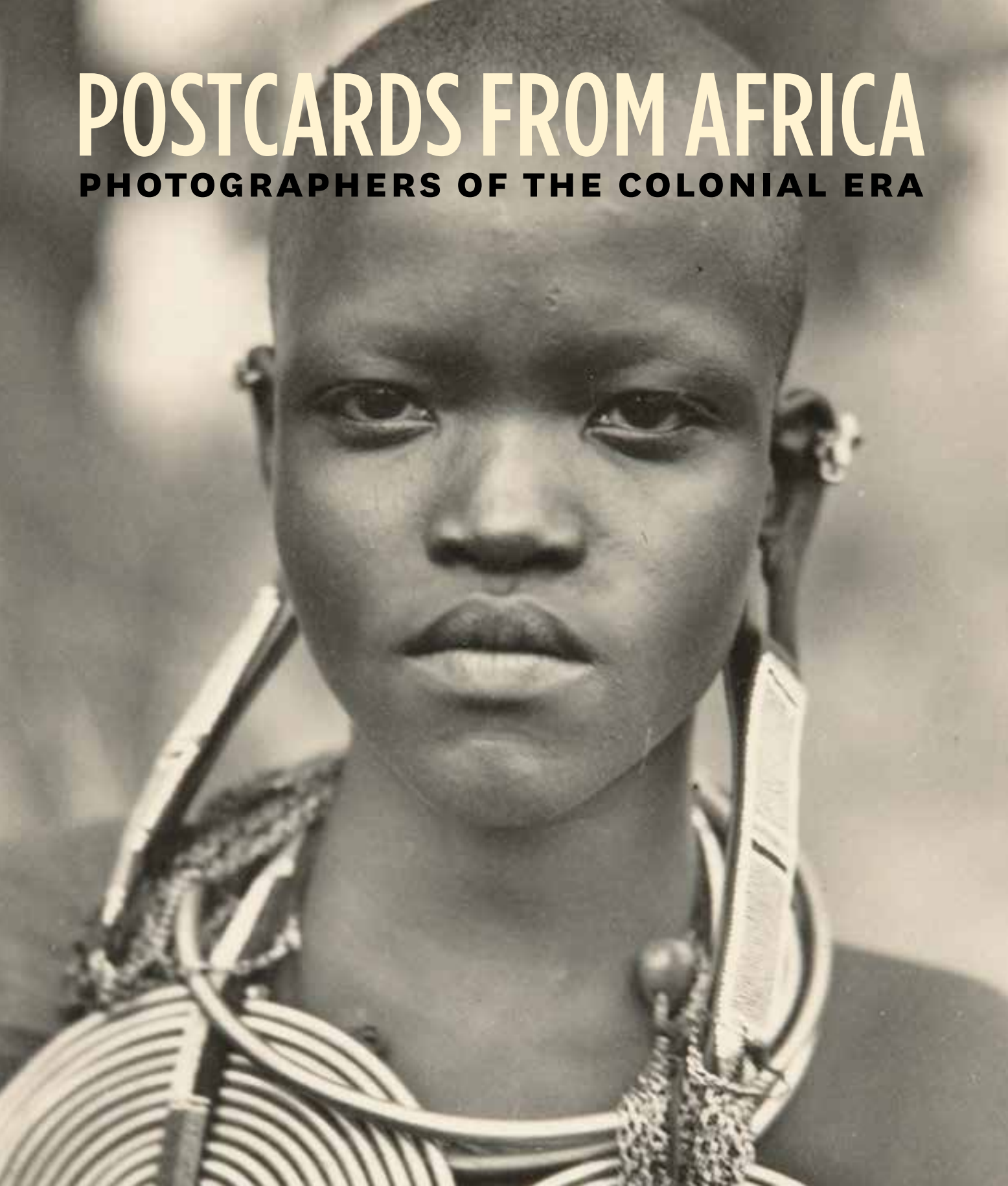


# POSTCARDS FROM AFRICA

PHOTOGRAPHERS OF THE COLONIAL ERA



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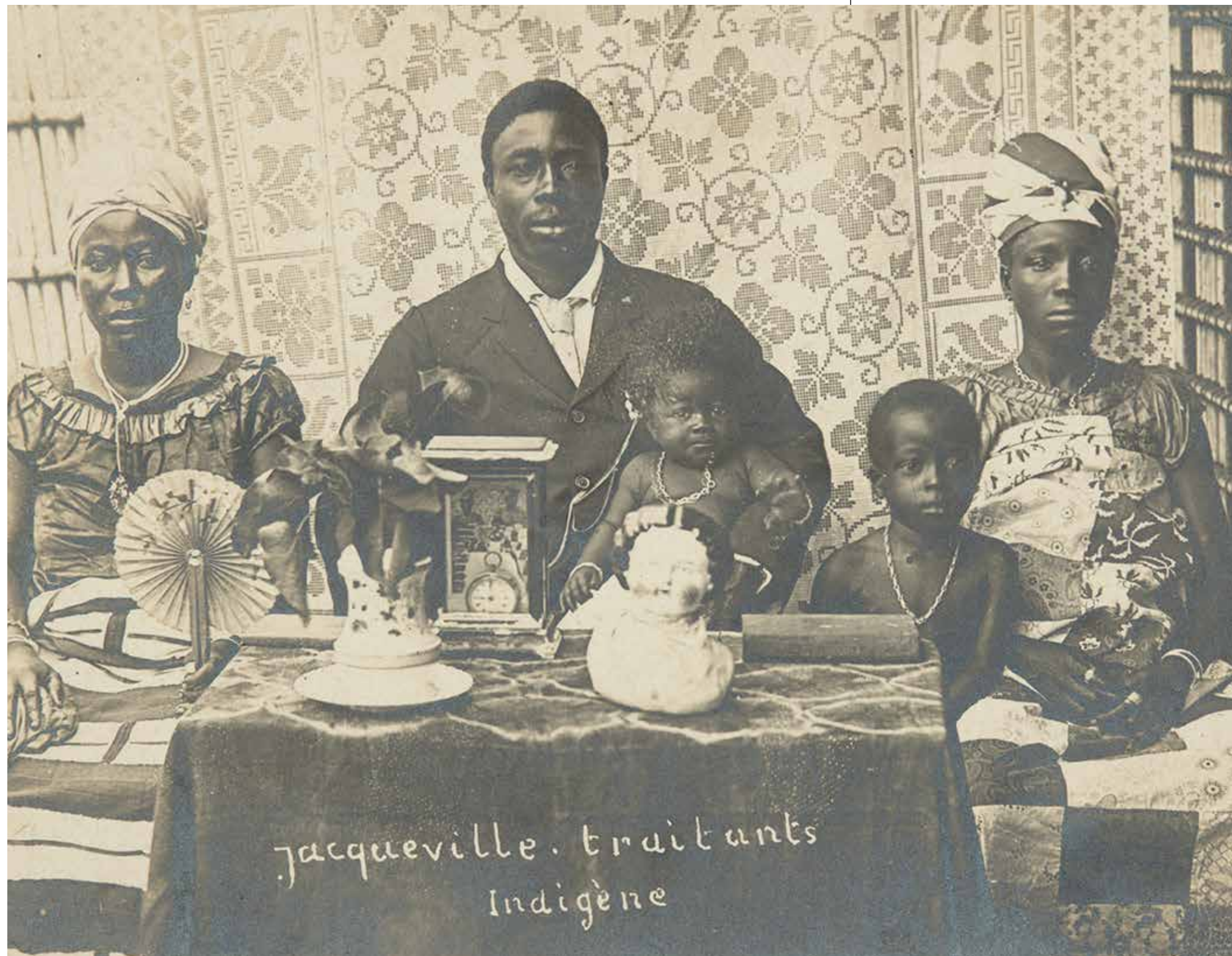
PHOTOGRAPHERS OF THE COLONIAL ERA

Selections from the Leonard A. Lauder Postcard Archive

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## Prologue

**P**ICTORIAL POSTCARDS became all the rage when they appeared at the end of the nineteenth century. Besides the work of painters and illustrators, they soon circulated photographs of peoples, places, scenes, and sights from near and far, reaching audiences everywhere. Postcards created a new mode of communication, assumed the status of souvenirs and collectibles, and served as vehicles for advertising and propaganda. Enterprising photographers, publishers, and printers recognized the opportunities postcards created for expanding their business, and many joined the lucrative market. And for image makers in Africa and elsewhere, the popular small-format cards also provided an outlet for creativity and experimentation.

All of the cards featured in the following chapters were produced from photographs, which were in turn transformed through various photomechanical printing processes. There are collotypes, lithographs, halftones, and — especially from the 1920s onward — real photo cards, that is, cards printed from negatives onto

photo paper in the postcard format. The postcard's close relationship with photography not only increases our knowledge about the production and printing of photographs but provides insights into the history of photography and its practitioners. Picture cards also contribute to our understanding of massive changes on the African continent in the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth, for the rise of the new medium coincided with critical events in the expansion and consolidation of colonial rule.

This book focuses on a representative group of cards from the Leonard A. Lauder Postcard Archive, which includes around 4,300 postcards associated with Africa. The archive, which came to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 2012, provides a significant resource for scholars working at the intersections of postcard history, the history of photography, and world history from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth. As with all collections, these holdings of African postcards are not completely comprehensive: while several regions are well represented, there are only



1 At the photographer's. Cape Colony (South Africa), late 1890s

market and is one of many postcards of African market scenes, a motif favored by foreign residents and visitors because the hustle and bustle, and smells and sounds, of African markets were among the first experiences for new arrivals to the continent from Europe and the Americas. The message, penned tightly in the white space around the photograph on the front, or recto, of the card, is like countless banal postcard messages, which rarely relate to the images on the cards: "20/1/06. Dear Maymie Many thanks for post card & kind wishes. If you do not hurry up with your

letter I shall have to come & bring it as I hope to leave Lagos on June 10th this year. I have not forgot about my intended visit to the States. So look out for me. Best Wishes to you, 'Kindest Regards to all.' Cousin Stan."

A business stamp on the back, or verso, of the card implies that Stan was probably associated with the trading company Ashton, Kinder and Company of Manchester, England, which occupied offices on the marina in Lagos and specialized in the export of exotic woods, among other goods. A penny postage stamp with a portrait of Edward VII, king of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions and emperor of India, fills the stamp box. Stan's card traveled to Liverpool on the steamship *SS Tarquah*, and from there to New York and then Paterson, where it arrived by the middle of February 1906.<sup>3</sup>

The logo "Photoholm" on the front of the card indicates the publisher was Neils Walwin Holm (1865 or 1866–about 1927). Holm was a prolific African photographer who operated a well-known commercial studio and thriving postcard business in Lagos. He is among the few African photographers whose life and work have been explored in detail.<sup>4</sup> Holm was a member of a prominent Euro-African family and hailed from Christiansborg in the British Gold Coast colony (now Ghana). He learned photography as a youngster and became a professional image maker at the age of seventeen. In 1887 he expanded and later moved his business to Britain's Lagos Colony. Soon a successful photographer and businessman, Holm traveled to Great Britain several times. In 1893, for instance, we find him in London, where he filed copyright for four of his photographs at the Stationers' Company, which registered copyrights for photographs by practitioners in Great Britain and the British possessions. The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain admitted him as its first African member in 1896 and soon thereafter



2 Vegetable market. Lagos Colony (Nigeria), 1890s.  
NEILS WALWIN HOLM

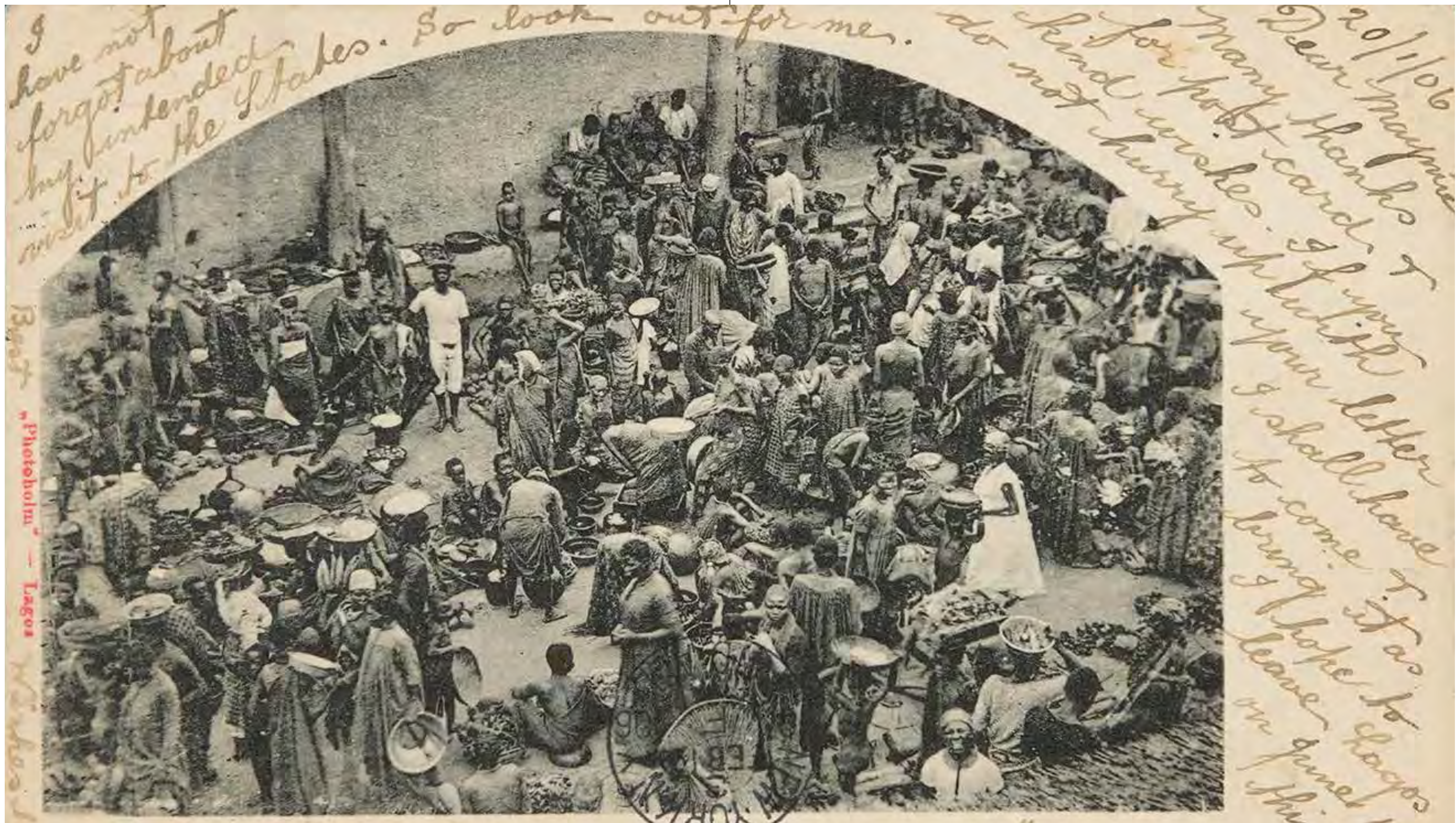
made him a fellow.<sup>5</sup> He also contributed to *Practical Photographer*, a British monthly published between 1890 and 1900. In 1910 Holm left Lagos again for London, and trained for a new career in the law. His son Justus A. C. Holm, also a professional photographer, took over the Holm studio and business. In 1917 Neils Walwin Holm returned to Lagos and opened his law chambers; he was a preeminent figure in Lagosian society and politics until his death around 1927.

We can assume that the senior Holm himself captured the postcard's unusual bird's-eye perspective on the vegetable market, which would not have been an easy task: to get the shot he would have had to place his tripod and camera on a rooftop or balcony. On its verso, the card displays the distinct electrotype associated with Photoholm—that is, the printer used a particular cast-metal plate for the layout and the arrangement of the words "Pictorial Post Card Lagos" and other text for Holm's cards. The words "Printed at the works in Germany" next to the stamp box inform us that Holm shipped photographs ready for production to a German

printing house. Finished cards were returned to Lagos and distributed along the West African coast, as well as in Great Britain and elsewhere. While Photoholm's business was small in comparison with Tuck's, it was lucrative, and Photoholm cards had many buyers.

These two postcards tell us quite a bit about the history of pictorial cards in Africa, their photographers, publishers, printers, senders, and consumers. Both cards date from the golden age of postcards, when the popular craze or mania for postcards was so great that critics of the medium referred to it as "postal carditis."<sup>6</sup> Even the editors of the *British Journal of Photography*, in announcing Corkett's talk, had looked down on his topic: "But we are surprised to see that the collection of postcards enters into his discourse. Imagine any of the audience at the Society of Arts being advised on the best methods of accumulating examples of this modern scourge of middle-class society."<sup>7</sup>

The postcard's golden age began in the late 1890s and culminated in the first decade of the twentieth century, when millions of picture cards circulated



7 Holiday greetings.  
Southern Nigeria  
Protectorate (Nigeria),  
about 1903. JONATHAN  
ADAGOGO GREEN



his postcards as well as stationery, tobacco, leather goods, and Senegalese souvenirs, until 1920. To the best of our knowledge, his original photographic plates no longer exist; the postcards are Fortier's only legacy.

A holiday photographic postcard dated November 16, 1903, with four photographs arrayed on a leafy plant, is the creation of African photographer Jonathan Adagogo Green (1873–1905). Indeed, the photos that surround the Christmas greeting, set among fronds and little white flowers, seem to be advertising the image maker's work (fig. 7). A member of the Ibani Ijo peoples and progeny of an important Canoe house, a prominent lineage among the Ibani, Green was active as a photographer in Bonny, a harbor town in the delta of the Niger River in today's Nigeria.<sup>18</sup> According to the impressive Victorian-style marble-covered obelisk that marks Green's grave in Bonny—carved by Clement Jonckheer & Fils, stonemasons in Antwerp, Belgium, and shipped to Africa—Jonathan Green was born in 1873. He was thus a contemporary of Neils Walwin Holm. He may have learned his trade from members

of the Church Missionary Society, which operated a mission and school in Bonny, as well as from itinerant African photographers who passed through town. Like his African colleagues, he began his career at a young age—at eighteen, around 1891—and he was active until his premature death in 1905.<sup>19</sup>

European and African clients patronized Green's studio, and some three hundred of his photographs have been identified in archives and private collections around the globe. Quite a few of his images illustrated periodicals and books published in Europe and the United States well into the 1990s, although the identity of the photographer is not acknowledged. At least thirty-three Green photographs appear on postcards, including a few real photo cards that bear Green's embossed logo. Others came out on cards printed in Europe, and in some instances his images were published (or perhaps appropriated) by Photoholm in Lagos, and by Gold Coast photographer and publisher Jacob Vitta, who was active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Like Neils Walwin Holm, Green

8 Lisk-Carew Brothers studio and store. Freetown, Crown Colony of Sierra Leone (Sierra Leone), 1938. EMORY AND MYRTA PEARSON ROSS



must have been well aware of the international nature of his business, for twice, in 1899 and early 1905, he submitted photographic prints to the Stationer's Company and filed copyright.<sup>20</sup>

"There is probably no establishment in Freetown that is visited by more passengers from the steamers than that of Messrs. Lisk-Carew Bros. The reason of its popularity is because of its extensive stock of postcard views of Freetown and Sierra Leone, as well as because of its large assortment of fancy goods, stationery [sic], and photographic requisites," wrote an observer in 1920.<sup>21</sup> Freetown, then a British crown colony, was where Alphonso Sylvester Lisk-Carew (1883–1969), a member of the local Creole community, took up photography

as a profession in 1903, following in the footsteps of an earlier generation of practitioners. Freetown was a port city and urban center with a large population of Creoles, descendants of slaves liberated by the British after the end of the slave trade in 1807, during the British blockade of slave vessels. Descendants of returnees from the Americas joined them, and together they constituted Freetown's Creole elite, a group that maintained close ties to Great Britain. British residents and Africans from the crown colony's hinterland and elsewhere in West Africa contributed to the town's cultural, ethnic, and religious mix of inhabitants.<sup>22</sup>

Photography arrived in Freetown early, and many of its practitioners, like the Lisk-Carews, were Creoles.

what is today Cameroon and through the Grassfields, a highland region in Cameroon's northwest and the location of the Bamum kingdom. Bamum was famous for its art traditions, including brass casting. Sometime between 1931 and 1933 Goethe arrived in Bamum's capital, Foumban, where he expertly photographed an artist and his young helpers making and displaying metal

alloy objects for the tourist market (fig. 13). A scene like this one, on a card that was probably issued a few years after Goethe's tour through the region, must have resonated with his customers, because Bamum by then had many French missionaries and other long-time French residents, as well as foreign visitors, who eagerly purchased local artists' products.



13 Copper artisan. French Cameroun (Cameroon), 1931–33. GEORGE GOETHE

14 King Albert I, king of the Belgians, and his wife, Queen Elisabeth, greeting dignitaries. Léopoldville, Belgian Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo), 1928. CASIMIR D'OSTOJA ZAGORSKI



One of the most accomplished and well-known photographer-publishers working in Africa during this later period was Casimir d'Ostojka Zagourski (1883–1944), who arrived in the Belgian Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo) in 1924. He is best known for a series of postcards he titled *L'Afrique qui disparaît!* (Vanishing Africa!). Zagourski's complex life story reflects the vicissitudes of history. Like many men and women of his generation, he experienced war and turmoil in Europe and had to find a way to make a new life for himself. Kazimierz Zagórski, his name before he changed it to Casimir Zagourski, was of Polish descent and was born in the Ukraine. He joined the air force in czarist Russia, became a pilot in 1913, and participated in campaigns during the First World War. It was while he was in the air force that Zagourski became familiar with photography. There is little information about his life after 1917, when the czar fell and the Bolsheviks took over, but we know that he left Russia for Poland and by 1920 had served a short stint in the Polish army. In 1924 we find Zagourski in Léopoldville, now Kinshasa, where he took up photography as a profession and soon established his own studio.<sup>40</sup>

In his expanding business as a photographer, Zagourski catered especially to Belgians, his Polish compatriots, and other foreigners in the Belgian Congo, as well as to colonials and white residents in nearby Brazzaville and beyond in the French Congo. In front of his studio, he advertised his work by posting portraits of Belgian clients and others and displaying his postcards assembled in large frames under glass — much like the Lisk-Carews did outside their studio in Freetown, but on a grander scale.<sup>41</sup>

Zagourski recorded important events in the colony, such as the royal visit of the very tall King Albert I, king of the Belgians, and his wife, Elisabeth, whom he photographed greeting dignitaries on their arrival



15 Mangbetu hairstyle. Belgian Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo), 1929 to mid-1930s. CASIMIR D'OSTOJA ZAGORSKI

at the colonial capital's airport in 1928 (fig. 14). However, his most famous cards depict African motifs and subjects, among them his well-known image of the elegant hairdo of a young Mangbetu woman (fig. 15). This photograph's soft focus and lighting reveal his pictorialist sensibility, in contrast to other Zagourski postcards that reflect modernist documentary practices.<sup>42</sup> Zagourski also made films, of which none survives.

The Second World War, which affected Europe's African colonies as well, ended Zagourski's career. He





16 Ivory tusks. Mombasa, British East Africa (Kenya), about 1925. C. D. PATEL

had briefly returned to Poland in 1939 and was there when the war broke out; he barely made it back to Léopoldville, where he died in 1944. His nephew Marian Zagórski traveled from Poland to the Congo after the war, in 1946, and took over the studio. Zagórski continued to republish his uncle's postcards and produce enlargements of his images until 1959; he finally closed the business in 1976, returned to Europe, and settled in Brussels.

Between the 1920s and 1950s, the postcard business also continued in eastern Africa and benefited from international tourism. One major participant, another photographer from the Indian subcontinent, was C. D. Patel (1886–1975), whose sons later joined his enterprise. Patel traveled from Gujarat, then under British rule to Africa, intending to stay with an older brother in South Africa.<sup>43</sup> He never got there, however. When he landed in East Africa and stopped in Mombasa, Patel realized that city offered excellent economic opportunities, and he opened a photography studio in Mombasa's Old Town. In 1924 he issued the

first of a few printed postcards, and in 1927 he and his sons began editing a series of real photo cards as well, sending both types of cards to Great Britain for production.<sup>44</sup> In 1928 Patel relocated his studio and business to Fort Jesus Road (Nkrumah Road today), a main thoroughfare in Mombasa that leads to the old Fort Jesus, built by the Portuguese between 1593 and 1596, which was then, as now, a major tourist attraction.

Patel did not lack for customers: local residents and foreign visitors alike bought his cards, many of which featured pictures Patel had taken in Tanganyika (Tanzania), and in other parts of the Kenya Colony, as well as his scenes of Mombasa. Among his images was a photograph depicting the transport of elephant tusks, the region's "white gold" and a subject of fascination for expatriate residents and visitors (fig. 16). Collectors also purchased Patel's picture cards, including one of a Swahili mother carrying a baby on her back, a child-rearing practice that intrigued Europeans and Americans, who were used to transporting children in baby buggies (fig. 17). Such depictions of African

mothers with babies were a distinct genre common in the African postcard world and were very popular.<sup>45</sup> This particular postcard was mailed to California in an envelope containing two other cards and some coins. The card bears a message on the verso that reflects an ongoing postcard exchange between the sender and recipient: "Mombasa 23-3-[19]29. Dear Friend I am in receipt of your four fine cards. Re snake cards: Although I could not get at this time, I shall try my best to send you sometime in future. Re. natives I send these three cards of natives the type of which can be seen on the East African Coast. Re coins, I send all these coins in the registered envelope." Patel established an even bigger studio on the same Mombasa street in 1933–34, and returned to India in 1942. There he operated Bombay Photo Stores, a firm that also produced motion pictures, until he retired in 1960.

The photographers and producers of early postcards in Africa worked in different historical and geographical settings and came from diverse cultural backgrounds. The participants mentioned here included practitioners from the African continent, Europe, and the Indian subcontinent. They all loved photography, however, and shared an interest in the technical development and aesthetic aspects of the medium. Some wanted to contribute to the world's expanding knowledge about Africa and African peoples, whom they perceived as threatened by modernity. All of them depicted the implementation of new social and administrative structures. As entrepreneurs, they also saw adding postcards to their offerings as a way to diversify and expand their business. In the course of their lives, most of these photographer-publishers had to reinvent themselves and adjust to changing circumstances. They were modern men, making a living, and capturing the flow of time with their cameras.



17 Swahili mother. Tanganyika (Tanzania), about 1925. C. D. PATEL



## Colonial Worlds

PICTORIAL POSTCARDS, much like engraved illustrations and, later, photographs reproduced in travel books, magazines, and newspapers, offered a panorama of the African continent, with its deserts, rivers, rain forests, mountainous regions, and ocean shores. Their views of remote villages and ancient urban centers created visual surveys and showed how Africans lived in their different environments. Postcards also traded in damaging and painful stereotypes, with images reinforcing Eurocentric, imperialist views of Africa that had been deeply rooted in Western thought for centuries. Some cards emphasized tropes of the “dark” and “mysterious” continent, evoking in image and caption myths that had evolved in the nineteenth century, when European countries scrambled for possessions in Africa, and still resonate to this day.<sup>1</sup> Other postcard images were used to justify the subjugation and oppression of African peoples and their leaders by European imperial powers. Cards from the colonies tracked the growth of colonial administrative centers, the development of

infrastructure, the exploitation of resources, and the impact of missionary societies. For European audiences at the time, they reinforced notions of progress in empire building and provided visual evidence of the “civilizing” of African peoples under European rule.

After the end of the First World War, the surveillance of the land, the administrative grip on the colonies, and the consolidation of white settler economies intensified. Picture cards documented these developments as well. Tourism, which already existed during the postcards’ golden age, contributed to their continued popularity. The British Empire’s holdings — South Africa and in eastern Africa, especially today’s Kenya and Tanzania — became preferred tourist destinations for cruises and inland safaris. One need think only of former US president Theodore Roosevelt’s African expedition and hunting trip in 1909, which photographs and print media, among them pictorial cards, documented in great detail.<sup>2</sup> All over Africa, newly built roads, bridges, and railroads facilitated travel, and by the mid-1920s air transportation companies began to



**20** House of the chief. Djenné, French West Africa (Mali), about 1935. GABRIEL LERAT

Lattes took over, thereby acquiring Lerat's negatives and prints.<sup>7</sup> This image is striking in its modernist conception and had to have been captured at just the moment when the sun hit the building at an angle and shadows enhanced its architectural features.<sup>8</sup> By the time this picture card appeared, French expatriates, researchers, and tourists were visiting these parts of the French Empire. The image evokes the experience of strolling through the narrow streets of this storied town and glancing at the residences from the outside, perhaps wondering what goes on behind their walls.

### Establishing Rule

Pictorial cards depicting growing colonial towns and their new buildings were also much in demand, and all photographers and postcard publishers offered such motifs for their customers. Fortier issued many views of Dakar, the capital of French West Africa, including cards showing the splendid palace for the government of French West Africa and the governor's residence that was inaugurated in June 1907 (fig. 21). For the postcard here, Fortier photographed a ceremony taking place in front of the building — perhaps even the opening of the Palais — from an elevated viewpoint, very likely a grandstand. In this perfectly symmetrical picture, local spectators line the plaza, and uniformed *tirailleurs*, the famed Senegalese soldiers in the French colonial army, stand in a row in front of the palace, while both Senegalese and French military men on horseback survey the scene.<sup>9</sup>

In West Africa as elsewhere on the continent, the establishment and consolidation of colonial rule, accompanied by military actions and the expansion of settlers into southern and eastern Africa, led to resistance and uprisings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Africans were disowned, displaced, forced into labor, imprisoned, and even executed. Leaders of conquered kingdoms who resisted the new regimes faced removal, exile, and death. Picture postcards documented these aspects of colonial conquest and power as well, sometimes in sensational fashion.

The situation in the Congo Free State, which Leopold II, king of the Belgians, privately owned and had been exploiting since 1885, was particularly dire. The company C. Van Cortenbergh Fils of Brussels published a postcard bearing an image by an unidentified photographer, showing a line of prisoners in Boma, then

**21** Palace of the General Government. Dakar, French West Africa (Senegal), about 1907. EDMOND-FRANÇOIS FORTIER



**22** Group of chained prisoners. Boma, Congo Free State (Democratic Republic of the Congo), about 1895





71 (DETAIL)

Johnston's card reveals the fellow Gold Coast man's own anticolonial sentiments, for it states: "King Prempeh of Ashantee and his parents with their immediate attendants as political prisoners at Freetown, Sierra Leone. Photo. W. S. Johnston." With this information, we can identify several important chiefs in the group (although the king's father is not among them) and Prempeh's mother, the *asantehema* YaaAkyaa, holding an imported fan. Johnston also published a second postcard from another picture taken during the same session, on which he used the same caption.

Postcards of defeated, deposed, and exiled African leaders transmitted different messages to indigenous viewers and those from abroad. For Europeans and expatriates in the colonies and protectorates, they confirmed Europe's imperial and cultural dominance and reinforced racial prejudice and stereotypes. In contrast, African viewers familiar with the political situations from which these pictures emanated may have seen them as affirming resistance to colonial domination, or celebrating survival in spite of traumatic circumstances, as projected through the self-fashioned appearance of their unbroken rulers and the way they return the viewer's gaze. It is this interpretation that we share today. These leaders are now heroes in their countries, and the picture cards help tell their stories.