



Of borders and crossings: the lives of a healer in northern Mozambique

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Of borders and crossings: the lives of a healer in northern Mozambique

Daria Trentini, *At Ansha's: Life in the Spirit Mosque of a Healer in Mozambique* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2021), 246 pp., hardback, £97.76, US\$120, ISBN 978-1-97880-670-2; paperback, £31.78, US\$34.95, ISBN 978-1-97880-669-6; e-book options, £20.42, US\$34.95, ISBN 978-1-97880-671-9, 978-1-97880-673-3, 978-1-97880-672-6.

Daria Trentini's book is a narrative exploration of the life and practice of a healer in the northern Mozambican city of Nampula. Ansha, the titular protagonist, was a Makonde migrant from the province of Cabo Delgado who moved to Nampula, converted to Islam and set up a 'spirit mosque' in which the Koran and herbal knowledge were used to cure afflictions. Spirit possession (*majini*) was central both to illness and healing. A being of many worlds, Ansha crossed, navigated and negotiated a number of borders: between ethnicities, regions and religions; between sickness and health, the city and the countryside, the spirit and the human domain. Indeed, the figure of the border – especially the notions of 'border crossing' and 'border events' – provide the book with its central conceptual anchoring.

The book is organised in 22 short chapters, arranged in four parts. The first part charts Ansha's biography, from her childhood in Mueda through her move to Nampula, the illness that made her discover her vocation as a healer, her conversion to Islam, and her tumultuous marital life, up till her untimely death. The second part explores the social structures that both enabled and constrained Ansha's practice: ethnicity, religion and the state; healers' associations and the formal health sector. The third part describes the illness and healing – often unsuccessful – of a number of Ansha's patients, most of them vulnerable, who turned to her after western medicine had failed to resolve their troubles. The final part comprises two poetic snapshots in the guise of a conclusion. Each of the chapters is broken into sections which move back and forth, from field vignette to historical canvas to anthropological analysis. The writing is sparing, elegant and affecting. Fragmentariness is embraced as a mode of knowing and telling.

While the style of the book falls within the paradigm that George Marcus has dubbed 'the messy baroque' – with its reflexive field tales, central theoretical riff and reliance on cultural history as provider of surplus meaning, it also ultimately exceeds the genre by openly embracing the idiosyncratic.¹ The conceptual riff announced in the introduction – border crossing and events – is not obsessively rehearsed through the text. To use a musical metaphor, the theme is reprised only in distant keys and variations. In the free interplay between fragments, the *life* that Trentini has foregrounded in the title is left space to breathe and is never straightjacketed within one overarching theoretical framework. The reader gets to see and hear and feel with Ansha and her friends. This might be one of the book's strongest virtues.

Even within this radical openness and fragmentariness, several strong analytical threads emerge. *At Ansha's* vividly illustrates the contemporary transformations of Islam in the city of Nampula, especially the frictions surrounding spirit possession in the context of the gradual demise of Sufism and the spread of Wahhabism and Islamism. There are insights into the emergence of the Ahl al-Sunna movement which will be precious to anyone interested in the current unfolding of the Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado. The book also provides unique vistas into gendered aspects of healing; the transformations of matriliney; the tensions between coastal and hinterland Makhuwa society; the experience of children as patients; community policing; urbanisation and social struggle in Nampula; the

1 G.E. Marcus, 'Ethnography Two Decades after Writing Culture: From the Experimental to the Baroque', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 80, 4 (2007), pp. 1127–45.

dynamics of healers' associations; political opposition to Frelimo; the ever-evolving East African spirit world – and much more.

With its irregular surfaces, *At Ansha's* inevitably presents a few zones of shade. While the text offers evocative descriptions of mountains and forests, mentioning some of the plants that together with the Koran are the core ingredients of Ansha's craft, no sustained discussion is provided of the healer's relationship with the vegetal world. Here, non-humans are definitely cast in minor roles. A historically minded reader will wonder about the uneasy relationship between ethnography and biography, considering that Ansha's life is presented in a patchy and non-linear manner (perhaps echoing her own spirit epistemology). And even though witchcraft is one of the major preoccupations of Ansha and her clients, it is not explicitly thematised and is at times reduced to an allegory of neoliberalism. Finally, for a book that makes so much of dialogue, Trentini spends little or no time discussing the idioms in which such interactions occurred, her level of proficiency in Emakhuwa and her translation strategies. These minor misgivings, though, do not detract in any way from the book's manifold qualities.

At Ansha's is a thoughtful, engaging, empirically rich and delicately written ethnography. Any scholar of Mozambique, spirit possession and Islam will have much to learn from this carefully crafted gem.

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Migration and the politics of the everyday: the Malawian experience in Southern Rhodesia and Zimbabwe

Zoë R. Groves, *Malawian Migration to Zimbabwe, 1900–1965: Tracing Machona* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), xvii + 254 pp., hardback, £79.99, US\$98.67, €108.99, ISBN 978-3-03054-103-3; paperback, £89.99, US\$99.58, €102.85; ISBN 978-3-03054-106-4; e-book, £75.99, US\$93.74, €85.59, 978-3-030-54104-0.

Zoë Groves situates this accessible work as answering a mid 1960s call by another British historian of Malawi, George Shepperson, for studies of the movement of Africans within the continent (p. 12). The author's examination of Malawian migration to colonial Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia) ventures across a diverse terrain that variously falls within the realm of social, economic and political history. The book, an adaptation of Groves' 2011 doctoral thesis, successfully affirms Shepperson's decades-old exhortation. Groves convincingly asserts the importance of expanding studies of migration in southern Africa beyond their traditional South African domain, and serves up a pioneering examination of the substantial presence of Malawians in colonial Zimbabwe as her contribution to that end.¹

The study adopts a transnational dimension, covering 'both origin and destination to better understand migrant experiences' (pp. 7–8). This approach makes the work more inclusive, but is something of a double-edged sword, as this expansive framework impedes

1 Two articles previously published in this journal constitute some of the most representative extant literature: A. Daimon, "'Totemless Aliens': The Historical Antecedents of the Anti-Malawian Discourse in Zimbabwe, 1920s–1979', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44, 6 (2018), pp. 1095–114, and Z. Groves' 'Urban Migrants and Religious Networks: Malawians in Colonial Salisbury, 1920 to 1970', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38, 3 (2012), pp. 491–511.