

THIS IS NOT NOMOLI



Reframing photographic presence and performance.

There is something deeply satisfying about generating a pattern, since it is characterised by regularity, predictability. Photographs have been, and all too often still are, used to suggest the existence of patterns through lens- and light sensitive surface-based registration of an encounter. The picture resulting from this encounter is then presented as exemplary or representative of wider social and cultural practices that are only partially understood at best, and often grossly misunderstood.¹

In my visual artistic practice,² in which I intervene in the general distribution of historical photographs as a research method, I try to make room for ways out of the consequences of these observations through thick engagements with historical photographs and heritage communities of the encounters depicted.

An example of this is *ReframingPJU*, an ongoing research project on a photographic legacy that was arguably both of substantial influence on, and provides insight in, imaginations of 'Africa' in the Netherlands in the 20th century. The photographs were produced by Paul Julien (1901-2001) between 1932 and 1962. A selection of these photographs reached mass audiences through various modes of publication. The collection is currently in the care of the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam.³



1. For the positioning of photographs as encounters, resulting from events and its consequences, see Azoulay, 2008, *The Civil Contract of Photography* and, 2021, *Potential History: Unlearning Empiricism*.
2. Understood as positioned by J. Rancière in, 2003, *Distribution of the Sensible*, p.13.
3. Please visit: pju.bridginghumanities.com
4. William A. Hart, 1993, 'The Stone Sculptures of the Upper Guinea Coast', in *History in Africa*.

Photographs used in the patterned picture above:

- # a lantern slide produced by Sjoerd Hofstra in relation to his research in Sierra Leone in 1934-1946. Personal collection Marijke Gijswijt Hofstra. Use of the lantern slide is unknown.
- # a lantern slide produced by Paul Julien as a result of a brief visit to Sierra Leone. Derived from a 9x12 negative filed with the words "Nomoli Holland, Moyamba". Collection Nederlands Fotomuseum. Lantern slide used during a wide range of public lectures, possibly up to the 1990s.
- # a detail of a page in the register of the National Museum of Sierra Leone, photographed by me in 2020.

This poster is an invitation to think about photographs as part of material culture, also in a time in which they are mostly distributed on screens. These pictures are not (only) representation. They present depictions of encounters that took place in the past. The encounters were in most cases unequal in terms of the distribution of power among those who were part of it. The photographs were often produced primarily or exclusively for audiences far away from where the encounter took place.

This does not make the pictures 'bad' or useless. It means that their use comes with responsibilities of care and transparency. If you do not have the expertise to exercise this care, please search for expertise among those of us who can ask the right questions in terms of the string of encounters and technologies that resulted in the availability of the picture to you, and the material and social biography of a photograph. Such expertise is more important than any copyright legally facilitated.

Quite a lot is written, but much is unknown, about the ancient stone figurines found in parts of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia known as Nomoli.⁴ When I shared the photograph of a Nomoli produced by Paul Julien in a Facebook group devoted to 'Sierra Leone Heritage', it was instantly labeled as 'fake'. The National Museum of Sierra Leone has a separate storage for Nomoli. Its permanent display includes both 'real' and 'fake' Nomoli.

Among the photographic legacy of anthropologist Sjoerd Hofstra (NL 1898-1983), partially in the care of the African Studies Centre Library and digitalised on their request by me, there are also pictures of Nomoli, both in situ on what appears to be a village square, and photographed on a table top.

Nomoli are sold in Freetown among other souvenirs of cultural tropes. I bought one that reminded me most of those photographed by Julien and Hofstra in Sierra Leone in 1934. It is forbidden to take Nomoli out of Sierra Leone because of their significance as situated heritage.

While visiting Selenga Chiefdom in 2022 Paramount Chief Kargobai posed the question "Where are our Nomoli, and why do we not have access to one for my community?". He spoke of the objects as "naturally carved", reminding me of the stone I picked up from the road after a conversation with Moyamba based historian Mr. Vanja in 2020, as it appeared to be gazing at us passing by with a wide open mouth.