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REVIEW // COMPTE RENDU

TRACES OF THE FUTURE: AN ARCHEOLOGY OF MEDICAL SCIENCE IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AFRICA

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Browsing through *Traces of the Future: An Archaeology of Medical Science in Africa* is a tactile experience. Thick and fibrous, beige pages introduce the five medical sites the book investigates, localizing these on a stylized map of Africa that neatly corresponds with a beautiful, colour-coded table of contents overleaf. The book continues with its introduction, a conclusion in disguise that explains what the book has set out to do. Printed on thin, standard paper, the sections of scholarly text feel far more familiar to readers of academia, but again this gives way to prosaic polaroids and stylized still lives, an artist's impression of the medical infrastructure's interiors on smooth photographic paper. The rugged fibre pages return, unfolding in five separate but identically structured chapters on the five case-studies: Uzuakoli, a former leprosy research centre, Ayos, a renowned Cameroonian hospital, Amani, a medical research station, Niakhar, a medical and demographic observation centre and Kisumu, a city dotted with several research stations. Each chapter begins with a brief chronology of the case: when, why and under which conditions the centres founded and how they evolved. Then, an audacious composition of reflective text, quotes, fieldwork notes, video stills, doodles, drawings, plans, black and white portraits and aerial photographs, grouped around a few case-specific themes, invites the reader to "think with" and construct one´s own interpretation of the historical and present realities of these cases. It is not clear whether this is truly an academic publication, an artistic collage or just some well-selected field notes and souvenirs put together, the reader is challenged and baffled. One thing is clear however: with its textures, its incredibly rich variety of sources and its delicate feel to make archives come alive and tangible, this book is all about materiality.

As the title of the book reveals, the authors have a "lust for traces" (p. 16), which they

straightforwardly define as "what remain of past action" (p. 15). Traces can be objects, marks, ruins, as well as records, archives, and even memories. Africa, they argue, is replete withthem: abandoned colonial vestiges, crumbling infrastructures, postcolonial ruins that once were the hope and pride of independent African nations, but also still functioning (post)colonial constructions and facilities, sometimes fully renovated or expanded, more often refurbished with the limited budgets available. Within these African "wastelands of the aftertime," it is no coincidence that the authors have chosen to trace five medical infrastructures. Such "sites of twentieth century medical and biological science" (p. 17) embody the many contradictions of the (post)colonial political reality: scientific reverie and mirage, colonial subjugation and welfare, violent racial or social inequalities and hopes for a better future. Because such contradictions stretch across different decades, these medical stations at once materialize different temporalities, from past memories to future possibilities. It is precisely these temporal layers, simultaneously present in each of the five cases, that the authors have traced in the book.

However, rather than taking an evidential (Ginzburg, 1980) approach, trying to fully reconstruct these places' histories, they have taken an ethnographical one. Deploying material debris as method (Hunt, 1999) the authors use concrete objects and places not just to mine for and unearth lost histories, but also as entry points for (self-)reflection and as conversation starters, sparking inhabitants or (former) employees of these stations to recollect old memories, tell anecdotes, or intimate hope and nostalgia. In Ayos for instance, a rusty Citroën truck which used to bring medicines to remote villages, not only offers insight into the former colonial *réseau pharmaceutique*, but also engenders nostalgic memories of free healthcare, African trust in western medicine that French doctors had introduced and reflections on the current precarious state of the hospital. Another example: a hole in the concrete floor of one of Amani's old German buildings turns out to have been made by treasure hunters, who all over Tanzania, are digging for German gold or relics. This quest for treasures – be it profitable or not – lays bare topical myths of colonial riches, German spirits protecting these, and economies of traditional healers protecting treasure diggers against such ghosts. Many more traces, including architectural plans, yellowed portraits and old passports, feature in the book, all of which bring to life the different narratives of these five medical sites. As such, without being complete or exhaustive, the authors sketch fragmentary biographies of each of these cases, much like the concept of "landscape biographies" of Kolen, Renes and Hermans (2015).[1] Like a biography, they pay particular attention to the evolving nature of these sites, and the transformations that have taken place over the years and across colonial and postcolonial temporalities. Moreover, by explicitly visualising and collaging objects and debris, they illustrate how material traces

1 This notion of "landscape biography", although not present in the book, is used explicitly in an article that Paul Wenzel Geissler co-authored on Amani and which aims at presenting – and critically reflecting on – a mapping of the research center and its surroundings.

echo and elicit these temporalities. The material is the object of inquiry, but has, at the same time, become a rhetoric form in its own right.

Using these visual, non-discursive narratives, the authors not only follow the material turn social sciences have started to take since the 2000s, they push it to the extreme. Challenging "history as form" (Simmel, 2004), they question and expand the boundaries of the anthropological and historical disciplines. This "rejection of the historicist" (p. 11) is of course a result of the methodological approach, of tracing as a process. Criss-crossing and blending timescales, the authors treat traces not just as historical sources but as contemporaneous artefacts that exist in the present and still engender memories, nostalgia, hope and wonder. This is reflected in the book's provocative lay-out that deploys material objects as visual narratives, as well as in its innovative structure. In contrast to the chronological introduction, the chapters discard any classical historicist sequential format. Rather, they are thematically structured, based simply on whatever topics emerged during the fieldwork. Pictures of colonial tombstones, an old map indicating African graveyards and informants walking past and commenting on quarries that used to be mass graves, are, to give an example, bundled in the topic "Death and dust in Ayos" (p. 101); similar themed mixes include the topic on the Citroën truck, "Present absences" (p. 79), the piece on "Treasure diggers" (p. 163) in Amani and many others. Audacious and vulnerable at the same time, as the authors put the material sources encountered and their private reflections completely in the open, such an anachronistic structure is innovative and indeed rethinks classical forms of narrating history.

Provocative as this book is, its strength may also carry with it a significant weakness. The authors explicitly search for an "affective encounter" with material objects that not just sparks reactions from informants and interviewees, but generates a "shared historical sense," "intertwining subjectivity and exterior materiality" (p. 22). From personal field notes and self-portraits to a polaroid picture showing the authors bathing in an Amani rock pool where some of the informants used to bathe in the late 1950s, this affective approach glows throughout the book, but is perhaps epitomized by the re-enactments. These staged events, where some informants play human bait to catch mosquitoes just like they did some sixty years ago, not only give insight into the sometimes violent repetitiveness and *sérieux* of colonial work, but, as the authors indicate, they also "shed light on the ethical and political tensions in our relationship with the past" (p. 153). However, while the re-enactments of European researcher as employer, and former African scientific staff as make-believe employees, certainly do so, they also raise very real and practical questions – how much does one pay the actors? How many performances are demanded before the actor has done his or her job? Such questions can create, and certainly do for me, a certain moral uneasiness.

As *Traces of the Future* pushes the limits of wide-ranging disciplines and domains, ranging from medical anthropology to colonial history, the book is of course bound to cross some boundaries and venture into

wild, uncharted academic territory. Some of its provocative approaches, methods of visualisation, and affective re-enactments may be a step too far for some readers, but in doing so, the book does achieve what the authors had set out to do: aise thought-provoking questions about nostalgia, temporality and the affective through a cunning lay-out of combined texts and material traces. This pioneering book, at once an academic publication, an artistic collage and well-selected field notes and souvenirs, leads the way beyond classical forms of history and opens up the field of inquiry.

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