

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939** By *E. Schmidt*. Harare, Baobab; Portsmouth NH, Heinemann; London, Currey, Social History of Africa, 1992, xiii, 289 pp., ISBN 0-435-08066-0 (pbk), Z\$90.00.

Elizabeth Schmidt's book is one of the first of a new wave of works by historians, as opposed to anthropologists and sociologists, that seek to correct the imbalance in Zimbabwean historical writing by focusing on African women. As Schmidt points out, while over forty years the histories of Zimbabwe have progressively shifted in emphasis from White Rhodesians to Africans and from African élites to African workers and peasants, they have lagged behind histories from elsewhere in Africa in failing to recognize the 'centrality' of women in history. Centrality can be a treacherous concept because it has a connotation of 'unique importance' when in fact many facets of history are equally important. Schmidt has undertaken the tricky task of highlighting one seriously neglected issue without divorcing it from its context, and on the whole she has been most successful in this endeavour. Historians pioneering new and entirely different emphases in the future, whatever they may be, will stand very much in her debt.

As is well known, researching the history of women in Africa is not easy. Indeed, evidence about women is not easy to find in most of the 500 years of recorded Zimbabwean history — which is no reason why it should not be sought. Schmidt's starting date of 1870 corresponds roughly with the period for which reliable evidence begins to become available. At this point, however, the researcher has a problem: as the bulk of evidence in documents increases from inadequacy in 1870 towards the relatively satisfactory quantity of the colonial period, it becomes more difficult to handle. Whereas the researcher using the documents of the 1870s and 1880s is tempted to use all available material for the whole country, this is practically impossible for the 1930s: a history of men in the 1930s would be unwieldy, but a complete history of women in the 1930s would be nearly as difficult to write. There are two time-honoured ways of dealing with the problem. One is the choice of a special area, using oral traditions and oral histories. The other is the selection of specific themes covered by the documents in the modern period. Schmidt combines these approaches. To begin with, she takes the Goromonzi District, a virtually ideal choice, and carries out an intensive documentary and oral history study of women in 'traditional' society (chapter 1) and women as agriculturalists facing the colonial state (chapters 2 and 3). She then develops the themes of women as the targets of male social control (chapter 4), women in the orbit of the mission (chapter 5) and women as domestic servants (chapter 6), to name the main topics. Chapter 5 does pay attention to the women of Goromonzi, but most of the second half of the book ranges very widely indeed. Here, Schmidt draws upon previously published articles, and to some extent her book begins to resemble a collection of papers rather than a single argument. What she has to say in the last three chapters is often fascinating, but it might well have been summarized,

leaving even more room for the women of Goromonzi and their history as a case study of Zimbabwean women.

Schmidt's case study of Goromonzi is very thoroughly researched indeed, and it advances the neglected history of women considerably, demolishing several myths that place women in rigid categories. However, it has some defects. One is that it borrows too often from works on other areas. Schmidt often uses Bazeley's article on Manyika headwomen<sup>1</sup> while neglecting such cases in Goromonzi as the Koswa female 'chief', Nemasanga of Seke, and Mwende of Samuriwo that are much more relevant. Another defect is that, whereas Schmidt makes much use of court cases and oral histories she rarely, if ever, combines the two to get at the history behind the cases. Indeed Schmidt does not give full weight to the fact that, like it or not, Goromonzi's women were 'central' to four or five major patrilineal groups. For example, it was the murder of the women Recha and Wandimira by Madzivanyika of the Chinamhora lineage that sparked the civil war in Chishawasha mentioned by Seed and Chidziwa in their *NADA* articles.<sup>2</sup> Schmidt uses the anthropology of Peter Fry to inform her historical work, but misses some opportunities to use history to modify anthropological theory.

A third criticism that could be made is that, while Schmidt rightly criticizes earlier works as being ungendered, like them hers is not entirely numerate — and numeracy is also central to history. For example, in 1904 there were 4 602 married women counted in the district, at least 65 of whom were reported as having fled from their husbands between 1899 and 1905, while as many as 95 unmarried females out of approximately 300 (not 2 491) refused to marry their assigned husbands. In addition, there were an average of about 60 marital disputes a year at this time (p. 22). Between 1931 and 1939 the annual average of divorce petitions was just over 14 (p. 116). Whether this means that Shona marriages were becoming happier or more stable, or that a pre-colonial 'backlog' was being dealt with between 1899 and 1905, or that from 1931 to 1939 the colonial authorities and Shona patriarchs were suppressing the evidence of marital unhappiness is not at all clear. However, we are increasingly dependent on figures in historical analysis, and even the dubious figures of the colonial period can, when handled carefully, tell us much more about human society than individual examples.

Nevertheless, although Schmidt's book is primarily based on examples, it has raised plenty of issues that historians ought to look at in the future. One is the history of the household in Zimbabwe. As Schmidt puts it:

The structures of women's subordination in both the domestic and social spheres are negotiated, disputed and transformed over time. Hence, the household is a terrain of struggle, manifest in disputes over the allocation of labor, control over female reproduction, the distribution of resources, etc., the outcome of which

<sup>1</sup> W. S. Bazeley, 'Manica headwomen', *NADA* (1940), 3-5.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Seed, 'A glimpse of native history', *NADA* (1936-7), 5-16; J. Chidziwa, 'History of the Vashawasha', *NADA* (1964), 16-33.

helps to shape the broader society, as the household in turn is shaped by those broader social forces (p. 1).

This view of the Shona household as a kind of Passchendaele Wood is a feature of Schmidt's book, though her views are not in fact so simplistic. Her women of Goromonzi toil away at agriculture, gold-washing, trading crafts and a host of other tasks. They are variously oppressed by their fathers, husbands, officials and missionaries, and occasionally bully each other. There is no doubt that all this is true. Whether it is the whole story is another matter.

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**A Guide to Zimbabwean Administrative Law** By G. Feltoe. Harare, Legal Resources Foundation, 1991, vi, 62 pp., ISBN 0-908312-04-0, Z\$15,00.

**A Guide to Sentencing in Zimbabwe** By G. Feltoe. Harare, Legal Resources Foundation, 1991, xvi, 215 pp., ISBN 0-908312-03-2, Z\$26,00.

**A Guide to Zimbabwean Criminal Law** By G. Feltoe. Harare, Legal Resources Foundation, 1991, viii, 142 pp., ISBN 0-908312-00-8, Z\$15,00.

**A Guide to the Zimbabwean Law of Delict** By G. Feltoe. Harare, Legal Resources Foundation, 1990, xii, 126 pp., ISBN 0-908312-02-4, Z\$15,00.

It is essential to understand from the outset the purpose of these guides. They are not intended to be exhaustive accounts of Zimbabwean law, but rather they are designed to provide an introduction to certain specific aspects of the law. Equally important is their role as source books from which Zimbabwean cases may be referred to quickly and easily. This is obviously useful for legal practitioners and students seeking local precedents.

In his introduction to *A Guide to Zimbabwean Administrative Law*, Feltoe tells us that this branch of the law is concerned with 'the administration of the state, that is, the detailed and practical implementation of the policies of Central Government aimed at the running of the state' (p. vi). Appropriately enough, Feltoe begins with an account of what delegated or subsidiary legislation is. This is important because delegated legislation is the primary instrument for regulating and supervising a whole host of activities within the state. The various different types of delegated legislation are clearly set out — as are the procedures needed for their creation. In this connection it is pleasing to note that Feltoe pays great attention to the need for controls in ensuring that subsidiary law-making bodies do not exceed or abuse their powers.

Feltoe describes in appropriate detail the nature and purpose of administrative tribunals, which he states 'are bodies other than courts of law which are given the power to resolve disputes and to decide cases' (p. 7). In the course of looking at the relationship between tribunals and