This discussion critically examines a particular piece of material culture that encapsulates the theme of empire and celebration: a postcard sent from the British Empire Exhibition held at Wembley Park from 23 April 1924 until October 1925. The postcard was sent by a woman named Amy (b.1883) to the house in Suffolk where she lived with her father and sister. The front of the postcard depicts two individuals from the region of Asante in the Gold Coast, referred to as Princess Baa and her husband (Figure 1), and on the back we see Amy relaying the notable highlights of her visit to the exhibition to her father Alfred (Figure 2).  

Because they were ‘so frequently encountered in the quotidian experience of people of all classes’, according to Ashley Jackson and David Tomkins this postcard and other pieces of colonial ‘ephemera’ are amongst the most pervasive sources of imperial ideas and images.

Featuring a photograph as well as a personal written message, postcards are a particularly rich example of printed ephemera. They are unique for the way in which they communicate two stories in a single item and reveal the interplay between the two. For Prochaska and Mendelson, postcards allow scholars to
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Imperial Debris: Picture Postcards and the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, 1924-1925

Examine the ‘complex relations among subjects, producers, senders and receivers’, and to question how forms of representation relate to notions of authority, originality, class, gender and power. In choosing a particular postcard over any number of others, the individual has actively engaged with the postcard’s cover image in as much as they have picked it off the shelf, looked at it, perhaps turned it over a few times, and found it to be a suitable partner for their brief note. If we are fortunate, however, the back of a postcard will provide the scholar with clues as to what the writer thought of the image they chose to send, and the circumstances surrounding the postcard’s purchase. As such, postcards sit at the crux of the debate that evaluates the impact of dominant imperial discourses on the British public.

More specifically, the postcard discussed here allows a consideration of the argument put forward by Paul S. Landau, among others, which contends that imperial culture utilised a visual language that sought to communicate ‘authentic’ representations of non-European peoples and lands.

My interest in material culture largely stems from its centrality to museum exhibitions, collections and curation, fields I am currently exploring through the Criticism & Curatorial Practice MFA programme at OCAD University in Toronto (formerly the Ontario College of Art & Design). Writing this article has given me the opportunity to explore this research process, which remains rarely used as an integral form of evidence by historians. Although focusing on a different kind of source material, this investigation draws on my earlier postgraduate research, which centred on the social and cultural history of the British empire, specifically the memories and experiences of those who spent their childhoods travelling between Britain and West Africa in the decades leading up to decolonisation.

The length and reflective nature of this piece informed the decision to focus on a single material source. Although it offers a critical analysis of a primary source and relevant existing literatures, this article should be taken as a ‘work-in-progress’. Its aim is to raise questions and invite further research rather than present a fully formed in-depth study.
Photographs are routinely read as authentic representations of their subjects because photography is perceived as an intrinsically truthful format, distinguishing it from other descriptive mediums such as, for instance, travel writing and historical painting. For Landau, photography stands alongside rifles, Gatling guns, steamships and quinine as a ‘tool of empire’, because it played a fundamental role in creating a ‘public transcript’ of colonialism that forwarded the notion of ‘an authentic and timeless Africa’. In much colonial-era photography, those depicted are organised into administrative categories such as ‘Wolofs’, ‘Massai’ and ‘Ashanti’; or ‘weavers’, ‘youths’ and ‘blacksmiths’. This vocabulary of classification drew from ethnographic practices of the late nineteenth century, which had in turn developed out of earlier studies in physiognomy. For Landau, the process of photographing individuals and then assigning them to particular categories achieved the paradoxical effect of at once honouring and de-individualising them. Portraiture’s inherent capacity to elevate the individual is overpowered by the act of reducing the subject to a nameless member of a constructed type. This trope of an authentic and timeless Africa populated by easily categorised Africans was appealing to the remote command structure of British colonial rule, largely because it helped remove the ‘ugliness of genuine colonial encounters’ from the version of the empire that was presented to the British public.
Imperial Debris: Picture Postcards and the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, 1924-1925

Figure 1: Front view of the postcard titled ‘Princess Baa of Ashanti and her Husband’.

Figure 2: Back view of the postcard titled ‘Princess Baa of Ashanti and her Husband’.
‘Princess Baa of Ashanti and her husband’ reads the caption at the bottom of the postcard, one of many produced as souvenirs of the British Empire Exhibition by the prolific printer Raphael Tuck & Sons. It is one of three in a small set of postcards from the Gold Coast pavilion and accompanies ‘Prempeh, son of the late King of Ashanti and Gold Coast Africans in the Native Village at Wembley’. Although she is the stated focus of the photograph, Princess Baa appears very removed. She stands to the right of her husband in a decidedly rigid and stiff stance, with her arms hanging straight down at her sides and her feet positioned shoulder-width apart. She wears traditional kente cloth, although it shows signs of having been draped rather hurriedly, and almost no jewellery. Perhaps the most curious detail in the photograph are the Princess’ sturdy, leather lace-up walking shoes, which appear particularly out of place next to her husband’s more traditional thong sandals. The expression on her face and the way she focuses her gaze somewhere off camera both suggest a considerable degree of detachment from the photographic process. Looking directly at the photographer, and by extension the viewer, her husband appears confident and more put-together with his rather more flowing kente robes, accented by numerous rings and bracelets, likely made out of gold, and a ceremonial fly whisk. Although perhaps more amenable to the situation, the overtly casual nature of his pose, with his right foot hidden from view, leaving behind an empty sandal, suggests he shares his wife’s lack of interest in sitting for this photographic portrait.

Although the individuals pictured on the postcard are named (albeit only partially), it remains an apt example through which to consider Landau’s concept of ‘authentic’ representation, because it successfully casts a veil over the reality of the colonial system. Similar to the iconography of the Maasai murran, which had no place for discussions of loss of land to white settlers, the image of Princess Baa and her husband reveals nothing of the contemporary situation in the Gold Coast and its historical underpinnings. Prempeh I (1870-1931), the Asante king who had been ousted and forcibly exiled by the British in 1896, had
just been granted leave from the Seychelles at the time this postcard was produced, returning to the Gold Coast as a private citizen in 1924. Recognising the usefulness of this local power structure to the system of indirect rule, which had become ‘an almost sacred doctrine’ following its initial implementation in northern Nigeria by Sir Frederick Lugard, the British would reinstate Prempeh I as Kumashene two years later. As was noted not long after the Gold Coast gained independence, the policy of indirect rule relied on traditional institutions to such a degree that some were even rebuilt in order to facilitate it.14

As Landau reminds us, ‘the idea that Western photographs objectified colonised peoples in Africa is correct, if also banal’.15 In placing Africans in front of a wholly exploitative lens, the historian risks creating stereotypical roles akin to those established in the nineteenth century. Consequently, it is important not to overlook the subject’s potential sense of agency when analysing photographic images. Curious about the princess’ shoes, historian Michel R. Doortmont suggests it reveals a purposeful act of defiance against ‘being turned into a circus attraction’. Even the simple act of forgetting her sandals can be interpreted as a more subtle indication of resistance to a staged photo session that Princess Baa had little interest in attending.16 Her husband’s more fashioned appearance and strong, direct gaze could represent a conscious decision to use the camera to communicate his heightened status. Confidence in his own position relative to that of the photographer’s would explain what initially seems an odd combination of the numerous ornaments paired with a decidedly informal, relaxed pose. Further research into who Princess Baa and her husband were, and their connections to the British Empire Exhibition, would help answer some of these questions.

For Doortmont the photograph alone offers ‘few clues as to where it was taken’, and whether Princess Baa and her husband were present at the exhibition.17 Amy’s note, however, confirms that these two members of Asante royalty were indeed in London. ‘Have just seen these two people,’ she writes. Consequently, in
all probability the photograph was taken at the pavilion rather than in the Gold Coast itself. A comparison between the decorative patterns on the textured walls that Princess Baa stands in front of and those seen in the background of ‘Gold Coast Africans in the Native Village at Wembley’ verifies this (Figure 3).  

Figure 3: Front view of ‘Gold Coast Africans in the Native Village at Wembley’.

Knowing Princess Baa and her husband were photographed a considerable distance away from the real-life setting that the photograph seeks to illustrate challenges the purported authenticity of the image. It raises questions about the photograph’s ability to accurately represent the individuals it depicts and, by extension, the tribe or type they are standing in for. This certainly gives credence to Landau’s assessment that colonial-era photography asked ‘Africans to perform as “Africans”’ in order to create a comfortable picture of the British empire. Landau goes so far as to assert that the process of reducing African peoples to types, exemplified by the image of Princess Baa and her husband, resulted in colonial officials ruling less over populations than over images. While this is certainly a dynamic conclusion about the role of photography in the colonial process, it seems to contradict the point he makes elsewhere that most European administrators, particularly those who worked overseas, ‘knew better’.

On the basis of Amy’s reactions to what she saw at the exhibition, it is more
fitting to modify Landau’s argument, applying it not to colonial officials but to those who came into contact with the empire’s diverse populations predominantly through events such as the British Empire Exhibition and its ephemera. The British Empire Exhibition held at Wembley Park sought to

strengthen bonds that bind mother Country to her Sister States and Daughters, to bring into closer contact the one with each other, to enable all who owe allegiance to the British flag to meet on common ground and learn to know each other.²⁰

The short note on the back of the image discussed above suggests that the exhibition was largely successful in fulfilling its mandate. Her introductory announcement, ‘am now visiting Natal’, leads to an initial assumption that Amy is writing from South Africa to a distant relative in Britain. It is only as one reads the full postcard, noticing the special postage stamp and postmark, that it becomes clear she is actually writing from London. It would certainly seem that, for Amy, the exhibition offered a convincing representation of the empire. Such an interpretation echoes Cannadine’s assessment that large public events such as the British Empire Exhibition successfully created an ‘ordered imperial society’ that encompassed both periphery and metropole:

There was a homogenizing convergence about their social structures, and about perceptions of them . . . brought alive, made real, and carried along from past to present to future by unrivalled and interlocking displays of regular ritual and occasional spectacle . . . thereby constructing comforting and familiar resemblances and equivalencies and affinities.²¹

I would venture to qualify Cannadine’s evaluation, however. While the exhibition presented the empire as a cohesive whole, the event was promoted as an opportunity to travel the empire, which reinforced the dichotomy between
metropole and periphery. Visitors were encouraged to send postcards, quintessential travel mementos, from the exhibition to friends and relatives in Britain. Numerous postcards were made especially for the occasion, and the Post Office issued a commemorative stamp that could only be purchased at Wembley Park, thereby recalling the regional stamps produced throughout the empire that announced the arrival of a letter or postcard from a faraway colonial setting. The fact that the photographs used on the postcards were taken at the exhibition reinforced to both sender and receiver that the pavilions were like-for-like transplants of their colonial outposts, and consequently that progressing through the exhibition was akin to travelling from one exotic locale to another.

For Amy, visiting the exhibition does seem to have offered a convincingly ‘authentic’ experience of the empire, thereby constituting an act of travel and exploration. She was busy ‘rushing around to see as much as possible’ and felt it necessary to document her travels by sending a postcard to her father, with whom she lived, despite the very short physical distance between them. The exhibition may have succeeded in bringing the empire home to Britain, but this cultural exchange could only take place within the confines of a larger imperial narrative, which was based on the belief that crucial social and cultural differences separated Britain from its colonial empire. Visitors to the exhibition such as Amy may have come into closer contact with the empire, but the experience certainly did not take place on ‘common ground’. 

As Jackson and Tomkins stress in their recent contribution, studying its ‘debris’ reveals the British empire’s fundamentally complex and fluid nature. Focusing on a single postcard, this discussion has explored some of the existing literatures that seek to illuminate this issue. A central concern has been the question of ‘authentic’ representations of non-European peoples: how, why, by whom and for whom were these visual tropes created and maintained? In this instance, the discussion has revolved around two individuals from Asante in the Gold Coast, seen by a woman living in Britain when she visited the British Empire Exhibition
in the mid-1920s, and pictured on the postcard that she chose to send to her father at the family home in nearby Suffolk. Despite its brevity, her description of the visit reveals that two seemingly opposing narratives were communicated through the exhibition and its related ephemera. Working in tandem, these dialogues sought to foster a sense of cohesion between periphery and metropole while also maintaining the hierarchy that underpinned the empire’s social and political structure.

The British public was encouraged to regard visiting the exhibition as an exercise in foreign travel, through which they would gain first-hand knowledge of the peoples and cultures on show. Although the numerous pavilions brought the empire into closer physical proximity, this narrative of travel ensured that periphery and metropole remained two very distant locations in people’s minds. This virtual distance served as a metaphor for difference, drawn along lines of race, ethnicity, gender and notions of progress. This supports Landau’s argument that European and non-European peoples came into contact with one another through two interfaces, the ‘virtual’ and the ‘actual’. I would suggest, however, that the virtual interface extended beyond ‘photographs, words on stationery and images projected onto screens’, and into mediums that purported to offer an even more tangible experience of Britain’s overseas empire, like the British Empire Exhibition of 1924-25. Furthermore, the virtual and the actual were fluid concepts that intersected in a number of ways as they were variously employed to communicate dominant imperial discourses that strove to keep the empire at bay.


My MA dissertation was submitted to the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Bristol in October 2009. It is titled “I’m a Product of a Colonial Family”: Conceptualisations of Home and Understandings of Belonging Seen through the Lens of British-West African Colonial Childhoods”.


DeRoo has found that in much French colonial photography in Algeria women were portrayed as ‘the bearers of culture’ and were seen to ‘embody a particular ethnic group’ because they were more commonly the subjects of ‘ethnic’ photographs, whereas men were shown engaging in work and labour (De Roo, ‘Colonial Collecting’, pp. 87-9). Princess Baa’s distinctly European shoes raise interesting questions about the role of gender in colonial photography, which unfortunately cannot be fully explored here, because in this instance it is her husband who looks more convincingly ‘ethnic’.


Doortmont, ‘Asante Princess on Display’.


