

## **Together Again: the link between transnational ties and photo archiving among Ghanaian families**

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*Photos from Ghanaian family reunions are distributed through Facebook. The elders are often recorded telling family tales.*

Recent debates around the motivations for taking digital photos ask whether people document for memory or as tools for communication (Dijck 2008:58). However, this debate tends to dichotomise memory and communication while romanticising digitisation as a revolutionary force brought from

beyond the cultural landscape. Moreover, digital archiving destabilizes traditional divides between storing and sharing and creates new forms of memory through 'distributed storage'.

During my research with diasporic Ghanaian families living in London and their digital archives, it was essential to put photos and videos in their wider context of transnational communication and new media. Rather than focusing on the content of the archive and working my way out, I started by exploring the choices of where and how to store photos, while illustrating how these choices emerge from existing socio-cultural understanding of family, photography and digital communication. Just as domestic cameras allowed Ghanaians to step out of photographic studios and document family festivities (Wendl, 1998), the arrival of digital communication meant Ghanaians in the diaspora could finally recreate their extended familial intimacy, which was threatened in the West.

**Lets take** Nana Mensah's family FaceBook page as an example. Migrating to London from Ghana, in the mid 1980s, Nana says she did not pay "enough" attention to photos or genealogy in the past but after losing some elderly family members, including her father, she felt something must be done to keep the family together. She explains:

*In Ghana we all used to live in one large household. Other family members lived nearby and gatherings were more frequent. We are now spread and struggle to squeeze everyone in our small British houses. We call them chicken coops.*

For the Mensahs, family bonds are not simply kept for pleasure but are essential for the biological, financial and cultural systems around them. For example, Nana is planning to build a large block of flats on ancestral land in Ghana; the communal building will be equally divided between Mensah siblings or their descendants. The planned building symbolises a dream of return and reunion, a recreation of familial intimacy after transnational separation, but until everyone is geographically united, family ties must be preserved. How is this done?

Apart from annual family reunions, relatives meet at engagement parties, birthday celebrations, funerals and 'naming' of new-borns. However, these are only special occasions and throughout the year it is digital technologies that maintain transnational bonds.

Emails, Skype sessions and phone calls are not half as important as the archiving and sharing of photos. Four years ago Nana and her cousins opened a Facebook page titled: "Mensah Family Worldwide". The page has 85 members and helped Nana meet relatives she never knew, who turn to her with questions on family history and genealogy. Announcements on reunions, funerals and weddings, as well as questions and stories about distant relatives, appear as wall posts. Photo albums from reunions are posted via the page, alongside pictures of family celebrations and funerals from across the world. The archive is a tool for communicating, updating and filling the absent/present gap (in oppose to remembering). This post, for example, shows how the page

became a living archive of familial memories:

I recently got a text message and the sender wanted to know the location of Florence Mensah (her father was a police officer)... Kindly post all information here if you know Florence (Facebook page)

While the socially aware family archive aims to contribute to the keeping of ties through communicating text and photos, it also hopes to be a platform for the practising and documenting of oral culture. In fact, the first target of the page (as stated in its introduction) is to draw a detailed family tree that 'will enable us to know and identify each other, acknowledge anniversaries, and provide the data for allocation of monies for funding education and health' (FaceBook page).

Growing up with vicar as a father, who also worked in the Colonial Civil Service, Nana absorbed many values on modernity that included ideas on photography and archiving. Like her cousins she sees oral culture from a Western perspective, as something to be archived/materialised. Family members record speeches and stories of elders during gatherings and upload the videos or transcriptions to the communal FaceBook archive. The last two surviving sons of the 'first' Mensah, are especially respected and considered a living repository of knowledge that must be materially documented before it is too late.

In my study I witnessed repeating dual relations towards oral traditions: Nana wishes her culture had been documented more but she also hopes storytelling will remain alive. Regarding future generations she says:

*I believe the second generation will continue the tradition of oral culture but they will combine it with more documenting, probably less through writing and more through photos or videos.*

The choice of archiving platform, as discussed, sets the tone of the archived material and reflects the approach towards it (Derrida, 1998). Storing photos in FaceBook, then, allows a communal experience with multiple participants, even more valued than one on one communication. The FaceBook family page, with its timeline, photos, videos and notes, plays a part in storing what is not yet lost; it negotiates the recording and practising of oral culture and maintains family ties that are vital for future reunions and financial support.

To recap, like the block of flats in Ghana or the crammed living room in England, FaceBook in its Ghanaian context is a place for being a family. As one of the keepers of the archive, Nana (and her co-administrators) becomes the conductor of global kinship, which she sees as a major responsibility. She shared a quote on the page saying: 'Like branches on a tree, our lives may grow in different directions yet our roots remain as one.'

Other families interviewed for this research used different digital platforms for similar goals;-

building a digital family tree through MyHeritage, exchanging photos via Google or simply screening slideshows through a portable hard drive. The main point was that although in the Ghanaian case photos are perceived as objects of communication more so than objects of memory, this was not created by digitisation but existed in previous understanding of family, oral culture and photography.