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Museum ANTHROPOLOGY

Excavating Whiteness in the African Archive: The Story of Amandus Johnson's 1920s Expedition to Angola for the Penn Museum

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Abstract

As we further seek to “decolonize” museum images of Africa, the museum archives of African Collections—the correspondence, ledgers, diaries, photographs, and other documents of White explorers working in Africa—suture the colonial practices that produced ways of seeing Africa—and Blackness more broadly—back onto the objects that museums maintain and display today. As increasing scholarly attention seeks to rectify the anti-Black colonial violence of the archive, this research aims to situate the pedestrian colonial ethnographic practices and spectacular African explorer mythmaking found in museum archives within the foundation of museum anthropology and the museum itself. It also looks to the possibilities of contemporary museum practice to reframe and repair colonial museum constructions of Africa.

KEYWORDS

Africa, archive, collections, exhibition, Penn Museum

INTRODUCTION

The museum archives of African collections both bear witness and bury witnesses to the exploits of anthropological acquisition. Consider, for example, a postcard in the Penn Museum archives¹ that scholar and self-made ethnologist Amandus Johnson produced in the field and sent to the Museum's Director, George Byron Gordon, showcasing his expedition campsite in Angola in the early 1920s (Figure 1). By the early 1920s, Johnson was a prominent professor of Scandinavian Languages at the University of Pennsylvania, where he had received his PhD in 1908. Notwithstanding Johnson's expertise in Scandinavian languages, he led an expedition to “Portuguese West Africa” (now Angola) from 1922 to 1924, ostensibly conducting research and amassing a large number of staves, sculptures, masks, and prestige objects; these objects, including the small wooden sculpture that appears in his postcard to Gordon, are still held today in the Penn Museum's African Collections. As museum objects, whether on display or not, Johnson's Angolan objects remain decontextualized artifacts alienated from their origins, but the museum's archives offer invaluable traces of their history. Moreover, Johnson's photographic postcard links these objects and the history of their acquisition to a scopic regime of race and power that has been central to constructions of Blackness that continue to haunt us today—and this is precisely what the Penn Museum's new African galleries seek to reveal and revise.

The Johnson postcard represents the colonial logic of ethnographic collections. It is a useful emblem of such logic, reminding us of the chains of racist thinking that linked the bad faith of explorers, adventurers, and anthropologists to the practices of museum display that made a fetish of its objects while mystifying their provenance. By excavating this shadowy collector lurking in the background of this campsite photograph and in the recesses of the Penn Museum Archives, this article reflects on the work of the museum archive while examining the history of one unique donor to the Penn Museum African Collections. The case of Johnson's postcard suggests how we can use museum archives of African collections—with the correspondence, ledgers, diaries, photographs, and other documents of White explorers working in Africa—to shed light on how Western museums both channeled and championed a colonial image of African people—indeed, of Blackness itself. While we should continue to critique the museum for its politics of display and structures of inequity, the effort to decolonize the museum benefits from an interrogation of its archives. How then do museum archives, particularly the records of accessions, suture the colonial practices that produced ways of seeing Africa—and Blackness more broadly—back onto the objects that museums maintain and display today? How do the stories of acquisition, often buried in museum archives, reveal more about the collectors than the collections?² To begin, I would like to reflect on my own engagement with the archive of the museum, which is part of the story behind this story.



FIGURE 1 Front of a postcard produced by Amandus Johnson [c. 1923]. According to his postscript, Johnson is the man in the helmet, second from the left. He is shown here at his camp in Malange, Angola. From the Penn Museum Archives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

ENGAGING THE ARCHIVE

My experience as a museum anthropologist resonates with the call to “decolonize”³ museums and the call to interrogate the archive as a site upon which the museum rests. If the archive constructs knowledge rather than simply accumulates materials, then for some scholars, activists, and museum professionals, a decolonized museum demands that we transform the ways we approach archives as the basis of knowledge production.⁴ Similarly, a decolonized museum demands new archival research practices to uncover the silent stories of museum objects and subjects.⁵ For some Black theorists, the challenge of the archive involves preserving, amplifying, and even imagining those Black voices that have been silenced or marginalized in the construction of the archive. Figuring the ceaseless effects of slavery as a “wake,” Christina Sharpe has argued powerfully that

the wake and wake work trouble the ways most museums and memorials take up trauma and memory. That is, if museums and memorials materialize a kind of reparation (repair) and enact their own pedagogies as they position visitors to have a particular experience or set of experiences about an event that is seen to be past, how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing? [...] Because how does one memorialize the everyday?

(Sharpe, 2016, 19–20)

The museum archive is also part of this racial wake, and its traces of colonial encounters in Africa are in some very real ways foundational to both the history of the museum and to the persistent stigmatization of Black people as primitive. These power dynamics continue, and they betray the foundations of a logic that still serves to disenfranchise and demonize Black people in the present day.

My turn to the museum archive came after decades of researching the more visible production of “Africa on display”

in natural history museums and ethnographic exhibitions. By studying the material objects in collections and on display, the interpretive strategies and institutional politics of museums, and the audiences’ reception, reframing, or resistance to such strategies, I became deeply aware of the visual and textual lexicons of “exhibiting Africa” in Western museums. As I argue in *Rethinking Evolution in the Museum: Envisioning African Origins* (2007), the fundamentally racial rhetoric of Victorian anthropology, the bedrock of natural history museums, encodes Africa and its peoples as primitive archetypes according to Western ontological narratives. Anticipating the current discourse around “decolonizing” anthropology, my own research documented how race science and colonialism were foundational to natural history and ethnographic museums, particularly in their representations of the African continent, its peoples, and their cultural production. My turn to the museum archive has allowed me to confront another hurdle that continues to vex museum anthropology.

In 2017, I began to research the history of the African collections of the Penn Museum as a member of the curatorial team, led by Tukufu Zuberi, charged with the reinstallation of their permanent African galleries, which opened 2 years later. Working to construct rather than critique a permanent exhibition dedicated to Africa, I felt a certain responsibility to, and not just for, the objects we were putting on display. This research required me to excavate African archival materials that were dispersed, somewhat haphazardly, within the Penn Museum’s vast archives.⁶ As I gathered materials for the reinstallation, I realized (with some chagrin) that this research would also require me to really confront the elusive network of White collectors of African objects. For me, as an African American anthropologist, this new perspective on the buried colonial practices that formed these museum collections was both tedious and unsettling. Zuberi, a sociologist of Africa, wanted the exhibition to bring to light the troubled and sometimes violent histories of the Penn Museum’s collections, and the ultimate exhibition, “Africa: from Maker to Museum” invites visitors to “Trace the journey from maker to museum, to consider why, where, and how objects were made” (Penn Museum, n.d.). According to the exhibition’s introductory text (Penn Museum, n.d.),

As with most Western museums, the foundational objects of this collection were created in, or taken out of, Africa during periods of enslavement and colonialism. Most of the Penn Museum’s Africa collections were acquired by curators, ethnologists, archaeologists, antiquarians, or travelers in the late 19th or early 20th centuries. The objects on display in the Africa Galleries were selected to deepen the conversation about African material culture, its representation in Western museums, and its connection to the African Diaspora.

Given this “maker to the museum” directive, I traced many of the specific histories of the objects in the Penn Museum African collection, investigating the trade routes and exchange politics that brought these objects into encounter with the museum. I was aided in this daunting task by other Penn Museum scholars

and archivists such as Dwaune Latimer, Keeper of the African Collections, and Alex Pezzati, Senior Archivist at the Penn Museum, as well as interns that aided in this archival work.⁷ While the Penn Museum's archives are a valuable resource for scholars generally, the sub-Saharan African materials have received relatively little attention. Unlike other regions represented at the Penn Museum, the African collections were eclectic, originating in a hodgepodge of purchases by, and donations from, varied amateur or "gentlemen adventurers," missionaries, colonial officers, and other opportunists.⁸ As in other museums, the origins of these late nineteenth and early twentieth century African collections were not often the product of organized, museum-directed anthropological fieldwork, as we will see in the case of Amandus Johnson.

While narratives of White supremacy are conspicuously present in the Western museum—from grand Greco-Roman columns outside buildings to the sanctified galleries within—these narratives are also grounded in the archives buried within. Concealed behind closed doors with restricted access, the archives are a repository of the museum's power and authority, disguised as a pedestrian accumulation of boxes, where the fragility of aged documents obscures the colonial violence they represent. It became apparent to me that the papers and photographs representing Africa in the collection of cardboard boxes at the Penn Museum obscures the most conspicuous forms of power within the museum. Here are the buried witnesses to the economics of colonial exchange and the calculating manipulations of culture that are the foundation of the Western ethnographic museum. As a set of records authorizing and legitimizing the power of the museum, these documents, images, and ledgers underscore the practical and ideological control of the objects—and by association, the people—that the museum collected. As Michel Foucault observes, "The archive is the law of all that has been actually said," and for the museum, archival records legitimize historical claims so that the archive not only holds knowledge but produces it (Gutting, 2014; Manoff, 2004). In addition, the colonial archive of the museum erases the individuals who created the traditional African art objects now circulating globally in museums; they were not people that have history, they *were* history, as Anna Tsing has observed (Tsing, 1993). Moreover, museums reduce cultural objects through objectification, rending it from the Black minds and bodies and lives and stories that produced them.

Uncovering the histories of the African objects in the Penn Museum collection was challenging. This research required an archival encounter with an assortment of White individuals—those who wrote the letters from the field to museum curators, divulged their musings in diary entries, calculated sums in ledgers or curio account books, and casually hand-drew images of the African people and servants they observed. The archives revealed how these White explorers trafficked in a certain colloquial vernacular that dehumanized African people, a complement to my earlier research, showing how persistently the legacy of Victorian anthropology informed constructions of Africa for early twentieth century White explorers. In combing through the archives, I found that these quotidian practices, reflecting the colonial banality of the exchanges between White men and White women around the

value of Black bodies and Black cultural objects, subtended the racism that would follow Black people well into the twenty-first century (Scott, 2019).

Working as a Black museum anthropologist, I had no expectation of uncovering any *truths* in the archives, per se, about the people of African descent described in the colonial records. Yet I understood how the archives constituted a nexus, a set of origin stories about how African objects were "made" in museums, how African cultural objects were *made* museum objects (Alberti, 2005). Still, I was surprised at my visceral reaction to interacting with these archival curiosities—these fragile handwritten notes and the cursive scrawling on the back of photographs. Engaging the colonizer through these primary sources was a very different experience than confronting the colonial histories of museums writ large—that is, confronting what is situated deeply within museums, not how museums themselves are situated. It was a wholly sensorial experience holding the delicate pages without gloves, laying a finger on the embedded script of a White explorer that I imagined may have enacted colonial violence, big or small, before laying pen to paper. I was ever aware that the time-laden letter held in my hand was also held by distant colonial others working to other people of African descent, something I felt viscerally and sometimes painfully while combing the archive. Ironically, these papers as archival objects were meant to codify and sterilize exchanges, but, for me, they reverberated with an undercurrent of the messy, the manipulative, and the violent.

Amandus Johnson was just one of the many intriguing collectors I encountered in the Penn Museum archives. Take, for example, William Ockleford Oldman (1879–1949), a British art dealer well-known for his collection of indigenous skulls, or the anthropologist Henry Usher Hall (1876–1944), who primarily worked in Siberia but also conducted fieldwork in Sierra Leone along with his wife, Frances Jones Hall, who kept her own copious diaries filled with illustrations and notes of her daily household activities in Sierra Leone. There was also the donor John Quinn (1870–1924), a wealthy patron of the arts, who was close friends with Joseph Conrad of *Heart of Darkness* fame, an unexpected link to colonial mythmaking. The archives also provided evidence of the many objects that came to the museum through both missionaries and colonial officers, including one object pocketed by a military doctor during the 1897 British raid of the kingdom of Benin. It was clear that the collectors that supplied the Penn Museum with African objects were quite varied in disciplinary training, exploratory goals, and institutional or individual motivation, whether missionary, military, colonial, or recreational. Each of their stories is as complex and eclectic as the next, evincing the haphazard and troubled nature of sub-Saharan African collections in museums.

Ahead of the Penn Museum reinstallation, I had the unique opportunity to curate a temporary exhibition in 2019 at the Penn Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), *Colored People Time: Quotidian Pasts*, which showcased some of the archival histories I encountered at the Penn Museum (Scott & Onli, 2019). *Quotidian Pasts* allowed Meg Onli and I to explore these varied collectors of African art in ways that we could not for the Penn Museum Africa exhibition. While *Quotidian*

Pasts was produced in collaboration with the Penn Museum, the critical and creative framing of the stories were all ours as “art” curators. And we could frame these stories with contemporary art audiences in mind, not bound by the strictures of the Penn Museum administration or the elementary to elder age ranges of Penn Museum audiences. At the Penn Museum, the archival histories of White explorers were largely tucked away in reference interactives for visitors looking to dig deeper into the history of the collections. At the ICA, we could stage the exhibition to *foreground* the way the colonial gaze shaped Western misimaginings of African peoples as stuck in a static prehistory.

As the second chapter in a larger exhibition series, *Colored People Time*, that Onli curated, *Quotidian Pasts* was wholly concerned with the trafficking of Blackness through the colonial practices of collecting, commodifying, and exhibiting both African people and African artwork. The exhibition examined early twentieth-century ethnographic practices and the racist legacy they left behind in museums. In *Quotidian Pasts*, the very long history of Western exploitation of both African people and their cultures was represented through the reconfiguration of a few small archival objects—such as a photograph, newspaper clipping, or journal entry. These archival materials, which range from the early to mid-twentieth century, documented key histories or biographies of African objects from the height of colonial exploitation of Africa to the birth of Anthropology and ethnographic research in universities and museums to the sensational presence of African ethnographic objects in popular culture. At the center of this exhibition was a newly commissioned work by the artist Matthew Angelo Harrison, whose 3D-printed works manipulated several West African sculptures held in the Penn Museum's robust collection of African artifacts. Through his artistic practice, Harrison challenges us to look at African sculpture in new ways, to question how we see and make meaning of “authentic” African sculpture, how we assign cultural and commercial capital and value to African objects. At its center, the exhibition asked troubling questions of us all: How has the identity of African cultural objects been manipulated and bastardized to become what we see them as today? How have the identities of the explorers, ethnographers and amateur collectors suppressed the presence of Black identities? And how do we, by the uncomfortable act of looking and relooking at the decontextualized African object, simultaneously engage in the act of recovering and silencing Black voices? (Scott, 2020).

To undertake any of this work on White collectors, ethnographers, explorers, and opportunists, I had to ask myself: “Given the role of the archive in obscuring the African individuals who produced these objects, why not recover the artists rather than return to the explorers? Does this simply center Whiteness, again, in an archive that already silences Black voices?” Surely, I was indeed recentering Whiteness but my aim was precisely to excavate and interrogate colonial Whiteness, to extract it from the dark recesses of storage boxes and shed light on the explicit colonial acts and interactions that undergird the Penn Museum's African Collections and indeed the Penn Museum itself.

AMANDUS JOHNSON, THE UNLIKELY AFRICAN ETHNOGRAPHER

As a donor to the Penn Museum African Collections, Amandus Johnson was not typical. He was not a colonial officer, missionary, or an ethnographer by training (the archives are filled with these, of course), nor did he donate to the Penn Museum in significant ways. However, he was an unquestionably dubious White explorer of Africa who capitalized on the trafficking of African objects and ideas about African people in some rather unique and significant ways. And he is entangled in a history of collecting that binds him to three Philadelphia-area institutions: the Penn Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, The Mercer Museum of Natural History, and the museum he himself founded, the American Swedish Historical Museum.

Johnson is largely remembered for his contributions to the Swedish American community, specifically for founding the Swedish Colonial Society and the American Swedish Historical Museum in 1926. Johnson was publishing scholarly work at a time when many Scandinavian American scholars were writing nativist literature that argued for the Nordic role in “discovering” America. As historian Jørn Brøndal has demonstrated, many Scandinavian writers of that generation aimed to prove that Scandinavian immigrant groups were at the top of a White racial hierarchy, superior to new immigrant groups such as the Italians, and on par with the American-born Anglo-Saxons (Brøndal, 2014). Brøndal cites Johnson as one of these filiopietistic scholars, noting that Johnson was particularly influenced by Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*. For example, in the introduction to his 1953 book *Contributions by Swedes to American National Life, 1638–1921*, Johnson wrote: “Due to their isolated position and relative seclusion [Swedes] retained...their purity of race to a greater extent than any other Germanic people, and maintained to a higher degree than other nations the special characteristics of what Grant calls ‘the Great Race’” (Brøndal, 2014, 26–27). In the same section, Johnson testified to the high moral character of the Swedes by referring to their “kindly” treatment of African people: “Education and Christianity were always the first thoughts of the Swedish statesmen and warriors...When governors were sent to America and Africa they were strictly enjoined to treat the aborigines kindly, and large fines were imposed for any injury done to the natives” (Johnson, 1921, 9).

A series of fires in 1918 and 1920 destroyed Johnson's library and several of his manuscripts and marked a decisive moment in Johnson's academic career, a convenient turn toward ethnography (Felsten, 1982). Rather than resuming his research on the Swedish colonial period, he proposed an ethnographic expedition to Angola to collect tools and other objects from the Ambundu people. Johnson's scheme received support from three important benefactors. His expedition was funded by Henry C. Mercer, the founder of the Mercer Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, and curator of the American and Prehistoric Archaeology section at the Penn Museum. At the time, Mercer was looking to fill a gap in his museum's collections on “the history of Human industries,” and requested that Johnson collect tools that were used in agriculture, food preparation, net-making, steel-making, and

mining (Wardwell, 1986, 20). Johnson also made arrangements with Dr. George Byron Gordon, the Museum Director of the Penn Museum, to collect ethnographical material for their African galleries (Wardwell, 1986, 20). Finally, Johnson was contracted to supply objects to the Five Continents Museum in Munich, Germany (formerly known, until 2014, as the Bavarian State Museum of Ethnology). Johnson embarked on this “Educational West-African Expedition” in 1922, collecting ethnographic materials for his institutional benefactors, researching different dialects, and photographing his travels until he returned to the United States in 1924.

Although he would later speak romantically about his experiences in Angola, his correspondence from that time reveals a much more conflicted story. At some point during the trip, the man Johnson had hired to take photographs and motion

pictures, J. Allen Ewertz, had disappeared along with all of the films, leaving behind canisters filled with rocks so that their loss would go unnoticed (Wardwell, 1986, 20). However, Ewertz insisted that he was not the sole con man on this expedition. In a letter addressed to Dr. Gordon on December 27, 1923 (Ewertz, 1923), he wrote:

Obviously, this intriguing letter raises questions about Amandus Johnson's true ambitions in Angola. Whether or not Ewertz's claims are true, he continued to list a number of people he believed would vouch for his story about Johnson, promising that if Gordon sent him a private investigator, he could prove his accusations (Ewertz, 1923). There is no record of Gordon's response in the Penn Museum Archives, and Ewertz's letter had little apparent impact on Johnson's relationship to the Penn Museum. By the end of the expedition, Johnson sent 25 cases of objects he collected in Angola to Mercer (Wardwell, 1986, 21). The Mercer Museum ultimately kept a collection of tools, weapons, and musical instruments, but Mercer was reportedly disappointed that Johnson's African cache did not contain more tools (Rosenstein, 1977, 59). Of Johnson's more ceremonial objects, Mercer sold the Penn Museum an array of sculptures, staffs, masks, and other prestige objects, several of which are currently on display in the new African Galleries (as in Figure 2, the label notably containing acquisition information) (Wardwell, 1986, 21).

Upon returning to the United States, Johnson published his research and experiences in several books, such as *In the Land of the Marimba* (1929) and *Mbundu English Portuguese Dictionary* (1930) but gained the most attention for his popular speaking tours. In the following years, Johnson traveled across the United States and Sweden, performing public lectures and showing films (ultimately recovered from Ewertz) from his expedition in Angola (Wardwell, 1986, 21). Privately, he began an endowment campaign to mark the tricentennial of the first Swedish colonial trading company, leading eventually

Dear Sir,

Presuming that Dr. Amandus Johnson has made certain statements to you regarding our relations during his trip to Africa, I hereby take the liberty to lay before you some facts relating to this matter.

This trip was started under false pretentions [sic] from the beginning. His reasons for going was not due to any enthusiasm related to Ethnographic discoveries or collections. Dr. Johnson simply intended in company with a German M. Freyberg and myself to lift a cache of Diamonds which the above mentioned German buried in Africa years ago. The collections and taking movie film was to cover up the real game.

The plans failed when Dr. Johnson started to fight with the German accusing him of stealing cartridges!

This was already in the beginning of the trip. Later on I went through the interior of Angola with Dr. Johnson for 10 months working real hard making fotos [sic] and movie film.

Afterwards when returning to Loanda, Dr. Johnson refused to give me any money saying he would pay me when he sold the film. He now owes me, either 42 weeks salary at \$75.00 per week or half of the film taken.

Dr. Johnson has written to people in Berlin trying to blacken my name and saying that I was a crook, but coward as he is, his letters are typewritten and without signature.

Dr. Johnson has been trying to persecute me ever since I left him but with no such luck because in Africa most men have hearty red blood in their veins and love fair play. Now Dr. Johnson is hiding himself behind your name and behind the name of the University of Pennsylvania.



FIGURE 2 The Penn Museum object from the Johnson expedition that is referred to as “fetish.”

to the erection of the American Swedish Historical Museum; Johnson became its first curator (Felsten, 1982). This was evidently a very profitable time for Johnson. A 1974 article, entitled “Amandus Johnson...Historian, Lecturer, Inventor, Engineer” (Johnson Correspondence), reports that “His earnings in the United States from his illustrated lectures on Africa were greater than at any other period in his life. It was a new and fascinating topic at the time and drew great crowds.” In a pamphlet created for Johnson's speaking tour, “The Educational West-African Expedition, 1922–24: Africa from a New Angle” (Johnson Correspondence, Box 2, Folder 2), Johnson is praised for his ability to put on a good show: “He is widely known as a writer and he has lectured on many subjects before popular audiences and learned Societies in this country and Europe. He has the rare ability of ‘combining scholarship with popular presentation’ and he never fails to hold an audience.” The story of Johnson's exploits is poignant, of course: committed to the idea of racial hierarchy, he founds (and funds) a Swedish-American museum by narrating his adventures in Angola for audiences in America (as well as plundering the objects that come to represent Africa still).

We do not have clear insight into Johnson's original intentions in Angola—was he an ethnographer genuinely interested in Africa, an adventurer seeking to exploit America's fascination with atavistic Blackness, or an opportunist motivated by greed? What we do have, however, are his post-expedition accounts. In his preface to *Mbundu English-Portuguese Dictionary*, Johnson thanked the Ambundu people who assisted in his research:

Nor must I forget the native chiefs, who treated me with such whole-hearted hospitality in their primitive and often weird manner, especially Soba Mbundu, Soba Marimba and Soba Lili. They will never know that “the queer white man” who bought almost anything they would part with and who tried so hard to learn their language and to pry into their secrets, thus publicly acknowledges their kindness and thanks them openly for their many little signs of friendship.

How I wish they could see this volume and read these lines! Often as I am writing about my experiences among them and about their language, an indescribable longing comes over me to be back again among this people, far away from the madding rush of our western world, back again in the wilds of Africa, where men live to live, not to acquire fame, nor amass a fortune, nor to gain power, nor even to prepare for another world, but solely for the pleasure of living.

(Johnson, 1930, 9–10)

These sentimental passages stand in stark contrast to a letter Johnson wrote to Colonel Henry D. Paxson, friend and board member of the Mercer Museum on February 25, 1924, in which he said, “I now long to be back in dear old Philadelphia. If all the grumblers and growlers over there could be sent to Africa for

fifteen months or more, they would return good citizens, and be satisfied and content for the rest of their lives” (Wardwell, 1986, 21).

In his writings, Johnson described the people he met in Angola with a mixture of mystified exoticism and racial disregard. In “The Educational West-African Expedition, 1922–24” (Johnson Correspondence), the pamphlet advertising his lecture tours, he excerpts his book *In the Land of the Marimba* (Figure 3):

And if the traveler leaves the cities and the military posts and goes off into the interior, unfrequented by civilized man, he will enter a world where enchantment dwells supreme, where superstition is the driving force of the spirit and where man is but the plaything of unseen powers...In this land there is a spirit in every bush, there is genius in every tree, there is a sprite in every brook, there is a god in every river! Filth and dirt and grease and all the things we have learned to shun and abominate are there—not by chance or necessity, but by choice; but the charm of mystery dwells with this people and spreads a veil of poetic beauty over hut and village, over plain and hill, over river and lake. A lazy indifference, with no thought of tomorrow is written on every face. The husband lives to eat, and his wife or wives work that he and they may eat and live.

Despite of or as part of Johnson's “veil of poetic beauty,” the passage is heavily steeped in a typical colonial condescension and more powerfully proposes an evolutionary rhetoric that perpetuates the myth of Africa as an evolutionary backwater, a place and a people that suffer from “lazy indifference” toward the progress of civilization. It paints a picture as rhetorically suggestive as any encoded in visual colonial propaganda.

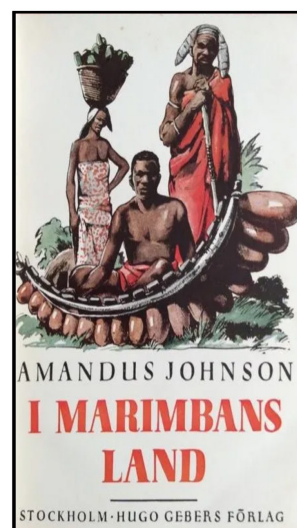


FIGURE 3 Title page of *I Marimbans Land* by Dr. Amandus Johnson.

AMANDUS JOHNSON: THE CAMPSITE POSTCARD

If Johnson's expedition contributed objects to the Penn and Mercer Museums, it also served a discursive construction of Africa that he exploited upon his return. Likewise, the campsite photograph that Johnson sent to Gordon both reproduces and reinforces colonial tableaux of racial hierarchy. The postcard thus constructs a colonial ideal aligned with a larger visual archive of Black bodies that sought to diminish and dehumanize Africans. Johnson's undated, typewritten postcard briefly apprises Gordon of the expedition's progress, noting that, despite some early "trouble in finding carriers here," he is preparing to march "into the Lunda country" with a "caravan...of 55 carriers and men," thanks to the Governor's offer of support (see Figure 4). Accompanying Johnson's pragmatic note, however, is the startling campsite image of a group of seven men arrayed in front of a large tent, an image apparently attesting to the expedition's success so far. Surrounded by five White men—two of them standing and three seated—two Black men in the foreground sit on a mat in the dirt; one of them stares at the small sculpture he holds in his hand while the other also gazes at the object and away from the camera. Two of the seated White men also look towards the "wooden fetish"—an object that remains in the museum's collection today—while the White man seated at the center of the image is the only one staring directly at the camera, as though he is the subject of this portrait documenting the expedition's acquisition. Oddly, Johnson has written by hand at the bottom of his note to Gordon that "I am supposed to be the man with the helmet"—that is, one of the men standing in the background staring intently at a book with some other object in his hand. With this pose, the expedition's leader decenters himself, presenting himself as a diligent scientist preoccupied with tools of the intellect while others find leisure and recreation in colonial repose. The vectors of various gazes do not ultimately settle triumphantly on the sculpture held by one of the Black men, suggesting that this image does something other than simply celebrate its acquisition. In fact, the fetish itself is overshadowed here by the visual construction of a colonial ideal. As I have written in a label for Quotidian Pasts, this photograph "represents staged hierarchies of power, beginning with the African object held

in the hands of kneeling Black men, to the seated White men centered at the campsite to the arch of the tent itself. As an ethnographic photo, it reveals how the camera was used to train the Western eye how to see Blackness vis-à-vis Whiteness."

This photographic postcard reminds us of the camera's power as a colonial technology to legitimate racial hierarchy through "scientific" means of knowledge production. As much scholarship has attested, Europe's colonial scramble for Africa coincided with the emergence of anthropology as a discipline and the museum as a means of visually codifying difference.⁹ This convergence was fueled by the hierarchical assumptions of race science that often informed early anthropology and offered ideological cover for colonial exploits. Moreover, European incursions into Africa were widely responsible for the objects that would form museum collections, objects upon which the scientific study—and representation—of culture drew. As I have argued elsewhere, the cultural construction of Africa in natural history museums, for example, renders the Black subjects they presume to center as passive objects, betraying an enduring colonial legacy (Scott, 2007). Likewise, stagings like Johnson's campsite photograph foreground the Black body only to assert the overarching power of the men who effectively fashion themselves as architects of White power—White power staged above the Black bodies on display, White power embodied in the carefree leisure of the African encampment, and White power effaced as Johnson, the expedition's helmeted leader, attempts to fade into the background as if preoccupied with something other than the staging of such fierce colonial power.

CONCLUSION

Despite Johnson's derision of those White men seeking to "acquire fame, amass a fortune and gain power," he seemed to be motivated by those very ambitions himself. Johnson's story, while unique, attests to an ecosystem of White explorers who exploited their African ethnographic research to gain social and financial capital. And while Amandus Johnson sees in his African subjects "A lazy indifference, with no thought of tomorrow...written on [every] face," we can see in Johnson something far more pernicious in his lazy anthropological "fieldwork" and his lazy capitalization of African myth-making, performing African explorer, to make something of himself. As a careless African ethnographer, he revealed little about the African cultures he encountered but revealed volumes about the calculating and capitalist impulses that drove one dubious ethnographer to cash in on Africa exploration, valorizing his own Whiteness in the form of a new museum dedicated to celebrating his European heritage. Perhaps this is the combination of narcissism, racism, carelessness, and greed that undergirds many of the colonial foundations of the Western ethnographic museum.

For now, I cannot know the experiences of the Black subjects in Johnson's campsite postcard. However, by seeing these Angolan men in the context of Western ethnographic exploration in the wake, I hope to offer them a new way of being seen against the White explorers that made objects of them in

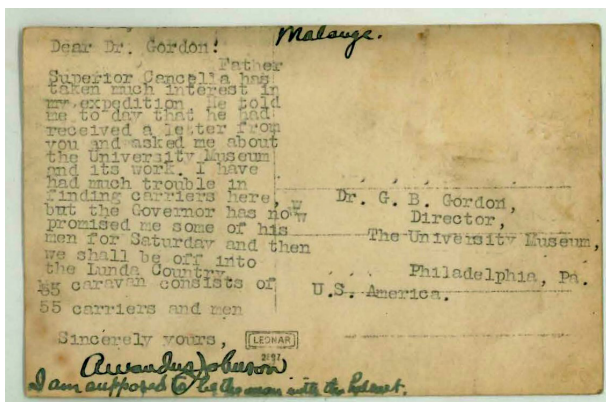


FIGURE 4 Back of a postcard produced by Amandus Johnson [c. 1923].

their work. I see them subjected to, made subjects of, a history of careless and carefree exploitations that helped to constitute the Penn Museum's African collections, a window into the calculating exchanges that root many ethnographic collections in the modern museum.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology was recently renamed the Penn Museum, and the terms may be used interchangeably.
- ² I am directly paraphrasing here Margaret Bruchac's remarks at the Council for Museum Anthropology conference in 2019. Bruchac's work has been instrumental to my own thinking about the importance of museum archives generally, and the Penn Museum archives specifically.
- ³ In the past, I have been reluctant to embrace the term "decolonizing the museum" as a descriptor for my own work for several reasons. First, the term's rampant overuse in the academy and elsewhere threatens to reduce it to an empty slogan. This broad popularity of the call to "decolonize" institutions also risks erasing the legal specificities of Indigenous struggles over land and cultural property. Nonetheless, it is useful to think about what makes this moment in museum anthropology unique as we embrace decolonial or anticolonial work in productive ways. The overarching "decolonization" discourse offers both hermeneutic and pedagogical strategies to decentering White supremacy in historical narratives and some practical applications of decentering Eurocentric knowledge.
- ⁴ Postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe emphasizes the need to challenge Eurocentric narratives and power structures that shape archival practices (Mbembe, n.d.). Verne Harris advocates for decolonizing archival practices with a shift from neutrality to accountability; by acknowledging the biases and power dynamics that shape the archive, the field can actively work toward more inclusive and just archival practices (Harris, 2007). Stacie Williams explores the decolonization of archives through a critical race and social justice lens, emphasizing the importance of community engagement, reparative practices, and the recognition of the archive's role in shaping collective memory (Farmer et al., 2022).
- ⁵ Decolonizing the Archive has also suggested new archival research methodologies, with very real implication for decentering Eurocentrism in the archive. First and foremost is the call to fill the gaps in archives with new knowledges informed by non-Western voices and histories. This is exemplified in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021), as well as Michelle Caswell and Ricardo Punzalan's research (Punzalan & Caswell, 2016), which focuses on the intersection of archives, social justice, and human rights. They argue that archives can perpetuate systems of oppression while calling for a radical reimagining of archival practices that center marginalized communities and challenge dominant narratives.
- ⁶ The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology has a rich history of collecting and preserving archives related to its research, expeditions, and collections. The museum was founded in 1887 and since its inception, it has conducted numerous archeological excavations and anthropological research projects around the world. As a result, it has accumulated a vast amount of archival material documenting these activities. The Penn Museum archives consist of a wide range of materials, including field notes, photographs, maps, drawings, correspondence, excavation records, and personal papers of staff, scholars, and researchers. These archives provide valuable insights into the museum's involvement in archeological and anthropological research, as well as the history of specific expeditions and excavations. The Penn Museum African Archives refer to the extensive collection of field notebooks, maps, photographs, and other materials that document archeological expeditions and ethnographic research conducted in Africa. While the majority of "African" archives pertain to Egypt (and Egypt is not classified as Africa), the archives contain a wealth of information about various African cultures, history, and traditions. The

archives aim to provide some context on the large collection of African objects at the Penn Museum, including objects such as sculptures, textiles, pottery, masks, and much more. Within the Penn Museum archives is the University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives (UPMA). This collection contains administrative records, institutional documents, and correspondence related to the museum's operations and activities. It provides a comprehensive overview of the museum's history, development, and growth over the years. And it is in these collections that one can gain purchase/ascertain the value, intellectually and financially, of the sub-Saharan African collections at the museum—again a content area that received less attention than the more famed/notable aspects of the Penn Museum collections, such as Egypt and the Middle and Near East.

- ⁷ This archival research would not be possible without the support of Bryn Mawr College students Maeve White and Lara Fields; Isabella Nugent's contributions to this essay have been especially valuable.
- ⁸ "Gentleman adventurer" refers to the men and women of a certain wealth, education and privilege to undertake these African explorations (Herbert, 1999).
- ⁹ This investigation into Amandus Johnson (and particularly this photo) is informed by nearly a half century of scholarship on constructions of Africa in anthropology and on African peoples as objects of display, including Coombes, 1994; Ewen & Ewen, 2006; Geary & Plustoka, 2002; González, 2008; Jahoda, 1999; Lindfors, 1999; Pieterse, 1992.

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