Photographic Props/ The Photographer as Prop: The many faces of Jacques Tousselle

Preface

As an initial exercise I ask readers to consider a photograph of Jacques Tousselle, a Master Photographer and two of his pupils: Joseph Chila and Jean Bosco Ndanga (nicknamed Kondja). The photograph was taken in the Cameroonian town of Mbouda by Jacques Tousselle probably in the late 1970s or early 1980s. He was then the main photographer in the town (he was the first Cameroonian photographer from there).

Although obviously staged for the camera, this image reflects something of the master-apprentice role which is an accurate reflection of their relationship. At the end of this paper I will consider another photograph similar to the one above. Both were copied from Tousselle’s personal albums with the kind permission of the photographer. I will discuss both in the conclusion.

Jacques Tousselle was active at the end of the ‘glory days’ (roughly 1950s-1980s) of the studio photographer in West Africa. By the time he started working photographs were compulsory on national identity cards (which themselves were compulsory) and many other official documents. The then current technology of photography was such that the only way that ordinary people could get photographs was from studio photographers such as him. (We should note that the combination of digitisation in ID cards and instant camera/photo labs has robbed the trade of its profitability). From the images he took we can trace his route to prosperity. He progressed from being an itinerant taking photos on the street to having both a studio with a motor cycle and then a car. These are the accoutrements of success.
Introduction: African Photography

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 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 also essays in (eds.) Pinney and Peterson 2003). The 1990s publications represent the beginning of a true art history of African photography.

Background to this paper

In 2005 I helped organise an exhibition of the work of two Cameroonian studio photographers in the National Portrait Gallery, London (see Zeitlyn 2005 and other chapters in Swenson (ed.) 2005). This arose from my then twenty year involvement as a social anthropologist working in Cameroon. One of those photographers, Joseph
Chila, introduced me to Jacques Tousselle who had taught him photography in the early 1960s. Together we made several visits to ‘Photo Jacques’ in Mbouda, a small town in the Western Province, and I was shown the pile of boxes which were in his final studio (his retirement was precipitated in early 2007 when the building where the studio was located was redeveloped).

I now know them to contain more than 40,000 negatives (and a few thousand prints), which is the legacy of Tousselle’s 40 year career. Unlike many photographers of his generation, he kept most of his negatives, which now provide a wonderful archive of life in Mbouda especially for the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. The collection is an unparalleled archive of local photographic practices spanning several decades. With the help of the British Library’s ‘Endangered Archives Programme’ the negatives (and prints) have been scanned and catalogued as a first step to ensuring their long term survival. The negatives were scanned in Yaoundé, the capital city, enabling documentation prints to be made on a laser printer which were sent back to Mbouda.

1 More information about the archiving project may be found in Zeitlyn 2009a, 2009b, 2010 and forthcoming 2011. The social context of photography in Mbouda is described in McKeown 2007, 2010. Copies of the complete archive have been deposited with the British Library and Autograph APB in UK. In Cameroon copies have been left with the National Archives, Yaoundé, The British Council, Yaoundé, and the Universities of Yaoundé 1, Dschang and Ngaoundéré.
where a team of four worked with Tousselle to fill in summary datasheets about each print. These were returned to Yaoundé where they were typed into a database which I subsequently checked and tried to fill in omissions where, for example, DVD problems meant that no prints had been made so no documentation had been prepared.

This paper has emerged out of a series of conversations that I have had with Tousselle Jacques over the last ten years, and is one of a series that are in preparation, all in different ways arising from the archiving project. In this paper I examine the portraits of the photographer himself which are in the archive, and also in his own albums. I use these to consider styles of self-display and how the photographer worked with clients to achieve desired effects. This included the use of props, and on occasion, the photographer as prop.

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 could be made from these at the correct size for identity card photographs (although it should be noted that normally Tousselle used an enlarger so his ID photographs are not close-ups, see below). So in principle, rural photographers could process and print the film without needing access to electricity. Throughout West Africa a small supporting industry of photographers, (including the earlier examples of Sidibé, Augustt and Keita, see 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: 53 cites a parallel case in Togo, see also Gore 2001, Werner 2001 and Buckley 2006 for cases from Gambia). Jacques Touselle is among the many such photographers to have lost their livelihood in Cameroon.

Although these photographers were sustained by administrative requirements (e.g. the need for ID photographs from the early 1950s onwards\(^2\)) such requirements did not fully determine the sorts of images taken. They provided a secure economic basis for the photographers and meant that the cost of photography including other recreational photographs was affordable for the clients. Among the negative archives of the studios, as well as the administrative photographs we find marriage photographs, family groups, new babies and young couples. Others mark funerals and in some cases illness. Road traffic accidents and buildings under construction are among the other types of image.

To give a more concrete idea of the relative frequency of the different kinds of photographs a simple categorization was prepared of a small collection of 304 negatives from another photographer (working in the town of Banyo). These had been stored (mainly) in uncut film rolls so they give a better sense of the range of types encountered from day to day (of course, on particular days e.g. New Year, one

\(^2\) The full sequence of official implementation is as follows: 14 Jan 1947 ID Cards were required in some urban areas but photographs were optional (Arrêté du Haut Commissaire de France au Cameroun 2521, 3/9/1946, 46/1946, 46/1078 in Journal Officiel du Cameroun François pp. 1078-9). From 24 Sep 1953 ID cards with compulsory photographs were required throughout French Cameroun. This was implemented over the entire country in the period 1954-7 (Order 599 of 24 Sep 1953, 53/1688, JOCF pp 1168). Finally on 29 Sept 1964 a National Id Card with photograph was required in the Federal republic (Decree No. 64-DF-394 of 29 Sept 1964 Official Gazette of the Federal Republic of Cameroon 1041-2). Mbouda was in French Cameroun. (My thanks are due to Ferdinand Taneken Kanno for help in compiling this information).
particular kind might predominate, but this was not the case with the sample considered). The categorization produces the following results. Half of the negatives are of individuals for identity cards (28% of males). Forty percent are of groups (11% of men only, 15% of women, 14% of mixed sex, e.g., family groups). The remainder comprise photographs of babies (5%), cars and sport (4%) and religious events (1%).

One significant omission in Tousselle’s work is the lack of uncommissioned reportage: he was not a freelance photo-journalist. On occasion he took photographs of public meetings, of investitures and of the opening of dispensaries, new buildings and even of court cases. However, these were all by invitation. He has told me that he was sometimes called in by the police to photograph people arrested (or the bodies of those killed) but in such cases the police took the negatives (see below) so there is no reflection of such photographs in his archives. That he did not take freelance reportage photographs is significant in terms of Cameroonian history and where he was based. In the early years of independence (the 1960s, continuing into the early 1970s) there was an insurgency movement in the West Province where Mbouda is located. The armed struggle by supporters of the Union des Populations Camerounaises (UPC) and its suppression by the Cameroon Army (supported by the French Army) is still a highly delicate and controversial subject in the Bamiléké region (see Joseph 1977 for background). So the ‘normal life’ which Tousselle’s archives document, which his clients wanted to celebrate, was one which sometimes had to be struggled for. It is tempting to suggest that this made their achievement all the sweeter, and the more worthy of being recorded by a photographer. To investigate this we need to compare the scope of Tousselle’s archive with material from an area Cameroon not affected by the insurgency (this work remains to be undertaken).
As was alluded to above, the convention among studio photographers in Cameroon (and elsewhere in West Africa) was that there was a two tier pricing structure. Clients paid a certain amount per print but had to make an additional payment if they wanted the negative as well. Strictly, therefore, the archive contains only the negatives (and prints) which the clients chose not to redeem, leaving negative and image rights with the photographer.

Having considered some aspects of the background, we now turn to the photographer himself.

**Jacques Tousselle**

Jacques Tousselle was born in Bamessingué in 1939, one of the constituent chiefdoms of Mbouda, Cameroon. Ethnically Mbouda is one of the Bamileke chiefdoms of the Western Grassfields, and the groups around Mbouda are known as the Bamboutous. Jacques Tousselle was not the first photographer to work in Mbouda but he was the first autochthonous photographer. He was taught photography in 1959/1960 by Ignatious Nochai, who he describes as the first photographer resident in Mbouda, but who originally came from Yaoundé. Supplies came mainly from Douala via Bafoussam and after independence from Bamenda through the anglophone supply routes connecting Cameroon’s North-West Province (now Region) to Nigeria. I note that an early photograph of him as a young photographer, posed nonchalantly by a box camera on tripod was according to the stamp on its reverse taken in Bamenda (at Ever Ready Bright Daylight Studio 21 May 1965), This image was still on display in his studio in 2000, thirty five years after having been taken.
Through such connections he was connected to the West African photographic networks described in Erin Haney’s doctoral thesis (2004). Mckeown (2007, 2010) discusses photography in Mbouda concentrating on the photographers active in Mbouda in the early C21st. She primarily worked with the successors to Tousselle (although her account starts with him).

Originally, they used glass plates but these were replaced (to his great relief) by plastic plates and then medium format film. He disliked glass plates. Not only would they break but the emulsion was fragile - if placed in the sun to dry the emulsion would melt and slide off. In several interviews he made his dislike for them very clear to me. One of the images in his album, (one which occurs in the archive as a copy of the album print) he remembers as being the first photograph he took with a particular camera, a Photax\(^3\), which he used for shots outside, for example at the weekly markets at different villages to which he and his apprentices would go with a rolled up backcloth and sometimes a mat to put on the ground.

\[\text{[Insert Image 9 around here]}\]

His apprentices continued to service the markets even after he had established a permanent studio. His access to the markets is also a testament to his success: the business enabled him to purchase first a motorcycle and then a car. Both feature in

\[\text{______________________________}\]

\(^3\) Boyer Photax III “Blindé”, produced 1938-1946 M.I.O.M., Vitry-sur-Seine, France http://www.thecamerasite.net/05_Box_Cameras/Pages/bakeliittikamerat.htm
several photographs, and not only of Tousselle and his apprentices. The motorcycle was even brought into the studio and used as a prop by some clients. Others were photographed outside posing by the car as if it were theirs.

Success meant he could graduate from a booth beside the road to having proper studio premises. Before that he was basically itinerant: he had a shelter outside a house but had no proper facilities and worked with sunlight, without an enlarger.

He moved into his first proper studio at the time when electricity arrived in Mbouda in 1970. It was opposite a bakery which meant there was a steady stream of passing trade and, when necessary, a supply of delivery vans to serve as props. He stayed at that studio from 1970 until 1994 when he moved up a block to a studio fronting the main arterial road to Bamenda (also near to another bakery) which he occupied until the site was redeveloped in December 2006 at which point he retired. Almost all the photographs in the archive date from the first permanent studio.
As well as the photographs of Tousselle which are contained in the archive, I have benefited from his conversation, friendship and being able to copy his personal album. In addition, several of the photographs which were displayed in his studio to demonstrate his talents were actually of him. This is not unusual. Several display boards of other photographers which I have inspected have the same feature (see illustrations in Zeitlyn 2005 and 2011 forthcoming). However, not only is he a skilled photographer but he also enjoyed the game of arranging poses, finding props and using costumes to change appearances. So he appears in the various photographs in several different guises (hence the title of this article). Over the years Jacques has appeared in photographs taken for his own pleasure, and as documents of his growing success, as his family has grown. But he also enjoyed appearing in photographs with customers, and managed to sneak, Hitchcock-like, into several group photographs such as formal wedding photographs.
He is unusual not only for keeping his negatives but it is clear he enjoyed being photographer and enjoyed the game of multiple views which running a studio afforded. He kept a stock of props for his clients, and he was happy to participate in the creation of the images with the clients.

So he features as a drinker and in other guises:

[Insert Image 18 around here]

Indeed, he told me, not without pride and amusement, that he had got into some trouble for taking a photograph of himself dressed as a policeman. Since the photograph continued to be prominently displayed in his shop, it cannot have been serious trouble, but an official had clearly questioned it. My suspicion is that what was troubling to an official mind was not so much the dressing up but printing the photo in the style of passport or id-card photographs which are intended for official use.

[Insert Image 19 around here]

[Insert Image 20 around here]

Another case concerned photographs which were taken of him and a young woman who was a frequent visitor to the studio: these were taken by some people in the town to suggest that they had had an affair, which they had not. Tousselle is clear that those images were just part of the ‘game’ of running a studio. She wanted
photographs of her with a boyfriend. In the absence of another man, no one else being available, he stepped in, using himself as another type of studio prop.

[Insert Image 21 around here]

[Insert Image 22 around here]

[Insert Image 23 around here]

It is clear that Tousselle would work with clients with enthusiasm to create the images they wanted, using himself as a character actor where required. However, when we look at images of him by himself, a differently nuanced picture emerges. We have already seen several such images, including the problematic passport style one of him as a policeman. He would play similar games for his own entertainment. It seems clear that he enjoyed the possibilities that photography affords of presenting oneself in radically different ways, for example:

As businessman, see Image 4 above

As traditional elder

[Insert Image 24 around here]

As a horse-rider as well as car owner (see Image 3).

[Insert Image 25 around here]

Tousselle is now retired but he has retained some of the props from the studio and he has been an enthusiastic supporter of the British Library archiving project,
without which this paper would not have been written. One of the things we both enjoy is the idea that through the archive, his images will acquire a new life, with new purposes and readings unimagined when they were first taken.

To illustrate the playfulness and the extent to which photographers and clients collaborate to jointly achieve the final images consider a final image from Tousselle’s own album.

[Insert Image 26 around here]

At first sight this looks like the first image we saw, a shot of the senior photographer and his pupils. However, unlike that first image, when I asked him who were the other people in the photograph, he said that he had no idea, that they were just passing clients who came in and somehow or other they ended up posing ‘as if’ they were his pupils. That he made a copy for himself and has included it in his own album is a statement of sorts about play and playfulness; about how unimportant he feels is the difference between an image of him with pupils and another with anonymous customers.

Conclusions
Agency: Arjun Appadurai’s contribution to the study of non-western photography consists of a short paper (1997) about painted backdrops which he suggests have a subversive anti-colonial role since they reduce the evidentiality of the image: one cannot tell by inspection where the photograph was taken (see also discussion in Burke 2001 of other types of images as historical evidence). As well as the painted backdrops visible in some of the illustrations to this article, Tousselle also used
double exposure to achieve the same effect. He commissioned a photograph of the Akwa Palace Hotel in Douala, an iconic building, symbolising ‘bright lights and the big city’ throughout Cameroon. He would use this as a background using masking in the darkroom so that individuals appeared to be standing in front of the hotel. Sadly, although the background image is in the archive, I do not have examples of these printing exercises.

[Insert Image 27 around here]

The studio was stocked with a few stock items which recur frequently in the archives. For new year pictures there was a painted piece of plywood with a large heart shaped cut-out in which people could sit, underneath a sign reading “Bonne Annee”. For use throughout the year there was a painted gourd (gourds are used in Bamileke tradition to serve palm wine, so symbolise well being and feasting), and a piece of freestanding ornate iron grillwork round which clients would pose. At various times there were plastic trees, (both large and small) and some tinsel bouquets which could be either held or placed on the ground near to a person or group. To my eyes the most intriguing of these ‘stock props’ is a length of rope which features in some images, hanging from the ceiling. Tousselle remembers its existence but cannot recall why it was installed in the first place.

[Insert Image 28 around here] dvd65_047

[Insert Image 29 around here] dvd249_028
What Appadurai’s emphasis on agency leaves unclear is who chooses which backdrop (where there are more than one available) and who chooses the poses adopted in recreational photography. In short, whose agency is at play? It seems clear to me that both photographer and clients (often with a supporting cast of friends and hangers on at the studio) make important contributions, sometimes one more than another (see Buckley 2006, Mustafa 2002 and Mießgang 2002 for discussion of parallel examples from Gambia, Senegal and Congo). Although the images I have been considering suggest that Tousselle was an active player, in discussion he stresses that it was the paying customers, the clients who literally ‘called the shots’. He was happy to play along and to set things up, but acting in response to their suggestions. Among other things, the images displayed in the studio foyer themselves may suggest a range of scenarios, transmit tropes or conventions for display. But, the clients have many other sources for styles of self-presentation, ranging from magazines, photo albums of their family and friends as well as advertising hoardings. In the absence of records of how photographic sessions actually were and are organised, all we can do is make inferences based on the archives which reveal both consistent, recurrent tropes (which I discuss elsewhere in mss1) and creative free play.

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———. Mss1 What are they thinking? A recurring trope in Cameroonian photography