

Symbols of Life: An Analysis of the Consciousness of the Karanga By *H. Aschwanden*, transl. *U. Cooper*. Gweru, Mambo Press, Shona Heritage Series 3, 1982, xviii, 332 pp., illus., index, Z\$10.80.

This detailed study of Shona symbols of life is an analysis of the consciousness of the Karanga, a Shona-speaking group who inhabit a sizeable portion of Zimbabwe. Many aspects of Karanga life are examined, such as childhood and education, puberty, marriage, division of labour between the sexes, sexual intercourse, pregnancy and birth. The author was a medical doctor in charge of a rural hospital in Zimbabwe from 1965 to 1971. Almost all the information presented in the book was obtained from people who came to the hospital. His Karanga nurses helped him to collect the information.

One interesting point about the study is that the various symbols and rituals are described and analysed from the point of view of Karanga informants themselves without any 'outside' interpretation. The author points out: 'It was realised from the start of the project that the interpretation of those symbols and rituals which had been collected could only be satisfactorily explained if it was based on the most intimate knowledge of the Karanga's world. And, of course, only the Karanga themselves have this kind of knowledge. This has been our guiding principle throughout.' He believes that we can learn far more in this way than we can from any scientific theory about symbols, myths and rituals: 'Theories that have become dear to us tend to cloud our judgement and lead us to ignore wilfully the fact that "primitive" tribes possess a consciousness of their own, relating to their own world and ideas, a consciousness we never looked for because we did not suppose it existed.' This approach means, as the author rightly points out, that the reader will have to form his or her own opinion at every stage on the question of whether indigenous interpretations given make sense or not. In other words, what has been presented in this book is oral tradition only. Readers must bear this in mind.

The author chose to write in the present tense 'for the sake of simplicity'. This approach led to two main problems. Firstly, social change has largely been ignored. Many of the symbols, myths and rituals are no longer found today or have changed in form. Thus, to have a fuller picture of Karanga life the reader must read other books or articles. Secondly, the author has made a large number of generalizations throughout the book that are often misleading, generalizations such as 'The Karanga knows nothing about the human ovaries'; 'One of the biggest mysteries for the Karanga is the development of the embryo which starts after fertilization'; 'The Karanga woman has no need of emancipation'. There are many statements such as this in the book.

Despite these weaknesses the book has much to offer to historians, anthropologists and others interested in oral tradition, and can be a useful reference book.

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