THE AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE

Research and curatorial strategies

Edited by
Christopher Morton and Darren Newbury
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PREFACE

This volume has its origins in a one-day workshop, *Interpreting African  
Photographic Archives: Research and Curatorial Strategies*, convened by the  
editors at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, on 7 December  
2011. We would like to acknowledge the support of Birmingham City University  
and the African Studies Centre, University of Oxford, which enabled us to  
host so many excellent speakers at that event. It brought together academics,  
curators, artists and a group of research students in a number of disciplines, to  
consider both established and emerging themes in the research and curation of  
photographic archives relating to Africa. Workshop papers by Sophie Feyder,  
Erie Haney (with Jennifer Bajorek as co-author), Christopher Morton, Darren  
Newbury, John Peffer, Christoph Rippes, Andrea Stultiens and David Zentln  
have been revised for publication here and joined by essays from Heike Behrend,  
Patricia Hayes and Richard Vokes, all of whom have worked extensively on African  
photographic collections. The workshop was closed by a stimulating afterword by  
Elizabeth Edwards who reflected on the key themes that emerged from the day’s  
discussion.

The workshop itself was convened to complement the exhibition *People Apart:  
Cape Town Survey 1952. Photographs by Bryan Heseltine*, which was curated by  
Newbury at the Pitt Rivers Museum and ran from 19 July 2011, until 8 January  
2012. It seemed to us that the exhibition of this fascinating collection – that  
had recently come to light as a result of the research process – raised a series of  
critical questions about the role of the researcher in driving debates about, and  
setting the research and curatorial agenda for, African photographic collections.  
The workshop sought to widen such reflexive issues outwards to then consider  
expanded notions of the African photographic archive, from institutional  
collections to private and personal assemblages, as well as the ways in which  
researchers and artists are curating local reengagements with photographic  
archives as part of their work. We would like to thank all of the participants for  
their enthusiasm for this project and for their forbearance in bringing its results  
to publication.

Finally, we wish to express our thanks to all those institutions and individuals  
who have kindly granted permission to reproduce a selection of the photographs  
that have proved such rewarding objects of enquiry.
11 VERSIONS OF FRAGMENTED HISTORY AND (AUTO)BIOGRAPHY: ON AND FROM THE KADDDU WASSWA ARCHIVE

Andrea Stultiens

Most people do not write their own history
Some people are given a history that is not really theirs
But who can oppose and prove otherwise.

Kaddu Wasswa John

Photography might be thought of as a medium that shows what is gone. Texts that try to get to the nature of the medium argue that photographs are objects that refer to death, to what is no longer tangible and accessible (Barthes 1981: 96). It has been convincingly argued that photographs are tools, used to register and fix identities, and to accumulate knowledge and, therefore, power over others (Tagg 1988). In the combination of photo-essay and text that comprise this contribution, I want to present an alternative perspective based on work I did as a photographer and (nascent) researcher. It is based on the documentation of a single life. Although the life and its documentation were far from exemplary, it was this pile of papers – an assemblage of texts and images – that drew my attention and that I photographed. Led by the documentation and the accompanying stories we heard, Ugandan photographer Arthur Kistu and I also photographed in Uganda from 2008 until 2010. In collaboration with Kaddu Wasswa and Arthur Kistu, I then edited the resulting collection of images into a book, which can serve as an example of a way to deal with a photographic archive and narrative in a context that includes both vernacular and outside views (Stultiens, Wasswa and Kistu 2010).
I met Kadu Wasswa (born Uganda 1933) in 2008. I had been in his country twice as a tourist, visiting a friend I used to live with in a student house in the Netherlands. During these trips I had not been able to take anything for granted. The simplest things had to be thought about while, at the same time, much seemed familiar; and had been seen before on television. I had to watch my step and have a constant feeling of information overload, but there they were, the colourful markets, the ladies carrying baskets on their heads. After the second trip I developed a project as an artist. I tried to use photography as not a tool to fix or control (my view of) others but as a way to go beyond the culture shock that I experienced during my first two stays. I began by asking two groups of school children to photograph what was important to them to show to the children in another village.1

My first visit to Kadu's house took place a week after we met in Uganda's capital city, Kampala. Arthur Kikutu told me I should see some of the photographs his grandfather had since I was interested in Ugandan archives. He had just mentioned this when Kadu Wasswa called him to meet up since he was in town. He turned out to be a charismatic man and an appointment to come to Kyrio, a village close to Uganda's second biggest town, Jinja, followed instantly. The visit started with a tour of the house and grounds. Then Kadu Wasswa announced that he was going to fetch his collection. When, on a mat in his garden, he opened a piece of cloth to reveal his collection, I immediately understood that this was what I had been looking for: an opportunity to interact with a view from the inside. Not the missionary or colonial images with which I was familiar from illustrated books on Uganda published in the first half of the twentieth century (Hattersley 1907; Lloyd 1921; see also Turnerism 2009) but a rotary club photograph from the 1970s where Ugandans are donating to white nuns (Stahljens et al. 2010: 96). Not the horror stories about Idi Amin but a document on the thinnest possible paper rejecting the manuscript of a novel written by Kadu Wasswa due to a lack of paper and printing ink (Stahljens et al. 2010: 84).2 This collection would allow me to go beyond what I had read and seen so far, which was limited to tourist guides, books mostly about postcolonial politics and some ethnographic sources that at the time seemed to me to be endless lists of observations that failed to shed light on what I saw and experienced.

I instantly knew I wanted to try to make a biography about this man. But by first suggesting and then doing this I stepped into his life and became part of the story I wanted to tell. I did not want to claim an authorship that was not mine. Kadu Wasswa had been making sure that these images existed, that they were contextualized over time, that the photographic (and other) documents have a materiality that tells its own story in relation to the transparent message of what was photographed (Edwards and Hart 2004: 1–15). So I had to make a biography with this man. A hybrid between biography and autobiography. His and also partly mine. At the same time I did not want to deny that my interests (and Europeanness) presented Kadu in a different way than he would have himself. In an attempt to distinguish as clearly as possible the different voices involved, I did not alter any of the documents Kadu Wasswa gave me but instead photographed them while I held them. My white hands frame his material. I hope that this visual strategy makes the reader aware of his or her skin colour and relation towards what is seen. The medium is present; it makes itself visible and is part of the story (Mulder 2004: 60–5). In compiling the book I had to choose from all the photographs made. This felt like an impossible task; choices were made by me based on my interest in photographic representation and with a still very limited knowledge of Ugandan history and culture.

Kadu Wasswa used photographs to prove what he did; to transfer the moment into an object he could show and share. When I visited him for the first time in his village he gave me his curriculum vitae. On it was a long list of occupations and activities he employed, accompanied by a photocopied photograph with a few sentences to explain it. The explanation began as follows: "Records are good. What I am indicating here could not be believed if "ink and photography" were not the evidence." Kadu Wasswa had no intention to create an archive—a word that only appeared when I entered his story. He did, however, intend to create the possibility to share what he preserved. This, as Jacques Derrida argues, is key to the constitution of an archive. There are objects—they do not have to be photographs—that are references to something else: something that existed outside of the here and now of the archive (Derrida 2010: 3).

Kadu Wasswa explained why he started documenting his life with an anecdote:

My father died when I was five years old. My mother was left with nothing. The family vandalized all his property, but she managed to keep one photograph, a small photograph. She gave it to me at the age of twelve and informed me what had happened that caused me to grow up as an orphan. From that moment I realized that preserving things is essential. And that things as they grow older, they become more valuable. (Cited in Blokland and Pelupessy 2012: 215–16)

Here a photograph not only foreshadows death but also creates a way forward. Kadu Wasswa does not own this specific photograph anymore; though he had a painting made of it, which has a prominent place in his living room (see photo-essay). A residue from the past made the situation Kadu Wasswa found himself in as a 12-year-old understandable and caused a lifetime commitment to documenting initiatives taken and the events that resulted from them. Even though Kadu is proud of the book we made, he also began to notice its shortcomings in relation to his reality. Audiences in the Netherlands felt that I
should have approached the man's story more as though he was a fictional novel character, whereas Ugandans said they did not see enough of the man, Kaddu Wasswa. Some viewers commented that they only saw a man who failed at most of what he attempted to do. Kaddu Wasswa then asked whether I could make a revised version of the book, to put more emphasis on his ongoing advocacy for non-commercial community centres and his attempts to educate his community about the dangers of alcohol abuse in relation to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Limited by all sorts of practical challenges, I suggested that he would select the material himself and that I then would produce a print-on-demand volume, based entirely on his edit. The Kaddu Wasswa Archive 2013 is made up solely of photographed documents, including reproduced photographs. In this version there is a lot of text, partly in Luganda, partly in English, and there are many documents that are relevant and understandable only within the Ugandan context.

The photographs in the 2010 version of the Kaddu Wasswa Archive refer to and show a past in order to understand the representation of it in (relation to) the present. The image that shows a situation that happened at a specific time and place becomes a time machine that refers to other places and moments to which it is causally related. These places and moments are of course not the same for those seeing the image. Every documented fragment leads to other fragments that are part of a library of experiences, interests and observations connected to the individual that encounters it. The engagement with the image will be completely different when that individual is Kaddu Wasswa himself who keeps digging up new documents and photographs every time I meet him, or me with my interest in what I can and cannot understand of a culture that is not mine through photographs, or others seeing and reading what I attempted to do.
Top: conundrum and learn away things – you learn to cope with situations. In this picture the negotiation with the “bad” boys are so hopeless, life is quite full. From 1960’s... now all those pictures are prominent features in any aspect of life.

All persons who were in the YLC agree that the club developed the personalities they enjoy now.

Carol never breaks a date now.

Join the YLC.

At our club-house we enjoyed ourselves – provided we spent a happy and devoted like others.

We had our secret days when we had TIDACO, radio and sound recording. Then we had ﬂying, the hula and so on... our ﬁlm, our speakers.

At our club-house we enjoyed ourselves – provided we spent a happy and devoted like others.

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Notes

1. The project, both book and accompanying theoretical reflection, was my thesis for the Master of Photographic Studies degree at Leiden University.

2. In the first exhibitions, which took place in The Netherlands (Nederlands Fotomuseum 2010) and Uganda (Makerere University Art Gallery and ArtFirst Gallery 2011), I presented volumes with all the material for the audience to browse through. Presentation of the works has developed since and each subsequent exhibition has included more recent images and more stories of the life of Kaddu Wasswa and the relationship between us. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, 2012; Art Cadre, Marseille (2012) and Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford (2013).

3. Amin took over after toppling Milton Obote in 1971 and was in power until 1979. He expelled the large Ugandan Asian population and his regime led to an endless list of disappearances and political murders in the country. The feature film 'The Last King of Scotland' (2006), with Forest Whitaker as Idi Amin, is an example of how the figure of Amin has come to dominate popular international representations of Uganda's recent history.

4. See van der Elst's explanation with the exhibition 'Multivoical Histories', curated by him as part of the Noorderlicht Photo Festival 2011 in Groningen (Netherlands), <http://www.paradox.nl/multivoicalhistories> (accessed 24 February 2013).

5. Comments were made by several individuals in response to the Kaddu Wasswa Archive exhibition in the Netherlands, as well as in a review by Merel van der Sluis in the national newspaper Het Volkstaart.

6. The book is available on Book (<http://www.blurb.com/b/4554234-the-kaddu-wasswa-archive>), Kaddu has seen and commented on the book. He sees points for improvement, not least because the documents had been compiled in a rush. We plan to make another version in 2015.
Christopher Morton is Curator of Photograph and Manuscript Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, UK and Lecturer in Visual and Material Anthropology at the University of Oxford, UK. He has published extensively on collections, histories and the history of photography within anthropology, particularly relating to Africa.

Daren Newbury is Professor of Photographic History and Director of Postgraduate Studies in the College of Arts and Humanities, University of Brighton, UK. He has published widely on photography, most notably on the history of photography during the apartheid period in South Africa and the use of historical photographs in post-apartheid museums and exhibitions.

This exciting collection treats photographic images and archives as messages offset to an unknown future. Traces of past events become revelatory in the hands of these stellar contributors. This is a book that should be read by everyone interested in the potential of new reflections of visual history.

Christopher Pinney, Professor of Anthropology and Visual Culture at University College London, UK

This is a timely and groundbreaking collection of essays that focus on the construction of the African photographic archive as a contested, political site of collective reflection and re-invention. In eleven distinctive and thought-provoking essays, the archive is stretched and extended - both geographically and theoretically - so that it ranges from the vernacular to the official, the personal to the artistic, while exploring the photographic archive as a site that is steeped in the past.

Tamar Garb, Deringer Lawrence Professor in the History of Art at University College London, UK

African photography has emerged as a significant focus of research and scholarship over the last twenty years, the result of a growing interest in postcolonial societies and cultures and a turn towards visual evidence across the humanities and social sciences. At the same time, many rich and fascinating photographic collections have come to light.

This volume explores the complex theoretical and practical issues involved in the study of African photographic archives, based on case studies drawn from across the continent dating from the 19th century to the present day. Chapters consider what constitutes an archive, from the familiar mission and state archives to more local, vernacular and personal accumulations of photographs, the importance of a critical and reflexive engagement with photographic collections, and the question of where and what is 'Africa', as constructed in the photographic archive.

Essential reading for all researchers working with photographic archives, this book consolidates current thinking on the topic and sets the agenda for future research in this field.