Barotseland
and the performed archive
the auto-ethnographic eye and I

By Mukwae Wabei Siyolwe

Photos: Courtesy of Mukwae Wabei Siyolwe Private Collection and Défap - Service protestant de mission, Paris

King Lewanika, Kwa Ndu, Lialui, Barotseland, 1900. Photo by Francois Coillard.
Private Collection of Mukwae Wabei Siyolwe
Auto-ethnography, the fusion between biography and ethnography, first came to my attention as a method to articulate and archive the pre-colonial encounters documented in the photographs of my great-great Grandfather, King Lubosi Lewanika (1842 – 1916), taken by French missionary François Coillard of the Paris Mission Society between 1884–1903 from his diary, *On the threshold of central Africa: A record of twenty years pioneering among the Barotse of the Upper Zambezi*. The photographs taken by Coillard reveal powerful African historical documents and push to the fore issues of agency, representation, and the adequate repository for their archive. Meaning must be created with these images, as they go beyond a rudimentary knowledge of the languages or culture of the Barotse, and enter into the world of the subjects who used them to interpret their ideas of power and form of governance. These images, like the bones found in Ethiopia and the Arabic manuscripts “discovered” in Timbuktu are all keys to historicizing Africa. There is metaphysical symbolic system within the frame where the mis-en-scene, characters and setting give evidence of the noumenal realm where the material world and spiritual world are interwoven and Ba-ntu, translated as people of Spirit, are connected, through movement and vibration into their true nature, Spirit, Ba, “undifferentiated energy and matter” expanding on Ra Un Nefer Amen.

In my auto-ethnographic journey to make sense of these images and cultural memories, I notice several leitmotifs, recurring themes and traces of Kuomboka, one of the annual new moon flood ceremonies of the Barotse, which Coillard witnessed and documented but could not interpret. Literally translated as: “to wade in and out of the water, Kuomboka is a mass exodus to move the
nation to the safety of higher ground when the flood comes and the ritual to return called Kufuluhela when the water recedes.

The King of the North, the Litunga, translated as Earth in the ancient royal court language, Siuyana, and the Queen, Earth of the South, the Litunga La Mboela, both have their own Ku-omboka. They are “stand-ins” for the Higher Ba and signifiers, custodians of the earth with reference to the work of Likando Kalaluka.

These spectacles of religiosity are based on ecological necessity and are a symbolic narrative system that includes vibration of the royal drums, masquerades, and journey of the royal barques with a cast of a million. This photographic archive illustrates how the African monarchs of the late 1880’s knew the power of the image and that it would “stand in” and translate their metaphysical power. To be the ideal reader, I use Umberto Eco’s theory of textual cooperation, which gives the reader an essential role in the process of making meaning.

What metaphors have been passed down to me so that I can interpret and be the ideal reader of these photographs? What lullabies from my mother’s breast, unique food customs from our table, songs in childish play and rites of passage help me translate and transfer these photographs? How can I “cut” my own history -- citing Foucault, who used this cinematic metaphor to express the often-violent cognitive process, which must take place within the body and soul to “de-colonize the mind” (to borrow from Ngugi wa Thiongo)?

We cannot understand the images if we do not accept the terms of the narrative of the Barotse. To do this we must re-map Africa to get a multi-millennial perspective on the migrations and their Nilotic origins to understand the function of this central myth and cultural practice.

Ku-omboka is a lived experience and Barotse practice Kuomboka, therefore their knowledge base comes from a place deeper and more complex than field research for a book chapter. Barotse willingly or unwittingly must pass through the metaphysical realm in order to experience and transmit oral and symbolic knowledge. Ku-omboka has through the centuries gone through many changes and the photographic archive shows us every legitimization crisis, including the one today.
The country known as Zambia today came about as a result of a merger of two autonomous nations, namely Barotseland, a constitutional African monarchy, and Northern Rhodesia, a territory occupied and constructed by the colonial project and so-named after its own architect, Cecil Rhodes, the director of the British South Africa Company. Due to the Kalahari sands and endless rivers, gorges and great Mosi-Ou-Tunya falls, “the smoke that thunders”, this African empire once spanned part of modern day Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia, and was impenetrable until the twilight years of colonialism in the 1890’s.

In the missionary diary of Francois Coillard, he gives vivid descriptions and images of his ten-year trek to Barotseland to convert the King, Lubosi Lewanika, into a Christian. When Coillard came to Barotseland asking to show the Barotse the Son of God, Lewanika told him he had come to the right place as the literal translation for Muan’ a Mulena is “Son of God” in Siluyana, the name given to any prince of Barotseland. Over a century, every successive Barotse monarch used the image as a tool for legitimization. The Barotseland Agreement of 1964 is an international treaty and ensures self-determination for its people from the ravages of the post-colonial nightmare of dislocation and cultural genocide. Now, after fifty years, like a child rejecting its mother, Zambia is denying its own African past prior to 1964 by ignoring the ancient state of Barotseland and its right to self-determination, even with the plethora of forensic documents, maps and photographs. Its occupation has been one of misrule, neglect, and acts of aggression, repression, suppression, intimidation, harassment torture and arbitrary arrests. Zambia abrogated the treaty and Barotseland declared independence on March 27th, 2012, at the behest of the Barotse National Council, the indigenous governance system and representatives of the people.

This is where the archive has purpose. For Africa, obscure lands have resurfaced right out of the travels of Herodotus or the visions of Volney. Ethiopia, as a name, referred to the whole of the continent of Africa. When Africa was first mapped, it stretched into the Indus Kush valley. South Sudan, Somaliland, Zanzibar, and old kingdoms like Barotseland are re-mapping Africa and re-remerging from obscurity to take
their historical place on the proverbial global table. Reawakened African philosophies left to the human family, like Ubuntu and Likute, are a moral compass to help us negotiate change from this constructed chaos.

A “virtual” wave of independence and revolution from neo-colonialism is happening on the African continent. Worlds destroyed are being reconstructed and restored through the Internet, after centuries of obscurity. Why? Because people now have access to the archive and are seeking maximum fiscal and policy autonomy by reasserting their traditional systems of governance, because the colonial nation state construct is bankrupt.

The Barotse are one such group who are using the Internet as an advocacy tool to revise their stolen history, revitalize and exercise their right to self determination, by making the Internet a repository, a growing database of archival images and texts, laying bare forensic evidence to their legal claim for sovereignty and a restoration of the Barotseland Agreement of 1964.

This archive of the Barotseland narrative is helping us to unravel the arbitrary borders imposed by imperialism and the colonial project on the African body, and these distinct dramatic events are also putting into question Africa coming to terms with its own colonial history with the resurgence of a Jim Crow system, Apartheid for Africans globally. Beginning the process of Ubuntu starts with respect for a commitment to share more information and open the archives of Africa, the mother ship, to retell the story of origins and migrations and begin the process of being at peace with ourselves and the world.

In watching this Barotseland story unfold I ask you to be an ideal reader and apply a wider lens to view the events on the Internet. Identify the plot, a few of the scenes, one of its epic hero/ines and the role you could play as a spectator to borrow from Boal. Before the Internet, access to this information was left only to social scientists, who, like medieval priests, limited access to this information, in order perhaps to build the idea of an Africa without her own systems of governance. Africanists without cultural memory, and thus with very limited cognitive tools, can no longer be considered authorities by “mis-reading”, the needs of millions of people. Some of us are too stubborn and decided long ago to dedicate our lives to creating epistemological frameworks to put the pieces back together, not only for Barotseland but also the whole of the global south.

Either way, the western missionary, anthropologist and social scientist still tell us much through omission. Even the little old French missionary who appreciated but did not really understand Kuomboka in his observations of the “heathen races” has left us much. I, for one, would be bereft without these very intimate images of the comings and goings of my great-great Grandfather King Lubosi Lewanika (1842 – 1916).

Mukweae Wabei Siyolve is currently writing a hybrid oratorio with Haitian American composer Daniel Bernard Roumain called Wade in the Water, Kuomboka to celebrate the centennial of King Lewanika of Barotseland in February 2016, in association with The Kelly Strayhorn Theatre. Pittsburgh USA. This production is made possible by grants from Advancing Black Arts, of the Heinz Endowment, The A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust Fund of The Pittsburgh Foundation, and The Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council (GPAC).
King Lewanika of Barotseland, Coronation Tour of Edward VII, 1902, Edinburgh. Photo by G. H. Tod
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