

conditions of exile, as they intermingle and interact with South African Muslims, Indians, Pakistanis and Southeast Asians. Yet, Somali refugees struggle to survive in South Africa. Abdi concentrates less on the harsh conditions of the foreign countries where Somalis live, focusing instead on a range of positive experiences, such as the businesses they established in South Africa, the UAE and the USA. One would not find in these pages the horrors we occasionally see in the news about Somalis in South Africa being burned alive or killed by machete, the Somalis occasionally deported from the USA to war-torn Somalia, or those whose businesses are being shut down in the UAE for various reasons.

While briefly mentioning her own reflections in the diaspora and at home, Abdi shows how Somalis in the UAE and South Africa fare better than their counterparts in the USA. These were not essentially refugees, but mostly economic immigrants who fled for better job opportunities. So why are Somalis in the UAE opting to travel to Europe, while those in South Africa are looking to the USA? For immigrants, there are lopsided prospects for a better life in the West (idealized in the *Jannah*) and the life-long ideal of one day returning 'home' (Somalia). In addition, the systems in the host countries determine their relations between one another and with immigrants from elsewhere. In the UAE, for example, men and women work hand in hand, but, in South Africa, they rarely work together or women stay and bear children at home (as tended to be customary among Somalis back home).

The two contrasting positions notwithstanding, the fact that Abdi and Bjork deal separately with some crucial patterns and practices of everyday life in the Somali diaspora living in specific countries makes the books indispensable for scholars and students seeking to understand the dislocation of Somali society. That both books include women's perspectives in their descriptions of the roles of Somalis in the diaspora, and a detailed explanation of how gender power relations affect their interlocutors, is itself commendable. Abdi and Bjork provide a good service to current and future generations of students studying the recent history of the Somali diaspora.

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Marie Grace Brown, *Khartoum at Night: fashion and body politics in imperial Sudan*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press (hb US\$85–978 1 503 60152 9; pb US\$25–978 1 503 60264 9). 2017, v + 222 pp.

Khartoum at Night is a great title for an elegant book, authored by feminist historian Marie Grace Brown. The book's focus on the meanings of Sudanese women's body wrap (*taub* or *tobe*) brought back some of my cherished childhood memories. When my grandmother, Sitana, took me with her to our village in Korti, at the bend of River Nile in northern Sudan, I was excited about the adventure of taking the train and the ferry for the first time in my life. What I remember most is our return at night. For a young girl, this was the first chance to venture out of the confines of one of Khartoum's neighbourhoods. The glittering lights of the city, my grandmother's intimate grasp of my little hand, and the colour of her humble blue and white striped *taub* remain with me to this day.

Khartoum at Night ignited these intimate memories but does more by providing a multi-layered history of how Sudanese women refashion a modern perspective of

public engagement to insert themselves into the politics of the city and the nation. This is not the sort of story that one would read in the pages of *The New York Times*' fashion section, like the one that celebrated the activism of Alaa Salah, who became the iconic image of the Sudanese revolution that toppled president Omar al-Bashir in April 2019. Indeed, the image of the young Sudanese activist, wearing a white *taub* and adorned with Nubian jewellery, grabbed people's attention. It made the Sudanese revolution more visible in a world plagued by so many distractions. But the story of Alaa and her white *taub* could benefit from a deep analysis of the long history of women's activism in Sudan that *Khartoum at Night* closely examines.

This accessible book, supported by archival material and thorough interviews, offers a fresh perspective on how the *taub* carries in its entangled threads valuable historical knowledge told by Sudanese women themselves. These 'body stories' urge the reader to value textile as text as women narrate the shifts in the history of Sudan and their place in it. Body wraps come in different colours, patterns and styles, and each one of them marks important historical changes that women commented on through their *taub* naming practice. Whether it is the 'Post Office Pen', 'Asia and Africa', the 'Russian Satellite' or my grandmother's humble body wrap, *taub* names tell myriad stories of women's involvement in the making and remaking of history. Cotton exported from Sudan came back in *taubs* of varied quality manufactured in Manchester (and elsewhere) during colonial times. These *taubs* later encompassed novel ideas and political vocabularies that defy static constructions of womanhood. They speak to global transformations that have long defined the boundaries of colonizer/colonized and engendered new perceptions of gender, class and national belonging in Sudan's changing landscapes.

The story of the white body wrap, like the one worn by Alaa, the idol of the Sudanese revolution, is part of this entangled history of colonialism, modernity and change in Sudan. It marked the emergence of a new class of educated Sudanese women who entered the new medical domain of midwifery and caregiving embedded in the British notion of the civilizing mission, and who just, and on occasion, visited 'the post office to send a letter to a friend'. But beyond the emerging professional publics for women in Sudan, the *taub* also serves as a symbolic gesture in other intimate social spaces: it denotes difference among age categories and cements romantic and marital relations in the form of bride-wealth and other kinds of gift-giving.

Khartoum at Night details these myriad meanings in five chapters, four of which bear the name of a fashionable body wrap in its title. The first three chapters of the book focus heavily on reading the history of Sudanese women's dress and the fashioning of new ideas about schooling, discipline and work from the perspective of colonial women, such as the 'Wolves' sisters whose involvement shaped the history of midwifery in Sudan. However, in the last two chapters, the author balances these historical narratives by introducing the perspective of a rising generation of Sudanese women feminists, politicians and activists in the independence era. The voices of these Sudanese women elites comment on how they viewed, embodied, resisted and negotiated both colonial and postcolonial practices of domesticity and control and how they carved a political space for themselves built on respectability and fighting for women's rights in Sudan, Africa and the Middle East.

This book is a great contribution to studies of gender and history and is a must-read for both graduate and undergraduate students eager to learn about the embeddedness of gender in national and transnational power relations. It, however, has a few limitations. First, it highlights European colonial

interventions at the expense of Islamic and pre-Islamic ideas of discipline, hygiene and other civilizing cultural norms. Second, it privileges the narratives of urban elite women in Sudan and by doing so misses an opportunity to engage narratives by and literature about other Sudanese women. Third, the author could have tapped into Sudan's rich and diverse sartorial practices to enrich the ongoing debate about identity and citizenship in the two Sudans. This is important as we see more representations of women as national icons continue to be articulated through the narrow lens of the female body as a symbol of containment and physical beauty.

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Donald Donham, *The Erotics of History: an Atlantic African example*. Oakland CA: University of California Press (pb US\$29.95 – 978 0 520 29631 2). 2018, 136 pp.

This is a thought-provoking book, full of surprises and even suspense, inspiring challenging reflections on the study of 'sexuality' in general and in Africa in particular – all this in only 100-odd pages. It took a special occasion to make Donham – an American anthropologist, well known for his studies on political economy and sexuality in East and South Africa – come to West Africa. A neighbour in Oakland surprised him by announcing that he was going to sell his house and resettle in West Africa in the house of his African lover – 'jack-of-all-trades, body-builder in his late thirties and son of the local shrine priestess' (p. 18). When Donham went to visit his friend there, he discovered that his friend's move was not exceptional. In this neighbourhood, eight white male gay foreigners had built second-storey apartments on top of their African lovers' family houses; a ninth had built a three-storey house on his lover's land. Despite the fact that colonial sodomy laws still criminalized male–male sex in this country (which Donham prefers not to identify), and that both nationalists and Pentecostals increasingly attacked homosexuality as un-African, these liaisons between local and expatriate men had become part of everyday life – an 'open secret' (p. 20). The internet had become important for forging such erotic links, but Donham emphasizes that the pattern has a longer history both in Africa in general (cf. British businessman J. M. Stuart-Young living with his lover and the latter's family in Onitsha in the 1930s) and in this village in particular (situated next to a colonial golf course, it had become a recruiting ground for caddies, some of whom served their white patrons sexually as well).

But there are more surprises to come. When Donham showed a draft of the book to his Oakland neighbour (who subsequently had opted for alternating between California and his African home), the latter told him that he had missed the sadomasochistic context of many of these relations. In his chapter on 'White slavery', Donham reports on further research on the internet, notably on the creativity with which Africans try to profile themselves in line with the preferences of Euro-American gay men. A recurrent profile turns out to be that of an 'African slave master' – some using pictures not unlike American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's famous *Man in Polyester Suit*. But Donham emphasizes also a special aspect: the African slave masters seem less preoccupied with pain than with power. He relates this to his more general analysis of the performance of sexuality by Africans in these contacts as a special form of 'extraversion' – a