

## Photographs and Findings Carl Passavant's travelling and exploring in West Africa

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A contribution for a conference that attempts "to show how Swiss modern culture has been influenced by the long contact with Africa", could lead us into two directions: It could either deal with "Swiss modern culture" by looking for the traces and vestiges such a contact has left in that culture or, alternatively, it could take a closer look at the material carriers – the medium, or rather the media – of this "Africa" and the processes through which knowledge and ideas about and of Africa was translated and built into the local Swiss culture.

For the paper that I will present here I chose the latter. Consequently, in the following 15 minutes I will give you an example of such a material carrier, namely two photo-albums dating from the 1880s. I will briefly examine how and where the photographs in these albums, a legacy of the Basel citizen and medical doctor Carl Passavant, were taken and collected. Lastly, I will explore the specific quality and power of photographs and photo-albums in the process of culture formation.

My main hypothesis is that Carl Passavant's cultural input owes much to other (European) cultures, in his case specifically much to German, British and French culture, to the extent that the very idea of a Swiss imperial culture in its own right is challenged. Switzerland was rather sharing a globalised visual repertoire of the African world and participating in its discursive as well as its pictorial and metaphorical extension.

My starting point and major basic assumption is that culture, however we may define it, is mediated, negotiated, formed, developed and changed through and by means of images **and** words.

### Who was Carl Passavant?

Carl Passavant was born in Basel in 1854. He died on Hawaii in 1887 at the age of 33. He studied medicine in Basel and passed his final exams at the University there with Professor Julius Kollmann (1834 – 1918) who would later also supervise his doctoral dissertation "Craniologie der Negervölker". In 1883 he travelled to West Africa for the first time and again, for a second time, in 1884. From these two voyages he brought back some 267 photographs as well as a number of ethnographic objects. After his first trip he submitted a doctoral dissertation in January 1884 with the title "Craniologie der Negervölker".

His father, the banker Emanuel Passavant-Bachofen (1817-1879) as well as his mother Adèle, sister of Johan Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887), the well known culture theorist and author of "Das Mutterrecht", were both descendants of old and wealthy Basel bourgeois

families. Carl's younger brother Georges, in honour of Carl, as he underlined in his diary, and in order to visit his brother's grave on Hawaii, undertook a trip around the world between 1888 and 1889. The records that have remained from this trip – several voluminous photo-albums and a travel diary of about 700 pages – have been given as a gift to the Museum der Kulturen Basel by one of the family's descendants.

I only mention Georges Passavant's legacy because 80% of all of Carl's photographs are to be found in one of Georges's albums. The other, remaining 20% form a separate album – called the red album because of its red leather cover.

### **What is in the albums?**

As I already mentioned, there are a total of 267 photographs in the two photo-albums which contain Carl Passavant's West African pictures. With regard to their geographical origin as well as their quantity we can make out three main areas: Madeira and Tenerife, Porto Novo, Lagos and Abeokuta, and lastly Gabon and the Ogowe. These three regions make for 2/3 of all photographs. The photographs in the albums are more or less arranged according to Passavant's movement along the West African coast beginning on Madeira and ending in Gabon. The pictures show people – individuals, couples or bigger groups -, plants and animals as well as factory buildings.

### **Who took the pictures?**

It's very likely that Carl Passavant took none of the photographs or at least not many of them! Why? The chief reason for this statement is that I have been able to find a great quantity of Passavant's photographs in other collections and that I have also been able to find out the names of some of the photographers. Let me give you a few examples.

- ◆ **P I (F) III 23570:** A copy of this photograph from Madeira is to be found in the **Basel Mission's** archives.
- ◆ **P I (F) III 23613:** A group of Boobies from Fernando Po. There is a glass negative plate in the Harry H. Johnston collection at the **Royal Geographical Society in London**. On the other hand there is a print of that photograph in the **Pitt Rivers Museum photograph collection** in Oxford dating from earlier than February 1869.
- ◆ **P I (F) III 23588 (Baobab) and P II (F) III 23813,** only to show you two items of a series of over 20 photographs taken by **Dr. Julius Falkenstein** between 1873 and 1876. Falkenstein was a member of the German Expedition to the Loango coast, the today Cabinda, the coastal region north of the river Congo, which was initiated by the "Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Erforschung Aequatorial-Afrikas".

- ◆ **PII (F) III 23721, P II (F) III 23724:** These photographs again are only some items of a series of about 25 photographs taken by the Nigerian photographer **John Parkes Decker**.

From all we have seen so far, there is every indication that a great deal of the photographs in the two albums are not Passavant's photographs in the strict sense. He must have bought some, he might have been given some, others might have been added to the collection only after his death.

But what are the implications of these findings? Let me first, before I embark on answering this specific question reflect briefly on a rather general level on the specific quality and power of photographs and photo-albums in the process of culture formation.

Photography is the most important process of imaging of the 19th and 20th century. Both its impact and importance on and for European and African cultural practises are due to its - assumed - ability to directly reflect nature and reality. Even though this "realistic" view has lost much of its power of persuasion, photographic images are still widely accepted as being "real", "factual" and "authentic".

One picture is worth a thousand words, goes a familiar proverb, and even though this might prove in some contexts to be quite useful, in others it is not. Elizabeth Edwards, for instance, points to the rawness of photographs, their unprocessed quality, randomness, minute indexicality and infinite recodability, whereas Christopher Pinney contends that anthropologists and historians are worried by still photography because, lacking the constraining narratives of film, still images contain *too many meanings*. And unlike written and oral sources, where our knowledge of grammar helps us to understand and interpret the words, there are no comparable rules that help us to "read" visual information.

Photo-albums, however, have such constraints. Like in a film and in a book there is a narrative strategy, a beginning and an end. The proximity to comics-albums or photo novellas is striking, in particular when there are several pictures mounted on one page. And like with comics-albums the analysis of the photo-album needs to take place on several levels: Firstly, on the level of the single photograph, secondly on the level of the whole page, and thirdly on the level of the whole album. We do, for instance, like in comics-albums, permanently move our gaze from the single image to the whole page and back. Even what the American comics specialist Scott McCloud calls **closure**, that is observing the parts but perceiving the whole, which in particular happens **between** the single images, is crucial in the reading and understanding of photo-albums. With the important difference, however, that the **gutter**, the space between the panels in comics and, as I would argue, between the photographs in an album, plays a slightly different role in either case. Generally, in comics it's our imagination which, with the help of certain narrative strategies and words in bubbles, takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea, whereas in photo-albums it is spoken words, oral

comments or questions, in short oral language in direct social interactions, which bridge that gutter.

There is another important feature of photo-albums: They are all archives. Archives in the sense that they are places of disciplinary regulation and regulated enclosure, places where specific classification schemes apply which go far beyond the formal or technical restrictions of a book. Any item that has once entered the archive leaves its mark there; as a registration in a stockbook or, when it has been removed intentionally or simply gone lost, as a bright field of the size of a photograph on the album's pages.

If we agree that the archive is politics, as the South African Verne Harris argues, pointing to the works of Derrida and Foucault as well as to the rallying call of the 1960s US-feminists that "the personal is political", then this holds true for the family photo-archive, too.

People who are looking at a photo-album comment on what they see. A single photograph or a series of photographs can be the starting point for a long and intensive discussion, a motif for heated debates, the exchange of meanings, opinions and attitudes. In other cases it is a couple who browses an album of one's family, remembering this and that, or an audience listening in silence to somebody's explanations. Long-known narratives are being told again and again, and every time they are told, they change a little and nevertheless remain essentially the same. But at times a person can have a look at the photographs and see something nobody has seen before or some contextual conditions have changed so that a revision of the narrative suggests itself.

Photo-albums are points of reference where factual visual information goes together with asserting, contesting, doubting, questioning and explaining words. They are complex, fluid and often heterogeneous objects by means of which culture is negotiated and altered. Their specific quality is to be found in the connection of authenticity and reality, which photographic images generally convey, with narrative strategies both in the construction of the albums and the perception and presentation of photo-albums respectively.

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## Implications

Let us go back to Carl Passavant's photographs and eventually resume the question we dropped there: What are the implications of the assumption that most of the photographs in Passavant's albums are not his in the sense that he didn't take them?

First of all, it means that Carl Passavant's photo albums are collections in the very meaning of the word: Passavant collected the photographs during and after his travels in West Africa like any tourist would buy photographs, and later postcards, as souvenirs and pieces of evidence that he had been "there".

There were a few local African photographers working in the coastal regions of West Africa in the 1880s. The German journalist Hugo Zöller who, commissioned by the *Kölnische Zeitung*, travelled there in the mid-80s counted 4 or 5 African photographers. Then, the missionaries took pictures: It's no coincidence that some of Passavant's photographs are also to be found in the collection of the Basel Mission and the Church Missionary Society. Traders took pictures, too. Max Buchner, Cameroon's first governor, asserts in his memoirs that in the early 1880s nearly every factory at the West African coast had its own photo-album. And last but not least, it was explorers like Julius Falkenstein who took photographs. In short, when Carl Passavant travelled in West Africa there were already many people taking, buying or exchanging photographs thus creating a network of people who shared a certain visual repertoire which, in many cases, they themselves had helped to create and expand.

Back in Europe these pictures became part of photograph collections and/or personal photo-albums. And since efficient and effective photomechanical reproduction techniques were still to be developed they were used as copies for the wood engravings which illustrated travel and mission reports, newspaper articles or novels. We have examples for such a usage of photographs in the Passavant collection. In this way photographs of heterogeneous origins were used in newspapers and in photo-albums. Single photographs, formerly independent from each other, were assembled and put together according to various criteria. Series of photographs were torn apart and re-arranged in a multitude of new media and contexts thereby altering and re-charging the photograph's meaning and message.

The photographs in Carl Passavant's albums conveyed an idea of what Africa was, about the people who lived and worked there, about African animals and plants. They also told the story of a young man who had travelled to West Africa, who fell ill there, and who died in his early 30s. There were those beholders who found confirmed in the pictures what they already believed to know and others who had never seen such pictures before. All of them, however, were looking at photographs which, at first sight, gave the impression of belonging together and of being of a common origin, whereas, in fact, they were looking at an *assemblage*: Photographs taken from different individuals, at different times, and for

different purposes. They were looking at photographs that had already become part of a globalized visual repertoire.

There is no doubt that Swiss modern culture has been influenced by the long contact with Africa. I have tried to show that some major carriers of the idea of Africa, namely photographs, images based on photographs, and photo-albums, were something that the Swiss people shared with many other Europeans and, not to forget, Africans. They were consumers and producers of images and participating in a commonly shared and increasingly globalized visual repertoire about Africa and Africans.