book review

• Fotofieber. Bilder aus West- und Zentralafrika
Die Reisen von Carl Passavant 1883–1885
edited by Jürg Schneider, Ute Röschenthaler
and Bernhard Gardi

German. 247 pages, 96 ills.
£32.00

reviewed by Christraud M. Geary

When I tried publishing a photographic history of the Bamun kingdom some twenty years ago in Germany, the reactions of my academic colleagues were less than favorable. “This is not Wissenschaft [scholarship],” remarked one of them, who later wrote several essays about photography in Africa herself. It took persistence, an unconventional publishing company established by former anthropology students, and some creative financing to get the project off the ground. Much has happened since then. Attitudes have changed, studies of foreign and indigenous photography in Africa have multiplied, and theoretical approaches have become much more varied and sophisticated. With the advent of the new field of Visual Culture Studies, photographic research has finally taken off. Fotofieber is a case in point.

Fotofieber, one of those inimitable compound nouns that German speakers can create on the spot, translates as “photographic fever”—an apt title for a book devoted to a collection of images accumulated by the young Swiss medical doctor Carl Passavant during two trips along the West and Central African coast between 1883 and 1885. It represents a complex, multilayered approach to a corpus of 274 images, which lingered in two albums at the ethnographic museum in Basel (now Museum der Kulturen Basel) for more than forty years before being rediscovered by a group of scholars with an interest in photographic history and the exploration of history through visual records. The three editors approached the project from different perspectives. Jürg Schneider, a Basel-based anthropologist who has been involved in photographic research for several years, spearheaded the project. Ute Röschenthaler, a specialist for the Cross River region and Cameroon at the Frobenius-Institut in Frankfurt, brought her local expertise to the project, as did Bernhard Gardi, curator at the Museum der Weltkulturen Basel, whose own writings often focus on photography.

Their “archaeology” in the archives, the literal “unpacking” of archival boxes and opening of albums, reminds one of Elizabeth Edwards’ recent insightful essay about the materiality of photographs in a random archival box in the archives of the Pitt-Rivers Museum (Edwards 2004). Such an undertaking reveals many surprises and poses challenges. One of the editors’ first insights was the realization that the photographs were not taken by Passavant himself, as had been earlier surmised. Rather, he had purchased and received them from different studios and photographers operating along the West and Central African coast, among them African photographers who participated in an ever-evolving “photographic culture” extending from Sierra Leone and Liberia all the way to Angola. Faced with images with varied themes from many different regions, the editors developed an interesting interpretive strategy: They contacted specialists in various fields, sent them a predetermined set of images relating to their research interests, and solicited short essays. This strategy resembles the kind of photo elicitation undertaken by some scholars of photography in indigenous communities—only here the community is that of fellow scholars. The result is sixteen essays by thirteen writers, only loosely linked by the thread of Passavant’s journeys and the larger historical milieu along the African coast. Once in a while there seems to be repetition, but the overall structure of the book more than makes up for some of the redundancies.

In the introduction, Schneider and Röschenthaler describe the process of the images’ discovery and the nature of the collection. Given that Passavant was not the only traveler who purchased these photographs, it is not astounding to find that some of the images circulated, often for decades, in different geographic realms, such as contemporary publications in England and France, and that they appeared in different material forms. The actual photographers of the pictures often remained anonymous and many questions cannot be answered. “We know hardly anything about the first photographers in the region, their working conditions, the practical and aesthetic training, and earlier education. We know little about the reactions of the African populations towards this new medium, their appropriation and use strategies,” lament the authors (p. 13; this and all other translations from the German are mine). Several complex case studies of life histories of selected images follow and prove the authors’ claim that photographic research encounters numerous problems—among them the fact that the same or related images may be distrib-
uted in various repositories in different parts of world, which encumbers their study.

The essays can be organized into three groupings, although this is not the way they are presented in the book (which begins with biographical essays and continues geographically, following the route of the journey): contributions devoted to the history of scholarship about Africa, essays focusing on imperial and economic history, and articles emphasizing the role of photography. In the first grouping, we find two essays presenting the biography of Carl Passavant. In “Carl Passavants Reisen nach West- und Zentralafrika” [Carl Passavant’s Travels to West and Central Africa] Jürg Schneider traces the history of Passavant’s two trips, which resemble similar activities of other enterprising scholars of that time period. The scion of a well-to-do Basel family, young Passavant studied medicine and focused on the craniology of “Negroes” and “Negro peoples.” In January 1883, at age twenty-nine, he embarked to West Africa, accompanied by a young zoologist colleague who drowned in a Cameroon coastal river in May 1883, cutting short the voyage. In February 1884, Passavant undertook a second trip with another travel partner and returned to Europe in ill health in fall of 1885. In 1887, he died in Hawaii, where he had tried to regain his health. In the related essay “Sieben Schädel und eine Theorie” [Seven Skulls and a Theory], Christoph Keller places Passavant’s 1884 dissertation on craniology in the larger scientific debates of the time period; and in “Geld und Geist” [Money and Spirit]—a third contribution with a decidedly local emphasis—Peter Haenger traces the role of Basel explorers in the “discovery” of Africa. I would place a second essay by Schneider into the same overall context. In “Bruder oder Bestie?” [Brother or Beast?] he presents a fine study of the earliest sources about the discovery of gorillas in the nineteenth century, stimulated by the photograph Passavant acquired of a gorilla, which possibly depicted the animal brought back by Dr. Julius v. Falkenstein from his expedition in central Africa in 1876. It is a fine contribution, which might have perhaps benefited from consulting the relatively unknown conference volume Ape, Man, Apemen (1995) edited by Dutch philosopher Raymond Corbeý and Bert Theunissen.

A second group of scholars used the photographs in studies devoted to economic and imperial history. Several fascinating essays deal with travel and the mid- to late-nineteenth century trade along the west and central African coasts. In “Vorwärts mit Wind und Dampf!” [Ahead with Wind and Steam] Markus M. Haefliger describes the logistics of traveling and conditions on board the ships that connected Europe and Africa. He also explores the local travel situation in some of the ports. It is a lively account of the practical aspects of such journeys and the challenges facing travelers in the different harbors. Indeed, many of the pictures Passavant acquired showed life aboard ships and views encountered along the routes. Another essay by Dmitri van den Besselaar titled “Palmöl, Ellenbein, und europäische Waren” [Palm Oil, Ivory, and European Goods] examines the European trade establishments along the African coast, for travelers like Passavant not only journeyed in the company of European traders of all origins, but also stayed at some their factories during the voyages. Indeed, the typical “tour” along the African coast always included a stop over in Madeira, before traveling farther south and—as Rü Careta describes in his essay “Hängematten, Ochsen schleudern und atemberaubende Aussichten” [Hammocks, Ox Sleds, and Breathtaking Views]—by the late nineteenth century the island had developed a tourist infrastructure that catered to European visitors and long-term foreign residents. Travelers like Passavant could acquire fine souvenirs in the form of photographs produced by local photographers.

Two essays capture the spirit of towns along the coast and add to the growing body of literature about the histories of African cities. Jeremy Rich’s evocative “Liberville—die Stadt der Freien” [Liberville — the City of the Free] draws a lively picture of the town in the 1880s, plagued by tensions between the culturally diverse inhabitants: the indigenous Mpongwe, traders from everywhere, missionaries, French administrators, and Africans from all along the coast. Ayodeji Olukoju’s “Lagos—die Geburt einer Stadt” [Lagos—the Birth of a City] gives a sense of another vibrant, cosmopolitan town, in which both Europeans and Africans moved and established themselves in what Marie Louise Pratt has called “contact zones” (Pratt 1992). Here the photographs of the harbor, trading houses, and prominent inhabitants, among them the portraits of chiefs, depict the world that Passavant encountered. Two other contributions add to the increasing sense of time and place one encounters. Two other contributions add to the increasing sense of time and place one encounters. Two other contributions add to the increasing sense of time and place one encounters. Two other contributions add to the increasing sense of time and place one encounters. Two other contributions add to the increasing sense of time and place one encounters. Two other contributions add to the increasing sense of time and place one encounters. Two other contributions add to the increasing sense of time and place one encounters. Two other contributions add to the increasing sense of time and place one encounters.

For this reader—admittedly most interested in aspects of Fotofieber that deal with the practice of photography—the essays by Martha Anderson, Lisa Aronson, and Anna-Maria Brandstetter provided food for thought. In “Werbung in eigener Sache. Selbstdarstellung und lokale Aneignung der Fotografie in Bonny und Opobo” [Advertising Oneself: Self Representation and Local Appropriation of Photography in Bonny and Opobo] Anderson and Aronson examine a set of photographs taken of several important chiefs, among them Oku Jumbo and Jaja. In a fine-tuned analysis, they demonstrate how the rulers, like some of their counterparts in other regions of Africa, used photography as a means to project their importance and to support their claims vis-à-vis other chiefs in the region. Brandstetter in her contribution “Frauenbilder/ Männerblicke” [Images of Women/Male Gaze] also focuses on photographic portraits—this time on a grouping of dignified studio images from the Lagos and Libreville regions, clearly commissioned by the women sitters themselves. There are more than 50 images of women in Passavant’s collection of 274 pictures. Based on the work by other German scholars, among them Tobias Wendl, Brandstetter aptly describes photographic conventions and asks questions of these images (for example, how the pictures came about, and what some of the poses might mean) without being able to provide easy answers. Her dilemma, which we all face, is the issue of republishing pictures of women in the collection, which clearly belong into the erotic/exotic domain, were not commissioned by the women, and perhaps even taken under duress. She decided to show three such images in order to cast light on their context and reception.

Both above essays discuss images by unknown photographers—or more accurately, by photographers who were unknown to the authors when they wrote their contributions. In the meantime, Anderson and Aronson have pursued their studies of photography in the Niger Delta and established the identity of the image maker who photographed most of the chiefs. He was Jonathan A. Green, a Bonny photographer active at the end of the nineteenth century, whose excellent photographs can be found in many archives. In a Getty Collaborative Research Project together...
with Professor E.J. Alagoa and myself, they are exploring the life history and oeuvre of Green. As far as the women’s studio portraits are concerned, Schneider has also made new discoveries. His current work in progress focuses on Francis W. Joaque (c. 1845–1900), a Sierra Leonian photographer, who might have taken some of the images in Libreville. Even though Fotofieber appeared only two years ago, subsequent findings already cast additional light on the history of photography along the coasts and on the images in Passavant’s collection.

In conclusion, the essays in this book at first seem somewhat episodic, a bit like patchwork. Yet, similar to a patchwork blanket or piece of clothing, the parts slowly begin to form a whole, and by end the reader has gained a sense of time and place and the photographic history of a region. In addition, the essays demonstrate how photographs can be integrated into research designs in many different ways, and they also point to the challenges that lie ahead. It is a pity that such a fine and stimulating book, which accompanied an exhibition at the Museum der Kulturen Basel, appeared only in German. I hope that these studies with their interesting approach and rich tapestry of materials will be translated into English.


References cited


book review

● Manipulating The Sacred

Yorùbá Art, Ritual, and Resistance in Brazilian Candomblé by Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara

Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. 208 pp., 44 b/w and 36 color illustrations, glossaries, bibliography, index. $29.95 softcover.

reviewed by Kimberly Cleveland

In Manipulating the Sacred: Yorùbá Art, Ritual, and Resistance in Brazilian Candomblé, Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara imparts a wealth of information about Candomblé Nágo, the religion that has linked Yoruba-based practice in Bahia, Brazil, with Yoruba religion in West Africa since the eighteenth century. The author argues that Candomblé Nágo provides its predominantly Afro-Brazilian participants not only spiritual guidance, but attainable opportunities for mobility that are otherwise unavailable from their subaltern position in Brazilian society. Candomblé Nágo initiates face economic and other types of hardships within and outside the boundaries that physically indicate the sacred sphere. The privileging of African priorities, customs, and concepts that takes place in Candomblé Nágo, however, makes their religious experience distinct. At the same time that Candomblé Nágo is dynamic and changing, as evidenced by the gods, customs, and rituals that diverge from the West-African Yoruba models upon which they are based, it remains closed to the inverted values of the hegemonic Brazilian population and, the author argues, is therefore resistant.

Omari-Tunkara bases her discussion on knowledge gained over the course of more than twenty years as an active participant in Yoruba religions on three continents and on a set of diverse analytical tools. Through her own special status as an “outsider/within” initiate, a term borrowed from Patricia Hill Collins (1991:40), Omari-Tunkara occupies a liminal position and gives a rare view from inside the world of Candomblé Nágo. She draws heavily on the concepts and arguments laid out in her 1984 monograph From the Inside to the Outside: The Art and Ritual of Bahian Candomblé, now out of print and difficult to obtain, and her other scholarship on gender, agency, and art in Bahian Candomblé Nágo. In the two decades since that important 1984 publication, Omari-Tunkara has continued to gain information about Yoruba religious practices in Brazil and West Africa, which she presents in Manipulating the Sacred.

The first three chapters of the book cover the key terms, concepts, and practices of Candomblé Nágo. Although there are several types of Candomblé houses or communities, Candomblé Nágo, whose structure is specifically based on Yoruba models, is Omari-Tunkara’s main focus. Recalling her work from 1984, the author explains how the ilés axés (sacred spiritual spaces) are conceived of and function as “microcosms” for Africa in the minds of the initiates. As identified by Omari-Tunkara, the two tenets of Candomblé Nágo are 1) the preservation of “pure” African ideas and 2) the meticulous maintenance of the esoteric religious ritual processes of the Yoruba-speaking peoples of West Africa (p. 21). Despite their incorporation of both “traditional” and postmodern social and religious practices, Yoruba societies in Africa and the Diaspora remain fundamentally linked, nevertheless, through their cosmological, divination, and belief systems.

The ilé axé is characterized by a complex hierarchy that dictates the clothing, colors, social behavior, and sacred art forms required of the initiates, and also signifies each individual’s rank, prestige, and privileges associated with the serving of the orixás (gods). In direct contrast to the secular sphere, Afro-Brazilian women occupy the majority of the high positions within this Candomblé Nágo hierarchy. Central to Yoruba religion in West Africa and Bahia is the concept of axé (loosely defined as a worldwide energy), a powerful