

To the people depicted, whose names have been lost over the course of time.

“The millions, whose photographs are taken, are not referred to in any meaningful way in the histories and theories of photography.”

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay

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Purchased with funds from the Rietberg Circle

The historical names for the town and country are used for the locations where the photographs were taken. The current names are indicated in parentheses thereafter. The nationality of the photographer is indicated in the current form.

## «The Future is Blinking»\* Early Studio Photography from West and Central Africa

Museum Rietberg Zurich, 18.March–3.July 2022

Nowhere in the Global South was photography as enthusiastically received as on the coast of West and Central Africa. At the end of the nineteenth century, the region was closely tied to Europe and North and South America by trade. In this transatlantic realm, people, goods, images, and technologies circulated on ships. As a result, just twenty years after photography was first presented, in Paris in 1839, a flourishing photographic culture emerged in the cosmopolitan trading centers between Dakar and Luanda.

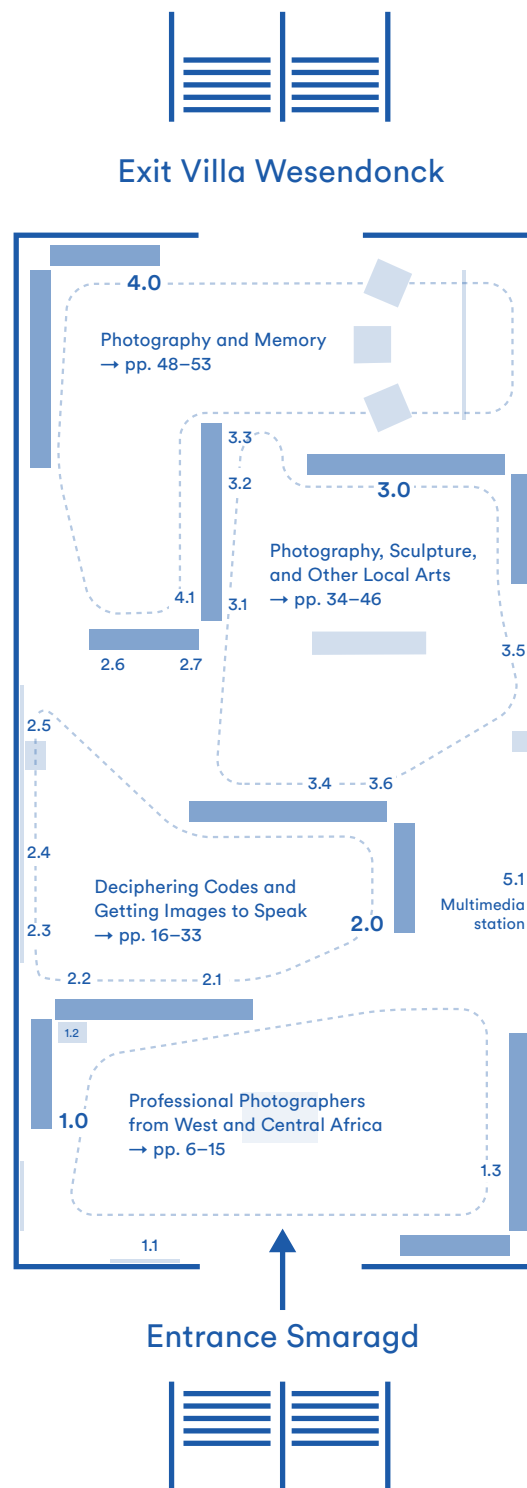
Liberated slaves returning from the United States, Britain, and the Caribbean to Sierra Leone and Liberia played an important role in the introduction of photography. They and their descendants formed the first generations of African photographers. In open-air studios, they created unique portrait photographs of their customers—mostly members of the local upper class. They made use of the potential of photography to create new realities: in front of the camera, participation in global modernism could be articulated. In an era in which life was increasingly characterized by oppression by European colonial powers, the open-air studio in the colonies became a place of self-determination, self-depiction, and identity formation.

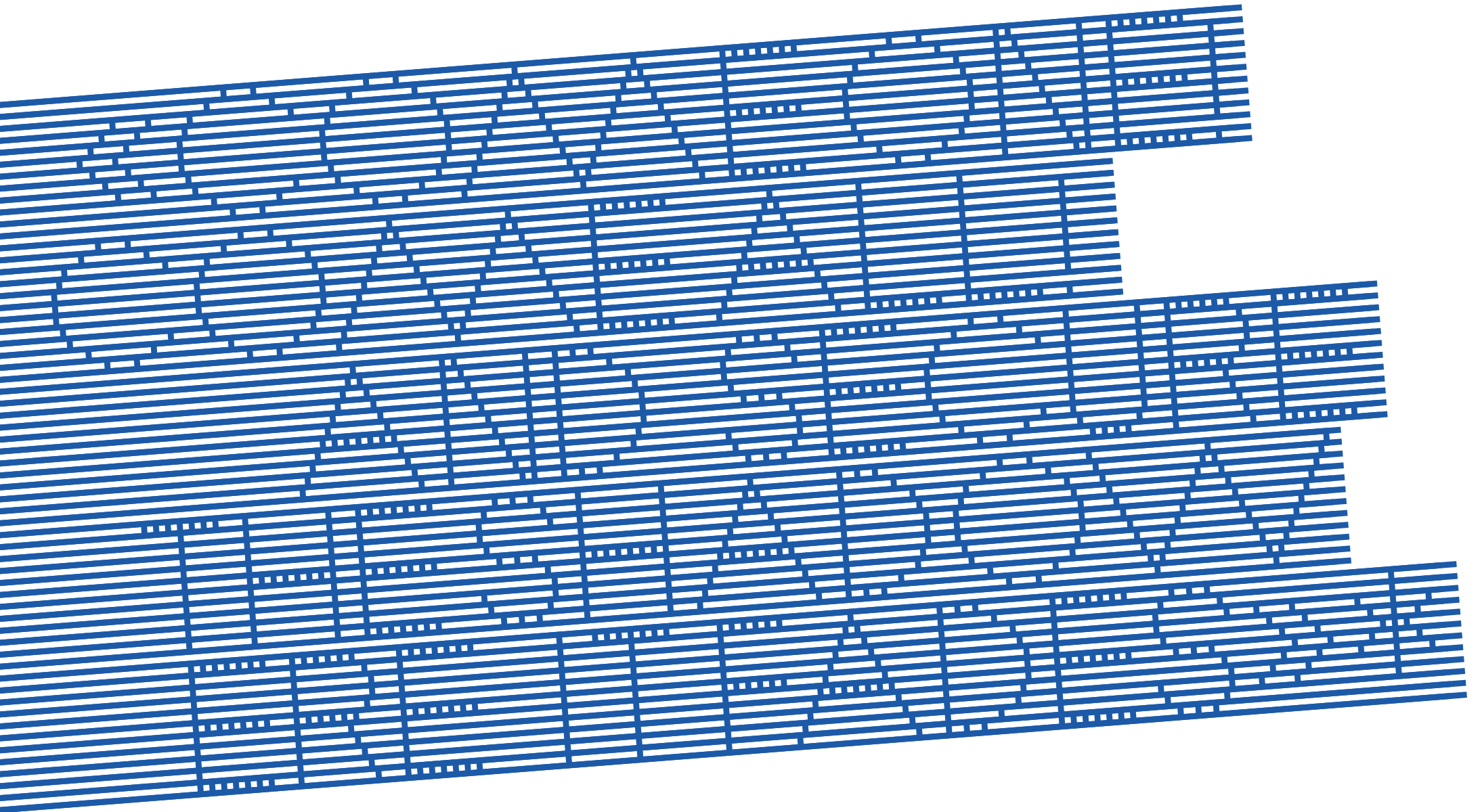
The earliest photographs from the region were thus the result of a self-determined photographic culture. From today's perspective, they seem a strong counter to the history told through the lens of colonial photography, whose depictions of Africans were shaped by prejudices.

“The future is blinking” is a quotation from the Ghanaian photographer Philip Kwame Apagya (born 1958) from the film *Future Remembrance* (1997). Apagya is referring to the task for photography in Ghana that was, in his eyes, the most important one: namely, creating idealized photographic portraits to help future generations remember. The studio photography of the late nineteenth century also had the future in mind when it staged idealized images both for the present and for posterity. Although the names of most of those depicted have been lost over the course of time, we encounter their gazes and realize that they had the last word when the photograph was created.

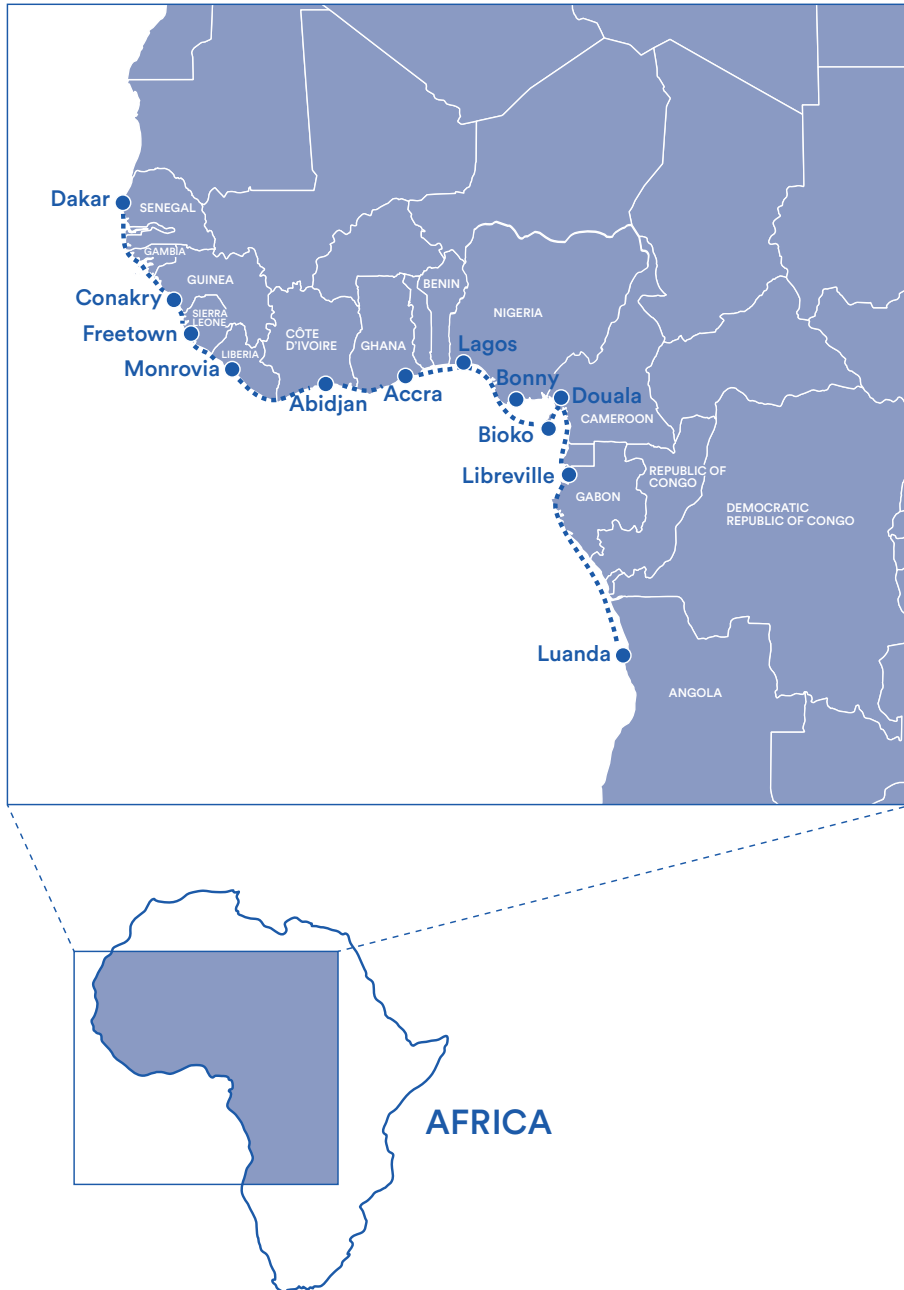
\* Philip Kwame Apagya, 1997  
in: *Future Remembrance – Photography and Image Arts in Ghana*,  
Tobias Wendl and Nancy du Plessis (D, 1998)

<https://vimeo.com/133272148>  
(min. 1:45)





\*A.A.H. Obafemi, 1900



## 1.1 Professional Photographers from West and Central Africa

With these words the photographer A. A. H. Obafemi promoted his services in the *Lagos Standard* newspaper in 1900. Obafemi was one of numerous professional photographers of West African origin who were practicing at this time. Together they were responsible for a large part of the production of photographs in West Africa at the time.

The pioneers were young men from the urban elite with similar biographies. Many of them were from Sierra Leone or Gambia and had attended mission schools. They belonged to the Krio group and were thus descendants of former slaves, who enjoyed a privileged position in colonial society.

Newspaper ads and the printed versos of their photographs reveal additional valuable information about these busy men: they led restless lives and traveled as itinerant photographers by steamship along the coast from Dakar to Luanda; they thought of themselves as artists and had mastered the latest technologies. They were strikingly well networked internationally. That was necessary in order to acquire equipment and photographic materials and later to have postcards produced. Several photographers were also members of the British Royal Photographic Society and belonged to international networks such as the Freemasons or the Odd Fellows.

Their services were employed by the colonial governments and the local elite. Thanks to their cultural

knowledge, photographers were able to do justice to the aesthetic ambition of their foreign and local customers in equal measure.

With the rise of picture postcards in the early twentieth century, their photographs made it to the Global North by the thousands. They used their international contacts to have the cards produced and sent their photographs along with the captions they wanted to postcard manufacturers in Europe. After they were printed, the postcards were shipped back to West and Central Africa, where they were sold to travelers.

- 2 Unknown photographer  
**Portrait of the photographer Francis W. Joaque (ca. 1845–1895) with a stereo camera**  
probably Fernando Po (Bioko), Equatorial Guinea, ca. 1865  
Reproduction, 2022  
Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid
- 3 Francis W. Joaque (Sierra Leone, ca. 1845–1895)  
**Young king of New Calabar**  
Nigeria, prior to 1875  
Hand-colored collotype print, ca. 1905
- 4 **Newspaper ad by the photographer Shadrack Albert St. John (Sierra Leone, 1847–?)**  
*The Sierra Leone Weekly News*, October 18, 1884
- 5 **Newspaper ad by William Stephen Johnston & Sons (Ghana, active ca. 1890–1919)**  
*The Colony and Provincial Reporter*, September 21, 1912

- 6 T. Vieyra (active ca. 1920–1930)  
**A photographer at a reception of François-Joseph Reste, French Governor General of Dahomey**  
Porto-Novo, Dahomey (Republic of Benin), ca. 1929  
Collotype print
- 7 Alfred Ferdinand Carew (active ca. 1890)  
**Verso of a cabinet card with the photographer's services**  
Lagos, Nigeria, 1890  
Albumen print
- 8 Lutterodt & Son, (Ghana, active until 1897)  
**Verso of a cabinet card with the all-seeing eye of the Odd Fellows, from a lodge in Liverpool**  
Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1888  
Albumen print  
Museum der Kulturen Basel
- 9 Lutterodt Brothers, (Ghana, active ca. 1894)  
**Photograph of Benguela, Angola, more than 4,000 km from the photographer's head office**  
Benguela, Angola, 1895  
Albumen print

## 1.1 A New Galaxy

The sculpture *Young Photographer* depicts, according to British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, a child who is leaving Earth and traveling to a galaxy where he or she can resist the images of Africa created by the West and create a new inventory of images.

On the photography universe—represented by the globe as the child's head—the names of famous photographers are

inscribed. The name of the photographer Malick Sidibé of Mali stands out prominently between Nan Goldin and Wolfgang Tillmans on the front in the center. Shonibare thus recenters the global history of photography in West Africa and makes the Global North appear to be its periphery.

*Young Photographer* is programmatic for this exhibition: the history of photography in West and Central Africa is not considered from the West; rather, the focus is on its local features, practices, and conventions of depiction. Unlike in Shonibare's case, however, the photographs do not have to be created first; they were there the whole time.

- 1 Yinka Shonibare CBE (UK/Nigeria, born 1962)

**Planets in My Head, Young Photographer**

Sculpture (various materials, camera, tripod), 2019  
Nicola Erni Collection

## 1.2 Visible to Everyone and Yet Hidden

Most of the early photographs by West African photographers are now found as postcards or in albums in archives in the Global North. It was long assumed that the names on the backs of these photographs were those of European photographers. Only in the past twenty years has research shown that most of these studio photographs were taken by local photographers. This exhibition shows original works

by photographers who have already been identified as well as others by (as yet) unknown photographers. The search for their names is complicated: Some photographs in British colonies registered copyright of the photographs with the relevant office in London. Nevertheless, European publishing houses published their photographs as postcards or in books without identifying their author. Identification of authorship is also made more difficult by the fact that the photographers often exchanged or took over possession of negatives and also copied prints.

- 10 John Parkes Decker (Gambia, ca. 1840–1890)

**An alagba masquerade**

Bonny, Nigeria, photograph prior to 1880  
Collotype print published by A. Ferdinand Carew, Lagos, ca. 1908

- 11 Charles Spencer Smith

**Glimpses of Africa, West and Southwest Coast**

Nashville, Tennessee, 1895  
Photographs by Lutterodt Brothers, D. Olawala Labinjo and others

- 12 William Stephen Johnston (Ghana, active between 1890 and 1915)

**Portrait of a young man**

Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1905  
Gelatin silver print

- 13 Unknown photographer

**Family of a trader with valuable property, including a framed photograph**

Jacquerville, Ivory Coast, ca. 1902  
Halftone print

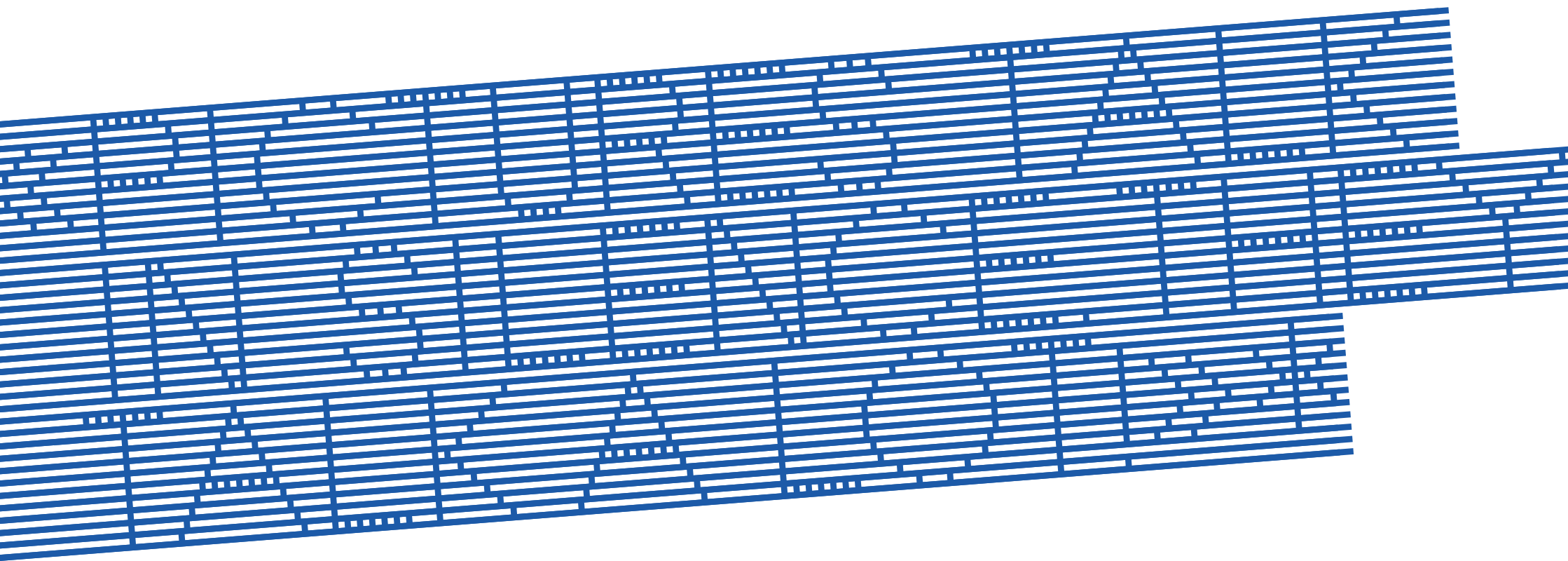
## 1.3 The Lucrative Business of Prejudices

The growth in popularity of picture postcards in the early twentieth century provided photographers with a lucrative business field. African clients for postcards were aware of Europe's hunger for exotic images and used this to their advantage by staging scenes that spoke to foreign viewers. They also used portraits commissioned by private customers for their own purposes. Generic captions meant the people photographed lost their identity; women depicted went from body as subject to body as object. In this way postcards by African photographers also contributed to demeaning and misleading stereotypes of Africans.

- 14 Unknown photographer  
**Alphonso Lisk-Carew's studio in Freetown with postcards on the signboards**  
Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1938  
Reproduction, 2022  
Emory and Myrta Pearson Ross
- 15 H. Sanya Freeman (Nigeria, active ca. 1920)  
**Woman with basket in the studio, probably staged for a foreign audience**  
Lagos, Nigeria, ca. 1920  
Gelatin silver print

- 16 Alex Agbaglo Acolatse (Togo, 1880–1975)  
**Women with containers of millet beer, probably staged for a foreign audience**  
Lome (Lomé), Togo, 1925  
Collotype print
- 17+18 Jonathan Adagogo Green (Nigeria, 1873–1905)  
**Christmas cards**  
Nigeria, 1903 and 1904  
Gelatin silver prints
- 19 Alphonso Sylvester Lisk-Carew (Sierra Leone, 1883–1969)  
**Collage of three photographs**  
Sierra Leone, ca. 1920  
Gelatin silver print
- 20+21 Jonathan Adagogo Green (Nigeria, 1873–1905)  
**King Abbi Amachree IV of Buguma**  
Buguma (Buguma City), Nigeria, ca. 1898  
Albumen print  
Colored collotype print, ca. 1903, sent from Dahomey (Republic of Benin)
- 22–24 William Stephen Johnston (Ghana, active between 1890 and 1915)  
**Three picture postcards with generic captions**  
Ghana and Sierra Leone, ca. 1905  
Halftone prints
- 25 Neils Walwin Holm / Photoholm (Ghana, 1865–ca. 1927)  
**Picture postcard with a generic caption**  
Lagos, Nigeria, ca. 1905  
Collotype print





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<https://vimeo.com/133272148>  
(min. 2:38)

## 2.0 Deciphering Codes and Getting Images to Speak

Rarely can the conditions under which a photograph was taken be followed as well as in this one. It shows the photographer Antoine Freitas in 1936 in a village in the interior of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The constantly overcast sky, which resulted in diffuse lighting in many photographs, is evident as well as the numerous people attending the photo session as spectators. On the left edge of the photograph, four women in posing in their finest clothes in front of a painted background. Nothing in the final photographs suggests the spectacle of its staging.

In arduous photo sessions in studios, photographers and sitters created idealized portraits. For such transformations the photographers provided their customers with a stage and props. There were also backgrounds, decorations, and accessories. Depending on their intentions for the photographs, the sitters chose the appropriate elements and added objects from their personal possessions.

The elements visible in a photograph and the poses represented cultural codes that offered local viewers photograph insights into the social role that the sitters were articulating in front of the camera, the intention behind their visit to the studio, or their relationships of those being photographed. Today, it is not simple to read these cultural codes. Decoding them and getting the images to speak is the intention of this chapter.

- 26 Unknown photographer  
**Antoine Freitas photographing a group of five women**  
Kasaï, Belgian Congo (DR Congo), 1936  
Reproduction, 2022  
Revue Noire
  
- 27 Antoine Freitas (Angola, 1901–1966)  
**Portrait of two men**  
Kasaï, Belgian Congo (DR Congo), ca. 1936  
Gelatin silver print  
Museum Rietberg Zurich  
Gift of the heirs of Hans Himmelheber
  
- 28 Thomas Fischer   
**Sound Composition**  
Zurich, 2022

## 2.1 Backdrops between Reality and Illusion

Backdrops as projection screens to make the world more beautiful were an important element of the photographs. As with the depictions of the people, the backdrops were also about idealization. Painted garden landscapes or salons were ordered from Britain through mail-order catalogs. Photographers soon began to design their own visions of ideal landscapes and furnishings and commissioned local painters to produce them. Backgrounds of corrugated metal as a symbol of luxury emphasized a person's status as did prestigious fabrics, which only certain people were allowed to possess.

Some of the compositions are striking for having been framed so that both the backdrops and their embedding in reality remain visible. This was a typical phenomenon of traveling photography worldwide, as is clear from this photograph from the Blenio Valley by the Swiss photographer Roberto Donetta.

- 29 Roberto Donetta (Switzerland, 1865–1932)  
**Two women in an improvised studio**  
 Blenio Valley, Switzerland, 1910  
 Gelatin silver print, 2014  
 Collection Fotostiftung Schweiz/Archivio Donetta
- 30 Vialle (active ca. 1900)  
**Studio with wine and cloths, corrugated metal and mural as background**  
 Brazzaville, Congo Français (Republic of Congo), 1900  
 Collotype print
- 31 Khalilou (Senegal, active ca. 1900)  
**Portrait of generations between reality and fiction**  
 Libreville, Gabon, 1910  
 Collotype print
- 32 G. Faure (active ca. 1920)  
**Portrait of three men**  
 Port-Gentil, Gabon, 1929  
 Collotype print

- 33 Unknown photographer  
**Group of chiefs in front of a house and painted background**  
 Nigeria, ca. 1910  
 Halftone print
- 34 A. Albaret (active ca. 1910)  
**Women in front of a symmetrical arrangement with viewers in the background**  
 Conakry, French Guinea (Guinea), ca. 1910  
 Collotype print
- 35 Varella & Oliveira (active ca. 1910)  
**Courtyard studio with commemorative cloth**  
 Thysville (Mbanza-Ngungu), Belgian Congo (DR Congo), ca. 1910  
 Collotype print
- 36 E. G. Davis (Ghana, active ca. 1890)  
**Portrait of a man in front of a background imported from England**  
 Gold Coast Colony (Ghana and West Togo), ca. 1890  
 Albumen print
- 37 Unknown photographer  
**Woman in front of a locally painted background**  
 Sekondi, Ghana, 1910  
 Collotype print
- 38 Desgranges and Decayeux (active ca. 1910)  
**A mother with her daughters after their initiation in front of a painted European background**  
 Conakry, French Guinea (Guinea)  
 Collotype print
- 39 Reveyron (active ca. 1905)  
**Two women in front of a background with idealized, exotic landscape**  
 Dakar, Senegal, ca. 1910  
 Collotype print

- 40 G. Faure (active ca. 1915)  
**Young man in front of corrugated metal**  
Port-Gentil, Gabon, 1915  
Collotype print
- 41 Jonathan Adagogo Green (Nigeria, 1873–1905)  
**Chief William Brown and his family in front of a high-status tortoise cloth**  
Nigeria, 1890  
Albumen print

## 2.2 Tyler Mitchell

The American photographer Tyler Mitchell (born 1995) is considered one of the most important photographers of his generation. In his photographs he presents visions of a Black America with self-confidence and joie de vivre. In 2018, US Vogue published for the first time in its history a cover by a black photographer: Mitchell's portrait of the singer Beyoncé. That was followed in 2021 by a portrait US Vice President Kamala Harris as Mitchell's second *Vogue* cover.

Tyler Mitchell explicitly refers in these portraits to the aesthetic principles of the historical studio photograph of West Africa and the African diaspora in the United States: For his portrait of Beyoncé, he had a copy of a historical background painted, and for his portrait of Kamala Harris he found inspiration in the use of fabrics as decoration.

- 42 Joseph Moïse Agbodjélou (Benin, 1912–1999)  
**Young woman**  
Porto Novo, Benin, 1960  
Gelatin silver print, 2022  
Jack Bell Gallery
- 43 Tyler Mitchell (USA, born 1995)  
**Beyoncé in front of a painted background**  
USA, 2018  
US *Vogue*, August 2018
- 44 Alex Agbaglo Acolatse (Togo, 1880–1975)  
**Portrait of a standing woman**  
Togo, ca. 1900  
Gelatin silver print
- 45 Unknown photographer  
**Portrait of a young woman**  
Ghana (?), ca. 1900  
Albumen print
- 46 Tyler Mitchell (USA, born 1995)  
**Kamala Harris on the cover of US Vogue**  
USA, 2021  
US *Vogue*, February 2021

## 2.3 Playing with Modernity and Tradition

To express their modernity, sitters reached for imported accessories such as pith helmets, umbrellas, and plastic flowers. Depending on the occasion for their studio visit, traditional accessories with local significance, such as jewelry, fabrics, or insignia of political power were used.

By using accessories, the sitters underscored the image they wished to evoke with the photograph. An impressive example of how the sitters themselves could actively construct their identities is conveyed by two photographs of King Jaja, the most powerful palm oil dealer of his time in the Niger Delta. As a supporter of traditional religion, he played the role of a priest in one photograph, pouring out a sacrificial drink. Jaja wore a prestigious tortoise cloth (ikakibite), with which the former slave expressed a new, royal identity. In stark contrast to that, in another photograph he posed as a trader, surrounded by imported goods such as a hat, shirt, jacket, and wicker chair.

47–49 Unknown photographer

**Three photographs from the same studio, furnished differently**

Port-Gentil, Gabon, 1920  
Collotype prints

50 Unknown photographer

**Couple in the studio with pith hat and jewelry box**

Dahomey, Togo, ca. 1920  
Halftone print

51 Alphonse James (active from 1910)

**Two women with asianizing paper fans**

Conakry, French Guinea (Guinea), ca. 1915  
Collotype print

52 Alphonso Sylvester Lisk-Carew (Sierra Leone, 1883–1969)

**Portrait of a girl after her initiation**

Freetown, Sierra Leone, ca. 1920  
Gelatin silver print

53 Unknown photographer

**Woman in her wedding dress with a Queen Victoria crown**

Old Calabar (Calabar), Nigeria, ca. 1900  
Collotype print

54+55 John Parkes Decker (Gambia, ca. 1840–1890)

**King Jaja dressed as a priest and as a trader**

Opobo, Nigeria, prior to 1885  
Albumen prints  
Museum der Kulturen Basel

## 2.4 The Rhythm of Pictures and the Meaning of Fabrics

Textiles were particularly important in portrait photography. With their asymmetric patterns, they broke through the balanced compositions of the photographs and provided movement. The clothes of the people portrayed and the textiles in the background could be coordinated harmoniously but could also form an elaborate contrast. In such compositions, objects and people merge into a single ornamental surface.

Around 1900, cotton from India, batik from Java, locally woven fabrics, and industrially produced fabrics from Europe were all available in the region. The sitters' choice of fabrics signaled their social status, belonging to a particular regional group, or relationship to one another. Fabrics could also commemorate puberty or funeral rites.

- 56 Fr  derick H. W. Arkhurst (Ghana / Ivory Coast, ca. 1880–1969)  
**Two women in tailored clothing. The motif is based on square Niki neckerchiefs**  
Gran Bassam, Ivory Coast, ca. 1910  
Collotype print

- 57 Unknown photographer  
**Two men with draped fabrics, hat, and umbrella**  
Ivory Coast, ca. 1900  
Collotype print
- 58 Unknown photographer  
**Woman in batik dress in front of a chinoiserie paravent**  
Ghana or Ivory Coast, ca. 1900  
Albumen print
- 59 G. Kant   (active ca. 1900)  
**Two sisters in wax-print fabrics from Holland**  
Bandoukou, Ivory Coast  
Collotype print
- 60 Unknown photographer  
**Chief with a fly whisk surrounded by textiles**  
Ivory Coast, ca. 1900  
Gelatin silver print
- 61 Unknown photographer  
**Two friends, one wearing a fabric from Ghana (Asante or Ewe), the other European clothing**  
Cameroon or Belgian Congo (DR Congo), prior to 1939  
Gelatin silver print  
Museum Rietberg Zurich  
Gift of the heirs of Hans Himmelheber
- 62 J. W. Paris (Sierra Leone, active 1903 –?)  
**Alake Gbadebo I (1854–1920, Nigeria) in a cape that is presumably from Mecca, Saudi Arabia**  
Sierra Leone, 1904  
Collotype print
- 63 Unknown photographer  
**Elegant woman in voluminous clothing**  
Nigeria, ca. 1900  
Gelatin silver print

- 64 Fr  derick H. W. Arkhurst (Ghana/Ivory Coast, ca. 1880–1969)  
**Woman with Dutch wax-print fabric**  
 Ivory Coast, ca. 1900  
 Collotype print, ca. 1908
- 65 Alphonse James (active from 1910)  
**Woman with locally woven fabric and blouse of imported fabric**  
 Conakry, French Guinea (Guinea), 1910  
 Collotype print
- 66 Unknown photographer  
**Women with different wax-print fabrics**  
 Ghana, prior to 1915  
 Gelatin silver prints  
 Mission 21, Basel

## 2.5 Beauty as Resource: Women and Photography

The strong presence of women in the studio photography of West and Central Africa contrasts with their absence in Western historical writing.

Unlike men, women were open to the new medium. They used their beauty, supported by lavish textiles, as a

resource in front of the camera in order to articulate their position in society—for example, before or after their initiation, as a literate Christian, or as young woman searching for a husband. The portrait they had taken for their initiation was considered the most important photograph in a woman’s life. It was evidence of their status as a marriageable woman and future mother.

- 67–69 Unknown photographer  
**Three portraits of woman taken by the same studio: Portrait of a woman with fashionable hairdo and umbrella; Girl before her initiation; Portrait of a woman before visiting church, with Bible**  
 Nigeria (?), ca. 1890  
 Albumen prints
- 70+71 Neils Walwin Holm / Photoholm (Ghana, ca. 1865–1927)  
 Jacob Vitta (probably Ghana, ?–1914)  
**Portraits for future husbands**  
 Ghana or Nigeria, ca. 1900  
 Collotype print  
 Ghana or Ivory Coast, ca. 1910  
 Gelatin silver print
- 72 Unknown photographer  
**Two women before mass with hymnal**  
 Ghana, 1900  
 Albumen print

## 2.6 Weak Rulers, Strong Portraits: Men and Photography

One consequence of colonization was that alliances with colonial powers and successful trade relations could put men in positions of power who had little support from the population. They used photography to make their claims to power evident both to a local and to a European audience. Portraits of rulers from the periphery of the British Empire are distinguished by the sitters' choice of symbols of power that a European audience could understand. These included crowns and imported luxury items. For the native audience, the men indicated their claim to power with local insignia such as royal staffs and fabrics.

- 73+74 Jonathan Adagogo Green (Nigeria, 1873–1905)  
**Chief Young Briggs, one of Green's most important clients, with a Bath chair and a bicorn**  
Abonnema, Nigeria, ca. 1899  
Albumen print and collotype print (ca. 1904)

- 75+76 Unknown photographer  
**Acquah III, King of Winneba, on the occasion of his coronation, with a locally painted background**  
  
**Acquah III on the occasion of his coronation, with retinue**  
Winneba (Simpa), Ghana, ca. 1905  
Gelatin silver prints
- 77 Unknown photographer  
**Chief from Benin in front of corrugated metal, with wine carafes and traditional emblems of power such as coral jewelry**  
Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria, 1895  
Collotype, ca. 1903
- 78 John Parkes Decker (Gambia, ca. 1840–1890)  
**Prince Archibong II with crown on throne**  
Duke Town (former city-state in present-day southern Nigeria), prior to 1872  
Collotype print, published ca. 1903
- 79 Unknown photographer  
**Chief with staff, cross, and coral jewelry**  
Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria, ca. 1900  
Collotype print

## 2.7 Subtle Evidence of Resistance

In 1897 the British attacked the insubordinate Kingdom of Benin, burned down the palace, and plundered the palace treasures. Known today as the “Benin bronzes,” it has sparks a debate currently over the restitution of looted cultural assets.



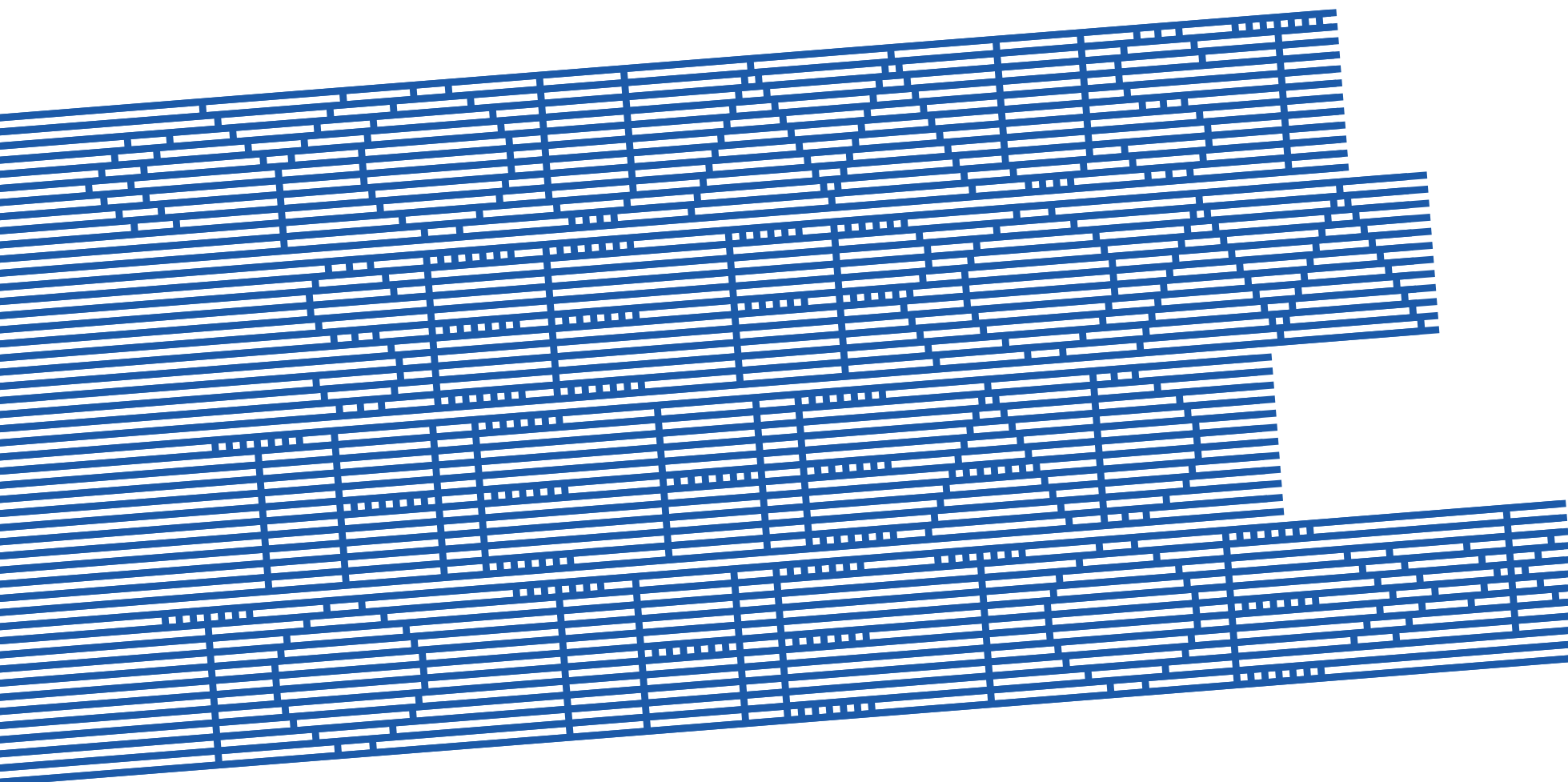
This photograph shows the deposed Oba (King) of Benin, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, as a prisoner aboard the yacht Ivy on his way to exile in Calabar. Chains have been placed around his neck, and he is not wearing any emblems of power, as was otherwise common in portraits of rulers.

Although this photograph was originally commissioned by the British as a document of subjugation, the mocking smile of the king can be read from today's perspective as evidence of subtle resistance. Smiling was not a feature of the local repertoire of portraiture. The deliberate control of emotions is set aside here in favor of another message that still reaches us today.



[https://rietberg.ch/  
forschung/benin-  
initiative-schweiz](https://rietberg.ch/forschung/benin-initiative-schweiz)

- 80 Jonathan Adagogo Green (Nigeria, 1873–1905)  
**Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, King of Benin, as a prisoner  
onboard the yacht Ivy**  
Bonny, Nigeria, 1897  
Albumen print



\*Joseph K. Davies, 1997  
in: *Future Remembrance – Photography  
and Image Arts in Ghana*,  
Tobias Wendl and Nancy du Plessis (D, 1998)





<https://vimeo.com/133272148>  
(min. 33:00)

### 3.0 Photography, Sculpture, and Other Local Arts

Unlike in the Global North, photography in West and Central Africa was not tied to painting. It borrowed rather from sculpture and the performing arts, either in a reciprocal relationship or from symbioses. The relationship to sculpture in particular produced the specific aesthetic of the photographic culture of West and Central Africa. Photography adopted from it the aesthetic principles of idealization, abstraction, and symmetry. These principles were applied differently according to place, context, and photographer but are recognizable to some extent everywhere.

Naturalistic renderings in sculpture were reserved for people outside the society, such as foreigners, slaves, or refugees. In the art of carving and later in photography as well, the primary concern was not physiognomic similarity between the person and their likeness. The focus was rather on depicting their identity in a universalizing aesthetic.

Figures and objects on altars and memorial shrines were grouped and placed side by side and on top of one another in clear axes. Symmetrical representation of objects and people was adopted by photography and led to balanced compositions and symmetrical reproduction of bodies.

- 81 Cyril Punch  
**Ancestral shrine**  
Royal palace, Benin City, Nigeria, 1891  
Reproduction, 2022  
Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art  
Smithsonian Institution
- 82 Jacob Vitta (probably Ghana, ?–1914)  
**Mirrored arrangement of four women**  
Ghana, 1905  
Collotype print
- 83 Unknown photographer  
**Mirrored composition with children, cat, and dog**  
Ca. 1920  
Gelatin silver print
- 84 Moukarim Frères (Cameroon or Gabon, active ca. 1900)  
**A chief in a symmetrical arrangement**  
Jabassi (Yabassi), Cameroon, ca. 1900  
Collotype print
- 85 Workshop of the court of Benin  
**Jewelry pendant: King flanked by dignitaries**  
Nigeria, Edo, 16th cent. / 17th cent.  
Ivory  
Museum Rietberg Zurich, inv. no. RAF 606  
Gift of Elisabeth Zink-Niehus
- Provenance  
until 1965: Nigerian art dealer  
1965: Africa exhibition at Globus Zürich  
1965–Jan. 1991: Collection of Elisabeth Zink
-   <https://rietberg.ch/forschung/benin-initiative-schweiz>
- 86 Jonathan Adagogo Green (Nigeria, 1873–1905)  
**Chief with his family**  
Bonny, Nigeria, ca. 1890  
Albumen print

## 3.1 The Complete Person

Both in carved and photographed portraits, people were depicted as full-length figures in a frontal view. Their bodies are balanced and are distinguished by corpulence.

Because the exposure time required the sitter to sit still for several seconds, people usually sat on chairs, which were part of the studio's furnishings. Their position with legs apart was intended to create additional physical volume. Their pose tautened their clothing to unfurl the patterns of the textiles. Feet and hands, resting on the lap or knees, were also visible. The photograph presents, in a very conscious presentation, the entirety of the person in all their facets.

It was, however, not always photography that was dependent on sculpture. Conversely, the motif of a seated man was adopted for a carved figure and is evident of the simultaneity of both art forms.

- 87 Artist in the Yoruba style  
**Female twins (ibeji)**  
Region around Ilorin, Nigeria, Yoruba, prior to 1970  
Wood  
Museum Rietberg Zurich, inv. no. RAF 665  
Gift of Hans and Henriette Coray  
  
Provenance  
prior to 1970: Hans Coray, Zurich

- 88 Jonathan Adagogo Green (Nigeria, 1873–1905)  
**Akenta Bob of Abonnema after her initiation**  
Bonny, Nigeria, 1898  
Collotype, published by Neils Walwin Holm
- 89 Fr  derick H. W. Arkhurst (Ghana/Ivory Coast, ca. 1880 –1969)  
**Portrait of a seated woman**  
Gran Bassam, Ivory Coast, ca. 1900  
Collotype print
- 90 Unknown photographer  
**Portrait of a seated woman with a child**  
Ghana, ca. 1930  
Gelatin silver print
- 91 Artist in the Baule style  
**Seated Figure**  
Ivory Coast, Baule, prior to 1958  
Wood, traces of red paint  
Museum Rietberg Zurich, inv. no. RAF 513  
Purchased with funds from the City of Zurich  
  
Provenance  
prior to 1958–18.07.1960: collection of Maria Wyss, Basel
- 92 Khalilou (Senegal, active ca. 1900)  
**Portrait of three women**  
Gabon, prior to 1910  
Collotype print

## 3.2 Eliminating Traces of Life

Rather than a chisel, photographers such as the Thompson Brothers used graphite pencils to rework their images so they came as close as possible to ideal human beings. With these interventions, the traces of life were eliminated, so that faces look like masks—an ideal borrowed from the art of carving.

The skin and the whites of the eyes were brightened with graphite pencil on the negative; wrinkles and furrows touched up; and the shape of the face made rounder. Small rolls of fat on the neck were considered an indication of physical well-being and beauty, and they too were applied on the negative.

- 93 Artist in the Asante style  
**Fertility figure akua'ba with perfectly round head and rolls of fat on its neck**  
Ghana, prior to 1982  
Wood, glass  
Museum Rietberg Zurich, inv. no. RAF 455  
Gift of Annemarie Woodman
- Provenance  
prior to 1982: Annemarie Woodman, Kilchberg
- 94 Thompson Brothers (active in Ghana, ca. 1890)  
**Retouched photograph of a woman**  
Ghana, 1890  
Albumen print

### 3.3 Did you see?

Anyone pointing to his right eye with his or her right index finger is saying “Did you see?” This message to the viewer is found with both photographs and figures. The two examples shown here were brought back by the ethnologist and art dealer Hans Himmelheber from a journey to Cameroon, Gabon, and DR Congo around 1938–39—a fact that shows us once again that carving and photography existed in parallel.

- 95 Artist in the Songye style  
**Power figure with raised arm (nkishi)**  
Belgian Congo (DR Congo), prior to 1939  
Wood  
Museum Rietberg Zurich, inv. no. HH 3  
Gift of Eberhard and Barbara Fischer
- Provenance  
1938/39–2003: Hans Himmelheber, acquired in situ  
2004–2013: Eberhard and Barbara Fischer Collection
- 96 Unknown photographer  
**Woman suggesting “Did you see?” with a gesture**  
Cameroon, Gabon, or Belgian Congo (DR Congo), prior to 1939  
Gelatin silver print

### 3.4 The Doubling of the Human Being

Double portraits already existed in sculpture. They point to the presence of one's own real or imaginary twin. Before it was possible to depict one person twice by exposing a negative twice on the same print, the appearance of twin-like similarity was achieved by two people with matching clothing, pose, and similar facial expression.

One special variety of the double portrait concerns the memory of twins: When one of two twins died among the Yoruba in Nigeria, wooden memorial figures would be made in his or her memory, but beginning in the 1970s this was increasingly replaced by photography. The dead twin was added to the picture by mirroring the living one.

- 97 Unknown photographer  
**Two women in the same pose**  
 Luanda, Angola, prior to 1907  
 Collotype print
- 98 Artist in the Congo, Vili, or Yombe style  
**Seated couple**  
 Congo Free State (DR Congo)  
 Second half of the 19th or early 20th cent.  
 Wood  
 Museum Rietberg Zurich, inv. no. RAC 720  
 Gift of Eduard von der Heydt  
 Provenance  
 Charles Ratton, Paris  
 Eduard von der Heydt Collection
- 99 Khalilou (Senegal, active ca. 1900)  
**Portrait of two women**  
 Gabon, prior to 1910  
 Collotype print
- 100 Unknown photographer  
**Twin daughters of the Prince of Mankessim**  
 Cape Coast, Ghana, 1910  
 Reproduction, 2022  
 Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art  
 Smithsonian Institution
- 101 Jacob Vitta (probably Ghana, ?–1914)  
**Twins after their initiation (ayefor portrait)**  
 Gold Coast, (Ghana), ca. 1907  
 Collotype print, hand-colored

- 102 Workshop of Igboke  
**Female and male twins (ibeji)**  
 Nigeria, Oyo, Yoruba, 1900–1960  
 Wood, beads, textiles, indigo pigment  
 Museum Rietberg Zurich, inv. nos. 2017.87a–c  
 Gift of François and Claire Mottas  
 Provenance  
 until Sep. 19, 1988: Galerie Walu, Zurich  
 Sep. 19, 1988–2017: François Mottas, Pully / Lausanne
- 103 Unknown photographer  
**Double portrait of a woman**  
 Ghana, ca. 1970  
 Reproduction, 2022  
 Clotney Family, Accra, Ghana

### 3.5 Puberty Rites and Photography

Coming of age is accompanied by complex rituals in West and Central Africa. After succession initiation, young women and men present their new self, dressed in the most beautiful fabrics and richly adorned, in public parades of the entire community.

At such moments, photography and ritual enter into a symbiosis: photography makes it possible to capture this moment of display for the future and to expand its audience. A new photographic genre emerged in the late nineteenth century as a result. Such portraits of debutantes served as marriage licenses as well as self-promotion, since they embodied ideal feminine beauty.

Young women in Sierra Leone derive inspiration for their poses for such portraits from the dances they learned during initiation. Their model for embodying ideal femininity, with closed mouth and inward expression, was the masked figure Ndoli Jowei, who accompanied them during their initiation.

- 104 Alphonso Sylvester Lisk-Carew (Sierra Leone, 1883–1969)  
**Debutantes from the Sande women's society**  
Sierra Leone, 1905  
Gelatin silver print

- 105 Unknown photographer  
**Portrait of a debutante**  
Calabar, Nigeria, 1900  
Collotype, ca. 1910

- 106 Jacob Vitta (probably Ghana, ?–1914)  
**Portrait of a debutante**  
Ghana, ca. 1905  
Gelatin silver print

- 107 Alphonse James (active from 1910)  
**Portrait of debutantes**  
Conakry, French Guinea (Guinea), ca. 1910  
Collotype print

- 108+109 Alphonso Sylvester Lisk-Carew (Sierra Leone, 1883–1969)  
**Single and group portrait with participants in an initiation**  
Sierra Leone, 1905  
Gelatin silver print and halftone print

- 110 Master of Nguabu  
**Bundu mask (ndoli jowei)**  
Sierra Leone, Mende, before 1928  
Wood, plant fiber  
Museum Rietberg Zurich, inv. no. RAF 130  
  
Provenance  
until 1928: Han Coray, Agnuzzo  
1940–1961: Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich

### 3.6 Horror Vacui

On plaques that formerly decorated the Palace of Benin from the seventeenth century onward, artists richly decorated the background with floral patterns. Scholars compare this trend to the fear of empty space, or horror vacui, that existed in Baroque art in Europe at the same time.

Around three hundred years later, the photographer Sumonu Fayawo of Benin used a fabric with a sunflower pattern as a background. With this choice of backdrop for his photograph, Fayawo appeared to be connecting directly to the artistic practice of his predecessors working with sculpture.



111 Workshop at the Benin court

**Relief plaque with warrior**

Nigeria, Edo, 16th or 17th cent.

Brass

Museum Rietberg Zurich, Eduard von der Heydt Collection, inv. no. RAF 602

Gift of Eduard von der Heydt

**Provenance**

prior to 1928–1940: Han Coray Collection, Agnuzzo

1940–1952: Eduard von der Heydt Collection



<https://rietberg.ch/forschung/benin-initiative-schweiz>

112 Sumonu Fayawo & Sons photographers (Nigeria, active ca. 1900)

**Couple in front of a fabric with sunflower pattern**

Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria, 1900

Albumen print

113 Unknown photographer

**Woman in front of an ornamental fabric, perhaps from India**

Jacqueville, Ivory Coast, ca. 1902

Halftone print

71 Jacob Vitta (probably Ghana, ?–1914)

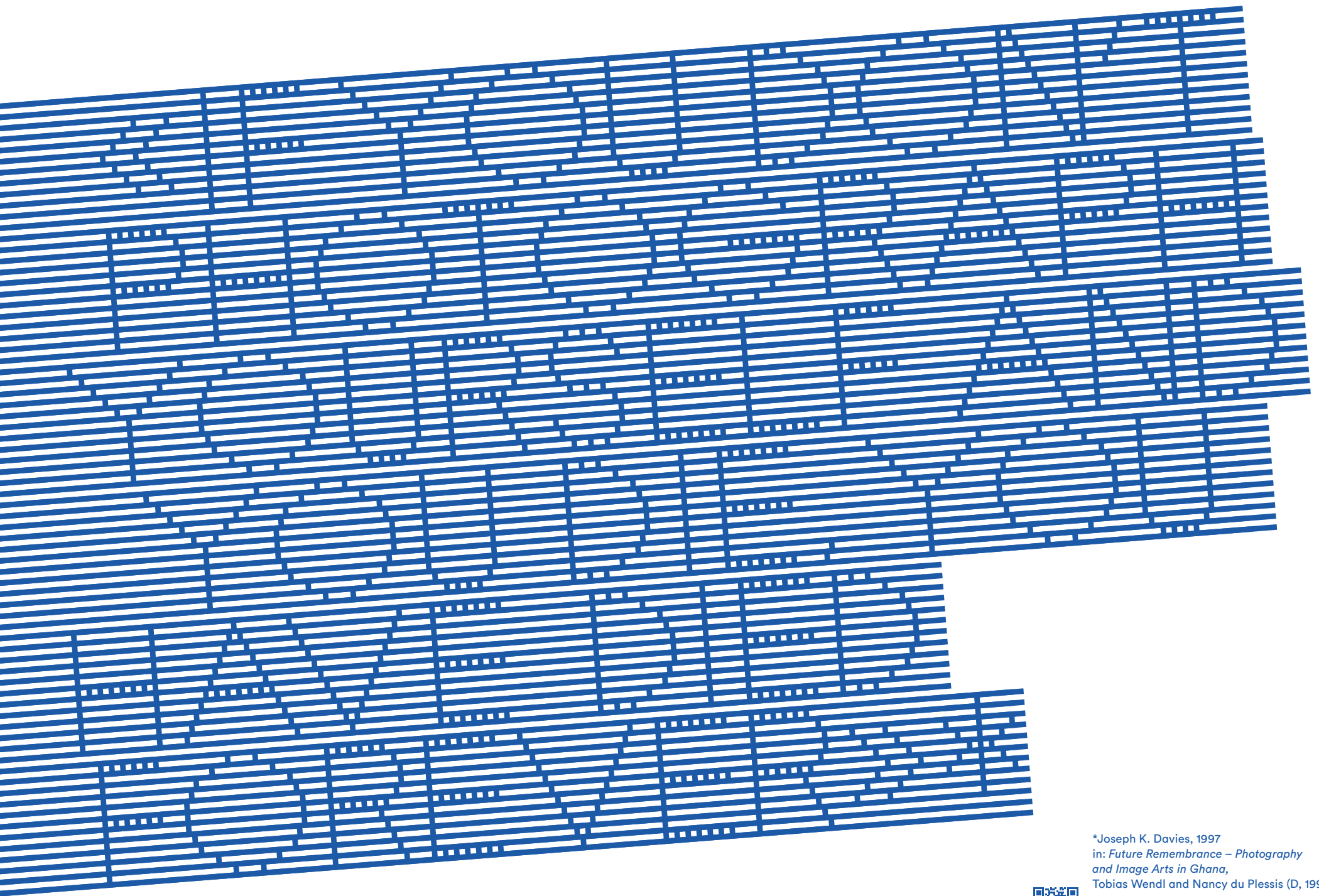
**Portrait for the future husband**

Ghana or Ivory Coast, ca. 1910

Gelatin silver print







\*Joseph K. Davies, 1997  
in: *Future Remembrance – Photography  
and Image Arts in Ghana*,  
Tobias Wendl and Nancy du Plessis (D, 1998)



<https://vimeo.com/133272148>  
(min. 1:25)

## 4.0 Photography and Memory

As a medium of remembering, photography was embedded into stories and practices that kept the memory of the person depicted alive. Placed at graves, photographs served as nameplates. Photographs were displayed in the entry halls of homes, given to friends and strangers, or preserved in photo albums.

The photo album was an important component of the protocol for visitors and provided information about the origin and social status of their owners. The focus of the albums was the network of relationships; photographs supplemented the narrated genealogy with one of images. That becomes evident in the photograph of a family, who had themselves photographed with a portrait of important family members. By doing so the family in the large illustration on the left was illustrating its family tree for future generations.

Many photographs in this exhibition were sold soon after they were produced as postcards to travelers from the Global North. With this transfer of private images to a public sphere, the photographs were separated from the narratives and practices of the people who commissioned them, and in the process their original meaning and the names of those portrayed were usually lost.

But what role do historical photographs play in West and Central Africa today? In this chapter album owners from Ghana offer insights into their albums and explain the memories connected with them. Many parallels to the

photographs shown in the exhibition become evident. As objects of a *living archive*, however, the albums and the surfaces of photographs bear the traces of their owners, who have changed, adapted, and written on the photographs for their personal use.

- 114 Unknown photographer  
**Family with a framed photograph, probably of the man's parents**  
Jacqueville, Ivory Coast, ca. 1902  
Reproduction, 2022  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
Leonard A. Lauder Postcard Archive—Gift of Leonard A. Lauder
- 115 Antoine Kiki (Ivory Coast, active ca. 1925)  
**Memorial site with photograph**  
Porto-Novo, Benin, 1925  
Collotype print
- 116 Unknown photographer  
**Memento mori**  
Calabar, Nigeria, 1890  
Gelatin silver print
- 117 Unknown photographer  
**Chief with his family**  
Ivory Coast, 1900  
Collotype print
- 118 Unknown photographer  
**Family portrait**  
Togo, 1920  
Gelatin silver print
- 119 Tiberio d'Oliveira & Ca. (active ca. 1910)  
**Family portrait**  
Benguella (Benguela), Angola, 1910  
Collotype print

- 120 Alphonse James (active from 1910)  
**Portrait of generations**  
 Conakry, French Guinea (Guinea), ca. 1910  
 Collotype print
- 121 Alphonse James (active from 1910)  
**Woman with a baby**  
 Conakry, French Guinea (Guinea), ca. 1910  
 Collotype print

## 4.1 Ghana We Dey (We Are Ghana)

The goal of the crowdsourcing project Ghana We Dey, which means “We are Ghana,” is to collection historical photographs from private family albums in Ghana and its diaspora on a digital platform, to document their narratives, and at the same time to preserve the photographs. The platform will serve as a fluid, democratic site which allows a different look into the past. On the website [www.ghanawedey.net](http://www.ghanawedey.net) and on Instagram @ghanawedeyproject, the constantly growing archive of images can be viewed and expanded.



[www.ghanawedey.net](http://www.ghanawedey.net)



[www.instagram.com/ghanawedeyproject](https://www.instagram.com/ghanawedeyproject)

- 122 **Ghana We Dey: Private photo albums with historical photographs from Ghana and its diaspora** ▶  
 Ghana and the UK, 2021/22  
 Slideshow

- 123 **“Some have markings on the forehead. Those are the ones who are gone.”\*** ▶  
 Album owners tell their stories  
 Ghana, 2021/22  
 Video  
 \*Davidson Quaye Dosseh

## 5.1 Expanding the Gaze

This exhibition is based on the photo collection of the German-American social anthropologist and historian of photography Christraud M. Geary, which was acquired by the Museum Rietberg in 2020. The collection includes around 5,000 photographs of different kinds. Geary compiled her collection with a special interest in local photographers. Because the collection includes photographs from all of Africa, taken between 1880 and 1990, it makes it possible to tell a comprehensive story of photography in Africa.

The Future Is Blinking takes up just a few of many aspects of the history of photography in Africa. In this multimedia station, the historians of photography Olubukola Gbadegesin and Christraud M. Geary expand our gaze by offering insights into their research on the collection.

- 124 **Interviews with Christraud M. Geary and Olubukola Gbadegesin** ▶  
 USA, 2021/22  
 Video

# Imprint

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**Ausstellungstexte/exhibition texts/textes d'exposition**  
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**Lektorat/copy-editing/relecture**  
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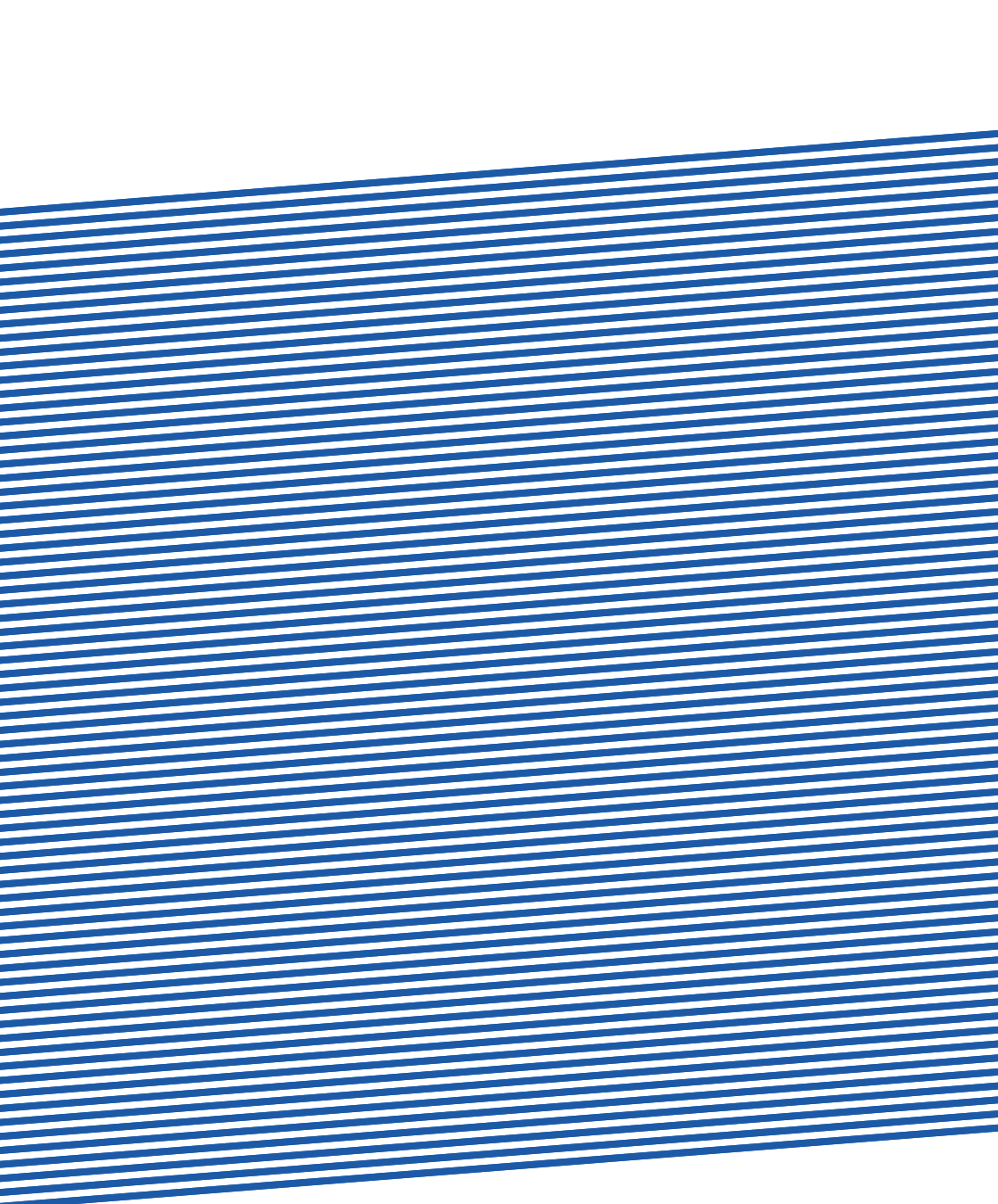
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Nicola Erni Collection

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