

**Monograph No-81**

**ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES OF  
PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE AND THE  
AESTHETICS OF DISINTEREST**

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CMDR Monograph Series No. 81

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First Published : May - 2016

## ***“Anthropological Studies of Photographic Practice and the Aesthetics of Disinterest”***

This paper examines the distance and disjuncture that often emerges in cultural anthropology between what people say and how anthropologists interpret what they say. The focus of this paper is the anthropological study of African photography—specifically, photographs of African people taken by Europeans and Africans. A typical academic approach has been to consider the political nature of these images. During my own fieldwork in the Gambia, West Africa, political understandings of photography never arose during my interviews with studio photographers and their clients. Instead their understandings were always framed in terms of beauty and aesthetics. My challenge, as an anthropologist, was to understand how to interpret my data in ways that were actually grounded in the terms that my interviewees themselves used. The challenge, in other words, was to believe that my interviewees meant what they said—that photography was important because it was concerned with beauty.

Anthropology has not treated the study of aesthetics or beauty as a serious topic. Data related to beauty or aesthetics are usually treated as discursive texts that can be decoded for their “real” and meaningful content—that is, these data are understood as something other than themselves. In the act of interpretation data related to beauty become data related to some powerful hermeneutic frame—postcolonial national identity, for example. I found that this raised some ethical issues. My interviewees never actually talked about politics; they only spoke of beauty. Why couldn’t I, an anthropologist, take them seriously? Was every aspect of African culture to be analyzed as a political response to either colonialism or nation-building?

African photography has been the subject of academic writing and museum exhibits in the USA and Europe for the last thirty years. As I was preparing this paper, I was

reminded of the recent popularization and politicization of African photography in mainstream Western consciousness by an article on the portrait photography of the West African photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibe in the magazine supplement of the *New York Times* (June 24 2015). Even in this short article in a magazine supplement to a daily newspaper, the idea that there is something inherently political about African photography is present:

“These photographs are ripostes to the anthropological images of “natives” made by Europeans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Those photographs, in which the subjects had no say in how they were seen, did much to shape the Western world’s idea of Africans. Something changed when Africans began to take photographs of one another. There seems to me a correspondence between the energy of these pictures and the optimism and determination of the West African independence movements of the ’50s and ’60s.” (Cole 2015)

The legitimacy of African photography as an object of critical inquiry has often depended on its capacity to store, retrieve and reveal evidence for a political consciousness existing in those producing and appearing in the images. This definition has excluded what is perhaps most immediate and obvious about photography— its status as a highly-engaging, aesthetic presence. Canonical works in anthropological theory and Africanist anthropology tend to exclude the aesthetic experience of photography from serious consideration. In contrast, portraiture in the Gambia presents a compelling case-study of an African photography that is resolutely attentive to the primacy of aesthetics. This photography’s disinterest in political experience is not an indifference towards politics. Instead, disinterested photography provides an occasion to present, theorize and envisage social life in ways that are often impartial to colonial inheritances such as the political structures that dominate rational life.

### **Photography in Africa and in the Gambia--A Brief Background.**

Christopher Pinney has noted that photography has no “xeno-trace” (Pinney 1997:112)—meaning that photography was never a stranger or outsider, and was instead immediately at home wherever it emerged in the world. The first photograph was taken in 1839 in France by Louis Daguerre. By the early 1840s daguerrotypists were practicing photography in African sea ports connecting West Africa with Europe. By the mid-1840s the first studios appeared in these locales. By 1861 there were 40 studios in South Africa, run by both Europeans and Africans. In the 1870s studios were flourishing in East Africa, often operated by photographers originally from India (Eze 2007).

Up until the 1940s in the Gambia, most photographic portraits were produced by itinerant photographers migrating along the west coast from Ghana and Sierra Leone. By the mid-1940s Gambians themselves were photographing each other at both public and private events—at school events, dances, weddings and baptisms, for example. These photographers were self-trained, learning their craft by studying camera manuals and books on darkroom developing techniques that were available in the British Institute Library. During this period, these same photographers were hired by the Public Relations Office to produce local photographic imagery for the Gambian Colonial Government (Buckley 2010). Locally-run studios arrived relatively late in the Gambia because local photographers initially had full-time and secure jobs as colonial civil servants, and no need to branch out and work independently. The history of locally-run studios in the Gambia emerges around the time of Independence in 1965.

At Independence, the new government recruited local photographers to travel around the country photographing Gambians for the first census. The earnings from the government contracts helped to fund the first Gambian studios. The studio names of the early days of Independence reflected the dynamic that related portraiture to an experience of living through social change. This experience of change was centered not so much on the emergence of a political consciousness, but on a consciousness of

people's beauty and elegance. Even though photographers received government contract work, they actively avoided affiliation with any particular political party—thereby guaranteeing that they would receive work from both the politicians in office and those in the opposition. In Bathurst, the capital city, Ousman Njie opened “Tarru,” meaning, “to make beautiful,” and Malick Secka opened “Ifange,” a Mandinka term meaning “to look at oneself.” By 1969 Peter Kwesi Adjei had opened “Afro Beauty.” Portraiture and Independence came together in the practice of making society look beautiful and encouraging acts of maintaining well-groomed appearances.

In the late 1970s Mansong Dambele won a series of lucrative government registration contracts. During the 1980s, Mansong played a key role in the establishment of the country's photo lab system in collaboration with a group of Korean investors. By the early 1990s, photographers in the Gambia no longer developed or made prints from their own film. Photo labs increased in number. Photographers closed down their darkrooms and entered into client-relationships with the labs, which began to fund studio maintenance and decoration. With no darkroom to maintain, actual studio spaces grew in size and became increasingly elaborate (Buckley 2006).

### **Theorizing Photography**

Studies in African photographic culture have tended to focus on the colonial period and images produced by Europeans. This approach makes sense given the academic context in which these studies emerged. As the academy uncovered the ideologies that directed the West's construction of the “idea of Africa” (Mudimbe 1988, 1994), images of Africa become privileged objects for the study of colonial discursive practices and the ways that images expressed the racist ideologies of imperialism. Indeed, Malek Alloua has described photography as “fertilizer of colonial vision [producing] stereotypes in the manner of great seabirds producing guano” (cited in Pinney and Peterson 2003:3).

Photographs of colonial life—often distributed in the form of postcards, images in print media, magazines, and educational slide lectures--celebrated the “progress” brought by European governments and missionaries (see Alloula 1986, Geary 2003:17-55, Killingray and Roberts 1989:200-201, Monti 1987, Ryan 1997). According to this hermeneutic, photography acted as an inherently Western technology that was complicit with the colonial agenda. Anthropometric images of “natives” stripped naked for measurement in front of a grid are perhaps the most obvious examples of the capacity of imperialist photography to grasp and violate its subject matter (see Spencer 1997).

Recent archival work has complicated the presumption of any stable affinity between photography and colonialism. For example, colonial officials were mostly ambivalent about the meaning, ethics and practical use of anthropometric photographs.

As part of the material and political inventory of colonial life, photographs demonstrate the ambiguities and tensions rather than the integrity of imperial culture in Africa (see Cooper and Stoler 1989, 1997, Gable 1998, Gordon 1997).

To appear in a photograph did not necessarily imply the status of “colonial victim.” Instead, being able to stand in front of a European photographer and be photographed gave colonized people an opportunity to directly engage and critique their occupation (Geary 1988:47-61, 2003:81-123; Prins 1992:221). Styles of clothing and posture frequently depicted their powerful and defiant presence. These photographs of Africans show a colonial culture in which the colonizer and the colonized are not divided into homogenous units. Instead, they present visual records of cross-cultural encounters subject to the social tensions and ambiguities of colonial communities (see Stoler 1992:319-323).

The idea that African photography is to be understood as an essentially political practice continues—with a special concern for the politics of identity and representation. Since the 1990’s, scholars have examined colonial-era photographs taken *by* Africans

themselves. In one of these branches of research, archival studies have demonstrated that these ambiguities and tensions are consistent features of colonial photography. Photographs taken by Africans of Africans do not testify to any stable or essentialized “native point of view.” “African” photographers were not necessarily perceptive of that which eluded European photographers (Geary 1998:174). The other branch of research considers contemporary, postcolonial depictions, including international gallery exhibitions of the work of West African photographers. The photographs of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibe from Mali are the most publicized (Lamuniere 2001). This approach explores the relationship between African photography and the politics of decolonization and Independence.

### **Anthropology of Aesthetics**

Anthropological studies of photography have been mainly concerned with how photographs define and uphold political values and identities. They do not address the more immediate question of “Why photographs?” Nor does they understand the efficacy of photographs and their innate capacity to transform situations and people. In other words, they presents a functionalist approach that overlooks the critical issues of the actual visuality and aesthetic impact of photography.

Aesthetics—the study of the ways that people evaluate the presence of beauty in their lives—poses a mystery and a challenge to much anthropology. Discussing aesthetic analysis in his essay “Art as a Cultural System,” Clifford Geertz writes:

“It not only is hard to talk about it; it seems unnecessary to do so. It speaks, as we say, for itself: a poem must not mean but be; if you have to ask what jazz is you are never going to know... [Aesthetics] materialize a way of experiencing, bring a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects, where men can look at it.” (Geertz 1983:94, 99).



For Geertz, the challenge of aesthetic objects is that they are “difficult to talk about,” and that they appear “to float, opaque and hermetic, outside the general course of social life.” (ibid 96).

Aesthetics thus appear to be unconcerned with the “texture” and practicalities of life.

### **Studies in African Aesthetics**

African material culture studies have been particularly wary of any discussion of aesthetics. Part of this avoidance has been based on the view that aesthetics is a subject best left to the world of museums, galleries, exhibits, connoisseurs, art dealers and collectors. Aesthetic discussion is often considered elitist and guilty of imposing a universalist concept of pleasure, taste and beauty. Furthermore, preoccupation with the thing-in-itself is thought to be divorced from any social or cultural context--and therefore from the research concerns of anthropology (see Arnoldi and Hardin 1996:4-8).

Perhaps the most powerful deterrent to an ethnography of African aesthetics is the postcolonial burden carried by Africanist scholarship to self-consciously acknowledge and redeem its privileged relationship with colonial and neo-colonial cultures (Falk Moore 1994:74-87). For scholars of postcolonial Africa, attention to the beauty of an object seems sorely oblivious to the need to speak about “more important” contextual matters related to socio-political and historical issues. As a result, Africanist anthropologists publish illustrations and photographs of visually compelling objects accompanied by functionalist explanations, but utterly silent about the images’ aesthetic qualities.

Outside of anthropology, in the field of art studies, scholars do speak at length and with insight about African aesthetics. They engage and resolve the fears held by the rest of the humanities and social sciences about the danger of dwelling too long on beauty.

First, these scholars embrace local aesthetics, eschewing notions of global fine-taste and the sovereignty of Western connoisseurship. Second, this scholarship focuses on the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, the formal and the moral, beauty and goodness. It thereby moves aesthetics beyond the realm of elite taste and pleasure. Finally, this approach examines the impact and efficacy of aesthetic objects themselves as opposed to art's function as a tool of political agenda (Van Damme 1987:9-19). Examples of the attention given to aesthetic detail and effect include the African ethno-aesthetics of Yoruba art, Fang carving and Mende feminine beauty (Thompson 1973, Fernandez 1973, Boone 1986). This type of ethnography shows how beauty engages the world, how it makes moral systems visible and tangible, and how people expect beauty to offer life goodness and order.

There are some examples of Africanist anthropologists who have incorporated aesthetics into their methods of analysis in a clear and manifest way. Kris Hardin, for example, in her work on the Kono of Sierra Leone, shows how aesthetics generate a wide variety of social activities including dance, farming, and cloth design and production. She also discusses the subsequent rights and obligations borne by the human subjects who participate in these realms of conviviality (Hardin 1993). The anthropology of aesthetics shows how people imagine an ideal world that sustains life and keeps harm and death at bay. It asks very appropriate, relevant and engaged questions for today—questions especially pertinent for people living in recently formed postcolonial nations.

However, it is important to discern how exactly the aesthetic is actually relevant to an understanding of the range of human life. What makes aesthetic data legitimate evidence for socio-political analysis? As a rule, these data act only as visual citations of that which is already known. Kris Hardin notes, “until very recently the arts have been seen only as a reflection or mirror of culture, something that occurs after the fact. Researchers have tended to ask questions about what an object means, symbolizes, or

represents, tying the object to what is already known about the culture itself” (Hardin 1993: 9-10). Is it possible to conceptualize a relationship between aesthetics and politics which does not view aesthetic detail as contingent? In what ways might aesthetic “frills” actually construct rather than simply illustrate the very basis for cultural life and social action? (see Hardin 1993:282-283)

### **Daily Aesthetics**

Portraiture belongs with a sphere of social life devoted to adornment and the presentation of the self. This practice involves not only the taking of photographs but also the grooming and dressing of the body, the tailoring of clothes, and the styling of hair (Buckley 2000). Portraiture has afforded a somatic and kinaesthetic knowledge of the world based not on an intellectual and rational knowing but on experiencing the materiality of the beautified body. This way of seeing and knowing the world allows for the possibility of a civicsbased and dependent on aesthetic appreciation. I suggest that rather than being something superficial, concern for a well-groomed appearance is critical to the conviviality and dignity of Gambian social life. Portraits exemplify comportment and substantiate a moral system of visual reciprocity that guides the way people respectively regard each other, and present themselves to be looked upon by others. Refusal to enter this field of vision leads to the withering of sociality.

### **Sansé—Dressing Well**

*lekkal lu la neex, waaye solal lu neex nit ña*(Wolof)--Eat what you want but dress according to what people (society) want *Bët bu rusul tuuru*(Wolof)--An eye that isn't sensitive to decency or modesty explodes Having one's portrait snapped takes a fraction of the time that a person devotes to the other stages of adornment. For example, a visit to the hair salon can take most of a day for a woman. During the festival season, a man, hoping to finally walk away with his new clothes, will often have to make repeat visits to the tailor who will have fallen behind with a workload that had gotten too heavy. Suitably adorned, persons step out of the domestic space of their compounds and into

the public realm of the street. If they are going to a nightclub, it will be late in the evening. Along the roads, and clustered around transit points, the lights of the photo studio will merge in the stream of lights of the taxis and mini-vans. Before catching a ride, the dressed person will enter the studio.

If it is the daytime, the studio will be closed, and people seen dressed-up and walking along the street will be on their way to a marriage, a naming ceremony, a *kompin* association meeting. Upon arriving at the host's compound, the guests will often encounter a photographer offering to take portraits. They will pose individually or with groups of friends. In both cases, having one's photograph taken marks the final stage in dressing-up—the portrait completes the person's appearance. It allows the subject to see if his or her appearance "fits" (*japana*), to see if that new outfit or hair style truly looks good.

As the Wolof proverbs at the opening of this section suggest, maintaining an appearance is as much about the idea of looks and looking, as it is about the practice of following rules and observances. In Wolof, the term *sansé* describes the act of making a grand appearance—of dressing up and dressing well. On a couple of occasions at the beginning of my fieldwork, my hosts sent me back into my house to dress properly before they would agree to take me to some public gathering, "Liam, why don't you wear that shirt you bought in Banjul?" or "Liam, are you going to comb your hair?" After all, I was a representative of the compound—if I was to be seen in public as such, I should look good. *Sansé*, then, is not a lone activity—one participates in dressing well with others. People, adults and children, from the same church or mosque, youth group or compound, will often dress in clothes cut from the same cloth.

In the evening, at dusk, when the light is kinder to color, ranks of *sansé* people move like schools of tropical fish. *Sansé* requires that a person first changes out of the clothes worn while working (*mbubi ligeeykaye*) or the clothes worn inside the walls of the

compound(*mbubi keur*). After attending to one's toilet (bathing, oiling, and the adding of perfume or cologne), a person steps into *yeeri rafet*—one's best clothes. *Sansé* also requires the putting on of cosmetics and jewelry, (*defar*), the dressing of hair, (*léttu*), and the staining of skin with henna (*fuudan*).

In Western discourses of adornment, the act of dressing-up reveals desires and anxieties for a sense of personhood based on a possessive individuality(see Warwick and Cavallaro 1998). In contrast, *sansé* is a procedure for socializing the surface of the body, of giving the person an appearance that *distributes* the person (see Turner 1978). *Sansé* is extravagant and excessive--dressing well can often swallow up a meager budget. This extravagance is not directed at individuating what would be an original-looking person. Such a look would likely draw suspicion. Rather than evoking a vision of the inherent splendor of the individual, *sansé*-extravagance *dignifies* the person according to the *à priori* privilege of the collective. This is why, as Deborah Heath has documented, the dress of *sansé* is capable of symbolizing the functioning of a discourse and “articulating” a variety of social relations between people (Heath 1992).

Dignity is not inherent--it exists on the surface of the person, like a hovering radiance. It is an interface that marks the impact of the gaze and estimation of those around who look on. It is shared not owned. Indeed, the dignity of one person can hover around the body of another. A person's good looks and fine clothes can display another person's generosity (*jottali*), and honor the house of a generous host (*teranga*).

### **Aesthetic Observations**

People's appearances are subject to aesthetic evaluation on a daily, minute by minute basis. In the Gambia, portrait photography belongs to that realm of life devoted to maintaining morally good appearances. Photography is a form of adornment that contributes to what Geertz called a person's “sentimental education”—to the shaping and structuring of a person's senses and disposition.

The importance of appearance has remained resilient—even in the face of efforts to “rationalize” and westernize Gambian society. In the late 1950s anthropologist David Ames studied the modernization of pre-colonial systems of economic exchange and the transition from cloth-based to cash-based economy. Post-war development schemes, such as those focused on ground nut farming, were intended to establish and increase the circulation of cash in Gambian life. However, this money was quickly converted back into cloth. As Ames reported, Wolof people were spending 40% of their income from groundnut farming on clothing (Ames 1962:51).

Observing appearance provides people with a lightning-fast way of evaluating the well-being of life that requires no professional training or accreditation. For example, in the early 1980s the Gambia experienced several of the structural contradictions faced by former colonies. The Gambian government took loans from Western donors and commercial banks, marketing the country as the “Switzerland of Africa”—a peaceful place worthy of investment. The 1981 coup that left hundreds dead and the presence of the Senegalese army on alert across the border did not stop the flow of loan money. By 1985, the Gambia owed the equivalent of 114 % of its gross annual domestic product (Wright 1997: 219-25). In people’s memories and in the urban folk-lore of this period, there are stories of the figures of conspicuously and overly well-dressed women distributing cash in different currencies from large shopping bags. They funded extravagant festivities. These women were immediately recognizable signs of the times—that things were really too good to be true.

There was a second coup d’etat in 1994. Between 1994 and 1996, the Western nations, that had previously been the donors who fueled The Gambia’s dependence on foreign loans during the 1980s, imposed sanctions blocking the flow of capital into the country. Portrait photographers and their clients immediately felt the effects, as the number of festive occasions when people usually enjoyed being photographed dropped

dramatically. The sanctions immediately blocked the import of hair extensions and cosmetics, and women in the city began to cut back on their daily beauty regimens and routines. The public eye, ever vigilant for the presence and possibility of beauty in society, clearly and immediately saw the visible truth of the sanctions: a postcoloniality that was drab, plain and inelegant.

Aesthetic practices, including photography, are indeed disinterested in social life—but not for the reasons that anthropology has generally dismissed the study of aesthetics. To be disinterested is not to be unconcerned social life (see Maquet 1986:33). Aesthetics are in fact very concerned with society and its well-being. Indeed, to be aesthetically disinterested is to be impartial while evaluating social life. In the case of the Gambia, the aesthetics of disinterest are radically postcolonial in that they are impartial to the political abstractions inherited as part of the colonial legacy—that is, the mystifying abstractions of development, modernity, governance, and state authority.

### **Conclusion**

Colonial authorities may have been worried by the idea of their African subjects using cameras for subversive ends (Monti 1987:8). However, once in business, African photographers produced studio work that had little to do with the politics of anti-colonialism (Enwezor and Zaya 1996:30). While photographers played a key role in recording Africans' experience of living through the end of colonialism, the practice of portrait photography was not political. Studio photography is typical of that aspect of African popular culture that is not obviously nationalistic and that is not concerned with neocolonialism (Appiah 1992:149.)

The studio photography of Independence in the Gambia is resolutely a-political. It is preoccupied with fashion and style. Photography does not concern itself with some of the questions that have so preoccupied African nationalists and postcolonial theorists. Studio photography seems almost banal or lacking in sophistication. It appears to have

nothing ‘serious’ to say about the economics or politics of postcolonial life. Yet the photographs are visually compelling and demand attention. Studio photography resembles the fashion concerns of Brazzaville *sapeurs* for French name-brand haute-couture clothing during the economic and political instability of the 1970s and 1980s (Friedman 1992).<sup>1</sup>Portraiture is devoted the realms of the aesthetic in a way that is disdainful of politics. Photography shows that beauty is not contingent – it is sovereign in terms of epistemological, phenomenological and existential life. Photography thus presents aesthetic data that could be considered to be “primary documents; not illustrations of conceptions already in force, but conceptions themselves that seek—or for which people seek—a meaningful place in a repertoire of other documents, equally primary” (Geertz 1983:99-100).

Rather than dismissing a preoccupation with beauty as the effect of some ideological mystification or as a discourse for something other than itself, African photography takes the aesthetic seriously and on its own terms. Studio photography gives expression to a predominant aspect of a postcolonial imagination that is not allied to any particular politics. Beauty attends to that part of a person engaged with the immediacy of experience.

At a fundamental level, photography and postcolonialism are ways of fashioning the world. A set of aesthetic social practices and rituals, iterated on a daily basis, substantiate the relationship between photography and postcolonialism. This postcolonial aesthetic governs over ways of living based on harmony, conviviality, transcendence and the practical wisdom of everyday life (see Lambek 2002, Nyamnjoh 2002). Its photography materializes and makes visible the power of beauty to give order to the world, and to transform what it means to be free and to know truth (Buckley 2013).

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<sup>1</sup>*Sapeurs* are members of an association known as SAPE (Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes)



This conviviality provides a model for sustaining life based on the bonds of friendship, the everyday rites such as dressing and adorning the body, even decorating the home, and the observances of conduct that govern people's regard for each and help to defuse the dangers of envy and jealousy. This model knows not only how to beautify the person, but also how to protect the beautiful person from danger and malevolence. Hence the words *law la chat* that are written on the walls of many Gambian photography studios – “May God protect you from gossip and the evil eye [malevolence].”

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