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Twilight on the Zambezi: Late Colonialism in Central Africa

Might a book be so composed that the very act of reviewing it–that is, offering a single reader's assessment–contradicts the structure and assumptions of the book itself? Eugenia Herbert's *Twilight on the Zambezi* presents just such a dilemma, for she has chosen to present late colonialism (and more specifically, the year 1959) among Lozi people of what is now Zambia from multiple perspectives, following the model of Akira Kurosawa's celebrated moving picture, *Rashomon* (1950). Kurosawa presents what seems a simple tale, but once told, he tells it again and again through the voices of different witnesses. After several competing views are presented, one wonders which is true; but then again, need, or can, any be false? It was Kurosawa's prescience to be stunningly postmodern decades before the term was coined: in *Rashomon* he created a polyvocal approach that decenters all but the most basic understanding that *something* life-changing has occurred. The result can be oddly anxiety-producing for those seeking the false security of having a "true" account of what "really" happened.

Herbert provocatively asserts that *Rashomon* is "a salutary model for historians, for there is, in reality, no master narrative" (p. xvii). Long a distinguished professor of history at Mount Holyoke College, Herbert reflects upon the difficulty her students have had in "resist[ing] the temptation simply to see 'colonialism' and 'nationalism' as so many abstractions, rather than the day-to-day actions of a variety of individuals, each operating in an imperfectly understood tangle of relationships and possibilities" (p. xix). As a "reminder of how unpredictable history is when one is living it" (p. xx), Herbert seeks, rather than eschews (as other historians might and she admits doing in the past), "an antiphony, even a cacophony, of voices, all of them eager to tell *their* version of what happened" (p. xix). Curiously missing is acknowledgment of Ian Cunnison's brilliant Rhodes-Livingstone Institute paper of 1951, "History on the Luapula," in which he writes that among these same central African peoples, "histories ... are particular" and "known well only to the groups which partook in the events enumerated." Indeed, "there is no coherent wider history" at play in day-to-day life.[1] In other words, Herbert's approach may be better attuned to local African historiologies than she reveals.

As a harbinger of her project, Herbert uses the book's title page to cite John Londale's exhortation that "our approach to African history should allow us to number district commissioners among the dancing dead–along with our usual cast of chiefs and witchdoctors, warriors and herders, peasant men and women."[2] Our first glimpse of the lively ways that 1959 was experienced in this part of what was then Northern Rhodesia is offered from the vantage point of the *boma* or district headquarters at Kalabo, where a colonial officer, whom Lozi nicknamed the "Little Man Who Goes Around in Circles," once held sway.[3] There follow *Rashomon*-like accounts of some of these same events and personalities viewed from the Barotseland Protectorate Native Authority, from Salisbury (now Harare) as the seat of Federation government during the strangely slow transition to Zambian independence, and from Whitehall, for a sense of how British colonial administrators and politicians considered these same circumstances.

Barotseland and the somewhat similar Betchuanaland (now Botswana), to its south, stand as peculiarities of African colonial history, largely because their remarkable kings–Lewanika and Khama, respectively–were larger-than-life individuals who often played the colonizers' games breathtakingly better than they did. (Herbert briefly contrasts the two men's careers on p. 6.) Rather than seeing his powers stripped and his kingdom ignominiously folded into a colony, as was the wont of most other African kings and chiefs, in 1900 Lewanika managed to gain his own protectorate roughly the size of

Wales from the concessionary British South Africa Company (p. 13). The "invention of tradition" thesis of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger finds no better illustration than Lewanika's Barnumesque success as a cultural impresario.[4] If the British wanted Victorian splendor, he would give it to them; if they waxed rhapsodic about royal river barges on the Thames, Lewanika would outdo them through the Kuomboka spectacle of the Zambezi floodplain. Only Handel was missing, but "Water Music" met its match in Lewanika's unparalleled pomp and pageantry. The good king deserves far more attention than he has received by historians and, indeed, by novelists; but Lewanika's imprint is upon every twist and turn of Herbert's stories.

Herbert has a fine eye for anecdotal detail. She draws evocative landscapes and swiftly limns portraits of colorful European administrators and Lozi leaders with whom one cannot help but feel affinity, despite or often because of their distinct idiosyncrasies. Combined with her occasionally jarring use of the present tense for events that occurred in 1959, readers are afforded an unusually affective "you are there" sense of the vicissitudes of daily life for particular individuals as well as the grand moments of collective experience. Methodological problems do arise from Herbert's adaptation of a *Rashomon* approach, however.

In speaking "from the *boma*," Herbert reports that "a [native] messenger thinks nothing of walking a hundred miles off into the bush to apprehend someone who has fled a crime–or simply gone berserk (something that tends to happen at the new moon)–and bring him in. At night he ties his prisoner to a tree via an extremely sensitive part of his anatomy and resumes his walk to the *boma* the next day" (p. 14). Where does the irony lie in such a troubling assertion? Because Herbert writes from a colonial administratorĥÒs perspective but uses no quotation marks or other devices to indicate whose ideas these were, absurd presumptions are left to the reader to interpret. Do local people really "tend to go berserk at the new moon"? How often? Why? Is this possibly a misinterpretation of ritual activities (perhaps involving trance) staged by Lozi at the rising of a new moon as they are among closely related central African peoples? Did colonial messengers really tie the tender parts of prisoners to trees? How often? When? What prevented the prisoners from untying themselves and escaping? Is this meant to be humorous? If so, from whose perspective–the colonial administrator's or Herbert's?

Although Herbert seems to trust her readers to "get it" and understand that such behavior (or inventive description of it) was a sign of the times, ironic essentialism can backfire, leaving Herbert vulnerable to a reader's assumption that not only did such things occur–and on a regular basis, as her statement implies–but that she condones their happening insofar as she offers such statements without qualification.[5] Examples of this problem abound, as when Herbert writes of how an airstrip was constructed with prison labor "for the princely sum of 4 shillings" used to replace the district commissionerĥÒs wife's panties, used as a windsock (p. 14); or when she describes how the DC, "in a moment of whimsy," built a fountain in front of the *boma* which, because "there is no reliable plumbing … is activated by a man hidden in the bushes who pumps furiously from a tank whenever anyone approaches" (p. 15); or when prisoners are obliged "to dance as Christmas trees during the holiday season with leafy branches stuck in the back of their shorts" (p. 26), which is illustrated in a period photograph (fig. 5). Again, is such demeaning behavior meant to be funny to today's readers, or are we supposed to understand how even dithering DCs, who "genuinely believe[d] in the solid values of their class and country: in decency, service, authority exercised with restraint" (p. 22), could be so ridiculously insensitive? Given how dire the crisis of misinformation about Africa can be in contemporary America, this reader is not convinced of the wisdom of leaving readers so adrift.

Countering such quibbles are insiders' glimpses of how difficult colonial life could be for what were, after all, very ordinary persons sent to manage hugely complex cultural constituencies simply beyond their ken. A colonial officer weeps when he discovers there will be no Worstershire sauce for a lunch honoring the Queen's visit to Nigeria in 1956 (p. 24). A district commissioner is relieved to be assigned to bucolic Barotseland after a stint in Kenya dealing with the Mau Mau Emergency (p. 23). "The Colonial Service is a man's world," and some complain that having wives or other English women about inhibits making friends with local people, so that one can "go hunting and drinking with the chiefs, with no one to complain about long absences or overdoing the booze" (p. 23). Gardening can bring a touch of home to frighteningly foreign lands, and "your great triumphs," a guidebook consoles, "will always be when you have induced some ordinary English flower … to make itself at home in an unlikely clime, as you will be doing with yourself" (pp. 24-25). Furthermore, the "paternalism inherent in colonial relations" could be "turned on its head," at least occasionally, for "'in the bush,' reminisced one D[istrict] O[fficer], 'the white man was a wayward, irresponsible child who would get hurt if you didn't keep sharp things

out of his messy little hands"' (p. 32). Whether or not Herbert's assertion is justified that this and "other relationships also transcend race" (p. 32) is left to her readers to judge.

A view presumably from Lozi eyes presents the structure of royalty that Lewanika inherited and developed through a hierarchy of titles and responsibilities "translated into the architectural and spatial patterns of the royal capital" (p. 51). This same structure allowed for "administering ... subject peoples" in a Protectorate of significant ethnic complexity. Here one expects Lozi voices to prevail, so that 1959 will come alive through their accounts; but any such direct narratives are invariably tempered by non-Lozi comments. For example, "because it is so inscrutable (at least to outsiders), the system of Lozi government has been notoriously hard to pin down and no two accounts fully agree. Pity the poor officer who takes Lugard at his word and tries to understand how *this* people govern themselves before assisting them" (p. 52). As opposed to the royal towns where a district officer might content himself by "whisper[ing] behind the throne" (p. 51), the villages of Lozi commoners were allegedly marked by "lack of any discernable order, [and] their flimsy grass huts, often in a state of disrepair," possessed "piles of rubbish strewn about" (p. 57). As for the inhabitants of such seemingly sordid places, "the stereotypical Lozi (if there really is such a thing) is portrayed as dignified and somber," yet apparently such people were "gay, irresponsible, bubbling over with song and dance" (p. 57). Whose perspectives are these? Certainly not those of Lozi themselves, one must presume, despite this seeming to have been *their* chapter. Direct conversations in which Lozi remember 1959 are lacking, yet these would be needed to present a *Rashoman*-like view of late colonialism from their own perspectives, rather than predominantly Eurocentric ones.[6] Perhaps Kenneth Kaunda's quip about the short-lived Federation of Rhodesia and Nyassaland could be adapted here. "Joining the white man in a federation is like trying to share a small stool with someone with a big backside" (p. 83). And so it still is with writing local history, it would seem.

In providing a view of Barotseland in 1959 as seen from Salisbury and Whitehall, Herbert again offers a sweep of intriguing information about personalities, events, and contingent circumstances. The oft-crude machinations of Sir Roy Welensky, as he helped to create and then presided over the Federation, make for engaging reading, as do Herbert's descriptions of such characters as the politician Creech Jones. Herbert also reviews the huge impact that construction of the Kariba Dam would have on local lives and regional politics. African reactions to loss of land, heritage, and social identity are sketched and reference is made to local people's acute understanding of the "vampirism" of late colonial enterprise; as occurred elsewhere in Africa, each side assumed the other was bent on eating them alive, both figuratively and literally. Kenneth Kaunda strides triumphantly through Herbert's pages, setting in train the nationalism that would eventually lead to Zambian independence. And tales of the Barotse Native Government allow one to grasp the political decline of a place that once seemed so promising, but by 1959 had become a "backwater" (p. 67) exporting its best and brightest (p. 115).

As Zambian independence approached in the early 1960s, Lozi elites attempted secession, hoping to make the Barotseland Protectorate an internationally recognized state in its own right (pp. 162-163). Such dreams were quickly dashed, however, for "ironically, the very success of the Lozi elite in dealing with European colonialists had lulled them into a complacent resistance to change" (p. 163). When Herbert visited in 1999, she found Barotseland a depressing place of ruin and rust, punctuated by the rare but regular joy of the Kuomboka river pageant, which by 1999 was a major international tourist event replete with t-shirts "sell[ing] like hotcakes" (p. 154). Given the Kurosawian premise of Herbert's *Twilight on the Zambezi*, readers are left to decide which of the several accounts Herbert presents they find most compelling–including Herbert's own take on the complex lives and events of Barotseland in 1959 and thereafter.

Notes

[1]. Ian Cunnison, "History on the Luapula," *Rhodes-Livingstone Papers* 21 (1951), pp. 1-6.

[2]. From John Lonsdale, "Kenyatta's Trials: Breaking and Making an African Nationalist," in *The Moral World of the Law*, ed. Peter Coss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), apparently p. 199; and citing Wole Soyinka (without precise reference) for the phrase "the dancing dead."

[3]. While drawing attention to the need for inclusiveness in Africanist historiography, Herbert ignores a similar, though largely unanswered, call to study colonial and missionary ethnographies along with those of local Africans that was made in the late 1930s by Bronislaw Malinowski. The great anthropologist visited his student Audrey Richards at her research site among Bemba, of what is now northeastern Zambia, and wrote what remains a provocative call to broader study in *Methods of*

Study of Culture Contact in Africa ... With an Introductory Essay by B. Malinowski (London: Oxford University Press for the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures, 1938, and adapted from issues of the journal *Africa*).

[4]. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1973, 1992).

[5]. The classic example of how wrong irony can go is Jean Canizzo's well-intentioned but disastrous Royal Ontario exhibition, "Into the Heart of Africa." See Enid Schildkraut's "Ambiguous Messages and Ironic Twists: *Into the Heart of Africa* and *The Other Museum*," *Museum Anthropology* 15:2 (1991): pp. 16-23; and Henrietta Riegel's "Into the Heart of Irony: Ethnographic Exhibitions and the Politics of Difference," in *Theorizing Museums*, ed. S. Macdonald and G. Fyfe (London: Oxford University Press and Blackwell, 1996), pp. 83-106. I wish to thank Doran Ross for discussion of these points.

[6]. Herbert does mention that when she visited Barotseland in 1999, she found people who could remember the events and personalities of 1959 (pp. 153-155), but her emphasis is more upon what became of the colonial than the Lozi protagonists of these tales.

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