

# MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



*Scroll down to read the article.*

BOOK REVIEWS

**A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe, 1890-1939** By *Chengetai J. M. Zvobgo*. Gweru, Mambo Press, 1996, 412pp.

Doctor Zvobgo's studies of the history of Christian missions in Zimbabwe are very valuable. In this book he studies the systematic evangelisation of Zimbabwe from 1890 to 1939, the beginning of the Second World War. Dr Zvobgo introduces his subject with a summary of the first attempts in the field of Christian evangelisation of the Ndebele and the Shona peoples from 1859 to 1890.

Lobengula, the king of Matabeleland, did not allow missionaries to teach religion, nor reading or writing. Nevertheless, he skillfully supported their presence. Missionaries were convinced that under Lobengula's rule it would be impossible to evangelise, and consequently they welcomed the fall of Lobengula. With the 'Pioneer Column', Jesuit Catholic missionaries and the Anglican Canon Belfour entered Lobengula's territory. The Anglo-Ndebele war of 1893 put an end to Ndebele power. Missionaries approved and urged the dismantling of the Ndebele kingdom. They were happy that the people (Ndebele or Shona) could no longer use the political power of Lobengula as an excuse not to convert to Christianity.

With all the facilities offered by Cecil Rhodes, missions increased. So the question must be put: would it be necessary to destroy the Ndebele social and political system to evangelise them? This is not the object of Dr Zvobgo's discussion. He accepts the fact, and analyses the history that follows. However, the problems remain beneath the surface, and Dr Zvobgo does analyse them very well when he writes about the Ndebele and Shona uprisings of 1896-1897. These two disturbances, and the Shona rising in particular, took the whole White population by surprise. The Chishawasha missionaries thought that a 'Shona rebellion was the last thing the "cowardly" Shona would dream of attempting' (p. 47). The author chiefly uses missionary sources, but not exclusively. Missionaries played a role in suppressing the two uprisings because they were, in the words of Fr. Boos, S. J., a 'war of heathenism against Christianity' (p. 55).

They were completely mistaken in their appreciation of Shona people, because they did not know the history of their brave past as conquerors. Also superficial was their appreciation of the religion of the people. Some missionaries were convinced that these two rebellions destroyed all the religious work they had done until that time. Others, with a positive point of view, believed in a spring time for the Mashonaland mission with 'its joyous promises of good things to come (p. 56). In reality, we deduce that Christianity was not so deep-rooted. There was a real spring and a very

flourishing time for Christianity in Zimbabwe, but at the same time, there were many difficulties. After the suppression of the Ndebele and Shona risings, Catholics and the various Christian denominations established missions everywhere.

Was it a desire to make Christ known or expansionist dynamism that drove missionaries to face all kinds of sacrifices? Dr Zvobgo considers the question from two points of view: from the missionaries's point of view, and from that of the Africans.

Missionaries found Africans very difficult to convert. Sometimes they felt that Africans didn't believe in their voluntary work, and instead believed that missionaries merely wanted to separate people from their customs and traditions.

'But the greatest hindrance to Christianity in Mashonaland as in Matabeleland, from the missionaries' point of view, was the institution of polygamy and its concomitant *roora/lobola* system' (p. 104). Generally the missionaries' opinion about African adults was very negative. 'We are too old to change our ways' (p. 104) was the answer used by some Africans. Dr Zvobgo analyses very well this problem of the *roora/lobola* system. The great majority of the missionaries from abroad had an uncompromising position on this matter. About polygamy missionary opinion was more or less unanimous, but failed to get the colonial government to forbid it. The issue of *roora/lobola* was more debated, and Dr Zvobgo reports studies made by different churches, and their final positions. However, the opinion widespread among Africans was that missionaries did not understand the system. 'We may therefore, reasonably conclude', writes Dr Zvobgo, 'that missionary efforts to limit lobola through legislation during this period (1924-1939) were unsuccessful' (p. 334).

In spite of the initial opposition to Christianity from the old generation, the Christian community increased considerably. This was due to the translation of scriptures, allowing people to read the word of God in their own languages, the establishment of Christian villages (an unrealistic programme in the long term, p. 166), and Western education (the most potent agency in the evangelisation of the Africans of Zimbabwe, p. 149). Initially missionary education was religiously oriented, but soon included academic, industrial and teacher training. Parents were initially reluctant to allow their children to attend school. Later they were completely convinced of the benefit of education for boys and girls. The governing British South Africa Company was interested in industrial schools to qualify Africans for different occupations, and helped the missions to open this kind of school. But it was literary education that appealed most strongly to African pupils.

The role of the government and missions in African education is well analysed by the author. Professional teacher training schools fulfilled an

important role in African education. Dr Zvobgo considers this matter in all its aspects: government subsidies, organisation, reforms, etc.

The ministry of healing was also a means of carrying into Africa the total salvation of body and soul, as Christ had done. It was a very convincing way to evangelise. So missionaries opened hospitals, dispensaries and clinics. Initially Africans had no confidence in White doctors. Later on the missionaries gained the confidence of Africans by gentleness supported by spectacular cures, and missionaries took advantage of this confidence by ministering to their spiritual needs at the same time.

In the last chapter, the author presents some statistics, which show the growth and expansion of Christianity in Zimbabwe. Of interest is that ordained ministries among the Africans, in spite of the stringent rules, began to appear in almost all the denominations from 1924 on: in the Catholic church, however, the first two priests were ordained only in 1947.

Dr Zvobgo offers us a very useful book on how to know and understand the Christian history of Zimbabwe, which will be an essential basis for further investigation. It is a precious contribution to the history of Africa, and in particular to that of Zimbabwe, which cannot ignore the role played by the churches and their missionaries. Churches have always brought to Africa the equilibrium for harmonious development. The author shows skill and balance in his presentation. Sometimes we would like to see more interpretation, and criticism of the events.

*Istituto Storica della Compagnia di Ges  
Via dei Penitenzieri, Roma, Italy*

FRANCISCO A. CORREIA, S. J.

**Politics of Repression and Resistance: Face to Face with Combat Theology**  
*By Canaan Sodindo Banana.* Gweru, Mambo Press, 1996, 335pp., ISBN 0-86922-650-9.

Racism among Whites is used to justify what Banana calls a 'combat theology'. He writes,

... missionary motives were often at variance with the economic interests of their Governments, but this in no way detracts from the fact that European Churches often shared the same attitude of superiority towards the beliefs, values, customs and traditions of the peoples of lands being colonised.

Banana provides a detailed account of the responses of the Church to the challenge to remove White supremacist policies. He articulates well the complex relationship between Church and State in politics, against the background of a war of liberation in which Banana himself took part as both Church leader and politician.

Following Linden's example of a study of the Catholic Church,<sup>1</sup> Banana pays much attention to those Christians in the history of the Methodist and other Churches who opposed racism. Banana refers to the 'double mandate' of the Church in Rhodesia. By this he means first, the way in which the Church acquiesced to the demands of the State to educate Africans to become good subjects in a colonial state. Second, he refers to the way in which the Church had the responsibility to challenge the State that oppressed Blacks.

It is important to note the historical orientation of Banana's book, in particular, the attention paid to the fight between Whites and Blacks in the second *Chimurenga*. Banana provides a useful historical account of how individuals and groups of Christians resisted White oppression. We might question Banana's depiction of the historical survey of Church reactions to racism as a 'combat theology'.

There is a whole spectrum of liberation theologies in the third world that are movements of protest against oppression, espoused along the lines of class in Latin America, race in North America and with women in mind in both the third and first world. These theologies might help the reader understand the meaning of a combat theology. Given that there was a war of liberation in Rhodesia, Banana identified a terminology which highlights the need to counter White racism. The book gives the impression that the religious sector masterminded a clearly organised religious 'war' of liberation from White supremacist policies and simultaneously developed a clearly discernible theology. This in fact is more than what the Church did by sporadically raising voices of resistance to the oppression of Blacks. Moreover, the wider society was already caught up in a war against oppression, whether Christians agreed or not.

Since the aim of the Church in opposing government policies in Banana's book is to promote 'a lasting spirit of racial tolerance' (p. 27), the term 'combat theology' sounds awkward. The word 'combat' connotes a confrontation in which there must be a winner. In contrast, Banana draws attention to a necessary dialogue within a community whose aim is to encourage harmonious relations among the different adherents of the same Christian religion. Key to Christianity is the figure of Jesus who has already died for the sins of all and risen in victory.

To this day, there are differences in behaviour between Christians from a European background and African Christians. Banana speaks of 'the illusion of perceived notions of self-importance' among people of the colour White. Besides this, there are cultural and linguistic issues which are key to our understanding of the differences between White and Black since the dawn of British imperial rule. If lasting harmonious relations

---

<sup>1</sup> Ian Linden (1980) *The Catholic Church and the Struggle for Zimbabwe* (London, Longman).

across racial barriers are to be achieved in the Church, there is a need, therefore, to look beyond race. The book is simplistic when it quickly rejects cultural considerations, which go a long way to explain further the tendency towards racial segregation in the Church and wider society (p. 22).

Zimbabweans of today live in a society marked by a plurality of modes of being-in-the-world and unfortunately they lack a theology that provides guidelines for facing up to modernity. To make racism the main framework for interpreting the segregation of Blacks from Whites is thus useful, but only in a limited way. I am not suggesting that colonialism and racism have become redundant areas of scholarship. Instead, I am drawing attention to wider questions about modern African societies, which continue to have divisions and appalling injustice prevail despite the fact that White rule has been eliminated.

Finally, more attention could have been paid to editing. For instance, on page 8 reference is made to 'Paul's sterling and spirited attempt to identify the operative dynamics . . .' This is not a reference to Paul's spirited writings of the New Testament, but the Church historian, Paul Gundani. On page 26, one has to guess that 'the Commission' refers to the Theological Commission of the Catholic Church. Dodge wrote to Ian Smith during the times of Rhodesia in 1966 and not, as stated on page 105, in 1996.

*University of Zimbabwe*

ISABEL MUKONYORA

**Gospel Ferment in Malawi: Theological Essays, Book 2** By Kenneth Ross. Gweru, Mambo Press, 1995, 151 pp., ISBN 086922-615-0.

**Christianity in Malawi, A Source Book, Book 3** Edited by Kenneth Ross. Gweru, Mambo Press, 1996, 253 pp., ISBN 086922-641-x.

These two books, when read together, bring out a composite picture of the Christian history and theology in Malawi, spanning a period of more than a century (1889–1996).

In *Gospel Ferment in Malawi*, Ross begins his theological reflection by analysing the Christian social witness in Malawi since the issuing of the Pastoral Letter of 8 March 1992 up to the holding of the National Referendum in June 1993. For one to understand the thrust of Ross's arguments in this essay, it is necessary to refer to documents 18, 19 and 20 in *Christianity in Malawi*. It is Ross's opinion that the publication of these documents by the largest Christian Churches in Malawi, i.e. the Roman Catholic Church and the Presbyterian Church (CCAP), provides 'grounds for suggesting that the Church, for all its divisions and failures, acted as a liberating force at a key turning point in Malawian history'.

Essays 2 and 3 basically affirm the Church's right to participate in the civic affairs of the country. Ross's reflections on Presbyterian theology and the idea of the kingdom of God lead him to the conclusion that 'the risks and the costs of engaging prophetically in social and political conflict are necessary to the integrity of the Church's witness' and discipleship.

In the remaining essays Ross refreshingly grapples with the theological implications of vernacular translation, church architecture, preaching and the African sense of recreation. These topics also get better amplification when one reads source documents from *Christianity in Malawi*. These include hymns, memoirs, diaries of Christian converts and missionaries, as well as documents that have bearing on matters of the cultural identity of Christians, gender and ministry, as well as independency.

The categories that Ross provided for the documents, and the introduction made before each section and each individual document are of tremendous help to the reader. The introductions help the reader to place the documents in their appropriate historical, socio-cultural, political and missiological contexts. The documents were well chosen to reflect the whole period of Christian presence in Malawi. *Christianity in Malawi* presents an invaluable source that affords the reader an opportunity 'to listen directly and critically to the voices of the past'.

While both books are well conceived and well written I would like to pick out one essay for deeper scrutiny. This is the one entitled 'The theology of hope: A missing link in African Christianity'. I pick out this essay because it purports to represent African Christianity in a generic sense. This is an essay that affirms John S. Mbiti's thesis in his *New Testament Eschatology in An African Background* (1971). For Ross to subscribe uncritically to Mbiti's claims, made over 25 years ago, reflects the kind of cynicism that Ross has of African scholarship. This essay vulgarises the reality of conversion not only in Malawi, but also in the rest of Africa.

Apart from citing Mbiti, Ross does not present reasons for supposing that African Christians, in spite of the long history of the Church's presence, have failed to make a transition from the 'traditional world view' (whatever that means) to the 'Christian world view' (whatever that means) that accommodates a truly Christian eschatology of hope. To imply that African Christianity has to undergo a process of regeneration in the norms that the European Christianity represents is tantamount to claiming absoluteness of Western Christianity and its virtues over other forms of Christianity. One only hopes that Ross has not lost sight of the fact that while the struggle for orthodoxy can surely be defined in terms of historical and cultural specificity, African Christianity does not have to aspire to European orthodoxy.

Another oversight was to leave out a bibliography at the end of *Gospel Ferment in Malawi*. The two books, however, are an important addition to

students and scholars of Christian history and theology in Africa, in particular Malawi.

*University of Zimbabwe*

P. GUNDANI

**Street Sellers of Zimbabwe Stone Sculpture — Artists and Entrepreneurs**  
*By C. & M. C. Kileff.* Gweru, Mambo Press, 1996, 68 pp., Illustr., ISBN 0-86922-637-1, Z\$96.

This short work is unusual among the growing literature on Shona stone sculpture in two ways. It is written by an anthropologist rather than an art critic; and it deals with artists selling on the streets and generally unknown, even despised, by the professional critics.

The first half of the book comprises an introduction to ways in which the works of unknown artists may be sold, principally to tourists, around Zimbabwe. Many of the themes are covered through vignettes of particular artists. The substance of the book is the brief autobiographical profiles given by 14 artists in and around Harare, together with those of three sellers and one White South African artist, who also sells Shona sculpture, in Cape Town. There is a final chapter that questions the distinction between the high art to be found in galleries and the sculptures found on city streets.

In a book of this size the narratives and the analysis are necessarily brief. References are limited, and do not always tally with the bibliography. Nevertheless, the book is welcome for the points it raises. The Kileffs show the importance of the entrepreneurial skills of the artists, and the economic significance of their work in their lives. On the other hand, the narratives of several of the sculptors also show an artistic dedication to their craft. Although stone sculpture is relatively new in Shona history, it can provide an authentic expression of the perceptions of Shona artists. Art is essentially creative. Although carvers presented in this work do borrow ideas and designs from others, they are also innovative at times.

A key issue, which the book opens up rather than resolves, is the relationship between the art of the galleries, and the items sold by street vendors and curio shops. About five percent of sculptors achieve the elite circles of galleries: others are left on the periphery, not necessarily due to lack of talent. The Kileffs present Tago, a sculptor and street seller who commented on the exclusiveness of the elitist galleries. He only managed to get his works into a gallery when they were given to a promoter by a renowned artist.

The book is easy to read and well illustrated, and I recommend it as a refreshing balance to works that emphasize the elite in Shona sculpture.

We need a fuller and more thorough investigation into the sociology of Shona sculpture. If this book provokes such a study, it will have served a further useful purpose.

*University of Zimbabwe*

M. F. C. BOURDILLON

**The Gender Dimensions of Urban Poverty: The Case of Dzivarasekwa** By *Neddy R. Matshalaga*, Harare, Institute of Development Studies, University of Zimbabwe, 1997, 50 pp.

**The Gender Dimensions of Urban Poverty: The Case of Tafara** By *Neddy R. Matshalaga*, Harare, Institute of Development Studies, University of Zimbabwe, 1997, 51 pp.

These two short pieces provide basic data on household economies in two of Harare's high-density suburbs. Each is based largely on a survey of 320 households. Although there was an attempt to randomise the samples, it is not clear how the population, including those living in rented shacks, was established. The survey comprised a questionnaire that included such topics as household size, income, education, use of health facilities, food and accommodation. There were also questions on perceptions of poverty and its causes. The survey data were supported by informal interviews and discussions, from which some short extracts appear. But there is no mention of whether or how verbal answers to questions were verified in any of the cases.

The reports largely present descriptive statistics of the results of the surveys, paying particular attention to differences according to the gender of the household heads but with little attention to further analysis. The sample in Tafara is on average much poorer and less educated than that in Dzivarasekwa. As an indication of poverty in Tafara we find over half the children of school-going age are out of school, which is disturbing for the long-term future of the community. Around 60 per cent of men claim not to be getting enough food in both samples (slightly fewer in Tafara); 65 per cent of women in Dzivarasekwa make the same claim as do 75 per cent in Tafara. The author does not offer a systematic comparison of the communities nor an analysis of the differences.

Although the reports are limited in both data and analysis, it is useful to have such descriptive data on the quality of life in high-density suburbs of Harare. It is right that we should be disturbed by such data.

*University of Zimbabwe*

PROFESSOR M. F. C. BOURDILLON