

ESSAY REVIEW

SITHOLE, THE POLITICIAN AS AUTHOR

NDABANINGI SITHOLE'S BOOKS have attracted interest more as a result of the political circumstances in which they were published and their author's role in Rhodesian politics than from their intrinsic merits. His *African Nationalism*,¹ which was published in 1959, although not particularly subtle or penetrating, was welcomed within and outside Africa as an expression by an African of what African nationalism meant to Africans at a time when African nationalist leaders were rapidly taking over the governments of their countries from colonial rulers. Sithole's reputation as the author of *African Nationalism* launched his career as an African nationalist leader in Southern Rhodesia, when in 1960 his fame as an author helped him rapidly to attain eminence within the N.D.P. Since then his prominence as a politician has, by contrast, stimulated interest in the books that he has written. Sithole soon established himself as one of the most important African leaders in Rhodesia. After holding senior office in N.D.P. and its successor, ZAPU, Sithole broke with the ZAPU leader, Joshua Nkomo, in 1963 to become President of the rival ZANU. The Rhodesian Government then improved his status as a nationalist leader by detaining and imprisoning him for over ten years between 1964 and 1974. After he was released Sithole quickly gained the reputation in 1975 of being the most militant of the nationalist leaders in Rhodesia, projecting himself as the commander of the by now successful ZANU guerillas in the north-east of the country. When most of these guerillas refused to acknowledge his leadership, he lost much of his political significance, until he became one of the two nationalist leaders to sign the internal agreement with Ian Smith in March 1978, which planned African majority government by the end of the year.

Sithole, who has since the mid-1960s written a remarkable amount for a man at first confined to prison and then involved in politics, has gained some kind of reputation as the intellectual among African leaders. However, the quality of his writing does not match its quantity, and he is less intelligent and less intellectual than some others in the Rhodesian African nationalist movement, notably Robert Mugabe and Willie Musarurwa, although they have not produced books. One of Sithole's recent books, *Roots of a Revolution*,² might not have seemed worth publishing, if *African Nationalism* had not been successful throughout the world in two editions and in several languages and if Sithole had not been a celebrated politician.

Roots of a Revolution is Sithole's latest experiment in quasi-documentary fiction, in which Sithole has explored the predicaments of Africans coping

¹ N. Sithole, *African Nationalism* (Cape Town, Oxford Univ. Press, 1959).

² N. Sithole, *Roots of a Revolution* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1977). 142pp., £3.50.

with the impact of European society. His first book, and the only one written in Sindebele, *AmaNdebele KaMzilikase* was published in 1956.³ It was a kind of historical novel about the failure of the Ndebele in the war of 1893 and the rising of 1896 to fight the Europeans with sufficient vigour. Sithole's next work of fiction was *The Polygamist*,⁴ which was published in 1972 and, like the revised version of *African Nationalism*,⁵ *Obed Mutezo*⁶ and *Roots of a Revolution*, was written while he was imprisoned. The central figure of *The Polygamist* is Dube, the headman of a village who has seven wives. Sithole is not an imaginative novelist, but aims to give an accurate account in fictional form of tribal customs and beliefs and to show how Africans previously isolated from European culture may react when European influences enter their lives. Dube's son leaves the village for a long time and, while he is away, goes to school and becomes a teacher. On returning home the son is treated as a stranger and feels alienated from his village. He resents the fact that his family still live in the old style and fears that his fiancée, whom he met away from the village, who is also a teacher, may reject him because his family is primitive. The son successfully persuades his father to buy European clothes for his wives, but Dube argues for the naturalness of polygamy against his son, who has become a Christian during his absence from the village. Unlike *AmaNdebele KaMzilikase*, *The Polygamist* has no implicit message about how to confront the Europeans. Sithole is concerned with the related, but separate theme of how Africans should select and fuse what is of value from traditional African life and from the alien European culture. To Sithole who has a strong emotional attachment to his tribal origins and, at the same time, a clear commitment to Christianity, the problems of how to move between the African and the European worlds is personally important, and he explores it sensitively in some of his other writings, in particular, *Obed Mutezo*, as well as in *The Polygamist*. This novel, however, while it has a certain charm, lacks depth or subtlety. It is almost as if Sithole is trying self-consciously to strip himself of European sophistication, which he distrusts, to write about African simplicity, which he admires.

The third of Sithole's works of fiction, *Roots of a Revolution*, which was written in 1973, although not published till 1977, is basically a political tract, although presented in a fictional form. In effect, it presents the case that violent African resistance is necessary in Rhodesia to remove unrepentant European oppression. The book has no real plot and the various episodes, which illustrate different aspects of the confrontation between the races, are only loosely linked together by a common general theme and some common characters. What is least satisfactory is the manufacture of events which might have happened, but which in fact did not. For example, Chapter 7 describes how a rally of African militants in Highfield culminated in violence between them and the Government's security forces, with the

³ N. Sithole, *AmaNdebele KaMzilikase* (London, Longmans, Green, 1956).

⁴ N. Sithole, *The Polygamist* (New York, Third Press, 1972; London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1973).

⁵ N. Sithole, *African Nationalism* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 2nd edit., 1968).

⁶ N. Sithole, *Obed Mutezo: The Mudzimu Christian Nationalist* (Nairobi, Oxford Univ. Press, 1970).

result that 10 White policemen were killed and 1 039 Africans were injured. The exactness of the figures gives the temporary illusion that Sithole is reporting an actual historical event. Stranger still is the account of an African youth prosecuted in Rhodesia in the early 1970s for writing a love letter to a White girl in contravention of the Immorality and Indecency Act, which in fact was repealed in 1961. Fiction here seems to slide into fantasy or falsehood. Such fables would mislead a reader ignorant of Rhodesian history and might for any reader who recognized the historical anomalies undermine the credibility of Sithole's implicit argument. Why does Sithole not quote authentic historical cases or create fictional episodes that are not clearly at variance with known facts? Possibly he believed that he would be less vulnerable to prosecution under the security laws if he expressed his criticism of White supremacy through the mouths of fictional characters in fictional situations, rather than openly acknowledging his own opinions about real events. However, this had not prevented him publishing *Obed Mutezo* in 1970, which contained detailed descriptions of alleged maltreatment of ZANU members by the police in 1964.

Obed Mutezo is one of three books in which Sithole has explored the significance of African nationalism through the particular experiences of one individual man, a literary method that Sithole has handled more successfully than quasi-documentary fiction. He first experimented with this form of political biography in the second edition of *African Nationalism*, where he added information about his own career as a nationalist to the account of his life before becoming a nationalist, which had been in the original edition. In *Obed Mutezo* Sithole examines the commitment to African nationalism of a local branch official of ZANU, describing his involvement in politics against the background of his private life, in particular his belief in the power of his ancestral spirits and his faith in Christianity. By giving this detailed portrait of a particular average African nationalist supporter Sithole provides a new dimension in understanding the African nationalist movement which studies of its aims, ideology and leadership omit.

The third, most recent, political biography that Sithole has produced is *Frelimo Militant*,⁷ which was published in 1977. The subject of this book is Julius Ingwane, an African from Mozambique whom Sithole met in Maputo in 1975. Like Mutezo, Ingwane is an ordinary African whom Sithole reveres as a nationalist, but to whom he is also attracted as a person and with whose personal life he is fascinated for its own sake. In the book Ingwane tells Sithole of his hatred for the Portuguese and his part as a supporter of Frelimo in their overthrow. Like Mutezo, he suffered torture at the hands of the police because of his political sympathies. Although *Frelimo Militant* is like *Obed Mutezo* in looking at a national political movement through the feelings and experiences of a single man, the more recent book is less successful because of its tedious mode of expression. It is written as a verbatim account of a kind of protracted Socratic dialogue between Sithole and Ingwane. Since Sithole includes all his questions to Ingwane as well as Ingwane's answers and reproduces many of the trivialities of casual conversation, such as the often repeated, 'I see', the pace of the

⁷ N. Sithole, *Frelimo Militant: The Story of Ingwane from Mozambique, an Ordinary, yet Extraordinary, Man, Awakened . . .* (Nairobi, Transafrica, 1977), 187pp., 30s.

book drags and the tone in places is almost of ritual incantation. The following passage (p. 2) gives the flavour:

'Where did you learn Zuzulu?' I asked.

'Me?'

'Yes, Comrade, you'

'In Johannesburg,' he said.

'Do you come from there?'

'No, I worked there.'

'I see. When?'

'Long time ago.'

'Do you live in Lourenço Marques?'

'Yes.'

'Are you a Shangana?'

'No. I am Mutswa.'

'Are you married?'

'Yes.'

'Where is your wife?'

'Here.'

'In this house?'

'No, in Lourenço Marques.'

Although *Frelimo Militant* has many such laborious passages, Sithole's other works are also marred by an inability or unwillingness to exclude inessentials. In *Obed Mutezo*, for example, he gives a long verbatim account (pp. 199-210) of a cross-examination by the defence lawyer in a political court case where a summary of the questioning would have sufficed. Similarly, in *Roots of a Revolution* Sithole chooses to spell out this ritual exchange between a nationalist speaker and his audience (p. 100):

'In everything in this our God-given country, we are given only a third of the normal values of things. Citizenship?' he asked.

'Third-rate!' they roared.

'Housing?'

'Third-rate!'

'Wages and salaries?'

'Third-rate!'

'Jobs?'

'Third-rate!'

'Education?'

'Third-rate!'

'Land?'

'Third-rate!'

'Water supply?'

'Third-rate!'

'All services?'

'Third-rate!'

The same obsession with comprehensiveness leads Sithole also in *Roots of a Revolution* (pp. 95-6) to list the twenty-nine occupations of the Africans at a nationalist rally. In the biographies Sithole seems to feel an over-scrupulous obligation to document trivial details of his subjects' lives. In *Frelimo Militant*, for example, Sithole is concerned to elicit from Ingwane the days of the week on which he and his brother at one period arrived in their mother's village (p.78), and the precise physical characteristics Ingwane

required in his wife (not 'too much buttock', p.63). Similarly, in *Obed Mutezo* he records (pp. 61-2) Mutezo's excessive desire for meat when he was a boy. Sithole has the instincts of an archivist, carefully storing information, rather than the skill of an historian, choosing only those facts that contribute to the explanation of the events he is specifically concerned with. The result of Sithole's appetite for trivial detail is sometimes an air of naivety or banality which is far removed from the intellectual sophistication that some people associate with him.

Sithole's books have, in fact, been characterized more by moral passion than intellectual toughness. Some of his published writings interestingly document the development in his political attitudes as this moral passion reacted to changing circumstances. When he wrote *African Nationalism* Sithole was not an active politician, although he was emotionally committed to African self-government. Consequently he had little to say about the practical problems of African nationalists in concrete situations. The second edition of *African Nationalism* he prepared in detention as a seasoned nationalist leader. In this he included new material on his own political experiences and on the methods available to nationalists. He did not explicitly advocate violent overthrow of the White Rhodesian regime, which would have invited prosecution, but he came close to endorsing the use of violence when peaceful methods had failed.

In 1969, the year after the publication of the revised edition of *African Nationalism*, Sithole was convicted of smuggling a letter from prison which urged his supporters to have Ian Smith assassinated. Sithole maintained during the trial that the letter was a forgery and claimed also that he knew nothing about the organization by Herbert Chitepo, his colleague in ZANU, of a guerilla army in Zambia. However, in the introduction to a collection of letters, Sithole later related how he smuggled out of Sikombela detention camp some time in 1965 or 1966 a letter delegating power to Chitepo 'to prosecute the revolutionary armed struggle'.⁸ In December 1972 he wrote elatedly to Chitepo congratulating him on the bridgehead that the guerillas had established in the north-east and in November 1974, as Commander-in-Chief of the ZANU guerillas, sent an inspirational message from Que Que Prison to the Zimbabwe National Liberation Army.⁹ *Roots of a Revolution*, written in 1973, portrayed and virtually praised fiercely militant Blacks preparing to fight brutal, arrogant Whites, who were determined to hold on to their power. After Sithole was released from prison in December 1974 to negotiate a settlement with Smith, he hoped to use ZANU's military success as a bargaining counter. In a letter to his brother in February 1975 he wrote: "We are not in a hurry for a settlement. It is Ian Smith who is in a hurry for it They are dying for a cease-fire order, but we are not."¹⁰ The Government rightly regarded him as more bellicose than Nkomo or Bishop Muzorewa, and re-arrested him in March 1975.¹¹ Eventually Sithole

⁸ N. Sithole, *Letters from Salisbury Prison* (Nairobi, Transafrica, 1976), 5.

⁹ Ibid., 129-30, 149-52.

¹⁰ Ibid., 156.

¹¹ See Sithole's defence against the charges brought against him in, N. Sithole, *In Defence of a Birthright* (Sweden, ZANU Office, 1975). This is reprinted in a booklet containing other pieces by Sithole and some by other ZANU writers: N. Sithole, *In Defence of a Birthright* (Toronto, Norman Bethune Institute, 1975).

found that the ZANU guerillas did not accept him as their leader, although he continued to support their fight.

When in 1978 Sithole signed the internal settlement and became a member of the Transitional Government Executive Council, it may have appeared that he had made a *volte face*, abandoning his earlier militancy. In his pamphlet, *In Defence of the Rhodesian Constitutional Agreement*,¹² he shows that what changed dramatically at the end of 1977 was not his own attitude, but the policy of Ian Smith, who for the first time was prepared to concede one man, one vote. Sithole states that, 'the internal African nationalist leaders felt that the acceptance of majority rule in itself constituted sufficient reason to begin negotiations The principle was not negotiable; everything else was.' However, if the guerilla war continues, Sithole's cogent argument is an irrelevancy.

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¹² N. Sithole, *In Defence of the Rhodesian Constitutional Agreement: A Power Promise* (Salisbury, Graham Publishing, 1978), 71 pp., \$1.60.