

## BOOK REVIEWS

IVES, Sarah. *Steeped in Heritage: The Racial Politics of South African Rooibos Tea*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 255 p. ISBN 978-0-8223-6993-6.  
<https://doi.org/10.31577/aassav.2024.33.1.06>. CC-BY

*Steeped in Heritage: The Racial Politics of South African Rooibos Tea* is a book written by Sarah Ives, a social anthropologist, researcher, writer and editor currently teaching at City College of San Francisco. She previously taught anthropology, writing and rhetoric at Stanford University from 2013 to 2018, and she has also published numerous articles in *National Geographic News* and *National Geographic Kids News*. The book *Steeped in Heritage* is the first academic book published by the author, apart from several academic articles and chapters in books which she has published. She focuses mostly on environmental studies, gender studies, comparative studies in race and ethnicity and Southern Africa.

The book *Steeped in Heritage* will take its readers to the Cederberg Mountain region in South Africa and offers them the opportunity to taste its unique rooibos tea. But some readers after finishing this book may discover, that despite its natural sweetness, slightly nutty flavour and low levels of tannins, this tea may for some leave a more bitter taste than expected. This is because, unlike most articles written about the rooibos, Ives does not focus her attention only on the healing properties of this particular plant, but instead she concentrates on its region of production, one defined by violence, poverty, racism and dispossession.

The rooibos is traditionally perceived and hailed as an ecologically indigenous commodity. However, this book recounts the historical development of the region and the dynamics of power and property relations of its inhabitants, questioning the authenticity of the rooibos and its producers. “Afrikaners”, who are the main players in the rooibos industry, struggle to express their attachment to the land and, regardless of their attitudes, they still benefit from the “heritage” of the apartheid system and systematic racism which was an everyday reality for the people of South Africa. The group of people who under the apartheid regime were labelled as “coloured” and were portrayed either as people lacking identity and indigenous to nowhere or as the mixed-race progeny of “extinct Bushman”, concentrate their claims on the cultural ownership of this indigenous plant and they are trying to overcome their problems of access to land. The presence of a third group of people, who under the apartheid administration were labelled as “black”, and who have started to come to the region in bigger numbers only relatively recently, since the collapse of apartheid regime, is perceived by both “Afrikaners” and “coloured” people

as a threat to their livelihood. “Afrikaners” take advantage of black workers, especially those who are in South Africa illegally. They use them for the hardest labour on their farms, while in most cases they do not even pay them the minimum wage. Despite this fact, “Afrikaners” perceive them as a threat to the status quo in the region; they fear their physical and also political power, arising from their majority status in South Africa. “Coloured” workers fear a surplus of available labour in the region, which pushes the price of labour down, and they also fear that their claims for the cultural ownership of the rooibos may be threatened as well.

The introduction of the book acquaints readers with basic facts about fynbos and especially rooibos or “red bush” from a general perspective. It also provides them with some information about the history of the region in which the rooibos is grown and about the political situation in the region. The first chapter *Cultivating Indigeneity* describes the racial politics of apartheid South Africa in detail, while focusing mainly on describing specific categories of racial classification, stereotypes which are related to these categories, and also opinions of individuals from the region about the classification itself and their personal identification with those categories. It is striking how these categories still affect the lives of individuals in the region despite the fact that nearly a quarter of a century has passed since the policy of apartheid was outlawed. The second chapter entitled *Farming the Bush* describes the technique of cultivation of rooibos. The author also uses the concepts of symbiopolitics as an extension to Foucault’s biopolitics. According to Ives local populations used different approaches to the place and the plant, to justify the position of their own group in the social hierarchy and also the position of other groups in the society as well. The third chapter, *Endemic Plants and Invasive People*, explain a striking match in the narrative about invasive plant species and incoming migrant workers. Terms such as indigeneity, endemic, invasive, endangered are commonly used by local residents to justify their claims for the authenticity of their identity and its connection to the physical place. *Rumor, Conspiracy, and the Politics of Narration* is a chapter in which theoretical approaches of anthropologists (for example Max Gluckman and many others) about rumours and their importance in social life are used to give a better illustration of the everyday reality of the people living in the region and especially about the ways in which they perceive the world around them. The chapter *Precarious Landscape* discusses specific external factors which are perceived as a threat to the region by its residents. In this chapter the author also uses a Marxist approach to describe different forms of alienation (such as the alienation of workers from the product of their labour, the alienation of workers from the act of producing, the alienation of workers from one another etc.) and their impact on the people in the region. The concluding chapter identifies the three most serious trends which can be perceived as a threat to the production of the rooibos in the region: climate change, the changing global agrarian market and changing political dynamics. The author also reflects on the most recent events in the region.

The book gives a very balanced picture. The author’s style is engaging, the book easy to read and full of many interesting stories. Her knowledge of the region and its geographical, environmental and social aspects is impressive. The conclusion drawn from the material seems to be well-founded. In my opinion, there is one thing that could be criticized, the lack of statements from the “black” respondents, which leads to insufficient

representation of this group and their opinions about the problem in the book. Nevertheless, I recommend this book to anyone interested in South Africa, ethnic identities, environmental issues or human rights issues.

Pavel Miškařík

BEŠKOVÁ, Katarína. *Mahfouzian Nights: Fate, Desire and Politics in Layālī alf layla*. Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2021. 96 p. ISBN 978-80-8265-000-9.  
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The literary oeuvre of Najīb Maḥfūz has received considerable scholarly attention, which, since 1988, when the writer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, has only grown in depth and volume. Some of the most valuable studies on Maḥfūz's work, however, were published even prior to his rise to such international acclaim, for instance Sasson Somekh's *The Changing Rhythm: A Study of Najīb Maḥfūz's Novels*<sup>1</sup> (1973) being a case in point. After a certain lull in Mahfouzian studies around the turn of the millennium, recent years have seen a renewed scholarly interest in the works of the foremost Egyptian novelist, with the publication of the two monographs by Muḥammad Shu'ayr, *Awlād ḥāratinā: Sīrat ar-riwāya al-muḥrama* [Children of Our Alley: The Story of the Forbidden Novel, 2018]<sup>2</sup> and *A 'wām Najīb Maḥfūz: al-Bidāyāt wa an-nihāyāt* [The Years of Najīb Maḥfūz: the Beginnings and the Endings, 2021] respectively. However, literary criticism on the lesser-known works by the world-renowned Egyptian novelist that could also be available in English for both reference and teaching, is still relatively sparse. This lack makes Bešková's monograph a vital contribution to the field.

The book is divided into six chapters, the first two introducing the life and work of the Nobel laureate and situating his work *Layālī alf layla* within a broader framework of literary re-imaginings and rewritings derived from – as well as inspired by – one of the most influential repositories of Arab storytelling; that of the famed collection of the *Thousand and One Nights*. While the first chapter, as its title<sup>3</sup> suggests, situates Maḥfūz's genius in his most natural habitat, the Cairene ḥāra, the second looks to position his work

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<sup>1</sup> SOMEKH, S. *The Changing Rhythm: A Study of Najīb Maḥfūz's Novels*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973. Given its date of publication, this study, however, concerns itself with the first forty years or so of Maḥfūz's literary career and discusses the works published prior to 1967.

<sup>2</sup> Shu'ayr's book is now also available in English translation. See SHOAIR, M. *The Story of the Banned Book: Naguib Mahfouz's Children of the Alley*. Translated by: HUMPHREY, T. D. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> *The Genius of the Cairene Hāra*, pp. 11–23.