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The German imperial presence in Africa was relatively brief and geographically limited. Lasting only thirty-five years (1884-1919), it did not extend beyond six of today’s nations (Namibia, Cameroon, Togo, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi). Until recently the whole enterprise tended to be dismissed as unreliably brutal. That conclusion was difficult to avoid, given the infamous order issued by one of its functionaries, General Lothar von Trotha, to “exterminate” the Herero people. In fact, as this volume edited by Itohan Osayimwese makes clear, the nature of this short imperial enterprise was far more complex than a simple display of sheer dominance.

Art historian Osayimwese has addressed both the reality and the legacy of the German imperial presence in Africa by assembling six essays by scholars specializing in visual culture. They base their conclusions on diverse forms of material evidence: contemporary paintings, lithographs, photographs, and postcards; the site and shape of new settlements; the design of buildings; and, coming right up to the present, the imperial residue visible in twenty-first-century visual icons and avant-garde art. The research preferences of the six scholars have caused the book to focus exclusively on today’s Namibia (three chapters) and Cameroon (two chapters). Thus, the book is best read as a select sample of approaches and focal points rather than as a comprehensive survey of German empire.

Taken together, the essays help to free discussion of the imperial encounter from the prior anticolonial approach that focused on African victimhood. Each author carefully writes from a postcolonial perspective, one that resists reducing complex historical material to a simple message. By taking material culture seriously, the six authors also move beyond political economic analysis. In doing so, they give richer meaning to the tired trope of “African agency.” They show truly hybrid cultural forms evolving during and after the brief German presence. Mark Delancey provides one particularly clear and compelling example of this
hybridity in his study of Bamum palace architecture. Delancey argues that King Njoya’s palaces were not built in “blind imitation” of European architecture (p. 136). The king selectively appropriated styles—from Germany, the neighboring Grasslands kingdoms, the Islamic polities to the north—as he sought to serve his own political interests within a constantly changing regional context. In Delancey’s telling, colonial architecture was not a tool of imperial oppression but a resource for expressing and manipulating shifting alliances and identities.

Osayimwese makes a similarly subtle argument when she discusses the work of the three most prolific German imperial artists (Wilhelm Kuhnert, Rudolf Hellgrewe, Ernst Vollbehr) who mainly depicted scenes of local nature, like Mt. Kilimanjaro. They were contributing to the idea that African space was “uninhabited and culturally and politically underdeveloped” (p. 58). She concludes her essay by issuing a gentle warning that pictures do not, and cannot, document reality. The paintings are valuable because they offer “a multilayered translation of some experience and knowledge to which we may have no other access” (p. 60). They are of value to historians today in large part because they helped popularize the idea in late nineteenth-century Germany that the colonies were vital to German interests.

German initiatives shaped the land—where people settled and how they designed their towns—but they did not do so in isolation from local political actors or without regard for the environment. In South West Africa they were reacting to two big facts: the land was the driest in southern Africa, and local people resisted. Walter Peters notes the siting of Namibia’s towns was determined by where the first missionaries found enough water to allow them to establish their stations. They did not do so alone but often relied on the guidance of locals. The shape of the settlements was determined by security concerns. Boundaries and fortresses were imposed to limit the success of any insurrection, thus setting up the legacy of spatial segregation based on race that Hollyamber Kennedy says “prefigured” apartheid (p. 92). Both Peters and Kennedy show that towns in today’s Namibia were not created by the Germans alone. Whether as antagonists or helpmeets, local African people contributed to their shape, nature, and location.

German Colonialism comes to a particularly artful conclusion with two essays on contemporary visual imagery. Fabian Lehmann shows how one photograph of a valiant Nama leader, Hendrik Witbooi, has been used in independent Namibia to serve purposes ranging from stirring nationalist fervor to advertising the Nampost Savings Bank. As Witbooi’s stern iconic face morphs into a grin in that ad—and as words he never said are attributed to him—popular understanding of his life and struggle pulls further and further away from what he actually did. And yet, Lehmann endorses those artists who unsettle popular familiarity with Witbooi’s image; they succeed by making local people look at the iconic leader with fresh eyes. The last essay, brief and mainly visual, takes the freedom and provocation of artists in a charming direction by profiling a Kenyan-German artistic couple, “Mwangi Hutter,” who have conjoined their names and work as if they were one person. Art thus brings home a core message of the volume: at the heart of empire and its legacies lies human connection.

The essays in the volume are, like the images, not necessarily of the same high quality. A few of the photographs, for example, are too dark to be useful (p. 127). Essays overladen with theory can be similarly murky. They are sometimes also self-contradictory. What, for example, does the following mean: “the ambiguous, empty zones on Bismarck’s map mirror colonialism’s desire for effacement” (p. 97)? It is confusing to write that colonialism has “desires,” while at the same time citing with approval Frantz Fanon’s definition of colonialism as “not a body with reasoning faculties”
(p. 110). Further, excessive use of theory can smother the vitality of voices from the past. Hendrik Witbooi's piercing words—at the end of a life lived both in cooperation with and antagonism toward the Germans—lose some of their power when sandwiched between citations of Foucault and Fanon. Subtlety and surprise get lost, two traits otherwise characterizing this volume.

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