

BOOK REVIEW

Susanne Verheul. *Performing Power in Zimbabwe: Politics, Law, and the Courts since 2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Vii + 265pp. Photographs and diagrams. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$110.00. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1316515860.

In *Performing Power in Zimbabwe*, international development scholar Susanne Verheul explores the trials of Zimbabweans accused of political offenses in the country's Magistrates' Courts from 2000 to 2012. While Zimbabwe is often depicted as having no rule of law, Verheul argues that these trials are spaces where the law is negotiated and performed. Highlighting the judiciary as a contested arena and exploring courtroom "performances," she emphasizes the role of law in shaping social and political power. She asserts that legal engagements are not acts of resistance against the law but rather contestations involving competing conceptions of political authority that shape the self-perceptions of Zimbabweans. Verheul draws on existing scholarship in history, anthropology, and legal studies, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between the practice of law within judicial institutions and its role in the political imaginations of citizens.

As the title suggests, Verheul adopts a performance-centered approach, treating the court as a metaphorical theater and combining this with Butlerian performativity to analyze how individuals in the courtroom use scripts, actions, and the court itself to perform and challenge state power. Her perspective recognizes the dual nature of power, encompassing repressive and productive elements enacted by those involved in political trials.

The book comprises eight chapters, each focusing on specific aspects of Zimbabwe's legal system and the performance of power. Chapter 1 provides historical background from 1950 to 2002, illustrating the intertwined nature of legal and state consciousness and examining how historical narratives were employed in debates about law and justice in the early twenty-first century. Chapter 2 explores the fragmented hegemony of law within Zimbabwe's Attorney General's Office, where prosecutors were divided into "good" and "rebel" categories based on their compliance with political instructions.

In Chapter 3, "Zimbabweans are Foolishly Litigious," Verheul investigates the politicization of the judiciary and the state-sponsored violence that shape legal and state consciousness and influence Zimbabweans' approaches

to litigation. In Chapter 4 she focuses on the arrest and detention experiences of young, black, urban-based Zimbabwean men who were human rights defenders, student leaders, political activists, and supporters of the Movement for Democratic Change, the main opposition party. Verheul demonstrates how these activists critique the police and state for their lack of professionalism, emphasizing the normalization of arrests, detention, violence, and torture and their impact on activists' masculinity.

The focus of Chapter 5, "Material and Sensory Courtrooms," is the manner in which human rights lawyers contest the court's authority by pointing to the physical deterioration of courtrooms and presenting visual and olfactory evidence of their clients' abuse in detention. In Chapter 6 the focus turns to the trial of six activists accused of treason after they gathered to watch news footage of the Arab Spring in 2011. Verheul argues that the state used the prosecutors' bench and witness stand as platforms to articulate "acceptable" forms of political expression.

Chapters 7 and 8 contribute to a more inclusive understanding of Zimbabwe by focusing on cases that challenge Shona-centrism. In Chapter 7, Verheul examines the trial of the Mthwakazi Liberation Front, a Bulawayo-based political party accused of high treason. She highlights the contestation of historical narratives surrounding the Gukurahundi period of government-sponsored violent atrocities against the Ndebele. Chapter 8 focuses on the state's erasure of that history, centering around the case of Ndebele artist Owen Maseko, who launched an exhibit about Gukurahundi at Bulawayo's National Gallery in 2010 and was promptly arrested. By examining this case, Verheul highlights how the state has suppressed certain narratives and attempted to control the collective memory of historical events.

Throughout the book, Verheul draws on data collected through courtroom ethnography, drawing from two three-month stays in Zimbabwe in 2010 and 2012. She also conducted dozens of interviews with key stakeholders, including human rights lawyers, activists, magistrates, prosecutors, government ministers, civil society leaders, and political analysts—a list of whom appears in the Bibliography.

This book will be valuable to scholars of legal anthropology, international law, and history. While it lacks the rich detail, contextualized conversations, and fully rounded descriptions of participants one would like to see in an ethnography, it remains accessible and offers nuanced arguments suitable for diverse audiences, including undergraduates. The book provides essential insights into the role of law in Zimbabwe's political landscape and the contestation of power in the courtroom.

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