

From fauna to founding fathers: Semiotic layers and identity construction in the street nomenclature of Tanzania's capital

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ABSTRACT

Guided by an integrated framework combining linguistic landscape theory, critical toponymy, postcolonial onomastics, and semiotic theory, this study examines how street naming functions as a mechanism of identity construction in Dodoma. The research adopts a mixed-methods research approach, integrating quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative ethnographic and semiotic interpretation. Data were drawn from multiple sources, including an official municipal register of 205 street names, government gazettes, cartographic materials (OpenStreetMap and satellite imagery), a photographic corpus of street signage, semi-structured interviews with planners and residents, and participatory mapping workshops. The data analysis followed a four-stage procedure: corpus preparation and translation, iterative qualitative coding into semiotic categories, quantitative frequency and spatial patterning, and in-depth semiotic interpretation grounded in Peircean and critical toponymic frameworks. The findings reveal a highly structured toponymic regime dominated by personal commemorative names (48.3%), followed by fauna-based and ecological references, moral-ideological terms, and institutional labels. The study identifies a distinctive model of personalist-ecological nationalism, where political authority, moral discourse, and wildlife symbolism jointly construct national identity. However, the naming system also exhibits significant exclusions, particularly of women, Islamic identities, and indigenous Gogo spatial knowledge. The study concludes that street names in Dodoma function as instruments of top-down nation-building and ideological inscription, while their everyday uptake remains uneven. It recommends the adoption of participatory naming frameworks, greater representational balance, and the integration of vernacular place knowledge to enhance inclusivity, legitimacy, and practical usability of urban toponymy.

Keywords: Critical Toponymy, Dodoma, Linguistic Landscape, Postcolonial Onomastics, Street Naming, Tanzania

I. INTRODUCTION

The naming of streets is never a pure act of naming. In the words of Maoz Azaryahu (2011), street names constitute “a political skill of space”; it is a subtle yet powerful mechanism through which regimes, nations, and communities inscribe their ideologies, memories, and aspirations onto the everyday geography of the city. Few urban contexts illustrate this principle more vividly than Dodoma, Tanzania's planned capital, where, beginning in earnest in 2016, a sweeping programme of toponymic re-inscription transformed hundreds of anonymous numbered avenues and residual colonial designations into a richly semantic Swahili-language landscape from *Simba* and *Twiga* (lion and giraffe) to Nyerere and Magufuli (the republic's founding and most recent late president), from Serengeti and Ngorongoro (globally iconic protected areas) to abstract virtues such as Umoja (unity) and Hekima (wisdom). The new street names of Dodoma constitute a deliberate semiotic project which attempts to turn a hitherto “forgotten” capital into a legible manifesto of Tanzanian post-colonial identity.

The deliberate creation of new capitals has been one of the most ambitious political-geographical experiments of the modern era globally: from St Petersburg to Washington, Canberra to Brasília, Islamabad to Abuja, Naypyidaw to Nur-Sultan (now Astana again). States have repeatedly sought to materialise their visions of modernity, sovereignty, and national unity by building entirely new seats of government. In post-independence Africa, this phenomenon acquired particular intensity. Between 1957 and 2005, at least twelve African countries either relocated their capitals or launched major projects to do so: Gaborone (Botswana), Lilongwe (Malawi), Yamoussoukro (Côte d'Ivoire), Dodoma (Tanzania), Abuja (Nigeria), and more recently eThekweni-New Capital proposals in South Africa and the projected new Egyptian capital east of Cairo. These projects are rarely merely administrative, but they are performative acts of state-making, designed to break the colonial spatialities, redistribute population and resources, and symbolise a rupture with the past (Potts, 1985; Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019). Dodoma belongs squarely to this tradition, yet its trajectory has been unusually protracted and, until recently, largely unrealised.

In July 1973, at the height of *Ujamaa* (socialism), President Julius Kambarage Nyerere announced that Tanzania would move its capital from Dar es Salaam to the geographic centre of the country. Dodoma. At that time, Dodoma was a small railway town inhabited predominantly by the agro-pastoralist Gogo people, and it was chosen for its centrality, its perceived neutrality among ethnic groups, and its embodiment of the socialist ideal of rural development. The master plan, prepared by the Canadian firm Project Planning Associates (1976), envisioned a garden city for 350,000 inhabitants, with wide avenues, zonal separation of functions, and a monumental government zone. Parliament formally endorsed the move in 1974, and the Capital Development Authority (CDA) was established. Yet, for four decades the project languished. By 2015, Dodoma's population barely exceeded 410,000, and most government ministries remained in Dar es Salaam, and the city was widely mocked as “the capital that never was.” Streets were known primarily by numbers or letters (Fourth Street, Block 15, Area D), or by informal vernacular designations. Colonial-era names such as Livingstone Road or Railway Avenue persisted only in fading memory. This prolonged midpoint produced what Kironde (2006) has called a “non-capital capital”: a city with the legal status but not the functional reality of a national seat of power.

The accession of President John Pombe Magufuli in November 2015 dramatically altered Dodoma's fate by declaring the completion of the capital transfer a personal priority. Within months, ministries began relocating; the presidential residence was moved, and a massive infrastructural push commenced: new parliament buildings, ring roads, government housing estates, and the standard-gauge railway link to Dar es Salaam. By 2023 the majority of central government functions had shifted, and Dodoma's population surpassed 700,000. It was against this backdrop of rapid institutional and demographic transformation that the Dodoma City Council, in collaboration with the Capital Development Authority, launched an equally ambitious toponymic programme. Between 2016 and 2024, more than 1,000 streets were assigned official Swahili names, of which the 205 streets analysed in this study form a representative core sample drawn from the central and newly developed zones. The previous alphanumeric grid and scattered colonial remnants were almost entirely replaced by a nomenclature that is 97 % Swahili-medium and overwhelmingly commemorative, descriptive, or aspirational in character.

While the linguistic landscapes of Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, Accra, and Johannesburg have received increasing scholarly attention (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009; Kumasi & Bigon, 2021), the toponymy of Africa's planned capitals remains strikingly under-studied. Dodoma offers a rare opportunity to examine a near-total toponymic tabula rasa enacted in real time, under conditions of strong state direction, rapid urban growth, and intensified national imagination. By combining systematic quantitative coding of 205 officially gazetted street names with thick semiotic and ethnographic interpretation, this paper advances three broader scholarly conversations: It extends critical toponymy and linguistic landscape studies into the relatively neglected domain of sub-Saharan African planned capitals. It documents an original configuration of “ecological nationalism” in which urban space is branded with the nation's wildlife heritage. It provides a nuanced account of how commemorative naming practices negotiate the tension between heroic personality cults, grassroots recognition, and official narratives of unity and ethnic inclusivity in a multi-ethnic post-colony.

1.1 Research Questions

- i. How do street names function as instruments of nation-building and symbolic re-territorialisation in the context of a late-realised planned capital?
- ii. Which semiotic layers, personal commemorative, faunal-ecological, moral-virtue, ethnic-regional, religious-institutional, and developmental, are privileged in Dodoma's new toponymicon, and what hierarchies of value do these names reveal?
- iii. What do these naming practices disclose about contemporary Tanzanian ideologies of unity, development, historical memory, environmental identity, and political legitimacy under the successive administrations of Magufuli (2015–2021), Hassan (2021–present), and the enduring legacy of Nyerere?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is situated at the intersection of four mutually reinforcing fields: (i) linguistic landscape studies, (ii) critical toponymy and the politics of commemoration, (iii) postcolonial onomastics and decolonisation of urban space, and (iv) semiotic theory applied to place-making. Together, these frameworks allow us to read Dodoma's street names not merely as referential labels, but as a coherent ideological text written onto the city itself.

The concept of the linguistic landscape (LL), originally formulated by Landry and Bourhis (1997) and systematically developed by Gorter (2006), Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), and Shohamy and Gorter (2009). Linguistic landscape refers to “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings” visible in a given territory. Subsequent scholarship has broadened the LL paradigm from a primarily sociolinguistic concern with multilingualism to a critical

interdisciplinary lens on power, identity, and spatial practice (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Blommaert, 2013; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015). Street names, as the most durable and officially sanctioned element of the LL, occupy a privileged position within this field because they are almost always produced top-down, enjoy quasi-legal status, and they are reproduced daily in maps, GPS systems, postal addresses, and bureaucratic discourse (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010; Puzey, 2016). In planned capitals, where the entire urban fabric is subject to intentional design, the LL becomes an even more potent instrument of state semiotics (Shohamy, 2015; Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019).

Critical toponymy, emerging from the seminal work of Azaryahu (1996, 2011, 2012), Alderman (2000, 2008), and Rose-Redwood (2008; Light & Young, 2015), treats place names as commemorative arenas in which struggles over historical memory, legitimacy, and belonging are fought. Street naming is understood as a “political technology of space” that naturalises particular versions of the past while marginalising others. Recent contributions have highlighted three key processes: (a) legitimisation of ruling regimes through heroic personality cults (Azaryahu & Kook, 2002; Palonen, 2008), b) erasure or overwriting of colonial and pre-revolutionary toponymies (Bigon, 2008; Duminy, 2019), and c) the strategic deployment of abstract moral concepts (Freedom, Unity, Independence) to project an image of consensual national values (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016). Dodoma’s simultaneous celebration of individual leaders, wildlife, and virtues offers a particularly rich case for examining how these processes intersect in a single naming regime.

Postcolonial scholarship on African urban toponymy has documented a continent-wide wave of renaming since the 1980s aimed at “Africanising” or “Swahilising” cityscapes previously dominated by colonial heroes, monarchs, and administrators (Bigon, 2008; Nash, 2016). Swart (2010) and Guyot and Seethal (2007) in South Africa, Swilla (2008) and Mtesigwa (2009) in Tanzania, and Wanjiru and Matsubara (2017) in Kenya have shown that such projects are rarely politically neutral: they frequently privilege the ethnic groups or ideological factions currently in power while producing new silences (e.g., the relative absence of women, minorities, or defeated political movements). At the same time, Swahili itself functions as a deliberately chosen “neutral” national lingua franca that simultaneously erases both colonial languages and vernacular ethnic toponyms (Mekacha, 1993; Mazrui, 2007). Dodoma’s near-total adoption of Swahili-medium names must therefore be read as an act of linguistic nationalism as much as decolonisation.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Semiotics of Place: Indexicality, Iconicity, and Ideological Layering

Drawing on Peircean semiotics as adapted to spatial and linguistic anthropology (Silverstein, 2003; Irvine & Gal, 2000; Agha, 2007), this study treats street names as polyfunctional signs that operate simultaneously on multiple levels: First, indexicality: names such as Nyerere, Magufuli, or Ndugai directly point to specific political figures, historical, or local figures, anchoring the street in regimes of authority and patronage. Second, iconicity: this includes animal names like *Simba* (Lion), *Twiga* (Giraffe), *Tembo* (Elephant), and national parks (*Serengeti*, *Ngorongoro*), which create a resemblance between urban space and Tanzania’s globally recognised natural heritage, turning the capital into a microcosm of the nation’s ecological brand. Third, ideological layering includes virtue names *Umoja* (unity), *Amani* (peace), and *Hekima* (wisdom), and developmental terms *Mapinduzi* (revolution) and *Mwangaza* (enlightenment). These names presuppose and entail an idealised moral community, performing what Blommaert and Maly (2019) term “chronotropic” work by projecting a desired future onto present geography. Irvine and Gal’s (2000) processes of iconisation, fractal recursivity, and erasure are particularly useful for analysing how certain identities (the wildlife nation, the heroic leader, the virtuous citizen) are foregrounded while others (religious heritage, pre-colonial Gogo toponyms, women, labour movements) are backgrounded or eliminated.

Finally, the framework draws on the emerging paradigm of landscape linguistics (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Puzey & Kostanski, 2016), which insists on the embodied, multisensory, and material dimensions of language in space. In planned capitals, where master plans explicitly aim to produce a Gesamtkunstwerk of architecture, greenery, and nomenclature (Scott, 1998; Vale, 2008; Koch, 2018), street names are never isolated signs but part of an orchestrated semiotic ensemble that includes monumental axes, heroic statuary, and institutional architecture. Dodoma’s fauna-themed streets clustered near new ministerial complexes, or virtue-named avenues radiating from the parliament, must therefore be read as elements of a single, state-authored text.

By synthesising these five strands, linguistic landscape, critical toponymy, postcolonial onomastics, semiotic anthropology, and landscape linguistics, this paper develops an integrated analytical lens capable of capturing both the quantitative distribution and the qualitative depth of meaning in Dodoma’s new street names. The framework moves beyond merely descriptive accounts of “who is commemorated” to interrogate how an entire ideoscape (Appadurai, 1996) of political legitimacy, ecological exceptionalism, moral renewal, and ethnic unity is materially inscribed into the everyday paths walked, driven, and imagined by Dodoma’s citizens and visitors.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach characteristic of contemporary critical linguistic-landscape research, combining systematic corpus analysis of official toponymic data with qualitative fieldwork and spatial verification. The approach is deliberately multi-scalar and iterative, moving from macro-level quantitative patterning to micro-level semiotic and ethnographic interpretation.

3.2 Research Context and Case Selection

The empirical focus of this study is the City Council of Dodoma (Dodoma Urban District and adjacent newly incorporated wards) during the intensive naming phase 2020–2024. This period coincides with the effective operationalisation of Dodoma as national capital: the relocation of the presidency (2019), most ministries (2020–2023), and the completion of major infrastructural projects that necessitated formal street designation for postal, emergency, and electoral purposes. This corpus is therefore not a random sample but a purposively selected complete set of the most symbolically prominent streets in the emerging governmental and residential core.

3.3 Data Sources

Primary documentary source: Official Excel register titled “LIST OF STREETS IN THE CITY COUNCIL OF DODOMA” (205 entries), obtained directly from the Dodoma City Council Department of Urban Planning in June 2023 and cross-verified against the gazetted version published in the Tanzania Government Gazette (Supplement No. 14, 31 March 2023). Cartographic sources: OpenStreetMap layers (2022–2024), Google Satellite imagery (2023–2024), and official CDA master-plan maps (2019 revision) to confirm the physical existence and spatial clustering of the named streets. Photographic corpus: 1,840 geolocated photographs of street signs taken by the authors during six fieldwork periods (November 2022, March, July, October 2023, February and August 2024). Semi-structured interviews: 18 key-informant interviews with municipal planners (n=6), ward executive officers (n=5), long-term Gogo residents (n=4), and recently arrived civil servants (n=3) to capture naming rationale and local reception. Participatory mapping workshops: two half-day sessions (n=28 participants) in Miyuji and Chamwino wards in July 2023 to document vernacular alternatives to official names.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four rigorously documented stages: The first stage was the corpus preparation and initial glossing. Each of the 205 names was transcribed, provided with a literal English translation, and annotated with available biographical, zoological, geographical, or institutional information using Tanzanian government websites, parliamentary Hansards, memorial archives, and ethnographic knowledge of central Tanzania. The second stage was the iterative qualitative coding where an inductive-deductive coding scheme was developed. Nine primary semiotic categories emerged through open coding which were then refined against existing toponymic typologies (Azaryahu, 2011; Rose-Redwood & Alderman, 2011; Bigon, 2008). These include personal anthroponyms (national leaders), personal anthroponyms (regional or local figures & ordinary citizens), protected areas or national parks, moral virtues and abstract ideals, functional or institutional descriptors, ethnic and regional references, religious and educational institutions, commercial and residual (hotels, companies, colonial survivals). Each name was assigned one primary code and up to two secondary codes when hybridity was evident (e.g., “Ndugai” = personal anthroponym & political office holder). The third stage was quantitative patterning where frequencies and co-occurrence patterns were calculated. Spatial clustering was visualised to identify thematic “neighbourhoods”. The fourth stage was the thick semiotic and ethnographic interpretation. Drawing on Peircean semiotics and Irvine and Gal’s (2000) framework of iconisation, fractal recursivity, and erasure, each category was subjected to in-depth interpretation, with interview and observational data used to uncover indexical links, ideological presuppositions, and processes of inclusion or exclusion.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Research clearance was granted by the University of Dodoma and by Dodoma City Council. Informants were consulted. Recordings and transcripts are stored anonymously. As a researcher fluent in Swahili with long-term fieldwork experience in Tanzania, I remained attentive to the risk of over-interpreting state-centric narratives and actively sought out dissenting resident voices regarding the legitimacy and everyday usability of the new names.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

A systematic classification of the 205 street names reveals a strikingly non-random toponymic regime in which certain ideological themes are dramatically privileged while others remain marginal. Table 1 presents the final distribution after iterative coding and reliability testing.

Table 1

Distribution of primary semiotic categories in Dodoma's new street nomenclature (N = 205)

Rank	Category	n	%	Key examples
1	Personal anthroponyms (all types)	98	48.3	Nyerere, Magufuli, Mavunde, Mlewa, Mamamud, Sawe, Chololo
	National political figures & presidents	12	5.9	Nyerere, Magufuli, Malechela, Ndugai
	Regional & local politicians / notables	31	15.1	Makame, Mavunde, Makongoro, Ndorosi
	Ordinary citizens & minor local figures	55	26.8	Shabani, Noeli, Rosha, Chipana, Mwijuki
2	Fauna (Swahili names of wild animals)	23	11.2	Simba, Twiga, Tembo, Chui, Kinyonga, Swala, Tandala
3	Moral virtues & aspirational abstracts	19	9.3	Umoja, Amani, Hekima, Mashujaa, Mshikamano, Mwangaza
4	Functional / institutional descriptors	17	8.3	Hospitali, Kanisani, Shuleni, Airport, Takukuru
5	National parks & protected areas	12	5.9	Serengeti, Ngorongoro, Mikumi, Saadani
6	Ethnic & regional references	14	6.8	Ukerewe, Moshi, Tabora, Kyusa (Nyakyusa), Machame
7	Religious & educational institutions	12	5.9	KKKT, Saint Gasper, Maria de Mathias, CBE, CCT
8	Commercial, hotel & residual names	9	4.4	Four Points, Rose Garden, Verde View, Azam, Mafrem mengi
	Total	205	100%	

Dominance of the commemorative-personal principle: almost half (47.8 %) of all streets are named after individual persons, an unusually high proportion compared to most African capitals. For cross-continental comparison, Nairobi (a) post-apartheid Cape Town \approx 22 % personal names (Duminy, 2019), (b) Nairobi \approx 28 % (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2017). Dodoma, thus, exhibits one of the most intense “cults of personality” in contemporary African urban toponymy. The surprising salience of fauna (11.2%): animal names form the single largest non-personal category, far exceeding moral virtues (9.3 %) or functional descriptors (8.3 %). When combined with national-park names (5.9 %), ecologically themed streets account for 17.1 % of the total, an unprecedented configuration with no direct parallel in existing literature.

Near-total linguistic nationalism (97.6 % of names) is in standardised Swahili (200/205). English appears only in three commercially driven hotel names that were retained (Four Points, Verde View, Rose Garden). There are no colonial-era European personal names in the corpus. Gender asymmetry: only 4 of the 98 personal names (\approx 4 %) are unambiguously female (Sophia, Zubeda, Rosha, and “Maria de Mathias”). This reproduces a pattern observed across African renaming projects but reaches an extreme in Dodoma. Religious skewedness: despite Dodoma Region being approximately 55 % Christian and 40 % Muslim (NBS Tanzania 2022 Census), all 11 religious-institutional streets refer exclusively to Christian entities (KKKT, Roman Catholic, Saint Gasper, etc.). Islamic institutions, mosques, or figures are entirely absent. This implies an erasure that demands interpretive attention in Section 5.

Spatial clustering: GIS analysis reveals statistically significant non-random clustering (Moran's I = 0.42, $p < 0.001$). Fauna streets are concentrated in two western residential extensions (*Miyuji* and *Ntyuka* wards); political-hero streets radiate from the new State House and parliamentary complex, while virtue names dominate the ring roads and major arterial roads. These quantitative patterns serve as empirical foundation for the layered qualitative interpretation in the following section. Far from neutral administrative labels, the distribution demonstrates a deliberate hierarchical semiotics in which heroic individuals, Tanzania's wildlife brand, and state-sanctioned moral discourse overwhelmingly structure the capital's toponymic imagination, while alternative identities (gender, religious pluralism, pre-colonial *Gogo* heritage, labour history or opposition politics) are systematically marginalised.

4.1.1 Analysis of the data

The quantitative distribution outlined in Section 4 is not an accidental aggregate, but a carefully orchestrated ideological text. Dodoma's street names operate as a stratified semiotic system in which six principal layers overlap, reinforce, and occasionally contradict one another. Each layer simultaneously performs identity work on multiple scales: national, regional, ethnic, moral, ecological, and religious. The analysis below moves from the most dominant

to the most residual, using Peircean semiotics, Irvine and Gal's (2000) mechanisms of iconisation, fractal recursivity and erasure, and critical toponymic theory to unpack the ideological labour performed by each stratum.

Layer 1: The Cult of Personality and Political Legitimation

The most striking feature of Dodoma's new toponymy is its extreme personalisation where 98 (47.3) streets out of all the streets studied reflect the names of people, and 12 (5.9%) reflecting National political figures & presidents, ranging from founding president Julius Nyerere (the only figure granted a major arterial road) to the late John Pombe Magufuli (whose name appears on a boulevard linking the airport to the new State House) to dozens of regional commissioners, members of parliament, ward councilors, and even deceased ordinary residents. This pattern far exceeds the commemorative intensity observed in most post-colonial capitals.

Three sub-genres are discernible: (a) National heroes and presidents: only a handful of streets are reserved for the pantheon of canonical leaders: Nyerere, Magufuli, Malechela (prime minister under Nyerere), and Job Ndugai (former speaker). Their placement on the largest thoroughfares iconically reproduces the hierarchical structure of the Tanzanian state itself. (b) The "new notables" – regional and parliamentary elites account for thirty-one streets (12.1%) which honour living or recently deceased regional commissioners (e.g., Makongoro for the former Rukwa RC), MPs (Mavunde, Makame), and deputy ministers. Interviews with municipal planners revealed that many of these names were proposed directly by the individuals themselves or by their home constituencies as a form of political reward. This practice transforms the street grid into a clientelist ledger of recognition. (c) Ordinary citizens and grassroots commemoration is the most surprising subcategory where 55 streets (26.8% of the total) consist of apparently non-elite individuals: teachers, farmers, catechists, and accident victims. Municipal records and resident interviews indicate that many of these names were suggested by ward-level street-naming committees in exchange for community contributions (land donation or labour during road construction). The result is a curious democratisation of commemorative space that remains tightly controlled by local CCM party structures. As one planner candidly remarked, "Every street must have a patron; it motivates people to accept the new names." Taken together, this tripartite cult of personality iconises the Tanzanian political field as a continuum stretching from the quasi-sacred founding father through the ruling party apparatus down to the ordinary loyal citizen, thereby naturalising hierarchical authority as benevolent paternalism.

Layer 2: Fauna and the Ecological Nation

The second most prominent layer is zoological. Twenty-three streets (11%) bear the Swahili names of charismatic megafauna (*Simba*, *Twiga*, *Tembo*, *Chui*, *Kinyonga*, *Swala*, *Tandala*, etc.), while twelve others directly reference Tanzania's flagship national parks (*Serengeti*, *Ngorongoro*, *Mikumi*, *Saadani*). No other capital in the world, to the author's knowledge, has devoted such a large contiguous residential area to animal-themed streets. This pattern cannot be explained by local biodiversity—Dodoma lies in semi-arid miombo woodland where lions and giraffes have never roamed. Instead, it represents a deliberate act of iconisation; thus, the capital is made to resemble, metonymically, the nation's globally marketed wilderness brand. As one senior CDA official explained in interview (July 2023): "When foreign ambassadors drive from the airport, we want them to feel they are already in safari country. Simba Road, Twiga Road—these names sell Tanzania before they even reach their hotels." The fauna cluster thus performs three ideological functions simultaneously: First, ecological nationalism: Tanzania's international comparative advantage (wildlife tourism) is projected onto the seat of government. Secondly, de-historicisation: animal names are politically "safe," carrying no risk of ethnic or partisan contestation. Third, aesthetic modernisation: the theme lends itself to colourful, tourist-friendly signage and urban branding campaigns ("Welcome to the Wildlife Capital").

Layer 3: Moral and Developmental Discourse

Nineteen streets (9.3%) bear abstract virtues or developmental slogans such as *Umoja* (unity), *Amani* (peace), *Hekima* (wisdom), *Mashujaa* (heroes), *Mshikamano* (solidarity), *Mwangaza* (enlightenment) and *Mapinduzi* (revolution). These a tradition inaugurated by Nyerere's *Ujamaa* era (*Uhuru*, *Umoja*, *Amani* avenues in 1970s Dar es Salaam), but they are here updated with Magufuli-era anti-corruption signalling (*Takukuru* for the Prevention and Combating of Corruption Bureau) and infrastructural triumphalism (*Mashine*, "machine"). Positioned along ring roads and ceremonial boulevards, they function as performative speech acts. This implies that by naming a street *Hekima*, the state presupposes and attempts to entail wise citizenship.

Layer 4: Ethnic and Regional References

Although Swahili functions as the unifying medium, fourteen streets (6.8%) index specific ethnic or regional origins. These include *Ukerewe*, *Moshi*, *Tabora*, *Machame* and *Kyusa* (*Nyakyusa*). The majority, however, refer to regions or groups geographically proximate to Dodoma or politically allied with the ruling party. *Gogo* (the indigenous agro-pastoralist majority) are indirectly present through numerous personal names, but almost never

through direct ethnic labelling, an erasure that residents repeatedly remarked upon. As one Gogo elder stated: “All these animal and politicians, but where is *Wagogo* Road?”

Layer 5: Religious and Educational Institutionalisation

Twelve (12) streets (5.4%) commemorate Christian churches and schools (KKKT, Roman Catholic, Saint Gasper, Maria de Mathias, Brother Martin). Despite Dodoma Region’s sizeable Muslim population and the presence of major mosques, no street bears an Islamic referent or Sheikh or Madrasa or mosque name among the 205 streets sampled. This systematic absence constitutes a stark example of Irvine and Gal’s (2000) erasure: an entire confessional community is rendered invisible in the official toponymic imagination at the very moment the capital is meant to symbolise national unity.

Layer 6: Residual Commercial and Colonial Elements

A tiny handful of pre-2016 names (9 (4.4%) survive. These are exclusively high-end hotels (Four Points, Rose Garden, Verde View and commercially powerful brands (Azam). Their retention reveals the limits of ideological purity: global capital and tourism economics occasionally trump nationalist semiotics.

Synthesis: A Stratified Ideoscape

When read together, the six layers produce a coherent ideoscape: Firstly, the individual (especially the male political individual) is celebrated as the primary agent of history. Secondly, the nation is imagined as simultaneously heroic-revolutionary, morally virtuous, and ecologically exceptional. Thirdly, unity is performed through Swahili and through a careful distribution of regional references, yet achieved in part through the erasure of religious pluralism and indigenous Gogo spatiality. Fourthly, modernity is indexed via infrastructure, anti-corruption institutions, and the global readability of the wildlife brand.

Dodoma’s streets thus constitute a miniature of the post-2015 Tanzanian political imaginary: authoritarian-modernising, eco-nationalist, Swahili-centric, and carefully calibrated to reward loyalty while projecting an image of inclusive, virtuous, and globally attractive statehood. The following section situates these findings comparatively and reflects on their contradictions.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1 Dodoma as an Ideological Laboratory

Dodoma’s 205 new street names do not merely label thoroughfares; they constitute one of the most ambitious exercises in state-led onomastic engineering ever undertaken in sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike the piecemeal, often contested renaming processes observed in Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, or Johannesburg, Dodoma offered something close to a toponymic tabula rasa: a planned capital whose delayed realisation allowed the post-2015 Tanzanian state to inscribe its vision onto urban space with unprecedented coherence and minimal resistance. The result is a city that functions, in the strongest terms, as an ideological laboratory: a controlled environment in which competing imaginaries of the nation (personalist, ecological, moral-developmental, ethno-regional, and religious) are tested, stratified, and materially fixed.

Top-Down Nation-Building in an Era of Delayed Capitals

The Dodoma case illuminates a broader phenomenon: the resurgence of the planned-capital project in the 21st century. Where 20th-century relocations (Abuja 1991, Lilongwe 1975, Yamoussoukro 1983) were often framed in explicitly anti-colonial or socialist terms, Dodoma’s actualisation under Magufuli (2015-2021) and Hassan (2021-present) belongs to a new wave that combines authoritarian-modernising governance with soft-power branding. Dodoma uses monumental urbanism and micro-toponymy to signal rupture with a supposedly corrupt, cosmopolitan coastal past and to project an image of disciplined, forward-looking statehood. Dodoma’s ideological programme is articulated almost entirely through Swahili and through distinctly Tanzanian symbolic repertoires: Nyerere’s lingering charisma, Magufuli’s anti-corruption populism, and the globally recognised wildlife heritage.

Comparative Perspectives: Dodoma among African Planned Capitals

Comparative analysis sharpens the distinctiveness of Dodoma’s model:

Abuja (Nigeria) privileged ethnic-balancing and commemorated pre-colonial kingdoms alongside federal heroes, producing a deliberately pluralist pantheon (Elleh, 2012). Dodoma, by contrast, imposes a strongly centripetal, CCM-mediated hierarchy dominated by party-affiliated individuals. Gaborone and Lilongwe retained significant English-medium and colonial-era names. Dodoma achieves near-total linguistic nationalism (97.6 % Swahili), confirming Mazrui’s (2007) observation that Tanzania remains the most successful case of state-driven language planning in Africa. Generally, there is no surveyed capital which devotes comparable space to fauna. The closest

parallel is Brasilia's thematic wings (Asa Norte/Sul), but these are abstract rather than ecological. Dodoma's animal streets, therefore, represent an innovative fusion of environmental nationalism with urban branding.

The Limits of Onomastic Nationalism: Reception and Everyday (Non-)Use

Official names are one thing; vernacular practice is another. Ethnographic walks and participatory mapping (2023–2024) revealed a pronounced gap between the state's semiotic ambitions and residents' spatial practices. Long-term inhabitants, especially Gogo speakers, overwhelmingly continue to use pre-2016 descriptors ("Kwa Mchina", "Mtaa wa Sokoni", "Nyuma ya Hospitali") or plot numbers, or landmark-based directions. Newly arrived civil servants and younger residents are more likely to adopt fauna names ("Niko Twiga karibu na Simba"), which have proved memorable and photographable, but even they rarely use political-personal names in daily interaction. As one ministry driver remarked: "Magufuli Road is fine for GPS, but everyone says 'Barabara ya Airport'."

This disjuncture recalls Scott's (1998) critique of high-modernist planning: the more ambitious the synoptic legibility project, the greater the likelihood of local resistance or indifference. Dodoma's street signs, despite being brightly coloured and newly installed, frequently stand in splendid isolation, ignored by boda-boda riders and matatu touts who navigate instead by churches, bars, and tree species. The ideological laboratory, in other words, remains partially sealed from the lived city.

Street Names as Soft Power and Global Branding

Perhaps the most original contribution of Dodoma's toponymy lies in its ecological turn. By devoting 17 % of central streets to animals and parks, the state transforms the capital into an extension of the Northern Safari Circuit. International hotels, conference centres, and the new Convention Centre are deliberately located along or near Simba, Twiga, and Serengeti roads, creating a seamless experience in which delegates can feel immersed in "Brand Tanzania" without leaving the city limits. This strategy aligns with recent scholarship on "nation branding through nature" (Aronczyk, 2013) and suggests that wildlife, long instrumentalised in tourism marketing, is now being recruited into diplomatic and urban soft power. In an era when African states compete fiercely for Chinese, Gulf, and Western investment, Dodoma's fauna streets offer an instantly recognisable, politically uncontroversial, and aesthetically pleasing identity package.

Contradictions and Silences

In this study, three silences are particularly revealing: Firstly, gender disparity: with fewer than five unambiguously female names, Dodoma reproduces and arguably intensifies the patriarchal bias observed across African commemorative landscapes (Bigon, 2008). Secondly, religious pluralism: the complete absence of Islamic references in a region with a large Muslim minority contradicts the constitutional commitment to secular unity and risks alienating a significant constituency. Thirdly, indigenous Gogo spatiality: despite Dodoma's location in the historical Gogo heartland, pre-colonial hydronyms, cattle-track names, and clan territories have been almost entirely erased, replaced by a state-centric Swahili grid. This constitutes a second, quieter colonisation of space. These erasures suggest that the laboratory is not neutral; it is calibrated to the interests of the ruling party, the centralising state, and global tourism capital.

4.3 Theoretical Implications

The Dodoma case advances critical toponymy and linguistic-landscape research in three ways: Firstly, it documents a new hybrid regime type, personalist-ecological nationalism, in which the cult of the strong leader coexists with the celebration of non-human nature as national icon. Secondly, it demonstrates how planned capitals, because of their delayed or staggered implementation, can function as privileged sites for testing ideological innovations that would be politically impossible in established metropolises. Thirdly, it complicates the binary between top-down imposition and bottom-up resistance by revealing a third pathway: partial adoption mediated by aesthetic consequence and global legibility (fauna names succeed where political-hero names often fail). Generally, Dodoma's streets reveal a state that is simultaneously nostalgic (for Nyerere), disciplinarian (Magufuli), entrepreneurial (wildlife branding), and anxious about its own legitimacy (hyper-personal commemoration as clientelist glue). The ideological laboratory is fully operational, but its experiments remain contested, incomplete, and subject to everyday subversion.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Dodoma's post-2016 street-naming programme is far more than an administrative exercise in urban legibility. In the space of less than a decade, the Tanzanian authorities transformed a city once known only by numbers and letters into one of the most ideologically saturated toponymic landscapes on the African continent. The 205 streets

analysed here (personal heroes occupying almost half the grid, wild animals and national parks claiming a further sixth, moral virtues and anti-corruption institutions lining the ceremonial boulevards) constitute a deliberate, state-authored text that performs multiple forms of identity work simultaneously. They re-territorialise the planned capital as unambiguously Tanzanian, Swahili-speaking, politically loyal, ecologically exceptional, and resolutely modernising. In the process, they naturalise a specific vision of the post-Ujamaa, post-Magufuli state wishes to project both to its own citizens and to the world.

This study has demonstrated that Dodoma functions as a privileged ideological laboratory precisely because its capital status was so long deferred. Unlike Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, or Accra, where renaming must negotiate dense layers of historical sedimentation and competing social claims, Dodoma offered planners something close to a blank slate. The result is a rare instance of near-total toponymic coherence: 97.6 % Swahili-medium names, the almost complete erasure of colonial traces, and an unprecedented fusion of personalist commemoration with ecological nationalism. No other capital studied to date has attempted to brand itself so explicitly through its wildlife heritage while simultaneously cultivating an intense cult of political personality. The streets called *Simba*, *Twiga*, and *Serengeti*, radiating outward from Magufuli and Nyerere boulevards, encapsulate a distinctly twenty-first-century Tanzanian ideoscape: one that marries authoritarian-modernising leadership with globally circulating images of African nature.

Yet, the laboratory is not hermetically sealed. Ethnographic evidence reveals persistent gaps between official semiotics and everyday practice. Long-standing residents, especially from the indigenous Gogo community, continue to navigate by landmarks, plot numbers, and vernacular descriptors that pre-date the renaming wave. Fauna names have enjoyed the highest spontaneous uptake, not because of their ideological content but because of their aesthetic memorability and touristic resonance. Political-hero names, by contrast, often remain confined to maps and GPS applications. These disjunctures underscore a broader theoretical point: even the most ambitious onomastic projects cannot fully control the lived linguistic landscape. Street names may be imposed from above, but their enregisterment as meaningful social facts depends on uptake, subversion, and creative re-appropriation from below.

The silences in Dodoma's toponymicon are as revealing as its inclusions. The near-absence of female figures, the complete erasure of Islamic referents in a confessionally mixed region, and the marginalisation of pre-colonial Gogo spatialities all point to the limits of the nationalist imaginary being inscribed. Unity (Umoja, Mshikamano) is repeatedly invoked, yet achieved in part through selective erasure rather than genuine pluralism. These contradictions suggest that Dodoma's streets do not simply reflect an existing consensus; they actively police the boundaries of belonging in the new capital. For scholarship, the Dodoma case makes three lasting contributions: first, it expands critical toponymy and linguistic-landscape studies into the under-examined terrain: the planned capitals of the Global South, where state power over naming is at its most concentrated. Secondly, it identifies and theorises a novel configuration: personalist-ecological nationalism, in which the celebration of strong leaders is fused with the iconisation of non-human nature as national brand, and lastly, it complicates linear narratives of decolonisation by showing how post-colonial renaming can simultaneously erase colonial traces and indigenous vernacular geographies, producing new hierarchies in the name of unity.

For policy, the findings carry implications beyond Tanzania. As a growing number of African states contemplate administrative relocation or large-scale urban renaming (Egypt, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea), Dodoma offers both a model and a caution. A coherent, aesthetically striking toponymic regime can powerfully reinforce nation-branding and political legitimacy, but only if it resonates with lived experience and avoids blatant exclusion. Future research should pursue three directions. First, longitudinal resident surveys and GPS-tracking studies could quantify the extent to which the new names have been internalised or ignored. Second, comparative work on other delayed capitals (Nusantara in Indonesia, the projected Congo River city in DRC) would test the generalisability of the personalist-ecological model. Third, intersectional analysis of gender, religion, and indigeneity in African toponymic practice remains urgently needed.

Conclusively, Dodoma's streets teach us that place-naming is never merely nomenclature. It is governance by semiotics, an attempt to make the nation walkable, drivable, and imaginable in a particular way. From fauna to founding fathers, the new capital's toponymy reveals a state that is confident in its symbolic repertoire yet anxious about its democratic deficits; proud of its natural heritage yet reluctant to confront its human diversity; and determined to project modernity while remaining tethered to the heroic individual as the primary vector of historical change. As Tanzania continues its uneasy transition into a more urban, more globally connected century, the streets of Dodoma will remain a privileged site for reading the aspirations, contradictions, and silences of the nation itself.

The study reveals systematic exclusions, particularly of women, Islamic identities, and indigenous Gogo spatial knowledge. This indicates that current naming practices remain heavily centralised and ideologically selective. This study recommends the government to formalise participatory naming frameworks that include local communities (especially indigenous groups such as the Gogo), religious stakeholders across denominations and gender-balanced representation. Such participatory mechanisms would transform street naming from a top-down symbolic imposition into a negotiated semiotic practice, enhancing legitimacy, social ownership, and everyday usability. This aligns with

broader landscape linguistics insights that meaning emerges through interaction between authority and lived experience, not unilateral inscription.

5.2 Recommendations

This study also recommends rebalancing the toponymic hierarchy to reduce over-personalisation of street names. With nearly half of all street names commemorating individuals, the study demonstrates an unusually intense “cult of personality”. While commemoration is important, excessive personalisation risks politicising urban space, reinforcing patronage networks, and limiting long-term symbolic flexibility. It is, further, recommended that planners ‘diversify naming categories’ by expanding historical events, cultural heritage, and indigenous ecological knowledge, increasing representation of women and non-political contributors, and incorporating thematic clusters beyond political elites. A more balanced semiotic ecology would better reflect the multiplicity of national identity and reduce dependence on transient political figures.

The paper highlights a clear disconnection between official names and everyday navigation, where residents continue to rely on landmarks and informal descriptors. To bridge this gap, authorities should document and incorporate vernacular place-names into official registries, and introduce dual-naming systems where both official and local names can be used. This approach acknowledges that linguistic landscapes are ‘co-produced’, and not imposed. Integrating vernacular knowledge enhances usability, preserves intangible cultural heritage, and improves urban navigation systems.

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