

# BOOK REVIEW

**Derek R. Peterson, Kodzo Gavua, and Ciraj Rassool, editors. *The Politics of Heritage in Africa: Economies, Histories, and Infrastructures*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. vii + 291 pp. Maps. Bibliography. Index. \$107.00. Cloth. ISBN 978-1107094857.**

In their volume *The Politics of Heritage in Africa: Economies, Histories, and Infrastructures*, Derek R. Peterson, Kodzo Gavua, and Ciraj Rassool interrogate the diverse politics of heritage production in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Africa, with a specific focus on Ghana and South Africa. In taking on the concept of heritage, the editors' foremost aim is to broaden scholarly perspectives of what is meant by heritage work. As Peterson argues in the book's introduction, scholars—at least those outside the field of museum studies—have been reticent to actively engage the concept of heritage in their work. Moreover, within museum studies, Peterson further contends, the term has tended to be employed as a mechanism for scholars to offer what he characterizes as presentist and “prescriptive” advice designed for an audience of curators and policymakers (2). However, *The Politics of Heritage in Africa* espouses a much more expansive view of what heritage work can mean and entail, with nearly all of the book's contributors adopting a historical approach to their case studies. Even more importantly, each also emphasizes the ways in which heritage production takes place outside the formal confines of a conventional museum. In doing so, the interdisciplinary group of scholars who comprise the collection interrogate everything from attempted monument creations and the treatment of human remains to the codification of language and musical performance, among other topics, while arguing that each represents key arenas of contestation and debate around the concept of heritage in Ghana and South Africa.

The book itself is the culmination of a multi-year collaborative relationship between scholars based in Ghana, South Africa, and the University of Michigan that included conferences and workshops in Accra, at Rhodes University in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province, and at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. The depth of this relationship can easily be seen in the structure of this collection. Composed of twelve essays, plus an introduction by Peterson and a conclusion by Carolyn Hamilton, the collection as a whole enriches the reader with a comparative framework that

strives to put the Ghanaian and South African experiences with heritage work in conversation with each other in ways that might not be readily obvious to the casual observer.

Among the most analytically and methodologically innovative of the essays is that by historian Ciraj Rassool, who invokes the ownership and care of human remains as a mechanism for discussing the knotty relationship between what he defines as the “disciplines of the dead” (e.g., physical anthropology and human biology, among others) and the “South African memorial complex.” Also, of particular note is art historian Raymond Silverman’s discussion of the process of historical construction, if not invention, that surrounded the early twenty-first-century rise of the Ghanaian town of Manso—the site of the former Bono state—as a prominent tourist attraction for those interested in the history of slavery and of the slave trade in Ghana. As Silverman details, though, Manso’s place in this history is at best questionable. Instead, the public history articulated in Manso emerged from local leaders and chiefs seeking to expand the town’s economic fortunes in the midst of Ghana’s broader early twenty-first-century boom in heritage tourism. Linguist Kwesi Yankah’s essay on *ntam*—the taboo of talking about chiefs’ deaths—is also worthy of particular note.

In all, the overarching strength of the volume rests in the diversity of ways in which each of the book’s essays expands the idea of heritage work. Moreover, the interdisciplinarity of the collection deserves special praise. Not only does the collection successfully bring together a group of scholars that includes historians, linguists, art historians, archeologists, and others, but, within nearly all of its essays, the collection also exhibits a clear commitment to methodological innovation and interdisciplinary investigation.

The foremost challenge of the collection for the book’s editors as well as for its individual authors, however, rests in the volume’s comparative nature. Namely, their goal was to find ways to make the book’s individually rich essays—evenly divided between the Ghanaian and South African contexts—talk to one another. This is an extremely difficult task and one that affects nearly every comparative work. It is also a challenge that the book did not fully overcome, for, in many ways, it seemed as if the Ghana-focused chapters were talking to one another, while the South African-focused ones did the same. It may be that only an even more explicit, shared attempt to theorize “heritage” and “heritage work” in the context of the collection could alleviate this tendency. Regardless, this critique should not take away from what is a deeply rich collection of conceptually and methodologically ambitious and engaging essays.

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**For more reading on this subject, see:**

- Marschall, Sabine. 2017. "Targeting Statues: Monument 'Vandalism' as an Expression of Sociopolitical Protest in South Africa." *African Studies Review* 60 (3): 203–19. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.56.
- Sansone, Livio. 2013. "The Dilemmas of Digital Patrimonialization: The Digital Museum of African and Afro-Brazilian Memory." *History in Africa* 40 (1): 257–73. doi:10.1017/hia.2013.4.
- Wynne-Jones, Stephanie, and Martin Walsh. 2010. "Heritage, Tourism, and Slavery at Shimoni: Narrative and Metanarrative on the East African Coast." *History in Africa* 37: 247–73. doi:10.1353/hia.2010.0030.