

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Mortgaging the Ancestors: Ideologies of Attachment in Africa by Parker Shipton

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7b15j2hg>

Journal

American Ethnologist, 37(3)

ISSN

0094-0496

Author

MAURER, BILL

Publication Date

2010-08-01

DOI

10.1111/j.1548-1425.2010.01274_8.x

Peer reviewed

work less well in undergraduate courses. For researchers into youths, gender, cities, popular culture, globalization, and African topics, however, this ethnography provides immensely valuable data and conceptual frameworks for future analyses.

Mortgaging the Ancestors: Ideologies of Attachment in Africa. Parker Shipton. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009. 327 pp.

BILL MAURER

University of California, Irvine

"It is an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost walking as social characters and at the same time as mere things." Thus Marx, in *Capital*, quoted by Parker Shipton near the beginning of this fascinating book (p. 48). Covering the history of land, belonging, and lineage among the Luo people of western Kenya, this book concerns itself with the curious dynamics of freehold tenure in rural development policy and practice. Their hands bound by the mortgage, Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost walking in the name of the old and still influential theory that all things must be property, all property must be liquid, and all liquidity must be leveraged in the name of greater productivity and, thus, human progress. Shipton deftly reveals the evolutionist doctrine guiding this theory, and takes us on a tour of the various dead men still walking the halls of despots, technocrats, and nonprofit do-gooders alike, from John Locke to Alfred Marshall and the architects of the World Bank. But other ghosts figure in the Luo conceptions of land that get caught up in this theory of productivity: the dead who are buried on the plot of land outside the house, securing the position of the living in a kin group as well as warranting their enduring claim to territory and membership, a claim now up for foreclosure because of the new pragmatics of mortgage financing.

The title of the book is meant quite literally in this second volume of a planned three-volume magnum opus. The first, *The Nature of Entrustment* (2007), was the winner of the 2008 Melville J. Herskovits Award of the African Studies Association and is a fascinating exploration of moral economies of compensation and exchange across generations. The third, *Credit Between Cultures*, is expected in 2010. The trilogy poses trenchant critiques of development policy—especially policies whose aim is to enhance rural people's access to credit and savings—but also provides a richly sympathetic ethnography of people in East Africa trying to maintain their own sense of life and livelihood. For those of you who have not been keeping up with Shipton's work over the years, you've been missing out. Fortu-

nately, the book under review gathers up some of the diverse strands of his research. It also adds to the anthropological literature on topics ranging from descent theory to the anthropology of finance. Shipton has a keen grasp of the hoary debates in our field, a knack for explaining them clearly and concisely, and a gift for channeling these ghosts stalking our discipline and finding that they still have relevant things to say about the most pressing issues of the day.

The cover image of rolling grassy hills, a small thatched roof house and, slightly off-center, a cement or stone grave marker beautifully evokes the attachments of the Luo to the land. So it is fascinating to learn that such burial practices are a recent phenomenon, that people in this densely populated region have become "not less 'clannish,' but more," and that grave placement and marking has come to stake a claim to descent and to "anchor . . . social identity for living persons and groups" (pp. 86–87). At issue is the very nature of modernity, of bureaucratic rationality enhancing "primitive" attachments to kin and land right at the moment where the mortgaging of those attachments becomes possible. Shipton traces colonial-era efforts to, as one colonial writer put it, "throw the money about" (p. 139) to create a more politically palatable rural middle class and offset the rebellious tensions of the Mau Mau and other anti-colonial movements. Cadastral surveys and formal titling allowed land to be "freed up," to start ghost walking with capital, which led Luo and others more firmly to try to secure their own ghosts to what became their "property," invigorating some relationships of kin and ethnicity and obviating others. But titling and mortgages opened the new possibility of "*absolute loss* of ownership" (p. 142), a frightening outcome in a world where previously rights were cross-cutting and diverse, where one person could claim a right to hoe, another to swap, a third to transfer or relocate a wife to the land. Fields may have been bounded with sisal or other markers. But seasonal factors, the role of animals in redistributing "plant energy and nutrients" (p. 71), and overlapping—but not necessarily competing—claims (pp. 71–72) themselves get foreclosed with the possibility of absolute ownership and absolute loss entailed in the mortgage form.

Pointing out the morbid roots of the mortgage, Shipton traces the history of the freehold mortgage process and its inimical relationship to dry land agriculture, where seasonal oscillations involve a temporal cycle at odds with the regularity demanded of the amortization table. He also shows how land tenure and finance are bound up in European ideas about savagery and civilization. His account of the 1950s Swynnerton Plan, the first nationwide attempt in Africa to comprehensively title all land as individual property (p. 143), echoes his telling of the tale of the American Dawes Act and the 19th-century traces of the moral ambiguity of the mortgage in "civilizing" the "savage"

(pp. 30–33) that persist and can be discerned in the now all-too-familiar consequences of the mortgage financing crisis of the late 2000s (with the blame still often ascribed to “subprime” people rather than purveyors of the impossible dreams of property embedded in interest-only home loans or credit default obligations).

Shipton’s book stands as a warning to development planners who would buy into these dreams. Take current efforts to promote savings among the world’s poor. Implicitly referencing Locke’s famous proclamation that money serves the store of value function because unlike apples and acorns, it does not decay, Shipton remarks: “currency inflation . . . can sometimes render money worthless even faster than grain in a granary might rot” (p. 36). This is a powerful and important work, written in an accessible style, and highly recommended for undergraduate and graduate classes on property, economic development, and law.

References cited

Shipton, Parker

2007 *The Nature of Entrustment: Intimacy, Exchange, and the Sacred in Africa*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

2010 *Credit between Cultures: Farmers, Financiers, and Misunderstanding in Africa*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Missions, Missionaries, and Native Americans: Long-Term Processes and Daily Practices. *Maria F. Wade*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. 288 pp.

DANIEL LARSON

California State University, Long Beach

Missions, Missionaries, and Native Americans by Maria F. Wade is an ambitious attempt to synthesize historic information pertaining to the impact of Spain’s colonization and Catholic conversion of indigenous populations of Florida, Texas, northern Mexico, and Baja and Alta California. The author examines various conversion strategies used by the Franciscans and Jesuits between the 17th and 19th centuries. She astutely explores the variable reactions by Native American groups to European customs of religion, settlement, and economic expansion. Wade demonstrates that history matters and that both the Catholic Church and Spanish government were well experienced in enculturation processes designed during the Inquisition by trial and error on European peasant communities. She explains that the European religious and political mindset viewed the New World as one of good and evil where the masses of humanity were in need of guidance from higher authority with a divine capable of saving souls from hedonistic ways and an afterlife of infinite punishment, notions

that were incomprehensible in many ways to indigenous peoples.

This book is well written and reflects an enormous amount of work of archival research. There is much to be gained by reading this volume, but for the serious scholar looking for explanation and empirical analysis, this volume is best characterized as traditional historical narrative based on selective data and anecdotal information. I recognize that opinions differ on the use of anthropological theory and the purpose of our research; however, it is important to identify and employ theory that may allow us to explain cause-and-effect relationships in missionization processes as well as ethnographic research in general. I will refer to these alternative theoretical perspectives and empirical studies below in my review. In spite of my reservations, I believe this book is an important pioneering effort, and it should be read by those researchers and students captivated by this topic.

The book is divided into three major sections. In the introductory section, the author discusses several aims, including a commitment to “demonstrate the plight of the missionaries who felt trapped by the system they created” (p. xiii). Wade recognizes the diversity of motives and background of each missionary, and she is astute to the impact of the individuals on missionization and conversion practices. She characterizes the details associated with the daily and yearly activities of indigenous peoples who resided in or near the missions. Importantly, there is an attempt to understand and contextualize the alternative conversion strategies employed by the missionaries in diverse environments among hunters and gatherers as well as precontact agriculturalists. Emphasis on the comparative approach is of great value, and there have been many recent efforts to develop an explicit anthropological theory that can guide comparative studies of cultural diversity.

In the second section, a well-organized and clearly written discussion related to the difference in beliefs and organizations of the Jesuits’ and the Franciscans’ spiritual and structural frameworks and how such perspectives played out in the conversion of indigenous populations. This section provides an essential element necessary to the premise of her book, which is “I aim to show the similarities and differences between Native preoccupations and reactions to conversion and change in missionary practice” (p. xviii). The author suggests that we gain great insights into the minds of the missionaries as well as the Native peoples and that perspectives differ dependent on the geographic region, chronological period, ethnographic group, and missionary sect. The study area is immense, and the cultural diversity of the people within each microregion is great. Unfortunately, anthropological constructs and classification systems often mask the diversity of indigenous cultures that lived in close proximity and this hinders a scientific understanding of cultural processes. The influence of settlers