



Laurent Monnier, Yvan Droz, eds. *Cote Jardin, Cote Cour: Anthropologie de la Maison Africaine*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004. 282 pp. EUR 18.50 (paper), ISBN 978-2-88247-053-9.



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What Does *sociabilité* Mean in Africa?

This book is based on the proceedings from a conference organized in February 2003 by the Institut universitaire d'Études du Développement (the IUED) and the Société suisse d'Études africaines (SGAS) entitled "Garden Side, Courtyard Side: Plural Visions on the Current Economy of the African house." The subtitle has been changed to "Anthropology of the African house," and four new articles have been usefully added to the second part of the book. The title may sound enigmatic both in French and in English. The expression "Côté jardin, côté cour" was inspired by Tchicaya U Tam'si, a Congolese writer who describes the life of a Brazzaville family just after independence from two points of view: the garden side (*côté jardin*), which looks transparent, and the courtyard side (*côté cour*), reserved for initiated people.[1] The coordinators of the book suggest that political actors and the economy of the continent could be analyzed using this dichotomy.

The notion of "African house" used by the coordinators is very large indeed. If it obviously refers to the single unit of residence, it also refers in this book to the

nation, the state, a smaller portion of territory or even a diaspora. Thus, rather than a classical "anthropology of the African house," this book is an attempt to understand some larger topics concerning the continent today: namely, the organization of the state, the so-called informal economy, migration patterns, and the processes of globalization and modernization in Africa. The initial aim of the conference and the book is to understand *sociabilité* in Africa today (p. 11).[2] While no definition is given in the introduction, the reader understands gradually that *sociabilité* is probably synonymous with social networks; hence the analysis of so many different social and political units in the book (such as international trade networks, diasporas, village authorities, formal and informal political institutions, women's associations, etc.). Considering the metaphorical meaning that can attach to notions of *cour* (compound), *jardin* (garden), *maison* (house) and *sociabilité*, it is easy to imagine the hard task the editors had in summarizing the large body of literature on so many diverse topics. Let's have an idea of the different papers before coming back to these editorial considerations.

Under the title, "Economy of the African House," Laurent Monnier and Yvan Droz deal mainly with two topics: the state and the formation of a "modern elite," and the emergence of the informal economy. The authors convincingly argue that the distinction between "formal" and "informal" economy dates back to the historical process of colonial domination in Africa. The presentation of the emergence of *volus*—an educated social class whose class identity is borrowed from the West (pp. 24-25)—is, however, less convincing. Social historians as well as political scientists have insisted on the fact that this "modern elite" was far from a homogenous group: most of the *volus* were able to bridge the gap between European and African cultural practices.[3] From a different political point of view, Thophile Vittin explores *sociabilit * in the contemporary Benin Republic and the way the "Benin house" (i.e., the country itself), has been administrated since 1991. According to the author, political actors perform differently within and outside the "house:" the garden side being the democratic model and the courtyard being the invisible part of partisan politics. Local *sociabilit * is examined at a larger scale (a specific courtyard in Ouagadougou) by Sylvain Froidevaux through the relationships between housing, social networks and power in the capital of Burkina Faso. The history of such a house is especially interesting in terms of how conflicts have been managed after the death of the household's head, but how this specific story is representative of nowadays practices of local *sociabilit * in Ouagadougou is not clear. In her paper, Sandra Bolland also looks at power relations between two social groups, the nobility and the *jasare* (or griots) in Zarma society (Niger), through the songs she recorded. Very interesting accounts are provided of the need for the nobility to use *jasare* to enshrine its legitimacy within a long historical ascendance, whereas *jasare* tends to reverse the social hierarchy while they are performing.

Other papers of the book focus on trade networks, diasporas, and globalization. François Piguet goes over the various trade networks operating in Somaliland in the last decades from an economic perspective. Today the regional economy is based on cattle exports, money transfer from diasporas, and the re-exportation of Dubai-imported goods to the rest of Africa. Somaliland acts as a large warehouse for the whole region mainly due to recent dynamics in transnational networks trade. Mahaman Tidjani Alou examines a similar topic with the social and economic practices of *convois* in Niger (organized trade of imported goods by a float of trucks). These *convois* constitute a way for petty traders to use

"big men's" trucks, in order to both save money at the border and bring easily manufactured goods from Lagos, Cotonou or Dubai. Traders and truck drivers use networks of *sociabilit * based on personal and working relations, whereas the efficiency of heads of *convois* mainly relies on social capital as well as on their ability to organize the corruption of state agents and custom officers. Very different from the above papers is Lay Tshiala's article on *mutumbula*, a rumor that swept the Congo in the 1960s that native people were being kidnapped and changed into cows in order to be eaten. The introduction of the first cows by a White missionary and a Congolese schoolmaster in the rural hinterland radically changed the organization of village authorities, the land division of space (between farmers and stockbreeders), and the perception of race relationships. Without any link to the previous paper, Jules Bagalwa Mapatano studies Congolese money-saving associations for women (or *tontines*) in Switzerland. They represent a way to get access to credit, as well as to meet other people and develop investments within and outside Congo. Finally, Till F rster ends this session with a more theoretical paper on the "ethnological perspective of globalization practices" (p. 209). He criticizes the globalization concept as invasive, even not relevant once applied to empirical research, and generally perceived as an external movement which forces Africa to move ahead. He convincingly looks at the way African societies can be actors in the globalization process, using, for instance, home videos produced in Nigeria and given the popularity of Indian and Brazilian movies in many parts of the continent.

The two papers proposed in the debate section (from Jean-Michel Servet and Gilles S raphin) give critical readings of some articles mentioned above and remind us that such studies should be integrated in larger contexts and comparative studies. Gauthier de Villers also informs the reader of the value of *tontines* in Africa not only as social organizations but as political practices, the power being shared alternatively by a handful of politicians. Finally, Eric Morier-Genoud offers a review of nine books, mainly written by French-speaking academics and journalists since 2000. Interestingly he places these books within the larger debate on Afro-optimism/Afro-pessimism as well as within the complexity of the modernization process and globalization in Africa.

The richness of the book comes from this diversity of fieldworks, from an interesting mix of theoretical debates and more empirical studies and from its multidisciplinary approach (ethnology, anthropology, sociology,

economy, political science) and methodological diversity (interviews, songs, press cuttings, participatory observation). However, while most of individual papers prove to be really valuable, one wonders if the scope selected by the editors was not too large.

Thus, after reading the book, it is difficult to have a clear idea of what “an anthropology of the African house” should be, because the issues covered in the case studies are too different. They have no obvious links, except for the two papers on trade networks in Somaliland and Niger, which allow an interesting comparative analysis by Jean-Michel Servet. Using the term “house” and its components (garden and courtyard) to better understand the complexity and ambivalence of political or social units in Africa (compounds, cities, larger areas, nation-states or transnational activities) is probably not entirely satisfactory because it lumps together very different social and political dynamics under a single umbrella notion. Actually, many authors do not refer explicitly to *sociabilit * nor to the “African house” in their papers. As for the ones who do use the term, it could have been interesting to interrogate what *sociabilit * means in African studies. Most authors in the book use the term without defining it, whereas it covers various meanings in different disciplines (mainly anthropology, sociology, history, and political science). In short, the

reader will learn a lot from each individual contribution but may remain skeptical about the scientific coherence of this collective enterprise.

Notes

[1]. Tchicaya U Tam’si, *Ces fruits si doux de l’arbre   pain* (Paris: Senghers, 1987).

[2]. Since the term *sociabilit * does not strictly translate into the English “sociability,” we prefer to keep the French word in the review.

[3]. Mamadou Diouf, “Assimilation coloniale et identit  religieuse de la civilit  des originaires des Quatre Communes (S n gal),” in *AOF: r alit s et h ritages. Soci t s ouest africaines et ordre colonial, 1895-1960*, ed. Charles Becker, Saliou Mbaye and Ibrahima Thioub (Dakar: Direction des Archives du S n gal, 1997), pp. 837-850; Florence Bernault, *D mocraties ambigu s en Afrique centrale: Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, 1940-1965* (Paris: Karthala, 1996); Jean-Herv  J z quel, “Les enseignants comme  lite politique 1930-1945. Des meneurs de galopin dans l’ar ne,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines*, 178 (2005), <http://etudesafricaines.revues.org/document5458.html>.

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