

BOOK REVIEW

COVINGTON-WARD, Yolanda. *Gesture and Power: Religion, Nationalism, and Everyday Performance in Congo*. Duke University Press, 2016. 287 p. ISBN 978-0-8223-6036-0.

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Gesture and Power: Religion, Nationalism, and Everyday Performance in Congo is a book written by Yolanda Covington-Ward, a social anthropologist, researcher, writer and assistant professor of African Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. In most of her work she focuses her attention on performance, the embodiment of religion and history, group identity, gender, everyday negotiations of power and authority, and the relationship between physical bodies and group identity.

The book takes its readers to the Lower Congo region among the BisiKongo communities of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as to the capital of Kinshasa. Those are the places where Covington-Ward carried out her extensive field research, which was her primary source of information for this interesting book. The focal point for the book is the analysis of selected routine body performances which affect group identity in the selected region. For this purpose, the author uses a chronological approach because some of those specific body practices in the region have their origin in pre-colonial or colonial times. As time went on, some of those practices were used by different political actors in the region, for the purpose of achieving different goals. According to Covington-Ward some gestures and body postures can affect political life in the region because, among other things, they became a central identification factor for the members of specific nationalistic movements. In accordance with the situation and the process in which those practices are used, they can either support or jeopardize the existing social or political state in the area.

In my opinion, the theoretical aspect of the book is very sophisticated because all of the concepts which are used in the book are clearly explained and justified. The author uses some of the classical as well as more recent books from the field

of body anthropology, nationalistic studies, religious practices, the history of the region and so on. In the book, the author uses four main approaches to the study of the body, which she calls: *the body as centre*, *the body as conduit*, *the body as catalyst*, and *authority*. The *body as centre* is an approach which advocates placing the physical moving body at the centre of analysis because the human body is our first and most important means of interacting with the world around us. The *body as conduit* method sees the human body as an actor which can affect group and individual subjectivities and identities. The *body as catalyst* approach sees body performance as the social construction of reality rather than its representation. The *authority* approach sees body performances as a potential tool either for the creation or the subversion of authority.

The book is divided into four parts, which are further subdivided into six chapters. The first part *Performative Encounters, Political Bodies* consists of one chapter entitled *Neither Native nor Stranger: Places, Encounters, Prophecies*. This chapter provides the reader with basic information about the region, its communities and its historical development, as well as recounting the personal experiences and challenges which the author faced during her field research. The second part, *Spirits, Bodies, and Performance in Belgian Congo*, consists of two chapters. The first one, entitled “A War Between Soldiers and Prophets”: *Embodied Resistance in Colonial Belgian Congo 1921* depicts the era of Belgian colonial domination in the area, during which time the prophetic movement of Simon Kimbangu arose. Special emphasis is placed on the body performance of Kimbangu and his followers and the ways in which their activities were perceived by Catholic missionaries and colonial administrators. The following chapter *Threatening Gestures, Immoral Bodies: Kingunza after Kimbangu* describes the development of other prophetic movements after the arrest of Simon Kimbangu and the different and changing attitudes which the colonial authorities and the Catholic Church adopted towards different body practices such as secular or religious dancing, and others. Covington-Ward argues that this prophetic movement played a significant role in the process of independence. The third part of the book *Civil Religion and Performed Politics in Postcolonial Congo* consists of two chapters. The first, entitled *Dancing with the Invisible: Everyday Performances under Mobutu Sese Seko*, examines the transition from colonial government to the regime of Mobutu Sese Seko, and special attention is paid to the many practices of so-called “political animation” which his regime used in everyday interaction with its citizens. The main goal of these practices was to create a sense of national identity among its multi-ethnic citizens. The second chapter of the third part, entitled *Dancing Disorder in Mobutu’s Zaire: Animation Politique and Gendered Nationalisms* discusses the practice of organized public dances with some of the participants in those events. According to her findings, young women participating in those events were commonly abused by senior

males exercising political authority. The fourth chapter *Re-creating the Past, Performing the Future* consists of one chapter entitled *Bundu dia Kongo and Embodied Revolutions: Performing Kongo Pride, transforming Modern Society*. This chapter describes the most recent developments in the region, especially the formation, main principles, and performances of the politico-religious-nationalist movement of the Kongo people that seeks to re-establish the Kongo Kingdom, return to certain elements of tradition, and revitalize Kongo culture.

The book *Gesture and Power* is a very interesting contribution to the field of body anthropology and the study of nationalism as well. By taking an historical approach, the author illuminates the ways in which the everyday practices of the Kongo people affect the social and political situation in the country. Some of these practices at the first glance may seem to be irrelevant, trivial or meaningless but, as the author points out, some of them may be more than centuries old and can be packed with cultural meaning. In addition, over the course of time and even in different situations some of those performances may change their meaning or may start to serve different purposes. *Gesture and Power* is a perfect example of how an analysis from a micro-perspective may illuminate the functioning of whole societies of people. It is a book which is very readable, interesting, ethnographically rich and instructive.

Pavel Miškařík