

African Photographer J.A. Green: Reimagining the Indigenous and the Colonial
Edited by Martha G. Anderson and Lisa Aronson
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. 381 pages, 186 b&w and sepia ill., 2 maps, select bibliography, index, \$40.00 paperback

reviewed by Jessica R. Williams

Martha G. Anderson and Lisa Aronson's edited volume on the work of J.A. Green is a welcome contribution to the rapidly burgeoning history of African photography. Published in the wake of thematic anthologies that more broadly address the continent's photographic histories and its corresponding archives, this volume begins to redress the relative dearth of monographs dedicated to examining the particular lives and oeuvres of Africa's early photographers.¹ Beyond helping to fill a lacuna in the history of photography for focused studies on the continent's practitioners, this richly illustrated publication troubles simplistic understandings of the "colonial gaze," affords new opportunities for exploring the malleability of photographic meaning, and presents a cogent framework for engaging Africa's fragmented photographic archives.

Over the course of four thematic sections, this volume's five contributors situate Green, his images, and their legacies within the social and political contexts in which they first emerged and into which they have evolved. In the book's first section, Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa eases non-Nigerian specialists into the photographer's milieu by providing a valuable historical overview of the Niger River Delta in the early colonial period. Following Alagoa's concise essay is a deft examination of his predecessors and contemporaries by Christraud

Geary, whose contribution affords those unfamiliar with the history of photography and the medium's early mobilization on the continent's West and Central coasts a firm base from which to further explore Green's oeuvre.

In addition to providing the reader with information pertinent to understanding Green's photographs and their circulation, Geary introduces a number of themes that run through the volume's other essays—namely, how indigenous photographers navigated the dense intersection of local and colonial life as "visual intermediaries" and how scholars have been and are contending with what she aptly refers to as the "vagaries of the African archive" (pp. 47, 38). While the latter of these two themes readily appears throughout the book in discussions of Green's diverse and scattered imagery, the former more provocatively emerges over the course of the authors' close engagements with his life and work.

Building upon Alagoa and Geary's introduction to the region and its larger photographic histories, this volume's second part—"Green and His Oeuvre" by Lisa Aronson—delves more explicitly into the particulars of Green's life and profession. In the first of this section's two chapters, Aronson pairs oral histories with a close attention to what Elizabeth Edwards has called the "object biographies" of photographs in order to diligently reconstruct Green's personal history and the legacy of his photo studio.² In tracing the lineage of his business through two generations, she relates the ways in which his successors (Gobo Ada Green and James Adagogo Green) modified his studio to accommodate both the medium's rapid technological advances and subsequent changes in local demands. Aronson's detailed examination of these men's photographic practices—her discussion of the different cameras, processes, and techniques they used—is valuable to a field that too often disregards the materiality of photographs and instead focuses on the images embedded in their substrates. This is not to say, however, that Aronson does not insightfully attend to the complexities of Green's images. Indeed, in chapter 4, her second contribution to this section, Aronson analyzes the semantics of Green's portraiture and the social and political meanings his sitters' backdrops, attire, and poses suggest. Ultimately, her discussion of how Green's expatriate and Ijo clientele adopted and adapted Western conventions of portraiture in the context of the Niger Delta serves as an important contribution to recent scholarship on what John Peffer has astutely referred to as the genre's "creolization" (p. 121).

Moving beyond a consideration of portraiture's local idioms, this volume's third section ("Viewing Green through Expatriate Eyes") comprises two essays by Martha G. Anderson that expand our purview of Green's photographic practice. Accessible and smartly

written, her contributions contain some of this publication's most compelling theoretical insights. In "Differing Views: Imperial Agendas and Personal Histories," Anderson examines photographs that Green made of colonialism's physical and social structures. Referring to an impressive array of archival sources, she explores expatriate experiences in the Niger Delta—and the roles photography played within these—with a nuance that effectively challenges notions of a univocal "colonial gaze."

In this section's second chapter, "Envisioning Africa: From Ethnographic Types to Picturesque Views," Anderson reconsiders characterizations of the ethnographic from within the context of Green's production. Over the course of her essay, she addresses a wide range of Green's imagery—"type" photographs that he made of women participating in coming-of-age ceremonies, portraits that he made of "native chiefs," images of African material culture, etc.—and examines how these pictures were variously mobilized by those who commissioned them. In revisiting earlier readings of some of Green's photographs before his African identity became known, she provocatively reveals the extent to which a photographer's subjectivity effects our framing, and subsequent understanding, of their work's content, aesthetic, and politics.

Anderson's consideration of the photographs Green made to commemorate and celebrate empire and her discussion of the ethnographic images he produced for his European clientele in this section bring to the fore one of this volume's most pressing questions—namely, how we might make sense of Green's ambiguous relationship with the Niger Delta's expatriate communities and colonialism more broadly. In lieu of crafting a narrative that positions Green as either entirely aligned with or against the colonial regime, Anderson and her colleagues deftly, though perhaps at times too prudently, examine his position through the various articulations of his diffuse archive.

Because no texts written by Green himself are known to exist, it is impossible to know the exact intentions that lay behind his image making or what his thoughts may have been regarding how his pictures were used in the process of empire building. Although the contributors to this volume ultimately suggest that Green's acceptance of commissions from colonial officials and participation in imperial events should not be seen as indicative of his support for colonial rule, these aspects of his business certainly complicate how we understand his oeuvre. In probing the ambivalences of Green's archive, the authors lead their readers to contend with larger questions specific to the history of photography, such as what factors underlie, contribute to, or lend an image its politics. Though the valences of the medium's politics have been grappled with by

photo historians (Benjamin, Sekula, Solomon-Gadeau, Sontag, etc.) for decades, as the authors of this publication show with respect to Green's oeuvre and Africa's photographic histories more broadly, the issue remains ripe for interrogation.

Comprising three essays, this volume's fourth and final section ("The Performative Aspect of Green's Photographs") considers how Green's photographs have circulated throughout regional and global visual economies. In her contribution, Anderson provocatively explores the instability of photographic meaning by examining how Green's pictures were used by expatriates in their photo albums and variously mobilized in Western publications. Through numerous examples, she shows how Green's images became anchored in certain contexts (photo albums, newspapers, books, etc.) that opened them up to a wide variety of (often racialized) fictions. In "Green's Photos and the Visualizing and Reinventing of Ijo Histories," Aronson offers an engaging analysis of how his images have been translated across time, space, and media (including painting and sculpture). In particular, she discusses how his pictures have been used throughout the Niger Delta to both reconstruct and commemorate familial and political histories and affirm important social and political networks. The book's concluding chapter is written by Tam Fiofori, who approaches Green's oeuvre from the perspective of a contemporary photographer and practitioner. Tracing a general history of photography in Nigeria from J.A. Green and Solomon Osagie Alonge through J.D. Okhai Ojeikere to the contemporary moment, Fiofori asserts the importance of Green's legacy and potential place in the history of modern Nigerian art.

In addition to critically chronicling Green's life and work, this volume's five contributors examine the complex and somewhat contentious position he occupied in the Niger Delta during the colonial period. Through multi-faceted considerations of Green's relationship vis-à-vis British officials and colonialism more broadly, the authors collectively reframe and, as the book's title suggests, compellingly reimagine conceptions of the indigenous and colonial. Apart from bringing to light one of Africa's underexposed photographers, this much-needed volume offers profoundly generative theoretical frameworks for considering the roles photography has played both on and off the continent in the colonial period and beyond.

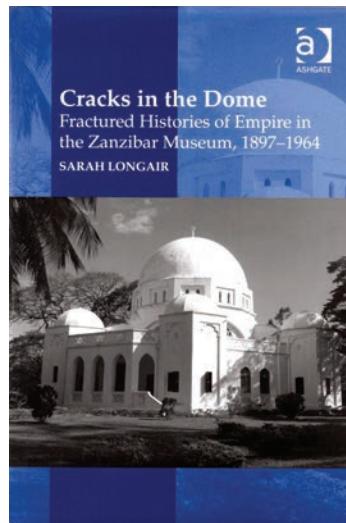
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Notes

1 While the field of African art history has been awash in articles and exhibition catalogs that address the work of contemporary African photographers, the number of critical monographs dedicated to the continent's more historical practitioners is meager. In addition to the book under review, important recent additions to the scholarship on Africa's late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century photographers include Amy Staples and Flora Kaplan, *Fragile Legacies: The Photographs of Solomon Osagie Alonge* (London: Giles, 2017), J.D. Okhai Ojeikere, (Lagos: CCA, 2015), and a forthcoming publication on the work of Priya Ramrakha (1935–1968) edited by Shravan Vidyarthi and Erin Haney.

2 Edwards has argued across a number of publications for a consideration of photographs as objects and not merely as images. Her work has been pivotal to the material turn in the history of photography. See, for example, *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (London: Routledge, 2004).

book review



**Cracks in the Dome:
Fractured Histories of
Empire in the Zanzibar
Museum, 1897–1964**
by Sarah Longair
New York: Routledge, 2015. 265 pp.;
53 b/w ill., table, appendix, bibliography,
index. \$145.00, cloth, \$57.95
ebook

reviewed by Jenny Peruski

Cracks in the Dome is an engaging study that weaves together colonial history and museum studies to highlight the relationship between museums and imperial policy-making, as well as the inconsistencies inherent in the British government's mission in its territories. In her work, Sarah Longair focuses on the Peace Memorial Museum in Zanzibar, a small museum built to memorialize World War I and serve as an educational center and repository of

Zanzibar's cultural heritage. Despite its small size, it held a crucial position in mediating relations between colonial officials and the local populations in Unguja and to a lesser extent Pemba, the two largest islands of the Zanzibar archipelago. Longair discusses both the period leading up to the opening of the museum in 1925, as well as the period from its opening until Zanzibar's independence, thus covering a broad stretch of British colonial rule in Zanzibar, from 1897 to 1964. Longair's work is all the more important for highlighting an institution in East Africa, a region often overlooked in museum studies. Her work thus brings added nuance to the varied practices and policies implemented under colonial rule that were undoubtedly dependent on individual practice, more so than any overarching regional policy.

The chapters of *Cracks in the Dome* can be considered in three sections. The first two chapters analyze the history of the Peace Memorial Museum prior to its opening in 1925. In chapter 1, Longair investigates early display practices used by British officials and curators to convey information about East Africa. She considers a wide range of displays, including residences such as the home of Alexander Rogers, Regent and First Minister to Zanzibar, and international exhibitions such as the 1905 Zanzibar Exhibition. Chapter 2 considers the building of the Peace Memorial Museum. Longair focuses on the practice of the museum's primary architect, John Sinclair, and his style of "Sinclairian Saracenism," which blended together elements from British, medieval North African and Spanish, and East African architecture. Longair's approach in these chapters demonstrates the varied attitudes toward Zanzibar in the decades leading up to the museum's foundation. Where Rogers' residential display emphasized British dominion over the local populace, Sinclair's architectural style showed a haphazard engagement with local practice that was much more invested in the idea of "the East" rather than structural necessities—a foolhardy notion that would ultimately result in his design being significantly reworked because of its structural instability.

In chapters 3–5, Longair approaches the first seventeen years of the Peace Memorial Museum's life through three different lenses. She first considers prominent figures at the Museum, namely the first two curators: Alfred Spurrier and Ailsa Nicol Smith. Spurrier's and Nicol Smith's backgrounds were markedly different. Where Spurrier had spent a significant period of time in Zanzibar and was invested in public health initiatives, Nicol Smith was new to the region at the time of her appointment and was valued for her education in museum studies. Chapter 4 focuses on acquisition, cataloging, and display practices. Longair explores the changing meanings of objects and how they can be used to further particular agendas.