



KEYWORDS

The Everyday

African Popular Culture

Miserabilism

Fun

Pleasure

Creativity

REVIEW

Oluwakemi M. Balogun, Lisa Gilman, Melissa Graboyes, and Habib Iddrisu, eds. *Africa Every Day: Fun, Leisure, and Expressive Culture on the Continent*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019. 77 illustrations. 386 pp. \$36.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-89680-324-4.

David Murphy

University of Strathclyde, Scotland

This interesting and extremely readable edited volume emerges from a research project based at the University of Oregon drawing together four Africanist scholars with complementary methodological approaches and a shared interest in everyday social and cultural practices. The introduction (authored by two of the four editors, Balogun and Graboyes)—building on similar sentiments expressed in the acknowledgements—roots the impetus for the volume in a desire to counter dominant Western media representations of “daily life in Africa as nothing but hardship, violence and despair” (p. 1). The volume is thus presented as a “corrective” to such representations, emphasizing the vibrant creativity of everyday life on the continent: “We define everyday life as the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of lived experiences and daily practices that provide valuable insight into broader social issues” (p. 1). This working definition reveals the outlines of what the editors describe as three key ways in which the volume contributes to a better scholarly understanding of Africa: first, by emphasizing the “intrinsic value” (p. 2) of everyday life; second, by recognizing that analysis of the everyday offers a window on to “many other aspects of society and culture ... illuminating societal values, norms and unstated codes” (p. 2), and, finally, by focusing on “fun, pleasure, and creativity” (p. 2), which, rather than negating the hardships faced by many Africans, offers a more complex understanding of African societies.

The opening section of the introduction concludes with a reference to the celebrated essay “How to Write about Africa,” by Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina, and the grimly satirical comedic advice offered in it. Wainaina’s depiction of everyday topics that do not reference economic hardship as “taboo” very much aligns with the editors’ desire to counter miserabilist representations of the continent. This repeated emphasis on popular (mis)representation of Africa makes abundantly clear to the reader that the primary audience for this volume is not other scholars of Africa—who, whatever other failings they may have, are unlikely to share the Western media’s truncated vision of the continent—but rather neophytes who have only experienced Africa via the Western media. Indeed, the acknowledgements had already explicitly stated that “we wanted to create a book that would be useful in the classroom for undergraduate students who have little exposure to or direct experience with Africa” (p. ix). This desire to address undergraduate students as the primary audience is, in my view, both a strength and a weakness of the volume. As was stated above, the essays are largely written in an accessible style and are unencumbered by a dense critical/theoretical apparatus. At the same time, however, the absence from the introduction of any in-depth discussion of core critical ideas regarding the study of the everyday in Africa means that undergraduates who do engage with the volume are likely to experience it as a loosely connected set of case studies drawn from across the continent rather than a critical endeavor underpinned by shared theoretical and methodological approaches. The introduction provides a two-page overview of “conceptual approaches to everyday life” that

1. Stephanie Newell and Onokome Okome, eds., *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014)..

inevitably offers a somewhat cursory engagement with key scholarship in the field. Indeed, even when major figures such as Karin Barber are cited, a rather truncated vision of their scholarship is presented: so, for example, Barber's 1997 edited volume, *Popular Culture in Africa*, is (rightly) heralded as a "landmark," but there is no mention of her even more important 1987 essay, "Popular Arts in Africa," a groundbreaking piece whose twenty-fifth anniversary was marked by an edited volume by Stephanie Newell and Onokome Okome, itself a work that consciously tackles the evolution of critical approaches to everyday African popular culture.¹

The editors do provide a certain critical framework, however, by organizing the twenty-nine chapters under six broad, thematic headings: "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." This allows the reader to identify some common issues linking what might at first appear to be quite disparate expressions of everyday creativity. Given my twin interests in Francophone Africa and festival studies, my eye was immediately drawn to fascinating essays on the pageantry surrounding Senegalese wrestling matches (Cheikh Tidiane Lo), and the emergence since 2005 of exuberant New Year's Eve celebrations in Niger (Scott M. Youngstedt). Other noteworthy essays examine the attractions of hanging out in malls in Botswana (Deborah Durham) and night life in Nigeria (Omotoyosi Babalola).

The commissioned pieces also provide wide geographical coverage both in terms of the academic homes of the authors (with far more based in Africa than one might normally expect in a North American publication) and the focus of their research, with chapters spanning almost twenty countries, although perhaps somewhat inevitably the overwhelming focus is on "Anglophone" Africa; that is, two-thirds of the chapters, with a full nine devoted to two former British colonies (Nigeria and Tanzania) while there are just five chapters on Francophone countries as a whole and one devoted to Lusophone Africa. This is not to single out the editors for criticism, as I would fully expect an inverse proportion of coverage in a similar book produced in France or Portugal; it is simply a reminder that the geographical focuses of study in relation to Africa are still often dictated by issues of language and colonial legacies.

In conclusion, then, this volume is a welcome contribution to scholarship on popular culture in Africa. Editorial choices mean that it is primarily student-focused, which is of course no bad thing in itself, but the lack of exploration of key critical ideas means that the average scholar is more likely to dip into the volume to engage with specific essays dealing with their research areas than to engage with the volume as a whole.

AUTHOR BIO

David Murphy is professor of French and postcolonial studies at the University of Strathclyde (Scotland). He has written widely on Francophone African, and particularly Senegalese, culture, as well as on the history of the black community in France. Major publications include a study of the pioneering Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene (James Currey, 2000), a critical edition of the writings of the Senegalese anticolonial militant Lamine Senghor (L'Harmattan, 2012), and the first volume devoted to the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts, held in Senegal (Liverpool University Press, 2016; paperback edition, 2021).

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