

16. Archiving a Cameroonian photographic studio

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In 2005, I helped to organise an exhibition of the work of Joseph Chila and Samuel Finlak, two Cameroonian studio photographers, in the National Portrait Gallery, London.¹ This arose from my then twenty-year involvement as a social anthropologist working in Cameroon. Chila later introduced me to his “patron”, Jacques Toussele, who had taught him photography in the early 1960s (Figs. 16.1-16.4). Together we made several visits to “Photo Jacques” in Mbouda, Western Province, and I was shown the pile of boxes containing what I now know to be approximately 45,000 medium format negatives and some uncollected prints, which is the legacy of Toussele’s forty-year career.² The collection is an unparalleled archive of local photographic practices spanning several decades. Among the negative archives of the studios, as well as administrative (identity) photographs, we found 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.

With the help of the British Library’s Endangered Archives Programme (EAP), the negatives have been scanned and catalogued.³ This was a first step to ensure their long term survival, making them available for a wide range of different research purposes to scholars in Cameroon and elsewhere.

1 See *Joseph Chila and Samuel Finlak: Two Portrait Photographers in Cameroon*, ed. by Ingrid Swenson (London: Peer, 2005).

2 No glass plate negatives — as used in the 1960s in the camera shown (Fig. 16.1)— have survived, although a very small number of plastic plates were found and have been scanned. The archive covers the period approximately 1970-1990.

3 EAP054: Archiving a Cameroonian photographic studio, http://eap.bl.uk/database/overview_project.a4d?projID=EAP054.

I developed the application after discussing the possibility with Toussele, who was bleak about the lack of prospects for black and white photography. The archive project gave him and his photographs a new, different lease of life as well as the prospect of a renewed income. At the time of writing in 2014, they remain in Toussele's personal possession so the archival story has not yet finished. The project is different in many respects from cases of "digital repatriation" in that the images never left Cameroon. However, most people in Cameroon, even in the Mbouda area, had and have no idea that the negatives survive. Digitisation opens the collection to wider access in the longer term so there are some parallels with some of the earlier "repatriation" projects such as *Digital Himalaya*.⁴



Fig. 16.1 Jacques Toussele with plate camera in 1965.

4 See the *Digital Himalaya* website at <http://www.digitalhimalaya.com>. See also Mark Turin, "Born Archival: The Ebb and Flow of Digital Documents from the Field", *History and Anthropology*, 22 (2011), 445-60.



Fig. 16.2 Jacques Toussele in 2001.

The collection is a rare archive of local photographic practices, which have been documented with Toussele's assistance (he still lives in the community where these photographs were taken), thus rendering the archive considerably more important for the future than the bare collection of negatives alone. In its relative completeness and its range of subject matter, it provides a way of contextualising the work of the few internationally famous African photographers. For all their achievements we should not let Seydou Keita, Malick Sidibé and a few others stand for the whole of Africa.⁵

Since pioneering work in the late 1970s,⁶ there has been an explosion of both art historical and anthropological interest in African photography. This has been demonstrated by exhibitions such as *In/Sight* at the Guggenheim, New York in 1996, and similar exhibitions in Paris and the United Kingdom.⁷

5 See *Seydou Keita*, ed. by André Magnin (Zurich: Scalo, 1997). For parallels from Togo and Ivory Coast, see Jean-François Werner, "La photographie de famille en Afrique de l'ouest: une méthode d'approche ethnographique", *Xoana*, 1 (1993), 35-49; and idem, "Twilight of the Studios in Ivory Coast", in *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*, ed. by Pascal Martin Saint Léon and N'Goné Fall (Paris: Revue Noire, 1999), pp. 92-103.

6 For example, Stephen Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves", *African Arts*, 12 (1978), 52-59.

7 For more on the Paris exhibition, see Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, Alain D'Hoogue and Jean

Several books published in the 1990s attest to widening interest among art historians and other researchers in non-western photography. For example, Christopher Pinney discussed colonial and Indian influences on image-making in India, while Deborah Poole considered ideas of race in the Andes; Elizabeth Edwards provided an overview soon after.⁸ The 1990s publications represent the beginning of a true art history of African photography. This research continues in work that examines the social roles that photographs play and the different ways in which they can be studied.⁹

The 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 black and white 4cm by 4cm “passport photographs” (Figs. 16.5 and 16.8-16.9). Such black and white “wet photography” had meant that images could be produced easily without needing much technology or infrastructure (this contrasts with printing colour images whether from film or digital which requires more complex and expensive equipment). Rural photographers could process and print the film without needing access to electricity. Throughout West Africa a small supporting industry of photographers (including the examples of Sidibé, Augustt and Keita mentioned above) has effectively been destroyed by the computerisation of national identity cards and the arrival of cheaper colour 35mm processing in the cities. Toussele is among many such photographers to have lost their livelihood in Cameroon.

Although these photographers were sustained by administrative requirements (for example, the need for ID photographs) such requirements

Loup Pivin, *L'Afrique par elle-même: un siècle de photographie africaine* (Paris: Revue Noire, 2003). For the UK exhibition, see Kobena Mercer, *Self-Evident* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1995). An overview is presented in *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*, ed. by Saint Léon and Fall.

- 8 See Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs, Envisioning Asia* (London: Reaktion, 1997); Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).
- 9 See work in collections such as *The African Photographic Archive*, ed. by Darren Newbury and Christopher Morton (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2015); *Photography in Africa: Ethnographic Perspectives*, ed. by Richard Vokes (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2012); and *Portraiture and Photography in Africa: African Expressive Cultures*, ed. by John Peffer and Elisabeth L. Cameron (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

did not fully determine the sorts of images taken. They provided a secure economic basis for the studios and this also meant that, for the clients, the cost of other photographs was affordable (Figs. 16.5 and 16.17).



Fig. 16.3 The studio in the early 1980s (EAP054/1/123/56).



Fig. 16.4 The studio building in 2006.



Fig. 16.5 A street seller (EAP054/1/54/58).



Fig. 16.6 Portrait for an ID card (EAP054/1/94/167).



Fig. 16.7 Portrait of an elderly man with spear and pipe (EAP054/1/68/125).



Fig. 16.8 Portrait for an ID card (EAP054/1/177/24).



Fig. 16.9 Portraits for school ID cards. Double exposure onto a single negative (EAP054/1/52/144).

To give a more concrete idea of the relative frequency of the different kinds of photographs in the archive, from a total of 46,504, just over half are passport-style photographs for national identity cards. Recreational uses include many groups of family or friends (3,522 images contain more than two people) as well as photographs of babies. I note that there are almost as many images of road traffic accidents (191) as there are of weddings (212). There are also a small number of images taken in hospital showing bandaged patients recovering after surgery. I have done such counts with other Cameroonian contemporaries of Toussele, and the relative percentages are similar.¹⁰

It must also be noted that even identity card photographs are of considerable research interest, especially when one examines the entire negative not just the head and shoulders which were printed for the passport-style image. This raises a host of problems and issues about representation and analysis (by whom and of what) which, to my mind, gives this project a dynamic tension since the analysis of individual photographs or groups of photographs are problematic in many different senses. The photographs are transformed by

¹⁰ Those surveyed are Samuel Finlak, Joseph Chila and a smaller sample of negatives from Photo Royale, Banyo.

being archived and viewed as part of “a collection” in, variously, the Cameroon national archives or the university archives or in a photographer’s shop.¹¹ There is a dynamics of appropriation, not only by the researcher but the state and the photographer as well — for older identity card photos, the negatives were left with commercial photographers or the sitters (see below). Now that identity cards are digitised there are no negatives and only the government representatives can make and “own” these important images. This also means there is no possibility of reusing them for other non-bureaucratic purposes.

Between client and photographer a delicate negotiation, often unspoken, took place about props, backcloth and pose. The photographers I have interviewed are insistent that although they make suggestions, and delicate adjustments, the choices of poses and props were made by the clients.¹² There are many different conventions which become visible when one compares similar image categories taken by different photographers. In other papers, I discuss some of the tropes at play but here I am concerned more with the archival side of the project.¹³

Uses of photographs

The images had many uses and these often changed over time. If the single most common reason for commissioning a photograph from one of the studio photographers was to get a passport-style print for the national identity card (or school cards for secondary school pupils), then there were also many casual or recreational uses. Photographs of family groups, of babies, weddings and groups of friends were taken for display or for storage and discussion when albums were passed around.¹⁴ Weddings, funerals, official meetings, hospital treatments and traffic accidents are among the different sorts of images found in photographers’ collections of negatives.

In some cases a single print or image could serve different purposes over time: the ID photos of the elderly are in many cases the only surviving

11 For further discussion, see David Zeitlyn, “Redeeming Some Cameroonian Photographs: Reflections on Photographs and Representations”, in *The African Photographic Archive*, ed. by Newbury and Morton.

12 The main interviews have been with Toussele, Chila and Finlak but also with several other photographers in Adamaoua, Central, Northwest and West Regions of Cameroon.

13 My other papers include David Zeitlyn, “A Dying Art?: Archiving Photographs in Cameroon”, *Anthropology Today*, 25/4 (2009), 23-26; and idem, “Photographic Props/The Photographer as Prop: The Many Faces of Jacques Toussele”, *History and Anthropology*, 21 (2010), 453-77.

14 For an early description of how albums were used to introduce families to strangers, see Janheinz Jahn, *Durch Afrikanische Türen: Erlebnisse Und Begegnungen in Westafrika* (Frankfurt: Fischer Bücherei, 1967 [1960]), pp. 169-72.

photographs of grandparents. After their death, the identity card may be copied so an enlarged print could be made of the passport photograph for display on the wall. Such photographs are also displayed in funerary celebrations, the so-called “cry-dies” which are widespread in west Cameroon.¹⁵ Photographs were sent from villages to relatives who were in town (e.g. for secondary education). Those at school together in the towns exchanged photographs between groups of friends before they graduated and then scattered, some returning to their villages of origin, and others moving to other cities or relatives in search of employment.

Sometimes prints were brought back to the studio to be copied (in literal photocopies). Where these were of Jacques’ own work, then sometimes we can compare the original negative with the copy of the original print. This can reveal a great deal about his dark room practices, and about the ways in which the negatives (which were scanned full frame) were actually used to create prints.



Fig. 16.10 A photocopy of a print of a man standing, showing how the original negative was cropped (EAP054/1/4/145).

¹⁵ See the film *Funeral Season (Ou la saison des funérailles): Marking Death in Cameroon*, dir. by Matthew Lancit (2010).



Fig. 16.11 Original negative for the print shown in Fig 16.10 (EAP054/1/50/562).

Copyrights and permissions

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 archiving project is concerned only with the negatives which the clients chose not to redeem. Moreover, it is impossible to get permission from the people who commissioned the photographs: Toussele did not keep records of who his clients were, hence we have no means of contacting them. As is conventional in photographic copyright law, the assumption is that the owner of the negative holds the copyright, and this has been reserved by Toussele. He signed a licence with EAP allowing the negatives to be scanned and for the scans to be distributed for non-commercial purposes only. All commercial rights are reserved

by him, and the London-based charity, Autograph ABP, are acting as his commercial agents.

Vulnerability

Until our project started, the collection was vulnerable.¹⁶ Physically it was stored in a back room of the studio and the roof was leaking — when I opened several boxes at random they showed signs of deterioration and damage; some negatives had stuck together (Figs. 16.12 and 16.13). The negatives are medium format and mainly of high quality (good contrast and well fixed). Many were very dusty and had suffered from damp so it was necessary to wash them before copying. This was undertaken by Emmanuel Noupembong, a former apprentice of Toussele who had recently retired from service as a photographer for the Cameroonian government.

Toussele is ageing and is not in the best of health. He collaborated with the project team of four people to provide basic documentation, thus rendering the archive considerably more important for the future than the bare collection of negatives alone. He was able to recognise some of the people in the photographs, enabling future research to be undertaken, thus greatly enhancing the importance of the archive. However, it should be noted that recognising someone is different from knowing their name — often all that we could record is that this person came from that village.

Nonetheless, it is anticipated that the archive will enable scholars to raise a wide range of issues about the presentation of self, changing fashions and global patterns of influence as mediated by local norms of appropriate behaviour in public. An example might be the influence of magazines such as *Vogue* and *Paris Match* which in the 1970s led to some young women being photographed in daring mini-dresses, and men to be pictured parading in trousers known locally as “*patte d’éléphant*” (“elephant’s foot”), the widest of flares. The Toussele archives permit a systematic examination of modes of displaying “modernity” and being fashionable. I look forward to a new generation of African historians and scholars exploring the archive in ways I cannot imagine.

16 It is very likely that, had I not been in discussion with Toussele, the negative collection would have been burnt or discarded when he left his studio. I have met many photographers from his generation who have not retained their black and white negatives. Many reasons are given, — the most common being “since no one is interested any more there is no money in it”.



Fig. 16.12 Baptism. Damaged negative (EAP054/1/44/45).



Fig. 16.13 Negatives before scanning.

Archival realities

Originally it was proposed to use digital SLR cameras to copy the negatives but further consultation and testing persuaded me that a higher quality could be achieved with dedicated negative scanners. Moreover, during the initial phase of the project an Epson scanner was available which could scan direct to a memory card without needing an intermediary computer. It was originally planned that Toussele and Chila would copy the collection, but this proved impossible in practice. Between submitting the application and its award, the owner of the studio building in Mbouda decided to redevelop and so Toussele was given notice to quit by his landlord. My arrival was fortuitous and I was able to help him clear out the studio. In the end, the negatives were taken temporarily from the studio to the British Council Library in Yaoundé where they were scanned by an operator trained specially for the project.

After scanning, the memory cards were used to make duplicate DVDs in a standalone burner, which also did not need a computer to operate. Of the DVDs, one came to the British Library from where it was eventually made available online, and the other went back to Toussele so that he has his own set of the scans. A Cameroonian coordinator made prints from the DVDs on an ordinary laser printer which were then sent with data forms back to Mbouda where a small team worked with Toussele to produce basic documentation of the images (Fig. 16.14). The results were typed up in a database (creating the basis of the archive's catalogue).



Fig. 16.14 The documentary team at work in Mbouda.

The project produced a reference digital archive, licensed for free educational use, based on the surviving negatives and reference prints in Toussele's studio.¹⁷ Copies on hard drives were deposited at the National Archives in Yaoundé (who supported the project from the outset), at the University of Dschang (which is the nearest university to Mbouda), and at the University of Ngaoundéré (which already has experience of archiving digital photographs through its collaboration with University of Tromsø on the archives of the early Norwegian missionaries), as well as at the British Council Library in Cameroon.

Looking to the future

Now completed, the archive provides raw material for a wide range of different research projects. An example of what is possible may be found in the work of Katie McKeown, who made a brief visit to Mbouda when studying for her Master's degree in 2007.¹⁸ This contributed to a small exhibition of Toussele's work which was held at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford in 2007-2008. As this book goes to press in 2014, a documentary film made by Regis Talla about Toussele and his peers is in production, and a research student (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in collaboration with the British Library) has started field research in Cameroon.

I hope the project will provide an example that will inspire other similar archiving projects, and enable many different new research projects. Moreover, as was flagged at the beginning of this essay, I hope that such archives enable the history of African photography to be written on the basis of a large and representative sample rather than a few exemplary cases.¹⁹

17 The archive is available at http://eap.bl.uk/database/overview_project.a4d?projID=EAP054

18 Katie McKeown, "Studio Photo Jacques: A Professional Legacy in Western Cameroon", *History of Photography*, 34 (2010), 181-92.

19 The project could not have taken place without the generous support of the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme. In Cameroon, the Yaoundé office of the British Council have provided invaluable logistical support to the NGO "AAREF", which has dealt with the everyday running of the project. The Cameroon National Archives have also encouraged the project from its inception. At the University of Kent (where I was based when the archiving took place), staff in the university's photographic unit were extremely helpful in helping me move from theory to practice. An earlier version of this article appeared as David Zeitlyn, "Archiving a Cameroonian Photographic Studio with the Help of the British Library 'Endangered Archives Programme'", *African Research and Documentation*, 165 (2009), 13-26.

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