

Christian Hornberger, Women Spinning Yarn with a Spindle (1865–68)

Abstract

This early photograph of West African women spinning cotton comes from the collections of the Basel Evangelical Mission. The photographer, Christian Hornberger (1831–1881), was born in Württemberg and trained at the Basel Evangelical Mission before entering the service of the Bremen-based North German Missionary Society, spending most of his career in British colonial West Africa (modern-day Ghana). Hornberger had been educated in the techniques of the still-new medium of photography and in 1863 the Missionary Society sent him a camera and tasked him with photographing the mission station in Keta and its work in Africa. The picture here of women spinning was among a series of photographs taken somewhat later, between 1865 and 1868, at which latter point a selection of similar portraits of indigenous life was offered for sale by the society. How far the image was meant to reinforce stereotypes of foreignness and primitiveness, or rather to establish the viewer's familiarity with the subjects, who were performing what was then perceived as women's work, is open to discussion. Photographs of this sort served multiples purposes: on the one hand, they served to document the lives of the local inhabitants in the spirit of ethnography; on the other hand, they were used for propaganda and commercial purposes as illustrations in books and magazines of the Missionary Society and/or for the market and public.

Source



Source: Christian Hornberger, "Femmes filant du coton au fuseau." Basel Mission Archives, QD-30.044.0046, <https://www.bmarchives.org/items/show/69873> (accessed April 9, 2021).

Basel Mission Archives

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