

BIANCA MURILLO *Market Encounters: Consumer Cultures in Twentieth-Century Ghana*. Ohio: Ohio University Press. (pb. \$32.95 - 9780821422892). 2017, vii-248 pp.

In her thought-provoking book, Bianca Murillo investigates contests over the distribution and selling of consumer goods in Ghana from the colonial Gold Coast era in the early twentieth century to the 1970s. Focusing on the market of foreign consumer items, the book shows how the market was shaped and produced in the interfaces between various categories of economic and political agents. These agents included representatives of foreign firms, local traders and sales personnel, politicians and state agencies, as well as police and soldiers. Throughout history, the contests revolved around the availability and price of goods, on the one hand, and questions of who controlled and profited from the trade, on the other.

One of the highlights of the book is its tracing of the shifting power of local African intermediaries that the foreign companies relied on, both for retailing their goods and for providing market information during the pre-independence era. The intermediaries—consisting of storekeepers, shop assistants, clerks and market women—held valuable knowledge of the end customers, which they shared sparingly with the European company representatives. In addition, the intermediaries took liberties from the companies' rules, for instance, by creating informal retail networks of their own and selling items other than the commissioning company's products.

In analysing the independence and post-independence era, Murillo focuses on the effects of varying macro-economic policies and socio-political coalitions on who could participate in the consumer goods trade, and on what terms. One chapter investigates the Kingsway department store, owned by the then-largest firm, the United Africa Company (UAC), a Unilever-owned company with mostly British managers. The creation of this polished consumption space attracted the support of the then Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, as it suited his vision of building a modern nation. However, the firm's employment policies that advanced young educated women and men at the cost of older staff, clashed with the prevailing gender and generational order. The macro-economic situation changed, when Nkrumah started to enforce socialist policies, which led to the establishment of a state-owned trading corporation in direct competition with UAC. The aim was to decentre foreign and private capital and to decrease import dependency. Coinciding with dropping world prices for cocoa, these policies led to austerity measures and serious commodity shortages, inciting the first military coup in 1966.

The next regime and its commitment to a free market economy is discussed through a case study on Ghana's first International Trade Fair in 1967. The purpose of the fair was to showcase the country's liberalization and connectedness to international capitalism. Moreover, the visible presence of traditional leaders communicated the regime's willingness to ally with factions marginalized by Nkrumah's government. Simultaneously, the fair celebrated "transnational business masculinity" (Connell, 'Masculinities, Change and Conflict in Global Society' p. 135), rendering the economic accomplishments of long-standing market women and young Kingsway saleswomen invisible.

The following two military coups in the 1970s led to an increasing use of physical force and intimidation in a fight against alleged hoarders and profiteers. During the first period, traders were targeted, but eventually anyone with more items than deemed necessary for immediate consumption was indicted, while the later period saw several leading marketplaces destroyed.

The connecting thread in the book is the focus on how the Ghanaian economy was constituted through social relationships and changing political coalitions. Another thread explores how racial, gender and generational ideologies and tensions shaped commercial encounters. The chapters are organised chronologically, each opening a window to a particular era through a distinct case study focusing on different historical actors. This means that specific categories of agents are not followed in the long term, leaving broken threads for those readers wanting to know more about such developments. The author's decision may have derived from limitations of the available source material as much as from wanting to prove her argument through examining distinct examples, each situated in different historical eras.

The book's subtitle, "Consumer cultures" places the book in the field of consumption studies. This is somewhat misleading, because we learn little about the consumers' desires and values – except that they often wanted and struggled to attain consumer items as much as the intermediaries did. There is an attempt to include some information on local consumer perspectives. For instance, there is a discussion, based on oral interviews and historical magazine extracts, on the suspected association of UAC with witchcraft. The author cites (p. 56) an interview by UAC (*Unicorn* magazine, 1956), in which a young woman explains that a dedication to British goods has grown in her, "as if by fetish", adding that she has "imbibed" her mother's "Juju" (her mother was a UAC retailer). The author sees here a connection to the notion of "commodity fetishism" and hence a critique of the way capitalism persuades people to become possessed by objects. Readers many feel uneasy when Ghanaians' comments on supernaturally animating powers are reduced to a Marxist critique of capitalism. Indeed, the West African coast has a special position in relation to the development of the term "fetish," which Murillo might usefully have considered. As William Pietz writes, the term emerged in West Africa during the encounter between European and African merchants in the sixteenth century, to connote what Europeans considered Africans' unintelligible ways of investing objects with mystic powers (Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish I').

These critical comments aside, the book is an important contribution to the history of commercial encounters in Africa. Even with an abundance of historical facts, the writing style is accessible, the pictures illuminating and the book a stimulating read.

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