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Can Women's Voices be recovered from the Past? Grappling with the Absence of Women Voices in Pre-Colonial History of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The question of whether women's voices can be recovered from the past may sound very old-fashioned to some people, but in the Zimbabwean academic situation, it is still pertinent even after all the advances made in researching women history elsewhere. This is because there is no attempt by historians to grapple with the absence of women voices in mainstream narratives of pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe. Invisibility of women has been maintained even in the latest historical works on pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe. This means that the existing histories neglected the activities of half of the population of the pre-colonial Zimbabwean societies. This article explores the conceptual, historiographical and methodological issues related to invisibility of women in history as well as strategies of recovering women voices from the past. If this article sounds too theoretical, this is due to pertinent conceptual issues involved in an attempt to recover women voices in pre-colonial Zimbabwe. The starting point is indeed to grapple with theoretical frameworks necessary for the recovery of women issues.

Introduction

Until relatively recently, history as a subject area, discipline, and practice, has been conceived in androcentric terms that made it to suffer severely from a trinity of sins of 'gender-blindness', 'gender-neutrality' and 'gender-bias'. The outcome of this conception of history was the invisibility of women in the main narratives of history. This paper examines the problem of the absence of women voices in mainstream historical narratives in Zimbabwe. The focus is on pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe. The analysis is centred on four main issues namely, the general problem of androcentrism that silenced women voices; perspectival orientation of existing historical narratives; the problematics of sources for the history of women in pre-colonial Zimbabwe; and finally it deals with the issue of new methodologies for the recovery of women voices in pre-colonial history.

Theoretical Framework: Towards a New Way of Doing History

The starting point is a re-definition of history as a discipline. The traditional conception of history as an 'uncontested given past' is inadequate for the purposes of understanding the absence of women voices.³ History is here defined as representation and construction of the past from particular perspectives. Therefore, what exists today as mainstream historical narratives of pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe are merely 'versions of the past' signifying certain 'regimes of

truth' held by the producers of that history and confirming the dominant power configurations of the time.⁴ This means that there is no such thing as unmediated, unconstructed, and non-perspectival account of the past.

The approach to history adopted in this study borrows heavily from post-structuralist thinking and feminist discourses, blended together with insights from the *subaltern* studies initiated by Indian scholars.⁵ The whole discussion is an enterprise in deconstruction of dominant knowledge in society as championed by the French philosophers, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.⁶ This approach is useful as it allows one to grapple and problematise issues of discourse, meaning, knowledge, epistemology, power, and metanarratives in relation to the production of history in general and the treatment of the experiences of the *subaltern* groups in historical accounts and narratives in particular.⁷

Himani Bannerji noted that by focusing on history as 'versions of the past we are able to foreground the role of the narrator of the past events and consequently the nature of narrative as a mode of knowing that selects, organises, orders, interprets and allegorises.'⁸ The important issue here is the call for a new way of doing history in general. The fundamental question to be asked is why are women voices missing/absent from historical sources in the first place? The important starting point is to engage the power relations embedded within pre-colonial African societies of Zimbabwe and informing historical accounts and records of the past. The second level is to understand the prevailing politics and power configurations shaping the thinking of the producers or narrators of the pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe. The third level is to deploy a serious engagement with methodology both as a tool of enquiry and in its relationship to epistemology. In other words, what is emphasised here is not only the need for new and innovative approaches to research methods but also a demand for a reconsideration of the purpose and power of the knowledge generated itself. What are being problematised are the whole research process, the enterprise of writing history, and the claims to objectivity.

Ann-Marie Gallagher, Cathy Lubelska and Louse Ryan wrote that, 'If relations of power and inequality determine whose voice and opinions are recorded, then they also determine who has power to speak on behalf of others, who has access to resources which aid the making of history, who is marginalised and who is silenced.'⁹ This has to do with discourse and power in society. Discourse is a way of speaking, thinking or writing that presents particular relationships, situations and events as self-evidently true. Within a discourse only certain things, events, situations are said, noted, recorded or thought about. To challenge these assumptions is to step outside the configurations and parameters of discourse. Discourses are therefore socially and culturally organised frameworks of meaning that define categories and specify domains of what can be said and done.¹⁰ Discourses are important because they structure the way people think and write about issues and themes. The language and meaning are both embedded within discourse. It was in language that women subjectivity as well as social organisation was defined, contested and constructed. Meaning was constructed in the relations between the originator of a statement, the language in which it was expressed, the discourse in which it formed a part, and

the understanding of those who read/heard and interpreted it.¹¹

Discourses are intimately involved with power relations. One is not free simply to choose which discourse he/she wished to operate in. As noted by Michael Foucault power is relational, operating in a network like fashion throughout the social world, inscribed in people's social formations and embedded in the language used. According to Foucault:

Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations.¹²

Women voices in pre-colonial history were lost within the 'interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations' dominant in societies of the time. The crucial task awaiting researchers of women history is to penetrate the lacuna in the prevailing power/knowledge relations that silenced the voices of women. The Foucauldian post-structuralism provides us with a way of approaching discourses that have so thoroughly entered our 'thinking-as-usual' to the extent that they appear unchallengeable. It enables researchers to uncover the hidden workings of gendered power/knowledge relations. Post-structuralism is focused on small as opposed to metanarratives. It emphasizes local stories about specific discourses and power relations. In this way it brings with it the benefit of challenging what are extremely powerful discourses that structure many of the common sense way we think about the world. Resistance to metanarratives makes possible a challenge to dominant discourses of reason and rationality, which privilege ways of thinking and behaving traditionally associated with masculinity over those regarded as inhabiting the realm of the feminine.

Sherry B. Ortner argued for a greater 'rapprochement between feminist, minority, post-colonial, and subaltern scholarship.' She went on state that the existing metanarratives are characterised by denial of the intentional subject, and of the agency of women. In this way existing metanarratives, both misreads and works against the intellectual and political interests of women, minorities, post-colonial, and other subaltern subjects.¹³ The main questions to be confronted in the search for women voices from the past include, what forms of differences, what kinds of identities and subject positions were constructed within the framework of a given cultural, ideological, or discursive formation. This study is indeed inspired by these ideas in its search for the women voices in pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe and its suggestions are predicated on the insights from feminist, minority, subaltern, and post-colonial scholarship.

Metanarratives, Historiography and Androcentrism

Metanarratives are the all-embracing explanatory concepts initiated by Enlightenment philosophers and associated with the perception of power as located in particular structures, groups or individuals. Metanarratives tell big explanatory stories about the world as a whole and humanity in general. The main narratives of the pre-colonial past of Zimbabwe fell into the

category of these metanarratives in celebrating male activities and subordinating female voices. Masculinity and patriarchy were accepted as the given, dominant, order of the human history that needed no questioning and critique. Horace Campbell has recently tried to trace the main contours of these metanarratives via a critique of Enlightenment thought. He stated that Niccolo Machiavelli was the clearest articulator of patriarchal and masculinist ideas of this period. The ideas of masculinity and patriarchy were expressed very firmly in his work, *The Prince*. For Machiavelli, sovereign man was one who sought power, autonomy and honour, and avoided dependence on any one. Women were excluded from the citizen body because they constituted a threat to men both personally and politically. He went on to quote Machiavelli:

Women were both a sign of their original weakness and a threat to their self-control. Women were a potential source of conflict and division among men. More importantly, perhaps they represented competing values; they could draw men out of the public realm. The male citizen had to be persuaded that all that was of value depended on the willingness of the citizen body to defend the state.¹⁴

Enlightenment thinking elevated the male gender as the only species capable of transforming society. Male activities were considered important, particularly participation in warfare, role in state formation, and expansion of empires. This thinking proliferated into the works of early producers of pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe. Pre-colonial past was told as a story of 'big men' and their armies. Women featured less in these accounts. The few women who featured in these narratives were squeezed into parameters of existing male histories, without disrupting or questioning these. Ortner writing about women in general made the following observation:

One of the problems running through...so far is a tendency to see women identified with male games, or as pawns in male games, or otherwise having no autonomous point of view or intentionality. At the very least it appears that, even if women have their own projects, these do not significantly organise the cultural order of gender representations and practices, which largely embody a male point of view. *Thus the question of how to think about women's relationship to a hegemonically masculinist (if not male dominant) social order must still be addressed* (My emphasis).¹⁵

Therefore, in addressing the question of women's relationship to a hegemonically masculinist social order in pre-colonial Zimbabwe, there is need to tackle such issues as the identity (gender) of the producers of the dominant knowledge as well as their perspectival orientation.

Male authors produced pre-colonial historical accounts. The leading pioneer historians of pre-colonial Zimbabwean history were David Norman Beach, Ngwabi Bhebe, Hoyini Bhila, Stan Mudenge, Julian Cobbing, Richard Brown, and to some extent Terence Ranger. They were basically men that dominated the production of pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe. Up to today, men rather than women are holding fort at the History Departments at the University of Zimbabwe and at Midlands State University.¹⁶ These men have shown little interest in gender

and women history.

Pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe emerged as a discipline in the University of Zimbabwe in the 1970s. Elizabeth Schmidt noted that since the early 1970s, historical studies of Zimbabwe have focused increasingly on African agency, reacting to both imperial and underdevelopment histories. While the former emphasized the progressive role of the white man in Africa, the latter stressed the state-imposed structural obstacles to African progress that smothered earlier African initiatives. The concern with African actors shaping their own history has naturally entailed the search for African voices. However, 'still dependent upon colonial and missionary sources, historians first uncovered the voices of African male elites-makers of urban political and welfare organisations and progressive farmers' associations, mission-educated teachers, clerks, and evangelists, and independent church leaders-who testified before government commissions.'¹⁷ Indeed the main pre-occupation of early producers of Zimbabwean history in general like their counterparts in other parts of the African continent was to establish African history as a reputable discipline just like imperial history that had constituted itself as *the* only history. The immediate concern was to prove that Africa had a history prior to its engagement with colonialism. This concern was heightened by the ranting of Hugh Trevor Roper who stated that the only history in Africa was that of Europeans in Africa. To him, Africa was indeed a 'Dark Continent' that deserved no studying, as darkness was not a subject of history.¹⁸ The desire was to prove Trevor Roper wrong. Further impetus to work on pre-colonial Zimbabwean societies emanated from the 'winds of change' and African nationalism that was sweeping Zimbabwe at the time. There was need to prove to the world that Africans had civilisation and history prior to the arrival of Europeans and colonialism.

The second stage in the development of historical writing in Zimbabwe involved a change in both subject and methodology. There was an effort to move away from recovery of elite voices that was rightly understood as recounting the history of a few individuals. A new history told the story of peasants and workers focusing on exploring their consciousness and modes of resistance to measures imposed by colonial capital and the state. Indeed the base was broadened, but this reconstruction of history from below in Zimbabwe remained androcentric. The voices of African subjects (peasants, workers and urban elites) have been almost exclusively male. Thus why Schmidt laments that 'most historical studies of Zimbabwe have failed to break with this pattern of neglect.'¹⁹

What can be said with certainty is that when the chorus of African voice was finally heard, it was interpreted as a single group speaking in unison. The male voice was presumed to represent collective African thought. The voice of African male elites stood in for the multi-faceted perspectives of workers, peasants and women. The history that was produced therefore suffered greatly from the three sins of 'gender-neutrality', 'gender-blindness', and 'gender-biases.'²⁰ Studies of men's activities emerged masquerading as encapsulating the whole of the African society. What is considered as mainstream pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe can be rightly labelled 'male stream' history, that is, historical narratives premised on sexist knowledge that

legitimated the male-dominant social order. 21

The producers of pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe were pre-occupied with political history. They tirelessly described political developments, wars, battles, and celebrated the lives of great men. It is no wonder that most of the accounts of pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe focused on pre-colonial societies like Great Zimbabwe, Mapungubwe, Munhumutapa, Torwa, Manyika, Rozvi and Ndebele States, which were considered to be empires. The intention was initially to show that in pre-colonial Zimbabwe there were big empires before the coming of colonialism. 'Big men' of exceptional abilities ruled these states/empires. The subjects of investigation were limited to dynasties, kings, chieftainships, as well as reasons for the rise and fall of the so-called empires.²²

Historical accounts of pre-colonial Zimbabwe are unique in that they lack even the romantic myth about the roles of women and men as equal and complementary in good old, harmonious, pre-colonial Africa or the lives of notable, exceptional, heroic women that were celebrated in other parts of Africa. Mbuya Nehanda who is celebrated in Zimbabwe was 'visibilised' more by poets, novelists and politicians than historians.²³

Among the most popular works on the pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe are those of D. N. Beach. His first major work was *The Shona and Zimbabwe 900-1850*.²⁴ This book became the first detailed outline of pre-colonial Shona history in Zimbabwe. In this book very little is said about women. The focus is on Shona dynasties and pre-colonial Zimbabwean states. The few women who are mentioned are the wives of chiefs. These women are mentioned in passing and are included not as representatives of women in history, but precisely because they were exceptional and different from the bulk of their sisters, thus reinforcing the notion that most women's roles in the past were inconsequential. Nehanda, for instance, is mentioned because she was a spirit medium and spirit mediums participated in political affairs of pre-colonial societies.²⁵ Beach wrote a total of six books on pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe and some of the titles were, *War and Politics in Zimbabwe*. The title captured clearly the concern of the Zimbabwean historians.²⁶ War and politics constituted the core of pre-colonial studies as well as the activities of chiefs and kings like Mzilikazi, Lobhengula, Mapondera and many other male members of pre-colonial Zimbabwean societies. In Beach's histories, there is no doubt that emphasis tended to be upon the public, the political and those with the power to influence the tide of what were judged to be important historical events. Focus was on the singular importance of individuals and their heroic deeds.

However in 1996, Beach wrote a very interesting article on Nehanda. In the novels and poems in Zimbabwe Nehanda was presented as a heroine of the African primary resistance to colonial rule. The British executed her in 1898 for her participation in the Ndebele-Shona Uprisings of 1896-7. Nehanda was elevated to a higher heroic position in the history of Zimbabwe during the struggle for Zimbabwe, when the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and its military wing ZANLA claimed inspiration to fight the war from the spirit of Nehanda. She was worshipped as

a guiding spirit and songs were composed about her. After 1980, Nehanda became a national symbol of the new Zimbabwe nation and a heroine of the struggle. Beach carefully read documents, oral history, and trial material on Nehanda and produced a different history of this woman. According to Beach Nehanda was just an innocent woman who was unjustly accused. To Beach Nehanda was just a scapegoat, accused by both whites and other accused Shona men. The whites were looking for a way to publicly display revenge, while African men wanted to escape the hangman's noose. According to Beach, Nehanda did not accept that she organised the Uprising in Mashonaland and that she gave orders for the murder of the oppressive native commissioner, Pollard.²⁷ It seems Beach's intention was to destroy the heroism accorded to Nehanda and to create a picture of an ordinary African woman who fell victim to the calculations of both African and white men. The impression given by Beach is that Nehanda's heroism is a construction of nationalist politicians who were desperate for ideological ammunition to connect the liberation struggle to the pre-colonial history and primary resistance.

If Nehanda is conceptualised from another level it emerges that her voice is not real that of a woman in pre-colonial Zimbabwe. She features in poems and novels as well as some few historical accounts because she was considered different from other women. Her inclusion was part and parcel of the tendency among early historians to highlight the 'great women' as an antidote to the 'great men' of conventional historiography.²⁸ Nehanda is herself suffering as a historical figure from 'masculinisation' using male standards to measure and judge her activities. She has never been studied as a woman in her own right. If she was not a spirit medium she could be suffering from invisibility together with her fellow Zimbabwean pre-colonial sisters.

Thus Nehanda's inclusion in historical narrative was not part and parcel of giving priority to the perspective of marginalised groups, particularly ordinary women. Nehanda's voice is masculinised just like that of Mantatisi, Nzinga and other pre-colonial queens and prophetesses. Marc Epprecht asked a very important question: Are these 'Great Women' credible examples of women's power in pre-colonial era? He proceeded to state that the evidence suggests not. These women were not icons of proto-feminism or feminine heroism, rather were masculinised into 'honorary males.'²⁹

Ann-Marie Gallagher, Cathy Lubelska, and Lousie Ryan wrote of the tendency among early historians to 'add key women to men's history,' leading to misrepresentation or lack of representation of the histories of the overwhelming majority of women. This happened in a number of ways. First, it placed women within androcentric assumptions about the nature of history, particularly its pre-occupation with great and powerful men, which accordingly remained undisputed. Second, even those approaches (within social and labour history), which sought to challenge history's traditional focus upon the powerful and to give voice to the underprivileged have been inclined to do so with a tenaciously gender-blind eye.³⁰ In other words, male experiences were seen as normative and the power dynamics of gender remained unquestioned.

Indeed in pre-colonial histories of Zimbabwe the power dynamics of gender has remained

unquestioned. Instead of women being represented in their own right as women, the few who feature in the historical narratives are defined in terms of their relationship to men, putting in an appearance as wives, mothers, and daughters. For example, in Stan Mudenge's book on the political history of Munhumutapa State, the few women who feature are wives of the Mutapas. The notable one is Nembudzia, who is said to have played a role in Mutapa-Portuguese relations. Even where the wives of the Mutapas are mentioned, only senior wives are mentioned by name. The majority junior wives are not mentioned. Senior wives were mentioned because they had a bearing on power configurations particularly via the production of heirs to the throne.³¹

Hoyini Bhila's study of the Manyika kingdom emphasises trade and politics. Women are mentioned only in pages 13, 22, and 23. In these three pages Bhila gives us a limited picture of the role of women in Manyika society. He mentions that women were active in politics since they were appointed as ward heads and acted as the king's magistrates. The female ward-heads were known as *vazvari* or *muzvari* in the singular. These two titles still conveyed the idea of women as mothers whose main duty was to produce children rather than political figures. *Kuzvara* is to give birth. Bhila concludes that women were involved in politics as a counter-force to the royal sons so as to assist the king in maintaining and centralising power structures. In the neighbouring Uteve chiefdom, women participated in the selection of the new king. Bhila leaves the story hanging simply because the activities of women were not his main concern. It seems Bhila was overwhelmed by the available evidence that made it difficult for him to just ignore the role of women in politics in southeastern Zimbabwe. His response was to say a 'little bit about women.'³² Ngwabi Bhebe concentrated on religious aspects of the Ndebele State and its interactions with the Christian missionaries. Bhebe mentions two women, Loziba, Mzilikazi's senior wife and Lomqele, a young Ndebele woman who defied Ndebele pre-colonial norms by wedding in a Christian way prior to the fall of the Ndebele state.³³ Loziba was a powerful woman due to her position as the wife of the king. She features in Bhebe's historical account because her illness and death in the 1860s created tension between Christian missionaries and Ndebele religious practitioners. The Ndebele religious practitioners blamed the presence of missionaries for the illness and death of Loziba. This was part and parcel of their agenda to get scapegoats to use to justify removal of missionaries from the Ndebele State.

Julian Cobbing wrote a majestic study of Ndebele history as his doctoral thesis. His aim was to refute and explode colonial distortions and falsifications of the Ndebele past. Like his colleagues who wrote in the 1970s, the experiences of women did not matter to him much. However, in his discussion of witchcraft a few women feature as they were considered to be the leading witches. Nompethu, the mother of Mzilikazi is mentioned by name. Nompethu was a daughter of Zwide of the Ndwadwe. In Cobbing's thesis again the names of the mothers of Nkulumane the heir apparent and Lobengula are mentioned. Nkulumane's mother was Mwaka Nxumalo and Lobengula's mother was Fulatha Tshabalala from the Swazi. A lot of detail is spent on Mncengence, an influential sister of King Lobengula. Cobbing also included Xwalile, a Gaza Queen, who was married by Lobhengula to cement political alliance with the Gaza under King Mzila.³⁴ It is apparent from the above list that these women were not a representation of

ordinary Ndebele women. They belonged to powerful royal houses and were powerful by virtue of being either wives or sisters of 'big men' in the Ndebele society. However, even the information, which exists on these powerful women, is also scant compared to their male counterparts. Their voices are not coming out clearly in existing pre-colonial historical accounts.

One needs to notice that the second wave of feminism of the 1970s had not yet hit Zimbabwean historical scholarship to the extent that history continued to be articulated in masculinist terms. The producers of pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe were not enthusiastic about the imperatives of feminist history. Hence their historical accounts have remained un-gendered. Their accounts were largely premised on the nationalist paradigm whose epistemology lacked the conceptual tools as well as the ideological inclination to deal with class or gender hierarchies. Worse still, African historiography failed to deviate from the contours of western bourgeois historiography that was itself patriarchal and androcentric in its orientation.

Pathisa Nyathi, writing Ndebele pre-colonial history in the 1990s has made efforts to 'include women' in his accounts adding impressive photographs of Ndebele women which were taken during the early colonial period. Nyathi has tried to compile lists of Mzilikazi and Lobhengula's wives and daughters.³⁵ From Pathisa's accounts one is struck by the fact the surnames of some of these women have remained unknown, having been lost in the patriarchal social order of the Ndebele society. At the end of the day Nyathi was forced to record surviving first names only. While the focus was still on elite personages, it is indeed commendable effort. The starting point is to build women history from what is available.

Barbara Mahamba wrote a Master of Arts thesis on women in the Ndebele State in the 19th Century. She used missionary records and a few oral sources to try and construct the history of women in the Ndebele State. While the thesis is not exhaustive on women issues, it offers a good starting point to anyone intending to study women in pre-colonial Zimbabwe. Mahamba proved that it is possible to construct the history of women from the existing sources.³⁶ Mahamba exercised what is termed external and internal criticism of colonial and missionary sources so as to glean some information on women issues in pre-colonial Zimbabwe.

Marieke Faber Clarke is currently writing a biography of Queen Lozikheyi Dlodlo, which is promising to be a groundbreaking study as it will be the first biography of a pre-colonial Zimbabwean woman. Clarke has used missionary records, carried out oral interviews with the existing Dlodlo people who have direct links to Lozikheyi and she is reading a lot of literature on *Amakhosikazi* (wives of Zulu kings) in the Zulu State for comparative purposes.³⁷ While Marieke's book falls neatly within the confines of elitist histories that visibilised 'great women,' it is still a welcome contribution to the desperately needed history of women in Zimbabwe.

These efforts bring hope that one-day the women voices could be heard. One problem with existing accounts of pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe is that even the voices of queens are not coming out clearly. For instance, Queen Nyamazana, who entered the Zimbabwean plateau prior

to the Ndebele and inflicted devastating defeat on the last *Mambo* Chirisamuru, has remained unknown. In Shona history, only Nehanda is known as though she was the only woman in pre-colonial Shona history. The main challenge to be engaged is how can we recover the voices of women from pre-colonial past?

Can Women's Voices be recovered from the Past?

One of the main difficulties of doing history in a new way (incorporating women in their own right as women) relates to the difficulties and limitations inherent in the existing sources of history. The first problem relates to the survival and non-survival of sources, the former of which are often partial or fragments. The second problem is akin to the fact that the sources that do survive are based on another's interpretation of what actually happened and what was worth of being recorded in the first place. This problem is common to both oral and documentary sources. The third problem is that of the historian's interpretation of sources, an act that is ideological and political through and through, and therefore partial. Researchers of women history have to devise ways of transcending these problems. New approaches are required to enable historians of women studies and feminists to interpret the past in a way which means that women are not only visibilised but that their role as actors and agents are more fully understood.

The starting point is to look at the particular ways in which women have been represented both by previous historians and within historical sources themselves. It is the role of the historian to retrace and uncover the process through which women have been represented in narrow, particular, and marginalised ways. Understanding the ways, in which women have been silenced, represented or invisibilised necessitates an engagement with the power relations embedded within and informing historical accounts and records of the past. One important point to recognise is that the voicelessness of women was a construction of society, and therefore, there is need to develop a clear understanding of inequalities of power as central determinants rather than variables in the history making process. This realisation will take the historian of women studies to the interrogation of the relationship between power and knowledge, noting that the archive itself and existing historical narratives are a form of knowledge reflecting particular power configurations.³⁸

A distinctive feature of doing history in a new way is the synthesis of a variety of methodologies otherwise known as interdisciplinarity. Himani Bannarji celebrated this approach in these words, 'Memories, experiences, daily practices, and oral histories now jostle with conventions of disciplines, allowing for recreations never seen before. Disciplinarian purity has finally yielded to hybridities such as historical sociology.'³⁹ Indeed historians of women studies and feminists must begin to push from the boundaries of what has traditionally been seen as history and must begin to ask new questions. Below I discuss some of the approaches that can be employed in the struggle to recover women voices in general.

Subaltern approaches

Subaltern studies are concerned with rescuing from the condescension of posterity the pasts of the socially subordinate groups. It is anti-elitist approach to history writing. Its declared aim was to produce historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subjects of history.⁴⁰ Women belong to the subaltern groups and as such insights from these studies can contribute to the advancement of research on women history in general.

The quest for a history in which the subaltern was the maker of their own destiny brought researchers of the subaltern to the interrogation of the relationship between texts and power. Historical archives are collections of documents and texts of various kinds. Historians of subaltern social groups made an important realisation that the subaltern social groups like peasants and women do not leave their own documents. Women and peasants do not speak directly in archival documents, which are by and large produced by the ruling classes. As such historians concerned with recovering women voices and recuperating peasant experiences in history must turn to the resources of other disciplines for help such as anthropology, demography, sociology, archaeology, and human geography. They also noted that those who are invisible from the existing historical narratives were not inarticulate. They indeed expressed themselves in several ways. What is needed is to employ expertise from sociologists, ethnographers, demographers, and geographers, as a means to interpreting evidence.⁴¹

Subaltern studies emphasise the need for the historian to develop a conscious strategy for reading the archives, not simply for the biases of the elite but for the textual properties of these documents, in order to get at the various ways in which elite modes of thought represented the refractory figure of the subaltern and their practices. The architects of subaltern studies innovatively opened the way for literary theory into historical studies. They focused on the textual properties of archival documents and considered representation as an aspect of power relations between the elite and the subaltern.

While scholars like Gayatri Spivak have mounted a serious challenge to subaltern approaches, pointing to the absence of gender questions and lack of problematisation of the 'subject' in subaltern studies, there is no doubt that insights from these studies have led to a revolution in conceptualisation of history. Spivak doubted the very agenda of letting the subaltern speak and condemned it as a nostalgic search for non-existent origins.⁴²

One must note that the scholars of subaltern studies have since responded to some of the criticism levelled against their work. For instance Partha Chatterjee and others have seriously engaged feminist and gender issues.⁴³ Subaltern approaches to history cannot be ignored by historians of women studies and feminists in their search for new methodologies because they provide a promising framework towards recovery of women voices.

Foucauldian Post-structuralism

An initial issue is the centrality of the text to post-structuralist thought. The focus is on how texts are produced, used and interpreted. A leading post-structuralist, T. Hawkes noted that a text could be treated as either *readerly* or *writerly*. *Readerly* is when a reader remains passively oriented towards a text, reading it *straight*, without making any attempt to interpret it. Treating a text as *writerly*, involves creative and critical interpretation, making the text one's own, and relating it to other experiences.⁴⁴ There is no doubt that the producers of gender-blind histories treated their text *readerly*. Hence they missed the voices of women.

There is therefore urgent need for a new way of reading and (re) interpretation of sources of history if the women voices are to be recovered. Historians of women studies and feminists must carefully approach sources particularly written text, so as to avoid the mistakes of their predecessors. Their task involve approaching the sources *writerly*, factoring in gendered, raced, classed, as well as hetero-sexist criteria around the framework of their interpretation. A pre-requisite of the task of interpreting sources in this way is the act of *seeing*, which necessitates taking a consciously critical stance that invites the potential *seer* to use double-consciousness so often ascribed to feminists working within the academy to read between lines.⁴⁵ In order to be able to *see*, the researcher has to be appraised of the traps of language.

Post-structuralist thought is very powerful on the issue of understanding the traps of language. It states clearly that it is in language that 'our subjectivity as well as social organisation are defined, contested, and constructed.' Post-structuralists also alert researchers to the issue of *meaning*. To them meaning is constructed in the relations between the originator of a statement, the language in which it is expressed, the discourse in which it forms a part, and the understandings of those who read or hear, and interpret it. In reading a text, the emphasis must be in the contextual interpretation so as to empower the reader to take from a text what is useful and important, even if this was not central to the author's focus and intentions.⁴⁶

The Foucauldian post-structuralism has a key feature, which it shares with its cousin post-modernism, that is a stance of 'incredulity towards metanarratives.' In this way it enables researchers to deconstruct dominant knowledge, opening up hidden workings of gendered power/knowledge nexus. Foucault's conceptualisation of power allows researchers of women history to retrace a place for women agency with respect to power relations, and to see how the deconstruction of discourses is an important aspect of and precursor to the construction of resistant counter-discourses. According to Foucault, 'we can never be ensnared by power; we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and with a precise strategy.'⁴⁷ This means that even women voices cannot be trapped in masculinist power relations forever. A precise strategy is needed to recover these voices. Deconstruction of dominant historical knowledge is one of the starting points.

What can be done?

Women voices can be recovered from the past as long as researchers devise new ways of doing

history, involving asking new questions, changing masculinist perspective of history, re-interpretation of sources with the hindsight of gender categories, and building greater rapprochement between feminist, minority, post-colonial and subaltern scholarship. Scholars of women history and feminists must develop skills superior to those of a traditional historian, enabling them to read between lines, reading from the margins, transcending traps of language, understanding refraction of women's lives, and listening and interpreting silences in both oral and written sources of history. Existing histories of pre-colonial Zimbabwe made women invisible because its producers, by pursuing what was deemed most significant and important about the past, asked wrong questions. Historical questions were framed within the androcentric social order, where the activities of males were considered important. Writers of women history must begin to ask new questions that conventional history either has not thought to ask or rejected as non-questions that were too subjective. Asking such non-questions entails approaches, which aim to catch at some of the missing persons in various societies' version of the past. Those missing persons were women. The endeavour of refocusing the lens of history, then is from the very on set, one which seeks not only to change history's existing emphasis on men as actors and agents of history in order to stress the role of women in past societies, but to do history differently. The call is for a new way of doing history that recognises that women's history is human history writ large.

Scholars of women history and feminists must begin to engage African oral literature with a view to decipher women voices. Songs, proverbs, riddles, praise poems, metaphors, folk tales etc are a rich embodiment of African wisdom and ideologies. Women like other subaltern social groups were not passive in the face of male power and oppression. They devised methods to mock and ridicule male power via such means as songs, child naming, riddles, and folk tales. J. Scott and Achille Mbembe have shown that ordinary people are not fooled by or passive objects of power and domination, but regularly mock and ridicule it through vernacular rewriting of party slogans, through gossip, and through popular cartoons.⁴⁸ It is clear that aside from covert manoeuvring and private negotiations, there were culturally accepted means by which women could express dissatisfaction and criticise superiors whom they would dare address directly. Therefore, the search for women voices cannot be found in formal structures of power and authority. It must be sought in such informal ways of communication as gossip. Again through pointed names and barbed lyrics, women boldly and openly confronted their social superiors, if only indirectly. The problem with this approach is that the starting point is rather difficult. One needs to gather the songs, names, proverbs, riddles, praise poems, folk tales, myths and legends as a start. Some of these oral literatures are no longer available. Pre-colonial Zimbabwean societies just like other pre-colonial states were pre-literate, so it was difficulty to keep such immaterial aspects of society as songs for posterity. But praise poems and folk-tales are available as a new source for women history. Women themselves were the custodians of this rich cultural tapestry. The other problem which is aligned to this research is that of dating of oral literature to make sure this one dates back to the pre-colonial era.

There is need for historians to embark on a systematic interpretation of myths of origins and

legends as they say a lot about women issues. For instance, women's fertility, sexuality, and magical life figure prominently in the myths of origin of African societies, indicating beyond doubt the women were once influential. Female ancestors are regularly mentioned in the myths of foundation of African kingdoms and chiefdoms. In many of these myths and legends, the seductive powers of women are said to have been used to trap particular rulers, thus making way for brothers or fathers' enthronement. In many charter myths, there is a strong association between female fertility and the fertility of the land, often represented by the rainmaking power of a female ancestor. Legends contain stories of legendary women with powers and skills such as hunting and fighting which are now considered a preserve of male gender. Indeed female ancestors not only founded lineages and saved their people from starvation or danger, their medium wielded political power too. Only Ifi Amadiume has proven and successfully recovered the voices of Igbo women of Nigeria during the pre-colonial era. Her work must inspire Zimbabwean historians to do the same for pre-colonial women whose voice has remained unheard.

I am inspired by the research of Marc Epprecht, particularly his forthcoming book entitled, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*. Through careful consideration of cryptic sources combined with the queer theory, Epprecht has managed to shed light on a range of gendered relationships and discourses, including homosexuality that is generally submerged in academic language that poses as scientific or gender-blind. Epprecht has painstakingly undertaken the task of double reading of existing texts, involving disentanglement of facts from tropes guided by the torchlight of queer theory. He has gone to the extent of reading rock paintings searching for gender issues. Epprecht has also carefully read the archaeology and ethnography of the modern day descendants of the San in his search for any clues on their sexuality. At the end of the day he has succeeded in producing a convincing account of sexuality in Southern Africa.⁴⁹ It is such industriousness that is required on the part of historians if women voices are to be recovered from the past. If Epprecht is able to reconstruct such a complex issue as sexuality, then it is possible too to combine a multiplicity of methodologies to recover women's pre-colonial past.

I do not agree with Gayatri Spivak's insistence that the voice of the colonised subject, and especially the colonised female subject, can never be recovered-it has been drowned out by the oppressive collusion of colonial and patriarchal discourses.⁵⁰ My argument is in line with Gyan Prakash that we must continue to engage the dominant discourses, deconstructing them in such a way that the subaltern is visibilised.⁵¹ There is urgent need to grapple with the fundamental questions about the epistemological structures of power and cultural foundations of domination that continue to overshadow and decentre the voices of women.

endnotes

1This paper was first prepared for presentation at *Writing African Women: Poetics and Politics of African Gender Research International Conference*, University of Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa, 19-22 January 2005.

2 Dr Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatszeni is a Zimbabwean historian. He taught History at the University of Zimbabwe, Harare (1995-2000), History and Development Studies at the Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe (2000-2004) and is currently teaching International Studies at Monash University, South Africa Campus, Roodepoort, South Africa.

3 The pioneers of history as a discipline believed in the possibility of finding and knowing historical truth, as long as one worked hard to fight against distortions, errors, and the demagogic tendencies of politicians and historians alike. These scholars were positivists and empiricists. To them history was able to come out as an uncontested given. See my critique of this type of scholarship in my paper entitled, *Rethinking Research Concerns and Approaches in Pre-Colonial History of Zimbabwe: An Essay in Method*, (paper presented at St. Anthony's college, University of Oxford, 12 June 2004).

4 I have advanced this argument in my paper entitled, *Rethinking Research Concern and Approaches*.

5 Subaltern is derived from the military referring to officers under the rank of captain. It was brought to political theory by Italian political scientist and theorist, Antonio Gramsci. However for the purposes of this study, I derived the term subaltern from the work of the Indian historian Ranajit Guha who inspired what came to be known as Subaltern Studies, an anti-elitist approach to history writing concerned about 'rescuing from the condescension of posterity the pasts of the socially subordinated groups in India' Refer to Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies 1: Writing on South Asian History and Society*, (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1982)

6 On Derrida see E. Oger, *Jacques Derrida*, (Kok Agora, Kampen, 1995) and for Foucault see M. Foucault, 'Truth and Power' in C. Gordon (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1984*, (Harvester Press, London, 1980)

7 This does not mean that I ignore the critique of subaltern studies marshalled by such scholars as Gayatri C. Spivak in her influential article, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in P. Williams & L. Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourses and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1994), pp 66-111. She criticizes the whole exercise of trying to capture the 'pure subaltern' voice as a nostalgia for lost origins that can no longer be recovered. My endeavour is not to recover the 'pure subaltern voice.' I don't believe in pure voices at all. My wish is to deconstruct metanarratives using insights from subaltern thinking.

8 H. Bannerji, 'Politics and the Writing of History' in R. Pierson and N. Chaudhuri (eds.), *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, (Bloomington, Indiana, 1998), pp 15-20.

9 A. Gallagher, C. Lubelska, and L. Louise, 'Introduction' in A. Gallagher et al (eds.), *Re-*

presenting the Past: Women & History, (Pearson Education, London, 2001).

10 C. Paechter, 'Using Post-Structuralist Ideas in Gender Theory and Research' in B. Francis & C. Skelton (eds.), *Investigating Gender: Contemporary Perspectives in Education*, (Open University Press, Buckingham, 2001), pp 23-24.

11 *Ibid*, p 42.

12 Quoted in C. Paechter, 'Using Post-Structuralist Ideas,' p 43.

13 S. B. Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' in Zimbalist- Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture and Society*, (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1974)

14 Horace Campbell, *Reclaiming Zimbabwe: The Exhaustion of the Patriarchal Model of Liberation*, (Africa World Press, Trenton, 2003), pp 9-10.

15 Ortner, *Making Gender*, p 16.

16 At the University of Zimbabwe, there is Dr Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi who is concerned with women issues particularly within the nationalist movements. At Midlands State University I introduced two modules on women issues namely, *Introduction to Gender Studies* and *Gender & Development in Africa*. These modules were very popular with students and I used them to seed feminist thinking and gender consciousness.

17 Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939*, (Baobab, Harare, 1996), p 1.

18 The statement of Hugh Trevor Roper was widely quoted and elicited responses from Africanist and nationalist historians as they inaugurated African history as a counter to imperial history.

19 Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives*, p 1.

20 Gender-neutrality refers to studies that made no distinction between genders implying that what is said or written is equally valid for and for all genders. Gender-blindness refers to lack of awareness of distinctions of gender. Gender-biasness refers to orientation towards one gender usually masculine.

21 Paul. Tiyambe Zeleza, 'Gender Biases in African Historiography,' in A. Imam, A. Mama and F. Sow (eds.), *Engendering African Social Sciences*, (CODESRIA, Dakar, 1997), p 81.

22 For instance, David Norman Beach's books are devoid of any details on women experiences.

In his *Shona and Zimbabwe, 900-1850*, the index does not even direct us to women issues. They are not even listed.

23 Refer to the creative works of Solomon Mutswairo and Yvone Vera on Nehanda. Terence Ranger wrote about Nehanda in his book, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* published in 1967, not because she was considered an important female historical figure but that she was a spirit medium. The focus was on spirit mediumship and war rather than on women.

24 Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe, 900-1850*, (Mambo Press, Gweru, 1980).

25 In historical accounts of pre-colonial Zimbabwe, there appear to be two Nehandas. Nehanda the historical figure and Nehanda the legendary spirit medium. We know very little about Nehanda the historical female character.

26 Beach, *War and Politics in Zimbabwe, 1840-1900*, (Mambo Press, Gweru, 1986).

27 Beach, 'An Innocent Woman, Unjustly Accused? Charwe, Medium of the Nehanda Mhondoro Spirit, and the 1876-7 Central Shona Rising in Zimbabwe' in *History in Africa*, 25, (1998), pp 27-54.

28 Marc Epprecht, 'A 'Beachean' Critique of Recent English-Language Historiography on Gender and Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa' (Paper presented at the University of Alberta, 2000).

29 Ibid. See also Joseph Miller, 'Nzinga of Matambain a New Perspective' in *Journal of African History*, 16, (1975), pp 101-16. Refer also to John Thornton, 'Legitimacy and Political Power: Queen Nzinga, 1624-1663' in *Journal of African History*, 32, (1991), pp 15-40.

30 Sexualised power differentials were not taken seriously at all.

31 S.I.G. Mudenge, *A Political History of Munhumutapa*, (Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare, 1988). As the title indicates the focus of the book was on politics and war.

32 Hoyini H.K. Bhila, *Trade and Politics in a Shona Kingdom*, (Longman, London, 1982)

33 Ngwabi Bhebe, *Christianity and Traditional Religion in Western Zimbabwe, 1859-1923*, (Longman, London, 1979)

34 Julian R.D. Cobbing, 'The Ndebele Under the Khumalos, 1820-1896', (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Lancaster, 1976)

35 Pathisa Nyathi, *Igugu LikaMthwakazi: Imbali YamaNdebele, 1820-1893*, (Mambo Press, Gweru, 1994)

36 Barbara Mahamba, 'Women in Ndebele History' (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Zimbabwe, 1996)

37 Marieke Clarke, 'Queen Lozikheyi' (Ongoing book). Marieke has also made effective use of Jennifer Weir's PhD thesis on the Zulu.

38 Refer to Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power' in C. Gordon (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1984*, (Harvester Press, 1980)

39 H. Bannerji, 'Politics and the Writing of History,' p 269.

40 Ranajit Guha, (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1982)

41 Keith Thomas, 'History and Anthropology' in *Past and Present*, 24 (1963), pp 3-18 turned to anthropology in search of ways of getting to the experiences of subaltern classes. Refer also to the work of Joseph E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernisation of Rural France, 1870-1914*, (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1976), p vxi.

42 Her influential article is entitled, 'Can the Subaltern Speak' in P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourses and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1994).

43 P. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, (Zed Books, London, 1986)

44 T.Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, (Methuen, London, 1997), pp 205.

45 Ibid.

46 C.Paechter, 'Using Post-Structuralist Ideas in Gender Theory and Research,' pp 40-42.

47 Ibid, p 24.

48 Achille Mbembe, *On Postcolony*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001). See also J. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985) See also Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990).

49 Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*, (in press).

50 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Gary Nelson and Lawrence

Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (Urbana and Chicago, 1988).

51 Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Post-Colonial Criticism" in *American Historical Review*, 99, 5, (December 1994).