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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Annie E. Coombes. *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. vii + 280 pp. \$32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-06890-0; \$57.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-05972-4.

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As institutions and art councils strive to reevaluate the very nature of African studies, moving away from long held Eurocentric conceptualizations, and as Africans and African-Americans alike strive to reevaluate their true heritage and ethnicity in the modern world, one of the most salient issues that can possibly be discussed, and indeed must be addressed, is that of “What steps have led us to this mindset?” How indeed did the very notions that perpetuated the racial mythologies of colonial mind remain intact for so long? And further, what role did museums and academics play in advancing these myths rather than exposing them?

These questions are carefully and painstakingly explored in Annie Coombes’ book, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*. Coombes’ approach is simple and direct. First, she holds that African objects were originally looked at as curios. In late Victorian and Edwardian England private merchants, government institutions, missionary organizations, museums and academic institutions deliberately redefined these objects. They were reevaluated based on their ‘Aesthetic’ qualities as part of the manipulation of the British middle and working classes. These changes were necessary to justify certain behavior that would have necessarily raised ethical questions. Second, she examines the materials that are contemporary with this period, providing a clear indication of what social changes in England occurred and how they affected the various groups with interests in having Africa and Africans appear in a particular light.

Coombes points out in her introduction that:

little attention has been paid to the relation between anthropology’s academic and public image over this pe-

riod [1890-1913]. It is this interface and what I perceive to be a disjuncture between the anthropological theory promulgated in the public domain through museums and that produced for circulation within the aspiring academic community, that primarily concerns me here ... This disjuncture mitigates against using the ethnographic collection as a barometer of the latest developments in anthropological thought. On the contrary, there is no easy correlation between the two. The ethnographic collection or museum instead represents the material intersection and negotiation of state, institutional and professional politics and policy over this period“ (p. 4).

To prove this, Coombes begins with the now familiar history of the Benin “punitive expedition” of 1897. After discussing the socioeconomic reasons for the raid, she turns to early criticism of it, some of which was published soon after the expedition. Coombes then turns to the famed “booty” of the raid—the numerous Benin bronzes and ivories. Initially, attention was showered on the objects; colonial administrators and companies sought to use the material as a living proof of the “savagery” of Benin, and as a justification for their military campaign. At the same time, certain scholars were using the art to prove the ‘degeneration’ of Benin culture. They considered the casting techniques in Benin at the time of the raid as inferior to castings of earlier objects. Certain scholars, such as Ling-Roth, were quick to point out the merits of the Benin castings. In private correspondence, Pitt-Rivers argued for an African origin of the techniques used on the most exquisite pieces. However, by and large, the objects were seen as something in the realm of curios. Moreover, the fineness of the casting and carving was ascribed to European intervention or even Egyptian origin!

Coombes explains how the theory of cultural degeneration, much in fashion at the time, was forced on the Benin material as a means of providing “more evidence” for the case of cultural degeneration. In short, the theory described how most non-western civilizations at some time had a flowering of culture, but were unfortunately in steady decline. Abstraction in design elements was interpreted as an inability to correctly copy the ancient motifs. The Benin material had now been redefined as “art” of a sort, and an example of savagery that only colonialism could help. Most importantly though, the work was defined as “degenerate” and this led to moral and ethical views “validated” by science.

In the following sections of the book, Coombes explains the power of the ‘Spectacles.’ These huge world’s fair-like events depicted the various parts of the empire and presented the material from Africa as “trophy” displays. These spectacles, Coombes points out, were not only racist but also sexist, often depicting the women as mere chattel to their “savage” husbands. Africa was here redefined from the land of ‘savages’ that only military intervention could redeem, to a dark and mysterious continent, full of unusual rituals and strange behavior—an Africa that could of course be helped with the aid of colonial ‘care.’ This change in view was not so much due to new philosophies or enlightenment as much as pecuniary desires to capitalize off the huge interest in all things African that was being generated by the public and manipulated by promoters and private interest groups.

Coombes turns from this vantage point to that of the newly burgeoning museums. In dealing with the Horniman, the Pitt-Rivers and the Mayer museums, Coombes illustrates how the collections of these ethnographic institutions began to pay more and more attention to what had simply been curios and, though not yet “art,” were now examples of the anthropological opinions expressed by the directors: degenerationist, diffusionist, and so on. Now considered as ‘craft,’ the art objects from Africa were again redefined as worthy of attention, this time as a tool for educating people on the ‘evolution’ of cultures.

After a discussion of missionary societies, in some ways the most enlightened organizations at their time, Coombes finally treats the enormous Franco-British exhibition of 1908. Here, the treatment of the ‘Empire’ and the two great agents of civilization, Britain and France, were brought to an unprecedented point. Africa, though, figured differently than it had years before. It was now more important to England to have Africa seen as civilizable; emphasis here was placed on sexist views of the

African woman, and a farcical demonstration of a mock Irish village in contrast won high accolades.

In her conclusion, Coombes points out:

... the Edwardian era, so often dismissed as a sleepy watershed, was nevertheless a historical moment that posed various challenges to the established social and moral universe of the Victorian period ... Transformations in the social and political structure of various African colonies, due partly to the colonizing process itself through, for instance, the establishment of an educated elite, resulted in a different kind of challenge to the British state...Small radical presses gave voice to their demands and exchanged copy with a number of West African newspapers...protests against the colonial administrations were also taking place in the colonies themselves. This book has suggested that such criticisms and protests made an impact on Britain, whether directly or indirectly“ (p. 215).

In much of Coombes’ work, she is direct and evenhanded. Some confusion though does occur between the Kuba and the Luba, one group being interchanged for another with regards to descriptions of objects in a photograph, (p. 171, four Luba sculptures referred to in the text of the book as Kuba) and again, Luba for Kuba in a discussion of cut-pile cloth and Emile Torday, (p. 185). Though not of overwhelming importance, such attention to detail, as Ms. Coombes demonstrates throughout the text, should at least be carried over to the material objects that Ms. Coombes fights so valiantly to have us understand as ‘reinvented.’ I however could not agree with her in her criticism of the French in their archaeological work in Tunisia: “the French administration had projected a...self-image as not only the guardian but more importantly the “discoverer“ of Tunisian heritage and history, with the archaeological excavations at Carthage and other Roman sites. In other words, the benevolence of the French colonial enterprise extended to ‘producing’ a historical memory for Tunisia, which only the French were then capable of preserving in the face of the evident dereliction of duty and lack of interest of the Tunisian people” (p. 193). In all fairness, the sites of Carthage and later Roman cities really were of little interest to the modern Tunisian, the remains of an ancient “Pagan” city having little impact on turn-of-the-century Tunisian Moslems who would not regard it as their “heritage.” Further one need only take a look at the English in India; colonial and oppressive regime though they were, when the great temple at Sanchi was found by the British, its main pillars were being used by the local Indians to grind

sugar cane. Bodhgaya and Sanchi exist today thanks to the British. The same holds true for Angkor in Cambodia, where the French spent decades clearing the jungle around the city, and stopping the Cambodians from dismantling what was there for building materials. It seems to me a little bit of a labored point to think that the English robbed the Indians of their dignity by restoring the temples that they indeed had abandoned! It seems not so much to produce a “historical memory” that these things were done, but to sustain the “glory of the Empire,” but this was a glory for and by the colonials and usually far removed from the everyday difficult lives of the natives. The result though is the preservation and indeed existence of monuments that would have been otherwise lost forever.

A final argument with Coombes’ book on the whole is that it is easy to look back with 20/20 hindsight and pronounce blessings and curses. At the time in question, anthropometry (something Coombes devotes much negative attention to) as a form of physical study was as real

as our DNA mapping. Perhaps by today’s standards it appears as outdated as leaches did in Victorian times. More caution or at least a little less categorical pronouncement could have been used with this point in mind.

Overall, *Reinventing Africa* is a well-researched and highly erudite discussion of a particular way of looking at Africa in a specific time and place. Its scope opens up many important avenues of thought (the treatment of Native Americans and the changes in public opinion, for one). And its conclusions help us to understand how it is that we have come to the crossroads where we now stand—somewhere between a long and grudging romance with colonialism, and the fledgling steps toward a humanistic and anthropocentric understanding of humankind.

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