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In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885-1960. Christaud Geary. London: Philip Wilson, 2002. 128 pp.

This book, based on a wonderful exhibit originally organized at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, has insightful approaches to evaluating the ways Europeans and Africans created, transmitted, and employed photographic images for varied ends. Geary describes the formation of a Central African “image world” where photographers, publishers, subjects, and consumers all sought to produce and control images that often proved far more long-lived than the reputation of the photographers. To counteract the anonymity of most photographers in colonial Africa, Geary worked with Polish scholar Krzysztof Pluskota to examine the oeuvre of Polish photographer Casimir Zagourski, who worked from 1924 until 1944 in Léopoldville (Kinshasa), the capital of the Belgian Congo.

The author does an outstanding job of placing his subjects in a range of historical contexts: the technical and artistic development of photography, the history of colonial Central Africa, and the complex relationship between anthropology and images in the twentieth century. Geary begins with a short essay, “A World of Images,” that sets up the main themes of the entire work and introduces readers to the formation of colonial photographic styles, especially the “type” image that essentialized ethnic identities. He then gives an overview of the images disseminated in Europe about Central Africa, especially the Belgian Congo. In his masterful review of images produced in the era of Leopold II’s notorious Congo Free State, he shows how both the opponents and supporters of Leopold II deployed images of violence and ethnic “types” in their discussions. Officials posed Africans in “traditional” scenes along with abetting the creation of photographs celebrating economic and educational benefits of colonization. Some African photographers in the Free State, such as Herzekiah Andrew Shanu, saw their careers ruined once they joined in the protests against Leopold II. Still others, such as Frederick Starr (the first anthropologist at the University of Chicago), defended the Free States usage of staged images of “untouched Africa.”

After the Belgian government took the colony over shortly before World War I, images continued to play a key role in how Central Africa was understood. Changing technology altered the types of photographs that were produced, as postcards lost popularity and new journals like *L’Illustration Congolaise* introduced readers to the Belgian Congo. Tourists, whether they were members of the Belgian royal family or foreigners in search of adventure, sought out “traditional” African types. Africans, especially chiefs favored by the colonial state, responded to others’ expectations by encouraging tourists to take photographs. Geary notes how images of Mangbetu women from northern Congo appeared on stamps, travel books, and postcards. Mangbetu leaders knew that their guests expected to see hairstyles and clothes based on decades-old photographs and learned to change from Western style dress to “traditional” outfits and to carefully stage what they wanted visitors to photograph.

Pluskota and Geary devote two chapters to Zagourski. The authors uncovered a wide range of photographs and biographical information gleaned from family interviews, state archives, and personal letters. Zagourski appears as neither a stooge of colonial propaganda nor a selfless photographer defending indigenous ways of life, but a complicated man seeking to build a reputation and capturing the ethnographic present on film. He came to Africa at the age of 40 in 1924, for reasons the authors have difficulty discovering, and ran a photography studio for the next two decades. Zagourski proved to be a skillful businessman who sold elaborate albums and sought money from the colonial government to continue making photographs and films. His artistic creations drew from the common belief of “salvage anthropology” which held that indigenous cultures needed to be caught on film before they vanished. Though these images often appear staged, they are still stunning to see.

Of course, Africans too were photographers and people who wished to be filmed. Accordingly, the last chapter explores their craft in Central Africa. African subjects were not docile props, but actively took part in how they would appear. Turn of the century portraits taken by Africans show the self-representations of a coastal urban elite that enjoyed following conventions of European family photography. For example, Tutsi royal leaders seeking to prop up their legitimacy found photographs one way of displaying their power and connection to a tradition they actively helped construct. Geary also provides a brief but impressive collection of biographies of African photographers as well as examples of their works.

This book is a joy to look at, and has the potential to be quite useful in upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses in art history, imperialism, and African studies courses. First, it combines careful archival research with a beautiful set of images that can be used to examine how images were produced about Africa. Second, the study offers a nuanced view of image making that would compliment broader themes of colonial rule and the artful construction of “customary” practices. For classes that deal with the Congo Free State, this book makes an intriguing text to assign with Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost*. Finally, it recapitulates in succinct and skillful prose much of the recent literature on colonial photography.

There are a few quibbles one could have with this excellent book. Missionaries as photographers rarely enter the discussion, despite the tremendous amount of images they produced. For a book on Central Africa, it is surprising that Gabon, a place where African photographers worked from the 1870s onward, does not receive much coverage. Finally, the references to Frederick Starr suggest the anthropologist mistakenly used violent imagery that worked against Starr’s goal of defending Leopold II. This was no accident; Starr was an anti-imperialist who thought violence inevitably came with conquest, but placed the blame for brutality on African soldiers working for Leopold instead of the colonial government’s own policies. Starr’s photographs of chained prisoners could be interpreted as proof that Leopold II was trying to restrain the supposedly unavoidable cruelty that came with colonization. Despite these minor criticisms, do not hesitate to read this beautiful study.

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