

BOOK REVIEWS

Robin Law Ouidah. *The Social History of a West African Slaving Port 1727-1892*, Oxford, James Currey, 2004, pp. xii+304 (trade cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1571-9; ISBN 978-0-8214-1572-6.

In recent years a trend has been developing whereby West African governments are actively encouraging tourism to their historical sites associated with the Atlantic slave trade. Some examples of this are the Roots Festival in The Gambia, where tourists meet the “descendants” of Kunta Kinte, the protagonist of Alex Haley’s *Roots*, and the promotion of the “slave coast”, with its ancient forts and historical sites, by Ghana’s tourism ministry. These and other efforts at focussing the tourist market on one of humanity’s darkest chapters presents an array of complex problems, and situating the story of Ouidah within this context is germane, for the town’s prominence in the Atlantic slave trade was perhaps second only to Luanda in Angola. Yet outside of Africa Ouidah remains largely unknown – off the tourist trail and with no government funding initiatives. Robin Law’s account of the social history of the town will no doubt go a long way towards changing that aspect, and shed light on what was otherwise a forgotten tale.

The town of Ouidah is situated on Benin’s coast, some 30km west of the commercial capital, Cotonou. For over 200 years Ouidah was one of the primary ports through which African slaves were exported to the “new world”. The Bight of Benin, it is generally agreed, accounted for approximately 20% of the 10,000,00 plus slaves exported from Africa, with Ouidah witnessing the passage of more than 1,000,000 souls through its harbour. Law provides a thorough account of the history of this “slave port”, covering the period of the pre-Dahomian conquest to the colonial era.

What marks this text above others is the author’s passion for his subject: the level of detail is not so much meticulous as encyclopaedic, and the text would undoubtedly be of great importance to a range of research specialists in fields such as economics, history, and anthropology. The author makes full use of his wide variety of sources, which include documents cited from the European presence, oral histories, and texts by African historians. Presented in a chronological manner, Law devotes the early chapters to life in Ouidah before and after its inclusion in the Kingdom of Benin. “The operation of the Atlantic slave trade” is a chapter unto itself, and here Law unravels the complexities of the trade and its effects on both the international and domestic economies. The human tragedy of the trade is also examined, through a description of the experiences of the slaves both through their own words and through that of the author’s.

In summary, this is a major work on the topic of the Atlantic slave trade, covering the genesis of the trade through to its zenith and into prohibition. Law brings to the topic a consummate research approach, providing not only the facts and figures, but the social history to this tragic period.

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Review of Peter Mbago Wakholi, *African Cultural Education and the African Youth in Western Australia: Experimenting with the Ujamaa Circle* published by VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, (2008) pp. 127 ISBN978-3-639-02631-3.

African Cultural Education and the African Youth in Western Australia is a timely and most recent contribution to the ongoing discourses on competing identities in multicultural Australia. This is a generalist book written in accessible language, which is suitable for a wider audience, including specialists such as educators, youth workers, artists and counselors, and the casual reader. The book calls for identity negotiations within African migrant communities in Australia as well as negotiations with other non-African contact cultures. Drawing on Akinyela's Ujamaa Circle, also known as the Afrikan Centred Pedagogy, and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of borderline existence, Peter Wakholi sheds new insights into our understanding of marginal identities in contexts of global population movements. The book brings to major spotlight some of the challenges confronting African migrants to Australia, and provides both conceptual and research-based strategies for coping with problems of transmigration and contacts between cultures. One of the major innovative contributions of the book is that it is premised on the author's personal experience as an African Australian as well as the experiences of other migrants of African origin. From the outset, the author explains that "the more I examined the African diaspora, the more I found evidence to suggest that the anxieties I held about the cultural well-being of my children were also true of the experiences of many other black migrant families" (p. 6).

The book is organized into seven chapters. The first chapter is exploratory, mapping out the nature of the problem discussed in the book. Chapter two provides an overview of the conceptual issues that inform the overall argument of the book. The second chapter further discusses African cultures, trans-ethnic cultural communities and also provides a critique of existing scholarship on African diaspora identities. The third chapter is a detailed description of the methodology consisting of rigorous six sessions of dialogue

among participants, reflecting on personal attitudes and experiences of being African in Australia. Chapters four, five and six examine in detail participants' perceptions of African cultural identity in the context of a dominant Anglo-Australian way of life. It is in these three chapters that the African settlement experience in Australia and its associated challenges are explored and suggestions for more meaningful integration posited. Chapter seven concludes the book by advancing a futuristic agenda proposing the need to foster and promote migrant cultures as they have the potential of building cohesion in communities and reducing alienation and homogenization.

African Cultural Education and the African Youth in Western Australia is important both sociopolitically and sociolinguistically as it involves one of the most vulnerable and 'problematic' migrant groups in Australia that has come to play the role of the non-desired 'other'. The study addresses questions that are of immense importance for the future (successful) further development of Australian multicultural and multilingual policy, based on inclusion. The book also provides detailed information about African cultures, history and knowledge systems that are least known and scantily acknowledged in mainstream Australian academic, media and public discourses. Because African mass migration to Australia is considered a relatively new phenomenon, there have been lots of misconceptions and negative stereotyping of this group of migrants by some sections of the Australian society. Starting from August 2007 the behaviour of some Sudanese youths in south-eastern Melbourne has been erroneously perceived as representative of African identities in Australia. In a 7.15 minute video clip of 'Media Watch Coverage of Sudanese Gang Violence', the following phrases are used interchangeably to describe a perceived homogenous African Australian identity: "African migrants", "Sudanese refugees", "Sudanese gangs", "African refugees", "African gangs", "Black Africans", "African migrant violence" and "Sudanese youth violence"

([youtube.com/watch?v=uH684WWgi-8#](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uH684WWgi-8#)). This terminology that simplistically conflates 'Sudanese' with 'African' identity was also evident in Channel 7 and Channel 9 News reporting of street violence in south-eastern Melbourne. The negative perceptions carried by these media discourses have crystallized into stereotyped popular beliefs about all people from the African continent, particularly those with a dark skin pigment. Therefore, by highlighting the positive attributes of African cultural identities, world views and philosophies, Peter Wakholi provides a significant counter-narrative that addresses the dearth of knowledge about African identities in Australia.

However, there are a few sloppy issues in the author's conceptualization of African cultures and identities. Firstly, the author consistently uses the term 'African root cultures' in an unproblematic way giving an impression that

African cultures are static phenomena located in some kind of a pre-modern communal setting untouched by forces of modernization. African identities are in fact “multi-layered, self-imposed, as well as ascribed by others and as such require a critical analysis to avoid the essentialism that has bedevilled much of the discourse on African identity in the diaspora” (Chima, 2006:91). African identities and cultures should thus be seen as coalescing around a sentiment of belonging that can no longer be identified with a purely or exclusively territorial dimension that views human populations as bounded entities confined within specific culturally, linguistically and geographically uniform boundaries (Jacqemet, 2005: 4). Therefore, while it is not a bad thing to point out the uniqueness of African cultures and traditions, I view the adoption of strategic essentialism (which the author has done in this book) as something dangerous because it serves to reinscribe and legitimize negative perceptions that are held about African Australians. Because the book essentially sets out to provide a counter-narrative that tries to correct the master-narrative’s distorted version of African identities, its response tends to be guided by the parameters set by the master-narrative. Such an approach threatens mimicking the ideas of the Negritude movements of the 1960s that over-emphasised notions of ‘black beauty’, ‘black pride’ and ‘black culture’ as a way of protecting perceived African cultural ‘purity’ against the encroaching western value systems.

Secondly, and related to the first point is the author’s location of African material culture and economy in an imagined/nostalgic historical past that appears to be out of sync with contemporary lived experiences of the African people. The author says “in many parts of Africa one finds round houses, the keeping of cattle, sheep and goats, and the growing of bananas, millets, and yams as staple food. The custom of a husband having more than one wife exists in practically every African society” (p.19). Although this is a paraphrase of Mbiti (1975), Wakholi reaffirms it as a typical way of life in contemporary Africa. People from the African continent have been in contact with western cultures, modern technology and the capitalist economy for many centuries, which makes these assumptions about a traditional pre-modern lifestyle too simplistic and misleading.

My third area of concern is that the book seeks to provide African cultural education exclusively to African migrants in Australia. It is my considered view that this type of education needs to be extended to mainstream Australian society as well. This is precisely because integration problems in Australia do not necessarily lie in the failure by African migrants to measure up to the expectations of their new home. Rather, the problems are firmly resident and located within the attitudes of some sections of mainstream Australian society that are not willing to accept and accommodate cultural difference. In my

view, the monolingual and monocultural ideology of Anglo-Australian society, dating back to the heyday of the 'White Australia' policy, can be moderated and/or transformed by extending the cultural education programs proposed in this book.

The few lapses in the author's conceptualization of the debate around identity and identity formation do not in any way eclipse the major contributions of the book to the field of African diaspora studies. On the basis of the strengths and innovations highlighted in this review, I strongly recommend *African Cultural Education and the African Youth in Western Australia* for both individuals and institutions interested in cutting edge research on marginal transnational identities.

Bibliography

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