

HISTORY

Stephanie Newell. *The Forger's Tale: The Search for Odeziaku*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. vii + 233 pp. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$46.95. Cloth. \$22.95. Paper.

At the very end of the nineteenth century John Mount Stewart Young, a Manchester youth of dismal working-class origins, invented a secret double life for himself financed by forgery. He rented a house in a “better part” of town, furnished it in middle-class style, collected books, hosted spiritualist meetings, and wrote lyrics and letters, as well as poems, reviews, and articles for provincial and national journals. When his embezzlement was discovered, he was tried, convicted, and sent to prison, ending his taste of British middle-class gentility.

Soon after his release from prison, J. M. Stuart-Young, as he soon became known, escaped from his stifling working-class origins by signing on to serve the Manchester firm of Miller Brothers as a clerk in Liberia. By 1905, Stuart-Young was trading imports and palm produce in Onitsha, the busy river port in Southern Nigeria, where he remained, with brief sojourns elsewhere, until he died in 1939. In Onitsha, Stuart-Young constructed a life of multiple identities that he never could have known in Britain. Beyond sometime successful British trader, the identities included poet, novelist, journalist, homosexual, and patron.

Stephanie Newell has written a penetrating analysis of Stuart-Young's life and work that sheds powerful new light not only on this sad, inventive man, but also on class, gender, sexuality, and colonialism within the British Empire. While the cultural analysis in the early chapters on class and empire is timeless and sometimes forced, the argument in later ones is convincing. Newell shows how as a young man Stuart-Young survived “his own sexual difference” (65) by forging a friendship with Oscar Wilde in letters and a “memoir” that illuminates the deeply ambivalent reactions of one queer reader to the publicity surrounding Wilde's trial. She then uncovers how in Onitsha Stuart-Young gratified and came to terms with “Uranian,” or boy-love, by sponsoring male youths and cloaking his sexual desire in patronage; in doing so, she illuminates the history of homosexuality in colonial Igboland.

Despite having achieved in Onitsha a class position and the emotional freedom he could probably never have attained in Britain, Stuart-Young not surprisingly retained the paternalistic and highly pejorative views of Africans characteristic of empire in the early decades of the twentieth century. Newell's smart interpretation of how he nonetheless became a regular contributor to the African-owned and early nationalist press of the period casts important new light on its primary project, which was, she argues, to serve as an instrument of open debate. Her analysis underscores the origins of the Nigerian press's long tradition of independence and freedom of

speech, which has played such a vital role in the nation's history.

Beyond being a good read and telling a fascinating story, this book makes significant new contributions to Queer, African, and British imperial history.

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Dmitri van den Bersselaar. *The King of Drinks: Schnapps Gin from Modernity to Tradition*. African Social Studies Series, vol. 18. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007. xiv + 268 pp. Photographs. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$99.00. Paper.

Early in this fascinating history of imported Dutch gin in West Africa, the author describes a Fon iron memorial staff dating from nineteenth-century Ouidah. At the top is a tableau featuring a figure of a prominent merchant, dressed in a top hat, seated at a table arrayed with a large container of rum surrounded by the distinctive square bottles that unmistakably contain Dutch gin, or schnapps. With his description of this object, van den Bersselaar reveals his deceptively simple theme: the incorporation of foreign commodities into local economic, political, and cultural systems—how “Dutch schnapps gin had become ‘African’” (228).

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, imports of Dutch and German gin into West Africa grew dramatically, dislodging American rum in much of the region and igniting an antiliquor movement in Europe and West Africa that ultimately led to severe restrictions on the trade. A number of scholars have looked at aspects of this controversy and at the history of alcohol in Africa. Van den Bersselaar shows a sophisticated mastery of that literature, but this is not really what *The King of Drinks* is about. Instead, the author approaches his topic as the history—or biography—of a commodity. And that commodity, schnapps, is as much those distinctive square containers as it is the liquor inside. That said, the book is oddly silent on the very mind-altering properties that define gin and other forms of alcohol as drugs.

Building on recent work on the history of African consumption, van den Bersselaar follows imported gin up and down the commodity chain, back and forth between Europe and West Africa, always maintaining the perspective of African consumers. In the process, his engaging narrative (strengthened by some fifty illustrations) illuminates, among other topics, the evolution of ritual and ritual substances in Ghana and Nigeria, the organization of wholesale and retail trade in the region, the development of industrial distillation in Holland and Germany, and the emergence of advertising. But what this important book most clearly teaches us is that the expansion of the commercial economy in West Africa during the twentieth