

11-1-1999

The Body In Question: Review Of "The Anatomy Of Power: European Constructions Of The African Body" By A. Butchart

Timothy Burke

Swarthmore College, tburke1@swarthmore.edu

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Timothy Burke. (1999). "The Body In Question: Review Of "The Anatomy Of Power: European Constructions Of The African Body" By A. Butchart". *Journal Of African History*. Volume 40, Issue 3. 493-494.
<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/18>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

THE BODY IN QUESTION

The Anatomy of Power: European Constructions of the African Body. By ALEXANDER BUTCHART. London and New York: Zed Books, 1998. Pp. xiv + 220. £42.50/\$62.50 (ISBN 1-85649-539-6); £14.95/\$22.50, paperback (ISBN 1-85649-540-x).

The representation and institutional control of the bodies of Africans was a major theme in the encounter between Western European and African societies, a fact which Africanist scholars have been slow to recognize and even slower to study. In *The Anatomy of Power: European Constructions of the African Body*, Alexander Butchart tackles this rich vein of evidence and experience. His analysis is frequently interesting and useful, and at times, markedly original. However, this book will ultimately and unfortunately serve as Exhibit A for overwrought Africanists who fear the spread of what they often misleadingly characterize as 'postmodernism'. In this case, their fears are warranted. I have seldom read a work more handcuffed by needless theoretical rigidity, or more afraid to explore the complexities of its own subject matter.

Butchart's study pursues a rigorously Foucauldian approach to the history of the European construction of 'the African body'. This strategy has the basic peculiarity that it is a relentlessly systematic application of a profoundly anti-systematic thinker. However, the scope of the book also exposes fundamental problems with its evidentiary foundation. For example, Butchart unwisely chooses to extend the authority of his analysis to cover all European constructions of African bodies, even though he acknowledges that most of the texts that he uses to reconstruct that discursive field are from or about South Africa. His account of the transition from the Renaissance's 'African body' to what he calls the taxonomic body, numerous early modern narratives of Portuguese, Dutch and French travellers are given short shrift in comparison to those written in English – an omission repeated with later eras and later colonizers.

Similarly, Butchart's sweeping characterizations of the secondary literature are based on a relatively limited range of works. Megan Vaughn's work on illness is referred to several times (and strangely chided for its insufficiently Foucauldian perspective), but relevant works by scholars like Luise White and Nancy Rose Hunt – published contemporaneously with some of the other works cited – go unmentioned. Therefore, when Butchart offers his strongly utilitarian and reductionist reading of the available scholarship, a reading that indiscriminately lumps the work of scholars like Maynard Swanson and Randall Packard into a common discursive domain with colonial authorities, it comes off all the weaker. With both primary and secondary works, the omissions are notable only because Butchart insists on a perspective of unlimited scope and authority. Less magisterial arguments would demand less exhaustively comprehensive command of the relevant material.

There are more critical issues at stake here. The attribution of all representations of African bodies to a single and unitary discursive mode of power completely flattens out contradictory and divergent representations of African bodies within the colonial archive, as well as the complex and uneven relationship between those representations and institutional practice in the colonial era. It is hard to see why Butchart dwells in detail on the precise content of particular passages to be found within the archive: he already knows what he will find there before he begins to read.

The book also avoids a serious engagement with what Foucault called 'governmentality'. Foucault recognized that different discourses exercised different and often quite particular forms and degrees of institutionalized authority.

For all that Butchart terms his book an anatomy, he rendering of various constructions of 'the African body' ultimately tends to reduce all such constructions to an undifferentiated mass whose forms of authority were more or less boundless and monolithic. He traces missionary discourses, medical discourses, managerial discourses, discourses of urban planners, and yet, because he so strongly rejects the social historians' account of the institutions that generated these discourses, he has no real way to appreciate or explain the different purposes that each might have served, their correspondence with particular and constrained modes of power in African colonial societies.

The most frustrating missed opportunity is the failure to explore one of the most profound absences in Foucault's own work, namely what happens when two disparate epistemic formations meet and conflict contemporaneously (as opposed to one episteme succeeding the other over a period of centuries). Despite Ann Laura Stoler's recent attempt to explore the implications of colonialism for Foucauldian ideas about power,¹ a great deal remains to be said on this subject. This book does nothing to fill that gap: in fact, it characterizes such an investigation as theoretically retrograde. Perhaps the most banal and superficial scholarly critique in Africanist circles is to complain that a work lacks 'African voices', so I do not wish to be misunderstood here. The problem in this instance is not so simple. The irony is that because Butchart lumps together virtually all scholarly work and colonial texts together within a common discursive domain that names 'the African body' as the subject of a particular form of power, his own categorical and deliberate failure to consider the different and diverse ways in which African societies made bodies the subject of various indigenous regimes of power and truth makes him subject to the force of his own stringent critique of discourses about 'the African body'. Unfortunately, Butchart acknowledges this very point in his conclusion, and describes his book as a 'tactic of provocation' which he admits is no more outside 'the loop of power' than anything it comments upon. This makes the book less a provocation that opens new lines of inquiry than an ouroboros, a snake that swallows itself and leaves little trace of its existence.

Swarthmore College

TIMOTHY BURKE

PROBLEMATIZING ETHNICITY

Die Konstruktion von Ethnizität: Eine politische Geschichte Nord-West Ghanas, 1870–1900 [*The Construction of Ethnicity. A Political History of Northwestern Ghana, 1870–1900*]. By CAROLA LENTZ. (Studien zur Kulturkunde, 112). Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 1998. Pp. 690. DM 128 (ISBN 3-89645-207-x).

It has by now become a commonplace to regard social identities – from the community through the ethnic group to the nation – as 'produced', 'constructed' or 'imagined'. However, few historians have taken seriously the task to show, in a truly comprehensive manner, how these 'constructions' have actually emerged over time. In her book about the political history of the Dagara in Ghana's Upper West Region, Carola Lentz studies these processes. She does so in a theoretically well-founded way, and at a historical and analytical depth that is breathtaking.

Lentz studies ethnicity as a product not only of administrative, anthropological and missionary intervention, but of local agency as well. While both sides are always present in her analysis, their relative strength over time is already indicated by the

¹ Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, 1995).