

## Some Studio Photographers from Cameroon: three tropes

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Recently art history has been challenged by work emerging from photographic studies, visual anthropology and visual culture. These make photographic images ‘perplexing’, both as pictures and in their complex and shifting relationships to different personal, social, political and economic contexts. If the critical analysis is based upon assumptions and concerns ‘framed’ by canonical photographers, established genres, and professional histories, then our understanding of the nature and role of photography is unwittingly constrained and distorted.

When Cameroonian citizens went to a local studio photographer to have photographs taken for their national identity cards they were literally inscribing themselves into the nation state.<sup>1</sup> Post-mortem their children may take the cards to another photographer (or an anthropologist) to have the photograph (often the only image of a deceased parent) copied for display on the wall: they are changing the representation. Another case is the post-mortem drawing of crosses on the forehead of people in photographs - as their subjects die (eg 2006-348 annotated ID card). How can a corpus of such photographs be analysed? They are not ‘the pencil of nature’ as photography was described in the C19th; they are documents of a series of intentions about display, about the presentation of self (cf Goffman 1959). It is easy

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<sup>1</sup> Poole 1997 discusses parallel South American material; for African photography see e.g. Sprague 1978 Geary 1986 and Mustafa 2002.

to write as such but much harder to document and justify this: this is one of the larger theoretical and methodological challenges which this project will address, albeit indirectly, by example.

The notion of ‘cultural biography’<sup>2</sup> is emerging within photographic studies as a useful indication of a developing awareness that ‘the image’ is not a static entity, to which viewers bring a variety of ‘interpretations’ of ‘what can be seen there’. Rather, ‘images’ are more fruitfully and accurately construed as *dynamic cultural constructions*, which, just like ‘people’, are simultaneously produced as *objects* and *agents* in the social world. As Edwards notes,

Integral to social biography is the way in which the meaning of photographs, generated by viewers, depends on the context of their viewing, and their dependence on written or spoken 'text' to control semiotic energy and anchor meaning in relation to embodied subjectivities of the viewer. These are acts upon photographs, and result in shifts in its meaning and performance, over time and space, producing “a culturally constructed entity endowed with culturally specific meanings and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories” (Kopytoff 1986: 67) [Edwards 2001: 14/15]

Since pioneering work in the late 1970s (e.g. Sprague 1978) there has been an explosion of interest in African photography. This has been demonstrated by exhibitions such as the *In/Sight* exhibition at the Guggenheim, New York 1996, and similar exhibitions in Paris (e.g. *L'Afrique Par Elle-Même* 1998) and UK (Mercer 1995), summarized in, for example, the *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* (1999). Several books

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<sup>2</sup> We prefer this term to the more widely used ‘social biography’, as it suggests more clearly the embeddedness of meaning construction within a cultural context which is informed by both existing social practices and relations and by the narratives and values which have been sedimented in contemporary social structures and concerns.

published in the 1990s attest to widening interest among art historians and others in non-western photography. For example, Pinney (1997) discusses colonial and Indian influences on image-making in India, Poole (1997) ideas of race in the Andes (see Edwards quote above). The 1990s publications represent the beginning of a true art history of African photography.

Edwards has examined the changing meaning and status of images in the museum collections, as have Geary<sup>3</sup> and Lee-Webb. Our project seeks to look at the history of prints *before* they enter the museum. This will provide a telling contrast with the employment of similar materials in other contexts (examples include portraiture and contemporary African artists such as Rotimi Fani-Kayode and others in the 'In search of an Aesthetic' section of the *Revue Noire Anthology*).

This project takes seriously Edwards' description of 'photographs as objects of memory' (1999). It will lay the foundations for the wider artistic exploration and art historical study of such processes by doing the preliminary documentation and initial analysis of the cultural biographies of the objects concerned. This will enable us to consider inflections of the 'reception aesthetic' for different audiences - how we, as academics see the photos is possibly different from how the clients and the photographers see them (q.v. Clifford (1988) on surrealism). Images and objects are subject to different appropriations, misappropriations and 'seeings'. Only by understanding the nexus of understandings can we understand how an image can have a political import – either by what it represents or by where it has come from/ gone to – our photographs are transformed by being in a collection in, variously, the Cameroon archives or the University archives or in a photographers shop. There is a

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<sup>3</sup> Geary is especially important to us since she has worked on photographic history in Cameroon (see references in bibliography).

dynamics of appropriation – for older identity card photos the negatives were with the commercial photographers (see below). Now ID cards are digitised so there are no negatives and only the government representatives can make and ‘own’ these important images.

### **Introduction to cultural context of photography in Cameroon**

Professional black and white photography in Cameroon had been under threat from colour photography since the 1980s. It has now all but disappeared following the introduction of new identity cards in 1998. They were issued complete with instant photographs, removing the need for ‘passport photographs’. These had been produced easily using 120 format film since contact prints were the correct size for identity card photographs. Rural photographers could process and print the film without needing access to electricity. A small supporting industry of photographers, (as celebrated by, e.g. Magnin 1997), has effectively been destroyed by computerisation of the national identity cards and the arrival of cheaper colour 35mm processing in the cities (Werner 1993 & 1999 cites parallels from Togo and Ivory Coast). Touselle, Finlak and Tchila are among the many photographers to have lost their livelihood in Cameroon.

### **Three Tropes: Crouching, Thinking, Couples**

In the following I introduce and discuss three tropes found in the photographs. I stress that these are widespread in the region found in the work of different photographers from different ethnic backgrounds and art traditions. I also remind readers that these images are the results of Cameroonians photographing Cameroonians. It would be foolish to say there has been absolutely no Western influence but there are significant differences to the earlier images taken under colonial regimes by Europeans of their African Subjects. By comparison these were taken in independent Cameroon. Although the commonest type of photo was for identity cards and hence driven by a neo-colonial administration many of the others were taken in circumstances quite apart from Foucauldian governmentality. The aesthetics which

produced the images are not those of control (although I discuss a possible counter example below).

### **Trope 1: Crouching**

Sprague discusses a 'squatting pose' found in Yoruba portrait photography. He says it is restricted to young women allowing them to be traditionally demure yet engaging with the 'modern' imagery of American pin-ups photos from the 1950s (1978: 56 reprinted 2003: 249). As my examples show although used by young women in Cameroon it is also used by men (including Chila when he posed for a photograph taken by DZ). Also not all women who crouch are demure. I read DVD10\_092 as a statement of assertiveness.

### **Trope 2: Thinking**

NB Ciebeh Daniel – about resting your chin in your hand. This means that you are thinking of something – or someone – that your thoughts are far away – so it might be something that friends send to one another when they are apart - so the pose means what the act of giving also implies. But in statuary it means that its active spirit is not just in it but active elsewhere – wherever it is needed.

Northern (1986 p 19) suggests it is a mark of respect: certainly among centralised polities of the Grassfields (her illustration is Bamiléké) it is the ase that when addressing a high status person such as a Fon one speaks to them through cupped hands. I do not think this is what is going on here – part from not really looking like hand cupping (and often being one hand only) many of the examples come from groups such as the Mambila who do not have that tradition.

### Tropes 3 Couples touching heads

The heads lean towards each other and touch. These are portraits that show both intimacy and affection. Taken at the same period (within the last thirty years) by two photographers working within 70 km of each other but who have never sat down and discussed their work together. The photographs were composed in negotiation with the photographers and clients. We can speculate whether one pair of clients had seen the photo of the other but the strong likelihood is that they had not. Somehow the two trios (each set of photographer and clients) arrived at virtually identical compositions quite independently.

#### Affection in Public

Public displays of affection among adults are rare in rural Cameroon. In public the only people of opposite sexes likely to openly display affection are siblings. In the street or market husbands and wives display considerable reserve and certainly do not touch one another. This makes these photographs all the more intriguing, for although a photograph is different from a public display they are usually intended for display if not to the public at large then at least for visitors to the house/compound. The photograph from Atta is all the more intriguing since neither are wearing any headgear. The norm in both Christian and Moslem areas is that everyone covers their head either with hats for men and tied cloths for women (usually matching the fabric of their wrappa – the cloth tied round their waist as a skirt)





Jonathan Dombea and his wife Fonika Sitan (Yamba) (Photographer Finlak). Dombea commissioned this photograph in order to get an official civil marriage license but in the end did not proceed. Few people in rural Cameroon have civil marriage licenses; most prefer to have marry according to their ethnic traditions which typically lack documentation. Traditional marriages usually precede civic marriages, although for Christians who want to be married in church a civic marriage license is required. As of December 2003 he still had the original (see DZ's photo above – in which the couple are holding an original print, replicated below). Their son had not seen this photograph. Moreover, the full print clearly offers a different repertoire of interpretive clues, following which raises intriguing and complex issues. Considering the photograph as a 'portrait of a couple' might lead the viewer to see these two heads touching as a sign of tender feelings; a culturally informed viewer might be surprised by this, as expressions of relationships between the sexes in public are highly constrained and formal in rural Cameroon; however, a viewer versed in the technical processes of producing such images 'in the field' will note that, by arranging the couple thus, the photographer has ensured that both people will be identifiable in the resulting (physically) cropped image—thus satisfying a legal requirement. And again, the aesthetic interest of the full partly lies in the tension between the intended 'focal region' of the image and the surrounding periphery, full of detail and circumstance that tells tales of the conditions of social production of the photograph itself. Since taking the photo they have had two more children. This illustrates both the variety of reason for taking an image and how the full

negative often contains material very different from the cropped image which was printed.

By comparing original negative with original print the aesthetics and rationale for particular printing decisions can be explored with both clients and photographers.

In another example a marriage certificate photograph was recycled the year following the marriage in a greetings card sent to friends and family in which the marriage certificate image was reproduced along with photographs of the couples two children. Njitabe/Sondué

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