

HEALTH AND DISEASE

Anika Wilson. *Folklore, Gender, and AIDS in Malawi: No Secret Under the Sun*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. xi + 190 pp. Black-and-white illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$90. Cloth.

In this study, Anika Wilson looks at informal folk narratives such as advice, gossip, rumors, and urban legends in order to explore popular beliefs about marriage, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS in contemporary Malawian society. She argues that these narratives provide rich material for discussions about gender relations and public health because they provide “unofficial” perspectives, as opposed to “official” sources of knowledge such as governmental and nongovernmental agencies and the media.

The introductory chapter presents an overview of the book’s course of enquiry as well as the history of the Malawian HIV/AIDS epidemic, including its development, governmental policies, public health interventions, and media responses. It also outlines marriage practices and gender relations among the Tumbuka in northern Malawi, a rural area where Wilson conducted most of her field research. In order to analyze everyday conversations among Malawian women and men, Wilson uses a methodology that relies upon guided interviews as well as journals kept by locals who wrote down the stories they heard about marriage and HIV/AIDS. She discusses the difficulties that arise with this kind of fieldwork because the “journalers,” whom she recruited, instructed, and paid, did not keep verbatim records. Although she comments on the language barrier—she conducted the interviews with the help of a research assistant and interpreter, and the journalers wrote their entries primarily in English—she does not explore this issue and its implications for postcolonial studies research.

Each of the following chapters focuses on a particular kind of folk narrative. Chapter 2—aptly titled “Advice Is Good Medicine”—explores the advice young women receive from elders on questions concerning marriage, sexuality, children, and HIV/AIDS; since elders can confront and exercise power over the behavior of others, their authoritative position allows them to define and negotiate social norms and practices. Chapter 3 examines stories about social conflicts among women who, “in their effort to ensure fidelity of their spouses, . . . may resort to aggressive or confrontational strategies that challenge female rivals, that is, the ‘other’ woman in their husbands’ lives” (65). These strategies include the “woman against woman fight story” (65), in which women stigmatize the “other” woman by labeling her a “prostitute,” a “foreigner/stranger,” a “spinster,” or an “AIDS widow,” labels that gain in meaning in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic because they characterize these opponents as “threats to the health of the community” (66). Quoting a journal entry about rumors that were prominent in Malawi in 2008, chapter 4 is entitled “Nobody Fears AIDS, Mphutsi Is More Fire.” *Mphutsi* is supposedly a new sexually transmitted and

inevitably fatal disease, named after the maggots with which the genitals are said to be infected. Wilson argues that by investigating the rumors and fears about *mphutsi*, one can draw conclusions about Malawians' attitudes toward HIV/AIDS. Characterizing AIDS as the "new normal," she shows how Malawians have adjusted to the epidemic. The final chapter investigates *mgoneko* stories. *Mgoneko* is a traditional medicine that is said to paralyze people and make them fall into a deep sleep. According to Wilson's research, *mgoneko* is closely connected to rape scenarios, as evident, for example, in reports about girls who are attacked in their school dormitory by supernatural forces. Reading the *mgoneko* rape stories along the lines of gender inequality, Wilson interprets them "in light of the media hype over domestic violence" (120).

While the book is structured around different informal folk narratives, it is not always clear how the chapters connect to one another because the focus on gender, marriage, and HIV/AIDS is still quite broad. Moreover, it is a bit odd that the final paragraphs of chapters 2, 3, and 5 are labeled "Discussion" (in chapter 4 they are called "Conclusion"); it sounds as if the main body of the chapters consists only of descriptions, which is not accurate. Wilson does indeed present complex and convincing analyses in each of her case studies. Locating the rumors, stories, and advice in their culturally specific contexts, she takes into account the social, political, and economic differences within Malawi and distinguishes the patrilineal marriage conventions among the Tumbuka from the matrilineal traditions among peoples in central and southern Malawi. She might, however, have been more cautious at times about her choice of words such as "fidelity," "infidelity," and "womanizing." The use of such moralizing terms may distract the reader from Wilson's rich collection and critical discussion of Malawian folk narratives on marriage, sexuality and HIV/AIDS.

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Anneke Verheijen. *Balancing Men, Morals, and Money: Women's Agency Between HIV and Security in a Malawian Village*. Leiden: African Studies Centre, African Studies Collection, vol. 53, 2013. xii + 301 pp. References. Appendixes. Summary. <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/21741>.

A specter haunts the pages of those who write of HIV in Africa, the specter of the Vulnerable Woman. As Jenny Higgins, Susie Hoffman, and Shari Dworkin, among others, have shown, a widespread tendency by researchers to ignore women in the early years of the epidemic has in the past decade or so been replaced by a "paradigm" in which the "vulnerable woman" has come to be the face of the epidemic. Women are presumed "susceptible to