



# Football, Identity, and Belonging: The Case of Highlanders Football Club and the Ndebele People in Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

Football serves as a powerful medium for shaping identities and fostering belonging across local, national, and transnational communities. In Zimbabwe, Highlanders Football Club (FC), founded in 1926 by descendants of the founding King, Mzilikazi ka Matshobana, represents more than a sports institution; it embodies historical, ethnic, and political narratives that transcend the game. Using the Social Identity Theory, this study examines how Highlanders fosters a sense of belonging and cultural expression, particularly among the Ndebele people, within Zimbabwe's broader socio-political context. The study employed a qualitative approach where in-depth interviews were carried out with former and current players, administration and supporters of Highlanders FC. Stadium ethnography was also used to explore the matchday mood, songs and expressions of identity and belonging. The study found that for a Highlanders FC supporter, to go to Barbourfields stadium was a renaissance of Historical Resistance and Ethnic Pride. The songs and matchday activities are performed as identity rituals which rekindle collective memories of belonging to the Ndebele State. Collectively, these becoming acts of affirmation and resistance work together to strengthen the sense of Ndebele belonging and identity amongst the supporters of Highlanders FC.

## Subject Areas

Anthropology

## Keywords

Mthwakazi, Highlanders Football Club, Ndebele Identity, Football Fandom, Renaissance, Football Rivalry

## 1. Introduction

One of the greatest footballers ever to live, the Brazilian Pele, called football “the world’s most beautiful game. The beauty of football transcends through nations and races and has brought the world together. It fosters a spirit of unity, oneness and at times, identities are forged and strengthened through football loyalties. Football, plays a pivotal role in the articulation and performance of collective identities [1] [2]. It serves not only as entertainment but also as a social field where ethnic, cultural, and political meanings are created and contested. In Zimbabwe, Highlanders FC, locally known as “iBosso,” occupies a unique place in the social and historical fabric of the nation. The club was founded by Rhodes and Njube Khumalo, the grandsons of the founder of the Ndebele State, King Mzilikazi ka Matshobana. The club, therefore, has historically been associated with the Ndebele people and has become a symbol of ethnic identity, pride, and historical memory [3]. The club’s links with Ndebele nationalists like Joshua Nkomo and the ZAPU party as well as the subsequent Zimbabwe government’s persecution of Ndebele nationalists such as the ZIPRA generals Lookout Masuku and Dumiso Dabengwa further cement Highlanders Football club as an unifying identity for the Ndebele people.

This paper explores how Highlanders FC acts as a centre for cultural expression and a mechanism for fostering a sense of identity and belonging among the Ndebele people. Through the lens of the Social Identity Theory, the study investigates the club’s symbolic significance, fan practices, and the broader socio-political narratives surrounding it that foster positive distinctiveness, cultural belonging and identity among the Ndebele people.

## 2. Background

Highlanders FC was founded in 1926 by the Ndebele State’s founding King’s great grandsons, Albert and Rhodes. These were the sons of Njube, son of King Lobengula, son of Mzilikazi ka Matshobana. The team has evolved in name and form over the 99 years due to necessities of relevance, politics and survival as it celebrates 100 years in 2026. The team was originally named Lions Football Club founded in Makokoba, which holds Ndebele heritage as Bulawayo’s oldest residential location. The name later changed to Matabeleland Highlanders in 1936. However, at the advice of the ZAPU nationalist Joshua Nkomo, the team dropped Matabeleland from its name to become just Highlanders football club [4]. Nkomo suggested this so as to foster a sense of unity and not regionalism, and hence the club became known as “*I team yezwe lonke*” team of the nation [5].

Founded by the royal blood in Bulawayo, it is no surprise that Highlanders draws the majority of its support base from the Ndebele ethnic group. Ndebele identity is now very significant in Zimbabwe, normally articulated via political rhetoric, cultural practices such as the “*Umgubho We Nkosi u Mzilikazi*, an annual King Mzilikazi Day celebration held every second Saturday of September and membership such as the Highlanders FC, which are sites of ethnic pride and re-

sistance within a postcolonial nation where ethnic exclusion is a common refrain [6].

### **Ndebele Identity and Highlanders FC**

The Ndebele-State relations since independence have also unintentionally further strengthened the spirit of Ndebele identity and the renaissance of “*Mthwakazi*” in contemporary Zimbabwe. The term *Mthwakazi* refers to the historical Ndebele nation and its sovereign territory, a concept deliberately employed by Ndebele historians and culturalists to assert nationhood rather than tribal identity [6]. Highlanders FC has become a contemporary embodiment of this *Mthwakazi* identity, and the club functioning as a cultural institution where Ndebele heritage, pride, and political consciousness are performed and maintained.

In the post-independence period, tensions immediately arose between the new ZANU-PF government and the old Ndebele-supported opposition PF-ZAPU party led by Joshua Nkomo. These strains had culminated in the exclusively led Shona Fifth Brigade Gukurahundi massacres (1983-1987), a campaign of violence orchestrated by the regime in Matabeleland and much of the Midlands, killing an estimated 20,000 civilians, the majority of whom were Ndebele [7]-[9]. Far from integrating the Ndebele into an organic national identity, this savage repression created additional senses of exclusion, marginalization, and ethnic victimhood among the Ndebele people. The government’s efforts to suffocate opposition through violence and propaganda only cemented a collective memory of suffering and resistance, which formed the foundation of modern Ndebele identity and nationalist ideology [3] [10].

The heritage of state violence and oppression has thus strengthened the reassertion of Ndebele political and cultural identity, expressed in terms of claims for recognition, justice, and decentralization, hence *Mthwakazi*. Ndebele nationalism can therefore be seen through the restoration of Ndebele cultural institutions, increased promotion of isiNdebele language, remembering past grievances, and mobilization around symbols including the Highlanders FC and Gukurahundi anniversaries [3] [11]. In addition, there has been renewed advocacy for federalism or even autonomy in Matabeleland, as a vehicle for reclaiming local politics and fighting what is seen to be national politics dominated by Shonas [12]. In this context, far from eroding ethnic consciousness, the post-independence state’s authoritarian and exclusionary policies unwittingly created fertile ground for Ndebele nationalism founded on historical memory, cultural pride, and continued socio-political struggle.

The majority of this Ndebele nationalism and *Mthwakazi* renaissance is therefore seen at Barbourfields stadium and across Zimbabwe through Highlanders FC matches, where memories of perceived Shona led injustices and marginalisation on the Ndebele minority are re-enacted in conversation and in song, while cheering on the black and white “*amawaba*”. *Amawaba* or *Amajaha* were not ordinary soldiers, their regiment was a special regiment that did parades and displays,

“*ukugiya*”, for national ceremonies, only visible at large gatherings and large banquets, thus the name *Amahlolanyama*. The colours of “*Amawaba*,” King Lobengula’s regiments, are black and white. These colours have also been adopted by the Highlanders FC who were inspired by King Lobengula’s regiments and are also known as “*Amahlolanyama*”. Their regiment, an impregnable fortress, that protected the Ndebele king with their lives and this is seen in the Highlander FC logo where there is a shield, knobkerrie and the spear and the inscription, “*Siyinqaba*” the fortress. In the absence of the monarchy, due to the defeat by the British 1894, and the refusal by the present government to recognise the incumbent Ndebele King Bulelani Lobengula Khumalo (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment No. 20, which, in Chapter 15, Section 283, provides a framework for traditional leadership that is limited to chiefs, headmen, and village heads, with no constitutional provision for a king or monarch) [13], Highlanders FC has proved to be the go to medium for Ndebele identity and cultural renaissance.

### 3. Literature Review

Football has long been recognised as one of the most influential cultural institutions in the modern world, shaping collective identities, social relations, and political consciousness across diverse societies. Scholars in sport sociology and cultural studies view football as more than a game, it is a social field where meanings of belonging, nationalism, ethnicity, and resistance are continuously produced and contested [14]-[16]. In many postcolonial contexts, football provides a language through which communities articulate historical memory, pride, and aspirations for recognition. In Zimbabwe, this dynamic is vividly expressed through Highlanders Football Club, whose history and fan culture are deeply intertwined with the identity and experiences of the Ndebele people.

Globally, research has demonstrated that football fandom operates as a key site of identity formation. Studies in Europe and Latin America highlight how clubs become symbolic extensions of local, ethnic, or national belonging. For instance, work on FC Barcelona’s motto “*Més que un club*” (“More than a club”) shows how sport can represent broader political and cultural identities tied to Catalan nationalism [17]. Similarly, clubs such as Celtic and Rangers in Scotland embody sectarian and ethnic divisions, turning football into a medium for expressing communal loyalties and antagonisms [18]. In Latin America, teams like Boca Juniors and River Plate reflect class and neighbourhood distinctions that shape urban identities [19]. These studies underscore football’s global significance as a space where individuals negotiate inclusion, difference, and recognition through symbolic and emotional investment in teams.

In the African context, football has been deeply entwined with anti-colonial and postcolonial identity projects. For instance, Alegi (2010) documents how football clubs in colonial Africa served as sites of resistance and later as platforms for post-independence identity formation [20]. Darby (2013) similarly highlights how national and regional alignment in African football reflects broader struggles over

power, belonging, and heritage [21]. Post-independence, football clubs often mirrored ethnic, regional, or political alignments, reflecting the unfinished project of nation-building. For instance, in Nigeria and Ghana, local clubs provided spaces for expressing both regional pride and a sense of modern citizenship [22]. Similarly, in South Africa, Orlando Pirates and Kaizer Chiefs became cultural symbols for Black urban identity and resistance under apartheid [23] [24]. These patterns reveal that football operates within layered social realities where fandom expresses both solidarity and struggle.

Within Zimbabwe, the relationship between football and identity has received growing scholarly attention. The country's football landscape, marked by the intense rivalry between Highlanders (Bosso) and Dynamos (DeMbare), mirrors broader ethnic and historical divisions between the Ndebele and Shona populations [25] [26]. Highlanders FC occupies a unique position as both a sporting institution and a cultural symbol of Ndebele heritage and pride. Scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni argue that postcolonial Zimbabwean nationhood has been shaped by a hegemonic Shona narrative that marginalises other ethnic groups, particularly the Ndebele [3] [27]. Within this context, Highlanders FC functions as a counter-narrative, embodying regional solidarity and offering fans a collective alternative space to reclaim their dignity and visibility.

Studies by Ncube (2014) and Guzura & Ndimande (2016) reveal that for many supporters, Highlanders FC represents a form of "ethnic citizenship," where participation in fandom expresses cultural belonging and resistance to exclusion [25] [26]. Match-day rituals, chants, and club regalia serve as performative acts through which fans affirm both their loyalty to Bosso and their pride in being Ndebele. This aligns with findings from global scholarship on football fandom, where symbolic practices—songs, clothing, rituals—play a central role in constructing and maintaining group identity [28] [29]. In Zimbabwe, the chant "*Siyinqaba—We are a fortress*" encapsulates the intersection of sporting pride and ethnic resilience.

Ndlovu (2017) observes that football fandom offers young people in Bulawayo a social outlet for expressing aspirations and frustrations in a context of economic marginalisation [30]. Barbourfields Stadium, the home of Highlanders FC, becomes a social arena where collective emotion and identity are performed through bodily movement, sound, and spectacle. This resonates with Bromberger's (1995) ethnographic work in Europe, which shows how stadium spaces create ritualised moments of unity and emotional release that reinforce belonging [31]. Through stadium ethnography, football can thus be understood as an affective public sphere where fans negotiate their place in society through shared sensory and emotional experiences.

At the same time, football's identity politics cannot be divorced from broader historical and political processes. Zimbabwe's post-independence history, particularly the Gukurahundi massacres of the 1980s, left deep scars on Ndebele collective memory [27]. For many, support for Highlanders symbolises cultural endur-

ance and the refusal to be silenced. As Muzondidya (2010) and Ncube (2014) note, the club's continued popularity among Ndebele people reflects how sport becomes a site for re-imagining belonging in a nation where ethnic divisions remain sensitive [12] [25]. Football thus functions as both a mirror and a mechanism of social identity, allowing marginalised communities to assert visibility and pride in a politically charged landscape.

Ethnographic and sociological studies also point out that match-day rituals, chants, and material culture such as jerseys, colours, perform identity. These symbolic practices help construct and maintain a collective sense of belonging and resilience [14] [32]. At Barbourfields stadium, for example, the stadium becomes a performative space where Ndebele heritage and community are publicly affirmed [25] [33].

Beyond ethnicity, class and generational identities also shape Highlanders support. Some scholars note that for young people in Bulawayo, Highlanders provides a social outlet where they express both hope and frustration amid [27]. Barbourfields stadium serve as affective public spaces, it serves as a place of ritual, emotion, and social encounter that reinforce belonging through movement, sound, and collective spectacle.

Globally, the study of diasporic football fandom provides additional insight into how identities are maintained across borders. Research shows migrant communities use football to sustain ties to home and negotiate hybrid [18] [34]. While Highlanders support is heavily localised, these global patterns resonate. Ndebele diaspora communities maintain emotional and symbolic connections to Bosso through social media, digital fan networks, and transnational community belonging.

Literature suggests that football is a multifaceted social phenomenon where symbolic, emotional, and political dimensions intersect. In Zimbabwe, Highlanders Football Club is not just a team but a powerful cultural symbol, rooted in Ndebele history, it operates as a space for memory, resistance, and identity [35]. The club's meaning cannot be separated from the broader ethnic, historical and social dynamics of the country. While global scholarship on football fandom provides useful comparative frameworks, the local context of Highlanders highlights how deeply embedded sport can be in postcolonial identity-making.

#### 4. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals derive a sense of self and belonging from their membership in social groups [6]. The theory posits that people construct their identities through processes of categorisation, identification, and comparison, which together shape patterns of inclusion, exclusion, loyalty, and collective pride.

In the context of this study, SIT offers a powerful lens through which to examine how Highlanders FC functions as a symbolic and emotional space for the ar-

ticulation of belonging and identity among the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe. Rather than viewing football merely as a recreational activity, SIT allows an interpretation of the sport as a site of identity work where group membership and collective consciousness are performed and maintained.

Furthermore, Tajfel and Turner (1979) posit that the formation of social identity begins with the process of social categorisation, where individuals classify themselves and others into specific social groups to make sense of their social world [6]. These categories, such as “Highlanders supporters” or “Dynamos fans,” carry symbolic and emotional meanings that become central to how individuals orient themselves in society [36]. Within the Highlanders FC context, this categorisation manifests through shared identifiers such as chants, colours, and slogans that signify inclusion within the group. Once individuals have categorised themselves as members of a group, they internalise this membership through a process of social identification, integrating the group’s values, traditions, and practices into their self-concept [37]. For Highlanders FC supporters, identification is often demonstrated through the performance of rituals such as attending matches, wearing club regalia, and singing in isiNdebele. These acts not only reinforce individual attachment to the club but also affirm collective identity as part of a community with a shared heritage and destiny.

A further process within SIT, social comparison, explains how individuals and groups derive meaning by contrasting themselves with others. Through inter-group comparison, members of a group seek what Tajfel (1982) described as “positive distinctiveness,” the belief that their group is better or more authentic than others in important respects [38]. In the Zimbabwean football landscape, this is vividly expressed in the rivalry between Highlanders and Dynamos Football Clubs. These rivalries extend beyond sport, evoking deeper historical and cultural meanings associated with Ndebele and Shona identities [25] [26]. By celebrating Highlanders’ heritage and success, fans assert both club pride and a broader sense of cultural resilience, positioning their in-group favourably against perceived out-groups. This dynamic of pride and differentiation is central to the social identity process and helps explain how football becomes a powerful vehicle for constructing and expressing belonging.

Social Identity Theory is particularly appropriate for this study because Highlanders FC has long been intertwined with narratives of ethnicity, region, and resistance. The club occupies a unique place in Zimbabwean history, symbolising Ndebele identity and cultural continuity [3]. For many supporters, Highlanders represents more than a football team; it is a living embodiment of collective memory, pride, and cultural assertion within a national context that has often marginalised Ndebele voices. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Ncube (2014) observe, sport in Zimbabwe has historically reflected broader political and ethnic tensions, with Highlanders serving as a platform for articulating regional consciousness and solidarity [25] [27]. Applying SIT in this context enables an exploration of how supporters use the club as a means of asserting identity, negotiating

recognition, and reclaiming visibility within a postcolonial state.

Barbourfields stadium thus becomes a social arena where belonging is enacted through shared emotional energy and ritual participation. While Social Identity Theory primarily focuses on the cognitive and emotional mechanisms of group membership, its relevance extends to broader socio-political contexts when embedded within an understanding of power and history. Scholars such as Hornsey (2008) and Hogg (2018) emphasise that social identities are not formed in isolation but are shaped by structural conditions, collective memories, and historical narratives [39] [40]. In Zimbabwe, legacies of colonialism, postcolonial governance, and regional inequality have profoundly influenced how Ndebele people experience belonging and exclusion. By applying SIT to the Highlanders case, this study situates group identification within these historical and political realities, demonstrating how collective pride and solidarity through sport function as both emotional responses and political statements.

Football fandom thus becomes a lens through which to understand how individuals and communities manage identity in contexts marked by inequality and contestation.

In employing Social Identity Theory as its guiding framework, this study contributes to both sport sociology and African identity studies by linking micro-level expressions of fandom to macro-level processes of cultural negotiation. The theory provides a coherent structure for analysing how individuals categorise themselves as members of Highlanders, how they internalise this identity through rituals and narratives, and how they maintain positive distinctiveness through inter-group comparison and rivalry. Moreover, by situating these processes within Zimbabwe's postcolonial and ethnic landscape, the study extends the explanatory reach of SIT, showing how psychological processes of identity formation are deeply embedded in historical and cultural contexts. Ultimately, Social Identity Theory enables a nuanced understanding of how Highlanders Football Club serves as a site of belonging, resistance, and cultural expression among the Ndebele people, revealing football's capacity to mirror and shape the broader dynamics of identity and nationhood in Zimbabwe.

## 5. Methodology

Qualitative ethnographic research design is employed in this study to explore how Highlanders FC creates identity and sense of belonging among the Ndebele-speaking people of Zimbabwe. Theoretical framework that underpins this study is Social Identity Theory [41] and gives insight into how identities are created through football fandom.

Data was gathered using a combination of stadium ethnography and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The stadium ethnography was carried out at Barbourfields Stadium during match days against teams such as Caps United, Dynamos, Chicken Inn, Simba Bhora and Scotland football clubs, where immersion in fan spaces was done to observe chants, rituals, gestures, symbols, and spatial prac-

tices that are used in enacting collective identity. This also enabled observation of the embodied performances of belonging and emotional atmospheres of match-day interactions.

In-depth interviews were carried out with 30 purposively sampled participants to ensure that a range of views were obtained in the Highlanders community. The study was balanced with 20 male and 10 female participants, taking into consideration gender dynamics in football support while ensuring that women's views were adequately represented. The participants included old and young supporters, as well as club administrators and sportswriters, allowing for both past and present understanding of the social significance of Bosso.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis [42]. The coding process was both inductive and theory-informed. This facilitated the emergence of themes through the lens of Social Identity Theory constructs such as social categorization, identification, and social comparison. Themes were Bosso as family, cultural resistance, and the stadium as home. Participant narratives were used to triangulate and deepen insights derived from collective performances of identity. Direct quotes are presented verbatim, translated from isiNdebele to English.

Ethical considerations included the employment of participant consent, the adoption of pseudonyms, and the promotion of participant confidentiality. Trustworthiness was improved through an extended presence in the field, triangulation, the practice of reflexive journaling as a means of establishing researcher positionality, peer debriefing, and the application of thick description. Taken together, these steps offer a rigorous and contextually informed assessment of Highlanders fandom as a site of considerable cultural expression.

## 6. Results

The study findings reveal that that Highlanders Football Club functions as a significant medium of Ndebele identity. The team's officials, former players, stakeholders and fans repeatedly referenced the club's historical lineage, cultural symbolism, and political undertones. Three major themes emerged from the study's data analysis, which include the feeling of historical Resistance and Ethnic Pride, Rituals and Collective Memory, Affirmation and resistance as well as Contested Nationalism and Transnational Belonging. These four themes therefore guide the proceeding discussions.

### 6.1. Historical Resistance and Ethnic Pride

Highlanders FC takes the role of a medium that facilitates the continuation of the Ndebele struggle against marginalization. The club's foundation by royal descendants lends it historical weight, reinforcing a collective memory royalty and elitist ideology. The clubs songs and chants portray its deep rooted identity in the legacy of Mzilikazi and *Ndebeleism*.

*“Sivela lee, ko Bulawayo, Ka Mzilikazi*

*Siyi Bosso”*

The song simply states that this team is from Bulawayo, the capital of the Ndebele nation under Mzilikazi and whoever plays or plots against the team should know that they are doing so against royalty.

Although the songs often portray the might of Highlanders and the Ndebele Amawaba and Imbizo regiments, the stadium ethnography also portrays songs of alleged and perceived vulnerability, lamentation and disconnects with the current status quo where the ruling Shona majority has allegedly systematically marginalised and persecuted the Ndebele people. Stadium ethnography of Highlanders FC richly documents not just sporting enthusiasm but also more profound socio-political sentiments, such as lamentations and stories of alleged exclusion, systematic persecution, around past and present marginalization of the Ndebele nation in Zimbabwe. These grievance narratives tend to take the form of an envisaged symbolic resistance to the post-independence Shona-dominated state, echoing an enduring sense of alienation and injustice. Scholars contend that the Gukurahundi violence (1983-1987), in which the Fifth Brigade killed Ndebele civilians in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, institutionalized a shared memory of trauma and victimhood [3] [8].

*Lingamashona, He haaaa*

*Lingamashona hee ha lalibulal’ obaba*

*Lingamashona, hee haaa*

The song is seen as a perceived lamentation of how the Shonas, purportedly behind the Gukurahundi, killed the forefathers of the Ndebele and got away with it.

The song seems to further purportedly put blame on pro Shona dominance individuals as being seen to be responsible for the continued suffering of the Ndebele people. Although Highlanders FC has a lot of shona players in its 2025 season team such as McKinnon and Mason Mushore, the terms shona in this context is perceived to mean anyone who plays and works against Highlander FC. The same songs have been sung against Bulawayo based teams such Bulawayo Chiefs, Njube Sundowns and the defunct Amazulu football clubs. The song seems to blame all pro-Shona dominance for working with the state to carry out Gukurahundi and encourages resistance and hope to such [43].

It is the norm that when the team is not playing well and is losing, purportedly the Shonas are responsible for the ongoing suffering. The alleged suffering then immediately re invokes the Gukurahundi memories and the spirit of being helpless, vulnerable and defeated at the stadium. At such moments another song of lamentation erupts

*“lamlela Lamlela*

*Lamlela nank’ amaShona engibulala.”*

A loose translation of the song is a cry for help, to say “come to my rescue, the

Shonas are killing me”. The song can be understood as a sign of disappointment since the team is perceived as letting down “*umthwakazi*,” which has gone through Gukurahundi and is now being symbolically and metaphorically reenacted on the football pitch. Though the song can be taken as a football rivalry song, it goes deeper than that as it captures the collective spirit of Ndebele identity being “under siege from the Shona”. The song is, however, read as one of disappointment by the team due to the fact that the team is estimated to have disappointed ‘*umthwakazi*’ that has been victimized by Gukurahundi that gets symbolically and metaphorically re-lived on the football pitch. As being a song that can be read as a football song, it is rooted more within its meaning because it carries the Ndebele people’s collective identity being ‘under siege from Shona [26].

This song is mostly sung when playing against Dynamos football club whom Highlanders supporters perceive as the epitome of Shona identity and identified with the ZANU (PF) political regime. Dynamos, established in Harare in 1963 and supported by most Shona-speaking Zimbabweans, and is seen as the symbolic bear of Shona identity and the state-aligned nationalist discourse fostered by ZANU (PF). The club’s early association with the nationalist struggle and media coverage during the post-independence era gave it the role of a flagship of Shona political and cultural hegemony [3] [44]. Here, Dynamos becomes a lightning rod for historical injustices like the Gukurahundi massacres and blanket marginalization of Matabeleland from post-independence government and development [8] [45]. These matches, thus, become more than footballing rivalry; it is a reenactment of contested national selves and postcolonial wounds [46].

Under James Scott’s (1990) “hidden transcripts” theory, Highlanders matches provide limited public spaces where repressed ethnic stories are performed through symbolic actions, chanting, and mass performance [47]. The stadium is thus transformed into and perceived as a politicized stage where Highlanders supporters recreate acts of resistance against the hegemonic national regime represented by Dynamos and, in the process, the ZANU (PF) government. The state never fully memorialized or dealt with this violence, and it created a permanent perception of ethnic persecution and second-class citizenship [3]. Here, the state’s nation-building towards a unitary Shona identity has not been able to wilfully eschew Ndebele discourses of culture, language, and history from national narratives [44] [48]. Highlanders matches then become a site of performance for Ndebele identity, history, and resistance, with songs and chants as “subaltern communication” [49] that contest the dominant national order and make ethno-cultural claims.

## 6.2. Rituals and Collective Memory

Evidence from stadium ethnography shows that match-day rituals are common including chants in isiNdebele, traditional dress such as the traditional headdress “*Umqhelel Indlukula*”, and symbolic gestures, foster solidarity and group cohesion. Fans describe attending matches as “going home,” emphasizing the club’s role in reinforcing communal identity [46]. The nickname of Highlanders FC’s

home ground, Barbourfields stadium,” *Emagumeni*” the “Arena” presents it as a fortress that is a safe space, where absolutely nothing can go wrong, which resonates with the Highlanders logo “Siyinqaba”. For Highlanders supporters, BF is a place where they can recall, relive, and ultimately challenge and reject violence and other sorts of injustices that continue to happen as reproductions of Gukurahundi [43].

Respondents described these as not merely fan activities but as acts of united affirmation. One long-time supporter, a 52-year-old man who has attended matches for over three decades, explained:

*“When I am at Emagumeni [Barbourfields Stadium], I am home. It is not just football. This is a family gathering. This is where I meet my brothers, where we remember who we are. We sing the songs our fathers sang. The stadium is our sanctuary.” (Participant HF-07, male, 52 years)*

This sentiment of the stadium as a “home” and an “arena”, a traditional Ndebele homestead, was echoed by a female supporter in her thirties, who articulated the intergenerational nature of this belonging,

*“My grandmother supported Bosso. My mother supports Bosso. I grew up hearing the songs. Now I bring my children, my daughter is here. It is the one thing that unites our family across generations. When we are at the stadium, we are all the same—rich or poor, young or old. That is family.” (Participant HF-08, female, 34 years)*

This familial bond extended beyond the stadium and into everyday life, creating networks of mutual support and care that participants described as essential to their well-being.

*“We have a WhatsApp group—we call ourselves ‘Bosso Fanatics. We WhatsApp every day. If someone is sick, we visit. If one of us is bereaved, we make contributions. The club brought us together, but now we are family in all things. The love for Bosso is the rope that ties us.” (Participant HF-02, male, 28 years)*

### 6.3. Affirmation and Resistance

These songs, such as “*Bosso Ngenkani*” (“Bosso by force or come hell or high water”), are not merely football fan slogans but are imbued with a discourse of resistance and subaltern resistance. The song within it is dignified with pride, strength, and an unbending determination for cultural and institutional space in a socio-political context where the Ndebele have long been marginalized. This chant, commonly echoed around Barbourfields Stadium, is supposedly a condemnation of hegemonic Shona elite and state narratives that have consistently excluded Ndebele identity and history post-independence [3] [50]. The “*Bosso Ngenkani*” ethos is a performative, communal declaration of being a strong assertion that we exist and shall not be made to disappear, thus politicizing the stadium into survival cultural space of performance of identity [8] [44].

While the songs of lamentation and resistance provided a collective narrative of historical grievance, individual participants offered personal reflections on how this history shaped their identity. A retired school teacher and lifelong supporter reflected on the meaning of the songs,

*“When we sing” lingababulali lalibula o baba (You are killers, you killed our forefathers), it is not just a song. It is a wound that still bleeds. But singing together, we heal together. It reminds us that we survived. It reminds us that we are still here, still Ndebele, still proud. The club carries our pain and our hope.” (Participant HF-14, male, 67 years)*

Through such mottoes, Highlanders fans redefine football, not merely as sport, but as a site for voice, resistance, and recovery of dignity in the face of state-sponsored homogenization and erasure of memory [49] [51].

### **Contested Nationalism and Transnational Belonging**

While Highlanders FC is deeply rooted in Bulawayo and Matabeleland, its significance extends far beyond Zimbabwe’s borders as a critical node in transnational networks of Ndebele identity. As Giulianotti and Robertson (2009) observe, football clubs serve as anchors of identity for dispersed populations navigating migration and belonging.

Digital platforms have transformed Highlanders into a transnational phenomenon. Ncube and Maposa (2021) argue that digital football fandom creates “readily-combustible virtual online platforms and this connectivity enables diaspora supporters to maintain emotional and symbolic connections from thousands of kilometres away [52]. One participant in South Africa explained

*“I join the Bosso WhatsApp groups, I watch the live updates, I send money... My children were born in South Africa, but they know Bosso. They sing the songs. It is how I teach them where they come from” (Participant HF-02, Male 56)*

A London-based supporter described the club as “our umbilical cord to home” (Participant HF-05, male, 49 years). This familial belonging extends into material practices of mutual support across borders, creating transnational economic networks rooted in shared identity [16].

For diaspora supporters, allegiance to Highlanders functions as political expression and a means of contesting perceived Shona-centric narratives of Zimbabwean nationalism. Ncube’s (2018) foundational study demonstrates that the club serves as a crucial site where Ndebele ethnic nationalism is articulated, with supporters viewing the team as “*ithimu yezwe lonke*” (a team of the whole nation) while embracing its role as a symbol of Ndebele particularism [53].

Removed from the state’s coercive power, diaspora communities articulate more explicitly political interpretations. A UK-based participant stated:

*“Here, I can speak freely. I can say that Bosso is not just a football club—it is the parliament of the Ndebele people. I can say that Gukurahundi was a genocide” (Participant HF-14, male, 42 years)*

Another framed his fandom as cultural preservation: *“My children are British...*

*but they know they are Ndebele. The club is our way of keeping the identity alive*’ (Participant HF-09, male, 51 years).

A more contentious dimension has since emerged towards the 2026 season, which coincides with the clubs centenary celebrations, through sponsorship from wealthy Shona businessmen with close ties to ZANU-PF. This has exposed the limits of the “Bosso family” metaphor when financial salvation arrives from sources perceived as ethnically and politically “other.” Highlanders received substantial support from Kudakwashe Tagwirei (Sakunda Holdings) and Wicknell Chivayo, both ethnically Shona and publicly associated with ZANU-PF [54] [55].

These interventions generated profound ambivalence. A long-time supporter stated:

*“We know who these men are. We are grateful for the bus, for the money—yes, we need it. But do not ask us to forget. There is always a price.” You cannot wash away blood with money* (Participant HF-09, male, 65 years)

The controversy has divided supporters. Some defend pragmatic acceptance

“If we refuse every Shona person who wants to help, the club will die... Let them give us money. We will take their money and still be Ndebele, still be Bosso. They cannot buy that” (Participant HF-17, female, 44 years)

Another noted, that everyone who wishes to be part of the Bosso family should be allowed to do so regardless of political affiliation:

“On WhatsApp, it gets ugly. Some say we are selling out, that we have been captured by ZANU-PF. Others say we are being unrealistic. Families are divided, but I believe that if they say they are Highlanders supporters then they are part of the family just like everyone else in the Bosso family. (Participant HF-09, male, 32 years)

Another also added the Ndebele nation was built from uniting different ethnicities and as such everyone who wishes to support the club should be allowed to do so.

*There is need for level heads, as Highlanders fans we should learn that Mzilikazi created a state from different ethnic groups. That is why Bosso is known as Ithimu Yezwe lonke (a team of the nation). I know that Tagwirei and Chivayo are both support Highlanders and can speak IsiNdebele so what’s wrong with them sponsoring their favourite team?* (Participant HF-21, male, 51 years)

## 7. Discussion

Highlanders Football Club presents an intriguing case study of the way in which sport, rather than being a politically neutral domain of activity, is a playing field upon which identity, memory, and power are negotiated. The club, on one level, is a badge of solidarity that reflects ethnic pride and ensures cultural heritage among the Ndebele people. In its history in Bulawayo and identification with Nde-

bele royalty, Highlanders is more than a football club, it is a cultural symbol, an identity device, and a point of collective historical consciousness. This symbolic role is especially significant within the Zimbabwean context, where post-independence state discourse has enshrined a homogenized Shona-dominant nationalism at the expense of other ethnic and historical perspectives [3] [50].

Barbourfields Stadium, serves as a performative safe space for renegotiating such repressed identities. Fan performances such as singing songs like “Bosso Ngenkani” and chanting invocation of past Ndebele war heroes and songs of lamentation are acts of remembering and resistance acts. These acts of performing culture resonate with what Stuart Hall (1990) terms the reconstruction of identity in postcoloniality, where fragmented histories are written against dominant histories [56]. By so doing, football allegiance is politicized, “counter-memory” [57] challenging the hegemonic historiography of the Zimbabwean state.

As regional and ethnic patriotism takes place within a wide national football framework which requires collaboration, competition, and common association among teams and fans beyond regional and ethnic allegiances. This doubleness is characteristic of the larger Zimbabwean challenge, that of reconciling politics of recognition with nation-building imperatives. Although Highlanders professes a Ndebele identity, its engagement with national leagues requires state institutions, inter-ethnic sporting competition, and national representation. This doubleness speaks to what Benedict Anderson (1983) called “imagined communities,” in which collective symbols and institutions build national belonging even in the face of profound ethnic cleavages [46].

Additionally, cultural importance of Highlanders transcends national frontiers by way of its engagement with diaspora communities, particularly in South Africa, the UK, and Botswana. These cross-border engagements serve to demonstrate football’s power of universality as an identity and sense of belonging transmitter. Highlanders’ affiliation provides the bulk of Ndebele migrants with a space for ensuring cultural continuity and the struggle against loss of ethnic identity in foreign or hostile cultures. While local identities, as Giulianotti and Robertson (2009) in their “glocalization” idea, though, are not obliterated by globalization but reaffirmed in the manifestations of new transnational spaces [58]. Highlanders fandom among diaspora is a type of cultural anchoring—reaffirming affiliations to “home” amidst the travail of global migration and displacement.

This rich dynamics of ethnic claims, national identity, and international belongingness is the contradictory positioning of football as both a unifying and a dividing force. It gathers people round shared symbol, ritual, and emotional identification, even as at the same time it unleashes and even exacerbates existing social cleavages. Highlanders Football Club thus represents the multi-scalar dynamics of ethnicity in Zimbabwe, a club that enacts memory, tells histories of struggle, and negotiates belonging from local to global scales.

## 8. Conclusion

Highlanders Football Club is a great illustration of postcolonial African sport as a

powerful cultural and political institution. In addition to entertainment, the club is a space where ethnicity, memory, and identity come together. Placed in Matabeleland's past and sociopolitical environment, Highlanders is a space wherein the Ndebele are capable of claiming pride, resistance, and belonging within a national environment that has repeatedly marginalized their identity. By chants, rituals, and supporter culture, the club transmutes football into a public performance of reclaiming notice and resisting mainstream state narratives.

Highlanders also possesses significance outside Zimbabwean boundaries, resonating with diaspora communities who find in it a sense of homeliness and heritage. It illustrates the potential of sport to tie the local and global together, preserving cultural identity in diverse settings. Highlanders, then, is not merely a football club—it is a site of collective memory and resistance, which shows how subaltern groups utilize cultural institutions to map onto questions of identity and belonging in the nation-state. This reveals the political function of sport and how it represents, contests, and remembers identities in postcolonial worlds.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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