AESTHETIC CHOICES: NEGOTIATIONS IN THE FIELD

The questions of how, for whom, and through what relations this anthropological relevance is constructed are the important ones here. I would argue that decisions about anthropological relevance involve aesthetic choices, and an insistence on the difference between this relevance and aesthetic composition has led to the latter's becoming to some extent taboo. (Chris Wright 1998:17)

This paper explores questions of anthropological relevance and the privileging of certain aesthetic choices. The term 'aesthetic' is undoubtedly controversial and avoided by some academics such as Elizabeth Edwards (1997:77) who finds the '. . . suggestion of an 'absolute value' derived from Western connoisseurship, with the same claims to value and standards as painting or drawing, unhelpful. Within photographic writing and practice this has largely meant a classic, fine art-derived Western aesthetic which suggests a universalist judgemental position on photography which I find untenable in the contexts of much of the material I am discussing here.' However, I have chosen to use the term 'aesthetic' as I propose to explore the art/science dichotomy in terms of composition and realism. 'Aesthetic' here is defined broadly within the context of photography as; any image taking involves a compositional choice which is influenced by the way we like to see and be seen.] within the context of negotiations between anthropologist and respondents regarding photographic practices. Integral to this moment of negotiation is how people want to be seen and see, and how the photograph is going to be used. The inquiry comes from my current doctoral research and is framed within a discussion of reflexive processes. The ideas in this paper were stimulated by attendance at the recent workshop 'Transcultural Images and Visual Anthropology' hosted by The Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at Australian National University.

While conscious of the responsibilities of representation the discussions on photographic practices at the workshop made me further query the intersection of my own practices and that of respondents. I started to wonder about the ways respondents posed for and used the photographs I gave them. What could this tell me about the way they saw themselves and the ways they would like others to see them? Howard Morphy and Marcus Banks (1997:21) have noted that '. . . increasingly studies must take into account the interrelationship between anthropological and indigenous practice without collapsing the one into the other.' In an attempt to better understand how these various practices met in my own work I have taken an example from
fieldwork conducted in Fiji during 1996-97. The purpose of this exercise is to make the process of production more visible and explore why certain images become privileged over others in anthropological contexts.

**What is relevant?**

The doctorate explores the dynamics of small holder sugarcane farming families in Fiji and their relationship to the wider sugar industry. The focus of the thesis is family labour, especially that of women and children on the farms as their work is officially rendered invisible yet they have been integral to sugar production in Fiji. I am interested in their experiences of work and how constructs of gender and seniority within the family shape these experiences, particularly as it is within family relationships that farms are primarily operated.

Like many anthropologists I had taken a camera and video [For the purposes of this paper the discussion will be confined to photography.] to the field, with the intention of incorporating visual media into the thesis that would complement the written text and add an exciting dimension of representation by evoking a sense of people and place that words could not. In terms of my own visual practice I had identified the stills depicting 'daily life shots', particularly those involving people working on the farm, as useful for the thesis. The use of visual material would be descriptive of physical environment, the diversity and conditions of work and the social relations that organised labour. In this sense, the photographs I chose as anthropologically relevant were primarily illustrative as they supported the written text. The underlying advocacy of making visible the invisible, namely the labour of women and children on the farms and hence their contribution to the sugar industry, further situates these choices within documentary realism.

Chris Wright (1998) in his discussion on contemporary trends in visual anthropology observes that the art/science dichotomy is still prevalent in the academic privileging of 'anthropological relevance' in terms of the 'right' content over 'aesthetic composition'. Rather than viewing these two concepts as antagonistic opponents he sees them as mutually productive. (Wright 1998:17) In the opening quote Wright proposes that decisions about anthropological relevance involve aesthetic choices. He further suggests that 'anthropology usually privileges one convention or genre, one way of visually apprehending others - documentary realism - and there is a sense in which the documentary mode is part of our own aesthetic.' (Wright 1998:19)

This was certainly true of my own work, where preferences for realism privileged the 'more natural' shots over the 'more constructed.' These natural shots were not in the observational realist tradition, prior consent was always sought which meant that there was usually some degree of awareness and engagement with the camera. The 'naturalness' came from the ordinariness of the shot as people went about daily activities. Participants were never asked to pose or rearrange the scene in any way, it was I, the photographer who moved around trying different angles for light and composition. Whereas, the photographs of people who posed themselves in overt ways, rearranged the setting or requested particular shots I regarded as their photographs, something I could offer in return for their hospitality.

I had not given much thought to respondent's own photographic practices, what their poses and photographic arrangements could mean. These
photographs revealed the aesthetic choices of respondents, and can reveal a lot about cultural values and situated identities as well as the negotiations and relations involved around taking the picture, but were they relevant to my thesis? Relevance for a particular anthropological study depends on the parameters chosen and I am not suggesting a conflation between the two branches of visual anthropology; using visual media to study culture and studying visual forms and practices. David MacDougall (1997:283) observes that these areas will sometimes overlap as in the study of visible systems which may demand the use of visual communication. I propose for the example in this paper that the use of visual representation benefited from an examination of the visual practices of the anthropologist and the respondents.

Photograph: Ashmita (right) [Ashmita' is a pseudonym.] and her mother. (Fiji 1996)

**Femininity, food and friendship**

The photo of Ashmita and her mother displaying a cooked meal suggests questions of why and for whom is the meal cooked? Why are they displaying it? Is it a special meal? And why is Ashmita looking so earnest? I chose this photograph because of the complex interweaving of expectations that surrounded its production and I consider the final image a tension between my aesthetic choices and Ashmita's in the quest for anthropological relevance.

Ashmita became a friend and one of the main respondents for the case study of twenty farming families. During fieldwork I often visited her and her mother, (her father was usually harvesting sugar cane), and would generally participate in any of their activities such as washing at the river, processing and cooking food, or agricultural work. This photograph was taken within the first month we met and the occasion was a picnic. Ashmita had initiated the idea as an event she thought we would enjoy and also as something different as she had never been on a picnic before. I was touched by her thoughtfulness and expressed an interest in helping her cook the food so I could learn more about food preparation, an important part of most women's daily routine.

At the outset then, the meal was elevated to a special status and it should be noted that while Ashmita organised the day it was her mother who controlled the cooking process while we assisted. We ate part of the food down by the river where they usually go to wash dishes, clothes and bathe and in fact we
incorporated all these activities into the picnic. The novelty of the picnic was eating by the river, which they did not normally do. The river is one of the main sites of women's work, but it is also a chance to catch up with neighbours and if time and weather permit, relax while bathing.

I am exploring ideas of femininity and how this relates to gender relations and the division of labour, and consider the photograph conveys a sense of the importance of cooking to Fiji-Indian women in this community. Respondents estimated that around ninety percent of Fiji-Indian marriages are arranged in this area, and the good reputations of the prospective spouses are indispensable in securing a favourable marriage. It is beyond this paper to go into the various aspects of reputation and the monitoring by the community other than to say that for women, admired qualities include the capacity to work in a skilled and dutiful manner on the farm and in the household, the ability to grow, process and cook food being essential. Traditionally when the young man and his family come to visit the proposed brides place for the first time to negotiate the wedding, it is her duty to serve tea and food that she has prepared so her appearance, demeanour and domestic talents may be assessed by his family.

In this photograph the range of dishes and their presentation are not only important as a display of culinary skill but also of hospitality. The entertainment of guests is very important and it is primarily women who care and cater to the needs of visitors which takes place within the context of kinship protocols and gender segregation. The offering of chicken curry is particularly prestigious as the family can not afford to eat meat regularly and this chicken was especially killed for the occasion. The roti opened to display the dhal inside signifies it is no ordinary roti which are eaten daily. The display as a whole could be said to be linked to ideals of womanhood; the plastic flowers can be related to ideas of femininity [MacDougall (1992:118-119) in his discussion on photographic practices of Indian tourists at the Mussoorie hill station in northern Uttar Pradesh notes that the second major female prop is baskets of plastic flowers.] as can the cutlery set which is related to women's work.

Why then had I considered that this photo was not anthropologically relevant to my thesis? It had been composed specifically for my thesis yet it did not fit my 'naturalistic' framework and seemed too constructed to be of any use in daily life sequences. It was constructed by Ashmita, these were her aesthetic choices, how she wanted to be seen in the thesis as well as an occasion to be recorded for her family album. Ashmita was considering both the private and public uses of this photograph [Here I refer to Berger 's (1980) discussion on the public and private uses of photographs and the role of memory in contextualization and interpretation.] and wanted to control the production process of her family's representation.

Ashmita's serious expression was typical of other Fijian-Indians I knew who posed for portrait shots and can be considered part of local photography practice. I did not inquire at the time why people pose like this but I am inclined to think it is an indication of the importance of the photograph and a pose adopted for publicly displayed photographs such as the family portraits that are hung on the wall. In reference to Indian photographic practice MacDougall (1992:123) comments that,

[r]evelation and unmasking are clearly not part of this construction of
photography, as they so often are in the West. Photography is not meant to break through class indifference or bridge social divisions. Nor, in domestic use, is it historical, in the sense of catching people unawares as part of a family narrative, a chronicle of change. Its purpose is not so much to define, for people already exist as defined beings, but to acknowledge and enlarge. Thus photography assists in the creation of a reality, not in the discovery (or uncovering) of it. (MacDougall 1992:123)

This statement could be said to apply to the perspective of Ashmita and myself as we participate within what could be defined as Indian and Western world views respectively [This is meant in the most generalist sense and is no substitute for analysis of our situated identities. Nor is this an acclamation of cultural boundaries, if one can define an 'Indian' culture or a 'Western' culture?]. My agenda was [is] to reveal the 'realities' of poor small holder cane farming families, while in this example Ashmita wanted to display an ideal reality. Both perspectives involved aesthetic choices that were culturally orientated and considerate of the uses of photographs, remembering of course that this photo was also negotiated within the context of our relationship at the time.

Conclusion

The workshop prompted me to further question my own photographic practises and to pay more attention to the ways respondents were representing themselves. While aware of representational issues I had not realised just how biased I was towards a 'documentary realism', showing it 'how it is', yet nevertheless framing photographs to suit these aesthetic choices. The criteria for anthropological relevance for these images had been based on the degree of 'realism' I perceived in the photographs. While all the photographs were taken with consent and therefore awareness of the camera, if I considered the image too 'constructed' in terms of respondents own arrangements and posing, the photograph literally became theirs rather than a representation that could be used for the doctorate. I still maintain an advocacy approach and think the 'life in action' photographs are valuable in providing a sense of the physical environment, the diversity and conditions of farm work and the social relations that orientate farm life. However, now I have many more stills to choose from as I have broadened my criteria so to speak.

The example in this paper I think portrays some of the tensions surrounding the production and selection of photographs for anthropological use. Both Ashmita and I shared a similar objective to produce a photograph for the thesis yet the complex expectations [For instance the photograph was taken early on in our relationship and at the beginning of fieldwork. The clarity of what the thesis was going to be about grew alongside our relationship, so the expectations I conveyed to Ashmita at that time would not have been that clear. Which is not to imply she would have altered the photographic composition. She continued to organise photographs in this way but was also very accommodating when I wanted to take the more 'natural' shots. Ashmita also brought to our relationship knowledge regarding research work, she had previously conducted a survey on causes of divorce in the area and, although she was engaged in helping her parents on the farm, expressed an interest in maintaining her academic skills. Considerations such as these were all part of the production process.] and different 'aesthetic choices' led to a tension between our views of what would be 'anthropologically relevant'. Yet
ironically the very constructedness of the photograph makes it relevant, 
conveying ideas about the role of women in the way Ashmita chose to 
create/display reality. (cf. MacDougall 1992:123)

Implicit to this discussion of aesthetic choices are the power dynamics of 
representational politics and the interplay of the image and contextualisation 
in consumption. While the constructed and negotiated nature of 
anthropological projects are well documented, I found an exploration of this 
process in the above example valuable. Firstly, by enabling me to recognise 
that my own biases had led me to ignore a wealth of information that is 
relevant to my thesis and secondly because an acknowledgment of the 
subject's own photographic practices provides a space for them to collaborate 
more explicitly in their own representations for public use.

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