
OUT OF AFRICA

Images of women in anthropology and popular culture*

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ABSTRACT

The article explores images of sub-Saharan African women. These images can be seen as the sign of the times and markers of the colonial expansion, as well as powerful signs of the colonizers' own insecurities and feelings of lack (especially when it comes to sexuality). Through these representations, one can see how perceptions are also changing – more recently, into the images where women are increasingly depicted as independent, outspoken, and strong. While these images are still competing with the more antiquated ones, the new iconography will undoubtedly influence generations of young women (as well as men) that are increasingly questioning the old stereotypes.

Key words: women in Africa, representations of women, image of the other, anthropology of gender

IZVLEČEK

Članek raziskuje podobe podsaharskih afriških žensk. Na te podobe lahko gledamo kot na znamenja časa in označevalce razširjenosti kolonialne prevlade ali kot na močna znamenja negotovosti samih kolonizatorjev in njihovih občutkov prikrajšanosti (zlasti glede spolnosti). Skozi te predstavitve lahko ugotovimo, da se pogledi spreminjajo – v novejšem času v podobe, v katerih so ženske vse bolj pogosto upodobljene kot neodvisne, odkrite in močne osebnosti. Čeprav te podobe še vedno tekmujejo z bolj zastarelimi, bo nova ikonografija nedvomno vplivala na generacije mladih žensk (in moških), ki vse bolj dvomijo v stare stereotipne predstave.

Ključne besede: ženske v Afriki, predstavitve žensk, podoba drugega, antropologija spola

Introduction

Looking blandly at the camera, the woman is standing right next to her husband, and they are both (as the natives should be) naked from the waist up. The caption under the photograph is truly informative: “These people are of dark bronze hue, and

* Most of the research for this paper was conducted while I was a Visiting Researcher (Post-doctoral Research Fellow) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

have good athletic figure. They possess some excellent traits, but are horribly cruel when once they have smelled blood.” This description of a “Zulu Bride and Bridegroom” is from the 1898 *National Geographic Magazine*, and its historical value lies in (among other things – like being a good example of racist, colonial view of the “other”) that it is an inauguration of a certain way of representing “native” women or “women of color.” This is the first photograph of the bare-breasted “native” woman in history.

178 Almost a century later, in 1999, the South African Landrover commissioned (and subsequently aired in 2000) the advertisement featuring their product (a Landrover) speeding through the semi-desert, actually speeding so fast that its speed caused the breasts of a Himba woman¹ standing by to sway (and extend quite a bit) in the direction in which the vehicle sped away.

These two examples show that little has changed in a century since the images of naked or semi-naked “women of color” became part of global popular culture. Of course, I should note that recently (2001), the Landrover apologized and agreed to produce and pay for the advertisements retracting the previous one. No sign of apology from the *National Geographic*, though, which proudly displayed the aforementioned photograph both in their Atlas and in the video commemorating 100 years anniversary of the *National Geographic Society*.

Throughout the recent history, the “Africa” has served as a metaphor for the exotic, different, mysterious other. Within this metaphor, there was another one – African women were even more exotic and even more mysterious, so they tended to signify the ultimate alterity. In this paper, I will briefly present some of the dealing with the “scientific” and “cultural” representations of African women. Starting with the exotic in literature and in anthropology, I will proceed towards a more recent imagery – which tends to be more in tune with some global trends and favor less “traditional” images of women in Africa. For practical reasons (staying in South Africa, I have more access to sources from certain parts of the continent), I will concentrate on the sub-Saharan Africa, although I believe that aspects that I will be discussing here can easily be applied to the representations of North African (Arab, Berber, Tuareg, etc.) women as well.

Sex and the other

One way of looking at these representations is to conclude that it is basically all about sex. Even a cursory glance at the scientific survey-type literature of the late 19th and early 20th century shows that when demonstrating specific “racial types”, the authors were much more interested in depicting naked women than men. Among the more prominent examples is C. H. Stratz’s *Die Rasseschönheit des Weibes* (“Racial Beauty of the Woman”), published in 22 editions between 1901 and 1941 (Corbey

¹ The Himbas are semi-nomads who live in the northern part of Namibia.

1988: 91n). As the Western colonialism expanded into Africa in the 19th century (the Berlin conference of 1884 drew the boundaries between the colonial powers), the clash of cultures and clash of values was especially sharp in the area of personal relations. For the (sexually) repressed and inhibited Europeans, the image of bare-breasted African women was both the stimulus and the temptation. The “African culture” appeared to the newcomers as very relaxed when it comes to expressions of sexuality, so the “natives” were perceived accordingly. On the one hand, the imagined sexuality of African men was perceived as dangerous and threatening – coming from the (perceived) promiscuous cultural background, they were imagined to be totally superior to the white men (myth of the black lover with huge penis). As such, they were supposed to be controlled and (most importantly) kept away from the white women. When the colonized women were concerned, the image was the same, but as white men were the conquerors, they were perceived as “easy” and “willing” – and the whole imagery in the first half of the 20th century was constructed accordingly.

Corbey has analyzed this imagery using examples from the French colonial postcards from the first three decades of the last century. “Oh, but they are very sweet, the little black girls, and not shy at all!” is just one of the captions that accompany these postcards (Corbey 1988: 76). Others display women and girls in positions of being dominated, dehumanized, or simply depicted in a way that was interesting for the colonial photographers. For example, a postcard with “Hair-do of Boubou woman” has little to do with the hair-do, but a lot with the depiction of breasts that the photographer obviously found most interesting (Corbey 1988: 86). I found the degree to which the women and girls depicted in these pictures were animalized and eroticized in an “exotic” fashion almost incomprehensible (and so did Corbey). But it shows very well and very clearly one way of dealing with images of bodies. While representation of the naked body is strongly discouraged in Western contemporary culture, the “natives,” being symbolically desexualized and deeroticized (by the very fact that they were and are the objects of study) can be depicted nude. Their sexuality is abstracted, hidden, or disguised – depending on the researcher’s interests. A friend of mine some years ago suggested to me that the *National Geographic Magazine* actually serves as substitute for *Playboy* in her country (USA), since “little boys can look at the tits of native women.”

Referring to her performance/installation piece for the 1993 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, performance artist Coco Fusco said: “We wanted to connect pornographically inflected voyeurism with ethnography – the voyeurism involved in turning us into ethnographic objects on display. Looking at naked women of color in National Geographic constitutes the first pornographic experience for a lot of American boys” (Lavin 1994: 82). Bloom (1993) also provides numerous examples of the way that the decisions were made on what to represent and what to omit in the early years of the *National Geographic Magazine*. As the influence of this journal to the shaping of the American culture of travel and exploration is well documented, one could only wonder about the implications of this stereotyping present today.

Signs and images

Represented in this way (as a sexual, depersonalized object), a woman becomes a sign – sign of the insecurity that the dominating men have faced with the other as well as with their internal inconsistencies and neuroses. It is interesting to note that there are cases where representations of women (any representations) are simply lacking – one could put as an example most of the history of anthropology until the 1970s. Another striking example was provided by Solomon (1995), when she pointed out that many paintings depicting women or dealing with scenes from the lives of women were simply ignored by the researchers of San (“Bushman”) rock art.

180 Individual women have served as powerful images (like recently Winnie Mandela in South Africa – cf. Lewis 1996²), but in many cases the images of powerful women served more like exceptions that should enforce powerful stereotypes. To quote from a leading historian of African women:

“The image that African men have of them – and African men, like men throughout the world, love to watch women – has been the more distorted for having been perverted by others, particularly but not exclusively Western observers. All these observers have been men, for it is men who have traveled to Africa from earliest times. Thus, even more than that of women in general, the image of African women is stereotyped: from the fertile and nurturing Earth Mother to the lazy, debauched young beauty.”

(Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997: 1)

Not surprisingly, most of these stereotypes are reinforced by women themselves (especially by the ones in positions of power), and this is one area where I feel that the women in education (especially in the university-level education in Africa) should play a prominent role. So far, they have refused to do so, opting instead for the images of “woman the nurturer” type. There is too much talk about women and femininity in the antiquated, 1960s-derived model of “gender and development” and much less about the actual issues related to identity, culture, sexuality and other aspects that women have to deal with on a daily basis. This imagery then filters back into the popular culture, sometimes along the slightly racialized lines. For example, in the recent advertisements for the Best Comfort mattresses on the SABC,³ a white woman is showed as a seductress, while a black woman’s primary (and it seems only) concern is that her baby gets to sleep.

As advertising is in most cases the reflection of the predominant views within a culture, this image is quite important. It projects not only how things are, but also how they should be.

² Although I should add that the image and the standing of Mrs. Madikizela-Mandela is today much higher than when Lewis wrote her article.

³ South African Broadcasting Corporation.

Concluding remarks: the African beauty myth

In many cases, it simply depends on who is looking and who is doing the interpretation. Anim (1997) has pointed to the cultural aspects he believes are neglected when refereeing to the beauty of African women. Ansariyah-Grace (1995) refers again to the stereotypes of what the beauty is from her own experience, while Khan (1996) describes examples of African women actually disfiguring themselves (lightening the color of their skin) in order to be regarded as “beautiful.” While all these studies point to the colonial legacy and stereotypes (“white” as beautiful, “black” as ugly), an important aspect that they lack is understanding of how it is that women themselves construct certain images and how then feel bounded by them. In a study conducted during 2000 in England, it turned out that the great majority of interviewed women (70 per cent) were unhappy with how they look. On the other hand, in the same study, it turned out that their primary concern was *how did they look to other women* – not to men! This is an important aspect of self-representation that has so far been completely neglected in studies referring to African women. 181

But there is much more in the images of beauty and the subsequent instrumentalization of them. Barnard (2000) shows how the Miss South Africa pageants since 1991 were in the function of nation-building, noting that all the beauties since 1993, while ethnically quite diverse (as one would expect from the country like South Africa) actually conformed to the global (standardized) images of beauty (Barnard 2000: 357). What became most important was what are the ideals of beauty dictated from “the world,” from outside. As these ideals change (although quite frequently conforming to the images of the supermodels gracing catwalks during glamorous fashion shows), so do the ideals of beauty. In the 18th century, Edmund Burke remarked in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* that

“The sable Africans view with pity and contempt the marked deformity of the Europeans, whose mouths are compressed, their noses pinched, their cheeks shrunk, their hair rendered lank and flimsy, their bodies lengthened and emaciated, and their skin unnaturally bleached by shade and seclusion, and the baneful influence of a cold humid climate... Who shall decide which party is right, or which is wrong; whether the black or white model be, according to the laws of nature, the most perfect specimen of a woman?”

(quoted in Barnard 2000: 344)

The standards of beauty do change, and so do standards of representing African women. More recently, especially in the popular culture in South Africa and elsewhere⁴, women tend to be increasingly depicted as independent, energetic, and self-sufficient, as well as young and beautiful. One could find examples for this in contemporary imagery of South African kwaito artists (or ex-kwaito, like Lebo), as well in the whole iconography for the black urban youth designed by the very hip *Y Magazine*. In this

⁴ “Ironically, Western canons of beauty hit South Africa the hardest” (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997: 229).

imagery, women (as well as men) are also presented as role models, instruments of possible influence on the generations of up and coming youngsters, speaking out against drugs and urban violence. Although these new images are still not the norm, their presence is growingly present – especially in the media in Western Europe and the US, but also in Africa, where there is a real boom in the number of women's and women-oriented reviews and magazines in recent years.

182 In the early February 2001, *The Guardian* newspaper featured a story about the young Tanzanian rapper, Witness Mwajjaga (Astill 2001). All the elements of the new representation of African women were there: difficult childhood, poverty, hardships in the music business, helping out the women deal with the HIV, but, still, a bright, optimistic girl that raps her way into the future, despite all the obstacles. The women can do it for themselves. There is also a message that can be seen as an interesting example of cross-cultural comparison, when Witness says: "American rappers talk about crazy things – drinking, drugs, violence against women, American blacks killing blacks. I hope African rap stays African and doesn't turn crazy." This is a message of hope, coming from the continent where many do not see any. This is also a message of a new image of African woman – strong and outspoken, the one capable of taking her destiny in her own hands.

In this paper, I outlined a certain development of the images of African women, from the first bare-breasted Zulu woman in the *National Geographic*, through the images affected by the colonial gaze (postcards studied by Corbey), to the present blend of different representations (women as mothers – women like Iman as all-powerful supermodels – women rappers like Witness Mwajjaga). The whole imagery speaks perhaps more about the circumstances of its origin (and its creators), than about the African women themselves. While not trying to be too optimistic, I think that the current developments towards presenting images of strong and self-sufficient women are something that should be encouraged as an expression of the new age, when women and men could be treated as equal. How far are we from this age, still remains to be seen.

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BESEDA O AVTORJU

Aleksandar Bošković, dr. (1996, univerza St. Andrews), trenutno gostujoči raziskovalec na Oddelku za socialno antropologije univerze v Witwatersrandu, Johannesburg. Preden je prišel v Južno Afriko, je predaval na Škotskem (VB), v FR Jugoslaviji, Braziliji in Sloveniji. Napisal ali uredil je tri knjige (zadnja, ki je izšla, je *Critical Art Ensemble: Digitalni partizani*, Beograd, 2000) in številne članke (med njimi izstopata "Vsaka ima svoj faktor: Constructing the body in Southeastern Europe", *New Moment* 9/10, 1998, in "Não há lugar como nosso lar: Antropologia, multiculturalismo e novas tecnologias", *Revista Imaginário* št. 5, 1999).