M. R. Moyd: Violent Intermediaries


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Who were the askari? Michelle R. Moyd admits in the opening sentence of her preface that a very simple question stood at the beginning of her research project: „who were the askari (sic, KD), the African men who fought for the German colonial army during the East African campaign of World War I?” (p. xi). As so often the case with simple questions, they mark the beginning of a long investigative journey. In her book „Violent Intermediaries. African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa“ Moyd succeeded in extensively answering this question by reconstructing the men, known as askari, and the sociocultural context that shaped them and was shaped by them in turn.

Violent Intermediaries is a detailed examination of a particular social group - the askari - in a particular space and time - German East Africa (until the end of World War I) - and its interaction with a broader historical development – colonialism. It analyses how the askari contributed to the making of the colonial state in German East Africa (p. 4). In this way it seeks to unravel the inner workings of colonialism in practice (p. 10).

Moyd pursues her research aim by reconstructing the askari in their sociocultural context through thick description. Their experiences are made understandable to the reader by interpretative techniques, accordingly employing approaches from historiography, anthropology as well as cultural studies. The historical sources from German and Tanzanian archives are treated cautiously by paying attention to the sense-making realities of their origin. The author carefully dissects from them how the actors made sense of their surroundings and reconstructs this clearly for the reader. The „everyday“ serves her as a category both, for quotidian practices and to examine the micropolitics involved in state making processes of the time (p. 29 f.). The book’s main argument is „that the askari played a critical role in making the colonial state“ (p. 17) and „that making the Schutztruppe required an interactive sociocultural process between Africans and Germans [..]“ (p. 23).

In Violent Intermediaries the empirical material is presented in a clearly structured way guiding the reader chapter wise through the recruitment of askari, their training and socialisation, their immediate fighting practices and experience as well as their quotidian life in the maboma (plural of boma that in Kiswa-hili refers to a military outpost). Chapter five then brings together the different aspects of askari-life and analyses the „Askari as Agents of Everyday Colonialism“ (p. 182). The introduction and conclusion provide an ideal framing. The introduction prepares the different aspects the book examines in relation to the case of the askari, while the conclusion takes the reader from the in depth analysis of the askari as intermediaries to more general implications.

While reading one may wonder initially about the somewhat disproportionate length of the first chapter (which is almost twice the length of the others). Here, Moyd not only depicts various recruitment practices of the Germans, but moreover links their success to the non-colonial martial culture, tracing the origins and experiences of individual askari biographies back to pre-colonial times. Thus, she makes an outstanding contribution to writing history in the „deep past“ (p. 13). A task that historians often shy away from, due to the challenging access to sources.

In her depictions the author brings the askari to life, particularly by showing their relation towards other groups, like the German Schutztruppe officers or the askari wives and dependants. Exemplary for this are the accounts of seemingly trivial details of everyday interaction. These reveal, for example, that German orders and military contributions were not always unquestionably accepted. The gymnastic exercises introduced by German officers prompted some askari to think of monkeys, evoking quite a lot of scepticism towards them (p. 101). Turning to the askari’s interaction with their wives, Moyd shows that they were by no means passive subjects, but rather agents with their own in-
terests and room for manoeuvre. If an askari failed to appropriately provide for his family and household, either due to absence on expeditions or irresponsibility – such as being “an inveterate drunkard“, it happened that his wife would complain to the German officer in charge (p. 155). Another illustration of the status of women are the numerous accounts of them demanding to follow the troops on campaigns and expeditions. For askari men as well as their wives, the (visible) household was important to manifest their position and status (p. 123 f). With the askari wives the author describes in lively detail a group which is often omitted in conventional history writing – women. By making these actors visible she shows in particular “women’s constitutive place in the making of askari, and indeed, Schutztruppe masculinities” (p. 155).

My only comment to this outstanding analysis could in fact better be understood as an enthusiast remark provoked by this very intriguing reading. With an elegant self-evidence Moyd analyses the social and cultural importance of the maboma (the military fortresses of the Schutztruppe) in their spacial dimension. She depicts their importance for the contact and merging of the different African and German cultures. This is illustrated by her thorough description of festive occasions and their dance performances where Prussian-style parade and African dance conceptions interacted, as shown by the Kiswahili loanword „manova“ (from „maneuver“) for mock-fighting as part of dancing choreography (p. 200 f.). Her actor centred approach, cautious display of different languages’ interaction and careful depiction of what are essentially moments of „cultural transfer“, bound by the particular spacial dynamic of the maboma, thus invite to read these places as „portals of globalization“. This category refers to „places that [...] have served as entrance points for cultural transfer, and where institutions and practices for dealing with global connectedness have been developed.“¹ To my reading Moyd’s analysis of the East African maboma can be interpreted as essentially that – portals of global connectedness.

As a work of African history (and connected to military studies), Violent Intermediaries will naturally be a valuable contribution in this field. Moreover her work also approaches the askari through cultural studies and anthropological perspectives. Since the book rests on the intersection of these different disciplines, it will be particularly interesting to scholars of similar interdisciplinary studies such as global or transnational history. In light of the just said, I find it an exemplary work of current scholarly history writing that should thus be highly recommended to students of the subject. Her eloquent writing blends thorough narration of individual biographies and the rich depiction of everyday life with subsequent general conclusions. This should make her account of the askari also interesting to people initially not concerned with the topic.

Moyd has worked on issues relating to the focus of Violent Intermediaries since more than a decade. To me this fits nicely with my impression of a well rounded thoughtfully written and reasoned book. She manages to reconcile the German inflated myth of the „loyal askari“ and the post-colonial Tanzanian emphasis of the askari as brutal agents of colonialism, by showing the many nuances in between – tracing the contradictory accounts to eventually reveal simple human behaviour.
