinti Mkandla, the lawmaker said Matabalalaland south crops are almost write off at this point. While a Matobo villager Bekithemba Nkomo said crops have been hit hard. Bekithemba Nkomo said, “the situation is hopeless in all parts of Matobo”. Names given to children born during this incident are Phelithemba (we have lost hope), Ndalambi (severe hunger), Phephelaphi (where to seek refuge) and Silobile (we are no more).

3.2 Names in the context of HIV and AIDS

AIDS is another natural disaster that has claimed massive numbers of peoples’ lives per day. The AIDS pandemic is not curable, only suppressive measures are adopted by people who are infected by it, but its devastating effects are felt not only in Zimbabwe, but at a global scale. AIDS effects have not also escaped the observation of the Ndebele people, and such observations were recorded in their children’s names like; Silliswe (we have been spared) usually used to a child born of HIV and AIDS parents, Siphetbangani (for how long shall we suffer this pandemic?), this kind of a name shows extreme anxiety of people as they question when will the pandemic be over and Silobile (we are finished) such a name portrays that people have lost hope for life.

Some of the names portray different reactions to these disasters as evidenced in the following name; Sithembene (we trust each other). This kind of a name is in line with the biblical directive of one man one woman, and as well as fostering the principle of faithfulness in marriage.

4.0 NAMES DERIVED FROM CULTURE

Culture is a way of life of a people. It portrays their norms, beliefs and values. P’Bitek (1986) defines culture as philosophy lived and celebrated by a people. The Ndebele naming system is deeply rooted in Ndebele culture as well as their philosophy. African culture in general and Ndebele in particular, dignifies women as postulated by Sofola in Hudson – Weems (2004:66) who states that:

The female gender is the centre of life, the magnate that holds the social cosmos intact and alive.
Destroy her and destroy life itself. (Africana Womanism xviii).

This strong, probing, enthusiastic and pregnant message speaks volumes on the honoured status of women – dignity. This resulted in most women names portraying this dignity and hence the celebration of women as child bearers, bearers of beauty, care givers and mothers of nations, as portrayed in such names like Nozizwe (mother of nations), Nomazhawe (mother of warriors), Nomalanga (mother of days), Nombuso (mother of kingdoms). Such names constantly concietise us of how much respect should be rendered to women, yet it is regrettable to note that, in most cases, they are no longer given that dignity portrayed by such names. This kind of unexpected change was triggered by the coloniser, who brought foreign ideas and disturbed the society. Traditional practices like polygamy had so much value before the coming of the coloniser but, nowadays, they have been denigrates as evil and backward.

A polygamous marriage which was so much adorned and cherished in the traditional past, was ruined by the coloniser with his foreign philosophy, hence became the battleground for power relations. The polygamous contest of power was usually between women versus husband and first wife versus younger wives, centred on who rules who, how, and to what extent? This follows that such marriage arrangements became conflict – laden
situations in which power relations and the status between the giver of the name and the receiver of the onomastic message play an important role, for example, one cannot respond directly to the criticisms of the head of the family or to the injustices of a senior woman or any other woman in order to avoid physical fights among them. So the best possible way that was and is manipulated which one used to avenge oneself against the offender was through this onomastic practice. Ndebele people used children’s names to indirectly communicate their feelings and opinions, particularly to such conflict-laden situations. This communication allowed them to express a variety of grievances in spite of the power relations in play. As a result children’s names born into such arrangements portray the experiences of people, for example, Siphilisiwe (we have been spared from death), Zondiwe (we have been hated), Sinanzeni (care for us), Hluphekile (we have been troubled), Sihlaleleni (why are we staying here?), Qaphela (be aware), Thuthani (dislocate), Xolile (have forgiven). These names portray the current characteristics of polygamy which are jealousy, hatred, greed, witchcraft and many other demeaning names which are exactly the inverse of the traditional characteristics of polygamy before the invasion of the Ndebele culture by foreign cultures.

More so, this kind of onomastic system is aimed at repairing what is considered to be wrong or an infringement on the right of the name giver and interpellator (Meiring 2010:223). As a result, therefore one can stipulate that this kind of onomastic practice is a useful corrective tool that can be employed by both the offender and the offended to call back one to his/her senses.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In the discussion of this paper, it has been observed that the Ndebele onomastic system is adaptive as it records changes of times and situations and even when a society has been confronted with a challenge. The Ndebele onomastic practice has been tracked right from the liberation struggle era up to the present time with special focus on the people’s views and feelings as regards the liberation struggle. The naming patterns have also been traced to the post-independence era, the impact of natural hazards which include pandemic diseases like HIV and AIDS, and culture. These naming tendencies have also been applied to tropical cyclones that destroyed the land in various ways as well as leading to a setback in agriculture and developmental activities. This article explores the complex nature of the messages conveyed by such names. This indeed portrays that naming is the window which mirrors the history and philosophy of a people particularly the Ndebele.

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