'Echoing Silences': Ethnicity in post-colonial Zimbabwe, 1980-2007

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Abstract

In spite of its rare entry into both official and public discourses about contemporary Zimbabwe, ethnicity, alongside race, has continued to shape and influence the economic, social, and political life of Zimbabwe since the achievement of independence in 1980. In this article we argue that whilst post-independence Zimbabwe has since the days of the Gukurahundi war (1982-1986) not experienced serious ethnic-based wars or political instability, there is serious ethnic polarisation in the country and ethnicity remains one of the challenges to the survival of both the state and the country. This ethnic polarisation is to be explained mainly in terms of the broader failure by the state to develop an effective response to the political economy of ethnicity inherited from the colonial past.

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* The subtitle of this article is derived from Alexander Kanengoni's brilliant, semi-biographical novel about the rarely discussed violence and trauma of the war of independence, *Echoing Silences* (Baobab Books, Harare, 1997).

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As with most postcolonial African nationalist governments which have come to be haunted by ethnicity, such as Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and most recently Kenya and South Africa, the postcolonial government of Zimbabwe has largely remained reluctant to engage ethnicity as an issue in both politics and the economy, particularly with regard to addressing historical and contemporary factors that continued to make ethnicity an important issue in people's lives. The nationalist government's state-building project, especially its coercive mobilisation and nation-building projects of the early 1980s, paid little attention to the ethnic configuration of the inherited state, as well as the structures and institutions which enacted and reproduced ethnicity. Such neglected processes, structures and institutions included unequal development of the provinces and the marginalisation of particular ethnic groups in politics, economy and society.

Introduction

Until recently, Zimbabweans have been conspicuously silent about questions of ethnicity. As in the colonial period, especially during the days of the nationalist liberation struggle, all attempts to discuss ethnic identities, especially their manifestation in the political and economic spheres, were brushed aside. Yet, ethnicity has continued to shape and influence the economic, social, and political life of Zimbabwe since the achievement of independence in 1980. This chapter seeks to discuss the influence of ethnicity in post-independence Zimbabwe. More specifically, it tries to understand why ethnic identities have continued to be important in the everyday lives of Zimbabwe. It does so by discussing the processes that have continued to enact, reproduce and reconstruct ethnic identities as well as ethnicity in Zimbabwe's post-colonial period.

The colonial background of ethnicity in post-colonial Zimbabwe

The roots of ethnic tensions and divisions that characterise Zimbabwean politics and society today cannot be understood outside the context of two broad historical interludes: the colonial and African nationalist interludes which, through their socio-economic and political engineering projects, both helped to polarise existing ethnic identities. In both processes, pre-colonial social formations, especially the history of interaction among the various groups scattered across the Zimbabwean plateau, was used to provide the ideological basis for these social and political engineering processes. To understand how and why ethnicity was politicised during this period, we need to look at each of these specific historical junctures.

Rhodesian colonialism did not invent ethnic groups or divisions in Zimbabwe. Like many pre-colonial African societies, present-day Zimbabwe was a multi-ethnic society inhabited by a number of Ndebele and Shona-speaking groups. Some of these groups were the Shangani/Tsonga in the south-eastern parts of the plateau; the Venda in the south; the Tonga in the north; and the Kalanga and Ndebele in the southwest. The Shona-speaking groups included a number of sub-ethnic/linguistic groups: the Karanga inhabiting the southern parts of the plateau; the Zezuru and Korekore inhabiting the northern and central parts of the plateau, now constituting the administrative provinces of Mashonaland West and Mashonaland East and Mashonaland Central; and the Manyika and Ndau in the east, the area now known as Manicaland (Beach 1994; Ranger 1989). The political and economic relationships among the various groups inhabiting the plateau were always dynamic and changing. Their complex and fluid relations were characterised by both conflict and cooperation; both incorporation and fragmentation – as facilitated through marriages, political alliances and constant population movement. Their sense of identity was also more of a social identity rather than a political one (Beach 1984:46; Ranger 1989:121).

However, Rhodesian colonialism, like colonialism in many other parts of Africa, set into motion the politicisation of African ethnic identities by trying to construct and reconstruct people's identities and by compartmentalising them in cultural and geographic terms.[1] It also polarised and reinforced ethnic divisions among Africans, thereby deliberately preventing them from developing nationally integrated identities, by differentiating among them and favouring certain groups against others (Ranger 1985; Chimhundu 1992).

To illustrate, the Rhodesian colonial state, from its very inception in 1890, introduced laws and institutions which all defined the population into racial and ethnic categories: European; Asian and Coloured; and Native. Natives or Africans were further classified into various sub-categories, according to colonial notions of origin and geographical location. The world of the natives was made up of a variety of natives: 'aboriginal natives' and 'colonial natives'; the 'Mashona natives' and the 'Matebele natives' (Southern Rhodesia 1963:22). Race and ethnicity defined social and political relations between members of these different categories and also determined one's access to resources and position in society.

In addition to its categorisation of Africans into distinct groups, the Rhodesian colonial state divided the country into ethnicised administrative units: Mashonaland for Zezuru-speaking Shonas; Matebeleland for Ndebele-speaking groups; Fort Victoria (Masvingo) for Karanga-speaking groups; and Manicaland for Manyikas. Many groups, especially those speaking minority languages, were lumped into these ethnicised administrative units and their alternative identities ignored. The colonial state did not only categorise the country's nationals in terms of their geographical places of origin but also enforced their identities through what the renowned Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani has called an 'ethnic citizenship' regulated through a 'regime of ethnic rights' (Mamdani

1 The role of the colonial state in the construction of racial and ethnic identities in Africa in general and southern Africa in particular has been well documented in influential studies such as Terence Ranger (1985); Leroy Vail (1989); Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido (1987); and Heribert Adam and Herman Giliomee (1979).

2001:29-31, 236-241; Mamdani 1996). In the case of Rhodesia, this idea of an ethnic citizenship among Rhodesian Africans was enforced through the National Identity Card or Pass Law system, used to classify Africans in terms of their village and district of origin. Under this system, which was surprisingly carried over into post-independence unreformed, every 'Native District' in the country was represented by a specific numerical code and every adult Native was issued a national identity card (*chitupa/ situpa*), with details indicating one's rural chief, village and district of ancestral origin.

Under this regime of ethnic rights, African people's access to resources, especially communal land in rural areas, could only be attained through one's ethnicity. In the rural sphere, Natives had to adopt or assert their identities in order to access important resources like land. Equally, in the urban areas the Rhodesian state politicised African ethnic identities by according differential rights and privileges to its subjects. In the work place, for instance, the colonial state reserved specific jobs for specific subject groups, and settler stereotypes produced a hierarchy of wage differentials based on ethnic or racial categorisations. On the mines, Shangaans were stereotyped as 'the best workers above and below ground', Zulus as the 'best drillers', Ndebeles as the 'best foremen' and Manyikas and 'northern boys' (Malawian and Zambian immigrants) as the 'best house servants' (Yoshikuni 1989:68; Van Onselen 1976:81, 93; Ranger 1985). As a result, it was not uncommon for individuals to emphasise or claim those identities to open up wider opportunities and increase social mobility. The racial and ethnic stratification of Rhodesian society, as with other colonial African societies, thus tended to promote group exclusivity among subject groups. In this respect, Solomon Mombeshora is correct to assert that 'the seeds of ethnic factor were derived from the pre-colonial past, [but] the colonial era provided fertile soil in which the ideology of tribalism germinated, blossomed and was further propagated (Mombeshora 1990:431).

Nationalism and ethnicity

The relationship between ethnicity and African nationalism during Zimbabwe's struggle for independence, as in many other cases on the continent, was a complex one (Mkandawire 2005:10-55). Ethnicity manifested itself both positively and negatively. One of Zimbabwe's specialists on ethnic studies Enocent Msindo (2007:267-290) has recently argued that Zimbabwean scholars have not yet fully assessed the complex interactions of ethnicity and nationalism, especially their co-existence as poplar identities. Distinguishing between ethnicity and tribalism, he argues that 'whereas (political) tribalism is normally the mobilisation of ethnically conscious people to foment political enmity and disunity between ethnic "others" to the detriment of nationalism, ethnicity, its variant, is that capacity in people to classify themselves as social "others". In this endeavour, ethnic groups do not always stand as opponents to the development of a nation, but instead may complement efforts at developing an inclusive nation' (Msindo 2007:269). Basing his conclusions on an analysis of ethnic-based societies, clubs and unions in Bulawayo, such as Sons of Mashonaland Cultural Society, Kalanga Cultural Society and Matabele Home Society, Msindo argues that in the period 1950-1963 ethnicity and nationalism positively fed each other. Ethnic associations were the springboard for the emergence of nationalist leaders while ethnicity provided the needed pre-colonial heroes, monuments and local expressions of anti-colonial discontent (Msindo 2007:267, 275-276, 289).

During the formative years of mass nationalism in Zimbabwe, ethnicity was deployed positively to mobilise the masses. The major nationalist parties of the 1950s and early 1960s – such as the Southern Rhodesia African National Congress, National Democratic Party and Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) – all positively deployed ethnicity to mobilise the masses. They appealed to ethnic cultural symbols, such as the leopard skins worn by pre-colonial Shona chiefs and Nguni hats worn by Ndebele indunas, which early nationalist leaders like Joshua Nkomo and Leopold Takawira used to wear when addressing the masses.

However, from the early 1960s onwards, ethnicity became a divisive force in Zimbabwe nationalist politics. Ethnic divisions were mainly caused by leadership positioning for the takeover of the state and perceived inequalities in political participation by individual nationalist leaders and their supporters. In all this tribalism, instead of being an aberration, became a political resource used by political actors at crucial times to maximise personal power. In 1963, ethnicity within the nationalist movement led to the fragmentation of ZAPU when a core group of Shona-speaking leaders of the party revolted against the leadership of the Ndebele-speaking Joshua Nkomo to found a new party, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). The ZAPU-ZANU split resulted in faction fights and violence in urban areas, which increasingly took ethnic dimensions (Sithole 1984:117-125).

From the 1963 split onwards, the struggle for national independence was dominated by ZAPU, comprising mainly Ndebele and Kalanga-speaking politicians and fighters, and ZANU, comprising mainly Shona-speaking politicians and fighters (Sithole 1999 and Sibanda 2005). After the 1963 breakaway, ZAPU tried to maintain ethnic balance in its leadership but this strategy did not save it from ethnic politics and ethnic-induced crises. Some of these ethnic-motivated clashes of the 1970s pitted Ndebele/Kalanga-speaking politicians, such as Jason Moyo, Edward Ndlovu and George Silundika, against their Shona-speaking counterparts, James Chikerema and George Nyandoro. They culminated in the second split of ZAPU in exile (Sibanda 2005:144-151; Msindo 2004).

As the ethnic dimensions of the rift between ZAPU and ZANU widened, animosity and suspicion among ZANU and ZAPU leaders grew, assassinations and detentions of political activists from 'unwanted ethnic or dialect groups' increased, and recruitment and fighting became more ethnicised and regionalised. Shona-speaking recruits increasingly joined ZANU in Mozambique while Ndebele recruits joined ZAPU in Zambia (Tungamirai 1995; Bhebe 1999). Within the organisational politics of these two major nationalist organisations, ZANU and ZAPU, political elites also continued to mobilise different ethnicities as an important

political resource in contests for power throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In the case of ZANU-PF, power contestations were mainly between the three main Shona sub-ethnic groups of Manyika or easterners; the Karanga or southerners and the Zezuru or northerners. As Masipula Sithole has convincingly argued in his *Struggles within a Struggle*, it was tensions within these ethnicities which led to divisions within ZANU and to the assassination of Herbert Chitepo, the first Chairman of the party (Sithole 1999). Within ZAPU in Zambia, ethnicity fragmented the party as the Shona, Kalanga and Ndebele politicians mobilised on an ethnic basis (Sithole 1980:28 and Sibanda 2005). The lives of its top leaders, such as that of the ZIPRA commander Nikita Mangena, were also lost due to this Ndebele/Kalanga-Shona rivalry.

The dominant liberation movements of ZAPU and ZANU indeed tried to manage ethnicity within their organisations. Their strategies of managing ethnicity included ethnic balancing in the leadership of the party. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s both ZAPU and ZANU tried to deal with the issue of ethnicity through ethnic representation. ZAPU tried to fill its leadership positions with individuals across Ndebele, Shona and Kalanga ethnic divides. In ZANU, particular attention was paid to achieving balance in leadership by having leaders drawn from the three dominant Shona groups: Karanga, Manyika and Zezuru (Sithole 1999). At the ideological level, nationalist organisations tried to deal with ethnicity through political rhetoric that ignored realities of ethnicity in favour of nationalist and Marxist radicalism (Chung 2006).

Despite these efforts, ethnicity continued to manifest itself negatively. Part of the problem was the failure of these organisations to develop a proper mechanism to deal with the phenomenon. Some of the leading nationalists were also not committed to practical eradication of ethnicity. They condemned ethnicity during the day but used it by night as a political resource in their own battles for power. Zimbabwe was thus born with a very bad ethnic birthmark that was to negatively affect its national integration efforts.

The post-colonial nation-state building project and ethnicity

Once it got into power in 1980, the nationalist leadership of Zimbabwe tried to restructure the inherited colonial racial and ethnic order in a number of ways. At the political and ideological levels, it placed emphasis on dismantling colonial institutions, laws and practices promoting ethnic polarisation. To promote national integration among the ethnically diverse Zimbabwean groups, government employment policies, for instance, emphasised the deployment of public servants to places away from their districts of origin. The government language policy emphasised the teaching of both Shona and Ndebele (the languages of the two major African ethnic groups in Zimbabwe) to develop a spirit of nationhood among the young. It promoted Ndebele and Shona, alongside English, as official national languages and introduced them in the curricula in formerly white-only schools. The other minority languages, such as Kalanga, Shangani, Chewa (Nyanja), Venda, Tonga and Nambya, were also officially recognised for use in education and on radio (Makoni, Dube & Mashiri 2006).

The government also tried to change group attitudes through the promotion of political reconciliation between the previously antagonistic and disintegrated groups of the nation. For example, the Shona-Ndebele ethnic divide which had been amplified during the days of the struggle was to be achieved through the promotion of political cooperation between ZANU-PF and ZAPU, the two antagonistic nationalist parties which had both assumed ethno-regional characters by the time of independence. The first government to be formed after 1980 independence elections was thus to include not only members from the defeated Rhodesian Front government but also individuals from ZAPU, which had been defeated at the polls by its rival nationalist organisation, ZANU-PF. The new army was also an integrated unit, consisting of combatants from both ZANLA and ZIPRA, on the one hand, and Rhodesian units, on the other (Rupiya 1995).

In spite of all these de-ethnicisation processes, Zimbabwe struggled to develop into a united nation-state because of its negative legacy of racial and ethnic polarisation inherited from both colonialism and African nationalism. The suspicions and ethnic tensions developed, as well as alliances built, during colonial rule and the nationalist struggle did not immediately disappear after independence. They continued to shape relations between political elites in the post-independence (Rich 1982; Sylvester 1986). The ZANU-PF government tried to deal with ethnicity and maintain the unity of both the state and the party through persuasion and coercion. However, as Mandaza has correctly pointed out in his introduction of Edgar Tekere's recently published biography, ethnic/regional tensions continued to be dominant in the contest for power within ZANU-PF and the state (Mandaza 2006).

Ethnicity was enacted and reproduced through a number of sites and processes during the early years of independence. The first site for the enactment of ethnicity involved the conflict between ZANU-PF and PF ZAPU which had constituted itself as the major opposition party in Zimbabwe following ZANU-PF's victory in the 1980 election. Though originating as a political conflict between the two leading nationalist parties with contrasting visions about their roles in the post-independence state, this conflict soon assumed ethnic dimensions through a number of events and processes.[2] First and foremost, there was ZANU-PF's controversial use of party slogans, songs and political speeches that not only valorised ZANU-PF and ZANLA as authentic liberators while disparaging ZAPU, ZIPRA and its supporters (represented as constituting a distinct ethnic group) as villains (Alexander 1998:151-182; Dabengwa 1995). The ZANU-PF government also inaugurated a narrow official narrative of liberation history which downplayed and denigrated ZAPU and other nationalist parties' role. This historical moment of ZANU-PF triumphalism was also characterised by the use of Shona pre-colonial

2 From the time of independence in 1980, ZANU envisaged Zimbabwe as a one-party state while ZAPU regarded itself as an official opposition party in a multiparty democracy.

heroes and historical monuments to imagine the nation, while Ndebele heroes and history were marginalised (Kriger 2003:74-75).

Helping to develop a sense of marginalisation among former ZIPRA combatants was the preferential treatment of ZANLA cadres in the Zimbabwe National Army and sidelining of ZIPRA. Examples of this were the promotion of former ZANLA combatants, ahead of their former ZIPRA colleagues, to senior military positions within the new ZNA. These and other grievances led to military clashes between ZIPRA and ZANLA in Assembly Points of Ntumbane, Ntabazinduna, Connemara and Chitungwiza in the early 1980s. These simmering tensions came to a head in 1982 with the discovery of arms caches in ZAPU-owned properties around Bulawayo and Gweru. The ZANU-PF government reacted by arresting a number of ZAPU leaders and ZIPRA commanders, and sacked ZAPU leaders in the coalition government, including the ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo. All this exacerbated feelings of marginalisation among ZAPU leaders and their supporters, including some ZIPRA ex-combatants. A few of these politically dissatisfied individuals expressed their disgruntlement by taking up arms to fight for a 'better deal' (Ranger, Alexander & McGregor 2000:180-196).

Utilising this opportunity to crush its only viable opponent in the post-independence period, the ZANU-PF government deployed both the army and a special militia unit – the Fifth Brigade or *Gukurahundi* (the rain that sweeps the chaff) – to suppress the few rebels. The violent and brutal method used by the Fifth Brigade seriously destabilised the regions of Matebeleland and Midlands between 1982 and 1987. More than 20 000 civilians were killed by these government forces battling to contain the activities of a few armed political rebels. As detailed in the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) and the Legal Resources Foundation (LRF)'s report, *Breaking the Silence,* the Fifth Brigade's military operation became a bizarre combination of random killing, abduction and torture of ZAPU supporters and Ndebele-speaking civilians, raping of women and girls, cultural imperialism, conducted through attempts to force Ndebele-speakers to speak Shona

only, and indoctrination aimed at forcing people to support ZANU-PF (CCJP & LRF 1997).

The violence and killings of this period only ended in 1987 after the signing of the Unity Accord between ZANU and ZAPU and the merging of the two parties into the Zimbabwe African National Union-Popular Front (ZANU-PF). But, the atrocities of this period have remained a bitter source of resentment among the country's Ndebele population, who also feel marginalised from both central government decision-making processes and the economy (Ranger, Alexander & McGregor 2000; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003). The lingering bitterness of the people towards the central government has been evident in people's voting patterns. Since the end of the killings in 1987, ZANU-PF has struggled to get votes from the provinces of Matebeleland.

Bjorn Lingren (2005:156-158), who did fieldwork on ethnicity in Matabeleland, has argued that one of the serious consequences of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities is that it solidified the feeling of Ndebele-ness among the people of Matabeleland that is currently making national integration very difficult to achieve. He noted that 'people in Matabeleland accused Mugabe, the government and the "Shona" in general of killing the Ndebele' (Lingren 2005:158). In the eyes of the Ndebele public, what was portrayed as a mission to stamp out dissidents became an anti-Ndebele campaign that deliberately conflated Joshua Nkomo, ZAPU, ex-ZIPRA and every Ndebele-speaking person into a dissident; a dissident collaborator; a dissident sympathiser and sponsor. This is mainly because the Fifth Brigade unit was almost entirely Shona and justified its violence in political and ethnic terms. For others, the violence and killings of the period, therefore, represented a 'Shona-crusade to make the Ndebele account for the nineteenth century raids on the Shona'. The state, in the eyes of most residents of Matebeleland and Midlands who endured the killings and violence, thus not only became tribalist, using ethnicity to suppress political dissent and to monopolise power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003; Ranger, Alexander & McGregor 2000:204-231).

The consequences of this violence of the 1980s on the nation-building project have been dire and far-reaching. The ethnic nature of this state-sanctioned violence not only left many Ndebeles more aware of their differences with the Shona, but also provoked radical Ndebele cultural nationalism and radical Ndebele politics (Lingren 2005). This radical politics has sometimes been contesting the idea of a unitary Zimbabwe state. This spirit of radical 'Ndebele particularism' manifested itself through the formation of radical Ndebele pressure groups in the 1990s, such as *Vukani Mahlabezulu* and *Imbovane Yamahlabezulu*, focusing on a revival of particularistic features of Ndebele culture (Chikuhwa 2004:93). The more political-oriented groups include *ZAPU 2000*, a belated attempt to revive ZAPU following the death of Joshua Nkomo in July 1999, as well as *Mthwakazi Action Group on Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in Matabeleland and Midlands* and *Mthwakazi People's Congress (MPC)*, both diaspora groups concentrating on the issues of the *Gukurahundi* violence and government accountability for it (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003).

Arguing against what it views as the continued marginalisation of the three provinces of Matebeleland South, Matebeleland North and Midlands, ZAPU 2000 agitates for a Federal state in which provinces retain greater political and economic autonomy. It has repudiated the Unity Accord which it has described as an elitist pact. The two *Mthwakazi* organisations, on the other hand, have agitated for Ndebele self-determination and have called for the establishment of an autonomous Ndebele state (United Mthwakazi Republic) (Mthwakazi Action Group 2006). All these organisations have tried to develop a regional/ethnic support based on Ndebele popular resentment of the neglect of the western region and perceived hegemony of the majority Shona ethnic group. While the social pressure groups such as *Imbovane* have managed to attract mass support, the separatist political groups have received limited support. For instance, ZAPU 2000 attained only 0.4% of the vote in the 2002 presidential election, and did not even participate in the last 2005 parliamentary elections (Electoral Institute of Southern Africa 2007).

Separatist organisations have rather found more support among the young generations of Diaspora political activists from Matabeleland who have become sceptical of the territorial nationalism of ZANU-PF which they regard as a Shona tribal party. Ndebele ethnicity has become a major issue in the Diaspora, where displaced Ndebele communities are linking up via the internet, through web-based forums such as inkundla.net, and other public forums to promote a distinct Ndebele political identity. The more radical groups and individuals have gone to the extent of imagining an autonomous independent nation-state, built on a re-imagination of both pre-colonial history and a recounting of the recent history of the Fifth Brigade atrocities. The radicals have claimed a separate history from their Shona compatriots and have sought to appropriate the nationalist leader Joshua Nkomo, ZAPU and ZIPRA as the property and heritage of the Ndebele rather than the nation at large. They have basically provincialised Ndebele identity and tried to construct it as an antithesis to Shona identity and political power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 1997; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003; Mthwakazi Action Group 2006).

Inside Zimbabwe, Ndebele ethnicity has continued to revolve around key developmental issues. These include complaints about the sidelining of the western regions in development projects, and perceived marginalisation of Ndebele people in both the economy and politics by the dominant Shona groups. Following the Unity Accord, the people of Matebeleland had expected affirmative action in terms of development projects since their regions had lagged behind in economic development during the Gukurahundi days. Shona-Ndebele tensions in urban centres like Bulawayo have centred on limited employment and educational facilities, with Ndebeles accusing their Shona counterparts of taking 'their jobs and vacancies at teacher and nurse training colleges'. The former Mayor of Bulawayo in the 1990s, Joshua Malinga, the late MP Sydney Malunga and the former Governor of Matebeleland North, Welshman Mabhena, were the most vociferous in airing Ndebele feelings of marginalisation (*Financial Gazette* 2004). The discussions on provision of water to the city of Bulawayo from the Zambezi River are also

entangled in Shona-Ndebele ethnic politics. Muchaparara Musemwa has described the politics around the Zambezi Water Project, particularly the reluctance of the government to sponsor this project, as a continuation of 'ZANU-PF's disciplining of a dissident city' (Musemwa 2006).

Ethnic polarisation has not just developed between the Shona and the Ndebele, but also among the various Shona groups – the Karanga, the Manyika, the Zezuru, the Korekore and the Ndau, which have accused and counter-accused each other of ethnic favouritism. Minority groups like the Shangaan, Kalanga, Tonga and Venda, located in the marginal borderlands with little economic development and less physical and social infrastructure, have felt marginalised from both the economy and society and have complained of political and cultural domination by both Shonas and Ndebeles. In the field of education, for instance, children of the minority language groups generally have little access to education in their mother tongue as these languages are taught in schools only up to the 3rd grade. Thereafter, Shona and Ndebele become the only indigenous languages on offer, meaning that children from these minority groups have to switch to them since the curriculum requires children to study at least one local language (Hachipola 1998).

The marginalisation of minority group languages in education and other national policies has particularly become a sore point around which political mobilisation of these groups has occurred. On a number of occasions, community leaders among these minority groups have complained against what they perceive to be Shona or Ndebele cultural imperialism enforced through government policies, such as its national language policy and employment policies. In the case of the southern border town of Beitbridge, for instance, the issue of language has become so politicised that it is has become an important mark enforcing identity group boundaries between the local Venda-speaking groups and Shonas, considered outsiders (Mathe 2005:8-20). Shona-Venda tension in Beitbridge came to a boiling point in 2002 when a group of 'war veterans' dismissed the head of primary school in the district, allegedly because she was employing mainly Shona teachers, and not Vendas.

The Shangani-speaking communities in the south-western parts of the country have over the years also complained about the employment of 'Karangas (derogatively termed *vanyai* or foreigners) ahead of their sons and daughters' (Author's personal experiences, January-March 1988).

Local feelings about marginalisation in both politics and the economy as well as intensified competition for limited resources like productive land have equally given potency to the growth of a strong politicised Shangani ethnicity in this part of the country. Competition over rights to land has periodically provoked ethnically motivated violence between Shangani-speaking and Karanga-speaking groups living side by side. In the period leading to the 2000 election, the ZANU-PF Member of Parliament for Chiredzi South, Aaron Baloyi, allegedly incited Shangani villagers in Chilonga village to evict all Karanga villagers settled in the area. About 400 villagers, armed with sticks and spears, attacked livestock, uprooted crops, destroyed property and houses belonging to their Karanga-speaking neighbours (*Daily News* 2001). Many Shangani ethnic mobilisers have continued to complain about their 'land being taken over by the Karangas'. Ethnic relations between Shangani and Karangas have become even more polarised since the death of Baloyi in 2006 and his succession by a Karanga-speaking Member of Parliament (*Zimbabwe Standard* 2007).

Contested rights to land and to movement on ethnic or regional grounds have been a common feature in post-colonial Zimbabwe, and a number of individuals have been denied access to land or evicted in various parts of the country by both political elites and peasants opposed to any attempts by 'outsiders' to settle in their 'ancestral' lands.[3] For instance, in 2002 the *Daily News* reported that a ZANU-PF Member of Parliament for the Mashonaland Central district of Muzarabani, Nobbie Dzinzi, had instigated local villagers to evict 'Karangas in Muzarabani' for 'being Karangas in an area indigenous to the Korekore people' (*Daily News* 2002).

3 The general understanding among many rural communities is that individuals have eminent rights (based on history, origin and ethnicity) to certain pieces of land. See Marongwe (2002) for a more detailed discussion of this issue.

In 2003, when the Mashonaland-born, Coloured businessman and publisher, Ibbo Mandaza, tried to occupy his newly acquired farm in the Bubi district of Matabeleland North province, his move was strongly resisted by local peasants on the basis of both ethnicity and regionalism. Local war veterans and ZANU-PF politicians who, according to newspapers, had 'publicly stated their unhappiness with the allocation of the farm to Mandaza whom they consider an outsider' had allegedly mobilised these locals to bar him from settling on this prime farmland (*Zimbabwe Standard* 2003; *Zimbabwe Independent* 2004).

Though not as intense as Shona-Ndebele conflict, intra-group conflict among the various Shona groups has always been a feature of their relations since independence in 1980. The Karangas, Manyikas and Ndaus have complained about the dominance of the Zezurus in politics and economy. Since the early 1980s, a politicised Ndau identity, revolving around the controversial ousting of Ndabaningi Sithole, a Ndau-speaker from Chipinge, from the leadership of ZANU in 1975 and the economic marginalisation of the remote eastern districts of the country bordering Mozambique, manifested itself in the way residents related to the state. ZANU-Ndonga successfully mobilised this Ndau ethnicity against a ZANU-PF government led by Robert Mugabe who replaced Sithole as leader. Until 2005 when the two parliamentary seats were won by ZANU-PF and MDC (Movement for Democratic Change, the people of these districts consistently supported and voted ZANU-Ndonga – a situation which led many commentators to view the party as a tribal organisation since these were the only districts where the party managed to attract support. During the Mozambican civil war, the dynamics of Ndau ethnic politics were also at play when some inhabitants of these remote eastern districts expressed their frustrations with both the lack of development in their region and the government's handling of the war by offering support to RENAMO (Alao 1994:122-123).

Since 1980, post-colonial expressions of ethnicity have also been strong in Masvingo, where the late nationalist Eddison Zvobgo tried to mobilise

Karanga identity to dilute what he and others viewed as Zezuru monopoly over power and resources. From independence, Karanga political elites and their supporters constituted themselves as another centre of power that could not be ignored in power calculations and politics of ethnic balancing (Mandaza 2006; Rukuni 2003). The roots of this politicised Karanga ethnicity go back to the days of the struggle when contestations for power were mainly between the Karanga and the Manyika (Sithole 1999). But, after independence their ethnicity was mainly derived from perceptions, both real and imagined, about marginalisation. At the moment, Karanga ethnicity has been revived by the ongoing succession struggle in ZANU-PF which has, to a large extent, taken ethnic and regional dimensions (Zimbabwe Institute 2006).

Ethnicity and power contestations in contemporary Zimbabwe

In spite of all official pretences to the contrary, Zimbabwe has increasingly become ethnically polarised. As in the 1970s, ethnic and regional tensions have been quite dominant in the power contestations within both the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. Zezuru, Manyika, Karanga and Ndebele ethno-regional identities have become the main basis through which power has been contested. The dominant factions in the ongoing struggle for succession of the leadership of ZANU-PF and the country, for instance, have all mobilised on regional and ethnic basis (Zimbabwe Institute 2006). To illustrate, there are heavy Zezuru ethnic undertones in both the Mujuru and Mugabe factions struggling for the leadership of ZANU-PF. The leading proponents of Mugabe's continued stay in office, such as Nathan Shamuyarira, Webster Shamu, Ignatious Chombo and Nicholas Goche are by and large Zezuru-speaking elites drawn from Mashonaland West province. In terms of ethnic and regional classification, the majority of leaders in the Mujuru camp are Zezurus originating from the Chikomba and Chivhu districts of Mashonaland East province. The Mujuru faction

is often referred to in the media as the Chivhu Corridor Group (CCG) or 'Super Zezuru' because of the ethno-regional undertones in its leadership and membership (Zimbabwe Institute 2006).

The Zezuru character of these two factions has invoked fears of Zezuru political dominance among political elites from other provinces outside Mashonaland. These include Masvingo, and Midlands (dominated by Karanga-speaking groups) as well as Matabeleland (dominated by Ndebele-speaking groups). There are also rumblings of discontent in Manicaland province (dominated by Manyika and Ndau-speaking groups), and Emmerson Mnangagwa and his faction have tried to mobilise their fears. As a result, Mnangagwa has a significant support base in his home province of Midlands, large parts of Masvingo province and the two provinces of Matebeleland North and Matebeleland South who all feel politically marginalised from the current configurations of power in ZANU-PF. The Mnangagwa group is, therefore, also tainted with ethnic politics, and it is sometimes referred to as 'South-South' group because of its attempt to mobilise on a regional basis. The convergence of grievance and resentment among various groups and constituencies has thus given rise to highly ethnicised politics in Zimbabwe.

The MDC has since its formation in 1999 been similarly plagued by the same ethnic and regional tendencies that have weakened ZANU-PF. Six years of infighting along regional and ethnic fault lines, as well as disagreements over strategy, accountability and violence within the party, eventually resulted in a split in October 2005 (Raftopoulos 2005; Magaisa 2005; *Financial Gazette* 2005). The MDC split resulted in two formations of the same party, one led by party-founding president Morgan Tsvangirai and another led by the radical former student leader, Arthur Mutambara and founding Secretary-General, Welshman Ncube. Since their split, both factions have been viewed as ethno-regional formations commanding regional support rather than national support. The Mutambara and Ncube faction has commanded more support in the Ndebele-speaking constituencies of Matabeleland and Midlands, whilst the Tsvangirai group has had more support in the Shona-speaking

constituencies of Harare, Masvingo and Mashonaland and Manicaland (Moyo 2006; Moyo 2007).

Conclusion

The trajectory and process of nation building in post-colonial Africa has always been a complex and tricky affair, especially in countries such as Zimbabwe that inherited a highly fragmented society, divided along racial and ethnic fault lines. This article has argued that for the last 27 years ethnic tension has remained rife in Zimbabwe mainly because of the politics of silence. This silence has been experienced at two levels: the state and society. At the societal level, the politics of silence has been evident in the way members of society either avoid or try to silence all debates about ethnicity in the country. At the official level, the state's politics of silence has been experienced in the ZANU-PF government's reluctance to engage ethnicity as an issue in both politics and the economy, especially with regard to addressing historical and contemporary factors that continued to make ethnicity an important issue in people's lives. The government silence over, or failure to respond to, ethnicity was particularly evident in its nation-building project, especially its coercive nation-building and state-building projects of the early 1980s, which paid little attention to the ethnic configuration of the inherited state, as well as the structures and institutions which enacted and reproduced ethnicity. Zimbabwe's failure to build social, cultural and political systems in which all citizens stand in the same relation to the state and feel equally incorporated into the structures of both political and economic power has thus ensured that ethnicity, alongside race, continues to matter to Zimbabweans.

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