convincingly, also for the precolony, when outsiders with radically different technologies (Emin Pascha, Henry Stanley) entered the region, then known as the Lado enclave (1930–*c*. 1850), and engaged with "tribes" they named and characterized as inherently violent. Thus under the Belgian occupation of the first decade of the twentieth century, Nubi gained a reputation for being "extremely brave" but needing "special methods of treatment" (Spectator article), while Lugbara earned the label "shy, savage and unsophisticated" when their neighbours fabricated discourses for the ears of eager outsiders. These legacies live on, leaving local historians to face the tough challenge of how to de-marginalize their society and culture, and thus re-construct their relationship with history, and indeed with the capital Kampala. It is a reconstruction Lugbara elders (and other locals) take most seriously, not just for the sake of getting the record straight but also in the hope of achieving a lasting peace.

Leopold's experiment in historical anthropology aims to throw into question the persistent association of West Nilers with marginality and violence. Through writing the region's history backwards, and keeping a solid focus on the interweaving of discourse and reality, Leopold achieves this objective with rigour and clarity whilst also setting new standards for future explorations in how history and anthropology can be made critically to question each other. The technique of reading history backwards is effective, an eye-opening device that should be tried more often.

Johan Pottier

GENERAL

ZHOU XUN and FRANCESCA TAROCCO:
Karaoke: The Global Phenomenon.
207 pp. London: Reaktion Books, 2007. £14.95. ISBN 978 1 86189 300 0.

How could a book on *karaoke* fail? This one comes beautifully packaged in an arty sort of way, with colour photographs throughout and an assortment of boxes containing text on specific topics. It ranges far and wide, from religion to cowboys, from technology to competing invention stories. It covers a broad geographical area, with chapters on China, Japan and Korea, South-East Asia, North America, Brazil, Britain and Europe. The authors are based in Britain, so Britain gets a separate chapter; both authors are scholars of China, so the chapter on China is the most comprehensive and well researched, containing plenty of ethnographic and interview data.

As a totality, this is hardly an academic tome. In many ways, it should not be, but thoroughness is certainly not a hallmark of each and every page. Some segments appear more academic in orientation than others. The first-hand information on, for example, *karaoke* in China, and references to articles and books on *karaoke* in Brazil are thus juxtaposed to text assembled largely from newspaper articles and internet citations on, for example, *karaoke* in the Philippines or North America. There is, as a result, a certain unevenness, which is compounded both by date-sensitive material – *karaoke*, after all, in all its

many manifestations, has rapidly evolved during its few decades of existence – and by occasional uncritical use of internet sources. It remains, at all times, a friendly take on its subject, but with a serious side. Hence, the introduction tells us how at Christmas 2002, the downmarket British store Woolworths constantly ran out of stock of its *karaoke* machines; how *karaoke* is so varied in different parts of the world that it challenges the notion of global culture (and, of course, challenges those who would have it that global culture originates in the United States); how *karaoke* belongs "to complex interacting social groups, so it may not be helpful to use oversimplified terms such as 'ethnicity' and 'multiculturalism'" (p. 12); how every *karaoke* place has its own "tribe" or "its own family". There is an academic bent discernable in these last comments, with theorizing about diaspora and identity, and the latter comment is a take on the anthropologist Alain Anciaux.

None the less, the volume is at all times an enjoyable read, made all the more enjoyable, I suspect, because so many of us are closet *karaoke* singers in one form or another. (I would, of course, deny that I am.) Chapter 1 considers from whence *karaoke* came. In 1993, Roberto del Rosario, in the Philippines, claimed an infringement of his patent on the basic machine, although the Japanese Inoue Daisuke, "an amiable looking character", was in 1996 revealed by a Singapore TV channel as the "Grand Daddy" who back in 1971 devised a way to record backing tracks for a singer when, as a jobbing musician, he could not play for his client. He recorded the track slightly off-beat, because his client "was worse than your typical bad singer. He couldn't hit the notes, couldn't even hold a beat" (p. 20). And so, after Inoue enlisted the help of some friends to develop a more sophisticated machine holding backing tracks to any number of songs, complete with microphone and echo box, the legend began. Or did it? Zhou and Tarocco go on to cite a rival claim from Wales… Wales? Well, the Welsh clearly have a love of singing, particularly hymns. From here we go on to hear about the function of Christmas carols across the border in Puritan England, and about the Victorian music hall tradition that instituted the singalong tradition "from Shoreditch to Sunderland" (p. 24). The two authors acknowledge how arbitrary it is to choose such an original idea, demonstrating this by taking us to Chinese cinemas, then noting in their text – on the same page as an unintentionally ironic photograph featuring topless *karaoke* waitresses in Finland – how *karaoke* has a presence in religion and education.

Karaoke is forever associated with Japan, so chapter 2 takes us through its development there. Starting with the first machine marketed by Clarion in 1976, we are offered glimpses of the value of the industry, rules for social singing, and a box titled "Hello Kitty tries to woo families at Tokyo's Big Echo". Korea gets a look in next, but the coverage has some dubious comments, including a totally myopic view of pop music that should never have made it to publication. Two aspects of *karaoke* relevant to Japan and Korea could usefully have been teased out: the distinction between up-market (or, at least, expensive) business clubs and low-rent (cheap) singing rooms, and the notion that those who cannot sing suffer from a medical condition requiring the attention of specialized doctors. Next, we move to South-East Asia, where *karaoke* is linked to prostitution (particularly in Thailand and Vietnam), to fascism (in Burma), and well-being (Vietnam, etc). Vignettes feature strongly, particularly when we read how *karaoke* is one of the most important aspects of a Filipino's life: "To many Filipinos, *karaoke* is so fundamental to their life that owning a *karaoke* machine is far more important than having a toilet in their home" (p. 77). This is a point worth pondering.

Any impressionistic sense takes a back seat when we arrive in China. Here, the authors include personal, detailed research, including first-hand exploration of a few choice *karaoke* venues. We return to a mix of vignettes in the next chapter, where attention shifts to religion, starting with *karaoke* in South-East Asian Buddhism and moving to American, European and African Christianity. The richness of the vignettes is such that each could have become a separate chapter, but to do this would require the sort of ethnographic data that the authors have done in China, and would presumably be best accomplished in a multi-authored edited text. Chapters 6 and 7, where North America and Britain, respectively, become the focus, mix first-hand data with newspaper and internet sources. Here, I suspect that the authors had little choice to do things differently, simply because there are far too many different venues and styles of *karaoke* out there to allow anything more than an overview. Europe, though, is dispensed with too quickly in chapter 8, while Brazil gets considerable attention in chapter 9 at the expense of anywhere else in South America. Following a return to technology issues, a seven-page list of venues for *karaoke* completes the volume – this will, of course, date particularly quickly, besides which it is of necessity highly selective.

What is the sum total of the book? An enjoyable read, certainly, full of anecdotes and brimming with information, some briefly noted and some fleshed out in greater detail. Excellent photographs, widely sourced, creating a package that can never bore. And yet, this reviewer yearns for more critical reflection, for a more careful sifting of internet and newspaper accounts, and more balance between the different geographical areas and the different styles of *karaoke*. None the less, I'm off to Imperial China, a restaurant in Lisle Street, London, which Zhou and Tarocco list as a place with VIP rooms set up for *karaoke* parties.

Keith Howard

SHORT NOTICES

J. N. POSTGATE (ed.):
Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern.
ix, 187 pp. London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007.
ISBN 978 0 903472 21 0.

This volume brings together the contributions delivered during a "study day" held by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq in November 2003. It is poignantly dedicated to the memory of Iraqi colleagues who have lost their lives since April 2003, the date of the calamitous invasion by US and British forces, although the editor omits to mention this obvious circumstance with a dignified silence. The authors present a formidable array of eminence from the ranks of British and other European scholarship, each offering a basic overview of the history of one of Iraq's many languages, ancient and modern. In many cases the presentations are unique in the English language.

J. N. Postgate offers a short introduction stressing the continuity of elements of language and culture in Iraq from ancient times to the present, before "leaving the field to the specialists".