

# Book Review: Robert Munson 2013

## The Nature of Christianity in Northern Tanzania

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Robert Munson's *The Nature of Christianity in Northern Tanzania* uses Christianity as a window to examining environmental and social changes in Northeastern Tanzania. The author tries to show a somehow, silenced, or overlooked agency of the colonial peoples. He tries to show and critique the view that the colonised always remained passive recipients of anything their masters ordered. But for the case of Northern Tanzania, he argues, if in whatever way – people were forced – which really they were, without their readiness, they were at a position to abandon everything after the colonial masters had gone. The adaptations and continuities after Germans had gone revealed the extent to which the newly introduced social and landscape changes took root in people's minds and wished to continue with them throughout their lives. Throughout the British colonial period and after independence, the legacies of German presence in Northern Tanzania remained visible socially, economically and environmentally.

The book is divided into seven chapters where the first chapter is devoted in showing the precolonial human-environment interactions that existed for centuries before the coming of foreign influence. In this chapter he starts by providing the geographical characteristics of the slopes of Mount Meru and Kilimanjaro by showing suitability potentials for new green immigrants. He also indicates that, although botanical imports were tried in different areas of Tanzania, only in some areas where the physical landscape and readiness of the people provided suitable environment, where prosperity of new ideas and ecological development took roots. This prepares the reader to understand the predecessors for the establishment of German rule and mission stations that are deeply discussed in chapter two and three. In these chapters, the author takes most of his time to show the struggles that missionaries had in trying to establish stations on the two slopes of the Twin Mountains. He indicates that this was made possible through land alienation and forging collaboration with local people to carry out the spread of religious and ecological ideas on the slopes. The chapter ends up by swiftly moving into another chapter by linking the departure of German rule in 1916 with the continuities of landscape and social changes that had started in the preceding colonial period in chapter four. Chapter four apart from showing continuities of change, it also touches on the new definitions on the landscape imposed by British colonial government that in one way or the other had some impacts on former arrangements on interests of the Chagga, Meru and Arusha on one side with settlers on the other side. Chapter five examines the introduction of new crops and its relationship with the prior existing indigenous crops before moving into chapter six where he indicates the reciprocating and reflective tendency of the introduction of new plants and religious faith on the slopes. He argues that, while the establishment of both ideas took an early rooting among the Chagga, they were slowly realised among the Meru and Arusha on the slopes of Mount Meru. Ecological ideas rooted early among the Chagga as they accepted and practised Christianity. Finally the last chapter discusses the endurance of ecological and religious ideas after the end of colonialism.

On the whole Robert Munson's book adds knowledge to studies of Christianity, environment, and social change. It remains one of the most detailed works in recent times about and on Northern Tanzania that cuts across a wide range of scholarly intercessions ranging from history, education, development, colonial policy, ecology, geography and religion. It is written in a simple and plain language, it should surely appeal to many readers interested in the mentioned topics. The book makes use of a detailed researched German archives by combining archives from three different countries, Tanzania, German and Britain. The author is one of, the few, scholars who continue to write about German period in Tanzania by

use of German records. The depth of the information provided is massive and the arguments well supported. In some cases, there is a lot of information provided in the notes that seem quite an important part of the main text but due to space in the main text they did not get a chance to appear as part of the main text.

However, despite the lucidity of the discussion in this volume, in some cases readers may fail to get coherence of arguments and follow up discussions due to several hindrances, which I will point out a few. Although, from the start the book opens by pointing that it intends to show how Africans were ready to adopt and adapt newly introduced ideas; ecological and religious, it remains almost, totally silent on the weight through which alien and local ideas converged, diverged and influenced each other. Mentions of, just by passing, Chagga traditional beliefs to their God 'ruwa' would perhaps make more sense out of it if taken into the wider contexts of western God through the introduction of Christianity to understand how the Chagga and Christian's concepts of 'God' were mediated and shaped each other. Presenting the acceptance of Christianity and abandoning traditional belief systems indicates transformation in the society that its motives should be understood rather than generalising that acceptance of Christianity indicated an active role of Africans. Also the same balance is missing on – the extent of cooperation between Africans (Chagga, Meru and Arusha) and Germans, a cooperation that is assumed to be the reason for the success of transformations and their endurance on the mountain slopes. The reader may be left pondering for instance, what were the roles of Africans in such cooperation? What about the roles of Germans in the same? Was it a mutual cooperation or just a master and subject cooperation; the master giving orders, instructions and guidelines and the subject observing them or a kind of mutual and reciprocating cooperation among actors existed. The author indicates quite well the extent to which Lutheran and Catholic Missionaries and Missions competed in establishing mission stations and only points that there were African initiatives in the process without giving a somewhat detailed way of that seemingly an African initiative. While we may agree that Africans were ready to take an opportunity provided by Germans, we must try to establish the type of readiness argued for. It might, in some cases, and which seems to be most obvious and convincing, that the kind of readiness showed by Africans was an unavoidable evil to survive. They should have resisted taking an active part, and on the other side they could be forced to do it. The history of German presence in Tanganyika is well known for its brutality not only in Northern Tanzania but also in several other parts of the territory. A good example, is what also the author makes much use of; the *Maji Maji* resistance from 1905 to 1907. Though the debate on *Maji Maji* is receiving a new dimension, the main received knowledge on its causes laid on the harsh treatment of indigenous people by Germans. The failure to establish a strong way through which Africans participated, leaves the volume in the same lines like previous works that failed to bring out active African roles in shaping and influencing whatever new introduction in their societies. This in turn, weakens the assumptions that Africans took an active role in German colonial and Missionary transformations and endured them by heart not force of some hidden pressures or motives.

Lastly, throughout the book there have been many of, probably, unnecessary repetitions on headings and subheadings. For example, some of which are highly repeated are the 'Savanna' and 'Plants: Green and Native.' These have occurred in several subheadings. It is obviously hard to decide on an appropriate style to present a comparative study like this and whatever way that may be chosen might inhibit its own complications and challenges. The approach used in this book that treats each of the two mountain slopes almost separately from one another warrants repeated subheadings and also needs the reader to be much more careful in getting glimpses of a comparative analysis which otherwise maybe left less comprehended.

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