

Davidson, Joanna. 2016. *Sacred rice: an ethnography of identity, environment, and development in rural West Africa*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 249p. ISBN 978-0-19-935868-7. US\$19.95, paperback.

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Joanna Davidson's study is set among the coast-dwelling Jola people of Guinea-Bissau, a former Portuguese colony. The Jola are an ethnic minority inhabiting the northwest of the country and number about 20,000 (while as many as half a million Jola live in neighbouring countries). Latin American cocaine traffickers know exactly where to locate Guinea-Bissau, but most do not: Guinea-Bissau is a small country on the west coast of Africa sandwiched between Senegal and the Republic of Guinea. It is not a popular research destination for foreign scholars. Davidson arrived in 2001, and following a two-year stint of field-work among a cluster of Jola villages, she returned periodically for the next ten years.

"Sacred rice", for Davidson, is not to emphasise the strictly religious meaning of rice as many classic studies have done. Rice is a "complex technical, social and ritual system through which Jola produce, consume, and revere rice" (p. 47). Beyond the local "rice complex", rice serves as Davidson's entry point to explore numerous historical, socio-political, religious, ontological and modernist themes directly or indirectly associated with a uniquely African mode of rice cultivation and, it turns out, one that is central—"sacred"—to Jola-land. It is also fairly typical of mixed mangrove and forest rice growing along the coast of Guinea-Bissau.

Drawing on the work of French anthropologist Marcel Mauss, Davidson presents a systemic, holistic view of Jola rice as "a total phenomenon" and she resists making analytical separations between "legal, economic, religious, and other parts" (p. 5). If the reader begins to suspect a variety of "cultural essentialism" or a contrived "holism" in Davidson's portrayal of the Jola and their rice, that essentialism or holism soon appears as something relegated to the past. Davidson shares alarming news: climate change. Since 1945, annual rainfall has halved, rice yields have declined dramatically, and people are facing severe deprivations. Jola rice farmers can no longer see "living off the land" as a viable future. In the absence of substantial rural development projects, they consider alternatives (e.g. growing cashew nut), albeit reluctantly, since rice is so engrained at all levels—cosmologically, socially, culturally and so on. In effect, Davidson issues regular reminders that all things are bound up in this unravelling Maussian whole. She asks "what happens?" when the "total phenomenon" of rice unravels, "disentang[ling] itself from spheres of social, cosmological, moral, economic, political, and familial life?" (p. 8). Her question is reflected in local perceptions: the Jola themselves know all too well that their "feet are in the fire", are they are asking themselves "what next?"

Before we learn "what happens and what next", Davidson does the usual thing: she zooms out to the broader context. Chapter one in particular takes the reader from well-known Asian rice to little-appreciated African rice. Then she zooms back in to the Upper Guinean coastal rice of the "mangrove ecosystem." All the while she interconnects histories of rice domestication, local innovation, international breeding programs, developmentalist priorities and failed national policies. Coming back to the Jola, she reasserts rice's centrality: "rice is omnipresent in Jola economic, social, and symbolic life..."; it is "the medium of exchange during life-cycle redistributive processes"; it is the "ticket to ritual power"; "Jola lives are permeated by rice"; "growing, eating, displaying, wearing, discussing and revering rice" is "ubiquitous" (p. 34) and so it has been for a thousand years.

And yet, this is all changing. Engines of change (predating Davidson's arrival) are Portuguese colonialism, Catholic missionary influence, the eleven-year war of independence, bumpy postcolonial politics and some developments touching on education and health but neglecting agriculture. But more than anything, rice and yield are driving change. As much in the wet-rice paddies as in the dry-rice forests, Jola are working more for less return. However, the seemingly intractable cultural identification with rice-farming (even among those who have other salaried work) and a host of attendant social and cultural entanglements keeps the Jola labouring in the fields: more backbreaking work for less food.

Chapter Two begins to situate these shifts within the context of Davidson's field research. Her ethnography now comes alive as she recounts stories that revolve around the family with whom she lives—

people she comes to see as "friends" more than "informants." Elevating story-telling to a method in its own right, she traces the family's stories through several generations. A "deeply biographic approach" describes kinship, experiences, conflicts, personalities, bodies, behaviours, anxieties, social roles, gender relations, ritual life, salaried employment and, of course, rain, rice work and change—always change away from the Maussian whole. In their stories and her stories of what was and what is, the reader gradually comes to appreciate that the coming and going of Davidson over twelve or so years has also enabled her to detect change within her own "ethnographic frame"—sometimes rapid change but most often subtle changes in activities, interactions, attitudes and tones. With her ethnography always bordering on the novelistic, Davidson presents herself as a highly sensitive ethnographer attuned to the nuances and meanings embedded in microscopic shifts.

Chapter Three concerns the norms surrounding agricultural labour. She contrasts a Jola ethos of "hard work" to traditional notions of the "lazy African" and describes the disciplinary measures through which hard work is enforced. Given the sixty-year presence of Catholic institutions in particular, however, "the protective and punitive power of spirit shrines to enforce the social relations of labour is weakening" (p. 93). Yet, says Davidson, "the ways in which work was evoked, performed, or prohibited illustrated how Jola work was a complex of values that cuts across economic, religious, and social domains" (p. 97). Indeed, Davidson herself was subjected to some disciplinary norms since she too worked in the fields, planting, transplanting, and harvesting rice. In this chapter, the theme of disintegration emerges forcefully when the ethnographer-cum-cultivator points to a kind of inertia in the rice complex that has given rise to a contradiction: Jola work has become delinked from actual productivity in terms of rice output. The "paradox of custom" has meant that the Jola appear to work almost for almost nothing. "Jola villagers....were maintaining the very social forms that exacerbated... their central problem"; they worked ever-harder in the fields, but were ever-less able to secure enough food (p. 98-100). Davidson avoids conjecture as to how low yields must get before the Jola give up the ghost of rice cultivation once and for all.

The following chapter then moves from the cultivation of rice to the cultivation of knowledge. Davidson is particularly concerned with the many layers of secrecy, both the formal secrecy concerning, for example, esoteric religious knowledge, and the informal, everyday secrecy that encompasses, for instance, the extent or nature of Jola possessions. Here, Davidson returns to questions of method. She distinguishes her approach from the "penetrative ethnography" that goes in search of secrets. Comically, Davidson describes how some of the "big secrets" she non-penetratively unearthed turned out to be "banal." This gave her reason to believe that "the content of the secret was irrelevant" compared to the significance of "the performance surrounding its concealment and revelation" (p. 110). Ironically, the less Davidson wanted to know peoples' "secrets", the more they were willing to enlighten her (but always out of earshot of others). She then jettisons the simple idea of "secrecy" in favour of a more sophisticated analysis of the dynamics of concealing and revealing information inhering in the uniquely Jola ways of "producing, controlling and transferring knowledge" (p. 111). All this is better understood in terms of communicative and practical strategies for concealing actions, possessions and so on, and keeping the special knowledge of different social locations separate, including between the genders and within them (e.g. the female knowledge of reproduction); the "leaking" of knowledge is a continual Jola preoccupation. In teasing out the links between knowledge, power and the processes of gaining rights to knowledge, Davidson's Jola, we read, inhabit a world "rich in ideas and information." The chapter concludes with a caution for the development industry, particularly the "learning-from-farmers" approach that assumes that "local knowledge" can just be plucked from its context and incorporated into development intervention. Acquiring information from the Jola is evidently tricky, even for an anthropologist. Apart from all their secrets, they tend not to explain things. Here, there is no place for impatience or "rapid rural appraisals."

The complex relationship between the Catholic religion and animism (although Davidson avoids the term, and perhaps sensibly given the likeness between the Christian God and the Jola "supreme deity") is broached in Chapter Five. In many ways, Davidson tells a familiar story of missionaries undermining what she calls "customary beliefs and practices." The result has been a growing Jola ambivalence towards them. Yet Davidson noticed one anomaly: a growing attachment to a certain once-every-thirty years initiation process, by which males aged from three to 33 undergo a long period of seclusion in the forest. On the one hand, Catholic pressures opened up a rift between those who participated in the ritual seclusion (last held in

1998) and those who didn't in what was once a "tight-knit community." On the other hand, Davidson notes the marked persistence of the ritual, her explanation for which centres on a combination of influences including environmental degradation, declining rice yields and a number of contingent rituals and practices. Essentially, this greater "rice complex" that defined masculinity was no longer doing its job. So, in its absence, the importance of this initiation process was raised as "one of the last purely male and man-making venues" (p. 153). With a more speculative tone, Davidson suggests that Jola men's participation in initiation might ritually "encode" their desire to reverse the environmental degradation that has limited the viability of rice, such that they can "regain the opportunity to become men in the rice paddies once again" (p. 154). Since ethnographers rarely free themselves from their attachment to their doctoral field-sites, I suspect that we can look forward to Davidson's update following the 2028 male initiation ritual.

A return to story-telling marks Chapter Six. Davidson's adoptive family, among others, continued to emphasise the importance of hard work in the fields, especially as an alternative to thievery. But hard work in itself had its limitations, and so modifications to traditional work regimes were afoot. Women's work associations had formed to alleviate the burden of work and distribute economic vulnerability. Beyond the farms, parents were increasingly pinning their hopes on their children's education and urban upward mobility. Typically, the kids were sent off to the city for higher schooling where they would hopefully proceed to salaried employment. Most of the time this didn't work out, and many returned to the village. Daughters in particular came home pregnant and out-of-wedlock. More generally, social mobility, urban migration and globalisation were ushering in all sorts of challenges: traditional Jola sexual mores were in jeopardy and HIV infections were on the rise. Davidson picks up the theme of eroding Jola socialisation practices and "moral decline" in the final chapter. She does this in light of the various simplifying discourses for understanding social problems (taking J. Scott's notion of "legibility"). Davidson issues a warning about "the implementation of facile and ineffective solutions" (p. 180) by "external-change agents." She demonstrates the true complexity of problems biographically and experientially by telling the stories of the daughters of her host-family. Defying stereotypes and standard development and missionary narratives, "each young woman [is] a unique social drama unto herself", says Davidson, generalising. Interestingly, Davidson reveals how she gets caught up in the drama as a provider of funds to help women in their predicaments, as a source of information (e.g. on birth control) or a cross-border (to Senegal) escort; even the total rent she paid to her host-family gets spent on resolving a certain pregnancy-related problem.

Davidson's critique of manufacturing simple solutions for complex problems is resumed in the conclusion. This applies to agricultural development as well. Development agents, Davidson advises, must take account of the specific ways in which the Jola understand work, not simply in productive terms but also in its links to personhood, morality and social structure; they must also take into account the special Jola approach to knowledge and communication. Davidson, again, emphasises the centrality of rice to all facets of social life while simultaneously acknowledging that this rice-centricity is disintegrating. The younger generation of Jola barely identify with rice at all. I often sensed contradictory messages in Davidson's arguments that derived from a certain idealism surrounding the essential place of rice. I was left wondering to what extent rice was really central to Jola lives, in both the past and the present, and to what extent these depictions that fluctuated between "the total rice complex" and "disintegrating rice complex" were rather essential to Davidson's narrative. Davidson may betray a slight discomfort about her deployment of a longstanding anthropological technique—to take an object or practice and wrap a "total" cultural narrative around it—when in the conclusion she admits that the book has been *ostensibly* about rice. While she has certainly been quite creative in her efforts to bring disparate social phenomena to bear on rice—including the impact of global warming and collapsing productivity—one is tempted to think that the purported centrality of rice has more to do with Davidson's narrative skill in rendering a Maussian "total phenomenon" partial. The problem might be that the evolving "rice partialness" remains attached to its parent "whole" as an idealised, "close-knit" culture (although she mostly avoids the term "culture").

Davidson, finally, pronounces on globalisation and "the effort to make sense of dramatic changes wrought by forces beyond local control, and to respond based on local imaginings of what the good life is" (p. 195). She navigates a position midway between "doom-and-gloom" stories and celebratory ones of "cultural creativity". This position runs parallels to her general conclusion that the Jola are both culturally constrained yet, within those constraints, are able to find ways to better their situation. I was left with the

feeling, however, that the doom-and-gloom picture was rather more accurate given the environmental and social impact of climate change over the last fifty years. I would have liked to see Davidson extrapolate into the not-too-distant future heralding a two-, three- or four-degree rise in average global temperatures. What would remain of the Jola covenant with their supreme deity—"if we work hard *Emitai* will bring rain"—when the rainy season has contracted further or when annual rainfall has halved yet again? At what point would rice yields reach zero? Would there remain a forest in which to seclude young males? Would the mangrove paddies lie under seawater instead of in freshwater? Would the Jola exist at all by the end of this century?

In relation to one chapter, Davidson asserts that it "might be a frustrating [one] to read for those looking for a clearer theoretical package or exegesis" (p. 155). As a reviewer, I thought that this applies to much of the book as the author meandered loosely around a range of positions. Yet one could also be more forgiving in this respect, commending Davidson for not "reducing" Jola life to one or two explanatory regimes (thus imposing her own standards of legibility). Either way, it is not clear the book makes much of a contribution to theory; and while it critiques development from a number of perspectives, some readers (but not me) may wish to see those critiques meaningfully applied to the actual implementation of development projects (although it appears that not much in the way of development projects was going on anyway).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned—or because of it—*Sacred Rice* remains an excellent ethnographic monograph. It is well written (poetic in parts), engaging, reflexive and thoroughly researched. The book does remarkably well at illuminating the complex and dire social, environmental, religious and economic predicament of the Jola people in a way that has much in common with the situation faced across the illegible "Third" World. I find exactly the same themes emerging in my "fields"—Peru and East Timor. *Sacred Rice*, in my view, stands at the cutting edge of ethnographic writing where ethnography is often at risk of becoming excruciatingly detailed, positivistic, depersonalised and dull. Few ethnographies are as engaging as this one. If one of Joanna Davidson's objectives of *Sacred Rice* has been to provide the reader with a feel for the everyday material as well as emotional reality of Jola life in all its hardship, suffering and hopes, she has succeeded in doing so.

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