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SOUTHERN (AFRICAN) BELLES & THE AESTHETIC FORMS OF SEDUCTION: PORTRAYING ZULU WOMEN IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY POSTCARDS

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1. “What is so striking about the Zulu cards is that they are so crass – unashamedly objectifying, sexualizing and exoticizing Zulu people”.¹ It is this White dominant aesthetic ideology and representation that Black American artist Carrie Mae Weems denounces through one of her artworks: “From Here I Saw What Happened and I cried” (1995-96).² The twenty-nine images of that work are seen from the perspective of a Zulu-type African woman looking towards the pictures presented next, to her right. This first “blue” portrait is captioned “FROM HERE [Africa] I SAW WHAT HAPPENED”; the series ends with the same “blue” portrait of the African lady, but looking to the left, stating “AND I CRIED”, giving meaning to the series. The first four of the twenty-seven “red” portraits, which are in between the two “blue” ones, are chromogenic red prints of African American people, old photographs with sand blasted text on glass. The first one, the profile of a Black bare-chested woman is captioned: “YOU BECAME A SCIENTIFIC PROFILE” and the fourth, a young woman, is entitled “& A PHOTOGRAPHIC SUBJECT”. The succession of the four portraits shows that the viewer is invited to read all the texts as one: “You became a scientific profile, a Negroid type, an anthropological debate & a photographic subject”. With the last portrait of the series of four, Weems underlines one of the most subtle and subliminal aspects that White violence took towards the Blacks in past centuries. Being a “photographic subject” was part of a vast, often unconscious, programme to “capture” the image and lives of indigenous people, producing stereotyped and biased representations that would belittle them and therefore give pre-eminence to the “White race”. Carrie Mae Weems sheds light on Western people’s former (and maybe still present) attitude towards Black women’s bodies. It is this attitude we would like to examine through in this paper.

2. This paper concerns itself with the way South African and European postcards portrayed Zulu

1 C. Thurlow, A. Jaworski, and V. Ylänne-McEwen, “‘Half-hearted Tokens of transparent Love’? ‘Ethnic’ Postcards and the visual mediation of Host-Tourist Communication”, 6.

2 Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Can be viewed: <http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html> (last accessed 10 November 2017).

women at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries to cater to a growing postcard industry by playing seductively with a photographer, a publisher, a purchaser / sender, and an addressee / collector at a time when the emerging consumer society was massively producing goods, including picture postcards, within a capitalist market that the critic Ulla Karttunen describes as “a grandiose body of desire”.³

3. We will approach the White male paradigm through Baudrillard's vision, as he stated that: “Seduction and femininity are ineluctable as the reverse side of sex, meaning and power”.⁴ Likewise, using his insight into the “system of objects”, and his mobilisation of the libido by the image, this paper will endeavour to deconstruct the process of seduction that is generated at various stages in the existence of a postcard, from its creation to its preservation in a private album. Another focus of this article is iconophilia in the 19th century, when photography was still thought to convey a “true” or faithful presentation of reality as the “effet de réel” is certainly stronger in photography than any other medium.⁵ The visual analysis of the mechanisms of seduction and the projection of one's frame of mind to objectify the “subject” (like the cinema and the theatre, postcards were a travesty of reality) will be at the heart of this paper. Drawing from about 280 postcards representing Zulu women, published at the beginning of the 20th century, this paper will also foreground the diverse processes of seduction: what interactions are established between the artist, his or her product and the onlooker / consumer. How is the gaze caught up by the artwork? How is the onlooker stripped of his capacity to analyse what is happening to him or her? And finally, why is he kept in a permanent state of unfulfilled desire and frustration?

Postcards, a new media to seduce the masses

4. “‘Public’ images, and by extension postcards produced for an international market, act as metaphors for their consumers, signifying something beyond the actual image to give visual form to Western discourses about Africa.”⁶ The notion of seduction lies in the process which starts with a picture being taken to be then donated or sold to an editor, who prints it and displays it in a view to selling it to a customer who will choose to buy it and send it to an acquaintance. From the
- 3 U. Karttunen, “The Aesthetics of Seduction. The Capitalist Market as the Body of Desire”, ESA 2015 Prague Conference Programme: <http://esa12thconference.eu/programme> (last accessed 10 November 2017).
- 4 J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 2.
- 5 See A. Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions, Representation of the “Native” People and the Making of European Identities*, London, New-York: Leicester University Press, 1999.
- 6 C.M. Geary, “Different visions? Postcards from Africa by European and African Photographers and Sponsors”, 150.

photographed scene to the postcard archived in an album we have a chain of potential seductive or appealing modes of interaction: the photographer wishes to trigger interest from the editor to make money out of his photography. The editor is bent on “seducing” his customer into buying his postcard. The buyer in turn is keen to appeal to the person he sends the postcard to, thus implying: “I hope you will like it”. The person who receives the postcard may also choose to display it in his or her album and thus please a friend or a visitor. This is what early twentieth century postcards are about. At least since Roland Barthes and his “rhetoric of images”, we have become aware that iconographic documents are structured to convey a message. Beyond this statement, what is often more stimulating is to analyse what the image says about its designer. The image is a mirror which speaks more about the latter than the central object or person of the document. In that sense, 19th-century Western presentations of the Other reveal the cultural context in which they were produced.

5. Victorian photographers were all the keener to testify to what they witnessed, as they were often pioneers who could release images they were happy to sell to a large public. The fascination for the relatively new media that photography was in the late 19th century led many European travellers or people working in the colonies to make the most of the exotic environment and to take pictures themselves (particularly after George Eastman’s invention of the Kodak folding camera in 1896), but also to purchase pictures from professional photographers so as to add them to their own souvenir travel albums. Other professionals would either buy photos from these photographers or commission the latter to capture scenes and people for them. Among these professionals, we can mention postcard editors who took photography to another level of networking: the picture printed in limited numbers and confined to the private album became, along with the picture postcard, a mass-produced good which was sent around the world before it ended up very often, like photographs, as a collectable in an album.

6. Yet, right from the beginning, there was a rupture between the “veracity” of the scene shown on a postcard, as what the viewer saw was the photographer’s (and subsequently the editor’s) point of view of the subject-matter, and the “real” scene as actually seen by the photographer. The point was not to represent what the photographer saw, but to produce images that were merely the reflexion of a fantasy.⁷ In that sense, Marie-Christine Massé highlights what she considers to be the “aesthetic manipulations” of photographers and postcard editors, which they imposed on different parts of landscapes in order to create and spread a certain image of the colony.⁸ Virginia Lee-Webb

7 B. Wastiau, “Les plaques sensibles de la mémoire ‘ethnographique’ : Congo Belge, 1890-1930”, 256.

8 M-C. Massé, “Étude des cartes postales des Antilles françaises et de la Guyane des années 1900-1920”, 373.

also acknowledges that there was manipulation in the handling of colonial images:

[N]ineteenth-century photographers in general were great manipulators and stylists. After the initial thrill of capturing reality through light on a glass plate, they soon discovered through this process reality could also be invented and altered to suit their personal and political needs.⁹

James R. Ryan gives us an example of the colonial administrator, geographer and naturalist Harry Hamilton Johnston who used his photographic work to testify to the positive impact of the British colonial rule on intellectually “inferior” Africans.¹⁰

7. Photographs are therefore a first entry into the world of seduction as the aim of the manipulator was to present things in a positive way to lure his victim, the onlooker. Photography is thus to be understood as both an aesthetic and a political construction.¹¹ This is why postcards must be examined with a critical eye as they not only display a manipulated vision of a more or less biased presentation of reality through photography, but add a second stage to the manipulation with the caption inserted by the editor of the postcard. The importance of the link between text and image is not to be under-emphasized.¹² Indeed, photography and subsequently postcards in the 19th and 20th centuries are not to be trusted as “innocent” recreational media, but as implements of control and normative codification: “With the apparatus of the camera, categories from criminology to ethnography to bourgeois subjectivity were established that facilitated the cataloguing and surveying of bodies, in visual and discursive terms, in ways that fuelled ideological investments in colonialism and nation building”.¹³ The development of various means of seduction by editors of colonial or imperial postcards must be framed within the cultural and political contexts and mood that prevailed. Not only were editors sensitive to the environment, but they also had to deal with sometimes opposing forces leading to tension in the postcard business world. In the early 20th century debates arose in several European countries on what could be displayed on postcards in terms of the nudity of “indigenous types”. Some countries like Germany exercised more caution and censorship when compared to France or Belgium.¹⁴ Postcards must be approached as a “world in one”, in that they contain all the elements of a narrative. The image with its caption was meant to be clear and easily understandable for any viewer regardless of his level of education. As argued by Thurlow, Jaworski and Ylänne-Mcewen in their comparison of modern postcards of Zulu, Sami and

9 V. Lee-Webb, “Fact and Fiction: Nineteenth-Century Photographs of the Zulu”, 51.

10 J.R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, 158.

11 M-C. Massé, *op. cit.*, 373.

12 V. Lee-Webb, *op. cit.*, 53.

13 L. Firstenberg, “Representing the Body Archivaly in South African Photography”, 59.

14 B. Wastiau, *op. cit.*, 241.

Welsh people, the people represented on postcards in the colonies were one with the landscape in the background of the picture, as well as with the mind frame of the viewer:

They are stereotyped, tokenistic representatives, devoid of personal histories, individuality, relative status, unknown, and unnamed. (Reverse-side legends for the Zulu postcards also render the players in generic terms like Zulu maiden, a Zulu “belle”, and “little warrior”). Visually, this is emphasized by the averted gaze of some subjects, medium to long shots at side angles, suggesting distant relationships between tourists and hosts. On a par with cityscapes and landscapes, people are commonly seen as “ethnoscapes,” or part of local scenery.¹⁵

The message conveyed by the postcard could hence travel through the editor from the photographer to a buyer, who would in turn display it in his album, if he were a collector, or to family or friends if he used the postcard for its intended purpose, i.e. as a means of communication.

Female seduction or the Southern African belle

8. The so-called fair sex has been a source of inspiration for artists from time immemorial. Female beauty was (and still is) at the heart of the so-called “male gaze” which has led publicists to associate a commercial product with a good-looking woman to catch the eye or libido of the potential consumer. Referring to advertising, Baudrillard points out that it is

[t]rue, we do not buy potato crisps just because they are connoted by a woman with blonde hair and a sexy bottom. What is certain, though, is that the brief moment when the libido is thus mobilized by an image offers a sufficient opportunity for society as an agency of control to invade us in its entirety, complete with its customary armamentarium, namely the mechanisms of repression, sublimation and transference.¹⁶

The traditional view held by publicists is that women have the power to seduce men, as well as other women: “the strength of the feminine is that of seduction”.¹⁷ Interestingly, some of the Zulu postcards under scrutiny are captioned “Zulu Belle” [see Fig. 1, 2 & 3], or “Belles of the Kraal [an indigenous village]”, “much admired Zulu Belle”, “The Three Graces ‘Zulu Belles’ South Africa”, “A disdainful Zulu Belle”, “Kaffir Belle”¹⁸, “South African Native Belles”.

15 C. Thurlow, *op. cit.*, 6.

16 J. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 180.

17 *Ibid.*, 7.

18 The word kaffir comes from Arabic language. It originally meant “an infidel”. It was given by Arab traders to Sub-Saharan Black populations. In South Africa, it was used by White people to call Black South Africans of Bantu origin, until it became a very offensive word under apartheid. At the beginning of the 20th century a “Kaffir Belle”

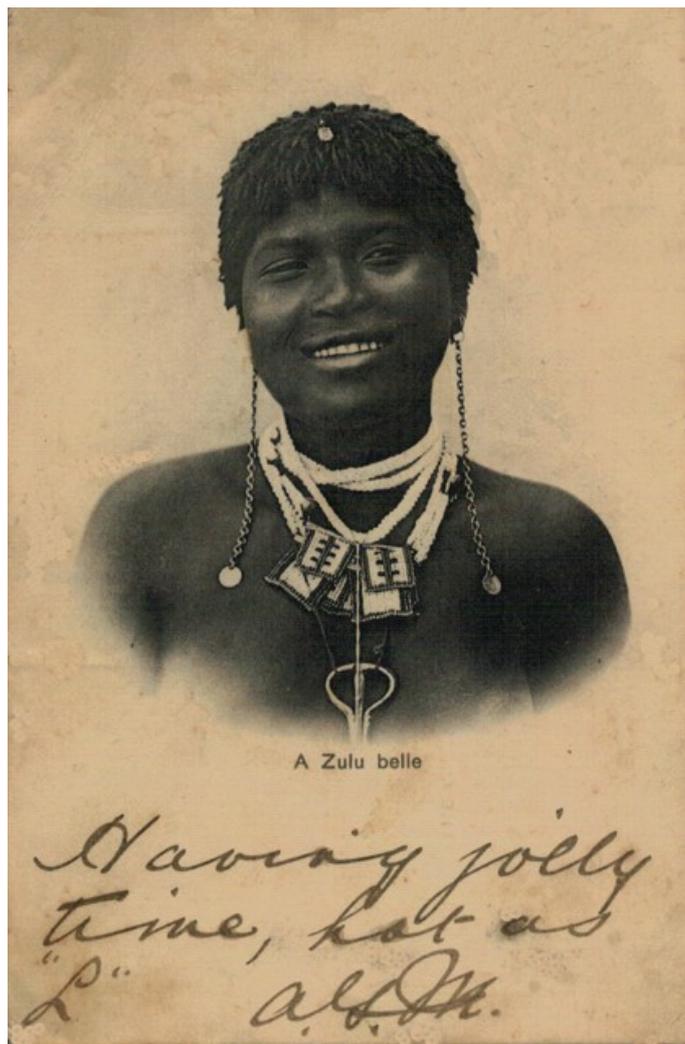


Fig. 1. "A Zulu Belle", published in Natal, South Africa, unknown editor, posted in 1903

was the equivalent of a "Black Belle", devoid of pejorative connotations.

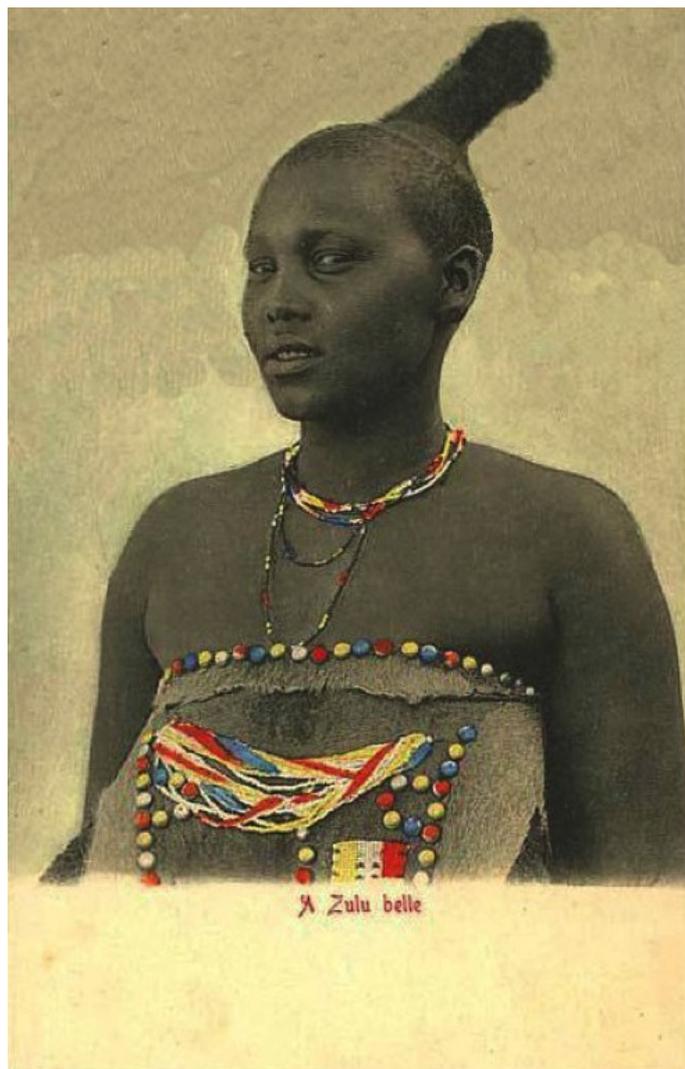


Fig. 2. "A Zulu Belle", published in Natal, South Africa by Sallo Epstein & Co, Durban

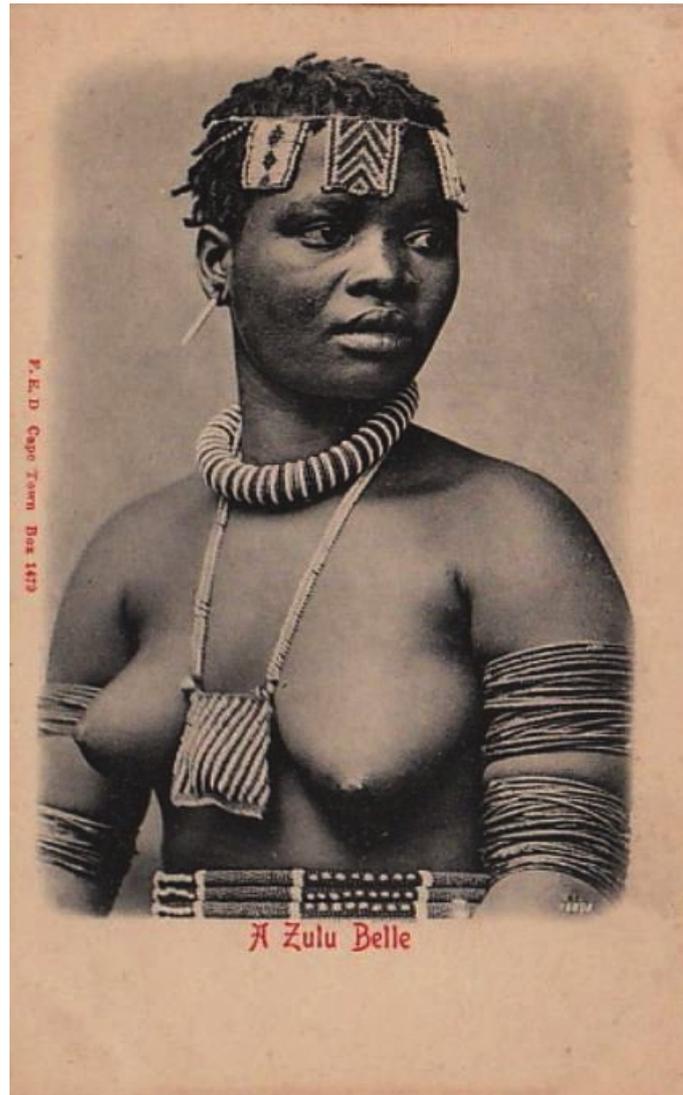


Fig. 3. "A Zulu Belle", published in South Africa F.E.D. Cape Town Editor

They generally represent young Zulu women, either standing, sitting or lying down, as if resting. More often, there are postcards portraying head-and-shoulder women, from above or below the breasts, smiling or not. The use of the French Word "Belle" (Beauty) is sometimes translated into English and there are captions such as "A Zulu Beauty", "A Bevy of Zulu Beauties" [see Fig. 4], "The Beauty of the Kraal" or "the Pride of the Kraal" [see Fig. 5], with pictures representing young Zulu women as described above. Yet the use of a French word is not just one of the trends of the day but more likely a reference to the United States antebellum stereotyped character of the famous "Southern Belle", celebrated through the character of Scarlett O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind*. Embodying the ideal aristocratic young woman, raised on a prosperous plantation, she was represented as beautiful, with fine features, and an impeccably elegant appearance. Impoverished by the disastrous economic context of the Civil War (1861-1865), and yet expected to

follow the fashion slavishly, whether she had the means or not, she put up a façade. She was intelligent, witty, well-bred, and a good cook, destined to become a lady devoted to her family, with an important social role to play within her community. She was supposed to be charming, gracious, hospitable and kind; she had to be all softness, unselfishness and attentiveness to other people's welfare. Before marriage she could be flirtatious, but had to remain chaste. She played the obedient daughter and the dutiful wife of a respectable young husband, never overstepping her role. She was therefore part of the myth of a lost Eden, that of the antebellum "deep South" known as Dixieland.

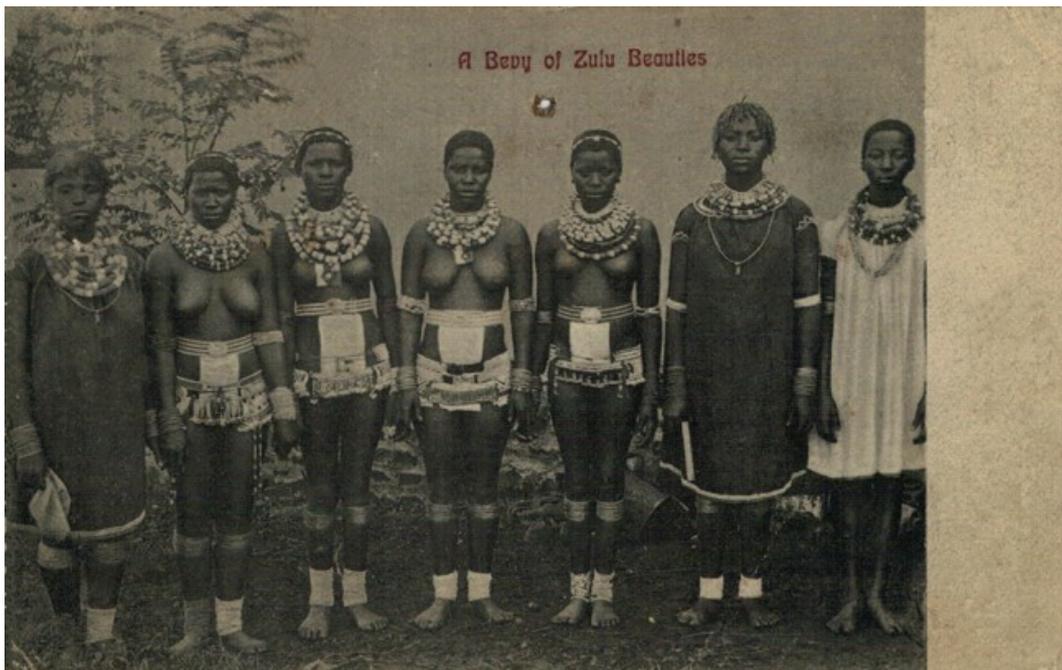
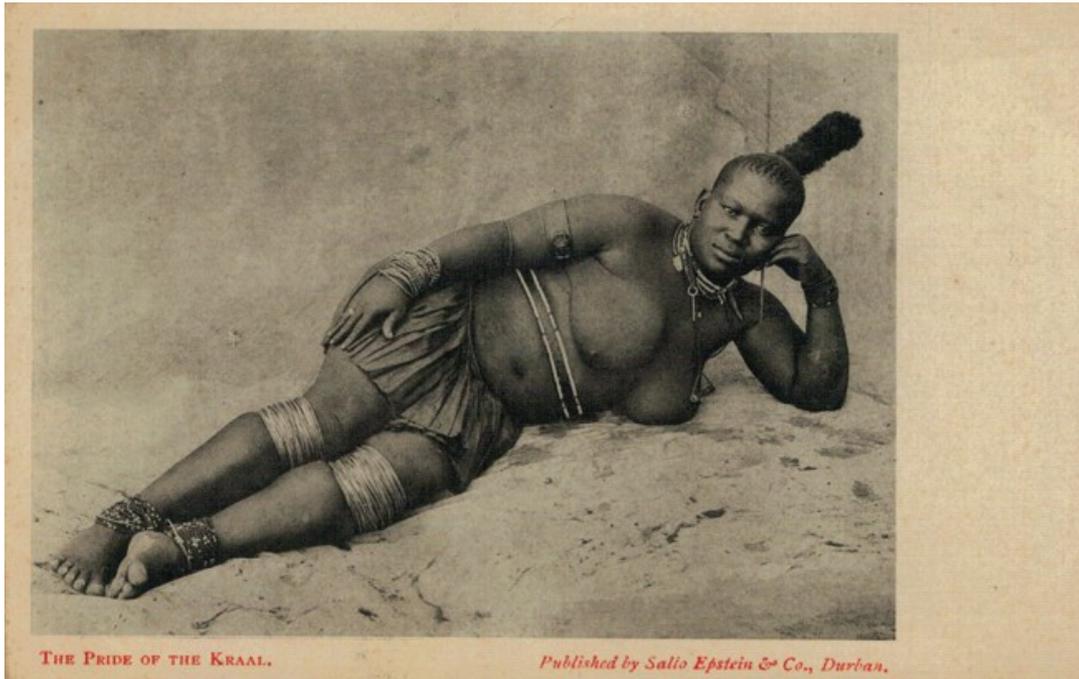


Fig. 4. "A Bevy of Zulu Beauties", published in South Africa by P.S. & C - Box 1203 - Cape Town



THE PRIDE OF THE KRAAL.

Published by Sallo Epstein & Co., Durban.

Fig. 5. "The Pride of the Kraal", published in South Africa by Sallo Epstein & Co, Durban

9. In fact, the smiling Southern "African" Belle on the postcards under scrutiny is comparable to the Southern "American" Belle from the United States. That some of the portrayed Zulu women are cheerful is a tribute to the gentle and pleasant appearance revealed in the representations of the American Southern Belle: an agreeable, kind-hearted person who will welcome the outsider, the stranger. A warm seductive smile is therefore the guarantee of the quality of the hospitality dear to the antebellum southern ideal. The hostess displays her femininity and beauty to give a positive first impression to the newcomer(s). Zulu women were asked by the photographers to smile. In the eye of the beholder, picture postcards such as Fig. 1 ("Zulu Belle"), Fig. 6 ("A 'Cheery Face' Zulu Girl") or Fig. 7 ("Bewitching Maiden") were, I argue, reminiscent of the legendary Southern Belles' beaming smile. As in many manichean mental productions, seduction implies both magnetism and repulsion, just as there was a "good beauty" (*Bonne Belle* in French) and a bad one (*Mauvaise Belle*, an evil and sexy woman who tried to dominate and use her charms to reach her own personal targets), or an attraction and repulsion for the Black African body.¹⁹ Southern Belles were desirable but untouchable despite their alluring smiles.

19 B. Wastiau, *op. cit.*, 246.

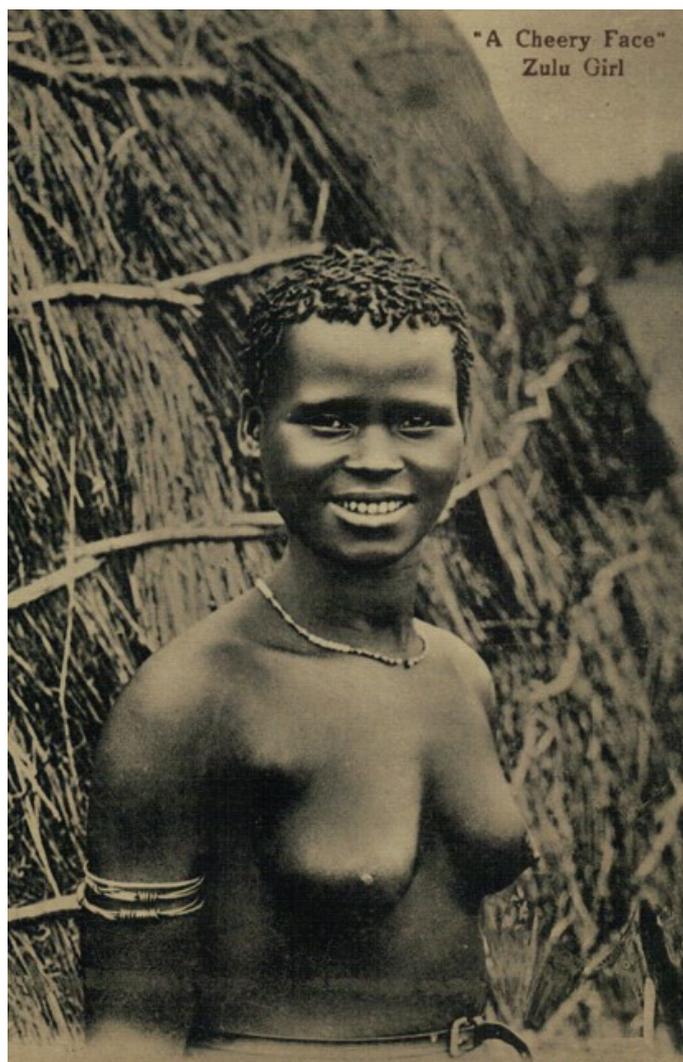


Fig. 6. "A 'Cheery Face' Zulu Girl", unknown editor



Fig. 7. “Bewitching Maiden”, published in South Africa by F. Howe & Co, East London, posted from East London in 1904

10. Seduction, in that context, is akin to a “possible” that cannot be, it is a fantasy, which is not to be fulfilled. The inaccessible “obscure object of desire”, as Bunuel once described women, belongs to the realm of the dream world: “To seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion. It is to be taken in by one’s own illusion and move in an enchanted world”.²⁰ For Baudrillard this “enchanted world” is commonly shared by all men in what he calls “the presumption of collectivity”.²¹ He then adds that if a man desires a woman, there is the assumption that any man can desire her: “[n]o desire, even a sexual one, can endure without the mediation of an imagined collective realm”.²² The three examples of Zulu Belles used in this survey [Fig. 1 to 3] all work on the same pattern; they are objectified Zulu beauties whose image is offered on a postcard to a

20 J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 69.

21 J. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 178.

22 *Ibid.*, 179.

person who becomes the owner of the image. In the mindscape of many men, possessing the image of a woman is a prerequisite to possessing the woman.

11. Interestingly, as shown by the following quotation on Black nude pictures, Western presentations of African people, particularly in the 19th century, have oscillated between outward disgust and rejection towards animality on the one hand, and clear attraction, nay fascination, on the other: “Similarly the abundance of these images in 19th and 20th-century ethnographic and pornographic photography [...] attests, paradoxically, to the intense fascination and attraction that the black female body has held for the West for much of the Common Era”.²³ The Black subject in the era of classical colonialism was the creation of “the spirals of white desire”.²⁴ The White male’s dominating and seductive attitude over a White woman was expressed on early postcards through the theme of the “bathing belle” or “bathing beauty”, defined by the Collins English Dictionary as “an attractive girl in a swimming costume”. The young attractive woman in an early 20th-century swimsuit is admired by a gentleman fully dressed in a seaside striped blazer, bow tie and straw boater. The woman’s nakedness is not exposed but suggested through her skin-tight swimsuit while the man is not exposed. This is the main difference with a Zulu Belle, who is not only a woman, but also an African, and therefore fantasised as sexually permissive and more readily available for White men. This is expressed through the fact that, being an indigenous woman, she may show more intimate parts of her body.²⁵

12. The attraction for the sweet cheerful face of a “Southern (African) Belle” is therefore at the heart of the editors’ project to commercialize such postcards. Yet the comparison of two distinct types of belles (the American and the African) does raise questions. How could an African woman be put on an equal footing with a White Deep South Woman (even if it is only in the manufacturing of images), especially in the light of the dual contexts of colonisation and slavery? One may wonder whether there is irony behind the expression “Zulu Belle”, which could thus be oxymoronic. Yet, as we shall see further on, hand-written comments imply that Europeans (with no sex distinction) considered South African women to be attractive. Maybe another assumption behind the choice of the word “belle” is that if Dixie Belles were unapproachable, Zulu Belles were, on the contrary, more easily secured as sexual partners (at least that is what many Europeans believed). This is based on the stereotype of the available, non-prudish and willing native woman which had its roots

23 L.E. Farrington, “Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude”, 15.

24 S. Osha, “‘Venus’ and White Desire”, 82.

25 See A. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, London: Routledge, 1995.

in the European contacts with female indigenous populations of the Pacific, as described in Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1772) for example. Yet paradoxically the pattern is reversed with the postcard as it is only an illusion that the owner of the postcard can "have" the Zulu Belle associated with the document. It is only the image of the woman he can have, not the real person. Seduction is linked to the teasing of the desire for what man can see but cannot possess, as it is but a representation of the original. Seduction therefore touches the point of view and the fantasy of a person. The game of seduction stops or must be renewed when desire is fulfilled. Therefore, preventing one person from having access to the "object" of their desire is a way of keeping him or her in a state of permanent frustration. The seduction process can go on *ad infinitum* if the person keeps looking at the postcard of the Zulu Belle hoping that one day he might meet her in flesh and blood. Of course, some people will not be frustrated looking at the postcard as they have no desire to meet the person. The object of their desire might also be the postcard itself, because as collectors, for example, they would have been hunting for that particular postcard for a long time. The question that follows in our inquiry is whether the threshold is crossed when editors produce not only pretty indigenous women's faces, but when they display nakedness on their postcards.²⁶

Seductive nudity?

13. Quoting Hegel, Baudrillard states that art reveals the soul to the spirit through every point of the surface of the body: "[t]here is, therefore, never any nudity, never any nude body that is simply nude; there is never just a body".²⁷ For Baudrillard, the body is a face that looks at us: "In a non-fetishistic culture (one that does not fetishize nudity as objective truth) the body is not, as in our own, opposed to the face, conceived as alone rich in expression and endowed with 'eyes': it is itself a face, and looks at you". He further demonstrates that

26 Zulus are not the only ones to be admired on postcards for their beauty: there are numerous "Maori Belle" and Belles, such as "Ani, the village belle", "a Kopi Belle (Arizona)", "Hawaiian Belle", "Manilla Belles, Island of Luzon, Philippines", "la belle guadeloupéenne", "An Island Belle, Fiji" or "Fijian Belle", "Native Belle in Pollera costume, Panama", "Ifugao Belle, Philippines", "A Pueblo Belle", "South Sea Island Belles, Fiji", "New Hebrides, Native Belle, Aoba" or from Mozambique: "Three Kaffir belles (Tres Tombasanas)". Associated with this type of "belle" postcards are the "beauty" postcards which are far more numerous: "Maori Beauty" (and Beauties), "Nubian Beauty" (Macedonian, Bombay, Hawaiian, Filipina, Somali, Samoan, Tamil, Tahitian, Dravidian, Burmese, Zanzibar, Japanese, Brahmin, Goan, Egyptian, Eskimo, Cingalese), "Tanger, beauté arabe", "A type of Mysore Beauty", "Une beauté Kabyle", "Chinese Small Feet Beauty", "Beauté orientale", "Célèbre beauté mauresque 'Zinah'", "Beauté bédouine", "A Model of Raiput Beauty" etc.

27 J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 33.

[i]t is therefore not obscene, that is to say, made to be seen nude. It *cannot* be seen nude, no more than the face can for us, for the body is – and is only – a symbolic veil; and it is by way of this play of veils, which, literally, abolishes the body “as such,” that seduction occurs. This is where seduction is at play and not in the tearing away of the veil in the name of some manifestation of truth or desire.²⁸

Yet he adds that in a total culture of appearances, the body becomes visible in its nudity, hence it becomes obscene while the face fades away.²⁹ For 19th-century Westerners, nudity was seen as such as proved by the numerous colonial references to the “civilized-because-dressed” person in opposition with the “savage-because-undressed” person.³⁰ A beautiful body is aesthetically pleasing to the eye, as shown by Greek statuary, which explains the use of women’s (and more recently men’s) bodies to sell a product.

14. In the tradition of the Grand Tour, which enticed rich young European men to discover the world before settling in life, the colonies were a place to have access to sexual experience.³¹ To keep a “souvenir” of those experiences or to share them with someone at home (the cards were then often sent in an envelope as shown by the absence of an address, a stamp and a postal mark at the back of the postcard) is what nude postcards were about: “English and Scottish commercial portrait photographers in Natal particularly exploited women, using them as subjects to fulfil their own or the clients’ social and sexual fantasies”.³² The three examples of semi-nude Zulu women [Fig. 3, 6 & 8] selected in our corpus all portray young Zulu women, as seen by their hair, which shows they are “intombis” that is unmarried women.

28 *Ibid.*, 33.

29 *Ibid.*, 33.

30 See Durand, Teulié.

31 See R. Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality, The British Experience*, “Studies in Imperialism”, Manchester University Press, 1992.

32 V. Lee-Webb, *op. cit.*, 57.

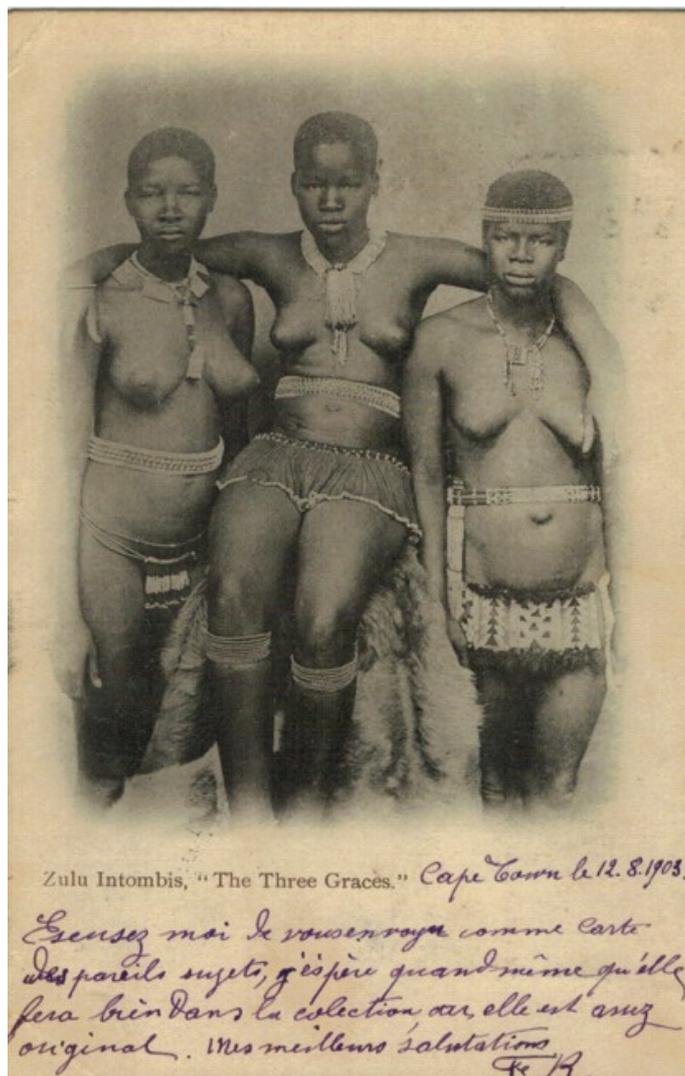


Fig. 8. "Zulu Intombis, 'The Three Graces'", The GWW Series, sent from Cape Town 1903

The fact that they are represented in a head-and-shoulder portrait in the first two of these documents indicates that the photographer and the editor chose not to conceal their breasts contrary to Fig. 1, 9 and 11 in which another choice was made.

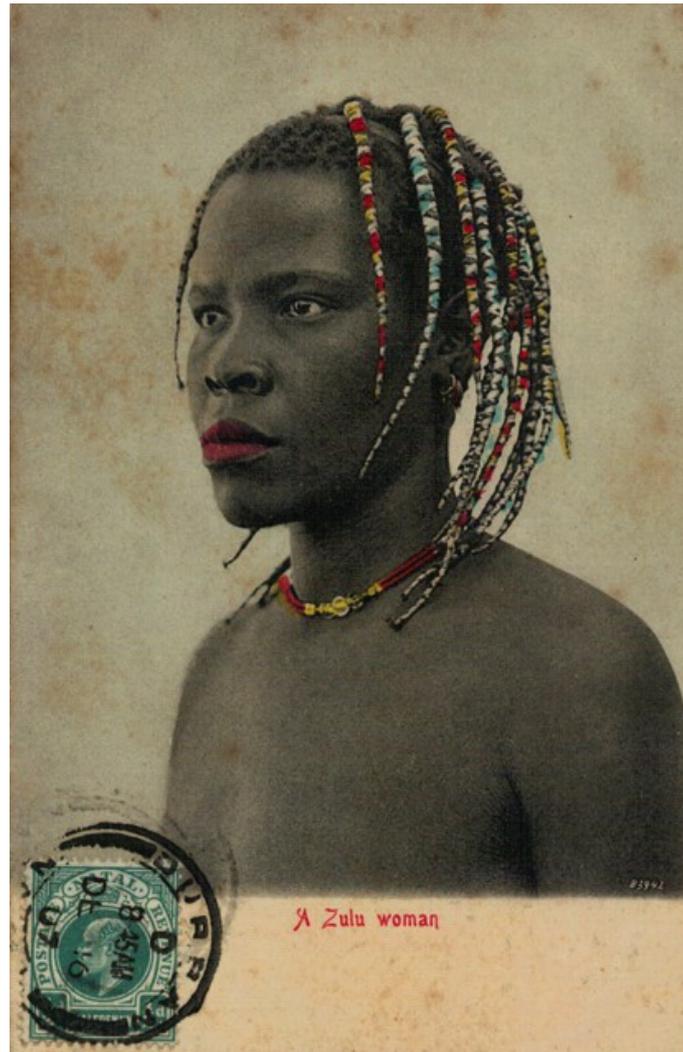


Fig. 9. "A Zulu woman", published in Natal, South Africa by Sallo Epstein & Co, Durban

Fig. 8 shows three young "intombis" (unmarried women), the central one sitting on a high chair her arms around the shoulders of the other two young Zulu women, the caption stating they are "Zulu Intombis, 'the Three Graces'" along with a manuscript text showing the embarrassment of the sender, who signs with his initials "F.R." and states in French that he is confused to send bare-breasted African women to his or her addressee (a Miss Léonide Maroq, a book dealer in Paris).³³ Taking a close look at the photograph one can see that the emphasis is not put on their breasts, as on some French postcards where young women were holding a horizontal stick going from one shoulder to the other at the back, or placing their hands at the back of their head, or steadying a basket on their heads by raising their arms, engaging in any movement or gesture that will lift their breasts and display them generously on the picture. However, the fact that their chest was visible

³³ "Cape Town Le 12.8.1903. 'Excusez-moi de vous envoyer comme carte de pareils sujets, j'espère quand même qu'elle fera bien dans la collection, car elle est assez originale. Mes Meilleures salutations. F.R.'"

was undoubtedly part of the appealing power of the postcard.

15. The attraction for bare-breasted women can only be understood if one remembers that these postcards were probably a rare opportunity for young boys and adolescents to see breasts. In October 2015, when I presented a paper on such postcards at a seminar in France, a retired gentleman told me that as a twelve-year-old youngster, he had no opportunity to see breasts, contrary to what is freely accessible in today's image-saturated world of advertising, and that it must have been worse at the turn of the 19th and 20th century.³⁴ That might explain why editors were so eager to publish postcards of semi or completely naked Zulu women. Nudity as a forbidden fruit would have been the successful thrust behind the desire to buy such a postcard, as pointed out by Baudrillard: "Our center of gravity has been displaced towards a libidinal economy concerned with only the naturalization of desire, a desire dedicated to drives, or to a machine-like functioning but above all, to the imaginary of repression and liberation".³⁵ The association of the object (to be sold) and the presence of a pretty woman is generally artificial, as is the case in car-exhibitions: "to stimulate the demand for a product, they [sellers] attach psychological values such as acquisitiveness, power, sexual pleasure, attractiveness, social approval, and competitive success, none of which are in the product".³⁶

16. We can go further in our analysis of the process of seduction in the early 20th century postcard portrayals of Zulu women. With the postcard captioned "The Pride of the Kraal" [Fig. 5], Sallo Epstein the famous South African Durban-based postcard editor offers an open reference to sexuality, even though it is not mentioned in the caption. Indeed, when a semi naked or totally nude woman was lying on a bed, a coach or on the floor in a colonial context, the picture immediately evoked Orientalism for late-19th-century and early-20th-century viewers.³⁷ What the viewer saw immediately was a representation of the odalisque, that famous slave member of a harem, immortalized by French painter Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres in 1814 with his painting *La Grande Odalisque*, which inspired many an artist in the 19th and 20th century. Postcards took up the theme of the "odalisque" lying in her harem. Many postcards represent North African women either

34 The scarcity of nude pictures in the early years of the 20th century accounts for their attractive power, as a recent survey points out that their abundance has saturated the image market and that customers pay less attention to ads using eroticism [Robert Lull and Brad Bushman, "Do sex and violence sell? A meta-analytic review of the effects of sexual and violent media and ad content on memory, attitudes, and buying intentions", *Psychological Bulletin* 141.5 (2015)].

35 J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 38.

36 F. J. d'Angelo, "Subliminal Seduction: An Essay on the Rhetoric of the Unconscious", 160.

37 See J. Mackenzie, *Orientalism, History, theory and the Arts*, Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1995.

fully dressed or, more often, bare-chested, lying on a luxurious sofa or bed, seeming to invite the viewer to join her as if he were an Ottoman prince, owner of a harem.³⁸ A more thorough analysis of these “odalisque” type postcards would be needed, but goes beyond the scope and length of this article. Fig. 5 is one of a dozen postcards representing lying Zulu women with other captions such as “A Betrothed Girl”, “A Zulu Woman”, “A Sweet Girl”, “A Chief’s Daughter”, “The beauty of the Kraal, Zululand”, “Native Women, Zululand” or “Take it easy” (a smoking woman). None of the captions explain or justify the fact that the women are lying down. It is just the analogy with the stock character of the odalisque that explains the way they pose. By connotation these postcards imply, as in Fig. 5, that the “pride of the kraal” must be the most beautiful woman in the village and that she is waiting for someone to come and lie down by her side. The question here again is whether that type of postcard and presentation of Zulu women is part of the seductive process which is under scrutiny in this essay. Though the content of the postcard is not explicitly sexual, intertextuality leads to create a sexual atmosphere. For Jean Baudrillard, there is no doubt that sexuality and seduction do not work together:

To be sure, neither pornography nor sexual transactions exercise any seduction. Like nudity, and like the truth, they are abject. They are the body’s disenchanting form, just as sex is the suppressed and disenchanting form of seduction, just as use value is the disenchanting form of the object, and just as, more generally, the real is the suppressed and disenchanting form of the world. Nudity will never abolish seduction, for it immediately becomes something else, the hysterical enticements of a different game, one that goes beyond it.³⁹

Further on Baudrillard complains that people do not see the difference: “Seduction is stronger than production. It is stronger than sexuality, with which it must never be confused. It is not something internal to sexuality, though this is what it is generally reduced to”.⁴⁰ Oversimplification, and focus being put on male desires when confronted to indigenous women, is probably why there was such a vast production of erotic postcards in some European countries. But, with the vast amount of men going to the colonies, the editors were not mistaken in massively producing such erotic postcards under the guise of ethnographic studies, as another element is to be taken into account: the explosion of what is known as modern tourism:

Pritchard and Morgan (2000) have commented on the interrelationship between the discourses of tourism and of heterosexual patriarchy—what they see as the dominant, privileged “male gaze”. A

38 See Alloula, Geary, Yee.

39 J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 43.

40 *Ibid.*, 47.

number of postcards in our collection seem to reproduce this (hetero)sexist imagery by depicting examples of feminized landscapes, untouched and uncontaminated “virgin territory”, and more literally the array of bare-breasted, smiling Zulu women in inviting poses [...]. The underlying assumption here is that it is the (White) heterosexual man to whom the images of the erotic/exotic nature must appeal.⁴¹

Nudity was still taboo at the time of the production of these postcards, inherited from the Christian tradition, when Adam and Eve knew they were naked (Genesis 3:7) or when Ham was cursed by his father Noah for having seen him in a state of nudity (Genesis 9:22). Yet the prudish attitude forged by Victorian conventions and codes did not apply to heathens, the noble savages as invented by the philosophers of the century of Enlightenment. They could go naked until they became Christians, as proved by the massive mission postcard production published at that time which opposed the undressed “savage” indigenous and the dressed “civilized” indigenous.

When postcards solicited clients

17. To conclude our survey on seduction and early postcards, it would be pertinent to examine some case studies with items that show how a postcard can be turned into a more seductive commercial piece by the editor (when he produces the postcard) or by the sender (when he writes comments about the postcards he bought and is about to send). Indeed, until now we have observed that the image of a seductive woman can entail a buyer to purchase the postcard so as to symbolically “own” the woman. Now it seems important to assess the various interferences that may give an added value to the document. To start with, Fig. 8 displays three semi-naked young Zulu girls, as mentioned before. The caption states they are “intombis” (unmarried women) yet refers to them as “Three Graces”.

18. There are several postcards which refer to a trio of African women in reference to Greek Mythology (the Charites, goddesses who embody beauty, charm, fertility etc.). Mainly shown naked, they represent grace and friendship as they are very often depicted as holding each other just as on the postcard. Here again the question of the irony conveyed by the comparison can be raised. There are other photograph postcards published in South Africa which are clearly ironical as they put Zulu people, both men and women, in a “European” situation where one would expect to see a White person instead. One postcard shows two semi-nude Zulu women playing ping pong or

41 C. Thurlow, *op. cit.*, 7.

another one represents Zulus playing the piano, smoking cigars and having a drink in a European living-room but wearing Zulu, not European, clothes. With the Three Graces type of postcards it is more difficult to determine whether the women depicted were being made fun of, which would imply that they did not match the European (Greek) aesthetic criteria, or on the contrary if they were worthy of it. Yet, we may conclude that the focus is being put on the nakedness of the three women just like their European counterparts.

19. With Fig. 9 (a postcard) and Fig. 10 (a small image), we are confronted with iconographic manipulation. Postcards were in black and white, unless they were hand-painted by professionals (generally women) who would paint the same picture on hundreds of postcards for days in a row. In Fig. 9, the colour red, just like the caption, stands forth. The red patch on the picture that saturates it highlights the lips of the “Zulu woman”. The seductive part played by the lipstick worn by a European woman is transposed onto the Zulu woman’s lips to turn her into a seductive European-type woman while she keeps her attributes as an African, i.e. the beads tied to her hair. Interestingly, Fig. 10 (a picture offered in Nestlé’s chocolate bars which was then pasted in an album in the 1950s), which reproduces the same picture, also attracts the viewer’s gaze on the woman’s lips by painting them red, although the earrings are longer and her necklace has disappeared.

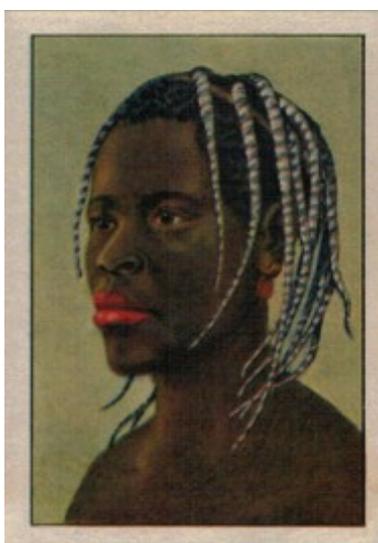


Fig. 10. « Femme zouloue » card, *Les Merveilles du Monde, series IV, vol I* from Nestlé, Gala Peter, Cailler, Kohler 1950s

The question raised by postcard 9, published before the First World War, is what buyers thought of that manipulation: were they attracted by the red lips of the woman, or not? Were they just sensitive to the nice colours of the document? Or were they looking at it as an anthropological document? Here again, it is difficult to be conclusive, but we might assume that if the editor went through the

arduous task of having the cards painted, it was because it was worth it: “Admittedly, the commercial success of a postcard depended on its popularity and whether it attracted consumers and collectors or inspired proper sentiments in viewers”.⁴²

20. With Fig. 11 we move to hand-written texts added to the picture by the sender for his addressee. The postcard represents a young married Zulu woman (she wears the long conical hair style of married women). The caption usually gives ethnographic details (maybe as a pretext to turn the erotic postcard into something more serious). Yet here, it does not do so, but lays the emphasis on the person's young age, calling her a “girl” instead of a woman: “Young Zulu Girl”. This is maybe what led the sender of the postcard to purchase it and send it to a friend with the following comment “A Black beauty for you”, as if he were offering the woman (as a gift, a slave?) to his friend. This postcard was not turned into a “beauty” or “belle” type of postcards by an editor's caption, but by the buyer-sender who added his *own* caption to the document to personalize it, and to create an intimate link between the two friends, and symbolically with the Zulu woman. This example of an added text referring to the image is not rare and there is a whole set of hand-written texts that express the feelings of the writers towards the women on the pictures.

42 C.M. Geary, *op. cit.*, 150.

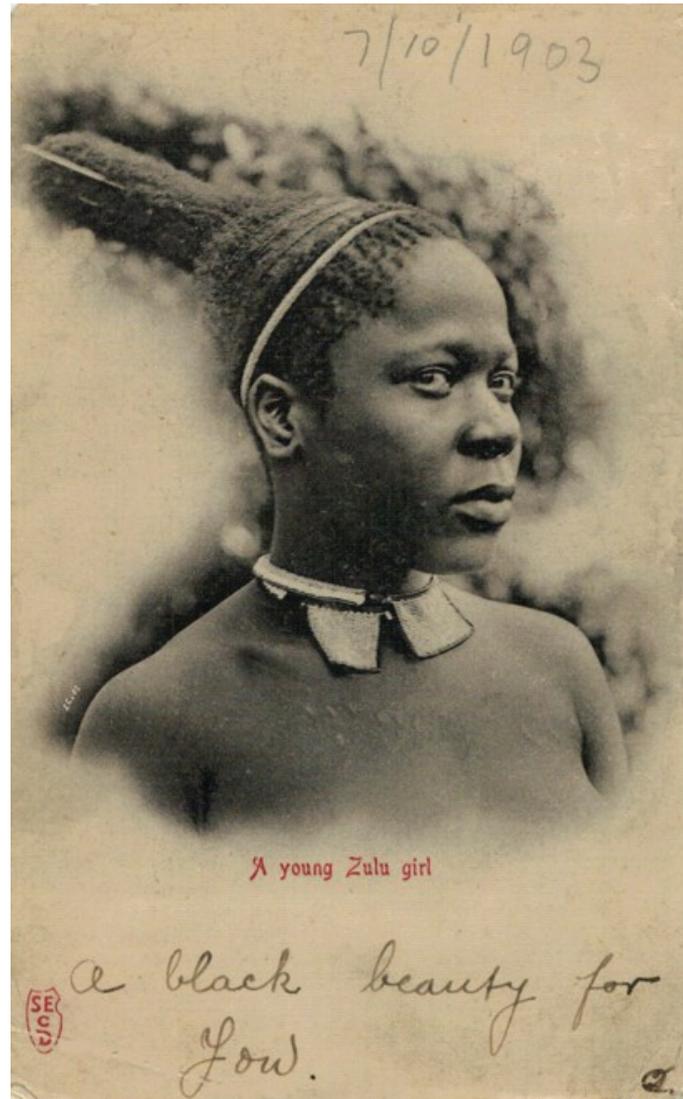


Fig. 11. "A young Zulu girl", published in South Africa by SECD, posted from Natal in 1903

21. Fig. 7 has a double interest for our analysis. It depicts a young woman, fully dressed, smiling, and presented as a "Bewitching Maiden". The theme of the witch is present in this caption which reminds the viewer that indigenous "savages" are not to be trusted. Yet here it is not a frightening sorceress who is presented, but rather a seductress who is going to bewitch the man she might take a fancy to or might want to abuse. The sexual potential of the card has not escaped the sender who added as a comment to his friend: "This is my third wife. Don't you think she is a little bit of all right. When you require a Kaffir wife out here, you do not court her in the usual way. You give so many cattle for her. This one would fetch 10 oxen". The fact that the sender presents her as "his wife" (and brags it is his third one and that she can be "bought") places the picture, alongside the teasing caption, into the sexual colonial sphere that goes beyond simple seduction.

22. Another document for this section is what we could call “pin-up girls”. The caption says, “A Bevy of Zulu Beauties” [Fig. 4]. Out of the seven Zulu women posing, three are fully dressed and four are semi-nude. The interesting element of this postcard is that it has a pin hole in the middle and in the third quarter of the upper part of the card. The rust around the hole proves that it is not a recent hole, and we may safely conclude that it was pinned on a wall a long time ago. Along with cards that were displayed in albums, it is quite striking to understand that the Zulu beauties were daily admired by someone just like several African women type of postcards (generally bare-breasted) which also bore a “pin-up” hole in them.
23. To end our survey, a last postcard [Fig. 12], sent in 1907, shows a cartoon depicting “Jack Tar”, the stock character of the Merchant or Royal Navy seaman, echoing “Tommy Atkins” as his infantry counterpart.



Fig. 12. “They all Love Jack. My Zulu Belle”, artist: G.M. Payne (1879-1947), English postcard, unknown editor, posted 1907

It clearly shows that a sailor can be seduced by a “Zulu Belle” and in turn seduce her, as they are both sitting on a rock, in a flirtatious fashion, against a backdrop that recalls Zululand. The text “My Zulu Belle” appears to come out of Jack Tar the sailor’s mouth. Gilbert Morris Payne (1879-1947), the artist behind the illustration of the postcard, was inspired by a well-known Victorian tune composed by Michael Maybrick (1841-1913) entitled “They all Love Jack”. The lyrics relate the story of Jack the sailor, wearing his easily recognizable blue navy uniform and cap, pining for his sweetheart whom he had left behind, but finding consolation in the world where other women were eager for him, as expressed by the lyrics:

When he’s sail’d the world all over, and again he steps ashore,

There are scores of lasses waiting to love him all the more.

He may lose his golden guineas, but a wife he'll never lack,

If he'd wed them all they'd take him, for they all love Jack.

G.M. Payne used Jack in several of his cartoons which appeared on postcards. Another also bears the title of the song “They all Love Jack”, suggesting that these cards were part of a series. He is seen in a white uniform, this time, walking in what looks like an oceanic Eden: a sandy beach with a fringe of coconut trees and a beautiful sea. He is happily walking with two young good-looking indigenous women who also seem pleased to have his arms around their waist. Another caption locates the scene “On India’s Coral Strand”. A third postcard from the “They all love Jack” series, captioned “Sunny South”, shows him again in his white uniform, very pleased to be sharing a drink with a stunning and contented Spanish woman, as they are about to kiss. A final one portrays him in a blue uniform, standing discomfited, on the dock, watching several female beauties, attired in exotic or national costumes representing various countries, amongst which a European, a Japanese and an Indian woman, while a prosecutor explains to an astonished judge: “He has promised to marry all these” with a caption that adds “Jack is proved unfaithful”. Jack is clearly a womanizer,⁴³ and the use of the possessive adjective underlines that the Zulu Belle, who is married as shown by her hair, cannot resist him, she belongs to him and is about to be seduced. This postcard strengthened the impression among Europeans that Zulu women were available for them, an impression they got through the other postcards so far analysed, although they were less explicit than the cartoon. Thus, the postcard has the potential to seduce and lure someone, usually a male, into buying it, with the deceptive and illusory offer of a fantasy world in which the postcard owner is made to feel that he is powerful and that he deserves “the old hero’s welcome” in the arms of a “Zulu Belle”.

Conclusion

24. “Mirror, Mirror” (1987) represents a Black woman looking at a mirror on a wall but what she sees is not her reflection but the face of a White woman with a veil, holding a star. The caption is what gives the whole meaning to Carrie Mae Weems’ work of art: “Looking into the mirror the Black woman asked: ‘Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who is the finest of them all?’ The mirror says:

43 Further proof of that is given in the song “The Blackpool Belle” in which “Ice cream Sally” runs away to the Isle of Man with “Sailor Jack”. <https://www.flashlyrics.com/lyrics/the-houghton-weavers/blackpool-belle-48> (last accessed 10 November 2017).

'Snow White you Black Bitch, and don't you forget it'". The Black Panthers movement once claimed, "Black is beautiful" and recently artists from African origins, such as Faith Ringgold, Alison Saar, Carrie Mae Weems or Renee Cox, bore testimony and denounced the way Black women's bodies were treated both in Africa and the United States of America.

25. Coming to terms with both the codification of Black people as inferior beings and the labelling of Black women as sexual objects is at the core of these artists' message. The failed self-seduction scene of a narcissistic Black woman described by Carrie Mae Weems ironically reminds us that it is the White woman who looks at herself in the mirror not the Black woman. Early postcards may be framed within the mirror as if the Southern African Belles postcards revealed a European man looking inside the image, hoping that the eyes of the Zulu woman would reflect a positive image of himself as an attractive man.

26. Yet the point is that this is only an image; and it is only through the eyes of a real person that one can see one's own reflection. These postcards appealed to male buyers not only because of their aesthetic qualities but also because of their teasing power, arousing their (sexual) desire to buy the postcard. Despite attempts at discriminating between ethnographic artistic nudes,⁴⁴ it still remains a perilous exercise to legitimately claim that postcards fall into distinctive categories, as the boundary between ethnographic and erotic photographs is often blurred. What is obvious is that images are seductive when they convey both attractiveness and illusion. What is inaccessible then comes within reach.⁴⁵ Keeping the postcard in an album was a way to appropriate what was represented on it, whether a Zulu Belle or a landscape. But the seduction was carried on when shared with a correspondent: "the act of purchasing and sending a postcard is thus an act of self-affirmation, (re)capturing something of the tourist's experience of a place or people and passing this on to others who thereby validate the experience".⁴⁶ Seduction was (and probably still is) at the heart of the making of a postcard. It had to be attractive to become a bestseller. By using photographs of beautiful women, not only for their aesthetic qualities, but for their phantasmagorical potential, editors have secured an important market in a colonial context which has shaped Western presentations of the indigenous woman. Yet one may wonder whether seduction is not just too mild a word to describe what is maybe a violent appropriation of the image of the indigenous woman as she is being objectified. The Southern African Belles from Zululand were nonetheless part of that global imperial network all out to dominate the heathens, physically and sexually.

44 B. Wastiau, *op. cit.*, 252.

45 J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 69.

46 C. Thurlow, *op. cit.*, 3.

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