

BOOK REVIEW

Tasha Rijke-Epstein. *Children of the Soil: The Power of Built Form in Urban Madagascar*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2023. 376 pp. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781478025290.

Part of Review forum on “Children of the Soil: The Power of Built Form in Urban Madagascar”

Children of the Soil considers the history of Mahajanga, a city on the northwest coast of Madagascar from ancient times through the mid-1700s to the advent of French colonial rule in the 1890s and into the early postcolonial period of the 1960s and 1970s. Tasha Rijke-Epstein reconstructs this history with great care and subtlety. She is most attentive to what she describes as “quiet and hidden” practices, moments that “can rarely be found in documentary sources and instead demand an attunement to the oft-unseen, whispered, and nuanced dimensions of everyday life” (226). *Children of the Soil* is rooted in nearly three years of ethnographic research in Madagascar that included extensive archival and oral history work, and countless conversations with people about their lives and those of their ancestors.

Rijke-Epstein contributes to the transdisciplinary fields of migration and autochthony studies, architectural studies, waste and water studies, religious studies, affect studies, and the anthropology and history of Madagascar and the wider Indian Ocean world. At the heart of the book is an argument about how people from the Comoros and elsewhere in the Indian Ocean built homes and lives for themselves in Mahajanga and made themselves not into natives but into *zanatany*, “children of the soil.” As Rijke-Epstein explains, *zanatany* is a “forceful claim to insider status” (18).

Within Madagascar studies, this is an important contribution. For decades, other anthropologists and historians have examined how the Merina and Sakalava have built and maintained tombs in which they bury and rebury their dead. The likes of Maurice Bloch, Gillian Feeley-Harnik, Pier Larson, and Jennifer Cole have shown how people in Madagascar have long created life and kin through acts of physical and spiritual emplacement.

Rijke-Epstein demonstrates how Comorian immigrants recognized Sakalava as the guardians/owners of Mahajanga but also produced their own strong attachments through marriage and through building homes of increasing durability. We witness, in her telling, an “ethics of being a good settler” (19), a way of embedding oneself and one’s kin in a new place over decades and generations that insists on mutual recognition and ongoing reciprocity with its first inhabitants. Yet, as Rijke-Epstein so heartbreakingly renders, *zanatany* claims-making is hard-fought and fragile. In 1976–77, it broke down entirely with violent

pogroms against Comorians and Comorian-Gasys. Many were murdered and others forced to leave Madagascar.

What I see as Rijke-Epstein's greatest analytical achievement is her simultaneous and sustained attention to materiality and to the more-than-human, a dual attention she maintains throughout every chapter and throughout every time period and topic she discusses. In her introduction, Rijke-Epstein makes a case for the analytical significance of built forms by smartly explaining how they "occupy a mediating space between agency and structuring forces" (3). In her hands, built forms also occupy a "mediating space" between materials and more-than-humans. The materials include palms, mangrove poles, mortar, and limestone—itsself the product of marine organisms deposited over million years old. They also include corrugated tin, animal fat, and umbilical cords. The more-than-human overlaps with the material in the form of trees, stones, and vital fluids but then extends into the realm of spirituality and religion to include ancestral presences, water deities, and Sufi networks and ascetism.

Seldom have I read a work that brings the material and the more-than-human into such deep and sustained conversation. The final chapter, "Residual Lives and Afterlives," is a tour-de-force in this regard. Rijke-Epstein reveals how diverse and potent spiritual entities were "active presences in the unfolding biographies" of cesspools, latrines, septic tanks, buckets, and a swimming pool. These inequitable forms of infrastructure and anti-infrastructure were conjured in colonial Mahajanga through the cross-pollination of tangible materials and abiding spiritual concerns. Similarly, in the chapter entitled "Garnered Presences," she insightfully explores mosque construction as an "excessive phenomenon," one that was so suffused with Sufi values and affective ties that it swamped colonial logics.

A key question I had in reading *Children of the Soil* was about the place of the postcolonial in the histories she tells. Postcolonial times are both very much present in this book and very much absent. They are present in that Rijke-Epstein's exceptionally deep ethnographic and historical research was conducted in postcolonial times. They are also present in the book's epilogue as the violent pogroms took place in the mid-1970s, more than 15 years after Madagascar's formal independence. But the postcolonial is largely absent in the previous chapters that move chronologically, from deep history through French colonial rule. The analytical effect is that the deeper past—the past before 1960—weighs heavily on the present. Implicitly, if not explicitly, the past sixty years come off as less consequential for understanding the present day.

For instance, in the final chapter "Violent Remnants," Rijke-Epstein chronicles the lasting influence of French colonial waste and water systems that were unimaginative, ill-informed, and starkly inequitable. I was left wondering, though, about postcolonial dynamics that continue to impede the construction of more equitable and less onerous systems. For example, I wondered what prevents the revival of private mechanical latrine cleaning services like the ones that the Ah-Than brothers operated from 1937 through the 1970s, or efforts at more systemic waste management by the state. Here I have in mind postcolonial dynamics such as electoral politics and patronage networks, the flow of economic resources into and out of the country, and the significant increase in urban

populations and unemployment. Rijke-Epstein knows about these conditions but chooses to limit her discussion of them to a few pages in the epilogue. This choice leaves underexplored questions about why *zanatany* claims-making appears to have become a less secure and more perilous strategy for belonging during the postcolonial period.

Perhaps there are bigger questions here for historical ethnographers of Africa: in trying to better understand and “decolonize” the present, how might we think through the relative and compounding influence of colonial and postcolonial formations? How might fuller consideration of both continuity and rupture over the past two centuries contribute to more telling visions of the future?

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