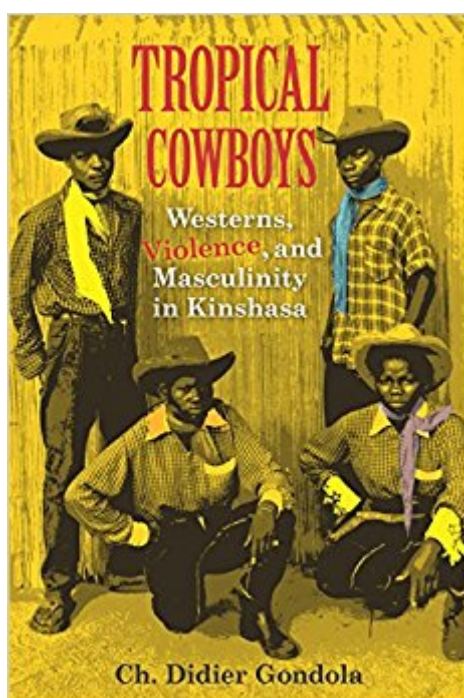


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Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence, And Masculinity In Kinshasa (African Expressive Cultures)



Synopsis

During the 1950s and 60s in the Congo city of Kinshasa, there emerged young urban male gangs known as "Bills" or "Yankees." Modeling themselves on the images of the iconic American cowboy from Hollywood film, the "Bills" sought to negotiate lives lived under oppressive economic, social, and political conditions. They developed their own style, subculture, and slang and as Ch. Didier Gondola shows, engaged in a quest for manhood through bodybuilding, marijuana, violent sexual behavior, and other transgressive acts. Gondola argues that this street culture became a backdrop for Congo-Zaire's emergence as an independent nation and continues to exert powerful influence on the country's urban youth culture today.

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Customer Reviews

"Aligns social banditry with popular cultural formations and subcultures. This has been a longstanding feature of Didier Gondola's scholarship that is of great interest." —Peter J. Bloom, University of California, Santa Barbara
"An innovative and original study that sheds light on masculinity, youth culture, performative violence, and the circuit of global imagery in the townships of Kinshasa." —Stephan F. Miescher, author of *Making Men in Ghana and Modernization as Spectacle in Africa*

Ch. Didier Gondola is Chair of the History Department and Professor of African History at Indiana

University-Purdue University, Indianapolis. He is editor (with Peter J. Bloom and Charles Tshimanga) of *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France* (IUP).

Who could have imagined that during the mid-twentieth century, Buffalo Bill and other cowboy heroes featured in American Wild West films would inspire a culture of resistance and masculine prowess among adolescents in the heart of Africa? Most of these Kinshasan youths were male. However, some females also influenced and came under the influence of urban gangs such as the *“Bills”* and the *“Yankees”* during Congo’s (former Zaire) tumultuous struggle for independence. In this fascinating account, accomplished African historian Didier Gondola brings to light this lesser known story of youth culture and the construction of masculinity during Congo’s march toward decolonization. Here Gondola argues that the polyamorous relationship among violence, masculinity, conquest and sovereignty is the leitmotif binding together the macro and microhistories that chronicle Congo’s treacherous past with colonial subjugation and its determination to achieve independence. While readers will see the forces of globalization at work in the aesthetic, social and political performances of Kinshasan youth gangs under the seductive powers of American media/popular culture, they will also perceive glimpses of Chinua Achebe’s Okonkwo and other African literary tragic heroes in those same urban characters. Like Okonkwo, positioned between two alien worlds, distanced from the social and economic capital that makes conforming to colonial politics of respectability worthwhile, Gondola brilliantly demonstrates how their politics of reputation conferred power and authority within their particular theaters of operation. It dominated then and Gondola contends remains the backdrop for reigning understandings and performances of masculinity in current day Kinshasa. Cogent and detailed through elegant and evocative prose, this volume is a must-read for anyone interested in masculinity and gender studies, youth studies, globalization, media studies, violence studies and African history during the colonial and independence eras. Dianne M. Stewart

If you are interested in the emerging field of masculinity studies in Africa, then this is a must-read book. The study looks at how the figure of Buffalo Bill (America’s most vaunted cowboy) shaped the way large segments of youths in Kinshasa (the capital of the Belgian Congo) forged new standards of masculinity and manliness in the face of one of the most racialized contexts in colonial Africa. For Belgian colonial authorities Congolese men were no more than

“big kids.” They also, on occasion, referred to them as “macaques” (a type of monkey). Then appeared Congolese tropical cowboys with names such as John Wayne, Pecos, Burlan, Godzilla, Samson, and the likes. They created a dominant type of masculinity (hegemonic masculinity) that flew in the face of colonial racism and infantilization of Congolese men. They basically rewrote the script of masculinity in Kinshasa with their cowboy outfit, slang, drug consumption, sexual violence, and subversion of other colonial norms. Yet, this well-written study is not just the story of the tropicalized West in Kinshasa, nor is it only about the reception of the Hollywoodized western movies in Kinshasa. In fact, it shows how hybrid culture come about, how young people appropriate and rearrange any culture they can lay their hands on to create baffling new, hybrid cultures. This book, to my knowledge, is one of the first monographs to tackle this aspect of youth power in Africa. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it and highly recommend it.

First ever study that traces youth violence in urban Africa to the American Farwest, as viewed through Hollywood lenses. How American cowboys taught young disenfranchised African how to be good at being men is at the heart of this fascinating book. This is a great addition to Masculinities Studies and Popular Cultures.

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