

Photographies and Modernities in Africa

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In the last few years, a new field of research and knowledge has opened up. It is concerned with the photographic practices of Africans and those photographic images whose production, circulation and consumption they have been able to control. In other words, we are dealing here with local images produced by Africans, in contrast with images Westerners took of Africans.

Indeed, photography was introduced very early in Africa. Only a few months after photography had been invented in Europe, this new medium of technical reproduction reached Africa and became appropriated in various ways into some African cultures. Indeed, it is better suited to use the plural "African photographs" rather than the singular, as the situation is characterized by a great diversity of local histories, by evolutions either divergent or convergent, by paces that were fast here and slow there.

While, on one hand, photography was integrated into already existing visual traditions, on the other, it also shaped and transformed African practices and discourses, especially those in relation to memory and the construction of personhood. In Africa, photography was established, above all, in the domain of portraiture, while landscape or still-life photography never really developed as genres.

As a modern technique of reproduction, photographers used the new medium extensively to establish various visions of modernity. They created their own myths and critiques of modernity, sometimes by inventing traditions which should not be seen as pre-modern but as an essential part of the construction of modernity in Africa. Thus photographic visions of modernity in Africa oscillate between the construction of bounded local traditions and globalizing, cosmopolitan views that transcend local identities, ethnicity and even the nation-state.

In the various contributions presented here, different photographic constructions of modern identities (as well as "traditional" identities) will be discussed: some enforced by the colonial as well as the post-colonial state (I.D. pictures studied by J. F. Werner), others deliberately appropriating spaces that belonged to Western tourists (H. Behrend). In addition, various ways of using photographs in the cult of the dead, in the reconstruction of kingships, in the context of commemoration will be dealt with (C. Gore). Furthermore, intermediality, the intertwining of photography and other modern media, such as video, film, textiles, etc. is explored (T. Wendl).

Two short papers written in a field-note style will evoke two different sides of the practice of photography in contemporary Africa: the "motion-picture" used on the campuses of Nigeria (E. Nimis), and the everyday life of street photographers in Lomé (G. Hersant).