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Early Ethnography in Northeastern Congo and the Making of the Mangbetu Myth

Mid-nineteenth-century Italian, British, and German explorers in search of the headwaters of the Nile, as well as subsequent military expeditions into the troubled Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, had brought back to Europe fantastic stories of a people known as the Niam-niam--supposedly cannibals with tails. The stories were modified as Europeans encountered actual Zande and Mangbetu people, but exaggeration, distortion, and the elaboration of these fantasies continued well into the twentieth century, if not to this day. Beginning with the first European encounter with the Mangbetu--the meeting between the German botanist Georg Schweinfurth and King Mbunza in 1870--the Mangbetu were stereotyped in myth. Schweinfurth's florid account of the Mangbetu court in 1874 provided a model for subsequent descriptions, most of which exaggerated the power of the rulers and the prevalence of cannibalism.

The dominant tone of European literature on Africa's and indeed on the whole world --in the period of European expansion and colonization was one of self-congratulatory comparison. By the middle of the nineteenth century, with the exploration and colonization of the African interior, Europeans began to justify colonialism with "scientific" as well as moral comparisons. Theological and moral justifications of Caucasian superiority were buttressed by a smattering of empirical observations, and comparisons between races and cultures were made according to a notion of evolutionary progress. By the turn of the century these notions were translated into justifications for conquest and colonial rule.

The Mangbetu myth is just one variation of generalized European stereotypes of Africa. They inevitably were built upon fragmentary bits of information that were incorporated into exotic tales through exaggeration and romanticization. The resulting stereotypes were characterized by ambivalence and Eurocentrism. In the case of the Mangbetu, the myth consisted of exaggerated descriptions of court life and of cannibalism, of high artistic achievement and abhorrent yet tantalizing (to Europeans) social practices.

Eurocentric comparisons ranked African peoples along several dimensions: one comparison concerned the relative progress of different societies toward centralized government; another concerned artistic production; and a third concerned morality. With respect to government, centralized societies with strong authoritarian institutions were assumed to be superior to non-centralized ones (they were also more comprehensible and more easily incorporated into colonial systems). With respect to esthetics, representational art--particularly anthropomorphic art--and symmetry were admired over nonrepresentational, abstract expressions. And with respect to morality and religion, Europeans ranked monogamy, monotheism, and patriarchy higher than polygamy, animism, or matriarchy.

When they were applied to the peoples of what is now northeastern Congo, such comparisons judged the Azande and Mangbetu superior to their neighbors because they had developed greater political centralization and stronger military capabilities. The Mangbetu also gained respect among Europeans for their art. Their architecture, pottery, and carving were admired for their complex

design and use of symmetry, supposedly symptomatic of a more ordered intelligence. In the early years of colonialism, Mangbetu visual arts were praised for their naturalistic representations of the human form. Their dress exemplified the European vision of the exotic with its use of animal skins, feathers, and decoration applied to the body itself. Designations commonly applied to the Mangbetu were "artistes" "the Parisians of Africa" "les elegants," and "les jouisseurs."

Although the Mangbetu were admired for their centralized government and artistic achievement, most Europeans of the period denigrated them for their reputed immorality. Tales of exotic, uncivilized, and repulsive traits reinforced the barriers between Europeans and Africans. Gruesome stories of brutality and savagery, when combined with images of powerful kingdoms and fine art, titillated the Victorian imagination. In the case of the Mangbetu, the clearest evidence of savagery was not simply human sacrifice, common enough even in the European past, but cannibalism. Reports of Mangbetu cannibalism attracted particular attention because it was supposed not to be a result of religious ritual (like the understandable, if unforgivable, Aztec practices) but rather a result of a passionate taste for human flesh. Cannibalism, which almost certainly only existed in very restricted ritual contexts, became an obsession in the early colonial literature on the Congo and provided the principal rationale for missionary activity and colonization. The Mangbetu have heard of these stereotypes and join freely in their elaboration. Even today they recount tales of cannibalism among Africans; in pre-colonial times, former enemies often described each other as cannibals, and today many people claim that Europeans manifest the same tastes in the Eucharist and even practice it covertly.

The Lang-Chapin expedition produced more in the way of collections and subsequent publications than any other single expedition of the period. Their expedition attempted to be rigorously scientific in its methods of collection and description. Inevitably, though, preconceptions of the period determined the questions asked, the kinds of photographs taken, and the relationships between European observers and the Africans they observed. On his return, Lang also wrote articles for the general public revealing his own prejudices and perpetuating elements of the Mangbetu myth.