Photography, Colonialism and Racism

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It is common to hear condescending and incorrect statements about the states and peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Westerners are often surprised that a Nigerian or Kenyan has access to television, uses a cell phone or is well educated. In reality these are all real and common aspects of Nigerian or Kenyan life; the same can be said for most, if not all, of the fifty-four states located south of the Saharan dessert. We get these incorrect ideas through, many means, and one of the most salient is the circulation of photographic images that portray Sub-Saharan Africa as an underdeveloped land ridden with disease and death. First this essay will address why photographs are a medium that many people believe to be truthful and objective. Second, it will explain how and why colonial powers used Christianity, the civilizing mission, and the construction of racism to represent Sub-Saharan Africa as the 'dark continent.' These are issues that feed into the present's problematic discourse. Third, it will demonstrate that colonialism and imperial ideals are embedded in modern day representation and thought, and finally will provide some solutions to the ongoing issues of the representation of Africans in the Western world.

Photographs as Truth

In 1882, United States Chief Justice James Jackson declared, "We cannot conceive of a more impartial and truthful witness than the sun, as its light stamps and seals the similitude of the wound on the photograph put before the jury; it would be more accurate than the memory of a witness, and as the object of all evidence is to show truth, why should not this dumb witness show it?" Jackson was allowing a photograph into evidence in *Franklin v. State of Georgia* (Meskin & Cohen, 2008). Though U.S. law is not of primary concern here, this statement is emblematic of the importance placed on photographic images, an importance that transcends geographic and cultural boundaries. Photographs were and are considered evidentiary, truthful, and objective throughout the world. In the Victorian era, in which photography was invented, it was considered a marriage between art and science. During the 1854 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), statements were portraying photography as a "valuable aid where truthful delineations of natural objects were of importance" (Ryan, 1997). Unlike the hand of the artist, the camera was considered exact and accurate. There was little question that a photograph was an accurate and truthful representation of the object.

That most if not all people believe each photograph appearing before them to be a truthful representation of its subject causes serious social issues. Photography, like any form of representation, was and is a social practice whose connotations were organized through cultural ideas and contracts (Ryan, 1997). A photograph, therefore, represents the ideals of its time. In an imperial context most colonial photographs are not entirely objective or accurate. They portrayed specific ideas and social values. A photograph, like any other medium, is inherently biased in its subject matter. Factors such as how the photographer frames the photograph, what the photographer includes or excludes, and how the subject is posed all contribute to the meaning of a photograph. During colonialism photographs portrayed explicit cultural ideas, justified colonization, advertised empire, and represented different peoples and cultures, and fed into a racial discourse of European superiority.

Photographs have a certain epistemic value and hold a significant source of information. According to Meskin and Cohen, one reason photographs have epistemic value is because viewers hold background beliefs influencing their ability to provide evidential value to the photograph (2008). Put simply, people see what they want to see. Photographers also represent the ideas and values that they want to in a photograph, both consciously and subconsciously. Because of this inherent bias it is important that photographs are not seen as truth, but as representations that exist inside a multifaceted cultural process.

They are not truth; rather they are 'ways of seeing' (Ryan, 1997).

Constructing the 'Dark Continent': Christianity and the Civilizing Mission

The use of photography to represent European superiority in Sub-Saharan Africa was one of Empire's most powerful weapons. Paired with the 'legitimacy' of the photograph, colonial powers were able to portray their apparent supremacy over peoples whom they believed to be uncivilized. The power of the photograph to depict purported truth reinforced the ideas of Empire and portrayed Africa as a place of savagery, death, and disease. This is a representation still common today. Yet it was not until colonial powers invaded Africa with missionaries and scientists that the continent grew 'dark' as it was flooded with 'light' (Ryan, 1997). This 'light' was often represented in photographs depicting white people standing in stark contrast to Africans, showing a difference in dress, stance, and power relations. They are all carrying specific racial messages.

Take for example a photograph (Figure 1) taken in the Belgian Congo in 1910 for a postcard. The photograph depicts a sewing class held in the Mission of the Daughters of Charity. There are three Congolese women seated at sewing machines and two white women, dressed in all white standing above them, each with a hand on the shoulder of a Congolese woman (Smithsonian). The position of these women is not accidental: the postcard was meant to portray the education that the missionaries were providing to justify their civilizing mission. White women standing over the Congolese women, placing a loving hand on the shoulder portrays an almost parental relationship between the two. This puts the Congolese women on a lower level, both literally and representationally. The postcard was a common way of portraying Africans as a lesser race and glorifying imperial ideals.

Figure 1

This light and dark iconography was primarily prevalent in the imagery of Christian missionaries. It fed into the discourse of the civilizing mission often used as a justification for colonial rule. In John Gilbert's "Pictorial Missionary Map of the World," (1861) (Figure 2) the majority population of Sub-Saharan Africa is represented as heathens and colored black (Ryan, 1997). It must be understood that this was considered fact and the racist discourse of the time considered Africans to be the most sinful and savage of peoples. It was also a common practice for missionaries to exaggerate savagery and darkness to gain both financial and moral support for their missions (Brantlinger, 1985). The idea that because of their racial and societal superiority Europeans had a 'burden' to bring civilization to the 'darkest' parts of the world was widespread. The French were, perhaps, the most specific in their claims, yet the 'civilizing mission' applies to both the British and Belgians, alike. Edward Said (1994) writes that the purpose of the civilizing mission is "what has been called 'a duty' to natives, the requirement in Africa and elsewhere to establish colonies for the 'benefit' of the natives, or for the 'prestige' of the mother country" (Hirono, 2008). The civilizing

mission has two important ideas embedded within it: a comparison between 'civilized' peoples to those who are 'uncivilized'; and a self-appointed duty of the 'civilized' to help the 'uncivilized' (Hirono, 2008). The Christian missionaries were an important part of a larger discourse as religious ideals justified ambitions of empires. By claiming religious authority it was easier for colonial powers to justify their presence in foreign lands. Photographs of the time often portrayed colonialism as good for the native people. Religious convictions, racial discourse, and photographs depicting these social interactions created a systemic disempowerment of African people.
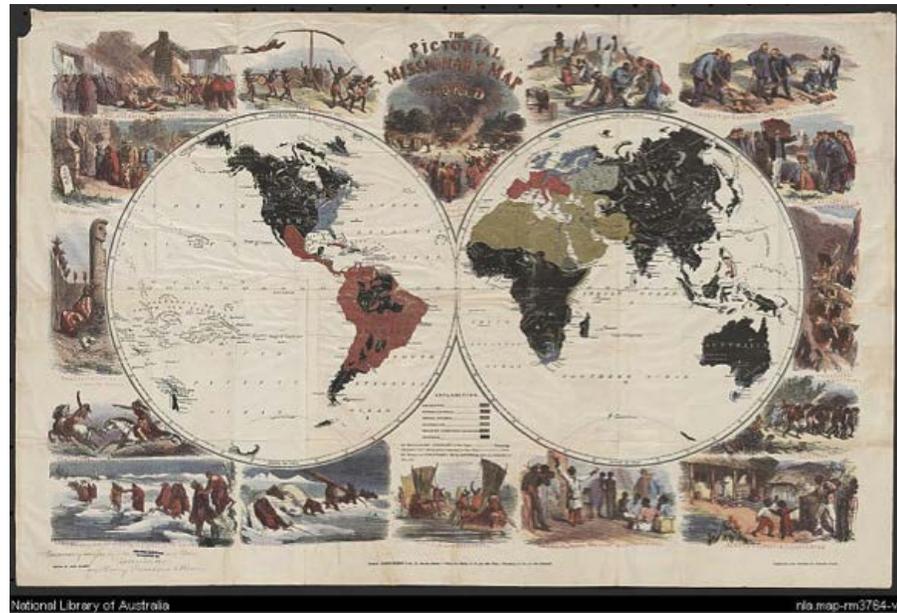

Figure 2

Although the civilizing mission typical of the colonial age is over, missions are still sent to 'help' Africans today. This is not to say that all western organizations or people who travel to Africa are out to civilize Africans, but it is undeniably still an issue on a global scale. There are countless representations of Africa in the media that portray it very much the 'dark continent'. The effort that was once deliberate in exaggerating issues in African in order to portray it as a place of death, disease, and savagery is now so engrained in the minds of the Westerners that the rhetoric surrounding and representations of African states and peoples are not much different than they were a hundred years ago. Even in our modern times, Africans are often looked at as the 'other'.

Many modern, international non-government organizations (INGOs) are as guilty as the colonial missionaries when exaggerating situations in Africa to gain both financial and moral support for their organizations. There is a similar condescending relationship at work: instead of the 'civilizer' and the 'uncivilized', there are the 'developer' and the local population (Hirono, 2008). The photographs chosen for websites and volunteer pamphlets prove to be excellent examples. Many INGO websites feature images of white people helping Africans but less often portray images of the many African field workers, volunteers, and employees of these organizations who dedicate their lives to helping people within their native countries. There are also images of poor, starving African children and horrific photos of death and disease. These images are real and representative of issues that many African states face, but feed into an unhealthy racial and global discourse of Western imperialist ideals of superiority. To state it simply, these images portray the idea that Africans are unable to help themselves and Westerners are their only hope. These representations are inherently false for there are many African organizations that have had great success and many Africans who are able to develop potential solutions to the issues their states face. And, of course, problems portrayed as inherently, like AIDS, poverty, starvation and lack of access to education, are not specific to Africa, but are global issues that all countries face.

Constructed Racism

Race is created by one culture in order to justify its power over another. In this case, colonialists developed racism to justify power over African peoples. According to Lewis (1973), there are three ideological bases for racism: the separation between the culture of the colonist and the colonized; the

exploitation of this difference to the betterment of the colonist; and the use of these theoretical differences as fact. Relying on these three criteria one can argue that photography was used as a tool to portray and ingrain these ideas into the master discourse of white superiority.

In addressing the first criteria colonial powers purposefully created images that contained blatant contrast between Africans and Europeans. This contrast played upon 'light' versus 'dark,' 'civilized' and 'uncivilized'. There are vastly different cultures and peoples living in Sub-Saharan Africa and so it was a necessary step for colonialists to depict a homogenized Africa in order to create a separation between cultures. This step was crucial because it was the beginning of the still prevalent idea that Africa and its many nations are indistinguishable from each other. Through photographs and similar tools of representation, ideas of the 'superior' European were widely circulated and created through the trope of the 'primitive' African.

Secondly, these images often portrayed exploitation and financial success of colonial powers through the taking of natural resources. Take for instance a photograph (Figure 3) showing ivory harvested in the Congo. Within the picture the camera focuses on the white men and the photograph includes the Congolese men to the right, far from the focus of the image. The way in which this image was framed creates a contrast in dress, color and placement thus consciously building an image in which the European men appear to be the successful 'finders' of the ivory. The subtext illuminates that the exploitation is justified because of the superior nature of the European male.
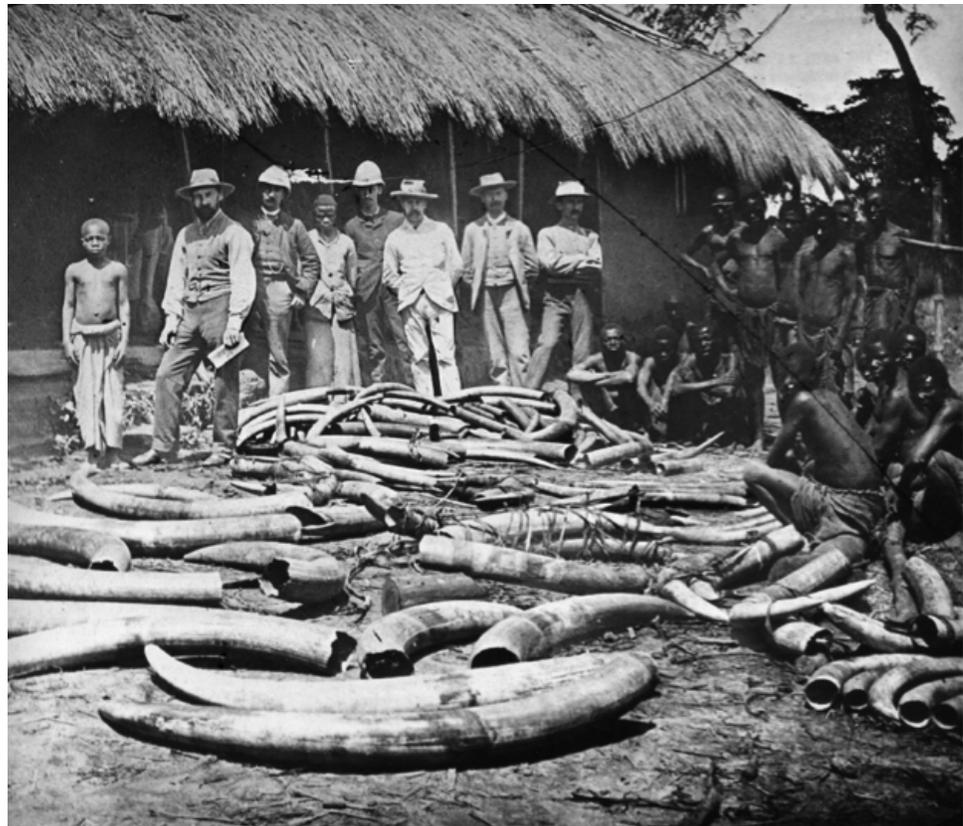

Figure 3

The third criteria, and possibly the most influential, was the use of science, specifically anthropology and its sub-disciplines, to justify racism. It was a tool for European self-understanding and therefore Africans or 'primitive' peoples were directly contrasted with the Europeans, who were viewed as normative. There was a great deal of fascination with these 'uncivilized' cultures. Anthropologists' main motive was to capture knowledge of cultures untouched by civilization.

Colonial anthropology was not a study of culture but a study of difference in comparison to the 'superior' European race. This can be seen within the practice of collecting ethnographic data (Figure 4). By 1858, photography was utilized to portray and document different races and types of people. There was also an increasing concern at the time with the accuracy of human classification systems and a fascination with the 'other'. After the development of the Linnaen classification system in 1735, a variety of standards were added based upon human characteristics, including skin color and shape of head (Ryan, 1997). In

following the first criteria for the construction of racism, ethnological practices were used to portray differences between Africans and Europeans to the extreme, often including measurements, documents of daily activities, diet, religious and cultural beliefs in order to study unknown cultures and contrast against the cultures of the colonist.

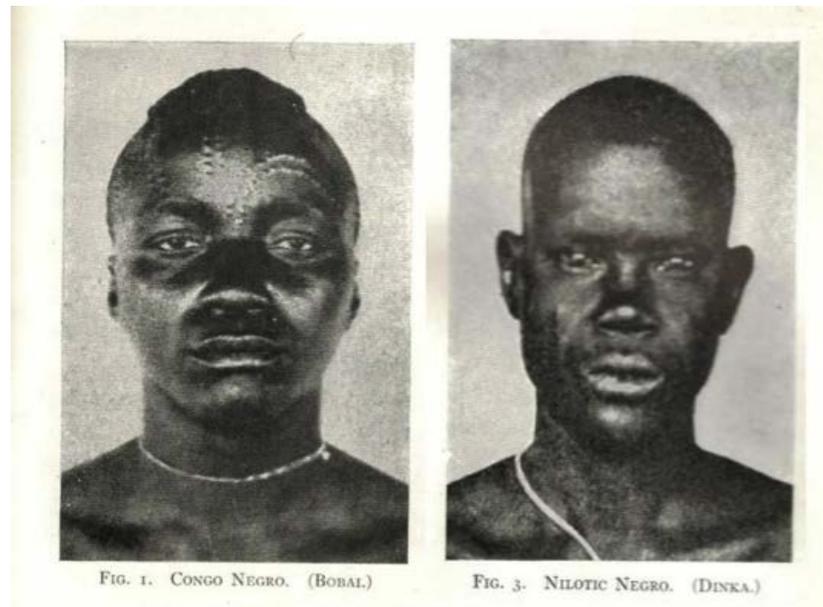FIG. 1. CONGO NEGRO. (BOBAI.)   FIG. 3. NILOTIC NEGRO. (DINKA.)

Figure 4

Evolutionary anthropologists promoted ideas suggesting that Africans were an inferior 'breed,' and possibly the missing evolutionary link between ape and man. These false ideas greatly influenced anthropology and ethnology. Though not all anthropologists supported these types of theories, there were often overtly racist portrayals within their work (Brantlinger, 1985). Photographs taken in an anthropological context portray ideas of race and hierarchy and pass them off as scientific fact. Combining the evidential weight of the photograph with 'science' proved to be one of the most influential ways in which racism was used to justify colonial power and exploitation.

Modern Representation

The structures put in place by colonialism and imperial ideals remain present globally, perhaps most powerfully within Sub-Saharan Africa. The modern analogue to the trope of the civilized and the uncivilized is the developer and the undeveloped. Photographs continue to be used in order to perpetuate ideas of Western superiority and ability to govern and organize. The images created and supported in Western culture focus primarily on the negative and continue to portray this multi-cultural region as the same 'dark continent' originally constructed in colonial, Victorian times.

There is no longer a literal rule of colonial nations by foreign powers but in many ways the problems faced by African states are due to both colonial rule and the liberal economic order put in place by Western nations. In this case, photographs of Africa perpetuate images of famine, disease, and violence, leaving out the cause of some of these conditions. Take for example one of the many photographs taken for world media portraying the 2010-2012 Somali famine. This picture posted to World Bulletin (2011) portrays a woman and her child exhausted from hunger and in need of immediate medical attention. The image itself shows a dire situation yet its representation does not include the cause, only the effect, leading the viewer to see only another photo of a trouble ridden African nation. The picture would preferably have a caption reading: "effects of drought in Somalia exaggerated by forced neoliberalism and cheap imports which led to the inability for Somali farmers to make profit on food sales." Instead the caption reads "A mother lies exhausted with her child on a dusty road in Mogadishu while waiting for medical assistance from 'The Gift of the Givers' at a makeshift medical camp for famine stricken Somalis in Mogadishu, Somalia, 03 August" (Reuters).

Figure 5

Perhaps the most powerful example of such representation is how these constructed ideas have become so embedded in western culture is a simple screen shot. A search done in *Google Images* portrays the exact stereotypes being researched in this paper, providing photographs of people dressed exclusively in traditional, 'authentic', and tribal attire. Above the original search bar other suggested searches include: poor, culture, starving, dancing, and AIDS. This search engine is structured to work with the perpetuation of mass media images and suggest the most commonly searched topics in regards to a subject. It is obvious then that those ideas about Africa constructed over a century ago are still present and prevalent in society today.

Figure 6

Changing the Discourse

These ideas and representations are imbedded in western culture. They are incorrect and must be changed, but examining possible solutions poses difficulties, as most people feed into the present discourse unconsciously. The most obvious way this occurs is through the perpetuation of the notion that the continent of Africa is somehow one political entity or nation-state, a view present in this very essay. It seems impossible to both speak of the homogenization of Africa and relate it to the present day while addressing every individual state. Africa is a continent, Sub-Saharan Africa is simply a territorial area

beneath the Saharan desert, home to fifty-four separate states. It is important to refer to each state separately when speaking of any issues in regards to that state; one cannot turn an event in Kenya into an African issue. For example, the violent election in 2007 was a conflict within the state of Kenya, not an issue reflecting upon the continent as a whole.

Within a photographic context it is important to consider what is excluded from an image as much as what is encompassed. One cannot simply believe photographs are truthful, objective representations of whatever it is they are depicting. Ryan is correct when he writes, "photography is a social practice whose meanings [are] structured through cultural codes and conventions" (1997). When viewing a photograph think about what is being presented and the overall purpose of the image. This can be said for the photographer as well. Perhaps it is time to leave the creation and perpetuation of images to those who are closest to the issue. This is in some ways a radical suggestion, for it is most likely an impossible goal to attain. Yet, if more photographs were published and circulated by those involved in specific issues the discourse can at least be altered. For example, it would be preferable if Somalis, not Western photojournalists, took the images circulating in Western media on the Somali famine.

On an individual basis, we must be willing to address our biases and racist prejudices. Our conceptions of Africa have been constructed through photography and a biased Western media discourse. This influences and perpetuates many incorrect ideas and our responsibility as educated and mindful consumers of such information is to contest this in any way we can both within and outside of ourselves. With knowledge comes awareness. Once a person becomes critical of the images being presented about a place or a group of people, that person can also analyze how these images feed into existing and problematic discourse.

Conclusion

This essay has addressed how the idea of the 'dark content' was constructed to justify colonial exploitation and imperial ideals through the use of photographic imagery. Photography, along with its perceived epistemic value, was a powerful tool used in order to perpetuate and portray the ideals of imperialism. Colonial powers purposefully constructed racist attitudes by creating the notion of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of homogenous tribal culture, a land of savagery, disease, and death. These ideas are still prevalent in modern photographic representation in Western culture as well as in the general discourse surrounding Africa and African countries. It is imperative for people to change negative perceptions of Africa through awareness and refutation of problematic ideas and representations.

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