

Photographing Kanak women in the nineteenth century

A voyeuristic approach?

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Résumé

Il y avait de la part du pays colonisateur une image forte et imaginée des peuples colonisés. Décrits et perçus comme naïfs et primitifs, mais idéalisés grâce à leur osmose parfaite avec la nature, ils ont soulevé la curiosité du fait de leur exotisme et de leur iconographie à tendance sexuelle.

Le mannequin kanak à moitié nu est devenu objet et plutôt un stéréotype en studio de photographie où la « réalité » était contrôlée. Le photographe lui ôtait ses vêtements et exposait son corps dénudé à l'objectif. L'accessibilité même de ces femmes renforce le voyeurisme du photographe.

Je remets en question la thèse suivant laquelle les représentations photographiques des femmes Mélanésiennes et Polynésiennes construites sur des notions de subordination sexuelle et raciale étaient peut-être les images coloniales françaises les plus significatives. C'est la photographie qui a renforcé la coupure entre la femme Mélanésienne et la Polynésienne. Les Tahitiennes étaient perçues de façon plus positive et attrayante que les femmes kanak, considérées comme simples et dépourvues d'attraits. Nous nous intéressons ici à des concepts différents de beauté indigène trouvés couramment dans la société coloniale française.

Les colonies françaises dans le Pacifique ont rarement échappé à cette contradiction. En réalité, les représentations photographiques des femmes Kanak étaient très différentes de celles des Tahitiennes. Les images peuvent-elles jouer un rôle voyeuriste sans connotation sexuelle?

Dans le discours culturel occidental, les femmes ont été perçues comme objets de beauté et de commerce. Les photographies de femmes ont joué un rôle central permettant à l'art de la photographie d'exister sous-jacente et silencieuse sous une couverture scientifique, augmentant ainsi le nombre de lecteurs et remplaçant la légitimité du projet présenté comme la recherche de la vérité et la beauté.

Abstract

The colonising country, for its part, wrought a definite, though imagined, picture of the indigenous people of the conquered colonies. Portrayed and perceived as being naïve and primitive, but idealised by virtue of their 'perfect' osmosis with nature, these people aroused curiosity for their exoticism and the sexual overtones of their portraiture.

The partially clothed Kanak model became an object and more of a stereotype, in the studio setting where 'reality' (or a sense of reality) was controlled. Stripping them of their clothing, the photographer laid bare their bodies to the lens. The very accessibility of these women reinforces the voyeurism of the camera operator.

I challenge the proposition that the photographic representations of Melanesian and Polynesian women built on a foundation of racial and gender subordination were possibly the most significant French colonial images. Photography itself has, rather, set in concrete a cleavage between Polynesian woman and Melanesian woman. Tahitian women were seen in a much more positive and alluring light than Kanak women, who were considered plain and devoid of attractions. What is of interest here is the quite disparate concepts of native beauty that were current within French colonial society. French colonies in the Pacific rarely escaped this contradiction. Indeed the photographic representations of Kanak women differed considerably from those of their Tahitian counterparts. Can images play a voyeuristic role without sexual connotation?

In Western cultural discourse, women have been perceived as objects of beauty and commerce. Photographs of women have played a central role, allowing the art of photography to exist, deep-seated and silent, beneath a scientific agenda, thereby inflating readership and further legitimating the project as research into beauty and truth. The probable result, however, of the photographers' presentation of their subjects' unshielded bodies for close examination was the subconscious attribution of erotic qualities or even sexual license to non-Europeans (particularly women).

HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS of Kanak women have been used as a source of ethnographic and historical information in documenting the lives of women in the nineteenth century. Photographs of women in colonial territories have reinforced, across time and space, the idea of women as sexual objects. I intend in this paper to highlight and then interrogate the voyeuristic approach of nineteenth century photographers (and their viewers) towards their subjects.

Reading a photograph involves identifying as many aspects of the cultural context as possible: the photographer, date and photographic technology used to produce the image. The artifice (that is, the props and backgrounds) are culturally highly charged and their influence on the 'truth' of an ethnographic image is immense. Studio photography of Kanak women, photography of Melanesian Kanak women as opposed to Polynesian women, missionary images and today's subjective interpretation of nineteenth century photography draw out several theoretical approaches to analysing old photographs.

I have purposely omitted any visuals for this paper as I wish to avoid a charge of biased selectivity and the perpetuation of colonial views. I wish to distance myself from such writers as Malek Alloula, who fiercely condemns the male voyeuristic approach towards Algerian women (1986). He believes the photographs did not represent Algerian women, but rather the Frenchman's fantasies of the Oriental female and her inaccessibility behind the veil in the forbidden harem. Yet by publishing those photographs in his book *The Colonial Harem*, he reinforced for some of his readers the very thing he aimed to condemn.

A strong mental image of the indigenous people from conquered colonies had been forged back in the homeland of the colonising power. Portrayed and believed to be naïve and primitive, idealised through their perfect osmosis with nature, such peoples aroused curiosity for their exoticism and the sexualized portraiture of them. The competing and converging myths of the sexualized 'other' that riddled French *belles-lettres*, colonial official texts and the sub-disciplines of nineteenth century science have been the subject of contemporary critical tradition (Stoler 1997: 33). With the wide demand for visual images of the far away colony of New Caledonia, commercial photographers very rapidly responded to the demand for the exotic 'other'. Studio photography

of Kanak women served the purpose of arousing sexual fantasies and ideas among the audience. As the genre wanted to create an authentic setting, Kanak women were staged in their traditional grass skirts and surrounded by traditional artifacts, but bare breasted. Those studies were made in Noumea, at a time when Kanaks in the city had already adopted European clothing. Yet potential buyers were interested not in assimilation and Kanak appropriation of western dress and habits, but in difference.

The erotic was further emphasised through the Darwinian influence of types, which ‘expressed a range of variation within a race or population, the development of variants being central to the process of evolution’ (from an article in *Photographic News* 1859, cited in Edwards 1990: 240). The Kanak female type created inquisitiveness about the unknown and exotic ‘other’. The partially clothed Kanak model became more objectified and more of a stereotype within a studio setting, where reality—or some sense of reality—was controlled. The photographer would strip off their clothing, exposing their alluring bodies to the camera. The created appearance of accessibility of these women intensifies the voyeurism of the camera operator.

Photography reinforced the cleavage between Melanesian women and Polynesian women. French colonies in the Pacific rarely escaped this duality. Photographic representations of Kanak women, indeed, differed considerably from those of their Tahitian counterparts.

The photographs representing Polynesians are built on a foundation of racial and gender subordination belonging to the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. They are perhaps the most significant of French colonial images in their seductive exotic beauty and uninhibited sexuality. Beginning in the nineteenth century, then later reinforced in the 1940s and 1950s through Western popular culture, particularly in movies and novels, the stigma of licentiousness has remained. Even today, tourism continues to portray the South Pacific as a site for romance (to verify this statement one need only to flick through the Polynesian Airlines brochure).

This exotic beauty was not considered something familiar to the European viewer, despite constant classical allusions through the depiction of the bodies of Polynesian women and men as akin to the bodies of ancient Greeks or Romans (Young 1995: 8). The representations of Polynesians that appeared

around the turn of the century were pushed further from reality by the baggage of the photographers. Visitors to the South Pacific came with a store of ready-made images and expectations. The voyeurism that relied on women's reputation for uninhibited sexual activities was translated into the photographs of bare-breasted, smiling young Tahitian women that liberally decorated the text of books (Maxwell 1994: 315).

The erotic qualities of the natives, however, were the result of photographers' presentation of their bodies for close examination. Yet the story of the powerful, white male subject looking upon native women as sexual objects is too simple (Stoler 1997, cited in Jolly & Manderson 1997: 9). Assumptions about male voyeurism can be challenged a step further as these images also circulated in France, where many of the consumers were females (Jolly 1997: 102). Why such interest on the part of European women? This fact really opens the whole notion of sexual voyeurism in colonial photography.

Curiosity in the exotic 'other' was not limited to French (European) males. The interest those photographs triggered remains genderless. The general repression in the late nineteenth century, forcing women's sexuality to be covert, could have sparked an interest in those images of uninhibited bodies freed from the highly folded and meticulously made dresses of the nineteenth century middle class, which although they had their own sexual references were nonetheless repressive.

Can images have a voyeuristic role without a sexual connotation? It would seem so, given the compulsion of the white female market to circulate those photographs. Male voyeurism is also challenged by the travel writings and photographs left by Beatrice Grimshaw, who wrote about Papua New Guinea and visited New Caledonia. The assumption of a male audience combined with a prejudicial photographer taking pictures of a victimised female 'native' has been condemned by contemporary postcolonial critics, but Beatrice Grimshaw's images challenge the male sexual line of argument. For though she sexualised Polynesian women, Grimshaw did not disempower them. Rather, she celebrated the power, the dignity of older Polynesian women such as Queen Makea of Rarotonga (Jolly 1997: 108).

But is she really empowered, fully dressed in a 'Mother Hubbard' covering her body from head to toe? Grimshaw's novels and photographs

were being published at a time when missionaries had succeeded in getting Pacific Islander women to cover up. Again, it is important to note that Grimshaw's wide popular audience was among women in Europe, the USA, Australia and New Zealand. Yet her fully clothed subjects could be seen as a challenge to the perennial theme of the nude woman as an object of artistic endeavours in Western 'fine arts'. Many of her images were rendered through pose and lighting so as to suggest artfulness.

In Western cultural rhetoric, women have been seen as objects of beauty and commerce. This reverence for the beauty and purity of women was reserved for the wealthy and the middle classes. It was, ironically, the social power of the very wealthy that made it possible for them to lead promiscuous lives or break social convention and still retain their attributed status as beautiful and pure. In the lower social strata, on the other hand, servants and housemaids were often seen by their 'betters' as sexually available, impure and having a beauty that was implicitly that of the underworld.

Photographs of women play a central role in allowing the art of photography to exist silently beneath a scientific agenda and thereby increase readership and further legitimate the project as one of both beauty and truth. Although Melanesian women were rarely accorded such 'classical beauty' as Polynesian women, they were represented as licentious. Photographs of unclothed women confirmed the theories of anthropologists. However, the diversity of images and image-objects found in the Pacific speaks against any simple relationship among representational technologies and power. Ethnographers as much as photographers were reinforcing stereotypes of lustful indigenous behaviour and compounding the prevailing cultural objectification of the subject.

Missionaries denounced this overt visual sexuality. They promoted Christian values and notions of monogamy. Despite failure, missionaries wanted to record their Christian efforts through photographs. Those images were used as a political weapon to argue the success of the civilising process.

The record of progress was composed of images portraying Kanak women dressed in European clothing and huts converted into churches adorned with crosses. However, much remained to be accomplished before full conversion was achieved and indigenous sexual excesses eradicated.

Missionaries complained of the huge task facing them as ‘these children of nature can become devils of horrible sensuality’ (Burton 1926: 25–6, cited in Reed 1997: 50). However, the blame was put on women, for the woman, in the eyes of both missionaries and colonial officers, ‘nearly always tempts the man’ (Great Britain 1904: 25; cf. Reed 1997: 51) and leads him into infidelity. Yet missionaries were not suggesting that it is the female’s iconic physical beauty that leads to temptation, more that the blame lay with the sexual perversion of the European visitor.

The dichotomy in photographs between the controlled sexuality of the civilized white and that of the unrestrained and dangerous ‘native’ appeared repeatedly in missionary discourses. However, the white/black division was more complicated than civilised/savage cataloguing when it came to sexual matters. Missionaries portrayed white males who participated in sexual relations with black women as sexually aggressive ‘low whites’, and potential exploiters of the indigenous woman’s childlike vulnerability (Burton 1926: 109, cited in Reed 1997: 50). Those men were looked upon by the clergy as men who were against Christianity and who imposed their low moral values and vices onto an indigenous society naturally inclined to licentious behavior. Missionaries tried to enforce monogamy, which for them was seen as the highest achievement of a successful conversion. Refraining from sexuality was considered both morally ‘right’ and a protection against the spreading of venereal diseases, a matter of concern to missionaries and colonial officials alike. The former insisted on the trilogy—sexual excess, disease and sin—as direct causes for the alarming decline in the size of the population.

Photography in New Caledonia reflected the dominant genres of the era: self-portraits for the rich, cartes de visite for the middle and working classes, and propaganda to promote a colonial possession. In the scientific world, Kanak photographs were not objective. That is to say, instead of providing a taxonomy or register of Kanaks (native groups) the photographic practice fell back onto traditional styles of representing women and men as objects of desire, exoticism and commerce.

On reflection, it can be seen that what drove the new use of photography as a tool in scientific investigation and social inquiry was the prevailing understanding of gender. Native woman could be shown bare breasted, but

this was a reflection of the sublimated sexuality of the scientific project. In other words, photographs of Kanak women were a form of pseudo-scientific investigation that masked a voyeurism, an objectification of men and women, by the men and women who produced and consumed the images.

There was an assumed distance to this sexual voyeurism. However, when men and women not under those restraints engaged in sexual activity with natives, it was often criticised as weakness of colonial character, a lack of responsibility and of good citizenship. This attitude masked several interesting observations.

Perhaps those relationships between white and native, so frowned upon in colonial society, were rich and rewarding relationships. Audiences and contemporary researchers make little attempt to understand the subtleties of the subjects' feelings. Were companionship and agreement disregarded because they refuted imperial colonial propaganda of the native as primitive, noble, innocent or childlike? Did audiences, or the sitters and in situ subjects, have any knowledge of what the photographs were going to be used for? Did they in fact manipulate and perform for the photographer in an act of subversive compliance?

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