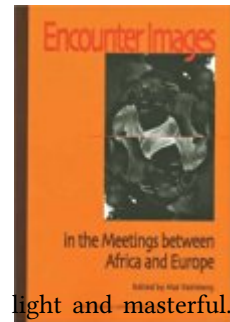


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mai Palmberg, ed. *Encounter Images in the Meetings between Africa and Europe*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2001. 278 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-91-7106-478-3.

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Published on H-SAfrica (September, 2003)



Scandinavian African Studies have largely been considered, if at all, as peripheral to African Studies, at least by non-Scandinavians. For years, Mai Palmberg has been an important figure in Scandinavian African studies. In this volume, she brings together original contributions by fifteen scholars, most of whom work in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, or Finland. There are also interviews with Valentin Mudimbe and Terence Ranger. Of the authors of the articles themselves, only Bernth Lindfors's name will be familiar to most American Africanists. Palmberg renders a service, for as this collection of essays indicates, there is some interesting work emanating from scholars associated with the Nordic Institute in Uppsala.

The subject of this book is images, meaning both symbolic or metaphoric, as well as iconic images. The time period and geography covered is broad, ranging from medieval Europe to contemporary Denmark, charting encounters from the Gold Coast, to South Africa, to Madagascar. The breadth of topics covered poses something of a problem, for the very range of subjects means that many of the articles are only indirectly related, chronologically or geographically—aside from the fact that everything deals with Africa—to the themes of other chapters.

The subject of European-African interaction, and of the role played by images in this interaction, is an important one. Several of the articles in this volume relate to studies published by other scholars. For example, Zine Magubane's chapter on "Images of the Khoikhoi in the Age of Abolition"—a carefully documented and important contribution about the nexus of nineteenth-century capitalism, imperialism, and English racial attitudes—relates to Annie Coombes's work on late-Victorian images of

Benin. Magubane's prose style is light and masterful. This article is highly recommended.

Lindfors's piece on the "Making of Racist Stereotypes in 19th-Century Britain" is also well-written and documented. The approach is, however, less original: here we have yet one more study of poor Sartjee Baartman. In fairness, there is also material on the less well-known "Zulu Kaffirs," performers who were all the rage for "le tout London" in 1853.

Of use to Anglophone scholars who are not particularly familiar with Danish sources is Selena Axelrod Winsnes's study of Ludewig Romer's 1769 travel account from the Gold Coast. In this instance, the "images" discussed are purely narrative, with no visual depictions included. Romer was a merchant who lived at Christiansborg, near present-day Accra. To provide an English translation of some of Romer's narrative, along with interpretation of his perspective, is an important addition to both the primary and the secondary literature.

Herein lies the chief contribution of *Encounter Images*, namely that the book will bring Scandinavian sources and themes to the consciousness of scholars previously unfamiliar with this material. But this is perhaps unfair to the editor, whose primary aim is clearly elsewhere: to contribute to the growing field of studies on the African-European encounters, and on the role of written and visual images as producers and products of those encounters.

The Scandinavian orientation is evident, for example, in Karina Hestad Skeie's essay, "Beyond Black and White." Using private letters as well as public writings of Norwegian missionaries in Madagascar, Skeie demonstrates that images of the Malagasy people show a refine-

ment that transcends stereotypes. In so doing, she also transcends the polemics of post-colonial discourse, and paints a picture of Malagasy-Norwegian interaction that is vividly human in its contradictions and ambiguities.

It is particularly to be mentioned as a strong point of the volume that there are two contributions on the dimension of gender in the creation of images of Africa and Africans. I. B. Udegbe writes on gender elements in contemporary Nigerian wood carvings. Udegbe argues that these works, produced for sale, often express negative concepts about Africans, especially through their depiction of naked or partially clothed women. The argument is somewhat simplistic, though essentially accurate. In her article, Hanna Mellemsether focuses on gendered images in the writing of male and female missionaries. The latter chapter, while short, deftly weaves together consideration of the different perspectives reflected in these writings: rural Norwegian missionaries living in South Africa, missionaries following certain European patterns of discourse on Africans, and, finally, a missionary (Martha Sanne, 1852-1923) whose writings express an only minimally gendered discourse on the male and female subjects of her life's work.

My assessment of other contributions is less laudatory. While several of the contributions, such as those cited above, constitute significant additions to the field of African-European encounters, others are too general to add much more than thoughts for future research. Yet, as a reviewer, I hesitate to criticize. The reason for this is

that the wide-ranging themes included in *Encounter Images* encompass more varied areas of expertise than any one scholar is likely to muster. My own ignorance, for example, concerning the ethnomusicology and study of Muslim-African influence on medieval Iberia causes me to hesitate to criticize A. Kirkegaard's chapter. Yet, her study seems to imply that similarities in the transmission and practice of oral epics in ancient Mali and medieval Spain should be seen as evidence for contact between the two culture zones. Unsupported by historical documentation, this is a superficial and dubious argument. But perhaps the article in question should be seen as a brave effort to investigate a field that simply does not yet exist.

Still, the scattered themes do detract from the book's organizational cohesiveness. This reader found—and, I suspect, most other readers will find—that some pieces simply are too far afield to constitute a central historical theme. Although these “encounters” are slices of history by definition, they are not clearly related historically. Indeed, after reading the book, I am not entirely sure how one would define the central organizing theme. This is not a critique of the contributions themselves. And Mai Palmberg is certainly to be complimented for having brought together a body of scholarship by these diverse authors, several of whom will, through this book, become known for the first time to English-speaking readers. This volume will have served a worthy purpose if it succeeds in bringing Scandinavian Africanist scholarship to a broader audience.

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Citation: Peter Mark. Review of Palmberg, Mai, ed., *Encounter Images in the Meetings between Africa and Europe*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

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