Representing Africa: Whose Story Counts?

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Photographs by
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Photographs have long been an important tool of cultural anthropologists. A quick survey of the anthropological literature shows visual images being used to provide records of change, to record important events or activities, and to elicit commentaries from informants about performance, costume, or other areas of interest. Increasingly in the last 20 years, however, anthropologists have begun to question the veracity of their visual records and to explore the ways that culture, interests, and personal experience shape the interpretation of visual images. These questions have led to a re-examination of what “documentary” means and how we judge a photograph and its ability to help us understand other worlds (see MacDougal 1991 and Ruby 1991, for example). We have come to realize that photographs and their interpretations often tell us more about the photographer or viewer or, when published, the editor, designer and writer than they do about those who are actually photographed.

The Illusion of the Image

How many times have you heard the statement “A picture is worth a thousand words”? With pictures there is what Michael Katakis has called the “illusion of the image”; one sees what is happening as real and true, and yet that truth can only be an interpretation. John Berger writes (1972) that interpretations of visual images, like interpretations of literature and speech, are shaped by the experiences of the interpreter, his or her culture, goals, interests, and training in ways that remain relatively absent and unexplored. He also writes that “The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled” (1972:7). If this is the case then people’s interpretations of visual images will change as their experiences compound in the normal course of everyday life.

The ways that experience and background affect the interpretation of visual images were brought home to me after working with photographer Michael Katakis during a field trip to the Kono area of eastern Sierra Leone in 1998. Soon after returning to the United States it became clear that Katakis had made an extraordinary collection of photographs, yet anthropologist and photographer saw the photographs and the potential of publishing or exhibiting them in very different ways. As an artist, Katakis felt that the photographs stood on their own as visual images and that ethnographic commentary should be minimal. Katakis’s stance is an example of what Kratz has called the “family of man” view, which posits that “the humanistic message of the photographs would be obvious, conveying unity within the diversity of humankind” (Kratz n.d.). As an anthropologist with a commitment to cultural specificity, I felt it would be a disservice to those photographed to encapsulate them in our world without trying to share some of what is interesting and unique about Kono history and life. Karp (1991) and Kratz (n.d.) characterize these differing points of view as assimilating and exoticizing.

Seen together our positions (Katakis’s reliance on similarity and mine on difference) reflect two diametrically opposed approaches. In their extreme forms each of these positions is problematic. On the one hand, emphasizing similarity flattens out cultural difference in ways that lead to a homogeneous view of humankind. This view cannot acknowledge the existence and thus the effects of inequalities or cultural and historical difference. Emphasizing similarity also leads to the interpretation of what is perceived as different as the representation of marginality, pathology, or dysfunction. On the other hand, emphasizing difference, as my training as an anthropologist seems to foster, has the potential of exoticizing other life-ways to the point that translation or communication between cultures becomes a conceptual impossibility.

After months of sporadic discussions of our different approaches to the photographs it was clear that neither Katakis nor I had changed our positions, although each of us probably came to respect the view of the other more than before. However, the problem of how to publish or exhibit the photographs still remained. If each view was “right” under certain circumstances (specifically depending on our goals and training), we could assume there were other views that were equally right, equally worth representing. From that
realization grew the idea of incorporating a third voice and focusing publication of the images on exactly the issues we had been debating. We returned to Sierra Leone in 1985 to discuss the photographs with Monica Mondel-Gbogba, a Kono health worker familiar with the area where the photographs were originally taken.

We had several goals in considering the three commentaries on the photographs. First, we hoped that by presenting viewers with multiple commentaries they would begin to explore their own biases about photographs and other visual images. Second, in addition to exploring biases about photographs in general, we hoped that viewers would begin to question their biases and assumptions about Africa in particular. If visual images of an African community are interpreted in ways that are related to training and personal experience, then what are the sources of this experience? Is one's interpretive stance related to attitudes about African Americans in this country? To stereotypical views of Africa that were predominant during the colonial era? To the stories that Christian missionaries brought from Africa as a way of encouraging contributions to the missionary process? Or to the sensationalistic coverage of Africa found in the United States media? To romantic images of a pristine and primitive Africa untouched by the ravages of time and globalisation, as in recent films such as Out of Africa? Each of these threads, and there are numerous others as well, provides us with a prism through which we interpret the images.

Third, we were interested in exploring what the multiple interpretations of photographs mean for questions of power and representation. Does allowing for the voice of those represented affect the viewer's power to define the meanings of images? Does it alter how portrayed to have more of a say in how they are perceived by the outside world? These are ultimately questions about whose interpretation counts, and how we negotiate or mediate among the varying interpretations people have. Another question that must be asked in this regard is what use photographs are to the social scientists if the way we see them is so closely tied to individual experience and history.

The Kono

The photographs seen here were taken around the town of Kamakoea in Sierra Leone (Fig. 1). Kamakoea is the headquarters of Soo Chiefliness, one of 24 Kono chieffresses. The Kono in this rural area are primarily subsistence farmers, although large numbers of men and young people are likely to migrate to the nearby urban centers of Koidu and Yenga to work in diamond mining or marketing. Increasing numbers of young people migrate from Koidu or Freetown (Sierra Leone's capital) for school. The primary crop for Kono farmers is rice, but cassava, yams, potatoes, and other vegetables are also grown. Some farmers also grow coffee and groundnuts (peanuts) as cash crops.

As in many other rural towns in the Kono area, services in Kamakoea are relatively limited. There is no electricity or running water. The town has an elementary school and rudimentary health care facilities, with several government-trained nurse-midwives and a government dispensary. The Kono are patrilineal and patriloclal, which means that inheritance of land and title passes from fathers to sons and that upon marriage, women tend to move into the households of their husbands where they spend their formative years and raise children. Kono women live in what is called the Rice Field, or the husband's rice field.

The Kono say they migrated from the highlands of Guinea to their present location, probably about 500 years ago. Scholars say this migration probably occurred in the aftermath of the fall of the great Manding empires of what is now Mali and northern Nigeria. (For a more complete description of the Kono see Hardin 1983.)

The Photographs

We selected the photographs in two ways. Katakis was interested in those that he thought would make the best images for future publication or exhibition. I was interested in presenting a variety of views of Kono life. We selected 25, although only 10 are included here. (The complete set will appear in our book Three Voices: Images and Reflections from a West African Town.) Once they were chosen we worked separately as I was writing captions for an exhibition of photographs. I, as an anthropologist and Katakis as an artist, when we arrived in Sierra Leone, we asked Mondel-Gbogba to add her commentary. We had decided not to share our captions or really discuss the project except to choose the photographs until all three sets of commentaries were completed.

On the following pages you will see the photographs, coupled with the three sets of commentaries. Following the photographs I will discuss how interests and experiences have played into the ways that each of us responded to the images.

Figure 1

MSI-G These children are trying to use something in place of a camera. One should encourage such children. But the parents didn't give them shoes. They have forgotten that they will get worms. All this comes out of poverty. These children need help for a better life.

KLH Young Kono boys have relatively few chores to do for the women or mothers and they spend most of their time wandering the town in the company of their cousins and playing their own age. One of their pastimes in 1988 was following Michael Katakis as he took photographs.

MCK These young boys had followed me for days. I would raise the camera to my eye and take my pictures. I would hear laughter from behind me and quickly turn and they would always scatter, disappearing behind a tree or building. After a few weeks of this dance I turned to the laughter and found these fellows looking at me through their homemade lenses.
MMG: Faidaro is a brave man. He does things that his people like and whenever he gives advice they take it because they know that he is right. He is a section chief. Faidaro means "my father is in town." In our home the chiefs dress themselves in cotton clothes. It shows that they are chiefs. He is one of the brave chiefs.

KLH: Here you see a man wearing a shirt of locally produced "chief's cloth." It is called chief's cloth because of the thickness of the fabric and the prevalence of indigo-dyed thread in the pattern. This is a portrait of Chief Faidaro, the Chieftain Speaker (second in command) of Soa Chieftdom.

MGK: When I first met Chief Faidaro he shook my hand—his hands were so large they completely covered mine. One of my few portraits. Chief Faidaro wearing his country cloth.

MMG: People here have come to sell their market so they can buy food. A little boy is buying some groundnuts (peanuts) and beans, a pregnant woman is selling garden eggs (eggplant) and groundnuts so that she can buy rice. People here spread their bags on the ground for their markets. This really shows that they need a health worker to advise them about how to maintain their food.

KLH: One of the few avenues to cash for rural women is small-scale local marketing. The eggplant, bananas, pepper, and peanuts being sold here are surplus from the women's gardening.

MGK: The markets are wonderful places—activity was composing itself around me with great speed—sometimes I was quick enough to capture it.
MMG: These people are finished selling their markets so they are going back to their villages on foot because no vehicle is available.

KLI: When the trucks do not run or if people don't want to spend their money on transport, they walk. Many rural Kono say the worst problem of their lives is the lack of dependable, cheap transport. In their words it keeps them from being able to get produce to market and from being able to get emergency health care.

MGK: The people walked and walked and then walked some more, often back and forth carrying heavy loads. I walked this road more times I stopped here to record the terrain but mostly to sit and rest.

Figure 4

MMG: This woman is plaiting her daughter's hair; it is our native custom. We won't be able to afford money to roll it like an English woman, so we use plaiting to make our hair neat.

MGK: I photographed these people because of the light. I loved this light. I was really not aware of the people.

Figure 5
MM:G: This woman is making thread from our native cotton wood. This is part of a longer procedure. She has cleaned seed from the cotton, carded it, and made the thread. When there is enough she will make it into clothes and they will use it for cover when it is cold.

KLH: Older women spin cotton thread in the afternoons or early evenings when most of their other work is done. Once a woman has enough thread she will engage a man to weave it into strips that are then sewn into blankets, shirts, or lappas (a length of cloth that is worn as a skirt). I knew an older woman who wins thread from a spinning bobbin onto a larger bobbin for storage.

MGK: What attracted me to this woman was her elegance and smile. Also, I loved her glasses—they reminded me of Buddy Holly. As I photographed her I hummed a Holly tune. She smiled, but the little boy appeared to be thinking “a madman has come to our town.”

MM:G: This is a village that we do mobile clinics in. We use a hanging stick scale and trousers so we can know the weight of the child. This is a local clinic and it is just a nursing aide that is running it.

KLH: This is Agnes Selabo at work in the Manjama clinic. Here she is measuring a baby’s growth. Younger Kano women such as Agnes are beginning to find new ways to support themselves that take them away from the farm work that has been their major occupation until recently.

MGK: Agnes Selabo was one of the more remarkable people that I have ever met. She worked very hard to improve conditions at the Manjama clinic. I photographed her working with a new patient.
Figure B

MM-G This vehicle has come from a village where people meet to sell their markets. The women are finished buying and they are going to their various places.

KLIH A truck on the road to Kainokoku. The driver's assistants are known as "rally boys." Young boys dream of becoming rally boys, but few families would encourage their sons to pursue such a life.

MGK These fellows came rushing down the road—only had a moment to take this one photograph. Their expressions of unadulterated joy reminded me of driving down Pacific Coast Highway in a convertible with the top down.

Figure 9

MM-G This man is taking something on his head to market to sell and he is happy because it will give him money to do any other thing that he wants to. He is also smoking a pipe which shows that he is economizing by buying tobacco leaf rather than cigarettes, which are more costly.

KLIH Most rural Kenyan farmers. Husband and wives form a cooperative unit to grow enough rice and other produce to last from one yearly harvest to the next. Here a farmer returns to town after a day of working on his farm.

MGK My camera almost photographed this man on its own. His smile and his eyes were so alive and magnetic. He possessed a kind of joy that was radiant.
Three Voices

When working with Monica Mendeh-
Ghebreghi in Sierra Leone, I began by col-lecting a life history in the hopes that I would be able to connect some of the par-ticularities of her life to events and interests that shaped her interpretations. Mendeh-Ghebreghi in Kono, although not from the village where the photographs were taken. She was born in 1955 and completed several years of high school before marrying. Her husband, Daniel, has worked in various capacities with foreign missionaries throughout much of their married life. Together they have seven children. Mendeh-Ghebreghi has lived in Kointh, the second largest city in Sierra Leone, for most of her adult life. Last spring she moved to Freeborn, the capital of the country, to escape fighting between rebel and army forces in the Kono area. She has passed several certificates courses that enable her to provide various kinds of health care at the community level. Her familiarity with Konekome comes from her work over a period of years with a mobile health clinic that traveled to the area once a week to provide treatment and education. In 1982 she and her husband began writing to correspond with a mobile health clinic in Kointh. While she knows many of the families in the Kointh area, she knows personally only two of the indi-

MM-G: This vehicle has come from a village where people meet to sell their markets. S场合omose people to the villages, buy produce, and carry it to Kointh for sale. The economic impact is that they are able to produce the market for Kointh because they know they will be able to sell there.

KLIH: This truck is passing through Kointh on the way to Kamandu and the Kointh border. (Kointh is the headquarters for Sea Chiefdoms.) This truck is the local market, Kointh for crops such as bananas, oranges, and sweet potatoes. The truck is a new addition to the local economy, and it has changed the way people travel and work. The truck also serves as a mobile health clinic, providing medical care to remote areas.

MCG: I was constantly amazed at people's resourcefulness and determination under difficult circumstances. I am a transport that would make a 'westerner' weak in the knees.
Katakis's captions are patterned in yet another way. He focuses overwhelmingly on the ways in which what is portrayed mirrors his own experiences (Figs. 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, and 9). He also considers the quality of the light (Fig. 5); the shift it takes to photograph people as they live their daily lives (Fig. 3); and the ways in which those photographed cope with the hardships of their lives (Figs. 4, 8, 9, and 10). Katakis's emphasis on similarity is in some part related to the length of time he spent in Sierra Leone (two months), the fact that he did not speak Kono (the local language) or the English-based creole that many younger people now speak, and the fact that he has not been trained to explore cultural patterns in lieu of other things he has his own experiences with which he base his descriptions of others. As we have seen, this is a common way of interpreting the unknown. We scan our own past experiences to understand the new.

Katakis was born in Chicago in 1952. His father emigrated from Greece to the United States shortly after World War II. Katakis was the son of Greek immigrants. As he was growing up, household stress contributed to American life rather than to the preservation of Greek traditions. In his late teens he left Chicago to pursue a music career in southern California that led to several years of touring in the United States and abroad. When he tired of the touring required by the music business, he went back to school and completed a masters degree in psychology. As he puts it, somewhere along the way he picked up a camera and began photographing. Katakis is unutterably 11 playing-healed as a photographer or artist for he has also published several articles and edited a volume of essays on topics related to current social issues. He has made two trips to Sierra Leone, in 1993 when the photographs were taken, and in 1995 to work further with Monica Mendez-Diez.

When I asked Katakis about his captions, he attributed this tendency to relate his photographs to his own experiences to two influences in his life. As the son of a Greek immigrant he found himself somewhat between and between Greek and American. He sees much of his younger life as a search for similarities between himself and his friends and classmates, in order to discern the differences that an immigrant background often imposes. In later years Katakis has traveled extensively, and these travels have often taken him to places where English is not spoken. His strategy for getting around in such situations is to use photographs and laughter, concentrating on similarities of gesture and expression to communicate.

This emphasis on similarity also shows up in the kinds of photographs Katakis took. I was struck by the fact that he had photographed agricultural labor among his approximately 2,000 photographs. Agriculture is obviously an occupation that is of primary importance to rural Kono. It was certainly part of most people's daily activities during the months of July and August while he was in Sierra Leone. Katakis, however, chose not to photograph this dimension of Kono life, probably because he had little basis for understanding it or relating it to his own life.

Conclusions

This article points out some of the ways that background, training, and interests affect the interpretation of visual images. The question remains, however. Whose story counts? It is a difficult position to take, but from the above exploration I can only answer that they all count in some way, because none of them can stand alone. A quick comparison of the three texts for any of the photographs presented here demonstrates this. While all of the stories count, they have drawbacks, but these are only readily apparent within a comparative frame, such as that attempted here. Visual images cannot be viewed free of interest or simply as fact. What becomes important then, is knowing how to judge an interpretation of a photograph. Ordinarily, when faced with only one caption, we do this by matching the interpretation to our own expectations and then delve into past experiences to help us decipher a particular image. Knowing something of the biography of the viewer or the interpreter suggests another avenue to explore, namely what interests they have in presenting information in certain ways, and what kinds of information they have at their disposal to present. Following this approach, viewers may become more aware of the resources they use to interpret stereotypes, ethnomorphology, and often inaccurate images tend to underline their creators and become resources for constructing how audiences think about a certain place or issue.

The last topic I want to pursue has to do with the implications of this work for social science. Anthropologists, in particular, have been exploring the idea of multiple voices as a way of circumventing the problems of bias. Some believe that you get closer to the truth of a type or fact by using several voices or letting the "informants" speak, either by themselves or alongside the researcher. Such productions can be deceiving in two ways. First, no individual can speak for a group. My view of the photograph was considerably different from Katakis's, just as Mendez-Diez's view differed from that of someone else. I might have worked with. Second, in projects such as the one presented here, there is always someone at the helm and their interests will be apparent, although perhaps subtle, in what photographs are selected, how the editing is done, and how the questions are asked. It does not matter if that person is from the group being photographed. Instead, I would suggest that using multiple voices is an important strategy for developing the tools that allow individuals to question or be aware of the biases inherent in the interpretation of visual images or in interpretation in general.