

Adopt a Photograph: Anthropological Contextualization and Analysis Exercise

This is the last of three assignments for your ever deepening relationship with your adopted photo, the studio photographer and his client. In addition to the observational paper and the work of ethnographic fiction you have completed on the photograph you “adopted” from the exhibit, *Staging Selves: Cameroonian Portrait Photography*, you have also read about the social context of Cameroonian photography, history, and identities. This is your chance to practice writing like an anthropologist.

The assignment: Write a three to four page paper in the style of a (very short) scholarly anthropological article about your photo and its context.

The articles by Heike Behrend and by David Zeitlyn, provide examples of anthropological contextualization and analysis of photos-as-used-in-life-as-lived. Geary’s work on Bamum photos (Eastern Grassfields, West Region, Cameroon) and Fardon’s work on photos of the Lela ceremony in Bali (Western Grassfields, Northwest Region, Cameroon) exemplify ways that anthropologists either: 1) use anthropology and history to understand colonial-era photographs (Geary), or 2) use colonial-era photographs for an anthropological analysis of a particular ceremony and what it reveals about history and ethnogenesis. Ethnographic works by Geschiere, me, and Nyamnoh give you a deeper understanding of the intersections of identities, politics, and history in the parts of Cameroon from whence the photos come.

Photo critics Enwezor and Zaya address the philosophy of *négritude*, the leading identity theory of the era just before and during the period when our photos were being taken. One of the proponents of *négritude*, Léopold Senghor (first president of Senegal), during the 1940s to 1960s, the era of the push toward independence, posited that *Africanité* (what is “authentically African”) is to be found in the continent’s pre-colonial traditions. Both the pre-liberation/pre-independence commercial studio photographers described in Enwezor and Zaya’s article, and the studio photographers featured in our exhibition, provide a visual argument against what could be seen as the essentializing argument of the proponents of *négritude*. “The African identity apparent in the pose, dress, props, and direct gaze show us modern individualists—not generic ‘Africans’—already embracing modernity: individuals creating unique, knowing fusions of traditional and modern aesthetics and values” (Enwezor and Zaya 1996:26).

Finally, Paul Riesman’s review article on concepts of personhood, selfhood, and the life cycle in African social life and thought, gives you a (dense) and sophisticated introduction to the “state of the art” of an emerging field of study within Africanist anthropology around the time when our photographers were in business.

All of the works assigned thus far give you food for thought to analyze and contextualize your photo in an anthropological style.

Again, in combination with the previous two assignments, this exercise aims to heighten your awareness of writing for different audiences.