

# The Surface of Things: A History of Photography from the Swahili Coast

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The Swahili coast of eastern Africa figures prominently in the pictorial remains of European colonization and empire making in Africa. Today, photograph archives across the world continue to catalog, disseminate, and display thousands of images of this African littoral society. Pictures and descriptions of Swahili men and women have long ignited the imagination of Europeans and Americans, because they evoke a much-loved phantasm of ruthless slavers, languid harem girls, adventuring seamen, and mysterious “hybrid races.” This trope had its beginnings in the sixteenth century, when the Portuguese empire colonized key ports on the Swahili coast, but it reached unprecedented heights in the nineteenth century, as new machineries of representation, mass production, and telecommunication created a modern visual economy around the bodies and faces of Swahili coast people. Studio prints and postcards depicting local women especially circulated all across the Western world during the colonial period (Figs. 1–3), when the coast was part of the British Protectorate (1890–1963). Most show young girls in contrived poses, meeting the eye of the viewer either with suggestive stares (Fig. 1) or with a bright smile of welcoming warmth (Fig. 2). Photographic profiles of the human face were also common (Fig. 3). In such mass-produced postcards voyeuristic pleasure is conveniently coupled with “scientific” data about humankind, and the head and planes of women’s necks and shoulders were often bared to document their physiognomy. Here, photographic likeness is deployed to give visual form to modern anthropology’s ethnic typology schemas.<sup>1</sup> Each sitter is simply identified as “Swahili” or “Comoro.” As is true of most Victorian-era postcards, these three examples are really image-texts: written descriptions or titles were superimposed onto the image, fixing the meaning of the pictured individuals.

Of course, all photographs are in a sense reductive, turning people, their bodies, and their experiences into static representations. The evidentiary efficacy of photography was exactly why it was consistently deployed as a technology of exploration, propaganda, and bureaucracy in the colonization of Africa.<sup>2</sup> Photography endowed racist discourse with the power of the “real,” enabling claims about the essential difference between the colonizer and colonized to be anchored in photographic representation. But the representational protocols of photography can be deployed for diverse ends. While photography was and is a technology of empire, it is also a technology of self—a site of embodied performance. That is, photographs are very much connected to bodies; they can work as images that hold people’s lived experiences and memories. After all, the reality effect of photography can materialize a person’s presence, however mediated or even displaced; if one concentrates on the sitter *in* the photograph, then photography’s documentary and social aspects come into focus.

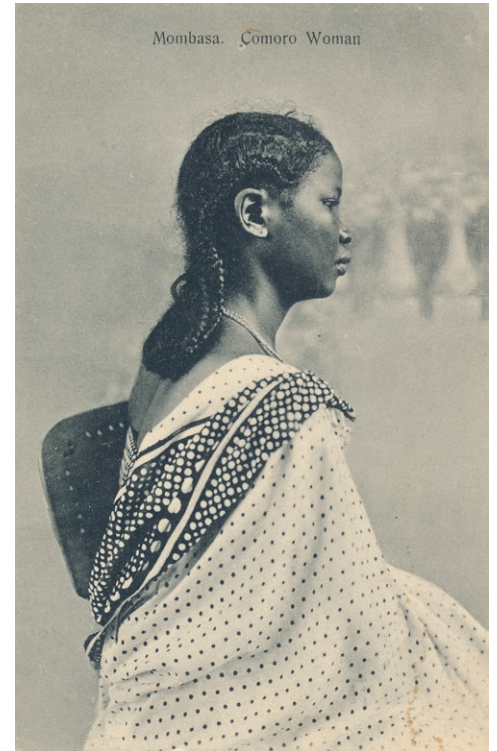
Research on African photography, which is mainly concerned with west and central Africa studio photography from the 1940s through the 1960s, has been at the forefront of exploring issues of identity formation, selfhood, political struggle, and class aspiration.<sup>3</sup> The work of Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta has been the subject of many important book and exhibition projects, inspiring lively debates about the challenges of interpreting African cultural production within Euro-American institutional and interpretative frameworks.



**1** A. C. Gomes & Sons Photographers, *Zanzibar, Suaheli Schönheit*, photograph before 1900, postcard printed ca. 1912, collotype on postcard stock, 5½ × 3½ in. (14 × 9 cm) (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Christraud M. Geary)



**2** A. C. Gomes & Son Photographers, *Swahily Woman, Zanzibar*, photograph after 1900, postcard printed ca. 1920, collotype on postcard stock, 5½ × 3½ in. (14 × 9 cm) (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Christraud M. Geary)



**3** Coutinho and Sons Photographers, *Mombasa, Comoro Woman*, photograph before 1900, postcard printed ca. 1912, collotype on postcard stock, 5½ × 3½ in. (14 × 9 cm) (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Christraud M. Geary)

For example, Africanists who are dedicated to fieldwork and archival research often critique the way large-scale exhibitions and their accompanying catalogs turn private photographs into art world commodities, thereby erasing their unique cultural and historical significance. Notwithstanding such critiques, both curators and Africanist scholars have argued that African photographers and their clients understood photography as an imaginative expression of personhood and individual identity. Already in the early 1990s, when Keita was just beginning to gain popularity in Europe and North America, Kobena Mercer argued that Keita's photographs are powerful portraits that “reveal a ‘self’ not as he or she actually is, but ‘just a little more than what we really are.’”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Africanists, such as Jennifer Bajorek, have highlighted the aesthetics of embodiment, suggesting that “different kinds of bodies [are] produced” at the level of the photographic portrait.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, calling attention to issues of portraiture and subject formation has been immensely generative, but other aspects of photography in Africa remain largely unexplored. By delving into the early history of photography on the Swahili coast I began to see that photographs, including studio pictures of individuals, were sometimes not primarily about bodies or the people *in* the photographs.<sup>6</sup> Instead, especially before the Swahili coast gained independence from Great Britain in the 1960s, the photograph was primarily understood as an itinerant thing that expressed opaque, even intractable meanings that exist at the intersection of objectification and haptic experience. Even locally commissioned photographs, although seemingly about the sitter's desire to express some essential aspect of his or her being, were often about quite the opposite. Surprisingly, they concerned the one thing scholars are usually trying to move beyond: the surface of things.

### ON THE SURFACE

Surfaces and their effects are not new topics in scholarship on photography. Art historians and art critics have considered both, often foregrounding questions of ontology.<sup>7</sup> From the vantage point of its surface, the photograph and its referent are not identical, allowing one to explore the “thingness” of the photographic object. This perspective also reveals how

photography can work as “fine art,” with properties unique to the medium itself. Cultural anthropologists, too, have been committed to thinking with and about the photographic surface, but for decidedly different reasons. Christopher Pinney, in his influential “Notes from the Surface of the Image,” which also drew on Olu Oguibe’s concept of “the substance” of photography, argued that postcolonial Indian and African studio portraits are all about the conflation of two surfaces: the surface of the image and the surface of the sitter in the image, ultimately generating an anticolonial style—one that refutes the figuration of colonized bodies—which, according to Pinney, is constituted by the three-dimensional illusionism of perspectival image making.<sup>8</sup> For Pinney, Keita’s photographs are characterized by a modernist “surfacing,” one that accentuates the materiality of the photographic image.<sup>9</sup> He contends that the intense patterning of the textiles worn by Keita’s sitters and used as studio backdrops merge on the surface of the photograph, creating a screen “where everything springs out of the photograph toward the viewer, rather than a field of spatio-temporal certainty receding within the image.”<sup>10</sup> In Pinney’s analysis, Keita’s portraits are not just pictures but screens of refusal—they do not reproduce the colonizer’s way of seeing the world. Perhaps not surprisingly, his ideas have been immensely generative. His overarching agenda, to present popular Global South photography as a negation or even a “deformation” of Cartesian perspectivalism, has inspired a whole generation of scholars to think about surfacing as an alternative to and even rejection of Euro-American photography traditions. Krista Thompson’s provocative work on contemporary Caribbean and African American photography perfectly exemplifies this trend.<sup>11</sup> She explores the manifestation of a series of surfacing aesthetics in the Atlantic world, arguing that they are part of a distinct African diasporic visual economy that undermines the visualization of black bodies as abject objects in North American representational regimes. Besides looking at the fusion of bodily and photographic surfaces, Thompson adds a third: the afterimage produced through bodily performances in front of and with the camera. For example, in her fascinating analysis of the use of lens-based technologies in Jamaican dance hall events, she suggests that revelers transform their bodies into luminous surfaces that in part appropriate but ultimately undo Euro-American modes of photographic portraiture. Through such acts they create new sites for the making of selfhood—ones that exist beyond pictorial representation.<sup>12</sup>

The surface qualities that I consider here are also about photography’s nonrepresentational aspects, but they are not primarily about overcoming or rejecting the North Atlantic world’s visual economy. Swahili coast residents stressed photography’s surfaces to engage distant cultures on their own terms. Here, photography was defined by a playful—and at times repressive—opacity, one that embraced the distancing qualities, even the superficiality, of photographs. Further, looking at, exhibiting, and posing for photographs were often very much about exteriority. People knowingly played with photography’s ability to create a contingent—even objectified and superficial—pictorial representation of the self. Paradoxically, while scholars tend to critique the reductive uses of photography, its ability to obscure interiority, Swahili coast residents embraced this aspect—albeit for reasons that would not have been understood by North Atlantic viewers because they are not a stylistic aspect of the photograph’s “look.” A history of photography told from the eastern African littoral therefore shows how photography was primarily about the tactile pleasure of beautiful objects and the power to make objects—and people—travel great distances in order to display them as ornamental things.<sup>13</sup> That is, for locals photographs were often exotic imports that had traveled across oceans to come to rest in their spaces of daily life.<sup>14</sup> Here they often communicated in ways that had to do with their ability to act as a mobile object, laden with textures and surface minutiae. Certainly by perhaps the 1940s and 1950s,



sitting for one's photograph was very much a popular form of portraiture, a leisure activity embraced by the urban middle classes of big cities like Mombasa, but during its early years the local meaning of the photograph was connected to a different history. Photographs were folded into very old practices, traditions that were primarily about the fact that the photograph was both a surface and an exotic thing that could be collected, played with, displayed—like so many other oceanic commodities that had long been coveted by residents of the Swahili coast.

#### PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE INDIAN OCEAN CROSSROADS

Photographs first became available locally in the 1860s or 1870s, arriving as exotic imports via the mercantile networks that connected Swahili port cities to other trade hubs across the western Indian Ocean.<sup>15</sup> Even before European colonization, Swahili coast residents avidly collected photographs, especially in the form of cartes de visite, in their homes.<sup>16</sup> The first carte de visite and pictorial chromolithographs likely arrived from Bombay, sold in Zanzibari markets with other South Asian imports, such as textiles, housewares, and decorative ornaments destined for the realm of bodily display or to beautify interiors. The increasing availability and affordability of nonessential commodities—objects meant for social communication, such as photographs—were very much linked to the development of new trade networks and major population shifts in the region.

Zanzibar was annexed into the Busaidi Sultanate of Oman in the 1830s, which meant that the entire Swahili coast became the center of new forms of mercantile capitalism, increasingly connecting the Swahili coast to the North Atlantic economic system.<sup>17</sup> At first Sultan Said al Busaidi and his leadership simply took control of extant trade networks, leaving local political institutions largely intact, but by the 1850s they began drawing on European models to change the economic and political systems of the region, establishing slave-labor plantations that produced cash crops for export to Europe and the Americas.<sup>18</sup> About a decade later the Busaidi government also began embracing an overtly imperialist agenda. With the help of the British, it claimed sovereignty over large swaths of eastern Africa. By the 1890s, once constantly shifting alliances between groups and lineages were transformed into discrete, colonial territories, where state power was largely about controlling property and legitimizing new forms of landownership.

During the first half of the nineteenth century the thriving maritime towns of the coast, particularly Mombasa and Zanzibar, saw their populations expand dramatically. The majority of the coast's new residents, Africans who were enslaved to work in harrowing conditions on clove plantations, in caravans, in the domestic realm, or in businesses in towns, had roots in the mainland.<sup>19</sup> A smaller number of immigrants arrived willingly, without having to experience the violence of enslavement. They came from even further away, such as from the United States and Europe, primarily because of the new business and job opportunities the thriving economy of Zanzibar promised. In fact, Zanzibar quickly became the most prosperous port in the western Indian Ocean, and from the 1850s until about 1900 it attracted wealthy financiers and businesses from North Atlantic port cities, such as Hamburg and Salem, Massachusetts.

Members of the Goan, Punjabi, and Gujarati diaspora, who had been traveling and settling in the littoral regions of the Indian Ocean for centuries, also began to move from places like Goa, Bombay, and Aden to Zanzibar and Mombasa, adding another layer of cultural complexity to the Swahili coast. Wealthy South Asian financiers immigrated on the direct invitation of the sultans, who needed them to connect the local economy to the currency markets of Bombay. But South Asian traders of more modest means also settled on the



Swahili coast in unprecedented numbers. They soon established small businesses, facilitated in part by the establishment of regular steamship service, which made travel and the movement of manufactured goods between the major ports of the western Indian Ocean relatively cheap, reliable, and easy, compared with the vagaries of sailing ships. As one of the main providers of cheap imports, they introduced new fashions and cultural practices to both rich and poor communities, helping to shape new consumer societies, whose tastes also became increasingly interlinked.

Significantly, it was South Asian migrants of modest means who also first introduced photography to the Swahili coast. Goans opened the first commercial photography studios in Zanzibar. Pereira de Lord opened one close to Zanzibar's port area in the 1870s, followed by other Goan firms, including A. C. and P. F. Gomes, J. B. and Felix Coutinho, and E. C. Dias. About 1900 Felix Coutinho moved from Zanzibar to Mombasa to open a studio on the thriving waterfront of Old Town.<sup>20</sup> Although it is often assumed that Goan photographers first came directly from India to Zanzibar, many had been living in other ports with significant European populations. A. C. Gomes, for one, had first opened a studio in 1869 in Aden, where he also served as a photographer to the British government.<sup>21</sup> He and his family migrated to Zanzibar sometime in the 1870s, precisely as British interests in the Indian Ocean region shifted from the coastal towns of the Arabian Peninsula to the Swahili coast.

Goans had long acted as the primary intermediaries for Europeans traveling and living in the western Indian Ocean. They followed European migration patterns in the region and often built businesses around selling goods and services to them. Already by 1865 C. R. de Souza had opened a store specializing in North Atlantic commodities in Zanzibar Stone Town, and by the 1890s a section of Zanzibar's bustling market was called Portuguese Street (Goans were Portuguese citizens), where Goan merchants lived and owned storefronts.<sup>22</sup> They also worked in European-owned hotels, played instruments in European-style bands, opened bakeries that specialized in European baked goods, and sold Western merchandise, including alcohol, jewelry, furniture, and women's fashions. In fact, Europeans often viewed Goans as part of their world, likely in part because they were Christians and because they were so adept at meeting European consumer desire. A German man who visited Zanzibar in 1893 included "Goan photographers" as part of his glowing description of the diversity of "European life" evident on the town's main street, Mnazi Moja.<sup>23</sup> They produced portraits for clients but kept large stocks of cartes de visite of famous personages, albumen prints, and picture postcards of "native studies." By the 1900s they also were selling cameras and film and offered printing services.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, during this time South Asian photographers very much catered to Europeans living on the Swahili coast. Yet it is important to note that on the Indian subcontinent, in such cosmopolitan cities as Calcutta and Bombay, they had been running studios for local clients already since the mid-1850s.<sup>25</sup> Here photography very much connected to a whole range of indigenous pictorial traditions, including painted portraiture. Further, Swahili coast elites had also likely been conversant with South Asian pictorial practices long before the popularization of picture making through photography on the Swahili coast. Arabs, Africans, and many others certainly traveled widely in the Indian Ocean world, regularly visiting Bombay and Goa. Barghash bin Said al Busaidi, for one, lived in Bombay in forced exile for two years before returning to Zanzibar to become the third Busaidi sultan in 1870. Once in power he embraced the latest technologies of mass production, modular architecture, and tools of data collecting to build multimedia cityscapes of unprecedented globality on the waterfront of Zanzibar Stone Town.<sup>26</sup>

## PHOTOGRAPHS AS ORNAMENT

In contrast to South Asia, on the Swahili coast photography did not connect to preexisting picture-making practices (although low-relief semiabstract zoomorphic carvings were not uncommon).<sup>27</sup> Despite the absence of such traditions, looking at, touching, and sharing photographs was a pleasure instantly embraced by locals, the majority of whom were Muslims.<sup>28</sup> Swahili coast residents certainly knew how to look beyond the surface, so to speak, into the perspectival depths of the photograph, but they very much enjoyed the haptics of engaging the photograph as an object.<sup>29</sup> While older residents perhaps found photography's realist illusionism unnerving or even uncouth, local reservations about photography were mainly concerned with preserving a proper separation between male and female bodies and gazes in the photographic encounter. Many likely felt that unrelated men and women should not be photographed together, an opinion certainly expressed by many locals today. Yet it must be emphasized that no evidence indicates that they considered the making of or looking at photographic likenesses as something fundamentally un-Islamic.<sup>30</sup> Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources suggest instead that consuming photographs was considered a decorous pastime, one that was intimately connected to homemaking. Displaying photographs demonstrated one's ability to craft spaces of tasteful sophistication, international connectedness, and hospitality in one's home. Zanzibaris enjoyed inviting Westerners to their homes, offering them "Arab-style" coffee and almond-infused sweetmeats and showing them their fashionable collections of imported objets d'art, which included boxes and albums filled with cartes de visite of European princes, princesses, and other famous personages.<sup>31</sup>

This interest in overseas things was not a recent phenomenon or simply a result of capitalist globalization. Rather, collecting and exhibiting imported objects expressed the ability to make the exotic one's own. It was a local tradition for women to stage elaborate assemblages of imported exotica, giving material form to memories and even fantasies of long-distance travel and mobility. During the height of the nineteenth-century economic boom cheaper and new commodities flooded the market, which also, in part, gave new life to old ways of consuming "the world."<sup>32</sup> A photograph taken in 1884 of an interior of a merchant's mansion documents this phenomenon (Fig. 4). This interior features a range of imported objects, including American mechanical wall clocks, Chinese porcelain dishes, French mirrors, Indian beds, gas lamps, and chromolithographs of Arabic calligraphy. Here, the massing of hundreds of export-ware porcelain dishes transforms the room into a striking interior of teeming surface ornament. Sir John Kirk, the British consul to Sultan Barghash, took this photograph during his visit to the Lamu Archipelago (today part of the nation-state of Kenya), then under the suzerainty of the Busaidi Sultanate of Zanzibar. Kirk was on an extended trip to coastal Kenya to inspect and settle disputes at various British vice consulates, including those at the port towns of Lamu and Mombasa. He was also an avid amateur photographer and collector of Swahili coast material culture. While living in Zanzibar Stone Town he mostly photographed the social events of the local European community, but during his stay in Lamu Town he also took several photographs of local life, including this one. In fact, his photographs are the only extant visual representations we have of what local homes looked like before the twentieth century. His photograph of a merchant's mansion (Fig. 4) is also the earliest documentation of how local elites presented photographs and other pictorial works during the late nineteenth century in their homes. A series of framed photographs of people, the outlines of heads and bodies just barely visible in the pictures, decorate the walls and columns of the sitting room. Large gilded frames, only their lower sections discernible, filled with lithographs of landscapes and portraits hang high above the heads of the four men



4 Sir John Kirk, Photograph of patricians sitting in state in a richly decorated reception room in Lamu Town, present-day Kenya, 1884, albumen print, 9 × 11¼ in. (22 × 28.5 cm). National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the National Archives of Scotland)

seated in the center of the room. Other objects, especially porcelain dishes, encircle the pictures and photographs. Here photographs are presented not as singular pictures but instead work in tandem with other objects to create a screen of ornament. These display strategies suggest that photography was very much about the haptics of interior architecture during this time.

In contrast to Lamu residents, Zanzibaris arranged photographs in slightly different ways. This is evident in a photograph of a bedroom in a wealthy Omani man's stone mansion in Zanzibar Stone Town (Fig. 5). Significantly, studio portraits are a very central element of the room's design program: three large mounted and framed portraits of men in Omani dress are set on the ornate Indo-Portuguese cabinet in the right foreground of the image, and another occupies the small nightstand next to the bed. Here, in contrast to the Lamu interior, each photograph is a distinct thing, not just an element in a larger mass of other objects.

The manner in which objects and photographs are presented in this interior is typical of a style that became popular during the reign of Sultan Barghash. At this time, local consumer taste was increasingly influenced by South Asia and Europe. As can be seen in the image, Zanzibaris embraced Indian, including British Raj, fashions and ornament, juxtaposing the latest technological innovations, such as European clockworks and electric lighting, with fashionable Anglo-Indian furniture, directly imported from Bombay. The photograph was taken sometime in the 1880s by a Goan commercial studio, called Souza and Paul.





5 Souza and Paul Studios of Zanzibar, Photograph of a room in a stone mansion in Zanzibar, ca. 1880, albumen print (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Historical Photography Archive in the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum—Cultures of the World, Cologne)

Interestingly, this photograph circulated across many publics during the colonial period: copies of it exist in several archives across the world, including in Germany, England, and Zanzibar, and a chromolithograph of it was also published in a 1899 book titled *The Queen's Empire: A Pictorial and Descriptive Record*.

Two photographs showing sitting rooms in the British Residency in Zanzibar, from around the 1880s and 1890s, illustrate the similarity between the staging of photography in the homes of the Omani Arab elite and the European community of Zanzibar (Figs. 6, 7). Just like in the Omani man's room (Fig. 5), here, too, photographs are staged as distinct objects of display, either hung on the room's wall or placed on tables and shelves. In both European and Arab homes layers of Victorian bric-a-brac surround the photographs, but they are distinct from the other interior ornament: viewers are meant to behold the personage in the images. The photographs seen in these interiors were not bought in the market or acquired for their exotic objectness. Rather, they are portraits, keepsakes, and mementos of family members.

But it would be wrong to assume that the tastes of non-Europeans living in Zanzibar were simply a "localized" version of British Raj or Victorian styles. In fact, when Europeans, including businesspeople, government officials, and missionaries, moved to the Swahili coast they rented the houses of locals, and also appropriated coastal, albeit elite, home decor. Stone mansions, which Europeans associated with "Arab" forms of genteel living, were especially popular as homes among European immigrants. One such immigrant was Oskar Baumann, an Austrian geographer and self-styled dandy, who delighted in living and



dressing like a coastal patrician during his tenure in eastern Africa. A photograph from 1893 of Baumann at age twenty-nine, which was also reproduced as a halftone print in his book *Through Massailand to the Source of Nile Massailand*, gives a glimpse of his Zanzibari home and his uses of local decor (Fig. 8). It shows him flanked by two employees, sitting on the



stairs leading to the second-floor galleries of his stately stone mansion. A *kofia*, a type of cap worn by Muslim men on the Swahili coast, sits on his head, tilted to one side at a rakish angle, while he gazes into the distance, a dreamy smile playing across his lips. The walls are covered with imported textiles and carpets, decorative things typical of the kind of “oriental” or Indian Ocean flourishes preferred by many living in Zanzibar. Baumann, who had just returned to Zanzibar from a two-year expedition in central Africa, also embellished the space with ethnographic exotica, including spears, shields, and a mask. This fusion of Indian Ocean and African “souvenirs” also expresses Baumann’s carefully cultivated persona as someone who had “gone native,” a vision of himself that he also narrativized in his extensive publications.

Missionaries, another segment of the European population living on the Swahili coast, also rented stone mansions, although they never performed “going native” like the many self-styled explorers settling on the coast. A photograph from 1896 documents the interior of a merchant mansion in Mombasa Old Town, which was leased by members of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) from a local patrician family (Fig. 9). The room was related in design and layout to the Omani man’s room in Zanzibar (Fig. 5). The overall dimensions are less grand and the furniture is less ornate, but the walls are similarly articulated by a series of recessed arched niches, a typical design element in nineteenth-century Swahili coast stone architecture. Even the chairs, manufactured in Germany and shipped on steamships all over the world, are identical to those in the Zanzibari room. Here, too, photographs play a prominent role: dozens of framed



6 Photograph of a sitting room in the British Residency of Zanzibar, ca. 1890s. Winterton Collection of East African Photographs, Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, Northwestern University, Evanston (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Winterton Collection of East African Photographs)

7 Photograph of an interior room in the British Residency of Zanzibar, 1884, albumen print. National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the National Archives of Scotland)

photographs occupy the shelves, tables, and walls of this room, creating an imaginarium of familial attachments and sentiment. This dense layering of photographs also expresses personal, private experiences. Members of the CMS felt extremely homesick and out of place during their time in Mombasa, where they spent long hours singing hymns and reciting Scriptures on public squares, attempting to convert local Muslims to Christianity. Their feelings of estrangement and loneliness are documented in the diary of Sibbie Bassett, who lived in this house and who is likely the woman pictured to the right in the photograph.<sup>33</sup>

In many ways, this room is a British domestic space, where the framed pictures speak to notions of Victorian homemaking and middle-class self-fashioning. But the overlapping uses and staging of photographs in these ranges of interiors also reveal how local and



foreign actors worked together to foster a material culture that exceeded simple categories of identity, such as European, African, Swahili, Asian, or Arab. In fact, these rooms feature strikingly similar attributes: they were all riotous arrangements of ornament, cluttered with so much furniture and bric-a-brac that the overall effect was one of sensuous surfaces.

Swahili coast homes became nodes of intersection, where global trade, imperialism, and new patterns of migrations and consumption produced a shared material culture. Consuming and collecting masses of objects, including photographs, was a passion prevalent across diverse communities.

Yet it is important to point out that similarity does not mean these extravagant presentations were part of a single system of signification. Affinity does not necessarily mean equivalence. While the photographs in these spaces are related, each assemblage, each individual photograph likely also meant different things to the different people using these spaces. Certainly, Swahili coast people and Arabs collecting photographs probably had little interest in reproducing Victorian notions of proper homemaking. The photographs in each of these different, but connected, interiors sit at the edge of multiple value systems, their meanings mutable and always on the verge of becoming something else.

#### PORTRAITURE: THE SERIALITY OF SURFACES

Scholars today often assume that people, particularly the poor or colonized, took portrait photography very seriously: that they wanted pictures of themselves to be seen as emblems of their individuality. This perspective has a long tradition in mainstream photographic theory. For Susan Sontag, “facing the camera signifies solemnity, frankness, the disclosure of the subject’s essence.”<sup>34</sup> Roland Barthes similarly approached the photographic portrait as a trace of a person’s personhood, even if it is constituted by loss and absence. For him, pictures of people, most notably familial ones, can make viewers *feel* the person in the photograph.<sup>35</sup> Such ideas, that photographs can express people’s identity (even if it is creatively manipulated), are undergirded by the assumption that individuality is indeed stable and visible on the surface of people’s bodies and faces. But, as Alan Trachtenberg’s work on early photographic portraits reminds us, alternative understandings of the photograph’s essential nature also circulated in North America. According to Trachtenberg, the photograph, especially the spectral, flickering quality of the daguerreotype portrait, suggested to



8 Photograph of Oskar Baumann and two of his employees (names unknown) posing on the steps of his stone mansion in the Shangani neighborhood of Zanzibar Stone Town, 1893, albumen print. World Museum, Vienna (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the World Museum)

34 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 113. 35 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 113.



some nineteenth-century viewers that photographic images manifest a temporary, unreal, and contingent identity.<sup>36</sup>

The mutability of likeness and identity is exactly what Swahili coast residents cultivated in their engagement with photographic portraits. As mentioned above, locals certainly

saw the individuals, their postures, clothes, and bodies, pictured in the photograph, but the portrait was nevertheless consumed primarily as a generic object, as part of a genre.<sup>37</sup> Above all, when printed and framed as a *carte de visite*, the photograph presented the subject as a traveling, transferable, and interchangeable type. The physical qualities of *cartes de visite*, their sturdy format and small size, further heightened their serial quality, allowing them to travel with relative ease across great distances and between diverse systems of signification.

Sultan Barghash was one of the first Swahili coast residents who used the photograph as a genre of long-distance communication. He embraced its superficial seriality as a tool of persuasion and diplomacy,



9 Interior of a missionary's stone mansion in Mombasa Old Town, 1896, photograph. The National Museums of Kenya, Mombasa (artwork in the public domain; photograph by the author)

orchestrating the circulation of photographs and mass-produced images of himself across various publics. He proudly reprinted engravings published in the *Illustrated London News* of his public appearances when he toured Europe in 1875 and kept a scrapbook of the images.<sup>38</sup> He also commissioned several *cartes de visite* of himself from the most fashionable photography studio of London, Maull and Company (Fig. 10). This studio specialized in serving the social and political elite of England, including members of Parliament. Once Barghash returned to Zanzibar he would present his London *cartes de visite* as gifts to European visitors and residents. Barghash also appended signed *cartes de visite* of himself in diplomatic missives, at least in those sent to Europeans. One of his Maull and Company *cartes de visite*, which he signed in Arabic (Fig. 10), accompanied his letter to Roger Price, a British man who established a missionary station in Ujiji, a Swahili “frontier town” on the northeastern shore of Lake Tanganyika that Barghash claimed as part of his sphere of influence. The letter, also written in Arabic, on gold-embossed sultanate letterhead, entreated Price to remind important people in London that it was he who made their “work”—colonization—in central Africa possible.<sup>39</sup>

By the 1880s Europeans often described receiving signed *cartes de visite* at the conclusion of their audiences with powerful locals. Mary French Sheldon, an American adventurer who was the first Western female to lead an expedition in Africa, happily accepted Sultan Ali bin Hamud al Busaidi's photograph, also autographed in Arabic, along with an official letter of passage and protection, which she hoped would help her avoid any trouble with “natives” on her way to Mount Kilimanjaro.<sup>40</sup> Not surprisingly, almost all public portraits of Swahili coast men, even those produced by photographers in Zanzibar, are extremely formulaic, with backdrops and poses that could be found in many places across the globe (Fig. 11). Barghash's Maull and Company portrait certainly is prescribed; the photographer likely instructed him



**10** Maull and Co. Photographers, *Carte de visite of Sultan Barghash al Busaidi*, 1875, albumen paper photograph, 4 × 2½ in. (10 × 6.4 cm). Archives & Special Collections, Library, SOAS University of London (artwork in the public domain; photograph by the author)

**11** Studio portrait of an unidentified man in Zanzibar, ca. 1900, albumen paper photograph, 4 × 2½ in. (10 × 6.4 cm). Zanzibar National Archives, Tanzania (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Zanzibar National Archives)

how to stand and where to direct his gaze (Fig. 10). He is reproducing established codes of photographic portraiture: his body is turned slightly to one side, his face holds a calm expression, and he is resting his hands on an ornate columnar pedestal. Interestingly, all coastal men, even when they did not belong to the Busaidi royal court or other Omani powerful families, consistently wore only Omani ceremonial dress, including the *joho* robe and a *kilemba* turban, for their official portraits at this time (Fig. 11). Omani forms of dressing came to signal pedigree, wealth, and sophistication already by the 1850s all along the coast, and most local Sunni Muslims even today prefer wearing these clothes at major ceremonies, such as weddings.

Cartes de visite effectively worked as tokens of likeness because they transformed people into commensurate icons, prompting recognition in the eyes of others through their generic qualities. It is likely that Barghash hoped that his letter and signed carte de visite would compel Price to “like” him, to remember his social debt, and therefore to lobby on Barghash’s behalf to the British government in London. At the same time, the photograph as a message was probably not meant to create an affecting reciprocal bond with its recipient, in this case, Price. While focusing on the individual in the image, we might interpret the use of portraiture by Zanzibaris as a form of mimicry on the level of deep intercultural identification, but that would be a romanticized misreading.<sup>4</sup> Rather, such pictures expressed the sitter’s desire for surface similitude. The conformity, even normativity, of the carte de visite ensured that the individual in the picture remained rather opaque. Perhaps one could even propose that, precisely because the photographed subject gained only a circumscribed visibility, as a node in a sea of thousands of cartes de visite circulating across the globe, sitters did not have to worry about photography’s power to fix identities into place.





**12** Studio portrait of an unidentified woman of the al Busaidi dynasty, ca. 1890. Zanzibar National Archives, Tanzania (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Zanzibar National Archives)



**13** Studio portrait of an unidentified woman of the al Busaidi dynasty, ca. 1890. Zanzibar National Archives, Tanzania (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Zanzibar National Archives)



**14** Studio portrait of an unidentified young girl of the al Busaidi dynasty, ca. 1890. Zanzibar National Archives, Tanzania (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Zanzibar National Archives)

## THEATERS OF PLAY

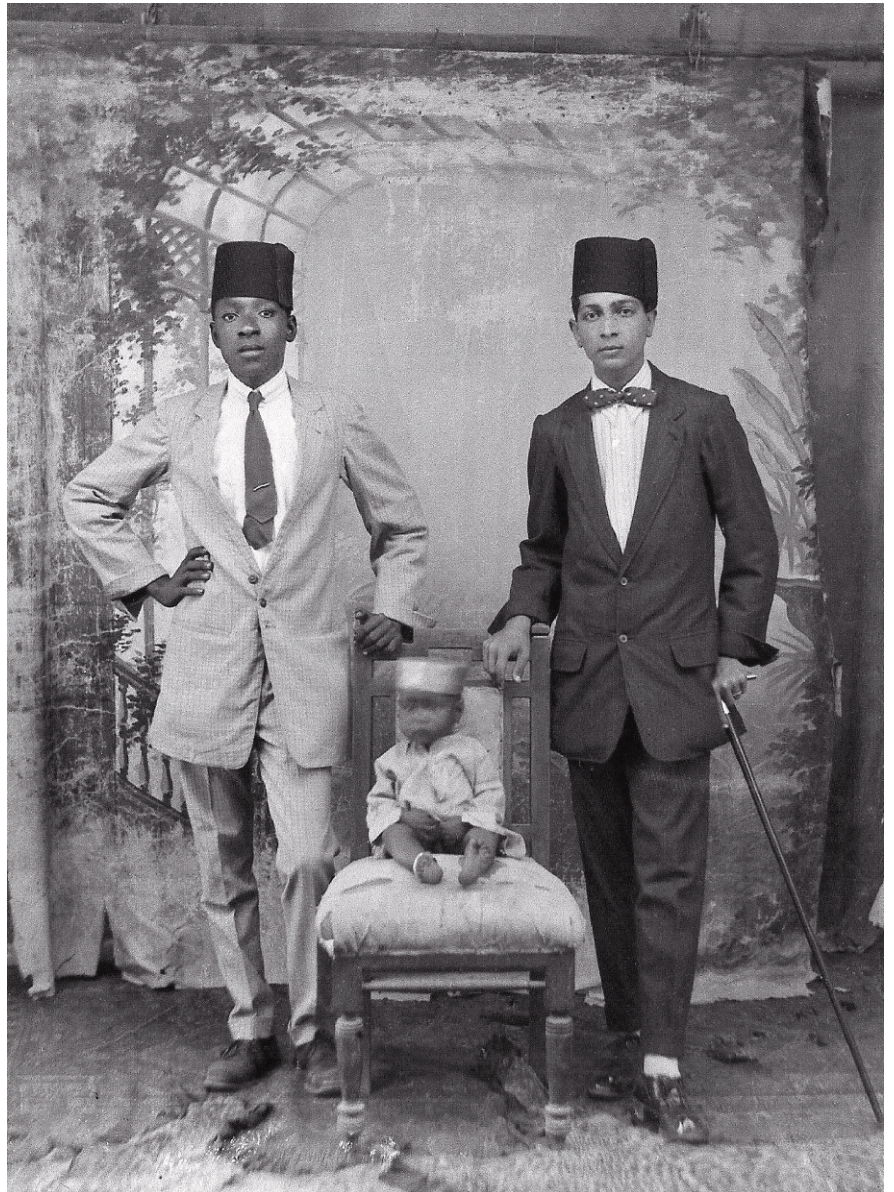
A few rare private portraits indicate that people of means also very much enjoyed simply playing with photographed bodies of fashionably dressed distant others.<sup>42</sup> Converted into an image, bodily surfaces became tangible and stylized forms that could be “tried on” for one’s own appearance in front of the camera.<sup>43</sup> A rare portrait of a female adult of the Busaidi household, now housed in the Zanzibar National Archives, Tanzania, suggests that women posed for private portraits already by the 1890s (Fig. 12). Resting her hands on the back of a chair and gazing directly into the camera’s lens, she easily reproduces Victorian codes of respectable comportment. Although very much embracing the stylized body language of North Atlantic public portraiture, this image is in many ways a transcultural self-representation because the sitter is also wearing fashions popular among local high-ranking Muslim women at that time. The dots painted on her face and cheeks, her hair ornaments and jewelry, including the gold earlobe plugs, are in the courtly style of Zanzibar. But such photographs were not meant to circulate freely. In fact, most public portraits of highborn women from this time period show them either covering their face and hair (Fig. 13) or as small children (Fig. 14). Further, portraits of highborn or wealthy females usually presented them holding their bodies in Swahili poses of freeborn and patrician respectability: enthroned symmetrically and frontally on exotic chairs with feet apart and firmly placed on the floor (discussed in more detail below).

Similarly, young men connected to powerful Omani families also enjoyed engaging the pictured appearances of Europeans in photographic portraits (Figs. 15, 16). Ali bin Hamud al Busaidi, who would become sultan of Zanzibar in 1902, is seen in a studio portrait of about 1895 (Fig. 15), and Mbarak al Hinawy, who would become the *liwali* (governor) of Mombasa in 1936, was portrayed in about 1915 (Fig. 16, at right). Mbarak shared the photo session with two unidentified males: a toddler sitting on a chair in the center and another young man, who is dressed and posed similarly to Mbarak. These photographs present the young men as stylish and carefree dandies, cosmopolitan flaneurs par excellence. Mbarak and Ali are leaning on their walking sticks, standing in jaunty contrapposto positions, and wearing pressed suits imported from overseas. Ali in particular, wearing a white shirt starched





**15** Studio portrait of Ali bin Hamud al Busaidi, ca. 1895. Zanzibar National Archives, Tanzania (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Zanzibar National Archives)



**16** D. V. P. Figuiera Photographers, Studio portrait of Mbarak al Hinawy and two unidentified males, ca. 1915 (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Muhaimin Khamisa, Mombasa)

to perfection and presenting himself in a confident stance, projects a stylish self-awareness. Although not documented, this portrait was perhaps taken overseas, in Great Britain. The careful presentation of an unmarred studio backdrop and his precise frontality convey that it was made in a European photographer's studio. Interestingly, Ali was the first sultan to be sent to boarding school in England. He attended Harrow, where, according to Zanzibari popular lore, he learned the affectations of the English—which made him an unpopular sultan in the eyes of many.

The Hinawy photograph (Fig. 16) was taken at D. V. P. Figuiera, one of many Goan photograph studios located in the busy commercial heart of Mombasa Old Town during the 1920s and 1930s. The ragged edges of the painted backdrop and its pulley system are very much visible in the background of the image. This imbues the portrait with an idiosyncratic, even provincial character. The studio's worn props signal Mombasa's distance from places such as Bombay or London, where standardized norms of portraiture were more strictly followed and studio props could be more easily replaced. But the fact that the image was not cropped also suggests that sitters perhaps also desired a theatrical effect. That is, while the tattered quality of the props was likely undesirable, the inclusion of the studio's theatrical mechanisms in the portrait further enhances the artifice of the photographic encounter.



These two photographs certainly are “serious” portraits, presented as keepsakes to friends and family for display in the home, but they also express a playful self-projection. I do not mean to say that aesthetic and social practices did not intersect in these photographic encounters; rather, locals also enjoyed creating things that existed apart from the everyday, even if only temporarily. The sitters in these instances are embracing the performative aspects of sitting for one’s picture; they are temporarily masquerading in the clothes and postures of distant places. They are also in part signaling their familiarity and engagement with European cultures and fashions, although it should be mentioned that these outfits were not necessarily read as “Western” but were also associated with Ottoman imperial modernity, as wearing tailored suits in combination with a fez as a head covering was popular in Egypt and other parts of the Ottoman Middle East among the elite at that time.

#### PERSONHOOD AND OBJECTHOOD

The photograph also gave locals a new medium through which to reimagine local performances of the aestheticized body. For example, when elite men dressed and posed for portraits that commemorated important Islamic ceremonies, they presented themselves to the camera using traditional codes of self-presentation, holding their bodies as if they were in fact in the space of the ceremony. This is evident in a wedding portrait of a resident of Mombasa Old Town (Fig. 17). The glass-plate negative for this photograph is still in a local family collection in Mombasa (although the sitter’s identity is no longer known). The photograph was likely taken in the 1910s, when it was common for grooms, but not brides, to visit a local studio to have their photograph taken wearing their wedding costume, which for men of means was Omani ceremonial garb, including the *joho* robe, the multicolored *kilemba* turban, and the ceremonial *jambia* dagger. This young man is also holding a sword, which indicates that he belonged to a powerful local lineage with ancient political rights. In such marriage tableaux the subjects sat enthroned on a locally crafted *kiti cha enzi*, a “chair of agency, power and ability,” the same type of chair used to present the groom (and bride) for the viewing pleasure of guests during actual marriage celebrations. In the photographic restaging of such events, the body of the sitter was frontally oriented toward the camera and the body took on an expansive position: legs spread and feet firmly planted on a ledge or the floor. This posture is symbolically significant on the Swahili coast. It indicates belonging to the *wa-ungwana*, the freeborn patricians. In fact, the earliest photographs of noble Swahili coast men and women show them enthroned in this manner, presenting their body in this position of power. Key was to position one’s legs astride and to firmly place one’s palms on one’s legs. The female members of the Busaidi royal family seen in photographs also hold their bodies in these postures of power (Figs. 13, 14). Elders today describe the poise and composure of patricians as they sat stiffly erect for hours on a *kiti cha enzi*, ever vigilant and in command of the bodies of others. The staging of oneself enthroned, wearing fine clothes, was itself a performance of autonomous personhood.

Photography’s pictorial qualities allowed locals to present people as things in new ways. A studio photograph, still in a family collection in Mombasa (Fig. 18), shows seven males, but only the two enthroned men, Sheikh Mssellem and his son, are the subjects of the photograph. According to his great-great grandson, Mssellem first moved to Zanzibar from Oman in the 1880s to take part in the burgeoning caravan trade, prospering as a trader and business owner, first in Zanzibar and later in Mombasa. Today his descendants view this photograph as evidence of his wealth, especially of his ability to amass a great retinue of dependents, people who were beholden to him. He and his son, likely the people who commissioned the photograph, were freemen of means, while the two standing men and three



**17** D. V. P. Figuera Photographers, Studio marriage portrait of unidentified man in Mombasa, ca. 1915 (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Muhaimin Khamisa, Mombasa)

**18** Studio portrait of Mssellem family and retinue in Zanzibar, ca. 1890, albumen paper photograph, 4 × 2½ in. (10 × 6.4 cm). Sheikh Mssellem Family Collection, Mombasa (artwork in the public domain; photograph by the author)

young boys, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the studio in the photograph, are not free or semiautonomous bondsmen. Once photographed, their bodies became objects, tokens of Sheikh Mssellem’s authority over the bodies of others.

Photography also gave material force to local practices of turning the body into objects of “good taste,” which was in many respects an expression of the cultural dimensions of nineteenth-century capitalist globalization.<sup>44</sup> As scholars of the region’s economic history have noted, the trading boom of the nineteenth century, when the Swahili coast was absorbed into the North Atlantic economic sphere, led to the commodification of life and people in many profound ways.<sup>45</sup> The unprecedented intensification of the slave trade beginning in the late 1700s and the rise of plantation slavery on the Swahili coast in the 1800s forever changed local social relations.<sup>46</sup> The categorical equation of enslaved humans with wealth and luxury very much informed local notions about the nature of being cultured and what it meant to be civilized. Even as enslaved men, women, and children labored under extremely harsh conditions outside the city on cash-crop plantations, in the city enslaved peoples often had to do work as objects of display. A culture of refinement and social distinction developed on the Swahili coast that revolved around the ability to force others to act as ornaments, as pleasing tableaux vivants of worldliness and wealth. It is unclear when exactly the display of bodies became essential to



public performances of urbane sophistication and social power, but it was common among plantation owners, the ruling classes, and rich city dwellers by the 1830s.

This phenomenon is exemplified by a photograph, once in the Busaidi family collection, showing Ali bin Hamud al Busaidi as a child, accompanied by two young men (Fig. 19). The man standing stiffly behind Ali and staring directly into the camera is likely a



**19** Portrait of Ali bin Hamud al Busaidi (seated) accompanied by two unidentified men, ca. 1890. Zanzibar National Archives, Tanzania (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Zanzibar National Archives)

close family relative. Both are wearing Omani ceremonial dress, including *kilemba* turbans and dark muslin *joho* robes draped over white *kanzus*, full-length cotton gowns customarily worn by men on the Swahili coast. They are dressed identically, although young Ali's costume is costlier: his *joho* is ornamented with an elaborate panel of gold embroidery and his regalia includes a silver-capped walking stick and a finely detailed brass dagger, almost too large for his small frame. The refined workmanship of his clothes and accessories all symbolize his high rank and royal status. Yet the most extravagantly dressed person in the photograph is the man whose body is turned sideways, his gaze and attention intently focused on Ali. He, too, is wearing a white *kanzu* and turban, but his robe is fashioned from a paisley-patterned brocade, an expensive and much-prized import from South Asia. His rich clothes are not emblems of his own status or good taste. He is an attendant bonded to the royal family, indicated by his bare feet. He is an ornament, a visual cue to signal the wealth of the sultanate and the many bodies it commands. This man's body, although at rest, is still fundamentally a laboring body. He is doing aesthetic "work" as a frame for the display of exotic textiles that had been imported from faraway.<sup>47</sup>

Textiles have long acted as an exchange medium and currency in commercial systems in many long-distance trading systems, but in transoceanic contexts imported textiles were also very much linked to the commercial value of enslaved human beings. In the Indian Ocean realm merchants and slavers often primarily exchanged people for textiles. As the historian Pedro Machado has demonstrated, in eastern Africa begin-

ning in the 1700s, both the export of humans and the import of textiles intensified as the region became linked to the global expansion of modern commodity markets.<sup>48</sup> For example, enslaved Africans were shipped to the Indian Ocean islands of Réunion and Mauritius from the Swahili coast to work on European-owned sugarcane plantations. This demand for laboring bodies was paid for with South Asian textiles, and imported cloth became increasingly available all over eastern and central Africa. Exotic textiles also held complex cultural meanings in Africa. On the Swahili coast cloth was one of the most important imports because it was exchangeable and highly mobile, perfectly encapsulating transoceanic connectivity and mercantile plentitude. Important families owned large collections of such textiles, stored for safekeeping in beautifully carved wooden chests in the sitting rooms of stone mansions. Local residents also coveted imported textiles because they could be used to create networks of

dependence through practices of gifting. The rich and powerful collected the goodwill, labor, allegiance, and respect of others by providing them with clothes and cloth. Patricians could patronize large feasts and festivals if they could dress their retinues in imported textiles. It was an essential performance of patrician largesse to distribute cloth to one's allies and bonded workers at public celebrations.<sup>49</sup> In effect, imported textiles allowed one to ornament the bodies of enslaved people, dependents, and vassals to create spectacles of luxury and beauty.

It is documented in travelogues that patricians took pleasure in dressing up enslaved household members or vassals. Women in particular had to act as ornaments, their owners reducing them to pleasing armatures for the display of their textile collections (Figs. 20, 21).<sup>50</sup> Women had to don identical or matching textiles and ornaments to form pleasing multisensory events.<sup>51</sup> There even existed a category of bonded or servant women, called *wapambe* (the ornamented ones), whose role during festivals was “to signify the wealth and ability of their owners.”<sup>52</sup> Sumptuously dressed in the most expensive silks and cottons, they would accompany patricians at various public festivals and processions, the mass of their bedecked and bejeweled bodies transforming the spaces of the city. A photograph taken by Sir John Kirk documents the reductive role women had to play, but it must be emphasized that this also was very much an early form of tourist photography (Fig. 20). Kirk took this photograph during his trip to Lamu Island in 1884, and he printed and pasted it into his memorabilia album. Like the majority of mass-produced postcards from the 1890s (Figs. 1–3), Kirk's private photographs often focused on the lavish ornamented dresses and physique of young Swahili coast women.

A very unusual photograph that once belonged to the Busaidi family reveals another aspect of the local logic of objectifying people into photographic things (Fig. 21). This photograph, although also a likeness of six unidentified *wapambe*, primarily has the effect of intensifying the surface qualities of their bodies. Barefoot and forced to pose in a perfect line on the verandah of the House of Wonders, the presentation palace built by Sultan Barghash bin Said al Busaidi in the 1870s, their bodies act as a kind of ornamental screen. The striking patterns of their *kanga* cloths merge on the surface of the photograph with the arabesque-like graphics formed by the cast-iron verandah against which they stand. This flattens their bodies, further reducing them into ornamental objects. Photographs restaged and froze moments of corporeal performance through the photographic artifact, making temporary acts of adornment and comportment into permanent things.<sup>53</sup> Further, the surface effects of photography heightened the aesthetics of ornate textiles and turned ornamented people into photographic objects. These young women had objecthood imposed on them, and through the photograph they are forever giving material form to other people's concepts of the beautiful, aesthetic, and exotic. In a sense, then, this photograph reveals how photography amplified the ornamental effect of bodies, creating a series of striking surface equivalences between bodies, objects, and ornament.

## BEYOND CATEGORIES

I do not want to suggest that Swahili coast photographic practices were only about surface effects, objectification, or collecting the exotic, nor do I want to argue that we can even demarcate a distinctly “Swahili” style in the history of photography, because that would overstate the consistency of the diverse ways locals used photography over the years. Like elsewhere in the world, on the Swahili coast the uses and meanings of photography changed rapidly over the years, always working in tandem with a range of old and new media cultures. Around the 1940s the aesthetics and local significance of photography had been radically transformed, reflecting, in part, the social and political landscape of life during the high



**20** Sir John Kirk, Photograph of three *wapambe* (bondwomen or enslaved attendants) and two male attendants holding the *siwa* (sideblown horns) of Lamu and Pate, 1884. National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the National Archives of Scotland)



**21** Photograph of *wapambe* of the al Busaidi family standing on the verandah of the House of Wonders, Zanzibar, ca. 1880. Zanzibar National Archives, Tanzania (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Zanzibar National Archives)

colonial period. Photography and sitting for one's picture were increasingly associated with modern portraiture, middle-class respectability, and cosmopolitan city life. By the 1960s going to a commercial studio was a popular leisure activity, and teenagers often went with their friends to sit for group portraits for the fun of it and to celebrate their consumption

and production of global youth cultures. By then how one chose to pose for one's portrait signaled the growing interest in international mass media, including films and lifestyle magazines. People's homes, still spheres of familial respectability, now commonly featured black-and-white headshots of male and female family members, whose aesthetic shared much with the images of movie stars and newscasters that flickered across the screen of the family's television set (Fig. 22). Although radically different in many ways from late nineteenth-century interiors, here, too, mass-produced pictorial imagery, including lithographs showing landscapes, reclining female models, and excerpts from the Quran, constitutes part of a dense layering of old and new homemaking fashions.

Yet during the second half of the nineteenth century photography was still closely linked to older cultural practices that had much to do with collecting transoceanic commodities. At this time photographs worked as relational things, colliding with other things—such as bodies, commodities, and heirlooms—in the spaces of daily life. In this context photography's shape-shifting and mobile qualities came to the fore, prompting viewers and users to understand it as a thing in the world, not a representation of the world. The Swahili coast therefore offers a different genealogy for understanding the early history of photography, one that reveals its role as an object.

The study of early photography in Africa and the Indian Ocean world also suggests that non-Western photography was not always about “countering” the colonizer's gaze or that it should be framed as a story of the “localization” of the “global.” Such analytic frameworks can inadvertently present local histories of photography on the colonizer's terms, by naturalizing the overarching rationality of the colonial project, which set in

place such binaries as colonizer versus colonized or local versus global in the first place.<sup>54</sup> It is true that when we look at African photographic practices and juxtapose them to photographs of Africans taken for European audiences they powerfully trouble and even challenge colonialist forms of knowing. But overburdening the African engagement with photography with the full weight of countering misrepresentations of African lived experience also can simplify



the heterogeneity of photographic practice. In contrast, as seen here, coastal east Africans who posed for photographs never saw themselves in terms of colonizer versus colonized, nor did they feel the need to make the photograph somehow authentically or recognizably “local.” Zanzibaris certainly experienced no qualms about photography’s distant origins in a place different from their own. Instead, photography’s connection to an exotic place, like Bombay

or London, made it interesting and meaningful locally. In fact, the foreignness of the photographic artifact was essential. For local consumers photographs were tantalizingly dense and ornate, endowed with a foreign quality that made them perfect artifacts of display and pleasure.

Further, while we often want to see locality or cultural specificity when we study African photography, what was “unique” to Swahili coast photography was not a distinct stylistic feature or formal aspect of the photographic image; it cannot be readily seen. Instead, it was a way of “doing things” with photographs. The surface effect of photography allowed locals to heighten a series of ancient *practices*, practices that are primarily about the haptic experience of things, their

textures, and the sensual qualities of the exotic and faraway. Through photography, modernity and ancient display and performance cultures became intertwined vectors, and the difference between sentient beings and things became less clear.



**22** Photograph of the sitting room of the Shikely family’s stone mansion in Mombasa Old Town, ca. 1960s. The National Museums of Kenya, Mombasa (artwork in the public domain; photograph by the author)

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#### NOTES

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1. For landmark discussions of the role of photography in the formation of anthropological knowledge, see Elizabeth Edwards, ed., *Anthropology and Photography, 1860–1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

2. The scholarship on colonialist photography is extensive. See James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, eds., *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place* (London: Routledge, 2002); Paul Stuart Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin, *Images and Empires: Visuality*

*in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Christraud Geary, *In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885–1960* (London: Philip Wilson, 2002); and Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). An excellent introductory overview of colonial and postcolonial photography in Africa is Erin Haney, *Photography and Africa* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010).

3. Africanists have been at the forefront of exploring the theme of identity formation in relation to photography. See John Peffer and Elisabeth L. Cameron, eds., *Portraiture & Photography in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Richard Vokes, ed., *Photography in Africa: Ethnographic Perspectives* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: James Currey, 2012); and Heike Behrend and Tobias Wendl, eds., *Snap Me One! Studiofotografien in Afrika* (Munich: Prestel, 1998).

4. Kobena Mercer, “Home from Home: Portraits from Places in Between,” in *Self Evident* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1995), n.p., quoted in Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian*



*Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 178.

5. Jennifer Bajorek, "(Dis)Locating Freedom: The Photographic Portraits of Seydou Keita," *Critical Interventions*, nos. 3–4 (Spring 2009): 100.

6. My interest in exploring how studio photography is not always about issues of selfhood and identity has been shaped by Christopher Pinney's groundbreaking book, *Camera Indica*. Published in 1998, well before the "material turn" in photography studies, it argued that vernacular studio portraits are not about the "burden of self-representation" in India (209). I am also influenced in my approach by Elizabeth Edwards's analysis of the "presentational" aspects of vernacular photographs. Edwards, "Material Beings: The Objecthood of Ethnographic Photographs," *Visual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2002): 69–75. See also Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (London: Routledge, 2004).

7. Major works that consider the ontology of photography include Peter Galassi, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981); Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, or the History of Photography, Part I* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); and Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). Recently Giuliana Bruno has engaged the surface as a philosophical and aesthetic concept in order to consider the affective materiality of the visual arts, including lens-based works, in our contemporary digital media age. Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

8. Christopher Pinney, "Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism, and Vernacular Modernism," in *Photography's Other Histories*, ed. Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 202–20; and Olu Oguibe, "Photography and the Substance of the Image," in *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 230–51.

9. Pinney, in "Notes from the Surface of the Image," argues that the "surfacing" of Keita's photography is uniquely Malian, although it can also be understood as characteristic of mid-twentieth-century modernist aesthetics, as a playful engagement with pictorial abstraction more generally.

10. *Ibid.*, 216.

11. Her most recent contribution is Krista A. Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Heike Behrend also argues that postcolonial portrait photography in Mombasa and Lamu represents a subversion of colonialist perspectivalism. For example, she interprets the ornamental collagelike designs of Bakor Studio portraits as an expression of Islamic aniconism and as "a sort of resistance, as an attempt to betray or trick the technical apparatus and subvert the inherent linear perspective." Behrend, *Contesting Visibility: Photographic Practices on the East African Coast* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript, 2013), 157.

12. Thompson, *Shine*, 20–24.

13. For discussions of photographs as objects that materialize memories and histories, see Elizabeth Edwards,

"Photographs as Objects of Memory," in *Material Memories*, ed. Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, and Jeremy Aynsley (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 221–36; idem, "Photographs and the Sound of History," *Visual Anthropology Review* 21, nos. 1–2 (2006): 27–46; and Christopher Wright, *The Echo of Things: The Lives of Photographs in the Solomon Islands* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

14. Deborah Poole's pioneering work has shown that the mobility of photography between Europe, North America, and Latin America constituted a transatlantic visual economy. Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). I expand on her emphasis on transoceanic connectivity, but I do not focus on the making of economies of vision and visibility. I attend to photography's material and aesthetic dimensions, suggesting that the photograph became instantly desirable on the Swahili coast because locals had long coveted objects linked to oceanic mobility. For the significance of "oceanic materiality" on the Swahili coast, see Prita Meier, *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

15. Heike Behrend has written pioneering studies of photography in coastal Kenya, already conducting research on the subject in the 1980s. She has explored themes of self-fashioning, framing photographs as techniques of the self. Behrend, "'Feeling Global': The Likoni Ferry Photographers of Mombasa, Kenya," *African Arts* 33, no. 3 (September 2000): 70–78; and idem, *Contesting Visibility*. Because coastal society is largely Muslim, she also sees local photography as constituted by the "aesthetics of refusal," which, according to her, makes the surface of the image act like a mask or veil. See for example Behrend, "Love à la Hollywood and Bombay in Kenyan Studio Photography," *Paideuma* 44 (1998): 139–53. Isolde Brielmaier has also done major work on studio portraiture in Mombasa, linking it to the production of collective identities. Brielmaier, "'Picture Taking' and the Production of Urban Identities on the Kenyan Coast, 1940–1980" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2003); and idem, "Mombasa on Display: Photography and the Formation of an Urban Public, from the 1940s Onward," in Peffer and Cameron, *Portraiture & Photography in Africa*, 253–86.

16. I am also responding to Geoffrey Batchen's call on scholars to move beyond an emphasis on the intentions and agency of photographers and their sitters and to instead begin imagining the "possibility of a history of reception of photographs." Batchen, "Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn," *Photographies* 1, no. 2 (September 2008): 127.

17. The British, who also later choreographed the separation between Oman and Zanzibar in the 1850s, supported the annexation of Zanzibar by the Busaidi dynasty of Oman. Another branch of the Busaidi family ruled Muscat and its Arabian Peninsula dominions, and the sultan of Zanzibar paid an annual subsidy to the sultan of Oman until the 1870s. A clear independence of the two empires was not recognized until the establishment of the British Protectorate in 1890.

18. Omanis and wealthy local landowners with access to British Raj banks emulated the slave plantation system of several French-owned islands in the Indian Ocean.

19. While the institutions of bondage and slavery had existed in the past, the unprecedented scale and dehumanizing cruelty of modern chattel slavery of the modern plantation system forever changed the social landscape of the region. For analyses of the history of slavery in eastern Africa, see Edward Alpers, *Ivory & Slaves in East Central Africa: Changing Patterns of International Trade to the Later Nineteenth Century* (London: Heinemann, 1975); and Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East African Coast* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

20. Heike Behrend was the first scholar to document South Asian photographers in eastern Africa. Behrend, "A Short History of Photography in Kenya," in *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* (Paris: Éditions Revue Noire, 1999), 160–65.

21. Allister Macmillan, *Eastern Africa and Rhodesia: Historical and Descriptive, Commercial and Industrial, Facts, Figures, and Resources* (London: W. H. and L. Collingridge, 1930), 314.

22. *Zanzibar Gazette*, February 22, 1893.

23. Gustav Meinecke, Fritz Bronsart von Schellendorff, and Moritz Schanz, *Aus dem Lande der Suaheli* (Berlin: Deutscher Kolonial-Verlag, 1900), 96.

24. Somerset Playne and Frank Holderness Gale, eds., *East Africa (British): Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: Foreign and Colonial Compiling and Publication Company, 1908), 419.

25. Judith Mara Gutman, *Through Indian Eyes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), xi–xii.

26. Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*, 102–38.

27. Photography's intermediality, or its ability to work in tandem with other media, has been observed by scholars since John Tagg's *Burden of Representation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); and Victor Burgin's *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

28. Scholars of the Middle East and South Asia have gone to great lengths to emphasize that although religious texts express concerns about the relation between image making and idolatry, figural representation has existed in many Muslim societies throughout history. Much "Islamic" art features pictured people, and many Muslims embraced photography shortly after it became popular in the 1830s in Europe and the Americas. See for example Mirjam Brusius, "Royal Photographs in Qajar Iran: Writing the History of Photography between Persian Miniature Painting and Western Technology," in *Photography, History, Difference*, ed. Tanya Sheehan (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2015), 57–83; Maria Golia, *Photography and Egypt* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010); Zahid R. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Carmen Pérez González, *Through the Lens of the 19th Century Iranian Photographers* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012); and Stephen Sheehi, *The Arab Image: A Social History of Portrait Photography, 1860–1910* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

29. For discussions of the haptic and corporeal qualities of photography, see Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Edwards and Hart,

*Photographs Objects Histories*; Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu, eds., *Feeling Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); and Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

30. For example, Sultan Barghash was critiqued for being photographed with women in England, but not for his embrace of photography as a medium of self-presentation. Arthur Henry Hardinge, *A Diplomatist in the East* (London: J. Cape, 1928), 85. Also, today the majority of Swahili coast residents are constantly using digital cameras and smartphones to pose for and share photographs. Photographic likeness only becomes problematic if a woman feels she has lost control over her picture. Opinions about what constitutes this loss vary greatly; for some it is shameful for both the subject and the spectator if an unrelated man sees a photograph of a woman in which her hair is not covered.

31. Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 95, 112.

32. See Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*; and Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*.

33. Dairy of Sibbie Basset, Gladys S. B. Beecher Family Papers, vol. 1, 1893, National Archives of Kenya, Nairobi.

34. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 37.

35. Ronald Barthes's celebrated book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), in which he presents his personal responses to a range of photographic portraits, is especially important to analyses of the "affective" dimensions of photography. See Brown and Phu, introduction to *Feeling Photography*, 1–25. Shawn Michelle Smith has argued that by focusing on his own responses, "Barthes obfuscates the presence of other historical subjects . . .," allowing him "to devalue those who have been, subsuming them under himself, under his own personal history. . . ." Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 27.

36. Alan Trachtenberg, "Likeness as Identity: Reflections on the Daguerrean Mystique," in *The Portrait in Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 190.

37. My interest in the significance of the formulaic and generic qualities of cartes de visite is inspired by Geoffrey Batches's "Dreams of Ordinary Life: Cartes-de-visite and the Bourgeois Imagination," in *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*, ed. J. J. Long, Andrea Noble, and Edward Welch (London: Routledge, 2009), 80–97. On the carte de visite as a standardized likeness, see Elizabeth Anne McCauley, *A. A. E. Disdéri and the Carte de Visite Portrait Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

38. Francis Barrow Pearce, *Zanzibar: The Island Metropolis of Eastern Africa* (London: T. F. Urwin, 1920), 265.

39. Sultan Barghash to Roger Price, file CWM/LMS/20/02/02, Roger Price Papers, Archives & Special Collections, Library, SOAS, University of London. My thanks to Basim Magdy for translating the Arabic text into English.

40. See Moritz Schanz, *Streifzüge durch Ost- und Süd-Afrika: Bilder aus Britisch-, Deutsch- und Portugiesisch-Ostafrika, Zanzibar, den Komoren, Madagaskar, Réunion, Mauritius, Natal, Transvaal, Oranjestaat, Rhodesia und Kapkolonie* (Berlin: Deutscher Kolonial-Verlag, 1900), 43; Hardinge, *A Diplomatist in the East*, 85; Richard Harding Davis, *The Congo and Coasts of Africa* (London: Urwin Fisher, 1908), 218; and Mary French Sheldon, *Adventures in East Africa, or, Sultan to Sultan: The Narrative of a Woman's Adventures among the Masai and Other Tribes of East Africa* (Boston: Dana Estes, 1892), 95.

41. My analysis of photographic likeness as a tool of diplomacy is prompted by Jeremy Prestholdt's landmark study of the "domestication" of English goods, manners, and practices on such Indian Ocean islands as Nzwani. He argues (*Domesticating the World*, 30) that the great demand for English things in the nineteenth century expressed a desire for similitude, ultimately revealing "the breadth of Nzwanian desires to command Englishness." I, too, see the use of photography as a form of strategic engagement, but my argument is that sincere similitude was not desired. Instead, it was about gaining a superficial visibility, to become recognizable in the eyes of others.

42. Anthropologists have long emphasized that popular studio photography is also about the expression of the sitter's fantasy and dreams. Pinney's work has been pioneering in this regard: he described the photography studio as "a chamber of dreams." See especially Pinney, *Camera Indica*, chap. 3. See also Karen Strassler, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Similarly, Heike Behrend presents Swahili coast studio photography as a "wish-fulfilling machine." See Behrend, "Fragmented Visions: Photo Collages by Two Ugandan Photographers," *Visual Anthropology* 14 (2001): 301–20; idem, "Photography as a Wish-Fulfilling Machine: Photo Studios on the East African Coast," in *World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts across the Indian Ocean*, ed. Prita Meier and Allyson Purpura (Champaign, IL: Krannert Art Museum, forthcoming); and idem, "'I Am Like a Movie Star in My Street': Photographic Self-Creation in Postcolonial Kenya," in *Postcolonial Subjectivities in Africa*, ed. Richard P. Werbner (London: Zed Books, 2002), 44–62.

43. Pinney (*Camera Indica*, 201) has observed that vernacular photography in postcolonial Nagda was "prized for its ability to record idealized staged events characterized by a theatrical preparedness and symmetry."

44. See Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

45. Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), 45–54, 81–82.

46. When the first Busaidi sultan moved his capital to Zanzibar in the 1830s, the institution of plantation slavery was introduced to the region to produce cash crops, such as cloves, for export to Europe.

47. Kerstin Pinther and Tobias Wendl have focused on the communicative power of textiles in photography in western Africa. Pinther, "'Wenn die Ehe eine Erdnuß Wäre': Über Textilien und Fotografie in Afrika," in Behrend and Wendl, *Snap Me One!*, 36–41; idem, "On the Parallel History of Cloth and Photography in Africa," *Critical*

*Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture* 1, no. 1 (2007): 113–23; and Wendl, "Entangled Traditions: Photography and the History of Media in Southern Ghana," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 39 (2001): 78–101. Wendl (87) presents textiles and photographs as intertwined technologies of self: "Photographs resemble persons, but are not identical with them.

Textiles, on the other hand, do not resemble persons, but—by absorbing and storing their bodily traces—they are, at least partially, identical with them." See also Heike Behrend, "'The Terror of the Feast': Photography, Textiles and Memory in Weddings along the East African Coast," in Vokes, *Photography in Africa*, 229–40.

48. Pedro Machado, *Ocean of Trade: South Asian Merchants, Africa and the Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

49. For an analysis of Swahili practices of gifting and feasting, see Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*.

50. Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*, 118–23.

51. Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*, 130.

52. Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*, 122.

53. Wendl ("Entangled Traditions," 87) made a related observation about the role of dress in photographic portraits in postcolonial Ghana: "while clothing remains a temporary act, photography provides a perfect means to make clothes endure."

54. In this point I am inspired by Chaudhary's critique of the limits of postcolonial theory for understanding the meanings of photography—even colonialist photography—in non-Western contexts. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire*, 9, 27–32.



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