

Cloth that does not die: The Meaning of Cloth in Bunu Social Life. By Elisha P. Renne. (Seattle and Washington: University of Washington Press, 1995. Pp XXI + 269, 34 illus., 9 in colour, map, tables, notes, appendix, glossary, bibliography index, US \$40.00, ISBN: 0-295-97392-7, cloth.)

Sandra A. Niessen

Volume 21, numéro 2, 1999

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087818ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087818ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Niessen, S. A. (1999). Compte rendu de [*Cloth that does not die: The Meaning of Cloth in Bunu Social Life.* By Elisha P. Renne. (Seattle and Washington: University of Washington Press, 1995. Pp XXI + 269, 34 illus., 9 in colour, map, tables, notes, appendix, glossary, bibliography index, US \$40.00, ISBN: 0-295-97392-7, cloth.)]. *Ethnologies*, 21(2), 206–209.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087818ar>

speculations do not contribute to our understanding of Guy's legends, and, unfortunately, are not rare in this book. Although her treatment of literary and social contexts improves in her coverage of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, too often Richmond remains content with noting differences in Guy legends from one account to the next without engaging in critical analysis of the reasons for these changes.

Overall, Richmond is too often content to observe and list when what is needed is for the material to be questioned and analyzed. In her preface, Richmond tells us that this book is the product of fifteen years of research. The level of detailed familiarity with these texts, and the breadth of materials brought together here, both proclaim a lengthy and assiduous collecting process. Where this book fails to satisfy is in what it does (or more precisely, fails to do) with the materials that it collects. Too often in this volume, one is left with the impression that the author has not really digested the materials, but has presented them to us in a form that sometimes seems little more than elaborated notes.

Tim Lundgren
Ohio State University
Columbus, OH, USA

Cloth that does not die: The Meaning of Cloth in Bunu Social Life. By Elisha P. Renne. (Seattle and Washington: University of Washington Press, 1995. Pp XXI + 269, 34 illus., 9 in colour, map, tables, notes, appendix, glossary, bibliography, index, US \$40.00, ISBN: 0-295-97392-7, cloth.)

During the course of her doctoral fieldwork into marriage and divorce among the Bunu Yoruba in Nigeria (1987-1988), Elisha Renne assembled an array of details about cloth: "I realized that cloth use and references pervaded Bunu social life in ways I had hardly imagined" (p. xviii). Her return to Bunu in 1990 and 1991 allowed her to supplement her findings enough to write the ten essays, or chapters, which comprise *Cloth that does not die*.

Renne herself has signaled the significance of her work:

The diversity of West African and Nigerian textile traditions has been treated in several general surveys on cloth types and looms. While the

cultural importance of cloth in West African societies — in funerals, in chieftaincy installations, in spirit possession, as bridewealth payments, and as currency — has been noted, the social significance of cloth and its production has received relatively little attention in West African textile literature (p. 13).

The textile literatures of different world regions: South Asia, Southeast Asia, West Africa, the Andes, etc. are each characterized by different approaches and themes of analysis which lead the generalist to query whether this diversity reflects the local nature of cloth, or the school of study of the ethnographer. To this reviewer, who has focused on textile traditions in Southeast Asia, where the social significance of cloth and its production have received relatively more attention, Renne's contribution is a particularly satisfying read. The predominating themes in *Bunu* of gender, time, and fertility, the colours red, white and black, and the role cloth plays in linking the human and spirit worlds are all familiar. But Renne is among the first to signal their unique configuration in an African tribe.

It is particularly appropriate therefore, that the (elegantly and insightfully written) foreword is by an anthropologist whose impact on the textile literature has been profound; Annette Weiner has gone a long way toward locating local ethnographic threads in more universal webs and she highlights the *Bunu* themes in that same web.

Renne's sensitivity (or is it the sensitivity of the *Bunu*?) to the extraordinary capacity of cloth to embody existential themes and dilemmas of social life is the strength of her book (and ultimately the reason why *Bunu* cloth does not die). While Renne deals with the realities of daily life: birth, marriage, death, the occupations of hunter and chief, the looms used by men and those used by women, the impact of colonialism on local political, economic, and clothing systems, unfailingly she unveils the more profound cognitive dimensions of cloth in all of these social processes.

The gender associations of cloth are an important case in point. Cloth is known throughout a good part of the world for its association with a symbolic complex including women, time, and fertility. Those regions in Africa where men are the weavers, therefore, inspire query. In the chapter, "What *Bunu* Men Wove", Renne describes the division of weaving labour between men and women. While predominantly women are weavers — and yes, the themes of time and fertility are closely connected with this fact — men of the highest social station will weave, on women's looms and outside the village, red cloth

of enormous prestige which only they may take with them to their grave. The apparent symbolic contradiction of men weaving the most powerful of cloths and doing it on women's looms, is resolved when Renne points out that "By culturally embellishing death in a particular way, men emphasize their own reproductive capacities...through their ability to control this aspect of a cycle of birth and rebirth, their authority as chiefs is enhanced (p. 121)." "Restrictions on this cloth's production reflect a tendency toward the centralization of power related to the strengthening of the authority of kings. This centralization tends to diminish the role of others..." (p. 126). With this Renne has revealed the breadth of the Bunu definition of reproduction and the manipulation of the symbol complex in the functioning of Bunu politics. The sacred and secret nature of the unusual red cloth becomes clear; the red cloth hanging in front of the late chief's house in one of Renne's photographs is transformed for the reader into something rather precious.

The plain white cloth of the Bunu, which Renne initially found uncompellingly nondescript, was similarly transformed for her as she learned to see in it "an evocative symbol for mediating relations among individuals, social groups, and spirits" (p. 23) in both positive and negative ways. Similarly, she defines the privileged status of the wearer of black cloth, older women who "shape young women into socially responsible beings ...[and] symbolically assert control over their reproductive power" (p. 71). In the simple black and white striped cloth of the hunter "is not only the non hierarchical nature of their organization but also a playing down of material wealth and an emphasis on the wealth of spiritual power" (p. 97), while in the elaborate red regalia of chiefs, there is an elaboration of rank and the ambivalently perceived forces involved in accruing material success and authority.

These simple ideas and associations are complex in their daily expression: "The bits of red cloth on the road just out of town, the strip of white cloth tied to a tree, the faded *adofi* marriage cloth drying on a line, and the small girl with a doll secured to her back with cloth... These unassuming pieces of cloth are the vehicles for socially constituted ideas about other beings, other domains, and times past" (p. 92). Renne's prose is both evocative and explicit in unraveling complexes of ideas and activities associated with these unassuming pieces of cloth, revealing the density of these simple ideas and the complexity of their associations in the many facets of daily life. In her task, the author draws upon tales and myths, archives and experiences, conversations and rituals. The past blends with the future in the present moment of fashion;

cloth is both a social construction and a repository of the past. People use the cloth to weave their lives.

“The study of material things like cloth provide a way of grasping the microscopic ways in which more abstract ideas such as the past, identity, and obligation are constituted in the course of everyday social life” (p. 192). As the study of material culture struggles to find its way back into favour, Renne’s results are eloquent and explicit testimony to the richness of the object as a point of entry into social analysis. Her descriptions share the significance of Bunu cloth in ways that readers have hardly imagined.

Sandra A. Niessen
Department of Human Ecology
University of Alberta

Cajun and Creole Folktales: The French Oral Tradition of South Louisiana.

By Barry Jean Ancelet. (New York and London: Garland, 1994. Pp.lxxii + 224, selective bibliography, indices of tale types, motifs, and narrators, ISBN 0-8156-1498-1 cloth).

That *Cajun and Creole Folktales* is the product of twenty years of thorough, careful, and caring scholarly work by one of the field’s most eminent collectors and commentators is apparent from the opening pages of the book. Series editor Carl Lindahl catalogues Ancelet’s previous published work and his efforts not only to study the diverse folklore forms of south Louisiana but also to make those resources available to whatever audience is interested at the time. Much of this is revealed in a scene Lindahl describes when Ancelet finds himself bringing Wilson “Ben Guiné” Mitchell before a formal audience of some eighty odd people. Ben Guiné is at first overwhelmed and falters as he begins his first story, but in the midst of doing so he brushes Ancelet and instinctively turns his chair to someone he knows and trusts will appreciate his story and his efforts.

The scene captures vividly much of the feel of the rest of the book, whose organization is unconventional but once made familiar becomes a ready resource. Before getting to the tales themselves, which are presented with little to none of the performance situation but with thorough references