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REVIEWS OF BOOKS

COLIN MURRAY and PETER SANDERS, *Medicine Murder in Colonial Lesotho: the anatomy of a moral crisis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International Africa Institute, London (hb £50.00 – 0 7486 2285 4). 2005, 512 pp.

This book has appeared at just the right moment. We badly need an anthropological guide to the matter of medicine murder. The last time there was a 'moral crisis' in Britain – over supposed satanic child abuse – Jean la Fontaine cut through the fantasies and illusions with masterly rigour. Now we have another 'moral crisis' in multi-cultural Britain. This time it conflates the alleged medicine murder of African boys with the exorcism of African girl 'witches'. There is not a great deal of evidence for either, though there is more evidence for the second than for the first.

This book is not, of course, an equivalent to la Fontaine's report. It does not focus on Britain. Indeed it does not mention Africans in the diaspora at all. It makes no use of prevailing theories of the 'occult economies' of globalization. It focuses very much on beliefs and practices specific to particular African societies and its main subject is a series of medicine murders, their detection and punishment in late colonial Basutoland, rather than any post-colonial phenomena. No doubt the book will be criticized and even regarded as old-fashioned for its methodology. Nevertheless, it *does* propose a comparative framework, even if its comparisons are with other cases in Africa. It *does* focus on 'moral crisis'. It does ask a series of questions, many of which are relevant to making sense of the current moral panic in Britain. And because of its 'old-fashioned' approach, based on meticulous ethnographic and archival research, its analyses are infinitely better grounded than anything yet produced in the British case or in most of the writing on 'occult economies'.

In 1949 the Cambridge anthropologist G. I. Jones was appointed by the British government to inquire into Sotho medicine murders. 'Sherlock Jones Fights Voodoo', announced the *Daily Mail*. Novelists depicted Basutoland as the heart of darkness, the home of 'undying barbarism'. Missionaries condemned 'heathenism'. All this was bitterly resented. Sotho chiefs in an odd alliance with the first nationalists rejected the whole idea of medicine murder as a British invention, imposed through a series of show trials, and intended to destroy the chiefship so that the country could be handed over to South Africa. Murray and Sanders ask whether the heart of darkness really lay 'not in the beliefs and actions of the Basotho but in the fevered recesses of the colonial imagination' (p. 5).

They find plenty of fevered colonial imagination but they show that this did not have the effect of inventing medicine murder. Rather it had the effect of exaggerating its incidence and producing a moral crisis. They offer a careful exploration of historical evidence which suggests that medicine murders had taken place intermittently for a hundred years at least. They offer detailed case studies of late colonial murders based on exhaustive research in the archives. Their book ends with a 122-page appendix which summarizes every case of suspected medicine murder between 1895 and 1966. By contrast with the British moral panic they have abundant data. It is admittedly difficult evidence. There were no confessions by principals to medicine murder. Every conviction depended on the evidence of accomplice witnesses. But it is hard to end this book without accepting that medicine murders did take place, in order to strengthen chiefs, over a long period of time.

They are concerned, of course, to explain why this was so. They reject any idea of a general African, or even southern African, ideology of human sacrifice. In every place where medicine murders took place, or became notorious – and they examine the crisis in Swaziland in the 1970s, in Venda in the late 1980s, in Ghana, in Nigeria – motives for murder could be understood 'only within local systems of belief that were difficult for outside observers to penetrate' (p. 310). They explicitly reject the approach of John and Jean Comaroff in an influential 1999 article in which they 'analysed both witchcraft and ritual murder together with a variety of other phenomena such as trading body parts, the production of ''zombies'' and pyramid scams'. They find 'little justification for the way in which [the Comaroffs] indiscriminately aggregated such diverse phenomena ... or indeed for the speculative flourishes by which they sought to explain them with reference to the contradiction between the consumerist propensities of late capitalism and the realities of poverty, inequality and structural unemployment faced by modern youth' (p. 295).

Murray and Sanders focus only on medicine murder. They are particularly interested by the question of why at some times its commission aroused no great interest, but at others generated a moral scare. Their explanation for this is essentially political rather than economic. In Basutoland the key parties to a medicine murder were the most powerful men in society, but they were not denounced by the impoverished young who took part in the murders. The moral panic about such murders in Basutoland between the late 1940s and early 1950s had political causes: they took place both before and after these ten years but were generally ignored. In those particular years there was an acute tension between the chiefs and the British administration. The tension was the result of a crisis in the system of indirect rule. The British, and especially High Commissioner Baring, in fact wanted to strengthen the chiefs against South Africa. But Baring thought strengthening could only be achieved through purification. The dreadful evil of medicine murder must be extirpated and those responsible for it punished. For their part the senior chiefs took every step they could to empower themselves. The result was the conviction for medicine murder of the second and fourth most senior chiefs in the country and their hanging in August 1949. It was 'the blackest day' in Basutoland's colonial history and spread panic throughout the country.

Murray and Sanders have not attempted to emulate Jean la Fontaine. But they have laid the foundations for a real attempt to understand our contemporary moral crisis. Any such attempt will need to emulate their carefulness and rigour.

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JOHN ILIFFE, *Honour in African History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, African Studies Series (pb, £16.99 – 0521 546850; hb £45.00 – 0521 83785 5). 2005, 404 pp.

The 'Concluding questions' which end this sweeping volume are decidedly modest in tone. In them, John Iliffe identifies areas of future research, and expresses the belief that, in suggesting such questions, the book will have served a purpose. Elsewhere, however, he is rather more bold about the argument, notably on p. 227, which states his central thesis with characteristic clarity: honour matters in African history; we can understand the periodization of African history partly in terms of competing notions of honour (some local,