

Photographic Traditions in South African Popular Modernities

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South African Visual Economies

The spread of photography in South Africa - as in many other colonial societies - reflects to a certain extent the parallel histories of colonialism and anthropology. Introduced to South Africa's major cities in the 1840s, the camera progressively reached out into the countryside in the hands of white explorers, administrators, traders, anthropologists, missionaries and settlers (Bensusan 1966). Given this control over the camera, white subjects initially occupied a different range of photographic genres than did Black subjects – personal portraits, family photographs, etc. Black Africans were more often treated as anthropological “types” within scientific genres and racial taxonomies, emphasising their tribal classifications and reinforcing colonial stereotyping in the pursuit of the production of anthropological knowledge (Edwards 1992, Faris 1996, Ryan 1997). Where they appear in other contexts, such as family snapshots, it is usually in a more marginal role – as servants, nurses and grooms in South Africa's racialised hierarchical society (c.f. Schoeman 1996).

Based on this history, it is not surprising, as Edwards and Morton have pointed out (2009) that for a long time the study of colonial photography, and particularly photography from Africa, was dominated by the analytical idea that control over the shutter ensured control over the image, and especially over the ways in which Africans and African society were represented. However, as valid as this approach has been, it can only provide a narrow vision of the diverse photographic practices that have multiplied in South Africa since the early 20th century. Limiting the reading of a photograph to power relationships and discourses leaves little room for the different personal memories and subjectivities with which an image can be simultaneously loaded. Perhaps more worryingly, it also risks perpetuating a view of black subjects as lacking agency – forever locked in the viewfinder of power.

A Foucauldian reading of the I.D. picture, for example, would underline the complicity of photography in systems of domination and control (Tagg 1988). Undeniably, the I.D. photograph required for the obligatory passbook under Apartheid reinforced the power of the State to limit and control black people's displacements. Yet it was also very popular in black communities to transform I.D. pictures into airbrushed idealised wedding portraits or individual portraits bearing fictional uniforms. This tradition began in the 1930s, when various forms of popular photography were starting to develop in the streets of the city and the township. By the 1950s Black South Africans had actively taken the question of self-representation into their own hands (Appadurai 1997, Feyder 2009, Ranger 2001, Werner 2001).

As a research group, we hence intend to complicate the field of power between the camera and subject, by building on the argument that the vision of the camera as a tool of colonial and apartheid domination is only partial. Recent studies have sought to nuance the relationship

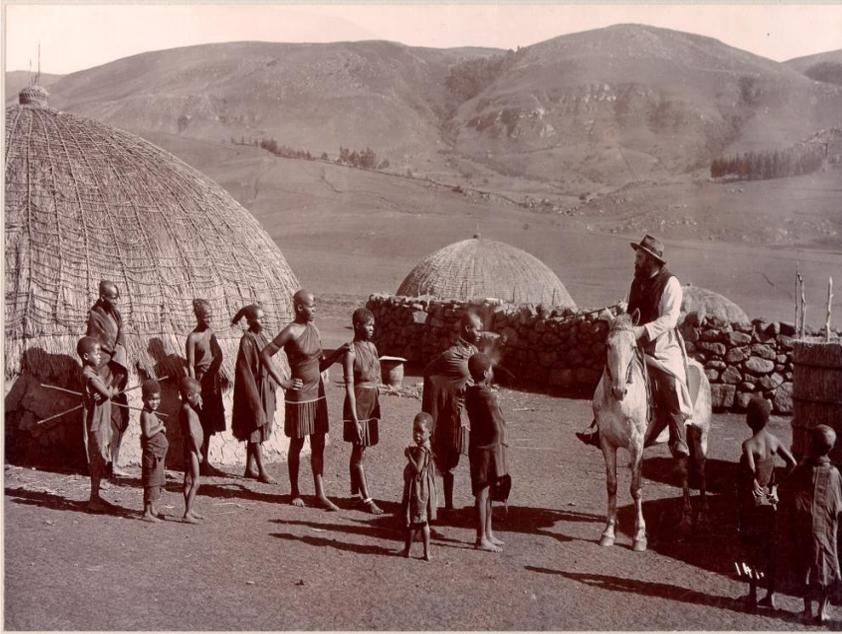
between ideology and representation, showing for instance how contemporary vernacular practices of photography can recode colonial heritage within a new framework, adding new layers of meaning to the image (Pinney 1997, Hartman et al 1998, Strassler 2010). It then becomes possible to comprehend how for example photographs produced as “ethnographic” images by missionaries could appear on the living room walls of black South African homes, or how photographs of black domestic workers, appearing initially in a white family album, subsequently appear in black albums. Here, the stereotype is personalised and reclaimed as an ancestor, entering the domain of family photography and accordingly embedded in private narratives and histories.

The questions of multiple trajectories and contemporary readings of photographic archives are central to all three projects, though focusing on very diverse archival situations. The three different archives cover a wide geographical and temporal scope, ranging from early settler and missionary photography (1880s onwards) in rural KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) to urban township photography of the 1950s in Johannesburg. In these collections, an understanding of South African photographic practices starts to emerge that complicates the view of white control over photographic production and use, and black photographic disempowerment.

Photographic Archives: Alternative Sources for History

The social sciences have only relatively recently started to use historical archival photographs as primary historical sources, as opposed to mere complementary illustrations. Starting in the 1980s, social historians and anthropologists began to recognise the value of photographs as sources for the writing of histories (e.g. Coronil 2004, Edwards 2006, Fontcuberta 2002, Geary 1986). Initially, works focused primarily on the colonial localities more generally, but are increasingly integrating indigenous narratives (e.g. Pinney and Peterson 2003). It is now generally assumed that such photographic archives can provide alternative sources of history – as compared to textual archives and oral history - that offer new perspectives on various aspects of colonial and apartheid society, up to the present day. In particular, we would like to further explore how historical interactions between different ethnic and racial groups – black and white people but also among ‘Non-European’ minorities themselves – have been constructed around the camera and visually manifested in images.

Missionaries, for instance, were often the first to study and describe local populations scientifically - preceding governments, anthropologists and Black people themselves. Missionaries recorded photographically their influence on landscapes, architecture, but foremost on Black Africans themselves, and projecting them as potential or successful converts. Unlike evangelising protestant couples, catholic celibate missionaries did not serve as direct role models for local families. They rather presented examples of piety and proper attitudes towards work and discipline. Hence many photographs portray their direct presence in and influence on ‘native’ life: baptisms, visits to local homesteads, social and ceremonial life around the missions often represent the decade long interaction of missionaries and their subjects. This distinguishes their photographic production as historical sources from the one of contemporary anthropologists, who often only stayed a relatively short period at a time.



Fr. Ivo visiting Kraal near Clairvaux, KwaZulu-Natal, c1910 [Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne, 2241].

The photographic collection belonging to a white English-speaking family from Estcourt, a small town in KwaZulu-Natal, also provides insight into a particular way of life – in this case, the everyday lives of the family members represented, and their interactions with other ethnic groups, primarily black Zulu-speaking workers on the farm and in the house. Part of what makes this collection interesting is the combination of its ‘ordinariness’ together with the volume of photographic data that constitutes it, accumulated over several generations. This provides a concrete basis for examining the ways in which these particular identities were performatively constituted, affected by different senses of belonging, and mediated by various power structures at different historical periods. For example, photographs taken at the time of the Union suggest an ongoing affiliation to Europe, as well as a lingering colonial identity, that is not evident in photographs taken during apartheid. The relationship between black and white subjects also shifts, with black subjects generally playing a marginal, background role in the early photographs, and moving into the foreground in later photographs, though still occupying socially circumscribed roles.

Given that all of these images were taken and (initially) viewed by a white family, the photographs suggest some of the ways in which the black ‘other’ was visually constructed in this environment. However the images also show examples of black practices being appropriated by the white family, and white attendance at black ritual ceremonies. In addition to highlighting the construction of difference, the collection therefore also suggests ways in which interactions between social groups introduced ambiguities, influences and affiliations that draw into question the idea of fixed identity, and expose the ways in which these identities were constantly shifting and changing.



Fyvie Farm, KwaZulu-Natal, c1907.

Refiguring the Archives

Using private family photographs as visual documents of the past is an example of the development, not just of methodologies vis-à-vis visual material, but also of the very notion of the archive. The “archival turn” within anthropology incited researchers to reflect critically on the process of archival formation and its entanglements with discourses of power and surveillance (Edwards and Morton 2009). In post-apartheid South Africa, historians and museum workers called for a ‘refiguring of the archive’ (Hamilton et al 2002): the inclusion of oral data, literature and art works, in order to fill in the gaps in the records left by the bureaucracy of apartheid. Initially engrossed in narratives around the resistance struggle, historians and curators are increasingly open to lesser known, and less overtly political archives, as historical collections (re)surface, become available in the general public, and are assimilated in the public historical canon. From this perspective, the unpublished collection of negatives made by the late autodidact photographer and factory worker Ronald Ngilima (1910-1960) corresponds to this call. His collection, consisting of about 5500 commissioned portraits, gives us an intimate insight into daily life in a Black township (Wattville, East Rand, Johannesburg) in the 1950s. Photographed in their own homes, in the streets of the township, or at Ngilima’s homemade studio, he depicts people that are striving to appear dignified, despite the often-difficult circumstances of living. The home interiors and the strong presence of consumer objects in the pictures stand as visual manifestations of their social aspirations. The subjectivity resulting from this process of self-documentation makes this collection unique: these pictures show urban Black subjects the way they themselves wanted to be remembered.



Photo by Ronald Ngilima, Watville (East Rand), 1950s.

Yet the process of transforming a private collection of photographs into a public archive is not unproblematic. What does it imply to conceptualize an eclectic collection of photos as a single body of work, as a unified archive? By “framing” the collections (Spyer 2001) in a particular way, individual images are placed in the service of new and broader meanings.

The Estcourt family collection and the Ngilima collection were both conceived of and produced for the personal consumption of the subjects portrayed. What new meanings do the photographs accrue as they enter the public realm – for example, in publications, or as part of an exhibition? Given that photographs are repositories for personal memories, and that many of those being analysed still occupy their original private and personal spheres, how do these new layers of meaning affect the ways in which the families continue to relate to their photographs, and the memories and histories tied up in them? This is especially pertinent in the Estcourt collection, where the presence of Black figures in the archive might be used to explore political questions that aren’t necessarily issues with which the family members would be comfortable.

Similarly, the Ngilima subjects might not always agree with the ways in which their personal portraits are used to explore more general processes of consumption. With this in mind, it is important to continue to acknowledge the original, local, contexts of production, and to guard against reducing the photographs to simple illustrations of certain social conditions.

It becomes clear that the production of an image’s meaning is entangled with its ability to circulate in broader spheres of visual economies. The missionary photographs are especially interesting in this regard, since this was their intention from the outset; the exact opposite movement, from public to private potentially applies. Photographs were often deliberately produced with an undetermined compositional character. Missionary’s portraits of their protégés neither clearly belonged to anthropometric photography, nor to other photographic genres. Therefore they could be easily

used as “multi-purpose-photographs” in a broad variety of dissemination: in the mission’s own pious publications, sold to ethnographic museums around the world, or used as tourist postcards. These multiple parallel socio-cultural biographies make the photographs important sources to reflect on various aspects of colonial and apartheid society, up to the present day. The comparatively liberal depiction of subjects by missionaries also makes it easier for Black South Africans today to “look past” (Aird 2003:25) the colonial context of production.

Visual Heritage - Photographs between Communities

The call to democratize archives evolved with the post-colonial period in which museums were grappling with questions of colonial heritage and repatriation. In South Africa for instance, the post-apartheid era has seen a serious restructuring of the museum’s exhibition methods and of their target audiences (Coombes 2004). Emerging literature has put forth the needs and moral responsibilities that impel museums to re-engage with archival objects in an ethical way (e.g. Peers and Brown 2003). Yet the general enthusiasm for ‘re-engagement’ tends to insufficiently problematise the potential tensions and conflicts that could emerge out of this process. The return of objects, including photographs, to their particular “source communities” might not always be possible, or desired by all involved parties. Furthermore, the romanticized notion of ‘the community’ hides internal divisions and the potential difficulties in identifying those to whom this heritage supposedly belongs.

In the case of missionary collections, the related “source communities” might include various Black South African communities as well as the present white and black missionaries. Other than three-dimensional artefacts, made only by indigenous communities, photographs were actively co-produced by both Africans and missionaries. These historical as well as current configurations multiply layers of meanings and values that photographs can produce in these social relations, generating various and competing interpretations of history.

In a similar complicated situation, the Ngilima collection was produced at a time where entire communities were being displaced and redefined in terms of racial categories. This historical legacy will most likely make it harder to retrace the depicted subjects or their descendents. The numerous photographs of Indians, Coloureds and Blacks bear witness to an era of multicultural cohabitation, which briefly survived the waves of forced removals of the 1950s. However, Wattville today is characterised by dispersed families and tensions between the different local groups. How can this historical collection of photographs help materialize local history given this present state of memory erosion?

Depending on their social context, photographic collections can have ambivalent social impacts when they are taken out of the archive and reintroduced into social circulation (Edwards 2003): they can provide a centralising force to root presently dispersed and divided communities in some cases, but in other cases may work as wedges in between post-apartheid communities and their perception of a shared, though sometimes fraught past.

Whose Heritage?

As material traces of the past, photographs are potential vehicles for multiple memories and histories. How do people in South Africa today relate to historical photographs? How do photographs shape people’s understanding of their history? A theoretical examination of the connection between the notions of photography, history, memory and archive necessitates an

empirical engagement with the involved communities and a detailed analysis of this potentially messy process of cooperation.

The application of the notion of “community” and “heritage” inevitably leads to the tricky question of ownership, shifting between interests of individuals, groups, or even nations. The question of who can lay claim to an image becomes even more complicated with the advent of digitisation and the Internet, where the original image can be endlessly multiplied, downloaded, modified and printed. While it opens possibilities for access, it can also complicate institutional and personal relations with questions of copyright. Finally, we have to ask who legitimises the actions of often unrelated researchers to excavate photographs and inject them into often tense local relations. In our own projects, we have to be aware of these processes, and anticipate the possible effects of our work as far as possible. Popular academic notions, such as repatriation, re-engagement, or photo-elicitation are extremely valuable trajectories, yet need to be problematised according to each case. To engage with these highly complex and multifaceted issues, we will seek the participation of the different involved parties, namely local source communities, academics, museum curators, missionaries and photographers. In so doing, we hope to evaluate in how far photography can – or cannot – constitute and serve as “intermediate visual heritage” between communities.

The authors:

PhD-researchers Sophie Feyder, Christoph Rippe and Tamsyn Adams work on three distinct South African photographic collections, which originate, respectively, from a black township in Johannesburg, a missionary station in KwaZulu-Natal, and a farm, also in KZN. This interdisciplinary project, “Photographic Traditions in South African Popular Modernities”, will be running until 2014 at Leiden University, the Netherlands, as a collaboration between the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, and the Institute of African History, Language and Culture.

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