REVIEW ESSAYS

ELIZABETH COLSON: AN APPRECIATION

Chet Lancaster and Kenneth P. Vickery, eds. *The Tonga-Speaking Peoples of Zambia and Zimbabwe: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Colson.* Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007. viii + 392 pp. Maps. Tables. Figures. Notes. References. Index. $45.00. Paper.

In March 1955, after more than a decade of economic and engineering feasibility studies, the international bidding was opened for the construction of a dam at Kariba Gorge on the Zambezi River. At 384 feet high and 1737 feet long, the Kariba project remains one of the most massive hydroelectric dams ever built, creating the largest artificial lake in the world at the time of its construction. This unique engineering feat was a bold expression of postwar European confidence in science and the human capacity to tame and transform nature in the name of modernization: in fact, to command nature's acquiescence in grandiose colonial dreams of limitless industrial expansion. The Kariba project was also a surprising expression of confidence in the stability of the colonial order of things. Through the hindsight of history, we know that the British Empire in West Africa was already crumbling at that time. Indeed, the former Gold Coast had already achieved some measure of internal self-rule and would receive full independence in less than two years. Much of British Central Africa would follow suit in less than a decade. Yet Kariba Dam was conceived not as a parting gift, a farewell gesture of thanks to colonial peoples for decades of human and material contributions to European development. Instead, Kariba moved forward as if the African clamor for independence were inconsequential—as if African people themselves were irrelevant. The project would flood 20,000 square miles of potentially productive African farmland, and it forced the removal of 57,000 African people to higher ground. No input was sought from those who would be most affected, and no resistance was tolerated.

The immensity of Kariba Dam's impact on the landscape was perhaps exceeded only by the immensity of its impact on the human imagination. Industrialists worldwide intensified plans for utilizing the heretofore inconceivable amount of electrical energy that would be up for grabs in both Northern and Southern Rhodesia. International environmental organizations vied to be the first to study the dramatically changed downstream ecology that would result from the containment of roughly 40 percent of the total runoff of the Zambezi River. Conservationists from all over the globe flocked to the Zambezi Valley to participate in "Operation Noah," a multi-

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year effort to rescue animals, large and small, from the rising floodwaters. Members of the hospitality industry jostled one another to acquire the best sites for new hotels, game lodges, sport fishing resorts, and boating marinas along the shoreline of the newly forming lake.

One small group of scholars, however, recognized the potential the Kariba project held for studying social change. A group of people with a richly varied riverine-focused subsistence system was about to be forced to begin life anew on the bleak, wind-swept, wild-animal infested plateaus that hovered over 3000 feet above their old village sites. How would these people adapt? What would be the impact of the move on their social, political, and economic systems? How might notions of land tenure, reciprocal rights and duties, traditional leveling mechanisms, and gender dynamics fare in the new dispensation? Might the change affect such basic parameters as morbidity and mortality rates? And what of the ancestors and spirits of the forest and river below? Would they move up to the new location as well?

This satchel of weighty questions was foisted on the shoulders of a young anthropologist named Elizabeth Colson. And the rest is history.

Colson was raised in a small farming community in Central Minnesota, conscious from a young age of the continuing presence of Ojibwas who had been dispossessed of their land by Euro-American settlers. Her parents were both educators, and little Elizabeth was well noted for her early and passionate love of reading; even her memories of Christmas shopping as a child centered on buying books for others that she herself would hope to read later. This voracious appetite for books perhaps contributed to Colson's capacity both to make short work of the classroom and to endure long periods of fieldwork. She skipped the sixth grade entirely, and in 1938 completed her B.A. in anthropology at the University of Minnesota in only three years. She would spend the following three successive summers doing fieldwork on women's lives and social change among the Pomo, a Native American group just north of San Francisco Bay, while completing her M.A. at Minnesota and beginning advanced work at Radcliffe. By the time she finished her Ph.D. dissertation in 1944 she had spent an additional year working on assimilation and resistance among the Makah of Neah Bay, Washington, as well as another full year working on the response of Japanese Americans to World War II internment in the Poston War Relocation Camp in Arizona. Colson would go on to hold positions at Harvard, the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (Northern Rhodesia), Manchester University, Goucher College, Boston University, Brandeis, Northwestern, Berkeley, the University of Zambia, and Oxford.

The specific pathway that would lead Colson to academic preeminence in the minds of many began, perhaps, with a job ad in a British journal, an ocean voyage around Cape Horn to Cape Town, and a fortuitous assignment to begin fieldwork among the Tonga of Southern Rhodesia (Zambia) in 1946. Although life would lead Colson in many varied directions, these pathways always led back to the Tonga, and sixty years of continuous

scholarship on one people has resulted in a breadth of inquiry, a depth of analysis, a density of data, and a wealth of scholarly exposition perhaps unsurpassed in the history of ethnographic investigation.

Colson has encouraged and supported three generations of scholars. Her most famous collaboration began in 1956 with the selection of Thayer Scudder, a student in her Africa seminar at Boston University, to be her partner in the Kariba Dam-Tonga relocation study. But Colson's imprint can be found on scholars and scholarship the world over. As director of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute from 1947 to 1951 she recruited and gave impetus to the works of such later luminaries as Victor Turner, William Watson, Marion Pearsall, Jaap Van Velsen, and Lewis Gann. A festschrift published in 1984 titled *Opportunity, Constraint, and Change: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Colson* (Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers 63/64) reveals something of Colson's profound and lasting impact on her students as they went on to grapple with cultural issues as far afield as Indonesia, Morocco, Tunisia, Kenya, Japan, Canada, Sweden, Scotland, the U.S., and, of course, Zambia.

The festschrift under review collects essays by those who most directly followed the trails blazed by Colson—individuals who have done extensive fieldwork among Tonga-speaking peoples on both sides of the Zambezi River. Fifteen scholars, representing social and physical anthropology, education, history, linguistics, and political science, pay homage to Colson by signaling the value of the intellectual overlaps, disciplinary complementarities, rational extensions, quantitative comparisons, and historical juxtapositions that extend from her rich material and sustained focus on the Tonga for six decades. Even those who had had little direct contact with Colson acknowledge the degree to which their own work would have been greatly improvised in the absence of Colson's pre-Kariba Dam relocation baseline data or her continuous theoretical reworkings of her observations of social change over time.

Kenneth P. Vickery opens the volume with an introduction to Colson and Tonga scholarship. The essay is full of facts and personal anecdotes that breathe life into our image of Colson. Vickery also attempts to answer a fundamental question: who are the Tonga? Unfortunately the result is a convoluted treatise on ethnicity in Africa that brings little clarity to the topic, and, indeed, is more likely to increase the level of confusion among the uninitiated and the level of irritation among those more deeply seeped in the issue. I fear, however, that this failing is not a result of Vickery's mode of explication, so much as a reflection of anthropology's continuing inability to clearly identify its unit of analysis, or generate a succinct discourse about the nature of ethnicity in Africa.

Tim Matthews's attempt to historicize the issue of Tonga identity in chapter 2 only compounds the problem. The essay is impossibly dense, with endless speculation about the multitude of folks moving about, conquering and being conquered, making claims and changing names, appearing and

disappearing from the pages of history. Nevertheless, Matthews certainly gives the reader a sense that those who dwelled in the Zambezi valley region were dynamic actors, well aware and integrally connected to outside events long before the advent of colonial rule. They were likewise among the earliest of folks to seize the economic opportunities associated with the externally imposed colonial order.

Chet Lancaster (a former student of Colson who conceived this festschrift volume in the 1980s but died before its completion) follows with a superbly tantalizing essay on the Tonga spirit realm. He introduces us to vibrant notions of classes of spirits (royal and commoner, ancient and recent, helpful and harmful)—notions saturated with elements of symbolic importance that persist and help the Tonga interpret otherwise inexplicable events. In the process he shows the relevance of belief systems for decoding the differential and unique responses of various Zambezi populations to relocation, the emergence of new political contingencies, and the periodic outbreak of troubling diseases. From this, the Tonga spiritual realm emerges as continually reshaped and reconfigured by aspiring prophets and mediums, with its denizens propitiated and reappropriated by aspiring chiefs and political figures in accordance with shifting power relations in present-day Zambia and Zimbabwe. With Lancaster as our guide, we are immersed within an interconnected system of thought that integrates vivid awareness of a cruel past with present ideas about political organization and the cultural ecology of the land the Tonga have been forced to live on.

Dan and Carolyn O'Brien follow with an essay that challenges the general perception of the Tonga as historically disparate groups of migratory folks without any apparent overall cohesion. This chapter argues for the religious and even political centrality of specific rain shrines, sites of pilgrimage and ritual activity, and regional cults that did not compete with local loyalties but rather appealed to a more widespread and diffuse notion of connections. The Monze Shrine and its Lwiindi Festival in particular, where even warring parties would put down their weapons and pray jointly for health and rain, emerges as a Central African alternative to the more highly developed chieftainship elsewhere.

Kenneth P. Vickery is more comfortably in his element in the next essay as he nimbly outlines the unique set of features that led Tonga on the plateau to adopt plow agriculture quickly and compete successfully in the rapidly expanding maize market. Indeed, the Tonga were one of the few people in colonial Southern Africa who managed to satisfy most of their cash needs for tax and consumer goods through producing for the market, rather than selling their labor. Vickery clearly demonstrates Tonga creativity and perseverance in overcoming the series of legal and structural barriers erected to protect European farmers from Tonga competition.

The next two essays provide a fine-grained assessment of the emergence and impact of socioeconomic differentiation among the Tonga that accompanied their increasing incorporation into the market economy.

Mac R. Dixon-Fyle focuses first on Tonga reluctance to engage fully with the earliest African opposition movement, even while being ardent anticolonialists themselves. The Tonga had every reason to resent policies that paid Africans less than European farmers for crops and animals, limited their access to credit, transport, and extension services, imposed soil control measures from which European farmers were exempt, and required forced labor in service to the state. Dixon-Fyle notes the tension between the fear of losing profits, on the one hand, and the need for political participation in anticolonial struggles, on the other. But the real tension, he asserts, was between an African nationalism that privileged urban intellectuals and wage laborers at the expense of successful rural farmers. He touches on the role of ethnicity in maintaining a veneer of unity among the Tonga, even while varying economic fortunes might suggest differing styles of political action.

Jotham Momba continues this line of argumentation, but he does so within a neo-Marxist framework. While much of his rhetoric sounds a bit dated (particularly his attempts to make explicit distinctions between upper and middle classes of peasants and Kulaks), his approach is indeed quite productive. Although neo-Marxist approaches may have fallen out of favor in much of academia, we should not neglect the reasons that it was once a major paradigm: there is still much to be gained by looking at social circumstances through the lens of class and via a detailed examination of people's relationships to particular modes of production. Such a perspective informs much of Tonga political behavior as well as that of pockets of successful African farmers elsewhere.

Bonnie Keller's essay extends directly from Colson's early assertion that of all the traditional specialists, Tonga diviners and herbalists were the most adept at increasing their importance and the scope of their activities under changing circumstances. Keller looks at three Tonga women diviners who have set up shop in town and have managed to attract a large daily clientele, many of whom are not Tonga. One may be able to escape the wrath of distant ancestors in town, but urban life is fraught with its own unique set of dangers, social tensions, moral breaches, financial entanglements, and male–female relations gone awry. Blending culturally specific symbols with a bricolage of contemporary and Christian allusions, Tonga diviners produce an explanatory and curative environment that resonates powerfully in the urban milieu.

The essay that follows is built around diary entries given to Pamela Reynolds by Zimbabwean Tonga adolescents. Here we see earlier notions about the vibrant Tonga spirit world reemerge in youthful concerns about contemporary life, love, school, and dreams for the future. This essay adds an important counterbalance to a volume otherwise saturated with the voices of elders speaking about a bygone era. The next two essays focus on gender relations. Gisela Geisler begins with an early 1980s look at gender dynamics among the Toka, a group of Tonga intermarried with Lozi people to the

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west, where men variously appeal to traditional matriliny or newly acquired patriliny in accordance with their own perception of strategic advantage at a given moment. According to Geisler, men have been successful, for the most part, at channeling women's labor into male cash crop ventures while minimizing men's obligations to contribute to female subsistence activities. The essay is somewhat disappointing, as Geisler's women seem utterly without agency, dull and stupid, allowing themselves to be totally used by men (be they fathers, bothers, or husbands) without figuring out how to extract anything of value in return. The women studied by Lisa Cliggett in the next essay, however, stand in great contrast to those presented by Geisler. Cliggett's women quickly realized the shifting matrix of value that accompanied the move to the plateau; they devised strategies for gaining access to men's cash earnings, invested that cash in "mothering" (buying clothing and paying school fees for children), and used it as the basis for claims on children's resources in old age.

Two essays that follow illustrate Colson's precocious sensitivity to ecological issues. Bennett Siamwiza's essay assembles the material on the history of periodic famines in the Zambezi Valley (c.1859–1958) and surveys the coping mechanisms devised by the Tonga to mitigate the effects by means such as hunting, gathering, craft production, trade, and temporary outmigration. While quite interesting, the essay might have been better positioned earlier in the volume, offering expanded context for subsequent articles addressing the more recent past. Next, Susan Langley provides a good summary of the lingering effects of the Kariba Dam Project in Zimbabwe in an essay dense with local voices about the nature of their marginalization and their strategic responses. Those voices focus mostly on questions of daily subsistence: problems associated with the insecurity of land tenure along the riverside, the uncertainly of river levels in a given year (since the degree of rise and fall is quite high and thus gardens could be either suddenly flooded or left high and dry) and the problems of living in close proximity to wild animals under circumstances that denied Africans legal access to weapons.

Rhonda M. Gillett-Netting's essay reminds us that whereas Colson and Scudder collected the prerelocation data on social, political, economic, and ecological features, it was Phillip Tobias of the University of the Witwatersrand Medical School in South Africa who collected primary physical anthropology data. While many scholars have built their research upon the baseline material of Colson and Scudder, Gillett-Netting is perhaps the first to have followed up extensively on Tobias's explorations of the effects of resettlement on the growth and physical status of Tonga children. Her data, clearly still open for reinterpretation, suggest that after relocation boys are slightly worse off than girls, but that in general relocation affected these children more adversely than similar circumstances have affected children in prosperous areas. Things were and continue to be bad for the Tonga, despite the construction of schools and clinics on the plateau, most such in-

stitutions operate under such deplorable conditions that they have minimal impact on children's health. The essay that follows, "A History of Development and Downturn in Zambia's Gwembe Valley: 1901–2002," by Thayer Scudder, provides a grand overview of events, broken down into historical periods and topics, and overall might have served more adequately as an introduction to the volume.

Unlike most festschrifts, the book ends with a summary essay by Elizabeth Colson herself. Interestingly, it provides the reader with a unique opportunity to hear the voice of the honoree at that special moment when, after having heard the observations of others, listeners most welcome reflections from the person who inspired them. Colson's comments range widely, reminiscing about her early years, reviewing what little we knew about the Tonga, clarifying her position on issues of ethnicity, and graciously acknowledging those who have assisted her over the years. The essay provoked this reader to contemplate, yet again, Colson's contribution to anthropology. It has been routinely suggested that her greatest gift may be the exhaustive and meticulous fieldwork that produced rich data, constantly filtered through an original and analytical mind, rather than theoretical purity. Indeed, some have accused early Colson of possessing an almost Boasian aversion to theory, or to the promptings of her advisor, Clyde Kluckhohn, who frequently urged her to develop "conceptual schemes." She argued forcefully that neither she nor any other anthropologist of the time was sufficiently well informed about the facts of social life elsewhere to construct grand theories of human behavior. Indeed, the specific group with which she was dealing, the newly relocated Tonga, could not be categorized by cultures that were longstanding, highly integrated, complex wholes, whose contours were deeply infused into the consciousness and subconsciousness of every member of society. Generalizations would simply have to wait until the density of data suggested plausible conceptualizations.

Later, Colson herself would suggest the existence of gender-specific approaches to theory building: men make bold declarations from the start, whereas women guide the reader along, slowly building on the evidence, revealing the highest truths in the last line. She once noted, perhaps a bit tongue-in-cheek, that men like tools; they become enamored with a new theoretical tool and try to see everything through that one lens. Women, by contrast, are more fascinated by the task at hand; they will reach for any tool that helps them get the job done. She may have a point. If Elizabeth Colson is not granted a seat at the table with the giants of anthropology, the exclusion will most likely be the result of her adherence to a commonsense rhetoric rather than a propensity for attaching bold labels to her thoughts. Clearly her theories about the negotiated relationship between individual and inherited structures, Tonga order in the absence of centralized government, conflict avoidance, the emergence of "tribalism" as protection from the excesses of the state, and the "sequencing" of kinship ties as reflective of individual fortune are novel emanations, far ahead of their time and useful

as abstractions that deserve to be tested for their applicability elsewhere. Only the absence of a bold unifying label prevents them from taking their place alongside such concepts as "habitus," "agency," "practice," "structuration," "cultural intimacy," and so forth as grist for the anthropological mill.

In summary, *The Tonga-Speaking Peoples of Zambia and Zimbabwe: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Colson* is a triple celebration. In addition to celebrating Colson the scholar, it celebrates of the maturation of a discipline: the capacity of African studies continually to generate new paradigms and perspectives, new interdisciplinary approaches to understanding the lives of African people. It is also a celebration of the Tonga, the largest of Zambia's five main linguistic blocs and the third largest language community in Zimbabwe. Little known to the nonscholarly world because of distance from major population centers, the Tonga have endured decades of poking and prodding, answered millions of silly questions, and maintained their dignity in the face of countless intrusions into the most intimate and awful aspects of their struggle to survive.

I would be remiss in my duty as reviewer if I did not note the unbelievably shoddy quality of this University Press of America product. The sheer number of errors, both of omission and commission, of grammar and spelling, of awkward formatting, and even smudged printing is absolutely embarrassing. Colson, African studies, and especially the Tonga deserve better.

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