

BOOK REVIEW

Douglas J. Falen. *African Science: Witchcraft, Vodun, and Healing in Southern Benin*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018. 240 pp. 16 black and white images. \$79.95. Cloth. ISBN: 9780299318901.

On my second extended research trip to Togo, I attended a major *gorovodou* (kola nut vodou) ceremony on the beachhead. In preparation for the festivities, my hosts, who included a local vodou priest or *bokono*, accompanied me to the market where we purchased a kitten, a puppy, a duck, and a chicken. *Trò*, I was told by one of the senior members of the community, had a particular taste for kittens. I was a wide-eyed graduate student, keen to experience, keen to understand. I couldn't believe my luck running into renowned anthropologist Judy Rosenthal in the field. My experiences with the devotees of *Trò* recast my relationship with my Togolese interlocutors and transformed my understanding of the failures of colonial power. It seems as if Doug Falen encountered similar transformative deities during his decades of research in Benin. His new book reads so profoundly and clearly that I was transported back to that beachfront. Falen's masterful *African Science: Witchcraft, Vodun, and Healing in Southern Benin* cracks open the concealed and yet simultaneously public and omnipresent operations of African pluritheistic spiritual practice with unparalleled sensitivity, precision, and erudition.

African Science consists of an introduction, five substantive chapters, and a conclusion. Falen first addresses a problem that continues to befuddle scholars of vodou and related animist practices, namely, how to reconcile the numerous conflicting terminologies, ranging from witchcraft and sorcery to magic, juju, and others. He advocates for a descriptive ethnographic model that privileges fluidity and change, a model attractive to a range of social science and humanistic methodologies. In Benin, it is easy to see and believe in binary operations. *Àzě* and *bõ* are introduced in Chapter One as seemingly mapping neatly onto the classic Evans-Pritchardian framework of witchcraft and sorcery, respectively, that continues, almost a century after it was first laid out, to frame our understanding of African, non-Abrahamic, indigenous religio-philosophical worldviews. Indeed, he reveals how the deceptively false dichotomy is so spellbindingly compatible with a thin reading. But then he quickly switches gears to argue no: the amorphous, nebulous nature of

practice, ritual, and tradition (not belief) is forever evolving, shifting, incomplete.

At such a juncture, the reader might be forgiven for then thinking, so we can never understand vodou? But that would be too easy. Instead, Falen provides multiple, accessible, crisp, and grounded paths to understanding. He is especially sensitive to change and transformation in practice, whether addressing the growth of syncretistic churches, the spread of *Trò*, or the deepening embrace of magic by the Beninese state. In the final stunning chapter on globalization, we learn how Beninese practitioners travel abroad to India or China to learn healing practices and mysticism, but simultaneously seek knowledge about witchcraft in the U.S.—studying not wicca, but rather Freemasonry and Scientology.

Whether *àzě* or *bò*, at their core these practices and ways of life are manifestations of secret societies, membership of which is privileged. Participation is cautiously, if not jealously, guarded. Observation by outsiders such as Falen or Rosenthal is permitted only after a judicious vetting process, and with good reason, perhaps. Rosenthal on one occasion in Togo invited some Haitian American relations of a U.S. embassy staffer to a ceremony, where they promptly fell into trance. Because the *gorovodou* practitioners did not know the names of the spirits inhabiting their foreign guests, they were powerless to assist, and this left them deeply unsettled. As secret society adherents, the followers Falen describes in Chapter Two recognize helpful *àzě* and harmful *àzě*, which inhabit multiple realities where seemingly incommensurate ideas and values coexist. In Chapter Three, he challenges us to question our reality, indeed whose reality, by thrusting the reader into a world where there is no witchcraft disbelief. He piles up evidence supportive of witchcraft, including striking confession narratives. He transports us into his own process of discovery, including his own growing fear of the occult, and he tirelessly advocates for engaging as seriously with witchcraft as the Beninese do.

Falen's book is a masterwork, and easily the most compelling work on African spirituality I have read in decades. This is the rare teachable book that I would not hesitate to assign to undergraduates as well as graduate students. Falen moves artfully through complex theories and scholarly minefields, rendering the most esoteric debates comprehensible to novices yet all the while pushing forward the conversation in new directions. While some readers may initially cringe at the thought of science as a lens through which to understand alterity, Falen's reframing of magic, witchcraft, and religion as African science is as enthralling as Carl Sagan's reconceptualization of astrophysics as belief in *Contact*.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Alessandra Brivio. 2013. "Notes Sur Le Culte Des Orisa Et Vodun: Pierre Fatumbi Verger and the Study of 'African Traditional Religion.'" *History in Africa* 40: 275–94. doi:[10.1017/hia.2013.13](https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2013.13).

Alison Lang, Philippe LeMay-Boucher, and Charlemagne Codjo Tomavo. 2019. "Expenditures on Malevolent Magico-Religious Powers: Empirical Evidence from Benin." *African Studies Review* 62 (4): 154–80. doi:[10.1017/asr.2018.136](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.136).