



Ngwabi Bhebhe, Terence Ranger, eds. *Society in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*. Oxford: James Currey, 1996. vi + 250 pp. \$37.98 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85255-660-3.

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## The Painful Birth of a Nation

"Please bear with me in case some of the details sound strange and far-fetched ..." writes Paulos Matjaka Nare in his contribution to this volume. "The fact is that life was strange" (p. 130). For anyone who has read the several books about Zimbabwe's War of Liberation, the details do indeed seem bizarre and at times horrific beyond comprehension. It was a war where spirit mediums strengthened the ties of Marxist guerillas to the land,[1] where a vitriolic settler racism provided the background for especially brutal counter-insurgency tactics,[2] and where, it cannot be denied, guerillas also used brutality and terror against those for whom they claimed to be fighting.[3] *Society in Zimbabwe's Liberation War* is the second in a two-volume series that emerged out of an international conference held in July 1991. While the first volume concentrates on soldiers, the second describes the involvement, willful or not, of civilians in the war. In this interesting work two renowned scholar-activists, Ngwabi Bhebhe and Terence Ranger, once again bring together the conference participants, combatants and academics, in an effort to spread a better understanding of the traumatic years of war out of which Zimbabwe arose.

The first section of the book, by far the most interesting and polished, is an exploration of Christian and African religion during the war. David Lan's work on spirit mediums, of which there is no specific discussion in this volume, provides the background. Lan's research area, the isolated Dande region where mhondoro mediums were powerful and ZANU/ZANLA guerillas closely tied to the local peasantry, is often thought to contrast with other regions where African religion was not

as strong in consolidating a peasant/guerilla alliance.[4] Such was the case, so the argument goes, in Matebeleland, where the supposedly more secular, proletarian-based ZAPU/ZIPRA held sway for most of the war's duration.[5] In the first chapter Ranger and Ncube attempt to confront this argument. Using oral sources, they convincingly show that the Mwali cult, associated with resistance to European conquest and based in southern Matebeleland, witnessed a revival during and after the war years. While sufficient evidence is presented for the revival of Mwali shrines, I remained unsure as to the extent ZIPRA guerillas actively sought legitimacy from the Mwali cult, as ZANLA guerillas did from the spirit mediums.

The second subject of this section is the collaboration (or its lack) between guerillas and the Christian church. The relationship between the guerillas and churches is explained in terms of the depth of trust between the local community and the church leaders. Where ties were strong, guerillas and the church existed in a symbiotic relationship; where weak, guerillas attacked the church and the church was forced to rely on the Rhodesian security forces for protection. While this explanatory framework assumes a strong guerilla/peasantry alliance, which is often not proved, it remains convincing in the examples given in this volume. Janice McLaughlin describes Avila mission, where, under the guidance of the Irish Catholic Bishop Donal Lamont, the local laity supported the guerillas even when faced with marxist-inspired ideological opposition: "Spirit mediums were now joined by Christians as motivators and mobilizers" (p. 101).

Such support fractured any previous alliance between the Catholic church and the settler state, and made way for a new Catholic church in an independent Zimbabwe. David Maxwell, in his interesting contribution, blames the horrific Vumba massacre of nine missionaries and their four children on the displacement of the missionaries from Elima where they were trusted by the community to Vumba where they were unknown. Maxwell goes on to argue that one of the consequences of the dependence of the church on the local community during the war was the creation of a new Zimbabwean church, with greater representation and participation from local members. After the war, a central role of this church was to remember and heal: "rural Christians found it easier to theologize their experiences of the war than to historicize them" (p. 87). Indeed, these three articles combine to elaborate and underline the importance of religion in providing a valuable mechanism for civilians to deal with the traumas engendered by the war.

Unfortunately the rest of the volume does not display the consistency in subject and quality of the first section. The second section on ideology and education begins with a lengthy discourse analysis of a few rather silly white Rhodesian novels. While this analysis may interest a certain audience, it does little to penetrate the fears and ideological justifications of white settlers which led them to wage such a bitter and brutal war. Indeed, the volume lacks an adequate reflection on settler society and the war. The discourse analysis is followed by two short activist accounts of education in ZAPU and ZANU camps. Fay Chung's account of ZANU schools seems celebratory compared to Paulos Matjaka Nare's poignant testimony of ZAPU's schools. They are both worth reading. Yet the lack of critical analysis left me wondering whether the difference between the accounts reflected the persuasions of the authors or a substantial difference between ZANU and ZAPU camps. And if this was the case, what explains the difference?

The final section deals with the legacy of the war. Ngwabi Bhebhe turns again to religion and tells the story of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Zimbabwe (ELCZ) during and after the war. In this case the consequence of the war on the church was not as benign as in the examples of McLaughlin and Maxwell. While the war caused schisms between the head office and local parishes, this did not lead directly to a more representative locally-based church, but rather encouraged ethnic divisions within the church. Instead of unifying and healing, the ELCZ became infected by the ethnic strife that continued after the nationalist victory. Only after the National

Unity Accord between ZANU and ZAPU did a new ELCZ emerge, which, Bhebhe hopes, was actually strengthened by the post-war crisis. The emphasis on religion and healing is continued in Richard I. Werbner's final contribution to volume. Werbner writes an account of his return to a community in south-western Zimbabwe where he first did research in 1961. Here he listened to the horrors and hardships endured over the last thirty years and noticed the revival of sangoma mediums in the area. The sangomas, unlike the *mhondoro* spirit mediums, were healers who dealt with the legacy of the war by making "voices of the past ... speak in the present in order to testify ... that certain memories have to be kept alive...memories of suffering and loss, of lapses from humanity, of the failure of kin, and not merely their triumphs in success or achievement" (p. 205). Remembrance of those who died cruel deaths along with healing and purification after the war was, once again, taken up by local religious leaders. These two articles are a fine conclusion of the first section on religion, and I was left wondering if the volume might have been more coherent if it focused solely on the role of religion in the war and its aftermath.

All the articles examined thus far are not the hagiographic accounts of the war which first appeared in the 1980s; yet, they remain within a nationalist narrative that envisages a united and democratic Zimbabwe as the ultimate outcome of the war. No-one denies the desirability of such an outcome, but, as rioters take over Harare and Mugabe struggles to strengthen his grip over the state, we need to recognize the increasing unlikelihood of its realization in the near future. To what extent does the experience and legacy of the war explain the difficulties faced by Zimbabwe? Only one article, dealing with political change in Zimbabwe's rural areas, begins to explore such a question. Jocelyn Alexander points out that the authoritarian Rhodesian bureaucracy survived the war and simply co-opted the ZANU elite. Meanwhile, the grassroots local party apparatus was weakened in favor of this bureaucracy, denying the local peasants input in the political process. During the war, political mobilization was subordinated to the military struggle, and without this struggle the impetus for democratic mobilization fell away. Instead of the party, traditional chiefs, who were expected to disappear with their colonial overlords, have become the representatives of the peasantry. Her analysis is valuable but incomplete in places: even if there is a seeming continuity in bureaucratic traditions, surely the fact that the new bureaucracy is manned by ZANU elites, with their particular support networks, make the new administration substantially different to

its settler-run predecessor. Has the “passive revolution” and the rapid ascent of ZANU elites “straddled” public and private capital, as Jean-Francois Bayart would put it, and begun to entrench the elite’s position as a bourgeoisie enmeshed in several less formal political and economic networks?[6] Such an analysis may indeed go beyond the confines of her article, which at least begins a critical reflection on the political limitations of agrarian transformation in Zimbabwe.

The entire collection is accompanied by a valuable introduction which places the contributions in the context of both the conference and Zimbabwe’s attempts at healing the wounds of war. Important subjects omitted in the volume—notably the role of women—are briefly dealt with here. What the introduction lacks, however, is an attempt to place both the historiography and the history of the war and its legacy in a broader African context. This is not only of academic interest: Africans throughout southern and central Africa are currently dealing with war and its consequences. A regional understanding of these processes desperately needs to be generated. This seems even more urgent as Zimbabwe’s troops fight their first post-colonial battle to defend the interests of their leaders in the forests of the former Zaire.

Notes:

[1]. David Lan *Guns and Rain: Guerillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London, James Currey; Harare,

Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985)

[2]. D. Cauter *Under the Skin: The Death of White Rhodesia* (London, Allen Lane, 1983); Peter Godwin and Ian Hancock *Rhodesian Never Die: The Impact of War and Political Change on White Rhodesia* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993).

[3]. Norma Krige *Zimbabwe’s Guerilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992). This is not the central point of Norma Krige’s work; nevertheless the importance of terror and coercion used by the guerillas does surface in Krige’s work.

[4]. The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) was led by Robert Mugabe and supported by China. The Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) was ZANU’s army.

[5]. The Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) was led by Joshua Nkomo and supported by the former Soviet Union. The Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) was ZAPU’s army.

[6]. Jean Francois Bayart *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (Longman, London and New York, 1993), pp. 90-98

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