**The colonial library, the 'uncited' image and the rise of visual self-governance in Zambia: Photographing Generation Z**

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Zambia has since independence stayed largely under the radar of international news agencies. Because of the limited visual material available about Zambia, the country is perceived by Western audiences through prevailing narratives of the broader African continent often depicted through images of underdevelopment, wild life, and poverty; however, Zambia’s affluent middle class in its is growing fast and 58% of Zambians according to the UN are predicted to life in urban centers by 2050. Therefor Zambia lends itself to investigate new representations and the importance of visual self-governance.

Self-governance in an African context describes an emancipation of local and national politics, trying to shed postcolonial and resist neocolonial governance structures, which have their roots in colonial rule. The existing governmental structures remained embedded within the newly independent nations. In most African countries, independence did not lead to a restructure of local and national governance and therefore the newly established governments largely reproduce colonial ‘things’, in a Foucaultian sense. Foucault (1978) suggests that “what government has to do with, is not territory, but rather a sort of Complex composed of men and things” (p.208).

I argue that *visual self-governance* can study representations of relationships between men and things and can eloquently question these legacy power structures. Currently much visual material depicting low income countries evokes narratives relating to *things* from the colonial past. The visual relationship of people and *things* have until now, if at all, often been depicted by non-domestic media through the prism of colonialism.

It is therefore important for media to be involved in the development of visual self-governance both by creating new imagery exploring the relationship between men and ‘non-colonial’ *things*, but also by re-contextualizing historic material, as the next example will show.

In April, 2018 the National Geographic magazine published a *Race* issue in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King’s assassination. Editor in Chief Susan Goldberg fronted the issue with a letter titled *For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist. To Rise Above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge It*. She quotes Historian John Edwin Mason, whom the magazine had asked to reviewed the over hundred-year-old back catalogue. He concluded that rather than educating and informing the American readership, the magazine perpetuated stereotypes: ‘National Geographic wasn’t teaching as much as reinforcing messages they already received and doing so in a magazine that had tremendous authority.’ (2018)

The National Geographic magazine is known for its photographic essays accompanying its articles about explorations of far flung and exotic places. In the letter, Goldberg acknowledges, that “The magazine often ran photos of “uncivilized” native people seemingly fascinated by “civilized” Westerners’ technology.”

Recognizing this lack of visual diversity also through my own research, I started photographing the series *Generation Z* in Lusaka in 2016, and am documenting modern life in the rapidly developing city. The series documents the experience of a new wealthy section of society by photographing environments such as shopping centers, ballet classes and family gatherings.

To a Western audience, the images look strangely familiar, as if they might have been photographed in one of the urban centers in the United Kingdom or United States. The images, at first glance, are street photographs, and refer to known canons of visual references, both historical and contemporary. However, upon further investigation, the images provide hints as to where they have been taken: the fast food chains are not familiar and the street furniture is markedly different. It becomes clear that these images have been produced in Africa. It is at this point that the apparently ordinary becomes unfamiliar, and doesn’t meet expectations of the viewer.

The Congolese philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe argued in his seminal book *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (1988), that audiences often take their references from a narrow pool of narratives, which cite existing references from a *colonial library* (p.195). I argue that this concept of the colonial library can also be transferred to the visual archives.

Edward Said’s definition of Orientalism, as “a system for citing texts and authors” (p. 23), according to Garuba and Himmelman, also plays out in the visual culture by quoting this ‘colonial library’. Images which do not quote from the colonial library could be envisioned as a step towards an emancipatory reading of representations of Africa (p.17), and are referred to as ‘uncited’ by Garuba and Himmelman. The ‘uncited’ can be conceptualized as a “blank, uninscribed space, that is still outside of discursive representation” (Garuba & Himmelman, 2012, p. 17)

The question then arises, whether this filling-in blank, uninscribed places, is being willfully ignored, and if ignorance is a valid excuse for an unwillingness to engage? As Homi Bhabha suggests, as long as “one silence uncannily repeats the other, the sign of identity and reality found in the work of the empire is [only] slowly undone” (1994, p. 124).

A quest for visual self-governance and more current representation is not unique to Zambia or the African continent. We have witnessed subtle and steady changes in perception of countries such as South Korea, Jamaica or even Australia over the years. At the beginning of the 21st century India also began the debate on how to take control of the internal and external representation and Indian media houses took an active part in changing perceptions. In 2005, picture editor Bandeep Singh from India's largest news magazine *India Today* made the point that their *magazine chose to no longer visually emphasize the depiction of poverty but showcase a more diverse India* and therefore allow a debate on self-representation and visual self-governance of the nation. Zambia, and other African nations might be at a similar point in history. It will therefore be important to document how far and how fast views on Zambia shift in the next few years.

For now, photographers from the African continent only represent a tiny number of photographers whose work is internationally published and recognized. In 2017, the *World Press Photo Awards*, one of the most recognized industry awards, saw 5034 photographers submitting 80,408 images, but only **two** percent were from African photographers and only one African photographer was amongst the prize winners. Even in 2014, at the height of the Ebola Crisis in West Africa, there was only one African photographer awarded (2017, p. 11). Nevertheless, most of the images in the competition come from what Susan Sontag describes as “memorable sites of suffering” in Asia and Africa. (2004, p.33)

It becomes apparent that, as Ballatore, Graham and Sen suggest, “a few countries in the Global North play an inordinately large role in defining the digital augmentations of the Global South and that content about the geographic South is mostly produced in the geographic North.

Zambian photographers are now starting to claim the right to participate in the production of creative content, and a creative industry is emerging. This, so far, is not supported meaningfully by Zambian higher education and research institutions. This lack of critical engagement with the photographic material produced both now and historically, leaves the work exposed to being contextualized through the existing ‘colonial library’.

Bwire M Musalika described the situation of African photojournalist in 1994: “They are mostly not formally trained in the profession and are academically far less educated in comparison with other journalists”. The emerging creative industry in Zambia still is, more than 20 years later, like a cottage industry, where photographers building up their skill base through informal and formal mentoring arrangements and are working mainly for the local market.

In collaboration with the Mass Communication department at the University of Zambia, we developed an under graduate curriculum for photography to foster visual self-governance. The course should go life within the next couple of years. The curriculum addresses the need to heighten visual literacy amongst the student and supports them to find their own voice. The collaboration brings together the structure of a well-established British undergraduate photography course with the need of a de-colonialized, country specific curriculum.

In my series *Generation Z*, I attempt to combine the acknowledgement of my own Western visual heritage with the experience of extended stays in Lusaka. I ask viewers to contemplate change in Zambia and dismantle neocolonial visual discourses. But it also meant that I had to change the way I was looking, what I was photographing. This was not an easy process and it is still ongoing. But what excited me, was that there is a real interest in Zambia to see an alternative representation of the country. The interest is for images less laden with colonial and post-colonial references; images that are shaking off the burden of representation, and which are less attached to a post-colonial narrative.

In August 2017, the *Generation Z* series was exhibited at the Henry Tayali gallery in Lusaka. The series was originally aimed at a Western audience, however, it also sparked debate amongst Zambian photographers on how to develop methods of showing a wider, more diverse view of their country. The question therefore is not if my photographs are the ‘correct’ representation of modern Africa, but if they contribute to the debate on how Zambia could be represented.

There is a long-standing awareness for the need of a more diverse representation of Africa, but also a distinct lack of action to address the problem. Poor access to research materials, the lack of funding for the Zambian academic community and the absence of funding for research into visual representation can be cited as the key factors that limited local research has been done.

This, combined with the disinterest of more established research centres in the West, created a vacuum that allowed the status quo to fester for many decades.

In my own photographic practice, I reacted intuitively to these issues. Working both in practice and theory allowed me to explore these concepts, visualizing some of the more challenging questions.

I contend that, because of the lack of information, it is important for researchers like myself not to return to the limited research material available, and to not use outdated reference material from the ‘colonial libraries’, as that in itself would not acknowledge the ‘uncited’ visual practices which happened over the last sixty years. The lack of research about photographic image production in Zambia in itself does not mean that there was no image production. It is astonishing that Zambia had been, until now, only represented by the extraordinary, the wild life, waterfalls and various stereotypical depictions of the poor. It is the contradiction of the ordinary, everyday life that is *uncited* and the extraordinary wildlife and poverty that is *cited*, that is discussed in my practical work.

Toussaint Nothias (2014) argues that the danger is that this blank space will be filled by generic imagery with neither historic nor cultural relevance to the countries. It is therefore important that African nations find their own visual narrative as otherwise “African identities and the continent’s future are visualized in the increasingly homogenized and generic visual language of global neoliberalism.” (p.336)

In a time where we are flooded with images and it is said that we no longer need photography as everything has been photographed already, it is important to understand that these statements come from a privileged, but limited Western perspective. This perspective does not take into account the fact that many post-colonial countries were, until now, denied access to photographic education, their own visual history and the research into visual self-governance. As this research still has to be done, we still might find historic and current icons of African photography.

Thank you