Christian Williams

University of the Free State

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Reviews

The politics of heritage in Africa: economies, histories, infrastructures.

By Derek R Peterson, Kodzo Gavua and Ciraj Rasool (eds).

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015

The Politics of Heritage in Africa offers a wide-ranging analysis of how heritage has been defined in Africa and of the on-going significance of heritage work on the continent. In presenting their project in this manner, the authors differentiate it from scholarship focused more narrowly on heritage as museum studies, and they illuminate domains outside the museum which may be understood as contributing to heritage as a form of knowledge production, including scientific disciplines and performing arts. The volume focuses primarily on Ghana and South Africa, two countries which have aggressively marketed violent pasts (the transatlantic slave trade and apartheid, respectively) to international audiences and yet whose different circumstances illuminate qualities of the African heritage economy that extend beyond particular national contexts. Chapters are organised around essays written by 15 scholars, including several who have actively participated in heritage institutions in Africa while working as academics in history and related disciplines.

Although the volume features diverse points advanced by the individual authors, two arguments clearly resonate throughout the text. First, the authors maintain that heritage is a form of political organisation with unique significance in Africa. Derek Peterson sets out this argument most directly in the volume's introduction, wherein he highlights how colonial governments relied on heritage objects and institutions to legitimate systems of indirect rule and traces the aftermath of such colonial-era heritage making. As Peterson illustrates, European "heritage workers" took the fluid political boundaries and shifting cultural formations of precolonial Africa and transformed them into claims about the ancient "traditions" of African "tribes". These claims could not easily accommodate historical change or contemporary contestations within African societies, but they could become a basis for structuring systems of government in which European powers (and later the apartheid regime) supported receptive "traditional authorities" to govern "their people". By the 1960s, as "the winds of change" swept across Africa, nationalist leaders drew from established institutions and practices of heritage to challenge colonial era knowledge, highlighting the collective past of nations, united across their purported tribal divisions. And by the 1990s, many of these nationalist efforts had declined even as Africa was increasingly opened to the global marketplace, with far flung audiences seeking "authentic" African cultural products and traditional authorities desiring recognition at home and abroad. In making these points, and especially the latter one about global markets and African heritage projects, Peterson draws from John and Jean Comaroff's path-breaking work, *Ethnicity Inc.* (2009), while distinguishing the present volume from the Comaroffs' by highlighting its greater attention to how recent global trends are embedded within African histories.

Beyond Peterson's reading of African history through heritage politics, other contributors to the volume highlight specific dimensions of heritage work in Africa, thereby illuminating the unique scope of heritage on the continent. For example, in her chapter "Language as Cultural 'Heritage,'" Judy Irvine traces how colonial era linguists mapped the European "ethnolinguistic imagination" – with its assumptions about the relationship between land, language, and culture – onto the forms of language that they studied, refashioning linguistic and ethnic boundaries in Africa in their own image. Similarly, Ciraj Rassool highlights how colonial era physical anthropology contributed to the racialising of African bodies, whose behaviours could allegedly be understood with little grasp of personal biographies or concern for the violent processes that enabled such scientific (or pseudo-scientific) endeavours. Rassool's chapter also draws readers' attention to another recurring theme in the book with particular significance in Africa, namely "the unfinished business of the dead" (156). Whether the context is South Africans demanding the repatriation of bodies held in European museums (as per Rassool),

or communities in KwaZulu-Natal drawing from oral art forms to trace ancestries that invoke pre-Zulu identities (as per Mbongiseni Buthelezi), or factions within Nelson's Mandela family seeking legitimacy to speak on behalf of a national icon (as per Carolyn Hamilton), the dead are recurring agents in African heritage work, mobilised by the living to serve particular interests but with social capital that extends beyond the living's control. The dead and their mobilisation draw our attention to a further quality of heritage work with particular resonance in Africa – namely, debates over the evidentiary basis on which claims about the past are made. As Hamilton suggests in her conclusion, in African settings there is often an extraordinary "*jostling*" of ideas about how heritage should be constructed, with (colonial) archives, (African) oral histories, personal memories, and scholarly literatures all competing for attention and authority. This jostling is not only a source of much contestation and confusion about the African past, but also of rich traditions of critical engagement with African history and its production.

Beyond these and other points about heritage politics *in Africa*, several of the volume's authors discuss the social processes through which heritage is made more generally. Their points, I suggest, amount to a second key argument. This argument is advanced most directly in Gary Minkley and Phindi Mnyaka's chapter on the Duncan Village Massacre Memorial in East London. Therein, the authors critique Sabine Marschall's juxtaposition of "official" and "vernacular heritage" – as if "vernacular heritage" remained outside a restrictive public domain and was a more authentic reflection of local views. In fact, as Minkley and Mnyaka maintain, "vernacular" discourses surrounding the memorial at Duncan Village are inflected by a South African conversation about victimhood, shaped by various points of reference, including the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Leslie Witz and Noëleen Murray develop a related point in their essay on the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum outside Cape Town, highlighting how the museum's founders have not only created a site that opposes powerful notions of heritage, but also that offers "a parable of development" that resonates with conversations among South Africans about the post-apartheid (95-6). Likewise, Buthelezi's essay distinguishes "Heritage" from "heritage" not to instantiate a firm division between the official and the vernacular, but rather to highlight how localised heritage projects – such as the construction of pre-Zulu identities – are, in fact, products of a dominant heritage discourse wherein communities seek to use ethnic categories to gain public recognition. Such arguments have South African and African dimensions, of course, but they draw our attention to social dynamics across a wider range of contexts in which people use heritage to make claims on publics.

As these and other examples from the book suggest, heritage discourses, including so-called heritage "vernaculars", are often deeply problematic, resorting

to simplifying narratives and essentialised identities that defy critical engagement. Moreover, in the African context, these discourses tend to obscure colonialism's central role in shaping identities that are mobilised through heritage initiatives on the continent today. Nevertheless, the authors do not dismiss heritage work in the name of "history," an academic discipline with a more authoritative approach to knowing the past. Rather, they suggest that debates over evidence and narrative can be sources of strength, enabling seemingly opposed genres to engage with the entrenched knowledge practices of one another and illuminate the processes through which "heritage," "history" and other forms of historical knowledge are produced. Indeed, the entire volume could be seen as the product of this kind of collaboration, as historians and other scholars with substantial experience in the heritage sector speak to processes of knowledge creation that are observable, at least in part, because they and others have crossed these boundaries. For students of the African past and/or heritage, this book is certainly an important read.

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Stephanie Cawood

University of the Free State

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Violence in/and the Great Lakes: The thought of V-Y Mudimbe and beyond.

By Grant Ferrad, Kasereka Kavwahirehi and Leonhard Praeg (eds).

Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2014.

The book, *Violence in/and the Great Lakes: The thought of V-Y Mudimbe and beyond*, is topical and timely given the current volatile time. At first glance, its title may seem quite straightforward and narrowly delimited, but this is illusory. The intriguing orthographic choice of the preposition 'in' and the conjunction 'and' (in/and) alerts the reader to a deeper meaning at play, a meaning that relates directly to the central theme when read in relation to the space defined as 'the Great Lakes'.

The ambivalence created by this orthographic choice signals that 'the Great Lakes' is less a distinctly demarcated territory with clear borders than an indistinct space lying somewhere between "northern Lake Tanganyika, western Lake Victoria, and lakes Kivu, Edward and Albert", although there is no consensus as to which countries or parts thereof are included (Chiwengo, 2014: 94). Like 'Africa', 'the Great Lakes' is equally an invention, "a geographical fiction" (Mudimbe, 2014: 195). This ambiguity seems to be deliberate as it points to the arbitrary construction of colonial borders and its

complicity in different forms of violence that cannot be contained by artificial lines on a map. 'The Great Lakes' also becomes a liminal space for liminal experiences of sublimated violence (Praeg, 2014: 204). This leads the line of thinking back to the use of the preposition 'in' as 'the Great Lakes' is thereby marked as a container with diffuse borders through which the substance in the container, violence, can and does easily spill or leak. The choice of 'Great Lakes' also seems to be deliberately contentious because of its colonial connotations to its Belgian colonisation (Chiwengo, 2014: 94).

The subtitle makes it clear that Mudimbe's thought is foregrounded but in conversation with a polyphony of postcolonial voices as implied by the use of 'beyond'. Each essay is intertextually rich, but forms a cohesive if holographic narrative, an exchange of Mudimbian thought. Mudimbe is present as a conceptual force throughout the collection of essays, but especially as symbolic conscience for a world that has ignored this terrible war and its unimaginable suffering. This is especially true in Mudimbe's unsettling memory of the disappearance of the 'Unknown Women', an event he witnessed and has carried with him over the years. The 'silhouette of the Unknown Women' is metonymically used by Farred in the Introduction to symbolise and humanise each and every casualty of this war and is conceptually used to bring the reader closer to the horror in order to counter the detached disbelief in the sheer scale of death. The 'Unknown Women' is a call to responsibility for the reader to overcome the dispassionate distance between the 'Self' and 'Other'.

Words and labels matter and the collection of essays makes it clear the titular violence is a tool of war – not a mere conflict – but it is an invisible war unnoticed by the 'civilised world'. Only 'war' can fully describe the systematic genocide and democide endemic to this space. The treatment of violence in the essays is conceptually diverse and yet forms a cohesive account. In Chapter 1, Kavwahirehi considers the nature of victimhood and the role it played in the ambivalent responses to this war by the so-called 'civilised world'. He emphasises the ethical responsibility of intellectuals to deconstruct the complex dynamics at the heart of the habitual violence in 'the Great Lakes', as well as the atavistic myths driving power relations in this space. Farred unpacks the complex interplay between theology and politics in colonised spaces like 'the Great Lakes' and considers Mudimbe's theological and philosophical struggles as a product of this dynamic. In Chapter 3, Bisanswa takes a more literary turn by reading Mudimbe's novels as manifestations of "the modern human's experience of violence". His novels are further explored by Hél-Bongo in Chapter 4, who considers different modes of representations of a violence that is at once "thematic, epistemological and formal". Chapter 5 by Chiwengo foregrounds the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a feminised space – the "primordial Other" – where victimhood and

violence is gendered. This chapter demonstrates the structural nature of phallic power and colonial violence and its endurance after decolonisation.

The psychological violence enacted through Western modernity is critiqued by Kerr in Chapter 6. The author shows how the West's dehumanising ambivalence towards the suffering in 'the Great Lakes' is a function of "becoming modern" and how experiencing shame as a victim contributes to the dynamics of violence. Wai considers the banality of violence in Chapter 7 and specifically how Africa was invented as an "intermediate space" through the structural violence of colonialism. He illustrates how the perpetual, everyday violence in this space is a counter-violence against the legacy of the persistent alienation created through colonial structural violence. In Praeg's ingenious postcard exchange with Mudimbe in Chapter 8, he ponders the ambivalence to the violence in 'the Great Lakes' and to what extent violence is a function of everyday life in the postcolony. In Chapter 9, '*Debitores sumus'* becomes Mudimbe's lament for the deaths of millions of people "between seven and ten" and the complicity of humanity and religious systems therein. Indeed, his essay and Praeg's conclusion (CODA) reminds the reader that this entire enterprise is a call to responsibility for 'us'. It demands a critical self-reflection of the reader on the meaning and ethics of responsibility and what it takes to overcome the essentialist expectation of the 'brutal Congo' as constructed in Conrad's *A heart of darkness*.

The collection of essays is thought-provoking, incisive and theoretically robust, although at times the writing may appear highly conceptual and challenging to master as an ordinary reader. As an unexpected boon, however, the insightful unpacking of the nature of violence in the space of 'the Great Lakes' can be used to logically deconstruct and problematise forms of 'unexplained' violence in 'other' postcolonial spaces, including the South African higher education sector and its recent volatility. *Violence in/and the Great Lakes: The thought of V-Y Mudimbe and beyond* is a noteworthy tribute to Mudimbe's oeuvre.