

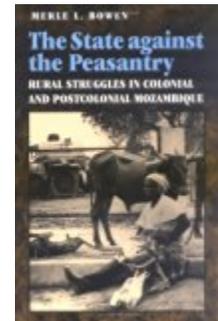
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Merle L. Bowen. *The State Against the Peasantry: Rural Struggles in Colonial and Postcolonial Mozambique*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000. x + 256 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1917-1.

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FRELIMO'S Socialist Experiment in Agriculture

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Merle Bowen has written an important indictment of the almost ten-year experiment with socializing agriculture begun in the mid-1970s by the postcolonial government of the Mozambican National Front, FRELIMO, and disavowed in 1984.

When FRELIMO took power in 1975, the population of the country was overwhelmingly rural and the economy based on agriculture, especially export agriculture, and services, particularly in the areas of transport and port facilities, for its neighbors. There was a small industrial sector, mainly catering for the consumer needs of the Portuguese settlers. Despite having a majority of its supporters in rural area, FRELIMO gave priority to industrialization as the motor of its national development strategy with agriculture relegated to providing exports for earning foreign exchange and raw materials for domestic industry. The agricultural strategy was based upon a three-pronged approach: creation of large-scale state farms; encouragement of production and consumer cooperatives; and stimulation of the villagization of rural peoples for the purpose of collective production and in order to create social services for their inhabitants. Bowen pulls no punches. She describes FRELIMO as having "evolved from a popular and victorious liberation movement into a bureaucratic, anti-peasant, one-party state" (p.1) and its policies as inimical to peasant interests.

Bowen also shows that in many ways FRELIMO continued policies which had their origins in the colonial period and she structures her opening chapters, on the state and policy issues, with a focus first on colonialism from the 1950s to 1975 and then on the socialist experiment. She distinguishes her critique from those who blame the failure of rural socialism on the de-stabilization efforts of South Africa and other countries (Saul, Hanlon, among others), and also from those who see the primary fault for the rapid decline in production as due to the disruption of settlement patterns and denigration of the cultural practices and political structures of Mozambican rural societies (Geffray, Cahen). Bowen saves her arguments for the latter: villagization did not cover the entire country and did provide valuable health and education services and clean water to the 1,360 communal villages. As far as the charge that the party substituted its structures for 'traditional authorities', Bowen identifies these local authorities with the hierarchical, authoritarian Portuguese administration and has little sympathy for them.

Bowen's major attack on FRELIMO has to do with the organization's non-comprehension of the realities of rural life, shown in its adoption of a dualist perspective. "In planning their development strategy, the new leaders embraced a simplistic vision of agrarian class structure based on a dualist model of a traditional subsistence-oriented peasantry opposed to a modern large-scale commercial sector." (p.205) FRELIMO expected to transform this peasantry through collective production, coopera-

tives and urbanization in communal villages. It expected to restructure in one fell swoop what it saw as an archaic mode of living and production and “it failed to consider the process for getting from where people were to where FRELIMO hoped they could be.” (p.119) Finally, FRELIMO never opened a discussion with anyone but itself over either ends or means.

The literature on the antagonism of the State and the peasantry in Africa is voluminous and, mercifully, Bowen does not rehearse it again. Moreover, since the 1980s there have been a number of studies on the anti-smallholder bias in Mozambican programs and in her sister Lusofrancophone countries, Guinea-Bissau and Angola (Wuyts, Raikes, Galli and Jones, among others). What Bowen brings to this legacy is an analysis of the impact of the Frelimo strategy in one concrete setting, the Ilha de Josina Machel, a rural locality situated at the confluence of the Incomati and Matseculi rivers in Manhica district, Maputo Province. Two things above all make her study important. First is her exposition of the links between the 1950s and the 1970s and 1980s when both the Portuguese government as well as FRELIMO encouraged the formation of cooperatives in this exceptionally well-endowed locale. Secondly is her demonstration of the ways in which individuals and households adapted both Portuguese and ‘socialist’ policies to their own particular survival strategies. In other words, this is not simply a record of the closing off of options by FRELIMO but of producer initiative and creativity in a situation of adversity. To the extent possible, the various strata of producers turned the cooperative to their own advantage. However, even they could not defend themselves from the growing civil war in the country and things fell apart from 1984 onward.

Bowen worked among the people of the Ilha Josina Machel for two years on a project sponsored by five Scandinavian countries within the context of the MONAP (Mozambique-Nordic Agricultural Program) program which dominated the Ministry of Agriculture in the 1980s alongside Eastern European advisers. Her account is therefore intimate, full of the life and energy of the people with whom she worked. What becomes clear from her study is that FRELIMO attempts to replace the rural commercial structure established by the Portuguese were ineffective and that this was particularly difficult for the Ilha producers who, for the most part, were used to marketing their crops. Ilha cultivators used the FRELIMO cooperatives as an outlet for their production. Wealthy producers used the cooperatives in order to get access to agricultural inputs and both they and the poorer fami-

lies used the cooperatives as a way of obtaining essential consumer goods in short supply in the local area.

Bowen has produced a fascinating tale of the dynamic evolution of family agriculture in a small fertile, well-watered area of Southern Mozambique from the 1950s until 1983, when she left the area. She shows the integration of the area into the South African mining community, into the local economy dominated by the Incomati Sugar Mill, Portuguese settler farms and the Cereals Institute during colonialism, the latter two being replaced mainly by the MONAP project after Independence.

Chapters four to six show how the community responded with a differentiated labor force for the mines, settler farms and the sugar cane fields, how it fed the sugar cane workers and local urban areas even with such exotic crops, in an African setting, as wheat. Out of the population of over three thousand, two farmers evolved into capitalist entrepreneurs and twenty others were accorded the status of *pequena agricultores* (‘small farmers’). It is a pity that she does not describe this process of capitalization, as it would have greatly enhanced her analysis and our understanding of the social, economic and political set-up under late colonialism. It is particularly interesting because Bowen follows the course of one of these farmers until 1993 and shows that even after the war with RENAMO, he was able to re-establish himself as a farmer-trader on a capitalist basis. Chapter six details the cases of seven individuals and households in 1982 who were more typical of the majority of small commodity producers of the Ilha.

There are some problems with Bowen’s analysis of Mozambican rural cultivators, part of which lies in the fact that her experience is limited to southern producers. A greater part lies with her analytical concepts. >From page one, she introduces us to two categories of ‘peasants’, the middle peasants who have at least three hectares and who have animal traction, rely on family labor and sometimes hire seasonal workers, and the poor peasants, who have two or less hectares of land and who use manual labor provided by their families to work the land. She derives these two categories from her work with the Ilha producers and an agricultural census of landholding made in 1970. Because twenty-five percent of holdings in the census were three or more hectares, she classifies these as middle and upper peasants who, according to her, number 390,000 and are responsible for most of the commercial production, while the remaining seventy-five percent are *de facto* poor peasants who consume most of their production. There are problems

basing one's analysis solely on a study whose reliability may be in doubt as well as with categorizing producers according to landholding size. For one thing, the significance of having two hectares differs widely depending upon soil fertility, amount of rainfall, access to sufficient labor and inputs. Moreover, there is no indication whether the size of holding represents lands only under cultivation or total landholdings.

In the studies conducted by the Institute for Rural Development in which I participated, we found that a more reliable yardstick for classifying wealthy, middle and poor peasants is the amount of labor available to a household. Access to animal traction is the exception rather than the rule in most of Mozambique, so that having one or more pair of oxen and a plough was an almost automatic sign of a wealthy farmer. Having three or more wives and a number of teenage children was also a good indicator of an upper status. Middle peasants lived mainly in nuclear families and had the help of children and other family labor. In the areas that we perused in the center and north of the country, it was not unusual for the majority of producers to cultivate two or more hectares and to have quantities of produce for sale if the weather was 'right' and thus the harvest abundant. Poor peasants were mainly the elderly, sick or physically handicapped, widows, widowers, in a word, the abandoned that were barely able to support themselves.

In her analysis of the case studies of Chapter six, the poor households number only thirty-five percent of her survey of all the cooperative members (two hundred and seventy people) of two of the cooperatives on the Ilha. These are also families with an insufficient labor force. One would have expected the number to be higher if her analysis based on the agricultural census was accurate. Moreover, she characterizes the remaining sixty-five percent as 'middle peasants', a much greater number than the national figure of twenty-five percent according to the census. The 'middle peasants' were split into two groups on the basis of sources of income; the first group had a contributing wage earner whereas the second group had an income-generating activity. The question I have for Bowen is were there no upper peasants in these cooperatives? Why, for example, is Fernando Chavango, with three wives, twelve children, four teams of oxen, sixteen sickles, seven hoes, two cows, six hectares under cultivation, as president of the cooperative and party secretary of his neighborhood not classified as a wealthy or 'upper peasant'. There are other such cases among the ones she cites.

Another source of perplexity is Bowen's use of the term 'capital accumulation' when she probably means wealth creation. She states in various parts of her narrative that the Portuguese restricted the 'capital accumulation' of the wheat cooperative they formed on the Ilha. This is a particularly poignant story when Portuguese technicians tell the Ilha cooperative members who want to buy a tractor that tractors are not for Africans, only Europeans. Bowen repeats the accusation because under FRELIMO the cooperatives were not allowed to sell their produce above the official price (they did anyway!). She says: "As the project-assisted cooperatives became more independent and economically viable, they encountered state policies that limited their opportunities to accumulate capital." (p.130) There is also repeated use of the term 'proletarianization' in relation to women and others working seasonally in the sugar cane fields or even in the South African mines. None of these people were separated from their means of production so that the more correct term is probably 'semi-proletarianization'. Later on, at the end of Chapter six, Bowen characterizes the cooperative members as a whole as petty commodity producers responsive to market incentives and also as people willing to compromise profit-maximizing in the interest of solidarity with other groups upon whom they were mutually dependent, so I think she would agree with me that the restrictions placed upon them were upon their wealth creation and not upon capital accumulation.

Bowen's southern focus leads her into making such statements as "Colonial Mozambique was integrated into a regional southern African economy under the domination of South Africa. Its economy was structured primarily to serve the needs of South African capitalism." (p.27) This she attributes to the economic weakness of Portugal. While this characterization may have some truth in it in relation to the southern provinces of Maputo, Gaza and Inhambane, it would be very hard to apply it to the situation of the North and Central areas of the country in whatever epoch of the country's history, which is why RENAMO's recent but certainly idle threat to break the country into two at the Save River is not as nonsensical as it may seem.

I have reservations about Bowen's reading of the regulado structure under colonialism and since colonialism. There are a number of other inaccuracies as well but these do not detract from the real merit of this case study in helping us appreciate the resourcefulness of rural peoples, the rich regional diversity of African societies and in making us humble about making generalizations not grounded in detailed empirical analysis.

This book should be required reading for all Mozambican politicians and government officials, international development agencies, non-governmental organizations, and all who pretend to work with rural societies around the world.

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