

## **HIGHLANDERS FOOTBALL CLUB AND NDEBELE IDENTITY AMONGST FANS IN ZIMBABWE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper examines the issue of identity construction amongst the Ndebele through the prism and lens of football. It examines how Ndebele identity is constructed, mediated and reproduced through support for Highlanders football club. This is achieved by adopting sociological theory particularly the interactionist perspective. Succinctly, the theory views sport as not just a sport or a game, sport according to the theory is given meaning as various members within society interact. This therefore has implications for one's understanding a, shaping and negotiating the issue of identity. In this regard then, using the lens and mirror of football, the article explores the issue of identity particularly Ndebele identity. Football is a metaphor of life, struggle, freedom, and fans identify with their club because it offers them a sense of identity and represents their aspirations and dreams as a social group. In sum the paper unearths that the football club is more than just a sports team to the Ndebele, it represents a yearning for self-expression of what it means to be Ndebele within Zimbabwe.*

**Key Words: Zimbabwe politics, sports and politics, sports and sociology, ethnicity**

*Football is war-***Rinus Michel**

*Some people think football [soccer] is a matter of life and death. I don't like that attitude. I can assure them it is much more serious than that."* **Bill Shankly**

## **Introduction**

Football is the most popular sport worldwide, and its popularity in Zimbabwe is no exception. It is a game that arouses and inflames passions amongst society and contributes to a polarization within society, polarization is brought up by issues related to identity, ethnicity, language, culture and even perceived historical injustices based along ethnic lines. Football becomes a theatre, a site of struggle and tensions where identity is constructed, deconstructed, mediated, challenged, questioned, affirmed and celebrated. In a sense, football can be read as a metaphor signifying a struggle for power, dominance and superiority not only between the two protagonists but between societal groups such as ethnic ones. The encounter between football and identity has always been inevitable as football clubs tend to be formed on the basis of social identity, in this instance a group identity, they identify with a geographic location, social class, racial group, ethnic group and in some cases religious group. Highlanders is viewed by fans as a vehicle of Ndebele expression, it has emerged as the 'only' institution they have following the demise of the monarchy and ZAPU which were representative of Ndebele aspiration and identity. Fans have given highlanders meaning and shaped it into a club that stands for Ndebele identity and nationalism, captures the Ndebele experience such as Gukurahundi, critique of Shona triumphalism, imagining Ndebele identity, marginalisation, Ndebele-Shona relations.

The paper is divided into five sections, following the introduction is an outline on the theoretical framework used in the study, next will be a discussion on the intersection between football and identity which will be followed by a discussion on Ndebele identity and Highlanders Football Club. Lastly, will be the conclusion remarks.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The paper employs the interactionist perspective of sociology as well as discourse analysis. Succinctly, interactionism focusses on issues relating to meaning, identity and how social groups relate to each other. According to Holborns and Haralambos (2004: xix) '...interactionism is concerned with interaction, which means action between individual.' In the context of football there is interaction between and amongst different social actors, groups and ethnicities, therefore it contributes to the formation and shaping of perceptions on issues of identity. As humans

interact with each other, they ascribe meaning to sport, and this is especially true of ethnic groups where people make assumptions about each group. It is noteworthy that ‘identities are key factors as people interact with one another and construct their social worlds...they change over time as our actions and relationships change, as we meet new people, and as we face new situations.’ Resultantly there emerges a sub-culture which amongst fans and supporters which can shed more light on relations between the two ethnic groups. In addition, discourse analysis is incorporated in order to solidify the theoretical section, Stauffer (2009:52) ‘discourse analysis sees every textual statement as embedded in a broader conversational backdrop.’ Language and issues of identity are therefore best understood through discourse analysis as the discourse shows us the interaction and attitudes of one group towards the other. Discourse analysis incorporates songs, slogans, chants, parlance, paraphernalia and conversation. How they speak (discourse) about the ‘other’ reveals a lot about identity and attitudes held, discourse analysis aids us to understand the social, political and historical contexts which gives meaning to the discourse thus shaping attitude towards one group. However, one has to be cognisant that meaning in language and discourse analysis is determined by the context. Therefore the stadium and emotions which flare up in it do not serve necessarily as a reflection of wider society’s feelings and attitudes towards identity.

### **Football clubs and identity**

Football offers an interesting insight into societies understanding of issues pertaining to identity. This is apt considering that football involves two opposing teams who have different identities, strips, playing styles, ethos and philosophy and are in competition against each other. Identity conflict is gleaned when rival teams play each other, on the pitch, in the board room, on the terraces as taunts are shouted and in their interaction outside the stadium. This is reflected amongst the fans of rival clubs who assert their identities through the teams they support. For Giulianotti (1999:10) ‘...football matches involve two teams that represent specific geographical and cultural identities. These matches therefore give rise to the most potent dramatizations of binary opposition within sport.’ One may add that the binary opposition also acts as a reflection of the differences that are found within society such as ethnic identity, religious, political ideology, historic experience, ethnic group, nationalism, class, in some cases political movement

and linguistic to mention but a few. Identity is not just important to the fans but it also provides a sense of meaning and enables the club to connect with its fans. It is therefore hardly surprising that football teams are keen to identify with certain groups in society in order to remain relevant. In Zimbabwe, Highlanders football club was established in Bulawayo the second largest city in the country, a city traditionally peopled by the Ndebele. Therefore, the club draws the bulk of its support base among the Ndebele thus matches involving the club do dramatise at least for the fans the cultural differences between the Ndebele and 'others' who are not Ndebele. Identity is in the DNA of humanity therefore whenever and wherever human beings interact, there is bound to be conflict and that the issue of identity will flare up, this is so in football where teams represent and stand for a certain identity be it consciously or unconsciously. Fans and the team supporters attach certain connotations towards their team of choice.

Furthermore, football arouses strong feelings and passion amongst fans all over the world, fault-lines include; politics, religion, class warfare, and ethnicity (Bradley, 2006; Giulianotti and Robertson, 2006; Spaaij, 2006; Stuivenberg, 2008). Through supporting a football club, fans realise and release their feelings and thoughts with respect to identity, fans and supporters follow their teams with a passion that borders on the fanatical, to them, football is life, a source of pride and an identity marker. This is true considering that teams are often based or have their roots within locales and identify with certain classes and groups within society. Football offers a sense of community and belonging thus lending itself to identity construction whereby supporters of a club identify themselves with the club and fellow supporters whilst at the same time in conflict with rival supporters. In a word, football supporters construct a narrative on identity and this is reflected in a plethora of ways such as chants and songs which provide us with an insight into how fans perceive issues of social identity.

A plethora of examples from across the world illustrate the organic and umbilical cord like relationship between football clubs and how their fans view them as a vehicle for a particular identity. For more than a century the Scottish league had one of the fiercest rivalries in the world-the Old Firm rivalry in Glasgow between Celtic Football Club and Glasgow Rangers divided the country along religious lines (Bradley, 2006). Celtic has Irish and Catholic roots whereas Rangers has Protestant origins (Giulianotti, 1999). The city would be divided along

religious lines and it was so serious that a Catholic could not play for Rangers, in the same way that a Protestant could not play for Celtic although there were exceptions as some Protestants such as Kenny Dalglish went on to play for the club (Bradley, 2006; Clancy, 2010). In the Spanish league, the Basque region as represented by the clubs Real Sociedad and Athletic Bilbao stand for Basque nationalism and represent the region's political identity against the Castilian idea and identity as represented by Real Madrid which was held up by General Francisco Franco as an embodiment of what it meant to be Spanish (Spaij, 2006). Athletic Bilbao view themselves principally as Basques before being Spaniards, their sense of identity as Basques is evident as the club has a policy of not signing non-Basques, only Basques and players with Basque roots have ever played for the club ([www.athletic-club.es](http://www.athletic-club.es)). This is coupled with the fact that the club using Basque players has never been relegated thus creating a sense of pride amongst the Basques suggesting a triumph over Castille. Still in Spain, the rivalry known to the world as *el clasico* between Barcelona and Real Madrid resonates of identity conflict., Barcelona is from the region of Cataluña and as its slogan '*mes que un club*' which when translated means more than a club represents Cataluña, its identity, culture, language and independence as opposed to Madrid which represents the Castilian identity and was the darling of the Fascist Franco who tried to quash Cataluña (Ranachan, 2008). General Franco wanted to centralise the state under Madrid, he met resistance from Catalunya which wanted to maintain its identity thus was viewed as rebellious and opposed to Franco (<http://worldsoccer.about.com>). Apart from the political dimension to the rivalry, there is the economic and social rivalry where the working-class from Cataluña play the wealthy from Madrid.

In Argentina the superclasico pits Boca Juniors and River Plate; here the issue of identity borders on the social and political. Both clubs have their roots in the suburb of La Boca, but River Plate moved away to the more spacious Nunez suburb and is generally supported by the wealthy, this is even reflected in their nickname 'los millionaires' which indicates their status as wealthy and supported by the wealthy (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>). Boca Juniors on the other hand, has remained firmly rooted in the poor part of the suburb and draws its support base from the less affluent members of the society ([www.worldsoccer.com](http://www.worldsoccer.com)). The political divide is also apparent as Boca Juniors is Leftist whereas River Plate is Right-wing (Stuivenberg, 2008), therefore the fans of both are divided on political grounds and ideological stance sometimes leading to violent clashes

among the rival set of fans. In the former Republic of Yugoslavia football clubs were an identity marker as teams tended to represent the ethnic and nationalist aspirations of the various groups in the Balkanised region. For example, matches between Red Star Belgrade which represented Serbian nationalism and Dinamo Zagreb which epitomised Croatian nationalism aroused passions of ethnicity and would tend to degenerate into chaos both on and off the pitch (Woods, 2010). Matches between the two teams were volatile and a case in point is the (in) famous match in 1990 which resulted in a mass brawl as Dinamo players under siege identified with Croatian nationalism and demands for independence ([www.thescore.ie](http://www.thescore.ie))

Sport is competitive and this characteristic is visible in politics and society at large hence one may posit that sport mirrors the prevailing attitudes and identity construction within society. Sporting teams thrive where there is rivalry and one such exploited rivalry is that of ethnicity, therefore sport finds itself being a site where identity is challenged, questioned, mediated, deconstructed, constructed and challenged. The competitive nature of sport where teams compete for supremacy and domination mirrors how society and issues of identity are perceived. In a word, sport provides a commentary and window into society especially on issues of identity. Identity is a contested terrain, a concept that is rigid, defined yet elusive at the same time. Identity sits at the core of humans as each individual values their group identity. In a group, people find shelter, companionship; support for sports teams provides individuals with a sense of shared solidarity, and a sense of group identity. Teams become a symbol of identity, an expression of a collective group identity.

### **Historical Background to Ndebele-Shona Relations**

Encounters between the Ndebele and Shona, as well as colonialism have shaped Ndebele perceptions on group identity. The Rozvi kingdom was the last Shona state and this was decimated by various Nguni groups during the Mfecane migrations after a series of Nguni raids which contributed to the gradual decline of the Rozvi, finally, the Ndebele whose king was Mzilikazi came along and applied the coup de grace and established the Ndebele state (Bhila and Shillington, 1986). Mzilikazi received tribute from his chiefs and other Shona chiefs thus creating tension between the Ndebele and Shona. Relations between the two ethnic groups were altered with the coming of the British who played both groups against each other using the classic

strategy of divide and rule. For instance, the British South Africa Company (BSAC) tended to employ the Shonas as tax collectors and they were required to collect tax from the Ndebele, the British South Africa Police (BSAP) had Shona recruits and some would subject the Ndebele to harsh treatment (Tidy and Lemming, 1981). Examples also include the Gomala incident and the Victoria incident which were used by the BSAC to invade and attack the Ndebele. It was clear that ethnicity and identity issues were to be one of the fault lines in the new colony. The defeat of the Ndebele and the loss of their king meant that the Ndebele had lost their figurehead who was the embodiment of their culture and a source of unity. Despite the loss of their King, the white colonial government was fearful and suspicious of the Ndebele as they thought that they could mobilise round something. Resultantly, they sent away the king's sons to South Africa in a bid to give them a western education civilize them and make them forget their culture. Highlanders Football Club is synonymous with the Ndebele kingdom which was destroyed by Rhodes and his BSAC. It was formed by the grandsons of the last Ndebele King, Lobengula around 1926 (Moyo, 2013) and from the onset, the club was associated with Ndebele nationalism and identity as the nation had lost its leader, its institutions. The post-independence violence which witnessed about 20 000 Ndebele lose their lives in what is known as Gukurahundi (CCJP, 1997), resulted in a siege mentality among the Ndebele who saw themselves as victims of Shona dominance leading to the idea of 'us' versus 'them' as well as otherness. It is in light of this historical and political context that this paper seeks to understand why the football club means so much to the fans.

### **The Stadium as a Theatre for Identity Construction**

The formation of football clubs in Zimbabwe seemed to indicate the ethnic divide as the first two clubs showed the ethnic distinction. Originally Highlanders was known as Matabeleland Highlanders, the colonisation of Zimbabwe resulted in the country being divided into provinces and these were named according to the dominant ethnicities that where to be found there. Bulawayo was peopled largely by the Ndebele hence it was called Matabeleland, from a discourse analysis perspective, one gleans that the club represented the Ndebele, stood for 'Ndebelerism' and was to be the vehicle to carry the culture and heritage of the Ndebele. Not only was it meant to promote Ndebele identity and nationalism, it was an expression and celebration of the Ndebele way of life, language, culture, identity and sought to unite the

Ndebele people around one symbol. The King had been the embodiment of the state; he had been the symbol of Ndebeleness and identity. With the king 'gone', football became the medium of expressing and celebrating Ndebele culture and identity.

The importance of identity in football was to be revealed as Shonas within Bulawayo founded a team called Mashonaland United; this was to act as a home and shelter for Shona identity in Bulawayo in the midst of being surrounded by the Ndebele who had Matabeleland Highlanders as their vehicle for self-expression. One may postulate that the reason for the formation of the club was to re assert Shona identity which seemed to be threatened by the rise of Ndebele ethnic nationalism. The scene was set for ethnic rivalry finding a place in football as Matabeleland Highlanders was largely Ndebele and represented the Ndebele ethnic group pitted against Shonas who identified themselves with Mashonaland United. Therefore, the interaction between the two clubs and their fans were to be determined by their language, and ethnicity. This was no longer just a game; it was now a struggle and quest for identity.

With Harare being the nerve centre of politics and economics, it was called 'bambazonke' (this due to centralisation) football became a metaphor of challenging the status quo and the city's politico-economic domination. Identity through football also took a new meaning as Highlanders was to be the torch-bearer of the region and its people, carrying its hopes and dreams, and the stadium was to be a safe arena where criticism of the political elite could take place freely. A look at the composition of teams who over the years have made up the league reveals that a majority have often come from Mashonaland province. Therefore matches pitting Highlanders from the fans perspective were seen as 'us' versus 'them' further showing the dynamic of identity and ethnicity assumed by matches. Highlanders' triumphs and league successes were a source of pride and gave the umthwakazi (the idea of a Ndebele nation) satisfaction at having conquered 'bambazonke.' Politically and economically, umthwakazi as an idea could be broken through military ruthlessness such as Gukurahundi as well as economic sabotage, but it found a voice through football it could find its expression.

The stadium is the theatre where identity is created, challenged, celebrated, and recreated. Arguably, football offers an insight into reinforced group identities, circumvent and challenge the status-quo, create an identity amongst the ethnic groups and a sense of separatism.

Furthermore, football is a site of struggle and a metaphor for various struggles and conflicts which take part within the broader society, identity being one of them. The stadium provides fans with a sense of identity, belonging and community and it becomes an appropriate site to observe how fans mediate the question of identity. Moreover, it is a sphere theatre where social and political attitudes, where identity is mediated, constructed, challenged, reinforced, negotiated, asserted, and where a community of people express and celebrate their collective identity as they cheer for ‘their’ team. In cheering for their team, binary opposition is visible, the demarcation of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ is brought out and this is indicative of a group identity.

Chanting and singing are part and parcel of football rituals; fans chant and sing in support of their teams. These chants and songs are rooted in history; some of the songs are traditional ones whose lyrics have been modified to comment on the socio-political and economic conditions within the country. Chants and songs are commonplace in football matches as they identify supporters of a certain team hence it is no surprise that songs will be laced with references to ‘other’ ethnic groups. Chants and slogans involve not just friendly sporting banter but one that is laced with commentary and critique on identity issues and concerns. Consider the following song by the fans:

*Wakhalu’gog’ekhaya ishona liyadelela (grandmother is weeping because of the Shona)*  
*Highlander ithimu yezwe lonke (Highlanders is the nation’s team)*  
*Osithi lonyaka kuyafiwa bo, sokuselu’mongameli (the economic situation is tough, only the president is left)*  
*Highlander ithimu yezwe lonke. (Highlanders is the nation’s team)*

This song was sung by Ndebeles during the liberation struggle, originally as a protest song against the brutality and cruelty of the white settler regime. In the original song, the reason for grandmother’s weeping is because of the whites who are ill-treating the Black African, now that Zimbabwe has been liberated, the new tormentor is the Black African who through violence such as Gukurahundi and economic mismanagement and corruption is making the lives of ordinary people unbearable. In terms of identity, being Shona in the eyes of Highlanders fans is synonymous with the ruling ZANU PF party which has presided over the country’s economic decay and meltdown. The song therefore is a commentary on the political and economic woes in the country which are blamed on the ruling party which is led by a Shona.

In addition, Highlanders supporters' conception of identity is informed by ethnicity, this is despite the slogan 'highlander ithimu yezwe lonke' which when translated suggests that the team cuts across ethnic and social divides. This can be captured by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008:35)

'to those with a hegemonic Ndebele agenda, being a Ndebele means a conglomeration of all those people whose ancestors were assimilated into the Ndebele state, be they of Nguni, Sotho, Shona, Kalanga, Tonga, Tswana, Venda or Lozwi extraction. This historical-pluralistic-hegemonic definition of being Ndebele celebrates the Ndebele nation as a pre-colonial form of a rainbow nation.'

However, this presents an interesting dichotomy, on one hand the team draws its support from across the country suggesting that there are non-Ndebele for it draws its support from all over the country and across various ethnicities amongst its ranks, it draws players from across various ethnicities, on the other hand there is a sense of Ndebele centricism amongst its fans as the idea of the nation applies to umthwakazi and Ndebele speakers. The idea of 'isizwe' (nation) according to the historical-pluralistic-hegemonic is all encompassing showing how eclectic Ndebele identity is. Visiting fans especially the Harare teams have their own stand reserved for them that is the Mpilo hospital end, from a footballing perspective, it is standard that rival fans are separated but this can be read as a metaphor showing the separateness between the fans in terms of team allegiance and their ethnicity. It is generally regarded as the stand where Shonas sit, it is interesting to observe that the Mpilo and Soweto stands are directly opposite each other, further heightening the polarization and confrontation between the two teams and by extension the ethnic groups as well. Sitting directly opposite each other also evokes a war metaphor, not only is there a war of attrition on the field of play but there is symbolically a war as evidenced through chants and taunts between the rival supporters moreso if the team is playing against its bitter rivals Dynamos who are regarded as the embodiment of Shona identity and are associated with the political establishment. One may adduce that the vanguard of Ndebele culture and identity sit at the Soweto stand, they are symbolically acting as the Praetorian Guard, the protectors and defenders of Ndebele identity. They defend the identity by making sure that only Ndebeles sit on the stand, only isiNdebele is spoken, furthermore this is also the most vociferous section of the stadium where the most fanatical and by extension the Ndebele amongst the Ndebele sit.

On the other hand it presents difficulties of sorts as Ndebele particularism is visible in the Soweto stand where a form of ethnic discrimination takes place and the idea of 'isizwe' is constructed purely on a linguistic and lineage perspective thus throwing into question the idea of the team being all inclusive. It is noteworthy that those that sit at the Soweto stand are staunch supporters and regard themselves as the representatives of Ndebele as expressed through the idea of 'umthwakazi.' This is in light of the social organisation of the State where there was something similar to a caste system, at the apex were the Zansi who were the aristocracy and came from Nguniland, these are usually referred to as the 'pure' and 'original' Ndebele. Next in the where the AbeZansi who included the Sotho, Tswana, Kalanga amongst others who were assimilated and incorporated into the state and made up the majority of the population in the state. Lastly, there were the Hole who were predominantly, Shona; this hierarchy is visible in the stadium not only in terms of sitting arrangements but in the support of the team. Arguably, the eastern side of the stadium known as 'empankweni' ( the place where lizards stay) because fans will be facing the sun, is where the 'other' Ndebele and Shona supporters of the club sit one may submit that these are the abEnhla and have to be left out to roast as they are not pure Ndebele. The western enclosure which is the VIP section tends to be peopled by the mixed people who have one parent being Ndebele, or Shona people who were born in the city or have lived in the city and speak the language but would not be accepted in other sections of the stadium because they don't belong.

Ndebele identity is fluid as there is no consensus on what constitutes being Ndebele and as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008:35) notes '...there are many versions of Ndebele identity that have mushroomed in recent years.' This is important so as to enable one to understand how Ndebeleness is perceived by the different groups as it were as one's level experiences supporting highlanders differently. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008:35) articulates that the label Ndebele refers to '...anyone who spoke Ndebele language as a mother tongue. Then there is the regional-local definition that defines a Ndebele as any person residing in Matabeleland or the Midlands regions of Zimbabwe.' It stands to reason that one's identification with the club is informed by their Ndebeleness, these levels or categories view highlanders differently, one may submit that Highlanders fans attach importance to Ndebele language as the mother tongue, therefore a true highlanders fan is one that speaks Ndebele and is born into Ndebele family, customs and culture.

This is an important point as a section of the stadium known as Soweto is known to be populated only by hardcore Highlanders supporters and for one to sit there requires the individual to be Ndebele, that is speak Ndebele and have a Ndebele surname, that is one should be from umthwakazi. Therefore those that speak Ndebele as their mother tongue view the club as part and parcel of Ndebeleness and these tend to support aspects of Ndebele exclusivity and separateness. For instance, though Shona players may play for the club and achieve a degree of success, this group of fans never fully embrace them because ‘ngabafana beHarare’ (they are Harare boys, which simply means they are Shona). Success by the club is sweeter when achieved with ‘local boys.’ These fans would prefer a scenario similar to the Basque club Athletic Bilbao where Basque’s play for the club, however this is difficult for Highlanders because Ndebele identity is not homogenous as there are other groups which were incorporated thus creating the Ndebele state (identity).

While it is true that the team derives its support base from across the country and that non-Ndebeles are amongst its supporters. The fallacy of this is revealed in that ethnicity and Ndebele identity is central to Highlanders fans. It is also true that the club has over the years and even currently has Shona players in its ranks. However, this does not mask that as far as the fans are concerned, and the club is a representative of umthwakazi. It is also interesting to note that though there are Shona players who don the club’s colours, those who are viewed as Bulawayo Shonas are embraced as they are seen as indigenes of Bulawayo more so because they speak the local language. The story is different for those who are brought in from Mashonaland teams who when they go through a bad patch in terms of performance, are booed by the fans and reminded that after all they are not from Bulawayo. Taking football as a metaphor for war, competitiveness and a microcosm of the attitudes of opposing fans towards identity issues, one notes that the chants are laden with meaning. They are not chants directed at club rivals but at what that club represents in terms of the ethnic group. In other words the chants do not target the club but the fans of the club and their ethnic identity.

The slogan ‘I Bosso ngenkani’ (loosely translated to Highlanders till death) is not just a statement spoken by a football fan showing their allegiance to the club. In terms of discourse analysis, the slogan reveals a defiance of the status quo as the fans seemingly pull a middle

finger at the establishment, it can be read as a celebration of Ndebeleness, a celebration of Ndebele culture, language and identity. In a sense the statement can be taken as a posture adopted by Ndebeles that ‘singamaNdebele ngenkani’ (we are Ndebeles and this cannot be taken away from us), violence as seen in Gukurahundi, lack of investment in the city cannot break the spirit of the collective group. Support for the club therefore becomes a way of expressing one’s identity as a Ndebele.

Time, space and history shape one’s perception and conception of both reality and identity. Identity both constant and fluid as it is informed by birth, historical experience and the political situation, prevailing at the time, with the passage of time, identities are negotiated, and re-established. Ethnic groups have a historical narrative which shapes its construction of identity, groups celebrate their joys, triumphs, mourn their sorrows and lament over tragedies. This forms part of the group’s understanding, construction and conception of identity and how it relates with other groups. Football provides fans with an outlet to construct a narrative that informs their understanding on identity and ethnic relations. Giulianotti and Robertson (2006:175) ‘among some sections of a club’s support, we may find a ‘deep particularism’ or ‘search for fundamentals’, as manifested, for example, through intense rivalry with particular opponents or through linking the club’s historical meaning relative to broader political, ethnic and religious identities.’ The history and experience of Zimbabwe has contributed to the shaping of identity amongst the Ndebele, this is visible even within football which becomes a theatre where identity is contested and asserted. Since football is often described as the ‘people’s theatre.’

Relations with the Shona continue to shape fans conception of, identity; this is revealed in the following two short songs:

*Sowake waliboni’shona lihlale’soweto (have you ever seen a Shona sitting by the Soweto stand?)*

*Ngiyabuza ishone’lihlale’Soweto (tell me people, a Shona sitting by Soweto stand)*

*Ngiyabuza ishone’lihlale’Soweto (I am still asking, sitting by the Soweto stand)*

*Sowake waboni’shon’elibhalwe tshilamoya (have you ever seen a Shona supporting Highlanders)*

*Sowake waboni’shon’elibhalwe tshilamoya (have you ever seen a Shona with Highlanders identity)*

This first is a traditional song which was sung among the Ndebele. Though the above songs may seem like banter within the stadium, a deeper reading reveals that some fans would rather have the club being all-Ndebele. This is visible in the rhetorical question where fans ask if Shonas should ever sit and occupy Soweto which as earlier paragraphs have shown is the epicentre of Ndebeleness in the stadium, furthermore, though the team may have Shona players, this doesn't make the players Ndebele in anyway. This appears to be the idea expressed in the second song which also deals with identity. One may adduce that the song reflects the general feelings amongst the Ndebele as the group has had to contend with '...a continuous process of minoritisation as Shona identity picked the agenda of hegemonic triumphalism' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008:36). Therefore the song is a challenge and subversion of Shona dominance and Shonacracy by the Ndebele who feel overly dominated and subjugated economically, politically and socially by the Shona.

A further look at the songs reveals that Soweto and supporting the club is the preserve of the Ndebele. In addition, Soweto is a haven, a sanctuary where Ndebele culture and identity can be practiced and maintained without any intrusion by the status quo and Shonas, Soweto has to be exclusively Ndebele as Shonas seem keen to be found everywhere ( interview with respondents). It is the citadel and epitome of Ndebele identity as well as a place where the vanguard and defenders of Ndebele culture and identity sit. This section of the stadium can be equated to the arena or space where the ultras among various European teams sit as they cheer their teams. Furthermore, in this space Ndebele is spoken exclusively, a situation similar to Camp Nou the home ground of FC Barcelona where only Catalan is spoken in the stadium, Soweto therefore is unlike any public space where for instance policemen or people in the general public will speak to one in Shona believing that everyone understands the language. It is a space where one is not apologetic of being Ndebele and proudly interacts with other Ndebele in the process. This can also be read as protest against the 'bambazonke' spirit shown by Harare and the increased Shonarisation of the city and institutions of education where Ndebele feel suffocated by the pervasiveness of Shona.

Over the years the club has had Shona and non-Ndebele players donning its black and white strip. In times of success, this has been largely ignored by fans, but when the club goes through a

lean spell, certain sections of the fans begin to call for an all-team just like Athletic Bilbao which is Basque. However, there is a section of fans who believe in plurality and are of the view that one's origins need not disqualify them from playing for the team, perhaps illustrating that group identity within the fans is fluid and there is no consensus on what being Ndebele is. In addition, it can be argued that this shows how inclusive and all embracing the club is thus warranting the tag 'ithimu yezwe lonke (the nation's team). Be that as it may, when the team is down and playing poorly, Shona players become scapegoats and an easy target for the boo-boys and elements of the crowd who accuse them of not giving their all because they are not Ndebele therefore do not understand that the club means more to the supporters than the players can imagine. A song expressing unhappiness towards the team's performance but whose lyrics are directed towards Shona players, according to some respondents, players from Harare goes like this:

*Lidlala masimba litshova amarete (a literal translation is you are playing shit,  
you are playing testicles)  
Thina sotshisi'stadium (we will burn the stadium)  
We mashona (you Shonas)  
Sotshisi'stadium (we will burn the stadium)*

What is fascinating about the song is that it is not sung strictly in IsiNdebele, some of the lyrics are Sotho. What one observes is the fluidity of Ndebele identity, secondly though the team has players from various ethnicities, the song is directed towards the Shona players who are accused of playing poorly, and in local parlance they are playing 'marete' which is a Sotho word for testicles (interview with respondent ). The song also exposes the identity fault lines between the Ndebele and Shonas as they are specifically singled out in the lyrics of the song as seen the lyrics 'we Mashona) which in English translates to 'You Shonas.' The connotative meaning is that is that the Shonas have diluted the club just like they have killed the country, the Shonas as a group are collectively identified with ZANU PF (interviews with respondents).

Songs are common in football stadiums as fans sing to express their team's identity as well to celebrate their culture. Songs are composed and borne out of social contexts and have a history that is peculiar to the team's fans. Though the songs may have a football meaning, it can be gleaned that there are social, political and identity undertones associated with them. Songs act as

a mirror and a reflection of society's attitudes. However, chanting slogans, singing songs also serves an outlet to vent out frustration and also to provide a commentary and critique on identity issues in the country. Chants and songs cannot be ignored for they are formed, composed and performed in a public sphere informed by the reality of identities as prevalent in the country. These chants and slogans have a historical root and are informed by the conception of 'us' versus 'them' as well as a sense of injustice prevailing within society in as far as identity issues are concerned. Furthermore, the chants are generational and are then passed down from one generation to the next though they evolve with time depending on the concerns in terms of identity at that time. The identity can be in footballing terms as the chants differentiate teams from each other or they could be asserting the ethnic identities of the various supporters. Furthermore, the slogan 'ayisoze yabulawa' (it will never be killed) though referring to the football club can be interpreted as a defiant statement expressing that despite political and even economic marginalisation, the region and Ndebele culture and identity will never be destroyed. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008:3) 'Post-independence events like the connection of Shona triumphalism with Gukurahundi atrocities; the limits of the Unity Accord, the death of Joshua Nkomo...' infuriated the Ndebele who in a bid to find shelter and solace express their hopes and frustration through the club. On one level the Gukurahundi war can be viewed as a social and identity based conflict therefore the song emerges as a commentary on the 'ukubulawa kwamaNdebele' (the killing of the Ndebele by the government). Amongst the Ndebele and Highlanders supporters Gukurahundi has shaped perceptions on ethnic relations. The war has had a huge influence in the framing of identity issues between Ndebele and Shonas. Time and space will possibly not erase the deep seated feelings of Shona injustice amongst the Ndebele. Social, political and economic issues affect relations and how fans perceptions on identity. This is illustrated by the song below:

*Hambangihawule ngitshiya'bantwabami ngivalele'ndlini (I leave my children in the house)*

*iZANU iyahawula ngitshiya'bantwabami ngivalele'ndlini ZANU is nonsense, my children are suffering at home)*

*iZANU iyahawula, iShona liyahawula (ZANU and Shonas are the same)*

*ngitshiya'bantwabami ngivalele'ndlini (I have left my children at home)*

*iShona liyahawula. (Shonas are crooks)*

Correspondence with respondents reveals that the song has its roots in the Zimbabwean war of independence where people would leave their families to go and join the struggle. One observes that the song has been adapted to provide a commentary and critique on the social and political condition in the country where there is a poorly performing economy, lack of employment and this blamed on the ZANU PF regime. Therefore, the fans chant and sing this song directing it to their rivals for in their minds as far as they are concerned, support ZANU PF and this is the party they blame for the ills and for the marginalisation of the region and lack of economic development.

Resistance, unhappiness and protest against the status quo is visible in some of the songs. Due to closed space and a lack of freedom of expression with regards to consequences after the expression of sentiments within the public sphere, the stadium became the arena to voice and express fan displeasure towards the ruling elites. One such issue was that of National Service where youths were to go to training camps where they were to be indoctrinated by ZANU PF, these youths went on to carry out orgies of violence against citizens both in the urban areas but more viciously in the villages. Border Gezi was the minister in charge of this programme where the state was 'capturing' metaphorically the mind, body and soul of youth to be used in service of the party.

*Wabhodu'Border Gezi bo wabhoda waze wafa (Border Gezi went in search of our children yet in the end he died)*

*Highlander ithimu yezwe lonke (Highlanders the nation's club)*

*Osithi lonyaka kuyafiwa bo, sokuselu'mongamelisekuselu'mongameli (this year things are tough, only, the president is left)*

*Highlander ithimu yezwe lonke. (Highlanders the nation's club)*

The song defiantly states that he (Border Gezi) and ZANU PF will not be allowed to take and brainwash Ndebele children, his project is set to fail. Border Gezi was to die in a car crash and one may hazard that the song implies that anyone who wants to destroy the Ndebele is doomed to meet the same fate of Border Gezi-failure, for when they are dead, the Ndebele through highlanders will still live. For he will die but Highlanders and by extension, the Ndebele will continue to live even after his death. The song also captured the economic difficulties facing the ordinary people as the economy was in free-fall and everyone was feeling the pinch except the president of the country. Discourse analysis also reveals that the song puns on the life of the

president as the line before the last has a double meaning, it somewhat asks when the president will die. This may be a result of the frustration at his inability to solve the economic crisis as well as his role in masterminding the Gukurahundi when the Ndebele were massacred and he has never given an official apology. Therefore he becomes an object of ridicule but this is done in the safety of the stadium.

The Gukurahundi massacres which occurred in the early years of Zimbabwe's independence against the ZAPU and the Ndebele continue to shape identity amongst the Ndebele. The systematic purge and cleansing of Ndebele in Matabeleland and the Midlands regions of Zimbabwe took place in the period 1980-1987. During this period being Ndebele was limited to being loyal to Joshua Nkomo and PF-ZAPU, the former liberation movement that became an opposition after 1980. This political definition had the immediate impact of uniting all those who were brutalised by the Fifth Brigade, not only as a dissident community as ZANU-PF and Robert Mugabe defined them, but also as a victimised and unwanted community that had to look for a state of their own (Gatsheni-Ndlovu, 2008). Highlanders which traced its roots and formation to the Ndebele royal family became the focal point of expression of Ndebele identity and the medium for expressing the region's feelings with respect to social, political and economic issues bedeviling the country and the region in particular. In terms of identity, the following song illustrates how the Ndebele use memory to keep their roots and origins alive as well as memory to remind them and the future generations about the events which shaped them as a group.

*Lam'lela Ndwandwe lamlela (Ndwandwe come to my rescue)*

*lamlela Bosso lamlela (highlanders come to my rescue)*

*nanka'amashone'sibulala. (The Shonas are killing me)*

Zwide was the ruler of the Ndwandwe in Nguniland where Tshaka the leader of the Zulus reigned supreme. The Ndwandwe and Khumalo who were led by Mzilikazi were chieftaincies and subservient under paying tribute to Tshaka, there was intense rivalry and competition between Tshaka and Mzilikazi and in one battle where Mzilikazi was losing, Zwide the leader of the Ndwandwe came to his rescue. However, the song underwent further metamorphosis as it was used by liberation war fighters as a rallying cry against white oppression. A respondent revealed that this song was adapted from the liberation struggle where the whites as the colonial

and oppressive government, the Gukurahundi period witnessed ‘Black on Black violence’ as the ZANU government was behaving like the Rhodesians, therefore in light of this the song was adapted to capture the plea of a people under attack by a new oppressor. The song can be read as an expression of disappointment as the team is seen as letting down ‘umthwakazi which has experienced Gukurahundi which is now being symbolically and metaphorically re-enacted on the football field. Though the song can be taken as a football song, it goes deeper than that as it captures the collective spirit of Ndebele identity being ‘under siege from Shona’ and they call upon Ndwandwe and the club to rescue them from the ignominy of defeat in the hands of their rivals who will laugh and taunt them if they lose.

ZAPU was associated with the Ndebele and had widespread support from the Matabeleland provinces; this is seen in that ZANU never won any seat in the provinces until the two parties merged. ZANU lumped all Ndebeles as supporters of Joshua Nkomo and were targeted by Gukurahundi; the experience is captured in the song ‘Babetha’yibulawe.’ Though the song may refer to highlanders, it can be postulated that it refers to Ndebele identity and spirit as captured in linking ZAPU and Ndebele identity, ZAPU was ‘killed’ through military action, it was killed as a party and a representative of Ndebeleness when it signed the Unity Accord in 1987, the Ndebele as a people faced the real prospect of being killed by the regime. Therefore the song is in defiance of the establishment both Harare administrators who are seen as an extension of the ruling party who in their various ways have tried to stifle Ndebele identity, the song makes it clear that nothing can kill the Ndebele spirit and identity. Furthermore, in a region which has suffered from economic marginalization and lack of development such as the stalling of Matabeleland Zambezi Water Project (MZWP), the song can be read as a defiant call and shout to the establishment that Ndebeleness will not be killed; economic sabotage and marginalisation in terms of development and investment will not kill the Ndebele spirit. Therefore the song seems to take a dual role commenting on the political and that Ndebele identity will not be killed as now Highlanders would be the vehicle expressing that identity. The song becomes a metaphor not just for the team but for the Ndebele identity as a whole, this is in light of the attempts to cleanse and kill the Ndebele during the Gukurahundi.

The media also plays a major role in shaping and molding identity issues amongst fans. The media thrives on conflict and completion and in the country the major daily newspapers are concentrated in the two biggest cities, Harare and Bulawayo. Harare as the capital is home to Highlanders bitter rivals and a team which is viewed as a representative of Shona identity, The Herald a newspaper based in the capital has columnists who have openly declared their support for Dynamos. In Bulawayo, The Chronicle is associated with Highlanders; therefore both newspapers thrive by playing on the polarization and rivalry that exists between the two teams and by implication mold perception on identity. Matches between the two teams are described with war metaphors as ‘the battle of Zimbabwe’ and in terms of discourse analysis brings out connotations of battle between Ndebele and Shona where a winner has to emerge. Instead of the match being nothing more than a game, it is further fuelled by the media who through using war metaphors such as battle of Zimbabwe actually serve to fan the ethnic identities in football.

Highlanders’ fans feelings towards the national football team shed light on identity and the sense of belonging within the country. Highlanders fans in the Diaspora ( South Africa, Botswana, United Kingdom) view themselves as having an umbilical cord with the club and follow it closely as opposed to the national team. They identify with the club more than the national team, as the club represents them as opposed to the national team, this is because the national team selection has often been biased towards Harare based players and that matches are played in the capital city. Therefore, the national team ‘ngeyabo, thina sile timu yethu’ (correspondence with respondents) which by implication translates to the country as a whole suggesting that the question of belonging still lingers on, therefore Highlanders provides a sense of belonging. Therefore, Highlanders fans are more interested in their team more than the national team which they don’t particularly identify with. One may suggest that the years 1992 when the national football team had the likes of Benjamin Nkonjera, Peter and Adam Ndlovu, Mercedes Sibanda, Willard Khumalo to mention but a few was the era when Highlanders fans identified with it because it had players from their team. Talent from Highlanders dominated the national team and the explanation given is that the national trainer, a German Reinhard Fabisch was in charge and his selections were not influenced by Harare (interview with respondent). One may intimate that it was not the national team they cheered but a celebration of Ndebele identity following the years of Gukurahundi.

It is interesting to note that the city has had other teams but these have not been as popular as Highlanders. Clubs such as Amazulu, Railstars, Chicken Inn, Njube Sundowns, Bantu Rovers and Quelaton never gained a huge following as they did not resonate with the Ndebele because they did not have the same history as Highlanders. This gives credence to the view that the club is the epitome of Ndebele identity as the fans attach symbolism to it.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, supporting Highlanders is a way of expressing their Ndebeleness and celebrating the idea of being Ndebele. Songs and chants provide the fans with an outlet of expressing their views with respect to the social and political conditions and as well as celebrating their culture. Support for the club has served as an identity marker for fans, an emblem and badge of Ndebele identity, in the eyes of the fans the club is more than Highlanders football club. The club is viewed not merely as a club serves but as an expression a way through which Ndebeles identify themselves and construct their reality within the country. Fans perceptions regarding identity have been molded by history, the encounter between Ndebele and Shona, the debilitating socioeconomic environment of the country, the socio-political situation. Fans of the club have an emotional and almost spiritual attachment to the club for it represents and stands as the epitome of what it means to be Ndebele.

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