

# Locating Place Naming in the Zambian Constitution: a Critical Toponymies Perspective

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## Abstract

This paper examines the Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act No. 2 of 2016, the prime aim being to establish the location of place naming and place names in it. The point of departure in this study is an appreciation that place naming and place names themselves is a very sensitive and important process, capable of being utilised as a tool to repress various aspects of people such as culture, history and identity by those who are privileged to nominate places. This appreciation is weighted equally by an understanding that not every person or group of people have the privilege to nominate places. Equally, the study appreciates that a national constitution is a very sensitive and important document as it serves as a guide on what should and should not be done by people in the country. Therefore, it is inevitable that place naming should be provided for in any well-meaning national constitution if that constitution is to be taken and regarded in its purported spirit of importance and protectiveness.

## Keywords

The Constitution of Zambia; culture, history, linguistic hegemony, national symbols

## Introduction

Zambia is a Southern African country. It attained its independence from the British rule in 1964. From 1964 to date, the country has had six presidents, meaning it has gone through six different regimes even though some of the presidents have come from the same political parties. Some of the regimes have attempted to while others have actually amended the national constitution. However, this study is concerned with the current Constitution of Zambian; (*Amendment*) Act No. 2 of 2016. It is the goal of this paper to establish the location or rather the provisions made in this constitution on place naming and place names.

A constitution describes basic principles of a nation, processes of government, structures and basic rights of citizens. It is a law which cannot easily be changed, thus, it is a higher law of a nation (Bulmer, 2017:2). Bulmer outlines several functions of a constitution, one of them being that “constitutions can express the identity and values of a national community” (Ibid). This credits a constitution with national-building status with which it can (re)define national symbols such as flags and

anthems, and with unwavering power to make decrees about the history, values and identity of a nation. This places a constitution at the junction of society, legal system and political system of a nation, entrenching its standing as a social, legal and political document.

In line with the foregoing, Lutz (2006:7) notes that a constitution reflects and (re)shapes society in many ways. Some of the ways through which it does so is by expressing the aspirations and identity of people as well as declaring the shared ideals and values. It is also common that a constitution will provide for socio-economic, cultural and linguistic rights. So, a constitution can also be said to be a social declaration. To this end, it appears that some of the social aspects, such as the aspirations, identity, language matters, culture and history, which a constitution upholds and makes a decree on, are also inherent or at least upheld and reflected in place names. From this backdrop, a constitution and place naming, as far as the expressing the aspirations of people, culture, identity and values of a national community is concerned, weight equal. This calls for serious reflections on the relationship between any given

constitution and place naming and place names. It is in response to this call that the present study seeks to examine the Constitution of Zambia so as to identify the position of place naming in the so-called *higher law of the nation*.

The informing rubric in this study is Critical Toponymics Theory, which views every place naming *modus operandi* as being biased or political. This suggests that place naming, and therefore place names, is entangled in a socio-political power matrix. Accentuating the power and biasness which characterises and play out in place naming, Perko et al (2017:103) observe that “People are not, and never have been, in equal positions to name places, neither individually nor collectively.” Therefore, place naming and place names should not be taken for-granted. Rather, it should be taken so serious to a point where it should have some space or be provided for in a constitution. There should also be clear statement or guide on the punishment that should be meted out to anyone who acts outside such provisions. This implies that place naming and names should also have a place in other important national documents such as the penal code.

There are many other studies which expose place naming and place as a highly political and competitive social process (cf Hang'ombe et al., 2019; Wideman and Masuda, 2018; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). In these studies, and many others, there is a hankering that place naming and place names deserve to be treated and regarded with seriousness and alertness. This is because this process is capable of being used as a tool in human rights and freedoms suppression agenda, either intentionally or inadvertently. It therefore becomes compellingly necessary and vitally important that place naming be provided for in a national constitution. It is from this backdrop that this study examines the Constitution of Zambia to establish whether or not it has provisions which guide on the ways in which place naming should be done.

### **Some roles of places names**

Names of places play many significant roles. Some of these roles are outlined in this section. Place names are historical records; they are reliable and durable sources of the history of the people who bestowed them. Emphasizing the durability of place names, hence their reliability as historical records, Saparov puts it this way:

*Place-names are some of the most durable of national symbols. They can outlive most material artefacts of a civilisation. The material components of the cultural landscape [which informed their selection] may disappear or be destroyed, the*

*civilisation that created them may also disappear but its place-names will most probably survive (2003:179).*

Thus, it would make sense to argue that the history which is contained in place names is engraved on ‘stone’. The importance of the history of any group of people cannot be overemphasised. On the importance of the history of any group, Papanek (1994:186) says that if group of people has no history and tradition, it risks extermination. Changing place names, therefore, entails erasing out the history contained therein. If we follow Woodson’s line of argument, changing place names of a given region can be equated to sentencing the names bestowers to death; extermination.

Place names are also vestiges of culture (cf (Paikkala, 2009), suggesting that they are carriers of the culture of those who bestowed them. In other words, there is a close relationship between place names and the culture of the people who speak the language in which the places of a given geographical region are named in. Furthermore, there is a close relationship between place names and identity. To be precise, place names are identity markers (cf Ainiala, 2012; Chabata, 2012; Helleland, 2012). But then, there are different types of identity. Among others, there is territorial/geographical identity, linguistic identity, cultural identity, religious identity and political identity. Place names are handy in marking out these of identities.

A steadily growing body of literature in toponymy exposes place names as commodities that can be traded. A socio-economic value, therefore, is increasingly attached to place names. This, it can be opined, is escalating the political and biased nature of place naming and place names. The attachment of financial value to place names is commonly referred to as *place names commodification* in critical toponymy (cf Light, 2014; Light and Young, 2014). According to Light and Young (2014) the urban toponymic landscape is more susceptible to commodification than its counterpart, the rural toponymic landscape.

Place names can also be appreciated from a linguistic geography perspective. From this perspective, they are handy in determining the distribution of languages in any given geographical area (cf Wafer, 2014). Once the languages of a given area have been identified, one can go a step further to check; using the names, whether or not there is linguistic hegemony in that particular region. The presence of linguistic hegemony is an overt manifestation that the place naming fashion used favours one language over others.

The foregoing demonstrates that there is *something in a name*. It also speaks to the sensitivity and delicate nature of the process which brings about place names into being; the place naming process. Looking at the roles of place names outlined above, it is not surprising to note that

people (individually and severally), seek take keen interest in naming places, consciously or unconsciously. This is the only plausible explanation for the reason why place naming is so highly political.

The critical toponymies perspective which this study adopts questions every aspect reflected in place names and every type of naming. The informing philosophy and rallying plinth for this study is the outlook that people, individually or severally, do not have similar privileges to nominate places in the areas that they populate. This state of affairs pushes place naming on the centre where different groups of people with different interests, views of the world and ambitions try to reach out for it; making place naming a highly contested social process. This contest, however, sometimes passes without being noticed, especially if and when place names are viewed as passive designators. Viewing place names as passive designators, in fact, brings place naming and place names into mundane existence where they are then ignored as they end up appearing neutral rather biased and political. A view is taken in this study that since not all people have the opportunity to assign names to places, and since all (groups of) people have culture, identity, history and economic aspirations, the names of places for any given region reflect the culture, identity, history and economic aspirations of only one group; those who named the places. The question is; *what has happened to the socio-cultural aspects of those groups of people who did not have the privilege to name the places?* Looking at the sensitive roles of place names that have been outlined above, and others not outlined, one would desire that place naming be a constitutional matter; that it be guided and provided for in a constitution.

### **The constitution of Zambia versus place naming and place names**

Notwithstanding the sensitivity of place naming and place names, our examination of the *Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act No. 2 of 2016* reveals that place naming is not provided for. Yet in the preamble this constitution promises that it will “recognise and uphold the multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural” nature of Zambia (The Constitution of Zambia, 2016:10). We isolate one aspect that the constitution seeks to uphold; multi-culturalism. One of the ways through which multi-culturalism can be promoted and upheld, in our view, is promoting a place naming practice whereby all cultural groups have a stake in naming their places. We have already alluded to the relationship between place names and culture in this study. Our examination of the constitution reveals that there is no guidance from the constitution regarding place naming. With such a commitment in the preamble, one would expect to find a provision or clause providing guidance on how places should be named. Such a provision,

definitely, is expected to guide place naming in such a way that names of places in the country reflect multi-culturalism. The philosophy igniting this expectation is an understanding that the culture of the people who assign names of place is somewhat embedded in the names.

The other area where one would expect place names to feature in the Constitution is Part 1 Article 6(1) which outlines the country’s national symbols as follows: National Flag, National Anthem, Coat of Arms, Public Seal and National Motto. In our view, place names are part of national symbols. Wikipedia says that a *national symbol’s* goal is to unite people by invoking or appealing to their culture, goals, values and history. The common feature of national symbols is that they tend to be representative and inclusive, as far as the culture, goals, values and history of people in a nation is concerned. Hence national symbols have a unifying power. Just like the national symbols outlined by the Constitution, place names not only invoke but are also an embodiment of the cultural values and the history of the bestowers. In asserting the importance of place names as national symbols, Saparov (2003:179) holds that, “the use of national toponymy ensures historical continuity, preservation of cultural traditions of a nation”, suggesting that place names are steady historical records and placards on which the culture of those who bestow them is inscribed. Accepting this view entails a deep seated concern why place naming is forgotten in the Constitution, yet place names are as important as a national flag, anthem, seal and motto.

Part XIX of the Constitution is yet another section where place naming would easily be remembered to be provided for. This section is on land, environment and natural resources. Article 225(a) of Part XIX provides that “natural resources [or natural features] have an environmental, economic, social and cultural value...” These natural features have names, definitely. A good example of a natural feature in Zambia with some of these stated values is the Victoria Falls. In cases where these values are present in a given natural feature, the name given to the feature can promote or favour one value over the other, depending on the interests of the name bestower(s). But then there will be other people or groups of people who will have an interest in the neglected value of the feature. These may opt for a different name, a name which suits or promotes their preferred value of the feature. Again, a good example of such a status quo is the Victoria Falls. Hang’ombe et al. (2019) bring out the economic and socio-cultural values of the Victoria Falls as well as the perceived contest for it between the Leya people (who attach a socio-cultural value to it) and the Zambian government (who attach an economic value to it).

The foregoing, as can easily be concluded, presents a classic case of the contestations that characterise place

naming and, therefore, place names. In most situations where there is contestation, one of the contenders emerges as a winner, while the other as a loser. Hang'ombe et al further exposes the losses that the Leya people have suffered as a result of government's having an upper-hand or more control of the Victoria Falls; the Leya people's socio-cultural stamina is endangered because they no longer have full access to some of the points of the Victoria Falls where they used to perform very important traditions and religious rituals in the past. It is the view of this study that anything which endangers the cultural stamina of any group of people is cancerous and poisonous, hence a danger to the very existence of those people. In fact we think this is exactly the reason why the Constitution in Article 225(a) insists that natural resources have a cultural value. Unfortunately the Constitution is undermining itself by neglecting place naming which is, in our view, one of the key stakeholders in providing narratives of and in (re)shaping the cultural values embedded in natural features.

Stated concisely, the Constitution does not take into consideration place naming and place names in its provisions. It appears that it has forgotten that place names, place naming for that matter, "can offer a way to reach further back to the past" and that place names are "part of the immaterial cultural heritage of the community in which they are used" (Paikkala, 2009:68). Thus, there is a lacuna in the Constitution. This lacuna has far-reaching and detrimental effects.

In the absence of provisions on place naming in the Constitution, one would hope that there be an institution formed by an act of parliament to preside over place naming and place names, or even names in general. One example of an African country which seems to have seriously taken into consideration the importance of place names is South Africa which has a council in charge of geographical names. The name of the council is South African Geographical Names Council (SAGNC), whose principal role is to advise government on matters of place naming and place names. No such functional body exists in Zambia, to the best knowledge of the present researcher.

At global level, the United Nations has a group of experts known as United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) which is in charge of geographical names matters, such as place names standardisation. This group of experts was formulated in 1959. UNGEGN has 24 divisions with UN member countries belonging to one or two divisions. Zambia belongs to Africa East Division and Africa South Division. Aganyo (1991) notes that a committee mandated with the duty to standardise place names and advise government on issues to do with place names in Zambia was constituted put in 1978. The operations of this committee, unfortunately, were "retarded due to lack of enthusiasm on the part of the appropriate authority

towards its [committee] effectiveness" (Aganyo, 1991:4). Obviously this rendered the committee dysfunctional or moribund. Reaffirming or confirming that this committee is moribund, Abrahamo's (2006:22) notes that during a UNGEGN meeting for Africa South Division, a Zambian government representative observed that there was no such a committee in Zambia and that there was only a government notice in 1959 for such a committee to be instituted.

We could therefore say that there is no any place naming and place names regulatory framework in Zambia. This provides a fertile ground and enough space for place naming contestation, especially that Zambia is a multi-cultural nation and given that not everyone has an opportunity or power to bestow names on places. Neglecting place naming and place names in such as way may be a signal that place naming and place names are taken-for-granted in Zambia. That is to say, place naming and place names are viewed as neutral designators, thereby bringing them into mundane existence in which their political and biased nature slips off unnoticed. Equally, the social imbalance that they agitate in communities goes unnoticed, hence not addressed. The next section discusses some of the effects of taking for-granted place naming and place names.

### **Effects of the leaving out place naming and place names in the constitution**

The main informing philosophy in this study is the view that not all (groups of) people have a privilege to assign names to the places they inhabit or to places in the area they live in. Thus, taking for-granted place naming and place names has momentous wide-ranging ramifications, threatening the personhood, dignity and the very existence of those at the receiving end of the equation socio-culturally, historically and economically.

To start with, the lack of a regulatory framework for place naming and place names has potential to stifle the culture of those cultural groups that are not privileged to bestow names on the places around them. It has to borne in mind that Zambia is a multi-cultural nation in which different cultural groups co-exist, in most cases 'sharing' same place and features. It is an almost obvious case that different cultural groups have different cultural persuasions and aspirations. On the other hand it is natural as well as expected that where there are two different groups of people one will somewhat have influence or dominance over the other, or at least there will be conflict of interests between the two. And, wherever there is conflict, one group is likely to emerge victorious. This will probably be the case regarding place naming in most parts of Zambia where different cultural groups live in the same area. This study fails to make a distinction between a language group and a cultural group because according to Crystal (1987), language and

culture themselves are inextricably intertwined. Thus, the language or cultural group which has a 'louder voice' in place naming will most likely imbue their culture in the places that they inhabit at the expense of the other group.

The other social problem that is caused by unbalanced naming trends is linguistic hegemony, which is the domination of one language over others. From a linguistic perspective there are 83 languages in Zambia (cf Ohannessian and Kashoki, 1978). However, only seven (Bemba, Kaonde, Lozi, Lunda, Luvale, Nyanja and Tonga) of these languages are given the Regional Official Language (ROL) status, the regional definition being the political demarcation mainly at provincial level, though there is a case where three ROL share a province by district. Thus, each province has a ROL with some ROLs found in two provinces. Alongside an ROLs in any given province or district, there are many other languages. A cursory survey of the toponymic landscape in the provinces shows that the ROL dominates the toponymic landscape, meaning there is linguistic hegemony. A good example which emanates from the present researcher's on-going doctor of philosophy study is Southern Province of Zambia whose ROL is Tonga classified as M64 by Guthrie (1948).

The on-going research, using the case of school names, is noting that the toponymic landscape of Southern Province of Zambia is heavily dominated by Tonga names; meaning that there are more Tonga school names than there are in other languages. The other languages that are domiciled in this province are Ila and Leya. In fact, these two languages are barely visible in the toponymic landscape. As far as we can tell, this is the situation in all the provinces in Zambia; the ROL dominates the other languages in each province. This could be blamed on lack of a framework guiding in such a way that the names assigned to places reflect all the languages in a given area.

The effect of linguistic hegemony is that it can lead to the death of the dominated languages. On linguistic hegemony with specific reference to English, Rose-Redwood and Alderman have this worry:

*The disappearance of indigenous languages is accelerating dramatically under the weight of the global dominance of English and other major world languages. It is estimated that half of the world's 7,000 languages are expected to be extinct by 2100, which will have a direct impact on the presence of competing ways of*

*naming and hence knowing places (2011:5).*

Therefore, the status quo in Zambia whereby only one or two languages are visible in the toponymic landscape in any given province is a cause for great concern as far as the future of the other languages domiciled in the province but are missing in the toponymic landscape is concerned. As we have insinuated already, such a type of naming is tantamount to language strangulation. Unfortunately one almost fails to draw a clear line of difference between a language and its speakers, and a language and the culture of its speakers. It therefore becomes irresistibly compelling to see the linguistic hegemony, which is partly agitated by the unavailability framework guiding place naming, as a direct and heinous attack and assassination of the culture of the speakers of those languages that are absent in the toponymic landscape. According to Paikkala (1994:186) if a group of people has no worthwhile culture, "it stands in danger of being exterminated ..." Thus linguistic hegemony is capable of bringing about damage and destruction to the culture of the subjugated languages.

When there is a biased naming trend, in addition, the history of the people who are not privileged to assign names to the places around them is affected. This is because, as we have already shown, place names are historical records. Thus, assigning a name to a place is writing your history onto a durable national or communal symbol; a place name. Equally, the inability to assign a name to a place entails missing out an opportunity to engrave one's history onto a place name. Our view is that place names are the best containers ever in which one's history can be kept because, as Saporov (2003:179) observes, they are very durable. According to Muwati (2015:27) history is a campus through which one can work their way into the future. This suggests that those that do not have the opportunity to name places may have difficulties in working their way into the future, especially if they do not have an alternative tested source of their history.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusion of this study is in the form of a recommendation that: a nation ought to have a framework guiding place naming activities so as to avoid a situation whereby one group of people so personalise the naming of places that their culture, history, language and indeed any other social aspect dominates the toponymic landscape at expense of those who may not have had the opportunity to name the places. Such a framework could be in the form of constitutional provisions or council/board/committee overseeing and/or regulating the naming of places in the country. Without such frameworks in place, some groups of people will continue dominating others culturally, linguistically, and historically and etcetera. The reason being; there is a

close (but usually an unrecognised) relationship between place names and culture, language, history and etcetera. The major reason why such a framework is inevitable is that not every group of people have the opportunity to assign names to place, but all groups of people have a culture, language and history which are capable of being carried by and reflected in place names.

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