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BOOK REVIEW

Land, Migration and Belonging: A History of the Basotho in Southern Rhodesia, c. 1890-1960's, Joseph Mujere, New York, James Currey, 2019. 198 pp, ISBN: 978- 1-84701-225-8

The 2000s resurgence of nationalism in Zimbabwe saw the country enduring the politicisation of race and ethnic differences by the political elite. The discourse of identity and belonging came to the fore as it was deployed particularly by the ruling party to instrumentally define "being Zimbabwean", an exercise designed to discredit the opposition. Excluded from the partisan definition of being Zimbabwean were, broadly, blacks of Malawian and Mozambican origin and whites. Their perceived support for opposition politics was because, as the government touted, they were not autochthonous Zimbabweans and they had places other than Zimbabwe to call home. The emergence of this dimension in Zimbabwean politics triggered a flurry of scholarly research on identity and belonging in Zimbabwe, demonstrating that the subject was more complex and contentious than it initially appeared.

Departing from the prevailing view that has tended to focus on belonging in the contemporary period, Joseph Mujere has joined the debate by using belonging to explore the history of the Basotho in Southern Rhodesia from 1890 to the 1960s. In a compelling way, *Land, Migration and Belonging* explores various strategies that the Basotho community in the Gutu District of Southern Rhodesia used in order to construct a sense of belonging since their migration to Southern Rhodesia in the 1890s. The study shows how throughout the 70 years a multiplicity of experiences and processes of belonging worked in different ways for the Basotho community. The community

continually negotiated and renegotiated their belonging by appealing to strong in-group ties, or strategically engaging the missionaries, colonial officials and the neighbouring Karanga people. In *Land, Migration and Belonging*, Mujere explores the materialities of land, graves and property and their centrality to the struggles over belonging. Rich in ethnography and historically grounded, the book brings to the fore narratives of belonging and autochthony of a mainly Christianised people who had recently migrated from South Africa along with missionaries to settle in a Zimbabwean communal area. On arrival in the Gutu communal lands, there developed a complex layer to struggle to belong defined by both intra-group dynamics and external factors. This timely book contributes to ongoing debates about migration, missionary encounters, identity, land and the politics of belonging during the colonial period and their legacies.

Departing from debates that focus on exclusion and inclusion, or outsider and insider binaries, *Land, Migration and Belonging's* leitmotif is that, the Basotho sought to establish themselves permanently in the area, while still clinging to their traditions. This search for balance saw the Basotho constructions of belonging fluctuating between ethnic particularism and attempts to integrate into the local community. Attempts to become autochthons were through such means as joining or forming native councils and farmers' associations (p. 2). Particularism, designed to maintain their *Basothoness*, and hinged on their freehold ownership of land, was usually performed during such social gatherings as funerals and memorial services. On these fora, they retreated to their kinship networks and adhered to Sotho etiquette such as singing hymns and speaking in Sesotho, which they did not do in their everyday life (p. 93). Throughout the study, Mujere demonstrates that identity politics and the quest for belonging were not absolute and fixed. They were deployed strategically and depending on who the Basotho were interacting with between their Karanga neighbours, the colonial administration and the missionaries. Infact, the Basotho themselves were not eager to commit to an exclusively geography-bound idea of belonging. In spite of having set root in Gutu District, they never lost connection with South Africa, their ancestral home.

The book is divided into thematic chapters. Chapter One introduces the book by discussing various theoretical approaches that have been widely deployed by scholars to discuss identity and belonging. It makes a case for studying the Basotho and the politics of belonging in Southern Rhodesia. The first of the substantive chapters, Chapter Two, introduces the idea of the Basotho's quest to establish belonging by presenting themselves as qualitatively different and superior to their Karanga neighbours. On arrival in Southern Rhodesia, they endeared themselves to the missionaries and the colonial administration. They exploited the relationship such that they managed to acquire freehold land in 1907 and 1909, something that the colonial system was reluctant to allow

Africans to do (p. 41). The Basotho convinced colonial officials that they were “progressive Africans”, unlike the Karanga. This perception was enhanced by their role in activities such as the formation of African Associations in the 1920s, but more crucially, by their rejection of radical and confrontational approaches of other African organisations such as the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union. As Christians, owning freehold land, demonstrating an entrepreneurial spirit, and avoiding conflict with the state, among other characteristics, the Basotho were allowed space to negotiate land-based belonging.

Taking land as key in the Basotho’s quest to establish a degree of autochthony in the Gutu District, Chapter Three examines the Basotho’s experiences with colonial displacement and the establishment of Native Purchase Areas under the 1930 Land Apportionment Act. The Basotho, who had established an attachment to Rhodesian land through their ownership of Erichsthal and Niekerk’s Rust’s farms, were uprooted from the land. However, through their reputation as progressive Africans, they were allowed to purchase freehold land (Bethel Farm) in the Dewure Purchase Areas. For Mujere, this demonstrated their conviction that their belonging in Southern Rhodesia would only be complete with full ownership of land. Owned by the Basotho community, the farm gave them an opportunity “to coalesce and rebuild their entitlement to land as well as negotiating their belonging” (p. 72). All other sub-elements and identifiers of belonging became hinged on Bethel Farm, owned by the Basotho community. Encapsulated in the Basotho’s negotiation for belonging and lying on the farm, were materialities such as a school, a clinic, a church and the cemetery.

It is in Chapter Four that *Land, Migration and Belonging* reveals forcefully the centrality of Bethel Farm to the Basotho. Mujere argues that, more than the mere ownership of the farms, it is the presence of graves that defined the Basotho’s constructions of belonging. He demonstrates that while the farm became the centre of all activities, graves were key in the Basotho memorialisation of their migration, settlement, displacement, and resettlement (p. 76). By establishing an exclusively Basotho cemetery on the farm, the area became a very important part of the community’s attachment to Dewure Purchase Areas and a rallying point in their construction of belonging. As newcomers the Basotho needed something fundamental to identify themselves with, the new place and the graves became crucial in creating material link with the land, backing their claim to autochthony and representing a spiritual marker of their unity. Mujere successfully links his discussion on graves to the Basotho’s use of funerals to articulate their belonging and to transform themselves into autochthons.

Chapter Five builds upon the previous chapter by further considering the salience of materialities in the belonging matrix. Beyond the use of funerals, graves and farms to claim autochthony, the Basotho utilised anything that potentially enhanced their sense of belonging to Southern Rhodesia and to

the Dewure Purchase Areas. Farms, schools, roads and bustops, were among other features that made material representations of the Basotho. In Chapter five, Mujere focuses on the rise and fall of Bethel School, owned by the Basotho community and located on the farm, to explore the link between education and identity construction. By using only Sesotho as a medium of instruction in an area dominated by an autochthonous majority, the Basotho tried to make the school a marker of their identity. Bethel school is therefore a window through which one can view and appreciate the various strategies the Basotho used in dealing with the ever changing contours of belonging.

For Mujere, religion “can provide adherents with something on which to build networks and solidarities”, and engenders notions of inclusion and exclusion (p. 131). Chapter Six examines the salience of religion in the Basotho’s construction of belonging in the Dewure Purchase Areas. Christianity among the Basotho intertwined with identity, autochthony, ethnicity and politics among other factors in the matrix of belonging. Beyond the veil of an amicable relationship between the Christian missionaries and the Basotho community were subtle and concealed tensions, emerging from the Basotho’s quest to disentangle themselves from missionary influence after building their church. Underlined by the bell incident (pp. 141-2) and the consistent rejection of church donations, the Basotho desired to retain their independence from the missionaries and avoid their patronage and “paternalistic tendencies” (p. 132).

Tensions were not only between the Basotho community and Christian missionaries, but were also internal. Scholarly representations of identity typically ignore and repress internal difference within communities, while emphasising a strong sense of belonging and membership to a community. In all chapters, Mujere demonstrates the limits of ethnic loyalty and of a shared vision of belonging. While properties such as the school and the church showed Basotho “progressiveness” and secured their place in Dewure, fissures emerged over the running of such institutions. Despite their keenness to maintain a semblance of unity and cohesion, factions often emerged over many issues, including financial contributions towards the purchasing of Bethel Farm, the language policy at Bethel School, and the refusal of some Basotho people to use the Basotho-owned cemetery as a burial site. Mujere persuasively argues that, in the context of both tensions with Christian missionaries and intra-group friction, while religious institutions clearly provide platforms on which belonging can be negotiated, they were also a stage on which notions of difference were played out.

Methodologically, *Land, Migration and Belonging* is a fascinating book which uses a wide range of sources in its appreciation of local histories, and to successfully bring out a complex story of the Basotho struggles and strategies to belong. Mujere deploys anthropological and ethnographical insights, high quality and wide range of interviews, archival material and newspapers, which

he effectively blends to engage with key debates in the politics of identity and belonging. As the issues which Mujere engages with were largely happening concurrently, he skillfully adopted a thematic approach. This enabled him to demonstrate the constant shifting discursive construction of Basotho identity and belonging.

As a historian, I prefer *long duree* approaches to engaging scholarly debates. In a sense, *Land, Migration and Belonging* is a response to studies that have tended to focus on the problem of belonging in the contemporary period without considering historical trajectories. Scholars have responded to, for instance, the upsurge of autochthony following the emergence of multiparty democracy in Africa or the recent xenophobic violence in South Africa (p. 12). Such an approach risks being ahistorical. By looking at the period 1890 to the 1960s and by including in the epilogue current dynamics in the politics of belonging within the Basotho community, Mujere demonstrates that belonging is a continuous process involving negotiation and contestation. Indeed, "different historical contexts brought unique challenges to the Basotho, which required specific strategies" in their construction of belonging over a long period of time (p. 153). A flowing narrative that is refreshingly free of jargon, *Land, Migration and Belonging* is a welcome contribution to the struggles over belonging in Southern Rhodesia by a migrant group that tried to strike a balance between ethnic particularism and integration. The book effectively captures everyday stories of the Basotho community in the Dewure Purchase Areas. It is important for anyone interested in rethinking identity and belonging in Zimbabwe and in the region.