Colonial Transactions: Imaginaries, Bodies, and Histories in Gabon. Florence Bernault. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2019. 344 pp. $28.95. Paperback ISBN-13: 9781478001584.

During my days as an undergraduate in African Studies back in the late 1980s, I only heard about witchcraft in classes related to anthropology. Courses on the political history of Africa, colonialism, post-colonialism, and even pre-colonialism completely ignored this subject. Indeed, at the time, historians of Africa mostly refrained from discussing witchcraft, possibly because they did not wish to focus on a theme that ostensibly separated Africans from the West and labeled them as "primitive." The only article I was assigned that referred to witchcraft was that of Max Gluckman, explaining Evans-Pritchard's theory regarding witchcraft among the Azande of Southern Sudan. At the time, this theory was considered revolutionary. Evans-Pritchard claimed that African witchcraft was rational. His basic assumption was that "Western man" thinks in a rational and scientific way. He tried to demonstrate that although the Azande's beliefs in witchcraft may seem to the "Western man" as irrational and primitive, in fact in some respects they could be easily compared to Western beliefs in science and technology.[1]

Several decades have gone by and happily, witchcraft is no longer taboo among historians of Africa. Many of them recognize that this is not a phenomenon that they can afford to ignore if they want to understand the African past. This recognition does not make the research of witchcraft an easy mission. It is difficult to write about witchcraft without a nagging feeling that what one writes might be utter nonsense, that one is only pretending to understand, and in fact is just fumbling through the dark. Thus, Florence Bernault's *Colonial Transactions* is not only a welcome addition to the growing historical writing about witchcraft in Africa, but it also a book that takes witchcraft seriously and challenges accepted perceptions about this fascinating subject. Even without accepting all her complex arguments, it is clear that after reading this book, one will never be able to think about witchcraft and about colonialism as one did before.

Bernault opens the book with an anecdote. She recalls her anger during one of her early visits to Brazzaville when she realized that a young Catholic Congolese man she had met believed in witchcraft. In retrospect, she analyzed this anger as a sentiment shaped by the colonial past. After working on several other topics, one of which was the history of the prison in colonial Africa, Bernault decided to tackle this minefield and study the impact of the colonial encounter on Gabonese beliefs that we tend to label as witchcraft. The book thus says no less about colonialism than about witchcraft.

Bernault's goal is twofold. She aims to challenge the notion that current accusations of witchcraft, and the trade in human organs in Gabon (and elsewhere), are related to modernity, capitalism, and globalization alone. She insists that the transformation of witchcraft beliefs, and especially the passage from symbolism to practice, unfolded already during colonial times. Current witchcraft was shaped by the encounter of colonial and local ideas rather than by con-

[1] The article was a Hebrew short version of Max Gluckman, *The Logic and Science of African Witchcraft: An Appreciation of Evans-Pritchard's Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande of the Sudan* (London: Bobbs Merill, 1944).

temporary processes. Bernault's second goal is to revisit perceptions of colonial relations by putting forward a new and intriguing concept: transactions. At first glance, this term may seem inappropriate, as it offers the impression of a business partnership rather than subjugation and control. But in fact, transactions can be unbalanced and unfair and the term does not necessarily imply equality between the two sides. Bernault claims that historians of colonial Africa are limited by colonial categories. The archives force us to make distinctions between the subjects of our research according to the racial lines that were so important to the colonizers. Therefore, the similarity between African and colonial perceptions or exchanges between the colonizers and the colonized are difficult to see and conceptualize.

The key framing in this book is transactions. Bernault examines six basic concepts that evolved during the colonial period through encounters and exchanges of ideas between French and Gabonese, maintaining that these exchanges can often be seen as transactions. The most basic one is colonial rule itself – the French proposed an offer they believed that the Gabonese could not refuse, progress and civilization in return for hard work and human sacrifice. Not a very attractive deal, but one that defines colonialism, according to Bernault, much better than any other metaphor. The exchanges between French and Gabonese explain the transformation of Gabonese ideas and beliefs that was shaped by the encounters between French and local notions.

To explain the main argument of the book a few examples are in place. In a chapter about carnal fetishism, Bernault deals with the idea of ritual crime. She argues that the reenchanting of the body in Gabon was a process that derived from the accumulation of judicial, moral, and spiritual engagements between Africans and Europeans over the location of power. The French insisted on the power of their own bodies. They erected pompous monuments to deceased colonial administrators. They admired the body of the colonizer and its power to control humans and nature in Africa. They performed so-called scientific autopsies and cut up the dead bodies of Africans. In fact, they stole these bodies from Africans to perform autopsies. When the Gabonese performed their own ritual autopsies, by which they determined whether the person who died was a witch or was bewitched, the French accused the Gabonese of cannibalism, refusing to see the similarity between this practice and their own attempt to find the cause of death.[2]

Bernault also emphasizes the French misconceptions with regard to the symbolism of the body in the Gabonese worldview. While in previous periods the French themselves perceived the body as having a symbolic power, during the Enlightenment they began insisting on seeing it as no more than a biological substance. This view influenced the way in which the Gabonese saw the body. Body parts were then detached from kinship and tradition and a market of anonymous human substances emerged in the colony. The legacy of this process is grave robbery and trade in human parts today in Gabon.

Another transaction is related to the value of people. Colonizers and colonized debated whether this could be measured in money. The French ridiculed the Gabonese, claiming that they saw people as commodities. But in fact, the French often replicated the idea of wealth as

[2] More on the subject of autopsies during the colonial period see: Ruth Ginio, "When Dead Bodies Talk: Colonial and Ritual Autopsies in French-Ruled Africa (1918-1945)," *Social History of Medicine*, 34:3 (2021), 962-983.

people. Bernault gives the example of "blood money," compensating physically injured victims with cash. This institution opened new equivalences between physical injury, social worth, and cash compensation. Another example, which is not mentioned in the book is the French notion of the "blood debt" of colonial soldiers. The French justified the recruitment of Africans for European wars by claiming that this was a debt they had to pay with their blood due to the ostensible merits of French colonization and the progress it was supposed to bring to their societies.[3]

Another chapter is dedicated to the complex and delicate issue of cannibalism. This is a much-discussed subject. Various scholars have shown that cannibalism was in fact a European obsession. In fact, the European examinations of cannibalism can tell us much about them and nothing about African societies, none of which had ever included human flesh in their daily menu. While the French misunderstanding of the concept of symbolic eating as a metaphor for witchcraft was already reported on in previous studies, Bernault adds a fascinating perspective to the debate. She discusses the French enthusiasm for collecting body parts of apes and humans. This practice of cutting organs out of dead bodies and putting them inside sealed jars filled with chemical liquids could only been seen in Gabonese eyes as a form of cannibalism.

The book relies on extensive material ranging from colonial documents and missionary sources to interviews with healers, patients and informants, television programs, radio broadcasts, cartoons, advertisements, and jokes. This variety of sources, Bernault's obvious acquaintance with Gabon and the long periods she spent there, make the book rich and fascinating. What is also impressive is Bernault's modesty and self-awareness. She does not presume to fully understand everything she hears or sees. She knows that her own position as a privileged white woman limits this understanding. Unlike her younger self, though, she is open to listening and observing without judgement and without putting her own culture on a different so-called rational scale.

Colonial Transactions expands our knowledge and refines our understanding of the two themes that stand at its center – witchcraft and colonialism. The book historicizes witchcraft, arguing that history can enhance our understanding of the obsessions and modes of power of modern witchcraft in Africa. It brings closer the allegedly contradictory ideas of the European colonizers and the colonized Africans and discusses them in the same realm. But instead of insisting on viewing African perceptions as rational, the book questions the assumption that the French saw the world in entirely different terms. Bernault also shows that colonialism extensively reconfigured African societies. She offers historians a different way to examine the colonial past, one that rejects the colonizer's insistence on difference and distance between Europeans and Africans. Through the concept of transactions, she shows that French and Gabonese exchanged imaginaries and ideas even if the power relations with them were unequal.

To return to my only assigned reading on witchraft with which I opened this review, what Bernault does in this book is a step further from Evans-Pritchard's idea of rationality in witchcraft. She rejects the idea of two distinct worldviews – western rationality and African mysticism. Through the case of French colonial rule in Gabon, Bernault draws our attention to

[3] See: Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

encounters and exchanges – unequal as they may be – rather than to divisions and difference. She also gives current disturbing practices in Gabon, such as the trade in body parts, an historical perspective that was missing in previous studies. No future research about witchcraft or about colonial relations will be able to ignore this fascinating and eye-opening book.

Ruth Ginio, Ben Gurion University of the Negev