



# River Of Blood: The Genesis Of A Martyr Cult In Southern Malawi, C. A.D. 1600

*J. Matthew Schoffeleers*

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The culmination of years of fieldwork in southern Malawi, *River of Blood* reconstructs the beginnings of the Mbona martyr cult, follows its history to the present day, and reveals the fascinating intersections of an indigenous belief system with European Christianity.

In the cult of Mbona, the central African mythology of the snake that is beheaded to make the rains come has been combined with a more spiritual interpretation: the snake has been transformed into a human martyr and redeemer. According to the cult, the rainmaker Mbona was tracked down by his enemies; they cut off his head, and his blood formed the River of Blood. Mbona returned as a storm wind and asked that a shrine be dedicated in his name.

J. Matthew Schoffeleers recounts how the Portuguese presence in Zambezia in the period 1590–1622 led to more than three decades of internecine warfare and caused the people of southern Malawi tremendous suffering. In response to this political oppression and social upheaval, Schoffeleers shows, the people looked to Mbona, their “black Jesus,” for redemption.

Beyond reconstructing the cult’s genesis, Schoffeleers traces its recent history, particularly in political context. He provides texts of seven cult myths from different historical periods in both Chimang’anja and English. His analysis presents the Mbona myth as a continuous social construction and deconstruction. Emphasizing the impact of political and spiritual oppression on the cult, he distinguishes between the differing versions of the myth preserved by the aristocracy and by the commonalty and demonstrates how these disparate views unite to preserve historical information. In so doing, he shows that cults serve as valuable repositories for historical information.

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