Portraits in the Hands of Strangers:
Colonial and Postcolonial Postcards as Vignettes to African Women’s History

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Abstract

When photography was invented in 1837, it was later referred to as a ‘mirror with a memory’ that instantly transformed photographs into historical documents. The circumstances under which photographs are produced have a huge impact on their meaning. Thus, the reading of photographs requires special skills from the historian; hence the introductory objective of this paper is to discuss the methodological practices relevant to the study of historical photographs in Africa – the archaeology of photographs from production (subject and cameraman/woman), printer/publisher, owner, anonymous/strange consumers, collectors, etc. Secondly, since this is like a conference on the history of African women, I will delve into the history of the representation of the African woman in photographs from the colonial period to the present. Of particular interest will be postcards from three photographers, namely: Edmond F. Fortier of France, Alex A. Acolatse of Togo, and the German Uwe Ommer. These male photographers produced copious volumes of postcards of Africa with a significant percentage of women’s portraits. I define portraits as the representation of an individual or groups that reflect their identity or social status in a specific context over time. Portrait photography is also a negotiation between the sitter or sitters and the cameraman; however, in the case of these African women, I argue that, their objectification and commercialization into stereotypes have consequences that are relevant in contemporary times. Although it is intellectually rewarding to undertake these analyses, one cannot remain oblivious to the negative impact of some of these stereotypical images on Africa. The scourge of sexual tourism cannot be ignored in the era of an AIDS pandemic and academics like us also have a role to play in discouraging some of the socially reprehensible portraits.

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Résumé
Quand la photographie fut inventée en 1837, elle a été considérée comme un « miroir de souvenirs ». Ce qui a immédiatement transformé la photographie en document historique. Les circonstances dans lesquelles les photos sont prises, ont un impact énorme sur leur signification. Ainsi, l'historien a besoin de compétences spéciales pour étudier les photographies, d'où l'objectif préliminaire de cet article d'examiner les pratiques méthodologiques concernant l'étude des photographies historiques en Afrique – l'archéologie des photographies à partir de la production (sujet et photographe), imprimeur/éditeur, propriétaire, consommateur anonyme/étranger, collectionneur, etc. Deuxièmement, puisqu'il semble s'agir d'une conférence sur l'histoire de la femme africaine, cet article passe au peigne fin l'histoire de la représentation de la femme africaine dans les photographies, de la période coloniale jusqu'à nos jours. Les cartes postales de trois photographes, notamment Edmond F. Fortier de la France, Alex A. Acolatse du Togo, et Uwe Ommen de l'Allemagne, seront d'un intérêt particulier. Ces photographes masculins ont constitué de gros volumes de cartes postales sur l'Afrique dans lesquelles les femmes font légion. L'étude définit le portrait comme la représentation d'un individu ou d'un groupe qui reflète son identité ou statut social dans un contexte spécifique au fil du temps. La photographie de portrait constitue également une négociation entre le(a-s) photographie(s) et le (la) photographe. Cependant, dans le cas de ces femmes africaines, l'article soutient que leur négociation et leur commercialisation sous forme de stéréotypes ont des conséquences significatives qui persistent jusqu'à nos jours. Bien qu'il soit intellectuellement enrichissant d'entreprendre ces analyses, on ne peut rester insensible face à l'impact négatif de certaines de ces images stéréotypées sur l'Afrique. Le fléau du tourisme sexuel ne peut pas être ignoré à une époque marquée par la pandémie du SIDA, et les universitaires ont également un rôle à jouer, notamment celui de décourager certains des portraits socialement répréhensibles.

The Frenchman Louis Daguerre’s invention of the camera in 1837 dramatically transformed photographs (a ‘mirror with a memory’) into valuable historical documents. The early cameras were very bulky and the chemical emulsion on the copper and later glass plates was unstable. By 1888, George Eastman introduced the Kodak camera, which made the memorialization of events cheaper and less cumbersome. In recent times, the digital camera, and by extension the ubiquitous mobile telephones, has indeed brought the revolution of photo-documentary to the average person. Unfortunately, our profession has not taken full advantage of this valuable source because we have been trained to read the written texts and not the visual texts as our primary sources. Some interesting research has been carried out by art historians and anthropologists on photography in Africa but this has largely been limited to the colonial period with few attempts to research post-colonial archives.
Chris Geary (1988, 1998, 2002, 2004) is one of the leading scholars on photographs about Africa. She has written extensively on postcards from Africa in general whereas the main corpus of her research is based on photographs of the Bamum Kingdom. She also recently curated an exhibition at Boston University (2008) entitled ‘Exposures: Other Histories in Early Postcards from Africa’ which was about photographs by African photographers. Her objective was to reveal African agency in the case of rulers who present themselves with pride and dignity and the cosmopolitan lives of the city dwellers. Geary was also the guest editor for the special African Arts issue on Historical Photographs of Africa (1991). Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin edited an important volume on the different forms of visual representations (monuments, cinema, cartoons, photography, etc.) in colonial and postcolonial Africa and how these representations impact the meaning and power of images in African history and culture (2002). Philippe David (1986–88, 1993, 1998, 2006) is another scholar of African postcards. His research, however, tends to focus on cataloguing the works of specific photographers like Edmond Fortier and Alex Acocatse. Photographs from French colonies in West Africa and Algeria are discussed in the works of David Prochaska (1990, 1991). Perhaps the single most important publication on the objectification and commoditization of women was the work of Malek Alloul (1986), which portrays the controlling and denigrating image of Algerian women by the French colonizers. Okwui Enwezor (2006) was the curator of a thought-provoking exhibition ‘Snap Judgements: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography’ at the International Center of Photography, New York. He set out to challenge in grand style the stereotypical images that come out of photographs of Africa taken by foreigners. He chose to exhibit photographs by Africans that represent themselves without the touristic gaze. Okwui was fed up with the fact that:

the photographic imagery of Africa has circled the same paradoxical field of representation: either showing us the precarious conditions of life and existence, in which case the African subject always appears at risk, on the margins of life itself, at that intersection where one is forced to negotiate the relationship between man and animal. Or we are confronted with the heart-breaking beauty of its natural world, where man is virtually absent except on the occasion when the landscape is left to the whims of tourists and researchers with dollars and fat grants (2006:12).

There is, therefore, the need for historians to complement the works of these scholars.

Perhaps there is an explanation for the timid approach to the use of photographs as primary sources for the historian because research on photographs requires special skills and many of us lack training in this field. Just as we do not take the written documents at face value, photographs
should also be examined carefully before they are considered as primary sources. The historian should first of all understand the history of photography in general as well as the technological evolution of the camera, and the varied range of image selections available to the photographer. Next, the individual behind the camera must be identified: what was his/her profession, what was his/her purpose in taking the photographs, and what was his/her relationship with the subjects or sitters. It is equally important to examine the purpose of the collection of study: who owns the archive and what was the purpose of the collection. If it is a family collection, one must study the history of the family to aid in understanding the collection; and should it be a studio archive, then it is imperative to know the history of the photographer: professional training, method of operating, clients, etc. There are other issues inherent in the collections that the historian faces but, above all, the historian must put the photographic archive into its historical context to compare it with other available historical evidence. It is only when all the above and other peculiar cases are analyzed to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the collection that we can accept photographs as historical documents.

This paper examines a selection of the postcards of three professional photographers, namely, the Frenchman Edmond François Fortier, the Togolese Alex A. Acolatse, and the German Uwe Ommers. Both Fortier and Acolatse’s photographs covered varied themes during the colonial period, whereas Ommers’s photographs are recent and focus specifically on African ‘models’. I argue that despite the repeated analysis of the objectification of the African woman during the colonial period, the stereotypical imagery continues unabated in the works of contemporary photographers such as Uwe Ommers. These postcards are portraits which are defined as the representation of an individual or groups that reflect their identity or social status in a specific context over time. Freelander maintains that portraits tend to ‘reveal the sitter’s subjectivity or self-conception; and to exhibit the artist’s skill, expressive ability, and to some extent views on art ... Portraits reveal status and artists were paid to reveal power, wealth, and authority’ (Freelander 2007:97). Thus with the assistance of props, clothing, pose and stance, and composition, the portrait should reveal the unique personality and social status of the individual. Freelander further postulates that portraits can show subjects in four or more different ways that include accurate likeness, testimonies of presence, evocations of personality, or presentations or subject’s uniqueness (Figs 1a & b). This paper postulates that the aforementioned photographers did not respect the canons of portraiture in their representations of African women. But before I discuss the selected photographs, it will be appropriate to analyse briefly the business of postcard production.
Fig. 1a: King Acolatse of Anecho

Fig. 1b: King Sri of Anloga

Postcards production began around the second half of the nineteenth century and became a useful medium for transmitting images of other peoples, events, and places by travellers, explorers, colonizers, settlers, and collectors. Personal photographs have sentimental values whereas postcards, on the contrary, have commercial or exchange value. Some postcards were printed in North and South Africa but those of the rest of Africa were usually printed in Europe and shipped back to Africa. French colonies produced more postcards than the British colonies and Germany, because their limited colonial existence in Africa, produced the least amount of postcards (Geary 1991). Philippe David (1978) estimated that in the French colonies of West Africa, a minimum
of 8,740 different types of postcards was published. The majority of these postcards represented scenes from Senegal. Besides, popular postcards were reissued several times. Although the image and captions constitute the main visual imagery, messages on postcards are equally useful to the historian (Geary 1991). Take the case of this card (Figs 2a & b, 3a & b): ‘Si tu trouves ma bonne amie dans le tas, tu a gagné grosses bisces’ (If you find my best friend in the pile you have earned big kisses).

Fig. 2a: Young girls of Lome

A careful look at the postcard shows the racist attitude of the sender. Here you have a group of young girls at the catholic mission in Lome, Togo, on the postcard and centrally located among them is a white doll. Obviously, the writer considered her doll to be of more importance than the Togolese children and would reward the addressee with a big kiss if she were able to identify it. Likewise, the postcard from South Africa focused on the items carried by the woman: the baby and the pots, mats, etc. The accompanying correspondence affirms the stereotypical view of the African woman as a beast of burden as well as her reproductive responsibilities.

Racist images of colonial subjects were common themes of these postcards; however, women fared the worst. Feminist authors have argued
that these postcards focus on women as objects of desire and are presented as either passive sexual objects or instinctively sexual if they are children. In most cases, they appear in their 'natural habitat' scenes such as boudoirs, landscapes, huts, naked or partially naked. Sigel (2000) states that the nackedness in these cards needs to be thought about on several levels: "native" people's culture and beliefs about nakedness; that act of taking the picture; the card as a consumer item; the shipping of the card as a form of communication; and the meaning of the card in the European context (2000:862). In the commodity culture, postcards are inexpensive and the average person could purchase them with the implication that the purchase of these images renders the colonial women available to the European.

Edmond François Fortier (1862–1928) was the most prolific photographer and postcard producer and distributor in French West Africa based in Senegal. His postcards cover the modern countries of Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali and Benin. From his studio in Dakar, Fortier sold his pictures to soldiers, colonial officials, and tourists. His specialty was clearly postcards of semi-nude women which was big business; and to satisfy market demands, many of his postcards were reprinted several times (Hickling 2007). On the other hand, Alex Agbaglo Acolatse (1880–1975) came from Togo and learned his craft from the catholic mission apprentice shop of Brotherhome in Lome. He plied his trade from his studio in Lome and along the coastal regions of both Togo and the Gold Coast. Although some scholars would like to impute agency to these colonial African photographers, I argue that unlike their postcolonial counterparts who exhibited a certain modicum of independence, Acolatse was influenced by the stereotypical images of his European colleagues. Besides, a significant portion of his income was coming from postcard publishers in Europe, hence he had to adhere to their requests. The missionary influence was equally present in his numerous postcards depicting 'fetish'. I have selected these few postcards of Acolatse and Fortier to demonstrate similarities in their visual objectification of women in West Africa.

The first category is the girls with upraised arms to accentuate their breasts (Figs 4 & 5). The second category is the set on group photographs of young girls whose breasts are equally emphasized in these postcards (Figs 6 & 7). The third category is groups of women at work (Figs 8 & 9). The forth category emphasizes the reproductive role of the African woman (Fig. 10). The fifth category lays emphasis the availability of the village 'belle' (Fig. 11).
Fig. 2b: Correspondence

Fig. 3a: South African woman
Fig. 3b: Correspondence

Fig. 4: Fortier, Girls with upraised arms
Fig. 5: Acolatse, Girls with upraised arms

Fig. 6: Acolatse, Group of girls

Fig. 7: Fortier, Group of girls
Fig. 8: Fortier, Group of women working and children

Fig. 9: Acolatse, Group of women working and children

Fig. 10: Acolatse, Reproductive role of women
Fig. 11: Fortier, Le choix de Picasso (Picasso’s choice)

As mentioned earlier these stereotypical presentations did not stop during the colonial period but continued into modern times with the postcards of photographers such as Uwe Ommer. To understand the pornographic gaze of Ommer’s postcards on women from Senegal, one needs to at least understand the concept of beauty, status or personal achievement among Senegalese women. Hadifa Nura Mustafa (2002) described portraiture in Dakar as ‘masks and gifts, archive and fetish, conformity and recuperation. Women collect and display photographs of themselves dressed as elegantly as possible, a practice called sansve’. The latter is the way these women ‘craft their social personae’ where they are usually dressed in the best: embroidered boubous, gold jewellery, elaborate coiffures, and headscarves. This being the case, the appropriate question then is why will these modern women pose in nude or semi-nude for Ommer. Biaya (2000) argued that ‘the body is erotically valued in African societies on the condition that it is not naked but accessorized’ as opposed to the primitive eroticism demonstrated in the works of Ommer and others. Besides, the African moral and sexual educational system that emphasis tactile eroticism is more connected with the sense of touch and smell than the sense of sight which is the case for the western voyeurs.

Here are a few series of Uwe Ommer’s portraits: Akwaba series of postcards (Figs 12 and 13) – if one is familiar with the Akan word Akwaba (welcome), then what will be the implication of these postcards which have been sold to tourists?
Next was the pocket-size book production of these portraits (Figs 14, 15, and 16). The text of the trade review which happens to be from *Hustler Magazine* puts this production into context with all the attendant implications.

Fig. 14: Ommer, Pocket book
Fig. 15: Ommer, Inside page

"...some of the hottest bodies, sweetest faces and most protuberant asses to grace the pages of any photographic volume. An enjoyable mix of ebony and nudity."

_Hustler_, Beverly Hills, California

Fig. 16: Ommer, Inside review, _Hustler_ magazine

In conclusion, this paper is partially a plea for the use of photographs as primary sources for historical research in Africa. This should not be left only to anthropologists and art historians who are mostly concerned with the visual and aesthetic appeal. Secondly, I have tried to demonstrate the continuous nefarious exploitation of women's imagery to denigrate the body of the African woman. Finally, we are faced with a serious pandemic with regard to the spread of HIV/AIDS with some of the causes naturally resulting from sex tourism. Until and unless African women take possession of how they wish to be represented, the negative stereotypes will not cease.
Bibliography


