

BOOK REVIEW

Marcus Filippello. *The Nature of the Path: Reading a West African Road*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. ix + 217 pp. Contents. Notes on Orthography, Diacritics, and Language. Photos. Maps. Acknowledgements. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$27.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0283-4.

Marcus Filippello's *The Nature of the Path: Reading a West African Road* charts the history of the Ọhọri people of present-day Benin from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century. It documents the various ways Ọhọri communities have engaged with, and disengaged from, larger political entities, including wider Yoruba political networks, French colonial Dahomey, and the independent states of Dahomey and Benin. The book challenges prevailing descriptions of the Ọhọri people and their place within precolonial regional politics.

Scholars, when they have written about Ọhọri, have tended to situate Ọhọri's political history as part of broader Yoruba political structures. Filippello believes this is mistaken. The Ọhọri community, he contends, has viewed itself as independent since its founding. By placing the community within the political structure and political history of a wider Yoruba network "scholars have crafted what amounts to an invented historiographical tradition" (43). In effect, Filippello is disentangling shared language, culture, and political connections from distinct political identities. He is similarly uncomfortable with singularly defining the political identity of Ọhọri. Part of what Filippello calls a "fluid sense of independence" (11) comes from Ọhọri's own fluctuating political structure, which ranged from centralized authority where power was vested in a "king" to a more decentralized authority where decision making was the purview of various individuals.

While first and foremost a political history, *The Nature of the Path* is also an environmental history. The influence of critical environmental history and political ecology can be seen especially in Chapter Five, "Cementing Identities," which addresses Ọhọri narratives of environmental change under the Kérékou regime. Here Filippello presents Ọhọri stories of environmental decline, deforestation, and marginalization. While not framed as such, these Ọhọri narratives challenge prevailing depictions of declensionist environmental narratives, which tend to emphasize the ways in which colonial

regimes in Africa used claims of environmental decline to justify land appropriation, forced resettlement, and exploitation. Here, however, narratives of decline serve as resistance narratives.

The road referenced in the book's subtitle is the Pobé-Kétu road, which runs north-south between Pobé and Kétu in eastern Benin. This road is not only the physical site of Filippello's investigation. It is also, he argues, the medium by which histories of Qhōri are transmitted and understood. When Filippello first began his research, his interlocutors were reticent to speak to an outsider about their political histories, or perhaps they were simply uninterested. However, once Filippello began asking people about the road specifically, individuals were willing to share their stories and those of the Qhōri community. It was in these conversations, for example, that Filippello heard the story of Tollou, a young woman merchant who founded what would become the village of Oligbolo in the wake of the French military occupation of Qhōri-Ije in the early twentieth century. Filippello expertly ties this vignette and others like it to the political history of Qhōri as a challenge to scholars who have suggested that the French occupation resulted in annihilation of the community. The French destruction of Qhōri forests certainly "challenged Qhōri conceptualizations of the natural world's role in substantiating their autonomy" (74), but it did not destroy the community or a sense of Qhōri independence or identity.

Filippello has consulted an impressive range of source material, such as French colonial documentation from the national archives in Benin, Senegal, and France, including colonial Public Works files and documentation on Qhōri resistance to French forces in the early twentieth century. He also consulted French-language Dahomean and Beninese newspapers, as well as photographs from the photographer and ethnographer Pierre Verger. While these materials are important for Filippello, they are secondary to the impressive oral materials that he has collected. Working with Jean-Didier Akpona as translator, Filippello conducted more than one hundred oral interviews, most of them along and around the Pobé-Ketu road.

Filippello has written a book that will be a must-read for anyone interested in Yoruba political history. It will be of interest to scholars concerned with African political ecology, sovereignty and interstitial communities, and oral history and the environment. Filippello's writing is fluid and clear. The book could fruitfully be used in undergraduate African or global history courses as a book that asks its readers to consider how communities understand and frame their own history as global history.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Falen, Douglas J. 2008. "Polygyny and Christian Marriage in Africa: The Case of Benin." *African Studies Review* 51 (2): 51–74. doi:[10.1353/arw.0.0082](https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.0.0082).
- Grätz, Tilo. 2014. "Radio Call-In Shows on Intimate Issues in Benin: 'Crossroads of Sentiments.'" *African Studies Review* 57 (1): 25–48. doi:[10.1017/asr.2014.4](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2014.4).
- Lang, Alison, Philippe LeMay-Boucher, and Charlemagne Codjo Tomavo. 2019. "Expenditures on Malevolent Magico-Religious Powers: Empirical Evidence from Benin." *African Studies Review* 62 (4): 154–80. doi:[10.1017/asr.2018.136](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.136).