

MANDALA, ELIAS C. *The End of Chidyerano. A History of Food and Everyday Life in Malawi, 1860–2004.* [Social History of Africa.] Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH 2005. xiv, 346 pp. Ill. \$139.95; £80.00; DOI: 10.1017/S0020859007062967.

This interesting book has been written by an author with a chip on his shoulder, an axe to grind with his critics, and the ambition to transform the manner in which African history is conducted. Elias Mandala, professor of history within the field of global history at Rochester University, commences his book by emphasizing his credentials as an African historian by drawing attention to his condition as a “migrant worker” in the United States of America far removed from his “homeland”, Malawi (p. 1). In this book, which is divided into three sections, Mandala confronts the producers of “crisis literature” and seeks to describe the production and consumption of food in both a historical and contemporary setting. Section 1 analyses the events leading to, and the social and political impact of, famine; section 2 deals with the seasons and their impact on food; and section 3 deals with the daily routines of cotton and food production. Central to the book is the concept of *chidyerano*, the communal meal in which people partake and which is governed by a whole host of cultural prescriptions. Mandala argues that two concepts of time, (1) teleological and (2) cyclical, what Mandala, drawing on Gould, refers to as (1) *time’s arrow* and (2) *time’s cycle*, need to be combined if we are to come to an understanding vis-à-vis food production and consumption in the Tchiri valley in southern Malawi. Furthermore, not only are two concepts of time to be combined, but Mandala also wishes his readers to understand “that hunger exists only as an integral part of abundance”.

Dealing with Africa, Mandala lambastes those researchers who have produced crisis literature, be they of either what Mandala refers to as a Whiggish or Liberal persuasion. Mandala contends that neither of these two persuasions adequately describes or accounts for the access of peasants to food in Africa. The producers of crisis literature either see the total absence or they see the total abundance of food. Yet, as Mandala notes, for peasants in the Shire Valley of southern Malawi, hunger is a seasonal phenomenon that returns every year, and that has done so ever since at least the 1850s. In the cycle of every year a season of hunger (*njala*) returns annually. Mandala argues that for peasants in southern Malawi *time’s arrow* and *cyclical time* combine, but that this is lost on the producers of crisis literature who only see either the growth of abundance or dearth.

Njala, seasonal hunger, which returns every year to afflict the poor and is registered as a regular event in cyclical time, can become famine, *chaola*, which by contrast, according to Mandala, is registered by peasants as a singular event in teleological time. *Njala* can become *chaola* in exceptional circumstances, and then the rules of participation and preparation of *chidyerano*, the communal meal of independent households, are discarded in “hunger that abolishe[s] history” (p. 23). In the first part of his book Mandala examines two cases, in the 1860s and 1922–1923, in which *njala* became *chaola*, when seasonal hunger became famine. Mandala argues that *chaola*, which “breaks time’s arrow”, is a unique event, which occurs “not as often as students of crisis literature would have one believe”. Seasonal hunger becomes famine under political stress and, according to Mandala, Malawian peasants treat *chaola* as a landmark separating one epoch from another (p. 71).

Having read Mandala’s earlier work, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, 1859–1960* (Madison, WI, 1990) I was looking forward to a further detailed analysis of the development and emergence of the *chaola* famine of 1923, otherwise known as *Mwamthota*. In this earlier work, Mandala had

stated that this famine “killed many people”, and provided as reference a footnote which noted, “[a] separate study is in progress on the famine” (see Mandala, *Work and Control*, p. 177, n.104). Clearly the book currently under review is the aforementioned separate study, and I was anxious to learn more. In the event I was disappointed.

Mandala begins his discussion of the famine with the rider, that, “as students of Chinese and Soviet history know too well, political agendas determine official mortality rates for different famines, and the two famines examined here are no exception”. Having said this Mandala notes that “colonial officials left only fragmentary accounts about *Mwamthota*”, implying that these officials did so in a conscious attempt to clear themselves from blame. This is conjecture that is not backed up by material. In his work Mandala relies extensively on oral informants, yet unfortunately there are problems with the manner in which the author presents this material. Often we are not provided with what the informants actually said (p. 67, n. 60). In those places where informants do speak, the text has the appearance of stilted replies to a direct question, for example, “The word [Mwamthota] means death, people dying; many died while others looked for food” (p. 66). The listing of a string of names in a footnote does not necessarily prove the assumption that all of those listed had something interesting to say that substantiates the statement being made in the text (p. 62, n. 36 and p. 68, n. 65). If, as Mandala implies, there was a conscious cover-up, I would have preferred a detailed historiographical expose of the manner in which famine can remain hidden from the official gaze yet remain in the minds of oral informants.

Although Mandala’s book is marketed as history, for large sections it reads more like a primer for undergraduate anthropology courses. The author provides his reader with extensive overviews of the manner in which people in the Tchiri valley attempt to make a living. How the importance of cattle has increased for a minority, how cotton competes with food crops, how peasants seek to exploit more than one ecological niche, and so forth. Yet the detailed description of food preparation, maize as opposed to millet and the like, seems to be more geared to providing US undergraduates with a measure of insight into daily life in contemporary rural southern Malawi than it truly illuminates the book. Underlying the hole book is the meal as a social construct: a social contract in which women and children consistently draw the short straw, and in which an alternative view is presented to the perceived golden age of plenty in which all could eat their fill. In what is a reflection of daily life, women and children, as Mandala notes, consistently have rights that limit their access to daily food and the side-dish in particular (p. 207).

Mandala’s work raises interesting methodological issues as to the manner in which people conduct historical research in Africa. Yet is there really any need for cyclical time and teleological time for the extended descriptions that Mandala presents? Associated with this is the question of style and language that accompanies these exposés which, in all honesty, at times, left this reader at a loss. What are we to make of the following: “The arrow signature does not promote attention to the presence of food. What is more, it in effect shunts attention away from highly pertinent historical questions raised by that presence. So we see that what begins only as a metaphor, originating in the historian’s mind, can stride into the midst of the world the historian is trying to understand. The damage it can then do is plain. Whenever the evidence does not justify the identification of a trend, that should be the end of it – the same as one would do with the notion of ‘average’, a measure of central tendency, if the numbers vary so widely that there is no central tendency to measure” (p. 240)? Related to this is the issue of purple passages and over-extended metaphors: “Beginning in the late 1850s, an army of disorder descended

upon the valley, riding such vehicles as the shifting levels of the Tchiri River, the slave trade, the colonial state, Christianity, and the all-powerful but faceless engine they call money" (p. 241).

One of the issues that Mandala raises is the importance of local language skills in conducting research, a point well taken, yet, unfortunately, this does not necessarily justify the use of idiosyncratic spelling as being somehow more correct. Why should Shire become *Tchiri*, or Zambezi *Zembezi*, or Makololo *Magololo*, when it serves more to obfuscate than clarify? And why should Shire become *Tchiri* yet Kirk Range remain Kirk Range? In addition, although Shire, Zambezi, and Makololo, are admittedly anglicized forms, they are derived from local designations, and not merely foreign labels overlaying already existing terms. When dealing with French soldiers in the Rhineland following World War I, historians writing in English do not refer to Cologne as *Köln*, or the Rhine as the *Rhein*, or Germans as *Deutschen*, why then should this be done simply because the region of study happens to be in Africa? Quite frankly I was left feeling that with Mandala it is more an issue of *stance*, as defined by Cooper, than that his findings are of true methodological importance.

Mandala's desire to exact retribution on those whose positions he rejects, primarily through sniping at his perceived opponents from the safety of his endnotes, is jarring and eventually becomes rather irritating. Two examples shall suffice to make the point. The work of John Iliffe is highly respected and very few would wish to suggest that his sympathies were in any way aligned with those of the settler colonists in Southern Rhodesia, present-day Zimbabwe. Mandala is of a differing opinion, and following a footnote in which the "white-controlled press" is berated for failing to adequately gauge Zimbabwe's "food crisis" of 2000–2003, and Iliffe and Bryceson are lambasted for daring to suggest that "colonial relief programs" saved Africans from starvation (p. 254, n. 19), Mandala states that Iliffe suggests that "there is no suggestion that European settlers might have been responsible for some of the crises, which are uncritically labelled 'precapitalist' famines" (p. 265, n. 92). Yet a reading of John Iliffe, *Famine in Zimbabwe, 1890–1960* (Gweru, 1990) makes a mockery of Mandala's claims. In describing the famine in Matabeleland in 1896, Iliffe notes explicitly that though they did not admit it, it was "the Europeans whose violence caused the famine" (p. 21).

In conclusion, this reader was left more irritated than informed, and greatly saddened that a topic of such great historical importance could be essentially stripped of history in the struggle for perceived authenticity that has more to do with American academia than African history.

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ROOSA, JOHN. *Pretext for Mass Murder. The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'État in Indonesia*. [New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies.] University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2006. xii, 329 pp. Ill. \$60.00 (Paper: \$23.95.); DOI: 10.1017/S0020859007072963.

From late 30 September till early 2 October 1965, a few Indonesian left-nationalist officers, some communist youth and women, and a handful communist leaders, including party chairman Aidit, were involved in kidnappings and assassinations of top-level anti-communist army leaders and the proclamation of a revolutionary council. The attempts