

# SELECTED TRANSPHONOLOGIZED ZIMBABWEAN TOPONYMS

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## Selected transphonologized Zimbabwean toponyms

**Abstract:** This paper seeks to discuss the phonological adaptations of English place names to Shona or Ndebele forms. The transphonologized forms are 'sincere attempts at adaptations' in which pronunciations are simplified, making the unfamiliar English sounds familiar. Selected toponyms to be discussed in this paper are the following: *Makoholi, Topola, Demgudu, Ngerengere, Titji, Lepete, Domlanda, Mhesilanti, Jimila, Sikisiveli, Tshenisi* and *Crosini*. The paper aims to identify the geographical location of the places and the possible source toponyms, then trace the change using information from people who are in one way or the other connected to the place.

**Keywords:** phonologization, Zimbabwe, toponymy, adaptation, oral history.

The history of Zimbabwe is very influential in the toponomastic landscaping of the area. The British who colonized became very influential in the country's economy and politics. In an effort to tame the new space, they renamed and named the space they occupied using their language. Thus, one would find that the toponymic landscape of Zimbabwe has been characterized by English names during colonialism and there is a slight change in the postcolonial period. Lack of knowledge of the indigenous languages for the British and English language for the indigenous people resulted in transphonologization of old and new toponyms respectively. Transphonologization of toponyms in colonial Zimbabwe then was two sided: the British mispronounced existing place names in indigenous languages and, on the other side, the colonized people mispronounced the new English names given to their places. Examples of transphonologization of indigenous names include how the British renamed most towns in Rhodesia and examples are tabled below.

**Table 1: Transphonologized indigenous place names**

Indigenous place name	Transphonologised form
<i>Mutare</i>	<i>Umtali</i>
<i>Mvuma</i>	<i>Umvuma</i>
<i>Chipuriro</i>	<i>Sipolilo</i>
<i>Kadoma</i>	<i>Gatooma</i>
<i>Chipundura</i>	<i>Bindura</i>

On the other side, which is the focus of this paper, the indigenous people also transphonologized the new English names given to their places. It is significant to note

that most of the mispronounced names are maintained in independent Zimbabwe. For most of the transphonologized toponyms, there are stories to their origins which have never been written down. Selected toponyms to be discussed in this paper are *Makoholi*, *Topola*, *Demgudu*, *Ngerengere*, *Titji*, *Lepete*, *Domlanda*, *Mhesilanti*, *Jimila*, *Sikisiveli*, *Tshenisi* and *Crosini*.

### **Transphonologization**

The colonial Zimbabwean situation resulted in many places named in English because the English people were the powerful language group that ruled and had the authority to give names. Many economic and political centers in the colony were given English names as they were controlled by the British, however the names were used more by the black communities that were obviously more in terms of number compared to the name givers. Since English phonology is different from the phonologies of indigenous Bantu languages in Zimbabwe, most of the English toponyms were transphonologized. The pronunciation and representation of English toponyms by the indigenous people of Zimbabwe is a case of lexical borrowing that utilizes transphonologization as a process of adaptation. This kind of borrowing is a result of the imposition of foreign names. The adaptation could be part of subtle resistance to the imposed toponyms; a subtle way of challenging colonial authority that demythologized and renamed the dominated space. Transphonologization of English names is not peculiar to Zimbabwe, Neethling (2005) has written about the same process in isiXhosa. He shows that there are phonological consequences of linguistic contact between English and Xhosa and a similar trend is observable in Zimbabwe. Neethling describes transphonologized Xhosa forms of English surnames. Describing transphonologization of English names in Xhosa, Neethling says, “they appear to be sincere attempts at adaptations to Xhosa facilitating pronunciation and ‘domesticating’ these ‘strange sounding’ English names.” (2005: 136)

For the indigenous Zimbabweans, the English people brought ‘strange sounding’ names that needed to be adapted to indigenous phonological systems. The efforts could have been a subtle way of subverting the English people’s efforts at domesticating spaces, yet when we look at the etymology of the transphonologized forms, today we tend to find humor in them. Since names play a symbolic function in society, one finds that these English sounding names in Zimbabwe tell of the relations that were there between Blacks and the colonial masters. The majority of Blacks could still use their languages to name the environment but they could not freely do so as power relations did not allow them to do so. This relates well to how “Names are a good example of the social function that is often fulfilled by language ... and is also a very important means of establishing and maintaining relationships” (Trudgill 1974: 13). Such a relationship is clear when the majority of Blacks resorted to transphonologizing foreign sounds as a subtle response to domination.

Generally, transphonologization involves sound changes that facilitate adaptation. According to Neethling,

there is sound play on the one hand which could be considered as light-hearted and friendly, but at times also reflecting phonetic liberties, suggesting a lack of effort ‘to get it right’. Some names have been twisted phonetically for the sake of convenience or amusement. (2005: 136)

The sound play between English phonemes and Bantu phonology is the transphonologization that is at play in the derivation of Zimbabwean English toponyms. It is not the primary concern of this paper to describe the various types of sound changes that are at play in the transphonologization of different toponyms, but the process is achieved through different processes in sound change. In the majority of cases, deletions are more than insertions since the aim is to simplify these sounds.

### **Makoholi<sup>1</sup>**

“Makoholi Research Institute (CRI) is a government research institution that is located some 32 km north of Masvingo town. The Institute falls under the Livestock and Pasture Research Division of the Department of Research and Specialist Services (DR&SS) in the Ministry of Agriculture, Mechanization and Irrigation Development.”<sup>2</sup> Oral history has it that, in 1942, a white man set out to establish a farm to help in the preservation of Mashona cattle breed and as the hired Shona speaking people were marking the boundaries of the farm, the white farmer was leading them indicating where they had to mark holes. Taking it from the white man’s repeated instruction “mark a hole here”, the Shona people named the place Makoholi, which is a manipulation of sounds of the “mark a hole here” phrase. It is quite interesting to note that without that background it is not easy to work out and relate the meaning of the transphonologised form Makoholi to the “mark a hole” phrase. The transphonologized form is used in the public sphere and in official discourse.

*Change Schemata: Mark a hole > markahole > makoholi > ma-ko-ho-li /makoholi/*

### **Topola**

In an informal interview carried out at the Topola shopping center on 15 March 2013, an elder who preferred anonymity informed us that there was nothing in terms of physical structures on what is today known as Topola shopping center until around 1973, when a Mr. McKenzie built a shop. Boys who would spend most of their time at the shop named it *Topola*. The name was a slang manipulation of the English “top area” description of the area and the name is neither Shona nor Ndebele. Geographically the area is a “top area” in the sense that approaching it from either side one will be ‘going up’ and leaving it in any direction one makes a downward movement. Though the township *Topola* is located within Rukovo village, the place is popularly known as *Topola*.

*Change Schemata: Top area > toparea > topola > to-po-la > /topola/*

### **Demgudu**

*Demgudu* is a name of an old gold mine in the midlands area of Silobela, however the name has over the years spread to include the surrounding villages. People who live in the *Demgudu* area owe their toponym to the gold mine and the process of transphonologizing.

<sup>1</sup> The story for this toponym was given by Dereck Muramba, who a Senior Research Hand that started working at the place in 1967, in an informal interview at Makoholi on 14 March 2013.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.drss.gov.zw/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=127&Itemid=197](http://www.drss.gov.zw/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=127&Itemid=197) (accessed April 25, 2013).

Looking at the linguistic landscaping in the mine today, it is clear that the mine is officially called ‘Do me good mine’; the mine was named by the British who through colonialism owned it but the owners of the land are the Ndebele. These could not properly pronounce the English name, especially due to the fact that the mine was established long before many people in the area could speak English. The Ndebele then transphonologized the name ‘do me good’ to *Demgudu*. The mine and the area are called *eDemgudu* today. In an informal interview on 14 March 2013, an elderly man from the area, who could not reveal his identity, confirmed that the name *Demgudu* was adapted from the English name ‘Do me good’, as the place had its name *Wozoli* before the coming of the White mine owners. As demonstrated by Raper “each successive wave of incomers had its effects on the toponymic landscape of the region, which includes place-names from all of these languages, including hybrids, adaptations, translations, and so forth” (2012: 03). The coming of the White settlers that discovered and started mining gold in the *Wozoli* area of Silobela gave the English name that was later transphonologized by the Ndebele people staying in the area.

*Change Schemata: Do me good > domegood > demgudu > de-m-gu-du > /demgudu/*

### Titji

Plumtree is a small town in Zimbabwe about ten kilometers from the border with Botswana. The town started as a small railway station where trains from and to Botswana stopped and still stop up to this day. The railway station was the only economic activity in the area, much that the area came to be known as “the station”. The place was known as Plumtree station and the ‘Plumtree’ part of the name was dropped to shorten it to “Station”. It is this shortened version of the train station that was transphonologized by the Kalanga people in the area to *kuTitji*<sup>3</sup>. The Ndebele, who are also a significant group in the area, took the Kalanga name and derived their own toponym *eTiji*.

*Change Schemata: Station > tation > titji > ti-tji > /titfi/*

### Ngerengere

Most urban low-density locations in Zimbabwe were named using toponyms in the West. The toponyms from the West were obviously in English, and were imposed on black populations that did not understand the English language. To the Eastern side of Bulawayo towards Gweru, there is a low-density suburb named Glengarry by the colonial occupants. The name is from Western locations and was possibly taken from the Glengarry Scottish military hat.

Invergarry Castle was the seat of the Chiefs of the MacDonnell of Glengarry, a powerful branch of the Clan MacDonald. It was burned down in 1654 by General Monk, then re-built c.1660–1665. After the 1745 uprising Invergarry Castle was sacked and partially destroyed by troops under “Butcher” Cumberland as part of the systematic suppression of the Highlands<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> This information was provided by Mr Nleya, an elderly resident of Plumtree in an interview on March 14, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> [www.glegarry.net/history.php](http://www.glegarry.net/history.php) (accessed April 22, 2013).

The Ndebele population in Bulawayo had to mimic the English in their pronunciation of the toponym, and the resultant phonemes are *Ngerengere* for Glengarry. The name is officially Glengarry; however, it is interesting to note that if you look for Glengarry people may not know it but what they know is *Ngerengere*. Mr Nleya noted, in an interview on 14 March 2013, that his White Masters lived with him in Glengarry for years, they called the place Glengarry and he called it *Ngerengere*.

*Change Schemata: Glengarry > ngerengere > nge-re-nge-re > /ngerengere/*

### Lepete

In the *Silobela* area of Kwekwe district, there is a group of gold mines under the Zimbabwe Mining Development Cooperation (ZMDC). The mines are called Jena Mines, and one of them is called Leopard's Mine. The name Leopard's Mine has been transphonologized for the convenience of the Ndebele and Shona communities that work and live around the area. What is officially Leopard's Mine is popularly known as *Lepete*. The 'mine' at the end of Leopard's has been deleted to remain with the toponym *Lepete* representing even the area around the mine. The name of the place is referred to in Ndebele as *eLepete* and in Shona as *kuLepete*.

*Change Schemata: Leopard's mine > leopard > lepete > le-pe-te > /lepete/*

### Domlanda

*Domlanda* is a rural area in the *Silobela* area in Kwekwe district. The toponym *Domlanda* is derived from the American toponym *Domeland* that is taken from the topography of the area. The rural district also has a hilly topography like the American *Domeland*.

The Domeland Wilderness occupies a large area (about 93,000 acres) along the South Fork Kern River Canyon at the southern end of the Kern Plateau in the southern Sierra Nevada Mountains. Most of the Wilderness is managed by the US Forest Service (Sequoia National Forest) but there is a small portion managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). With elevations ranging from 3,000–9,730 feet, Domeland (on some maps and guidebooks it is known as Dome Land or Domelands) is a vast playground for hikers and especially for rock climbers. Beautiful granite domes stretch across the landscape as far as the eye can see<sup>5</sup>.

The toponym is transferred from America and used to name a place in Zimbabwe that bears topological similarity. The etymology concurs with the transphonologization as the topography is hilly like the dome land. When tracing etymologies of place names, the topography described by the name should correspond to the topography of the area named. Trask says, for example, if we are tracing the etymology of the toponym 'Heather-valley' we should look for the qualities described in the toponym: "First the town must be located in a valley, or something that can pass muster as a valley. Second, there must be heather growing in the area, or at least there must be evidence that heather formerly grew there in some abundance" (2010: 65). In the *Domlanda* area derived from Domeland the topography found in the American Domeland is present, an indication that the etymology tracing the name to the English Domeland can be trusted.

*Change Schemata: domeland > domlanda > do-m-la-nda > /domlanda/*

<sup>5</sup> [www.summitpost.org/domeland-wilderness](http://www.summitpost.org/domeland-wilderness) (accessed April 22, 2013).

### Mhesilanti

The Ministry of labor offices in Bulawayo is called by some old-aged Ndebeles *koMmesilanti*. A Mr. Mithi of Bulawayo in an interview says when people finished standard six, junior certificate, ordinary level or advanced level, they went to the labor office looking for ‘miscellaneous jobs’. ‘Miscellaneous’ is an English adjective, which means ‘of many kinds, mixed composition or character’; companies in Bulawayo advertised miscellaneous jobs with the labor office. The Ndebele rephonologized the word to *mmesilanti*, by voicing the initial nasal and deletion of vowels to give the toponym *Mhesilanti*.

*Change Schemata: Miscellaneous > mhesilanti > mhe-si-la-nti > /mhesilanti/*

### Jimila

In Tsholotsho there is a place called *eJimila*, to this a Mr. Ndlovu from the area says in the past there was a white man who had a farm in the area and his name was Jimmy Miller. The Ndebele people changed the name to Jimila, and the name is now used to refer to a village in the Tsholotsho district. In the case of the transphonologised toponym *Jimila*, the prominence of Jimmy Miller in the Tsholotsho area prompted people to associate his name with the area until it was the name of the area. In Ndebele language *ukuJimila* refers to a state of being totally lost; for example in a bush, but investigations and interviews with people in the area do not in a single instance point to this line of etymology, but rather they all point to the Jimmy Miller etymology.

*Change Scemata: Jimmy Miller > jimmymiller > jimina > ji-mi-la > /dʒimila/*

### Sikisiveli

Essex is a toponym carried over to Zimbabwe from the United Kingdom through colonization. The name has its history from the Anglo-Saxon period of the Middle Ages and taken from the Old English word ‘Eastseaxe’ for East Saxons. Essex is a county to the east of Britain. According to Trask, “where the Saxons settled, some transparent local names were conferred, and these names have endured: the territory of the East Saxons (Essex), of the middle Saxons (Middlesex), of the south Saxons (Sussex), and of the west Saxons (Wessex). There are still counties of England named Essex and Sussex today” (2010: 94). The name was used to name an area east of Bulawayo, and since this place is a valley it was named Essexville. The area was known as Essexville up to 1980 when Zimbabwe got independence from the British, and it is now called *eSigodini*. The name has been transphonologized from Essexville to *eSikisiveli*. The transphonologization was done during the colonial period when the place was officially Essexville; however, even today after it was renamed *eSigodini*, people still call it *eSikisiveli*.

*Change Schemata: Essexvale > sikisiveli > si-ki-si-ve-li > /siyisiveli/*

### Tshenisi

*Tshenisi* is another transphonologized form constructed in the same manner and history as *Jimila*. Colonial land ownership in Zimbabwe was such that white farmers owned commercial farms across the country and employed many blacks. Black out growers

surrounded most of these farms. The tendency was that communities in the farms grew and became villages inside the farm and were called by the name of their master. In the Plumtree area of Zimbabwe, the Chennels family had a farm, their family name was used to refer to the farm, and later it was extended to the area in and around the farm. The Ndebele community now staying in the area refers to it as *koTshenisi* from the English surname Chennels.

*Change Schemata: Chennels > tshenisi > tshe-ni-si > /tʃenisi/*

### **Khrosini**

The Kalanga people of Kezi district in Matabeleland South province and the Ndebele of *Silobela* in the Midlands province have both transphonologized the English toponym Crossroads. The Kalanga transphonologized it to *kuKrosi*, while the Ndebele it to *eKhrosini*. Both transphonologies actually mean 'at the cross'. With the Ndebele transphonologized form of Crossroads, principles of derivational morphology are at work. As Ndlovu demonstrates "to adapt history into Ndebele names, rules of Ndebele phonology are followed resulting in some sound changes from the original words. Principles of Ndebele derivational morphology are adhered to in the derivation of historic names (2011: 142). The word "crossroads" is an English word that has been adapted to Ndebele phonology, and the adaptation has been extended to morphology by adding the suffix *-ini* to make it a locative.

*Change Schemata: Crossroads > cross + ini (locative suffix in Ndebele) > khrosini > khrosi-ni > /khrosini/*

### **Conclusion**

The discussed transphonologized toponyms emerged out of the colonial experience. Transphonologization by both the indigenous and the British was a symbolic act. For both, it was a means of domestication of spaces. Specifically for the British transphonologization of indigenous place names was part of the larger efforts to conquer and legitimize dominance. For the indigenous people transphonologization becomes a reaction to alienation and translates into an act of reclamation of lost authority to name and own. Adaptation through transphonologization entails that some elements of colonial naming are largely maintained even if the process is some kind of subtle resistance to colonial dominance. Also significantly, there are often oral stories for most of the transphonologized place names.

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