

# Reality and representation in ethnographic photography

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## Introduction

This exploration examines the concepts of reality and representation within the framework of ethnographic photography. It draws on Hall (1997a; 1997b; 1997c) and Johannes Fabian (1990), particularly their works on representation, othering and their conceptualisation of levels at which societies come to represent things through signs. These areas are vital, as this discussion falls within the broad paradigm of othering; how different cultures see each other and how we interpret some cultures' perceptions of other cultures, as evident in written and visual ethnographies. The study seeks to contribute to the building of a matrix of new methods and analyses relating to observer-observed relations being developed under the University of Natal's Culture, Communication and Media Studies (CCMS) *Semiotics of the Encounter project*. The study explores the processes through which cultural and media industries (print and electronic media) construct and shape opinion by producing images of other cultures. Though concerns with objectivity of representation may imply the need for vigilance when taking pictures of other cultures, the imaging project transcends picture taking. The divergence in the media coverage of the Zimbabwe land reform program, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Iraqi and United Nations Weapons inspectors for instance, are some examples of that struggle for control of images of people and countries. This study is therefore interested in exploring the cultural, social and ideological factors that shape the production and consumption of photographic representations of other cultures.

## Ethnographic photography

There are differences among academics regarding the appropriate way to describe photography on and about cultures, hence the dissimilar terms; visual ethnography (Duffield 1998:2), ethnographic photography, photographic ethnography or ethnographic/photographic documentary (Heider 1976; Faris 1996; Ruby 1996; van Maanen 1988; Ball 1997 and Brandes 1997). I decided on ethnographic photography, explicat-

ing it as one where, consciously or subconsciously, photographers take pictures of other cultures, both as “factual evidence” (Webster, 2000: 1) of having been there and for elucidating the written, audio and visual evidence of ‘what is actually there’ (Worth 1996). Ethnographic photography is therefore, situated within the relationships between researchers and subjects, be it a one-day relationship, five-years or a continuous interaction.

There are two strands of ethnographic photography. Anchored and published photographic texts are called activated ethnographic photography. An activated text is one where the interpretant is generated by an interpreter (Tomaselli 1999). An activated text employs ‘realism operators’ to increase the believability of a text such as a photograph (Fiske 1979). On the other hand, an inactive text implies a photographic text whose photographer did not provide any explanation on or whose explanation is meaningless at a particular point in time. During CCMS’s April 2002 field trip in the Southern Kalahari, for instance, Keyan Tomaselli talked to a #Khomani woman, Rosa Meintjies, focussing on a photocopy of Donald Bain’s (1936) inactivated photo of Rosa’s parents, which was only described in the book as ‘plate 63, the family of #Cu’. In a spontaneous moment of photo-elicitation, Meintjies “possessed” my video camera and tearfully activated a long history of dispossession, of ancestor remembrance and genealogy by explaining the significance of the photograph, which, to us, had, until that emotional moment, merely been an inactive text.

The photographer plays the central role in determining how and what to record of his/her subjects, how to interpret and refine the information s/he has gathered and how to present the information to his audience effectively (Ball 1997; Weinberg 2002: Interview). Indigenous research subjects play a minor function in the ultimate result of the ethnographic article. The literate world of academics and media industries, however, plays a decisive role in determining the ethnographic value of some of the research aspects over others (Ball 1997; Weinberg, 2002: Interview). In studying other cultures, photographs taken by anthropologists, journalists, tourists, and travel writers are ethnographically useful as raw data, since photographs taken by academics are indistinguishable from those taken by non-academics (Ruby 1996). The difference emerges, in the packaging - the writing and production of this data, resulting in theoretical ethnography (sociologists, visual anthropologists, anthropologists) and non-theoretical ethnography (journalists, travel writers, tourists).

Responding to criticisms of representing other cultures negatively, photographers have attempted to search for the ‘authentic’, a realistic method of representing their subjects,

by trying not to tamper with the camera and the pro-filmic event (that which occurs in real time in front of the camera), the photograph and its meaning (Metz 1974). Attempts have ranged from handing over technology (cameras) to the subjects, to 'stealing' or 'snapping' images. This dilemma over authenticity brings up a number of questions for consideration, since questions of voice, authority and authorship are serious issues in imaging others (Henderson 1988). Concerned with the ongoing battles over determining authentic meanings of 'what is out there' with regards to photographs probably led Fabian (1990: 207) to argue that the traditional problem of representation has been its accuracy, "the degree of fit between reality and its reproductions in the mind".

## **The problematic of accuracy in ethnographic photography**

One afternoon, a North American anthropologist, Julianne Newton, living among the Indians of Mexico snapped a picture of Tia Maria, an old Indian woman who she always found knitting in a store, seated in the same chair. Tia Maria did not know she had been observed, let alone photographed. As a surprise gift, Newton brought the photograph some days later to show the woman. This angered Maria, because, she argued, she had not dressed up for the photo and suggested that she be photographed again, this time dressed in a nice dress, not knitting and sitting on a large couch (Newton 1998: 58-59).

Newton's 'snapped' photo (of Tia Maria) can be seen as having captured what she considered to be an 'authentic moment' (Newton 1998: 59) or what Jean Rouch defines as a 'moment of truth', a 'privileged moment' (Rouch in Fulchignoni 1989: 270). Tia Maria's first photo is thus a visual document in which Newton's presence did not shape the content of the photo, although she had the power to possess, dominate and construct how the old woman was imaged (Newton 1998: 59). On the other hand, the collaborative photography between Newton and Tia Maria showed the old woman, who had now assumed authority over her image, engaging in a 'visual embrace' or Rouch's 'necessary contact' with the photographer (Rouch in Fulchignoni 1989: 268; Newton 1998: 59). This photo could also be considered an 'authentic document' of how Tia Maria wanted to be seen, a part of her character. A similar request for a 'good photograph' occurred after Tomaselli's interview with Rosa, who throughout the interview, was wearing a torn black T-shirt with red spots and a dirty old skirt. She was also smoking. When student researcher, Vanessa Dodd requested some shots of the homestead and the people, Rosa suggested we wait for her to put on her traditional Bushman dress, but the team assured her she was fine.

Such experiences contribute to extant controversies over what constitutes and how to identify 'authentic moments' as well as classify others as less authentic: which is the authentic reality - the photographer's or the subject's? How real is realism (Tomaselli 1999: 151)? These questions are important for consideration, since, much as photographs provide ingenious visual evidence of a particular pro-filmic event, the dimension and depth of their relevance as visual documents are contestable for one beholds what he wants or chooses to see. The implication is that five different cameramen, who simultaneously observe children playing will see, choose to see and produce five very different versions of playing children. What factors would lead to the production of five different versions of the same event?

## [Re]thinking representation

The concept of representation has many meanings. From a Latin linguistic perspective, the concept denotes the bringing into presence of something that was previously present, but presenting it in a different way (Goody 1997: 31). Representation would thus imply presenting again something not present. Philosophically, representation implies a prior assumption of difference between reality and its doubles (Fabian, 1990: 207). The main problem with representation, however, lies in the tension between re-presentation and presence (Fabian 1990: 208). What is this tension or problem of accuracy?

Representation is grounded in the cultural intuitive processes through which meaning is produced, identified and made meaningful. It is also one of the key practices that produces and maintains culture (Hall 1997c). Hall's conceptualisation of culture, therefore, centres on the production and exchange of meanings. He introduces the concept of 'circuit of culture', which he elucidates as an environment in which a community of people produces, circulates and consumes meanings through texts and values.

Hall's 'environment' is a developed concept of 'system of culture' (Ruby 1973). Ruby argues that an anthropologist belongs to different "cultural systems"; the home system and the field system. Ruby's system, which is also Hall's circuit, is Tomaselli's context (1999: 34) and has five stages, which are in themselves, processes that interpolate at different levels: representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation.

Language is the medium through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture (Hall 1997c: 1-2). Language sustains dialogue between participants, enabling them to build up shared understandings as well as collective memories, thus facilitating their interpretation of the world in roughly the same way. A culture therefore

depends on its participants to share interpretations and meaningfully make sense of their world. The generated meanings then organise and regulate social behaviour (Hall 1997c: 2-3).

In the circuit of culture, these meanings are constantly being produced and used to form identities through consumption and circulation. This enables cultural members to represent themselves and their worlds similarly. Taking on a social constructionist stance, Hall builds up two processes of representation through which language functions as a cultural signifying practice. The first process is one through which reality, that is objects, people and events are correlated with a set of mental conceptual maps. The second process involves constructing a set of correspondences between mental conceptual maps and a set of humanly constructed signs. Mental conceptual maps are crucial in representation for they enable cultural members to construct and interpret signs in a shared way. Hence Fabian correctly asserted, that one problematic of representation is the degree of fit between reality and its reproductions in the mind (1990: 207). Fabian's "reproductions in the mind" are Hall's 'mental conceptual maps', which have cultural origins. This implies that people can see something flying in the sky, but will have to negotiate on what it really is. Some may contend it is a bird whilst others will argue it is an airplane (Varela 1996:156). Varela's hypothesis is that the translation of reality into edible or sensible form requires cultural interpretation, which itself is grounded in Fabian's "reproductions in the mind" (Fabian 1990: 207). Being social constructs, meanings are dynamic because of what Bronslaw Malinowski (1945:1-3) termed "culture change dynamics", the process by which the existing order of society is transformed into another through evolution and diffusion.

## **Photographic representations**

Photography is a method of both seeing and looking within a 'strange confined space' (Price 1994). A camera is different from an eye in that a camera does not think, but depends on the hand and the eye to create the two dimensional pictures from a three dimensional object (Price 1994; Webster, 2000: 1). Photography does not involve a thought-out process but what Price terms a 'flash of recognition' (1994: 86), which Pierre Bourdieu (1997:162) terms 'arbitrary selection'. In the process and practice of photography, the key issues are the hand, mental ideas, mechanical instrument and result (Price 1994: 29). Price (1994: 29-30; 86) however, maintains that though the eye dominates the process of conceiving a photograph, the capture of a picture is not a thought-out process but a "flash of recognition".

A photographer therefore transcribes what he sees as memorable, remarkable, moving, sensational or typical, all of which constitute the process of seeing by interpretation (Price 1994: 87). In carrying a camera, a photographer does not only gaze at things, objects and events in front of him but also classifies and arranges them in order of importance. Introducing the concept of 'nonsign-events', Larry Gross describes the events that himself and Sol Worth had ignored or coded transparently during their ethnographic sojourns among the Kayapo of Mexico in 1985. He described sign-events as those objects and events that had evoked an interpretation. Depending on its context and the context of the observer, an event was assigned sign value (Gross, 1985). Similarly, in travelling with Tomaselli in the Southern Kalahari to Ngwatle communities in Botswana, student researcher and photographer, Darryn Crowe admitted that he "thought with his camera and framed his experience, thereby locating himself through the same construct" (2003 forthcoming). Crowe's 'framed experience' leads us to Susan Sontag's (1991: 81) conception of photography as an "acquisition in several forms" .

Much as Sontag strongly emphasises "our experience" as the crux of photography, she quickly contends that photography is not dependent on an image-maker, noting that though the photographer carefully "intervenes in setting up and guiding the image-making process, the process itself remains an optical-chemical one" (Sontag 1999:82-83). Both as a process and experience, photography "imprisons objects by making them stand still" (Price 1999: 85-86) and "safely motionless". Thus it makes images of reality accessible (Landau 1996: 133). Photography enables us to depersonalise our relation to the world, allowing us to participate, while confirming alienation (Sontag 1999: 87). Photography is therefore, a "discursive space" through which man establishes practices, institutions and relationships with which to examine the extant tension between reality and its reproductions (Krauss 1999: 207).

Drawing on Barthes's concept of 'here-now' and 'there-then', Christian Metz (1974:4) argues that representation is an exhibition of a pro-filmic event, in this case, a pro-photographic event. Photographic representation, therefore, enables photographers to present somebody's presence on their behalf because they (the subjects) are neither here nor there. During presence, which Fabian (1990:209) defines as the context in which subjects and objects share time and place, a pro-photographic event is encoded on to film and is later transcribed into a picture. This picture assumes a form, or Barthes's (1999b: 51) 'mythical status' .

Introducing the notions of an object-copy relationship and real unreality, Metz (1974) argues that when we look at a photograph, we do not see reality or presence in front of

us, but we see a presence that has once been there. Here the photograph attains the role of a copy and assumes a role of a re-production of the real object, which, in essence, it is not, thereby creating real unreality. For example, looking at a photograph of the Xhosi leader, Dawid Kruiper, one sees something that looks like Dawid himself, but if we were to touch it, 'our hands would close on an empty light' not a soft skin. Thus, the real Dawid did exist as a pre-photographic event at one time, but what we see now is unreal because Dawid has now been produced and re-produced by deliberation and our awareness of what is here on this picture (Metz 1974: 5-6).

Realising the extant 'confrontations' between reality and the 'imaginary', Rouch proposes the creation of visual pictures that are simultaneously truth and fiction, by revealing the subjectivity of the ethnographer, leading to the production of the 'truth of the cinema'. This is the same as Worth's 'snapshot realism', which amounts to a subjective science (DeBouzek 1989: 304; Feld 1989: 234; Rouch in Fulchignoni 1989: 271; Worth 1996: 20). 'Truth of the cinema' takes into account the social constructionist nature of the process of collecting and packaging images, whereas the 'cinema of the truth' results in producing 'something truer than reality' (Rouch in Fulchignoni 1989: 268). Drawing on Rouch's terms, we can talk of the 'truth of photography' and 'photography of truth'. Thus ethnographers should not be concerned with searching for authentic behaviour or representations (photography of truth), but rather how the performed realities or Newton's (1998:59) visual theatres are accommodated within the lens of the camera (the truth of photography).

## **Photographic experience in ethnographic photography**

Ethnographic photography involves the use of image-making techniques to study and present outsider perceptions of indigenous cultures through pictures. The concept of outsider is contentious and shifting, as modern ethnography involves people studying their own cultures. Ethnographic photography is centred on the observer and observed. Visual culture rests on, among other things, the "articulation between viewers and viewed" (Evans 1999:4). Evans's "articulation" is the relationship that impacts on picture-taking processes and eventually the quality of the resultant photographs. The concept of human visual behaviour refers to the interaction between the photographer, photographed and the camera (Newton 1998). Drawing from nineteenth century psychiatric studies, Newton (1998: 60) argues that people engage in photographic behaviour by behaving differently in front of cameras. For instance, in an interview on Durban's East Coast Radio, Lara Plumstead, an evicted participant of M-NET's first Big

Brother reality television game show, argued that though she kissed a boyfriend during the show, she could not have consented to sex, explaining, “under those cameras, never, never” (Breakfast Show, 2001: 24 September).

Drawing on Tia Maria’s request for a second and authentic photograph, Newton (1998: 61) introduces various concepts to describe the viewer-viewed encounters noting that, for “every occasion for taking a snapshot involves a relationship”. A photographer and his subject interact through visual behaviour and the photograph is thus a visual record of that interaction through which the reader of the photograph interacts with the imaged subject. This reader-imaged subject relationship is also largely affected by how the observer interacted with the observed during the process of photography (Newton 1998:65). When subject and photographer embrace or have intimate reciprocal interactions, the resulting equivalent is a visual embrace. When one snaps or steals a subject’s picture, the resulting photograph becomes a visual theft. Other interactions are visual gift, visual encounter, visual document, visual theatre, visual cliché, visual lie, visual intrusion, visual assault, visual rape and visual murder (Newton 1998: 65). Newton then recommends that the perspective, direction of the action and intensity of the interaction, as factors of visual behaviour, need to be considered carefully when participating in a photographic event.

The circuit of culture model enables individuals to produce and share meanings and knowledge of the world with other cultural members in similar ways. When an observer enters and participates in a photographic event or experience, he does so, not purely as an individual, but as a member of a particular circuit with outstandingly different perspectives of the world from that of the observed. No matter how many circuits of culture we add to this photographic experience, they do not create a new circuit of culture. Rather, they create a space through which members from different circuits of culture can interact.

## **The notion of ‘spectacle’: photographic colonisation of the Bushmen**

The concern over the problematic of spectacle has been a major issue in representation thus bringing out questions of aesthetics, ethics and objectivity in how indigenous cultures are seen, observed and represented. The notion of spectacle is thus concerned with concepts of difference, stereotyping and otherness (Hall 1997b). Building on his earlier work of representation, Hall introduces the concept of the ‘spectacle of the other’, elucidating how stereotyping and othering are manifested in popular culture



genres like music and videos. Representation is distinguished from depiction at both levels of praxis and conception, with the focus being on feeling, attitudes, emotions, fears, and anxieties as well as capitalising on collective memory or 'common sense' (Hall 1997b: 226).

In the first orders of meaning, there is a literal, denotative meaning of pictures (Hall 1997b; Tomaselli 1999). As an icon simulating reality, a pictorial text uses words to increase the believability of the text. At this stage, a picture is just a depiction, showing what is or should be 'out there' (Tomaselli and Shepperson 1991). In the second and third orders or levels of reality however, the pictorial text undergoes a transformation or metamorphosis, from the iconic level to the indexical and symbolic levels, during which producers and readers of texts attempt to fix, situate or contextualise the visual signified. This process of fixing and situating constitute what Peirce terms being and becoming, when signifying subjects (producers or readers) develop their experience through the sign (pictorial text) into a communicable entity (Tomaselli and Shepperson 1991). Becoming through texts constitutes a representational practice, thus representation is largely a praxis (Hall 1997b: 228; Tomaselli and Shepperson 1991).

In pictorial representations of other cultures, issues of difference, sexuality, ethnicity and gender come into play. Producers of pictorial texts of other cultures emphasise indigenous bodies because, as Hall (1997b: 231) argues, these images are "naturalised as instruments of skill and achievement" He gives an example of many messages based on stereotypes that accompany images of black people in popular texts like films, magazines and advertisements. When read in context as well as in con-text, these images accumulate meanings of difference and otherness, during which, they subvert or reinforce the entrenched stereotypes about the blackness.

The notion of difference is drawn from structural linguistics, which classifies things in binary opposites, for example this is black because it is not white. Hall's Saussurean-Bakhtinian argument is that difference enables us to construct meaning "through dialogue with the other" (1997b: 235). Thus by considering the concepts of signified racial difference, commodity racism, staged racial difference, stereotyping, fantasy and power, fetishism and disavowal, we are able to classify positive and negative images with respect to how they empower or dis-empower subject communities. The organised perpetuation and naturalisation of negative fantasies about indigenous cultures constitute what Hall (1997b) terms the 'spectacle of the other'

By the 19th century, Africa played a role in the growing trade of ethnological show business where indigenous bodies were displayed for education, commerce and

curiosity (Parsons 2000: 13). This was the age of Social Darwinism and African exploration. It was a period of growing Western imperialism and colonisation, which was also compounded by biological confusions about the inferiority of indigenous Bantu Africans, suggesting they were closer to animals than humans.

Curiosity about Bushman bodies also led to the search for the 'authentic Bushman'. This search and longing for the authentic bushman manifested itself in two ways: the setting up of museum dioramas and photographs. As representations of "external reality", colonial photographs helped "establish concepts of order and interpretations of an alien environment" (Webster 2000: 1). Colonial photographers used "juxtaposition, moralising and comparison" to place the alien African world in a "comprehensible European context" (Webster 2000: 1-2). Focussing on the photography of Dr. Wilhelm Bleek, Christopher Webster (2000: 4-5) traces the influence of colonial photography in Social Darwinism, arguing that such photography was akin to zoological studies.

In South Africa, the Cape Town Museum Bushman exhibitions, gave false impressions of the Bushman living in a timeless, peaceful landscape against the historical reality in which they were waging final desperate battles against white settlers who would later dispossess them (Schmidt 2001: 4). Engaged in the diorama and political correctness debate, some have argued for the maintenance of the Cape Town diorama for historical education (Skotness 2000: 38). Even Khomani Bushmen leaders like Dawid Kruiper liked the diorama "for instilling pride in Bushman heritage" (Simoes 2001: 157; Gordon, Rassool and Witz 1996: 268-269; White 1995: 17). Other Khoisan leaders welcomed the closure, arguing that the diorama representations were "vulgar" (Tromp 2001: 29). How vulgar was the diorama? Belinda Kruiper noted:

I spoke about [representations] earlier on - that Vetkat (my husband) and I went to a museum (SA Museum in Cape Town). [...] Vetkat stood there looking at the display of a Bushman herdsman on his land and I didn't realise what he (Vetkat) was going through. It's only afterwards when we got home (Blinkwater Farm, Kalahari) that he got very ill. He was in a spiritual state and he kept on saying about him being nothing but just an example, 'we are just examples'. Two days later I asked him, 'what really upset you?' and he said 'you see, I was standing on one side of the glass, breathing but there I was, looking at myself, on the other side of the glass but was not breathing'. He (Vetkat) kept on saying he was not happy because it was not right (Belinda Kruiper, 2001: Interview).

In recent times, Bushmen photography has been carried out by tourists, journalists, researchers and government officials, and in most cases, the subjects themselves do not

see the photos (Weinberg 2002: Interview; FGD I, II, III, 2002). Photos are taken for different purposes, but generally, they are used as a proof of 'having been there' or what is actually 'out there'. Jody explained after she took an evening shot of her son, Nino playing a guitar next to Vetkat:

[I was] taking the photographs here because I feel that I want to do justice in explaining to someone in words what I saw out here, what I experienced out here [...]. I want people to actually see it [...]. Taking photographs is a way interacting and making the interaction more personal [...]. Photographs are memories of times gone by (Van Schalkwyk, 2002: Interview).

Unlike colonial photographic practices, which ignored the participation of subjects as equal partners, most modern ethnographic photographers strive to base their photography on ethical principles. They place emphasis on access, consent, returning pictures and long lasting relationships between researchers and subjects (Henderson 1988; Weinberg 2002: Interview). Giving them back their photos enables the #Khomani and other Bushmen to look at themselves. This moves them to be happy, more open and even to ask for more photos to be taken (Dodd 2003). Elsie Van Wyk and Johannes Kaartman requested more photographs because they were happy to see themselves (FGD I, II, III, 2002).

## **The South African representation debate: Bester/Buntman versus Weinberg/Bregin**

There are two schools of thought on the Kalahari representation debate: the traditionalists or isolationists and the revisionists or integrationists (Barnard 1996). Traditionalists perceive the Bushmen as remnants of the hunter-gatherers who have been isolated – and that the only way to correct colonial dispossession and dehumanisation of the Bushmen is to give them back their land and leave them alone. On the other hand, revisionists see the #Khomani as an impoverished underclass in a larger social system, who are finding it hard to cope with demands of modernity. They believe that the solution to Bushmen poverty can be found by developing the areas and skills of Bushmen.

Employing structuralist semiology as a method of textual analysis, Rory Bester and Barbara Buntman (1999) attempted to read Weinberg's photographic documentary exhibition, 'Footprints in the Sand' (1996), which formed the basis of the published version entitled *In Search of the San* (1997). They based their analysis on the notion of 'spectacle', which derives from structuralism. Focussing on Weinberg's photographic

styles and aesthetics, Bester and Buntman (1999) questioned Weinberg's attitude towards and his relationship with subject communities.

Focussing on *In Search of the San* (1997), this section critiques Bester and Buntman's reading for two reasons. The first is that 'Footprints in the Sand' was only part of *In Search of the San* which could have been in print when Weinberg participated in a Cape Town exhibition titled 'Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushman'. Weinberg did not want to reveal much about his upcoming book and thus decided to exhibit a small slice of it. *In Search of the San* however contains much more of a written account explaining Weinberg's field experiences, which add more meaning to the photographic documentary. Secondly, I refer to *In Search of the San* because Bester's and Buntman's article on Weinberg's photography appeared in 1999, implying they had access to both the exhibition information and Weinberg's book which had come out by then. Their bibliography indicates they had access to the published version of the book. This discussion therefore assumes Bester and Buntman made inter-textual referential applications between the exhibition and published book and that their reading, which mainly focussed on photographic aesthetics applied to Weinberg's published photo-documentary as well as some of his other works.

Bester and Buntman focused on the exhibition 'Footprints in the Sand', beginning, in their criticism, by providing a brief history of the Kagga Kamma private game reserve of the Cedarberg mountains, from which some exhibition photos were taken between the 1980s and 1990s. Bester and Buntman (1999: 50) make footnote acknowledgement of the return of some land to the #Khomani community outside Kagga Kamma. They also give a brief history of projects on Bushmen representation, noting that most of these were motivated by fantasies. They thus argue that these representational fantasies of 'bushmanness' have become a 'bushmania', which is driven by politicians, academics, philanthropists and the tourism industry (Bester and Buntman 1999: 52).

Bushmania has made the Bushmen a 'Khoisan spectacle', which has induced and entrenched their dispossession, displacement and exploitation over centuries (Bester and Buntman, 1999: 52). Without examining the revisionist and traditionalist ethnography debate, Bester and Buntman nonetheless seem to place Weinberg among the revisionists charging he attempted to evince the Bushmen as a disadvantaged South African minority marginalized within corporate capitalism (see Buntman 1996).

In his documentary photographic excursions, Weinberg's objective was to produce images of "cultures in transition, cultures that had been dislocated and degraded with colonisation and modernisation" (Weinberg 1997: 1; Weinberg 1996: 340). Weinberg's

'cultural transition' has been induced and worsened by both colonial and post-colonial land appropriation and exploitation by both black and white people. This exploitation moved Weinberg to focus on "poignant issues – the struggles for land, water and schooling" (Weinberg, 1999; 2002: Interview). In attempting to show the transition and the growing poverty amongst modern-day Bushmen, Weinberg is just being "adamant" because such struggles are "traditionally beyond the scopes of documentary practice" (Bester and Buntman, 1999: 53). Bester and Buntman acknowledge Weinberg's photos as bringing an "unexpected facet" of contemporary Bushmen lives. Such "unexpected facets" contribute towards "a consciousness of Khoisan empowerment" but not a source of "actual empowerment" because social documentary practice reduces itself to a process through which the cultural values of the photographer are imposed on the photographed (Bester and Buntman, 1999: 54).

On the one hand, Weinberg's photography is thus recommended for its advocacy for the case of the 'suffering Bushmen', sensitising the outside world about 'what is out there in the Kalahari'. On the other hand, Bester and Buntman argue that his photography makes no contribution to the self-esteem of the Bushmen themselves because it was Weinberg, not the Bushmen themselves, who took those photographs. The experience of observing Tomaselli's discussions with Rosa on Bain's photograph of her parents tells a different story. Rosa never knew about the photograph until Nigel Crawhall of Southern Africa San Institute (SASI) discovered it in Bain's book, copied it and gave it to her. This copy of Bain's photograph of her parents, unnamed in Bain's book, invoked many memories for Rosa. This copy was glued to an A3 paper together with three colour photographs taken by a National Geographic team that came to South Africa in 1999 during the return of some land to the #Khomani Bushmen. Looking at the photographs, Rosa talked to Tomaselli about the individuality of each of the subjects - what had happened to them and their relationship to each other. Then when asked what the photos meant to her, she unexpectedly lamented:

[These photos] mean a lot to me in my heart, because when I look at them, I think of my grandmothers and ancestors. I love the photos of my three grandmothers, my great grandmothers because when I look at them, I get courage. I really get courage. When I look at them, then I think I must go further. They show me [...] that my blood is close to uncle Dawid Kruiper's blood because our blood is one. I want to tell Professor [Tomaselli] that when we lived in the [Kalahari Gemsbok] Park, we really lived. This fig tree in the photograph....it means a lot for me Professor. I love my people. I love my grandmothers (Rosa Meintjies, April 2002: Interview).

Drawing on Su Braden (1983: 2), Bester and Buntman reject possibilities of genuine

collaboration between photographers and subjects, resulting in participatory representation. They claim this is because the person behind the camera always appropriates the identity of the person in front of the camera. Again, Bester and Buntman reject Weinberg's photos for neglecting to "address the Bushmen voices" so that they "become part of the photographic history of Bushmania informed and overshadowed by the myth of the Bushman" (Bester and Buntman 1999: 57). According to Bester and Buntman, Weinberg's photographs produce a 'double act of subjugation', producing victims for an audience expecting subjugation. Weinberg's images are seen as visions of disempowerment, creating 'victimologies' as they do not portray socio-political and historical changes within #Khomani communities, who "are a silent minority, showing no resistance to" Weinberg's identity (Bester and Buntman 1999: 57-58). What do Bester's and Buntman's observations about Weinberg's photos reveal?

Bester and Buntman's reading ignores the historical context of 'bushmania' or the spectacle but still find Weinberg guilty of perpetuating 'victimologies'. They speak of 'Khoisan identity' as a fixed entity, as evidenced through their use of the term 'misrepresentation', implying there must be one way of representing people. Bushmen voices are disregarded in interpreting Weinberg's photographs, nor does the reading demonstrate an understanding of a documentary photographer (Weinberg 2002: Interview). Their criticism of Weinberg's photography ignores the historical context of the Bushmen, the context in which Weinberg carried out his photography, the influence of ethnographic filmmaker, John Marshall, who introduced Weinberg to working in Bushmen communities and the context in which they were reading those photos (Tomaselli 1999). More importantly, Bester and Buntman do not seem to be aware of the limitations of photographs as ethnographic documents as well as research tools and cannot differentiate inactive from activated photographic texts.

## Weinberg and Elana Bregin

A photographer is a storyteller with a camera (Weinberg, 2002: Interview). Storytelling has a very long tradition and is about 'contradictions', 'nuances', 'rhythm' and 'different perceptions' (Weinberg 2000b: 9). Storytelling requires openness, creativity and the "generosity of the spirit for the storyteller and the observer", reasons Weinberg cites for his refusal to be considered an expert on Bushmen representations (2000b: 9; 2002: Interview). Regarding *In Search of the San* as well as 'Footprints in the Sand', Weinberg (1997) contends that his objective was to photograph the people of a dispossessed culture, whose community ties with the land had been loosened and who were living very degraded lives. Placing his argument within the revisionist paradigm, Weinberg

(2000b: 9) notes that the essence of his work “has been to photograph a culture in transition”. To show the transience of these cultures and the associated repercussions of dehumanisation, Weinberg notes that he spends time with his subjects, knowing them as individuals, explaining the purpose of “his” photographs and asking for permission to take the same (2000b: 10).

*In Search of the San* was funded by the Norwegian Church Aid and it introduces the Bushmen providing a comprehensive historiography on the people’s culture, ethnicity, outsider’s stereotypes, relationship with other tribes, their displacement, forced incorporation into the modern capitalist economy and the resultant predicaments (Weinberg 1997: 6-9). It is in the context of this written history that Weinberg attempts to present in pictures in the rest of the book, from Namibia, Botswana and South Africa. From page 28, *In Search of the San* features full or half page photographs with captions identifying places and in some cases, individuals. From page one to 27, Weinberg provides a detailed chronological review of the actual places he visited and also the encounters with individuals.

Written ethnography locates Weinberg within the discourse of his encounters, his sense of ‘being there’ in the Kalahari. The photographs, on the other hand, show snippets of life in the Kalahari, with captions that identify places, sometimes activities, but rarely subjects individually. Thus, readers are unaware whether the subjects Weinberg mentions in the written sections are the same un-named subjects in the photographs. *In Search of the San* (1997) was thus a summary of Weinberg’s work from the exhibition, ‘Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen’ (1996). ‘Footprints in the Sand’ as presented in *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (1996) takes the same format of *In the Search of the San* (1997).

The published presentation (‘Footprints in the Sand’) begins with an anonymous old Namibian Bushman playing a musical instrument, a *gull/aci* (Weinberg, 1996: 331), followed by a photocopy of the 1918 letter, correspondence from Namibian colonial officials which reveals despicable treatment of some Bushmen who were awaiting a death sentence and were referred to as ‘wild creatures’, ‘wild things with no idea’ in which the writer confesses to have ‘a limited knowledge of natives’ (Weinberg, 1996: 334). The published ‘Footprints in the Sand’ then provides undated photographs of hunting, gathering roots, playing *dongu*, making crafts and feeding livestock in Namibia and South Africa. In some instances, Weinberg (1996: 340) identifies subjects individually, like in the case of Jamie Uys and Hotnot ‘discussing a next day’s shoot’.

Responding to Bester’s and Buntman’s dismissal of Weinberg’s documentary

photography as perpetuating popular colonial representations, Weinberg and Elana Bregin (2000) reject the dismissal as an “exercise based academic ideology”. They suggest that “academics have tendencies of dismissing works by non-academics”. Though having done extensive photographic work on indigenous societies in Southern Africa, Weinberg himself refuses to be categorised into the ‘pigeon hole’ of an ethnographic photographer but insists he is just a documentary photographer as ‘ethnographic photography’ has some negative connotations of being what Bregin terms ‘too prescriptive’ (Bregin 2000: 86; Weinberg 2002: Interview). Weinberg thus insists ‘he would like to be loose and open-ended’ in his approach towards photography.

Referring to representation, Bregin points out Bester’s and Buntman’s problematic of seeing things in binary positions; white/oppression or black/victimisation, for instance, and raises the question whether the criticism was directed at the photographs or Weinberg himself. She questions Bester’s and Buntman’s attempt to authoritatively ‘fix’ the Bushman image by dictating the appropriate way in which they should be photographed and viewed. This ignores the ‘complex negotiations of identity’ that the Bushmen engage in during their struggle for survival in a modern and post-modern world (Bregin 2000: 86). Along similar lines, in a subsequent interview, Weinberg (2002: Interview) asked some questions relating to the process of photography and the photographs themselves:

I am I wrong? Are they right or Am I right? Who’s the judge? It’s a very hard thing to say apart from pointing out the differences. Of course, we have to acknowledge that certain things happen when you photograph the Bushman like setting up photographs. Set up in a sense that photographers dress them up like hunters. This is presented today as ‘today’s Bushmen’ who have their land back are hunting. And you have to ask: Is that a true representation or is it an enactment? Is it what goes on or just a fantasy? Such pictures do not conjure up authenticity for me. [But] photography is just an experience and process of giving meaning to what we deem important.

The Bregin/Weinberg school therefore conceptualises photography as Rouch’s ‘subjective science’ which involves creativity, which itself involves a personal projection, ‘perceptual selectivity’ and the blending of truth and fiction (Bregin 2000: 87; DeBouzek 1989: 304). Bregin’s and Weinberg’s response to Bester’s and Buntman’s criticism of Weinberg’s photography also raises some issues regarding photographic representations: what is the difference between depiction and representation? If each photographer has his own style, ‘mindset’, ‘technical priorities’ and ‘prerogatives’ (Weinberg 2002: Interview), is ethnographic photography a fluid field? How do we



identify and agree on images that frame the Bushmen as a spectacle? Bester's and Buntman's criticism was based on "ignorance about the process of taking photographs or being a photographer or trying to survive as a documentary photographer, about the methodology, his style, intentions, approach and commitment to subject matter" (Weinberg 2002: Interview).

## **Questions arising from the debate**

The South African debate on representation of ethnographic photography demonstrates an extant tension within academia but more importantly between photographer-practitioners and academic researchers. The general feeling is that academia is attempting to colonise, subjugate and prescribe how the practitioners are going to work (Bregin, 2000; Weinberg 2002 Interview). Academics are suspected of being "good at setting up traps for practitioners, looking for mistakes and then knocking them down in the building of their careers, rather than being humble and understanding the contexts in which practitioners work" (Weinberg 2002: Interview).

The debate demonstrates the extant confusion over the notions of depiction and representation, in which the former is always used for the latter. Depiction has some 'picturing' within it, thus it involves the creation of written, captured or recorded visual images in differentiating this image from that one. Representation is a theory-based argument that develops out of certain depictions with similar set of attributes. The implication is that, as icons, Weinberg's photo texts could have faithfully depicted what the photographer observed out there in the Kalahari in a particular epoch, thus the photo texts could have simulated the reality. Yet, the process of selecting photos for exhibition and publication involves preferring some from others as well as activating them to enable the photos as icons to become photos as indices. This process constitutes representation as it involves setting up an argument. Thus, true iconic depictions can result in questionable symbolic and indexical representations depending on how the argument has been formulated.

The debate also raises questions regarding the span of a photographic process: when does photography begin and when does it end? What is the role of the camera in photography? Borrowing from Dziga Vertov (1929) and Robert Flaherty (1922), Rouch introduced the notions of 'cine-eye', 'cine-ear', 'cine-hear', 'cine-trance' and 'cine-think'. He argued that during his filmmaking processes in the field, the camera gained consciousness, thus becoming both a participant and principal actor (Feld 1989: 234). Thus to Rouch, issues of participant-observation, feedback, staging reality, seizing

improvised life, editing and deliberate self-reflexivity, constitute the process of photography (Feld, 1989). Rouch's picturing process (be it film or photography) begins before the camera comes out of the bag and continues long after the camera has disappeared from the scene - even after the subject communities have seen their pictures. Rouch's photography is a long process, which can take as long as sixty years. In some cases, you need 'generations of researchers' because photography is the 'art of patience' and the 'art of time' (Feld 1989: 234; Rouch in Fuchilgnoni 1989: 268).

It should also be pointed out that taking good photographs is a craft and very difficult (Weinberg 2002: Interview). Much as professional photographers can take better pictures because of their ability to manage the environment, non-professional photographers can collaborate with indigenous peoples in the kind of photography they want. These photos can be explained by providing the context and con-text within which the photography took place. Academics should also be humble enough to work with non-academic practitioners in photography, recognising the difficult circumstances under which photographers work and incorporating them in the academic programmes of ethnographic photography, rather than being too critical of the quality and importance of photography knowing well that they could not produce better works. This can only serve to decrease the tensions between the academy and the practitioners not only in photography but other development communication fields as well.

## Conclusion

The foregoing study has suggested that ethnographic photography would become easier to read if a photographer carried out some research so that the photographs should become products of a clear understanding of how indigenous societies work. Though it is a challenge to employ photo-elicitation techniques in subject communities using recently taken photographs by a photographer associated with you (as a research team), taking photographs back to subjects increases the trust between researchers and the indigenous communities. It must be mentioned, however, that the subject matter of a reader of ethnographic photography cannot be clearly defined as there are many things happening during the photographic act: what the photographer thinks is going on, what the subjects know is going on and hope the photographer can see and what is actually happening. Reading photographs requires an understanding of these processes as well as the relationships that defined photographic acts. This cannot be done with a researcher sitting in his office fantasising about testable hypotheses.

Photography as a process, practice and experience enables the photographer to enter

into a relationship with the photographed. The photograph becomes a visual record or document of the relationship that existed between the researchers and their subjects. This interaction also involves the circuits of culture of the subjects, researchers and photographers. The nature of these circuits of cultures is visible or invisible depending on the nature of negotiation between outsiders and indigenous people. The location of the resultant ethnographic photograph is therefore a confluence of the various circuits of culture. The photograph becomes a result of the tensions, negotiation and compromise among the visible and invisible circuits of culture. Returning to an earlier experience in the Kalahari, Rosa Meintjies's reading of an inactive photographic text of her deceased parents indicated that active interpretation of photographs is a convergence. It is a convergence of photographs as cultural texts, the circuit of culture (Hall, 1997a; 1997c) of the photographed, the circuit of culture of the photographer, the circuit of culture of the videographer, the circuit of culture of the reader and the circuit of culture of the context in which the reading is taking place.

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3-04-2002	Semi-structured and audio recorded interview	Coekie Jody Van Schalkwyk Levy	A Cape Townian coloured housewife visiting Belinda and Vetkat with her son, Nino	Blinkwater, Southern Kalahari
23-08-2002	Structured and video recorded interview	Sian Dunn	Photojournalist	Westville Durban
8-11-2002	Structured and video recorded interview	Paul Weinberg	Human Rights Activist and Documentary Photojournalist	Durban
12-07-2002	Focus Group Discussion I	Khobus Witbooi, Isaak Gooi, Jakob Tieties, Elsie Kariseb and Geoffrey Kruiper	≠Khomani Bushmen artists	Witdraai, Southern Kalahari
12-07-2002	Focus Group Discussion II	Silikat Van Wyk, Elsie Van Wyk, Tina Swart, Andries Kruiper, Gert Swart and Shaun Witbooi	≠Khomani Bushmen artists	Witdraai, Southern Kalahari
13-07-2002	Semi-structured, informal and video recorded interview	Dawid Regopstaan Kruiper	≠Khomani traditional leader	Witdraai
14-07-2002	Focus Group Discussion III	Abraham Malgas, Jokkie Malgas (son), Bettie Malgas (Jokkie's wife), Shyron Ben (Bettie's grandson), Klein Dawid Kariseb Kruiper, Maria Kruiper (wife), Philemon Kariseb, Aunt Eva de Waal, Maureen de Waal	≠Khomani Bushmen and coloureds	Welkom
15-07-2002	Semi-structured and video recorded interview	Jakobus Malgas	≠Khomani Bushman	Witdraai

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