

Tasha Rijke-Epstein. 2023. *Children of the Soil: The Power of Built Form in Urban Madagascar*. Durham: Duke University Press. 347 pp.

How does one discuss material histories and architecture in African cities? Tasha Rijke-Epstein's *Children of the Soil: The Power of Built Form in Urban Madagascar* provides a thought-provoking exploration, focusing on Mahajanga, a city shaped by migration in Madagascar before, during, and after colonization. The text delves into the contested claims over the city's origins and how its buildings have become politically charged symbols. Drawing on archival and ethnographic research, Rijke-Epstein argues that "buildings in Mahajanga have served as politically charged inscriptions through which groups sought to rewrite the past, manage the indeterminacies of the present, and establish new conditions of possibility for aspired futures" (p. 2).

Though the author kept her readers in suspense about how she came up with the title *Children of the Soil*, it is quite an intriguing text about how "through human actions, buildings became meaningful and powerful things able to reorient historical trajectories" (p. 3). Using buildings as a valuable inheritance of historical scholarships of urban pasts in Africa, Rijke-Epstein explores two overarching themes: "How rulers—precolonial, colonial, or postcolonial—have drawn on urban space to perform their authority and the creative ways residents inhabited space of the city" (p. 13).

Rijke-Epstein draws her methodology from a decade of historical and ethnographic research, combing through the constraints of colonial archives and "privileging Malagasy and Comorians as the primary knowledge makers and brokers of their city" (p. 24). She discusses that "through rituals and everyday practices, early coastal dwellers drew on affordances of the landscape to create enduring architectural practices that persisted for decades and centuries" (p. 29). As Michel-Rolph Trouillot suggests, buildings' material heft conceals hidden histories (p. 4). Rijke-Epstein discusses "the Rova" in Mahajanga to highlight Anatalaoatra masons, who used local materials like limestone, mangrove timber, and satrana palms to legitimize their authority, showing built environments as entanglements of human, spiritual, and material forces.

Rijke-Epstein summarizes the French incursion in Mahajanga, noting how "colonial dreams of constructing new civic buildings and infrastructure were hindered by the fundamental lack and refusal of laborers" (p. 91). This opposition led to reliance on Indian, Somali, and Comorian workers, with resistance framed as "architectural refusals"—creative acts of challenging political constraints through the built environment. Of particular interest is how Rijke-Epstein presented the movement of the Comorians to Mahajanga as laborers. She differentiates the migrants from the Malagasy, seen by the French as too lazy to work or become skilled artisans. The Comorians, through creative stone buildings, shaped their own city space, embodying "politically and ethically charged ideas of urbanism" (p. 125). Their designs and stone architecture depict Africans as "everyday experts—designers, planners, and engineers" (p. 128).

The suspense of the book's title waits explanation until chapter five, which portrays Rijke-Epstein as a historian, literary scholar, and anthropologist. She examines how the offspring of Comorians and Malagasy, termed "Comorian-Malagasy," distinguish themselves from traditional narratives. These individuals identify as *Zanatany*, meaning "children of the soil" (p. 127), emphasizing a connection to the land through "blood and soil" rather than mere

possession (p. 175). *Children of the Soil* uncovers the relationship between “personhood, waste material, and infrastructure” in Mahajanga, framing them as human efforts to create a safe environment. Rijke-Epstein tracks these activities as a “peopling of infrastructure” (p. 196), where Mahajanga’s residents resisted French sanitation projects. They viewed waste systems as “degrading to bodily, communal, and cosmological integrity” (p. 197), ultimately turning Mahajanga into a “rote city” (p. 222).

Children of the Soil is a valuable contribution to the discourse on Africa’s material histories. Rijke-Epstein uncovers forgotten histories within buildings, revealing that Africa was not ignorant of modernity or the use of stone and concrete before colonialism. The text highlights Africans as “early designers and builders of reservoirs and fountains” (p. 199). With thoughtful notes on toponyms, introduction, epilogue, and chapters one and six, the book is cohesive and accessible. The inclusion of postcards, photographs, maps, and interviews reflects the author’s balanced approach. While I would have preferred color visuals, this is more of a publisher's limitation. Notably, chapter five lacks a “conclusion” subheading and has an obvious margin on page 193.

In sum, Rijke-Epstein opens a new discussion on architectural history as she interrogates objects, belongings, and houses as “restless places” in her epilogue. Investigating built forms, as Rijke-Epstein writes, “as historical sources are not only a matter of elasticizing the bounds of the archive” but “centering everyday dwellers and their architectural forms as views on how cities were made” (p. 226). This book is recommended to historians, urban analysts, and policymakers on the activities of Africans and colonial administrators in making African cities.

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