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Photographic Practices and the 'Aesthetics of Withdrawal' among Muslims of the East African Coast

Heike Behrend

In the last years, various image theories have connected images with the specific gesture of showing and attempted to reveal their deictic potential (for example, Seitter 2002: 206; Boehm 2015: 19ff). By producing images, painters or photographers give something to see. In fact, in a picture, the gesture of showing gains its strongest expression because the transitory act of showing is fixed and materialized in the image. Yet, what is shown with visual means implies a decision to also withhold something from showing. A picture not only enables one to see but also withdraws something from visibility. It may show the front side of a person but not his or her backside, for example. The act of showing in a picture thus implicates withdrawal, effacement, concealment or veiling. Against the concept of a primary transparency of the photographic image, in the following, I will focus more on its negative and opaque qualities. As I attempt to show, at different historical times and in diverse cultural milieus, the acts of showing and concealing in photographs receive different regulations, framings and institutional connections that determine the pictures' status, power and truth.

Along the cosmopolitan East African coast, since the 1980s and in particular after 9/11,¹ reformed Muslims, followers of Wahhabism originating from Saudi Arabia,² have increasingly questioned figurative representations. In fact, different and opposing attitudes towards images have gained a new religious-political importance and have become intensely debated and contested, perhaps more than ever before. In addition, Muslims have actualized a gendered concept of purity ('purdah') that centres on seclusion and concealment and has been extended to prohibit the circulation of pictures of women in the public domain. In strong opposition to the West – associated with immorality and decadence – interdictions and collective moral claims on female bodies to conform to a particular aesthetics of propriety and piety have translated into new strategies of concealment and the creation of new opacities in relation to photography. Yet, as suggested by Michel Foucault, interdictions do not necessarily only function in a repressive manner; they can also become extremely productive and unleash a creative potential through finding different ways of observing as well as undermining the interdiction.

In the following I will focus on what I have called 'aesthetics of withdrawal': the various ways and techniques that process the photographic act as well as the photographic image to theatricalize the surface of the image in new ways by veiling, masking and concealing (see Behrend 2013). My argument here is that a veiled person or an opaque surface also gives something to see by creating a secondary image of defacement, thereby challenging the simple binary opposition of creation and destruction, image making and image breaking, revealing and concealing. By focusing on contradictory aspects in processes of photographic mediation, I attempt to complicate the concept of (religious) mediation more than scholars have up to now.

The 'aesthetics of withdrawal' I will explore thus centres on the process or act of becoming visible in a particular form that, however, insists on (partial) concealment of, for example, the body or face of women and thereby creates a visible screen or 'outside', hiding and protecting the 'inside' from view. This concealment or withdrawal produces a strange surplus of energy or desire that is likely to be aroused from within the defaced object itself. As Michael Taussig (1999) suggests, this visual negativity of seeing what is not given to see that is inherent in the 'aesthetics of withdrawal' lies at the very heart of a vast range of social powers and different forms of knowledge.

It is important to clarify that making the 'aesthetics of withdrawal' the subject of this contribution is not an attempt to reinstate orientalism and the old opposition, taking the West as a pursuer of visibility, truth and enlightenment and the Orient (including the East African coast) as prone to secrecy and deception. As Walter Benjamin suggested, truth is not a matter of exposure which destroys the secret but a revelation that does justice to it. Following Michael Taussig (1999) again, I prefer to dissolve the opposition between truth and secret and join both, I understand one as enveloping the other, truth being a secret and secrets holding some truth.

For centuries, and in particular after the 1980s, Muslims of the East African coast have created a complex aesthetics that shows that something is NOT shown, that something is withdrawn from visibility. In the following, I attempt to unfold this 'aesthetics of withdrawal' in relation to two different media: textiles and photography.

The coast and its media

Africa is often seen as the continent of figurative icons, of masks, sculptures, bronze castings, and 'fetishes'; yet, as Jack Goody has suggested, there are large gaps in their distribution. There were and are regions where little or no figurative art was produced or only in restricted contexts (1997: 35). Sometimes people with rich sculptural traditions and those without lived as neighbours, had access to the same resources and on various levels were in intense contact with each other. Obviously, in certain historical contexts, some people may decide against certain images, maybe in more or less conscious opposition to those who do produce these representations (Kramer 2001). Thus, it is not only monotheistic religions that have rejected and problematized figurative images and the representability of god; some polytheistic religions have also preferred the absence of figurative representations (Goody 1997: 56ff).

It seems that the East African coast was such an area where even in pre-Islamic times we have no evidence of a strong pictorial tradition. And when Islam started to spread along the coast in the eighth century, the above-mentioned (assumed) absence of figurative representations may have matched well with Islam's attitude towards images. While in other parts of Africa the process of Islamization was inimical to African artistry and material culture because Islam (like Protestant Christianity) could and would not tolerate 'idols' and other figurative representations, it seems highly probable that along the East African coast Islam established itself without iconoclastic acts and without radical rupture, this even more so because Muslims' hostility towards and refusal of figurative images seems to be a later development that may have begun when confronted with Christian (colonial) politics of images.

Ludwig Krapf, the first CMS missionary to evangelize the coastal people, mentioned the absence of 'idolatry' in his diary (15 December 1848). In fact, the material culture that archaeologists have found, such as ceramics, glass and porcelain, locally produced as well as imported from China, India, Persia and Arabia, seems to have followed the aniconic tradition. And coins, most of them probably minted on the coast, were all non-figural and, with their inscriptions in the Arabic language, can be classified as Islamic (Brown 1993).

While (probably) the production of figurative images (on material support) did not take place along the coast, there existed another tradition of visualization that centred on the production of inner images which were given expression in performances of spirit possession. Alien spirits embodied themselves as 'living images' in their mediums during possession rituals. In performative visualizations of spirit possession, 'living images' of strangers were (and still are) communicated in institutionalized forms. In fact, the absence or marginalization of visual media such as sculpture or figurative painting coincided with complex imaginative practices that centred on embodiment and in the context of spirit possession rituals were externalized so that they could be shared by other people (Kramer 2001).

Beside rituals of spirit possession, the media of scripture and textiles preceded the medium of photography and intensively shaped the visual economies of recording and processing of visibility, performance, social status and meaning in photographs (Behrend 2013).

Textiles, veils and (in)visibilities in the nineteenth century

In the nineteenth century along the cosmopolitan East African coast, a visual regime dominated that expressed origin and descent, social class and status through the quality and social value of (imported) textiles and by the amount of clothing a person used to cover his or her body. Class and status, as well as sexual difference, manifested themselves within the field of vision by withdrawing, in particular, women from visibility in the public domain. Respectable femininity demanded the veil as a kind of shield against the gaze of unrelated men in public spaces. While slaves went 'naked' and wore only the slightest of clothes usually made of the rudest and cheapest material, Omani aristocrats were distinguished by their sophisticated headdress and

silk cloth. High-ranking women who were privileged to stay in seclusion would cover their whole bodies in public, including their faces, behind masks, veils and portable walls, so-called *shiraa*, carried by slaves and later forbidden by the British (Middleton 1992: 150; Figure 10.1a).

A complex technology of veiling and concealing was made available for extending women's physical seclusion outside their homes. Veils in these different forms were movable, flexible and unstable; as *shiraa*, the wall-like textiles would hide a woman completely while the other forms of veil could take the shape of what they covered, remaining suggestive of what they were hiding (Figure 10.1b).

It is important to note that men also had to cover their bodies in decent ways. The (general) dress code was inverted during times of mourning. In particular, after a chief's death, when his turban and his umbrella – both imported commodities that served as signs of chiefly authority – were buried with his body, all mourners went bareheaded, including women, and sometimes all the men would shave their heads in order to display an even more radical 'nakedness'. Again, the social hierarchy was expressed in the amount of clothing men were allowed to wear during the mourning period. While important chiefs removed only their coats and wore the *kanzu*, holders of lesser rank were not allowed to wear the *kanzu*, and untitled youths and male slaves were required to bare their chests, wearing only loincloths or *kikoi*. The social ranking was again revealed by the order in which men were allowed to resume wearing their clothes when the mourning period was over (Glassman 1995: 157). Thus, a complex dress code existed that, by the various degrees of (un)covering the head and the body, served to mark gender, inequality, liminality and differences in social status.

After the abolition of slavery, covering their heads and bodies was one of the first ways men and women of slave origin could show their 'freedom' and new status (Fair 1998: 93). When around the 1930s the *buibui*, a loose black garment that covered the entire body except for face, hands and feet, was introduced, it was quickly adopted by women of the lower classes and of slave origin to show their respectability, their adherence to Islam, and their modesty (ibid.: 82f).

It is important to note that also a veiled person gives something to see by creating a secondary image of defacement. In fact, the veil makes invisibility very visible; it makes an overt and visual point out of concealment, in the process transforming the private, individual women into her public representation of a more general kind (Dudley 2011: 65). The visual power of the veil seems to be rooted in this tension between invisibility and visibility and its intimate relationship with the body. As mentioned before, the visible screen that is provided by the veil, hiding and protecting the 'inside' from view, produces a strange surplus of desire.

Kusitiri, a Swahili term that can be translated as 'concealment', has been identified by David Parkin as a 'root metaphor', serving as an affective base for social action (Parkin 1995: 212). In fact, *kusitiri* implies not only the decent concealment of head and body of women and men with textiles, but also the control of the body, its movement, gestures and affective expression, including speech and, in particular, the art of concealing in poetry. They follow what I have called 'aesthetics of withdrawal': they give something to see (or to hear) in a specific form that insists on (partial) concealment, on withdrawal from visibility.

Figure 10.1a Women carrying *shiraa*, around 1900. © Collection Heike Behrend.

Figure 10.1b Woman with face mask. Unknown photographer, Zanzibar, 1905 (Winterton Collection).

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the veil was disappearing in most towns along the coast when unveiling went along with aspirations for independence and modernity. Yet, as mentioned before, with the Islamic revival and its attempts to Islamize also public spaces, the veil and new Islamic clothing strongly reappeared not only to mark (female) Muslim presence but also to erase social and economic differences between wearers. The new Islamic dress imbued women with a kind of moral and religious authority that would discourage harassment and allowed them to enter public spaces confidently (cf Ahmed 2011: 87).

The introduction of photography

While the various means of veiling seem to have been able to protect, in particular, women, from being seen (and heard) by others (unrelated men), with the introduction of technical media, such as photography and video, the existing boundaries between public and private became intensely disturbed. As the proliferation of mass media has strongly foregrounded public visibility, it demanded new strategies for the protection of what should not be given to see.

Around 1860, when Indian (Christian) photographers from Goa and Christian photographers from Europe reached the coast and built up the first commercial photo studios, the above-mentioned local visual regime that shows that something is not shown, was confronted with photography, a highly inclusive medium that always gives something more to see. Before the introduction of photography there existed only a very restricted repertoire of portraiture (for example, in spirit possession rituals) and only the sultans had their portrait painted (Figure 10.2).

Common people were not celebrated in images but remembered in their names and in written or spoken poetry only. Thus, with the introduction of photographic portraiture a radical new field was opened up that had to gain acceptance against Islamic aniconism and a strongly gendered visual regime that sought to conceal (free) women's bodies and faces in the public domain. Yet, in spite of strong resistance at the beginning, Muslims too appropriated the new medium and inserted it into various domains of life, in particular rites of passage and festivities, albeit not uncontested (Behrend 2012). Indeed, portrait photography became a new technique of the self for Muslims.

Debating the medium of photography

As already mentioned, since the 1980s, within the context of a new Islamic revival, pious Muslim men and women have increasingly attempted to control and reduce the visibility of women in the public domain.³ Since 1988 in Nairobi and since the 1990s in Mombasa, new Islamic schools called *mahad* were established especially for women to teach them what is *haram* (forbidden) and what is *halal* (allowed). In these schools, the visibility of women in photographs and other visual media was problematized and discussed. What used to be a theological debate among scholars has become increasingly popularized nowadays. In fact, interactions and oppositions between

Figure 10.2 Sultan Sayyid Said, Fort Jesus, Mombasa. © Collection Heike Behrend.

different Islamic traditions as well as interactions with the (Christian) 'West' created a more intense awareness of the ways images (of women) intruded into everyday life, opening up various debates on the 'Islamic interdiction of figurative images' in relation to visual media.

Among Muslims in Lamu the prohibition to represent human beings and animals was widely accepted; however, the reasons given varied considerably. I met some Islamic scholars who resented photographic portraits because they feared image worship – especially when the picture was hung on a wall – and saw Islamic monotheism endangered, but they accepted video because of its fleeting images that would not allow idolatry. For example, Sharif Said Hassan of Lamu, who kindly gave me an interview in October 1996, narrated the well-known story of the Prophet Muhammad, who wanted to visit a house where a picture was hanging on the wall. When he saw the picture he refused to enter. Sharif Said Hassan explained that especially photographs of dead relatives, of ancestors, encourage idol worship, which the Prophet forbade. Their representation, he said, poses a threat to monotheism.

In contrast, other Muslims claimed that photography as a picture medium should not be prohibited because it does not create what it depicts but only reproduces or represents what is already there and therefore photographers do not violate God's singular capacity of creation. Another scholar argued that only three-dimensional things can become objects of idol worship, while two-dimensional pictures of human beings or animals – because they have lost already their life-like quality – such as photographs cannot. Again, other scholars maintained that the photographic picture is already life-less; as photography freezes and immobilizes all it captures, inherent in it is an iconoclastic gesture. As vitality is already annihilated in the photographic image it cannot be considered as imitating God's creation.

In addition, in the context of the Islamic revival, *pardah* – the ideal of (gendered) modesty, purity and seclusion, that does not allow women to expose themselves in public – has been redefined to include photographs of women as well as videos, tape recordings and paintings. Pious Muslims have drawn attention to the complementary effects of unveiling and women's exposure in photographs and videos, both violating *pardah*. This is why photographs of Muslim women have disappeared completely from public spaces in Mombasa's Old Town and Lamu. In addition, in the private domain of many homes, photographs of (male and female) relatives or friends have been removed from the sitting room and either put up in the more private domain of the bedroom or stored in albums. However, I heard of only one case in which a pious woman destroyed all her photographs in order to comply with Islam's aniconism. The other women I talked to kept their photographs – more or less hidden – in albums or boxes in order to control access to them.

It is not only that photographs may reveal women's faces and bodies to unrelated men, it is also the quality of photography as a mass medium that poses special problems. When a photographer takes a picture of women dancing at a wedding, for example, he or she can produce many copies and publish them so that they may appear at a distance in time, space and context from the original event. Photographs can be displayed in contexts beyond the control of the photographed women, and this poses complex and worrying problems. In fact, since 2007, with the appropriation of digital camera phones on a mass scale, these predicaments have become ever more vexing (see Behrend 2013: 241ff).

Thus, there existed a multitude of competing voices accepting or questioning photographic portraits, covering a spectrum that at one extreme totally refused photographic portraits and at the other included more pragmatic attitudes that allowed the production of photographs in a controlled way.

Photography as unveiling

In the late 1940s, the colonial state in Kenya started to demand photographs – cropped, frontal headshots – for I.D. cards to better identify and control its subjects (Brielmaier 2003: 131). If somebody wanted to travel, open a bank account or get a driver's licence, an I.D. picture was needed. Especially in the rural areas, capturing the face for an I.D. was often the first encounter with photography as a gesture of subjection by the (colonial) state (Werner 2001).

Although identity photography is a global genre it has nevertheless accumulated resonances and nuances specific to the East African coast. Here Muslim women's veils formed an obstacle to the sight of the colonial government and its cameras. Veiled women reinforced the impression of inaccessibility. The veil discouraged the colonial photographer's scopic desire and intimated more or less clearly a refusal. Veiling and, in particular, veiling the face, was considered equivalent to resistance. And just as, for Christians and Westerners, the face marked the identity of a person, the veil was not only (mis)understood as a symbol of the oppressed status of women but also as a potentially subversive attempt to hide one's identity. Thus, the veil had to fall and faces, including those of women, had to offer themselves to the bold cameras of the photographers working for the state.

Along the Islamic East African coast, especially Muslims experienced the imposition of I.D. photography as a violent act and as humiliating. In colonial as well as postcolonial times, the central government in Kenya lay in the hands of Christians; so measures were interpreted as deliberate infringements of Islam's 'interdiction of figurative representations' and as anti-Muslim. I was told many stories about resistance to photography, particularly by pious Muslim women who wanted to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca and therefore needed a passport. I was told about Fatma, the daughter of Sheik Habib Saleh (1844–1935), the reformer and founder of the Riyadhha Mosque in Lamu. She also needed a passport photograph to go to Mecca. As a woman, she was anxious about unveiling her face to the photographer, because she would thereby violate not only the interdiction of figurative representation, but also *purdah*, women's purity and modesty, that is associated with their (partial) invisibility in the public domain. This is why she burned the photograph after her pilgrimage; but fortunately, as her granddaughter Muzna Ahmed told me, the negative was saved. It was enlarged in the Bakor Studio and her descendants are happy to be able to remember her in the photograph. Photographs originally produced within the repressive colonial relationship could thus assume new purposes and meanings representing highly treasured ancestors who provided a connection between the past and the present. In this narrative, the highly ambivalent attitude towards photographic portraits produced by the state is displayed. While descendants may cherish the reworked photographs of their ancestors in new framings, they nevertheless stress in their narratives that the preservation of the pictures was not intended by the persons photographed but happened more or less accidentally.

Muslim women, in particular, associated I.D. photographs not only with foreignness, Christianity and colonization but with the act of forcefully unveiling their face and thereby violating conventions of piety and modesty. Thus, I.D. photography gained among pious (reformed) Muslims a negative connotation. The boundaries and divides such as inside/outside, private/public, female/male and inclusion/exclusion that are created by the veil were troubled and disturbed by photography. In fact, photographs were conceived as the opposite of the veil because the camera intruded into a domain conceived as private and because the camera recorded an 'excess' of visible details and surfaces that could not be controlled. The mobile medium also provoked anxieties about the easy reproduction, mobility and circulation of portraits of women among, in particular, (unrelated) men who were not supposed to see them. While veils were used

to cover and conceal women's bodies and faces, photographs revealed what should have remained concealed. In the urban milieu of Mombasa and Lamu where the influence of reformed Islam (Wahhabism) is especially strong, sharp tensions arose between the global medium of photography that 'unveils' and always gives something 'more' to see, and local understandings of the appropriate use of women's visibility and led to various attempts to withdraw women from visibility and create new opacities.

Obviously, because the colonial and postcolonial government's visual politics was bent on unveiling Islamic women through photographs, it actualized and reinforced what now is seen as an essential part of local tradition, culture and religion, the veil, *pardah*, and the 'interdiction of figurative images'. When Muslim women today critically associate photography and unveiling, they refer to their experiences of forceful unveiling in front of a photographer working for the postcolonial administration and a state that insists on a visual regime of transparency.

Yet, there were also other voices. A female Islamic scholar and midwife, Asya Sunkar Salim, held in a conversation in September 2007 that, since there is no mention in the Qur'an of photographs, the Prophet did not say that photographs should not be taken. For her, photographs of women were, first and foremost, a question of modesty. As long as the photographed women cover their body according to Islamic rules, she had no objections to photographs. For her, the degree of exposure was at issue rather than the portrayal itself. She showed me her I.D. card that depicted her in passport format with her veil (*hijab*), her face not hidden. She said that nothing was wrong with photographs that enabled you to go on a *hadj* to Mecca, the pilgrimage being one of the five pillars of Islam. She saw no humiliation in being photographed and in exposing her face because in Islam, so she said, the face of women is not hidden. However, when praying in a room with photographic portraits on display, she saw the danger of distraction and usually turned the pictures to the wall to better concentrate on her prayers.

The Bakor Studio and the ornamentalization of photographs

The Bakor Studio in Lamu, situated on one of the main streets of the Old Town, was established in the 1960s (Wendl and Behrend 1998: 118ff). The founder, Omar Said Bakor, born in 1932, was a self-made man and brilliant *bricoleur*, who never went to school. His family originated in Yemen. Before opening the studio, he worked for ten years as a street photographer. He died in 1993, and his sons continued to work in his studio until recently. Bakor created a unique tradition of photo collages that I will take as examples of the 'aesthetics of withdrawal' and as an attempt to reconcile photographic portraits with local cultural and religious values, especially the 'Islamic prohibition of figurative representations' that mediated the ways through which photography has been transformed and accepted.

While rejecting figurative representations, Islamic arts have been described as favouring and concentrating on the ornament. Vegetable and geometrical ornaments are used to embellish the walls of buildings and the surfaces of objects. Highly complex mathematics, especially geometry, provided the basis for the calculations necessary

for this purpose. Geometry represented not only decoration or technical skills, but also cosmological laws. And the ornament was not only decoration but – sometimes – became semantically loaded and a medium of messages (Belting 2008: 127f). In Islamic arts, many motifs and even inscriptions were ornamentalized. Ornaments were permanently transposed from one medium into another, for example, from textiles and rugs to plaster walls or wooden doors and vice versa (Grabar 1977: 236, 265). Although ornaments decorate and beautify surfaces, they also produce some sort of shutter or veil that conceals the objects and buildings they cover and thereby open up questions about the relationship between the visible and the invisible.

It was Bakor who started to ornamentalize photographic portraits. By integrating photographic portraits into floral ornaments, Bakor's collages connected to the existing local aniconic art forms of ornamental wood carvings, plasterwork in local architecture and embroidery. He transposed ornamentalization into photography, thereby giving proof of the tendency inherent in Islamic art to ornamentalize whatever comes into its realm (Figure 10.3a,b). On the East African coast, floral motifs like *waridi*, rose, or leaves of various plants like *kulabu* form well-established, named patterns, some of which are widely used in textiles, on plasterwork, wood carvings, and, of course, Bakor's photomontages.

By integrating photographic portraits in ornaments, the portraits become part of surface decoration and are combined with more general principles of Islamic aesthetics – for example, the anti-naturalistic tendency verging on abstraction, consisting in making the relationship between forms more important than the forms themselves. In this way, the surface decoration averts the viewer's risk from becoming absorbed by the photographic portrait and in this way serves as an obstacle to

Figure 10.3a, b Bakor Studio, Lamu, c. 1970. © Collection Heike Behrend.

image worship. Thus, the ornamentalization can be seen as an attempt to reduce the importance of the photographic portrait in deference to the actualized preference for aniconism along the Islamic coast. Although the artist is not allowed to imitate God's creation, through ornaments he or she gains the freedom to experiment with various parts of God's world in their abstraction and to recombine them into new ensembles. Indeed, fragmentation and recombination of the surface conjoins decorative practice with a mediation of the photographed portrait that does not stand for itself but acts as a 'relay' or point of connection with other more abstract entities.

Iconoclastic icons

Bakor produced his collages by cutting images into pieces, especially by severing the heads of the depicted persons from their bodies and transferring them into other contexts: to montage the heads into ornaments, for example. The act of cutting, and even more so of decapitation, is deeply iconoclastic. In Islamic arts, images depicting persons or animals without heads or bodies lose the status of an image and are no longer forbidden. Artists thus make clear that they are not attempting to rival God by creating human beings.

Thus, the playful way of dealing with severed heads in Bakor's collages may be seen as an attempt to observe Islam's aniconism. By inserting an iconoclastic gesture into his collages, the portraits he produced lost their status as images. In fact, some of Bakor's

Figure 10.4 Bakor Studio, Lamu, c. 1970. © Collection Heike Behrend.

collages could be seen as 'icons as iconoclash' (Koerner 2002), icons that are made and at the same time break images. Iconoclash and icon, two mutually incompatible absolutes, become deeply engaged with each other (ibid.: 166). While on the one hand, the imposed ban on the representation of living beings seems to have inspired Bakor to evermore effective inducements to captivation by visual artifice, on the other hand, in a subversive way, he also reinstated aniconism by producing 'iconoclastic icons'. Through his collages he succeeded in acknowledging the 'interdiction of figurative images' while at the same time undermining it.