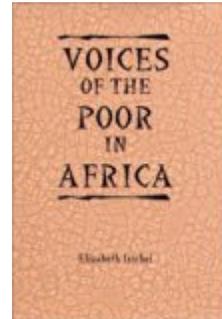


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth Allo Isichei. *Voices of the Poor in Africa:: Moral Economy and the Popular Imagination (Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora)*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002. ix + 287 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58046-107-8.

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“This is a book about the history of ideas” (p. 150). More specifically, it is a book about the history of folk ideas, those ideas held by the ordinary Africans who are the typical sources of field information for Africanists, especially in the social sciences and humanities. As such it is a book which will be important to anyone doing humanistic or social scientific research in Africa. It may also be of interest to those doing more technical research, who are interested in the ideas of the Africans with whom they interact, for example medical scientists who need to understand African concepts of disease causation.

Specifically the ideas that are investigated here concern the sources of wealth and poverty, and the ways in which ordinary Africans conceptualize the African dilemma of poverty and underdevelopment. Therefore the book is also relevant to understanding the ways in which more educated Africans perceive the economic problems of the continent today, especially if their education did not include the discipline of economics. People in general understand new information in terms of old information. Isichei shows that the concept of economic exchange as a zero-sum game, incidentally intrinsic to the process of bargaining in the marketplace (though she never mentions that fact), is central to the economic paradigm of most Africans.

In part 1 Isichei considers how this basic paradigm affected perceptions of the Atlantic slave trade, looking at aspects of those perceptions ranging from the belief that whites were cannibals to the idea that cowries, the so-called “shell money of the slave trade,” literally fed on the bodies of slaves. She even goes to the New World to examine African American folk beliefs about the African slave trade.

Isichei is right that the ideas in question are oxymoronically “true fictions” (p. 39) in that they express metaphoric realities, but as fictions they are less useful for manipulating reality than are more modern, scientific paradigms. Had it been otherwise Africa would not be in the condition it is today. Nonetheless, the ideas dealt with here are not only interesting in themselves, they are important for anyone working in Africa to understand.

The second, longer section of the book continues the story of the development of African folk ideas into the colonial and postcolonial eras. Ideas elucidated here include zombies, vampires, magic associated with money, folk beliefs about AIDS, the impact of the Bible on African thought, the spread of the Mami Wata cult, ambiguous reactions to “modernization,” and the symbolic and metaphoric meanings of “eat” in African languages.

The strengths of this book are many. It is very interdisciplinary, and will be useful for scholars in many fields. It introduces new paradigms, specifically the paradigms used by Africans to understand their world. Such paradigms are often dismissed as “superstition” but without taking such superstitions into account we cannot understand the African world view. This is important to scholars of Africa whether we are interested in understanding such paradigms as an end in itself, or whether we have another purpose. This book is thought provoking and will be very useful as much for the thoughts it provokes as for the ones it describes. For example, this book reminded me of the two meanings of the Hausa word *zamananci* (literally “modernism” or “modernity”). Bargery defined the word as “the disrespectful or unseemly behaviour prevalent today ... as contrasted with the ‘good old days,’” and “[b]eing up to date in fashions,

&c.[1] These two ambivalent meanings, of course, reflect the African concepts of modernization that Isichei describes, which have in turn grown out of Africans' ambiguous experiences with the modern world. This is in such sharp contrast to the experience of Europe, North America, and Japan that scholars in the developed world sometimes assume that Africans have not experienced modernization at all, rather than realizing that their experience with modernization has been less happy than our own.

This book also demonstrates why so much of the African discourse about slave trade reparations conceived of the damage done by the trade as a zero-sum game, that could be rectified by a simple transfer of money to Africa. In fact, the period of the slave trade, which saw the paradigm shifts in African thought documented in this book, also gave rise to science and the Age of Reason in Europe and North America. Without a similar paradigm shift in African thought, no mere transfer of funds is likely to lead to African development. The African folk concepts of the nature of money also documented in this book would tend to confirm that. Other readers, of course, will find their own thoughts stimulated in particular ways by this book.

Like all books this one has weaknesses. Lack of a folkloristic background on the author's part has led to some confusing use of technical terms. For example the term "myth" is used to mean a motif (p. 67), and "motif" is sometimes similarly used in non-technical ways. It is true that film scholars use "motif" in a very different way than folklorists do, but this book deals not so much with film as with folklore. Similarly, Isichei seems to be unaware of the use of such reference tools as folk-tale and motif indexes, although in her defense it should be pointed out that such indexes are of limited applicability to African data. A more serious shortcoming is that

she seems unaware of the work of folklorists in attempting to trace the origin and spread of folkloristic materials (p. 68).

Historians who use oral traditional data are in fact using folkloristic materials as evidence with which to reconstruct the past. Historians, like ethnographers, are looking for facts. Both make an underlying assumption that they are describing a reality: present reality in the case of ethnographers, former reality in the case of historians.

Folklorists do not care whether the materials they investigate are "true" in some positivist sense or not; they are interesting, therefore they are worth studying. Nevertheless, historians could profit from the insights of folklorists into how those folkloristic materials are produced and reproduced, and how they tend to change in that reproduction. Since Isichei is specifically interested in folk ideas and how those ideas have been used to interpret reality (which can suggest to historians how such ideas have affected oral historical data), the absence of folkloristics from the interdisciplinary mix that has gone into the creation of this book is an unfortunate omission.

There are a few minor mistakes. The Biblical curse of Canaan (Genesis 9:25) is misattributed to all the descendants of Noah's son Ham (p. 180) but this misattribution is hardly unique to this book.

Despite these minor errors, the book is an important contribution to our understanding of Africa. It may become one of those "must read" books for all Africanists.

#### Note

[1]. G. P. Bargery, *A Hausa-English Dictionary and English-Hausa Vocabulary* (London; Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 1126.

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