



Cahiers d'études africaines

231-232 | 2018
Face à la sorcellerie

BONHOMME Julien & BONDAZ Julien. — *L'offrande de la mort : Une rumeur au Sénégal*

Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2017, 286 p., bibl.

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafricaines/23204>

ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2018

Number of pages: 1049-1051

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2743-1

ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference

Shelagh Roxburgh, « BONHOMME Julien & BONDAZ Julien. — *L'offrande de la mort : Une rumeur au Sénégal* », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 231-232 | 2018, Online since 15 December 2018, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafricaines/23204>

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.

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- 1 Like a rumour, *L'offrande de la mort* begins with an ominous story told with the tentative tone of hearsay before spreading out and unravelling through the following pages, exposing lines of inquiry, intrigue, and concern that are never fully captured, exposed or resolved. Bonhomme and Bondaz recount the tale that gripped the capital of Senegal for weeks in early 2010 before disappearing just as quickly as it appeared: someone emerges from a mysterious 4 x 4 and offers a donation of meat wrapped in cloth and a 10,000 CFA note. Anyone who accepts the offering dies the next day. Though the details of the rumour fluctuated and varied with each recitation and new location, this rumour of the deadly offering terrified those who depended on anonymous donations and spread fear of the anonymous charitable donor that was profound enough to compel some to commit acts of violence.
- 2 Bonhomme and Bondaz use this rumour as an illustrative case study, employing the deadly offering in the style of Passeron and Revel (2005)¹ as a *pensée par cas*; a single event used to reflect and refract the greater complexities of daily life in modern Senegal (p. 10). Building on their expertise studying deadly rumours, both those that threaten the lives of individuals in their telling and which lead to violent repercussions in their re-telling, Bonhomme and Bondaz draw out the intricacies of rumour that apply as much to the “deadly offering” as to rumours of genital theft and killer phone calls. Through the prism

of this single story, the authors map out and open up the terrain of rumour, sending out lines of inquiry that upset ideas of charity, donation, selflessness, and strategic giving, and question the morality of philanthropy in a context of inequality. The baseline of this exploration is *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss,² which investigates the nature of the gift, the relationship between giver and receiver, the ambivalence of gift giving and the lingering ambiguity of expectations of reciprocity.

- 3 Though there is mention of “*radio-cancan*”—the Senegalese rumour mill—the authors focus on journalistic representations and experiences of the deadly offering, leading their discussion within the framework of a media analysis. Unfortunately, this framing is not paired with communications theory or a substantive media or content analysis. The central role of the media in propagating the rumour of the deadly offering begs the question of what role media itself played in the fomentation of fear and panic. It is impossible to tell from the few, brief citations from ethnographic informants whether the rumour is being related with an illocutionary force that indicates belief or whether the quotes reflect a mundane recitation of events transpired.
- 4 Essential features of Senegalese society, such as the role of marabouts and the importance of charity in Islam, do not benefit from the well-sourced material that speaks to individual features out of context, such as norms of charity in the Middle East or African marabouts in Paris, but rarely addresses these themes in combination. The disconnect carried across the central links being made weaken some correlations while overlooking others. Though the authors cite the work of Comaroff and Comaroff³ when introducing the concept of occult economics, Bonhomme and Bondaz do not address the potential role of modernization in a rumour that concerns an expensive foreign vehicle and the corruption of charity by nefarious strangers. In *L'offrande de la mort*, the role of foreign interventionism remains buried in cited works such as Luise White, Michael Taussig and the Comaroffs, leaving the myriad of possible connections between the local context and the global economy unexplored. In a footnote, Bonhomme and Bondaz cite Pfeil (2012: 39)⁴ who notes that “[o]bjects given as sarax [...] points to someone’s personal problem or secret, and they suggest, by their size, something about the scale of the problem,” yet the implications of this exposed conflict is not comprehensively correlated to post-colonial development initiatives, the gross iniquities of the neo-liberal capitalist economy, or a history of global wealth (and local poverty) built, in part, through the exploitation of African bodies.
- 5 Most unfortunately, like the short-lived rumour of the deadly offering, *L'offrande de la mort* is limited in space and time. Bonhomme and Bondaz raise many important and engaging questions that could lead to deep, complex analysis, particularly in regards to the moral questions of wealth, sacrifice, inequality, and trust in Senegal today. However, in the limited scope of their analysis, Bonhomme and Bondaz confine their work to hypothetical argument, leaving the interplay of religion, witchcraft, and charity unclear, which is perhaps ultimately the most responsible and accurate representation of rumour possible. For those who have some experience with this murky world, *L'offrande* serves to whet the appetite of those who may be seeking to get to “the meat” of the subject. For the uninitiated, Bonhomme and Bondaz offer a descriptive map, an accessible and rich introduction to the possibilities of rumour, which clearly demonstrates the complexity and wealth of a single case study.

NOTES

1. J.-C. PASSERON & J. REVEL (dir.), *Penser par cas*, Paris, EHESS, 2005.
2. M. Mauss writes how the thing given (including food, for example) is not inert and potentially deadly if unreciprocated in the well-known passage: “car, accepter quelque chose de quelqu’un, c’est accepter quelque chose de son essence spirituelle, de son âme ; la conservation de cette chose serait dangereuse et mortelle et cela non pas simplement parce qu’elle serait illicite, mais aussi parce que cette chose qui vient de la personne, non seulement moralement, mais physiquement et spirituellement, cette essence, cette nourriture, ces biens, meubles ou immeubles, ces femmes ou ces descendants, ces rites ou ces communions, donnent prise magique et religieuse sur vous. Enfin, cette chose donnée n’est pas chose inerte” (M. MAUSS, *Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, Paris, PUF, 2012 [1925], format e-book, n. p).
3. J. COMAROFF & J. L. COMAROFF, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony,” *American Ethnologist* 26 (2), 1999, pp. 279-303; “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on A Second Coming,” *Public Culture* 12 (2), 2000, pp. 291-343; “Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (4), 2002, pp. 779-805.
4. G. PFEIL, “Sarax and the City: Almsgiving and Anonymous Object in Dakar, Senegal,” in C. HIGH, A. KELLY & J. MAIR (eds.), *The Anthropology of Ignorance*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 33-54.