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ESSAY REVIEW

FAMINE IN ZIMBABWE

AFTER TWO MONTHS of primary research in the National Archives of Zimbabwe in Harare Iliffe has written a fascinating book on the changing nature of famine in colonial and pre-colonial Zimbabwe.¹ Although Iliffe modestly cautions the reader as to the finality of his analysis (due to the 'brief period of research and an inadequate knowledge of Zimbabwe'), the book is, nevertheless, a highly valuable and long overdue contribution to Zimbabwean historiography.

The major arguments of this attractively written and easily comprehensible publication are: pre-colonial famines did not normally cause mass starvation and were not responsible for the low population before 1900. Under colonialism food shortage changed its character from famine which killed directly (though few people) to structural malnutrition of the poor.

Iliffe's initial motivation to research into the history of famine was derived from his interest in historical demography. In trying to explain why the population in pre-colonial Zimbabwe was so low and why it rose so fast after the onset of colonialism he examines a hypothesis suggested in the model of demographic transition. The model posits that famine mortality was a key factor in the population history of pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwe and suggests that the cessation of high (pre-colonial) famine mortality brought about by colonial rule could have caused the rapid population growth after 1900. But the empirical evidence that Iliffe found does not — in his view — support this hypothesis. He argues that although famine ceased to kill directly after about the mid-1920s, famine mortality was not the main constraint for population growth in pre-colonial times. Thus the control of famine mortality during the colonial period cannot explain Zimbabwe's extraordinary population growth since 1900. Hence the major question raised in Iliffe's book remains unanswered.

In dealing with the main problem of historical demography outlined above the book has a rather unhelpful focus. Whereas the answer to the question rests as much with an analysis of pre-colonial as with colonial history only one out of the thirteen chapters discusses the pre-colonial period; and the analysis of pre-colonial famines in that chapter appears problematic and ambiguous. On the one hand Iliffe suggests that 'the point is not to deny that serious famine, and perhaps serious famine mortality, occurred in pre-colonial Zimbabwe; it is rather to stress that we have almost no evidence of it' (p. 17). But the main thrust of his argument centres around the assumption that the lack of evidence on famine mortality reflects a lack of widespread famine-caused starvation itself. Droughts seem to have occurred frequently before 1890, he argues, but usually only a few people died from them. This was due to the fact

¹ J. Iliffe, *Famine in Zimbabwe 1890-1960* (Gweru, Mambo Press 1990), 142 pp., Z\$16.50, ISBN 0-86922-459-X.

that the agro-pastoralists of pre-colonial Zimbabwe had achieved control of famine mortality because of ecological reasons and (more importantly) by a remarkable variety of technical and socio-economic means and strategies. Only in association with violence (and mostly in the arid lowveld) droughts have turned into severe famines: 'The peoples of Zimbabwe suffered recurrent scarcity but normally prevented it from causing numerous deaths. 'Famines that killed' appear to have occurred when violence intensified scarcity' (p. 111).

The main body of the book presents an analysis of the nine major colonial famines between 1896 and 1960. Within this period Iliffe identifies a historical process of change in the character of famines effecting the African population of colonial Zimbabwe. Prior to 1922 the pre-colonial, 'traditional' type of famine prevailed. The famines of 1896/7, 1903, 1912 and 1916 were 'traditional' (with 'the leading actors from an older world' (p. 31)) in terms of causation, extent and effects and also crisis management. With the exception of the post-Chimurenga famine of 1896-7 these famines were caused by drought and the regions least exposed to early colonialism were the main sufferers from the failure of the rains. These famines threatened but did not cause deaths from starvation in great numbers owing to the continued operation of pre-colonial famine-survival strategies and (to a small but increasing degree) to famine relief by the colonial state.

It was these strategies of coping with famines which were firstly affected by colonial changes. Already the great drought of 1912 — although it was met mainly by traditional famine management techniques — carried transitional characteristics. Here government drought-relief operations, as well as indirect entitlements to food² through the colonial economy (wage labour, cattle sales) became important elements in coping with the environmental stress. But it was the famine of 1922 which incorporated most elements of transition from pre-colonial to capitalist famines. This famine was the last one which killed a significant number of people directly. But in contrast to the previous famines it was not confined to peripheral areas or to Southern Mashonaland; neither was it caused by a succession of bad harvests; it was caused by one single catastrophic season. Although colonial land apportionment was still not a major causative factor, the severity of the famine was linked to developments in the capitalist economy: as a result of the Depression following the First World War cattle prices dropped drastically and Africans were unable to secure exchange entitlements to food by cattle sales. In terms of crisis management there was also an important shift. In the 1922 famine government drought relief became as important (if not more important) as traditional techniques as the main check on famine mortality. Also in terms of famine-induced labour migration the 1922 famine marked a turning point in a longer historical process. For the first time a famine caused a marked upsurge in labour migration.

By the early 1930s colonial capitalism was dominant and had profoundly changed the character of famines in Southern Rhodesia. Fatal

² The concept of 'food entitlements' has been developed by A. Sen. See his *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1981).

famine gave way to non-fatal food scarcity which was now geographically concentrated in the areas of most intense White settlement (Matabeleland). Malnutrition now affected predominantly the poor and socially weak members of African society. The causes of the food scarcities of 1933, 1942 and 1947 are closely linked to the impact of land alienation, evictions, the overcrowding of the Reserves and declining agricultural per capita productivity. Their repercussions were also reflected in the growing social differentiation in African society. Iliffe argues that 'whereas [prior to the 1930s] both rich and poor had fasted and feasted, now food was regularly available to those who could afford it and regularly scarce for those who could not' (p. 79). Until the late 1950s mature colonial capitalism replaced traditional famine control and also government famine relief almost completely with exchange-related indirect entitlements to food and provided for the necessary infrastructure and markets. For a limited historical period most African families earned sufficient income from cattle sales and migrant labour to buy enough food to avoid starvation but not always — in the case of the poor — to eliminate malnutrition.

After the end of the prosperous 1950s the history of food scarcity in Zimbabwe entered a new phase. Increased social differentiation and the marginalization of the rural poor during the period of economic prosperity that followed the Second World War led to a renewed dependence on government famine relief in the disastrous drought of 1960 which was paralleled by the onset of a long-term structural crisis of colonialism. African agriculture was now clearly undermined by the effects of land apportionment. Coupled with this 1960 saw the onset of stagnation of the colonial economy which excluded sections of the African population from acquiring sufficient indirect entitlements to food. The pattern of food scarcity established in 1960 is still prevalent today. Endemic malnutrition of the rural poor and socially vulnerable and a dependence on government famine relief in times of drought has replaced earlier patterns of famine mortality and famine crisis management.

Iliffe presents his book to the reader as a call for further research. He himself repeatedly points to gaps in his factual evidence and to the resultant vagueness of his interpretations. The greatest merits of the publication lie — I think — in its analysis of the changing nature of famine and food shortage during colonial rule and thus indirectly in its contribution to a more thorough understanding of colonialism in Zimbabwe. One could disagree with certain elements in Iliffe's interpretation but his central arguments on colonial famines are entirely convincing to me. I would, for instance, argue that real wages did fall during the Great Depression of the 1930s and that the Maize Control Board operated in a manner slightly different from that described by Iliffe. I would put more emphasis on African strategies to earn indirect entitlements to food and less on the capacity of colonial capitalism to create a network of exchange and transport. The declining food production in the African Reserves has to be seen — in my opinion — much more in the context of increasing holdings and rising prices of cattle.

More important are the limitations arising from the nature of the sources used by Iliffe (of which he is very well aware). When dealing with

the colonial period the book relies almost exclusively on colonial records, and consequently the administrative perspective and perception of famine underlies the analysis. The sources to an extent determine the themes discussed (for instance, the bias towards writing about famine relief) and exclude central facets of famine. Social and gender-related processes (within African society) generating differential entitlement to food as well as accompanying food shortages and famines could be dealt with much more thoroughly.³ Also the geographical frame of analysis (the smallest unit being the District) set by the sources appears problematic. For instance, recent research on Mazvihwa Communal Land in Southern Mashonaland highlights the necessity of microstudies by revealing striking differences in the impact of drought on human welfare between two adjacent ecological zones — the sand veld and clay veld environments.⁴ The inadequacy of the sources also affects one element in Iliffe's main argument concerning the shift from famine mortality to malnutrition during colonialism (of which he is again aware). The lack of mention of malnutrition in the colonial records prior to the 1930s does not mean, of course, that malnutrition did not exist. Famine-caused starvation and malnutrition of the poor could very well have co-existed before the 1930s.

But what seems most problematic to me is Iliffe's analysis of pre-colonial famines and his rejection of famine-caused mortality as a major constraint of pre-colonial population growth based upon it. First of all it remains unclear whether he argues for an absence of serious famine mortality or for a lack of evidence on it. His assumption that control of famine mortality was achieved except when famine merged with violence is not totally convincing. He himself lists a number of severe pre-colonial famines which were not all intensified by warfare and violence. The consultation of additional sources like the collection of oral traditions recorded by the National Archives of Zimbabwe (the Oral History Programme) would have extended the knowledge about this type of famine.⁵ Also Iliffe's own analysis of early colonial famines — especially those of 1912 and the 'Ndanga famine' of 1916 — casts doubts on his interpretation of the pre-colonial period. He argues that the famines of 1912 and 1916 were of the pre-colonial type in the sense that the colonial intrusion did neither cause them nor contribute substantially to their extent. Still — owing to the severity of the droughts and the partial inadequacy of traditional strategies — many people depended for their survival on famine relief provided by the colonial state. For instance Iliffe argues that during the 1916 Ndanga famine 'the prevention of mass starvation by the supply of roughly 2 500 tons of grain was a remarkable administrative achievement,

³ See M. Vaughan, *The Story of an African Famine: Gender and Famine in Twentieth-century Malawi* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).

⁴ K. Wilson, 'Ecological Dynamics and Human Welfare: A Case Study of Population, Health and Nutrition in Southern Zimbabwe' (London, Univ. of London, Ph.D. thesis, 1990).

⁵ See for example: Nat[ional] Arch[ives of Zimbabwe, Harare], AOH/17 ([African Oral History] Interview with Dick Munjeri Mhako, 1 Apr. and 12 Apr. 1977); AOH/14 (Interview with Aaron Jacha, 14 July 1977) and AOH/17 (Interview with Mr Rakala, 17 Aug. 1977). Further information is provided in Natl Arch., N/3/33/8 (Native Department, Chief Native Commissioner, Correspondence: Miscellaneous: History of the Mashona Tribes' Dec. 3 1903 – Jan. 21 1904).

for on this occasion other survival mechanisms could scarcely have prevented many hundreds or thousands of deaths' (p. 66).

But these additional considerations still do not answer the basic question concerning a possible link between famine mortality and population history. It might well be that the focus and direction of enquiry taken in the book is able to give only an inadequate answer to the question. Firstly, I think that the low population of the nineteenth century might well be explained in the context of the very exceptional character of this century (high level of violence with tremendous direct and indirect impacts on the reproductive capacity of the societies) and not as a reflection of the relationship between people and environment in pre-colonial times *per se*. Secondly, the search for 'apocalyptic' famines with high mortality is probably misleading in relation to population history. Minor famines (which were not perceived as severe famines that killed) could very well have had a decisive impact on population growth, unnoticed by contemporary observers and unrecorded by oral traditions. Wilson, for instance, found out that (minor) famines led to higher infant mortality due to lower birth weight as a result of the low nutritional status of mothers.⁶

A more general thought can be linked to the above point. Whereas Iliffe's description of entitlement to food prior to the 1930s ('both rich and poor had fasted and feasted' (p. 79)) suggests tinges of 'merrie old Africa' there are indications — though also very fragmentary — that famines had differential effects on the population along the lines of economic and political status, age and gender. The *gore reMvemve* (a major famine of the nineteenth century), for instance, is described in the following manner: 'Mvemve was a catastrophic famine . . . Those who survived did so by migration. Some survived because they had wealth . . . Women and children died. Those women who were in a polygamous family were divorced.'⁷ Ranger gives a vivid description of the impact of the great famine of Masvaure on women and children with a quotation from an oral testimony: 'Women left their areas of starvation to offer themselves as wives to men in areas of plenty. Some of these women threw their children into pools or rivers so that they would appear as unmarried women.'⁸ For the 1886–7 famine the death of slaves is recorded in Chief Negomo's territory.⁹ Enquiries along these lines might prove helpful in establishing a link between pre-colonial famines and population history. But they necessitate a deeper knowledge of the social history of pre-colonial Zimbabwe than is provided by Zimbabwean historiography so far. Iliffe's book has opened up a whole range of extremely important questions which await further research.

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⁶ Wilson, 'Ecological Dynamics and Human Welfare'.

⁷ Natl Arch., AOH/17, Interview with Mr Rakafa.

⁸ T. O. Ranger, 'Women in the Politics of Makoni District 1890–1980' (London, paper presented to the ASAU Conference, 1981).

⁹ See D. N. Beach, *Mapondera: Heroism and History in Northern Zimbabwe 1840–1904* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1989), 64 n.14.

