

**'Through a Glass Darkly': Some Thoughts on the Portrait and the
Problematics of Meaning**

Graham Clarke

Editorial Note

This essay was written in 2005 as part of the preparation for the exhibition in the National Portrait Gallery, London of the work of two Cameroonian photographers. It was not intended for the catalogue but for a follow-up collection which, in the end was never completed, and Graham Clarke subsequently died. It has been included here with the kind permission of his family to make the work available. Editorial input has been limited to the identification of the images concerned (not always straightforward) and the preparation of the bibliography. Readers should note that the captions were not available when Graham Clarke wrote this essay. He was responding to a set of images without context (later provided in Zeitlyn 2005 and other essays in Swenson (ed.) 2005, which have been added to the bibliography for convenience). DZ 1 March 2018

Abstract

In this posthumously published essay Graham Clarke, the art historian and expert on photography, reflects on a series of Cameroonian photographs that were exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 2005

Keywords: Cameroonian photography; art history; African photography

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Why complicate in this way an experience which we have many times every day - the experience of looking at a photograph? Because the simplicity with which we usually treat the experience is wasteful and confusing. We think of photographs as works of art, as evidence of a particular truth, as likenesses, as news items. Every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality. Hence the crucial role of photography in ideological struggle. Hence the necessity of our understanding a weapon which we can use and which can be used against us. John Berger 1980: 294

John Berger's assertion concerning the relationship between the photograph and ideology is central to the ways by which we must attempt to come to terms with these extraordinary images of Cameroonian culture by Samuel Finlak and Chila Joseph. Not only do they record a particular culture in historical (and individual) terms, they equally confront the viewer with a series of implicit questions as to how they are to be read. In brief, they bring to focus the decisive, and

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problematic relationship between the image as recorded and the image as understood. Thus, they represent not so much a literal reality as an ideological discourse which is key to an understanding of a wider cultural condition and meaning.

In this sense the images move beyond their individual terms of reference and consistently ask a fundamental question: how *are* they to be read and understood? Virtually all of the images are portraits; either photographs of individuals or groups in 'posed' settings. They are, in fundamental ways, formal records of their subjects and consistently make use of the conventions of the portrait as one of photography's central (and oldest) genres. But as they celebrate individual (and unique) lives so they raise questions as to how, and why, the camera records what the photographer, and in turn the viewer, *sees*. The cloth, for example, that is used as a background against which many of the subjects are placed recalls Richard Avedon's use of a white sheet of paper in his 'American Portraits' of the American West (1985); but where Avedon closes down the image to contrast and isolate the subject against a neutral background so many of these images pull away from an assumed 'framed' photographic space to include both the environment beyond the formal terms of the portrait so as to probe the ways in which the photographic space is constructed and interpreted. The images consistently question both how and on what terms the photograph records an assumed 'moment' of meaning. Thus the importance of the fact that, whilst portraits, none of the images is taken in a studio - all are recorded *in situ*. They are, ostensibly, rooted in their environment and culture. But the use of the portrait consistently alerts us to the conventions of photography as a form of representation and cultural recording and opens up a critical space between the act of photographing and its assumed terms of reference as distinct from the 'reality' outside the frame.

Photographs construct their meanings just as they reflect their subject of concern. No photograph is neutral and, inevitably embodies a complex series of questions which emerge from what is and

what is not reflected in the image that we view. In this sense each photograph involves a dialectical tension between photographer and subject, image and reader. The image becomes the site (and sight) of endless oppositions; oppositions which can be suggested by the merest detail which, once noticed, alters our initial sense of the photograph's meaning(s). These images of the Cameroon place themselves directly in this dialectical process, at once using the conventions of photography in order to question how it records an indigenous culture whilst celebrating individuality and uniqueness. And, once again, the portrait is central to this process. In many ways the images recall the work of some of the great portraitists: August Sander and Walker Evans (Agee and Evans *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* 2001) or Diane Arbus, David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson. Their work sought to interpret rather than record – to reflect a condition of being which was both complex and problematic. All simultaneously used {portraits} as they questioned the conventions of the photograph and the nature of portraiture as a genre and means of recording their subject. These images take their place in that radical tradition. As we view them thus, initial assumptions are both undermined and questioned as part of a larger problematics of meaning. The underlying question is consistently how the subject is represented in terms of the photograph as a means of representation and cultural recording. The images are at once subtle and devious in their terms of reference; a visual challenge to the viewer whilst remaining absolutely faithful to their subjects.

Two examples of this questioning are the ways in which the 'subject' of the photograph is often decentered and the deliberate use of photographs within the photograph. Such strategies establish a series of self-referential questions as to what is being represented in the image. A casual look at the photographs suggests the assumed use of formal and conventional poses, composition, and framing. These are, seemingly traditional portraits, but once again they inject into their terms of reference a subtle but radical point of view. As the camera displaces the subject from the centre of the photograph so a critical space opens up (to the right or to the left) which makes us ask why

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this be so. Why not crop the image to retain the conventional sense of balance? Lee Friedlander, of course, alerted us to such questions, but these images relate such terms of reference to a very different cultural condition and ideology. Look, for example, at Figure 1. Like so many of the images it has what I want to call a 'margin' of ambiguity, a photographic space which alerts us to the problematic nature of the portrait photograph and its capacity to record an indigenous African culture through what is still, essentially, a western (European and American) technology and visual perspective. In brief, how is the subject allowed to *claim* the photographic space as their own and their individual terms of reference and identity?



Figure 1 Elizabeth Noki. Photograph: © Samuel Finlak. Used with Permission. SF2-9a

The group photograph (Figure 2, to which I shall return), for example, once again displaces the figures from the centre of the photograph in order to establish a 'margin' on the left-hand side of the image, and tantalisingly uses a vertical post (part of a building) as its conventional frame. Crop the image on the basis of this 'boundary' and we have a traditional group portrait; but the

inclusion of this additional space creates a deliberate set of alternative readings. The rigid traditional format of a group portrait is deflected in order to question the photograph's and the viewer's terms of reference. The left-hand margin establishes a diffident and difficult presence – the authentic aspects of an authentic culture as distinct from the adopted conventions of photography as a means of representation.

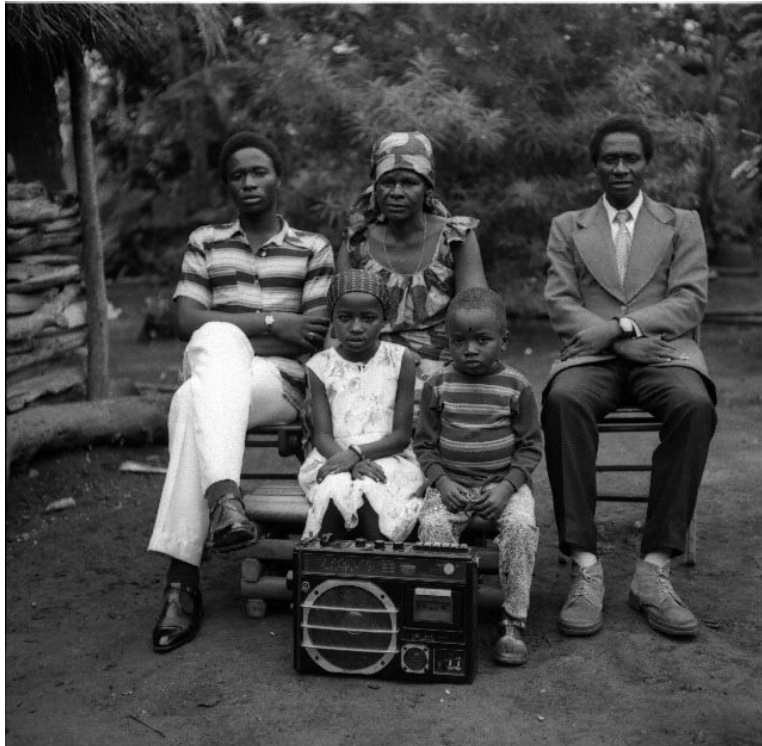


Figure 2 group with cassette Photograph: © Samuel Finlak. Used with Permission. 135 sf1-12a

The photographs are, thus, highly self-conscious in the ways in which they seek to record their subjects as part of wider codes of meaning. Once again what we are presented with is a subtle questioning of an image's (and viewer's) ideological assumptions in relation to underlying and conflicting codes of meaning. They consistently 'play' with the conventions of the portrait – simultaneously using the (western) codes of signification as they establish a critical eye which questions how a culture, through the accumulated portrait of a series of individual subjects, is to be read and recorded, understood and celebrated. Many of the images, for example, empty the

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conventions of photographic practice of any meaning and reduce them to cliché. Thus Figure 3, saturates the photograph with a plethora of photographic images and achieves a sense of excess which makes it a parody of the portrait – but it retains its integrity, and its critical perspective by the subtle inclusion a hand on the right side of the image. This is a complex and difficult image, but in the ways in which it uses the photograph (and the portrait) to establish a dense series of questions about the nature of photographic meaning so it is an exemplary example of the ways in which the images are to be ‘read’ as a whole. The image deserves detailed analysis; suffice to say that its multiple meanings is characteristic of the photographers’ approach and achievement.



Figure 3 Copy photograph. Photograph: ©. Joseph Chila. Used with Permission. mdj36b

Part of this process of questioning, subtle and radical as it is, returns us consistently to the nature of the portrait as a particular kind of photographic image. If the portrait photograph as a means of

identity has its roots in portrait painting (with all of its implications concerning status, power, and ownership) so these images extend that tradition to new and contemporary contexts. What we view is a culture alien to the photograph as a means of recording individuality but, at the same time, saturated by and framed within Western terms of reference. Once again, the images hover between their concern to celebrate a culture and their concern to establish a critical perspective of the photograph and its ambiguity of meaning.

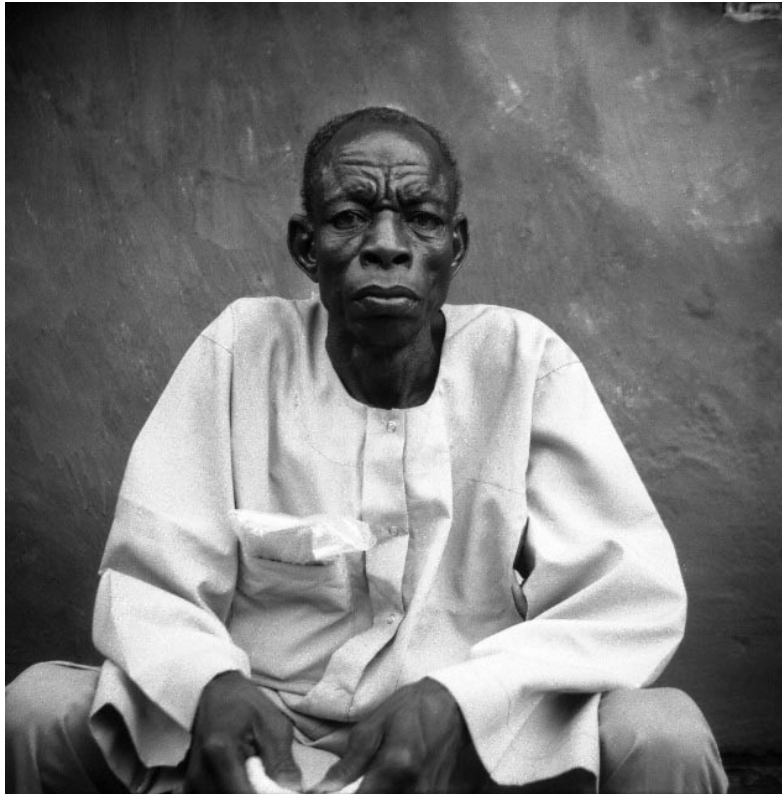


Figure 4 Photograph: © Joseph Chila. Used with Permission. 13 mdj3b

Consider Figure 4. This is, for me, one of the most ‘pure’ of the images in the series. It is seemingly simple; the record of an individual which reflects the person before the eye of the viewer. But does it? I am, for example, reminded of Roland Barthes’ acute insight in relation to a similar image by Richard Avedon (captioned “William Casby, born a slave”)

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which Barthes included in *Camera Lucida* (1981: 35). Barthes notes of Avedon's photograph that

Since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), photography cannot signify (aim at generality) except by assuming a mask. It is this word which Calvino correctly uses to designate what makes a face into the product of a society and its history. As in the portrait of William Casby, photographed by Avedon: the essence of slavery is here laid bare: the mask is the meaning, insofar as it is absolutely pure (as it was in the ancient theater). This is why the great portrait photographers are great mythologists.... (1981: 34).

In Barthes' meaning the 'mask' is an ultimate, almost absolute state of representation. The individual subject is transposed, as it were, to a level of meaning which is at once as dense as it is archetypal. In brief, it reflects the condition and essence of a culture. Figure 4 is an example of such an image and condition. Indeed, part of its power (and allure) recalls us as to why these images are all in black and white. The use of colour deflects from the kind of essence with which they are concerned to reflect (and which Barthes celebrates). It both reduces (rather than simplifies) the subject to its most intense and primary terms of reference. This is, as it were, the real thing. But equally it alerts us to the fact that what we look at *is* a photograph which, in turn, takes its place within a larger tradition overwhelmingly (until the 1950's) based upon black and white images. As in all of these images, there is a wonderful clarity of technique and effect, but characteristically, the use of black and white belies any sense of the direct, the implied, or the assumed. These images, in their meanings and questioning are anything but black and white.

The use of black and white photography has, in this instance, other implications. The mix of Western and African conventions and traditions is, of course, basic to the way the culture is recorded, and, in different ways, compromises any sense of an assumed audience for the images. These are not photographs for consumption, as commodities. They are, rather, signatures of a distinct reality and retain their dignity, and individuality within what I have attempted to define as

the problematics of their meaning. They consistently refer us back to the conventions of western photography as they alert us to the ways by which a culture is to be represented as part of a complex inter-textuality. The effect, for example, of Figure 4 is to both suggest an extraordinary sense of presence which, in relation to Barthes' use of the mask', achieves, once again, a remarkable sense of the individual subject. And yet, characteristically, this image is made problematic by intrusions and echoes of other cultures and meanings which undermine any initial sense of the authentic and 'pure'. What does the figure hold in his hands? I assume that it is some form of local bread that he has moulded and is about to bake. But then what protrudes from his breast pocket? It is a plastic bag the contents of which we cannot identify. In a similar form the 'shirt' is offered as a 'natural' form of dress, but the trousers are not – once again an example of details which establish an ideological frame of reference within which the subject is 'placed'.

The very opposite to this image is, once again, Figure 1. The photograph images a different kind of 'mask' which is the very extreme of Figure 2. It is a complicated and complex image and, as I noted above, both uses and questions the conventions of the portrait photograph. For example, and most obviously, the image is saturated with the paraphernalia and technology of western culture. As distinct from Figure 5 these figures define, indeed advertise themselves through alien terms of reference. The clothes, the shoes, the poses and, of course, the cassette/radio player foregrounded at the very centre of the photograph (with its many connotations). The more we look at this image so the more anomalous it becomes. Once again, it has a density of meaning which belies its apparent ease and transposes it to a wider series of cultural and ideological questions. The contrast in colour between the trousers on the left (white) and the right (black) is complicated by the ways in which cultural codes have become mixed and confused. Note, for example, that only the male figures wear watches. As distinct from the relative purity of Figure 4 this image suggests, and reflects, a kind of cultural hiatus. It is, in its own way deeply depressing.

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In its complications and ambiguities it is characteristic of the images as a whole. They constitute, in the overall effect, a kind of problematic serial biography, constantly alerting us to the way we seek to both record and represent a culture. How significant, then, that one of the most effective and optimistic of images is of a group of figures, in traditional dress, moving down a road towards an open sky and a 'natural' landscape before them (Figure 5). It suggests that they are returning home. For once we cannot see a face. They have, as it were, turned their backs on the camera. The image is full of a sense of space, freedom, and optimism. It offers an almost effusive alternative to the terms of reference which underlie the majority of the images in the collection. That is, of course, until we note a printed word on the back of the vehicle which, once again, intrudes into this celebratory scene. The word, as they return home, is 'TOYOTA'. There is no escape. At least it isn't 'NIKE' or 'COCA-COLA'.

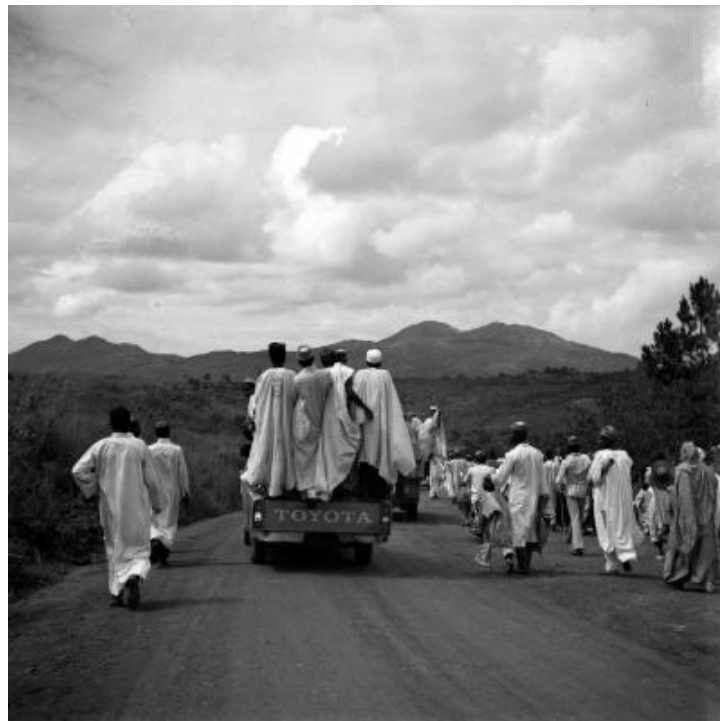


Figure 5 Returning from prayers at the end of Ramadan. Photograph: © Joseph Chila. Used with Permission. MDJ29a

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