

## [The Africana Historic Postcard Collection at the Library of Congress.](#)

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### [The Africana Historic Postcard Collection](#)

February 6, 2023 by [Anchi Hoh](#)

*(The following post is by Edward Miner, Head of the African Section, and Fentahun Tiruneh, Area Specialist for Ethiopia and Eritrea.)*

The African and Middle Eastern Division is delighted to announce the rerelease of [the Africana Historic Postcard Collection](#). Originally made available online in PDF in 2017, the collection is among the most popular resources on the AMED website. Former African Area Specialist Angel Batiste curated and oversaw the original digitization of more than 1,300 postcards. Recognizing the need for enhanced discoverability and higher resolution images, African Section Head Edward Miner and Area Specialist for Ethiopia and Eritrea Fentahun Tiruneh collaborated with the Digital Content Management Services Division to upgrade and migrate the entire set onto the Library's Digital Collections site. Meanwhile, the African Section has acquired thousands more colonial-era African postcards for future inclusion in the online collection.

The [Africana Historic Postcard Collection](#) provides strong coverage for researchers working on the French, Italian, German, Belgian and British colonial establishments in Africa from the 1890s until the end of the 1930s. The early part of this period corresponds to the Golden Age of the Postcard, or the pre-WWI mass popularity of picture-postcards as souvenirs and a means of informal communication. In the European metropolises, governments utilized the postcard as propaganda to naturalize their economic and military presence in Africa as an extension of Western power and values. Evangelical congregations such as the Church Missionary Society, the Pères Blancs (White Fathers), and Comboni Missionaries (Verona Fathers) were prolific in publishing postcard series intended to build support for their African missions. European photographers would produce postcard propaganda based on staged "ethnographic" matter that reinforced colonial imaginaries about African people and societies as devoid of history and culture. Most problematically, this postcard genre also used images of individual African people to objectify them as racial or ethnic "types." Such postcards propagated some of the most offensive racial stereotypes about African peoples, histories and cultures – stereotypes that continue to shape (mis)understandings about the beauty, richness and diversity of the continent today.

Most of the first 1,300 postcards bear images relating to Ethiopia/Eritrea, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Madagascar, German East Africa, British East Africa, and the Belgian Congo. Especially well documented are the Italian invasions and occupation of the Horn of Africa (Somalia & Ethiopia/Eritrea); pre-WWI German East Africa and its occupation by British and Belgian Congo forces; and Britain's West African Frontier Force in Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria. Images

unique to the collection include the works of Ukrainian-born postcard photographer-producer Casimir Zagourski (1883-1944) and prolific French photographer and ethnographer Francois Edmond Fortier (1862-1928). Through their postmarks, correspondent identities, and messages, postcards provide immediate evidence of the social networks through which they circulated and the demand for imagery valorizing the colonial project they served.

The collection also documents in rich detail the popularization of photography and photographic products among both European and indigenous urban elites up and down the East and West African coasts from the mid-19th to early 20th centuries. While postcards functioned as propaganda for the colonial project in European metropolises, African consumption of photographic products shaped new local practices in presenting self and inscribing social status. Africans also participated in the photographic trade as apprentices and set to work as entrepreneurs serving both coastal and hinterland indigenous elites. By the turn of the 20th century, African photographers in St. Louis, Freetown, Monrovia, Lagos, the Niger Delta, Zanzibar, Dar es Salaam and Mombasa served private customers in their studios, often turning privately commissioned portraits into stock photos and postcards they sold alongside stationary wares. African postcard photographers represented in the collection include notable names such as Alphonso Lisk-Carew from Sierra Leone, Demba N'Diaye from Senegal, W.S. Johnston from Gold Coast (now Ghana) or Sierra Leone, F.W.H. Arkurst from Gold Coast, Frederick Grant from Gold Coast, N. Walwin Holm from Gold Coast and Alex Agbablo Accolatsé from Togo.

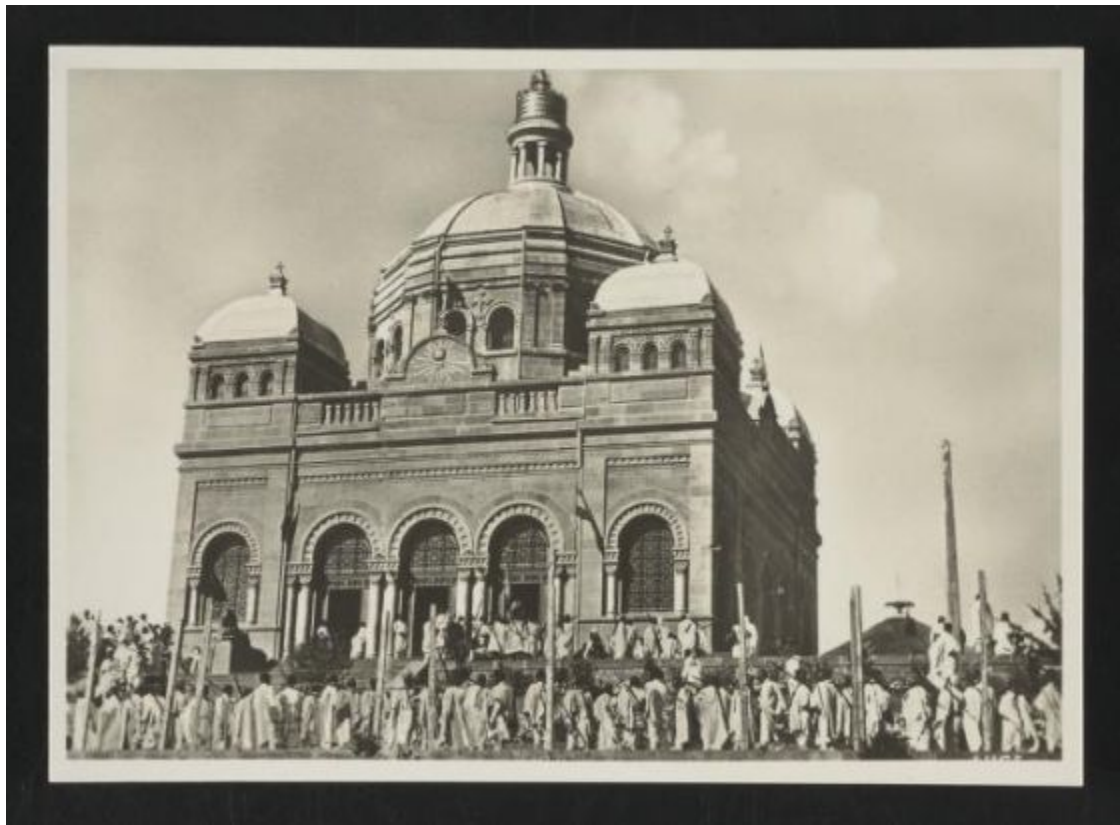


[“Acrobats and Magicians, Sierra Leone,”](#) by the Lisk-Carew Brothers of Freetown.

Nearly half of the online collection comprises postcards relating to the Italian colonial period in

Ethiopia and what would become Eritrea. This part of the collection richly captures the architecture and facades of Tewahedo (Ethiopian Orthodox) churches and the edifices of the Italian colonial administration; public religious ceremonies and festivals; and African soldiers in service to either the Ethiopian king or the Italian colonial military. Of unique interest to researchers are the Trade Cards, or in this case postcards that are collectibles. Some of the earliest commemorate the bravery of King Tewodros II in resisting British military incursion.

Others depict the epic confrontation that was the Battle of Adwa in 1896, where [King Menelik II](#) and [Empress Taytu Betul](#) led Ethiopian forces in defeating the Italian army. Some of the Trade Cards from Portugal and Spain record snippets of the negotiation between the Pope of Rome and King Menelik II via the Pope of the Alexandrian Coptic Church to effect the release of war prisoners.



[The mausoleum of King Menelik II](#) (1844-1913) in Addis Ababa.

The bulk of the Ethiopian/Eritrean postcards, however, are propaganda produced by the Italian Fascist government of Benito Mussolini lauding its military invasion and occupation during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-41). During five years of occupation, the Italian colonial administration faced fierce local resistance despite its superior weaponry, and attempted to counter these insurgencies by recruiting foreign and some local irregular forces called *bandas*. Italian Trade Cards, marketed to children as collectibles, explicitly portray the ferocity of African mercenaries as like that of wild animals. These auxiliary battalions were even given unit nicknames such as “lions,” “tigers,” etc.



[Trade Card representing the 15th battalion of the Royal Corps of Eritrean Colonial Troops, informally called “lions.”](#)

As a visual record, the *Africana Historic Postcard Collection* offers researchers data on topics such as early colonial urbanization, the material culture of emerging indigenous elites, snapshots of artisans and merchants at work, indigenous Christian catechists and the first African clergy, as well as African soldiers serving in colonial militaries. The collection augments a number of rich and diverse visual resource collections in the Library of Congress, including the archival collections of the *Basel Mission*, the *Church Missionary Society (CMS)*, the *Royal Commonwealth Society Photograph Collection*, the *Frank and Francis Carpenter Collection* and the *American Colonization Society* photographic collection housed in the Library’s Microform and Prints and Photographs reading rooms.

#### **Learn More:**

Prochaska, David. “Fantasia of the *Phototèque*: French Postcard Views of Colonial Senegal,” *African Arts* 24, no. 4 (October 1991): 40-47, 98.

Viditz-Ward, Vera. “Photography in Sierra Leone, 1850-1918,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 57, no. 4 (1987): 510-518.