

BOOK REVIEWS

ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

Parker Shipton. *Mortgaging the Ancestors: Ideologies of Attachment in Africa.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. xix + 327 pp. Map. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$55.00. Cloth.

Few things are more fundamental in social life or politics than what we have and who we are. Property and social identity, in the broadest sense, are perhaps the most overt and familiar manifestations of these core dimensions. Few issues in Africa connect the two aspects more intimately than land, where claims to land are defined partly by social identity, and social identity is defined partly through property. At the same time, few issues test and challenge this connection more acutely than the idea of a mortgage: the mortgage basically strips land of a complex of social relations. When mortgaged, land belongs to one single person (and not a group with variable, seasonal, generational, and other partly overlapping claims); it becomes fully alienable (and is thus no longer to be claimed by virtue of identity); and it is therefore a “simple” commodity. So while a mortgage can raise capital for the landowner at the risk of dispossession if he (indeed, mostly “he”) cannot honor the debt in time, other (secondary) rights-holders had already been dispossessed long before—at the time the loan was taken out. In short, the mortgage represents the crucial rupture between belonging and possession. It is where “Things Fall Apart.”

Parker Shipton’s book examines how the principles of landholding among the Luo in Western Kenya, historically based on access through kinship and social ties, have been affected by land reform—specifically the famous Swynnerton Plan—which at its core promotes individualization and alienation. Named after the assistant director of agriculture Roger J. M. Swynnerton, this was the first comprehensive and nationwide plan for land titling in Africa. Launched in 1954 by the British-run Department of Agriculture, and continuing under Kenya’s own postcolonial government since independence in 1963, the land registration program by the turn of the century had come to cover most of the higher-potential farmland in the country—and among these lands, most of the farmland in the Luo country.

The author argues that it is not titling itself that produces a problem for smallholders, nor does credit in and of itself undermine security. Rather,

“the conjunction of individual land titling and farm credit in the freehold-mortgage process is what makes both parts together so hazardous, and personal, family, and community fortunes so volatile” (239). In a context of capricious rain-fed agriculture, farmers are likely to be caught, sooner or later, in a trap in which debts cannot be serviced in time and foreclosure is the result. If to this we add the unequal distribution of power characteristic of Kenya (as well as much of Africa) and stir in a context of rural economic insecurity for many, we end up with a violently efficient mechanism for increasing land concentration and increasing landlessness. Shipton points out that this was never seen as a problem by the architects of the Plan. Indeed, insofar as they thought about this at all, they found the prospect attractive: to Swynnerton, social differentiation was inherent to the “natural evolution of property.” While social differentiation and landlessness had become political issues by the time of the debates on the Kenyan Constitution in 2003, the political power of landowners and their organizations had managed to neutralize most efforts at reforming the land legislation.

Luo society has not embraced the land reform wholeheartedly, however. Innumerable small obstructions to the reform—ranging from failure to register land transactions to harassment of buyers of foreclosed property—have undercut the reform just as effectively as any well-orchestrated collective action might have done. However, the perverse result is that while the mortgage system seems to have ground to a standstill, many families do face internal rivalries, dispossession, and uprooting. In particular, Shipton suggests, women and poor people in general (without political protection) will fall through the cracks. It would have been helpful if he could have been more specific about just how the dysfunctional mortgage system still produces pernicious effects of landlessness and destitution. For this reader, a few more cases exemplifying this conundrum would have been welcome.

The book is the second of what Shipton somewhat coyly dubs “an informal trilogy,” following *The Nature of Entrustment* (Yale University Press, 2007) and preceding the forthcoming *Credit Between Cultures* (Yale University Press, 2010). These three books represent research and writing completed over a period of thirty-five years: a long gestation period, but triplets worth waiting for. One of the most striking features in his work is the demonstration of government’s ability and propensity to legislate, its incapacity to control how legislation is absorbed into social practice, and its inability to “legislate away” old laws and practices. Attempts to replace a law seem inevitably to end up paralleling it, thus adding to the legal and normative repertoire, and loading the dice for the most powerful and dextrous players.

Shipton’s work is characterized by a fine feeling for ethnographic detail. At the same time, his erudition, as well as his ability to see large questions in small settings, ensures that his work is never simply about the Luo of West Kenya. For example, in the chapter in the present book on the history of property, the reader is guided through European and North American political philosophy on property and on the mortgage. What Shipton shows vividly

is just how contingent and relatively new the concept of the mortgage is. There is nothing “natural” or “inevitable” about the mortgage in an economy, and importing such an institution into a society where alienability is already an alien concept is bound to produce friction. *Mortgaging the Ancestors*, however, gives the reader much more than a history of property friction in Western Kenya. In lithe and lucid prose, Shipton provides a lens through which scholars and students of changing societies may better see and understand the contexts in which they themselves work. Not all books do that.

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Martin J. Murray. *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008. xvi + 261 pp. Photographs. Notes. References. Index. \$65.00. Cloth. \$22.95. Paper.

The changing face of Johannesburg, sub-Saharan Africa’s third largest city—dynamic, fascinating, and often quite ugly—has attracted considerable international interest. Several authors since the fall of apartheid have already offered books on the subject. Martin Murray, the author of a number of books on South Africa, now joins in. This volume, however, is as much (or more) about postmodern planning as about Johannesburg. Somewhat paradoxically, it bemoans the abandonment of the inclusive city by postmodernists while fully incorporating their language and critique of modernism.

Johannesburg is a city that exhibits many faces, some of them fairly homely. Murray emphasizes the extremes: on the one hand, the status-conscious gated world of the successful, conjoined with planning aimed at filling corporate needs; and on the other, the world of the homeless, the migrant, and the destitute. In the economic context of contemporary South Africa, of course, the first literally attracts the second as older social and economic forms disintegrate; as elsewhere, the rich and the poor are becoming more polarized, and the center is holding less well. Much of the specific description of this book concerns the fate of central Johannesburg, which is certainly an extreme if not unusual case in Africa. Here there are miles of decayed industrial landscapes and densely packed high-rise housing now fallen on very hard times. The city form is reminiscent of the downtowns of many large American provincial cities built up in the same time period; but in South Africa, a much poorer country, the prospects for gentrification are far more limited. As Murray notes, more than 1 percent of the city’s population lives in “bad buildings.” Indeed, he provides us with some horrific descriptions of their circumstances as well as those of a shifting homeless population difficult to quantify in numerical terms; many are immigrants from elsewhere in Africa.