trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



Circulating West-African Photographs in the Atlantic Visualscape

Jürg Schneider

In the second half of the 19th century, photographs circulated widely in a triangular region stretching between northeastern South America, Great Britain and West Africa, giving shape to a shared visualscape, where portraits of the African elite and exploration photographs often followed similar routes.

PUBLISHED	December 19, 2022
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	English
TOPICS	Visual Arts · Media
SPACES AND PLACES	South Atlantic · Africa · Europe · South America
PERIODS	The Steam Atlantic
KEYWORDS	photography, west africa, visualscape, diaspora, madeira, exhibitions, libraries, trade
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/circulating-west-african-photographs-in-the-atlantic-visualscape/

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jürg Schneider

Affiliated researcher · Centre for African Studies · University of Basel · Switzerland

Jürg Schneider is a historian and affiliated researcher at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel, Switzerland. His teaching, writing and curatorial activities are centred on the African continent's rich photographic heritage and those who created it, with a particular focus on West and Central Africa. He is a co-founder of African Photography Initiatives, an organisation working in and with photo archives in Africa.

The Atlantic Visualscape conveys the idea of an extended space, of countries and continents connected by the Atlantic Ocean, a space which is given shape by the circulation of photographs and photographic reproductions in print media, and kept in motion by the movement of people. The movements of photographic images in the 19th century were much different from today's, when they can move from person to person and from place to place with a "click." The reasons for travelling, though, were very much the same—business, migration (under the admittedly slippery terms of "forced" and "voluntary" migrations), to (re)unite with relatives and family members or simply to visit them, or simply driven by a spirit of adventure; but back then much less for the purposes of leisure.

In what follows, I would like to take a closer look at a geographical area in this wide Atlantic Visualscape—a triangular space between northeastern South America, Great Britain and West Africa—and try to shed some light on the aforementioned movements of images and people. The main focus will thereby be on the West African coast in the second half of the 19th century, where photography has strong and deep roots.

Indeed, photography was an early guest in West Africa. The French naval officer Louis Édouard Bouët-Willaumez set up a camera in Elmina, Ghana (then Gold Coast), in 1841. Already in 1839, a few months after photography was introduced to the public in France, he had been equipped with a camera by the Ministry of the Navy. We know of the Frenchman Jules Itier, who took daguerreotypes in St. Louis, Senegal as early as January 1843, and then there is the black daguerreotypist Augustus Washington, who together with his young wife and two small children migrated from the United Stated to Liberia in November 1853 to continue his profession between Senegal and Liberia until some years later he turned to agriculture and gave up photography. However, as far as we know, until the mid-1860s, apart from Augustus Washington, only white European photographers were active in West and Central Africa.

Early Western African photographers

The earliest reference to the activity of an Africa-born photographer dates back to 1867. In the official journal, the *Moniteur du Sénégal et dépendances*, the photographer John Parkes Decker thanked the people of St. Louis, Senegal, "for the sympathies which he was the subject of." [1] We do not know where Decker was born (probably The Gambia or Sierra Leone); neither do we know whether he ever ran a permanent studio. The photographs he took and which have survived in various archives [2] cover a time period of about 25 years, until at least 1890, and the coastal section between Senegal and Cameroon. Decker, in fact, has always referred on his business logos to his radius of action as the "West Coast of Africa."

Decker's mobility as a photographer was typical for early African professionals who did not just work in one location but rather, following clients and seasons, covered wider areas on the coast. Augustus Washington, as we have seen, worked in Liberia, which was his main place of residence and business, but also in Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Senegal. Francis W. Joaque (1845?-1893?), the son of a liberated slave, emigrated from Sierra Leone to Fernando Pó (now Bioko, Equatorial Guinea) in the early 1870s, where he worked for some years, only to establish his studio in Libreville in the mid-1870s and finally return to Sierra Leone in the 1890s. Members of the Lutterodt family photography dynasty worked in Cameroon, Fernando Pó, Gabon, the Congo and on the Gold Coast from the 1870s to the mid-20th century. Neils Walwin Holm, who was born in Accra in 1865, and who became a member of the Royal Photographic Society in 1895, worked in his place of birth for many years before moving his business to Lagos in 1886. Holm has been the subject of sustained research by a number of scholars—Olubukola A. Gbadegesin, Charles Gore and most recently Francis McWhannell—and we therefore are quite informed

about his life. Well established in Lagos, acknowledged as a skillful photographer and a profuse advertiser of his business in the local press, he did not only portrait work for private clients but also worked for the government in several instances. Between 1893 and 1910 he traveled several times to London, to further his training in photography, to attend the first Pan-African Conference in 1900, and to study law. He returned to the Gold Coast in 1917 a full-fledged barrister. In his absence, the business at home had been taken care of by his son Justus.

Many, though not all, of these photographers mentioned above were members of the Krio elite from British West Africa, who were as mobile as these photographers. And, together with these people, moved photographs. Zachary Kingdon, in a recent book on trans-imperial cultural flows, grants us a glimpse on such movements. [3] He mentions a portrait photograph, taken by the studio W.S. Johnston & Sons in Freetown, but eventually sent to Great Britain to be enlarged. It may well be that the enlarged photograph was sent to its owner in West Africa, but the original photograph was not returned. It was kept and later entered the collection of the Bolton Museum. The man who facilitated the transfer of the portrait was Arnold Ridyard (1851-1924), a steamship chief engineer, collector of ethnographic artifacts from West Africa and prolific donor to museums in northwest England. The photograph shows a middle-aged Krio woman standing very upright with her head slightly tilted in front of a painted background, which is probably supposed to represent an interior of a Victorian town house. She is of strong build, wears a two-piece dress of dark color and is leaning on the back of a chair with her left hand, as was often the case in portrait photographs of the time.

About this Krio elite E.A. Ayandele wrote in his biography on "Holy" James Johnson, a pioneer of African Nationalism, that:

> *"far more than the post-World War I African educated elite, their predecessors were cosmopolitan and West African, in their outlook; they were veritable West Africans. [...] from about the middle of the 19th century to the early years of British rule in the 20th century West Africa was in a sense a unit, a unit demanding a history of its own."* [6]

Let us have a closer look at these West African cosmopolitans and take as an example the Lewis family in Sierra Leone. But in order to understand how photography became part of the Atlantic culture, let me make an important point first: a prerequisite for commissioning, buying and circulating photographs was that the clients, buyers and those who received photographs as gifts knew what to do with a photograph. Regardless of whether it was a carte-de-visite photograph, one in the larger Cabinet format, or any other format, this required a certain lifestyle which included a house with walls on which to hang photographs and furniture on which to place framed photographs or a photo album, as well as social practices that included showing, collecting or giving away photographs as gifts to friends and family members. The educated African elite in the West African port cities of which the Lewis family was part cultivated a lifestyle based on that of Victorian England.

Sir Samuel Lewis (1843-1903) was certainly the most prominent member of that family. His father and mother were both freed in the 1820s by a British anti-slavery squadron patrolling the West African coast and subsequently settled in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Lewis went to school in Freetown, was trained as a lawyer in Great Britain, became the mayor of Freetown and was the first West African ever knighted. One of his brothers, Ebenezer Albert Lewis, worked as a photographer; another brother was married to Rebecca Joaque, photographer Francis W. Joaque's sister, and his own sister Caroline was married to

Charles Jenkins Lumpkin, a physician with a diploma from the Royal College of Surgeons (Edinburgh) and a medical degree from the University of Brussels. The couple moved from Freetown to Lagos but frequently travelled between these two port cities to meet with family members and friends. In 1908 and 1909, a "Miss Lumpkin"—Caroline and Charles Jenkins Lumpkin's daughter Carrie—advertized her services as a photographer in the *Lagos Standard*.



Advertisement for Carrie Lumpkin's photo studio in Lagos, *Lagos Standard*, 21 November 1908

Source: Courtesy Ed Keazor

What does this tell us? First, that West African port cities such as Freetown, Lagos, Cape Coast and Bathurst in Gambia were connected to each other through family and business ties, and these cities in turn were connected to England, where many members of the African elite completed part of their education, worked and settled for shorter or longer periods. The African Steamship Company which commenced operations between West Africa and Britain in 1852 greatly facilitated such movements. In this way a wide network of people, photographers and photographs that moved back and forth was created and kept alive. Furthermore, it was quite common practice for those travelling to England to go ashore in Funchal, Madeira, a stopover on the route between England and West Africa, to have their photograph taken in one of the local studios which existed there since the 1860s. The carte-de-visite of an unknown African man with top hat and suit as well as the Pairaudeau studio portrait of Walther Jackman below, are part of the collection of the Scottish palm oil trader Graceus Reece who worked in the Niger Delta in the 1870s. We don't know what Recce's relationship with these two men was, whether they were friends, business associates, or travelers he hosted, but the photographs were obviously important to him and he kept them.



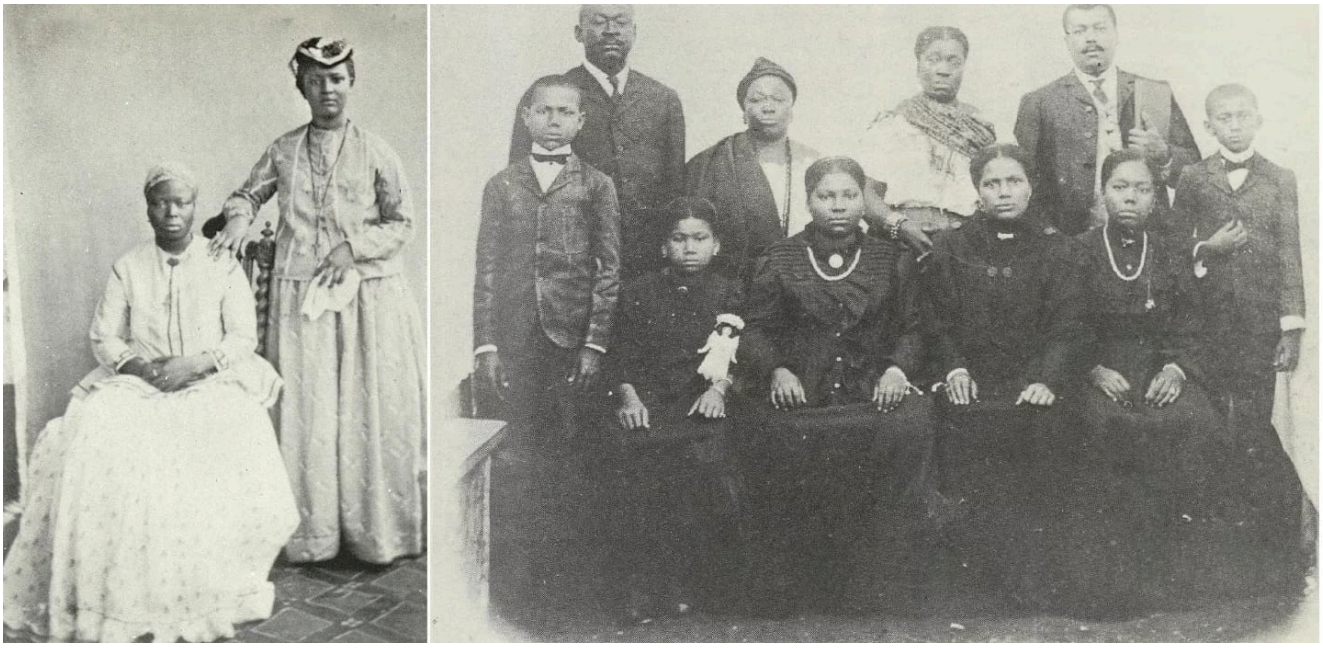
Front and back of a carte de visite photograph. Studio portrait of an unknown man. Funchal, Madeira. Ca. 1875. Photographer A. Camacho

Source: © Sue Taylor

Second, it shows that photography was a well-accepted profession among these families, including for women. Apart from "Miss Lumpkin," there was also Nancy Johnson from the prominent Sapara Williams family (Sierra Leone/Nigeria) who was trained in photography and dressmaking when residing in England, although she did not work as a photographer after her return to West Africa. Like Neils Walwin Holm, she too became a member of the Royal Photographic Society.

Expanding diaspora connections

The paths these people travelled and along which photographs circulated were further enlarged and strengthened through the contacts West Africans had with Brazil from the 1830s on, as liberated slaves returned to Africa. In many cases, these returnees remained connected through family ties and business interests with Brazil. They exchanged copies of family photographs so that the same pictures could be found in albums both in West Africa and Brazil, a visual proof and a symbol of these ties.



Left. Women from the Brazilian community in Lagos. Ca. 1875. Photographer John Parkes Decker. Right. The Mendes family from Rio de Janeiro. Part of this family lived in Lagos, part in Cachoeira (Bahia) and part in Rio de Janeiro. The same photograph is in the archives of the family in Lagos as well as in Cachoeira.

Source: Marianno Carneiro da Cunha, Da senzala ao sobrado: arquitetura brasileira na Nigéria e na República Popular do Benim (São Paulo: Nobel, 1985), 24, 39.

Other connections existed with the British West Indies, Guyana, for instance, where Sierra Leoneans went to work on the plantations after the end of slavery in the British colonies in the 1830s. Walter A. Jackman may have been in West Africa to recruit workers for the plantations and, during his trip, came to stay with the palm oil trader Reece.



Front and back of a carte de visite photograph. Studio portrait of Walther A. Jackman. Georgetown, Demerara. Ca. 1875. Photographer G.L. Pairaudeau

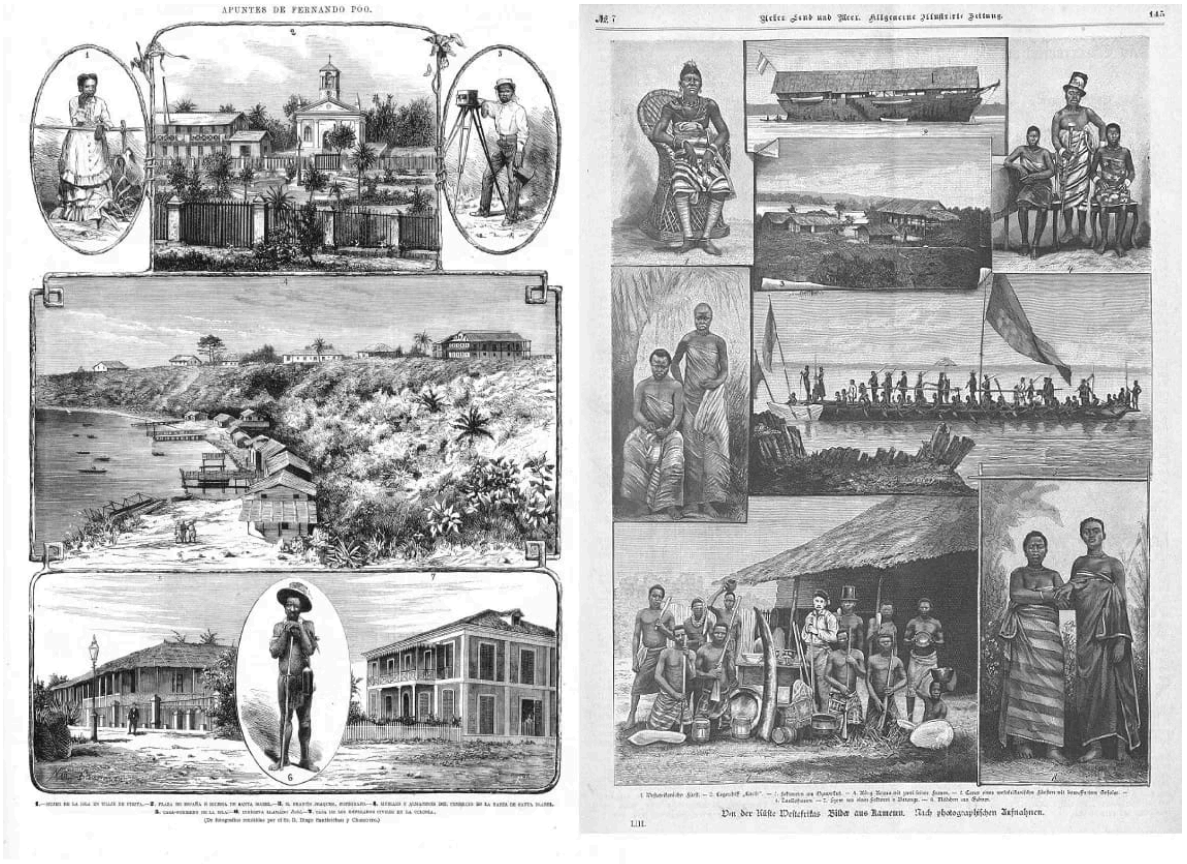
Source: © Sue Taylor

In the period between the virtually simultaneous invention of two working photographic processes on either side of the English Channel (Daguerre and Talbot) in 1839 and the launch of George Eastman's No. 1 Kodak camera in 1888, photography established itself as the dominant visual medium of the 19th century. This period, however, began not only with the date of the invention of photography, but also, as we have seen, in the context of the end of the transatlantic slave trade, its prohibition and outlawing, generating waves of new migratory and return movements within the Atlantic Visualscape and thus an intensified circulation of people. Expanding family and diaspora connections and in consequence the disentanglement of social relations from concrete spatial conditions evidently had an impact on interpersonal relationships, which had to re-establish themselves in their practice. A means and media to do this were photographs, visual substitutes—re-*present*-ations of those absent—, which were both easy to reproduce and easy to distribute. Transcending time and space, the photographs kept narratives of memory and belonging in motion among family members, and through acts of adoption, they transformed "rectangular pieces of cardboard into telling details that connect lives and stories across continents and generations." [4]

Mission, trade and science

Photographs did not circulate exclusively in family circles but also within broader personal networks, which included traders, travelers and missionaries. Furthermore, they were widely reproduced in books and illustrated newspapers and, in addition, starting in the 1890s, as postcards. Francis W. Joaque's pictures were published in 1884 in the German illustrated newspaper *Über Land und Meer*, in 1886 in

Globus, and as early as 1876 in *Ilustración Española y Americana*. John Parkes Decker's photographs were printed in 1873 in *The Graphic* and *The Illustrated London News*. Photographs taken by W.J. Sawyer as he accompanied the Spanish Lieutenant Captain Francisco Romero on an expedition on Fernando Po in 1883 appeared in the Spanish periodical *La Ilustracion Española y Americana* the very same year. Today, the pictures are kept in the Royal Palace collection in Madrid.



Left. *Ilustración Española y Americana*, "Apuentes de Fernando Poo," 15 November 1876, p. 301. Francis Joaque himself poses with his camera in the upper right corner. Right: *Über Land und Meer, Allgemeine Illustrierte Zeitung,* "Von der Küste Westafrikas. Bilder aus Kamerun," Vol. 53, 7, 1884/85, p. 145.

Source: Left: Ilustración Española y Americana, "Apuentes de Fernando Poo," 15 November 1876, p. 301. Right: Über Land und Meer, Allgemeine Illustrierte Zeitung, "Von der Küste Westafrikas. Bilder aus Kamerun," Vol. 53, 7, 1884/85, p. 145.

Various factors, in addition to generally difficult-to-understand processes of iconisation, may have contributed to the fact that in the 19th century we often find the same West African photographs in very different private and institutional settings. This included a rather limited selection of photographs, the relative market dominance of individual photographers who were also prepared to sell photographs that were actually intended for the private use of their customers, and the fact that roughly the same routes were always travelled. The basic prerequisite for this was, of course, the flexibility and adaptability of photographs and the absence or deliberate removal of accompanying information that allowed a private portrait shot to be transformed into a type photograph without leaving a trace. Such plasticity had its limits where, as in the case of the Haussa troops pictured in *The Graphic* (see below), the cannons, the stable building, and the troop symbol captured the photograph within a context of colonial dominance.

VIDEO

View online: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8453143g/f1.item.mini

Robert Bruce Napoléon Walker, photo by Francis W. Joaque, 1886

Source: Gallica

VIDEO

View online: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8453143g/f2.item.mini

The portrait of the French merchant Robert Bruce Napoleon Walker, made by Joaque in 1886 found its way into the collections of the Bibliothèque nationale de France by way of the Société de Géographie

Source: Gallica

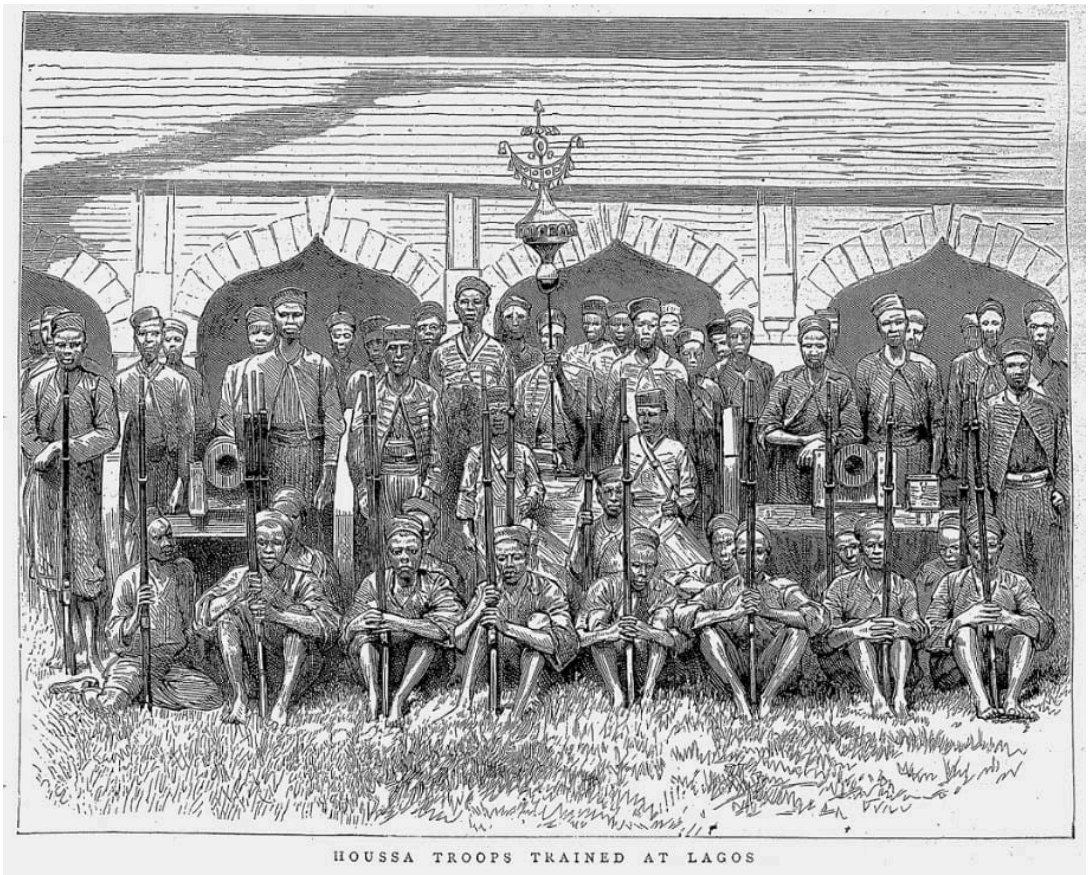
The portrait of the French merchant Robert Bruce Napoleon Walker, made by Joaque in 1886 and probably handed over personally to the explorer Alfred Marche, found its way into the collections of the Bibliothèque nationale de France by way of the *Société de Géographie*. Was Madam Efunroye Tinubu, the powerful Lagosian (slave) trader, aware that the portrait John Parkes Decker took of her would eventually being sold to the Swiss traveler Carl Passavant who included it in his collection which is today kept in the *Basel Museum der Kulturen*? This was hardly her intention, unless we imagine a deliberate strategy to make her person known beyond the region. Did the Duala chiefs and their families whose pictures Frederick Lutterodt took know and agree that the photographer made these images a gift to the Liverpool Museum in 1898? Similarly, the transfer of personal photographs to strangers may have happened to the photograph of this group from Abeokuta, Nigeria, that was not only sold to Swiss explorer Carl Passavant, but also reproduced in the illustrated journal *Katholische Missionen* in its 1881 issue.



"Bewohner von Abeokuta" (inhabitants of Abeokuta). *Die Katholischen Missionen. Illustrierte Monatsschrift,* 1881, p. 153.

Source: In Die Katholischen Missionen. Illustrierte Monatsschrift, 1881, p. 153.

As already mentioned, less personal than the portraits of individuals but telling with regard to the ways photographs circulated in various collections and media is the photograph of the group of Haussa soldiers in Lagos which we find in the collection of the Church Missionary Society, in an album of the German trader Adolf Lüderitz and reproduced in the British illustrated newspaper, *The Graphic*, who had probably received the photograph from the merchant W.R. Renner in the early 1870s.



"Houssa Troops Trained at Lagos," *The Graphic*, December 6, 1873, p. 528.

Source: In The Graphic, December 6, 1873, p. 528.

Missionary societies were enthusiastic collectors of photographs, but so were traders, travellers and passing researchers and explorers. They bought from local photographers, commissioned photographs from them or received photographs as gifts, so that what we hold in our hands today is a visual potpourri made up of many different sources. Many photographers did not much care about the rights the portrayed had on their likeness but sold what was in stock, or made new prints from old negatives.

There is more. Photographs W.J. Sawyer had taken on Fernando Po in 1883 were also shown at the Colonial Exhibition in Amsterdam in 1883. Like Sawyer's images, other African photographers' images also were on display in exhibitions. Joaque had his photographs exhibited in the 1887 *Exposition coloniale et agricole du Gabon Congo* in Libreville and was awarded a silver medal. Two years later his images were shown at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris and awarded a bronze medal. The *Colonial and Indian Exhibition* held in London in 1886 also featured a number of photographs from West African photographers. Payne's *Lagos and West African Almanack* identified them as the "native photographers" Herpin and Decker. [5]

Together we have travelled along the paths of a huge and dynamic network knitted and knotted by the movements of people and photographs. We have stood at junctions and nodal points looking in all directions following and testing one or another path. We have sketched some of the routes that ran through the Atlantic Visualscape and the networks through which it spanned. But there are still many forgotten and abandoned areas about which only fragments of stories still exist and are told, where photographs, like pearls incompletely strung on a string, give a glimpse of the trails that were once so

frequently taken. Future research will probably concentrate more on the almost invisible and faded lines, the faint traces of movements left between West Africa and Brazil, the British West Indies, the Caribbean and the United States.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Massot, Gilles. "Jules Itier and the Lagrené Mission." *History of Photography* 39, no. 4 (2015): 319–47.

Kingdon, Zachary. *Ethnographic Collecting and African Agency in Early Colonial West Africa. A Study of Trans-Imperial Cultural Flows*. New York, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018.

Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Gore, Charles. "Neils Walwin Holm: Radicalising the Image in Lagos Colony, West Africa." *History of Photography* 37, no. 3 (2013): 283–300.

Gbadegesin, Olubukola. "'Photographer Unknown': Neils Walwin Holm and the (Ir)Retrievable Lives of African Photographers." *History of Photography* 38, no. 1 (2014): 21–39.

Cunha, Marianno Carneiro da. *From Slave Quarters to Town Houses: Brazilian Architecture in Nigeria and the People's Republic of Benin*. São Paulo: Nobel, 1985.

Ayandele, Emmanuel Ayankanmi. *"Holy" Johnson, Pioneer of African Nationalism, 1836-1917*. London: Routledge, 2014.

Graham-Stewart, Michael, and Francis McWhannell. *Broad Sunlight : Early West African Photography*. London: Michael Graham-Stewart, 2020.

Cunha, Marianno Carneiro da. *Da senzala ao sobrado: arquitetura brasileira na Nigeria e na Republica Popular do Benim*. Sao Paulo: Nobel, 1985.

Brown, Robert T. *Immigrants to Liberia, 1843 to 1865: An Alphabetical Listing*. Philadelphia: Institute for Liberian Studies, 1980.

Shumard, Ann M. *A Durable Memento: Portraits by Augustus Washington, African American Daguerreotypist*. Washington D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1999.

NOTES

1. *Moniteur du Sénégal et dépendances: journal officiel* no.362 (1867): 484.
2. Museum der Kulturen, Basel, Switzerland; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; The National Archives, Kew, London, England. The list is not exhaustive.
3. Zachary Kingdon, *Ethnographic collecting and African agency in early colonial West Africa. A study of trans-imperial cultural flows* (New York, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 50-51.
4. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2012), xii.
5. John A. Payne. *Payne´s Lagos and West African Almanack* 14 (1887): 24.
6. E.A. Ayandele, *Holy Johnson. Pioneer of African nationalism, 1836-1917* (London: Routledge, 2014), 13.