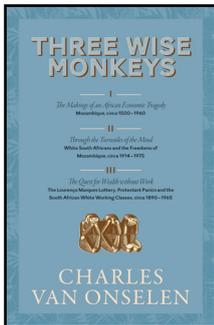




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# Exploring the dynamics of the relationship between South Africa and southern Mozambique

Charles van Onselen is a leading South African historian whose career has spanned decades. With this trilogy, he has made yet another important contribution to the historiography of southern Africa. Standing firmly in the field of social history, but foraying into economic, political and cultural history, van Onselen uses a broad approach, both in terms of time and space, to look at some of the different dynamics of the historical relationship between South Africa and southern Mozambique, to which he has been devoted in the past few years.

This collection is made up of three volumes:

Volume 1: Mizaru – ‘See No Evil’ – The makings of an African economic tragedy: Mozambique, circa 1500–1960

Volume 2: Kikazaru – ‘Hear No Evil’ – Through the turnstiles of the mind: White South Africans and the freedoms of Mozambique, circa 1914–1975

Volume 3: Iwazaru – ‘Speak No Evil’ – The quest for wealth without work: The Lourenço Marques lottery, Protestant panics and the South African white working classes, circa 1890–1965

The title of the collection – and of each of the three volumes – is in itself particularly meaningful: by referencing the old Japanese proverb of the Wise Monkeys, van Onselen is evoking what in these historical exchanges between the two neighbouring territories has been silenced, especially in the context of colonialism and imperialism. That is precisely what he hopes to uncover: “Only by seeing, hearing and speaking honestly about the past can we hope to understand a troubled present” (Vol. 1, p. VIII).

The particular dynamics of the relationship that the author proposes to examine in detail, as well as the methodologies chosen to do so, are laid out in the general introduction to the collection, entitled “Intersections of Church, Nation and State: South Africa and Mozambique, circa 1650–1970” (Vol. 1, p. 1–67). Therein van Onselen makes a strong case for bringing together the teachings of Braudel and Hobsbawm and examining the connections between South Africa and southern Mozambique since the very earliest times. By setting aside the traditional basis of analysis in historical research, the nation-state, favouring instead a transnational, regional approach, and by looking at the deeper history of southern Africa from the 1650s, but mainly after the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, van Onselen hopes to follow more closely how the relationship between South Africa and southern Mozambique unfolded, emphasising instances of tension, competition, dependence or cooperation.

Importantly, the main argument goes, the political, cultural and economic dynamics of the relationship to be examined in the three volumes were profoundly shaped by asymmetries that are at the root of Mozambique’s current underdevelopment. Mozambique’s predicament, van Onselen posits, is that it was doubly colonised – first by “the Portuguese and commerce” since the 16th century, and then by “South Africa and industry.” Although officially under Portuguese colonial rule, in the late 19th century, southern Mozambique (the region below the Sabi River, known in Portuguese as the Sul do Save) became “in effect, South Africa’s fifth province, the subject of a form of sub-imperialism both bedeviling and retarding ‘state’ formation in a colony” (Vol. 1, p. 14). Religion is another key variable in this argument: van Onselen attributes a central role to Protestantism and Catholicism and the ways in which they helped shape different societies on either side of the border and informed official policies, as well as relationships between the two neighbours.

Van Onselen addresses the root causes and the consequences of the historical asymmetries between South Africa and Mozambique in Volume 1. Following in the footsteps of his recent *The Night Trains: Moving Mozambican Miners to and from the Witwatersrand Mines, 1902–1955*<sup>1</sup>, where he examined in detail the harrowing experience that led thousands of Mozambican men to work in South African mines after the mining revolution, in Volume 1 of the trilogy he explores the long path that led Mozambique from “global slavery to one of regional industrial servitude” (Vol. 1, p. 67). Looking at a glance through centuries of Mozambique’s history, van Onselen focuses especially on the 19th-century shift from a territory politically and economically centred in the north and around relations in the Indian Ocean World, to a territory centred in the Sul do Save and around relations with South Africa, as seen by the growing importance of the Lourenço Marques port. South Africa’s “predations” on the Sul do Save since the 1870s, van Onselen tells us, were also financial and commercial, and its industrialisation was made on the back of thousands of low-paid Mozambican workers.

In Volumes 2 and 3, the 20th-century culture wars being fought within Protestant South Africa, and their reflection in neighbouring Catholic Mozambique, take centre stage. Highlighting the close entanglement between religion and politics in an increasingly conservative South Africa, van Onselen examines first how Mozambique, and especially the then capital Lourenço Marques (now Maputo), praised for its buoyant nightlife and pristine beaches, came to occupy an important role in the lives and the imagination of white South Africans looking for a refuge from the strictures of Calvinist morals. Appealing to different tourist populations, from adventurous young women to working- and lower-middle-class men, Lourenço Marques came to signify the possibility of living a freer life, even if just for a few days. And while the Portuguese, van Onselen shows us, were intent on stimulating these exchanges and even dreamed of turning Lourenço Marques into a French Riviera of sorts, namely through the construction of the high-end Polana Hotel, the South African government was less pleased. Fearing the subversive potential of a city where classes, sexes and races mixed in ways that could complicate the stricter hierarchies imposed at home, South African authorities put in place systems of surveillance and control of cross-border movements, but ultimately failed to curb Lourenço Marques’ touristic appeal.

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A second cultural war, this time fought in the airwaves, is the focus of the second part of Volume 2. Van Onselen centres on the fascinating history of an English-language commercial radio station, Lourenço Marques Radio (LM Radio), based in the Mozambican capital, from its beginnings in the 1930s to its demise in the 1970s under pressure from Afrikaner nationalists, revealing in the process a Portuguese government pliable to South African interests. Much like travelling to Mozambique, listening to LM Radio became an escape for the elusive South African youth. Popular shows like the 'LM Hit Parade', aired on Sunday nights and broadcast to South Africa, led to fears of the potentially dangerous effects of popular culture, while in the 1960s, in the context of decolonisation wars, South African authorities feared rather politically subversive messages.

Finally, in Volume 3, van Onselen tells the story of "a religious war lost" (Vol. 3, p. 18). What was at stake in this war was controlling the hearts, the minds and especially the wallets of South Africans. In this rich and detailed transnational history of gambling in South Africa, van Onselen focuses especially on the lives and dealings of an Australian businessman and a Portuguese ex-priest working in Johannesburg as a "Native Affairs Curator," each with capital and influence on either side of the border, who came together to obtain a concession to run the Lourenço Marques Lottery. Aimed especially at white working classes in the Rand, where gambling was essentially illegal and frowned upon by the church, the lottery, thriving between the wars, also faced opposition in Mozambique. Importantly, van Onselen shows us how activities like dog racing, pinballs or lotteries came to occupy different roles for different sectors of the population in South African society during the 20th century, in the context of changing economic and political circumstances, but also how Afrikaans and English Protestants – at odds on other issues – and the state aligned to control the future of the disposable income of first working-class men, and later women and families.

*Three Wise Monkeys* will appeal to scholars of southern Africa and wider audiences alike. It remarkably shows how Mozambique is part of South African history, not just through the hardship of thousands of Mozambican workers, so fundamental to sustaining the mining industry, but also through different relationships and cultural exchanges. From an interdisciplinary perspective, beyond the study of history as narrowly understood, van Onselen's work throws light on a number of intersecting fields, including the studies of extractive labour practices, the entanglement between politics and religion and international politics. By limiting his analysis to mostly English-language primary sources, however, van Onselen tells this story essentially from a South African perspective. In particular, the points made about the inner workings of the Portuguese colonial government, about the ways in which the Sul do Save was captured by South African interests, or about the social and economic life of the region could be nuanced by referencing other important scholarship drawing mostly on Portuguese-language

sources.<sup>2-4</sup> Furthermore, the cultural exchanges discussed in this trilogy appear as one-sided, when more varied sources could perhaps have helped to understand how different expressions of popular culture, namely coming from South Africa, circulated, were received and were appropriated in Mozambique, by settler populations and especially by African populations. For a broader picture of the dynamics and relationships forming on both sides of the border, van Onselen's *Three Wise Monkeys* could usefully be read alongside works like Todd Cleveland's recent exploration about tourism in Africa, several chapters of a recent edited volume on popular culture in Africa under former Portuguese colonial rule, as well as with a monograph on football in Lourenço Marques.<sup>5-7</sup> In spite of these shortcomings, these three volumes greatly enhance our knowledge about the history of southern Africa and specifically about the relationship between South Africa and Mozambique, and they should be read by scholars from a wide range of fields.

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