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ESSAY REVIEW

A.B.S. CHIGWEDERE'S PRE-COLONIAL HISTORIES
OF ZIMBABWE AND AFRICA

A QUARTER OF a century ago, in 1962, the study of the pre-colonial history of Africa as a serious academic discipline was beginning to get under way. This was a period of high hopes. Archives virtually untapped by historians were beginning to be used, and it was hoped that the faded documents of European imperialism could be used to recover the history of the peoples of Africa rather than that of their colonizers. Oral traditions were recognized as a legitimate historical source, and researchers armed with tape-recorders were beginning to set out to recover the histories of peoples not recorded by observers before the nineteenth century. It was understood that Africa's past required a multidisciplinary approach, and special stress was laid on the importance of archaeology and linguistics, though it was also hoped that such disciplines as physical anthropology, serology, palaeobotany and a host of others could be pressed into service. This was the heyday of African nationalism, and Africans and Africanists were largely united in the hope that Africa could be given a reliable history reaching as far back as that of Europe, the continent with which Africa was most frequently compared. Hugh Trevor-Roper's opinion that this was impossible and, worse, irrelevant was often cited only to be demolished.¹

For about ten years after 1962, tremendous strides were made. Articles, books, research reports and whole new journals appeared regularly, and conferences were held that linked the universities of Africa with those of the outside world, mostly in Western Europe and North America. The gigantic *Cambridge History of Africa* and the Unesco *General History of Africa* were launched, and moved slowly towards completion. The chronology of the history of Africa appeared to be becoming securely established, to the point where by 1974 it was claimed that the traditional history of the Interlacustrine region could be dated with remarkable precision to as far back as the eleventh century AD.²

Unfortunately, the foundations of the whole structure of African pre-colonial history were by no means as firmly founded as they looked. New research into almost every field not only cast doubt on previously established 'facts', but a much more critical approach towards evidence of all kinds was emerging by the early 1970s. In history, documents began to be read with much greater care, with internal and external criticism of texts receiving far more attention.³ Also in history, oral traditions were re-examined and found to contain a high content of

¹ D. P. Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London, Longman, 1982), 21.

² J. B. Webster (ed.), *Chronology, Migration and Drought in Interlacustrine Africa* (London, Longman, 1979).

³ B. Heintze and A. Jones (eds.), 'European sources for Sub-Saharan Africa before 1900: Use and abuse', *Paideuma, Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* (1987), XXXIII.

myth, cliché, invention and feedback from written sources.⁴ Outside history, much the same process was going on: archaeological theories rose and fell,⁵ and linguistic reputations were destroyed.⁶ The journal *History in Africa*, founded in 1974, was devoted to the testing of evidence, often to destruction. The results of this new spirit of criticism were often dramatic: the Almoravid conquest of Ghana of 1076 never happened, Ganda history before 1800 is very dubious, the Jaga may not have existed, and so forth.⁷ The reduction of so many 'facts' in pre-colonial African history to the status of 'disproven', 'improbable' or 'not proven' probably explains why so many university students up to doctoral level have tended to desert the pre-colonial period for the supposedly secure ground of modern African history,⁸ but in fact pre-colonial African history does survive as a discipline. If the highest hopes of the 1960s school of historians of Africa have not been realized, Trevor-Roper has been proven wrong: Africa does have a recoverable past, but there are limitations on just what can be known about certain aspects in some periods, and some periods in some areas remain resolutely prehistoric.⁹

However, the 1960s and 1980s as eras of African history have one thing in common, at least: no one researcher stands supreme. A glance at the index of just one journal, the *Journal of African History*, shows how true this was and is. This is just as true of single African countries. To take an obvious example, my own history of the Shona cited 93 other researchers active in and around Zimbabwe in the 1960s and 1970s without whose work my own would not have been possible.¹⁰

All the foregoing is necessary if the claims and contributions of Aeneas Chigwedere to the field of African history are to be seen in their proper context. Chigwedere has so far published three books on history: *From Mutapa to Rhodes*,

⁴ For example, J. C. Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone, Dawson; Hamden CT, Archon, 1980); D. P. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1974).

⁵ For example, D. W. Phillipson, *The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1977), and *African Archaeology* (London, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985).

⁶ J. Vansina, 'Bantu in the crystal ball', *History in Africa* (1979), VI, 287-333, and (1980), VII, 293-325.

⁷ D. C. Conrad and H. J. Fisher, 'The conquest that never was: Ghana and the Almoravids, 1076', *History in Africa* (1982), IX, 21-59, and (1983), X, 53-78; D. P. Henige, '“The Disease of Writing”: Ganda and Nyoro kinglists in a newly literate world', in Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks*, 240-61; C. C. Wrigley, 'The kinglists of Buganda', *History in Africa* (1974), I, 129-39; J. C. Miller, 'Requiem for the “Jaga”', *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* (1973), XIII, 121-49; J. K. Thornton, 'A resurrection for the Jaga', *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* (1978), XVIII, 223-7; J. C. Miller, 'Thanatopsis', *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* (1978), XVIII, 229-31; A. Hilton, 'The Jaga reconsidered', *The Journal of African History* (1981), XXII, 191-202.

⁸ One would think that modern historians would at least know whether there had been strikes, disturbances, risings and so forth in the Lourenço Marques of the 1940s or 1950s or not. But apparently they did not: J. Penvenne, 'A luta continua', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* (1985), XVIII, 109-38.

⁹ For an assessment of the status of oral tradition after the wave of criticism of the 1970s, see J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

¹⁰ D. N. Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe 900-1850* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1980), 399-412.

Birth of Bantu Africa, and *The Karanga Empire*.¹¹ These should not be read or reviewed in isolation from each other, because each of the later books tends to assume a knowledge of its predecessor, while the first is clearly influenced by ideas formulated but not published until later.

*Africa has produced some distinguished academic historians of the pre-colonial period, writing with authority on whole peoples of the past; it has also produced amateurs, working outside the academic mainstream, who apply a natural talent and common sense to the history of a small group that is easily accessible and whose traditions can be used as part of a much greater mosaic of research. Unfortunately, Chigwedere's work belongs to neither category, and gets the worst of both worlds, being neither of an academic standard nor content to confine itself to targets of research appropriate to its author's circumstances.

Chigwedere began his History Honours degree in 1962, and graduated at the end of 1964.¹² Thus he began by being exposed to the African history of the 1960s at its most optimistic point, but in 1965 he began teaching, and, except for a brief period in 1970-1, lost contact with the world of professional academic history, at least as far as effective supervision was concerned.¹³ He gradually rose to become Headmaster of, firstly, Goromonzi and then Marondera secondary schools, and began publishing his work in 1980.

Chigwedere's references show just how far he was out of touch with academic research in his field: they are very few indeed, and modern academic works of history are very thinly represented. (One might assume that Chigwedere was ignorant of them, but the first chapter of *The Karanga Empire* suggests that he was aware of their existence but could not bring himself to discuss them.) Apart from these, there is a mixture of articles from such journals as *NADA* (no bad source, if used critically), such obsolete works as C. G. Seligman's *Races of Africa* (published in 1930 but which Chigwedere seems to have thought was a recent work) and primary and secondary sources from the nineteenth century such as Livingstone and Stanley. Chigwedere's own researches into oral traditions are not cited properly at all, and it is virtually impossible to deduce just whom he interviewed, or, it seems, to examine his interview transcripts. As it is absolutely essential that it should be possible to check on oral sources, it follows that for a great deal of Chigwedere's work there is no proof at all. But the defects of Chigwedere's books derive from more than just limited sources: there are fundamental problems attached to his handling of evidence. These problems are in fact what makes his work interesting, from the point of view of an anthropologist, because they amount to an attempt to reconstruct the history not just of the Shona but of the whole of Africa according to the principles of local kinship.

¹¹ A. B. S. Chigwedere, *From Mutapa to Rhodes* (Salisbury, Macmillan, 1980), 168 pp., Z\$4.31; *Birth of Bantu Africa* ([Harare], Books for Africa, 1982), 141 pp., Z\$3.80; *The Karanga Empire* (Harare, Books for Africa, 1986), 174 pp., Z\$9.78.

¹² Information from Academic Registrar, University of Zimbabwe, Dec. 1987.

¹³ It was not entirely Chigwedere's fault that he lost contact with academic history, as resignations and deportations from the University College in the mid-1960s made such contact difficult. But by 1970-1, when Keith Rennie and I read an early draft of Chigwedere's work, it was clear that if academic criticism were to be applied to it then not just points of detail but Chigwedere's entire methodology would need revision. This Chigwedere would not accept, and he went on his way alone.

The Shona use the totem (*mutupo*) to identify individuals, especially in questions of kinship and inheritance. The *mutupo*, inherited from the father, relates to a very limited number of animals or parts of the body, and in any district, although there may be several totems represented, a few are likely to be preponderant. Thus, in Chigwedere's home district of Hwedza, the *soko* (vervet monkey), *shava* (eland) and *moyo* (heart) totems are probably the most common, or at least the most conspicuous, because they relate to the dominant lineages in the area. Moreover, members of these lineages can trace their ancestry back to an individual first ancestor: thus virtually all, if not all, *soko/mhondizvo-vudzijena* people from Hwedza are descended from Dendenyore of the early eighteenth century, and similarly the *shava/museyamwa* and *moyo/mhondizvo* groups go back to various rulers holding the titles of Mbiru and Changamire in the same period. Similar situations, but with different totems and ancestors, exist in different parts of the country. But these genealogies can be misleading: by concentrating on the patrilineage and omitting many brothers and uncles in that patrilineage, as well as omitting virtually all wives' ancestors, they give an exaggeratedly pyramidal structure and the impression of a very small population in the past. In addition, there are natural limits in time beyond which traditions do not go: without using documents, and by using a realistic generational dating system, it is difficult to establish the existence of most dynasties any earlier than 1700, although there are some significant exceptions.

In view of this and of the fact in a *local* situation most people of the same totem probably are related within the last three centuries, it is not surprising that some earlier local historians have tried to show that all, or almost all, people of the Shona area with same totem come ultimately from the same ancestor. Aron Marwodzi was doing this in the 1920s,¹⁴ and the missionary Harald von Sicard took the process even further, building elaborate structures on chance resemblances of names and the assumption that successive waves of people, each wave with a distinctive totem, had occupied the country, producing a sort of layered effect.¹⁵ Chigwedere has been influenced by these concepts, and especially by the ideas of von Sicard. Yet the idea that the same totems are necessarily connected is fundamentally unsound: the same totems are found not only among completely unrelated non-Bantu peoples in Africa, but on other continents such as Europe and North America as well. Moreover, to prove a link between two dynasties one must have reasonably coherent genealogies that go back to the same ancestor, proven by checkable sources. It is here, as will be shown, that Chigwedere's methodology falls down.

The best of Chigwedere's three history books is the first, *From Mutapa to Rhodes*: although it ultimately leads to an unrealistic and unproven structure reaching back to the remote past, parts of it, though not supported by checkable evidence, do correspond to the picture given by the available evidence. This applies to the post-1700 period. Chigwedere identifies most of the main dynasties of the period; and, although I would dispute some of his linkages, the overall pattern is fairly coherent. What Chigwedere does not do, however, is to go into the detailed history of each dynasty. This is an enormous task, but ultimately if

¹⁴ D. N. Beach, 'The Rozvi in search of their past', *History in Africa* (1983), X, 16-18.

¹⁵ For a list of von Sicard's more important articles, see Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe*, 410.

any sense is to be made of Shona dynastic history then it must be undertaken, because it is out of these basic building blocks that a structure — or rather, several structures of connected dynasties — can be identified. It is becoming increasingly clear that many traditions have been considerably revised in this century and before, and very careful assessment of the evidence is necessary before a history of a dynasty can be arrived at.

It is in the pre-1700 period that Chigwedere's reconstruction runs into increasing trouble as it moves back into the remote past. Firstly, he lumps together all water-oriented and bird totems into a single group and follows von Sicard in the assumption that the users of these totems represent a very early 'layer' of settlement in this country, before about AD 1000. This simply is not supported by the evidence. For example, by following von Sicard's misreading of a Native Department note on the Matibi *mbedzi* dynasty of the south,¹⁶ he ignores the evidence that Matibi's dynasty was preceded by a *nzou* dynasty as recently as the eighteenth century. Similarly, the *dziva* Ngowa had been in the modern Chivi region only from the eighteenth century, not the tenth, while the neighbouring *shiri* people of Zvishavane were even more recent immigrants. Their genealogies simply do not go back to the remote past. But worse follows: in trying to prove that the *soko* Mbire, by a coincidence (?) his own group, were the 'core' group of most Shona dynasties, Chigwedere builds on the unreliable structure of dynasties assembled by Donald Abraham in the early 1960s.¹⁷ Although he castigates Abraham for exaggerating the importance of 'Mutota' and the Mutapa state, with which few would now disagree, Chigwedere tends to give the main period covered by Abraham's daunting articles (c. 1400–1800) a wide berth. Possibly this was because he was unable to read the Portuguese sources that are so vital for most of that period. But he also criticizes Abraham for underestimating the length of Shona traditional history before the fourteenth century, when even Abraham's ambitious structure was beginning to run short of 'evidence'. In short, by misreading the archaeological evidence and taking separate names of figures from a variety of unconnected sources, Chigwedere builds a superstructure on top of Abraham's structure that goes back from the fourteenth century to the early ninth in about six generations (!) to arrive at a 'first ancestor' named 'Mambiri' in the Ethiopia–Kenya region in about AD 800.¹⁸

¹⁶ H. von Sicard, 'The origin of some of the tribes in the Belingwe Reserve, 9: The Pfumbe under Macetu and Mketi', *NADA* (1952), XXIX, 43. The 'Matibi' referred to, who died c. 1900, was the first of his lineage to be appointed 'Chief' by the colonial government and the first to use 'Matibi' as a hereditary title. Prior to that his ancestors used the Venda system of personal names instead of hereditary titles, but they went back only two generations to Mafukanoro, who immigrated from Venda.

¹⁷ D. N. Beach, 'The Mutapa dynasty: A comparison of documentary and traditional evidence', *History in Africa* (1976), III, 1–17.

¹⁸ There is hardly room in this review for a detailed discussion of the slipshod nature of Chigwedere's methods, but his treatment of this 'first ancestor' will serve as an example: Chigwedere's source is not B. J. M. Foggini, as he thinks (he could not even cite his sources correctly), but Fr J. H. Seed, 'The kinship system of a Bantu tribe', *NADA* (1932–3), X–XI, 10–11, 65–73, 35–56. Seed was making an imaginative guess about the origins of totems, and happened to use the name of his basic unit, a boy named Philip Mambiro, as his imaginary first ancestor from whom the Chinamhora *soko* lineage came. Chigwedere, *From Mutapa to Rhodes*, 3, 19, took 'Mambiro' to be a real person, changing his name to 'Mambiri' to make it look more like 'Mbire'.

The 'evidence' for this is thin where it is not non-existent. But there is one significant point: Chigwedere claims to have relied upon a spirit medium who is said to have emerged in the Hwedza district in 1964. This medium was said to have been possessed by five ancestral *mhondoro* spirits: Nyahuye, founder of part of the Svosve dynasty to which Chigwedere belongs; Mabwemashava, ruling circa AD 1000, and his brother Chigwangu Rusvingo of c. 1050; Gumboreshumba, the 'founder of the Rozvi empire'; and the famous Chaminuka, father of the second two. (These are Chigwedere's dates and given relationships.) But Chigwedere does not name this remarkable medium. Was he by chance Chigwedere himself? I have approached Chigwedere on this point and received no clear answer. If Chigwedere was the medium, then certain questions about the origin of 'evidence' emerge. If not, then there was a quite exceptional medium operating in Hwedza for sixteen years who escaped the notice of researchers.

In short, *From Mutapa to Rhodes* moves backwards in time from the realms of post-1700 history, which is coherent even if little evidence is given, to the remote past and unproven fantasy. *Birth of Bantu Africa* is, quite simply, historical balderdash. It proposes that most of Africa was originally inhabited by 'Bushmen', with a small 'Hamite' population in the Nile valley, and that 'commingling' brought about the 'Hottentot' and 'Negro' who then occupied the rest of Africa. The specifically 'Bantu' section of the 'Negro' are said to have begun their migration from north-east Africa about AD 600. Readers will recognize this as part of an obsolete and racist theory that runs back through Seligman in the 1920s to the nineteenth century. The research on Africa that had taken place before 1962 had already killed it, but the work that has been carried out since then has buried it with a stake through its heart. Or so one would assume.

In *The Karanga Empire*, Chigwedere returned to more familiar ground. He was also, to a certain extent, going over his older arguments in more, if not entirely convincing, detail. While he still clung to his ideas over north-eastern African origin for the Bantu-speakers, he tried to use archaeological evidence, with only partial success. This may be because he saw himself as being on the defensive. His letters to me suggest that his as late as 1985 he genuinely believed that he had uncovered certain basic truths about the history of Zimbabwe and Africa that would lift him to pre-eminence in the field. The history conference at the University of Zimbabwe in 1982, in which academics from Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique and Botswana read his work, did not respond positively towards it. So *The Karanga Empire* is in a way a return to the battlefield. Yet the faults of the earlier works persist: based on an incomplete and inadequate command of the sources, it triumphantly asserts points known long before, while at the same time trying to prove some very dubious points of historical ethnography. It remains resolutely non-academic: ethnic identity is, very nearly, all. (On one point Chigwedere must be defended: if I understand him correctly, he is as worried by the growth of 'tribalism' in modern Zimbabwe as I. All his work on different divisions of Zimbabweans is supposed to unite, not divide them, by proving long-term links.)

Why, the reader might ask, have I written this much about three very amateur history books? After all, like all Zimbabweans, Chigwedere is supposed to be able to believe and publish what he likes. Because I argued with him on television

during thirteen hot, sweaty recording sessions in late 1984?¹⁹ No. Because, for all its faults, his work *is* interesting from an anthropological view point because it shows what happens when one tries to apply a local kinship concept to the whole of Africa? Partly. Because, for all the unacademic quality of his work, he achieved a certain prominence in the Ministry of Education and the National Museums and Monuments? Partly. But my main reason is that it has been clear for some time that the product of the Zimbabwean school system arriving at the University to read history seem to be under the impression that a book is a book, and that all books are equal and appropriate. The idea that ongoing research has disproved much of what they were taught at school, or that not all books are equally reliable, appears to fill them with horror. The origins of this attitude are hard to trace. They may lie with lazy teachers who fail to keep up with recent research — or they may lie with the failure of the University to make sure that new research findings penetrate the Ministry of Education. Chigwedere's books make a 'tale without a head' (*Soko risina musoro*) if it is understood that the 'head' of history is represented by the academic researchers and that the 'tail' lies in the classroom. The problem is to keep the two connected.

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¹⁹ Only ten were broadcast, in 1985.



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