

Pictures from here for the people over yonder Photography in migratory circuits¹

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Researchers in the social sciences have paid scant attention to how photography interrelates with migration. Photographic works by artists specialising in photography, video makers, photo-journalists, along with those of amateur and anonymous photographers have made possible the creation of indispensable sources of images on the theme of migration. However, these images, as well as their purpose and usage by those directly involved in migration, have thus far rarely been the object of sociological or anthropological analysis. My contribution will endeavour to piece together, from the perspective of cultural anthropology, the various strands connecting photography and migration.

Quite aside from its function of recording a particular reality, a photograph could equally be defined as a form of seeing or writing. Photography 'is conspicuous as a narrative form in the way its content is partly inspired by aesthetic and subjective concerns' (Njami, 2005:3). What thus ensues is that, far from being neutral, a photograph conveys a multi-layered message: it could be aesthetic in nature (to render the beauty of the real); historic (to record for posterity a particular situation or event); or even political (as evident in the photographs used by those groups supporting migrants, as well as in works by activist photographers). It's not a matter of a straightforward link between a supposedly neutral technology and a given social reality but instead that of much more complex processes.

Images of migrants

Migration, as a process, begins with a migrant leaving his/her country of origin and settling in his/her host country. Yet, the process by no means comes to a halt at that point. As corroborated in numerous studies on cross-border movements, migrants, even those who settle down in their host nations, maintain contact with community members in their country of origin. The quantity and frequency of these cross-border exchanges creates international spheres in which people, capital and currencies freely move, as do information, ideas and materials goods (D'Andrea, 2004; Appadurai, 1996; Basch et al., 1995; Rouse, 1991; Quiminal, 1991)². Thus the migrant community and its families back home are so continually in contact with one another that, despite the fact of being so far-flung, they could be considered as one and the same entity (Rouse, 1991:14).

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I borrowed the idea of the circuit from Rouse (1991:14) who refers to the 'transnational circuit'.

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In his study, Appadurai describes and analyses, in the context of globalisation, the processes by which the human, financial, technical and material resources circulate between one country and another (*ethnoscapes, financescapes, technoscapes, ideoscapes and mediascapes*). In my estimation, the constant circulation of these resources constitutes the concretisation of transnational spheres. The transnational approach, as taken by Basch and Rouse, clearly demonstrates that such networks evolve irrespective of national borders.

One could thus readily surmise that photographs, along with other material goods, play a vital role in the buoyancy of these transnational spheres. The images freely circulating within these spheres enable migrants to present their families and relatives back home with visual testimony of their lives in their host countries. Communication is not one-way: those back home also send images to the distant migrants enabling them to share in moments of their lives in which their relatives are unable to participate due to the lack of daily face-to-face encounters. Images pertaining to local news are also sent; thereby allowing those at a distance to participate in certain decision-making procedures that will subsequently be acted upon in their homeland. The issue at stake is to analyse photography's capacity to at once reduce distances and bring the migrant and his/her native community closer together.

That said, the host country's involvement in this process is not negligible. Images of migrants are likewise used in their host countries; at times to sway the public's attitude towards foreigners, or to influence public opinion in the decision-making process concerning the governance of immigrants. As can be seen both in the photographs used by certain non-governmental organisations as well as in news reports covering the topic of immigration in western countries, two ideologically opposing trends exist. On the one hand, the images shown in the mainstream media, often close to conservative circles, tend to emphasise how detrimental immigrants are to the status quo. At the other end of the spectrum, we have those used to alert public opinion to the immigrants' plight. Such is the case depicted in *Guerre aux Migrants* (War on Migrants; Migreurop ed., 2005), Sara Prestianni and Anne-Sophie Wender's photographic treatment of the subject.

This analysis underpins the fact that the images circulating in these transnational spheres are at once multifarious and varied, a consequence of differing life experiences among migrants as individuals. Taking such diversity into consideration, how can we establish a typology for photographs dealing with this multi-faceted experience?

Different categorising systems could be proposed. For the purpose of this presentation, the classification employed takes into account the various players involved in migration, namely the migrants themselves along with the migrant community, their families, social networks and those organisations in the receiving society creating the images.

Photographs on migration can be classified into three broad categories:

- 1) photos taken at the behest of the migrant or migrant community;
- 2) photographs taken at the family's behest or members of their community in their country of origin and subsequently forwarded to the migrant;
- 3) in addition to the images created at the behest of institutions in their host country, we should note those projects on the theme of migration by artists specialising in photography. What requires discussion, within this framework, is the content of the images created by all the above-mentioned groups, their usage in the context of migration and the motivation behind taking the photographs at the outset.

Photography and the material culture of success

During the colonial period, the waves of migrants departing Mali headed in the main for those African states in which European commercial ventures had established themselves, and which, moreover, required manual labour to grow crops destined for export. The cocoa plantations and ground-nut fields of the Ivory Coast, Ghana and Senegal were popular destinations for young seasonal migrant workers whose main objectives were to accumulate sufficient funds to contribute towards paying their poll tax, financing a dowry, purchasing a bicycle and putting aside some savings to help their elders.

On his³ homecoming, a migrant's success was above all evaluated by how well he dressed himself, whether he possessed a bike and the proceeds from his period abroad. As can be seen in photographs by Seydou Keita (1923–2001), Abderramane Sakaly (1926–1988), Malick Sidibé and Adama Kouyaté – all Malian photographers – the migrant's homecoming was often 'recorded' in photo-studios where he came to have his portrait taken. Availing of the studio's décor and backdrops readied by the photographer, the migrant would have his portrait taken, frequently in the company of a friend who had also experienced living abroad, or sometimes in the company of his fiancée, both of whom dressed up for the occasion.⁴ In some instances, a migrant would have himself photographed with his bicycle.

Nonetheless, we learn from the history of Mali's photographic

³ Although migrancy in this region is not exclusively a male phenomenon, in the past it was even more so than in present times.

⁴ Today we can see a similar phenomenon among young women who move to the cities to work as well as gather the necessary funds to marry. Naturally, some of them end up remaining in the city. Those who return to their native village ensure that they are well dressed for their portraits. They hold on to these photos as mementos.

studios that not all the objects seen in the photographs necessarily belonged to the clients. Numerous observers have testified to the fact that it was the photographer who supplied both the backdrops used for the photo-shoot and the various props (two-wheeled vehicles, furniture, transistor radio and such) beside which the client positioned himself to have his photograph taken (see also Nimis, 1998). Suit and tie were routinely available, enabling clients to spruce themselves up for an attractive portrait. According to information garnered from former photographers, migrants originating in Mali's interior provinces had themselves photographed in these studios so as to be able to subsequently send their portraits to family members in their home villages. The message

Malick Sidibé
*Toute la famille
à moto, 1962*
Gelatine Silver 50x40 cm
courtesy of the artist and
MAGNIN-A



conveyed in these pictures was one of success in the big city.

While such practices have certainly evolved over time, the underlying process remains similar for the migrant of today. As a general rule, photos of migrants forwarded to their families in their homeland, or those kept as mementos, portray individuals who have profited from their period abroad or those well-integrated into their receiving culture.⁵ Such success stories can be deciphered in those photographs taken of migrants in well-furnished living rooms, in recreational facilities, or at restaurants and parties organised by the immigrant community. It is worth noting that among certain migrant communities in the United States, such as those in Harlem and Queens in New York City, one often encounters photographers from a co-ethnic background who carry out the photo sessions for their co-migrant fellow countrymen.

The characteristic common to all these photographs, regardless of whether they date from the colonial period or today, is the way in which the photo session is staged, often in concert with the photographer, so as to enable the migrant to convey 'success'. Irrespective of whether one is dealing with photographs taken in a photographic studio designed for that purpose, or in a migrant's living room, the background is meant to underscore that, which Michael Rowlands (1994) refers to as 'the material culture of success'. Phrased differently, the individual's or group's success is measured by whether they possess, for real or otherwise, the requisite material symbols that indicate social status. From an analytical standpoint, it seems as though putting this material culture of success on public view somehow enabled migrants to renegotiate their status on the social ladder in their community of origin, as well as empowering them to lay claim to a place and social standing in their host country.

⁵ The photographs, however, in which the migrant finds himself in disagreeable circumstances, such as a police raid on a migrant community, are never sent to family.

Photography's messages



Anne-Sophie Wender
2007, *Le livre noir de Ceuta et Melilla* (p. 9)
courtesy of Anne-Sophie Wender & Migreurop



Le livre noir de Ceuta et Melilla (p. 7) courtesy
of Anne-Sophie Wender
& Migreurop

In our current environment, in which communication and information-sharing technologies are available in even the most distant lands on the planet, photography both completes and underpins telephonic and written communications between migrant populations and members of their communities in their country of origin. Photography was thus routinely used by certain members of the Malian migrant community in France as an instrument with which to negotiate their marriage contract. Several anecdotes attest to the fact that migrants have decided to marry after receiving photographs of prospective young brides sent to them by their parents or relatives. When choosing a fellow countrywoman as a future partner, the migrant often makes the decision based upon her portrait, even though she is at a distance. In turn, his future fiancée will receive the marriage applicant's photo before settling upon the alliance.

These are not, however, the only images being sent from the migrant's country of origin. In addition to those of marriages and newly born infants, photographs of building sites (domestic or as part of community infrastructural projects financed by migrant groups) are routinely sent to migrants, not only to inform them of progress on the projects but also to appeal for the funds necessary for the well being of their next-of-kin. Money transfers destined to finance construction projects are often made upon receipt of photographic evidence of the work in progress, or following a request to send supplementary or additional funds to complete the work at hand. Thus, photography not only serves as an instrument enabling migrants and their communities back home to update and share information, but also as a means for the migrant to evaluate projects. Photography, seen from this perspective, complements written correspondence and telephonic communications insofar as it furnishes written or spoken information with visual evidence. In fact, it offers a qualitative advantage in cases where scholarly achievement among emigrants is low, or where written exchanges could be problematic. In this respect, it is the most accurate form of illustration.

Confrontational images

Unlike those photographs conveying the material culture of success, and in contrast to those with a message, images created by artist-photographers, organisations and institutions in the receiving society present another facet of the

migrants' life experiences. The images are confrontational due to the fact that their authors and users endorse a cause. Whether originating in mainstream media outlets, organisations and groups defending migrants' rights, or from artists engaged in projects on the theme of migration, these photographs testify to the migrants' trials and tribulations, their precarious existence throughout their experience of migration, their confinement in detention camps as well as their deportation back to the country from which they came.

Prestianni and Wender's photographs in *Guerre aux Migrants* accurately reflect the migrants' predicament. These touching images on the theme of African migration to Spain convey the turmoil migrants face in a reality fraught with conflict and confrontation. The book's first plate reveals the reinforced surveillance and sustained vigilance at the entry to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. From the Spanish authorities' viewpoint, the sentries, barbed wire and daunting security apparatus are intended to discourage any potential immigrant (see Migreurop, 2005:41). The images on pages seven and 45 show migrants, forced by poverty to forsake their homeland, abandoned by their smugglers in the middle of nowhere, and yet willing to confront any danger in order to reach Spain, their final destination. The picture of a handcuffed migrant behind the window of a bus transferring detainees reveals the attitude of one who wants to get across to the outside world the suffering and injustice endured on foreign shores. Thanks to the photographer, as well as the support provided by Migreurop, this precise moment of the refugee's experience has been framed for eternity.⁶

Anne-Sophie Wender

2007, *Le livre noir de Ceuta et Melilla* (p. 33)
courtesy of Anne-Sophie Wender & Migreurop

Le livre noir de Ceuta et Melilla
(p. 41), courtesy of Sara Prestianni & Migreurop

Le livre noir de Ceuta et Melilla
(p. 45) courtesy of Anne-Sophie Wender & Migreurop



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See the photos on pages 9 and 33. These interpretations are not explicitly described in *The Black Book of Ceuta and Melilla*. The tone of foreword, along with the content of the subsequent texts in the book, support such an evaluation.

Migreurop, a Euro-African network, along with other groups defending migrants' rights are not alone in adapting such a militant stance towards the hazards of migration. In 2009, Bamako Encounters, the 8th African Biennial of Photography, provided an occasion for artists specialising in photography to present their projects on migratory experiences. The work of South African photographer Jodi Bieber shows illegal immigrants rounded up in detention centres before being repatriated⁷.

Myriam Abdelaziz, a (French) photographer of Egyptian descent, lays bare the predicament faced by the Darfouris in Cairo due to their precarious situation in Egypt.

Through the lens of his camera the Nigerian, George Osodi, retraces the rituals undertaken prior to leaving home by those who decide to emigrate. All these projects were presented within the framework of *Borders*, the title of Bamako Encounters 2009.

It's as if these militant artists, along with refugee support and relief groups, are helping foreigners in dire straits to claim their rightful place in their host countries. The images

produced in this context differ from emphasising the material culture of success, and are deliberately not forwarded to family members because they would compromise the outcome of negotiations aimed at ensuring advancement on the social ladder in the migrant's home community.

Given the complexity of migrants' experiences, and the breadth of the field of research, the debate on how photography ties in with migration in the current climate of globalisation remains wide open. The data gathered by photographers, migrants' families and those migrants who have returned to their country of origin have unfortunately, thus far, not enabled a probe into how the links between photography and migration have evolved, particularly in light of the prevalent use of the Internet and new media. It is more than likely that migrants are availing of these new media forms to interact with their communities whenever these new technologies are available.



Myriam Abdelaziz
*Many Darfouris live in closed
 storehouses and factories* (2008)
 courtesy of the artist and plainpicture

Summary

In closing, I would like to reiterate that photography is used in migrant circles as a communication tool enabling migrants to remain present in their community of origin, where they are continually negotiating their presence, while at the same time endeavouring to advance their social standing.

The analysis undertaken here also suggests that if the migrant's plans 'come to nothing' and he is unable to engage in such negotiations within his home community, photography does offer some recourse, abetted by artists, photographers and groups campaigning for migrants' rights, who shape public opinion and draw the attention of host country authorities to the plight and the precarious situations in which people find themselves. It is reasonable to assume that these confrontational images help the 'failed' migrant to negotiate a place in the country to which he has immigrated, because settling down and acceptance by the receiving society constitute the preliminaries for any form of negotiation with his compatriots and kin. If a photograph embodies the *ja* of the individual, that is to say his silhouette or his double in the Bamanan language, then photography enables the migrant to have himself represented by his double in the transnational sphere.

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[English by John Barrett]

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