

**THE PAST AS BATTLEFIELD IN RHODESIA AND ZIMBABWE:  
THE STRUGGLE OF COMPETING NATIONALISMS OVER HISTORY  
FROM COLONIZATION TO INDEPENDENCE**

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Nation building and interpretation of history have been linked in Zimbabwe from the conquest and colonization of the area by the British South Africa Company in 1890, and the naming of it as Rhodesia in 1895, to the attempts to consolidate African national independence in Zimbabwe after 1980. The mobilization of historical mythology has played a prominent part both in relation to the endeavours of white colonizers to appropriate and legitimize power and to the battle of African nationalists to take it away from them and install themselves as rightful rulers. An interesting light can, therefore, be thrown on the varying nationalisms which have dominated the political and ideological development in the country by examining their designs for an interpretation of history.

The fact that Rhodesia was a conquest society which the white "pioneers" had grabbed by force from the African population in the invasion in 1890, the war against the Ndebele state in 1893 and the suppression of the Ndebele and Shona risings in 1896-97, put a peculiarly aggressive mark on the presentation of historical mythology from the outset. It was central to the self-understanding and propaganda of white settlers that what they had appropriated was an empty, "virginal" tract of land which was only sparsely populated by groups of "primitives" - people without elaborated social structures or culture and without any historical development of their own behind them. It became a recurrent theme in Rhodesian understandings of history that the African population of the region were relatively recent immigrants, and that its history - inasmuch as it had a history at all - had consisted in meaningless and bloody disputes about supremacy between groupings without written languages or culture - from "Bushmen" through the Shona to the warlike Ndebele invaders from Zululand - and that the rich resources of the area had remained unexploited and waiting for the arrival of the whites and their order and civilization. Thus history and development in any real sense only began with colonization, and everything before 1890 belonged to a dark and chaotic prehistory. This theme was put forward without any greater variation in academic treatises on history, in literary accounts, in school textbooks, and in Rhodesian nationalist propaganda until the fall of the Ian Smith government in 1980.

As a modern African nationalism emerged, the colonial understanding of history was countered from the 1960s with alternative efforts to write history from an African point of view. On the basis of archaeological research, missionary materials and investigations of oral traditions, attempts were made to reconstruct the development of pre-colonial modes of production and forms of government, and to trace the continuity in the history of anti-colonial resistance from the revolts of the 1890s to modern political movements and parties. Since independence in 1980 a new type of official history writing has been establishing itself which, in certain respects, is just as mythologically oriented as its colonial precedent, as it strives to glorify a heroic African tradition and situate the roots of modern national identity in a rich and autonomous historical development. Finally, the beginnings of a critique of this mobilization of tradition are emerging - history and the past remain a battlefield for conflicting ideas about what development and progress might imply.

## The Zimbabwe Ruins and the Myth of a White Africa

A special role in the debate about the history of Rhodesia and Zimbabwe is played by the conflicting interpretations of the extensive complexes of ruins that are found in different parts of the country, and of which the so-called Great Zimbabwe ruins south-east of Masvingo (the former Fort Victoria) are the most impressive. Here, apparently, one is faced with the remnants of a civilization with a history of several centuries which seems to have been much more elaborate than the forms of African social organization that existed at the time of colonization in the 1890s. The structures are described in Portuguese documents from the 16th and 17th centuries and associated with gold production and long-distance trade but, according to recent excavations and carbon datings, the culture and economy which found expression in Great Zimbabwe flourished at the beginning of the 15th century (Garlake 1973:197 and Beach 1980:50).

Interest in the ruins, the tradition of the Monomotapa empire and medieval gold production at Zimbabwe intensified considerably from the 1870s when larger-scale discoveries of gold began to be made in what is now the Republic of South Africa. In 1871-72, on three occasions, the German geologist Carl Mauch succeeded in getting through to Great Zimbabwe in spite of the opposition of the local population and in finding and describing traces of a civilization which he claimed was "Phoenician". Mauch thought that "Zimbabye", as he calls the complex, comes from "Simbaöe", and that this is derived from "Saba". On the basis of an interpretation of quotations from the Bible he argued that the buildings had been modelled on King Solomon's temple and palace, and that they had been the residence of the Queen of Saba (or Sheba):

All the natives admit that neither they nor the formerly so powerful Balosse were capable of constructing such walls, they even maintain that these could only have been built by white people. Should one not come close to the truth if one assumes that Phoenicians and, possibly, Israelites in their thousands had been working here!

(Mauch 1969: p 226; cf. pp 191 and 215)

The myth about the Zimbabwe ruins as vestiges of an earlier, extinct, mighty white civilization in the heart of darkest Africa - of the "Ophir" described in the first Book of Kings in the Old Testament, from where Solomon got gold, precious stones and building materials for his temple - continued to fascinate over the next century. The most famous presentation of the mythology is Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1886), which established the paradigm for a whole school of colonialist literature (cf. Chennells 1982: pp 1-77). Ideology and practical interest, however, were closely related - Cecil Rhodes and the British South Africa Company supported the elaboration of the mythology from the earliest days of colonization for two reasons: the idea of an earlier white civilization in the Rhodesian territory together with the assertion of black African primitivity and barbarism served well to justify the return of the Europeans; further, the tradition and the myth of Great Zimbabwe was of interest because it indicated the existence of gold deposits in the region.

The first archaeological excavations were conducted by Theodore Bent in 1891, and the report of them in the book *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland* (1892) was financed by Rhodes and the Company, as were the subsequent investigations and descriptions by R N Hall (cf. Hall and Neal 1902). The early archaeology was disastrously amateurist - the digging was unsystematic, without proper registration procedures, and directed by the already given assumption of an earlier white civilization; to a large extent the material was spoilt for future examinations (cf. Garlake 1973: pp 65-75). Some of the ruins were destroyed completely by being treated as gold mines by a firm called Rhodesia Ancient Ruins Ltd, which operated under concession from the British South Africa Company between 1895 and 1900. For Rhodes, however, the propaganda value of the historical myth was more important than scientific clarification - already from the mid-1890s it was known

that the expectations of Rhodesia as "a second Witwatersrand" with gold deposits as rich as those in the Transvaal had been highly exaggerated. In order not to discourage investors and settlers, this realization was kept a secret by the Company for as long as possible, and the dream of King Solomon's mines was kept alive (cf. Phimister 1988: pp 10-12).

In spite of the damage done to the historical source material through the reckless diggings of Bent and Hall and the commercial exploitation of the ruins, professional archaeologists were able at a relatively early date to organize more properly prepared and decently conducted excavations and to dismiss the theory about their "Semitic" or European origins. Both David Randall-MacIver in 1906 and Gertrude Caton-Thompson in 1931 concluded that it was meaningless to suggest that the ruined structures had been built by any other than African societies (cf. Garlake 1973: pp 76-83). This was confirmed when it later became possible to use carbon-14 dating methods and to supplement the information from the archaeological material with results gained from a more systematic approach to oral traditions.

For Rhodesian self-understanding and nationalist ideology, however, the myth about a white primordial civilization existing in the wilderness continued to be of much greater importance than whatever might be supported or contradicted by scientific evidence. In his presentation of the history of the Rhodesian novel, Anthony Chennells describes how the notion of the past empire and its fall to besieging hordes of black savages developed into a flexible symbol which could be used to articulate widely differing ideological points. There was no clear borderline between popular historical and literary or fictional presentations, and during the early phase the symbol provided the occasion for imperialist reflections in the style of Kipling's *"Lest We Forget"*. In A Wilmot's *Monomotapa (Rhodesia)* (1896), the alleged white origins of the ruins are used to establish the postulate that Africans are unable to organize anything without white leadership, while at the same time the fate of the ruined buildings invites reflection on the seriousness and great responsibility of "the imperial romance": the British Empire might fare likewise, if the task were not faced with the appropriate humility. In Edward Marwick's *The City of Gold*, also published in 1896, the ruins are used to demonstrate that a civilization breaks down when it loses vitality and the will to expand. In Rider Haggard's *Elissa: the Doom of Zimbabwe* (1900), the Great Zimbabwe empire is said to collapse due to degeneration: "it became weakened by luxury and the mixture of races ... hordes of invading savages stamped it out beneath their bloodstained feet." And in the post-Boer War period the fate of Zimbabwe was used to illustrate what happens if ruling white groups and classes are not able to agree between themselves, as in Iver McIver's *An Imperial Adventure* (1910).

During the years before 1923, when a referendum decided that Rhodesia should not enter the Union of South Africa but that it should aim at becoming an independent dominion, historical mythology could be used to outline a specifically Rhodesian national identity and nationalist ideology, superior even to British imperialist values. In Gertrude Page's *The Rhodesian* (1912), the master race of Great Zimbabwe is compared to the vigorous settler types who in Rhodesia face the task of building an alternative to the decadent Europe from which they have escaped.

On several occasions reference to the collapse of the Zimbabwe civilization was used to emphasize the foreseeable consequences of a too accommodating policy towards Africans and of not being constantly aware of the possibility of a new "rebellion" (cf. Chennells 1982: p 55). In some novels the symbolism of the ruins is reversed - their African origins are acknowledged, but Great Zimbabwe is then presented as an epitome of the despotism and brutality, the unnameable rites an African regime would involve. After the Mau Mau insurrection in Kenya, civil war in the Congo, the wave of decolonization and the emergence of African independence movements, and not least after the militarization of the African nationalist struggle in Rhodesia from the early 1970s, the elements of claustrophobia and sense of being under siege were intensified in white self-understanding.

In novels like Wilbur Smith's *The Sunbird* (1972), the ruin mythology is employed as earlier to sketch out an authentically African and a racially superior white civilization. In other white versions, however, the significance of the symbolism slides, and the ruins are associated with a black African nationalism, which itself began to make use of Great Zimbabwe as an image of a pre-colonial "golden age" in Africa which must be re-established after independence. In 1970, the Rhodesian Front government instructed its employees "that no official publication may state unequivocally that Great Zimbabwe was an African creation" (Garlake 1982a: p 64; and Garlake 1973: p 204). An open discussion about the interpretation of history had by now become too politicized to be allowed, and a serious archaeologist like Peter Garlake was allowed to return home to Zimbabwe only after independence.

Yet the Front was giving in: in an article called "Zimbabwe Ruins - a Mystery Solved" (1978), Helmut K Silberberg, a white archaeologist who had remained in Rhodesia, accepted that Great Zimbabwe had been built by Africans, but that the importance and magnificence of the edifice had been enormously exaggerated: "... it cannot possibly have been built by one of the famous old civilizations or any 'civilization' worthy of this appellation" (Silberberg 1978: p 53). Let them have their old ruins - it is heap of primitive nonsense anyway!

African nationalist literature and history writing began to appropriate the Great Zimbabwe ruins seriously as a political symbol from the 1970s, when the Zimbabwe bird also began to appear on the banners and posters of a variety of parties and organizations, from Muzorewa's UANC to Mugabe's and Nkomo's Patriotic Front. In historical novels like Stanlake Samkange's *Year of the Uprising* (1978), the ruins are presented as an image of African national unity and the potential of African culture. In the same year Zhiradzago Muchemwa had a poem printed in which he uses the museum and tourist facilities at Great Zimbabwe as a symbol of the alienation that has been forced on Africans vis-à-vis their own culture, and in 1979 Musa Zimunya published a whole sequence of poems about the Zimbabwe ruins and the Zimbabwe birds as traces of a past and now silent African age of greatness (Muchemwa 1978: pp 15-16; Kadhani and Zimunya 1981: pp 5-12; cf Garlake 1982b: p 15). Here the thread was resumed from earlier renderings of an African pre-colonial "golden age", in e.g. Solomon Mutswairo's *Feso* (1957) (cf Kaarsholm 1989: p 34), but the tone of voice had become much more explicitly political, and the Zimbabwe bird was identified with the rooster symbol of ZANU (PF).

In his speech at Zimbabwe's independence celebrations in 1980, Robert Mugabe promised that national independence would give the country "a new perspective, and indeed, a new history and a new past" (Garlake 1982b: p 15), but it was soon to become clear that the new historical perspective in the interpretation of the Zimbabwe ruins was no less mythological than its colonial predecessor. The most spectacular example of this is Ken Mufuka's booklet *Dzimbahwe. Life and Politics in the Golden Age 1100-1500 AD* (1983), which - on the basis of a very free handling of the existing materials and the idea that "native Africans" have special qualifications for understanding and describing their own past - gives a nationalist-romantic presentation of the medieval Zimbabwe culture as a religiously governed, classless and - "at village level" - democratic society, which can provide a guiding star for modern Zimbabwe: "... for four hundred years, the Zimbabweans found common purpose, unified leadership, and common discipline enough to make possible the achievements that are a source of amazement today" (Mufuka 1983: p 8).

A similarly romantic view of the past can be found in post-independence literary representations of the Zimbabwe complex. Edmund Chipamaunga's novel, *A Fighter for Freedom* (1983), has a chapter which tells how a group of ZANLA guerillas camp in the "Dzimbahwe" ruins and by studying their pre-colonial building techniques gain inspiration and confidence to fight victoriously for a "resurgence of our Zimbabwean Civilization" (Chipamaunga 1983: pp 219-32; cf Kaarsholm 1989: p 35).

The romantic approach to the past in post-colonial interpretations of history has met with a variety of responses. In general terms David Beach has warned against the idea that it is possible to replace an "old" with a "new" history that can be declared to be valid from now on - according to Beach such an assumption contradicts the basic character of historical knowledge, which progresses through a constant changing of understanding in the light of new materials becoming available and a running debate on its interpretation (Beach 1986: p 11). In a similar vein, Peter Garlake has vehemently attacked Ken Mufuka's treatment of the Great Zimbabwe material as a parody of Victorian prejudice, "grotesque in its exaggerations" and "yet another example of the racist cult history which Great Zimbabwe has always inspired ... there is no common ground between this nonsense and normal processes of historical ... research" (Garlake 1984: pp 121-23). From a different point of view, Terence Ranger has questioned the possibility of any "objective" understanding of history: since the interpretation of Great Zimbabwe has been dominated by ideologically informed approaches, the development of different interpretations has in itself become an integral part of the history of the ruins. The important thing is not to work towards an "authorized" version of their history, but to make the differing interpretations available for discussion and to ensure that history remains "a source of inspiration for individual and collective creativity" (Ranger 1985b: p 76).

The question is, however, what a romantic-nationalist idealization of the African past can be used to inspire. Translated into politics, the inspiration may easily lead to varieties of cultural nationalist programmes of "authenticism" or "African socialism" rather than of democracy, as can be seen from the way in which references to African "tradition" have served in the debate about the desirability of a one-party state in Zimbabwe. In this context, quite flimsily based interpretations of the past have been used to assert, among other things, a natural continuity between a pre-colonial political culture, which was at once autocratic and consensus-oriented, and to dismiss the idea of "western" parliamentary democracy as an appropriate form of constitution in Africa which some politicians would like to promote (cf. e.g. Mutasa 1988: pp 138-44).

### The History of Rhodesia

Some of the themes that dominated the presentation of the process of colonization by white historians had been firmly established in travelogues and missionary reports before 1890. One recurrent theme was that the Africans in the region between the Limpopo and the Zambezi rivers were "rootless" immigrants without rightful claims to the land; another, that their social organization was primitive and characterized by superstition and brutal rituals; further, that they lived in a state of constant discord, looting and massacring each other, and that there were essential "racial" differences between the groupings, from aboriginal "Bushmen" through primitively pastoral and often treacherous "'Shonas" to the more respectably organized, but also martially cruel, "Matabele" (cf Ranger 1985a and 1989a).

In the middle of the nineteenth century such a catalogue of stereotypes appears even in the writings of a missionary like Robert Moffat, who was not uncritical vis-à-vis his own cultural background:

How like these barbarians are to some of the civilised nations of Europe, who love robbery, dominion and oppression! Wherever these things are perpetrated, whether here or in civilised Europe, they must be classed among the dark places of the earth. Nothing but the Bible can save man from these woes. (Moffat 1976: I, pp 167-68).

For Moffat, it was important to establish a difference between Mzilikazi's "Matabele" and other groups of Africans - the former may have features of cruelty, but their social organization is unusually efficient, and therefore they are particularly well suited for

missionary efforts of conversion. Chennells quotes the following paradigmatic statement concerning the superiority of the Ndebele, as compared to the groupings that are being colonized by them, from Moffat's *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (1842):

The former inhabitants of these luxuriant hills and fertile plains had, from peace and plenty become effeminate, while Matabele under the barbarous reign of the monster Chaka, from whose iron grasp they had made their escape, like an overwhelming torrent, rushed onward to the north, marking their course with blood and carnage (Chennells 1982:83).

In this way missionaries and later on colonial administrators would construct a set of "ethnic" identities which disregarded the actual complexity and political interaction of African societies and aimed at dividing and ruling - at first as regards the blessings of religion, later on in relation to the colonial state (Beach 1986: pp 16-18). At the same time, it became an important ingredient in the legitimizing of the violent aspects of colonial conquest that colonialism proceeded to create order within a context of chaos, in which groups are already constantly invading and violating each other's borders.

An early example of the consolidation of stereotypes in colonial historiography is represented in the reports of the British South Africa Company on the suppression of the African "rebellions" of 1896-97. Here the basic elements in the explanation of the origins of the revolt are not the frustrations and protests of the African population against the expropriation of land and forced labour, but a superstitious fanaticism brought about by witch doctors and the talents of the warlike Ndebele in exciting the Shona into taking up arms (cf British South Africa Company 1898: p 55). A counter-image was provided by the white miniature civilizations which heroically established themselves inside the besieged fortresses of Salisbury and Bulawayo, or by the valiant white patrols who fought to the last man as martyrs for enlightenment and progress. Even the way in which the insurrection was brought to an end is presented in a way that contains an ideological lesson: while the disorganized Shona were hounded down and finished militarily, peace was made between the Ndebele leadership and Cecil Rhodes at spectacularly staged indabas in the Matopos hills to the south of Bulawayo.

The mythological pattern which emerges here runs through a great deal of the subsequent Rhodesian presentations of history and historical fiction and became influential in the policies of government that were adopted towards the black African population groups. The pattern has four poles: on the one side, we have wild and unmanageable Africans as opposed to those who accept defeat in honest battle and can be negotiated with; on the other side, there are the white colonizers who understand African realities and what is required as opposed to sentimental European politicians and idealists. The latter distinction was weakly marked in the early period of colonial rule, but later became a predominant feature in demarcating a Rhodesian national self-understanding from alleged missionary naivety and British liberal effeminacy.

This pattern is chiselled out with many variations, especially in the rich Rhodesian literature of novels dealing with historical themes. The earliest example is Ernest Glanville's *The Fossicker* (1891) which has heroic Britons and brave Nguni stand up together against the spineless and decadent Portuguese and their hybrid-race allies (cf Chennells 1982: pp 101-02). In other novels - like Marwick's *City of Gold* and Fred Whishaw's *Lost in African Jungles*, both published in 1896 - the pattern is elaborated by bringing in a differentiation between "faithful old" and "bloodthirsty young" native Africans. The point at stake is an assertion of a "healthy" and "natural" feudal harmony between white supremacy and the essence of African traditional life. But the four-pole pattern continued to be prominent through the decades into the most desperate and pornographically violent war literature from the last years of colonial rule - in novels like, e.g., John Gordon Davis's *Hold My Hand I'm*

*Dying* (1967) or Peter Stiff's *The Rain Goddess* (1973). Faithful Ndebele assistants stand shoulder to shoulder with their Rhodesian master heroes against deceitful Shona nationalists, young hotheads and missionaries who let themselves be exploited by the disruptive forces. And, to the very last, the hope was that the African nationalist front would fall apart in tribalist bits and pieces - that PF-ZAPU and ZANU(PF) would prove themselves to be Ndebele and Shona organizations unable to agree (cf Kaarsholm 1989: pp 28-9).

Racial ideology and tribal thinking are apparently even less sophisticated in the history textbooks which were used in Rhodesian schools. One reason for this is that the teaching materials that were used both in the government system of education for white (and later also "Coloured" and "Asian") students and in the missionary schools which catered for African children and youth were mainly of British and South African origin. The message they communicated was therefore imperialist in a much more general sense, and African history occurred only marginally. It was much more urgent to teach the history of civilization and of Europe - there was very little to be learnt from Africa after all, and consequently pupils had for their main history fare titles such as *Discovery, Expansion & Empire* and *From Caves to Castles*.

A much used British textbook system in Rhodesia was T R Batten's four-volume *Tropical Africa in World History* (1939), which was reprinted in several editions. Batten devotes more than half of his pages to explaining the roots of civilization in Egypt, the development and decay of the Roman Empire and "The Growth of Britain and the British Empire" and "The British Empire in the Modern World". When reference is eventually made to Africa, it is to provide the occasion for reflections on themes like "... no great civilization began in Tropical Africa. Nor did the people there learn very much from more civilized peoples until quite recently. Why was this?" (Batten 1960: I: p 39).

Only during the final years of colonial rule was there a tendency for this radical Eurocentrism to become modified - for instance in a textbook system like *The Pattern of History I-II* (1972) which is still common in Zimbabwean schools today. Here, on the other hand, are found other schemata of colonial mythological thinking in almost classical form - the "Matabele" or "Ndebele" people (both terms are used) are "traditional Zulu warriors" who defeat and subdue "the Mashona" or "Shona"; the white colonizers are "pioneers" who "develop" Rhodesia; the outcome of the 1896-97 "rebellion" was that:

The Africans were naturally disillusioned at the failure of the rebellion which they thought had been undertaken at the bidding of the ancestral spirits. Some began to doubt the power of the spirits, they had formerly worshipped and began to turn to Christianity. There began, too, a weakening of tribal beliefs and customs; during the next fifty years, some Africans began to adopt some of the European customs ... The Europeans had not been very surprised by the rebellion of the Ndebele, but they had not expected armed resistance from the Shona. Having fought for the land, the Europeans were more determined than ever to make it prosperous and successful. (Coleman *et al.* 1983: p 140)

Rhodesian self-understanding and the contrasting definition of African identities come to the fore more practically and with greater emphasis in the policies that were formulated by the Native Affairs Department until 1963, and from then on by the Department of African Education and the Ministry of Information and in the publications of the Rhodesia Literature Bureau. There is something almost touchingly amateurist in Rhodesian cultural policies directed towards the "native" population when compared to the more elaborate and anthropologically based initiatives that were taken in South Africa - at least until the late 1960s when inspiration is sought more systematically in apartheid and bantustan social engineering. In the 1962 issue of *NADA* - the yearbook of the Native Affairs Department - the amateur approach is defended:

Are we not living in an anthropological emergency ... ? We cannot wait for the doubtless more elaborate and efficient accounts that the subsidised professionals will give us in their good time. (cf Ranger 1979: pp 521-22).

On the same lines, the former Publications Officer in the Rhodesia Literature Bureau, E Walter Krog, answered a question about what qualifications he had brought to the job of editing African-language literature on the basis of a career as Assistant Native Commissioner, manager of a tobacco farm and functionary at a printing plant: "It was all a matter of knowing how to deal with Africans." (Kaarsholm 1987).

The investigation of African history through interviewing and the collection of oral traditions was begun within this amateur context. One prominent pioneer was J Blake-Thompson, a doctor who examined the health of migrant workers entering Rhodesia and who in his spare time was an enthusiastic historian or "antiquarian" (cf Ranger 1979). His writings contain plans for ambitious projects for classifying different African peoples on the basis of an examination of their "physical and psychological characteristics" and interviews about their "traditional" cultural backgrounds. He developed a theory that the highest and most valuable African types were of "Semitic" origin - in parallel with the "Phoenician" features of the Zimbabwe ruins. According to the theory, however, these "Semitic" types had undergone a process of degeneration, due to miscegenation with less valuable "races", from a highly developed cultural stage, where e.g. they had had a written language, to the level of primitivity characteristic of the majority of Africans in modern Rhodesia. (Ranger 1979: p 516).

What is striking is once more the attempt systematically to divide Africans into higher and lower "races", and the endeavour to prove a fundamental difference and incompatibility between them, which required an efficiently authoritarian colonial regime to be kept under control. A similar, if less imaginative, approach was characteristic of the policies adopted by the Literature Bureau and the Ministry of Information to manage the cultural expressions of black Africans and manipulate their self-conceptions. The main point was to encourage Africans to see themselves and their "traditions" as essentially different from the "historical" development of the Europeans, but also as mutually exclusive and as belonging to a world that required white order and administration if it were not to degenerate and collapse.

What was at stake was a process which is parallel to the one which Terence Ranger describes in *The Invention of Tradition* as having taken place in Tanganyika, in which a loosely structured, differentiated and flexible social world was forced by colonial policies into conforming with ossified "traditions" and "ethnic" identities:

People were to be 'returned' to their tribal identities; ethnicity was to be 'restored' as the basis of association and organization. The new rigidities, immobilizations and ethnic identifications, while serving very immediate European interests, could nevertheless be seen by the whites as fully 'traditional' and hence as legitimated. The most far-reaching inventions of tradition in colonial Africa took place when the Europeans believed themselves to be respecting age-old African custom. (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: pp 249-50)

At the same time a reverse process was taking place - by defining Africans as "traditional", the whites created an image of themselves as "modern" and "development"-oriented.

In a similar way in Rhodesia, the colonial authorities attempted "to bring order into chaos" by homogenizing the confusing variety of African dialects and bringing together the multitude of social and cultural groupings into two main "tribes" - Shona and Ndebele. In

the the 1950s, two Language Committees were set up that worked until 1977 to "standardize" Shona and Ndebele and establish rules for their use as written languages - that is, in reality, to create new languages on the basis of, in the case of Shona, a very broad variety of dialects and, in the case of Ndebele, to establish the language as different from Zulu and solidify its dominance vis-à-vis Kalanga, Venda, Sotho and the other languages spoken in Matabeleland (National Archives of Zimbabwe S/SH65 and S/ND60).

In close co-operation with the Language Committees, the Literature Bureau was divided into a Shona and a Ndebele department that published novels, short stories, poems, books of instruction for housewives, etc, in the two languages and, on the basis of their publications, provided the Committees with word lists for their preparation of dictionaries. The editorial policy favoured texts with "traditional" contents; political (and some religious) subjects were vetoed - "the Government was not prepared to do the Nationalists' job for them", as Walter Krog put it (Kaarsholm 1987). The endeavour was to make Africans describe and understand themselves as "Africans" and different from Europeans, and at the same time as "tribal" people who existed in segregated "traditional" worlds, and whose loyalties and needs did not coincide.

The project of cultural segregation was intensified after 1965 when the anti-colonial opposition grew stronger. One new venture of the Rhodesian Front government was to launch the three-language *African Times* which was distributed freely to compete with the nationalist organizations for the support of the local populations in townships and Tribal Trust Lands. The journal exposed its readers to a regular bombardment with images of "traditional" living and tales of harmonious co-operation between the white government and loyal chiefs. At that time, the Rhodesian policy was increasingly aimed at emulating South African measures of social control.

### **Interpretation of History and African Nationalism**

It is debatable how successful the Rhodesian project of dividing and segregating was, but there can be no doubt that at independence in 1980 there was a much stronger tendency for people to see themselves and each other as either Shona or Ndebele than there had been twenty years earlier, and that appeals for solidarity within one group or the other could function as effective safeguards for politicians running into difficulty. [1] Neither can there be any doubt that "ethnicity" played a role in the nationalist mobilization of people during the liberation war - partly in the sense that political leaders set up power bases in their regional hinterlands, partly through the cultural policies which were being pursued. While PF-ZAPU and ZIPRA were obliged to formulate themselves in national terms and tri-lingually, because of the limited diffusion of the Ndebele language, it was possible for ZANU (PF) and ZANLA to benefit from appeals to a specifically Shona cultural nationalism. This involved the use of Shona as the language of "decolonization" as well as the cultivation of Shona "traditions" as a basis for mobilizing the peasantry and as representing the set of "authentic" values which had to be liberated from the yoke of cultural imperialism. To a much greater extent than PF-ZAPU and ZIPRA, ZANU (PF) and ZANLA came to rely on "traditional" cultural forces in the struggle - on songs, dances, co-operation with spirit mediums, and an emphasis on the continuity between the liberation war and the first *chimurenga*, the revolts of 1896-97.

In this way, the African nationalist movements, like Rhodesian nationalism, came to base themselves on mythologically informed interpretations of history which after independence have continued to play a significant role. Within ZANU (PF), Terence Ranger's highlighting of the leading and co-ordinating part played by spirit mediums in the 1896-97 revolt became a particularly strong inspiration. In a collection of poetry entitled *Up in Arms* (1982), Chenjerai Hove pays homage to Ranger for "the blood you spilled / in the muscle of history" and "the wind that blew / to fan man's enraged spirits" (Hove 1982: p 33). What Hove refers to is, in particular, Ranger's book *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-97*, which gained

unique influence during the liberation war, and which ZANLA political commissars are known to have carried along with them when they went out to enlist the support of peasants and spirit mediums (as did also, apparently, Rhodesian officers and later on instructors with RENAMO in Mozambique). In addition, the notion that modern African nationalism represents a direct continuation of the earliest forms of anti-colonial resistance was formulated clearly and programmatically by Ranger, partly in articles in the *Journal of African History*, partly in the book *The African Voice in Southern Rhodesia* (Ranger 1968 and 1970).

The latter work, which traces developments from the revolts through to the 1930s and was originally planned to have been followed by a third volume dealing with the period up to the 1970s, explains how the different endings to the 1896-97 revolts in Matabeleland and Mashonaland, respectively, led to the emergence of differing traditions of anti-colonial resistance and nationalism. In Matabeleland, the peace pact between Rhodes and the Ndebele leaders brought about a tradition oriented towards negotiation, co-operation and compromise; in Mashonaland, the fact that the struggle was carried through to the bitter end provided the point of departure for a more militant political tradition. It has therefore been possible to interpret Ranger's presentation of the history of nationalist traditions as a reversal of the image created within Rhodesian colonial ideology of the Ndebele as fierce and noble warriors and the Shona as disorganized and inferior peasants (cf Chennells 1982: p 139).

Terence Ranger's portrayal of African "primary" resistance against colonization and of its direct continuity with modern nationalist mass movements has been criticized for its "romanticism" by Julian Cobbing and David Beach, in particular. Cobbing claims that religious authorities in general, and the Mwali cult in particular, did not fulfil the co-ordinating function across regional boundaries in the 1896-97 rebellion which Ranger attributes to them: it "is essentially the history of a myth" (Cobbing 1977: p 81). Beach agrees with this criticism and argues that Ranger did not so much attempt to describe what actually happened in 1896-97 as to inspire the modern nationalist movement with "hope and encouragement" (Beach 1986: p 119). Like Cobbing, he points to the "basic similarity" which exists between Ranger's emphasis on the religious leadership of the revolts and the interpretation of them by Rhodesian colonial historians as having been based on a "conspiracy" among superstitious witch doctors.

The element of religious leadership was limited and the element of pre-planning non-existent. This makes the success and commitment of the local Shona communities all the more impressive, even though it was a traditionalist rather than a proto-nationalist rising.

(Beach 1986: p 147; cf Cobbing 1977: p 82)

On similar lines, Beach has more recently criticized Ranger's and Isaacman's presentations of the Mappedera "rebellion", 1901-04, for being romanticized: Mappedera was no early nationalist hero, but quite an impressive "dynasty builder" within a society characterized by general destabilization (Beach 1987: pp 43 ff; cf Ranger 1970: pp 3-7, and Isaacman 1976: p 113).

The "romantic" approach to resistance history has figured prominently in Zimbabwe after independence. The theory of continuity has become government policy, as emerges from Robert Mugabe's preface to Martin and Johnson's *The Struggle for Zimbabwe* (1981); according to the Prime Minister, this does for "the second chimurenga" what Ranger's history of the revolts did for the first (Martin and Johnson 1981: p v). But it is not least in literary accounts and in the new school history textbooks that have been produced since 1980 that nationalist romanticism has been rife. Ranger's image of Mappedera has been taken over uncritically by Solomon Mutswairo in his novel *Mappedera: Soldier of Zimbabwe* (1983) and supplemented with portrayals of heroic spirit mediums and evil Ndebele bandits.

In a similar vein, "the first chimurenga" is presented as the precursor of the modern nationalist struggle in Moyana and Sibanda's much used textbook, *The African Heritage*, and spirit mediums and traditional leaders like Mapondera are put forward as anti-colonial heroes:

The first Chimurenga demonstrated to the Africans that it was possible to attain freedom, and that armed struggle was the only way to achieve African liberation. The first Chimurenga also produced courageous, dynamic and gallant leaders whose heroism provided inspiration for the second and final phase of Zimbabwe's liberation. Leaders of the second phase often called on their cadres to reach the standards of courage, dedication and determination set by heroes like Sekuru Kaguvi, Mbuya Nehanda, Mkwati and Umlugulu. Finally, the first Chimurenga was part of the collective and spontaneous response of Africans throughout the continent to the imposition of colonial rule. (Moyana and Sibanda 1984: II, p 48)

The ethnicities defined during the colonial era have also continued to influence history writing since independence. Studies of regions in Mashonaland have dominated research and publications dealing with both the colonial period and the history of the liberation war, while Matabeleland and Bulawayo and the political traditions emanating there have been ignored. The immediate background for this is ZANU (PF)'s decision to break the alliance with PF-ZAPU within the Patriotic Front before the independence elections in 1980 and the party's subsequent efforts to consolidate its own power position - the transition, so to speak, from a "popular" to an "official" nationalism (cf Anderson 1983: p 102). These events led to a significant strengthening of "regionalism" within Zimbabwean politics - ZANU (PF) cultivated its hinterland in the north-eastern districts, while PF-ZAPU increasingly identified itself with the interests of Matabeleland and came to dominate the political scene in this part of Zimbabwe. From 1982 onwards, the disagreement assumed the character of something close to civil war, with the violent military suppression of "dissidents" and their possible supporters among the peasantry in Matabeleland - a state of affairs which continued with varying intensity until the Unity agreement between the two parties in 1987-88. It was therefore difficult to carry out research in Matabeleland - to gain access to archives and documentation, to get around and interview people, and for them to be brave enough to speak out. At the same time, important historical materials like the PF-ZAPU archives and the papers of ZIPRA were seized by the government and have not since come to light.

The one-sidedness that has been the result of this can be seen, for example, in the results of the Oral History Project of the National Archives of Zimbabwe, which has its roots back in the colonial era and in the "antiquarian" interests of the Native Affairs Department; among the pioneers of the project were Blake-Thompson and Donald Abraham, the first Publications Officer of the Literature Bureau. Today, the project is quite impressive: it contains a Shona-, a Ndebele- and an English-language section and has been given a high priority since 1980 - not least in order to build up a collection of the wartime experiences of different groups within the population. As far as the latter ambition is concerned, however, the Shona section dominates totally and very few interviews have been conducted in Matabeleland. This means that that the war memories of people in the province have not been registered while they were still fresh. Moreover, this leads to a lack of balance in the source materials available which parallels the imbalance in the written documentation. Obviously, the struggle that has been going on concerns not only present-day historical work, but also the possible perspectives of anything written in the future.

To make matters worse, a significant part of the officially approved history writing has been similarly one-sided in its excessive focus on Mashonaland, and as far as its representation of the war is concerned it has come close to resembling ZANU (PF) propaganda. This applies to David Martin and Phyllis Johnson's *The Struggle for Zimbabwe* (1981) and to an even

greater extent to *The Chitepo Assassination* by the same authors (1985), which appears to have been written almost to order. *The Struggle for Zimbabwe* systematically underplays the contribution of PF-ZAPU and ZIPRA to the political and military struggle for independence, and creates a false image of unity in the nationalist movement behind the ZANU (PF) leadership, concealing the opposition between left- and right-wing factions, between different generations of nationalists, between intellectuals and the uneducated, and between the needs and interests of different regions.

Parallel contortions can be found in the schools' history textbooks which have to be approved by the Ministry of Education - Moyana and Sibanda's *The African Heritage* is again a good example. What is being promoted here is perhaps more of a Shona nationalism than one which aims at bringing the whole of Zimbabwe together. It is no wonder that during the years between 1982 and 1987 separatist tendencies developed in Matabeleland which saw the future of the region as linked much more closely with a possible political liberation in South Africa than with political events in Mashonaland (cf Mhlaba 1989). One might conclude, then, that during the first years of independence what occurred in Zimbabwe is not so much a break-down as an intensification and dissemination of the potential for "ethnic" conflict that was cultivated during the colonial period. And, further, that the officially sanctioned historiography, which in principle should have been capable of moving beyond and providing a critique of "ethnic" modes of understanding, has worked more to consolidate it.

### Perspectives

This trend, however, does not reign supreme any longer. As has been pointed out already, sceptical voices insisting on close examination and critical discussion of the source material, like those of David Beach and Peter Garlake, have been part of the debate over the interpretation of history both before and after independence. Alternative interpretations have also been put forward from left-wing groups of Marxists who, with varying intensity and clarity, have opposed cultural nationalist positions. Since 1985, a series of important new history textbooks have been published, basing themselves on a historical, materialist analysis, which have been approved by the government for use in schools (cf Parsons 1985; Garlake and Proctor 1985-87; Bhila and Shillington 1986). In these works, attempts have been made to give a more a balanced presentation of history of the different provinces of Zimbabwe, and "ethnic" patterns of identification are explained on the basis of political orientations and class analysis. The fact that Marxist analyses may then easily develop their own types of schematicism is something that future debates will have to deal with - for instance, it seems like a new kind of imbalance and of reading the present into the past when one of the new textbooks explains that, in states like Great Zimbabwe, spirit mediums were "members of the ruling class" (Garlake and Proctor 1985-87:1,85).

Even more importantly, since the introduction of the Unity agreement between ZANU (PF) and PF-ZAPU in 1987, the amnesty extended to the "dissidents" of Matabeleland in 1988, and the student demonstrations and press exposures of corruption among politicians in 1988-89, there are signs that a wholly new political situation is about to emerge. The most prominent contradictions in society are increasingly between democracy and the misuse of power and between the different needs and interests of larger groups within the population, rather than between the regionally based "traditional" power bases of nationalist politicians. This opens up possibilities for the articulation of a variety of new interpretations of history, and for a new pluralism and debate.

Today, it is possible again to conduct historical research in Matabeleland. What local people refer to as "the period of silence" has come to an end, and documents, diaries, etc, that have been kept buried in back gardens or other safe places are beginning to surface. Terence Ranger is writing the history of the Matopos area and reinterpreting the role of mediums and Mwali priests in the history of popular resistance before and after independence, throwing

new light on the anti-colonial and anti-statist traditions of Matabeleland (Ranger 1989b and 1989c). Former ZIPRA soldiers and PF-ZAPU activists are writing a book of essays on their own history, and so forth.

There is an atmosphere of fresh air and new departures in Zimbabwe which, hopefully, will remain and make it possible both to understand history and become free of it in a new way.

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#### Note

- 1 Or perhaps, equally importantly, appeals for vigilance against the "tribalist" plots of the other grouping. One might argue that in a long-term perspective "ethnicity" has been more influential in its negative function - in establishing images of enmity - than in providing a positive instance of identification and mobilization for individuals and social movements.

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