AFRICAN POSTCARDS

A LOOK AT HISTORY THROUGH PICTURES

BY ZACHARY WARTHAN

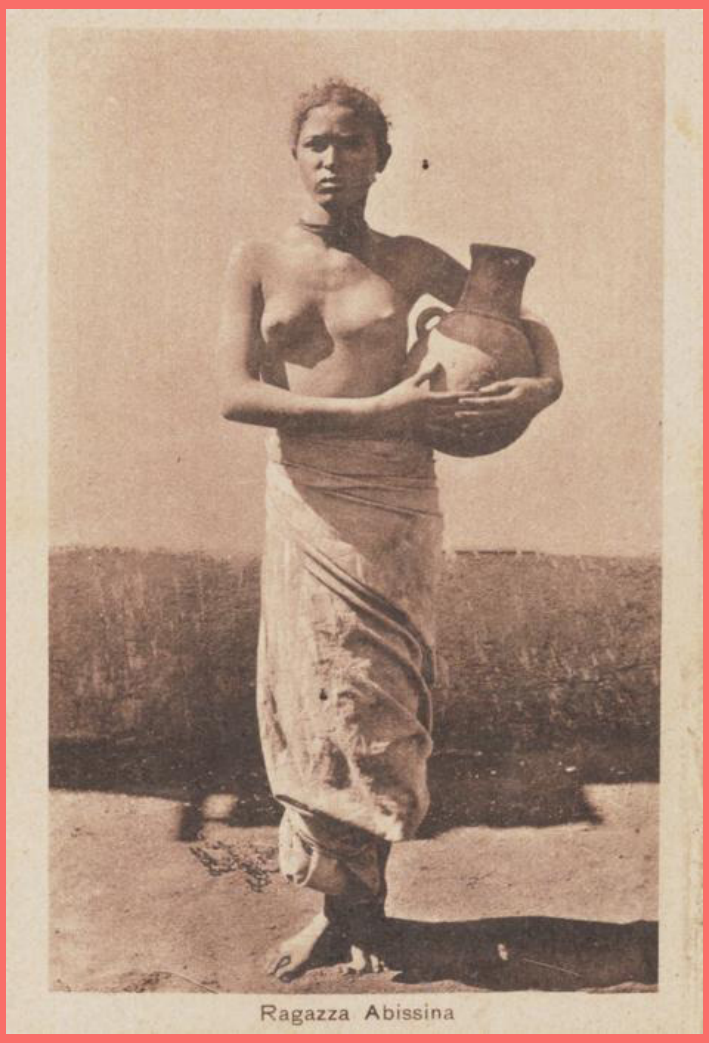

Figure 7: Ragazza Abissina. Photograph taken by Scozzi Attilio. Taken by 1900.

There are many ways someone can look at African women throughout history. One of these ways is to analyze photographs and postcards of Eastern African women during the first decades of the twentieth century and observe just how much gender norms have changed. This is important because not only can we figure out how Western countries and people thought of these African women, particularly European countries and people, but also how the lifestyles of these women changed over time due to Western influence. They have changed in many ways from the clothing they wore to how they are presented, and even to how they think later in time. I think looking at these postcards can show not only how they were presented, but also why they are presented this way.

Let's start by looking at 2 postcards from 1900 and see just how they were presented. This first postcard is titled, "Ragazza Abissina" which, translated from Italian, means, "Abyssinian girl." For context, Abyssinian is a part of Ethiopia. The second postcard is titled, "Africa Orientale - Ragarre bilene," which, also translated from Italian, means, "East Africa - Bilene girls." Both of these photos show African women not wearing much clothing, only wearing something either around their waist or over their shoulder. They are also shown as being outside looking dead-on towards the camera. The woman in the first postcard is holding a piece of pottery while the women in the other photo doesn't hold any objects, however there may be a chair that the woman in the very front is sitting on.

Next, let's look at 2 postcards from the interwar period. This first postcard, which is from 1925, is titled, "COLONIAL ERITREA - Madama abissinia," which, translated from Italian, means, "ERITREAN COLONY - Madama Abyssinia." This second postcard, which is from 1936, is titled, "Africa Orientale - Amatir e Unese (tipi abissini)," which, also trans-

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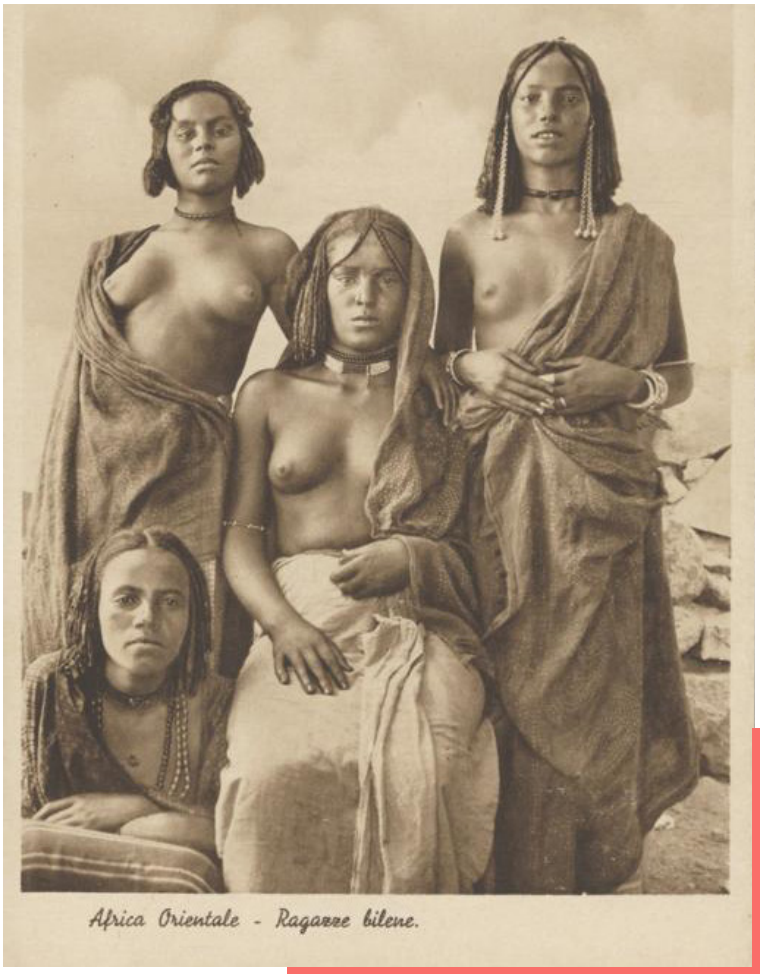

Figure 8: Africa Orientale - Ragarre bilene. Taken by 1900.

Figure 9: COLONIA ERITREA - Madama abissinia. Taken by 1925.

Figure 10: Africa Orientale - Amatir e Unese tipi abissini. Photograph taken by M. Decamerè Taken by 1936.

lated from Italian, means, "East Africa - Amatir and Unese (Abyssinian types)." These postcards show women in all white clothes, the first woman wears shoes, and they're all shown styled with necklaces, rings, and other possibly pricey items. The woman in the white is a wife of an Italian man, which we know this due to them being labeled as a "Madama." In these photos, the women's pictures are taken from a diagonal angle from a camera with them all sitting down inside and with most of them not directly looking at the camera besides for the girl on the right of the second postcard. They are all doing minor poses that make them look more feminine. These last 2 postcards seem very distinct and different from the other 2 postcards from the turn of the century.

In order to figure out why these postcards are so dramatically different, it is important to analyze these contrasts. To start, the most obvious difference is their clothing. The women in the first 2 postcards wore very little clothing, which all these photos show a clear front view of these women's breasts. Meanwhile the women in the other 2 postcards show them off in full clothing, including shoes, necklaces, rings, and other accessories. These accessories are likely much more expensive than any of the clothing or other accessories that the women had in the first 2 postcards. Many of these accessories make them look much more feminine, which leads to the next topic: how these women are portrayed in terms of masculinity versus femininity. The women in the first 2 postcards are all shown outside with them either in the fields or carrying poetry, which is shown in the first postcard shown. Meanwhile in the last 2 postcards, they are inside, sitting down, just trying to look as presentable as possible by Western standards. This also reflects in their poses. The women in the first 2 postcards aren't doing anything complex with how they are showing themselves. They are standing straight while looking directly at the camera. Meanwhile, the women in the other 2 postcards all are sitting down and either are shown as seemingly relaxed, either on furniture like in the first picture, or on someone else with their arm around them like in the second picture. This potentially portrays them not only as more feminine, but also more sophisticated than the women in the first 2 postcards. However, with all of these differences, it leads to a specific question: why portray these women the way they did? Well, to understand that, one must first understand the Colonial Gender System created by Maria Lugones.

Maria Lugones, who is a sociologist and feminist philosopher who has written much about how Western civilizations have tried to control African women, with a popular work of hers being about the Colonial/Modern Gender System. Based on Anibal Quijano's Coloniality of Power, Lugones uses the ideas

AFRICAN POSTCARDS

that people base power on the "'the four basic areas of human existence: sex, labor, collective authority and subjectivity/intersubjectivity, their resources and products'" , and "the basic and universal social classification of the population of the planets terms of the idea of 'race.'"[34] With these ideas, Lugones applies them to gender and how people use sex and gender to give certain people power. One such way is from femininity. Many feminists, who at the time were just the white bourgeois women, mainly looked at women through their own Western lens, which was based a lot on their own personal femininity. Women who did not fit this idea were often seen as "animals" and eventually this viewing of them as lesser caused the "heterosexual rape of Indian [and] African slave women[.]" African women in particular "were characterized along a gamut of sexual aggression and perversion, and as strong enough to do any sort of labor."[35] These descriptions do not line up with how feminity was back during this era. However, this was not entirely these feminists' fault. This gender system also focuses a lot on patriarchal control who controlled who and what was seen by people. This includes creating "the colonial meaning of men and women[,...]the banning of white bourgeois women from the sphere of collective authority," and what was shown of many of these African women.[36] Due to creating what they considered to be men and what they considered to be women, they had control over how that was presented, which thus led to them trying to control how African women looked. If they were to marry these women like some did, they would likely want them to look more feminine, which to them, means "sexual purity and passivity."[37] However, they also portrayed them through sexualization. According to race and gender academic Patricia Hill Collins, which was quoted by Lugones, "Black women were portrayed as being, to use Jewelle Gomez' words, 'sexually aggressive wet nurses.'"[38] This characterization of African women throughout history likely led many men to having more sexualized thoughts of these women.

Returning to the question posed earlier: Why were these women portayed in the way they were? Postcards from Africa in general were made for a few reasons: "distorting social ideas, promoting empire, justifying colonialism, and misrepresenting indigenous peoples and cultures." They did this in order to "nurture the

belief in European superiority."[39] The portrayal of the women in the postcards is very important to see how they distorted social ideas, justified colonialism, and misrepresented people and cultures. Something important to note is that these postcards were made for "European and North American audiences — without the knowledge of the subjects," meaning that the people in these photos did not know that these photos will be used this way. When discussing this with the co-curator Prita Meier

"'CAN YOU IMAGINE A PRIVATE FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH BEING TURNED INTO A TOURIST SOUVENIR?'"

for an exhibition called, "World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts Across the Indian Ocean" at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, he asked the question, "'Can you imagine a private family photograph being turned into a tourist souvenir?'"[40] Not only this, but it is clear that many of the postcards were sexualized. With the first 2 postcards, the women were portrayed with their breasts being shown to the camera. Considering how many white men sexualized African women, it is clear that postcards like the first 2 were shown in order to achieve this goal. These women in the first 2 postcards were also shown as more able to do labor based on their location outside, which helped show the idea the characterization of African women shown in Lugones of them being, "a gamut of sexual aggression and perversion, and as strong enough to do any sort of labor."[41] The sexualization was also done with postcards of other Eastern African countries, not just ones in the Ethiopian area. In some of the postcards of Swahili women from the exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, the women were given money "to stretch out in suggestive poses."[42] This portrayal of the women helps strengthen the narrative that African women are allegedly, extremely sexual beings, which results in European men wanting to "'have access to these exotic people. Especially exotic women,'" which, when combined with their ideas of African women being "inferior" to white women, likely led to not only the justification of them colonizing these women, but also many of the potential rapes that happened to these women.[43] This likely also led to a great need to control these women, and make them more inline with Western norms. This need for control eventually leads to the portrayal of the women in all white shown in the latter 2 postcards.

These postcards show women as more feminine by the standards of the time with the women's accessories and their overall appearance. This shift to more Western ideas of femininity shows the need men had during this time to control African women. During the colonial era, a lot of white men were trying to control the "'4 basic human areas'" as described with Quijano's coloniality of power.[44] To do this, they had to create the definitions for men and women, which for women, was based a lot around their femininity. So when they started doing madamism, which "is a for-

mal cohabitation between an Italian man and an Ethiopian woman," they likely tried to control a lot more of what the Ethiopian women had to wear in order to make them look more feminine.[45] This eventually led to how the "Madama abissinia" was shown.[46] Even when these women started to get less sexualized, it is still possible that many men wanted these women for sexual reasons. While the postcards for the Swahili women were still fully dressed, they were still sexualized according to Meier. As she describes it, "'Postcards were [...] meant to fulfill European fantasies about Swahili women,' [...] 'They wanted a sexualized, sensual image of Africa.'"[47] This can likely be broadened to include much more than Swahili woemn when you consider the 4 postcards shown and discussed here. While this sexualization helped further the exploitation of African women, they can be seen much differently by others, whether it be the women in some of the pictures, or African people who see these photos today.

The colonization of Africa affected it much more than how women dressed and how they were thought of by colonizers , but also how the women themselves thought and acted. When it comes to the Swahili postcards, some of them were actually commissioned by women, where they still did more sexual poses. They did this in order to rebel against the familial traditions and expectations they had placed on them. As stated by Meier, "For the [person in the portrait], it was a beautiful, playful or even humorous portrait."[48] This is

Figure 11: Zanzibar Beauty. Photograph taken by A.C. Gomes & Son. Photograph taken before 1900.

important because it shows that women were influenced by Western ideas in some ways. To see how they did this, let's look at this postcard. The photograph was taken before 1900, but the postcard was printed between 1907 and 1908. It is labeled, "Zanzibar Beauty," and is from the Smithsonian Museum of African Art, specifically the exhibition, "World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts Across the Indian Ocean." She is shown in a dark-colored garb that is styled in very traditional East African patterns, as well as wearing some bracelets and necklaces. She is facing the camera, with a smile on her face with her hands on her hips. This would be seen as something very feminine by Western standards, but her expression differs from the women who were also shown in a very feminine way in the 3rd and 4th postcards. This feels more playful compared to the 4 postcards shown earlier, just as they were described earlier by Schreiber. The clothing these women wore, while covered "with elaborate patterns that might seem to be traditional to East Africa," were still made in factories from North America and Europe.[49] This shows how women living along the Swahili Coast at the time did take some influence from Westernization, allowing them more freedom with how they express themselves. According to the book written by Meier titled, "The Surface of Things: A History of Photography from the Swahili Coast," going to take pictures at a studio was considered a "popular leisure activity."[50] This form of expression reflects the start of an era of both Western influence, but the combining of it with their own culture that when shown to "'people from Mombasa or Zanzibar look at these images, they focus on the beauty and elegance and see the photographs as historical documents.'"[51] Maiar believes that these postcards not only, "'tell us about the history of photography in a seemingly faraway place, like the coast of Africa,' [...], 'But they also tell us a story about women's fashion'."[52]

When looking at these postcards from 1900s East Africa, it can be easy to see just how much they were used to affect the African women of the land. They were used by colonizers to sexualize women, push an agenda of colonization, and to manipulate how we saw African women as a whole. However, that only tells part of the story. While all women were subjected to the negative parts of this treatment, some women were influenced by it positively by using it as a way to express themselves freely. This would influence future generations in much more positive ways. While the European gaze was the more important part of these postcards, it's still important to see both the positives and negative parts of postcards to get a full understanding of them and why they were important for the presentation of these women.

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Edo peoples, Head of Iyoba, ca. 18th-19th century, brass (cast), iron, 53.3 x 26.7 x 27.3 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
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British soldiers of the Punitive Expedition display looted objects within the burnt remains of the Oba's compound. Photograph taken by Reginald Kerr Granville, Interior of Oba's compound burnt during siege of Benin City, 1897, Wikimedia commons.

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Photograph of Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde. https://www.goodreads.com/photo/author/2860318.Nkunzi_Zandile_Nkabinde

Image of the cover of the book, “Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma,” written by Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde. https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/S/compressed.photo.goodreads.com/books/1328691813i/6294845.jpg