

The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa

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Introduction

As Werner Sollors has remarked, the word 'invention' has 'become a rather popular category in intellectual discourse'. No longer 'reserved for accounts of technological advances such as the telegraph', invention has been applied to 'such diverse phenomena as the invention of culture; of literary history; of childhood as well as the loss of childhood; of motherhood; of kinship; of the self; of America; of the Negro; of the Indian; of the Jew'. Some usage's of 'invention' have laid so much stress on 'the importance of *language* in the social construction of reality' as 'to let "reality" disappear behind an inventive language that disassembles it'.¹

*The Invention of Tradition*² has, then, been merely one of at least a score of similarly titled works.³ Yet it has had an impact greater than most of these others. Sollors himself regards it as providing a counter to the dangers of ahistoricity. For him it is 'a model collection for applying the concept of "invention" to a critical, yet eminently historical, study' by focusing not only on the *fact* of the invention of 'essentialist categories' but also on the process and agency by which such invention is accomplished. Since its publication in 1983 the book has been reissued several times and has been translated into Japanese, Portuguese and Catalan. It has outsold all other titles in the Cambridge University Press Past and Present series. I have often encountered enthusiastic readers. I was told by a folklorist in Indiana that it had advanced her discipline by a hundred years. I have been told that at one time it was cited in

1 Werner Sollors, 'Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity' in Werner Sollors (ed.), *The Invention of Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. ix-x.

2 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

3 Among these Earl Conrad, *The Invention of the Negro* (New York: Eriksson, 1967); Alvin Greeberg, *The Invention of the West*, (New York: Avon, 1976); Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1986); Bernard Sherman, *The Invention of the Jew* (New York: Yoseloff, 1969).

almost every social anthropological application to funding agencies in the United States.

It is clear that this success has been achieved partly at the expense of the book's particular argument. The folklorist and many of the anthropological applicants were drawing upon it to argue that all traditions, at all times and places, are 'invented'. In a sense, of course, this is true and where that sense has been ignored, or denied, then its statement is liberating. But the book's argument was different. It was about a specific historical period in which, it asserted, traditions were peculiarly frequently invented rather than customs continuing to evolve. Its argument focused on the rise of romantic nationalism, the rituals of mass industrial politics, the interactions of imperialism and 'scientific' classification, the production of 'neo-traditional' cadres to serve the imperial states, and the counter-inventions of anti-imperial and socialist movements. My own chapter on Africa was set firmly in this context. Indeed I argued that for Africa the divide with the past was especially clear, corresponding as it did to the cleavage between pre-colonial and colonial societies. The colonial period in Africa, I asserted, was not only marked by the importation of European neo-traditional inventions of identity - the regiment, the boarding school, the refeudalised country house - and the inclusion of Africans within them as subordinates, but also by systematic inventions of *African* traditions - ethnicity, customary law, 'traditional' religion. Before colonialism Africa was characterised by pluralism, flexibility, multiple identity; after it African identities of 'tribe', gender and generation were all bounded by the rigidities of invented tradition.

Despite the book's success, its central argument, and its exposition in my chapter in particular, could be attacked in various ways. The cleavage that it asserts between custom and invented tradition - between pre-industrial and industrial European societies or pre-colonial and colonial African and Indian ones - is open both to theoretical and factual criticism. As Rosalind O'Hanlon remarks, there is a danger of an ahistorical dualism. No matter how open and dynamic I seek to make African 'custom', my emphasis upon colonial 'invention' could be read to imply that 'once these alien representations had been stripped away . . . the authentic and other

(Africa) would emerge'. In this way essentialism might slip in by the back door.⁴

Moreover, it might be (and no doubt often will be) possible to demonstrate that traditions and rituals associated in the *Invention of Tradition* with mass industrial politics and with empire and nationalism in fact have earlier origins or earlier parallels. Here again, O'Hanlon has pertinent remarks to make. She warns of the danger of assuming that 'essentialisation, objectification and the development of elaborate taxonomies to describe the world (is) a particularly western and post-Enlightenment form of thought':

The evidence is that Indian cultures had and have their own forms of objectification and essentialism too. At the most superficial level, indeed, what is striking about many Indian regional cultures ... is the extraordinary range of classifications they have Key groups of Indian men had little to learn from colonial masters in some at least of the techniques of (subordination) as a means of expressing social distinction.⁵

The Brahman intellectual collaborators, who played such an important role in making 'colonial understandings of India', had already flourished during the economic and political transformations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as new Indian rulers looked to them for legitimacy and for bureaucratic skills. Perhaps the elaboration of identities and invention of traditions in pre-colonial India and Africa took place in much the same way and for much the same reasons as in colonial India and Africa.

Finally, it could be objected that another form of essentialism is built into some of the chapters in *The Invention of Tradition*- an oversimplified concept of the essential character of colonialism (or of industrial capitalism). Much recent work has emphasised the intensely contested nature of colonial knowledge and has challenged simple stereotypes of colonial science or colonial classifica-

⁴ Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Histories in Transition: Colonialism and Culture in India', paper given at the Conference on Popular Culture in Question, University of Essex, April 1991, p. 6. She is here criticising the very influential work of Edward Said and of Bernard Cohen (who is the author of the Indian chapter in *The Invention of Tradition*). See also Ros O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, 'Approaches, to the Study of Colonialism and Culture in India', *History workshop*, 32, Autumn 1991.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

tion.⁶ The invention of a tradition, even on the colonial side, is a much more complex process than my chapter allowed.

My concerns in this chapter are to take up some of these possible criticisms. They are also to make what could be called an 'internalist' critique. I believe that even when we take into account pre-colonial inventions of tradition and identity; even when we avoid the danger of replacing a colonial-invented 'other'; even when we adequately explore the contestations and complexities of colonial science - nevertheless, a real change took place in Africa over the period and along the broad lines I suggested. But it is possible to misplace the emphases in our discussion of that change. So I want to make more or less important modifications within the framework set up by *The Invention of Tradition*. It will be mostly a critique of my own work but necessarily also more fully developed work along the same lines. I need to begin, therefore, with a brief survey of the studies of the invention of tradition in colonial Africa published after 1983. Thereafter I shall argue for the modifications which now seem to me to be necessary to the emerging (or emerged) consensus.

Developing the colonial invention of tradition in Africa

Since 1983 there has been a good deal of work on colonial legitimation through tradition. Some of this has looked at the importation of European invented traditions of identity and governance into Africa; some at colonial inventions of African customs; some has tried to combine the two.

A good deal of the most interesting part of this work has not so much extended the argument in my chapter in *The Invention of Tradition* as filled in its most significant absence - the importance of the 'invention' of gender roles in the legitimation of colonialism. This is, of course, the topic of Helen Callaway's subtle and sophisticated chapter in the book, which there is no point in summarising here. But it is worth noting that her own *Gender, Culture, and Empire*⁷ was in part a direct response to *The Invention of Tradition*. It asked how colonial neo-traditions affected British women in Africa and focused on 'Power and Rank Made Visible'.

⁶ Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills. Colonial Power and African Illness* (London: Polity Press, 1991) analyses many of these complications with particular reference to colonial and missionary bio-medicine.

⁷ Helen Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

Imperial ceremonies in Nigeria (which were the focus of her book), with their round of Durbars and Receptions, were much more elaborate than those eastern and central Africa, which I describe in *The Invention*. In this 'Imperial Theatre' administrative wives played a key role as 'lesser queens'. As chatelaines of great houses they brought many Africans into one of the great British models of command and subordination. Callaway thus describes the role of Betty Moresby-White, bride of a Resident, who arrived in Lagos in 1936 and who went with her husband up-country to Oyo:

They entertained all the people who came through They also used to tour several times a year, travelling in 'quite a caravan' to visit all the large towns of the province Ahead of them went a lorry with all their loads and the servants They had to take enough china and glass to serve ten people at dinner because the Resident always had to entertain whenever he went. The servants went ahead to their destination and when they arrived the beds were made and the dinner cooking. They always wore evening clothes for dinner; she used to take about six evening dresses with her on every tour.⁸

In this way ideals and modes of conducts which were eroding or unrepresentative in Britain itself were imposed in exaggerated form in imperial Africa. British Women in Nigeria had to be more lady-like than in Britain in order to support men who were obliged to be more gentlemanly. This ideal of ladylike support to the imperial gentleman continued more or less up to the end of empire, into an era of austerity and Labour governments. Callaway quotes advice to colonial wives published in 1950, whose author realised how archaic the idea now sounded. But 'if this advice seems like an echo from an older world, she explains, it is because the colonies are remote in time and space from the contemporary world in England, where husband and wife both have jobs "You really are going into a man's world".'

Thus the neo-traditional gentlemen of empire, upon whom I laid emphasis in *The Invention*, products of the public schools, with their simultaneous emphasis on toughness and chivalry, on monarchy and on rural hierarchy, were incomplete without the neo-traditional lady. The splendour of the imperial lady, of course, required to be emphasised by contrast with the 'other' - the immoral or helpless figures of native womanhood. There could be no question of transforming such creatures into ladies. But they might nevertheless be

⁸ Ibid., pp. 78-9.

transformed into 'respectable women', fitting subordinates of and objects of charity for white ladies in a hierarchy of maternalism which was erected side by side with the male administrative hierarchies of paternalism.

In a recent article, Nancy Hunt, describes this process at work in Belgian Africa. She correctly asserts that 'surprisingly little attention has been paid to colonial efforts to domesticize women'. She focuses on the *foyer social*, a 'colonial project to revise and refashion gender roles, family life and social space enacted by European nuns and social workers and (by) African women within classrooms, households and an African urban community'. With implicit reference to *The Invention or Tradition*, Hunt writes:

The *foyer's* festive occasions and special events were recurring public rituals that institutionalised a colonial vision of private life, by offering urban Africans 'new traditions of subordination' celebrating domesticity. Christmas, New Year's and other holidays teas and parties were organised and all the women of the *foyer* and their families were encouraged to attend These repetitive rituals were part of the colonial invention of a new tradition of family activity, marital togetherness and mutual deference to colonial rule The incorporation of European women into positions as professional social workers did not 'feminise' Belgian colonialism. Rather, embedded within Belgian colonial paternalism was a maternalism which was used among women.⁹

Work like Callaway's and Hunt's thus serves to redress the over-masculine emphasis of my chapter in *The Invention*. But much other work done since 1983 has taken further than I did the discussion of colonial invented traditions of masculinity. Thus a great deal has been done on the history of the colonial military and police, stressing their centrality to imperial rule and also the incorporation of Africans into clearly demarcated and uniformed hierarchies. This work reached a recent climax with the publication in July 1991 of two collections edited by David Anderson and David Killingray.¹⁰ Their books link with the revived interest in imperial hegemony, which stimulated a conference held in Berlin in 1989, revised papers at which will appear in a book edited by Dagmar Engels and Shula

⁹ Nancy Hunt, 'Domesticity and Colonialism in Belgian Africa: Usambarara's Foyer Social', 1946-1960, *signs*, 15, 3, Spring 1990, pp. 468, 473

¹⁰ David Anderson and David Killingray (eds.), *Policing The Empire and Policing and Decolonisation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991). These are the latest titles in Manchester's remarkable series *Studies in Imperialism*.

Marks. The conference and the book which springs from it focus on policing, the law and education as hegemonic forms, serving the class interest of the colonial state but incorporating enough Africans into their assumptions and structures to exact a price in the form of constraints on the power of that state.

And if much admirable work has been done on the history of imported European neo-traditions in Africa, even more has been done since 1983 on the European invention of African tradition. Since - though not because of- my chapter in *The Invention* a series of important studies have documented the recent and artefactual character of 'customary law' and of 'traditional tribal identity', and have established that even those apparently most fundamental of African cultural characteristics, language and religion, have been defined or redefined under colonialism. Martin Chanock's, *Law, Custom and Social Order. The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* marvellously documents the alliance of colonial and African patriarchy to produce a 'customary law' which firmly put women and juniors in their subordinate place. Chanock at once situates his book in the context of *The Invention*:

A book about customary law is not simply a book about law, but it is about ways of conceiving the past and, the present. The way in which a society conceives its traditions is fundamental to its understanding of itself. Traditions symbolise continuity, cultural identity and orderly existence, though the nature of that order may be fiercely disputed. Images of tradition compete and change, and different views are consequently taken of social continuity and the sources of authority.... In recent African history continuity has been radically disrupted, cultural identity assaulted and social order transformed. I will be trying to examine ways in which, in these circumstances, traditions are maintained, manufactured and presented.... The law was the cutting edge of colonialism, an instrument of the power of an alien state and part of the process of coercion. And it also came to be a new way of conceptualising relationships and powers and a weapon within African communities which were undergoing basic economic changes, many of which were interpreted and fought over by those involved in moral terms. The customary law, far from being a survival, was created by these changes and conflicts.... African legal conceptions, strategies and tactics are formed both by the impact of capitalism and by the inter-

action of the communities thus affected with the concepts, strategies and power of British colonial legal institutions.¹¹

Chanock argues that the invention of 'customary law' was part of 'a transformation in African institutions rather than a continuity'; that it was a defensive attempt to assert status and power against challenge from migrant labourers and peasant producers; that the status and power thus defended was not in itself deep-rooted but a product of colonial alliances. He admits that his book is premised upon the importance of the division between pre-colonial and colonial Africa, but he warns that it is dangerous to think of 'the pre-colonial period as the established African past, in which African societies existed and African institutions functioned prior to the "impact" upon them of foreign conquest, foreign economy and foreign ideologies'.

Instead we must realise that

Not only are the latter-day versions of custom the product of the colonial period, but the nineteenth century, which they purport to reflect, was, in Central Africa, a time of violent and rapid change ... anything but a traditional world in which custom reigned. We do not have a 'traditional' world as an identifiable baseline.... My approach is to let the people 'hit the ground running', in all the disarray of conflict, rather than to begin with them in the stylised formations of the parade ground.¹²

Conflict within the African society was not new but the possibility of codifying and enforcing 'customary' law was new; the possibility was given by colonial rule and exploited by particular African groupings. Chanock sees his ability to dwell on such African divisions as a reflection of the 'development of a Marxist historiography'. This has produced a picture of 'a profound sense of disorder in the economic world linked to attempts to strengthen social order. African colonial societies were in many ways divided, distrusting and defensive.' In central Africa this reached a peak during the Depression of the 1930s when in rural Africa, as elsewhere, there was a connection 'between depression, inflation and the strength of conservative ideologies.'¹³

¹¹ Martin Chanock. *Law, Custom and Social Order. The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 3-4.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

If Chanock has thus dealt with 'customary law' with much greater sophistication than the brief passages in my chapter in *The Invention*, the study of the colonial 'invention' of ethnicity has also enormously advanced. Leroy Vail's magisterial collection, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* has brought together the best historical work on modern ethnicity. In his introduction Vail stresses that ethnic consciousness is an ideology, like all ideologies, created over time. In Southern Africa, he thinks, it was pre-eminently a response to disruption - to the ecological disasters of the 1890s and early 1900s, 'that greatly weakened the fabric of local African societies'; to the disruptions of the colonial 'scramble for labour'; to the alienation of land; to transformations of the gender division of labour; and to the erosion of previous political relationships:

Rapid social and economic change eroded earlier political relationship based on clientage.... This erosion in turn opened the way for new forms of consciousness throughout the region.

He identifies 'worker consciousness'; new types of religious consciousness; a petty bourgeois ideology of 'progress' and self-help. He goes on:

It is crucial to the argument of this book that one of the most far-reaching and important of these new forms of consciousness was a new ethnic - or tribal - consciousness that could and did encapsulate other forms of consciousness. Ethnicity could co-exist with other types of consciousness without apparent unease because it was cultural and hence based on involuntary ascription, not on personal choice.... Ethnic identity could inhere in both petty bourgeois and worker, in both peasant farmer and striving politician.¹⁴

Ethnicity, though a colonial invention, could rapidly appear natural, even immemorial.

Leroy Vail notes that this sort of model 'can be detected operating within different societies at different points in time', but he locates this range as falling within the last hundred years - 'from the late nineteenth century down to the present'. Peter Ekeh, in a recent

¹⁴ Leroy Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London: James Currey, 1989), p. 10.

discussion of modern ethnicity in West Africa¹⁵ has also laid his emphasis on that same hundred years. He adds, though, another dimension to Chanock's idea of an alliance of convenience between white and black patriarchy, or to Vail's idea of ethnicity is an all-purpose ideology for whose reacting to western economic and political impact.

Ekeh agrees that 'under colonialism the notion of kinship was considerably expanded into the construction of ethnic groups' which thus became 'central elements of any meaningful definition of the public realm'. In West Africa, the 'persistence of kinship ... must be seen as a product of the craft of colonial rule, which by and large built its methods of governance on the dominance of kinship in pre-colonial Africa'. In his view the colonial state itself was based only on parts of the European state model - mainly the 'coercive aspects'. military police and bureaucratic. But the colonial state 'avoided as much as possible controls imposed by societal constraints.... The colonial state in Africa was in general separated from the values and morality of both the European societies from which these coercive elements of state were imported, and the African societies on which they were imposed.' This had a peculiar result:

State and society in Africa were now operated on different principles of morality. Whereas state and its extended colonial apparatus were run on the principle of institutionalised amorality, action within restricted spheres of society (say, in an ethnic group) was governed by the principle of morality.

Morality became restricted to the societal sphere of the kinship nexus' within a defined 'tribe'; relations between 'tribes' were subject only to 'the principles of amorality'.¹⁶ In this view, invented modern ethnicity comes to seem not only immemorial and encompassing but also the only source of social welfare and public morality.

The Afro-American sociologist Karen Fields has extended some parts of Ekeh's analysis to the field of African religion. In a stimulating paper¹⁷ she asserts that

¹⁵ Peter Ekeh, 'Social Anthropology and Two Contrasting Uses of Tribalism in Africa', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32, 4, October 1990.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.683-4.

¹⁷ Karen Fields, 'Political Contingencies of Witchcraft in Colonial Central Africa: Culture and the State in Marxist Theory', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 16, 3, 1982.

Colonial systems are simple. They are simple, above all, in that order cannot be taken for granted, but presents itself to the participants, quite explicitly, as the problems of keeping order. As seen by rulers and ruled alike, order lacks the useful mystique of long habituation: and neither obedience nor command misrepresents itself to anyone as an inherent, natural characteristic of the groups involved or as an ineluctable outcome of their common life.

Fields says that in their African colonies the British achieved only a consciousness on the part of the rulers of their right to command but never the consciousness on the part of the ruled that it was their duty to obey. Still, this is not to say 'that British regimes in Africa lacked legitimising ideology'. After all, the British were able 'to obtain obedience without constant use of threat of force'. To do this they had to extend their own self-consciousness of their right to rule - cause some paralysing echo of their own satisfaction to ring in the awareness of the prey'. This they could not do she says, by creating a mission-educated elite; they could do it only by backing 'traditional' forces in African rural society. In this way, white administrators were led 'up to the doorsteps of weird collaborators and closer to moral community with the ruled than anyone unfamiliar with colonial practicality could readily have imagined'.¹⁸

In doing so, she argues, British administrators privileged certain aspects of African religion against others, creating a new model which linked so-called 'genuine' traditional religion with chiefly rule over small-scale organic communities. All this was an invention. In pre-colonial times Central African chiefs had not deepened on ritual but on armed force; many networks of African religion had been widespread and interactive. In her admirable *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa*¹⁹ Fields has a section entitled 'The Politics of Custom'. In this she describes how administrators first needed chiefs and then needed to think of them as legitimate. They were not, of course, prepared to allow chiefs to use arms or to achieve wealth. Large chiefly followings were broken up in the colonial scramble for labour. So what else seemed to legitimate chiefs had to be sustained:

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 57-75.

¹⁹ Karen Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in colonial Central Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

Black rulers' ability to command rested upon ... rituals, usage's, rules.... The legitimate authority of customary rulers - that is, their ability to obtain voluntary obedience - stood only if mounted on this foundation. When the technicians of indirect rule saw that by reckless pursuit of a civilising mission they might destroy this foundation, and thereby colonial power, they reconsidered.... Before the *pax Britannica*, the application of formal rules to cases was not the only method of choosing new leadership or settling disputed claims; war and migration cut through legal and moral tangles. But the new dispensation halted wars.... The decisiveness of rules did not arise full-blown from the traditional society of the past but was the creature of colonisation.

Colonialism created a world 'without a place for the Macbeth.... Genuine struggles for power occur in this world, if at all, in pantomime'. As she concludes:

Customary order is encapsulated in ritual and supernatural belief ... in flamboyant ceremonial and magic incantation (the local equivalents in Fields' vision to Callaway's high imperial theatre) But insofar as this portrayal corresponds to anything real, it was the plan of colonial rule that re-outfitted the customary order to look this way.... Paradoxically, the role of the 'supernatural' increased as Africa's history joined that of a secularised modern society.²⁰

The various authors I have cited vary, then, in their estimate of how deeply colonial ideology penetrated into African society, but all agree that inventions of law ethnicity or religion took place. Others extend this even to language. Thus Johannes Fabian in his *Language and Colonial Power*²¹ writes of 'the deep connections between language, linguistics and politics'. His desire to write a book about the Swahili spoken in south-eastern Belgian Congo resulted in

another book about colonial power.... Among the preconditions for establishing regimes of colonial power was, must have been, communication with the colonised.... Use and control of verbal means of communication were not the only foundation for colonial rule; but they were needed to maintain regimes.... In the former Belgian Congo brutal, physical force never ceased to be exercised; much less is known about more subtle uses of power through controls on communication.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 63-6.

²¹ Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Fabian asked why Swahili was adopted by the colonial rulers as the *lingua franca*; why it became the language of the industrial labour regime. He finds that 'Shaba Swahili has in its development been deeply influenced by colonial, administrative choices and by expert, linguistic decrees.' He also finds that Belgian linguists were profoundly influenced in their 'scientific' findings by the colonial utility of Swahili, both practically and symbolically. It may be objected, of course, that Swahili in the Congo was precisely an intrusive language of alien economic exploitation. But Fabian has extended his study of colonial language classification and 'invention' to the so-called indigenous vernaculars.²² He and many others have shown how missionaries, in *their* yet more urgent need to communicate, made a set of crucial decisions about which dialect to privilege, what orthography to employ, and what vocabulary to regard as 'pure'. The written languages which resulted were 'new' in many ways; new both in their idiomatic limitations and their unprecedented classificatory and descriptive power; new in their expansion and adoption by many people who had hitherto spoken other dialects or languages; new in the way the languages thus created came to be associated with the supposed intellectual, moral and even physical qualities of their speakers, thus giving a powerful impulse to the invention of ethnicity and to the idea of its rootedness in cultural and intellectual basic realities.

Thus the term 'invention' has been increasingly applied in African Studies in the last six or seven years. It was even applied in 1988 to the whole idea of 'Africa' and to the possibility of African studies themselves in V. Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*. Mudimbe adds a linguistic gloss to the overall argument of colonial classification. Noting that the Latin word *colere* meant to cultivate or design, he remarks that

colonialism and colonisation basically mean organisation, arrangement.... Colonists and colonialists have all tended to organise and transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs.²³

²² Johannes Fabian, 'Missions and The Colonisation of African Languages: Developments in the Former Belgian Congo', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 17, 1983.

²³ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988).

African 'customary' law or 'traditional' religion - seemingly the very reverse of European legal codes or mission Christianity were in fact just such European constructs.

Ethno-historians reflect on tradition

These insistences on the invented character of ethnicity, language, law religion - of 'tradition' itself- have naturally posed severe problems for historians of pre-colonial Africa. How can one get back to the realities behind these inventions? Can one still talk of continuous 'charters' or 'cultural archives' which give continuous identity to African societies throughout all upheavals?²⁴

In 1990 two leading ethno-historians, Jan Vansina and Steven Feierman, addressed themselves to these problems. Vansina understands the impulses behind a book like *The Invention of Tradition*. Commenting on it, he writes:

Traditions are historical phenomena which occur everywhere. Historians, however, have tended to shy away from them.... The popular use of the term in the sense of 'lack of change' irritates historians whose avocation is to discover change.... In addition 'tradition' is often invoked to designate the historical consciousness of a particular group and more often than not the term is just a flag of convenience to legitimate a position hold on other grounds.²⁵

Thus it is natural and even useful for historians to challenge the notion of tradition especially (as we shall see) in colonial Africa. Nevertheless, Vansina insists that 'traditions are not just in the minds of observers. They are "out there" ... Phenomena with their own characteristics.' how then to reconcile these propositions with the work of Chanock, Fields and Fabian?

Vansina does so by offering his own definition of 'tradition'. He uses the term in an archaeological or cultural anthropological sense:

²⁴ An influential exposition of the idea of the cultural archive is Wendy James, *The listening Ebony. Moral Knowledge, Religion and Power among the Uduk of Sudan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). The Uduk have constantly moved or been moved; constantly absorbed migrants and refugees; have no major ceremony. But James shows that the imagination and re-imagination of Uduk identity draws upon a scattered 'archive' of stories and themes.

²⁵ Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rain forest. Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (London: James Currey, 1990), p. 257.

The past of Equatorial Africa exemplified the workings of a powerful endogenous process, a cultural tradition that had its roots some 4000 - 5000 years ago, and that maintained itself by perennial rejuvenation, until it withered as a result of the colonial conquest. .. Historians and anthropologists have, on the whole, shunned the study of such phenomena that stretch over thousands of years and span vast regions. ... (yet) the main outline of the past in Equatorial Africa is a story about tradition.

Vansina's insistence on the 'perennial rejuvenation' of Equatorial African tradition makes his book a study, one might say, of 'invention *by* tradition' rather than the invention *of* tradition. He speaks with indignation of a western scholarship which saw African traditions as unchanging; how hurtful it is, he says, to Equatorial Africans 'to be told by foreign scholars that, in earlier days, the ingenuity of your forebears was so constrained by "cultural tradition" that people were condemned to repeat themselves endlessly, to be stuck in the same rut for time immemorial'. In fact, cultural tradition is 'both continuity and yet change', a great ancestral repository of values and solutions which allows for a wide range of elaboration's and innovations within its terms. Indeed, he asserts, 'all the social innovations which will be chronicled in the next chapters were but an elaboration of the social legacy of the ancestral tradition', even though these innovations encompassed chiefs, kings, brotherhoods, matriliney, patriliney, and so on. Even at the great crises of external incursion and the slave trade 'the tradition was not defeated. It adapted. It invented new structures'.²⁶

Working from this dynamic and fundamental definition of pre-colonial tradition, Vansina goes further than any previous author in his scathing characterisation of colonial inventions. The colonial conquest of Equatorial Africa, he says, took only forty years 'to destroy the equatorial tradition'. It did so partly by imposing its own invented constructs:

The conquest prevented the tradition from inventing new structures to cope with a new situation. Instead the colonial government invented them. Its agents preserved some old practices but the whole structure made sense only in the cognitive realm of the Europeans, not in the equatorial tradition.... The cognitive part of the old tradition, its very core, went into irreversible crisis.... The Europeans first built their own cognitive view of rural African society and then

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 100, 193, 236.

imposed it on daily life ... The only concession to the equatorial way of life was to preserve some cultural flotsam and jetsam, and to erect a structure labelled customary law, which was utterly foreign to the spirit of the former tradition. Customary law was the headstone on its grave.²⁷

The result of all this was disastrous. 'traditions are processes. They must continually change to stay alive.... Traditions need autonomy. The peoples who carry them must have the power of self-determination.' yet the recovery of political self-determination with national independence offered no solution. With independence 'insecurity exploded.... There was no turning back to an age of unsullied tradition.' instead there was a new sort of pluralism, featuring variants of neo-African tradition' but 'without the guidance of a basic tradition'. Today the people of Equatorial Africa are 'still bereft of a common mind or purpose'.²⁸

Steven Feierman takes a quite different route towards reconciling the idea of colonial invention with the idea of a long-standing cultural tradition. In his marvellous *Peasants Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania*²⁹ Feierman argues that 'long-term continuity and active creation are in fact compatible'. But he remarks that the study of 'long-term durations' may

Lead to the mystification of cultural continuities - to a sense that the continuity of a cultural form is unexceptional and expected, that it is passively accepted by the people who use it. (yet) when people select a particular form of discourse ... This is by no means a passive act.... Long-term continuities in political language are the outcome of radical social change and of struggle within peasant society.³⁰

This plainly is not a criticism of Vansina's dynamic definition of 'the tradition'. Yet Feierman's approach is nevertheless very different from Vansina's. For Vansina, as we have seen, the pluralism of twentieth-century Africa implies the end of the great tradition and the inevitable impotence of modern African thought. But, for Feierman, pluralism is the essence of creativity. Peasant intellectuals in Shambaa continue to draw on metaphors of legitimate

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 239, 247.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 248.

²⁹ Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals. Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

³⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

rule/fertility/rain, just as Shambaa intellectuals did in the pre-colonial nineteenth century. This 'configuration of conceptions, images and figures of speech had been in active use a hundred years earlier'.³¹ But in the 1940s and 1950s they were combined with ideas of democracy' and populism in an un-self-conscious, creative and topical amalgam:

Even when forms of discourse are inherited from the past, the peasant must make an active decision that they are meaningful at this moment, to select a particular form of discourse as opposed to other possible forms and to shape the inherited language anew to explain current problems.³²

In short, the 'traditional' in modern Shambaa rural discourse can itself be fully 'modern', chosen, relevant. It is the way that a particular 'open' rural society can make use of its own past to respond to the wider realities of the colonial or post-colonial present. By implication Feierman contrasts this creative and selective use of 'tradition' with the 'tradition' of colonial indirect rule, which sought to impose a supposedly total system of rules and practices in a distorted parody of inventive tradition. But whereas for Vansina this colonial imposition rendered traditional creativity impossible, for Feierman it was possible for peasant intellectuals creatively to select even while colonialism was imposing its deadening classifications.

Modifying the idea of the invention of tradition

From all the above it will be seen that Africanists have no need to turn to my chapter in *The Invention of Tradition* in order to study the elaboration of imperial ritual, or traditional invention of customary law, or ethnicity, or traditional religion, or language. Its formulations have been far surpassed. Nor does my chapter extend to the range of speculation of Vansina's or Feierman's books. Normally this would be for me a matter of mingled pleasure - that I was, however crudely, on the right lines - and regret - that my analysis was so elementary. But for two reasons I want to return to my elementary analysis. One is that *The Invention of Tradition* may well still be where non-Africanists encounter these ideas. The other is

³¹ Ibid., p. 7.

³² Ibid., p. 3.

that for me it remains a starting-point in the process of self-criticism, which generates more general critical propositions. I seek therefore to make some self-criticisms which may develop into wider criticisms of the new verities of colonial cultural and ideological invention.

I think the best place to begin with is with the word 'invention' itself. Our choice of it, was of course, deliberate. It had several advantages. To 'invent' tradition was yet more challenging than to invent 'America' or 'Athens' or even 'Ethnicity', so the term pointed up the paradox of the thesis argued in the book. 'Invention' was also a word appropriate to the age of industrial capitalism in which (as I have said) *The Invention* is situated. Finally, it emphasised conscious construction and composition of 'tradition', appropriate to the sort of situation described by Callaway:

British officers played imperial roles with what might be seen as a talent for theatrical improvisation. Appropriate ceremonies were elaborated, drawing from numerous sources: established military and state rituals, the displays of power staged in India at the turn of the century and, in Nigeria, some of the more regal practices they found on arrival.³³

But there are also serious drawbacks to the term 'invention'. It implies too one-sided a happening. An invention presupposes an inventor - and in my chapter in *The Invention* the inventors were mainly colonial administrators or missionaries, working admittedly with African collaborators but with these playing the role of laboratory assistants rather than of scientists. As Rosalind O'Hanlon remarks *à propos* of imperial India:

The assumption seems to be made too often that the flow of power was all in one direction: that colonial knowledges intervened from above and outside to transform Indian culture and social relations.

As we have already seen, O'Hanlon insists that as a result of indigenous developments towards capitalism and bureaucracy Indian intellectuals were already adroit in classification and the invention of subordinate identities. She insists that 'some at least of what we now call "colonial knowledge" about India emerged from the late eighteenth century as the jointly authored product alike of officials of the East India Company and their ... interested Indian infor-

³³ Callaway, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

mants'.³⁴ Pre-colonial Africa was certainly different from eighteenth-century India, but I take O'Hanlon's warnings to heart. And I confess that with all its scholarship and verve, Vansina's version of the pre-colonial great 'tradition', of the stultification of colonial invention, and of the present impotence of African thinkers and doers, constitutes an alarming over-endorsement of the argument of *The Invention*. I certainly did not mean in my chapter to abandon the idea, which I have often urged, of African creative initiative under colonialism. Hence I greatly prefer Feierman's formulations, which suggest, rather than a single great tradition coming to an end under colonialism, a pluralism both before, during and after colonialism, and which suggest that while colonialists were inventing 'tribes' and narrowing cultural choices, peasant intellectuals could make their own enlarging uses of 'tradition'.

Moreover, invention is too once-for-all an event. An invention may take some time to develop but, once made by the individual or team who have been working on it, all that is left is to supply for a patent. It is a term which makes little allowance for process, for the constant reworking of identities and the steady transformation of institutions. It may well be thought that I am making too heavy weather of a problem often recognised in the literature of 'invention'. So, for example, Werner Sollors writes of 'invented' ethnic groups constantly changing and redefining themselves; speaks of 'the ongoing process of inventing ethnicity'; and asserts that

The forces of modern life embodied by such terms as 'ethnicity', 'nationalism' or 'race' can indeed be meaningfully discussed as 'invention'. Of course, this usage is meant not to evoke a conspiratorial interpretation of a manipulative inventor who single-handedly makes ethnics out of unsuspecting subjects, but to suggest widely shared, though intensely debated, collective fictions that are continually reinvented.³⁵

Sollors' idea of 're-invention' might do the trick. But I think that colonial Africa is sufficiently different from modern America to justify rather more anxiety about the over-directive implications of 'invention' or 're-invention'. Many 'ethnicities' in the United States - like the nineteenth-century 'German' immigrants of Kathleen

³⁴ Rosalind O'Hanlon, *op. cit.*, pp. 6 and 7.

³⁵ Werner Sollors (ed.), *The Invention of Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) p. XI.

Conzen's chapter in Sellors' collection³⁶ - were manifestly inventing themselves. But some at least of the Africanist literature *has* more or less suggested the making of 'ethnics out of unsuspecting subjects', and we certainly need to come on to what Sellors calls the 'intense debates' *within* shared 'collective fictions'.

Hence I have come to think that the defects of the term 'invention' compromise not only my chapter but also some of the later work on colonial custom. The idea can be a foreclosing one. It emphasises, and emphasises rightly, a contrast between pre-colonial fluidity and the reification of colonial classification, between mobile custom and static tradition. But, however codified and static colonial tradition was intended to be, it could never end there. To focus on the innovation of a tradition is certainly to approach it historically, but to approach it fully historically means also to study its subsequent development and the conflict over its meaning. Moreover, to say that 'invented tradition was a product of the ideological needs of colonialism' foreshortens colonialism as well as tradition. Brief as it was in the overall history of Africa, the colonial period was long enough for a shifting history of hegemony. My chapter and the subsequent literature is strong on early colonialism and on the 1930s but much weaker on the period of the Second World war and after, when other legitimations and innovations were required. The continuation in Africa of the invented traditions of Europe, long after they had become irrelevant to governance at home (which is documented in Callaway's book) was real but deceptive. Things had changed in colonial Africa too.

So the word 'invention' gets in the way of a fully historical treatment of colonial hegemony *and* of a fully historical treatment of African participation and initiative in innovating custom. I have come to prefer Benedict Anderson's word from his *Imagined Communities*. Some traditions in colonial Africa really *were* invented, by a single colonial officer for a single occasion. But customary law and ethnicity and religion and language were *imagined* by many different people and over a long time. These multiple imaginations were in tension with each other and in constant contestation to define the meaning of what had been imagined - to imagine it further. Traditions imagined by whites were re-imagined by blacks; traditions imagined by particular black interest groups were re-

³⁶ Kathleen Neils Conzen, 'Ethnicity as Festive Culture: Nineteenth Century German America on Parade', in Sellors (ed.), *op. cit.*

imagined by others. The history of modern tradition has been much more complex than we have supposed.

Above all, I like the word 'imagining' because, much more than the term 'invention', it lays stress upon ideas and images and symbols. However politically convenient they were, the new traditions were, after all, essentially about identity and identity is essentially a matter of imagination. It is good that the growing focus on colonial ideology is beginning to be matched by an interest in African ideas.

Rethinking the invention of ethnicity

It seems best to begin a reconsideration of the invention of tradition in colonial Africa with the topic of ethnicity. In this way we can make a direct connection with the work of Sollors and his collaborators. It is in the treatment of ethnicity, moreover, that Africanists have begun to develop the study of intensely debated collective fictions. And the topic is central to my reconsideration of my own work because I have developed my own ideas by means of a series of studies of ethnicity in Southern Africa.

Over the eight years during which I have been seeking to resolve the problem of modern southern African ethnicity I have been changing my mind, away from the notion of 'invention' and towards the notion of 'imagination'. The sequence of my work on ethnicity began by placing almost all the emphasis upon imposed colonial classifications of identity. Thus in 1982 I published a chapter in Robert Ross's collection *Racism and Colonialism*.³⁷ Its title is self-explanatory- *Race and Tribe in Southern Africa: European Ideas and African Acceptance*. The argument ran that colonial administrators needed comprehensible and manageable units and so invented tribes; urban employers needed, or at any rate inevitably developed, ethnic hierarchies of hypothesised labour skills. These ready-made common-sense 'inventions' were given greater legitimacy by the classifying (and sometimes frankly racist) tendencies of colonial science and social science.³⁸ These were the "European ideas" which

³⁷ Robert Ross (ed.), *Racism and Colonialism* (Leiden, 1982).

³⁸ I treated these tendencies of colonial science and social science in 'From Humanism to the Science of Man: Colonialism in Africa and the Understanding of Alien Societies', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 26, 1976.

Africans 'accepted'.³⁹ The emphasis was perhaps an odd one for someone as closely associated as I had been with arguments for 'African initiative', especially since a sense of ethnic *identity* could hardly be simply imposed from outside or from above. There plainly had to be more than merely African 'acceptance'. At the least there had to be African collaboration.

This was the stage I had reached at the time of my chapter in *The Invention of Tradition* in 1983.⁴⁰ In this I took some pains to describe the essential African collaborators in the 'invention' of ethnicity and of customary law. But I treated them too much as 'collaborators' in an almost Second World War sense. I think now that my argument was too polarised between what I identified as 'admirable' flexible custom and what I defined as 'deplorable' invented tradition. I associated all the positive forces in African societies with custom and all the reactionary forces with tradition. The African agents of ethnicity were all those elements in southern African society of which I disapproved - chiefs against commoners, fathers against sons, patriarchs against wives and daughters. They had their own interests, of course, but these interests were compatible with colonial hegemony. Such collaborators were building up African patriarchy within the structures of European paternalism.

This is a polarisation that cannot really stand up to the abundant evidence of the key role played in the imagination of ethnicity by young migrant workers and by mission-educated catechists. Nevertheless, the same sort of argument emerges from my 1985 pamphlet, *The Invention of Tribalism in Zimbabwe*. There the inventors of Ndebele ethnicity - a self-conscious tribalism which had arisen in the twentieth century in place of nineteenth-century membership of a multi-ethnic state - were colonial administrators from Natal, who expected 'the Ndebele' to be like the colonial image of 'the Zulu', and salaried Ndebele chiefs, who were only too ready to accept such a glamorous and authoritarian identity.⁴¹ Even though the Rhodesian state did not experiment with Indirect Rule and did not seek to create an Ndebele 'homeland', nevertheless I argued that the invention of 'the Ndebele' contributed to colonial hegemony. The

³⁹ Terence Ranger, 'Race and Tribe in Southern Africa: European Ideas and African Acceptance', in Ross, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ Terence Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁴¹ Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tribalism in Zimbabwe* (Mambo, 1985).

salaries *indunas* - with greater wealth in cattle than they had ever enjoyed under Lobengula - were reliable opponents of calls to revive the monarchy and reliable repressors of popular religious movements which threatened both 'Ndebele' and colonial order.

I would now say that these successive formulations were not so much incorrect as incomplete. There *were* 'European ideas' of ethnic classification *and* they did play a key role; there was a patriarchal alliance; there *was* one type of 'Ndebele' identity which expressed particularly the interests of Ndebele *indunas*. These factors played in combination a very important part in the first stages of *inventing* Ndebele, and many other, ethnic identities. But these really are very much first-stage explanations. European classifications and inventions of race, or tribe or language in effect created a series of empty boxes, with bounded walls but without contents. It was all very well to write of 'the Ndebele', or 'the Kikuyu', but to give *meaning* to that identity was a much more complex and contested business. Whites, in alliance with patriarchs, could suggest some very basic meanings derived from simplifications of African history or from industrial and urban occupational stereotypes. But such meanings were *too* simple to sustain and develop self-identity. And this was particularly so if, as Ekeh and Fields argue, the colonial 'invention' of tribalism was less than fully hegemonic; if the production of 'tribes' was essentially a device to delegate the definition and operation of social morality away from the colonial state. Under such circumstances the *significance* of being 'Ndebele' or Kikuyu' was bound to be a matter of internal struggle. Its imagination could not be left to the patriarchs, especially as they rarely commanded the intellectual tools required to shape 'tribal' discourse.

In my more recent work on southern African ethnicity I have tried to explore the dynamics of 'imagining' identity, as well as the factors at work in the initial 'invention' of tribalism. But before coming on to this work I need to acknowledge two bodies of scholarship which have had the greatest influence on the development of my own thinking. One addresses the question of pre-colonial ethnicity; the other the question of the dialectic between 'political tribalism' and 'moral ethnicity' in twentieth-century Africa. I draw here on the writings of historians of South Africa of Tanzania and of Kenya.

Let us begin with Steven Feierman. His book is partly a confession of the inadequacy of the old ethnic unit of study. The political economy emphasis of Dar Es Salaam historiography showed him

that it was 'impossible to continue treating the spatial boundaries of the Shambaa kingdom as the boundaries of a political system'. But at the same time, Dar historiography did not help him to construct an alternative anthropology 'because it did not address questions about the local culture of the peasantry'. What Feierman has done is to move away from the assumption of a bounded 'tribal' society and to focus precisely on the construction of an unbounded 'local culture'.

This concept of the simultaneous openness and localism of culture is central to Feierman's argument. As he writes:

The whole weight of historical research since the 1960s has shown that important institutions and patterns of action stretched across the boundaries of linguistic/ethnic/cultural groups. Trade Diaspora's, religious brotherhoods, regional healing cults, the movement of individual households in search of farming land and migration during famine all took place within spatial boundaries very different from the lines on any ethnic map.

Hence any locality had 'a co-existence of multiple histories' and many discourses. For Feierman the main question in understanding such open local cultures is not 'What is Tradition?' but 'who invests a form of discourse with authority?' In this way we can

situate discourse in a society without making the assumption that the whole of a society shares a single body of practice. A single local culture, superficially homogeneous, includes many streams of discourse, each located in the differentiated organisation of intellectuals.⁴²

In a rich and subtle discussion Feierman reveals the multiple and conflicting discourses within pre-colonial Shambaa, each articulated by differently legitimated intellectuals. In such a context, the impact of colonialism looks very different. There could be no question of colonial ideological and material power throwing yet firmer boundaries around already enclosed African microcosms. New Shambaa identities were not 'moulded as though from raw clay by the dominant group'. The organisation of colonial power was 'national' and 'peasant discourse is local' but this did not mean that 'the powerful colonial state' could crush or reify 'fragile and helpless local

⁴² Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) pp. 29, 31, 33.

culture'. As in the past local intellectuals, 'at the nexus between domination and public discourse, imagined new identities. The colonial regime might go far to determine *who* such intellectuals were - in Shambaa, Kilindi chiefs and Christian and Muslim literates - but it could not decide anything else:

The colonial rulers determined who in African society introduced the terms of political debate but they could never determine where that debate would end.⁴³

By determining *who* rural intellectuals were to be, the colonial government partly determined what identities they would imagine. Chiefs and young literates in combination imagined ethnicity all over British Africa, as chiefs who could no longer carve out conquest polities for themselves over coerced strangers sought to legitimate their dominance of colonial local government by means of the invocation of the immemorial solidarities of tribe, and the young literate sought to modernise rural politics as advisers and councillors to 'tribal' rulers. In so doing, both played upon or responded to the inventive tendencies of colonial administrators and missionaries. In this way, in Shambaa as in many other parts of East and southern Africa, identities become more bounded even as networks of interaction widened enormously. In fact, the enclosing and the widening were part of a single process as the imaginers of ethnicity tried to achieve competitive advantage over other 'tribes' and over ethnic juniors or members of 'sub-ethnicities'.

So far Feierman's emphasis on multiple discourse and the key role of intellectuals is compatible with the periodisation of *The Invention* - there had been, after all, plenty of identities to imagine other than the tribal. But Feierman's emphasis is compatible also with an O'Hanlon-style analysis in those parts of Africa where there were in the pre-colonial period complex and multiple political economies *similar* in fundamental ways to colonialism. In these rare instances - rare, at least, in East and Southern Africa - there was no need to have colonial capitalism in order to invent, or imagine, ethnicity. In such cases African intellectuals could privilege ethnic discourse over all others by a process which was entirely internal to their societies. Recent work suggests that the pre-colonial Zulu state was just such a case.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

Of course, the later definitions of Zulu identity were profoundly affected by European language work and 'traditional history' collection, and by ethnic task hierarchies, and by black and white patriarchal alliances, but the earlier stages allow us to carry out a sort of intellectual experiment and to explore what happens before and without the dominance of 'European ideas'.

Research on the Zulu state has begun to show the complexity and elaboration of the ideological work that underlay it. Thus John Wright has described the development of a hierarchy of dialect. The term 'Nguni', which had been in use among the small chiefdoms of what came to be Zulu land to denote 'great antiquity and extensive political authority', was now appropriated exclusively by the Zulu ruling lineage. Shaka claimed the term in order 'to associate himself with the ancient inhabitants' and to transform his status 'as the upstart head of a potentially unstable conquest state', thus propagating an ideology which depicted the Zulu ruling house as 'natural' rulers of the kingdom by right of 'seniority'. The term *Mntwana*, which had merely meant 'child', was now reserved to mean 'prince'; salutations used in other lineage's were monopolised by the Zulu rulers. Thus most of the previous prestige terms were drawn to the centre of the new state. At the same time, 'ethnic terminology' was developed in order to *differentiate* as well as to *consolidate*. Marginal subject peoples were marked off as inferior to those at the kingdom's core, by means of stressing 'certain features of their cultures and dialects'. Meanwhile, at the core,

the Zulu ruling lineage worked to enforce linguistic and cultural uniformity ... with non-Zulu patterns of speech and behaviour being officially discouraged in favour of Zulu ones.⁴⁴

This process of ethnic differentiation within a complex political economy, which expropriated from some and distributed to others, is further illuminated in a recent article by John Wright and Carolyn Hamilton.⁴⁵ They properly criticise the proliferation of descriptions of the Zulu polity which portrayed it as a united and homogeneous state that was held together primarily through the exercise of force by its rulers'. Such accounts were too exclusively political and

⁴⁴ John Wright, 'Politics, ideology and the Invention of "Nguni"', in Tom Lodge (ed.), *Resistance and Ideology in Settler Societies* (University of the Witwatersrand, 1986).

⁴⁵ John Wright and Caroline Hamilton, 'The Making of the Amalala: Ethnicity, Ideology and Relations of Subordination in a Pre-Colonial Context', *South African Historical Journal*, 22, November 1990.

economic; 'there was very little conception that the Zulu state ... consisted of a number of heterogeneous groups, and that, as in all polities, ideological factors were crucial in maintaining its social cohesion.'

In this way Wright and Hamilton suggest a shift of problematic in the analysis of the Zulu state analogous to the shift in the study of the colonial state itself, where earlier stress on the 'exercise of force by its rulers' has increasingly been supplemented by emphasis on 'ideological factors'. And their conclusions on Zulu ethnicity are strongly reminiscent of Leroy Vail's conclusions for colonialism. They argue that, before the nineteenth century, kinship operated in the 'Nguni' areas as an ideology of political incorporation. In such small 'kin'-based chieftaincies ethnicity meant nothing. With the rise of the complex and differentiated Zulu, state, however, kinship came to operate also as an ideology exclusion, as 'ruling groups came to use it in attempts to define groups of people whose access to socially necessary resources ... they were concerned to diminish'. Where differentiation *within* political economies was required, ethnic identities developed. They illustrate their argument by the special case of the emergence of the *amalala* identity. They conclude:

The *amalala* emerged in the 1820s as an ethnically defined category of peripherally situated peoples who were incorporated into the Zulu kingdom on quite a different basis from the chiefdoms of the kingdom's heartland. In so far as they recognise its existence at all, previously developed theories of the kingdom's formation cannot adequately account for this differentiation. Older theories, which see the kingdom as a politically homogeneous conquest state would portray the 'Lala' as a group of related 'tribes' whose subordination to the Zulu state, like that of the other tribes of the kingdom, was achieved and maintained purely by force.... The implications of our argument go beyond the making of ethnic identities in pre-colonial Natal. In many respects, the *lala* case conforms to the model for the development of ethnic consciousness in southern Africa in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries posited by Leroy Vail. It lends support to the central feature of his model, that ethnic identities are always created in specific historical circumstances. It confirms his view of ethnicity as an ideological statement which acquires heightened appeal in contexts of rapid and profound social and political change. Vail argues that what emerges from case studies of ethnicity in colonial and post-colonial times is the extent to which ethnic ideologies were 'carefully crafted' in order to define the cultural characteristics of various ethnic groups. Likewise, he stresses the connection between the emergence of ethnic ideologies and the

establishment of systems of 'indirect rule'.... His points find clear echoes in this case study (though) the case of the *amalala* indicates that in Southern Africa ethnicity had taken root before the advent of literacy, European intellectuals and colonialism.⁴⁶

It may seem strange that this work on the Zulu should have influenced my own movement from 'invention' to 'imagination' because, in one sense, Hamilton and Wright present us with an all-too-simple model of *imposed* ethnicity. Almost all ideological initiative is given to Shaka or to undefined 'Zulu leaders', who allocate prestige to some aspects of culture and language and shame to others. This sort of Lala identity certainly looks invented rather than imagined. But their work opens up a much richer and more contested interpretation of the history of consciousness in nineteenth-century Zulu land, an interpretation which gives full value to ideologies of decentralisation as well as of dominance; which shows how the process of ethnic differentiation was carried on into the 'Lala' chiefdoms themselves so as to discriminate between the Cele ruling house and ethnically inferior commoners; but which also shows how 'Lala' identity came after Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 to be 'increasingly accepted, and even promoted by certain categories of African people in Natal, in particular by elements of the newly Christianised elite' who wished to distinguish themselves from the defeated Zulu. What emerges from the Zulu case, in other words, is a sense of how lengthy and various the contest over meaning can be once ethnic markers like 'Zulu' and 'Lala' have been 'invented'. Indeed, the various and constantly developing and interacting 'imaginings' of Zulu-ness, constituted a major theme in the ideological history of southern Africa over nearly two centuries. With Zulu royal definitions of identity, just as with colonial classification, it was one thing to invent boundary markers and another to fill them with imaginative meaning.

After Feierman's emphasis on the critical role of the local intellectuals and after Wright and Hamilton's demonstration of the dynamics of pre-colonial ethnicity, one turns back with different eyes to the role of the colonial state in invention. Here I have found the most penetrating work to be Bruce Berman's on the ambivalence of the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23. See also C. A. Hamilton, 'An Appetite for the Past: the Recreation of Shaka and the Crisis in Popular Historical Consciousness', *South African Historical Journal*, 22, November 1990.

colonial state in Kenya.⁴⁷ Indeed, it is not too much to say that Berman's book brings together into one coherent set of interactions the scattered insights of my chapter in *The Invention*, and also develops the idea of the transition from colonial invention to African imagination.

The Kenyan state, he writes, 'lacked the key attributes of autonomous statehood', yet it was *not* merely a 'subordinate part of the metropolitan state' nor 'a dependent superstructure of capitalism'. In fact, 'colonial states exercised genuine autonomy in relation to the metropole, and at the level of the conscious practice of the officials involved'. Nor were the officials of the Kenyan state mere instruments of metropolitan or local capital. They stood apart from and were often hostile to settler society, and they were imbricated in various ways with African society:

If the colonial state is to be seen as the coercive instrument of the metropole subduing and controlling the indigenous population it has to be recognised that it accomplished this with an apparatus of force notable primarily for its small size and the paucity and decrepitude of its hardware.... The slender resources of violence employed and the actual achievement of a remarkable level of order and control suggest a state resting to some degree on the consent or acquiescence of the local population. In other words, it had achieved, at least temporarily, a measure of legitimacy and a mode of domination rather more complex than that of omnipotent ruler and servile subject.

But how much more complex? Like Fields and Ekeh though the Kenyan colonial state was more active in transformation than the Northern Rhodesian or Nigerian - Berman does not argue for a fully hegemonic relationship between ruler and ruled. Alliances of imperfectly conceived interest were struck with African elites, but the content of the structures thereby created were neither defined nor controlled by the colonial administration. Internal struggles within African societies - struggles about definitions of identity among much else - continually eroded the effectiveness of collaborative structures:

Colonial 'domination' is a much more complex and fragile relationship than is commonly recognised, resting as much on a material

⁴⁷ Bruce Berman, *Control and Crises in Colonial Kenya. The Dialectic of Domination*, (London: James Currey, 1990).

foundation of accumulation and class collaboration as (on) the imposition of superior coercive force. The relationship of domination was essential for the process of articulation, yet was repeatedly undermined by the latter's contradictions and crises. From this perspective we can more clearly analyse the pivotal importance, often noted but seldom fully understood, of the colonial prefect or field administrator, as the primary agent of the construction and maintenance of the relations of domination.⁴⁸

Thus Berman has a section on 'ideology in the colonial state: paternalistic authoritarianism and the ruling class', in which he shows how Kenyan colonial administrators drew on the 'invented traditions' of nineteenth-century Britain to distinguish themselves both from settlers and from Africans. He stresses their belief in organic community, derived from 'a romanticised image of an agrarian society (notably the English village of some ill-defined golden past)'; their emphasis on hierarchy and tradition, derived from the culture of the public school; the cult of games; the elaborate rites of gentility; their strong sense of an order of ranks 'into which Africans fitted as an inevitable and necessary lower class'. It was, he says, an ideology which reflected 'the contradictory social forces pulling at the state'. It 'reflected the continuing influence of the landed aristocracy' and also 'the ethos and interests of an increasingly powerful professional middle class'. It was an ideology which did not fundamentally challenge capitalism but which asserted the need for disinterested management of its consequences. So far as Africans were concerned, it was an ideology which asserted knowledge of and authority over the African subject but which at the same time depended for its plausibility on a series of shifting and superficial alliances with African interests. Berman ends his book by summing up 'the existential pathos' of the Kenyan state, 'that janus-faced quality, which emerges so clearly to us in historical analysis' but which 'also presented itself to the officials involved':

The ambivalence of their position, which this whole book has endeavoured to reveal as a complex of contradictions, was experienced by them as alternations of potency and weakness. The consciousness of colonial officials displayed an oscillation between a commanding sense of volitional power and a fearful sense of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3, 9.

impotence in the face of unseen and incomprehensible forces; between control and crisis.⁴⁹

This is the context in which Berman's discussion of colonial ethnicity is placed. In a recent paper⁵⁰ he gives an account of the *origins* of Kikuyu ethnicity which *mutatis mutandis* is very similar to my own 1985 account of the 'invention' of Ndebele tribalism. In this account, too, the myths of administrators and the interests of chiefs are central. 'It is increasingly clear', writes Berman, 'that the concept of "traditional society", and its particular expression in Africa, "tribal society", represent idealised constructs which very imperfectly reflect what we now understand about the character of pre-colonial African societies.... traditional society" represented instead the coming together of a set of seemingly incongruous assumptions and interests.'

These were variously the administrative ideology of 'paternalistic authoritarianism grounded in a concept of society as an "organic community"'; the 'far more rationalist model of traditional society of British social anthropology'; and finally 'the interests and perspectives of African chiefs and elders ... who were the primary source of information about indigenous institutions and culture and sought to bolster their legitimacy by accounts that stressed their authoritative role in the maintenance of the order and harmony of pre-colonial society'. So far, there does not seem to be anything very different here from my own original account of 'invention'.

The difference lies, of course, in Berman's insistence on the internal dialectics of Kikuyu identity. In pre-colonial times, he insists, 'Kikuyu' society was *not* stable harmonious and traditional; instead there was already a process of differentiation and class formation, as wealthy families colonised new lands and attached landless dependants to themselves. The chiefs and elders who negotiated Kikuyu ethnicity with the administration were among such accumulators. But under colonialism the character and consequences of accumulation became more complex:

From the 1920s the developing elite of accumulators was internally split by a cleavage between the collaborationist chiefs and their families and supporters and a younger and more populist element ...

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 440.

⁵⁰ Bruce Berman, 'Nationalism, Ethnicity and Modernity: the Paradox of Mau Mau', Conference on the State, Society and Social Movements in Africa', University of Warsaw, March 1990.

willing to confront colonial authority over the issue of the 'stolen' lands.... At the other pole of the class structure, growing numbers of impoverished Kikuyu were leaving the home territories ... to seek land and work as squatters or wage labourers

These internal divisions within 'Kikuyu' society meant that those who had created the idea of 'Kikuyu tradition' could no longer determine its content. As Berman writes:

The developing conflicts within and between the developing social classes in Kikuyu society were expressed in a vigorous internal debate ... over the meaning of Kikuyu-ness, the nature of the community, the value of 'tradition', the involvement in new forms of production and exchange, and the degree of acceptance and assimilation to European culture.... By the late 1940s the Kikuyu were a deeply divided people, increasingly in conflict among themselves as well as with the colonial political and economic order. The dispossessed and impoverished confronted the leadership of the chiefs and the developing petty bourgeoisie.... The struggle over authentic Kikuyu-ness, over the character of the imagined community, continued unabated.

In such a situation the imagination of chiefs and elders and intellectuals was challenged by the imagination of radical trade unionists and church leaders and peasant utopianism. It is in this context that Berman situates 'Mau-Mau'. It was not a Kenyan nationalist movement challenging patriarchal tribalism. Rather 'what the British called Mau Mau ... was no single thing, but a diverse and exceedingly fragmented collection of organisations and ideas, out of which no dominant concept of a Kikuyu imagined national community had emerged'. Mau-Mau ideology, writes Berman, consisted of 'largely failed efforts to define a Kikuyu nationality linked to a militant populist politics of the poor'. On the other side, the 'loyalists' continued to propagate 'Kikuyu traditional' values of industry, achievement and patronage.⁵¹

Berman's statement of the contested imagining of Kikuyu identity is exciting enough. But, as he himself says, the content of the rival imaginings was obscure to the British at the time and is only now being reconstructed by historians. Here the work of John Lonsdale is crucial. In a series of seminar papers and in his new collection with Bruce Berman, he has been exploring the intellectual, moral and

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 7-9, 20-4.

symbolic content of ideas of Kikuyu identity.⁵² Lonsdale emphasises that 'tribes' were not actual social organisations but states of mind:

Tribes, like nations - and they are alike in most respects other than in their lack of a state - are changing moral arenas of political debate.... Kikuyu nationalism, like any other, was in origin an intellectual response to social process. It was a contest of moral knowledge. Its rival leaders addressed the concerns which face nationalists everywhere. There is some tantalising evidence that they did so before colonial rule. After British conquest they then had to thrash out again the old issues raised by their society's unequal moral economy, at a time when its distribution of wealth, honour and power was being subverted by external pressure for change.... To debate civic virtue was to define ethnic identity.... At that time citizenship had an ethnic dimension. There were good reasons for this. First, ethnic identity was the reverse of what it is often said to be, unthinking conformity. A common ethnicity was the arena for the sharpest social and political division. Second, argument over domestic civic virtue tested claims to provide external political leadership. Finally, contests about tribal identity did not exclude and may have kindled a territorial, 'Kenyan' political imagination then. There is no reason why they should not do so now.... To rethink tribes may also be to rethink states.⁵³

Lonsdale's endeavour is to trace the continual redefinitions to analyse the successive 'political languages' of Kikuyu nationalism. As he writes, 'the creation and recreation of this political language was a historical process' which had to be studied historically. He begins with the pre-colonial 'ideological entrepreneurs' who created a sense of communal identity out of the 'peoples of mixed origins' who occupied and began to clear the central Kenyan forests in the nineteenth century and he shows how the metaphors of clearing and stumping and labour remained central to successive Kikuyu imaginations. He goes on to make use of Kikuyu Bible translations of the vernacular press, of Kenyatta's anthropological and polemical writings to show how there emerged in the twentieth century a

⁵² For an early statement on imagined ethnicity, see John Lonsdale, 'When did the Cusii (or any other group) become a tribe?', *Kenya Historical Review* 5, 1, 1977. For the developing argument in seminar papers, see John Lonsdale, 'Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought', University of Stirling, March 1988; Oxford University, February 1989.

⁵³ John Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of Mau-Mau', in Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley* (London: James Currey, 1992). Page references are to the manuscript of the chapter. This citation is from pp. 3 and 4.

systematic 'Kikuyu labour theory of value', drawing upon but transmuting these nineteenth-century origins:

They elevated the identity of tribe over that of clan, with the aid of a Biblically-inspired sense of history.... They tried to recapture the civilising energies of labour for the service of Gikuyu improvement from out of its tributary subordination to white settler capitalism; they faced the problem of moralising their own educational advantage ... principally by aligning themselves with the inherent patriarchy of male Gikuyu thought.... Collectively, they tried to translate the private virtue of material accumulation into the civic right to defend the interests of a people whom they were in the process of reinventing. Gikuyu nationalism, like nineteenth-century European nationalism, was a quest for social solidarity; like them too, it was also a political theory of capitalist enterprise.⁵⁴

It was this Kikuyu theory of capitalist enterprise which was challenged by the Kikuyu dispossessed and impoverished.

Lonsdale stresses the externality of the colonial state to this moral debate about citizenship, however much it depended on its invented tribes. 'Conquest states wielded force outside daily life rather than persuasive power within.... Dominating networks of ethnicity, they lacked the curb of civil society.... Without such political constraints, white rulers were deprived of social purchase. Their political domination could not enjoy moral mastery.'⁵⁵ Lonsdale calls the colonial (and post-colonial) *invention* of ethnic groups and their exploitations as units of patronage political tribalism'; the *imagination* by Africans of ethnic citizenship he calls 'moral ethnicity'. 'Tribe was not so much inherited as invented.... External ethnicity was the form of the politics of access to the state; it was pursued in tension with an "interior architecture" of civic virtue.... Political tribalism constitutes communities through external competition. Moral ethnicity creates communities through domestic controversy over civic virtue.'⁵⁶

The legacies of political tribalism and of moral ethnicity are very different. 'The British offered Africans no arena of debate wider than their invented tribes' and hence impeded the evolution of African civil society. 'The illegitimacy of the state bred deep political

⁵⁴ John Lonsdale, 'Wealth, Power and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought', Oxford, February 1989, p. 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

crisis.' Meanwhile, 'moral ethnicity is the nearest Kenya has to a national memory and a watchful political culture ... a more trenchant critic of the abuse of power than any western political thought'.⁵⁷

It has been in tentative anticipation of, interaction with and reaction to this Tanzanian, South African and Kenyan work that I have sought to move in my studies of Zimbabwean ethnicity from invention to imagination. Feierman's insistence on the critical role of African organic intellectuals; Wright and Hamilton's demonstration of pre-colonial invention *and* imagination of ethnicity; Berman's exposition of the profound limitations of the legitimacy claimed by the colonial state and of its influence over the imaginations of its subjects; Lonsdale's insistence on the distinction between 'political tribalism' and 'moral ethnicity' and on the positive potentials of the latter - all these are deeply challenging to the first-stage reductionism of my own earlier accounts of the invention of Ndebele ethnicity. So in my later and ongoing analysis of both 'Manyika' and 'Ndebele' ethnicity I have sought to bring out the internal imaginative processes.

I began to do this in a paper for Leroy Vail's 1983 conference on the creation of tribalism in Southern Africa, which was published in his edited volume of 1989.⁵⁸ Under the title of 'Missionaries, Migrants and the Manyika: the invention of ethnicity in Zimbabwe', I focused especially on the ideological input of younger men - the first teacher-catechists of the Christian missions in eastern Zimbabwe, who were the real creators and users of written 'chi-manyika', and the ethnographers of an imagined Manyika identity. I focused also on how these ideas were developed by young migrant workers from eastern Zimbabwe, who spread out into the cities of Rhodesia and South Africa and there adumbrated radical, 'Ethiopian' definitions of manyika-ness. Of course, mission catechists and migrant workers could become patriarchs, but they were

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 198-9, 202. But for the constraints of space I would have wished to acknowledge the influence on my rethinking of work on the other major 'moral ethnicity' in Kenya, the 'Luo', especially D. W. Cohen and E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, *Siaya. The Historical Anthropology of an African landscape* (London: James Currey, 1989); E. S. Atieno Odhiambo, 'From the Kenya State to the Civil Society of the Luo Nation', Conference on State and Society in Africa and Eastern Europe, Bellagio, February 1990.

⁵⁸ Terence Ranger, 'Missionaries, Migrants and the Manyika: the Invention of Ethnicity in Zimbabwe', in Leroy Vail (ed.) *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London: James Currey, 1989).

not expressing patriarchal conservatism in these imaginings of identity, nor was manyika ethnicity a category of 'political tribalism' in the Direct Rule administration of Southern Rhodesia. In short, in this paper, I was discussing John Lonsdale's 'moral ethnicity', the debate over citizenship, without yet knowing it.⁵⁹

In my current work on 'the Ndebele' I am seeking to go beyond the formulations of my 1985 pamphlet. It is clear that even by comparison with 'the Kikuyu' or 'the Shambaa' or 'the Zulu' Ndebele ethnicity is a very complex business. The people who now call themselves Ndebele cover a wider area, come from more varied origins and environments, have more numerous alternative identities available to them. Whereas the clearing of the forest can be said to have created the Kikuyu, ideas about the land predated the Ndebele state, were associated with non-Ndebele cults and symbols, and could only be assimilated to an imagined Ndebele identity by strenuous ideological work. I have tried to give an account of this process, which operated at one level among Mwali cult adepts at the rural grassroots and, at another, among the cultural nationalists of the towns - two distinct, sometimes interacting, sometimes antagonistic groups of organic intellectuals.⁶⁰

Moreover, even though the Ndebele of the nineteenth century has often been thought of as a Zulu-style, Nguni creation, in fact its imaginative processes were very different from those described by Wright and Hamilton for the Zulu kingdom. In the nineteenth century the Ndebele state was a polity to which a great variety of linguistic and 'ethnic' groups owed obedience. When early Rhodesian Native Commissioners, many recruited from Natal, tried to turn the *indunas* of the Ndebele state into tribal chiefs on an authoritarian 'Zulu' model, they were bound to invent a narrow 'Ndebele' ethnicity with a membership restricted to the royal clan and the *Zansi* aristocracy but excluding the great majority of the subjects of the pre-colonial state.

Nevertheless, despite these and other differences, there has been a steady movement of the imagination towards a wider 'Ndebele', identity and away from the narrow 'Zulu' -type model created by

⁵⁹ David Maxwell is developing the analysis of imagined Manyika identity in his Oxford doctoral thesis on north-east Nyanga, where incoming 'Manyika' immigrants confront longer-settled 'Hwesa' people.

⁶⁰ Terence Ranger, 'The Politics of Prophecy in Matabeleland', Satterthwaite. April 1989; 'Power, Religion and the Community: the Matobo Case', Calcutta, December 1989, forthcoming in *Subaltern Studies*, 1992; 'Ethnicity and Nationality: the Case of Matabeleland', Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, May 1991.

early administrators and *indunas*. I have been seeking to document two processes here. The first is the failure of the Rhodesian administration to deliver even when they had the opportunity to work with a strong chief, supported by ideological entrepreneurs who had imagined an exclusive Ndebele identity. In the case I have examined - the case of chief Sigombe of Wenlock in the 1950s - the refusal of the administration to allow Sigombe to develop his own area led to a movement in Wenlock towards a radical and inclusive definition of Ndebele identity which was compatible with participation in the Zimbabwean nationalist movement. This wider cultural nationalism allowed, among other things, for the fusion of Ndebele identity with older ideas about the landscape. Here there is material for comparisons and contrasts with Lonsdale's and Berman's accounts of Kikuyu contestations, also coming to a head in the 1950s.⁶¹

The second process which led to the imagination of a wider Ndebele identity was the emergence of urban ideological entrepreneurs, based mainly in Bulawayo. Here one can make something of the same use of an indigenous press as Lonsdale makes in Nairobi. In this light, Joshua Nkomo emerges as a culture-broker at least as influential as Jomo Kenyatta. As I wrote in a conference paper in February 1990:

I have moved on to see Ndebele ethnicity in rather a different light. I see now a debate between different imaginations of Ndebeleness - the aristocratic caste-limited vision of the *indunas* wing with a succession of alternative visions; a Christian progressive imagining; an inclusive democratic vision of a greater Ndebele identity developed by urban workers and professional men in post-second-world-war Bulawayo.⁶²

What emerges from all this, as from work on the Zulu and the Kikuyu is that ethnicity, once it has been invented, cannot bear a single significance. It cannot be, *by definition*, patriarchal, conservative, reactionary - though it may well begin, or end up, by being so. Its meaning is something to be struggled for - as the uses of Zulu 'tradition' are now being struggled for between *Inkatha* and the radical trade unions in Durban. In the case of Ndebele ethnicity in Zimbabwe, its potential relationship to the state has depended upon

⁶¹ Terence Ranger, 'The Origins of Nationalism in Rural Matabeleland: The Case of Wenlock', Oxford, October 1990.

⁶² Terence Ranger, 'Ethnicity and Nationality in Southern Africa', Bellagio, February 1990, p. 9.

who were at any time the dominant Ndebele 'imagers', but has also depended upon the approach of the state towards regional cultural imaginations.

Thus I would at the moment propose something like the following sequence for Ndebele identity and its relationship to the state. It began, rather as I suggested in *The Invention of Tribalism in Zimbabwe*, with an alliance of administrators and *indunas*, though also supplemented by the ideological work of the first Ndebele-speaking Christian intellectuals, who were largely drawn from the aristocratic *Zansi* caste. When this narrow notion of Ndebele ethnicity spread to the towns and to labour migrants it did so defensively and as a means of beating off the competition of Shona-speakers in the Bulawayo labour market. But in the 1940s and 1950s the initiative passed from the *indunas* and aristocratic Anglicans. Many of the most successful mission-educated men were now drawn from areas which had been outside the core of the Ndebele state: they were ethnically 'Kalanga' or 'Nyubi'. Such men, of whom Nkomo was the foremost, were simultaneously reviving Kalanga cultural nationalism - secretly visiting the shrines of the pre-Ndebele Mwali cult in the Matopos - *and* assuming leadership in the Matabele Home Society, which was defining a broader, inclusive Ndebele identity. Nkomo visited Ndebele royal praise-singers; for a time backed the call for a restoration of the Ndebele monarchy; and advocated pilgrimages to the grave of Mzilikazi. And at the same time he was a trade union leader and leader of the emerging nationalist movement.

All this was producing a rich mix of Matabeleland cultural nationalism. When the Rhodesian state sought in the 1950s to intervene in the rural areas so as to enforce massive destocking of cattle and movement of people, it alienated the 'pure' Ndebele chiefs who had been its potential allies, and drove them and their people into alliance with the urban political spokesmen of the wider Ndebele identity. These urban 'imagers' stressed the compatibility of Ndebele-ness and a wider Zimbabwean nationalism. They emphasised that if Mzilikazi had founded a narrow Ndebele aristocracy, Lobengula had 'imagined' a poly-ethnic patriotism; they argued that representation of African interest must be pyramidal, with men who thought of themselves as 'Kalanga' joining in local Kalanga cultural activities, and the same men, in so far as they saw themselves as Ndebele, joining the Matabele Home Society, and the same men in so far as they shared interests with all Africans in the

country, joining the nationalist movement. Against this development, spokesmen of the old, narrow, exclusive Ndebele identity issued dire warnings of the dangers of alliance with nationalism rather than with the colonial state. But in the later 1950s and early 1960s a wider 'patriotism' dominated. Nkomo was able, as leader of the Zimbabwean nationalist movement, to take even Shona-speaking colleagues to Mzilikazi's grave or to the High God shrines in the Matopos. He was, in fact, actively imagining these as resources for a Zimbabwean identity, just as they had been imagined as resources for a wider Ndebele ethnicity. Thus, in the words of John Lonsdale. 'contests about tribal identity did not exclude and may have kindled a territorial political imagination.... To rethink tribes may also be to rethink states.'⁶³

Such imaginations seemed ill-founded in view of subsequent events. The guerrilla war of the 1970s seemed more and more divided between 'Ndebele' guerrillas of Nkomo's ZIPRA and 'Shona' guerrillas of Mugabe's ZANLA. After 1980 it transpired that the imagination of a Zimbabwean national identity had been nothing like resolute or deeply-rooted enough. The Mugabe state tried to equate Zimbabwean identity with a 'Shona' cultural heritage; its soldiers, deployed in Matabeleland against 'dissidents', tried to wean Kalanga away from the wider Ndebele identity by appealing to their older links with 'Shona' culture. Commentators explained events in terms of the unchanging hostilities of primordial tribalism. But, in fact, the 1980s were a further stage of intense debate between different imaginations of Ndebele identity. Some spokesmen of the older, narrow version interpreted events as proof that they were right to warn against participation in Zimbabwean nationalism; on the ground, people responded to the preaching of Shona culture by feeling simultaneously *more* Kalanga and more Ndebele. Nkomo continued to believe that a wide Ndebele identity could be a building block for, and was not incompatible with, Zimbabwean identity. In my 1985 pamphlet I was concerned to show the artificial and narrowly based 'invention' of Ndebele tribalism and to emphasise that if people had come to think of themselves as primarily Ndebele they could as readily come to think of themselves as Zimbabweans. I think now that this was correct in so far as

⁶³ John Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau', p. 4. The summary argument set out here on the imagining of Ndebele ethnicity is most fully stated in my Institute of Commonwealth Studies seminar paper, 'Ethnicity and Nationality: the case of Matabeleland', May 1991.

it emphasised historicity and self-consciousness but misleading in so far as it opposed Ndebele and national identity. The issue in the Zimbabwean case - as with the Kikuyu in Kenya and the Zulu in South Africa - seems to be not so much how to move from reactionary tribalism to progressive nationalism, but how to ensure interactions between a dynamic and inclusive ethnicity and a pluralist and democratic nationalism.⁶⁴

Extending the argument beyond ethnicity

This chapter has already grown too long. But I must set out - in a much briefer way - how the arguments I have been developing for ethnicity can be applied also to other asserted colonial 'inventions'. Take 'customary law', for example, which Chanock has so admirably analysed for Central Africa. The involvement of the administration in codifying customary law seems more concrete and easier to document than its input into ethnicity; the constant determination of cases relating to property and to family makes the idea of patriarchal exploitation of newly-invented customary law immediately plausible. Yet there is a major East African work on customary law which suggests the same sort of modifications to Chanock's conclusions which Lonsdale and Berman compel for my own. This is Sally Falk Moore's *Social Facts and Fabrications, Customary Law on Kilimanjaro, 1880-1980*. Moore emphasises that 'the notion of "customary law" is itself a cultural construct with political implications. The term sounds as if it designates a straightforward set of traditional rules. But the entity to which it refers is a set of ideas embedded in relationships that are historically shifting. The label "customary law" has its own history in the colonial and post-colonial worlds.' She insists upon the need for historical ethnography.

But what the application of her historical ethnography reveals is something different from the reified codification of law on which I insist in my chapter in *The Invention*. In Moore's work the colonial - and post-colonial - recognition of 'customary law' does not mean, as I argued, the ending of flexible custom and the introduction of a rigid code operating in the interests of a patriarchy. Rather it means the setting-apart of a sphere - restricted, tolerated - in which an

⁶⁴ For the recent re-imaginings of 'Kalanga' and 'Ndebele' identity in south-western Zimbabwe, see Richard Werbner, *The Tears of the Dead. The Social Biography of an African Family* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

assumed static customary code in fact deals flexibly with matters below or beyond the concern of the state. Moore's work thus postulates the continued dynamics of a rural 'civil society', dynamic under the guise of traditionalism, autonomous from the overarching state. Once it has 'invented', and gone on recognising, 'customary law' the state does not police it so as to ensure its 'traditional' and unchanging character. Hence the Chagga customary courts adapt and change to the new realities of the colonial and post-colonial economy, all within the rhetoric of changelessness. Chagga customary law is one of the zones set apart for internal contestation and redefinition: no single Chagga interest can continue to dominate it over decades. There are important echoes in this analysis of Ekeh's arguments on ethnicity or of Berman's analysis of the limitations to the hegemonic project of the colonial state. Moore concludes:

The social and economic transformation of Kilimanjaro that occurred in this century radically changed the milieu in which "customary law" was used. But almost by definition, the conventional idea of what "customary law" was seemed not to change. There was no simple mechanism by which the customary corpus could be altered as such. In the colonial period the Native Authorities could make new rules. "Customary law" could be added to, bits of it replaced. It could be reinterpreted. Parts of it could remain unused. But as labelled, it was an entity which was conceived as static. In fact practices changed freely. In practice land became valuable for cash-cropping ... schooling changed the control of parents over the education and labour of their children. The cash economy radically restructured the balance of relationship in households, both between husbands and wives and between parents and children ... (yet) there was no formal means of acknowledging that the entity called 'customary law' had been altered to take account of these changes. (Indeed, after Gutmann there were no successful attempts to compile it let alone to change it).⁶⁵

Yet, *because* of the internally self-justifying ideology of customary law, 'these changes have been accommodated with ease without raising the issue of their status as legal rules'. Customary law courts exist to deal with practice, not to debate rules. And they go on determining local rights and allocations even under the interventionist post-colonial state:

⁶⁵ Sally Falk Moore, *Social Facts and Fabrications. Customary Law on Kilimanjaro, 1880 - 1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1986), pp. 317-18.

The construction of a restricted place for custom by governments clearly has been a matter of calculated policy. But some of the operational effect may not have been fully foreseen. The policy has worked to increase the gap between official government conceptions and the realities of local affairs. The domain of local autonomy is not large, but it is carefully insulated from external interference.... The illusion from outside is that what has been labelled 'customary' remains static in practice is patently false.... A succession of governments have treated 'customary law' as culturally legitimate but essentially obsolete. The legislated transposition of 'customary law' into the 'private' sphere has been accompanied by an official version of government that links innovation with national political leadership, modernism with the top of the political system, archaism and static folkways with the bottom. Meanwhile generations of lively and ingenious rural Chagga have in fact been using their traditions as one of a number of resources out of which to construct new arrangements.⁶⁶

These insights have been taken up in a recent collection on *Law in Colonial Africa*,⁶⁷ which includes chapters by both Moore and Chanock. Its editors, Kristin Mann and Richard Roberts, stress that 'law was central to colonialism in Africa'. Colonialism, they say, 'sought to impose a new moral as well as political and economic order founded on loyalty to metropolitan and colonial states and on discipline, order and regularity in work, leisure and bodily habits'. But this was 'European' law; customary law was another matter, the fruit of 'the invention of tradition in Africa'. So far, so like my chapter in *The Invention*. But they go on to emphasise that traditions were invented by means of a process of 'change and conflict', that there was nowhere a single African tradition but instead 'contested and continuously reconstructed traditions', and that the establishment of customary courts, so far from permanently privileging patriarchs, provided the context for increased competition. Chanock's own chapter introduces many complications to the picture drawn in his book. It deals with the customary law of land tenure and reveals local interests in imagined 'custom' very different from the interests described in the earlier study:

When I looked (in the book) at the development of the 'customary' law of persons in terms of the need to control household labour in

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 319.

⁶⁷ Kristin Mann and Richard Roberts (eds.), *Law in Colonial Africa* (London: James Currey, 1991).

the cash economy, it appeared to be the case that those who were doing economically well within the limits imposed by the colonial regime were those who had the most interest in promoting a 'customary' view of control of persons, a view, that is, that could be presented and validated in customary terms. But the same people would not necessarily adhere to a completely customary package with regard to land. I have also pointed to the widespread rejection of the customary law of marriage by those who had little stake in the rural social order. But with regard to land, these seem to be the very people who would most readily defend the customary view, to preserve the possibility of establishing a claim to an increasingly scarce resource.⁶⁸

In short, 'customary law', so far from being a seamless whole, was in fact an arena for debates about social morality, advancement and citizenship.

Chanock goes on to stress that 'also of vital importance for the framing of "customary" definitions was the question of gender'. In particular, the formation of customary land law took place in the context of a 'developing gender struggle over land'.⁶⁹ And here we reach an important point. Hitherto, this revision of assumptions of 'invention' has not much invoked the conclusions of Africanist gender studies. A remaining deficiency of studies of Kikuyu or Zulu or Ndebele ethnicity is that they tell us almost nothing about the role of women in defining identity. But this is not the case with studies of contests over customary law. Indeed, not only the customary law of land tenure but also the customary law of persons could give rise to gender struggles. A patriarchal alliance might 'invent' customary law in Central Africa but neither administrators nor elders could ensure that it worked continuously to repress women. Megan Vaughan has argued that we need 'to trace the development of a discourse on the meaning of matriliney' and to 'analyse women's contribution to this'.⁷⁰ She stresses the changing attitudes of elders, 'new men', administrators and women and their interaction in the operation of customary law, with women defending matriliney against those who wished to move towards patrilineal

⁶⁸ Martin Chanock, 'Paradigms, Policies and Property: A Review of the Customary Law of Land Tenure', in Mann and Roberts (eds.), *Law in Colonial Africa*, p. 72.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷⁰ Megan Vaughan, 'The Meaning of Matriliney: Marriage in Southern Malawi, 1900-1950', Conference on the Crisis Over Marriage in Colonial Africa, Oxford, December 1988.

institutions and at the same time using the courts to make additional demands on their husbands. Vaughan writes:

The institution of marriage ... was structurally unstable and was in the process of being redefined, partly in response to some of the new economic circumstances of the colonial period and the tendencies of colonial legislation. Women were actively involved in redefining the institution. They defended their rights to uxorilocal marriage and to close co-operation with matrikin. At the same time they attempted, in line with colonial thinking, to enforce a greater degree of financial responsibility on their husbands. There was a tension between these two approaches which emerges clearly in the marriage cases coming before Blantyre District Court... Like any other social system, that of Southern Malawi was an arena of struggle and compromise, of conformity and non-conformity.⁷¹

It is clear, then, that as with ethnicity so with customary law we need to trace a constant process of imagining and reimagining, and the ways in which Africans exploited 'inventions' useful to the colonial rulers so as to preserve areas of autonomy in which unexpected and disconcerting changes might take place. Thus in Zimbabwe, just as I have been seeking to set up such a sequence of contested imagination for Ndebele ethnicity, so other scholars have been seeking to trace the successive imaginations and contestations of 'Shona' customary law.⁷²

Conclusion

I hope I have shown that since the publication of my chapter in *The Invention of Tradition* in 1983 there have not only been much more sophisticated treatments of gender and ethnicity and customary law-and language and religion which advance its argument, but also other work which suggests the need to reformulate that argument. This work has, so to speak, taken the various ingredients of my chapter and reassembled them into another pattern. It has insisted on the need to set the whole discussion within the context of an analysis of the colonial state, not so much in order to lay yet more stress on its agency as to show how ambiguous and limited

⁷¹ Megan Vaughan, *The Story of an African Famine, Gender and Famine in Twentieth Century Malawi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 145.

⁷² Andrew Ladley, 'Courts and Authority: A Study of a Shona Village Court in Rural Zimbabwe', doctoral thesis, University of London, 1985; 'Just Spirits? Chiefs, Tradition and Contract in the Customary Law Courts of Zimbabwe', ms, 1990.

that agency was. Berman has restated the idea of the continuity in twentieth century Africa of the invented traditions of British gentility, not in order to demonstrate their archaic irrelevance, but to show how they reflect the 'relative autonomy' of the colonial state and its aspirations to monitor relations between settlers and Africans. He has shown that there was more connection between such an administrative ideology and the colonial interest in ethnicity and custom merely than that administrators admired 'tradition'. The evolution of ethnicity or of customary law was shaped both by the needs and the impotencies of the colonial state. He and Lonsdale and Moore have shown how initial colonial inventions become a privileged sphere of African contested imaginations. Vaughan has shown how the hegemony of African patriarchs was no more complete than that of the colonial state, and how women could take part in the contestation and the imagining.

This work, therefore, constitutes something other than merely a revival of the old emphasis upon 'African initiative' - from which my chapter in *The Invention* seemed a break. It insists that we see African imaginings as an aspect of colonial society, as part of the processes characteristic of the colonial state. At the same time, it insistently poses questions about the relationship of post-colonial states and African 'tradition'. Lonsdale and Berman explicitly discuss the disjunction's between Kikuyu identity and Kenyan nationalism; Moore explicitly discusses the continued separate sphere of custom within the interventionist Tanzanian state.

I have sought to show how my own work on Zimbabwean history has been affected by these ideas; how I have tried to explore the relationships of Ndebele identity to the colonial state, to nationalism and to the post-colonial state. It remains to be said that one of the key questions for Zimbabweanists at the moment is precisely that of the relationship of the Zimbabwean state to tradition. It claims simultaneously to be the heir of African tradition and of colonial modernity, the custodian of proletarian ceremonial (in the invented May Day parades), of national glory and of rural custom. Its imaginings and uses of an array of traditions, customs and identities are challenged and contested by others. These topics have already stimulated a number of articles.⁷³ They suggest, with

⁷³ A. P. Cheater, 'Contradictions in Modelling Consciousness: Zimbabwean Proletarians in the Making', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, 2, January 1988; Norma Kriger, 'In search of a National Identity he Politics of War Heroes', in Terence Ranger and Ngwabi Bhebe (eds.), *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's War of Liberation*

their strong element of conscious manipulation, the need for a second volume on *The Invention of Tradition in Independent Africa*. And no doubt, in this era of the assertion of civil society, we shall discover yet again that state invention is surpassed, transformed and often thwarted by the imagination of those in what Moore calls 'the domain of local autonomy'.

(Harare: University of Zimbabwe Press, 1993); Terence Ranger, 'Rendre présent le passé au Zimbabwe', *Politique Africaine*, 19, September 1985.