

BOCCHETTI, CARLA (DIR.) GLOBAL HISTORY, EAST AFRICA AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITIONS. *LES CAHIERS D'AFRIQUE DE L'EST* (IFRA). IFRA: NAIRÓBI, SPECIAL ISSUE, N. 51, 2016. 216 p.ISSN: 2071-7245

Otávio Luiz Vieira Pinto¹

Keywords

Global History; East Africa; Classics; Postcolonial Studies

Global History, East Africa and The Classical Traditions is a collaborative volume coordinated and organised by Carla Bocchetti. It was published in 2016 as a special issue of *Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est* and it is one of the outputs that stemmed from *Globafrica*, a four-year research programme developed by the French Institutes of Research in Africa (IFRA – *Institut français de recherche en Afrique*) based in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. The organiser, Carla Bocchetti, is a research fellow at the IFRA at Nairobi. A PhD from the University of Warwick, she has obtained several fellowships and teaching positions in Italy, Colombia, Peru, and the United States. Although her doctoral thesis explored the *ekphrasis* in Antiquity, she is now focused on Africa in different geographical traditions, and on the uses of the past in Global History.

The plurality that marks the education of Carla Bocchetti certainly inspires the proposal of this volume. While its nine chapters were written by different authors (including Carla Bocchetti, who also wrote the Introduction) and are greatly diverse in terms of subject and chronology, *Global History, East Africa and The Classical Traditions* is supported by three methodological and historiographical threads: Global History, Postcolonial Studies and Uses of the Past. In this sense, although

¹ Professor of African History at the Federal University of Paraná, Brazil. Researcher at NEMED – *Centre for Mediterranean Studies* and at LEOM – *Laboratory for Studies of Other Middle Ages*. Contact: otavio.luiz@ufpr.br

not present in the title, the Postcolonial approach seems to be the backbone of this volume, as we shall see further ahead. The introduction written by Carla Bocchetti makes it evident. According to her:

global history can offer a revision of traditional epistemological approaches to Classical Antiquity, in which Greece becomes just another place in the Mediterranean world, rather than the ideal *topos* of Western exceptionalism (Bocchetti, 2016: 10)

In other words, *Global History, East Africa and The Classical Traditions* has, in general, a great focus on the decentralisation of historical readings. This means that Global History, here, is understood as an approach with the potential to break with the imperialist background of traditional ideas of Centre and Periphery. Such decentralising movement could open the space for the protagonism of new geographies and new epistemologies. In a similar fashion, “Classical Traditions”, here, are seen as a discourse, that is, they refer less to the study of what we call Classical Antiquity (therefore, Greece and Rome) and more to a field of studies that was created upon the idea of Western Exceptionalism and, therefore, would carry a certain ideological stance.

Thus, the title *Global History, East Africa and The Classical Traditions* can, at first glance, mislead its readers: this volume is not a traditional work of Global History in which relations between African and Mediterranean societies are investigated. In reality, it aims to analyse how discourses on “Classical Antiquity” were consumed in spaces that are frequently considered peripheric and how a multicentric approach (that is, Global) can contribute to a new understanding of the field of Classics. According to Bocchetti, this volume

will explore the classical past as a hybrid global product. (...) While Classical Antiquity was used to shore up nationally-founded imperial identities, the divergence debate has challenged historians to think outside their national boundaries and to consider histories of relationality that predate European industrialization, therefore confronting the legitimisation of the use of the Greek and Roman past as universal history (Bocchetti, 2016: 10).

To tackle all fronts opened by Carla Bocchetti in the Introduction, *Global History, East Africa and The Classical Traditions* is divided into three sections. The first one, *Classics and Africa*, has two chapters investigating how Western visions of Africa (the Western notion of African identity) are shaped by Graeco-Roman rhetoric; the second section, *Global History*

and Geography is composed by three chapters discussing how African and Asian spaces were central to the creation of European cartography and how this symbolic-spatial dimension is an integral part of Imperialism. And lastly, the third section, entitled *Africa and visual culture*, has four chapters occupied with the reframing of images from Antiquity (mainly architecture and material culture) in Latin America and Africa during colonial regimes.

Opening the first section, *Ethiopia and India: Fusion and Confusion in British Orientalism* was written by Phiroze Vasunia, Professor of Greek at University College London and specialist in the reception of Classics in subaltern colonial spaces, such as India. His aim is to understand, through the work of two 18th century British Orientalists (William Jones and Francis Wilford), the reason behind the confluency between India and Ethiopia amidst European intellectuals. He affirms that, despite the obvious cultural and geographical knowledge produced by the British colonial expansion during the Modern period, orientalist would deploy a rhetoric influenced by the “canons” of Western thought – particularly Biblical Ethnology. That being said, the influence of ancient classical texts does not appear much in Vasunia’s argument, who seems to be more focused on the biblical texts and the 18th century reading of the racialisation articulated by Biblical Ethnology, which frequently attributes a common origin to Africans and Indians on the ground of skin colour. Therefore, as Vasunia states, “the Ethiopians and Indians of Jones and Wilford seem in many instances to conform to this idea of a generalized black who is also Oriental or generalized Oriental who is also black” (Bocchetti, 2016: 32).

The chapter *V. Y. Mudimbe and the Myth of Oedipus* closes the first section. Written by Daniel Orrells, Lecturer in Ancient Greek Language and Literature at King’s College London and researcher of the reception of Ancient Greek and Roman culture in Modern Intellectual History, this chapter proposes a proper Postcolonial reflection: its main focus is to discuss how the thought of famed Congolese linguist and author, Valentin Yves Mudimbe, is influenced by the myth of Oedipus. Through a rich and careful argument, Orrells proves that Mudimbe’s education in Classical and Romance Philology functions as a critical intellectual framework, in such way that the Congolese author is not just a receptor of Classical culture, but an agent of transformation. This transformation can be perceived when Mudimbe utilises the oedipian argument as a metaphor for an Africa which, after decolonisation, faces difficulties to find its place in the world: just as Oedipus kills his father and becomes

the same as him, so do the African postcolonial experiences seem to be a repetition of colonial violence. Thus, Orrells concludes that “Mudimbe’s allusion to Oedipus was not simply rhetorical but reflected what he has viewed as the difficult and entangled oedipal relationship between the colonial legacy and the postcolonial African intellectual” (Bocchetti, 2016: 48). Orrells’ contribution is rich because it demonstrates, in a precise way, the nuances with which Mudimbe articulates his reading of Classical Antiquity to understand the postcolonial reality.

The second section of *Global History, East Africa and The Classical Traditions* is focused on Global History – although in detriment of debates on Classical Tradition, which seldom appear in its three chapters. The first, *Cotton and the Great Divergence: The Asian Fibre that made Europe Rich* is written by Giorgio Riello, Professor of Global History and Culture at the University of Warwick, where he is also de Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies. Riello’s text departs from a simple but fundamental premise: cotton can be seen as an agent for the study of Global History, revealing connections, networks and consumption in a global scale – all the while helping to explaining the economic ascension of Europe during Modern times. That being said, this chapters seems more like a brief account of the book *Cotton*, published by Giorgio Riello in 2013, rather than an original contribution to this volume. Riello does not engage with Classics and has little to say about Africa within the framework of a Postcolonial Global History. Nonetheless, the following chapter course-corrects this situation, at least from the point of view of East African History. Authored by Carla Bocchetti, *Performing Geography in Global History* argues that European cartography, during the Modern age, has a silent and underestimated debt towards the geographical knowledge of Swahili societies (which, today, inhabit Coastal Kenya and Tanzania). Even though she does not engage with Classics either, Bocchetti offers an important methodological discussion in relation to Global History and Geography – not only Geography as the physical space, but also as a discursive dimension (in the shape of European cartography). Her text engages greatly with scholars of Global History, such as Jean-Frédéric Schaub, and with scholars researching the African presence in the cosmopolitan dynamics of the Indian Ocean, such as Michael Pearson, Himanshu Prabha Ray, and Edward Alpers. Lastly, the chapter entitled *Interpreting Medieval to Post-Medieval Seafaring in South East Tanzania Using 18th- to 20th-Century Charts and Sailing Directions*, written by Edward Pollard, concludes the second section of this volume. Pollard was Assistant Director at the British Institute of Eastern Africa and, since 2002, has been surveying coastal areas of Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique.

His chapter, although fully centred around the African Eastern Coast, does not engage with Classics, and delves little in Global History. His main objective is to reflect on the maritime past of the Swahili Coast through a historical analysis of navigation charts. According to Pollard, the accrual of past experiences can act as a compass for archaeological excavations in important and sensible places in Africa. This chapter presents interesting potential for future research, but the text ends up displaced within the composition of this volume.

The third and last sections has four chapters that, thematically, are very cohesive. While the first section approached the (re)reading of Greek and Roman texts and archetypes in the construction of images and identities of Africa and African during the Colonial and Imperial Modernity, and the second section explored (in a slightly dispersed manner) a variety of questions concerning Global History, this third section seeks to notice Classical influences in the materiality and visibility of complex colonial relations. The first chapter, entitled *El Temple: Civic Monument, African Significations, and the Dialectics of Colonial Urban Space in Early Nineteenth-Century Havana, Cuba* is written by Paul Niell, Assistant Professor at the department of Art History at the Florida State University. Niell's text is centred around the *El Temple*, a Neoclassical memorial built in Cuba in the first half of the 19th century. Niell solidly argues that *El Temple* is not just an example of Classical influence in architecture, but rather a symbol of dispute of resistance and memory between enslaved Africans and colonial officers. He affirms that, as a symbol, *El Temple* "contends with this multiplicity of meaning and draws attention to the African elements at work in this colonial monument, while outlining the mechanisms used to reinforce hegemony over populations of African descent" (Bocchetti, 2016: 130). The following chapter, *Patterns of Contacts - Designs from the Indian Ocean World: A Curator's View* is an overview of an exhibit (of the same name) that took place at the Iziko Museum in Cape Town (South Africa) in 2014. The curator of the exhibit was Carol Kaufmann, author of this chapter. Her text is a contextualisation of some of the objects that were on display and that reveal the stark influence of East Asia and Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism in the products consumed in South Africa during the Dutch colonisation period. In the third chapter, *Visions of the Global: the Classical and the Eclectic in Colonial East African Architecture*, Sarah Longair, Lecturer of History of Empire at the University of Lincoln, explores the architecture of Zanzibar and Nairobi in the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. She analyses the urban projects of John Sinclair, British colonial officer for East Africa, and demonstrates how local contingencies and influences from the Indian Ocean world made

Neoclassical architecture, so present in the processes of imperialism, to be adopted in different ways in Nairobi and Zanzibar: while Nairobi, a city recently created by the global British Empire, has its classicising architecture symbolised at the McMillan library (designed by John Sinclair), Zanzibar, a much older city connected to the Indian Ocean, kept a much more eclectic architecture. Longair thus demonstrates how the use of Neoclassical architecture in East Africa was a complex game between past and present, between local interests and colonial desires. Lastly, the last chapter of this section (and the volume overall) is titled *A Global History of Asian's Presence in Kisumu District of Kenya's Nyanza Province* and written by Gordon Onyango Omenya, Lecturer of History at Pwani University, Kenya. Omenya's text explore the South-Asian diaspora in the province of Nyanza and its influence in the architecture of Kisumu district. This chapter presents interesting points on the Afro-Asiatic interaction not only under British colonial domination, but also after the process of Kenya's liberation.

In short, *Global History, East Africa and The Classical Traditions*, organised by Carla Bocchetti, is a diversified and high-level work, despite having some downsides. As in any published volume, the plural contribution of the various authors creates uneven reading pace but offers the public a wider range of topics and chronologies. That being said, this work is certainly closer to Postcolonial Studies than to Classics. Almost all chapters are preoccupied with epistemologies stemming from European Modernity and its effects in spaces that have been subjugated by colonial processes. In contrast, few chapters explore Greek and Roman texts or, at most, do so in a generic and tangential way. This is not a problem in itself, but the title of the work can be misleading. Thus, this volume will appeal much more to those interested in Global History, Postcolonial Studies and even African Studies than to those seeking a debate between Africa and Greek or Roman Antiquity.

Even so, all chapters gathered in this volume propose important research and raise fundamental points of debate. Some chapters have truncated prose or even repetition of paragraphs, but these details do not compromise their indisputable quality.