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Picturing a Colonial Past: The African Photographs of Isaac Schapera [Book Review]

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Picturing a Colonial Past: The African Photographs of Isaac Schapera. *John Comaroff, Jean Comaroff, and Deborah James*, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 234 pp. \$60.00, cloth; \$25.00, paper.

The various ethnicities of Southern Africa have undergone far-reaching, occasionally catastrophic changes in the past century. The Tswana, Herero, Yei, Bakalagadi, and Khoisan peoples have interfaced with modernity in ways that have been transformative, when not outright effacing of their cultures. The editors of this photo book—John and Jean Comaroff and Deborah James—are known for their studies about the fate of traditional beliefs when said beliefs collide with modernity. The editors have thoughtfully considered the long career of Schapera to create the present volume. It is a book that is satisfying as a record of colonial times, enriching our understanding of Schapera and his subjects of study.

Ethnographer Schapera presents us with 136 photographs that enable us to see the country and its people of 75 years ago through the eyes of a knowledgeable, respectful, and sympathetic observer. Schapera took some 400 or so black-and-white photographs between 1929 and 1940 and preserved them at the Royal Anthropological Institute in London. He wanted this collection to be published during his lifetime, but an earlier venture was abandoned in the 1990s because the negatives could not be found. Now, these photographs have been restored by scanning prints and are collected after his death in this handsome volume along with substantial essays by the Comaroffs, by Adam Kuper, as well as a reprint of a 1933 field report by Isaac Schapera that provides context for many of the photographs.

Isaac Schapera (1905–2003) was born in South Africa, an ethnographer who focused on Southern African societies, especially the Khoisan and Tswana peoples. Schapera is known for his very descriptive ethnographic style of down-to-earth empiricism. In this book, Schapera shows a similar tendency in his photography, in which we see clear, unambiguous photographs, portraits (mostly of Bakgatla nobility in Mochudi), group photographs, illustrations of ritual and work, such as house construction and pottery-making, that appear to represent the unaffected worlds of his subjects. The term *respect* comes frequently to mind as you study the images and seems to characterize the photographer's attitude toward the subjects of the photographs. In the useful biographical essay that appears in the book, Adam Kuper locates Schapera's work in the historical context of British anthropology and its challenge to prevailing racist theories.

The viewer who is familiar with contemporary Botswana might be impressed with how little the visual topology of Botswana has changed. Beautifully constructed mud huts with thatched roofs are pictured in crisp detail, as are makeshift fences fashioned from branches stripped of foliage. People working, carrying water, and children playing probably look very much the same then as now. Then there are things pictured that are probably less common these days, such as the initiation rites of age-classes of young men, or a traditional Chopi Timbili orchestra from Mozambique photographed at the Johannesburg gold mines (plates 9.11–9.13). For those familiar with the image of Herero women in brightly colored, billowy dresses and anvil-shaped cloth *tukus*, there are some

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amazing pictures of Herero women in pre-colonial attire, wearing minimal leather skirts and towering headgear consisting of three pointed spires (plates 9.1–9.10). Scholars and students of traditional Batswana law and custom will be impressed by the documentation of open-air *kgotla* or courts (plates 8.1 and 8.2).

Overall, this is a wonderful book for lovers of Southern African cultures, as well as for students of classic ethnography and visual culture. There is value in these photographs on a number of levels. They are valuable as data and as illustrations of Schapera's studies. They have considerable historical importance for Botswana, as documented by Kgosi Linchwe II in a letter included in the introduction to the book, and they provide convincing evidence that the various cultural/ethnic groups of Botswana were interacting in the 1930s as they are now. Finally, there is much value in the aesthetic beauty of these photographs, reminding us that cultures reassert their values in a wide range of contexts.

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Ethnographic Sorcery. *Harry G. West.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 128 pp. \$35.00, cloth; \$14.00, paper.

This book addresses a longstanding and important concern in symbolic anthropology, anthropology of religion, and medical anthropology: the problem of translation. The author constructs the book around a central question: how to understand apparently cryptic statements and beliefs, expressed by local intellectuals as well as more "traditional" specialists and healers, such as "lions (who may also be sorcerers) are not symbols, . . . they are real." Many poststructural approaches to modes of thought now question the value of glossing such statements as "metaphorical," for this still imposes the cultural and professional bias of researcher's own modes of thought onto those of others. Thus many recent and current efforts challenge "Western" (i.e., Euro-American) assumptions of "transparency" in the practices of medico-ritual healing, often glossed as "sorcery."

In this brief but rich ethnography that is also theoretically engaging, Harry West grapples with these challenges. In this work, based on more than a decade of field research on the Mueda plateau in Mozambique, there is particular attention to what Byron Good has termed "the problem of belief": by describing others' modes of thought as "belief," anthropology tends to delimit "truth" to our own philosophical/disciplinary forms of knowledge, and to oppose local knowledge to them as "not true." West explores local theories of illness causation and healing and, more broadly, transformations and "invisible" forms of power in rural

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