

evolutionary cognitive science, he is not much interested in questions of historical periodization, of differential modernity, and of global circulations of power, including imperialism.

Strathern's main interest is in the relationship between religion and power. He focuses on royal power and distinguishes between two forms of sacred kingship: the divinized king and the righteous king, representing an evolution from magic to morality. This is again a problematic division, but more troubling is the neglect of major struggles about sovereignty between religious and secular powerholders. In general, Strathern is very good on the various aspects of royal power, but much less so on the history of violence against religious opponents, a major aspect of sovereignty in world history. For instance, we learn much about the divinization of kings, but hardly anything about the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Christian Spain, the massacre of Christians in Japan, or the European religious wars after the Reformation. In short, this reader found a weakness in *Unearthly powers'* analytical framework and neglect of significant parts of the global historical record. That said, the strength of this well-written book is its rich inclusion of the ethnographic record of societies that are neglected in global civilizational history, which should inspire readers to think more broadly about religion and political change.

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Living politics

CHANCE, KERRY RYAN. *Living politics in South Africa's urban shacklands*. xvi, 184 pp., illus., bibliogr. Chicago: Univ. Press, 2018. £22.50 (paper)

When thinking about poor people's politics, we would be mistaken to view them as inherently atomized, as in Marx's 'sack of potatoes' formulation, or else as an amorphous rabble easily manipulated from above. In *Living politics in South Africa's urban shacklands*, Kerry Ryan Chance makes clear that within a liberal democratic context, residents of shack settlements frequently collectively identify as 'the poor', cutting across lines of race, ethnicity, and nationality. This process of collective self-identification is what she defines as living politics, the central concept organizing her monograph. Rejecting preconceived notions of how poor people should organize, Chance develops the concept to capture how any oppositional political action is inextricable from a politics of everyday life; she

argues that politicization must be limited to struggles *for* survival and *against* state agents who criminalize any politics beyond the confines of political parties.

This ethnography explores how lived politics structured the collective self-identification of a shack dwellers' movement in Durban, South Africa. This social movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM), emerged in the wake of the implosion of the first wave of social movements critical of the post-apartheid government. In contrast to other movements, AbM represented itself at its inception in 2005 as more firmly grounded in popular politics and therefore more deliberative and democratic in its approach.

Chance carried out extensive fieldwork in AbM's flagship settlement, called Kennedy Road, as well as visiting sites in Durban, Cape Town, and Johannesburg. Each chapter is organized around what she calls an elemental form of material life: fire, water, air, and land. To be clear, she is not working in the tradition of new materialisms, attributing agency to these elements themselves. Rather, she treats them as 'dynamic social relations that are intertwined with power' (p. 16), representing each as a field of struggle, with collective identity at one pole and mutual fragmentation at the other. This is what she calls the 'double edge to the promise of infrastructure' (p. 39).

Chapter 1 analyses how fire is used to unite poor residents, ranging from organized illegal electricity reconnections to the burning of tyres in mass street protests. But fire also divides: burning tyres are used to kill perceived rivals, while reconnections and their attendant protests are used as pretexts to criminalize entire settlements. Chapter 2 turns to water. Under apartheid and after, residents whose water bills were in arrears collectively refused to pay, transforming 'citizens-in-waiting' into 'frustrated consumers' (p. 52). But this identity also militated against collective action, producing 'nonracial' consumers in accordance with the liberal contract model, 'cultivat[ing] desires for civic inclusion' (p. 47). Air is deployed metaphorically in chapter 3 to discuss practices of 'coughing out', speaking in Pentecostal tongues, and singing protest songs that unify the collectivity against the backdrop of Durban's poor air quality. Chapter 4 explains how residents communally occupy land and develop a 'thriving political and legal life' (p. 104) as they challenge the state in court for the right to stay put. This, too, has a double edge, and residents are often reduced to 'waiting for future inclusion' (p. 88) in government-provisioned formal housing projects, or, worse, in state-run

temporary encampments. The story of what Chance calls a pogrom against AbM leadership in Kennedy Road in September 2009 is told in chapter 5. She combines the various elements into different configurations of the story: how collective identity articulated through ethnicity produced a violent Zulu nationalism; how the formation of a popular police force amplified competing claims over territoriality; and how toilet provision before a local election did much the same.

Chance concludes with a short meditation on how living politics is often a politics of sacrifice. I found this chapter to be the least convincing, largely because it stands as a sort of afterthought instead of bringing together the various essays that comprise the book. The framing in terms of elements links the various chapters thematically, but it does not address the elephant in the room: where does the question of AbM as a social movement feature in Chance's analysis? To what extent do living politics require a certain organizational form? Why was a high-profile social movement selected for the analysis, as opposed to, say, studying more typical cases of poor people's politics? I also wondered about the conception of the state underlying Chance's narrative. Who are these 'state agents'? How do the various scales of the state apparatus matter, and do all state agents have identical aims? And how does her contribution relate to what is now a large body of work on infrastructure, housing, and cities after apartheid?

These questions aside, *Living politics in South Africa's urban shacklands* provides a rich account of the everyday struggles that both unite and divide poor communities, facilitating the development of a collective identity, on the one hand, but creating liberal subject-citizens, on the other. It will be of interest to scholars of social movements, urban informality, and subaltern politics in the Global South.

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DAS, DEBOJYOTI. *The politics of swidden farming: environment and development in Eastern India*. xx, 252 pp., maps, figs, tables, illus., bibliogr. London, New York: Anthem Press, 2018. £70.00 (cloth)

Nagaland has a troubled and violent history. Under colonial rule, it was the victim of brutal 'civilizing missions' and punitive expeditions. In the post-independence era, it has persistently

been the object of no less oppressive forms of postcolonial state-making and 'national integration'. In Debojyoti Das's fine monograph, however, the people of Nagaland emerge as historical subjects in their own right as they navigate the conditions of possibility offered them by the 'complex colonial heritage' (p. 2) that continues to shape the current postcolonial conjuncture in profound ways. By casting the Yimchunger Naga tribal group that is at the core of his ethnography as historical subjects, Das brings to light the creative process of resistance, negotiation, and aspiration for improvement (p. 22) that defines social existence in contemporary Nagaland.

The politics of swidden farming narrates the long history of the Yimchunger Naga through the prism of *jhum*, or swidden agriculture. While *jhum* has historically been dismissed and derided by the powerful as an 'ignorant and savage-like' (p. 6) and ecologically destructive form of agriculture – derogatorily also labelled 'slash and burn' – Das brings to light how among the Yimchunger Naga it is in fact an evolving and dynamic practice shaped by complex historical, social, and political factors. As such, this monograph constitutes a valuable contribution to our knowledge of *longue durée* agrarian change in the highlands of northeastern India. The fact that it is richly illustrated and written in clear and jargon-free language adds to its appeal.

The book consists of eight chapters. The introductory chapter sets the stage by surveying current debates on swidden agriculture. Chapter 2 is a reflexive essay that dwells on the methodological and ethical implications of doing fieldwork in a context marred by 'everyday violence and suspicion' (p. 25). Chapters 3 and 4 analyse the history of Naga encounters with the colonial state based on secondary sources, while chapters 5 through 7 are more ethnographically informed. Here, Das's village-level ethnography brings to the fore the ways in which multiple regimes of access and control – tied to land and labour relations, Baptist missionary activities, and state development programmes – shape agrarian change in Yimchunger villages in complex ways. Chapter 8 summarizes the book. Across these eight chapters, scholars of long-term agrarian change will find much that is of interest. Indeed, it is a strength of the book that it operates with considerable historical depth and thus avoids a 'synchronic "history-free" detailed account' (p. 200) of Naga culture, even if it means that the first-hand ethnography enters the narrative relatively late. Das's command of historical detail is impressive, but there is a good deal of