

Ethnicity in Zimbabwe

**Transformations in
Kalanga and Ndebele
Societies, 1860–1990**

Enocent Msindo

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Abbreviations

APs	Assembly Points
ATA	African Teachers' Association
BCC	Bulawayo City Council
BFBS	British and Foreign Bible Society
BSACo	British South Africa Company (aka BSAC)
CAS	Centre for African Studies (Cambridge)
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CNC	Chief Native Commissioner
CUL	Cambridge University Library
CWM	Council for World Missions
CYL	City Youth League
FROLIZI	Front for the Liberation of Zimbabwe
ICU	Industrial and Commercial Workers Union
KCS	Kalanga Cultural Society
LMPS	Loyal Mandebele Patriotic Society
LMS	London Missionary Society (later CWM)
MCS	(Sons of) Mashonaland Cultural Society
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change
MHS	Matabele/Matabeleland Home Society
NAZ	National Archives of Zimbabwe
NC	Native Commissioner
NDP	National Democratic Party
NLHA	Native Land Husbandry Act
PCC	People's Caretaker Council
PHS	Plumtree Home Society (aka Kalanga Cultural Society)

PNC	Provincial Native Commissioner
PIST	Post Independence Survivors Trust
RU	Rhodes University
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies (London)
SRANC	Southern Rhodesia African National Congress
ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union
ZIPRA	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army
ZNP	Zimbabwe National Party

Note to the Reader

Sources

This book is based on research from primary sources. My sources, which are clearly referenced in the notes, include official government documents, personal reminiscences, missionary correspondences and reports, autobiographies, newspaper collections, and oral interviews conducted in Zimbabwe, the UK, and other countries. Throughout this book, although I have made use of primary written sources from several archives housed in institutions in South Africa the UK, and other countries, the bulk of my sources came from the National Archives of Zimbabwe. Unless explicitly stated otherwise in the notes, all sources are from the National Archives of Zimbabwe.

Names

Some place-names and people's names have been spelled differently at different times in the archival records. In this regard, while trying to capture such changes and also grapple with colonial officials' spelling errors that seriously affected the way names were pronounced and even remembered, I have attempted to represent both the historical names and the ways they are spelled today by making reference to alternative names, where possible, in parentheses/brackets or in the notes. For instance, the chieftaincy that was historically known as Madandume is also known as Matundume, Mandundume, or, more contemporarily, as Malalume, and I felt it was necessary to represent these variations in brackets. Except where variants occur in quoted text, the language of the Ndebele will be referred to as "isiNdebele" or simply as "Ndebele language," and the language of the Zulu will be referred to as "isiZulu." The language of the Kalanga will be referred to as "TjiKalanga," following their rules of grammar. I will not use the Botswana variant, Ikalanga, which has been influenced by SeTswana. I have also used TjiKalanga rules of grammar in spelling some Kalanga place-names. Therefore I have used "Madyambudzi" instead of its Ndebele variant, "Madlambuzi" or "Madhlambudzi," except where it appears as such in some quoted sources.

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Introduction

This work is a comparative study of two ethnic groups—namely, the Kalanga and Ndebele of southern Zimbabwe—whose interaction dates back to when a group of people (now called the Ndebele) settled in an area predominantly under the control of the then-weakening Rozvi state to which many small Kalanga polities paid homage. The book begins with the year 1860, following the establishment of the Inyati mission station in the Ndebele kingdom. In this work, it is argued that the interactions of the Ndebele and Kalanga peoples (the two significantly large ethnic groups in Matabeleland) over a long period of time has led to the emergence of complex identities that can be defined spatiotemporally as ethnic, regional, cultural, or even subnationalist. This complexity itself further makes studies of Matabeleland quite challenging and also controversial.

This book is pioneering in its examination of the interactions of the Ndebele and Kalanga and the kinds of identities that were formed as a result. It also revises major debates about the formation of identities, especially ethnicity. With the exception of this book, there has not been any comparative study of Ndebele and Kalanga ethnicity and the related identities that their interactions produced. Although there have recently been a handful of groundbreaking books on aspects of Matabeleland history, no works on the history of the Zimbabwean Kalanga people, save for my recent publications in journals and edited collections, have been published.

Apart from filling this gap that exists in Matabeleland history, this book contributes to African history and Zimbabwean scholarship in three main ways. First, by adopting a comparative approach to these two different communities inhabiting the same region, the book helps unravel the complexity of identities and how these have shaped the social and political character of the peoples in the region over a long period of time—beginning with the later part of the precolonial era through the postcolonial period. By examining these identities, we realize the hidden, alternative and unofficial histories; contested claims to land, to the city, and to authority in general; the struggle by communities defined as underdogs for recognition; and the different ways by which the dominant Ndebele have dealt with others of their region over time. By examining all this, we understand the contested nature of Ndebele identity and the ways in which being Ndebele has changed. However, to fully engage with the debate on Ndebele identity, one must necessarily grasp not only the region's complex history but also its confusing contemporary politics: in Matabeleland there are, on one hand, calls for secession, while on the other there are calls for Zimbabwe to become a

2 *Introduction*

federalist state. At the same time, some press merely for increased political recognition and economic development in Matabeleland within the broader, unitary Zimbabwean state. There is a marked difference between Ndebele as a political identity (in which such non-Ndebele peoples as the Kalanga and others could be shareholders) and Ndebele as an ethnic identity, which is a narrower construct in that it looks for and imagines as constituent elements of its own ethnicity aspects of what are called Ndebele culture and traditions, while also remaining malleable. Historically speaking, in Matabeleland, it was possible for TjiKalanga-speaking people to associate with the Ndebele people regionally (or politically) when they dealt with the postcolonial Zimbabwean government and yet also claim Kalanga ethnic affiliation when engaging in more internal community issues, such as the election of Kalanga chieftaincies and advocacy for Kalanga language, culture, and other issues pertinent to the domain of Kalanga "moral ethnicity."¹

The second contribution of this book lies in its revisiting of the debate on agency in the creation of identities. Scholars have generally viewed ethnicity and African identities as having been created by the elites, mostly within the colonial system. This scholarship, notwithstanding its various reformulations, does not offer a sufficiently close reading of the nature of the colonial social and political landscape. It, perhaps unwittingly, exaggerates the innovative and interventionist nature of colonial rule in Africa. In this book, I will argue that the colonial state in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was not well enough organized to thus intervene and that it operated in most cases on an experimental basis and by means of "stopgap" measures. Notwithstanding their pretense to know the "Natives," colonial officials lacked a well-rounded understanding of African social and political systems and did not have close enough ties to the African communities that would have enabled them to influence Africans and effectively enforce colonial laws. Although colonial regimes generally possessed some inventive power, this capacity was limited by their lack of knowledge and information about their subjects. For their part, Africans took advantage of these weaknesses to create and sustain alternative identities that were neither expected of them nor accepted by the colonial officials of their times. The creation of such identities, I will argue, was not always the preserve of the African elites; an important part was played by the African commoners. This book therefore revisits constructivism as theory, and extends its scope by bringing in the role of commoners in creating ethnic and other identities within their communities since the precolonial era. The resurgence of Kalanga claims to chieftaincies, which went hand in hand with their opposition to the imposition of Ndebele chiefs, for instance, is only one such struggle against imposed colonial social and political structures.

The third contribution of this book is its argument that the emergence of African ethnic consciousness and ethnic identities in Matabeleland did

not have to wait for the imposition of colonialism, but actually existed during the precolonial era. Most constructivists overreacted against primordialism to the extent that they unfairly discounted the precolonial roots of ethnicity. Until more recently, most social historians in southern Africa and other parts of Africa tended to accept that political identities were more important than ethnic identities in the precolonial era—and that African ethnic consciousness did not exist then.² In this work, I argue that the early phases of the creation of Kalanga and Ndebele ethnicity can be traced to the precolonial era, especially to the second half of the nineteenth century when relations between the Ndebele and Kalanga were marked by increasing competition for social, economic, and political space. In this struggle, the Kalanga generally became a vulnerable Other, who had to fight for the survival of their sociocultural institutions under threat of political domination. The Ndebele, as conquerors, attempted not only to perpetuate political power but also to impose parameters of social and cultural control upon the conquered in an effort to make them embrace Ndebele social and political identity. It will therefore be argued that precolonial ethnic consciousness coexisted with other identities such as belonging to chieftaincy and clan.

This book therefore offers an opportunity not only to develop theory but also to test it with tightly knit body of archival and oral evidence. It covers a fairly long period of history: from the precolonial, through the colonial, to the early years of postcolonial Zimbabwe.

Although this is primarily a historical work, the issues examined are of equal relevance to any serious researcher in African studies. I have deliberately developed my themes as separate chapters that inform each other as one reads on. The point in doing so was to demonstrate the ways in which debates around ethnicity and other identities in Zimbabwe, and particularly in Matabeleland, relate to the wider issues in both rural and urban Zimbabwe and also to broader developments of the Zimbabwean past.

Ethnicity and Identities in Matabeleland

Ndebele and Kalanga Ethnicity: Theory and Context

Matabeleland is a restless frontier where identities (ethnic, regional, and national) have shifted and taken on different meanings with time. The history of this part of Zimbabwe is not simply a history of the Ndebele people but also a history of many other ethnic groups whose cultures, traditions, and societies have yet to be sufficiently explored and whose pasts thus remain hidden. Most of the scholars that have written about Matabeleland have simply worked under the false illusion that Matabeleland was synonymous with *Ndebele*-land.¹ Thus, we have only disjointed and tiny bits of Kalanga past, Tonga folklore, and a bit of Venda history.² However, there is a growing scholarship on Ndebele history, such as Ngwabi Bhebe's work on Ndebele and their encounter with Christianity;³ Cobbing's and Rasmussen's works on Ndebele sociopolitical history;⁴ and works on Ndebele religion, ethnicity, nationalism, evictions, and postcolonial history.⁵ Recently, Sabelo Ndlovu studied precolonial Ndebele history from a human rights dimension. Using mainly Ndebele aristocrats as his sources and operating within the ambit of the Gramscian theory of hegemony, Ndlovu tried to find "notions of human rights and democracy" in the alleged autocracy, barbarism, and militarism of precolonial Ndebele politics.⁶ Ndlovu's use of the oral testimony of Ndebele aristocrats, the *zansi*, as his major source of information for his work is problematic.⁷ His informants, mainly descendants of the precolonial ruling Ndebele elite class, tend to purvey the official version of the Ndebele past that often overlooks certain precolonial Ndebele injustices perpetrated against neighboring communities and lower classes of the Ndebele society. This sanitized "official" history runs the risk of silencing other Ndebele histories, especially that of the ordinary people who were on the receiving end of the abuse of power. Today Ndlovu's historical work seems to play an important part in legitimizing contemporary demands for secession from the Zimbabwean state as it provides a glorified and "usable" version of the Ndebele past that seems to have been suppressed by both the colonial and

postcolonial Zimbabwean regimes. A more glaring gap in Matabeleland history, however, is the complete absence of comparative histories of the many ethnic groups in this region, a void that this book seeks to fill.

This book explores the relations between the Kalanga and Ndebele peoples, whose interactions date back to the time when Ndebele rulers invaded the area mainly under Rozvi control, to which numerous Kalanga polities paid homage.⁸ However, since earlier periods of Ndebele history are fairly well researched by a few historians, I will not focus on those earlier years, but will begin around 1860, a year after the establishment of the Inyati mission station in the Ndebele kingdom. From this time, written records became more available to help construct a meaningful history. In undertaking this work, my aims are threefold. First, I hope to understand the nature of Kalanga and Ndebele interactions and their different responses to critical sociopolitical and economic developments during the three historical epochs: the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial; I do not intend to write a general history of the Kalanga and Ndebele peoples as such.⁹ The interactions of these two ethnic groups over such a long time span produced complex, at times multilayered identities that constantly informed and defined these two groups' view of ethnicity, nationalism, chieftaincy, language, urbanization, boundaries of belonging, and other factors in Matabeleland and on its margins.

The comparative study of these two groups undertaken herein helps us distinguish between those that are Ndebele by virtue of ethnic identity from those who claim a broad-based Matabeleland regional and political identity by virtue of their capacity to speak an Ndebele language and their historical cultural associations with the region. Although Ndebele ethnicity is exchangeable, it is narrower than Ndebele regional political identity because the latter is more democratized as it incorporates ethnic Others as regional political partners. Although Kalanga people generally found it politically prudent to ally with Ndebele in the region, as has been the case since the late 1950s, they acknowledge themselves as a separate ethnic group from the Ndebele and closed their doors to ethnic Others when discussing sensitive local and internal ethnic issues such as the selection of their chiefs and the promotion of their languages in their schools and when dealing with such problems as perceived Ndebele cultural encroachment in their communities. Kalanga ethnic activism must therefore not be mistaken for another instance of mindless tribalism fighting against its opponent, Ndebele tribalism. It is clear that although Kalanga people tried to prevent a perceived Ndebele cultural threat, their real work was genuinely to try to rehearse what they thought would embody true Kalanganess in their communities. Their interactions with the Ndebele were therefore not synonymous with such instances where ethnicity is mobilized as an instrument for political competition—what Lonsdale termed “political tribalism”—but

theirs was a special manifestation of "moral ethnicity."¹⁰ Although they were inward-looking when debating strictly Kalanga issues, the Kalanga nevertheless reacted to external stimuli such as the Ndebele threats, the challenges of cosmopolitanism in town and other labor settlements, and above all, the challenges of colonial and postcolonial government policies that marginalized smaller ethnic groups. Therefore, debates that communities engaged in under the banner of moral ethnicity did not themselves necessarily make ethnic communities windowless. Instead, internal community debates did often give communities the latitude to look at others as well as critiquing themselves. It was not easy to define what being Kalanga or Ndebele was, without acknowledging what it was not. Since Kalanga confronted the twin problem of imposed Ndebele moral and political ideologies, conceived out of precolonial political realities and colonially imposed ideologies and traditions, the challenge of defining and maintaining Kalanga moral ethnic communities tended to carry some mild political overtones that helped to emotionalize their cause.

The second aim of this book is to revisit the popular assumption that precolonial Africans were not conscious of ethnic identities as they were of their clans, chieftaincies, lineages, and so on. I maintain instead that nineteenth-century African inhabitants of Matabeleland were conscious of their ethnicities, and that their social structures and networks were becoming more complex than has hitherto been assumed. The other identities that they also had did complement one another and were relevant in various contexts.

Although a handful of scholars now admit in principle that precolonial ethnic consciousness was possible, most of them do not actually examine the nature of precolonial ethnicity within its social, political, and ideological contexts. There is a tendency to follow generalizations that run as follows: that precolonial Africa had fluid and unstable frontiers such that people's identities often changed very rapidly with time and that Africans possessed multiple levels of identities such as class, lineage, village, and polity.¹¹ Therefore, it has been held that precolonial ethnicity scarcely existed and that ethnicity was a preconceived notion that Europeans invented for Africans as an administrative instrument.¹² This view and similar ones were propounded by social constructivists of the 1990s and beyond, who, having borrowed from Benedict Anderson's influential notion of the nations as imagined communities, now define ethnicity as an imagined identity.¹³ With a few exceptions, this scholarship still lacks a deeper appreciation of the historical evolution of African societies before colonialism and does not consider the possibility that there was, more often than not, a complementary relationship between some African chieftaincies and their ethnic identities. This relationship was sustained even in those kingdoms that drew their subjects from various ethnic communities.

Emerging scholars, like Carola Lentz, now stress the existence of what they term older "we groups." According to Lentz, precolonial models of

identity resemble “ethnic maps” on which colonial constructions of ethnicity later were drawn.¹⁴ Although this admission is a step in the right direction, it is still shy of admitting the existence of a full-fledged precolonial ethnic consciousness in Africa. An attempt at that task by Poppy Fry, who studied the Fingo, established that Fingo identity merged as individuals defined themselves in response to the social landscape of early nineteenth-century Xhosaland and developed a set of shared ideas—especially ideas relating to the division of labor on the basis of gender and to ownership of cattle wealth.¹⁵ This very commendable effort demonstrates the constructedness of identity by both elites and commoners outside the ambit of direct colonial control. However, Fry’s case does not cover the precolonial era, for the period studied is mainly colonial as the British had already taken control of most of the Eastern Cape. Moreover, Fry is silent on whether this Fingo identity was ethnic or otherwise. My careful examination of precolonial Kalanga and Ndebele history leads me to argue that because of the nature of their relations in the second half of the nineteenth century, Ndebele and Kalanga communities were characterized by increasing ethnic consciousness and the desire to guard their social and cultural institutions against perceived “contamination” by the Other. This development was born out of Ndebele attempts to control the plateau. Facing a stronger Ndebele political newcomer who also wanted to transform the social and political landscape, Kalanga people felt themselves to be a vulnerable Other, who had to fight for the survival of Kalanga symbols, ideas, language, communities, and also in some cases political institutions in the face of political domination and forced social change. Consequently, strong Kalanga chieftaincies rose up by combining Kalanga-speaking communities that had repudiated Ndebele authority. These communities became a belt of people that spoke one language, TjiKalanga; that found their common cause and unity from resisting direct Ndebele political control; that married among themselves; and that also conducted some economic transactions that differed from those of the Ndebele. These Kalanga communities formed a buffer between Ndebele and the Tswana, farther west. Although Kalanga chiefs would have benefited from this popular desire by the commoners to maintain a community at a time of upheaval and change, they were not the sole movers in the creation of this Kalanga ethnic identity. The common people, like those among the Fingo studied by Fry, played an important role. This leads us to the third focus of this book: the debate on agency and identities in Africa.

Scholars generally view ethnicity and African identities as having been invented or constructed by the elites within the colonial arrangement. This argument emanates partly from a misreading of the colonial social and political landscape and an exaggeration of the overall impact of colonialism in Africa. Steeped in the later nationalist historiographies of the 1970s, which blamed colonialism for creating tribalism and other forms of disorder in