Review: Grappling with the Beast

JARED MCDONALD
School of Oriental and African Studies
University of London

Peter Limb, Norman Etherington and Peter Midgley (eds.), *Grappling with the Beast: Indigenous Southern African Responses to Colonialism, 1840-1930*, Leiden: Brill, 2010 (377 pp).

The collection of essays collected in *Grappling with the Beast: Indigenous Southern African Responses to Colonialism, 1840-1930* brings together the contributions of a number of established and emerging scholars within a field of inquiry, which in spite of an extensive historiography, remains far from being settled. This collaborative effort is a welcome revisit of a subject which continues to be as relevant today as it was back in the 1960s and 1970s when historians first began to focus on indigenous responses to colonialism in southern Africa. However, rather than recasting the colonists and the colonised in the typical, taken-for-granted moulds of the aggressors and 'the Other' respectively, these essays advance a number of innovative directions in which studies of indigenous responses to colonialism may be developed in the future. The result is a well balanced reappraisal of how colonised identities were shaped and re-shaped in the fluid and highly volatile context of the colonial encounter in southern Africa, with an emphasis on indigenous perspectives.

While avoiding superficial conclusions underscored by an over-dependence on postmodern assertions of the hybridity and variability of identities at all times and in all settings, the authors have nonetheless reconfirmed the debunking of the worn out binary opposition of domination and resistance. Indeed, for those living in the past (both colonised and coloniser) there was no stable, single trajectory toward colonial subordination. African responses were

complex and ambiguous and it is this reality that this book captures so well. Following the introduction, the ten chapters are organised in two parts, the first dealing with African political, social and spatial responses to colonialism, the second focusing on responses of the literary, cultural, intellectual and religious variety.

Norman Etherington's introduction sets a firm conceptual and theoretical foundation for the chapters that follow, simultaneously highlighting the core themes which are explored. At the heart of the research lies a plurality of analytical thought: lived experiences relating to confrontation, collaboration and even consent, exchanges of knowledge, diffusions of power, and with regards to identity politics, an emphasis on hybridities as opposed to dichotomies. 'Resistance' and 'agency' are present as organising concepts, but their nuanced handling by the authors has meant that the potential for falling into a structuralist trap, positioning indigenous responses as universally hostile and subversive, has been avoided. In this vein, Etherington sums up the rationale behind the compilation when he comments that '[i]f there is a single strain of intent running through the chapters [...], it is the shared objective of making complex something widely thought to be simple'. [1] In a brief critique of the foundational texts for post-colonial studies, namely those of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, Etherington points out that while he and the contributors agree that settlers made the 'native', and that colonialism invented 'knowledge' about the native, this was not always 'in circumstances of their own choosing'.[2] Indigenous peoples across southern Africa, they contend, continuously challenged European settlers by 'employing a bewildering variety of strategies: collaboration, accommodation, mimicry, religious innovation, cultural differentiation, ethnicity, communication in native as well as European languages' and myriad others.[3]

Certainly, the timing of the publication of this work is right on cue. After all, it is not surprising that in the early twenty-first century, historians continue to be intrigued by the diverse ways in which colonised peoples responded to European intrusions and impositions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The 'rest', more than ever before, is 'speaking back' to the 'West' (most evidently in the rise of the 'Global South') and in doing so, inspiring scholars to search for subaltern voices, through close analysis of historical texts and

documents. When it comes to colonial and post-colonial studies, the subaltern has never before been more vociferous.

In addition, the crucial and complex roles played by mediators within the processes of colonialism are revealed over and over again as they appear in almost every chapter of the collection. Whether chiefs, Christian devotees, lower level colonial bureaucrats, or members of the indigenous *petit bourgeois*, it is apparent that these intermediaries serve the historian well as the personifications of the hybrid nature of the subjects colonialism produced. Rather than type-casting such characters as resistors or collaborators, 'resistors and collaborators were frequently the same people'; interstitial individuals were active in inventing their own self-images by 'adjusting their strategies to the exigencies of the moment'.[4] Colonial intermediaries are appealing figures for historical inquiry, especially at a time when historians are grappling with the writing of history in an increasingly globalised context. Cross-cultural brokers, interstitial figures and hybrid identities are everywhere; questions pertaining to how 'in-betweeness' exhibited itself in the past are well placed in the contemporary intellectual milieu.

Part One of the book begins with a historiographical piece by Christopher Saunders discussing why it took so long for historians of southern Africa to investigate indigenous responses to colonialism. Saunders suggests that this is largely due to the impact of extensive settler colonialism in the African sub-continent. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that historians began to seriously consider African reactions to colonialism. Although pioneering, much of the related canon was, however, very descriptive and in large part motivated by anti-apartheid and anti-colonial agendas, meaning that resistance was emphasised and collaboration sidelined.[5] Contrastingly, in a bid to demonstrate that there had been inter-racial cooperation in the past and that there was no reason why it couldn't happen again, works in the 1980s tended to romanticise historical instances when collaboration did occur.

Saunders' chapter neatly sets up the remainder of Part One and is followed by the stand-out contribution: Fred Morton's 'Fenders of Space: Kgatla Territorial Expansion under Boer and British Rule, 1840-1920'. Morton's study of three generations of Kgatla who were consecutively subservient to the Boers of the Rustenburg District, the

Zuid Afrika Republiek (ZAR), the British South Africa Company, and finally the Bechuanaland Protectorate, captures the essence of the arguments and analyses pursued in this volume. Contrary to any linear narrative of colonialism, dispossession and resistance, the Kgatla actually increased their cattle holdings and the territory over which to graze and water them during this period. In the 1840s, they provided mercenary forces to Boer commandants plundering Africans on the ZAR frontier.[6] During the 1850s and 1860s, they paid tax to help satisfy Pretoria's dependence on revenue from Africans.[7] In the 1870s, the Kgatla relocated to Bechuanaland, from where they assisted Pretoria in securing its western border from African incursions. Following 1885 and the founding of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, the Kgatla became British subjects successfully representing 'themselves to the British as a "nation" under Linchwe', their leader, eventually gaining 'recognition from the Protectorate', which resulted in the 'creation of the Bakgatla Reserve in 1899'.[8] During the South African War of 1899-1902, the Kgatla provided the British with military support, while gaining land and cattle for themselves. Morton argues that the Kgatla were 'led by chiefs and advisors who understood the strategies employed by their respective colonial overlords', so much so, that 'they succoured both the bent of Afrikaners to stifle African assertiveness and the predisposition of Britons to feel in control'.[9]

Morton's chapter is followed by two equally valuable contributions. Firstly, Peter Limb has written a substantial piece on indigenous responses to colonial capitalism in South Africa between 1890 and 1920. In a period in which the first waves of industrialisation swept across the region, Limb explores the multifaceted roles played by *petit bourgeois* intermediaries in the creation of new regional and national African political organisations, as well as the 'first attempts to organise black labour'.[10] In doing so, he reveals what he calls 'shades of accommodation': combining political, labour and gender history, the chapter assesses how educated subalterns – re-cast as cross-cultural brokers and *bricoleurs* – 'collaborated or accommodated with colonisers to facilitate colonial administration, while securing terrain to survive'.[11]

Secondly, Dag Henrichsen's chapter forwards a convincing reappraisal of the war between the Herero and Germans in southern

and central Namibia in the first decade of the twentieth century. Emphasising 'territoriality' as the primary motivating factor for the Herero to go to war, Henrichsen argues that Herero society, on the cusp of the war in 1904, has to be regarded as having been 'a modern pastoral society that developed only from the 1860s onwards within the frameworks of mercantile capitalism and early colonial expansion'.[12] The Herero's concept of territoriality, which had emerged as a result, ran contrary to German attempts to physically demarcate borders and boundaries, thus triggering the outbreak of the war. Henrichsen's central, and persuasive, argument is that 'the war itself was not a war between a traditional African society and a modern colonial machine', but rather between two groups who were accustomed to the challenges of modernity and fully appreciated the role of territoriality in managing those challenges.[13]

Following on, and in an otherwise excellent discussion of the Kalanga's experiences of, and engagements with, colonialism in south-western Zimbabwe, Enocent Msindo devotes too much attention to discrediting the available historiography. Surely it is unfair to judge as harshly as he does histories written before the cultural turn by the new theoretical impulses and criteria established by the cultural turn? Terence Ranger, in particular, comes in for several scathing rebuttals, as does Julian Cobbing.[14] Such a refutation of histories written forty years ago may have its merits, but the caustic tone of the criticism in the chapter only serves as a distraction. It would have been sufficient to point out, as Msindo does, that the historiography, in its nationalist guise, has tended 'to [ignore] the histories of small communities, especially their internal socio-political cultures', and then focus more directly on the importance of 'localised identities' and 'their role in shaping indigenous responses to the colonial system'.[15] Nonetheless, in the end, Msindo succeeds in demonstrating that there was no single experience of colonialism for indigenous peoples and that resistance, when it did occur, took on multiple forms, dependent upon localised circumstances.

Closing out Part One is a chapter by Stephen Volz and Part Mgadla which deals with how the Batswana 'increasingly employed literacy as a tool in their dealings with Europeans'.[16] While Etherington may be right that this chapter, with its 'emphasis on

texts', serves as a 'natural bridge to the second part of the book', its unsubstantial analytical engagement with the texts comes across as more of a dependence on texts.[17] Indeed, what is to be gained from a chapter wherein there is very little analysis in a volume dedicated to analysing indigenous responses to colonialism? Rather than letting the sources speak for themselves, a more robust analysis of the sources ought to have been produced, tying in the themes revealed by the dual processes of conflict and negotiation for the Batswana in the Lower Vaal River region during the mid to late nineteenth century with the pertinent, over-arching themes elucidated in the rest of the volume.

The four chapters of Part Two, as already alluded, focus on African literary, cultural, intellectual and religious responses to colonialism. The conceptual ethos of the chapters by Peter Midgley, Ntongela Masilela and Grant Christison are best summed up by Masilela's remarks on the 'great historical enigma' represented by European modernity within the colonial context: 'oppressing African people, yet at the same time providing them, however unintentionally, with the tools for their own liberation'.[18] All three chapters explore the creative responses of African intellectuals and authors to colonialism, and their endeavours to articulate autonomous understandings of modernity. From Ntsikana's 'Ulo Thixo omkhulu' to A. C. Jordan's 'The Wrath of the Ancestors', from Samuel Mqhayi's 'Ityala lamawele' to the poetry and writings of Nontsizi Mgqwetho and Robert Grendon, the political allegories and calls to figurative and literary warfare by each are deftly explored by Midgley, Masilela and Christison.

The stand out chapter in this section, however, belongs to Tolly Bradford. He explores how two 'native missionaries' – Tiyo Soga in the Cape Colony and Henry Budd in Canada – 'constructed visions of the wider world and responded to colonialism' in ways informed by the global reach their involvement with mission organisations afforded them.[19] The trans-regional networks created by British mission societies tied Soga and Budd into a global frontier context, which gave them more comprehensive insight into the ways of the colonial world. Bradford's observation that 'scholars of Indigenous peoples have been slow to examine the possibility that Indigenous peoples were also operating in a global context during the era of

colonialism' is a timely call for more work to be done on this aspect of mission history.[20]

Having noted that this volume did not arise from a conference or workshop, but rather out of the individual contributors' responses to the editors' invitation, Etherington, has inadvertently alluded to the work's main weakness – its lack of collaborative exchanges between the contributors. While collaboration is a dominant conceptual theme in the chapters of the book, it is unfortunately lacking in the volume's assembly. For example, Samuel Mqhayi features prominently in Midgley's chapter, as one of the 'Renaissance Men', as well as in Masilela's chapter, in which Mqhayi's appeals for the preservation of African languages within the broader 'New African Movement' are an important focus. Yet neither author makes any reference to the other. This is a missed opportunity for exchanging notes between analyses; for making the overall work more cohesive and engaging.

One final note: Etherington's brief discussion of the word 'indigenous' is far from satisfactory in a volume dedicated to indigenous responses to colonialism. That none of the contributing authors offers a more intensive discussion of this term is equally disappointing. Several authors treat the term 'African' as synonymous with 'indigenous'. Historically, that may be acceptable (even so, this is dependent upon who qualified and continues to qualify as 'African'), but in the identity politics industry of southern Africa today, 'indigeneity' is used to denote those who belong from those who think they belong or want to belong; the former regarded as 'insiders', the latter as 'outsiders'. And yet, all 'insiders' in southern Africa were at one point 'outsiders', apart from the San, who unfortunately only feature as bystanders in this volume. 'Indigeneity', rather than being a given, is subject to being invented, and inventing, no doubt, occurs more vigorously at particular intervals, such as during the colonial era (Henrichsen's chapter succeeds in demonstrating this). A more thorough discussion of the loaded nature of *indigeneity*, past and present, would have been welcome. Nonetheless, this is a valuable collection of excellent essays, dealing with a subject matter that has many more questions to ask and answer. It should be read by those seeking to do just that.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Jared McDonald is a PhD candidate in the History Department at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His research interests include, among others, missions and 'First Peoples', Christianity and identity politics, and the history of the London Missionary Society in the Cape Colony. He is also a Research Assistant for the Livingstone Online Project at University College, London.

NOTES

[1] Norman Etherington, 'Indigenous Southern Africans and Colonialism: Introduction', in Peter Limb, Norman Etherington, Peter Midgley (eds), *Grappling with the Beast: Indigenous Southern African Responses to Colonialism, 1840-1930* (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 6.
[2] Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965), Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1963), Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Hardmondsworth: Penguin, 1995 [1978]), Etherington, 'Indigenous Southern Africans and Colonialism': 6.
[3] Etherington, 'Indigenous Southern Africans and Colonialism': 6.
[4] Etherington, 'Indigenous Southern Africans and Colonialism': 7.
[5] Chris Saunders, 'Reactions to Colonialism in Southern Africa: Some Historiographical Reflections', in Limb, Etherington, Midgley, *Grappling with the Beast*: 17.
[6] Fred Morton, 'Fenders of Space: Kgatla Territorial Expansion under Boer and British Rule, 1840–1920, in Limb, Etherington, Midgley, *Grappling with the Beast*: 27-33.
[7] Morton, 'Fenders of Space': 34-38.
[8] Morton, 'Fenders of Space': 43.
[9] Morton, 'Fenders of Space': 23.
[10] Peter Limb, 'Intermediaries of Class, Nation, and Gender in the African Response to Colonialism in South Africa, 1890s–1920s', in Limb, Etherington, Midgley, *Grappling with the Beast*: 47.
[11] Limb, 'Intermediaries of Class, Nation, and Gender': 48.
[12] Dag Henrichsen, 'Pastoral Modernity, Territoriality and Colonial Transformations in Central Namibia, 1860s to 1904', in Limb, Etherington, Midgley, *Grappling with the Beast*: 94.
[13] Henrichsen, 'Pastoral Modernity, Territoriality and Colonial Transformations': 94.
[14] Enocent Msindo, 'Social and Political Responses to Colonialism on the Margins: Community, Chieftaincy and Ethnicity in Bulilima-Mangwe, Zimbabwe, 1890–1930', in Limb, Etherington, Midgley, *Grappling with the Beast*: 122-125, 127-128, 128.
[15] Msindo, 'Social and Political Responses to Colonialism on the Margins': 115, 119.
[16] Stephen C. Volz, Part T. Mgadla, 'Conflict and Negotiation along the Lower Vaal River: Correspondence from the Tswana-Language Newspaper Mokaeri oa Becuana', in Limb, Etherington, Midgley, *Grappling with the Beast*: 162
[17] Etherington, 'Indigenous Southern Africans and Colonialism': p. 9.
[18] Peter Midgley, 'Renaissance Men: Ntsikana, A. C. Jordan, S. E. K. Mqhayi and South Africa's Cultural Awakening', in Limb, Etherington, Midgley, *Grappling with the Beast*: 245.

[19] Tolly Bradford, 'World Visions: "Native Missionaries", Mission networks and Critiques of Colonialism in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Canada', in Limb, Etherington, Midgley, *Grappling with the Beast*: 311.
[20] Bradford, 'World Visions': 334.