

Review: Claudia Roth (2012)†, Willemijn de Jong, Manfred Perlik, Noemi Steuer, and Heinzpeter Znoj (eds), *Urban Dreams - Transformations of Family Life in Burkina Faso* (2018)

Tarr, Natalie

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Book Reviews

Roth, Claudia (2012)†, Willemijn de Jong, Manfred Perlik, Noemi Steuer, and Heinzpeter Znoj (eds) (2018), *Urban Dreams. Transformations of Family Life in Burkina Faso*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn, ISBN 978-1-78533-376-7 (hardback), 208 pages

The book *Urban Dreams* was published as an edited volume posthumously by four close colleagues of Claudia Roth and reunites selected articles she had written for different academic publications over the span of a 20-year time period. Roth's long-term ethnographic involvement in the same neighbourhood in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, her repeated interviews with the same interlocutors, and also the fact that she looked at the same research topic – how people manage to secure their livelihoods – from a number of different angles makes her work particularly dense. The theoretical lenses through which Roth looked at her diverse research interests are gender studies, anthropologically oriented social security studies, and practice theory (Bourdieu). She also shows in her work how everything is interconnected: the economy, politics, history, and of course tradition, lived out daily. As a welcome side effect, *Urban Dreams* provides a walk through the canon of publication conventions of the past two decades.

The chapters in the book are grouped into four parts, covering the main subject areas: 1. Ethnography and Reflexivity; 2. Negotiating Love and Marriage; 3. Elderly Parents and Their Children: Sharing or Living in Poverty; and 4. Youth: Dreams and Hardships. All chapters had originally been published between 1995 and 2014 in either French, German, or English – some as book chapters in edited volumes (chapters 1, 3, 4, 6, and 7), some as journal articles (chapter 2, and chapters 8–10). For the ten chapters in total that make up *Urban Dreams*, the editors had all articles translated into English. In all four parts of the book, Roth returns to her interlocutors' way of dealing with poverty and their increasingly difficult access to the resources needed to become respected, socially integrated adults.

The first chapter describes in detail – and, indeed, in a very personal, often self-ironic way – how difficult gaining access to and becoming familiarised with fieldwork can be. This pragmatic look at the logistics of doing fieldwork is unusual in anthropological publications of the time (1998). Yet, Roth's pioneering contribution to anthropological research in West Africa was clearly in her intimate look at marriage relationships,

as discussed in the three chapters that make up part 2, and in her coining of the concept of the inverted intergenerational contract (chapter 4). Here, Roth paid particular attention to why certain household members work while others do not – and who they respectively are. Normally it should be children who satisfy their ageing parents' everyday needs, by providing for them. Due to the changing economic situation, however, coupled with (enduring) traditional societal views on adults' acceptable behaviour, Roth explains how it has come about that these ageing parents still continue to feed their grown children and grandchildren.

In part 2, she also calls into question other established ideas such as the much-lauded one of African solidarity (chapter 4). Here, Roth demonstrates that the idea of the extended family as the epitome of social security is a myth – a theme she returns to in part 3 (chapter 6). Roth shows that today it is indeed often women alone who secure their family's livelihood, sometimes far into old age (chapter 7). This, in turn, highlights how marriage, having a job and money, and the way men and women carry themselves make socially accepted adults out of adolescents. Another innovative and new research angle Roth took was to look at sibling relationships in these changing economic times (chapter 8). Because the eldest son often cannot assume his responsibilities as the traditional breadwinner, thus supporting his nuclear family and his parents, he needs to involve his younger siblings to help him live up to his duties. Until then, social scientific research had not paid much attention to these relationships in the West African context.

The fourth and last part of the book takes a look at a new research topic that Roth would become interested in, but due to her untimely death in 2012 could ultimately not pursue further: youth and their future (chapters 9 and 10). Unemployed men often hang out drinking tea, reinforcing the stereotype of the lazy man who, instead of looking for a job, simply sits around with his friends all day (chapter 9). Roth shows, however, that it is easier for women to work because many types of job are considered to be purely theirs alone to do. A man cannot be seen to be doing “women's work” unless he is willing to risk losing his honour in the eyes of society.

Roth not only took a gender relations perspective, but integrated a much bigger picture into her analysis as well. Two interconnected developments in West Africa have influenced societal change and with it gender relations, she found. Particularly, who in a family earns money and with what kind of work. These developments are the penetration of the money and market economy with colonialism and neocolonialism and blocked economic development after the mid-1980s, respectively. The

interplay between politics, the economy, and long-held ideas about how individual members of a family need to carry themselves deeply influence core beliefs and ways of behaving. Roth made these complex, interwoven circumstances visible in and through her research.

From today's scientific perspective, reading individual chapters of *Urban Dreams* by themselves makes little sense; doing so would not contribute to a better understanding of social relations in Bobo-Dioulasso. The book was conceptualised as ideally being read as a whole, with each new chapter building upon insights gained in preceding ones and the reader being increasingly led to greater depth. Consumed in its entirety, *Urban Dreams* allows readers to appreciate Roth's growing and more in-depth understanding of social relations and gives a profound overall acknowledgement of the daily struggle of men and women in Bobo-Dioulasso.

Roth was not the first social scientist to look at marriage and gender relations in an urban West African setting, of course. But she laid the groundwork for further research to be conducted on marriage in Burkina Faso, and particularly on intergenerational relationships. This is what gives Roth's work particular strength and depth, and makes *Urban Dreams* a very readable and not-to-be-missed contribution to scholarship on social relations in West Africa.

- Natalie Tarr
University of Basel, Switzerland.