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## The Sex Thieves : The Anthropology of Rumor. By Julien Bonhomme [Book review]

Lindfors, Antti

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are giving us the gift of their sharing; we are not giving them the gift of our listening. Although the folklorist *qua* savior of tradition motif has long been absent from the literature, palimpsests remain. Gilman and Fenn bring humble practice to a Noyesian humble theory.

What truly distinguishes the *Handbook* from its predecessors, beyond its obvious contemporaneity with its public, is how it de-centers the fieldworker from a position of privilege and, specifically, from white, heteronormative, middle-class, neurotypical, and—dare I say—tenured privilege. It is, in short, intersectional in its approach. It does not assume that in the field (or even in the classroom), the taking on of the social identity of “fieldworker” somehow erases all the other identities one negotiates by being in the world. In the “AFS Position Statement on Research with Human Subjects,” we are reminded that “the risks of humanistic research constitute a special case of the risks inherent in civil society” (October 25, 2011, <https://www.afsnet.org/page/HumanSubjects>). This is, of course, true, but it is directed to the risks we potentially expose our research subjects to: it is equally true for the researcher. Chapter 11, “Issues in the Field,” clearly adverts to the very real circumstances potentially faced by fieldworkers: sections on “Physical and Emotional Well-Being,” “Interpersonal Relationships,” “Identity in the Field,” “Gender and Sex,” “Sexual Harassment and Violence,” and “Alcohol (and Drugs)” take the quiet conversations we have, sometimes too late, with our students and give them due prominence. That fieldwork can be a personal struggle is not an inevitability, but neither is it an aberration.

The structure of the book, divided into “Preparing for the Field,” “In the Field,” and “After the Field” sections, might seem obvious, but the authors diligently remember to point out trees and forests both, cross-referencing to more detailed discussions of the later processes that need to be planned-for early. I haven’t taught it thus, but such completeness bodes well for using discrete chapters in courses where a fieldwork principle needs explanation but not implementation.

Although the *Handbook* is replete with exercises suitable for class discussion prompts, it is a handbook as much as it is a textbook, and there are chapters that, at least at the early stages

of modest fieldwork preparation like my undergraduate course, are not necessarily to be taught from so much as pointed toward. Chapter 6, “Funding and Resources,” is invaluable but not, as it were, really PowerPointable. I skipped it entirely in my syllabus, merely adverting to its presence. But for my recent grant proposal, I used it as the *de facto* checklist. The book’s strength, that as a whole it is of use for both the initiate and the grizzled pro equally, means that at either end of that spectrum, it is not something that is necessarily to be read from soup to nuts. The sweet spot of maximal applicability would most likely be in coincidence with the preparation of one’s first ambitious fieldwork project, either the capstone for an undergraduate program or the methods courses in the first years of graduate work.

In sum, with the *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork*, Gilman and Fenn have done a great service to ethnographic disciplines, especially but not exclusively for those that foreground performance and expressive culture. This will rightly be the standard text for the foreseeable future.

**The Sex Thieves: The Anthropology of a Rumor.** By Julien Bonhomme and trans. by Dominic Horsfall. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. xvi + 174, editorial note, acknowledgments, foreword, introduction, appendix, references, index.)

ANTTI LINDFORS  
*University of Helsinki*

The French anthropologist Julien Bonhomme’s study *The Sex Thieves* centers on the transmission, diffusion, and interactional dynamics of the African genital theft rumor, wherein/whereby ordinary people are accused of stealing or shrinking the genitals of strangers over a simple handshake on the street or in the marketplace. Originally emergent in 1970s Nigeria and still concentrated in Central and West Africa, the rumor has become a transnational “intermittent tradition” with explosive social ramifications: spreading like wildfire amidst urban crowds, genital theft rumors can lead to potentially fatal lynchings of alleged “sex thieves” (or occasionally of their accusers) by angry mobs.

Gruesome as the consequences may be, the rumors surrounding genital theft serve for Bonhomme as a remarkably rich “case study for understanding contemporary Africa, its modes of sociality, the channels by which information circulates, its moral norms, and even the forms of violence that manifest within it” (p. 125).

Not only is the genital theft rumor startling, but when placed in its rightful context of African witchcraft, it also appears as highly idiosyncratic in its structural and social details: “It all starts with a point of contact between two strangers in a public place, usually a passing graze or an everyday handshake. The individual touched then experiences something akin to an electric shock around his groin. The shock is followed by the impression that one’s genitals have disappeared, or perhaps simply shrunk” (p. 8). In contrast to family witchcraft, which commonly affects the domestic sphere at nighttime, genital thefts take place in public spaces in broad daylight, amid the hustle and bustle of fleeting urban encounters. Bonhomme contributes to demystifying the rumor complex (as well as to de-exoticizing Africa more generally) by unveiling it as an ordinary social phenomenon, the mechanisms of which yield themselves to ordinary analytic descriptions and explanations on both grassroots and heavily mediated levels. Genital theft rumors are first of all “good stories to think and tell,” while the mysterious disappearance or shrinkage of genitals is attributed to fright response, whose symptoms can apparently include penis retraction and scrotal contraction. Somewhat more abstractly, Bonhomme traces one of the emotional foundations of genital theft rumors to the insecurities inherent in urban interaction, characterized as it is by anonymous encounters between strangers. One of the most incisive chapters of the book describes how a central perceptual premise of these rumors stems from the categorical mode of identification prevalent in cities, which relies on ethnic, racial, and national stereotyping. Genital theft rumors are thus framed as partaking in antagonistic collective dynamics insofar as they frequently reiterate xenophobic attitudes toward cultural and social foreigners.

Bonhomme methodologically conceptualizes the rumor as a recurring social and cultural phenomenon. In addressing “the existence of

culturally distinct systems of rumor that act as attractors around which the message reconfigures itself” (p. 87), or in noting “the laws of transformation” (with no mention of Walter Anderson’s “law of self-correction” in *Kaiser und Abt* [FF Communications No. 42, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1923:397–403]) that dictate how the rumor travels and accommodates itself to diverse tradition ecologies, the author is steeped in a theoretical quagmire familiar to folklorists since the nineteenth century—the repetition and contextually motivated variation of communicative forms and practices vis-à-vis certain generic ideals. However, the work seems to be characterized by what I would term a folkloristic bias, one that should perhaps give pause for thought to practitioners of these related fields. In particular, the way the author differentiates himself and his field (sociocultural anthropology) from folkloristic methodology and practice appears both self-serving and somewhat dated. The study of contemporary (rumor) folklore is described as being “too often limited to compiling catalogs of legends, identifying motifs, or drawing up formal typologies, rather than seeking to understand the process of cultural transmission in all its complexity” (p. 17). Elsewhere, a summary of the folkloristic approach to urban legends raises an eyebrow: “Raised to the status of myths ingrained in the collective unconscious, rumor then becomes the subject of a perilous mass psychoanalysis resting on simplistic functionalist interpretations: rumor as a symptom of fear of modernity” (p. 19). Such reduction of folkloristics to decontextualized typologies—or to psychoanalytically tinged functionalism, for that matter!—to the detriment of a rounded analysis of cultural transmission seems more than a bit unfair, given that the discipline has long since accommodated performance-and-practice-oriented perspectives.

Disciplinary and methodological peculiarities having to do with folkloristic and anthropological self-understandings aside, *The Sex Thieves* is a delightful, if frightening, read. Bonhomme does a fine job of bringing different scales of perspective with respect to the rumor into fruitful and instructive dialogue. He manages to illuminate the microsociological intricacies and causes of genital theft rumors, such

as the cultural dynamics of handshakes or traffic relations in the urban environments in which the thefts take place, as well as the national and international propagation of the phenomenon both in media and along the grapevine. Given that the opportunities for studying the “events, actions, emotions, and utterances” (p. 15) of the elusive rumor in situ are quite slim, Bonhomme primarily relies on newspaper reports, which broadens the scope of the study to “the ubiquitous role of media in contemporary Africa” (p. 7). Theoretically, Dan Sperber’s epidemiology of representations that addresses “how and why certain representations spread and entrench themselves within a group” (p. 13) suits Bonhomme in being inclusive enough to accommodate the rumor as an internationally recurring, heavily mediated phenomenon. Representing the first full-length study of the genital theft rumor, *The Sex Thieves* is bound to become an established reference in the lively field of African witchcraft studies. In the meantime, it offers plenty of insight—as well as opportunity for disciplinary self-reflection—for the folklorist and anthropologist alike.

**Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan.** By Benjamin Gatling. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018. Pp. xiii + 233, acknowledgments, note on transliteration and translation, introduction, notes, references, index.)

TOM MOULD  
Butler University

In *Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan*, Benjamin Gatling explores how contemporary Sufis use narrative, poetry, prayers, ritual, material texts, and embodied culture to practice their faith and construct a sense of identity that is simultaneously personal, cultural, political, and religious. Guided by ethnographic field practice and analysis of performance in situ, Gatling teases out the various layers of explicit and implicit meaning, identifying particularly relevant nodes of interpretation around time, memory, history, and nostalgia. The result is a carefully documented description and thoughtful analysis of how Sufis construct, interrogate, and de-

ploy competing stories of Sufism past, present, and future.

Laying bare epistemological processes but avoiding the pitfall of the self-referential cooption of the narrative, Gatling introduces the reader to Sufism in Tajikistan as he comes to understand it through careful ethnography. We walk alongside him to shrines, sit with him in *zikrs* (ceremonies during which the name of God is recited and repeated) and *dars* (lessons in Sufi teaching), and travel with him to remote villages to meet with local *pirs* (Sufi masters). Through the experiences of these men—and they are all men; strict gender divisions within this religious group meant Gatling had no meaningful opportunity to conduct fieldwork with women—we come to understand the political, economic, social, and religious marginalization of these disciples and masters, both in the past and the present. Gatling avoids the all-too-common assumption in folklore scholarship that all marginalized peoples are necessarily engaged in explicit acts of resistance. He does, however, explore those ways in which Sufi practitioners claim agency in a present filled with repression and loss. Nostalgic narratives provide one strategy, allegories another. Both draw explicit comparisons between past and present, one as an expression of discontinuity, the other of continuity. This tension between these two states of linear coherence pervades the competing visions of contemporary Sufi practice.

The most explicit articulation of this tension is between a narrative of massive disjunction during the Soviet era and one of continuity despite Soviet control. Such narratives are complicated in post-Soviet Tajikistan, where Islam can again be publicly practiced but is heavily regulated, and where Sufism is seen as a strange anachronism at best, a direct threat to the government at worse. Gatling parses the various arguments for continuity and discontinuity, noting the range of stakeholders and performance contexts that might encourage a person to downplay the impact of the Soviet era in one instance, and highlight it in another. Gatling also found that these stories were individually situated, with many men looking to the 1970s when they discovered Sufism as a period of authenticity and devotion. For virtually all of