

## Reviews

*A Dictionary of Chimurenga War Names*. By CHARLES PFUKWA. Pp. xv + 149. Harare: Africa Institute for Culture, Dialogue, Peace and Tolerance Studies. 2012. Paperback. ISBN: 978-0-7974-4627-4

*A Dictionary of Chimurenga War Names* (hereafter *Chimurenga War Names*) by Zimbabwean onomastician Charles Pfukwa is an original and refreshing piece of research to emerge from the arena of Southern African names studies. The book presents a classification of a corpus of names that were coined by individual members of the guerilla forces who fought in *Chimurenga*, the long and bitter war of liberation in which Zimbabwe's black majority population struggled to gain political independence from white minority rule under what was then the Rhodesian government.

*Chimurenga* names were used as temporary markers of personal as well as group identity throughout the duration of the fifteen-year war. They were initially created to “camouflage” the true identities of the guerilla fighters, given that the use of real names could easily have resulted in severe reprisals against them and/or their families in the tense and complex socio-political environment that existed in the country during the war years. Within a short span of time, however, the names came to form a crucial linguistic component of the war itself. Particularly in the case of names that were derived from indigenous languages, *Chimurenga* names made a powerful, non-militant statement of solidarity and resistance against the powers of colonialism. Furthermore, many of the names encapsulated and expressed different aspects of the prevailing ideological mood and political aspirations of Zimbabwe's suppressed black majority population. The war names assumed by the guerilla fighters capture many nuances of the war and collectively serve as a metaphor for *Chimurenga*, which name itself means “war.”

*Chimurenga War Names* is presented as a cultural, rather than a conventional, dictionary insofar as it focuses on the associative meanings (descriptive backing) of the names rather than on their phonological and morphological features. The primary purpose of the dictionary is to preserve *Chimurenga* names and in so doing honor the memory of those who carried, lived, and died with them. Pfukwa contends that his cultural approach to classification of the names is crucial, given their specialized nature as texts and their extreme vulnerability in that they were used only for a limited period of time in Zimbabwe. He points out that, based on their rich and powerful meaning associations, the names function as narratives of war within a cultural context that is characterized by a strong oral tradition. Pfukwa explains and illustrates how these narratives provide fascinating insights into the ideological, political, social, cultural, personal, and spiritual worlds of the *Chimurenga* guerillas.

The dictionary is structured around the classification of *Chimurenga* names into thirteen main categories with more than twenty subcategories. The main categories are: semantically transparent names; common Shona names; English first names with Shona surnames; innovative names as social barometer of attitudes; names from popular culture; names derived from other sources; names derived from fauna and flora; ethnic slurs; names of women; martial names; ideological names; names from other languages; and miscellaneous names. A number of themes recur across these different categories, including, for instance, “the uprising,” “war,” “guerillas,” “unity,” “the nation/country,” “suffering,” “determination,” and “rulership” (of blacks), to mention just a few. These motifs reflect the popular sociopolitical ideology held by

Zimbabwe's black majority population during the time of *Chimurenga*. Names are listed alphabetically within each category/subcategory, together with the English translations of their literal meanings.

In some instances, Pfukwa provides contextual interpretations that illustrate the richness and depth of the associative meanings of certain names. The entry for the name *Chawadya Chamuka*, for example (from the semantically transparent category, p. 5), offers: "What you ate is coming back to haunt you. This is drawn from the Shona idiom 'chawakadya chamuka,' meaning, that whatever wrong the white people did to the blacks was coming to haunt whites because blacks were now retaliating. The name signifies how the guerillas were coming back to recover what was lost though the colonization of the country." In the case of the name *Nobody Knows* (from the innovative category, p. 70), Pfukwa explains how the name refers to "uncertainty of war, life and death [...] [and] references Charles Samupindi's novel, *Paawns* (1992) and Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* (1989), in which guerillas are realistically portrayed as people with fear and who could also be killed during battle or contact. This name is important because it questions the ever celebratory or assertive tones in most of the names described in this dictionary." In other instances, Pfukwa chooses to leave the meanings of certain names opaque, for the individual reader to discern. In the case of indigenous names, however, only speakers of the language/s concerned would have this ability.

Although Pfukwa's collection of *Chimurenga* names is by no means exhaustive, *Chimurenga War Names* provides a valuable ethno-historical record of people, places and events that could easily be forgotten as the passage of time gradually erodes the triumphant as well as tragic memories of a unique era in Zimbabwe's turbulent political environment. In its contribution to onomastics, the book serves as an important reminder of how names can be employed as a powerful and effective means of social action. For anyone with an interest in exploring the socio-cultural meanings and functions of names, this book constitutes a worthwhile resource; for those who have an affinity for Zimbabwean history, languages, and cultural traditions, it is an absolute treasure.

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**The Strength in What Remains.** By TRACY KIDDER. Pp. 285. New York: Random. 2009. \$16.00. ISBN 978-0-8129-7761-5

Tracy Kidder's *The Strength in What Remains* is a portrait of Deogratias (Deo) Niyizonkiza, the founder of Village Health Works. Deo flees the civil conflicts of Burundi and Rwanda in the 1990s and moves to New York City, living in Central Park and delivering groceries for tips. He eventually learns English, earns a degree from Columbia, and founds a community health organization.

The reader is invited to take an onomastic approach to this story, for Kidder frames the book as one about names. In the beginning, his Author's Note reads, "Out of what I hope is an excess of caution, I have changed the names of many people and places in Burundi" (xiii). At the end of the book, the Acknowledgments state, "I am also immensely grateful to a number of Burundians, but I think it best not to mention them by name" (261).

Why all this caution about naming people? Choosing to name (or not name) remains a prominent theme throughout the book. Our protagonist is named Deogratias. His name has a story: it means thanks be to God, and is from the Latin that his mother learned in church. We discover early in the book that in Deo's culture, most children's names convey messages. We encounter a boy named *Good Road* who was born on the side of the road; a descriptive label. Names also function as social commentary; a child is named *I Won't be Rich Soon*, a message from his parents to the community not to expect gifts. And we learn about so-called "names for growth," labels that allow children to grow up safely, names so unappealing that Death will not take these children, such as *Hungry Street Dog* and *Shit*. Even as adults, names

continue to exert power over people's fate: "One woman told how her husband had been murdered by militiamen simply because his last name was the same as that of a leader" of a political group (137). On one of Deo's first flights out of Africa, he sits next to a journalist and worries, "What if she found out his name and used it?" (9).

Once in America, Deo finds a new set of names that are useful to his survival. In New York, he works for Gristedes supermarket and is asked so many times as he carries food to apartment buildings "Who is it?" that he decides "Delivery" will be his American name. The tenement he at first sleeps in has a name, a prominent graffiti tag that reads PEN. This landmark helps him on more than one occasion to orient himself around the neighborhoods of upper Manhattan, prevents him from getting lost. Then again, PEN evokes the confines of a prison yard, conveying the limits on Deo's mobility at the time.

In Deo's native culture, having a name is a sign of one's existence, one's status as a rational being. Eventually enrolled at Columbia University, Deo takes a philosophy course and is told by the professor that animals are not rational beings. Deo knows this to be untrue since cows have names in his village back home and answer to those names: they come when called, proof enough.

One particular question for Deo about naming is potentially fatal: "Are you Hutu or Tutsi?" When young Deo first hears the ethnic labels Hutu and Tutsi, he thinks the distinction has to do with owning cows. That is the only difference he can observe in his limited experience. Kidder, in fact, makes it clear that there are no true definitions to these labels. Nonetheless, Hutu and Tutsi can be life-or-death names. Deo wrestles with this name distinction throughout the book, for he, himself, is a hybrid, and the stereotypes of Hutu and Tutsi do not fit the reality of the region.

In his review of the area's ethnic strife, Kidder explains the emergence of the labels by quoting historian Jan Vansina: "'The [colonizing] Europeans merely adopted a practice they found on the spot and the terminology they used to express it derived from the speech of the local elites'" (265). Kidder continues, "But the Europeans added poison to that terminology" (265).

When you have no true name, it is best to say nothing; silence, not surprisingly, also figures in Deo's story. The belief that sometimes reverting to silence is better is illustrated by the story Deo tells of the rolling head, a cautionary tale Burundian parents tell their children, the moral of which is that you might be killed by your own tongue, for telling stories. Similarly, in Deo's native Burundi, it is unwise to name the dead, either through memorials or stories. Invoking their names will call up the sorrow that accompanied the deaths. When you do not name, there is nothing left to say. And without names, without words, one is bereft of identity.

The second half of the book is titled *Gusimbura*, which is a word in Deo's native language Kirundi conveying the stark contrast of either remaining silent or purging through story-telling that cannot be stopped. After much loss and many displacements, Deo's mother adds to her name the Kirundi word for silence. She chooses that option, and Deo never asks her for the reason; he responds with silence as well.

Deo does open up on several occasions. On a flight to New York, he finds the journalist who speaks French: "After such long solitude, it felt wonderful to talk, so wonderful that for a while he forgot all he knew about the importance of silence, the silence he'd been taught as a child, the silence he had needed over the past six months" on the run (8-9). He does, as we are told, hesitate to give his name.

When Deo meets Sharon, a nun who works at a church in New York and who can also speak French, he again forgets to be silent and tells his story to her. Sharon becomes the link to his support network. And of course Deo is telling his story to Kidder through the book, who is telling it to us.

For Deo, silence comes with invisibility. As he enters the US, he is asked by a customs official the name of his homeland, who then states that she never heard of it: "Are you sure

it isn't Burma?" (253). He searches *The New York Times* daily for the name Burundi, which is again invisible. Yes, he finds news of Rwanda, but nothing of Burundi.

The culmination of loss of name and silence is an identity in flux. So many times Deo is asked, "Who are you? Are you alive? Are you you? Are you Deo?" He is the recipient of so many identities and labels that he might as well be no one: he is Delivery, a New Yorker, a Columbia student who is mistaken for the son of an African king. Fittingly, he eventually moves into a home of a philanthropic couple, living in a small space in their loft he names "The Black Hole" — the void.

Translation in general is a problem for Deo. Many times, when he wants to speak, English eludes him. He is frustrated about no English equivalent to *adieu*, no good translation of *Merci beaucoup*; and the English words he encounters in graffiti on walls and hears on the streets (especially *mothafucker*) are not in the dictionaries he consults.

The reader encounters instances of society itself choosing not to translate directly, substituting instead euphemisms. Rwanda is said to be enjoying a "stable peace," which is code for the absence of war; the massacres are called "the Events"; and the civil war in Burundi is (in French) *La Crise*: to use a more specific term than that would reveal one's ethnicity and leanings.

Change happens when Deo meets Paul Farmer, a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health and founder of Partners in Health, someone who, as Kidder says, expands the discourse for Deo and has an impact on Deo's identity. The reader is aware of the familiar ring to this man's last name, *farmer*, a kinsman to Deo, someone who owns cows. After that, Deo becomes a US citizen, at which point he says he is now finally visible. And of his work with Farmer, and continued work with his own organization Village Health Works — a name he deliberated over — Deo says, "Finally, finally, this is who I am" (159).

In some ways, though, naming and identity issues still follow Deo. His last name, Niyizonkiza, is never mentioned in Kidder's book, nor does it appear on the Village Health Works website. The founder is listed simply as Dr Deo.

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