

Kent Academic Repository

Full text document (pdf)

Citation for published version

Macola, Giacomo (2004) Two Zambian Autobiographies. Review of: Mwanakatwe, Teacher Politican Lawyer: My Autobiography Zukas, Into Exile and Back by Mwanakatwe, John and Zukas, Simon. Journal of Southern African Studies, 30 (4). pp. 901-904. ISSN 0305-7070.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0305707042000313086>

Link to record in KAR

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/7570/>

Document Version

UNSPECIFIED

Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

John Mwanakatwe, *Teacher Politician Lawyer: My Autobiography* (Bookworld Publishers, Lusaka, 2003), xii + 515 pp., paperback, ISBN 9982-24-021-8

Simon Zukas, *Into Exile and Back* (Bookworld Publishers, Lusaka, 2002), vii + 220 pp., paperback, ISBN 9982-24-020-X

The desire to reflect on the historical achievements and failures of the Zambian nationalist project – coupled with the gradual demise of the generation by which this project was first elaborated and carried out – has recently given rise to a flurry of political autobiographies and memoirs.¹ Although their academic value varies greatly, historians and other social scientists would do well not to underrate the usefulness of these texts as primary sources of evidence and their potential for contributing to the long-overdue development of a modern historiography of nationalist and post-colonial Zambia. The heterogeneity and unevenness of contemporary Zambian memorialistic literature is aptly brought out by the two volumes under review, for John Mwanakatwe and Simon Zukas' autobiographies have precious little in common beyond their publisher – Bookworld, a local venture run by Dr. Fay Gadsden, former lecturer in the History Department of the University of Zambia – and chronological framework (1920s to the present). Indeed, the fact that both authors occupy a prominent place in the country's nationalist pantheon cannot obscure the profound diversity of their personal trajectories and the principles and ideals by which most of their adult lives have been informed.

Born in 1926 into a rigorous Methodist household, Mwanakatwe was a member of the royal clan of the Lungu of Mbala district and the son of a relatively well-to-do employee of the Public Works Department of Northern Rhodesia (colonial Zambia). One year older than Mwanakatwe, Zukas belonged instead to the Eastern European Jewish diaspora, having left Ukmerge, his Lithuanian birthplace, in 1938 to join his father, a struggling hawker based in the Copperbelt, the colony's mining and industrial area. In 1946, the year in which Mwanakatwe completed his Form V at Adams College, Natal, an 'elitist institution' under the American Board of Missions (p. 24), Zukas served with the King's African Rifles in Uganda and began to develop an anti-colonial consciousness as a result of the high-handed British policies towards Baganda nationalists. At the end of the same decade, while Mwanakatwe was an active member of the Students' Christian Association of Munali Training Centre, Lusaka, where he was employed as one of the few African

¹ See A. Sardanis, *Africa: Another Side of the Coin. Northern Rhodesia's Final Years and Zambia's Nationhood* (I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2003) and the numerous unpublished memoirs listed in M. Hinfelaar and G. Macola, *A First Guide to Non-Governmental Archives in Zambia* (National Archives of Zambia, Lusaka, 2004).

secondary school teachers, Zukas's early Marxist leanings, the result of his youthful flirtations with the Zionist-Socialist movement, were being rekindled at Cape Town University, where he studied civil engineering thanks to a Junior Beit scholarship. By 1950, the authors' political orientations had crystallized. Zukas, working closely with the Communist Party of South Africa and having come under the influence of such revolutionary intellectuals as Bram Fischer, Lionel Forman and Jack Simons, is unlikely to have shared Mwanakatwe's enthusiasm for the gradualist policies advocated by the African Representative Council of Northern Rhodesia.

Zukas' unorthodox emphasis on the 'question of African nationalism' – which most South African communists regarded 'as secondary to the struggle of the working class against capitalism' (p. 34) – accounts for his decision to join the embryonic nationalist movement upon his return to Northern Rhodesia. The campaigns and publications of his Ndola Anti-Federation Action Committee did much to consolidate African opposition to the planned Central African Federation and to popularise the notions of self-government and independence among the early leaders of the Northern Rhodesia African National Congress, the country's sole African party until the formation of ZANC/UNIP in the late 1950s. Militant anti-colonialism, on the other hand, was never very high up on the agenda of the African Civil Servants' Association, the white-collar union to which Mwanakatwe belonged from 1950. In 1951, as the Munali *wunderkind* was being fêted all over the colony as the first Northern Rhodesian African to obtain a university degree (Fort Hare), Zukas was dismissed from the Ndola Municipal Council on account of his political activities. Ostracised by the Copperbelt's European community – whose anti-Semitism was never far from the surface – the 'stateless Lithuanian Jew' (definition of the *Central African Mail*) was eventually convicted of being 'a danger to peace and good order' (p. 85). Having spent eight months in jail pending his appeal, Zukas was finally deported to England at the end of 1952.

During his London exile, and despite having begun a successful career as a structural engineer, Zukas kept in close touch with nationalist leaders in Northern Rhodesia, wrote for Ruth First's *Fighting Talk* and was involved in the campaigns of such influential anti-colonial bodies as Basil Davidson's Union of Democratic Control and Fenner Brockway's Movement for Colonial Freedom. Mwanakatwe's experiences in the late 1950s were of an entirely different order, for that period marked his ascent to the top of the African civil service in colonial Zambia. After three years as headmaster of Kasama Secondary School and one year as education officer in the Southern Province, he was seconded to London in 1961 as assistant to the Northern Rhodesian Commissioner. Given that Mwanakatwe's principal personal concern during his stay in London was the 'routine of "keeping terms" [...] at Lincoln's Inn' (p. 99) with a view to being admitted to the Bar and that his 'role model' at Lincoln's was a young barrister and Conservative MP called

Margaret Thatcher (p. 355), it is hardly surprising that the two authors appear not to have spent a great deal of time together in the UK.

Having been persuaded to join the ranks of UNIP's 'new men' in the run-up to the first Northern Rhodesian General Elections of October 1962 and won the party's only upper roll seat, Mwanakatwe had no difficulty in securing a series of high-profile appointments in Kenneth Kaunda's administration. Between the end of 1962 and 1978, he served successively as Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Labour and Mines, Minister of Education, Minister of Lands and Mines, Secretary General to the Government and Minister of Finances (twice). Conversely, and despite his courageous decision to return to Zambia after the attainment of Independence in 1964, the country's highest political circles remained close to Zukas. His enduring friendship with some of Kaunda's internal opponents, rapid disavowal of his initial support for the institution of a One-Party State in 1973 and, most important of all, inborn mistrust for what he calls the 'establishment' might all be held to account for his comparative marginalization during the Second Republic (1973-1991).

The trajectories of the former Communist firebrand and the influential Rotarian (who had reinvented himself as a successful corporate lawyer after his retirement from active politics in 1978) began to converge in the 1980s, as both of them grew more and more weary of the dictatorial excesses of Kaunda's rule and the seemingly unstoppable decline of the Zambian economy. Having contributed to the electoral success of the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy in 1991 – Zukas as the party's first national vice-chairman and Mwanakatwe as a respected external advisor – they both became key figures in its first administration. While Mwanakatwe chaired the Zambia Privatisation Agency in 1992-1993 and the Constitutional Review Commission in 1993-1995, Zukas, the MP for Sikongo, Western Province, held the posts of Deputy Minister in the Office of the President (1991-1992) and Minister of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (1993-1995). As usual, however, the call of political wilderness proved too strong for Zukas to resist. In 1996, soon after his appointment as Minister of Works and Supply, he resigned from President Frederick Chiluba's cabinet, in protest over the introduction of a discriminatory constitutional provision whose main *raison d'être* was to prevent Kaunda from contesting that year's presidential elections. At present, unlike Mwanakatwe, who enjoys the status of retired luminary and impartial father figure, Zukas is still involved in active politics as chairman of the FDD, one of Zambia's many opposition parties.

The different social and cultural location of the authors has a bearing on the two autobiographies' styles. Especially in its early chapters, *Teacher Politician Lawyer* is exceedingly teleological, with every youthful experience being presented as a *rite de passage* along a triumphal path towards full-blown adult glory and moral authority. As the book progresses, teleology is

superseded by sheer conceit and self-praise, with which *Teacher Politician Lawyer* is literally replete. A few, priceless examples will suffice to underscore the point. During his tough correspondence studies for a South African BA degree in 1949-1950, Mwanakatwe found solace in the ‘words of the poet John Milton “... to scorn delight and live laborious days” in the sonnet *On His Blindness*. It was a virtue to burn the midnight oil for this purpose; it earned [him] respect and admiration among [his] fellow teachers’ at Munali (p. 51). Fifteen years later, his selection as Minister of Education in the first independent Zambian cabinet must have finally convinced him of what he had suspected since his ‘sensational’ promotion to the post of education officer in 1960 – namely, that he ‘was destined to be a pace-setter’ (pp. 93-94). While Mwanakatwe admits that his ministerial appointment ‘came as a surprise’, he is quick to reassure the by now adoring readers that he felt ‘confiden[t] that [his] qualifications and experience in the field of education’ would have enabled him ‘to make a valuable contribution to the effectiveness of the new government.’ (p. 142) Three years later, the ‘phenomenal programme of development’ (p. 195) implemented by his Ministry vindicated his earlier predictions. Given this impressive pedigree, is it really surprising that a number of young UNIP activists in the early 1970s ‘looked to [him] as their role model’ (p. 228), or that the members of the University of Zambia’s Law Association – of which he became patron in the 1980s – regarded him as ‘their guide, philosopher and friend’ (p. 407)? Throughout the book, moreover, readers are constantly reminded of the author’s ability to withstand ‘prodigious workload[s]’ (p. 298) and his ‘desire to be associated at all times with success, not failure [...]’ (p. 452) No doubt, this aspect of Mwanakatwe’s work reflects the truly remarkable self-improving drive of early African elites in Northern Rhodesia and the author’s intimate adhesion to Christian and bourgeois notions of respectability and achievement. But this reviewer, deeply allergic to intellectual prudery and one-sided representations, could not help feeling a little taken aback by the depth of Mwanakatwe’s faith in the ‘myth of [his] personal coherence’.²

Fortunately, Zukas’ much more controlled prose demonstrates that the perfectly legitimate aspiration to leave a mark of one’s existence for the sake of posterity – an aspiration that most authors of autobiographies must be assumed to share – need not necessarily lead to the edification of dehumanised and monolithic commemorative monuments. To be sure, the author is rightfully proud of the progressive role he played in late-colonial Northern Rhodesian politics and his ‘contribution [...] in turning the emerging political movement in a militant direction: away from begging the Colonial Office for continued protection towards demanding universal suffrage and

² I borrow this neat expression from P. La Hausse de Lalouvière, *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c. 1881 - 1948) and Lymon Maling (1889 - c. 1936)* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2000), p. 3.

self-government [...]’ (pp. 117-118) Readers are also left in no doubt as to the sincerity of his commitment to the ‘political, cultural and economic development’ of independent Zambia (p. 128). Yet *Into Exile and Back* does not amount to an edifying narrative of personal moral probity and success, for the author is honest enough to dwell on some unsavoury aspects of his past, too. A good case in point is the admission of his mechanical acceptance of colonial racial hierarchies and anti-African prejudices in the early 1940s (pp. 10-11, 15). Zukas is also to be commended for the frankness with which he describes his more controversial ideological shifts: the break with the Communist Party of South Africa in the aftermath of the ill-fated Hungarian revolution of 1956 (pp. 103-104) and his conversion to multi-party democracy and free-market economy from about 1980 (pp. 167-168).

While celebrating the power of personality, good autobiographies may be expected equally to illuminate the interplay between individual agency and broader historical processes. The gulf separating *Into Exile and Back* and *Teacher Politician Lawyer* stems in no small part from the different outcome of the authors’ efforts to situate the discussion of their personal trajectories in the relevant historical contexts. Drawing competently on the limited available specialist literature and on both his own and Thomas Fox-Pitt’s important personal archives, Zukas is able to offer a reasonably engaging and accessible introduction to Zambian politics. The same cannot be said about *Teacher Politician Lawyer*, for its author’s tendency to gloss over moral complexity and to subscribe to Manichaeic models is not confined to the sphere of self-representation but spills over to the book’s most specifically historical sections. Mwanakatwe’s description of Zambia’s early post-colonial period, in particular, does not go beyond a mere reinstatement of trite nationalist myths. While the rhetorical celebration of the ‘spirit of sacrifice and patriotism’ of the ‘rank and file’ of UNIP (p. 129) provides the excuse for overrating the extent of the party’s hegemony in the 1960s and neglecting the activities of Kaunda’s opponents both within and outside the party, the ascription of many of the country’s problems to the ‘disruptive influence’ of an undefined ‘tribalism’ (p. 171) is, at best, a gross simplification and, at worst, a sign of explanatory powerlessness. Given the abnormal size of the volume and, especially, Mwanakatwe’s prior willingness critically to engage with the ‘end of Kaunda era’,³ his cursory treatment of Zambia’s most recent past is similarly unsatisfactory.

Because the workings of the impersonal historical forces confronted by the authors during their life-time are not always adequately addressed, the main value of both books lies undoubtedly in the wealth of first-hand information that they provide. The lengthy period of time and variety of individual experiences encompassed by the two autobiographies mean that most Zambianists will

³ J. Mwanakatwe, *End of Kaunda Era* (Multimedia Publications, Lusaka, 1994).

find something of interest here. This reviewer was particularly intrigued by Zukas' account of his 1991 campaign in the remote western constituency of Sikongo (pp. 179-184) – a powerful reminder of the need to take local factors and complexities into account when examining the behaviour and choices of the Zambian electorate – and by Mwanakatwe's description of his role in the legal defence of Valentine Musakanya, a former governor of the Bank of Zambia who stood accused of plotting a coup d'état at the end of 1980 (pp. 311-352). Again, however, it must be noted that Mwanakatwe pushes the notion of historical relevance to the limits. Hugely overwritten, *Teacher Politician Lawyer* includes a meticulous assessment of the models and performances of the vehicles owned by the author in the 1950s (pp. 60-61, 84, 91, 101); a lengthy list of all the high-profile cases in which his commercial law firm was involved (chapt. 13); and, last but not least, an entire chapter (14) on his 'community service'. As I put down *Teacher Politician Lawyer*, the elation that took over me was somewhat tempered by the realization that the manifest lack of good local editors might bring to a premature end the promising development of Zambian autobiographical literature.

GIACOMO MACOLA
Centre of African Studies, Cambridge