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## Re-encoding Glamour from Ghana to England: Illustrated Magazines, Gender Norms and Black Identities through the Lens of James Barnor (1950s–1980s)

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### Abstract

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How have gender and racial norms conveyed by illustrated magazines—whose circulation exploded in Africa in the 1960s—affected photographers’ local practices? And how, in turn, have they themselves generated this gendered visual order?

This article aims to shed light on this two-fold question by proposing a diachronic analysis of the influence of models of femininity transmitted by the illustrated press on the visual imagination of a Ghanaian photographer—as seen in his photographs taken between the 1950s and the 1980s. It explores the links between the publications of the pan-African magazine *Drum* (the most widely circulated magazine in English-speaking Africa at the time) and its translation into the art of portraiture as practiced by James Barnor (1929–), a photographer with a transnational career, between Ghana and England. Because his professional and personal career path tracked the evolution of these gendered norms, James Barnor became both the repository and the instigator of an idealized vision of “the” African woman.

By means of an intersectional focus, the issues of gender norms and of racial biases are examined in parallel to better understand how the photographer appropriated throughout his career the shifting codes of a “female glamour” reinvented for Africa during the post-independence period. While numerous studies have examined the modalities of this codification, in the present paper they are addressed through an in-depth exploration of the photographer’s archives, now held in Paris, and combined with an analysis of early issues of *Drum*. The aim is to juxtapose images intended for publication, i.e. public, with private images in order to consider how the standards of fashion photography infused Barnor’s practices which lie at the crossroad of different social worlds. The corpus composed of portraits of young women is also informed by numerous interviews with the photographer and some of his models, which provide

behind-the-scenes insights relative to the published images by exploring their political and social contexts.

We first look at *Drum*'s editorial strategy from its launch in South Africa to its expansion throughout West Africa. While the magazine initially borrowed from white Western references such as *Life*, it gradually became, to some extent, a showcase for black pride on the continent and in the global diaspora. Then, we study Barnor's early studio practice as already acutely aware of the codes of femininity enacted by the magazine: this is shown through his "recycling" of the poses and the composition of the images. During the ten years he spent in England, from 1959 to 1969, his collaboration with *Drum* gave rise to a gallery of portraits of anonymous young women, who became ordinary icons for an ideal African femininity in the context of the diaspora. Finally, in the 1970s, Barnor's return to Ghana saw the reuse of these codes inherited from the globalized fashion industry combined with the emerging iconography produced by African-American models as a means to create social documentary. In this way, he contributed to an aesthetic of blackness that was constructed within a transnational framework.

Keywords: photography, magazines, standards, gender, portraiture, Ghana.

## Résumé

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Ré-encoder le glamour du Ghana à l'Angleterre. Magazines illustrés, normes de genre et identités noires dans l'objectif de James Barnor (années 1950-1980)

Comment les normes de genre et de race véhiculées par les magazines illustrés, dont la circulation explose en Afrique au détour des années 1960, se répercutent-elles dans les pratiques localisées de photographes du continent qui, à leur tour, se font prescripteurs d'un ordre visuel genré ? Le présent article éclaire cette double question, en proposant une analyse diachronique de l'influence des modèles de féminité transmis par la presse sur l'imaginaire visuel d'un photographe ghanéen, des années 1950 à 1980. Il articule les publications du titre panafricain *Drum* (magazine le plus distribué en Afrique anglophone à cette époque) et ses traductions dans l'art du portrait tel que pratiqué par James Barnor (1929-), photographe au parcours transcontinental, entre le Ghana et l'Angleterre. Parce sa trajectoire professionnelle et personnelle épouse les évolutions de ces normes, James Barnor devient ainsi à la fois le réceptacle et l'instigateur d'une vision idéale de « la » femme africaine.

Dans une approche intersectionnelle, on croise la question des normes de genre et celle des biais raciaux, pour tenter de comprendre comment le photographe s'est approprié tout au long de sa carrière les codes mouvants d'un glamour féminin réinventé pour l'Afrique durant la période des postindépendances. Si de nombreuses études se sont interrogées sur les modalités de cette codification, elles sont ici abordées à travers l'exploration en profondeur des archives du photographe, aujourd'hui conservées à Paris, croisée à l'analyse sérielle des numéros de *Drum*. Le parti-pris est de mêler images destinées à la publication et images à caractère privé pour analyser comment les canons de la photographie de mode infusent les pratiques de ce producteur d'images à la croisée de différents mondes sociaux. Le corpus composé de portraits de jeunes femmes est également éclairé par de nombreux entretiens avec le photographe et certaines de ses modèles, qui nous informent sur les coulisses des images publiées en explorant leurs contextes politiques et sociaux.

On se penche d'abord sur la stratégie éditoriale de *Drum* depuis son lancement en Afrique du Sud, et à mesure de son déploiement vers l'Afrique de l'Ouest. Si le magazine emprunte dans un premier temps aux références du monde blanc occidental comme *Life*, il devient progressivement, et dans une certaine mesure, une vitrine pour les fiertés noires sur le continent et dans la diaspora. Dans sa pratique de studio des années 1950, Barnor montre déjà une attention aiguë aux codes de la féminité édictés par le magazine, par la reprise de poses et de façons de composer l'image. Durant les dix années qu'il passe ensuite en Angleterre, de 1959 à 1969, sa collaboration avec *Drum* alimente une galerie de portraits de jeunes femmes anonymes, qui deviennent les icônes ordinaires de cette féminité africaine idéale en contexte diasporique. Enfin, dans les années 1970, le retour de Barnor au Ghana témoigne du réemploi de ces codes hérités de la photographie de mode mais aussi de l'influence nouvelle des modèles africains-américains pour produire du documentaire social. Par ce biais, il contribue à une esthétique de la *blackness* qui se construit dans un cadre transnational.

Mots-clés : photographie, magazines, normes, genre, portrait, Ghana.

## Resumo

Recodificar o glamour do Gana em Inglaterra : revistas ilustradas, normas de género e identidades negras na objectiva de James Barnor (anos 1950-1980)

De que modo as normas de género e de raça veiculadas pelas revistas ilustradas, cuja divulgação explode em África, por volta dos anos 1960, se repercutem nas práticas locais de fotógrafos do continente que, por sua vez, se tornam prescritores de uma ordem visual baseada no género. O presente artigo esclarece esta dupla questão, propondo uma análise diacrónica da influência dos modelos de feminilidade, veiculados pela imprensa, sobre o imaginário visual de um fotógrafo ganense entre os anos 1950 e 1980. Articula as publicações da revista pan-africana *Drum* (a mais distribuída à época na África anglófona) e as suas traduções na arte do retrato, tal como foi praticado por James Barnor (1929-), fotógrafo com um percurso transcontinental entre o Gana e a Inglaterra. Pela sua trajetória profissional e pessoal, ao abraçar a evolução dessas normas, James Barnor torna-se assim ao mesmo tempo o receptor e instigador de uma visão ideal de “a” mulher africana.

Numa abordagem interseccional, cruza-se a questão das normas do género com a das vias raciais, a fim de tentar compreender de que forma o fotógrafo se apropriou, ao longo da sua carreira, dos códigos movediços de um glamour feminino reinventado para África no período posterior às independências. Se há numerosos estudos que se debruçam sobre as modalidades desta codificação, neste artigo as mesmas serão abordadas por meio da exploração em profundidade dos arquivos do fotógrafo, conservados em Paris, em cruzamento com a análise serial dos números de *Drum*. O ponto de partida é o de juntar as imagens destinadas a publicação e as imagens de carácter privado a fim de analisar o modo como os cânones da fotografia de moda infundem as práticas deste produtor de imagens, na encruzilhada dos diferentes universos sociais. O *corpus*, composto de retrato de mulheres jovens, é igualmente explicado pelas numerosas entrevistas com o fotógrafo e algumas das suas modelos, que nos dão informações sobre os bastidores das imagens publicadas, explorando os respectivos contextos políticos e sociais.

Debruçamo-nos em primeiro lugar sobre a estratégia editorial de *Drum* desde o seu lançamento na África do Sul e da sua expansão para a África ocidental. Se, num primeiro momento, a revista toma de empréstimo as referências do mundo branco ocidental, como *Life*, ela torna-se progressivamente, e, em certa medida, uma vitrina para os orgulhos negros no continente e na diáspora. Na sua prática de estúdio dos anos 1950, Barnor já presta uma forte atenção aos códigos de feminilidade adoptados pela revista, pela retomada de poses e de formas de composição da imagem. Durante os dez anos que passa seguidamente em Inglaterra, de 1959 a 1969, a sua colaboração com *Drum* alimenta uma galeria de retratos de jovens mulheres anónimas que se tornam os ícones ordinários dessa feminilidade africana, ideal em contexto diaspórico. Por fim, nos anos de 1970, o regresso de Barnor ao Gana testemunha o reemprego desses códigos herdados da fotografia de moda mas também a nova influência dos modelos afro-americanos, para produzir documentário social. Por esta via, contribui para uma estética da *blackness* que se constrói num quadro transnacional.

Palavras-chave: fotografias, revistas, normas, género, retrato, Gana.

# Re-encoding Glamour from Ghana to England Illustrated Magazines, Gender Norms and Black Identities through the Lens of James Barnor (1950s–1980s)

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**Data associated with this article: James Barnor Archive.**

Approx. 30,000 negatives and 4,000 contact sheets, deposited at the Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière (Paris, France).

The archive has been entirely catalogued, and legends added, in the presence of James Barnor for about three quarters of them, and digitalised. The digital database of the archive is not available online at present. It is intended to be made available for exhibitions or research projects.

## Introduction

Two women pose seated, smiling, one with her arm around the other, dressed in outfits typical of the fashion in Ghana in the seventies—ensembles adapted from the traditional style known as *kaba*,<sup>1</sup> thick-heeled shoes, small patent leather handbags and large sunglasses (fig. 1). On the wall behind them, in the top left hand corner of the photograph, we can see two covers of a magazine with the title *Drum*.<sup>2</sup> We are somewhere around 1972 in Accra, the capital of Ghana. If this picture catches our attention, it is because it concentrates two logical principles which are the subject of the present article. On one hand, it highlights the effect of triangulation between the subjects of the photograph—people of the female gender—, its creator—a man of about forty at the time—and finally a visual model—magazine covers—which dictate a set of codes of African femininity in those early 1970s. The co-presence of the normative aspect and its direct application by the portrait produced places this image at the heart of our study. On the other hand, this image raises the issue of the circulation of visual models. The Pan-African scale of the magazine *Drum*, with regard to both the production sites and the areas where it is read, raises questions concerning the fabrication of these models of femininity and their circulation via illustrated magazines.

1. The *kaba* refers to a style of women's clothing composed of a tight-fitting skirt, a blouse with three-quarter length sleeves and—sometimes— a third piece of cloth, all cut from the same material, as we can see here. See Richards (2021).

2. Only the cover on the left could be precisely identified by going through the numbers of the magazine conserved in the library of the laboratory *Les Afriques dans le Monde* (LAM) attached to Sciences Po Bordeaux. It is the June 1966 number of the magazine.





**Figure 1. James Barnor, Untitled [portrait of two friends in front of covers of *Drum*], Accra, c. 1972**

Digitalised and positivised colour negative, 6 x 6 cm.

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.

Like this one, James Barnor's photographs offer the means to apprehend the codification of representations of women by photographic portraits. Born in 1929 at Accra, James Barnor was initially a portrait photographer in a neighbourhood studio from the late 1940s to 1959, while learning the craft of photo journalism during the decade that saw Ghana win its independence on the 6th of March 1957. In 1959, he went to England to perfect his skills as a photographer. The English years (1959–1969) gave Barnor a fertile environment giving rise to a proliferation of practices which shaped his vision as if in sedimentary layers.<sup>3</sup> It was in particular for the pages of *Drum* that Barnor schooled his eye to the standards of fashion photography in around 1965–1967.

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3. See the diversity of his activities during his English period in the chronology recently updated in Barnor et al. (2022).

This monthly magazine founded in South Africa in 1951 spread rapidly throughout the continent through national editions. Through its content, focused on individual life stories, its lively narrative style,<sup>4</sup> its broad spectrum of distribution, the magazine became one of the mainstays of the Pan-African ideology and endeavoured to create a common imaginary throughout the African continent. Like other illustrated magazines launched at the turn of the 1950s in Africa, such as *Zonk!* in South Africa or *Bingo* in Senegal,<sup>5</sup> it served as a showcase for the idea of an African modernity thought up in Africa. James Barnor worked with the magazine from 1952, thanks to his links with the owner James Bailey, but we shall focus here on his second period of working with *Drum* and the way this shaped his later photographic practice. Whereas in the 1950s, he mainly covered political news for *Drum* with photographs that are today conserved in the magazine's archives in Johannesburg,<sup>6</sup> his work was significantly refocused in the 1960s towards portraits of young women from the black diaspora—both African and Caribbean—destined to provide material for a section that became an institution in the late 1960s: *Drum's* "Girls of the Month." This section consisted of a report in one or two pages with pictures and text which showcased the supposedly "real" life of a young woman presented as a model of modernity for a whole readership on the African continent and in the diaspora.<sup>7</sup>

While it was not the only component of his vision, the imprint of *Drum* was manifest in the photographs that Barnor produced on his return to Ghana in 1970. There then started a period of broad diversification of his professional activities, under the pressure of the economic recession that hit the country at that time.<sup>8</sup> The normative aspect of fashion photography and its male gaze<sup>9</sup> is distilled in the wide range of genres that he worked in, from wedding photos to advertising commissions for major corporations. While documenting the social realities of the capital, his photographs became the melting pot of a kind of visual cosmopolitanism<sup>10</sup> which

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4. On the literary style of *Drum*, see Cowling (2016).

5. For an in-depth contextualisation of these publications, see Jaji (2014) and Bajorek (2020) (for *Bingo* alone).

6. Bailey's African History Archive (B\*A\*H\*A). See <https://www.baha.co.za/>.

7. This section might in this respect constitute a variant of the section "Girl about Town" which appeared in the South-African edition from the late 1950s, with the notable difference that the latter was really written by a woman: Marion Morel, a young model, herself recounted her experiences in town. In contrast, the portraits in "Drum's girls" were all the product of the normative vision of male authors. On the shaping of "the Modern Miss trope" in the pages of the South-African edition of *Drum*, see Johnson (2009).

8. Murillo 2017.

9. The notion is borrowed here from the pioneering writings of Laura Mulvey (1975) who defined it as a process of objectification of women's bodies by the image, whether moving (cinema) or still (photographs, illustrated documents). See too Berger (1990).

10. On the influence of globalised culture in the West African urban centres, there have been numerous studies, but one may cite in particular the work of Manthia Diawara (2001) on James Brown at Bamako through the pictures of Malick Sidibé.

today conditions Barnor's success on the European art market,<sup>11</sup> usually to the detriment of an in-depth analysis of the social scope of his photographs and in particular of the relations of gender-based domination that underlie them. In contrast to this decontextualised reception, the present article juxtaposes visual history and gender history to attempt to understand how the photographer has assimilated throughout his career the shifting codes of female glamour reinvented for Africa, codes which reflect a gender-based visual, media, cultural and social order. While there have been numerous studies dealing with this codification, we here propose to tackle the issue on the basis of the archives of a photographer whose professional career and personal life were in phase with the shifts in these norms between the 1950s and the 1980s. In his work, James Barnor is thus both the recipient and the instigator of an ideal vision of "the" African woman. This article thus proposes to relate by an intersectional approach the issue of gender norms and racial bias in the construction of these figures during the post-independence period.

The first part focuses on *Drum*'s editorial strategy since its launch in South Africa, and in the course of its deployment in West Africa ("The launch of *Drum*: a visual school out to conquer Africa")—as a basis for exploring the way the young Barnor took inspiration from the magazine for his studio portraits of women in the 1950s (Part two: "The glamorisation of the studio portrait [1950s]"). The ten years spent in England then provide a basis for thinking about how his contribution to *Drum* from England fuelled an ideal of the African woman in the context of the diaspora (Part three: "Ordinary icons: female ideals in the African diaspora press [1960s]"). Finally, in the 1970s, Barnor's return to Ghana provides evidence of the re-use of these codes inherited from fashion photography but also the influence of African-American models to produce social documentary (Part four: "Social documentary through the prism of the fashion photographer [1970s]").

## Sources and methodology

This article is part of a broader research project based on the exploration of the archives of James Barnor, deposited at his initiative at the Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière (in the fourth *arrondissement* of Paris) in several sets, from 2016 to 2022. This archive consists of a collection of about 30,000 negatives as well as more than 4,000 contact sheets,<sup>12</sup> catalogued and digitalised under the supervision of the photographer. There are also several hundred contemporary prints and a collection of documents (personal correspondence, work contracts, course notes, etc.) enabling an in-depth exploration of his conditions of production in the different phases of his career. The gallery makes use of this archive for commercial purposes, but has also

11. See here the recent exhibitions dedicated to the photographer at two major institutions of the contemporary art scene, the North Serpentine Galleries in Londres ("James Barnor: Accra/London—A Retrospective," 30 March to 31 October 2021) and the LUMA foundation ("James Barnor: *Stories—Le Portfolio*," presented at the *Rencontres d'Arles* 2022).

12. Estimation in March 2023.



constructed a digital archive base to make it available to researchers, for exhibitions or for research projects. Since the outset of my research in 2018, I have had close relations with this gallery, and have benefitted from unlimited access to the archive, in exchange for my participation in the development of the digital archive base. This platform, at present private, centralises the whole set of negatives and prints making up the archive, structured by a chronological and thematic nomenclature which enables the user to navigate easily among the flood of images. The information delivered by the photographer concerning the contact sheets (the basic unit of this archive) is transcribed there.

A small part of Barnor's archive is also conserved by the London establishment ABP Autograph, some hundred contemporary negative and prints,<sup>13</sup> but because of the size and the accessibility of the archive managed by the Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière, I have based my research in this gallery. It should be noted that photographs from the period and modern prints made by the photographer have also been acquired by art galleries such as Tate Britain (2012), the Musée du Quai Branly (2016) and more recently the Centre Pompidou (2021).

Other sources are studied alongside these archives, in particular several editions of the magazine *Drum*. Because they were available in France, I first consulted all the numbers of the Ghana edition from January 1964 to April 1966, then those of the Nigeria edition from 1966 to 1970, available at the library of Sciences Po Bordeaux. I consulted them focusing on those in which James Barnor had published photographs (that is in five numbers from 1966 and 1967). He also published in numbers which cannot be consulted in France but for which low definition reproductions were transferred to me by the Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière: the numbers from May 1967 and March 1968 conserved at the African Studies Center of the University of Leiden (Netherlands). I also consulted the collection at the library La Contemporaine at the University of Nanterre (January, March and April 1962 of the Ghana edition, then March, May and June 1964 of the Nigeria edition), in which there are no photographs by Barnor but which enabled me to become more familiar with the editorial content of the magazine. More recently, I was able to consult the numbers from 1951 to 1960 available at the Bodleian Library in Oxford—mainly the South Africa edition, and more rarely the East Africa edition for the end of the decade.

While focusing this search on discovering images published by Barnor, my attention was also more broadly fixed on the issues of codification of gender roles, in particular those attributed to or expected of women. To that end, several parameters and contents were observed, whether the role of the image in the representation of the bodies and the roles of women, the visual economy of advertising transcribing these representations, the interactions between the text and the image in the storytelling of the section

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13. See for example the online picture gallery "Ever Young: The Photography of James Barnor," *Autograph*: <https://autograph.org.uk/online-image-galleries/ever-young-the-photography-of-james-barnor>

“*Drum*’s Girls of the Month,” the contributions of women writers such as the fashion section, with occasional contributions from the Ghanaian author Beryl Karikari,<sup>14</sup> or the very popular “lonely hearts” mail—the “Dear Dolly” section which appeared from 1951.<sup>15</sup> In the earliest editions, between 1951 and 1960, the injunction to beauty is really ever-present in the magazine. Among many examples, in the June 1952 number, the section “Mr. Drum” was devoted to the quest for the ideal beauty pursued by him throughout the continent. Through his eyes, readers are offered “A Quick Look-round for the Ideal of African Glamour”: ten portraits of young women are accompanied by short texts insisting on the particular charms of each “beauty.” To contextualise the tone of these publications, the contemporary testimonies on the editorial strategy of *Drum* and its evolution are also deployed in this article.<sup>16</sup>

Thorough exploration of the Barnor archives shows that his attention was not exclusively focused on women. Like other well-known photographers of his generation (whether we think of the canonical examples of the Malian photographers Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, the Burkinabe Sory Sanlé, or the Nigerian Okhai Ojeikere), he was witness to the changes in the representations of the self as much in women as in men. Nevertheless, here it is the portraits of women that capture our attention sine they were more codified by the circulation of illustrated publications such as *Drum*, whose business was based in large part on the attractiveness of the portraits of young women displayed on the cover. Cameron Duodu, the editor of the Ghana edition from 1960 to 1965, was very explicit on this issue: “But perhaps best of all, *Drum* exposed its continent-wide readership to what was regarded as feminine beauty in other parts of Africa” (Duodu 2014).

Barnor’s pictures have been selected for their exemplary nature among the typological categories of this archive and their capacity to provide visual testimony to James Barnor’s personal circulation between several cultural universes. On the basis of a corpus combining images destined for publication and images of a private nature, we seek here to trace from within how the canons of fashion photography permeate the practices of a photographer. From this point of view, the procedure takes inspiration from works which investigate the “hidden face” of published pictures by exploring their political and social context.<sup>17</sup> Beyond the glossy surface

14. In her section illustrated with drawings or photographs, Beryl Karikari, who was the wife of the editor Cameron Duodo, offered advice to women on the way they should make the most of their beauty, from the most intimate gestures for self-preparation to the choice of the most fashionable outfits, how to behave at the beach or relate to men. See Karikari 1962a et 1962b.

15. A section which although originally run by a woman, was later taken over by several male journalists. The pseudonym “Dolly,” taken from the popular name of the black South African actress Dolly Rathebe, stayed the same and was a way to mask the male identity hidden behind Dolly’s knowledgeable advice. See *Creative Camera* 1984.

16. See the testimony of Anthony Sampson, Jim Bailey’s right hand man in the early 1950s, and the number of the magazine *Creative Camera* dedicated to the history of *Drum* (Sampson 1956; “*Drum—South Africa’s Black Picture Magazine*” 1984).

17. See for example the work of Louise Barré (2018) on the use of photography in the visual propaganda of the Democratic Party of Côte d’Ivoire based on two images showcasing the

of the illustrated magazine (Jaji 2014, 111–46), this article seeks to compare the published version of the images with the archives: we shall thus explore the contact sheets from which the published images were taken, reproducing the photographer's intentions in his composition of the portraits of women, and examining the agency of his models. Finally, the exploration of the archives has been considerably enriched by regular interviews with the photographer<sup>18</sup> and with some of his models,<sup>19</sup> on the basis of the method of photo-elicitation<sup>20</sup> which consists in carrying out an interview based on photos which may (or not) represent the people interviewed.

## The launch of *Drum*: a visual school out to conquer Africa

In March 1951 a new illustrated magazine was launched in South Africa, *The African Drum*, whose sub-heading—"A Magazine of Africa for Africa"—did little to hide the "white hand" (Fleming and Falola 2005<sup>21</sup>) which was at the helm. This first version did indeed continue to propagate the racial and tribal stereotypes regarding the black populations of Africa which it claimed to address. This being so, it met with devastating failure a few months after its launch. The owner, Jim Bailey, hired a new editor, Anthony Sampson, who aimed to "Africanise" the magazine by recruiting black staff. The ebullience of the magazine during these first years—amply commented on (Haney 2010, 106–7; Enwezor 1998; Fleming and Falola 2005)—is incarnated in this emblematic photograph taken in the *Drum* offices in 1954 by a young German photographer living in South Africa since 1950, Jürgen Schadeberg (fig. 2). He is

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role of women published in the paper *Fraternité* in 1964. My work is also based on the work of researchers who have attempted to re-examine corpuses of African photographs from a perspective of "social life" of the images, that is to say tracing all the contexts in which they have circulated and been shown. On the notion the diaspora of the images inspired by the notion of "the social life of objects" of Igor Kopytoff, see Pfeffer (2013).

18. Four semi-structured interviews with James Barnor were carried out and recorded, then fully transcribed (Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière, December 2018 and June 2019). Since then, numerous conversations with him, mainly online, have enhanced my understanding of the images as the corpus was progressively constituted. These more informal exchanges were all transcribed in a text file, and are indicated here as "Personal communication," to distinguish them from the main formal interviews.

19. For example: interview with Erlin Ibreck on Zoom, May 2021. Erlin Ibreck is one of the "Drum's girls" whose portraits were published in the May 1967 number of the Nigeria edition. I met her at the opening of the exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London. She lives in the United States, and came to London specially to see James Barnor again. The interview was carried out online as she was not staying in London.

20. On this method applied to representations of female African models, see Magee (2013) and Buckley (2014), and in a social history perspective, Panata (2016).

21. The expression is taken from the testimony of one of the first editors of the South Africa edition of *Drum*, the British writer Anthony Sampson, in 1956. He contrasted in the first chapters of his book a "white hand" which designates the founders of the magazine and a "black hand" which designates the black authors and photographers that they recruited from 1952, aware that the success of the magazine depended on its ability to relay African voices throughout the continent. See Sampson (1956).

known to have trained the South Africa photographers Peter Magubane (1932–), Bob Gosani (1934–1972)—who we see here taking a photo—, and Ernest Cole (1949–1990), figures of a new generation of black photographers whose early careers were intrinsically linked to the success of the magazine (Haney 2010).



Figure 2. Jürgen Schadeberg, “The DRUM Office,” Johannesburg, 1954  
Published as an illustration of “Four Years of *Drum!*,” *Drum*, March 1955, p. 40–1.  
Double page: 71 x 54,4 cm.  
A photo taken at the same moment and its original legend can be consulted on this page: [https://www.baha.co.za/item-detail/?q=19\\_846](https://www.baha.co.za/item-detail/?q=19_846) [archive].  
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The photo attests to the situation of the magazine in the mid-1950s and the deployment of its strategy beyond South Africa. According to the legend that accompanies the version published in the March 1955 number, we can see “squatting on the ground, the circulation manager Benson Dyanti and the accountant Ken Mtetwa [who] were planning the expansion of *Drum* in Africa” (*Drum—South Africa’s Black Picture Magazine* 1984). In the background, two men are holding a magazine where can be made out the portrait of a white woman in pin-up attire. The legend reads: “Victor Xashimba, dark room assistant, and Dan Chocho, journalist, want to destroy the last number of *Africa*.” This magazine, designated as the “little sister” of *Drum*, was another publication launched by Bailey in the early 1950s, but it was a failure. All the white women sexualised in the pages of *Africa* appear as the counterparts of the young black models shown on the cover of *Drum* ever since the first editions (Enwezor 1998). These portraits of women are shown in succession on glossy paper every month. Already in the 1950s, when colour photography was virtually non-existent on the African continent, these photographs were manipulated—literally speaking—by an exclusively male team and retouched in the alluring colours that define the canon of the modern African woman. These codes derive from the visual



repertoire of the major publications of the western press that Bailey and his white editors knew well (Newbury 2010).

If the dominance of a male gaze is undeniable in the editorial strategy of the magazine, Ttisi Ella Jaji has shown that the glossy surface of similar publications has nevertheless contributed to forging an imaginary community at the scale of the continent. Analysing the first front page of the South African magazine *Zonk!*, launched a little before *Drum*, which gave the star role to the actress and singer Dolly Rathebe, she considered that the image of so self-assured a woman “[changed] fundamentally the perception that African women may have had of themselves and of the rest of the world.” (Jaji 2014, 113). She goes on to insist on the pivotal role of the image of women in the codification of an ideal “of domestic life, consumption of the media, urbanisation, modernity and political identity in post-World War Two Africa” (*ibid.*). Thus the scope of the magazine as a textual space (Johnson 2009<sup>22</sup>) but also a visual space made a major contribution to the spread of gender norms throughout the continent. It provided a set of stylistic prescriptions which defined the gender ideals of an epoch when many countries in Africa, on the threshold of independence, were in quest of new social models. If it is difficult to evaluate the respective male and female share of the readership of *Drum*, we may nonetheless stress that its eye-catching front pages artfully target both audiences throughout the continent.

*Drum* rapidly spread to other regions of Africa and exported to them its own aesthetic while adapting to the culture of the countries concerned. From the end of 1951, Bailey and Sampson tried to develop its network, notably in Ghana and Nigeria, but the success of the enterprise initially remained rather limited. The West African readership felt rather remote from the themes treated in the columns of the magazine which referred to political, social and cultural realities specific to South Africa, as James Barnor, who began to work with Bailey in 1952, testified: “When I was working for *Drum* in Ghana, we didn’t have any trouble at all. We didn’t even know what was going on” (Manu et al. 2021). To compensate for this effect of distance, a process of adaptation began to develop at this time: initially, only a few items, then gradually a substantial part of each number were dedicated to portraits or news items specific to these countries, up until the launch of a West Africa edition in 1956 (Priebe 1978). In 1957, two permanent offices were set up in Accra and Lagos, and in 1960 *Drum* put into operation the split long expected by the readership of the two countries, offering two distinct editions for Nigeria and Ghana. The golden age of the magazine is generally placed in the early 1960s, reaching, respectively, 90,000 and 65,000 readers each month. In these two versions, pictures occupied considerably more space than in the South Africa edition, which devoted a major part to written

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22. This is how Rachel Johnson defines the nature of the medium *Drum*. On one hand, it is a “space,” since it is limited both in terms of the freedom of the press in South Africa, and also in terms of accessibility to its potential readers. On the other hand, in the sense that it made coexist a wide spectrum of voices (journalists, readers letters, etc.), sometimes mutually contradictory, within the same number.



texts, considered initially as the primary vector of identification for the readers. In Ghana, the importance of new models of identification in the illustrated press was perhaps all the more marked given that the deployment of *Drum* coincided exactly with the period of negotiations for independence led by Kwame Nkrumah, from 1951 to 1957.

## The glamorisation of the studio portrait (1950s)

Bailey's strategy for deployment consisted in finding locally authors and photographers capable of providing material for the pages of the magazine for the purpose of "West Africanising" it. This network was deployed throughout the decade, reaching around three hundred agents for the whole of the Nigeria and Ghana teams at the beginning of the 1960s (Toyin and Falola 2005, 148). James Barnor was among them (fig. 3) and remembers the revolution that this kind of press represented in his country:

"In fact, before *Drum* came, there was no idea of such magazines publishing pictures. So, even though I didn't work for them full time, I was offered a different level of photography. I had my studio photography, I had my journalistic photography, and that extra which makes (*sic*) *Drum* a new thing in Africa." (Manu et al. 2021)

In the numbers from the 1950s that I have been able to consult, very few of the photographs can be attributed with certainty to Barnor. Nevertheless, in August 1952 there is a portrait of his sister Ivy Barnor, used to announce the beauty contest "Mr and Miss Africa."<sup>23</sup> Launched in January 1952, the idea was to adapt the western genre of the beauty contest with the specific aim of "finding the ideal of African womanhood," and, a few months later, her male counterpart (Cowles 2001) (fig. 4). Photographed by her elder brother, probably on the occasion of a church ceremony, the young Ivy has her hair in an elegant chignon; her face is shown beside a portrait of a young Southern Rhodesian, just as elegant, and a smiling baby—also photographed by Barnor although he was not credited for it<sup>24</sup>—, as if the three formed the ideal family of this young African generation.

This example shows that in his studio, baptised "Ever Young," the photographer was as early as 1951 the vector of the gender norms imposed by the magazine. In 1947, James Barnor started his apprenticeship as a photographer in the studio "Yehowa Aakwe" ("God is watching" in the Gã language) of his cousin, J.P.D. Dodoo. It was photography being ever-present in his family (another of his cousins and a maternal uncle were also photographers) that oriented him towards this profession. During the first years of his career, between 1949 and 1952, a certain conformity in the execution of the portrait reflected not only the technical rigidity imposed by the

23. On the history of this competition and its gender bias, see Clowes (2001).

24. The original negative of the portrait of the baby is indeed in the Barnor archive at the Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.



**Figure 3. James Barnor, Untitled [Jim Bailey, left, another member of the Ghana team and James Barnor, right], Accra, Ghana, c. 1952**

Digitalised and positivised negative, 6 x 6 cm.

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.

recourse to the view camera using glass plates<sup>25</sup> but also the formal codes passed on by his trainers. But from 1953 on, his installation in his premises in the harbour area of Jamestown, one of the oldest and most lively neighbourhoods in Accra, contributed to the deployment of a less formal aesthetic. This gradual emancipation took inspiration from different sources which reflected the influence of cultural industries in the process of globalisation, notably the cinematographic imagery which was developing rapidly in the major African cities (Behrend 1998). It should be specified here that Barnor's studio was located very close to the Sea View Hotel, a nightspot founded in 1873 which was also one of the first cinemas in the city (Jackson 2019).

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25. The view camera was the most widely used device used in Africa until the beginning of the 1950s, when it was gradually replaced by cameras using lighter film. It required a fairly long exposure time, of several seconds, which gave the subjects' poses a rigid aspect.



4

DRUM: AUGUST 1952, International Edition

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From Southern Rhodesia comes this picture of Mr. J. B. Samson.

**A WONDERFUL WEEK-END IN DURBAN!**  
This free holiday has been planned by DRUM for the winning Mr. and Miss Africa, who will travel there by air. Should the prize winners live in Durban or outside the Union, or if any travel restrictions prevent their going to Durban, they will be given the cash equivalent.

2nd prize for Mr. and Miss Africa will be £27 each and 3rd prize £13 each. There will also be 48 prizes of 5/- for the runners up. The prettiest baby will win £10 and a 2nd prize of £4 and a prize of £1 will be given. In addition there will be 20 5/- prizes for the runners up.

This big smile comes from 4-month-old Amatey, of Accra, Coast.

**AFRICA 1952**  
To: THE EDITOR, AFRICAN DRUM, 176 MAIN STREET, JOHANNESBURG.  
I wish to enter for THE AFRICAN DRUM "Africa 1952" Beauty Contest. I agree to abide by the rules of the contest and enclose a photograph of myself.  
.....Signature.  
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ADDRESS.....  
AGE.....  
Fill in this form now!

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ADDRESS.....  
\*For Subscription Rates see opposite

Figure 4. Mr. and Miss Africa 1952 Beauty Contest, featuring Ivy Barnor (right). *Drum*, international edition, August 1952  
Bodleian Library, Oxford.

These international influences contributed to the development of a sexualised aesthetic in James Barnor's studio portraits which increased over the course of the decade. The idealisation of the anonymous women who were eager to pose before the lens of the young photographer was based on the strong distinction in the respective representation of men and women, as is well illustrated by a page of Barnor's personal album (fig. 5). We can see clearly here that with the women, the skin and the sexual attributes such as the low neckline are much more visible, and the postures more sensual, than with the men, often shown in active positions and in suits.<sup>26</sup> The pose of the young woman in the bottom left corner became a

26. It should however be noted that the portraits of men shown in this picture are not studio portraits, unlike those of the women, which implies a different photographic experience, not

classic of the studio and is somewhat reminiscent of the pin-ups on the covers of the magazines of the time—the pose is for example frequent on the cover of *Drum* or *Jet*.<sup>27</sup> The development of a sexualised aesthetic among young women was however rarely as explicit in this portrait, where the skin and the low neckline of the model are on display, owing to the increasing control of morals exercised by Kwame Nkrumah's government targeting young people from the mid-1950s on.<sup>28</sup> It then rather took the form of what we here refer to as the “glamorisation”<sup>29</sup> of the studio portrait, understood as the glossing over of the markers of social status in the individuals represented—women in this case—to showcase their aesthetic or sexualised attributes. An expression of this can be seen in the series of portraits of Miss Accra taken by Barnor in about 1957, which are typical of the photographer's production in the second half of the 1950s, in particular with regard to the poses and camera angles used (fig. 6). The three-quarter profile predominates from 1955 as one of the signs of the progression of the functions of the studio. The studio no longer served solely to define the social identity of the subjects, to mark the high points of their success in the system of moral values of the country (marriage, access to a profession, etc.), but to show the specifically aesthetic character of the individuals. The choice of outfits of his clients, in particular, is shown as the reflection of a fashion that mingles aspects borrowed from 1950s Western culture—here backed up by the allegorical presence of the Coca-Cola bottle—and wardrobe items tailored from material with local symbolic significance.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, although in the 1950s James Barnor's work for *Drum* was not exclusively devoted to fashion photography and portraits of women, his studio production, in particular the portraits of young women, already reflected a familiarity with these conventions, which was to be exploited and enhanced during his stay in England

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based on the stage setting specific to the studio. But we may consider them as representative of the aesthetic generally associated with portraits of men at the Ever Young studio.

27. See *Drum*, September 1957, consultable here: <http://www.robertnewman.com/1950s-covers-of-south-africas-drum-africas-leading-magazine/> [archive] or *Jet*, 14 July 1955, reproduced here: <https://flic.kr/p/35Xrvb> [archive]. The image of the black woman as pin-up was mainly spread by the latter magazine, although James Barnor never mentioned its influence on the way he composed his portraits of women. We might nonetheless envisage the rebound effects of one publication on the other. See for example this collection of reproductions, which includes a number of covers and photographs from *Jet*, which illustrates this kind of imagery: [https://www.flickr.com/photos/vieilles\\_annonces/albums/72157601493848821](https://www.flickr.com/photos/vieilles_annonces/albums/72157601493848821).

28. On the control of the morals of young people, in particular those of the middle classes who Barnor photographed, see in particular Plageman (2016).

29. A term freely borrowed from Allison Moore (2020) who used it à propos of the aesthetic reception of the social photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé in the international art world. The concept also takes inspiration from the writings of bell hooks (2021) who uses it to characterise the instrumentalisation of the sexuality of black women in American society.

30. We find for example numerous portraits showcasing *kente*, a material originally linked to Ashanti royalty which, through the intermediary of Kwame Nkrumah, became one of the emblems of claims both for national independence and for a Pan-African project (Fila-Bakabadio 2009).





Figure 5. James Barnor, Untitled [Portrait cutting from a page of an album constituted by the photographer], Ever Young studio, Accra, Ghana, c. 1953  
Size: 24 x 30 cm.

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.

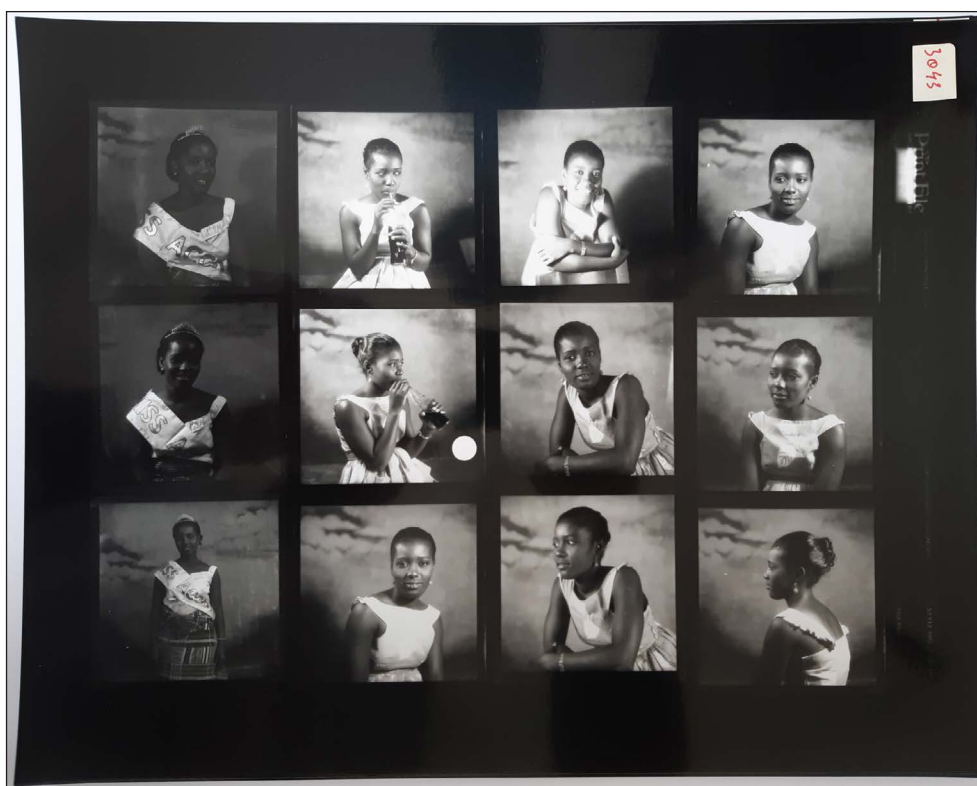


Figure 6. James Barnor, Miss Accra 1957 [?], Ever Young Studio, Accra, Ghana  
Digitalised and positivised negative contact print, 6 x 6 cm.

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.



from 1959 to 1969. We can also see in them the hallmark of the visual fashioning operated by *Drum*, which, while it did not succeed in achieving the status of an African Time or Life, as Bailey had originally planned, was nonetheless the most popular magazine ever distributed in Ghana.

### Ordinary icons: ideals of womanhood in the press of the African diaspora (1960s)

In 1959, James Barnor decided to leave his studio and his family in Accra to go to live in England, wishing to perfect his mastery of the photographic medium and encouraged by his connections with Jim Bailey.<sup>31</sup> On his arrival, he trained at the photography department of Kent college of applied arts (Medway College of Art, Rochester) and worked in a photography laboratory specialising in colour printing (Colour Processing Laboratory, based at Edenbridge, also in Kent) from 1960 to 1965 (Mussai 2016; Lavernhe 2021). It was only in the middle of the decade that he rejoined the staff of *Drum*, which had opened an office in Fleet Street, where at that time most newspaper and magazine offices were located (Oppenheim 2019). Barnor's training at Medway College enhanced his fashion photography culture. The college encouraged exchanges between the design department, which included the photography course James Barnor was taking, and the fashion and textile department.<sup>32</sup> Barnor was therefore regularly called on to photograph the creations of his stylist fellow-students. The different sub-genres of fashion photography (studio portrait, outdoor portrait, close-up focusing on the details of an outfit, etc.) which he worked in is evident in the numerous contact sheets from this period in his archive (fig. 7). One photograph also shows James Barnor posing against a wall of pictures which is evidence of the emphasis on industrial and advertising photography at this college. It was also the expertise in colour photography which he developed during these years that helped him to rejoin the staff of *Drum*.<sup>33</sup> Barnor offered a series of pictures to the magazine, this time pivoting clearly towards portraits of women,<sup>34</sup> from September 1966 to December 1967.

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31. This is attested by a letter sent by the latter in response to a letter from James Barnor in which he referred to his plans to go and try his luck in England. Bailey wrote to him: "I should try London first. Remember, competition for jobs is much hotter in England than in Accra so you must rely on your own initiative." Letter from Jim Bailey to James Barnor, 15 September 1959. Archives James Barnor, Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.

32. Brochure of Medway College of Art, 1961–1962. Rochester: Kent Institute of Art and Design Institutional Archive. Researched October 2021. See too *UCA Archives and Special Collections Online Catalogue*, ref. no. MECOL/1/27: <http://archives.ucreative.ac.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=MECOL%2f1%2f27>.

33. Interview with the author, December 2018.

34. Barnor also photographed for *Drum* portraits of Muhammed Ali shortly before his fight against Brian London in 1966, and a series with the Ghanaian radio presenter Mike Eghan. 197



Figure 7. James Barnor, *Untitled [Model posing for a student assignment]*, Rochester, Kent, c. 1962

Digitalised and positivised negative, 6 x 6 cm.

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.

During the years preceding this collaboration, there was a surge in press publications from the black communities in the United Kingdom (the Black British press) in reaction to the rise of racism the country was then experiencing.<sup>35</sup> However, Barnor's testimony gives a more nuanced view of this observation: "I wanted to do cover photos or fashion photos, like for the 'normal' English papers [...]. There were few black magazines to begin with" (Manu et al. 2021). His contribution to the numbers of the Nigeria and Ghana editions of *Drum* thus reflected the paradox of a "re-aestheticisation of blackness" (Ford 2015) through the adoption of the norms of the white press. But the magazine also took inspiration from the major African-American references, *Ebony* and *Jet*, which aimed to subvert "the familiar markers of degradation, spectacle, and victimization" of black populations in America, to

35. The years 1958 and 1962 were respectively marked by the race riots in Notting Hill and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act which drastically restricted admission to the United Kingdom of citizens of Commonwealth countries. Naomi Oppenheim (2019) nonetheless recalled that the press publications were already well established in the Afro-Caribbean communities in London since the post-war period.

promote on the contrary an “iconic blackness articulated to [...] symbols of class respectability, achievement, and American national identity” (Stange 2001). The project was quite different as regards the pages of *Drum*: the portraits of young women are in fact enlisted not for the promotion of a national consciousness but at the instigation of models of social success in the very experience of the diaspora.

The female ideal of the “girl about town”<sup>36</sup> (Johnson 2009), which had made its way in the western metropolis, was usually based on an affirmation of her ease in relationships, her dynamism or her ambition. Barnor’s portraits made the covers the magazine seven times, and at least six times the inside pages for the “Drum’s Girls of the Month” section. Most of the time, his models were not professionals and could be his personal acquaintances,<sup>37</sup> but they were transformed into icons through *Drum*’s visual strategies. Here, it is worth comparing the covers of the magazine, which, to make it more eye-catching, banked on a glamorisation or even a very striking sexualisation of the models, with on the other hand the portraits in the inside pages which were rather based on the scenario of their supposedly “real” lives. On the cover, the close-up is invariably the rule, with more rarely a bust shot. Like that of the black South African icon, Dolly Rathebe, in the early 1950s (Jaji 2014), it is here the gaze of women who are complete strangers which by its directness incites the curiosity of the reader in Africa (fig. 8 et 9). The accent on the details of their beauty treatment, such as the kohl eye makeup and the saturated colour code accentuate their brazen attitude. In the section itself, it is the more sober black-and-white (and less costly to produce) that is used, closer to documentary photography. Thus the young Rema Nelson (fig. 10), an eighteen-year-old Jamaican who was hoping for a career as a model, was photographed in her house in the suburbs of London. The staging of the scene uses the motifs of the telephone and the car, symbol of the “material cultures of success” of the 1950s-1960s (Rowlands 1996; cited in Fouquet 2014, 7). At that time, the visual consumption of fashion magazines had accustomed western readers to an almost natural association between women and cars.<sup>38</sup> In the context of institutionalised racism in England in the years 1967–1968 (Gilroy 1987), the car associated with a young black woman evokes a horizon of expectation and consumption of which *Drum* had become the showcase. Consultation of the contact sheet these portraits were taken from reinforces this observation, since we see in several shots the car given almost as much of a star role in the picture as the young

36. This notion is discussed by Rachel Johnson with regard to female models in the metropolis of Johannesburg in the 1950s, but perhaps repurposed in the context of African immigration outside the continent: it served the same aim of showing that it was possible and desirable to succeed away from one’s homeland.

37. For example, Gladys Brown, “Drum’s Girl” for September 1966, was a friend of the Barnor family. As for Erlin Ibreck, a young Ugandan student given the star role in the May 1967 number, Barnor met her at a London bus stop. Interviews by the author with James Barnor, December 2018.

38. On the model of this association as proclaimed in the pages of American Vogue, see Tuite (2019, 228–35).





Figure 8. James Barnor, Untitled [Portrait of Constance Mulondo on the cover of *Drum*, Nigeria edition, August 1967]

Page size: 37.5 x 27.5 cm.

Library, Sciences Po Bordeaux.

woman. Furthermore, at least three of the sessions organised by James Barnor in about 1966 showcase luxury cars, recycling a motif and a way of posing his models he had experimented with during his course at Medway College of Art (fig. 7). The Jaguar, albeit borrowed by Barnor from an African-American artist friend,<sup>39</sup> Bill Hutson, became in a lasting way the instrument of a narrative where the staging of a desire for social success was linked to the model of American consumption.

Behind the glossy surface of the magazine and the theatrical staging of the lives of these ordinary icons are concealed the visual strategies orchestrated by a spectrum of actors, all male. The testimony of Erlin Ibreck, a young Ugandan student photographed by Barnor on several occasions between 1966 and 1968, has shed light on the conditions of production of these images.<sup>40</sup> In particular, she insisted on the generation gap that separated her from Barnor, who was twenty years older than

39. James Barnor, personal communication, March 2022.

40. Personal interview with Erlin Ibreck on Zoom, May 2021.



Figure 9. James Barnor, Untitled [Portrait of Helen de Coteau on the cover of *Drum*, Nigeria edition, December 1967]

Page size: 37.5 x 27.5 cm.

Library, Sciences Po Bordeaux.

her and who she therefore considered as her “mentor.” Erlin Ibreck also recalled that the amateur models like her were not paid, but that it was considered an honour to be shown on the front page of a magazine with such a wide distribution in Africa. The models could play an active part in the choice of their outfits and accessories. For one of the sessions for the “Drum’s girls” pages, James Barnor took Erlin Ibreck to the home of Bill Hutson, the African-American artist who also lent her his Jaguar<sup>41</sup> (fig. 11). She tells how she proposed several outfits to the two men, outfits

41. See for example two other photographs from the same series where the car featured: James Barnor “*Drum Cover Girl Erlin Ibreck Stepping out of a Jaguar in Kilburn, London, 1966*” (Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière): <https://www.galerieclémentinedelaferonniere.fr/artworks/1991-james-barnor-drum-cover-girl-erlin-ibreck-stepping-out-of-1966/> [archive], reproduced in Carey-Thomas and Constable (2021, 44); James Barnor, “*Drum Cover Girl Erlin Ibreck, London*” (Tate Modern, reference: P14384): <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/barnor-drum-cover-girl-erlin-ibreck-london-p14384> [archive], reproduced in Barnor et al. (2022, 139).



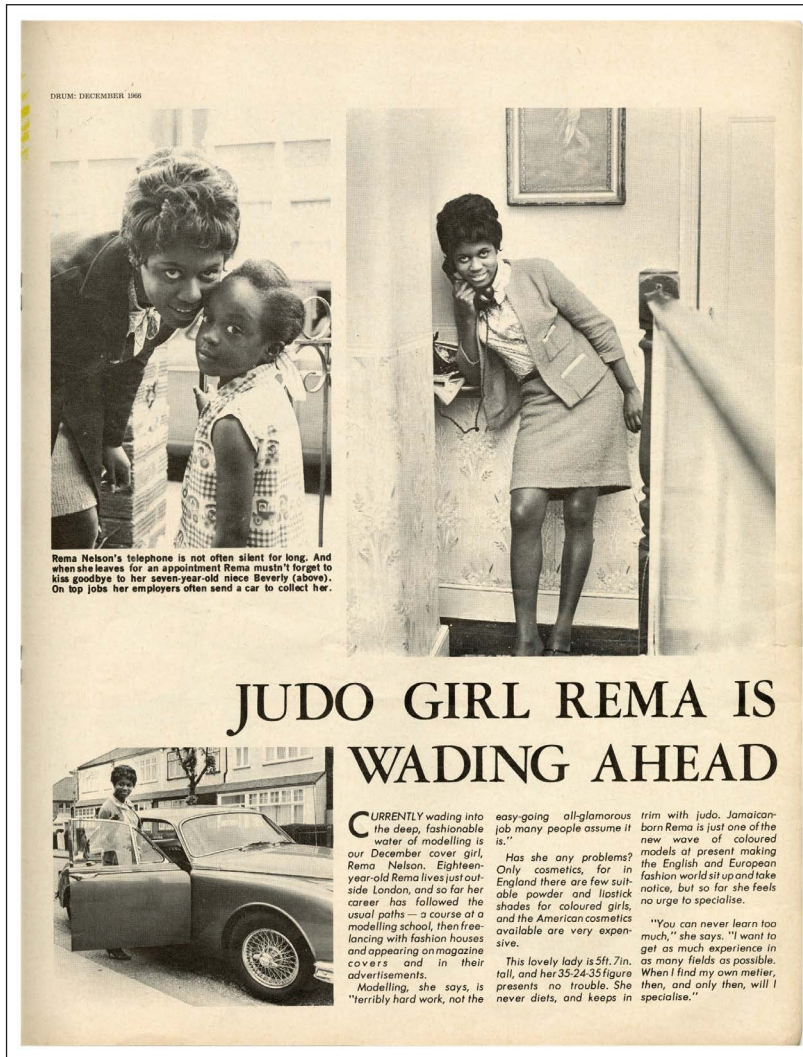


Fig. 10. "Judo Girl Rema is Wading Ahead," *Drum* (Nigeria edition, December 1960).

Story showing Rema Nelson at home, photographs by James Barnor.

Page size: 35.5 x 27.5 cm.

Library, Sciences Po Bordeaux.

she had bought at the cheap chain stores of 1960s London.<sup>42</sup> Then it was the men who managed the artistic direction, choosing the dress she wore and having her pose in the modernist decor created by Hutson's works, whose geometrical motifs were artfully reflected in the patterns of the dress and the design of the jewellery. This phenomenological approach to the photographic session also makes it possible to grasp the relations of dominance, but also the agency of the model, which are at play behind the staging of these portraits of women. This narrative dimension, the main trigger of the sexualised aesthetic of the young women he photographed in the 1960s, was to leave its imprint on the art of the portrait as practised by Barnor in the years to come.

42. Interview with the author on Zoom, May 2021. See too the text by Erlin Ibreck, "On the Other Side of the Lens," in Carey-Thomas and Constable (2021, 46–51).



Figure 11. James Barnor, photo session for *Drum* with Erlin Ibreck in the apartment of the African-American artist Bill Hutson, Kilburn, London, 1967  
Digital and positivised colour negative, 6 x 6 cm.

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.

### The social documentary through the prism of the fashion photograph (1970s)

Back in Accra in 1970, James Barnor took on a range of professional functions, all related to his expertise in colour photography,<sup>43</sup> or to links he had developed with graphic creation, but he no longer worked for the press strictly speaking. The decade was shaken by *coups d'état* which destabilised the country's economy, made photography work precarious and impinged on the freedom of the press. While the business affairs of Ghana *Drum* were already going badly, the accession to power of General Acheampong in 1972 sounded the death knell of the national edition

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43. James Barnor went back to Accra as a business representative for the Belgian-German firm Agfa-Gevaert, which was planning to develop its markets in West Africa through the intermediary of local photographers trained in its techniques. See Lavernhe 2021.

(Fleming et Falola, 162<sup>44</sup>). Despite this decline of the illustrated press, the covers of *Drum* continued to decorate Barnor's studio (fig. 1). This can be seen in particular in a photo taken in his studio in the mid-1980s which shows, pell-mell, portraits of the "Drum girls" photographed in the 1960s (including Rema Nelson) and other fashion photos showing racially type-cast models whom he did not photograph himself (fig. 12). The imaginary of the commercial studio, always devoted to multiple strategies of invention of the self, going beyond or even subverting the simple attribution of the legitimate roles of the social order,<sup>45</sup> thus perpetuates the references to glamour photography.



Figure 12. James Barnor, assistant at Studio X23, leaving the dark room, Accra, Ghana, between 1983 and 1987

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.

44. Apart from the dissent that opposed Bailey and the editors of the new regime, it was these material restrictions related to various embargos on imports that hamstrung the production capacity of the magazine, which was forced to cease publication in 1984.

45. On breaking free of social discipline in the images of photographer-portraitists, see for example the study by Sandrine Colard (2019) on the work of Jean Dapara at Léopoldville/Kinshasa. On the values of the photographic portrait on Africa, see more generally Peffer and Cameron (2013).

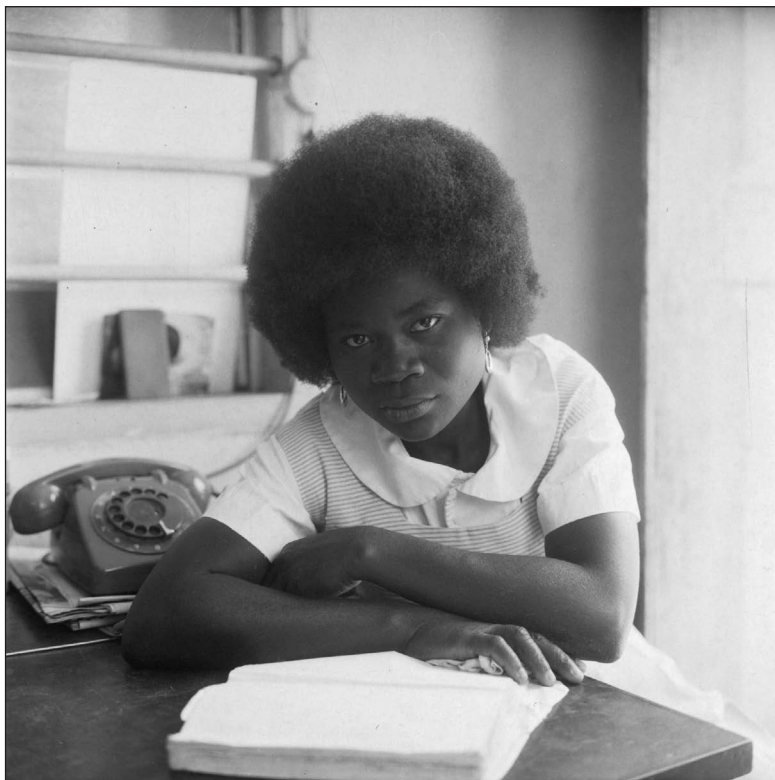


We identify these references to glamour photography first of all at the scale of the studio itself, where the photographer reworks certain of the motifs experimented with in England in the 1960s, such as the telephone or the cars, already seen in the portraits of Rema Nelson for *Drum* in 1966 (fig. 13). The studio of the 1970s, multifaceted and amendable at will, plays on the combination of interior and exterior spaces. There are also material factors, in this case very small premises, which oblige the photographer to make do with what he's got. His clients sometimes pose on the ground in his courtyard, in the glamour poses already observed in the 1950s, which contrast with this stark decor (fig. 14). But the fashion photographer's lens also went outside the studio and acquired a whole corpus of images produced for private use, without any intention of publishing them or commercialising them. We see, for instance, facilitated by the evolution of the photographic medium, the fairly frequent recourse to the close-up, highlighting as for the *Drum* models beauty features such as hairstyles which became a veritable exercise in style in the 1970s (fig. 15). The hairstyles were commented on as privileged markers of cultural expression sometimes borrowing from the register of African-ness,<sup>46</sup> sometimes from that of cosmopolitanism.<sup>47</sup> With Barnor, the hairstyles are above all material for photographic experimentation, real sculptural objects which enable him to test his sense of composition. In a portrait taken on the occasion of the diploma award ceremony in a higher education establishment at Accra, he photographed the hairstyle of a student, highlighting the contrasts of its coils by means of a neutral background improvised in the courtyard and an upward-pointing camera angle which accentuates the composition of the picture (fig. 16). Glamourisation is fully at work since we see here a photographer, initially commissioned to cover an official event in a documentary style, go off at a tangent to produce a portrait directly inspired by his experience as a fashion photographer. In the rest of the contact prints related to this event, the full sequence shows the same young woman shaking the hand of one of the directors of this establishment to receive her diploma along with her fellow students.

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46. On this documentation of traditional hairstyles in West Africa, the series "Hairstyles" by J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere in Nigeria is now a reference (see for example, on the website of the gallery MAGNIN-A: <https://www.magnin-a.com/artists/20-j.d.-okhai-ojeikere/works/> [archive]). We might also cite the work of Youssouf Sogodogo on the different types of tresses in Mali (a few examples: [https://www.sfmoma.org/artist/Youssouf\\_Sogodogo/](https://www.sfmoma.org/artist/Youssouf_Sogodogo/)), but neither of these two photographers or their pictures were known to James Barnor in the 1970s. For the two of them, see respectively Seikkula et al. (2012) and Sogodogo (2000).

47. On the symbolic and visual role of women's hairstyles in the formulation of a transatlantic aesthetic repertoire based on "Black is Beautiful" in the years 1960–1970, see for example Craig (2003). See too Mercer (1987).



**Figure 13. James Barnor, Cynthia Ankrah, classmate and friend of the photographer's daughter, Studio X23, 1970s**

Digital and positivised negative, 6 x 6 cm.

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.



**Figure 14. James Barnor, Portrait of a woman, Studio X23, Accra, around 1975**

Digital and positivised negative, 6 x 6 cm.

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.





**Figure 15. James Barnor, Miss Sammy Tetteh, Secretary, at her desk, Accra, Adabraka, 1970s**

Period print, 20.5 x 25.5 cm.

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.



**Figure 16. James Barnor, Untitled [Diploma award ceremony at the Opportunities Industrializations Centre], Accra, 1970s-1980s**

Digital and positivised negative, 6 x 6 cm.

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.

But the re-use of visual supports experimented for *Drum* is never more obvious than in a set of full-length portraits taken with an upward-pointing camera angle in which the models display their choice of clothing as a way of belonging to a “soul” aesthetic (Ford 2015). This style, forged in Harlem in the 1960s, spread across the Atlantic through printed materials such as magazines and record sleeves. It may be understood as a visual portrayal of African identities from the United States: it is the idea, materialised in the choice of clothing and hairstyles, of African roots which, “re-aestheticised,” become the springboard for an emancipation of black populations throughout the diaspora. Thus, if in the 1960s the aesthetic deployed in Barnor’s images consisted in a repossession and adaptation of hegemonic white models, in the 1970s it rather borrowed from the repertoire of a globalised black culture. As in certain reports produced for *Drum*, the public space is made use of as the stage-set for the affirmation of identities that are embedded in a cosmopolitanism lived, staged and displayed from Africa. In this portrait of his niece Naa Ayeley Attah (fig. 17), the upward camera angle accentuates the motif of her spread-out dress which might equally well be seen as a reference to the psychedelics imported from the United States as to a geometric and repetitive aesthetic typical of African textile art. Reinforcing the stylistic choice of this outfit, the camera angle firmly situates the young woman in the urban space, signified both by the modern building and the signpost in the background.<sup>48</sup>

We also see the imprint of the culture in more spontaneous contexts reflecting the highpoints of social life at Accra. For example, there are the wedding photos, which are among the most numerous during this epoch. Often taken with the *contre-champ* from portraits, highly codified, taken on the steps of a church, James Barnor photographed the outfits of the guests to highlight the matching of their dress choices with the fashions of the day, the effort at self-ornamentation by outfits and accessories that belong to a global culture. In a colour portrait of the early 1970s, we can see the very clear evolution of female dress codes in relation to Barnor’s early career, with this fake fur beige beret, the large round glasses à la Janis Joplin, but above all a miniskirt made of sun-coloured material (fig. 18). When this photograph was selected for an exhibition at the *Rencontres d’Arles* in the summer of 2022,<sup>49</sup> Barnor was reticent about it, precisely because he considered it as an outfit that was a bit too daring for the epoch. This puritanism, which may seem anachronistic to us, in fact expresses the concern of a man who did not wish to have attributed to him *a posteriori* an inappropriate gaze on the members of his community, all the more so as the photograph was taken in the context of a religious ceremony.

48. The roundabout indicated on the signpost also bears the name of the oldest family of photographers in Ghana, several generations of which were active between the 1870s and the 1940s, the Lutterodts (Haney 2018).

49. Exhibition “James Barnor: Stories. Le Portfolio (1947-1987)” organised at La Tour Luma. I took part in the scientific curatorship of this exhibition with the curators Matthieu Humery, Clémentine de la Féronnière and with my colleague Isabella Seniuta.



**Figure 17.** James Barnor, Naa Ayeley Attoh, James Barnor's niece, posing in front of Lutterodt Circle, Accra, around 1974–1975  
Modern analog print.

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.

If certain pictures are free of any direct reference to their local roots, others re-use the visual vocabulary inherited from *Drum* to transpose it to the documentation of ceremonies where signs of local or national affiliation are on display. In one of the best known of Barnor's photographs, we see two women in dresses made of *kente*, a material that since the mid-1950s had become the symbol both of Ashanti royalty and of the Pan-African struggle (fig. 19) (Fila-Bakabadio 2009). The iconic character of this picture derives from the encounter between a style of representation borrowed from the lexicon of modernity—the colour photograph—and references to the historical culture of Ghana, here symbolised by the sculptural hairstyles of the





**Figure 18. James Barnor, A wedding guest in the park behind Holy Trinity Cathedral, Accra, around 1971**

© Archives James Barnor/Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière.

young women, and by their similarity which borrows from the prized motif of the double in the art of West African statuary (Sprague 1978; Micheli 2008). These visual signs which index African-ness to varying degrees are thus remixed in a modernist aesthetic taken from fashion photography, of which cars and colour are two direct vectors.<sup>50</sup> Red on red, highlighted with gold and typographical characters recalling the world of advertising, taken with a slightly upward-pointing camera angle which always denotes the style of the illustrated fashion press: this photograph shows the influence of printed materials in the Accra social worlds. It is this borrowing from a globalised visual culture that explains today the success of images such as this outside their territory of production.

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50. This recycling of the car motif in the 1970s is very present in Barnor's images. He uses in particular this car, a red Simca loaned by the company Agfa-Gevaert for his business trips. The symbolic and visual function of the car is all the more significant in that it is accentuated in the context of economic recession which makes it an item of consumption that was increasingly inaccessible from the end of the 1970s. See Akyeampong 2000.





Figure 19. James Barnor, *Untitled [Two friends dressed for a church ceremony]*, around 1972

© James Barnor/Autograph ABP.

### Today's re-readings: glamour to the detriment of social value?

In 2021, as part of the retrospective exhibition dedicated to James Barnor at the Serpentine Gallery in London, there was the launch of the Serpentine Studios, a creative laboratory where several young artists were invited to come together to work on pictures by the photographer. Among their creations, a photo montage by Jaerome Andre superimposed on a fictitious *Vogue* cover the face of one of the “Drum girls” photographed by James Barnor (Helen de Coteau, see fig. 9) and a full-length portrait of the singer Rihanna. Along the same lines, we may cite the cover of *Vogue Italia* of April 2021 (number 847) which, before the opening of the exhibition, showed the international model Adwoa Aboah, a British woman of Ghanaian origin, in front of Piccadilly Circus, mimicking the pose in which James Barnor had in 1967 photographed the Ghanaian radio presenter Mike Eghan for *Drum* (“James Barnor, Adwoa Aboah e *Vogue Italia*” 2021).

Since James Barnor's earliest exhibitions in the world of international art a dozen years ago, the attraction for his glamour portraits, crowned by re-employment of this kind, has been constantly on the rise and polarises the attention paid to the photographer. The goal of the present article is to momentarily break free of the context of the current reception of his work to propose a more in-depth reading of the influences of fashion photography in James Barnor's production. It has offered a basis for exploring the editorial framework in which this glamour perspective was fashioned in the gaze of a young photographer in the years 1950 to 1970, a framework intrinsically linked to the logical precepts of racial and gender domination in and by the visual culture. The major magazines of the white press in this period have the status of hegemonic references, but they are also taken up and subverted by the black magazines. Among them, *Drum* has left a lasting mark on the practices of James Barnor, progressively becoming a filter over his documentation of the social realities of Accra through a spectrum of genres. From the use of poses and ways of composing the image to this visual universe of globalised fashion, there emerged a laid-back quality in the attitude of the models, a "black cool" aesthetic (Tulloch 2016) which developed transnationally, and from which Barnor borrowed his vocabulary. This hybrid imagery which was the foundation of a transcontinental blackness was mainly fuelled by the circulation of illustrated magazines which reached its peak in the years 1960–1970 in West Africa.

A number of photographers working in the neighbouring countries to Ghana reflected its impact in their portraits, such as Sory Sanlé (1943-) in Burkina Faso who in around 1975 posed two lovers in evening dress in front of an assemblage of pages cut out of fashion magazines and pasted onto the walls of his studio (fig. 20). If the black magazines and the African-American visual culture worked their way into the practices of Ghanaian photographers like Barnor, it must be noted on the basis of the Sory Sanlé's choice of images that white models of the genre continued to be a major reference at the same time in other West African countries.



Figure 20. Sory Sanlé, “Les amoureux timides,” Burkina Faso, 1975

© Sory Sanlé, Courtesy of Tezeta.

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## Interviews & Discussions

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See: <https://www.baha.co.za/>.
- Database of the photographic archives of James Barnor:  
Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière. 51 Rue Saint-Louis en l'Île, 75004 Paris, France.  
N 48° 51' 7.496" E 2° 21' 18.95" [geo:48.8520821,2.3552648]  
Digital platform under construction, at present private.  
See: <https://www.galerieclémentinedelaferonniere.fr/fr/>.

## Collections of *Drum* in libraries

Collections of the magazine *Drum* in the various editions are available in numerous libraries. See too, for all formats and all editions, the lists of library collections available via Worldcat:

*Drum: A Magazine of Africa for Africa.*

<https://www.worldcat.org/formats-editions/2323286>.

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### Libraries in France

In France, the library at Sciences Po Bordeaux holds archives of the South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana editions (partial collections). La Contemporaine, at Nanterre, conserves a few numbers of the Nigeria and Ghana editions.

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