

Book Review: Colonial Transactions: Imaginaries, Bodies, and Histories in Gabon by Florence Bernault

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Colonial African history is inextricably intertwined with power—who has it, who loses it, and how it is wielded. Equally important is the study of change over time. Historians have spent decades analyzing the ways in which both metropole and colony were shaped by their imperial experiences. The simplified version of this story tends to focus on the introduction of “modern” ideas by Europeans, which were then adopted and adapted by Africans for their own purposes. Florence Bernault’s *Colonial Transactions: Imaginaries, Bodies, and Histories in Gabon* seeks to expand our understanding of both power and change by using unusual subjects to broaden the definition of control. She examines what she terms conversant and congruent imaginaries to explore witchcraft, currency, and cannibalism in order to “retrieve” African history. Rather than place ideas such as fetishistic healing as solely under the purview of Africans, or the introduction of currency as a French invention, she argues that each of these topics have a pre-existing history, i.e. they were imagined, in both France and Africa before, during, and after the colonial experience. The transmission and alteration of these imaginaries constitute what Bernault terms colonial transactions, which affected power and spirituality in both Gabon and France.

Bernault examines four imaginaries—spirits, carnal fetishism, cannibalism, and fantasies of kinship in order to understand how they influenced Gabonese understandings of *puissance* (power). Each of these ideas worked in multiple directions throughout the period—they were used by the French to assure themselves that their civilizing mission was worthwhile, and by the Gabonese to create agency and gain *puissance*. The book is divided thematically, and each section focuses on the conversant and congruent imaginaries found within each topic. Bernault is especially interested the body, in part because it provides a particularly striking example of how

these imaginaries worked on the ground. Pre-colonial Gabon believed in the power of the body. Frequently corpses were used to create relics and charms as the temporal body retained power even after death, particularly for those who claimed kinship ties. When the French conquered Gabon they had centuries of mythic tales of African cannibalism already engrained in their psyche, which meant that they viewed these funerary rites as a type of carnal fetishism. In order to stamp out this preconceived cannibalism, they passed multiple regulations which forced African mourners to alter their death ceremonies. Bernault argues that the Gabonese had an imaginary of the body—one in which each person had a temporal body and a powerful spirit which could be harnessed through witchcraft. The French had two imaginaries—one in which Africans were cannibals and one that saw bodies as largely biological, rather than spiritual. In order to achieve the civilizing mission, the French attempted to force the colonial population to also see the body as scientific rather than spiritual. They forbade African autopsies which meant that the creation of relics also declined because the *nganga*, or expert, did not have the materials necessary to make them. At the same time they also frequently exhumed bodies in order to perform their own autopsies, which became a type of transaction through which the French could ‘steal’ *puissance* from the Gabonese population.

The process of ‘stealing’ *puissance* fed into another imaginary—eating *puissance*. The French believed that Africans were literal cannibals, which is one reason why they fought so hard to control corpses and funerary rites. Local populations did in fact use metaphors related to cooking for the preparation of bodily materials for relics and witchcraft, but under French rule these metaphors changed in dangerous ways. In modern Gabon politicians and local power brokers frequently use metaphors regarding eating power, which have led to ritualistic murders

and the stealing of body parts for symbolic consumption. In turn this ‘feeding’ leads to an increase in *puissance* for those politicians.

Throughout her work Bernault seeks to trace these imaginaries through pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence Gabon, while also hinting at the ways in which these ideas also transformed France. *Colonial Transactions* is largely successful as an examination of these imaginaries, although Bernault’s insistence on examining each of her topics through the lens of transactions can be, at times, too ambitious given the relative brevity of her monograph. However, her ability to trace these imaginaries throughout centuries of thought and praxis in both France and Gabon make this book a valuable addition to the historiography of west Africa.

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