

BOOK REVIEW

Health, Healing and Illness in African History *by Rebekah Lee*

Paperback (also available in other formats), 272 pages
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Missionaries, slavers, colonial administrations, migrations, international organisations and ultimately national governments have affected the shape of health, illness and healing practices of indigenous people and incomers in sub-Saharan Africa.

Rebekah Lee, Senior Lecturer in History at Goldsmiths College, University of London, describes these forces and the development of historical approaches to the great diversity of health and healthcare in this continent. The book is in two parts. Part One is an overview of African health and illness from the pre-colonial past to the present day. It is largely chronological to show the broad patterns. Part Two consists of four case studies: HIV/AIDS; mental illness; malaria and sleeping sickness; occupational lung disease and mining in South Africa.

A key issue for historians writing about medical history in sub-Saharan Africa is establishing a base from limited documentary evidence. Lee explains, for example, how non-medical sources, such as writings by the 14th century Berber traveller Ibn Battuta, provide useful observations. There are extracts included from widely varied historical sources - from Richard Burton's 1860 account of the Lake Regions of Central Africa to the 1994 lyrics of a song about migrants to the mines in South Africa.

Lee describes how historians are exploring less direct tools, such as the retrospective application of colonial and post-colonial accounts on the basis of the resilience of African cultural practices. She stresses the value of work across disciplines, such as anthropology, human geography, linguistics and etymology. A fascinating example is the extrapolation of 2015 Ebola virus transmission chain to provide additional information.

There are some illustrations. The five main maps in the book are not presented such that they link clearly with references in the text; this would have been particularly helpful for early periods.

This is a well written book with an exceptional level of research and extensive references. It does not try to be exhaustive but will be valuable for medical historians who want to explore specific aspects of health and healing in this growing area of study. Researchers in other fields will be able to use it to add health and healing dimensions to their work on, for example, sociology or political history in Africa.

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