

TRAVELLING AFRICA & THE ARCHIVES

SATURDAY, 23 APRIL 2016

SOAS, University of London
Room 116

Beth HUNT Travelling Objects, Travelling Officers: 'The Gift of Independence' & Farical Exchange in the Foreign Office Archives

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Sana GOYAL Imperial Tactics and Imaginary Tourism: (Belgian) Congo and the Case of the Travelling Colony

Daniel RATHBONE "I Looked and Beheld a Country"¹: Home Movies, Homesteads and the Family Archive

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ABSTRACTS

BETH HUNT (MA Postcolonial Studies, SOAS)

Travelling Objects, Travelling Officers: 'The Gift of Independence' & Farcical Exchange in the Foreign Office Archives

Combining the practices of critical history, gift theory and archival research this paper considers the role of gifts, giving and 'gift economies' in both the colonisation and de-colonisation of Nigeria. How were the meanings of gifts, the travelling objects (and concepts) of the title, re-made, re-imagined and re-interpreted under the distorting influence of first the colonial then the post-colonial mind set? How did the 19th-century colonisers of Nigeria and then the 20th-century Commonwealth Relations Officers put in charge of Nigeria's 'Independence Day Gift' use and abuse the ideas inculcated by the foundation of Nigeria as a nation created by and reliant upon British 'gifts'? Through the examination of a single Commonwealth Relations Office file evidence is wrested as to how these travelling officers felt and dealt with their feelings about Nigeria's imminent independence and the importance of producing a gift that would travel well not only between the two nations but also through time, history and myth. Contemporary testimony from the former British High Commissioner of Nigeria, Graham Burton, is helpful for determining how Nigeria today may still be enmeshed in but also moving away from a relationship with Britain determined by perpetual exchange.

ELETTRA FRANCESCA PELLANDA (MA History of Art, SOAS)

Away from home: the 1897 Punitive Expedition and the Benin bronzes at the British Museum

In this paper, we are going to assess the 1897 British Punitive Expedition to Benin Kingdom, focusing on two different aspects. On one hand, we are going to give a brief account of the historical facts connected to the Expedition, focusing on the connected colonial propaganda, the difficulties of travelling in the "Dark Continent" and the looting of Benin City. We are going to rely on old and more recent publications, including the archive material formed by the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers. On the other hand, our focus will be the so-called Benin bronzes, i.e. the rich booty of brass castings and ivories that the British troops acquired in that occasion, from a museum studies perspective. The British Museum archival material concerning the purchase of the so-called Benin bronzes by Western Museums and private collectors will guide our line of thought in order to assess the movement of the bronzes. In studying the mode of acquisition of these art objects, their trip from Benin Kingdom to London and from there to different parts of the Western world, we can outline the restitution issues that are entangled in the history of these objects and address display concerns.

ATAMUNOBARABINYE JONATHAN TITUS-GREEN (MA African Literature, SOAS)

The Congo River and its Influences; A Critical Perspective of the travels of H.H Johnston

In studying rise and fall of empires throughout history, one would discover that conquests

usually began with the coming of some form of transportation which was symbolic of the conquering nation. These range from foot to horses and chariots, camels, ships, etc. In more modern times, these means of conquest have become more technologically advanced and they have also been used as tools to ‘civilise’ the people who have been conquered. The first experiences which Africans had of western colonization were with more advanced ships, and later roads and railways. This is the case of the region of Africa now known as the Congo.

Many great rivers like the Nile and the Congo for many centuries had been a source of life for Africans. Their livelihood depended on it and this river was a critical factor in their basic needs, social activities and the economy of Ancient Africa. These rivers wound their way deep into Africa, a phenomenon which would arouse the curiosity of Europeans and lead them to journeys and expeditions with the aim of finding the sources of these rivers. It would also open a new era of trade and the transfer of wealth between Africa and the West.

SANA GOYAL (MA Postcolonial Studies, SOAS)

Imperial Tactics and Imaginary Tourism: (Belgian) Congo and the Case of the Traveling Colony

When Belgium inherited Congo from Leopold II in 1908, it also inherited his controversial legacy. In such a context, world opinion was as weighted in the years prefacing Belgian rule as it was in their penultimate years as an imperial centre: Was ‘little’ Belgium capable of controlling the vast Congo colony?

Congo’s existential crisis, at once coveted and threatened, coaxed Belgium to initially isolate the colony from the outside world, and eventually, in the decisive decade—post-World War II and pre-“precipitous decolonization”—to actively position its long-term involvement in the Belgian Congo by promoting pro-colonial propaganda through tools of tourism. Suspicion would’ve swelled, had the Belgians operated on a strictly closed-door policy; in their advantage, however, was to make it relatively difficult to enter the colony. Thus “Belgian authorities constructed a charade, a sharp piece of statecraft by seeking to use government-led tourism presentation as a means to manipulate domestic and international audiences into believing the Congo was a progressive society, open for business and accessible to tourists.” (Wigley)

The *Traveler’s Guide to the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi* (1956) and British and Belgian colonial archives reveal the inner workings of the Belgian state—for all that talk of tourism, not many journeys were made. In fact, by rendering Belgium Congo what I call a *traveling colony*—under the façade of tourism—the imperial master had managed to maintain a strategic balance between showing the Belgian Congo to the world without showing the world *into* the Belgian Congo.

DANIEL RATHBONE (MA Cultural Studies, SOAS)

“I Looked and Beheld a Country”: Home Movies, Homesteads and the Family Archive

Home movies, like family photographs, are important parts of family life, acting as ways to frame the idea of the family and connect different, inter-generational memories together. Footage of key moments helps develop a family identity, as well as locate it within broader historical contexts. As a result, home movies provide an incredibly useful source with which to examine the intersections between narratives of the family, nation and belonging. Utilising a collection of personal home movies, this paper will explore how these themes

are touched on within the context of British Colonial Southern Africa. These films explore how ideas of family identity are rooted within ideas of home and belonging, articulating a conceptualisation of colonial Southern Africa as a 'home-scape' for descendant of British settlers living there during the 1950s and 1960s. These home movies draw attention to the creation of the idea of home and family, while also producing disruptive elements to those narratives.

Revisiting the Archives & Further Research

STEPHANIE DE GOEIJEN (MA Comparative Literature, SOAS – 2013-14)
The Archive of Dreams: Malagasy Micropolitics in the Missionary Archive

The London Missionary Society archives, alongside the Hardyman Madagascar collection (both held at SOAS, University of London), are exemplary of the macropolitical workings of the imperial and post-imperial European involvement in Madagascar. Within these archives, documents attest both to the written nature of the British imperial network in the Indian Ocean, as well as to the relegation of the indigenous voice of the colonial Other to silence, to be read as only as a present-day reconstitution. However, the journal of David Ratsarahomba and the letter of Josia Andrianilaina, written into the archive during the time of the Christian expulsion from Madagascar (between 1835-1861), speak of a Malagasy agency which defies this silence. Reading these letters along the grain of the archive reveals a subaltern micropolitical intervention in the macropolitics of the imperial age and archive, in which both men travel an alternative itinerary and in the process, refigure the idea of what it means to be a missionary in the western Indian Ocean.

JADE LEE (MA African Studies, SOAS – 2012-13; SOAS Research Scholarship for PhD 2015-)
Women of the British Colonial Service: Contested Identities and Liminal Lives, 1936 – 1961

My research is focused on the ways in which the women of the Colonial Service negotiated, affirmed and contested their complex position in the final decades of the British Empire.

The personal archives that form the case studies for my thesis centre on a group of women working with or affiliated to the Colonial Service in what was then the British Cameroons. These archives span 1945 to the colony's integration with the French Cameroons to form the Republic of Cameroon in 1961. The material available ranges from official publications produced by these women to the more private realm of personal correspondence and, in one case, an unpublished book.

My aim is problematize the traditional narrative which sees the colonial project as solely male in both aim and practice. I do not see the official archive as the record and product of empire; rather I aim to read 'along the grain' (Mary Ann Stoler) to understand the ways in which these reams and reams of paper that categorized, codified and enclosed people and spaces were the very nuts and bolts of the system itself. By using a methodological approach which draws on anthropological conceptions of liminality and the literary tool of intertextuality I hope to open up the script to other voices, both the women of the Colonial Service themselves and the local women with whom they worked so closely.

Kai EASTON

Landmarks: Coetzee's Maternal Lines

Draft footage of my recent research trips in South Africa (Western, Eastern and Northern Cape – March-April 2016) which literally included travels with my aunt back to sites visited together on three different journeys in the Cape between 2010-2012. New routes were also explored, and this visual essay is a companion to my earlier work 'Maps & Notebooks', which is in dialogue with selected archives in the Coetzee collection at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.