

BOOK REVIEWS

ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

Simon Ottenberg and David A. Binkley, eds. *Playful Performers: African Children's Masquerades*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2006. 268 pp. Photographs. Illustrations. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$59.95. Cloth.

Focusing on children's masquerades, this book revisits some established assumptions about masquerading in Africa. One such assumption is that masquerading is an instrument of social control: for example, where village elders stage masquerades to control women and youth, denying this prerogative to noninitiates. However, such received wisdom was challenged by publications drawing attention to the prevalence of women's masquerades. Now, *Playful Performers* establishes that in some societies children, too, have participated in masquerading as performers. Uncovering this neglected field, the present volume makes a major contribution to the study of masquerading.

The volume comprises a general introduction by the editors and thirteen case studies by established scholars. The essays cover West, Central, and Southern Africa. It appears that children's masquerades can be found in many areas known for their traditions of adult masquerading; indeed it is the relationship between adult and children's masquerading that the present volume examines. The cover copy states that this book wants to see children as "active agents in their own culture rather than passive recipients of culture as taught by parents and other elders." The editors seek to establish the originality of the children's masquerades as well their relative independence from adult masquerades. To that end, the book distinguishes children's masquerades according to their measure of integration within the wider society. For example, the "integrated" children's masquerades of the Bamana, Dogon, and Yoruba are part of a ritual complex and are therefore distinguished from the Igbo and Kuba masquerades that are said to be mere copies of adult masquerades ("emulating masquerades"). These, in turn, are differentiated from the children's masquerades that are carried out in complete independence from adults.

Most "independent masquerades" happen to be urban practices that give clear evidence of children's creativity and inventiveness. For instance, children play an important role in the making of papier-mâché "monster"

masks used in the Bissau Carnival. The chapter dedicated to this carnival, edited by Ottenberg so as to reveal the contradictions among the interpretations of its various authors, is one of the most interesting in the book: whatever their other differences, all authors agree that the Bissau Carnival has been used by the national government as a stage for propaganda, as well as by the participants to mock politicians. The tendency for postcolonial governments to appropriate masquerading as “national” culture can also be seen in the essay on Ouagadougou. In the 1970s the Dodo masquerade was staged in La Maison du Peuple to promote national development. Thus masquerades are increasingly commoditized as part of the making of national cultures.

The most important contribution of this volume is the evidence it provides that boys (and occasionally girls) receive a great deal of training in masquerading before their initiation into adulthood. Indeed, they are so well versed in the art that one wonders whether adult masquerading is not merely a continuation of an early-learned practice. One wonders, in fact, whether the classification proposed by the editors is useful in examining the relationship between adults’ and children’s masquerading. Rather than producing a timeless classification, the editors could have explored the historicity of children’s masquerades. It would have been interesting to examine to what extent the popularity of children’s masquerading is related to changing relations of authority in Africa. Surely the growing weight of youth as a demographic category must have had an impact on the popularity of children’s masquerading, but most articles in the book situate children’s performances in the ethnographic present. Furthermore, in various other ways the volume fails to pick up interesting research avenues. For instance, the editors signal that many new masquerades have emerged at Christian and Muslim holidays, without dedicating a chapter to them. Again, while some chapters focus on masquerades that have died out, no chapter is dedicated to the masquerading of child soldiers during the civil war in Liberia. Such case studies could have shown how children’s masquerades assume new functions in a changing society.

Although the volume could have done more to explore children’s masquerading in the public sphere, it does help establish that children’s masquerades are often used to criticize power, either greedy village elders or corrupt politicians. It is a welcome contribution to our understanding of children’s participation in the political process, and it establishes youth as a social category with agency and autonomy of action.

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