



Regina Finsterhölzl. *Kommerzielle Werbung im kolonialen Afrika: Die Werbebranche und der politische Wandel in Ghana 1930–1970.* Köln: Böhlau Verlag Köln, 2015. 399 S. gebunden, ISBN 978-3-412-22309-0.

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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (June, 2016)

The role of advertising in the shaping of modern consumer cultures in Europe, the Americas and Asia has been the subject of a substantial cultural history literature since the 1980s. Yet, apart from Timothy Burke's 1996 work on Zimbabwe, little research exists on the history of advertising in Africa. Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women. Commodification and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe*, Durham 1996. (Burke in the same year also published several articles drawing on the same research.) More recent work on consumption and on business in colonial and post-colonial Africa has begun to look at advertising as a field of analysis from which insights can be derived about changes in African consumption and agency, gender, appropriation, development, modernity, corporate legitimacy, and so on. Examples include: Stephanie Decker, *Corporate Legitimacy and Advertising: British Companies and the Rhetoric of Development in West Africa, 1950–1970*, in: *Business History Review* 81 (2007), pp. 59–86; Jonathan Roberts, Michael Power and Guinness Masculinity in Africa, in: Steven Van Wolputte / Mattia Fumanti (eds.), *Beer in Africa. Drinking Spaces, States and Selves*, Zürich 2010, pp. 29–52; Dmitri van den Bersselaar, *Who Belongs to the “Star People”? Negotiating Beer and Gin Advertisements in West Africa, 1949–1975*, in: *Journal of African History* 52 (2011), pp. 385–408. However, a detailed study of the emergence and

development of the advertising sector in an African market was hitherto unavailable.

In this pioneering book Regina Finsterhölzl explores the advertising sector in Ghana. She starts from its emergence during the colonial period, follows its subsequent development and ends with the Africanisation and professionalisation of the sector after independence. Her main focus is on the advertising services associated with the United Africa Company (UAC), which owned West Africa Publicity, Ghana's first advertising agency founded in 1928. UAC was the largest importer of consumer goods into Ghana during this period, and following World War II also a significant local producer of consumer goods. She mentions other expatriate and Ghanaian advertising agencies rather more briefly, but in sufficient detail to give the reader a sense of the advertising sector as a whole. Advertising started as part of the colonial economy, and it was the expatriate businesses formerly associated with colonialism that stood to benefit most from the development of the advertising industry during the decolonisation period. However, Finsterhölzl makes a strong case that the companies' attempts to establish mass consumer culture along a Western model were welcomed by African societies, that slow progress towards such a consumer society resulted in unrests strengthening anti-colonial movements, and that leaders of independent Ghana in turn attempted to achieve such a consumer society. Thus

advertising occupied a central place in the history of West African decolonisation, and its study is relevant for economic, social, cultural, political and business history.

Aside from the introduction and conclusion the book contains four substantial chapters. The first of these introduces the reader to import trade, marketing and the creation of knowledge about local markets in Ghana during the colonial period (then called the Gold Coast). Following an overview of the consumption of imported goods by Africans, the focus shifts to the organisation of the import trade by the largest importer, the UAC. The chapter ends with a discussion of the ideology of consumption and the civilising mission. Finsterhölzl notes an important difference between colonial government and missionaries on the one hand, and business on the other: where the former insisted on the appropriate, civilised consumption of imported goods, businesses such as UAC accepted that African consumers used goods in different ways than the producers had intended.

The following chapter covers the starting period of commercial advertising in West Africa up to 1945. Initially advertisers attempted to reach African audiences mainly through posters and billboards, whereby printed advertising was aimed at European expatriates. During the course of the 1930s, as local newspapers with larger circulation and better reproduction quality started to emerge, print advertising became increasingly aimed at African elites. These advertisements were produced by professionals in London and sent over for use by the local advertising agency in Ghana. Finsterhölzl observes that advertising professionals saw themselves as being part of a civilising mission to bring progress to West African societies. The images they designed do not appear to support colonial ideology: they showed an upwardly mobile educated urban African elite, dressed like the European colonial elite – presented thus as equals to the colonial rulers.

The next chapter covers the post-war period up until the early 1960s. This was a period of rapid social and political change, during which increases in consumer spending power alternated with scarcity of consumer goods and urban unemployment. Companies like UAC introduced new forms of marketing, while aspects of the production of advertising material were relocated from London to West Africa, where African designers took part in the production process. Finsterhölzl notes that with the expansion of the African audience for advertisements, the representation of Africans in these adverts also changed: while during the 1930s members of the African elite were addressed with images that represented European consumers, during the 1950s African mass audiences were instead presented with images that represented the local African elite.

The final substantial chapter covers the period since independence and describes the Africanisation of the advertising industry and the professionalisation of the business. The recruitment and training of the first generation of African advertising professionals is discussed in detail. Members of the first generation of African advertising professionals could make quick careers, became managers and in some cases owners of advertising agencies. I agree with Finsterhölzl's observation that the increasing production of advertising in Ghana itself, and the increasing use of systematic market research, were linked with the local production of consumer goods. Ghanaian advertising professionals adopted the idea of the modernising mission from their European predecessors, but focused in their advertising more directly on the specific use of products in Ghanaian society in the correct cultural context.

Overall, this is a carefully researched and well-written book. It is based on a great deal of original archival sources, predominantly from the Unilever corporate archive (UAC was a subsidiary or the multinational Unilever), with additional material from the Nestlé historical archive and

the Raleigh collection. Most of this very rich material has not previously been used by historians. It includes correspondence about marketing and advertising, reports and minutes of meetings, strategy papers, advertising and marketing plans, and actual advertisements. Finsterhölzl has added to this with reporting and advertising from close to twenty contemporary West African newspapers and magazines, and also conducted interviews with ten men from among the first generation of Ghanaian advertising professionals.

I particularly like her detailed analysis of the visual language of specific advertisements to develop the broader argument. Changes in advertising are very convincingly shown, using examples from advertising for the same brand or products from different moments in time. I have, however, some reservations about the use of some of the other sources. I do not think that visit reports of London-based UAC directors are the best source for establishing attitudes within the company towards African consumers. Also, a short celebratory company history of UAC's Nigerian advertising agency appears to be over-used. Towards the end of the book I also began to wonder why Finsterhölzl had decided to base her case study on Ghana, as she repeatedly indicates that core developments in advertising in West Africa tended to happen in Nigeria, rather than in Ghana. A final grumble is that the book would have benefited from more careful proofreading (in particular for the spelling of names and businesses) and a better index.

Kommerzielle Werbung im kolonialen Afrika is organised as a business history, which competently traces the development of the Ghanaian advertising industry with careful attention to the changing social, cultural and political context. As such, the book also offers insights into the colonial ideology of consumption, and into the adopting in turn of aspects thereof by Africans, as well as the politics and cultural impact of Africanisation. In Ghana, as elsewhere, advertising profes-

sionals were 'missionaries of modernity', and Regina Finsterhölzl's narrative of their exploits includes much that should be of interest to a broad audience of social, cultural and commodity historians.

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Citation: Dmitri Van Den Berselaar. Review of Finsterhölzl, Regina. *Kommerzielle Werbung im kolonialen Afrika: Die Werbebranche und der politische Wandel in Ghana 1930–1970*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. June, 2016.

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