

## Book reviews

**Monique and the Mango Rains: Two Years with a Midwife in Mali.** By Kris Holloway. Pp 208. (Waveland Press, Inc., Long Grove, Illinois, 2007.) US\$17.95, ISBN 1-57766-435-3, paperback. doi: 10.1017/S0021932008003167.

Understanding a culture can be accomplished, at least in part, without necessarily forming close friendships and this is where this book differs from so many others. Kris Holloway, as a Peace Corps volunteer, with only a brief training to prepare for her two-year stint in Mali, needed all her commitment and resourcefulness to complete her assignment but central to that was her friendship with Monique Dembele, a young village midwife only three years her senior. The bond between the two women enabled each to support the other through difficult times, such as when a severe bout of giardiasis struck the author or when Monique's marital problems threatened to overwhelm her.

The introduction deals concisely with the author's background and describes a little of the geography, climate, religions, languages, culture and economy of Mali. This sets the scene for what is to follow and gives it a context, important for many from the developed world. Each chapter contains different aspects of village life, from the relationships between 'joking cousins' to the rhythmic dances associated with *fétiche* ceremonies or problems with husbands wanting only sons or threatening to take another wife.

From the beginning of the first chapter, we are thrust into the midst of a vividly described experience. A 17-year-old girl is crouched on an immense concrete delivery table, struggling to produce her first child in the makeshift birthing house, illuminated by a single lantern and in the oven-like heat generated by the corrugated iron roof. Monique is calmly in control, her only equipment being a medical kit in a tin box, a plastic tub for the afterbirth and a frayed birth ledger. This, we soon understand, is childbirth in rural Mali in the twenty-first century.

Everyday life in a sub-Saharan village is brought alive as the narrative unfolds and we get to know Monique's extended family as well as others in the community. The daily workload of the women is intense: pounding millet for hours at a time; bringing up an average of seven children, some of whom will succumb to disease before they reach their fifth birthday; back-breaking work in the fields and the continuous struggle to survive. Add to this the very high maternal mortality rate, extreme poverty and lack of modern contraception, and we begin to have some idea of what life for women in this part of sub-Saharan Africa is really like. This is a truly personal account which also describes the joys, pleasures and sense of humour which is the bond of common humanity. The fact that such feelings are shared by people with vastly different backgrounds gives us an insight as to how cross-cultural understanding can develop.

One important aspect of the book is the way in which positive changes in the lives of the village inhabitants are achieved. A health project to teach the women how to

make rehydration salts to qualify for a supply of free birth control pills is a major success. However, improvements to the design of the well and the rebuilding and refurbishing of the birthing house, which have all the hallmarks of a Peace Corps volunteer's dream, are far less straightforward. In spite of negotiated village support and leadership, adequate funding, local workers and resources and the realizable result of improving women's and children's lives, the project almost founders because of petty quarrels and misunderstandings. There are lessons to be learnt here.

*Monique and the Mango Rains* is a joy to read. It is beautifully and sensitively written, free from cumbersome academic language and unpretentious in style. There are moments when unpretentiousness verges on naivety, but the openness and honesty of this account are refreshing, giving the reader a real sense of connection with the Malian villagers and their lives. All students of anthropology, international health and development studies should read this book, and so should everyone else!

LESLEY HAMPSHIRE

*Freelance Environmental Consultant*

KATE HAMPSHIRE

*Department of Anthropology,  
Durham University*