

BOOK REVIEW

New Approaches to the Prison in African History

L’Afrique en prisons: Sociétés, Espaces, Temps.

Edited by Frédéric Le Marcis and Marie Morelle. Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2022.
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A voyage or ‘une rencontre’ (an encounter) between Francophone and Anglophone African countries on the topic of imprisonment, *L’Afrique en prisons* succeeds in its goal to fill in a significant gap in the scholarship of prisons in Africa. Rather than focusing on the history, sociology, or anthropology of prisons in Africa, which have grown enormously, this volume offers to ‘ethnographize the prison’ within and beyond its walls. Using sources including interviews, observations, prison and court records, and archives, the book challenges studies that provide ‘a univocal discourse’ about prisons in Africa and their ‘dysfunctions’ (14). From the beginning, Marie Morelle and Frédéric Le Marcis, the book’s editors, suggest they are less concerned about strictly addressing prisons in Africa. Instead, they are seeking to understand ‘les expériences carcérales et punitives dans leur pluralité and dans leurs dynamiques, entre histoires singulières et logiques mondiales’ (the carceral and punitive experiences in their pluralities and dynamisms, between local histories and global logics) to offer powerful narratives about prisons in Africa. The book explores how criminal, judicial, religious, and cultural norms intertwined with practices of corruption, mediation, negotiation, and violence in various ‘punitive ecosystems and prisons’, producing ‘punitive imaginaries’ as prisoners and defendants bridge the gap between prisons and societies (20).

The book’s contributors offer a nuanced critique of the confinement experience by documenting the lives of prisoners and individuals who engaged with justice systems, while advocating for Africa’s place within the global debates about punishment. Highlighting the polysemy of prisons in Africa, they weave together an excellent analysis of prison experiences and practices connected to politics, policies of development, prison reforms, power relations, and gender construction. Whether it is an analysis of the prison in Africa told from below (146) or a story that highlights ruptures and continuities (279), the authors privilege prisoners and ex-prisoners’ stories and experiences over those of state and prison authorities as well as the reformers and human rights advocates who purport to speak on behalf of prisoners.

The volume is organized into four parts with a total of fifteen chapters. Covering the colonial and postcolonial periods, the chapters span ten countries: South Africa, Senegal, Guinea, Cameroon, Ghana, Burundi, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Tunisia. In Part One, authors Sasha Gear, Muriel Champy, and Frédéric Le Marcis discuss imprisonment, prison operations, power relations, moral values, and moral economies within various detention facilities. Part Two takes a broader view of prison reform in Africa. While Yasmine Bouagga interrogates multiple actors and examines their ambiguous and conflicting discourses on prison reforms in Tunisia, Marie Morelle, Roman Tiquet, and Maud Angliviél analyze how prisoners and defendants experience,

understand, reconceptualize, or envision prison reforms. In Part Three, Mandla Musa Eldrige Risimati, Sirius José Epron, and Kathleen Rawlings place the prison within larger mechanisms and practices of justice, especially in rural and urban settings. They also locate it as an important site to discuss ‘the negotiations in the definition of legal, fair, or legitimate’ (25). Part Four include authors Julia Hornberger, Sabine Panel, Nana Osei Quarshie, and Christine Deslaurier. These authors examine the sociopolitical impact of the prison on African societies — from its impact on ex-prisoners to its deployment as a tool of economic development and social order. In the last chapter of the book, Frédéric Le Marcis and Marie Morelle encourage scholars to continue forging innovative approaches to the study of imprisonment in Africa more broadly. Their call for ‘an ethnography with ethics’, the book’s major achievement, adds to conversations about methodology in the social sciences, especially when it comes to studying topics such as imprisonment.

The book’s strength lies in its multiplicity of actors (including prisoners, ex-prisoners, suspects, administrators, prison officials, human rights advocates, lawyers, judges, and reformers) and how the complexities of their interactions and connections within and outside diverse detention facilities produced a variety of discourses and perspectives on imprisonment in Africa. Focusing on their words, experiences, and practices — whether it was a first-time offender in the back of police car or *gumba-gumba* as prisoners in Johannesburg called it (42), a defendant awaiting trial in a courtroom, an ex-prisoner, a street boy (*bakoroman*), a migrant, a peasant, an excision practitioner, or a penal camp convict, the book’s contributors demonstrate that these individuals injected themselves as actors in the development of discourses, attitudes, and practices about imprisonment in Africa. This agency can be located, for instance, in the ‘illegalisms’ (57) that *bakoroman* in Burkina Faso brought them with in prisons to survive as discussed in Chapter Two, in transactions such as the *couffin* (basket of food), which according to author Yasmine Bouagga, are normalized by prisoners in Tunisia to maintain sociality among themselves, or through mediation or *nouchi* (191), a cultural practice among young people in Abobo, a commune in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, to settle neighborhood disputes, as Sirius José Epron demonstrates in Chapter Nine. Such agency was also expressed through written complaints (137) by penal camp convicts in colonial Senegal to improve their detention conditions and through the use of *muthi* (traditional medicine) (167) in Giyani, a small town in northeastern South Africa, to change or influence courtroom verdicts. Within these tensions, the book’s subjects develop new ‘social imaginaries of justice’ or ‘a sense of justice’ to refute, scrutinize, and redefine discourses on human rights, *karama* (dignity, 109), prison reform and norms, and redemption. Put simply, the subjects redefine existing notions of justice, establishing new and broader notions and representations of punishment based on their shared or individual experience to reinscribe power relations within and outside detention facilities. By placing prisoners in the center of this study, *L’Afrique en prisons* helps to rethink the dynamic changing nature and meanings of imprisonment in Africa.

Some authors suggest that bureaucratic machines, reform programs for ‘a better way to punish’ (94), governmental policies of development, *dette de l’engrais* (fertilizer debt) (245), and social policies (fights against excision and migration) also account for the various practices, spaces, and usages of imprisonment in Africa. Others document the crucial role that local and international public policy and advocacy leaders also played in the development of discourses about imprisonment in Africa as they champion prisoners’ human dignity and freedom, further complicating the narratives of prisons. If the prison in Africa is ‘a social reality’ (20) still deeply hindered by strong colonial legacies, dilapidated architectures, and ambiguous penal policies, the authors argue for the need to reform it, and especially ‘its materiality, violence, and social and political significance’ (210) by placing prisoners and ex-prisoners at the center of the reform.

There is a lot to learn in this wide-ranging and ambitious book that weaves together an analysis of life stories with local histories and global processes. Its fascinating findings call for a reevaluation of prisons in Africa at all levels and from all those involved. Yet, its focus on Anglophone and Francophone Africa with no space given to other parts of the continent, hampers their narratives

of prisons. The book also offers a limited gender analysis with one chapter devoted to women. Despite these shortcomings, it offers a new perspective about imprisonment in Africa. It will be of great interest to scholars from many disciplines and to public policy and advocacy leaders.