

## African Nationalist or Imperial Agent – David #Livingstone analysed

LSE's Benedict Greening reports from the *Imperial Obsessions* conference in Zambia where scholars recently gathered to debate the man and the myth of the Scottish explorer David Livingstone.

David Livingstone stares out at the passing bright blue taxis on Mosi-Oa-Tunya road in the centre of the Zambian town that bears his name in the country's Southern Province. Below him is written a motto: *Procedens Floreo*. The best translation I can find of this is: *Proceed to prosper*. Mosi-Oa-Tunya is the local name of the world-famous attraction eleven kilometres down the road where the River Zambezi forms a natural and spectacular frontier with Zimbabwe. The name translates as the "smoke that thunders". This "smoke", which is actually the spray from the waterfall and can be seen for miles distant, was perhaps a more evocative name than the one Livingstone came up with in honour of his Queen: Victoria Falls. After hearing about the falls from local people, he had gone in search of them in 1855. He wrote:

*No one can imagine the beauty of the view from anything witnessed in England...but scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight*



David Livingstone was the first Westerner to visit the Mosi-Oa-Tunya waterfall after hearing about it from locals

Despite this, according to acclaimed author Tim Jeal, Livingstone's other descriptions of the falls were not that complementary. In Jeal's view this was "illustrative" of Livingstone's lifelong tendency "to diminish anything or any person that stood in his way". Livingstone, in 1858, set out on an expedition up the Zambezi, funded by the British Government to the tune of £100,000, with the hope of finding a navigable waterway that could open up the African interior to trade. It failed, as ostensibly as most of Livingstone's other grandiose adventures. Yet the African-grandeur of the falls and their international reputation encapsulates Livingstone the town's ambivalent relationship with David Livingstone the man. Zambia, a country boasting 20 different languages and 73 tribes, despite its challenges, seems to be self-confident and at peace with itself. There exists a quiet, if not uniform, respect for Livingstone that begs a question. To explore the nature of this question, and suggest answers, African and international scholars, authors, travellers and artists met in Livingstone between April 19 and 21 to examine Livingstone's life in the two-hundred years that have passed since the man's birth on March 19, 1813 in Blantyre, Lanarkshire.

Perhaps fittingly, the conference began with a congregational air. At the opening ceremony, Zambian voices sprang into the hymn-like National Anthem. “Zambia, Praise to Thee! All one, strong and free”. The representative of all the 73 tribes in Zambia, Her Royal Highness Senior Chieftainess Nkhomeshya Makamambo II called Livingstone a “peace broker” who had “feelings for the sufferings of others”. Her Royal Highness also said African hospitality had been crucial to his journeys. “He suffered with us, we suffered with him”. She also pointed to Livingstone’s contribution to fighting the slave trade, run in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century on Africa’s east coast by the Sultan of Oman, who was a key British ally in the Middle East. Zambia’s deputy minister of traditional affairs Professor Nkandu Luo meanwhile said Livingstone had a central place in the country’s history in opening up African commerce and boosting tourism. And Dr Joanna Lewis of LSE said while it was important to recognise the legacy of “racism and exploitation” that both preceded and accompanied Livingstone’s arrival in Zambia and southern Africa, there was also a legacy of some development and education that needed to be unravelled and understood.



Debate is an important antiseptic for the hagiographical tone that can sometimes characterise scholarship about Livingstone. From the 1970s, readers started to see the man as he really was, complete with his flaws but also were forced to acknowledge his fearlessness and compassion. Dr Gary Clendenen of Kyoto University who spoke on Livingstone’s visit to the Shoshong Hills in present day Botswana in 1842 described Livingstone as an “African nationalist”. “This man knew no fear”. Meanwhile, asking conference goers to engage with the African agency in Livingstone’s journeys, Dr Walima Kalusa of the University of Zambia argued that the missionary was an imperial figure who tried to impose values of industrial capitalism on tribal chiefs such as Sekeletu, the Makokolo king of Barotseland in present-day Zambia, who met Livingstone in 1853 at Linyati. Mr Jeal, whose 1973 book *Livingstone*, challenged the explorer from another angle, describing him as “a complicated man”. “A contradictory hero, with a darker side to his character” and who had worked from the age of ten in a cotton spinners’ mill to enable him to afford medical school fees. He chose to go to Africa in 1841 because he did not view the West Indies as a sufficient challenge. Mr Jeal said Livingstone had grandiose visions of using the Zambezi as a trading channel and as “God’s highway” for commerce. With his mixture of “bravery, pride, faith and obstinacy”, Livingstone believed God had chosen him to open up routes to legitimate trade that it was believed would provide an alternative to the slave trade. He used this as a kind of “divine clothing which he wore like a suit of armour”...yet he “also feared that God had rejected him”. Far from religion being a tool in the pursuit of empire, Livingstone partly understood empire as a tool through which to bring what he saw as the salvation of “Commerce, Christianity and Civilisation” to Africa in the form of a liberal individualism, freedom, legitimate trade and private property rights. This was at a time when the British government was not all that interested in colonising Africa. While Livingstone was a “hopeless leader of Europeans”, he displayed courage in the face of famine, civil war, attacks by slavers and malaria, with which his battle was constant and from which his wife Mary Moffat died in 1862. He had “ambition, callousness and vanity” yet also a profound sense of humanity and an ability to suffer pain.

In a sense Livingstone encapsulates the dilemmas at the heart of issues of liberal development in Africa – for his qualities were tightly bound up with the very prejudices that made him into a Christian warrior for the British Empire: humanity merged with zealotry, his call for colonialism

as a way of tackling the slave trade impossible to separate from his respect for African people, cultures and languages. This was the enigma that was Livingstone. What better place to untangle that Gordian Knot than in the bustling, vibrant African town that still retains his name.

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