

# THE HISTORY OF XHOSA TOPONYMS IN MBEMBESI

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## Abstract

This article discusses the history of eight Xhosa toponyms in the Mbembesi area of Zimbabwe's Matabeleland Province. The main objective of the study is to unravel the history of the Xhosa people by investigating their toponyms, guided by the conviction that they are reservoirs of their history and not just mere tags or labels. The research follows a qualitative methodology employing purposive sampling techniques and snowballing. The study uses the Afrocentric theory, largely the nommoic creativity principle. The theory underscores that African people's history and culture is of great significance and is about the strategic creation of concepts, thus, it should be studied and told from an emic perspective. The study's main findings include, among others, the realisation that Xhosa toponyms in Mbembesi are to a large extent descriptive locatives, with some linked to the various clans found among the Xhosa and the geophysical features in the areas, while some have to do with the chiefs of the various clans in the villages. The study, therefore, concludes that Xhosa toponyms are reservoirs of the history of the Xhosa people and are a vital component of their cultural heritage as the bulk of them have been handed down from generation to generation.

**Keywords:** placenames, territorial toponyms, geographical toponyms, onomastics, Xhosa

## 1. Introduction and Background

This study, rooted in the field of onomastics, seeks to explore selected Xhosa toponyms in the Mbembesi area of the Matabeleland Province of Zimbabwe. The paper is concerned with understanding the history behind the Xhosa placenames of Mbembesi. It seeks to explain how these placenames came about to understand the art and science of place-naming among the Xhosa people. This is done by tracing the origins and meanings of the selected placenames in the area. The research derives impetus from the growing studies on the Xhosa people of Zimbabwe. Previous studies have tended to focus on the culture, identity, and origins of the Xhosa people of Mbembesi, but very little has been done regarding toponyms.

Onomastics is the study of names while toponymy or toponomastics is the technical term that refers to the study of placenames. Onomastics is of great significance to human existence as people value the names of people and places. Names, either of people or places, are used as tags which serve to identify people, places, or things and are thus historical witnesses of how and why various places are named the way they are. Placenames or toponyms have a direct connection to historical reality and preserve fascinating

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intimations about the culture of those who use them. Various scholars concur that toponyms provide cherished discernment into the history of a particular region and a particular people. Crystal (2003) posits that place names can be a source of information on a society's history and past events. The society in a particular place determines the type of names to be given to an entity. Like personal names, toponyms have social significance for the people who name and those who live in the places that are named. Furthermore, like personal names, toponyms mirror the historical, cultural, social, political, and economic factors which serve to identify a given place. Toponyms are, therefore, in various ways, trails which a society can follow to establish where it came from.

The Xhosa people of Zimbabwe, found in the Mbembesi area of the Bubi district in Matabeleland North Province, are a considerably small group when compared to other cultural groups in Zimbabwe. Their language is one of the country's previously marginalised ones which, until recently, through the 2013 Constitutional review (Moyo, 2021), were relegated to the home domain only. The dispensation, to a larger extent, led to the neglect of this language and others, which, in turn, has led to very little research being done on the language, the history, as well as the culture of the Xhosa people in Mbembesi.

Placenames are an important part of a people's geographical and cultural environment. The name is a key to the memories and experiences of those who live in the areas concerned (Hulden, 1994). In this regard, to understand the name of a Xhosa person is to understand his or her history and identity. Placenames are of major social importance as they identify major geographical entities of different kinds and represent irreplaceable cultural values of vital significance to the people's sense of being. This makes toponyms part of a people's language and their intangible cultural heritage that should be preserved and protected as they bear links to their cultural and linguistic history (Helleland, 2002). Names embody words for reference to flora, fauna, climate geology, hydrology, topography, and many other aspects of the country in which people live (Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2015). Placenames are coined as descriptions of the geographical features and circumstances that influenced the naming process (Helleland, 2002). They may be viewed as a historical record of the name-givers or the place itself in terms of its habitation and development. Thus, placenames are an important part of the history of any given area and, if interpreted correctly, they would reveal more about the name-givers as well as their understanding of the named places at the time of naming (Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2015). A careful and detailed study of place names can reveal the history of any place.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by the Afrocentric theory, a paradigmatic intellectual perspective that privileges African agency within the context of African history and culture trans-continentially and trans-generationally (Asante,

2007). This means that the quality of location is essential to any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour, whether literary or economically, politically, or culturally. In this regard, it is the crystallisation of a critical perspective on facts. Thus, the study of place names of the Xhosa people needs to be done with a focus on their perspective as the name-givers of these places. Afrocentricity, as a theoretical framework, has numerous principles, as outlined by Gray (2001). Among these is nommoic creativity, which is mainly concerned with creating words and the strategic creation of concepts. Gray (2001, p. 103) states that nommoic creativity “contains within it the understanding that words contain power and used rightly, words can achieve and accomplish what many strong hands, arms, legs, and backs cannot do.” Therefore, this study is guided by the philosophy that placenames in Mbembesi are not just empty labels, but they carry significant values and meanings.

Asante (2007, p. 108) defines the Afrocentric idea by the following five crucial points. Afrocentricity is first defined by an intense interest in psychological location as determined by symbols, motifs, rituals, and signs; it is a paradigm that is defined by a commitment to finding the subject-place of Africans in any social, political, economic, or religious phenomenon with implications for the issues of art, music, and literature. It focuses on defining the role of African cultural elements as historically valid and essential in the context of art, music, and literature. Thus, Xhosa toponyms are reservoirs of a valid history of their culture. Furthermore, Afrocentricity pushes for a celebration of centeredness and agency, and for a commitment to lexical refinement that eliminates pejoratives about Africans or other people. Thus, Afrocentricity is an imperative to revise and cleanse the prejudiced collective narrative about African people.

### 3. Methodology

This study follows a descriptive survey as it focuses on defining the position of a defined population with respect to certain variables. The descriptive survey was chosen because it has the benefit of producing a rich expanse of responses from a wide range of people (Frankael & Wallen, 2000; Babbie, 2001). Qualitative research was chosen because place-naming is a social phenomenon that cannot be quantified. The data was collected using a semi-structured interview which was conducted with traditional leaders and elderly members of selected villages within the Xhosa speaking communities of Mbembesi. The data is presented and discussed using the descriptive narrative.

The study involved the names of eight Xhosa villages in the Mbembesi area of Bubi in Matabeleland. The eight villages used in the study were selected based on their names being of the Xhosa language. These places are namely, *EmaZizini*, *Emaqaqeni*, *KoMkhulu (Emandluntsha)*, *Engxingweni*, *Emarhawana*, *KwaNqakala*, *EmaNtanjeni*, and *KwaMbethe*. The number of participants interviewed per village ranged between four and six. These

interviewees included elderly members and traditional leaders of the community, whose ages ranged between 60 to 80 years old. The participants were identified as people who are knowledgeable about the history of the Xhosa people of Mbembesi.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 *EmaZizini*

*EmaZizini* (the place of the Zizi clan) village is inhabited mainly by the Zizi, which is the major clan in the area, although there are other few families that are not of the Zizi clan. The Zizi clan is comprised mainly of families with the *Kona*, *Dlamini*, and *Njokweni (Ginya)* totems. The name *EmaZizini*, which is the name of the village to date, was decided by Chief Kona. He was the chief of the Zizi clan who later came to lead the whole area of Mbembesi. This leadership role saw him allocating land to the different clans of the Xhosa who had come with him from the Eastern Cape in South Africa. The name of the village was decided when the chief settled the Zizi clan in one area. From then on, people came to refer to the place where the Zizi clan had settled as *EmaZizini*. The village was, therefore, given this name as a way of demarcating the land apportioned to the Zizi clan. That is why people came to call the place *EmaZizini*. However, due to the reliance of this study on oral traditions, it was difficult to establish the exact date as to when the village was given its name. However, it was established that the name was first used when the clan first settled in the area. One of the respondents highlighted that Chief Kona and the Xhosa people, which the Zizi clan was a large part of, came into the area in 1898, which might have been the time around which the name came into existence.

The history of *EmaZizini* as a village name in Mbembesi indicates that the placename is highly territorial. This is because it came about as a way of demarcating or marking the territory, or the place inhabited by a particular clan. The placename is also a way of providing information pertaining to the different clans of the Xhosa people who settled in Mbembesi. Toponyms are thus not mere tags and labels of places but are a significant part of the name-givers' lives. This view is underscored by Crystal (2003), who posits that place names can be a source of information on a society's history and past events. The name *EmaZizini* is, thus, a representation of the history and past events in the lives of the Zizi clan of the Xhosa people in Mbembesi. This is because the name will always be a reminder of the land they were given by Chief Kona when they came to settle in the area, although this took place many years ago. This is corroborated by Nhongo's (2014) view that the toponymic landscape of any country is a mirror that reflects the historical, cultural, political, and most of the social variables of a society.

The name, *EmaZizini*, will always be a reminder of the different clans of the Xhosa people, of which the Zizi is a significant part. However, as indicated above, in as much as the village is largely inhabited by the Zizi clan, there are some other clans who settled in the area. One can thus argue that

the village name might be somewhat discriminatory and segregatory to the minority clans who have legally settled in the village. Also, the chief, as the leader of these people, is said to be the one who might have given the village its name, thereby indicating his authority among the Xhosa in Mbembesi. However, it can be argued that present-day residents of *EmaZizini* might not have an attachment to the name since they did not play any part in naming the village.

#### 4.2 *Emaqaqeni*

*Emaqaqeni* (the hilly area) is another village name in the Mbembesi area. This place is inhabited mainly by the Hlubi clan, also a sub-clan of the Xhosa. The Hlubi clan of the Xhosa was the first one to settle in this area and is from the Mzamo (Radebe) lineage (citation). This group is said to have been one of the first two to settle in this area. The leader of the group was Veni Mzamo. The other one was the Amagubevu (amaDuna) clan. A third clan, which also later moved into the area was the Dywili (Radebe) clan. However, although the first two clans form the majority in the area, there are other clans that are now found there. They include the Sobantu (Radebe), Ntuli (Tshabangu), Gumede, Hlazo (Kheswa), Nqatha (Ngutyana), as well as a few families from the Ndebele clans. However, most of the population in this area are from the Hlubi clan, particularly the Mzamo lineage (citation).

The name *Emaqaqeni* is a locative which is derived from the Xhosa word *amaqaaqa* (hills), which are the dominant geophysical features in the area. Thus, the name means “at or in the place of small hills”. It could not be ascertained as to who named the place due to the limitations of oral history. That is because, as pointed out earlier, the study is treading on uncharted ground without any documents to analyse, apart from interviewee memory. This, together with the question as to when the village name was given, was thus left to speculation. However, one respondent was adamant that the place name was given by the inhabitants of the village as well as other people around Mbembesi.

#### 4.3 *KoMkhulu/Emandluntsha*

*KoMkhulu* (*Emandluntsha*) is another village name in Mbembesi. However, the study unearthed controversy pertaining the name of this place, with some, especially the elderly, calling it *KoMkhulu*, while the younger generation calls it *Emandluntsha*. However, the official name is *KoMkhulu*. For the sake of impartiality on the matter, the study discusses both toponyms. The clans that are settled in the area are mainly of the Ndondo clan, which is also a sub-clan of the Hlubi clan (cite). However, in this area, there is also a group of the Masoka (Ndzombane) and Mxoli families.

***KoMkhulu*** (the chief's or leader's place/territory), a place locative, is the official name of the village, which, according to oral tradition, was given to the village because it was the place of the chief's residence. This is the village where Chief Ndzimende, who succeeded Chief Kona as chief of the whole Xhosa group in Mbembesi, resided with his people, the Ndondo

clan. The name *KoMkhulu* is said to have been decided by the local people of Mbembesi as they referred to the place where the chief resides. However, it could not be established as to exactly when the village got its name, since no documentation was available to shed light on the issue. It could not be established when Chief Ndzimende came to settle in Mbembesi.

***Emandluntsha*** is a locative name derived from *amandluntsha* (new houses). Although popular, especially among the younger generation, the name is unofficial. It is believed to have come from the different and varied designs and architecture of the houses that were built by inhabitants of this area, features which were quite distinct from the ones that were originally there. The name was given to designate an area where immigrants that moved into *KoMkhulu* village from the Kona group were allocated land by the chief. The newcomers then constructed houses whose structures were different from those of the locals such that their area earned the name “new houses”. With time, the group that had settled in *Emandluntsha*, in an area across from *KoMkhulu*, deserted the place and settled in the *KoMkhulu* area. When they moved, they carried with them their name *Emandluntsha* and sought to supplant the official name by imposing their new name on the area.

#### 4.4 *Engxingweni*

The *Engxingweni* area in Mbembesi is arguably unique because it is inhabited by numerous clans of the Xhosa, namely, the Hlubi, Zizi (Dlamini), Hadebe, as well as the Amagubevu. Therefore, it is difficult to determine with certainty which one is the major clan in the area. One interviewee in response to the question on who resides in the area, spoke in Xhosa, and said ‘*inene yingxingwa*’ (it truly is just a mixed place - with different clans). The name of this village *Engxingweni* is a locative. It is derived from the term *ingxingwa* (a place where valleys meet) creating a place that has many trees and is somewhat impassable. It is a kind of a forest with a clogged vegetation.

Interlocking valleys are the dominant geophysical feature in the area, which is how the place came to be known as *Engxingweni*. One of the interviewees, a traditional leader, took the researchers on a tour of the village and the surrounding areas to show them the places they were referring to. However, due to the limitations of oral traditions, none of the respondents could confidently reveal who had decided on the name of the village. This is because many of them found the area already named when they were born. One respondent, however, indicated that the name could have come from the early inhabitants of the village, as well as from other people from other villages who might have noted the unique geographical landscape of the area.

#### 4.5 *EMarhawana*

*Emarhawana* is the name of a village in the Mbembesi area which is inhabited mainly by people from the Ndzombane clan, who are also of the Masoka (English gloss) totem. However, in this area, there are other families and clans of the Amampondo of the Nyawuza, Nqadini, Majola, Khuboni (Ngabaza or Zondi) totems. It was not clear from the interviewees on who

decided on the name of the village. What was unearthed by the study were answers to the questions on the origins of the name of the village. Firstly, the village name *EMarhawana* is said to have been borrowed from that of the river near the village which separates *EMarhawana* from the next village of *KoMkhulu*. This river is called *Marhawana* river, which then gave rise to the village's locative name *EMarhawana*. *Marhawana* is a Xhosa term whose meaning could not be established because none of the interviewees knew its meaning.

#### 4.6 *KwaNqakala*

*KwaNqakala* (Chief Nqakala's place of residence) is a village in the Mbembesi area. It is mainly inhabited by the Khuboni and AmaBhele clans. The clans in the area are settled haphazardly, that is, in no particular order or manner. The name of the village is said to have been derived from that of the chief of the area, Chief Nqakala, who first settled there with a few of his subjects when the Xhosa people first settled in Mbembesi. It has been revealed that the name was given by Chief Nqakala and the people that first settled in the area. According to Stewart's (YEAR) topology, as cited in Cresswell (2009), such a place name would be classified as one that commemorates a place, a person, or an event. The village name can thus be said to signify the inhabitants' commemoration of Chief Nqakala, who is a vital part of the Xhosa people's history, particularly the inhabitants of the village. Therefore, the village name embodies the history of the local people. However, since the place name is said to have been decided upon by the Chief himself, and not by the inhabitants of the village, it raises questions on the extent to which the inhabitants identify with it.

#### 4.7 *EmaNtanjeni*

*EmaNtanjeni* (a place of the Mntambo people) is located next to the *Engxingweni* area. The major clan that settled there is mainly made up of people of the Mntambo (English gloss) totem. This clan is commonly known in and around Mbembesi as *amaNtambo*. Therefore, the name *EmaNtanjeni* is a derivative place locative that means the place of the Mntambo people. Although there are other clans which settled in the area, such as those of the Nkwali, Maduna, Ndlangisa, as well as the Ngutyana totems, the dominant clan is the Mntambo. The village was given this name because it was the place where the clan resided, so the name became a tag for identifying the place. Also, the name was said to have been one that this clan migrated with from the Eastern Cape of South Africa. As to who decided on the name, the traditional leader indicated that the chiefs that first came in with the first Xhosa group to settle in Mbembesi were the ones that allocated different land portions to the various clans. Thus, the name originated from South Africa and is largely territorial, like *EmaZizini*.

#### 4.8 *KwaMbethhe*

*KwaMbethhe* (Chief Mbethe's residence) is inhabited by many clans. However, one traditional leader indicated that the original clan, as well as most of the

people who settled in the area, are of the Majola totems. The other groups that settled in the area are those of the Hadebe and Ndlangamandla totems, as well as some from other cultural groups that are non-Xhosa like the Ndebele. The findings concerning this name, its origins, and its meaning, revealed a lot of controversial versions of historical events. Most of the interviewees maintained that they could not state with certainty as to who chose it, as most of them were born into the area and found it already named. One interviewee indicated that the village name could have been decided by the village head, together with his people, when they settled in the area.

The traditional leader, however, narrated that the village was originally known as *Kwaphakathi* or *Iphakathi LakoMkhulu*. He explained that this name came about because the leader of the group in this area was the son of Chief Ndzimende, whose village was referred to as *KoMkhulu*, the place where the chief resides. However, another respondent indicated that the name *KwaMbethé* is originally from the Eastern Cape and added that when they migrated to Mbembesi with their leader Sityebi Ndzombane, they brought the name with them. The interviewees could not explain what the name means exactly because it is a name that their forefathers had brought from the Eastern Cape. Due to the multiplicity of oral traditions and the limitations associated with them, the meaning of the name could not be ascertained.

## 5. Discussion

Based on the findings presented in the previous section, it can be concluded that Xhosa toponyms in the Mbembesi area are derived place locatives. In the Xhosa language, locatives are adjectival forms derived from other parts of speech, and are used in reference to places, time, and chronological order. Locatives are mostly formed using morphological processes such as prefixing and circumfixing. In this regard, the Xhosa toponyms in Mbembesi can be classified according to those formed through prefixing and those formed through circumfixing. The names, *KoMkhulu*, *KwaMbethé*, *KwaNqakala*, and *eMarhawana* are all formed through prefixing locative markers with /ko-/, /kwa-/ and /e-/, respectively. The prefixes /ko-/ and /kwa-/ are used exclusively with proper or personal nouns. Hence, *KoMkhulu* means at Mkhulu's place or Mkhulu's residence. The same applies to a name such as *KwaNqakala*. It means at Nqakala's place or Nqakala's residence. The locative prefix /e-/ is used in forming locatives from common names. In the context of the Xhosa toponyms, this applies to names such as *eMarhawana* and *eMandluntsha*.

1. a)  $e + (a)marhawana = emarhawana$   
 b)  $e + (a)mandluntsha = emandluntsha$

Illustrated at (1) above is the formation rule for the place locative derived from common nouns using the locative prefix /e-/.

2. a)  $kwa + (u)Mkhulu = koMkhulu$

b) *kwa* +(u)*Nqakala* = *kwaNqakala*

c) *kwa* +(u)*Mbethe* = *kwaMbethe*

The prefixes /*ko-*/ and /*kwa-*/ are used exclusively with proper or personal nouns to derive locative nouns that are territorial. Whenever the locative prefixes /*ko-*/ and /*kwa-*/ are used, it is always with reference to a place that belongs to someone, thereby making them territorial. Perhaps one of the most common territorial names in this category is the KwaZulu Natal region in South Africa, which is a Zulu territory.

The second group of toponyms are those derived through the process of circumfixing, a process through which two segments, a prefix and a suffix, are simultaneously added to a word. In this regard, names such as *EmaZizini*, *EmaNtanjeni*, *Engxingweni*, and *Emaqaqeni*, are thus formed in this way. The circumfix is a combination of the prefix /*e-*/ and the suffix /*-ini/-eni*/, as seen in the following illustrations.

3. a) *e*-\_\_\_\_-*eni* + (*a*)*maqaq(a)* = *emaqaqeni*

b) *e*-\_\_\_\_-*ini* + (*i*)*ngxingw(a)* = *engxingweni*

c) *e*-\_\_\_\_-*eni* + (*a*)*maNtamb(o)* = *emantanjeni*

From the above discussion, it is noted that the toponyms under study are basically derived place locatives. It can then be argued that the Xhosa toponyms in Mbembesi area are derived place locatives.

### 5.1 Territorial toponyms

These are toponyms or village names that are territorial as they are derived mainly from the names of the people who inhabit the areas, be it leaders or clans. In this category, territorial toponyms include such names as *EmaZizini* (a place of the Zizi people, or the Zizi territory) and *EmaNtanjeni* (place of the Mntambo clans/the Mntambo territory). Such toponyms are territorial because they were originally used to demarcate the land that was occupied by or was allocated to a particular clan by their chiefs. Other toponyms in this category also include *KoMkhulu* (the Chief's place) and *KwaNqakala* (Nqakala's place or territory). According to Pellegrini's (YEAR) classification of toponyms, as cited in Batoma (2006), it can be concluded that the above toponyms in Mbembesi are 'anthrotoponyms'. These are basically toponyms that relate mostly to the ownership of large areas of land and are usually derived from people's names, people who might have originally owned a particular piece of land. The above toponyms are, therefore, anthrotoponyms, since they are derived from the names of the clans that owned the land which they had settled in.

In contrast, Stewart (1954, cited in Cresswell, 2009) classifies them as those toponyms that identify a place owned by a person or a group, or also as those toponyms that have been manufactured or coined from sounds, letters, or fragments of other words. To substantiate how the above toponyms fit into Stewart's second classification, one must demonstrate that they were products of certain derivational processes. For example, the *EmaZizini*

village name was derived from the clan's name, *AmaZizi*, where the prefix was changed, and a suffix was added to come up with the placename.

### 5.2 Geophysical toponyms

Another type of toponym used by the Xhosa in *Mbembesi* is geophysical toponyms, i.e., toponyms that are based on a certain geographical physical feature found in a particular area. The names of villages such as *Emaqaqeni*, *Emarhawana*, and *Engxingweni* were derived from geographical features such as hills, rivers, and valleys. These geophysical features are the prominent landforms in the areas from which the placenames are derived. Batoma (2006) classifies them as geo-toponyms. This term refers to those toponyms that are reflective of the presence of minerals or are based on land, as well as water features connected to climatic conditions.

### 5.3 Historically commemorative toponyms

Toponyms such as *eMarhawana*, *EmaNtanjeni*, *EmaZizini*, and *eMandluntsha* are classified as historical or commemorative names. This is because these names are also found in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa, where these Xhosa communities originated. It is such history that makes these names commemorative, notwithstanding the fact that, within the *Mbembesi* area, the Xhosa settled in clans, a practice they brought from the Eastern Cape (cite). The Xhosa toponyms in the *Mbembesi* area exist in harmony with their locality as they express physical or historical cultural facts, to which the Xhosa people of Zimbabwe subscribe. They are a powerful way of celebrating their collective Xhosa identity, their history, and origin, as they form an important link to their origins in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa. Although, at one level, they may be regarded as ancient names that the Xhosa brought from Eastern Cape, at another level, they may be seen as of more recent, or even contemporary, since they were created for the purposes of reflecting or celebrating the Xhosa identity even on "foreign land". One can thus argue that these toponyms are symbolic in that they represent the political organisation of the Xhosa people, as argued by Mvenene (2014, p. 12), who posits that "the Xhosa political organisation was a pyramid with the base being disparate related groups and the pinnacle being a Chief. A particular area would generally consist of an agnatic group related through the male line." The settlements in the *Mbembesi* area can thus be regarded as a reconstruction of the Eastern Cape Xhosa communities since they maintained, by and large, the socio-political organisation as well as the toponyms that existed in Eastern Cape.

## 6. Conclusion

On the history of the Xhosa toponyms in *Mbembesi*, one can conclude from the findings of this study that some of those outlined above were derived from the local people's close relationship with their natural environment, prior to studying the geographical features in the areas. They derived the toponyms from geographical features such as hills, rivers, and valleys. One can also conclude that the Xhosa are people that are very observant, especially of their

natural environment. However, some toponyms in this area were used mainly to denote, demarcate, and claim the territory for particular clans. From the toponyms that are mainly territorial, it can be concluded that the Xhosa people are a largely territorial group that respect their different clans and value the unity of their clans. Therefore, they made efforts to settle according to their clans as a way of transforming Mbembesi into a home away from home. However, it can further be argued that the territorial toponyms may be or are, indeed, discriminatory, since they did not recognise other groups like the Ndebele who settled in the same villages, who also have a history to commemorate.

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