

Review of Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa by Jane I. Guyer

By

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This book began life as the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures at Rochester University in 1997. The thrust of Guyer's argument is that monetized transactions in Atlantic Africa are far more complex than one might imagine. This is incontrovertible given the limited imaginations of most disciplines, and well worth pointing out. The richness in the book is in reinterpreting, categorizing and synthesizing the arcana of anecdotes (and occasional data) on monetary transactions.

Guyer suggests there are five aspects to Atlantic African complexity. First, people still see and practice incommensurabilities in transacting for certain kinds of goods and services. Some of these goods and services include secrecy, witchcraft, chieftaincy, and fetishes. Second, the scales that people in Atlantic Africa use to judge and evaluate transactions are different from simple cardinal scales, where each thing can be assigned a number and so compared. Instead, scales are complex, and Guyer implicitly subscribes to Latour's view of things as objects that are discussed about publicly. Third, people maintain strong normative judgments about what constitute fair prices in the marketplace and how fair prices are realized in practice. When a price is not market-clearing, a whole repertoire of rationing 'performances' are mobilized by suppliers. Fourth, the repertoires stored in individual memories of how to structure transactions are extensive and their incidence variable across space and over time. This is particularly true, Guyer argues, for monetary transactions that include a time dimension (such as credit). Fifth, because of the dearth of formal financial institutions, and consequent importance of social networks of personal relations, the easy line between consumption and investment expenditures assumed in most analysis does not apply in Atlantic Africa.

Guyer devotes three chapters to the proposition that scales are complex. Chapter 3 is a hodge-podge of anecdotes about calculations. Very Polly Hillish, with cute descriptive titles for each anecdote. (Incidentally, the writing in this chapter shares the virtues of Polly Hill's, spare and direct, with no jargon.) Guyer's belief is that multiple numbering systems matter a lot, but none of the examples clinch that contention. They may, but how could we know? The problem is methodological. Piling example upon example of people talking about numbers and money in ways that sound like nothing more than rhetorical exaggeration or rational miscalculation does not prove a point: might not one find the same kinds of discourse on a streetcorner in San Jose, among high school dropouts, or in an Indian gaming casino, among chain-smokers? Numeracy is a hard nut. Calculating and remembering numbers without paper and pencil presupposes a generous spirit of tolerating mistakes. Many African societies have complex and multiple

numbering systems (e.g., one for ordinary counting, another for market transactions). Numerology is also around the corner of many an African religion. So there is no reason to think that numbers are going to be straightforward things. Making a statement about how, exactly, numbers matter is something else. What is missing from the chapter, then, is any confirmation, from a tidy informant, that people are indeed using multiple number systems and interpretations that are meaningful and purposive. This raises an important methodological problem of the book: much of the material relies on the bewildered accounts of outsiders, very little on alternative accounts of insiders. Amadou Hampaté Bâ, for example, in his memoir of his early years as a civil servant beginning to think about his famous creation the merchant Wangrin, seems to not be bewildered at all as he transitions from Peul calculating to French colonial accounting. This archive of memories, interpretations and lived experiences is conspicuously absent from the book.

Chapter 4 strings together a number of observations on the ranking system of Eastern Nigeria. A difficult chapter, because it is not clear how the observations support the idea of complex scales. In part, this is because Guyer hedges on what the historical record says about purchasing rank. The second sentence of the section on Igbo ranking is (p. 74): “The level of ranking corresponded exactly to the level of money spent to achieve it.” This sentence is followed only one page later (pp. 75-6) by: “The standard payments were never enough, and people themselves outdid them...no formal limits are set...” Unless the first sentence is a platitude such as “you get what you pay for”, the two cannot both be true. Either the price of rank is fixed, or it varies with time, bargaining, social identity, and other considerations. Certainly there is no quibble with Guyer’s admonition to think more about the importance of rank in affecting Yoruba economic decisions and interactions. Many economists have been anticipating this call, and have developed theories of how rank systems may matter (Cole, Mailath et al. 1995; Frank and Cook 1995; Corneo and Jeanne 1997).

Three short chapters follow describing Nigerian scales of quality and performance of rationing along scales of social status. Amusing anecdotes about the labels used by Nigerians to describe local and imported goods, and new and used goods, lead to a research call for study of the nodes of information production. A short vignette—of a day queuing for petrol—likewise leads to a suggestion of the value of work along these lines. A brief discussion of the mystery of community banks follows, asking why Nigerians seem comfortable in turning over hard-earned cash to local financial institutions that would seem to be very poor guarantors of value. The final substantive chapter of the book is an extended discussion of the Ghana Living Standards survey. Here Guyer tries to re-imagine why the proportion of expenditures on food seems not to fall with income, as predicted by experience and common sense. She links the beginnings of an explanation to the earlier chapter: the dearth of financial institutions means that the ordinary person invests in social relations by providing food to others. But this hypothesis begs to be examined closer in the light of the earlier chapter: in places where community banks are more accessible, should not the proportion spent on food decline?

The difficulty with the book, aside from the usual aggravations of Guyer’s style, is that pointing out and categorizing complexity then raises the question of how and for whom that complexity matters. The book leaves the reader bewildered, to use Guyer’s

own word, as to what point Guyer eventually wants to make with this material. There is the serious risk of leaving behind a compendium of *marginalia* hinting at deep insight.

One cannot review a book like this without reference to Guyer's dense style. Let me illustrate. On page 49 the reader is given an introduction to the second part of the book, wherein will be described the content of what is struggled over in social performance in Atlantic Africa. This content is referred to as "scales and tropes" in the title of the page. Scales referring to how things related to money are measured, tropes referring to linkage points or thresholds (that is, certain special numbers and points on scales that are talked and thought about in special ways). The second sentence of the section however introduces the phrase "measures and reductions" as an expression for "scales and tropes", and then the third sentence introduces yet another clarification, "measures and mediations," and then the next paragraph suggests that scales can also be thought of as registers (so we now perhaps have "registers and mediations", and then some scales are named (cardinal, ordinal, interval, ratio) and the concept of trope is invoked to refer to an argument that scales contain "hooks" for linkages. The introduction is a disorienting Möbius Strip.

A further illustration occurs on page 27: "African economies were monetized over several centuries, but this feature seems to defy the very 'purpose' of money as an unambiguously measured standard of value." Leave aside the frequent quotation marks bracing ordinary words (at one point the word 'a' is encased with special apostrophes...), the question here is: what feature? That it took several centuries to monetize? That they were monetized? No, it turns out that the feature referred to is the persistence of exchange of nonequivalent items. The first clause, it turns out, has nothing at all to do with the second clause. She may as well have written, "African economies were located in Africa, but this feature seems to defy the very "purpose" of money as an unambiguously measured standard of value." Overall, this rewarding but aggravating book is classic Jane Guyer: a compote of ripe anecdotes plucked from archives and ethnographies stewed with bravura forays beyond anthropology's disciplinary boundaries in a syrup of bad style.

## References

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