

## Review

Ranger, Terence (1999) *Voices From the Rocks: nature, culture and history in the Matopos hills of Zimbabwe*. Harare: Boabab; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; Oxford: James Currey.

### Tinyiko Sam Maluleke

I am ashamed to admit it, born and bred in Zimbabwe's southern-most neighbour - South Africa - and having been to many countries in Southern, East and West Africa, I have never been to Zimbabwe! However, after reading this rivetting account of the Matopos hills - an important pole around which a significant piece of Zimbabwean history and culture has revolved for at least 200 years - I feel like I have been travelling in southern Matabeleland for a long time. Ranger tells stories of the Matopos with the proficiency of a novelist and the skill of an able and meticulous historian. The characters are painted in vivid colours and authenticated with apt archival substantiations - indeed the Matopos are brought to life as a complex main character. Plots, themes and meanings are multifarious, various, numerous. At least eight years of intermittent and painstaking archival and field research lie behind this book. The arguments are piercing and incisive.

The book is divided into three parts which are predicated on a brief but dense and forthright introduction. The first part (two chapters) deals with nature and culture in the Matopos, the second (five chapters) with the struggle for the land, and the last part (two chapters) addresses questions of violence, identity and environment. A basic contention of the book is that the Matopos are much more than 'wild nature' - the latter being the main portrayal the hills receive in the Zimbabwe National Park today. The objective of the book is 'to re-instate culture and history into nature' (1999:2) so that the 'voices from the rocks' of the Matopos - voices of humans, shrines and caves - are heard and taken note of. Against this

background, Ranger presents a thick historical analysis of the Matopos from the days of Cecil John Rhodes up to the times of the dissident revolts against the new Zimbabwean state under Robert Mugabe, underscoring that in a hundred years the Matopos have been 'living culture', often challenging or confrontational to states. Ranger argues that the hills have been, and continue to be, the site of contesting symbolic and religious systems; contesting notions of ecology, development, agriculture and conservation; divergent understandings of culture and human settlement; a place where fierce and bloody armed struggles have taken place as well as a site for remembering the past, for the invention and re-invention of identities. Thus for Ranger, present-day tourists and inhabitants of the Matopos should realise that 'the hills have a rich human history and that only in the light of this can the scenery itself be understood' (1999:289).

Having opened my review with an enthusiastic and positive assessment, it should be clear by now that I do recommend this work very warmly. However, I do have a few concerns. Several chapters of the book present a thick forest of excessive and uninteresting details which are, in my opinion, not crucial for the substantiation of the book's basic arguments. For this reason, unless one intends literally to settle in the Matopos, chunks of the book can be skipped without losing the gist of its argument. Furthermore, while I appreciate the (intended) theoretical and analytical even-handedness of the author wherein black and white, Banyubi and Ndebele are all treated as fairly 'equal' and active agents interacting equally with the hills and with one another; there is something artificial about this. Means of survival and measures of coping with 'state' violence and increasing restriction are not equal to measures of control, means of containment and ruthless suppression. The two sets of strategies are not merely ways of understanding culture, nature and history. They are a playing out of unequal power-relations which, while admitting shifts especially in the 1980s, have been in favour of the few over the many – white settlers having taken the lion's share of the power in the hundred years under investigation. Lastly, it is regrettable that while Ranger often invokes race, ethnicity and religion as social categories with which to analyse the history of the Matopos, he does not invoke the category of gender even though he refers to the role of women mediums and spokespeople. As a result, this could be said to be not only a gender insensitive historical account but a rather patriarchal one too.