

ENGEL, Elisabeth. 2015. Encountering Empire: African American Missionaries in Colonial Africa, 1900-1939. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag. 303 pp. ISBN 978-3-515-11117-1

reviewed by

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The historiography of Black America involvement in Africa is framed within the discourse of anti-colonial conflicts. Black Americans are theorized as either Pan-Africanists, or just plain concerned anti-colonialists drawn to Africa by the combined forces of historical/Providential Design, and convergence of the challenges of domestic struggles and excesses of colonialism. Some studies analyse efforts of prominent individuals in specific African nations. Others highlight African American institutional interventions in major colonial encounters. One theme dominates the historiography: confrontation and antagonism. Elisabeth Engel's *Encountering Empire* revises this historiography. The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) missionaries encountered the colonial system not as antagonists or Pan-Africanists. Rather they deemphasized confrontation by distancing themselves from the Pan-African movement, enabling them to overcome British suspicion and avoid being labeled anti-colonialists with a liberation agenda. In essence, they established that Africa's descendants were not uniformly driven by one overarching nationalist obligation to an ancestral homeland. Challenging the dominant narratives, Engel contends that blacks who escaped colonialism did not remain apathetic and apolitical. Neither was the AME's involvement in civil rights activism confined to America. Using British West Africa and South Africa as case studies, Engel demonstrates how AME missionaries moved beyond the United States into the transatlantic world where they engaged the colonial system, becoming what she describes as a "micro-event" within colonial entanglement.

The founding of the AME Missionary Department in 1844 launched missionaries such as Charles Spencer Smith, Henry McNeal Turner, Levi J. Coppin and John A. Gregg on foreign missions. This overseas extension forged a fundamental link between African Americans, Africans and their colonizers. Hitherto, Engel contends, African American missionaries had not been analysed as part of colonial encounter. They were portrayed instead as

“agents” drawn “naturally” to Africa due to historic relationship. Britain had in fact attempted to isolate the missionaries as it had the more militant Pan-African and anti-colonial Garvey movement. The AME missionaries, however, renounced the confrontational Pan-African platform, representing themselves as friendly agents and harbingers of a new source of knowledge of Africa. By the 1920s, the AME Missionary Department began to emphasize “specialists” and “efficiency” as opposed to “Providential Design” in its selections for foreign assignments. In their travels and writings, the missionaries offered new means of interpreting and understanding Africa that helped American blacks gain enhanced understanding of their identity and history. Their engagement with colonialism created opportunities for Africans within the colonial system that otherwise would not have been available had they been confrontational. They theorized Africa as a complex continent that could not accurately be deciphered from a distance or systematized as a whole. They debunked the prevailing “Dark Continent” narratives, and contested the authority of Western science and intellectual tradition, while validating their own first-hand accounts. Collectively, they prioritized “direct contact” as key to proper understanding of Africa.

AME missionaries took three interrelated paths. First, through their travels and writings they authenticated their voices and perspectives and produced a distinctly black missionary knowledge of Africa. Second, they joined the global ecumenical tradition in the Inter-War years, and third, through their encounter with the native as both a colonial category and Church functionary, AME officials framed the Church in Africa as an institution that enriched Africans despite limitations imposed by the colonial state. In essence, they latched on to the colonial system and recoded colonial schemes as practices of black self-determination that afforded African agency, mobility and material benefits.

Engel advances three historiographical theses. First, within anti-colonial discourse, she suggests that the AME missionaries exemplified a pragmatic alternative to the prevailing and problematic Pan-African ideology and movement that had both problematized relationship with the British and dominated scholarship on Africa - Black America relations. Secondly, she tackles the absence of empire in United States history through re-conceptualizing post-colonialism. By “re-inscribing empire as a complex, relational and productive form of power” (p. 273), Engel makes the compelling contention that post-colonialism did not begin with anti-colonial

struggles, but was rooted as well in the efforts of those AME missionaries who sought for, and gained, new possibilities to speak and function on the imperial stage. Third, she critiques and revises Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic emphasis on the African American perspective by highlighting the role of Africans in transatlantic networking.

This is a well-researched and powerfully written revisionist study of both the historiography of the AME Church and its missions, and the broader Africa - Black America relations. Engel makes a compelling case for both re-inscribing empire into United States history and rethinking post-colonialism. Furthermore, she challenges prevailing interpretation of Christian missionaries as active agents and collaborators of colonialism. The AME missionaries in this study encountered the colonial regime as both critics and transformative agents whose intervention not only offer a much nuanced counter-narrative to prevailing Eurocentric interpretations of Africa, but also was immensely beneficial to both colonial subjects in Africa and African Americans.