

BOOK REVIEW

Lisa Feder. *Jeliya at the Crossroads: Learning African Wisdom through an Embodied Practice*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. vii + 264 pp. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$110.44. Hardcover. ISBN 978-3-030-83058-8.

This is an evocative, profound story told with lucid sincerity, utilizing metaphors laden with brutal intensity. The reader is enthralled by the jeliya and its cultural possibilities that Feder portrays, including her adoration and passion for it. As a doctoral student whose subject is the jeliya music, she travels to various places including Gambia, Guinea, Paris and Brazil. In West Africa she immerses herself in the culture of the local Mandingo to enhance her knowledge of African music and its teachers. She is also fascinated by the instruments that exude pleasing sweetness and some of the rich cultures of the global South. As soon as she begins her participant observations and learning more about the breath-taking sounds and history of the jeliya, she uncovers the insiders' view of the African rhythm and way of life.

This is a world that teaches her family values, spirituality, and history. Her intoxicating romance with the Gambian native, Lasine Camara, is intense but short-lived. There are factors she cannot understand as an American in Africa, and she grows to realize that Africa does business differently. She does not understand submissive women like Awa, or the display of exaggerated humanism where her boyfriend has to greet everyone on the way to the market and is even suspicious, if not paranoid, about the way the African wants to wrest her money. She sits down to reflect from time to time, and one might be tempted to say that her knowledge about the jeliya and the artists slowly advance her study but it is the subliminal story that is nuanced that may captivate discerning readers. The story is reminiscent of Gabriel Okara's poem, *Piano and the Drum*, where the speaker is perplexed by the two worlds of the African continent, represented by the traditional African drum on the one hand and the Western realm epitomized by the piano on the other.

There is even a more critical story beneath these and that is opposition to colonialism and epistemic violence. She is a progressive scholar who tries to demystify the enigma of intransient but concealed colonization vestiges. Within her story, Feder becomes a conduit where readers pose significant questions about culturecides and historicides. The reader finds Feder unmasking herself when she reflects on incidents and her actions. The jeliya sweetness is mired by disharmony that is evident when two cultures clash. Feder also finds that as her excitement on the jeliya soars, some of her attributes flounder. She soon learns

that the *toubabs* (white people) are mystified by some incidents and beliefs in Africa.

The people and practices both in West Africa and abroad unveil to her that she still has to unlearn much of what she has learnt to understand and relearn the *jeliya* and its associated cultures. The challenge starts here, because she fails to fully comprehend the *jeliya* as well as the people, hence she misconstrues her life's direction. She soon learns that the West African music plays with ambiguities (68). It is not easy to understand as learning the Manding *balafor* is like putting pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that are upside down together (69). This is part of her struggle as she attempts to decolonize her Western vantage point.

Another great value about the book is that it is astonishing and invaluable for a variety of readers. Musicians who are fascinated by the everyday life and struggles of other musicians will relish this book, especially the magnificent way in which the author relates her journey. Furthermore, ethnographers who want to glean from another way of immersing one in a foreign culture can learn from Feder's portrayal of her escapades. This can also be appreciated as a well-documented biographic work of literature and, most importantly, this book can be critical in studying and understanding the complexities of cultural clashes as well as the positives and/or negatives that can be linked to them. It contains practical examples of the travails of decolonization in the lives of ordinary people within their daily lives.

In her search for identity, Feder does not really arrive where readers might have expected her to. She still needs to deprovincialize America; she cannot and should not use America to measure the world. America, like Europe, should share the center with the global South, with Africa. The *jeliya* instrument emphasizes this. Linked to this is Feder's failure to prepare herself when she gets to Africa; she wrestles with the idea of unlearning, in line with Alvin Toffler who pronounces that, during times of transformation, there is much need to unlearn in order to relearn. The more she understood the *jeliya* the more she moved away from herself. The latter is not necessarily bad, but she needs the patience that Bacar talked about when he was teaching them the *Soli*. This is an astonishing memoir to fathom the incessant quest for beauty and sweetness in others despite the pervading and ingrained colonial disparagements.

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