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Narrative from an Old Photograph: How Absences Make the  
Story and Inspire Research on Craft Apprenticeship in Benin

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## Abstract

Generally, photographs are used in anthropology as documentary artefacts to support external narratives or as visual representations of situations or events from the past. Using photographs allows researchers to explore and describe situations, recreate images, and illustrate anthropological discourses within a field of research. Reconstructing the context in which an image was taken gives the picture an extra dimension that can be related to many topics. In my case, orphans, kinship fostering, schooling, and craft apprenticeship are the topics that frame my analysis of a twenty-four-year-old family photograph. The story behind this specific photograph informed my research on craft apprenticeship. The story was told by a childhood friend who was absent from this family photograph because he was forced, on the very day the photograph was taken, to start an apprenticeship as welder.

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## Narrative from an Old Photograph: How Absences Make the Story and Inspire Research on Craft Apprenticeship in Benin

Gbeognin Mickael Houngbedji

### Photography in ethnographies

One of the functions of photography in ethnographic research is to provide a visual representation of a situation. This can assist readers in understanding past situations. Old photographs are also considered vital memories of the past. They inspire emotions and orientate narratives in ethnological research. Elisabeth Cameron, for example, gave her Zambian research participants photographs of themselves to build relationships with them. As she was doing so, she noticed that her interlocutors used portrait photography to capture a fixed ideal of the self or a desired self rather than current reality. The photographs were also spaces where people displayed actual relationships (Cameron 2013: 141–155). One of the most important aspects of using photography is the insight photographs can grant into the context in which they were taken. This context plays a major role for the analysis of the image (Farahmand 2017: 31). Analysis means first of all description of the picture and its visual aspects. For John Pepper (2013: 16), colonial photographs show that already in the nineteenth century African people embraced photography as a means to create images of themselves, sometimes as cosmopolitan subjects, sometimes as traditional leaders, and sometimes to adapt older roles to modern media. Photographs can be used to position bodies and faces within history but can also act as a means of escape. To illustrate this argument of the surface of the image, Christopher Pinney (2003: 218), for example, shows how Indian and Yoruba photographic practices use ‘photographic cutouts [ . . . ] made by pasting photographic images’. He critiques postcolonial photographic practices as projecting a materiality on the surface in contrast to colonial representations that he characterises as ‘depth’ representation.

The second dimension, as important as the first, is the photograph’s non-visual dimension: the context or the story behind the photograph. This dimension is very important. Elisabeth Edwards sees in recent theorisations by anthropologists working on visual and material culture a renewed interest in the social history of art and in the recreation of the far more inclusive field of objects and images (Edwards et al. 2006: 10). Before and after the moment the picture is taken, many things take place that cannot be seen in the image itself, because a photograph is just a fragment of the past even if

it appears to be transported as an apparent entirety into the present (Barros and Wunenburger 2015: 55; Edwards 1992: 13). In this way interpreting a photograph is a very delicate exercise. There are always fewer things to see in front of an open door than one can imagine behind a closed window. But the non-visual is not only speculation. In the case of photography, it implies the reconstruction of the context and the story behind the photograph. This story can be characterised by personal circumstance, vision, and intention that are present within this overall framework and exist in a reflexive relationship with wider cultural frameworks (Edwards 1992: 13). So many photographs become famous not because of the picture in itself or the person of the photographer but because of the story behind the image. Think, for example, of the photograph from the 1960s of an attractive air hostess standing in front of a Zambia Airways aeroplane that came to stand for the boom of Zambia's economy, its urbanity, and its moves to open up towards the world and its air travel in the 1960s (Ferguson 1999: 237). Similarly, the photograph of East German policeman Conrad Schumann jumping across coils of barbed wire to West Berlin has become an eminent symbol for escape from socialism to democracy. The photograph, which has been widely used to express this escape, was taken two days after the socialist regime in East Germany started building the wall separating East from West Berlin (Voigt 2010).

In ethnology, photographs are often used as testimony of living in the field site and proof for field experiences (Beaugé and Pelen 1995: 8). As representations of results, these photographs allow comparisons with similar or contrary situations (Belden-Adams 2017). For posterity, these photographs are stories, documents, and archives: they show things or situation that cannot be seen anymore. Recently, anthropological research has been conducted on photographs that were exchanged between Africans in the diaspora and their families and communities back home. The importance of these photographs is that they reconnect recipients with the source and show social change, such as shifting notions of personhood, the emergence of new social imaginaries, or the reworking of collective memories (Vokes 2012: 13). Behind each photograph there are stories that denote relationality and temporality. The perspectives that appear in photographs differ from one period to another or from one generation to another. This can be seen quite clearly, for example, in terms of kinship expressed in family photographs. But social change captured in photographs also depends on what concept and perspective the people depicted and/or the photographer wanted to highlight. A researcher who has taken photographs in the field knows the context in which he took them and the stories behind them (Cameron 2013). But in the case of a single old photograph or old collections and archives of images, the difficulty lies in correctly reconstructing the context in which they were taken. In most cases it is impossible to reach all of the protagonists depicted in the images to ask for a full reconstruction. And if it were able to contact them, many

protagonists would find it difficult to remember exactly the context in which a certain image had been taken and the stories behind it. Jo-Anne Driessens (2003: 17) experiments with this on a journey of photographic discovery as she was trying to track down her blood relatives. One method is to ask a protagonist: ‘What does this photograph bring to your mind?’ It is indeed a question that many of us have used in research contexts and also in private life. We know how difficult it is to remember the context of a photograph and the story behind it. We know that reconstructing such a context happens bit by bit as people try to remember what had happened around the taking of the photograph. Often people remember situations that carried important meaning for them: one person might have forgotten the names of persons depicted but might remember something important about a wedding dress worn. Most of the time protagonists cannot narrate all the stories behind a photograph in which they featured. As a result of such partial memories, it is necessary that as many protagonists as possible should be interrogated about each specific photograph. The interactions and possible contradictions between what each of them says help the researcher build up information about the photograph (Schwartz 1989).

A special and rare situation arises when the researcher forms part of the scene depicted in the photograph. For seasoned researchers, it is possible to find older pictures in which they are depicted interacting with interlocutors. Such instances can also happen for anthropologists who do research on their own society. It could even be photographs from the researcher’s own past or their childhood. For my research on craft apprenticeship in Benin, I am in such a special situation where I have a childhood photograph in which I am depicted and that speaks to my research topic. The story behind this photograph has become a focus of my research.

### The photograph: from analogue to digital to narrative

The photograph in question was taken in analogue format in Benin in October 1996. I did not take the picture but featured in it as protagonist. There are nine persons in the image, seven of them relatives of a man known in town as ‘Welder Kiki’: two of his brothers, one of his aunts with three of her sons and one of her nephews, and my brother and I. It was a spontaneous photograph, taken in an informal, everyday situation when the welder’s aunt had not yet properly dressed.<sup>1</sup> My brother and I were on school holidays and were visiting the city of Abomey-Calavi<sup>2</sup> where we stayed next to the welder’s aunt and played with her children. That is how we got included in this image. The photograph was taken at the initiative of the aunt’s nephew who wanted

1 For ethical reasons I do not include the photograph in this article. The welder’s aunt and one of her sons felt it was inappropriate to make it public.

2 Abomey-Calavi lies adjacent to Cotonou, Benin’s central economic hub located on the Gulf of Guinea.

to immortalise us all playing together during this holiday and called a photographer to the house. The photographer invited everybody to join in, which is how we came to be nine people in the picture. Some years later I receive a copy of the photograph as a gift and placed it in a photo album for safekeeping. It is a rare photograph from this time for me and for the others in it for in the 1990s the taking of photographs was an expensive endeavour in Benin. When I was a child, only special events such as Christmas, New Year's Eve, First Holy Communion, a wedding, or a funeral ceremonial were captured in photographs. I rediscovered the photograph when I asked my brother in September 2009 – I had just arrived in Germany – to scan in all my old photographs and send them to me. It is not a special photograph or in any way extraordinary. It is just one of hundreds on my computer. But it has become central for my research on traditional apprenticeship in Benin. It all started when, by chance, Welder Kiki saw the photograph and recalled that it was taken the very day he started his apprenticeship to become a welder.

Fascinated by his memory, I wanted to explore it more and organised a focus discussion with as many of the people depicted in the image as possible. And so we met in May 2018 at the house of Welder Kiki's aunt. My aim was to recreate as closely as possible the situation in which the photograph had been taken. We were four people: Welder Kiki, one of Welder Kiki's younger brothers, one of his aunt's sons, and I. I placed the picture on the table before us and asked each person to say what they could remember from the photograph. I then opened up a general discussion to see what other revelations we could elicit. The entire discussion took about three hours. Even though we had all been children or teenagers when the picture was taken, it was amazing to see that the information raised in the discussion was concordant and I was excited by how it was directly relevant for my analysis. I transcribed the discussion and analysed the information it provided on the context in which the photograph had been taken.

### The photograph's context and story

In March 2018 I was in Benin for my fieldwork on craft apprenticeship. Like many in Benin, I have family members or friends who are artisans. These are persons who produce goods or offer services with the use of simple technologies, such as being a tailor and a hairdresser. A childhood friend of mine is a welder: Welder Kiki, as we met him above. I decided to do participant observation in his workshop. One day he came to my family home to repair a metal staircase. As we were talking, I turned on my laptop to show him some old pictures. When he saw the picture in question, he looked startled and exclaimed: 'Do you know why I was not part of this picture?' Indeed, I did not. Generally, individuals not in a picture are not considered in descriptions of a photograph. If they are mentioned, then it is to show what they missed out

on. Richard Vokes, for example, discusses the case of scholars absent from school photographs. In his example, learners were obliged to be present for the class photo in order to qualify for a photograph identity document or passport and to be included in school membership documents. If they were absent on the day, scholars were disqualified from receiving their identity document and were excluded from their school (Vokes 2012: 212). Nowadays, absence from a school photograph no longer carries the same consequences, but it does affect the narrative told about the photograph in the future. Thus, discovering the reason why a person who should have been part of a photograph was absent can be insightful for constructing the narrative behind the photograph, a point critical for our photograph. Welder Kiki explained: he had been absent from the photograph because on that very day his uncle forced him to start an apprenticeship to become a welder. His information opened up a completely new perspective on the photograph: not those featured *in* the photograph but a person *absent from* it was instrumental to its analysis. The photograph was not a simple family picture: it was a story.

The question arose why two of Welder Kiki's brothers were in the photograph – for they were not there by mistake. Their father had been a military officer in Parakou, the largest city in northern Benin. He had passed away in May 1996, a few months before the image was taken, and left behind a widow with seven children: the oldest sixteen years old, the youngest about three months. After his death, the widow mother and all the children came to Abomey-Calavi to stay with an aunt (one of the father's sisters) for a while, until the family could decide on a more permanent solution. All paternal aunts and uncles were involved in organising the care for the children and their mother. The decision finally was for each aunt and uncle to take over the care for one or two children. It was in this way that the two brothers in the photograph were identified to remain with the aunt in Abomey-Calavi – and how they came to be in the image. Welder Kiki, in turn, the second son and fourteen years old at the time, was to stay with an uncle who was a welder. It is from him that he learnt to become a welder. But until he was able to move to his uncle's place, he remained at his aunt's house and that is how we got to spend the holidays together. The day we took the photograph was the day of his departure: in fact, he had already left by the time the photographer arrived. Early in the morning his aunt had informed him that his uncle would come and pick him up that day. He remembered having been very unhappy: 'I cried all the time. The problem was not to go and stay with the uncle, but the real problem was that it was also decided that I must stop going to school and start an apprenticeship as a welder'.<sup>3</sup> In fact, when the aunts and uncles decided for the care of the children, they did so with a clear plan for each of their social integration. The oldest brother was to continue schooling until he was old enough to get a job. His younger brothers were

3 Welder Kiki, interview with author, 25 May 2018.

also to continue their schooling. Their mother, with the baby, was to return to Savalou, her and the father's birthplace.<sup>4</sup> Kiki, however, was to leave school – he was still attending primary school despite already being fourteen years old.<sup>5</sup> He recalled how he experienced this as a cruel decision, had cried and said: 'My father is dead. This is the reason why they take me out of the school to do an apprenticeship'.<sup>6</sup>

But he could do nothing to change the decision; at that point he had no choice: he had to follow the family's decision. So, at 11 o'clock on that morning, the uncle arrived to collect him. He did not want to, refused to go, and started crying. The aunt's husband and other adults tried to persuade him to accept: 'They told me this is a good decision for my future. They told me also that the apprenticeship has many positive aspects, and I can find very early a job and earn money'.<sup>7</sup> After arguing with him for a little while, his aunt then gave him some presents to motivate him to go with his uncle.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after lunch they finally left the house. So when we took the photograph around 2 p.m., they had already left. This is the reason why he did not feature in it. But why is this context so important for my research on apprenticeships in Benin?

### The photograph and research on apprenticeships

The fact that Welder Kiki was not present in the family photograph was because of the family's decision to send him to learn a craft as an apprentice. In the context of my research on craft apprenticeship in Benin, this particular photograph reveals two aspects central to anthropology: kinship and education. The photograph was taken at a time when Welder Kiki and his brothers were set in a context of kinship fostering. This context also was the reason for Kiki's enrolment in a craft apprenticeship. What this context reveals is the manner in which relatives arrange not just for the physical care of children after the demise of their father but *about the future* of these children, particularly on the subjects of schooling and apprenticeship.

Kinship fostering is a common practice in many African societies. It has been linked to concepts of parenthood and childhood, and different forms of this practice have been identified. Erdmute Alber (2014: 99) shows for the Batombou in northern Benin that children often grow up with non-biological parents (see also Martin 2015: 47). Esther Goody (1982: 38) points out how, in Ghana and other African countries, kinship fostering allows aunts and uncles to take care of the children of their brothers and sisters:

4 Savalou is a small town in central Benin.

5 Generally, children finish primary school at the age of eleven.

6 Welder Kiki, interview.

7 Welder Kiki, interview.

8 He did not, in fact, have a choice for the decision had been taken, even if the family did engage with him to some extent and tried to make it a bit easier for him.

*The claiming of rights in children is expressed in the institution of kinship fostering that is prevalent throughout Gonja, taking somewhat different forms in different parts of the country. The institutionalised pattern is for a daughter of marriage to go to a father's sister and a son to the mother's brother.*

Kinship fostering plays an important role in providing care for orphans. In situations of crisis, such as death or divorce, the entire family acts as a support structure to provide care for the family members in need (Hollingsworth 2012: 22). The importance of kinship fostering goes beyond mere help for a few family members in difficulty. As social structure, it is of crucial importance for survival in African countries like Benin where there is no universal care system provided by the state. In the context of the story behind the photograph, the way in which Welder Kiki's uncles and aunts acted is a common way of caring for orphans in Benin. So, kinship fostering is a form of care system for orphans. What about the decisions made for children?

The place of children in society is always a controversial question not only because of their rights but also because of the duties expected from them. Parents are responsible for their children. At the same time, they take into consideration the child's will or at least the child's own interests. Many international conventions on the protection of children highlight this aspect (Bello 2015; Wanitzek 2013). In the case of Welder Kiki, his aunts and uncles decided to take him out of school, a decision he considered degrading and disagreeable. However, he had no choice and had to follow the decision made by his relatives. The universal recommendations regarding the rights of children are not really applicable because of the local context. Decisions made for children by adults are not always bad in the long term. In Welder Kiki's case, this decision in fact led to success. Today he is the only successful one amongst all brothers: he has his own workshop, is married, and has two children. Even if he has no advanced educational qualifications, he has a stable life, an income, and a family. This observation tells us something about the perception of apprenticeship in Benin: here, as elsewhere in West Africa, craft apprenticeships are considered appropriate only for children who are not good at school, or for children whose parents cannot finance their schooling (Adekola 2013). The low social status accorded to people with an apprenticeship plays a considerable role in decisions whether to send a child into an apprenticeship. Many youths consider it as negligence shown towards them when they are pushed in this direction and a refusal to invest in them. Nevertheless, as empirical investigations show, apprenticeship is one of the best ways to have a chance of getting a stable job (Fajobi et al. 2017).

My research into craft apprenticeship in Benin was oriented by this family photograph of kin of one of my interview partners. It shows a kinship context in which children were living with non-biological parents. My interview partner was absent from the photograph, but the story behind the image

dominated his life. My analysis shows that the photograph cannot be taken as a single, unchanging representation but has to be understood as a succession of meanings attached to the practice of kinship fostering in order to ensure orphans are cared for. The story behind the photograph also shows that decisions that affected children might consider as bad at the moment can be what saves them in the future.

The photograph speaks not only to the issues of social life. It also refers to the debate on the postcolonial perspective in photography (Pinney 2003). This specific photograph is not based on a kind of ‘vernacular modernism’; rather it was made impulsively in the normal course of life and included everyone who was present in the household at that time. In this manner it gives a depth representation of the familial situation at this moment. Where, some years ago, photographs from colonial or missionary archives were the only available sources of ‘depth’, this is no longer the case today. Through the appropriation of the technology of photography, African natives can engage in this area by making photographs that highlight not only the social imaginary or that rework collective memories (Vokes 2012; Pinney 2003) but that have real depth and capture ordinary social context.

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