THE SURFACE OF THINGS: A HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE SWAHILI COAST

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7:30-9:30pm
DML 241

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Photography, especially studio portraiture, became instantly popular on the Swahili coast of eastern African and by the 1880s residents of such port cities as Mombasa and Zanzibar avidly collected and commissioned photographs of locals and distant others. Although photography was used as a medium for the performance of selfhood later on, during its early history it was about murkier, even intractable meanings. Rather than focus on its realist abilities, its role as a picture of a person’s life, I foreground its qualities as an object, showing how photographs worked as relational things colliding with other things—such as bodies, commodities, and heirlooms in the mercantile world of the Swahili coast. From this perspective it becomes apparent that photographic portraits, although seemingly about the sitter’s desire to express some essential aspect of his or her being, was often about quite the opposite. Namely, it is about the ornamental and the desire to hold onto bodies as things.

Photo credit: Ali bin Hamud and attendants, circa 1895. Collection of the Zanzibar National Archives

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