

Blush Unseen in Forests and Meadows: Thomas J. Alldridge, Sierra Leone, and the History of Photography in Africa

Madeline Drace

Although its artistic merit was at first contested, photography's ability to show and preserve visual facts was easier to agree upon. Colonial powers such as Great Britain came to rely on photography to learn about and document their colonies abroad. One colonial photographer, Thomas J. Alldridge, published his account of the British colony of Sierra Leone in 1910 in *A Transformed Colony*. Throughout his photographs and text, it is clear that Alldridge's perspective is heavily informed by his position as a colonial officer because he views the colony and its people through the almost ethnographic lens of a Briton reporting back to his native empire. However, despite Alldridge's official status, the human subjects of his photographs, particularly the Mende people of Sierra Leone and young initiates into the Sande secret women's society, take control over how they are seen both by him and his camera, much to Alldridge's wonderment and surprise. Parallels emerge in how Alldridge and early writers on photography conceived of their nationality, seeing, and what was being seen, highlighting photography's potential as a prime tool of colonization as early as its inception. This paper pits Alldridge's own descriptions of his photography against those of the art's early "biographers" who faced similar dilemmas of pictorial representation, staging, and uncertainty, as well as how much they themselves were responsible for the images their cameras captured. Comparing the nationalist and naturalist themes present in writings from the birth of photography to Alldridge's *Transformed Colony* will establish the place of photography in the colonialist narrative of Western technological progress, showing the official and unofficial imbalances of agency at work in the colonizer-colonized relationship enforced in Sierra Leone as well as colonialism's disturbing equation of colonized peoples to nature.

The cultural and aesthetic distance between Alldridge and his photographic subjects is most clearly observed in his photographs and commentary on the Mende ceremony of girls' initiation into womanhood and the Sande society, an exclusive, secret organization of Mende women.¹ Despite

having stages of intense concealment and restriction—for the entirety of the transition, men were not allowed to approach the initiates—the process was one of great celebration for the Mende, marking the arrival of a new generation of women who would contribute to the survival of the people and the culture.

Alldridge includes photographs of the Sande initiation in *A Transformed Colony*, but, curiously, he seems to have only photographed fragments of the more secretive stages of the ceremonial process, not the grand public festival at the end.² The most striking photograph included in his chapter on the Sande society is one titled with the misnomer "Bundu Initiates" (Figure 1).³ The photograph shows a row of eleven Mende girls kneeling on the ground of a clearing, bent forward, their foreheads close to the ground, with their hands extended in front of them. From a Western viewpoint, the girls appear to be engaged in quiet prayer, but this was certainly not the case, as Alldridge writes,

This long row of young girls then prostrated themselves upon the ground in a supplicating attitude with arms upstretched and hands clasped, and in that position they sang their morning and evening hymns in the Mendi [*sic*] language. It was an extraordinary sight, and although, to our civilised thinking, it was what we are pleased to describe as barbaric, I can only say that to me it was a most impressive service, and was certainly regarded by the initiates as a serious ceremony. They were under the most complete control, most obedient to their superior, behaving in the most decorous way throughout, so much so indeed that I gazed upon that small band of children, for they were all under sixteen years of age, with considerable interest.... At the conclusion my thanks and offerings followed, and I witnessed the departure of the girls with their custodians into the dense forest to return to their isolated encampment, which is as secure and sacred from the outside world as it is possible to be.⁴

I would like to thank my professors at both Tufts and Emory who have encouraged me in my studies, especially Peter Probst for his help with my thesis and exploration of African art, and Susan Gagliardi who first introduced me to these photographs and their mysteries.

1 Nanina Guyer, "Extending the Stage: Photography and Sande Initiates in the Early Twentieth-Century," in *Visions from the Forests: The Arts of Liberia and Sierra Leone*, ed. Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers and Alexander Bortolot (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2014), 45.

2 Ibid.

3 Thomas J. Alldridge, *A Transformed Colony: Sierra Leone As it Was, and As It is, Its Progress, Peoples, Native Customs and Undeveloped Wealth* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1910), 228. Alldridge did not seem to know the actual name of the Sande Society and instead called them "Bundu." The derivation of this name is not certain. He also misspelled Mende as "Mendi."

4 Alldridge, *A Transformed Colony*, 222-23.

Alldridge's experience of this performance is a passive one. He did not request that the Sande initiates pose themselves in such a way, nor did he ask them to sing. In his recollection of asking permission to photograph them, he writes that "there was a Bundu in session in the bush outside the town, when the soweh or head woman at the request of the chief very kindly brought the initiates out of their sacred retreat to an open space on the road, in order that I might take a photograph of them."⁵ This was not the only Sande performance Alldridge was permitted to photograph. The initiates posed for another photograph, this time fully facing the camera, and sang another set of songs (Figure 2).⁶ Therefore, this subsequent, "supplicating" photograph may depict the performance of a much more secretive, perhaps sacred, song.⁷

Alldridge's response to the initiates' song is mostly one of surprise since he apparently did not expect such "natural" women to be so disciplined.⁸ Alldridge's awed bafflement at the particularity with which the initiates sang and positioned themselves stands in stark contrast to his rather condescending comments on their "scanty" apparel or the "barbarism" of their rituals.⁹ Although, even in his condescension, there are some concessions. For example, despite "the whole rite" being "barbaric," "the girls being all garbed alike there was a uniformity about it that made it look ceremonious, and it was all conducted with much decorum."¹⁰ All this despite the girls, and the Mende in general, Alldridge also writes, being so "nature-fitted" for "simple," unorganized pursuits.¹¹ His surprise at the Sande initiates' "decorum" lets slip the common colonial, patronizing assumption that British ("human") civilization brought order to foreign ("natural") chaos. However, he subverts that assumption as seen in his own contradictions. Alldridge's concessions strike a blow to his own status as an enforcer of colonial cultural hierarchy. With his expectations about Mende ritual capability upended, he unwittingly admits that he has very little control over the content and meaning of these images. Despite the powerful status he thinks would come from his appointment as a British colonial officer, Alldridge is merely the audience for

a carefully choreographed performance of cultural identity and self-control. Nanina Guyer writes in her study of this photograph, "Alldridge's report [above] provides insight into the young women's response to having their pictures taken. Rather than being passive subjects, they actively shaped the images by offering the photographer different views. In this way, they did much to create the appealing qualities that characterize many such photographs."¹² The question thus arises as to who is responsible for the photograph: Alldridge for taking it or the initiates for choosing how their image would be taken?

Compared to the purpose with which the Sande initiates and their chaperones orchestrate the photographs, Alldridge's participation seems minor. His only contribution to producing these photographs was asking Mende and Sande authorities permission to carry a camera into the forest and watch the initiates. However, his camera did not capture what simply happened, but rather what he was allowed to see. The sole creative and discretionary force behind staging the photographs was that of the initiates and their superiors who decided how they would pose and what they would sing; but this power difference is all but absent from the photographs themselves. The frontality of the standing initiates, to Western eyes, could perhaps point to an open guilelessness. The following "supplication" immediately reads as allotting power to the viewer, not the girls. What the photographs do not show is the initiates convening in the "secure and sacred" bush where they may have discussed how they would participate in the photographs, making this image the result of deliberation and not one of "natural" spontaneity, as Alldridge appears to interpret. The modern viewer is left completely ignorant of the initiates' intentions or motives for coming into the clearing to be photographed and must instead settle for, as Alldridge calls it, a "great show of mystery."¹³

Questions of agency and the power play of photographer versus photographée is well-trod ground in the early discourses on photography. One of photography's earliest anxieties was whether or not it could be considered "art," a matter complicated by the fact that photographers do not necessarily *create* images, but instead *take* the likeness of images that already exist in the world. In his first writing on his invention, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre declared that "the DAGUERREOTYPE is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself."¹⁴ Daguerre also noted that in some reaches of the globe, "The imprint of nature would reproduce itself still more rapidly in countries where the light is more intense

5 Ibid., 222.

6 Ibid. Alldridge writes: "The girls were brought out by some of the duennas [Sande superiors], and being still in the Bundu bush were unable to enter the town, which would have been contrary to the stringent laws of the society. The girls were marched into line and began their peculiar chants, which are of the quaintest kind but are always rendered in perfect harmony, the sounds seeming to come as from one voice instead of from the eleven which were before me. There are no shakes or trills, the monotony was only broken by short gentle movements of the arms and by occasional clapping of the hands, the whole usually ending by a smart single clap which has a fine effect in the quietude of the bush."

7 Guyer, "Extending the Stage," 50.

8 Alldridge, *A Transformed Colony*, 356.

9 Ibid., 222.

10 Ibid., 25.

11 Ibid., 188.

12 Guyer, "Extending the Stage," 49.

13 Alldridge, *A Transformed Colony*, 208.

14 Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, "Daguerrotype," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, Inc., 1980), 13.

than in Paris, such as Spain, Italy, Africa, etc., etc."¹⁵ Nature was thought to be the first genius behind photography and the intelligentsia of the day found themselves preoccupied with this dilemma. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, a noble member of photography's early commentators, penned her concerns thusly, "Our chief object at present is to investigate the connexion of photography with art—to decide how far the sun may be considered an artist, and to what branch of imitation his powers are best adapted....Photography is, after all, too profoundly interwoven with the deep things of Nature to be entirely unlocked by any given method."¹⁶ To Eastlake, the photographer had no claim to the pleasing qualities that appeared in their photographs. Rather, because photographs were the result of natural and earthly forces, nature, and nature alone, was the creator and deserved praise. However, despite anxieties Europeans may have had at the thought of nature or the sun having optimum artistic photographic power, those worries all but melted away when they turned their lenses towards the world's darker latitudes and the riches therein.

Photography appeared in Africa almost as soon as the French government allowed for the dissemination of daguerreotype technology and the continent's first photographers were often colonial officers reporting back to the crown.¹⁷ However, photography was a harbinger for colonialism even before it ventured overseas. In his 1839 address to the French Chamber of Deputies, Dominique Arago argued for the "genius" cultural and practical possibilities of the newly-developed daguerreotype.¹⁸ Arago's endorsement of photography ranges from romantic to scientific, likening the fine detail of a daguerreotype to the delicacy of lace while also bringing up its documentary uses and its potential for expanding the Western empires.¹⁹ According to Arago, the French propensity for posterity extends back into history. Recalling Napoleon's imperial foray into Egypt, Arago writes that "everybody will realize that had we photography in 1798 we could possess today faithful pictorial records of that which the learned world is forever deprived of by the greed of Arabs and the vandalism of certain travelers."²⁰ For Arago, photography promised not only technological accuracy but also nationalist and colonial advantages. Implicit

in Arago's report is the notion that the French, with their photographic innovations, know best how to treat foreign archaeological material as well as the cultural material of other nations and races. Although Arago's "enterprise" of preservation for the sake of education is admirable, it does not negate his underlying argument that the French (and, by extension, the West) deserve to have ultimate representative power over other cultures' images because those peoples are not adequately equipped or advanced enough to do so themselves.

Soon after its dissemination, the daguerreotype became a necessary tool of colonization, and France was not alone in turning a photographer's eye to conquered or conquerable continents. Photography afforded the West a tool of scrutiny and "from the first moment [France]... [was] proud that it [could] present it generously to the entire world."²¹ Arago expected photography to teach science more about the micro and macro, "animalcules" and the moons of Jupiter.²² Alldridge trained his sights in between, on the "human interest" of Sierra Leone, which, he writes, exercises a kind of "fascination over the onlooker even when he is familiar with them."²³ Alldridge indulges in other avenues of looking at Africa photographically, even using some familiar technical language. He describes the nautical approach to the coast of Sierra Leone, how "After several days on the open sea the mountains of Sierra Leone are eagerly looked for. Presently those who are scanning the horizon receive the impression of what they take to be 'the loom of the land.' Gradually the impression becomes a certainty; minute by minute the scene develops, and the distant mountains become faintly visible, rapidly gaining distinctness."²⁴ Alldridge's description of the "developing" of the Sierra Leone coastline exudes the same excitement pioneering photographers had when their first pictures started to emerge from their experimental chemical baths. Oliver Wendell Holmes, author of "Doings of the Sunbeam," a 19th-century essay on photography, also felt this anticipation of "[seeing] something of the forming picture" in the developing dish.²⁵ Alldridge's description of arriving in Sierra Leone creates a similarly visual suspense, the gradual seeing of what was not there before. Primarily, however, it establishes his relationship to Africa as a viewer to whom images are made available, not one who makes those images. Although it is his authored photographic study, Alldridge inadvertently admits that Sierra Leone—or, as Daguerre would say, "Nature"—makes the image of itself visible to his eye. Alldridge does not earnestly acknowledge

15 Ibid., 12.

16 Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, "Photography," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, Inc., 1980), 43.

17 Jürg Schneider, "The Topography of the Early History of African Photography," *History of Photography* 34, no. 2 (2010): 135. Christraud M. Geary, "Photographic practice in Africa and its implications for the use of historical photographs as contextual evidence," in *Fotografia e storia dell'Africa*, ed. Alessandro Triulzi (Naples, IT: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1995), 105.

18 Dominique François Arago, "Report," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, Inc., 1980), 15.

19 Ibid., 20.

20 Ibid., 17.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 25.

23 Alldridge, *A Transformed Colony*, 30.

24 Ibid., 20.

25 Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Doings of the Sunbeam," in *Photography: Essays & Images. Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 67.

Sierra Leone's agency in its representation, preferring to say it "is quite capable of holding her own," in Alldridge's opinion, solely because of British imperial involvement in medicine, infrastructure, and "civilization."²⁶

Photography has at its crux a tension between the seen and unseen, the known and the secret. Holmes extolled photography's "inexhaustibility," that "in a perfect photograph there will be as many beauties lurking, unobserved, as there are flowers that blush unseen in forests and meadows."²⁷ Try as colonial powers might, they could never ensure that they saw the whole picture. Alldridge's colonial study is just one example of photography's complicated history as part of the colonial narrative. From securing and preserving images of exotic and esoteric cultures to the befuddlement that nature "preserves herself," photographers have grappled with a fundamental question: who

makes pictures?²⁸ In the case of Alldridge's photographs of the Sande women, the photographer may have taken the picture, but "Nature" takes the credit. At the close of the initiates' performance, Alldridge "could not help wondering what their future would be when 'The morning light should break and the darkness disappear.' But who is to bring them the light?"²⁹ In the colonial narrative, Alldridge would like to believe that he and the West brought light to a "dark" continent. Little did he expect that the young girls of Sierra Leone would choose in what light they would be shown and how that light would bounce off of them and onto the waiting negative.

Tufts University

²⁶ Alldridge, *A Transformed Colony*, 19.

²⁷ Holmes, "Doings of the Sunbeam," 77-78.

²⁸ Daguerre, "Daguerreotype," 13.

²⁹ Alldridge, *A Transformed Colony*, 222-223.

►Figure 1. [facing page, top] "Bundu Initiates: In supplicating position. The bodies of these girls, after being covered by a thin washing of clay, are being striped by the fingers of a duenna or an initiate being drawn over them while the mixture is wet." Source: Alldridge 1910, 228.

►Figure 2. [facing page, bottom] "Female Secret Society: Initiates of the Bundu Order in the bush near Juru, Gaura County, Mendiland." Source: Alldridge 1910. 224.

