

REVIEWS • RESENSIES

Mlambo, O.B. 2022. *Land Expropriation in Ancient Rome and Contemporary Zimbabwe: Veterans, Masculinity and War*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. Pp. 239 + xxiv. Hardcover. ISBN 978-1-3502-9185-0.

This book offers an ambitious comparison between expropriations of land in the late Roman Republic and in Zimbabwe after the war of liberation in the 1960s and 70s. Specifically, it focuses on the role of masculinity, as experienced by the veterans of these wars, and the ways in which owning land was essential to playing a masculine role in these societies. In general, Mlambo argues that a 'veteran masculinity' existed, 'linked to violence, fighting for land as remuneration and also as a reward of honour – masculinity which violated and feminized its victims or opponents' (p. 3). He makes use of various theories that explain how masculinity was conceptualized in ancient Rome and in Zimbabwe, specifically practice theory, which holds that culture can be studied by observing publicly accessible practices and performances.

In general, there were some remarkable parallels between ancient Rome and contemporary Zimbabwe. In both societies, veterans wanted to be seen as heroes, to be rewarded as such. In both, veterans who did not receive what they thought they deserved could descend into 'war madness', leading to plundering and destruction. In fact, Robert Mugabe, as well as Zimbabwean veterans themselves, explicitly referred to the Roman Republican generals and soldiers as role models to look up to. There were, however, also important differences, such as the spiritual values that Zimbabweans attach to land and to the bones of deceased veterans. Furthermore, in Zimbabwe, people who had been maimed in war were seen as less masculine, while in Rome this does not seem to have been the case. The role of Roman generals was remarkably similar to that of the Zimbabwean leaders such as Mugabe. They developed homosocial relationships with the soldiers: the soldiers depended on the generals for land, but the generals depended on the soldiers' support to maintain their position. Thus the soldiers were tied to the general in a kind of 'personality cult'. Any sign of weakness or effeminacy, or failure to make good on their promises of land and spoils of war, could make the soldiers abandon their leaders.

The concept of masculinity as used in this book is quite different from current debates in Europe and the US; gender in the US and Europe mostly relates to an individual's views of what it means to identify as a man or a

woman. In Mlambo's book, however, masculinity is considered mostly a social concept, focusing on the social and economic roles of men and women. Interestingly, this seems to have nothing to do with biological gender, as women were active fighters in Zimbabwe's liberation war, and female veterans in Zimbabwe could also take on masculine social roles. It is a pity that the book does not connect this social concept of masculinity in the context of war with more individual expressions of gender: do female veterans who exhibit this masculine behaviour also experience changes in their gender overall? How do these experiences in war tie in to gender debates in general in Zimbabwe? Have the events of the wars and the role of female veterans changed traditional gender expectations in Zimbabwe, and if so, how?

It would also be interesting to know why Mlambo has chosen to focus on masculinity rather than on the economic, political or social consequences of land expropriation. Is this a subject that Zimbabwean veterans themselves specifically focus on? Mlambo offers citations from interviews with Zimbabwean veterans, which show mostly that they wanted their just rewards for the suffering they had undergone in freeing the country from colonialism, but it remains unclear whether masculinity was a specific issue for them – apart from the expectation that a man is able to provide for a family, for which he needed land. In the Roman context, masculinity came into play especially when the various generals accused their opponents of effeminate behaviour, while the veterans themselves were, again, mostly concerned with receiving proper rewards and being able to make a living.

Part of the complexity stems from the fact that the concept of masculinity as understood in the book is not fully explained until chapter 3, where Mlambo discusses what social roles were expected of men in ancient Rome and in Zimbabwe. The question remains whether all the events related to land distribution could be directly related to masculinity; the military and economic aspects of land distribution and warfare are not much discussed in the book. It would have been interesting to consider, for example, whether other forms of livelihood (e.g. trade) were also acceptable as masculine social roles. In ancient Rome, this was certainly the case – was a plot of land in Zimbabwe seen as the highest achievement, or could other profits of war also lead to status in society?

It seems that this book is part of a recent wider trend in scholarship in southern Africa that investigates the connections between the recent wars in the region and concepts of masculinity. This scholarship has not received wider recognition in European and US scholarship and therefore the themes explored in this book seem rather unfamiliar to the reader. A short state-of-the-art as to where this book fits in the wider debate would have been welcome. Similarly, the history of Zimbabwe in recent decades has not been

summarized in this book, and a brief exposition would have been very welcome – p. 29-30 are not quite sufficient for readers who know nothing about the country. For example, what types of farms were expropriated: only large commercial ones or also smaller farms? Who were the White people owning them and what relationship did they have with Black farmers before the expropriations? Were the Black farmers settled on the land in a more or less regulated way, as in the Roman era, or were the farms simply taken by individual veterans? What happened to these farms; who actually worked them and was this successful? What happened to the White farmers who lost their land? Did similar ideas of masculinity exist among them as well, and if so, how did they respond to the loss of their farms?

It is also surprising that the concept of race is not discussed very much in the book. Of course, Black soldiers taking farms from White farmers (although Mlambo states, but does not explain, that farms were also taken from Black farmers) saw themselves as heroes who liberated the country from colonialism. Other than that, ideas around racism are not brought up. It would be interesting to know whether there was also an idea of 'race masculinity', i.e. Black veterans being seen as better men than White farmers. Presumably this theme has been studied extensively by recent scholarship in southern Africa, but a short discussion in the context of land expropriation would have been welcome.

The book contains some spelling errors, but these do not detract from the argument. Mlambo curiously sometimes gives the Latin or Greek text of ancient passages, but not always, without there seeming to be a reason for giving the original. Furthermore, the translations he uses are sometimes very old, but this may be caused by the difficulty of acquiring recent works in Zimbabwe. Sometimes there is some imbalance between the Roman and the Zimbabwean material. For example, chapter 5 mostly discusses the Roman situation, leaving the reader curious as to what parallels existed in Zimbabwe – perhaps the reader is assumed to know about recent Zimbabwean history, but for readers who are not familiar with this, the imbalance means that valuable insights into the Roman world are lost. In other places the structure of the text seems illogical. For example, on p. 182, in a section about the sons of veterans, Mlambo first states, without explanation, that Zimbabwean veterans' sons showed the same 'muscular arrogance' as their fathers, before jumping into a discussion about whether and why Horace fled at the battle of Philippi, a completely different topic. These issues make it sometimes hard to follow the argument of a book that already covers a complex subject in itself.

As it is, the book is not very accessible to uninitiated readers, and that is a pity, as Mlambo's book offers an interesting glimpse into a field of scholarship that has not yet received much attention in European and US

academia. Therefore, it is perhaps not the best book to introduce new readers to this topic, due to the lack of background information about the southern African situation and the complexities of gender studies in general. One of the most important lessons of this book is that land expropriation in the context of war is not something that only happened in ancient Rome – it can happen in the modern world as well. A scholar like Mlambo, whose family was directly involved in these expropriations, will have a far deeper understanding of the horrors of war than any western European or US scholar. I hope, therefore, that he will continue to study the phenomenon of land expropriation and other issues related to war and the possession of land in ancient Rome and modern Zimbabwe.

Saskia T. Roselaar
Independent scholar, The Netherlands