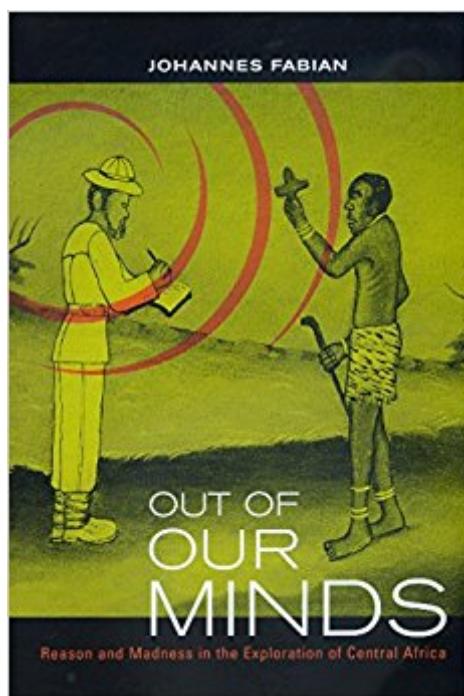


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# Out Of Our Minds: Reason & Madness In The Exploration Of Central Africa



## Synopsis

Explorers and ethnographers in Africa during the period of colonial expansion are usually assumed to have been guided by rational aims such as the desire for scientific knowledge, fame, or financial gain. This book, the culmination of many years of research on nineteenth-century exploration in Central Africa, provides a new view of those early European explorers and their encounters with Africans. Out of Our Minds shows explorers were far from rational--often meeting their hosts in extraordinary states influenced by opiates, alcohol, sex, fever, fatigue, and violence. Johannes Fabian presents fascinating and little-known source material, and points to its implications for our understanding of the beginnings of modern colonization. At the same time, he makes an important contribution to current debates about the intellectual origins and nature of anthropological inquiry. Drawing on travel accounts--most of them Belgian and German--published between 1878 and the start of World War I, Fabian describes encounters between European travelers and the Africans they met. He argues that the loss of control experienced by these early travelers actually served to enhance cross-cultural understanding, allowing the foreigners to make sense of strange facts and customs. Fabian's provocative findings contribute to a critique of narrowly scientific or rationalistic visions of ethnography, illuminating the relationship between travel and intercultural understanding, as well as between imperialism and ethnographic knowledge.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[A] fact and theory-rich book that rolls in a very leisurely fashion through a selection of early expeditions to central Africa."--"Times Higher Education Supplement

"This subtle and original book is an anthropology of anthropologists, an exploration of explorers. We have for much too long looked at the records of the late 19th-century European travelers to Central Africa mainly as source material--sometimes reliable, sometimes not--about Africa. Fabian holds these visitors' accounts up to a mirror and looks at what they show about Europe's own assumptions, prejudices, and dreams."<sup>151</sup> Adam Hochschild, author of King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa "This remarkable book explodes all the old myths about European explorers in Africa while at the same time advancing a subtle and far-reaching critique of conventional ideas of scientific rationality. Fabian's insightful analysis of the literature of exploration provides the grounds for a provocative and very contemporary argument about colonial reason and the conditions of ethnographic understanding."<sup>151</sup> James Ferguson, author of Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt

Good

Fabian works industriously to get behind the "Indiana Jones"-type figures who opened Africa up to European enterprise. His general thesis is obvious if correct: that explorers were not the rational beings who used scientific reason to conquer the wild African landscape and the wilder Africans. They were scared, drunk, pompous, open to seduction, tied to creature comforts . . . They resemble the late 20th-century American who cannot imagine living without civilization. What makes the book entertaining is the encyclopedia of sensual experiences that Fabian offers: how they saw, herd, felt Africa, how they interacted with people and the world, how they established their authority and leadership. Fabian thereby produces an extensive and detailed image of the personalities of explorers as they worked their way across Africa. Perhaps the most amusing image is of heavy phonographs and bottles of wine carried along jungle paths that they followed rather than discovered and the extent they relied on native Africans as guides, porters and interpreters to learn about the "dark" continent. Some sense of Central African exploration might help, but it is by no means necessary.

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