

PICTURES AND TRIBES GENERATIONS

Firstly, consider this black and white picture shot in 1909 by one of the photographers from Underwood & Underwood Company (producer of images in New York, specialized in stereographs) in a village of East Equatorial Africa that shows in its foreground four young girls half-naked, decked in necklaces, piercings and native dresses, posing in front of the camera and looking deeply into that with a serious and sad gaze.

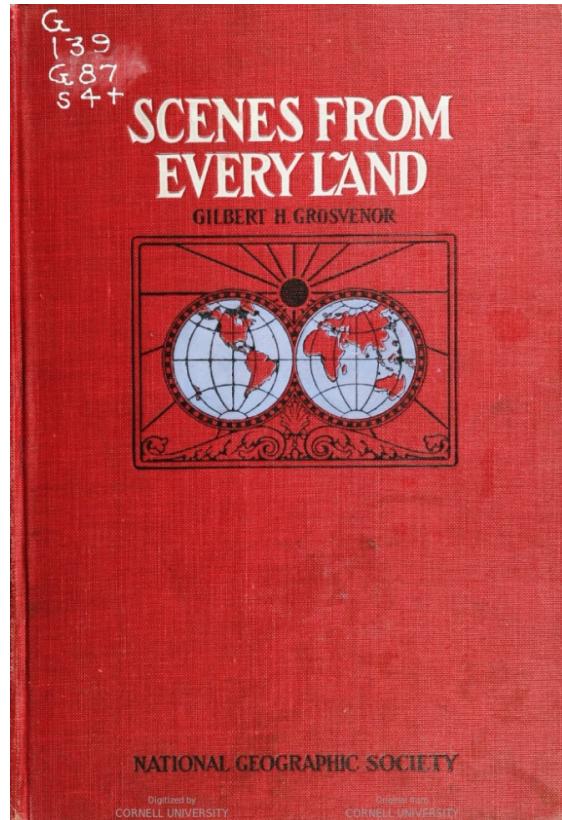


GIRL FRIENDS IN A VILLAGE OF EAST EQUATORIAL AFRICA

Photo and Copyright by Underwood & Underwood, New York

This is an image taken from the M. W. Marien's book '*Photography: A Cultural History*' which appeared for the first time in the second series of the National Geographic Society's publication called '*Scenes from Every Land*', edited by Gilbert H. Grosvenor in September 1909.

This collection was printed previously in the 1907 with the first series, which actually was a reassembly of 250 illustrations that have already seen before in some volumes of the National Geographic Magazine, which the same editor was running. The second one was essentially an enrichment of the previous one, by adding some new images have not been hitherto disseminated.



This book 'pictures the people, natural phenomena and animal life in all parts of the world with one map and a bibliography of gazetteers, atlases, and books descriptive of foreign countries and natural history' (Grosvenor, 1909).

These girls, as other pictures of the book, symbolized something that challenged the comfort-zone of the American allowance: the primitive conditions of the Southern part of the world, still not contaminated by the consequence of the Western industrial revolutions and their facilities, was something unusual appearing on public magazines.

In fact, during the nineteenth century, while the majority was still wondering if the photography could be recognised as a proper fine art, some intellectual characters as the photographic journalist Cosmo Burton (1889, *British Journal of Photography*) and the anthropologist Everard im Thurn encouraged the role of photographer-explorer to catalogue any record supported by pictures as proofs 'labelled with date, time, place and details of the conditions' (Taylor, 1994, p.54)

Ann Maxwell quotes E. im Thurn in her book : ‘Primitive phases of life are fast fading from the world in this age of restless travel and exploration, and it should be recognised as almost the duty of educated travellers in the less known parts of the world to put on permanent record, before it is too late, ... But it is certainly not a sufficiently recognised fact that such records, usually made in writing, might be infinitely helped out by the camera’ (Maxwell, 2000, p.52)

Therefore, between the end of ‘800s and the early ‘900s, the period before the First World War called New Imperialism, there was a inflow of expeditions to the ‘Dark Continent’ and to the East pushed by anthropologic and ethnology interests, following the footsteps of the early 1850’s missionary photographers to Africa (William Ellis to Madagascar). They “discovered”, wrote and divulged those news, luring Europeans to there.

All this selection of images belongs to a historical context in which we can remind the long debate regarding which route was best suited for the construction of a canal: Nicaragua or Panama.

In January 1902, the idea of the Nicaragua Canal won again on the other challenger in race for 305 votes, but some issues about the layout came out from specific geographic studies on that surface. Indeed, some volcanoes of the belt that linked the Atlantic and Pacific oceans together were mostly active, implicating the Panama route the final most deserving decision.

This is just an example that proves how geographic knowledge helped humans in their actions and defined planes throughout history. Thanks to other scientific and social studies ‘in loco’ Europeans were finally able to colonise the most obscure areas that actually were hiding precious raw materials and fertile lands, and also, by knowing the native population’s behaviours, they could become familiar and deal with them.

http://www.pearsonhighered.com/assets/hip/us/hip_us_pearsonhighered/samplechapter/0205208606.pdf

From there, started the phenomenon named ‘Scramble for Africa’ (Pakenham, 1992), or rather the Africa colonisation by the Europeans (occupation from 10% in 1870 increased to 90% in 1914). Discovered a so potentially economic resource, the colonisers started to compete with each other to conquer the most profitable regions and to increase their own grandeur.

Bismarck, German Chancellor, tried to agree upon all the powers by convening the Berlin Conference (1884-85) for sharing the lands, with a little temporary success. Thus, few years later all the unresolved conflicts resulted in to the First World War (1914-18).

Take up the White Man’s Burden- Send forth the best ye breed-

*Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need; To wait in heavy harness, On fluttered folk and wild-
Your new-caught, sullen peoples, Half-devil and half-child.*

Kipling, 1899, first four verses

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/interactive/2011/jul/11/a-political-history-of-africa-interactive>

Also, the nudity is another aspect that touched the sensitivity of the American policy and privacy. However, no law could stop or denounce the National Geographic Society in the name of the main educational principle in which it was founded 'for the increase and diffusion of geographic knowledge', which is still carrying forward by 'the high-minded dual pursuit of information and entertainment beloved by fans of the stereographic photograph' (Marien, 2009, p. 220).

This is clearly a pure nudity without any vulgar nuance, but rather with a deep explicatory meaning. In their eyes we can catch a sight not just of humility and melancholy but even of strength and pride represented even by their clothes and the accessorises they are wearing and especially by the ones they actually do not have on their breasts. By merely showing them, we can distinguish their real gender as in effect at the first glance they seem young male warriors.

The interest for the native populations and their customs and traditions is still alive and quite active even if with other standards of beauty. In fact the perspective has changed from pure documentarian purpose to a refined aesthetic research for details and colours. While in the nineteenth century explorers needed to go around the most stranger parts of the world to discover, to know something that was completely new and unknown for the majority at that time, now journalists, photographers, scientists of the new millennium mainly want to go where others already have been to make what is already been done richer and visually better.



MASAI WOMEN, Amboseli National Park, Kenya

By Aleksandr Lyashkov for National Geographic Magazine 2014

This recent picture epitomises the idea expressed above.

A (provocative) question that I have in my mind: could the maasai women of the 2014 picture belong to the same tribal family of the girls of the 1909?

The subjects are indeed similar but definitely the photographers and their pictures are different and so are the ways of depicting the same reality.

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