

Performing Africa. Paula Ebron. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002. 272 pp.

Performing Africa is an intriguing ethnography that explores *jali* performers and performances within the small West African nation of the Gambia and in the United States. *Jali* are hereditary groups of Mandinka-speaking praise singers (griots in French), consisting of both men and women, whose songs not only provide an oral history of the region, but also affect the public reputations of their patrons. This ethnography is based on more than a year of field and archival research with *jali* from all over the Gambia, from urban, suburban, and rural settings. Ebron writes in a self-reflexive, accessible, and engaging manner, illuminating her position not only as an ethnographer from the United States, but also as a woman of the African Diaspora on the African continent.

Ebron is very interested in the circulation and production of ideas of “Africa.” The major themes of the book are performance, representation, and cultural commodities. These are utilized as the central analytic frames in *Performing Africa*, examining the ways in which concepts of Africa are produced through performance, the performance of Africa becomes its representation, and performances of Africa are circulated as commodities.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section looks at the idea of representation and performance. Here, Ebron notes that most studies of representation are based on written texts, and thus directs her study to fill the gap by looking at performance, embodied and oral, as representation. She also seeks to extend studies of performance, which are often criticized as being too local and even individual in perspective. Ebron makes a valuable contribution in both of these areas. In chapter one Ebron examines the ways in which the category of “African music” was created, defined as communal and rhythmic, and placed in opposition to that of individualistic, complex, Western music. “African music” became a category signifying difference, which in turn represents Africa as a whole. Chapter two looks at several performance events of *jali*, both in the Gambia and the United States, as ways to access conceptions of Africa that are performed by the *jali* as well as audience members.

The second section of the book looks at the role of *jali* in national history, their “personalistic economy,” and their individual performances during interviewing sessions. Chapter three examines *jali* and the contestations and negotiations surrounding a government-sponsored oral history as part of nation-building in post-independence Gambia. Chapter four explores the importance of interpersonal communication in the patron-client relationship as the basis of *jali* livelihood, as well as the performatives of *jali* in creating public power for their patrons with their spoken words. Ebron recounts the performance of self by individual *jali* in chapter five based on her interview encounters.

The third section of the book moves to the sphere of tourism in which *jali*, although present and performing, are not the only Gambians involved. Chapter six examines the sexual tourism of Western women traveling to the Gambia to find young, male partners. This is a situation in which ideas of gender are reconfigured, so that Gambian men are “feminized” based on the power and status of these Western travelers. Chapter seven focuses on African-Americans going to the Gambia as “pilgrims” returning on a homeland tour (sponsored by McDonald’s interestingly enough), and explores their imagined Africa and the cultural misunderstandings and miscommunications that occur. Many of the issues raised in this chapter are similar to those discussed by Edward Bruner in his article on the conflicting interpretations

and meanings of Elmina Castle in Ghana between Ghanaians and the people of the African Diaspora visiting there (Bruner 1996).

An overarching goal of the book is to directly confront the challenge presented to anthropologists to examine the local, while still tying it in to larger national and global issues and perspectives. Ebron draws upon the ideas of global flow of Arjun Appadurai (1996), and does an excellent job of showing connections between *jali*, Gambia, and the broader world. For example, in chapter four, Ebron demonstrates that *jali* make interpersonal connections locally, on the national level, and abroad as a way to secure opportunities for performances, generating income for themselves at many levels. Similarly, in the third chapter Ebron examines the place of post-independence Gambia on the world stage, the role that the oral histories of the *jali* played in solidifying its status as a nation with its own history apart from the colonial past, and the significance of development funding to support such projects. Moreover, in her discussion of sexual tourism involving Western women in Gambia, Ebron explores the motivations, aspirations, and power differentials in these relationships, reexamining “a critical, transnational aspect of the social construction of gender” (170). Although Ebron includes a global perspective at most points, a slight drawback of the book is the loss of the “local,” in that there is not much sense of any particular locale as the setting of the ethnography, as it is an amalgam of many different places. However, in an age in which multi-sited ethnography is becoming more common, Ebron’s work fits in well.

Performing Africa is a well written ethnography that presents many challenging questions that will be of interest to Africanists, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and scholars of both cultural and performance studies alike.

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REFERENCES

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