BOOK REVIEWS


This richly detailed ethnography examines the multiple challenges to women’s fertility among a group of Muslim Hadendowa migrants to the informal settlement on the edge of Sinkat in eastern Sudan, and how these women understand and act to maintain their group identity in the face of enormous political and socioeconomic change. Fadlalla’s study adds a useful dimension to our understanding of women’s reproductive struggles as part of a larger community effort to cope with local and global power relations. Illustrating the ideal of “responsible motherhood” through an astute analysis of gendered notions of morality and respectability, the author uses women’s narratives to understand their lifetime strategies for healthy reproduction. Central to this understanding is the representation of “foreignness,” a cultural concept rooted in a historical narrative that is used to explain and respond to potential threats from “outside.” Fadlalla’s rather complex and dense analysis nevertheless paints a compelling picture of Hadendowa women’s social and bodily management of their fertility in relation to the “regeneration” of their community through reference to a particular complex of foreignness.
*Embodying Honor* is organized into six chapters. These develop the author’s narrative from an overview of the political economy of the Hadendowa in historical context to a highly detailed analysis of women’s honor and morality (*durarit*, in Tu-Badawie) in strategizing responsible motherhood and coping with reproductive suffering. Using the narratives of women as a starting point, Fadlalla weaves her own observations and experiences into the chapters, giving the reader a rich ethnographic understanding of Hadendowa gender expectations, religious practices, spatial arrangements and tent construction, food preparation and taboos, bodily adornment and comportment, ritual practices and the spirit world, and a host of other social and cultural practices and beliefs. The concept of *auslif*, parsed as those familiar with and the habitual practices derived from “the legacy of the ancestors and the power of the Qur’ān, hadith (the Prophet’s sayings), and the baraka of religious saints and healers” (12) is contrasted with that which is considered “foreign.” Fadlalla makes clear that this apparent dichotomy is, in actual practice, fuzzy and subject to shifts of meaning on both sides—as in the strategic receptiveness of some of the younger women to Islamic trends of understanding and treating infertility (166–67). That is, while new patterns of *auslif* are incorporated into tackling infertility, successful reproductive trajectories (leading to the birth of sons) assert Hadendowa women’s centrality in the social regeneration of their group.

We find out a range of pertinent information about the precarious livelihoods and structural injustice of Hadendowa as their nomadic way of life was increasingly incorporated into the Sudanese state. As a Muslim non-Arabic-speaking minority, the Hadendowa were marginalized through state-centered development processes that eventually compromised their access to grazing rights and fomented conflict with neighboring or competing groups. These and other pressures led to displacement and forced urbanization in the provincial towns of eastern Sudan and to the Hadendowa’s introduction to the world of humanitarian relief. It is fascinating to be led along the pathway of understanding through the eyes of the author, a Sudanese anthropologist who is constructed by her Hadendowa research participants as *balaweit*, or northern Sudanese. Through this experiential lens, Fadlalla learns about the ways in which this identity also implies “foreigner, intruder, and superior,” and from there gains insight into the complex relationship Hadendowa have to “foreignness,” and the ambiguous role of Islam implied by this. It is from these insights that Fadlalla draws her understanding of the threat not only to group identity but to the