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## **How to write the history of Africa – Terence Osborn Ranger (November 29, 1929 – January 3, 2015)**

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## OBITUARY

### **How to write the history of Africa – Terence Osborn Ranger (November 29, 1929 – January 3, 2015)**

To say that Terence Ranger was not always an historian of Africa would ring hollow, but it is true. His doctoral dissertation at Oxford was on Richard Boyle, first Earl of Cork, as part of the 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup>-century history of Ireland. Then, in 1957, he went to Southern Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe), where he joined the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland as a lecturer to teach Early Modern and Late Mediaeval British and European History. He was well prepared to work in archives and started archival work in the National Archives at Salisbury, where he began to study the history of South-Central Africa, mostly the period 1896-1930.

From the beginning, he befriended many outstanding black politicians, such as Joshua Nkomo, Robert Mugabe and others, and became a member of the National Democratic Party. So he participated, together with his wife Shelagh, in opposition activities to the white government. He became a hero for his African students after he was once thrown by a white policeman into a water pool during a demonstration.

In 1963 he was deported from Rhodesia and went on to the University of Dar es Salaam in the newly independent Tanzania. He became a professor and head of the new History Department, where he initiated modern forms of historical research. Up until this time, European historians believed that black Africa did not have its own history as there were no written sources. One of those historians was Ranger's former supervisor from Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Professor of Modern History. Terence Ranger opposed this view and tried to form a national (or nation-oriented) history of Africa. Apart from finding written sources (there were not as many of them in Tanzania's archives as in former Rhodesia) he came to collect oral traditions of representatives of local ethnic groups with the help of his students. The other problem with African national history at that time was the so-called

Eurocentric point of view. Ranger was one of the first historians to diverge from this position.

It was exciting for me to meet him in Dar es Salaam on my way to Zambia in 1967. Terence Ranger was a good friend of Ivan Hrbek, my supervisor and one of the first Czech Africanists. Simultaneously, Zbyněk Malý, my friend from the Oriental Institute in Prague with an interest in the history of East Africa, was a member of Ranger's team for a short while. At the University there were also the best Africanists, such as the professor of political studies, David Kimble, who with his wife Helen edited *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. Both gave us opportunities to publish reviews of newly published books on African history and very soon they published one of my first papers on the modern history of Rhodesia and Zambia.

From Tanzania Ranger went to the University of California, Los Angeles (African History, 1969-74), then to Manchester (Modern History, 1974-87) and finally to Oxford (Rhodes Professor of Race Relations, 1987-97). There I had my second opportunity to meet him in the year 1992 and spend a nice time discussing modern Southern African history with him. At the time, he was very optimistic about the political situation in those countries and the possibilities to write their national history. He was always very busy writing.

His bibliography is long and varied. There were many books and papers on modern history of former Rhodesia, such as such as *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-7: A Study in African Resistance* (London: Heinemann, 1967), *The African Voice in Southern Rhodesia, 1898-1930* (London: Heinemann, 1970) and *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe: A Comparative Study* (London: James Currey, 1985).

His theoretical approach to African history is seen in his and Eric Hobsbawm's famous edited volume *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

There were many other books and papers, written and published mostly after Ranger's retirement in 1997 and his partial return to Zimbabwe to bolster the postgraduate education in the History Department at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare. During this time, and mainly at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he witnessed how the nationalist government in independent Zimbabwe carried out systematic atrocities

against the black citizens of western Zimbabwe and later against white farmers. Once again, Ranger found himself aligned with the victims of the state. He became very unsatisfied with the ideology of the ruling ZANU/PF and its policy to produce a so-called “patriotic” history. This policy went against his whole-life principle as it was explicitly antagonistic to academic historiography. We can see in Ranger’s last and rich literary production that he never betrayed his views as in his books *Are We Not Also Men? The Samkange Family and African Politics in Zimbabwe, 1920-64* (London: James Currey, 1995); *Voices from the Rocks: Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999); *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the “Dark Forests” of Matabeleland* (with Jocelyn Alexander and JoAnn McGregor, Oxford: James Currey, 2000) or *The Historical Dimensions of Human Rights and Democracy in Zimbabwe*. Volume 1: *Pre-colonial and Colonial Legacies*; Volume 2: *Nationalism, Democracy and Human Rights* (edited with Ngwabi Bhebe, Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2001-03).

During this period he continued his research on Shona and Ndebele history, finding many new sources in archives. He also collected oral traditions, mainly in the Bulawayo suburbs among poor Africans. The result was his monograph *Bulawayo Burning: The Social History of a Southern African City, 1893-1960* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010). Terry Ranger once said that he wrote his book as a tribute to the late Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera and her novel *Butterfly Burning*. His final work was *Writing Revolt: An Engagement with African Nationalism, 1957-67* (Woodbridge: James Currey/Harare: Weaver Press, 2013). I am confident that he dedicated his books to all Africans, not only to those in modern Zimbabwe.

Otakar Hulec

## Editorial Note

See also: An Association of Concerned Africa Scholars (ACAS) Tribute to Terence O. Ranger, compiled by Timothy Scarnecchia, Teresa Barnes, and Peter Limb, *ACAS Review* 89, April 8, 2015, incl. bibliography, URL: <http://concernedafricascholars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/rangerbulletin1.pdf>