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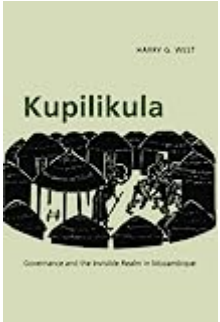

Harry G. West. *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xxviii + 336 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-89405-8.

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The Politics of Sorcery on the Mueda Plateau of Mozambique

Based on several years of research in collaboration with three Mozambican researchers, Harry G. West has written an insightful ethnographic study of the relationship between sorcery, politics, and the changing role of the state.[1] Building on the analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin and Jean and John Comaroff, West explores Makonde discourse about power and how that affected their participation in political life in the pre-colonial and Portuguese colonial eras, as well as the period of the national liberation struggle and the various stages of FRELIMO rule since independence. He uses a series of encounters between himself and people in Mueda, as well as narratives he gathered in the course of field research, to explore Makonde views of sorcery, government, power, and wealth, and how those views change over time. In contrast to Paul Stoller's apprenticeship to several sorcerers/healers, West does not study to become a sorcerer; instead, he learns about community perceptions of them and, occasionally, their views of themselves. Still, West does not essentialize Makonde views, pointing out the diversity of their perspectives: "At times, Muedans themselves challenged the ideas put forth by fellow Muedans who suggested that people among them could make external forms for themselves into lions, could make others into zombie slaves" (p. 1).

In fact, it is West's keen attention to the relationship between Mozambican political history, as manifested on the Mueda plateau, and local views of sorcery that provides one of his most important contributions. He begins his study with a discussion of Makonde sorcery during the era of slave-trading and warfare before the Portuguese occupation in the early twentieth century. In his discussion of this period, he analyzes the role of settlement chiefs who have the power of sorcery, but who use it to protect the community against nefarious attacks. It is their ability to operate in this dangerous world of sorcery that justifies their political authority. They practice a type of "constructive sorcery" that is able to undo–*kupilikula*–the effects of sorcery, to turn it around on those who seek to harm others. It is this power that provides the title of the study. These village chiefs were replaced, however, by Portuguese-appointed *regulos*, who were seen as practitioners of constructive sorcery, but who also were obligated to provide forced labor and tax monies to the colonial state. This collaboration empha-

sized a more predatory view of local chiefs, who were said to "eat" the people they ruled, but who, in turn, were eaten by the Portuguese. The term "to eat" is often associated with the nocturnal attacks of sorcerers, in the realm of the spirit. Still, by protecting against other forms of sorcery, they acquired legitimacy in the eyes of the people of the Mueda plateau.

During the years of armed struggle against Portuguese rule, FRELIMO leaders regarded these traditional authorities with considerable suspicion, as people who not only worked for the colonial authorities, but who used beliefs in such things as sorcery to bolster their ability to control local communities. With the independence of Mozambique, FRELIMO adopted policies of scientific socialism (West's term for FRELIMO policies), influenced by the policies of Julius Nyerere, who emphasized an "African socialism" based on rural communities. FRELIMO, like the Tanganyikans, emphasized the consolidation of rural communities that could market their goods more effectively on a collective basis and who could more readily receive schools, health clinics, potable water, and other services if the communities abandoned their scattered homesteads for more compact villages. They had no place for village chiefs and replaced them with FRELIMO officials who were discouraged from assuming "traditional" forms of authority. Sorcery, protection from sorcery, sorcery accusations, and spiritual healing were all relegated to the category of "obscurantism" and forbidden. Without realizing it, however, FRELIMO's leadership imposed a secular view of authority that did not correspond to many Muedan Makonde's view of political power. Leaders needed to be able to protect their communities against sorcery.

FRELIMO'S failure to understand local discourse about power was utilized by RENAMO, a movement aided by the white Rhodesian and South African regimes, to moblize disaffected rural people against the Westernized and urban FRELIMO leadership. As the civil war dragged on into the 1980s, FRELIMO began to soften its opposition to "tradition." While some local FRELIMO officials previously had quietly begun to practice "constructive sorcery," by the early 1990s they could do so more openly. As FRELIMO adjusted to the end of the Cold War, it abandoned "scientific socialism" and allowed village presidents to assume much of the authority of the old settlement chiefs. As the pressures of neo-liberal economics and structural adjustment forced the state to sharply curtail its activities in rural areas, village presidents and healers filled the void. West points out, however, that this was not simply a return to old beliefs; instead, concepts of sorcery actively shaped Makonde ideas about the new form of the Mozambican state, the civil war, and the new economic order. West's narratives speak of sorcerers using helicopters to attack villages and how they could manipulate the mines used by various armed groups, causing their enemies to be drawn toward them and maimed or killed (p. 155).

West has done careful field research and has used carefully selected narratives not to provide an ethnographic catalogue of ideas of sorcery, but rather to bring the reader into the logic of sorcery as it exists within a broader system of thought. He provides a convincing analysis of the continuing but changing role of concepts of sorcery in interpreting and influencing local manifestations of the Mozambican state as policies evolved through the colonial era, the war of independence, FRELIMO socialism, and the liberatization of the 1990s.

I would have hoped, however, that West would have provided (somewhere in this rich text) an analysis of how ideas of sorcery fit within a broader religious system. His closing narratives do not provide the reader with a necessary closure. He leaves us with the designation of a new healer in 1999 (one of the first since the war for independence began), but something more is needed in the form of a conclusion that ties all this wonderfully rich material together. West needs to step back from his narratives and explore, in more detail, what the people of the Mueda plateau can tell us about the complex relationship between sorcery, politics, power, and wealth beyond Mozambique.

Note

[1]. Based on research conducted in collaboration with Marcos Agostinho Mandumbwe, and assistance from EusÃ©bio Tissa Kairo and Felista Elias Mkaima.

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