Reichardt on Fardon, 'Lela in Bali: History through Ceremony in Cameroon'

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The Broader Context of the Bali Kingdom's Lela Celebrations in Germany's Cameroon Schutzgebiet

Reconstructing and reevaluating the photographic and textual record left behind in mainly German and Swiss archives, Richard Fardon's book *Lela in Bali* is an ethnographic study and historical encapsulation of the Bali region of Cameroon, which was historically dominated by one or more African kingdoms but also subject to various European colonial ambitions. With his focus on the Lela festival of 1908 as celebrated by the Bali people of Cameroon, Fardon also compares accounts of earlier and subsequent Lela festivals and places his findings within the expanded context of Cameroonian history. Despite its authorship by an anthropologist, *Lela in Bali* could be of interest to cultural historians working on Imperial Germany, colonialism, and the history of anthropology. In addition to the book's contribution to German colonial history (Germany claimed Cameroon as a colony roughly from 1884 until 1918 and afterwards as well though no longer officially), one key point of interest to scholars of German Studies might be Fardon's exemplary use of archival sources in Germany that aided the composition of his richly detailed analysis of Cameroon's Bali ceremonial culture.

Fardon's volume is predominantly a story about the Grasslands people of Cameroon near the West African coast. This story includes numerous German-speaking explorers, officials, and missionaries who, in contrast to other authors' critical discussions specifically highlighting abuses by representatives from Imperial Germany, appear more as tolerated guests, or at worst as invading technocrats, instead of imperialist overlords.[1] In the early 1800s, the Bali people migrated and fought their way from present-day Nigeria south into Cameroon and an area referred to as the Grasslands. Most of them were under the rule of the Bali king, or Fon, sitting in Bali Nyonga. From 1889 on, successive Bali kings received German guns and military advice in order to hold their Mankon and Bafut neighbors at bay. In 1905, the Fon of Bali became the official regional paramount and in return supplied labor forces for coastal plantations and hundreds of irregular troops "to assist their German ally's campaign of pacification and to buttress their own paramountcy in the process" (p. 6).

Once a year, the Bali people gathered to celebrate a four-day festival ushering out the old year and welcoming the new. Led by their Fon and Nwana priests, they consulted the divine Nyikob entity, and the fortunes of the coming year were predicted by the behavior of a selected chicken destined for the feast. Subsequent days offered occasions for military parades and colorful Mardi Gras-like festivities. Such celebrations reportedly welcomed the Bali public and foreign visitors equally. In this book,
Fardon engages in the complicated process of amending reconstructed histories of cultural practices associated with Lela and carefully discerns what we can learn from outsiders' documentation of the event. The book considers the writings logged by Swiss Protestant missionaries such as Ferdinand Ernst, German explorers, and vanguard German colonial officials such as Eugen Zintgraff, as well as the photographs of Bernhard Ankermann from the Berlin Museum of Ethnology. One of its strengths is its magnificently dramatic portrayal of the festival, which takes into account the presence of European guests and their probable situational impact upon the staging of the celebration. Specifically, Fardon easily tackles the daunting task of confronting the stifling questions of how much the Lela ceremony varied because of the presence of Europeans and to what extent the photographs from the event were staged. The Bali apparently welcomed these variants to the list of Lela participants, especially because attendees from Germany were regarded as useful military allies. Fardon suggests that cultural change is constant, and that some form of outside influence always exists, whether from a neighboring village, kingdom, or continent. Fardon's discussion is far from heavy-handed, and he avoids the paradoxical questions regarding the "authenticity" of Lela festival culture, which would have preoccupied fin-de-siècle ethnographers as well as countless subsequent discussants. Because "authenticity" is culturally defined and is not a normative category in itself, the search for it would ultimately be pointless and futile. Accordingly, Fardon carefully avoids over-interpreting his sources. He refrains from hazarding a guess as to what individuals were thinking or what their intentions might have been, always letting the reader know what is documented and what we are unable to ascertain without delving into pop psychology.

The evidence Fardon presents points toward an increasing secularization of Lela celebrations after 1908, which went hand in hand with stepped-up Protestant missionary activity and Christianization efforts. Therefore, as Fardon seems to imply, while the Bali initially benefited from Germany's intervention into Cameroon politics and Lela began to thrive as a display of Bali might, within a few short years, European hegemony began to constrict and stifle key aspects of the flourishing festival culture. Interestingly, the transformation of Lela, especially with regard to the introduction of Protestant Christianity and the resulting secularization of the festival, bears the distinct characteristics of modernization. Fast-forwarding to the 1960s, the author notes a more prominent role of the queen mother, symbolisms associated with Bali women, and official participation by the Fon's maternal relatives during Lela celebrations in postcolonial Cameroon. In all likelihood, new flags and official participants filled a void left behind by colonial officials and their respective flags. After Cameroon's independence, members of the Bali Historical Society began reflecting upon their festival culture and publishing studies on their history. As the number of Bali publications increased during the 1970s and 1980s, writers from Cameroon started to chronicle Lela and incorporated descriptions of how Lela changed over time, even as the Fon continued to preside over the celebration, using the popular festival to conduct official business. Meanwhile, modern concerns such as the logistics of staging this unique carnival cropped up as well.

The value of Lela in Bali to German Studies is evident, as a welcome addition to the history of Imperial Germany and postcolonial developments, as a rich source of pathways to further research, and as a measured contribution to current debates over the utility of primary sources on Germany's colonies. Despite a recent critique by Hans-Ulrich Wehler of the new transnational histories focusing on Imperial Germany, Fardon's book offers one more concrete example for the significance of Germany's involvement in Cameroon's cultural and religious history.[2] In this precisely focused micro-history, readers also gain insight into how several German anthropologists gathered
photographs and observation notes, primarily for the advancement of science but also for eventual dissemination among the educated middle classes via books, articles in popular home journals, and displays in municipal museums. The impact of late-nineteenth-century anthropology on the European mindset of the early twentieth century has been studied in depth. Ironically, long before scholars of German history claimed places like Cameroon as crucial to understanding the history of Germany, the government of Imperial Germany claimed places like Cameroon as vitally relevant to the national interests of Germany. Fardon's study presents a new addition to Cameroon Studies, and therefore also to the history of Germany and its global networks.

Notes

[1]. For example, Gisela Graichen and Horst Gründer, Deutsche Kolonien. Traum und Trauma (Berlin: Ullstein, 2005).


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