

Book Reviews

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Recommended Citation

Money, Duncan (2013) "Book Reviews," *Zambia Social Science Journal*: Vol. 4: No. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/zssj/vol4/iss1/7>

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Book Reviews

The long shadow of the British Empire: The on going legacies of race and class in Zambia. By Juliette Bridgette Milner-Thornton (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) xi, 304 pp.

There has been almost no academic research on the coloured community in Zambia and this alone would make Milner-Thornton's account of the creation of coloured identity and the experience of the coloured community during the colonial period welcome. Milner-Thornton herself identifies only one previous work, Ibbo Mandaza's 1997 book *Race, colour and class in Southern Africa*, which considers Zambia alongside Zimbabwe and Malawi, and I can think of no other. Building on her doctoral research, she therefore sets out to document the experience of a community deeply connected with the African and European societies which created them, yet historically alienated from both.

There has been more work on coloured people in South Africa but Milner-Thornton argues that it is important to distinguish the community in Zambia from others in the region. She contrasts the long history of the coloured community in South Africa with the comparatively recent origins of the coloured community in Zambia as an ethnic category which is, "within the living memory of older members of the Zambian community." (p. 15) Moreover, there is a strong diasporic element in the Zambian coloured experience as many members of the Zambian coloured community have sought to return to Britain in recent decades, something Milner-Thornton links to the desire of Zambian coloured people to re-connect with the British fathers who abandoned them.

The treatment of the Zambian coloured community as distinct from other seemingly similar communities in southern Africa is well-justified. However, the book also contains a strong comparative element not only with Southern Rhodesia or South Africa, the usual counterparts to colonial-era Zambia, but also with Australia and West Africa.

Milner-Thornton has written what is in many ways a deeply personal book. She was born in Kitwe and her maternal great-grandfather was Doctor Sidney Spencer Broomfield, also known as 'Kachalola', an early settler in Northern Rhodesia who was perceived as a pioneer in colonial society (a town in Eastern Province is named after him). Her paternal grandfather was Joseph Milner, a Jewish Lithuanian who moved to Southern Rhodesia. Both men had relationships with African women and Milner-Thornton identifies herself strongly as a member of Zambia's coloured community, now spread across the world.

She has an intimate, personal connection with the subject at hand and this permeates the book. Her introduction is an account of a dinner party where she was challenged over how she identifies herself and the book ends with a moving account of her visit to the graves of her Jewish ancestors in the village of Silale, Lithuania. Many of the photographs contained in the book are pictures of her own family. This is not only a family history however, fascinating as that would be, but a way in which to examine and understand the production of ethnic identities in a historical setting. She defines her approach as autoethnographic, using the personal experiences of herself and her family to explore wider questions about ethnic identity and colonialism.

Although few in number, Euraficans occupied an uncertain place in the colonial order. This enables Milner-Thornton to explain how ethnic identity was constructed during the colonial period. As she explains, the Euraficans were a social, racial and political problem as they presented, "a particular classificatory problem," in a society based on presumed innate racial

and cultural difference. (p. 72) This comparatively small number of people occupied an inordinate amount of official time, a clear indication of the importance placed on maintaining the boundaries of the racial order. The Northern Rhodesian Government held seven enquiries into the social, economic and political status of coloured people between 1939 and 1956, none of which could agree on a definition of 'coloured'. This government also corresponded extensively with other colonial administrations on the issue, providing a neat entry point for the valuable comparative element in the book mentioned above.

Milner-Thornton takes her great-grandfather as a representative of the group of British sojourners and settlers in Northern Rhodesia who had children with African women – including Percy Sillitoe, later Director General of M15 – and largely later abandoned them and the children they fathered. Broomfield never again contacted his children after he moved from Northern Rhodesia and it was only when Milner-Thornton relocated to Brisbane with her husband in 1998 that she discovered her great-grandfather had died at the Royal Brisbane Hospital and was buried in the city. This abandonment was coupled with the stigma of illegitimacy as the colonial authorities did not recognise marriages between Europeans and Africans, while non-European mothers could not register the birth of a baby if the European father did not acknowledge the children. This illegitimacy is one of the painful legacies of British colonial rule in Zambia for Milner-Thornton. She herself felt sharply aware of it when requesting a copy of Broomfield's will in Australia, as she perceived that officials there did not recognise that a black woman could be his legitimate great-granddaughter. (pp. 69-70)

Milner-Thornton engages closely with Broomfield's autobiography – *Kachalola : or, The early life and adventures of Sidney Spencer Broomfield* – and colonial documents to illustrate ideas about sexuality, perceived appropriate gender relations and colonial categories. Her description of Broomfield's own life reveals important aspects of the early settler society, particularly its transience and the kind of Europeans who were attracted to the territory. For instance, Doctor Broomfield was not, it seems, actually a doctor as he appears to have held no medical qualifications. In a twist worthy of a Patricia Highsmith novel, Milner-Thornton's ancestor arrived in Southern Rhodesia as plain Sydney Spencer in 1892, when there also appears to have been a Doctor Broomfield working in the territory as an endocrinologist. This Doctor Broomfield subsequently disappears and Sydney Spencer assumes the name Broomfield at some stage after entering North-Western Rhodesia in 1896. (p. 40) Unfortunately, Milner-Thornton's diligent research has been unable to verify or disprove this story.

Milner-Thornton's research has been facilitated by her own lived experience. She discussed how Northern Rhodesian Eurafricans have generally preferred to marry other Eurafricans and have produced complex, interconnected ties of kinship within the community. This community places a great weight on understanding these family connections, partly, she explains, to avoid the inadvertent development of incestuous relationships (p. 100). Given her position within this community, and the importance placed on family, it is a shame that she does not make more use of oral history, as she does in an earlier work, her chapter in Mohamed Adhikari's 2009 edited volume *Burdened by Race: coloured identities in southern Africa*.

It is also a shame that this study largely confines itself to the colonial period, though Milner-Thornton is explicitly concerned with the legacies of British colonialism and its enduring impact on herself and her family. She notes that the coloured community has not faded away in Zambia even though it has dispersed across the world. Milner-Thornton stresses as well that coloured identity was not an imposed colonial category, a bureaucratic solution to a vexing problem in the racial order. Instead, "Colouredness... describes the community's historical cultural practices, which are an amalgamation of European and African cultural traditions," and captures this community's experience of marginalisation in the colonial period. (p. 237) Beyond stories from her own life, there is little systematic treatment of the coloured community in the post-

colonial period and how the segregation of this community was initially imposed from above but evolved into a self-imposed separation.

These, however, are comparatively minor criticisms. Milner-Thornton's work represents a welcome and important contribution to the sadly neglected area of the history of Zambia's minority groups. This effective intertwining of personal family history and wider imperial history sheds light on racial boundaries in colonial society. She amply demonstrates that the lingering presence of the British Empire in Zambia is present not only in governing institutions, the built environment and language, but also in the lived experience of the Zambian coloured community.

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