Résumé

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Compte rendu de deux ouvrages (Ranger et Lan) sur la lutte paysanne pour l'indépendance du Zimbabwe. Les régions étudiées sont aussi différentes que les méthodes d'étude, lesquelles restent cependant complémentaires jusqu'à un certain point. Ranger, historien, focalise sur le changement ; Lan, anthropologue, sur la continuité. Le second s'attache à la permanence des structures symboliques, le premier à la transformation des rapports sociaux, en évitant la réification des idéologies que côtoie parfois son collègue.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

doi : 10.3406/cea.1986.1696

Document généré le 02/06/2016
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Peasant History and Peasant Symbols*

In 1980, a few months after the long struggle for an independent Zimbabwe had finally been won and ZANU (Zimbabwean African National Union), under the leadership of Robert Mugabe, had been elected to form the new government, Terence Ranger and David Lan both set off for Zimbabwe to carry out research, Ranger for six months and Lan for twelve. Both of them have had a long and deep commitment to Zimbabwe's struggle for liberation, and they shared a desire to understand and record the way Zimbabwe's peasants had themselves experienced and understood that struggle. Each focused on a different region within Zimbabwe: Lan on Dande, a small remote corner in the north near to the Mozambican border; and Ranger on Makoni district, also close to the Mozambican border but further south between Harare and Mutare.

The two regions are very different. Dande is hot, prone to drought, infected with tsetse fly and with poor soils. It has, Lan tells us, 'few shops, few schools, no beer halls, no jobs, no markets' (p. 10). In contrast, Makoni district, Ranger writes, 'contains a good deal of fertile land and enjoys more regular rains than many other parts of the country.' It was noted for its productivity in grain in pre-colonial times' (p. 28). At various periods during the colonial years, some of the people of Makoni managed, as Ranger puts it, to exercise the 'peasant option'—essentially what Ranger means by this is producing agricultural commodities for the market—quite successfully; and Makoni became for the colonial authorities 'one of the districts notoriously least productive of migrant labourers' (p. 30). But in Dande, it seems, the 'peasant option' was never genuinely viable. Although Lan gives little information about the economic history, he does tell us that, at the time of his fieldwork, almost all families were to varying degrees reliant on wages earned by some member outside the area. However Dande and Makoni do have one important characteristic in common, they are both areas dominated by the Shona-speaking peoples who constitute the majority of the Zimbabwean population. Both authors acknowledge the Shona bias of their studies and defend it on the grounds that it is inevitable given their regional focus, but both recognize that as a result their accounts have important gaps, in particular they are not able to say much about the nature of the struggle in Ndebele areas.


Despite their shared concern to illuminate the peasant experience of Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle, Ranger and Lan approach their subject in quite different ways and the result is two very different studies. Ranger and Lan are each familiar with the other’s work and cite each other freely; a glowing reference to Guns and Rain... by Ranger is quoted on its cover, and Ranger is the most cited author in Lan’s bibliography. Lan directs readers to Peasant Consciousness... for ‘an excellent and full-scale political and economic history of the causes of the war throughout Zimbabwe’ (p. 135), while Ranger refers them to Lan for a full account of the ‘systematic symbolic logic’ of one of the means, namely the co-operation between Shona spirit mediums and the guerrillas, which enabled ‘radical peasants and incoming guerrillas to come together as one community of resistance’ (p. 206). Each author here seems to be recognizing in the other the concern with a separate, but complementary, academic sphere; the historical, looking at the political and economic causes of the war, and the anthropological, focusing on the intricacies of a system of symbolic logic. But are the approaches of Ranger and Lan in reality so complementary?

As a historian, Ranger’s concern is not just with the years of open guerrilla war, but with the whole of the colonial period. Using the specific example of Makoni district, he documents, through archival material and data collected during interviews he conducted after independence, how the active support for the guerrillas on the part of large sections of the Zimbabwean peasantry was the culmination of a continuous history of resistance to the colonial State, in particular to its administration of the rural areas and of African agricultural production. Not that this resistance was necessarily open and explicit, or always exhibited the same degree of intensity, or was reflected in clearly articulated nationalist demands; it is to be traced rather in the day-to-day struggles of peasants sometimes to improve, more often simply to maintain, their standard of living in the face of continual attacks by a State more concerned with the demands of White settler agriculture, fearful of the competition of Black producers, and with White employers’ needs for Black labour. It is not surprising therefore that the guerrillas’ message of national liberation with its stress on return of the lands appropriated by the Whites found ready acceptance with many peasants.

Although the framework of Peasant Consciousness... is comparative and Ranger continually attempts to locate the Zimbabwean experience in relation to the very different histories of Kenya and Mozambique, for me by far the most valuable and interesting parts of the book are the long and detailed accounts of the shifting fortunes of the Makoni peasants in the course of the colonial period, and how these shaped, and were shaped by, the changes in that complex and elusive entity, ‘peasant consciousness’. In contradiction to some of Ranger’s explicit theoretical formulations, the substantive analysis of the book, at least implicitly, raises the question of whether there is such a category as the ‘Zimbabwean Peasantry’. Historians belonging to the Anglo-Saxon tradition are often criticized for a certain reluctance to engage seriously with theory, but this can sometimes have the advantage that they may be less inhibited from following through their empirical analysis, even if this contradicts some of what they claim to be their theoretical framework. One of the virtues of Ranger’s study is precisely that it does not treat either ‘peasant consciousness’ or the peasants themselves as some undifferentiated entity, but traces out, in a concrete and meticulously documented way, the different variants of the ‘peasant option’—in other words, the different strata of the peasantry, and how these gave rise to, or found correspondence with, different forms of consciousness.

Some of the linkages that existed in Makoni, for instance, were ‘the peasant entrepreneurs, inspired by the American Methodist mixture of ardour and discipline; the small marketing peasant Anglican; the folk Catholicism of the subsistence...
peasantry; the congruity between production for the market on a “traditional” basis and the injunctions of the Mwari cult or the spirit mediums’ (p. 185). Each of these linkages is explored in detail, and in particular the way they have changed and developed over time. Throughout the book the stress is on the way peasant consciousness cannot be seen as something fixed and static but as something that is continually changing and adapting in line with the changing realities of peasant life.

In contrast to Ranger, Lan, like many anthropologists, is ultimately more concerned with continuity than change. For him, the history of Dande can be seen as ‘a series of waves that washed across the valley floor. First came the Korekore conquerors, then the Mutapa State, then the Portuguese and then the century of settler rule. All were partly absorbed and partly resisted’ (p. 31). Even though he defines as a central preoccupation of his book ‘the question of what changes over time and what remains, of what is washed away, what alters and what holds firm’ (p. 13), implicit in this kind of formulations is the notion of an essential core, an entity that ‘partly absorbs and partly resists’. For at least the last hundred and fifty years, one element of this core has been, Lan argues, ‘the possession rituals of the mhondoro mediums and the belief in the power of the mhondoro to bring rain’ (p. 72). And a major part of Guns and Rain. . . is taken up with a detailed exploration of the symbolic structure of the beliefs surrounding the spirits of the ancestors, the mhondoro, the mediums who become possessed by them, and the role of the spirits and their mediums in the life of the people of Dande. Both the symbolic system and the mediums who embody it are central to political relations within Dande.

In the past, it seems the mediums were closely linked to the local chiefs—the mediums through whom the ancestors (the dead chiefs who are described as the ultimate owners of the land) are provided with a means of speaking to their living descendants, providing the spiritual legitimation of the chiefs’ authority. In the colonial period, however, the authority of the chiefs declined as they increasingly became no more than minor functionaries within the colonial administrative machinery. The more the State tried to bolster the power of the chiefs—and in the years of Unilateral Declaration of Independence [UDI] the beleaguered settler regime tried with increasing desperation to use them to legitimate their rule in the eyes of Black Zimbabweans—, the less they were seen as the genuine and legitimate successors of the ancestors, even if their backing by the State meant that any resistance to them tended to be passive rather than active. Neither the colonial authorities nor those of the minority settler regime ever tried to incorporate the spirit mediums, who were generally regarded as ‘witch-doctors’ trading in ignorance and superstition.

Consequently, according to Lan, ‘the spirit mediums retained their independence and their rituals cleared a space within which the peasants could express their resistance to the present’ (p. 228). The spirit mediums became a focus for everything that was in opposition to the colonial State and the world of Whites. One expression of this opposition was the strict prohibition against mediums coming into contact with the industrially produced goods of Western technology. The people of Dande believed ‘that it was dangerous for mediums to wear Western-style clothes or eat factory-produced foods, to smoke cigarettes or to use Western medicines. The smell of a clinic or a hospital was harmful to them. So were the smells of petrol and of tar. [. . .] They ate only off wooden plates and drank from dried gourds’ (p. 143). It was believed that the death of one medium during the war was due to his smelling the fumes of a police car.

The success of any guerrilla army always depends on the support and co-operation of the local community in which they base themselves. When the ZANLA (Zimbabwe National Liberation Army) guerrillas first entered Dande in 1971,
they came as strangers, unknown and unrelated to the local people on whom they would have to rely not only for food, but for concealment from the security forces. One of the means the guerrillas employed to establish the necessary trust within the community was the spirit mediums. Lan’s argument is that the guerrillas were able to make use of this already existing set of beliefs both to find a place within the community, and to transmit their own particular message. When the guerrillas entered Dande, ‘they stepped into the categories which history [...] had laid out in wait for them’ (p. 226). Not that this was a strategy worked out in advance by the guerrillas, rather the relationship between mediums and guerrillas is something that developed out of the guerrillas’ need for incorporation within the peasant community and the shared aim of guerrillas and mediums to restore Zimbabwe to its rightful owners. The mediums gave their spiritual blessing to the armed struggle, something that was crucial since, as one senior guerrilla leader put it, ‘If they [the mediums] tell their children they shouldn’t go and join us they won’t’ (p. 147). They also helped the guerrillas in more direct ways, guiding them along the small paths unknown to the security forces and showing them secure places where they could store their weapons.

At the heart of this co-operation was Dande political ideology to which the spirit mediums are so central, and this political ideology is part of that essential core which has endured as the waves of history have washed across the Dande region. Lan summarizes his argument as follows:

‘the cluster of abstract ideas, symbolic associations and ritual performances that make up the political ideology of Dande has survived the upheavals of colonialism and of war virtually unaltered. Like a cork afloat on the sea, it has risen above and overcome each wave of history as, one by one, they have washed up and broken on the shore’ (p. 225).

Lan does not see this system as totally fixed and static, rather,

‘in a changing world, ideology and ritual must continually seek out new raw material to feed upon, to ingest and absorb in order to grow to meet the challenges change brings, and in order to remain essentially unchanged’ (ibid.).

But however much Lan may stress that change does take place, implicit here, and indeed throughout the book, is the assumption that what changes is content, while the forms that structure this content remain the same, and also that these symbolic structures and ritual processes are a fundamental element in the identity of the people of Dande. It is this continuity of forms—Lan makes much of the fact that the descriptions of the mhondoro mediums written by Pacheco in 1861 are virtually identical with what he observed himself in 1980—and the reasons for it that are one of his major themes.

Not only does Lan see Dande political ideology as unchanged in its essential forms since precolonial times, he also sees it—and here he is very much in the tradition of Lévi-Strauss—as underpinned by a basically unitary set of symbolic structures shared by all the members of the Dande community. A considerable part of Guns and Rain... consists of an exhaustive structural analysis of the mythological system in which the spirit mediums are embedded. At the centre of this set of structural oppositions is a basic opposition between the reality of biological life and death, which is associated with blood and is the business of women, and the far more prestigious, if ultimately synthetic, symbolic creation of life and reproduction of fertility, which is controlled by men and from which women are excluded. The rituals of the mediums, during which they are possessed by the spirits of dead chiefs, who in this way live again and thereby transcend death, are an expression of this male-controlled reproduction, through which, it is believed, comes the rain on which the existence of this peasant community depends.
unravelling of the complex layers of symbolism involved is fascinating, but even if we accept that this elegant system of structural oppositions actually exists in some form in the heads of the people of Dande, is it necessarily true that this explanation of reality, this 'political ideology' as Lan calls it, is in fact accepted and shared by everyone in Dande? Is there in reality just this single symbolic account of the reproduction of peasant life and of the basic relationship between the peasants and their land, the land of Dande? And however much this symbolic system may be based on a set of oppositions, ultimately, according to Lan's analysis, all these oppositions are part of a single system.

It is here, it seems to me, that we come not only to a fundamental difference between the historical approach and the anthropological one, but to something of a contradiction between them. For while, as I have mentioned, Ranger may in certain passages of Peasant Consciousness... talk about the peasantry as if they were a distinct and unitary class, in practice his analysis, with its stress on the historical development of peasant consciousness, emphasizes the very different options available to different groups at different times, and the often very different responses of these groups. The more Ranger develops his analysis, the more it begins in fact to deconstruct and call into question the very category 'peasant'. Lan's analysis, in contrast, depends upon the assumption that there is an entity, 'Dande political ideology', which is essentially outside history, whose waves merely wash over it.

In Lan's world of structured symbols, there may be oppositions but these only serve to constitute a higher unity; there is no place for any real conflict between competing representations of reality that might be produced by different interest groups within the community. It is true that certain ideologies may be hegemonic, but even such hegemonic systems, I would argue, should be seen as the outcome, at any one moment, of a ceaseless struggle between the different ways in which different people explain the reality that confronts them. One result of Lan's assumption that there is one shared political ideology within Dande is that there is no place in his account for any kind of genuine peasant consciousness that did not support the guerrilla struggle. It might be argued that the defeat of the White minority government in Zimbabwe was in the interest of the Black peasantry generally, so that any opposition to the struggle was some kind of false consciousness, but this does not get us very far in understanding the actual complexities of peasant allegiance during the war. The point is not whether or not there was any, or substantial, opposition to the guerrillas, but that the nature of Lan's argument rules out the possibility of a peasant consciousness that would have been both genuinely 'Dande' and opposed to the freedom fighters. One consequence of this is that it is difficult to see how Lan's analysis can be used to explore future developments in the relationship between the people of Dande and ZANU now that the latter are the new rulers of Zimbabwe.

Although Ranger in his explicit statements is at pains to show the new Zimbabwian government of Mugabe and ZANU in the most favourable light—not surprisingly, given his committed support for ZANU during the long years of struggle—, once again the substantive content of his analysis reveals a whole set of conflicts of interests—both within the peasantry and between the peasantry and the government—which are already threatening the unity of the war years. For instance, the fundamental question of land: how can the government satisfy the demand for the return of the lands appropriated by White settlers in the colonial years and still abide by the terms of the Lancaster House agreement? And how are the demands of the poorer 'subsistence' peasants for a mass redistribution of land to be reconciled with those of the more prosperous and market-orientated farmers that the process of accumulation should continue unchecked?

Over the years Ranger has made extensive recourse to the work of a number of anthropologists, and in dealing with oral material collected in Makoni he has even
made use to some extent of anthropological methods. *Peasant Consciousness* . . . shows how profitable this kind of cross-fertilization can be. *Guns and Rain* . . ., however, for all its fascinating unravelling of the symbolic system underlying the institution of the *mhondoro* mediums, exemplifies, it seems to me, some of the weaknesses of that anthropological tradition which insists on treating the realm of ideas and beliefs as a series of structured symbolic systems existing outside of history.

*Manchester University, November 1986.*