

The 'polyonymous identity' of the Hlengwe people of Zimbabwe and their struggle for a 'collective proper name'

**Authors:**

Mandla D. Mathebula¹ 
 Sekgothe Mokgoatšana¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Cultural and Political Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Limpopo, Sovenga, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Mandla Mathebula,
 MathebulaM4@dws.gov.za

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The Hlengwe people of Zimbabwe constitute one of the four sections of the Hlengwe subgroup of the Tsonga – an ethnic group found in four Southern African countries that include Mozambique, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Swaziland. Before the 18th century, these sections constituted a single group that was resident in the Nyaka kingdom, south of Maputo, amongst the Southern Rhonga people. Here, they were known by the names 'Hlengwe' and 'Tsonga/Rhonga'. Before then, they were known by names such as 'Makomati' and 'Tonga/Thonga'. After years of internal and external pressures, the Hlengwe people migrated to the north and eventually settled as four separate sections in the three countries. Are the Hlengwe a distinct ethnic group or part of the Tsonga or Shangaan, or they embrace all these identities? This article investigates the 'collective proper name' of the Hlengwe people of Zimbabwe from their current 'polyonymous identity'. The article further explores the complexity of identity formation and the politics of tribalisation, giving rise to assumed identities and sometimes ascribed and coerced identities in order to fulfil demands of power structures that name and label identities, resulting in exonyms used largely as appellation from above or outside. Although the study was heavily reliant on the available literature and archives, it also follows the oral historical methodology that privileges oral tradition and its associated subgenres of conversations and narratives. Most of the data were collected during the main researcher's exploit of Zimbabwe, Mozambique and eSwatini whilst documenting the migration of the va ka Valoyi people.

Contribution: This article contributes to complex debate of defining and locating the Hlengwe as group within the post-colonial identities largely shaped by colonial boundaries. Should the be defined as a distinct group, or polysemously as a group with an amorphous identification.

Keywords: polyonymous identity; collective proper name; Hlengwe; Tsonga; Shangani; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

The identity of the Hlengwe like most cross-border groups is a complex conundrum, which continues to shift as a result of sociopolitical factors that shape their ethnicity and nationness depending on where they find themselves. In Zimbabwe, they constitute one of the four sections of the Hlengwe subgroup of the 'Tsonga' – an ethnic group found in four Southern African countries that include Mozambique, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Swaziland. The other three Hlengwe sections are in Inhambane and Gaza provinces of Mozambique and Limpopo province of South Africa. Before the 18th century, these sections constituted a single group that was resident in the Nyaka kingdom, south of Maputo, amongst the Southern Rhonga people. Here, they were known by the names 'Hlengwe' and 'Tsonga/Rhonga'. Before then, they were called by names such as 'Makomati' and 'Tonga/Thonga'. After years of internal and external pressures, the Hlengwe migrated to the north and eventually settled as four separate sections in the three countries. Today, the section that is based in Zimbabwe constitutes the only Tsonga-speaking group in that country and is recognised as one of the distinct ethnic groups constituting the Zimbabwean nation. Like other groups elsewhere, it is known by more than one name, which confuses its identity.

The question of 'group identity' is often complicated by a number of concepts that are involved in explaining it. Thondhlana (2014:1) argues that human beings find comfort in belonging. 'Group identity' refers to an individual sense of self in terms of membership in a particular group (Liebkind

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1992:154, 2001:392; Phinney 1990:502). Such identities take various forms, such as ethnicity (Machiridza 2013:206; Thondhlana 2014:1), which, as a modern political phenomenon, has been prolifically documented (Green 2010:2). Ethnicity is a socially constructed identity, which is constantly defined and redefined (Fought 2006:4). In its concise form, it is a cultural concept centred on the sharing of norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices (Barker 2012:256). When people are brought together by such historical ethnic commonalities, they constitute an ethnic group (Thondhlana 2014:2), which is the embodiment of identity amongst the people it represents. In general, an ethnic group forms a critical part of the overall framework of individual and collective identity (Cháves & Guido-DiBrito 2002:39).

The construction of identity by an individual or a group of people is essentially a complex process. However, people will always be identified with certain groups (Thondhlana 2014:1). This identification may be a result of shared values, histories, language or historical past; however, it may be as a result of a group's choice to associate with another group for strategic reasons, such as security, economic benefit and deliberate choice to be assimilated. Other than this, assimilation can be a result of coercion, with the dominant group enforcing uniformity to avoid the threat of influence from the other, or coerced by foreign, colonial powers that coalesce all African identities into one subgroup for control purposes. An individual's 'ethnic identity', therefore, is his or her identification with a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and share a common culture. The people sharing such common culture usually also participate in shared activities, in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito 1999:40; Yinger 1996:200).

The myth of a common ethnic identity is often invoked to subjugate multiple identities for control and administrative purposes. Smith (1991) lists the essential characteristics of an ethnic group as:

[A] collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific place or homeland, and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population. (p. 21)

None of these characteristics rank above the other. However, Green (2010:4) identifies 'a collective proper name' as perhaps significant in easily identifying an ethnic group.

These characteristics often fall short to explain ethnic identities in Southern Africa because division into discrete segments is complicated by imposed foreign political control. For this reason, the search for a proper identity of the Hlengwe is muddled by some of these factors as to whether they are a distinct group called the Hlengwe, or a Tonga/Tsonga or Shangaan; or collectively Hlengwe; or either of these identities.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that ethnic identification is not a feature unique to Africa, with populations in the Caucasus

region, even within some European countries – such as Basque country, Scotland and Flanders – harbouring strong local ethnic identities (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou 2016). However, research shows that sub-Saharan Africa is by far the most ethnically and linguistically diverse region of the world, with African ethnicities characterised by distinct cultural norms (Alesina et al. 2003:2).

Furthermore, in Africa, an ethnic group is often a linguistic group, which fosters interaction within group members and limits communication between ethnic groups (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou 2016). The name of the language, in many instances, is the same as that of the ethnic group (Barker 2012:11; Maluleke 2017:30). In many cultures, especially Southern Africa, the two are differentiated by prefixes denoting people and those denoting languages. There are instances caused by various factors, in which a language applies across several ethnic groups. In such instances, other cultural and historical features, other than language, play a prominent role in distinguishing these ethnic groups. Hence, Thondhlana (2014:2) cautions that ethnicity cannot be defined by language alone.

Material for this article is drawn from a series of interviews and secondary data collected. The study hinges on oral historical sources that have shaped the content and texture of the analysis. By largely drawing narratives from conversations and narratives, the article gives voice to the often neglected voices of the marginalised. Most of the interviews were carried out when the main researcher was conducting a study of the va ka Valoyi's ancestry and migration, traversing vast areas of Zimbabwe, Mozambique and the Republic of South Africa. The article will first explore the concept of 'polyonymy' and polyonymous identity, and go further to examine how such identities are constructed temporally and spatially. The article will, in addition, detail the manifestation of the Hlengwe identity and conclude by examining the Hlengwe's search for a collective identity and an endonym and/or; exonym.

The concept of 'polyonymous identity'

The word 'polyonymous' is derived from two Greek words *poly* meaning 'many' and *onyma* or *onamia* meaning 'name'. Thus, the concept of 'polyonymous identity' is employed, in this context, to denote the application of more than one name on a single ethnic group. This concept has so far not received the necessary attention from social scientists, despite evidence that historians have long recognised the confusing use of many names on a single ethnic group amongst African societies. Roberts (1989:193) states that ethnographic delimiting amongst African societies tends to be 'confusing' as shown by the manner in which different authors delimiting them at more or less the same time invariably report different findings with regard to who they are. In one of the early writings on the subject, Junod (1905:222) states that the greatest difficulty of African ethnography is to decide upon the real name of each of these African societies. In essence, this means without a single, all-embracing name of the

group, the determination of the identity leads to confusion and the overlaps crop in now and then. This can result in a group being excluded from its main identity or have a wrong identity applied to it.

Possession of more than one name by a single group seems, in many instances, inevitable amongst African societies. There are factors that influence this. Firstly, these groups become associated with certain regions or places where they reside at a particular time. Roberts (1989:193) states that some of these names are derived from regions, whereby people inhabiting those regions are also referred to by the names of those regions. Junod (1927:15–17) seems to suggest that such instances have prevailed amongst the Tsonga people and other peoples in southern Mozambique.

Secondly, groups of people give each other names, mainly as part of scorning each other. Junod (1905:222) refers to these names as ‘mere nicknames’ and argues that they are given to the groups by their enemies and neighbours. Furthermore, Junod (1927:15) suggests either the meaning of the name or the attitude in which it is applied to the people concerned could be offensive (in some instances, correct non-offensive names are resented by people because of the attitude in which they are used). Almost every African society would have one or more nicknames from its neighbours and enemies. Moreover, Fought (2006:4) concludes that, basically, ethnic identity is either imposed on a group of people by others or self-created.

Thirdly, it is the ‘multi-layered’ nature of African societies. Ethnic groups generally coexist with several sub-identities that are recognised as constituent parts of the main group. Each subgroup is peculiar to a specific region and is often associated with its own unique history (Junod 1927:16–19). These layers within an ethnic group take various forms. Ranger (1989:120) suggests that what binds the various subgroups of an ethnic group are a single language and many other cultural traits in common. Their regional differences, however, and their respective proximity to other ethnic groups, as well as their unique histories, could determine such distinguishing features as a subgroup. These could include a common ancestor and migration history (Maluleke 2017:38).

The fourth and last factor is acculturation. According to Phinney et al. (2001:493), acculturation takes place when immigrants come to a new society. It encompasses a wide range of behaviours, attitudes, values and change with contact between cultures (Phinney et al. 2001:495). In Africa, this could be influenced by subjugation, assimilation and mere dominance by a larger ethnic group over the minority groups (Barker 2012:9–10; Thondhlana 2014:3). In certain instances, government policy can also promote this situation (Mabaso 2007:317).

Manifestation of ‘polyonymous identity’ of the Hlengwe people of Zimbabwe

Like any African society, the manifestation of the identity of the Hlengwe has its roots in its own history. The Hlengwe

come from the Nyaka kingdom, along the northern coast of the present-day KwaZulu-Natal up to the present-day Mozambican capital city of Maputo, which they founded and ruled until their migration to the north. The kingdom is believed to have been in existence by the end of the 14th century (Hedges 1978:102). Very little is known about the Hlengwe before their kingdom was encountered by the Portuguese in the middle of the 16th century. However, historical records of the time suggest that they could have used ‘Tonga/Thonga/Rhonga’ and ‘Makomati’ as their identities. These were the names applied to people in the same region where the kingdom was located (Heine & Tellingner 2008:33; Liesegang 2013; Mukhombu 1955:88; Theal 1908:373). The ‘Tonga/Thonga/Rhonga’ identity appears to have originally been the ‘Tonga’ identity from the time a group with this identity, to which the Hlengwe apparently belonged, settled along the east coast of the Great Lakes region (Torrend 1968:31; Wotela 2010:2, 8; Young 1977:67; Zungu 1999:8). Although the ‘Makomati’ identity disappeared around the 17th century after years of declining use, the ‘Tonga/Thonga/Rhonga’ identity does not appear to have disappeared. Instead, it seems to have continued to exist in several variations. The later version of ‘Tsonga’ was one of such variations.

The period from which the name Hlengwe came into use is not known. Its origin is also uncertain, but it is unlikely that it derives from the name of a person as is the case with some African societies. In fact, it could be one of those names that derive from a place or region. A corrupted version of ‘Ntlwenga’ (or ‘Hlwenga’) exists amongst the Nguni, who still apply it to some of the descendants of the Tsonga-speaking people in South Africa’s KwaZulu-Natal province (Bryant 1929:84). Historical sources seem to agree that Hlengwe could have been derived from the wealth the kingdom possessed because they suggest its meaning is ‘wealth’ (Junod 1927:18; Mpofu 2014:12). Some sources suggest that the present-day Kosy Bay, which was the capital of their kingdom, was known as Lake Hlengwe (also Hlangwe) (Mathebula 2002:15). Be that as it may, the name ‘Hlengwe’ seems to have been applied to both the people and the area they occupied or at least a part thereof.

It seems by the end of the 17th century, there were basically two identities associated with the Hlengwe: the ‘Hlengwe’ identity and the ‘Tsonga’ identity – the latter having distinguished itself from the original ‘Tonga/Thonga/Rhonga’ identity (Harries 1989:86–89; Zungu 1999:8). During this period, the leader of the Hlengwe was a man called Xinyori (Jaques 1938:18–20, 26; Liesegang 2013), who is likely to be the much revered Cawuke, the name believed to have been derived from Cioki-ca-humba (Jaques 1938:18; Junod 1927:24). The name is Xioki-xa-humba in the contemporary standardised Tsonga language (Junod 1927:24; Mpofu 2014:14). The name ‘Cawuke’ was certainly extended to the rulers of the Hlengwe during the next two or three generations after Xinyori. ‘Chauca’ was mentioned as an ‘important chief’ in Portuguese sources in 1729 and 1734,

during the reign of the successor to Xinyori (Liesegang 2013). Oral accounts of the Hlengwe also talk about their kinship with the Mabaso (Jaques 1938:18; Mukhombo 1955:88; H. Mabasa [Department of Arts and Culture] pers. com., 19 November 2012; E. Mabaso [Xitsonga National Language Body] pers. com., 21 January 2014), a lineage amongst the Ntungwa of KwaZulu-Natal, which lists one of its praise names as 'Shawuke' (Msimang 1991:18). Sources in Mozambique and Zimbabwe also suggest that the name could have been used in later generations when and after the Hlengwe made contact with the Sono (Junod 1927:24; Mpfu 2014:14; Tavuyanago 2016:54). Therefore, whereas the ruling core appears to have used 'Cawuke' as a *xivongo* (lineage name) throughout the Hlengwe's migration to the north, the group certainly retained 'Hlengwe' and 'Tsonga' as identities.

Xinyori's successor was his son, Bangwana, the leader of the Hlengwe in the beginning of the 18th century (Jaques 1938:18–20, 26). He had two known sons, Madzivi and Mantsena (Jaques 1938:19), the latter being probably the senior one, considering that he appears to have succeeded Bangwana and even reigned with the 'Cawuke' name, which Bangwana also used (Jaques 1938:18; Junod 1927:24; Mpfu 2014:14; Tavuyanago 2016:54). The 'Cawuke' name seems to have disappeared in the Madzivi group when this group split and settled in Inhambane (Mukhombo 1955:88; Smith 1973:569, 571). The Hlengwe of Zimbabwe are the descendants of Mantsena, and they have been completely cut off from the Madzivi group (Bannerman 1981:7; Jaques 1938:18–20; Tavuyanago 2016:54). However, sources amongst the Tshwa also referred to the Madzivi as the Rhonga (Mukhombo 1955:5–24, 33–41, 88), which suggests the possible continued use of the 'Rhonga' identity in the Madzivi's 'polyonymous identity'.

Literature suggests that the Hlengwe were in Xikundwini, amongst the Sono, by the middle of the 18th century (Mpfu 2014:15; Tavuyanago 2016:54). Furthermore, it is estimated that Mantsena could have died somewhere between the periods 1751 and 1766 (Bannerman 1981:7) before infiltration of the Zimbabwe Lowveld by the Hlengwe (Bannerman 1981:6; Mpfu 2014:15). In fact, 1751 seems to be the period of the Hlengwe's arrival in Xikundwini and 1766 actually marks the year of Mantsena's death. Although the literature is not explicit about where Mantsena died, stories about the Hlengwe's encounter with the Sono suggest that he died in Xikundwini, which is in the present-day Mozambique (Jaques 1938:18; Junod 1927:24; Mpfu 2014:15; Tavuyanago 2016:54).

By the last quarter of the 18th century, some Hlengwe groups had penetrated the present-day Zimbabwe and conquered the local lineages (Bannerman 1981:6; Mpfu 2014:15). By the end of the 18th century, therefore, the Hlengwe had maintained the two identities, which was also the case during most part of, if not the entire, the 19th century. However, Thondhlana (2014:18) states that 'group identities in Zimbabwe have over the centuries become complex', which

explains why the issue of identity amongst the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe remains a subject of debate. Mpfu (2014:19) suggests that it remains problematic to this day, because these people still have not been addressed with their correct sub-identity and main identity.

The 'collective proper name' of the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe

In a situation where an ethnic group is known by more than one name, people would generally not differentiate between its 'collective proper name' and the rest of other names, which could be nicknames or names of its subgroups. In some instances, a wrong identity will dominate over the correct one. Likewise, the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe are known by more than one name: as the Hlengwe, as the Tsonga and as the Shangani (Mabaso 2007:318; Tavuyanago 2017:59–61). This has created a 'polyonymous identity', and therefore, confused the 'collective proper name' as the true identity of the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe as an ethnic group. Moreover, the dominant identity amongst these people is a wrong one, whilst the correct one has been subsumed by the incorrect one to an extent that this has contributed to the distortion of the history of these people. Mpfu (2014) explains this problem as follows:

... Hlengwe people refer to themselves as the Shangaan. ... Shangaan is seen as their official language by the government ... in schools. In universities such as Great Zimbabwe they offer degrees in Shangaan ... the Hlengwe are now struggling to retain their identity. (p. 20)

Historical sources suggest that this problem goes beyond the Hlengwe and extends to other Tsonga-speaking peoples in other countries where they are found. Harries (1989) puts it as follows:

... [T]he word Shangaan has become an all-embracing term used to refer to the Tsonga-speaking peoples of southern Africa and, in a more general way, to all Mozambicans employed on the South African mines. (p. 86)

Although history suggests that various factors contributed to the creation of the 'polyonymous identity' amongst the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe, the Hlengwe themselves are implicated in the confusion around their 'collective proper name'. Mpfu (2014:19) states that the Shangani identity became dominant when historians and other players began to call the Hlengwe people the 'Shangaan'. The word 'Hlengwe' became less used and the term 'Shangaan' became more frequent. Even the Hlengwe people began to call themselves 'baShangane'.

The central argument about the application of the name 'Shangani' over the Hlengwe people of Zimbabwe and, indeed, other Tsonga-speaking peoples of Southern Africa is the belief that the Gaza-Nguni defeated, subjugated or even assimilated all Tsonga-speaking peoples and created a new ethnic group called 'Shangani'. The reality, therefore, would be that if indeed the Gaza-Nguni subjugated all the Tsonga-speaking peoples and gave them a new identity of

Shangani, then the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe, as part of the subjugated Tsonga, would justifiably be referred to as Shangani. However, the argument that the Gaza-Nguni defeated and subjugated all the Tsonga-speaking peoples has so far failed to produce evidence in its support, other than a vague, blanket statement to that effect (Mpofu 2014:18; Tavuyanago 2016:56–57, 2017:47).

This notion is contrasted by evidence pointing to the fact that even though the Gaza-Nguni defeated and subjugated some of the Tsonga peoples, there are many who were never influenced by the Gaza-Nguni (Harries 1989:86; Jaques 1938:82.127–128; Junod 1905:222–224, 1927:5; Mathebula 2002:11–36, 77–115; Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1979:26–31). Junod (1905:222–223) argues that ‘a good many of (Tsonga) clans ... were never tributaries of Manukosi (Soshangane), and the name Shangaan would not apply to them’. Junod (1927:16), therefore, argues that the adoption of the Shangani name to many Tsonga-speaking people ‘... *would be objectionable*’. However, even if the Gaza-Nguni did not subjugate all the Tsonga-speaking peoples, but managed to create a new distinct identity amongst those they subjugated, the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe would be justifiably called Shangani if they formed part of those subjugated and included in the new identity.

However, scholars are divided on whether the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe ever formed part of those subjugated by the Gaza-Nguni. Those who associate the Hlengwe with the Shangani identity attribute this to what they refer to as the defeat and subjugation of the Hlengwe by the Gaza-Nguni. Tavuyanago (2016:56) suggests that the Shangani identity on the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe is a product of the Gaza-Nguni’s incursion into southern Zimbabwe, suggesting that the Gaza-Nguni conquered all the Tsonga-speaking peoples at least in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Other sources, such as Mpofu (2014:18–20), suggest that the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe were subjugated by the Gaza-Nguni without substantiating the claim.

Tavuyanago (2016:56–57) admits, however, that there are contrary views around the defeat and subjugation of the Hlengwe by the Gaza-Nguni. Evidence suggests that the Gaza-Nguni influence over the people of Zimbabwe was around Chimanimani Mountains and Chipinge district. Thondhlana (2014:16) suggests that the Gaza-Nguni only conquered the Ndauspeaking people in this area. Other sources refer to the Chipinge area having been ruled by Soshangane’s son, Mzila and other Ndwandwe family members (Jaques 1938:1–6; Mathebula 2002:47; Tavuyanago (2016:60–61). Furthermore, Thondhlana (2014:16) argues that unlike the Ndebele who maintained their customs and most elements of their Nguni language, the Gaza-Nguni were acculturated by the groups that they had surmounted; hence, those of Chipinge area currently speak Ndaus. Despite this, Thondhlana (2014:16) nevertheless extends the Shangani name to the Hlengwe,

who do not speak Ndaus. Tavuyanago (2016:55) goes on to suggest that the Hlengwe had their own separate identity until the incursion of the Gaza-Nguni who later developed a new language Xitsonga or Tsonga or Shangaan, and based its orthography on the dominant Hlengwe language, thus turning Hlengwe from language to dialect status. Similar tendencies are prevalent amongst the other Tsonga-speaking peoples in the other three countries where the Tsonga-speaking peoples reside (Harries 1989:86; Junod 1905:222–224, 1927:5, 20).

Another school of thought argues that the genesis of the Shangani identity on the Hlengwe and other Tsonga-speaking peoples has nothing to do with their supposed defeat, subjugation and assimilation by the Gaza-Nguni. In fact, this school of thought dismisses the very suggestion that Tsonga-speaking peoples were assimilated by the Gaza-Nguni. Tavuyanago (2016:58), citing Sparrow, states that such assimilation never took place. Several scholars have supported this contrasting school, contending that the Gaza-Nguni influence on the Tsonga peoples is generally overstated (Tavuyanago 2016:58). According to Tavuyanago (2016:58), other researchers believe that the narrative is confused by the ‘loose use of the Shangani appellation at the beginning of colonialism which assumed Gaza-Nguni cultural and linguistic impact as enormous’. There are also those who think that the Gaza-Nguni political influence on the Tsonga peoples was almost absent, other than in military and economic terms (Tavuyanago 2016:58). Junod (1927:15–16) says the name was used mainly by whites to denote Tsonga in the South African mines. It was later extended to all the mineworkers from southern Mozambique (Harries 1989:86; Junod 1927:15–16).

Mpofu (2014:19) suggests that it was in this social pyramid that a false historiography had begun concerning the Hlengwe and other groups, which were classified as Shangaan. Historical evidence suggests many of the Tsonga peoples resented the application of the name to them. Therefore, Tavuyanago (2016:60) labels the name as ‘a colonial invention arising out of cultural confusion’. On these and other accounts, Bannerman (1981:7–8) concludes that the Hlengwe and many other Tsonga-speaking peoples are not Shangaans. Instead, Shangani itself is regarded as a subgroup of the Tsonga and the Shangani speech as a dialect of the Tsonga language (Harries 1989:86; Mabaso 2007:318, 2017:1; Maluleke 2017:43–44; Mathebula 2002:2, 4, 10).

Therefore, the issue of this confusing Shangani identity lies with its incorrect use over the people who should not be associated with it. Harries (1989) argues that the Shangani name should not be used for many of the Tsonga-speaking peoples, stating:

... [C]orrectly used, (the name Shangani) should be applied to those people who adopted the material culture of the Gaza Nguni chief Soshangane. (p. 86)

Amongst the Tsonga-speaking people of South Africa, Harries (1989) argues that:

... [O]nly the descendants of the Gaza Nguni immigrants who entered the eastern Transvaal after the second Luso-Gaza war of 1897, are officially classified 'Shangaan' or 'Tshangana', and in this way distinguished from the descendants of earlier immigrants, the Tsonga, who were in most cases never under the Gaza rule. (p. 86)

Similarly, Tavuyanago (2016:59), citing Mtetwa, argues that the only people in Zimbabwe who should be called Shangaan, even though they currently speak the Ndau language, are those of Chief Mpungu, a descendent of a younger brother of Nghunghunyani who were settled in Gwenzi and subsequently moved to the east of Chisumbanje. In fact, Mpungu, the originator of the Mpungu lineage, was the younger brother of Nghunghunyani.

The issue of 'polyonymous identity' amongst the Tsonga people and other groups must first be understood in order to be able to distinguish between 'a collective proper name' of a group of people and other names. Each group amongst the Tsonga will have at least two names – one for its sub-identity and another for its main identity – that it shares with other subgroups of the same ethnic group. The rest shall be nicknames or misplaced identities.

The 'confusion' around the identity of the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe emanates from the lack of understanding the 'polyonymous identity' amongst the Tsonga-speaking peoples, in particular and other groups, in general. The main issue, here, is that each ethnic group is constituted by several subgroups, each with its own name that becomes its sub-identity. Collectively, these subgroups constitute an ethnic group and share the name of the ethnic group to which they belong. That ethnic group's name becomes their main identity, and therefore, one of their two names. For this reason, the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe have 'Hlengwe' as their sub-identity and 'Tsonga' as their main identity. The Shangani of Mozambique's Gaza province and South Africa's Mpumalanga province constitute a separate subgroup amongst the Tsonga. The dialect spoken by the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe is different from the one spoken by the Shangani in Mozambique and South Africa. Moreover, this and the fact that the Hlengwe of Zimbabwe were never subjugated by the Gaza-Nguni means that they cannot be classified as the Shangani.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that there are contestations of identity amongst the Hlengwe people of Zimbabwe and South Africa. This complexity is compounded by regimes of power and scholarship appropriating everyone as Tsonga or Shangaan depending on whether one is in South Africa or Mozambique, or at best in Zimbabwe. The Hlengwe identity is rooted in the politics of identity that shape ethnicity in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa and to a smaller scale in eSwatini. To this end, the Hlengwe people straddle all these identities, holding a polyonymous identity. The question that remains to be asked is whether they should be seen as a distinct group or as

a subset of the Tsonga, or the Shangaan. This study concludes that all appellations are politically correct, resulting in the Hlengwe holding variable identities; however, they should be seen as a separate group from the Tsonga and the Shangaan, despite their late subjugations, and even relegating their language into dialect status. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated that identities are not only fluid but also continually determined by social and political factors.

The question that requires further investigation and probing is, 'can one be Tsonga and Shangaan, or Shangaan and Tsonga at the same time?' Is one subsumed in the other, or are they politically connected to be seen as one? When this debate is settled, the challenge of being Hlengwe and the solution to Hlengwe identity will be better resolved, and situated in this polemics of identification; otherwise, the independence of the Hlengwe can always be debateable.

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Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

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