

Capturing the Soul

Alan Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul. The Vhavenda and the Missionaries, 1870-1900*

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In *Capturing the Soul. The Vhavenda and the missionaries, 1870-1900*, Kirkaldy brings together much of his work on the activities of the missionaries of the Berlin Missionary Society among the Vhavenda. This book, drawing from his doctoral thesis, is largely a critical reading of the Berlin Mission records. Instead of a chronological approach, Kirkaldy has used these records to investigate a number of themes. These themes pick up various post-colonial concerns such as landscape, visual representation, the body and relationships of power, and culminate in the case study of the Mphaphuli rulers.

The title is apt, in particular the second half, *The Vhavenda and the missionaries*, as this is not so much a history of a missionary society as it is an examination of the interaction between the Berlin missionaries and the Vhavenda. Kirkaldy's book is a contribution to the study of Venda history and throughout one is aware of his familiarity with this field. For a book that would essentially fall into the category of missionary historiography, it is noteworthy that Kirkaldy has succeeded in making the voices of both the missionaries and the Vhavenda heard. This is reinforced by the fact that the book starts with African converts and ends with an African ruler.

In Chapter 1, "Background and context", Kirkaldy gives a brief overview of the history of the Vhavenda, the first settlers in Vendaland and the arrival of the Berlin missionaries. In Chapter 2, "Local beginnings", Kirkaldy introduces local Vhavenda converts who were present in Vendaland before the arrival of missionaries. He examines their respective stories of conversion and their differing responses to the arrival of the first Berlin missionaries. Kirkaldy draws various conclusions from the cases of these three local converts regarding their failure or success to adhere to their new-found faith and the expectations of the missionaries.

In Chapter 3, Kirkaldy focuses on the individual missionaries who laboured in Vendaland. He takes a socio-cultural look at their backgrounds and training. Each of the Berlin missionaries is given a brief biography, and the ideal mould of a missionary is considered in more detail in two contrasting case studies. The first is of a missionary failure, the story of a missionary from a seemingly ideal background who "went native" and was expelled from the society. The second presents the ideal missionary, painting the transformation of a missionary of mixed descent into a "German" model of perfection.

In Chapters 4 and 5, the missionary description of the Vendaland landscape and the visual depiction of the Vhavenda and their landscape are discussed respectively. Kirkaldy examines the missionaries' changing perspective of the landscape of Vendaland, and demonstrates how missionary writings inextricably linked the inhabitants with their environment. The discussion of missionary photographs and etchings in the following chapter further demonstrates the missionary view of the landscape. Kirkaldy's reading of published and unpublished images from the mission archives is insightful and perceptive.

Chapter 6 presents the missionary view of local beliefs in the supernatural. These are compared with non-missionary ethnographic writings. The missionaries' contribution to ethnography and their attitudes towards local beliefs are examined. Chapter 7 offers a discussion of Venda customs surrounding the body, including cannibalism, and a critical examination of missionary opposition to many of these practices.

Chapter 8, the case study of Mphaphulis, draws together all the preceding themes. The whole book builds towards this chapter, which forms a logical base for what, at first glance, can seem to be diverse topics. The various ways in which the rulers of the Mphaphuli people

engaged with the Berlin missionaries demonstrates the agency of the Vhavenda. This is in line with current missionary studies scholarship. The story of Khosi Makwarela, in particular, sheds much light on the tensions of African agency. Kirkaldy investigates and interprets Makwarela's changing relationship with the missionaries over a period of years, which goes from an extreme of seeking to be baptized to an outright rejection of the Christian gospel by his alleged acts of anthropophagy.

Kirkaldy's book is an innovative and critical reading of missionary sources, published and unpublished, from which he manages to extract the voices of the Vhavenda. From these sources, he succeeds in extracting African history, as his focus throughout is on the tensions acting on Venda society. It is a noteworthy demonstration of what can be done with missionary history and missionary sources, and it echoes much of the recent trends in mission studies. His book, while informed by contemporary theory, is a practical demonstration of how these theories can open the past and shed light on the relationships between missionaries and local Africans.

The lengthy footnotes at the end of each chapter and the extensive use of quotations bear witness to the thorough research and the wide range of particularly primary sources drawn on in compiling the book. It has a detailed glossary, bibliography, index, and illustrations which are referred to in the text. It is definitely recommended for those in the field of missionary studies and scholars of Venda history.

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