

BOOK REVIEW

David Afriyie Donkor. *Spiders of the Market: Ghanaian Trickster Performance in a Web of Neoliberalism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. xvii + 232 pp. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$30.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-253-02154-0.

Ghanaian expressive culture has received enormous attention in the last few decades, with studies on topics ranging from “traditional” drumming and dancing to popular music such as highlife and its contemporary development hip-life, as well as concert party, state dance ensembles, poetry, film, narrative, folklore, and, of course, theatre. David Afriyie Donkor’s book *Spiders of the Market: Ghanaian Trickster Performance in a Web of Neoliberalism* comes on the heels of a similar examination of Ghanaian theatre, Jesse Shipley’s *Trickster Theatre*, also published by Indiana University Press (2015). Both analyze *ananse* (spider) trickster performance within the context of neoliberal political economy. While there is some inevitable overlap, namely in shared historical narratives and in their analysis of a national concert party series, each author presents complimentary case studies, taking distinct political and theoretical stances that produce valuable contributions in their own right.

While Shipley’s work takes a more historically-sweeping diachronic approach, Donkor focuses more acutely on the Rawlings government (1979–2000), showing how it harnessed staged cultural performance, rooted in *ananse* storytelling, to legitimize its power and policies. Against the backdrop of democratization and neoliberalism, the genres of *gyimi* (stand-up comedy), concert party (variety show), and *kodzi* (spider-trickster storytelling) are investigated to illustrate the ways in which performers embody the trickster’s cunning to subvert government and corporate agendas, maintaining creative integrity in the face of attempts to co-opt their artistry. Donkor employs a combination of performance and post-colonial theories to highlight the dual nature of trickster performativity, as it often simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the social order. This double-ness also appears in the author’s insightful analysis regarding the dialectic between the subjunctive (“acted self”) and indicative (“true self”) performance modes.

Chapter One offers a conventional political history of Ghana, starting in the 1940s and moving through the Nkrumah and post-Nkrumah periods, to set up the book’s subsequent focus on the Rawlings era. Readers already

familiar with this history may find it unnecessary to revisit this rehearsal. Moreover, this discussion could have benefitted from more analysis of the cultural activity and policies during these periods, particularly Nkrumah's own co-opting of expressive forms (i.e., highlife, theatre, "drumming and dancing") to legitimize his power; such a discussion would have provided a firm comparative reference point for the remainder of the text.

Offering further historical and cultural foundation, Chapter Two details the practices of *anansesem* storytelling. Here, Donkor emphasizes and elucidates the "ontological double-ness" of the trickster spider, using colonial and post-colonial accounts to explore how ananse transgresses and avoids human/divine, true/false, actual/imagined, and man/animal dichotomies. Escaping definition and capture, this ambiguity, the author argues, gives the trickster its power as a "counterhegemonic" critique of political structures, even as it may often create such cultural webs of authority. Ultimately, Donkor convincingly argues that "ananse is more of an *ethos* than an individual" (83).

Taken together, the first two chapters provide historical and cultural context for the subsequent case studies outlined in the following three chapters. Chapter Three particularly analyzes Rawlings' co-opting of gyimi (comic foolery), examining the way that he conscripted the well-known performer/comedian Bishop-Bob Okalla into endorsing his campaign. Donkor illustrates the ways in which Okalla used clever ananse-style indirection, ambivalence, and innuendo to avoid partisan politics while maintaining his own sense of artistic integrity, his counterhegemonic voice, and his reputation and fan-base. Chapter Four examines how the Rawlings regime and the Unilever corporation reconfigured the concert party tradition at the National Theatre in the 1990s to bolster support for their compounding neoliberal agendas. This discussion evinces that concert party was simplified, sanitized, and de-politicized through a "progressive" ideology to create a wider consumer appeal, as performers employed a repertoire of trickster tactics to counter these attempts to render concert party as a unidimensional expression. The attention to gender dynamics and skin bleaching practices here is a welcome addition to the conversation on theatre in Ghana (and Africa in general). Focusing on the village of Ekumfi-Atwia near Cape Coast, Donkor's final case study (Chapter Five) explores ananse storytelling within the context of cultural tourism in Ghana. Donkor shows how this tradition (*kodzi*) was first modernized under the direction of Efua Southerland's experimental sensibilities and subsequently reformed to appeal to the limiting historical-preservationist stereotypes of tourists.

Because Rawlings himself emerges as a type of ananse figure, this book analyzes a battle of trickster tactics and maneuvers as performers contend with state and corporate attempts to co-opt their artistry/appeal to further their own social, political, and economic interests. In the end, as the author argues, this book makes at least three important academic interventions. First, within the discourse on performance theory, it shows that the "unresolved tension" between indicative and subjunctive performance is more

than a mode of performance; it is a technique that “performers deploy, not simply to engage with domination, but also to survive that typically precarious engagement” (186). Second, Donkor’s discussion reminds us that neoliberalism is not simply the absence of the state in economic affairs, but requires activist-interventionist regimes to implement such policies and practices in ways that resonate with local populations, illustrating how neoliberalism “goes native” (189). Third, pushing against James Ferguson and other scholars who argue that neoliberalism is often propagated in technocratic language that denies its own morality, Donkor argues that, “at least in millennial Ghana, the language of neoliberalism presented the market as a morality” (190). Finally, as part of the ethnomusicology multimedia series, this book includes companion videos with carefully detailed annotations that correspond to the three case studies, offering constructive additions to the text. Overall, as a Ghanaian actor and director as well as a scholar, Donkor’s cultural insider analyses of ananse theatre within the space of political economy make important contributions and interventions to the discourses on performance (theory) and neoliberalism and their interaction in Ghana and Africa.

Paul Schauert

Detroit Institute of Music Education

Detroit, Michigan

paulschauert@dime-detroit.com

doi:10.1017/asr.2018.106

For more reading on this subject, see:

- Hess, Janet. 2001. “Exhibiting Ghana: Display, Documentary, and ‘National’ Art in the Nkrumah Era.” *African Studies Review* 44 (1): 59–77. doi:10.2307/525392.
- Mirzeler, Mustafa Kemal. 2007. “The Tricksters of Karamoja.” *History in Africa* 34: 421–26. doi:10.1353/hia.2007.0015.
- van der Geest, Sjaak. 2004. “Orphans in Highlife: An Anthropological Interpretation.” *History in Africa* 31: 425–40. doi:10.1017/S0361541300003582.