BOOK REVIEW

Reuben A. Loffman. ***Church, State and Colonialism in Southeastern Congo, 1890–1962.*** Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland for Palgrave Macmillan Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series, 2019. xxiii + 281 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. $109.99. Cloth. ISBN: 978-3-030-17379-1.

Surprisingly few historical studies have examined the relations between sub-Saharan communities and the Christian missionaries who have long sought to "save their souls." Most scholarship concentrates on missionary purposes and personnel while neglecting Africans' understandings of and reactions to them. Instead, Africans are reduced to a collective "they" without attention to particular actors who accepted or rejected Christianity in their own ways. Reuben Loffman's fine-grained monograph, *Church, State and Colonialism in Southeastern Congo, 1890–1962*, proves a felicitous exception.

Loffman's research is based in Kongolo in the southeastern DR Congo. The town has long been a crossroads of inter-ethnic politics, and due to its location along the mighty Lualaba, riverine trade has been prominent. Kongolo's importance increased after 1909 as the town became a railway hub linking the Copper Belt to resource bases northward. The railroad also branched eastward to the Lake Tanganyika port Albertville/Kalemie, thus connecting the Congo to eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean world. However, despite the prominence of their location, Kongolo and adjacent communities have received scant scholarly attention.

The author seeks to set this straight. Through fifteen extended case studies, Loffman confronts facile assumptions about how closely the Catholic Church and colonial authorities worked in the Belgian Congo by suggesting that instead, missionaries and administrators developed a "competitive codependency" (141). Their purposes were often at variance, yet as competitive as administrators and missionaries might sometimes have been, commonalities of their supremacist powers as Europeans led to "codependent" advantages vis-à-vis local people. In particular, Catholic healthcare and educational programming proved a collaborative platform, yet colonial decisions could have disruptive outcomes, as when authorities chose a place in

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proximity to a White Fathers mission to hang a number of “subversive” persons. Local people’s resentment extended to expatriate missionaries, but soon the priests’ proselytizing benefited through reference to the Church’s function as a haven (76).

Among Loffman’s reasons for addressing such dynamics is to fathom the Congolese responses to circumstances so seemingly out of their control. He begins by addressing the complexities of social identity and especially that of the so-called Hemba people in and east of Kongolo. Loffman historicizes “Hemba” as an umbrella term imposed for colonial convenience (48). Despite how assertive missionaries might be about such matters, they “never succeeded in colonizing the consciousness of the African communities” within their purview as much as they might wish in seeking to realize their “stark moralistic intentions” (7). Considering such fraught interactions, Loffman insightfully suggests that “the fissiparous nature of local authority” in Hemba society “dovetailed with the equally fragmented and competing colonial and missionary authorities” (102). Aware of such schisms, Congolese protagonists could sometimes play colonial agents against each other, even as they sought advantages in their own local-level political arenas.

The author is at his best when considering the animated give-and-take through an extended case study of the chiefdom of Buki, named a Paramount (*grand chef*) through the peculiar feudal model Belgian colonizers imposed upon Congolese societies in the 1920s and ‘30s. Loffman provides a useful review of these matters (119–21) as the background for Chief Buki’s clever moves with and against authorities, as he deemed situationally advantageous. Of special interest was Buki’s participation in Bugabo and Ukanga as trans-ethnic sodalities offering powers of healing, protection, and promotion at variance with and sometimes in direct opposition to colonial modes and methods; one hopes that Loffman will pursue such issues in future. Similar scholarly strength is demonstrated in his biography of Tambwe Benoit Abati (193 and elsewhere throughout) as a sage commentator upon political turmoil in the years leading to and shortly after Congolese independence in 1960. As Loffman notes, many have assumed that increasingly contentious relationships between missionaries and colonial authorities contributed to what seemed a snap decision by Belgian officials to grant independence to the colony (246). The violence of the Katangan Secession soon followed, including the assassination of Catholic missionaries in Kongolo, but through exegeses such as Abati’s, Loffman finds that “local historical dynamics” reveal more nuanced complexities endured by those experiencing such fraught moments than many outside observers have discerned (262).

Loffman occasionally stumbles, as when he simplistically asserts that Congolese men sought to “control their female populations” because of women’s fecundity and domestic labor (168), thus denying affect and agency to Congolese women and men alike. And Palgrave copyeditors

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should have caught the author's minor mishaps. Still, his insightful monograph foreshadows valuable contributions to Central African scholarship to come.

Allen F. Roberts
University of California Los Angeles
Los Angeles, California, USA
aroberts@arts.ucla.edu

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