
Historical Photographic Collections: an untapped resource?

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The subject of this paper is a recent initiative to make a large historical photographic collection, that of the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (UCMAA) accessible for first time. In addition to providing an overview of the variety of collection content, it will discuss the approach that has been adopted and how this is appropriate for the character of the collection and the interests of its user communities. The paper raises the subject of the potential use of historical photographs for participatory, collaborative projects.

The key propositions which will be discussed through the paper are as follows:

- That historical photographs should be recognised as unique objects and cultural artifacts of value and significance in their own right, deserving the same kinds of attention as other sorts of artifact collection.
- That photographs are a rich and complex resource which, as reproducible images, have great potential for varied uses.
- That in order to realise the participatory, collaborative uses of photograph collections we need to invest in their on-going care and documentation.

Photographs are everywhere; practically everyone has experience of them in this image-pervasive world.

Photographs not only record, but are an active part of total cultural heritage. Photographic collections can be found in all continents in a variety of institutions. They are held by public institutions such as museums, libraries and archives, and in the private collections of commercial companies, individuals and families, and professional photographers. The reasons for their existence and their cultural significance vary. In museums, despite their association with accessioned artifacts collections, photographic acquisitions were often not catalogued systematically, nor cared for intentionally. Clearly, detailed research into individual collection histories is required to understand the changing status of photograph collections in different institutions.

In the last 20 to 30 years there has been increasing recognition of the importance and value of photographs as art objects, historical information-bearing resources, and cultural artifacts worthy of attention in their own right. For instance, as Mark Haworth-Booth, Curator of Photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum, has commented, when the photographs were moved from the National Art Library to the V&A's Department of Prints, Drawings and Paintings in 1977, "the Photography Collection became part of the history of graphic art [...] instead of an accessory to printed books"¹. *Standards in the Museum Care of Photographic Collections* published by the Museums and Galleries Commission in 1996 affirms the fact that photograph collections are no longer regarded as ephemeral accruals to artifact, book or manuscript collections. The expert panel who compiled the standards are the first generation of dedicated photographic curators in the U.K. to have received funding for collections management

and research which is enabling access to and increasing awareness of historical photographic collections.

In recent years we have started to see the results of work with photographic collections in the form of exhibitions and publications which would not have been possible 25 years ago. There have been large scale exhibitions which have focused on historical photographs at major museums and galleries in Britain, for instance, at the Hayward Gallery, the Barbican, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and at the City Arts Centre, Edinburgh². Equally important for raising the profile of historical photographs with the general public are smaller scale exhibitions such as those developed around social history community oriented projects. For example, Brighton Museum and Art Gallery have developed *My Brighton*, a community history project, and *Brighton and Hove in Pictures*, which are making historical images (including those from a collection of 50,000 glass plate negatives and 1,500 prints and drawings) more accessible to the public through interactive multimedia programmes and CD Roms³. Relatedly, the Birmingham Library Service outreach History Van promotes historical photographs belonging to the people of Birmingham themselves⁴. Since 1992 the History Van has carried scanning and recording equipment to collect photographic images and oral history of people in Birmingham at schools, community libraries and public events. The material has then been disseminated globally via the Internet through exhibitions on the library website.

Anthropological Photographic Collections

Photographs are familiar. We assume that we can interpret them with relative ease. Yet I have found that the photographs in the collection of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology often resist my interpretation as much as invite it. Because photographic meaning is not inherent or universal they cannot be understood in isolation⁵. Like other artifacts, photographs created with a particular intention in mind may subsequently be used and interpreted in many different ways. The varied stages of their life histories in museums affirm this rule.

Alongside the photograph collections of the Department of Ethnography of the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum of the University of Oxford, and the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, UCMAA's Photograph Collection is one of the four main collections of historical anthropological photographs in the United Kingdom. It was the last to begin to systematically document and conserve its holdings. By 'anthropological photographs' I mean that the images were either taken with anthropological intent, or they were kept by the institution because of perceived anthropological content. Over the last 20 years, identification, documentation and subsequent research on such collections in the U.K. and overseas has resulted in their recognition as historical sources for the communities represented as well as the general public and academic researchers.

Case Study of the UCMAA Photograph Collection

The University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology was founded in 1884. It has extensive archaeological and anthropological collections from all regions of the world, and collects local archaeological material of all periods. The museum was recently recognised by

the Museums and Galleries Commission as a 'Designated Museum' with collections of international importance and quality. If you were to read the book on the history of the anthropological collections published to mark the centenary of the museum in 1984, you could be forgiven for not realising the artefacts were closely interconnected with a photograph collection numbering over 90,000 items⁶. At that time relatively little was known about the content of the Photograph Collection, as it was largely uncatalogued and due to lack of funds there was no dedicated Photograph Curator. Until the late 1960s the photographs were kept at the end of a corridor known as 'the dump', when they were moved to the attic of the museum. In the mid 1980s the tide finally began to turn for the Photograph Collection when environmental control equipment was installed in the attic.

In October 1997 the Museum began a Photograph Collection Project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund to re-house, accession, and catalogue the collection, and to produce researched catalogues for specific sections⁷. When the lottery bid was submitted, it was estimated that the entire Photograph Collection numbered approximately 30,000 to 40,000 items. Two years on, a conservative estimate puts the figure at 90,000. How many photographs do you think a box the size of a small screen television can hold? In one such box I was amazed to count 6,000 prints!

Initial research showed that photographs were actively acquired from the foundation of the museum in the 1880s until the 1950s. Many anthropologists and archaeologists donated their field photographs, including prints, negatives and lantern slides. A large lantern slide teaching collection of approximately 8,000 slides was created for University departmental use, and during the 1930s a selection of 10,000 photographs representing all continents were mounted and catalogued, and classified by geographic area. This mounted print

collection is known as the 'Haddon Collection', after A. C. Haddon, the anthropologist who made the selection⁸. Other than a few isolated print collections which have been catalogued in detail, the good organisation of the Haddon Collection existed in marked contrast to the remaining photographs which were found in dusty boxes, acidic envelopes and old suitcases.

Following a preliminary assessment of the Photograph Collection, a strategy was developed for its care and documentation during the Heritage Lottery funded phase of the project. Other than the catalogued and mounted Haddon Collection, the remaining photographs have been inaccessible for the memorable past. Making the collection available to researchers, people represented in or associated with the photographs, and the general public was a priority for the museum. In order to achieve this aim, it was decided that for this stage of the Project 30,000 items should be accessioned and catalogued at inventory level. They should be re-housed to current conservation standards, and stored in an appropriate climatic environment. In addition, Photo Archivists were to carry out research on specific collections, and a section of the budget was to be set aside for inviting visiting experts to complete researched catalogues. When the work is completed it is intended that the Photo Collection Catalogue will be made available alongside UCMAA's Object Collection Catalogue on the Museum's website. It was decided that at this stage we would not digitize the collection, other than for a small digital image exhibition to be attached to the museum's website. We need to find out what we have got and to stabilize its condition before establishing and acting upon a digital imaging strategy.

The cataloguing system which has been developed is the result of the cataloguing policies of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology which follow the SPECTRUM standards, and, importantly, consultation with a number of colleagues working with anthropological photograph collections

internationally⁹. All colleagues consulted have been generous with their time and in sharing their knowledge.

Most of the images in the collection are part of smaller collections, and a number of them are bound in print and negative albums. In order to situate a photograph within the wider context of the collection and/or album to which it belongs, three separate but inter-linked computer databases have been created. The three databases are used for cataloguing individual items, albums, and whole collections. They are integrated in the Museum's overall collections management system; through the Photograph Collections Catalogue you can access Object Collection Catalogue, Biography, Bibliography, and Manuscript Archive Catalogue databases. As I mentioned earlier, photographs, like other cultural artifacts, are susceptible to multiple interpretations from diverse perspectives. As Wooley and Brewster have suggested, a photograph can be an art object, item of ethnographic enquiry, and family heirloom all at the same time¹⁰. For photographs catalogued at research level, we aim to incorporate different sources of information in each record, including where available, original inscriptions, the comments of visiting experts, relatives of the people depicted, and the cataloguer. Specifying sources of information is particularly important, as, to a certain extent, information is historical and cultural interpretation. Treating photographs as cultural artifacts and historical documents rather than solely as a picture library of images with image content involves recognising the importance of recording both the historical and cultural circumstances of their production and consumption, and different interpretations of image content, in order to situate the photograph more fully.

So, what are the results of four person-years work undertaken over two years? We have accessioned and catalogued at inventory level over 35,000 photographs, re-housed approximately 24,000 photographic objects, and completed research

catalogues for five collections. The Photograph Collection is characterised by a variety of forms, geographic areas and subjects portrayed, dates, and sources. Object types include photographic prints, glass and film negatives, lantern slides, transparencies, drawings, paintings, prints, moving film and video. All continents are represented in the collection. Subject matter varies from archaeological digs such as lantern slides of the excavation of the Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, in the 1939, to photographic prints of Hindu temples in Madhya Pradesh, India, and Igbo masquerades in South Eastern Nigeria in the 1930s. Photographs date from the 1860s to the 1990s, however the majority are from the 1890s to the 1930s. An example of some of the earlier material are J. W. Lindt's five albums entitled 'Picturesque New Guinea' which were taken on Sir Peter Scratchley's expedition of annexation to south east New Guinea in 1885.

Donors to the Collection include professional archaeologists and anthropologists, travellers, missionaries, colonial officers and curators from other museums. The collection includes the original glass plate negatives from Haddon's field work expeditions to the Torres Strait Islands (between Australia and Papua New Guinea) in 1888, 1898 and 1914¹¹. Prints made from these negatives are currently displayed in the temporary exhibition at the Museum curated by Anita Herle and Jude Philp, 'Torres Strait Islanders: an exhibition marking the centenary of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition'¹². Haddon encouraged many of his students to do research in the Pacific, and to use photography as part of their fieldwork method. For instance, John Layard who conducted fieldwork in New Caledonia in 1914-5, and Gregory Bateson who carried out fieldwork in New Britain and Papua New Guinea between 1927 and 1938 both donated photographs as well as object collections to the museum.

Two major African photographic collections which are linked with objects held by the museum are the 6,000 prints by Northcote Thomas, Government Anthropologist in Nigeria from 1909 to 1912 of Igbo and Edo peoples, and the Reverend John Roscoe's 2,700 photographs from the Mackie Ethnological Expedition to Central Africa in 1919 and 1920. These collections demonstrate the interconnections between individuals and institutions, and the fact that a museum's holdings form part of a wider museum community. In the case of G. I. Jones, who was a District Officer in south eastern Nigeria from 1926 to 1945, UCMAA was donated his photograph collection depicting Igbo and Ibibio masks and masquerades and a few objects; Jones collected other objects for the National Museum of Nigeria, and the Pitt Rivers Museum of the University of Oxford. Likewise, Roscoe donated objects to both UCMAA and the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Photographs of Europe include images taken by Haddon on the Aran Islands in 1880s, and numerous photographs of archaeological digs in the British Isles taken and collected by members of the University of Cambridge Department of Archaeology, such as those of Miles Burkitt and Glen Daniel. There are extensive collections depicting Asia, including over 5,000 anthropological fieldwork photographs of Ethel Lindgren depicting north west Manchuria in the 1930s, over 2,000 photographs of 1930s Tibet, taken and collected by Frederick Williamson, a Political Officer for the British Government in Tibet at the time, and the photograph collection of Harold Hargreaves, former Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India.

The photographs representing the Americas reveal equally varied histories of creation and acquisition. A notable collection depicting South America is that of Thomas Whiffen, a traveller and explorer in the Colombian Upper Amazon during 1908-9. Some of the North American photographs reveal turn of the century links between UCMAA and the Smithsonian Institution, Washington

D.C.. Recently, collaborative research which I have initiated with Paula Fleming, the Photo Archivist of the National Anthropological Archives, National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution, have led to the discovery that our collection includes exchange copies of many photographs of Native North American delegations to Washington D. C. in the 1850s, 60s and 70s as they went to sign land treaties with the American government.

Possibilities for Collaboration and Use

What are the Possibilities for Collaboration and Use? With such a varied and rich photographic collection, it is hoped that future work might develop collaborative and participatory projects through the interest, involvement and commitment of three parties: the museum, institutions with related collections, and the museum's user community.

The first, and seemingly obvious party is the museum itself. The outward looking approach adopted for the documentation of the Photograph Collection at CUMAA has included incorporating diverse sources of information in the catalogue records and inviting visiting experts to research the collection. The strategy of prioritizing care and cataloguing has meant that we are now in a position to allow access to a significant proportion of the collection. Already, increasing awareness of the existence of the collection has led to growing numbers of enquiries and visitors. It is hoped that research publications and exhibitions will follow, including a small exhibition with digital images of photographs from the collection attached to the Museum's website. It is anticipated that the Photo Collection Catalogue database will be accessible via the Internet in the near future; an invaluable first port of call for enquirers all over the world.

The second party is that of staff in institutions with related collections. On-going consultation and

collaboration with an active international network of colleagues from other institutions has been invaluable for this project¹³. Areas discussed include appropriate documentation systems and care strategies, current research, and issues relating to anthropological photograph collections. In addition, opportunities for collaborative research between institutions on interconnected collections histories have begun to emerge.

The third party are the users of the museum. Identified user groups include the general public, international researchers, and the people represented through the photographs. People whose histories are associated with anthropological photographic collections are an increasingly important user community, who, as Edwards has pointed out, are interested in gaining access to photographic collections. A number of projects have developed in North America, Australia and the Pacific to this end¹⁴. A conference on the history and use of photography in the Arctic of North America and Greenland was held in 1996 at the Department of Ethnography of the British Museum. George Quviq Qulaut, an Inuit from Igloodik, North West Territories, Canada, gave the keynote address¹⁵. His comments drew attention to the power of photographs to provoke memories - the multiple narratives of personal recollection - and their potential as a resource for cultural assertion and revival¹⁶.

The fact that photographs are reproducible has not only affected the creation of photographic collections in the past, but affects the potential uses of those collections in the present and the future. Clearly, new technologies create significant possibilities for distribution and access to photographs, transformed into digital images and made available via the Internet and CD Rom. Nevertheless, hard copy prints remain important. Ron Day and Terance Whap, elected Island Chairs of Mer and Mabuiag, Torres Strait Islands, were consultants for UCMAAs Torres Strait Expedition exhibition, and came to Cambridge for

the opening of the show in July 1998. While visiting the Museum, they looked at both the Object and Photograph Collections, and took prints of some of the expedition photographs home with them. To develop such links and participatory projects involving museum collections and user communities requires, amongst other things, on-going commitment from all parties. Learning from the experience of colleagues can be particularly important. It was recently agreed that participatory projects between museums with ethnographic collections and associated communities is to be the subject of the Museum Ethnographers Group annual conference in May 2000. However, I would stress that continuing investment of time and resources in the basic care and documentation of collections and the allocation of resources for serving the needs of users is essential if their potential for participatory projects is to be fulfilled.

In conclusion, the size and scope of the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology's Photograph Collection reveals an abundant, complex and important visual resource for a wide variety of users. The work funded by the Heritage Lottery since Autumn 1997 has demonstrated the international significance of the collection. If future funding is secured it is hoped that alongside the documentation and care of the collection, participatory projects with diverse users and collaborative projects between institutions will develop further. And who knows, with a bit of luck, it may even be possible to secure the permanent Photograph Curator post which this Collection warrants!

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- 1 Haworth-Booth 1996: 3.
- 2 In the UK, large scale exhibitions have drawn attention to historical photographs though a variety of subjects, including the history of photographic practice, the work of specific photographers, particular photographic collections and genres of image, and photography in specific countries or regions. For instance, in London: *The Art of Photography, 1839-1989* at the Royal Academy of Arts, 1989; *In Our Time, The World As Seen by Magnum Photographers at the Hayward Gallery*, 1990; and in Edinburgh at the City Art Centre in 1993 *The Waking Dream, Photography's First Century*. More recently there has been a series of exhibitions at the Barbican Art Gallery in London including *Native Nations* in 1998, and *Africa by Africa*, and *Picasso and Photography* in 1999.
- 3 See Roles 1996, 1998.
- 4 See Morris 1999.
- 5 As Lidchi and King assert in their introduction to a conference proceedings about photography in the Arctic, photographs are "rich, ambiguous and embedded cultural products" (1998: 13).
- 6 See Ebin and Swallow 1984.
- 7 I have worked full-time on the Photo Collection Project, managing it jointly with a part-time colleague, Dr. Sudeshna Guha; over the summer of 1999 we were joined by two Cataloguing Assistants, Gennevieve Boast and Claire Thornton.
- 8 The photographs from which the initial selection was made were donated by colleagues and friends of A. C. Haddon, as a festschrift for recognition of his pioneering work as an anthropologist on his eightieth birthday in 1935. Haddon immediately donated the mounted collection to UCMAA, and subsequently Haddon's colleagues at UCMAA selected additional prints to be mounted and included in the Haddon Collection.
- 9 Colleagues who have discussed photographic collections management issues at various stages of this project and who have provided invaluable advice include: Elizabeth Edwards, Pitt Rivers Museum University of Oxford; Chris Wright, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland; Harry Persaud, Department of Ethnography of the British Museum; Virginia-Lee Webb, Department of the Arts of Oceania, Africa and the Americas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Daryl Gammons, American Museum of Natural History, New York; Paula Fleming, National Anthropological Archives, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D. C.; and Joanna Newman, Te Papa, National Museum of New Zealand.
- 10 Wooley and Brewster 1998: 145.
- 11 The 1898 expedition proved instrumental for establishing the fieldwork method of anthropology as a discipline. Herle and Philp 1998: 51.
- 12 'Torres Strait Islanders: an exhibition marking the centenary

of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition' opened in July 1998, and is scheduled to be on display until July 2000.

- 13 For instance, I was fortunate to learn about the state of photo collections in the West African context while participating in a conference in Senegal, in January 1999. The conference, 'The Promotion and Preservation of the Photographic Heritage of West Africa' was organised by the West African Museums Programme and the majority of participants were curators and archivists from West African countries.
- 14 Edwards 1995: 132.
- 15 An early twentieth century photograph by Geraldine Moodie of Qulaut's Grandmother (Koo-tuck-tuck) appeared on the poster for the conference. It is held by the Pictorial Archive of the British Museum Department of Ethnography.
- 16 In Qulaut's words: "As I interviewed some of the elders and asked about photographs, and what they think of them, they talked to me with great interest. Whenever they see an early photograph they talk about how time flies, and how much our culture has changed. They often start telling stories relating to the photograph. I find that when elders talk about photography they are really talking about their parents and their grandparents. They often wonder if there are any photographs of them. They ask if they could obtain copies. At this point I start wondering where I would look. The first place of course for me is the Canadian National Archives, but they are very limited. I often think of the other photographers that were here before. These people were traders, missionaries, teachers, scientists and other people who had gone through Igloolik over the years. If I find some of these people I wonder if they would be willing to share their photographs with the people of Igloolik" (1998: 20)