

[Foreword. In: Sjoerd Rijpma, *David Livingstone and the myth of African poverty and disease*. Leiden: Brill, 2015, pp. xi-xvi]

Foreword

Books and articles about David Livingstone, the 19th century Scottish missionary, colonial pioneer, medical doctor, explorer, adventurer, scientist, botanist, humanist, ethnographer, and linguist, can hardly be counted. The long list of qualifications after his name partly explains the widespread interest in his life and personality. Livingstone's travels and writings were so multifaceted that discussion about them continues today. His role in Victorian England and pre-colonial Africa has been subjected to widely diverse interpretations, often instigated by ideological controversy, which are long-standing and likely to continue in the future. A website, 'Livingstone on line', included 44 biographies in only a 'selected list'!

Here is yet another book in which David Livingstone takes centre stage. Sjoerd Rijpma's close reading and examination of Livingstone's journals and letters has resulted in a meticulous reconstruction of his movements and a wealth of biographical information. However, this volume is different from most other publications about the man. In Rijpma's study, Livingstone is not the main *topic* of interest; rather the author's interest is focused on nutrition and health in pre-colonial Africa and Livingstone is only his key informant for this exploration into the obscure past of the so-called Dark Continent. Rijpma's approach is as simple as it is ingenuous: Livingstone was a sharp observer, a talented writer and a qualified medical doctor. Moreover, he had respect for local customs and demonstrated a remarkably low level of ethnocentrism in his encounters with Africans, particularly if we place him in the time in which he lived. He is probably the most reliable person to be 'interviewed' if we want to learn more about the quality of Africans' nutrition and state of health on the eve of colonization. Rijpma did exactly this: interview an eyewitness, with great dedication, determination and accuracy.

Sjoerd Rijpma earned his medical degree in 1961 at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. In 1962, he and his family left the Netherlands for Liberia after one year of additional training in surgery and obstetrics. He worked as a doctor in a Liberian hospital until 1964. His experiences with patients suffering from numerous infectious diseases and his encounters with undernourished children spiked his interest in the origins of disease, malnutrition and poverty in Africa and raised questions about conditions of health and nutrition before colonial rule.

In 1964, he returned to the Netherlands strongly convinced that nutrition is - and was - always far more important than medical care. From that moment on, Rijpma began to search for information about agriculture and nutrition in Africa's precolonial era. He discovered that little had been written on this topic, with the exception of journals and other writings from a few explorers; the most important of these was David Livingstone.

Rijpma became a 'general practitioner' (*huisarts*) in a rural community, Laren Gelderland, in the east of the Netherlands and remained there until he retired in 1993. During that period he obtained a doctorate in agricultural science in Wageningen University studying health and the nuclearization of families in the community where he practised medicine

(Rijpma 1973). Eight years later, he published a book on three-generation households in the same region, which built on and drew from his dissertation (Rijpma 1981). Rijpma's views in this book are topical today as both policy-makers and families are looking for solutions to manage the growing loneliness of an ageing population and the lack of care-giving to both younger and older generations. Africa is not mentioned in this publication, but it is hard to believe that Rijpma's experiences in Liberia, where multi-generational households are the norm, did not influence him to focus on the phenomenon that was rapidly disappearing in the Dutch context.

In 1974, Rijpma took a few months off from his work as a general practitioner and travelled to Gabon where he interviewed older people about the past and participated in medical work at Albert Schweitzer's Lambarene Hospital. This was almost ten years after the death of Schweitzer, a person almost as colourful, versatile and controversial as Livingstone. Rijpma's research in Gabon resulted in an unpublished study 'Basic agrarian technology to combat the food shortage in Gabon' (1975).

Rijpma retired from his work as a *huisarts* at the age of 62 and moved with his wife Jet to a house in the woods of de Kempen in Belgium, about 55 km from the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, near Brussels. This location made it possible for him to pursue his fascination with health in precolonial Africa. The museum's archives and library promised to be a rich *Fundgrube* for his research.

However, long before his move to Belgium, Rijpma had already started his research after he had completed his doctoral dissertation in 1973. From Laren Gelderland, not far from the German border, he often travelled to the Tropical Institute, in Amsterdam, the African Studies Centre in Leiden and other archives and libraries in the western part of the country. In 2002, almost thirty years later, his work was finally completed. He called the result of his quest, 'An African surprise', which beautifully epitomized his elation about what he had discovered. It is no exaggeration to say that 'An African Surprise' was his 'life's work', his *levenswerk* in Dutch. He published the Dutch text on his own (Rijpma 2002) for distribution among the friends, relatives and people who had helped him and he dedicated the book to his 'patients' in Laren Gelderland who had made his study possible with their financial support. Some time after publication, the study was placed on the Internet.

Six years after the Dutch publication, Rijpma was able to present the English version of his work (Rijpma 2008), again 'published' on his own. He received financial support from the Fentener van Vlissingen Fund for the English translation. Attempts to find an international publisher for his study proved difficult, mostly due to the book's length - more than 500 pages. Rijpma stubbornly refused to shorten his book. In 2013, however, the African Studies Centre in cooperation with Brill Publishers agreed to publish the entire volume, under a new title. Special thanks are due to Jan-Bart Gewald, Dick Foeken and Franca de Kort who played key roles in making this publication possible.

It is important to bear in mind that Rijpma's study was completed in 2002, and that the author was not able to update his work after that time. To the best of my knowledge, new perspectives on health and nutrition in Africa's precolonial history have not been proposed since 2002. As for Livingstone, in 2013, the bicentenary of his birth was celebrated, which prompted an upsurge in academic work and debate about his significance in African

development, British colonialism, Christian missionizing and science. A brief remark about this recent development is therefore in order.

The debates about Livingstone over the last ten years can best be viewed in the context of historical revisionism, which started in approximately 1970. Historians, theologians, Africanists, political scientists, anthropologists, feminists, biographers and novelists began to re-examine Livingstone's activities and writings. One of the most prominent authors in this endeavour was Tim Jeal, who in an impressively detailed and critical biography (Jeal 1973), took the initiative to "debunk the Livingstone myth" (Barrett 2013). Thirty years later, Jeal published an expanded version of his book on the occasion of Livingstone's bicentennial (Jeal 2013). Barrett, who is a medical scientist, wrote the following lines in a review of this new version:

Correcting 100 years of pro-Livingstone propaganda was the book's primary mission, and in 1973 that had a purpose. But since then so many people have echoed Jeal's emphasis on the missionary's flaws, his petty jealousies, cantankerous relations with Europeans, the neglect of his wife and family, and myriad other failings that the time is perhaps right to consider the man's achievements in a more generous spirit. For Livingstone's bicentennial, Jeal's book has been revised and reprinted. But sadly, for me, the old bias remains (Barrett 2013).

One could perhaps - with some simplification - say that there are two extremes in this revisionist debate: the hagiographers and the demonizers. In between, there are a wide variety of views and nuances that focus on the various parts of the 'elephant' that Livingstone was. Lawrence Dritsas (2010), for example, argues that the main purpose of Livingstone's expeditions was 'science', but that he was forced to present them as a civilizing mission to win political and financial support.

However, as I suggested earlier, the continuing torrent of publications on Livingstone does not really affect the point that Rijpma is making in this study. Whatever Livingstone's role and (secret) agenda was at the time, he was an eyewitness who communicated his observations to the world. He was one of the very few who visited that part of Africa in the period that Rijpma wanted to explore. Livingstone's authority as a key informant lies in the fact that *he was there*, that he saw everything with his own – clinical – eyes.

'David Livingstone and the myth of African poverty and disease' is an unusual book. After a close examination of Livingstone's writings and comparative reading of contemporary authors, Rijpma has been able to draw cautious conclusions about the relatively favourable conditions of health and nutrition in southern and central Africa during the pre-colonial period. His findings shed new light on the 'medical history' of Sub-Saharan Africa. Rijpma also demonstrates an original way of interpreting 'popular', non-academic sources by providing the reader with extensive information on the context and the personal views that led to his conclusions. Joanna Lewis, anthropologist and specialist of African history, called the book "an impressive piece of scholarship, truly forensic in its close reading and re-reading of Livingstone's published works and those of other travellers during the same era, clearly a labour of love which has taken years to complete." I like that qualification, 'labour of love',

love and passion to uncover the riddles of an unknown part of history, but most of all love for Africa.

Oud Ade, 24th January 2014

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Postscript

Three months before the publication of this book Sjoerd Rijpma suddenly died. His health had been fragile the last few years but we had expected that he would live to see the published result of his 'labour of love'. The book will remain a testimony of a remarkable life.