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Book Review

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In the monograph *Ageing with Smartphones in Uganda*, anthropologist Charlotte Hawkins investigates various experiences of aging through the lens of smartphones in the quickly evolving digital landscape of Lusozi, a neighborhood in Kampala, Uganda. The term dotcom in the title covers multiple facets, such as the impact of information and communication technologies, urban migrations, and changing lifestyles in the city. Technologies such as mobile and smartphones are signified as “dotcom tools” and the “dotcom generation” (5) are what older people in Lusozi call the younger generation who are exposed to global information and social media. In this book, the author uncovers the various influences of dotcom on older people’s personal and political lives, how dotcom affects their health and caregiving practices, social status, norms of respect and respectability as well as intergenerational relationships. For this book, Hawkins conducted a 16-month ethnography in Lusozi exploring the interplay between age, tradition, and technology. The analysis is based on 250 interviews with mostly Acholi people from Northern Uganda, a significant portion of whom were displaced during the civil war that started in the late 1980s and continued up until 2006. Originally, Acholi signified a linguistic group but later became synonymous with a geographical region in northern Uganda and parts of South Sudan. Acholiland, the geographical region in northern Uganda, is the homeland to the Acholi people who speak Acholi, a Luo language that is part of the Nilotic language family.

Throughout the book, Hawkins highlights the resilience and adaptability of the people of Lusozi in the light of social change. The methodology and foundational analysis of this research is grounded and inspired by Francis Nyamoh’s (2020) “convivial scholarship,” as originally articulated in his book called *Decolonising the Academy: A Case for Convivial Scholarship*. This approach emphasizes the production of knowledge that takes place collaboratively and holistically with the help of mutual dialogue.

In the introductory chapter, Hawkins briefly touches upon the historical, linguistic, and religious context of Lusozi, Kampala. The population of Uganda according to the 2014 census was 14 percent Muslim and 84 percent belonging to the Christian faith. From the latter group 11 percent adhere to Pentecostal or *Murokole* beliefs, demonstrating a rapid growth of Pentecostalism in the region. Religion, as observed by the author, is considered integral to Ugandan culture, providing comfort, strength and most importantly a perspective that accepts adversity as a part of God’s will. Although a central focus throughout the monograph, the introductory chapter highlights the practice of ‘togetherness,’ or the encouragement of family and friends to work together harmoniously. Hawkins’ research findings emphasize that cultivating reciprocal assistance, or providing and receiving help between individuals

and groups, is essential for the people of Lusozi. The use of digital technology further highlights the importance of togetherness and reciprocal assistance.

Hawkins, in Chapter two, provides insight into intergenerational values and traditional cultures of respect in Uganda. Acholi society reflects a gerontocratic structure where older men wield authority in the family, clan, and community governance. However, there are growing concerns over the decline of this social status and increased isolation and loneliness with a decrease in priority and respect faced by the elderly in Uganda. The author shares an ethnographic story of a prominent Acholi leader, the 67-year-old Ladit. His experience is that social and cultural values have been hybridized in Acholi societies where dotcom lifestyles are integrated into existing social values, and, conversely, that social values and norms are adjusted to dotcom lifestyles. Ladit, for example, mourns how ideals of respectability were lost through the introduction of tools like smartphones, but to fulfill his responsibility of educating the younger generations about their traditional values, he relies on these tools to transmit his message. He uses Youtube and other social media platforms as a medium to promote to younger generations, their cultural group who perform Acholi and Ugandan dances, in hopes of passing down knowledge from one generation to another.

In Chapter three, "Age and Work," Hawkins recounts the everyday routines, work and interconnectedness inside the informal economy of Kampala. The author illustrates how elderly people generate fresh incomes through various self-owned businesses, mobile money transfers, and online betting and gambling (60). Mobile and smart phones provide strategies for older people to create their own support systems to cope with a ruptured economy and sustain themselves financially. In addition, collaborative assistance within the central market of Lusozi which is the "hub of Uganda's real economy" (75), is highly promoted when securing a means of living. "Togetherness is Strength" (Chapter four) is an important contribution to Hawkins's argument because here she elucidates how the notion of unity and togetherness is derived from the concept of *pur aleya*, meaning "rotational or reciprocal labor for farming" (81). As described by the elder Ladit, *aley* is a way to reduce the burden and work pragmatically. He explains further how a digging that would normally take a month if done by one single person, can instead be completed in a day if done collectively by 30 people or *awak* (work parties). The hard work of *aley* is then followed by celebrations and eating together. Extending on this idea of togetherness that brings strength, the author describes savings and family support groups founded by the elders in Lusozi. These are innovative responses from below, signifying their agency and creative efforts to deal with financial and emotional hardships and inaccessible healthcare.

In Chapter five, "Dotcom Wave", the author documents a contrasting perspective to the otherwise public narrative of smartphones being unproductive. Hawkins discusses the role of smartphones in everyday intergenerational care and reciprocal assistance that bridge the economic and gender disparities of phone ownership. For example, the practice of phone sharing inside the household and neighborhood or when children purchase mobile phones and smartphones for their parents while simultaneously guiding them on how to use this technology, symbolizes reverence as well as caregiving across generations (113). Mobile money remittances are another method that adds to reciprocal assistance where the younger generations, who have moved to the city in order to find better job opportunities and incomes, transfer money to the elderly.

"Who is responsible for elderly health and care?" is a pertinent question explored by the author in Chapter six. Hawkins delves into global anxieties over elder care, de-personalization, abandonment and varying opinions on successful aging. Components such as globalization, family dynamics of caregiving, mobile money remittances, or "care currency" (144) provide a solution to the dwindling healthcare resources, funding health care, and health emergencies.

In Chapter seven, Hawkins discusses her observations of how people articulated 'goodness' in everyday language. Older people would often praise those who exhibited a 'good heart,' emphasizing values such as generosity, respect, and cooperation. In the concluding chapter, the author draws on Ugandan medical anthropologist Stella Nyanzi and cultural anthropologist Christine Obbo who, through their research, advocate for an equal involvement in policy making for the elderly, or the "voices often muted" (183). Therefore, asking for an equal involvement of the elderly in policy and decision making in a society where respect for the elderly is waning.

The book's strength lies in its detailed descriptions on how togetherness is expressed between the old and the young through the use of technology, intersecting and bridging gaps between tradition and modernity, and fostering nuanced ways of building communications and caregiving. Charlotte Hawkins' photographs of the local life and people add life to the text. The ethnographic thickness of this volume makes it accessible to non-academic readers, steering clear from theoretical jargon. The work's co-operative morality, supported by digital technologies, challenges rigidized colonial capitalistic injustices and inequalities, offering solutions to issues related to aging in Uganda. As such, this work is a thought-provoking contribution to the field of social policy, social cultural, and medical anthropology.

References

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