

BOOK REVIEW

Laura Ann Twagira. *Embodied Engineering: Gendered Labor, Food Security, and Taste in Twentieth Century Mali*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2021. 328 pp. \$36.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780821424681.

This work is an excellent contribution to the fields of labor history and social anthropology of gendered agriculture and food security in Mali and the Sahel. Step by step with storytelling and folk narration, Twagira traces the history of women's intellectual production that overlaps with patterns of consumption, taste, and the aesthetics of women's technological production (21). The author takes the embodied techniques of women at the Office du Niger (Mali's ecological granary) as archival material. She shows that the techniques were appropriated through different processes of accommodation and resilience by women in moment of extreme crisis (i.e. the great Sahel drought, 1969–73). The author conducted extended field work that centers the body as a site for the production of gendered knowledge. That is to say, she relies on oral accounts that she calls testimonies, but she also observed women's work and physical movements in the everyday life at the Office du Niger.

Laura Ann Twagira is an outstanding researcher keen to showcase the way technology was historically employed in West African agriculture and households and especially the Office du Niger. She has structured the book in five well elaborated chapters. Chapter One focuses on the gendered labor in the farms in rural Mali in the early decades of the twentieth century and provides the theoretical framework for embodied engineering. It also highlights the labor experiences of both men and women at the Office du Niger diachronically. Chapter Two describes the colonial body politics of labor recruitment and the problems of food production at the office. Until the mid-1940s, as the author put it, households at the Office du Niger did not produce enough food to eat. The colonial emphasis on production for export had the unforeseen consequence of suppressing the qualitative aspects of food cultivation that were relevant to local taste. This led to women's absence from labor and therefore to a demographic crisis (23). Chapter Three focuses on the women who stayed at the Office du Niger to manage a new agro-industrial environment and make it livable. Chapter Four showcases the interplay between small-scale domestic technologies and large-scale industrial ones in the daily preparation of food as women started using the new metal pots, buckets, and other practical materials and technologies to ease their daily labor. Chapter Five describes the shift in the governance of the Office du Niger after Mali's independence in 1960 and the subsequent crisis of the Great Sahel Drought.

Twagira's book reflects a dynamic of different symbols such as the mask *muso koroni*, which for her speaks to regional ideologies about gender and labor. Gendering the body produced specifically gendered labor tasks (28). The nuanced distinction of labor is also symbolized by the mask *Ciwara* dancers to encourage the farmers. Still, team work and complementarity persist in the Office du Niger societies. Despite the fact that only men sought land ownership and were responsible for the fees and debt payments to the project, the water fee and the charges for other agricultural services sometimes cost farmers 50 percent of the harvest. Men and women definitely opposed these fees (110); they also collaborate to cope with the crisis and survive it through canal building and irrigations as well as the appropriation of the know-how to make metal and aluminum pots (p. 160).

Twagira concludes that women and men are working towards food security in Mali and the entire Sahel region. The author writes that in her several interviews, women repeated the phrase "*an segenna*" (we are tired), which was a critique of the project, that their labors have not always been rewarded with greater economic benefits (213).

In summary, I absolutely recommend this book to anyone who is interested in Africa, labor technology, history methodology, and gendered labor. This work is well documented with an enormous array of scholarly references in different languages as well as archives and oral accounts, especially in Bamanankan. Throughout the book, Twagira shows a great mastery of Bamanankan and the cultural practices of the societies living at the Office du Niger. This work is a testament to long and meticulous research on a non-familiar field for the author's positionality. *I ni ce! I ni baara!*

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