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RECENSIONI / REVIEWS

Florence Brisset-Foucault, *Talkative Polity: Radio, Domination, and Citizenship in Uganda*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2019, 328 p.

Florence Brisset-Foucault's book is a major contribution to African studies. It cuts across several disciplines, contributing to media studies, cultural anthropology and political sciences on the ground of a thoroughly researched, thought-provoking analysis of a Ugandan weekly live radio talk show, the *ekimeeza*. This live talk show appeared first in Kampala, around 2000, in a particular venue, the Club Obbligato, where a small number of politically active members of the elite started to meet weekly to discuss the programs of the presidential candidates for the upcoming 2001 elections. The number of participants quickly increased, attracting the interest of one of the local private radio stations (Radio One), which began to broadcast these debates as a live weekly talk show. The formula caught up and was replicated by several other broadcasters in Kampala and elsewhere across the country, transforming the *ekimeeza* (plural: *ebimeeza*; Luganda word for "round-table") in the most popular interactive talk show genre in Uganda, until Museveni's regime banned it in 2009. This program became a major avenue for common people to express and share their political views, within the context of a "semiauthoritarian regime". However, as Brisset-Foucault shows, far from being simply the result of the emergence of a new form of "free speech", the *ekimeeza* established itself as a complex space of negotiation within which specific limits were "imposed on the ways in which people may imagine themselves as part of a polity" (p. 4). In this sense, Brisset-Foucault uses it as an ideal entry point for the analysis of the contradictory tensions at play in the processes of political subjectivation taking place in Uganda under Museveni's regime.

Critical of existing normative definitions of "hybrid regimes" in Africa, based on dichotomic understandings of what constitutes authoritarianism and democracy, domination and resistance, Brisset-Foucault's analysis of the *ekimeeza* genre and its transformations over a decade-long period produces a nuanced portrait of the complex dynamics by which "conformity can be produced without necessarily being equated with support for the regime or involving absolute constraint" (p. 244). Echoing Marissa Moorman's suggestion that the "sonorous capitalism" of radio broadcasting probably played a bigger role than print capitalism in the processes of formation of African public spheres throughout the twen-

tieth century,¹ Brisset-Foucault's book guides us in understanding how diverging tensions participated in shaping the Ugandan publics in the age of multiparty politics. The malleability of the *ekimeeza* genre's format allowed for competing and often diverging models of citizenship and polity to come to the fore, and for different actors (including journalists, political activists, traditional leaders, members of the ruling party, members of the NGOs) to express themselves. At the same time, however, this genre's links to "a history of interelite relations *within* the political, economic, and social establishments" (p. 23, italics in the original) contributed to producing forms of participation that depended on the capacity to conform to specific rules and ways of conceiving citizenships.

Hence, *ebimeeza* shows did not simply opened up the political arena to discordant political views; they also contributed in producing discipline and conformity from below. As Brisset-Foucault highlights, here, conformity occurred in order to "make critiques more credible, stronger and more legitimate" (p. 245). It also corresponded to individual aspirations "to engage in honourable speech" as a strategy to favour "social ascension" (*ibidem*). Many participants saw *ebimeeza* as opportunities to develop professional careers as politicians, public orators or media figures, and prepared accordingly, carefully crafting the content of their speeches ahead of the public performance. The historical trajectory of the *ekimeeza* genre that Brisset-Foucault produces in this book can thus be read also as a tale of the battle for social and political visibility of different political and social actors in recent Ugandan history.

The *ebimeeza* "provide a heuristic entry point to unearth the historicity of entrenched emic debates about the conditions of political participation and belonging in Uganda" (p. 14). Brisset-Foucault unearths these debates by mobilizing a vast array of different sources, including interviews, materials collected during fieldwork (such as speakers' notes, list of debate topics, list of presenters, written messages exchanged by members of the audience), notes based on participant observation, archival research, and questionnaires with regular participants to the talk shows. The wealth and depth of details contained by these documents give her the possibility to produce, across the nine chapters that comprise the book, a detailed description of the historical and sociological context from which this genre has emerged, and a thick analysis of the processes of political subjectivation taking place during the talk shows and as a result of their broadcast.

The way the political role of radio is analysed in the book is particularly valuable, as it convincingly manages to go beyond the normative debates that dominate much media studies analysis about the role of popular media in democratization processes across Africa. While recognizing the importance of analysing the role that (both old and new) media play in processes of political transformation across the continent, Brisset-Foucault argues for the need to produce detail-

1. M. Moorman, "Airing the Politics of Nation: Radio in Angola, Past and Present", in L. Gunner, D. Ligaga and D. Moyo, eds., *Radio in Africa: Publics, Cultures, Communities*, Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2011, p. 241.

led, ethnographically grounded and historically situated analysis that can take into account the complexity of contemporary African mediascapes, and the specificity of the infrastructural, political, economic and cultural constraints in relation to which they evolve. Brisset-Foucault, for instance, shows how political contents was often side-lined by radio broadcasters not much because of the authoritarian prescriptions of the ruling regime, but because “it was not financially attractive” (p. 50). Commercial logics drove radio broadcasters toward programs that could attract advertisers, and *ebimeeza* were given airtime precisely because they were also successful commercially: audiences liked them. This shows us the importance of keeping the analysis of the political dimension of these shows (and of political communication more generally) connected to larger questions about the cultural, narrative and aesthetic attributes that make specific speech genres successful at specific historical moments, raised for instance by scholars such as Karin Barber and Stephanie Newell in relation to the study of West African popular culture production.

Evolving along the lines of a number of major recent works on radio broadcasting in sub-Saharan Africa based on in-depth ethnographic and historical research,² Brisset-Foucault’s work shows once again how, in a world dominated by internet and smartphones, radio remains a fundamental tool for political participation across countries of the South. This book thus not only present the results of a solid research, it also implicitly makes a statement in support of the production of a more holistic, nuanced, and historically precise analysis of the impact of different media technologies in the processes of formation and consolidation of African public spheres. Much recent research is conditioned by forms of “digital exceptionalism” and sees internet and social networks as game-changing technologies that have opened unprecedented spaces for political participation from below, in Africa and beyond. *Talkative Polity* shows us that things are much more complex, and that our understanding of the role of media in contemporary processes of political subjectivation will very much benefit from studying the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity that exist between the different modes of political participation that specific technologies produced at precise historical moments.

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2. H. Englund, *Gogo Breeze: Zambia’s Radio Elder and the Voices of Free Speech*, Chicago IL, University of Chicago Press, 2018; L. Gunner, *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019; M. Moorman, *Powerful Frequencies: Radio, State Power, and the Cold War in Angola, 1931-2002*, Athens OH, Ohio University Press, 2019.

Carlo Piaggia e le sue esplorazioni africane (1851-1882), edited by Luca Lupi, researches and texts by Giancarlo Caselli, Michele Quirici, Giorgio Tori ... [et al.], Pontedera, Tagete, 2017, 2 vols., 2073 p.

The historiography that has flourished around the lives of explorers has always swung between re-evocations and silences, an inevitable indication of an often ambivalent, never simple relationship between historians and these particular figures of the past. In the case of Italy, the works celebrating the exploits of explorers in real time have been followed by periods of sheer slackness and indifference, with intermittent flareups of renewed interest. Thus in the late 19th century, Italian explorers were very popular, thanks to both the specialized and amateur geography periodicals that had just sprouted up, attracting a wide readership; an enthusiasm that faded in the early twentieth century and then revived in a true conflagration in the 1930s, with college courses, publishing series and an impressive array of biographies devoted to the “pioneers” of expansion in Africa.

Since the 1970s, the problem of the origins of Italian colonialism has seen a very active commitment by historians of geography and explorations, who have investigated the role of explorers in the process of Italian expansionism and the construction of consensus and the colonial imaginary. In 1975, the first issue of *Miscellanea di Storia delle Esplorazioni* was published, a periodical that for forty years has been a fundamental point of reference for this type of research. Then, with the beginning of the new millennium, the history of exploration in Africa suffered a sharp setback, at least at the research level – a little due to what could be defined as the original sin of this subject, its ambiguous relationship with colonial expansion. What Gennaro Mondaini stated in this regard is indicative, when in 1927 he wrote that “The exploration and knowledge of the territories [...] constituted the prelude and the even more necessary presupposition of any colonial action in Italy” and defined missionaries and explorers as “pioneers of European colonial expansion on the dark continent”³. But what influenced this pause was above all a certain difficulty in offering a new interpretation of African explorations, one capable of asking new questions, perhaps trying to get clear of a markedly Eurocentric perspective, starting from the recognition that explorations were not an exclusively Western phenomenon⁴, and that exploration as a fully decipherable act requires the cooperation of such disciplines as geography, anthropology, book and publishing history, and literary criticism⁵. The need to overcome the marked self-referentiality of the literature produced by explorers has led some scholars to investigate the methods of exploration⁶, in search of

3. G. Mondaini, *Manuale di storia e legislazione coloniale del Regno d'Italia*, vol. 1, Roma, A. Sampaolesi, 1927, p. 178.

4. G. Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.

5. D. Kennedy, ed., *Reinterpreting Exploration. The West in the World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

6. I. Surun, *Dévoiler l'Afrique? Lieux et pratiques de l'exploration, Afrique occidentale, 1780-1880*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2018.

intermediaries (interpreters, guides, porters), who were fundamental to the success of each expedition⁷. While research setbacks were evident in Italian universities, the same does not hold true at the local level, where activities have continued, with towns and provinces celebrating the biographies of “their” travelers. What spared Carlo Piaggia (1827, Badia di Cantignano, Town of Capannori, Lucca - January 17, 1882, Karkoj, Sudan) the *damnatio memoriae* of many other explorers was most likely his so-called atypicality, his anomalous career, which made him unique among the standard ranks of 19th-century explorers. In his introduction, Claudio Cerreti defines him as “the first and only proletarian [...] who played a major role in acquiring knowledge of the world” (p. 11), a description that perfectly fits this traveler of quite modest origins, whose father was a miller, and who, as the third child of eight brothers and two sisters, decided in 1851 to emigrate to Tunisia to escape poverty. His transformation into an explorer was due to a series of fortuitous circumstances, such that Piaggia, before donning the mantle of explorer, had worked as a gunsmith, a bookbinder, a hatter, an upholsterer, a coach painter, a house painter, a laborer and a hunter. But mainly what made his profile atypical was his humanity, his empathy with the peoples he visited and his respect for others, traits that also influenced his style of traveling and approaching the range of realities he observed.

With such premises, it is natural that local institutions have been very sympathetic to Carlo Piaggia ever since 1936, when Giovanni Alfonso Pellegrinetti, one of his first biographers, lent his name to the Technical Commercial Institute of Viareggio in the province of Lucca, where Piaggia was born. Indeed, local institutions have played a fundamental role in maintaining the memory of this traveler, starting with the Lucchese Historical Institute, chaired by Antonio Romiti, who has always been a great admirer of Piaggia. Hence the genesis of the two volumes under review owes a great deal to the local affection for and knowledge of Piaggia. The Foundation of the Cassa di Risparmio of Lucca donated the resources for the four years of intense research that have gone into this work and for its publication. The mayors of Lucca and Capannori, the Lucchese Historical Institute and the Lucca Chamber of Commerce also contributed to the project’s realization, a group endeavor, in which the energy and competence of Luca Lupi, who curated the two volumes and recruited the leading Piaggia experts (Giancarlo Caselli, Roberto Giovannini, Michele Quirici, Antonio Romiti, Elisabetta and Paolo Emilio Tomei and Giorgio Tori), who contributed to the research by signing part of the texts.

The project starts by pinpointing the crucial need in Piaggia studies to combine in a single, definitive work, till now lacking, the research that has been

7. On this see Felix Driver’s and Lowri Jones’s interesting online exhibit, *Hidden Histories of Exploration* (2009), hosted on the Royal Geographical Society website: <https://www.rgs.org/about/our-collections/online-exhibitions/hidden-histories-of-exploration/> (accessed 15 December 2021). The exhibit catalogue published as: Felix Driver, Lowri Jones, *Hidden Histories of Exploration. Researching the RGS-IBG Collections*, London, Royal Holloway-University of London, 2009.

done on him to date. Although in 1941 Giovanni Alfonso Pellegrinetti, with his *Memorie di Carlo Piaggia*, came close to achieving this end, the studies of Antonio Romiti⁸, Giorgio Tori and Ezio Bassani⁹, all focused on mainly limited aspects of Piaggia's life, have created the conditions for a timely synthesis.

Many scholars, fascinated by Piaggia's simple way of traveling and relating to the populations he visited, as by the complex maze of versions of his later *Memorie*, have missed what is another unique detail in Piaggia's life, namely the long duration of his exploratory and travel activities. Piaggia first arrived in Sudan in November 1856, and died on 17 January 1882 in Karkoj, on the Blue Nile. Hence he spent twenty-six years in Sudan, with sojourns in notoriously unhealthy areas such as Holy Cross, Gondokoro and Rejaf, on the White Nile. It is really hard to find travelers in this part of Africa with such a considerable "service record". Many others did not have such luck, their stays on the Nile cut short by fevers and a variety of tropical diseases. The White Nile and the swamps of Bahr al-Ghazal were in effect a deadly and inescapable "white man's tomb". Piaggia was one of the few Europeans who had the privilege of witnessing two distinct periods, in terms of environment and people, in the history of Sudan: that of the 1850s-1860s and later that of the 1870s. In the first period he witnessed the often illegal activities carried on by a group of European traders who operated along the White Nile – including Andrea De Bono, Jules and Delphine Barthelemy, Alphonse De Malzac, Antoin Brun Rollet and Adolfo Antognoli – and then in the 1870s the arrival of the many Europeans who were part of the Sudan administration during the Gordon Pasha years.

For almost thirty years Piaggia wrote, in his uncertain Italian, notes, diaries, notebooks, letters, correspondence, and then collected objects, animals and plants. His memoirs and reports went through various editions, at times with substantial differences and different periodisations. A considerable amount of documents and collections are scattered in at least a dozen locations, though the most substantial nuclei of his writings are kept in the State Archives and the State Library of Lucca. The curator of the work has chosen to publish the existing drafts of his *Memorie*, thus enabling scholars to access as much data as possible.

The organization of the work is eminently chronological, starting with a substantial introduction devoted to Piaggia's youth and an overview of his exploration of Africa, and moving on through the four main periods of his African sojourn: the first (1856-1859) made up mainly of hunts along the White Nile and his rather inconsistent intention to discover the sources of the Nile; the second (1860-1866) occupied by journeys along the White Nile and the Bahr al-Ghazal,

8. A. Romiti, *Il viaggio in Abissinia di Carlo Piaggia, (1871 - 1875)*, Capannori, [s.n.], 1998; A. Romiti, ed., *Le memorie di Carlo Piaggia. Nuovi contributi alla conoscenza dell'esploratore di Badia di Cantignano*, Capannori, Comune di Capannori, 1998; C. Piaggia, *Primo viaggio in Africa, 1851-1859*, memoirs transcribed by Giancarlo Caselli, with Antonio Romiti's and Giorgio Tori's introductory notes, Capannori, Comune di Capannori, 2008.

9. C. Piaggia, *Nella terra dei Niam-Niam: 1863-1865. Da i Viaggi di Carlo Piaggia nell'Africa*, ed. E. Bassani, with a language note by A. Stella, [Lucca], M. Pacini Fazzi, 1978.

and later, especially by explorations of the Azande territory (Niam-Niam), on the border between Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo; the third (1871-1877), which involved Eritrea and Ethiopia, and later Lake Alberto and Kioga; and the fourth (1878-1882) on the Blue Nile and later on the Sobat as a member of the expedition of the Dutchman Jean Marie Schuver. Each period includes a detailed introduction followed by the text of Piaggia's memoirs, accompanied by extensive explanatory notes on characters and places and by reproductions of rare texts and documents. Of the four periods, the best known is the second, when Piaggia, on his own, achieved the most important feat of his life, managing to remain among the Azande for almost two years, the first European to reside in this area and to leave a comprehensive description of it. But it is difficult to formulate a hierarchy of his journeys by importance since each in its own way had elements of powerful interest. The third period (1871-1875), for example, generally neglected by critics, actually offers a wealth of data. It consisted of two different expeditions, the first in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the second in the region of the equatorial lakes, cumulatively the phase for which Piaggia was acclaimed an authentic "explorer". The conference held on November 8, 1876 at the headquarters of the "Société Khédiviale de Géographie du Caire" – in which he was appointed honorary member – and the gold medal granted by the Italian Geographic Society (September 1877) sanctioned this consecration.

Another appreciable item is the space the curator devotes to Piaggia's three returns to his homeland (1859, 1866-1871, 1877), fundamental for understanding the genesis and functioning mechanisms of the explorations, but also the difficulties, misunderstandings and frustrations that the participants of these journeys often experienced on their return from Africa.

The last two chapters are devoted to an interesting review of how Carlo Piaggia has been remembered since the end of the 19th century, and to the notes of one of the five members (Roberto Giovannini) of the expedition "In the footsteps of Carlo Piaggia", which, in February 1982 on the occasion of the centenary of the explorer's death, retraced the itinerary Piaggia made among the Azande people.

To appreciate and understand this work, it is necessary to place it in a distinct editorial perimeter, that of Bank Publishing, which partly explains some of its features. Bank publications are rare and particularly valuable undertakings that, however, remain unmarketed, commissioned with the foreknowledge that such works can rarely satisfy the standards of market logic. They aspire to highlight knowledge on specific issues by a careful attention to both content and graphics. The encyclopedic approach especially evident in these two volumes, where reconstruction clearly prevails over analysis, must also be understood as typical of such publishing¹⁰. This richly illustrated work, in addition to its imposing

10. In November 2021 Luca Lupi and Michele Quirici published the volume *Carlo Piaggia. Dalla lucchesia all'Africa (1851-1882)*, which offers the results of this research in a more accessi-

cartographic apparatus, also contains a small travel notebook by the Venetian painter Damin, kept in the Lucca State Archives among the Piaggia manuscripts and for the first time the subject of a complete publication. In a volume where the images are chosen with great care and expertise, the insertions of wildlife shots that are hard to connect to Piaggia are somewhat jolting. Though it is undoubtedly a formidable work – 2073 pages – well aware of being a milestone in Piaggia studies, it lacks an index of names and a bibliography, two essential tools for navigating and getting the most out of the enormous amount of information offered to the reader. Such a precious undertaking should not suffer from what is, unfortunately, one of the downsides of bank publishing, namely a distribution that is always much too limited. It is paradoxical to sponsor and finance such a unique work as this while neglecting its circulation, which should go at full throttle.

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ble format and with a more informative slant. The volume is hosted in the “Italian explorers” section of the *Esploratori italiani* series of the Tagete publishing house.