

Biruk, Crystal. 2018. *Cooking Data: Culture and Politics in an African Research World*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 296 pp. Pb.: \$26.95. ISBN: 9780822370895.

Book review by

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There is a great need for an anthropological book about data production. The trustworthiness of data has been shaken in all fields, notably in science. Many famous research studies have come under scrutiny (“the replication crisis”), and some reputable journals have been ridiculed for accepting fake scientific papers (the Grievance Studies affair). The book *Cooking Data* looks at the background of data production and survey culture in general. This ‘ethnography of the production of quantitative data’ (p. 3) explores data’s life course, survey culture, and universal anthropological issues of knowledge production.

The author of this book was hired as a fieldwork supervisor in four different research projects in Malawi, in 2005 and 2007-2008. The author conducted a fieldwork study in parallel with the original fieldwork engagement in these survey projects. In a way, it was a “fieldwork study of survey study fieldwork”. Biruk’s ethnographic work was mainly based on two of these four studies: a study of socio-demographic and health conditions in rural Malawi, and another one exploring young people in transition to marriage. The other two projects were about girls’ schooling and religion. This is a multi-sited ‘research on research’ (p. 126) based on participant observation (including fieldwork and relevant conferences, meetings, etc.) and the interviews conducted with fieldworkers, demographers, policymakers, and other relevant actors.

The book consists of five chapters, following the logic of a survey (pre-fieldwork, fieldwork, and post-fieldwork stages). The illustrations included in the book are useful an-

thropological visual tools. In addition to several very interesting, sometimes anecdotal photos of the fieldwork activities, there are segments of the original questionnaires (visual rating scales, diagrams, and vignettes) and para-data (e.g., maps of the selected villages). These are excellent epistemic tools for a proper understanding of the process of data production.

Chapter One sets out to deconstruct the basic concepts of survey culture: survey design, questionnaire, sample, among others. The complicated production of “clean” data is depicted through interesting stories from the field, for example, the contextual negotiation of the household as a statistical unit, sometimes overly rigidly defined in survey guidelines. This chapter shows how demographers merely want to streamline the messy field process and prevent any improvisation. Even if there is a modification to the original survey, the “contextualisation” is done in a simplified and biased manner (‘add culture and stir’, p. 51).

Chapter Two focuses on the category of ‘knowledge workers’ (p. 68). In Africa, there is a new category of young people, ‘living project to project’ (p. 67), who benefit from the global public health interest in AIDS and other health issues. In this book, their ambiguous status and critical role in data making and knowledge production are highlighted: ‘Fieldworkers are trained to transform villages into “the field”, snippets of conversation into data, and rural dwellers into interviewees’ (p. 74). There are several lines of division between actors in data production, the main one being between the local researchers and international researchers, but also there is a divide between the fieldworkers and respondents. Many elements of sociological analysis are included in this section (social mobility, social class analysis, social determinants of fieldwork rules of conduct).

Chapter Three is a micro-case study of soap as the model gift in survey culture. The title of the chapter, *Clean Data, Messy Gifts*, epitomises the ethical divisions, different expectations and presumed entitlements by interviewees and demographers.

Chapter Four deals with the process of *Materializing Clean Data in the Field*, as the title suggests. The chapter presents an anthropological explanation of survey culture “artefacts”: the material side of the questionnaire (handwriting, readability, the content), the script, the tools for visual presentation (beans were used as a prop to visualise the 10-point scale), and bodily aspects of interviewing.

Chapter Five deals with a ‘policy-research nexus’, which is described as a ‘social artifact, reflective of the social positions, interests, and economic constraints of those who craft it in social relations’ (p. 196). The case of the HIV epidemic is used to show the construc-

tion of evidence. Some data are not accepted as evidence even if they meet the standards of data production (for example, the link between men-who-have-sex-with-men and HIV transmission). In contrast, some evidence is accepted in public policy, even though it is based on unreliable, or even non-existent data (the claimed links between HIV transmission and cultural practice).

This book provides a valuable contribution to different fields of anthropology. Anthropologists of knowledge and science might be interested in the revealed ambivalences of survey culture: work ethic, rituals (soap as a gift for respondents), taboos and myths about data (raw data vs cooked data). Another topic is “scientific colonialism”, namely, the asymmetrical power relations between “imperial knowledge” and “colonial knowledge”. Scholars of anthropological theory and methodology should focus on the epistemic divide between the ‘culture of demography’ (p. 56) and the culture of anthropology. For example, demographers, data creation is a taboo and anthropologists are ‘number averse’ (p. 20). Also, the book provides great methodological insights into the process of “fieldwork within fieldwork”, especially the elements of autoethnography (for example, the conflict of dual identity as an anthropologist and fieldwork supervisor). Anthropologists of health and medicine will certainly find some relevant material on the construction of HIV transmission discourse, and the interplay between local and global health policies. Anthropologists of public policy, applied anthropology and development should read about the global and local actors involved in social interventions.

A few critical remarks should be made about a noticeable lack of self-reflection. Namely, the book sets out to show how quantitative data are cooked, and Biruk admits that qualitative data are also cooked (p. 180), but with no further explanation. Anthropology, as a science predominantly relying on qualitative methods, should be criticised with the same rigour. Another problematic aspect of the book is the chosen conceptual framework. The post-colonial paradigm, which was used as the main theoretical framework, seems to be inadequate to explain the role of local interests in constructing the dominant discourse on HIV transmission. The explanation focuses mainly on the local homophobia and global health policy agenda, but the process seems to be far more complex than that. Notwithstanding these minor shortcomings, the book presents a well-written study of knowledge production in contemporary global Strathernian “audit cultures”.