

Colonial Gaze and the Fetishization of Asante Women in Nineteenth-Century Photography



Figure 1: Three Fetish girls in group with gold ornaments, Gold Coast 1884. Grant 1884.



Figure 2: Four Coomassie women, two of them beating ju-ju in a mortar, 1884. Grant 1884.

During the 1800s, Colonial fetish photography of Asante women came into popularity on the Gold Coast. These photos fabricated African daily life in the name of Colonial science research and surveillance. Figures 1 and 2 are examples of such fetish photography, depicting three nude African women in 1884 behind a barren landscape. Through the use of lighting, mise-en-scène, and composition, the two fetish photos above construct an image of African women as primitive, sexually available, and innately different from the “sophisticated” Western culture.

Within Figure 2, the primary source of light hits the foreground where the three women stand from the right side of the frame. The women’s nude bodies are illuminated by this light, highlighting their breasts, collarbones, and shoulders. Similarly, but to a lesser extent, the light within Figure 1 shines towards the women, reflecting off their bellies, breasts, and thighs. This brightness in the foreground is juxtaposed with a darker background. Within Figure 2, the cascading trees on the left side of the photo drown out the light. The lighting within these photos draws the viewer's attention to the female bodies, emphasizing their nudity. Furthermore, it reaffirms the

British perception of Africa as a "supernatural" and a "mysterious" land.¹ The rendering of the forest as dark serves a dual function to both encourage the continued colonization of the space and to render African land and those that inhabited it as mysterious and fundamentally different from Europeans.

The construction of "us vs them" within these photos is aided by the mise-en-scène. Within Figure 1, a boater's hat, commonly worn by British and French men, lies on the bottom right side of the photo. This hat can be compared to the ceremonial headwraps on the three female subjects that stand next to it. The inclusion of this boater's hat invites the European viewer to draw comparisons between the clothing they are familiar with in Europe and the headpieces, loosely wrapped waist pieces, and thin strips that cover the pubic regions of the African subjects. This "fetish photo," like many from its time, "functioned to establish colonial discourses of race, ethnicity, and gender juxtaposed around a series of discriminatory metaphorical binaries."² In this case, the unbridled sexuality of African women is placed in opposition to the supposed sexual morality of Europe, demonstrated through clothing.

Within Figure 2, the mise-en-scène of a fallen tree and a branch used as a pestle simultaneously bolsters the power of colonizers while rendering the female subjects as "primitive." In the left midground of the photo, a branch hangs off a tree, as though it has been recently cut. The fallen tree may gesture towards an impending transformation wherein the forest will be cleared and the land industrialized by colonizers. Furthermore, the fallen tree connotes the landscape's perceived fragility, reinforcing its imagined availability for colonization. In the foreground, the two subjects on the right use a branch-like tool for beating a juju. The visual similarities between this tool and the fallen

¹Engmann, Rachel Ama Asaa, "Under Imperial Eyes, Black Bodies, Buttocks, and Breasts: British Colonial Photography and Asante 'Fetish Girls,'" *African Arts* 45, no. 2 (2012): 49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23276801>.

²Ibid, 53.

branch behind it draw a relationship between African technology and nature, bolstering the Western belief that Africans are “excessive, animalistic, and representative of the darkness of the African continent itself.”³ According to scholar Rachel Engmann, photography united “colonialism with the project of modernity.”⁴ The capturing of the branch pestle, used by the African subjects, with the camera, used by the European photographer, emphasizes the colonial two binaries of “primitive” Africans and “innovative” Europeans. This narrative is enhanced by the compositions within both of the fetish photos analysed.

Alternatively, composition constructs a divide between African “performer” and European “voyeurist.” Although not visually a part of the image composition, the presence of Grant, the British photographer, is palpable within both Figures 1 and 2 based on the subject's body language. Within Figure 1, the three women stand with their legs half bent, arms straight, and gazes fixed. Their posture gestures towards discomfort. This discomfort indicates the presence of a foreign individual in the space. Furthermore, they face the camera, another indication of Grant’s presence. While in Figure 2, the subjects are all three-quarter facing, their body language tilts towards the camera so that their faces and bodies are fully illuminated. Their straightened postures and fixed gazes similarly indicate a bodily discomfort that gestures towards the presence of the invisible photographer. Grant’s presence further reinforces the divide between the African and the Colonizer. It creates a fundamental distinction between the two, wherein the African takes on the role of “performer” and the European takes on the role of audience. Scholar Engmann alludes to this divide when she writes that “objects of fascination, women's bodies offered a source of erotic pleasure through the act of

³Ibid, 54.

⁴Ibid, 52.

looking by absent and invisible white colonial males.”⁵ This claim highlights the voyeuristic quality of the invisible photographer's presence, implying the sexual undertones of these two photos.

As discussed, these sexual undertones are evident through the lighting that highlights the nude bodies portrayed and the construction of a voyeuristic photographer's gaze that is felt, but never seen. These pictorial devices reinforce the notion that African women are sexually devious and conquerable. The viewer's conquest extends to the space itself, as is demonstrated by the dark lighting of the forest, which sparks curiosity in the Western viewer and emphasizes the belief that African land is dark and mysterious. By depicting a fallen branch in Figure 2, the photographer gestures towards an impending colonization that will destroy the land. Furthermore, the fallen branch can be seen in conjunction with the branch used as a pestle. By depicting the technology used by the Africans as relating to nature, the photographer enforces the concept that the Africans were "primitive." This comparison underscores the binaries between a primitive African subject, who uses a branch as a tool, and a “modern” Western photographer, who uses the camera as a tool. The rendering of binaries is enhanced by the inclusion of a Western boater’s hat in Figure 1. This hat invites the viewer to compare the “modest” clothing within the West with the nudity portrayed in African fetish photos, further rendering Africans as immodest in relation to Europeans. These devices not only construct an image of fetish women as primitive, but also bolster the modernity, modesty, and sophistication of Western culture. However, the consistent efforts to disarm these women through lighting, *mise-en-scène*, and composition may have a reverse impact on the viewer. Read against the grain, these photos demonstrate the threat that Asante women posed to colonial authority. By rendering these women powerless, unsophisticated, and non-threatening, the

⁵Ibid, 55.

photographer inadvertently reveals the women's power, sophistication, and threat with which the camera was employed to disarm.

Bibliography

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