

VAMPIRES AND HISTORY

Luise White. *Speaking With Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa.*

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I'm probably not the only reader of this journal who has discovered while living in East Africa that he or she is believed to be a vampire. Nor will I alone be reassured by this book that such rumors are usually not prompted by one's personal behavior! I will also not be alone in having marveled at the speed with which rumor can harden into political fact. In 1984, the car wreck that killed Tanzanian Prime Minister Edward Sokoine was instantly assumed to have been anything but accidental. So important did this belief become in Tanzanian political life that ever since then every mention of Sokoine's name and every display of his picture has been scrutinized for rebuttal or confirmation of it. Those who have shared such experiences with rumor will agree that this highly imaginative book explores an important subject.

Luise White's point of departure is an argument about language and personal experience made by the historian Joan Scott. White follows Scott in proposing that people's understanding of their own experience is socially mediated because they think and speak about it in language and concepts that are socially constructed. Often, suggests White, the ideas and idioms that mediate understandings of personal experience float up to people on a tide of gossip, rumor, and hearsay. In this book, her purpose is to explore the meaning of a particular variety of the flotsam that people use to patch together an understanding of their lives as continuous and integrated experience. This language is found in stories and rumors of vampires, or *mumiani* and *chinja chinja* as they are known in Tanzania. Why people living in colonial Africa should have chosen to understand personal experience in this particular idiom is the central problem addressed by White. She argues that it provided a way of speaking about the complexities of life under colonialism.

White's two introductory chapters suggest that vampire stories came into existence during the colonial period. Yet their provenance remains uncertain. Perhaps because she is skeptical of arguments for cultural continuity, the author does not investigate one likely source of them—the many local traditions from Tanzania and elsewhere about witches who steal bodily essences and make zombies of their victims. Chapters 2 and 3 suggest that aspects of colonialism found throughout eastern and central Africa encouraged the spread of vampire stories across this region. Chapters 5 through 9 explore local variations in vampirism.

How one judges this book will probably depend on whether one finds it successful in connecting vampires and colonialism. I think chapter 4

makes the connection with particular success. In it, White focuses on vampire stories that describe relations between supervisory European vampires and the African assistants who actually got their hands bloody. She suggests that such stories speak about the Africans of the colonial period who, in taking relatively skilled employment under Europeans, gained privileged access to knowledge, technology, and money at the cost of submitting to the discipline of their employers.

The connections between vampires and colonialism made in other chapters, however, seem tenuous. Each chapter tries to make the connection by weaving what the historian E. P. Thompson called “patterns of inference.” Some readers will be satisfied that the weave created by White’s detail is close enough to be persuasive. Others will feel that it does not bear the weight of her arguments. Chapter 8 provides an interesting discussion of newspapers in colonial Kampala and their role in official efforts to control rumor. Yet it does not persuade me to accept its central proposition, that stories about a trial involving accusations of vampirism in 1953 were actually “about authority in Buganda” (261). The chapter does not provide enough details about the trial, such as the charges made against the defendant, to make the connection firm. Similarly, chapter 9 discusses interesting differences between the Copperbelts of the Belgian Congo and Northern Rhodesia, but does not persuade me that vampire stories were inspired by conditions on the mines. The connection between mines and vampires rests ultimately on the unlikely assertion that the Bemba word for rubber balls and rubber tubes also denoted the bandages carried by African supervisors in the mines (281). The forced quality of this argument characterizes discussion of African language throughout the book. Sometimes the details woven into the patterns of inference are also unpersuasive. For example, chapter 3 argues that vampire stories reflect different effects of colonial medicine on men and women. Men are said to be stupefied, while women lose their power of speech. Yet the difference seems to boil down to the fact that while men are said to be made “dull” by medicines, one Ugandan interviewee said that they prevented women from shouting and talking (116–17). Great weight is attached to a sliver-thin distinction.

Chapter 5 argues imaginatively that vampire stories in Nairobi reflected anxieties about women’s property rights. However, the author’s extensive interview material does not make this connection explicitly. White supports her argument by contending that vampire stories emerged in Nairobi about the time women began acquiring ownership of houses in a particular section of the city, and ceased about the time they lost the ability to do so. Yet she doesn’t show that residents of Nairobi commonly date the appearance and disappearance of vampires in this way. The chapter relies heavily on the assumption that precolonial women enjoyed no property rights and that their sudden entitlement to them in Nairobi created intense anxiety among both men and women. “Perhaps the most significant way in which urban Kenya differed from rural Kenya,” she states, “was

that women could own huts in the former but not in the latter" (12). This statement grants too much authority to historians' sketchy knowledge of precolonial rights in land and property. Moreover, the chapter tends to isolate property rights as a distinct category, although East Africans probably did not usually separate them from relations of kinship, marriage, and patronage.

An aspect of this chapter that troubles me is its assertion that, by denying relatives the inheritance of their property, "many women... bluntly reject[ed] kinship ties; it was by careful deliberation that they guaranteed that their property would not go to the families into which they had been born" (158). The chapter shows neither that the women who did this were "many," nor that their action resulted from "careful deliberation." Now, it is true enough that norms of obligation to kin are violated with a regularity that reflects the usual sordidness of human interaction. Much more remarkable is that the morality of obligation to one's kin survives, is cherished, and continues to inspire fresh outrage with each new violation. Historians should be honest about violations of these norms. They should also pay respect to the power of these principles to inspire outrage by making sure that all discussion of their violation is supported by abundant evidence and contextualized with sensitivity.

The fundamental problem posed by this study of vampire stories is how we assign meaning to them. Do we translate them into our own terms, and place them within our conventional historical narratives? Or do we seek to know the meaning that their African tellers found in them? White leans toward the second approach. She speaks dismissively of historians who place African voices "in a narrative derived from colonial documents and shaped by the author's mediation" (91). Moreover, she argues throughout the book that assigning any one meaning to vampire stories would rob them of their richness. Africans tell these stories, she believes, because they speak about the contradictoriness of life under colonialism. The crux of the problem is to learn what meanings African tellers and listeners read into these stories. White believes that the problem is all the more difficult because present-day Africans are unlikely to remember the meanings that were expressed by these stories during the colonial period (241).

If our aim is to tell stories of the past that are more grounded in African perceptions and less dominated by Western conventions, I think that White's claims for the superiority of her "writing strategy" (113) may lead us astray. White describes her approach as one which "privileg[es] words and images over voices" (113). She insists that vampire stories should be studied as a genre composed of "formulaic elements." In her view, what's important is less the individuals who tell stories and their manner of telling them, than the flotsam of ideas, images, and clichés which they assemble into stories. In some ways her approach recalls Jan Vansina's discussion of mute testimony and core elements in oral traditions. "I am not interested in individual testimony or the contexts of recollection or collection," she

says. “I argue that reading evidence for its generic qualities, for the formulaic elements . . . reveals a level of meaning and significance that interpreting evidence as personal testimony would not do” (89).

The use of the term *evidence* in this passage betrays a peculiar view of how historians work. It suggests that historians sift through life histories and first-person accounts because they seek nuggets of evidence that are untainted—or at least less tainted than documentary sources—by language, political interests, and subsequent events. White remarks elsewhere that the “idea that a pure voice can be distilled and disembedded from the struggles of colonial experiences is itself problematic. It argues that colonial African language and thought and imagination were not sullied by the categories and constructs of the oppressors” (280). But White is punching a straw-man. Historians don’t really think in these terms. Not only do they know well that “eyewitness testimony has been mediated” (312), but they actively seek that mediation. They do not expect that informants will recount raw experience or provide an unsullied “African” view. Instead, they seek to learn from the reflection and interpretation of those with whom they speak. They value this reflection precisely because it is enriched—or mediated, if you prefer—by a wealth of thought and experience. Much of that experience came, of course, in the colonial contexts of schools, churches, mines, plantations, and government offices.

Once we get over the fact that all accounts of the past are mediated by language and after-the-fact experiences, we can begin looking for ways of addressing the difficulties encountered by White. Her discussion frequently hinges on the fine points of stories—their delicate stresses, their silences and omissions, their subtle distinctions. When historians fish these elements out of the ebb tide as individual pieces of flotsam, they must place them in a context that will give them meaning. The most obvious sources of context are colonial documents and scholarship. Sometimes connections with these contexts can’t be made firm. But even when they hold, the way in which they are made guarantees that historians’ stories will continue to be shaped by colonial documentation and Western-dominated scholarship.

Yet there are alternative approaches, and here is an example that points toward one of them. Several years ago, an elderly Tanzanian man gave me a long account of his struggle to save his home during the period of compulsory *ujamaa* villagization in the early 1970s. At first, I inserted his story into my conventional, state-dominated narrative of Tanzanian history. I thought that he told this story to impress upon me the degree to which villagers resented forced resettlement and the lengths to which they would go to prevent it. It was only after I spoke with this man many more times, and also talked to his relatives and neighbors, that I understood his true intention. I understood him only after I placed his *ujamaa* story in the context of all that I learned about his life and personality. I realized that he intended his story not as an account of an event in national history—villa-

gization—but instead as the culmination of a personal experience: a decades-long feud with a politically ambitious village rival of his own age. That’s why his story climaxed with the moment when he exposed the foolishness of his rival before the eyes of party superiors. *Ujamaa* villagization was mere backdrop. Understanding his intention in telling this story explained much about its emphases and omissions. As this example suggests, by listening to and contextualizing the “voices” of thinking men and women, rather than concentrating exclusively on decontextualized “formulaic elements,” the historian finds an alternative way of understanding the storytelling elements that lie at the heart of White’s interest in vampires.

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