anthropological questions of how people define their world and its constituents, and what specific practices and authorities make knowledge of that world possible.

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Matthew Schoffeleers' study of the Mbona cult of Malawi's Shire Valley, River of Blood, is the fruit of seventeen years research and ten further years of reflection. Over that long period he has produced a stream of theses, papers, articles and chapters about Mbona which have been greatly influential. Declaring my own interest, coming across Schoffeleers' work in the late 1960s first made me think that African religion could be studied historically. This in turn led to the publication in 1972 of The Historical Study of African Religion, (Ranger and Kimambo, eds., London, Heinemann) to which Schoffeleers contributed a crucial chapter. Thereafter, Schoffeleers himself kept the comparative historical study of Central African territorial cults going, editing the 1979 collection Guardians of the Land, (Gwelo, Mambo) and convening the conference which led to the 1985 Theoretical Explorations in African Religion, (Van Binsbergen and Schoffeleers, eds., London, Kegan Paul) in which I myself have a paper on the Mwali cult. Since 1987 I have been working on the modern history of the Matopos and collecting interview material on the Mwali rain shrines; since 1993 I have been working in northwest Zimbabwe and exploring the history of rain shrines on the Zambezi escarpment. Schoffeleers' work has been unfailingly suggestive and illuminating for both these projects. In short, I have been engaged with Schoffeleers and Mbona for over twenty-five years.

River of Blood brings together much of the previous work, sets it in the context of new introductory and explanatory material, engages with critics, and prints the key oral texts. There are some second thoughts and refinements of argument but essentially the project remains what it has always been—an attempt to reveal the history of a 'martyr cult' over several centuries. To do so Schoffeleers uses archival sources, the work of other scholars and above all the oral texts themselves.

It is a most impressive achievement. The many years he has devoted to the study of Mbona have not resulted in clotted complexity or over-
elaboration. The book is beautifully lucid and simply written. It has a clear argumentative sequence despite moving to and fro in time—beginning with the contemporary environment, going on to the structure of the cult in the 1960s, then exploring its political history in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and only then turning to the crucial and formative period of the late sixteenth century and to a consideration of the interpretation of myth and oral narrative. There is perhaps some circularity in this arrangement because a good deal of what we are told in the earlier chapters is deduced from oral material which is only analysed in the later ones, but it is hard to suggest a more effective sequence. Readers who wish to use the book as a test of the historical analysis of myth variants will need to re-read the early chapters in the light of the later, but this is a reasonable enough demand given their elegance and clarity.

It is Schoffeleers' belief that mythic oral narratives do not merely constitute legitimations of regimes, nor state cosmological stereotypes, but derive from, reflect and comment upon historical events. They certainly do not do this in any straightforward—way in fact Schoffeleers invokes the principle of inversion, by which 'real' characters and events are transformed into their opposites. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect references to recorded historical crises and once having done this to perceive the ways in which the myths correspond to experience. Above all, Schoffeleers insists upon the importance of the variations between and within myth narratives. He establishes three successive renderings of the Mbona myth which he argues relate to different historical periods. In the third period—the late sixteenth century/early seventeenth century time of the emergence of the idea of Mbona as martyr—he discerns two rival versions of the new story: a court version and a popular version. These enable him to analyse 'ideological confrontation.'

I find myself broadly persuaded by his argument and by his demonstration of it in the case of Mbona. I say 'broadly persuaded' because inevitably a good deal of his reconstruction has to rely upon inspired hunches and he often has to make historical bricks without much evidential straw. If by some highly improbable miracle we were suddenly to come into a great body of evidence about sixteenth and seventeenth century southern Malawi, no doubt the correlations between myth and history would look rather different. But that there are such correlations I believe Schoffeleers to have demonstrated.

I continue to find his work dauntingly challenging. I have myself been concentrating on the history of the Mwali shrines of the Mtopos in the last hundred years. Yet I believe that rain shrines of some