



Christraud M. Geary. *In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885-1960.* London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2003. 128 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-85667-552-2; \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85667-551-5.



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Image Worlds: Central Africa

This book emerged from an exhibition of the same name but is not an exhibition catalogue as such. Focused on Central Africa and Congo, it is a history of the cultural processes of image production and dissemination of photographs through their reproduction in different formats: snapshots, postcards, stereocards, postage stamps, advertisements, posters, calendars, albums, and magazine pages. Aimed at a general readership, it keeps its theoretical underpinnings very much as a substratum while managing to avoid the pitfalls of reductionism and over-dichotomizing the argument. Making little theoretical fuss allows a rich history to emerge through the photographs themselves. Indeed, the images and their “image world” are the core of this history. It is not the content alone which interests Geary, but the dynamic relationship between content, style, dissemination, reproduction and significance. This constitutes the “visual economy”—that flow of images through spheres of consumption in which meanings are made. As one has come to expect from Geary, the book is superbly researched. Throughout she demonstrates a deep understanding of, and respect for, the historicity of the photographs and the multiple contexts that make up the image world in

which Central Africa was, and indeed, still is, entangled.

The book starts with a short discussion of the image world in which the photographs operate—colonial expansion and consolidation, science and anthropology. Specialists may find this frustrating for it largely goes over old ground. However, it sets the scene for the following chapters where the general position is demonstrated through detailed histories of the popular imagery of Central Africa. In many ways this chapter is an excellent example of the kind of work now emerging on colonial cultures of imaging. I refer in this case to the visual tropes that have influenced our ideas of Africa through the interpenetration of colonial and anthropological language, tracked over time and space.

Throughout one has a strong sense of the circulating object and the way in which pictures and publications were used to produce a dynamic and encyclopedic image of the colonial process. This is demonstrated through an examination of the visual narratives of *Le Congo Illustré*, 1892-1895 (bi-monthly published from Brussels) for instance, and in an exploration of the different performances of specific images. Good examples are

R.P. Alex's photograph of a young dancer from Ubangi, which get reproduced in many formats and contexts, or those of Queen Elisabeth of the Belgians, for instance her photograph of the Mangebetu woman at Buta. It too was used in many different ways, including at least two postage stamps, creating different sets of meaning. Such images track the values of colonial expansion, of infrastructure, of cross-cultural relations, which can now be read against the grain to suggest alternative interpretations of the past.

The book interweaves the history of the Congo and the history of photography, using each to illuminate the other and demonstrating their interconnectedness. This is supported by a useful bibliography. Throughout there is a sense of the unfolding of the visual narrative. Although the formats changed over time—from postcards and Keystone stereocards to a greater emphasis on such illustrated magazines as the bi-monthly *L'Illustration Congolaise*, the colonial process continued to be bolstered through the circulation of images, forming a "print community" which reproduced and cohered commonly held values. Such uses of photography are of course well known; however it is extremely instructive to have them unfolded through a detailed and highly informed examination of one region.

The intensity of photographic practices in Congo is exemplified by Krzysztof Pluskota's two chapters on the career and image world of Polish émigré photographer Casimir Zagourski (1883-1944), one of the most notable professional photographers working in inter-war Belgian Congo. Covering a wide range of colonial and cultural subjects interpreted through the styles of both ethnographic romanticism and documentary, Zagourski's photographs present a familiar narrative through the thematic emphasis and physical arrangement of his album series *L'Afrique qui disparaît!* These examples are beautifully reproduced in the book, giving one a real sense of the ways in which the photographs were presented and consumed, exemplified by two Zagourski portraits in a wooden frame decorated with ivory stars and carved panels (p. 71). In some ways the sudden shift of style and scale sits uncomfortably in the book. However, Zagourski's beautifully crafted images were key in shaping ideas of central Africa for some two decades, shown at the 1937 Paris exposition, and Zagourski deserves to be better known.

Nor was this image world created between 1885 and 1960 merely a colonial one. The last chapter, "Africans and Photography," shows how Africans themselves be-

came involved in the photographic encounter and created their own dynamic photographic culture. Geary explores how different kinds of interaction, often linked with the imaging desires of indigenous elites, created the politics and poetics of specific visualized myths which have become iconic of the region—the Aristocratic Tutsi, the Elegant Mangbetu and the Artistic Kuba. (20 percent of Zagourski's total photographic output relates to these groups). At the same time, African photographers emerged during the late colonial period to fulfill the specific photographic desires of local communities, especially in portrait photography. Flowing between private and public domains, such increasingly educated and mobile photographers as Joseph Makula and the Yoruba Mr. Shanu who worked in Boma, come forward first in the discourses of the Congopresse photographers and then, the newly independent post-colonial state, re-shaping "visual economies" of the region.

A major strength of the volume is that it is beautifully produced and again one feels the deeply informed sense of the images that pervades the writing. Great care has been exercised in the reproduction not only of the tonal or color values of the images but also of the material qualities of the photographs in their various formats and presentational forms, complete with scuff marks, blemishes, handwritten additions, and captions. This attention to detail is not merely aesthetic sensibility to the object but an integral part of the evidence and argument. There is no mistake; these images are social objects that generated multiple meanings in multiple contexts of usage. The density of the imaging in places (e.g. the six postcards reproduced on pages 34-35) makes the text secondary; one follows the argument through the pictures. The only thing missing, oddly, is the measurement of the images, which would have been useful.

There is, however, one aspect of Congo visual history which is strangely under-represented. Although the atrocities of King Léopold's Congo are discussed within the contexts of the image worlds, only one photograph is reproduced. Whilst one does not support the gratuitous reproduction of such images, one feels that here the book would have benefited from a few more examples. The images were extremely controversial and there is a need to see them discussed in their contemporary context. They undoubtedly had a role in external perceptions of the Congo and especially, as argued here, in the anti-Leopold campaign. Yet illustrations suddenly become thin on the ground.

That being said, this is an excellently researched and

well-produced book. Although specialists may find parts of it frustrating in its modest interpretative reach, the richness of the data embedded in a careful and fully demonstrated analysis more than compensates for this. *In and Out of Focus* brings to the fore important visual economies and their material deposits that a decade ago were effectively unknown, overlooked, or over-

simplified in an all-embracing concept of “colonial gaze.” It will become a standard reference work on the photography of the Congo and Central African region, for it demonstrates admirably the complexity of the cultures of imaging and imagining, peopled by significant photographers, all of which we have only just begun to understand.

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