

Photography and Orality

Dialogues in Bamako, Dakar and Elsewhere

A Photographer's Story: Methodological Reflections

Darren Newbury

I had just finished a lengthy interview with the South African photographer Peter Magubane, in which we had talked about his long career, including the early days on *Drum* magazine, his photographs made in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre, the difficulties of working faced with the oppression of the apartheid security apparatus, and the direction his photography had taken in the post-apartheid period. As I was preparing to leave he suddenly stopped me. He had remembered something and insisted that I must sit back down, turn on my recording device again and listen to the story he had recalled. Peter Magubane is not someone to be refused, and besides I was intrigued, not least by importance he appeared to place on recording this one for the official record.

As promised, he proceeded to narrate a story that was both fascinating and hilarious, exemplifying the photographer's ability to outwit the apartheid authorities. It was set in the early 1950s. Magubane was out on an assignment with fellow *Drum* journalist and writer Nat Nakasa covering the issue of child labour in Bethal, a farming area to the east of Johannesburg notorious for the brutal treatment of its workers. Bethal was the focus of a celebrated *Drum* photo-story in 1952, and had earlier drawn the attention of campaigners and journalists, including Michael Scott and Ruth First. Magubane related how the police had arrested them while he was busy making photographs, and taken them to the local police station for questioning. We then come to the point

of the story. Annoyed by this interruption to his day and fearing the consequences, the quick-witted Magubane came up with a plan. I'll let him tell this part of the tale in his own words – readers not familiar with the old style Weston light meter and its accompanying leather case may need to acquaint themselves with this old technology to get the point:

We got to the police station and he starts swearing at us, so I take out my light meter, I did this [gestures moving the meter about in his hand] and as the needle goes that way I closed it, when it goes I open the back and the needle goes past. I closed the back and then the needle goes back slowly. He says 'what are you doing?' I said, 'I am in consultation with my office in Johannesburg, all the insults that you have been saying here, my office knows what exactly you are doing and where we are.' You know this man believes me and he calls his superior. His superior comes, I close the back and I open the back, but when you open the back the light comes in you see, and then the needle goes, so the needle goes, as we are talking the needle goes and then I close the back and the needle goes back. And he says 'what the hell is going on there?' I said, 'I am in contact with my office, you can do what you like, my office already knows we are in your hands and you have been so abusive.' The man said, 'Look, take your damn car and move away from here, never come back here again.' We got into the car and we drove off and we were safe.

Now there are some interesting things to say about this story, but the first point I want to make relates to this specific occasion of its telling, in the context of an interview by a visiting researcher. Despite the urgency with which I was requested to record this narrative, it was certainly not the first occasion on which it had been relayed by the photographer. This was not the revelation of some new information for the historical account. Quite the contrary, a version of the story can be found published much earlier in one of Magubane's photographic books. And no doubt it had been recalled for the entertainment of friends and colleagues long before it was reproduced in a more permanent form. The purpose of the telling then was not to impart new information as such, but rather more pedagogical. I was being offered a lesson in what it meant to be a photographer during that period of South Africa's history; as Magubane put it, 'you needed to be sharp, you needed just to be sharp to be ahead of them'. And as an academic I was also seen as a means by which this lesson might be passed

on to future generations. On more than one occasion whilst interviewing South African photographers during my research I have been conscious that my interviewee has viewed me as a vehicle through which stories of photography and apartheid can reach a wider audience.

But that is not the only point I want to make. Not only had this story been told before, but also there are remarkable structural similarities with many other stories told by South African photographers that I have heard and read over the years. The use of the light meter provides a pleasing role for photographic technology in the narrative, but one could substitute many other stories for this one. There are numerous and oft-cited accounts, including from Magubane, of photographers concealing cameras in loaves of bread, milk cartons or under coats in order to obtain pictures they could not have captured openly. A fellow photographer at *Drum*, Bob Gosani, was the subject of a story in which the magazine editor's white secretary pretended to be an amateur photographer wanting to make panoramic views of the city, accompanied by Gosani and journalist Arthur Maimane as her black assistants. The ruse enabled them to get onto the roof of the nurses' home that overlooked Johannesburg's central prison, where they were able to photograph the courtyard and the infamous 'tausa' dance – prisoners stripped naked were made to perform a humiliating routine to demonstrate that they had nothing concealed on their person. The images were the centrepiece of a 1954 *Drum* story on prison conditions, and now form a small display at Constitutional Hill, a post-apartheid heritage site at the location of the former prison. Another photographer of the same generation, Alf Kumalo, relayed how he travelled in and out of Soweto in the boot of a car in order to make photographs. And of course, Ernest Cole, one of the most significant chroniclers of apartheid, is the subject of a story wherein he fooled the authorities into classifying him as 'coloured', which greatly facilitated his ability to move about the city and record the oppressive conditions for South African blacks.

Viewed in isolation, one might ask whether any individual story is true or not, whether or to what extent it has been polished in the telling to exploit its narrative potential or enhance its impact, comic or otherwise. Seen collectively, however, these questions become somewhat less important, with the core narrative –

contrasting the stupidity of the apartheid authorities to the canniness of the photographer – around which, to a greater or lesser extent, all these individual stories revolve taking on the qualities of myth, in the sense of a particular way of explaining the world to oneself and others. Stories such as these, I suggest, were an important indicator of the photographic culture of the time, a significant dimension of how photographers thought about themselves and the task that they were engaged in, with wider a symbolic significance with respect to South African society. Unsurprisingly for photographers' stories, at their centre are questions of knowing and seeing, or more precisely the ability of the photographer to reveal 'how things really are' in an oppressive society, despite the restrictions placed on the movement of black photographers; their ability to see and record the world.

In Magubane's story, the light meter is presented as a magical object, which enables his office to know what is going on at the police station; by extension Magubane's camera shares this quality, enabling the world to know what is going on in Bethal, and apartheid South Africa. This narrative also effects a nice reversal wherein it is the black African actor who is master of the technology of photography, and the white police officer who is bewildered, and indeed frightened, by its operation.

Following this line of thought, photographers' stories, rather than being treated as a means of simply gathering information on the life and work of the photographer, might become an object of study in their own right. This prompts further questions. For example, what is the relationship between these photographers' stories and other narratives circulating in the culture? I would hazard a guess that this kind of story could be placed within a wider set of cultural narratives related to means of negotiating and subverting the racist and bureaucratic apartheid state. But perhaps the photographers' stories are paradigmatic or archetypal in this regard; the photographer is a key figure in the telling and showing of the injustice of apartheid. How do such narratives evolve over time? The comic portrayal of an incompetent and amateurish apartheid security state that comes through many of these stories is, I suspect, a feature of stories shaped in the early years of apartheid. Tracking the evolution of the genre through later decades may well reveal stories of encounters with the apartheid state that are less comical and more brutal or traumatic.

Magubane, for example, was subject to police violence and extended periods of imprisonment. One might also ask how the stories told by white photographers compare with their black counterparts.

And thinking beyond the specific context of apartheid South Africa, what other stories are being told by photographers elsewhere across Africa, and what do these have to tell us about the place of photography in very different cultural settings? I hope that this short essay can serve as a prompt for other researchers who use photographer interviews as part of their methodology to reflect not just on the content of the narratives they hear, but to listen again to the ways in which they are told, and the insights they provide into the rich and diverse practices of photography across the continent.

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