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### **Review of Anita Jacobson-Widding, Chapungu: the bird that never drops a feather. Male and female identities in an African society**

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another. Even now I am unable to write one book at a time. Today I think I have five going' (p. 157).

Such anecdotes and views, that give insight into the *experience* of writing and publishing in the contexts from which the interviews emerge, make this collection of such value, for they are details that supplement our understanding of literary analyses of the works of these writers.

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ANITA JACOBSON-WIDDING, *Chapungu: the bird that never drops a feather. Male and female identities in an African society*. Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology 28. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis (pb no price given – 91 554 4638 8). 2000, 525 pp.

Anita Jacobson-Widding's monograph is based on three periods of fieldwork (between 1984 and 1996) among Manyika people in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe. She states early on that it is her deliberate intention to restore the role of *culture* into anthropological analysis. Using an eclectic, if somewhat mutually reinforcing mixture of cognitive, psychological and symbolic approaches, she describes how three cultural models of gender relations interact with social structures and personal experience to produce an individual's sense of their own identity. These co-existing, tensioned cultural models range from the familiar dominant/explicit model of overt patriarchy, to a second, rarer model of gender equality which emerges in particular ritual performances to do with requests for rain, and on to an even more elusive or 'muted' third model involving a male fear of female dominance.

As I read on, I repeatedly found myself wondering where these three models of gender relations actually exist, beyond, of course, the pages of the anthropologist's own field notes. An anthropologist doing ethnography in Zimbabwe has no need to search for an obscure 'subconscious' place where the patriarchy may exist because it is well known, observable, and people talk about it; it is, in Jacobson-Widding's language, the dominant model. However, as the author is also concerned to demonstrate the existence of the other, less familiar, 'hidden', gender models, a strange result is that she unnecessarily, and indeed counterproductively, looks for this obvious patriarchy in the most obscure of places. This leads her to an absurdity which particularly riled me and which illustrates this book's most fundamental flaw: that its 'culturalism' is profoundly ahistorical.

According to her analysis, there is a 'mythical bird' called the *Chapungu* which is a 'phallic representation of a stereotypic ideal of male identity' (p. 28) whose physical shape is both copied by men when they 'straighten their backs and assume a stiff erect body posture' (p. 27) and is embodied by one of the famous 'Zimbabwe birds' that originated at Great Zimbabwe. In fact she goes so far as to distinguish between two different mythical birds represented by different individual Zimbabwe bird carvings; the most well-known stone carving representing the virile *Chapungu* – the dominant male model of gender relations – and the less well-known carving representing the androgynous *Hungwe* 'as a symbol of the tacit model of male/female equality' (p. 144). She does not mention that *hungwe* and *chapungu* are both Shona words – for the fish eagle and the bateleur eagle respectively – birds which have a very real existence outside of the mythical gender models she inscribes them in. Having myself spent some time asking people in Zimbabwe what they

thought of the 'Zimbabwe birds', and having received a huge variety of answers on every occasion, I was surprised by how definitively Jacobson-Widding was able to identify individual Zimbabwe bird sculptures with these particular birds and map them onto two of her three gender models. This neat fit is particularly striking as she states that no one she spoke to in Manicaland knew of the 'Zimbabwe birds' existence at all (p. 28). I was left wondering how it is that Manyika men may be copying a stone bird sculpture that they don't even know of.

But I could allow Jacobson-Widding her creativity here were it not for a much more fundamental issue that is at stake. By suggesting that dominant and secondary cultural gender models are inscribed in stone birds created 700 or 800 hundred years ago, 200 hundred miles away, she is implying that very little has changed in gender relations since that precolonial Zimbabwe state. By implication what happens in Manicaland province now – today's 'culture' – is somehow the same as what used to happen in Masvingo province many centuries ago. In this way, she ignores archaeological and historical evidence of a whole series of subsequent and preceding precolonial states, and she privileges one very distinct, imagined moment of history centred on Great Zimbabwe, over everything else that may have happened then and since. It is in this way that her work is profoundly ahistorical. In its rush to see links and symbolic connections between ancient relics and current cultural models, this book is reminiscent of Thomas Huffman's highly innovative but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to interpret the symbolism of Great Zimbabwe's space and, like those works, this book too joins the enormous genre of strange but flawed books that have been inspired by Zimbabwe's infamous ruins.

But more than just ignoring archaeological and historical evidence of a much more complicated past, she also ignores a huge amount of social historical and ethnographic literature on Zimbabwe that has highlighted the great complexity of colonial and postcolonial discourses and imaginations of the past, culture and identity. This is reflected in how she deals with the often captivating ethnographic material her book contains. For example, she includes early on in the book (pp. 59–63) a fascinating account of Chief Mutasa's visit to Great Zimbabwe and the way he relates his sense of his own clan's past to what he finds there, but then she leaves the account hanging, uninvestigated, and moves straight into her argument about dominant gender hierarchies. In this way she dismisses or at least ignores people's own historical and cultural imaginings and seems to deny people's consciousness and agency. This, it seems to me, is decidedly odd for a book that aims to address Fortes's question, 'If personhood is socially generated and culturally defined, how then is it experienced by its bearer – the individual?' (p. 24).

Further exemplifying its lack of historical awareness, this is almost the only book on Zimbabwe that has emerged since Independence that seems not to consider the war of liberation or cultural nationalism in any way at all. The only war she discusses is that of 'ancestral sexual intercourse' (pp. 151–3) which can in itself be taken as indication of the kind of symbolic/psychological approach that permeates the text. As a result, in her hurry to see the *hungwe* and *chapungu* birds as symbolic representations of long existing and evidently durable cultural models of gender relations, she ignores the fact that both have also been associated with the celebrated relationship between ancestors, spirit mediums and guerrillas during the war of liberation. Exploring this kind of historicity would have made her book much more interesting and would have avoided her falling into the obvious trap of reifying a 'tradition versus modernity' dichotomy by allowing her to focus on the political and discursive potency these very terms have across Zimbabwe today.

Apart from reducing, in effect, all of history to a single tension between 'traditional' and 'modern' culture, the only other meagre offering of 'historicity' that Jacobson-Widding explores is that of the development of people's sense of individual identity. And the tragedy here is that potentially this could have been the most interesting part of her book, relating shared and undeniable 'cultural' gender roles, and symbolic meanings and practices, to people's individual biographies through the lens of Eriksen's notion of 'selfsameness' (p. 431). Unfortunately, she employs neo-Freudian notions of Oedipal tensions between sons and mothers, ignores people's personal histories in much the same way as she ignores broader social history, and ultimately comes up with the ridiculous assertion that somehow all men in Manicaland have a deficient sense of personal identity, especially in opposition to their confident and self-assured sisters. This awfully generalizing analysis is patched with photographs of girls allegedly 'jumping for joy' while boys are 'waiting for what?' (p. 430–1), which add nothing to the argument and merely irritate the exasperated reader further.

Not to be entirely negative, this book is full of incredibly engaging extracts of direct ethnography and, if one puts aside the way it is all made to lead to the sweeping assertion about male cognitive deficiency, there is much to be gained in terms of insights into family life, interpersonal relations, and gender symbolism in language and ritual practices. Unfortunately, despite a fascinating theme of research and plenty of interesting ethnography, the main argument of this book completely undermines its stated and admirable aim of trying to refocus the anthropological lens back onto the 'cultural'. It is much more likely to be of use for students to demonstrate the importance of 'postmodern' critique, than to lead the way for a reassertion of 'culture' in social anthropology.

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STEPHEN ELLIS and GERRIE TER HAAR, *Worlds of Power: religious thought and political practice in Africa*. London: C. Hurst & Company (pb £16.50 – 1 85065 734 3; hb £45.00 – 1 85065 735 1). 2004, 263 pp.

This is an important book about an important subject. Its main concern is to demonstrate a fundamental link between religious and political ideas in modern Africa. The authors rightly stress that the theme has not attracted the attention it deserves and has not been studied systematically. With their book they wish to remedy this imbalance, not the least by drawing on new types of material, and the result is an important and exciting contribution which will no doubt stimulate debate and further research.

Ellis and ter Haar first formulated their views in an article in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (vol. 36, 1998) and now offer a full analysis. Their introductory discussion of approaches and concepts is admirably clear and explicit. Their point of departure is what they see as a long neglect of religion in the study of African politics. They criticize a post-Enlightenment, secular tradition in Western social science for having developed a set of assumptions and concepts incapable of grasping African political realities. Briefly stated, their overall view is that religious ideas play a key role in political life in Africa because 'the spirit world is commonly considered the ultimate source of power' (p. 6). They stress repeatedly that this should not be taken to mean that Africans and African politicians do not have a clear understanding of the