

Colonial Bureaucracy, Ethnic Conflict, and Post-Independent Statecraft: Racial Classification in Zambia and Zimbabwe

Yao Lu

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

How did the state racially classify its population in post-independent Africa? State classifications are legibility projects integral to statecraft, shaping nation-building and informing policy-making (Foucault 1991, 2005; Bourdieu 1984; Durkheim 1963; Rodríguez-Muñiz 2017). Among classification projects historically adopted by empires and states, racial classification was instrumental in facilitating colonialism and racial capitalism, reinforcing the global color line (Du Bois 1894; Magubane 1996; Nobles 2000; Omi and Winant 2014; Winant 2001; Loveman 2014; Hammer 2022; Quisumbing King 2022). However, while racial classification has been extensively studied in North and Latin America, Africa remains underexplored despite its deep entanglement with Blackness and colonial racialization.

COLONIAL BACKGROUND OF THE FORMER FEDERATION

To examine the forces shaping African racial classifications, this research traces two different paths to post-independent racial classification in Zambia and Zimbabwe. These two neighboring countries in southern Africa share significant colonial similarities and divergences. Britain simultaneously colonized both territories in the 1880s (Mlambo 1998; Phiri 2006). Between 1953 and 1963, the two territories joined Malawi (Nyasaland) to form the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (Cohen 2019). After the Federation dissolved in 1963, Britain officially retreated from both territories.

After British retreat, Zambia gained independence in 1964 under Black majority rule (Phiri 2006). By contrast, due to Zimbabwe's status as a settler colony and Zambia's classification as an extractive colony, Zimbabwe had a larger settler population and more

developed colonial infrastructure (Tawse-Jollie 1927; Mlambo 1998). White settlers in Zimbabwe secured minority rule in 1965, delaying independence until 1980 after a prolonged and violent liberation struggle (Chikowero 2015).

RACIAL CLASSIFICATION IN ZAMBIA'S AND ZIMBABWE'S CENSUSES

Table 1. Zambia's and Zimbabwe's census racial schemes, 1961-1992.

Zambia (Northern Rhodesia)			Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia, Rhodesia)		
Year	Term	Scheme	Year	Term	Scheme
1961	Race	Africans, Europeans, Asians, Others.	1961	Race	European, Asian, Coloured, Eurasian, Eurafrican.
Independence (1964)					
1969	Ethnic Group	Africans, Europeans, Asians, Coloureds.	1969	Race	European, Asian, Coloured, Eurafrican, Eurasian.
			Independence (1980)		
1980	Ethnic Group	African, European, Asian, Mixed/Coloured.	1982	Ethnic Group and Citizenship	<i>For Zimbabwean Africans</i> , state father's dialect. <i>Other Zimbabweans</i> : state ethnic group. <i>Others</i> : state citizenship and ethnic group.
Racial Classifications Stabilize					
1990	Ethnic Group	Enter Zambian tribe; if not applicable, enter major racial group (African, American, Asian, European, Other).	1992	Ethnic Origin	African, European, Asiatic, Mixed race.
2000	Ethnicity	If Zambian enter tribe, if not mark major racial group (African, American, Asian, European, Other).	2002	Ethnic Origin	African, European, Asiatic, Mixed race, Other.

Source: Zambia Statistics Agency, Princeton University, IPUMS.

Table 1 demonstrates two key moments of change in racial classification Zambia and Zimbabwe after their respective independence. First, both countries transitioned from using the term "race" to "ethnicity" immediately after independence—Zambia in its 1969 census and

Zimbabwe in its 1982 census. Second, in the 1990s, each country experienced a moment of both change and stabilization. Zambia's classification system moved away from colonial categories (African, European, Asian, Coloured) and instead prioritized tribal identity while retaining racial categories only if tribal identification was not applicable. Conversely, Zimbabwe, after its 1982 census that counted dialect, ethnic group, and citizenship, reverted to its colonial categories (African, European, Asiatic, Mixed race) in 1992. This return to colonial classifications remained stable in subsequent censuses.

This study triangulates three types of data—archival, interview, and oral history methods—to investigate the processes behind key moments in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Interviews with government officials and census experts provide insight into how racial categories were formulated and census projects implemented. Oral histories, widely used in African research, highlight individual agency and the lived experiences of those affected by racial classification policies (White, Miescher, and Cohen 2001; Chikowero 2015). Interviews and oral histories are conducted in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Archival data offers a comprehensive account of colonial history and the official narrative of racial classification. Key archival sources include records from the National Archives of Zambia, the Zambia Statistics Agency, the National Archives of Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Statistics Agency, Princeton University, and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

FINDINGS AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

Archival records suggest that Zambia experienced what I term a "classification break" between 1960 and 1990. This break coincided with Zambia's nationalist Zambianization project (Burawoy 2014). Government memos and correspondence from the National Census Committee (CO 2/7 003) indicate that post-colonial Zambia sought to establish itself as a statistically capable nation. Officials aimed to enhance statistical capabilities to compete regionally,

particularly with Tanzania. By 1963, Zambia had undertaken comprehensive demographic surveys mapping tribal and ethnic affiliations at multiple levels. Over the next three decades, this legibility project consolidated into the new racial classification scheme of the 1990 census. Weaker settler power, weaker colonial bureaucracy, and nationalist projects contributed to Zambia's departure from its colonial past in state racial classification.

In contrast, Zimbabwe's classification system reverted to colonial categories after 1992, largely as a response to ethnic tensions following the Gukurahundi Massacres (1982-1987). The conflict between PF-ZAPU and ZANU(PF), representing Ndebele and Shona groups, respectively, resulted in over 20,000 civilian deaths. The 1987 Unity Accord promoted ethnic reconciliation, influencing census classification. Census designers deliberately removed ethnic distinctions, and the presence of a colonial bureaucracy, along with familiarity with colonial categories, facilitated the reinstatement of these classifications in the 1992 census.

Existing research suggests that in ethnically diverse countries, states may avoid counting ethnicity. This project builds on this by arguing that it is not merely ethnic diversity but the presence of ethnic conflict—and the state's intent to mitigate it—that drives the removal of ethnic distinctions in state classification systems. Furthermore, in post-independence states seeking to eliminate ethnic distinctions, the reinstatement of colonial categories does not necessarily reflect colonial continuities. Rather, it is the result of the deliberate agency of classification designers and a strategic aspect of post-independence statecraft. This project makes a significant contribution to theories of statecraft, colonialism, and racial classification by expanding existing frameworks to newly independent nation-states. Understanding Africa's divergence is crucial for developing a global comparative framework on race and state formation.