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**DEBATING ‘ZAMBIA: THE REDISCOVERY OF LIBERALISM’: RESPONSES  
TO HARRI ENGLUND**

In *Africa* 83(4) (November 2013), Harri Englund discussed several recent books on Zambia published preceding the country’s fiftieth independence anniversary. His article explored the ways in which recent publications by *Zambian* and *Zambianist* authors have launched a fresh research agenda, and he focused in particular on the scholarly engagement with liberalism. Below, we publish responses from David Gordon, Bizeck Jube Phiri and Giacomo Macola, whose work was discussed in this article, and a comment by James Ferguson, offering a more general view on the scholarship Englund inspires.

<LINE SPACE>The new historiography of Zambia comes of age with Harri Englund’s perceptive and stimulating review article. In the hands of a distinguished anthropologist, this diverse and, in some respects, analytically undeveloped body of literature prompts a whole range of fresh questions about history, culture, politics and religion. So tempting is this opportunity to continue with the conversation that I see no reason to be drawn into sterile personal or disciplinary polemics. Instead, inspired by Englund’s gentle jibe about ‘neoliberal’ Tonga-speakers (p. 676), I propose to supplement my book’s understanding of the relationship between Harry Nkumbula’s political agenda and his key constituents’ civic thought. The purpose of these further reflections on the intersections between high and popular politics in southern Zambia is to adumbrate the argument that the political commitments of both past and present observers of Central African social realities might have led them to downplay unduly the significance of individualism among the subjects of their work. In the concluding section of my short discussion, I will use my reading of the mainsprings of Bantu Botatwe political behaviour to contribute to another arena of

controversy touched upon in Englund's essay: the imbrications of politics and religion in contemporary Africa.

Speaking in the Zambian National Assembly in 1968, Edward Mungoni Liso, Nkumbula's alter ego and the most faithful interpreter of his thought at the time, questioned the foundations of Republican President Kaunda's 'Humanism' by stressing that in the Southern Province, "the part of Zambia that I come from", "achievement ... was far more respected than anything else even than the man ... [I]n our society we did not regard everybody as equal. Even up to the present moment, Sir, at home a poor man is looked down in pure village life" (quoted in Macola 2010: 118). Three years earlier, Maxwell Beyani, another member of Nkumbula's opposition party, the ANC, had described his Tonga constituents as "hard workers [who] want to spend most of their time improving their way of life. ... [T]hey hate interference which does not lead to prosperity" (quoted in Macola 2010: 117).

Views of this nature suggest that, beginning in the middle decades of the twentieth century, a deep, centuries-long history of 'statelessness' (Colson 1962: chapter 7; De Luna 2012; but cf. O'Brien 1983) or political fragmentation (Fielder 1965: 30–41) and a much more recent history of comparatively successful involvement in market production (Vickery 1986) were leading to the emergence of norms of social behaviour that it is difficult not to qualify as 'individualist'. Built around the celebration of self-reliance, autonomy and personal enterprise, this world view was shared by both 'rich' and 'poor' Tonga-speaking peasants (who – as Momba [1989: 331–2, 346] clarified – were not separated by differential access to the means of production and cannot therefore be rightly described as forming separate, antagonistic classes). This – I am persuaded – lay at the very heart of the political philosophy of Nkumbula and his party in the aftermath of the emergence of UNIP. If liberal thought – as Englund argued in his review article and elsewhere (2006; 2011) – has always oscillated

between the poles of rights and freedom on the one hand, and duties and equality on the other, by the time their alliance with the ANC crystallized, Bantu Botatwe opinion-makers (often the better-off peasants) were strongly leaning towards the former bundle of concepts. Their impermeability to offers of state patronage, I argue, is to be understood in this light. While the adjective ‘neoliberal’ is plainly inappropriate to describe this set of aspirations and concerns, one ought not to shy away from pointing to the possibility of their serving to energize such free-market, non-redistributive political projects as were espoused by Nkumbula. Influences from below, not least from smallholding farmers, work across the political spectrum and do not necessarily take the form that engagé social scientists might view as being desirable. This, after all, is the reason why orthodox Marxists have often regarded the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ with ‘contempt’ (Scott 2012: 86–7, 94–5). If an anachronistic definitional game is to be played, I would rather describe the Bantu Botatwe of the Southern Province as ‘right-leaning anarchists’ instead of ‘neoliberal’. ‘Right-leaning’ because the defence of private property and individual initiative were the organizing principles of their ‘cultural citizenship’, a neat expression I borrow from Scott (2012: 90); ‘anarchists’ because the claims of the state – be it colonial, post-colonial or, indeed, pre-colonial – were their ultimate *bête noire*. Pace Scott, however, these cultural inclinations do not appear to have been accompanied by a similarly profound attachment to ideas of ‘mutuality’.

My reading of Bantu Botatwe motives and commitment to the protection of their autonomy vis-à-vis the state is entirely secular. This, of course, is not to deny the sincerity of both their old and new religious allegiances from the early twentieth century (see, for example, Carmody 1992; Colson 2006), but it is to argue that such allegiances scarcely impinged on their oppositional political positioning in nationalist and contemporary Zambia. Instead of attempting to parry the charge of reductionism, I will end by pointing to a slightly

disconcerting parallel between the nationalist historiography that revisionists have attempted to take to task and the more recent, and self-consciously cutting-edge, scholarship of which Gordon's work (2012) represents such a distinguished example. The function attributed to religion in early, nationalist-inflected studies of African resistance during the Scramble was obvious enough: it was the world of the spirits and their mediums that provided that principle of inter-ethnic unity that was required if 'primary' resisters were to be legitimately portrayed as the precursors of later decolonization movements (Ranger 1968; Cobbing 1977; Beach 1979; Ellis 2000). Now that this epistemological responsibility has been lifted from the shoulders of the spirits, only their ostensible timelessness – and related exoticizing effects – remain. Yet there simply is no need to invoke supernatural forces to explain what, to the southerners who suffered for them, were, at heart, political choices rooted in civic concerns that were themselves interwoven with historical forces and economic circumstances. The Tonga-speaking peasants who followed Nkumbula through thick and thin paid a price in foregone patronage for their principled stance; their province still bears the hallmarks of its long history of opposition to the dominant political dispensation. Viewing them as only partly responsible for their own destiny diminishes the morality of their choices. We have England to thank for taking the debate on religion and politics to another level in the new historiography of Zambia.

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