

THE UNCONTAINABLE STORIES OF TODD WEBB IN AFRICA

AN INTERVIEW
WITH ERIN HYDE NOLAN & AIMÉE BESSIRE
BY JACQUI WALPOLE

In 1958, the United Nations Office of Public Information commissioned photographer Todd Webb to document industry and technology in eight African nations, either recently independent or on the cusp of gaining independence.

In five months, Webb amassed approximately 2,000 color images. At the time of their commission, only 22 were published by the UN in a single black-and-white brochure. The remainder of the negatives remained hidden away until 2017.

Images courtesy of the Todd Webb estate

Todd Webb, Untitled (44UN-7943-006), Tanganyika (Tanzania), archival pigment print, 1958.

Todd Webb in Africa: Outside the Frame (published by Thames & Hudson) by Maine College of Art & Design Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History Erin Hyde Nolan and Aimée Bessire, Lecturer in Art & Visual Culture at Bates College showcases more than 150 striking color photographs from Webb's African journey. The stunning images are complemented by essays by African and American scholars, artists, historians, photographers, and writers who provide context for the images and insight into the role that photography played in presenting to the rest of the world the social, governmental, and economic transformations of these African countries.

In 2021, the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA) exhibited *Todd Webb in Africa: Outside the Frame*. A version of the show curated by Tanzanian curators Chance Ezekiel, Halfan Magani, Sixmund Begashe, Sekela Charles, Rehema Habibu, Zainabu Hassan, and Veronica Mollel, will travel to the National Museum of Tanzania in Dar es Salaam on December 9, 2021, coinciding with Tanzania Independence Day. It will travel to the Portland Museum of Art in 2023.

Note from authors Erin Hyde Nolan and Aimée Bessire:

“The project in its many formations—the book and the exhibitions—is a much larger transatlantic collaboration that involves (like Todd’s project from 1958) many different people.

We feel it is very important to mention that the project is part of a multi-year collaboration, extending to networks in Minnesota and Tanzania. It includes our co-curator at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Casey Riley, our collaborator Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, Curator of African Art at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, as well as many other collaborating authors and panel discussants, many of whom we will mention directly today and who contributed to the book project with a variety of different essays. And then, finally, also to a team of curators and scholars at the National Museum of Tanzania (NMT) in Dar es Salaam, led by curators Chance Ezekiel and Halfan Magani.

“We are so lucky to have the Todd Webb Archive here in Portland, Maine. It’s thanks to Betsy Evans Hunt’s wonderful preservation of Webb’s photographs and contribution to documenting history that we have been able to complete the project.”

(The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.)

MECA&D: Thank you for chatting with us today. It is such a fascinating project that you have put together. For anyone who doesn’t happen to know Todd Webb very well yet, could you please share some background?

Erin: Todd Webb was a little bit like Julia Child in that he came to photography late in life. It wasn’t until he was 40 years old that Webb really began experimenting seriously with a camera while working at the Chrysler company in Detroit. He joined the camera club there together with a fellow photographer Harry Callahan, who became a trusted confidant and also a renowned photographer.

After World War II, Todd moved to New York and made photography his primary vocation, forming friendships with people like Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Berenice Abbott. He also began taking commercial commissions beginning with work for the Marshall Plan and the Standard Oil Project in the late 1940s.

In 1957, he was first hired by the UN to take photographs of different delegations in New York City at its headquarters. Just a few months later, he was sent to Mexico to document technology and industry in Mexico.

In 1958, Webb was commissioned for a five-month project in the African continent. This is the time our project revolves around. His itinerary was finalized in March of that year, and he arrived in Lomé, Togoland, a month later in April.

While Webb is probably best known for his street photographs of New York and Paris, this body of work is something different because the photographs are in color. He only very rarely worked in color.

MECA&D: The full Africa collection was only rediscovered by the Todd Webb Archive in 2017. What was it like to sit with some of these images that had been hidden away for the past 60 years?

Aimée: I learned about Webb’s images of Africa in the fall of 2017. When I first saw them, I was overwhelmed. They were very unique in the larger corpus of colonial photography of Africa—as color images and because they frame industry and development in ways that are at odds with the exoticized versions of Africa that most

colonial-era photographers from the geographic north were documenting at that time. I immediately thought this would be an incredible project to collaborate on with Erin.

In our initial conversations we talked about the importance of bringing in voices from the countries Webb photographed—to invite responses to the colonial era photography from an African perspective. What is most resonant today is how people from Africa and the African Diaspora have responded to the images. We’ve learned so much from listening to the stories of people like Ali Jimale Ahmed originally from Somalia, James Barnor from Ghana, Rehema Chachage from Tanzania, Emmanuel Iduma from Nigeria, and Gary van Wyk originally from South Africa.

MECA&D: Were any bits you learned throughout the project things you didn’t expect?

Erin: We think of ourselves maybe not so much as curators or editors, but as interlocutors. Most of all, we hoped to facilitate conversations about the material, generate questions, and to listen.

The personal narratives really resonated—like Rehema Chachage talking about how the photographs made her remember the way that her grandmother’s bread smelled when it baked in the oven. The way that Fatuma Elmi talked about walking down the Via Nazionale in Mogadishu as a child past the Cinema Hamar. Or the way in which Emmanuel Iduma translated Webb’s “documentary-style” photographs into transcendent fictional narratives from his own experience.



Untitled (44UN-T2-R21-679),
Tanganyika (Tanzania), 1958 Archival pigment print



Untitled (44UN-58-073),
Togoland (Togo), 1958 Gelatin silver print

These responses made us look closer at the images and their histories, listen harder, and reorient ourselves to the material in ways that are necessary at this moment in time, especially as two white women working on this material.

Aimée: We invited the authors to respond in any way they wanted: through a creative piece, a poem, a deep critique of colonialism, or a personal story.

Emmanuel Iduma, for example, chose specific photographs and wrote fictional narratives, telling new stories about the individuals in the images.

Erin: I have used Iduma's essays in my classes at MECA&D over the last year. His creative and fictional reimaginings of the photographs tell stories that might not be "true" in the way that we think about truth existing within documentary photography.

MECA&D: The UN body that commissioned these photos only used about 20 of the thousands taken. Did you notice differences between the narrative that was portrayed by the UN's choices versus what was there as a whole project?

Aimée: The commission had a very specific goal: to document industry and technology and economic development on the continent in these different countries.

Ghana had already achieved its independence in 1957 before Todd visited, but many of the other countries were at the cusp of becoming independent, some by 1960, and others much later—Southern Rhodesia, not until 1980.

But the UN had a vested interest in also “fostering,” watching, and overseeing the movement of these countries toward independence, to become independent nations.

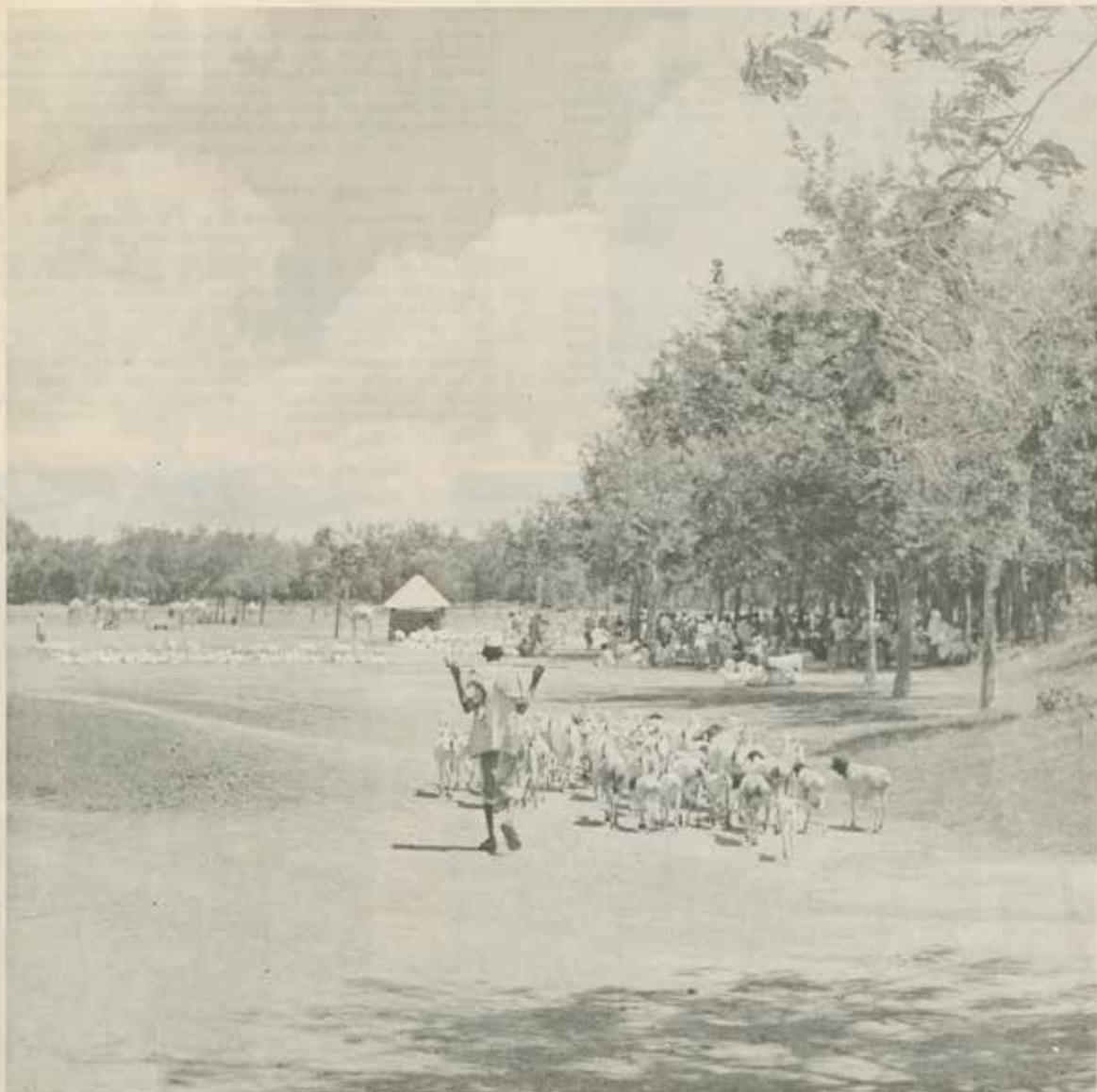
Erin: To support this interest, the UN chose what appear as disinterested reports, as some scholars might say. They’re certainly not the most compelling images that Todd took, but they do fulfill the mission of a documentary photograph, which is to tell the “truth,” to supply the United Nations with quantifiable information and data.

MCA&D: You mentioned the idea for creating this book together was instantaneous, that it was something really special. How did the project evolve?

Aimée: We immediately envisioned the material as a book and exhibition project. We started by spending a great deal of time with the photographs, researching, writing, and developing the framework for an exhibition.

The Minneapolis Institute of Art expressed interest in the show. We began working with our colleague and co-curator there, Casey Riley, and also with other collaborators, including Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers and the whole MIA team.

We have also collaborated with colleagues at the National Museum of Tanzania, where a version of the exhibition will open as part of the celebrations for Tanzanian Independence Day this December. Erin and I co-authored an article about the collaborations on the Todd Webb project with Halfan Hashim Magani in the German photo history journal *Fotogeschichte*.



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UNITED NATIONS



Supplement No. 7 PHOTOS

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PRESERVING TODD WEBB'S LEGACY

"I can't help but feel that the hand of fate happily landed on my shoulder," reflects Betsy Evans Hunt, Hon. DFA '13, a MECA&D Trustee Emeritus and the Executive Director of the Todd Webb Archive in Portland, Maine.

It was 1989 when Charles Clayton ("Todd") Webb III first started arriving at Betsy Evans Hunt's gallery events for the likes of Ansel Adams. When he recounted stories of friendships with the photography greats and artists like Georgia O'Keeffe, Hunt couldn't help but be intrigued.

A former stockbroker hailing from Detroit, Webb produced a unique body of work from the time he picked up his first camera in the 1930s up until the 1980s. What resulted was a legacy destined for the annals of American photography. While Webb generally harbored a deep mistrust of art dealers after an unfortunate experience left him unpaid for much of his work, it didn't take long for him to strike up a friendship with Hunt that would last and grow for the rest of his life. Under Hunt's guidance and representation, Webb went from claiming he didn't care if he ever sold another photograph again to a renewed engagement and rebuilt career. The pair became like family. "Todd and [his wife] Lucille were like grandparents to my kids, even though they were old enough to be my grandparents," Hunt recalled.

When Webb turned 90, he and Lucille called on Hunt to carry the torch forward for his estate, which she officially inherited in 2008. The mission—one Hunt considers both a tremendous "honor and responsibility"—is to ensure Webb a spot in the history books. Hunt made it her personal goal to secure a book and museum

show for every major body of work he created, starting with the images of New York City from 1975-77 already wedded to his name.

The road forward was not always easy or straight. "Things kept popping up on auction sites, a lot of which either didn't best represent his work or was going for far less than it was worth." Eventually in 2017, Hunt's path led to an Oakland basement filled with steamer trunks of Webb's negatives. It was there that Hunt found a simple manila envelope containing long-hidden treasure: negatives from Webb's five-month un-commissioned trip in 1958 to eight countries across Africa—most of which were yet to gain their independence from colonial rule. "My first thought was that these were amazing. I'd never seen anything like them!"

As she continued to scan the images, buried for nearly 60 years, Hunt was struck by the serendipity of having access to the team of professionals best suited to move forward with the find: Director of the Todd Webb Archive Sam Walker to expertly master the negatives, as well as scholar of African art history and cultural studies Aimée Bessire and Assistant Visiting Professor at Maine College of Art & Design Erin Hyde Nolan to develop the project *Todd Webb in Africa: Outside the Frame*.

toddwebbarchive.com

Erin: The title of the exhibition in Dar es Salaam is *Todd Webb in Africa: Where We Came From and Where We Are*. The idea of Webb's photographs returning to the continent was a very important part of the project for all of us. It was always our goal, and I think Betsy's too, to have the photographs remain in the National Museum's collection in Tanzania.

Aimée: The u.s. embassy in Tanzania is collaborating with the National Museum and supporting the exhibition. They are highlighting the exhibition as the end of their year-long campaign, "Pamoja 60 (Together 60)," celebrating 60 years of diplomacy between the u.s. and Tanzania.

It is significant that the National Museum chose to open the exhibition on the country's Independence Day to further highlight the developments in industry and technology since independence.

MECA&D: You subtitled the book "*Outside the Frame*." I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about that choice.

Erin: Our methodology was rooted in asking questions about what is not visible in the photographs and how all of the things that go unseen—people, power, politics, etc.—actually do impact what the image looks like. What are the stories, where are the people that you don't see in the image? Can we identify the networks and cross-cultural encounters that fall outside of the frame? This gets at one really compelling aspect of Webb's imagery from the continent—a kind of tension or ambiguity that exists in the photographs.

One image, for example, of a sisal field in Tanganyika with Mount Kilimanjaro in the background, looks like a beautiful landscape photograph: no people, no develop-

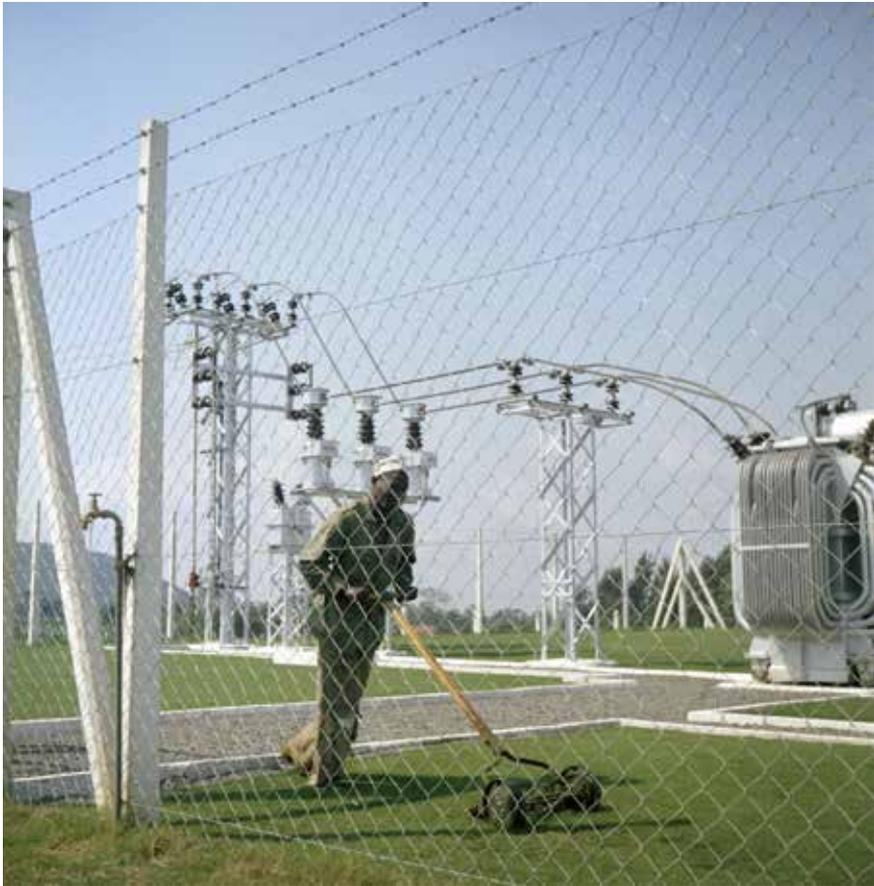
ment, no built environment. And yet, if you dig a little deeper, if you practice what Mark Sealy calls “forensic looking,” looking outside of the frame—which the sisal plants push very aggressively up against—we might begin to understand how these plants got here.

Sisal was not native to Tanganyika. It was imported by a German doctor in 1893 from the Mexican Yucatan. By 1961, three years after Webb made this photograph, when Tanganyika became independent from Great Britain, it was also the world’s largest sisal exporter.

These plants appear native in the photograph, but in fact are not. We can instead see them as foreign colonizing forces invading the local topography, disrupting the health of local ecosystems and suffocating indigenous species.

In so many cases, photography is about containment—the viewfinder, the four sides of the frame—but really, photographs are uncontainable, and the stories that they cannot contain are the things that we were interested in revealing.

Aimée: Another photograph also inspired our discussions about Webb’s positionality as an outsider to the individuals and cultures he was photographing. In this image a man mows a lawn behind a chain link fence at a newly built hydroelectric power station in Tanzania (then Tanganyika). Seemingly unaware of being photographed, the man focuses on his work, the chain link fence creating a physical separation from the photographer, who is quite literally “outside the frame.” These multidimensional layers of the image all add texture to our reading of this document of expanding power systems in Tanzania in the 1950s.



Untitled (44UN-8011-469)

Tanganyika (Tanzania), 1958. Archival pigment print



Untitled (44UN-7981-177),
Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), 1958. Archival pigment print

MECA&D: It was an immense collection that you were dealing with—around 2,000 that you narrowed down to 150. How did you choose and curate the book itself?

Aimée: Todd Webb was an incredible archivist. He kept meticulous records, organizing his negatives in manila envelopes. This was very helpful as we began culling through everything, first with Betsy and Sam, and later with our co-curator, Casey Riley.

We spent a great deal of time talking about the photographs. I remember sitting around the Archive's computer in a pre-COVID time with Erin, Sam and Casey Riley, talking about the scanned images and identifying the images for the book and exhibition.

We began to see themes throughout the images that we eventually highlighted for the exhibition: colonialism and independence, portraits and power dynamics, environmental impact, built environment, trade and transport, and industry and economy. We had many discussions of the ways that different images intersected multiple categories.

MECA&D: Were there any photos that were particularly enlightening to you when it came to how they brought to life some of those themes?

Erin: Many of the landscape images, for example, present a particular perspective of industry and technology. Consider an image of the Kariba Dam and the Zambezi River Basin that looks like a celebration of industry and technology—the kind of material Todd was hired to photograph.

But if you look outside of the frame here, the whole view becomes more expansive—you learn that more than 57,000 Tongan people were displaced in order to create the dam, and that entire river ecosystems were disrupted and ruined because of the aggressive and violent nature of the dam construction.

These kinds of images, which reveal the impact—the deep and really violent impact—of imperialism and colonialism on African topography, we found particularly problematic and compelling.

There's another image of a slag heap from Northern Rhodesia that is so beautiful you want to hang it in your living room, but if you actually consider what is happening in the image, it's very disturbing. And so we see a coupling of the beautiful surface of the image with darker, more violent and troubling histories together. They're not always easy to look at, but they do force us to ask really important questions.

Aimée: These images help to make that point in the exhibition sections entitled “Impact on the Environment” and “Built Environment.”

MCA&D: Congratulations on all your work in creating this to share with the world.

Aimée and Erin: Thank you for your interest and great questions.



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