

AFRICA

Rivista semestrale di studi e ricerche

N.S. II/2, 2020



VIELLA

AFRICA. Rivista semestrale di studi e ricerche

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N.S., II/2, 2020

ISSN 2612-3258 ISBN 978-88-3313-469-7 (carta) ISBN 978-88-3313-702-5 (e-book)

Registrazione presso il Tribunale di Pavia n° 2/2019 dell'8/4/2019

La rivista è pubblicata anche grazie al sostegno dell'ISMEO - Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l'Oriente/Il Novissimo Ramusio

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website	www.viella.it/riviste/testata/15
amministrazione administration	Viella s.r.l., Via delle Alpi, 32 - 00198 Roma tel./fax 06 84 17 758 - 06 85 35 39 60 abbonamenti@viella.it info@viella.it www.viella.it
abbonamento annuale annual subscription	Italia € 70 (carta/print) € 90 (carta/print + digital) Abroad € 85 (carta/print) € 110 (carta/print + digital) Digital (enti / institutional) € 60 Numero singolo (Italia) € 35
modalità di pagamento terms of payment	c/c bancario IBAN IT82B0200805120000400522614 c/c postale IBAN IT14X0760103200000077298008 carta di credito Visa / Master Card

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RECENSIONI / REVIEWS

Laurick Zerbini, *L'Afrique noire en vitrines. Lyon 1860-1960*, Paris, Hémisphères/Maisonneuve & Larose, 2019, 320 pp.

Laurick Zerbini is a *maîtresse de conférences* (associate professor) in the history of the arts of sub-Saharan Africa at the University of Lyon 2 and a member of the Rhône-Alpes Centre for Historical Research. In 2019, she published a modified version of her Ph.D. thesis at that university in the late 1990s. Let me at once make clear that the “exhibit cases” of the title are not only those of the museums of Lyon, though these are discussed at length in the book. Zerbini includes an analysis of the political, economic, secular and religious attachment to the museum system in a broader study of the attention given by the political and religious élites of Lyon to Africa. Because, clearly, museum exhibit cases, missionary publications or the 1894 colonial exhibition in Lyon do not speak of distant countries subject to colonial power, but, above all, of the relation that the promoters of these initiatives stubbornly insisted on creating with the conquered lands, a conquest that in this case was mainly economic and religious. In this sense, the book constantly wavers between a *histoire des savoirs* and a social history of Lyon’s élites and their ties with the colonies in a period when the Finance Minister Maurice Rouvier claimed in the National Assembly that “France in Central Africa must show that she is not a conquering power, but a trading power”¹. Historians have brought out the causes and effects of French under-investment, including in those equatorial areas over which the colonial power was then trying to extend its extremely uncertain control by military violence (see C. Coquery-Vidrovitch classic study on the concession system)². But Zerbini’s study deals exclusively with Lyon: in the city of silk, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, there were significant attempts to awaken economic interest in colonial products and markets, but Africa was to remain decidedly secondary to the Far East.

The 1894 Exhibition in the *Parc de la Tête d’Or* confirms this dynamic: the exhibitions’ “bipolarity of play and learning” aimed to reinforce the ties between the city of textiles and overseas territories, their products and raw materials, but the space given to Africa was limited³. As a result, in the early twentieth century, the *élites* of Lyon were almost wholly absent from the sub-Saharan region,

1. Zerbini, *L'Afrique noir en vitrines*, 155.

2. C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1898-1930*, Paris, La Haye, 1972.

3. Zerbini, *L'Afrique noir en vitrines*, 137ff.

unlike those of Bordeaux or Marseille, which were more active (although in the 1910s-1920s Lyon's Chamber of Commerce supported some companies such as the *Société de l'Oubangui-Chari*, which exploited rubber extraction in this territory⁴).

It was the missionaries that felt the greatest interest in Africa, making Lyon "a great evangelizing centre". As elsewhere in Europe in the period, seminarists tended to come from the poorest sections of the community. The awakening of missionary vocations could also depend on an "active core"⁵ – formed in response to the crisis brought on by the Revolution – and developed in republican France with the clear intention of combating the influence of Protestants and Islam in Africa (as well as that of other Catholic congregations competing with them to penetrate and occupy the continent). Propaganda made use of every means available (publications, newspapers, conferences), adopting different registers of discourse each time: the height of barbarity served to confirm the humiliation of the African peoples, but this description reworks that of the "backwardness" of the French countryside at the time of the Industrial Revolution⁶. Actually, this discourse (and the practices that were to spread throughout Africa: in this connection the author cites the fundamental article by Françoise Raison in 1978⁷) would go through significant variations and was at the origin of radically different experiences, sometimes associated with exceptional figures (for example, Francis Aupiais of the African Missions) but also with the choices of the religious hierarchies that sought to develop a scientific and Catholic ethnology (extensively analysed by André Mary in his recent work⁸). In short, the virulence and requirements of propaganda – and this book analyses some discursive aspects of it and its effects on the choices of exhibitions and museums – never excluded much more complex overtones from nestling in the conceptions and practices of the missionaries: for example, the recourse to the theory of Ham's descendants, which enabled the missionaries to reintegrate some African peoples in the account of Genesis and thus to affirm their humanity while also explaining their supposed "decadence", and even to recommend "salvation through work"⁹.

To conclude, let us return with the author to Lyon. The colonial decline, which also touched some of the presuppositions of missionary involvement, had a significant impact on the changes and destiny of the city's main museums, both

4. Zerbini, *L'Afrique noir en vitrines*, 217.

5. Zerbini, *L'Afrique noir en vitrines*, 28.

6. Zerbini, *L'Afrique noir en vitrines*, 96.

7. F. Raison, "Ethnographie missionnaire et fait religieux au XIX^e siècle. Le cas de Madagascar", *Revue française de sociologie*, 1978, 19-4, 525-549.

8. A. Mary, "Partir en mission. Vocation missionnaire et passion ethnographique", in Gaetano Ciarcia, André Mary, dir., *Ethnologie en situation missionnaire*, Paris, Béroser - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie, 2019 (Les Carnets de Béroser, 12), 5-31. See also: A. Mary, "La preuve de Dieu par les Pygmées. Le laboratoire équatorial d'une ethnologie catholique", *Cahiers d'études Africaines*, 198-199-200, 2010, 881-905.

9. Zerbini, *L'Afrique noir en vitrines*, 50.

secular and religious, whose *raison d'être* had lain squarely in colonial interest or evangelizing propaganda. Today, the debate on heritage restitution or return of cultural property to its countries of origin is opening a new chapter for the analysis of the subtle ties that link exhibition spaces to the main political changes of our age. The author evokes these complex questions, describing the choices and changes that have happened in exhibiting the various museum collections of Lyon, but also returning, in the last part of the book, to the developments concerning the status of African objects (an analysis completed by another on the emergence of Christian African art). The decline and then the closure of Lyon's *Musée africain* illustrates the difficulty of rethinking the tie between exhibition on the one hand, and a religious, confessional and missionary space on the other: but new experiences are appearing on the horizon or already exist (for example, the new museum of Spiritan missionaries in Allex, inaugurated in 2018). We may also note some fundamental changes in non-religious museums, obviously exemplified in Lyon by the *Musée des confluences* above all. More and more often now, the term "museum" indicates a complex system consisting of an "architectural referent" and the collections it houses. The political-cultural discourse that this system expresses is grafted onto a sometimes virulent public debate in which it participates, and that it helps feed through its constantly changing decisions not only on what it does and does not exhibit, but also on how it does so.

Andrea Ceriana Mayneri