

The historical and contemporary experiences of the Ndebele people have generally been marginalized in academic and public discourses about Zimbabwe. Their history has also been a subject of great controversy, exaggerations and distortions, repeated by both the Ndebele people themselves and outsiders. Building on these distorted historical memories and myths, the Ndebele people have been invariably represented as 'heroic warriors', 'noble savages' or 'bloodthirsty savages' in the historical and popular accounts that abound.

The work under review is one of the few texts that seek not only to redress the imbalance in Zimbabwean historiography by providing a comprehensive account of Ndebele people's pre-colonial and early colonial experiences, but also to address some of the distortions about Ndebele people's history and traditions as well as their contemporary culture and politics through a detailed and nuanced discussion of their past.¹ It takes a broad revisionist approach, picking on a number of grey areas in previous historical accounts about Ndebele people's experiences and explaining them through detailed analysis.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's study focuses on the period from the early nineteenth century, when the Ndebele State was founded, to the early twentieth century, when colonial rule was imposed on the Ndebele people. It discusses in detail the pertinent issues of state formation, nation-building and governance in the pre-colonial Ndebele State. The book also looks at debates about Ndebele people's hegemonic influences on the Zimbabwean plateau, specifically focusing on the dynamics of power within the Ndebele State and its environment. It analyses how the Ndebele people's traditional system of governance worked, focusing on how power was constructed within the Ndebele State and how it was institutionalized and managed across the broad spectrum of different ethnic and linguistic groups making up the Ndebele State. It argues that, contrary to popular projections of the Ndebele State as a hegemonic and imperial state relying on military force and violence to survive economically and politically,² the Ndebele State was a dynamic state with fluid politics and economics characterized by both coercion and persuasion. It was also a highly adaptive state whose politics changed over time. For instance, while the earlier period of imposition of Khumalo and *ebaZansi* (those from the South/Nguniland) hegemony over the heterogeneous communities on the South African Highveld and Zimbabwean plateau incorporated into the emerging Ndebele State was achieved mainly through force, peaceful and ideological ways of winning support, such as marriages, were relied on to maintain the power of the ruling class in the later phases of the matured and stabilized state.

Another important theme that this book deals with is that of the heterogeneity of the Ndebele State, hence the reference to it as a nation rather than tribe. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that while power within the Ndebele State was constructed around the Khumalo clan and other groups from Nguniland (*ebaZansi*), the Ndebele State was a heterogeneous collection of communities and groups with different backgrounds, cultures and languages whose collective cultural and linguistic input all went into the making of modern Ndebele identity. Utilizing the concept of

hybridity, he demonstrates how Ndebele identity emerged as a hybrid identity benefitting from the input of all communities within the political influence of the Ndebele State.³ The issue of Ndebele identity has continued to be controversial in contemporary Zimbabwe, with debate centering on who the 'authentic Ndebeles' were within the broad collection of people referred to as the Ndebele today.⁴ Ndlovu-Gatsheni's book, approaching the issue from a social constructionist view, undoubtedly contributes towards enhancing our understanding of the main issues to be considered in this debate.

This book significantly engages key ideological and strategic issues influencing politics within the Ndebele State and other pre-colonial Southern African states within their contextual framework. It also highlights and interrogates many of the ambiguities and contradictions in the politics of the Ndebele State, and other pre-colonial African states, not sufficiently dealt with in earlier studies. These ambiguous and contradictory tendencies and practices, which coexisted uneasily within Ndebele society, include the cultures of resistance and domination, oppression and tolerance, coercion and consent, democracy and despotism, justice and exploitation, and rights and privileges.

Most importantly, this book is one of the few texts that interrogate issues of representation and memory about the Ndebele people, specifically dealing with the various colonial and postcolonial factors shaping the reproduction of specific memories and myths about the Ndebele within both Ndebele communities and outsiders. Through its nuanced discussion, the book demonstrates how the 'Ndebele warrior tradition', which has continued to dominate both historical and contemporary imaginations of the Ndebele, was built. As this study eloquently argues, the Ndebele people's warrior tradition was built mainly through distortions and exaggerations of history as well as discourses and representations in the day-to-day encounters of Zimbabwean groups during both the colonial and postcolonial periods. For the Rhodesian colonial state, for instance, the Ndebele, with their powerful army and history of migration from Zululand, fitted the colonial image of the noble savage built through Europeans' encounters with other African groups with strong armies like the Zulu, the Ngoni and the Maasai.

They, therefore, promoted the image of the Ndebele as noble savages. Through detailed discussion, this book demonstrates how the Ndebele themselves later played up to some of the colonial stereotypes,

especially the warrior tradition, as they sought to leverage for group space within an environment of competition with the numerically dominant Shona communities. At the same time, their Shona counterparts contributed to the image of the Ndebele as a militaristic and aggressive group by projecting themselves, in both colonial and postcolonial periods, as victims of Ndebele imperialist aggression throughout history.

The result of all these internal and external discourses about Ndebele politics and traditions, as the book ably demonstrates, has not only been an exaggeration of Ndebele military prowess but also a distortion of their traditional systems of governance and general way of life.

This book's richness lies in its ability to combine theory and empirical data to build a powerfully convincing argument. Its utilization of historical sources is ample. It makes sense of a number of distortions and grey areas in Ndebele history by engaging in critical analysis, using post-colonial theories of discourses. Utilizing theories of state formation and nation-building, Ndlovu-Gatsheni also manages to explain how a small group of Mfecane refugees from Nguniland (the Khumalos and other Ngunis) managed to extend their power among a large number of people across the Zimbabwe plateau. The book's appeal is not confined to readers of Zimbabwean politics and history. It has a wider African significance because it deals with the broader issues of pre-colonial African systems of governance.

Historicizing the Ndebele

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The Ndebele Nation: Reflections on Hegemony, Memory and Historiography

by Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni

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Notes

- 1 Zimbabwe's historical writings have focused on the experiences of the majority Shona and the economically dominant whites, at the expense of the various minority groups such as the Ndebele, Shangani, Kalanga Coloured, Asians, Venda, Chewa, Tonga and Nambia.
- 2 Many of the earlier written and oral texts on the Ndebele state emphasize violence as the only means through which the state maintained its power and authority over both its subjects and surrounding independent communities. See Rasmussen (1978); Lye (1969); Wallis (1945); Summers and Pagden (1970). The only notable earlier writings which tried to explain and contextualize the role and place of the military in the Ndebele state's political economy are: Beach (1986), Bhebe (1973) and Cobbing (1974 & 1976).
- 3 For a more detailed discussion of hybridity in identity formation, see H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); S. Hall, 'Cultural identity and Diaspora', in P. Williams and L. Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1993).
- 4 The debate about 'Ndebeleness' has centred on whether Ndebele identity has to be defined through language and culture or historical and geographic background. Adopting a primordial approach, some have argued that only those with historical connections to Nguniland are the 'authentic Ndebeles'. Those taking a social constructionist approach, on the other hand, have argued that since Ndebele identity only evolved during the formation of the Ndebele state by the Khumalo clan and others from Nguniland, Ndebele identity includes all those groups who were incorporated into the pre-colonial Ndebele state and their descendants. The cosmopolitans in this debate have, in addition, argued that Ndebele identity includes even those Shona-speaking groups and other colonial migrants who have adopted Ndebele language and culture and have been socialized into Ndebele traditions and culture through their residence in Matebeleland since the beginning of the colonial period – a view contested by the puritans who maintain that groups that cannot trace their historic origins to Nguniland cannot be considered 'authentic Ndebele'.

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