

## RECENSIONI

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**Daniele COMBERIATI, Pierre HALEN, Rosaria IOUNES-VONA (eds) | *Des italiens au Congo aux italiens du Congo. Aspects d'une glocalité*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2020, pp. 366.**

Daniele Comberiati, Rosaria Iounes-Vona and Pierre Halen's edited volume sets out to reflect on the link between Italy, Italians and the Democratic Republic of Congo and the scantily known history of Italian emigration to Central Africa. It explores various aspects linked to the intertwining of Congolese and Italian history and to Italian and transnational Congolese cultural and artistic representations, concluding with a proposal for a glocal identity that can also be enriched by artistic experiences.

The edited volume consists of five parts: the first three refer to three phases of contemporary Congolese history (the independent state of Congo, the Belgian Congo and the post-colonial Congo); the fourth part deals with Pasolini and Moravia's reflections and literary and cinematographic representations of Congo and Africa more generally; the last part presents the perspectives of three Congolese-Italian personalities from the Italian political and cultural spheres.

Within these parts, there are 25 chapters. The first ten ones, which make up the first two parts of the book, present the stories of specific Italian figures who travelled to Congo as military officers, adventurers, doctors, filmmakers, employees, especially in the construction and mining sectors, and missionaries. Through diverse and comprehensive sources – books, military reports and court cases, articles published in scientific journals, encyclopaedias and newspapers in the early 1900s, religious congregation bulletins, travel diaries, photographs and films – the authors delve into the various Italian debates and imaginaries about the Congo in the first half of the 1900s. Many of these exceptional life stories reveal Italy's important role in the Congo in those years and the Italian media's interest in Congolese affairs. Despite the absence of a conspicuous Italian presence on Congolese



soil at this time, through Giulia Piccolino's chapter (pp. 17-28), for example, the reader learns that various newspapers of the time were reporting with detailed articles and journalistic investigations of what was happening in Congo. The newspapers' audience could thus find out about the accounts on "Congo atrocities" (see Giordano's chapter, pp. 35-42, and Meurice's chapter, pp. 55-70) perpetrated by the Leopoldian Congo Free State and the subject of Italian political and military discussions. These debates are fuelled by medical concerns, as described in Scarfone's chapter, pp. 71-83, related to "white psychopathology" and "tropical neurasthenia" allegedly developed by Italian soldiers and migrants in Congo to adapt to the new "inhospitable" environment. In these two parts of the book, most of the chapters touch upon the various aspects of colonial racism and the civilising mentality of evolutionary positivism, which was also responsible for the construction of a clear division into social/racial classes (e.g. Quaretta's chapter on Salesian missions in Katanga, pp. 147-162).

In the third part, divided into eight chapters, the authors dwell on the description of a more relevant and continuous Italian presence, especially in the region of Kivu and ex-Katanga. From 1910 to 1960, the number of Italian settlers in Congo increased from 278 (p. 141) to 4000 (p. 167), covering diversified roles in the Congolese socio-economic fabric (Grilli's chapter, pp. 133-145, and Genin's chapter, pp. 165-177). During the end of Belgian colonialism and the post-colonial period, the Italian government re-considered the Congo as an attractive country for investment. Consequently, the immigration of Italians to the Congo became an established and less exceptional option. The feelings described by Italians in Congo, especially during (pre)colonial time, relating to adversity, sacrifice, strangeness or wonder at the astonishing exotic Congolese nature and anthropic diversity began to be complemented with new imaginaries linked to nostalgia for the colonial period and related attempts to legitimise it. Life in Congo became describable (Ruffinengo's chapter, pp. 179-192), albeit mainly through juxtapositions, binary oppositions and racist stereotypes (Hoyet's chapter, pp. 223-237), it sometimes took the form of a reassuring, familiar place (p. 186) that was difficult to leave during the dramatic phase of independence (Grilli's chapter, pp. 133-145).

Throughout the book, a particular emphasis is placed on the construction of knowledge and the role of visual techniques in forming the Italians' collective imagination about Africa. From the first photos of Italian explorers (e.g. Lanslots' chapter, pp. 43-54) to comic books (Federici's chapter, pp. 207-221) and the various documentaries and films (e.g. Van Schuylenbergh's chapter, pp. 101-116, or Allovio and Pennacini's chapter, pp. 117-132), Italian artistic production seems to have played an influential

role in shaping the Italian and Congolese gaze on the other and contributing to the construction of both Italian and Congolese identities. In particular, in the fourth and fifth parts of the book, the authors describe how past and present events in Congo have been fundamental in triggering intellectual and imaginative reflections around a syncretic and universal political project of history. The binary and divisive terms of “them” and “us” presented above all in the first two parts of the book are partially replaced by the concepts of creolisation and metissage in the third part (Mpala-Lutebele and Halen’s chapter, pp. 247-261), to end up being rejected and critically discussed in Pasolini’s “Panmeridional” project, which saw in the Congolese/African people a revolutionary force against the mass neo-capitalist model (e.g. Riva’s chapter, pp. 305-324).

In the fifth part, the perspectives of three Congolese migrants in Italy reinforce the main idea of the book on how cultural representations can be used to fight stereotypes, unite cultures and build transnationality. The idea of talking about Italians from Congo is very pertinent, although this part could have been better developed: there are only three chapters that seem almost detached from the book’s structure. Although perhaps this was not the aim of the book, it would have been interesting to have chapters in all parts of the book on the perspectives of some Congolese figures on Italians in the Congo and if and how Congolese artistic representations have influenced the Italian imaginary on Africa.

The book would also have benefited from an extra chapter on the historical and social situation of the Italians in the Congo to provide a more coherent framework for the various themes dealt with and the different styles of the authors. Notwithstanding these minor issues, I found the book extremely significant as it sheds light on many aspects of the almost forgotten history of Italians in Congo despite the normality of this history in the lives of many Italian families and in the imaginative references of 20th-century Italian culture. It is a necessary book, especially because of the absence of a real debate in Italy on (Italian) colonialism (as Morone also points out in his chapter, pp. 193-206) outside of the scientific community (e.g. Giordano’s works on Italians in Congo). Perhaps it would be worth thinking of an Italian translation that could also reach an Italian audience and trigger a reflection on the role of Italians in Africa during colonialism and on the forms of identities of the new Italians of Africa.

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