Photographs Beyond Ruins
Women and Photography in Africa

A one-day symposium at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies,
University of London

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ABSTRACTS

Panel 1: Photographic Essays and Conversations

Dora Carpenter-Latiri, University of Brighton
‘Photographic Representations of Tunisian Women (50s to Present): From Family Archive to Fieldwork’

Compared to other Arab nations, the case of Tunisia between Independence and the writing of the post-Revolution constitution in 2014 is characterised by ‘State feminism’ (Rocca: 20161; Lamloum: 20062; Bessis: 19993). The final draft of the new constitution (2014) states equal rights for women; it also states that Islam is the religion of the State. I will explore these tensions between tradition and modernity under colonial rule and the early days of Independence in the 50s-70s and the affirmation of gender equality and Islamic interpretations of gender roles through photographic representations of Tunisian women in a family archive and in my own photographic work.

My father Mokhtar Latiri (1926-2007) was a photographer whose work was part of his practice as a civil engineer and one of the main contributors to the infrastructure of modern Tunisia. In the first part, this paper will explore a lesser known part of his work: his private family albums and in particular his photographic portrayal of women, documenting both a timeless world and a changing one in 50s-70s Tunisia. I will reflect on the archival and ethnographic meanings of a selection of photographs as a Tunisian woman photographer and as an academic.

In the second part of this paper, I will present a selection of my own photos of women taken during fieldwork before and after the Tunisian Revolution as a visual response documenting Tunisian women and the complexity of post-modern Tunisia.

Juliana Kasumu (photographer)
‘From Moussor to Tignon: Hair, History and Heritage’

Throughout history, head-ties have been worn by women to highlight critical elements - culture, class, status- of one’s personal identity. From enslaved servants to wealthy entrepreneurs, a fundamental symbol of womanhood has been the notorious head wrap. After researching about this global phenomenon, I have uncovered influential connections between Creole women of colour in New Orleans, LA and signares in Senegal, West Africa as iconic leaders of the head wrap movement.

Visually depicted is the response of women to Governor Esteban Miró’s Bando de Buen Gobierno (Edict for Good Government), introduced to New Orleans in 1786. This oppressive tactic stated that both enslaved and ‘gens de couleur’ (free women of colour) shall cover their heads in public to distinguish themselves from white women. Such a proposition put at the forefront an array of societal issues - race, marriage, genealogy - and ultimately presented women of colour the stage for a satirical protest.

As decreed, women did in fact cover their heads, limiting the cultural visibility of entrancing hairstyles. However, intricate methods of head wrapping combined with foreign embellishments were astutely adapted instead, giving rise to the present-day exoticism of the head-tie. In this photo-essay, through conversations on creolisation, entrepreneurship and fashion, we begin to understand the importance of cultural memory as a means for survival within the diaspora.

‘From Moussor to Tignon: Hair, History and Heritage’ offers a unique perspective of the head-tie, not only as a means of re-appropriating customs, but also as an emblem of re-appreciation for one’s African heritage.

Biddy Partridge (photographer and musician)
‘Conversations with the Past: Some Collaborative Readings of Personal and Cultural Photographs from Southern Africa in the Eighties’

I have an archive of 19,000 black and white negatives taken in Southern Africa 1979–1999. The question of what to edit, preserve and display raises a host of issues, fears…and ghosts.

Verne Harris’ 2015 article on ‘Hauntology, Archivy and Banditry’ has opened two useful directions in the consideration of these questions.

First, he describes South Africa as being ‘awash with archives’, and notes that ‘the recounting, rehearsing and reinforcing of post-apartheid metanarratives squeeze out counter-narratives and sub-narratives. The cacophony of big voices makes it hard to hear softer voices.’ If I am a ‘softer voice’, how then do I want to be heard?

Second is Harris’ discussion of the Derridean notion of hauntology. What are the ghosts raised by each image I choose to preserve? What is excluded?

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Harris says ‘(Hauntology) is about believing in justice … discovering that most disturbing of all ghosts – the stranger deep inside oneself - (who) could be identified in feminist theory as multiple individual identities, internally fractured and jostling with one another for supremacy.’

Which of my identities is dominant behind the lens in any one image – mother, sister, wife in a ‘mixed marriage’, feminist, (white) S. African photo-journalist, Afro-jazz musician?

I cannot properly answer these questions by myself.

For Derrida, haunting ‘is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done’.

In my case, the hauntings cry out for collaboration.

In the light of these questions I will therefore invite responses to several of my photographs from various viewers including, crucially, the subjects of the images or their families. I will attempt to uncover the possibility of collaborative redemption which may be the ‘something-to-be-done’ around my work.

Will this process open a freedom from or a conversation with some of the ghosts, and a way out of the trap of nostalgia? Will our intertwined memories cast light on the meanings of the past through those fragments of history which we call photographs?

Anna Rocca (Salem State University, Salem, MA)
‘Tunisia: Héla Ammar’s Corridors. Human Dignity, Compassion and Self-Compassion’

Like many Tunisian women, Héla Ammar is a multifaceted and politically active individual. She is a feminist visual artist, a jurist and a professor of law at the University of Tunis. Her personal and professional commitment to human-rights causes is reflected in both her artistic production and legal engagement. Art for her cannot be but a political act and since 2003, she has regularly showed her works nationally and internationally. As a jurist, in 2011 she was part of the Tunisian National Committee that investigated the abuses and civil right violations that occurred in Tunisian from December 2010 to October 2011. This task gave her unprecedented access to twelve penitentiaries, and the opportunity to interview inmates and to document, by means of photos and written reports, the prisoners’ conditions. After this life-changing experience, Ammar articulated her material in a variety of formats: in 2012, she staged a visual installation entitled Counfaq in the Kasbah’s subterranean parking lot; in 2013, she co-authored the book Le Syndrome de Siliana, a judicial survey against the death penalty; and in 2015 she published Corridors a book of photographs and text.

After overviewing Le Syndrome de Siliana and Counfaq, my presentation will focus on Corridors. All works share a common goal: to draw attention to a fragile and uncomfortable Tunisia composed of human beings whose mistreatment and abuse have yet to be acknowledged by either the State or fellow citizens. By calling into question the concept of humanity, Hammar challenges the prejudice against prisoners that citizens more or less unconsciously internalize. Her act of re-textualizing the penitentiaries’ reality by means of interviews, legal examination, photographs, audio segments, and also by means of an illustrated collective autobiographical narrative, is essential to the re-contextualization of Tunisian history and historical writing.
Panel 2: Rereading the (Colonial) Archive

John Aldridge (publisher and photographer) and Neil Parsons (historian)
‘The Photography of Mabel Bent at Great Zimbabwe, 1891’

Mabel Virginia Anna Bent (née Hall-Dare, born 28 January 1846) accompanied her husband James Theodore Bent as the expedition’s photographer on the pioneering first scholarly examination of the Great Zimbabwe ruins in 1891. Her skill as a photographer is evident in the numerous illustrations of *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland, Being a Record of Excavation and Exploration in 1891*, published under her husband’s name by Longmans, Green & Co in 1892. The photographs include not only stone walling and artefacts but also some remarkable portraiture, notably that of ‘Umgabe and His Indunas’.

The Bents have been dismissed, possibly too lightly, as ‘antiquarians’ by later archaeologists, and the expedition was compromised by the backing and finance of Cecil Rhodes who sought proof of ancient Middle Eastern origins for Zimbabwe civilization. The paper will draw on the Bent Papers in the Royal Geographical Society, London, as well as *The Ruined Cities* book, to show how far these critiques are valid, and how far the Bents exercised genuine scientific and aesthetic detachment. They were not archaeologists in the mould of Flinders Petrie, and the reproduction of Mabel’s photography suffered from coarse screening for halftone blocks, or was represented by facsimile linear wood-engravings.

Mabel and Theodore were by all accounts soul-mates. They married in 1877 when she was 31 years old and he was five years younger. As photographer and diarist, she accompanied him on numerous trips from Italy and Greece to the Persian Gulf, Ethiopia and the Yemen, as well as Zimbabwe. After Theodore’s death (from malaria in 1897) she published three books, and was a minor ‘lady traveller’ abroad – declaring her continued interest in photography in *Who’s Who*. She died in London on 3 July 1929, aged 83, and is buried in Theydon Bois, Essex.

Gwil Colenso (independent researcher)
‘Harriette Colenso, Ambassador and Campaigner for the Zulu People in Zululand, Natal, Cape Town, England and St Helena’

In 1897 Eleanor Marx commented: ‘the only two persons … to speak the truth [about] … South Africa are two women, the daughter of Bishop Colenso and Olive Schreiner’.

Harriette Colenso (1847-1932) was the eldest daughter of Bishop Colenso of Natal. Raised on her father’s mission station, Harriette learned the Zulu language and, from an early age, supported her father’s campaign in defence of the Zulu people in their resistance to colonial rule. After the Bishop’s death in 1883, defying conventional boundaries of gender and race, referring to herself and her siblings as ‘we Zulus’, and sometimes wearing a man’s hat, Harriette took the lead within the family in championing the Zulu cause, travelling when necessary, as reflected in her Zulu name, Mandiza - ‘the one who flies’.

This original study will examine photographs of Harriette in Zululand, Natal, Cape Town, England and St Helena alongside relevant extracts from her correspondence, and in relation to her several Zulu names. These photographs show her as a modest but strong and determined woman, in family groupings evidently the most forceful character, sometimes displaying symbols of Zulu nationalism to indicate her commitment to their cause. But they also reveal something of the symbiotic nature of Harriette’s relationship with her more
reticent younger sister, Agnes Colenso (1855-1932), Harriette’s lifelong companion and helpmate who, while always remaining in the background, provided Harriette with vital practical and emotional support.

A photograph of Harriette on St Helena with the wives of the exiled Zulu paramount chief, Dinuzulu, and his infant sons, explains Harriette’s future role in resolving Dinuzulu’s disputed succession. Comparison with photographs of Queen Victoria’s and our present royal families will demonstrate how Harriette sought to affirm the continuation of the Zulu royal family in the face of the Colonial Government’s wish to suppress it.

Fiona Loughnane (National College of Art and Design, Dublin and Maynooth University)
‘From Daughters to Sisters: Photography and the Institutional Narratives of the Little Sisters of St Francis’

The Little Sisters of St. Francis (LSoSf) are a multi-ethnic, transnational group of East African Catholic sisters, founded in Nkokonjeru, Uganda in 1923, by the Irish missionary, Mother Kevin Kearney. The Little Sisters worked alongside Mother Kevin's Irish congregation, the Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa (FMSfA), until they became a fully independent institute in 1959. This paper will examine the Little Sisters’ curation of their photographic archive and will argue that the sisters' use of photography is an important means through which they affirm their independence and equality.

The paper represents part of a critical study of photograph albums, depicting Irish Catholic evangelism, accessed through extensive research in the archives of Irish religious institutes, supplemented by a field trip to Catholic archives in Kenya and Uganda, undertaken in 2015. The archives of the FMSfA, in Dundalk, Ireland, house a number of albums depicting the early years of the LSoSF. These albums often present the East African nuns in a subaltern role, as daughters rather than sisters.

In the large hall of their motherhouse at Nkokonjeru the Little Sisters have installed an exhibition of hand-made posters, incorporating photographic and decorative elements alongside text. Although hand-made and impermanent the LSoSF's photographic display can be viewed as a significant assertion of their agency. The Little Sisters' exhibition is characterised by the types of overlaps, entanglements and discontinuities Achille Mbembe associates with the postcolony. Their use of photography doesn't always resist the clichés of Africa produced by European missionaries, however, I will argue that strategies such as their careful naming and locating of individual sisters, and their claiming of the image of Mother Kevin, allow the sisters to produce an alternative archive of religious mission from an East African perspective.
Panel 3: Photography and Social Worlds

Tina Barouti (Boston University)
‘We Own the Night: Fatoumata Diabaté and Female Urban Youth Identity in West Africa’

_Sutigi_, or ‘the night belongs to us’ is a confident declaration of ownership and the title of Malian artist Fatoumata Diabaté’s photographic series documenting a small population of African youth. Born in Bamako in 1980, Diabaté began this project in 2004 photographing the youth of Mali and Senegal and completed the series in 2013 with images from South Africa and the Congo. Diabaté captures, as the title suggests, the nightlife habits of youth, particularly women, some of whom are the photographer’s own friends and neighbors, living in great metropolises.

With the support of Diabaté’s photographs, this paper briefly defines what “youth” means in the African context – introducing its liminal condition on the continent today. This paper highlights not just how Diabaté, a female ‘youth’ photographer in West Africa, sees her subjects, but also how they want to be seen - technologically connected, fashion-forward, confident, and desirable. This paper analyzes individual photographs of women taken in both private and public settings in order to discuss modes of self-fashioning in urban-oriented female youth living in hyper-sexual and hyper-gendered spaces. ‘Sutigi’ captures the ways African female youth in urban areas reinvent their identity, self-fashion, are self-assertive, and perform their limited agency in the public sphere. This paper historicizes and contextualizes Diabaté’s work by placing it in dialogue with Malian photographer Malick Sidibé, who not only exhibited alongside Diabaté, but also captured similar subject matter fifty years earlier.

Sophie Feyder (University of Leiden)

African women’s engagement with the photographic medium might appear to be scarce in a trade that is historically dominated by men. While being a minority, cases of black female photographers in South Africa do exist, while black women more generally have been keen visitors of photographic studios, as early as the 1930s.

Photographic activities such as going to the studio, exchanging photographs during courtship and compiling photo albums constituted subtle and limited—but significant nonetheless—zones of privacy for young women in the 1950s, in a context when they were increasingly postponing marriage for work and experiencing romantic love. As objects of intimacy, photography thus participated in the privatization of lives in the townships. By challenging the conventional representations of femininity, young women quietly laid claim to the sphere of leisure and took part in defining certain aspects of the new urban culture emerging in the black townships of the Rand.

Private photo collections are hence a key source to reconsider the role of women in the making of a black urban youth culture. This perspective is difficult if not impossible to obtain if historians focus solely on elements such as _Drum_ magazine or the emerging gang subculture known as ‘tsotsism’.
My presentation will be based in part on interviewees’ own private photographic collections, but mainly on the Ronald Ngilima Photographic Archive, a collection of over 5600 images made by photographer Ronald Ngilima and his son Torrance in the Benoni area, between the early 1950s and the mid-1960s.

**Ewa Majczak (University of Oxford)**  
‘Mobile Images in (Im)mobile Social Worlds, Yaoundé (Cameroon)’

In this paper I show how engagement with photography constitutes a domain through which women respond to the conditions of life in the postcolony, specifically how photographs are used by women to transform their partly immobile social worlds and challenge their social status.

Marriage is the key way for young Bamileke to achieve social adulthood. Yet in today’s Cameroon, paths to personal mobility through marriage are restricted. It is increasingly difficult to find a suitable candidate - one of the same ethnicity, preferably from the same village, of the same religion and with sufficient wealth to afford bridewealth payments. Therefore, many of my Bamileke friends are ‘blocked’ in a state of youth, experiencing personal immobility, being excluded from social privileges that adulthood bestows.

Yet my friends constantly search for new means to overcome that immobile state. One of them is to engage in a playful performance in front of the camera, dressed up as successful stars, models on the catwalk and as respected and wealthy women. Still images that come out of such performances fix their desired future aspirations. When displayed at home these images mobilize my friends’ imagination, allowing them to maintain daily hope that ‘the best is still to come’ in a context where realities negate such hopes. The mobilization of imagination also translate into physical mobility when they undertake concrete actions to achieve desired aspirations. Such actions involve images, which in a literal way become mobile - they move across space for example when sent through the internet to a man as a part of courtship. But these images can also move you, not only as you are lifted out of personal immobility through marriage, but also if a man takes you to live with him abroad.

**Oyedepo Olukotun (De Montfort University, Leicester)**  
‘The Critical Mass of Yoruba Women Photographers in Economics, Ethnography and History’

Focusing on the theme of ‘African women as photographers’ this paper presents the undisputable presence of women photographers in southwestern Nigeria – the Yorubaland. In highlighting a critical mass of Yoruba women photographers, the paper responds to the academic discourse of women as marginalised or relegated practitioners within visual culture, or reference to their professional/commercial presence and practices as exceptional.5

With the aid of a historiography the paper will locate and track the activities of Yoruba women photographers in the twentieth century in the two major Yoruba cities of Ibadan and

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Ogbomoso. The paper will highlight Yoruba women photographers as an integral part of the economy of Yoruba photography. It uses an analysis of the Yoruba town Ogbomoso to illustrate an economic argument. In addition, with an analysis of the current photographic sector, and specifically the photography apprenticeship tradition, in the historical city of Ibadan, the paper discusses how Yoruba women might have maintained their resilience within Nigerian photographic history, and sustained their presence in its economic landscape.

My analysis draws on Erika Nimis’ geo-historiography of Yoruba photography in West Africa and engages with Ohioma Ifounu Pogoson’s and Charles Gore’s historiographies of photography in southern Nigeria. For the wider contexts of colonialism, gender and politics this paper engages with, and presents a photographic parallel to the documented role indigenous women played in the history and struggles of the Yoruba and Nigeria, as written in Nigerian scholarship by, for example, Professor (Mrs) Bolanle Awe.

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