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Dossier: Plaidoyer pour les pédagogies régénératrices et réparatrices

Numéro dirigé par Obrillant Damus (Université de Sherbrooke, Université d’État d’Haiti, Université Quisqueya), Chen Qiang (Université de Sanya), Duffé Montalván Aura Luz (Université Rennes 2), Juan Carlos Sánchez-Antonio (ICE-UABJO/México) et Christoph Wulf (Université Libre de Berlin)

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Translating the subtitle of Obrillant Damus’ book *Anthropology of Homebirth* into English is difficult. It refers to various actors in the field of birth, one of which, “matrones”, is polysemic and already a translation from terms in Haitian Creole. Its closest equivalent would be “traditional birth attendant,” a term broadly used in anthropological research because it marks a difference with midwives trained in the Western biomedical tradition. In this book, Damus, a Haitian scholar with expertise on a range of topics pertaining to health, education, and gender, brings to the forefront the voices of mothers and traditional birth attendants, women (*fanm chay*) and men (*fanm chay gason*) working in the field of birth in contemporary Haiti. Damus provides enough contextualization to make the book accessible to readers unfamiliar with Caribbean cultures. Through the accounts of his informants and his comments, Damus contributes to documenting the changes in discourses and practices about birth in the recent history of his country. He outlines the challenges facing women in Haiti and demonstrates how traditional birth practices in fact contribute to the health and well-being of mothers, babies, and their communities, rather than damage them.

The first chapter presents an original and interactive methodology: the “local dialogue workshop” (*l’atelier de dialogue local*) was used to gather data from the traditional birth attendants themselves. Damus conducted four of these for his study and thus accessed valuable information as the participants were able to respond to, complement, or contradict each other. This is particularly relevant because they belong to different religious traditions in Haiti: different groups of Catholics, Protestants, and Vodoo. Individual interviews and qualitative data collection through extensive fieldwork supplemented these collective exchanges of traditional knowledge. The second chapter focuses on the representations of pregnancy care and of the sites of birth, the houses of the mothers. The author shares and analyses several accounts by mothers and by birth-attendants. Citations and proverbs, as well as color photographs taken by Damus, enrich the vivid descriptions, in this and other chapters as well. Chapter 3
focuses on childbirth and post-partum pain and the ways that these are conceptualized and dealt with, very practically, with the use of plants or rituals. Chapter 4 then moves to discuss difficult childbirth, or cases when the expected processes do not go as planned: mambos may then be called in to intervene. Chapter 5 focuses on the immediate post-partum period and rituals of purification and strengthening of the mother and baby. In chapter 6, the author explains how “epistemicidal” practices, those that contribute to annihilating local knowledge, constitute a threat to pregnant and birthing women, to women who assist them in birth, and to the few men who are traditional birth attendants. As in the other chapters, the words of Damus’ informants are broadly relayed to account for their sometimes-fraught relationships with biomedical care providers, on the one hand, and with officials of various religious groups, on the other hand, such as Christian (Protestant) pastors. The limits of the ethics of care of Haitian traditional birth attendants are discussed in Chapter 7 while Chapter 8 addresses the moral dimension of the profession.

A final section (“Ouverture”) opens with statistics about maternal mortality rates and ends with a plea against a blind application of technocratic models of childbirth. Three pages with the references cited in the books follow. The book then ends with an appendix, an 18-page long transcript of a 2012 interview with two traditional birth attendants, in Haitian Creole, without translation. There is a detailed table of contents, but no index and, regrettably, no glossary either, which would have been useful to readers unfamiliar with the many Creole terms such as houngans, sajès, fanm chay, médecins-feuilles, mambo, lwa, and others, of which brief definitions are provided only in the chapters.

This short and engaging book thus presents key aspects of an unprecedented and thoroughly documented ethnography, based on years of research and fieldwork. A meticulous observer and attentive listener of his culture, Damus draws from his proximity to the issues he studies as well as from his personal experience and situation as a Haitian scholar. As the national representative of a UNESCO Chair in education and health, Damus shares his research results in the form of a well-structured contribution, articulated around transversal issues. These relate to the anthropology of birth in several other contexts as well, thus making this book a valuable resource. Damus’ descriptions and discussions move the reader beyond local and politicized issues by highlighting the dynamics at work around birth in rural areas where technocratic models of childbirth are not the dominant ones. His plea for defending and valuing local knowledge traditions (savoir local) also serves as an invitation to a humanist and decolonizing approach in studying birth practices taking place outside of medical and often still colonial settings, in Haiti and elsewhere.

In addition to students and scholars in gender and women’s studies, this work will be of interest to anyone working or advocating in the field of public health and, particularly, maternal and women’s health. More than forty years after Brigitte Jordan’s landmark book Birth in
Four Cultures (1978), anthropologists might regret that Damus does not situate his work in continuity or contrast with other contributors to this field, and that the bibliography remains quite succinct, with fewer than 50 references altogether, including 10 by the prolific author himself. Damus’ mention and analysis of the convergence of medicine, magic, and religion around birth in Haiti might constitute a highlight of this book for scholars of religions. As I am reviewing Anthropologie de l’accouchement à domicile from the perspective of this discipline, I can only hope that Damus will further document and analyze this confluence of discourses in future publications.