

Roads through Mwinilunga: a history of social change in Northwest Zambia, by Iva Peša, Leiden, Brill, 2019, xiv + 430 pp., € 49.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-90-04-40790-9.

Iva Peša states her theme clearly: Mwinilunga's roads have provided mobility and thus been instrumental in social change in Zambia's North Western Province. Even when inadequate, roads not only "symbolised connectivity, modernity and development" (2–3) but also were conduits thereof. Their roadsides became a "magnetic focus towards which villages gravitated ... to take advantage of rising economic opportunities" (80). Moving along the roads has led to better productivity, marketing and integration.

Whilst maintaining that social change in Mwinilunga has tended to be gradual and incremental from 1750 until the present, Peša "engages [in] a grand historical narrative of continuity and change, whilst focusing on local specificity" (3). The Lunda social organisation of matrilineal descent and virilocal marriage has always provided an inherent tension. To understand Lunda society, this tension between continuity and change must be accounted for. Peša tries hard to do this.

For reasons that elude me, Mwinilunga is by far the most studied district of Zambia's North Western Province (NWP), so much so that even a graduate course could be based on the writings of this interesting district! Indeed, Peša's excellent research and writing did not begin in a vacuum. She follows two top notch anthropologists with multiple publications about Mwinilunga and the Lunda people: Victor Turner (1957, 1967, 1968, 1969) and James Pritchett (2001, 2007). Despite different perspectives, the three researchers' combined scholarship provides the serious academic reader with an extraordinarily comprehensive understanding of Lunda society and social change since World War II. (Like Turner and Pritchett, Peša addresses her book at scholars, not the casual reader.) Peša's biggest contribution flows from her historical background: she adds a comprehensive historical dimension to her predecessors' works. She is a thorough researcher and her academic writing is thoughtful. Her documentation, both in the footnotes and the bibliography, is meticulous. In fact, I am a little awed! No one can criticize her for omitting crucial material and not pointing the reader towards additional sources.

Like Turner and Pritchett, Peša delves deep into the theoretical components of social change. All three focus on theories emanating from the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute's comprehensive studies of Northern Rhodesia, especially on the processes through which capitalism, colonialism but also labour migration would bring a continuity of social change after World War II. Peša makes strong

points about continuity and change in village life. A key observation, reiterated throughout the book, is that “villages persist and have not disintegrated as Turner predicted in the 1950s” (367). She also notes Pritchett’s restudy of Turner’s work whilst wrestling with Turner’s concept of farms. She stresses that “change did not follow a clear, preconceived or lineal course (367).” Lunda traditions crucially helped people cope with change.

The book has five thematic chapters that move the reader steadily forward. The first, “Paths to the Past: Continuity and Change (1750s–1970s),” builds an historical framework for four spheres of social change, namely production, mobility, consumption and social relationships (12). The subsequent chapters look at “Production,” “Mobility,” “Consumption” and “Settlements and Social Change.” Here I pick out topics that cut across these chapters and that especially engaged my attention as someone who lived and worked in the province in the 1960s and 1970s¹: Mwinilunga’s complex political geography in relation to its physical geography, Lunda mobility and migration, and the production of cassava and pineapples.

Peša’s first topic that most interested me was the complex political geography of modern-day Mwinilunga in relation to its natural geography. Today Zambia, Congo and Angola artificially divide the larger region that includes the NWP and most certainly Mwinilunga. The Lunda people spread into Angola on the west and into the Congo to the north and east. Thus, the district resembles a finger sticking up in the middle of these countries. Whilst these international borders are very significant, they have remained quite permeable. They often became “corridors of opportunity” (175) as people crossed them for enhanced chances, such as to avoid taxes or get better produce prices.

Besides the fact that people often had to cross international borders just to get to their fields or to their water supplies, Peša makes several other crucial observations about Lunda migration and general mobility. She points out that the Lunda have been very mobile, partly because of their fragile environment and remoteness from major urban centres, and that this was amplified by their social organization. Most important, she gives a valuable historical dimension to this complex labour mobility, in both the colonial and post-colonial periods and both within Zambia and going to and fro between Zambia, Angola and Congo. She argues for the significance of migration that frequently necessitated crossing international borders or making long journeys, especially by men for work. She intriguingly shows how mobility strengthened Lunda identity.

Peša’s most interesting topic(s) may be cassava and pineapples (esp. 118–128). Like Turner, she shows that cassava is “the foundation of production” (160) for village life and helps create a “land of plenty.” She contrasts cassava with grain crops, especially maize (corn), which both the colonial and Zambian governments strongly encouraged, even pushed, farmers to grow, whilst discouraging cassava. Mwinilunga’s mostly thin, acidic soils best accommodate cassava, however, and provides a steady source of food for much of the district. Crucially, it does not require attention every year and provides food security and helps avoid “hungry periods” before harvests (see Peša 2012). When transport problems can be solved, cassava is a saleable crop, especially on Zambia’s Copperbelt. In like manner, pineapples grow well in Mwinilunga’s acidic soil and, like cassava, have often been a commercial crop over the past 50 years.

In sum, I find Iva Peša’s new book praiseworthy and worthwhile reading for any scholar interested in both the larger theme of social change as well as the lesser topics that she covers.

Notes

1. I have been connected to the NWP since the mid-1960s. After teaching in Solwezi in 1965, I opened a secondary school as headmaster at Balovale (now Zambezi) for the new Zambian government. In 1968, before leaving Zambia, I taught briefly in Mwinilunga. I returned to Zambia in the 1970s to take on a position of provincial lecturer for the University of Zambia. Whilst extensively travelling throughout the province for the university, I collected data for my Ph.D. (Wilkin 1983). I run the website “The NorthWestern Province of Zambia: Professional and Personal Reflections of Paul David Wilkin and Friends.”

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Paul David Wilkin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1818-099X>

Independent researcher, New York, United States of America

Email: pdwilkin@rcn.com

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2020.1749525>