

Working in and with African Photo Archives

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Abstract:

In the last two years African Photography Initiatives, a non-profit organization involved in various projects with the common goal of promoting Africa's rich photographic heritage, have been working in and with the Press Photo Archives Buea, Cameroon.¹ The project received financial and institutional support from the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme, the Swiss Federal Office of Culture and the Centre for African Studies, University of Basel. The project's main goals were the protection/conservation and (partial) digitization of the archival holdings, to make the material known and accessible to a wider national and international audience, to sensitize the Cameroonian authorities for their cultural heritage and to promote research with visual records, in Cameroon and abroad, in particular photographs.

Within the framework of the project over 25'000 negatives and 13'000 groundsheets (templates on which up to 16 contact prints were mounted for the purpose of reference) have been digitized and several articles in German, French and English journals presenting the project have been published.

¹ <http://www.african-photography-initiatives.org/index.php/archives/camerun>

We held research seminars at the universities of Buea and Basel and closed the project in January 2015 with an international conference in Buea on Africa's visual heritage and the role of the archive. Copies of the digitized material will go to the British Library, the Cameroon Ministry of Communication, and, hopefully, to several Cameroonian universities.

This paper will present the project as a case study showing what problems and challenges African Photography Initiatives faced in its dealing with the archive and the collection, and with regard to the objectives it intended to achieve. It will highlight the opportunities for collaboration, research and access the project offered and what new perspectives for further successful collaboration with various stakeholders the project created.

Keywords: Cameroon, press photography, archives, digitization

I am Paul Weinberg, Senior Curator of Visual Archives at the University of Cape Town Library. I am also a professional photographer and a co-founder of **Afrapix and South**, collective agencies that were directly engaged with the development of photographic archives in South Africa in the 1980's and 1990's.

I will present the project "Cameroon Photo Press Archives. Protection, conservation, access" which has been carried out by **African Photography Initiatives** between 2013 and 2015 in the Buea Press Photo Archives in Cameroon.

African Photography Initiatives is a Swiss non-profit organization involved in various projects with the common goal of promoting Africa's rich photographic heritage. It was founded in 2007 by Jürg Schneider and Rosario Mazuela.

African Photography Initiatives' main objectives are

- The protection of African photo archives through conservation measures, digitization and storage
- The sensitisation of governments, academic institutions and the general public for the vulnerability and value of a nation's visual heritage
- Support and advise governments, institutions and individuals in their endeavour to make photographic material accessible to the public
- Promote and enable research and scholarship with regard photographic archives

The two year project "Cameroon Photo Press Archives. Protection, conservation, access" was concluded in January 2015 with the conference *Validating Visual Heritage in Africa: Historical Photographs and the Role of the 'Archive'*. The conference was held in Buea, Cameroon, in the South West of Anglophone Cameroon. The scholars and archivists who attended the conference came from Cameroon, South Africa, the United States, Canada and Europe. I was part of the South African "delegation". It was encouraging to find out that there was a great deal in common between African Photography Initiatives' interests and goals and what we are trying to do here in the Visual Archive, in Special Collections. There was much interest expressed at the conference in exploring the potential collaboration between African and European universities around photographic archives. I also had the opportunity to gain a substantial insight into the project in the Buea Press Photo Archives and thus was asked to present the paper instead of Jürg and Rosario whose schedule does not allow for their presence in Cape Town today.

After having given you some contextual information with regard to the African Photography Initiatives and why I am the presenter today I will now present the project itself and

subsequently link it to the IFLA conference's theme *Dynamic Libraries: Access, Development and Transformation*. I will show what problems and challenges African Photography Initiatives faced in dealing with the archive and the photo collection, and with regard to the objectives they intended to achieve. Furthermore, the paper will highlight the opportunities for collaboration, research and access that emerged from the project and what new perspectives for further successful collaboration with various stakeholders, it created.

The Cameroon Press Photo Archives Buea

The Cameroon Press Photo Archives Buea (CPPA-B) were established in Buea in 1955 by the then Delegate of Information and Culture. Southern Cameroons, as the Anglophone part of Cameroon was called in those days and where Buea is located, was a trusteeship of the United Nations under British tutelage until it gained independence in 1961 and reunited with French Cameroon to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon changing its name to West Cameroon. Buea is situated on the slopes of Mount Cameroon, a still active volcano, on an altitude of about 1'000 metres. The climate is rather moderate as regards temperatures but extremely humid. Some old buildings still remember the time when Buea was the capital of German Kamerun in the early 20th century until Germany lost all its colony after its defeat in WW I.

The mandate of the photographers of the Press Photo Archives was to follow any governmental or otherwise socially relevant events throughout its territory (today's Northwest and Southwest Regions). Activities of the Photographic Division continued after 1961 under West Cameroon and, thereafter, under the United Republic of Cameroon which was formed after a referendum in 1972.

The first photographer of the Information Service, Mr Emmanuel Mbwaye, retired in 1987 after being transferred to the Cinematography Division in 1983. Until his retirement, the Photographic Division was on the whole well-staffed: one librarian, several photographers and two persons in the darkroom worked there full-time. Unfortunately, none of them were replaced after retirement. As a result, the photographic archives have been progressively left with less staff and remained practically abandoned at the beginning of the 2000s, when the last photographer retired. From its inception and through the 1980s the Photographic Division was active and able to preside directly over all the phases of photo production, from shooting to development and print thanks to the presence of two dark rooms.

The Press Photo Archives are located in an old and badly maintained colonial building in Buea Town. Some renovation works were carried out on the building just a few days before the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the reunification of Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon in February 2014. The result, although nice in colour, had something Potemkian about it, since the roof was only painted on the side facing the street where the president passed and in the interior nothing was ever attended to. The Archives contain approximately 100'000 negatives, 14'000 groundsheets (templates on which up to 16 contact prints were mounted for the purpose of reference) and 12 register books.

The project

In February 2013 African Photography Initiatives together with a group of 6 Cameroonians started to digitize the negatives and groundsheets and set up a database. Dust, paper clips and staples were removed from the groundsheets, the forms put in acid free envelopes and ordered in boxes. In one year over 25'000 negatives and 14'000 groundsheets were digitized. The project received financial and institutional support from the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme, the Swiss Federal Office of Culture and the Centre for African Studies, University of Basel.

Within the framework of the project not only a huge number of negatives and groundsheets have been digitized but African Photography Initiatives also presented the project in various

German, French and English journals, held research seminars at the universities of Buea and Basel and closed the project in January 2015 culminating with the above-mentioned international conference in Buea on Africa's visual heritage and the role of the archive. The project also attracted the attention of the national media which reported on the works being carried out by African Photography Initiatives as well as its outcomes. Copies of the digitized material and the database will now go to the British Library, the Cameroon Ministry of Communication, and, hopefully, to several Cameroonian universities.

The project's main goals were

1. the protection/conservation and (partial) digitization of the archival holdings
2. to make the material known and accessible to a wider national and international audience
3. to sensitize the Cameroonian authorities for their cultural heritage
4. to promote research into visual studies, with particular reference to photography in Cameroon and abroad,

Have these goals been achieved?

In brief:

Point one, the preservation/conservation and (partial) digitization of the archival holdings has been achieved in that part. The negatives and all groundsheets were digitized and the groundsheets are now stored in new envelopes and boxes. A long-term and sustainable solution for the safe storage of the archive material, however, has not yet been found. The negatives are still in their old paper envelopes and packed in wooden boxes. The archive encounters a number of serious challenges. There is no electricity in the building, no fire extinguishers and no equipment that regulates temperature and humidity. These problems have been addressed several times in meetings with the Regional Delegate of the Ministry of Communication or the Minister himself. The renovation of the building and measures to protect the material have also been promised but nothing has happened in this direction. The discussions, however, are ongoing.

Point 2, the goal to make the material known and accessible has also only been partially achieved. The public distribution of information relating to the Archives and the material it holds which happened through the Cameroonian media (press, TV, radio) publications, seminars, workshops and exhibitions was quite successful. These deliverables addressed and reached both a general and academic public. Access, however, remains a huge challenge and I will come back to this in a moment.

Point 3, to sensitize the Cameroonian authorities about their cultural heritage is difficult to assess. If we judge the authorities not by their words, but by their deeds in terms of what has happened so far in order to protect the archive material, the project was a failure. However, if we trust that the tangible results the project has achieved, incidentally with modest resources, and the fact that the project itself, with all the difficulties it encountered notwithstanding, was achieved and has the potential to influence future policy decisions with regard to the responsible handling of Cameroons cultural heritage, the project can be considered a success. Results might not always be what we expect them to look like but nevertheless have positive impacts in a direction desired by us.

Point 4, to promote research with digitised visual material in Cameroon and abroad achieved its goals but needs to be continued. While this is common in the academic world in the West and in fact a booming activity, in Cameroon this kind of project is at its infancy.

Let me conclude by describing the problems and challenges the project was facing during its implementation thereby linking it to the conference's overall theme *Dynamic Libraries: Access, Development and Transformation*.

The environment in which the project developed was indeed dynamic to say the least. This is all the more so for a project that was dealing with Archives in the possession of a government. Changes in the administration and hence staff directly and indirectly involved in and responsible for the project, posed a major challenge. Depending on the responsible person's interests and agenda it received either active support, found open doors and ears or was obstructed. Important political events such as the reunification festivities in February 2014 drew attention to the photographs and increased the demand for its digitization. Hence, continuing adjustment to new political and administrative constellations were the order of the day.

Access, as I have already mentioned previously, remains a major challenge in two ways namely concerning access both to the physical and the digitized material. With regard to the first, so far, no archivist has been appointed for taking care of the collection and the building. There is no archive or access policy in place even though African Photography Initiatives has developed and submitted such a policy to the Ministry of Communication. Researchers who want to work with the material in the Press Photo Archives have to find their way through the administration of the Regional Delegation themselves, which, of course, is possible since the Regional Delegation's building is quite small and its staff not numerous. Once they have found the person in charge, and that person has found the keys to the building, things go on smoothly in general but the whole process of obtaining access and copies of the negatives or groundsheets needs to be continuously negotiated without having more to rely on than one's personal experience in similar situations and a good deal of sensitivity and intuition.

Access to the digitized material is the next challenge. Even though the Regional Delegation and the Ministry of Communication will obtain a copy of all material digitized (this has not yet happened at the time of writing) a clear procedure allowing researchers (or any individual interested in the photographs) to consult the material on a computer still needs to be developed. An issue of discussion with the MINCOM is the handover of the digitized material to Cameroonian universities who have clearly signalled their interest. They are quite well organized and both their infrastructure and know how will guarantee student's access to the material of the Press Photo Archives. Furthermore, the British Library is ready to host the data and the database on their website as they usually do with all digitizing projects funded by the Endangered Archives Programme. In summary, access to the Archives and the material it holds in material and virtual forms is the litmus test for a project's success as well as the Archives owner's and users' commitment and interest. Demand for the material is as important as its supply and hence the Archives' *raison d'être* based on a common understanding of the value and importance of the Cameroon Press Photo Archives in Buea.

African Photography Initiatives is confident that the development and transformation of the Cameroon Press Photo Archives into a great opportunity for researching Cameroon's history and beyond exists. The critical momentum created by the project we believe will persist and lead to new perspectives for further successful collaboration with various stakeholders, academic and non-academic.