struggle, then I would be saying that I regret having liberated my country.' This is a poignant statement from a man who gave so much but got so little in return. The feelings expressed by the ex-combatants in Barnes's chapter make me search for my conscience that has been long lost in the ecstasy of liberation.

The work of the Mafela Trust outlined in Brickhill's chapter mentioned earlier, reveals that the traumas of the war are still very much alive for both the perpetrator and the victim. The work of the Mafela Trust is 'an attempt through field research, to list the names, next-of-kin and places of burial and the ZIPRA dead'. The pain and grief over the loss of a loved one can be overcome if there is a burial. The grief is perennial when the loved one is unaccounted for. Some fighters and peasants who fell in the struggle are still to be located. Everyone knows someone close to them who has never been found and this is a painful experience. Thus the effort of the Mafela Trust is commendable and should be the basis of a nationwide documentation of the fallen heroes, be they the fighters or the civilians.

This generation has the duty to record accurately events in the liberation war for the unborn generations. Moreover, as we enjoy the fruits of liberty we can do justice to those who died for us by putting together chronicles of the war. This new book sets us off in that direction and it is a valuable addition to our history of Zimbabwe's bloody road to liberation. The second volume is to be published in the near future. I can hardly wait for it.

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A Zimbabwean Past *By D. N. Beach.* Gweru, Mambo Press, 1994, xviii, 368pp., ISBN 0-6922-52-6, Z$89,18.

This book is a very pleasant surprise. We have known for some time that David Beach intended to follow up his *The Shona and Zimbabwe, 900–1850* (Mambo, Gweru, 1984) with a collection of dynastic histories. The weaker brethren among us have feared that such a collection would be very difficult reading. And Beach tells us sternly in the introduction to this new book that if '*Shona and Zimbabwe* was complicated for academic and foreign readers, *A Zimbabwean Past* will be even more complex'. That intimidating rather than reassuring comparison — the Hapsburg Empire — appears on the first page of the introduction. It looks as though we are in for a necessary but gruelling time.

And yet the book's effect is quite different. The dynastic histories are there, of course, in three chapters which between them cover over 150 pages. But each history is introduced in bold print with a paragraph setting out the moral of the tale. The first of these — a note on the Marange dynasty of Bocha — gives their flavour:

Newcomers to the world of Shona politics could hardly find a better point at which to start than the Marange dynasty of Bocha; it offers a neat little case history of struggle for political power and land, with the enforced peace of colonial rule only just suppressing the older method of conducting politics in the last century.

The effect is almost of a Shona Machiavelli, concerned with power rather than with principles. Anyone who reads through these stories will not need persuading that, as Beach concludes on page 269, there was 'no such thing as a Shona succession system'. The late colonial attempt to introduce 'traditional rules' into a dynastic politics which was denied force and fraud was an absurdity.

Presented in this way, as case studies of Shona political dynamics, the dynastic histories no longer bewilder with their detail. Moreover, they are set in this book in the context of major historiographical essays in which Beach lays out his methods and his assumptions. The dynastic histories become samples and tests of Beach's historical procedures.

These historiographical sections of this book make it required reading not only for Zimbabweanists but for all those who are introduced in the development of African history. We are in an introspective time. That great pre-colonial historian, Jan Vansina, has recently given us an extraordinary frank account of his academic autobiography; Tony Kirk-Green has edited a collection of anecdotal confessions by the founders of African history in British (and anglophone African) universities, which concludes with my own reflections on Southern Rhodesia in the early 1960s as an environment for historical production. Now Beach offers an account of oral historiography in the Rhodesia of the 1970s which if less remarkable than Vansina's book is, still nonetheless, a significant contribution to understanding. Beach argues explicitly that in many ways, Rhodesia in the early 1970s was a surprisingly favourable environment for oral historiography; he also shows implicitly what a very peculiar environment it was, and how easily its peculiarities might distort both collection and interpretation.

The third section of the book is entitled 'The traditions of the Shona states' and the fourth 'Toward an analysis of Shona traditions'. Both are historiographical. The third section contains a reprint of Beach's important account of indigenous historical speculation. 'The Rozvi in search of the past'. It also contains a definitive demolition of Donald Abraham's work on the Mutapa dynasty. A suspicious Shona cultural nationalist might notice that the tendency of all this is to diminish the importance of the 'Shona Empires' and to offer instead a mosaic of small dynasties. But Beach is not, of course, denying the existence of the Mutapa and Rozvi states, which are attested in archival sources. He *is* denying that either modern Rozvi traditions or the work of oral historians like Abraham can tell us anything about those states.

Indeed, it appears in the fourth section of the book that Beach does not believe that any Shona traditions can take us back before 1700. This makes astringent reading for someone who, like myself, was reared on ideas of the spirit mediums as custodians of ancient truths about medieval empires. Beach comments that mediums are actually worse informants

than most lay people; that the Shona lack creation myths and have no traditions of a common founder; that they are even poor in myth stereotypes. Once again, the Shona cultural nationalist stirs into protest. Yet one gets the sense that Beach would be only too happy if he *could* use traditions for a reliable history from the fifteenth century; if there *were* creation myths and stories of common founders.

All this is challenging and valuable. Beach has lived with this material, as he tell us, for more than 15 years and he knows it more thoroughly than anyone ever has or is ever likely to do. I cannot challenge him on detail, but greatly daring I shall raise a wider challenge. Within African oral history as a whole, there has long raged a debate between the 'literalists' and the 'structuralists' — between Jan Vansina in his earlier incarnations and scholars like Joseph Miller and Roy Willis. An extreme of 'literalism' was attained by Daniel McCall, who seriously advocated throwing away everything in a tradition that could not be believed and focussing merely on real events. Beach is no McCall. He discusses narrative stereotypes; he allows that Shona traditions 'tell us what lay behind the beliefs and actions of the people', even if only 'from the coming of colonial rule to the present'.

Yet he does tend to make a straightforward, unproblematic contrast between 'myth' and 'truth'. Thus on page 245, he remarks that

> even very well educated people will tend to resist the notion that what grandfather told them is mythical. They can take comfort in the fact that if quite a lot of grandfather's stories are myths, some are more or less true.

There is certainly no sense here that profound truths may lie in myths. There is equally no sense that a historian may use the mythical and legendary layers of tradition — as Miller and Willis argue — to get at the founding values of a culture or at its repetitive political processes. Beach's is a powerful but limited notion of oral historiography.

This comes back to the Machiavellian parables of the dynastic histories. They are indeed stories of struggles for power and possession. There is not much about ideas or beliefs. Beach has long been properly suspicious of vague invocations of 'religion' or 'ritual' to explain what is otherwise mysterious in Shona political history, rather than in the same way that archaeologists often explain any article whose use they cannot guess as a 'ritual object'. But in sweeping away illegitimate religiosity, Beach tends to sweep away all ideologies and legitimations. This is very much against the tendency of recent work on pre-colonial African polities, of which perhaps the supreme example is Tom McCaskie's work on the hegemonic ideologies of the Asante state. McCaskie uses narrative, myth, ritual to construct his picture. No Shona polity was like the Asante state. Still, I hope that one day another oral historian of the Shona will arise who will ask different questions of the material so painstakingly accumulated by Beach. I am sure that in his sense of loneliness, his lament that everyone now works on the twentieth century, David Beach hopes so too.

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