

BOOK REVIEW

Charles Didier Gondola. *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence, and Masculinity in Kinshasa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. xii + 201 pp. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$30.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-253-02080-2.

Writing about violence is never an easy task. One must walk a tightrope, as there is always the risk of wandering off into sensationalism or of making judgmental descriptions. In *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence, and Masculinity in Kinshasa*, Didier Gondola avoids these traps with his lucid, superbly written, and sensitive historical ethnography of youth gangs, focusing on the Bills in colonial Léopoldville (then Kinshasa). For more than a decade, Gondola has carried out research on this youth movement, which “gave way to a culture of liminality, whereby young people occupied and coped with the blind spots and interstices created by colonial neglect” (3). The Bills defined Kinshasa’s streets and intimate spaces far more than the Sapeurs, which are better known in the Africanist library, ever did.

Gondola’s reconstruction of popular violence as performed by the Bills highlights one of the various so-called “interstitial youth movements” (3) of (post-)colonial Kinshasa that continues to nourish the city’s daily life with its own vocabularies, its own scripts for daily survival, and its urban savviness, characterized by a “rebellious ethos” which walks “the line between compliance and deviance” (4).

The first three chapters, grouped as Part I and aptly titled “Falling Men,” focus on the ways in which the violence of early and late colonialism not only impacted ethnic leadership and geographical occupation but also generated new forms of leadership. Gondola’s argument about the emasculating effect of colonialism is well taken. At various times, he hints at an “Afro-Victorian” ideology, which seems to beg further analysis. In addition, one would have expected deeper insights into how young men lived in pre-colonial times, and what were the previous scripts for successful manhood.

The second part, “Man Up,” describes the emergence of the Bills, which draws heavily on the cinematic experience of the early colonial period, though, as Gondola shows, it also perpetuates autochthonous forms of leadership, power acquisition, and masculinity. While some stories address the spiritual enhancement of one’s physical power, there are also careful descriptions of self-motivation and of impression management through various techniques and rituals. Chapter six, probably the strongest

element of this excellent historical ethnography, depicts the Bills as both predators and protectors. Emic concepts such as *koluka* (wandering) and *éboulement* (violent interaction, characterized by coercion and rape) are introduced here.

The third and final part of this book identifies the changes that the Bills movement has undergone since the late colonial period. Chapter seven, “Père Buffalo,” offers a success story amidst failed projects by the colonial state to address youth delinquency. While an occasional colonial observer had sympathy with the young men, the colonizers did not understand that initiatives to bring economic autonomy were ultimately the answer. Rather, they set up some re-education centers and detention camps, which mostly failed. Then, there appeared a Belgian missionary, Scheutist Father De Laet, “Père Buffalo Bill,” who would later become legendary as the leader of the Bills. This Flemish religious man realized that unemployment was an important source of frustration for Kinshasa’s male youth in the late 1950s and early 1960s and set up a system in which the Bills learned various professions under his guidance, thus giving them professional experience and self-worth. The type of masculinity that De Laet instilled in these young men moved on toward a more “muscular Christianity” (172), in which the Bills did not need to rape girls, steal, or create havoc. This chapter concludes with an explanation of how the Bills movement eventually dissolved. Mobutu Sese Seko’s well-known politics of incorporating potentially adverse powers into his own structures eventually neutralized the Bills. Many of these Bills, so Gondola’s *longue durée* research shows, later on appeared in high positions in the Mobutu government and economy. Yet, the spirit of the Bills has never fully died. Rather, the final chapter, aptly entitled “Avatars,” sketches the various offshoots from the late 1970s until the present day.

The main impact of Gondola’s book is in the way it lays bare the complex interplay of local urban cultures, translocal flows, and kinship worlds. We learn, for example, about the intimate relationships between Kinshasa and Brazzaville in the early colonial period; ethnic groups relocated at the other border of the Congo river as colonials gradually settled in Léopoldville. Later on, girls from Brazzaville, attracted by the celebrity of some big fighters, spent days in Léopoldville; these same fighters would flee the colonial police by settling in Brazzaville for a while. Gondola is careful to position the Bills within larger (fictive) kinship networks, sketching how parents themselves had an ambiguous stance, especially with regard to their daughters. When these girls were victims of sexual violence enacted by the Bills, parents would thank these same Bills for disciplining their daughters. The city itself appears as an important actor in giving shape to this youth movement. When colonial control over *évolués* ended after independence in neighborhoods such as Matete, only then did Billism arrive there. Nowadays, Matete is known to be the fief of the *kuluna*, one modern avatar of the Bills. Gondola also skillfully describes how taboos such as rape and homosexuality—even though documented in archival sources, or

confirmed through gossip—remain difficult to confess to, even in interviews sixty years later. We thus gain insights into the challenges of carrying out oral history on themes that through time have acquired sensitive meanings.

With Gondola, the Bills have found a most empathetic broker for academic as well as more popular representations of this legendary subculture. Gondola's pen is fluid, sharp, witty at times, and always highly accessible, thus making this book a good read also for undergraduates. No doubt, this superb monograph will become standard reading in urban popular culture, histories of African cities, and media studies.

Katrien Pype

KU Leuven University, Leuven

University of Birmingham

Birmingham, United Kingdom

katrien.pype@kuleuven.be

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For more reading on this subject, see:

Ratele, Kopano. 2014. "Hegemonic African Masculinities and Men's Heterosexual Lives: Some Uses for Homophobia." *African Studies Review* 57 (2): 115–30. doi:10.1017/asr.2014.50.

Zoettl, Peter Anton. 2016. "'Prison Is for Young People!' Youth, Violence, and the State in Praia and Mindelo, Cape Verde." *African Studies Review* 59 (2): 231–49. doi:10.1017/asr.2016.30.