Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization

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In the course of working on a book on the history of the Rhodesian state during its renegade independence (1965-80), I became very interested in the history of universal suffrage and how one man, one vote became the natural logic of decolonization. With funds from the Center for Humanities and the Public Sphere at UF and the Center for African Studies, I was able to organize a small workshop here in April 2009, to bring South Asian historians together with those of Anglophone and Francophone Africa. The discussion was terrific, but made me realize that suffrage was only part of the question; the very mechanics of voting was also critical.

With the help of a CLAS Humanities Enhancement summer award, I was able to go to Zimbabwe for three weeks of research. I had hoped to find material on a quickly organized African-run referendum on Southern Rhodesia's controversial 1961 constitution. I didn't find very much as most files from the early 1960s in Southern Rhodesia have not vet been accessioned in Zimbabwe. I did however find some excellent newspaper accounts, especially from the African press, that described the actual practices of the referendum in several cities. But archives are places of great riches and to my surprise I found material I had long despaired ever finding, especially some of the submissions to the 1969 constitutional commission. This was the constitution by which Rhodesia became a republic and attempted to re-invent Africans as tribal people, unconcerned with politics and policies and eager to follow their chiefs.

Indeed, as the 1969 constitution was debated and drafted, tribes became races and Rhodesia was to be eventually divided into three provinces, one for Europeans, one for Ndebele, and one for Shona. The submissions that led to such a constitution were

quite weird and wonderful, about why Rhodesia should not only continue to be a monarchy but should be ruled directly by the Queen, about voting rights for American Indians in the US, and projections of the extent to which republican status would impact tobacco sales.

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