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BOOK REVIEW

Black Peril, White Virtue: Sexual Crime in Southern Rhodesia, 1902-1935, *By Jock McCulloch*, Indiana University Press, 2000, ISBN 0-253-33728-3.

This book on how the sexual fantasies of men from a distinctly European cultural background turn around to haunt them adds to the collection of books on colonialism that are a spin-off of Foucault's critique of western culture. McCulloch's book is distinguished by a sharp focus on inter-racial sexual relations considered transgressions in a discourse on colonial power in Southern Rhodesia. This is notwithstanding the fact that, during the last decade, several historians on Southern Rhodesia have shown that colonialists disrupted the lives of many Africans, manipulated and exploited them, even in matters of their sexuality (Barnes, Jeater, Schmidt). Against the background of a western intellectual culture, where for centuries, sex has been associated with irrationality and/or sin and, therefore, something to avoid discussing so openly, McCulloch's boldness is bound to draw some attention.

However, the story is a grim one for the African reader. McCulloch shows how fears associated with western cultural myths about African sexuality led to serious abuses of Africans by British colonisers. At the heart of the story of *Black Peril* are African men, deemed as black as they were uncivilised and immoral, and consequently, falsely accused of violently attacking white women for whom they worked as domestic servants. African men, presumed to have an intense appetite for sex because they were coming from a much-denigrated cultural background where one man could have two or three wives, were easy to accuse of raping white women. This was worsened by the demand put on young African men joining the labour market to leave their wives behind in the rural areas and, while they lived in towns, to look upon sexual relationships with women as both sinful and a distraction from work. In domestic employment, African men were reduced to doing chores that they had always left to women in the culture. Making beds, cleaning floors, cooking, serving food, and doing laundry are just a few examples of duties carried out under the supervision of white women who, themselves, were viewed by their male counterparts as subordinate members of society responsible for the smooth running of the domestic sphere.

It is not surprising at all that sex between white women and black male servants working close to them in the private world of the home became an issue. Domestic servants were bound to experience problems

with white women, fearing that, as men, who were young and sexually active and members of a patriarchal world of their own, they would have moments when they felt emotionally disturbed by their women bosses and vice versa. But that is not the main issue for McCulloch. He is concerned by the ideas that inform whites about sexual desire among Africans and cause them to panic at the thought of their wives being taken advantage of in their households. Just to show how pervasive and demeaning to blacks the mythology about African sexuality is, McCulloch's book begins with a shocking story about a white woman, Ms Falconer, who claims she was raped by a black man when, in fact, she had bumped into a wandering baboon. This mind-boggling story will make any African reader stop and read it again, as whites often publicly denigrated Africans as baboons or kaffirs. In this and other stories from colonial records, McCulloch illustrates how fears about the sexuality of Africans, based on ignorance about them, became the basis for accusing black men of crimes of rape that they did not commit.

He tries to show that British society has precedents that further our understanding of this behaviour. However, the background to this problem takes us beyond British habits to the grounding of them in Christian thought, for, in the latter is a pervasive western philosophy derived from the Greeks, which says that the desire for sex brings humans, even the best of them, close to the animal and must, therefore, be handled with caution by those gifted with reason and power to regulate social developments, namely, men. Those humans with difficulties controlling sexual desire, like women, maintained Aristotle and Plato, are closer to animals by nature and must not be allowed to have public roles. That is why men only ran governments for many centuries in western patriarchies. Southern Rhodesia was no different.

Stories about African men attacking white and African women unable to function without giving men sexual favours show how this unscientific and outdated cosmology was used to manipulate and control African people as gendered human beings placed below whites in the hierarchy of being. Worse still, McCulloch shows how whites tried to control African women who were seen as worse than their male counterparts, and as an even lower species incapable of morality altogether and, therefore, unemployable dangerous carriers of sexually transmitted diseases (p. 128). The African woman was presented in colonial records as a threat to men in a language that was so demeaning that any African woman who reads the records and has suffered because of colonialism is bound to feel insulted by the blatant sexism of colonial administrators and missionaries.

British imperialists were so threatened by the sexual habits of Africans that they lived in constant apprehension, for as McCulloch writes:

> Black Peril was a rich metaphor. It symbolised the erosion of white male authority over women, it was an emblem of racial pollution, and it suggested that cities were unsafe. It was also a reminder of the threat of armed resistance . . . Black Peril hysteria served the interests of the white community by dramatising the dangers it faced and giving it some leverage (p. 83).

Driven by this fear and determined to reassert their control, white colonial settlers went around villages shooting blacks, raping their women, and beating up people in order to make them pay tax, dispossessing them of their resources, forcing them into employment in the white economy and, generally, in the words of the Methodist missionary, John White, behaving in an uncivilised manner.

Unfortunately, McCulloch does not discuss African sexuality as Africans saw it, but only as Europeans perceived it. This is the book's major weakness, for one would have expected that the author would have, at least, tried to go beyond the textual evidence in colonial records in order to find out the African point of view and, thus, present a more balanced account. It would have been interesting, for instance, to find out what the response of the Africans was to what the author describes as the "rich metaphor" of the Black Peril. This would not have been difficult to investigate given the fact that many elderly African former domestic servants from the period McCulloch discusses are still alive and would have shed more light on the African perspective. A book about colonial sexual politics across the racial divide cannot be balanced without a discussion of the African perspective, especially since Africans were at the receiving end of white abuse that was based on the white people's self-generated myths about African sexuality. Thus, one would have expected McCulloch to pay some attention to the sexual perceptions of the very people whose rights he so passionately defends in the book.

This weakness, notwithstanding, *Black Peril* is an interesting contribution to scholarship on the colonial history of Zimbabwe and will, no doubt, fuel debate on past and present race relations in a country which is still grappling with the legacy of colonialism and the racial polarisation which it entrenched. Hopefully, it will lead people to realise that there is a need to treat each other as human beings, regardless of race or gender.

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