

Reviews

Market Encounters: consumer cultures in twentieth-century Ghana by
BIANCA MURILLO

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Economic histories of global capitalism have too often overlooked the ways that African women and men have understood their positions in relation to exploitative world systems and institutions. Within the extensive scholarship on Ghana's economic history, Ghanaians recurrently appear as cocoa farmers, gold miners, market women, railroad workers or coastal merchants – but rarely, if ever, has a study focused on Ghanaians' consumer preferences, experiences and aspirations. In *Market Encounters: consumer cultures in twentieth-century Ghana*, Bianca Murillo makes a critical intervention into African economic history by emphasising the need to treat Africans as discerning consumers who have historically cultivated sophisticated ideas about the global, national and local circulation and accumulation of capital through their experiences at shops, markets, department stores and trade fairs.

This important contribution to African economic, social and cultural historiography traces the history of 'consumer politics' (21) from the First World War to the late 1970s. *Market Encounters* unfolds in five chapters, each of which offers a window into the experiences of those Murillo calls 'commercial intermediaries', such as retail shopkeepers, department store staff, credit customers and other 'middle figures' within distributive networks (8 and 62). Drawing on critical race theory and feminist scholarship to guide her analysis, Murillo vividly reconstructs commercial spaces to explore the interpersonal dynamics constituted by diverse actors working within them. In so doing, she exposes how men and women, young people and adults, and people from different nationalities and class backgrounds negotiated and at times inverted the established racial, gendered and generational hierarchies around them.

Individual actors bring to life Murillo's arguments and observations. In Chapter 2, for example, the reader meets Mr Isaac Ogoe, whose ability to leverage his trade knowledge, balance various loyalties and communicate across multiple languages enabled him to become an indispensable resource to the United Africa Company and a highly respected figure in his home city of Sekondi by the 1950s. To others, such knowledge and influence proved a mixed blessing. In Chapter 3, Murillo highlights how some young women working at the Kingsway Department Store in Accra in the 1960s were harshly critiqued for transcending gendered and generational expectations by being appointed to positions of authority in such a modern, desirable space. Such stories are meticulously reconstructed from an impressive repertoire of primary sources, including most notably oral historical testimonies from over 30 Ghanaians, records from Unilever's corporate archives, and letters collected from archives in Ghana, the UK and Switzerland.

A core issue *Market Encounters* grapples with is the ways in which Ghanaians addressed the accumulation and circulation of wealth. During the colonial era, Africans in the Gold Coast framed the operations of the United Africa Company as a form of witchcraft, because the firm sent its profits back to Europe rather than reinvesting them in local economies or supporting the communities where the firm operated. Later, after the overthrow of Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, whose administration was condemned for corruptly accumulating the nation's wealth, the subsequent regime portrayed Ghana's first ever International Trade Fair as a celebration of Ghanaian citizens' restored ability to consume. The state once again curbed consumption in the 1970s in its efforts to halt the improper accumulation of wealth. Murillo crucially reframes scholarship on this period, which is largely dominated by grand narratives of state failure, economic decline and cowed political life, by showing how Ghanaians engaged with the military state toward their own ends, including to exact revenge on personal enemies.

Market Encounters will not only invigorate African economic historiography, but it will also prove an excellent text for use in courses on African colonial and post-colonial history. Murillo's close engagement with a variety of revealing sources provides readers with thick descriptions of life in Ghana, and her rigorous analytical discussions are presented in clear and engaging prose. Experts and undergraduates alike will thoroughly enjoy reading this pivotal book.

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The Value of Disorder: autonomy, prosperity and plunder in the Chadian Sahara by JULIEN BRACHET & JUDITH SCHEELE

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'Saharan studies' has recently captured renewed attention as a result of the wider context of 'foreign military interventions' (7). Yet, sources have regularly portrayed Northern Chad and the Saharan desert as 'next to places where "history" happens' (18), a marginal vacuum rather than a genuine locus, a transitional zone that travelers only cross. *The Value of Disorder*, by geographer Julien Brachet and anthropologist Judith Scheele, provides a creative and elegant attempt to debunk this image of emptiness, marginality and desolation. Drawing on an original, manifold combination of early classical accounts by precolonial explorers, local sources and long-term ethnographic research, the authors offer a fantastic range of perspectives on this little-researched land. They notably unravel the complex values of the Tubus. "Tubu" is an all-encompassing term devised by outsiders to refer to a major ethnic group of the Sahara, divided into Dazagada and Tedaga. As the authors note, they locally hold an incendiary reputation for pride, love of anarchy, and fearlessness.

The book begins by recalling the history of Faya and the broader Borkou region (Chapters 1 and 2), starting by examining its 'boom and bust' (75). Precolonial explorers like Gustav Nachtigal (1834–1885) characterised Borkou as isolated and empty. Yet, the authors argue that, by contrast, Borkou has been highly vulnerable to foreign interferences. The Sanussiyya, a 19th-century Sufi brotherhood,