

“The Devil’s Cataract”: Demonising the Tonga people’s spirituality through colonial naming

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In Zimbabwe, African spirituality is contentious as the majority of Christians generally associate it with evil. However, it is paradoxical that most of these Christians practise African spirituality in their private lives. Most of African Christian doctrines imagine African spirituality negatively, while their members engage with it in various ways. These Christian views on African spirituality are based on the colonial images of African culture as savage. This study engages with Afrocentric reasoning to demonstrate how Tonga spirituality is seen as evil spirituality through the nomenclature “Devil’s Cataract” at Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. This qualitative research used purposive and snowball sampling to find a target population for interviews. It further utilised a desk review survey for data collection. Guided by the Afrocentric principle of *nommoic* creativity, the article establishes that the name given to a part falls is a reflection of the negative and savage images of African spirituality in Christendom. It traces the etymology of the name to the rainmaking and thanksgiving ceremonies performed at the falls which were regarded by the white Judeo-Christian namers as devil worship.

Introduction

Victoria Falls in the Zambezi Valley attracts people of different backgrounds who come to appreciate it. Victoria Falls is one of the natural wonders of the world and was declared a World Heritage Site in 1989. The waterfall is located along the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe, and the earliest recorded inhabitants of the area, the Tonga people called it *Mosi-oa Tunya*, which means “the smoke that thunders”. Victoria Falls comprise five distinct waterfalls, namely the Devil’s Cataract, Main Falls, Horseshoe Falls, the Rainbow Falls, and Eastern Cataract which is on the Zambian side but can be seen from the Zimbabwean side. Along the Zambezi valley are the indigenous people of Tonga descent who were displaced after David Livingstone saw the natural wonder and thought to allow for the establishment of the town and resort. The Tonga people lived with and along the river and the places around the Zambezi valley, including the falls. In this regard, the article seeks to unravel the manner in which the indigenous people’s spirituality is demonised through the nomenclature given to the “Devil’s Cataract”. The Tonga people’s religion was a source of both livelihood and religious practice hence viewing it as devilish and bestowing satanic names on the areas in which the practices were done dehumanises them. In support of this view, Mapara (2009) notes that Europeans also took away the indigenous people’s lands and renamed these using names from the metropolis, and added insult to injury by claiming that the indigenes were in the dark and were backward. The article seeks to unravel how the Tonga people’s spirituality has been demonised through naming. This was done through interrogating the Tonga people of Songwe area on how the renaming of their place of worship affected their lives. The article gives the background of the Tonga people and their

spirituality, a theoretical underpinning, methodology and finally presents results on how the people's spirituality has been ridiculed.

Understanding the Tonga people and their spirituality

Two groups of indigenous people lived around the Victoria Falls area that are of the Tonga branch of languages. They comprise two related groups, the Toka (Batoka) and the Leya (Baleya), and they both speak dialects of Tonga (Clark 1952). These people are known as the Toka-Leya people and they are indigenes of the area surrounding Victoria Falls in Zambia and Zimbabwe. The falls are a sacred and essential element in the culture of the Toka-Leya. The falls form an integral part of their way of life and they have inhabited the area for hundreds of years. They also know the falls by another name, *Shungu Namutitima* (boiling water). Living so close to the falls, the Toka-Leya understand the waterfall better than most and they respect it. They have created a number of shrines for different purposes including prayer and sacrifice stemming from their belief that various spirits live around the falls. They do not just admire the beauty of the place, but the Leya know the myths and stories of this sacred place (Kaoma 2013). Siwila (2015) opines that sacred sites in the African context are imbued with communal spiritualities. The community is also part of these sites. Each member of the community has a responsibility towards these sites. According to Kaoma (2013), Tonga people believe that the sacred aspects of nature, such as a good rain pattern, leads to a good harvest that need to be safeguarded and protected. Failure to do so may lead to misfortune. Some of the feared disasters include drought, famine, floods and epidemics that kill both livestock and humans. This fundamental attitude to land is predominantly religious and is located in the fear of mystical sanctions from the ancestors. It is due to their love for their ancestors that they have spiritual attachment to the Zambezi River as some of the ancestors are believed to be venerated there.

Spirituality is seen as the relationship with the supernatural or the spiritual realm which provides meaning and a basis for personal and communal reflection, decisions and actions (Gardener 2002). In any community, spirituality is central to the people's understanding of the natural world and their cosmos. For most people in the world and Africa, to be specific, spirituality is integrated with their understanding of the world and their place in it. It is central to the decisions that they make about their own lives and their communities. In this case, when the Tonga people's place of worship and their attachment to the spiritual world is disturbed, they can no longer venerate their ancestors. It is a cause for concern because spirituality affects decisions about who should attend their sick children, when and how they will plant their fields and whether or not to participate in dangerous but potentially beneficial social action, etc. (Gardner 2002). For the Tongan people, referring to their spirituality in a derogatory manner, such as calling it the "Devil's Cataract", diminishes their sense of agency. Spirituality plays a significant role in influencing actions and often provides individuals with a sense of strength and hope.

Furthermore, spirituality refers to the state of one's soul, emotions, beliefs, mind-set and connection to the infinite. These factors can be seen to make up one's spiritual anatomy called your "light body" (Spencer 2012: 54). Just like the physical body, the light body can grow stronger or weaker based on one's actions. African spirituality has the potential to guide African ontological existence. Ani (1994: 8) thus argues:

Spirit does not die...physically deceased members of the family continue to be part of that family, and we are assured of immortality...and it is through the ancestors that we keep in touch with our sacred origins.

Colonisation stripped Africans of their religious practices, leading to their disempowerment. By disregarding the spirituality of African people, the vital connection to their ancestors is severed. In this regard, divorcing the Tonga people from their ancestors and beliefs at Victoria Falls is synonymous with dispossessing them of their past and spirituality. Apparently, abandoning African religion has the net effect of dislocating, confusing and disempowering African people. To this effect, Ani (1980: 8) said:

African life is replete with ritual. It states interrelationship with the other beings in the universe. Ritual sacrifice symbolises the principles of interdependence and reciprocity. It is through ritual that the unexplained is “understood”.

Ani further notes that “[r]itual is, in a sense, the ultimate philosophical expression of the African world view”. Thus, it is important to uphold African people’s philosophies for the betterment of their lives and for other generations to come.

Theoretical underpinning

This article is broadly Afrocentric and the choice of the theory is necessitated by the general tendency to demonise the African past by Eurocentric scholars such as Hegel, Trevor-Roper among many others. There is a sustained negative portrayal of the African past as a place for evil doings (Wolf 1982). It is against this understanding that Afrocentricity is used as it seeks to obliterate the mental, physical, cultural and economic dislocation of African people by advancing Africans as centred, healthy human beings in the context of African thought (Asante 2007). The renaming of the site and the falls in particular is a clear indication that Africans were looked down upon and had no place in their own heritage. They are detached from their history and the spirit of self-hatred is built in their minds. The “Devil’s Cataract” is named for the rituals that used to be done at the place by the indigenous people. Associating their rituals with the devil is a clear demonstration of demeaning the spirituality of the indigenous people. Nevertheless, Afrocentricity is “a mode of thought and action that holds central the interests, values, and perspectives of the African people” (Asante 2003: 2).

When Afrocentricity is employed in analysis or criticism, “it opens the way for examination of all issues related to the African world” (Asante 2007: 41). Thus, the Tonga people are here at the centre of analysis as their spirituality is misrepresented through naming to save colonial interests. The theory is suited for this article as the African people’s cultural esteem remains feeble, hence sensitising and raising the flag for recognition is vital. The research draws insights from the concept of Afrocentricity called *nommo*. *Nommo* is a creative character of the word and is rooted in African heritage. The principle of *nommo* regards names as spoken words that create bonds and bring about personal or social transformations. The spoken word is very powerful in the African perspective for it is a life-affirming force (Osha 2018). Jahn (1990: 124; as cited in Alkebulan 2013: 56) postulates that it is this life force that is “...a unity of spiritual-physical fluidity, giving life to everything, penetrating everything, causing everything...”. As such, *nommo* comprises life and is a way of life. Osha (2018: 110) adds that it gives power to strive for transcendence and harmony, and the word possesses “therapeutic properties and transformative effects” which African people use to create a world that they aspire to.

It is in this context that this research adopts *nommo* as a guiding principle. The African world view emanates from the productive power of the word *nommo*, which is itself a life force. It is the force that is believed to create reality. Knowles-Borishade (1991: 490; in Alkebulan 2013) describes the word as “...pregnant with value-meanings drawn from the African experience which, when uttered, gives birth to unifying images that bind people together in an atmosphere of harmony and power”. Each African name has a range of meanings and relevance. For example, *Mosi oa Tunya* speaks of the

place after which it is called and it has relevance to the people of the area. Of interest in this principle are the concepts of self-definition, self-determination and defining the world. It holds the African philosophical continuities, the culture, the history and the importance of language and the force of life. The notion of *nommo* permeates Africans, allowing them to name their world, to say that which defines them. It is a strategic creation of concepts or words that empower Africans. Karenga (2003: 215) describes *nommo* as the “creative character of the word, as an inherent and instrumental power to call into being, to mould, to bear infinite meanings, and to forge a world we all want and deserve to live in”. In this regard, *nommo* is believed to permeate every area of life. It allows African people to understand the world around them and shape them to who they want to be. It uses the past or history as the foundation for the present and future discourses. As Afrocentricity locates African people at the centre, through *nommo* they regain their lost heritage with a right attitude to life.

Research methodology

The article adopts the qualitative research design which is concerned with the depth of reality. The research attempts to acquire an in-depth understanding of the naming that happened at Victoria Falls. Creswell (2009: 42) says that in using a qualitative approach, “one can employ the constructivists’ world view which helps the researcher in establishing the meaning of the phenomenon” from the views of the participants. Naming is a human activity where humans construct meaning at a social level. This approach is significant in the article because it captures reality as seen and experienced by the people, their understanding and their world view, rather than relying on fixed judgements. The qualitative approach is adopted because it is informed by constructivism which entails that knowledge does not exist in a single reality, but is constructed through different settings. The study applied purposive and snowball sampling techniques for data collection. Interviews were done with 10 people who were sampled through snowball sampling in Songwe village in Victoria Falls where most Toka-Leya people live. The researcher carried out some interviews with some people from the Songwe area to understand their views on the way the heritage site’s name, Devil’s Cataract, appeals to them. This was done to link with the key subjects of the study through direct or indirect linkages. A review of the literature, particularly on the history of the Tonga people from the site museum at Victoria Falls and Binga museums were very useful.

Presentation of findings and discussion

Demonisation of the Tonga people’s spirituality through the name Devil’s Cataract

Kunene (1971: ix; as cited in Furusa 2009: 38) postulates that “the naming of things follows a principle of describing their function, appearance, sounds and relationships, not merely to identify and label them”. From this argument, naming is a way of understanding the nature of phenomena and the discourses involved in formulating them. The article’s main objective is to assess how the Tonga people have been demonised through the colonial naming of their place of worship.

Taking a glance at the naming of the world heritage site under focus, the submission by Kunene (1971) holds water as the indigenous people’s name *Mosi oa Tunya* clearly describes the site as the “smoke that thunders”. This reflects the actual behaviour of the water from the falls. When the water from the Zambezi River on the Zambian side hits the ground on the Zimbabwean side, it produces smoke-like showers and the sounds that come out are all found in the name. It is as a result of these observations that the indigenous people came up with a name to bestow on their place, which supports Kunene’s argument above. Subsequently, Reid-Merrit (2009), in his Afrocentric study, avers that a name can reconnect an individual to his African roots. This is not the same with the naming of

Victoria Falls. The indigenous people are cut off from their history, their spirituality is satirised through the name Devil's Cataract. By naming the place Victoria Falls, already the appearance and function of the place is not represented, hence negating the Tonga people's history and culture. When asked to comment on the naming of the place, one respondent noted that

[i]t began when a place which existed since time immemorial was given a name of a foreigner who had nothing to do with it. We knew the place as *Mosi oya tunya*, which was significant to us. This foreigner who is hailed for discovering the place which was already there and gave it the name of his queen marked the beginning of our negation. From that time we were detached from the place.

This observation by the indigenous people clearly shows that the coming of foreigners disturbed their peace and resulted in giving their place of worship names that are alien to their belief system. In the same vein, Karenga (2009: 54) observes the main concern of self-definition by indicating that it does not include a name but an "expansive self-understanding that serves as foundation and framework for the self -assertion...". He further postulates that a name is a category of culture and reflective of the historical source of African people and the point of departure for historical and cultural studies.

Furusa (2009: 39) gives the reasons for naming. He opines that when naming the world, we also "name ourselves, evoking a recognisable, tangible construct of that panoply of [patterns] which constitute what we call human experiences". The indigenous peoples' human experiences are not captured in the tag Devil's Cataract. Instead of giving a name that fits with their beliefs and practises, which recognises their efforts in observing their religion, their place of worship is given a name that ridicules their spirituality, thereby rendering it useless and demonising them. One interviewee confessed that

[s]o, is it fair that people come to equate our religion with evil spirits? Our religion and belief systems are ours not theirs. They cannot understand it because it has nothing to do with them. Naming our place of worship with a derogatory name is looking down upon us.

The interviewee laments the idea that the renaming of their place of worship is clearly denigrating their being. I argue that self-naming is critical as it restores agency among the African people. It is imperative to observe that self-definition is how African people create their own agency against dominant cultures. In this regard, the name *Mosi oa Tunya* is an indigenous creation that promotes the idea of self-definition. Thus, Tembo and Mutasa (2019) argue that the ideology of self-definition implies the negation of Eurocentrism and a complete departure from viewing the world through a white man's lens which hinders African people from exercising their agency. Mungwini (2011) argues that naming plays a significant role in the reproduction of power and privilege in the social world. This is a truism when we look at the world heritage site. For example, the indigenous name *Mosi oa Tunya* is rarely used in preference to Victoria Falls. More so, the naming of the falls is a reflection of power and privilege that is displayed by the bestowal. The article further notes that naming can be a means of claiming ownership. Furthermore, Mungwini (2011: 5) postulates that "names create symbolic and emotional attachments to the place and objects, and can therefore be a form of violence against those communities that are excluded from the process of naming". In this case, the idea of self-detachment from the monument cannot be overemphasised among the local people as they feel excluded and robbed of their heritage. One elderly person had this to say:

Mosi oa Tunya ndilyo zina nditwakazi. Izina liliwo lino ndyaMakuwa nkinkako chibaliwo. Iswe tatuchikwe chakuchiita anchicho.

'Mosi oa Tunya is the name that we used to know. The new name that is there now belongs to those whites, that is why they are always there. We no longer have a stake there.'

This discourse reflects power and social struggles about the area between the indigenous people and the Europeans. The above submission also emphasises the idea that the indigenous people no longer have any attachment to the area by virtue of the name that has been given to the place where they used to venerate their ancestors. The situation of the indigenous people is also exacerbated by the laws that govern tourism in Zimbabwe. The place has been proclaimed a world heritage site and is now governed by associated laws such that the indigenous people can no longer carry out their activities on the site. Thus, this ridiculing of their spirituality is a form of violence since they were never involved in the naming process of the falls.

In Gebrehiwot and Haftestion's (2015: 12) assessment of the politics in naming the Ethiopian Federation, they put forward that naming is a serious matter especially when dealing with public institutions, political parties, governments and governance systems. It is a serious matter in the sense that it can cause divisions and uprisings among people. Each individual's history deserves respect, regardless of their ethnic background. These two authorities further argue that "names are expected to summarise the nature, purpose and behaviour of the entities they represent". In respect of the Devil's Cataract, the naming itself is a misrepresentation of the indigenous people's way of life. With the establishment of the tourist attraction, the indigenous people's spirituality was distorted through the nomenclature Devil's Cataract, which can be seen to describe the indigenous people's ritual ceremonies which were done around the place in the precolonial past. The Tonga people used to appease their "god" of water during thanksgiving ceremonies and the rainmaking ceremonies by the falls and Westerners associated the rituals with devil worship. This means that the activities which were done were deemed evil by the colonialists who did not acknowledge African spirituality.

Their spirituality calls them to venerate their "god" in water and the place they used to do those rites is given a derogatory name. The purpose and behaviour they represent is not constituted in the name given and neither does it summarise the nature and purpose of the place, hence satirising the spirituality of the Tonga people.

Ndlovu (2013) discusses Ndebele topo-naming patterns. He brings out the interplay between a people's past and experiences which are then translated to toponyms that preserve the past experiences of a people. It is against this understanding that the Tonga people are dehumanised and their past experiences negated and misrepresented through naming of the place. The history that they are supposed to hold on to dearly is denigrated and given a negative meaning altogether, thereby stripping the indigenous people of their sense of belonging. Naming should give people a sense of belonging and this observation mirrors an African world view which locates history as heritage. It should be further understood that history gives back agency to the African people. As such, the Tonga people should be allowed to perform their rituals at the falls and to self-name the place, thereby promoting eco-cultural tourism that will give them a decent status other than being seen as visitors.

Mabunda (2012) has it that each person's ontology is structured and organised by language. Language is regarded as the medium of expression of the societies. Wathiongo (2009) contends that language is a communication system and carrier of culture by virtue of being the cornerstone of memory. Nonetheless, naming a community's sacred site in a foreign language effectively erases their memory and history, thereby demonising African spirituality. By labelling the Tonga people's rituals as devil worship, as implied by the name, their ancestral practices are forgotten, resulting in both a loss of cultural identity, and linguistic erasure.

Conclusion

The article is a contribution to the meagre scholarship on spirituality and onomastics, especially on how spirituality can be a major cause of community dysfunction in Africa. The article has attempted to bring out that the Westerners have demonised African religious systems associated with the Tonga people's place of worship through the name Devil's Cataract. The name is evidence of the demonisation that is associated with their rainmaking and thanksgiving ceremonies which they did by the falls. The article further demonstrates that looking down on a people's religion and depriving them of their freedom to worship is killing their creative potential hence removing them from where they belong. The article argues that as long as Africans continue to exist in the shadow or periphery of white consciousness, they will remain marginalised, subdued and powerless. In the final analysis, the article recommends that indigenous people should be allowed to conduct their ceremonies at these sites to preserve their spirituality and to boost eco-cultural tourism.

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