

conflict as well as consensus within the divination process, along with his reluctance to draw out overarching and noncontextual meanings, makes some of the book resemble undigested field notes. But the benefit of such micro-description is that the reader never comes to a simplified or reductive account of what Tswapong divination is about. Instead, after reading case after case, the readings of the lots, the complex metaphoric poetry, one gradually comes to appreciate its many different practices and poetics.

Much ethnography, as Werbner points out, depends on the quality of translation. Werbner relies on the notion of the “moral” in particular to translate the key motivations and consequences of the divination process. Clients go to the diviners to reveal the “moral perils of everyday life”; the divination process is a “restless moral questioning,” and its poetry reveals a “morally passionate intersubjectivity” (304 and *passim*). This begs the question, however, of what we consider the “moral” to be. Reading through his cases, the consistent object of divination is the correct relationship between living and dead. If this is the case, is “moral” an adequate translation of this quest?

Werbner is reluctant to draw overarching generalizations from his account or make assertive claims for its novelty. His conclusion places Tswapong divination in a comparative perspective by considering a spectrum of modes of divining, from the strictly mimetic (in which objects aid in the discovery of hidden knowledge) to the textual (which is a reading of inscribed signs for knowledge of the occult). According to Werbner, Tswapong divination exists somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. Like the diviners, Werbner is himself an elder, and much of the text respects the diviners’ appeal to appreciate ancient knowledge and to listen to the ancestors, even those such as the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, whose work on witchcraft Werbner passionately defends. This book will be of most interest to those willing to read it with patience and to revel in the artistry that Werbner finds in Tswapong divination.

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HISTORY

Jelmer Vos. *Kongo in the Age of Empire 1860–1913: The Breakdown of a Moral Order*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015. xiii + 218. Maps. Photographs. Acknowledgments. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth. \$65.00. ISBN: 978-0-299-30620-5. E-book. \$75.00. ISBN: 978-0-299-30623-6.

Jelmer Vos’s *Kongo in the Age of Empire* is a very fine addition to the considerable corpus of historical and anthropological writings on the long history of one of Africa’s iconic “kingdoms,” a literature distinguished by its revealing

blending of the two academic disciplines. The book is also a subtle and compelling narrative of “empire” as experienced in what was becoming northern Angola, an approach contrasting with the usual perspectives of the politicians attempting to implement colonial projects from Europe. On the history of the “kingdom,” well known through the many ongoing studies of John Thornton and recently deepened by Cécile Fromont’s provocative study of overlapping Kongo and Christian symbologies, Vos contributes a distinctive sense for how Africans understood and operated polities—as contrasted with the modern and structural connotations of “kingdoms”—that applies far more widely than this half-century along the lower Congo River. On “empire” he expands on the too-minor current in the flood of works on “conquest,” “colonialism,” “resistance,” and other abstractions that dominate too much historical writing on Africa to portray the Kongo experience of these processes as largely unaware of, and certainly unconcerned with, what seems obvious only now, from afar, and in retrospect. His narrative flows smoothly and revealingly in a thoroughly historical mode, that is, people on all sides—British Baptist missionaries, Portuguese Catholic priests, Angolan government agents, and Kongo generations, lineages, factions, and tellingly characterized individuals—proceeding under the pressure of circumstances only marginally of their own making, and through perspectives they inherited without thinking about them as such, to make the most of the kaleidoscopic changes through which they were living. The title captures the approach cleanly: the book is consistently about Kongo people, more than about the polity of the same name, navigating a turbulent age that Europeans understood as competing for national survival through overextended imperial maneuvering around the globe, using a political “moral economy” of personal relationships that had served them well enough over four preceding centuries of engaging worlds beyond, until one December afternoon in 1913, when it didn’t.

The story proceeds through roughly chronological chapters marked by the succession of broader changes sweeping through the Kongo area, and increasingly centered on the historic Catholic capital, São Salvador. The opening act sets the stage in terms of a depiction, as clear a one as I have seen, of the sense in which the Kongo integrated Catholic titles and sacraments into a thoroughly African healing cult centered on a “king” who functioned as trustee for the aggregation of communities that had long coordinated their shared business—recently slaving and the ivory trade—through a succession of holders of the title that rotated, often contestedly, among them. Although he did not rule, nor was there a “government” separate from the networks, mostly of kin, joining in the composite, the channels of connectedness flowing through him mattered. Political power in Kongo was the power of belief, and it was strong. Vos here builds on Wyatt MacGaffey’s penetrating notion of African political systems as “states of mind.” Then the growth of the export trade in wild “red” rubber in the 1860s enabled a new generation of younger men, some from communities marginal to the historic networks, and many working as carriers for European

trading factories on the south bank of the lower Congo, to build retinues (including slaves no longer sold off) independent of their elders.

Happenstance, as in all good history, figures prominently, and the second chapter brings it on the scene in the persons of British Baptist missionaries, whose presence prompted a Portuguese Catholic counter-mission, and then traces the utility of both, seldom naive but often dependent, to the Kongo parties in the game through the 1870s and '80s. The death in 1891 of the *mani* who had maneuvered through these shoals opened the situation to Portuguese efforts to establish an official presence, in the wake of the no-less-coincidental Berlin Conference, through the politics of the principal Kongo factions manipulating their support in the 1890s; the initiative remained effectively with the Kongo. It continued after 1900 as politics in Lisbon, yet another *deus ex machina*, introduced head taxes, head counts, and demands for workers for unseen plantations in Cabinda and Príncipe Island. Kongo's remoteness in space and in conceptualization from all of this allowed the next generation of young men to appropriate these faint initiatives as cover for all-too-evident outright thuggery. Dissatisfaction focused on the *mani* Kongo, as custodian of the commonwealth that was clearly unraveling, and produced a meeting of the leaders of growing protest in São Salvador at the end of 1913.

The proceedings of that climactic gathering were recorded separately by both Baptist and Catholic missionaries in the room, offering a rare window on the intricacies of the politics that Vos has so lucidly explained. The meeting failed to convey its point, and protests turned violent, finally giving the Portuguese the opening they needed, again coincidentally on the eve of World War I, to introduce the succeeding incremental steps of forcing people in Kongo to acknowledge their increasingly imposing presence. But the Kongo nonetheless evidently restored the moral integrity of the whole, shaken momentarily by the chains of events detailed in the book, but no more destroyed than it had been by many preceding crises going back to the mid-sixteenth century, with the recoveries all proceeding through the collectively healing power of Kongo minds, or as Catholics have seen it, of Christianity. Vos has solved the paradox of the Kongo's preserving of a political system that bear no substantive resemblance to European notions of monarchy. The seemingly eternal "kingdom"—of God?—reemerged in the public media as an aspiring player in the nationalist politics of the 1950s, and it figures today in the personalistic politics of independent Angola. The moral order was betrayed in 1913 but not broken, or even shaken. Vos thus truncated his story on a misleading note of finality; perhaps he will carry on the story in a sequel, to be welcomed, subtitled "resurrection of the moral order."

Vos palpably feels the positions of all his protagonists and conveys that intuitive sensibility—perhaps the historian's core virtue—in straightforwardly compelling prose. Far-reaching research in official files of the five imperial governments with agents converging on the lower Congo, one of the hot spots among the tensions leading up to Berlin in 1884–85, day-to-day Baptist

correspondence, and rich and diverse reports of the numerous “explorers” swarming through the area provided the ample sources that he marshals expertly to tell his story. He never speaks for his subjects, skillfully allowing them to speak for themselves, and then adding concisely penetrating highlights of what they said to advance his argument, and his readers’ understanding. This thoroughly humanistic approach leaves the reader knowing Kongo thinking without having to struggle through the technical jargon of academic discourse to discern its outlines. Kongo and its foreign foils built changes historically, acutely adapting whatever hands it had been dealt to take advantage of externally induced shifts in opportunity. The effect conveys the full drama, and irony, that the best history is capable of portraying.

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David Birmingham. *A Short History of Modern Angola*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xvi + 159 pp. Timeline. Glossary. Map of Modern Angola. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95. Cloth. ISBN: 9780190271305.

How to write a concise and coherent history of such a vast region as Angola, where people’s lives were often shaped by contrasting ecological, economic, and political challenges? David Birmingham, a pioneer historian of Angola in the English-speaking world, writes about the country’s past through the lens of the Portuguese empire, which gave different peoples a shared experience of colonial domination, a national border, and a centralized state whose authority they would contest into the twenty-first century. Birmingham’s narrative style is admirably loose and includes the frequent use of historical vignettes to illustrate specific time periods. Despite this flexible narrative approach, he does not fail to highlight important continuities between Angola’s historical involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, the country’s colonial experience with forced labor and dictatorial rule, and its current situation of presidential rule and deep social and economic inequalities.

Birmingham’s account starts in the 1820s, when Portugal gained a new interest in Angola with the loss of Brazil and when some politicians and businessmen, under the pressure of British abolitionism, began to envision a future for the colony based on agriculture and the commodity trade instead of the export of slaves. In separate chapters, Birmingham discusses how this economic transformation affected the city of Luanda (chapter 2), the northern hinterland (chapter 3), and the central highlands (chapter 4). The British “ultimatum” of 1890 was an important turning point in the colonial history of Angola, as it thwarted Portuguese dreams of an eastward expansion to Mozambique and stimulated Portugal to embark on a policy