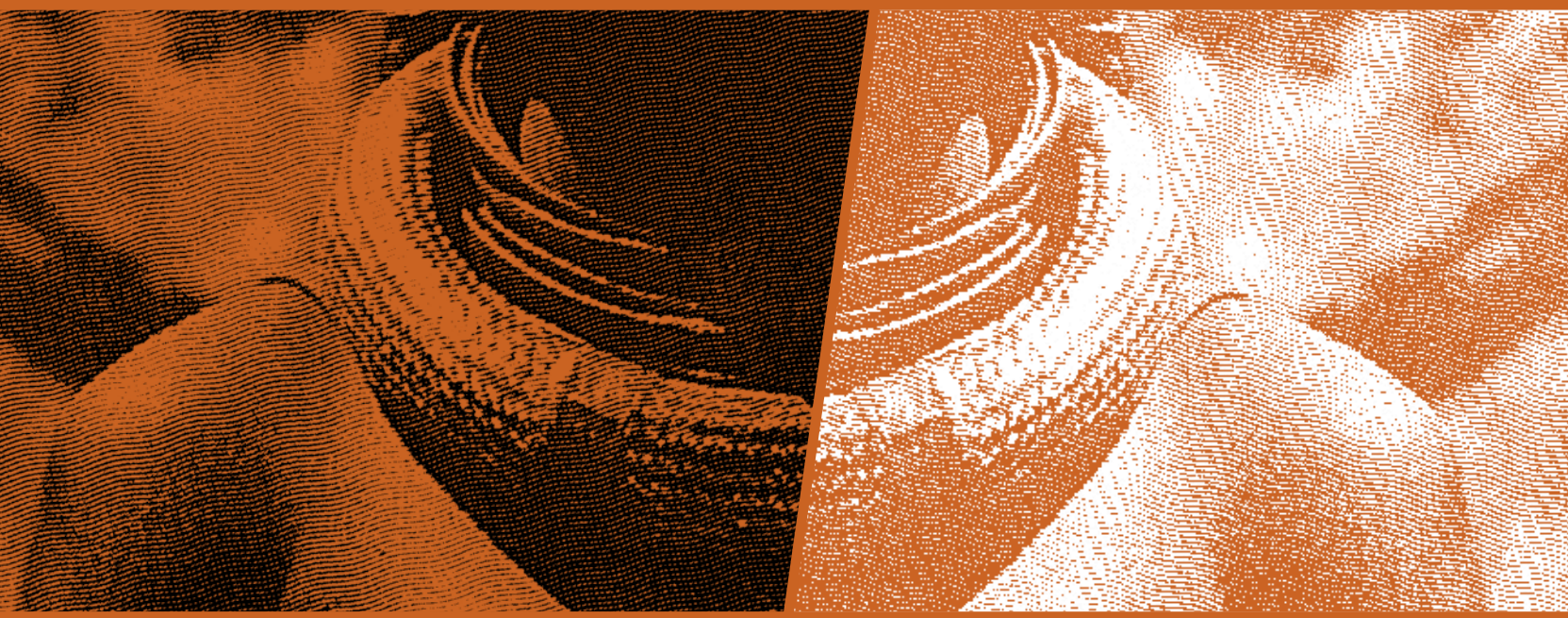

Jeanne van Eeden

Starring the Himba: Postcards and Touristic Representation

BIOGRAPHY

Professor Jeanne van Eeden has been Head of the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Pretoria since 2007. Her research interests lie in issues of gender, spatiality and post-colonialism and how these are manifest in the production of contemporary visual discourses such as tourism images. She is the co-editor of the book *South Africa Visual Culture* (2005); she has contributed to British, American, German and South African books and is a regular participant in national and international conferences. She has published articles in journals such as the *Feminist Journal of Politics, Design Issues, Historia, Image & Text*, *Communicatio* and *De Arte*. She is currently working on postcards and the creation of identities in Southern Africa.

Selecting postcards is one of those seemingly innocent acts that has become fraught with ideological risks. Cynthia Enloe (1989:19)

→ **In this paper,** I discuss a recent postcard from Namibia that depicts a Himba woman whose naked nipples are concealed by two yellow stars; the accompanying text on the picture reads: 'Himba goes to Hollywood'. Postcards are a cheap, accessible and popular form of pictorial discourse that are an important part of the visual culture of tourism. I illustrate how this postcard is embedded in the signifying practices and 'circuit of culture' that both constitutes and reflects the discourses of power, identity and representation. In order to unpack some of the relevant issues, I investigate the genre of ethnographic postcards in terms of the politics of representation in relation to ethnicity and gender. Both ethnicity and gender have been important markers of difference in colonialism and tourism and have been determinants in the power relations between the west and its so-called 'other'.

I start by sketching the alignment between colonialism and tourism and suggest that they are equally complicit in sustaining asymmetrical power relations by means of the manner in which identities are represented. Thereafter the key issues with regard to travel photography and postcards are investigated. I show that familiar stereotypes and codes are enlisted to position the Himba woman on the postcard as exotic, 'primitive' and 'other'. The creator of the postcard states that owing to the influence of tourism, the Himba people themselves have started to adopt other positions

with regard to nudity, hence the reference to Hollywood. In the paper, I thus deal with various forms of exploitation and question the possibility of auto-ethnographic imagery that breaks with idealised, derogatory, uncomplimentary or offensive forms of cultural representation generated by those operating from a position of power.

Introduction

In this paper, I consider Cynthia Enloe's (1989:19) opinion that the apparently innocent act of selecting postcards has "become fraught with ideological risks" in relation to a recent Namibian postcard that depicts an indigenous Himba woman[1] (Fig. 1). What makes this image different from countless similar images is the fact that the woman's naked nipples are concealed by two strategically placed yellow stars and the text on the picture states: 'Himba goes to Hollywood'. Postcards are culturally produced texts and are therefore embedded in the signifying practices and 'circuit of culture' that both constitute and reflect the discourses of power, identity and representation (see Hall 1997a:1). For the purposes of this paper, the pertinent issues I address include the genre of ethnographic postcards and the politics of representation in relation to gender, race and ethnicity. The term ethnicity is generally still used in the discourse of tourism to designate non-western people (Morgan & Pritchard 1998:212) and to allude to (minority) groups in a country that have a "significant degree of separate ethnic, cultural or social identity ... [that] 'marks' them as sights or attractions of ethnic or cultural tourism" (Cohen 1993:37). This use of the word ethnicity veers towards an essentialist definition of identity that is fixed, immutable and natural. This is, of course, contrary to constructivist notions of identity formation and signals an important ideological underpinning that informs a good deal of tourism material. Similarly, gender has persistently been a determinant in the power relations between the west and its so-called 'other' (Morgan & Pritchard 1998:167), not only in colonialism but also in the practices of tourism. The ubiquitous and mass-produced nature of postcards means that they have become implicated in the reproduction of the gendered gaze (Pritchard & Morgan 2005:57). In this paper, the way in which humour adds to the gendered gaze informs my investigation.

My research can be located within a post-colonial perspective because it deals with the legacies of colonialism in western ideologies of domination that continue to inflect contemporary tourism and the manner in which it refracts the identity of others through fantasy images. I interrogate a postcard here to illustrate how discourse analysis can be used to situate cultural meanings within the broader historical and social contexts in order to reveal the dynamics of power. This type of discourse analysis is concerned with interpreting cultural production on three levels: the image itself, its symbolic representation and its historical, geographical and cultural context (Ateljevic & Doorne 2002:652).

This paper is primarily exploratory; because of space limitations I do not analyse a broad range of postcards of the Himba but rather focus on this specific postcard as an example of a discursive visual tradition that was (and still is) used to generate and sustain difference. An examination of tourism postcards sold in Namibia and South Africa reveals that the depiction of indigenous women is a very popular topic. The majority of these postcards represent women in a predictable manner that objectifies them and their exotic otherness; this particular postcard is selected for discussion precisely because it is different, but ultimately, I believe, the same. My aim is not to uncover the 'true meaning' of the postcard, but rather to offer a short critical engagement with its context and subject matter. I start with an overview of the points of contact between colonialism, tourism and visual culture and then briefly contextualise the Himba in relation to how they have been represented, specifically within the tourism industry. Thereafter, I discuss the postcard to show how it can be read as an example of a gendered and raced text that is typical of the tourism market.

Colonialism, tourism and visual culture

Many critics have remarked that the language of empire and tourism are similar (see Caton & Santos 2008:10) in that the politics of superiority and domination that emanated from colonialism resonate in the rituals, gestures and language of tourism. Indeed, the colonial project of the nineteenth century was reinforced by tourism and disciplines such as anthropology and cartography that expressed a set of dominant values related to class, race, gender, sexuality

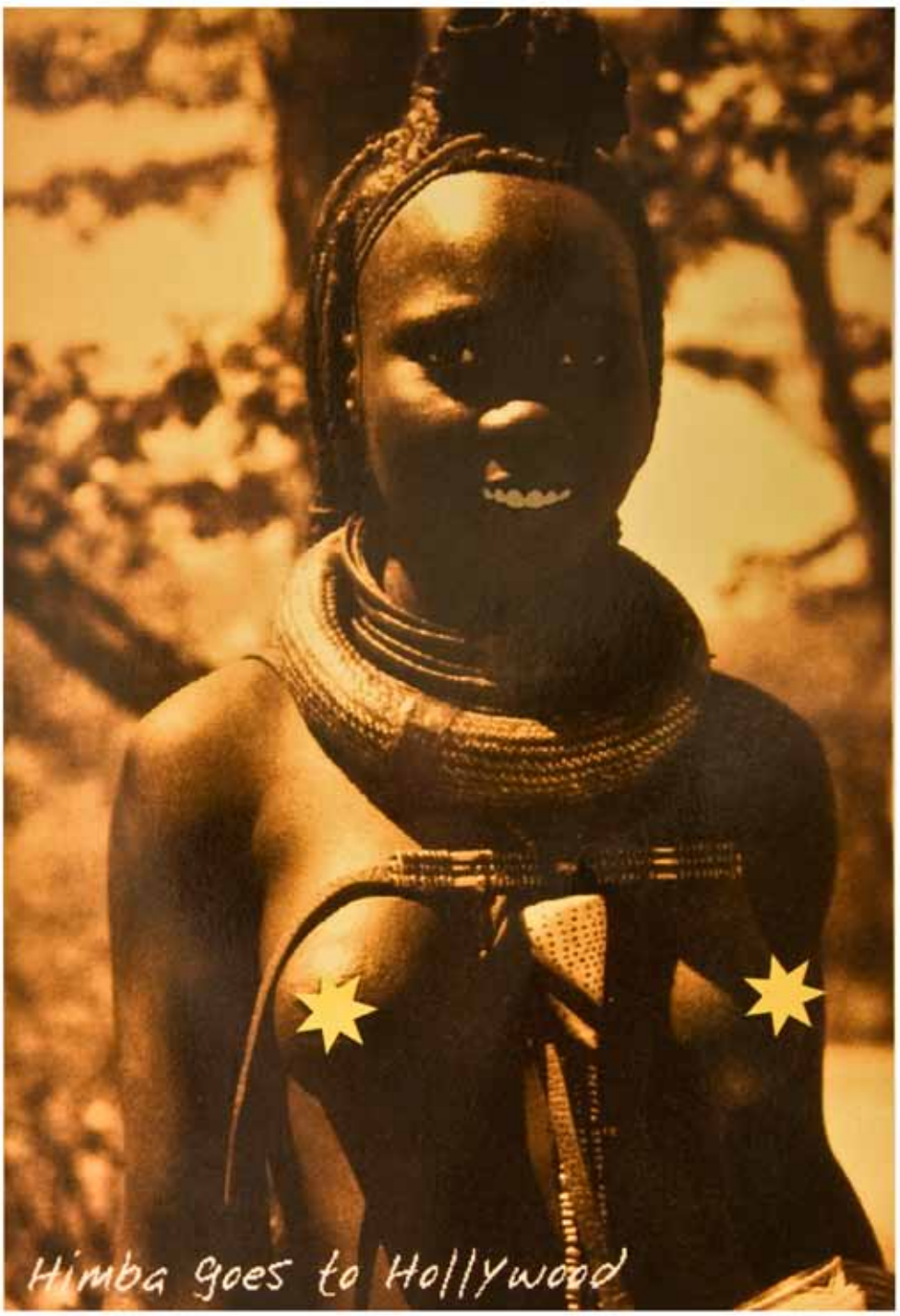

Fig 1: Weir, A. 'Himba goes to Hollywood', ca 2008. Courtesy of Andre Weir.

and ethnicity, constituting Donna Haraway's (cited in Blunt & Rose 1994:3) 'master subject' that still underpins the tourist gaze. During the nineteenth century, colonialism and tourism rationalised hegemonic and essentialist opinions about other cultures that were classified as irredeemably different, exotic, wild, primitive, sensual, static, uncivilised, servile and inferior. The colonial legacies of travel, discovery, adventure and exploitation are reproduced in the neo-colonialist structures and mechanisms of tourism and sustain global imbalances of wealth and power (Ateljevic & Doorne 2002:652, 658, 662; Caton & Santos 2008:10). As theorised by John Urry (2002), tourism invests (western) people with an empowered and othering gaze that reads other cultures "through the fictions of the picturesque, the exotic and the primitive" (Pollock 1992:60). Dean MacCannell (1976) maintains that contemporary tourism is a search for authenticity, unspoilt nature and people, pristine landscapes and the exotic and primitive that are absent in the tourist's own world – what is significant is that this desire is frequently aligned with an imperialist nostalgia that is used to market touristic experience (Bruner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994:435).[2]

The tourism industry's ability to evoke imperialist nostalgia or other related incentives for travel is embedded in its reliance on the visual objects of tourism such as photographs, advertising images and postcards that frequently "replicate colonial forms of discourse" (Echtner & Prasad 2003:662). Particularly in formerly colonised areas of the world, established codes and representations of tourist destinations predominate in promotional items such as postcards (Caton & Santos 2008:8). Tourists respond to the images of the destinations they are about to visit that are already in cultural circulation and hence visual culture has the power to construct the ideas and desires of tourists (Crouch & Lübbren 2003:4, 6). Tourism imagery functions in a hermeneutic circle that creates expectations that are confirmed by tourists' own perceptions and are reinforced by the types of postcards they buy or photographs they take (Caton & Santos 2008:8; Morgan & Pritchard 1998:5, 27). Tourism imagery is therefore ideological because it naturalises and legitimates the values of the dominant system and both constructs and reflects a specific mode of envisioning racialised and gendered identities.

The mutually beneficial relationship between colonialism and tourism in the nineteenth century was aided by the invention of photography, which captured and retained images of the exotic and spectacularised 'other'. Postcards originated in the 1870s, and although pictures were only added in 1889, they were immediately embraced by colonialists; according to Enloe (1989:42),

> **[c]olonial administrators, soldiers, settlers and tourists were looking for ways to send home images of the societies they were ruling, images that were appealing and yet made it clear that these alien societies needed the civilizing government only whites could bestow.**

As postcards have a long shelf life, there is often very little difference between historical and more contemporary images, and some are deliberately nostalgic in style (Edwards 1996:204-205); this is exemplified by the sepia-like tones of the Himba postcard under discussion.

In their seminal text on travel photography, PC Albers and WR James (1988:150-151) point out that the critical questions that need to be asked about tourist imagery include how it is produced, in whose interests, and for what purpose. Semiotic analyses[3] of the manner in which ethnic subjects are portrayed in postcards can reveal symbolic, ideological and contextual meanings that are encoded in the types of motifs and visual codes that are deployed (Albers & James 1988:138, 145). Most ethnographic postcards focus on the depiction of metaphorical cultural markers such as dancing, hunting, body painting or ritual to signify the 'other', primitivism, authenticity, tradition or the untouched, or they focus on images of everyday life that are exoticised and essentialised (Edwards 1996:209).

The ideological battle regarding the ethics and politics of touristic representation is fraught with complications and vexing issues. Eric Cohen (1993:40) comes to the conclusion that indigenous people rarely represent themselves, are predominantly represented by others, but hardly ever represent others. Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to state that indigenous people have no agency – many postcards produced in more recent times are indeed self-representational or produced by the culture itself and are thus auto-ethnographic (Pritchard & Morgan 2003:2). More pertinent is whether auto-ethnographic images perpetuate exotic self-representation in response to tourist demand by attempting to conform to tourist expectations (Edwards 1996:198; Albers & James 1988:137). Whilst it is certainly true that the objects of the tourist gaze often collude in their own objectification because of consumer demands, it is also possible to resist, negotiate or exploit the production of representations (Cohen 1993:37; Morgan & Pritchard 1998:223). Instead of then asking how Himba identity has been constructed by the tourist gaze (Kangumu 2000:132), it should be possible to argue for the construction of multiple or nuanced identities.

Locating the Himba

The population of Namibia is estimated at 1.8 million and comprises 11 ethnic groups and 15 languages, with English as

the main language of the tourism industry (Papen 2005:82). Black Africans constitute about 86 percent of the population; the Himba are part of the larger grouping of Herero and are nomadic cattle herders who live in northern Namibia in the Kunene region. The Himba have come to be identified by the characteristic manner in which they adorn their bodies with animal fat and ochre as protection against the sun. They have been labelled one of the last 'unspoilt' or pristine 'tribes' of Africa whose isolation from westerners during colonial times enabled them to keep their traditions and mode of dress (Pillinger 2001:1; Rademeyer 2000:2). In actual fact, however, many Himba are no longer nomads – they have modernised and live in cities in permanent homes, and the 'Himba' of touristic imagination generally only pose for photographs for a fee (Kangumu 2000:131; Botha 2008:27). The commercialisation of the Kunene by means of photography has made it one of Namibia's most popular tourist destinations, which has led to the objectification of the Himba for the tourist gaze (Miescher & Rizzo 2000:10; Kangumu 2000:130), as demonstrated in this paper.

Contemporary Namibia is largely the product of more than a hundred years of colonial rule, and a legacy of this state has been its photographic construction as a site of 'fantasy' about the so-called natives (Miescher & Rizzo 2000:11). Namibia was colonised by Germany in 1884 and the majority of Europeans who visited the territory thereafter were explorers, adventurers, missionaries and hunters. In 1915, during World War I, the German colony was conquered by South African military forces and, in 1920, the League of Nations granted South Africa mandate over the territory. During German colonial rule the region where the Himba lived was declared a reservation, and only when Namibia became independent from South Africa in 1990 did that area become a popular destination for international tourists (Rademeyer 2000:2). Tourism currently contributes significantly to the economy of Namibia and the majority of tourists come from South Africa, Germany, Europe and North America (Papen 2005:82).

Tourism in sub-Saharan Africa conventionally centres on the trope of the safari (Bruner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994:438), but because Namibia has fewer animals than its neighbours do, tourists have also been attracted by its culture, colonial history, isolation and rugged landscapes (Papen 2005:83; Salole 2007:208). Namibia's tourism industry not only features its "spectacular sand dunes, the world's oldest desert, Africa's oldest petroglyphs, [and] remarkable indigenous fauna and flora" (Salole 2007:207), but also focuses on ethno-tourism regarding ethnic groups and their traditions in 'authentic' Namibian homesteads (Papen 2005:80-84).

Representing the Himba

The role of photography in the development of a new mode of seeing that transformed areas of nature and other cultures into objects of the possessing western gaze have been well documented. The seemingly artless, unmediated and naturalistic representation of the exotic 'other' by means of photography led to the seamless incorporation of typical visual tropes from nineteenth century anthropology in contemporary postcards (Albers & James 1988:136; Edwards 1996:205). Photographs of Himba women were in fact quite rare during the German period, which tended to show groups of anonymous and inactive men or natural resources and the landscape (Miescher & Rizzo 2000:14-15, 18). Patricia Hayes (2000:59, 61) adds that photographs of the Himba in the 1920s emphasised their "raw tribal state" and that the colonial mastery of the area was expressed more compellingly through evocative photographs of the vast landscape. During the 1930s, photographs continued to show anonymous types, and women in 'traditional dress' came to stand for tradition, cultural continuity and primitive or 'native' beauty (Miescher & Rizzo 2000:20-21, 25).

The late 1940s to 1950s is mainly represented by so-called expedition discourse photography that recorded the exploits and adventures of male groups; at the same time, Himba women were photographed doing domestic chores and this predictably characterised the region as feminine (Miescher & Rizzo 2000:30-31, 34). This feminisation of the land is a typical strategy of colonialism and indicates a metaphorical gesture of domination that surfaces later in the rhetorical imagery used by tourism. One of the typical tropes that came to constitute the Himba was firmly established by the 1960s and consisted of photographs of a "single woman, portrayed in a 'traditional dress,' standing in front of the camera and looking at the photographer and at the observer" (Miescher & Rizzo 2000:15, 26). During the 1970s and 1980s, images of Himba women were used for advertisements to represent the notion of 'unspoilt natives', and in the next decade women were associated with overwhelming natural scenery, the private sphere, beauty and the body (Miescher & Rizzo 2000:36, 41). The compositional conjoining of a lone Himba woman with a dusty, arid background became the iconic signature by which the 'Himba' came to be represented. By 1990, pictures of the Himba were used by the tourism industry to signify Namibia (Miescher & Rizzo 2000:42).

Himba goes to Hollywood

The image on the 'Himba goes to Hollywood' postcard can be traced back to the context of colonial representations of the exotic 'other' that often disseminated imagery that was insensitive, anachronistic or derogatory. That is not

to suggest that this image was deliberately designed to be offensive, but, given the genealogy of visual representations of racialised and gendered otherness, it relates to a number of potent signifying practices. Although the designer of the postcard implies that he wished to draw attention to the hypocrisy of the tourist gaze (Weir 2008), this intentionality does not, in my opinion, manifest clearly enough, although it must be acknowledged. Images of the 'primitive 'other' have remained remarkably consistent from the nineteenth century to the present and include depictions of sexually compliant women, primitive customs and dress, the noble savage, and bare-breasted African women; this continuation is not just a visual correspondence but also denotes a "similarly grounded consumption of culture" (Edwards 1996:205). Accordingly, the metaphorical function of postcards that enables them to stand for something else by means of analogy is rooted in an established lexicon of binary oppositions such as civilised/uncivilised, tame/savage, unnatural/natural, urban/rural, white/black, contained/unfettered, moral/licentious, fractured/harmonious and rational/irrational (Edwards 1996:202; Albers & James 1988:141). Although space precludes an exhaustive unpacking of all the possible readings of this image, I attempt to engage with some of the issues and try to determine its association with the genre of ethnographic postcards.[4]

A basic description of the Himba postcard yields the following:[5] it comprises a half-length close-up shot of a young black woman, naked from the waist up, standing against a natural background. The original photograph has clearly been manipulated to mimic a dominant sepia tone for both the background and the woman. Two post-production yellow stars cover the site of her naked nipples. She can be identified as a Himba woman by means of her characteristic body adornments and hairstyle, and this is corroborated by the anchoring text: 'Himba goes to Hollywood'.[6] The way in which she is presented and posed is typical of comparable postcards and photographs of the Himba from the 1920s onwards – she is depicted standing immobile, turned towards the spectator; she is smiling and her body language is friendly and inviting. The background of this image is severely cropped but it is nonetheless obvious that she is standing outside in a rural environment; although no cultural artefacts are shown, the ornaments around her neck and her hairstyle are effective metonymic markers of her ethnicity. Establishing the temporal variants of this photograph based on what is depicted is problematic because there are no indicators that point to any specific timeframe. Indeed, the photograph could equally well have been taken in 1958 or 2008, but as I suggest later in this paper, this atemporarility is part of a trope that is usually used deliberately in tourism imagery.

Cohen (1993:36, 43, 45) offers a differentiation between serious, neutral and ludic touristic images that correspond to the differences in the tastes of tourists. Serious images usually convey the beautiful or exotic, whereas ludic images focus on the cute or comic; both exotic and comic images are used metaphorically. Cohen (1993:45, 47) furthermore stresses that comic images are usually overtly staged and rely on exaggeration or incongruence for their ludic effect, and the body is customarily the most important vehicle for conveying humour, the bizarre or grotesque, or sexual innuendo (Markwick 2001:424). It is therefore possible to state that the 'humour' of the Himba postcard lies in the parodic manner in which the body of the woman is depicted. In their study of Welsh comic postcards, Annette Pritchard and Nigel Morgan (2005:54) conclude that comic postcards function by ridiculing the language, customs or sexuality of someone else and that ethnic minorities are frequently seen in racist terms. In addition, they state that the sexual availability of women as a key ingredient in comic postcards is embedded in the way in which landscapes and women are intertwined, "inviting interpretation by a colonialist, male discourse" (Pritchard & Morgan 2005:67, 69). Although the Himba postcard does not seem to evoke the degrading connotations of childishness, indolence and mental inferiority that characterised comic postcards of black people in the American south produced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mellinger 1994:756, 772), it is important to remember that seemingly innocuous humour and entertainment are potent apparatuses that underscore dominant ideologies (Pritchard & Morgan 2005:57). Stuart Hall (1995:21-22) thus maintains that racist stereotypes in the contemporary media that still perceive the 'other' as primitive, sexually available and as a source of entertainment merely re-enact established imperial narratives of adventure and conquest.

It is apparent that this postcard eludes easy classification and is typical of the post-modern blurring of genres and temporal dislocation. What seems at first sight to be a straightforward documentary photograph is subverted by the addition of the stars that were typically used to censor images of nudity in the South African press in accordance with legislation such as the Publications Act, no 42 of 1974.[7] This is confirmed by Andrew Weir (2008), the designer of the postcard:

> **... it is merely a send up on [*sic*] the old southern African way of putting stars on nudity in order to print the material in such magazines as *Scope* (italics added) and then a parody on [*sic*] the fact that so many tourists travelling through Africa claim to find these people fascinating whilst lecturing [*sic* – read 'letchering'] over the nudity. On a deeper level it is also due to tourism the people themselves start aspiring to the connotation of nudity in a different way thus Hollywood. I guess it is my way of showing that nothing is sacred unfortunately.**

The potentially serious documentary nature of the image is undermined by the addition of the text 'Himba goes to Hollywood' and the stars, which not only connote censorship but also the Hollywood 'star system'. There is thus an ambivalent slippage between levity and gravity as the image comments on the hypocrisy of the voyeur audience but also titillates the viewer by means of the same code. Female nudity has always been a staple subject in tourist postcards but, although it has not always had a uniform meaning, one of the most important strands has been the "ethnographic depiction of nudity that emphasises 'primitiveness'" (Albers & James 1988:142). Albers and James (1988:142) continue that these kind of ethnographic representations often suppressed or denigrated sexuality. What makes the Himba image remarkable is that it seems to combine the depiction of nudity as primitive with a knowing sexuality that engages with the gaze of the tourist-spectator. This double coding taps into the so-called ethnographic or anthropological alibi for voyeurism that has haunted and legitimated sensational representations of the 'other', but also validates the assertion by Weir that the Himba's aspiration to nudity is consensual. By "aspiring to the connotation of nudity" it seems that they have become complicit in the construction of a (westernised) sexualised identity that has monetary value.

The intrinsic 'meanings' of this postcard are undoubtedly located in the key image of the female figure who is used as the vehicle for a number of signifiers and codes that convey the following clusters of meaning: feminisation and nature; exoticism, 'otherness' and primitivism; and timelessness. The depiction of the Himba woman operates in the tradition of colonial discourse that condoned the objectification and deprecation of *black* women. As previously stated, one of the most well known strategies employed by colonial powers to establish power was to feminise conquered landscapes. This had an important ideological function because colonial images of possession and control of a receptive and feminised Africa articulated the premise (and promise) of an empty land. Accordingly, the "association of indigenous women with colonized land legitimated perceptions of both women and land as objects of colonization" (Blunt & Rose 1994:10). This strategy persists in tourism images where women signify the exotic character of a place and are presented as welcoming and available in their femininity (Morgan & Pritchard 1998:192; Enloe 1989:32). When feminised, land and nature stand for that which is wild and seductive, waiting for the penetrating gaze and exploration of the male subject (Morgan & Pritchard 1998:198, 202). Images of friendly young women on postcards reiterate the notion of the 'family of man' and Africans as "noble, innocent and simple savages" (Morgan & Pritchard 1998:178; Edwards 1996:213-215). In this regard, it is significant that indigenous people like the Himba have commonly been represented anonymously in photographs; consequently, the Himba woman becomes a stereotype of her entire 'picturesque' ethnic group and individual identity is rendered impossible.

The anonymity of indigenous people is underscored by their ubiquitous alignment with images of nature that emphasise that their lifestyles are closer to nature, simpler and more authentic (Edwards 1996:202-203; Markwick 2001:428). From the nineteenth century onwards, idealised representations of 'noble savages' in their 'natural' state assumed a new significance to offset the reality of European urbanisation and industrialisation (Ateljevic & Doorne 2002:656). Colonial photography rendered indigenous peoples as "rooted in the soil, subsumed in nature, an extension of another natural world" (O'Connor cited in Markwick 2001:428), and by extension the tourism industry depicts them as part of the environment, reflecting the total ambiance or atmosphere of a destination (Cohen 1993:49). The 'essence' of Namibia is thus supposedly captured in the postcard of the Himba woman – she is shown against a natural background that echoes her colouring, and the brown earth and arid landscape identity a typically 'African' landscape (Bruner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994:454).

The stars that ostensibly conceal the woman's breasts place her in an uneasy liminal space, neither 'tribal' nor modern. This ambiguity is typical of depictions of indigenous peoples and is underlined by the way in which they are represented as static and fixed in a timeless vacuum that suggests an atemporal 'pastness' (Edwards 1996:203). This mystification decontextualises, disconnects and fragments the culture of others to create an essentialised vision that appears to accord with touristic expectations.

Conclusion

In reading the Himba postcard, it is inevitable that a critique of the representation of gender and race takes predominance because the fact that a *black woman* is depicted already implicates an awareness of a range of discriminatory practices. It is certainly true that tourism images reflect the context that produces them rather than any external "reality" of the destination (Caton & Santos 2008:12), but the perception that is created by this type of image enshrines power relations in terms of race and gender that are untenable, precisely because they are derived from imperialist narratives. As Morgan and Pritchard (1998:197) point out, the sheer number of tourism images that represent women in a traditional role both constitute and sustain inequality. In terms of an economy of signs, the volume of images that are embedded in colonialist ideologies (Caton & Santos 2008:23) does not seem to have been effectively disrupted or dismantled by post-colonial critiques. The Himba postcard

taps into stereotypical depictions of the Himba that show them as essentially backward, "mythologised 'primitives', as ethnically exotic, harmless and friendly human beings" (Kangumu 2000:130). This type of image clearly has its genealogy in the tradition of documentary ethnographic imagery that purports to present so-called ethnographic reality accurately and objectively (Edwards 1996:198). Given that postcards function metaphorically, they perpetuate an ethnographic discourse that ostensibly says one thing, but signifies another.

One of the issues at stake here is the manner in which 'humour' is used in the postcard. Albers and James (1988:141) note that the way in which figures are posed in postcards often reveal metaphoric intentions; in terms of my reading of the image, the Himba woman becomes an objectified commodity, the object of a joke that mocks her aspirations and cultural identity. The entertainment economy commonly uses humour to express ideological messages regarding identity, but no product of cultural production can ever be 'merely entertainment' (see Wolf 1999). By means of misrepresentation, distortion or falsification a comic postcard has the capacity to objectify and ridicule, often without leaving the potential for oppositional readings. Edwards (1996:212-213) and Pritchard and Morgan (2005:54, 69) express the opinion that the imagery in (comic) postcards should be able to be read in different or oppositional ways that subvert the intended meaning, but I believe that is difficult here, if not impossible, in terms of the overwhelming power of the stereotype. The objectification of the Himba is complicated – some people believe they are complicit in their construction as 'primitive' objects of the tourist gaze that ultimately generates income for them, whereas others detect resistance to how they are imaged and represented for the tourism market (Kangumu 2000:131-132). Tourism in Namibia still "reflects the hierarchies and inequalities inherited from the colonial and apartheid past" (Papen 2005:83) and the main beneficiaries of this practice are white people. In an attempt to elide the inequities of the past in order to present a politically reconciled image of Namibia, a simplified tourist discourse has been created that thrives on stereotypical imagery (Papen 2005:88-89). One of the results of this discourse is the production of postcards by white designers and photographers for an "essentially white audience ... [that depict] a quaint and simple rural life" (Mellinger 1994:759, 761).

The problem with the Himba postcard is that although the designer, Andrew Weir, acknowledges the ambivalent and hypocritical position of the audience for whom it was created, I think his intention of creating a parody fails, as it does not ridicule the audience, but rather the Himba woman. The contextual contingency of the image overrides all attempts to invest it with levity and humour; what the postcard does is to foreground one narrative and erase the possibility of multiple or complex identities, fixing the Himba (woman) in the (neo-) colonial imaginary as the epitome of a (comic) 'other'.

Endnotes

1. The postcard was bought by a colleague in Swakopmund, Namibia, in July 2008. The company that produces postcards such as this and other tourist items is called Maid in Africa. The postcard was designed by Andrew Weir and I am grateful for his permission to use the image in this paper. Maid in Africa fulfils a useful role by providing work for Namibian women and I do not denigrate this here; I merely wish to comment on the postcard 'Himba goes to Hollywood'.
2. See Renato Rosaldo (1989) on imperialist nostalgia. The notion of imperialist nostalgia is important for this paper because so many of the tourists who visit Namibia come from former colonial superpowers such as Germany.
3. When studying a range of postcards it is useful to start with a content analysis to establish things such as themes, subject matter, modes of presentation, frequency of images and clustering (Albers & James 1988:145-146). Semiotic analysis is interpretative and is concerned with unlocking how meaning is conveyed through recurring codes that underpin social myths and ideological frameworks.
4. Albers and James (1988), Cohen (1993), Edwards (1996) and Pritchard and Morgan (2005) offer useful frameworks for the analysis of postcards.
5. This description is loosely based on the parameters suggested by Albers and James (1988).
6. The reverse side of the postcard has no explanatory text and only bears an e-mail address of the production company (weird@iway.na).
7. The legislative history of censorship in South Africa dates from 1892 and the most recent Act was the Films and Publications Act, no 65 of 1996 (see Film and Publication Board http://www.fpb.gov.za/docs_publications/publications/publications.asp).

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