

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Sites of Struggle: Essays in Zimbabwe's Urban History** By Brian Raftopoulos and Tsuneo Yoshikuni (eds.), Harare, Weaver Press, 1999, 279 pp, ISBN 0 7974 1984 5.

*Sites of Struggle: Essays in Zimbabwe's Urban History* is undoubtedly one of the most significant books published on Zimbabwe's socio-economic and political history in recent years. This book is edited by Brian Raftopoulos and Tsuneo Yoshikuni, two scholars with unquestionable scholarly credentials who have, in the past, produced pioneering work on various aspects of Zimbabwe's urban social history. The book was published by the newest player in Zimbabwe's book publishing industry, Weaver Press. It addresses various issues, which have hitherto been neglected by scholars of Zimbabwe's historical past and, thus, fills a gaping hole in Zimbabwe's historiography.

Numerous studies on the cultural, agrarian, industrial, religious and other types of Zimbabwean history exist, but much remains unknown and uninvestigated, about the process of urbanisation in colonial Zimbabwe or the constraints and opportunities confronting the urban African communities, their coping mechanisms and strategies, and the various battles they waged in their struggle to retain their dignity and for self-actualisation and control of their own lives during the colonial period. The impression was thus created that, apart from some trade union activity and formally organised political movements in the post-Second World War era, there was nothing else of substance happening in Zimbabwe's urban areas in the colonial period which merited serious scholarly analysis.

*Sites of Struggle* corrects such an erroneous impression and shows that there was a rich ferment of cultural, ideological, political and social activities among the African communities in the colonial urban areas which helped shape the trajectory of development at both the local, urban level and in the wider national arena. Rather than being helpless victims of the economic, social and cultural hegemonic power and dominance of colonial settler society, Africans contested the colonial dispensation at every stage. Whether it was the petty-bourgeoisie in pre-1933 Bulawayo who grabbed every opportunity inadvertently and reluctantly offered by colonial capitalism, the Africans re-asserting cultural morays and practices or adapting cultural traditions to new urban settings, the so-called "middle class" trying to set the norms of respectability and the contestation to which such efforts gave rise to, or urban communities participating in new religious institutions or even domestic workers

subverting the dominant colonial White society from within, urban Africans constantly strove to carve out and control their own space and lives and to blunt and mitigate the impact of colonial policies and practices as best they could under the circumstances. It is these and other issues pertaining to the urban African experience that the book documents and analyses.

The book is organised into eleven chapters and contains chapters by some of the leading scholars in urban social, political, cultural, religious, labour and gender history, among others. In Chapter 1, Stephen Thornton analyses the struggles and experiences of the African petty-bourgeoisie in Bulawayo as they fought to compete with the more established colonial capitalist businesses in the first quarter century of colonial rule. He demonstrates that some Africans, especially women, were able to seize the few opportunities that were opened up by colonial capitalism and thus acquired a relative degree of independence from wage labour.

Thornton argues that these groups initially hoped that they would be able to participate in the evolving colonial political and economic dispensation but soon found that the dominant colonial society had no place for them. It was then that they turned their backs on the colonial system and began to work with other discontented groups to struggle against the European administration. The entrenchment of segregation, especially following the report of the 1925 Morris Carter Commission, gradually eroded what economic opportunities had been available to the Africans in the past and eventually eradicated the African petty-bourgeoisie in Bulawayo.

Similarly, Timothy Scarnecchia and Terri Barnes' chapters focus on the gender aspects of the colonial urban scene. The former analyses the debates that surrounded the efforts to promote "respectability" among urban women in Harari African Township and highlights the tensions between middle class families, who considered themselves to be "stable", and single migrant workers whom they regarded as "unstable" and from whom they consistently tried to distance themselves. The latter explores the complex and sometimes contradictory attitudes of the state and the African males to women's presence in the city, the constraints which the women encountered as well as the opportunities which they took advantage of despite the generally unfriendly legal and social climate within which they operated. Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni's contributions analyse "the changing effects of rural-urban relations on the urban process" and examine how changes in the rural areas impacted on developments in the city. Chapters by Kaarsholm, Hallencreutz and Pape explore urban culture and politics in Bulawayo, religion in the city and the role of domestic workers in the liberation struggle, respectively.

*Sites of Struggle* is as impressive in the quality of the research and analysis which went into the chapters contained in it as it is surprisingly

diverse and pleasantly comprehensive. As anyone who has ever had to edit a wide variety of divergent papers to produce a single volume book will know, it is not always easy to make sure that all papers compliment each other well and that the final product is both thematically and stylistically coherent. The selection and editorial problems that Raftopolous and Yoshikuni faced must have been considerable, given that the book deals with, in their words,

the spaces created for different groups of Africans at different periods in the urbanisation process; the contradictory responses of the colonial state to the problem of the stabilisation and reproduction of labour; the relationship between ethnicity, the labour process and differential relations to rural production processes, the effects of rural-urban linkages on labour organisation and on the broader struggles for the imagining of national identity; the effects of regional labour supplies on urban structures and forms of urban organisation; the struggles over the mapping of the city along racial, class and gender lines; and finally the gendered nature of the colonial city and urban struggles (pp. 1-2).

Fortunately, the editors were able to surmount the problems posed by the diversity of the topics covered by the contributions to produce a book that not only has a coherent thematic unity but one which is both stylistically consistent and, to borrow an American expression, "hangs together" extremely well.

Thus, despite the diversity of topics covered, indeed, because of it, *Sites of Struggle* is a very rich and informative book which is impressive by any measure of assessment. It is a welcome addition to the field of urban social history in general and the urban social history of the Zimbabwean city in the colonial period in particular. By making the very rich urban colonial history of Zimbabwe available to the public, Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni deserve to be congratulated for blazing a new trail which should stimulate both experienced and new scholars of the Zimbabwean past to probe further into some of the historical developments discussed in the book, to critique analyses and viewpoints expressed in it and to advance further the frontiers of historical knowledge through new research. This will provide a corpus of knowledge which will complement the already rich fund of historical knowledge that has been produced by generations of scholars in the areas of Zimbabwe's rural, economic, religious, cultural and political history and thus enhance the understanding of the country's evolution and development.

*Sites of Struggle* has already made a good beginning by illuminating and deepening as well as challenging conventional knowledge about various historical developments in Zimbabwe. For instance, John Lunn's re-interpretation of the meaning of the 1948 General Strike brings a new and refreshing perspective to a subject about which much has already

been written and raises new questions which demand further investigation, while Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni's chapters clearly suggest the need for more nuanced analyses of rural-urban relations and interactions and their role in the development of Zimbabwean nationalist politics. On his part, John Pape enjoins scholars to re-visit their understanding of the much-neglected and marginalised domestic workers who have tended, in the past, to be treated as victims and "loyal servants" who passively accepted their lot under the colonial dispensation rather than as actors who, not only subverted the colonial *status quo* from within but who also took enormous risks to support the liberation struggle. Thus, by venturing into new areas of research and analysis and/or re-examining and re-interpreting already known evidence, the contributors to *Sites of Struggle* not only call for the revision of conventional wisdom about historical developments in Zimbabwe but also point to new vistas of research for scholars working on the Zimbabwean socio-political and economic experience. They have, therefore, made a notable and very welcome contribution to scholarship.

In addition, both the editors and the contributors have produced a book which, despite the serious nature of the subjects it deals with, is written in jargon-free and easily accessible language whose style of presentation is aesthetically pleasing and intellectually satisfying. Equally to be congratulated are the publishers, Weaver Press, for facilitating the dissemination of such important and pertinent scholarship and doing so in a well-packaged and meticulously edited book which anyone would be proud to have on their book shelves.

*Sites of Struggle* should be of interest to both the serious scholar and researcher who has an interest in urbanisation studies in general and the history of Zimbabwean urbanisation in particular, as well as the casual reader who wants to understand the historical forces that shaped the development of Zimbabwe. The diversity of topics covered, the impressive research that went into the writing of each chapter and the highly impressive analytical rigour with which the contributors approached their subject will impress anyone who reads the book.

The book should also be extremely useful to urban planners, those who work in the social services sector, educationists, those interested in a gendered understanding of history and, most importantly, policy makers, at both national and municipal levels, who will find their understanding and appreciation of current problems and tensions in the cities enhanced by reference to the history of the colonial urban experience. As the editors of the book rightly point out, housing, health, transport and other problems colonial administrators and policy makers had to grapple with continue to "face their post-colonial counterparts, but in an exacerbated form" (p. 13).

To the above categories of readers and the many international readers who have an interest in Zimbabwe's social, economic, ideological and cultural history and whose understanding of the history of the urban communities in their home countries will be enriched by reading *Sites of Struggle*, this book is highly recommended.

*University of Zimbabwe*

A. S. MLAMBO