



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Intimacy in a violent context: photographs from Mbouda (Cameroon) in a time of troubles

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Abstract

All archives have silences, which may come to resonate, even if they may never speak. What is unsaid or unsayable may be understood and appreciated even if never enunciated and never heard. The photographs of the Cameroonian photographer Jacques Toussele from 1960 to 1980 were taken against a background of violence: the uprising of the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), which started before Cameroonian independence and continued for the next decade. The fight against UPC ‘terrorists’ by the Cameroonian state and the French military was marked by violence on all sides. There is no evidence of this in the Toussele archive, which consists of administrative ID portraits and recreational shots depicting friends and family and various displays of intimacy. The Toussele photographic archive shows young people in Mbouda exhibiting the global tropes of modernity. Soon after independence in Owest Cameroon, both the violence and the promises of 1960s modernity were challenges to traditional sociality. A local reading makes it clear that the violence was ever present in its absence and denial: to perform an event was no small achievement and, like the birth of a child, was to be celebrated and marked by photography. Intimacy was achieved against a background of violence and celebrated for this very reason.

Résumé

Toutes les archives ont des silences qui peuvent se mettre à résonner, même sans parler. Le non-dit ou l’indicible peut être compris et apprécié même sans être énoncé ni entendu. Les photos prises par le photographe camerounais Jacques Toussele de 1960 à 1980 l’ont été sur fond de violence : le soulèvement de l’Union des populations du Cameroun (UPC), qui a commencé avant l’indépendance du Cameroun et s’est poursuivi durant la décennie suivante. La lutte contre les « terroristes » de l’UPC menée par l’État camerounais et par l’armée française a été marquée par des violences de toutes parts. Les archives photographiques de Toussele, qui se composent de portraits d’identité administratifs, de photos récréatives de rencontres amicales et familiales et de scènes d’intimité, n’en témoignent pas. Elles montrent des jeunes de Mbouda présentant les tropes de la modernité. Peu après l’indépendance, dans l’Ouest du Cameroun, la violence et les promesses de modernité des années 1960 furent des défis pour la socialité traditionnelle. Une lecture locale montre clairement que la violence était omniprésente dans son absence et son déni : organiser un événement n’était pas une mince affaire et, comme la naissance d’un enfant, se devait d’être célébré et marqué par la photographie. L’intimité se créait sur fond de violence et se célébrait pour cette raison.

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Resumo

Todos os arquivos têm silêncios, que podem vir a ressoar, mesmo que nunca falem. O que não é dito ou não pode ser dito pode ser compreendido e apreciado, mesmo que nunca tenha sido enunciado e nunca tenha sido ouvido. As fotografias do fotógrafo camaronês Jacques Toussele, de 1960 a 1980, foram tiradas num contexto de violência: a revolta da Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), que começou antes da independência dos Camarões e continuou durante a década seguinte. A luta do Estado camaronês e dos militares franceses contra os ‘terroristas’ da UPC foi marcada pela violência de todos os lados. O arquivo de Toussele não apresenta qualquer indício deste facto, sendo constituído por retratos de identificação administrativos e fotografias recreativas de amigos e familiares e várias manifestações de intimidade. O arquivo fotográfico de Toussele mostra os jovens de Mbouda a exhibir os tropos globais da modernidade. Pouco depois da independência dos Camarões Ocidentais, tanto a violência como as promessas da modernidade dos anos 60 constituíram desafios à socialidade tradicional. Uma leitura local torna claro que a violência estava sempre presente na sua ausência e negação: realizar um evento não era um feito pequeno e, tal como o nascimento de uma criança, devia ser celebrado e marcado pela fotografia. A intimidade era alcançada num contexto de violência e celebrada por essa mesma razão.

Introduction: breaking archival silences or accepting enigmas?

In this article I follow the thread of intimacy in an archive of photographs taken by the Cameroonian photographer Jacques Toussele in the 1970s,¹ a period during and just after ‘a time of troubles’ in Ouest² Cameroon: the armed struggle of the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), which was violently suppressed by the newly independent government with help from the French, the former colonial power in the area.³ The article is based on the work undertaken to create the Jacques Toussele archive, which included many discussions with Toussele and other photographers as well as with some of the people depicted, a few of the original clients, when they could be identified and traced. As I show, the photographic archive apparently has no trace of the armed struggle that formed the backdrop to the lives of Toussele’s customers depicted in his images. This may be an instance of what Pumla Gqola calls ‘unremembering’, ‘a calculated act of exclusion and erasure inscribed by power hierarchies’ (2010: 8), as discussed by Shanaaz Hoosain in this issue. However, although Jacques Toussele’s work may be a case of an archival silence or invisibility,⁴ it is not one created by colonial administrators. And, as we shall see, echoes of the silence can be transcribed. Photographs from the period can be read as

¹ Background information has been published in, e.g., Zeitlyn (2010; 2015a).

² I have retained the French term to help reduce the potential confusions in talking about West Cameroon. I am talking about the area of ‘Ouest Province’ (now Region) of the French mandate/trust territory which became independent in 1960. This abuts what was known as West Cameroon (South West and North West Provinces/Regions), which joined what became the Federal Republic in 1961. Part of the confusion is that both have a lot of cultural commonalities and are sometimes known as the ‘wider Grassfields’ or a generalized West Cameroon.

³ See Deltombe *et al.* (2011) for background.

⁴ Hannah Feldman (2013) contrasts different archives of the war in France and Algeria and the silences they contain. She uses a few snatched images of protests in Paris as a way of breaking the silence.

celebrating the achievement of types of 'ordinary modernity',⁵ the minidress and flared trousers fashionable in Mbouda as well as Paris, for all the violence nearby.⁶ Before discussing this in detail, I first return to the topic of archival silence and then introduce the specifics of the archival material I am considering.

All archives have silences, gaps, voids. A considerable amount of work has now shown that there are ways in which careful and painstaking research can begin to identify (more or less approximately) the zones of silence and, in various ways, make the silences resonate even if they may never speak (Zeitlyn 2012). What is unsaid and what is unsayable may be understood and appreciated even if never enunciated so never heard. If silence is thought to be inappropriate in a discussion of visual evidence, then we could think of the *invisible* in ways that return us to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's original argument (1995) about the incompleteness of archives from and about the Caribbean: they are silent about slavery, saying almost nothing about the slaves (neither naming them nor *showing* or *depicting* them). The idea of 'archival silence' stands for a general archival exclusion.

Yet close reading and assiduous research ('mining the archive' and reading archival sources in different ways) can allow us to 'excavate' hidden or silenced voices, such as that of the parricide of Pierre Rivière, allowing 'an insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (Foucault 1982; Sheringham 2011). This suggests that we are not complete prisoners of the archive and that we can sometimes recover (or 'hear') other voices or see other faces. For example, from archives we can excavate and recover subjugated voices of women (Davies 1987; Burton 2003), the insane (Foucault 1967), and religious dissidents (Ladurie 1978). Such arguments suggest that there is no fundamental difference between colonial archives and any other government or administrative archives: the unequal relationship between those in power and those governed is what matters.

Considering material from the Caribbean, Trouillot encourages us to think about the power plays affecting silences, determining which stories get told and which leave traces (1995). Recognizing this, we can 'read' the silences, visualize the emptiness: reading archival absences both 'against the grain' and 'along the grain' is a way of making silence speak or of seeing faces in the darkness (Pels 1997: 166; Stoler 2009). However, this process is not always possible. Ballantyne is doubtful about the project of 'recovery' (2001: 94). The answer to Spivak's (1988) question, 'Can the subaltern speak?' (at least for women), is sadly all too often 'no'. Discussing images of slaves, Best concludes that 'the archival disfiguration of any record of the enslaved may have been so intense . . . as to bar any hope of recovery and render the enslaved all but irretrievable' (2010: 158). Sometimes the past is truly lost. That said, we cannot know *a priori* what is fully lost without trying to find it. Susan Stewart closes her book about museums and the desire to collect with the thought that names on labels are an attempt to belie mortality (1993 [1984]). We must ask if names alone are enough. Perhaps we should accept that often we are left only with enigma, although we try for more than that.⁷

⁵ The phrase comes from Taylor (1999).

⁶ As Abdelmajid Hannoum (2010) argues (for Algeria), colonial violence is an essential component of modernity.

⁷ See Zeitlyn (2012: 465). In another paper (Zeitlyn 2015b), I discuss the possibilities of putting names to faces, the possibly redeeming 'resurrectionalist' affordances that adding names can produce and their limitations.

Working in the politically sensitive context of South African archives, Carolyn Hamilton and Pippa Skotnes (2014) consider how artistic interventions (that allow images to fade or blacken) can point to what is not visible. They introduce the idea of ‘anarchives’ to think about archival absences (which again returns us to Trouillot’s work). As Carine Zaayman (2014) puts it, this is a way of ‘picturing absence’: we are invited to imagine and visualize what is literally not there but which can yet be inferred or otherwise invoked. A parallel can also be found in Nicolas Argenti’s work (2007) from Oku, a Cameroonian chiefdom not far from Mbouda, which is where the images I consider come from. Argenti’s time period is far greater than the one that I engage with: he explores how something of the unspeakable, unshowable, undiscussable horrors of the transatlantic slave trade can be excavated from Oku by means of masquerading – how the singing and dancing by masked figures can be made to speak about an undiscussed past in which older men sold younger men and women down to the coast and eventually to the Americas. The material I consider contains a parallel set of silences and visual lacunae. As I argue below, in the context of Mbouda and Ouest Cameroon, such silences and visual absences emphasize fashion and intimacy as *achievements* worthy of celebration in photographs.

To enable readers to understand the case study presented below I need to provide several different background introductions. I am very conscious that the background risks overwhelming the material I wish to put in the foreground. Still, the historiography of photography in Cameroon and the troubled history of that country⁸ cannot be taken for granted.

Background 1: Cameroon and photography in Cameroon

The notion of cultural biography – and of social biography – has been used in photographic studies as a shorthand for the way in which the image is not a static entity to which viewers bring a variety of interpretations of ‘what can be seen’. Rather, images are more fruitfully and accurately construed as *dynamic cultural constructions*, which, just like ‘people’, are simultaneously produced as *objects* and *agents* in the social world. In other words, photographs are transformed by being in a collection in, variously, the Cameroon National Archives or the university archives or a photographer’s shop. There is a dynamic of appropriation: for older identity card photographs, the negatives were held by commercial photographers or the sitters (see below). Now ID cards are digitized so there are no negatives and only the government representatives can make and ‘own’ these important images.

The history of Cameroon has complexities that affect how we must discuss the path to independence.⁹ After World War One, the relatively short-lived German colony of Kamerun was divided up, with the parts being administered by France and Britain under League of Nation mandates, which later became United Nations trusteeships, until independence in 1960–61. The area I am considering was under French administration (see Figure 1). Inland, it had not been very much affected by German administration and was in effect brought under colonial administration

⁸ All the more so given the violent conflicts of the last few years, which sadly have many echoes with the UPC uprising of the 1950s and 1960s.

⁹ See summaries in, e.g., Fanso (1989) and Ngoh (1987).



Figure 1. Cameroon (Mbouda is between Bamenda and Bafoussam).

Source: UN Mapping Service open license, <<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/99/Un-cameroon.png>>.

under the French soon after World War One. A local administrative centre subdivision was created only in 1950 (Zeitlyn 2018); before that, Mbouda was administered from the long-established centre of Dschang, some 50 kilometres away by road. It is not entirely by coincidence that this date was only slightly before the armed struggle that



Figure 2. Studio Photo Jacques in Mbouda, c.1975–80. EAP054_I_125_181.
Source: Photograph © Jacques Toussele.

preceded independence and the introduction of identity cards with photographs (in about 1955; see below). The latter requirement brought into being a widespread network of photographers throughout Cameroon (Zeitlyn 2019).

By the 1980s, professional black and white photography in Cameroon was under threat from colour photography. It all but disappeared following the introduction of new identity cards in 1998, which were issued complete with instant photographs, removing the need for ‘passport photographs’. These had been produced easily using plates and 120 format film since solar contact prints could be made of the correct size for identity card photographs. Rural photographers could process and print the film without needing access to electricity. A small supporting industry of photographers¹⁰ was destroyed by the arrival of cheaper colour 35 millimetre processing in the cities and then the computerization of the national identity cards.¹¹ Jacques Toussele (his studio is shown in Figure 2 while Figure 3 shows the location of Mbouda) was among the many photographers who lost their livelihood (Zeitlyn 2019).

I have worked in collaboration with the Cameroon National Archives and the Endangered Archive Programme at the British Library to archive the work of Jacques

¹⁰ As celebrated by, e.g., Magnin (1997).

¹¹ For parallels from Togo and Côte d’Ivoire, see Werner (1993; 1999).

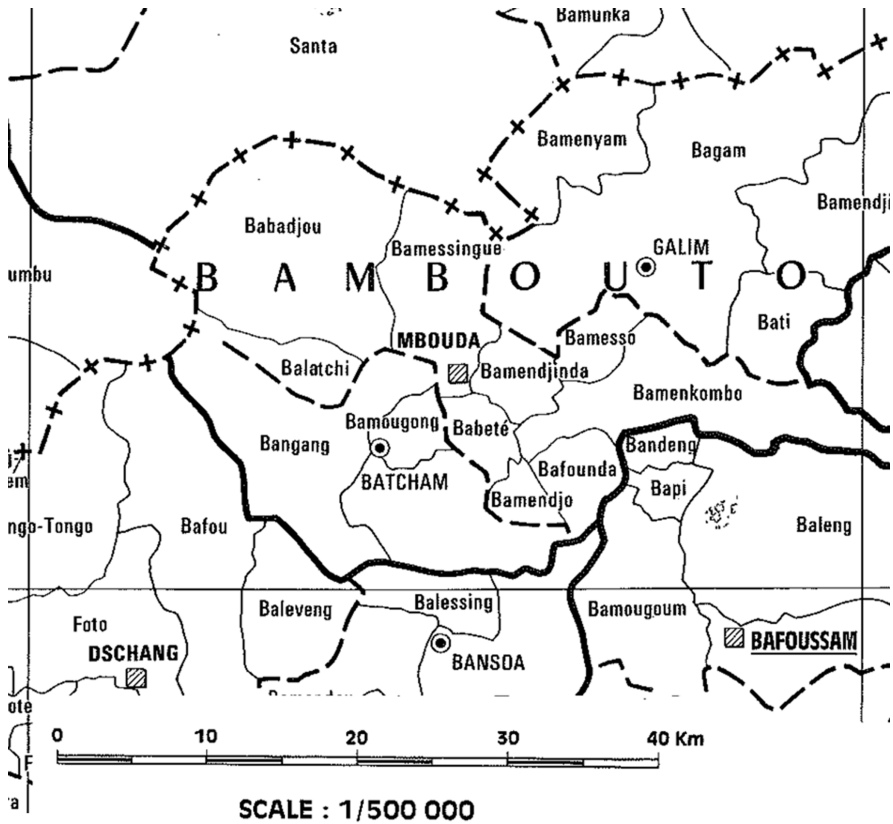


Figure 3. Mbouda area detail.

Source: Champaud (1973), IRD open licence, <<http://sphaera.cartographie.ird.fr/carte.php?num=2202&pays=CAMEROUN&iso=CMR>>.

Toussele.¹² To give a more concrete idea of the relative frequency of the different kinds of photographs in the archive, from a total of 46,504¹³ images, just over half are passport-style photographs for national identity cards (see Figure 5). Recreational images (by which I mean those not taken for administrative purposes; see Figure 4) include many groups of family or friends – almost 8 per cent (3,522) contain more

¹² See, e.g., Zeitlyn (2015a). Note that the project was undertaken collaboratively with Jacques Toussele, and while the images have been licensed for archiving and academic use by the photographer, all commercial rights are retained by his family following his death in 2017.

¹³ Note that this number relates to the archive as originally supplied to the Cameroon National Archives, Yaoundé, the British Library and several Cameroonian universities. Subsequently, some more damaged images (approximately 3,000) have been found that are in the process of being added to the archive, so the number will change. However, there is no reason to think that this will significantly alter the percentages between categories.



Figure 4. A street seller. EAP054_I_54_58.
Source: Photograph © Jacques Toussele.

than two people – as well as photographs of babies. I note that there are almost as many images of road traffic accidents (191) as there are of (Christian or civil¹⁴) weddings (212). There is also a small number of images taken in hospital showing bandaged patients recovering after surgery.¹⁵ I have done such counts with other Cameroonian contemporaries of Toussele, and the relative percentages are similar.¹⁶

It must also be noted that even identity card photographs are of considerable interest, especially when one examines the entire negative, not just the head and shoulders printed for the 4 x 4 centimetre passport-style images required for identity cards (see below).

Between client and photographer, a delicate negotiation, often unspoken, took place about props, backcloth and pose. Jacques Toussele and the other photographers

¹⁴ I note that traditional weddings are not reflected in the Toussele archive.

¹⁵ Beuvier makes it clear that road traffic accidents and illness are referred to diviners (*kemsi*) to establish whether their ultimate causation is the anger of the dead or a malediction by a living person (2014: 33ff.). As far as I can tell, photographs are not used in these consultations but photographs of damaged cars are sent to insurance companies (who, in Cameroon, according to widely held beliefs, never pay out).

¹⁶ Those surveyed are the photographers Samuel Finlak, Joseph Chila and a smaller sample of negatives from Photo Royale studio in Banyo, Adamaoua.

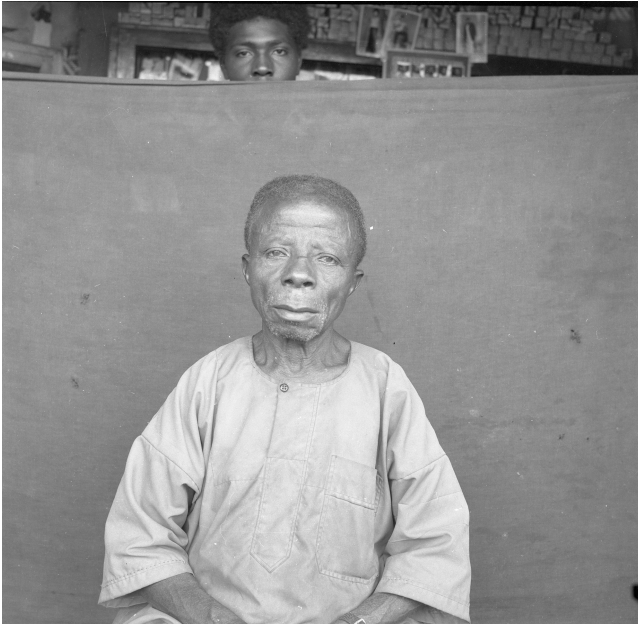


Figure 5. Portrait for an ID card. EAP054_I_177_24.
Source: Photograph © Jacques Toussele.

I have interviewed are insistent that although they made suggestions and delicate adjustments, the choices of poses and of props were made by the clients (who, as Toussele saw it, were in charge since they were paying). There are many different conventions that become visible when one compares similar images taken by different photographers. That similar poses are found in photographs taken in Banyo (in the cultural north) and in Mbouda (in the cultural south) is significant. The local traditions of display and posing available from masquerades and wood carving (most prominently on the outside walls of chiefs' palaces in the cultural zone of the wider Grassfields) seem not to have influenced how clients in Mbouda present themselves to the camera.¹⁷ In the remainder of this article, I discuss the reuse of administrative photographs and the uses, transformations and appropriation of Western fashions, for example as transmitted through copies of *Paris Match*, producing displays of intimacy among both young and old. Such uses are expressions of modernity and aspirations for material success.¹⁸

¹⁷ There is a trope found in statuary that is found in photographs: statues and people alike are shown in a 'thinking' pose with hand to chin. This is, however, not an exclusively Bamiléké trope: such statues are found throughout the wider Grassfields area, and I have cases of people adopting the pose in photographs from Adamaoua, far from the influence of Grassfields art. My hunch is that a set of poses was disseminated along with the technology of photography. Another example is a crouching pose that fits the whole person nicely in the square frame of a medium-format negative.

¹⁸ See Mustafa (2002) and Mießgang (2002) for *flâneurs* in Congo and elsewhere.

Background 2: the photographer Jacques Toussele and the UPC insurrection

The Cameroonian photographer Jacques Toussele took images between 1960 and 1985 against a background of violence: the uprising of the UPC. This was based in Ouest Cameroun and the town of Mbouda where Toussele was located. Indeed, in 1960, in the immediate aftermath of independence, Jacques Toussele moved to the comparative quiet of Bamenda (some 50 kilometres away) and worked there for a year.

Militants from the UPC started their armed struggle in 1956, before independence (which for Cameroun under French administration occurred in 1960). They continued long afterwards since the leaders of the UPC argued that France continued to rule in all but name. This argument was seen to be corroborated by the continuing role of the French army in 'anti-terrorist' activity that lasted for more than a decade after independence.

The emergency formally came to an end in 1972¹⁹ but the area continued to be very tightly policed for many years after that (at least until the founding president Ahidjo stepped down in 1982). During the emergency, many villages that traditionally had been spread out over the landscape were forcibly resettled, so they could be more easily policed, in small nucleated settlements (Socpa 1990).

The UPC insurrection in the late 1950s marked the run-up to independence. Among many other things, it was an impetus for the introduction of compulsory ID cards containing ID photographs. The key date was 24 September 1953,²⁰ when an ID card with a compulsory photograph became required in French Cameroon. This was imposed over the entire country in the years 1954–57. This was a very important economic spur for the development of studio photography in Cameroon and photographers such as Jacques Toussele (Zeitlyn 2019) benefited from it. A further refinement was that, in the areas where the insurrection was concentrated, an additional document, also with an ID-style photograph, was required in order to travel within the country, a '*laissez-passer*'. Failure by an adult to produce an ID card and travelling without a *laissez-passer* were both grounds for arrest.²¹ Checks by police (and other officials) of these documents were some of the most prevalent and most commonplace forms through which the weight of the state was experienced by ordinary Cameroonians.

The fight by the Cameroonian state with the help of the French army against UPC 'terrorists' was marked by violence and savagery on all sides: for example, heads were taken by both sides and severed heads were photographed (but not by Toussele). The use of such theatrics of violence exemplifies Teresa Koloma Beck's triadic theory of violence in which the third pole is the observer (Beck 2011). Violence in the time of the UPC maquis in Cameroon was, at least in part, exemplary and intended for wider audiences than those immediately present. Examples of such imagery have been published (e.g. in Deltombe *et al.* 2011), but I will not include them here. I must emphasize that there is no evidence at all of the insurrection in the archive of Jacques

¹⁹ Ordinance 72/13 of 26 August 1972.

²⁰ Order 599 of 24 September 1953, *Journal Officiel du Cameroun Français* (JOCF) 53, p. 1688.

²¹ As Patrice Nganang has pointed out to me, UPC members lacked ID cards, so, at checkpoints – at the entrance to towns such as Mbouda, for example – the absence of an ID card or *laissez-passer* was taken by the police as a marker of being a 'terrorist'. Routine checks for valid ID cards continue in contemporary Cameroon in part to enable the police to extort payments.

Toussele's work. However, a local reading makes it clear that the violence is ever present for its very absence and in its repudiation or denial: to hold a wedding, to celebrate a birth, to have a gathering of friends was no small achievement and one to be celebrated and marked by photography. Intimacy was achieved against the odds, and celebrated as such, a point I return to in the conclusion. Moreover, some forms of intimacy and their display could be seen as being as revolutionary (threatening the established order) as the violence of the UPC. Modernity, as exemplified by displays of intimacy between girlfriends and boyfriends, was a challenge to traditional sociality (traditional power structures in families, controlling the arrangement of marriages) and as such potentially revolutionary. Two further aspects are worthy of note: the photographs mark a form of resilience in the face of violence, in which the everyday becomes noteworthy. And second, this archive functions on a small scale, showing the 'micro-space' of a town in which the colony and resistance to it are externalized (in the sense that the armed conflict between the state forces and the UPC took place in the bush outside the towns).²²

Uses of photographs

Photographs had many uses and these often changed with time (as mentioned in the comments on cultural biography above). If the single most common reason for commissioning a photograph from one of the studio photographers was to get a passport-style print for the national identity card (or for school cards for secondary school pupils), then there were also many casual or recreational uses. Photographs of family groups, of babies, weddings and groups of friends were taken for display or for storage and discussion when albums were passed round.²³ Weddings, funerals,²⁴ official meetings and traffic accidents are among the different sorts of images found in the negative collections of the photographers.²⁵

In some cases, a single print or image could have different uses at different points in time: the ID photos of the elderly are in many cases the only surviving photographs of grandparents. After their death, the image from an ID card was copied so an enlarged print could be made for display on the wall and in processions at *funérailles* (post-mortem celebrations). Photographs were sent from the village to relatives in the towns (e.g. for secondary education). Those at school together in the towns exchanged photographs between groups of friends before they graduated and then scattered, some returning to their villages of origin, others moving to other cities and other relatives in search of employment.

²² This is a rhetorical turn that Azoulay (2020: 160) reminds us is part and parcel of the archival shuttering that constitutes archival violence.

²³ See Jahn (1967 [1960]: 169ff.) for an early description of how albums were used to introduce families to strangers.

²⁴ In this cultural context, this includes burial and post-mortem death celebrations, so-called *funérailles* in Cameroonian French or *cry-dies* in Cameroonian Pidgin English, which are typically held several years after a death. For an ethnography of *funérailles* close to Mbouda, see Franck Beuvier (2014) and also the film *Funeral Season (ou la Saison des Funérailles): marking death in Cameroon*, made in Dschang by Matthew Lancit in 2010.

²⁵ Rizzo has documented similar combinations in 1920s South Africa, where a visit to a photographer for passport-style photographs needed for travel documents produced a set of family portraits as well (2013).



Figure 6. Photograph for a marriage certificate, 1 March 1986. EAP054_I_96_78.
Source: Photograph © Jacques Toussele.

When Cameroonian citizens went to a local studio photographer to have photographs taken for their national identity cards, they were literally inscribing themselves into the nation state.²⁶ As has been mentioned, the representation was at times changed post-mortem: the children of the deceased would often take the ID cards to another photographer (or an anthropologist) to have the photograph copied for display on the wall – it was often the only image of a deceased parent or grandparent. But uses changed before that: a photograph made for a civil marriage certificate would sometimes be put in an album or a large copy printed for display on the wall. Once taken, these images have different lives of their own. Once the negative exists in the photographer's archive, and if spare prints are held by individuals, then for all their role in state bureaucracies, the images may have a life beyond their bureaucratic uses.²⁷ The social lives of photographs are even more complicated than those of other things, since they are often multiple: in the case of a photograph taken for a marriage certificate (see Figure 6), the image may have many different lives in

²⁶ Poole (1997) discusses parallel South American material; for African photography, see, e.g., Sprague (1978), Geary (1986) and Mustafa (2002).

²⁷ This argument was first made by Igor Kopytoff (1986).



Figure 7. A framed and captioned marriage certificate photograph on the wall of a house.
 Source: Used with permission. Original photograph © Jacques Toussele.

parallel (what happened in the 1960s continues in the 2010s and 2020s). One copy lives in the administrative archives, stapled to the official register copy of the marriage certificate, a duplicate of which will be held by the couple possibly along with the large print on display as already mentioned (see Figure 7), alongside or instead of photographs of church weddings. In some cases, homemade Christmas cards are made in which the couple (represented by the marriage certificate photograph) are surrounded by photographs of their children.

I should explain that, in Cameroon, many different forms of marriage are possible: most people undergo what are called 'traditional' marriages, governed by local customs and not (much) recognized by the state. The world religions and the state also administer forms of marriage, and the state requires a civil marriage before a ceremony in a world religion takes place. In other words, civil marriage certificates are required by Christian churches before church marriage services are performed. My impression is that in the north of Cameroon, there was and still is less stringency for Islamic marriages about having the civil certificate before the religious ceremony, but this may apply only in the countryside. As illustrated below, Cameroonian civil marriage certificates include a photograph showing the heads of the husband and wife; they also state whether the marriage is monogamous or polygamous.

It may be helpful to consider the biographies of administrative documents and the photographs that are attached to them: they have lives and indeed they may have afterlives – both at the *funérailles* and now in archives.

Aspiring to *Mbouda Match* and looking stylish (looking French while fighting the French)

And so, finally, I want to turn to a discussion of intimacy and the lack of depiction of violence in the Toussele archive. In one way, this raises the question of why people in Mbouda lauded French culture, given the history of state repression of the UPC with its anti-colonial and anti-French policy.²⁸

In broad terms, the UPC was opposed to and was fighting against the French colonial state from about 1955. Furthermore, this became part of the Cold War: the UPC was seen as part of the radical left. By the mid-1960s, it was fighting the Cameroonian state and the French, and although by the mid-1970s the UPC had all but ceased to exist, its supporters remained opposed to the Cameroonian neocolonial state (a state in which the French had left in name only and continued to exert influence and extract wealth from the nominally independent country).

Long before 1980, the young people seen in Toussele's photographs did not feel the animus towards the French that some of their parents and grandparents did. I do not want to get involved in hypotheticals or worse. 'Should' they have felt more hostile to the French and French fashion than they did? This is not a good question. By the time these photographs were taken, the worst of the fighting was over, and for the young people getting their pictures taken, the enmity of their parents towards the French might have seemed a very different thing from their aspirations to be cool like Johnny Hallyday, or to wear short skirts like Brigitte Bardot. Exploring why French fashion was trendy in Cameroon in the 1970s reveals a disconnect between being cool and being anti-colonial. Perhaps the best response is to say that hip fashion was trendy everywhere, so 'Why not in Cameroon?' – or rather, 'So of course in Cameroon.' The people in the photographs were actively responding to world fashion, not passively consuming it: the dresses, suits and flared trousers demonstrated hipsterness. They were a Cameroonian form²⁹ of what Ferguson, discussing the Zambian Copperbelt, calls a 'cosmopolitan' style (1999: 90).

As Achille Mbembe put it in the course of a discussion on the oracular dreams of one of the UPC leaders, Ruben Um Nyobè, 'there was no economic struggle in the colony that was not simultaneously a struggle over meaning' (1991: 97). These 'struggles for representation' (*ibid.*: 101) or 'for the control of the networks of indigenous imaginary' (*ibid.*: 104) were complex, and, as Mbembe argues (*ibid.*: 106), traditional morality was manifold and cannot be reduced to a single position. Wearing miniskirts or minidresses was controversial in 1960s Cameroon as it was at the time in France, and indeed the conflict between the young – 'youth' as a category – and older generations was perhaps even more pointed in Cameroon than it was in Europe.

The period of the UPC insurrection coincided with an epidemic of royal palace burnings across Ouest Cameroon. These were the results not only of generational conflict but also of discontent with chiefs siding with the government (against the UPC) as well as their arrogation of power during the colonial period (see Malaquais 2002; Warnier 1996; 2005). Mike Rowlands (1995) situates this in a wider context (and over a far longer time period) of disempowered youth using the effects and by-products of

²⁸ This was first posed to me this starkly by Richard Fardon, who I thank for the provocation.

²⁹ In the 1960s and 1970s, most of the clothes were made by Cameroonian tailors using locally available cloth to recreate styles published in *Vogue*, *Paris Match*, etc.

colonialism to challenge the established holders of power. Indeed, the chiefs and senior men had benefited from colonial rule: their power had increased because the administration stifled opposition. This suggests that perhaps it was less a case of wanting to look French than of young people wanting not to look 'traditional',³⁰ and looking French (then a paradigmatic way of looking modern) was a good way to do this. A display of 'modern intimacy' in a photograph was a sort of challenge to the colonial status quo.³¹ There is, of course, a profound irony in this: as Hannah Feldman has argued (principally discussing Algeria but encompassing all of France's colonies), the wars for independence had an important cultural reflex and a visual one to boot. Miniskirts in Paris were not as disconnected from postcolonial struggles far from the metropole as they might seem, or as might be claimed for them.³² Jacob Tatsitsa, a historian of the UPC insurrection says:

The fight against imperial France, in my view, was above all against political and economic domination. I did not find in the archives a slogan of the nationalist party demanding the rejection of the French dress style. If there was even such a slogan, these young people, at that time, would not have followed it openly for fear of falling under the anti-subversion (counterinsurgency) laws of 1962.³³

What this meant for ordinary people was that to carry on everyday life was itself a struggle.³⁴ As I have said above, to perform a Christian wedding, baptism, a burial or a post-mortem celebration was not easy or straightforward, as gatherings were policed. If one succeeded in participating then a visual record of the event was indeed a record of achievement, an achievement in more senses than one.

Another response was to cast one's eyes to the wider horizon and in defiance of the misery at home, to aspire to and to display oneself as a fashionista,³⁵ a member of the modern world as at home in Paris as in, say, Bamenjinda (Mbouda). If Mbouda was a part of the global village, then the town was Paris. The advert for '33' beer said '*Comme à Paris*' (see Figure 8). At the risk of reading too much into an advertising slogan, I think in Ouest Cameroon in the early 1970s this was taken to mean that we should all be, we should all *aspire* to be, we should all *appear* to be '*comme à Paris*'. For many of

³⁰ As a reviewer points out, the rejection of 'tradition' was not across the board. They were rejecting the colonial repurposing of tradition applied to a more centralized distribution of power. Other forms of tradition were respected and flourished along with photography, for example *funérailles* (death celebrations).

³¹ This parallels the challenges to traditional patterns of authority in family life from both the Spiritan missionaries and French administrators in Cameroon starting a generation before independence, as discussed by Kombo (2024).

³² Feldman (2014) uses Hannah Arendt's idea of a 'public space of appearance' to critique Malraux's high modernism in *The Voice of Silence*, which silences colonial voices in its stress on the metropole (Paris).

³³ Personal communication, email, 31 May 2018.

³⁴ There is now a substantial literature on the UPC uprising. As well as the work already cited, scholars such as Meredith Terretta (e.g. 2005; 2010) have been examining the reflexes in the villages affected. Antoine Socpa's important work on *camps de regroupement* is cited above.

³⁵ See the discussion of *Les Sapes* in Kinshasa (Friedman 1994).



Figure 8. Detail, *Comme à Paris*. EAP054_I_182_383.

Source: Photograph © Jacques Toussele.

Toussele's younger clients, their displays of intimacy were a modernist challenge to traditional power structures, and I suspect that was part of their attraction.

Meredith Terretta's account of political violence in Cameroon considers this too. She discusses the political repertoire formed from 'gestures, music, clothing, and performance' (2013: 97) and other elements of 'colonial modernity', describing them in Nicolas Argenti's words as the tools of the colonizer used against them (Argenti 2007: 163). On this account, it was deeply political to dress as the French did; freedom meant the freedom to dress in modern ways.

This finds some confirmation in Jennifer Bajorek's recent discussion of photography in Senegal and Benin (considering a time that, I note, coincides with the main period of UPC violence). As she puts it:

Without a doubt, cultural factors played a significant role in the democratization of photography in Francophone west Africa in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The medium had become associated, at this moment, with radios, telephones . . . and James Brown; motorcycles, movie going, and miniskirts; romantic love, state formation, and longdistance travel – hence the many studio portraits featuring cars and scooters, backdrops depicting jet planes, and the ubiquitous hitchhiker pose. (Bajorek 2020: 5)

This raises some wider questions about comparison between Jacques Toussele and other photographers in Cameroon and beyond (see Figures 9 and 10). Comparison with



Figure 9. Posing with the photographer's motorbike. This image was used as an example on display in the studio. EAP054_1_111_20.

Source: Photograph © Jacques Toussele.

contemporary studio photographs, not only photographers from other parts of Cameroon not affected by the UPC uprising (e.g. Kameni Michel in Yaoundé (see Roberts 2019)) but also those in West and Central Africa, reveals a very similar set of tropes. Even the work of photographers in Ghana and Mali who had no direct connection with Jacques Toussele show very clear affinities. In part, this is through the widespread circulation of magazines such as *Vogue* (and associated cultural imperialisms). According to my informants, the fashion magazine titles circulating in Cameroon in the 1970s included *Vogue*, *Paris Match*, *Elle*, *Marie-Claire*, *Amina* (after 1972), *Marie-France* and *Modes et Travaux*, as well as the make-it-yourself magazine *100 Idées* and the music and pop culture title *Salut les Copains*.



Figure 10. Jacques Toussele on a motorcycle with baby Annie (born c.1984). EAP054_1_123_197. Source: Photograph © Jacques Toussele.

Also read in Mbouda was the African-published *Bingo!*, which features in an image Jacques Toussele took in Mbouda in around 1977. Indeed, in 1968, he published a letter in *Bingo!* asking for correspondents to discuss photography.³⁶ Thus, working without the immediate pressures of an insurgency, many African photographers took images very similar to those taken by Jacques Toussele. The difference lies not in the images themselves but in how they were (and still are) understood by local viewers. Even well into the 2000s, people in Mbouda will hint at the context when looking at these sorts of images. Others, more like Argenti's informants in Oku, do not say as much. Saying nothing produces a different sort of silence from the archival silence already considered. Cases such as Oku, as considered by Argenti, and now Mbouda, via the Toussele archive, raise important issues of evidence and interpretation. These can be summarized by the old truism 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence'. More tellingly, we must ask how a reader can tell if we are wrong. What sorts of evidence can be adduced to help decide one way or another? Reflecting on how the Toussele photographs are or were seen in Mbouda has made me realize that my evidence for this article comes not as much from the images as from the discussions I have had when trying to document them, and from talking about family albums with people in Mbouda and neighbouring villages. Here, I have been struck by contrasts with conversations I have had about similar photographs 200 kilometres further north on the Tikar plain when documenting the work of the photographers Samuel Finlak and Joseph Chila (a former pupil of Toussele), where the local population was

³⁶ *Bingo!*, September 1968, no. 188, p. 81.

relatively unaffected by the UPC troubles. On the Tikar plain, people seemed happier to talk about the memories elicited by old photographs, in terms of both the specific stories associated with an individual image and the wider social context that a photograph or an album might evoke.

Dealing with contrasting experiences of photo elicitation, trying to decide if a lacuna is 'evidence of absence' or not, puts considerable pressure on the analyst about how to be fair to the material and how to produce a reasoned and reasonable interpretation. Absences have implications even when only the analyst wants to take the steps needed to draw them out. The important thing is to be clear and honest about who is making the inference on the basis of what material.

But let us return to the material under consideration here. Working on fertility concerns among Bamiléké women (which are often discussed in terms evoking the period of the UPC 'troubles'), Feldman-Savelsberg, Ndonko and Yang report profound distrust of Western-style medical practices and a simultaneous desire for their choice of its benefits: 'Several women interviewed in 2002 described seeking out "important" vaccinations for their children at the clinic attached to the Centre Pasteur, "the source of all vaccinations", while expressing a refusal to participate in vaccination campaigns conducted by public health outreach workers' (Feldman-Savelsberg *et al.* 2005: 17). At the risk of seeming too fanciful, I see a parallel between this and the attitudes revealed in the photographs: they were fighting the French while admiring and sometimes wearing French fashion.

Where is the city for the global village?

At a theoretical level, I find encouragement in an eclectic mix of Bruno Latour's wholism and attentiveness to the social role of objects, which sits well with Kendall Walton's idea of props for mimesis (1990) and Zerubavel's powerful notion of 'mnemonic others' (2003). A photograph (and the stories people tell of it and in response to it, at different points in time, in different places) is a part of the social lives of people.

Hence, an image taken for an official document (e.g. a marriage certificate, where it is *not* inappropriate to read it as a portrait of affection and intimacy) can take on a different role when reproduced on a greetings card (where the reading of affection may be appropriate). That magazines such as *Paris Match*, *Vogue* and *Modes et Travaux* were important players in 1970s Mbouda can be seen in the fashions adopted and the poses struck in the photographs. *This* was what modernity looked like!

Discussing forms of African modernity in nearby Bamenda (less than 50 kilometres from Mbouda) and writing of a period when Jacques Toussele was still active as a photographer, Mike Rowlands said:

people will display their mobility and wealth in the acquisition of Western style clothes and shoes. Imported clothes from France and shoes from Italy are the most favoured at present because, although they are more expensive than clothes imported from Nigeria they are considered more elegant and distinctive. (Rowlands 1996: 204)

Conclusions

Kristin Ross discusses the speed of French modernization after World War Two in her book *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*. She makes it clear that it is not a coincidence that ideas of a 'modern life' took hold in France in the 1950s at the same time as decolonization. She wants us to take

seriously the catchphrase popularized by Lefebvre and the Situationists in the early 1960s: 'the colonization of everyday life.' In the case of France, in other words, it means considering the various ways in which the practice of colonialism outlived its history. With the waning of its empire, France turned to a form of interior colonialism; rational administrative techniques developed in the colonies were brought home and put to use side by side with new technological innovations such as advertising in reordering metropolitan, domestic society, the 'everyday life' of its citizens. (Ross 1994: 7)

By the 1960s and 1970s, citizens in Francophone Mbouda shared these aspirations, and these are visible in some of the imagery produced by local photographers such as Jacques Toussele.

As this article has made clear, the Jacques Toussele archive has no direct reference to the UPC insurrection and emergency. There are no images of the sort we know were taken during the period.³⁷ There are no severed heads, or the bodies of combatants exposed at crossroads or outside police stations. Nor are there photographs of UPC members taken during clandestine visits to their families that other photographers from Mbouda, such as the late 'Louis National', said they took. Jacques Toussele was not a political actor and did not take risks with the state (unlike him, at least one other contemporary photographer in Mbouda took images for UPC members). Nor can one retrieve from his archive anything about the social upheavals as a consequence of the forced moves to the artificially created and controlled '*camps de regroupement*' (Socpa 1990). Jacques Toussele and his archive are silent about all of this (in visual terms masking or hiding, more or less consciously choosing not to depict it). What this silence does, however, is put more emphasis on fashion and intimacy as an *achievement* and sometimes as a playfully provocative achievement at that. In images such as those considered here, intimacy and affection are being staged, or, as Jess Auerbach would have it, 'rebranded' as modern (2020: 151ff.). They challenge traditional sociality, just as the UPC challenged traditional authorities who colluded with the colonial and postcolonial powers. Playing at or staging intimacy can indeed create the intimacy depicted.

Looking at the photographs today, and from somewhere other than Ouest Cameroun, we have to do work to recognize what we are seeing. For what may now seem like a somewhat quaint (damaged) old print in an ageing photo album was in fact a pointed piece of bravura (see Figure 11): the performance of 'modern' friendship or of being a modern cosmopolitan in the face of a repressive state. Although perhaps never stated as such, the freedom to be modern, and to be *modern in their own terms*, was, of course, what they had always been fighting for.

³⁷ In this way, the Toussele archive is marked by such untaken photographs – as discussed by Azoulay (2016: 158).



Figure 11. Jacques Toussele posing with a client. EAP054_I_51_62.
Source: Photograph © Jacques Toussele.

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