

Together again: the link between transnational ties and photo archiving among Ghanaian families

Juntos de nuevo: el vínculo entre los lazos transnacionales y los archivos de fotos de las familias de Ghana

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Resumen

Este artículo examina la práctica de almacenar y compartir fotografías digitales entre las familias de Ghana durante la diáspora. La observación etnográfica ha permitido plantear cuestiones acerca de la materialidad de las fotografías digitales y sus plataformas de almacenamiento así como sobre el complejo diálogo existente entre la arquitectura digital y las fuerzas culturales preexistentes tales como el parentesco y la narración.

Palabras Clave: ANTROPOLOGÍA DIGITAL, CULTURA MATERIAL, GHANA, ARCHIVO, FOTOS DIGITALES, ÁLBUMES DE FOTOS FAMILIARES.

Abstract

This article examines the practice of storing and sharing digital photos among Ghanaian families in the diaspora. Ethnographic observation raised issues about the materiality of digital photos and their storing platforms and the complex dialogue between digital architecture and pre-existing cultural forces such as kinship and storytelling.

Key words: DIGITAL ANTHROPOLOGY, MATERIAL CULTURE, GHANA, ARCHIVE, DIGITAL PHOTOS, FAMILY PHOTO ALBUMS.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent debates around the motivations for taking digital photos ask whether people document for the purpose of remembering their lives or as a technique for human interaction and communication (DIJCK, 2008: 58). While raising important questions about motivations in technological use, these debates also tend to dichotomise memory and communication as two distinct categories, while romanticising digitisation as a revolutionary force that

completely alters the pre-existing cultural landscape. The practice of digital archiving and its analysis, as discussed in this paper, destabilizes traditional divides between storing and sharing while encouraging new forms of memory via ‘distributed storage’ (GEISMAR, 2012) which is the ability of digital artefacts to be stored in platforms that cross time and space.

During my research with diasporic Ghanaian families living in London and their digital archives, it was essential to put photos and

videos in their wider context of transnational communication and new media. Rather than focusing on the actual content of the archive (what is in the photos and why) and working my way out, I started by exploring the choices of where and how to store photos. Choices between mediums, according to Miller's concept of polymedia, can teach us about meaning (MADIANOU & MILLER, 2012). Hence, I explored the architecture of digital storage platforms by looking at its interaction with existing socio-cultural understanding of family, photography and communication. Just as domestic cameras allowed Ghanaians to step out of professional photography studios and document family festivities within their "natural" settings (WENDL, 1998), the arrival of digital communication meant Ghanaians in the diaspora could finally recreate their extended familial intimacy, which was threatened by the move to the West. I will now explore these issues through two ethnographic stories on how photos are used by Ghanaian families in various platforms.

2. FACEBOOK COMMUNITY PAGE: MAINTAINING TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY LINKS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA ARCHIVES

Nana Mensah immigrated to London from Tema, Ghana, in the mid 1980s. Until recently, Nana says she did not pay "enough" attention to photos or genealogy but after losing some elderly family members, including her father, she felt something must be done to keep the family together and preserve its history. She explains:

In Ghana we all used to live in one large household. Other family members lived nearby and gatherings were more frequent. We are now spread and struggle to squeeze everyone in our small British houses. We call them chicken coops.

Indeed, Ama's house seems like it is always ready for a family gathering. Couches and chairs are pushed back beside the walls; ornaments and

furniture are reduced to minimum in order to save space for guests, big packages full of gifts awaits for delivery to Ghana and framed family photos hang on the wall next to wooden African decorations. This could be described as a 'typical' British-Ghanaian home; other informants' houses were more or less similar. According to Adjetey (2010: 144) the saving of space and cramming of guests in living room corridors can be seen as 'improvised ways of accommodating their cultural traditions within the architectural constraints of the new environment'- digital technologies enter that Ghanaian space exactly.

With family members in the USA, Canada, Australia, Germany, Netherlands, France, UK, South Africa and Ghana, Nana defines her family as 'very big yet very small'. The Mensah surname, she says, is one of a kind and anyone that carries it is related. For the Mensahs, family bonds are not simply kept for pleasure but are essential for the biological, financial and cultural systems around them. Membership is officially validated through biological belonging before one receives access to the family's resources of philanthropy and investments. For example, Nana is planning to build a large block of flats on family grounds in Ghana; the communal building will be equally divided between the Mensah siblings or their decedents. The planned building symbolises a dream of return and reunion, a recreation of tribal intimacy after transnational separation, but until everyone is geographically united, family ties and oral culture must be preserved. How is this done?

Between annual family reunions, relatives meet at engagement parties, birthday celebrations, funerals and 'naming' ceremonies of newborns. However, these are only special occasions and throughout the rest of the year it is digital technologies that maintain transnational bonds. Apart from emails, Skype sessions and phone calls; the archiving and sharing of photos and videos take a crucial role. Four years ago Nana and her cousin opened a Facebook page titled: "Mensah Family Worldwide" (which replaced the old family webpage). Through the page, that

currently has 85 members, Nana met relatives she never knew, who turn to her with questions about family history and genealogy. Running the page she became the guardian of family memories and the imagined community around them. Announcements on reunions, funerals and weddings, as well as questions and stories about distant relatives, appear as wall posts. Photo albums from reunions are posted via the page, alongside pictures of family celebrations and funerals from across the world. The archive, therefore, is a tool for communicating, updating and filling the absent/present gap. That notion already presents an alternative for the concept of archives as technologies for remembrance. This post, for example, shows how the page became a living archive of familial memories:

I recently got a text message and the sender wanted to know the location of Florence Mensah (her father was a police officer)... Kindly post all information here if you know Florence (Mensah Facebook page, field notes)

Another example is from the time a laptop was given as a gift from one cousin to another but the two were in separate continents. Using the family Facebook page they managed to plan a route for the laptop. She describes:

A Mensah member was traveling from New Jersey to London so the laptop was sent from Boston to New Jersey by post and when he came to London another family member took it to Ghana

While the socially-aware family archive aims to contribute to the keeping of ties through communicating text and photos, it also hopes to be a platform for the practicing and documenting of oral culture. In fact, the first target of the page (as stated in its “about” section) is to draw a detailed family tree that ‘will enable us to know and identify each other, acknowledge anniversaries, and provide the data for allocation of monies for funding education and health’ (Mensah Facebook page).

Growing up with an Anglican reverent as a father, who also worked in the Colonial Civil Service, Nana absorbed many values on modernity that included ideas on photography and archiving (WENDL, 1998). Like her cousins she sees oral culture with a Western perspective, as something to be archived/materialised. For her, Immigration brought a separation from sources of oral knowledge as well as a loss of what little materialised memories they had.

To overcome this cultural crisis, family members record speeches and stories of elders during gatherings and upload the videos or transcriptions to the communal Facebook archive. Papa George and Papa Edward, the last two surviving sons of the ‘first’ Mensah, are especially respected and considered a living repository of knowledge that must be materialised before it is too late. Nana explains:

Before Papa George died I interviewed him about our family because he knew so much. I still have many questions that may never be answered because nothing is written down. We have an oral culture.

Nana expresses complex relations towards oral traditions: she wishes her culture had documented more but she also hopes storytelling will remain alive.

The choice of an archiving platform sets the tone of the archived material and reflects the approach towards it (DERRIDA, 1998). Storing photos on Facebook, then, allows a communal experience with multiple participants, even more valued than one on one-communication. Like the block of flats in Ghana or the crammed living room in England, Facebook in its Ghanaian context is a place for being a family. The keeper of the archive, Nana Mensah, became the conductor of global kinship, which she sees as a major responsibility. She shared a quote on the page saying:

Like branches on a tree, our lives may grow in different directions yet our roots remain as one.



Figure 1. Picture from a family reunion, shared online

3. MYHERITAGE.COM: BUILDING A DIGITAL FAMILY TREE AND REDEFINING INTIMACY THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ARCHIVES

Facebook infrastructure demands for a page admin to manage its content, which facilitates a specific social environment but in this section I will explore the practice of collaborative archive building. Kofi and Dorothy Elyot have lived in the UK for over 25 years. Inhabiting a small house with their two sons, they long for the extended family bonds they had back in Ghana. Family has a central role for the Elyots but living in the diaspora meant it is not to be taken for granted. Kofi and Dorothy keep in touch with family in Ghana via Skype, phones and emails. Kofi uses Skype from his smartphone to speak to his brother daily and Dorothy receives updates from her twin sister and four siblings by emails. She knows exactly what each of them does every week and if they attend an event they email her the photos shortly afterwards.

Before digitisation, Dorothy used to send and receive videocassettes of funerals and gatherings by post. Sometimes a group screening of a funeral will be arranged to ‘recreate’ it among those abroad. Today, videos are simply shared online or emailed, which changed recording practices significantly. Dorothy explains long continuous videos are now replaced with short 3-10 minute clips that can be shared digitally. The ability to share is crucial and many printed

photos were scanned for the same reason. Kofi says:

When photos were printed you just shoved them in an album or a box and forgot about them. Now we actually look through photos and spread them around.

Not only do they spread photos around but also communally archive all family photos and videos in a site called Myheritage.com. The site offers a collaborative drawing of family trees, alongside photos and texts; their page has about 200 family members and over 6000 visits. A visual mapping of patriarchal kinship (blue for male, pink for female, black stripe on deceased and lines between couples and children) goes six generations back and links each person to hundreds of photos and videos, with extra space for comments, story posting and announcements. An event calendar and a timeline with biography of the family are also included.

The Elyot Family Tree keeps expanding thanks to a face recognition function, that links between parallel trees when identifying similar faces. This extension of family networks through automatic recognition reflects the social nature of Ghanaian family archives. The distinctiveness of faces implies a biological similarity and carries identity, biography and relationships within the meta-data of the photos and their material agency.

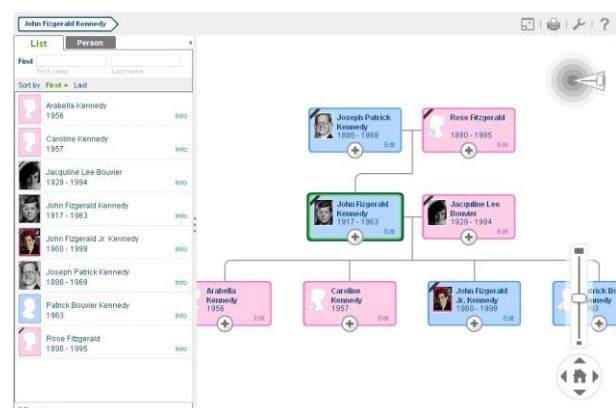


Figure 2. My heritage Family Tree user Interface

Family Trees are becoming increasingly common in their digital form but for many

Ghanaians, they are also a product of modernity that calls for a documentation of oral memory. Kofi started the My-Heritage site after his son was expressing uncertainty about family history and genealogy; He realised that oral knowledge must be documented and that the previous family Yahoo group was not equipped for such a mission. Apart from the tree, he can now record and upload videos of his 95-year-old uncle, who lives in the UK and is considered an important source of familial knowledge. He says: Storytelling is our main transmission of knowledge. We do not document history enough. It is amazing we can collect these stories with videos.

As mentioned, the social/digital/collaborative archive does not only materialise oral traditions but also encourages their practice. The picture is not the final target but a tool for remembering a story. Dorothy and Kofi carry photo albums and portable hard drives to family gatherings to show and tell about their latest trip or event; Online, photo albums are accompanied by captions, jokes and stories- there is a real sense of conversation, a virtual family circle around the audio-visual memories. Dorothy says:

The photo is just helping me remember. I look at it and then many more things come to my mind that I might have forgotten. I've always loved photos.

Until it is time for their awaited return to Ghana, Kofi and Dorothy must creatively combine digital technologies and actual attendance in gatherings to maintain the familial intimacy they value so. The digital family tree, the sharing of photos as storytelling and the

storing of oral knowledge are all brought for that goal. Kofi Concludes:

I am in love with digital technologies! I don't think it replaces meetings but simply makes it easier and quicker to share information. I keep photos to tell stories and keep track of our lives. Besides, what else can I do with a 28 Gigabytes hard drive?

4. CONCLUSION: CULTURE AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

Other families interviewed for this research used different digital platforms for similar goals such as exchanging photos via Google or WhatsApp. What those unique archives teach us is that although in the Ghanaian case photos are perceived as objects of communication more so than objects of memory, this was not created by digitisation itself but existed in previous understanding of family, oral culture and photography. Debates around the goal of digital photos must acknowledge the specific cultural patterns that influence such issues. Ethnographic enquiry demonstrated how the negotiation between the architecture of digital infrastructure and the pre-existing cultural settings of the family determine how the medium is used. Further exploration of the dialogue between culture and the materiality of digital technologies can enrich our understanding of people and technology and is developed through the practice of digital anthropology.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all the participants in this study, who opened their doors and their family photo albums to tell the intimate story of culture and memory. Also, I would like to thank the academic staff at UCL's digital anthropology department for the guidance and inspiration.

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