

Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Yoruba Sacred Kingship: "A Power like That of the Gods" by John Pemberton, III; Fun## S. Af#layan

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Reviewed by J. LORAND MATORY

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Yoruba sacred kingship is a vivid and detailed account of contemporary ritual life in the town of Ila, southwestern Nigeria. It focuses particularly on the annual cycle of rites for ancestors and gods (òriṣà) that undergirds the authority of the town's king, known as the Orangun, but it also attends to the rites that dramatize the historical autonomy of local sub-groups that have resisted the sovereignty of this king. In this setting the authors illuminate the interplay of dominant and subaltern histories while examining the role of collective memory and politics in ritual performance generally.

Although the town of Ila and its monarch hold an exceptional importance among Yoruba polities, they illustrate principles of government and of historical consciousness that might be recognized in any Yoruba town. Like other Yoruba towns, Ila plays host to multiple and rival narrations of the historical past (itan), of which annual and biennial ritual observances are invoked as proof. Some narrations and the related rituals dramatize the claims of the kingship to central authority, while others dramatize the claims of subject lineages to autonomy or to their distinctive rights as the original rulers of the town. Still other rituals appear to mediate the rival claims of rulers and ruled, and, in service to the greater good, dramatize the chiefs' ultimate acquiescence to the centralizing and ordering power of the king.

Yoruba political history and contemporary socio-political order have inspired countless publications since the nineteenth century, and Yoruba art history is now an international growth industry. Beautifully bound and richly illustrated in both color and black-and-white photos, this book reveals anthropologist John Pemberton's lengthy collaboration with the community of Yoruba art historians and his demonstrated skills in the photographic documentation of Yoruba art. Afolayan has brought to the project his extensive experience not only at collecting Yoruba oral literature but also at the far more difficult task of translating and interpreting it as a source of history.

Pemberton and Afolayan together take full advantage of the anthropological literature as well, addressing themselves to "rituals of rebellion," to bor-

row a phrase from the Manchester School. In numerous rituals the chiefs of non-royal houses ritually defy or express mistrust of the king. The authors explain this defiance as a reflection of past historical conquest and of a now-established balance of power in the characteristically semi-centralized Yoruba kingship (in contrast to the centralized kingships of neighboring Benin and Dahomey, for example).

As deftly as it reproduces the successes of these diverse disciplines, Yoruba sacred kinship is exceptional with respect to all of them. Along with J.K. Olupona's Kingship, religion, and rituals in a Nigerian community, this book is truly exceptional in the degree to which it details the conjunction of Yoruba religion and politics in a single town. Like the best of ethnography, it eschews both de-contextualized generalizations and the "ethnographic present." It instead documents the ongoing changes in a local ritual complex that have followed from the growth of Christianity and Islam, from the demands of the Nigerian state, and from named actors' improvised responses to the unforeseen illnesses, absences, preferences, and objections of other named human actors. Pemberton and Afolayan's accomplishment will find an enthusiastic audience in anthropology, art history, and the study of religion, but political scientists concerned with the renaissance of "traditional authorities" amid the perplexing evolution of the African national state would also do well to take note.

Though set in one town and carefully attentive to the patterns of politics and religion in a specific African ethnic group, Yoruba sacred kingship also endeavors to illustrate some cross-cultural principles in the relationship among ritual, memory, and politics. Following Connerton in his How societies remember (1989), Pemberton and Afolayan emphasize the role of ritual performance as a relatively unchanging medium and therefore as an exceptionally reliable repository of historical memory. Thus, on the one hand, the authors try to use contemporary ritual to reconstruct an objective event history of the town's distant past. They thus valuably and credibly revise the dominant view that the migration of Odudua's children outward from Ile-Ife represents

the beginning of statecraft in the region. On the basis of histories recounted in non-royal houses and the orisà festivals, proverbs, and traditional poetry (oriki) that evoke them, Pemberton and Afolayan argue that important constituent chiefdoms within the Odudua-centered kingdom of Ila have non-Ife dynastic origins. Thus, what the authors call "counternarratives" of history are shown to possess the same reality and historiographic worth as their dominant counterparts. Thus, most importantly, we are encouraged to examine ritual as a check against the claims of dominant narrations of history.

On the other hand, Pemberton and Afolayan carefully document how contemporary actors (such as Muslims and Christians) have demanded changes in the rituals, how rituals are revised to accommodate changing circumstances, and how actors with different political interests have interpreted the historical implications of specific rituals differently. Such fine-grained observations could lead us to question the general reliability of rituals and of recently told oral narratives as "memory," or sources of objective corrections in event history.

The pursuit of analytical balance between (1) the reconstruction of event history and (2) the interpretation of historical narrative and ritual as dependent variables in a contemporary politics is an old one indeed, with wide-ranging implications. Melville J. Herskovits and his followers have analyzed ritual and other conventions of bodily movement as "survivals," or embodied memories, of African Americans' African past, while Sidney Mintz and Richard Price are keen to note how such alleged "survivals" reflect a changing New-World socio-political con-

text. In his analysis of "oral tradition," Jan Vansina weighed in on the side of event history, and Arjun Appadurai too has recently insisted that the past is not infinitely manipulable in modern political apologetics. In the North American "culture wars" of the past decade or so, the American Right has employed increasingly shrill tones in representing its own narration of the past as a unique inheritance of objective knowledge. They deride alternative narrations of that past (and especially those that confess that the historical record requires interpretation) as nothing more than myth-making in the service of contemporary leftist or minority politics. Yoruba historiography thus bears a critical and current lesson for us: only if we presume that dominant history is objective history can the social scientist give up the pursuit of analytic balance or renounce the productive tension that Pemberton and Afolayan demonstrate in their contextualized history of Ila.

In carefully demonstrating one resolution of this dilemma in a richly detailed African setting where so many people care about history, Pemberton and Afolayan have made an incalculable contribution. Indeed, Yoruba sacred kingship is a highly credible and scholarly documentation of a local debate over politics and social memory within a community of Yoruba intellectuals and political actors. The detail and respect with which Pemberton and Afolayan document that debate through ethnographic description, quotation, and photography make this book a monument to a debated Yoruba present, whose gorgeously ritualized details will henceforth never be forgotten.

The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg. RICHARD HANDLER and ERIC GABLE. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1997; 260 pp.

Reviewed by RICHARD J. PARMENTIER Brandeis University

Cultural anthropology's recent increased fascination with the reflexive ethnographic experience and concern with the material world as a locus of meaning are coupled in this meticulous and well written study of Colonial Williamsburg, a museum complex based on the reconstruction of the late eighteenth-century capital of Virginia. Inspired by the 1920s vision of a local Episcopal minister and funded by John D. Rockefeller Jr., this "living museum" rapidly grew into a major tourist attraction and also became a

model for the construction of other historical museums. The ethnographic task facing Handler and Gable was made difficult, first, because of the overall size and complexity of the site as a total institution and, second, because of the fact that each day as fieldworkers they encountered different tourists experiencing varying interpretive messages.

Handler and Gable's ethnographic exposition favors the particular over the systematic (or the "microsociological" level of interaction over the