

Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Death, Belief and Politics in Central African History By Walima T. Kalusa and Megan Vaughan (Lusaka: Lembani Trust), 2013, 384pp + xxvi, ISBN: 978-9982-68-001-1 soft cover.

The last book I read that discussed Malawi and Zambia together as Central Africa was Robert Rotberg's *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa, The Making of Malawi and Zambia, 1873–1964*, published by Harvard University Press in 1965., and although the two authors ignore Rotberg's book, it actually laid the foundation for their own work, which, despite the references to anthropology, theology, and belief systems, is mainly a political history. Rotberg studied the fall of the Central African Federation or of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, but what is the reason for Kalusa and Vaughan combining Zambian and Malawian history today? I really cannot say.

This book is 'a set of essays', as the blurb says, and all of them are stand alone essays, as actually they have already been published as journal articles and that is how they should be read. The theme of death permeates everything in both ancient and modern history and so it cannot be ignored and by the same token cannot be made a special topic. There is no death without life and all that it entails. Clearly politics and belief are always present when death is discussed but so are health, or recreation, or even profit and capitalism.

In Chapter 1, 'Translating the Soul: Death and Catholicism in Northern Zambia', Megan Vaughan analyses how translation creates new and curious unintended meanings for both missionaries and the scholars who followed them. Take for example *ukupyana*. The literal meaning is succession, but the focus of both the White Fathers and the historians is on the rituals accompanying succession. Thus, when Bemba warlord Mwamba asked Father DuPont to succeed him and inherit his wives, there is no reference in the Catholic or historians' versions of the story to 'removing death from a surviving spouse' - the preferred translation of *ukupyana* used by many in the HIV/AIDS industry for reasons we cannot discuss here.

Why is the life/death struggle translated as a sex/death link by the White Fathers and European scholars? This is a complex puzzle but for a better understanding of the African perspective, one would have to read Milingo's discussions on the world in between or study the Lenishina doctrine, which also exposed the limitations of European religion abroad. The same applies to the references to previous anthropological work on shades, spirits, and ancestors covered in the second chapter.

Kalusa's 'Death on the Copperbelt' in chapters 2 to 4 takes us over familiar territory of Zambia's modernisation: social stratification, workers struggles, and the nationalist movement. I am sure the book will be an important reference for students of Zambian history. However, the ethnographic present has been dead in anthropology for a long time, so Kalusa's strong belief that there is such a thing as an African culture of death and that anthropologists present it as static is simply not plausible as a close reading of even colonial era anthropologists like Al Epstein will show him. Take for example the *Chisungu* ritual. In the 1930s, Audrey Richards observed a ceremony in rural Bemba land already aware that things are not what they used to be (they never are). In the '50s, she returned to Zambia and was asked by *banafimbusa* for advice on how to conduct proper *chisungu* ceremonies for young women on the Copperbelt. But what is a correct ceremony? Participants may follow a certain template but no two weddings can be the same. Why should funerals be different? Even if we took away the colonial interference in African rituals, we would still have several ritual experts arguing about what is correct on such occasions., and one thing anthropology teaches is that ancestral culture and tradition are always about power and wealth today, no matter how far back in history

contestants may go to find their precedence. As I have argued in another context, it is history and not anthropology that produces dead culture.

The final section on Malawi explores the themes of suicide and deaths of presidents and attempts to bring history back into the world of the living descendants of the recently departed. But having not done justice to the original clash of cultures between missionaries and African colonial subjects there is still no understanding of exactly why the Christianity of T. B. Joshua is in such close harmony with the local concepts of spiritual power. It would seem that death, belief, and politics are more closely interconnected than the historians imagined. Rituals and traditions are invented and contested not just in Central Africa. That is what most politics normally culminate in. Power struggles are power struggles and blaming the political confusion caused by power hungry contestants on some kind of tribal chief's succession guidebook is just unfortunate. One would gain better understanding by looking more closely at the political economy of the Republic today.

By all means, study the book, but do read Rotberg, Chirwa, Englund, Meebelo, and Roberts as well to understand where the historical study of Malawian and Zambian political culture came from.

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Book Reviews

Looking For Mrs Livingstone. By Julie Davidson (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2012), 272

'We have one last relic to visit at Kolobeng before we leave the haunt of the wild boar... Albert Piet leads us down the hill towards the river and a thicket of wild mimosa, where there is a clearing staked with more posts linked with chain' (165).

Julie Davidson's biography of Mrs Livingstone is rigorously and tirelessly personal. As Davidson herself mentions several times, sources that have solid facts about the wife of the famous David are few and far between. *Looking for Mrs Livingstone* is intended for a lay audience, and although it offers a certain quantity of evidence, its existence relies entirely on imaginative bridges. Davidson avoids excessive historical speculation, and instead uses her own journeys in Africa to fill the gaps. In the insert, historical photographic portraits of the Livingstone family bookend the author's travel snapshots. She is writing two parallel stories, that of Mary Livingstone herself, and that of *her* search for Mrs Livingstone. The two are interwoven, roughly following the chronology of Mary's life, from her childhood at the Moffat's mission in Kuruman, through her marriage, her travels by Livingstone's side, her 'exile' in Britain, and her final return to the continent. This double narrative means that the reader is 'discovering contemporary Africa' through Davidson being led down the hill towards the thicket of wild Mimosa, at the same time that she is 'discovering history'. As such, large chunks of the book are likely to feel clunky and irrelevant to those whose lives are lived in Southern Africa. Nonetheless, Davidson brings sensitivity and imagination to the double narrative, and it meets with some success.

Firstly, Davidson is highly attuned to her own emotional relationship to the historical characters. This allows her to pick up on and draw out sentiment in other historians who have presented the Livingstones, from fame-seeking explorers such as Devereux in 1869, to those writing lives as moral models. It also keeps her sharply aware of what everyone in the book—from pastors, to tourist agents to taxi drivers; those in Chupanga, like those in Aberdeen—might *want* from Mary Livingstone's story. The power of historical biographies to make money and shape futures is a live issue and she addresses it head on.

Secondly, Davidson emphasises another component of historical writing that is often suppressed, the act of witnessing. She does this actively through her pilgrimages to various sites of Mary Livingstone's life, but also stylistically: her writing resounds with ghosts, traces, spoor, and legacies. Romantic notions aside, Davidson's pursuit of witnessing seemed to me to bear fruit. I think it would have been quite impossible for such a solidly pragmatic account of missionary life in that period to have emerged, had the author not made these journeys in her heroine's footsteps. Both strands of the book, the story of Mary and the story of Julie, focus on moving, washing, mending clothes, eating, healing, and laughing. Davidson is careful to record efforts in the everyday toil of nourishment and nurture made by the whole cast of characters, male and female, living and deceased. I am pleased to say that this is an ever more common feature of historical writing, but Davidson does it skilfully and elegantly.

Finally, while governments, and institutions form part of the background of the book, the author focuses on political paths and networks created at a very intimate level. It is a history of personal responses to dramatic events, and follows the fates of white and black individuals and families from the nineteenth and into the twenty-first century as they move upstream, downstream, across rivers and state boundaries, searching for places to build lives that might work. These three aspects – the persistence of personal networks; the importance of the everyday; and the role of empathy in historical writing – are fluently woven through the book.

For me, they saved it from the 'lightness' of the evidence, and the dangers of sentimentality, and made *Looking for Mrs. Livingstone* an interesting and worthwhile perspective on stories that might otherwise seem well trodden.

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