

**Monique and the Mango Rains: Two Years with a Midwife in Mali.** *Kris Holloway*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2007. xiii + 212 pp., map, photographs, bibliography.

**ELISHA P. RENNE**

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Monique Dembele, the young midwife who worked in the Malian village of Nampossela, to the east of Bamako, is the focus of this engaging narrative written by Kris Holloway, who served in the Peace Corps in Mali from 1989 to 1991. In some ways, this story of an American woman's learning to adjust to Malian village life resembles the earlier fictionalized narrative of a rite of immersion in Africa, namely, Laura Bohannan's classic *Return to Laughter: An Anthropological Novel* (1964), which was based on Bohannan's fieldwork in central Nigeria in the early 1950s. Bohannan also experienced the tragic death of a close Tiv friend in childbirth, although her interest in the intersection of politics and kinship brought more of an anthropological perspective to her narrative.

In *Monique and the Mango Rains*, Holloway concentrates on her growing friendship with Dembele, illustrating how closely friendship may come to resemble kinship. However, it is Monique's work as a midwife that makes this volume particularly useful for understanding the cultural dynamics of childbirth, sexuality, and women's reproductive health in Mali. In this sense, the book resembles Brigitte Jordan's relationship with the Mexican midwife, Doña Juana, described in *Birth in Four Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Investigation of Childbirth in Yucatan, Holland, Sweden, and the United States* (1992). Like Jordan, Holloway is

instructed by Monique and assists her in her work in the small, dilapidated birthing house built in the town by the Chinese during an earlier development initiative. One gets a sense of how the simple techniques that village midwives use to assist women during childbirth and to advise mothers on their infants' health—weighing them, keeping records, and teaching them to make baby food and “health water” (oral rehydration therapy)—may sometimes make an enormous difference in their lives. Holloway (and her fellow Peace Corps worker and soon-to-be husband, John Bidwell), organized the renovation of the birthing house before they left Nampossela, providing a vivid example of the dynamics of a community development project. Holloway also arranges for Monique to visit the United States, where they make presentations at schools and churches on women's health care in Mali. This visit allows the American author to parallel her own astonishment with Miniankan social life with that of a Malian visitor to the United States for the first time.

*Monique and the Mango Rains* consists of 11 chapters, along with an introduction and postscript, which largely follow Holloway's experiences from her first days in the village to her departure and, later, a brief return. Along with the details of village midwife practice, Holloway provides insights into gender relations in a patrilineal, virolocal system with a strong son preference, with all its implications for thinking about infertility and birth control, as well as about female circumcision and the value of women's work. This discussion is complemented with Holloway's keen observations about more general aspects of life in rural Mali. For example, she dramatically documents the importance of “water, precious water” (p. 59) and peoples' sometimes desperate hope for rain. Indeed, the “mango rains” of the book's title refers to the light rain that falls during the dry season which is believed to make mangos sweet.

This book was written by a compassionate and considerate observer, with an unabashedly American and personal perspective. While the author does not use a particularly socially analytic approach to her material, her ability to convey a sympathetic sense of life from Monique Dembele's perspective makes this an excellent text for anthropology undergraduate courses that have a focus on women's health, gender, and Africa. While Holloway does not explicitly say so, she provides readers—by way of a comparative perspective—with the means for contemplating how social ideals are sometimes countered in practice.

### **References cited**

Bohannan, Laura

1964 *Return to Laughter: An Anthropological Novel*. New York: Anchor Books.

Jordan, Brigitte

1993 *Birth in Four Cultures: [A Cross-Cultural Investigation of Childbirth in Yucatan, Holland, Sweden, and the United States](#)*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.