

## Work and Life on the Mission Station

### *Labour and Christianity in the Mission: African Workers in Tanganyika and Zanzibar, 1864-1926*

By Michelle Liebst. Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2021. Pp. 240. \$99.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9781847012753); \$24.99, e-book (ISBN: 9781800102859).

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Doing the Lord's work: so have Christian missionaries, historical and contemporary, described their terrestrial assignment. For their part, historians telling the stories of mission labor have emphasized teaching and preaching, which scholars have perceived as the central tasks of saving souls. In *Labour and Christianity in the Mission: African Workers in Tanganyika and Zanzibar, 1864-1926*, Michelle Liebst shifts the spotlight to the more mundane kinds of work being done at mission stations, work carried out by African laborers in East Africa, from the nineteenth century into the interwar period.

Focusing on an Anglican missionary society, the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA), and its stations at Zanzibar and Magila, the book builds two interrelated arguments. The first pertains to periodization: namely that, until the 1920s at the earliest, association with the mission — whether through conversion, school attendance, or labor arrangements — was not an unadulterated advantage, either for marginalized individuals or social strivers. This meant, and here is Liebst's second major contention, that East Africans who engaged with the UMCA were also, often, simultaneously drawing upon other, non-Euro-Christian sociocultural complexes in order to secure socioeconomic status, including the matrix of coastal, Swahili, and Islamic influences in which the UMCA and its workers lived. This included everything from male students leaving the mission to find work in town, to females marrying outside of the fold, to the adoption of the classically 'Muslim' sartorial styles of coastal cities.

The book thus presents a social history, framed by a labor history: through the detailed examination of work such as cooking, cleaning, mending, and maintenance — the daily tasks that kept mission stations afloat — Liebst uncovers the multiple, often contradictory interpretations of that labor. African laborers were perceived as at once invaluable helpers and lazy workers by European missionaries, servile by town-dwelling Zanzibari Muslims, and variably by one another. Carefully attuned to these differences, Liebst systematically presents the types of social-labor experiences lived by African mission workers, shaped by factors such as former-slave status, gender, and place of work (mainland or island, school or farm, etc.). The laborers of the UMCA were linked by the overarching network of the mission, but their past, present, and future paths were thoroughly differentiated both by the mission leadership and by their own strategies of survival in ongoing 'status struggles' (30).

In the first chapter, Liebst utilizes conflicts over missionary lime burning — used to create the mortar to build churches — as a window onto local ambivalence about the mission presence in the area around Magila, in what is today northeastern Tanzania. Unlike at other stations, including Masasi in the south, the UMCA leadership decided against the deployment of formerly enslaved adherents from Zanzibar to form the basis of the station's foundational generation — a move which often resulted in a community cut off from its surroundings, a suboptimal strategy for gaining converts. Rather, at Magila the missionaries sought alliances with local leaders among the Kilindi and Bondei communities, who had been engaged in disruptive power struggles — including

the 1868 Kiva rebellion which broke up the Shambaai kingdom — in the decade prior to the UMCA's arrival in the region. The UMCA was no major power broker in local politics, but rather one player (often, in fact, a pawn) in a complicated game of political alliance making. Moreover, as Liebst stresses, rather than sending their sons to the mission school at Magila, local elites would send dependents — including enslaved children and orphans — only reinforcing the local association between the mission community and slave status. And as the frustrated missionaries would find again and again, both at Magila and Zanzibar, they were being interpreted through local terms, but were not yet able to set those terms. Chapter Two lays out the 'divergent abolitionist sensibilities' (76) displayed by the UMCA, using the construction of the Zanzibar cathedral as a case study. The mission, founded on a wave of abolitionist enthusiasm, let its cathedral be built by wage laborers who were at the same time enslaved. The chapter also explores the UMCA's complex ideology of anti-industrial industriousness — which stressed the importance of teaching adherents the 'value of work' while eschewing wage labor and material gain as motives for taking on that work — that underpinned the creation of its own labor force.

Chapters Three and Four focus on the mission's Zanzibar schools — Kiungani for young men and Mbweni for young women. It was at Kiungani that the persistence of former-slave status came into finest resolution, as the mission shifted its hopes for the institution from a school for the education of former slaves to a college for training never-enslaved mainlanders as teachers or priests. In the final accounting, however, life was often more difficult for 'educated ex-slave Christians' than it was for 'ex-mission, non-Christian dependents' who could find both work and social space in Zanzibar Town (125). Options were more limited for those who, in a sense, had fully bought into the mission through conversion, education, and the forging of social ties: the stigma of slave status, or mission dependency, shadowed them for life, largely foreclosing work and social opportunities outside of the mission community. Yet neither school could escape the orbit of Zanzibar Town and the supposed temptations it represented — from alcohol to sex to Islam — nor, more importantly, the socioeconomic power it represented. The situation was just as complex for the young women educated at Mbweni, who were perceived as 'privileged oddities' and, thus, were even more reliant upon the mission than were their educated male counterparts (144). By examining the life trajectories of students at Kiungani and Mbweni, Liebst demonstrates that, much as the UMCA fancied itself an 'emancipator' of former slaves, association with the mission often only reinforced slave status. The book's final chapter examines *uboi* (domestic labor) at both Magila and Zanzibar, where into the twentieth century only a thin line separated the role of student and servant, until domestic service slowly transformed into a professional labor category that individuals began to claim for better wages and social standing.

*Labour and Christianity in the Mission* describes a wide spectrum of labor experiences, thereby crystallizing the necessary agility of East African workers. For while mission stations offered their laborers a place to survive, they did not necessarily provide the socioeconomic means to thrive. For that, individuals sought to tap into the range of sociocultural and economic networks on offer in coastal East Africa. This pivot is what makes the book such a satisfying read: framed as a labor history that corrects historiographic misperceptions about work on mission stations, if one sticks with Liebst through the thick forest of historical and historiographic details set out in each chapter, one receives a carefully rendered social history, in which mission work is both central and tangential to the larger story of individuals making their way in complex situations. The book will be of interest not only to those keen to learn about the entanglement of religious and labor ideologies on mission stations, but also useful to scholars looking for a longer-term and thicker understanding of the — as Liebst's work demonstrates — winding history of the development of postcolonial political and social elites in Tanzania, including the tangle of persistent tension and inseparable connection that exists between the mainland and Zanzibar.