

I am a social anthropologist, and have worked for twenty years in the Tikar Plain region of Cameroon in West Africa. My interest in photographs was sparked by the African Photography exhibition at the Barbican (curated by Carol Brown) in 1999. The exhibition made me wonder about the photographs owned by people in the village of Somié, where I do my fieldwork: almost all adults there have photographs (mostly of people) but there is no photographer working in the village. So where did their photographs come from?

On my next field trip I started asking questions about photographs, which very soon led me to Samuel Finlak (born 1958) between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s, came to be exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in London., in a farming village to the south of Somié, and to Joseph Chila (born 1948), in a small town (until recently, a tin-mining centre) to the north. Each had a stock of black and white negatives which had lost their commercial value. Joseph had already closed his business, and had burned many negatives in a series of bonfires while clearing out his studio. I thought that the photographs would make an inspiring research resource, and I discussed the possibilities with the Director of the Cameroon National Archives. He supported my proposals. After several meetings with Joseph and Samuel, and a tactful and considerate process of discussion and exchange, both photographers gave me their surviving negatives. These form the archive from which the images shown here were selected.

Chila and Finlak were trained using large wooden box cameras, but by the 1980s they were using medium-format cameras. The passport-sized images needed for identity cards

were easily produced from a 120-format film contact sheet, and this process did not require electricity. Each had his own studio, where clients were photographed either indoors or outside, against the walls of the building, but they also took many photographs at clients' houses, sometimes travelling several kilometres from their studios. Each photographers used both plain and patterned cloth as backdrops. Chila also had some painted backdrops, used mainly inside his studio but also occasionally outdoors; for example, when photographing a client on horseback.

Clients keep their prints in albums, or display framed enlargements on the walls of their homes. Sometimes displays are made by pinning prints to a mat which is hung on a wall; these resemble the displays of work made by professional photographers to advertise their studios. An example is discussed in Andrew Wilson's essay [here](#),

Some photographs were commissioned on special occasions, especially at New Year and Easter, or to mark weddings, births, baptisms and funerals. A few images show building works, or migrant workers. People visiting relatives often brought photographs of other family members, and it was common to go to a studio and be photographed with the relative or friend one was visiting (this is the origin of some of the group photographs, and explains why the prints have travelled). Multiple prints were often made, and given to those depicted in a photograph. The negatives were usually kept by the photographer in case of future requests for copies.

However, most of the negatives in the archive were produced for use on identity cards, which all Cameroonian citizens are obliged to carry. Identity card photographs provided the financial bread and butter for studio photographers throughout the country. Then a new kind of national identity card was introduced in 1998 which, together with the technical advances in digital imaging and cheap colour processing, ensured the swift demise of this once significant small industry, and the consequent loss of many skilled jobs .

Back in England, while washing some 4,000 dusty negatives in the bathroom at home, I wondered how best to use them. I find the images and their composition complex, interesting and exciting, but as a social anthropologist my interest was primarily in the individuals photographed, and the ways in which photographs are used by their owners. Their use as a research tool for students was another goal. The first step was to get them contact-printed, which I did with the aid of a small grant from the University of Kent. There followed a series of grant proposals to help finance further work on the collection, during which time I worked with a Cameroonian colleague from Ngaoundéré University.

In Cameroon again, I was introduced to the man from whom Joseph learned his craft, who in turn introduced me to other pupils of his; this raised the exciting prospect of future projects concerned with photography and photographs in Cameroon. Meanwhile, I provided Samuel with several sheets of contact prints (175 images in all), from which he was able to identify the people shown in seventy-five of the photographs which he had taken, sometimes many years before.

A major advance came when the British Council in Cameroon agreed to fund an exhibition there. At this point I started to collaborate with Dave Reason, a cultural theorist at Kent, and the co-organiser of this project. With his insightful co-operation, we selected a 'long-list' of 180 images, and eventually a short-list of thirty. It was his suggestion, for example, to print the images full-frame, showing details such as neighbours' children peeping round a door frame. I then documented these thirty images in the field, finding out as much as I could about the individuals photographed and the stories behind their images. Sadly, a number of the subjects had died, but relatives and surviving sitters were uniformly pleased to see photographs of their younger selves. I was able to give them prints and explain what we were doing.

The British Council exhibition was shown in Yaoundé and elsewhere in Cameroon. At the private view in Yaoundé, someone invited to attend by the British Council, a teacher of English, happened to come from the same ethnic group as Samuel. She stopped in front of one of the photographs, having recognized the subject: 'It's Mama Elizabeth!' She immediately started using her mobile phone, and by the end of the private view ten people from that ethnic group had arrived to look at the photograph of their senior relative, a particularly pleasing response (and an unusual means of confirming my identification of the subject).

From the enthusiastic response for this work in Cameroon Dave Raeson and I resolved to have images from the archive shown in the UK. The framework of the Africa 05 events and celebrations provided an excellent context in which to present this work. After a series of discussions with the Africa 05 director, Gus Caseley Hayford, he sought and secured funding for Chila and Finlak to come to London to undertake a short residency, hosted by the National Portrait Gallery, in June 2005. This was soon followed by an invitation from Roger Hargreaves from the NPG, who was organising the residencies, to select work from the archive for a presentation of images taken in Cameroon and in London that would subsequently travel to the Zandra Rhodes Gallery in Rochester, Kent. For Chila and Finlak the process of obtaining passports and visas was time-consuming and expensive, and it highlighted the complex bureaucracy often encountered by travellers in Africa where the majority of the population seldom travel abroad. We are indebted to the British Council for their support in their endeavour. After a preliminary visit during a very wintry February, Chila and Finlak returned in June to carry out their London commissions, a selection of which are shown alongside the archive work. Both Dave Reason and I are extremely grateful for the support and enthusiasm that this project has received from the many people who have been involved, but our especial thanks go to Samuel Finlak and to Joseph Chila for giving so generously of their time and their work.

Canterbury, June 2005