

Analysing Livingstone's life and legacy through contradiction, complexity and controversy

LSE's Joanna Lewis was one of the organisers of the recent Imperial Obsessions conference and in this post, she says that LSE's international conference to mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of one of the major and singularly influential figures in the history of Africa's early encounter with the west – the explorer, missionary, scientist and humanitarian Dr David Livingstone – was unique in its organisation, events and findings.

It was one of the few events being held throughout the year globally, to be conducted in Africa, with such an international line-up. Held in the town in Zambia that still bears his name, five miles from the Victoria Falls, it was organised by LSE with the National Museums of Zambia in association with the University of Zambia History Department and a local events committee. Thanks to a generous grant from the Annual Fund, keynote speakers from all over the world were flown to central Africa and local historians supported so that over three days, academics, museum workers, members of the public and the local community could debate his life, legacy and Africa's future.



Before we could begin the conference, Zambian protocol meant we had an opening ceremony presided over by a Government Minister, the Honourable Susan Kawandami, and HRH Senior Chieftainess Nkomenysha Mukamambo II. From the speeches, it was clear Livingstone was publicly respected and admired for bringing Christianity to the region and for starting tourism.

There was clearly a wide gap that the conference would have to try to explain and, if possible, bridge. Many academics in the audience, including Zambians and South Africans, despised Livingstone for these and for many more legacies in terms of imperialism and capitalism. Others, especially Christians and teachers, had travelled in some cases thousands of miles to hear him praised. Some of us had been funded to attend; others were sleeping on floors, without money for food, relying on the tea and coffee breaks for sustenance. How would these massive disparities be played out over the three days? There was certainly drama, aggressive confrontations, tears, accusations, and camaraderie in equal measure.

In my speech I tried to draw in, to draw out, the two more obvious camps, as the following extract illustrates:

“As is well known, Livingstone called for ‘Commerce, Christianity and Civilisation’ in Africa. He was profoundly upset by the spread of the slave trade at the time and he understood well the value of a free press and public debate on his causes. Sadly, the colonial and white settlement that came in his wake, literally, spread racism, and exploitation, alongside some development and education. This conference is about tackling his life and legacy through a different set of the famous three Cs: ‘contradiction, complexity and controversy’.”

The theme of the conference was then explained. The title of *Imperial Obsessions* came about as a result of the search for a term that encapsulated the past and the present, a thread that ran from his life and times through to the here and now in terms of the many obsessions that kept Livingstone in Africa. This was channelled through his visions, his competitiveness and belief while often sick, beleaguered and without hope; in terms of the Victorian obsession with his life, his work and with a version of imperialism in Africa that resulted in much of the British empire, the missionary presence and his cult following, memorabilia and worshiping biographers. It also takes into account the internationally-renowned scholars who have doggedly pursued him, many assembled at the conference, working on fragments, revisiting manuscripts, letters and artefacts, over and over again; still finding new material, new angles and new theories.

You might think we know all there is to know about Livingstone but, as this conference showed on all three days, think again. It ranged from research by African historian Dr Kalusa, who looked at Chief Sekeletu's relationship with Livingstone in a new light to the artist Sybren Renema who told us about fragments and carvings from trees associated with Livingstone that are now scattered all over the world, allegedly from sacred trees on sacred sites. Professor Brian Stanley made the case for the distinctiveness of the legacy of a Scottish enlightenment in Livingstone's African trajectory; and the biographer and travel writer Julie Davidson, showed us how his wife Mary and her family dynasty actually made so much of Livingstone's early success possible. Livingstone biographer, Tim Jeal argued that the evidence from the recently discovered original account of the massacre he witnessed, did not implicate his own slaves and himself in the genocide, but reinforced the whole tragedy of the situation in which he was caught up.

Three main conclusions stand out over the three days. For me the most exciting was the conclusion of Professor Keith Hart following his experimental keynote with a PhD student from the Moral Economy programme, University of Pretoria. Both argued that the relevance of Livingstone today was in his example: he searched for ways to tackle inequality – Africans for him were disadvantaged in their unequal access to commercial exchange and Christianity. Through personal relations he tried to find effective and new social forms to surmount the severe inequalities and injustices he saw. Tackling inequality manifested through race, class and power is an even bigger challenge today for Africa, yet the continent has never been better placed to renegotiate its presence in world society with its burgeoning and youthful population. Finding effective social forms of exchange of goods and services will be the key, argued Professor Hart and the new pan-Africanism for the 21st century should be “an economic association of African states and a customs union”. He added that “although it goes against recent developmental orthodoxy, strong, functioning bureaucratic states are actually vital building blocks in the realisation of what Africa needs – a customs union that will open up the free movement of trade”.

Such a vision, as with Livingstone's vision of an Africa without slavery, requires world society to develop a more inclusive notion of humanity. That is the second major conclusion I drew from the conference. On the third day, some delegates were reduced to tears, as Father Jackson Katete, a campaigner against child poverty and contemporary slavery, revealed the full extent of poverty in countries like Zambia. Between 60-80% of children in Zambia live on or below the poverty line. Livingstone Town itself has a huge problem with homeless families and child labour. Poor families including children primarily work in the construction sector breaking stones, for use in building hotels. This type of work has a detrimental effect on the lungs and is the cause of some of the illnesses and death in the local area. Yet Livingstone has a huge tourist sector, much of which consists of luxury lodges along the Zambesi, many owned by South African companies. When I asked Father Katete what contribution these mega lodges make to the social and economic problems facing the local poor, he replied that most of the big tourist companies are “remote from

the community". Tackling poverty in Africa requires a major shift towards a more inclusive notion of humanity so that visitors and guests will ask these kind of questions and expect to see evidence of responsible tourism.

Finally, the third major conclusion for me was the way in which Africans in the 21st century are less interested in the Christian aspect and legacy of Livingstone. What surprised many at the public lecture given by Professor John Mackenzie in the Town Hall the day after the conference, was that he was associated with anti-slavery in Western accounts. Many locals in the audience learned about him through missionary and religious texts, while they are proud of that history, they wanted more information about his African followers. Most had no idea that there were African women on the expeditions working as carriers, cooks and lovers. One town councillor pledged to name the new townships planned for Livingstone town after his followers – Susi and Chuma – and Halima – his female cook.

Local humanitarians like Father Jackson Katete and others battle to create new forms of association and methods to humanise the local economy and fight for equal rights and justice. Having a fuller understanding of just how long and noble their tradition is of activism, sacrifice and human rights campaigning, rather than just Livingstone's, could be another source of empowerment and inspiration, especially in their educational campaigns in schools. As I argued in my own paper on the funeral of Livingstone in Westminster Abbey in 1874, the fact that Africans carried his body home and were quite possibly as committed humanitarians as Livingstone was, made the great Victorian memorialisation of Livingstone possible and begat the generations of myth and propaganda about his apparent noble deeds against anti-slavery. African generosity, bravery and sacrifice made Livingstone look good – better than he was – and made a generation weep and commit to their own version of a more inclusive humanity.

For in 1874, on the day after Livingstone's funeral attended by one of his African followers, Jacob Wainwright, Dean Stanley of Westminster Abbey included in his sermon the following about a natural human thirst for knowledge and a quest to satisfy curiosity, a fundamental principle of LSE (and illustrated so well by the many anthropologists who chose Livingstone-Zambia to pioneer their research in the 20s and 30s). It was quoted at the beginning of the conference for its contemporary relevance to the spirit of this special event:

"There is an instinct planted in the heart of man that gives birth to new understandings...; to link the human race together by bonds much stronger than the barriers that keep them asunder, as spirit is stronger than matter, knowledge is stronger than ignorance, as love is stronger than hatred."

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