FIGHTING OVER NDEBELE IDENTITY THROUGH ONLINE FORUMS: QUARRELS OF THE VANQUISHED?

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ABSTRACT

Social media has transformed into a space of contest for identity, language and culture. In an attempt to reclaim, redefine and restore their distorted identity, the Ndebele people have taken to using social media as a forum to fulfil their quest. Unlike most cultures and identities the concept of 'Ndebeleness' is a fluid ideology, because the concept of nationalism in this culture involves a unification of various identities, which in itself has caused an identity divide in Ndebele ideology. More recently, identity debates have centered around the question of 'who is Ndebele and who is an outsider?' This article reflects on and discusses key ideas and cross-cutting themes around the evolution of 'cultures', discursive

practices and other 'language forms' in Zimbabwe that have, in recent years, played a significant role in shaping ideas about Ndebele identity and the other. The article analyses these concepts using facets of critical discourse analysis as well as primordial and constructivist theories of identity. The article draws on data collected from various social media forums for analysis purposes.

Keywords: constructivist theory, Ndebele, primordial theory, social media, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the concept of displacement and the contest for space and identity in the Ndebele cybercommunity. Ndebele identity has always been 'a hair-splitting' concept, with various definitions as to who is a Ndebele and who is an outsider. This is because, unlike most cultures and identities, the concept of 'Ndebeleness' is a fluid ideology, always shifting and changing. It is always under construction and reconstruction, mostly due to the fact that the concept of nationalism in this culture involves a unification of various identities, which in itself has caused an identity divide in Ndebele ideology. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2011, 25) asserts 'that in the southwest of the Zimbabwe plateau there emerged another hegemonic identity known as Ndebele that conflated and homogenised such identities as Kalanga, Nyubi, Venda, Tonga, Tswana, Sotho, Birwa and Lozwi into a broad Ndebele identity'. Due to this unification of various ethnic identities there is a notion of authenticity amongst the Ndebele which continues to spark identity debates. More recently, these identity debates have centered around the concept of 'who is Ndebele and who is an outsider'. This article interrogates the concept of displacement and the contest for space and identity in the Ndebele cybercommunity, i.e., the various online discussion forums used by people as a space for social interaction. This article reflects on and discusses key ideas and cross-cutting themes around the evolution of cultures' discursive practices and other 'language forms' in Zimbabwe that have, in recent years, played a significant role in shaping ideas about *Ndebele* identity and the other. Considering that there are two very different groups (the Northern Ndebele of Empumalanga in South Africa and the Southern Ndebele of Zimbabwe) of people referred to as the Ndebele in southern Africa, it is important to make a clear distinction geographically, linguistically and culturally between the groups.

PRIMORDIALISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

The Ndebele are a displaced nation, both historically and in contemporary society. It is this concept of displacement that has instilled the quest for identity authenticity amongst member of the society. In the past, ethnic discussions were always oral and usually resulted in physical disputes amongst the Zimbabwean community. As

a result, most people shy away from engaging in identity construction or defining debates. Turkle (2012) asserts that real life provides little space for consequence-free identity-play, unlike the online realms of social networking sites and gaming forums. Like most societies, that of the Ndebele has evolved in terms of social interaction. With the turn of the century, interactions developed from physical to electronic forms. This is because the global economic situation has a direct impact on global social relations. Economic issues largely influence and define social interactions. The advent of technology has introduced various social network and online forums, such as Facebook, blogs, Twitter and Myspace. Throughout the global village, people are logging in, creating profiles, publicly articulating their relationships with other participants and writing extensive comments back and forth. In these online forums a virtual identity is created. As a result, online forums have transformed into a space where identity, language and culture are contested – and the Ndebele people are no exception. In an attempt to reclaim, redefine and restore their distorted identity, the Ndebele have taken to using social forums to fulfill their quest. In as much as people of Ndebele origin use various sites of interaction, this article only focuses on a single blog site, namely inkundla.net.

This article draws its strengths from primordialism and social constructivist theories. The former defines ethnicity as primordial, i.e., ethnicity is 'deeply ingrained in human history and experience' (Wolff 2006, 33). Ethnic bonds are primordial, and unlike other bonds have an overpowering non-rational, emotional quality; they are largely inexplicable; are ancient, enduring and recurrent; and are given, natural and immutable. This theory reflects how members of the Ndebele community view and define their identity, grounding it in their past experiences and history. It highlights how the people legitimise their ethnicity based on their traditions. Yet social constructivism views ethnicity as socially and politically constructed over time. Ethnicity is 'foremost a resource in the hands of leaders to mobilize followers in the pursuit of other interests' (ibid). Ethnic bonds are related to political and social projects; instrumentally mobilised as a means to gain material goals. This means that in referring to their traditions and emphasising their past battles (both won and lost), the Ndebele people are embarking on a journey of identity reconstruction. They reconstruct their identity through a process of deconstruction, in an effort to restore their identity as it is grounded in their historical past. Both theories – despite their differences – advocate for separate imaginings of identity and are intricately intertwined in discussions of identity formation.

Primordialism, in relation to ethnicity, argues that 'ethnic groups and nationalities exist because there are traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects such as biological factors and especially territorial location' (Bayer 2009, 2). This argument relies on a concept of kinship, where members of an ethnic group feel they share characteristics, origins or sometimes even a blood relationship. According to Bayer (ibid.), primordialism assumes ethnic identity is fixed once it is constructed; as

is evident in the Ndebele people tracing their cultural belief systems as descendants of Mzilikazi. There are three basic arguments at the core of primordialism: 1) to the primordialist, ethnicity is an ascribed identity or assigned status which is inherited from one's ancestors; 2) ethnicity is static; ethnic boundaries which demarcate who is a member of the group and who is not are fixed or immutable; and 3) common ancestry determines ethnicity. To primordialists it is the primordial bonds that give rise to and sustain ethnicity (Yang 2000, 42). In the case of the Ndebele their ethnicity is ascribed; their common ancestry is indisputable, yet their ethnicity is not always static. Depending on the context and concept under study, Ndebele identity is fluid. James McKay (1992) challenges the implication that ethnic identities are static and rejects the 'sense of primacy' about ethnicity. This means that Ndebele identity is socially constructed, to a significant extent. Social constructionists recognise the potential for change in conceptions of ethnicity; ethnic conflict stems from competition for material resources and perceived or real deprivation; and leaders stir up ethnic mobilisation. Yet constructivists argue that ethnicity is not primordial, even though members may experience it primordially (Horowitz 2002). This article therefore adopts both theories to interrogate Ndebele identity. Wolff (2006, 36–37) asserts that

> ethnic identity should perhaps rather be seen as something that has roots in a group's culture, and historical experiences and traditions, but that is also dependent upon contemporary opportunities that can be a useful instrument for mobilizing people for social, political, or economic purposes that may or may not be related directly to their ethnic origins.

The best approach is to use facets of both theories to explain any contemporary imaginings of who a people are.

THE GEOCULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE NDEBELE

Hadebe (in Kaschula 2001, 16) notes that in the foreword to *Palestinians: From peasants to revolutionaries*, Chomsky wrote that 'history is the property of the winners'. This observation is equally applicable to the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe, whose history, philosophy or general way of life and world-view have been neglected in mainstream history and knowledge. Most of whatever is officially known about the Ndebele people – be it their history, their arts or their politics – are vague impressions formulated by non-Ndebele writers. Needless to say, such situations usually breed negative stereotypes and consequently create prejudice against a people so marginalised. Nonetheless, the Ndebele people have managed to keep record of their history through proverbs, riddles, names and oral poetry.

The Ndebele were originally a derivative of the Nguni people of KwaZulu-Natal. They split from King Shaka in the early 1820s under the leadership of Mzilikazi, a

former general in Shaka's army. During a turbulent period of African history known as the Mfecane, Mzilikazi and his followers moved west towards the area near the present-day city of Pretoria, where they founded a settlement called Mhlahlandlela (a name which lives on in the modern-day Bulawayo suburb, Malindela). Here they came into contact with Tswana people, who are credited with giving this band of Zulus the name Matebele. *Tabele* comes from *tebela* which means 'to chase away' in Setswana. The term was then anglicised to *Ndebele* from the original *Amatebele*. Given that this name has been applied to other Nguni-speaking people apart from the Ndebele of Zimbabwe, Mazarire (2003, 3) believes it meant 'stranger', more than anything else. In time it came to refer only to Mzilikazi's people and to the 'Transvaal Ndebele', although the two groups are not related.

This group of people then moved northwards and settled into present-day Zimbabwe, where they battled with the Shona people, eventually carving out a home now called Matabeleland. Hadebe (in Kaschula 2001, 16) asserts that on its way to the north from Zululand, this group (then called the Khumalo) incorporated the Sotho people. When they crossed the Limpopo River around 1840 into what is today Zimbabwe, Mzilikazi's people were no longer referred to as the Khumalo but were given various names by the people they came into contact with. According to Mazarire (2003, 2), a renowned historian at the University of Zimbabwe,

> [it is] this military orientation and the Zulu origin [that] has led to the development of a specific mythology of the Ndebele as a warlike people who have often 'preyed' on their neighbours, as a mythology in which both the Ndebele and their supposed victims have all participated in perpetuating.

The moulding of the present-day Zimbabwean Ndebele ethnicity is, however, an entirely different issue altogether, since it takes into account developments which have shaped Ndebele society. Msindo (2002) argues that Ndebele ethnicity developed hand in hand with the establishment of the political, social and economic aspects of the state. Political formation, in Msindo's view, coincided with the formation of internal ethnic differentiation. Beyond Zululand, the Ndebele political formation had pursued a policy of incorporation and by the time they were settled in the south-eastern parts of Zimbabwe, they had become a cosmopolitan group with more Sotho and Tswana people than the original Nguni. According to Mazarire (2003, 4) it is then that the Ndebele encountered the Kalanga and the Rozvi, who had not only occupied the area for a long time, but had also encountered and even clashed with some passing Nguni groups. This in itself reflects that with the changing tides, Ndebele ethnicity was socially constructed and redefined.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008a, 18) asserts that a differentiated society of this nature has caused scholars to speculate on the mode of organisation of the Ndebele state – most have been content to explain it in terms of a caste system. In their simplest form, Ndebele castes are divided into three broad categories: 1) the Zansi, consisting

of the original Nguni component of the state which constituted mostly of the ruling elite; 2) the Enhla, composed of the Sotho-Tswana and other groups incorporated on the way to the Zimbabwean plateau; 3) the Hole caste, which was inclusive of the Kalanga, Rozvi and other Shona groups found in the area or assimilated as captives and/or slaves according to early missionary accounts.

Linguistically, the Ndebele occupy the south-western parts of Zimbabwe known as the Matabelelands – an area that represents a long-established culture and dialectical zone, through which many groups have passed. Language is an important aspect of identity. Our mother tongue, or language of primary socialisation, provides our initial contact with the world and facilitates the formation of values as well as our view of ourselves. It reinforces our self-concept and our perceptions of others within a multifaceted social order. Linguistic identity can be related to a particular country or ethnic group. For example, a South African might claim Xhosa or Zulu and a Zimbabwean might claim Ndebele or Shona as their linguistic identity, since neither Zimbabwe nor South Africa has one common indigenous language. Values are the basis of a people's identity, the embodiment of their consciousness. Such values help to define who and what we are as a people, and our place in society. Our consciousness affects how we look at our values, our culture. Values are embodied in culture and passed on through language. Hence it is important to define and describe the Ndebele identity linguistically.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (ibid) states that the Ndebele language is simple and can be easily explained in terms of the Ndebele's Zulu-isation, by both Ndebele aristocrats and colonial officials. Ndebele rulers attached a great deal of importance to the language. Lobhengula, like Mzilikazi before him, is said to have required his subjects to speak Zulu (the language of conquerors), and that this was the language which later transformed into the Ndebele of today. The Zulu language and culture were imagined as an identity for the Ndebele, although the aristocracy may never have perceived themselves as such. Nowadays the term 'Ndebele' is mainly used to refer to all Ndebele-speaking people who were once under the rule of Ndebele kings and assumed a Ndebele identity. Also, the term has been used loosely to refer to the inhabitants of Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe, regardless of their ethnicity or language. Maybe this is because the Ndebele language (isiNdebele) is taught (in government) compulsorily throughout Matabeleland, even to non-mother tongue speakers. However, for the purposes of this discussion we focus on the Ndebele society resident in Bulawayo, whose members still identify closely with the Zulu or Nguni culture, for whom Zuluness was aspired to as a political culture, despite the fact that the Khumalo clan from who they descended was not Zulu.

The Ndebele people of Matabeleland are the focus of this article. It is imperative to note that the Ndebele people's history cannot be defined outside of the Zulu culture. The Ndebele rebelled against Tshaka, as mentioned earlier, but they have always seen him as one of their greatest legendary heroes. Their identity is therefore

always constructed on their Zulu origins. This means that they are defined as a displaced people: displaced from KwaZulu-Natal through Mzilikazi's breakaway, and displaced in Zimbabwe through their Zulu origins. The Ndebele identity has thus had to be deconstructed and reconstructed over time.

With the advent of colonialism in Africa, the Ndebele culture and people began to change. As they came into contact with various cultures and belief systems (e.g., Western norms) it became difficult to treat Ndebele ethnicity as a separate entity. Ranger (1999) notes the developments beyond the 1930s as Ndebele identity (viewed in the context of the Matabelelands) having managed to transcend and abolish the age-old caste distinctions of the Zansi, Enhla and Hole. This simply means that a new imagined community was coming into existence, with its own contradictions and differences. As the nation was built through incorporating various ethnic identities, a new identity construct developed, which still had its roots in tradition, history and experience. It is this experience that makes a primordial and constructivist approach the most suitable theoretical framework for this article.

In contemporary Zimbabwe, the Ndebele people have been vanquished in multiple ways. They fought against colonisation, against ethnic genocide in post-independent Zimbabwe and against economic displacement in present-day Zimbabwe. They are a people who are on a quest to restore their past image as kings and queens, warriors and conquerors. As they fail to fight the dominant ethnic ruling Shona, they have begun to look within to find an enemy. This is a common human response amongst displaced people, which causes them to try to reconstruct and redefine themselves based on contemporary imaginings of who they think they should be. In the case of the Ndebele, this identity crux manifests itself in what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008b) terms 'Ndebele particularism'. Ndebele particularism is a complex phenomenon that reflects how and why the Ndebele identity has been constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed over the centuries, creating an inevitable state of confusion, exclusion and displacement of individuals within a single community. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008b, 37) the Ndebele's particularistic ethnic identity has precolonial, colonial and postcolonial origins:

> Ndebele ethnicity was built on multiple origins that were ordered in a hierarchy of belonging. A Ndebele could be of Nguni, Sotho, Tswana, Khalanga, Venda, Tonga and/Shona origin. The Ndebele were therefore viewed as a Nation rather than an ethnic group. A nation which consisted of the Abezansi, Abenhla and AmaHole (anyone who did not belong to the first two groups).

Many people believe the concept of 'Ndebele particularism' began with the intrusion of colonialism. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008b) clarifies this myth by stating that the colonialists did not 'invent Ndebele ethnic identity; they reconstructed it for colonial purposes. By the time of colonial rule, the Ndebele state had existed as a centralized political reality in the south-western part of the Zimbabwean plateau with people who were conscious of being Ndebele and spoke isiNdebele as their national language.'

This means that with the advent of each major political or social shift, the existing construct of Ndebele identity has shifted, which points to the fact that the concept of Ndebeleness is in constant flux. Hence, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008b) is correct in saying the best way to understand Ndebele ethnic identity is as a socially constructed phenomenon, not as a fixed primordial identity. This fluidity is evident in the online conversation interrogated from inkundla.net.

ONLINE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Social media have transformed into a space where identity, language and culture are contested. In an attempt to reclaim, redefine and restore their distorted identity, the Ndebele people have taken to using social media as a forum. As mentioned earlier, the global economic situation has a direct impact on global social relations, because economic issues influence and define social interactions. All across the global village, people are logging in, creating profiles, publicly articulating their relationships with other participants, and writing extensive comments back and forth. This article focuses on the blog site inkundla.net, which is run by an elitist diaspora-based Ndebele group who refer to themselves as the Mthwakazi Liberation Front (MLF). The blog is described as follows: *Ndebele and Mthwakazi people from Bulawayo, Matabeleland and Zimbabwe site/Inkundla nguMthombo woLwazi, oweMfundo, oweNhlalakahle, oweNjabulo, owoBuntu besizwe SikaMthwakazi.* [Inkundla is a library of knowledge, education, goodliving, happiness, uBuntu of the Mthwakazi nation]. The blog identifies the Ndebele as a separate entity from that of the Mthwakazi nation, i.e., it clearly identifies that there are diverse ideologies surrounding the concept of who is Ndebele. Hence the separation of Mthakazi's people from the general Ndebele; and the Ndebele being defined in terms of geographic location.

Of great importance is the fact that the MLF consists of a group of individuals who are displaced geographically. Most people are live in South Africa, Mozambique and the diaspora. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008b) asserts that a displaced people will always yearn to belong, be it culturally, linguistically or socially, and will always fight to feel at 'home'. It is therefore not surprising that the default defining aspects of home are culture, preceded by language, which in essence leads to the concept of identity. A displaced people will hold onto memories they have of their identity, be those violent or glorious. In this case, the Ndebele nation's past is marred by a history of violence and displacement. Jocely Alexander and Terrence Ranger (1999) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008) have captured how violence and memory, respectively, have shaped the history of the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe (through resistance against colonial forces as well as assaults on them by postcolonial forces). It is this shared history and these common experiences that influence and inform the spirit of camaraderie amongst the Mthwakazi. This group advocates for Ndebele

particularism, i.e., the rendition of a separate Ndebele history, which differs from Shona historical experiences and attempts to revive the Ndebele kingship (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008a).

All these traits are revealed in the blog discussion topics. The first posting on the blog related to *Origins yezibongo* [Origins of surnames]. This is not surprising, because until recently, an individual's surname reflected or identified their ethnic group. However, due to intermarriages, migration and various social changes, surnames are no longer a defining marker of identity location. Despite this, the blog sparked a great identity debate based on the topic. This blog thread aimed to ascertain who is Ndebele, and who is outsider. Online discussions often emphasise the differences between online and offline interactions and construct 'cyberspace' as a distinctively different arena for social interaction. Turkle (1995, 178) asserts that the Internet is another element of the computer culture that has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicitous. Users are able to build a self by cycling through many selves. On the inkundla.net blog, individuals are able to create profiles which only reflect their names or surnames. It is these names that identify them throughout the interaction. However, unlike Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, the blog does not give an option to upload pictures. It should be noted that individuals rarely use their real names on the blog, with most choosing to use their totem or clan names. Because their totems usually define who they are, it is through their totems that they are able to justify and defend the authenticity of their Mthwakazi nature. Hence, on inkundla. net most individuals have totems that are of Nguni origin, although some are general names. The discussion thread posted on 06/19/07 was led by Muntongenakudla:

> Over the years we've been privileged to have some well-informed forums explaining the origins of the Ndebele. We can however go a step further and determine our true history by discussing the concept of origins of izibongo ko Mthwakazi.

> In the above extract, Muntongenakudla asserts that identifying the origin of one's surname is a definite identity marker of one's origin and history. This is the thread that sparked a debate of who is Ndebele and who is an outsider. Below is an extract of the conversation that follows:

> *Ngingathokoza kakhulu uma abalolwazi balandise ngomdabuko wezibongo ezibiza Sibanda and Moyo.* [I would be happy if someone well vexed on origins of surnames could explain to me the origin of the surname Moyo or Sibanda]. (Butholezwe)

> Moyo is of Shona origins: A heart is *mwoyo* in Shona. These people are undisputedly of Shona extraction. Their totem is *Vuma balanda* in Ndebele or *Vuma varanda* in Shona. The Moyo's esiNdebeleni are still the same people with Moyos in the Shona. They are one and *bakhonza idlozi linye*! [They worship the same ancestral line]. They only came to part of Mntungwas nation by assimilation. *Umntungwa kaMbulazi* absorbed the Moyo from the conquered Shona hence forth they became amaHole, a part of Ndebele, alongside the *enhla nathi abeNguni* [as well as us the Nguni]. In summary, *mina wangaphesheya KoThukela, mina Nkwali yenkosi, uShamase wangempela uMtubatuba KaSomkhele* [I say Moyo is undiluted Shona]. (Muntongenakudla)

Omoyo abako Mthwakazi asiwo ma Shona [The Moyo from Mthwakazi are not Shona]. *Okhokho babo babe ngamaShona kodwa bona*, by religion, culture and language, ngamaNdebele [Their ancestors were Shona but by religion, culture and language they are Ndebele]. Remember that during the days of Mzilikazi you would not perform any ceremonial rituals and exclude them, therefore they were part of the house of Mthwakazi. They are Ndebele through and through. (Hitshi-Hitshi)

Hiss-Hiss!! Your lack of attention to detail will prove to be your undoing. Mnumzane 'Sir', please pay attention to detail. See the wood from the trees. I urge you to revisit my posting this time with both your eyes open. *Mina KaNwali* [I have told you] the origin of Moyo. They are Shona! (Muntongenakudla)

Mntongenakudla, the term Shona itself is not the original term, therefore it cannot be used to describe the origins of Moyo. The correct term is Lozwi. The term Shona is only a 100 years old and is used to describe a certain grouping of people who were not part of Mzilikazi's state. (Ginyambila)

Gwinyambila or is it Gwinyambira! You and Hiss – Hiss must be Moyos why are you so defensive? Your contention is farfetched. It misses the mark. I will reiterate, the fact that oMoyo are of Shona origins. They are not Ndebele. (Mntongenakudla)

Bafowethu [My brothers], *mntongenakudla, goqa iyembe mfana ekhaya sihle sitshayane. Hirrrrr Elamani?* [Fold you shirt sleeves my brother and lets fight to settle this]. Moyo is Lozwi by origin… (Zwangendaba)

Wena Kunene! Wena waphakade! Wena tive! Ngikuzwa ngingadakwanga [I hear you sober minded]. But I beg to differ *mfowethu*… (Muntongnakudla)

The interaction on the forum reflects various forms of individual power dominance. From the choice of profile names (in bold on-screen) one can identify that some individuals select names to affiliate themselves with their Nguni origins, for example, Zwangendaba was one of the great chiefs who left Zululand with Mzilikazi. This surname would identify the individual as a pure Nguni and the same applies to Butholezwe and Muntongenakudla. These names would identify these individuals amongst the abeZansi and abeNhla in the caste system, therefore they would by default have the respect of lesser individuals in the Ndebele hierarchy. The need for dominance and respect based on name choice is reflected in how these individuals address each other. The participants always mention their praise names and totems, either at the beginning of a conversation or at the end. Like an *iimbongi* does, the use of praise names is usually used as a genealogy tracer, a marker of one's identity and a legitimisation of one's place or right to speak. For example, after Muntongenakudla gives his version of the origin of the surname Moyo, he concludes by saying: 'In summary *mina wangaphesheya KoThukela*, *mina Nkwali yenkosi, uShamase wangempela uMtubatuba KaSomkhele* [I say Moyo is undiluted Shona]. He identifies himself as someone from across the Limpopo River (*Wangaphesheya koThukela*). He automatically asserts that he is of Nguni origin and because of this, his word should be taken as the truth. The exclamation mark at the end of the sentence highlights to the reader that he presents his view as the best and true version on the forum. This

superiority complex is revealed in his response to what he considers a challenge from an unfit contender, Hitshi-Hitshi. The latter disputes the idea that the Moyo people are of Shona origin, and Muntongenakudla takes offence to this challenge. He responds by mocking Hitshi-Hitshi's choice of name and rephrases it to 'Hiss-hiss'. This in itself is a use of ridicule and mockery which critically reflect his domineering nature. His acclamation *Mina KaNwali* [I am KaNkwali], I have told you the origin of Moyo. They are Shona!' represents his strong character and commands respect for his origins, that is, his ascribed primordial past. Muntongenakudla clearly views Zwangendaba as his only equal on the forum, and this is reflected in the way he responds to the latter's post. He uses Zwangendaba's praise names and clan names to address him via polite in interaction**:**

> Zwangendaba. *Wena Kunene! Wena waphakade! Wena tive! Ngikuzwa ngingadakwanga* [I hear you sober minded]. But I beg to differ *mfowethu*…

His choice of vocabulary renders Zwangendaba a worthy opponent and a kinsman, when he refers to him as his brother (*mfowethu*).This interaction on the forum reflects each individual's view of the so-called idea of who belongs to the Ndebele nation and who does not. There is evidence of many individuals like Muntongenakudla who seem to subscribe to the idea of exclusion, a separatist and exclusionary model of the Mthwakazi reconstruction. In their ideal new state for an imaginary land yet to be reclaimed, Moyo would not fit into their definition of Ndebele, which seems to be centered around the concept of surnames. However, this is a limited definition, because Ndebele surnames are a very complex phenomenon on their own, and have a too interwoven a history for one to simplistically deploy them as a concept to understand identity. When misunderstood, the notion of using surnames in this way could cause confusion, and could lead to further displacement amongst people who have already been vanquished. Totemic politics need explanation and cannot be deployed casually to enlighten debates on ethnicity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008< >, 34). It is clear that the current identity debate presents itself as verbally violent on online forums, as it has done in Zimbabwe in the past. Identity authenticity is still a complex ideology amongst the Ndebele and displacement has not made the journey of reconstruction a simple one.

CONCLUSION

As the Ndebele attempt to redefine and reconstruct their identity it is necessary for them not to confuse the disparate notions of individual assertiveness, ethnicity and nationalism. It is easy to forget that the Ndebele were a nation with multiple identities. Unlike most cultures and identities, the concept of Ndebeleness is a fluid ideology. This is because the construct of this culture involved a unification of various identities which, in itself, caused an identity divide in the Ndebele community at large.

Therefore, this concept will be in constant flux as society changes and socioeconomic factors come into play. The minority ethnic groups that were incorporated into the Ndebele identity are also continuously redefining themselves and reconstructing their identities (i.e., the Kalanga and the Tonga). This means that identity will forever be a social construct based on primordial experiences.

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