

Ethnicity in Zimbabwe

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

Enocent Msindo

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For Essy, Jil, and Benediction

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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.

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

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

the African societies, advocates of this initial version of constructivism (the “invention/creation of tribalism” thesis) assumed that since the colonial rulers had little knowledge of the Africans, they proceeded by means of inventing traditions, institutions, and ideas for the Africans. Unfortunately, this perspective needlessly reproduces the old dichotomies of the West as modern and Africa as traditional, pejoratively. The theory unwittingly presupposes that colonial rulers, notwithstanding their ignorance, presided over a gigantic, orderly, and innovative superstructure (termed colonialism); it also assumes that these rulers easily uprooted “authentic,” organic African traditions, and invented and imposed on their African subjects new traditions that suited the colonial enterprise—traditions that their African subjects easily accepted as their own.¹⁶ This perspective makes precolonial African societies appear overly simple, on the one hand, and colonial regimes and institutions overly sophisticated, on the other. Any reading of precolonial Africa demonstrates that precolonial African societies were not so loosely organized to have been unable to develop simple elements of moral economy that were necessary for the creation and development of ethnic identities. On the other hand, we have to accept that, although the colonial state had within its power the ability to make laws, imprison people, and enforce certain social aspects in defense of so-called colonial civility, the same colonial state, especially in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), was also a disorganized institution that operated in most cases on an experimental basis without a well-informed understanding of African systems and lacking close ties with African communities. Its inventive power was limited both by the colonizers’ inadequate knowledge of their subject peoples and by their inability to enforce some of their new laws. On the other hand, Africans took advantage of these weaknesses to create and celebrate their identities even against the wishes of those colonial authorities.

The creation of identities was not purely the preserve of the African and colonial elites such as colonial administrators, missionaries, chiefs, educated elites, and African nationalists. Although we cannot ignore the role of the elites in creating identities and in the day-to-day African moral economy, we also need to evaluate critically the role of commoners in the same vein and indeed the elites’ interaction with those commoners, which is a much more complex relationship than many scholars appreciate mainly because of the nature of the African social and political setting with its many layers of authority and accountability. Those who may be elites in one setting may not be in another. An educated elite, for instance, remains subservient to a poor commoner who happens to be his or her father-in-law; or to his or her rural elderly folks when it comes to enacting certain shared traditions in which culture is embedded; or even those who conduct certain rites of passage and rituals in the community on behalf of all but are, beyond that, mere commoners. By not paying enough attention to the role of commoners in

the making of identities, scholars, especially those of ethnicity, have given the wrong impression that commoners were passive recipients of ideologies rather than active agents in making and breaking societies.

Most historians have found it easy to document the achievements of the elites and those in positions of power, perhaps because traditional historical practices have often conspired against the poor and also because the elites seem to have easily accessible written pasts that commoners do not seem to have.¹⁷ However, a judicious study of the archives, even of those elites and of government together with a carefully considered oral history, reveals the important part played by commoners in dealings that are normally (unfairly) credited to the elites. This book therefore revisits constructivism, castigates its limitations, and moves beyond the notion of history from above to examine the complex interactions of both commoners and elites, as well as the conflicts that existed between them in the process of creating and debating Kalanga and Ndebele ethnic identities within their respective communities. These internal debates explain Kalanga communities' refusal to recognize imposed Ndebele chieftaincies within their communities; their tendency to circumvent both the Ndebele paramount chiefs and the successive native commissioners (NCs); their advocacy for the use of their language in Kalanga areas and in the major African newspaper in Bulawayo; their formation of a Kalanga vigilante society; their tendency to form exclusive tea parties in towns where it would have been easy simply to imagine themselves as Ndebele for the sheer benefit of numbers; their active participation in the politics of ethnic naming; their tendency to celebrate the dominance of Kalanga people in the nationalist leadership of the African National Congress (ANC), the National Democratic Party (NDP), and ZAPU since their formation; and despite the common suffering of the people of Matabeleland during the politically motivated violence meted out by the ZANU government forces in the 1980s, Kalanga people generally delineated their regional alliance with the Ndebele from their closer community ethnic activism represented by the Kalanga Muka Kwaedza Society. These developments—which were generated within the local African community (though not isolated from broader sociopolitical developments of their times) and which were hated and loathed by the colonial officials—do require some attention if we are to understand the internal dynamics of African politics and society. We therefore need to revisit the dominant theoretical positions under which identities have generally been examined. My proposal is that we accept the generality of the African people as active agents and movers in the creation of identities in Africa and as peoples that have not been simply docile recipients of ideologies formed for them by the elites. It is obviously difficult to name this theoretical perspective that I follow, but one could perhaps call it demotic or popular constructivism, a theory that offers to extend the scope of the dominant strands of social con-

structivism by enlarging the scope of ideological players to include commoners.¹⁸ To understand how I arrived at this theoretical position, it is essential to undertake a brief historiographical review of ethnicity.

The Historiography of Ethnicity

The study of ethnicity has undergone considerable shifts with time.¹⁹ Scholarship long ago shifted from *primordialism*, which depicted ethnic identity as natural and immutable, a product of language, blood, and soil.²⁰ Primordialism does not explain why ethnicity as a social organizational category, if it is truly a natural given, disappears during one period and intensifies during another. It also underplays the various social groups to which people belong outside their “original” circle.²¹

Leaving this approach and other approaches such as Marxism, which viewed ethnicity as irrational false consciousness inimical to class consciousness, and the Modernist perspective that dumped ethnicity as an ancient identity, meant to “disappear unceremoniously into the history of museums,” to be replaced with newly acquired status of individualism protected by the state, we have to analyze the directions in scholarship of the late 1960s to post-1980s that have had a major influence in contemporary ethnic studies.²² The first is the *instrumental constructivist* school, which argues that ethnicity was mobilized by migrant workers to help confront their urban problems, by nationalists to build political constituencies, and by cultural elites to enhance their social status.²³ Ethnicity is therefore a social and political resource, conditional and malleable.²⁴ Although this argument has its merits, instrumentalists did not explain what was really in ethnicity (its content) that made it such a powerful tool for political mobilization. This was dealt with earlier by primordialists who thought of blood affinities, common history, and shared culture, but primordialism, as we have already demonstrated, has its own flaws.

Instrumentalists and primordialists alike shared a common belief that ethnicity was fundamentally part of the social order, a basic assumption that later *social constructivists* contested.²⁵ The early (1980s) version of social constructivism, which sounded like multiple instrumentalism (otherwise known as the “invention of tradition” thesis or its slightly modified version, the “creation of tribalism”), represented ethnicity in Africa as a product of inventions by colonial authorities, missionaries, and African intellectuals in their bid to create a social order of convenience. Before colonialism, it is argued, Africans did not belong to fixed tribes, but had “fluid, overlapping social networks of kin, age-mates, clients, neighbors and chiefdoms.” Tribes were thus colonial creations as administrators created new chiefdoms and native authorities, as missionaries standardized African languages and

propagated African traditions, as African chiefs gained charge over huge territorial districts, and as the African educated elites and migrant workers produced new ethnic histories.²⁶ To this school belongs Ranger's analysis of Manyika ethnicity, which he suggested had no precolonial currency, having been invented by missionaries, migrant laborers, and colonial officials during the early colonial period up to about the 1940s. This identity became much more useful during the nationalist era, in the 1970s, as the politics of factionalism played into the liberation movement, ZANU.²⁷ By considering the role of missionaries, migrants, and the colonial state, Ranger's account sees the creation of tribalism among the Manyika mainly as an exogenous process, which is incorrect as it does not sufficiently explore the creative role of the local Africans in the process. Ranger's strict constructivism also denies the existence of precolonial ethnic identity, and in that denial we find one of its fundamental flaws. The thesis works under a false assumption of an existing fundamental break between precolonial and colonial Africa, itself a regrettable error in judgment. The creation of tribalism thesis fails to recognize the glaring fact that what colonial officials termed the "Native problem" was actually a manifestation of efforts by Africans to either continue practicing or revive their precolonial social and political systems that they thought were being deliberately undermined by colonial regimes, regimes that were not always viewed as legitimate by most of the colonized. Although colonial rulers tried to undermine many precolonial African institutions and ideologies, it is clear that some communities still had at least a semblance of these systems in place, notwithstanding the government's choice not to recognize them. The example of some Kalanga communities in Bulilima-Mangwe, which I will discuss below, testifies to this. Among the Ndebele there were also attempts to restore the Ndebele monarchy, although this proved ultimately unsuccessful because of the complexities involved.

The invasion of the area now called Matabeleland by the British South Africa Company (BSACo) in 1893 followed an earlier invasion that had taken place just over half a century earlier (the late 1830s). This invasion by the Ndebele in areas that had mainly been under the control of Kalanga, Nambya, Tonga, Venda, amaSili, Shona, and other communities, was as violent as the colonial invasion and equally destabilizing. There is no evidence to suggest that Ndebele authority had been accepted by the people they found in the land, and in fact, Ndebele authority, not unlike the European colonialism that succeeded it, had been contested by these peoples in different ways and with varying degrees of success. Therefore, we need to recognize that although new political regimes came into place, regardless of their origin, racial orientation, and methods of enforcing their policies, subject communities had their own ways of maintaining order, recreating community, and responding to novel circumstances. In other words, I am simply arguing that the colonial invasion of 1893 represented, for Kalanga people

and others in Matabeleland, another form of invasion that they had to deal with just as they had managed to deal with the earlier Ndebele invasion. For them, colonialism represented continuity in political interference rather than a break from it. In this sense, it would be unfortunate for any serious historian of the Kalanga to locate a Kalanga sense of social and political development, including the evolution of their moral economy, only within the ambit of colonialism and ignore its manifestations in the precolonial era. By this token, I am not suggesting that all precolonial African societies had ethnic identities attached to them, but suffice it to say, in some societies, and at some stages, ethnicity became a lived identity as such African societies widened their social networks and identities beyond clans and chiefdoms in response to developing social and political circumstances, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The creation of tribalism thesis also undermines the role of commoners as agents in the construction of ethnicity. Leroy Vail and a large number of his contributing authors to *The Creation of Tribalism* relegated commoners to “people who craved for the so-called ‘traditional values’ at a time of rapid social change.”²⁸ However, it will be shown that commoners were not as passive or reactionary as Vail and colleagues suggest. We will see how Kalanga and Ndebele commoners were, in most cases, important participants over matters that affected them, including in the debate over their identities.

Some constructivists have now realized some of the flaws in this school and have, in the light of new writings, repudiated the idea of “invention” for its one-sidedness in presupposing that mainly the missionaries and the colonial rulers were the inventors. They also concede that the thesis fails to recognize the subsequent reworking of identities and institutional transformations once they are invented.²⁹ Some now accept in principle the notion of precolonial “we groups”—in other words, some form of precolonial ethnic consciousness—but are still quick to emphasize that these networks were much more fluid than was colonial ethnicity.³⁰ Most constructivists depend on the argument that unlike the precolonial era, the colonial regimes introduced more rigidity to formerly fluid identities by codifying customs, traditions, languages, and other cultural practices, which effectively helped to create and solidify identities. This argument oversimplifies the otherwise complex interactions between the colonizers and the colonized that were characterized not simply by Africans’ acquiescence but much more seriously by resistance, negotiation, and at times indifference as Africans responded to colonial rule. Nor does it appreciate the fact that for many centuries most African societies had sustained certain traditions and structures in place in the absence of written codes and laws by means of orality, spirituality, unwritten laws, and strong family and community structures and networks that helped to create and sustain new identities. Before we depart from this, I will quickly comment on the notion of “we groups.” Although recognition

of precolonial “we groups” is a step in the right direction, it is important to note that, with the exception of this book, this notion has not yet been fully embraced in Zimbabwean historiography; and where it has been attempted by MacGonagle in her study of Ndaue identity in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, the evidential base for Ndaue ethnicity is rather too thin and vague.³¹ Pioneering scholars, especially Ranger and a few others, argue that precolonial identities were not ethnic but were merely political. For Ranger, precolonial Africans were organized into chieftainships, kingships, empires, and clans.³² In their coauthored work on the Shangani, Alexander, McGregor, and Ranger briefly discuss the tributary relations between Ndebele rulers and Shangwe in precolonial Shangani, and the history of Tonga and Rozvi inhabitants of the region. This discussion was included simply to highlight elements of precolonial political identities in general, and as expected, the authors do not critically examine ethnic relations in that era. They argue that in the Shangani, the inhabitants, themselves mostly Ndebele *assimilados*, juxtaposed Ndebele as a general identity with alternative political identities such as being Rozvi, Tonga, or Shangwe.³³ The trio’s central motif in doing this was to build a case to demonstrate how colonial authorities, and later the Ndebele themselves, imagined the Shangani as the ideal Ndebele home.

Taking their cue from Benedict Anderson’s reflections on the origins of nationalism, post-1990s social constructivists have come to view *ethnicity as an imagined identity*.³⁴ This, Ranger believed, would allow historians to examine multiple imaginations of traditions by different players over a long time. As he put it, “Traditions imagined by whites were re-imagined by blacks; traditions imagined by particular black interest groups were re-imagined by others.”³⁵ Reflecting on the work of scholars on identities in Tanzania (Steven Feierman’s emphasis on the creative role of African organic intellectuals, the Shambaa), South Africa (Hamilton and Wright’s emphasis on precolonial invention and imagination of amaLala ethnicity), and Kenya (Lonsdale’s distinction of “moral ethnicity” from “political tribalism” and Berman’s emphasis on the limitations of the legitimacy of the colonial state over its subjects, the Kikuyu), Ranger deployed Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities to make fundamental points about Ndebele identity.³⁶ First, he argues that unlike the areas inhabited by the Kikuyu, the Shambaa, or the Zulu, the area that the Ndebele occupied was very large and that they came from varied origins and environments and that the symbols and practices that later came to be associated with Ndebele identities were not originally Ndebele—for instance, the *Mwali* cult. Second, Ranger maintains that unlike the Zulu, the nineteenth-century Ndebele state was multilingual and had many “ethnic” groups. Therefore, when the native commissioners were imported from the Natal into Matabeleland, they came in and invented a narrow Ndebele ethnicity whose membership was composed mainly of members of the royal clan. Notwithstanding this, Ranger

argues that there was a move, especially in the 1950s, to create a broader Ndebele identity. This identity was a result of two developments: First, resistance to colonial evictions and the state's conflict with one of the chiefs in the Matopos Hills (Chief Sigombe of Wenlock) led to the emergence of a form of cultural nationalism that later fused in Ndebele identity with other ideas about the landscape. Second, Bulawayo-based ideological entrepreneurs' influence increased, as people like Joshua Nkomo emerged as culture brokers. Ranger concludes that there was a "debate between the different imaginings of Ndebeleness"—that is, between the aristocrats who wanted a narrow, caste-limited version of being Ndebele and the Christian progressives who imagined a more democratized Ndebele.³⁷

Ranger's major borrowing from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* appears to be the term "imagined" itself. The rest represents his playing around with the meaning of the term and how it serves to explain the reconstitution of traditions, symbols, and ideas over time. Anderson's *Imagined Communities* was definitely an ambitious work that tried to explain the different contexts under which nations in different global spheres emerged. Strictly speaking, it is neither a book about Africa nor a discussion of ethnicity. It is not necessary to lay out its specific weaknesses here, but the manner in which the concept of imagined traditions has been represented in African scholarship, especially as it relates to Zimbabwean history, requires some critical analysis. Although Ranger seems to have been influenced by some scholarship in Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa that, in different ways, accepted that precolonial ethnicity was at least possible, Ranger's work on Matabeleland demonstrates that he is caught between letting go of the creation of tribalism thesis (in which he strongly believes) and adopting the new perspective that comes in with the post-1990s scholarship that he claims to reflect on and to have learned from. For instance, he describes the precolonial origins of Tanzania's Shamba ethnicity and South Africa's amaLala as "rare instances" in which colonialism was not required to invent or imagine ethnicity. Turning to an account of Ndebele ethnicity, he denies the existence of precolonial ethnicity by arguing that the Ndebele state incorporated different peoples; that the state came to use what were formerly non-Ndebele symbols; and that the state was multilingual.³⁸ His argument is flawed on two basic grounds. First, he fails to examine the different ways by which being Ndebele was contested and negotiated during the precolonial era between both the ruling elites and the commoners, on the one hand, and also between the commoners internal to the Ndebele society and those who just joined it, on the other, by virtue of conquest, raiding, and voluntary incorporation, and via other means. Second, Ranger does not realize the distinction between people who simply belonged to the Ndebele state politically, or feigned belonging to it for their own safety, and those who both belonged to the state and perceived themselves as having the authority to

partake in the Ndebele's moral economy, in which ideas, beliefs, traditions, and symbols about Ndebele identity were being imagined and reconstituted. Moreover, Ranger did not critically examine the nature of Ndebele relations with their Matabeleland neighbors, such as the Kalanga. A more critical examination of this aspect would have been more helpful.

Another point is that Ranger's version of imagined traditions as applied to Matabeleland and elsewhere is still limited in its conception of ideological players. In short, like his earlier scholarship on Manyika identity, it is still elitist. In fact, this is a problem that emanates from Anderson's postmodernist theory of imagined communities itself. Although Anderson examines the different developments that made possible the imagining of the nation, he is evasive about the set of ideological players involved in these processes. Notwithstanding his points about (among other things) the collapse of fundamental cultural conceptions such as centralized religion and its sacred texts, the monarchical orders that ruled under the principle of divine right of kingship, and the changes in the conception of time that made it possible for people to think about the nation, it is not clear who were the ideological players in these developments. His writing concerning print capitalism, the evolution of national languages, the rise of patriotism, African nationalism, and other topics is equally coy on the question of agency.³⁹ Generally, Anderson's ideological players are simply the elites. For Ranger, Chief Sigombe is the ideological entrepreneur in the Matopos, as are the urban intellectuals represented by Joshua Nkomo and people in his mold.⁴⁰ In the Shangani, it is the encounter between the "modern" Christian evictees and the people they found in the "dark forest" that explains the creation not only of ethnic stereotypes but also of a wider Ndebele identity that in turn becomes consolidated as a result of the influence of rural religious elites (the cultic figures or priests) and the rising political elites from within the reserves and those with urban connections.⁴¹ In these two major texts on colonial Ndebele history, the role of the commoners is unclear but the roles of the different elites feature prominently. However, the relationship between elites and commoners is not always this simple and straightforward. As Fry has aptly demonstrated in a study of the Fingo, commoners are equally active agents in creating their identities.⁴²

The elite-centered nature of the imagined communities model does not help explain why symbols and ideas imagined by the elites get to be so powerfully embraced to the point that most people become willing to lay down their lives for them. Mere patriotism, racism, colonialism, and other "isms" do not in themselves sufficiently explain this sacrificial element in most identities. For this reason, Anthony Smith suggests that we not only emphasize the imaginative process that creates identities but also focus on the volitional and emotional aspects that complement the imaginative aspects.⁴³ In this sense, ethnic communities are imagined, felt (emotional), and willed (voluntary) communities. Emotion and will are not themselves

always derived out of an imaginative process, but emerge out of real historical and contemporary points of reference and circumstances that create them. These three (imagination, emotion, and will) are interactive in enriching and foregrounding identities. However, what produces that interaction is the link between modern expressions of ethnicity and earlier “collective cultural identities and sentiments” that developed over long periods of time.⁴⁴ According to Smith, himself an ethnosymbolist, the past influences the (national) present through recurrence; through continuity, whereby institutional and other processes dating back ages are perpetuated; and through appropriation, whereby generations try to rediscover, authenticate, and appropriate aspects of their assumed pasts.⁴⁵ In its imaginative sense, an ethnic group appeals to those ancient elements of society and culture with a view to legitimizing and solidifying its practices. For this reason, ethnic groups usually ascribe primordial characteristics to their symbols and practices to legitimize themselves. The emotional aspect of ethnicity causes members of an ethnic group to feel for one another and defend the group and one another where circumstances permit. At times, this emotional aspect of ethnicity is taken advantage of by politicians and thus translates a people’s moral ethnicity into political tribalism. The volitional aspect of ethnicity explains why certain people cleave to their identity or at times why they struggle to renegotiate it.

Because of the framework explained above, we are now able to look at ethnicity imaginatively without doing harm to the historical basis of ethnicity and the reality of symbols around which ethnicities were mobilized. Ndebele ethnicity continued to be debated during the colonial era on the basis of its precolonial symbols, ideas, and more. That explains why debates about Ndebele ethnic “purity,” Ndebele language, chieftaincies, and other traditions, which were believed to be the assemblages that made up Ndebeleness, often rallied around the reinterpreting of the past, which was done by both the elites and commoners. Kalanga ethnicity, too, emerged during the precolonial era, but was constantly shaped during the colonial era as communities negotiated and interpreted not only their old historical traditions, but also new social and political realities that arose as a result of evictions from their lands, the placement of Ndebele chiefs in some Kalanga communities, the promotion of isiNdebele by the state ahead of the Kalanga language, the emergence of a new urban politics and society in Bulawayo, the rise of nationalism, and other factors.

Challenges in Matabeleland History

The biggest challenge in the study of Matabeleland history is dealing with sources. Apart from the dearth of written sources on certain districts to the

margins of western Zimbabwe, there is also the matter of changing memory, reconstituted traditions, and the problems created by scholars' tendencies to write politically correct and usable histories. Defending his use of oral sources gathered mainly from historical Ndebele elites for the study of Ndebele history, Sabelo Ndlovu stated: "The Ndebele of present day Matabeleland are still closer to the events that took place in the Ndebele state in the nineteenth century due to cultural and linguistic affinities and continuities."⁴⁶ Nothing could be more oversimplified than this assumption. Although there are certain continuities from the Ndebele past, a number of things have nonetheless shifted over of time, and certain traditions and codes of practice have taken on new meanings, while others have long been discarded. Some people who had been "Ndebele" have repudiated Ndebeleness, and some who had been Kalanga are now being referred to as Ndebele. By means of the Ndebele policy of political assimilation, which underpinned the political and spatial growth of the state, certain traditions were definitely reconstituted. Historians studying this region must be aware of this situation and treat the social history of this region, like others, as a history of people undergoing changes as a result of a number of influences.

The memories of the peoples of Matabeleland have been shaped by many events, such as the wave of evictions from their land, which created new societies; droughts and related catastrophes; rising nationalism, which also led to the emergence of a new regional Matabeleland identity; urban challenges; and also the postcolonial political instability in the region. Most of these events have overwritten memory to such an extent that the interpretations of past events that remain are subjective and personalized. In short, Matabeleland has a very deep history of multilayered crises. These crises have caused instances of selective amnesia and remembrance whereby people choose what to forget about the past and what to remember depending on its perceived importance to them. Events are not totally forgotten, nor are they necessarily remembered except when another crisis unfolds.⁴⁷ What people are often ready to tell a researcher may reflect merely what they consider important or what they think the researcher wants to hear. In some cases, communities volunteered information with the idea in mind that once their history is written down, they would be able to use it as a legitimizing source for their claims to land, restitution, and other gains. As historians, we never rely on oral testimony alone but also use our reflections from the archives and even information from earlier oral reminiscences to further interrogate our sources and also in part as provocation to the forgetting "sages" so that in turn their recall improves. In most cases when informants relate a story, they do so under the assumption that the interviewer is seeking information that he or she does not know; yet this is not always the case, because we often have prior knowledge based perhaps on archival research or other sources, however incomplete that knowledge may be. So although

I relied on my fieldwork to gain much information, I did not approach the task of interviewing naively.

Matabeleland is a “postconflict” region that has also been beset by other problems like drought and bad governance. Although its people are seeking to move on with their lives after *gukurahundi* atrocities, for which none of the state actors has accepted responsibility and apologized, they often rethink their past and reinterpret it in the context of the present situations. The period of the rise of African nationalism, which later saw the split in the nationalist movement between the Zimbabwe African Peoples’ Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) coupled with the postcolonial massacre of Matabeleland people in the 1980s, created and cemented a new regional Ndebele identity. For this reason, a new researcher to Matabeleland may find it difficult to delineate elements of Kalanga identity from those that are Ndebele when one arrives in the region for the first time. Today, some Kalanga people can be both regionalist (Ndebele) and Kalanga ethnic patriots at the same time. A person’s devotion to either of these identities depends on individual perception of their importance. For some Kalanga people in Bulilima-Mangwe, however, there was a strong feeling that a growing regional Ndebele identity needed to be checked to prevent its negative impact on Kalanga ethnicity. In Madyambudzi, Plumtree, an old man (whose name I have withheld) told me privately after the interview, “You . . . people must help us. We are being oppressed by these Ndebele people a lot. You see, they come and live with us here, but they do not respect us. They do not even want to learn our language!” But interestingly, when one interviews politicians and Ndebele cultural activists who wish to see greater Matabeleland reconstructed as a unified whole, with only one social and political identity, one gets a quite different view—one that justifies the informant’s current political project. My awareness of these different interpretations of the past has been helpful, and I have therefore used their views with caution. This does not mean that the accounts of commoners are in any way more truthful than that of the politicians because even commoners can have their diverse agendas. However biased the views of both commoners and Ndebele elites of today may be, I came to understand the complex nature of individual memory and the plurality of versions of the past as shared with me by different informants at different moments.⁴⁸

Another challenge concerning research in Matabeleland is the problem of trust. First, researching in a region that has undergone extreme postcolonial violence is seldom easy, especially when researchers are sometimes viewed as outsiders. Second, Ndebele oral informants differed in terms of their idea of what a researcher was entitled to know and what he or she could not be allowed to know. When I approached Chief Kaisa Ndiweni of Ntabazinduna, once a very famous old Ndebele chief (but now deceased), there were things that he could not tell me about Ndebele political history