PALANQUIN OR FILANJANA: DIGITISING AND DESCRIBING A COLLECTION OF STEREOGRAPHIC GLASS SLIDES OF MADAGASCAR

Lesley Hart
University of Cape Town Libraries
E-mail: Lesley.Hart@uct.ac.za

Received: 19 November 2010
Revised: 15 April 2010
Accepted: 3 May 2010

Abstract

The article deals with the digitization of a collection of stereographic glass slides, provenance unknown, and the description of the slides using the few clues available. From the handful of slides that are dated it would seem that the date range is circa 1907 to 1912. Subjects include both the French colonial troops as well as local Malagasy inhabitants. The challenges of using correct and helpful terminology are mentioned.

Keywords: Digitization, stenographic glass slides, Malagasy inhabitants

Introduction

The recent digitization of a collection of stereographic glass slides taken in Madagascar between 1907 and 1912 serves as a useful case study to consider some of the issues involved in the digitization of historical photographs. I shall discuss very briefly about the technical aspects involved in digitizing negatives on glass, but the actual scanning is often the most straightforward part of any digitization project. One also has to take into account descriptive metadata, an understanding of the historical context, intellectual property issues, as well as the ethics involved in placing photographs of people on the web.

The collection

The collection consists of about 340 stereographic glass slides in their original boxes. The slides were found in a junk shop in London and kindly donated by the purchaser to the University of Cape Town. There is no indication as to the identity of the photographer, but it would seem most likely, from a close examination of the slides, that they were taken by a member of the French colonial troops stationed in Madagascar after 1895, when the French took occupation of Madagascar. All writing on the boxes, or on the slides themselves, is in French and where there are photographs of small groups, they are often of men in uniform. Photographs of social occasions, too, show a large number of military men.

Glass slides as medium

Perhaps a description of the glass slide as an artifact will also give an idea of the challenges faced in handling, storing and digitizing this fragile medium. Glass was one of the very earliest supports on which photographic images were captured, being used from 1851 until about 1920. Very early processes involved the photographer himself coating one side of the glass with a light-sensitive mixture, taking the photograph and developing it before the emulsion dried on the plate. This was an arduous task and fraught with possible problems. From the 1870s, gelatin dry plates in different sizes were commercially manufactured. These plates were already coated with a dry layer of light sensitive emulsion and could be stored for a length of time. As these were widely available and easy to use they were instrumental in the rapid growth of popularity of photography. The slides in our collection are the commercially manufactured, dry gelatin type, which were purchased with the emulsion already applied. The size of each slide is 105 x 45 mm.

Images on glass came in several different types, from straightforward negatives to lantern slides, which were the precursor of the modern slide. Stereographic images, which enable the viewer to see the image in 3D were a fascination from the early days of photography. A stereo view is obtained by the photographer taking twin images of the subject, with these appearing side by side on the negative. When viewed through a special viewer, the two images merge into one and

are seen as a single three-dimensional image. The earliest stereographic photographs were taken separately and this would have required extraordinary care in the way the two images were taken in relation to each other, as well as a hope that subjects would not move before the second photograph was taken. Once cameras were developed with twin lenses, taking twin photographs as though each image was viewed with a separate eye, they became extremely popular and remained popular until the advent of the cinema when they declined in popularity (Waack 1985).

Digitisation

Glass is, of course, a fragile medium, becoming brittle as it ages and easily broken if not stored or handled carefully. In addition, in time and if stored in less than ideal climatic conditions, the emulsion on glass negatives – and, hence, the image itself – may lift from the glass. The emulsion and the glass expand and contract at different rates, causing cracking, lifting or blistering. The emulsion may also get scratched through being handled.

The fragility of the medium is a compelling argument for digitisation as a means of preserving the image. The argument for digitisation for reasons of access is equally compelling. As with more modern negatives on polyester, the image is not easily viewed in its original state. Prints can be made from glass negatives but these will not give the wide access that is the hallmark of digitised images.

The slides in our collection were not in very good condition. The emulsion on a large number of them was torn or lifting. Others showed blistering. The tears and blistering are clearly visible in the scanned image. Where the emulsion had lifted in one piece, however, if the slide was very carefully placed on the scanner, the resulting scanned image was better than those with tears or blisters. The advantage of having two images is that very often if one side was damaged, the other was still in good condition. We always scanned the whole slide, even if one side was badly damaged.

Once the project has been completed, the slides will be stored vertically in individual acid-free non-buffered four-flap folders, and kept in cold storage. As an archivist one always wants to retain useful

evidence showing the source of records and the boxes in which the photographs are removed will also be kept.

For interest, this was not the only collection on glass we digitised; it was part of a larger project to digitize all the glass negatives in our collections.

Although the technical aspect of the project is not the main subject of this article, it is perhaps useful to give brief details about this part of the project.

The slides were scanned in 8 bit greyscale at 600 dpi and at 400% of the original size in order to get a good enough image. We scanned them on an Epson Expression 1640XL A3 flatbed scanner with a transparency adaptor. They were placed on the scanner with the emulsion side down. As the images on these slides are positive images, the setting was for positive film.

The only preparation of the slides, in preparation for scanning, was a careful wipe on the non-emulsion side of each slide to remove any dust. This was done with a very slightly damp lint-free cotton pad and any moisture was allowed to dry thoroughly before the slide was replaced.

Metadata

Without good descriptive metadata images can be fairly worthless to the researcher. In our case, where our intention as an academic library is produce a scholarly resource, the addition of good quality metadata is essential.

Because the slides have little or no descriptive information written on them, the description and keywords supplied by the person doing the metadata is of great importance to enhance access to the photographs as a resource.

In order to try to understand the subjects of the slides, we needed firstly to gain an understanding of the historical context in which they were taken. This helped, not only with describing individual slides,

but to provide contextual information on the web as an introduction to the exhibit.

As already mentioned, it seems most likely that the photographer was a member of the French forces stationed in Madagascar after 1895.

France and England had been dominant influences in Madagascar with regard to trade and religion during the nineteenth century, but the island was ruled by a monarchy of the Merina people. Towards the end of the century, as French interest in the island intensified, resistance to the colonising power grew. France first established a protectorate over Madagascar in 1886 which was recognized by the British in 1890, in return for France's agreement to Britain establishing a protectorate over Zanzibar. There was active resistance in a large part of the island to French colonization, led by the Merina. In the unrest, 750 churches and mission schools, most of which belonged to the London Missionary Society, were also destroyed (Kent 1979: 138). The 103 year old Merina monarchy ended in 1896 when the resistance was forcefully put down by 7000 French troops under General Galliéni who summarily deposed Queen Ranavalona III and sent her into exile in Algeria (Brown 1978; Kent 1979).

During Galliéni's command, the French systematically occupied the country, establishing districts administered by Malagasy officials and local chiefs under military officers, a communications network, including the first section of a railway line, as well as an education and health service. By 1905, when Victor Augagneur took over from Galliéni, there were only isolated pockets of resistance but the military was still very much in evidence. Most of the structures laid down by Galliéni lasted until independence in 1960.

This then is a very brief background to the history and events in Madagascar leading up to the French military presence at the time the photographs were taken.

In describing individual slides one has to use any of the very few clues that are available. Fortunately, many of the individual slide boxes were labeled, either with a place (for example, Majunga or Antananirovo) or by subject (for example, boats or forests), but there

are several boxes labeled either “trés varies” or “divers”, in other words, these boxes hold a mixture of slides of various subjects.

All but a few of the slides are numbered, though the numbers do not always seem sequential and one cannot be confident that the numbers reflect a chronological sequence. There are photographs of the same event, for example of a fire, that are not sequential. It seems likely that the photographer numbered the slides at a later date. There are dates on only 3 or 4 of the slides. As these dates are 1907 and 1912, it is fair to assume that most of the slides fall between these dates.

Written in the space between the two images, many slides have some identifying information, in French. This information is extremely brief, often consisting only of the place the photograph was taken.

Everything on the boxes and on the slides is in French, apart from a few Malagasy words. A French-English dictionary as well as an excellent website called *malagasyworld.org* which claims to contain “the largest collection of Malagasy words ever assembled” were essential tools as I worked on the metadata.

Public events portrayed in the slides include French social events such as horse-racing and 14 July celebrations, as well as what would seem traditional Malagasy events, for example what appears to be a ritual bull killing. There are interesting photographs of local markets and one can see the produce on sale. One of the markets shows a pile of the style of hat that was obviously very popular at the time.

Very broadly, other subjects covered include landscape, town and village scenes, vegetation and animal life, boats, agriculture and mining. Because there is so little traditional “title” information, the main points of entry to anyone trying to find slides on specific subjects will be the description field and subject headings.

We use the Dublin core metadata set for our projects because it has become a standard and because of its interoperability. Library of Congress subject headings provide our controlled vocabulary for key words. At one stage there was concern that Library of Congress subject headings were not specific enough for countries outside of

the United States. Criticisms of bias, of ethnocentricity and even use of objectionable terms were leveled at them (Barratt 1995), but that has gradually improved and it seems logical to use a standard system that is also used for other library resources at UCT.

It is in the description field that the person doing the metadata has the most freedom to include as much information as he or she deems necessary to assist the researcher. It is important to give accurate information in the description field without falling into the trap of describing subjects from one particular point of view. In this case, would one describe subjects through the eye of the photographer, a member of a colonizing country, or would one seek to use terms that are appropriate, that are do not purport to be from a superior viewpoint?

In Australia, work is being done to develop a thesaurus and a set of library practices that will enable improved access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander related works. A 1995 report on a Roundtable to work on the thesaurus cites one of the compilers, Heather Moorcroft, thus (State Library of South Australia 1995):

> It is important that the Indigenous voices of Australia are heard and felt through proper representation in catalogues. It is very important that we as thesaurus makers are imaginative and creative and do not rely wholly on the literature itself because so much has been written ABOUT Aboriginal people, and not so much BY Aboriginal people, but this is changing. This means that we need to find the 'right' words in other ways, i.e. by consultation and reading staff by people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal who understand the issue of Aboriginalism and who are dealing with that.

This relates again to those concerns with the Library of Congress subject headings.

People portrayed in these photographs are either military personnel, presumably French colonial troops, and the indigenous Malagasy population. One needs to be precise, in order to be helpful to the researcher or searcher of the database, so how does one describe each? Similarly, buildings are either European colonial or local style

and one needs to indicate whether the houses in the photograph are one or the other. I have not yet resolved this dilemma.

As is often the case with historical photographs of places, places have changed names and it is necessary to include both outdated and current names to enable the researcher to find relevant photographs. For example, the capital of Madagascar, Antananarivo, was called Tananarive and Mahajanga was called Majunga.

One also needs to decide when Malagasy words need translation. For many there are no meaningful translations. The garment worn by many Malagasy people is called the *lamba* and is referred to as such in most of the books about Madagascar. There is no reason to try to translate it. To call it a shawl, for example, would be just silly. The type of transport whereby a person is carried on a seat (or "travelling chair"), borne by four men, is called a filanjana. This is, in fact, how it is described on the slides themselves. The web-based information source, at Malagasyworld.com, gives the translation as palanquin, hence the title of my article. Perhaps palanquin is as obscure a name as filanjana! It has entered the French vocabulary, however, as filanzane.

Ethical concerns

There is a growing sensitivity to the issues of putting ethnographic images on the web. While these are not ethnographic photographs, per se, because many of the photographs were taken by a non-Malagasy of Malagasy people some of the same considerations pertain and there is a need to be sensitive of cultural issues when putting images on the web, as well as in the terminology used to describe them.

There are interesting writings in the Australian literature on this growing sensitivity. Prof Martin Nakata, a Torres Strait Islander, in particular, has written of issues relating to the classification of information about indigenous peoples, "the collection, storage, retrieval, access, copyright, intellectual property, the sensitivities of culturally different clients and communities" and it is advisable to be aware of such concerns (Nakata 2002).

Concerns include the danger of perpetuating colonial attitudes toward "the other", a type of voyeurism and of publishing images not intended for wide audiences, for example secret ceremonies that are not intended to be seen by other groups, even within a society. So the language used must be precise and should not perpetuate stereotypes. Where photographs, such as these would seem to be, are taken by a colonial or occupying power, one needs to be aware of ethical issues.

Conclusion

There are enormous benefits to gain through digitising primary source materials such as these slides. Not only does digitisation make a hidden resource available to scholars, but it serves to protect the originals and, perhaps, even to preserve images that might, despite our best efforts, deteriorate even further. There are also responsibilities involved, particularly when publishing digitised material on the web. These include the responsibility to describe material accurately and without cultural bias, as well as a sensitivity to issues related to the publication of ethnographic images.

References

Barratt, A. 1995. Minorities and the Mfecana: adapting Library of Congress subject headings for use in a South African library. *Innovation* 10(June): 21-27.

Brown, M. 1978. *Madagascar rediscovered: a history from early times to independence*. London: Damien Tunnacliffe.

Ellis, S. 1985. *The rising of the red shawls: a revolt in Madagascar 1895-1899*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Feeley-Harnik, G. 1991. *A green estate: restoring independence in Madagascar*. Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press.

Kent, R. K. (ed). 1979. *Madagascar in history*. Allbany: Foundation for Malagasy Studies.

Mutibwa, P. M. 1974. *The Malagasy and the Europeans: Madagascar's foreign relations, 1861-1895*. London: Longman.

Nakata, M. 2002. Indigenous knowledge and the cultural interface: underlying issues at the intersection of knowledge and information systems. *IFLA Journal* 28(5/6): 281-291.

Pink, S. 2001. *Doing visual ethnography*. London: Sage Publications.

State Library of South Australia. 1995. First Roundtable on Library and Archives Collections and Services of Relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. The Aboriginal Thesaurus. [Online]. Available WWW: http://www.nla.gov.au/niac/libs/slsa.html (Accessed 23 November 2009).

Waack, F. G. 1985. Stereophotography: an introduction to stereo photo technology and practical suggestions for stereo photographs. [Online]. Available: WWW: http://www.stereoscopy.com/library/index.html (Accessed 24 November 2009).