

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

**Theodore Trefon. *Congo Masquerade: The Political Culture of Aid Inefficiency and Reform Failure*. Zed Books, distributed in Australia by Inbooks. Paperback, ISBN 9781848138360**

Trefon is well-informed, and this book is especially useful for those in the development sector who are trying to navigate the complexities of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Carefully referenced, *Congo Masquerade* is an excellent introduction for anyone keen to move for the first time into aid and development in central Africa. For those who are already familiar with Congo's volatility, the book is still an engaging and insightful read. Like the country that Trefon writes about, the book fascinates and disturbs. Trefon's succinct and simple prose helps the reader de-code the political dynamics of a country that is approximately the size of western Europe. The DRC's abundance of minerals and its magnificent rainforest are magnets for corruption, and Trefon does an excellent job analysing the wide range of actors who are ineffectively carrying out conflicting strategies aimed at solving Congo's aid dependency. Since 2001, Trefon states, international partners have devoted substantial funding and diplomatic effort to bring about positive change in the DRC. There have been many efforts with international partners, but little tangible success in Trefon's view. According to Human Development Index indicators and transparency rankings, Congo is still at the bottom of the comparison tables.

Trefon asks: In the context of patrimonial politics, and the high economic stakes, do Congolese authorities really want change? Does the international community want a strong and independent Congo? There have been more than 50 years of Cold War manipulation and other involvement (by the West), he says. Reform has been handicapped by overwhelming challenges such as the country's complex politics and society, vast geographical area and many diverse tribes. It is impossible to address all challenges at the same time, the author states; where everything is a priority, where does one start? Where is the financial commitment? Many strategies make sense at a theoretical level, and there are experts working on these challenges, but implementation seems unattainable. Trefon says the implementation is hampered because of two missing links: 1. Adequate administration and lack of an honest, motivated, well-paid cadre of civil servants; 2. Adequate involvement of a vibrant and independent civil society.

President Joseph Kabila is too weak to share power, Trefon believes. In order to share power, he says, the state has to be strong. A vulnerable and fragile state will not be willing to share power; it wants to capture and consolidate power, and once solidified, then you can start sharing. Right now the DRC is still in the phase of regime consolidation, which is why civil society hasn't been able to play a big enough role. According to Trefon, there are success stories too, but they are problematic. There are many Non-Government Organisations and others acting on behalf of the state. They replace the state and this perpetuates dependency. And when things go wrong, it's never the fault of government authorities - which exonerates authorities from responsibility. Examples include: Security sector? That's up to the UN. National parks? That's up to American environmental NGOs. *Congo Masquerade* offers excellent insights on Congo's aid inefficiency. The book helps de-code what's going on behind the scenes of power at all levels in the DRC, and will appeal to anyone who is interested in doing something that can contribute to shifting paradigms, and leading change. It also salutes the fact that, unlike the state, Congolese society has not failed: the people continue, somehow, to be resilient, tolerant and courageous.

**Lucy Hobgood-Brown**

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**Ian Dicks, *An African Worldview: The Muslim Amacinga Yawo of Southern Malawi, Zomba: Kachere Monographs No.32. 2012.***

**ISBN 978-99908-8751-9**

The publication of this monograph, a revised version of Ian Dicks' PhD thesis, is an important contribution to African studies in Australia. It is the first major ethnographic study of the Yawo of southern Malawi since the monumental contributions of J. Clyde Mitchell and as such it is a major new resource for social scientists and historians interested in the societies of east central Africa and in the interaction of Islam with African religious systems on the continent. It also signals the arrival of a new player in the African studies arena who I dare say will be an exciting addition to the list of key Australian scholars working in and on Africa.

Ian Dicks is an Australian anthropologist who has lived and worked in a remote rural area of Malawi for more than a decade. He did his PhD at Chancellor College in Zomba (Malawi) working with Professor Klaus Fiedler who has done so much to foster the revival of ethnography in that

country. Working as a Language and Culture Consultant he has learned to speak Ciyawo fluently and has already published a book of Yawo folklore and proverbs with English translation and interpretations. He is currently working on a bilingual learner dictionary in the Yawo language and English – an immense and time-consuming labour of love. His immersion among the Yawo in the very area where Clyde Mitchell began his fieldwork (Namwera in Mangochi District) is such that Yawo friends have told me that if they spoke to Ian Dicks on the telephone they could not tell that he had not been born a Yawo!

The monograph is a magnificent combination of detailed ethnography and textual analysis of songs, myths, proverbs and prayers. It is an excellent source of information about the beliefs, rituals and practices of the Yawo in the twenty-first century. However, it also develops an interesting and sophisticated theoretical thrust framed around the idea of ‘worldview.’ This theoretical and conceptual framework is what makes the monograph unusually valuable as it really opens up the debate about spirituality, representation and ethnographic truth. In this respect it is a must-read for all anthropologists that are interested in religion and in non-reductionist analysis of religious belief systems. Ian Dicks, in the tradition of Evans-Pritchard, Victor Turner, and Monica Wilson, takes the beliefs and views of his Muslim informants seriously. He treats them with respect and shows them the courtesy of trying to believe with them instead of doing the usual anthropological trick of conjuring their beliefs away and reducing them to functionalist, structuralist or postmodernist tropes. He does not bring a heavy-handed sense of irony to his analysis of beliefs in God, ancestors or witchcraft.

I have only one objection to this book. Ian Dicks uses the form Yawo to describe the people that Clyde Mitchell (and I) prefers to describe as the Yao. In fact, any number of forms of the ethnonym has been used over the years. Ian Dicks explains his choice by suggesting that it clears up the confusion between the Chinese and African Yao and conforms to the spelling adopted by the African linguistic unit at the University of Malawi. Fair enough. I asked some Yao friends which spelling they believe is the most accurate representation of the word (which means the mountain or place of origin of the Yao people) and they all preferred ‘YAO’. This however is a small quibble about what is in the end a very important and finely crafted monograph.

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**Richard Vokes, ed. “Photography in Africa: Ethnographic Perspectives.” Woodbridge, UK, James Currey, 2012.  
ISBN 978-1-84701-045-2**

Richard Vokes’ *Photography in Africa: Ethnographic Perspectives*, brings together twelve chapters of more eclectic themes than its niche title suggests. These are studies of history, social change, political dynamics, and more, all connected by a common association with the photographic image. The collection is divided into three sections: on the technologies and practices of photography; on the connection between photographic imagery and political authority; and on the relationship between photos and social change.

Vokes’ own chapter begins by tracing the story of an Indian owned photography studio in Mbarara, South West Uganda, from the 1940s. With this, he accepts as a premise the idea that an official form of photography was fundamental to colonial state power – providing the portraiture which gave access to the modern institutions of church, school and military. This legacy continued after independence, as the studio changed hands and continued to serve various changing governments on whose patronage (as the primary client) it relied. But Vokes’ main interest is in tracing the ‘vernacular’ images that developed from tangential offshoots of official studio photography – such as employees with borrowed equipment or wealthy members of the public with cameras bought overseas. In the vernacular form that developed, the double print (an industry standard at the time) led to a pattern of double portraiture, and a system of exchange in which each subject of the ‘double’ would receive a copy. A most interesting example is given in a local politician who moves with photographers recording his casual meetings with constituents. The politician then prints and sends the images to the constituent later, who now feels a bond with the ‘Big Man’ anchored in visual evidence.

With this vernacular mode, Vokes addresses the materiality of photographs as ‘image-objects’ that create ‘the best bonds’, reifying interpersonal connections in a culture in which such systems of exchange are socially fundamental. His conclusion is that although these two forms (official and vernacular) can be identified, their difference is not in their fields and forms of representation, but in the alternative systems of social exchange in which they become substantively valuable. For Vokes, photographic image-objects not only reflect systems of exchange, but generate them, wielding a degree of social agency in the process. Leaving

aside my own qualms about this use of the term ‘agency’ so in vogue in current anthropology (if images possess agency surely they are image-*subjects*, not image-objects), the conclusion that photos exist as such a social currency is convincing.

The theme of materiality is most interestingly addressed in Carrier and Quaintance’s chapter on the ‘frontier photographs’ that anthropologist Paul Baxter took in Marsabit, far north Kenya, in the early 1950s. The authors’ aim was photo-elicitation: using the repatriation of the images to subject communities as a mnemonic vehicle for historical memory. Indeed, the authors had a lot of success with this strategy, as many of those living showed extraordinary recall for the era of Baxter’s stay. But as the fame of the collection spread around Marsabit people came forth and made false claims about themselves or their relatives being in the pictures. In a way, this granted the authors a ‘social passport’ into the historical perspectives of those they were studying. In another way, the authors found themselves introducing a new historical material in the repatriated images, and consequently altering these historical perspectives.

My favourite chapter in the book was Pype’s excellent research on the politics of the photographic propaganda that dominates the Kinshasa cityscape. Her particular focus is on the billboards throughout the city showing the supposed fruits of President Joseph Kabila’s *La Visibilité des 5 Chantiers* (the visibility of five construction sites) platform. The campaign posits images of a utopian modernist progress – schools, hospitals and power plants in production – along with a smiling Kabila taking credit. The president is thus visually omnipresent throughout the city. Like other chapters in the collection, Pype builds on the affective photographic presence that states that Kabila’s imagery “produces” the urban experience as much as it attempts to reflect it. But the chapter’s main aim is to situate this affect within the economy of urban politics: to “combine the fields of optical and the political.”

The “contact zone” of the billboard/poster is thus revealed as a key terrain on which politics is contested. Just as politicians erect pictures of themselves to dominate the contact zone, citizens destroy and replace them. More subtly, protesters in the pay of politicians can campaign for their patron candidates but avoid removing their opponents picture as a secret signal of solidarity. While Kabila and the Kinois (Kinshasa’s inhabitants, generally considered to be anti-Kabila) contest for the monopoly of the contact zones, optical opposition becomes encourages

police suppression. Opposition candidates and their supporters are forced to use mobile boards at their rallies, and fix them to their houses rather than public property.

One of the challenges of using photographs lies in assessing its archival capacities. While Vokes' introduction cites Edwards' warning of the visual archive's "universalising" tendency as a historical record of its time frame, the collection occasionally oversteps the bounds of what the visual archive can actually tell us, and the caution we should take in using it. I was reminded of Mbembe's concern that the written archive's "montage of fragments... creates an illusion of totality and continuity". The photographic archive does this too, but (much more than the document) contains illusory capacity *within* each "fragment" as much as between them, as we fall prey to the falsehood that the 'camera doesn't lie'. An example of this in the collection is Morton's chapter on the anthropological photographs of Evans-Pritchard's field work in Zande. While Morton sets out with the noble and perhaps accurate contention that subjects of Evans-Pritchard's photographs had as much say over their self-presentation as the photographer did, he fills the gaps by hypothesising the meanings of postures and expressions within images; the cultural context of which we cannot possibly know. Here, he gives into the "universalising" temptation of the archive.

Voke's collection comes at an interesting technological moment. Presumably, Africa will soon follow the rest of the world into taking and viewing photos on portable devices, particularly phones. How the themes of the book might be reflected on in ten or twenty years was thus a constant thought as I read it. For this and other reasons, the collection is a valuable companion for the broad themes it explores.

**Sam Wilkins**

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