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Review of Zeman, A. (2023) The winds of history: life in a corner of rural Africa since the 19th century

Dreijer, G.P.

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Andreas Zeman, *The Winds of History: Life in a Corner of Rural Africa since the 19th century*; De Gruyter, Oldenbourg, 2023; ISBN 978-3-11-076482-6; 479 pp., Illustrations, Open Access.

This book details the history of a small, rural village in northern Mozambique since the late nineteenth century, through a global microhistorical approach. Nkholongue is situated on the eastern shores of Lake Malawi and, as Andreas Zeman notes in the introduction, it appears to have been largely untouched by history. However, as he convincingly demonstrates, the “Winds of History” have nevertheless significantly affected the lives of the people in Nkholongue since the late nineteenth century (roughly 1880), either for good or ill. Zeman’s book is an extremely detailed and well-written account of Nkholongue’s history, based on a wide array of sources, including oral history interviews, village surveys, and archival documents from various African and European archives. Zeman manages to link the history of the village to larger questions of the impact of colonialism and slavery, while maintaining a sharp focus on individual people and their agency. This book should be compulsory reading material for all (development) economists, as Zeman persuasively shows how flawed, incomplete, and sometimes harmful ideas about Africa’s rural areas are profoundly misguided and lead to perverse outcomes.

The book is structured into an introduction, ten chapters that are roughly chronological but cover a wide variety of topics, and a conclusion. Zeman lays out his “global microhistorical” approach in his extended introduction, arguing that his aim is to counter ahistorical clichés about rural Africa. He identifies three “myths” that are still widely propagated in Western scholarship and popular culture: the Aboriginal Delusion (the notion of rural inertia, isolation and harmony), the Legacy Mode (simplified references to an abstract and essentialised past, such as “legacies of colonialism” common in economic-historical scholarship) and the One-Way-Analysis (the linearity of historical processes like globalisation). In short, Zeman seeks to raise awareness to the historicity of life in rural Africa (p. 43), in which he certainly succeeds. Nkholongue itself is largely composed of the descendants of enslaved people brought there via the internal African slave trade, a fact that continues to resonate in local politics (p. 1 and p. 45).

The second chapter examines the history and present-day impact of the slave trade. Here, Zeman emphasises its significant effects but, as is often the case in the book, avoids making sweeping claims about guilt and simplistic notions of good and bad regarding the people and regions affected by slavery and colonialism. As Zeman observes (p. 45), for most people in Nkholongue, the slave traders were other Africans, not Europeans.

The third chapter explores the spread of Islam in northern Mozambique, particularly in Nkhlongue: Zeman demonstrates (contrary to popular belief) that the conversion to Islam in Nkhlongue was a bottom-up process rather than an elite-driven phenomenon. Moreover, he refutes the idea that Islam was somehow less effective for commerce than Christianity, which had already arrived in Nkhlongue before 1880 and converted many people.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the advent and lived reality of Portuguese colonialism in the village, adding important insights to our knowledge of Portuguese colonialism in the nineteenth century. Particularly noteworthy is Zeman's research into the "periodisation" of colonialism in Chapter 5, showing how the period of the concessionary *Companhia do Nyassa* was especially brutal and violent in its early efforts to colonise northern Mozambique (p. 120–126), and how the period of the First World War and the 1920s was particularly harsh in terms of tax and forced labour requirements (p. 189). Zeman also notes that, after the decline of the *Companhia do Nyassa*, Portuguese colonial presence was relatively "light" in this rural part of Mozambique. He critiques scholarly and popular "romantic" notions of African resistance to colonialism, instead offering a much more nuanced picture in which collaboration, resistance, and indifference coexisted. Zeman effectively demonstrates that Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique was not a linear process of increasing colonial power but one of ebb and flow, even quoting one Portuguese colonial administrator who pointed out the need for "effective occupation" of the region as late as 1961.

Chapter 6 critiques development studies and its persistent ideas of "traditional subsistence agriculture". Zeman asserts that steamship trade did have an impact on Nkhlongue's economic structure, which was much more reliant on trade than the image of "traditional subsistence agriculture" suggests. Zeman is particularly critical of World Bank and IMF economists, whose policies promoting entrepreneurship often led to increased inequality, contrary to their stated goals and perceived outcomes.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 tackle the Mozambican War of Independence, the Mozambican Civil War and their ongoing effects, including the position of Malawians in the village. Zeman shows how loyalties during these conflicts were both more complex and less fixed than often assumed, arguing that the impact of war was not always as profound as commonly believed. For many in Nkhlongue, independence meant a return to a war-torn village, but after the wars, little changed in terms of government policies. Zeman thus concludes that "the difference between Lisbon and Maputo proved to be pretty small" (p. 337), and that major events such as decolonisation and civil wars largely

bypassed Nkhlongue, despite the fact that many soldiers were recruited from the area (p. 343).

Chapters 10 and 11 take a more thematic approach, with chapter 10 focusing on recent efforts to promote ecotourism in the region and the difficulties in determining who can speak for the villagers. Most government organisations and NGOs rely on supposedly “customary” institutions like the village chief, even though this creates resentment within the community. Zeman makes a compelling argument when criticising the idea of traditional institutions as “apolitical and timeless protectors of homogenous communities” (p. 364), a myth he also addresses in his introduction. Chapter 11 highlights how matriliney in Nkhlongue has proven resilient against the “Winds of History” (p. 414), even though recent shifts towards virolocality and a “masculinisation of power” can also be observed (p. 416).

Zeman makes a strong case for his “global microhistorical” approach, demonstrating how a rural village on the shores of Lake Malawi indeed have a place in history. Particularly significant is his conclusion that “many developments in Nkhlongue’s history were not unidirectional, no one-way processes” (p. 419). By setting out to show the historicity of a rural African village, Zeman has succeeded admirably. The book is well-written, engaging, and deeply researched. Its interdisciplinary, historically rich approach provides much-needed nuance to grand narratives about the impact of colonialism and slavery. The only critical observation this reviewer could make is the question of how far Zeman’s findings can be broadened, compared, or generalized. Scholarly speaking, this is an excellent book, and policy makers in both Western and African governments would also greatly benefit from reading it.

Gijs Dreijer | ORCID: 0000-0002-0012-9336

Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

g.p.dreijer@hum.leidenuniv.nl