

**José Lingna Nafafé. *Colonial Encounters: Issues of Culture, Hybridity and Creolisation. Portuguese Mercantile Settlers in West Africa*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2007. 215 pp. ISBN 978-3-631-52779-5**

The book *Colonial Encounters: Issues of Culture, Hybridity and Creolisation. Portuguese Mercantile Settlers in West Africa* (Peter Lang, 2007) investigates the cultural exchanges which took place between Portugal and Africa during pre-colonial times starting in 1446. These encounters that were primarily economic, driven by the myth of the African wealth of gold and the search for spices, preceded later colonial interests based on slavery and Christianization. José Lingna Nafafé's monograph is founded on rigorous historical research, for the author draws on primary materials housed on The Vatican archives, National Library of Lisbon, and archives in Guinea Bissau. As a result, the book contains numerous original documents placed at the bottom of the page, in a full note fashion, claiming thus, the historical veracity of the sources.

The book sets out to demonstrate that from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, blackness and Africa were not perceived in a negative light by Europe and the Europeans, but quite on the contrary, the view was loaded with "extremely positive images" (Lingna: 2007, 30) for Africa, in the eyes of late medieval Europe, had become the liberator, the redeemer of a remote Christendom. Proof of this is the Cresques Atlas, which presents images of a wealthy African continent, containing cities and towns, and depicts African men and women as full human beings, as opposed to other Atlases of the times such as the Hereford map which represented Africans as half human, half animal-like beings. Thus, The Cresques Atlas served as a catalyst of Portuguese commercial and trading interest in Africa.

Cresques was a Majorcan Jew who completed the Catalan Atlas in 1375, commissioned by Prince John of Aragon. Professor Lingna Nafafé points out the fact that Cresques, as a Jew, was an outsider in Spanish culture—an other—and this might be the reason why he decides to draw a realistic, un-mythical portrait of African geography and its inhabitants. Furthermore, the map is very important for the development of Lingna Nafafé's own work, because the map shows in his words: "African trade relations prior to the European encounter with West Africa" (Lingna: 2007, 12). Cresques' cartographical representation of the African continent heralded the beginning of Portuguese merchant expeditions to Africa.

The book is undoubtedly written from the point of view of an African scholar whose intention is to review the reports of the first encounters between Portuguese merchants or Tangomãos and Africans. Lingna Nafafé declares the account of the Tangomãos made by Portuguese chroniclers of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to be biased, never reflecting the truth of these pre-colonial encounters. The purpose of the writer is to debunk certain myths created by westerners about the true identity of Africans, and the inclination of the latter towards peaceful and productive coexistence with their visitors. Lingna Nafafé criticizes the biased and racist opinions expressed by white Portuguese chronicle writers and historians such as Almada, Lemos Coelho, Donelha, Valentim Fernandes and Álvares, when rendering the history of the economical and cultural exchanges between the Africans and

the Portuguese. This scholar resists the interpretation of history from the hegemonic white western position only, and resolves to offer a close examination of the historical data of the period. In the light of his research, he rejects the view that the foundation of African slavery was African's own social structure. In order to prove this point, Lingna Nafafé emphasizes the roles of African kings as protectors not only of their subjects, but also of the political and commercial enterprises that they transformed into instances of cultural exchange and interculturality. Thus we are introduced to kings such as Matsamba, from the Casanga people of Casamance in modern Senegal, who reigned during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, starting in the 1570s. Among the subjects of king Matsamba were the Balanta people, for whom slavery was absolutely unacceptable and to which the only possible response was suicide. Lingna Nafafé investigates the true nature of African kings and their kingdoms, demonstrating how it was not their custom to live off the wealth of others, and how some of them found the idea of slavery truly repulsive and offensive.

Professor Lingna Nafafé also analyzes the effects of westernization in African societies. He describes how, through the presence of the Tangomãos or first Portuguese traders, together with the interest of the Portuguese and the Spanish Crowns<sup>1</sup> to spread Christianity, gave rise to issues of Creolization and Hybridization as well as questions regarding resistance to acculturation. Prior to this process, the Portuguese merchants or Tangomãos fulfilled the role of intermediaries between the African ruling class and the Portuguese commercial powers. They must be distinguished from the crusaders who were sent to Africa in search for wealth for the Portuguese crown by Henry the Navigator (1399-1460) and King John II (1481-1495). The Tangomãos or Lançados as they were also called, lived in Sierra Leone. They acquired a high degree of hybridization as they progressively adopted the customs and religious practices of the African societies in which they settled, becoming in this way Africanized both culturally and ethnically. Thus, Lingna Nafafé contends, the Tangomãos, not the crusaders or the Portuguese crown, were the true agents of Creolisation in West Africa at the time. He further affirms that the principal interest of the West African ruling class was commerce and community formation, not war. Indeed, the Tangomãos demonstrated their willingness to participate in African culture by marrying African women and undergoing African cultural practices such as circumcision. Again, the author argues, chroniclers fail to mention this in their reports. There is no doubt that a number of Tangomãos went to Africa looking for the freedom that Portugal and Spain, as repressive powers representing the heart of Christendom at the time, denied them. As Professor Lingna Nafafé states:

West African society offered them empowerment, social inclusion, pluralism, freedom and liberation. Therefore they sought to identify as fully as possible with Africans by adopting their culture, laws and religious traditions, which led to their becoming a new part of the social structure. The Tangomãos thus took on the African's life-style, culturally and religiously, absorbing those empowering elements from African traditions (Lingna: 2007, 155).

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<sup>1</sup> During the 16th century Portugal was ruled by Spain in the period known as the "Spanish Captivity" (1580-1640).

Lingna Nafafé uses this capacity of the Tangomãos to adjust to the African ways to investigate the role and meaning of ancestral ritual practices such as the sacrifices and the deities to whom these sacrifices were offered. He points out how ashamed the Portuguese chroniclers such as Valentim Fernandez are of this fact, and how they try to hide the term Tangomãos to avoid identification of these white Europeans “traitors” with Portugal. Lingna Nafafé convincingly defends his argument of interculturality and peaceful co-existence between Portugal and Africa during the pre-colonial times. He investigates official historiography—the Portuguese chronicles—and revises it, reading in between the lines to disclose an aspect of European history that has been systematically played down by western colonial powers: the fact that there were Europeans who were willing to travel to Africa not to impose their worldviews or their religious faith, but to look for a space where they could be free, looking at the Africans as equals.

Throughout his scholarly work Professor Lingna Nafafé takes the opportunity of commenting possible pathways towards the future and the betterment of African democracies. He suggests that the ruling classes of African countries should return to their original tasks in their society: that of protecting and leading their people without violence and promoting mutual respect. Only by adopting this position will African societies become agents of cultural exchange and dialogue not only between African countries, but also between the African continent and external powers.

This work, part history, part sociological treatise owes not a little to theological sources. It offers to the curious reader and scholar an honest and original study of the relationship between Europe and Africa adding invaluable research in the field of the African Diaspora from the African point of view during pre-colonial times. The book contains an ample, up-to-date bibliography, and a comprehensive index, both of which facilitate the reading of the volume. The book is divided in five chapters (I- West Africa: the Portuguese Agenda, II-West African Kingship, III-The Beginning of Westernisation, IV-The Emergence of an Afro-European Merchant Class, V, Religion, Ritual and Sacrifice:A Portuguese Encounter) with an introduction that clearly explains the source materials, organization of the book, important issues of language and translation, as well as the criteria for transcribing the original texts that, as mentioned above, are both abundant and conveniently located on the relevant pages for easy access.

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