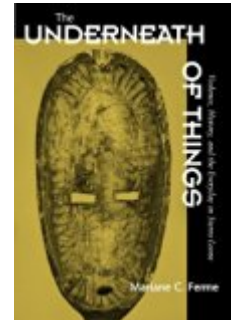


**Mariane C. Ferme.** *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone.* Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001. xii + 287 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-22542-8.



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**Published on** H-Africa (May, 2003)

Ethnographers face the risk that between the time of their research and the publication of their findings the nature of their field site will have irrevocably changed. Between the mid-1980s, when Mariane Ferme began and conducted the bulk of her research for this book, and 2000, when it was published, the small West African nation of Sierra Leone has been wracked by violence. Notably, the civil war that raged through Sierra Leone during the 1990s was remarkable for the brutality exacted on civilians. Ever since Robert Kaplan published his polemic and problematic article, "The Coming Anarchy," Sierra Leone has been situated in the academic imagination as a land whose exotic allure has been its nexus on the boundaries between chaos and civilization. Under such circumstances, the temptation (whether of publisher or author) to plant a book firmly in the fertile soil of the debates that situations such as these spawn would be great. From the title we can assume that Mariane Ferme intends to engage with these debates. Indeed in the introduction we are lured by the promise that this book will probe "not only the questions of origins ('How could this [civil war] occur?') but also issues of a sociocultural na-

ture and that sometimes are associated with violent practices" (p. 1). In the ensuing chapters we learn that the primary focus of this book is not violence or history. Instead, we are presented with a wonderfully detailed excursion into the everyday life of the Mande people.

These wonderfully rich ethnographic materials are presented in six chapters and three short "interludes." This book covers such an impressive range of materials that it is difficult to summarize them in a short review. The first chapter, "Immaterial Practices," serves to dislodge the reader's sense of permanence, reminding the reader that what we see on the surface is of recent creation, particularly in the context of the civil war that has so marked the landscape, which, we are rightfully reminded, is but a short pause in a longer history of shifts that have occurred across the Sierra Leonean landscape. The remaining chapters present a more conventional reading of the Mande ethnographic materials. Chapters 2 and 3 address marriage and gender relations. Chapter 4 examines residence patterns with a particular focus on the "Big House" or the "extended [women's]

household." Chapter 5 takes the reader into an examination of the "big people" (*kpako*) and the ways by which the Mande deploy an ascetic of self-hood to legitimize their position. And lastly, chapter 6 looks at children and the meaning of names in Mande society.

In addition to these full-length chapters Mariane Ferme interweaves three delightful ethnography "interludes" between several of the chapters. These present interesting side examinations of cloth and hair weaving, kola nuts, and clay and palm oil.

In the introduction to this book Mariane Ferme promises to present an examination of secrecy in Mande society that will link "a historically grounded analysis of everyday material culture, language, and social practices [with] an account of the aesthetics of ambiguity" (p. 9). Through much of this book this thread is lost in the wealth of ethnographic materials. As stated above, the title and stated objective of this work do not fully match the content. But I mention this as only a mild criticism and with an appreciation for the fact that perhaps the title is much too modest. I did come away from this text with the feeling that I had been taken "underneath the things" of Mande culture and society, but perhaps not in the way that the author had intended. The author intends this to be a journey into a central dimension of Mande cultural experience. From this text it appears that this underneath is that space of hidden meanings that only becomes apparent through familiarity and experience, the familiarity achieved and successfully conveyed by a skilled observer.

The sensitive examination of Mande culture and society that is presented in this work will be a valuable addition to the literature on this region of West Africa and one of its most important culture groups. Particularly impressive is the subtlety with which women's perspectives have been woven throughout this text. The old and rightly discredited ethnographic practice of writing from

a male voice and using male informants is turned on its head. This dimension of this text poignantly comes though in chapter 4 in the discussion of residence patterns. This chapter opens with a discussion of the "big house," which is a women's house, and men's residences enter only parenthetically. The effect can be unsettling, particularly for readers who are accustomed to a naturalized male perspective, but is very effective for naturalizing and authenticating a female Mande perspective. It also speaks to the author's ethnographic integrity: she leads us through her experience of Mande society and resists the temptation to speak to issues and domains in Mande society that she did not encounter.

I do feel that this excellent text could have been made even stronger had it been authored from cover to cover with a complete awareness of the fact that it is an ethnographic exploration of Mande society and culture. The distracting lack of fit between title, introduction, and text may be the artifact of a publishing industry that places panache before substance. Indeed to me it seems that an opportunity is lost in the allusion to violence. How wonderful it is to read a richly ethnographic text that celebrates the peoples and cultures of Sierra Leone--which this book achieves quite remarkably--to unhinge the dominant images of violence that so dominate western perspectives on this nation and indeed much of the region.

This said, I would have welcomed several simple additions to the text. First, this book presents too little background on the Mande and other culture groups of the region. We are not even provided with a map that would allow us to situate the location where this research was conducted. In addition, I would have liked to have more of an understanding of how Ferme conducted this research. What we know of her methodology we learn by reading between the lines of the ethnographic materials.

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**Citation:** Michael C. Lambert. Review of Ferme, Mariane C. *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. May, 2003.

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