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DEVELOPING PERCEPTIONS: DEFINITIONS OF SELF IN AFRICAN PORTRAIT
PHOTOGRAPHY

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ART 309 Arts of African Peoples

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Within the relatively new medium of photography, African photography is often excluded from the Western canon. Despite its colonial origins, African photography has something unique and globally relevant to say. In striving to define itself against its origins as an oppressive, colonial mode of representation, I argue that African portrait photography seeks to carve out an “African self.” There is no such thing as an singular, all-encompassing African identity. While each photograph analyzed in this paper works to capture individuality, the act of attempting to create a homogeneous identity further illustrates the incapability of the photographic medium to do just that. The “African self” can be understood as a mode of representing oneself or one’s subjects that is not reliant on Western systems of classification and highlights the individuality of each subject. As photographic practices change, the ability to represent the identities of the people on the other side of the lens never leaves the medium, which is evident in the work of King Njoya, Seydou Keita, and Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Veleko. In developing an African self, these artists challenge the Western understanding of artistic photography and use it to craft nuanced modes of representations for themselves or their subjects in a way that the Western medium could not accomplish for them.

King Njoya’s talent lies in his mastery of the construction of self-identity in the photographic medium. Many of the photographs of Njoya were taken by German missionaries, who traveled to the kingdom of Bamum, located in the modern-day country of Cameroon, after Germany gained colonial control in 1884. Bamum was able to remain autonomous during Germany’s rule and this is credited to the respect that King Njoya was able to procure through his manipulation of the photographic medium. In early photographs of the King, he appears uncomfortable and stiff, but in later images he comes across as collected, powerful, and intelligent. This quality of respectful imaging was not as apparent in other early colonial

photographs of the African continent in the early twentieth century widely distributed in the forms of postcards, and illustrations in books. The most popular of these colonial images feature scantily-clad Africans in a setting that takes them out of their context and enhances their preconceived “strangeness and otherness” to a Western audience. In “Empire of the Visual: Photography and Colonial Administration in Africa,” Paul S. Landau (2002) suggests that the Western understanding of colonial Africa came almost completely from written word and printed image (141). This became problematic to the identity of Africans when the only printed images to represent them in a global sense were taken through a colonial lens that had little motivation to depict them objectively. In addition, the colonial lens was only interested in creating types, and had no regard for the individual identities of any of their subjects. This helped to justify the inhumane, impersonal treatment that the Europeans bestowed upon their colonies and to label Africans as primal peoples in need of “the sophistication and socialization” that Europeans were so willing to provide. The photographs of colonialism are another form of exploitation and reinforced Western attitudes toward Africa in order to further the colonial agenda.

Rather than participating in the exploitative nature of colonial photography, King Njoya plays a more direct role in creating his identity. At the intersection of Western portraiture and Bamum innovation, Njoya crafts an image of himself that makes sense to a global audience and to himself, as well as the culture that he represents. A photograph attributed to Njoya, from around 1912, depicts he and his wife Ndayie. It includes elements of Western conventions such as the clasped hands of the two figures, breaking the prohibition against touching the king in public (Fig. 1). By employing this pose, the relationship between the King and his wife is more evident to an outside viewer. Here, Western conventions adopted by Njoya help him to control the production of his identity. This image also has elements of Bamum culture such as his dress

and posture, which make him appear larger, a goal for royalty in Bamum visual culture. This intersection of dress and gesture allows him to appear powerful to the Western audience that it was presented to, while allowing him to stay true to his culture and his individual identity. In a similar way, a 1912 photograph by the wife of a German missionary, Marie-Pauline Thorbecke, also helps Njoya to craft his desired identity (Fig. 2). In this image, the king appears with his subjects and displays a weaving sampler that demonstrates his direct role in the developments that helped Bamum to become successful and autonomous even under colonial rule. Njoya worked with his people to establish better cloth-weaving techniques and even created a written language for Bamum so they could record their history and traditions. He was an intellectual and creative ruler, and his photographs project this identity to an outside audience. Njoya was not a victim of the colonial lens. Instead, he learned how to manage his identity in a way that respects his individuality while portraying himself in a good light. He effectively used photography, primarily a European tool of “otherness” to craft an identity that was respected by the West as he successfully maintained an individual identity, helping the West perceive an alternate image of Africa, one in which I suggest an example of the African self.

While King Njoya crafted his identity from the other side of the camera, Seydou Keita created sought-after identities for his sitters as a photographer in the post-colonial Malian city of Bamako. Njoya’s distancing from the Western tradition was subtle and nuanced, but perhaps the freedom Keita enjoyed in post-colonial Mali allowed him to further liberate the medium from past colonial prototypes. Keita’s work is complicated by its involvement with the West in the later part of the twentieth century. In 1991, Keita’s work was reprinted for a show called *Africa Explores* in New York City, but like many works of African art, it was attributed to “Anonymous.” By 1995, a French collector named André Magnin tracked down Keita in

Bamako, and the photographer signed over the rest of his negatives to his care. Keita's work continues to be reprinted into large, uncropped gallery prints, a mode of presentation that is quite different than the personal, small-scale portraits that were originally commissioned by Keita's customers. According to Candace M. Keller in her article, "Framed and Hidden Histories: West African Photography from Local to Global Contexts" (2014), with the reprinting of negatives into a larger format often involving the use of different tonal qualities and paper than the artist originally intended, "the original negatives have been transformed into new creations and, by extension, the co-authorship of the photographer and the initial clients has been, to some degree, destabilized" (38). However, Keita himself has expressed his acceptance of these images in an interview with Michelle Lamuniere in 2000 (47). Even though those whom reprint his negatives play such a large role in the aesthetic quality of his widely-circulated prints, Keita's acceptance of these images allows viewers to trust that the meaning and integrity of the reprinted identities can be taken as seriously as if they were his own prints.

In crafting the sought-after images that his customers commissioned, Keita made his version of the African self. Some aspects of his work have an unmistakable colonial residue, especially the idea of the "studio," which for Keita was simply a backdrop and a wide assortment of props that reflected the changing ideals and environment of the city of Bamako, where these Western accessories had become a status symbol and a signifier of modernity (Magnin 1997, 12). Even though the props were related to Western ideals adopted by Bamako's elite, they were signified a level of success to local viewers. Keita's photograph of a young couple on a Lambretta motor scooter, from the 1950s-1960s is full of these symbols (Fig. 3). Obviously the scooter makes them appear to be a high-class, Westernized, urban couple, but so does the man's complete European suit, including tie, cufflinks, and patent black dress shoes. They both wear

jewelry prominently displayed: the woman adorns herself with a big necklace and earrings, the man a large ring, and they both wear wristwatches. It is impossible to know whether they owned these accessories or whether they were from Keita's studio, but without question the sitters understood the effect that these Western symbols had in adding prestige to their portrait. It is evident that Keita was an expert on how to make his subjects look dignified and regal, a talent of which he was well aware. He explained in his interview with Magnin,

My experience taught me the positions that my customers liked best. You try to obtain the best pose, the most advantageous profile, because photography is an art, everything should be as close to perfection as possible. After all, the customer is only trying to look as good as possible (12).

His talent is especially evident in his portrait of a woman lying on her elbow on a bed covered in a bold checkered blanket, from 1956-1957 (Fig. 4). He emphasizes the graphic quality of her printed dress and her large necklace. The slender quality of her feet, wrists, and hands are also enhanced by this pose, which were important aspects of beauty for women in Bamako. It is clear that Keita understood his power in creating individualized agency in his customers' portraits, but it is also evident that his sitters understood their power as well. In creating portraits his customers desired, Keita participated in crafting an African self in one of the clearest ways possible, by catering to the wishes of each individual to fashion themselves as they desired and imagine. Each portrait can be taken as an individual example of the African self. Together they work to create a broader view of the African self through the lens of Bamako, however it is critical not to think of this as an all-encompassing vision, but one layered with urban reimagination at a time during the waning days of colonialism and the beginning of a new identity. The collection of his negatives serves as an archive of African identity for a specific time, locality, and clientele.

Another artist who is concerned with individual identities for a certain group of people is Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Veleko. Veleko is a contemporary South African photographer in the midst of a project called *The Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*, which focuses on black identity, apartheid, and fashion in the urban center of Johannesburg. Her project explicitly deals with the idea of African self by exploring what it means to be black in South Africa. Today, photographs are distributed in many ways besides the postcards of King Njoya’s times or the large black and white prints that acquainted the world with the work of Seydou Keita. Veleko creates her vibrantly colored digital images with the intention for them to travel the globe in ways that Njoya and Keita could have never dreamed of. Veleko’s images have been included in various exhibitions, grace the pages of several books, and have an online presence as well. Her training as an artist sets her apart from the traditions of African portrait photography and forces her to make conscious choices about style and meaning when creating her work because she knows that her prints will be received in a global environment.

In the 2003 photograph *Cindy and Nkuli*, by Veleko, two young women stand next to each other in front of an urban brick wall (Fig. 5). The electric colors of their clothing are a stark contrast against the dull gray wall and street behind and underneath them. Their headbands play a dominant role in the hair of the subjects, and the young girl on the right wears large earrings and a large white bracelet as well. Although not as formally composed as Keita’s studio portraits, the gaze of Veleko’s subjects resonates with those of Keita’s. In her artist biography for the 2010 exhibition catalog of The Walther Collection’s *Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity*, her images are described as, “immediately recognizable by virtue of their explosive color; through informal (yet never completely uncalculated) gesture, her subjects carry themselves in poses that confront the viewer, their confident gazes returning to our own”

(Enwezor 2010, 382). Although these images are taken in the street, the respectful lens with which Veleko captures their likeliness mimics that of Keita.

In *Sibu*, a 2007 photograph by Veleko, she further explores the street style of Johannesburg. Sibu appears in a bright pink, orange, green floral pant and jacket ensemble paired with a black armband and highly reflective sunglasses. He stands with his hands in his pockets in front of a wall that has been painted white and decorated with stenciled faces. Sibu's style clearly includes Western influences such as the aviator sunglasses, but helps to define what it means to be South African as well. It is unclear whether this image is meant to be part of Veleko's *The Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder* project, but it certainly appears to fit into that idea of defining the urban identity of black culture in Johannesburg while maintaining the individuality of the subject. Veleko turns Sibu into a representative of her own culture while still allowing him to express and control his identity through his clothing and pose. Veleko understands how these aspects relate to the history of African portrait photography and continues this narrative in her work. In crafting her own understanding of the African self through her photographs, Veleko places South African identity and fashion in an easily accessible medium for the rest of the world and allows her individual subjects to express their own interpretations of style for a global audience. Her exploration of self identity for herself and her subjects within a purposely global context continues the narrative of African portrait photography in constructing an African self.

Through different modes of representation and style, African portrait photographers have shaped the notion of an African self and identity from the genesis of the medium on that continent. Photography in Africa is still working to overcome the oppressive lens of colonialism in much the same way that the continent and its people are still reacting to this tumultuous time in their history. In their reaction to the colonial lens, each of these photographers exposes the

problem with a homogeneous African identity- that it does not exist. Each individual that passes in front of a photographic lens adds to the archive of the African self, however complicated and nuanced that narrative might be. Photography comes close to being able to construct this archive, but in its attempts, only further points out its incapability to do so. In an essay for the exhibit *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, which was on display at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1996, Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya explained the relationship between post-colonial Africa and the West. Since colonialism, the West has sought to experience an “authentic” Africa that existed before colonial influences, but because of their influences, this culture does not exist anymore. However, post-colonial Africa is more dynamic and syncretic than ever. It is alive, not a reconstructed culture from antiquity (Tilkin 1996, 32). Photographic portraiture helps to document this ever-changing African identity by portraying the people of Africa in a respectful light, one cognisant of individual identities and the true reality of Africa: that “purity and authenticity” has never existed, but has always been projected through the medium of photography whether controlled or not. It is this very playfulness that defines what the African self means to Africans themselves.

Images



Figure 1

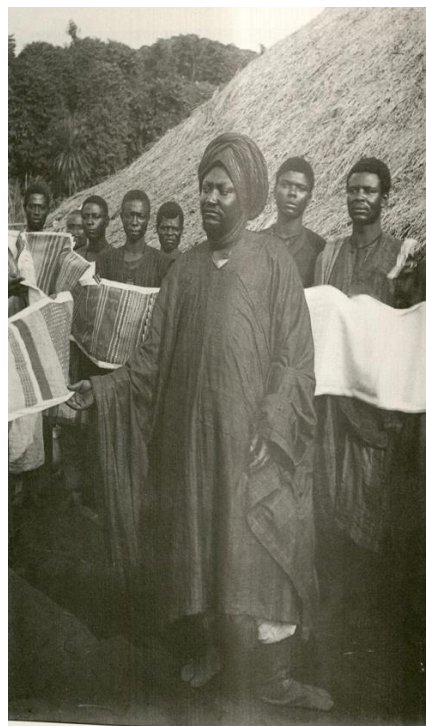


Figure 2

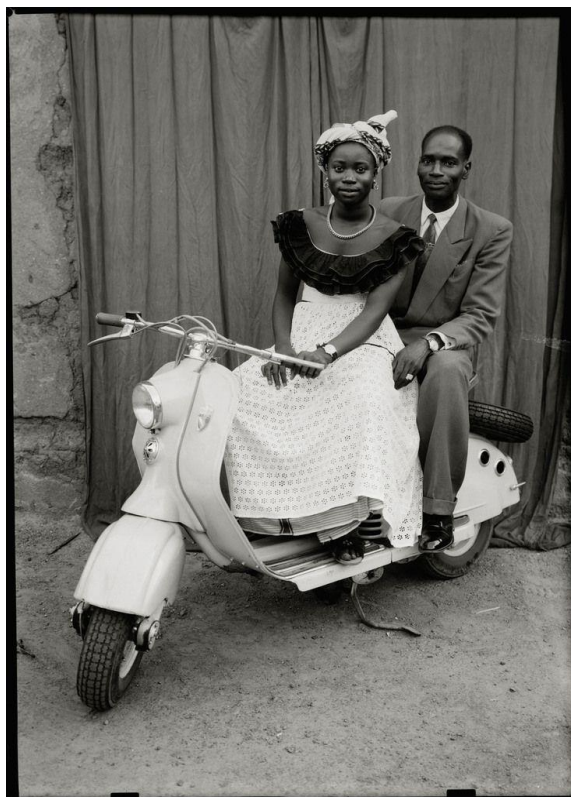


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

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