

Colonial Transactions: Imaginaries, Bodies, and Histories in Gabon

Florence Bernault

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A recognized and prolific historian of Gabon and Central Africa, Florence Bernault has perhaps published her greatest study to date, *Colonial Transactions: Imaginaries, Bodies, and Histories in Gabon*. Currently, a Professor of African History at Sciences Po in Paris after spending several years of her illustrious career in the United States at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Bernault has already written extensively on Gabon but *Colonial Transactions* is her only work dedicated solely to this small, but fascinating Central African nation, the stage she has chosen for exploring imaginaries about witchery and fetishism.

Those who specialize in African Studies take away two very essential messages from Bernault's work, two points that will potentially reshape our work in the future. First, Bernault emphasizes that scholars "tend to reflect on the historicity of modern witchcraft by reaching out to precolonial patterns and beliefs" in order to compare them with contemporary ones. However, "by jumping over the colonial moment," Bernault states, we "obscure how colonialism restructured the field of practical and mystical agency" (ix). Her six main chapters attempt to bring us back to that "colonial moment" to see what scholars and their existing studies may have missed in their analyses of shrines, charms, carnal fetishism, the value of people, cannibalism, and eating. Secondly, Bernault brilliantly heeds the call for Afrocentric inquiry without completely ruling out the use of other relevant approaches. Bernault urges us to look "beyond the racial paradigm" (5) in our understanding of notions involving power, transactions, religion, and kinship. She reminds us that prior to the divisive colonial period, Africans and Europeans "worked with compatible and conversant imaginaries, drives, and ideas" (202). The acknowledgement of this fact along with the awareness of the legacies of colonialism lead to a fuller understanding of modern Africa and the "new forms of agency, governance, and power that thrive there" (203).

In Chapter One, "A Siren, an Empty Shrine, and a Photograph," the author presents research from her fieldwork in the Ngounié Province and more specifically on the water genie, Marhumi, and her associated tales of origin. It is in relation to Marhumi that Bernault first introduces the concept of *puissance*, or rather "beliefs in the capacity of people to harm and heal, to 'see' spirits and ancestors and use their divine forces, to produce kin and allies, and to master the

production of material goods” (29). Examples and discussions of *puissance* are peppered throughout the entire book.

Chapter Two, “The Double Life of Charms,” focuses on the history of physical artifacts in Gabon that are used for divination, therapy and cursing (69). During colonial times, missionaries often destroyed indigenous charms, replacing them with religious medals and rosaries among other objects revered in Christianity but, as Bernault rightfully points out, this “transaction” only reinforced for the Gabonese, the belief that sacred objects could mediate power (85).

In Chapter Three, “Carnal Fetishism,” the author next explores ritual crimes, happenings that have recently brought more and more negative international attention to Gabon as told through media sources and also contemporary literature. These crimes involve the harvesting of body parts so that they may be crafted into charms to be sold to wealthy patrons wishing to secure power. Bernault maintains that such body trafficking has been the result of increased “judicial, moral, and spiritual engagements between Africans and Europeans over the location of power” (96). The chapter’s focus then shifts to looking at realities that may have impacted the development of ritual crimes in the country. Regular practices of Europeans living in the colonies—taxidermy and the confiscation of indigenous charms, along with rumors that missionaries were stealing bodies from cemeteries—were all equated with “witches greedy for human substances” (115), with such behaviors becoming linked with the acquisition of wealth and power.

Chapter Four, “The Value of People,” continues the analysis of ritual crimes and modern witchcraft in Gabon. Bernault reasserts that such occurrences are “a legacy of the slave trade and colonialism” (118), pointing out that in Gabon it was actually the French who had created “countless ways of equating people with cash” (119), such as the introduction of compensation paid to people who suffer personal injury because of accidents or wrongdoing. What stands out in this chapter in particular, is Bernault’s attention to women in Gabonese society, especially during the colonial period. She outlines the construction of the “powerful woman” who was able to manipulate and maneuver resources for the benefit of her clan (124), but also describes parents who commonly sold female kin to missionaries who had initiated such transactions with the intention of “marrying” the girls as brides of Christ (129) in order to free them from becoming a commodity with a bride price. But to the Gabonese, European transactions looked the same as theirs; both involved the selling off of young women. Missionaries once again had encouraged the very same practices that they expected locals to eradicate. This chapter also contains intriguing discussions on modern notions of money. Through the assignment of “excess value and fetish-like qualities” to currency,

the colonizer made it “impossible for Africans to dream of wealth outside the realm of white people” (137).

Chapter Five, “Cannibal Mirrors,” concentrates on white colonial fantasies, proving that constructions of cannibalism were “crucial to white imaginaries of domination” (138). Not so unexpectedly, these constructions greatly impacted the Fang ethnic group, in particular, who make up approximately 40% of Gabon’s population.

Finally, Chapter Six, “Eating,” revisits and develops more in depth some of the same concepts already presented in the book; Bernault exposes the realm of “eating-as-power” and the status that women held through their abilities to cook, that is, both “processing food in earthen pots and cooking a child in the womb” (170-171). There is also an excellent section in this chapter on the Bwiti religion and how Christianity has impacted it.

Bernault unlocks the meaning of everyday occurrences and expressions in Gabon while still tackling even more profound happenings in the country, which have been shrouded in mystery or have even gone unperceived in contemporary society. She has done this through meticulous research and solid archival work spanning several years and bringing her, not only to urban centers and small towns, but also to some of the more remote areas of Gabon. Her book also contains original photographs and other images that can be found in no other publication. While Bernault’s contribution to African history is most obvious here, the reach of her work should not be underestimated as it is also potentially useful to scholars and students in many disciplines including anthropology, sociology, religious studies, women’s and gender studies and literature. Literary scholars, for example, encounter the very notions and concepts that Bernault explores in their readings of contemporary Gabonese writing and her book thus becomes an essential tool in the uncovering of hidden symbolism present in modern texts.

Bernault’s *Colonial Transactions* is perhaps the first work that has rivaled Peter Geschiere’s seminal writings on witchcraft in Central Africa published in the mid-1990s. Furthermore, while there is an impressive amount of research on Gabon available in French, sources in English are quite scarce and thus, Bernault’s book fills a void in many ways, providing an English-speaking audience with one among the very few in-depth studies out there on a nation and its people that certainly merit more attention.