

ON PHOTOGRAPHY

When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism. (And When It Still Is.)

By Teju Cole

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I first saw the photograph some years ago, online. Later, I tracked it down to its original source: “In Afric’s Forest and Jungle: Or Six Years Among the Yorubans,” a memoir published in 1899 by the Rev. R.H. Stone. It shows a crowd in what is now Nigeria, but what was then Yorubaland under British colonial influence. The caption below the photograph reads: “A king of Ejayboo. Governor of Lagos on right. For years the rulers of this fierce tribe made the profession of Christianity a capital crime.” This description is familiar in tone from anthropological literature of the period, though the photograph is hard to date precisely. “Ejayboo” is what we would nowadays spell as “Ijebu,” a subgroup of Yoruba. That catches my attention: I am Yoruba and also Ijebu. This picture is a time capsule from a world to which I am connected but had not seen before, a world by colonial encounter.

By the middle of the 19th century, through treaties and threats of force, the British had wrested control of the coastal city Lagos from its king. They then turned their efforts to improving access to the goods and services in the Yoruba hinterland. The Yoruba were already by that time a populous and diverse ethnic group, full of rivalrous kingdoms large and small, some friendly to the British, others less so.

Stone, a Virginian sent by the Southern Baptist Convention, lived among them — lived among us — for two spells, in 1859-63 and 1867-69, before, during and after the American Civil War. He had this to say about Yoruba people: “They are reasonable, brave and patriotic, and are capable of a very high degree of intellectual culture.” It is praise, but must be understood in the context of a statement he makes earlier in his book about living “among the barbarous people” of that part of the world. In any case, the Ijebu in the mid-19th century were largely wealthy traders and farmers who did not want to give the British right of way to the interior of the country; only through diplomacy, subterfuge and violence were they finally overcome.

This photograph was made in the aftermath. The white governor of Lagos — based on the plausible dates, it is probably John Hawley Glover — sits under an enormous umbrella. On one side of him is another high-ranking colonial officer. On the other side is the Ijebu king, or oba, probably the Awujale of the Ijebu kingdom, Oba Ademuyewo Fidipote.

The oba wears a beaded crown, but the beads have been parted and his face is visible. This is unusual, for the oba is like a god and must be concealed when in public. The beads over his face, with their interplay of light and shadow, are meant to give him a divine aspect. Why is his face visible in this photograph? Some contravention of customary practice has taken place. The dozens of men seated on the ground in front of him are visibly alarmed. Many have turned their bodies away from the oba, and several are positioned toward the camera, not in order to look at the camera but in order to avoid looking at the exposed radiance of their king.

The invention of the daguerreotype was announced in 1839. By the 1840s, photography had spread like wildfire and become a vital aspect of European colonialism. It played a role in administrative, missionary, scientific and commercial activities. As the Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera put it: “The camera has often been a dire instrument. In Africa, as in most parts of the dispossessed, the camera arrives as part of the colonial paraphernalia, together with the gun and the bible. ...”

Photography in colonized societies was not only a dire instrument. Subject peoples often adopted photography for their own uses. There were, for instance, a number of studios in Lagos by the 1880s, where elites could go to pose for portraits. But such positive side effects aside, photography during colonial rule imaged the world in order to study, profit from and own it. The colonial gaze might describe as barbarous both the oba’s beaded crown and his regal right to conceal himself. This was one of the repeated interactions between imperial powers and the populations that they sought to control: The dominant power decided that everything had to be seen and cataloged, a task for which photography was perfectly suited. Under the giant umbrella of colonialism, nothing would be allowed to remain hidden from the imperial authorities.

Imperialism and colonial photographic practices both flourished in the 19th century, and both extended themselves, with cosmetic adaptations, into the 20th. In 1960, during the horrific French war on Algeria, the French military assigned a young soldier, Marc Garanger, to photograph people in an internment camp in the Kabylia region of Northern Algeria. Thousands of people had been confined in the region under armed guard, and the French military commander had decreed that ID cards were mandatory. A picture of each prisoner was required. Many of the women were forced to remove their veils. These were women who did not wish to be seen, made to sit for photographs that were not for them. (Photography played a different military role in the numerous aerial reconnaissance missions by the French, which resulted in thousands of negatives mapping the region.)

Garanger’s photographs both record an injustice and occasion it. His alternative, not an easy one, would have been to refuse the order and go to prison. His pictures show us what we ought not to see: Young and old women, their hair free flowing or plaited, one face after the other, in the hundreds. They collectively emanate refusal. The women of Kabylia look through the photographer, certainly not considering

him an ally. Their gazes rise from the surface of the photograph, palpably furious.

When we speak of “shooting” with a camera, we are acknowledging the kinship of photography and violence. The anthropological photographs made in the 19th century under the aegis of colonial powers are related to the images created by contemporary photojournalists, including those who embed with military forces. Embedding is sometimes the only way to get a direct record, no matter how limited, of what is happening in an armed conflict. On occasion such an arrangement leads to images whose directness displeases the authorities, but a more common outcome has been that proximity to an army helps bolster the narrative preferred by the army.

Still, photographic reportage has the power to quicken the conscience and motivate political commitments. Examples abound of photographs acting as catalysts in the public’s understanding of vital issues, from the images of Bergen-Belsen in 1945 to the photograph of the Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi in 2015. And yet, perhaps even more insistently, on a day-by-day, week-by-week basis, photography implicitly serves the powers that be. To insist that contemporary photographic practice — and I mean to include a majority of the international news coverage in newspapers like this one — is generally made (and published) for the greater good is to misconstrue history, because it leaves out the question of “Good for whom?” Such pictures aren’t for their subjects any more than the photograph in Stone’s book was for the Ijebus and their king.

Certain images underscore an unbridgeable gap and a never-to-be-toppled hierarchy. When a group of people is judged to be “foreign,” it becomes far more likely that news organizations will run, for the consumption of their audiences, explicit, disturbing photographs of members of that group: starving children or bullet-riddled bodies. Meanwhile, the injury and degradation of those with whom readers perceive a kinship — a judgment often based on racial sympathy and class loyalties — is routinely treated in more circumspect fashion. This has hardly changed since Susan Sontag made the same observation in “Regarding the Pain of Others” (2003), and it has hardly changed because the underlying political relationships between dominant and subject societies have hardly changed.

Without confronting this inequality, this misconstrual of history, photography will continue to describe itself as one thing (a force for liberation) while obdurately remaining another (an obedient appendage of state power). It will continue to be like the organs of the state that “spread democracy” and change regimes. Even when it appears to go against the state, it will only do so selectively, quaintly, beautifully, piteously, in terms that do not question the right of the state to assert power.

For how long will these radically unequal societal realities endure? Many affecting photographs have been made during the huge waves of international migration of the past few years. These pictures issue, as usual, from the presumed rights of photographers to depict the suffering of people “out there” for the viewing of those “back home.” But in looking at these images — images of war, of starvation, of capsized boats and exhausted caravans — we must go beyond the usual frames of pity and abjection. Every picture of suffering should elicit a question stronger than “Why is this happening?” The question should be “Why have I allowed this to happen?”



Detail from Richard Mosse’s “Moria in Snow, Lesbos, Greece,” 2017. From Jack Shainman Gallery

This is what the scholar Ariella Azoulay calls the “citizenship” of photography, its ability, when practiced thoughtfully, to remind us of our mutual responsibilities. When I look at the bewildering photographs of refugee camps in Richard Mosse’s recent book, “The Castle,” I feel indicted. The imperial underpinnings of Mosse’s project are inescapable: Using military-grade thermal cameras, he makes extremely complex panoramic images (stitched together from hundreds of shots) of landscapes in the Middle East and Europe in which refugees have gathered or have been confined. His pictures echo the surveillance to which these bodies are already subjected. But the thermal imaging renders the images very dark, with the humans showing up as white shapes (almost like a negative). The picture conceals what it reveals. We see people, but they remain hidden.

This technique makes for uncanny images in which distressed people move about like the figures you see in dreams, indistinct but full of ghostly presence. At the Moria camp in Greece, it is snowing. We see a long snaking line of people, waiting. What are they waiting for? For some material handout, probably, for food or blankets or documents. But their waiting represents the deeper waiting of all those who have been confined in the antechamber of humanity. They are waiting to be allowed to be human.

Mosse’s images, formally striking as they are, are unquestionably part of the language of visual domination. With his political freedom of movement and his expensive technical equipment, he makes meticulous pictures of suffering that end up in exquisite books and in art galleries. He is not the first photographer to aestheticize suffering, nor will he be the last. And yet, by suppressing color, by overwhelming the viewer with detail, by evoking racial horror rather than prettily displaying it and by including in his work philosophical considerations of the scenes he shows — “The Castle” contains essays by Judith Butler, Paul K. Saint-Amour and Mosse himself and a poem by Behrouz Boochani — he does something quite different from most photojournalists. He unsettles the viewer.

Photography’s future will be much like its past. It will largely continue to illustrate, without condemning, how the powerful dominate the less powerful. It will bring the “news” and continue to support the idea that doing so — collecting the lives of others for the consumption of “us” — is a natural right. But with a project like “The Castle,” I have a little bit of hope that an ethic of self-determination can be restored. I have hope that the refugees of Moria, Athens, Berlin and Belgrade will gain a measure of privacy. The women of Kabylia will cover their faces and return to themselves as they wish to be. The oba’s beaded crown will fall back into place, shadowing his face. Photography writes with light, but not everything wants to be seen. Among the human rights is the right to remain obscure, unseen and dark.