

Purchasing Culture: The Dissemination of Associations in the Cross River Region of Cameroon and Nigeria

by Ute Rösenthaler

New Jersey: World Africa Press, 2011. 616 pp., 161 b/w ill., 37 maps, glossary, bibliography, index. \$49.95 paper

reviewed by Imo Nse Imeh

Purchasing Culture: the Dissemination of Associations in the Cross River Region of Cameroon and Nigeria, by Ute Rösenthaler, is a valuable and enriching contribution to the fields of African art and aesthetics, and cultural anthropology. Scholars of Nigerian traditional cultural associations and objects, especially those who focus on the rich history of the Cross River region, will find great use in Rösenthaler’s balanced navigation between the nuances of men’s and women’s associations and the market exchangeability of material cultures, aesthetic objects, and intangible properties. *Purchasing Culture* seeks to reveal the pivotal roles of cultural associations—such as the Ejagham women’s group Njom-Ekpa and the men’s group Ekpe—within their respective regions, by discussing the ties between regional migration and trade histories of these associations. This is truly a rich volume of work that exhaustively demonstrates the innumerable layers and textures of Ejagham associations and networks, and how they gain movement from one community to the next, and evolve to take on the needs of those who buy into them.

From the onset, Rösenthaler asserts that the marketability/purchasability and exchange of various components of Cross River “cultures” is connected to a larger drive to unite villages of different ethnic identities in a common trading network. We are asked to reconsider our understanding of significant associations like Ekpe; to see them not merely as one-dimensional, ritualistic “secret societies” but rather to think about these associations as *investments* that ultimately address issues of development and sustainability of African people by their own means.

Rösenthaler walks us through a range of topics that collectively address the history of regional cultural dissemination, including the detailed histories of the formations of men’s and women’s associations, the connections between dance associations and law-making, and the various ways in which these associations and their cultures are disseminated. I am impressed by the level of detail about these cultures that this book engages—even to the point of addressing the prevalence and history of associations that are generation-specific, such as Echo-Koriko and Isughi, associations for young boys, or Moninkim, the association for girls who are entering womanhood—neither of which, we learn, are purchasable cultures. In Chapter 10, Rösenthaler maps the historical trajectory of a handful of associations into their present-day struggles for relevance, sustainability, and purpose in the face of religious obstacles (namely, the preponderance of Christian beliefs), the politicization of associations, and the question of whether or not significant associations and their cultures should be sold to people who are not native to the region.

As my own research involves Cross River women’s aesthetics, I was especially drawn to her conversations about the relationships between men’s and women’s associations, and the aesthetic objects and performances that enter the complex world of cultural commerce that is central to her argument. Rösenthaler asserts that women’s associations have hardly had a firm place in theoretical approaches, villages in which they exist, or in other spaces of cultural significance and/or analysis. The notion of a complex systemic culture and body of philosophies that is woman-based is often trumped by the belief that women are somehow fixed to the more socially familiar activities of “housework” and “caring for children.” In Chapter 5, Rösenthaler demonstrates the inherent power and complexities of women’s associations, and at the same time, debunks the myth that they are merely inferior facsimiles of men’s associations. She finds that both men’s and women’s associations were developed at the same time “on the basis of an existing dual and complementary gendered ascription of tasks and responsibilities” (p.

215). She describes a textured system of interplay between men’s and women’s groups—a push and pull over bodies of information and forms of expression. For me, one of the great contributions of this portion of Rösenthaler’s analysis is that in no instance are the women’s associations that she either encountered or researched discussed in terms of passivity or neutrality—the author’s expert reporting demonstrates that a great part of the reason for the development, maintenance, and movement of associations and their material cultures lies with the ability of women to “retain control over the power of their bodies” (p. 215) and agency over their own cultural associations.

I find Rösenthaler’s conversation about the women’s association Ekpa, and the Ibibio and Igbo equivalents, Abang or Iban-Isong “association of daughters of the land” to be useful, not only as a means of describing the advent of “woman power” in the Ejagham village setting (as something that could be invoked during the “mask of night” to address issues such as the endangerment of a community and its food crops, or the violation of established social norms), but also as a force that had legs beyond the village setting and among foreigners, such as in the case of European Colonial officers and scholars, for whom “the mere thought of women using their nakedness, not as an erotic device, but as a weapon to punish and even kill men was a provocation” (p. 217). Rösenthaler’s discussion of Ekpa and other contiguous women’s associations, in this regard, reveals that this form of women’s power had both local and far-reaching consequences, even so far as into the collective imaginations of European colonists, and into the scope of colonial politics.

I am genuinely intrigued by the complex nature of cultural “purchasability” (that is *marketability*, in some instances, and *commercial availability* in others) as it is revealed through *Purchasing Culture*. We learn that these Ejagham associations, which already have an inherent allure, have *degrees* of purchasability, which are, at times, enhanced by “miraculous performances and secret languages,” intriguing objects and sculptures, and “elaborate performances.” And while the market value of certain cultures can be increased, there are existing regulations concerning which cultures can actually be purchased, and which can only be ascertained by other social interactions (such as marriage, for example). Not every culture is available for purchase.

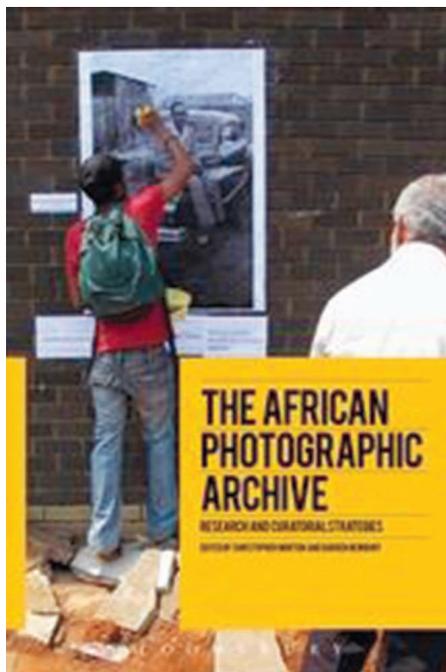
While Rösenthaler’s analysis is a very close reading of a portion of Ejagham territory, I found this book quite illuminating for my own study of Efik and Ibibio cultural objects and associations. For those of us who research African objects—not only their aesthetic histories and cultural significances, but also how and why they and their ideas move

across community and regional boundaries—this text is a useful resource, in that it carefully presents the strong case that objects of significance within associations that are similar to those found in Ejagham territory could possibly travel across regions, not just by means of physical commerce, but by the purchasing of intangible, aesthetic concepts as well.

I walk away from *Purchasing Culture* with a greater appreciation for the nuanced connections between women's and men's associations in Cross River. In my own research of the Ibibio women's institution known as Mbopo, I found many seemingly inexplicable aesthetic ties between Mbopo and the men's associations of Ekpo, Ekpe, and Ekong—the sharing of objects, emblems, performative gestures, and apparel—but found myself unable to grasp the rationale for and method behind a number of these connections. Rösenthaler's analysis has shed a new light for me to consider Mbopo, its material cultures, and how they gain movement via networks of exchange, in this respect. This book offers an encyclopedic collection of histories about the dominant associations in Ejagham culture, and tracks these histories into their contemporary positions, all in an effort to demonstrate the interconnectedness of commerce and exchange with sustainable and evolving cultural systems. Rösenthaler's work is a gift to Cross River scholarship and an invaluable contribution to the fields of African studies, women's/gender studies, art history, and anthropology.

IMO NSE IMEH is Assistant Professor of Art History at Westfield State University in Westfield, Massachusetts. His scholarship addresses the aesthetics of women's rituals in the Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria. He is the author of Daughters of Seclusion: The Revelation of the Ibibio "Fattened Bride" as the Icon of Beauty and Power. imoimeh@gmail.com

book review



The African Photographic Archive: Research and Curatorial Strategies

edited by Christopher Morton and Darren Newbury
London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 245 pages, 72 b/w ill., bibliography, index. \$112, cloth.

reviewed by Jessica Williams

Standing on a pile of rubble with his back to the viewer, Xolani Ngilima is fixed on the cover of this recently published collection of essays in the act of pasting an enlarged photograph, originally taken by his great-grandfather, Ronald Ngilima, onto a brick wall in Actonville (Benoni, Gauteng), South Africa. Taken by one of this compilation's twelve remarkable contributors, Sophie Feyder's documentation of the 2011 informal street exhibition "Searching for the Old Location" visually introduces the reader to several of the questions the authors of this volume engage. How does the publication of African photographers' previously private collections aid in or complicate the production of local histories? How do curators and scholars navigate the tensions that exist between the complex historical pasts photographs depict and their visual and material affects? What roles do oral histories play in the formation and interpretation of photographic archives that are located both on and off the continent and, extending from this, how do digitization efforts and new online platforms challenge our under-

standing of African photography as a categorical construct?

Edited by Christopher Morton and Darren Newbury, *The African Photographic Archive: Research and Curatorial Strategies* comprises an introduction and eleven significant case studies by authors who deftly explore the methodological challenges confronted by those researching the continent's photographic histories and sincerely interrogate the abounding practical, theoretical, and ethical matters of the archive. The well-illustrated book is separated into four parts along thematic, rather than chronological or geographical lines. While the first section, "Connected Histories," returns to the institutionalized collections of expeditions and colonial-era missions (Morton, Rippe), the book's second section, "Ethnographies," comprises studies that consider the potentially more precarious archives held and displayed in individual homes (Zeitlyn, Behrend, Vokes). "Political Framings," the book's third section, offers four case studies stemming from the South African context. Containing some of the compilation's most self-reflective essays, the authors in this section honestly explore the challenges of relocating previously neglected photographic collections in the present (Feyder, Newbury, Hayes) and complicate our understanding of once-oppressive images as they are artistically repurposed (Peffer). Further opening up discussions of the reinvention and relocation of photographic archives is the book's fourth and final section, "Archival Propositions." Featuring a photo essay (Stultiens) and a forceful contribution by Erin Haney and Jennifer Bajorek, this concluding portion of the book rigorously interrogates the roles Western institutions have played thus far in enclaving photographic collections while simultaneously forefronting the generative potentials of artistic and cross-regional archival collaborations.

In his contribution to the first part of the book, Christopher Morton offers detailed object biographies of two sets of Richard Buchta's (1845–1894) mounted albumen prints made during the Austrian photographer's early travels through Equatoria. Looking to the reproductions of Buchta's images in nineteenth century European literature, Morton addresses how Buchta's photographs shaped the visual representation of Central Africa throughout the nineteenth century and argues that they continue to do so today as dematerialized images online. Heike Behrend also looks to the ways in which images have been translated across mediums in her consideration of the shifting role photographs have played in funerary rites in central Kenya. In her discussion of how photographs from family archives have been edited and repurposed for printed funeral programs, Behrend links the resulting photographic biographies to the "pro-

