

***Lozikeyi Dlodlo, Queen of the Ndebele: "A very dangerous and intriguing woman"***, by Marieke Faber Clarke, with Pathisa Nyathi. Bulawayo: Amagugu, 2010. 310 pp. ISBN 978-0-7974-4266-5. Z\$20.00.

On the front cover of this consistently interesting and engaging book is a striking photograph of Lozikeyi Dlodlo, King Lobhengula's senior queen, and after his death Queen Regent of the Ndebele. Taken around 1910 by the missionary Bowen Rees, it shows her confident and assertive, sitting alone in front of her cattle enclosure. The sense of authority is palpable. Yet the majority of the standard historical reference works on Zimbabwe make no reference to her at all. It is the aim of this biography to show that she was not just one of Lobhengula's many queens, but was an important political player in her own right, who was the moving spirit behind the War of the Red Axe (the Matabele Rebellion) in 1896, and who subsequently encouraged the renaissance of the Ndebele nation through embracing western education and then turning it against the European settlers in what had become Rhodesia. After her death during the great 'flu epidemic of 1919, she remained an inspiration to Ndebele freedom fighters, and Marieke Clarke tells us that during the liberation war of the 1970s bullets from the opposing sides were symbolically placed by her grave.

One of the problems of writing a biography of someone who has effectively been marginalised or ignored by mainstream history is the sources. In terms of the written record, this was almost entirely the creation of Europeans, most of whom had little or no understanding of Ndebele culture or politics and who therefore tended to underplay the role that royal women such as Lozikeyi played. Nevertheless Clarke makes good use of such written sources as do exist, and in particular of the papers of the trader and adventurer Johan Colenbrander, who was also Rhodes's interpreter at the Indabas with the Ndebele chiefs in 1896, and of the L.M.S. missionary Bowen Rees who was also fluent in *isiNdebele* and who got to know the Queen well over a long period of time. Bowen Rees's testimony is particularly important because as a Welsh-speaking Welshman at a time when English cultural imperialism was being forced on the Welsh, he was able to empathise with another small nation suffering under the same oppressor. Incidentally, on the basis of the evidence produced here, both Colenbrander and Bowen Rees would benefit from biographies of their own. Both were active in Matabeleland over a long period of time and were held in high regard by the Ndebele themselves, yet they made very different choices, Colenbrander effectively selling out to Rhodes, something one senses Bowen Rees would never have considered doing.

But however important these written sources are, it is obvious from the outset that this book is to a large extent based on oral history and tradition. From the time, over twenty years ago, when she first decided she wanted to write a biography of Lozikeyi, Clarke has built up a long list of informants, many of them linked by kinship with the Queen, and from these she has managed to create a remarkably detailed account of the different phases of the Queen's life. In this she has been greatly helped by Pathisa Nyathi, who has himself written extensively on Ndebele history and culture, and his name appears in the footnotes far more than any other; in that sense, therefore, this book is a true collaboration. Of course, oral history, particularly at this remove of time, can have its own problems of interpretation, but Clarke has done her best to test the information she has been given, and on balance the majority of her conclusions seem as soundly based as it is possible to be given the nature of the evidence.

The early chapters which discuss the political, cultural and religious makeup of the Ndebele kingdom, and which stress the importance of the complex ties of family and kinship which held it together, can be hard going for the unfamiliar reader, but fortunately at the end of the book is a whole series of family trees, genealogies and glossaries which are a real aid to understanding how

and why Lozikeyi Dlodlo came to be Lobhengula's senior queen and the significance of the religious rituals in which she played a key part.

The pace of the book increases markedly once 1893 is reached and Dr. Jameson's armed invasion of the Ndebele kingdom is followed by the death or disappearance of Lobhengula. In a key passage, Clarke puts forward the thesis that in the king's absence, Lozikeyi became 'acting head of the Ndebele nation' and, in effect Queen Regent. But she had to lead 'with such discretion that the occupying forces did not understand her role'. Thus, she simultaneously 'succeeded in winning the lasting respect of the Ndebele people, while concealing from the new white rulers (and from European historians) that she was her husband's acting successor' (p.96). Hence the importance of the oral traditions which Clarke draws on so extensively, and which open up an important debate on the role of women in the high politics of southern Africa.

The second part of the book is dominated by the War of the Red Axe. Clarke's account of this is drawn largely from writers such as Terence Ranger and Julian Cobbing, but she also includes much eye-witness testimony taken from such contemporary works as Frank Sykes's *With Plumer in Matabeleland* (London: 1897). Inevitably Lozikeyi is far from centre stage during her account of the military operations, but Clarke tries hard to make the case that the Queen was a key player behind the scenes, for example in determining the exact time of the rebellion's outbreak, in supplying the African soldiers with ammunition, and in being a party to the negotiations which ended the war. To this reviewer at least, the evidence for this seems suggestive rather than conclusive, and readers will need to make up their own minds as to the degree of influence the Queen exercised over these momentous events.

Finally, in the third part, Clarke discusses the ways in which Queen Lozikeyi continued to resist European occupation of Matabeleland during the years after the war. These chapters, and especially that which deals with her relations with the missionaries, are amongst the most interesting in the book. Lozikeyi, it seems, never considered converting to Christianity, but she was happy to encourage Bowen Rees and the L.M.S. missionaries to set up schools and give children western-style education. It was the L.M.S. who educated many of the nationalist leaders of a later generation, and in that sense Clarke is surely right to argue that Lozikeyi 'contributed to the growth and development of the Zimbabwean nationalist movement' (p.233). Perhaps this, together with the basic fact of 'keeping the nation together' (p.229) after two debilitating wars followed by famine, should be regarded as her greatest achievement.

The layout of the book could be improved in places. On page 213 Clarke discusses in detail the four photographs which the Queen allowed Bowen Rees to take of her around 1910, but the photos themselves - or rather some of them - appear much earlier in the book, and indeed it is not immediately clear which they are since some of the pictures are wrongly attributed in the text and you have to refer to an errata slip to make the correct identification. Similarly, an important photograph of the Queen wearing western clothes, taken by Johan Colenbrander in 1915, is discussed on page 221, but appears, illogically, over a hundred pages earlier in the chapter devoted to the aftermath of the 1893 conquest of Matabeleland.

In addition to the glossaries and family trees mentioned earlier, the appendices include extremely helpful lists of the *dramatis personae*, both Ndebele and European; the latter includes the feature - unique as far as I know - of indicating by a £ sign which of them were in the pay of Cecil Rhodes. There are also brief biographical notes on eighty-four of Lobhengula's queens, his eight sons and twenty-two daughters.

Overall, I feel Marieke Clarke has succeeded in her aim of restoring Queen Lozikeyi to her rightful place in the history of the Ndebele nation, and in doing so she has also made a major contribution to the study of gender in the politics of 19<sup>th</sup> century southern Africa.

*John Pinfold*