

REVIEW ARTICLE

Doing violence to the past: Zimbabwe's new old history*

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Voices from the Rocks. Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe. By TERENCE RANGER. Oxford: James Curry, 1999. x + 305pp. ISBN 0-253-21288 and *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forests' of Matabeleland.* By JOCYLYN ALEXANDER, JOANN MCGREGOR and TERENCE RANGER. Oxford: James Currey, 2000. xvi + 291pp. ISBN 0-85255-692-6.

Matabeleland, that is, the western third or so of Zimbabwe, has a past which is richly sulphurous even by the demanding standards of southern Africa. The scene of Lobengula's Ndebele kingdom until 1893; of large scale land alienation, forced labour and gold mining development after the turn of the twentieth century; and rapid secondary industrialization and urbanization during and immediately after the Second World War, it witnessed war and uprising in the 1890s; strikes and the emergence of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union in the 1920s and 1930s; a General Strike and rural unrest in the late 1940s and 1950s; and armed incursions followed by guerrilla war in the 1960s and 1970s. After Independence in 1980, Matabeleland experienced the murderous attentions of an authoritarian government determined to stamp out all resistance. Most recently, its people delivered their own verdict on the postcolonial state by returning, despite widespread intimidation, almost a full slate of opposition MPs to parliament, as well as registering a massive protest vote against Robert Mugabe in last year's presidential election.

Not surprisingly, this distinctive trajectory has long attracted the attention of leading historians. Julian Cobbing, Ngwabi Bhebe and Richard Brown all brilliantly illuminated Matabeleland's precolonial and early colonial pasts, perhaps none more so than Cobbing whose scholarly account of the Ndebele Rising demolished its crude nationalist pieties. The Ndebele *umvukela*, Cobbing concluded, did not witness 'the emergence of a leadership which was charismatic and revolutionary', as once was claimed. As the Ndebele had not been divorced from their 'traditional' leadership by the mid-1890s, the leading role ascribed to religious leaders was quite simply wrong. They certainly did not co-ordinate a

* This essay incorporates a review of *Violence and Memory*, first published in the *Journal of African Change*, vol.2, 2002 and is used here with permission.

united Ndebele-Shona resistance against the whites. Nothing like the ‘first act of “Zimbabwean” nationalism’, the Ndebele Rising was rather ‘the last act of the independent Ndebele state’.¹

Nor were scholars of the colonial period lacking. Robin Palmer, Charles van Onselen and Victor Machingaidze in the course of wide-ranging studies skillfully exposed the dynamics of land seizure, ‘chibaro’ or quasi-forced mine labour and peasant protest.² Others have examined capital accumulation and social differentiation in the region, while the highly ambiguous relationship between organised labour and nationalism has been interpreted with great subtlety by Brian Raftopoulos and by Jonathan Hyslop.³ Huge historiographical holes remained, however. By contrast to earlier periods and certainly with other parts of the country, the liberation struggle in western Zimbabwe was largely ignored, Jeremy Brickhill and Richard Werbner’s exceptional work notwithstanding.⁴ Similarly neglected were the mid-1980s when thousands of Matabeleland civilians were slaughtered. Where articles did appear, they tended to gloss over such awkward facts.⁵ Indeed, it was not until the appearance in 1997 of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace’s *Breaking the Silence. A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands* that the full extent of the atrocities committed by Mugabe’s troops was widely publicised.⁶

As these matters figure prominently in the list of issues which the second of the two books reviewed here, that is, *Violence and Memory*, promises to address when investigating ‘the relationships between anti-colonial resistance, nationalism, ethnicity and religion, and the more recent history of the guerrilla and post-independence wars,’ many Southern African readers will turn to it with rare anticipation. All but the most uncritical of them are likely to be keenly disappointed. Some will soon enough realise that the sweeping generalizations which this multi-authored volume makes on the basis of an examination of northern Matabeleland rest on nothing more substantial than a close look at two adjoining districts. As they will certainly search in vain for any figures as a basis for comparison, it is worth noting that the total population of the area at the start of the 1970s was only about 100,000. Others will balk at the contradiction between the claim that this is a book which eschews ‘a single overarching interpretation of the historical relation-

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1. J. Cobbing, ‘Lobengula, Jameson and the occupation of Mashonaland’, *Rhodesian History*, vol.4, 1973; J. Cobbing, ‘The absent priesthood: another look at the Rhodesian risings of 1896-1897’, *Journal of African History*, vol.18, 1977; and especially J. Cobbing, ‘The Ndebele under the Khumalos, 1820-96’ (Ph.D thesis, University of Lancaster, 1976); N. Bhebe, ‘Ndebele trade in the nineteenth century’, *Journal of African Studies*, vol.1, 1974; N. Bhebe, *Christianity and Traditional Religion in Western Zimbabwe 1859-1923* (London: Longman, 1979); R. Brown, ‘Aspects of the Scramble for Matabeleland’ in E. Stokes and R. Brown, eds., *The Zambesian Past* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966).2. R. Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1977); C. van Onselen, *Chibaro. African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1933* (London: Pluto Press, 1976); and V. Machingaidze, ‘The development of settler capitalist agriculture in Southern Rhodesia with particular reference to the role of the state, 1908-1939’ (Ph. D thesis, University of London, 1980).
 3. B. Raftopoulos and I. Phimister, eds., *Keep on Knocking. A History of the Labour Movement in Zimbabwe, 1900-1997* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1997); I. Phimister and B. Raftopoulos, “‘Kana sora ratswa ngaritswe”: African nationalists and Black Workers. The 1948 General Strike in colonial Zimbabwe’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol.13, 2000; and J. Hyslop, ‘Trade unionism in the rise of African nationalism. Bulawayo 1945-1963’, *Africa Perspective*, vol.1, 1986.
 4. J. Brickhill, ‘Daring to storm the heavens: the military strategy of ZAPU 1976 to 1979’ in N. Bhebe and T. Ranger, eds., *Soldiers in Zimbabwe’s Liberation War. Volume One* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1995); and R. Werbner, *Tears of the Dead. The Social Biography of an African Family* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).
 5. T. Ranger, ‘Matabeleland since the amnesty’, *African Affairs*, vol.88, 1989.
 6. *Breaking the Silence. Building True Peace. A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980 to 1988* (Harare: Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, 1997).

ships between rulers and ruled in Zimbabwe' and the fact that the views of 'every significant religious leader' and 'most, if not all, important local leaders' are disproportionately represented. In short, what is presented here is not even a history of a particular region; it is only 'the story of people who want to be incorporated into nationalist history.' Everyone and everything else gets short shrift.

This being so, *Violence and Memory* does not have much to say about agrarian political economy. The settler period is dealt with in cursory fashion. Apart from a brief mention of the 'second colonial occupation', there is no discussion of the wider context in which 'good husbandry' policies were formulated and implemented. Nor are the social relations and dynamics of production, property and power explored in any depth. Because social differentiation is discounted where it is not ignored, subsequent 'struggles within the struggle' are brushed aside. This is not a study in which Lionel Cliffe's penetrating insight concerning the simultaneity of struggle during the Liberation War finds any place. The possibility that the ambitions of ordinary peasants were not always perfectly accommodated by either 'the Party [ZAPU]' or the guerrillas is not one entertained by the authors.

No less revealing is *Violence and Memory*'s treatment of the so-called Unity Accord of December 1987 which put an end to the violence which had wracked Matabeleland for much of the decade. While the book acknowledges that although 'Unity [between ZAPU and ZANU(PF)] was accepted, it was an ambiguous acceptance,' it persists in discussing the question from the perspective of the leadership and in doing so, misses the most important point. And this, as the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace noted, was that the unity accord 'did not bring about meaningful reconciliation among the common people of Zimbabwe; the unity accord largely brought about an accommodation of interests between political leaders. Thousands of interviews conducted during the research leading to this report revealed that there is still deep rooted fear, anger and distrust at grassroots of society.' Unless the origins and nature of this fundamental cleavage are understood, Matabeleland's subsequent political trajectory cannot be explained. There is nothing in this one-sided account which prepares readers for the massive support garnered by the new opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change [MDC], in the general election fought in 2001.⁷ On the contrary, if *Violence and Memory* were to be believed, the 'convivial tension' between rulers and ruled, suitably refreshed by commemoration, cleansing and healing, should have delivered another victory for nationalism.

What of the other book under review here, *Voices from the Rocks*? Written with the express intention of redressing the geographical imbalance caused by the fact that much of the research published during the first decade of Zimbabwe's independence was Mashonaland-centred, this study of 'nature, culture and history' in the Matopos Hills, south of Bulawayo, has as its focus a region of rare symbolic significance for black and white alike. In doing so, it is at pains to explain how 'nature' is itself an historical and social construct. In what are undoubtedly the

7. *Organised Violence and Torture in the June 2000 General Election in Zimbabwe* (Harare, 2000). For an intimation of what was to come, see especially J. Makumbe and D. Compagnon, *Behind the Smokescreen. The Politics of Zimbabwe's 1995 General Election* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2000).

most interesting and satisfying sections of an otherwise seriously flawed book, the origins and contested implementation of conflicting notions of landscape, environment and conservation are traced over time, the pivotal moment arguably coming in 1949 with a Commission of Inquiry into the Matopos National Park. Local claims to the land were brushed aside: 'what the Commissioners took to be proven and incontestable science won out over unproven and doubtful oral testimony.' Under successive governments, including the present one, poor peasants have been the main targets of increasingly self-confident ecological experts. While the precise rationale may have varied, the bottom line was always the same: 'saving nature from African humanity'. As this could only be secured by removing the local population from the area, force was frequently contemplated and occasionally employed, certainly whenever politically possible. Only very recently was an accommodation with so-called traditional farming systems even proposed, a conservationist debate since rendered sadly irrelevant by the present regime's rapidly diminishing capacity to do anything except cling to power.

There are also tantalising glimpses in those chapters and sections of chapters which deal with the many attempts to 'appropriate' the Matopos for the construction of white and black, specifically Ndebele, identities of just how complicated and contested such processes actually were. The importance of the Matopos for Cecil Rhodes – his insistence that his remains should be buried at the location known to him as 'World's View' – is briefly described, as is the significance ascribed to the Hills by the early white settlers. Thereafter, the author's interest in what he so obviously regards as an undifferentiated mass of settler savagery quickly flags, and the rest of the book, several hundred pages in fact, concentrates on 'African identity and opposition', 'Tradition and nationalism', 'War and politics' and so predictably on. No mention is made of the role played subsequently by the Matopos Hills in the emergence of settler identity, nor is the likelihood explored that they may have been invested with successive, sometimes overlapping and often contradictory meanings. Perhaps this was never more apparent than during the events celebrating the occasion of the Rhodes Centenary Exhibition in 1953. Designed to mark the centenary of Rhodes' birth as well as showcase the potential of the soon-to-be established Central African Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, the Exhibition stood in sharp contrast to the van Riebeeck tercentenary held in Cape Town the previous year.⁸ For all of the contradictions posed by the 'second colonial occupation' of Africa in the postwar era, the ethos of the Bulawayo exhibition was very different from the sour Afrikaner triumphalism manifest in the Cape Town display. Much was made by the Centenary's organisers of Rhodes' ambiguous dictum of equal rights for all civilised men south of the Zambezi, and the proximity of the Matopos Hills was deliberately exploited to invest them with wider meaning than previously. A photograph taken at this time of Rhodes Scholars past and present grouped around his Matopos grave, and which is reproduced in *Voices*, cannot simply be passed off without comment as merely the latest in a long line of racist settler rituals. It was actually one of the first public statements of the liberal

8. C. Rassool and L. Witz, 'The 1952 Jan Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Festival: Constructing and Contesting Public National History in South Africa', *Journal of African History*, vol.34, 1993.

values, however paternalistic and limited in scope, which were beginning to inform Southern Rhodesian and Federal politics in this period.⁹

None of these developments are discussed in this blinkered book. Its failure to examine the different meanings at different times of the Matopos Hills in the construction of white identities and latterly of settler nationalism leads inevitably to a one-dimensional and ahistorical view of a crucial element of colonial Zimbabwe's past. But if settler voices are largely ignored, or misrepresented when they are not, only some African voices are privileged in *Voices*. Not everyone obtains a hearing. That an uncritical celebration of African nationalism informs *Voices* should hardly come as a surprise, though. In many respects, it is a precursor to *Violence and Memory*, and aficionados of this kind of thing will delight in the fact that the opinions which are given voice in the former are as expediently selective as the memories summoned up in the later volume.¹⁰ The late, unlamented godfather of Zimbabwean nationalism, Joshua Nkomo, appears in *Voices* as an avuncular figure whose concern for the integrity of the Mwali shrines in the Matopos is matched only by his disinterested support for land redistribution in the province. The fact that a very large acreage of land so designated ended up in his own hands is discretely passed over. Instead, Zimbabwe's past is presented as a morality tale in which good black nationalists overcome many obstacles before eventually defeating bad white settlers. It is a teleological tale that has lost nothing in its constant retelling. Indeed, one sympathetic reviewer of *Voices* was happy to see it as a sequel to Ranger's first book on Zimbabwe, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-7*. Just as *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* 'explored the complex inter-relationships between politics and religion in the ideology and cosmology of the rebellion and in its military articulation, so *Voices from the Rocks* examines the relations between politics, religion and war from the end of the rebellion, through the colonial period and during the first twenty years of post-colonial Zimbabwe.'¹¹

It is a comparison that is more apposite than the reviewer cited above can possibly have intended. Research conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s demonstrated beyond doubt that *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* had got it spectacularly wrong in every important respect, even to the extent of misquoting crucial documents. If Cobbing's demolition of Ranger's explanation of the Ndebele Rising was not enough, it very soon became apparent that *Revolt's* chapters on the Shona rising were equally unreliable. In a series of closely argued articles and essay reviews, David Beach subjected Ranger's work to forensic scrutiny. The results were scarcely edifying.

Acknowledging that no review of *Revolt* could be complete 'without some reference to the political context in which it was written', Beach explained to his readers that at a time when the settler counter-revolution of UDI appeared to be going from strength to strength in the face of African disunity, Ranger's interpretation

9. Amongst others, see F. Clements, *Rhodesia: Course to Collision* (London, 1969); L. Vambe, *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe* (London: Heinemann, 1976); and H. Holderness, *Lost Chance: Southern Rhodesia 1945-58* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publication House, 1985).

10. It would seem to be an old problem. Many years ago, when reviewing Ranger's *The African Voice in Southern Rhodesia, 1898-1930* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1970), Sholto Cross was moved to ask 'where the African voice begins and where the off-stage directions of the author end'; see 'Protest in Rhodesia', *Transafrican Journal of History*, vol.5, 1972.

11. P. Fry, 'The spirits of the hills', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 2000.

of the Risings offered hope for the future. With past divisions overcome under their new religious leadership, the Ndebele and the Shona 'achieved almost complete tactical surprise, with a preconcerted, coordinated, almost simultaneous rising in each zone in March and June 1896.' In short, wrote Beach, '*Revolt* served as a "charter for Zimbabwe as a focus for present-day political action."' But whatever interests it served, it wasn't good history. For Beach, *Revolt* turned too much on inference, analogy and assertion, and too little on what the documents actually said. Contrary evidence had sometimes been omitted. On Beach's meticulous reading of every available file, there was nothing about the Shona rising, or risings, as he preferred to see them, to support Ranger's usable past. In neither Mashonaland nor Matabeleland had events come anywhere near to approximating 'the Rangerian model of a tightly-knit Ndebele-Shona religious high command organizing a pre-planned, simultaneous rising.'¹² This being so, it is highly likely that a sequel built on such rotten foundations will also be found wanting. After all, *Voices* is a book that ends by proclaiming that from 1988 Matabeleland 'became the most secure stronghold of ZANU/PF in the whole country.'

At the first parliamentary session following an election which was neither free nor fair, the MDC called for a new history of Zimbabwe, one which would neither sing the same old nationalist praises nor serve the interests of the status quo. More is the pity that for all their incorporation of a number of mildly critical verses, the self-congratulatory micro-studies reviewed here do not herald the beginning of any such process. The song they sing is too tediously familiar for that. But with any luck, these two books will come to mark the end of a fly-blown orthodoxy whose limitations can be measured by its abject failure to speak to the past concerns and hopes for the future of anyone other than Zimbabwe's nationalist elite.

12. D. Beach, 'Chimurenga: the Shona rising of 1896-7', *Journal of African History*, vol.20, 1979; and his essay review, 'Revolt in Southern Rhodesia' in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol.13, 1980. Both accounts are discussed further in chapter 5 of his *War and Politics in Zimbabwe, 1840-1900* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986).