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## INTRODUCTION

# SHAPE-SHIFTERS

**Most studies of photography** are fundamentally “terra-centric.” Often, a national or continental lens dominates—they tend to focus on “African,” “Senegalese,” or “Indian” photography, for example.<sup>1</sup> However, for people living on Africa’s coastlines and islands, photography was not a landed phenomenon. Instead, it was linked to seaborne trade and travel, especially in the late nineteenth century. Photography was primarily an artifact of transoceanic connectivity.<sup>2</sup> What does it mean to experience photography as oceanic? What is the significance of archipelagic space in shaping photographic meaning? In this book, I seek to answer these questions by examining the reception of photography in the main port cities of eastern Africa’s Swahili coast.

The first photographic technology that could withstand oceanic travel was the daguerreotype, made public in 1839 at the Academy of Science in Paris. Shortly thereafter, in 1846, a French naval officer named Charles Guillain arrived on Zanzibar Island with a camera, photo plates, and processing chemicals.<sup>3</sup> His daguerreotypes show diverse peoples, especially elite men and many enslaved persons, all of whom participated, directly or indirectly, in the expansion of the region’s Indian Ocean networks. Some photographs are portraits, with the names of the sitters being documented—but the majority of the daguerreotypes were meant to function as “ethnic types.” Guillain had been sent to the region by the Ministry of the Navy to advance France’s commercial ambitions. However, like many such state-sponsored overseas ventures, the search for new resources and profits was coupled with research support.

Guillain was one of the first Europeans to use the camera as an instrument of anthropological fieldwork. He wrote a three-volume tome titled *Documents sur l’histoire, la géographie, et le commerce de l’Afrique orientale*, still used by scholars of precolonial Africa. The work is a modern ethnographic treatise, with his daguerreotypes playing a prominent role.<sup>4</sup> A separate large-scale atlas of lithographs accompanies the text, in which each print is labeled “after a daguerreotype” (fig. 0.1), emphasizing the facticity of the images.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 0.1. Plate 30 of Charles Guillain, *Voyage à la côte orientale d'Afrique* (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, 1856).

However, Guillain's original daguerreotypes often hardly work as pictures; about half of them are imageless metal plates. Their surfaces bear smudges, scratches, swills, and dried drips and sprays (figs. 0.2–0.4). Even those that do work as representations hold onto faces and bodies only tenuously. This was not because Guillain was unskilled at processing daguerreotypes. Rather, the sea and the vagaries of maritime travel left their mark.<sup>6</sup> Just as Guillain's ship was entering a harbor, a strong wave swept over the deck, causing large amounts of seawater to seep into his supplies, including his photography equipment. Many of his extant portraits were damaged and his unused plates processed unpredictably for the rest of his time on the coast. But for French audiences, even the failed plates provided access to distant bodies. The plates, including those showing only liquid-like swirls, were archived and labeled with ethnic monikers, such as "Majeerteen," "Swahili," and "Chagga."<sup>7</sup> They became part of France's earliest anthropology museum, the National Museum of Natural History.



Fig. 0.2. Charles Guillain. Young Majeerteen girl, 1846. Daguerreotype,  $6\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$  in. (16 × 12 cm). Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Paris, France (PM000132).



Fig. 0.3. Charles Guillain. Swahili, 1846. Daguerreotype,  $6\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$  in. (16 × 12 cm). Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Paris, France (PM000159).



Fig. 0.4. Charles Guillain. Chagga in profile, 1846. Daguerreotype,  $6\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$  in. (16 × 12 cm). Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Paris, France (PM000127).

Perhaps the most compelling of Guillain’s photographic “failures” are two plates that hold the faint likeness of a young Zanzibari girl named Aziza (figs. 0.5 and 0.6). We know from Guillain’s account that she was an eight-year-old grandniece of Suleiman bin Ahmed, an important Busaidi official who lived in Zanzibar Stone Town. Guillain frequently used the courtyard of Suleiman’s house to stage photography sessions, although his ongoing



Fig. 0.5. Charles Guillain. Aziza, grandniece of the governor of Zanzibar, 1847. Daguerreotype, 6¼ × 4¾ in. (16 × 12 cm). Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Paris, France (PM000140).

Fig. 0.6. Charles Guillain. Aziza, grandniece of the governor of Zanzibar, 1847. Daguerreotype, 6¼ × 4¾ in. (16 × 12 cm). Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Paris, France (PM000139).

frustration (see chapter 2) was that most people refused his invitations to sit in front of his camera. Suleiman was one of the few elites who acquiesced, likely because he needed to develop new North Atlantic trade agreements for the Busaidi Sultanate, which had annexed Zanzibar in the 1830s. He sat for Guillain and gave permission for Aziza's photography session as a gesture of diplomatic goodwill and reciprocity.

Guillain's written account of Aziza is exacting—and disturbingly sexualized—lingering on her eyes, skin, and limbs. His narration of Aziza's body is almost microscopic, even going so far as to describe the beauty of her fingernails, explaining that they are tinged yellow from henna. According to him, their meetings also had an intense impact on her. He likens her encounter with her photographed self as a kind of shock: "Great was the surprise of the poor one when her image came out of the magic box."<sup>8</sup>

Guillain's words enframe Aziza, but the plates themselves are much more inscrutable. Aziza's face disappears into an opaque void, the milky

whites of her eyes just barely anchoring her face to the surface of the plate, which is covered by a veil of smudged fingerprints and dust and dirt traces (see fig. 0.5). Yet, the jewelry and the embroidery of her dress and shawl are rendered in great detail because their hard surfaces reflected light much better than her skin. Her ornament is compellingly tactile, especially in contrast to the ghostly qualities of her face. Certainly, the reasons her plates are not particularly successful likenesses have much to do with chance and contingency. Their accidental encounter with seawater, which degraded the images' qualities, also reveals something that is often left unrecognized: photographs are objects with remarkable shape-shifting qualities. These plates are all that remain of her, even while she is sublimated by them. Shipped across oceans as a collectible, she continues to be re-signified in Paris.

It was not long after Guillain's visit to the region's archipelagos that photography became part of local popular culture. For him and his European audiences, Guillain's daguerreotypes were primarily about picturing and evidentiary realism, but this is not how people in littoral eastern Africa related to photography, at least not during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Swahili coast residents avidly collected photographs, notably in the form of photo cartes and photo-based prints. These small sturdy commodities initially became available in Zanzibar Town, arriving via the mercantile networks that connected local port cities to other trade hubs across the western Indian Ocean. Mimetic modes of representation had few local precursors, although sculptors did create low-relief zoomorphic carvings in architectural settings. Despite the absence of such traditions, collecting photographs was a pastime embraced by locals, the majority of whom were Muslims.

I propose that to fully understand the intermediality of the photograph—its ability to be many things at once—we must look to societies and places that are often assumed to be peripheral to global aesthetic formations. Key to this book's reassessment of the history of photography is its emphasis on the itineracy of photographs across oceans and systems of signification. The local engagement with photography attests to archipelagic Africa's global interconnectivity and the emergence of a new world order driven by industrial capitalism. But what did—and does—it mean to the diverse communities living in this region? Why was the photograph so immediately desirable, especially given that before its introduction locals did not cherish or produce pictorial likenesses? This book explores the specific cultural dynamics that made individuals want to look at, touch, and display pictures of people, frequently strangers, in their homes.

It is often assumed that consuming photographs of distant people and places is a recent phenomenon or a hallmark of "the West." However, by the

mid-1850s glass-plate negatives, allowing for the printing of several versions, made collecting photographs a leisure activity across the world. We are used to considering the way colonizers deployed photography to exotify and objectify, but what about Africans or other non-Europeans? In Zanzibar, collecting photographs of strangers and foreign figures was a popular pastime by the 1860s. Locals enjoyed inviting Europeans and Americans to their homes, offering them Arab-style coffee and almond-infused sweetmeats and displaying their fashionable collections of imported objets d'art, which included boxes filled with cartes de visite of European princes, princesses, and other known personages.<sup>9</sup> A postcard from Lisbon (fig. 0.7), featuring a late nineteenth-century photograph of an unidentified European woman, illustrates this phenomenon. The postcard has "Beauty" printed on the back, transforming her likeness into a pleasing trope.<sup>10</sup> It now belongs to the Zanzibar National Archives, but it was originally part of the personal collection of a member of Zanzibar's Busaidi dynasty.

This book offers an alternative genealogy of photography's significance, not defined by Europe's imperial hold on the world or the medium's powers of representation.<sup>11</sup> It moves away from the "global" paradigm of photo history, which is underwritten by a model of center-periphery diffusionism. A history of photography told from the littoral edges of eastern Africa demonstrates that photography often provoked viewers and users to understand it as a thing in the world, not a representation of the world. When we treat photographs as pictures or depictions, they reveal much. What do they tell us if we do not see *into* them and instead focus on their role as objects and their relationship to materials in the world?<sup>12</sup> I consider the formation of modernity across many locales, although this book is not a story about technological transfer from Europe to the Global South or about stylistic differences between "Western" and African photography.<sup>13</sup> Rather, it is primarily a historical ethnography of the mercurial, shape-shifting qualities of the photograph. I focus on the meaning of photographs after the moment of their making. In doing so, I respond to photo historian Geoffrey Batchen's call to move beyond an emphasis on the intentions of photographers and to, instead, begin imagining the "possibility of a history of reception of photographs."<sup>14</sup> Photographs instantiate multiple experiences.<sup>15</sup>

Just as elsewhere in the world, photography's meaning in Africa moved between different systems of signification. Photographs can be reductive, turning people, their bodies, and experiences into static objects. The camera objectifies. The evidentiary efficacy of photography is why it was consistently used as a technology of exploration, propaganda, and bureaucracy during the colonization of Africa.<sup>16</sup> Photography endowed racist discourse with the





Fig. 0.7. Postcard from Lisbon. "Beauty," ca. 1900. 4 × 2½ in. (10 × 6.4 cm). Zanzibar National Archives, Tanzania.

power of the "real"; claims about the essential difference between the colonizer and colonized were anchored in the rhetoric of photographic objectivity. However, photography is deployed for diverse ends. While photography was and is a technology of empire, it is also a force of embodiment. That is, photographs are connected to bodies. Even photographs that do not depict people connote the body behind the camera, and the viewer's body is entangled with the photograph. Photographs powerfully materialize a person's presence, however mediated or even displaced; especially if one concentrates on the sitter in the photograph, questions of self and identity come into focus. For the past three decades, research on African photography has been dedicated to this topic and portraiture has dominated the field. While most Africanist research has centered on western Africa, Heike Behrend wrote groundbreak-

ing studies of portrait photography in coastal Kenya already in the early 1990s. This scholarship has been immensely generative and the emergence of global photo studies has been shaped in large part by the work of curators and scholars dedicated to African Studies.<sup>17</sup> Yet, so much attention has been paid to presenting photographs as positive manifestations of African personhood and identity that other aspects remain unexplored, even sublimated.<sup>18</sup>

By delving into the early history of photography on the Swahili coast, *The Surface of Things* uncovers very different meanings and uses of photography. Certainly, by perhaps the 1920s and 1930s, photography was mediated by the proliferation of another mass-media medium: cinema. Urban populations had access to cinema houses and exhibitions of moving pictures, a key form of entertainment for both the rich and the working poor.<sup>19</sup> Going to get one's portrait taken by a commercial photographer was a popular leisure activity adopted by residents of big cities such as Mombasa. However, during its early life on the coast, photography expanded material desires born of maritime commercial exchanges. Particularly before the colonial period, photography was imbricated in Indian Ocean commodity cultures. In the 1860s, photo cartes and pictorial chromolithographs first arrived as trade imports in Zanzibar Town, likely shipped from Bombay and sold in local markets with other cargo, such as textiles, housewares, and decorations destined for the realm of bodily display or to beautify interiors. In fact, its exotic and foreign qualities were what first attracted local consumers. Like other coveted imports, such as Asian trade ceramics and textiles, photography was a sea-borne artifact. As we shall see in chapters 6 and 7, photography's relationship to imported textiles and adornment was especially important.<sup>20</sup>

Photography did not connect to preexisting picture-making practices. Despite the absence of such traditions, looking at, touching, and sharing photographs was a pleasure instantly welcomed by locals. Rather than being aligned with pictorial representation, photography was primarily about the tactile pleasure of objects and the power to put objects—and people—in motion. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources and photographs suggest that consuming photographs was considered a decorous pastime, which was intimately linked to homemaking. They often communicated in ways that had to do with their ability to act as decoration, laden with textures and surface minutiae. I treat this not as incidental, but as constitutive to photography's ontology.

### **The Problem of the “Foreign”**

Ninth-century Islamic monuments and Arabic religious inscriptions can be found at several ancient sites in the archipelagos of Kenya and Tanzania.

By the eleventh century, many coastal and island communities had become majority Muslim societies, and as elsewhere in Muslim Africa, Islamic institutions facilitated transregional connections and alliances. Local Muslim polities belonged to the Islamic *umma*, or the global community of Muslims. Islamic judicial texts and the Arabic writing system played important roles in structuring exchanges with other Muslim societies across great distances. Also, Swahili became a written language through the use of the Arabic script. Evidence of Swahili literacy dates back to as early as the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Arabic and Swahili texts and oral traditions intertwined in myriad ways, and locals produced cosmopolitan works of literature and poetry. The people living in eastern Africa's ports and entrepôts shaped Africa's trade and cultural exchange with the Indian Ocean world for centuries, while also creating unique littoral and archipelagic traditions. They crafted material cultures, built coral stone monuments, and nurtured world-views that gave rise to what can be described as the African Indian Ocean cultural world.

Islam's early presence in the region was enabled by Indian Ocean trading systems, and itinerant Muslim scholars and merchants traveled back and forth between continents, their movement beholden to the monsoon winds.<sup>21</sup> Canonical oral histories celebrate Muslim men from overseas who settled on the coast in the distant past. The Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and other parts of Muslim Asia are important symbolic places in the local imaginary, although the social geography of the African heartland is much more dominant. Expressive arts, familial structures, and customary practices along the Swahili coast are in consort with those of the mainland. The Swahili language, which has loan words from diverse languages, is Bantu in structure and grammar and very close to other African languages such as Pokomo, Digo, and Giriama.

Swahili coast communities tend to be multilingual and they code-switch with ease. They understand and contribute to many societies across Africa and Asia. This polysemic character has confounded academics since the colonial period, who often perceive it as a paradox. Many still seek to categorize and define what exactly is foreign versus what is native about Swahili coast heritage and arts.<sup>22</sup> This is not just a matter of academic debates. Racialized notions of culture are pervasive in postcolonial Africa. In this regard, Islam is often presented as being "non-native," even though it has been practiced across the African continent by Africans for centuries. Immigrant Muslims have played an important role, although local Bajuni, Mijikenda, and Swahili communities nevertheless constitute the Muslim majority of coastal Kenya. Yet their contributions to Islamic heritage are still marginalized. This has

much to do with the ways the slavery-derived hierarchies have been recast through religion.

Arab descent is still often conflated with Islamic authority.<sup>23</sup> Bajuni, Mijikenda, and Swahili activists have sought to counter this trope, emphasizing their authority and expertise as Muslims. Similar to other African Muslims, they claim Arab or Persian men as the primordial “founders” of their lineages, while also asserting African ancestral belonging. However, having several origins or affiliations is hard to reconcile with contemporary identity politics. Biological conceptions of identity dominate definitions of postcolonial citizenship in Africa, leading to exclusionary ethnocentrism in times of political strife. Full Kenyan citizenship, with its accompanying rights, is implicitly tied to being recognized as a member of an “indigenous tribe.”<sup>24</sup> To this day, Swahili coast Muslims are often required to provide additional proof of African ancestry to get passports or identification documents. The Kenyan nation-state remains suspicious of its Muslims citizens because aspects of their identity, religion, or culture appear foreign to Africa. Similarly, it is common to view national culture as something that must be protected against outside influences. Much of the Kenyan state’s narration of heritage and identity reproduces a set of binary or oppositional differences, such as modernity versus tradition, or native versus foreign.

Scholarly assessments of photography in Africa are underwritten by similar concepts and concerns. The fact that photography originates overseas always raises the specter of the foreign, and questions of African authenticity continue to shape scholarly work on photography. The importance of port cities and maritime networks is certainly acknowledged. However, documenting the biographies of African photographers or demonstrating that photography was amalgamated into preexisting African artistic traditions, such as figural sculpture, are abiding themes.

Yet, littoral societies are more than mere conduits that facilitated the Africanization of photography, and they exceed prevailing definitions of Africanness. In this book, I do not demarcate what is “African” or “indigenous” about photography. Instead, I emphasize multidirectional trajectories. Photographs are layered things, holding the entangled histories of Africa, Asia, and Europe. I draw on the analytic framework developed by anthropologist Nidhi Mahajan, whose multisited research with sailors traversing the western Indian Ocean has led her to think “through relations between ship, land, and sea.”<sup>25</sup> She practices a method she calls “archipelagic ethnography,” which is “wet with the sea but still attuned to dynamics on land.”<sup>26</sup> She never loses sight of the fact that most people embrace seaborne mobility only temporarily, to make life better at home. Even for diasporic communities, the

ties that bind are anchored in terrestrial places, such as a village, town, or ancestral landscape. While archipelagos and ports can be celebrated for an openness to others and transcultural connectivity, they are also shaped by social hierarchies and the struggle for sovereignty, including territorial and bodily. There is no port city or island in the western Indian Ocean that is not touched by histories of slavery, empire, and colonization.

It is important to highlight that no evidence indicates that locals considered the making of, or looking at, photographic likenesses as something fundamentally un-Islamic.<sup>27</sup> There might be exceptions, of course; however, Swahili coast Muslims did not struggle to reconcile photography with their faith. Religious texts express concerns about the relationship between human images and idolatry, but figural portraiture was already common in many Muslim societies before mechanically produced images became predominant. Clerics and scholars in 1860s Egypt, to whom Swahili coast Muslims often looked to in matters of religion, even praised photography's truth-claims, endorsing its use in matters of law, citizenship, and governance.<sup>28</sup> Local reservations about photography centered on separating men and women, including their gazes, in the photographic encounter. As will be discussed in chapter 3, Muslim women did not want their photographic likenesses to circulate beyond their family, a sentiment certainly expressed by many women today.

## **Methods and Sources**

*The Surface of Things* focuses on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photography and is based on more than a decade of historical and ethnographic research. I first arrived in Mombasa as a student in 1998 and have been returning ever since to study, research, and sometimes, to just visit. Originally, I was interested in photography only as primary evidence for my dissertation on Swahili coast architecture and urban history. During 2004–2005, I lived in both Mombasa and Zanzibar for a year and I was eager to find historical images documenting the transformation of urban life during the colonial period. I spent many days and hours at the Zanzibar National Archives, Kenya National Library, and National Museum of Kenya. Their photographic collections are varied and dispersed, yet I mostly discounted what I saw as “colonial” photography that revealed little about local life. It took me some years to think and see differently.

My research on photography can be described as meandering and informal compared with my dissertation research, which featured structured formal interviews. The types of photographs I considered changed many times and my perspectives on the topic shifted radically over the years. Since

2012, I have resumed regular visits to Kenya and Zanzibar, though not solely for the purpose of photography research. I would come to plan exhibitions or to work on institutional collaborations. Although archival research in the region's public archives and libraries has been important, another "method" was socializing in Mombasa Old Town. I visited dozens of homes to look at old photographs, yet conversations were never just about photography. Mohamed Mchulla Mohamed, with whom I have collaborated on projects since 1998, facilitated much of this. A much-respected elder, he introduced me to new people and searched out family photography collections. Trained in archeology, he has a vast knowledge of Swahili coast heritage and his wisdom and generosity have shaped this book in profound ways.

Starting in 2015, I also visited Oman and many European countries. The upheavals of colonialism and postcolonialism mean that Swahili coast photographs have been taken to many other places around the world. The photographs that are featured in this book include albums, photo cartes, postcards, glass-plate negatives, and snapshots from more than thirty public and private archives in Tanzania, Kenya, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands, Portugal, the U.K., and the United States. Most have not been previously published. Many are clearly public or private portraits; however, I do not focus on portraiture as an analytical category. This was a major course reversal, as originally my research stretched into the 1960s and 1970s, when studio portrait photography was in its heyday. Indeed, even today Mombasans display striking black-and-white portraits from this era in their homes. Mombasa's most celebrated photo portraitist was Narayandes Vithaldas Parekh, whose importance has long been recognized by locals and outsiders.<sup>29</sup> Going to Parekh Studio, in the heart of Mombasa's bustling commercial district, was a common pastime—it cost only a few shillings to get three prints of one studio sitting. A studio visit could be related to birthdays, graduations, weddings, and Eid holidays. Young people also went with their friends or lovers, often without the knowledge of their parents.

Many Mombasans freely shared their photographs and allowed me to make copies, although they often found my interest in their family portraits strange. Some agreed that their stories and expertise could be featured in this book, but not their photographs. Others gave permission, albeit with stipulations—such that I digitally add headscarves onto the likenesses of their mothers and grandmothers (as women did not cover their hair in photographs during the immediate postindependence era). I became aware that people did not enjoy having my "ethnographic lens" trained on their family albums and keepsakes.<sup>30</sup>

Beginning in the 1990s, academic researchers and collectors started buying local studio portraits. This also made my project suspicious, as the entire photo archive of Parekh Studio had been sold to European buyers (Lamu photography studio archives have met a similar fate). These sales happened after Parekh had emigrated from Kenya to the U.K. in 1970s and his studio was sold to someone else. The new owner sold Parekh's archive, including caches of hundreds of negatives, proof prints, or unclaimed prints. Many of these had sleeves and envelopes that identified the person who had ordered them, but not the names of the sitters. These photos have subsequently been reprinted, published, and exhibited in Europe and the United States as anonymous likenesses. The erasure of individual biographies also made their transformation into collectibles more seamless.<sup>31</sup> I, too, participated in this phenomenon. I co-curated an exhibition in 2017–2018 in the United States that also included Parekh Studio portraits from a private collection in Europe.<sup>32</sup> Kenyans who have seen these exhibitions or their accompanying books responded in different ways. Curators and archivists at museums have tended to take the position that these archives would have been destroyed without outsiders buying them. Many locals recognized their own parents in these books and expressed delight at being reunited with lost family portraits, which they photographed with their smartphones to share with relatives globally. Others called it a form of neocolonial exploitation. One individual considered pursuing legal action against a collector because he was upset that his mother's portrait, with her hair uncovered, had been published and exhibited in Italy.

These experiences and critiques affected my journey in writing this book. I progressively embraced historical distance and my interest shifted to less personal and private photographs. Locals have different opinions about the fact that the Swahili coast has been hosting an abundance of university-based fieldworkers since the colonial period. Nearly everyone I know in coastal Kenya and Zanzibar has commented on this matter, even if obliquely, and some made direct comparisons between me and other academics they have met or heard about. My interest in photographs has also puzzled many; even some of my most supportive mentors found it an odd topic, as photography is often seen as just the effluvia of daily life. However, there is growing interest in photographs as heritage. A robust community of public historians living in Old Town Mombasa and Zanzibar Stone Town have turned to old photographs in recent years, building their own collections that focus mostly on Muslim public figures, old monuments, and themes of past grandeur. They found my interests significantly different from theirs; yet we nevertheless agreed that the photographs from before the independence era are beguiling, even undecipherable. As Mr. Mchulla put it, they hold “a different world and time.”<sup>33</sup>

Over the years, I increasingly gravitated toward “dissonant” photographs that do not connect to celebrated pasts or public historical consciousness. For instance, I consider photographs that exist only as glass-plate negatives in a private collection in Mombasa and photographs that foreground hard truths about slavery and violence against women and girls. This means that the history of photography in this book is just one of the many stories that could be told about photography on the Swahili coast. My fascination with precolonial photographs made me aware that local uses of photography conveyed opaque, sometimes intractable meanings that exist at the intersection of objectification and embodiment. It became evident that even local photographic portraiture, although seemingly expressing the sitter’s subjectivity, was often about quite the opposite. Surprisingly, it was about the one thing scholars are usually trying to move beyond: the surface of things.<sup>34</sup>

### **On the Surface**

Surfaces and their effects are not new topics in studies of photography or art. Art historians and scholars of media have considered the surface to focus on questions of ontology and the making of modernism.<sup>35</sup> Cultural anthropologists have also been committed to thinking with and about the photographic surface, albeit for other reasons. Christopher Pinney, in his influential “Notes from the Surface of the Image,” which also drew on artist and art historian Olu Oguibe’s concept of “the substance” of photography, argued that postcolonial Indian and Malian studio portraits are all about the conflation of two surfaces: the surface of the image and the surface of the sitter in the image, ultimately generating an anticolonial style—one that refutes the figuration of colonized bodies.<sup>36</sup> For Pinney, Seydou Keïta’s photographs are characterized by a modernist “surfacism,” which accentuates the materiality of the photographic image.<sup>37</sup> He contends that the intense patterning of the textiles worn by Keïta’s sitters and used as studio backdrops merge on the surface of the photograph, creating a screen “where everything springs out of the photograph toward the viewer, rather than a field of spatio-temporal certainty receding within the image.”<sup>38</sup> In Pinney’s analysis, Keïta’s portraits are not just pictures but also screens of refusal—they do not reproduce the colonizer’s way of seeing the world. His ideas have been immensely generative. His agenda, to present vernacular Global South photography as a negation or even a “deformation” of Cartesian perspectivalism, has led a whole generation of scholars to think about surfacism as an alternative to and even the rejection of Euro-American photography traditions. Art historian Krista Thompson’s work on contemporary Black Caribbean and African American photography exemplifies this trend.<sup>39</sup> She explores the manifestation of a series of surfacist



aesthetics, arguing that they are part of a distinct African diasporic visual economy that undermines the visualization of Black bodies as abject objects in North American representational regimes. Besides looking at the fusion of bodily and photographic surfaces, Thompson adds a third: the afterimage produced through performances in front of and with the camera. For instance, in her analysis of the use of lens-based technologies in Jamaican dancehall events, she suggests that revelers transform their bodies into luminous surfaces that in part appropriate and also undo Euro-American modes of photographic portraiture. Through such acts, they create new sites for the making of selfhood—ones that exist beyond pictorial representation.<sup>40</sup>

I am indebted to the groundbreaking work of Pinney and Thompson; however, my argument is that Swahili coast users of photography were not concerned with overcoming or rejecting the North Atlantic world's visual economy. They never saw themselves in terms of colonizer versus colonized, and they had little interest in countering misrepresentations created by Europeans in the metropole.<sup>41</sup> Rather, they cared about photography's artifice and mobility.

Locals stressed photography's surfaces to engage other societies on their own terms. In mercantile centers such as Zanzibar and Mombasa, photography was defined by a playful—and, at times, repressive—impenetrability. Photography was folded into a series of local practices that emphasized the surface of things, their textures, and the sensual qualities of the exotic and faraway. Photographs could be collected and displayed like so many other commodities—and people—that had long been coveted by residents of eastern Africa's archipelagic entrepôts. Through photography, old and new practices intertwined, and the difference between sentient beings and things became less clear.

In photographs of the enslaved, the surfaces of bodies became interchangeable with the commodity's surface and the photograph's surface. Patrons also welcomed photography's distancing qualities. They knowingly played with photography's ability to create a contingent—even superficial—persona. While the reductive nature of photography, its ability to obscure interiority, is frequently criticized, Swahili coast consumers appreciated this aspect—albeit for reasons that would not have been understood by North Atlantic viewers, as it is not a stylistic aspect of the photograph's "look." To understand these surface effects requires being attentive to what people *do* with photographs.

Ultimately, I seek to unmoor the study of photography from the self. I start with a simple point that fundamentally reframes what aspects of the photograph we consider important: even though the photographed body

holds a privileged place in many studies of the self and personhood, photographs are inadequate sources for understanding either. Feeling, being, and philosophical and ethical commitments—key registers of personhood—are more ineffable. This book centers on lived experience. However, it does not attempt to delve into someone’s subjectivity or inner life. I take seriously the opacity of photography, or the way it only gives access to surfaces. I draw inspiration from philosopher Édouard Glissant’s formulation of the “right to opacity” as a form of being that evades transparency and legibility. His work challenges received ideas about “cross-cultural” understanding, reminding us that the desire to understand another’s identity can also be a form of surveillance.<sup>42</sup>

### **Organization**

The book comprises seven chapters, each considering different aspects of photography’s role as surface and object. The first chapter, “Itinerant Photographs,” lays out how photography related to Indian Ocean commerce. Photographs traveled across oceans as mobile objects, coming to rest in the spaces of daily life. The ports and people of maritime South Asia are central to photography’s early presence in Africa. The first photographs consumed in coastal eastern Africa came from Bombay. The first photographers working in both Zanzibar and Mombasa were itinerant Goans. The well-to-do families of these port cities created interior spaces filled with Asian imports and exotic ornament, which by the 1860s included photo cartes and other photographic prints. Since the foreign was a crucial aesthetic category, photography was consumed for its enigmatic strangeness. This chapter also sets the groundwork for the following chapters, explaining how photography was embedded in local and global patterns of human commodification and exploitation. The photograph, through its ability to hold onto bodies—gave rise to new ways of forcing people to act as things.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 delve into why the photographic archive of the Swahili coast is dominated by the bodies of young women and girls. In this archive, beauty is interwoven with terror. Today, we understand the violence of representation and we can analyze the colonial and male gaze. However, what do we know about female experiences in Zanzibar, Mombasa, or Lamu? Who forced girls and teenagers to stand in front of the camera, often disrobed, their faces brimming with pain and fear? To begin answering these questions, chapter 2, “Stilled Life,” tracks the making and use of such photographs by men in Africa. I detail specific cases in which men used physical, psychological, and sexual violence against young women to get the photographs they desired.

Chapter 3, “Oceans of Postcards,” charts what happens to photographs once they become detached from specific people and places and start circulating as postcards. Postcards of young girls fed the North Atlantic demand for libidinal and racist mass media. There are so many “Swahili beauties” photographs because foreign and local men felt free to coerce and exploit enslaved girls and young women. Yet, female voices and experiences have not been accorded space in the written remains of slavery or colonialism. One might assume that they did not know about their commodification as postcards. However, some were indeed aware and hated it. As detailed in the second part of chapter 3, one enslaved woman does leave an archival trace, and upon learning that she was being sold in the streets of Zanzibar as a postcard, she was horrified. For locals, the hypervisibility of the postcard was equated with sex work and depravity. She was afraid of the repercussions. I conclude the chapter by considering what it means that today these postcards are being re-signified as positive images of Black womanhood in Europe and North America.

Chapter 4, “The Ornamental Body,” explores local systems of slavery and grapples with how slavery shaped Swahili consumption patterns, especially the demand for exotic women and children. The chapter also discusses different forms of women’s work—including aesthetic labor—and how photography intersected with forced-labor regimes in the mercantile milieu of port cities. Photographic objectification found fertile ground because it was a Swahili tradition to display richly ornamented women for ocular pleasure.

The second half of the book shifts toward what sitters did with or wanted from their photos, especially in the context of Indian Ocean commodity exchanges, diaspora, and migration. It shows how studio portrait photos worked as agents of persuasion, play, and artifice.

Chapter 5, “Trading the Gaze,” charts the mobility and circulation of studio photos from the vantage point of elite experience. The Busaidi sultans, who were also profit-oriented merchants, embraced photographic representation already in the 1860s. They bestowed their photo cartes de visite as gifts to trading partners and would-be allies. In doing so, they did not emulate “Westerners”; instead, they expanded local gifting practices into the modern world of industrial capitalism. However, their creative deployment of the photographic artifact soon came to an end. The sultans were stripped of sovereignty and photographic authorship as the British asserted their control over them. Their British handlers told them how to pose and with whom. Their studio photos became kitschy souvenirs of late empire, suffused with Orientalist prettiness. They, too, became circulating postcards and ornamental objects to be pasted into memorabilia albums. Chapter 6, “Sartorial

Subversion,” examines the intersection between fashion and photography in relationship to the racial politics of public life in the East Africa Protectorate (present-day Kenya) and British Protectorate of Zanzibar. I consider how young men and boys struggled for sartorial autonomy. Photographs make visible their aesthetic politics and how they searched for an internationalist style that subverted their racialization. Young men loved embodying the transnational dandy aesthetic and they adopted the mercurial restlessness of urban fashions, but Europeans wanted them to dress like identifiable “tribals.” The chapter also examines how Europeans fought hard to police local fashions and the representation of African bodies in mass media. They created and collected countless photographs showing themselves surrounded by colonized Africans dressed in “native costumes.”

Chapter 7, “Pose and Appearance,” argues that photography on the Swahili coast, as elsewhere in the world, was also constituted by rupture and revolution. Elite women and the working poor commissioned photographs of themselves to reject established protocols and norms. They transformed local uses of photography by refusing to be pretty objects or respectable subjects. These photographs should not be understood as giving us insight into their inner lives or even their social identity. In fact, sitters welcomed the ease and temporary qualities of photographic performance. Rather than making photography a performance of identity, they used it to craft theatrical likenesses, ones that emphasized exteriority.

A brief epilogue, “Objects in the World,” considers the methodological implications of studying photography in terms of itinerancy and mobility. I suggest that an oceanic framework offers new analytical tools for the discipline of art history and related fields.

*Readers of this book are asked to reckon with injustice. Chapters 2 and 4 focus on photographs that document violence against vulnerable individuals. My aim is to address the violence that underlies the creation and dissemination of these images. Some photographs in chapter 2 have been altered due to the way women and children were forced into violating visibility by the photographers. Screens have been added to protect their bodies.*

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# ITINERANT PHOTOGRAPHS

**The islands and archipelagos** of eastern Africa are shaped by histories of transregional trade and migration, where people, ideas, and materials from all over the world converge and intermingle. Its port cities are porous sites, existing at the nexus of continental and oceanic worlds. Maritime trade engendered a worldly aesthetic, especially in the interior decoration of upper-class stone mansions dotting the seafront of port cities. Locals coveted goods that gave material access to far-flung places. In the 1860s, photo cartes and pictorial chromolithographs were sold in local markets. Photographs were mobile objects connected to overseas trade. The increasing availability of nonessential goods—objects meant for social communication, including photographs—was linked to capitalist globalization. During the height of the nineteenth-century economic boom, cheap goods flooded local markets, which also, partly, gave new life to old ways of consuming “the world.”<sup>1</sup>

The use and display of photographs intersected with developments in maritime commerce and technology. Already by the 1830s, the United States and the Hanseatic ports of present-day Germany had signed commercial treaties with Zanzibar’s Busaidi sultans, who worked with South Asian financiers to invest in the ivory trade and slave-based cash-crop plantations, monetarizing the entire east African economy and expanding the commodity markets of the region. During this period, African consumers wanted manufactured goods and bodily adornments, especially textiles. For centuries, Swahili coast residents favored Gujarati cottons and silks shipped from Surat. However, by the first half of the nineteenth century consumer desire and fashions began to fluctuate radically. Kutchi textiles became fashionable for a decade, followed by the preference for American cottons for a few years, then English cloth. Nevertheless, South Asian manufacturers and traders continued to provide the vast majority of the cloth consumed on the Swahili

coast. Bombay-manufactured cottons even imitated styles from other places.<sup>2</sup> Fashion and photographs came to mediate each other, serving as intertwined artifacts of beauty and power.

New shipping and communication infrastructures accelerated cross-oceanic exchanges. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the laying of telegraph lines made trade and exchange across multiple seas and oceans quick and easy. A regular schedule of interoceanic steam lines connected Zanzibar to London, Hamburg, and Marseille.<sup>3</sup> Asian-owned steamships transported goods and people between eastern Africa, the Gulf, and the Malabar Coast, and even Rangoon. For instance, Cowasjee Dinshaw, a Parsi merchant, owned dozens of steamships that connected Zanzibar to Mogadishu, Aden, and Bombay.<sup>4</sup> Merchant communities of more modest means continued to use sailing vessels, known as *dhow*s, often participating in “illicit” trading networks beyond the purview of state.<sup>5</sup> The movement of manufactured goods between the major ports of the western Indian Ocean expanded in the hands of South Asians. As the main providers of cheap imports, they introduced new fashions and cultural practices to both rich and poor communities, helping to shape new consumer societies, whose tastes also became interlinked.

### **Asia in Africa**

Photographs did not register as “Western”; rather, they tell us about Africa’s relationship to maritime Asia. Itinerant South Asians mediated the Swahili coast reception of photography. Not only were photographs imported from Asia but it was Catholic Goans who introduced the practice of sitting for one’s portrait. Despite being a small minority, they dominated local photography production well into the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> They were Portuguese subjects and were particularly adept at being trustworthy to different communities living in the African Indian Ocean world. Their migration patterns often followed the expansion of imperial powers and the growth of new ports. Two Goan immigrants, Pereira de Lord and A. C. Gomes, are frequently credited with opening the first commercial studios in Zanzibar Town sometime in the late 1860s or early 1870s, followed by other Goans, including the brothers J. B. and Felix Coutinho and E. C. Dias. In their shops-cum-photo-studios, they and their families produced portraits for a range of clients. They also sold stocks of “native studies” albumen prints and picture postcards. By the 1900s, Goans also sold cameras and film and offered printing services.<sup>7</sup>

Although it is often assumed that Goan photographers came directly from present-day India, many had been living in other western Indian Ocean ports before they moved to Zanzibar or Mombasa. A. C. Gomes first opened a

studio in 1869 in Aden, where he also served as a photographer to the British government.<sup>8</sup> He and his family migrated to Zanzibar sometime in the 1870s, as British interests in the Indian Ocean region shifted from the coastal towns of the Arabian Peninsula to the Swahili coast. By the 1890s, a section of Zanzibar's bustling commercial center was called Portuguese Street (today Gizenga Street), where Goans had settled and owned storefronts.<sup>9</sup> Europeans often viewed Goans as part of their world. A German man who visited Zanzibar in 1893 included Goan photographers as part of his glowing description of the vibrancy of "European life" evident in town.<sup>10</sup>

The Christian identity and the mixed South Asian and Portuguese heritage of Goans typically afforded them greater liberties than other imperial subjects, allowing them to live as "elite subalterns."<sup>11</sup> They owned hotels and bars, worked in the colonial service industry, and earned accolades for their culinary expertise, which had an impact on local cuisine as well. High-caste Goans also held prominent roles as engineers, educators, bureaucrats, and physicians. Some patronized "whites-only" clubs and built personal alliances with influential British and Omani families.<sup>12</sup> Europeans also felt threatened by Goans since some transcended the racialized boundaries of colonial society. Their way of being in the world suggested that descent and race were not essential to "being European." A German living in Zanzibar in the 1890s expressed this pervasive anxiety: "They are unpopular among Europeans since they are deficient copies of themselves."<sup>13</sup>

Most significant to this study, Goans also enjoyed great success in the local fashion industry and as tastemakers. Fashion and photography are of course deeply connected in myriad ways worldwide. In many parts of Africa, including on the Swahili coast, tailoring and photography were intertwined crafts before the rise of digital photography.<sup>14</sup> Goan tailors achieved remarkable success in Mombasa and Zanzibar by providing consumers access to transimperial stylishness. Goan tailoring was as popular as Goan photography, and Goans often moved between these two professions. The work of Goan tailors was all the rage among local youth beginning in the 1910s. Young Muslim women wore body-skimming dresses, skirts, and blouses, albeit not in the streets or other public places. Male teenagers and young men donned brimmed hats and lapel jackets to saunter through the streets of Zanzibar and Mombasa. Goan tailoring remained sought-after into the 1960s, although only elite families could afford ordering custom-made suits from them. Even today, Mombasans share nostalgic memories about the ways Goans always knew the latest styles, patterns, and silhouettes.

Both Goan tailoring and photography were foreign, and their popularity was not an uncontested phenomenon, especially since sartorial acts are also



expressions of public identities. For example, Muslim clerics in Mombasa expressed hostility toward Goans, which I discuss in more detail in chapter 7. They criticized young people in their own communities for patronizing Goan businesses and dressing like them. Clerics feared that the new fashion choices of the youth foreshadowed mass conversions and the loss of Islam. These fears, which in part express the conservatism of old men, also must be understood as a response to colonialism. Issues of cultural authenticity and religion dominated local discussions because political and economic independence had been completely lost by the first decades of the twentieth century, ostensibly the beginnings of the high colonial period. “Outside influence” was increasingly associated with colonial exploitation and cultural imperialism. Foreign things, such as fashions, took on an air of violence in the eyes of elders.

### **The Transoceanic Context**

Photography’s global reach was in part propelled by the dynamics of modern imperialism. From the mid-1890s to about the 1930s, postcards and albumen prints turned the bodies of Swahili coast people into transoceanic commodities. Cheaply printed in factories in Europe, thousands of picture postcards featuring locals circulated across oceans with unprecedented ease and speed during the colonial period (see chapter 3). They gave voyeuristic pleasure to North Atlantic audiences. They fulfilled a desire for lifelike models of exotic people, replicants who existed at the intersection of empiricism, spectacle, and objectification. Ethnographers and anthropologists experimented with how they could make such mass-produced imagery work more like material evidence of racial difference. They collected them as specimens alongside artifacts of daily life. It is not by accident that ethnography museums established during the colonial era also hold the largest and oldest photography archives of people from the Swahili coast.

Many postcards show Swahili coast girls and teenagers. Their bodies and clothes are often colored in luscious hues. These postcards, however, are not entirely separate from “the local.” “Western” postcards regularly look identical to or even were based on locally commissioned photographs. The same Goan photographers who worked with locals to create their portraits also produced the vast majority of “native studies” postcards and prints. A. C. Gomes, Coutinho Brothers, Pereira de Lord, and J. P. Fernandes sent their photographs to postcard-production factories in Hamburg.<sup>15</sup> Germany commanded a dominant position in the global market for picture postcards, producing billions annually until about the 1920s.<sup>16</sup> J. B. Coutinho simply sent local portraits overseas to be reproduced as postcards, subsequently selling

them as touristic souvenirs. He did this without the knowledge or permission of the sitters, labeling portraits with some European-recognized ethnic moniker, such as “Swahili” or “Manyema.”

Portraiture as a cultural form, including its assemblage of props and poses, traveled across oceans. By the 1860s, commercial photography studios could be found all across the globe. They became wildly popular in the African Indian Ocean world: Africans, Swahilis, Mijikenda, Bajuni, Arabs, South Asians, and Europeans all frequented them to have portraits made or to buy images of others. It is striking that in cities around the world, many separated by two oceans, people posed for similar likenesses, often holding identical poses in front of standardized backdrops. Zanzibari and Mombasan clients of studio portraits often stood and dressed like people in places such as Bombay, London, Lisbon, or Cairo. They commonly claimed an affinity or a familiarity with those places and their visual cultures. Self-commissioned portraits were consumed locally and also sent abroad or given to visitors. Handing out one’s carte photograph as an expression of mutuality and care was mastered by elite locals—a phenomenon that I explore more extensively in chapter 5. In the 1870s, Lady Janbai Seth sat for her portrait (fig. 1.1) in Zanzibar. She is shown in an elegant pose, leaning against a Bombay Blackwood table. She gifted a carte version of this portrait to Caroline Batchelder, a woman from Salem, Massachusetts, during her visit to Zanzibar.<sup>17</sup> Janbai was an influential Ismaili Muslim, who was the third wife of Tharia Topan, the richest Zanzibari merchant and financier of his generation. By making this gift, Janbai was participating in the mercantile politics of Zanzibar, as Batchelder was the wife of a Salem captain and ivory merchant and Topan’s business associate. Men frequently sent such photograph cartes overseas or presented them as diplomatic gifts. Janbai’s photograph is a rare example that reveals women also participating in these practices. Zanzibaris could share such tokens with relative ease. It was a gesture of mutuality and recognition, yet it hardly required deep knowledge about the recipient’s values and worldviews. Rather than engendering deep intercultural understanding, the standardized form of the carte, including its repertoire of poses and props, facilitated surface-level simulation.

African migrants and emancipated locals commissioned photos of themselves for different reasons than the elite. Entering the realm of the visual as a beautiful person, not a beautiful object, was an unprecedented experience for many. A mesmerizing photograph by Goan photographer D. V. Figueira of three young people in Mombasa suggests that portraiture resonated with them for reasons we can no longer grasp. They are remaking photographic visibility and they are masters of the artful pose (fig. 1.2). A familial



Fig. 1.1. Portrait of Lady Janbai Seth, Zanzibar. Zanzibar National Archives, Tanzania (AV3.32).

intimacy connects them, yet we can only surmise their relationships to each other. Are they siblings? Is the woman the wife of the man on the left? Are they Christians or Muslims? Are they “indigenous” to the coast or upcountry newcomers? Their photographed likenesses refuse easy identifications. The seated woman in the center radiates a steely determination; she leans slightly backward, relaxing her body into the back of the wicker chair, with her legs stretching out before her. Her high collar and long skirt ensure that all of her body is enveloped in textiles. Her blouse features a full, loose bodice and her skirt has been cut from a white cotton cloth with horizontal bands of eyelet patterns. She paired her white dress with a dark Indian sateen shawl, wrapped around the shoulders. The earrings, watch, bracelets, and rings are noticeably European. The two men on either side of her are holding walking

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