

Writing history beyond Trevor-Roper: The Experience of African History, with special reference to Zimbabwe

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In this paper, I will connect some issues and developments that at first appear isolated in space and time, yet they help us to understand the journey so far traversed in the writing of Zimbabwean history and where we are potentially going. These are (in no particular order), Hugh Trevor-Roper's argument about there being no African history and what it triggered – the rise of nationalist historiography in the 1960s and subsequent developments; the role of SOAS, London as an institution and its historical relationship with African studies; the Southern Rhodesian *Native Affairs Departmental Annual* (NADA) as a settler controlled journal that ignited much interest in studying Southern Rhodesian Africans during the colonial era, and lastly, the *Rhodesian Reprint Library* as a key library to recover white Rhodesian memory and to ignite the Rhodesian white nationalist imagination at a time settler colonialism was in a serious political crisis. Hopefully examining these will highlight salient features and perspectives on the development of African history, with special reference to Zimbabwe. A key strand in all this is the way in which history has been used as a legitimising tool for some political projects.

Hugh Trevor-Roper and Eurocentrism:

A highly celebrated Oxford professor of modern European history in the 1960s, Hugh Trevor-Roper made a series of lectures to the University of Sussex in October 1963 that were broadcast to the BBC Television and later published in *The Listener* between November and December 1963. He revised them for publication in 1965 in the book, *The Rise of Christian Europe*. Writing in his foreword in 1964, he indicated that he further worked on these lectures, "...correcting some small errors of fact which have been pointed out to me and expanding some passages which the limitation of time had originally forced me to compress." So there is no doubt that Trevor-Roper believed what he said as he then had the guts to write it for a wider audience beyond the radio broadcasts and beyond Britain. He was acutely aware of the controversies that his lectures stirred, but he thought that the controversy was going to come from "professional medievalists who, I read, are 'sharpening their knives' against me, and that the latter has made them clearer to my less erudite readers who, I hope, will be more indulgent."¹ He suggested to his readers that he was 'prepared to take the risk.' I don't think that he expected any response from Africans or at least from liberal Europeans whose views about Africa differed from his.

Trevor-Roper's first chapter, 'The Stages of Progress', was the worst affront to Africans. The lecture/talk started off as an attempt to defend the (perhaps inordinate) focus on the teaching of European history in universities in response to complaints from some of the European students in their university system who were demanding to be taught other histories including that of Africa. He argued:

Undergraduates, seduced, as always, by the changing breath of journalistic fashion, demand that they should be taught the

¹ Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe*, Great Britain, Thames and Hudson, 1965, p. 7.

history of black Africa. Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history.²

He knew that he had potentially created a storm, so he put a disclaimer, but this only made it worse:

Please do not misunderstand me. I do not deny that men existed even in dark countries and dark centuries, nor that they had political life and culture, interesting to sociologists and anthropologists; but **history, I believe, is essentially a form of movement, and purposive movement too.** It is not a mere phantasmagoria of changing shapes and costumes, of battles and conquests, dynasties and usurpations, social forms and social disintegration. If all history is equal, as some now believe, there is no reason why we should study one section of it rather than the other; for certainly we cannot study it all. Then indeed we may neglect our own history and amuse ourselves with the **unravelling gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe: tribes whose chief function in history in my opinion, is to show to the present an image of the past from which, by history, it has escaped;** or shall I seek to avoid the indignation of the medievalists by saying, from which it has changed? ... history or rather the study of history, has a purpose. **We study it not merely for amusement – though it can be amusing – but in order to discover how we have come to where we are...**The new rulers of the world, whoever they may be, will inherit a position that has been built up by Europe, and by Europe alone. It is European techniques, European examples, European ideas which have shaken the non-European world out of its past – out of barbarism in Africa,

² Trevor-Roper, *Rise of Christian Europe*, p. 9.

out of a far older, slower, more majestic civilization in Asia; and the history of the world, for the last five centuries, in so far as it has significance, has been European history. I don't think we need to make any apology if our study of history is Europa-centric.³

In general, it could be said that Trevor-Roper assumed that there was no serious professional African historical work that had been done before 1960 – and that what had been done was so minimal to justify why this should be taught. But he should have known better. Although this would not be counted as professional history, written by academically trained historians, there were many African writers who had written about their people's histories on the back of serious oral researches they did in their own communities. In South Africa, African intellectuals like Tiyo Soga, R.T. Kawa, Victor Ndamase and other had long written about Xhosa and Fingo histories, ideas and traditions.⁴ In Kenya, Kenyatta did a beautiful social and political anthropology of the Kikuyu grounded in fairly good historical narratives.⁵ In West Africa, scholars like Edward Blyden had, by 1908 written from Africa about racial equality, traced Africans' contribution to religion and morality, explained Africans' contribution to the history of civilisation and rejected colonial assimilationist policies that were built upon assumed racial superiority of Europeans. Blyden's writings were important in awakening cultural and political responses to colonialism that was then expressed more fervently by African missionaries, educated elites and others.⁶ There were also some African thinkers who were

³ Trevor-Roper, *Rise of Christian Europe*, pp. 9-11.

⁴ See for instance Victor Poto Ndamase, *Amampondo: ibali ne nentlalo*, Lovedale, Lovedale Institution Press, 1927; Richard Tainton Kawa, *Ibali lamaMfengu: and kunganjani kusiyiwa eKapa*, 1929, reprinted with an intro, Grahamstown, Rhodes University Cory Library, 2011; Tiyo Soga, *Intlako kaXhosa*, (compiled and edited by Burns-Ncamashe, S. M), Alice, Lovedale Press, 1989.

⁵ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu*, Nairobi, Heinemann, 1938.

⁶ Toyin Falola, 'Nationalism and African Historiography', in Q. Edward Wang and Georg G, Iggers (eds), *Turning Points in Historiography: A Cross Cultural Perspective*, Rochester, Rochester University Press, 2002, pp. 209-35. See also, Edward Wilmot Blyden, *African Life and Customs*, London, C.M. Philips, 1908, and also Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, Lagos, Church Missionary Society, 1921.

writing both conceptually and historically on negritude (Leopold Senghor, 1950s), on African nationalism and others (Kwame Nkrumah, 1940s), on Nigerian history (Kenneth Dike, 1950s), etc. We can't trace the whole continent, but there is enough evidence for us to safely argue that there was significant writing on African history as well as from other disciplines. The issue is whether Hugh Trevor-Roper acknowledged that as history or not.

In examining Trevor-Roper's thoughts, we argue that his issue was not necessarily about whether there is anything that has been written about Africa's past, but that he had fundamental issues about Africa and Africans. He almost qualifies to be a neo-social Darwinist of some sort. So, his speech need to be unpacked as it is pregnant of meaning and has fundamental implications for African history as a discipline. Trevor-Roper believed that there cannot be such a history of Africans as Africans had nothing in the past to be proud of or to be deliberately kept for posterity and memory – they were 'unprogressive', 'barbarous tribes'. Therefore, by his (il)-logic, 'western civilisation', which was supposedly brought by the colonisers, was the thing that Africans aspired to in their ethnographic present. He reasoned that this then would naturally arouse the curiosity of the sociologists and anthropologists, BUT not that of historians. For Trevor-Roper, if Africans had any past, their 'past' was something to be escaped from, and not for themselves to take pride in. Following that logic, he believed therefore that Africans of his time could not have had a history, for what purpose would their so-called 'past' serve? By his argument, history is always purposeful as it was a measure of progress (or [upward] mobility), both of which are, by his imagination a monopoly of the civilised. In this one traces conceptions of the relationship between history, patriotism (fanatical and romanticist love for the nation) and personal pride. I will say a little bit about an important point about Trevor-Roper's conception of history before I bring it closer home.

Trevor-Roper was Hegelian. His idea of history as progress and as an expression of what we are to be proud of and what we should keenly preserve, rather than escape from it, emanates from Hegel, a German philosopher of the 19th century. Hegel viewed history as, “... the embodiment of spirit in the form of events, that is, of direct natural principles” which he sees as hierarchically ordered.⁷ Thus, a progressing nation is one which is able, in defence of the overall happiness of its own people, to show superiority in its fight for its own interests over that of the other nations. However, he sees this as attainable when a people transitions from, “... the family, horde, clan, or multitude into a state...”, for without this progressive transition, the state cannot claim sovereignty. In that connection, Hegel justifies “the right of heroes to found states”, as their actions mirror what he thought was an expression of ultimate civilisation. He therefore supported the disdain that is often expressed by the more political powerful states on those who are perceived to be stateless, and thus inferior. He avers, “In the same way civilised nations may treat as barbarians the peoples who are behind them in the essential elements of the state. Thus the rights of mere herdsmen, hunters, and tillers of the soil are inferior, and their independence is merely formal”, as they cannot be sovereign. For, “Wars and contests arising under such circumstances are struggles for recognition in behalf (sic) of a certain definite content. It is this feature of them which is significant in world-history.”⁸ The Hegelian idea was based on Hegel’s assumption that, “... African kingdoms of his time represented the original state of human political evolution, and that the alleged lack of political evolution in these kingdoms rendered them outside of history.”⁹ Hegel’s extreme eurocentrism mirrors the political context of Europe of his time. His writings influenced the unifications that were happening in states, and the ideas of conquest

⁷ *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, (trans. S. W. Dyne), London, George Bell and Sons, 1896, p. 343.

⁸ *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, p. 344, 345.

⁹ John Edward Philips ‘Whats New About African History?’, *History News Network*, at <http://hnn.us/articles/24954.html> last accessed 12 July 2019.

as well as social Darwinist ideas that aided the aggressive colonialisms of the non-European world.

Trevor-Roper's argument about African history came at a particularly interesting time – the time of decolonisation and the struggles for independence, for those states that had not yet freed themselves – especially most of those in Southern Africa. There was changing British policy from the politics of formal empires to the economics and politics of informal empires. Colonies had become too expensive to run and a different model was being experimented with. In that era, it was not outrageous for British regime to support those Africans who wanted to free themselves as that represented an easing of the economic burden of sustaining the huge empire that was going to crumble due to increasing military costs, should Britain have decided to fight for its formal imperial hold.

Trevor-Roper did not read the signs of the times, for soon, some Universities in England would set up chairs in African history, which became very critical in the writing of academic African history, going forward. Trevor-Roper soon came under serious attack from the emerging Africanists, such as J. D. Fage as he delivered his inaugural lecture as a professor of African history at the University of Birmingham, and later by a host of other African historians. Fage sought to prove that Trevor-Roper's arguments were false and that in fact Africa possessed elements of progress, and that they were not barbaric. This was a key message of nationalist historiography, for everywhere, they proved that Africa had complex societies, sophisticated political organisations, etc. BUT, so long their history was to prove Trevor-Roper wrong, they were still being dictated to

by Trevor-Roper as their sets of issues they explored were merely located in revisionist historiography.¹⁰

However, to-date, there may still be many crypto Trevor-Ropers whom we think are doing African history a favour when in fact they are merely doing **a history of Europeans and their ideas in Africa**. Some African history is still being **viewed mainly from the perspective of empire, in a way that at times blurs the line between Imperial history and African history** – and in that one barely finds African agency. To-date, some African historians still think that **we should represent precolonial Africa in the form of states, or state systems – but why**, when doing so is tantamount to imitating depictions of European history as represented by Trevor-Roper and others? Is this just to prove Trevor-Roper wrong, by showing that we were also glorified, at least by his definition? **Isn't this undermining our capacity to examine the dynamism within which African people interacted or organised themselves in the past?** Moreover, **some scholars in our day still doubt some arguments by African historians as myths that have been perpetuated by Afrocentric writers over time in their attempts to claim the supremacy of African civilisations**. So there is a debate on repositioning Africa and representing the African past. There are contestations on what is authentic and what is not? I do not mean to defend a desperate approach to the study of the African past that seeks to tailor make, or manipulate evidence where it is not, because that won't make African historians better than Hugh Trevor-Roper. In fact some Afrocentric writing appears to go overboard with unverified information that passes as history. However, in the same vein, I can't understand why it should be worthy writing books attacking Afrocentricity when the same vehemence of attack has not been done on eurocentricity. Writing in 1996, a Classics scholar Mary

¹⁰ See a similar remark from Finn Fuglestad, 'The Trevor-Roper Trap or the Imperialism of History: An Essay', *History in Africa*, vol. 19, 1992, pp. 309-26; Arnold Temu and Bornaventure Swai, *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique – Post-Colonial Historiography Examined*, London, ZED Books, 1981, p. x.

Lefkowitz argued that she was not trying to create the notion that old classical civilisations were Western in origins, but to defend academic integrity by showing that the Afrocentric myth of ancient Egypt and ancient Greece were myths, not history. But the tone of her contribution is suggestive and her suggestion that the reduction of Afrocentric writers to “a brand of ‘ethnic truths’” is unfortunate¹¹,

In this book I want to show why Afrocentric notions of antiquity, even though unhistorical, have seemed plausible to many intelligent people. In part, the explanation lies in the present intellectual debate. There is a current tendency, at least among academics, to regard history as a form of fiction that can and should be written differently by each nation or ethnic group. The assumptions seems to be that somehow, all versions will simultaneously be true, even if they conflict in particular details. According to this line of argument, Afrocentric ancient history can be treated not as pseudohistory but as an alternative way of looking at the past. It can be considered as valid as the traditional version, and perhaps even more valid because of its moral agenda. It confers a new and higher status on an ethnic group whose history has largely remained obscure.¹²

Lefkowitz went on to deal with what she saw as the myths about Egypt and about African origins or ideas (e.g. – that Socrates was black; that Cleopatra was black and that Greek philosophy was stolen from Egyptian thoughts), myths of the stolen legacy and others. In other words, hers is an attempt to say that claims made by Afrocentric writers were incorrect. It is almost exposing to doubt the revisionism that we have come to accept about the roots of certain African civilisations. Lefkowitz’s argument is important to the issues

¹¹ Mary Lefkowitz, *Out Of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*, New York, Basic Books, 1996, p. 8.

¹² Mary Lefkowitz, *Out Of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*, New York, Basic Books, 1996, p. xiii-xiv.

of representing the past – BUT they in fact, may sound so familiar, considering the controversial speech by P. D. Curtin at the African Studies Association Conference in 1995, ‘Ghettoizing African History’. Here Curtin decried the declining quality of African Studies in the USA, which he ascribed to the massification of the programs and the ethnic profiling that was associated with the program – with it being taught mainly by Africans and Afro-Americans.¹³ In this he courted the ire of African historians and Africanists who wrote many rebuttals.

With this in mind, there are some questions, that I can’t fully answer: How do we disabuse Africa from being such a playground of scepticism, post-modernist thoughts, and even afro-pessimism, yet without compromising the integrity of African history? Do we perhaps need to retrain our undergraduate students and post-graduates – and train them with what content? What ideas should guide the teaching of history in Africa? Does the state have any role to play, if so, where does their role start and where does it end? The so-called European civilizations were products of so much Eurocentric histories, state politics, and key ideologies and philosophies. So, what kinds of histories and philosophies will help Africa going forward, to deal with inferiority complexes that have been promoted over numerous centuries of misrepresentations? Should we go along the lines of patriotic history? Why, for what benefit – and what are the pitfalls?

But another issue to discuss here is the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the NADA journal in Southern Rhodesia – and how these helped to promote a version of African studies and official narratives in the colonies.

¹³ Paul T. Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises*, CODESRIA, Dakar, 1997, p. i.

The SOAS, NADA and the Rhodesian Reprint Library:

The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) was founded in London in the year 1916, initially as the School of Oriental Studies (focussing on the Oriental world). It became SOAS in 1938 as it now included African Studies), with the main purpose being the strengthening Britain's economic, political and military stranglehold in Africa and Asia by means of providing education to colonial administrators, commercial people, missionaries, medical personnel, teachers and also military officers. The intention was to equip them with knowledge (of customs, religion, language, law, history of Africans and Asians) and the skills that was required for them to do their job in Africa at the time. The School of Oriental and African Studies was therefore in some way an extension of British imperial politics. Its agenda slowly morphed with time due to changing British colonial interests. In the 1950s onward, SOAS trained a new crop of students (including a few African students) to undertake cutting edge research in Africa at these times of transition of their politics and economies (broadly the era of political decolonisation). Thus, significant knowledge about Africa was generated, theoretical perspectives and methodologies developed without Africa's own direct participation as an equal partner in knowledge production.

Armed with knowledge and training gained from SOAS, colonial officials came, or rather some returned to Africa from retraining with what they viewed as guild knowledge. They influenced so many changes that impacted on the face of African political systems, administration, as well as impacting African social and cultural practices by means of tinkering with them to the extent palatable to colonial interests. But more critically, colonial officials, especially native officials, missionaries, medical doctors, some academics, and others contributed to a corpus of 'knowledge about Africans', not knowledge for Africans, through a series of contributions to their

own inter-disciplinary journal called the Native Affairs Departmental Annual (NADA) in Southern Rhodesia.

The issues covered in NADA were diverse, including just about anything pertaining to Africans, the environments, taboos, cultures, eating habits, dressing, languages, chieftaincy, and so on. D. N. Beach who did a study of this colonial journal, identified that of the 57 issues of NADA between 1923 and 1980, and out of its total of 912 articles, 40% of the contributors were identifiable officials of the Native Affairs Department (NAD). Of the 37% who were classified as general contributors, Beach argue that a considerable number of these were NAD officials who contributed under pseudonyms and initials, as well as policemen, forest game rangers, education and agriculture officers and others. This suggests that the bulk of the contributors were government officials. About 12% of the contributors were missionaries and only about 11% we academics such as C.M. Doke, Van Warmelo, J.F. Holeman, J. Schofield, R. Summers, Bourdillon, Clyde Mitchell, while only a paltry 6% were Africans contributors.¹⁴ Observing that most of the contributors lacked training on how to write about local history, were uncritical of their sources and had poor referencing, Beach concluded, “It is clear from the foregoing that there was no real attempt to direct historical research from the top. *NADA*, was more of a forum for amateur enthusiasts than an instrument of policy.” Here Beach was being too economical with the truth. This can be understood if one examines his attitude towards *NADA* in general, for Beach regrets that this colonial journal was closed by the new government when it came to power in 1980. He opened his introduction with a strange statement, “One of the casualties of the transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe in 1980 was the journal *NADA*, which came to an end with the

¹⁴ D.N. Beach, *NADA and Mafohla: Antiquarianism in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe With Special Reference To The Work of F.W.T. Posselt* University of Zimbabwe, in *History in Africa*, Vol. 13, 1986, pp. 1-11.

breakup of the government ministry that sponsored it.”¹⁵ There should have been no basis for him to regret the closure of *NADA* if he cared about how it misrepresented Africans and African history. I would like to suggest that Beach did not acknowledge how closely he was invested in journals of this kind which perpetuated the mind-set of the Rhodesian white folks. *NADA* was an essential element of the (Southern) Rhodesian information policy and an important tool for colonial knowledge creation. It did not need to appear more professional than it was, after all in the earlier years, it was not supported by any university intellectual critical mass as there was no local university then. **In fact, *NADA*'s power and importance lay in its amateurish appearance and the style of writing, which was not academic, yet had factualist pretensions.** In that amateurish appearance, *NADA* served its purpose well. First, it perpetuated European stereotypes about Southern Rhodesian Africans through systematic ways of representing and mis-representing the vanquished. Secondly, *NADA* was a conduit for gathering a corpus of information about the ‘natives’ from any district where a write was located.¹⁶ Thirdly, it was an information sharing platform for government officials who were scattered in different districts. The information would be used to rethink policy and for general administrative and governance convenience. Lastly, *NADA* helped officials to ‘know’ the natives as a way to rule them easier by anticipating common ‘native’ behaviour. Elsewhere, historians have found that there was a relationship between empire and depictions of the underdogs in the colonies, with Europeans in Africa representing Africans within their own Eurocentric, hence their own myths about Africans.¹⁷ Christopher Bayly has also demonstrated the

¹⁵ Beach, ‘*NADA* and *Mafohla*’, p. 1.

¹⁶ Information gathering was not unique to Southern Rhodesia, but was an important aspect of colonial governance. See C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

¹⁷ Sven Poulsen, ‘African history: from a European to an African point of view’, *Kunapipi*, Vol. 3, 1, 1981, pp. 75-80.

importance of information gathering in colonial administration in India.¹⁸ Some of the myths about Africans that are in the *NADA* are innocently passed into historical writings today as if they were facts of the past. *NADA* is now an important source for historians today – and there remains the danger of uncritical use of this source which will potentially influence the way we interpret and understand our history.

Other than the *NADA*, there was also a direct and purposeful move to promote patriotic settler history, or at least to legitimise it in (Southern) Rhodesia using the Rhodesian Reprint Library. Faced with the exodus of white whofaced uncertainty about the future of white minority rule after the break-up of the Federation and the legitimacy and economic crisis that bedevilled Smith's regime after the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965, there was a deliberate attempt to arouse a sense of white patriotism, some kind of *Rhodesianism*.¹⁹ There were concerted efforts to romanticise the past by appealing to the exploits of late 19th century hunters, doctors, missionaries, explorers and a militia (including mercenaries) that fought in the war against the Ndebele and Shona since the advent of colonisation and others. These were recast as the father figures of Rhodesian white nationalism – and this went hand in hand with other more active propaganda on radio, Television and in print media. The Rhodesiana Reprint Library reprinted almost all the volumes of memoirs, reminiscences, travel narratives, and auto-ethnographies of early visitors and early colonisers of the land that is now Zimbabwe. A sample check of the titles of those publications is interesting: *Old Rhodesian Days* (Hugh Marshall-Hole), *Three Years in Savage Africa* (Lionel Declé), *How We Made Rhodesia* (Arthur Glyn Leonard), and many others. The reprint of this series of old Rhodesian books came at a time an alternative historical narrative

¹⁸ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 2000.

¹⁹ Enocent Msindo, 'Winning Hearts and Minds': Crisis and Propaganda in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1962-1970', in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, 3, 2009, pp. 663-82.

was emerging – nationalist history, championed by Terence Ranger and like-minded colleagues across the continent. So it was supposed to serve as a counter narrative to African nationalist imagination.

Of Nationalist History and Its Aftermaths

The 1960s was a time of serious political change in Africa. Empires receded fast in the rest of Africa, with the exception of parts of Southern Africa where settler regimes were strongly rooted. With changes in British policy towards colonies, universities in Britain started offering some African studies courses. They set up chairs and worked with universities in their colonies that were in a position to introduce African history. University of Ibadan, Dar-es-Salaam and Makerere established prestigious chairs that were filled by British historians whose focus was advocating for ‘African perspectives of history’, as counter discourses to Eurocentric perspectives. In Nigeria, it was a mixture of both Africans and Europeans experts such as Kenneth Dike, Ajayi, Allan Ryder, , Aderibigbe, J.D. Omer-Cooper and others.²⁰ The Dar-es-Salaam school was manned by John Lonsdale, John Iliffe, John MacCracken and Terence Ranger. These scholars did have their own share of challenges.

Falola identifies the major challenges that nationalist historiography faced: First, as they were writing these radical histories, certain changes started to happen in the politics of independent African states that made some of them doubt the validity of their usable pasts that they had worked so hard to portray. They had to try and broaden their research agenda, in response. Second, there were also calls for a shift from a predominant political history focus of their early work – the obsession with states and empires to social history, labour, economic history (in the 1970s) as well as international relations (1980s in Nigeria). Third, their general concerns about

²⁰ Falola, ‘Nationalism and African Historiography’, pp. 209-35.

usable histories got them to focus on contemporary histories – the rise of military regimes, violent states, rebels and rebel movements, economic decay, oil crises, and so on tended to confuse these scholars about which way to go and how to analyse these issues historically. Economic decline in the neo-liberal era also made it difficult to get funding to undertake historical research. We are in that phase, and in Zimbabwe, it is a much more serious one.

However, paradoxically, that is the era when there has been the most unprecedented rise in the numbers of history PhD holders doing Zimbabwean history. Zimbabwe probably has the highest number of black people who have PhDs in History in Southern Africa, or are at least studying towards a PhD in History. This is due to an external stimulus – the role of universities outside the country, particularly the strategic role of South Africa in Zimbabwean historical studies.

In Zimbabwe, the works of Ranger remained Ur-texts of nationalist historiography. They have continued to influence generations of African historians, especially those of the 1970s up to the 1990s. Following his influential *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia and the African Voice*, which asserted African agency, a number of scholars such as Mudenge, Bhebe, Bhila, and others rose – all examining empires and their political (Mudenge), economic (Bhila) and religious structures (Bhebe). This work has remained foundational to Zimbabwean history. It is of course true that Ranger himself has become a subject of serious criticism in the mid-1970s with the rise of Marxist historiography that built on earlier scholarship. Rangerian history was seen as bourgeois, and that it tried to ignore class as an organisational category. Thus arose Julian Cobbing with a strongly Marxist interpretation of the Ndebele state, hence his political focus – which was also problematic as it exaggerated the political sophistication of the state and underestimated its fragility. Beach, on

the other end had another different reason for differing with Ranger. He was a Rhodesian.

David Newbury Beach had a consultancy with the Ministry of Internal affairs from the time they started to work on delineation of communities, from which Delineation Reports emerged. He was tasked to research on the history of 'native tribes', to find out their social and political organisation. This was an important role as his findings were meant to justify the 'Community Development' philosophy of Ian Smith that depended on identifying and strengthening 'tribal authorities' as counter power to nationalist whose doctrines had invaded 'Tribal Trust Lands'. Beach did exactly the opposite of the nationalist paradigm. He dumped empires, kingdoms, and pre-colonial states and focussed on finding clans, families and every small organisational structure that he could in one of the most intricate way – a significant fragmentation of African communities. Evidently, this served to prove that nationalism was a farce; that it built on false histories and false foundations, and that Africans did not have any history of working as a national collectivity, at least at a grandeur scale imagined by proponents of African nationalist histories. His criticism of Ranger and others is therefore strongly based on this ideological backend that many readers do not easily decipher. Both Ranger and Beach created usable pasts – but they differed on who their targeted user were. Their agenda was diametrically opposite. Interestingly, Beach did not supervise black African students to PhD levels. Ranger only did that belatedly in his career as well.

The mid-1970s is also interesting generally as a period of disruption. The Marxist scholarship was popularised Geovanni Arrighi, who focussed on peasants and the colonial economy, viewing the colonial state as a parasitic entity (1973) as well Julian Cobbing (1976).²¹ In

²¹ Giovanni Arrighi; "Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective. A Study of the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia" in *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa*, eds. Giovanni Arrighi and John S. Soul,

the late 1970s and early 1980s, there also arose other Marxist scholars who were mainly interested in analysing class and its manifestations in economic history, with a focus on mining and labour history, Phimister and Van Onselen championed this.²² Their assaults on Ranger's bourgeois history was therefore understandable. There was a realisation that the problem of Africans was not merely political, but it was also about their economic plight, even in the political dispensation they were in.

Concurrently, in the late 1970s, the development and underdevelopment and dependency school was strong elsewhere in Africa. The intention was to understand why the post-independence state was struggling to perform economically, particularly in the late 1970s, following two successive oil crises. There were no deep theoretical engagements with this school in Zimbabwe save for the works of Ibbo Mandaza and some development economists in the 1980s.

From the 1990s, the rise of ESAP and the resultant economic meltdown put history in a crisis. The hagiography that had characterised ZANU and the ruling government of the day began to come into question. Alternative histories were written as the nationalist paradigm, which had still survived the early onslaughts had remained strong, particularly because of the way it was promoted in school syllabuses. There was interest in social histories, but political history also remained, only that the subject of discussion shifted to something else. There was focus on ethnicity to demonstrate alternative claims to legitimacy and to rights within the state; on contemporary land struggles to capture the moment of change in agrarian policies since the independence era; on revisiting

London: Monthly Review Press, 1973. See also Julian Cobbing, *The Ndebele under the Khumalos, 1820-1896*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Lancaster, 1976.

²² See Charles van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1933*, London, Pluto Press, 1976, and Ian Phimister, *An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe 1890-1940: Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle*, London: Longman, 1988.

the liberation struggle to understand alternative histories such as the history of ZAPU, the role of women in the struggle, the politics of violence in the struggle; on chieftaincy; on evictions to create an arena for rights based claims, on medical history, to demonstrate the importance of service delivery and other facets; on urban histories to locate the historical roles of Africans as urban citizens. More recently, there has been a focus on landscapes, environments, water, animals, etc. There has been no lack of diversity in Zimbabwean history.

Summing up and Some questions:

The evolution of Zimbabwean history and more recently, the associated rise in a diversity of Zimbabwean history scholars is a very interesting development as it raises stakes for the future of the discipline. It will take time though for most scholars to move beyond the ideological positions of key early Africanists such as Terence Ranger, David Beach, Julian Cobbing, Ian Phimister, and perhaps a few others.

As a part of my concluding remarks, I raise a few questions which are potentially food for thought for us all:

- Why are we writing what we are writing? What is its purpose? Who is our target reader, and why?
- What is the intellectual backend and backbone of our writings and the theoretical leanings of our approaches? And where do we get inspired from? Some many years ago when I was in the UK, one of the common criticisms that I heard about writings from Africa was that although they were empirically rich, they severely lacked theoretical engagement. What do you see as the problem? Is it to do with our discomforts of theoretical perspectives and intellectual traditions from the Global North?

What is the role and position of theory in African History? BUT is the Global North the only source of inspiration? Does the Global South not have theory at all?

- What is the stuff that is unsaid in our writings – what are our silences? Are we over-relying on the colonial library that silences the underdogs? What alternative methodologies should be thought about?
- What are the issues with our archives and what constraints and opportunities do they present, and how do we surmount them? We have multiple archives – how do we access them – court records, orality, colonial records and post-col archives?
- Related to the above is a political question - How serious are our governments in Africa about preserving our post-colonial pasts? How accessible are the post-independence records? Will the post-independent archive be any richer than the colonial one?

Thank you... End....