

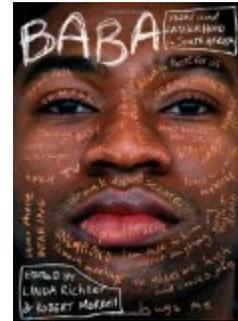
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lisa Richter, Robert Morrell, eds. *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa*. Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2006. 326 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7969-2096-6.

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Understanding Cultures of Fatherhood in South Africa

Lisa Richter is a clinical development psychologist who has written on the sexual abuse of children and other situations of stress and risk among youth and within South African families. She is currently one of the executive directors of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa's premier state-funded think-tank on social issues. The HSRC in 2003 sponsored a traveling photographic exhibition and related communities project celebrating the positive roles that fathers can play in family well-being, out of which this book has spun.

Robert Morrell is a pioneer in the growing field of critical men's studies or gendered writing on men in Africa. For African and Africanist audiences he has interpreted theorizations of masculinity by leading scholars in the West such as Robert Connell, and has conducted close empirical studies of his own on the construction of white South African masculinities. He has also played an important mentoring role for new scholars through workshops and edited collections devoted to understanding how men become or pass as masculine in specific historical and cultural contexts.

"Baba" means "father" in many of the African languages in southern Africa, with a connotation of respect attached to a highly valued social role and age. It most appropriately leads off the title of a book focused on how men have historically behaved and understood their social as opposed to biological roles as fathers. Morrell and Richter are eminently qualified to muster the

international theory on fathers and fatherhood into a compelling and coherent argument, backed by empirical studies from twenty-six contributing authors. Photographs of the contributors with their children, or as children themselves together with their fathers, are a wonderful touch.

The tone of the book is essentially optimistic (change can be achieved to make people's lives better than at present). It is calmly affirmative of the principle of gender equity (rather than "gladiatorial," as Morrell puts it, p. 2). It seeks to avoid a "romanticise[d]" perspective of fatherhood (Solani Ngobeni, p. 148) in its promotion of father's rights against the presumptions in favor of mothers or women in the current legal system and some strands of gender research. Underlying all of the chapters, and solidly theorized by Morrell, Richter and others in the first section of the book, is the belief that fathers can play a very positive role both in socializing their children to life-affirming values, and in creating a family environment that specifically empowers women and girls (and, albeit implicitly, children oriented to non-normative sexuality or suffering from other disempowering or stigmatized conditions as well).

The authors recognize that good fathering and "non-toxic masculinities" (Morrell, p. 21) do not happen consistently and that, in fact, many South African men directly contribute to the various health, crime, and other social crises that afflict the country today through objec-

tively bad or worse fathering. Some men do so through their abuse of alcohol and other substances, their physical or emotional absence from family, their introduction of sexually transmitted infections to wives and children, and their use of violence against family members. Other chapters in the first section of the book substantiate these claims with sometimes quite shocking empirical evidence. Statistics show that South Africa has extreme levels of absentee fathers compared to elsewhere in Africa (over four times the rate found in Nigeria, for example), and that there are disparities, in some cases worsening disparities between racial groups within South Africa. Absenteeism, poverty, and other aspects of toxic masculinity appear to be disproportionately concentrated in the black population.

How to address these problems is a unifying theme of the book. The final chapter by Tom Beardshaw (director of the British pro-feminist organization FatherDirect) spells out a practical program for the state, and for individuals, researchers, and civil society groups to promote healthy, family-affirming cultures of fatherhood. It emphatically does not promote a faith-based approach to this age-old project; indeed, the book acknowledges that the major religions in South Africa are deeply implicated in some of the abuses associated with hegemonic masculinity. The recommendations are secular in intent and, importantly, do-able even under current conditions. They include such practical matters as the provision of life skills education for boys, paternity support for men, law and bureaucratic reforms to eliminate mother-bias in key state institutions and structures, and collecting data on men's stresses and needs as fathers.

The obstacles to achieving these objectives are enormous. As the second section of the book makes clear, traditional cultures, colonial conquest and apartheid, dehumanizing industrial conditions, and global (U.S.-dominated, consumer-oriented) popular culture all combine to overdetermine men's sometimes pernicious attitudes and practices toward their families. Four chapters in this section focus on black men's historical experiences in the migrant labor system (Mamphela Ramphela and Richter), young colored men's experiences of poverty, incarceration, yearning, and suffering (Azeem Badroodien), Zulu men's feelings of disempowerment mainly by unemployment (Mark Hunter), and shifting ideals of style, modernity, and manliness for African men in popular culture through the 1950s to 1970s (Lindsay Clowes).

These themes are picked up in contemporary settings in the third section, focused on "representations and

roles." A powerful chapter here is Ngobeni's discussion of how black masculinity and fatherhood are depicted in U.S. film (especially in the enormously popular and seemingly influential *Boyz' n the Hood* [1991]). Problematically, he finds, this depiction appears to validate the importance of fathers in taming their sons' violence yet at the same time trivializes the courage and perseverance of the mothers. Ngobeni warns strongly against this. Similarly, Graham Lindegger in his chapter perceives danger in potentially anti-feminist streams of the North American men's movement or Jungian psychology. The trick will be to balance the need to address men's alienation with the need to empower vulnerable women and children.

Chapters by Desmond Lesejane and Nhlanhla Mkhize are promising and provocative in that respect as they give close, critical accounts of "traditional" ideologies, practices, and rituals around fatherhood. Both authors agree that masculine power was constrained in African societies in the past through various rituals and moral obligations, but that those constraints were undermined by racism and industrial capitalism among other factors. Both recommend strategies for, in Lesjane's words, the "restoration of fatherhood." This is meant not in a reactionary sense but as a social role deserving of respect in a democratic and gender-equitable modern society. Traditions would need to be re-invented toward that goal, perhaps including the *khotla* (community "court" for the management of family disputes and communication), *mephato* (age regiments that could function as peer support groups for boys), some kind of initiation ceremony to celebrate and confirm the transition from boys to family-oriented maturity, and a revived moral economy that stresses collective rather than individual responsibility for children's welfare.

Of course, as with the so-called mytho-poetic men's movement in North America, the potential in this approach for merely reinvigorating heteropatriarchal malpractices is high. Somehow, *ubuntu* would need to be modernized to acknowledge women's, children's, and sexual minority rights—a big task.

The penultimate section of the book focuses on specific contemporary issues complicating men's desires and efforts to become good fathers. This includes two chapters on the impact of HIV/AIDS, two on legal biases or blindspots under current jurisprudence (notably in child custody matters), and one on the changing situation for migrant laborers. These, like the final section of the book, place recent developments in South Africa into the inter-

national context, for example, comparing South African cultural practices and law on issues like corporal punishment of children with the emerging international consensus. Again, a difficult balancing act is suggested. For many South African men physically disciplining children is one of the few interventions they make that confirms their credentials as good fathers in both customary and Christian ideology (indeed, in much secular and scientific thinking as well).

Gaps are to be expected with a topic this big. For example, reading *Baba* one gets the impression that there are no people of Asian decent in South Africa. And what about the large and reputedly exploding population of Africans from elsewhere on the continent? I regret that there were no chapters devoted to impotence, infertility, witchcraft, or women's use of reputedly powerful "husband-taming herbs." I chafed, as well, at occasional

overstatements or generalizations, particularly in titles. Ngobeni's chapter on "U.S. films," for example, is really only about one film when in fact there is great and increasing diversity in the depiction of blacks in Hollywood movies and television. Lesejane and Mkhize need to be more cautious in their talk of "African traditions," as if there were an unproblematic commonality and continuity prior to colonialism.

Their points, however, are well taken. This book is clearly not intended as a masterful academic analysis but is a fine example of "action research" aimed to promote discussion and reflection as steps toward much-needed change. It succeeds very well on those terms, and could be a great resource for government, civil society groups, and researchers concerned about the future of African families.

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