

Florence Bernault. *Colonial Transactions: Imaginaries, Bodies and Histories in Gabon*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019. ix + 332 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$28.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781478001232.

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Book review

The civilizing mission was predicated on the idea that “Africa has no history.” This view became predominant during the Enlightenment and culminated in the nineteenth century with Victor Hugo’s memorable address “Discours sur l’Afrique,” delivered in Paris on May 18, 1879. In the flamboyant tone typical of the author of *La légende des siècles*, Hugo articulated to an audience consisting of members of “La Société des Amis des Noirs” the prevailing belief that European countries were morally obligated to colonize Africa. Hugo’s discourse, like Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden” two decades later, captured the essence of European assumption that superior races had the duty to contribute scientific, technical, and moral progress to inferior races steeped in ignorance, superstition, and barbarity.

Using Gabon as a research field, Florence Bernault argues that colonialism, although founded on social Darwinism, did not operate in that manner. As a system involving human groups with particular histories, the European venture in Africa was not a one-dimensional and radically transformative enterprise. Instead, it generated new strategies of negotiating transactions and agencies, creating hidden dynamics out of which emerged an intersectional space of cultural dialogism. Both innovative and refreshing, this argument forms the backbone of *Colonial Transactions: Imaginaries, Bodies and Histories in Gabon*.

Building on a bulk of written documents and oral testimonies collected in Gabon, South Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, and France between 1998 and 2012, Bernault shows how the colonial encounter, despite the racial divides, combined different imaginaries, weaving them into a hybridized cultural fabric. This process required a creative reconfiguration of old spiritual beliefs along with the subsequent readjustment of local agentive symbols, protocols, and objects. This redesigning of traditional practices is an essential tenet in understanding the structuring components of the country’s mental and spiritual landscape.

Bernault focuses on the mechanisms of political power for substantiation of her analysis. She persuasively contends that the concept of *puissance* in Gabon is invested with “physical and mystical dimension... saturating the landscape with political, economic, and social agendas” which, in turn, inform the country’s “powerscapes.” The exploration of these “powerscapes” provides a glimpse into the Gabonese phenomenological world, which is replete with supernatural beings such as the Fang *evu*, iPunu *kundu*, and oMyènè *inyemba*. These forces operate from the invisible realm and constitute the source of power, hence the widely accepted belief that every “Big Man” harbors an indomitable entity fed with human blood and empowered by “ritual crimes” recurrent in the country.

The colonial system gave rise to a three-movement pattern: absorption of new elements, transformation/transgression, and creative adaptation. This mechanism is exemplified in the

Ngounié region, where the water genie Murhumi mutated from a potent sacred entity into a mongrelized object deprived of any intrinsic power. Hijacked by modern exigencies, Murhumi lost her central function to crystallize “the destructive and lethal aura of the predatory capitalist system” as well as “the crisis of symbolic uncertainty” emblematic of the country’s existential malaise since the 1960s.

A well-documented scholarly work enriched with an elegant style, *Colonial Transactions* elicits a number of observations: first, if the notion of agency implies a freely asserted identity, how does it fit in with that segment of the population that strongly resists the magical practices associated with political tyranny? The second observation concerns the language. Rather than relying on a vocabulary derived from the colonialists’ repertoire (witchcraft, charms, sorcery, etc.), the author could have carried out a comprehensive lexical study allowing for perception from within. A more substantial analysis of native terminologies could have been instrumental in overhauling the colonial discourse while rearticulating the concepts by which the populations define their own mystical agency. Finally, it is worth remembering that Gabon, like many African countries, is a nation still in the making, where the sense of nationality remains ambiguous, as individual identities are rooted in ethnic values. The Fang are representative of this ambiguity. An influential ethnicity in Central Africa, the Fang experience of agency is intertwined with the mythologies and imaginaries of the epic tale the *Mvet*, a literary trope about the *puissance* of *evu* that is inexplicably overlooked in *Colonial Transactions*.

Still, with this new book, Florence Bernault makes an invaluable contribution to African cultural anthropology by proposing an innovative approach to witchcraft that transcends the nativist paradigm and explores the intersecting third space of mutual influences (colonized/colonizers) from which arose the creolized spiritual landscape of postcolonial Gabon.

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