

BALE, JOHN. *Imagined Olympians: Body Culture and Colonial Representation in Rwanda*. Sport and Culture Series. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Pp. xxx+277. Appendix, notes, bibliography, index, black and white photographs. \$19.95 pb.

I have been waiting a long time for a book like this. In *Imagined Olympians*, John Bale demonstrates how history and post-structuralist theory can merge effectively and eloquently to illuminate the past and provoke us to reconsider the present. The author allows his historical imagination to play off of his postmodern sensibility without resorting to pedantic statements about academic reflexivity. *Imagined Olympians* describes and analyzes Western European representations of a unique Rwandan body practice. By his own admission, Bale has not written a history of a sporting practice in colonial Rwanda. Rather, he regards his project as "an exploration and interrogation of European representations (mainly writings and photographs) of an indigenous form of Rwandan athleticism" (p. xviii).

Bale demonstrates that the representations of *Gusimbuka-urukiramende* (a spectacle that resembles Western athletic high jumping) were constructed through the Western gaze for European consumption. He argues convincingly that Europeans allowed their Western gaze to inaccurately "sportize" an indigenous form of Rwandan body culture. A number of European travellers to Rwanda in the twentieth century observed a spectacle in which Rwandan Tutsi, Hutu and Twa men demonstrated marvelous feats of physical prowess by leaping over horizontal bars suspended six to seven feet above the ground. Through the filter of their European sport discourse, these travel writers and photographers *imagined*, and then represented, these indigenous performers as potential athletes in Olympic high jump competitions. Ultimately, Bale argues that the "sportization" of *Gusimbuka-urukiramende* produced an artificial and idealized stereotype of ethnic Tutsi jumpers that was consumed by Europeans and Rwandans alike. Bale suggests that the idealization of Tutsi high jumpers magnified differences between Rwandan Tutsis and Hutus. In other words, the athletic stereotype of Tutsis contributed to politically charged ethnic and racial discourses in Rwanda that privileged Tutsi bodies and diminished Hutu bodies. Bale is cautious not to argue that this sportization of *Gusimbuka-urukiramende* contributed to the Hutu genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda in the 1990s. Instead, he encourages his readers to consider the far-reaching and potentially destructive impact of constructed ethnic stereotypes. In keeping with other post-colonial criticism, Bale reveals that de-contextualized, albeit positive (even benevolent), representations of indigenous cultures can often become integrated into long lasting political discourse that extends far beyond the initial intent of the texts or photographs.

John Bale's book includes an introduction, four thematic (rather than chronological) chapters, an epilogue and an appendix. The first chapter explains the complex history of ethnic populations and politics in Rwanda. The second chapter turns to issues of body culture and highlights the need to distinguish between forms and functions of body culture. In this chapter, the author draws heavily on the ideas of Henning Eichberg. Bale

contrasts athletic (sportized) high jumping with gymnastic jumping movements and Rwandan *Gusimbuka-urukiramende*. The third chapter examines text-based representations of *Gusimbuka-urukiramende* produced by European travel writers, German colonial administrative documents and sportsmen-anthropologists. The fourth chapter examines visual, principally photographic, evidence that often supplemented the written representations of this Rwandan body practice. From my perspective as a reviewer, this fourth chapter is where Bale makes a huge contribution to the craft of sport history. He tackles these incredible visual sources with an intuitive, passionate and critically informed eye. It has been my experience that sport historians and sports studies scholars, in general, have not taken full advantage of photographic evidence that represents the human body in motion. Bale's endnotes reveal his substantial effort to anchor the interpretation of these photographs in critical theory on visibility and representation. Bale's thorough and rigorous analysis of the photographs has certainly helped clarify my own thoughts on the challenging relationship between presenting and representing the human body in movement culture.

One of the most appealing aspects of this book is, quite simply, the opportunity to look at photographic images of what will be to many an unfamiliar form of body culture. Bale and his publisher have printed an incredible collection of photographs that cannot help but trigger a reader's historical and aesthetic imagination. I feel that the author critiques these photographs effectively without quelling his own enthusiasm for the images.

Beyond highlighting the ambiguous representations of Rwandan body culture, Bale encourages the reader to consider the inadequacies of rhetoric to which we often resort when discussing sport and other forms of body culture. This focused study on Rwandan corporeality serves as a general caution to all scholars who attempt to describe and analyze the human body. Bale highlights the ease with which Europeans drew upon the rhetoric of the emerging International Olympic Movement to make sense of, and represent, something that was in no way related to modern sporting culture.

As is often the case with much post-structuralist writing, *Imagined Olympians* offers a densely layered analysis of a rather finite human phenomenon. At times, the levels of analysis and the introduction of new theoretical concepts seem excessive. In spite of the content density, Bale's text reads quite fluidly. I suggest that readers try to move through the different chapters over a shorter, rather than longer period of time. I have read this book twice: once over a couple of weeks and once over two days. When I read the book over two days, I was much more satisfied with the flow of the arguments and Bale's explanations of the theoretical underpinnings. This book would be excellent for a graduate level course on sport history, philosophy of sport, or critical sport and body studies. Under the right circumstances, I also believe that senior undergraduate students in a number of disciplines would be receptive to (although challenged by) this book.

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