

Transnational written cultures, local challenges

A. Delmas and N. Penn (eds), *Written Culture in a Colonial Context: Africa and the Americas, 1500 1900*

UCT Press, Cape Town, 2011

364 pp

ISBN 978-1-91989-526-0

R250.00

Written Culture in a Colonial Context connects the evidence of written culture with historical issues of broad social and cultural significance. Bringing together the histories of written culture and European expansion from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, it lifts studies of literacy, writing, books and reading into the realms of transnational and interdisciplinary scholarship, foregrounding the largely overlooked regions of Africa and the Americas. The fifteen chapters that make up this seminal publication are so rich in detail that it makes little sense to provide a summative overview. It seems instead more useful to address some of its methodological features and to identify the challenges for historians who wish to carry forward this kind of research in South Africa. In doing so, I will draw on my overall impressions of the book using specific examples where these are relevant.

Following Isabel Hofmeyr's excellent and synoptic foreword, co-editor Adrien Delmas introduces the book's five parts and calls attention to the material dimensions of writing not just as the bedrock of historical studies, but as a recent focus especially of cultural historians. That documentation is also the object of history, revealing the "history of men, ideas, situations, places and the relationships that they produce" (p 91), echoes across the chapters. The significant shift from the idea of writing to that of inscription, which extended written cultures (probably better than "expressions of written culture") to include rock art, pictograms as well as oral performance as forms of proto-writing, breaks down such dichotomies as "civility/barbarism" and "writing/orality" (p xx). This now brings several cultures, previously thought to have been without writing and studied ethnologically only, into the "disciplinary boundaries of history" (p 210). Such methodological breakthroughs are supported ironically by the newer writing cultures, accompanied by their own benefits and anxieties.

The new technologies of digitisation, increasing access to online archival records, combined curiously with tougher intellectual property regimes have heightened awareness of the materiality of historical records and written cultures. But lurking behind the investigation of their roles in colonial contexts may also be concerns about the future of historiography as the permanence of records and traditional patterns of their production, circulation and consumption seem less clear in a digital world.

Nonetheless, excavating early modern writing technologies and written cultures can benefit from their twenty-first century versions. Translations and transcriptions occur more quickly now as a result of improved communication methods such as e-mail, listservs, blogs, social media, and other scholar-friendly internet features and electronic resources. Databases compiled from archival records can be mined from one's desk, often eliminating costly research visits. Electronic copies of documents can be ordered from research libraries and archives across the world using online inventories and payment schemes, and so forth.

Applying some of the successes of these developments, the editors skilfully intersperse chapters translated from Spanish and French with those written in English, making the narrative cohesive and appealing, and carrying the reader back and forth across colonial Africa and the Americas. More telling is that in the chapters of Part One alone, the early modern written cultures of areas in North Africa, Mexico, Chile and Argentina are brought together. This approach is a standard feature of the other four parts of the book, and breaks away from the nationalist outlook of the multi-volume book histories published over the past few decades. They may solicit funding more easily, but such histories tend to overlook the ways in which writing, books, letters, diaries, readers, and writers travel across languages, cultures, countries, and continents.

How the objects carrying writings shape their meaning is another methodological feature demonstrated in some of the chapters. In one example, a Cochimi Californian Indian hides the letter he is carrying behind a stone before eating a piece of bread intended for the letter's recipient. When he is accused after the reader finds no bread, the Indian replies that the "speaking" letter was lying because it could not see him from behind the stone. A locally relevant example is how Dutch publishers re-packaged Peter Kolb's letters to a network of correspondents in Europe about the Cape Khoikhoi. The resulting book presented "travel accounts as being more scientific than literary in their form and content" (p 179) and changed the way Kolb's *Caput Bonae Spei Hodiernum* was read and understood.

This brings us to the challenge that questions and themes of transnationalism in book history or print culture studies require stronger local engagement. Recent initiatives that brought together committed scholars include special sessions at South African History conferences, as well as a couple of seminars and conferences arranged by internal and external institutions. This book, for example, is the product of successful collaboration between the French Institute of South Africa and the University of Cape Town. A half dozen special issues of journals, a few chapters in books, a couple of monographs, and a forthcoming reader on southern Africa's print, text, and book cultures account for the small but growing local scholarship. There is, however, still no institutional home for the research and tuition of book and print culture studies in South Africa.

Some departments of History and literature feature relevant themes as special topics, and even offer postgraduate studies but these are driven by individuals instead of curricula. Despite the initial plans for a research-driven Centre for the Book at the National Library of South Africa, its focus remains presentist and development-oriented. One way forward could be to establish a few regional centres in Africa, or to connect a network of South African book and print culture scholars to existing centres with broader but germane research themes. One example is the Africa Codicology Institute; another is the Institute of Humanities in Africa (HUMA) located at the University of Cape Town that also hosts the Timbuctu Manuscripts Project. There are other possibilities. Transnationalism, as this book demonstrates both practically and conceptually, evinces what the future for book and print culture studies in South Africa could be. A dedicated research centre and curriculum inclusion would secure it.

Archie L. Dick
University of Pretoria