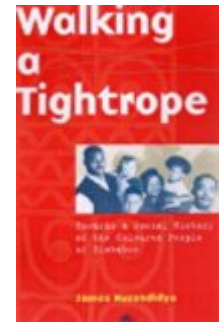


James Muzondidya. *Walking a Tightrope: Towards a Social History of the Coloured Community of Zimbabwe.* Trenton: Africa World Press, 2005. xviii + 323 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-59221-246-0.



Reviewed by Elizabeth Schmidt

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Based on a wide range of archival sources and more than two dozen interviews, James Muzondidya's book provides a major historical reassessment of Zimbabwe's colored community from the early twentieth century to 1980. This small community has largely been ignored in Southern African historiography. The few works focusing on the colored population generally have perpetuated a distorted view, arguing that the mixed-race community had no authentic identity. Rather, they posit that "colored" was a state-imposed category without roots in popular experience or consciousness. According to this view, coloreds were merely a product of the colonial state's divide-and-rule tactics. While Africans viewed them as dupes, collaborators, and beneficiaries of the colonial system, Europeans dismissed them as a marginal population that was more African than European and, as such, unworthy of European rights and privileges.

In this important contribution to the historical literature, Muzondidya reassesses the construction of colored identity, rejecting the proposition that colored social and political identities

were solely state-imposed. He argues instead that these complex and contested identities were the product of colored historical agency and the political, economic, and social structures in which the actors operated. He disaggregates the mixed-race category, too often viewed as homogeneous, in terms of gender, generation, class, culture, and historical background. In a particularly fascinating section, he explores the deep divisions between South African-born Cape Coloreds (or Cape Afrikaners) and the indigenous "EurAfrican" population. Cape Colored immigrants to colonial Zimbabwe were predominantly Muslim, Afrikaans-speaking descendants of African and Asian slaves, the Cape's original Khoikhoi inhabitants, and Afrikaner settlers. Generations removed from their exclusively African or European past, they belonged to the Western-educated middle and professional classes.

In contrast to this immigrant community was the indigenous Christian, English-speaking EurAfrican population, born of European fathers and African mothers. Tensions between Cape Colored elites and local EurAfrican leaders were not

the only divisions that plagued the colored community. Urban/rural cleavages linked to cultural differences also ran deep. Mixed-race individuals brought up in the rural areas among their mothers' people were frequently belittled by educated urban elites as half-castes whose life-styles were indistinguishable from those of the African population. Further distinctions were made between coloreds whose ancestry included Europeans and those of African and Indian descent.

Along with his nuanced assessment of the heterogeneous colored population, Muzondidya investigates the ideologies and strategies of early twentieth-century colored organizations and colored political mobilization in the post-World War II era. Besides the divisions, stresses, and fractures in the community, he considers the successes and failures of the various organizations. He explores the ways in which colored politics transformed over time. Members of the prewar organizations generally tried to distance themselves from the African population, identifying instead with the European power structures. By the 1970s, some segments of the colored community rejected association with the structures of colonial rule and identified with increasingly militant African nationalism. This was especially true of the younger generation. Nonetheless, the number of coloreds who identified with African nationalism was relatively small, as the nationalist movement generally ignored the colored population or dismissed its members as collaborators with the colonial state. As the guerrilla war intensified in the 1970s and the focus of nationalist organizing shifted from the urban to the rural population, the predominantly urban colored population was further marginalized. When independence came in 1980, coloreds again were sidelined. Long identified with European interests, coloreds were excluded from fundamental discussions regarding citizenship, political rights, and economic transformation.

While this book makes a valuable historical contribution, it would have benefited from further revision. It is sometimes repetitious and tends to be more descriptive than analytical. At times, the author's claims are confusing. More than once, he makes an argument, brings up contrary cases, and then modifies his argument--rather than making more a nuanced argument at the outset. Finally, the bibliography is somewhat dated, including doctoral dissertations rather than their revised and published versions, some of which have been available for many years. Despite these weaknesses, the book is an important contribution to Southern African historiography. It is highly recommended for college and university libraries.

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