

## BOOK REVIEW

Joseph Tonda (translated by Chris Turner). *The Modern Sovereign: The Body of Power in Central Africa (Congo and Gabon)*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2021. 456 pp. Cloth. \$45. ISBN: 9780857426888.

Tonda opens his book with a compelling statement: “A single hegemonic power informs and administers the relation to the body, things and Power in Central Africa: *The Modern Sovereign*.” The author continues: “It is made up of fantasies and realities, spirits and things, the Imaginaries and materialities constitutive of the contemporary, interactive powers of capitalism, the state, Christianity, the body, science, technology, books and witchcraft” (1). The book provides a powerful exploration of how the Modern Sovereign, conceptualized as a social relation, is both constituted by and constitutive of, the diverse, power-imbued, organizing structures of thought and practice. It is a sprawling synthesis of ideas, covering the quoted subject matter and more. This book thus holds a little something for everyone, while leaving open certain questions. *The Modern Sovereign* is a unique contribution to theorizing power and politics from an African scholar whose work was previously not translated to English.

At the heart of this book I find a politics of fetishism. The author draws from both the theoretical scholarship on fetish, fetishizing, fetishism, but also on the contextual use of fetish in Central Africa, innovating the concept beyond its heretofore applications. In particular, Tonda explores the complexities and nuances of power in both the formal political realm and in the everyday through the violence of fetishism, including, but in no way limited to, the legacies of colonialism. The book considers how power is internalized and through this process performs violence on the body and the imagination. “The body” is central to Tonda’s examination of power as it relates to economics, politics, and belief systems. Indeed, the author argues that there are several ways in which the violence of fetishism is synonymous with violence of the Imaginary (3), and frequently implicates the body, and other materialities, in these violences.

One of the exciting elements of this book is how the author weaves together the modern sovereign with hidden violences and the African realities of witchcraft, sorcery, and zombies. While Western anthropologists have long reflected on the links between the state, global capitalism, and witchcraft, Tonda provides a remarkably nuanced analysis that only comes from a profound understanding of how deeply ingrained belief systems and practices play a role in both self-violence and violence over, but also in the *possibilities* of liberation.

This is the space that is left open for further exploration. Are the roots of liberation to be found in the same space of internalized violence and, notably, in the imagination? What would this look like? The imaginary plays an integral role in Tonda's analysis, but the door is left open for us to wonder what *possibilities* may lie in the imagination and the subversive potential of witchcraft.

Given the breadth and depth of this book, it seems almost unfair to ask for more, *but*, if I were to point out a couple of areas of further reflection, I would highlight the gender analysis. In the second part of the book, on consumption/Consumption, we find discussion of the sex-body, where the author includes the bulk of discussion about women. While this is a productive contribution to the book, it also plays into some reductive tendencies. By limiting the gender analysis in other sections, it may appear that women are pigeon-holed in the spaces of marriage, sex, and clothes. At the same time, recalling the book's original publication close to twenty years ago now, I recognize that twenty years of thinking and debates on women and gender in African contexts had not yet occurred.

*The Modern Sovereign* is a unique contribution to theory in African Studies. While the book is focused on Gabon and Congo, the analyses are arguably relevant to numerous contexts across the continent. Engaging Western theorists, the author reinvigorates their concepts for the African context, and goes beyond by developing concepts that have their roots in Gabon and Congo's intellectual lineage, as well as lived experiences. It is worthy of a careful and thoughtful read.

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[doi:10.1017/asr.2024.51](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.51)