CFAR's Papers on Power is a series of commissioned essays for which artists, writers, activists, and cultural producers have been asked to respond to the question "What is power?" in whatever form best relates to their work and thinking.

EVERY DAY IS FOR THE THIEF

BRITAIN'S IMPERIAL MARKETING MACHINE AND HOW IT SOLD NIGERIA AND ITS RESOURCES

BUKOLA KOIKI

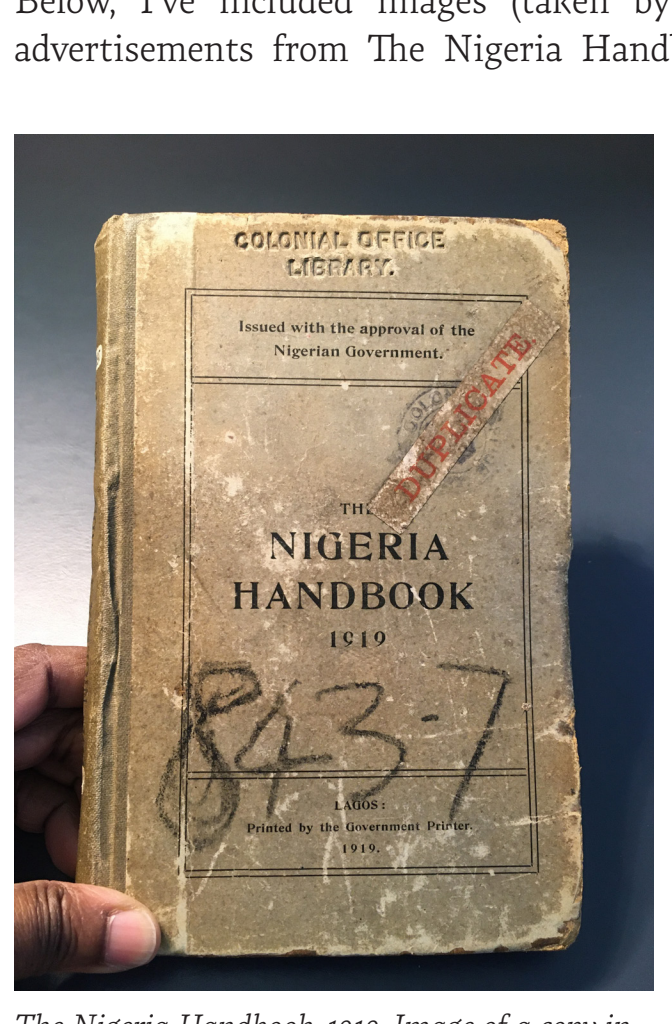
As I complete this writing, we are a mere week away from the failed insurrection at the Capitol building on January 6, 2021 by mostly White domestic terrorists. During and following that televised horror show there have been lots of words like "shocked" and "surprised" used, and I can tell you who was not shocked or surprised by this catalytic event—Black people. Specifically, Black people from formerly colonized countries and especially those from countries like Nigeria, who have witnessed the omens and wages of multiple coups. White America's shock and surprise was a privilege.

There is no greater irony than to be writing a paper about "power" when Americans have just witnessed the failure of clinging to power at the cost of lives and democracy. Democracy is the ideal we fought so viciously for against our British Imperial overlords and have subsequently exported by force to various foreign lands and territories. What a sight our day of reckoning must have been to them—Americans as the hoard of savages and barbarians for once. As a Nigerian-American whose formative years were spent in Nigeria, a former colony of the former British Empire, I could vividly trace the historical threads from this failing American democratic enterprise and the plight of my country of birth under British tyranny in the compounding events of the last five years. One thread I've been pulling at is the diabolical handshake between power and printed media (books, newspapers, posters, and other ephemera) to generate and wield propaganda and its power to coerce, mislead, and divide. Worst of all, that thread leads to the role that art and design can play in marketing your oppression, grievances, and that of others to you as a necessary and natural process for you to claim and consume your portion of a capitalist world. Sound familiar?

In 1899, the disparate territories that were to become Nigeria were purchased from the Royal Niger Company (which lives on as the massive Unilever Company) for £865,000 (equivalent to $126,000,000 today) and in 1914 the North and South protectorates were united and officially named Nigeria by Lord Frederick Lugard (as suggested by his wife, Flora). Under the British Colonial Administration, Nigeria's resources—people, crops, ores, etc.—were carefully cataloged and extracted, and marketed to fill the British coffers. By the time Nigeria was granted independence in 1960, it was a much mined and underdeveloped country that had never learned to rule itself. Like a suddenly emancipated minor sitting on a billion-dollar inheritance in oil wells, the subsequent implosion into decades of corruption, mismanagement, military coups, and the currently failing democratic experiment was nigh inevitable.

As history tells us, the winners write the books, thus it can be no surprise to you that as a student in Nigeria I was never taught and had no insight into the very complicated and character-defining history of Nigeria until I was an adult and years removed from my formative educational experiences. In fact, every textbook, imported TV show, educators, popular cultural product, and our revered elders seemed to reinforce Nigerian's Anglophilia and even espoused gratitude for having been colonized. Even more revelations appeared to me as I undertook research into a colonial text I had chanced upon in 2017 in the Smithsonian Libraries' online catalog. The text in question is "The Nigeria Handbook: Containing the Statistical and General Information respecting the Colony and Protectorate," a colonial-era publication compiled by Chief Secretary A.C. Burns of the British Colonial Administration of Nigeria. What this discovery made clear to me in unambiguous detail is that much of Nigeria's problems can be traced back to the tyrannies of the Empire and how the engines of art, design, marketing, and capitalism came together to sell a country and its people's potential.

Below, I've included images (taken by me, unless otherwise noted) of pages and advertisements from The Nigeria Handbook, British Empire Marketing posters, and other ephemera related to Colonial Nigeria. I have included my analysis of the design elements and their semiotics where applicable and notes from my ongoing research and observations towards a future body of work (already in progress).



The Nigeria Handbook, 1919. Image of a copy in the archive of the British Library.

In March 2020, I traveled to London, England on a research trip to the British Library and the British Archives to see what I could discover about the origins of The Nigeria Handbook and all relevant information as to the Brits' activities in Nigeria during that time. This 1919 copy of the Handbook (see left) is the earliest one I have ever encountered. I now own three vintage copies of this book, the newest and thickest being the 7th edition from 1926. I have yet to discover with any certainty when the book began to be produced and when the publication ceased. What struck me was that everything about the design of this book screamed of efficiency, class, and a classic, unshakable power from its patrician serif font used throughout, perfect spacing, and tightly stitched binding. It has the feel of a Bible—appropriate since one of the exports of colonialism was Christianity—and, at least in the earliest copies, portability that signaled that it was meant to be an indispensable reference for the ambitious merchant of all stripes. "Come to Nigeria! Seek adventure and make your fortune as efficiently as possible!" it almost cries. Like everything else in our world, it's made to ensure White comfort without all the messy bits in view.

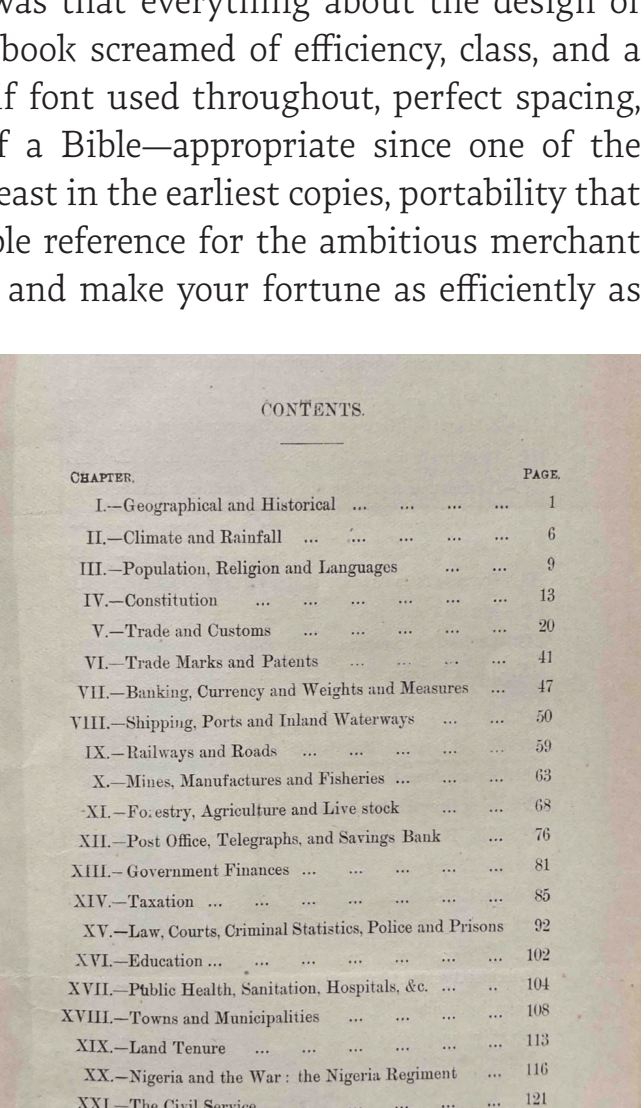
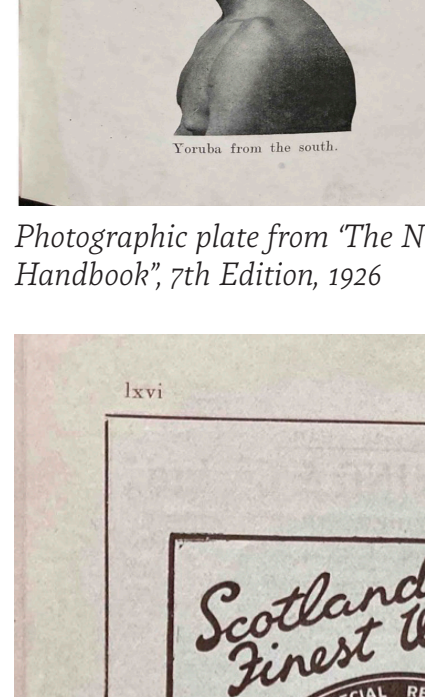

CONTENTS.

Table of Contents from 'The Nigeria Handbook", 7th Edition, 1926

I found that the table of contents moved me to horror at the clerical efficiency of chapters listing of all of Nigeria's sectors. A teaser for greedy eyes of the accounting of natural resources in land, sea, and air worth exploiting to come. A book that has everything—the people, plant, and animal life that come with this colonial prize and the self-serving British-created infrastructure of banking, currency, and law enforcement and carceral systems created for every Western comfort while the pillaging is done.

Discovered within the pages of the seventh edition of the Handbook are also several so-called "physical type" photographs (similar to those created by colonial anthropologist Northcote Thomas in the early twentieth century), intended to identify and classify people into different racial or tribal categories by colonial anthropologists. These images were so striking to me due to their clinical nature and dehumanization of proud men from the Hausa and Yoruba tribes into mute objects for the White gaze. How did these images reinforce the lie of White superiority to the Victorian officers, soldiers, merchants, and more who encountered these images? Such dehumanization and specimen-like violent images more than likely reinforced the British people's beliefs in their rights to Nigeria's resources.

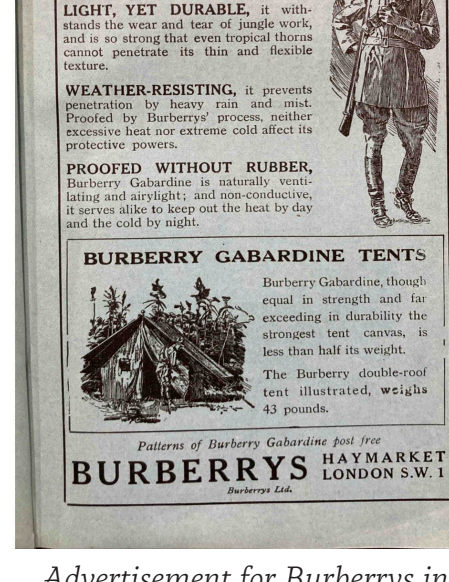


Photographic plate from 'The Nigeria Handbook", 7th Edition, 1926

The ads on this page (below) are for me, laden with symbolism and references to the history of Africa. Alcohol was a commodity brought to West Africa by Europeans to exchange for goods and eventually to exchange for human beings during the transatlantic slave trade. While the ad on the left may have been advertising to White colonialists venturing to Nigeria, similar ads were created for the many European liquor companies that soon sprang up in Nigeria and continue to operate and manufacture there to this day— liquor companies that contributed to alcoholism and it's public and domestic ills that soon plagued

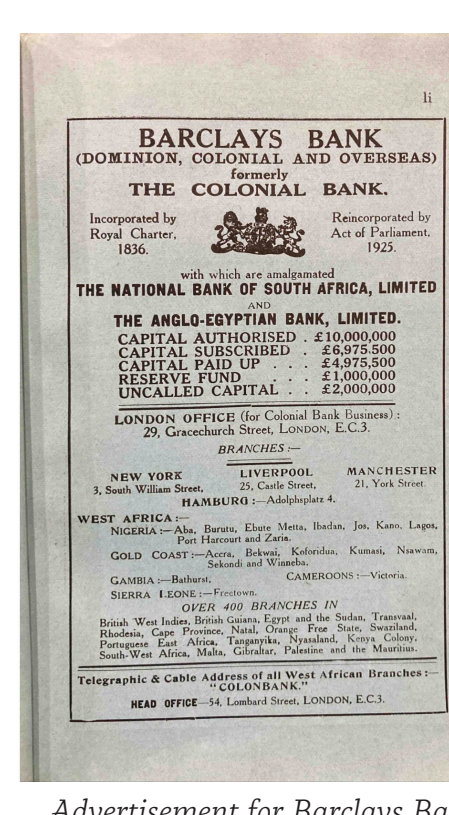
A spread of colonial-era advertisements in the blue pages at the beginning of every Handbook. These from 'The Nigeria Handbook", 7th Edition, 1926

many a Western African state. It's also hard to miss the racist caricature in the advertisement on the right selling pith helmets. The iconic accessory is seen as a symbol of European colonial invaders in Africa and also has ties to the horrors of safari hunting. You may have encountered this hat in recent memory because Melania, the outgoing First Lady, wore one in October 2018 while on a solo tour to some African countries. As safari touring is the thing one does in Africa, she chose to don a pith helmet as a fashionable hat. The tone-deafness was astounding but not surprising.



Advertisement for Burberrys in "The Nigeria Handbook "blue pages, 7th Edition, 1926

This ad for Burberrys—forbearer to the contemporary British luxury brand, Burberry—is just one of several ads that acted as an historical marker and as proof that many "heritage" apparel and consumer brands that profited from slavery and colonialism did not die with those evils and continue to build on that ill-gotten wealth until today. Everything about the language of this ad—and many other such Colonial outfitters to be found in the Nigeria Handbook—speaks of the rush to cater to White comfort in the foreign, "savage" lands of Nigeria. There at their shops, you could be kitted against the tropical heat, rain, bugs, and by virtue of your garb, be made obvious and separated from the so-called natives. This ad speaks to me of a distancing and denial of the truth of their situation, privilege, and of tyranny and atrocities that the British presence caused. Can one really be outfitted against such ills?



Advertisement for Barclays Bank in "The Nigeria Handbook "blue pages, 7th Edition, 1926

This ad for The Colonial Bank, showing its name change to Barclays Bank is a particularly painful one to look at. To see so much money available and credit to be extended to merchants and adventurers flooding into Nigeria, one cannot help but wonder if that money could have been used to help the country and its people thrive and create businesses of their own. However, we do know why that didn't happen, because the British would never show a man how to fish, for then he would taste independence and they would lose all control of their cash machine. The history of British banks is a long and sordid one, with diversions and investments in slavery in the Americas as well via plantation mortgages for which plantation owners often leveraged enslaved people and not their land as property. When slavery was finally abolished in Britain the banks were also involved in compensating slave owners for their losses. The final payments were not made until as recently as 2015! The sheer unfettered greed and lack of humanity of this just make my brain hurt.

Poster by the Empire Marketing Board, produced between 1926 - 1933, United Kingdom

This poster (left), created by the Empire Marketing Board or EMB (1926 - 1933) is a study in classic British propaganda and is reminiscent of (and precedes) the ubiquitous "Keep Calm and Carry On" posters created in 1939 at the start of WWII. The font is very reminiscent of Gill Sans but was actually a custom font that was never issued. Incidentally, enterprising contemporary typographers have hacked the posters and made their own complete font families. The bright red color and white stripes reference the British flag and the font's weights are friendly yet classic and firm, reminiscent of the British stiff upper lip. This is only an example of a basic poster design as the EMB went on to produce thousands of marketing posters for every British colony at the time—each with multiple designs, including some elaborately illustrated posters with decidedly gendered appeals. Everything about this poster shouts "Consumption is Your Patriotic Duty!" and "Buy More Stuff!" The Colonies and Dominions, the labor of millions of people of color, and yes, their literal fruits were produced to fill the coffers of the British banks and monarchy.

Posters for Nigeria by the Empire Marketing Board, produced between 1926 - 1933, United Kingdom

Finally, these are two posters touting "Orders" and "A Contract" making the purchase of Nigerian produce possible by citizens of the British Empire. One has to wonder, what the distinction is between home and overseas in such a sprawling portfolio of stolen lands? What is also striking are the two very different approaches to advertisement here: one poster is bright with an approachable yet stately san serif font and the other is moody, with a serif font that can't make up its mind and features lots of text. Two different advertising approaches were sure to confuse the masses and reeks of the desperation at "home" in Britain when there was a spike in nationalism and the already minimally-funded Empire Marketing Board was shuttered in 1933 with the adoption of the "Imperial Preference" economic model.

In conclusion, the art and design of printed matter can seem ubiquitous and unimportant to many people, but history proves that they have always been very adaptable tools to wield in service of power and the few powerful thieves of all kinds who steal the dreams, resources, and lands of the many. The vintage printed matter I have discussed here are no different from images and messages fed to us on red hats and on myriad t-shirts, through many a biilboard, campaign poster or yard sign, and yes, via social media and advertising too. The only difference these days seems to lie in differences in subtelty and sophistication. Accordingly, the semiotic meanings and messages within are always working on us and breaking down our resistance to lies and misinformation wielded by those who seek power. Always.

References:

- *The title of this piece comes from a lyrical Nigerian proverb which goes, "Everyday is for the thief, [but] one day is for the owner." It refers to the belief that no matter how long one may lie, steal, or cheat others, one day you will eventually be caught. It is a hopeful promise of justice in a world where power often allows an escape hatch for evil. We are still waiting for Britain to face justice for its theft of Nigeria's land, labor, resources, and the ongoing ways it keeps this and many other countries underdeveloped and reliant, even in their so-called independence from colonialism.*
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- *The Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership. Database, University College London and the Hutchins Center at Harvard.*
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Biography:

Bukola Koiki is a Nigerian-American transdisciplinary artist whose work strives to collapse the single-story of the West African immigrant experience by engaging and interpreting the liminal spaces she inhabits between two cultures through research and explorations of linguistic phenomena, cultural ontologies, generational memory, and more. Koiki's multidimensional works reflect her material and technical curiosity and include hand-pulled prints rendered with embroidered collagraph plates, giant beads employing Nigerian hair threading techniques, handmade and hand-dyed paper, Indigo dyed, and hand-printed Tyvek head ties, amongst other explorations.

Koiki was nominated for the Textile Society of America's 2020 Brandford/Elliott Award and was named a 2019 Finalist for the American Craft Council's Emerging Artist Award. She has exhibited nationally and been featured in American Craft and Surface Design magazines, Art21 Magazine online and has been interviewed on NPR. Koiki received an MFA in Applied Craft + Design from Pacific Northwest University in 2015 and a BFA in Communication Design from the University of North Texas in 2008. She completed the Fountainhead Fellowship in the Craft/Material Studies Department at Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in March 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is currently temporarily living and teaching in Oregon.