

Abstract:

Popular representations of Africa are ever-present, and their historical roots many. A little studied source of these representations is the stereoscopic slide, which was hugely popular in Europe and North America at the end of the nineteenth and into the first few decades of the twentieth century. This article examines a set of stereoscopic images taken of the Kikuyu near Mt. Kenya c. 1909. After a brief introduction to place this form of home entertainment, and education, in historical context, these images are used to address the broader issue of the ways one can “read” historical photographs. The first part of the article considers each of the seven slides and demonstrates how historical images can provide an entrée to the study of cultural representation in another time period. The second part considers the biographical study of a colonial era chief who might otherwise have remained, to historians at least, but one rather unremarked upon colonial functionary among many. From an identifying name in a caption on one of the stereoscopic slides, we take up the story of who Wambugu wa Mathangani was, and the role he played in the first half of the twentieth century. The article concludes with personal responses to the photographs by living relatives of Wambugu. They clearly do not see these as images of the “other” or representations of “Africanness,” but instead look upon them proudly as family photographs. Without any of their own pictures of women family members, these are emotionally acknowledged to be their “mothers and grandmothers,” who sadly can no longer be identified by name.