USING OLD PHOTOGRAPHS IN INTERVIEWS: SOME CAUTIONARY NOTES ABOUT SILENCES IN FIELDWORK

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I

In September 1987, early in my research at the Kenya National Archives, I came across a collection of photographs taken by a British missionary during the 1920s and early 1930s.[1] The collection contained nearly 250 photos of the terrain and people of Kenya's Taita Hills, where I would soon be going for my fieldwork. I pored over the photo collection for a long time, and had reproductions made of twenty-five shots. The names of those pictured had been recorded in the photo album's captions. Many of the names were new to me, though a few WaTaita of the day who had figured prominently in the archival records were also captured on film. When I moved on to Taita in early 1988, I took the photographs with me. Since I would be interviewing men and women old enough either to remember or be contemporaries of the people in the pictures, I planned to show the photos during the interviews.[2] At first I was simply curious about who some of the people pictured were, but my curiosity quickly evolved into a more ambitious plan. I decided to try using the photographs as visual prompts to get people to speak more expansively than they otherwise might about their lives and their experiences.

In the event, I learned that using the photographs in interviews involved many more complexities than I had envisaged in my initial enthusiasm. I found that I had to alter the expectations and techniques I took to Taita, and feel out some of the limitations of working with the photographic medium. I had to recognize the power relations embedded in my presence as a researcher in Taita, in my position as bearer cf images from peoples' pasts, and in the photos themselves. I found, too, that I needed to come to grips with a number of issues about the politics of image production, and the historical product of those politics: the bounded, selected images that are photographs. Finally, I had to address some of my own cultural assumptions about photography and how people respond to pictures, assumptions that my informants did not necessarily share.

II

The Taita Hills rise abruptly out of the savanna of southeastern Kenya, 100 miles west of Mombasa and just north of Tanzania. In contrast to the low, dry, sparsely populated plain that surrounds Taita, the Hills are thickly peopled. They are also relatively well-watered in the higher reaches, though inconsistent rains have caused severe droughts and famines several times in the last century. In-migration to them came from several different directions, dates back to at least the sixteenth century, and was largely completed by the mid-nineteenth century.[3]

Though people in Taita shared similar languages and many common social and cultural institutions in the nineteenth century, they organized these institutions around lineages and localities. Only with colonialism's new institutions and assumptions did WaTaita begin to mobilize themselves as a "tribe." With colonial rule, much surrounding lowland was alienated for sisal plantations, but the Taita Hills did not come under European settlement. Europeans there never numbered many more than a dozen, mainly missonaries and colonial officials.

I went to Taita to do a social history of the WaTaita from the 1880s to 1951, focusing on struggles among WaTaita over colonial-period changes in economy, authority, religion, and culture. WaTaita share a view of themselves as the makers of their history, but they often differed widely among themselves in outlook and action, as they struggled to make sense of, and make their way through, change. I based my research on life histories, rather than more formal oral traditions or remembrances of "Taita history" writ large. Oral traditions are notably weak and contradictory in Taita, and were not a major means of transmitting historical knowledge from one generation to the next.[4] I also feared that asking people about Taita history more generally would invite responses all too easily narrowed into overarching ideological representations of the past. Given that everyone brings a particular perspective and agenda to her/his reconstruction of the past, I thought the best course of action for this project would be to delve into the details of individuals' lives, to find out how their perspectives were rooted in their experiences. Perhaps not surprisingly, peoples' step-by-step reconstructions of their lives were often far more ideologically ambiguous than were their present-day summary views of the past. From these multiple perspectives (plus archival materials) I would then piece together an interpretation of the dynamics of Taita struggles over change.[5]

I thought I saw in the photographs a unique way to get people to reflect on their pasts. My overall interview technique was designed to start with open-ended questions that let informants structure much of their responses themselves, ("Tell me about your childhood."); then move to more specific questions that structured specific responses, ("After your husband left to work in Mombasa, what sorts of work did you do on the farm?"). I planned to conclude interviews with the photos, and thought that returning to a more open-ended style would be the best way to present them. After all, when people see pictures, they talk about them, right? I envisioned that the photos might jog peoples' memories about other people, past events, old friendships and grudges and the like; that seeing images (sometimes of themselves or their kin) from fifty and sixty years ago would set in motion trains of thought and conversation which otherwise might not have been accessible to me or even to them. I also thought that there would be a 'control' in this use of the photos. Large numbers of people would respond in their own ways to a common stimulus: the same set of pictures.

III

The pictures were taken by Miss Margaret Murray, a British missionary who lived in Taita for nearly thirty years and came to speak KiTaita fluently. She worked primarily as a teacher in regular and catechetical schools, then later as a

headmistress. Her longevity of educational service in that setting ensured that virtually everyone I met in the Hills knew of her, and that older people remembered (and usually honored) her person. The school where she last taught now bears her name.

Miss Murray's photographs, however, cannot be regarded as neutral, objective observations of the society she lived in; I quickly came to understand that photographs can no more be 'objective' than history can be.[6] For Africanists, any notion of objective history would have to be grounded in a mythology of objective fieldwork, and that sort of positivism is receding from the discipline.[7] So, too, with photography. Several scholars have recently written about how European photographers "reinforced and perpetuated stereotypes of Africa and Africans" by the way they selected, posed, and framed images.[8] These studies examine how European photography exoticized Africans.

Christraud Geary's work on German colonial photography in Bamum, Cameroon, delves into the underlying politics of how such images might be produced. Much of the German photography stemmed from European metropolitan curiosity about its African holdings. Some Germans in Cameroon, recognizing potential markets and profits, sought to sell Bamum objects to German museums. The agents photographed objects available for purchase, and several pictures show the objects being used in ceremonies. The ruler of Bamum staged these ceremonies specifically for the photographers. He had some dances performed for the first time in many years, and altered them in the process. The dances introduced new elements, highlighted some prior ones, and de-emphasized others.

The photography of the resurrected dances in this way became a site for the negotiation of meanings. This negotiation of meanings took place in part between the ruler and his subjects: he tinkered with Bamum "tradition" in an attempt to incorporate turn-of-the-century Islamic and colonial influences. Negotiation of meanings also took place between the King and the Europeans: he controlled what they would/could not see and enshrine as "tradition" in their photographs, while they took pictures to valorize the commodities they were hawking in Europe. The photographic moment was—is—thus shaped by unspoken agendas of photographers, photographic subjects, and referrents outside the picture's boundaries.[9]

In Taita, Margaret Murray had little interest in reproducing the stereotyical 'exotic African,' still less in brokering a clearance sale on Taita material culture. However, her photographic collection suggests that she carried a distinct agenda with her camera, an agenda influenced by her gender, her color, her elite/outsider position, her religion, and her work. Taita school teachers and students, Christian converts and clergy, chiefs, and public ceremonies involving colonial VIPs predominate in her collection. Almost all are shown wearing Western clothes. Her chosen subjects were usually carefully posed. Christianity and Education were put on formal display; whether the formality was her choice or theirs is not known, but it seems likely to have been agreeable to both parties. The more devout of the early Christians in Taita were very conscious of having "cast off [their] heathen ways."[10] They publicly distinguished themselves from non-Christians through missionized dress, manners, and rectitude, so it seems likely that many of the

Christians in Murray's pictures would have chosen to emphasize those aspects of themselves before the camera.

A different colonial stereotype from the exotic African was propounded by these collaborations—The New African: Christian, progressive, living proof of the value of the Western civilizing mission. Largely silenced by Murray's selection were non-Christians who fell outside of the Taita colonial elite, roughly 80-90% of the population in those days. Murray did take a few pictures of local markets and more 'exotically' dressed non-Christian WaTaita, but in her photography she clearly did not much concern herself with daily life as most people lived it.

I only came to understand the emphases and silences in Murray's photographs more fully through the emphases and silences I encountered when using them in the interviews. At first I presented the pictures with a bare minimum of information and with no explicit agenda of questions. The pictures drew extensive commentary from a few people—mainly early Christians who had gone in for education—but inspired much less from many old people who had not been part of that milieu. At their very occasional best, the pictures induced informants, who'd been raised by the woman shown standing in front of the church, or taught by the teacher in the second row of the school photo, to recollect old stories or details about the subject, and go on into tangential matters of interest and insight. More typically, people to whom I showed the photos in the expectation of provoking lengthy discussions were satisfied to do no more than what I'd originally envisioned: identify the people in question. Often, when people did not recognize a person or a place, they asked me to explain the photograph, thereby putting me into the position of the Authority on the pictures—precisely the opposite role from the one I preferred, but one that I came to realize was embedded in my position as presenter of the photos. People seldom responded to my open-ended presentation of the photos as I had hoped they would.

IV

Looking back on the difficulties I experienced using the pictures, the question of authority seems a central one. My own authority was constituted in part by the knowledge I brought into interviews as a researcher, and in part by my position as a Western outsider. Although I wanted to present myself to people as a pupil to be taught by them, I had gained substantial overview knowledge of Taita generally, and of some people in the pictures, through my archival research and my interviews. This knowledge came out in the questions I raised in interviews, so when I showed people pictures, they may well have been curious and guarded about me and what I already knew. The pictures were of Taita society, but I was the one who had brought them back into Taita for the first time, and I already had what must have seemed a disconcerting degree of knowledge about Taita history.[11]

This may have played into larger questions about the power relations of my fieldwork. A relatively well-off outsider from the West, I had, with government sanction, come to their homes to ask people about their lives and their struggles over social change under colonialism. To add to the intrusion, I was focusing not only on struggles against outsiders, but also on struggles and tensions among WaTaita. Getting people to answer specific questions on social tensions in which

they or their elders might be located was already a demanding and tricky imposition; that people might feel comfortable reminiscing freely with me about photos that captured some of those tensions was in many cases too much to expect. The authority WaTaita vested in me thereby structured not only what people might tell me, but also what people might prefer to withhold from me.[12]

Power relations were also captured in the pictures themselves, and that, too, may have delimited peoples' responses to them. On the surface of it, the photos didn't touch on most interviewees' close experiences, and thus didn't lead to reminiscences. Many older women didn't have much to relate to in a picture of early Christian female readers sitting outside a school, beyond pointing out that the second one from the right was Rahel, George's daughter, and did I know who the others were?[13] Below the surface more may have been at stake. While Christians now predominate in Taita, most of those pictured in the 1920s and 1930s belonged to a small minority community, which had aligned itself with a missionized-Christian, 'progressive view' of colonialism. Though many of those pictured are spoken of well, the photographs revealed ambiguities in the position that the early Christians occupy in post-colonial Taita consciousness.

Mau Mau is still viewed with some ambivalence in contemporary Kenya's public ideology, but independence itself is widely taken to represent the throwing-off of the evils of colonialism. WaTaita today generally and genuinely subscribe to this latter view, despite the lukewarm support they gave Mau Mau in the 1950s. The people Murray photographed, however, and the manner in which they were photographed, represent colonialism as a Christian civilizing mission. Despite the view of many contemporary Christian WaTaita that the people in the photos were founders of their present community, the pictures nevertheless draw up uncomfortable dissonances between past views of colonialism and present ones. In that context, it seems less surprising that people might hesitate to extemporize about the photographs to a Caucasian outsider; by doing so, they might have to address and implicate themselves in the contradictions still very much at play between past and present ideologies.

Beyond issues of power relations, it is also worth considering whether Taita culture might have inclined people to respond to photographs differently from the way I do. I found that many people in Taita—even those who had fallen in with the colonial missionary endeavor of that time—did not treat the photos as inherently calling for commentary or contextualizing. People often pointed out family photos on the walls of their homes, and others brought out pictures in albums to show me. However, they usually offered up only minimal information about the pictures; if I wanted to know more than names and places in them, I had to ask questions. People also clearly enjoyed looking at the pictures I brought, sometimes calling in spouses, children, and neighbors to look at them. But most presumeably either assumed that the pictures spoke adequately for themselves, or chose not to volunteer to me whatever thoughts the photos provoked. So the expansive conversations that I had hoped for, or the bridging of silences concerning what people thought about missionaries, missionized WaTaita, chiefs, and so on, were by no means filled by my unadorned presentation of pictures.

Under these circumstances I changed my interviewing strategy. In an attempt to break through literal and metaphorical silences that I had met, I decided to try

more jimmying. Rather than presenting the pictures in an open-ended way, I began to interpose prompts and more directed questions. This marked a definite adjustment from my earlier assumptions; the responses I got to my questions about the photos were structured by my agenda and prior knowledge. I was retreating from my earlier hopes that WaTaita would themselves structure responses to the pictures. By now I had some sense of what sorts of topics people were willing to talk about freely (and the clichés that most commonly dominated those presentations), and what people tended to elide over or avoid altogether. My strategy evolved into one of presenting the photos with a series of questions that pointed towards the elisions:

> Q: What is this picture of?
> A: That is a chief's *baraza* (meeting). The one standing is Chief Thomas, from Mbale.
> Q: What did you think of Chief Thomas?
> A: Oh, we all liked him very much. He brought us roads and schools. He wanted us to progress and not stay backwards.
> Q: So you used to attend his *barazas*?
> A: Oh, yes, you had to attend. If you missed you could be fined a goat, unless you had a good reason.
> Q: So you were forced.
> A: Yes, but it was for our own good.
> Q: I've been told that Chief Thomas also forced people to do road labor. Did people like that?
> A: Of course we didn't like that, who likes to be forced to do that kind of work? But we came to see the good of it when we had the road. Once I was even fined and put in jail by his *askaris* for refusing to work. But before he died [in 1941] I understood the value of the road and I thanked him.
> Q: You thanked him personally?
> A: Well, in my thoughts I thanked him.[14]

This technique was a more effective way of using the pictures to get at information, but it too had its limits. First, my later approach reinforced the power dynamics I had hoped to move away from. I was confronting interviewees with authority, by implying with my questions that I already knew something about tensions behind the photographic scenes. I used this authority to point people towards issues they might otherwise have tended to avoid with me. It was an approach that could carry undertones of intrusion and even coercion, despite my best intentions and my respectful demeanor.

Second, the photos were not entirely necessary for asking such questions. However, it is fair to say that they often helped, in that the images focused people's attention and thoughts. Had I asked people about Chief Thomas and *barazas* without the photos, my information on the subjects might well have been less thorough and complete. With the pictures I could, for instance, ask people about chiefs' uniforms as a lead-in to questions about colonial symbols of authority. Seeing the pictures also gave most people obvious enjoyment, which, at

least to some degree, mitigated the intrusiveness of my questioning. I was offering something, as well as extracting something.

Third, through this method we touched only on issues that I myself had identified, through my prior knowledge, (e.g., the tensions between chiefs and the people under their authority). The photos evoked for me a specific, limited range of issues, which in turn put limits on the range of questions I could think of for my use of them. Topics outside of the limits of my framework, understanding, and imagination remained untouched, whereas I had hoped that the photos would lead people into topics and ways of thinking that were beyond my grasp. Finally, if someone did not want to talk about something, s/he would stick to evasive or clichéd answers, questions or no. If people really wanted to avoid discussing a topic with me, the photographs made little difference.

Notes

1. My research in Kenya was funded by a Fulbright Hays DDRA fellowship. Grateful acknowledgement is due to the photographic section of the Kenya National Archives; to Adele Greenspun and Bill Goidell, professional photographers both, for discussions on some of the ideas in this paper; and to the many WaTaita who welcomed me into their homes and communities during my fieldwork.

2. A few of the people in the photos were in fact still alive.

3. Using a single informant, A. H. J. Prins confidently posited an explanation of Taita in-migration in *The Coastal Tribes of the Northeast Bantu* (London, 1952). Using different informants, James Mwakio criticizes Prins, and suggests a different migration history, in "The Origin of the WaTaita, Their Culture, and Their Political Evolution Between the Early 16th Century and 1963" (M.A. Thesis, University of Nairobi, 1978). For still other versions, see P.G. Bostock, *The Peoples of Kenya: The Taita,* (London , 1950); E. Hollis Merritt, "A History of the Taita of Kenya to 1900," (Ph.D., Indiana University, 1975); and Andrew Nazzaro, "Changing Use if the Resource Base Among the Taita of Kenya" (Ph.D. , Michigan State University, 1974). Most—though not all—of these scholars at least agree that the major in-migrations to Taita came from several different directions.

4. The weakness of oral traditions here may largely be due to people having migrated into Taita from a number of different directions across a large span of time; to the relative autonomy that people of different geographical regions within the Hills maintained; and to the relatively informal and decentralized nature of political authority structures. Nazzaro discusses contradictions in oral traditions in his dissertation. The differences in migration histories provide one example of such contradictions. Versions collected and assembled by Bostock, Prins, Mwakio, Merritt, Nazzaro, and Grace Harris, *Casting Out Anger: Religion Among the Taita of Kenya,* (Cambridge, 1978) range from slightly to dramatically different. The same scholars also each offer somewhat different explanations of Number Groups that still exist amongst the Taita, indicating a further lack of agreement among their informants. Another example is the very different stories told to me about whether or not people from Taita participated in the ninteenth century slave trade.

5. 'Piecing together an interpretation' in this (or any other) way raises important questions for the researcher about fieldwork, writing, and the production of knowledge. Other papers in this set examine how the intellectual frameworks one takes to the field, the way one uses them there, and the way one incorporates them into subsequent writing affect the production of knowledge. This paper has benefited

from and reflects the discussion and diversity of opinion on the subject within our working group, even though the paper's focus lies elsewhere.

6.   Although I stumbled into an appreciation that photographs are not objective through my fieldwork experience, this understanding is hardly recent news to photographers, photography critics, and, no doubt, many others. Walter Benjamin long ago took for granted that such objectivity was impossible; see his "A Brief History of Photography" in *Creative Camera International Yearbook*, (London, 1977), originally in *Literarische Welt*, (Berlin, 1931); also, more recently, Gisèle Freund, *Photographie et Société* (Paris, 1974); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1977); Halla Beloff, *Camera Culture* (Oxford, 1985).

7.   The body of literature attacking the notion that fieldwork can be "objective" is now considerable, e.g. Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (New York, 1973); M. Shostack, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*   (New York, 1981); Ivan Karp and M. Kendall, "Reflexivity in Fieldwork" in P. Secord, ed., *Explaining Human Behavior: Consciousness, Human Action, and Social Structure* (Beverly Hills, 1982); J. Clifford, "Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule's Initiation," in G. Stocking, ed., *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*, (Madison, 1983); J. Clifford and G. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, (Berkeley, 1986).

8.   Christraud Geary, *Images from Bamum: German Colonial Photography at the Court of King Njoya, Camaroon, West Africa, 1902-1915*, (Washington D.C., 1988), 11; see also Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*,(Minneapolis, 1986); and Nicholas Monti, *Africa Then* (New York, 1987). Typical of photography books that still perpetuate old stereotypes is J. Fabb, *The British Empire from Photographs: Africa* (London, 1987), whose text and photograph choices underline African exoticism, primitivism, and moral decadence, while celebrating European military conquest, the spread of white Christian civilization, and big game hunting.

9.   Germans who photographed Bamum before World War I included missionaries, merchants, military men, colonial agents, colonial administrators, and anthropologists, (Geary, *Images from Bamum*, chs. 3, 6). Each brought agendas to the images they framed, and in each case there were no doubt politics of image production that shaped the relationship between the photographer and the subject.
        Reworking traditions to accommodate changing circumstances was not, of course, unique to Bamum; see, for example, Sally Falk Moore, *Social Facts and Fabrications: Customary Law on Kilimanjaro, 1880-1980* (Cambridge, 1986); for a study of the mutability of 'tradition' more closely relating historical change with ritual performance see Corinne Kratz, "Emotional Power and Significant Movement: Womanly Transformation in Okiek Initiation" (Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin, 1988)

10.   Interview with R.N, Wumingu location, Taita District, 1 Oct 1988.

11.   For a lengthier meditation on how overview knowledge constructs part of the fieldworker's authority among the people s/he studies, see Clifford, "Power and Dialogue in Ethnography."

12.   For a related examination of the limitations of a fieldworker's good intentions, albeit in far more highly-charged circumstances, see Ted Swedenburg, "Occupational Hazards: Palestine Ethnography," in *Cultural Anthropology*, 4/3(1989) 265-72; also Jim Lance, "What the Stranger Brings: The Social Dynamics of Fieldwork Among the Mamprusi of Northern Ghana," *HA*, 17 (1990),

13.   Murray Photograph Collection, photo 247/81, Kenya National Archives.

14.   Interview with A.M., Mbale Location, Taita District, 4 Nov 1988.