

Forced Resettlement, Ethnicity, and the (Un)Making of the Ndebele Identity in Buhera District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This study examines the historical development of hostility between the Shona-speaking inhabitants of Buhera district in south-central Zimbabwe and Ndebele speakers who settled in the area after being forcibly removed from various parts of Matabeleland and Midlands provinces between the 1920s and 1950s. It shows how competition for productive farmlands, which became visible beginning in the 1940s, produced and sustained the Ndebele–Shona hostility in Buhera. While other scholars view this hostility primarily from an ethnic perspective, this article argues that ethnicity was just one of many factors that shaped relations between these people.

Résumé: Cette étude examine le développement historique de l'hostilité entre les habitants de langue shona du district de Buhera au centre-sud du Zimbabwe et les habitants de langue ndebele qui se sont installés dans la région après avoir été expulsés de force de diverses parties du Matabeleland et des provinces des Midlands entre les années 1920 et 1950. Il montre comment la concurrence pour l'exploitation des terres agricoles fertiles, devenue visible depuis les années 1940, a créé et maintenu l'hostilité qui perdure aujourd'hui entre les Ndebele et les Shona dans le district de Buhera. Alors que d'autres chercheurs considèrent principalement cette hostilité du point de vue ethnique, cet article soutient que l'ethnicité n'est qu'un des nombreux facteurs ayant façonné les relations entre ces deux groupes.

Key Words: Forced resettlement; ethnicity; identity formation; boundary disputes; Ndebele–Shona relations; Zimbabwe

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Introduction

From the mid-1920s to the early 1950s, Buhera district in south-central Zimbabwe received about one hundred families of Ndebele speakers forcibly removed from Matabeleland and Midlands provinces (see map). Most of them settled in scattered enclaves in the northern and eastern parts of this predominantly Shona-speaking area. Over the years, intermarriage and other forms of interaction between the Ndebele and their hosts produced somewhat hybrid communities in Buhera. The majority of evictees and their descendants adopted several aspects of their hosts' ways of life, and both groups became competent in the other's language. However, despite coexisting in this district for several decades, there is an unmistakable tension and promotion of negative stereotypes between the Ndebele and Shona speakers in Buhera.

This article examines why and how the Ndebele–Shona relations in Buhera came to be what they are today. It does so by exploring the politics of community building and identity (re)construction among the Ndebele in Buhera district. In so doing, the study builds on a growing body of scholarship examining the intersection of forced resettlement and identity formation in Zimbabwe. Examples of such literature include Worby's (1994) and Nyambara's (2002) studies of developments that took place in Gokwe district after the resettlement of evictees from Rhodesdale Ranching Estates near the town of Kwekwe. With slight differences of emphasis, both scholars concluded that ethnic labeling and counterlabeling became a daily occurrence in that area. While the earlier inhabitants of Gokwe called the evictees *madheruka*, "an onomatopoeic word intended to evoke the sound of the lorry engines that brought them," the evictees in turn referred to their hosts as *shangwe*, which had connotations of backwardness (Worby 1994:389). In their analysis of the interaction between Ndebele evictees and their hosts in the Shangani area, Alexander et al. (2000) came to a similar conclusion. They argue that naming played a big role in power politics between the "progressive" evictees (labeled *amaFilabusi*, *amabhunu*, or *amadeluka*) and the earlier inhabitants of Shangani, who were thought to be primitive.

What is common in works on identity formation in post-resettlement situations in Zimbabwe is an emphasis on the role that ethnicity has played in shaping interactions between the evictees and earlier inhabitants. Embedded in that analysis is the assumption that at the time of their resettlement, the evictees embraced a shared sense of identity markedly different from that of their hosts. In this respect, Alexander et al. (2000:13) assert that initial interaction between the evictees and their hosts was marked by antagonistic encounters whereby "the progressive evictees cast locals as the epitome of all things primitive." While my study benefits from these scholars' observations, it contends that ethnicity alone cannot adequately explain the historical trajectory of the Ndebele identity and community (re)construction or the prevalence of Ndebele–Shona hostility in Buhera.

As the following discussion elaborates, it took more than two decades for the Ndebele evictees to build a shared sense of identity in Buhera. Prior to relocation, the Ndebele speakers belonged to three categories. Descendants of the Nguni people (the Khumalos) who joined Mzilikazi, the founder of the Ndebele state, when he moved away from the Zulu kingdom in the early nineteenth century, constituted what was called the *zansi*. They were the majority of traditional leaders in the central government and outer regions of the precolonial Ndebele state. The second category, the *enhla*, comprised descendants of the Sotho, Tswana, and other groups that joined Mzilikazi and his Nguni followers before they crossed the Limpopo River. At the bottom of the Ndebele sociopolitical hierarchy was the *hole*, which comprised descendants of Shona-speakers who became “Ndebelized” during and after the establishment of the state on the Zimbabwean plateau. While most works on ethnicity in Zimbabwe (see Sithole 1980, 1995; Ranger 1985; Chimhundu 1992; Alexander & McGregor 1997) tend to take these categories for granted, Msindo’s (2005, 2012) and Ndlovu-Gatheni’s (2008, 2009) publications show that these divisions complicated the Ndebele speakers’ identity consciousness.

In addition to the existence of caste-based differences, the Ndebele speakers originated from different districts in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, moved into Buhera at different times, and settled in different locations surrounded by Shona-speaking villages. These factors significantly shaped the historical trajectory of the Ndebele community in Buhera and its interaction with the Shona groups the evictees found in the area. Therefore, rather than assuming that the Ndebele–Shona hostility emanated from preexisting notions of identity, this article argues that the manner in which the evictees resettled in Buhera and subsequent efforts to build a broader Ndebele identity led to tension that prevails in the district.

The Ndebele Removals and Resettlement

The resettlement of Ndebele speakers in Buhera occurred in the context of a massive land-grabbing spree that followed the British conquest of the Zimbabwean plateau in the 1890s. Starting with the 1894 uprooting of a handful of Ndebele chiefs and their followers from areas surrounding Bulawayo, forced evictions from areas set aside for white settlers’ use intensified after the defeat of Africans in the 1896–97 revolts (see Riddell 1978; Moyana 1984; Kennedy 1987). By the 1920s thousands of Africans in many parts of the colony had lost their lands and were forced to move into what the colonists dubbed “native reserves.” In a bid to deflect resistance against land alienation and forced removals, colonial officials “helped” the evictees identify “suitable” areas for settlement. On August 2, 1923, Southern Rhodesia’s Governor Chancellor and Chief Native Commissioner addressed a group of Ndebele traditional leaders at Fort Usher in the Matopos, and urged those served with eviction orders to consider moving to Buhera (then referred to as the Sabi Reserve), among other areas (NAZ S138/21).

Map of Zimbabwe Showing Location of Buhera District



Source: Stephen McCullers. Reprinted with permission.

While persuading the Ndebele evictees to consider moving to the Sabi, colonial officials pointed out that the area had “the heavy red soils favoured by the Matabele” (NAZ S138/21). The emphasis on the availability of red soils in Buhera reflected the prevailing notions of differences between the Ndebele and Shona people. In addition to the generalized belief that the Ndebele naturally preferred to settle and farm on red soils, records of discussions surrounding the relocation of Ndebele evictees in Buhera show a widespread tendency to emphasize perceived ethnic differences between the two groups. For instance, at a meeting held between the Native Commissioner for Mzingwane district and the Ndebele leaders in 1925, one chief (Chief Ntola) reportedly rejected the idea of moving to Buhera, arguing, “if a leopard and a dog were shut up in a cave together, the dog will soon perish. Formerly the Matabele were the leopard and the Maswina, the dog, but today if we move to the Sabi the position would be reversed” (NAZ S1561/10/8).

After a similar meeting in Fort Rixon (Insiza district), the district's Assistant Native Commissioner wrote that an Ndebele chief (Chief Maledanisa) rejected the idea of moving to Buhera, arguing that his people "did not like to live among people who are their enemies as they would practice witchcraft and in time exterminate them" (NAZ S1561/10/9). The Superintendent of Natives in Bulawayo also wrote to the Chief Native Commissioner pointing out that "chief Ngungumbana of Mzingwane visited the Sabi Reserve and on his return stated that he was moving there. However, this fell through as none of his people would accompany him" (NAZ S1561/10/11). Furthermore, the Native Commissioner for Charter (which incorporated the Sabi Reserve from its inception in 1911 to 1944) reported that although some Ndebele chiefs and their followers had visited the district and expressed interest in settling in the Sabi Reserve, the relocation of these people required "careful handling and fostering to ensure its success" (NAZ S235/505). Statements such as these, which are quite prevalent in archival documents from this era, give the impression that ethnic conflicts were a natural feature of Ndebele-Shona relations. As such, the Ndebele leaders and colonial officials anticipated that ethnic clashes would erupt immediately after the evictees moved into Buhera. However, conflicts did not occur until twenty years after the resettlement of the first group of Ndebele speakers in the district.

The first group of Ndebele speakers to settle in Buhera did so in 1926. The group comprised the families of Dobha, S'gaxa, Ndinga, Makhutshwa, and Msiza, all descendants of Sotho people who formed part of the *enhla* caste in the Ndebele social hierarchy. They left Fort Rixon after the colonial administration took their land and sold it to white farmers. Jackson Dobha, whose father was among the elders in this group, pointed out that at first the white farmers who bought land in Fort Rixon encouraged the Ndebele to stay as labor tenants (personal communication, Buhera, Oct. 21, 2001). However, they later introduced cash rents, forcing most people to relocate. Although colonial officials facilitated the relocation of these people by issuing licenses for them to move livestock and providing railway tickets from Bulawayo to Mvuma, the state did nothing beyond that. As such, Dobha and his group traveled from Mvuma to Buhera (about 80 miles) on foot. Also, in spite of the fact that the Native Commissioner for Charter district had "marked out an area of red soils near Mavangwe Hills" for the purpose of settling the Ndebele evictees, no government official was present to show these people where to settle when they arrived in Buhera (CHK5, Oct. 25, 1948).

In accordance with the prevailing colonial "native" administration system, which gave African traditional leaders power over land and other sociopolitical matters in their areas of jurisdiction, the evictees approached Chief Makumbe of the Njanja clan, a Shona-speaking group in northern Buhera, with a request for a place to settle. Makumbe did not just welcome Dobha and his group, but he permitted them to settle wherever they saw fit. In a move that complicates the "red soils thesis" that sparked heated debate

in the 1970s (see Mackenzie 1974; Mtetwa & Chennels 1975), the Ndebele identified and settled on “unsettled” red soils around Chizhou hills along the boundary separating Buhera from Chikomba district. However, the evictees recognized Chief Makumbe’s authority and enlisted the help of the locals in building homes and preparing fields for cultivation. Despite differences in language and other cultural attributes, the evictees related very well with their hosts.

Two years after the settlement of Dobha and others, Buhera district received another group of evictees from Matabeleland. The second group was not only bigger than the first, but it also included an Ndebele chief called Daniel Fish Gwebu. In addition to the Gwebu family, whose ancestors were part of the Nguni people (*zansi*), the group consisted of ten other households from the *enhla* caste—Gwibila, Sigudhumezi, Malombo, Sikwabayile, Mahodho, Nkamanda, Makhwakhwa, Ndonjelana, Mathonganyana, and Nkomo. All of them came from Mzingwane district, where Gwebu had, in 1927, taken over his late father’s position as chief of the Nyathini and Msizini sections. As Palmer (1977) observes, the majority of people of Mzingwane lost their lands to the Willoughby’s Consolidated Company Ltd, which bought more than half of the district in the late 1890s. However, the ten families that Gwebu took with him to Buhera constituted only a small fraction of his followers. Some remained in the district as tenants on white settlers’ farms, while others went as far as Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) (NAZ S2806/1966).

As was the case with the first group, the colonial government provided Gwebu and his followers with railway tickets and licenses to move livestock from Bulawayo to Mvuma, but it did not do anything else to help them settle in Buhera. Despite allowing Gwebu to keep his status as an Ndebele chief in a predominantly Shona-speaking area, the colonists did not demarcate an area for his jurisdiction. Instead, they left him to liaise with Makumbe and his followers. In a move that seems to turn the prevailing ethnic framing of Ndebele–Shona relations upside down, Makumbe organized a welcome party for Gwebu. At the party, the two chiefs exchanged bulls as gifts, while two Njanja headmen, Garamwera and Chatindo, each gave a goat to Makumbe to pass on to Gwebu. As he presented the goats to Gwebu, Makumbe said, “here Chief Fish [i.e., Daniel Fish Gwebu] is a gift I have been given. I too give you a gift of these same two goats” (CHK5, April 25, 1967). What happened at the ceremony shows that the two chiefs and their followers met as friends and not adversaries.

After receiving Makumbe’s approval to settle, Gwebu and his group temporarily settled among the first group of Ndebele speakers before moving to another “unoccupied” patch of red and black soils about six miles to the south of Chizhou. While the warm welcome that Makumbe extended to Gwebu allowed the two chiefs’ followers to embrace one another and enjoy a long period of cordial relations, the colonists’ failure to demarcate Gwebu’s area of jurisdiction in Buhera set the two groups on a collision course. Unlike the first group, which recognized Makumbe as

their chief, Gwebu and his followers did not pay allegiance to the Njanja leadership. Instead, Gwebu exercised authority among his followers as if they were still in Mzingwane. As we will see below, this created problems when the number of Ndebele evictees in the district increased.

Toward the end of 1928 a third group of Ndebele speakers, consisting of the Fengu (amaFengu) families of Sojini (Hadebe), Dhlamini, and Nobula, who came from Mbembesi, settled in the Sabi Reserve. The Fengu are descendants of Xhosa speakers whom the European settlers brought to Matabeleland from Transkei (South Africa) “to augment the labour supply and to assist in the defense of Bulawayo in the event of a further rising” (Palmer 1977:62). These people relocated to Buhera after the colonial administrators sold part of what was known as the Fingo Location (in Bubi district) to white-owned companies. Like the first two groups, they moved into Makumbe’s area, but they chose to settle on a portion of red soils about seven miles to the east of the Gwebu location. After a few years, the Dhlamini and Nobula households left Sojini and moved to another patch of red soils about three miles west of Chief Gwebu’s homestead—once again, amidst the Njanja people.

With the introduction of the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, which formally divided Southern Rhodesia into European and African areas, more Ndebele evictees moved into Buhera as individual families. While providing a full list of those who settled in this district in the 1930s and ’40s is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that they came from different parts of Matabeleland and Midlands regions. For example, the Mzizi family came from Gwanda, the Ndlovu and Moyo families from Plumtree, the Ngwazani and Mhlanga from Shangani, and the Manxabeni and Mlandeli from Selukwe (Shurugwi). The Mgazi, Mkandla, Masayile, and many others came from Hogo (Somabula). Some of Gwebu’s followers who had remained in Mzingwane, such as the Nkomo and Khumalo families, also relocated into Buhera around this period. As was the case with earlier evictees, these people represented all three Ndebele castes.

The majority of these people settled among fellow Ndebele speakers in Chief Makumbe’s area, but some went to the Mavangwe hills (about thirty miles east of Gwebu village), where colonial officials initially wanted to settle all Ndebele evictees in the Sabi Reserve. The Mavangwe area was under the jurisdiction of Chief Nyashanu of the Hera clan, which constitutes the majority of Shona speakers in Buhera. Among those who settled in Mavangwe were the Mlandeli, Maphosa, Ncube, and Dhlomo families. Others, such as the Ngwazani, Khumalo, and Moyo families, settled in an area called Bepe, also in Chief Nyashanu’s jurisdiction, about seven miles west of Mavangwe. This somewhat haphazard resettlement resulted in scattered enclaves of Ndebele-speaking villages in the eastern and northern sections of the district. Although preexisting ethnic consciousness might have played a role in the politics of community and identity (re)formation among the Ndebele speakers in Buhera, this settlement pattern had a greater impact.

Building an Ndebele Identity and Community

During the first few years of resettlement, the evictees did very little to build a broader community. In spite of a tendency to form cluster settlements on scattered patches of red and black soils in the district, the evictees strove to maintain distinctions based on the caste system discussed above. As Rinca Nkomo noted, “the Khumalos did not even want to marry non-Nguni wives. All of Chief Gwebu’s sons got their wives from Matabeleland. It was said a donkey could not be brought into the cattle’s pen” (personal communication, Buhera, July 24, 2000). In this respect, different groups focused on retaining strong ties with relatives who either remained in Matabeleland and Midlands or went to other places. For example, the Fengu used to send their adolescent sons and daughters back to Mbembesi for their rites of passage into adulthood (Gideon Mandinda, personal communication, Buhera, Dec. 30, 2000). Different families also invited their relatives from other parts of the country to partake in traditional rituals, leaving out fellow Ndebele speakers in Buhera.

In addition to maintaining differences based on the Ndebele caste system, the evictees organized themselves into a number of groups based on the area they came from, as well as when and where they settled in Buhera. The group that settled around Chizhou hills in 1926 came to be known as *Amakhanda Angakoni*, while Chief Gwebu’s group was called *Inyathi*. The group that composed of the Fengu families of Sojini and others was named *Shlomulo*. As Nichodimus Gwebu pointed out, attempts to classify evictees who arrived after 1930 into *Insukamini*, *Inxa*, and other groups were less successful (personal communication, Buhera, July 22, 2000). This organic classification exercise strongly suggests that establishing a broad Ndebele community was not a major objective of the evictees in the early stages of settlement in Buhera. Instead, they put more emphasis on historical and imagined differences among themselves. Despite speaking the same language, it was almost as if being Ndebele meant different things to different groups.

The Ndebele evictees also developed amicable relations with their hosts. As Sunday Chakoma pointed out, Gwebu and some of his followers participated in the Njanja “rain making” ceremonies known as *mukwerera*: “When the time for these ceremonies came we would send messengers to Chief Gwebu to ask him to bring the grain. . . . They could not lead or hold their own ceremonies because this is not their ancestral land. So they had to follow behind us” (personal communication, Buhera, July 22, 2000). In addition to participating in the Njanja ceremonies, the Ndebele observed their hosts’ traditional resting day (*chisi*) and took part in the locals’ cultural dances such as the *shangara* and *mbakumba*. Missionaries from the Dutch Reformed Church, the Anglican Church, and the Seventh Day Adventist Church introduced prayer groups, which drew converts from both groups of people. The churches also established burial clubs, which led funeral processions of their members from the two groups. While it is plausible that

the evictees' embracing of the local people's cultures did not mean that they had lost their identity consciousness, this gesture of assimilation defied concerns about ethnic conflicts that were raised before the Ndebele relocated to Buhera.

However, relations among the evictees, as well as between the evictees and their hosts, began to change in the 1940s when Chief Gwebu launched a campaign for the consolidation of the Ndebele community and the demarcation of his area of jurisdiction in Buhera. As his grandson Nichodimus Gwebu put it (personal communication, Buhera, July 22, 2000), the chief had realized that "despite our differences, we come from the same region and we speak the same language. We are different families of the same tribe." Indeed, Gwebu spent much of the 1940s and '50s lobbying colonial officials to set aside a portion of Buhera district for the Ndebele speakers. In one of the letters he wrote to the Native Commissioner for Buhera in 1946, he complained that colonial officials did not take seriously his requests for the demarcation of an Ndebele-land in Buhera, as it was

necessary for every chief to have an area of his own . . . My position today is more grievous than ever because when I make such a claim, everyone of these people of this country look upon me as a snake biting them because I need a share in their areas. . . . I don't wish this to be incorrectly interpreted that I am wantonly demanding a share of these people's land. . . . But the government should know that he brought me here on grounds that I should get my share amongst these people. Now these people have come to hate me for this complaint, because they take it on the understanding that I requested the government to allow me to come and live among them when the government himself did not mean it. . . . Is there any chief in the colony who has no area of his chieftainship? How can I be considered to be happy and settled with my people amongst people who are not of my tribe without my own area? (CHK5, May 28, 1946)

It is interesting to note how Gwebu deployed ethnicity in requesting the demarcation of his area of jurisdiction. Despite the fact that he and the majority of the Ndebele people received a warm welcome when they arrived in Buhera, Gwebu figured that this was probably the best card he could play to rally the evictees behind him and persuade the colonial officials to grant his request.

The timing of the request is also interesting in that it coincided with the implementation of the Land Apportionment Act in much of Matabeleland and the Midlands regions, which increased the number of Ndebele people who settled in Buhera. As someone who interacted closely with the colonial system before relocating to Buhera, Gwebu probably knew about the colonists' tendencies to view the Ndebele and Shona as "naturally" antagonistic. This explains why he emphasized that having a clearly defined area of jurisdiction was important for the stability of the Ndebele community and the survival of his chieftainship in this area. As Rain Mgazi pointed out, Gwebu's plan was to bring all Ndebele speakers in Buhera into a single

community without moving them from the red and black soils they settled on (interview with Edward Sake, Buhera, June 25, 2013).¹ In other words, he wanted colonial officials to mark out a portion of Buhera from Chizhou to Mavangwe and put it under his control.

To a larger extent, colonial officials supported Gwebu's efforts to build a broader Ndebele community in Buhera. As early as 1939 the colonial government approved the Dutch Reformed Church's proposal to build a school near Gwebu's homestead. Despite the fact that the majority of children at the school, which was named Gwebu, came from Shona-speaking families, the curriculum did not include the teaching of Shona. Instead, the school offered lessons in Ndebele and English. This scenario facilitated the spread of the Ndebele language and culture among the Njanja people and most likely encouraged intermarriages that are prevalent in this area. However, the school's language policy cultivated a sense of superiority among the Ndebele, something that most likely encouraged tension between them and their hosts.

Similar to what Alexander et al. (2000) observed in the Shangani reserve, where the evictees received preferential treatment from the colonial administrators, officials in Buhera also viewed the Ndebele evictees as more progressive than the earlier inhabitants of the district. They commended the Ndebele for their willingness to embrace good methods of farming and other "community development" initiatives. One colonial report, for example, characterized the Ndebele in Buhera as "a very progressive community which has ably demonstrated its ability to tackle its felt needs on a self-help basis" (NAZ S2929/1/1). In the same vein, the Native Commissioner for Buhera praised Chief Gwebu, who had received some Western education before relocation, as the only "progressive and attractive" traditional leader in the Sabi Reserve, adding that he wished Gwebu could be a chief for the whole of Buhera district (NAZ S371/1). Following the Native Commissioner's recommendation, the Native Affairs Department saved the Gwebu chieftainship from abolition during the 1940s restructuring of traditional leadership in Buhera. Despite noting that Chief Gwebu's followers consisted of only about 132 taxpayers as compared to Nerutanga's 693, Chitsunge's 834, and Maburutse's 173, the colonial authorities allowed the Gwebu chieftainship to continue while they abolished the other three. In fact, the district's Native Commissioner recommended an increase of Chief Gwebu's subsidy from £18 to £60 per annum (NAZ S371/1). In so doing, colonial officials gave credence to Gwebu's efforts to build a broader community of Ndebele speakers in the district.

By and large, Gwebu's efforts paid off, in that before the end of the 1940s the evictees began to associate more with each other's values and belief systems, occasionally organizing "Ndebele" ritual ceremonies that excluded the Njanja. They also adopted a different resting day and introduced the *mutshitshimbo* and *nquzu* dances that were common in many parts of Matabeleland (Blackie Masayila, personal communication, Buhera,

July 30, 2000). Many Ndebele speakers, including those in Chizhou, Bepe, and Mavangwe, shifted allegiance from Chiefs Makumbe and Nyashanu to Chief Gwebu, arguing that he was the only one who understood their language, culture, and value systems. As was the case with the Taita people of Kenya, who downplayed inherent social fissures to build an “ethnic” community (see Bravman 1998), the Ndebele speakers in Buhera (re)created a sense of shared history and identity by renegotiating the sociocultural and physical boundaries among themselves. However, as I will show in the next section, Gwebu’s calls for the demarcation of his area of jurisdiction and the drive to build a broader Ndebele identity in Buhera provoked stiff resistance from Chief Makumbe and his followers.

Ndebele–Njanja Boundary Disputes

As calls for the demarcation of Gwebu’s area of jurisdiction gathered momentum, relations between the Ndebele and their hosts deteriorated. Access to the agriculturally productive red soils became the major bone of contention. In 1946 the newly appointed Native Commissioner for Buhera contacted John William Posselt, who was the colonial official in charge of the district when Gwebu settled in Buhera, to hear his views on the boundary question. In his response, Posselt wrote, “although no definite area was set aside[,] it was always agreed that it would be done when the number of [Gwebu’s] followers warranted it” (CHK5, July 16, 1946). In further correspondences with other Native Affairs Department officials, Posselt pointed out that the Ndebele–Shona tensions began when the Njanja, who previously eschewed the red soils as uncultivable, saw the good harvests that the Ndebele obtained from this type of soil (CHK5, Oct. 25, 1948).

Results of my fieldwork in Buhera support Posselt’s argument that access to the red soils, and not preexisting ethnic consciousness, was the main cause of the Ndebele–Njanja boundary disputes. Most of the Ndebele speakers I interviewed in Buhera concurred with Posselt’s assessment of how the conflicts began. In fact, they argued that before the Ndebele evictees settled in the area the Njanja did not know how to use the red soils. For instance, Gebron Gwebu said the Njanja found this type of soil muddy and too heavy to till (personal communication, Buhera, Feb. 2, 2005). They also did not know how to handle a thick undergrowth of prickling grass, which they called *madungambeva*. However, in contrast to the Njanja, “our fathers had knowledge of using these soils which they called *isidakha*—they tilled the soils during dry seasons using two-furrow ploughs they brought from Matabeleland,” Gwebu added.

Another Ndebele elder, Bambatha Nkomo, said, “because the Njanja did not have the knowledge and equipment to cultivate the red soils, they did not raise any objections when we first settled here,” adding that “they later became jealous and started coveting the red soils when they realized that we always had surplus food when they could barely feed their children” (personal communication, Buhera, Aug. 5, 2005). In general terms, the

Ndebele argued that after observing how the evictees utilized the red soils, the Njanja started encroaching on what everybody regarded as Ndebele territory. They allegedly began by occupying the areas that the Ndebele, who kept large numbers of cattle, had set aside as grazing lands. In response to what he saw as the Njanja's "unauthorized" occupation of the Ndebele grazing areas, Chief Gwebu approached the colonial officials with the request for the setting of boundaries between his and Makumbe's territory. At that point, the argument goes, the Njanja demanded the removal of all Ndebele speakers from Chief Makumbe's area. In other words, the Ndebele, who claimed that they had taught the Njanja about "modern" methods of farming, argued that jealousy drove Chief Makumbe and his people to seek the removal of Ndebele speakers from northern Buhera.

While not disputing that their parents did not utilize the red and black soils for agricultural purposes before the Ndebele settled in the district, most of my Njanja informants argued that they regarded the red soil areas as their hunting grounds. It was in those "unsettled" areas that they obtained wild fruits and wildlife they killed for meat, skin hides, and other provisions. In other words, the absence of human settlements on the red soils did not mean they were "unclaimed." In addition, the Njanja argued that when the first two groups of Ndebele evictees arrived, they asked for places to "rest" and not to settle permanently. The Njanja leaders knew that the colonial officials had set aside an area near Mavangwe hills for the settlement of Ndebele speakers. For this reason, the argument goes, Makumbe organized a welcome ceremony and exchanged gifts with Gwebu, but he did not set aside any particular piece of land for the Ndebele chief and his followers.

As Tinos Garamwera put it, "there was no need for us to demarcate an area for Gwebu and his people because they were not meant to stay here" (personal communication, Buhera, July 23, 2000). This, according to Mugandani Mngangi, also explains why Chief Gwebu did not ask for the demarcation of his territory at the time of his resettlement among the Njanja. "Mbizvo [Posselt] would not have demarcated the Ndebele territory here because he had intended to resettle them in the Mavangwe area," Mngangi added (personal communication, Buhera, July 23, 2000).² In line with this argument, the Njanja contend that it was Chief Gwebu who first raised the issue of boundaries when he had established "friendship" with colonial officials and when he knew that some sections of the Ndebele evictees had occupied the Mavangwe area. In some ways, the Njanja felt that the Ndebele cheated them into believing that they were only taking a rest when their intention was to settle permanently.

Although the two groups blamed each other for causing the disputes, a look at other developments taking place around the same time helps explain the nature and timing of the Ndebele-Shona conflicts in this district. In the early 1940s colonial officials introduced land centralization—the separation of residential, agricultural, and grazing areas, in Buhera. Along with the imposition of contour plowing and the use of animal manure to conserve the soil and improve its fertility, colonial officials removed

human settlements from areas they set aside as farming and grazing lands. Within the residential areas, people had to build houses in straight lines; hence they referred to this program as *maraini nemakondiwa* (lines and contours). Also, colonial officials reduced the sizes of landholdings and the number of livestock that each family would keep at any given time. People who resided in hilly areas, which the colonists set aside for grazing purposes, had to look for new pieces of land to farm and build houses.

Alexander (2006:8) argues that people who lost their lands during the colonial period in Zimbabwe saw technical development projects such as land centralization as “a means of squeezing more Africans into reserves and denying their demands for land.” A similar situation unfolded in the northern areas of Buhera, where land centralization upset people’s traditional views about land use and ownership rights. Land centralization also destabilized Africans’ ideas about territoriality, chiefly authority, and legitimacy. The direct involvement of colonial officials in matters of land allocation came as a major blow to the Njanja people’s claims of authority over all the land in this part of the district. If it is true that the Njanja thought that the Ndebele would proceed to Mavangwe, centralization brought them face-to-face with the reality that the latter were not going anywhere. As for the Ndebele people, centralization provided an opportunity to assert their demands for exclusive land rights in a clearly defined territory.

Sometime in the late 1940s, colonial officials made the first attempt to demarcate the boundary between the areas of Chiefs Gwebu and Makumbe by putting marks on trees “from Kraal head Mangwengwende . . . to a hill called Nhaririri” [CHK5, April 25, 1967].³ However, this boundary-making exercise did not end where it started because the Native Commissioner could not resolve what emerged as the major point of disagreement between the Njanja and the Ndebele. Despite claiming ownership of land and jurisdiction over all inhabitants of northern Buhera, Chief Makumbe realized that it was almost impractical for colonial officials to move the Ndebele, especially Gwebu and his family, to Mavangwe. Makumbe therefore declared that the Ndebele speakers in Sizi village (the family of Sojini and others), Ndaba village (the Chizhou group), and Charlton village (Dhlamini, Nobula, and other families) should either pay allegiance to him or move into Gwebu’s village. This did not auger well with Chief Gwebu’s desire to have all Ndebele speakers under his jurisdiction without moving them; hence a battle for the red soils and the control of the three Ndebele villages ensued.

In 1965, almost two decades after the first attempt to resolve the Ndebele–Njanja disputes, colonial officials oversaw the construction of a concrete-beacon boundary that literally placed Chief Gwebu’s village in a circle surrounded by Njanja homesteads. Although the boundary left the villages of Sizi, Ndaba, and Charlton out of Gwebu’s jurisdiction, the Ndebele speakers in those villages continued to recognize him and not Makumbe as their chief. It was only after some further disputes that the Native Commissioner of Buhera declared, on April 25, 1967, that because

the Ndebele villages of Sizi, Ndaba, and Charlton were in Chief Makumbe's area, they were supposed to pay allegiance to him (CHK5, April 25, 1967). This ruling might have helped to clarify jurisdictional issues regarding the three villages, but it did not bring the Ndebele–Njanja disputes to an end. The inhabitants of Sizi, Ndaba, and Charlton resolved to give only “nominal” recognition to Chief Makumbe. As Edward Sake pointed out, these people devised ways of resolving issues among themselves without involving either of the two chiefs—only attending Chief Makumbe's court when “dragged” by an Njanja part in a dispute (personal communication, Buhera, July 23, 2013). For their part, the Njanja leaders continued to settle their people on the red soils outside Gwebu's village and increased the call for the relocation of Ndebele speakers from the three disputed villages to Mavangwe.

Around the same time that these developments occurred, the colonial government introduced educational policy changes that resulted in the transfer of the administration of African primary education from various church bodies to the newly established District Education Committees (Zvobgo 1986). The new arrangement also led to changes in the administration of examinations as well as various other aspects of the school curricula. The District Education Committee for Buhera, which was composed of mostly Shona speakers, changed the language policy at Gwebu School. The committee removed the Ndebele language from the curriculum and introduced Shona lessons. This angered the Ndebele community, which viewed the change of language policy as an onslaught on their identity as not simply evictees, but as Ndebele people. As Paul Ncube revealed, most of the Ndebele teachers at Gwebu transferred from the school, while some parents temporarily moved their children to schools in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces where they could study SiNdebele (personal communication, Buhera, Feb. 3, 2005).

In spite of the changes at the school, Gwebu continued to work closely with colonial officials. In addition to joining the Capricorn Africa Society, a multiracial organization that sought to strengthen partnership between whites and blacks in the British colonies of Kenya, Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, and Southern Rhodesia, he was the only chief from Buhera whom the colonists appointed to the Council of Chiefs. As a member of the Council of Chiefs, Gwebu attended the official opening of the Rhodesian Parliament in 1972. He also received the President's Medal for Chiefs, in addition to an increase on his personal allowance as an “appreciation of his good services to the government during the visit of the Pearce Commission” (CHK5, April 25, 1972; see also NAZ S3285/45/111). It is quite likely that Gwebu's close working relationship with the colonial administration helped to further his ambition to build a closely knit community of Ndebele speakers in Buhera. However, the strategy backfired.

Sometime in 1975, rumor circulated alleging that the Buhera District Commissioner (formerly Native Commissioner) planned to reverse the 1967 ruling by putting Chief Gwebu in charge of all Ndebele speakers in the

district. This triggered a wave of violent clashes between the evictees and the Njanja people. For almost two weeks groups of Njanja men, armed with spears, axes, bows and arrows, sticks, stones, and knobkerries, attacked Ndebele speakers they came across at the local townships, dip-tanks, and grinding mills. In the process they sang songs accusing the Ndebele of invading their lands. As one Ndebele elder said, “the Njanja threatened to burn our huts and kill our cattle. They were singing a song saying ‘dzviti ngarirohwe,’ and demanded that we must go back to Matabeleland. Many people were injured and some had their property confiscated by these people” (Leonard Mzizi, personal communication, Buhera, July 22, 2000).⁴ Interestingly, when the police moved into the area and rounded up all the Njanja men alleged to have participated in the violence, the Ndebele sang “svina ngarisungwe,” which means “let the Shona be arrested.” If anything, these violent clashes show that the Ndebele had, by the late 1970s, developed a strong sense of a shared identity. Also, unlike in the late 1920s, when Chief Makumbe and his followers warmly welcomed the evictees and allowed them to settle on the red soils, the Njanja had developed a shared sense of hatred toward the Ndebele.

Zimbabwe’s War of Independence and Its Impact on Ndebele–Njanja Relations

The Ndebele–Shona relations in Buhera further deteriorated during Zimbabwe’s war of liberation, which started around 1966 and spread to most of the country in the mid-1970s. As Sithole (1999) and others point out, ideological and strategic differences between the two major organizations that led the country’s liberation struggle—the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU)—aggravated tensions between the Ndebele and Shona people. ZAPU’s military wing, the Zimbabwe Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), fought the war in predominantly Ndebele-speaking areas while the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), which was ZANU’s military wing, operated mainly in Shona-speaking areas. When the war extended to Buhera in the late 1970s, Gwebu’s status as the only Ndebele chief in a predominantly Shona-speaking area, along with his record of working with the colonial administration, put him in a particularly dangerous position.⁵

On January 12, 1978, about a half-dozen ZANLA fighters entered Gwebu’s homestead and lied that the Prime Minister (Ian Smith) had sent them to the chief because he was working with the “terrorists.”⁶ As Bambatha Nkomo narrated, Gwebu fell into the trap and told them that he hated ZANLA guerrillas and that if he saw signs of their presence in the area he would send a message to the District Commissioner’s office (personal communication, Buhera, August 5, 2005). They eventually revealed their identity, killed Gwebu, and instructed his sons to bury the chief’s body without organizing a proper funeral for him.

Although the Njanja and Ndebele people in Buhera agree that ZANLA troops killed Gwebu, they have conflicting interpretations as to why he was killed. While the Njanja contend that Gwebu was killed because he was a sellout, the Ndebele argue that their chief was *sold out*. Bernard Machakayire, for instance, a Njanja elder and former teacher at Gwebu School, said, "Because Chief Gwebu was educated he was quick to work with the colonialists and sold out. That is what led to his death." He added, "he used a radio to communicate with the DC about the guerrillas' presence in the nearby villages. This made him a dangerous element during the struggle" (personal communication, Buhera, Aug. 6, 2005). However, one of Gwebu's former neighbors, Bambatha Nkomo, said, "Chief Gwebu was sold out by the Njanja people. He was in the Chief's Council as a Senator and he had traveled to London. These people hated him for that." He added, "the people who sold out Chief Gwebu were later killed when the guerrillas realized that they had been lied to" (personal communication, Buhera, Aug. 5, 2005).

It is possible that these conflicting sentiments reflect the relations of mistrust that prevailed between the Ndebele and Njanja at the time of these interviews (2005). However, available evidence shows that the two groups had somewhat turbulent interactions during the war of liberation. In an attempt to suppress ethnic tensions in the aftermath of Gwebu's death, the ZANLA combatants set up war committees, which had the Ndebele and the Njanja working together to provide food, clothes, and accommodation. They also required the two groups of people to sing and dance together during the night meetings (*pungwe*), although, as Rain Mgazi said, the majority of songs were Shona (interview with Edward Sake, Buhera, June 25, 2013). Regardless of the attempts to "normalize" relations between the two groups, the Ndebele and Njanja did occasionally "sell" each other out to the guerrillas and the Rhodesian government troops operating in the area. That practice resulted in deaths of innocent people and destruction of property. A case in point was the Rhodesian troops' burning of headman Garamwera's homestead after a member of the Njanja community allegedly told the guerrillas about an Ndebele man who was reportedly spying for the government troops. Rather than uniting the Ndebele and their Shona neighbors in northern Buhera against the colonial system, the war entrenched animosity between them.

The Postwar Crisis of Leadership and Identity among the Ndebele

Gwebu's murder did not simply rob the Ndebele people of a leader who had spent almost fifty years fighting for their space in Buhera; it also triggered succession disputes, which affected the group's cohesion and sense of belonging. The first succession tussle was between Gwebu's two sons—Isaiah and Theophilus. Although Isaiah was the older one and customarily presumed heir apparent, his mother, Nxongane Hlabangana, never married the chief. This led Theophilus, the first son of Mary Khumalo, who married Daniel Fish Gwebu in 1926, to argue that Isaiah was an "illegitimate

child” and therefore not qualified to take over the leadership of the Gwebu chieftainship (CHK5, June 29, 1980). The struggle came to an end, but only for a short period of time after the postcolonial government appointed Isaiah as chief on April 28, 1981.

Chief Isaiah Gwebu went to prison in 1990 after shooting Zozo Sambani (one of his Ndebele followers) during a fight over a piece of land. His imprisonment, though it was only for one year, plunged the Ndebele community into another period of uncertainty. Theophilus and his family wrote several letters to the Buhera District Administrator reiterating their argument that Isaiah was not the legitimate heir to the Gwebu chieftainship. One of the letters said that “Isaiah’s short-lived leadership was incapacitated because it had no blessing whatsoever both by the elders and the community as a whole. . . . Indeed the rationale from the indisputable point of legitimacy, coupled with leadership qualities[,] is that Theophilus Gwebu should be heir in his own right” (CHK5, July 25, 1990). In spite of Theophilus’s argument, the government reinstated Isaiah to the Gwebu chieftainship after his release from prison in 1991. His death on January 12, 2001, then plunged the Ndebele community into a second leadership crisis.

After another three years of contestation over Isaiah’s successor, his first son, Gebron, took over the Gwebu chieftainship in 2004. However, the Ndebele community had significantly changed. Without a strong leader to bring them together as a group, divisions along the Ndebele caste system had reemerged. While the few Khumalos or “pure Ndebele” families sought to uphold the Ndebele customs, including marriage practices, others revived their pre-Ndebele identities. As Rain Mgazi observed, many of those with ancestors who became part of the Ndebele state after its establishment on the Zimbabwean plateau had embraced many aspects of the Shona culture (interview with Edward Sake, Buhera, June 25, 2013). Despite the continuation of relations of mistrust between them and the Njanja, the Ndebele had lost the strong sense of community and identity that they had enjoyed prior to Daniel Fish Gwebu’s death. Because they felt disempowered, they did not actively resist the Njanja’s encroachment on portions of the red soils the colonists set aside in the 1940s as grazing areas for the Ndebele people’s cattle. Although the government reintroduced the teaching of SiNdebele, along with ChiShona and English, at Gwebu Primary School in 2007, that development did not generate much enthusiasm among the Ndebele people in this area. As Sake argued, they “preferred to keep quiet and let things go” (personal communication, Buhera, July 23, 2013).

As of 2013, most Ndebele speakers appeared to have lost hope for the survival of the Ndebele community and identity in Buhera. For example, Lakhukhu Mkandla said that “apart from our language, there is nothing that binds and sets us apart as unique people in this area. We no longer gather on our own for cultural events that are special to us as Ndebele people.” Another Ndebele elder, Nkulunguwe Nkomo said, “We are still distinct in the ways we build our kitchen huts using *amathikili*, and the ways we

show respect to our in-laws, but we have lost our bond as a community. No one seems to be encouraging people to come together as a Ndebele community.” In addition to the leadership crisis, intermarriages with the Njanja and other Shona speakers had also affected the Ndebele’s sense of identity. On this subject, Victor Mgazi said, “The Ndebele identity has been diluted by intermarriages with the Shona. We now have several families where the father only can speak SiNdebele,” adding “children learn to speak their mother’s language first, and if the mother is Shona, then those children will have little opportunity to speak SiNdebele” (interviews with Edward Sake, Buhera, June 23, 2013).

However, the weakening of the sense of community among the Ndebele does not mean the end of tension between them and the Shona. As Bambatha Nkomo argued, there is “secretive tribal discrimination between the Ndebele and the Shona in Buhera” (interview with Edward Sake, Buhera, June 24, 2013). While the district has not experienced violent conflicts since the 1970s, tension prevails between these two groups. The Njanja, especially those under Headmen Garamwera and Chatindo, still regard the Ndebele as *vavuyi* (foreigners), a term used by Shona people in Zimbabwe in reference to the colonists and hence a label that not only expresses disdain, but that also equates the Ndebele to colonists. Along with that, the Njanja hold negative stereotypes about the Ndebele, such as the belief that Ndebele women are loose and therefore not suitable for marriage. For their part, the Ndebele, as Nkomo pointed out, view the Njanja as greedy people who regard their daughters as a source of wealth by charging an exorbitant bride price (*lobola*) when they get married. While it is possible that these stereotypes emanate from the fact that more Ndebele men than women marry Njanja spouses, they reflect deep-seated tensions between the two groups.

Conclusion

Since the 1950s, scholars, policymakers, and ordinary citizens have identified ethnicity as the major cause of conflicts between different linguistic and cultural communities in Africa (see Epstein 1958; Mamdani 2001; Berman et al. 2004). In the case of Zimbabwe, the ethnic framework has become the conventional way of analyzing relations between the Shona and the Ndebele (see Bullock 1950; Beach 1974; Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace 1997; Muzondidya & Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2007). However, a closer look into the history of Ndebele–Shona relations in Buhera reveals that too much focus on ethnicity occludes other factors that have contributed to the tension prevailing between these people.

Although some Ndebele traditional leaders and colonial officials raised concerns about the possibility of ethnic clashes between the evictees and Shona speakers prior to their (re)settlement in this district, Chief Makumbe of the Shona-speaking Njanja clan extended a warm welcome to Chief Gwebu and most of the Ndebele people who moved into Buhera before the 1940s. During that period of cordial coexistence, the Ndebele speakers,

who originated from different parts of Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, appeared less inclined to establish a distinct “ethnic” community in Buhera. Instead, they showed an interest in building smaller groups based on where they came from and when they settled in Buhera. Also, the evictees made efforts to assimilate various aspects of their hosts’ cultures. In other words, being Ndebele meant different things to different groups of Ndebele-speaking evictees.

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, the increase in the number of evictees, Chief Gwebu’s political activism, and the state-sponsored land centralization program led to competition for productive farmlands. This culminated in boundary disputes, which led to violent clashes between the evictees and their hosts in the 1970s. Although it appears as if ethnic animosity led to the 1970s clashes, this article has shown that they were less about ethnic differences than they were about access to suitable farmlands, chiefly power, and territorial authority in this part of the country. Also, arguing that ethnic animosity led to the murder of Chief Gwebu in 1978 overshadows other factors that motivated the Shona-dominated ZANLA combatants to kill him. As the article highlights, many traditional leaders, regardless of their ethnic identity, lost lives during Zimbabwe’s war of liberation as they juggled their relations with the Rhodesian forces and combatants fighting for the country’s independence. In examining other forces that contributed to prevailing animosity between the Ndebele and Shona speakers in Buhera district, this article suggests an alternative way of exploring intergroup relations in Zimbabwe and Africa in general.

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Notes

1. Edward Sake, an Ndebele-speaking teacher and resident of Buhera district, conducted some of the ethnographic interviews on my behalf. He also provided, through informal conversations, some of the information I include in this article.
2. "Mbizvo" is a nickname that the people of Buhera gave to John William Posselt, who was the Native Commissioner for Charter district, which incorporated the Sabi Reserve, from 1911 to 1944.
3. It is not clear exactly when the first boundary was made. The minutes of a meeting held in 1967 to discuss the contestations over the boundary issue (CHK5, April 25, 1967) indicate that a man named Mr. Cargill (locally referred to as Mukotami), who became the Native Commissioner for Buhera in 1944, oversaw the first attempt to demarcate Gwebu's area of jurisdiction. However, several correspondences among Native Affairs Department officials suggest that by 1948 the boundary had not been marked out.
4. *Dzviti ngarirohwe* literally means let us beat the invaders—the Ndebele.
5. In general, the war put many of the country's traditional leaders in a precarious position. While the ZANLA and ZIPRA combatants expected chiefs to mobilize their followers in support of liberation from white settlers, the colonists, whose "native" administration system heavily relied on African traditional leadership structures, demanded chiefs' cooperation against the struggle for independence.
6. The Rhodesian government used the word *terrorists* to refer to the troops fighting Zimbabwe's liberation from white settler rule.