Allison Shutt, *Manners Make A Nation: Racial Etiquette in Southern Rhodesia, 1910-1963*, University of Rochester Press, Rochester, 2015. ISBN-13 978-1-58046-520-5. pp xiv+245

Allison Shutt’s fascinating book about what she describes as ‘racial etiquette’ reveals how ‘race’ is learned, and illustrates that ‘race’ is performative, far more than it is a physical characteristic. Shutt’s book is about how appropriate behaviour between ‘white’ and ‘African’ communities was defined, policed and challenged in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) from the 1910s to the 1960s. It is, as we would expect in an academic text on African history, a book about politics and economics, and about gender and generation. It is also about gesture, voice and everyday emotional upsets; about hats, sidewalks and dinner tables; and about the endless reinventions of ‘tradition’. Shutt’s use of ‘etiquette’ as a concept with which to think about these things reveals insights into the ideology of ‘partnership’ and the politics of the Central African Federation that are truly fresh and revelatory, having been hidden from other analyses. Although it might, at first glance, appear to be a minority interest, her focus on ‘good manners’ has produced a book that is important for scholars in many fields, although of particularly importance for studies of central African politics, settler colonialism and the multiple performances of ‘race’.

Shutt’s book alternates between looking at what white settlers defined as acceptable manners towards them from Africans, and at what both settlers and Africans defined as acceptable manners by whites towards Africans. She observes how white settlers, and particularly administrators within the Native (later African) Affairs Department, made use of their own myths and ‘knowledges’ about etiquette within African societies to justify their rudeness and violence towards Africans. Whites continually told each other that African ‘tradition’ was steeped with rules about deference to rank, and that Africans therefore expected to be met with violence if they challenged the authority of those in power over them. Administrators’ arrogance and brutality was represented as evidence of their ‘better’ understanding of Africans. These claims to ‘tradition’ were used to undermine the white liberals, who, so the argument went, challenged the administrators’ robust insistence on performances of deference only because they didn’t truly understand African culture.

Shutt’s attention to this deployment of ‘tradition’ reveals how far inter-group racial etiquette was informed by intra-group etiquette. Systems of deference within African societies were, indeed, very important, and had often been robustly policed in the past. Juniors were required to perform deference towards elders. One of the many early upheavals brought above by the white occupation was the employment of junior men into positions of authority over elders. This raised thorny issues about whether elders still had the right to be insolent towards juniors, if those juniors also represented the authority of the white state, as messengers, police constables, or appointed chiefs. The settler state did not argue that state authority replaced ‘traditional’, deference-based, systems of authority. Instead, it appropriated the trappings and rituals of established deference performance for itself. Shutt observes that by the 1960s, rather than challenging the settlers’ belief that it was ‘traditional’ (and therefore somehow acceptable) to use violence to enforce a performance of deference, African nationalists began to utilise the same ‘traditions’ to enforce discipline within the movement, particularly their control over women and youths who wanted to assert their autonomy in the struggle.

One of Shutt’s great insights is that the policing of manners becomes important when *economic* markers of difference in status and authority are slight. This explains the importance of performances of deference within nineteenth-century African societies, as a crucial tool in maintaining generational and gender power. It also explains the obsessions of early white settlers with Africans’ uses of hats and sidewalks. As new economic systems became established, the obsessions of white society shifted from hats and sidewalks, towards the question of how to accommodate an African middle class, with its economic claims to share space with whites in restaurants, bars and private dining rooms. For the white working class, the battleground was public transport, which they were forced economically to share with Africans. Shutt’s book reveals how struggles over the ‘colour bar’ in the 1960s were struggles about class resentment within the white communities, as much as struggles about the civil rights of the African middle classes.

By 1927, the state had recognised a need to give officials formal powers to deal with perceived incidents of African ‘insolence’. Apart from anything else, this provided state officials with a response other than physical assault, when they felt that their authority was being challenged. Shutt discusses the problems of creating a legal framework to address “intangible personal feelings of affront”, and how this had to be based upon external, legally-verifiable behaviours, such as aggressive gesture, inappropriate laughter, raised voice, throwing of objects, or challenging an official in front of an audience of other Africans. With great insight, she observes how this created a formulaic script defining ‘insolent’ behaviour, that attended to vocal pitch and mannerisms, rather than to whatever had created the performance of insolence. As she observes, ‘Based on these social codes, officials believed that they understood the emotional register of Africans and thus they did not need to understand what an African person actually said’ (p.36). This enabled even those white settlers who did not understand the vernaculars to believe that they ‘understood’ Africans, and reinforced the settler belief that Rhodesian whites had a uniquely good understanding of ‘their’ Africans and their culture.

The scripts regarding appropriate behaviour between Africans and white settlers also worked in the other direction. White settlers normalised their modes of thinking about race by policing each other’s everyday behaviour towards Africans. The need to train new settlers in the performance of race went back to the start of white settlement, inscribed in the language primers that were ostensibly designed to teach whites the local vernaculars, but which functioned far more as instruction manuals on how to behave towards Africans.[[1]](#footnote-1) Shutt provides many stories of whites who, in stepping outside the established ‘racial etiquette’, offended intra-group norms far more than they disrupted relationships with Africans. By the late 1930s, as economic differentials became more marked, whites began to emphasise courtesy to Africans, alongside an expectation of deference, as a key component in their ‘tradition’ of manners.

The problem of absorbing new white settlers who did not know the rules became particularly acute with the surge in immigration in the 1940s and 1950s. New settlers, and particularly their children, had to be taught the difference between insisting on deference from Africans and being rude to them. Shutt observes how violations of these codes undermined the Rhodesian Federation-era myth of a constructive ‘partnership’ based on their intimate knowledge of ‘their’ Africans. As Shutt observes, ‘The firm idea that they were courteous and respected Africans helped Southern Rhodesian whites to ignore ugly aspects of their rule’ (p178-9). By the 1960s, groups such as the Citizens Against the Colour Bar were exploiting the shaming mechanisms that the settler community had established to police their performance of inter-racial etiquette, exposing the internal contradictions of this settler ideology and hoping thereby to hasten the adoption of a genuine and equal political partnership between white settlers and Africans.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, such intra-settler debates about appropriate behaviour towards Africans quickly became irrelevant to the growing nationalist movements. The struggle was no longer about the right to share dining and swimming spaces with whites; it was about control over the state. Those Africans who had committed themselves to the struggles over the colour-bar were seen as sell-outs. The intimacy of manners, the directness of personal interaction, emphasised the everydayness of the sell out, and brought policing of nationalist politics into all aspects of life.

Nonetheless, the personal was not primarily the political, for the nationalist campaigns. ‘Courtesy campaigns’ launched by whites, attempting to transform racial politics by suggesting that all that was needed was a little less rudeness all round, had nothing to offer to African nationalists. Shutt illustrates how a focus on the politics of manners betrayed a belief in individual behaviours as the motor of history.[[3]](#footnote-3) By contrast, the nationalists of the 1960s were looking at structures of power, and control over the state. Shutt’s book is light on theory, being deeply rooted in wonderfully rich empirical data, but in discussing this divide, it provides a vivid insight into the differences between individual agency and structural determination as key to our understandings of the past. It is clear, in this account, that ultimately the structuralist analysis won out. This is perhaps a surprising outcome for a book so steeped in study of affect, gesture and personal interactions. It demonstrates with great clarity how an attention to the materiality of everyday behaviours need not preclude a sharp, effective analysis of politics, economics and the structures of institutional power.

DIANA JEATER

History Department, Goldsmiths College, London

1. D. Jeater, ‘The way you tell them: Language, ideology and development policy in Southern Rhodesia,’ *African Studies* vol 54 no. 2 (1995) pp 1-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. T. Ranger, *Writing Revolt: An Engagement with African Nationalism, 1957-67,* James Currey, Oxford, 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This was certainly Ranger’s perspective. See D. Jeater, ‘Stuff Happens, and People Make It Happen: theory and practice in the work of Terence Ranger’, *History Workshop Journal*, vol 73 (2012), pp. 193–210. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)