

Bjørn Enge Bertelsen, *Violent Becomings: state formation, sociality, and power in Mozambique*. New York NY and London: Berghahn Books (hb US\$110/£78 – 978 1 78533 236 4; pb US\$29.95/£21 – 978 1 78533 293 7). 2016, 360 pp. Available Open Access at <[https://www.berghahnbooks.com/downloads/OpenAccess/BertelsenViolent/9781785334290\\_OA.pdf](https://www.berghahnbooks.com/downloads/OpenAccess/BertelsenViolent/9781785334290_OA.pdf)>.

This book is the outcome of twelve years of research and fieldwork in the Manica area of Mozambique. In it, the author seeks to explain why rural Mozambique remains so unstable twenty-five years after the peace accord, and why the country as a whole has struggled to accommodate itself to modernity, a term which the author concedes ‘could perhaps instead be pluralised into multiple modernities, if not avoided altogether’ (p. 16). The author’s approach is to investigate the fraught relations between the state and what he calls ‘the traditional field’. Embedded in the often technical ethnographic language are many insights of value and it would be well worth while for the student of modern Mozambique to dig into this book for these nuggets.

The key idea is enshrined in the title. Neither the state nor the ‘traditional field’ are static concepts and they cannot be clearly defined; rather, both are in a state of ‘becoming’, by which the author implies that they are constantly changing, developing and evolving. The result is a high degree of ambiguity – the secular state is closely intertwined with the beliefs and practices of tradition and ‘is engaged in a battle to control the unruly field of spirits’ (p. 115). Meanwhile, the traditional belief in spirits, and their presence in everyday affairs, is also ambiguous – spirits can both protect and destroy, mediums and healers can be grasping entrepreneurs and at the same time real healers, *mhondoros* can strengthen as well as weaken the institutions and peoples they serve, and the historical process itself can be ‘territorializing’ and ‘deterritorializing’ at the same time.

Of particular interest for historians is the chapter explaining the historical context, which emphasizes the continuities between the precolonial overrule of Gungunhana, the rule of the Mozambique Company, the violence of the late colonial period and the catastrophe of the civil war that followed. Flight, forced labour, kidnapping, physical violence and intimidation are seen as continuous in the lives of the people, with little to distinguish the colonial period from pre- and post-colonial times. Throughout, it is control over people that is all important. During the civil war there were no hard boundaries between Renamo and Frelimo – ‘the shape of the war machine [did] not aim to control territory’ (p. 41). It was people, not territory, which each side sought to control.

Communities are haunted by the spirits of fighters who died far from their homeland, and the idea of ‘shape-shifting’ is deeply embedded in local beliefs – not only the ancient idea that the spirits of the dead can inhabit lions (some lions being natural beasts and others called into existence for nefarious purposes), but the idea that Dhlakama, in particular, has magical powers that enables him to escape ambushes and capture by turning into a partridge. ‘Dhlakama’s man-animality embodies *flight* and *mobility* as powerful capacities of defiance of state apparatuses’ (p. 111).

It is rash for someone who is not an ethnographer to advance any opinion about the methods used in this research. However, this book leaves a strong impression of telling Africans what their social customs and beliefs really mean. For example, the attempt to impose coherence and order on the random, diverse and vague beliefs that surround *mhondoros* ties the author in impossible knots (pp. 103–7). Perhaps there is no coherence, no systematic ‘meaning’ that can be captured and colonized by Western intellectuals. And there are examples where the search for symbolic meaning puts particular demands on the creative imagination of the ethnographer. In the healing ceremonies performed by the ‘*n’angas*’, ‘the *portugaro* [Portuguese

wine] signifies the blood and sacrifice of former generations' deaths at the hands of war or colonial or state-organized violence', while the *nipa* (which is brewed locally) represents the 'sweat of ancestors' bodies' (p. 144). An infusion is drunk akin to 'vaginal fluid' used 'for the cooling of sick children, the tempering of drunk husbands, or the cooling of corpses of husbands' (p. 133).

This book is a study in ethnography written by an ethnographer, for other ethnographers. There is an impressive bibliography, which makes it all the more surprising that no mention is made of the articles of Corrado Tornimbeni, who also carried out fieldwork in the region of Chimoio. However, those who are not skilled in the language of ethnography should approach this study with caution. The book gives the impression of being obscure, and it was sometimes incomprehensible to me, using words that do not exist in common dictionaries. It was the great virtue of the late Patrick Chabal, whose books are of such fundamental importance in understanding modern Africa, that he wrote simply and with absolute clarity. Anyone from any background could read his books and immediately understand what he was saying. Sadly, the same cannot be said about *Violent Becomings*, which for many people will prove largely inaccessible. The reader will have to cope with phrases such as: 'Frequently such valorization is actualized through deterritorializing and rhizomic processes that challenge the arborescent structures of state ordering' (p. 21). To write in this way is a pity, as the author has a great deal of value to say.

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Léon de Saint Moulin, *Kinshasa: enracinements historiques et horizons culturels*. Cahiers Africains 79. Tervuren and Paris: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale and L'Harmattan (pb €37.50 – 978 2 296 96924 7). 2012, 358 pp.

This work presents a precolonial, colonial and postcolonial history of the city of Kinshasa and an analysis of the social perceptions and values of its population. The aim is to provide an alternative history of Kinshasa, a history no longer emanating from the privileged view of foreigners and the documents they have produced about the country. On the contrary: the study aims to produce a history from inside, a history from the perspective of the Congolese population, which considers its opinions, perceptions and the subjects that matter to it, such as democracy, justice and education (p. 16).

The book is organized around three themes. The first part is concerned with the history and emergence of the city of Kinshasa. Based on research conducted from 1968 to 1972, de Saint Moulin provides insights into the precolonial villages that preceded modern Kinshasa, tracks the formation of its population and sheds light on the importance of cultural identity in the social relations of the city (pp. 19–21). He proposes revisiting the history of the city, not only through the accounts of the first foreign travellers (Stanley, missionaries and others) but also through the testimony of indigenous inhabitants, especially the traditional chiefs, to highlight their various reactions – alliance, negotiation, conflicts and resistance – to the reorganization of their space by colonial authority. A critical view of colonization emerges from these testimonies, emphasizing the restrictive character of the colonial order: in particular, the reorganization of traditional authorities and the delimitation of their lands.

The second part of the book focuses more precisely on the democratization process and how the population of Kinshasa has perceived it. The author