

SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

Commodities, Consumption, and Capitalism

Sven Van Melkebeke. *Dissimilar Coffee Frontiers: Mobilizing Labor and Land in the Lake Kivu Region, Congo and Rwanda (1918–1960/62)*. Boston: Brill, 2020. xv + 320 pp. Illustrations. Tables. Acknowledgements. Abbreviations. Annex. References. Index. \$91.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-90-04-42815-7.

Kathryn Barrett-Gaines. *Lake Katwe Salt and History of the African Great Lakes*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2019. viii + 224 pp. Abbreviations. Acknowledgements. Bibliography. Index. No Price Reported. ISBN: 9789970617975.

Tycho van der Hoog. *Breweries, Politics and Identity: The History Behind Namibian Beer*. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2019. viii + 116 pp. Foreword. Acknowledgements. Abbreviations. Figures. Bibliography. Appendix. \$30.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-3906927121.

Megan A. Styles. *Roses From Kenya: Labor, Environment, and the Global Trade in Cut Flowers*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019. xvii + 215 pp. Foreword. Preface. Acknowledgements. Abbreviations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$30.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0295746500.

Arianna Huhn. *Nourishing Life: Foodways and Humanity in an African Town*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2020. xviii + 208 pp. Figures. Preface. Notes. Abbreviations. Glossary. References. Index. \$130.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1789208894.

The five books under review here reflect the growing body of literature that has come out in the past couple of decades written by scholars and researchers from various disciplines who seek to understand the dynamics of commodity frontiers and their role in the expansion of capitalism in the global South. The Commodities Frontier Project and the Commodities of Empire Project are two of the latest initiatives by interdisciplinary scholars who research the production, circulation, and consumption of global commodities. In analyzing commodities and their frontier zones, scholars have been able to offer more textured analyses of commodity chains that are

rooted in local societies. This scholarship, in other words, foregrounds the periphery (or frontier zones) and strives to understand the various ways in which the transition to capitalism has unfolded within these regions. The scholars in this field thus underscore the point that examining what happens in the frontier zones is invaluable if we are to gain a comprehensive understanding of what it meant for those individuals far removed from the centers of power to be incorporated into the modern capitalist world-system (Curry-Machado 2013; More 2010). The books under review contribute significantly to this body of scholarship.

Collectively, these volumes both draw attention to the impact that the process of incorporation or frontier expansion has had on ordinary people in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century sub-Saharan Africa and elucidate the ways in which local actors were (and are still) able to shape the dynamics of the global capitalist system through the production, circulation, and consumption of lucrative export commodities such as coffee, beer, flowers, and salt. By focusing on how local communities located in the peripheries asserted, defined, and at times even controlled the production and distribution of commodities and thus their integration into the world-system, the books provide us with not only a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of commodity chains but also a sense of the unevenness of capitalist expansion on the ground.

Sven Van Melkebeke's study on the development of the coffee production sector in the region around Lake Kivu in Central Africa contributes significantly to the scholarship on commodity frontier dynamics. *Dissimilar Coffee Frontiers* is a fascinating story about how coffee became an export commodity in this particular region of sub-Saharan Africa, a process that began in the era following World War I, and the impact the commodification process had on the land and labor practices of the local rural populations. Van Melkebeke charts the historical trajectories within the coffee commodity frontier zones that emerged in the first part of the twentieth century within an interlinked region known as the "Lake Kivu space" located in former Belgian Africa (3). Moving beyond colonial/mandate/national borders, he adopts a comparative framework in order to demonstrate how and why the coffee frontier zones that developed and grew from one region to another were so dissimilar.

Broadly, Van Melkebeke seeks to trace how coffee as a commodity expanded capitalism and how it integrated rural Africans into the world-system. Van Melkebeke therefore centers his analysis on the direct experiences of those local actors and state agents on the ground who were responsible for the production of this commodity for the export market. In so doing, Van Melkebeke homes in on how different the processes of incorporation, interaction, and transformation were for the people residing in the territories bordering Lake Kivu, despite the entire region being under the same imperial power, in this case Belgium, and the fact that there existed in this area similar economic, political, and social structures and ties during the time when coffee was being transformed into an export

commodity. Rather than resulting in a singular coffee economy, two modes of production emerged and thrived on both sides of the lake—the plantation mode on the Congolese side and the smallholder system on the Rwandan side. The diversity in production systems, Van Melkebeke argues, was due to pre-existing local differences in land tenure practices and land availability and the fact that the local populations and state agents on the ground were willing to make compromises and to receive feedback from one another (12). These factors significantly influenced how land and labor were mobilized by local smallholder producers and plantation estate owners in order to produce coffee for world markets.

In six well-written chapters, Van Melkebeke makes the case that the Kivu coffee commodity frontier zones charted different development paths even though the two sides of Lake Kivu were experiencing the “harmonizing tendencies of capitalism” (284). Specifically, he utilizes newly available archival records from the Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs in order to trace how and why the expansion of coffee production in the colonial territories bordering the Lake Kivu area resulted in these two different modes of production. Through the administrative records, including detailed agricultural reports, Van Melkebeke is able to underscore the point that the expansion of the coffee frontier zones was dictated largely by the conditions on the ground, specifically by the availability of land around the lake region. Chapter Two, in particular, uses agricultural reports from the 1920s and 1950s to illustrate how European settler coffee farmers in western Rwanda were unable to expand their enterprises due in large part to the lack of land in the region because of the high local population density and the large number of livestock that had historically been in the region.

While the archival material provided detailed information about the colonial bureaucracy’s attempt to initiate and control a capitalist agricultural sector, it revealed little in the way of how the African producers actually fared as they were being incorporated into the capitalist system. These sources, in other words, kept Van Melkebeke from getting too close to the ground. Much of the discussion focused on African laborers who produced coffee, but for their employers and on large European plantation estates because that was what the source material revealed. Indeed, African farmers were discussed, but they were often folded into a larger “smallholder” group that needed to be further defined. It was not clear at times whether the smallholders were a group of European settlers who could not expand their coffee farms, local African farmers whom the colonial state encouraged to plant cash crops, and/or both of these groups. A better delineation between the smallholder category would have enabled this reviewer to better understand how dissimilar the expansion of the coffee sector was for the various segments of the coffee producing sector on either side of the lake. The colonial administration’s efforts to mobilize labor for the coffee plantation sector, which was the focus of Chapter Four, surely had implications for smallholder African growers in the region who were also in need of laborers. Yet there was little mention of how this challenge might have influenced the extent to which

African smallholders could and did engage with capitalism as producers of labor-intensive cash crops such as coffee. Including more of the local African producers' experiences into the discussion would have allowed Van Melkebeke to write a richer history about how African economic actors informed the trajectory of the coffee commodity frontier development.

Kathryn Barrett-Gaines' work on the history of the Katwe salt industry in the African Great Lakes region, in contrast, foregrounds the "interior architecture of African economic and social life" (21). To this end, *Lake Katwe Salt* focuses on the salt producers and traders who actively participated in an ancient local industry that was remarkably successful in spite of its location in a region of the Great Lakes that was historically of little interest to colonialists and that was largely unaffected by the whims of the global economy. By focusing her analysis on how local producers and traders commodified a resource that was indigenous to Katwe, Barrett-Gaines brings our attention to the importance of domestic markets and economies and how they in turn influenced global historical processes such as colonialism and capitalism. This regional history about the changes and continuities in the history of the Katwe salt industry challenges world systems theory by showing how insignificant global demands were in determining the outcomes of local and regional processes. The story of the development and growth of the salt industry in Katwe broadens our understanding of the inner logics of commodity frontier zones, as it clarifies the behavioral, social, and economic changes that the African communities residing in this particular commodity frontier zone experienced over the course of the last two hundred years.

Throughout *Lake Katwe Salt*, Barrett-Gaines builds on Jane Guyer's concept of the niche economy by showing how people at Katwe were able to make their living in the salt industry in spite of devastating environmental conditions, including famines and droughts, and disruptive political events such as colonialism and decolonization that unfolded across the region and affected production (25). The industry remained relatively steady throughout history, with production volumes fluctuating but never disappearing, because of empowered African economic actors who were willing to be flexible and creative in the face of challenging external pressures. Salt producers and traders in Katwe, in short, were pragmatic and smart about when and how to engage with regional and global economies.

The resiliency and ingenuity of the salt producers and traders in the Great Lakes region are underscored across the six chapters and introduction of this book. For instance, the story of Indian traders and their influences on the Katwe salt industry, featured in Chapter Five, highlights the adaptability of the salt producers and traders in western Uganda who found themselves in the 1930s producing various grades of salt due to pressures from outsider competition and foreign salt imports. Pushing against the established historiography, Barrett-Gaines maintains that the Katwe industry was not rendered obsolete by Indian traders and imported salt, but rather it thrived and continued its viability because people were willing to change their cooking and production habits (110). The author's detail examination of

the political economy of the region in Chapter Two and Chapter Six, namely, her account of the development and changes to the local trade networks, also made explicit the centrality of Katwe to the Great Lakes regional economy and, more importantly, how contact with the global economy did not significantly change its positionality and trajectory.

Because she aims to foreground Africans in their own history-making, Barrett-Gaines' source material includes a large number of oral histories gleaned from elders who participated in the Katwe salt economy as either producers, traders, or consumers. Collected over the course of several years of field work, which the author carried out in the late 1990s across the Great Lakes region, the interviews offer glimpses of African social and economic life in Katwe. Women salt producers' lives and thus their voices are featured prominently in the book, since they played a key role in ensuring that this industry would continue into the modern era. While Barrett-Gaines' oral histories helped the author in her quest as a social historian to bring to light the lived experiences of those marginalized communities that are missing from the archival source material, the reviewer would have appreciated more discussion about the informants and thus their particular relevance to the salt industry. Besides having a direct quote or two from an informant sprinkled throughout the chapters to support her points, Barrett-Gaines offers little insights about the individual speaking. This inattention to the individual to some degree rendered the oral history sources flat. Though the number of interviews Barrett-Gaines and her research assistants carried out with salt industry workers is impressive, the reviewer wishes that the author had better contextualized and thus problematized this impressive source material.

In a similar approach to that of Barrett-Gaines, Tycho van der Hoog narrows in on a local industry that emerged and thrived despite the political and social upheaval taking place across the African continent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Breweries, Politics, and Identity* focuses specifically on the breweries and thus the domestic beer market that emerged in what was then known as German South West Africa at the start of the 1900s. Unlike Van Melkebeke and Barrett-Gaines's analyses, Van der Hoog's study centers on a product that has a commodity dimension but is not necessarily a commodity in the traditional sense like coffee and salt. What's more, the economic actors whom Van der Hoog speaks of are mostly non-Africans who have made their home on the continent. This short history about the beer industry in Namibia nevertheless opens up conversations about the development of racial capitalism as well as the nature of state and business relationships and how such interactions shape commodity frontier zone dynamics.

Although not a straightforward commodity, beer, of course, is a popular food product made from agricultural ingredients such as hops and fermentable grains, especially barley, which is manufactured by both informal home brewers and large-scale commercial breweries for consumers worldwide to enjoy. As Van der Hoog demonstrates in the case of Namibia, this alcoholic beverage is an inexpensive commodity that consumers from all sectors of

local society have had access to because of the beer industry's ability to withstand and adapt to the changing political, economic, and cultural conditions that made brewing beer difficult yet not impossible to carry out within the territory (2). What began as an industry controlled by Europeans, the Namibian beer market, particularly the commercial breweries, evolved over the course of the twentieth century to become a symbol of apartheid politics and eventually a marker of national pride. It is this unique story about the "chameleon character of beer" in the context of the changing (and often challenging) political atmosphere that Van der Hoog writes about (101). For Van der Hoog, the remarkable transformation of Namibian beer is emblematic of the nation's broader history from the late nineteenth century to the present.

Moreover, Van der Hoog's short history of the beer industry in Namibia provides another vantage point into the territory's complicated relationship with South Africa. The histories of these two countries are very much intertwined, as the history of the brewing industry reflects. The invasion of the territory by South African troops in 1914, which led to South Africa's subsequent occupation and sustained rule over South West Africa until its independence in 1990, had profound implications for the local breweries, particularly for the numerous small settler-owned breweries that ceased to exist following the conclusion of the First World War. As the governing authority, the South African government sought to curb the growth of the Namibian brewing industry by implementing a set of racialized liquor laws that severely limited who could sell and drink alcohol within the territory. The 1920 ban on the sale of alcohol to Africans, as Van der Hoog shows, was the South African government's attempt to control the African population as well as to regulate the industry's growth along racial lines (45).

South Africa continued to impose problematic liquor laws throughout its occupation, particularly during the second half of the twentieth century, when the apartheid state was coming into form. The laws severely impacted business activities and exacerbated tensions on the ground, particularly among the white settler communities in Namibia, which were composed of the original German settlers and new Afrikaner settlers whose cultural outlook about beer diverged considerably. Van der Hoog also details the fierce beer wars between the South African breweries and the South West breweries (later Namibian breweries), showing how this competition pushed the brewing industry in Namibia to innovate and be more proactive in marketing their products globally (77). By focusing on how beer became mass produced in Namibia despite the many obstacles placed in front of it by the South African state, Van der Hoog offers an important study about a beer commodity frontier zone that was very much influenced by the events and decisions made not only by outsiders but also by the manufacturers and consumers far removed from the centers of power.

The points and arguments made in *Breweries, Politics, and Identity* are supported by a rich array of archival sources and interviews with former and current beer makers that the author conducted over the course of six

months of fieldwork in Namibia and South Africa. Van der Hoog also incorporates historical photographs and advertising material, such as beer labels and posters, throughout the book to showcase the changing nature of the beer industry. While a considerable amount of ground was covered in this concise history, the book could have benefited from a more thorough discussion about the changing cultural attitudes and lifestyles of those economic actors who participated in the turbulent local brew industry. Such ancillary material would have allowed the reviewer to better grasp how beer as a commodity became so central to crafting a distinct Namibian identity and culture.

The changing lifestyles of those economic actors who have played a significant role in developing a nation's economy is a main focus of *Roses From Kenya*. In this captivating ethnographic study, Megan A. Styles, similar to Van der Hoog, is focused on a nontraditional agricultural commodity, namely roses. The cut flower business is one of Kenya's most lucrative industries and is primarily situated in the Lake Naivasha region. As an environmental anthropologist, however, Styles' aim is not so much to detail the fraught and contentious history of Kenya's floriculture industry, though some of that history is featured throughout Chapter One. Instead, her research examines the neoliberal movement that began in the 1980s in Africa and is concerned primarily with the experiences and aspirations of floriculture industry workers in contemporary Kenya. It is through their points of view that the author aims to understand the deeper economic, social, political, and ecological effects of cut flower farming in the areas surrounding Lake Naivasha. Styles, in short, humanizes the commodity chain by offering a more intimate portrait of the economic actors who have expanded the commodity frontier zones throughout the global South.

Roses From Kenya shows how the lived experiences and perspectives of the farmworkers, managers, owners, state agents, and activists who are engaged with floriculture are not only complex but contradictory. Cultivating flowers, according to Styles, is merely a means for these individuals to achieve varying ends that are primarily connected to their larger desires to participate in national development and establish environmental and social control, as well as secure economic wealth and prosperity (9). For Styles, the actions and aims of those individuals whose lives center around the business of roses are therefore important because they reveal how the people living in this region have used the opportunities and resources of the industry to bring forth changes in their personal and structural circumstances. By bringing to light the ways in which the floriculture industry has served the complex interests of the people working and living around Lake Naivasha, *Roses From Kenya* opens the conversation regarding the impact of global commodity production to be more than a discussion about the misery and marginalization associated with this process (12). This is very much a story about how the people have exploited the industry rather than the other way around.

In order to make sense of the local people's aspirations, Styles makes it clear that Naivasha as a place also needs to be understood. Thus, this region is

itself an important character throughout the book. Situated next to a freshwater body, the town of Naivasha has ready access to a precious resource—water—that is coveted by local, national, and global agents who are all eager to exploit it for their own aggrandizement. Naivasha, as Styles argues, is therefore a highly contested and contentious site that essentially represents different things for the various groups of people who have a stake in the region. Throughout the five chapters of this book, Styles is deliberate about noting precisely how the different segments of the floriculture industry have understood this transnational “nerve center” as a site of possibility. The discussion of low-wage laborers in Chapter Two, for example, underscores the point that young, single, or recently married women recognized Naivasha as a place where they were able to live freely while also making an income, albeit limited (75).

Roses from Kenya is an insightful study that is engaging and well argued. The source material from state archives and the unpublished papers from private organizations, such as the Lake Naivasha Riparian Association, which were utilized by Styles allow readers to appreciate how the area surrounding Lake Naivasha not only has a complicated past but also remains an important battleground for global capitalists and Kenyans in the modern era. Given the nature of the research, the rich life stories of the floriculture workers are the main feature in this ethnography. Each of the key actors that Styles introduces throughout the book provides a unique window into how Kenya’s floriculture industry has served the interests of the different sectors of the local society. Since Styles’ fieldwork was conducted during the 2007 postelection violence, her informants do touch on how their lives were upended by the chaos at that particular moment, but little more on that subject is mentioned. The conclusion provides an update on some of the key actors whom Styles reconnected with in 2014, but much of this follow-up circles around the fact that this region and the industry are still recovering from the violence that unfolded around Naivasha following the contested elections. Nevertheless, this reviewer appreciated learning about how her interlocutors’ ambitions changed over time and how their actions continue to impact the floriculture industry.

While Styles’ ethnographical study of Naivasha concerned itself with the production and circulation of an agrarian commodity, Arianna Huhn’s ethnography of a small town in northern Mozambique is focused solely on the consumption and processing of food. Processing, in this case, however, is understood to mean the act of preparing food dishes rather than cultivating crops for export. *Nourishing Life*, a detailed study about African alimentation, therefore stands in contrast to the other books under review here that have dealt primarily with production rather than consumption. As such, it is a welcome addition to the scholarship on commodities, which often stops short of examining how the products are consumed and used by people worldwide, including those individuals living and working in the commodity frontier zones, to sustain themselves and their communities. As *Nourishing Life* underscores, countries in the global South that are becoming integrated into the

global capitalist system consist of people who understand food commodities and thus eating to be a serious matter and a practice that enables one to nourish and build their body and being.

Nourishing Life specifically examines the cultural understanding and behaviors associated with making and consuming food in Metangula, a peri-urban Mozambican town located along the eastern shore of Lake Niassa in the opening decade of the twenty-first century (24). Though this is an important political region, the population of Metangula, according to Huhn, remains largely absent from the academic research. There is no clear explanation provided by the author as to why this is the case, but Metangula seems to be a place that often serves as a jumping off point for other research projects rather than the actual unit of analysis for researchers. Yet it is in this small place that Huhn was inspired to investigate what it means for humans to be moral and fulfilled. Accordingly, Huhn's place-specific study, like the others mentioned in this review, expands our understanding about the experiences, ambitions, and habits of Africans residing in major nodes of the commodity chain.

The Nyanja people in Metangula are the individuals whose experiences with food and attitudes about alimentation are analyzed by Huhn. The author spent a total of two years conducting research in the community, whereby she engaged in long-term, unstructured conversations with the local population about everyday acts of consumption. It is through the perspectives of the people in Metangula that Huhn aims to understand the meaning and making of foodways and to offer a theory about the "universal endeavor to constitute humanity" (22). For the Nyanja, food is nourishing when it is consumed in circumstances that allow the individual to be in service of others and when it provides them the opportunity to cultivate deeper interdependence with the living and dead. Analyzing how and what people consumed enabled Huhn to demonstrate that the eating habits of the Nyanja had less to do with sustaining physical life and more to do with how they negotiated their notions of personhood in relation to their community.

In this thought-provoking work, Huhn builds on the rich philosophical and ethnographic literature about personhood and cuisine by observing how foodways play an important role in making us human. The vignettes that open each of the five chapters are captivating. They draw attention to the themes and arguments of the particular chapter but also introduce the key actors whose life experiences underpin this ethnographical study. It is clear from the passages in which Huhn and her informants debate the meanings associated with eating and using food items such as sugar, oil, and salt that the author was able to develop a strong and deep rapport with the local population. These sections, featured prominently in Chapters Two and Three, also demonstrate how Huhn successfully managed to get a window into the complexities embedded in the mundane alimentary rituals practiced by the people in Metangula.

Although the reviewer would have liked some kind of discussion about how global processes like the expansion of capitalism might have influenced

the ways in which the local population accessed coveted commodities such as sugar and salt, it is understandable that this would have changed the direction of the book. Nonetheless, at times, Huhn's choice to remain hyper-focused on the local made it seem that the people of Metangula were unencumbered and thus not impacted by the world outside of their town. Huhn's position, namely that the consumption and processing of food in Metangula is revelatory, in other words, would have been enhanced with a discussion that accounts for how the local and global influence each another.

Together, these five works under review offer important insights into what it is that people in sub-Saharan Africa have over time produced, traded, and consumed. The books specifically highlight the engagement of everyday Africans in global economic processes as well as underscore the lively regional economies and societies that produced and consumed the commodities. The scholarship, in short, brings to the fore the diversity of global processes, such as the expansion of capitalism, as they developed in specific sites located in the periphery. These books are a valuable contribution to the study of commodity chains and will be useful for any persons interested in expanding their knowledge of commodities, capitalism, consumption, African history, environmental studies, and foodways.

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