

BOOK REVIEWS

ESTELLE AMY DE LA BRETÈQUE, *Paroles Mélodisées: Récits épiques et lamentations chez les Yézidis d'Arménie*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013, 230 pp.

The product of fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2010 in the Yezidi villages of the Aparan, Hoktemberian and Talin regions of Armenia, *Paroles mélodisées: récits épiques et lamentations chez les Yézidis d'Arménie* by Estelle Amy de la Bretèque examines the usage of a particular musical form that the author calls a 'melodized speech'. Amy de la Bretèque describes these melodized speeches and presents their musical characteristics, the settings in which they are performed, their dominant themes and some of the social functions of their usage. What makes this book fascinating is the fact that it has been conceived in parallel to a multimedia interface located on the website of the Société Française d'Ethnomusicologie, which allows the reader to watch and listen to the ritual ceremonies, performed songs and melodized speeches that the author is analysing. All the analysed documents are referenced and can be consulted by the reader at www.ethnomusicologie.fr/parolesmelodisees.

We should first devote some lines to the Yezidis in general, a people perhaps not so familiar to the common reader. Amy de la Bretèque furnishes some information to situate them in the ethnic mosaic of the Caucasus before moving on to analyse different aspects of their cultural life. The Yezidis are a Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish) speaking group sharing a common religion: Yezidism. Yezidism is a syncretic religion deriving from an ancient Iranian cult related to Zoroastrianism and incorporating many common features with Islam, Christianity and Gnosticism. Having migrated from Anatolia as a result of persecutions by their Muslim neighbours, today the Yezidis live mostly in Armenia, Georgia and Iraq, but also in Syria and western Europe. Amy de la Bretèque makes interesting comments on the emergence of an identity crisis among the Yezidis of Armenia. She notes that,

in the Anti-Muslim climate [of Armenia] (during and after the Nagorno-Karabagh war), a schism developed between those who considered themselves to be Kurdish and those who saw Kurdishness as implying an Islamic identity. These people wished to claim for Yezidis a separate ethnicity, calling their language not Kurmanji but Ezdîkî. Nowadays this crucial identity debate divides the community into two groups – Yezidi-kurds and Yezidis – about to become two nations...

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Thus the author introduces an interesting topic of research to anthropologists interested in debates over identity and ethnicity. However, that is not the main theme of her book, and it is time for us to present the author's findings on the melodized speeches of the Yezidis.

As the author describes, the melodized speech is situated on the boundary between speech and music. Called *kilamê ser* (literally 'words about'), this genre of enunciation is a way of making use of the voice in such a way that the ordinary intonation of speech is replaced by melodic contours. These 'words about', which are used during rituals but can also suddenly be proclaimed at any moment during an ordinary conversation, can easily be qualified as 'songs' by non-Yezidi listeners. But interestingly, they constitute a totally unique category for the Yezidis, being considered radically different from what is called *stran*, literally 'song'. Amy de la Bretèque offers a structural analysis in order to explain this intriguing fact. First she thoroughly explains and proves that one of the most important characteristics of the 'words about' is their connection with sadness and pain. Then she reveals a general structure in Yezidi culture in which two opposing sides can be identified. On the one hand we find winter, happiness, dance, music, etc. Opposed to these are summer, sadness, speech, etc. Thus, given the fact that 'words about' are strongly associated with feelings of sadness, they can only belong to the second group, and so, no matter how melodic and musical they appear to non-Yezidis, they are never considered to be music or song by the Yezidis themselves, but rather as *speech*, as 'words about'. Although the author confines her structural analysis of Yezidi culture to what is relevant to the melodized speech, she nevertheless suggests a possible topic for further anthropological research: the inherent structures of Yezidi culture.

After defining melodized speech, Amy de la Bretèque discusses their thematic and musical characteristics. The main themes of the 'words about' are the following. First of all, as mentioned earlier, there are the themes of sadness, pain and suffering. According to the author, these pieces 'suggest an aesthetic experience of suffering'. 'The fire burns my heart' and 'my wounded hearth' are very common expressions in melodized speech. Another important and dominant theme in *kilamê ser* is that of the hero: *kilamê ser mêranîê* are 'words about the hero' that glorify different types of hero in the community, whether fighters against enemy peoples, Kurdish popular heroes like the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, or even mafiosi who have perished in gangster fights. Exile is the third important and recurrent theme in melodized speech, since it has a dominant place in Yezidi culture. In fact the Yezidis keep the memory of their exile from Anatolia and are experiencing a contemporary exile in the Russian and European metropolises. Other important themes are those of destiny, self-sacrifice and nostalgia. As for the musical characteristics of the melodized speech, these are thoroughly analysed in the second part of the

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book with musicological professionalism. Amy de la Bretèque notes that the *kilamê ser* is characterized by non-isochronous rhythms, quite free melodic lines that generally follow a descending path, a generally lower pitch compared to that of the *stran* (song) and often a lack of tension. She even meticulously identifies specific techniques and analyses them, such as the glissandos that, according to her, recreate the effect of moaning, the vibratos that materialize a trembling of the voice, and the noisy breathing of the enunciators that reminds one of a real sobbing.

Finally, the book also reflects on the social functions of the *kilamê ser*. As the author argues, ‘melodized speech constructs and moulds social relationships as much as it expresses individual feelings’. In fact, the ‘words about’ are qualified as mechanisms connecting distant people to each other, such as the emigrant to his family at home. Amy de la Bretèque provides examples of ‘words about’ sung during funerals, in which the enunciator mentions the names of the dead, his loved ones, his kinsmen and even those who are not present at the ritual, thus reinforcing the bonds between all the latter. Often emigrant relatives listen to these ‘words about’ directly during funerals through mobile phone calls. Another habit is filming the funerals and the melodized speeches in order to send the tapes to relatives living abroad. In this way friends and relatives are connected and share their emotions through the melodized speech. Moreover, some ‘words about’ are recorded in studios and sold in MP3 format or uploaded on to the web. These contribute not only to maintaining ties of kinship and friendship, but also to the creation of a shared culture between the Yezidis of Armenia, and even the Kurmanji-speaking Kurds of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and western Europe. Thus the *kilamê ser* even has the capacity to act on the identity dynamics of this people. Finally, the melodized speech has an educative function, since it helps construct and promote exemplary and memorable figures, especially in the case of lamentations commemorating perished heroes.

In conclusion, *Paroles mélodisées* thoroughly analyses a very interesting aspect of Yezidi culture: the melodized speech. It makes good usage of both anthropological and musicological approaches. And importantly, in parallel with its main topic, it also mentions and discusses many of the cultural expressions of the Yezidi community – their beliefs, traditions, myths, dances, musical instruments, marriage rules, etc., thus paving the way for further anthropological research among them.

HRAG PAPAZIAN

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ARJUN APPADURAI, *The future as cultural fact: essays on the global condition*, London and New York: Verso Books 2013, viii, 328 pp.

This collection of fifteen of Appadurai's essays represents an attempt to synthesise the trajectory of his thought as it has progressed, beginning with *The social life of things* (1986) and including *Modernity at large* (1996) and *Fear of small numbers* (2006). It is an ambitious text that incorporates theoretical engagement with the nature of exchange and risk in modern capitalism, reflections on Appadurai's engagement with NGOs in Mumbai slum communities, and a call for anthropology's re-orientation toward the future. In the book's later chapters, Appadurai also ventures a series of moral assertions on the practice of research, both in general and in anthropology specifically. He argues for an approach to doing social science that is more democratic and inclusive, and does so from a platform of both ethnographic and theoretical rigour. Readers with an interest in any of these topics, who are not daunted by the book's disjointed assembly, will find it provocative and worthwhile.

Rabinow et al. (2008) have previously reflected on the challenge of bringing anthropology up to date in *Designs for an anthropology of the contemporary* and note that change is required to capture the distinguishing features of the world we now live in, where people, ideas and objects move across the globe at a speed that the slow pace of traditional ethnography struggles to capture. Appadurai's approach differs from theirs in that it concerns itself very little with concrete questions of methodology and proposes instead an ethical re-orientation for the discipline. The concern for ethics is also not new. One recalls D'Andrade's (2001) argument that the discipline itself adheres to an ethical standard as much as to a scientific one. Still, Appadurai buttresses this ethical argument with a discussion of the significance of knowledge production to the production of power taken straight from Foucault's work, suggesting an optimistic complementarity between the dual agendas of doing good and doing good work.

The collection is divided into three parts, the first primarily devoted to meditations on the meaning of globalisation in its many facets, the second to the problem of housing and urban development in Mumbai, and the third to interrogating the concept of the future and the role Appadurai envisions for anthropology in providing a deeper understanding of how it is imagined and articulated. The title chapter, 'The future as cultural fact', offers a critique of the way that the 'culture concept' demands that new developments be explained within a timeless framework of social understanding. He argues that anthropological analysis should attend to the conscious production of futures and aspirations just as it attends to the production of social memory, continuity and coherence.

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The essays can be taken individually, and indeed some may find them more useful as isolated reflections than taken together as one mammoth argument. To take them as disparate contributions, however, strips them of their multi-dimensionality. The chapter ‘Research as a human right’, for example, argues that the capacity to do research – in its most general formulation as ‘gaining strategic knowledge’ (Appadurai 2013: 269) – is a necessary condition for both participation in the global economy and democratic citizenship. This is a compelling argument on its own, but it has greater resonance when read next to the chapter ‘Deep democracy: urban governmentality and the horizon of politics’. In this chapter, Appadurai explores the work of three allied Mumbai NGOs as they have adapted strategically to the realities of negotiations with the Indian government, which involves producing their own strategic knowledge by taking their own censuses and building their own archive of research. By putting these two apparently disparate essays in the same volume, Appadurai adds ethnographic depth to his theoretical and moral reflections, and vice versa. An extended engagement with the text reveals these connections in a way that reading the essays individually cannot.

Despite the strengths of this style of presentation, one gets the feeling in reading the text that the synthesis was not quite complete. Readers who have not read Appadurai’s earlier work may find that the connections between the essays are not immediately apparent. This is not surprising: although seven of the essays have previously been published, the earliest as the introduction to Appadurai’s *The social life of things* in 1986, eight appear for the first time in this book. The attempt to unify 27 years of intellectual development makes for a challenging read. At the same time, it also offers a surprisingly transparent look at how a curiosity about the movement of commodities evolved into a meditation on the meaning of poverty in the context of ruthless economic development, as Appadurai witnessed in Mumbai, and how these seemingly disparate veins of inquiry both impact on his approach to the practice of doing research at all.

SUSAN MACDOUGALL

TAMAR GARB (ed.), *African photography from the Walther Collection. Distance and desire: encounters with the African archive*, Gottingen: Steidl and the Walther Collection, 2013, 348pp.

This wonderfully produced book (with more than 200 good quality plates) is the result of a series of exhibitions in New York and Ulm of parts of Artur Walther’s collection of African photography. This volume is edited by Tamar Garb, the curator of the exhibition ‘Distance and Desire’. She has put together a collection which gives a good sense of the principles behind

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Walther's collecting and the images in the exhibition. These are complemented by an excellent collection of essays by many of the leading lights in the study of African photography. Elizabeth Edwards explores ways of going beyond (behind?) the idea of gaze by rehabilitating the idea of 'curiosity'. She takes this as defining a stance which is open to the world, aspiring to look without preconception or prejudice. This is not without its dangers. She would be the first to acknowledge that this is an unachievable ambition that risks reintroducing an idealised neutral curiosity akin to the sense of objectivity as providing a 'view from nowhere'. Accepting such caveats, she wants us to try to look and wonder, to engage with the multiple viewings and multiple readings which the images engender, 'looking beyond'. Other chapters illustrate this in practice by exploring the archive in more detail. Garb herself looks at *cartes de visite* images from South Africa (there is a preponderance of images from the South in the collection) and Chris Geary recreates a studio session from late in the nineteenth century somewhere in what is now KwaZulu Natal by collating evidence from myriad postcard collections. She uses the cards to provide evidence of which images were taken during a single session and of how they have been used subsequently with different forms of cropping, colouring and captioning. She also illustrates the dangers for later researchers: the same image was published early in the twentieth century with the caption 'A Basuto Chief' and also as 'A Zulu Chief' (p. 78)!

One of the themes of the collection is the disparate ways in which old images can be found, repurposed and 'revised'. Such issues are repeatedly illustrated, especially by a wonderful contrast between A.M. Duggan-Cronin's photos from the 1920s for the published volumes of the 'Bantu Tribes of South Africa' (discussed by Michael Godby) and Santu Mofokeng's Black Photo Album (discussed by Jennifer Bajorek). This points to one of the strengths of this collection: it is most empathically *not* just about old photographs but about contemporary responses to such images and how contemporary artists use photography in recognition of and in opposition to such histories of image-making.

DAVID ZEITLYN

GABRIEL LEFEVRE, *Médecine traditionnelle à Madagascar: les mots-plantes*, Paris: L'Harmattan 2013, 297 pp.

Traditional medicine is sometimes conceived as an alternative approach to ill health, as understood in modern European society, only differing in its use of practices derived from ancestral knowledge rather than scientific discovery. But this, Gabriel Lefèvre reminds us, is a mistake. If a European businessman wants to eliminate competition from a rival, he does not

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consult his doctor. If a woman wishes to attract a lover, she does not seek advice from her GP. Traditional medicine inhabits a different social space, addresses a wider range of human problems – social, familial, economic – than does modern biomedicine, and also departs radically and openly from the central Hippocratic value, ‘first do no harm’. Madagascan diviner-healers (*ombiasa*) do not shirk from seeking to harm others on behalf of their clients, aiming to inflict misfortune or transfer it from one person to another. But the legacy of colonialism, the influence of Christianity and the emergence of an educated political class in Madagascar has driven them into the shadows (but perhaps not the periphery) of society, where they are treated with a mixture of fear, contempt and respect. Paradoxically, just as ‘traditional medicine’ becomes big business in the West, it struggles to hold its own in Africa.

There is a wild flower that grows in Madagascar, similar to the European ‘Common Cleavers’, *galium aparine*. It clings to animal fur and human clothing by means of numerous downturned prickles on stems, leaves and fruit. The European plant was known to Ancient Greeks by the gentle appellation *phillantropon*, ‘love of man’. But the Madagascan version has an intrusive name, *mandehatsitaone*, which literally translated means ‘who comes uninvited’. It signifies a compelling magic function and is used as a love-charm. All sorts of other word play can be found linking plant names to their putative medicinal efficacy. This comes as no surprise to a psychiatrist reviewer, familiar with the large placebo response that attaches to every ‘double-blind’ scientific trial of psychotropic medication.

In the Madagascan context, Lefèvre argues, magic should not be understood as ‘supernatural’, but rather part of the ‘natural’ world. Madagascan healers invoke both the heavens and the earth, make use of geomancy and astrology and use personified magic-horns, which are thought to be living entities. They acquire much of their secret knowledge from *kokolampo*, wood-spirits. But the word ‘spirit’ has gained its supernatural, non-corporeal meaning in translation. For local people the *kokolampo*, albeit they live in faraway forests, are real beings that inhabit the everyday natural world.

This book, based on the author’s fieldwork in southern Madagascar and a close reading of the anthropological literature, is divided into two sections. It presents both a ‘static’ overview of the state of the art and a ‘dynamic’ analysis of change, highlighting the powerful role of language, words and names, in traditional medical practice. It is mercifully free of theoretical excess and obfuscating jargon. Lefèvre has achieved a difficult task and given us a rigorous, academic, ethnographic study, which is at the same time a highly readable account. It should be made available in translation to the English-speaking world.

STEPHEN WILSON

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JOHN PEFFER and **ELISABETH L. CAMERON** (eds.), *Portraiture and Photography in Africa* (African Expressive Cultures) eds., Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2013, 472pp (paperback).

This is a substantial volume (in all the several senses of the term), one which richly deserves to be widely read, and not just by those interested in forms of visual expression in Africa or in the history of photography. It is also highly relevant to those concerned with cross-cultural artistic expression, with the presentation of selves and the puncturing of enduring postcolonial myths of superiority (the trope that Africans fear that photographs will steal their souls is dismantled in Strother's chapter).

The volume concentrates exclusively on photography in sub-Saharan Africa and mainly on cases from West-Central Africa, thus providing a complement to the recent Walther Collection *Distance and desire* volume which concentrated on photography in Southern Africa (see my review elsewhere in this issue). (In the only chapter discussing the East Coast, Brielmaier looks at how Hollywood and Bollywood influences have contributed to the creation of a visibly 'urban public' in Mombasa.)

To start with Peffer introduces the three linking themes which structure the book. The first is Exchange, in which photographs are taken as objects that connect people. The second section, Social Lives, considers the lives of both the images and of the people whose portraits have been taken. Finally, the section entitled Traditions considers how photography has affected non-photographic traditions. It is particularly this section that has relevance beyond Africa.

Schneider and Haney provide information on some of the early nineteenth-century African photographers on the Cape Coast who worked in increasing numbers from the 1870s. These include the Lutterodts, Decker, Green and Joaque. Haney also documents changing local styles (89ff.): some prints of photographs from the 1880s and 1890s were of young women as they emerged into adulthood before marriage, but these were later suppressed or destroyed as Christianity took hold, and attitudes to the display of young women changed.

Nimis updates and summarises her earlier work on the diaspora of Yoruba photographers from western Nigeria into francophone West Africa. This had the important effect of disseminating traditions of double portraiture and of grey painted backgrounds beyond the Yoruba heartlands. Nimis's work is particularly important in trying to cover a wide field and put any individual photographer into the context of his peers (no female photographers are mentioned).

As already noted, Strother explores how Frazer established the notion that 'primitives' think the camera steals the soul, an idea which continues to circulate, despite repeated refutations.

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There are many reasons to refuse to be photographed, which he outlines in ways which I think will be especially useful in teaching. And just because a language may equate ‘shadow’ and ‘soul’, that does not mean that ‘shadow freezing’ (i.e. photography) is soul capture. In his case study of Pende (DRC) attitudes to photography and witchcraft, the concerns are over clothing and things that someone may have touched, *not* photographs. In Peirce’s terms, Pende see photographs as icons, as frozen reflections, *not* as true indices such as footprints.

Chris Geary continues the discussion of her long-term research on the history of photography in the Cameroonian city of Foumban in a chapter which looks at the influence of early photographers on current art production, especially as mediated by the impact of her own work! Images from her books are being used as models for public wall painting by contemporary Bamoun artists commissioned by the current Sultan, thus completing circles from Germany to Kamerun to Germany and the USA and now back to Cameroun.

Liam Buckley’s chapter widens the discussion by considering ‘beauty’ in Gambia after the revolution, which banned skin-lightening products (often sold by photographers). Lightened or reddened images then became ambiguous or dangerous, yet were still desired. As he notes, this constitutes a politicization of beauty. He argues (p. 306) that photographers in Gambia, at least, are more tricksters than griots or praise-singers, as Keller characterizes the work of Keita and Sidibe in Mali. She summarizes some of the key findings from her PhD, particularly the role the terms *fadenya* and *badenya* play in local aesthetics as manifested in the work of Malian photographers.

Cameron’s chapter, which contrasts her ‘research photography’ in Zambia with the portraits she took for her friends in the field, ends with what for me is the single most striking image in this volume. It is one which she was sent, she thinks, because it was deemed a failure. An elaborately constructed pose of a photographer surrounded by his family as he labours to repair his many cameras was spoiled (by local criteria) by one of the women bursting into laughter just as the shutter was opened, so the print was good only for sending to the foreign researcher (who wouldn’t know better, i.e. wouldn’t realise it was a poor image). We don’t have to invoke Barthes’ or Cartier-Bresson’s ‘decisive moment’ moment to appreciate the image. As she explains, she used not to value the posed shots made on request for friends, though now she does. They show people playing with identities, rural populations displaying urban sophistication (their ideas of urban sophistication). They show how they want to be seen, how they want to be remembered.

Indiana University Press is to be praised for producing a reasonably priced volume with high production values: not only are the images reproduced in good quality, but there are very few

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typos (I caught only one on p. 291 – the ‘Ground marketing board’ should be the ‘Ground Nut marketing board’ – as well as a minor bibliographic inconsistency).

DAVID ZEITLYN

References

Garb, Tamar (ed.) 2013. *African photography from the Walther Collection. Distance and desire: encounters with the African archive*. Gottingen: Steidl and the Walther Collection.

David Zeitlyn, Review of Garb (ed.) 2013. *JASO*, this issue (see above).

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