

# BOOK REVIEW

**Raoul J. Granqvist, *Photography and American Coloniality: Eliot Elisofon in Africa, 1942–1972*.** East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2017. xxi + 236 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. \$39.95. Cloth. ISBN: 9781611862362.

Raoul J. Granqvist's book, *Photography and American Coloniality: Eliot Elisofon in Africa, 1942–1972*, is a maddening, fascinating, and in many ways indispensable book about a preeminently important American photographer of colonized people. One is frustrated reading the book for two interlaced reasons. First, this is a biography in which the author is deeply ambivalent about the biographee. This ambivalence is camouflaged by the structure of the book, which examines groups of Elisofon's photographs taken over the decades, but nonetheless. We look at Elisofon through analyses of his images coupled with his journals and other information, reconstructing his mindset when he set up his shots and selected from among them. But, second, there are no pictures, no photographs at all, included in this study of Elisofon called *Photography and American Coloniality*. Since Krakauer, since Marshall McLuhan and John Berger, is this acceptable?

Not a single picture is included. The author himself expresses some doubt as to the wisdom of (xx) effectively derogating the visual. Many of Granqvist's points are as much about the captions of the images shot by Elisofon as they are about photographs he (mostly) describes. Many of them are said to be simple or forthrightly of what they depict, the pejorative or colonial messaging coming from his choices of subjects. The danger is that the images are not the real focus. If they need not be, what is going on?

Trying to locate Elisofon's images on the internet produces some results, but none findable by the archival index numbers Granqvist provides. One turns to Granqvist in *Africa is a Country* (a 2014 [essay](#)), which charges Elisofon with reproducing Victorian stereotypes of ethnic groups as non-individuated subjects. Included in the essay is a link to Elisofon's picture of a Kuba king, intended to be compared to a modern color photograph by Arnold Newman, "Bope Mabinshé, King of the Bakubas" (which must be found online). Does Newman's image show respect, or equality, whereas Elisofon's denigrates, as Granqvist has it?

I do not see such when I look. Is that because the issue is not the iconic image itself alone, but its passage into consumption? Why is Granqvist attributing this making-of-meaning to the picture itself, which is not shown?

In a general descriptive vein, the book is alternatively fascinating, digressive, imaginative, and gymnastic in its assertions, with many convincing connections and appositions, juxtaposed with some cookie-cutter judgments and generalized overreach. We learn pertinent facts about Elisofon: that he read pop culture and carried with him colonially-produced texts, and that he figured out what people want to look at. Show business, science, and high art overlapped around him. We understand his grand framing of “the traditional” at *Life* and later at *National Geographic* well.

This presents another problem: Elisofon’s travels are not all equally reliably contextualized in a history of usage. For example, in Granqvist’s discussion of Elisofon’s images of Maasai (100–103), there is no sense that Maasai are not an imagic construction but rather a *historical* construction, based on their elevation as a mobile police presence for the British in building the railway line and the expansion of herder domains. The once-common visual depiction of the statuesque *murrans* and the history of Maasai Mara were mutually constitutive. Gendered tribal identity was not just a pictorial holdover from the Victorian era (115). It was part of the apparatus of imperial rule, informing tax, legal, and labor policies. Typological pictures simplified administration and administrative self-understanding.

Granqvist also underplays (101, 200) predecessors to Elisofon such as Osa and Martin Johnson, with their cinema of Savannah life in East and Central Africa; relevant because “his [Elisofon’s] photographs are not about Africa, they are about Africa in America!” and that productive domain has an imagic history. Ten years before, in the thirties, the Johnsons made the lowbrow cinematic background to Elisofon’s higher craft. Granqvist does connect Elisofon to cinematographer Gerald Feil, who later worked for the Maysles brothers (*Salesman*, 1967) and filmed the Cape Town neighborhood District Six before its destruction in 1967 (134), among other piquant details. But these connections are not treated in a systematic way.

Granqvist relates ambivalently to this passionate and (but?) derivative auteur, Elisofon. Elisofon’s troubling subordination to USIA and its propaganda, his shallow-minded embrace of H.M. Stanley’s legacy, his poor framing of independent Africa in his work, are related issues. Granqvist treats them but nods to Elisofon’s “richness” in picturing African life, especially the lives of African men (188). Elisofon tried to inject “beauty” or “aesthetics” into his documentary pictures in spite of his service to colonial categories, but with no visuals it is hard to judge his technical achievement.

Elisofon’s role in the commodification of African “art” culminates in a brilliant (divided) section on how he, Elisofon, triangulated his “expertise” and transcended photography’s aesthetic (178–84, 204–5). Granqvist, walking a similar tightrope, alternates lucid and poetic evocations and reevocations of Elisofon’s craftsmanship with condemnations of his limitations. Elisofon was a “virtuoso” but, Granqvist concludes, “his photography in Africa

is a product of a colonialist mission, a Eurocentric subject-object relation as commodified delusion” (235). Is there a contradiction?

This book will be indispensable to anyone interested in the history of *Life Magazine*, the imagination of Africa in the Americas, or American *flaneur*-ism, with its generative categories and sense of itself as monarch-of-all-I-survey. No one will be able to comment on Elisofon without reading Granqvist.

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### For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Adams, Monni. 1989. “African Visual Arts from an Art Historical Perspective.” *African Studies Review* 32 (2): 55–104. doi:10.2307/523970.
- Castellote, Jess, and Tobenna Okwuosa. 2020. “Lagos Art World: The Emergence of an Artistic Hub on the Global Art Periphery.” *African Studies Review*, 1–27. doi:10.1017/asr.2019.24.
- Dunn, Kevin. 1996. “Lights...Camera...Africa: Images of Africa and Africans in Western Popular Films of the 1930s.” *African Studies Review* 39 (1): 149–75. doi:10.2307/524673.