

Who are the Ndebele and the Kalanga in Zimbabwe?

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Introduction

Our understanding of Kalanga and Ndebele identity is tainted by a general legacy of high school textbooks that have confessedly had a tremendous impact on our somewhat obviated knowledge of local ethnicities through a process known in history as 'feedback'. Under this process printed or published materials find their way back into oral traditions to emerge as common sense historical facts. In reality these common sense views come to shape both history and identity both in the sense of what it is as well as what it ought to be. As the introduction by Terence Ranger demonstrates; this goes together with the calculated construction of identities by the colonial state, which was preoccupied with naming and containing its subjects (itself a legacy on its own). Far from complicating our analysis, these legacies make it all the more interesting for the Ndebele and Kalanga who both provide excellent case studies in identity construction and its imagination.

There is also a dimension of academic research, which as Ranger observes, did not focus on ethnicity per-se. This shouldn't be a hindrance in studying ethnicity though; for we now know a lot more about the Ndebele than we would have some 30years ago (Beach 1973). In contrast, until fairly recently, we did not know as much about the Kalanga who have constantly been treated as a sub-ethnicity of the major groups in southwestern Zimbabwe such as the Ndebele, Tswana and Shona. This makes the analysis of the Kalanga and Ndebele of Zimbabwe only make sense when it takes into account local tribal histories, missionary ethnographic surveys of language culture and custom as well as academic research on these people, an approach successfully pursued by the most concise study on this issue to date (Msindo 2002).

The Ndebele

The common high school impression of the Ndebele is one of a break away branch of the Zulu empire who fled from Shaka the Zulu king under their fugitive leader Mzilikazi around c.1817. This followed Mzilikazi's refusal to hand over booty exacted from a raiding expedition resulting in Shaka sending a punitive expedition to deal with Mzilikazi. With Shaka's impis in hot pursuit Mzilikazi and his group fled across the Drakensberg Mountains, the Orange Free State, and the area occupied by Sotho-Tswana leaving behind a trail of destruction (Barnes et.al. 1994 see also Needham et..al) The reasons for this account are various, first the earliest Native Commissioners of the Rhodesian colony had been recruited from Natal and their writings about the Ndebele had been strongly influenced by a view of the Zulu as amounting to a level of 'pureness' for the Ndebele (Ranger, Msindo). Even so they constructed an orthography for Ndebele that was Zuluised (Beach 1986). As we speak now there is no standard Ndebele grammar for Ndebele in the schools, students learn Zulu grammar. Secondly the early historiography on the Mfecane upheavals in Southern Africa tended to stress the 'character and objects of Shaka' as depicting a ruthless military supremo whose tactics were adopted by the Nguni groups he dispersed who in turn used them against other groups leading to a spate of violence that swept the entire Southern African region from the Nguni heartland in the Indian Ocean coast right across the Zambezi to modern day Zambia and Malawi (Omer-Cooper 1966). This military orientation and the Zulu origin has led to the development of a specific mythology of the Ndebele as a warlike people who have often 'preyed' on their helpless neighbours, a mythology in which both the Ndebele and their supposed victims have all participated in perpetuating(Beach 1986). This mythology is also traceable to the work of early missionaries which as Anthony Chennels (1979) has shown, were accounts based on events that the missionaries had not witnessed.

In the recent past most of these views have been revised, thanks to years of research, we now have a better impression of who the Ndebele really are. First, we now know that save for the Ndebele and Gaza, all the Nguni groups that passed through the Zimbabwean plateau stayed very briefly and had less impact on the local people than was previously thought. We also know that both Ndebele and Gaza culture and language were as much affected by the local ones as much as they affected them. The Ndebele were far much able to do this than the Gaza because their political centre was

always in one place at KoBulawayo as opposed to the Gaza capital which shifted constantly between the eastern highlands and the Limpopo valley (Beach 1984). We are now clear that relations between the Ndebele and their neighbours were not necessarily antagonistic all the time but sometimes mutual, even where they were indeed antagonistic the Ndebele were not always the victors. (Beach 1974) Lastly we are now certain that the Ndebele economy did not rely predominantly on raiding but had a sound agricultural base with a strong herding component (Cobbing 1976). This now puts us on a firmer footing to understand the Ndebele as a people first and then as an ethnicity. All along we have been conveniently working with the general assumption of the Ndebele as a people yet that is not all there is to it, the concept of Ndebele is loaded and needs to be unpacked. R. Kent Rasmussen in his authoritative *Migrant Kingdom: Mzilikazi's Ndebele in South Africa* (Rex Collins, London, 1978) prefers to use the term Ndebele in a 'political sense'. This way he is able to refer only to those people who recognised Mzilikazi as their king and possessed the rights and responsibilities within the state system that he created after leaving Zululand. This kingdom lasted until 1894 when his son and successor Lobengula died. Beyond that he acknowledges that the concept of 'Ndebelehood' took on different kinds of meanings. It is these transformations that can help us understand who the Ndebele really are.

Where does the name Ndebele come from? Again secondary school history has it that Ndebele is a corruption of the Sotho word *Matabele* a nickname given to Mzilikazi's warriors by the Sotho-Tswana literally meaning 'men of long shields'. Further research although confirming that indeed Ndebele is an anglicised version of the word *Matabele* the meaning of the former is controversial. This name had been applied to other Nguni speaking people apart from the Ndebele, it therefore meant 'stranger' more than anything else. With time it came to refer only to Mzilikazi's people and to the 'Transvaal Ndebele' although these two groups are not related (Kent Rasmussen 1978).

The moulding of Ndebele ethnicity is an entirely different thing altogether and this should take into account developments shaping Ndebele society to date. Enocent Msindo (2002) argues that Ndebele ethnicity developed hand in hand with the development of the political, social and economic aspects of the state. Political formation, he says, coincided with the formation of internal ethnic differentiation. Beyond Zululand, Ndebele political formation had pursued a policy of incorporation and by the time they got settled in the southeastern parts of Zimbabwe, they had

become a cosmopolitan lot with more Sotho-Tswana people than the original Nguni. Here they encountered the Kalanga and Rozvi who had not only been occupying the area for a long time but had also encountered and even clashed with some Nguni groups who had passed by before the Ndebele. This is true of groups led by Mpanga, Ngwana Maseko, Zwangendaba and Nyamazana which left the Rozvi state very weak but not broken up although some Rozvi families did flee the area (Beach 1986). Somehow it could be said that this precluded any serious fights with the Ndebele to provide instead a fertile ground for a culture of assimilation which the Ndebele had already started embarking on as we have already seen. This was also convenient for a state in formation with a ruling elite that was already a minority surrounded by majority subjects in the form of the Sotho-Tswana and now the Rozvi and Kalanga.

A differentiated society of this sort has led many scholars to speculate on the mode of organisation of the Ndebele state and most have been content to explain it in terms of a *caste* system. In their simplest form Ndebele castes are divided into three broad categories, the *Zansi* consisting of the original Nguni component of the state which constituted mostly of the ruling elite, the *Enhla* composed of the Sotho-Tswana and other groups incorporated on the way to the Zimbabwean plateau, last was the *Hole* caste which was inclusive of the Kalanga, Rozvi and other Shona groups found in the area or assimilated as captives and/or slaves as early missionary accounts saw them. However these castes were not rigid classifications as has been the general assumption, intermarriage across and between the castes was permissible and it actually took place as Cobbing (1974) shows although in general the *Hole* tended to marry within their caste (Beach 1994). There could also have existed more castes than these three (Cobbing 1983). Msindo (2002) also shows us that even the *Zansi* and *Enhla* castes are in themselves misleading if viewed as biological concepts especially as *Zansi* indunas married *hole* women and their children would automatically belong to the *Zansi* caste. Similarly there are no grounds to argue for the existence of formal slavery in the Ndebele state, this thinking may as well have come from the missionaries' confusion with the role of the 'servant' amongst the Ndebele (Ibid.). We can now look at the Kalanga before we examine the linguistic make up of both the groups in question.

The Kalanga

The identity of the Kalanga like that of the Ndebele has been covered in a myriad of controversies and Enocent Msindo has again noted that this could be further complicated by the fact that Kalanga traditions were collected after almost a century of mythmaking, hence the danger of projecting backwards to a sense of Kalanganess that never existed before. A common high school text myth sees the Kalanga as a by product of the intermixture between the 'Ndebele' and local Shona (Sibanda et.al. 1981). We have already seen the Kalanga as people settled in the area well before the coming of the Nguni migrants. Yet the settlement of these migrants and that of the Ngwato and the Transvaal Sotho effectively reduced the original Kalanga area of settlement and this has led to an almost total neglect of Kalanga history. Thus there is very little known about the Kalanga before the year 1800 (Beach 1980). We know however that we can draw upon both Torwa and Rozvi history to illumine our understanding of the origins and identity of the Kalanga. The Torwa was a successor state to Great Zimbabwe which was stationed at Khami in the western parts of the country. This existed contemporaneous to and in competition with yet another successor state, the Mutapa which constantly shifted its capitals between the Dande and Zambezi valley in the northern part of the Zimbabwean plateau. Although there are some allusions to earlier 15th century Kalanga migrations into the western parts of the country from oral traditions (Wentzel 1983), it is on good record that in the seventeenth century, Khami fell within the territory of the Kalanga ruler Ndumba (Beach 1980). We are also told that occupiers of Khami perceived of themselves as Kalanga (Msindo 2002) although further linguistic research may still need to be done to establish whether the Torwa people indeed spoke Kalanga apart from perceiving themselves as such. A Rozvi invasion of the 1690s successfully took over the area and set up the Changamire state which mainly functioned as a confederacy of tributary agnates. The Rozvi dynasty intermarried with the 'Kalanga' and adopted their dialect thus preserving the cultural continuity of the Kalanga. This way a sense of cultural fluidity came into place characterised by exchange and inculturation between the two groups to the extent that Msindo (2002) views some people of the new Changamire state who perceived themselves as Rozvi to be descendants of the Torwa people.

We have already seen how the Rozvi were to become victim of the Nguni invasions that eventually led to the end of their state and how some of them were in turn incorporated into the Ndebele state system. We should know that at this time no such thing as Shona existed and that Kalanga and

Rozvi were no less identities as they were linguistic dialects, so the new look Rozvi that Msindo talks of could have perceived themselves as such only in a 'political sense'. Their identities remained multiple and like the Ndebele it remains misleading to equate their political identity with an ethnic identity. What we can safely conclude is that Kalanga culture as it had come to be was still able to maintain a high level of continuity even under Ndebele overlordship. Therefore, beyond the Ndebele invasion our reconstruction of Kalanga history and ethnicity rests on interpretations by early missionaries and writers who on their part emphasised the peaceful nature of the Kalanga as a counterpoise to their image of the Ndebele as a warlike people. We now need to look at the linguistic make of both the Ndebele and Kalanga before examining the making of their ethnicity to date.

Ndebele and Kalanga Language

Linguistically Ndebele and Kalanga occupy the southwestern parts of the country, which is an area that represents a long established culture and dialectical zone, into and out of which many different groups have passed. The zone got caught between two great systems of over-rule and incorporation-the Tswana and the Ndebele-both putting pressure on Kalanga speakers to accommodate to the ruling political culture. As a result of this situation, missionary linguists tended not to want to spend time and money developing Kalanga as a biblical or school language but preferred to work in Ndebele/Zulu and in Tswana. In fact missionary ethnographers based in the southwestern Zimbabwe originally thought that they were describing Ndebele customs but later they changed to studies of Kalanga culture after realising how thinly inculturated to the Ndebele the people were. In a similar way, London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries based at Dombodema-some of whom were sympathetic to Kalanga language-found themselves trapped between LMS Sindebele and LMS Tswana. It is interesting to see how missionary ethnographers based in the south-western parts of the country often began by thinking that they were describing Ndebele customs and culture like the series of articles by Rev O'Niell in *The Zambezi Mission Record* about the people at Empandeni Mission, the earliest of which were presented as studies of Ndebele customs but then later of Ndebele customs but then later changed to studies of Kalanga ones as the author became more aware of how thinly inculturated the Kalanga were to Ndebele culture. He was therefore more further inclined to explore further this submerged Kalanga culture.

In a similar way LMS missionaries at Dombodema some of whom were sympathetic to Kalanga language and to the local *Mwali* shrine-found themselves trapped between LMS Sindebele and LMS Tswana. (Ranger Pers. Commun. 2003). Kalanga language like Kalanga identity remains a tricky concept as we shall see below.

The case of the Ndebele language is fairly straightforward and can easily be explained in terms of *Zuluisation* of the Ndebele both by Ndebele aristocrats and the colonial officials. Ndebele rulers attached a lot of importance to language and Lobengula like Mzilikazi before him is said to have requires his subjects to speak 'Zulu'-the language of the conquerors, it was this language which was later transformed into the Ndebele of today. The Zulu language and culture was imagined as an identity for the Ndebele although the Ndebele aristocracy may never have perceived of themselves as such. This Zuluness was aspired for as a political culture despite the fact that the Khumalo clan from who they descended was not itself Zulu. The language however was promoted in its original form but gradually began to acquire an identity of its own quite distinct from Zulu as it was adopted by people both within the immediate and far off radius of the central state. It also became important as a symbol of class superiority associated with the *zansi* a language through which all the dramas of superiority were reenacted and communicated such as praise poetry and nostalgic musical recitals (Msindo 2002, see also Vail and White 1991)

Despite these aristocratic appeals to 'linguistic purity' it did not take long for early missionaries to start noticing the differences between the Ndebele spoken in southwestern Zimbabwe and Zulu and this had become an accepted fact by the 1860s. The LMS missionary Thomas Morgan Thomas was already advocating for its grammar by 1860 noticing that any attempt to use Zulu amongst the local people would prove unpopular. Nonetheless another missionary Sykes working amongst the Ndebele ruling class produced a version of Ndebele akin to Zulu. Debates emerged amongst the two on which version of Ndebele ought to be used. Eventually Thomas' version of commoner Ndebele proved more widespread although the confusion between these two versions meant that less material in SiNdebele language were produced until after the fall of the Ndebele state.

The fall of the state was a turning point both for the Ndebele and the Kalanga as it signaled the opening up of the rest of the Ndebele hinterland to evangelisation. With this development as earlier

mentioned the missionaries shifted their emphasis even further to start concentrating on Kalanga as an independent identity, a process which was forced into place by the firmness of the Kalanga themselves in denying the imposition of Ndebele culture. As Msindo sees it this was a classic case where African perceptions overcame European inventionism and this forced local missionaries focus on these languages independently. A number of written works in Kalanga emerged as a result and unlike that on Ndebele this Kalanga literature in effect helped to prop up some aspects of Kalanga cultural nationalism.

The situation amongst the Ndebele was slightly different after 1894, Ndebeles most drawn from the *Hole* class were highly receptive to the missionaries and the opportunities they offered, through mission education and participation in translation of the Bible. They became an 'elite in the formation' and were instrumental in the acceptance and popularization of the *hole* version of Ndebele that was spoken by the majority. Nevertheless some missionaries continued to teach in Zulu just as much as most missions including the LMS had to rely on Zulu teachers from South Africa. Similarly standardization of the local languages by Doke (1930) recommended that Zulu be recognized as the official language for Matabeleland. In this way Ndebele came to face the danger of being *Zulu-ised*. Msindo's incisive analysis, shows us that this situation created contradictions over the idea of pure Ndebele-ness which had come to be equated and imagined as Zulu-ness.

Msindos' is a complicated analysis of the making of Ndebele and Kalanga ethnicities which is still in formulation as he completes his doctorate in Cambridge and this part of the paper draws heavily from it. Nevertheless the crucial point he persuasively makes is that missionary education shaped Ndebele and Kalanga ethnicities in more imaginative ways, that as Ndebele speakers became more defensive of their language from *Zulu-isation* the Kalanga were frustrated by Doke (and consequently by the colonial government) 's failure to make their language official. They in turn sought accommodation within the 'nationalist' and official identity of being Ndebele yet still clinging to traditional Kalanga ethnic identity. [Based on the analysis by Msindo 2002]. Despite Msindo's *pan*-Kalanga slant this to me remains the most logical explanation for the existence of the Kalanga and Ndebele languages as we know them today. This is a fact echoed by yet another study of Kalanga language by the University of Zimbabwe linguist Jairos Kangira (2002) could have

proven invaluable but perhaps for now goes beyond the scope of this paper. A parallel can be drawn from the development of other identities apart from language during the same period

Ndebele and Kalanga Identity in Perspective.

From the above it is increasingly clear that it is hardly possible to treat Ndebele and Kalanga ethnicity separately, they are interlinked and feed a lot into each other due to shared experiences in the environments of the newly imagined Matabeleland. As Ranger (1999) sees the developments beyond the 1930s, Ndebele identity in the Matopos area (viewed within the context of Matabeleland) had managed to transcend and abolish the age old caste distinctions of *zansi*, *enhla* and *hole*. A new imagined community was coming into existence that had its own contradictions and differences. There were differences between the haves and have nots, between traditional agriculturists and modernised peasants and the list is endless. Class, generation or gender conflict he argues, may well have replaced linguistic, cultural and even ethnic conflict and there is plenty of evidence in the area to draw from. This in my opinion crystallised Ndebele and Kalanga interests into some form of communal identity reached at as a form of rebuttal to colonial injustices. Individual identities were however still maintained but by this time the Kalanga had ceased to see themselves in any way as part of the new Shona nomenclature (to which most of the Rozvi fitted in as part of Doke's Karanga dialect province) any more than they began to consider themselves to belong to the Ndebele. To illustrate this I shall have to draw from three main issues in the history of Matabeleland namely; rural and urban nationalism and the post independence disturbances.

First the increasing frustration of Africans to colonial legislation in the rural areas culminated in organised efforts by local people regardless of ethnic backgrounds to confront the state with a voice of solidarity to champion African interests. This is the background from which such organisations as *Sofasihamba* and *Sofasonke* emerge, indeed the circumstance that formed the base from which rural nationalists rallied the support of people not only from Matabeleland but from across the country. Put in the simplest form, nationalist consciousness began to override ethnic consciousness. This explains why Joshua Nkomo, a Kalanga was able to win such wide following for ZAPU from a predominantly Ndebele area.

Secondly in the urban areas where ethnic tension was manifested more clearly given the cosmopolitan nature of Africans found there, many analysts have been fooled to think that the Kalanga considered themselves Shona. Van Onselen and Phimister in an article about the Bulawayo faction fights used a court case about a Kalanga youth gang as evidence for 'Shona' organisation in Bulawayo although that gang and all other Kalanga associations in Bulawayo allied themselves with the Ndebele against the Shona.

Lastly the impact of the terror of the 5th Brigade unleashed in the early 1980s has been memorialised as a shared experience for the people of Matabeleland. The Zimbabwean government truly considered the Kalanga as part of the Matabele factor where former ZIPRA guerillas had been recruited and operated. Where insurgents considered 'dissidents' operated and were harboured. As Werbner (1991) shows for the Eastern Kalanga of Chief Bango, their survival was an enduring legacy of dislocation by both the colonial and post-colonial regimes never easy to forgive or forget a feeling common amongst even the northern Ndebele and some Tonga of Nkayi and Lupane (Alexander et.al. 2000).

In conclusion the Ndebele and Kalanga are different people with entirely different origins language and culture as has been demonstrated above. Their experiences however have of late come to be shared more often than not this has given rise to a common imagined identity of belonging among other things to Matabeleland. This imagined identity is however unique in its ability to appreciate and acknowledge differences between the two cultures.