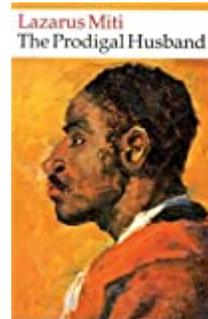


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Lazarus Miti. *The Prodigal Husband*. Cape Town: Kwela Books, 1999. 200 pp. \$8.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7957-0085-9.

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Lazarus Miti, a Zambian scholar who teaches linguistics at the University of Venda in South Africa, has produced an excellent work of historical fiction as his second novel.[1] Set in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) between the mid 1950s and the early 1970s, *The Prodigal Husband* depicts the struggle of a mother and her children to overcome abandonment by a migrant father and resist exploitation by the father's blood relatives. Miti's semi-autobiographical tale recaptures the charged atmosphere of economic uncertainty, social contradiction, and cultural ambiguity that southern Africa's migrant-labor system introduced to rural Zambian communities during the colonial period. It also reveals in rich detail how everyday people made their own history by renegotiating the meaning of "tradition" and "family" to meet the demands of "modern times." Miti's novel would be a worthy reading selection for undergraduate courses on the social history of twentieth century Africa.

The narrative of *The Prodigal Husband* opens in 1956 on a white-owned tobacco estate in Southern Rhodesia. Musa, an Ngoni migrant worker from the Fort Jameson District of Northern Rhodesia, has reached a personal crossroads. He has been working on the farm since the late 1930s and is now, by nearly every measure, a man of great status and achievement. Musa manages the estate

in the name of V.V., its European owner. He earns the impressive sum of 10 per month. He lives in a modern house originally built for V.V.'s son. He commands the respect and fear of his fellow Northern Rhodesian migrant workers (who believe he possesses powerful medicinal charms to protect him from witchcraft). And he is the husband of a beautiful, loyal wife and seven bright, healthy children. In short, Musa has attained virtually every measure of success that an African man can reasonably wish for in a white-dominated colonial society. Nonetheless, Musa is dissatisfied and uneasy. He has reached his full maturity, a stage when men of means back home take a second wife. Moreover, he has developed a strong attraction for Rhoda, a bright, young schoolteacher from a neighboring Shona community. Musa knows, however, that his wife Tisa is a devout member of the Dutch Reformed Church and a firm believer in the Christian principle that the only true marriage is a monogamous one.

Therein lies his problem. Musa loves Tisa and does not want to divorce her, but he also knows that she will try to prevent him from taking a second wife. He thus avoids direct confrontation over the issue by packing Tisa and her children off to live in his home village in Northern Rhodesia while he steals back to Southern Rhodesia to marry Rhoda. Tisa herself is Ngoni, and her father's village stands only a few hours walking distance

from Musa's. When she learns of Musa's second marriage by letter, Tisa travels home to consult with her parents about what to do next. Her father, invoking the principles of Ngoni tradition, tells her to accept Musa's right to plural marriage, while her mother, sympathizing with the hurt and rejection that her daughter feels, urges her to seek divorce in the headman's court on grounds of abandonment. Tisa finds little inspiration in either piece of advice. Her identity lies firmly within the values of her Christian faith, and she considers the notion of divorce sinful. She decides, therefore, to seek direction in prayer and wait for Musa to rediscover his own faith in the church.

It is a long and fruitless vigil. Musa goes on with his new life and sets up house on the farm with Rhoda. They have two daughters, and Musa finds that the extra expense of keeping a second family is more than he bargained for. He cannot afford to send remittances to Tisa, and he quietly surrenders the welfare of his first wife and her children to his brother Shuzi, who proves an unworthy guardian. Shuzi refuses to provide school fees for Tisa's eldest son, the bright and talented Isaki, and uses his authority as Musa's patrikin to force Tisa's children to tend his cattle and work his fields without compensation. Eventually Isaki and his younger brother Yosefe rebel by seeking refuge with their grandparents in their mother's village. This incident precipitates a legal struggle for custody of the children between the two villages, and Miti's description of the complex negotiation process that ensues constitutes one of the novel's most intriguing and insightful passages.

Unlike many other novelistic recreations of "traditional authority," Miti's headmen refuse to play the stereotypical role of backward, rigid "patriarchs" eager to uphold the right of elder men to determine what is good for their dependents. Instead, the headmen conclude that Musa has indeed abandoned his wife and children and that Shuzi has acted unreasonably as a guardian to his brother's family. They refuse to order the return of the boys, and accuse Shuzi of trying to use the letter of the law to his advantage without honoring its spirit. Miti's description of the negotiability and adaptability of "traditional law" thus recalls observations made by Max Gluckman, A.L. Epstein, and J.A. Barnes about the capacity of colonial-period "native" courts in Northern Rhodesia to act not simply as defenders of the established order of things but also occasionally as active agents of social change and transformation.[2] The notion of "reasonable" reciprocation in relationships between elders and dependents offered some women and children grounds

to challenge their exploitation at the hands of senior men (and sometimes senior women) and thereby provided an important strategy for restructuring family dynamics.

Toward the end of the novel, Isaki and Yosefe complete secondary school and obtain advanced degrees in medicine and law at the University of Zambia. They achieve these successes without the help of their father, who gradually stops writing home and becomes, for all intents and purposes, one of rural Zambia's many *machona* ("lost ones"). Tisa continues to wait patiently for Musa in his natal village, refusing to betray her own faith by seeking the divorce to which she is legally entitled.

Finally, when Musa grows too old to work any longer, V.V.'s family sends him back to Zambia with a pension of \$1,000 in traveler's checks. By this time, Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front government has sealed off UDI-Rhodesia's northern border with independent Zambia, and Musa is left to walk across the no-man's land of the Chirundu border post alone. Rhoda has no intention of joining him in a country she has never seen, and she moves with her children and her household possessions back to her parent's village in Mashonaland. The prodigal husband has returned to the land of his birth suddenly stripped of the trappings of status and wealth that he possessed on the farm. Fearing that his first family will refuse to accept him back, Musa goes to Kitwe, where he finds that the mines have little use for a tired old man in a declining economy where strong young boys are forced to sweep the streets for nothing more than food rations. His future appears bleak until Isaki, now a prominent doctor at the Kitwe government hospital, finds Musa in the mining compound and carries him back home towards reconciliation with Tisa.

Miti's novel successfully portrays many of the historical dimensions that characterized long-term labor migration from Northern Rhodesia to Southern Rhodesia during the colonial period. The forced removal of many Ngoni, Chewa, and Nsenga peoples to small, overcrowded reserves in the 1910s stimulated vast numbers of land-hungry men and women to seek wage work on the farms and mines of Mashonaland and Manicaland. The Ngoni, unlike their Bemba neighbors to the north, did not migrate in substantial numbers to the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt. Instead, most Eastern Province men worked south of the Zambezi, where cash wages were considerably higher and where wives received access to fertile garden plots on white-owned estates.

According to several colonial government estimates, at least sixty percent of all able-bodied men were away

at work in Southern Rhodesia at any given time between the 1920s and the 1960s. As a result, bustling ethnic enclaves – equipped with their own languages (Chewa and Nyanja) and popular cultures – emerged like distinct social islands in a sea of Shona-speaking communities. These islands began to fragment and dissipate in the 1960s, however, as rising rates of industrial sector unemployment in UDI-Rhodesia forced many Shona to seek farm jobs and as growing tensions between Zambia and UDI-Rhodesia led to the accelerated return of tens of thousands of Zambians to their homelands. Miti's novel thus commemorates an important period in the labor history of central Africa that exists today only in the memories of those who made the long trip. The history of these machona should not be lost, and it is now the task of writers like Miti to record the stories of their families for the sake of posterity. One sincerely hopes that *The Prodigal Husband* will be only the first in a long series of historical novels published by Miti and other Zambians who have important tales to tell about the way life was during the late-colonial and early independence periods.

Miti's novel is published by Kwela Books, a Cape Town press that was established in 1994 with a mission to offer "a home for writers who have been or have felt excluded – be it for cultural or political reasons – from the South African publishing fraternity." In a little more than half a decade, Kwela has published more than sixty texts in English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sesotho, Setswana, and Tshivenda. It has been especially active in providing a voice for South Africans of mixed-race (Colored) background, publishing several biographies, autobiographies, and historical novels dealing with life in the Western Cape from the seventeenth century to the present. Africa needs more regional presses like these,

but in the absence of a local reading public that can afford to pay between US \$7.00 and US \$20.00 for paperbacks, Kwela needs the support of an international readership to keep its prices down and make it accessible to readers and writers who generally receive little consideration from the publishing world. Hopefully this review will draw attention to the high-quality selections that Kwela can offer to high school and college instructors interested in exploring with their students the history of everyday life and everyday people in southern Africa.

A final note: Amazon.com's web site mistakenly claims that *The Prodigal Husband* is out of print. This is not the case: see Kwela's web site at <http://www.kwela.com>

Notes

[1]. Miti's first novel is *The Father* (Lusaka: Zambia Educational Publishing House, 1996).

[2]. See Max Gluckman, *The Judicial Process among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1955); A.L. Epstein, "Juridical Techniques and the Judicial Process: A Study in African Customary Law," *Rhodes-Livingstone Papers* 23 (1954); J.A. Barnes, "The Fort Jameson Ngoni" in Elizabeth Colson and Max Gluckman, eds., *Seven Tribes of British Central Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), pp. 194-252; Barnes, "Marriage in a Changing Society: A Study in Structural Change among the Fort Jameson Ngoni," *Rhodes-Livingstone Papers* 20 (1951).

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