

BOOK REVIEWS

Africa Every Day: Fun, Leisure, and Expressive Culture on the Continent, edited by Oluwakemi M. Balogun, Lisa Gilman, Melissa Graboyes, and Habib Iddrisu. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019. xii + 371 pp. ISBN: 9780896803244.

This edited volume emerges from a multi-disciplinary project by scholars at the University of Oregon to write a lively text for undergraduate students focused upon the history, society and culture of Africa. They were particularly keen to showcase sides of Africa less featured in the standard African Studies literature, in particular the everyday lives of people working, celebrating, socialising, playing and other activities that might be dismissed as ‘mundane’, but actually are insightful prisms onto wider dynamics and processes that play out on the continent. A symposium led to scores of submitted papers, several of which are now presented in this work.

The book is framed by an introduction by Balogun and Graboyes that links to a wider history of interest in everyday life in history and other disciplines, and draws on key scholars in this regard, including Karin Barber, whose work has inspired much fascinating research into African popular culture. This introduction gives just enough conceptual background to help pull together the disparate themes of the chapters, while also providing a starting point for students seeking to grapple with the relevant literature and theoretical currents in which the volume is situated.

Then follow the 29 contributions which cover an impressive array of topics, time periods and regions. The contributors too form an impressive array, with some very well-known names in African Studies alongside younger scholars. These chapters are separated into seven sections: ‘Celebrations and Rites of Passage’, ‘Socializing and Friendship’, ‘Love, Sex and Marriage’, ‘Sports and Leisure’, ‘Performance, Language and Creativity’, ‘Technology and Media’ and ‘Labor and Livelihoods’. These titles give a sense of the variety within, though all are themes strongly embedded in recent studies of the ‘quotidian’ in Africa.

There are far too many chapters in this volume to provide a summary of all in such a short review, and of course some resonated with me and my interests more strongly than others, though the overall quality is strong. There are a number of highlights for me that should give a flavour of the wider book to the reader. Lamba’s chapter on ‘Funeral Swag’ provides insight into how Zambian funerary practices are changing, particularly in urban contexts, becoming sites of often playful creativity that traditionalists find disturbing and disrespectful. The chapter shows how traditional and foreign elements are woven together in dealing with death, and highlights how contestation over such practices links to wider intergenerational tensions. The chapter by Perullo and

Nindi looking at humour in everyday life in East Africa was exemplary of the approach of the book. It gives a deep reading of a joke by King Majuto, a Tanzanian film comedian, showing how understanding the layers involved in the joke - and the different ways in which it might be perceived - requires much wider knowledge of Tanzanian society. This short piece of writing offers insight into how humour functions in Tanzanian society, but also how it can be a prism onto so many other aspects of life.

Other chapters do similar good work with foci on such topics as Senegalese wrestling (chapter by Cheikh Tidiane Lo), nightlife in Nigeria (chapter by Omotoyosi Babalola), and the social world of vehicle mechanics in Dar es Salaam (chapter by Joshua Grace). The book also intersects with the growing literature on 'intimacies' in African Studies with the excellent section on 'Love, Sex, and Marriage', Steven Van Wolputte's chapter being an anthropological highlight with its look at kinship and polyamory in Namibia. My own current research focuses on cannabis in Africa, so I was also pleased to read the chapter by Bill McCoy on cannabis in Swaziland that provides an intriguing case of cannabis being grown at a leprosy hospital in the colonial era.

As this short survey of the book contents suggests, there is a wealth of material here that may be of interest to scholars working on particular themes, as with me and the chapter on cannabis. The essays provide starting places for research in a number of topics (although they could perhaps have provided more suggestions for further reading). However, I did find that the book works as a whole too. The short length of each chapter is a strong advantage here. While it obviously does not allow comprehensive treatment of the subject at hand, it encourages the reader to dip into topics they may not have engaged with before, and this is enhanced greatly by the vivid and accessible style in which the chapters are written.

I think this book will fulfil the aims of the editors to provide a starting point for undergraduate students from which they can build their knowledge of Africa, and offer them a model of how the apparently mundane can form the basis of valuable social science and historical research. For the wider reader too, I would recommend the book. This is no dry social science tome, but one brimming with fun (living up to its subject matter in this regard), and one that certainly offers new perspectives on life in Africa.

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