

Hazel Crampton, *The Side of the Sun at Noon: A Quest*

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The Side of the Sun at Noon is an engrossing tale delivered by a skilful hand at bringing history to life. Hazel Crampton has followed up her first full length book, *The Sunburnt Queen* (2004), with an equally compelling narrative; a quest (and a seemingly plausible discovery) in pursuit of the Chobona. In the process, Crampton has produced a history book that reads like a detective novel. The work is “un academic” in its presentation and style, and so enjoyable to read, that one could be forgiven for thinking that it is more a project in literary intrigue than historical inquiry. The 130 pages of endnotes and references at the back of the book suggest otherwise and bear testament to the extensive research on which the volume is based.

The Chobona have proven to be elusive over the centuries; so much so that those who spoke of their existence have often been written off as the bearers of fanciful imaginations. One such individual was Eva Krotoa, the main interpreter for the Dutch in Cape Town in the mid seventeenth century. It was from Eva that Jan van Riebeeck, the first commander of the VOC fort at Table Bay, originally heard of the Chobona – a pale skinned people with long hair who were said to live in large, stone houses far inland, to the north east of the Cape, and who were rich in diamonds and gold. However, as Crampton points out, Eva was merely the interpreter conveying reports of the Chobona made by several notable Khoi chiefs, including Sousoa of the Chainoqua. Though Eva knew of the Chobona, she was not Van Riebeeck’s sole source of information. Crampton shows how Eva was unfairly dismissed by several twentieth century scholars for her accounts of the Chobona: at best an immature peddler of fantasy; at worst a fabricator and a liar.

Among many of the work’s qualities is the author’s sensitive treatment of Eva, who is among the many familiar characters who appear in the text. One such character is the Dutchman, Jan Huygen van Linschoten, who was the secretary to the Archbishop of Goa. In the 1580s, he managed to steal closely guarded secrets on Portuguese trading routes in the East before publishing them. *Itinerario* became required reading for navigators and VOC officials, including Van Riebeeck. The publication was also largely responsible for inspiring Dutch efforts to find the legendary southern African kingdom of Monomotapa. In a coincidental twist, the inhabitants of Monomotapa, like the Chobona, lived in stone houses and were said

to be rich in gold and diamonds. That the “great lord” of the Chobona and the “emperor of Monomotapa were one and the same” was a conclusion Van Riebeeck quickly reached, though Crampton posits that this was misguided (p 326).

Nonetheless, Van Riebeeck was so convinced of the link between the Chobona and southern Africa’s own El Dorado that he organised an expedition to travel from the fort in a bid to locate Monomotapa (which was in modern day Zimbabwe, some 3 000 kilometres from the Cape) in February 1658. This particular expedition only managed to get about eighty kilometres north of Cape Town; a dismal failure. But this did not deter Van Riebeeck from trying again and he organised several subsequent expeditions. He eventually left the Cape without coming close to locating the Chobona, although his successors, including the first governor, Simon van der Stel, took up the mantle. None managed to accomplish the feat.

Was this because the Chobona never actually existed, or was it due to unrealistic expectations on the part of those who were looking for them? For the European settlers in the south western corner of the African subcontinent, the interior to the north was a land of mystery; a place which evoked rumours, fear and myth. Crampton proposes that Van Riebeeck’s imagination was too “Eurocentric, or too Orientalist”; “he was looking for European style cities or concentrations of eastern style pagodas and, since they did not exist, he never found them” (Van Linschoten’s map actually depicted pagodas in the southern African interior) (p 326). However, as the author points out, “South Africa is littered with stone ruins” (p 271). The handiwork of the Sotho Tswana comprises hundreds of stone settlements stretching across much of the southern Highveld. Yet, these stone dwellings were modest; “by no means the grand structures of Great Zimbabwe” (p 326). Still, the largest concentration of stone ruins is to be found in what was once the “homeland of the Hoja” (p 271). Were they, perhaps, the mysterious Chobona?

The Hoja were Sotho speakers incorporating branches of the Fokeng, Kwena and Taung, among others. They did not have a centralised power structure, but rather lived in “numerous small groups, each with its own chief and identity” (p 270). The similarities between the Hoja and the descriptions of the Chobona provided by Cape Khoi informants are striking. They lived in stone, corbelled houses far inland, to the north east of the Cape. They had access to gold and diamonds and their elite wore gold ornaments and imported cloth. The Hoja also had pale complexions. Crampton explains that the name Hoja was derived from the nickname of a founding chief: Mabula was referred to as Sehoja; the old, phonetic spelling being Legoya, which is a “corruption of Lekgoa white person” (p 304). This point elicits questions about the extent of European and Arab commixture among southern African inland societies emanating from trade and contact on the east African coast, in particular, Delagoa Bay. An abiding feature of the work is the numerous glimpses into the historical hybridity of identities in the region, well before sustained European settlement in the south west. Crampton points out that during the seventeenth century, Eva’s time, the Hoja were known as the Kubung, “which bears more than a passing resemblance to *Chobona*” (p 325).

The author has covered a great deal of ground (some of it quite rocky, both literally and figuratively) in presenting her hypothesis of who the Chobona may

have been. Even so, it would be unfair to suggest that parts of the text are extraneous; *The Side of the Sun at Noon* is more than the sum of its parts. In pursuit of the Chobona, Crampton has drawn our attention to several neglected, or even ignored, aspects of southern Africa's pre colonial history. In doing so, she has shown the worth of investigating tales of fancy for they may lead to other, less imaginary discoveries. Behind every rumour there may just be a nugget of truth. One such neglected aspect concerns the existence of thriving "long distance communication and trade" in southern Africa well before sustained European settlement (p 88). The presence of *Cannabis sativa*, the scientific name for what South Africans colloquially call *dagga*, illustrates the point. Crampton explains that contrary to what some twentieth century scholars argued that the plant smoked by the Khoi was actually an indigenous herb, *Leonotis leonurus* it is now clear that the narcotic which was in such ready supply at the early colonial Cape was in fact *Cannabis sativa*. Originally from Central Asia, it was introduced to southern Africa by Arab traders approximately one thousand years ago. From the east African coast it was relayed to the south western Cape via the Hancumqua and Hessequa Khoi of the eastern Cape.

Crampton explores other historical traces of extensive trade links criss crossing the pre colonial southern African interior which facilitated the transfer of imported goods. For instance, Cape Khoi obtained red beads and copper from the Nama, who lived to the north west, spanning the Gariep River. It has been determined that the red beads exchanged between the Nama and Cape Khoi were actually cornelians from India which had been imported via the east African coast, most probably passing through the hands of Portuguese traders along the way. And there are yet more relics of what Crampton calls the "long vanished economies" of the pre colonial past, especially along the middle Gariep River (p 149). Two absorbing examples include the Kakamas Peach and the Weeping Willow, both of which are originally from China and both of which were present on the Gariep River before the arrival of Europeans in the region.

It appears the Hoja enjoyed a fair degree of prosperity for much of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They were known to grow tobacco and wheat, which also would have been acquired from traders along the east African coast; tobacco, originally from the Americas, was introduced by the Portuguese, while wheat originated in the Middle East. There are reports of the Hoja supplying the Korana, Griqua and Boers with wheat prior to 1820, thus indicating the production of surplus. Why then had the Hoja all but disappeared from the southern Highveld by the time the Voortrekkers first arrived there in the late 1830s? Crampton suggests that the Hoja suffered significant upheaval and displacement as a result of the *Difaqane*. Given that the "invaders of Dithakong" have been identified as having emanated from the southern Highveld (Hoja territory), this is highly likely. The *Difaqane* led to the disruption of livelihoods, trade networks and knowledge systems. Crampton argues that the *Difaqane* obscured the world before it to such an extent that it was easier for twentieth century scholars to dismiss the Chobona as fabrication, rather than pick up the scattered pieces and perhaps most notably, take Eva, a teenage Khoi girl, on her word.

This is a rich text delivered in an engaging and often humorous style, interspersed with brief accounts of the author's own journey of discovery. Has Crampton conclusively proven who the Chobona were? No, the available evidence is too patchy, too approximate to lend itself to a conclusive argument.

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Nonetheless, the premise is reasonably, possibly true. An abiding quality of the work is the author's deft interweaving of an extensive range of sources indigenous oral traditions, archaeological findings, Arabic writings, linguistic conventions, contemporary traveller's records, and archival material to reveal a picture of South Africa's past that is bound to challenge preconceptions and force the reader to think again.

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