

# How to use Colonial Photography in Sub-Saharan Africa for Educational and Academic Purposes

The Case of Togo

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From 1884 to 1914 Togo was under German colonial rule. An essential part of the country's colonial history is illustrated through photographs, which can be accessed online in German archives<sup>1</sup>. In colonial times, photography was used for propaganda and other activities by presenting and interpreting photographs only according to colonial ideology. Even today, despite debates, they are most often presented only from a European cultural perspective, because most pictures are archived without any comments on the cultural realities that they illustrate. Consequently several cultural and pedagogical aspects reflected in the colonial photography escape generations years after political independences in Africa. This situation is an obstacle in intercultural relations between Europe and Africa. Because today's fast pace of globalization leads to increasing contact between cultures, it has become necessary for African youths to have varied perspective on their own cultural history. Therefore, these pictures need to be critically interpreted according to the cultural and social contexts in which they were taken, so that the African written history may be completed. This chapter presents such an ap-

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1 <http://www.ub.bildarchiv-dkg.uni-frankfurt.de/>;  
<https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/>;  
<http://www.staatsarchiv-bremen.findbuch.net/>

proach to interpreting colonial photography about Togo from the online database of the German colonial society. Furthermore it will also be discussed how photographs may be used in educational and academic contexts. This chapter can also be seen as a contribution to the visual anthropology in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

## THE CONTEXT OF THE COLONIAL PHOTOGRAPHY TODAY

It is not possible to consider the present and the future of Africa without reflecting on African-European colonialism. Colonialism—an ideology of modernity—used media like photography to transmit its propaganda. Despite the available corpus, which consists of colonial pictures, postcards, drawings, photographs, movies etc., school activities in Togo generally do not include these kinds of sources for critically approaching Togolese history. At the same time, the history of former colonies becomes a more and more important resource to determine one's own national location.

Political movements which are going through Africa today need a historical consciousness and therefore must take a close look at colonial history in order to aim for a better future. Togo, for example, went through German and French colonial periods. Today there are still many passionate and emotional debates about these eras in Togo, just because they do not seem to have been overcome (Oloukpona-Yinnon 1992: 143). The reason for this fact is that the antagonistic nature of colonial presence is not known enough by many people. My experience with students of the Department of German studies at the University of Lomé in Togo confirms that: By introducing a course of master study on German colonialism in Togo in March 2012, I let students talk about a picture of native railway builders from German colonial

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2 As a research fellow of the Fritz Thyssen Foundation about the project: Perspective and deconstruction of the imperial eye. German colonial photography as a source of African history, the case of Togo (from October 2012 to September 2013), I worked on the description and interpretation of colonial photography from Togo for their academic and pedagogical use. This paper is considered as a contribution based on this research.

Togo. When I asked the class to comment on the image as they see and understand it, some of the students began to laugh. The students disassociated themselves from the images in their comments. It was as if they had neither relationships with the people in the image, nor a shared history. Only few students saw a connection between themselves and the subjects of the photograph, who might be their own ancestors. There are certainly several reasons why these students reacted the way they did; it is likely the students simply knew too little about their own history. Moreover, the history books used in Togolese classrooms introduce a European perspective, which has been the standard view (Azamede 2010: 26). In recent years, research led by the historian Nicoué Lodjou Gayibor developed a more complete and correct history of Togo. Therefore, new history books published by Togolese researchers are taught in schools (cf. Gayibor 2011). When pedagogical books and scientific publications visually introduce colonial history, images are mainly used in order to clarify facts about history. In many cases the images are also used in order to point out the unequal treatment of the people in this period. But one can notice that the treatment of the photograph often does not refer to the cultural and social contexts of colonized people. This deficiency could be corrected, if the images used related not only to the historical, but also to the cultural and social realities of those pictured, especially the indigenous people. This is why it is high time to consider the critical use of colonial photography as a way to clarify many aspects of colonial relations.

To use the colonial picture only for illustration misses an important requirement for critical writing of history. Pictures appear in these cases as evidence of something which appears as fact, and without due consideration to their ideologically driven origins. In these interpretations, forms of appearances are reproduced which are familiar to the European public and thus meet their aesthetic ideas. Such perceptions are necessarily limiting. The German historian Jens Jäger recognizes this fact when he states that „[d]ie Rezeption ist in den Bildern vorgeprägt, vornehmlich in Richtung Unterhaltung und Bildung.“ (the reception is pre-determined in the images, especially in the direction of entertainment and education) (Jäger 2008, 2). At best, such illustrations succeed in excavating the logic of the former European colonial rule.

## PROBLEMATIC AND VALUE OF COLONIAL PHOTOGRAPHY TODAY IN TOGO

I think photographs from the colonial period are more than just illustrations. Besides, the photographs from the archives of the German Colonial Society are not exclusive German properties but are now a common heritage. A lasting criticism which is supposed to lead to a discussion about colonial rule and ideology has to approach the images differently.

The Frankfurt colonial archive contain photographs showing Europeans and Africans who are on duty in the colonial administration. For those pictures we often find a one-sided description in the colonial archives/publications in Europe. If, for example, the “colonial master” and the African employee (the colonized) were photographed together, most of the time only the first person was named, and the second person was either just described in general or presented with stereotypes. Missing explanations for many images reveals the colonial discrimination from which the picture originated.

Pictures of Africans taken by Europeans show moreover the colonial exotic. The way African people are named or described in general served the propaganda and justified what is used to be called the civilizing mission (“Kulturaufgabe”); that is, the cultural aggression in the colonies. This refers to the semantic figure of colonialism “Weiß auf Schwarz” i.e. Black Domination by White (Hinz u.a. 1984).

A history book containing illustrations often has a more stimulating effect on the reader. It may be asked in which way the illustrations in a history book corresponds to the purpose of showing the person pictured. When we are describing pictures as evidence of a meeting with the foreign culture, how can the idea of a general representation be enforced? To what extent do the colonial photographs interpret the “reality”? Whom does the picture serve: the one who took it or the one who has been taken / shown? Moreover: how does the imagined past influence the present perception of the person who is depicted in the photograph? While pictures capture the location and the period in the memory of the people, the person who saved them in his memory continues to dream about them and extends their effect, if one has no other alternative. Therefore all the contexts appear arbitrary in a photographic world. A critical analysis of colonial illustrations aims to find out the different realities that are reflected in the colonial archives.

However we notice that many books, even some recent publications, which build on archival material, do not succeed in going beyond the perspective which were constructed through colonial photographs, especially the camera of the colonialist (Klein-Arend 1996, Meurillon 1996, Schmidt und Wolcke 2001, Frelüh 2007). That is why it is high time to search for strategies that challenge such an affirmative position in the domain of the interpretation of pictures. Jens Jäger provides an entry point in such a critical reading when he states in an article discussing of a photograph of a police station in German Togo, that photographs could not be reduced to only one meaning (Jäger 2006, 145). In his assessment of this picture Jäger asks the following question: “How would the African person who appears on the picture of the police station have interpreted the photo or how he would have used it?” (Jäger 2006, 145). This gap of not knowing needs to be filled since the answer to this question could help in considering and perceiving the photo in a different light. But since the photographed policemen can no longer be asked, at least they might be described from their local social, political, cultural and religious perspective. The interpretation will refer to historic ethnographies (Spieth 1906 & 1911, Westermann 1935 & 1970) and interviews of elders in the areas, where the photographs were taken. This methodology shall help to go beyond the imperial gaze by stressing African agency and experiences.

## HOW TO USE COLONIAL PHOTOGRAPHY?

This essay will refer to one photograph from Togo as presented in the online-database of the former German colonial society by the University Library of Frankfurt/M.<sup>3</sup>. The description and interpretation suggested in this essay emphasizes clearly the context of historical Anthropology (van Dülmen 2000). Colonial photographs often present a complex experimental field of emotions of concerned people in different domains. An interpretation of a photo is supposed to clarify the roles of each of the people. For instance: what does the person who is shown in the picture strive for, when he or she let take a picture of him or herself by force or voluntarily? What is the photographer achieving, when he is setting up the camera towards the “colonized”? Is each

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3 Accessible at <http://www.ub.bildarchiv-dkg.uni-frankfurt.de>.

one of the actors realizing the expectations or the consequences for their actions? Through these questions, the imperial eye of the photographer towards the colonial photographs will be examined and verified by referring to a new perspective which is a critical point of view showing both sides of the coin. The effect is that borders and frames shift, and other social and cultural fields are appearing.

The collection of the German colonial society (called DKG: Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft) from 1887 to 1937 includes about 55.000 pictures. 530 pictures of them are from Togo. The selected picture from the online database of the German colonial society shows Africans carrying a man who is likely white in a hammock.

*Fig. 1: Travelling in the hammock*



Koloniales Bildarchiv / Frankfurt: StuUB, Photo n°101,3-3502-25

The little information about the image on the online database is: the name of the photographer, the year and the occasion when the picture has been taken.<sup>4</sup> By drawing on the online database information and after describing the image by filling a scheme of categories<sup>5</sup>, we can come up with the following interpretation and analysis:

The picture was taken before the founding of the DKG and before Togo formally became a German colony. August Vogt, the photographer or the camera's owner, was a merchant and commercial agent of the company Friedrich M. Vietor in West Africa from 1873 to 1877 (cp. Sebald 1988, 765). Vietor was a founding member of the North German Mission Society and supported the Mission work through his company, which was founded in 1856 in the coastal town of Keta.

The company had its main factory at Keta, but, in order to escape the effects of Ashanti war, gradually opened up branch factories in the eastern coastal areas, first in December 1873 at Little Popo, later in the intervening coastal villages Denu, Bagida Beach and Bè Beach. Twelve European employees worked in the factories of this company in the year 1884 (Sebald 1988: 32). Already in December 1873 August Vogt had asked the King of Bè for permission to set up on a place about four kilometres from the beach. He probably had taken the picture on one of his trading journeys since he was mentioned as the author of the picture.

By interpreting the activities of the depicted Africans there are two hypotheses to analyse:

Hypothesis 1: The local workers are employed by the Europeans, and their job was to escort the merchant on the hard, bushy path. They could at the

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4 Fotograf: Vogt, A.?; Bildnummer: 101,3-3502-25; CD-Code: CD/5202/1614/0402/5202\_1614\_0402\_0005; Text auf der Hülle: Togo / Reise in der Hängematte 1873; Format Bildträger: 9x12; Material: Glasplatte-Negativ; Anomalie: Repro; Entstehungsjahr Vorlage: 1873 -/- Region: Togo; Schlagwörter: Hängematte Kleidung Palme; Bildbeschreibung: Togo / Reise in der Hängematte 1873. (cp. <http://www.ub.bildarchiv-dkg.uni-frankfurt.de/Bild-projekt/frames/hauptframe.html>; <http://www.ilissafrika.de/vk/#vkCatHits-dkg>).

5 The scheme of categories has varied cultural elements facilitating a detailed description of the image. It refers to the method of interpretation of images presented on the website [www.kolonialforografie.com](http://www.kolonialforografie.com).

same time during the travel act as interpreters, and earned money with this work.

Hypothesis 2: The illustrated locals were ordered by the local cultural conditions to accompany the agent Vogt on his journey. The chief of the village ordered people according to the local tradition of hospitality to accompany the European who came to the village.<sup>6</sup> They carried him in a hammock to the village boundary. The head of the next village had ordered other carriers to accompany him further.

By analysing the social positions of people in the image, i.e. the interactions between the two actors (Africans and Europeans), and the hard conditions of trips in the area, which entailed walking many hours or many days from one place to the other one through the bush and sometimes in the dark evening, we may conclude that the European could not walk or travel through the bush without help of a local. That could be the reason why the colonial or missionary expeditions in German Togo had been done with help of Africans, who could escort Europeans through the bush (Sebald 1988: 179, 181, 191).

The Africans, as far as they were concerned, sought through their contact with the Europeans an alternative for earning their living. The trade between Europeans and Africans along the coast produced workers of all kinds. Africans did not necessarily consider working for Europeans to be demeaning because they knew that they had the necessary experience with the dangerous paths and were the only people who could help Europeans get to other places through the bush. They also handled the tropical climate better and did business utilizing this experience (Sebald 1988: 288). To determine whether these people were representative of their society, the story of the North German Mission (NGM) can be illuminating. The first students of the NGM were called ransomed children (Akakpo-Numado 2005:70). The first Mission members were persons who, for various reasons, were on the fringes of society and were looking for an alternative by being in the service of the Europeans.

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6 John Otsyokpo, Ewe from Ghana explained in my interview with him, that at the colonial time, at the end of an official visit by a European in a village, the traditional chief of the town ordered some of his officers to carry the host to the boundary of the village.

Based on interviews with old people in the Ewe side of the Volta Region in Ghana and in Lomé (Togo), one can describe the usefulness and the meaning of the hammock in the Ewe society as follows:

The use of the hammock was not a new phenomenon in society. In fact, the power holders like kings or “chiefs” were also carried in a seat or in hammocks either at festivals or ritual occasions through the city or on travel. In the past, slaves or servants carried the hammock, but now volunteers among young strong people do it (Obianim 1976: 25–26).

However, the Europeans were not carried in hammocks for the same reason as the kings and chiefs were carried. The fact that Europeans were carried in hammocks was due more to the power of their capital than the Africans favourable regard. The European traders and missionaries used to be treated by their African employees like the traditional power holders had been treated, because their employees owed them their new social status. Labour, trade, capital, Christianity, and school were the focus of this power.

The hammock was used, depending on its material, for various functions in the traditional society:

- Woven hammocks were used for carrying kings at festivals, rituals, travelling. But, in explaining the use of the royal hammock, the Ewe author Sam Obianim, claimed that great Ewe kings did not get into the hammock most of the time. They had representative kings, who did it especially in their place, when the time had come to lay in it (Obianim 1976: 25).
- Hammocks from cotton were used for carrying corpses on the way to the burial place.
- Hammocks made of cotton were also used for carrying European missionaries, traders and colonizers.

The two examples have shown that adding historical and ethnological context to colonial photographs allows one to widen its readings and to focus on the agency of the African people and their activities. Without such context the imperial eye cannot be deconstructed.

## CONCLUSION

Photographs tell stories and can be used to illustrate history. But the use of colonial photographs in the post-colonial time can become problematic if people do not take new perspectives into account. Often influenced by ideological ideas, historical photographs are today presented on databases hosted in Europe in such ambitious ways that these digitalised images could mislead people. Interpreting and analysing photographs in their local cultural contexts helps to get more information about the social and cultural history of the formerly colonized societies. A close historical and ethnological reading allows viewers to probe a variety of perspectives on the same photograph which take into account the specific world of the individuals depicted, i.e. their desires, resentments, values, and expectations. Utilizing such an approach might prevent the danger that a stereotype that has just been detected may be replaced by yet another. Heintze reminds us that human understanding often takes the form of a continual process of standardization (cp. Heintze 1990: 132). Moreover such an approach allows the depicted individuals to revisit history and social and cultural values. This knowledge of how to use and read photography then might add a new reading to the visual history of globalization.

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## **INTERVIEWS WITH FOLLOWING EWE PEOPLE DURING MY INVESTIGATIONS IN GHANA AND TOGO:**

- Joseph Otsyokpo (80 years old): retired educator, in Ho, Ghana, January 5, 2013.
- Ida Yawa Otsyokpo (70 years old): retired teacher, in Ho, Ghana, January 6, 2013.
- Beatrice Otsyokpo Azamede (83years old): housewife in Amedzope, January 7, 2013.
- Prof. Samuel Adiku: board member of the Evangelical Presbyterian University College (EPUC), Head of the Department of Soil Science, University of Ghana, Legon, January 8, 2013.
- Prof. Gilbert Ansre (80 years old): linguist, anthropologist and expert in the history of mission in retirement. Former Research Fellow of the "Institute for African Studies" of the University of Ghana, Legon, January 9, 2013.