PHOTOGRAPHIC SOURCES FOR THE HISTORY OF PORTUGUESE-SPEAKING AFRICA, 1870-1914

Jill R. Dias
Universidade Nova de Lisboa
Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical

I

The wealth of the photographic record of Portuguese Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is only beginning to be appreciated. Until recently it was not only ignored but totally neglected. As a result much has been destroyed. The full extent of the surviving material is, as yet, unknown. Collections of photographs are dispersed in various archives, libraries, and private collections throughout Portugal. In most cases almost nothing is known of the photographers or of the circumstances in which their work was produced. The photographs themselves have not been studied, so that the work of dating and evaluating their content has yet to be done.

In this paper then I can present only a very preliminary and incomplete survey and exploration of some of the very diverse categories of photographic sources available for the history of Portuguese-speaking Africa between the 1870s and early 1920s, concentrating particularly on Angola and Mozambique. Whenever possible I also try to draw attention to some of the practical and theoretical problems involved in their interpretation as a step towards assessing more accurately their historical and sociological value.¹

II

Private professional photographers and their work

Individual European photographers began working professionally in Angola—and possibly the other Portuguese African territories of Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guiné, and Sao Tomé—at least as early as the 1860s. There were at least two photographic studios in Luanda by 1870: J. N. da Silveira (already an award-winning exhibiter in Porto and London) and Widow Moraes and Sons. Another photographer, Rocha Figueiredo, was established in Benguela, while a fourth, Nicola de Luizy, was apparently based in Mossamedes by the same date. In Mozambique, well-known professional photographers such as J. and M. Lazarus, J. P. Fernandes, and J. Wexelson were working in Beira and Lourenço Marques from at least the 1890s.

Among the striking Angolan images which survive from the 1870s are several unique studio portraits of different black embassies which visited the Governor-General in Luanda from the as yet unsubdued, politically autonomous African peoples in the interior of Angola. A handful of

photographic views of Luanda, Benguela, and Mossamedes survive from the same period. Taken principally by J. N. Silveira, they provide an important early documentary source for the history of urban development in Africa. Moreover, as is evident, the colonial elites of these towns, no less than their counterparts in European cities, seized the new opportunity provided by photography to preserve their image and memory for posterity. The earliest of such studio portraits so far discovered date from 1870. The hundred or so known surviving examples provide a fascinating glimpse not only of the representatives of metropolitan power—particularly naval and army officers—but of members of Luanda’s or Benguela’s Afro-Portuguese elites.

One of the earliest outstanding photographers in Angola in the 1870s/1880s was J. A. da Cunha Moraes, probably the younger brother of Abílio S. G. Moraes, successor to the Moraes family photographic firm established in Luanda as early as the 1860s. He appears to have begun his career as a professional photographer in the 1870s and by the mid-1880s had apparently created a collection of around four hundred photographs recording different aspects of colonial and African life. He was possibly the first photographer to try explicitly to document through individual portraits the social and racial contrasts within Luanda’s daily life, such as street sellers (Figure 1) washermen, or water vendors. Such photographs were sometimes the result of casual encounters in the street: on least one occasion, when two such women were passing Moraes, he called them over and asked permission to photograph them.\(^2\)

The majority of Moraes’ photographs seem to have been taken in the coastal zone running from Zaire southwards to beyond Mossamedes. A contemporary reference stresses that Moraes traveled up and down this coast several times on photographic expeditions. He was also said to have penetrated the interior, often risking his life to add to his photographic collections. The difficulties of such expeditions at this date included not only the transport and conservation of the bulky equipment necessary, but the reluctance of the indigenous African population to be photographed, regarding the camera as a fetish.

By the late 1870s Moraes was already a well-known photographer, whose photographic images of Angola were reproduced in the popular Lisbon periodical *O Ocidente*. At this date he was an award-winning associate of the Académie Nationale in Paris and had also received awards at exhibitions held in Rio de Janeiro and Porto in 1877 and 1882. Unfortunately, it is not yet clear whether all or only part of his work survives. Prints exist in several museums, archives, and private collections in Lisbon. In 1882 Moraes himself published a first series of photographic prints of Angola in his *Africa Ocidental. Album Photographico e Litterário*, published in monthly installments. These were accompanied by a text written by his friend, Francisco de Salles Ferreira, an Angolan trader and journalist. A further portion of Moraes’ photographic collection (160 prints) was published in Lisbon by the publisher David Corazzi between 1885 and 1888 in a four-volume work entitled *Africa Ocidental. Album Photographico e Descriptivo.*
Moraes' main concern as a photographer seems to have been educational and propagandist rather than artistic, although evidently the two dimensions were not always mutually exclusive. In particular he seems to have been concerned with producing visual information about European trade, the way of life, and kinds of people inhabiting Angola as a means of promoting public interest in the colonies and attracting more settlers from Portugal. Both the character and content of Moraes' work reflect the general intellectual and political preoccupations of nineteenth-century Europe. It is obvious that he was working at a time of mounting public interest in Africa, especially among
educated Europeans. Moreover, Portugal's complacency concerning her monopoly of economic and political relations in central Africa was being shaken by growing international rivalry which culminated in the Scramble for Africa of the 1880s. At this date Portugal effectively occupied only tiny portions of Angolan territory, centered on the coastal towns of Luanda, Benguela, and Mossamedes. Moraes evidently sympathized with the minority of colonial enthusiasts who, in 1876, founded the Sociedade de Geografia in Lisbon under the presidency of Luciano Cordeiro in order to promote Portugal's expansion in Africa. Not only was he a member of the Sociedade but also of the recently founded Sociedade de Geografia Comercial in Porto. Additionally he helped to found the Society for the Propagation of African Geographical knowledge in Luanda.

Moraes dedicated his four-volume photographic album, *Africa Ocidental*, to "the Portuguese explorers," referring, presumably to Capelo, Ivens, and Serpa Pinto, who undertook the first Portuguese African explorations of explicitly scientific character, sponsored by the Sociedade de Geografia in the late 1870s. In this presentation of the first volume of Moraes' album, Luciano Cordeiro, considered it to be "...truly a book of African exploration, full of extraordinary revelations, or extremely valuable contributions, of agreeable and firm instruction...assuredly the most important photographic exploration—the first to deserve the name—of so many attempted in the negro Continent..." Cordeiro saw Moraes' photographs as demonstrating the equation of the camera with other scientific instruments such as the thermometer and sextant in the ideal "conquest" of the African continent. He stressed the precision, objectivity, and truth of the photographic image transmitted by the camera, "which fixes and represents what is viewed not as it perceives it, but as it is...."

At first sight, such confidence, so characteristic of nineteenth-century positivism, seems justified. About half the photographs included in Moraes' albums represent views of natural scenery, colonial towns, monuments, and European trading posts, which are, indeed, captured untransformed, providing a valuable source of visual information about colonial trade and urban development in Angola by the early 1880s. However, the majority of Moraes' photographic images of Africans were inevitably interpretations of the human and social reality, imbued with European cultural and intellectual meanings. To be sure, a number of the photographs he selected for publication do show a striking degree of spontaneity and lack of composition—such as the arrival of a trade caravan at Catumbela (Figure 2), a party of African headbearers dividing up the ox traditionally received in payment of their services, or his group of Mossamedes fishermen. Mostly, however, the images represent the general style of ethnographic photography practiced by Europeans in this period, which in turn reflected current anthropological and scientific perspectives. This is particularly evident in Moraes' photographs of the "uncivilized" non-Christian population "gentio" of the Angolan interior, as beyond the pale of Portuguese colonial authority. Moraes' photographs of these Africans were
intended to portray general “types” rather than individuals. Posed groups and figures are presented impersonally to the camera, frontally and in profile in the manner of scientific specimens, as in his portrayal of the head and shoulders of a “young boy from the Zaire region,” photographed in two positions, according to Moraes, “...in order the better to judge his type...” (Figure 3).⁶

His collection contains many similar photographs, displaying a scientific preoccupation not only with the physiognomic and racial characteristics of his subjects, but particularly with the ethnographical details of hairstyle, dress and artefacts, by which the different ethnic groups inhabiting Angola might be distinguished and identified for colonial purposes. Many of the figures are presented against a decontextualized studio background, as in the “Bailundu carrier” (Figure 4), or in the “Black girl carrying palm oil.”⁷ Only occasionally does Moraes show a concern to depict African daily life or technological activities, as in his photograph of “Wandering Blacksmiths” taken near Cazengo or in his images of “A Family” taken near the banks of the Zaire river, whose main purpose seems to be that of showing the “extremely rudimentary culinary implements” which the camera has caught them in the act of using to prepare their meal.⁸

Not surprisingly, Moraes’ text accompanying the 1885/88 album abounds in the prejudiced stereotyped views commonly found in most European works
on Africa dating from this period. His photograph of “Caongo Types,” for example, is accompanied by the statement that “...[t]he Caongo blacks are, like almost all those of the coast north of the Zaire and Congo, robust and well constituted, but work little.” On the whole, however, the written descriptions which accompany many of his photographs are noteworthy for their preoccupation with accurate and objective reporting of ethnographical detail.

While it is evident that the majority of Moraes' images of African society represent posed figures bearing appropriate accessories rather than people engaged in daily activities, they still have historical value. Moraes' fine portrait of the king of Kongo included in the first volume of his Album Photographico Descriptivo, together with his images of African “princes,” Quimbandas (“witch doctors”), Soba (Chief) Manuputo and his Cabinda “types” reproduced elsewhere, all taken in the Zaire district around 1880, are not only interesting from an ethnographic point of view, but reveal the continuing existence of a sharply differentiated social and political elite in this region, providing important visual information about a period for which written sources are scarce. Moreover, it is probable that a careful study of Moraes' photographic images might uncover much useful historical information in the chance details caught by the camera independently of the aims of the photographer.
III

Portuguese scientific expeditions to central Africa, 1870s/1890s

A second important category of photograhic images resulted from the government-sponsored Portuguese explorations of central Africa from the 1870s to the 1880s. The Portuguese expedition to Angola and central Africa by Alexandre da Rocha Serpa Pinto, Hermenegildo Capelo, and Roberto Ivens between 1877 and 1879 may have carried photographic equipment. Ivens himself apparently took a crash course in photography before leaving Lisbon for Luanda in September of 1877.11 However, all the known photographs sent back to Portugal by these explorers were apparently taken at the coast. The published account of Capelo and Ivens' expedition, De Benguela as Terras de Iácca (1881), includes engravings of photographs taken by Cunha Moraes and Monteiro (possibly Joaquim João Monteiro, an Anglo-Portuguese mining engineer who traveled widely throughout the coastal region between the 1850s and 1870s, author of Angola and the River Congo [1875]).

The rest of the published engravings of their journey in the interior seem to have been based on drawings. A second expedition led by Capelo and Ivens across Africa from Angola to Mozambique in the mid-1880s evidently did include camera equipment, as is shown by the drawing from the diary of Hermenegildo Capelo (Figure 5).12 However, there are no descriptions of photographic activities in the text and the engravings relating to this expedition, published in 1886, seem once again to have relied mainly on drawings.

By contrast, the Sociedade de Geografia in Lisbon preserves a unique set of photographic prints belonging to Henrique Dias de Carvalho's expedition to Lunda between 1884 and 1888, accompanied by explanatory, handwritten notes. They include possibly the earliest photographs of Lunda villages and society, including the Mwata Yamvo himself. In his published descriptions of the journey Carvalho describes how he achieved some of his images. For example, in one village near the Kwango river, where the "most important personages" were reluctant to have their portrait taken, he used a music box to arouse their curiosity and distract their attention so as to obtain the photographs without their knowledge.13 On another occasion, having invited the inhabitants of a village to wait and see how "in an instant he would transfer their image to a piece of glass," only one of the important men in the group consented to sit and face the camera. When the rest saw the negative, their fear and wonderment were such that Carvalho and his companions had to reassure them that the camera was no fetish by taking their own portraits.14

It seems likely that a camera accompanied the Pinheiro Chagas Scientific Expedition to Mozambique, led by Serpa Pinto and Augusto de Melo Pinto Cardoso, between 1884 and 1886. Rev. Alexander Hetherwick, in charge of the Blantyre mission, who helped Cardoso find a camping ground in February of
1886, recalled having invited him to come to Blantyre and take photographs if he wished. But if any images have survived they have yet to be traced.

An official photographic expedition to Mozambique was ordered by the minister for the Navy and Overseas Affairs, Frederico Ressano Garcia, in September of 1889. The commission was entrusted to the photographer M. Pereira, who spent seventeen months traveling in the interior of Mozambique at a moment of great international tension between Portugal and England over possession of central Africa. On the conclusion of his mission, shortly after
the British ultimatum of 1891, several sets of Pereira's photographic prints were bound in albums. As yet, only one album, containing a first series of forty-seven photographs of the Zambezi region, has been traced. The majority depict views of the landscape, houses, and inhabitants of private agricultural estates in the Zambezi, Shire, and Quelimane districts, furnishing possibly the first photographic images of prazo life. A large proportion were taken in the Prazo Mahindo, Quelimane district, and depict different groups of "civilized" Africans of varying degrees of acculturation, as well as a so-called "anthropological section" of "types and races" portraying "tribal" Africans. The style of these portraits is strongly romanticist, in contrast to those of Cunha Moraes. The intention seems to be to emphasize the exotic nature of the figures which are posed against black, or artificially recreated "natural" backgrounds (See, e.g., Figure 6).
In his introduction to this album Pereira recalls how he met an English photographer called Dejoux recently arrived from London, exercising his profession near the Shire river. According to Pereira’s account, the local Portuguese settlers patriotically refused to supply Dejoux with the means of transport and other assistance to continue his journey via the lakes to Tete and Blantyre. Shortly after setting out from the lakes with very little support, Dejoux died of fever. Part of his photographic equipment and all the prints found in his belongings were acquired from the British consul by Pereira. His belongings also contained silver medallions and lengths of cloth bearing a design of the bust of Victoria, which he had apparently been distributing to the local African chiefs and population of the Mopeia region.

Several other official expeditions to Mozambique produced notable photographic records: for example, the government reconnaissance mission led by Mariano Cirilo de Carvalho, mathematics professor, politician, and journalist, in 1890; and the two missions led by Alfredo Augusto Freire de Andrade which participated on the Portuguese side, in the delimitation of frontiers between the districts of Lourenço Marques and the Transvaal in 1890, and between Manica and Rhodesia in 1892.

IV

Photographs produced by Christian missions

Photographs produced by Roman Catholic and Protestant missions from the 1880s onwards provide a further very important, though little explored, visual record of Portuguese-speaking Africa. A remarkable set of early photographs of Angola was compiled by the Holy Ghost Fathers, who founded the mission at Huila in 1881. The photographs taken and developed by the mission’s own photographic studio date from the late 1880s/early 1890s. Their total number is unknown. The mission produced at least one album, containing images from the 1880s, but it is likely that these formed only a fraction of the total, since a collection of other miscellaneous prints belonging to the same mission and dating from the same period have also come to light. Together with Moraes’ photographs, they represent the earliest photographic images of African society in the region of Lubango in southern Angola. Through them it is possible to follow the different stages in the development of the mission itself, including the construction of the buildings and groups of African children belonging to the mission. They also include some of the earliest photographs of Madeiran immigrant settlers in Lubango and Chibia, besides the only photographic record so far discovered of the Portuguese military expedition to Bié led by Artur da Paiva in 1890. Finally, they include a number of remarkable “ethnographic” photographs of Africans, some of which are particularly noteworthy for the more individualistic approach of the photographer. Though necessarily posed, they respect personal character and dignity, as in the striking portrait of the soba of Jau, in whose territory the mission was based (Figure 7).
Photographers belonging to the American Methodist mission, also founded in the 1880s, in Luanda, and throughout the hinterland by the early 1900s, seem to have been concerned particularly with documenting the educational and moral progress of their charges, reflected, for example, in images reproduced on postcards captioned "Teacher with her pupils," or "Burning of fetishes" (Figure 8), representing activities of the mission at Kisua, near Malange. A more thorough search of photographic material produced by both Catholic and Protestant missionaries would probably furnish many images documenting the historical process of African acculturation to European society, as well as much incidental ethnographic information.
Photographic records of Portuguese military campaigns in Africa 1890/1920s

Photographs of Portuguese military activities in Africa provide a further, often dramatic, category of images. These reflect particularly the new developments in photography in the late nineteenth century which permitted more comprehensive, non-selective recording, and, above all, movement. A large number of photographs documenting colonial campaigns in Angola and Mozambique in the period between the 1890s and 1920s appear to have survived. Apart from official photographic records, a substantial number of photographs exist in private collections belonging to the descendants of army officers participating in the action. They effectively evoke the emotion of memorable historic moments, such as the Catholic mass held for Portuguese troops in makeshift conditions amidst the semi-desert landscape of southern Angola at the start of the 1907 Cuamato campaign, or the signing of
agreements with defeated African rulers. Additionally they provide a wealth of
detail about the more mundane daily routine of camp life in the bush between
marches.

VI

Photographic records of colonial companies

A fifth main category of photographic images comprises the visual record
of activities accumulated by large private colonial enterprises, such as the
Mozambique or Zambeze Companies, which produced a series of albums
containing abundant photographic material documenting their growth and
development between the 1890s and 1960s. The Zambeze Company albums
are a particularly rich source for the history of sugar and cotton plantations and
colonial life in Africa in general in the early twentieth century. Hardly any
aspects of life and work in the Company-controlled territories is forgotten,
however shocking, as is demonstrated by the inclusion of a photograph of
African victims of the famine of 1901, the effects of which may have been
exacerbated by the Company's own agricultural activities.

VII

Picture postcards

Picture postcards provide a further important source of photographic
images of Portuguese-speaking Africa. It is well known that in the western
world the early years of this century witnessed a boom in the production and
sale of picture postcards. This was closely associated with improved printing
techniques enabling the mass reproduction of photographs for the first time. In
the peak period between 1902 (when introduction of the divided back permitted
the message to be included alongside the address and stamp on one side, leaving
the whole of the other side free for the picture) and 1914 (when the
outbreak of World War I cooled the enthusiasm of collectors) several million
postcards were bought and sent by westerners scattered all over the globe. The
Portuguese-speaking world was no exception. Private firms began
reproducing photographic images on postcards in Portugal and the Portuguese
colonies in the late 1890s, accompanying developments in the rest of the
western world. Several thousand photographs were reproduced on Portuguese
d picture postcards in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Of these, about
three or four thousand may have come from Portuguese Africa.

The circulation of these picture postcards, permitting for the first time,
the wide dispersion of photographic images of Africa, may have exercised an
important influence in Portugal on the formation of public perceptions of
Africa and the African population. The historical significance of picture
postcards in the Australian context in terms of their impact on the popular
image of Aborigine society has been underlined recently in a suggestive study by Nicolas Peterson.27

At least twenty firms published picture postcards in Angola alone in the first quarter of the twentieth century. A careful study of a substantial sample of the picture postcards produced in Portuguese Africa—principally Angola, Mozambique, and São Tomé—shows that many of the photographic images reproduced in the early 1900s were probably taken twenty or so years before, thus reflecting an earlier social reality, which was undergoing rapid change by the twentieth century. Some firms may also have entered into agreements with private photographers. This is indicated, for example, by several series of photographic images of regions in the interior affected by military campaigns of “pacification” in the early twentieth century, notable Libolo, to the south of the river Kwanza. Additionally, the firms which produced these picture postcards may in some cases have organized their own photographic expeditions. However, like most of the source categories touched on this paper, this has yet to be researched.

Notes

1. The present paper is a slightly revised and corrected version of the paper presented to the workshop on Photograph as a Source of African History held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 12-13 May 1988. It surveys mainly original photographic material located in Portuguese archives and in my possession as part of an ongoing research project directed at producing a visual history of the former Portuguese empire.


10. Moraes/Ferreira, Africa Occidental.


15. FO. 179/248, Cardoso to Hawes. Enclosure in Hawes' to Foreign Secretary, 28 March 1886, cited in Nowell, Rose-Coloured Map, 87.


17. A complete set of the photographs resulting from this mission is deposited in the Biblioteca de Ajuda, Lisbon.

18. Only part of this photographic record, including glass negatives and prints sold a few years ago by the Freire de Andrade family itself, has so far been traced.

19. “Albüm da Missão do Real Padrado do Huila,” ca. 1887/1891. So far the only known copy of this album is the one presented to the Portuguese government minister, Henrique de Barros, in the early 1890s, in my possession. Other miscellaneous prints belonging to the same mission and dating from the same period
have also come to light in antiquarian bookshops and some also survive in the archive of the Sociedade de Geografia in Lisbon. No photographic material relating to Africa is presently preserved on the premises of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Lisbon and Carcavelos.

20. Photographs apparently dating from around 1900, reproduced on postcards published by the firm Esteves e Reis, Luanda, after 1910.

21. See, for example, a collection of photographs, probably taken by an official photographer, representing different aspects of the 1907 Cuanamo campaign, a complete set of which exists in the Centro de Documentação e da Investigação Histórica, Luanda. Another interesting series of photographs probably taken in northern Angola during campaigns in the early 1900s by an army officer, Carlos Ribeiro Nogueira Ferrão, is deposited in the recently established Arquivo Fotográfico, Lisbon.

22. Still held in the Company’s archive in Lisbon.


25. Ibid., 33-43.

26. This is a conservative calculation based on the enumeration of a sample of around 800 postcards collected by the author, produced by different firms in Angola, Mozambique, São Tomé, Guiné and Cape Verde.