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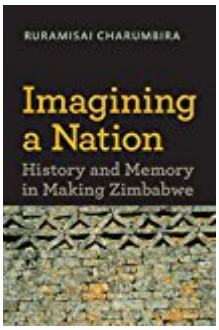
**Ruramisai Charumbira.** *Imagining a Nation: History and Memory in Making Zimbabwe.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015. xvii + 280 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-3822-6.

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Ruramisai Charumbira's *Imagining a Nation* is an incisive and readable account of the significance of history in nationalist projects. Charumbira casts her net wide to explore black and white remembrances of a key event in the Rhodesian/Zimbabwean past—the 1896-97 conflict between European settlers and indigenous African polities across Mashonaland and Matabeleland. In 1896-97, less than a decade after the rule of Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company (BSAC) had been established, European victory in these conflicts led to the patterns of colonial rule that would exist largely unchanged until Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. Consequently, these conflicts gained significance in African and European narratives of the founding of the nations in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. Charumbira seeks to trace the way historical narratives of the late nineteenth century became the basis for two ostensibly very distinct but surprisingly similar nationalist projects.

Underpinning all of this is a broadly defined "gender" analysis that teases out the vast historical "silences" surrounding women in the male-dominated nationalist histories and memories of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. It portrays women as active historical agents, who were nevertheless often confounded by the existence of twin settler/native patriarchies that conspired to reduce the roles of women in the nationalist narrative. In particular, this hangs around Charumbira's fascination with Nehanda-Charwe, a female spirit medium whom both settlers and African nationalists portrayed as having led the 1896-97 rebellion. The book starts with an exploration of the woman, Nehanda-Charwe. With the help of colonial archival sources from Nehanda-Charwe's trial, Charumbira, as per Ann L. Stoler, demonstrates that Nehanda-Charwe was neither a passive female victim nor the anti-imperialist firebrand that African nationalists later portrayed her as.[1] This introduces the character of Charumbira's analysis, which proves a refreshingly disruptive and messy alternative to more standard explorations of the Rhodesian/Zimbabwean past.

Elsewhere, Charumbira seeks to explore white settler perceptions of the 1896-97 rebellions and demonstrates how the settlers' interpretation of the past "won out" in the foundational narratives of the Rhodesian nation. The deaths of early white settlers in the 1890s became the blood price by which whites had "earned" their dominion over Rhodesia, and their rule over Africans. She demonstrates how the person of Cecil Rhodes, the country's "founder" and namesake, became the totemic figure of the new settler nation. Charumbira introduces readers to settler foundation myths very well by using interesting examples of particular stories and moments of memorialization. The most memorable of these is the settler tragedy of Blakiston and Routledge, two young men who became early settler heroes after being killed while trying to telegraph for assistance to help fellow Europeans besieged by "the rebels" in the Alice Mine at Mazowe (or Mazoe, as the settlers called it). She also demonstrates the rather brittle nature of these settler foundation myths, which, as my own research has found, proved to have serious consequences in later decades.[2] Their exclusionary nature forced Africans to craft their own historical narratives (sometimes with the help of European academics, such as Terence Ranger), and, while their tales of white triumph over African adversity helped inspire the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), they failed to unite white Rhodesians into anything resembling a "nation" in the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, the two chapters that focus on settlers end in the mid-1930s, with a short footnote about the 1950s. The challenges of making foundational narratives based around events that many white Rhodesians had never even participated in became even greater after the population grew exponentially (relatively speaking) after the Second World War. As Charumbira points out, although class divisions existed at the time, the number of settlers in Rhodesia in 1936 was still quite tiny. Also, the potential to explore the way 1896-97 was deployed by whites in response to the "bush war" of the 1960s and 1970s is missed in the book. Another interesting, if not entirely convincing, concept introduced in this part of the book is that of "ideological Rhodesians." An example of this concept can be found in the example of the American aficionado of Rhodesia who began his own private archive of the colony's history in the 1930s. This individual is used by Charumbira to illustrate the importance of "outsiders" to national historical narratives. The point in and of itself is astute, but the idea of people supporting Rhodes's dictums and therefore being defined as ideological Rhodesians seems a little far-fetched; could these people have not simply been imperialists?

After exploring white memorialization of the 1890s, in which women are again relegated to the supporting cast, Charumbira returns to the alternative African oral traditions that were preserved alongside the oppressive, triumphal, colonialist histories. To do this, she focuses on the oral testimony of a series of men to bring out a number of key historical themes, most important, disaggregating the African population, particularly highlighting the divisions created when Africans sought opportunities to work for or with the colonial regime, either as policemen or pliant government-appointed officials and salaried chiefs. The chapter dealing with oral testimony conveys the alternative oral traditions well but comes off as rather speculative, something Charumbira acknowledges herself at its outset. The chapter ends rather abruptly and more detailed analysis could have been carried out in some cases. The points it emphasizes, however, are characteristically well made.

Charumbira moves on to examine nationalist narratives of 1896 and Nehanda-Charwe, deconstructing the sanitized and bland "history" that underlies the contemporary Zimbabwean nation as represented in the so-called patriotic history of the governing Zimbabwe African National Union, Popular Front (ZANU PF) and the National Heroes

Acre outside Harare. She carefully demonstrates just how contested these histories became during the nationalist struggle and following independence, as different people tried to lay claim to different imaginings of Nehanda-Charwe as a strategy to retain (or obtain) power or influence in the new postcolonial nation. In the final chapters, Charumbira introduces a fascinating argument that ZANU (PF)'s understanding and use of history was not influenced by socialist or communist tenets, as has often been argued, but was instead a product of the colonial experiences of nationalists (often in education or detention). In this reading, Nehanda-Charwe becomes the African counternarrative to the settlers' Rhodes; the National Heroes Acre mirrors the Rhodesian "valhalla" in the Matopos hills, where Rhodes and several pioneer heroes were buried and venerated. Charumbira notes that, due to their education, African nationalist leaders often conceived of the nation in Western paradigms, refusing to acknowledge that Zimbabwe had a history that predated colonialism as its perceived backwardness acted as a hindrance to the emergence of a "modern" postcolonial nation. This illustration of the continuities between Rhodesia/Zimbabwe is a critically important one for undermining the exclusionary historical narratives that ZANU PF continues to use today but is also important for complicating our understanding of the Zimbabwean past and recognizing that April 1980 represented a moment of continuities as well as ruptures. One omission from these latter chapters is an exploration of how the other major nationalist movement in 1960s/1970s Rhodesia—the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and its armed wing, the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA)—engaged with history and gender. When Charumbira discusses the "nationalist movement" her account seems to elide the plurality of organizations fighting for Zimbabwean independence and suggests that she means ZANU; and whether or not ZAPU shared these attitudes is not particularly clear to the reader.

Charumbira has that rare gift among historians of rendering a difficult subject comprehensible. At the book's outset she boldly states the social responsibility of the historian and it is refreshing to read a study of memory, history, and identity that manages to remain relatively jargon-free. The work uses an excellent variety of source material in an attempt to trace those most elusive qualities—memory and identity—with success, largely thanks to the tight focus of the work around Mazowe and Nehanda-Charwe. It tells of a disrupted and complicated Zimbabwean past in which history and memory have been deployed in service of male-dominated national projects in which women like Nehanda-Charwe repeatedly refused to play ball. It explores the exclusivity and paranoia that underlay settler foundational myths and how these myths tried to paper over cracks that would only widen in the future. Importantly, it emphasizes the continuities between settler Rhodesia and "postcolonial" Zimbabwe. Finally, it demonstrates how history and memory are tools that can be utilized by anyone in the labyrinthine and internecine power struggles that accompany nationalist projects.

Notes

[1]. Ann L. Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," ***The Journal of American History*** 88, no. 3 (2001): 829-865.

[2]. David W. Kenrick, "Pioneers and Progress: White Rhodesian Nation-Building c. 1964-1979" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2016).

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