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Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape (Eastern African Studies)

David William Cohen, E. S. Atieno Odhiambo

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The authors of this highly original book set out to remove the persistent boundary between the authors and readers of ethnography on one hand and the subjects of ethnography on the other – those who observe and those who are observed.

The authors use stories to reveal Siaya, the Luo-speaking area of Western Kenya down near the Lake but still surprisingly vulnerable to drought. There are the stories of survival by a woman with her carpenter husband in Nairobi, there is the launching of a boat as bride into the Lake and there is the great Boro Christmas disco riot. The book finishes with an Afterword on the burial of the lawyer S. M. Otiono that divided its whole of Kenya.

It is both written about and for the Luo. It brings together Luo ideas and debates about their own past and present with findings, arguments and questions produced about this “other people;” by outside scholars writing in their own disciplines. Among the Luo, what constitutes culture, what is correct behavior, what is history, are questions that are heavily fought over.

This is one of those rare books that makes students and other interested individuals question their own cultural preconceptions and what are the genuine concerns of academic disciplines.

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