

Photography as a Learning Tool in the Field of Technology and Material Culture in African History

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After its invention in the 1830s, photography became a key agent of social spatialisation and for the construction of narratives. Photography is a subjective practice, but as a product of science and technology, it was considered an objective gadget that depicted reality objectively, and therefore it became an instrument to produce ideology. In the colonial context, it became a tool of empire, as important as railways or the telegraph (Ryan 1997). Imperial photography was used to create landscapes of modernity (and its reflection, landscapes of backwardness), to survey the territory and to control the population. Throughout the decades, thousands of images were taken, developed, and circulated in albums or in the press, within a visual economy that served the imperial agenda. Once a tool of empire, these images can now be used as a source for the study of African history, and as an instrument to deconstruct European colonialism and decolonise historical accounts of Western imperial past, thanks to its visual impact and materiality – I underscore here how photographs are not only images but also material objects with physical attributes that influence how the visual information is transmitted and understood. (Edwards and Hart 2004). In this sense, photography can help to see beyond the colonial apparatus, hear the voices of the colonised, uncover the hidden histories of colonialism, and therefore shed light on unlit areas of African history, especially in the fields of history of technology and material culture (Stoler and Cooper 1997). In this paper, I offer a practical exercise of this approach with images from the context of the former Portuguese empire, and I illustrate how photography is an invaluable asset to study, investigate and teach history of technology and material culture, especially when we consider that thousands of images are currently available online in varied archives.

References:

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