

## National Geographic: Representations of Black Africans

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### Abstract

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*The National Geographic Magazine (NatGeo) is an icon publication that began its influence in 1888. It is revered as the preeminent scientific and educational periodical that opened up the world to us. But, according to co-authors Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, NatGeo is not just an educational scientific magazine, but instead had an underlying agenda to reinforce existing social constructions of race and was designed to maintain the Western social and cultural hierarchy established by the dominant class and served to affirm a national identity. This essay examines the agenda of NatGeo and the notions of race it promoted, particularly the African race, through its patterns of photographic imagery. Further, this essay explores the background and context of those notions, and compares and contrasts with other literature that also explores the representation of Africans by Western societies.*

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### Introduction

According to its 2019 strategic plan and impact statement, the National Geographic Society aspires to be “the leaders in convening and connecting people with the wonders of our world and the human story.”<sup>1</sup> The Society is a well-known scientific and educational organization that has published its monthly magazine, National Geographic (*NatGeo*), since 1888. Most individuals can recall the magazine’s intriguing images of peoples from around the world. We have thumbed through it while sitting in the waiting room of our doctors’ offices. We have admired its splendid photography and captivating images of underwater sea life, the peaks of mountains, lush rainforests, or adventurous safaris. *NatGeo* has taken us to places we never dreamed we would see. They have introduced us to people we never imagined we would meet. They take us on journeys around the world in those illustrious pages. The Bengalese, Nepalese, Somalians, Guatemalans, Melanesians, Filipinos, and Kenyans were among the peoples who graced the pages with pride—in brilliant living color. Somehow, *NatGeo* has made the unfamiliar, familiar. However, according to co-authors Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *NatGeo* is not just about traveling the world over or capturing the perfect moment on film or even inspiring a *kum ba yah* experience. Instead, *NatGeo* had an agenda, or perhaps several agendas, beyond the obvious—and beyond the noble. Lutz and Collins argue that *NatGeo* sought to reinforce existing social constructions of race and was designed to maintain the Western social and cultural hierarchy established by the dominant class and served to affirm a national identity.<sup>2</sup> This essay will examine the agendas of *NatGeo* and the notions of race it promoted, particularly the African race, through its patterns of photographic imagery.

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<sup>1</sup> National Geographic, “About Us,” <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/about-us/> (accessed March 30, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

Moreover, this essay will explore the background and context of those notions, and compare and contrast with other literature that also explores the representation of Africans by Western societies. It will primarily focus on two theories: the conceptions and representations of race based on skin color, and the eroticized representation of black African women.

After examining 600 issues in the years 1950 to 1986 to gather data for their publication *Reading National Geographic*, Lutz and Collins argue that *NatGeo* sought to reinforce the perceptions that Americans already held about peoples from around the world, in particular, black Africans. Looking at its representations of Africans, *NatGeo* clung tenaciously to the already existing perceptions concerning the social constructions of race. It did not necessarily create new constructions, but reinforced the already existing stereotypes. The authors contend that the magazine's success can be attributed to this approach. *NatGeo* was not interested in rocking the boat, per se, but they were interested in keeping it afloat. Jan Nederveen Pieterse, author of *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, asserts, "The legacy of several hundred years of western expansion and hegemony, manifested in racism and exoticism, continues to be recycled in western cultures in the form of stereotypical images of non-western cultures."<sup>3</sup> According to Paul S. Landau, author of "An Amazing Distance: Pictures and Peoples in Africa," modern writers have attributed a special term to this theory: "alterity." He interprets alterity to mean "the idea that certain kinds of interactions tell people who they are and who most certainly they are not."<sup>4</sup> In general, the term alterity is a euphemism for otherness, or more radically, alien. Through strategic juxtaposition, composition, and fastidious selection of images, *NatGeo* built on formerly established techniques in representation that racialized, sexualized, and minimized African peoples. This was true from the time of the magazine's earliest publication to the time of Lutz and Collins' analysis.

Lutz and Collins were inspired to write their monograph during a search to teach about non-Western people "that did not objectify and were not paternalistic but fostered both a sense of how lives around the globe are interconnected and a capacity for empathetic understanding."<sup>5</sup> They turned to *NatGeo* to assist them in their endeavor. After selecting *NatGeo* and carefully analyzing it, the authors discovered that the magazine would not serve their purposes because of its underlying agenda. They understood the power inherent in the magazine and realized that the photographs contained in *NatGeo* are "one of the most culturally valued and potent media vehicles shaping American understandings of, and responses to, the world outside of the United States."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the photographs either created or reinforced views of the magazines readership. This monthly periodical was not neutral simply taking beautiful random shots. Instead, it had the power to mold the prevailing thoughts and belief systems of Americans, mostly middle class white Americans, about the peoples and cultures of the world—and used that power. *NatGeo* monopolized on its established authority claim as a purveyor of scientific information in an entertaining manner. As Lutz and Collins interpret it, *NatGeo* has significantly contributed to the appropriation of the non-Western world by the Western peoples. By employing some of the tried and true techniques that had been employed for centuries by other dominating Western societies, *NatGeo* contributed to the construction of social hierarchies. According to the authors, the perceived educational stance of *NatGeo* projected the photographs as images that simply portrayed life as it was/is. In other words, *NatGeo* was a willing participant in propagating some of the social issues, however subtly. In a profound statement, Lutz and Collins write:

Most important is the fact that those understandings or strategies for describing human differences have helped create and reproduce social hierarchies. At least, those hierarchies have created small humiliations and rejections and have lessened opportunities. At the worst, they have abetted wars of extermination, lynchings, and rape. Representations may be deployed for or against such horrors or indifferently in relation to them, but they are never irrelevant, never unconnected to the world of actual social relations.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Paul S. Landau, "An Amazing Distance: Pictures and People in Africa," *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Lutz and Collins, *Reading*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Lutz and Collins, *Reading*, xii.

<sup>7</sup> Lutz and Collins, *Reading*, 3.

## Conceptions and Representations of Race through Skin Color

Lutz and Collins contend that *NatGeo* reinforced social issues such as racial stereotyping of Africans in several ways, some ways that had been employed by the British, the French, and other Western imperialist societies over centuries. One prominent way of stereotyping was promoting racist assumptions through the representations and associations of skin color. The authors expound on *NatGeo*'s variances in representations based on a gradation scale of skin color and the correlation to the evolutionary scale previously promoted by late nineteenth century world fairs and expositions. In the expositions, sub-Saharan Negroes were objectified, denigrated, and projected as falling low on the evolutionary scale, somewhere between ape and human, that is, the missing link. Author of "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930," Raymond Corbey, asserts that "the natives figured as categories in Western representations of Self, as characters in the story of the ascent to civilization, depicted as the inevitable triumph of higher races over lower ones and as progress through science and imperial conquest"<sup>8</sup> Corbey acknowledges that nineteenth-century Europeans, and Americans alike, found great entertainment in the curious of the World's Fairs with Human Zoos, whose popularity coincided with the era of imperialism and colonialism. But the inherent purpose of such entertainment enterprises was to create an Other in order to justify imperialism and maintain a social hierarchy.

Historian Sadiya Quereshi further reasons that the creation of a stereotype or Other not only supported the benefits of colonial expansion for the imperial nation, but it was also promoted to support the notion that colonial expansion was "beneficial to the colonized people."<sup>9</sup> For example, the September 1910 issue of *NatGeo* featured an article called "Conditions of Liberia: Notes on the Only American Colony in the World." First, this article ruminates on the peculiarity that Liberia was founded by Americans and it was "the only part of the black man's continent that is now governed by the black man himself."<sup>10</sup> Further it muses, "All Africa is European except Abyssinia, Tripoli, Morocco, and Liberia, and the people of the first three are not negroes [sic]."<sup>11</sup> The photographer and author of the article, Edgar Allen Forbes, is suggesting that because the northern Africans have a lighter skin tone, then they are not classified as Negroes, (although, they are in fact Africans because they exist on the African continent). Being "Negro" implied a sub-Saharan—subhuman—black African, the ones with the darker skin tones.

America is historically a race-conscious society and nurses codified representations of blacks—African and African American. Forbes' photos that accompanied the article further supported the claims in his text. Forbes neglected to openly say that one reason those from Abyssinia, Tripoli, and Morocco, were classified as a different race was simply because of their lighter skin tone. Therefore, in contrast, the black Africans were viewed differently, held under a different type of scrutiny, and most importantly, were deserving of a different life that was lowest on the social scale. Although cultural historian Catherine Molineux primarily examines fine art pieces rather than photos, she supports this point in *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain*. Using the porcelain figurine titled *Lord Chatham* ca. 1767, Molineux argues that many fine art paintings, sculptures, and decorative art pieces pushed this notion to extremes and often showed a black African painted pitch-black (rather than dark brown), scantily dressed in tropical or indigenous clothing, and posed in subjugated positions against a backdrop of a highly contrasted white elitist person fully covered in refined and ornate white clothing, as they stood in a superior position over the black African.<sup>12</sup> Some of Forbes' photos reflect this very notion, such as his image on page 731 with the caption "Eight Sons of One Native King in the Lutheran Mission School at Muhlenburg, Liberia."<sup>13</sup> In this photo the black African children are standing in a lower position on the ground wearing tattered dark and dirty clothing without shoes against the backdrop of a white building. Meanwhile, the white missionary stands a few steps above lording over them while wearing Western clothing consisting of a long sleeve white shirt, high collar, and a wide-brimmed hat.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Corbey, "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930," *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (1993): 338-369. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/656317>, (accessed: 12/02/2014), 341.

<sup>9</sup> Sadiya Quereshi, "Displaying Sara Baartman, The 'Hottentot Venus,'" *Science History*. (Hist. Sci., xlii (2004), 234.

<sup>10</sup> Edgar Allen Forbes, "Conditions of Liberia: Notes on the Only American Colony in the World," 739.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), color plate 2.

<sup>13</sup> Forbes, "Conditions of Liberia," 731.

The images may have come from different media and different spaces in time, but the message was the same: blacks and whites are as different as night and day; do not mix and do not be confused about this point.

Further, Lutz and Collins share the notion of the continuum of skin tone and the associated representations observed in the pages of *NatGeo*. To affirm the “Euramerican” resolve that non-Europeans were different and “needed a continuum, one that was grounded in nature . . . A continuum of skin color was thus a perfect biological substratum on which to graft stories of human progress or cultural evolution,” the authors demonstrate by coding the representation of the peoples in *NatGeo* as light, bronze, or dark.<sup>14</sup> In racially-motivated Western societies, light and bronze skinned Africans may have been categorized as mulatto, a term often used to refer to light-skinned Africans or African Americans, usually of mixed parentage, but also more generally of any light or bronze person of African descent. Along with light skin came the inference that the mulatto was closer to being white, that is, higher on the evolutionary scale and therefore of greater privilege and position. This was often represented by the fact a mulatto individual was fully dressed in refined Western-made clothing (often white clothing) and wore shoes, just as the elitist white person wore. To cement the contrasting representation, mulattoes were presented with symbols of wealth or substantial means such as china, indulgent foods, coiffed hair, and perhaps a large Western-style home with Western-style fine furnishings. This can be seen in Forbes’ photo of the Americo-Liberians, who were actually mulatto African Americans that emigrated to Liberia with Christianizing/civilizing intentions. Miss Annabel Lyons, the light-skinned mulatto on page 722 of Forbes’ article, exemplifies this as she wore her Western attire of a striped full-length bustle skirt, a ruffled and lacy blouson white shirt finished with a high collar, and her straightened coiffed hair in a Victorian-style high bun. She sat on the porch of her Western-style home that displayed elements of the elite such as fine imported furnishings.<sup>15</sup>

Even when black Africans tried to defy the perceived norms and set themselves apart by wearing Western clothing, they could not seem to wear the clothes in just the way they were intended to be worn. The attire always looked out of place. Lutz and Collins illustrate this on page 251 in the photo of the native wearing a Western robe to give a public speech; the robe is out of place, but the natives don’t seem to realize it. Confirming this theory is Forbes’ photo of the “Liberian Guards at the U.S. Legation, Monrovia,” which shows the black Africans in full uniform and regalia with long sleeves and kufi hats, except they had bare feet—no shoes. The lack of a pair of shoes was always one of the supposed markers of a low level on the evolutionary scale. According to the proponents of scientific racism, since the black Africans were closest to beasts, they did not need or even want to wear shoes, they were savage earth creatures that could only be tamed, but not changed. In contrast, Earle and Lowe refer to the painting of mulatto *Allessandro de’ Medici*, who is also in full uniform, but as a mulatto, he is presented with the appropriate footwear.<sup>16</sup>

### **Eroticized Representations of Black African Women**

Lutz and Collins argue that while black African women were featured in *NatGeo* fewer times than any other women, their representations elicited strong responses. However seldom, when black African women were shown, their representations were often eroticized. The authors’ study revealed that many magazine viewers associated *NatGeo* with naked black African women more than with anything else, subsequently exposing the soft-pornographic nature of some of these depictions of black women. They write:

The widely shared cultural experience of viewing women’s bodies in the magazine draws on and acculturates the audience’s ideas about race, gender, and sexuality, with the marked subcategory in each case being black, female, and the unrepressed. . . .The centrality of a race-gender code to decisions about whose breasts to depict cannot be denied; however . . . none of the hundreds of women whose breast were photographed in the magazine were white-skinned.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, women considered white or Western, were protected from the potential voyeurism of *NatGeo* readers, while all Others were presented as prey, subject to the fantasies of white men, in fact all men, including African American men.

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<sup>14</sup> Lutz and Collins, *Reading* 157.

<sup>15</sup> Forbes, “Conditions of Liberia,” 722.

<sup>16</sup> T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe, ed., *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 314.

<sup>17</sup> Lutz and Collins, *Reading*, 115.

Lutz and Collins note that *NatGeo's* open nudity preceded the mass distribution of pornography in the 1960s. They recall Richard Pryor's comedy routine that exclaims that *NatGeo* was the "black man's *Playboy*."<sup>18</sup> The authors continue their argument with, "The racial distribution of female nudity in the magazine conforms, in pernicious ways, to Euramerican myths about black women's sexuality. Lack of modesty in dress places black women closer to nature."<sup>19</sup> Scholar Sander Gilman traces similar perceptions when referring to the propaganda associated with the Hottentot Venus and southern African women. He observed that "the black female was widely perceived as possessing not only a 'primitive' sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament—'primitive' genitalia."<sup>20</sup> The September 1938 *NatGeo* article by Lawrence and Margaret Thaw called "Trans-Africa Safari" seems to support this argument. This article featured 14 illustrations of the writer's experiences, including their encounter with young black African girls. They describe this encounter as follows:

"Our route now led us north across northern Nigeria . . . The former German colony marked the beginning of equatorial Africa. The natives became more primitive, more naked; and the Mohammedanism of the north changed to the paganism of the large majority of Africa's teeming black millions. . . . All the dances were symbolic and some, notably the Dance of the Virgins, would never pass a strict board of censors. These African natives are simple, child-like creatures, whose symbolism is as primitive as some of their other instincts."<sup>21</sup>

Thaw's narrative suggested that dances performed by "more naked" black Africans were preludes to uninhibited sex, characteristic of heathens. The photograph itself featured 12-to-14-year-old naked black African girls dancing. The caption read: "Ecstatically Dances the Sultan's Corps de Ballet." Not long prior to this 1938 article were the lively memories of American-born Parisian dancer Josephine Baker. In the 1920s, Baker was popular in France for her exuberant and frenzied topless routines replete with exotic costumes constructed of exotic bananas and feathers. She may have been exalted in France, but in the United States, she was shunned. Of Baker's first performance, the French publication *Magazin Candide* exclaimed, "This dance is the triumph of voluptuousness, the return of the morals of primal times" and according to Raymond Cogniat, Baker "introduced 'an instinctive eroticism.'"<sup>22</sup> But with no socially acceptable Josephine-Baker-type to openly view in the U.S., white men pining to get a glimpse of a wild black woman dancing in primitive fashion could always turn to *NatGeo* and no one would be the wiser that they were fulfilling their latent desires because images in *NatGeo* were considered scientific and educational. This was not new; historically, younger black African women were represented in images (especially ethnographic-style images that suggested scientific fact) and with associated captions that alluded to a promiscuous over-sexed nature that could not be controlled because supposedly the women were like savage beasts that copulated regularly throughout the day. As black savages they were sometimes shown with animals suggesting bestiality. Pieterse notes this in the eighteenth-century painting *The Orang-Outang Carrying Off a Negro Girl*<sup>23</sup> (presented as truth) where it suggests the breeding of the missing link because of the perceived unique ability of black African women to mate with animals and produce the offspring we see that so resembles apes.

In contrast, women from Africa considered bronze or light, or women who were of Oceanic descent from Melanesia or Polynesia, who were also coded bronze or light, were often shown in alluring poses reminiscent of the celebrated paintings by Gauguin of Tahitian women. Lutz and Collins refer to this representation on page 134 depicting the 1986 photograph of two Ulithian women where they are very idealized showing their young perky breasts in soft lighting. This refers us back to the continuum of skin color where light and bronze women were considered closer to white, therefore aestheticized more so than eroticized.

<sup>18</sup> Lutz and Collins, *Reading*, 172.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no.1, (1985:204-242). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343468> (accessed January 31, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Thaw and Mary Thaw. "Trans-Africa Safari." *National Geographic*, September, 1938, 341-342.

<sup>22</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 143.

<sup>23</sup> Pieterse, *White on Black*, 38.

Lutz and Collins provide substantial support for most of their claims, especially those claims about the variance in depictions based on skin color or race, and the objectification of black African women that were chosen to be addressed in this essay. Nonetheless, more photographs and several color photographs would have improved the arguments, especially those about skin tone, of which there were many skin-tone arguments. Nevertheless, Lutz and Collins examine an American icon for its role in American society to build racists assumptions. For more than 130 years, National Geographic has invaded thousands or perhaps millions of homes, not only in the United States, but now across the globe, and essentially, anywhere that the internet can reach. Lutz and Collins' publication is more than 26 years old now. Judging from the three-to-four-century history explored about the representations of people of African descent and observing how the fundamental goal of maintaining the social hierarchy of whites on the top of the scale and blacks on the bottom has never dissipated and has simply transformed with the prevailing notions of the times to meet the needs of the ruling class, seems discouraging. However, as the demographics of the U.S. demonstrate, the numbers of people of color are beginning to overtake the numbers in the white population.<sup>24</sup> Will a reversal in representation ever take place too? Or will this struggle for the top continue to be seen in images? Which venues will this play out—television, or the internet, or both?

*NatGeo*, indeed, has a television presence as well as an internet presence. But especially intriguing is their internet venture into the commodity industry in the form of a website called *Novica* that sells “happiness”<sup>25</sup> featuring artisans of color from across the globe. The site offers indigenous and culturally-inspired handcrafted products. Interestingly, no Western peoples—or even “white” peoples as coded by Lutz and Collins, such as Japanese—are represented as artisans. Only individuals from the Andes, Bali, Java, Brazil, Central America, India, Mexico, Thailand, and West Africa, are represented. But it is, however, noticeable that the attractive models shown wearing and using the products from *Novica's* global marketplace are white Westerners (and a few are light-skinned exotic people), but even the whites have a bit of a deliberate (vacation) tan. Definitely, there are no black models. This imagery seems to suggest that shopping from *Novica* is like traveling during a leisurely retreat around the world, but without leaving your living room. According to this site, blacks-and-peoples-of-a-darker-shade would not be interested in *Novica* products, or perhaps, could not afford *Novica* products. The perception here is that only white people are privileged enough to shop *Novica*—not any Other. In regards to white privilege, *NatGeo* hasn't changed much in those near thirty years since the publication by Lutz and Collins, they are still promoting the maintenance of the status quo, but then again, one could argue, that is the business they are in.

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<sup>24</sup> “Census: White Majority in U.S. Gone by 2043,” NBC News, <http://usnews.nbcnews.com/news/2013/06/13/18934111-census-white-majority-in-us-gone-by-2043?lite>, accessed May 20, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> “Our Mission,” Novica, <http://www.novica.com/our-mission/>, accessed May 18, 2014.