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Sidney Littlefield Kasfir. *African Art and the Colonial Encounter: Inventing a Global Commodity.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. xviii + 381 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34892-0; $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21922-0.

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African Art, Colonial Inscriptions, African Aesthetics

African Art and the Colonial Encounter is two books bound together by some powerful arguments drawn from commodification theory, performative analysis, and aesthetics. Straightforward in outline, but complex in its trajectories, this study by Sidney Littlefield Kasfir presents historical documentation of the Idoma of the Middle Belt of Nigeria and the Samburu of Kenya, from the colonial encounter to the present concerns with global trade, the politics of value, and regional warfare. Kasfir has conducted extensive fieldwork among these disparate groups, one West African, the other East African.

The historical narrative is framed by an interpretative focus from anthropology. In that timeframe, Kasfir's study focuses on changing layers of representation. She includes British popular and literary representations of Nigeria and Kenya, "storytelling" in a French idiom, of the Idoma and Samburu that enforced rather different colonial policy outcomes, and ultimately she presents the changing representations of material culture–objects–as art, ethnographic specimens, and commodity artifacts. What is important is that she shows how colonialism inaugurated alternative perceptions of material culture internally as the Idoma and Samburu adjusted their artistic and ideological idioms, and externally as the WORLD embellished these objects as ART. A feedback loop to the cultures that produced these utilitarian objects created a cycle of production and trade so that all this stuff is now designated as art, artifacts, and artifice; or of tourism where ritual equates performance and theater.

Kasfir's central question is: "What happens to a complex representation when the cultural script undergoes a major change?" (p. 317). The Samburu's aesthetic response centers on dance, spears, and new pastoralism; that of the Idoma has a locus in blacksmithing, carving, and tool-craft. For the Idoma, the colonial escapade began a transformation that aestheticized headhunting, though criminalized by the British. Thus, carved representations became the expressive outlet or reproduction, and a war dance became a masquerade. Among the Samburu, the spear has undergone a similar kind of transformation into an aestheticized and replaced object. Cattle-raiding is an honored tradition, and the spear is associated with predation and performance. However, the AK47 is the postmodern weapon of glamour and choice for cross-border excursions and intergroup conflicts.

In Kasfir's postmodern vision, the story is more complicated than colonial adventurism and pax Britannica. That great scramble for the African cake, ethnographic expeditions in the Victorian era, Darwinism, the Industrial Revolution, and so on, contributed to a complex Western aesthetic of representation: classification and typologies for natural history museums, utilitarian and ritual objects redefined as art for art museums, the entrepreneurial trade of collectors, and the credentialed expertise of curators. These created a rupture in how Africans reconfigured their objects and ritual performances, widening the scope of creative possibilities in some cases, smothering them in others. Inscriptions altered the way objects became categorized as "art" or "mere things" in Arthur Danto's telling distinction, or as authentic, the fake, and the authentically fake. There is, too, the transformation of African peoples into cultural objects: staged dances for government dignitaries, cultural tourism, and now participation in Hollywood cinematic representations or colorful (dare one say "exotically primitivized") backdrops for *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* fashion models.

Kasfir is one of the most theoretically knowledgeable anthropological art historians around. Her comfort zone lies within the interpretive and postmodern reference frames of Clifford Geertz, Paul Ricouer, Pierre Bourdieu, Danto, and Arjun Appadurai. Rather than settle for two

monographs, the easy way out, Kasfir united two widely separated groups into a single text wrapped around with postmodernism. Though lucidly written, this is not an easy read. Nonetheless, it is highly recommended with its emphasis on the three Cs–colonialism, commodity, and complexity of representation.

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