

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Fromont, Cécile. Images on a Mission in Early Modern Kongo and Angola

Robert John Clines

Volume 45, Number 4, Fall 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105511ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i4.41402>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Clines, R. (2022). Review of [Fromont, Cécile. Images on a Mission in Early Modern Kongo and Angola]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(4), 261–263. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i4.41402>

© Robert John Clines, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Fromont, Cécile.

Images on a Mission in Early Modern Kongo and Angola.

University Park: Penn State University Press, 2022. Pp. xvii, 245 + 126 col. ill., 52 b/w, 1 map. ISBN 978-0-271-09218-8 (hardcover) US\$109.95.

In the scholarship of early modern global missionary Catholicism, much of the focus has been on the various means by which European missionaries—Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, among others—converted non-Christians and integrated them into the larger apparatus of the emerging colonial logics of European imperialism. From Mexico and Peru to Goa and the Philippines, so the scholarship suggests, European missionary efforts cannot be extricated from the rise of European empires. While all of this remains true, Cécile Fromont's compelling study of missions to Kongo and Angola interrogates a visual corpus that suggests that such an epistemologically hegemonic world of European imperialism need not be the only lens through which we view Catholic evangelization. In fact, Fromont argues throughout, while central Africa is perhaps a "complex and singular sociopolitical situation" (7) that stands outside what we typically see with Catholic missions, it nevertheless is an important case study on the limitations of missionary work and how evangelization was not always a top-down creation of Catholic populations, but could also be a negotiated process that included Europeans and Indigenous peoples.

A visually striking book, with nearly 200 images from a wide array of European archives, the book convincingly shows that Catholic evangelization in central Africa centred on cross-cultural interaction, which forces us to rethink early modern encounters beyond the teleology of European empire. Fromont's argument hinges on reading this visual corpus against the grain; rather than seeing it as evidence of European evangelization alone, Fromont interrogates how the Capuchins depicted in these images had to operate outside of a framework of European colonialism and work with the local population if they hoped to find any success. Because of the unique geopolitical situation of the Kingdom of the Kongo—a Catholic state with both a long-standing relationship with the institutional church and a strong independent streak that pushed against the growth of the Portuguese Empire's role in the Atlantic slave trade and desire to control the whole of the African coast—Capuchin missionaries were often invited in and needed to work under the auspices of a ruling elite that cautiously allowed them to proceed. This reality shaped not only how

Capuchins worked within African Catholic territories but also, and this is the book's main intervention, how they visually depicted their experiences for a European audience.

Fromont argues that these images were anything but the reproduction of knowledge of Africa *for* Europeans *by* Europeans through a Eurocentric lens. Rather, the book argues that this large corpus of manuscript drawings, watercolours, and engravings “were products of the encounters between the friars and central Africans and as such were cross-cultural creations that were not images of but images from central Africa and created by central Africans in dialogue with the European friars” (10). Such a reading of these images is an attempt to nuance early modern cross-cultural encounters and unpack how the subjects of Europeans' depictions of the wider world were not subjects at all, but equal participants in their creation.

Across seven chapters, Fromont lays out how these images provided Europeans with a nuanced vision of the culture, nature, and socio-political life of central Africa. Fromont explores such topics as tensions between missionaries' goals and their superiors' expectations; images as realistic and practical guides for future missionaries; devotion, conduct, and combatting idolatry; as well as how consent and dialogue were central to cross-cultural encounters. In so doing, central Africa becomes not a site of colonial encounter, but a nexus of exchange where interlocutors on equal footing—or perhaps even with the Capuchins as invited guests gingerly navigating their precarious status—negotiate what it means to be Catholic. Chapter 6, for example, illustrates well how we must see these images, such as those of friars and Africans in conversation, as reflections of “a unique socio-political missionary environment within the two regions” that in turn “formed a genre of missionary images without parallel in the early modern world” (132).

What is most compelling about Fromont's argument is that, while these relationships operate outside of a colonial context, they were nevertheless “fraught yet collaborative” (188) because of the complex depictions of Africans that attempt to capture them as they operated as protagonists in the larger world systems of early modern globalization. In other words, while central Africa was not technically a colonial landscape, colonialism was nevertheless in the background of these images. This reality—a non-colonial space in an otherwise increasingly colonized world—allows Fromont to pinpoint moments in cross-cultural encounters when European supremacy might not be guaranteed

and when Indigenous visions of Europe inform Europe's view of the world. As we see in the conclusion—which triangulates Edward Said's concept of contrapuntal analysis from *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) alongside Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000)—we see how “traces of the colonized world animated in profound ways Europe and the works considered as the core of its literary canon” (194) because Europe's “engagement with the world beyond its shores shaped its own visual core in ways that have been both visible and invisible, in early modern times and in ours, because of ideological disavowal or interpretative shortsightedness” (195). Thus, we must interrogate how cross-cultural encounters shaped Europeans' visions of themselves and the peoples whom they eventually conquered, how those encounters did not always operate under the auspices of empire, and how European imperialism was not always a foregone conclusion. In turn, Fromont's book instructs us to reject the ongoing violence of imperialism and build a decolonial future that centres epistemologies and ways of being human that operate outside of the framework of colonialism, imperialism, and racial capitalism.

ROBERT JOHN CLINES

Western Carolina University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i4.41402>