

BOOK REVIEWS

Harry G. West. *Kupilikula: Governance and the invisible realm in Mozambique*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. 2005. 362 pp.

Beata Mtyingizana
Rhodes University
Grahamstown, South Africa

Kupilikula is an engaging and readable book that looks at social change in a relatively realistic light by paying close attention to the events on the ground and the interplay of social forces, thereafter showing how these have delivered very little to ordinary Mozambicans. In this book, West provides a rich description of the Muedan society as seen and understood by Muedans, he elucidates the Mozambicans' conception of transformative processes and demonstrates how these processes have been interpreted within the multiple genres of sorcery to embody genius and power.

Through the dialogical engagement with the Makonde people of Mueda plateau in the province of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique, West delineates how the Muedans, through the *language* of sorcery, have constructed their own understanding of the historical and transformative processes of slavery, colonialism, nationalism, socialism and contemporary forces of neo-liberal democracy that have made and remade Mozambican society.

Through the sorcery discourse or *uwavi*, West argues, Muedans have been able to explain social inequalities, processes of domination and forces of exploitation that have continuously shaped the nature of their reality. Having survived turbulent changes, *uwavi* has been understood by Muedans as a significant and stable system of social relations that served as a reference point for understanding the operations of power in Mozambican society from the pre-colonial era to contemporary times.

Kupilikula is arranged in three thematic parts, with each part focusing on a specific period of Mozambican history. The substance of arguments is organised in 28 vignettes through which West conveys his understanding of *uwavi* as well as the Muedans' understanding and use of the discourse to make sense of and engage with the contradictions presented by the making, unmaking and remaking of a world, which although they inhabit it, is not of their making.

The first part of the book part sketches the logics that have generally pertained in the realm of *uwavi* and how the *uwavi* discourse *reflects* and *refracts* Muedans' pre-colonial social relations. In this section, West elucidate the Mozambicans' conception of transformative processes, presenting sorcery

as a form of language that ordinary Mozambicans have cultivated, through daily life experiences, to express and address their everyday dreams and fears.

West maintains that Muedans understand *uwavi* as ability to transcend to the invisible realm and engage in invisible acts. Through acts of *uwavi*, certain powerful Muedans can transform themselves into animals or fabricate animals to either enrich themselves and or harm others. It was precisely out of the need to protect against and prevent – where necessary overturn – such sorcery acts that in pre-colonial times, Muedans organised themselves into settlements.

These settlements were governed and administered by settlement heads. The settlement heads were assigned the task of organising defence and ensuring the protection of the settlement against drought, famine, inter-ethnic conflicts, slave raiding and problems with trading. The success of a settlement head as a responsible governor was measured by the ability to balance the needs and desires of settlement residents through the appropriation, management and redistribution of goods. The settlement heads that were able to balance these interests were seen as a *wakukamalanga* or *providers* who ‘shared the bounty of their plates’ and commanded, as power holders, authority that Muedans accepted as legitimate.

The powerful Muedans who were unable to balance the interests of residents were conceived of by Muedans as *wakwaukanga* or *those who eat alone*, and condemned as sorcerers with extraordinarily horrific powers that *fed* on people. Due to the inability of the colonial and post-colonial governments to balance the interests of the people, these governments were accordingly perceived by Muedans as sorcerers of destruction, whose interest was only the accumulation of wealth at the expense of their subordinates.

In conveying the ambiance of scepticism prevailing amongst the Muedans and the ambiguities that characterise the *uwavi* discourse, West maintains that even though the *wakukamalanga* were bearers of legitimate power, they were not exempted from accusation of sorcery, rather, they were seen as practitioners of *uwavi wa kudenga*, or the *sorcery of construction*. They were placed in the same category as *waing’angas* or diviners and healers because they both possessed a power form capable of ensuring beneficial rewards for Muedans, whether in the form of goods or *mitela* (medicinal substances).

As sorcerers, *wakukamalanga* would engage in certain power actions, such as *ushaka* (acts of courage and audacity) and *humu* (stabilisers of excessive and predatory appetites), to *kupilikula* (overturn) and suppress acts of *kushulula* (greed) and ensure a relatively even redistribution of resources. Similarly, the *waing’angas* through engaging in various power actions, would render themselves invisible and then transcend the everyday world to the invisible sphere of sorcery, either to annul or to *kupilikula* (overturn) *mutela wakunyata* (bad sorcery), *mutela wa lwanongo* (sorcery of destruction) and or *mutela wakulogwa* (sorcery of murder). West maintains that it is this governance that Muedans understood and embraced. It is the same form of governance that

shaped the Muedans' expectations of the post-colonial state and later, of the neo-liberal democratic government.

The distinctiveness of *Kupilikula* lies in its exposure of power relations as addressed by or exercised within sorcery discourse. As the book provides a rich description of the Muedan society as seen and understood by Muedans, it simultaneously demonstrates how certain economic and political aspects are interpreted within multiple genres of sorcery to embody genius and power.

In the second part, West explores the construction and reconstruction of various sorcery discourses to show how they have enabled Muedans to interpret and make sense of the *language* of power by which they have been and continue to be governed. Embedded within a tripartised conceptualisation of economic, political and ideological power forms, genres of power actions are respectively manifested in the possession and control of resources and distribution of rewards. They are evidenced in the acquisition of facilities by which physical violence may be exerted, as well as in the manipulation and monopolisation of ideas capable of exerting influence upon the conduct of associated individuals. As bearers of different power forms, Muedans are said to engage in certain power actions that are capable of diminishing or enhancing others' social participation and social integrity. It is power forms that facilitate the fabrication or obliteration of material advantages and initiate either the infliction of bodily damage or the provision of remedial intervention. West refers to this as *Kupilikula* or the transformation and turning over of various things, including power, meaning and phenomena.

Indeed, West argues that it is the cultural schema of *uwavi* that has enabled Muedans to situate the foreign *languages* of power embodied in the processes of colonisation, nationalisation, modernisation, neo-liberalisation and democratisation within an invisible realm. Muedans have been able to interpret and engage with these processes while their experiences with the institutions of these processes, the practices and ideals of both local and foreign governments sought to transform the *uwavi* discourse thus producing other novel forms of *uwavi*.

In part three of *Kupilikula*, West challenges neo-liberal reformers to take it upon themselves to learn and internalise the Muedans' languages of power and the social factors that serve as the demarcation between Muedans' conceptualisations of power relations and those of the reformers. West urges neo-liberal reformers to internalise the Muedans' experiences and meaning by conceiving *uwavi* as a stable system with its own methods, ways of seeing and understanding social reality.

If neo-liberal reformers want to effectively engage with the rural people on the realities and challenges that face Africa, West suggests they should focus on unearthing a balance between scientific governance and local tradition. Such a balance to Muedans can only be attained by powerful reformers who, through acts of sorcery, will enter the invisible realm and undo, prevent or even reverse,

the destruction caused by the colonial and post-colonial sorcerers. West maintains that neo-liberal policy makers who attempt to integrate Muedans in governance structures through the adoption of policies that focus on a tolerance of divergent cultures alone, is not enough. He stresses the need for political leaders to cultivate African languages of power that can express emergent African political ethics.

The fact that the Makonde people use *uwavi* discourse to explain their problems, situations and aspirations is common knowledge to most Mozambicans. While this belief has served to provide means by which the Makonde people, especially those in the Mueda plateau, can make sense of their lives for purposes of negotiating the personal, social and political conditions they experience and through which they may even be empowered, such belief also serve to mystify fundamental economic and political forces that have shaped and continue to shape Muedans' reality.

It was against the latter effect of belief in sorcery, amongst other things, that prompted Frelimo socialists to vigorously condemn sorcery beliefs as false consciousness, asserting that such beliefs and practices were counterrevolutionary and obscurantist thus preventing people from liberating themselves from the bonds of superstition and mysticism. Clearly, for Frelimo's modernisation project to work, it needed enlightened members of society who would share its vision, in the same way that a neo-liberal democratic project of development requires citizens, policy makers and ordinary people alike that speak mutually intelligible languages of power. Unfortunately, the historical and transformative processes did not make Muedans conversant with multiple languages of power nor did Muedans gain various degrees of fluency in the languages of power introduced to them over the years as West suggests. The only language that Muedans are fluently conversant in is the language of domination that colonialism and socialism introduced to all Mozambicans. It is the same language of power that the neo-liberal reformers, through processes of economic liberalisation, still use to converse to the rural people of Mozambique.

In disagreement with West's suggestion that policy makers should conceive of *uwavi* as a stable system through which social reality can be understood, it is important for people to understand the real forces through which domination is enforced. People do not need to be buried in a world of ignorance that embraces sorcery as an analytical tool for economic, political and social realities. What a book like *Kupilikula* should be advocating, is an opening of opportunities for the enlightenment of broader society, as well as the devising of tools by which people can be empowered in order to realistically engage with the processes of transformation. West's suggestion that political leaders need to cultivate an African language of power to understand Western-grown phenomena such as neo-liberalism and democracy, sounds to me as yet another language of domination, only home-brewed.

A world that transforms and interprets or *Kupilukula* anything unknown as sorcery only serves to restrict people's chances of realistically participating in the formulation of policies that can improve the conditions of their lives. Indeed it is true, as West argues, that the Muedans are able to transform certain political and socioeconomic aspects by thinking differently about them. However, it should be noted that such transformation remains ideological. Reference to *ideological transformation*, however, does not imply that Muedan's knowledge is false assertions seeking to mask domination; rather, the intention is to point out the dangers of embracing a knowledge that surpasses experience, especially since such knowledge can neither be validated nor nullified. The Muedans' accounts and experiences of sorcery do not give us any information about the external world. Their 'knowledge of the world of sorcery is saturated with ambivalence, ambiguity and doubt', thus remaining mere indirect information about the condition of the minds of Muedans. West also mentions that Muedans have explained such things as outbreaks of disease, attacks by military forces and stray animals as acts of sorcery, a perception that is passed on from generation to generation, as the past informs the present while the present animates the past. In a Durkheimian notion, such normative understandings are appreciated for their ability to ensure social stability and cooperation. However, they do not work to integrate and reflect established societies, instead, they create a world of their own based on an invisible realm.

Nonetheless, *Kupilukula* does a brilliant job of showing how the Muedans have used the ideas of sorcery to conceptualise, cope with and criticise the very modernisation and development projects that sought to nullify the existence of sorcery. The book also raises fundamental questions about the significance of sorcery as a distinct system of knowledge. Throughout the book West treads carefully and does not declare whether sorcery exists or not. He leaves it to readers to draw their own conclusions from narrative vignettes. In this sense, for me the book does not serve as a very useful text where the contribution to knowledge of Muedans and their social reality is concerned.