

**Benjamin Burombo: African Politics in Zimbabwe, 1947-1958** By *N. Bhebe*. Harare, College Press, 1989, 160 pp., ISBN 0-86925-831-1, Z\$14,95.

One of the problems of writing historical biographies of modern nationalist leaders of Zimbabwe is that of 'heroism'. If a person is acclaimed as a heroine or hero this almost automatically involves stressing the more positive aspects of a person's character and career. However, professional historical research also almost automatically uncovers the less creditable angles as well. It is a test of the honesty of the historian to present an accurate picture of the subject, and of the maturity of the society in its response to that picture. Moreover, there is an inevitable delay between the hero's life and the clearance by the archives of the essential documents that must be read to correct or confirm impressions left by contemporaries. Burombo died in 1958 at 50 years of age so his biography would have been easier to research than that of one of the nationalist leaders of the generation born in the 1920s, a generation which is still very much with us. However, this consideration should not be allowed to detract from the value of Bhebe's work.

The book starts with two chapters setting the scene of Burombo's ten years of political life; one chapter dealing with the towns and the other with the countryside. These chapters are not intended to provide a definitive study of colonial rule in the 1940s, but they give the non-specialist reader a clear idea of the conditions that led to the urban strikes and rural protests in the 1940s and early 1950s.

The next chapter provides a brief survey of Burombo's life up to 1947, when he suddenly emerged on the trade-union scene, a scene that was inevitable political by the standards of the time, given the practical exclusion of Africans from the formal politics of the colony. The sources for the life of such a man cannot be easy to discover. The broad outline is obvious, but it is not always clear just when Burombo moved from one place to another in Matabeleland and the Transvaal seeking education and employment. Nevertheless, this account presents a most interesting image of the man. Burombo came from a family which was relatively well-off but which does not seem to have been very stable. When Burombo's father died (before Burombo was born) his mother was inherited by her husband's brother but was neglected by him. Both Burombo's father and mother were *moyo* Rozvi (that is, both belonged to the Rozvi clan and both had the same *moyo* (heart) totem), and it would be interesting to know whether the marriage was thought to be close to incest and whether this affected matters. As Bhebe shows, Burombo himself did not have a happy marriage.

Unable to obtain more than primary education, Burombo tried his hand at many activities. In this he was not unusual, given the limited opportunities for Africans in Huggins's Rhodesia, but his career as cook, café owner, storekeeper, farmer, cattle-trader, security guard and insurance salesman was exceptionally varied. As Bhebe explains, Burombo was rarely successful for long in most of his undertakings and could not always afford to be scrupulous; for example, he bought cattle from peasants who were being forced to de-stock and he paid his labour force in kind instead of in cash. Although he seems to have learned labour politics and amateur

law in South Africa, his sudden emergence into the field of labour unions in 1947 seems at first to be a break in the pattern, but trade-union work was also a career option.

In the two chapters on the 1948 strike Bhebe shows how Burombo tried to make his African Workers Voice Association a movement for the (even) poorer African workers. Historians dealing with this period are still uncovering fresh information on the strike and such questions as to whether the leaders were behind or apart from the surge of anger that lead to the strike. I cannot comment on this specialized topic, but two points emerge from Bhebe's work which arouse my curiosity: Firstly, although some evidence from 1948 shows Burombo's direct involvement in the strike (such as in the posting of placards) other evidence comes from the eulogy at his burial, when he was beyond the reach of the state. Although Bhebe refers to Burombo's trial and appeal he does not tell us exactly what happened and how he escaped punishment. Secondly, Whites such as Bailey and Davies were evidently involved to a greater or lesser extent but Bhebe does not explain their role or their motivation.

Two chapters deal with Burombo's activities in the countryside in the late 1940s and early 1950s when he was combating the great post-war eviction programme and a wide range of repressive legislation. Bhebe suggests convincingly that these activities were not a failure, for in a way Burombo was preparing the ground for the nationalism of the mid- and late 1950s, even though he was not able to stop the evictions and the legislation. Finally, after an unexplained gap from 1953 to 1956, the book deals with Burombo's sudden re-emergence on to the political stage and chronicles his tour of the Federation, his illness, his death as a result of a bungled operation, and his triumphant funeral. At the time his enemies hinted that business troubles lay behind his sudden activity, which is possible but not proven.

After all this, with evidence from Bhebe's own judgement and from the account itself, it seems clear that Burombo's reputation as a nationalist hero and worker for the common people is justified, even if his career had a strong element of self-interest at times. Bhebe has given us a clear and realistic account, but I would very much like to see a second edition with a little more detail in places. Burombo deserves it.

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