

BOOK REVIEW

Manase Kudzai Chiweshe, ed. *Football, Gambling, and Everyday Life in Zimbabwe*. New York: Routledge, 2024. 150 pp. \$153.00. Hardback. ISBN: 9781032578866.

In this work edited by Manase Kudzai Chiweshe, the focus is on football betting in Zimbabwe, a country that, due to a large economic crisis in the 2000s, has around 80% of its population either unemployed or with short-term economic activities (a fact mentioned by several authors in this anthology). Betting encompasses, to many Zimbabweans, a glim hope of achieving significant financial gains. It is, however, not only in the hope of achieving a profit from placing a bet on football matches, but rather on the many aspects involved within gambling, that this work shows its true force and relevance.

In the first chapter, the editor provides an interesting overview of how betting in football has become a relevant economic and social aspect in the country, due to a combination of economic despair, male sociability, the relevance of transnational fandoms (mostly of Premier League clubs from England), and a young population that is heavily connected to the internet, while also focusing on how betting has been a part of Zimbabwean history since its days as a British colony.

In the next chapter, the same writer tries to understand how the youth of Harare turn to betting due to a lack of other economical possibilities. In this chapter, however, Chiweshe adopts a rather moralistic view of his subjects, without engaging in a deeper analysis of the choices taken by his informants. By claiming that “African people have historically been superstitious” (29), the term superstitious is used in ways that would be more fitting of a travel journal from an Anglican priest in the nineteenth century, than a scholar in the twenty-first century. This becomes even more marked due to the author mentioning how some of his informants would turn to religion in order to achieve positive results, and then not offering any sort of analysis of the religious system being articulated by his informants. It is not that the author needs to share the beliefs of his informants but, rather, that he should have tried to interpret them in a more holistic manner.

In the third chapter, Choto turns his analysis to the female experience in a field that is mostly masculine. The majority of the informants mentioned throughout the book are male, as women are mentioned mostly as exceptions to the rule, as betting parlours are widely perceived as masculine activities. By using decolonial feminism, Choto (34–35) situates the women who, in spite of the social limitations within their own society due to their gender, utilize several strategies in order to partake in this sociability that is mostly socially sanctioned for them.

In the fourth chapter, Gamuchirai Karuma focuses on an impoverished, urban area and how unemployment and a desire for status make up the main economic motivations to engage in betting; while maladaptive coping mechanisms are pointed out as a main reason for maintaining the act of betting those subjects engaged with the act of betting. By focusing on the voices of his informants, Karuma manages to demonstrate a correlation between the drive to start betting, and the motivation for staying, even after accruing many losses.

Chirambaguwa, in the fifth chapter, focuses his analyses on the social relations of punters. By focusing on “Concerned Significant Others” or “CSO,” this article brings to the forefront the moral and ethical consequences that betting brings to the social fabric of Chinhoyi. In here, once again, the economic maladies of Zimbabwe form the background which constrains both the gamblers and their social relations. By focusing on the circumstances, often tragic, of family members and friends, the author wishes to inform governmental authorities and the civil society of an often-unseen consequence of gambling addiction.


Also authored by Chirambaguwa, Chapter Six focuses on trying to place betting as a “fourth state” alongside a male holy trinity of football, beer, and the pub as places in which masculinity and leisure coexist. Throughout the article, the author doesn’t seem to reach a satisfying conclusion, something he himself notes by claiming the chapter would need “for more precise focus” (109). In addition to this, many of his sources do not seem to be relevant in academic terms.

The following chapter, also authored by Chiwese, leaves the urban environment to what he describes as “peri-urban.” As with the article on female participants and the one on “CSO,” Chiwese tacitly admits that some aspects of betting are not addressed as much as others, and aims to correct this distortion. The main conclusion is that the internet penetration in those rural communities serves as a catalyst for betting. If in urban environments, the social interaction of betting parlours is also a locus for betting practices, in a rural one they occur mainly online.

In the final chapter, Gerald Dandah examines ideas of adulthood and its expectations, in the background of a youth population that struggles to find employment. By using a Turnerian concept of liminal state (albeit without citing Turner), the author maintains that for the youth of Gweru, betting seems like the only way of achieving financial success and, thus, manhood and its social status. As with other chapters in the book, the author admits that the economy is the main cause of the increased interest in betting and the problems that come with it, while however very often addressing betting as a phenomenon divorced from the local, material conditions.

Overall, this collection of essays deals well, albeit unevenly, with the topic of betting in the context of Zimbabwe, offering an interesting mixture of analytical tools within an ethnographic perspective while combining different types of fieldwork, both in-person and online, and focusing on different groups within different contexts. It also presents a diverse geographic approach within the country, both urban and rural; and within the urban, it presents different cities and contexts, while also focusing on the interconnectedness in all cases with a globalized football world. By providing all those different perspectives, this work

is of interest to scholars of African studies (especially the ones focused on Zimbabwe), football studies, and to those interested in betting as a topic of analysis.

Tiago Duarte Dias 
Lund University, Lund, Sweden
tiago.duarte_dias@soc.lu.se
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