

The Role of Place-Names in Preserving Living Heritage in Matabeleland

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the role of indigenous place-names in Matabeleland as a way of preserving living heritage. Names serve an important function of connecting us with our environment and the cosmos. They connect us with our spirit world, physical natural and the built environments, thus they and should be preserved as part of our oral history and cultural heritage. Earlier toponomastics research done in Bulawayo and the surrounding areas of Matabeleland has focused more on the linguistic modelling and the etymology of these names without attention to the role of names in the preservation aspect of living heritage. Using the New Convergence Theory the study advances the idea that indigenous place-names are key in preserving living heritage, particularly wildlife as a form of living heritage. By focusing on the intersections between toponyms and wildlife within selected Matabeleland communities in Zimbabwe, this article analyses and bring to the fore how the abundant wildlife informs the place-naming in both rural and urban contexts.

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of toponyms find relevance in the recognition by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), as part of the intangible cultural heritage and the realisation that, if neglected many toponyms will be destined to be permanently unexplained, concealing their original meanings, which will never be revealed and perhaps permanently lost[1]. Intangible heritage also includes oral traditions and expressions, including language, performing arts, social practices, knowledge and practices about nature and the universe, craftsmanship and even folklore[2]. Wildlife forms an important part of this living heritage. However, in much of Africa, heritage management has been mainly concerned with the preservation and presentation of heritage sites from a technical point of view culminating in bias and an emphasis on the preservation of the architecturally spectacular places, such as the pyramids, forts, castles and stone monuments. Although the conceptions of heritage are slowly changing, in most cases focus has remained largely on the tangible elements of the monumental and archaeological form[3]. Heritage is often defined as our legacy from the past, what we live within the present, and what we pass on to future generations to learn from, marvel at and enjoy. Thus, wildlife is an important aspect of our living heritage that we need to preserve by all means possible, especially considering that some of the species face imminent extinction. The incompleteness of heritage conservation initiatives that do not factor in wildlife cannot be overemphasised. Conceptions of heritage as non-living have always militated against efforts to conserve living forms of heritage, particularly wildlife. In this

regard, there is a need to broaden definitions and perspectives on heritage to incorporate living forms of heritage rather than limit ourselves to physical non-living monuments and intangible forms.

II. BACKGROUND

A people's language is part of their intangible cultural heritage that should be preserved and protected through toponyms as place-names represent important values in terms of cultural and linguistic history [4]. Place-names are an important part of our geographical and cultural environment. Place-names are of major social importance and identify geographical entities of different kinds and represent irreplaceable cultural values of vital significance to people's sense of well-being and feeling at home [5]. Further, place-names preservation is an important societal responsibility and every care must be taken to ensure that place-name planning is carried out in such a way that the functionality of the place-name stock is preserved and the cultural heritage is protected in a rapidly changing society.

In this regard, the place names of a people constitute a very important part of the language of that people, [6] as they sometimes include words and elements no longer common in that language. Ref [7] says, place-names constitute an essential part of the cultural heritage of a nation that reflects varied aspects of a people's economic, political, social and religious history. This is because, through toponymy, people immortalise their heroes and leaders, bringing to life their legends of mythology and religion, commemorating important events, celebrating milestones while reflecting the beliefs, values, fears and aspirations. Names embody words for reference to flora, fauna, climatology, geology, hydrology, topography and many other aspects of the country in which people live [6].

Place-names are either coined as a description of the features or of circumstances that influenced the naming process or are identifiers of the landscape [4]. They may be viewed as a historical record of the name-givers or the place itself in terms of its habitation and development. Thus, place-names are an important part of the history of any given area and if interpreted correctly, they reveal more about name-givers as well as their understanding of the named place at the time of naming [6]. Through a careful and detailed study of place names, one can easily understand the history of any place. Although the common practice is that in the cities and towns

street names and names of buildings may be thought of as merely addresses in the landscape for topographic maps of the surroundings mainly serving a function of environmental detail recognition, place-names are part of the rich tapestry of a people heritage through which historical events and memories are archived, thus, “Place-names are pegs which carry incidents and stories” [6]. Every place-name represents space-related concepts filled with contents[1], conveying these contents to inhabitants of the place as well as to people from the outside insofar as the latter know these contents or have learned about them. In this function, place-names are very similar to fags or coats of arms (Jordan, 2012) [8] closely linked with economic and politic interests and often a source of conflict.

2.1 The function of place-names

All names have a deictic or monoreferential function[4]. However, place-names precisely have monoreferentiality that applies to places or localities giving them address functions. Place-name typically exist in relation to a geographical object, real or imagined, and are subject to change as the object changes character. It is this address function that makes place-names an indispensable linguistic contrivance at any community’s disposal for daily communication. Due to the increasing complexity of human societies, the authorities want to regulate names in certain ways and certain contexts, such as their written forms, what name is to be chosen, and what area they are to apply to[4]. Apart from the address function, place-names function several other levels such as cognitive, emotive as well as ideological. This means that names create are a powerful tool for shaping and regulating human behaviour and interaction as names harbour certain ideologies that often arouse certain emotions in people.

Names are an important and very common method of heritage preservation as names tend to immortalise the mortal such as people and animals. [1] argues that “every single geographical name preserves, in whole or in part, the reasons for its origin and its original meaning.” Within local communities, geographical names become markers of identity for people and other living and non-living entities originating from a particular area.

III. METHODOLOGY

In terms of methodology, the paper relies on a comprehensive review of literature relating to toponymy in general. Ref [1] argues that “[O]nly the study of documentary sources and the cooperation of several branches of knowledge (linguistic, historical, geographical, palaeographic, diplomatic, natural, geological, etc.) may provide an interpretative key to the original meaning of a name”. The documentary research method was employed. This method involves analysing documents containing information about the phenomena of interest to the researcher [9]. Although this method is not common in the social sciences [10], it provides useful tools to categorise, investigate, interpret and identify the limitations of physical sources, be they in the private or public domain [11].

For this paper, various publications in the field of toponomastics and onomastics, in general, were studied. For the identified areas, maps and official documents containing place names and street names were also reviewed.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that is adopted in this paper is the New Convergence Theory. The New Convergence Theory is an integrative theory that does not seek to replace the existing ones, but complement them, taking into account several additional issues [12]. This is a new form of linguistic comparativism in particular into the field of historical toponomastics and general onomastics. Ref [12] shows that the New Convergence Theory’s methodology can be applied also to the general onomastics and toponomastics in particular to those of undocumented and endangered languages of non-Indo-European origin. It brings in new insights into the interpretation of toponyms within other theoretical perspectives such as hermeneutics without seeking to replace them. Thus the interpretation and understanding of indigenous place names should be done within the larger context of a people’s cultures and histories. It brings to the discussion ethno-zoology and ethnobotany in seeking to understand human relationships with nature, particularly in the African context. By deploying the New Convergence Theory in the study of intersections between toponyms and wildlife, this article seeks to analyse and bring to the fore how the latter informs the former within selected Matabeleland communities in Zimbabwe.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Ethno-zoology and indigenous place names

The researcher chose Chezhou, Kenyandavu, Sitokorombizi and Dete as place-names that indicate the importance of wildlife and to link these place names to ethnozology. Ethnozology can be defined as the scientific study of the relationship between people and wildlife. Central to ethnozology is the nomenclature, the study of naming techniques and choosing between competing names. Closely linked to ethno-zoology is the concept of ethnobotany, the scientific study of the relationship between people and plants. Indigenous names of plants and animals belong to folk-taxonomy and are part of the oral indigenous knowledge system. Some of these plants and animals have become extinct and they can only be immortalised through and preserved through toponyms. Place-names that are steeped in ethno-zoology are an important intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, that is being constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for biodiversity, cultural diversity and human creativity[2].

5.2 Urban street names

The naming of streets, roads, squares and other public and immovable objects is an important administrative activity for local authorities [4] and occurs in two ways; through spontaneous (popular) or baptism. In the Zimbabwean context, the latter is the most common way of naming streets, roads and immovable public objects. The act of baptism is giving an entity a name by naming it after another object. History and ideology play an important role in urban place-naming in Zimbabwe making baptism the most used naming strategy with names falling into different categories. Concerning naming category, naming (names arranged according to meanings groups) has been usual, for example, names of people, names of animals, geographical features, Ndebele history as well as created names. Bulawayo was founded on the backdrop of the collapse of the Ndebele kingdom in 1893 hence most of these names of streets in the central business district and the city's affluent and formerly non-African suburbs still bear foreign colonial names, most being names of former British monarchs, missionaries, founders, explorers, and commissioners as well as names of transposed European landscapes [13]. A survey of some of the city's affluent suburbs such as Hillside, Khumalo and Ilanda among others reveals such names as Cecil, Leander, Edward, Bookless and Moffatt among others, many all of which are colonial.

5.3 Selbourne Park

Selbourne Park is an affluent post-independence suburb in Bulawayo. It is a predominantly black middle-class suburb whose streets are exclusively names of wildlife and in Ndebele. Although its official name is Selbourne Park, a good section of the Ndebele speakers call it Solobhoni Park. Ref [13] argues that some of the European place names (in Matabeleland) have been modelled by the Ndebele people into their own phonological and syllabic patterns. This is because the language in which a place names is, plays a key role in the political establishment and the modelling of Solobhoni from Selbourne is one such example. It can thus be argued that the Ndebele had to name all the streets in this affluent suburb as a means of self-assertion and political establishment because “[A]ccording to their historical relevance, geographical names could also become symbols and they can express identity, belonging, possession, ownership and property” [1].

Selbourne Park is one such place whose streets names are a rich repository of Zimbabwe's wildlife. Despite the name of the suburb being colonial, all the street names are referenced after the wildlife and in Ndebele language corroborating the idea of a (game) park. In other words, Selbourne Park is a virtual game park where one can encounter all the wildlife in their Ndebele names. In this regard, even the most endangered and even extinct species like the white rhino (*umkhombo*) have been immortalised by naming a street in Selbourne Park. As one navigates the streets of Selbourne Park, they constantly come across the various wildlife immortalised

through street names in the Ndebele language. In this regard, the Ndebele used the naming of these streets as a social act to narrate their identity while reconstructing and positioning themselves in relation to others (Kearns and Berg, 2002) [14]. Such acts of naming can also be read as part of the toponymic warfare whereby the Ndebele were establishing themselves and asserting their dominance over other groups and thus taking control of the city.

5.4 Dete

The giving of names takes place either through the bringing in of existing names in the area or through the creation of new names [4]. The name Dete is a corrupted form of the term *idetema*, a Nambya term for swamps and morasses which are a dominant physical environmental feature in the area. The Dete Township is a small railway re-crewing township established by the National Railway on the bounds of Hwange National Park. It is named after the swamps and marshes that are characteristic of the areas surrounding the place. The name Detemais reflected in the name of a local secondary school Detema Secondary School which it shares with a local hotel Detema Safari Lodge.

Dete Township has three residential areas with only one section still under the founding developers of the settlement, the National Railways of Zimbabwe while others have been put under local government. Interestingly, the streets in this section of the township are named with reference to the wildlife found in the area. It should be noted that Dete Township was established by the colonial government and although the developers found it worthy to use the names of the wildlife to name the streets, they did not opt for local names. One of the most likely and probable reasons for this neglect could have been that the Nambya language was a marginalised minority language and the suburb in question was meant for the white elite of the NRZ employees. However, this section of Dete is a miniature and English version of Selbourne Park. It is a living testimony of how ethnozoology affects toponyms on a national and global scale.

5.5 Names of villages

Geographical names are also an intricate kaleidoscope of elements in which is written the story of mankind and so they are part of the cultural heritage of humankind [1]. Ref [4] points out that “[T]he majority of place-names have arisen as expressions describing certain properties of the locality that has been given the name, and they thus provide information about natural and cultural circumstances at the time the names were given in the areas to which they belong.” In other parts of the Matabeleland region, there are place names that reflect the abundance of wildlife in the area. In the district of Lupane, there are villages named Kenyandavu and Stokorombizi as well as Chezhou in Hwange district. Some of these toponyms reflect the past topography of places, present fauna and flora, while some keep the history of the people because of their connection with a historical period or historical activity and event [15]. Moreover, these toponyms contain traces of the

memory of the relationship between Man and Earth, though they change form, pronunciation and meaning over time, becoming opaque. As [1] would suggest, the opacity of a large part of contemporary place names is the consequence of a natural lack of memory and incredibly misspelt or mispronounced ancient toponyms inherited from the past. These place-names represent an inherited large amount of toponyms, incredibly distorted by authorities and maintained ever after the same. At another level, adulterated names passed on orally and have been collected and processed by the ignorant foreign dominators and were eventually recognized on the site by surveyors ill-informed about the dialect and sometimes even of the official language.

5.6 *Kenyandavu*

This is the official name of a village, some 100km north of Matabeleland North provincial capital Lupane on the Lupane-Binga frontier. However, this name is a corrupted and Ndebelised version of *kanwandavu* (a drinking place for the lions). It is a predominantly Tonga village although it has become home to a multiplicity of ethnicities partly due to immigration and resettlement in recent years. The name *Kanwandavu* has become almost non-existent due to its corruption by the pro-Ndebele authorities to *Kenyandavu*. Properly captured, this name is important historical documentation [4] of the area. Within the same area, one other place name that has suffered a similar fate is the name *tutobelambizi* (we are following the zebras) which is often pronounced and written *Stokorombizi* by the pro-Ndebele authorities. These place-names have a historical connectedness to certain periods and activities in the history of the area [15]. While these names serve as repositories of living heritage and history of the people in the area, they also provide examples of how indigenous names in general and place names, in particular, have suffered from hegemonic tendencies that seek to replace one memory with another. In an attempt to adapt history into Ndebele toponyms, rules of Ndebele phonology are followed resulting in some sound changes from the original words [15]. This ultimately results in a dilemma as the origin and meaning, for many toponyms, become permanently shrouded in mystery because sometimes the characters in which the toponym is written and the story of the name have an impenetrable form, as an encrypted code [1].

5.7 *Chezhou*

Chezhou village is about five kilometres north of the railway town of Dete on the outskirts of Hwange National Park. The name *Chezhou* is the name of a stream that was frequented by several herds of elephants. Even to date, there is a heavy seasonal presence of elephants in the areas despite the acute human-wildlife conflict. Thus, the name *Chezhou* is a Nambya term denoting the place of (many) elephants or elephant territory. The names that we find in any society have etymologies that can be traced to certain historical experiences or concepts [13]. This is corroborated by Ref [4]

who observes that place-names are part of the cultural heritage in the sense that they tell us something about the locality as a way of providing important supplements to the history of where people settled. Later the name *Chezhou* became the name of a village and a school under Chief *Nekatambe*. Over the years, with a growing population, *Chezhou* became the name of the village, emphasising the importance of toponyms as linguistic and historical layers, containing traces of the relationship between man and the land, even though place names are not tangible [1].

VI. CONCLUSION

Indigenous place names are an important aspect of our cultural heritage and key in preserving our living heritage. Indigenous names are part of our rich history and oral tradition that form part of individual and collective identities. They are an important source of evidence in understanding cultural histories through studying the historical narratives and tracing the names of places back into time. This makes it possible to learn whether geographical names are relatively innovations, or if they have been in use for much longer.

Names have histories that cast light on people, places and events which people consider important. However, some of these historical and cultural meanings may have been lost over time with these names becoming mere labels without any historical significance. This is partly due to the distortion of names that come with their adulteration causing them to drift away from their original meaning consequently becoming mere labels.

Within the Zimbabwean context, there is a need to engage in collaborative research on toponomastics involving different linguists and other experts in disciplines such as geography and archaeology the histories that is worth protecting. This is because toponymy is a true reflection of the linguistic history of a particular geographical location and, through this linguistic history; it also is an accurate reflection of history in general [16].

To that end, toponomastics opens up opportunities and prospects for collaboration among experts from various fields such as, geographical linguists, spatial archaeologists, experts in geographical information sensing and mapping, biologists and geneticists to build a clearer picture of the past through place names.

Place-names provide an opportunity for the immortalisation of living heritage such as flora and fauna. In the Zimbabwean context and many other former colonies of the world, one of the most common problems regarding place-names has been their corruption, and indeed this is still a major problem today, but this article brings to the foreground the importance of using place names as repositories of a people's living heritage.

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