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Elizabeth MacGonagle. *Crafting Identity in Zimbabwe and Mozambique.* Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007. 192 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58046-257-0.

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Ndau Ethnic Identity across Borders

In this slim volume (113 pages of text, followed by 70 pages of notes and bibliography), Elizabeth MacGonagle tackles a complex historical question about ethnic identity in southern Africa. Based on extensive archival materials and dozens of interviews, she works to untangle the development of Ndau identity over several centuries on both sides of the Mozambican and Zimbabwean border. Relying on primarily Portuguese reports beginning in the sixteenth century and turning to oral testimony for more recent generations, she demonstrates the shared language, historical memory, and cultural attributes that combine to form an idea about Ndau ethnicity.

The book begins with an historical overview, placing this region of central Mozambique and eastern Zimbabwe in the larger sweep of events, from the arrival of Portuguese colonizers to the nineteenth-century Nguni incursions. Ndau identity was flexible, as is ethnic identity in general. But certain forms of address and body adornment, including clapping as a greeting that demonstrates respect, tattoos on women, and ear piercing for men, contributed to local ideas about what it meant and still means to be considered "Ndau." Separate chapters investigate early political and economic exchanges; political entities; physical appearance, including dress, jewelry, hair styles, and scarification; cultural beliefs in rainmaking and the role of chiefs; and the strong impact of the Nguni in-migration and Ngungunyana's overrule. Although MacGonagle stops short of an in-depth analysis of current Ndau identity, the detailed background she presents offers insights into the role of some Ndau in Renamo's political efforts in modern Mozambique.

Despite the sweep of centuries, there is a narrow focus on Ndau on both sides of the national border. MacGonagle was admittedly limited by the kinds of documents available for the initial centuries being discussed, and some of the adjacent communities are absent from the documentation because they were of less interest to Portuguese visitors (p. 49). Nonetheless, the Ndau story would have benefited from more analysis of regional cultural activities in order to substantiate exactly what was specific to Ndau beliefs. Many of the customs and practices claimed by Ndau informants are found in similar or identical forms among other southern and central African societies. For instance, burial practices that included saving portions of bodies or bodily excretions, especially of chiefs, are strikingly close to rituals found throughout the region and recently displayed in a special exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[1]

MacGonagle integrates gender and women throughout the discussion, showing how ideas about personal adornment were gendered, and analyzing the impact of women as bearers of cultural tradition under the pressure of foreign invasions (p. 96). Information about marital practices, including polygyny and the levirate, also highlights the central role of women. A reference to the influence of royal wives in determining a succession dispute in the early seventeenth century raises questions about matrilineality and a possible later shift to patrilineality, as was seen elsewhere in the region, but the larger topic of kinship and descent systems is not included.

The clearest illustration of a continued Ndau identity over the centuries is seen in the juxtaposition of archival descriptions with current accounts. Published narratives from the sixteenth century and the late seventeenth century that portray Ndau reverence for deceased ancestors, called *muzimo*, are corroborated by twentieth-century testimony (p. 85). Likewise, ceremonial beer-brewing appears in early accounts, and continues as a central component in annual rites and work parties (pp. 84-86). Other practices were introduced more recently. Men, for example, only began piercing their ears in the nineteenth century(when the custom was introduced by

the Gaza Nguni), initially as a way to demonstrate allegiance to their new rulers. Ndau men continue to pierce their ears, but in the late twentieth century it was explained as an Ndau cultural marker (pp. 74-75, 101-103).

As MacGonagle concludes, "Although it is not always easy to glean Ndauness from the historical record (or from current inhabitants of the region), the presence of Ndau speakers in the hinterland of Sofala since the era of dos Santos and other early Portuguese writers offers a fascinating yet incomplete picture of a lasting *and* changing identity" (p. 107). Her close study of Ndau practices and beliefs is an important contribution to the ongoing effort to understand the many strands of ethnic identity in southern Africa.

Note

[1]. Alisa Lagamma, ed., *Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

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