

Gregor Dobler

## **Presence and Absence – Shops as traces of hopes in apartheid Namibia**

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I.

Once, Michael Jackson was sipping drinks at this swimming pool. He came to Northern Namibia in 1998, accompanying American casino tycoon Don Barden on a black empowerment business trip. (The cooperation empowered Barden all right, who sold hundreds of overpriced right-hand drive Chevrolets to the Namibian government with promises for a conversion plant and factory that never materialised.) In the fine new lodge in a dusty village near Oshikango, the King of Pop's host was the son of a prominent trader who had become rich owning supermarkets in the apartheid-era homeland of Ovamboland. His shops – one of them depicted in the second photograph – struggled to remain profitable after the country's independence in 1990. The lodge, the







EHAFO MINI  
SHI

ICE BOX CLUB BOITRE







LION  
LAGER

PURO  
LAGER

CASTLE  
LAGER

# GIFT SHOPPING CENTRE

Bakery

GIFT SHOPPING CENTRE  
DRY CLEANERS  
WASHING & DRYING  
NATURAL DYEING & FINISHING



PRIDE  
*Cola*

PUNYU

LION  
LAGER







MONDESA BAR NO 2



SABALI CLUB  
STATE House  
time will  
tell...

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[Abstract]

[Caption relating to all photographs:] All photos in this essay were taken in November and December 2014 in Ohangwena region, mostly in Ohangwena, Engela and Odibo. I know quite a lot about some of the businesses and very little about others, and I have not always been successful in tracking down the current owners of buildings. For these reasons, I prefer not to provide individual captions, but rather to use the photographs as a visual essay accompanied by my discussion of ethnographic photography. This photo essay can be read as a companion to the book-length account of the history of trading stores in pre-independent Northern Namibia that I have published elsewhere (Dobler, 2014).

[image 1]

I.

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I took the photographs in this essay in November and December 2014, after publishing a book on trading stores in pre-independence Northern Namibia (Dobler 2014). To me, the closed shops came to embody the relation of presence and absence in ethnographic photography – a relation I regard as constitutive for the way we see and take

ethnographic photographs. Both on the visual and on the theoretical level, the blue slide has become a symbol to me. Like Michael Jackson's visit, it represents hopes unfulfilled and dignity betrayed by structural change. A forlorn relic of these hopes, it also symbolises the way photographs fascinate us: by drawing our attention to what is present in them, they evoke what they do not depict.

## II.

In the densely populated area in Namibia's central North which colonial authorities called Ovamboland, local businesspeople had been officially allowed to open their own trading stores from 1951. By the late 1960s, more than 6000 men and women (out of a population of roughly 300 000) owned shops. Opening a store became the local empowerment strategy and development model par excellence, and quite a number of traders were fabulously successful. Running a shop was one of the very few ways to economic prosperity and social emancipation that did not directly involve toiling for a white boss. Traders became respected and envied members of the local society, and their shops were, for many, an embodiment of modernisation.

While shops offered traders a possible means to mitigate apartheid's degrading consequences, their success relied, nonetheless, on the structures of apartheid. From early colonial times, Ovamboland had been a labour reservoir to the colonial economy. Inhabitants were allowed and encouraged to work in the colonial economy, but not to spend their lives outside of 'their' area. When their contracts and with them their passes expired, mine and farm workers had to move back to their villages in the 'reserve' (later called 'homeland') and spend a good part of their income there. Although workers' wages were low, they added up to a huge and captive buying power. If you had the necessary capital to start a business, running a store was easy.

In the 1960s and 70s, the apartheid government, intent on showing the world how successful its development strategy supposedly was, subsidised stores with cheap credit, business facilities and training programs. It became much easier to achieve a degree of economic autonomy from the white economy by opening a shop than through manufacturing – not least because the state’s development corporations set up monopolist factories that could rely on lucrative state contracts. Successful traders soon became a role model that channelled young people’s entrepreneurial spirit into opening new stores. Shops were visual markers of success and newly found dignity within an undemocratic, racist, war-torn society.

When independence and democracy were finally achieved after a long struggle in 1990, the precarious nature of the traders’ success became visible. They had learnt to do business under the distorted conditions of a system that kept people confined to their region and eliminated outside competition. When liberation freed the markets, as well, large South African companies soon set up new supermarkets in the area. They combined better supply chains with economies of scale, with new consumer goods too costly to stock for village stores, and often with more efficient cost management.

To consumers, the old shops soon appeared as relics of the past. The new chain stores now embodied their own emancipation and their new integration into a globalised economy. Today, a huge new shopping mall opens in the region almost every month. The old shops have lost their economic and social significance; many of them stand empty and are slowly decaying. Like Michael Jackson’s footprints cast in concrete close to the blue slide, they have transformed into symbols of aspirations doubly betrayed by structural inequalities.

[images 2 to 5]

III.

Ethnographic photography does not merely illustrate texts. Like every art form, it makes things visible. In Wittgenstein's terms, it *shows* instead of *saying*; it evokes things instead of being definitive about them. This does not mean photography is imprecise. Good photographs show things in a very precise manner. It is just impossible to precisely say *what* they show us; they are less consciously malleable than words and not subject to as clear an order of grammar and sequence.

Just like lived reality, ethnographic photographs are difficult to nail down. Their accuracy, though, rests on more than the impressionistic rendering of a feeling we cannot express in words. Good ethnographic photographs – and probably all good photographs whose reception straddles the aesthetic and the informational – are simultaneously precise and accurate. By opening up a space of meaning, their precision transcends the precise to convey the accurate.

The great strength of photographs as a medium, their way of *showing*, is also their greatest potential weakness as a genre of ethnography. If we struggle to tell what *exactly* we learn from them, how can we use them for our attempt to convey what being in the world means to people who are not us? How can we be sure they show what we try to make them show?

We can, of course, frame the viewers' visual experience. We choose captions, arrange photographs in a sequence, surround them with institutional meaning, or simply *tell* the audience what the photos are meant to show. I have done so in the first part of this essay. Without such explanation, the slide would not be the symbol I want you to see in it; the empty shops could not stand for experiences you have not shared.

Yet if you ever have spent hours being shown a relative stranger's family albums, you know that even context does not always help to find meaning. We need visual anchors to which our interest in the life behind the photograph attaches itself. This is what I call

photographs' precision – a quality a skilled photographer can partly, but only partly, control. It is the expression of attentiveness to detail and significance, and of an eye for the unfamiliar whose result draws our focus on things we might think we know, but have never yet seen. These anchors – what Roland Barthes (1981) called *punctum* – might just as well be things we recognise as things we find strange; always, their presence creates an interest that goes beyond what can easily be narrated.

For me, the key to the possibility of doing ethnography through photographs lies in this relation between presence and absence. Photographs do not simply emerge; it is us who make them, intentionally and actively, trying to find the right way of conveying what we cannot otherwise express. In using photographs as a medium of expression, we engage a reality which, somehow, is out there, and we seek to find an image for its meaning to us. For this, we rely on the *presence* of things and beings.

Yet photographs do not fascinate us if they only depict what is directly present in them. Good photography, at least good ethnographic photography, shows more than is present and more than we could deliberately express. By reaching beyond what was there when we took the picture, it opens up a space for a surplus of meaning. We see a face and perceive a story; we see a tree and learn about history. Not just any story, not just any history, but the story of this particular face or the history behind this particular tree.

This is the conundrum of photography that wants to be ethnographic. It is forbidden to be too explicit under penalty of losing its significance; yet without being explicit, it has to precisely and accurately evoke meaning.

[Images 6 to 11]

IV.

Ethnography is about people, so most ethnographic photographs show people. Bodies, hands, eyes; joy or sadness or hardships written in the lines of a face. For us, few things in the world are as immediately evocative as good images of fellow human beings. We relate to them and recognise them, and their presence can be overwhelming. This very quality can make them precarious for ethnographic photography. We recognize them too immediately. We relate to them in a way that leaves little scope for estrangement, for an absence of meaning that can be filled by what the photograph evokes and what we did not know before.

Iconographic traditions which shape the way we take and see photographs are an important part of this: images we have seen before and whose meaning we have come to accept. If we look at photos of farmworker's faces, few of us can escape memories of Walker Evans' (1941) or Dorothea Lange's work (Spirn 2008). The 'best' faces for ethnographic images are not ordinary faces, but faces rendered beautiful, haunting and expressive by their exceptional qualities. The old lady in whose crinkles the experiences of a lifetime seem to become tangible; the gaunt worker whose tight muscles are traces of a life of toil. Yet what is the relation of the lady's experiences to her face? Are they any different from the experiences of her friend whose face looks ordinary and still smooth? Did the worker experience his life of toil as fulfilling or as degrading?

The photographs in this essay reflect on the presence and absence of human experiences in ethnographic photography. I wanted to find out how our relation to ethnography changes if we eliminate the immediate presence of people. Does their absence open a space for a more accurate depiction of their presence, a space to search for their experiences instead of being overwhelmed by the visual immediateness of their presence?

I cannot escape conventions of visual imagery. Just as earlier ethnographers learnt the vocabulary of, say, Walker Evans (1941) or Alfred Duggan-Cronin (1928-54), I grew up with images by David Goldblatt (1998), or with Bernd and Hilla Becher's objective photography (Becher 1997), and I learnt to see what photographs are through the writings of Roland Barthes (1981), John Berger (2013) or Susan Sontag (1977). I wanted to use this vocabulary as best I could. Sceptical towards portraits' apparent immediacy, I wanted to show peoples' hopes through the material structures they left behind. This, I hoped, would evoke their presence in a more precise manner, and open up a space in which their dignity could be preserved.

I am not sure how far the attempt succeeded. My training is in ethnography, and I still feel much more comfortable and versatile in words than in photographs. What led me to the subject was not, at first, any aesthetic interest; I had already written a scholarly book on the shops' history when their visual presence brought me to work on this photo essay. I knew what I was looking at, and I knew what I was looking for. Technical, ethnographic and aesthetic decisions influenced each other, and combining the ethnographic and the aesthetic sometimes made for uneasy choices. The photographs, I believe, reflect this.

The slide in the first picture is an anchor and an introduction. It is mostly absence. The lodge burned down, Michael Jackson is dead and gone, and I only told you about the continuing presence of his footprints. The photo gains meaning from ethnography, from telling about what it shows – and yet it shows much more than I could tell.

The next nine photos show buildings that no longer are used as stores. Visually most striking, for me, were the smallish, abandoned shops surrounded by emptiness.

Landscape gained increasing importance over the course of the project. I tried to frame the shops in a lived-in emptiness, in an absence of people that evoked their former

presence. Fallen bricks and refuse gather, footpaths bypass the buildings instead of leading into them. A dog's unconcerned presence makes humans' absence all the more tangible.

The larger supermarkets were much less rewarding to photograph: town phenomena, they are cramped in by neighbouring houses and often re-used as storage rooms or workshops. Without them, the story might have been more picturesque, but its ethnography would be less accurate.

The last image's lighting is poor, and like the building, the photograph lacks symmetry. The inscriptions, if seen as a commentary, are almost too blunt: the shop's name "Time will tell" is too explicit to leave room for ambiguity. When I decided to discard the picture, however, my regard was again and again drawn back to the running paint, to the crack in the wall and to the typographic similarity between 'Safari' and 'State'. These traces of time, for me, transcend what is depicted. They are anchors to hold the photograph in a lived reality I am unable to pin down in words, and to move beyond precision to accurately evoke what is absent.

Writing about my own photographs, I realise I am tempted to tell you what to see. Beyond providing context, such telling would make little sense: no words are needed for that whose presence is vivid enough, and no words will evoke what is completely absent. When doing photography, we try to accurately convey meaning without fully controlling what we show. In a more radical way than words, photographs make present what we cannot consciously put into them. We look at our own photographs and realise, again and again: I had not fully seen this. Because I am always not yet sure what they mean, photographs invite me to search for meaning.

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