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Review Of "Colonial Psychiatry And 'The African Mind'" By J. McCulloch

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[Book Review](#)

Colonial Psychiatry and "The African Mind"

Jock McCulloch. *Colonial Psychiatry and "The African Mind."* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. x + 185 pp. \$54.95.

Colonial psychiatry in Africa, argues Jock McCulloch, occupied a "small and uncomfortable niche" (p. 1). McCulloch's book draws the attention of scholars to the evolution of institutions and discourses concerned with mental health in colonial Africa. In the course of his study, McCulloch convincingly demonstrates that ethnopsychiatry played an important role in the construction of the colonial subject, arguing that this was the "most enduring" contribution of this "modest science" (p. 146).

However, by articulating this important claim, McCulloch also calls attention to some of the limitations of his work. Much of the book offers an account of ethnopsychiatry as a distinct form of medical knowledge and practice in colonial Africa. If we are to understand the ways in which ethnopsychiatry participated in the construction of the colonial subject, then surely we need an account that continually tracks ethnopsychiatry's complex interrelationship with other forms of medical, scientific, and bureaucratic practice in colonial Africa. Though McCulloch often acknowledges ethnopsychiatry's close ties to other disciplines, particularly social anthropology, his treatment of this relationship often seems peculiarly formal, designed to preserve a sense of ethnopsychiatry's exceptionalism. In contrast, I was continually struck by the close affinities between ethnopsychiatry and other colonial institutions, affinities that McCulloch substantially ignores or **[End Page 564]** fails to fully explore. He notes, for example, that J. C. Carothers, a central figure in the development of ethnopsychiatry, proposed "villagization" as well as "home hygiene" programs as policies for dealing with the Mau Mau uprising in colonial Kenya--proposals that exactly reproduced a host of official and missionary projects undertaken over the previous four decades. McCulloch treats this and similar facts as relatively peripheral, when in fact they strike me as utterly central to a full understanding of ethnopsychiatry's history in Africa.

There are a number of smaller but important oversights as well. In particular, the book's account of the history of specific colonial asylums seems rather underdeveloped. McCulloch offers some intriguing and novel readings of Octave Mannoni and Frantz Fanon, but he seems to ignore the equally intriguing if less spectacular Nigerian psychiatrist T. A. Lambo. The overall development of Francophone ethnopsychiatry (as well as Marie-Cecile Ortigues's work *Cedipe Africain* [1966]) goes largely overlooked--something that seems particularly odd in light of McCulloch's sophisticated

treatment of Fanon and Mannoni. The influence of Freudian visions of "the primitive" and of changes in neuropsychiatry is dealt with, but the influence of other changes in psychiatric and psychoanalytic practices in metropolitan societies between 1900 and 1960, particularly in the treatment of subordinate or minority populations within Western nations, is rarely tracked in the text.

McCulloch's book ultimately provides a suggestive overview of its subject matter, but some of the most important and substantive issues at stake will need to be dealt with more fully and satisfyingly in works yet to be published.

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