From:

HEIKE BEHREND
Contesting Visibility
Photographic Practices on the East African Coast

June 2013, 266 p., 28.80 €, ISBN 978-3-8376-2456-4

Since the introduction of photography by commercial studio photographers and the colonial state in Kenya, this global medium has been intensely debated and contested among Muslims on the cosmopolitan East African coast. This book does not only explore the making, circulation, and consumption of popular photographs, but also the other side, their rejection and obliteration, an essential aspect of a medium’s history that should not be neglected.

In a fragmented historical perspective, Heike Behrend seeks to complement, decenter, and counter the history of photography as it has been told by the West and to narrate another history beginning with preceding local media such as textiles and spirit possession.

Heike Behrend worked as a Professor of Social Anthropology and African Studies at the University of Cologne, Germany. She is retired now and lives in Berlin.

For further information:
www.transcript-verlag.de/ts2456/ts2456.php

© 2013 transcript Verlag, Bielefeld
## Contents

List of Illustrations ................................................................. 7
Preface / Acknowledgement .................................................. 9

**Chapter 1**  Introduction ....................................................... 11

**Chapter 2**  Providing the Context: The East African Coast ........ 27

**Chapter 3**  Polemic Encounters: Photography as Medium and Object of Ethnographic Research ............................................. 47

**Chapter 4**  Textiles and Images: Photography as Unveiling ......... 65

**Chapter 5**  Creating Spectacles: Studio Photographers of the Indian Diaspora .............................................................. 87

**Chapter 6**  Ambulant Photographers ....................................... 121

**Chapter 7**  The Bakor Studio and the “Aesthetics of Withdrawal” ... 147

**Chapter 8**  Weddings, Photography, and the Aura of Modernity .... 173

**Chapter 9**  Withdrawal of Life: Photography and Death ............ 199

**Chapter 10**  Iconoclastic Spirits .............................................. 219

**Chapter 11**  “Killer Panics” and Digital Photography ................ 241

Bibliography ............................................................................ 249
Preface

Acknowledgements

This book has taken a long time to complete and I am deeply indebted to many people who kindly and generously assisted me in my work. Above all, I would like to thank Maina Hatchison who has accompanied my research since 1996 for his enduring friendship, his fervent interest in photography, and his generous assistance. Christine Noll Brinckmann, Fritz Kramer, Johannes Harnischfeger, and Gisela Völger were so kind as to read the whole manuscript carefully and provided most valuable insights. Mitch Cohen kindly polished my poor English. Thomas Ladenburger was responsible for the layout. Ina Sykora, Omar Babu Maryan, Gerrit Dimmendaal, Dorothea Schulz,¹ Hannelies Koloska, and the late John Middleton read and commented on different chapters. Athman Omar Lali, Abdalla Uba Adamu, the late Sharif Khitamy, Dr. Rasik Patel, Birgit Meyer, Martin Zillinger, Timm Starl, Esha Faki, Thomas Fillitz, Monika Feinen, Tobias Wendl, Anton Holzer, Ivonne Treis, Kerstin Pinther, Ulrike Ottinger, Sanata Nacro, Astrid Kusser, Matthias Wittmann, Ruppert Gaderer, Hans Belting, Birgit Mersmann, Piet Meyer, Clara Himmelheber, Ann Biersteker, Brigitte Reinwald, Mwaisha Mahmoud, Ahmed Sheik Nabhany, Esha A. Ahmed, Narendra C. Patel, Ahmed Yassin, Judy S. Aldrick (now Baron), Mr. Salim from Salim Video and Decoration (Mombasa), Husna Sheeali Omar, Patrick Desplat, Ustad Harith Swaleh, Sharif Said Hassan, Mohammed Hyder, Bibi Salma, Asya Sunkar Salim, Mohammed Hassan, Linda Giles, Anne Storch, Alif Omar Said Bakor, Malara Farinde, Sammy Njuguna, Najid Omar Said Bakor, Arif Bakor, Mohammed A. Jahadhmy, Henrik Grohs and, in particular, Elizabeth Edwards, and Particia Hayes kindly assisted me in various ways and provided important insights that entered into the text. David Easterbrook, curator of the Africana Collection of the Northwestern University, kindly introduced me to the Winterton Collection.

In addition, I would like to thank the IFK in Vienna for a scholarship in 2007, the FK 427 in Cologne, and the Tokyo University of

¹ Dorothea Schulz and Martin Zillinger also assisted me to find the title for this book.
Foreign Studies, and Osamu Hieda, who provided me with a visiting professorship in 2010, allowing me to expand my interest to include photographic practices in Japan. In addition, I am very grateful to the students who attended my classes on photographic practices along the East African coast for their questions and invaluable comments. And I am deeply indebted to the members of the Institute of African Studies of the University of Cologne whose kind assistance and patience helped me to complete this book.
Chapter 1

Introduction

The “Discovery” of African Photographers

Although Stephen Sprague had published his meanwhile famous articles on Yoruba studio portraits in Nigeria in 1978, it was not until the early 1990s that African photographers became the subject of Western knowledge and their photographs started to be shown in Western museums and galleries. While colonial photographs have been critically studied since the 1970s, it is scandalous that anthropologists and art historians realized so late that Africans, too, had worked as photographers and created their own visual traditions.

In 1991 Susan Vogel showed a few studio photographs by the Malian photographer Sedou Keita1 in the exhibition “Africa Explores” in the Center for African Arts in New York. This was followed by “In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present” in the Guggenheim Museum in New York, curated by Okwui Enwezor in 1996, and by the publication of the works of Sedou Keita and Malick Sidibé by André Magnin. In 1998, Tobias Wendl, Kerstin Pinther, Henrike Grohs, and I organized an exhibition of African studio photographers (Wendl and Behrend 1998) in Munich that traveled to Amsterdam, and parts of it were exhibited in London, Paris, Bamako, and Berlin. More exhibitions followed and opened up a new field of image production that has been increasingly explored by anthropologists and art historians.

Around 2000, Sotheby’s organized the first auction of photographs by Sedou Keita and Malick Sidibé, and this economically very successful event marked the entry of African studio photographs into the Western art market. At the same time, Western art dealers started to buy the archives of various photographers in Africa.

The choice of African photographers who would „make“ it into the Western art market was tightly controlled by a small group of collec-

---

1 The prints displayed in the exhibition were designated the work of an unknown photographer.
tors and museum experts whose tastes as well as stylistic and formal standards established a framework for the appreciation of African photography and determined the criteria of connoisseurship. These gatekeepers also decided which aspects of a photographer’s work were worth exhibiting and what would be his “trademark.” Some photographs that entered the Western art world had a strange fate. For example, the I.D. photographs that the Ivory Coast photographer Cornélius Azaglo Augustt produced in the 1960s and 1970s – often under constraint of the colonial state – were bought by collectors and nicely printed on large-format paper by the best laboratories in Paris or New York. Since these photographs were much more widely exhibited and published than Augustt’s studio photographs, they became emblematic of his work. The makers of such “icons” for the Western art market never mentioned the pictures’ original use nor how and by whom they had been selected to be converted into valuable commodities in the art market (Werner 2001:266). In addition, canonized photographers such as Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita were placed in misleading genres, Keita as the exemplary studio photographer and Sidibé as the quintessential reportage photographer of “party” photographs (Keller 2008:3).

Yet, early studio photographs produced for more or less private consumption were also often turned into commodities and, for example, sold and circulated on a global level as postcards (see, for example, Geary and Webb 1998).

The new Western interest in African studio photography also had a few positive consequences in Africa. It has allowed some studios to survive, albeit in a precarious way. For example, the Capital Art Studio in Zanzibar – one of the first studios on the East African Coast, originally established by A.C. Gomez from Goa in the 1860s – today mainly sells prints from old black-and-white photographs to Western tourists (personal communication from Brigitte Reinwald).

The success of and increasing interest in popular studio photographers from Africa in the Western art market stimulated a few African

---

In contrast to, for example, the book by Marc Garanger, who served as a photographer in colonial Algeria and took I.D. pictures of women who were forced to unveil their faces in front of the camera. He published the photographs in a book as a rather ambiguous apology to the Algerian women.
artists – those who had already made it into the art market such as Santu Mofokeng\footnote{See Santu Mofokeng’s “The Black Photo Album/Look at me: 1890-1950”, a collection of photographs that urban black working- and middle-class families in South Africa had commissioned. The Black Photo Album is part of an ongoing research project.} and Sammy Baloji\footnote{See Sammy Baloji’s “The Beautiful Time”, a collection of photographs and photomontages of industrial landscapes of Katanga province in the Democratic Republic of Congo, into which he has montaged photographs of colonial subjects, prisoners, and workers (see Jewsiewicki 2010).} – to experiment and critically play with old studio photographs as well as the conventions of studio photography.

The photographs that made it into the Western art market circulated as art in a different regime of value in space and time (Appadurai 1988:4). A „tournament of value“ took place that separated photographs from the ethos of conventional economic exchange and followed a new logic of value (ibid.:21). Although being images of technical reproduction, they were provided with what Baudrillard calls „sign value“ – the signed, appraised piece of art as a luxury value and rare object, for example, as a vintage photograph. Photographs were thus transformed into distinctive material that served as the foundation of the „noble“ in a restrained exchange (Baudrillard 1981:112f,120).

Although sanctioned by the artists, the reissue of their work for predominantly Western audiences constituted a radical recasting of form and function; while the photographs had previously been privately commissioned and printed on an intimate scale, in the art context the subjects became anonymous and it was the photographer’s presentation as artist that spoke to the Western viewers. All the meanings created through a portrait’s rootedness in the texture of life were thereby denied, while the photograph was transformed into an object of value that now centered, above all, on the author’s name (rather than on that of the depicted person) (Lamuniere 2001).

Since the “discovery” of African photographers in the early 1990s, a new field of knowledge and research has opened up that has been named “ethnography of photographic practices” (see, for example, Edwards 2011:160,176ff; Vokes 2012). Here attempts are made to decenter the Western discourse on photography and bring in perspec-
tives from other cultural spaces that may shift, illuminate, and complement understandings of the medium (Edwards 2011:183). Here, not only locally generated aesthetics but also new sets of analytical and conceptual tools are explored to liberate photographic thinking from the demands of a Western canon (ibid.:185). This is the relatively new field of research and knowledge in which this study is situated.

Photography as a Global Medium

Three months after Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre presented his “invention” at the Academy in Paris, the first daguerreotypists reached Cairo in Africa and were „daguerreotyping like lions“ (Howe 1994). Early photographers such as Felice and Antonio Beato (born in Venice, Italy) were not only cosmopolitan but also highly mobile, working in Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, and in Egypt and Greece; in Egypt, Antonio established the Beato Studio in Luxor and took as his assistant Attaya Gaddis, who later bought the studio and became one of the first Egyptian photographers (Gaddis 1999). Both Beato brothers visited India and China; in Japan, Felice took residency in Yokohama and began teaching some members of the first generation of Japanese photographers (Lacoste 2010; Hockley 2006).

In India, photography was first employed in 1840, only a few months after its invention had been announced in Paris (Pinney 1997a:17). And only two decades later, in the 1860s, peripatetic Indian photographers, especially from Goa, brought the new medium to Zanzibar and other places on the East African coast and established the first studios there. In Brazil, photography was independently invented by Hércules Florence – contemporary with Daguerre and William Henry Talbot Fox – but his discovery had only minimal impact and fell into obscurity (Kossoy 1998:23). The first daguerreotypists reached Latin America in 1840, and from the 1860s on there was a noticeable increase in the number of photographic studios operating in the main cities of South America (ibid.:27,35).

The global flows, circulations, and complex itineraries of early photographers and their new medium still need further research, but from its beginnings, photography transcended localities, nations,
and even continents and questioned the boundedness of cultures. In fact, photography is a global medium not only because it has crossed national and cultural boundaries, but also because the technical apparatus was created by means of substantial exchanges and borrowings from different cultures.

As historians of science suggest, the “invention” of photography should be broken down into various more or less unexpected and practical sets of skills to produce images. Optical devices, such as the camera obscura and lenses, had to be joined with light sensitive chemicals and different supporting materials like glass or paper. The linear perspective and the technical apparatus to produce it – such as pin holes and the camera obscura – are what Bruno Latour has called “immutable mobiles”: they allow the transfer and translation of an object without modifying its internal properties. They create “optical consistency,” a translation without corruption that invites mobilization, travel, and displacement (Latour 1986:7,14).

The first mention of the principles of the camera obscura is by the Chinese philosopher Mo Ti (470 BC to 390 BC). He referred to it as a “collecting plate” and a “locked treasure room”. Later, around 840, experiments with pinholes and darkened rooms were described in Chinese texts (Needham 1962:98). In contrast to the West, however, the Chinese scholars made use of the camera obscura to develop “axometry,” which translates as “equal-angle see-through.” Unlike linear perspective, axometry has no vanishing point and therefore has been connected to the scroll as a pictorial medium. The scroll does not take the viewer through a collection of separate images, but rather a continuous and seamless visual image that unfolds itself. It does not assume a fixed position by the viewer. Many early Chinese landscape paintings display multiple perspectives whose focus is not in an outside viewer but instead in the tiny persons depicted in the paintings.5

It was the optical theory of the Arab scholar Abu Ali al-Hasan Ibn al-Haitham (965-1040), better known in the West under the name of Alhazen, that provided Europe with the preconditions to „invent“ photography. He not only constructed a camera obscura but also, in his book whose Latin translation is titled „Perspectiva“, developed a

5 I am grateful to Fritz Kramer who kindly informed me about the multiple perspectives in Chinese paintings.
mathematical theory of light that much later formed the basis for the invention of linear perspective in the Renaissance in Italy (Edgerton 2002:70ff). Through the camera obscura, Alhazen managed to produce mechanical images, „drawings of light,“ as Henry Fox Talbot named photographs nine hundred years later. In contrast to the artists of the Western Renaissance who relied on the camera obscura to produce perspectival paintings, Alhazen, as a mathematician and Muslim, was not interested in developing a mathematical theory of images, but instead a theory of light and its refraction. As Hans Belting has suggested, ironically, the camera obscura was taken up in the West through the mediation of the texts of an Arab scholar himself not interested in and perhaps even hostile toward images. Against its original purpose, it was then reformulated for the creation of perspectival images and later of the visual media of technical reproduction. Linear perspective was inscribed into the photographic camera, which produced permanent images on a mass scale, thereby (re-)exporting linear perspective as part of colonization to most parts of the world (Belting 2008:12,104ff).

The production of perspectival images constituted a break and a qualitative leap and led to a unique visual history in the West that was not shared in Africa (and only partially in Asia) until the 19th century. There is a connection between Western linear perspective, visualism, and subjectivity; and these foundations are integral to visual media such as photography (Weiner 1997:198). Thus, although produced on the basis of Chinese and Arab optical knowledge, globalized (Western) media carry within their apparatus a specifically Western visual regime and epistemology that cannot be described as either innocent or neutral.

Against this background, the history of photography as it has been told by the West has to be complemented and countered by histories as they have unfolded in Asia, Latin America, Australia, and Africa. The photographic practices that flourish outside the West allow us not only to complement, but also to decenter European knowledge and experience. By localizing photography in various parts of the world and connecting it with pre-existing media, aesthetics, and practices, new questions are raised about what a photograph – as act, image, and object – actually IS. By decentering the West, not only historical agency but also the centrality of Western representational practices is
shifted, relocated, and transformed in new spaces (Pinney 2003:12). In fact, as I intend to show in this book, photographers in Africa have tricked the photographic apparatus in various ways and created diverse strategies to counter the linear perspective inscribed into the camera.

**Photographic Spaces of Refusal**

When Daguerre presented his „invention“ to the Academy of Science in Paris in 1839, it created a frenzy of excitement, approval, outrage, and rejection. While some celebrated the new medium as a miracle and wonder, others denounced it as the devil's work, an “infernal French art,” and dismissed it as an infringement of the Old Testament prohibition of images. Walter Benjamin, for example, quoted the Leipzig City Advisor to illustrate this negative response: „To fix fleeting images is not only impossible, as has been shown by thorough going German research, but to wish to do it is blasphemy. Man is created in the image of God and God's image cannot be held fast by a human machine. At the most the pious artist – enraptured by heavenly inspiration – may at the higher command of his genius dare to reproduce those divine/human features in an instant of highest dedication, without mechanical help“ (Benjamin cit. Trachtenberg 1980:200). Thus, from its beginning, the tensions between the prohibition against representing human beings and (technical) image making were inscribed into the history of photography.

The camera met with resistance not only in Europe, but also in many other parts of the world. For example, in Japan (Kohara 2010:230f), on the Western Solomon Islands (Wright 2008), and in many parts of Africa (Behrend 2003b), in popular discourses the new medium of photography – as a “devil's engine,” a machine “to capture a person's spirit” or subtract bodily substance – was associated with death, misfortune, theft, and sorcery by many people who were subjected to the (colonial) camera gaze. It seems that the violent nature of photography itself – freezing its subjects in the act and in the picture – was integrally connected with both indigenous resistance to it and concerns about it (Edwards 2003:84).
Local forms of media engagement contested the superiority of technical visual media as claimed by the colonizing project of the West. Modes of (self-)representation were entangled in processes in which photographs of oneself and of others were translated and mediated in new ways, generating not only new visibilities, immediacies, and proximities, but also distances, ruptures, and withdrawal. It took some time to transform the new medium from a wondrous, dangerous, and deadly machine into a part of everyday life. Paradoxically, it was in times of war, despair, and violent death – when too many young people died – that photography became increasingly accepted and “democratized” in many parts of the world. In the USA, during the upheavals of the Civil War, the idea of photographs as a way of preserving memory gradually came to the fore. In Japan, during the wars with China and Russia, Samurai and later also ordinary soldiers developed a desire to leave a photographic picture behind before going into battle (Kohara 2010:237f). And among the Yolngu, Aborigines from Arnhem Land in Australia who initially vehemently rejected photography, in particular photographs of the dead, a turning away from the images of the dead recently came to seem no longer appropriate or even bearable; instead, there emerged a consensus that young persons who had lived only half-lives required attention and response through photographs on the one hand marking loss while on the other hand creating continuity (Deger 2008:304).

Despite the shock, rejection, and sense of utter improbability that accompanied the new technology as the very sign of the foreign (Morris 2009:3), in the long run photography became a global success and was inserted into nearly all domains of social life in most parts of the world.

Yet, in spite of photography’s seeming ubiquity, there are still specific times and social spaces in which photography is shunned. Along the cosmopolitan East African coast, some Muslim people have contested and problematized the camera and its uses, sometimes to the point of rejection, counter-violence, and destruction. While before the 19th century, the coastal regions of East Africa – inhabited by Muslims since the 8th century – were characterized largely by some sort of aniconism and a certain indifference toward images, since the 1860s photography deeply entered everyday life and radically transformed existing economies of representation, ritual passages (weddings and funerals), the culture of festivities, ways of remembrance, and sub-
jectivities, though it was never uncontested. Here we find forms of resisting the reduction to a visible trace and modes of establishing a negative relation to the camera that open the way of what has been largely excluded within the now familiar rhetoric of the hegemony of photographic vision (Morris 2009). In spite of photography's localization and increasing routinization, the multitude of photographic images and their global flow were accompanied, as I attempt to show, by a refusal to accept the medium’s representational capabilities and by an urge to counter them by defacement and the creation of new opacities.

This book attempts to contribute to a history of photography on the cosmopolitan East African Coast. It seeks to complement, de-center, and counter the history of photography as it has been told by the West and thereby shift and transform the agency and centrality of Western representational practices. It attempts to envisage a history as in part determined by struggles occurring on the level of the visual (Pinney 2004:8), struggles that may evolve around visual media and the question of what should be given to see and what should be withdrawn from visibility. It takes photography as an image-making technology that may also become a potential historical force in its own right. It seeks to explore not only the making, circulation, and consumption of photographs, but also the other side, their rejection and obliteration, an essential aspect of a medium's history that should not be neglected. In fact, it deals with various social spaces in which visibility was (and is) contested in different and creative ways, thereby transcending the simple divide between appropriation and rejection. While local actors’ adaption and creative use of traveling visual media technologies in the context of globalization processes have been extensively explored, in the following I will focus on the opposite processes of disentanglement, rejection, and withdrawal from global media and the creation of new opacities and secracies that scholars have largely ignored. I understand this contribution as an attempt to complement the existing theories of mediation by focusing on the discontinuous and disruptive role of media technologies in processes of globalization. While it seems as if most scholars take it for granted that modern media technologies have gained an undisputed place everywhere in the world and that a counter-history to the hegemonic spread of mass media on a global scale cannot be told (anymore), I

---

6 As exceptions, see Siegel (2009), de Witte (2010) and Spyer (2001, 2009).
will explore specific social spaces on the East African Coast in which possibilities of the rejection of and withdrawal from photography have been created and particular forms of mediation are disputed.

“Aesthetics of Withdrawal” along the East African Coast

Along the cosmopolitan East African coast, since the 1980s and in particular after 9/11, reformed Muslims have increasingly questioned figurative representations. In fact, different and opposing attitudes toward images have gained a new religious-political importance and have become intensely debated and contested, perhaps more than ever before. In addition, Muslims have actualized a gendered concept of purity (“purdah”) that centers on seclusion and concealment and has been extended to prohibit the circulation of pictures of women in the public domain. In strong opposition to the West – which they associate with immorality and decadence – interdictions and collective moral claims on female bodies to conform to a particular aesthetics of propriety and piety have translated into new strategies of concealment and the creation of new opacities in relation to photography.

Yet, as Michel Foucault suggested, interdictions do not necessarily function solely in a repressive manner; they can also become extremely productive and unleash a creative potential when people seek different ways of observing as well as undermining the interdiction. Thus, this book focuses not only on the creation of “spaces of rejection” in a historical perspective, but also on what I call an “aesthetics of withdrawal”: the various ways and techniques that process the photographic act as well as the photographic image to theatricalize the surface of the image in new ways by veiling, masking, and conceal-

---

9/11 has not only reinforced the ancient opposition between the Christian West and Islam, but has also inscribed itself into existing conflicts in Kenya on a national, regional, and local level. In Kenya in 1998, thousands of men and women had already experienced the “Embassy Bombing” of Nairobi and since then have suffered a whole series of terrorist attacks. Under the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression, a spiraling process of progressive alienation took place between Muslims and Christians.
My argument here is that a veiled person, an opaque surface, or a tapestry of flashlights also provide something to see by creating a secondary image of defacement, thereby challenging the simple binary opposition of creation and destruction, image making and image breaking, revealing and concealing. The “aesthetics of withdrawal” I will explore thus focus on the process or act of becoming visible in a particular form that insists, however, on (partial) concealment of, for example, the body or face of women and thereby creates a visible screen or “outside,” hiding and protecting the “inside” from view. This concealment or withdrawal, however, produces a strange surplus of energy or desire that is likely to be aroused from within the defaced object itself. As Michael Taussig (1999) suggests, this visual negativity of seeing what is not given to see that is inherent in the “aesthetics of withdrawal” lies at the very heart of a vast range of social powers and different forms of knowledge.

It is important to clarify that making the “aesthetics of withdrawal” one of the subjects of this book is not an attempt to reinstate Orientalism and the old opposition that takes the West as a pursuer of visibility, truth, and enlightenment and the Orient (including the East African Coast) as prone to secrecy and deception. As Walter Benjamin suggested, truth is not a matter of exposure that destroys a secret, but of a revelation that does justice to it. Following Michael Taussig (1999), I prefer to dissolve the opposition between truth and secrecy and join them, one enveloping the other, truth being a secret and secrets holding some truth.

On the Threshold to Digital Photography

Since 2006, digital photography, in particular in the form of camera phones, has changed the media landscape along the coast. With this new media technology coming up, writing about analogue photographic practices in Africa situates this study on the threshold of a “new” era in which digital media supersede and interact with the older analogue medium. Yet, as a rule in the history of media, when a new medium is introduced it largely subordinates itself to the old ones and only later slowly unfolds its own specific possibilities. As

---

8 See the discussion of the concept „aesthetics of withdrawal“
McLuhan has stated, the first effects of a new medium are simply the simulation and replacement of an older one. What digital photography is doing to the senses, the body, the referent, the sign, the image, and the subject and what new forms of audience and communication it will create in Africa we will only find out in the future.

Yet when a new medium is superseding an older one, this process also puts the old one in a new perspective. With the new medium, new conflicts, promises, expectations, and problems emerge that allow us to see the old medium in a new way. For example, questions of the objectness and materiality of photographs have come up with new intensity in the context of digital images’ capacity to remain „virtual“ as long as they are not printed (see Edwards and Hart 2004). Moreover, the „de-realization“ to digital photography that some scholars have deplored has opened up new questions about the indexicality of analogue photography and its manifold relations to the „real.“

In this book, I will mainly trace the history of the „old“ analogue medium from a perhaps slightly nostalgic perspective. However, this highly fragmented history will already be informed by certain questions and predicaments that relate to the digital. Media, so Niklas Luhmann (and others), open up the perspective on the world. Yet, this opening at the same time closes access to the media’s own historicity. Media are always already there and not only create their cultural milieus, but also change our perceptions before we can attempt to understand them. Through media we are constantly being caught in our own traps (Innis cit. Hagen 2002:220). Thus, when exploring the history of (analogue) photography in Kenya, we have to keep in mind that it is the medium of (digital) photography as it has already evolved that determines our perspective on earlier media. Consequently, I will end the book with a critical outlook on the various practices, threats, and panics that accompanied the rise of digital photography.

**General Outline**

This book moves along the pathways of colonialism and modern capital and explores the practices of individuals as well as different institutions and their often opposing ways of producing, distributing, consuming, and rejecting photographs from a historical perspective.
Yet, it does not adopt a chronological approach to the general subject; instead, it situates photography – as performative act, image, and object – at the crossroads of three institutions – the state, the photo studio, and the mosque. Although the first two of these institutions created their own fields of image production, circulation, and consumption and developed specific visual genres, there also emerged overlapping spaces into which and out of which (sometimes the same) photographers would move, engaging with customers in many different ways. In contrast, the mosque stands for a more negative and critical relationship to photography, a space of negotiation into which is inscribed an actualization of concepts of female purity and an “interdiction of figurative representations.”

In addition, photographs are discussed in terms of their (changing) pictorial characteristics and their visual precedents. I am interested in the ways pre-existing media, in particular textiles, spirit mediums and scripture, and their visual economies have shaped photographic practices and modes of representation. Furthermore, I also explore the uses, circulations, and exchanges of photographs as objects, as culturally meaningful artifacts, and their insertion into ritual practices (funerals and weddings) and exchange networks.

On the whole, the book raises urgent theoretical questions about visibility and its withdrawal, the relationship between photography and death, and the often-assumed „innocence“ or „neutrality“ of Western technical media and the epistemologies they imply. How can visual media such as photography that privilege the act of making visible cope with secrets and concealment? How can concealment be recorded or reproduced by photography? How can non-representational rituals that attempt to transform the initiate be mediated through visual technical media?

Though I am particularly interested in the emergence of a specific local “aesthetics of withdrawal” that evolved in a Muslim milieu through the import of photography and the various local struggles and attempts to accommodate the camera and/or to withdraw from visibility, I will explore a whole range of different photographic practices from a plurality of positions that I will not try to unify. While photographers from the Indian Diaspora and Christian migrant laborers from the “hinterland” who worked as photographers in Mombasa on the Kenyan coast aligned with the logic of modern mass media
and embraced photography with all its inherent possibilities without reservation, Muslim inhabitants of Mombasa and Lamu created and experimented with the aforementioned “aesthetics of withdrawal” that play with defacement, veiling, and opacities. In fact, the different practices and attitudes of Muslims, Christians, and “traditionalists” toward the camera cannot be understood in isolation, but must be seen in their oppositions to and interactions with each other and also in relation to the different positions of power in the public arena of the postcolonial Kenyan state and to the West.

What holds the various chapters together beyond the subject matter – photography – and the circumstances of place is the specific focus on the numerous attempts in quite different historical situations and milieus to contest photographic visuality, withdraw from the violence of the camera, and create new opacities. Besides exploring the studio photography of Indian photographers and (Christian) migrant photographers, it is the negative relation to photography that is elaborated in the various chapters from rather different perspectives. In this way, the book centers in particular on those many representational possibilities that photography seems to foreclose, such as opacity, exclusion, oblivion, prohibitions, and even indifference. It also centers on the “tricks” (de Certeau) with the help of which photographers and their customers subvert and undermine the “technical program of the camera” (Flusser 1997), thereby transcending the simple divide between resistance and appropriation.

After the introduction, in chapter 2, I situate the main area of my study, the Kenyan coast, and in particular the towns of Mombasa and Lamu, in a historical and global context. I deal with the cosmopolitan urban Islamic culture of the “stone towns” as part of the global economy and “image world” of the Indian Ocean, Islamic revival, and mass tourism along the coast and will end the chapter with a discussion of the repercussions of the Gulf War and 9/11 and their inscription into local conflicts in Kenya.

Chapter 3 deals with ethnographic research in a world in which the ethnographer and the subjects of ethnography more or less share the same media. It attempts to provide insights into the complicated and conflicting processes of generating ethnographic knowledge about photographic practices. I explore, in particular, the predicaments that opened up through the collision of ethnographic methods and local media practices during my field research.
Chapter 4 presents fragments of a media history of photography on the East African coast that takes its beginning with textiles and explores the mutual relationship between the two media. It deals in particular with the negative side of this relationship: photography as unveiling.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explore different aspects of studio photography from a fragmented historical perspective. After a more general introduction to the institution of the photo studio, I look at the production of photographs by photographers of the Indian Diaspora (1860-1980) and Christian migrant workers from the Western and Central province in Kenya (since 1990). While Indian and Christian photographers had no difficulties aligning with photography’s transparency and inclusivity, in chapter 7 I discuss the photomontages of the Bakor Studio in Lamu as an example of the “aesthetics of withdrawal.” I attempt to show how Muslim notions of (female) propriety and piety have translated into new strategies to veil, mask, and conceal the surface of the photographs and to create new opacities.

The last chapters focus on the “aesthetics of withdrawal” and a more negative relation to photography from various perspectives. In chapter 8 and 9, I focus on the insertion of photography into Muslim weddings, Muslim rituals of mourning, and Christian funerals. And in chapter 10, I not only interpret the defensive performative logic that interdicts the presence of the camera in rituals of spirit possession as connected to the ambiguous political and historical position of spirit mediums in the modern nation state of Kenya; I also formulate a few structural propositions as to why – in contrast to the West – spirit mediums in Africa may have shunned photography.

Finally, the last chapter, as a supplement, provides an outlook on some of the transformations that were triggered by the introduction of digital photography since 2006/7.