

ALTERITY: THE COLONIAL NUDE

Photographic Essay

Raymond Corbey, Nijmegen University

"Going up the river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. ... There were moments when one's past came back to one ... in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence."

This famous passage from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, describing his voyage up the Congo, was written down around the turn of the century, a time of rapid colonial expansion.¹ It expresses a characteristic European attitude towards Africa, perceived as a mysterious primal landscape, a wild periphery of the civilized world. Its inhabitants too were deemed still to be part of nature, wild, primitive, uncivilized 'contemporary ancestors'. Another place, another time.

The heyday of European colonialism coincided with those of the picture postcard. Photography and postcards are mid-nineteenth century inventions, and photography was applied to postcards on a large scale only about 1900. Professional photographers made good money with their codification of many aspects of the new colonies and colonial life.² Thousands of photographs on hundreds of thousands of postcards from the first decades of this century testify to the great curiosity and scopic eagerness of Europeans, abroad and at home, vis-à-vis Africa and its native inhabitants.

A numerically important category of these postcards is constituted by pictures of African women, reflecting an erotic interest from the side of the male, European spectators.³ These colonial nudes are categories in a complex European discursive activity on Africa, the continent without history, the land of children, wrapped in the black of the night, as Hegel, spokesman of civilized Europe, put it.⁴ They are visual narratives, telling a story of civilization and primitiveness, of wildness and control, of Europe and its others, of European beliefs, fears and, especially, desire.

In the following we shall study a handful of these images of Africa, all from the period 1900-1930, and try to put these fragments of a photographic discourse in their proper perspective: the history of Europe's interpretations of its others, of its authoritative representations and protocols for dealing with the alien.⁵

'ON MADAGASCAR'

"Oh, but they are very sweet, the little black girls, and not shy at all!". *Farouche* also connotes being wild, untamed. A very suggestive allegory of relations between Europe and Africa as perceived by Europeans. Imperialist/colonialist and sexist discourse have continually reinforced and legitimized each other, and Africa has often been equated metaphorically with a mysterious, sensual virgin to be conquered.⁶ This picture is one of series of similar allegories, produced in a studio in France around 1910.



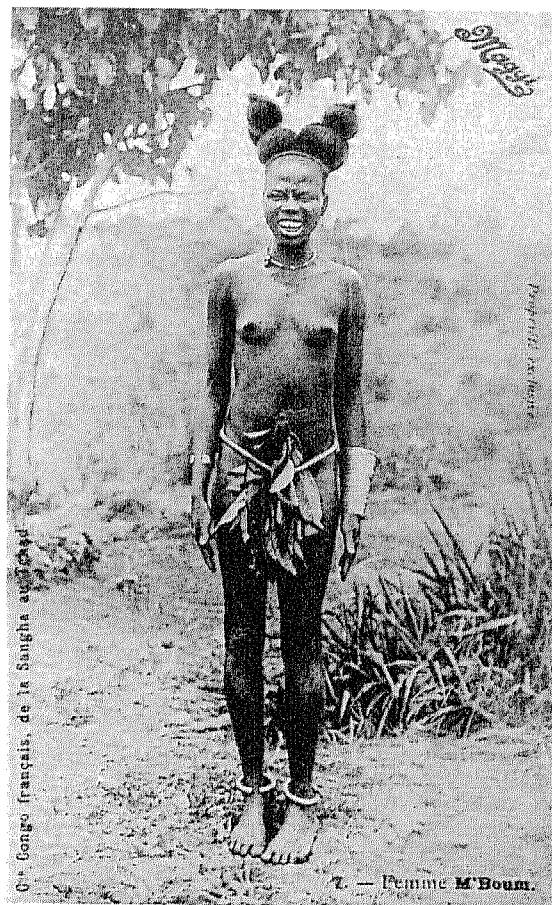
'YOUNG LAHOBE GIRLS' (Fortier, Dakar)

There is a primitivistic quality to this beautiful studio picture by Edmond Fortier, a prolific commercial photographer at Dakar.⁷ The pretty young girls, who appear on several of his postcards, are dressed for the occasion with exotic beads and colorful clothing. The exotic outfit is rather exceptional for black Africa, where most pictures of this kind were made in the open, and is more typical for postcards from Arabic speaking Northern Africa, depicting harem beauties.⁸



'M'BOUM WOMAN' (French Congo)

Young women, scarcely dressed, just standing there, looking into the camera, are disproportionately well represented among the 'types indigènes', as compared with men, older women or immature girls, who, if at all, are always photographed for some special reason, for instance mutilation by disease or an activity they are performing. The women are always heavily underdressed according to contemporary European standards, with their breasts well visible. This type of picture, a single female looking into the camera, is the most frequent one.



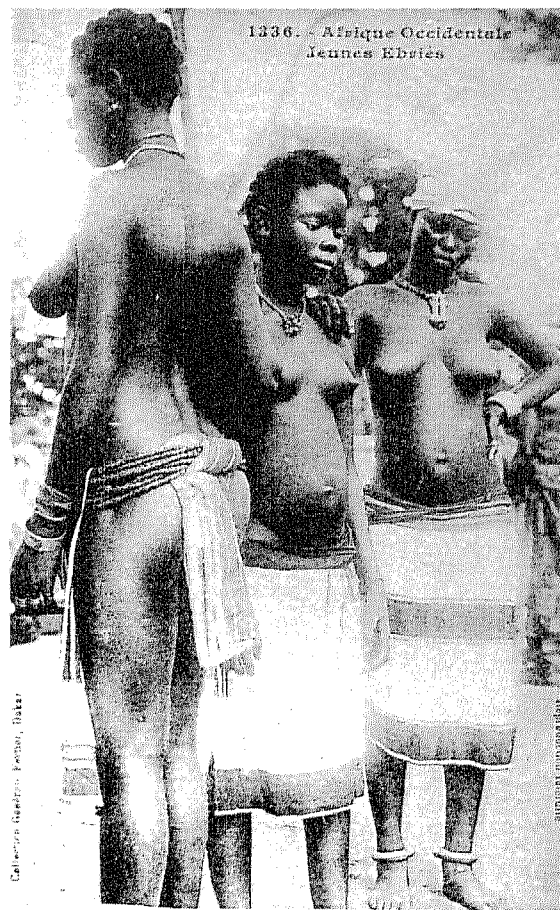
'YOUNG SOUDANESE GIRL' (Fortier, Dakar)

Sexual pleasure begins with the privilege of sight. The raised arms, which emphasize the breasts, are a common pose on this type of postcard - a convention taken over from painting and 19th century studio photography. Requested by the photographer, the pose reveals the nature of his interests. Comparable pictures of African men are as good as non-existent. The message is one of availability for male European purposes, as the whole colony was taken to be available.



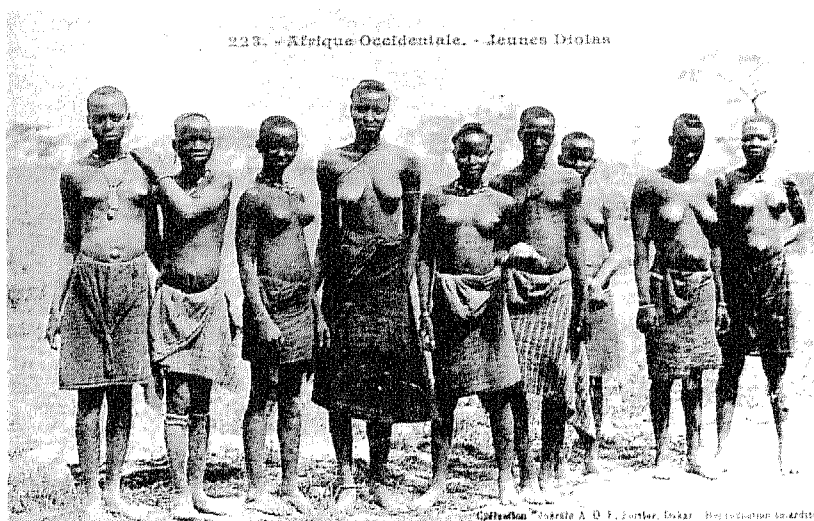
'YOUNG EBRIE' (Fortier, Dakar)

The position of the woman on the left, turned three-quarters, betrays the scopophilic eagerness of the (male) European consumer. This way of lining up the 'types' also is not uncommon on thousands of pictures in nineteenth-century and contemporary anthropological literature, the outcome of a positivistic scramble for photographic facts. The scientific character of publications of this kind provided an welcome excuse for the sexual interests of the reader in times of pretty strict sexual morals.⁹ The women on this postcard probably were dressed for the occasion. The person in the middle will not have worn her cloth as low as this.



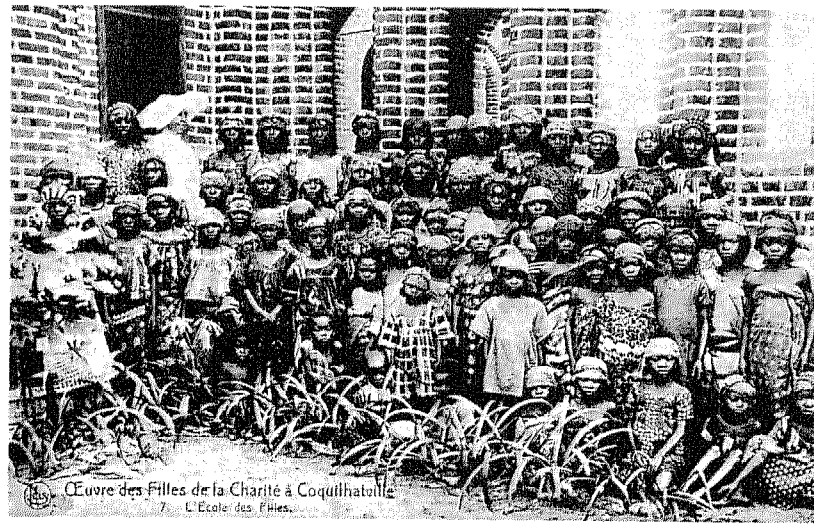
'YOUNG DIOLA' (Fortier, Dakar)

Lascivious Africa, an erotic dreamworld of the European middle class, in which men are conspicuously lacking. There are postcards picturing up to over twenty young, attractive women, selected and lined up for the occasion, like the nine on this one. As on the other postcards in this series, the ethnic attribution, suggesting an ethnographic interest, provides an alibi: let's look, for we have not seen any Diola yet. The same theme is compulsively repeated again and again in various registers - human desire is not definitively satiable. The impression one gets when going through a larger amount of postcards of this type is that of an anthology of bosoms.



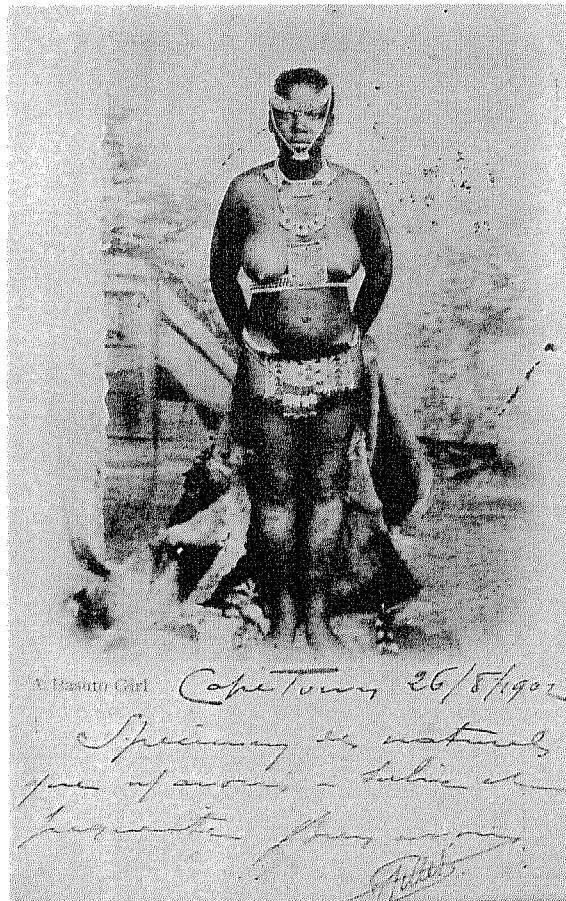
'SCHOOL FOR GIRLS' (ThIII, Brussels)

A sharp contrast with the more secular interests underlying the foregoing picture. Native women baptized and civilized, their souls saved, their indecent nakedness covered, their savage customs abolished. In the case of this particular postcard, the message and its sender are different ones. Or are both discourses, one concerning a task allotted to Christians by God, the other concerning a mission allotted to Europe in the name of Civilization or Progress, not that different?¹⁰



'A BASUTO GIRL'

Studio portrait of a woman, dressed exotically. "A specimen in its natural condition that we have to tolerate [literally: undergo] and to visit frequently".¹¹ The sender is ambivalent about his impulse and does not fully recognize it as his own ("we have to"). Precisely his distance to it and uneasiness about it create the possibility of a joke. Underlying his (*sic*) remark is an opposition between culture and nature, Europe and Africa as two mutually exclusive spaces, associated with the opposition between male and female.



No caption (Gabriel, Elisabethville)

Animal categories. "Vaches avec leurs veaux", literally cow with its calves, the sender has written on the photo. "Une vache", in contemporary French, had about the same connotations as "a bitch" has in English. Sexual impulsiveness is a recurrent attribute not only of black Africans as seen through European eyes, but of all those categorized as 'others' - we behave and control ourselves, they don't.¹² One feels uneasy about one's own ('beastly') impulses and projects them on ('beastly') others. Distortion, denigration, condescension.



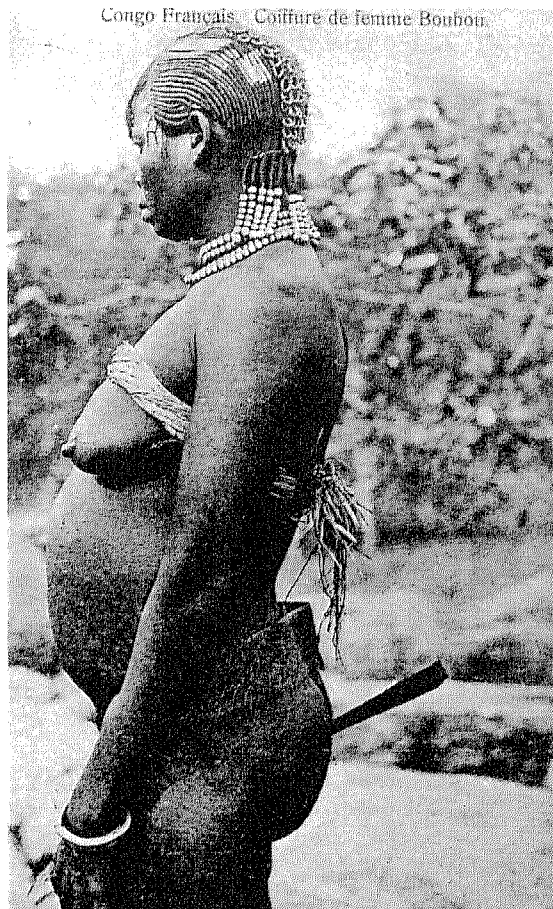
'ON ALL FOURS' (Gelser, Algiers)

The model, in this case probably a prostitute from a camp of black *tirailleurs* in colonial Algeria, the breasts bare, takes an inviting animal pose, "on four paws". Sexuality, bodily functions and unworthy behaviour, regarded as 'lower', 'brutish', have always been associated with animals and animality.¹³ Impulsive 'others' were considered to be nearer to the animal state. The animal metaphor is a powerful instrument of social control. Its ideological potential is evident: features may be highlighted, modified, created, hidden, debased. Psychoanalytically, what is forbidding from the point of view of conscience is inviting from the point of view of the impulse.



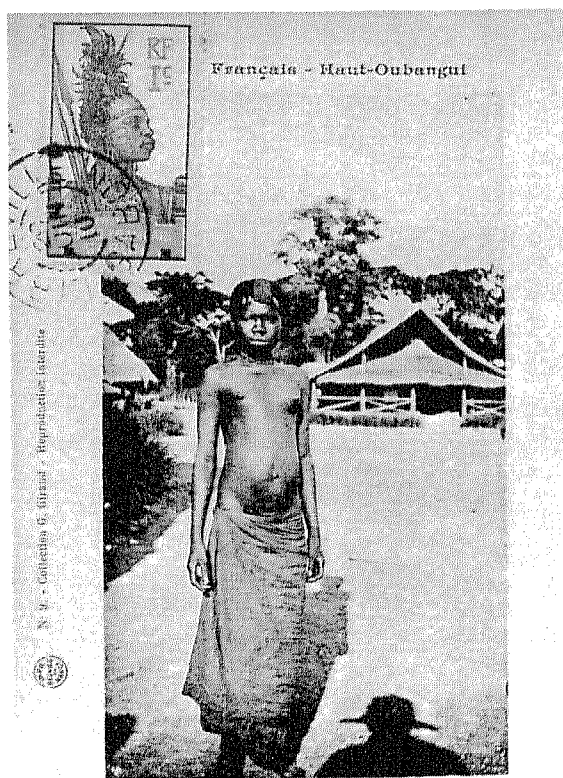
'HAIR-DO OF BOUBOU WOMAN'

Desire and defense: the caption suggests the style of hairdressing as the subject matter of the picture, but the photographic focus is set on the body, on breasts and buttocks of this African Venus, suggesting a different reading. Similarly, the larger category these postcards were subsumed under, 'Scenes and Types', suggests a cool and objective survey of colonial realities, enhanced by what has been called the "myth of photographic truth",¹⁴ the illusion of objectivity created by the very procedure of taking a picture. Pointing out how in this discourse phantasms are constructed - fulfilling secret wishes and subject to defense mechanisms - fundamentally is a *meta*-discursive activity.



'HAIR-DO AND TYPE OF BANDZIRI WOMAN' (Giraud)

Another picture from a plethora of images tirelessly repeating the same theme. The caption provides an alibi for the male, European interest for the body of a very young African woman. That her cloth is girdled around her hips so lowly is no coincidence. The shadow of the photographer, who keeps out of sight normally, secretly peeping through his camera, is visible, his topi suggesting how carefully he covers his own nakedness. The picture on the stamp is a far, exoticist cry from anything that was visible in French colonial Gabon of the day.



Coiffure et type de Femme Bandziri

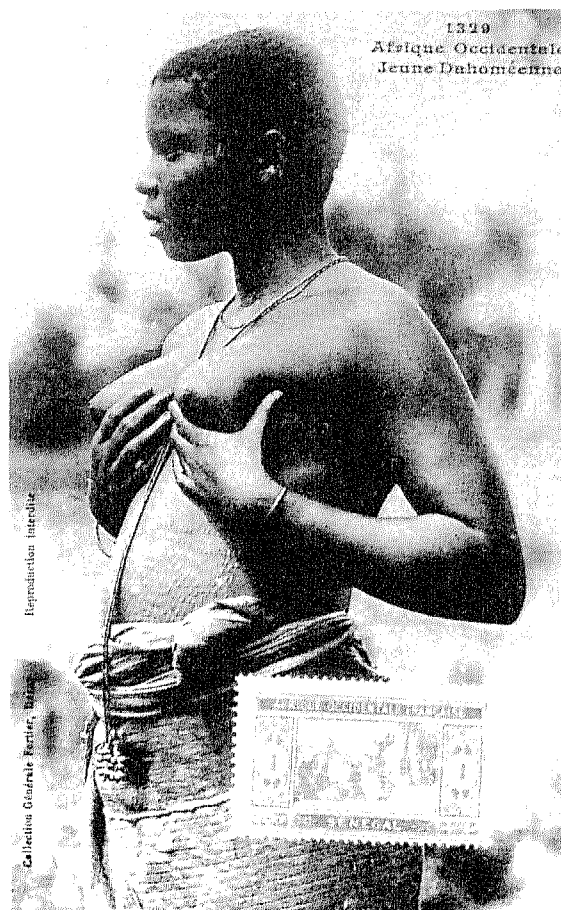
'FIOTE WOMAN AT TUBA'

This woman, anonymous like all the other unencountered others, not presented as an individual but treated as a stereotype, a wish-fulfilling phantasm, has laid off her clothing at the request of the photographer. *Nigra sum, sed formosa* - I am black, but well-proportioned.¹⁵



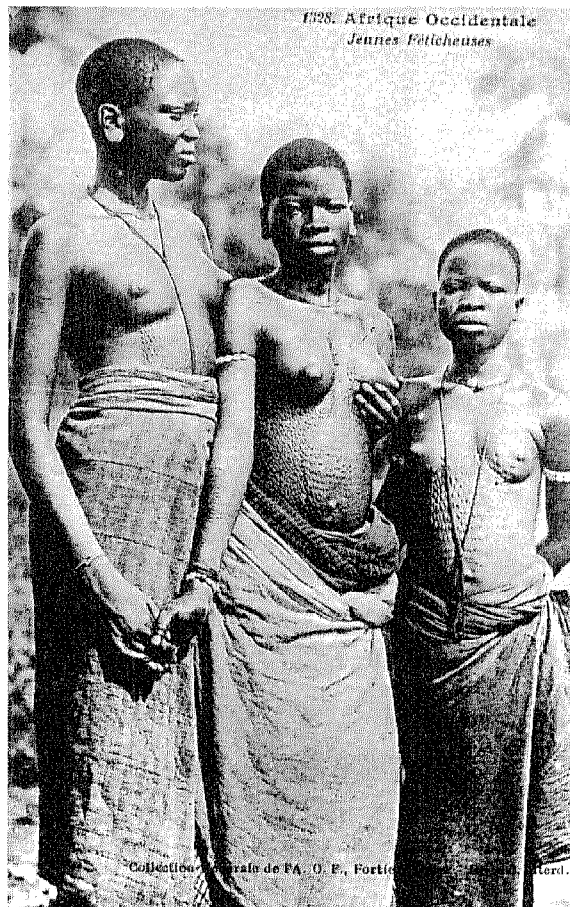
'YOUNG WOMAN FROM DAHOMEY' (Fortier, Dakar)

The gesture of touching the breasts, not infrequently to be found on colonial postcards, probably was performed at the request of the photographer, who thus imputes a nonverbal sexual message to the woman in question. The gesture does occur among several peoples in Western Africa, however, with a different, non-sexual meaning: the greeting of intimate friends without looking at them, implying the intention not to use the evil eye.¹⁶



'YOUNG SORCERESSES' (Fortier, Dakar)

Many of Fortier's pictures must be granted expressivity and esthetic quality.¹⁷ The same gesture of touching a breast as on postcard nr. 14, an imputed proposition and invitation. 'Féticheuses' literally implies worshipping a fetish. The women are thus definitely categorized as something 'other', what we are not, something mysterious and exotic, personifications of a different space, an imaginary world that only was what it was made to be. Colonial photography in a sense was an act of domestication of a foreign and elusive reality, of structuring what appeared to be chaotic, of conjuring the threatening - it was a gesture of submission.



NOTES AND REFERENCES

For their comments and suggestions I am much obliged to Jan Abbink, Gerard Brans, Léon Buskens, Philippe David, Paul Hennekens, Peter Mason and Albert Trouwborst.

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902), New York 1980, p. 48.

² For instance, Lehnert & Landrock at Cairo, J. Geiser at Algiers, or E. Fortier at Dakar.

³ For some quantitative data concerning French colonial Africa, see Ph. David, 'Portraits africains. De Samory aux belles d'Ébène', *Le Monde des Philatélistes*, febr. 1987, p. 34-35.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, in *Werke 12*, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 120 ff. On the myth of the dark continent as a Victorian invention, see P. Brantlinger, 'Victorians and Africans', in H. L. Gates Jr. (ed.), *Race, Writing and Difference*, Chicago/London 1986, p. 185-222.

⁵ Most of the items to be presented are from a collection of over a hundred postcards built up by a young French *colon*, a certain Nic, from the Pas de Calais, during the years 1910-1920 in Western Africa. He sent postcards of the type under study to his parents at home, requesting them, as can be inferred from texts on the back, to keep them for him in an album. This album, still intact, was acquired by the author in 1987. An extensive analysis of the collection and its cultural and ideological backgrounds can be found in my *Wildheid en beschaving: De Europese verbeelding van Afrika*, Baarn, autumn 1989 (English edition in preparation).

⁶ On the interaction between colonialist and sexist discourse, see Helen Carr, 'Woman/Indian: The American and his others', in F. Barker et al. (eds.), *Europe and its others*, Colchester 1984.

⁷ Edmond Fortier, 1862-1928. Cf. Ph. David, *Inventaire générale des cartes postales Fortier I-III*, Paris 1986-1988.

⁸ See M. Alloula's perceptive, but somewhat pathetic and querulous *Le harem colonial: Images d'un sous-érotisme*, Genève/Paris 1981.

⁹ The many titles of the type *Die Rasseschönheit des Weibes* ('Racial Beauty of the Woman', by C. H. Stratz, Stuttgart 1901) are revealing, as are the great numbers of editions and copies reached by such books. The 22nd edition of Stratz appeared in 1941. The first three editions of A. Friedenthal's *Das Weib im Leben der Völker* ('The Woman in the Life of the Peoples', 2 vols., 1st ed. Berlin 1901) totalled 35,000 copies; the second and third editions contained well over a thousand pictures each.

¹⁰ It would not be difficult to show profound analogies between both discourses, for instance from the theoretical perspective of structural semiotics/narratology, developed by A. J. Greimas and the Paris School.

¹¹ "Spécimen en naturels que nous avons à subire et fréquenter".

¹² African savages, like Australian ones, have not as willingly been seen as noble as those from the New World or from the Pacific. Exceptions are the Nuba, as photographed by, among others, Leni Riefenstahl, and Fulani women. See K. George, 'The civilized West looks at primitive Africa, 1400-1800', *Isis* 40 (1958), p. 62-72, and cf. B. Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768-1850*, 2nd ed., New Haven/London 1985. On the primitivistic treatment of Fulani women, see Ada Martinkus-

Zemp, 'Européocentrisme et exotisme: l'homme blanc et la femme noire dans la littérature française de l'entre-deux-guerres', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 49 (1973), p. 60-81.

¹³ Literary representations of African women in French colonial novels and travel-books from the period 1920-1940 are much the same. See Martinkus-Zemp, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ A. Sekula, 'On the invention of photographic meaning', *Artforum* XIII (1975) nr 5, p. 37; the "folklore of pure denotation", "a mythic aura of neutrality", "the myth of the semantic autonomy of the photographic image" (p. 37, 39).

¹⁵ *Solomon's Song* 1: 5.

¹⁶ For instance among the Yoruba. *Personal communication*, dr. H. Witte.

¹⁷ Cf. the second postcard.