

## BOOK REVIEWS

Bawa Kuyini, *Re-thinking Values in Africa: For Collective Well-being*, Creatspace, 2013, pp. 125, ISBN: 1492771945.

In this short and readable book, Bawa Kuyini bravely argues that values are at the heart of delayed progress in Africa compared to similar regions. Kuyini writes from his position as a man born in Ghana, who has lived and worked in Norway and now in Australia, educated and experienced in education, social work and research. As an African, and hence an insider, he seeks to bring a new way of looking at the African condition and “to construct an internal African reality” (p. 2). He begins his ambitious thesis by noting that while colonialism has impacted Africa, it cannot entirely explain current failures such as dictatorships and corruption. Kuyini argues for a return to indigenous African values for the benefit of collective well-being.

The initial chapters provide a brief history of Africa and the emergence of black identity. Chapter two critiques popular narratives of Africa’s history and presents evidence to the contrary, of history recorded through drums and music, of ancient kingdoms, such as Yoruba, Dagomba-Mossi, Zimbabwe, Zulu and Haya, and the early use of iron technology. Chapter three examines popular explanations for Africa’s stagnation, and poses alternative views about the role of Africa’s predictable climate in stifling creative thinking, the way in which written and other traditions have existed to transmit knowledge, and the lack of large enduring empires. Kuyini then traces the construction of black identity in America and Africa. The subject of the next chapter is the project of re-constructing black identity, as facilitated by independence and the civil rights movement, and through Reggae and Pan-Africanism.

Kuyini then highlights the role of religion in the crisis of African values, with societies perpetuating “kingdoms of hell with a million prayers” (p. 50). By this he means that prayer and miracles are predominant dimensions of religion rather than pragmatic actions and essential values as honesty, kindness, justice, compassion and the guidance of conscience. He suggests that the crisis in African values post-independence has its “roots in subordinating positive African values to foreign ones” (p. 73). This is exemplified in how most post-independence governments failed to entrench the principle of indigenization when choosing national languages with few exceptions, such as Tanzania.

Bawa Kuyini quotes extensively from Frantz Fanon in applying the concept of “the oppressor within” (p. 90) with tribalism, conflictual ethnic relations, nationalism gone awry and corruption at the core of this oppression. His conclusion is that the rule of law, proper governance, and increasing educational participation require a strong foundation of enabling collectively held values in order to develop improved conditions (p. 103). This leads to Kuyini’s call to reclaim African traditional philosophies such as Ubuntu to support values of service and caring for collective well-being, and the closely related West African ethics of Behagu and Burkina. Behagu epitomizes respect for others’ dignity, community solidarity and responsibility. Burkina is the quality of honesty, integrity and hard work for the benefit of all. As an overarching ethic it lends its name to the country of Burkina Faso meaning “the land of upright people” (p. 108).

As a social work educator reading this book I admire Kuyini for his courage in building an argument for an evaluation and a re-cultivation of values as a crucial project. He neither claims eloquence nor a final word. In some ways his book reads as a series of speeches and contemplations. His writing is a call to others, particularly Africans and Africanists, to consider the centrality of collective values for improved conditions. The book invites further thinking and writing of particular African philosophies of collective well-being, including Ubuntu, Behagu and Burkina. Readers will find encouragement in applying these philosophies to contemporary conditions and issues of marginalization, oppression and citizenship, morality and religion. It may well inspire you to reflect on how specifically African ways and values, explanations and directions apply to your area of concern based on “I am because you are”.

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Sjoerd Rijpma, *David Livingstone and the Myth of African Poverty and Disease. A Close examination of his writings on the Pre-Colonial Era*, Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2015, pp. 610. ISBN 9789004293731.<sup>1</sup>

Yet another book on Livingstone? You may well ask, given how many there are. But in this case, not quite. As medical anthropologist van der Geest's Foreword explains, this book is different because the author is focussed on examining, not Livingstone's journeys *per se* but his descriptions of the state of local nutrition and health observed in his travels. He also compares them with reports by seven other medically qualified travellers from 1624 -1880 in order to evidence his supposition that pre-colonial southern and central Africans actually experienced relatively healthy lives, that this was unlike the situation of those living in Europe in the same period and that (quoting Livingstone in the Preface) "... exceptionally productive food supply systems existed...", and "if agriculture were a test of civilization then these [people] are not savages". Rijpma argues that the reason there are serious problems with morbidity and mortality now is that those systems have been interrupted.

He consequently felt that the often promoted view of poverty, sickness and high mortality always being prevalent in Africa was false – and which he argues were only representative of newly colonized coastal urban areas, as a result of more dense populations, lack of access to the traditional range of foods and the arrival of new diseases. As he states in the Preface, his book "is ... a plea for insight into the historic attainments of the African people", attainments which have been ignored and lost in modern times because of failure to recognize and value existing systems.

The author of the Foreword quotes Joanna Lewis, anthropologist and African history specialist, as saying that "the book is an impressive piece of scholarship, truly forensic in its close reading and re-reading of Livingstone's published works and those of other early travellers during the same era, clearly a labour of love ...". That 'truly forensic' approach is

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<sup>1</sup> Rijpma (1931-2015) was a Dutch general practitioner with a PhD in agricultural science, who had about two year's medical work experience in West Africa (Liberia) and Gabon) in the 1960s and 70s. The result of almost 30 years of research this very lengthy manuscript was originally published privately in 2002 as 'An African Surprise' in his native language, and translated into English in 2008 and now published as a Brill publication in hard copy and as an ebook.

apparent from the extent of his study, being just over 600 pages, with 43 pages of references, and the way in which he is relying not just on the accuracy of Livingstone's observations but triangulating them with those of other pre-colonial science-minded observers.

Rijpma's main conclusions were deceptively simple and obvious in many respects to the health/nutrition practitioner: relatively good health was prevalent in the early days largely because of the highly significant role that lengthy breastfeeding (i.e. for 3 years or so) played. The benefits included optimal child nutrition and consequent delayed introduction to adult foods which are often not suitable for the very young child (which include exposure to dirty water); consequent delayed ovulation and therefore wide child spacing; better maternal health (with the protective role of post partem abstinence and polygamy part of that scenario), and some resistance to malaria and other diseases. These benefits resulted in minimal malnutrition and mortality and a more or less stable and age balanced population.

The related key element was all age groups having ready access to a wide variety of sources of other nutrients, and not just the farmed sort - which were produced using ecologically appropriate methods. And perhaps Rijpma could have added, the freedom of what were then small populations to move regularly in response to climatic conditions, human interference, seasonal and social demands, and the use of annual grass firings, both of the latter practices lessening the chances of un-healthy contamination of villages. He argues that in pre-colonial times "Growth, production and reproduction were attuned to each other, the opposite of 'underdevelopment'" (p. 511), and hoped that the recognition of the value of the traditional farming practices would "... stimulate the study of how the old systems and methods could be adapted for use today" (p. 6), because as the author points out, "... intensive Western method of agriculture is not applicable to most African soils" (p. 509).

Despite such intensive scholarship it is somewhat disappointing that the author states that these are only his 'cautious conclusions', but understandable perhaps, given the limited objective evidence which exists about past situations and the variable quality of his sources. But he certainly creates 'food' for thought for current day development practitioners.

It is also surprising, and somewhat disappointing that the author did not back up his theoretical work by undertaking field work in the region and report on any remaining physical and local oral evidence for his thesis - such as the sophisticated agricultural practices used in parts of Zambia as described by Oyama and Kondo (2007). Also, it wasn't just medical

travellers who usefully reported on local conditions (e.g. Melland and Cholmeley 1912, albeit in a later era, c1908). It is also somewhat annoying that Livingstone's inappropriate term 'tropical Africa' was maintained when referring to southern Africa, and the book's (unnecessary) length and detail may also discourage potential readers.

But despite those weaknesses this volume would be of interest to the student of southern African history pre-1880, especially Africans themselves in order to appreciate their heritage (rather than just the often negative colonial version of it), and those interested in re-thinking how agricultural practices could be environmentally sensitive and appropriate to southern African soils. The book could also offer ideas on how to reduce infant and child morbidity and mortality, however more challenging those aims are in an age of increasing urbanization and over-valuing of western style 'scientific' agricultural methods.

### **Bibliography**

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**Apology:** ARAS would like to apologise for incorrectly citing the title of Ali Mumin Ahad (2015). *Somali Oral Poetry and the Failed She-Camel Nation State: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Deelley Poetry Debate* (1979-1980), New York: Peter Lang. Reviewed by Lidwien Kapteijns, ARAS, Vol 37. No 1, June 2016, pp. 125-27.