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### Review Of "A Colonial Lexicon Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, And Mobility In The Congo" By N. R. Hunt

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo by Nancy Rose Hunt

Review by: Timothy Burke

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## BOOK REVIEWS

A COLONIAL LEXICON OF BIRTH RITUAL, MEDICALIZATION, AND MOBILITY IN THE CONGO. By *Nancy Rose Hunt*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999. Pp. xix, 475. \$59.95 cloth, \$20.95 paper.

Big books are big for different reasons. Charles van Onselen's *The Seed Is Mine* is vertically huge, an encyclopedic investigation of a narrow vein of historical experience. Frederick Cooper's *Decolonization and African Society* is horizontally expansive, ranging over the whole of the African continent and covering a huge subject that connects to many separate smaller histories. Joseph Miller's *Way of Death* is both, a thorough examination of a particular place and time that also has general significance. These are large books because their authors felt the subject matter required great depth, exhaustive detail, and sustained analysis.

Nancy Rose Hunt's *A Colonial Lexicon* is in the same weight class, but for very different reasons. This is the hermeneut's "Big Book of Interesting Things," a magic show full of flair and dazzle, big because the author's never runs out of interesting new interpretations to pull out of the top hat, never runs out of imaginative twists and original insights. It ends where it ends not because the author has exhausted the subject matter but because the author has exhausted herself, at least temporarily. The concluding chapter is less an end than an intermission. *A Colonial Lexicon* is a marvelous breath of fresh air in an increasingly stale historiographical room, by turns inventive, provocative, and exasperating.

If I had to summarize the contents of *A Colonial Lexicon*, I could say it is about the intellectual, cultural, and social encounter between missionary medicine and indigenous communities in twentieth-century Equatorial Africa and at the British Baptist mission station at Yakusu in particular. This is about as useful as describing *War and Peace* as "a novel about Russia."

Hunt's study is centrally driven by the desire to analyze the history of "meaning-making" within particular colonial and postcolonial localities within the Congo and at the wider expanse of European and African relations in Central Africa as a whole. Her method, the tracing of a "lexicon," is playful, almost a kind of analytic party game, in which the circulation of meaning around one conceptual domain leaps like the firing of a synapse to another domain and then another. Readers, following Hunt, may end far from where they started, looking backwards, searching for hermeneutical breadcrumbs left along a dark trail into a dense interpretative forest.

Much of the content of the lexicon, given Hunt's central interest in missionaries and medicine, is expected: birth, surgery, death, conversion, domesticity, scripture, hygiene, and fertility. Some of it is likely to surprise many readers, perhaps even those with a prior expertise in this region or in the history of colonial medicine in Africa: airplanes, bicycles, excess, elves, soap, clothing, crocodiles, canned meat.

There are likely to be many objections to Hunt's approach. Some are easy to ignore. The generation of Africanists who rushed to make Africa appear blandly universal may complain that this treatment "exoticizes" its subject, but Hunt can hardly be blamed for failing to produce a history that accords with Western ideas about what is normative or respectable. If these really are the terms and ideas at play in the moral and social discourse around Yakusu, or in the Congo more generally, then it is good intellectual practice to refuse to sanitize that discourse in the name of forsaking the "exotic." More to the point, Hunt is one of the few scholars in recent years to take seriously an argument that is often made only at the level of gesture, that colonial society was produced by the simultaneous, coincidental, or dialogic action of diverse African and European actors, not in the lockstep dance of imposition and resistance. If this is so, then the exoticizing vision of European actors becomes a part of the local discourse of colonial society, not something external to it. The institutional and social worlds that Hunt sketches make themselves exotic *to* themselves at times, perform the work of making their own familiar into something strange and back again without the need for any intervening historian to come along and do that labor for them.

Hunt's book is also generally free of the leaden pieties that now weigh so heavily on Africanist historiography—the by-the-numbers attacks on colonialism, the outsized sense of righteous obligation for the political and social salvation of Africa from the burden of its history through the judicious delivery of committed analytic scholarship. This is not likely to win her friends among the scholars who look first and foremost for such pro forma gestures. This is not to say that the book ignores questions of power, suffering, misrule, and oppression, far from it. It does not, but such issues are not neatly separated out from the circulation of meaning Hunt traces through colonial society. Still, it may be that Hunt sometimes maintains a playful approach when something graver and less diffuse might be required, particularly when the issue of the era of Mobutu's rule arises later in the book, or any time that human suffering is highly visible (as it necessarily so often is in the modern history of the Congo).

The most serious issue raised by the book is whether the lexicon that Hunt describes is "really" there in the history she studies. Is the lexicon an organic product of that history, or is it the consequence of Hunt's own interpretive desires, her own readings, her discovery of what she wants to find in the text of the Congo's twentieth century? The answer to this question is "yes."

*A Colonial Lexicon* is ultimately very persuasive about many, though not all, of its descriptions of discursive, institutional, and experiential circulations of discrete ideas and concepts in the modern history of the Congo. Many historians and ethnographers writing about Africa will think differently about their own areas of speciality after reading Hunt on bicycles or topsy-turvy rituals in mission stations. More important, Hunt does not fall into the trap that has absolutely crippled many other Africanist works about discourse, mistaking representations for lived experience. She is always careful to make the distinction between the two, and, even more important, to follow the intricacies of their relationship.

Yet there is also something of the charge that sticks. Hunt does read the Congo like a text, and her reading does sometimes feel capricious, whimsical, or

determined to conjure out of thin air those practices and ideas that Hunt herself is most personally fascinated by. Hunt is the first to admit this, conceding that her work is structured by conjecture and guesswork, by a willful resolve to escape the logic of linear history. Sustained whimsy and compulsive originality can become intellectual traps in their own right. There are a few moments where it might be desirable for Hunt to cut through her accumulating layers of invention and confront the inescapable fact that if her history is persuasive, it is persuasive because it often supplements rather than displaces the “grand narratives” of colonial and postcolonial society in the Congo, that her move away from linear history and the empiricist temperament is as often performative as it is substantive. At the end of the day, nothing of what Hunt writes would make sense if we were permanently to set aside more stolid and structured narrative histories of missionaries, colonial exploitation, Belgian maladministration, and the destructive abyss of the Mobutu era.

But so what if this critique has some validity? Who cares? Nothing could enhance Africanist history more than a richer and more diverse palette of interpretive and methodological frameworks. Nothing is more needed than historians and anthropologists who are willing to cast off the gloomy superego that hangs over the field like a perpetual fog, to deploy something of their own idiosyncratic imagination as observers and act as individually distinctive commentators upon the historical experience of various African societies. There is an excluded middle between history as playful fiction and history as dour empiricism; in the final analysis, that is where all of us ought to be found. Hunt is somewhere in that middling land, and she shows us a more capacious and unexplored territory than we have been often led to believe. Hunt has claimed her patch of it. It is not where I am personally to be found, and I suspect many other readers will have the same reaction. I am nevertheless grateful that *A Colonial Lexicon* has made visible this new intellectual domain, and look forward to further acquaintance with it.

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**NKRUMAH AND THE CHIEFS: THE POLITICS OF CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA 1951–1960.** *By Richard Rathbone.* Western African Studies. Oxford: James Currey, Athens: Ohio University Press; Accra: F. Reimmer Book Services, 2000. Pp. xii, 176; 8 illustrations. \$44.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

The eminently readable Richard Rathbone is on a roll. The book under consideration here is in many respects a continuation of the issues and themes he explored in his fascinating study *Murder and Politics in Colonial Ghana* (New Haven, 1993). As is the case with that examination of the death under mysterious circumstances of a minor chief in southern Ghana, *Nkrumah and the Chiefs* can be read on a number of levels. At the most basic level, it is a gripping narrative presented with a superb degree of literary fluency and organization. If P. D. James was a