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Introduction: Zimbabwe in Historical Perspective

The Land and the People

Zimbabwe, formerly a British colony known as Southern Rhodesia until 1965 and, thereafter up to 1980, as Rhodesia, is named after historical Great Zimbabwe monuments built of stone that are near the southern Zimbabwean town of Masvingo (formerly Fort Victoria). Built between AD 1270 and 1550, these structures, about which more will be said later, are the second-largest man-made structures from Africa's remote past next only to the pyramids of Egypt. The country obtained independence from Britain on 18 April 1980, following a protracted civil war that pitted a dominant small white population that governed the country against the African majority from the 1960s onwards. Zimbabwe's largest city is Harare, the capital. Other major urban centres are Bulawayo, the second largest, and Masvingo, Mutare, Gweru, Kwe Kwe and Kadoma. Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in south-central Africa covering a total of 390,580 square kilometres. Map 1.1 shows the geographical location of Zimbabwe and its major towns. It lies between the latitudes of 15.37 and 22.24 degrees south and longitudes of 25.14 and 33.04 degrees east. It borders the following countries: Mozambique to the east, South Africa to the south, Botswana to the south-west and Zambia to the north. Zimbabwe lies almost entirely more than 300 metres above sea level and is dominated by the Central Plateau (Highveld) watershed which runs through the middle of the country from the border with Botswana in the southwest to the east where Mt Nyangani is the highest point in the country at 2,592 metres. On each side of the Highveld towards the Zambezi River in the north and the Limpopo River in the south, the Highveld slopes into the Middleveld and then into the Lowveld, whose



MAP 1.1. Zimbabwe (geography.about.com).

lowest point at 162 metres is the junction of the Save and Runde Rivers on the Mozambican border. Running along the Highveld for a distance of more than 500 kilometres is the Great Dyke containing a wide range of mineral deposits, including chromium ore, gold, nickel, copper, iron ore, and platinum. The country's economy is based mainly on mining, agriculture, and, until the recent crisis, on tourism and manufacturing.

Among Zimbabwe's main rivers are the Zambezi River in the north along the Zimbabwe-Zambia border, the Limpopo River in the south, which separates Zimbabwe from South Africa, and the Sabi River in the middle. Fed by a number of tributaries, all three rivers flow through Mozambique into the Indian Ocean. On the Zambezi River is Lake

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Kariba built in the 1950s, as well as the Victoria Falls, a cataract 106 metres high. The country is predominantly savannah (tropical grassland), with patches of dense woodland in the evergreen forests of the eastern borderland and teak forests in the north-west, north of the city of Bulawayo. It has a tropical climate which is moderated by its high altitude, giving it average temperatures of 15 and 21 degrees in winter and summer, respectively, and has, essentially, two seasons, namely the dry winter period from May to September and the wet summer period from November to March.

At 2012, the country boasted a total population of just below 13 million, 70 per cent of whom were Africans living in rural areas. Those living in urban areas were concentrated in the towns and cities of Harare (approximately 1.5 million people), Bulawayo (approximately, 700 000 people), Mutare, Kwe Kwe, Kadoma and Masvingo, among others. By ethnic composition, the Shona accounted for 80 per cent of the African population, while the Ndebele and other groups represented 16 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively. Included in the Shona group were several subgroups, such as the Zezuru, Korekore, Manyika, Karanga, Ndau and Kalanga, which spoke closely related dialects. Included under the category 'other' are the Nyanja/Chewa, Tonga, Shangani, Barwe, Sotho, Venda, Chikunda, Xhosa, Sena, Hwesa and Nambya communities. Whites amounted to less than 1 per cent of the population, which was a much smaller percentage than at any time in the colonial period. This was the result of a large white exodus at Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 out of fear of black rule and, subsequently, in the wake of the acrimonious land reform programme of the early 2000s. The white population comprised mostly English-speaking immigrants from South Africa and Britain, most of who arrived after the Second World War; Afrikaners from South Africa, some of whom arrived as part of the early pioneering settlers at the beginning of the twentieth century; and other migrant groups such as the Portuguese, Italians, Greeks and Poles. The rest of the population comprises Asians and mixed-race Zimbabweans known locally as Coloureds, comprising 1 per cent of the country's population. Zimbabwe has three official languages – English, Shona and Ndebele – although English is the main language of business.

Religion and Culture

The Zimbabwean population subscribes to a wide range of religions, with approximately 70 per cent being members of mainstream Christian

churches; the main denominations are the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Seventh Day Adventist, Dutch Reformed Church and Methodist. Over the years, however, indigenous churches, mostly breakaways from the orthodox churches, and several Pentecostal and Apostolic churches emerged and grew rapidly. The situation is complicated by the fact that many African Christians are also adherents of traditional religious practices and move between the two seamlessly, attending Christian church services regularly but also consulting traditional spiritual leaders when necessary. There are, however, many Africans who subscribe only to traditional religions. The largest Christian denomination in the country, the Roman Catholic, accounts for approximately 7 per cent of the population. Approximately 1 per cent of Zimbabwe's population is Muslim and consists mainly of people of Asian, North African and Middle Eastern origin and some indigenous Southern Africans, including Zimbabweans. Other religions represented in the country are Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, the Bahai Faith and Greek Orthodoxy.

Zimbabwe is a land of many cultures that reflect its multi-ethnic and multiracial character. The most dominant cultural traits are those associated with the Shona-speaking peoples who comprise the majority. Other cultures include those of the Ndebele, White, Indian, Coloured and other African minority groups. Like most African countries, Zimbabwe was an artificial creation of Western colonialism which drew its present boundaries without any real understanding of the demographic/cultural realities on the ground; as such, it lacked a homogenous precolonial ethnic or cultural united entity and instead brought together different cultures and ethnicities into an imagined country, to be called Rhodesia. It is, therefore, not possible to speak of a collective Zimbabwean culture but only of Zimbabwean cultures.

Brief Historical Outline

Until British colonisation in 1890, the country was the home of indigenous black people, beginning with Stone Age hunter-gatherers, the San, from as far back as 200 BC. The San were later displaced by Bantu-speaking peoples, the ancestors of present-day Shona-speaking inhabitants of Zimbabwe. In the early nineteenth century, a series of incursions from Bantu-speaking peoples of Nguni stock from present-day South Africa introduced the Ndebele people, the majority of whom now inhabit south-western Zimbabwe and whose major urban centre is Bulawayo.

Other Nguni groups, such as the Gaza-Nguni, settled in the south-eastern regions of the country and intermarried with the local Shona population to produce the present-day Ndaue ethnic group. British occupation began with the arrival of Cecil John Rhodes-sponsored Pioneer Column in 1890, marking the beginning of an eighty-year-long colonial dispensation that saw the gradual expansion of a white settler population and the development of a modern economy based largely on mining, agriculture and, eventually, manufacturing heavily dependent on cheap African labour.

A racially based sociopolitical regime prevailed throughout the colonial period in which whiteness equalled power and privilege while blacks were marginalised economically, politically and socially. The tensions spawned by this discriminatory system resulted in many incidences of racial friction. In the meantime, Southern Rhodesia was granted self-government by the British in 1923, following a whites-only referendum in which the settlers had to decide whether to join South Africa as that country's fifth province or to govern themselves; they chose the latter. Under this arrangement, Southern Rhodesians could govern themselves in all but a few areas.

In 1953, for a variety of economic and political reasons, Southern Rhodesia joined its neighbours, Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), and Nyasaland (Malawi), in the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland, also known as the Central African Federation. The Federation collapsed in 1963 partly because of African opposition to it. In 1965, Southern Rhodesia unilaterally declared its independence from Britain, having failed to persuade the colonial power to grant such independence voluntarily. Thereafter, the country was caught in the throes of an armed conflict that only ended with Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 and the installation of a black majority rule government of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party under the leadership of Robert Gabriel Mugabe.

In 2000, Zimbabwe entered a major crisis period which was sparked by a controversial land reform programme referred to by government proponents as the fast-track land reform programme, which also involved violent farm invasions by government supporters, some of whom were veterans of the anti-colonial armed struggle. The international outcry that followed this campaign and the increasingly intolerant attitudes of the ruling party towards any political opposition led to a massive exodus of skilled professionals from the country, the

ostracism of the country by some of its major trading partners and investors and an economic downward spiral that was the hallmark of what came to be known as the Zimbabwean Crisis of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

This book traces the history outlined earlier in the chapter in greater detail in order to identify the forces that have shaped Zimbabwe's recent lived experience and the trajectory of its development in the hope that this will best contextualise the country's present situation. Chapter 1 introduces the study, while Chapter 2 traces the history of the early pre-colonial states from the original societies of the San and the early state of Mapungubwe, through the Great Zimbabwe, Mutapa, Rozvi and Torwa states to the Nguni conquest state in the mid-nineteenth century. Chapter 3 focuses on the coming of British colonisation in 1890 and African responses, including the Anglo-Ndebele War of 1893 and the *Chimurenga/Umvukela* uprisings of 1896–7. Chapter 4 discusses colonial society and economy under the colonial state until 1953, highlighting the growth of the modern state and the colonial contradictions that were later to shape the racial confrontation of the 1960s and beyond. Chapter 5 briefly examines the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland from 1953 to 1963 and its subsequent break-up. Chapter 6 traces the rise of Zimbabwean African nationalism from the interwar period, African nationalism's radicalisation during World War II and the rise of mass African confrontational nationalist politics in the immediate post-war period. Various post-war African nationalist parties are examined until the banning of the two largest parties by the government of Ian Smith in 1963.

Chapter 7 traces the coming of the unilateral declaration of independence from Britain by the government of Ian Smith and international reaction. The chapter also focuses on the reaction of black Zimbabweans to the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in the form of the armed guerrilla struggle which was to last until 1979. The scope, nature and impact of the guerrilla campaign by African liberation movements and other forms of African protests are also analysed. The chapter ends with a discussion of the Lancaster House negotiations that ushered in Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. Zimbabwe's independence experience from 1980 to 2000 is discussed in Chapter 8, while Chapter 9 analyses the Zimbabwean crisis from 2000 to 2009. Chapter 10 concludes the study by focusing on the challenges that have faced the country in its quest to build a common sense of nationhood and the prospects for the future. The book fills a big gap in Zimbabwe's historical literature where

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much has been written on various aspects and themes of the country's experience but there is a glaring absence of a comprehensive, informative and accessible one-volume study that those who seek to understand the forces that shaped the country's experience can read. It will also be useful as a textbook in university courses on African history and politics.

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Early States, c. 900–1900

Introduction

The colonisation of Africa at the end of the nineteenth century was often justified by claims that the colonised lands were ‘uncivilised’ and inhabited by a barbaric people without any history or, in the case of the South African interior and Zimbabwe, that the land was, in any case, empty and there for the taking. Both alleged attributes of pre-colonial Africa appear in a statement by the former Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith in 1997, in which he justified the occupation of Zimbabwe by a group known as the Pioneer Column that were sponsored by the arch-imperialist Cecil John Rhodes by claiming that these invaders were

going into uncharted country, the domain of the lion, elephant, the buffalo, the rhinoceros – all deadly killers – the black mamba, the most deadly of all snakes, and the Matabele [sic], with Lobengula’s impis, the most deadly of all black warriors.... But if the mission was to raise the flag for queen and country, no questions were asked. Moreover, their consciences were clear: to the west the Matabeles had recently moved in.... The eastern parts of the country were settled by a number of different tribes, nomadic people who had migrated from the north and east, constantly moving to and fro in order to accommodate their needs and wants. To the south were scattered settlements of Shangaans from Mozambique and Northern Transvaal. *Clearly it was no man’s land, as Cecil Rhodes and the politicians back in London had confirmed, so no one could accuse them of trespassing or taking part in an invasion.*¹

¹ I. D. Smith, *The Great Betrayal*, (London: Blake Publishing, 1997), 1–2 (italics added).

The dominant European view of non-European peoples then was based on racist assumptions of their inferiority as a justification for their conquest and colonisation. Thus, invariably, the lands occupied by indigenous peoples were regarded as either empty or uncivilised. The alleged ‘emptiness’ of colonised lands in Africa was based on a logic that maintained that areas that were not inhabited by Europeans were empty and there for the taking and that, where indigenous people were present, they were only nomadic wanderers without legal claim to the territory. It was also argued that such indigenous societies had no understanding of private property and, therefore, the land they occupied was not owned by anyone and thus available to the incoming Europeans. Lastly, proponents of this view insisted that indigenous people were not ‘rational’ beings and, therefore, had no institutions, culture or beliefs worthy of respect.²

This dismissive view of the African past was most clearly articulated by Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper of Oxford, first in a public lecture in 1960 and then, again, in 1969 when he categorically asserted that there was no African history before the arrival of the white man on the continent and insisted that the entire African continent, including Ethiopia and Egypt, was ‘unhistoric’.³ He stated:

Perhaps in the future ... there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely ... darkness. And darkness is not a subject of history.

He added, in what can be regarded as a forerunner of the ‘West and the Rest’ worldview:

The history of the world for the past five centuries, in so far as it has significance, has been European history.... It follows that the study of history is and must be Eurocentric. For we can ill afford to amuse ourselves with the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe.⁴

The prevailing Western colonial view of precolonial Africa, therefore, was that there was no usable past and that there existed no coherent, organised and functioning political systems and structures until the white people arrived on the continent.

² J. M. Blaut, *The Colonizer’s Model of the World: Geographical and Eurocentric History*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 15.

³ The statement was originally made during a series of lectures in the University of Sussex transmitted by BBC Television. The lectures appeared in print in *The Listener* in 1963 and finally became a book: *The Rise of Christian Europe*, (London, 1965), 9–11.

⁴ Hugh Trevor-Roper, ‘The Past and Present: History and Sociology’, *Past and Present*, 42 (1969): 3–17.

However, contrary to the claims of colonial historiography which portrayed the land between the Limpopo and Zambezi Rivers as a land that was either empty or inhabited by a savage people without a history or culture and who were only 'civilised' by the incoming white colonial settlers at the end of the nineteenth century, the country that became the British colony of Southern Rhodesia in 1890 and Zimbabwe at its independence in 1980 had, in fact, been home to centuries-old civilisations that dated back to the original San stone-age hunter-gatherers.

The arrival of Bantu-speaking migrants into the territory more than 2,000 years ago laid the foundation for a series of large and prosperous political entities or states that included, in chronological order, Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe, Mutapa and the Torwa/Rozvi states, all of which were established by ancestors of the present Shona-speaking people of Zimbabwe. The mid-nineteenth century saw the demise of the last of the Shona states, the Rozvi Empire, at the hands of Nguni invaders from the south, who established the Ndebele state under King Mzilikazi. This state was, in turn, destroyed by the incoming white colonial state in the 1890s. Caution must be taken, however, not to regard Zimbabwe's precolonial history as nothing more than a succession of large and powerful states, for while powerful states did exist prior to British colonisation, many groups lived outside the borders and control of such states, even though they interacted with them. Moreover, while precolonial Zimbabwean history has tended to be presented as a series of 'Shona 'empires' or states succeeding each other until the nineteenth century, the reality was that, until the usage of the term on the eve of British colonialism in the early twentieth century, no one in the territory that became Zimbabwe ever called themselves Shona, and neither was there a language with such a name.

The term 'Shona' is thus a creation of colonial rule, which is now used to describe people with a similar linguistic, cultural and political past, but who referred to themselves and were known by others by various names, such as the 'Karanga' of Great Zimbabwe (1270–1550); the 'Togwa' (Torwa) of the north-west (1450–1690), the Mutapa in the north (1450–1902) and the 'Rozvi' in the south-west (1690–1830), and other numerous small groups who never belonged to one monolithic group.⁵ Nevertheless, these various groups did belong to what has been called

⁵ G. Mazarire, 'Reflections on Pre-Colonial Zimbabwe, c.850–1880', in B. Raftopoulos & A. Mlambo (eds.), *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-Colonial Period to 2008*, (Harare: Weaver/South Africa: Jacana Media, 2009), 1–38.