

BOOK REVIEW

Michelle Liebst. *Labour and Christianity in the Mission: African Workers in Tanganyika and Zanzibar, 1864–1926*. Suffolk: James Currey, 2021. xiv + 224 pp. Appendices. Bibliography. Index. \$95.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1847012753.

Labour and Christianity in the Mission by Michelle Liebst is a history of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) missions in Magila (Tanganyika) and Zanzibar over roughly a sixty-year period. The book comprises five substantive chapters, an Introduction, a Conclusion, and five brief "appendices" consisting of reference chronologies and lists of *dramatis personae*. It draws primarily on archival collections in Oxford and Zanzibar, UMCA publications, and makes limited use of oral interview data. It breaks no new theoretical or methodological ground, but will be of interest to historians of Christian missions and of slavery and abolition.

Chapter 1 opens and closes with a dispute between missionaries and mainland "power-brokers" over the former's burning of mortar lime in what the latter considered to be their domain. This conflict is placed in the context of the longer-term strained relationship between missionaries and local leaders as they competed for prestige, power, and patronage. Chapter 2 is ostensibly focused on Bishop Edward Steere's use of enslaved laborers to build the Anglican cathedral in Zanzibar, but is much more centrally concerned with the UMCA's plantation in Mbweni and the anti-industrial Protestant work ethic the mission sought to cultivate there among its ex-slave residents. This sets up an analysis in Chapter 3 of missionary and African attitudes toward urban environments as sites of both opportunity and "moral contagion" (113), and how these were mediated, for some, by ex-slave status and/or mainland origin. Chapter 4 explores the consequences for marriageability and livelihood of mission education and ex-slave status for "Mbweni Girls," while Chapter 5 traces the historical separation of domestic service and education in the UMCA missions, the professionalization of "boy-work" in the colonial period, and corresponding shifts in the local valences of *uboi* ("boy-ness") across social contexts.

The scholarship in these chapters is generally solid; each represents a contribution to our knowledge of how the UMCA missions operated in this part of East Africa during this period, what the local uptake and


understanding of those operations were, and how both changed over time. Attention is paid throughout to how missionary and local attitudes toward a range of differentially stigmatized but partly overlapping social types (mainlander, ex-slave, Christian convert, etc.) mediated the strategies of marginalized men and women to shape their own lives. The framing of the book in the introduction as a “labor history” is inapt, however. With the partial exceptions of Chapters 4 and 5, Liebst’s focus is not really on labor (or Christianity, for that matter) at all, but rather on contests over status, identity, control, and opportunity in relation to the larger social field in which the missions were embedded. As Liebst puts it in the Conclusion, “the mission provided resources for status struggles” (187), and it is really only as one such “resource” among others in a struggle supposed ultimately to be about something else—status and identity—that labor comes into view at all.

Although well-researched, the book’s engagement with and grasp of existing scholarship and its own place within it is generally weak. Liebst suggests in the Introduction, for example, that the book “addresses two gaps in the literature”: labor history’s neglect of “forms of labor between the extremes of chattel slavery and ‘free’ wage labor,” and missionary history’s treatment of religion “separately to socio-economic issues” (3). But whether those “gaps” can reasonably be said to exist is debatable to say the least (the work of Frederick Cooper and Jean and John Comaroff comes immediately to mind as evidence to the contrary from the Africanist literature alone). The book’s real contribution is instead the empirical demonstration of its major (but uncontroversial, and not especially novel) claim: that during the period in question “the mission was not culturally hegemonic and status struggles were pursued in multiple idioms, drawing from the Islamic cultures of coastal East Africa as much as the cultures of Anglican Christianity” (30–31). This seems clearly to be true, but who would argue otherwise? UMCA missionaries were certainly aware of this fact and agonized over it, as Liebst ably demonstrates. Does this “challenge the notion of ‘colonization of consciousness’” (187) as Liebst suggests? Or does it mean that a concept derived from one context simply turns out to be less apt in one for which its authors made no claim? By deliberately limiting her study to the period *before* the UMCA missions become locally important, has Liebst “challenged” that concept, or just begged the question? In the absence of any theoretical discussion, how would we know?

The use of Liebst’s interview data, finally, is uneven, and their evidentiary status alongside other kinds of sources is unaddressed. Missing, too, is any contextualizing information that would help the reader evaluate them. Sometimes a quotation in the original Kiswahili is provided in a footnote but sometimes not, with no clear rationale and no translation attribution. In some cases, a recording timestamp is given and in other cases a transcript page number—but with no indication whether those recordings or transcripts have been or will be made available. Finally, the interviews themselves were apparently conducted by Zuhura Mohammed and Irene Mashasi (Liebst credits herself with just one of the 23 interviews listed in the

Bibliography—a refreshingly frank admission). But these women are thanked in the Acknowledgments, immediately before and after Liebst’s “driver” and sometime “kitchen assistant” “Mohammed,” not for their research contributions—which appear to have been substantial, perhaps even deserving some sort of author credit, *à la* Moodie and Ndatshe (for example)—but rather, for getting her shoes fixed without being asked, and for teaching her “how to make *chapatti* [sic]” (xii).

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