

Photography and the Ethnographic Method FREE

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Summary

Photography has had a close association with anthropology from the beginning of the discipline. However, this proximity has not been as evident since the 1960s. Despite this seeming discomfort with photographs in contemporary social anthropology in particular, they can play a useful role in social research in general and social anthropology in particular as both sources of information and objects of research. This is not to about using photographs as a decorative element in a written text as is often done. What is useful is to see how photographs can become audible taking into account when and where they were taken and by whom. To do this however, methodological considerations of photography needs to travel from the sub-disciplinary domains of visual sociology and visual anthropology into the mainstreams of these disciplines as well as into the midst of the social science enterprise more generally.

Keywords: photography, anthropology, method, visual, reading

Subjects: Education, Cultures, and Ethnicities, Education and Society

Introduction

Aaron Siskind has noted, “photography is a way of feeling, of touching, of loving” and “what you have caught on film is captured forever” because “it remembers little things, long after you have forgotten everything.”¹ These words capture much of the commonsensical, popular, and emotional assumptions about photography and photographs. That is, photographs (and by this I mean undoctored still photographs of people, events, and places) are by and large good repositories of memory and social history narrated pictorially. But obviously, for this information to be of any significant use for research in social sciences and humanities in general, there must be a way in which this information might be reliably decoded and presented in written form. Alternatively, they need to add a nuanced research sensibility to a given research project. In other words, photographs have to be centrally implicated in the process of research and not merely be decorative accompaniments to the final written project. But by and large, this has not happened beyond the restricted parameters of visual anthropology (and visual sociology) on one hand, and disciplinary domains such as art history, photography and film studies, cultural studies, and to some extent archaeology on the other. In the case of the former’s contemporary mainstream practices, there almost seems to be an anxiety over the visual except in the genre of ethnographic films.

This article poses two interrelated questions to address why this situation has come to dominate mainstream social sciences with a focus on social anthropology. These two broad questions can be formulated as follows:

- (1) What is the axiomatic relationship between photography and anthropology historically, and what kind of anxieties are embedded in this relationship, which might explain contemporary social anthropology's seeming fear of photography? This question does not extend itself to film, as in the case of ethnographic films.
- (2) In the context of the understanding that presents itself through the answers to the queries in question 1 above, how could photography be seen as a productive component of social research, including in ethnography? Toward this end, this article presents three case studies based on my own recent work, which heavily depended on photography.

My interest is not merely with photographs taken by professionals like anthropologists in situations clearly spelled out as “research” or “field” contexts. Barbara Wolbert (2000) has observed that an “‘anthropologist as photographer’ is both an amateur and professional” (p. 321). In this context, anthropologists are generally not formally trained photographers. However, when they use cameras in their professional contexts despite the absence of training in photography, “they do make photos in a professional context” (Wolbert, 2000, p. 321). But many photographs anthropologists take in such professional contexts do not become a core part of their reading of social situations or their narratives available in the public domain. Beyond such contexts however, I am also interested in photographs taken by individuals who are not necessarily researchers. Instead, they can be individuals such as travelers in the colonial period or contemporary professionals such as news photographers or ordinary people who simply happen to have access to cameras as they engage in routine activities or are confronted with extraordinary events. We need to keep in mind that in 21st-century global circumstances, the visual more than the written text has come to dominate our quotidian lives given the democratization of the act of photographing consequent to the introduction of cameras to mobile phones. This means that cameras are now owned by almost everyone and photographs are widely taken, stored, and often publicly circulated as never before. This has made photographs and photography widely accessible across class, cultural, and ethnic divides as well as across the world. While much of what is available in this sense involves photos taken in situations of leisure, there is no doubt that there are multiple and easily accessible repositories of photographs that have not been utilized for research in social anthropology, despite their availability.

Photography's Historical Presence in Anthropology

Photography has had a long-term relationship with anthropology. But, as MacDougal (1997) has correctly pointed out, anthropology as a discipline has never been able to work out how to clearly implicate photography in the practice of the discipline (pp. 276, 283). Viewed differently however, this difficulty can also be seen as a contradiction that defies explanation. For instance, as argued by Pinney (2011), cross-cultural concerns over causation, evidence, personhood, and matters of monumentality are issues that anthropology deals with and are also of interest to photography, making that engagement “anthropological” (p. 11). And yet, that seeming symbiosis cannot be seen convincingly in the recently published anthropological record. Hence the contradiction, to which not too many explanations have been offered within the discipline itself. Utilization of photographs in the early ethnographic practice emanated from following the prolific use of

images in 18th- and 19th-century travel literature. However, this earlier practice consisted of using engravings, drawings, and paintings, whose place was taken over by photography once the practice was invented and made widely available. The early ethnographic practice followed this tradition of travel literature, which described what a person had actually seen. It was merely a matter of an anthropologist taking the place once occupied by a “traveler.”

With the expansion of colonialism, the curiosity to “know” more about the colonized people and their material culture also simultaneously expanded in imperial centers. The evolution of this taste for exotic visual objects coincided to a certain extent with the early development of anthropology itself. It is in this overall scheme of things that Sir Walter Baldwin Spence once noted with regard to film in early 20th century, that his intention was to show the world “the real native” (quoted in MacDougall, 1997, p. 276). Both film and photography offered what seemed to be an irrefutable corpus of “facts” whose authority and authenticity were established within the realms of knowledge available at the time. After all, it was an individual who was “on the spot” to capture these images—in real time. This cluster of assumptions was captured by E. H. Man in his essay “A Brief Account of the Nicobar Islands” (1886), when he suggested that “more correct information [can] be obtained from photography than from any verbal description” (quoted in Pinney, 2011, pp. 14–15). In this way, photography was understood as a crucial and “clinically accurate” method for recording “facts.” However, the word “method” itself was never used in the debates at the time. The alleged accuracy of photography was based on the following closely related assumptions and conditions:

- (1) The historical record shows that early anthropologists had no faith in “native” people’s ability to offer what they considered factual information pertaining to their social systems and cultural domains. This was considered to be the result of these peoples’ civilizational backwardness. As such, only something tangibly “scientific” could overcome this situation, which stood in the way of advancing “science.” Science in this case was anthropology. This is what Pinney means when he suggests that the “anthropological potentiality of photography was defined” when early anthropologists were concerned about validity of what the “natives” actually said (Pinney, 2011, p. 14). But in reality, the circumstances were quite different. Many of the roots of these difficulties in communication can be traced to early anthropologists’ inadequate language training and the resultant challenges in understanding specific local situations and nuanced conversations (Pinney, 2011, p. 14). In this context, photography, with its direct lineage to “science,” addressed this lacuna.
- (2) As early anthropology evolved in its preliminary phases, there was no confidence in observation-related research methods. This anxiety resulted partly from a reductionist understanding of “science,” which was influential in formal academic and scientific discourses of the time. During these pioneering times of the discipline, carefully formulated fieldwork, as it has been understood since the second half of the 20th century (consisting of case studies, interviews, and so on), was yet to become an established research tool. It is in such an intellectual climate that Andrew Lang posed the following question in his book *The Making of Religion* (1896): “how can you pretend to raise a science on such foundations, especially as the savage informants wish to please or mystify the inquirers, or they answer at random, or deliberately conceal their most sacred

institutions?” (quoted in Pinney, 2011, pp. 25, 156). Lang’s target of ridicule was “observation.” Faced with these kinds of situations, photography was considered the most viable scientific option. In the construction of this favorable disposition, photography’s ability to freeze time and space was considered a major asset. Moreover, the belief was that such freezing of time and space occurred while natives were situated in perceivably natural states of habitation surrounded by their cultural implements and social practices. The postindustrialization intellectual climate, within which the emergence of anthropology also needs to be located, took the chemical processes involved in making photography work very seriously. This further reinforced its identity as a scientific tool. It is in this context that C. H. Read noted that “there is no question” about information captured in photography (quoted in Pinney, 2011, p. 15).

- (3) The implication of 19th-century photography in anthropology can be at least partly traced to its role in documenting the human body. Nineteenth-century anthropology was often seen as an extension of “comparative anatomy” (Pinney, 2011, p. 15). Given this association, photography played a crucial role in organizing societies according to types by creating human models (MacDougal, 1997, p. 280). The assumption was that these models offered possibilities for comparative analysis across the world (MacDougal, 1997, p. 280). In this context, photography was seen as a reliable tool that would make it possible to record the complexities in human body types.

As social anthropology evolved—particularly in the first decades of the 20th century—transforming itself from the informal nonprofessional armchair practice of its early pioneers, photography as a tool of reliable data collection, recording, and dissemination was already well accepted within the three conditions and assumptions referred to earlier. It is in this context that E. B. Tylor, a prominent anthropologist of his generation, noted that “the science of anthropology owes not a little to the art of photography” (quoted in Pinney, 2011, p. 29). As he elaborated, “most engravings of race-types to be found in books [are] worthless—now-a-days little ethnographical value is attached to any but photographic portraits” (quoted in Pinney, 2011, p. 30).

The seeming methodological reliability of photography in anthropology during this period however was more than a matter of the “accuracy” of the “facts” it supposedly presented. At one level, photography’s presence in social anthropology in the late 19th century and early 20th century offered the discipline a sense of being reliably anchored to stable foundations of “science.” In addition, photography played an equally important role in authenticating the ethnographic authority of professional anthropologists. Photographs that accompanied published accounts squarely situated these scholars in the midst of the “strange” and “exotic” places and people they were describing. In other words, this was no longer a matter of hearsay based on other people’s reports. This trend was clearly visible well into the mid 20th century as professional social anthropology was institutionally established. MacDougal (1997) has described photography’s prominent presence in ethnographies until the 1930s, after which it tended to occupy a much less obvious position. This generalization is made by taking into account the work undertaken by both amateur and professional anthropologists. But in both circumstances, an emphasis was placed on the “anthropological” content or focus of these works. C. W.

Hatterseley's *The Baganda at Home* (1908) marketed itself with the claim, "With One Hundred Pictures of Life and Work in Uganda." Similarly, Henry A. Junod's *The Life of a South African Tribe* (1913) offered its readers 112 black-and-white photographs. Charles and Brenda Seligmann's book *The Veddars* (1911), based on fieldwork in Ceylon, presents about 112 photographs. R. S. Rattray's *Ashanti* (1923) contained 143 black-and-white photos (MacDougal, 1997, p. 281). The most obvious feature in the books by Hatterseley, Junod, the Seligmanns, and Rattray is the saturation of photographs. But these photos were not closely or self-consciously interlinked with the written text. In other words, the stories these books presented could be told without the photos. Along with their captions, these photos helped provide a secondary narrative in pictorial form, which simply coexisted with what was written without making an inherent or symbiotic link. But in almost all cases, these writers were narrating their stories from the "field," and the images helped establish beyond any doubt their proximity to the circumstances they were describing. Even by 1940, when E. E. Evans-Pritchard's celebrated ethnography *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* was published, it presented 41 photographs (Wolbert, 2000, p. 325). As in the texts referred to earlier, Evans-Pritchard's photos took his readers on a visual tour aided by his written text to the parts of Sudan where he had conducted his fieldwork.

As anthropology evolved in Europe and the United States in the first half of the 20th century, Margaret Mead emerged as one of the most vocal supporters of photography in anthropology. Mead's interest emerged within her overall attempt to promote the visual in social science research by resorting to film as well as photography. Her intention was to use imagery as an integral discursive practice in anthropology, which she perceived as a "discipline of words" (quoted in Pink, 2003, p. 182). For Mead, anthropology's over-dependence on the written word created a methodological reductionism. She developed her approach in association with Gregory Bateson on the basis of their work in Bali, which played a crucial role over time in the development of visual anthropology later in the 20th century (Pink, 2003, p. 182). Mead was a supporter of what came to be known as the "observational method" in social research, which itself was influenced by the "ways of seeing" debate in anthropology (Pink, 2003, p. 182). The problem, however, was that the observational method quite simplistically assumed a photograph to be an "objective fact" emerging as a direct result of scientific research. But in contemporary circumstances, most scholars would agree that ethnographic research is the outcome of a "relationship and negotiations between the researcher and informants rather than of the former's objective observation of the latter" (Pink, 2003, p. 182). In this transformed intellectual equation, photographs—like all other social facts—cannot be thought of as objective scientific facts. Instead, it is necessary for them to be located in the larger and changing contexts of discourse and be interpreted both ethnographically and theoretically in these contexts.

Anxieties of Photography in Anthropology

Although photography was considered a marker of scientific validity in late 19th- and early 20th-century anthropology, almost from the very beginning of anthropology's association with photography this relationship also posed a number of anxieties, which in the longer term led to

photography's diminishing presence as a research tool in mainstream social anthropology. Many of the early photographs supposedly captured in the "natural" habitats of the subjects, which typified anthropological knowledge production of the time, were in fact carefully posed and choreographed. The people in them were "dressed" and "ordered" in a way that captured and emphasized the European imagination of "difference" at the time. But the dominant argument was that these photographs presented a sense of ethnocultural authenticity. Focusing on the way photography was understood and practiced among the French peasantry in the 1960s, Pierre and Marie-Claire Bourdieu argued that the "posed photograph, which only grasps and fixes figures who are settled, motionless, in the immutability of the plane, loses its power of corrosion" (Bourdieu & Bourdieu, 2004, p. 612). "Corrosion" here refers to the ability of the photographs to narrate a convincing story and to be creative. The argument they make in general also makes sense with regard to many anthropological photographs of the late 19th and early to mid-20th century as well. But "posed" photography was considered a valid practice as anthropology came into its own in the early 20th century. Much of the argument for this was based on the assumption that dying cultural formations needed to be recorded as completely as possible before their final demise due to colonialism, and later as the result of the rapid spread of modernism. It is in such a situation that Edward Curtis's photography came to be known for his efforts to "stage manage" a romantic representation of "dying native American culture" (Pinney, 2011, pp. 90–92).

This genre of photography in social anthropology, as well as in commercial photography more generally, has presented countless unsmiling photos of hunters, farmers, warriors, chieftains, and others whose ability to narrate a historically contingent story is limited. But this limitation does not mean their narrative abilities have been completely negated due to the constructed nature of these photos. Beyond the issue of posing and its resultant construction of a fictional reality, photography's strength also comes from its ability to freeze time, space, and people. However, that freezing creates photography's often referred to sense of immobility and silence. At times, these circumstances marked by emotions of immobility have linked photography with death (Metz, 1985, p. 81). As a result, for many critics visual imagery becomes "disquieting" because "they appeared to show everything and yet, like the physical body, remained annoyingly mute" (MacDougal, 1997, p. 276).

Claude Lévi-Strauss was an anthropologist with an interest in photography who presented a substantial critique of the possibilities for its use in social sciences. Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1962) resulted from his travels in Brazil in the 1930s. His thoughts are presented along with a series of 48 black-and-white photographs, which he himself had captured. At one point he observes that "travel-books, expeditionary records, and photograph-albums abound" and "they are written or compiled with an eye mainly for effect" and "the reader has no means of estimating their value" (Lévi-Strauss, 1961, pp. 17–18). His concern is that texts with photographs may be more interested in titillating readers than in advancing substantial knowledge. He is more explicit when he says,

mere mileage is the thing; and anyone who has been far enough, and collected the right number of pictures (still or moving, but for preference in colour), will be able to lecture to packed houses for several days running. Platitudes take shape as revelations once the audience is assured that the speaker has sanctified them by travelling to the other side of the globe.

(Lévi-Strauss, 1961, p. 18)

Lévi-Strauss's concern with photographs also comes from his fear that photos might be used to camouflage the disruptions colonial expansion brought to the landscapes he saw in his travels. He notes, "today the savages of the Amazonian forests are caught, like game birds, in the trap of our mechanistic civilization" (Lévi-Strauss, 1961, p. 18). But he says that he "will not be deceived by . . . the black magic" in the form of "an album in full colour" presented to eager audiences (Lévi-Strauss, 1961, p. 18). In 1994, 60 years after Lévi-Strauss initially took his photographs, his antipathy toward photographs had become more pronounced. In *Saudades do Brazil: A Photographic Memoir*, Lévi-Strauss completely discarded his own photographs as useless and considered them "a void, a lack of something that the lens is inherently unable to capture" (Pinney, 2011, pp. 104–105). He referred to these photos as "silent images" devoid of "perfume" of the place where they were captured (Pinney, 2011, p. 104). He argued his field notes still contained a more nuanced sense of the places where he undertook research even though time had allowed some sense of liminality to creep into these notes as well (Pinney, 2011, p. 104).

Critics have also argued that photographs are often captured after an event has actually taken place, which makes them similar to crime scene photos recording the "residual" by professionals who come to the scene "too late" (Bond, 2009, p. 1). Similarly, photographs taken by anthropologists or other field researchers who come to a ceremony or any other cultural or political event after it has taken place can be seen in a similar sense. But is this residuality such a methodological dead end? Photographs taken of an event need to be "read" and situated in a broader social and political context to be given meaning. After all, like all social facts, photographs are not autonomous texts. Instead, they are linked to the situations in which they must ultimately be located. To put it more simply, reading a photograph in this manner does not differ very much from having a conversation with a person about an event that may have already happened, making notes of that conversation, and revisiting such material later to compile a case study of the event. However, unlike such an interview, a photograph may record more contextually relevant background information, such as the aftermath of war and destruction evident in the series of photographs I took in the northern districts of Sri Lanka in December 2012. By this time, Sri Lanka's destructive civil war that had lasted for 30 years had already ended in 2009. But the photographs were taken in the midst of what used to be an active war zone, and the government had self-consciously adopted a policy of erasing all signs of war except for selected symbols, which helped narrate its own story. But even at that time, the pictures I took of military monuments, half dismantled monuments of the defeated guerrilla group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), houses that had been destroyed by war with clear signs of battle embedded on their walls, burned trees and masses of destroyed vehicles, juxtaposed with images of billboards of numerous commercial products and services that had begun to penetrate the

former war zone along with incoming capital helped place much of my research in a broader socioeconomic and political context. So the lapses of time from an event when a photograph is taken should not be an issue as long as that time lapse is taken into account in the overall reading of that image.

Talking about film, Kirsten Hastrup has argued that film is merely “thin description” when compared with written anthropological texts (MacDougal, 1997, p. 282). In a similar vein, Maurice Bloch says that anthropologists who spend time dealing with film have “lost confidence in their own ideas” (MacDougal, 1997, p. 282). Given the visual correlations between film and photography, there is very little difference between these two mediums. In this sense, Bloch’s and Hastrup’s criticism of film in the context of anthropology can also be made against photography. Again, this indicates anthropology’s obsession with the written word and its reluctance to see photographs as “data” or “information” with a sense of value.

Taken together, what becomes evident as a general trend in these criticisms is that they assume photographs had to narrate a “complete” story by themselves. Further, in so doing, they could not distract or deviate from the core narrative under any circumstances. In other words, photographs had to present the ultimate truth by themselves. But in the post-1980s’ “writing culture” and “partial truths” debates in anthropology, such a seemingly limitless burden of representation is not the prerogative of even the written text in ethnography. Even the “perfume” of place that Lévi-Straus sees in his field notes cannot be merely seen as references to simple undisputed “facts.” Instead, these are compilations of “partial truths” that need to be interpreted and “written” as ethnography. It is in this context that we should be quite clear that “photographs should be the object of a reading that one may call sociological and that they are never considered in themselves and for themselves, in terms of their technical or aesthetic qualities” (Bourdieu & Bourdieu, 2004, p. 605).

Given these criticisms of photographs in anthropology by groups of influential people within the discipline itself, anthropology’s association with photography considerably diminished as the 20th century progressed. By the advent of the 21st century, there was little discussion about the place of photographs in mainstream social anthropological work, either as sources of information or as objects of research.

Toward Photographs as Records of “Social Facts”

The criticism summarized here places an unreasonable and rigid burden of representation on photographs, without space for contradictions or interpretation. Interestingly, well-known ethnographies such as M. N. Srinivas’s *Remembered Village* (1980) and Edmund Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954) were based on memory and recollection because research notes maintained in the field were destroyed in accidents. In these situations, the Lévi-Straussian “fragrance” of field notes was not available to these two scholars. And yet, the works they produced continue to be generally perceived as examples of good ethnographic work. This seeming sympathy accorded to memory, notwithstanding its countless fallibilities, has not been granted to photography in mainstream social anthropology. Stated differently, these criticisms

suggest that memory and recollection are methodologically more acceptable and stable than the apparent silence and stasis of photography. However, in reality, if carefully situated in their broader context of production, photographs contain data and information similar to that of field notes and recollections. Referring specifically to photos taken by anthropologists in the context of their fieldwork, Wolbert (2000) notes that these photos are “delicate documents of the anthropologist’s transgression of intimate boundaries and temporary participation in the lives of others” (pp. 321–322). In such situations, precisely because the authors of such photographs are able to partake in the lives of people they are with, photographs become crucial elements in the bodies of “facts” compiled by researchers. As we know well, these compilations vary from field notes to audio recordings and encompass videos, photographs, case studies, and so on.

An additional lingering concern with photography has to do with its beleaguered position with regard to “objectivity.” But the debates in the social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s have shown us that issues of objectivity embedded in social research have not been completely resolved. That is, certain margins of “subjectivity” in any process of social research would always remain. But this itself does not delegitimize the overall process of research or the information collected. These issues can be managed by clearly accounting for the sociocultural and ethical contexts of research as well as the theoretical conditions of interpretation. The same general principles should apply to photographs as well. As Harper (2002) has noted, photographs “represent subjectivities embedded in framing, exposure and other technical considerations” (p. 13). According to him, such issues are often seen in photographs taken in anthropological field situations (Harper, 2002). Beyond such obvious technical limitations, which are easy enough to identify, the stories narrated by photographs are also impacted by the angles from which they have been framed and are also dictated by the nature of access to people, places, and events a researcher might have had in his research site. Similarly, photographs can also be silent about crucial events that are known to have taken place immediately beyond the frames of the photos. It is in this context that one needs to reemphasize that photos can never narrate an autonomous story by themselves, completely delinked from the historical, social, political, temporal, and spatial conditions within which their stories would make more nuanced contextual sense. That is, such additional and necessary contexts offer essential information to make photographs speak more reliably and audibly.

Seen in this sense, more than any dire difficulty in photographs as potential tools or sources of information, the issue is more a rigid frame of mind emanating from mainstream social anthropology’s limitless embrace of the written text. In this context, Pink (2003) suggests that any research project that incorporates images should not focus only on the internal “meanings” of the photos, but also on why a specific image might have been produced and how it makes itself meaningful to those who see it (Pink, 2003, p. 186). This has to do with the broader contexts of a photograph’s production and its consumption. For instance, there is a vast difference between photos taken in contemporary anthropological field situations by anthropologists and photos taken by tourists and travelers. In the same vein, the way they become meaningful to those who see them and “read” these images can be very different. That difference needs to be taken into account when a set of photographs is considered for research.

Unlike the preoccupation with anthropological field photographs by Wolbert and Harper referred to earlier, photographs for ethnographic or social research more generally do not have to come from fieldwork conditions. In fact, most photographs available for analysis in the 21st century would likely come from other less controlled contexts. Nevertheless, any photograph taken in a given social situation is a likely source of information. But often, supposedly “aesthetically satisfying” and casual photographs taken by tourists, professional photographers, and others would not be considered “reliable facts” or “sound” sources of information in formal anthropology or many general academic contexts, even by scholars who have methodological sympathies for photographs (Collier & Collier, 1986, p. 165). For instance, Collier and Collier (1986) note, “we can responsibly analyse only visual evidence that is contextually complete and sequentially organized” (p. 163). From their perspective, this is because “no matter how rich our photographic material is, quantitative use of evidence is limited to that which is countable, measurable, comparable or in some other ways scalable in quantitative forms” (Collier & Collier, 1986, p. 163). In other words, according to the Colliers, for photographs to be of any methodical value they have to be quantifiable. But in the 21st century in particular, photographs have become widely available from countless sources, many of which also circulate via the Internet. Most of these will hardly be quantifiable except under specific circumstances when using specifically designed algorithms to ascertain the prevalence of certain kinds of photos. Under these general circumstances specifically linked to the lifestyles of contemporary times, the Colliers’ position is too restrictive. Photographs’ methodological usefulness cannot be fully realized if they are perceived clinically only within the ambit quantification (Perera, 2016b, pp. 160–161).

Banks points to the following important general factors with regard to making sense of photographs as research tools:

- (i) what is the image of, what is its content?
 - (ii) who took it or made it, when and why? and
 - (iii) how do other people come to have it, how do they read it, what do they do with it?
- (quoted in Pink, 2003, p. 186)

Banks made these observations generally referring to “research about pictures” (quoted in Pink, 2003, p. 186). But these considerations would make sense in the context of any project that uses photographs as one of its main approaches, and not merely in projects that exclusively focus on photographs.

In the following elaboration, I present three case studies in the general context outlined so far. The examples are drawn from recent work in which I attempted to make reasonable use of photographs in constructing the core arguments and the overall narrative of the projects described, while at the same time depending on photographs as a significant source of raw information.

Case Study 1: Photographs as Representations and Silences of Social Life

Colombo Institute for the Advanced Study of Society and Culture launched a project in August 2008 to produce a number of documentary films focused on the youth in rural Sri Lanka. One of the places selected for filming was Dambana, an area that has been historically associated with the local aboriginal group known as the Veddas (Perera, 2017, p. 310). The expectation was to encourage the youth of this group to write a collaborative script for the film that aimed, among other things, to place in context their own “understandings of ‘multi-culturalism’ in the community through an exploration of the world around them” (Perera, 2017, pp. 310–311). To get a sense of this understanding, photography was adopted as the main approach. It was assumed that visuality would be an easier, more proximate, more personal, and more nuanced way for these youngsters to comment on their social and cultural circumstances. To facilitate this, approximately 20 cameras and unexposed film rolls were distributed among the young people who volunteered for the program. They were asked to take photographs of anything or anyone they wished, “which in their perception, described the social and cultural world around them” (Perera, 2017, pp. 310–311). Toward this end, they were given basic instructions on how to use the camera, how to frame, and how to control light. They were also introduced to ethical considerations in photography. After about one month, the Colombo Institute printed more than 400 color photographs the youth had captured that focused on different events, scenes, and people they had encountered during that time (Perera, 2017, pp. 310–311).

These photographs were publicly displayed in the front yard of a local temple, which captured the attention of many people in the community, including some of whom appeared in some of the photos. After the public interest in the photos waned, an effort was made by Colombo Institute staffers and the youth to “put selected images together in preparation for writing the script” (Perera, 2017, p. 311). It was hoped that the “relationships between the images that the youth might see would become the basis of the script” (Perera, 2017, p. 311).

In the context of this article, it is not important that the film was subsequently made, but what the photographs meant to the people who took them. For me, it was important to see how the young people in the area understood the world around them and what they considered important enough to photograph. It was also important to work out “the themes that are absent in their photographs” despite the consistent reference to those themes when the overall sociopolitical context of the site was taken into account (Perera, 2017, p. 311). The following were the dominant themes that emerged from the photos:

smiling children in schools; Buddhist religious ceremonies; sunset over the nearby irrigation reservoirs and scenes from the surrounding forests; old Vedda men carrying bows, arrows with a short axe slung over the left shoulder; young people bathing in the reservoir, smiling long-haired young Vedda men in the forest; the community leader providing herbal medicines to people with ailments, and so on.

(Perera, 2017, pp. 311–312)

What these photos collectively presented was an idealized image of a “‘happy’ and ‘self-contained’ group of ‘tribal’ people living an uncomplicated life in beautiful natural surroundings” (Perera, 2017, p. 312). This was also very close to the image of the community generally circulating among the larger Sinhala society both adjacent to this community and beyond. In this sense, the popular and almost uncomplicated “orientalist” visual consumption of the Veddas that circulated beyond them also seemed to have been adopted unquestioningly by the community members. In this fictionalized and narrativized visual context, “the routine difficulties, poverty, drunkenness, despair, global cultural influences seeping into the community transforming it, which are also part of the essential circumstances of the community, were not simply absent from these images, but were very consciously expelled” (Perera, 2017, p. 312). But these seemingly “negative” trends routinely came up in private conversations with the youth despite their absence from the photos.

What does this state of affairs mean in research and epistemological terms? In generating meanings from photographs, what is present within the frame is as important as what is self-consciously not present, which ideally one would expect to see (Perera, 2017, p. 313). Though not taken in a typical anthropological field research situation, given my own involvement, the introduction of photographs as a means of generating possible meanings of the surrounding social world was inspired by anthropological research and my own interests in photography as source of information. Nevertheless, these photos were not taken by a trained field researcher but by young people within the community who came from very different educational and social backgrounds compared to the film crew as well as myself. As a result of this “insider” status, the photographers had far more access to the community than any average field researcher ordinarily would. Notwithstanding the contexts in which the photos were taken and by whom, and when these images are situated in the larger body of work that has historically been produced on the Veddas, these photos shed considerable contemporary light “on identity politics and cultural representation among contemporary Veddas” (Perera, 2017, p. 313). For instance, they clearly present the ways in which “Veddas themselves readily consume the idealized image of them constructed by the dominant society and how, in that process, their routine predicaments and realities are expelled into oblivion” (Perera, 2017, p. 313). Through the photos, the young community photographers “were also keener to present the “Buddhist” scheme of things in their lives . . . rather than the numerous non-Buddhist local practices that were still known, but increasingly under-emphasized” (Perera, 2017, p. 313). This was a clear sign of the almost complete Buddhistization of the community, particularly among the youth. There were also numerous other cultural trends that were not visible in the photos even though they were evident all around, which varied from the young people’s embrace of both Sinhala cultural practices and global influences and trends. More specifically, these included following popular trends in Sinhala music, constant watching of Bollywood movies, popular dance forms that had nothing to do with the community’s own dance traditions, fashion, and so on.² The silence on the part of these trends in the photos and their open existence beyond the frames suggest what the community preferred to underemphasize in their own public self-representation.

In the overall context of this case study, it is not my intention to suggest that these kinds of photographs would narrate an independent story on their own. Instead, “they would enhance the narrative that is being constructed in the overall scheme of research and writing, which naturally

includes other sources of information” (Perera, 2017, p. 313). They would help situate what is present as well as what is absent; what is given voice and what is silenced. And a thoughtful reading of the absences and what is present, when situated in the broader domains of knowledge on the community that has been historically produced, would offer a more complete story of their situation.

Case Study 2: Photographs and the Politics of Visual Culture

The second case study describes a project that lasted from 2002 to 2012. Its primary focus was Sri Lankan visual culture as it manifested in painting, sculpture, and installations. More specifically, the artworks I paid attention to were collectively identified as the “The Art of the 90s,” and could generally be seen as “political art” (Perera, 2012, 2017). What was crucial was that in this project, not only “the process but the object of research itself was in the realm of the visual” (Perera, 2017, p. 313). My basic intention was to see how these artworks might be considered repositories of memory that could narrate stories of political violence that had become endemic in Sri Lanka’s recent past, while also addressing issues such as ethnicity, nationalism, and religion, which had become core political issues that had preoccupied local politics since the 1950s (Perera, 2017, p. 313).

As an anthropologist—and not as an art historian—my specific methodological approach was to explore whether such preoccupations might be embedded in these visual artworks, in their materiality, and in the way they were produced at a time when creative prose, poetry, and academic deliberations were not particularly dynamic arenas of discourse with regard to such crucial national issues. In this specific research context, my understanding was that photography would be a crucial source of recording and interpreting information in addition to more conventional anthropological means of information collection such as interviews, case studies of persons and events, press clippings, content analysis of exhibitions and exhibition catalogues, and so on (Perera, 2017, pp. 214–215).

Clearly, it was imperative that extensive field notes and detailed interview material had to supplement the photographs of artworks as well as the broader and varying contexts of their exposition in the longer term process of thinking about, analyzing, and writing (Perera, 2012, 2016a). That is, photographs of artworks were crucial in working out what had been said by artists as well as by viewers during conversations, and what was seen, heard, and read in other contexts. The main focus of attention in this project was a particular genre of visual objects by a group of radical artists interested in experimental work, many of whom were unfamiliar to potential viewers. As such, I assumed the artists would be even more unfamiliar to the readers of my text, many of whom may never have seen these works before. Beyond the needs of my own analysis and conceptualizing, photographs of these artworks had to be seen by readers as well. That is, they had to diligently accompany the written text. There were no alternatives. In this overall context, “photography was not merely a method of recording ‘field’ situations, contexts and objects, but a crucial co-narrative that had to accompany the written words if the overall narrative was to make better sense and to be more nuanced” (Perera, 2017, p. 315). In other words, without the photographs, I simply could not “‘show’ a particular reader what I had ‘seen’” and the overall narrative would have been incomplete (Perera, 2017, p. 315).

Case Study 3: Photographs and the Politics of Memory and Violence

In this discussion, I refer to two interrelated research and writing projects, one of which ran from about 2002 to 2014 and the other from 2002 to 2013. Both were published in 2016 and took photography as one of their main methodological preoccupations.

In the first project, *Violence and the Burden of Memory* (Perera, 2016a), photography was mostly a methodological concern in terms of recording field information that was crucial for my reading as well as in subsequently making what was seen by me manifest in the eyes of readers as in the case described previously. The core of the project was to see how memory works among the Sinhala in the context of Sri Lanka's civil war. But more specifically, in addition to getting a sense of how the memories of people who perished in war and extensive political violence were embedded in the recollections of people who survived, I was more interested to know how these memories were recreated or performed in public monuments, tombs scattered around the country, and the artworks formulated by a number of well-known artists.³ So a major concern was objects directly linked to war and violence. For analytical purposes, descriptions of them would be incomplete without any pictorial reference.

War- and violence-related public structures of memory are a relatively new phenomenon in Sri Lanka although public monuments constructed for other reasons have a much longer local history. But in both cases, no serious studies on the phenomenon existed in the academic domain. In the context of this relative absence of knowledge and popular reference, what was researched and what was presented were unfamiliar and had to be presented visually as well as in considerable detail for the analysis to make sense. Besides, prior to that the physical embodiments of public memory—monuments, tombs, or other structures, such as specially constructed bus stands—had to be carefully recorded and read like all other field information. In this process, it was essential that these structures were photographed carefully to understand not only the visual icons and symbols embedded in them but also their overall conception, design, locations, and use of space, all of which had their own dynamics of politics. At the time of research as well as in the process of writing and making a case, photography was methodologically crucial in making “sense” of what was being argued.

In the second project, *Warzone Tourism in Sri Lanka: Tales from Darker Places in Paradise*, the use of photographs was conceived in two ways. First, it was a field and writing/presentation prerogative in the same sense as the first project. Second, photography was an analytical category as a recurrent practice undertaken by a specific group of travelers (see Perera, 2016b). But unlike the earlier study, where the focus was on tombs and monuments built by the state as well as by individuals, in the second study the focus was on what constituted sites of “interest” for those who traveled across Sri Lanka's war zone during the ceasefire between 2002 and 2005 and after the war ended in 2009. Some of the sites that attracted the attention of tourists, such as the public monuments, cemeteries, and military infrastructure of the guerrilla group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, no longer exist. In this context, when I traced the trajectories of travelers to place in context where they went, where they stopped, what they saw, and what they photographed, it was essential that these trajectories were visually mapped. And this was done with commonly accessible photography. My reading of these circumstances could not be undertaken in any

degree of seriousness given my specific emphasis without recourse to photography. What the tourists saw, what I saw as a researcher, had to be seen—albeit pictorially—by those who read my text in order to comprehend my argument. This was the methodological preoccupation in this project.

The second preoccupation was not about collection of information, its recording and final presentation. It had to do with what the war zone travelers were doing with their cameras as they traveled. Many of the photographs they took were “trophy photographs” (Perera, 2016b, p. 165). What happened in these travels was not merely a cartographic mapping of terrain but also a pictorial mapping of war, violence, and celebration of victory. In this context, these photographs were devices of authentication through which travelers strived to document that they had been to the war zone and “seen” the “realities” of war (Perera, 2016b). Collectively, these photographs were signs of adventure. They were also symbols relating to a celebration of victory without stressing the human cost and pain that victory had caused (Perera, 2016b). This identification with victory in war, which was the same narrative presented by the state, was often achieved not simply by photographing remnants of war, but more specifically by embedding oneself in the foreground of objects and places that were photographed. This was not very different from the way in which photographs were used by early travelers and early field anthropologists referred to earlier in this article. In this context, the only way I could discuss the “logic of photography in contemporary warzone travel” in Sri Lanka (Perera, 2016b, pp. 160–171) and place it in a specific theoretical and ethnographic context was by presenting a visual record of what was seen by travelers and argue why they preferred to photograph some objects and not others.

When taken as a whole, in all the three case studies, photographs played a key role in research as well as in the final narrative of presentation, which helped make better sense of the arguments and the broader ethnographic contexts in which the narratives were woven. This does not mean that none of the studies could have been done without recourse to photography. But it does mean that without the use of photographs, those narratives would have been seriously incomplete and therefore only partially narrated. That is, I considered photographs in all the three case studies to be an important “methodological prerogative in at least partially creating a parallel narrative that would accompany the written text as a necessary subtext of what it [the written text] was attempting to outline” (Perera, 2016b, p. xiii). But to reiterate, my attempt was not to place these photographs on an intellectual stage and ask them to narrate their own story. Instead, these images were meant to enhance and offer a more nuanced reading of the overall narrative that was being presented.

There is one issue that needs further discussion if the use of photography is to be radically expanded in social anthropology: ethics. All the photographs produced in the three case studies presented here were produced in the context of planned research programs to which ethical considerations had been attached as a matter of routine practice. What to photograph and what not to photograph in these cases was decided by expanding established anthropological field research ethics. But the situation becomes more complicated when one has to use photographs taken by others that may be freely circulating on the Internet or in other less restricted repositories. Ethics applicable to these circumstances are not satisfactorily evolved.

Conclusion

What does all this mean in real terms? With special reference to research areas in emotion, the body, time senses, gender, and individual identity, MacDougal (1997) has referred to the difficulties of communicating sense in anthropology (p. 287). According to him, the challenge “has been in finding a language metaphorically and experientially close” to what these broad areas deal with (MacDougal, 1997, p. 287). In this context and with particular reference to the visual’s ability to communicate, he notes, “the historical primacy of the visual has been its capacity for metaphor and synaesthesia” and “much that can be ‘said’ about these matters may be best said in the visual media” (MacDougal, 1997, p. 287). Naturally, MacDougal’s list of research areas in which the visual might be better suited to communicate sense should not be seen as limited. This can be expanded creatively and, depending on the need, to many other areas in anthropology in particular and social sciences in general as has been done in the three case studies presented here, which included visual arts, violence, memory, and travel. The “visual” in the sense articulated by MacDougal also includes photography. But unlike MacDougal, I am not making a comparative argument in favor of photography to make the claim that photography is “better” or “more suitable” than other means of expression. However, photography allows for certain arguments to be made more completely and in a more nuanced manner than is possible without it. If this is the case, why not use photography, which is so readily available, particularly in today’s social and technological circumstances? To use photography or other kinds of visual media in presenting a narrative, the creation of a “specialized visual media” is not necessary (MacDougal, 1997, p. 287).

Instead, what is needed is a clear understanding of social anthropology’s varying relationship to photography and its research and narrative potential, and to evolve a more open frame of mind and scheme of reference that would facilitate this methodological transition (Perera, 2017). To consider the usefulness and utility of photography in social anthropology, we would first have to overcome the discipline’s seeming fear of the visual.

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Notes

1. Aaron Siskind. BrainyQuote.com <<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/aaronsiski141150.html>>.
2. Bollywood (Bombay + Hollywood) movies are produced in India's film capital, Bombay, or Mumbai. Hindi, the language in the films, is not spoken in this community or in Sri Lanka more generally, but the music, dance forms, and fashion presented in these movies are significant forces of cultural influence.
3. The focus on artworks and artists was the same as what was described in Case Study 2. As such, I will not focus on this aspect in the present discussion.