

Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History

Photographs as Sources in African History

Robert Gordon and Jonatan Kurzwelly

Subject: Cultural History, Historiography and Methods Online Publication Date: Jul 2018

DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.250

Summary and Keywords

Much has changed since photographs were used simply as apt illustrations and depictions of reality. The field of visual history has now become an important and legitimate area of rigorous enquiry. Photography and photographs as source material for research is now a widespread practice in history, anthropology, sociology and other social sciences and humanities. Both the historical trajectory of this medium in Africa, as well as some important theoretical and methodological issues which Africanists should be aware of, are introduced here. Photography is heavily imbricated in the rise of modernity. Different visual eras are delineated as technology and accessibility of the medium became easier to use and more accessible, moving on a continuum from daguerreotypes featuring mostly portraits and landscapes done by professionals largely for the elite to *carte d'visite* to postcards and stereoscopic-cards which decline with the introduction of spool photography epitomized by the inimitable Kodak, led to access by the broad middle class. After several innovations featuring 35 mm cameras and slides, digital photography arrived and made the medium even more accessible with smartphones leading the proverbial gaze to be turned into a glaze.

Photographs as Sources in African History

Alongside the historical development of photography, it is necessary to understand the different theoretical and methodological implications in the study and uses of this medium. Photography in itself can be understood through materialist, idealist and social constructivist ontological approaches. Whereas the latter is predominant in history and social sciences, a complementarity of different perspectives should be applied when using and assessing photographs as sources. For purposes of historical research the meaning of a photograph is established largely through contextual information about the image, its making, its different uses, and distribution. It is also important to consider how meaning is established in relation to other photographs or texts (i.e., through *intertextuality*). Issues include the assessment of images, ways of evaluating their credibility, and the questions scholars might ask in interpreting the meanings of the images, including identifying the provenance of the image, as well as the context in which the image appears. Was it intended for public or only private distribution? Was it in an archive, album, used in a publication, as a postcard and how might it be captioned? What affective meaning might it convey? How might one detect a fake? Besides using archival images, photography might also be used for *photo elicitation* and other experimental or participatory research methods.

Keywords: History of photography, contextualization, vernacular photography, imperial photography, intertextuality

The Rise of Photography

Much has happened since the pioneering workshop on the use of photographs as sources for African history held at the School for Oriental and African Studies in May 1988 and organized by Andrew Roberts and David Killingray.¹ Visual history has become an accepted subfield in history. It appears to have enjoyed a special vibrancy in Southern Africa, the scene of a large international conference and a pioneering special issue of the journal *Kronos*.² Namibia has been the subject of two edited volumes examining its history through photographs.³ Specialist journals have proliferated. A rough sampling would include *Visual Literacy*, *Journal of Visual Literacy*; *Journal of Visual Culture*; *Visual Resources*; *Journal of Media Practice*, *Visual Communication*, *History of Photography*; *Visual Studies*; *Visual Anthropology*; *Visual Anthropology Review* and the *Journal of Material Studies*. Instead of simply using photographs as apt illustrations the analysis of photographs as sources has become quite sophisticated, emphasizing the changing sociocultural context of the production, distribution, and anticipated audience in what Richard Chalfen calls “the evidentiary problematic.”⁴ Research about, and with the use of, photography transcends disciplinary borders, combining such fields as visual history, visual studies, visual anthropology, and art history. This trans disciplinaryity is of great benefit as it diversifies our methodological toolsets and widens our theoretical reflections

Photographs as Sources in African History

and thematic scope. It is reflected in this essay by freely drawing on related work and to an extent disregarding disciplinary affiliations.

Photographs constitute a focus of research in their own right or are integrated into larger research projects. Approaches range in a continuum from accepting photographs as accurate evidence—especially where they are accompanied by an extensive documented provenance, usually collateral information, as in official police crime scene photographs, or X-ray photographs—to more problematic but more common and interesting vernacular photographs: such photographs are made by unknown or amateur photographers with little collateral information and typically feature events of daily life or people of significance to the photographers. Digitization has now made online access to millions of such images readily accessible so that the proverbial gaze has become a glaze. Specifically African colonial photographs can be located at a variety of online repositories like the British National Archives, the Royal Geographical Society; the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft collection held at Frankfurt University and the Smithsonian's Eliot Elisofon Collection. In addition there are several repositories which have not yet made their collections available online or are engaged in digitizing their holdings.

Of the human senses, that of sight is accorded top billing in many cultures including what is now known as "Western modernity." In many legal systems a witness will be more likely to be convincing if they saw an event unfold, rather than "hearsay" (unless it is recorded). Photography, a term originally coined by the Cape Colony astronomer Sir John Herschel in 1839, was an activity intimately linked to the emergence of "modernity" and is seen by many as emblematic of modernity. Within thirty years of its invention by Louis Daguerre, who made a likeness on an iodized copper plate, while Fox Talbot produced negatives on silver-salted paper which could be used to make multiple copies, photography was transformed from a bourgeois gadget for making better portraits to a tool for policing, war reporting, military intelligence, pornography, encyclopaedic documentation, postcards, family albums, and anthropological and geographical research. In this vortex of photographic activity in Africa, photographs were used to invent, define, classify and dominate as well as entertain, memorialize and subvert.

Modernity can be divided into several visual ages initiated with the daguerreotype in 1839 and characterized by several developments from the cumbersome and complicated processes of the calotype and the wet-collodion process invented in 1848 to the silver-bromide-gelatin dry-plate process first marketed in 1871 and inaugurating a new era of making photography that required less expertise and expense and was therefore more accessible. It also signaled the emergence of the mass-produced postcard industry, stimulated further especially with the invention of handheld cameras.

Attitudes toward the new technology varied. Thomas Baines, the artist fired by Livingstone on the Zambesi Expedition which led to Kirk's famous pioneering photographs, had this advice for would-be African explorers: Kirk's "most beautiful pictures" were taken with a small and inexpensive camera but unless the traveler possessed "chemical knowledge enough to contend successfully against the various

Photographs as Sources in African History

contingencies of changing climate, impurity or scarcity of water, and innumerable other new and unexpected difficulties, we are inclined to think that the pencil . . . will afford, if not the best, at least the most certainly available results.”⁵ The Royal Geographical Society’s *Hints to Travellers* (1872) was encouraging but while subsequent editions contained a discussion of the technology and issues around developing film in the field, it contained minimal advice as to composition, what subjects to photograph, or how to document the images. Compared to German scientists of this era who considered visual methods to be the heartbeat of anthropology, British scientists were generally ambivalent about the value of photography, dismissing it as the activity of wealthy amateurs or photographic impresarios.⁶ Sir Francis Galton, the Victorian savant and author of the bestseller *The Art of Travel* (1872), made no mention of cameras. The Royal Anthropological Institute’s *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* of the same period barely mentioned photography, usually relegating the subject to an appendix and offering rather mundane advice such as:

For anthropological work a snapshot camera is quite indispensable; many incidents must be seized as they occur. Some people will not consent to be photographed and must be taken instantaneously, without their knowledge. A mirror, which can be attached at any angle in front to the lens, enables the operator to photograph unsuspecting bystanders . . .⁷

By the early fifties ethics had changed concerning what subjects one could photograph. *Notes and Queries* warned:

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that no photograph of a sacred place or building, or of a ceremony, dance or ritual performance, should be taken unless the permission of the people concerned has been obtained. It will usually be given if the fieldworker has been able to win their confidence. When permission has been given the photographer should do his work as inconspicuously as possible. It is far better to do without such pictures than risk of incurring ill-will or even hostility by tactless disregard of local feeling which we should not tolerate in our own society.⁸

Clearly the reliability of the photograph is framed by conventions and protocols, some of which have long been in existence.

These visual eras mesh with phases in the colonization of Africa as the second half of the 19th century saw the aggressive exploration and cataloging of the continent along with the expansion and growth of several disciplines like geography and anthropology, which used photography as an important means for obtaining credibility, not only of the proverbial Other but also of the landscape. Many exploration expeditions featured a professional photographer among its members to provide a sheen of scientific objectivity, but also serving visually to highlight claims to heroic masculinity, European technological superiority, and credibility of the “I was there” variety.

Photographs as Sources in African History

Early and even later photographers hewed closely to the aesthetic conventions followed by artists working with the same subject matters. There was another factor at work as well: These scientific exploration expeditions required, and thrived on, the oxygen of mass publicity which in turn thrived on the exotic, generated *inter alia* by the newly emergent “Yellow Press” to fund their activities. Their photographs were initially converted to lithographs and engravures but later as printing techniques developed published directly in journals, newspapers, and books. They were a form of proto-photojournalism.



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 1. Postcard captioned “Photography under Difficulties.” The painting by John Baines features his companion, the pioneer African photographer, James Chapman. Source: Robert Gordon collection, original postcard from the Bensusan Museum of Photography c. 1950s.

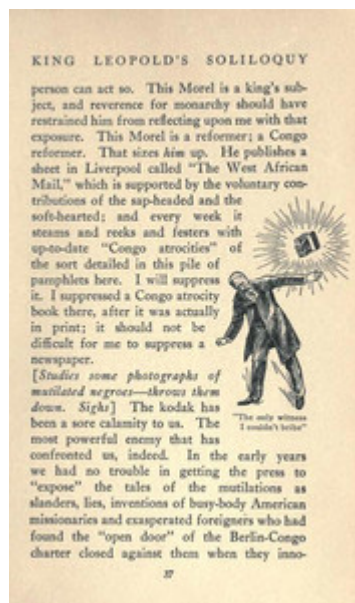
By the 1860s a network of commercial photographers had commenced operations along the West African coast, South Africa, and parts of East Africa. While they were mostly European expatriates, several African photographers were also involved in this lucrative portrait and landscape trade. The distinction between imperial and local photography became muddy. As equipment improved photographs of

daily life started appearing. Given the initial concern for “salvage” ethnology many were portrayed as if they were “pristine”—Western accoutrements being removed. The split between photographs intended for “science” and that for the tourist trade became sharper as tourism expanded; the founding of Thomas Cook, the famous group tour operator in 1860, heralded this new dynamic. The commodification of images was framed by local political conditions and economic opportunities and restraints. New reproduction techniques also came to the fore. Photogravure, high-quality photograph reproductions made from engraving plates, while around since the 1850s, surged in popularity between 1890 and 1920. This also saw the rise of the postcard industry and these served as role models for many photographic efforts by tourists who frequently mimicked postcard portrayals.

And then came the era of the mass marketed box camera, epitomized by Kodak with its slogan “You press the button, we do the rest,” which later used relatively inexpensive spools of film invariably sent away for development. In evolutionary terms visual technology shows a progression toward miniaturization but more importantly, increasing accessibility and, if you will, proletarianization from the reaches of the elite as it becomes increasingly inexpensive and requires less technical expertise. As such it soon became a

Photographs as Sources in African History

means of undermining colonialism and imperialism. In his biting satire, *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, Mark Twain has Leopold complain that the "incorruptible" Kodak was a "sore calamity to us . . . the only witness . . . that I couldn't bribe. Every Yankee missionary and every interrupted trader sent home and got one . . . that trivial little Kodak, that a child can carry in its pocket, gets up, uttering never a word, and knocks (the public) dumb!"⁹



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 2. This soliloquy signaled the birth of what might be termed exposé documentary photography epitomized by the important role photographs played in exposing Apartheid. Photo courtesy of Internet Archive.

By the late 1920s 35 mm film further enhanced portability with lightweight cameras like Leica coming to the fore. After the Second World War this development continued allowing for greater flexibility and less reliance on tripods. Color film and slides also consolidated their popularity. Finally, after much development and improvement in analogue technologies, the digital era arrived producing instantaneous results. Over the last thirty years emulsion photographs

have been almost completely replaced by digital cameras, which, through photo manipulation software and instantaneous distribution on the Internet, have changed the paradigm for pictures as sources.

Ontology of Photography

In addition to understanding the technological development and expansion of diverse uses of photography in Africa, it is necessary to consider theoretical and methodological aspects of using photographs as sources. Discussions on the informational value of photography are closely related to philosophical debates on ontology (that is, about the nature of reality, about the kinds of things there are in the world). One much debated issue is the relationship between the resulting image and the photographed object. There are two basic paradigms for assessing these images as source material: postpositivists and social constructionists.¹⁰ Postpositivists depart from an ontological position of *materialism* and positivist meta-theory of science and see photography as representative of the external world. By laws of physics and chemistry the properties of light reflected

Photographs as Sources in African History

from existing objects are registered on a photosensitive surface (film or a digital sensor). The resulting image, as Henry Fox Talbot and other positivists of his era argued, could be understood as a direct representation of external reality, and thus reduce the role of the photographer to a mere technician, replacing the artistic subjectivity with scientific objectivity. It is not the artist who made the picture, but the picture that made itself. The real agent of this operation was solar light rather than the artist, who only put the camera in front of objects and waited for the picture to be made.¹¹ Postpositivists accept an indexical relationship between the photograph and the material world with two limitations: These assertions are statistically probable, not certain, and when subject to rigorous testing can be shown to be falsifiable. This allows them to make “warranted” assertions backed by evidence that can be revised after considering fresh evidence. The second paradigm stresses a hermeneutic approach treating photos as symbolic texts and demanding semiotic interpretation to determine meaning. Depending on the topic at hand, most researchers use a mix of these two approaches. Postpositivists draw on Roland Barthes’ notion of *studium* developed in *Camera Lucida* (1981) : that the information provided by the photograph and its contexts are examined relying on deductions derived from circumstantial evidence that can be verified by others supplemented by speculative inferences beyond the photo such as hearsay and family legends.¹²

The initial positivist view was soon undermined by the first examples of collage techniques, photomontage, and various modifications of negatives. The influence of the author-photographer became apparent and undermined belief in the objectivity and veracity of the photograph. Photographs are now recognized as conditioned by the creators of the tool who shaped the properties of the lens, camera, film, or sensor, and nowadays firmware; the author of the photograph who chose its settings, moment, and framing of the image; the darkroom technician or the graphic designer who further cropped and adjusted properties of the image; as well as all related publishing and print technologies. Photography is susceptible to manipulation on all stages of the process, demanding a reconsideration of its relation to the photographed object. Rather than being a direct representation of the external world Susan Sontag famously saw photographs as a footprint or a death mask while John Berger argued that photographs do not translate from appearances but quote from them. These analogies are indicative of a more subtle and less direct ontological understanding, recognizing some form of indexical trace which is however not strictly objective. Such doubt can also lead to entire disbelief of any claims about representation of external reality—that is, from an *idealist* ontological position, a form of solipsism. Such an approach posits reality as primarily mental or spiritual, the result of inner thought processes; photographs could be understood as related to inner symbolic interpretations or some other cognitive process. A photograph would be an entirely human-made cultural artifact that is created through the individual’s mind.

Photographs as Sources in African History

Many scholars feel that the *social constructivist* paradigm is more useful for the purposes of history and social sciences. Rather than asking what photographs are in themselves one should ask what photographs are for people and in a given context. Such a rephrasing makes it possible to recognize different uses of photographs that prioritize different assumptions and different readings. For example, crime-scene police photography prioritizes the use and reading of images as evidence and is based on an assumption of representation of reality that can be used to document and help establish truth about events. For such a photography to be considered as valid, it must follow strict methodological rules about its making—the providing of contextual information, storage, and use—which are regulated by detailed manuals. In this sense, the belief in the validity of these photographs relies on the belief in methods and persons who create, store, and use them.¹³ On the other hand, photography displayed in modern art galleries is often not concerned at all with questions of valid representation and truth, but rather prioritizes a reading of photography as symbolic or affective. Such images are not viewed through a prism of their informational value about an objective world; they are rather seen as metaphorical and are supposed to make the viewers feel or think. Furthermore, images stored in photographic archives and used for historical research are another example of a different reading, which prioritizes its informational value about past places, people, and events. Unlike the crime scene photography, a historical use prioritizes interpretations in a broader historical context, not just the direct context of one event in a very limited time-frame. In other words, photographs are assumed to bear a relation to the historical time in which they were taken. The use of photographs as sources of course also demands further questions and regulatory practices, which researchers should take into account.

Assessing Photographs, Contextual Information, and Intertextuality

There is no reason why one should not combine elements from different paradigms in assessing photographs as sources. This involves seeing photograph as a complex practice producing unique circulating material objects within a frequently unequal “visual economy.” Apart from considering the composition of their content, their socially constructed biographies as visual objects need to be considered. A wide array of strategies can be used in building a forensic profile of the photograph: Relevant issues would include the physical details of the photo; its format, size, and type of emulsion; and evidence of cropping or airbrushing. Modern technology allows the image to be scanned or enlarged or both, and such enhancements can provide embedded clues. Most digital photographs now contain metadata about the image, about the type of camera used, and the time, aperture, and exposure settings when the picture was taken, which is of important forensic value. Cropping can change the meaning of the photograph. A common problem with many early African photographs concerned cropping to eliminate objects suggesting “contact.” In this era of pseudo-events and “fake news,” identifying forgeries or manipulated photographs takes on an added urgency, although one should be mindful that even fakes are in a sense authentic and should be grist for the historian’s mill. Fakes are especially prevalent on the Internet thanks to software that allows for relatively easy manipulation and editing of photographs, and a booming internet forensic industry has emerged. Many applications are available for assessing the veracity of images (see Online Photo EXIF Metadata Reader) and display the available metadata (when and with what device a photo was made, image characteristics, sometimes even the geographical location where a photo was made, in cases of devices with a built-in GPS, for example FotoForensics). Some services also allow one to identify parts of a picture that were added or changed. It is however very difficult to detect well-made fakes and a healthy degree of scepticism is recommended.

For pre-digital photographs there are several methods that can be used to detect fakes or embellishments. One can look for evidence of cropping—are there any obvious anomalies like missing limbs? It is important to examine if the shadows and proportions of people and objects are consistent. Are there any reflections in mirrors, windows, or other objects that might reveal additional information? One should also evaluate the photograph within the context of available knowledge. Is the picture credible? Where was the photograph found? Even mounting styles or colors can provide information regarding dating. Location is important. Is the photo loose, or does it appear in an album, a book, an article, and if so what is the given source? Contextual information is crucial.

Use of photographs as historical sources relies on contextual information about an image or a collection, which conditions how they can be interpreted and used. One should take into account who the photographer was and when the given image was taken; for what reason and purpose; what technology was used; how it was shared and disseminated;

Photographs as Sources in African History

what truth value was assumed about the image; what audiences was it made for; what ideological practices was it related to; how did it relate to different social, governmental or colonial institutions; what are the intersubjective relations and structures of power it represented or reproduced; what ethical issues does the image raise, etc.¹⁴ One should also consider what is absent from a photograph or a collection—what did the authors omit or hide from their representations, and what could be the reasons for it? All this contextual information is useful for a historical interpretations of photographs.

The meaning of photographs relies strongly not only on the general context of its creation but also on the *intertextuality* of its presentation with other images, objects, captions, and texts. Intertextuality, as defined by Julia Kristeva, means the transposition of one or more system of signs into another, which results in a new articulation. In other words it is what happens when a text, a photograph, or another system of signs is used in juxtaposition or combination, providing novel emergent meanings. Examples of such uses are common in advertising, where texts and images combine to convey all the benefits of a product or a service.

Photographs are often provided with captions, or presented together with other photographs and images, which create new intertextual meanings. Such intertextuality is often used to control and solidify, to *anchor* the interpretations of photographs.¹⁵ One can thus investigate how systems of signs exist in relation to each other and ask what meanings the author intended anchoring, and what alternative interpretations were omitted by the given intertextual transposition.

In this sense one should also be critical about the meanings which are imposed on photographs by archivists or collectors, who might imply certain interpretations by simply presenting or storing groups of photographs and texts together. As Elizabeth Edwards critically reflected: “The photographic archive [is] the site of a thousand stereotypes, gathering the dust of a century, a source of fever, a site of taxonomic and self-evident meaning, an ideological performance, an embarrassing legacy of past interpretative and methodological follies.”¹⁶ In this sense, rather than uncritically adopting the meanings which such an archive or collection provides us with, a thorough investigation of contextual information might lead to questioning the initial interpretations.

Furthermore, it is important to think of intertextuality when publishing the outcomes of historical research and examine what unintended meanings could emerge from one’s use of different photographs and texts. Books and articles set the intertextual context in which we hope the photographs will be understood (and also, how the photographs will anchor the meaning of the text). It is thus a responsibility to try to prevent stereotypical or abusive representations or people we write about. Readers, of course, bring their own knowledge, emotions, and imagination, thus the author cannot fully control how their work is going to be interpreted.

Photographs as Sources in African History

A closer reading of the photograph can also be made by examining the photographer's larger body of work or by comparing it with the work of other photographers who have worked in the area or event. One strategy in this regard is a technique derived from media studies, content analysis, which is useful as a supplementary method and involves determining the relative frequency categories within the sample. The problem is of course that these ostensibly objective categories are inherently subjective, and it is decidedly problematic whether the sample is representative of a larger population and assumes that the coders and analysts know how the images were perceived when originally made.¹⁷ Nevertheless close readings can in some cases provide information about style, approach (posed or staged?), use of props, ability to interact with subject, etc. Information, both intentional and unintentional, within the photograph can also be important, such as rules of etiquette especially with regard to race, gender and class. Even seemingly mundane observations like the position of shadows can enable one to infer the time of day the photograph was created. Tools developed in anthropology like proxemics (the study of space and how humans use it) and kinesics (nonverbal communication conducted through the use of gestures, facial expressions, and body language) are useful in this regard. Frequently such techniques can reveal much about the relationship between the photographer and the subject. Facial expressions and posture can suggest coercion or autonomy. Background and foreground items, such as clocks and furniture, can also be illuminating, providing a sense of scale and proportion. Context can range from the up close and personal to the state level. A frequently overlooked aspect concerns censorship, especially in the colonies where colonials and colonized were subjected to a wide range of restrictions.¹⁸ Gauging what Barthes called the *punctum*—the emotional effects of the photograph on both the originally and contemporary intended viewer—remains however personal and highly subjective.

Nevertheless close readings and examinations of photographs, illustrations, or postcards can be used to examine social norms, ideology, culture change, everyday life, and social relationships. Consider two Namibian examples. Erichsen's masterful thesis on the Shark Island concentration camp features as a frontispiece this photograph from a German officer who visited the camp, apparently featuring the owner of the album, von Düring.¹⁹ Examining the picture closely though, a strange anomaly appears: The woman in front of the officer appears to be cradling a dog. Not a typical African dog but a European Schnauzer which, judging from photographs from the German era, was a popular breed among the German officer corps, and von Düring took two dogs with him when he went to the colony. His album contains numerous pictures featuring erotic portraits of women, brawn, and booze and highlighting his dog Flora, who bears a striking resemblance to the object the prisoner is holding. How does one understand such incongruities? And what does the intertextuality of these photographs presented together say about German colonialism?



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 3. "Krafi hieselfange der gefangene Heisrück Mathen Wese" [Shark Island Camp of beach prisoners] [Hospital Affekt Brotkast, Wähler von Wese Album, Scientific Society Swakopmund (Incorporated Association not for Gain), PA09_107.



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 4. "Hottentotten Pontok" [Hut of the Hottentots]. Arbogast von Düring Album, Scientific Society Swakopmund (Incorporated Association not for Gain), PA08_096.

As source materials for African history additional forms of photographic representation can be considered, especially their transformation into postcards and their use in photojournalism and advertising. Introduced in 1869, postcards rapidly became ubiquitous in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, providing an important means of communication, contributing to personal memory, and showing proof of travel. Derived from the *carte de visite* which found a ready market among the expanding middle class, they were given a fillip by the introduction of cheap postage rates and photolithography. This led to a golden age for postcards from about 1900 to the First World War when postcards started being displaced by the telephone and greater access to cheap cameras. A lack of metadata exacerbated by huge quantities of items

enjoying a wide global distribution plus absence of dates and provenance has contributed to this enigmatic genre not being taken seriously by historians who dismissed postcards as part of the detritus of colonialism characterized by staged scenes, ethnicity, and racism underwriting a unilinear evolutionary perspective which justified colonialism.

Nevertheless it has now become appreciated as an importance source for understanding popular settler, tourist, and indigenous culture. Geary and Webb have identified three basic styles of postcards: (a) tourist, which emphasized animals and ethnic scenes and tended to highlight modernity and progress; (b) missionary, which obviously focused on

Photographs as Sources in African History

the good works of the proselytizers and finally; (c) erotic postcards, which tended to be found in private collections.²⁰ Scholars have also examined how captions have changed and have studied the often cryptic messages, addresses, and postmarks enabling them to reveal speech patterns, the degree of literacy, and social attitude as well as attempts at visual humor.

One example is this postcard labeled by the sender as “The Old Year in the Kalahari” while the caption on the reverse claims it is “A dead Bushman dried by the Sun.”



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 6. Symptomatic of their rather macabre sense of humor is this postcard which has a handwritten inscription “The Old Year in the Kalahari” while on the reverse the printed inscription claims “A Dead Bushman in the Kalahari, dried by the sun.” Foto-Centrale, Windhuk. Source: Gordon collection.

Consider this originally color-tinted post card entitled “Chief of Berseba and his Councilors” and at the bottom “Greetings from German South West Africa” (see Figure 7). The Berseba people were one of the few Nama groups who did not participate in the notorious wars of 1904–1907. The subjects have taken off their hats as a mark of deference or as an acknowledgement of their inferior status.

Obviously creating the postcard was a reasonably complex and relatively expensive undertaking, yet why did the photographer foreground the dog scratching itself for fleas? Might it be a political statement especially since one of the worst swearwords in many parts of Africa is to call someone a dog?



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 7. Color-tinted postcard entitled “Chief of Berseba and his Councillors.” Source: Gordon Collection.

Closely related to postcards were three-dimensional stereographs (aka stereoscopic slides) introduced at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851, which rapidly made their presence felt in upper-income families and libraries slickly marketed as documentary evidence of reality. Before they ceased production in 1939 the major purveyor of such

Photographs as Sources in African History

slides had an inventory of over two million negatives. Unlike postcards though such slides were marketed almost exclusively in Europe and North America.

Another important source of material is the use of photographs in publications. Official journals and publications – books, reports, pamphlets, and brochures – incorporated photographs to generate authenticity for their texts or frequently for propagandistic purposes. Many photographers were commissioned by their administrations to photograph official events and buildings and later many governments had professional photographers on their staff. Many government archives in Africa have surprisingly well-kept visual archives. Scores of these photographs were used in publications both official and unofficial, especially by travel writers. Many posters, pamphlets, articles, and books mesh photographs with text and together they tell a story. In such cases layout, cropping, and captioning are of critical importance in carefully crafting the intertextual meanings. This was especially important in photojournalism as practiced in the latter days of apartheid when photography played an important role in exposing the inequities and brutality of the system and it became important to emphasize the affective dimension or Barthesian *punctum*.



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 8. The pamphlet pertains to tell “The Romantic Story of the Backward Trail of Civilization.” Source: Gordon collection.

Recent research in West Africa, and to a lesser degree East and Central Africa, has shown how studio portraits can constitute a valuable source for history. Especially in the coastal areas indigenous photographers developed a flourishing trade in portraiture. Leaving aside important questions about who is included or excluded in such activities,

such portraiture provides important insights into “self-fashioning.” Apart from being social history, these portraits of an emerging elite illustrated the cosmopolitan and modernizing influences which signaled and visualised newly forged connections to a globalizing expansive political economy. Africans frequently responded to these forces by misusing European styles to perform hybrid identities and imagined new senses of self. These vernacular photographers frequently documented events believed to be important like the formation of new associations, as well as ritual life cycle events, most commonly weddings and funerals. Such portraits provide insight into the physical sensibilities of historical experience covering the spectrum of fabrics, poses, and poise and offer invaluable remnants of historical experience. In this regard, an important intervention, though rather inaccessible, is Heike Behrend’s study of East African coastal studios. While engaging in describing the conventional making, circulation, and consumption of

these popular images, she then goes further and considers their rejection and obliteration, especially among Muslims with their nuanced “aesthetics of withdrawal,” in an effort to decenter the Western-centric version of the history of photography in Africa, which begins, as she points out, with local media and subjects such as spirit possession and textiles; she concludes that photography as a visual technology has the potential to be a potent historical force.²¹

Photo-Elicitation and Experimental Research Methods

Investigation of archival photographic collections is one approach available for historical research but there are several ways in which photography can be actively used as a source to generate historical material. *Photo-elicitation* is a research method that can be used in place of, or together, with archival work, ethnographic research, and other methodologies. It consists of using photographs in interviews in order to evoke responses from research participants. All kinds of photographs can be used—those found in different archives, collections, newspapers, publications, reproductions of artworks, or stills from films, but also those which interlocutors might have in their private family albums, or even pictures specially made for the occasion—for the purpose of eliciting a variety of relevant information.

Elicitation does not need to limit itself only to verbal descriptions and can venture into more experimental and creative realms. Interlocutors can also be asked to draw on photographic prints (for example, to draw where a house once stood, or where an event took place), or invited to use given photographs as a basis for a theatrical reenactment of an event or a situation. Another option is to provide local people with cameras and ask them to photograph what are to them matters of historical significance. Researchers can also decide to create a photographic exhibition or a presentation together with their project participants, discussing the photographs during the process and afterwards eliciting responses from the audience or create focus-group interviews. Such methods might be beneficial in giving people more time to think about the images and thus give a variety of comments about them. Sometimes the result can be unexpected, as Liam Buckley experienced in the Gambia, when he hoped to use archival photographs to elicit narratives about the colonial past.²² In most cases people responded with utterances about aesthetics, or guesses about the objects in the pictures. In environmental history repeat photography has become an important strategy to determine environmental change; it involves rephotographing landscapes and then analyzing the photographs for contrasts and changes.²³ Rephotography has also been used to document social change and can of course be applied to archival material as well. A scholar who has engaged with all three of these strategies is Rick Rohde.²⁴

Discussion of the Literature

There is no dearth of material to use in examining the use of photographs as sources. There are several good introductions to the study of visual culture. An accessible and successful textbook in this regard is Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*.²⁵ An indispensable 750-page *vade mecum* of methodological advice is Margolis & Pauwels' *Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods* (London: Sage, 2011). For a more recent and sophisticated take on theoretical issues concerning photographs especially in the Global South one can do well to start with the wide-ranging and continuing work of Elizabeth Edwards, a trained historian and anthropologist. A useful point of departure is her review article "Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image," which considers the material conditions under which photographs are seen. She emphasizes the importance of how the "placing" of photographs in an assemblage of objects generate affect.²⁶ The ethics of using photographs as source and as a research tool are of great importance, especially in this current era of "micro-aggression" and while various professional academic associations have codes of ethics providing important guidelines, few pertain directly to photographs; however the Margolis & Pauwels *Handbook* contains several essays discussing visual ethics. Ariella Azoulay offers a debate on the political and ethical aspects of photography in relation to representation of victims.²⁷ Specifically concerning African photographs, Allen Roberts's short essay provides a useful discussion. Ethical issues have gained renewed emphasis with the increasing use of photoelicitation and "participatory" methods.²⁸

Recent overviews of photography in and of Africa include Chris Morton & Darren Newbury's important edited volume *The African Photographic Archives*, as well as Richard Vokes's collection of historical photographs, and visual history studies by Leila Kivunen and John McAleer.²⁹ Volker Langbehn's edited volume *German Colonialism, Visual Culture and Modern Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2010) while centered on Europe contains much of value concerning photographs composed in Africa and elsewhere; the use of photography to provide "scientific" evidence for racial types in Africa has a long history recently discussed by Amos Morris-Reich in *Race and Photography: Racial Photography as Scientific Evidence, 1876-1980*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).³⁰ There have been groundbreaking studies of indigenous photographers' work on studio portraits. A recent comprehensive volume demonstrating how the corpus of a single indigenous photographer can be used to recover history is Martha Anderson and Lisa Aronson's work on J. A. Green and Amy Staples and Flora Kaplan's edited work on Osagie Alonge. Related to these are two other recent biographies, one detailing the work of the Marshall family in the Kalahari, and the other on Margaret Bourke-White, an early anti-Apartheid photographer. These also serve as exemplars of how to contextualize the work of photographers.³¹

Photographs as Sources in African History

The study of postcards in Africa was pioneered by Christraud Geary in a volume she edited with Virginia-Lee Webb but remains surprisingly underresearched.³² Perhaps the most insightful recent account of missionary photographic engagements with indigenes is that of David Maxwell dealing with F.W. Burton, the missionary, who worked in the erstwhile Belgian Congo. Erotica, while the subject of postcard collections, has also recently been examined by feminists.³³

Closely related to postcards are stereoscopic slides, a much neglected topic but discussed by Neal Sobania in a special issue of *Visual Anthropology* that deals with “Persistent Popular Images of Pastoralists” in Africa.³⁴ The role of visibility in generating and sustaining stereotypes of “the Other” in popular Western culture is dealt with most famously by Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins in their work *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).³⁵ Such racist stereotyping, mostly of Africans, also played an important role in advertising where photographs were deeply implicated as shown in William O’Barr’s now classic *Culture and the Ad: Exploring Otherness in the World of Advertising* (Boulder: Westview, 1994).³⁶

The use of photographs combined with text to make a powerful and persuasive story is of course important. Photojournalism, or what might more specifically be termed exposé photography, has become an important factor stretching back to Leopold’s Congo through the dark days of Apartheid to contemporary crises of genocide, war, and famine. While there have been a few studies of war photography largely in the Global North, this has not been the case in Africa with one or two exceptions. During the last days of Apartheid some radical photographers developed an appropriately titled *A Bigger Picture: A Manual of Photojournalism in Southern Africa* compiled by Margaret Waller which is a veritable treasure trove for the researcher as it contains advice and strategies on why affect is of importance and how to maximize it.³⁷

Further Reading

Banks, Marcus and David Zeitlyn. *Visual Methods in Social Research*, 2nd ed. London: SAGE, 2015.

Berger, John and Jean Mohr. *Another Way of Telling: A Possible Theory of Photography*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.

Geary, Christraud and Virginia-Lee Webb. *Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1998.

Haney, Erin. *Photography and Africa*. London: Reaktion, 2010.

Hayes, Patricia. “Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography” *Kronos* 33 (November 2007), 139–162.

Photographs as Sources in African History

Margolis, Eric and Luc Pauwels, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods*. London: SAGE, 2011.

Morton, Christopher and Darren Newbury, eds., *The African Photographic Archive: Research and Curatorial Strategies*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Peffer, John and Elisabeth L. Cameron, eds. *Portraiture and Photography in Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.

Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. 4th ed. London: SAGE, 2016.

Soulages, François. *Esthétique de la Photographie: Le perte et le reste*. Nathan, 1999 [Spanish, Portuguese and Polish translations available].

Twain, Mark (Samuel Clemens). *King Leopold's Soliloquy*. Boston: P. R. Warren, 1906, 37.

Webb H., Robert, Diane E. Boyer & Raymond M. Turner eds. *Repeat Photography: Methods, and Applications in the Natural Sciences*. Washington, DC: Island Press 2010.

Notes:

(1.) David Killingray and Andrew Roberts, "An Outline History of Photography in Africa to Ca.1940," *History in Africa* 16 (1989): 197-208.

(2.) The conference proceedings are available in cyclostyled format. See David Godby and Patricia Davison, eds. *Encounters with Photography: Photographing People in Southern Africa, 1860 to 1999* (Cape Town, South Africa: 1999); and Patricia Hayes and Andrew Bank. "Introduction," in "Special Issue: Visual History," ed. Patricia Hayes and Andrew Bank, *Kronos* no. 27 (2001): 1-14.

(3.) Wolfram Hartman, Jeremy Silvester, and Patricia Hayes, eds., *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998); and Wolfram Hartman, ed., *Hues between Black and White: Historical Photography from Colonial Namibia 1860s to 1915* (Windhoek, South Africa: Out of Africa, 2004).

(4.) Richard Chalfen, "Snapshots 'r' Us: The Evidentiary Problematic of Home Media," *Visual Studies* 17(2007): 141-149. Even mainstream historians accept the merits of considering photographs beyond mere illustration. See Jennifer Tucker with Tina Campt, "Entwined Practices: Engagements with Photography in Historical Inquiry," *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2009): 1-8. A key figure in making the use of photographs as sources acceptable has been Peter Burke's *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion, 2001).

Photographs as Sources in African History

- (5.) W. B. Lord and Thomas Baines, *Shifts and Expedients of Camp Life, Travel and Exploration*. Africana Reprint Library (Johannesburg, South Africa: Africana Book Society, 1876 [reprint 1975]), 17.
- (6.) Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Anti-Humanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
- (7.) Barbara Freire-Marreco and John L. Myres, eds. *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute, 1912), 268.
- (8.) Freire-Marreco and Myres, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, 358.
- (9.) Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (Boston: P.R. Warren, 1906), 39.
- (10.) Eric Margolis and Jeremy Rowe, "Methodological Approaches to Disclosing Historic Photographs." In *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, ed. Eric Margolis and Luc Pauwels (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2011).
- (11.) Steffen Siegel, ed., *First Exposures. Writings from the Beginning of Photography* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2017), 101.
- (12.) Barthes' seminal *Camera Lucida* is one of the most known and cited books on photography. It has been debated, praised and challenged many times, and its influence continues to echo through literature on photography. See Geoffrey Batchen, ed., *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009). Margolis and Rowe "Methodological Approaches," 2011.
- (13.) Lorena Rizzo provides an important discussion on different approaches to colonial police and prison photographs, their ultimate ambiguity, and their interpretation as objects present in specific social relations and practices. See "Shades of Empire: Police Photography in German South-West Africa," *Visual Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2013): 328-354.
- (14.) An article by Elisabeth Edwards, in which she examines the collecting practices of the Colonial Office in London and their use of photographs for ideological reassurance, is a great example. See "Photographic Uncertainties: Between Evidence and Reassurance," *History and Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2014): 171-188.
- (15.) Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana, 1977)
- (16.) Elisabeth Edwards, "Photographs: Material Form and the Dynamic Archive," in *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History*, ed. Constanza Caraffa (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2011), 47.
- (17.) Margolis and Rowe "Methodological Approaches," 350.

Photographs as Sources in African History

- (18.) John M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Also Robert Gordon, "The Battle for the Bioscope in Namibia," *African Identities* 3, no. 1 (2005): 37-50.
- (19.) Casper Erichsen, *"The Angel of Death Has Descended Violently among Them": Concentration Camps and Prisoners-of-War in Namibia, 1904-08* (Leiden, The Netherlands: African Studies Center, 2005).
- (20.) Christraud Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb, eds., *Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1998).
- (21.) Amy Staples and Flora Kaplan, eds., *Fragile Legacies: The Portraits of Solomon Osagie Alonge* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2017); John Peffer and Elisabeth L. Cameron, eds., *Portraiture and Photography in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Martha Anderson and Lisa Aronson, eds., *African Photographer J.A.Green: Reimagining the Indigenous and the Colonial* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); and Heike Behrend, *Contesting Visibility: Photographic Practices on the East African Coast* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript-Verlag, 2013).
- (22.) "Photographs and Photo-Elicitation after Colonialism," *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 4 (2013): 720-743. See also Luc Pauwels, "'Participatory' Visual Research Revisited: A Critical-Constructive Assessment of Epistemological, Methodological and Social Activist Tenets," *Ethnography* 16, no. 1 (2015): 95-117.
- (23.) For more on methodological advice and emerging theoretical debates of repeat photography, see Robert H. Webb, Diane E. Boyer, and Raymond M. Turner, eds., *Repeat Photography: Methods, and Applications in the Natural Sciences* (Washington, DC: Island Press 2010)
- (24.) See Rick Rhode, "'How we see each other': Subjectivity, Photography and Ethnographic Revision," in *The Colonising Camera: Photography in the Making of Namibian History*, ed. Wolfram Hartman, Jeremy Silvester, and Patricia Hayes (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998); Rick Rhode and M. T. Hoffman, "The Historical Ecology of Namibian Rangelands: Vegetation Change since 1876 in Response to Local and Global Drivers," *Science of the Total Environment* 416 (2012): 276-288. Other noteworthy examples include: J. Nyssen, A. Frankl, R. N. Munro, P. Billi, and Mitiku Haile, "Digital Photographic Archives for Environmental and Historical Studies: An Example from Ethiopia". *Scottish Geographical Journal* 126, no. 3: 185-207 (2010); and Hannah Herrero et al, "Using Repeat Photography to Observe Vegetation Change Over Time in Gorongosa National Park," *African Studies Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (2017): 65-82.
- (25.) Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. 4th ed. (London: SAGE, 2016). Another good primer is Marcus Banks and David Zeitlyn, *Visual Methods in Social Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2016). Finally, see Robert Levine's classic and extensively illustrated *Images of History: Nineteenth and*

Photographs as Sources in African History

Early Twentieth Century Latin American Photography as Documents (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), which contains much advice on the nitty-gritty of using and analyzing photographs in the Global South.

(26.) Elizabeth Edwards, "Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 221–234. See also her book "The Camera as a Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918" (Duke University Press, 2012), which, although based on a study of England, offers a great example and many methodological insights for future scholars of photography.

(27.) Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2012).

(28.) "Image Ethics in and About Africa," *African Arts* 41, no. 2 (2008): 4–8.

(29.) The African Photographic Archives (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), which might profitably be read in conjunction with a special issue of *History and Anthropology* 24, no. 4 (2010), ed. Marcus Banks and Richard Vokes on "Anthropology, Photography and the Archive." The issue contains a fascinating article by Jennifer Bajorek, "Of Jumbled Valises and Civil Society: Photography and Political Imagination in Senegal," 431–452. See also *Erin Haney's Photography and Africa* (London: Reaktion, 2010); and Paul Landau and Deborah Kaspin's *Images & Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Another nuanced edited volume with much historical material is Richard Vokes' edited *Photography in Africa: Ethnographic Perspectives* (Woodbridge, UK: James Currey, 2012); Leila Kivunen, *Visualizing Africa in Nineteenth-Century British Travel Accounts* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and John McAleer, *Representing Africa: Landscape, Exploration and Empire in Southern Africa* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010) are two visual history studies with an emphasis on southern Africa and landscape.

(30.) Also the pioneering efforts of Gustav Fritsch in South Africa in this regard have been the subject of a volume edited by Keith Dietrich and Andrew Bank, *An Eloquent Picture Gallery: The South African Portrait Photographs of Gustav Theodor Fritsch, 1863–1865* (Cape Town, South Africa: Jacana, 2008).

(31.) See Tobias Wendl and Heike Behrend, *Snap Me One! Studiofotografien in Afrika* (Munich: Stadtmuseum, 1998); Heidi Behrend, *Contesting Visibility: Photographic Practices on the East African Coast* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript-Verlag, 2013); Martha Anderson and Lisa Aronson, eds., *African Photographer J.A.Green: Reimagining the Indigenous and the Colonial* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Amy Staples and Flora Kaplan, eds., *Fragile Legacies: The Portraits of Solomon Osagie Alonge* (Washington DC: Smithsonian, 2017); Ilisa Barbash, *Where the Roads All End: Photography and Anthropology in the Kalahari*. (Cambridge, UK: Peabody Museum Press, 2016); and Alex Lichtenstein & Rick Halpern, *Margaret Bourke-White and the Dawn of Apartheid* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016). Photographs made by anthropologists have also been scrutinized. See, for example, John Comaroff, Jean

Photographs as Sources in African History

Comaroff, and Deborah James, *Picturing a Colonial Past: The African Photographs of Isaac Schapera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

(32.) Christraud Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb, *Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1998). Two illustrative case studies are Jeanne Van Eeden, "Surveying the 'Empty Land' in Selected South African Landscape Postcards," *International Journal of Tourism Research* 13, no. 6 (2011): 600–612, and Richard Vokes, "Reflections on a Complex (and Cosmopolitan) Archive: Postcards and Photography in Early Colonial Uganda c. 1904–1928," *History and Anthropology* 21, no. 4 (2010): 375–409.

(33.) "Photography and the Religious Encounter: Ambiguity and Aesthetics in Missionary Representations of the Luba in South East Belgian Congo," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, no. 1 (2011): 38–74. Raymond Corbey, "Alterity: The Colonial Nude," *Critique of Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (1988): 75–91; and Corbey, *Wildheid En Beschaving: De Europese Verbeelding Van Afrika* (Baarn, The Netherlands: Ambio, 1989). See also Rachel Engmann, "Under Imperial Eyes, Black Bodies, Buttocks, and Breasts," *African Arts* 45, no. 2 (2012): 46–57.

(34.) Neil Soubania, "But Where Are the Cattle? Popular Images of Maasai and Zulu across the Twentieth Century," *Visual Anthropology* 15 (2002): 313–346.

(35.) One effort to examine the impact of photography on popular stereotypes of Africans is a special issue of *Visual Anthropology* 15 (2002) on "Persistent Popular Images of Pastoralists" in Africa. See also Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and William O'Barr, *Culture and the Ad: Exploring Otherness in the World of Advertising* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994)

(36.) Stuart Hall also offers some valuable insights about perpetuations of racial stereotypes through different media. See his "The Spectacle of the Other," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE, 1997).

(37.) Wendy Kozol, *Distant Wars Visible: The Ambivalence of Witnessing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); John Liebenberg and Patricia Hayes, *Bush of Ghosts: Life and War in Namibia* (Cape Town, South Africa: Umuzi, 2010); and Margaret Weller, comp., *A Bigger Picture: A Manual of Photojournalism in Southern Africa* (Cape Town, South Africa: Juta, 2000).

Robert Gordon

Department of Anthropology and African Studies, University of Vermont

Jonatan Kurzwelly

Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies, University of St Andrews

