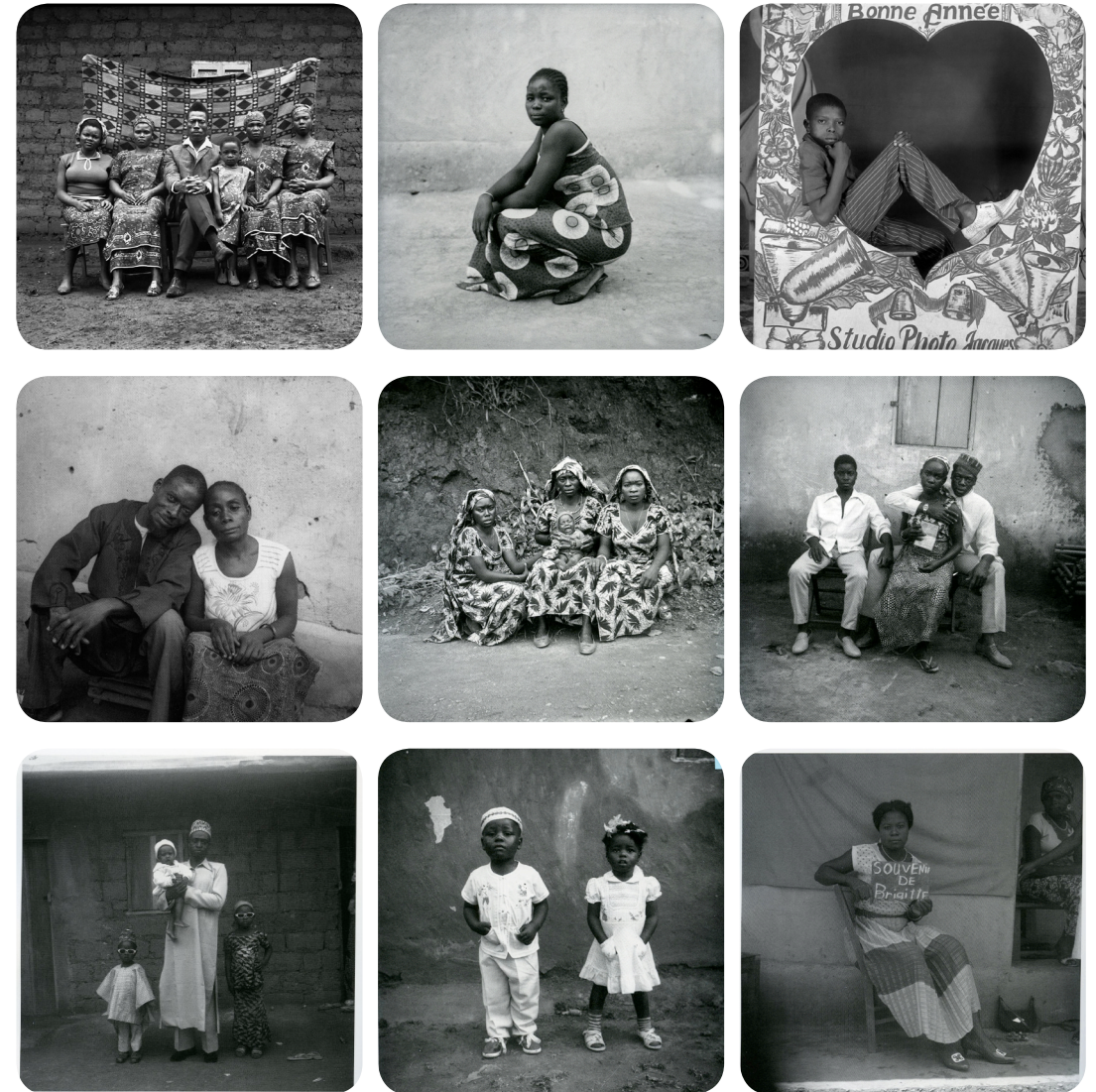


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## Staging Selves: Cameroonian Portrait Photography



Exhibition Catalogue by:  
The Students of SOAN 256:  
Transformations in African Ethnography  
Spring 2012  
Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg



# Staging Selves: Cameroonian Portrait Photography

April 6-June 16, 2012

Joseph Chila (b. 1948), Samuel Finlak (b. 1958), and Jacques Toussele (b. 1935), three Cameroonian studio photographers, took these images between 1970 and 1985. During this period, few cameras were owned by individuals in this West African country. Photographs were made by professionals who maintained commercial studios and also made house calls. The demand for small portrait photographs, used in identity cards, kept many studios afloat and the prices low, so that even street vendors could afford photos for official and more personal uses.

The three featured photographers, who worked in villages and small towns rather than in the capitol city of Yaoundé, represent the end of a tradition that reaches back to the invention of photography in nineteenth-century Europe. Jacques Toussele, the oldest, learned his craft using a large tripod camera and glass plate negatives. These old photographs maintain their value to Cameroonians even though the technology has been rendered obsolete by the advent of color photography in the 1980s, and by more recently introduced digitized identity cards. Such images, initially created for bureaucratic use in identity cards or marriage licenses, are now prized reminders of an aged or deceased relative. Some photographs appear, greatly enlarged, in memorial ceremonies known as “*Cry Dies*” in Cameroonian Pidgin (Wes Kos), or “*funérailles*” in Cameroonian French.

*Laurel Bradley, Director and Curator in the Perlman Teaching Museum*

## Acknowledgements

We thank Professor David Zeitlyn for inspiring this project and making it possible, Victoria Morse and the Carleton College Visuality Initiative for financing it, Laurel Bradley for being a wonderful curatorial partner, Margaret Pezalla-Granlund for conceptualizing the exhibit space, Aisling Quigley for her help hanging the show and producing the catalog, Elizabeth Musicant for extensive administrative support, Katie Markle ('11) for laying the groundwork, and the members of SOAN 256: Transformations in African Ethnography, Spring Term 2012, for their enthusiasm and creativity.

## Authors

- Kate Byrne (Sociology/Anthropology, '14)
- Veasey Conway (American Studies, '12)
- Cara Coren (Sociology/Anthropology, '13)
- Oumar Diallo (Sociology/Anthropology, '12)
- Katherine Goodyear (Sociology/Anthropology, '14)
- Amanda Grover (Music, '12)
- Jixiu Evelyn Li (History, '12)
- Flannery McArdle (Sociology/Anthropology, '13)
- Claire Weinberg (Sociology/Anthropology, '12)
- Milah Xiong (Sociology/Anthropology, '14)





Staging Selves: Cameroonian Portrait Photography  
 April 6-June 16, 2012  
 Gould Library Athenaeum

# Staging Selves: An Alternative Catalogue

The exhibit, “Staging Selves: Cameroonian Portrait Photography,” was inspired and made possible by David Zeitlyn, Professor of Anthropology at Oxford University. Noting that the Mambila families and diviners he worked with in the Cameroonian village of Somié displayed photographs in their homes and at public family ceremonies, but did not enjoy the convenience of a local photographic studio in their own village, Zeitlyn embarked on some anthropological sleuthing. He was led first to the photographers Chila and Finlak, in the neighboring towns of Atta and Mayo Darlé, and then to their teacher, fellow studio photographer Jacques Toussele (with various spellings, pronounced Toussele). Zeitlyn curated an exhibition of Chila and Finlak’s photography that was shown at the London Portrait Gallery, as well as at the British Council in Yaoundé. Wishing to find an opportunity to launch the exhibit in the United States, Zeitlyn approached Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg, a fellow anthropologist specializing in the area of Cameroon where Jacques Toussele made his home and trained his younger colleagues.

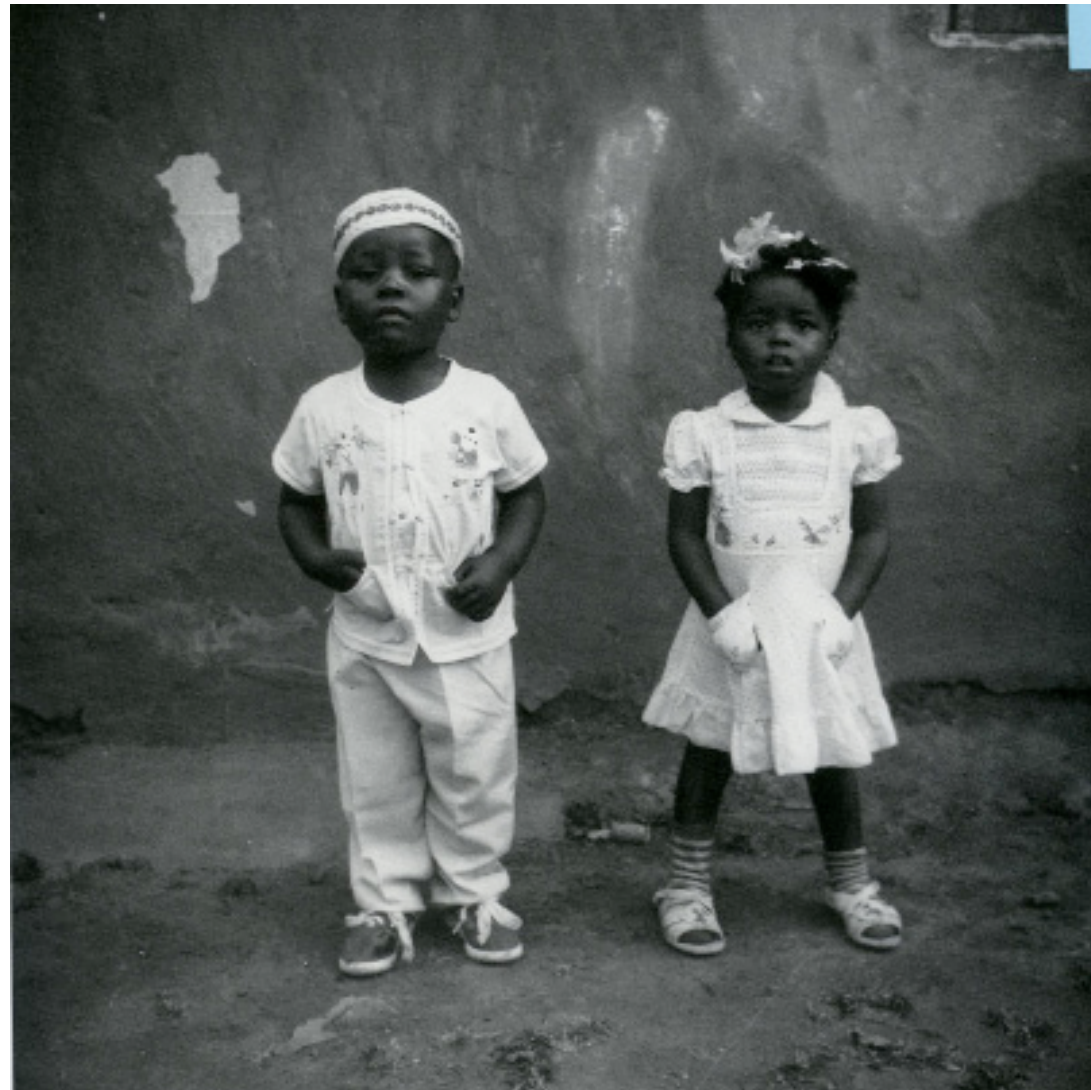
Thus, the exhibit came to Carleton College, curated by Laurel Bradley and Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg. In addition to the photos by Chila and Finlak, we included some selections from Toussele’s large opus, as well as some textiles that appeared as backdrops or props in the photos themselves.

Through Carleton’s Visuality Initiative, work with the exhibit was incorporated into Feldman-Savelsberg’s course, Transformations in African Ethnography, during Spring Term 2012. Together we explored analogous changes in photographic and textual representations of African peoples—by European and African anthropologists, photographers, and photographic subjects. We gained a deeper understanding of the context in which the photographs exhibited here were produced by reading ethnographies about this region of Cameroon by Dutch, British, American, and Cameroonian anthropologists. We benefited greatly by a one-week visit to campus by Professor Zeitlyn. Each student in the class adopted one photograph from the exhibit. The students wrote about their adopted photos in three different genres: an observational paper, a work of ethnographic fiction, and an anthropological contextualization and analysis paper. The students chose which of their three papers they wished to include in this alternative exhibit catalog.

We hope you enjoy the students’ creative and thoughtful contributions, and the wonderful images themselves.

*Pamela Feldman Savelsberg, Professor of Anthropology, Director of the African and African American Studies Program*





Joseph Chila  
***A Trader's Children, Mayo Darlé***  
 Photograph © Joseph Chila in association with Autograph APB, London

father's first and only wife; we were always poor so money for food, clothes, and school fees always trumped more frivolous expenses such as photographs.

I scrubbed my white shoes clean, even though I had only worn them once before, on my wedding day. The actual wedding was a simple affair; after all, I wasn't the first wife. Ouandié worked hard lumbering trees from the nearby forest. He was strong and serious, yet patient. He was a quiet man who chose his words carefully, so he always made himself clear; when he spoke, we listened. My father had travelled to the East to find work in the lumberyards and send money back home to support the family. It was there that he met Ouandié and arranged for my marriage. Although I was moving away from the city, Ouandié offered a generous bride-wealth payment that would help support my family.

I was oddly nervous and excited about the photograph. I wish I knew more about how photographs were taken and then made into those pictures that hang by the top of our walls. I was curious to see how the picture of me looked. Instead of going to the studio, the photographer came to our home so he could capture us proudly together for the first time in front of our home.

He arrived with so many things; the camera itself was larger than a man's head. It was black and we had to sit still for several moments while it took in the picture of the family and our house behind us. The photographer repeated this a few times and then just like that, it was over. I wondered when we would get to see the picture; it would be great to be able to have this photograph hang on the walls with the others, this time with me included in the family. It would make me feel at home more.

One day I hope that I can take a picture with my younger siblings. I'm sure my mother would proudly display it and show it to all that entered our home. I can't help but wonder if the next time my photo is taken, if my son will be in the picture, or maybe by then I'll have a few children. I can only hope.



I would come home each night and read it over and over. When I got my hands on the Egyptian *Arabian Nights* I was so thankful I could read. Every night I would spend hours reading the stories to my younger siblings. As the eldest child, a lot of caretaking befell to me, and this was the best way I knew how to keep them quiet and in one place.

The first breakfast I was here for I told the little boy the outline of the story, and each morning I'd tell him another one of the smaller stories within the larger one. I had read them all so many times I didn't need to look at the book anymore. By the time I finished the tale of the three apples, Pokam was happily fed, and my husband, Ouandié, and Ntecheun, his first wife, had started eating.

After the meal was over I washed the dishes and then we all started preparing for the big day. We bathed, I helped Pokam clean himself, and that's when it hit me: powerfully, my stomach revolted with almost no warning. As I finished up, Ntecheun confirmed what I had been thinking for days: I must be with child.

This thought terrified me, I'd seen what pregnancy could do to women, and I wasn't exactly sure I even wanted a child yet, much less was prepared for it. The thought of actually giving birth was so scary. I had helped my mother through multiple pregnancies, and not all of them had been easy.

Ntecheun had not quite gotten used to my presence. She was obviously threatened and jealous when I married our husband; I was much younger than her. She also had had many troubles with her pregnancies; she had many children born dead both before and after the little boy. Ntecheun had consulted countless healers before, during, and after each pregnancy to appeal to the ancestors and prepare herself for another healthy birth as soon as possible. Ouandié has buried these unfortunate children, and since they were never named there is no public grief, they weren't people of the village yet, and now would never have a chance to be. This forced her to cry late into the night, and seek more and more counsel to console herself and try yet again to have a child.

Ntecheun's recent recognition of my pregnancy has only reminded her of her past failures as a wife and mother and has done nothing to improve the relations between the two of us. She should be grateful though, considering the one child she has successfully birthed is a boy; at least she can give our husband a son, if nothing else. It's important to have a balance of boys and girls, so as long as Pokam was here to carry on the family name, Ouandié would be satisfied with the new child.

After we were washed, we put on the clothes for our first family photograph. Ntecheun and I had carefully washed them all the day before and had hung them up to dry in the humid heat. I'm grateful that the rainy season had finally come to a close, and I can once again wear dry clothes and shoes.

I've never had my picture taken before; my mother couldn't afford it. She was my

Joseph Chila

***A Trader's Children, Mayo Darlé***

Cara Coren '13

Observational Paper

Joseph Chila's black and white photograph, "A Trader's Children, Mayo Darlé" depicts two young children dressed in white and standing next to each other. The children take up most of the photograph and immediately draw the viewer's attention due to the contrast of their bright white garments against their dark skin. The girl wears a white dress with embroidery, a collar, and poofy sleeves. She has some sort of fabric or ribbon worked into her dark hair. Her striped socks compliment her white sandals. Next to her stands a young boy, also dressed in all white. He wears an embroidered head covering, a white shirt with intricate Asian embroidery and detailing, light slightly baggy pants, and shoes with white laces.

They stand outside of a structure which becomes a kind of backdrop, and they stand on the dirt ground. There are some stains on the wall in front of which they are placed, and one large area of paint has chipped away from the wall, which appears similar in color to the ground outside of it.

Possibly taken kneeling down, the viewer is not looking down at the children but rather looking straight at them from their eye level, giving an adult viewer an unusual perspective of such young children, seeing them as if we are among them. This perspective makes the viewer feel more like a participant than an observer. The composition of the photograph is balanced, with a child in each half, the boy on the right, and the slightly younger girl on the left. The placement of their hands mimic one another—the girl with both hands in the pockets of her dress, the boy with his hands similarly placed. The photograph was taken outside, and the lack of strong shadows suggests that it was probably taken on a cloudy day. The image has a full range of tone—the darkest and lightest areas being the children, countered by a background full of rich shades of gray.

The relationship between the two children is unclear; if they were the same age we might assume that they are friends or classmates, however the fact that the girl appears to be younger than the boy, we might assume that they are siblings, or otherwise related in some way. This image in particular stands out because Chila has truly captured a moment. Something above the camera has evidently captivated the children; they stand facing the camera in a state of genuine, unaltered curiosity and interest. The candid nature of their expressions is unusual and brings an emotional element to the image that allows the viewer to connect with the children in a special way. We see them both stand—heads raised, eyebrows expressing curiosity—in a picture that has captured the human element of candid expression.



Samuel Finlak

***Souvenir de Brigitte***

Photograph © Samuel Finlak in association with Autograph APB, London

Joseph Chila  
***Family Group***  
 Kate Byrne '14  
 Ethnographic Fiction

I woke up as the sunlight streamed through the slats in my mud hut. I'm still getting used to life around here, although I'm not sure if I'll ever get used to all the quiet and sunlight here in Abong-Mbang. Growing up in the city, it was hard to adjust to the more seemingly simple life in the Eastern Province.

My new home only seemed simpler with respect to the location. I missed my home, my real home. I long to go back there and walk in the door and smell my *Rémé's* famous *Ndole* filling up the entirety of our tiny house with its sweet, succulent steam. I want to walk through the door and have my mother kiss my cheek, with my younger siblings excited to see me shouting my name, "Bih! Bih!"

I sat up and stretched on my straw mat. A familiar hunger pang filled my stomach, reminding me that it was time to start cooking breakfast. I went out to get water, because of the dry season; the well had dried up so I had to walk a far distance to get water from the river. I carried it on my head for the trip home and sang some songs that I learned in school. Singing always made the walk more manageable; the beautiful day also improved my mood on the walk.

When I got back to the house I boiled and filtered the water. The electricity was down; so there are no filtering pumps and we couldn't risk getting sick from dirty water, especially this day. I prepared some corn porridge and instant coffee for breakfast. I heard stirring in the house and knew I wasn't alone any longer. Pokam wandered into the room.

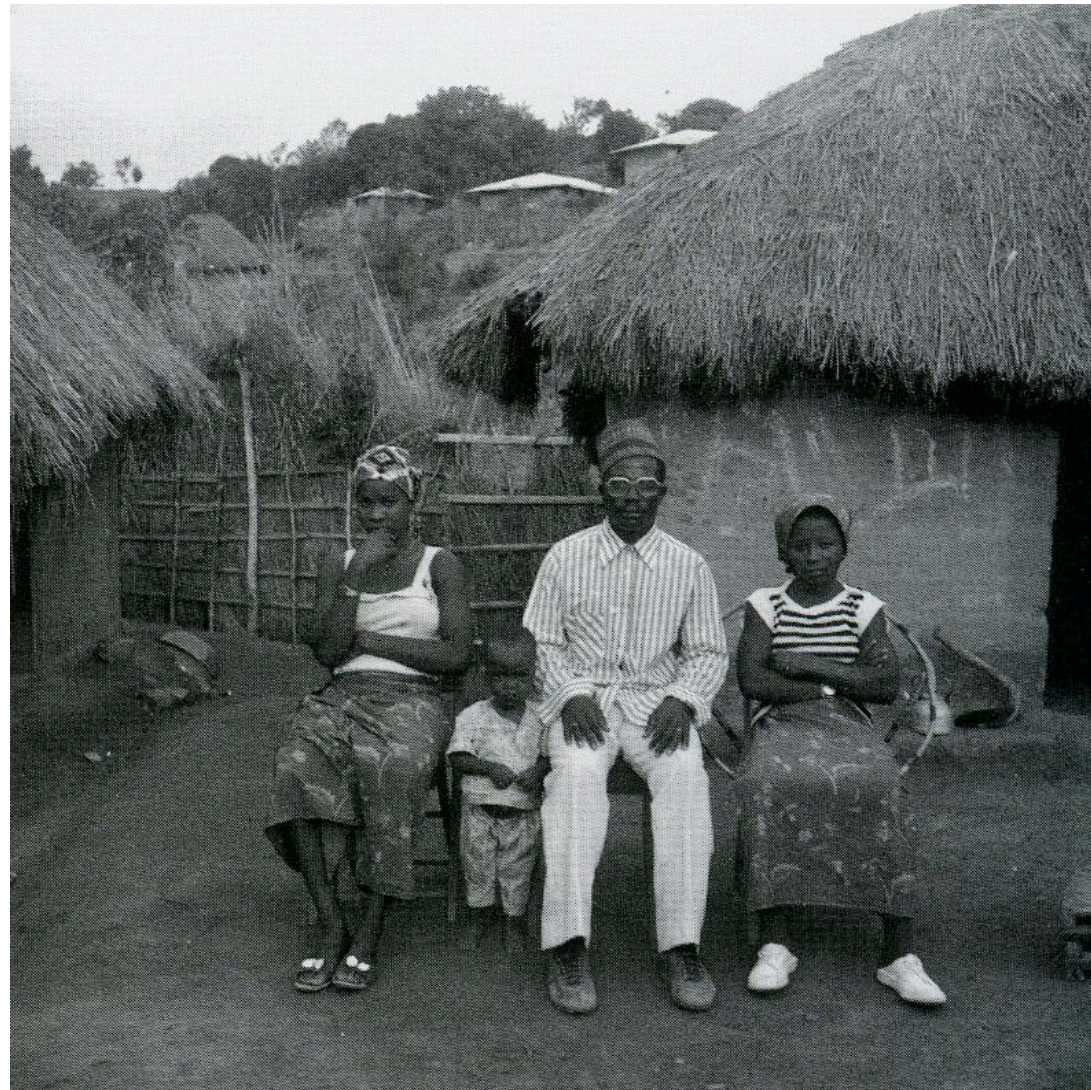
"I'm hungry!" he wailed as he started to cry. This was a morning routine, which is why I tried to get breakfast ready as early as possible.

"Almost ready, would you like to hear a story while I finish?" I calmly responded easing him into a chair so I could finish cooking and get him to stop crying.

"Yes," Pokam replied, sucking his thumb. At four he was getting too old for this, but I let it slide this morning; if his mother was here, she'd give him a good smack for him to stop.

I started to tell him a story I had read in school, from an old book that my teacher once lent me. School was my release from the world back home; I was always obedient and never received the cane. I was lucky enough to be a girl and go to school so long, up until I was 14 I read everything I could get my hands on. I went to an Arabic school where we learned to read out of the Qur'an. My parents weren't very pious, after all they married me off to a non-Muslim, but they wanted me to receive an education.





Joseph Chila  
**Family Group**  
 Photograph © Joseph Chila in association with Autograph APB, London

Samuel Finlak  
**Souvenir de Brigitte**  
 Claire Weinberg '12  
 Ethnographic Fiction

*"Being a bushfaller is like being married but available, like cheating on or being unfaithful to one's culture, identity, and belonging."*  
 – Francis Nyamnjoh, 2011

The photographer was taking his good sweet time, she thought. First setting up the tripod, then chatting with her family, now chatting with the neighbors, asking about the town, about this one's baby and that one's engagement, and on and on. Brigitte fidgeted. She worried that dust would blow up from the ground and settle on her new clothes, and the blinding white newness would be lost. She rolled the bouquet of dried flowers between her palms.

Finally, Finlak came over to talk to her. "I want a full body shot," she told him, "and I want to be holding this up." She gestured to the slate that leaned against the wall of the house, with "SOUVENIR DE BRIGITTE" in bright white chalk.

"Very good, very good. You just sit down here and make yourself comfortable –"

"And I want to be smiling."

Finlak gave her a quizzical look. "Smiling, why?"

Brigitte didn't answer.

"Look, if you keep a straight face, you can use it for your identity card. Crop one version for yourself, one version for the card. Very cheap, very efficient."

Brigitte frowned. She needed a new photo; hers would expire soon, and she knew she couldn't afford two photos. But the white girls she'd seen in magazines, the ones in Germany with Etienne, were always smiling in photos.

"Fine," she says, "I'll be serious, then." She felt her heart sink.

She reread Etienne's letter, the only one since he'd left to fall bush in Frankfurt, every night. As she read it she would turn the bouquet he'd sent with it over and over in her hands; the flowers had been dead already by the time they got to her, and every night they crumbled a bit more. He wrote about how strange it was – how the Germans ate cold meat for breakfast, and how the buildings were tall rectangles of color, and downtown, how the steel skyscrapers made the people look like ants. He told her how the language sounded like a river tumbling a little roughly over rock. Etienne was poetic.



At the end he told her he was sure the money in this strange country would be drawn to him, and then he would come home to Mbouda and marry her properly, and they would build their own house and be able to afford anything they needed. But the one part of the letter that she dreaded reading, the part that put poison in her stomach, was the one part she read over and over, as if Etienne's wavery handwriting would suddenly reveal something new. He wrote about a girl he'd seen with "hair as white as chalk", which he found "remarkable."

She knew – she told herself – he'd written it because it created a mood, because *les blondes* were a European setpiece, like the skyscrapers and the cold meat in the morning. But all the same she thought about that girl. When she imagined, or tried to imagine, Etienne in Frankfurt, she saw him surrounded by women, swarming around him, all of them blonde with chalk-white skin, staring at her fiancé with eyes as blue as the sky. She saw him looking back at them, giving them his too-wide smile with the one broken tooth.

Was the tooth on the left or the right of his mouth? She thought the left, but she couldn't be sure anymore. She could remember his face, but vaguely, as though through a blurry camera lens. There were no blemishes, no individual hairs curling around his ears. The burn scar across his collarbone, from when he meddled in his mother's cooking as an eight-year-old, was not raised and puckered in her memory; she couldn't feel the contours of it under her fingers. She touched the flowers because she knew he had touched them too. But when she imagined him buying them, it was a pretty white-haired flower seller who caught his eye. She saw the woman handing him the bouquet, her tiny unworked fingers grazing Etienne's. His hands were beautiful, bony and calloused, always with dirt caked in the cracks of the knuckles from days in the fields. But would they be dirty in Europe? She had no idea. Those dirty hands were her man's hands, and anything else would belong to a stranger.

When it was finally her turn to get the pot from the *tontine*, Brigitte knew exactly what she would do with it. She bought all the women cool drinks and they sat sipping them outside her mother's house, where she still lived, along with her two younger sisters.

Inevitably one of them asked her what she meant to do with the money. She felt suddenly ashamed, if no weaker in her resolve to do what she intended. "You know, some things here and there."

Her sister Martine laughed. "Come on, Brigitte, you know you've been planning for weeks. Don't be shy, tell us what you'll do with it!"

Brigitte swallowed. "I'm going to order some rich white cloth with gold thread sewn in, and some new shoes, and have a portrait taken to send to Frankfurt."





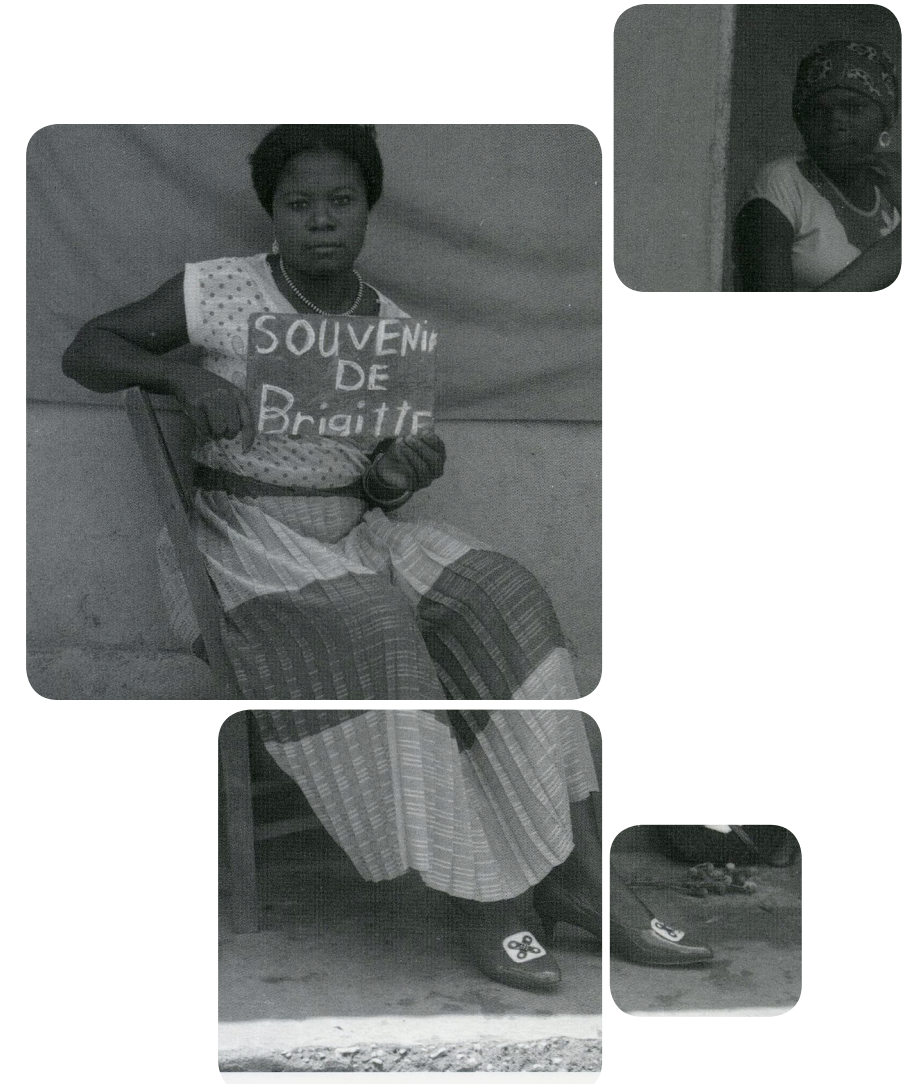
London. Places that we knew existed but could never really touch, the closest we got was when we sat down with our eyes closed and dreamed together. She talked about the beautiful dresses, jewelry, and shoes that I could never afford to give her and I talked about the fancy cars and big houses that we could never own.

I guess when it really gets down to it, the reason why I liked taking those photos of myself was the same reason that my Dad worked so hard to save up money for that first photo. We just wanted to feel like we were successful, not as great as the whites but still as good as we could be. Photos are still and eternal. If someone were to see these photos we could amaze them in those few minutes and we would feel happy, and after we die our far off sons and daughters will not know anything about us besides what they see in these shots of our lives. So it is only natural that we move things around to look nice, so people will think good things about us.

Grandpa is also kind of like us, he can create and un-create our world as well. I have heard many rumors consisting of doctors like Grandpa who can make someone better or can kill someone over night. Some people call him a joke but they are also afraid of his power.

On a cold rainy day Tiokou fell ill. My Dad told her to go see my Grandpa but I insisted that she go see the white doctors, from the missionaries' hospital, first. The white doctor told her to rest and drink water. In the morning, she still wasn't feeling well so she went to see my Grandpa right away. After another few days of still not feeling well she never woke up again. It happened so quickly but I remember each minute of sadness as it plays in my nightmares over and over again.

I am now the same as I was when I starting telling you this story, conflicted between two worlds. Sometimes I sit and close my eyes just like the old days and wonder the infinite "ifs." If only I made her stay with the white doctor, if only my Grandpa worked harder, if only I had gotten a job as a coffee farmer and made money to buy her the things she wanted, etcetera. I have decided to take up photography again; it is the only thing that makes me happy. I get to help make and unmake the dreams of what people want to be, a way to escape from reality.



There was a confused silence. The women looked around at each other, trying to mask their disapproval. She knew what they were thinking – the house was in disrepair, it had been a bad year for crops. It was the height of frivolity to spend hard-earned money on something like this. She sat stiffly under their gaze, and refused to bend. This, to her, was more important than the hole in the roof that dripped water on her feet when it rained. It would hurt more than hunger if this went wrong. If Etienne lost the feeling of her the way she was losing his, if he couldn't conjure the texture of her hair in his mind at night, she didn't want to imagine what would happen.

Brigitte sat straight as Finlak adjusted the camera. She felt Martine's eyes on her from the doorway behind, the way they had been since the day she announced her intentions, in equal measure disapproving and concerned for her sanity.

She laid Etienne's flowers at her feet, straightened her back and stared the camera down. A poof, a flash, and it was done.





Samuel Finlak

***Family Group***

Photograph © Samuel Finlak in association with Autograph APB, London

Jacques Touselle

***Portrait with Cloth Backdrop***

Milah Xiong '14

Ethnographic Fiction

Hello, my name is Bih the best poser with the best clothes. My dad works for the railroad so he gets clothes for me from far off places. Places where the camera was first encountered. Everything comes from far off places and it helps but deteriorates at the same time. I see the camera as a magnificent object that creates stillness and eternalness but when I look up and see the eucalyptus trees, which the white men have planted, I realize that life is just a game. The white men are the players and we are the pieces. Times have changed so much, that what are beliefs to me are different from that of my Grandpa, sitting in his chair watching the kids. He sits and tells stories that confuse me about what to know. The only things that I know are real are the elephants and lions. I know that the elephants and lions are out there meandering waiting to stomp on anyone at anytime. People are careful around Grandpa, they know that he is a renowned doctor and he is a master of these totems.

Yesterday, when I was at home with my Grandpa I stumbled upon a photo that I took with my father, his three sisters, and our servant a long time ago. This is what started my obsession with photography. After the railroad had just been erected, my Dad started working there and began saving money to take this photo right away. He saved enough money to buy cloth for my aunts to make their dresses and my outfit, a new suit, and to pay for the photographer and photos. I remember Tousele Jacques setting up this machine with a glass plate and I was not really sure what to do. That day, I remembered my dad as the happiest man in the world, well maybe not the happiest but he was really excited. He even got his haircut at the barber. That last woman in the photo is my aunts' servant. She is from a very tall mountain South of our town, Mbouda. Sometimes I would hear my aunts call her an outsider and yell at her but she always smiled, just like in this photo. I asked her why she was smiling in the photo and she simply told me, "When life is hard what else could you do?" I put the photo in my album for safekeeping, which worked out well for me later on in life.

It was a bright wonderful day when a family moved into our town. That family was Baptist and came from the North. They were strange with their own traditions and customs. Although, the most interesting part was about the family was their daughter. Her name was Tiokou and she was extraordinarily beautiful. I became friends with her at school. One day, she came over to our house and I was showing her all my cool photos but the only one Tiokou really liked was the one with my Dad, his three sisters, the servant, and me. I could not believe it; she didn't like any of my cool poses or clothes. After that day, I did not ask my father to buy or trade new clothes for me anymore and I stopped posing like my friends. Tiokou and I became great companions. We talked for hours about going to places like Paris or





Jacques Touselle  
**Portrait with Cloth Backdrop**  
 Photograph © Jacques Touselle

Samuel Finlak  
**Family Group**  
 Evelyn Li '12  
 Anthropological Contextualization

*Family Group*, the nostalgic black-and-white photo portrait of a family of nine in the village of Atta, taken by Cameroonian photographer Samuel Finlak in the 1980s, is an interesting case study of presentation and representation in post-colonial Cameroon. The photograph itself is revealing of many social, cultural as well as mental subtleties of both the photographer and the photographed. As a family portrait, the photograph not only plays roles of identification and commemoration, but also indicates many Cameroonian social conventions, or invented traditions, on a deeper level. Therefore, this essay will focus on contextualizing Finlak's *Family Group* in adoption of an anthropological approach. It proposes that the family of nine from Atta has used their photographic experience to an end that allows them to express themselves in a few particular ways. In addition, it will also analyze the triangular relationship between the family, Finlak and the photo's potential audience throughout the photographing and exhibition processes, arguing that it constitutes an essential component of the exercise of creating a social tradition through visualization.

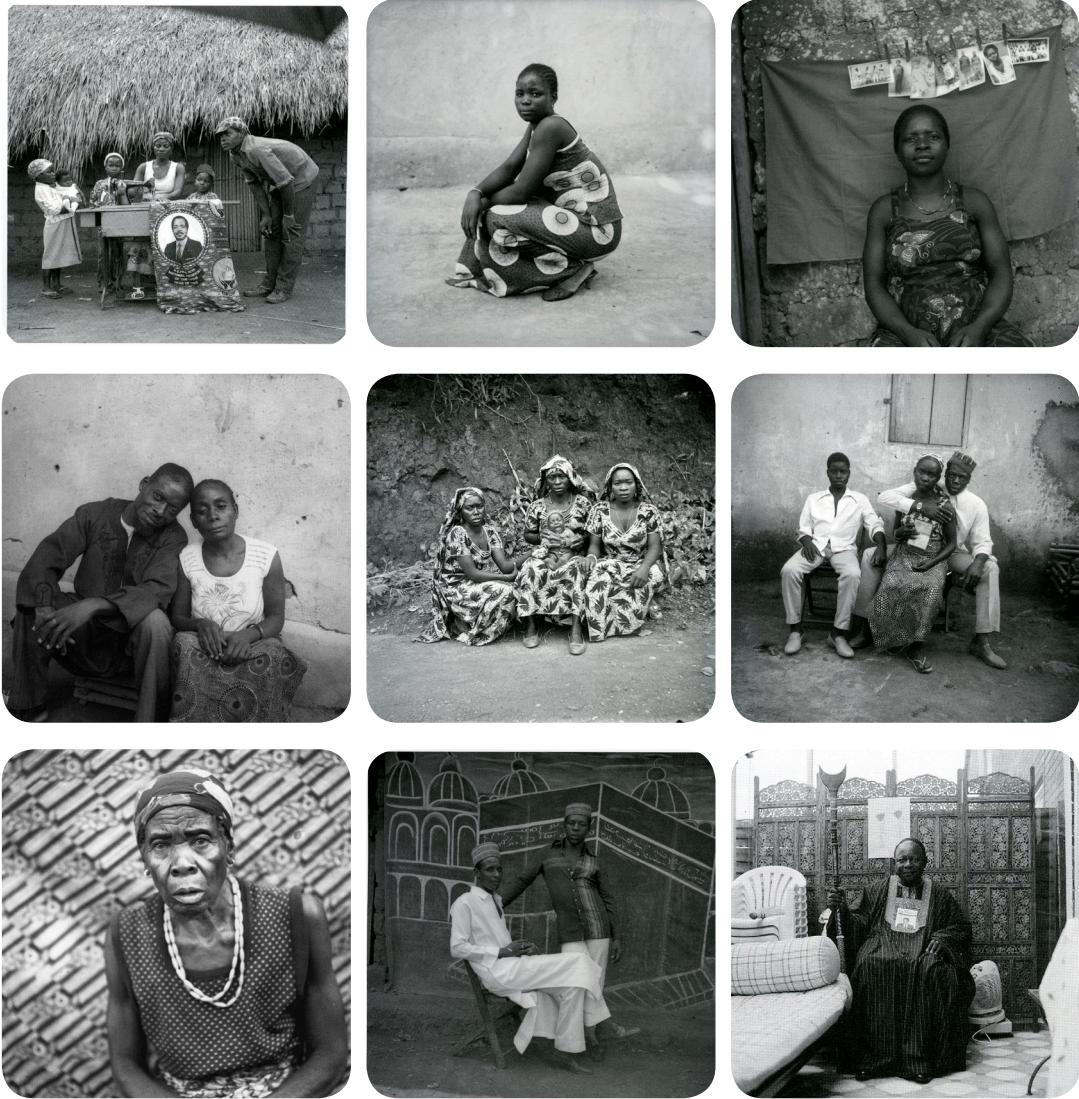
The composition of *Family Group* is explicit in its effort of a particular way of self-expression in a few respects. First, aesthetically speaking, the contrast between the black and —white triangles in the picture constitutes an essential visual impact for the audience, immediately highlighting the different individualities. Noticeably, the white backdrop, with apparent Cameroonian textures, serves a dual purpose of cropping out the natural surroundings, thus inventing a studio effect, and of adding another colored contrast in the photograph. These compositional details can together work out a function of the photo: as an identity document or a memorial piece that would accord to photographic conventions in Cameroon in the 1980s. Second, the photograph shows hints of its contextualization in a patriarchal society, which can be potentially connected to sociological studies of gender hierarchies. The accentuated central position of the father in the picture coincides with the fact that he is also the focal point of the two black-and-white triangles, further acknowledging the father's authority, at least on this stage of self-representation through photography. Therefore, in this way, *Family Group* implicitly provides its audience with some insights on the Cameroonian social norms regarding gender and hierarchy. Third, both the photo's title and its composition can tell us about the intention to construct a sense of "family" of the photographed subjects. By carefully dressing up in Cameroonian costumes of the same patterned cloth, deliberately choosing a natural setting that could indicate the cultural authenticity of the photographed location, and carrying serious facial expressions, the nine family members have successfully represented themselves as a particular social unit within an authentic Cameroonian culture. In other words, as Feldman-Savelsberg puts it, the family has experienced sentiments of belonging and home through photography (Feldman-Savelsberg 2010: 389).



Given these immediate observations of *Family Group*, it is interesting then to ask what kind of social and cultural implications about Cameroon we can get from behind the family portrait. In other words, if we take the photograph as the embodiment of an evolving process of interactions and communications, rather than a merely static object, then what can we say about such embodiment? Regarding this question, an analysis of the relationship between the family, the photographer and the photo's audience is very important, because the aforementioned embodiment occurs spontaneously at moments when such relationships are formed and realized. Zeitlyn has made a similar point about representation, arguing that representation is a process that can often be manipulated by the various actors involved (Zeitlyn 2010: 406). Issues such as identity formation, tradition acknowledgement, social communication and so forth can be raised in particular. By being portrayed as authentically Cameroonian, the family of nine not only admits their belonging to their specific society and culture, but also distinguishes itself from its viewing audience that is mainly western. In this way, a Cameroonian tradition is invoked and reinforced, with the inclusion of all the three parts in the process of communications.

Indeed, Finlak's photograph can be deemed as an intellectual heritage of the philosophy of *négritude* in the 1960s, which valorized an authentic "Africanité" through restoring the African cultures to their pre-colonial forms. Consciously or subconsciously, African photographers of Finlak's generation worked hard to create impressions of a "real Africa" by restoring Africa's pre-colonial traditions in their photos. As Enwezor and Zaya have accounted, the photographer and the photographed collaborate to represent their tradition as something vivid and alive, leaving out the marks of reconstruction from the deliberate reconstructions (Enwezor and Zaya 1996). In this respect, *Family Group* is evidence for both the family's and Finlak's success in living out their Cameroonian traditions and customs by making them explicit. Such disclosure, or exposure, of their desired identities in return would add another layer to their established ones. Moreover, the circulation of such process among the family, Finlak and the western audience has created a phenomenon of comparative understanding. In other words, the importance of the Cameroonian family's careful self-representation would not be highlighted if it were not to be accounted in comparison with the western stereotypes. Beyond being a mere showcase of Cameroonian conventions, *Family Group* also indicates the participation of a western audience in its making. Beyond being called cultural reconstruction, this process is also more of a cultural redefinition, with a time specific neo-tradition as the substitution for the real Cameroonian tradition in its pre-colonial terms. It would only make sense through being constantly compared to yet distanced from the past.

## Additional Exhibit Photos



**Top row, l to r:** Finlak, *The Ngansack Family*; Chila, *Woman Squatting*; Finlak, *ID Card Portrait*  
**Middle row, l to r:** Finlak, *Photograph for a Wedding License*; Chila, *Three Women and Baby*; Chila, *Youths with ID Card*  
**Bottom row, l to r:** Finlak, *The Late Elizabeth Noki*; Chila, *Two Friends*; Chila, *Chief Sam Tanyi*



Despite our success in finding the leaves, I could not get my mind off the camera. So as soon as we got near the path, I asked Ibrahim and Mohamed if they would pose and allow me to take a portrait. I was so delighted to learn that it still worked!

“This trip to Kobi, which could have been fatal, gave me new life here in Mayo Darlé. Not only did Ibrahim and Mohamed become two of my life-long friends after this experience, I was able to get my studio open again that same night with Mohamed leading the ritual ceremony. I am not from around here and I am not Muslim, but this inauguration made me believe in the power of the Zeitlyn ritual. The ritual has brought many people in Mayo Darlé happiness and peace. For Mohamed’s family, the photograph serves also as a memory of the good work their father has done for others, including me.”

“Will you reprint the photograph yourself or give it to the new studio in town since you are no longer in business?” I asked.

“I believe that the new studio, despite their fancy equipment, will not be able to reproduce the texture and essence of the photograph as it is remembered by Mohamed’s family, so I must do it myself. Doing so will not only evoke memories that Mohamed’s family seeks, but it is also my way of showing my appreciation for Mohamed.”



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Joseph Chila

***Man and Children***

Photograph © Joseph Chila in association with Autograph APB, London

could have ended with a fatal accident.

“After the bike was stabilized, Mohamed helped me off the Yamaha. I frantically searched for the only camera I owned, which had somehow dislodged from where I had tied it on the back. Mohamed found the camera. With a concerned look on his face, Mohamed handed it back to me with the cracked side facing me. I was in despair! I immediately plopped to the ground; first, inspecting it, then concluding that there was no hope that the camera had survived this ordeal. I suddenly curled into a fetal position, with my head in my hands and knees to my chest.

“As the men discussed whether to continue our intended journey into the bushes or to return home, I began to reflect about the major events of the six months before Ibrahim, an immigrant tin miner in Mayo Darlé whose identity photograph I renewed once in the past, took me to see Mohamed at his home. I had met Mohamed several years before when he came in with his Bushfaller son, who was maybe ten years old, for a school photograph.

“A year before my studio was flourishing into a mega business with immigrants coming from all corners of Cameroon to work in the tin mine. Most of the photographs I took were used for identity cards to legitimize national citizenship during President Adhijo’s rule, which was necessary to work in mines owned and operated by the State. The tin mine was the life of Mayo Darlé! My business slowed as the tin mining operation was shut down in 1983. My misfortune continued when I lost my first child, who was three months old, during the rainy season. Then my studio went up in flames five days later. I was lucky to have my camera at home with me on the night of the fire. After the accident, I was afraid that I had crushed my camera, my passion, and my livelihood!

“I was told that my misfortune was a result of the improper measures I had taken during the inauguration of my studio by not adhering to the Zeitlyn ritual followed by a Koran recitation throughout the night of the inauguration.

“I was not familiar with the ritual and my clients never mentioned it,” Joseph continued. “The ritual consists of sacrificing a lamb on a bundle of tiama leaves. These leaves are no longer found in Mayo Darlé because of the destruction in tin mining areas, but you can still find them in neighboring areas like Kobi. The leaves were left to dry in place before they were collected at night and moved to the entrance of the business, where a marabout would lead the recitation of the Koran over the tiama leaves in the presence of the business owner.

“After an extensive discussion between Ibrahim and Mohamed, they stood by my feet and tried to lift my morale. I followed the men inside the bushes. We walked for several kilometers before finally finding the tiama leaves.



death. The family does not know what he did with it. No one has dared to ask the old man.”

“What meanings are associated with the photo other than the fact he appears to be in good health?” I asked.

“Let me see it again,” Joseph commanded.

I handed him the negative, and he squinted for what seemed to be about fifteen minutes. I was dying to know his thoughts, but I have learned over the past year that interrupting Joseph with my questions during moments when he was studying photographs to recall memories or interpret was useless because he rarely answered them in-depth. So I waited until he handed me back the photo, and I let him explain the narrative of the photograph.

After he gave me back the negative, he said, “For one, his attire, the white kaftan and the head cap, represents his religion. If you look you can see a pen and pad in his chest-pocket. I think this symbolizes Mohamed’s intellect because he can write and read Arabic and French, which he taught himself. He was also extremely loyal to his friends but especially to Ibrahim, a relative who encouraged him to settle in Mayo Darlé in 1948, if I recall correctly, and helped him become the most sought-after marabout, seven years before I moved from Mbouda.”

Joseph paused for a moment.

“But the contents of the photo are not as important as the context in which the photo was taken. Basically why was this photo taken on this particular day, in this place, high up in the hills surrounding Kobi?” asked Joseph.

Another pause.

“Commençons! [Let us begin!]" Joseph began to recount the story.

“*As-Salamu Alaykum, as-salumu alaykum*, Joseph! STOP!” shouted Ibrahim as he and Mohamed ran out of the bushes to stop me from zipping past our intended rendezvous point on my old Yamaha. This was my first time in Kobi, so I was not familiar with the landmarks that Mohamed and Ibrahim had described the day before. They jumped out near the path as I pressed on both the foot and hand break. Instantaneously, the back of the bike slid to the right. The Yamaha, now at a ninety-degree angle, locked and began leaning to the left. Mohamed, who was on my right, instinctively pushed my body in the opposite direction. Simultaneously, Ibrahim grabbed the handlebars. If it were not for their courage and strength, this

Joseph Chila

***Man and Children***

Mandie Grover '12

Anthropological Contextualization

In contrast to the other portraits in the *Staging Selves: Cameroonian Portrait Photography* exhibit, Joseph Chila’s “Man and Children” is a family portrait without the mother. Other portraits by Chila show siblings (“A Trader’s Children”); complete families (“Family Group”); women and children (Three Women and a Baby”); male friends and colleagues (of the “Two Friends” portraits and “Two Men with Leaf Bundles”); youth (the “Two Friends” portraits and “Youths with ID Card”); and individual portraits (“Chief Sam Tanyi, Accountant”, which was taken in London). “Man and Children” is the only portrait in the exhibition that includes a central male figure, children, and no mother. The missing mother figure raises intriguing questions about masculinity and children. In this portrait, two masculine figures, the father and the photographer, interact with three children without the feminine presence of the mother.

The three children in the portrait create the framework for this inquiry into masculinity and femininity, as it is the relationship of the missing mother figure, the father figure, and the male photographer to the children that is examined in this photograph. A cursory examination of the children suggests a few facts about the family of which they are members. The children are distant enough in age from each other that they most likely come from a monogamous family or are the children of only one of their father’s wives. The children are dressed in nice, new clothing, and two of the children wear sunglasses, suggesting that the family is well-off, or at least that the portrait is meant to portray the family prosperous. The positioning of the children around the father suggests the centrality of their father to their lives. However, the three children are also positioned in relation to two people who are not in the portrait: the photographer and the mother. The children face the photographer, who is both a participant in and an observer of the staging of family in the photograph. The mother, on the other hand, is not given a definite position in relation to the posing of her children. Something has removed her from the staging of family in “Man and Children,” and her removal is of central importance.

The mother is a felt presence in the portrait due to her glaring absence. Her absence throws the purpose of the staging of family in the photograph into a doubtful situation. Why was the portrait taken with a key member of the family missing? The main uses of black and white portraiture in Cameroon at this time were for identity cards, marriage photographs, family groups, new babies, young couples, funerals, illness, and documentation of accidents or construction projects (Zeitlyn 2009). This portrait portrays a family group, but a group that includes only a segment of the family. The purpose of family group portraits is public display or storage in a photo album (Zeitlyn 2009). Why would the family group desire to be displayed or remembered without the mother figure? Her absence suggests that she is also absent from the family as a whole at this period. The possible sources of absence of the mother from the family are



death, illness, divorce, or distance. Given the age of the youngest child in the portrait, the mother most likely would not leave the child. The segmentation of the family unit as portrayed in this portrait is thus likely due to a traumatic event including divorce, as children in Yamba families at least are kept by the father following divorce (Gufler 1995). A mother would most likely want to be pictured with her children to show her social status as a mother, given that childlessness is undesirable for a married woman in Bamiléké culture (Feldman-Savelsberg 1999). The effect of the vacancy of the mother role in this portrait is a masculine-focused vision of the world, a staging of family centered on a father figure and on a male photographer.

The father is the central presence in the portrait, both visually and socially, framed by his two older children and centered in the photograph. Through the absence of the mother figure, the masculine presence of the father becomes central, and the focus is on his achievements. His children are the first achievement, as they are part of his legacy, markers of his familial success, and symbols of his virility. The portrait reveals something of both his material accomplishments, shown in the quality of the clothing he and his children are wearing and in their positioning in front of what is most likely the family residence, and his social accomplishments, shown in his fathering of three children. More than these two forms of accomplishments, the portrait also shows his position as head of a family, a family that is quite possibly a single parent family. The father's centrality to this photograph almost overshadows the ostensible reason for taking such a portrait, which is to display it as a family portrait.

The photographer, like the mother, is not pictured in the portrait, but is rather a felt presence in the moment of the portrait, in contrast to the mother figure. Joseph Chila, the photographer, is a participant in the staging of a family in this portrait. He participates as the person recording the staging and providing the opportunity for the staging. While there is no overt evidence that he participated in the posing and positioning of the subjects of the portrait, the possibility that he also contributed to the staging in this manner cannot be discounted either. The pyramid-like structure of the family unit in the photograph suggests the influence of some geometric vision, probably from Chila. He, like the father, brings a masculine vision to the portrait session, but he functions as the observer of masculinity and its relationship to family in addition to contributing to the staging of this same male-centric vision of family.

Given the absence of the mother in the photograph, the family unit in the portrait "Man and Children" by Joseph Chila is a family unit defined by two masculine figures: the father and the photographer. The masculine focus of the portrait provides some insight, although limited, on masculinity in Cameroon and the ideal masculinity based on the staging of a family around the masculine figure of the father. In the portrait, the father is the material provider for his children, the head of the family (the highest point in the pyramid at the center of the portrait), and a successful member of the community as a father. The participation of the male photographer in this staging suggests the affirmation of this vision of successful masculinity by another male member of the community.

Joseph Chila  
***Two Men with Bundles***  
Alpha Oumar Diallo '12  
Ethnographic Fiction

"David, you tell me that you have been working on religious practices in Somié. Well, have you heard of the Zeitlyn ritual?"

"No, I have not," I said with an inquisitive expression on my face. "What's it about?" I asked.

"I must find the negative of the photo of the two men who forever changed my fortune after performing the Zeitlyn ritual on my behalf," said Joseph as he shuffled quickly through a box of negatives marked #1, containing the negatives of photographs I later learned were taken after the studio burned down. He found the negative instantly.

"Do you happen to have the print?" I asked Joseph.

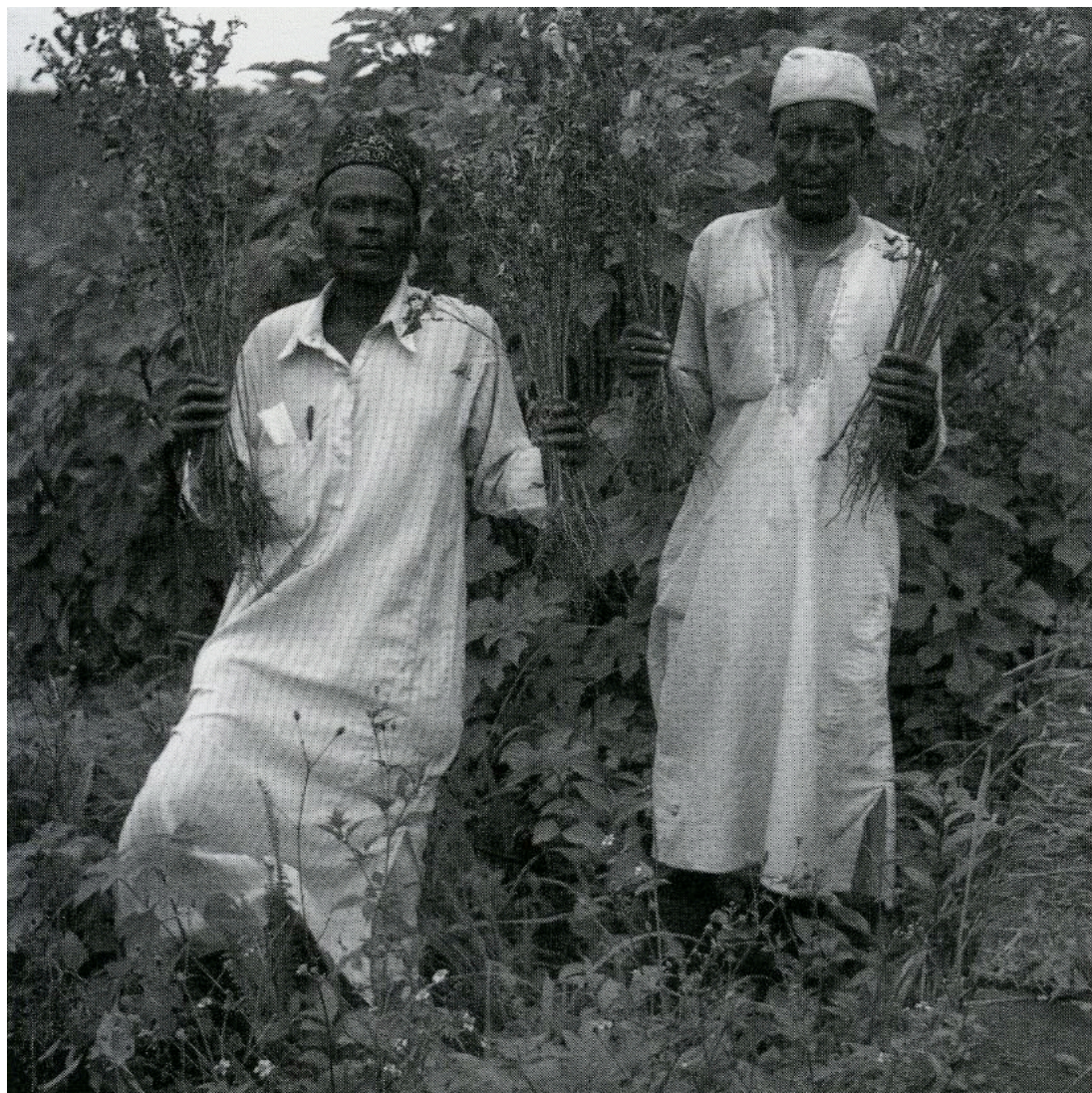
"No, I gave it to the men in the picture. We will go meet Mohamed, who is now an elder and lives three kilometers away on the Route N-6 on the way to Niaoua. He is the man on the right of the negative. Ibrahim, on the left, is a long-time childhood friend of Mohamed. He passed away five years ago," Joseph explained as he squinted quickly at the negative.

Joseph handed me the negative and said, "This is the first time I have seen Ibrahim's face since his death."

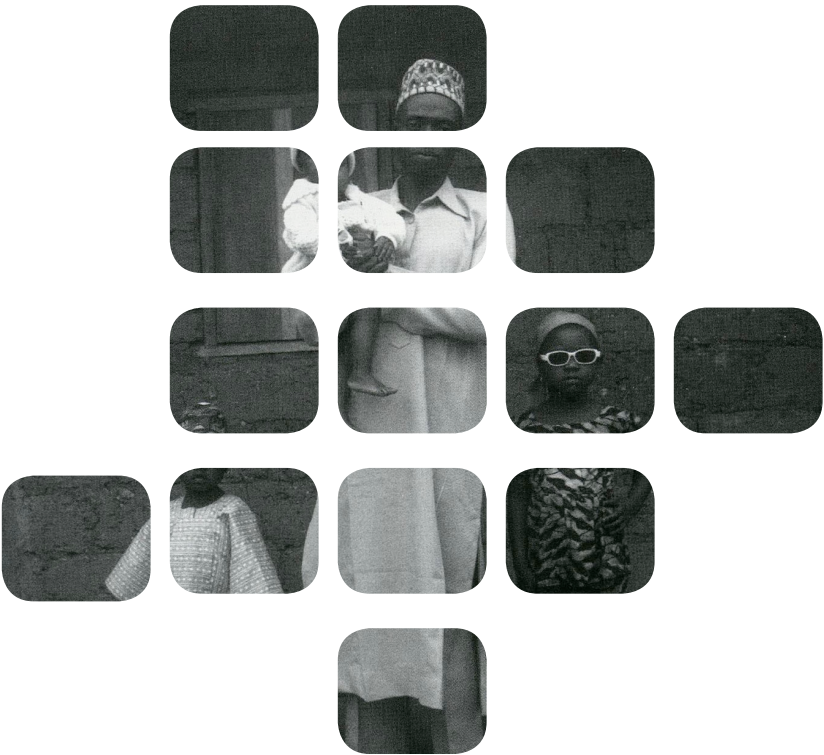
"I can't make out an X on the negative." I was expecting a mark signifying that Ibrahim was deceased.

"I want to preserve the integrity of the negative so that I can print it again for Mohamed's *funeraille*. Mohamed's family expects him to pass away in the near future and are planning the *funeraille*. They want the photograph cropped in a particular way. At the *funeraille*, the family wants to display a photograph from his youth when he was in better health. His first son, a Bushfaller in the United States, called me three months ago to tell me that Mohamed's health continues to decline and that the family wants to remember him as a healthy, progressive Muslim who faithfully practiced Fulbé traditions rather than the man whose life has been consumed by his sweet blood. He was able to assess the future of our people and, accordingly, he made sure that his sons and daughters could read the Koran, French and English. His son remembers the print, which was hung in the living room five years ago, but Mohamed took down the photo soon after Ibrahim's

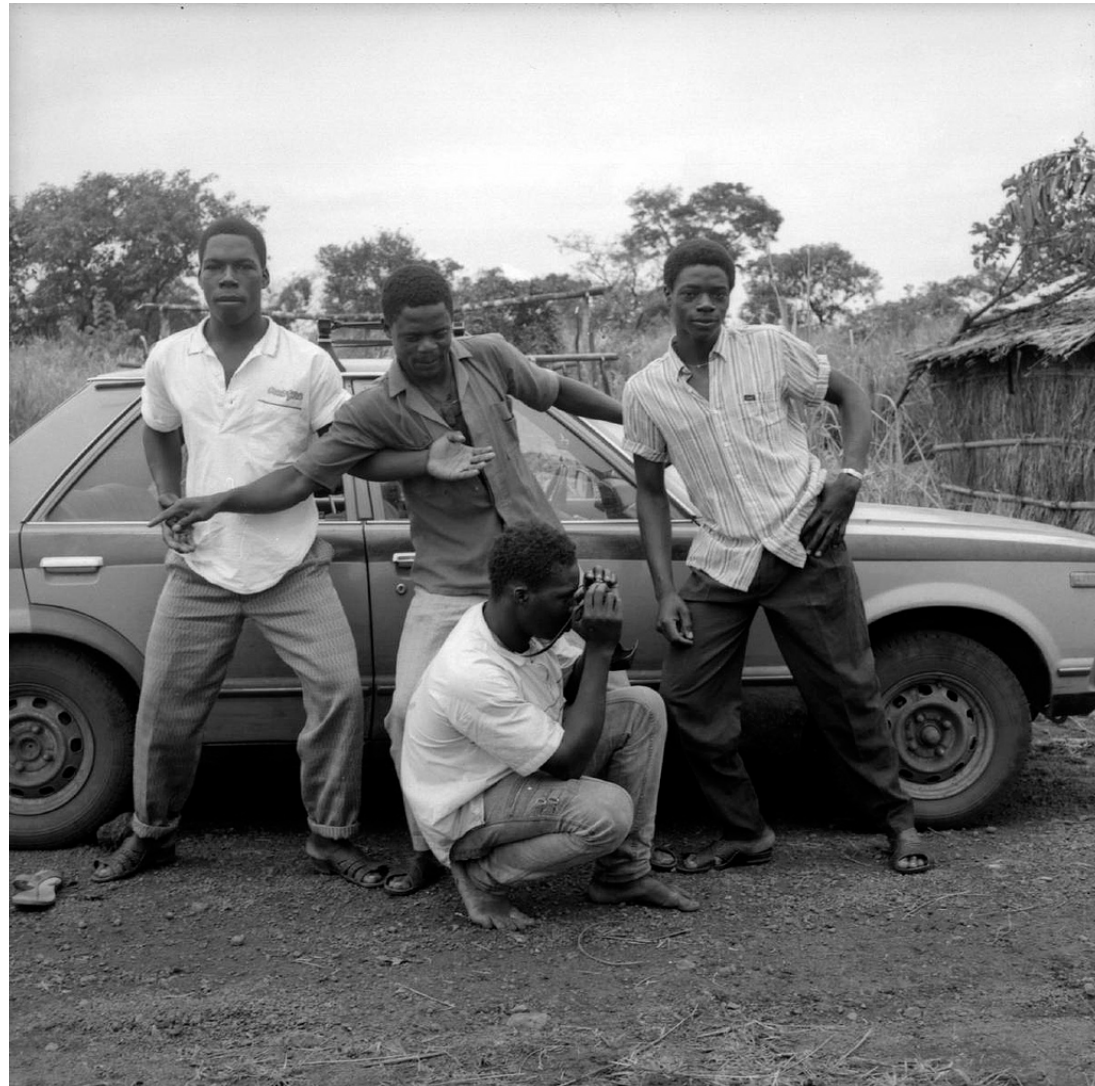




Joseph Chila  
***Two Men with Leaf Bundles***  
 Photograph © Joseph Chila in association with Autograph APB, London







Samuel Finlak

***Itinerant Fisherman***

Photograph © Samuel Finlak in association with Autograph APB, London

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ideas about modernity, which, at times, led them to butt heads with the more traditional local Islamic leaders. This disturbance was likely the social context of the time in the predominately Muslim region of Mayo Darlé, where Chila took this photograph. This dichotomy is, of course, significantly more complex when one thinks of the traditional religions that contrast with the worldly religions of Christianity and Islam, however, for the purposes of this review Chila is portraying the relationship between modernity and tradition specifically within the Muslim community.

The young man dressed in crisp white clothing of a traditional nature who sits, patient and composed, occupies the scene created by the backcloth. In contrast, the young man on the left, dressed in a western outfit, pushes off the leg of his friend toward the photographer and away from the backcloth, literally moving through space and figuratively moving through time from the traditional Mosque in Mecca towards the fashionable modernity of the photograph itself.

Chila worked primarily among the poor in rural areas. As a result, the fantasies that he helps to create were often, by nature, of a simpler and less grandiose nature than those produced in the more urban settings (Wilson 2005:12). In this case, it appears as though Chila is capturing the internal turmoil of a Muslim member of the community during this time. Should one move forward and go willingly with the sweeping current of modernity or should one cling to tradition and in doing so remain in place with familiar surroundings? By giving it the title of *Two Friends*, Chila may be implying that the two choices need not be exclusive nor each one incompatible with the other.

This idea is one that is pertinent in a country where internal migration is widely prevalent and, as such, issues of autochthony and belonging abound. Without even leaving the community, members can lose their feeling of inclusion or affiliation when the large part of a community moves toward modernity and away from tradition or vice versa. Chila's photograph seems to mirror this struggle and perhaps more notably personifies and makes tangible an abstract and at times seemingly untouchable concept. As a result, this photo epitomizes the ability of photography, particularly during this time in Cameroonian history, to have social and political significance by bringing the meanings and motivations behind meetings and rituals, celebrations and commemorations into the visual realm. In doing so, Chila makes the photos not only more real and manageable for the viewer, despite his use of the imaginary in his creation of new identities, but also more complex with his use of multiple dualities including those of modern and traditional, real and imaginary, and religious and secular.

Samuel Finlak  
***Itinerant Fisherman***  
Veasey Conway '12  
Observational Paper

In *Itinerant Fisherman, Market Near the Mapé Dam Lake*, Samuel Finlak gives us four young men posing in front of a small car. All have “Western” style clothes, and wear long pants and short sleeve button up shirts. Three stand with their knees bent, the fourth crouches in front.

Far from a picture of four disjointed men, their relationship and familiarity with each other is articulated through their physical location and individual expressions. The group's age, gender, and occupational similarities may also suggest they know each other. They might work as a team, and if so, the car behind them might be the vehicle for their itinerancy. The three men wearing light/white shirts serve to tie the group together: they form a triangle that draws the eye around the group.

The center man and left-most man are joined through their crossing arms – each man's arm stretches across the other's body. While the men are clearly posing, the particular arrangement of these two men appears candid. The center man is looking down, and the left-most man's arms are frozen awkwardly, suggesting the camera and photographer captured a dynamic scene. The hints of a grin – directed at the crouching man – are seen on the center man's face. Coupled with their physical proximity, a viewer can infer a familiarity and relationship between the two men.

The crouching man isn't just crouching. Holding a camera and facing to the right of the frame, he crouches to compose his own scene. This man's actions and posture draw immediate parallels to the photographer, Samuel Finlak. It reminds a viewer that a photographer is present, that these men are posing, and that photographers have the power to shape a scene. It reminds a viewer that this picture is but one among many possible pictures of this scene – one moment, one perspective.

Only the left-most and right-most men stare into the camera, and in turn, at the viewer. This too, suggests relationships: if these two gazing men were placed separately in the frame, then they would seem separate from the two men not looking at the camera. But because the staring men physically “bookend” the center men, we can infer that they are all part of a group. The differences in eye contact between the men might be more due to differences in personality, mood, and character than any differences in relationship to each other or the picture-taker.

The group of men are placed at the center of the frame: the photographer leaves space for the subjects to “breathe.” This inclusion of space around the subjects give us some details about the setting. A flat dirt ground with pieces of straw and pebbles is the surface: it literally “grounds” the subjects. A car behind the men stretches – and extends beyond – each edge of the frame. With the men clearly in the foreground, the car



separates them from the background. Behind the car (and slightly out of focus due to a relatively shallow depth of field), we see trees, tall grass, and the edge of a thatched straw shed or hut. A cloudless sky – translated as a near-white grey by Finlak’s choice of film – contrasts in position and tone with the grey ground at the bottom of the frame. Wooden cross-beams (possibly used for hanging fish) peek out from behind the car.

The caption to the photograph reveals we are located in or near a market. Situated near a lake, the fishermen might have been in the market to sell their catch. Thus, while the photograph is set in a *public* space, it might be a public space that the men are particularly comfortable with – as a result, they are willing to pose and play in a space open to many kinds of people and eyes.

The photographer pictures the men straight on (except for the crouching man, who seems to have chosen to turn sideways). While little is known about the type of camera, lens, or film used, Finlak probably crouched slightly to give a full-body “eye-level” perspective to the viewer. This perspective creates accessibility and offers high levels of information about the subjects. We see virtually everything – their clothes, what they wear (or do not wear) on their feet, how tall they are, and jewelry or accessories. The portrait doesn’t distill the men down to a representation of their faces. Instead, it gives meaning and significance to the men’s entire bodies. Interestingly, no fishing equipment appears to be present in this portrait of fishermen, possibly suggesting that the photographer believed that they were not simply defined by their profession.

Joseph Chila

***Two Friends***

Flannery McArdle ‘13

Anthropological Contextualization

Cameroonian photography in the 1960s and 70s, when Joseph Chila and Samuel Finlak were taking the majority of the photographs in their collections, was influenced by and embedded within the Cameroonian social and political context while simultaneously serving as means to create a new identity and at times to live out a fantasy. The majority of photographs commissioned during this time were produced for the identity cards that all Cameroonian citizens are obliged to carry, implying that the photograph is intended to be a truth of sorts, a representation of fact utilized for the verification of self. Chila’s photographs, however, walk a fine line between the real and the imaginary. While several of his photos do appear to be for the purposes of identity cards or marriage certificates (another product rooted in fact intended for identification), *Two Friends* is a photo that exemplifies the ability of a photograph to use the reality of political and social contexts to create a new identity.

In the 1970s, Islam in Cameroon was evolving with the return of the first generation of Muslim students who had received scholarships to study in Arab countries such as Egypt, Sudan and Saudi Arabia (Pelican 2008:122). These students’ enhanced ability to speak, read and write Arabic gave them legitimacy within their community, which allowed them to begin to slowly push back the more traditional intellectuals who had a mastery neither of the Quran nor of the Arab language. As a result, this new, foreign educated generation of Muslim students now had the agency to challenge the status quo and to put forth new ideas about different Islamic practices (Clarke et al. 2005:12).

In many of his photographs Chila experiments not only with a duality of fact and fiction but also of religious and secular allegiances and “the ways in which another form of self-identity is fashioned through this often ambiguous space”(Wilson 2005:9). The photo *Two Friends* incorporates one more duality in addition to those mentioned above and that is the contrast between tradition and modernity. As Andrew Wilson notes in his introductory essay “Let’s Go” featured in the book *Joseph Chila and Samuel Finlak: Two Portrait Photographers in Cameroon*, Chila commissioned a backcloth for his studio based on the mosque in Mecca, intended to suggest the religious beliefs of his subjects but also to introduce a “space of negotiation between the religious and secular...where traditional beliefs give way to the brashness of modernity”(Wilson 2005:13). Given the time period in which Chila was working, the inclusion of such a duality likely reflects the turmoil in the Muslim community brought about as students returned to the community. For the most part, the students had received western educations and came back with





Joseph Chila  
***Two Friends***  
 Photograph © Joseph Chila in association with Autograph APB, London



Jacques Touselle  
***Portrait of a Young Man (Bonne Année)***  
 Photograph © Jacques Touselle



Jacques Touselle

***Portrait of a Young Man (Bonne Année)***

Katherine Goodyear '14

Observational Paper

Jacques Touselle's photograph shows a young boy posing inside a heart. The boy sits with his back up against the right side of the cutout heart with his front leg raised and foot rested on the opposite side. His body is positioned sideways to the camera with his front arm hooked over the side of the cutout and his chin propped up by his hand as he looks straight out at the viewers. The boy's direct eye contact with the audience immediately draws the viewer into the photograph. His gaze makes it seem as if it is not only the onlooker observing the boy but the boy examining the viewer. His outward gaze invites the viewer to look at him, as he wants to be noticed and admired.



The boy's pose is strong and sturdy. He spreads himself out across the heart, using the space available to him to make himself appear physically large and powerful. He opts for western style, dressing in a smart shirt, pinstriped trousers, and white boat shoes. By having his legs raised and his foot propped on the side of the cutout, he exposes his attire. In fact, it is his leg position that draws attention to his clothes, as the bend in his leg is the focal point of the photograph. The viewer therefore looks at the trousers first, following the stripes down to his shoes, which stand out as they are white against a black background. His choice of pose and dress suggests that he is trying to make the impression that he is a fashionable and modern man.

In this photograph, Touselle highlights the importance of the backdrop. The backdrop is flat and frontal which allows the heart to frame the boy in the center and draw the observer's gaze to him. The space around the heart is heavily embellished with flowers and bells and has "Bonne Année" written at the top and "Studio Photo Jacques" written at the bottom. The highly ornate background suggests that photo was taken for a special occasion, possibly for New Year celebrations or for a significant other, creating a poetic effect to the photograph. Furthermore, the backdrop signifies that the photo was taken in Touselle's studio. On the far left of the photograph, the viewer can see where the frame ends and the wall of the studio begins. In the photograph's publishing however, the wall would be cropped out to make a very two-dimensional picture. This suggests that the photograph could have been used as the front cover of a card.

Moreover, Touselle uses differences in patterns and shading to add to the effect of the photograph. The contrast between the highly decorative frame and the solid background of the heart draws the viewer to the heart and thus to the boy's image. The ornaments on the frame around the heart further draw attention to the boy. This is because the bells at the bottom of the frame are positioned so that they point upwards, towards the boy, directing the viewer's gaze upwards to the center. The fact that the background of the heart is black and the frame around the heart is white further highlights the boy's image. The viewer is first drawn to the black heart because it stands out on the white background. The mix therefore of light and dark on the boy's clothing adds yet another layer, directing the viewer's gaze to boy. The viewpoint of the onlooker is also extremely important in the photograph. The spectator looks at the photo straight on and because the photograph is quite flat, the boy stands out within the two-dimensional background.