BOOK REVIEWS

ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

Daniel Jordan Smith. ***A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria.*** Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. xxiii + 263 pp. Photographs. Notes. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. $27.95. Cloth.

There is a paradoxical politics to the study of corruption in Africa: one that oscillates between paternalism and caricature, on the one hand, and justification and exposé, on the other—and one that also requires considerable intellectual diplomacy. African scholars may be tired of Western accusations of corrupt leadership and business practices, but they are equally frustrated with long-winded arguments that let corrupt leaders and malefactors off the hook. How do we navigate the embedded dialectics of history, structure, and agency to explain the varieties of corruption in postcolonial societies? How do we define a space of critical analysis that informs a "culture" of corruption?

Daniel Jordan Smith rises to this challenge with extraordinary insight and sensitivity in his study of the Nigerian arts of dissimulation. First, I must note the richness of ethnographic description and detail in Smith's engaging account of everyday deception, known as "419," "advance fee fraud," and "the Nigerian factor" in Africa and beyond. Smith has spent more than six years in Nigeria, and his cultural competence within Igboland (where he has affines) and within the broader mix of cosmopolitan cities (where a Nigerian national culture is more apparent) jumps off of nearly every page. On empirical grounds alone, Smith provides the most thorough survey of "419" confidence tricks to date, ranging from the dense regional sociology of Owerri to the global highways of the Internet, where the "419" has flourished during the last eight years.

Second, his study provides us with local understandings of state power and patronage within the context of the Nigerian petrostate, where the imperatives of national development and ethnic clientage are so often at odds. Less an ethnography of the state, as he says, than an ethnography of popular discourses and perceptions of the state, his study explores a popular imagination that is indeed transethnic and in constant negotiation. Rumors of hidden conspiracies within the inner corridors of government, ritual kidnappings and murders, kinship obligations extending into official offices and ministries, empty mansions of first ladies, ideas of entitlement to the national cake, and the sheer symbology of government limousines, protocols, and official insignia all inform pervasive idioms of state power as

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seen from below. The venues range from the mundane and everyday to the sordid, staged, and ceremonial.

Third, the discourses and idioms of state power and corruption extend into the everyday practices of Nigerians making money, cutting deals, pursuing careers, attending prosperity churches, or just getting by. Paying a dash to get past a roadblock appears to be a normal part of the daily landscape, but Smith unpacks the larger implications of the simultaneous criticism and complicity of Nigerians themselves. Central to the study of the Nigerian factor is this paradox of complicity (or at least ambivalent complicity) in the very practices that are publicly condemned. Here some reference to Michael Herzfeld's *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (Routledge, 2005) would have helped locate this paradox in a broader anthropological literature, but Smith does extend the analysis to the more general predicaments of postcolonial nations in Africa.

Finally, the study offers a compelling perspective on how to approach and understand what appears to be a culture of corruption—not in terms of fundamental flaws in national character (a perspective curiously invoked by Nigerians themselves), but in terms of the social logics of patronage, self-aggrandizement, and redistribution as Nigerians adapt to the fluctuations of an oil economy mediated by a porous state. It also develops an anthropology of vigilantism in Nigeria that functions as a signpost to an emerging subfield in African studies. At the end of the book, I found a bit of Weberian evolutionism lurking beneath the surface, as "tradition" adapts to the dislocations of postcolonial modernity. But the sheer depth and broad scope of ethnographic material bespeak a deeper critique of the postcolonial state, both by anthropologists and Nigerians navigating the phenomenology of the 419.

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Axel Harneit-Sievers. *Constructions of Belonging: Igbo Communities and the Nigerian State in the Twentieth Century.* Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006. ix + 388 pp. Photographs. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $75.00. Cloth.

The Igbo of southeastern Nigeria have become something of a cultural archetype in contemporary debates on African modernity. While some regard them as icons of ethnic entrepreneurship and indigenous democracy, others represent them as culturally disposed to criminality and violent vigilantism. Axel Harneit-Sievers cuts through these divergent perspectives in an insightful and historically detailed examination of Igbo identity formation from precolonial times to the present. His new book, *Constructions of Belonging*, considers how precolonial social organization has intersected with colonialism, Christianity, postcolonial state formation, and the legacy

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