

BOOK REVIEW

Janet Hodgson. *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*. Cape Town: BestRed (an imprint of HSRC Press), 2021. 193 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$18. Paper. ISBN: 978-1928246398.

Janet Hodgson's latest book, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, is a culmination of decades of research spanning a variety of disciplines, but with a particular focus on the history of conflict, conquest, Christian imperialism, and colonial governance in the nineteenth-century Cape of South Africa. Her previous work, *Zonnebloem College and the Genesis of an African Intelligentsia* (co-written with Theresa Edlmann), was published in 2018, although the foundation for it had been laid in 1975 with her Master's degree research.

Black Womanism in South Africa is based on previous research focusing on the life of Princess Emma Sandile, a forgotten historical figure whom Hodgson attempts to rescue from obscurity. She was the daughter of King Sandile and his wife Noposi, whose lives were disrupted by the arrival of settlers in the eastern Cape of South Africa in the 1800s. The wars and land dispossession which followed were witnessed by a generation of Africans whose lives were also upended by the new religion, Christianity, which was intertwined with Victorian education. While the book is framed as a biography, it is also a history of wars, resistance, colonial governance, and missionary collusion among the Xhosa people in South Africa.

There are two main issues in Hodgson's text: land rights for black women and the connection between religion and politics. The undercurrent of all of this is the nature of historiography as it relates to women such as Emma Sandile who have been relegated to a peripheral status in spite of their actual historical significance. The prologue is an important framing of the practice of creating a history. Hodgson maps out her journey with Emma Sandile's story, which reads as a masterclass for young researchers who are navigating archival research. *Black Womanism in South Africa* is presented in three sections: Emma Sandile's early life and her arrival in Cape Town; the contestations around her marriage when she came of age; and the political resistance which impacted her later in life. The epilogue follows the descendants of Emma Sandile and her husband, Chief Stokwe Ndlela, who continue to bear

the consequences of history as their struggle with land dispossession and traditional authority continues.

While the book offers an expansive narrative about Emma Sandile's life, at times it undermines itself. The title is somewhat misleading, as it appropriates black womanism without engaging it as a theoretical position, which has implications for how we read Emma Sandile as well as our understanding of black womanhood in the nineteenth century. This can be seen in the mischaracterisation of black women's experiences as oppressive without fully explicating the complexities of African traditional family structures. When Emma Sandile meets a potential husband named Qeya, Hodgson characterizes this as feminist independence without expounding on what feminism and black womanism say about Emma Sandile's life being overly determined by missionary collusion with colonial authorities, in a context where her father's power and her family network have been dismantled. In fact, many times Emma Sandile is characterized as silent, presenting her as a minor with no rights. At times this is attributed to African traditionalism, while other times it is the colonial and missionary collusion which disempowers her. The framing of the two worlds in which Emma Sandile is a victim renders her powerless, as she always seems to be at the mercy of the patriarchy. There is little evidence of her friendships while she lived in Cape Town or of her relationships with her co-wives, or any engagement with how to make sense of these absences other than an over-reliance on the colonial archive and the oral histories from the male relations and traditional leaders.

Many will read this book as evidence of the existing problems which arise when white historians write African history from a positionality which is blind to the reproduction of tropes that have been challenged by black feminist historians and Africanist historians in particular. This is warranted. However, it does not belie the book's success, as there exists more evidence than ever before about Emma Sandile's life, even while it raises more questions about historiography. *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile* will be of interest to researchers with an interest in colonial rule, the nature of violence in colonial territories, the nature of land dispossession, and the effect of colonial education in identity formation among the early generations of missionary-educated Africans.

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