

BOOK REVIEW

Jérôme Souty. *Pierre Fatumbi Verger: Du Regard Détaché à la Connaissance Initiatique*. Paris: Hémisphères, 2020. 418 pages. Photographs. \$67.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-2377010639.

Many Africanists across various disciplines are familiar with the photographs and scholarly publications of Pierre Fatumbi Verger. Jérôme Souty's book *Pierre Fatumbi Verger: Du Regard Détaché à la Connaissance Initiatique* bears the name of its subject, and as such traces the arc of Verger's life as a photographer of global cultures, ethnographer, Ifa religious figure, Atlanticist, and "guardian" of African and Afro-Brazilian oral traditions (23). Verger never trained formally in an academic discipline, yet he achieved these distinctions based on his activities beginning in the early 1930s through the end of his life in 1996. One of Souty's primary goals in this book is to explain how a young, self-taught photographer who "learned very early to avoid asking questions" of potential "subjects" when he started traveling the world with his Rolleiflex camera in the 1930s became a respected ethnographer and recorder of oral and religious traditions almost by "default" and "despite himself" over the course of his storied career (44).

In a perhaps ironic twist, Souty argues that much of Verger's success and the evolution of his methodological and scholarly contributions occurred in part because he was not bound by the rigors of academe. Ultimately, Souty suggests, this offered Verger the freedom to become not only a "messenger" of global cultures through his photos, as well as an initiate of Ifa and a "learned historian," but also an informant, which imparted to his work a richness that ethnographers trained to maintain objectivity often cannot achieve (374).

Souty originally published *Pierre Fatumbi Verger* in 2007. This revised and updated edition most notably includes a new selection of 80 photographs from Verger's collection of 61,000 images archived at the *Fondation Pierre Verger* in Salvador, Brazil, where Verger made his primary home from the late 1940s until his death. For those familiar with the previous version of the book, the images alone warrant a viewing of the new edition. Souty places them thoughtfully throughout the ten chapters in a way that offers visual evidence of Verger's keen attention to methodological detail and awareness of the varied roles he played as a field researcher, whether he recognized those consciously or not. The chapters follow a mostly chronological arc, beginning

with Verger's work as a photographer in the 1930s and 1940s, before moving to depictions of how and why he made the transition to conducting research and writing scholarly publications from the late 1940s onwards. Later chapters engage with Verger's initiation into Ifa and his interest in finding connections between African and Afro-Brazilian traditions.

Souty crafts the narrative of this scholarly life using a vast array of sources, including Verger's own publications, non-published field notes and conference papers, scientific reports, and his correspondence with prominent photographers and anthropologists such as Alfred Métraux, Roger Bastide, Lydia Cabrera, Gilbert Rouget, and Michel Leiris, among others. Souty likewise consulted Verger's personal library and photographs in Salvador, as well as an archival dossier housed in French archives. Conversations the author recorded with Verger in France and Brazil on various occasions in 1993 and 1994 add a unique personal touch and nuance to the narrative.

With the main text covering nearly 400 pages, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger* is indeed lengthy. Nevertheless, Souty could have devoted more attention to Verger's early life prior to his engagement in photography and, later on, in anthropological and religious fields. He may have had good reasons for not engaging this deeply in Verger's past, but doing so might have shed some light on the types of experiences that influenced the trajectories of Verger's unique professional life.

Regardless, Souty's intentions are clear. He did not intend for this publication to be either a strict biography or a hagiographical accounting of Verger's life. Rather, the book constitutes a thorough and thoughtful accounting of Verger's scholarly work and accomplishments, which he achieved despite his lack of formal academic training. As such, it is an excellent consideration of Verger's contributions to and engagement with discourses in anthropology, history, religious studies, photography, and botany, among other fields.

Souty published previous editions of his work in both French and Portuguese. This new edition is in French, but audiences in anglophone countries would certainly benefit from an English translation. One hopes the author and publisher might consider that seriously. Regardless of how one might feel about maintaining a certain distance in conducting fieldwork in order to maintain a semblance of objectivity, both undergraduate and post-graduate students would profit from learning about Verger's methodological approaches, whether through reading selected chapters or the book in its entirety. Those familiar with Verger's body of work will find this an engaging and informative read.

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