

## Photography in Ethnographic Research

Photography has a long and varied history in ethnography. Supported by different methodological paradigms, a camera has been an almost mandatory element of the 'tool kit' for research for several generations of ethnographers. During the colonial period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, photography, seen as an objective recording device, flourished as a method for the 'scientific' documentation of cultural and physical difference (see Edwards 1992, 1997b). Around this time early anthropological uses of photography in research were also developed by Britain's Alfred Cort Haddon (Banks's on-line catalogue of this work is discussed in Chapter 8), Franz Boas in the United States and Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen in Australia (Jacknis 1984; Morphy 1996), and from 1915 to 1918, Bronislaw Malinowski used photography as part of his long-term fieldwork method (Young 1998). Later, in the mid-twentieth century, Bateson and Mead (1942) used photography to record and represent Balinese culture (see Chaplin 1994: 207ff; Banks 2001). Between the 1970s and the end of the twentieth century photography was initially employed to fit the needs of scientific-realist approaches to ethnography, which were then critiqued by the reflexive stance that has endured and now informs most visual research. Attempts to connect ethnographic and collaborative documentary photography practices signify recent innovations. It is not my intention here to analyse the historical context of these developments (see Pink 2005: ch. 1). Rather, in this chapter I draw from my own and other ethnographers' experiences to explore two inextricably interconnected themes in contemporary visual ethnography practice: the study of local photographic cultures and uses of photographic images and technologies in ethnographic research.

Photographic practices have formed the subject matter of academic work across the social sciences and humanities. In the 1990s anthropologists critically examined the history of their own discipline, highlighting the ethnocentric, oppressive agendas in which scientific anthropological uses of photography during the colonial period were

implicated (see Edwards 1992, 1997b) and the primitivizing tendencies of 1970s and 1980s photographic representations of ethnographic realities (Brandes 1997). Other studies focused on photography in consumer culture (e.g. Bourdieu 1990 [1965]), family photography (e.g. Chalfen 1987), tourist photography (e.g. Chaney 1993; Crawshaw and Urry 1997; Edensor 1998; Hutnyk 1996; Urry 1990), the relationship between digital and 'traditional' photography (e.g. Lister 1995; T. Wright 1998) and ethnographic studies of local or ethnic photographic cultures (e.g. Pinney 1997; Pink 1997b, 1999b). Since 2000, new studies have focused on historical aspects of photographic practice and culture. For instance, Edwards (2001) interrogates the situated and historical meanings that can be produced through the analysis of historical and archival photographs; and Pinney and Peterson's edited volume (2003), *Photography's Other Histories*, demonstrates how photography has, historically and in the present, been appropriated in different cultural contexts. Other anthropological studies of photographic culture are represented in ethnographic films. For example, *Photo Wallahs* (MacDougall and MacDougall 1991) represents photography in an Indian hill town, while *Future Remembrance* (Wendl and Du Plessis 1998) is a study of studio photography in Ghana. These two films represent existing photographic practices in specific localities. *Future Remembrance* should be viewed alongside Tobias Wendl's (2001) writing about studio photography in Ghana, and *Photo Wallahs* with MacDougall's (2005) and Pinney's (1997) books.

In Chapter 2 I proposed that visual research methods should be informed by ethnographers' knowledge of the visual cultures they work in, including knowledge about local and academic uses of photographs. Using photography in ethnographic research is not simply a matter of studying visual culture on the one hand, and on the other adding to disciplinary and personal resources of visual materials by photographing exotic situations and persons. Rather, ethnographic photography can potentially construct continuities between the visual culture of an academic discipline and that of the subjects or collaborators in the research. Thus ethnographers can hope to create photographic representations that refer to local visual cultures and simultaneously respond to the interests of academic disciplines. To do so requires research into uses and understandings of photography in the culture and society of the fieldwork location. In some cases empirical and theoretical studies may be available, in others local photographic cultures may be virtually undocumented.

### The ethnographicness of photography

As I pointed out in Chapter 1, no visual image or practice is essentially ethnographic by nature. Accordingly, the ethnographicness of

photography is determined by discourse and content. For instance, Edwards rightly suggested that 'an anthropological photograph is any photograph from which an anthropologist could gain useful, meaningful visual information' (Edwards 1992: 13). She emphasized how viewers subjectively determine when or if a photograph is anthropological, pointing out that '[t]he defining essence of an anthropological photograph is not the subject-matter as such, but the consumer's classification of that knowledge or "reality" which the photograph appears to convey' (1992: 13). Similarly, using as his example the categories of visual sociology, documentary photography and photo-journalism, Becker noted that the definition of the genre of a photograph depends more on the context in which it is viewed than its pertaining to any one (socially constructed) category (Becker 1995: 5).

Therefore the same photograph may serve a range of different personal and ethnographic uses; it may even be invested with seemingly contradictory meanings. As Edwards noted, '[m]aterial can move in and out of the anthropological sphere and photographs that were not created with anthropological intent or specifically informed by ethnographic understanding may nevertheless be appropriated to anthropological ends' (1992: 13). Similarly, a photograph created by a researcher with a particular ethnographic agenda in mind may travel out of 'the research' and into the personal collections of informants or other individuals, therefore being appropriated for *their* own ends (see Pink 1996). For example, one photographic slide that I took of Encarni, a friend and informant during fieldwork, was duplicated as a print and used in a variety of ways: in her personal collection and family album, in my discussions with other informants, in my PhD thesis (Pink 1996), my book (Pink 1997a), in a conference paper (Pink 1996), as well as being part of my own personal collection of photographs of friends. Similarly, my photograph of the woman bullfighter Cristina Sanchez entitled 'The Bullfighter's Braid' was in one context an 'ethnographic photograph' that appeared on the front cover of my book *Women and Bullfighting* (1997a). This photograph also won a prize for artistic journalistic photography, was used to publicize the visit of a female bullfighter to Cordoba and became part of the personal collections and wall displays of my informants. Therefore, during the fieldwork this photograph had no single meaning, but it was re-appropriated and given new significance and uses in each context. In Chapter 5 I discuss how the diversity of meanings invested in these two images was fundamental to my subsequent analysis of them and informed the academic meanings I gave to them.

Thus there are no fixed criteria that determine which photographs are ethnographic. Any photograph may have ethnographic interest, significance or meanings at a particular time or for a specific reason. The meanings of photographs are arbitrary and subjective; they depend on who is looking. The same photographic image may have a variety of

(perhaps conflicting) meanings invested in it at different stages of ethnographic research and representation, as it is viewed by different eyes and audiences in diverse temporal historical, spatial and cultural contexts. Therefore it seems important that ethnographers seek to understand the individual, local and broader cultural discourses in which photographs are made meaningful, in both fieldwork situations and academic discourses. Photographs produced as part of an ethnographic project will be given different meanings by the subjects of those images, local people in that context, the researcher, and other (sometimes critical) audiences. Edwards's work on historical photography (1992, 1997b) is a good example of this. The contributors to her edited collections discussed mainly colonial archival photography. They critically deconstructed the theories, philosophies and political agendas that informed the intentions of those who produced and used these images. By revealing the historical meanings that these photographs were given, the authors thus gave them new meanings by embedding them in new discourses. At the turn of the twentieth century such images were assumed to represent objectively collected scientific knowledge about 'inferior', dominated peoples. Almost 100 years later, the contributors to Edwards's collections largely viewed them as documents that represent the subjectivity of a particular theoretical scientific perspective on reality and the ethnocentric, racist and oppressive ramifications of this. Re-situated, the images were made to represent a critique of the intellectual and scientific environment and framework of beliefs in which they were produced (see also Chapter 5).

However, it is not only historically that the meanings given to photographs may be re-negotiated. When I showed a class of students a series of slides of a woman bullfighter's performance, some members of the group reacted by interpreting them in terms of an anti-bullfighting discourse. The meanings they invested in them were quite different from the ways in which they were interpreted by bullfight *aficionados*, who focused on the details of the bullfighter's technique and her female body. Other students in the group situated the images in another moral discourse. Taking a more relativist approach, they argued that we should try to understand what the photographs would mean in a Spanish cultural context. For me, however, the slides are also ethnographic photographs. They were shot as part of ethnographic fieldwork with dual intentions that related to my research; as an attempt to document the performance of a woman bullfighter and as part of my project to learn the art of bullfight photography (see Figure 3.1).

### Ethnographer as photographer

When ethnographers take photographs, like any professional or lay photographer, they do so with reference to specific theories of photography

and in the context of particular social relationships. As Terence Wright has pointed out, 'anyone who uses a camera or views a photograph, will most probably be subscribing, albeit unwittingly, to some or other theory of representation' (1999: 9). A reflexive approach to ethnographic photography means researchers being aware of the theories that inform their own photographic practice, of their relationships with their photographic subjects, and of the theories that inform their subjects' approaches to photography. This is an important issue for portrait photography, as Lury noted (citing Homberger 1992), 'at the heart of the photographic portrait is a contract between the subject and the photographer, a contract in which the former negotiates the term of the latter's appropriation of his or her property rights in the self' (Lury 1998: 45). Yet the nature of this contract varies. For example, on the one hand, the commercial contract whereby the photographer 'makes especially clear the rights of the individual to self-possession created in portraiture: so for example the individual has the right to accept or reject the portrait' (Lury 1998: 45). On the other hand, in different circumstances 'other epistemological and judicial principles ... provided the authority for the abandonment of the contract and undermined the function of the uniqueness of the self as a possession of the individual' (Lury 1998: 46). These principles were those that operated in the construction of the photographic archives of government bureaucracies and colonial systems.

Therefore, it is useful to pay attention to the subjectivities and intentionalities of individual photographers, coupled with the cultural discourses, social relationships and broader political, economic and historical contexts to which these refer and in which they are enmeshed. Edwards's (1992) volume contains historical examples of this (e.g. Hockings 1992; Tayler 1992). Macintyre and Mackenzie demonstrate how in Papua New Guinea the 'cultural distance' between different colonial photographers and their local subjects varied according to 'the range of photographic genres and the varying degrees of control exerted by those behind the lens' (Macintyre and Mackenzie 1992: 163). Their comments remind us that for both historical and contemporary photography, '[t]he experience, the motivations and the social positions of the photographers are intrinsic to the images' (1992: 163). Archival research about vintage photographs should therefore investigate not solely the content of the image, but also the personal and professional intentions of photographers and of other institutions and individuals with whom they negotiated. Ethnographic research into local contemporary photographic cultures should refer to the same principles. Therefore, when possible, analysis of the content or iconography of photographs should be informed by a consideration of the photographers' personal and professional intentions, the historical development of photographic practices in any particular cultural context, the institutional agendas to which they were obliged to respond, how they have used photography to refer to specific cultural discourses and construct