

Book Review

Clarke, Marieke. 2008. *Mambo Hills: historical & religious significance*. Bulawayo: 'amaBooks. 28 pp. ISBN 978-0-7974-3589-6.

If you were hoping for a book on the archaeology or the monument, Ntabazikamambo, and its contestation as a heritage site this publication is not for you. In fact I don't think this was ever the author's briefing and instead we have a particularly valuable contribution on Mkwati and the broader family and cult relationships in which this important figure of the 1896-7 anti-colonial campaign featured. Surprisingly, there are few detailed histories of this man despite his importance in the anti-colonial and post-colonial historical discourse. Unlike Zezuru mediums of Nehanda and Kaguvi, Mkwati has hitherto been a bit of an enigma; mentioned only when necessary to bring Matabeleland into nationalist historiography and with the odd building named after him, but he not really known by most people unlike his Mazowe Valley counterparts.

Discussed briefly in that all-important book that has shaped Zimbabwean historiography, Terrance Ranger's (1967) *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, Mkwati is presented as a regional instigator of the insurrections of 1896 in Matabeleland. Relatively few details are however given and he is depicted as much the same as the more northern spirit mediums of the Shona heartland. Mkwati is further short-changed in later nationalist publications where he becomes a mere adjutant to events in Mashonaland. In fact that bastion of nationalist "history" A.S. Chigwedere relegates him to the mere status of a *mujibha* (runner) for some mystical central leader (Murenga) who supposedly instigated events across the entire modern nation (Chigwedere 1991). Chigwedere's blatant Shonisation and reinterpretation of events to suit current political patronage should always be remembered.

Clarke now presents a more a thorough picture of Mkwati and his part in regional events outside of modern nationalist concerns. He was not local, being born a Leya in the Zambezi Valley who was captured in his youth by Ndebele raiders. As one of Lobengula's "Black ants" he rose to importance through his marriage to Tenkela, the all important *iwosana*, messenger of Mwali, in this area of central Zimbabwe who acted as the local voice and transmitting of information for the Mlimo Cult based in the Matobo Hills. The importance of Mkwati was therefore not as a Shona medium, in the sense of Nehanda, but it was its association with Tankela and her family. It seems that the influence of the Mlimo Cult may have expanded further in the post-Ndebele era as people tried to come to terms with the intrusion and impact of colonialism. Mkwati would have spoken out and encouraged the local events of 1896 but he was not some cog of a massive nation-wide conspiracy against the colonial regime. I recommend reading this book to get a better understanding of the man and events of that era.

My main quibble about the book is the dearth of solid information on the Mambo Hills. We never get to know the broken hilly area which is after all the landscape in which these events were set and which, through its heritage associations with the past (the last Mambo and the once all powerful Rozwi State), determined who was living there, why and their actions. The ruin of Ntabazikamambo is shown on the cover but

there is scant detail on it. Its being one of many Khami-type ruins in this part of central Zimbabwe could have been analysed more thoroughly. Clarke comments as to Zhizo and Leopard's Kopje rock art (p.1) are curious and one can only assume that the fault lies with uninformed informants. I don't know any other serious researcher who would think that the art can be attributed to these farming community groups.

I was also very disappointed with the lack of adequate comment on the events that post date 1896. The hills were alienated as white farmland. How was this done, what were the relationships between the settlers and the locals and did they change through time? Access to the site was not restricted at all times and the competing interests of different parties who all lay claim to the site and its said spiritual associations could have been better analysed.

Clarke places too much emphasis on the interpretations and heritage explanations of one group, the Mambo Cultural & Sacred Places of Zimbabwe Advisory Committee of the late A.S. Moyo. There are other groups and individuals who are involved who dispute the legitimacy of this organisation. In this book there is an overreliance on a few commentators, sometimes a failure to separate contemporary concerns from those that may have counted in the past and the complex multivocality and the contested nature of the hills and the heritage site is not adequately covered by Clarke. More recent events in the Rhodesian Bush War or Chimurenga II in the 1970s and the Gukuruhundi of the 1980s would also have been very informative. Pathisa Nyathi in his foreword hints as much but the author seems to have avoided the issues completely.

All in all this is an interesting and important work that focuses on local areas and agency rather than broad sweeping panoramas. The author and publishers are also to be congratulated on ensuring that it is made available locally. Too often now our history is written and published elsewhere, so that we at home are denied access to it; we are studied and written about but the results are never shared with the actual people involved. May this trend initiated by Clarke continue.

References

- Chigwedere, A.S. 1991. *The Forgotten Heroes of Chimurenga I: the archives speak*. Harare: Mercury Press.
- Ranger, T.O. 1967. *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*. London: Heinemann.

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