

Photo-Objects

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Gathered in the smoke-filled shade of a large communal cooking hut, the villagers of Bulelavata – a small village on the edge of Roviana Lagoon in the western Solomon Islands – pass round a copy print made from a nineteenth century photograph of two Roviana teenagers. The photograph, or perhaps photo-object is a better term here, incites a whole range of responses. Old men talk sadly about the kastom ('tradition') that might be reclaimed through the photo-object – the large wooden earrings, clothing, lime-stained hair, and face decoration mark the image as one from "before". The 'crack' is taken by the people of Bulelavata as a sign that the photo-object itself – rather than the glass-plate negative from which it was reproduced – must have been damaged in an attack on Roviana carried out by the Royal Navy in the late nineteenth century. My discussion of the glass negative is met with indifference. People speculate that the descendents of the two teenagers can be recognised by comparing their faces to those of the living. Fathers complain about their own teenage sons, who hang listlessly about the village avoiding the subsistence work of gardening and fishing. These teenagers, whose cheap sunglasses, knotted red bandanas, and over-sized clothes show the influence of Ragga music and also raskol styles from Papua New Guinea, laugh dismissively at the photograph. But later, out of parental view, they express more curiosity. Women laughingly point out that teenagers are still obsessed with how they look and, talking about the ruf boys of the village, they make a series of thinly disguised sexual innuendo's.

The archival photo-object is re-animated through connection to these kinds of living contexts, revealing photography's connection to a plurality of histories. The comments the photo-object incites also suggest how the photographic process itself is understood in Roviana. Here, photographs are unique objects and their reproducibility – key to Euro-American models of the medium – is not a feature of Roviana models. Negatives are rarely returned with photographic prints, and when they are people make no attempt to keep them. Many photographs arrive through circuitous means from friends, family and outsiders, and are not taken by people themselves. In Roviana the links between photographs and the past are bound up with their status as singular objects, a fact which ally's them to a range of previously existing Roviana media. Objects such as ancestral skulls – kept in communal skull-shrines (oru) – and a variety of shell valuables that once played a central role in preserving histories and maintaining links with ancestral power. But with the advent of Christianity these kinds of relics are no longer avowedly available, but photographs - or in this case photo-relics - are one area where links with ancestral power can still be discussed. For Roviana people photographs are maqomaqo – shadows, shades, spirits – and the subtleties of this understanding are brought out through considering photography in relation to historical Roviana practices such as headhunting and the development of a range of media for memorialising the past. The connections between photography, memory and history are taken for granted in Euro-American models of the medium, such that, as Trachtenberg suggests, that which is considered historical is precisely that which could have been photographed. As well as modernising our vision, photography has profoundly altered our sense of the past. In relation to photography and history Bourdieu has argued that “the definitive certainty of an object replaces the fleeting uncertainty of subjective impressions”. The status of certain objects in Roviana, and their ability to materialise presences and channel ancestral power, is a key to understanding the current range of links between photography, memory and history.

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