

REVIEW ESSAY

The Practice of Politics in Postcolonial Southern Africa: Cases from Mozambique and Zimbabwe

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Bjorn Enge Bertelsen. 2016. *Violent Becomings: State Formation, Sociality, and Power in Mozambique*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn. 332 pp.

Sarah Rich Dorman. 2016. *Understanding Zimbabwe: From Liberation to Authoritarianism*. New York: Oxford University Press. 347 pp.

Blair Rutherford. 2017. *Farm Labor Struggles in Zimbabwe: The Ground of Politics*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. 278 pp.

Introduction

Mozambique attained independence from Portugal in 1975, and five years later the British flag was lowered in Salisbury, now Harare, ushering in majority government in Zimbabwe. Sharing a long history that dates back to the precolonial era, the two countries have experienced their fair share of political, social, and economic challenges. Still, the liberation movements that defeated colonial white minority regimes have managed to stay in power, controlling the postcolonial state. The three books in this review put under focus postcolonial politics in Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Despite their foci and being from different disciplines—anthropology and political science—the works by Bertelsen, Dorman, and Rutherford offer insights into the practice of politics in postcolonial Southern Africa. Indeed, while each book addresses a different subject within African politics, they nonetheless speak to critical issues germane to an understanding of the politics of postcolonial state making: the persistence of violence in different forms in the process of state making; the manner in which ruling parties have maintained control; and how the marginalized within society, whether in the Manica Province of Mozambique or farm workers in Zimbabwe, have contested state power, critiqued the state, and have, amongst other things, appropriated aspects of national politics to advance their interests in an effort to improve their livelihoods. Although these are not historical works, in their own ways, the books suggest to us that we rethink the past, and hence our understanding of the present by addressing the nature of the state, state institutions, and different historical subjects within the field of contemporary African politics.

Violent Politics and State Formations in Mozambique

The specter of violence haunts the relationship between state and society in Mozambique. One cannot talk of state making and nation building in Mozambique without paying

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v17/v17i4a7.pdf>

attention to the violent nature of the process. The Nguni wars of the precolonial period, the colonial conquest, colonial violence in the forms ranging from forced labor to pillage and plunder, the wars of independence, and the civil war in the immediate postcolonial era introduced different forms of violence to Mozambicans. Recently, Mozambicans have been experiencing new forms of violence ranging from urban riots to public lynching. The different forms of violence are part and parcel of state making. And for Bertelsen, the state should not be viewed as a finite entity and a bureaucratically ordered polity, “but rather as an always-emergent form of power and control at multiple societal levels” (p. 3). Hence the state is a continually evolving and violently challenged mode of social ordering. Throughout his book, Bertelsen meticulously explore the multiple ways in which state formations are always challenged, in the process exposing the ambiguities and the antagonist nature of the relations between the society and state formations.

Based on extensive ethnographic research work spanning multiple periods between 1999 and 2011, Bertelsen introduces the readers to the impoverished communities of Chimio and Honde in Mozambique’s Manica Province. These marginalized communities are used as points of entry in analyzing the relations between colonial and postcolonial state formations and what he calls the traditional field. The locals employ various terms interchangeably to denote this traditional field: *tradição* (tradition in Portuguese), *tsika* (tradition in vernacular) or *tchianhu wo atewe* (the way of the maTewe) (p. 6). According to Bertelsen, a focus on tradition helps to “grasp experiential dimensions, and broad historical trends that crucially shape contemporary and past dynamics of statehood, sociality and power ...” (p. 7). Because various state formations “seek to incorporate, capture, effuse, eradicate, or accommodate” (p. 264), the relationship between the traditional field and state formations has predominantly been one of tension and antagonism.

Reading Bertelsen, it is clear that the dynamics of state formation and the traditional field are entangled and enmeshed in conflicts over territory. The conflicts over territory transcend critical historical junctures, continuing from the precolonial and colonial periods through the war of liberation and the postcolonial destabilizations, including the current state of Mozambique. At different historical epochs as the state evolves, the traditional field is subjected to the process of deterritorialization. For example, the practices of *tsiano wo atewe/tsika* that includes the rituals over the fertility of land and the position of spirits such as *mhondoro*, have frequently been attacked by various state formations and endangered by war and violence. Hence under Ngungunyane, the precolonial state killed all rainmakers as part of the efforts at creating a well-ordered state, and Frelimo under Samora Machel attacked the traditional field as part of the reordering independent Mozambique along the lines of scientific socialism. However, over various historical periods, the state has failed to control the traditional field. Ngungunyane’s failure to include rainmakers within state structures leading to their killing and Frelimo’s contentious relations with *tsiano wo atewe* indicate some of the ways that the traditional field challenged the state.

In this highly engaging work, Bertelsen also examines the connections between the topography of healing and the processes of deterritorialization and the historical instances of state formation. Thus, he examines the work of healers known as *n’anga* and *profete* and also highlights the importance of annual family rituals such as the *kutenda adzimu edu* (thank the spirits) in analyzing the relations between the arena of healing and state formation (pp. 121-48). In Southern Africa, an *n’anga* is loosely translated as a diviner and traditional healer while a *profete* is a healer/diviner closely associated with African independent churches. By

focusing on the contested topography of healing, Bertelsen suggests that “this social field is one characterized by spirits and healing potencies constituting forces that inherently upset hierarchical and structural sociopolitical orders of the state kind” (pp. 121-22). While the field of healing has acted against forces of the state order, this does not mean that the state has not attempted to capture and control the topography of healing. Indeed, the postcolonial state in its various formations, through the *Associação da Medicina Tradicional de Moçambique* (the Association for Traditional Medicine in Mozambique, AMETRAMO), has had problematic relations with traditional healers (pp. 160-89). On behalf of the state, AMETRAMO aims to standardize, bureaucratize and make legible the practices of the *n’anga* and *profete* (p. 160). However, the practitioners have contested this deployment of state power via AMETRAMO to reorder the field of healing.

Besides the topography of healing, Bertelsen also examines the relationship between arena of law and political authority and the traditional field. He does this by following cases of summary justice in the poor neighborhoods of Chimoio. Through summary justice, the inhabitants of Chimoio take the law into their hands, in most cases circumventing state agencies and institutions. Bertelsen examines two events where popular justices threatened the accused and the accused resorted to traditional agencies, rather than state institutions, to resolve the matter. By privileging traditional agencies rather than state institutions in solving the case, Bertelsen points to the ability of the traditional authority to reach into what is often seen as the domain of the state and government practices. Through an examination of the cases of summary justice, Bertelsen makes a strong critique of the idea of Mozambique constituting a “heterogeneous state” (p. 266). Instead, he proposes the idea of multiple sovereignties: that is “formations of power that compete, overlap, and wax and wane within the overall framework of the postcolonial state apparatus” (p. 266). Thinking of Mozambique constituting multiple sovereignties allows Bertelsen to examine the multifarious ways in which the inhabitants of Chimoio and Honde contested authority structures.

Reading *Violence Becomings*, one is left with the sense that the book is targeted for a specialist audience, especially anthropologists. This is not an easy read for non-specialists. The writing is dense and at times difficult to penetrate. Still, this is a theoretically grounded work that shows excellent use of ethnographic material to untangle and complicate the violent nature of the continuous process of state making and how this is contested at various historical moments and within different domains in Southern Africa. Indeed, Bertelsen’s overarching analysis underscores the ambiguous relations between the state formations and the traditional field from various angles. Looking at it from innumerable perspectives enables Bertelsen to capture the broad range of contests within which the violence of state becoming can be approached. At the same time, Bertelsen shows how the state, as a mode of organization is “an arborescent structure always in a state of becoming and always being contested, challenged and evaded...” (p. 270). Not only is this work a critique of the scholarship that sees the state as a static and dominant entity, but by focusing on state formation as an unfolding violent process, what he calls “violent becomings,” Bertelsen also allows readers to view the state from the perspective of its non elite subjects. He does an excellent job in delineating the trajectories of violence central to state making in Mozambique.

Coercion and Consent in Maintain Power in Zimbabwe

In *Understanding Zimbabwe*, Sarah Rich Dorman's, like Bertelsen's, Dorman's purpose is to comprehend the emergence of postcolonial nations, how state institutions took form, and the role of the society in negotiating new identities after independence. Closely related to this is the manner in which ruling elites maintain control and power over the nation. Dorman argues that the persistence of authoritarian rule in Zimbabwe and the ability of the ruling elites to stay in power "should not be understood primarily in terms of greed and corruption... nor as a personalized and expedient use of security apparatus" (p. 3), but rather the Zimbabwean case reveals "a complex picture of how individuals and groups became bound in the project of state and nation building, despite contesting or even rejecting aspects of it" (p. 3). In other words, the endurance of authoritarianism is partly due to the active balancing of coercion and consent and the ability of the ruling elites to monopolize discourses aimed at fostering national unity.

The postcolonial elites did not become authoritarian overnight. The roots of the ways Zimbabweans practice politics should be traced back to the colonial period. Thus, Dorman historicizes the rise of African nationalism, the colonial state's response to nationalist movement, the liberation war, and the process of decolonization and how they shaped the relations between political parties/guerilla armies and civilians. Important to note here is that while there were calls for unity among nationalists, the nationalist movement was diverse, burdened with ideological and personal differences, leading to "diverse lived experiences of elite and subaltern nationalists and their civilian supporters" (p. 21). The supporters ranged from ordinary folk in rural areas, who had an uneasy relationship with liberation fighters, to urban communities of blacks, whites, and coloreds. At the same time, civil society and church organizations had tenuous relationships with the state and liberation parties (pp. 21-29). By the time of independence, there were many ambiguities and tensions in the relations between the political groups and civilians, setting the tenor of the practice of politics in the postcolonial era.

In 1980, Zimbabweans gave ZANU PF under Robert Mugabe the mandate to lead the nation. The first seven years of independence saw the ruling party building alliances with the former adversaries and those who were outside its sphere of influence. While this was a period of inclusion as Dorman suggests, the state also deployed violence against those with the capacity to challenge its authority. The massacres in Matabeleland and the Midlands Provinces are emblematic of the state's use of coercion as part of the nation building project and the ruling party's assertion of power. In other spheres, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were reoriented, the state imposed technocratic top-down developmentalism in rural and urban areas, and the media became central to the nation-building project. Dorman cites Norbert Tengende whose pithy quote succinctly summarizes the relation between the state's nation building project and the citizens: "Nation building ...became the instrument of domination and control...marked by the marginalization of popular participation" (p. 36). This culminated with the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987, which turned Zimbabwe into a de facto one party state. And in the following ten years, between 1987-1997 not only did Zimbabwe begin to slide into economic problems, but also experienced increased securitization and militarization of key bodies.

The years between 1997 and 1999 saw further knocks on the economy. This was partly as result of austerity measures and increased labor unrest. It was also due to imprudent state spending by deploying troops to the Democratic Republic of Congo, paying unplanned

gratuities to war veterans, and the rise in corruption. At the same time, the struggle for a new constitution confronted by the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) led to political polarization. The government responded to civic society's push for new constitution by appointing the Constitutional Review Commission (CRC). According to Dorman, the NCA-CRC debate "...catalyzed a much broader set of questions about the role of NGOs, trade unions, individual citizens and their relationship to the state" (p. 137). The government's constitutional referendum loss in year 2000 had major implications for the nation, the state, civic society, and citizens. It was the immediate catalyst of what has been termed the Zimbabwe crisis, and it transformed the relations between the state, civic society, and citizens. The ability of society to challenge the state and the ruling party's conception of the nation was met with increased authoritarianism.

What happened from 2000 onward is an all too familiar story of how a nation turns from a breadbasket of the continent to a basket case. For the post-2000 period Dorman weaves together a complex story of connections between economic decline, land reform, massive displacement of Zimbabweans, violence, and state exclusionary politics. Politics shifted towards polarization as the state not only deepened the patronage system to maintain itself in power, but also deployed violence on the so-called enemies of the nation. These included the opposition parties, led by the Movement for Democratic Change and civic society. By the time of the 2008 elections it had become clear that the state's hold on power was under more serious challenge than before. In the wake ZANU's electoral loss in 2008 and the subsequent violence that followed, Zimbabwe was on edge. At the behest of the regional body Southern African Development Community, ZANU and the opposition parties entered into a five-year power-sharing agreement, commonly known as the Global Political Agreement (GPA). According to Dorman, the GPA did not lessen the tensions and accommodating demands from competing forces, but rather it "ratchet[ed] up friction and intensified demands for representation, recognition and access to state power" (p. 189).

Throughout the book, Dorman narrates a fascinating story in which the ruling elites maintain power through a combination of coercion, consent, and a patronage system array. At stake is not only the struggle for political power and control of the levers of the state, but defining who has the right to speak for the nation, and the very nature of the nation itself. Nationalism is at the center of this struggle, and for Dorman nationalism should not just be understood in ideological terms only. Nationalism should also be understood as an organizing principle or the practice of politics. Dorman's attention to nationalism as a way of doing politics opens up space for her to examine post-independence political demobilization, the consolidation of power by ruling elites, and the limits of liberation politics.

The major limitation of the book, as Dorman acknowledges, is that it focusses on formal politics. It does not pay detailed attention to grassroots politics and how the marginalized practice politics. Still, it does an excellent job in illuminating the practice of contemporary politics in Zimbabwe. It is a good read not only for those interested in Zimbabwe under Mugabe's 37-year reign, but also for students of African politics and those interested in understanding how liberation movements have managed to stay in power. Based on extensive research spanning over two decades, *Understanding Zimbabwe* opens up space to interrogate transformations of postcolonial nations, the place of state institutions and the relations between the ruling elites and society.

Practicing Politics at the Margins

Blair Rutherford's work is a good companion alongside Dorman's. In *Farm Labor Struggles in Zimbabwe*, Rutherford moves away from grand politics to privilege the role of the marginalized farm workers in politics. Through a rich ethnography and using the labor case of farm workers at Upfumi farm, Rutherford makes a critique of the framing of the position and role of farm workers in Zimbabwe's postcolonial politics. Scholars and analysts have deployed two dominant narratives in their efforts to understand Zimbabwe after the year 2000. Anchored in the anticolonial struggle, the first narrative focus on politics as liberatory. Emphasizing the rights of Zimbabweans to have control of their resources, the politics as liberatory narrative is employed to support the post-2000 land reform program (p. 4). Anchored in human rights discourse, the second narrative is deployed by the critics of the ruling ZANU PF party. In what Rutherford calls politics as oppression, the narrative is highly critical of the violent nature of the land reform program and the use of violence by the state and its agencies against opposition forces (p. 4). Rutherford notes that these narratives have long genealogies within and outside Zimbabwe and "have come as universal grounds to evaluate Zimbabwe and to intervene, or to propose intervention of farm workers in Zimbabwe" (p. 4). In other words, farm workers have to either be part of the *Third Chimurenga* as the politics as liberation narrative would argue or as politics as oppression narrative would argue, rights of farm workers have to be protected. Rutherford's work moves beyond these narratives, bringing out a complex picture of the practice of politics on the ground. He notes that the focus on the everyday practices and struggles for livelihood by the marginalized and those on the margins of the society, living precarious lives and a makeshift existence, and how they are energized and how they can energize political actions, move moves away from the dominant narratives of Zimbabwean politics—those that emphasize land redistribution as part of social justice and those that condemn it (p. 3).

The story that is central to the book revolves around a two-year labor dispute between farm workers and an agribusiness company from 1998 to 2000. When Zimfarm, the owners of Upfumi entered the scene in 1997, the labor force consisted largely of single women and those of foreign origins. This was a time when Zimfarm was expanding its operations as it took advantage of the liberalization of the economy. And the first day Upfumi can under the control of Zinfarm, workers went on strike. This was going to be one of the many labor actions at the farm for close to eighteen months culminating in a decisive labor action. During this period, there was a growth of formal labor relations that was encouraged by the owners of the farm and increased demands of worker rights by the workers' committee. In mid-1998, human resource management personnel were changed at the farm. This move was seen by the farm workers' committee as an attempt by the farm owners to roll back the limited worker rights they had gained over a few years. At the same time, management at the farm was refusing to recognize seasonal workers who had worked for a continuous period of eight months as permanent workforce members as per agreement of the collective bargaining process. Workers downed tools, and a total of 879 were fired. To summarize the story, management offered some workers the opportunity to return to work but amended their contracts. Others returned while others moved elsewhere. Under the leadership of the worker's committee, a number contested the dismissals using the company labor relations department and also resorted to the legal system and political channels. While the workers

won their case in 2000, it was overtaken by events on the ground when politics was radically transformed as a result of the violence accompanying the land reform program.

The labor struggle is essential in understanding the oft-neglected part of national politics in Zimbabwe: the position of those often marginalized within electoral politics in post-2000 era. For scholars on Zimbabwe the labor struggle allows us to appreciate how women and people of foreign descent who constituted the majority of the workers took advantage of the shifting ground of politics to contest the authority of the farm management and ascertain their rights as workers. On a national scale, farm workers, just as civil society as demonstrated by Dorman in her work, became part and parcel of the struggles for democracy, human rights, and change. To be able to do this, the workers' committee at Upfumi "drew on translocal resources that were caught up with the exciting ferment of change at national scale" (p. 74). Through a web of networks, farm workers were able to incorporate in their struggle urban-based movements ranging from political parties to trade unions and NGOs. Not only did these networks enabled them to insert farm workers into national electoral politics, but the resources that came with these networks gave them a rare opportunity to challenge the agribusiness company.

Although the farm workers won their labor case in 2000, the ground of politics was fast shifting. The company stalled in its payments. Amongst farm workers themselves, there was a growing uneasiness with the style of leadership. At the same time, the agrarian reform that was unfolding made their lives more precarious. In the post 2000 era, farm workers' livelihoods were made "even more uncertain and unforgiving as the wider crisis and politicized violence impinged on their claims to land-based resources" (p. 26). With the land reform program, the meaning and practice of being a farm worker were also being altered.

In this rich ethnography of the world of farm workers at the turn of the century, Rutherford skillfully demonstrates the entanglement of labor struggles with national politics. He shows how the marginalized practiced politics by taking advantage of various networks from different political parties and civic organizations in the process reconfiguring the situation faced by farm workers on a national scale. However, this practice of politics was also problematic. While workers were successful in their lawsuit, they nonetheless received low compensation, were not rehired, and were silenced through intimidation by some of their leaders. On the whole, this work is a good contribution to agrarian studies, labor studies, and postcolonial politics in Africa.

Conclusion

Through their cautious, insightful, and moving ethnographies based on fieldwork in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, Bertelsen, Dorman, and Rutherford provide a deep understanding of the practice of politics, the postcolonial state, and the processes of state formations and nation making in postcolonial Africa. Each book is daring in its own right. Bertelsen's work compels us to rethink of the idea of the nation state itself. Whereas scholarship has taken a state centric approach, looking at the nation state as a unified and coherent entity, Bertelsen presents a different idea. By introducing what he calls the traditional field, Bertelsen brings to the fore how non-elite Mozambicans on a daily basis challenged, contested, and negotiated different state formations.

Dorman, just as Bertelsen also considers how ruling elites engage society in their efforts to maintain power. In Zimbabwe, the ruling party has tenaciously held onto power not just through coercion but also through consent and an extensive patronage system. As in

Mozambique, the deployment of power has been challenged and contested at various levels. Closely linked to this is how the marginalized, in this case farm workers, have also taken advantage of the shifting grounds of politics to stake their claim on national electoral politics as Rutherford notes. Not only do Bertelsen, Dorman, and Rutherford present a complex picture of the practice of politics in Southern Africa, but they seem to affirm the significance of non-state actors in state making and practices of politics in Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The books offer space to rethink state formation, relations between ruling elites and society, and how none state actors contest and negotiate the continuous process of nation building in Africa.