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Photography and Individualization in Contemporary Africa: An Ivoirian Case-study

Jean-François Werner

Among the various types of photographic image produced in Africa by African practitioners, the ID picture (or passport photo) has been the most widespread ever since the introduction of photography at the end of the 19th century. As far as photographers are concerned, the production of this kind of picture has always represented a major part of their work, as is the case for this Ivoirian studio photographer whose practice we are studying in detail.

It is argued that the ID picture, because of its insertion in legal structures as a source of evidence guaranteed by the State, has played an important role in the way photographic images have been perceived as mimetic reflections of reality by many African people. The institution of such a régime of photographic truth had important consequences for the rise of modern collective and individual identities in Africa and the building up of visual cultures oriented towards more realistic representations of the world.

INTRODUCTION

Among the many types of photographic image which have been and are still currently produced in Africa, I shall focus in this paper on a particular kind of photograph, commonly called the I.D. picture or passport photo, which I shall define as public-use portraits in contrast with the private-use portraits belonging to a broad "family photo" category.

A private-use portrait is defined by its predominantly domestic use within the limits of the family group and the fact that it is deprived of all economic value. Moreover, when one examines its conditions of production, one is struck by their variability across local cultures and specific histories.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS WERNER has been studying photography for the last ten years throughout West Africa, placing special emphasis on the social construction of this medium and its relationships with the building of modern identities. The results of his work have been presented in several exhibitions and numerous publications. He contributed, for instance, to the "African Photography Anthology" published by Revue Noire. Beside his anthropological research work, he has been involved in the conservation of the African photographic heritage, and is currently taking care of Augustt's photographic archives. He is currently heading a collective research project aimed at studying the relationships between visual media (television and photography) and changing identities of women in several West African countries.

Conversely, public-use portraits have been made since 1880 up to the present under remarkably stable conditions of production, in practically all societies. They are usually authoritatively manufactured upon request from public or private institutions, for purposes of identification.

In Africa, the I.D. picture has been used first by colonial authorities in order to document and survey the "indigenous" populations, before being massively used by the post-colonial states as a way of identifying and registering their populations. In Ivory Coast, for instance, millions of I.D. pictures are made every year for various purposes: to apply for a national identity card, a driving licence, a passport, a foreigner's identification card, to register in school, to obtain a loan from a bank, and so on.

But even if these two different uses of photography are closely related, I shall argue in this paper that the documentary status attributed to photography by the State has played a leading role in the construction of a new visual culture in Africa:

1. by furthering the spread of photography in African societies;
2. by influencing the way photography has been perceived by African people as a form of evidence;
3. by playing a catalytic role in the individualization processes.

To bring an end to these preliminary statements, let me add that this peculiar type of photographic portrait has not yet been studied in Africa [Werner 2000] as has been the case in Europe where some historical studies are available [Frizot 1985; Phéline 1985; Tagg 1988].

AN IVOIRIAN CASE-STUDY

The photograph [Figure 1] represents an elderly man, dressed in an old army coat. The picture is centered on his face, which is slightly turned to one side. He is not looking at the photographer, but rather is gazing away. The identity of this man is not known. We only know that he was an inhabitant of Piegbo, a Senoufo village located in the neighborhood of Korhogo, a small town in the north of Ivory Coast, and that the picture was taken on 24th August, 1964, by a photographer named Cornélius Azaglo Augustt.[1]

His professional and migratory trajectory makes Cornélius Augustt a representative of those photographers born in English-speaking countries (Ghana and Nigeria above all) who played such an important role in the spreading of photography throughout West-Africa. He was born in Togo in 1924 of parents who were both Ewe, an ethnic group straddling Togo and Ghana, and after his father's death he was raised in Ghana where he went to school. At the end of World War II he did various jobs before emigrating to Bobo-Dioulasso (now in Burkina-Faso), where he worked as an accounting clerk between 1950 and 1955. Meanwhile, he began his apprenticeship in photography with two Ghanaian photographers as it appeared to be a better economic prospect. Then in 1955 he moved to Korhogo where he began to work in the street with a box-camera.[2] In 1958 he opened a studio named Studio du Nord where he has been practicing photography ever since.

During the year 1964 Augustt shot about three thousand I.D. pictures in the villages surrounding Korhogo alone. The reason for this very important demand

Figure 1 Portrait of a man, Piagbo, 24 Aug 1964 (Copyright Ird/Augustt)

for I.D. pictures lay in the political context which was prevailing at that time in Ivory Coast. Indeed, the following year presidential, general and local elections were to be organized throughout the country. Hence, the one party (PDCI-RDA) which had been ruling Ivory Coast since Independence in 1960 was compulsorily mobilizing the rural populations in order to achieve an overwhelming majority. Getting an I.D. picture was then the first step before applying for an I.D. card which would give these people the capacity to vote. In some villages, women also were involved [Figure 2].

While he was busy most of the time practicing photography in his studio for an urban clientele, Cornelius Augustt was ready to go to the countryside whenever there were a lot of photographs to be made. Usually he was called upon by the village chief who would gather the people together to be photographed. On this one day alone, he shot 72 photographs in Piegbo intended to be used as I.D. pictures [Figure 3], and the day after he came back to make 16 more snapshots.[3] So, altogether, there are 88 negatives left from this two-days' work in Piegbo. They represent men only, posing in front of a backdrop made from a dark-colored cloth. The shooting occurred outside, in a public setting, and therefore under the visual supervision of the group. The photographer and his assistant were placing people in the shadow offered by a wall and were moving around the building as the sun moved on. Augustt used a Rolleiflex (middle-sized camera) with black and white film, and each portrait was made in a very short time, as the photographer was able to shoot about 50 persons in one hour, working in a production-line manner: "Yes, it did not last long. Because one can shoot fifty persons within one hour. Because as soon as one is seated, he

Figure 2 Eight ID portraits mostly of women, Pugbo, 1 Dec 1964 (Copyright Ird/Augustt)

Figure 3 Sample of eight from among 72 I.D. portraits of men, Piagbo, 24 Aug. 1964. (Copyright Ird/Augustt)

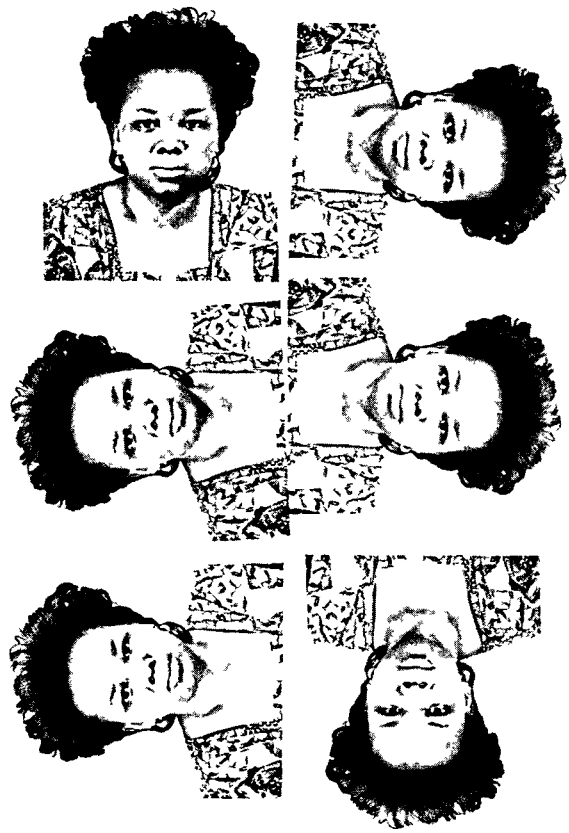

Figure 4 Sample of I D pictures, 4×4 cm (Copyright Ird/Augustt)

is positioned, then one does the focusing, then shoots, and somebody else is sitting down. One wipes his face and if he is not well combed then he is invited to do so."

Once the session was over, the photographer would go back to his studio where the films were developed overnight and then printed on small-sized cards (4×4 centimeters) after centering the image again on the face of the subject. The day after, they were delivered to the customers, who paid 250 francs CFA for four 4×4 centimeter prints, an amount of money far from unimportant for these poor peasants. On his profits, the photographer was obliged to give a ten percent "tax" to the local government representative [Figure 4].

The relationship between the photographer and the subjects was thus taking place under a double constraint: a political obligation and a normal photographic setting. The villagers were summoned by the local chief to come and get their pictures taken. So they left their work in the fields or at home and came dressed in working clothes to submit themselves to this compulsory photographic recording procedure. For most of the villagers, that was the first photograph ever made of

Figure 5 Portrait of an angry woman, location unknown, ca 1964 (Copyright Ird/Augustt)

them, and they were reluctant to be shot, whether because they were afraid to be bothered later on by the State which could now identify them, or because they feared to have some part of their soul taken away during the photographing operation. As a matter of fact, this symbolic violence exerted over the subjects is obvious when one examines the faces, which clearly express refusal and anger (with eyes gazing away or, on the contrary, defying the photographer and, beyond him, the onlooker) [Figure 5].

This political violence was increased by the very normal photographic rules applied to these people in order to reduce their image to a few physical characteristics: face centered in the middle of the picture, eyes looking into the lens, head slightly turned to the left side in order to have one ear visible. Under these conditions, photography became nothing more than a disciplinary method, an obedient instrument of the microphysics of power as described by Michel Foucault.

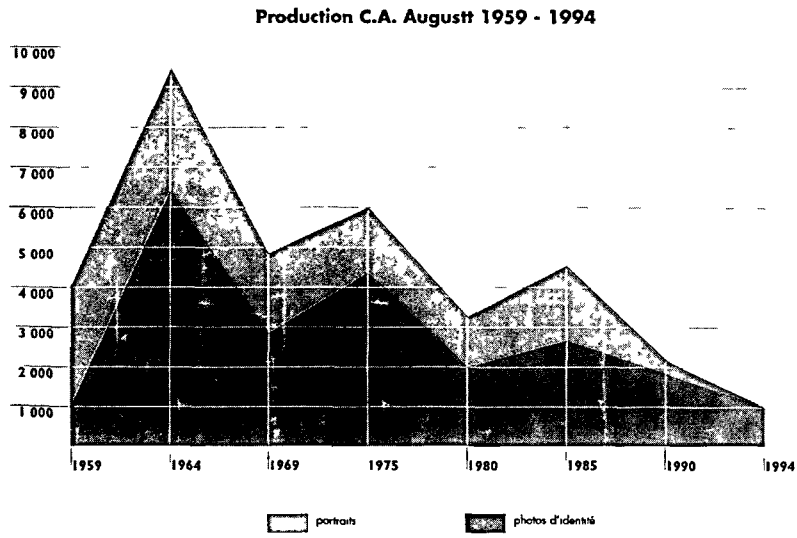

Figure 6 Graph showing development of the over-all production of public-and private-use portraits between 1958 and 1994.

IMPACT OF THE I.D. PICTURE ON THE SPREAD OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN AFRICA

The I.D. picture has played a significant role in the spread of photography in Africa: first, because of its quantitative importance, and secondly, because for many people this was the first photographic portrait ever made of them.

From a quantitative point of view, the manufacturing of I.D. pictures has always represented for African photographers a sizeable part of their production and a steady income. As far as Augustt is concerned, for instance, I.D. pictures have represented, on average, seventy percent of his production between 1958 and 1998, as we can see from the graph [Figure 6].

In 1964 alone, he shot more than five thousand I.D. pictures altogether in the villages surrounding Korhogo or in his downtown studio. But while in the studio the number of I.D. pictures was roughly equivalent to the private-use portraits, it represented, as far as the villages were concerned, 99.5 percent of all the photographs taken there. This difference reveals a temporal gap in the spread of photography between these two settings. While in Korhogo a middle class composed of state employees and merchants was rising socially and wanted to have this ascent recorded photographically, the rural populations were experiencing photographic representation as a burden [Tagg 1988; Figure 7].

As a matter of fact, for many African people, especially poor people from urban or rural settings, the first photographic portrait ever made of them has commonly been taken for identification purposes. And as far as the Senoufo peasants are concerned, it was only fifteen or twenty years later (during the 'eighties) that these men and women were able to have access to the private use of photography, getting themselves portrayed, in color from then on, and making use of middle-class

Figure 7 *Portrait of a woman made from an I D picture, Studio du Nord, date unknown Augustt comments "At that time, women were allowed to keep their head covered for I D pictures" (Copyright Ird/Augustt)*

Figure 8 *A group portrait made in a village near Korhogo, 1985–1990 (Copyright Ird/Augustt) See also Color Plate 2*

Figure 9 Two young men with cigarettes, in a village near Korhogo, 1985–1990 (Copyright Ird/ Augustt)

esthetic codes, but with much less freedom than in the studio, for the portraits were shot outside [Figures 8 and 9].

THE I.D. PICTURE AS EVIDENCE

The second point I want to stress is this: the use of the photographic image by the State as an instrument of record has not been without consequence for the way African people were going to perceive not only photographs but also other indexical images (movies, television, video) that were to follow.

Indeed, the I.D. picture descends directly from the judicial portrait as it was codified by the Frenchman Bertillon, around 1885, with the intent of registering the criminal population (in order to trace recidivists later on), in association with anthropometric measurements, the recording of fingerprints and biographical information.[4]

Later on, in France and many other industrial societies, the obligation to validate one's identity with an administrative document bearing a photographic portrait became extended to the entire population. In this case, a photograph is used to

make a link between the person and the biographical data inscribed on the identity papers (his civil status).

In order to fulfill this task, the portrait must be as likelife as possible, which means it must give the most accurate picture regarding anatomical details (forehead, eyes, nose, ears, lips of the subject) as well as the general features [Phéline 1985: 126].

This likeness—a term actually used during the 19th Century to designate a photograph—is obtained through the implementation of a number of very normal rules in order to strip the subject of his/her social identity, to reduce him or her to a few distinctive features by means of a neutral, objective, transparent photographic device which, at the best, could be worked without the help of a human (a Photomaton).

Consequently, the use of such technical procedures was to enhance the indexical nature of the photographic image, that is its nature of tracking, imprinting, marking, proceeding from a direct material relationship between the sensitive film surface and the physical reality of the referent during the very brief period of time which corresponds to the opening of the shutter of a camera. As a matter of fact, the widespread belief among African people that photography is able to capture a part of the person's soul on its surface and, in doing so, might endanger his or her life, appears to stem directly from this strange mimetical power of photography.

In Ghana, for instance, an early expression for the camera was "the machine that traps shadows"; negatives were referred to as *saman*, or "ghosts of the dead." Using light and film, the camera "captured" the person and produced his or her photographic double. The negative thus made invisible things visible, revealing what appeared to be the subject's "ghost" in an allusion to—and prefiguration of—his own death. Even today, this underlying association with mortality discourages many older people from being photographed. Similarly, pregnant women avoid the camera—even going to the extreme of categorically refusing simple identity cards[5] [Wendl 1999: 150].

This belief can still be found nowadays in Ivory Coast, not so much in an explicit way but rather hidden under codes governing the photographic representation of the person. As far as full-sized portraits are concerned, for instance, the subject ought to be entirely represented without any part of his/her body or clothes or shoes being out of the frame. Cutting off parts is considered a professional mistake by the customers (who may refuse to buy such a picture) and the photographers alike, it being interpreted as a symbolic aggression against the person [Werner 1997: 143].

But this peculiar property which photographs share with other indexical pictures, such as movie, television and video, would not have been sufficient by itself to give photography the status of a truthful representation of reality. In other words, the construction of photography as an instrument to register the truth is not so much based on the specific indexical power of photography as on the power of the State apparatus which used it and guaranteed its authority as a source of evidence. As a matter of fact, "this is the use of the photograph in police work—primarily for its value of evidence—and its insertion in legal structures that offer a privileged view of the organization of the régime of photographic truth" [Tagg 1988: 95; Figure 10].

Figure 10 Judicial portrait made by C. Augustt on orders of the Korhogo Police Department, 1987. (Copyright Ird/Augustt)

The institution of such a "régime of photographic truth" was going to have important consequences, (1) upon the building up of modern identities by African people, and (2) as the central axis of a modern visual culture turned towards realistic representations of the world.

THE I.D. PICTURE AND INDIVIDUALIZATION PROCESSES

My thesis is that photography has played an important role in the process of modernization in societies in the North as well as in the South; not only because it has drastically changed the fields of communication and representation (from icon to index), but also because it has been a central mediation between large-scale phenomena related with the modernization process (urbanization, industrialization, schooling, development of a market economy, construction of nation-states); and, on the other side, the social changes which go with it (division of labor, individualization, mechanical solidarity changing to an organic one, etc).

According to Elias [1991], individualization processes must be understood as a new way of defining the relationship between the individual and the society, in other words between the "individual identity" (the self-awareness of the individual) and the "collective identity" (referring to the way the individual becomes aware of belonging to a social system). And, according to this author, the modernization process is characterized, on one hand, by a more and more acute and increased self-awareness of the person, and, on the other hand, by an enlargment of the social context into which he or she is integrated through the building-up of

more and more complex and extended social wholes (from clan to tribe, from tribe to nation-state, from nation-state to a confederation of states).

From this viewpoint, I am arguing that the I.D. picture has played a role (in association with the written mediation) in the setting-up of a new balance between individual and collective identities in African societies. First, by its capacity to constitute the photographed subject into a singular entity (individuation); and secondly, by giving him a new social identity symbolised by the delivery of a national identity card. Paradoxically, this disciplinary technology which subjects the individual in order to better objectivize his/her body, finally turns out to make a subject aware of his/her own individuality.

First, the photographic procedure implemented in the making of an I.D. picture is going to uproot the subject from his spatial and temporal environment. Photography is extracting from the visible reality a bit of space containing a person, or more precisely a part of this person (his/her face), who is consequently cut out of his spatial and social environment because of the centering of the picture, the use of a neutral background, and the way the subject is reduced to a set of morphological features which make him/her into a unique person, different from everybody else.

Moreover, this spatial extraction of the subject is increased by his/her pulling out from the real ordered, ever-flowing collective temporality (founded on the oral transmission of local history), to make him/her enter into a new temporality, the photographic one, which is fragmented and disorganized. Hence, the subject being torn out from his/her spatial and temporal determinations is more precisely recognized as a unique individual by himself (he can look at himself from the outside) as well as by the members of his/her community.

Then this picture is stuck on a national I.D. card bearing biographical data and a fingerprint. This device will give the subject a new identity, making him the citizen of a nation-state. Thus it is materializing his belonging to a new social whole which exceeds the traditional communitarian identities of family, clan, and tribe.

Later on, people would go to the studios to have their portraits taken as the technical evolution of photography made it a more and more accessible medium. If, in the beginning, emphasis was put on the social identity of the subject by making conspicuous all the signs of ethnic belonging (clothes, ritual scars, hairdressing, gesture and so on), thereafter African people would make use of photography to show others how they succeeded in finding a place in the new social and economic order (through professional roles, for instance).

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW AFRICAN VISUAL CULTURES

It must be noted that if portraiture was not unknown in precolonial societies, it was rather a marginal production in the context of pictorial arts much more concerned with abstract than with figurative forms [Borgatti and Brilliant 1990]. A consequence of the régime of photographic truth legitimised by the State was to put photography, considered as a mimetical representation of reality, at the center of a new visual culture integrating indexical and non indexical images.

As a matter of fact, African ancient or modern pictorial arts (mainly painting and sculpture) have been deeply influenced by photography in that they are

adopting realistic patterns of description; as is the case, for instance, with funeral sculpture in Akan societies [Wendl 1998] or with painting in Congolese society [Jewsiewicki 1991]. I shall argue that if the African pictorial contemporary arts are so strongly attracted by photography, this is not for esthetic or technical reasons, which make photography more easily accessible, but because it is on the side of the modern powers (the State, technology) while traditional images are linked to dominated local political structures.

As far as photographic portraiture is concerned, this régime of photographic truth has produced a lasting effect, as can be seen in the dominating role played by mimesis upon representation, even if the closer control exercised by the people over the making of their own images allows them to stand aloof from the mimetic power of photography. In other words, since the 'sixties, one can observe the change from an authoritarian mimesis to a subverted one, as people no longer submit to mimesis but rather are playing with it in order to mix fiction and reality and create personal worlds [Wendl 1999; Behrend 1999].

Thus the central function assigned to photography in the making of new collective and individual identities stems from the remarkable plasticity of this new technology of representation. Depending on the way it is used, it can be either the instrument of a new régime of truth enforced by the political powers (as is the case with the I.D. picture) or a tool appropriated by the people to find their way into modernity (as is the case with portraits for private use; Figures 11 to 13).

The distancing of the mimetic power of photography has lately been accelerated by the recomposition of the field of photographic portraiture, following the

Figure 11 Two policemen posing with a pot of flowers; Studio du Nord, 1969. (Copyright Ird/ Augustt)

Figure 12 *Portrait of a young man holding a karate pose; Studio du Nord, 1980 (Copyright Ird/ Augustt)*

Figure 13 *Group of Ghanaian women dressed up for a funeral; Studio du Nord, 11 March 1980 (Copyright Ird/Augustt)*

advent of color photography in Africa during the 'eighties. Among the many changes which occurred, there is the parting of private-use portrait production and public-use portrait production in association with an increased division of labor within the photographic profession [Werner 1999]. The private-use portraits are henceforth manufactured by mobile photographers who use color films and who have completely short-circuited the studio photographers; while the main part of public-use portrait production is actually in the hands of a private enterprise (called Ciphot) which was given the monopoly on I.D. pictures made in the police stations, by the Ivoirian State.

Meanwhile, studio photographers must content themselves with what is left over by Ciphot—essentially I.D. pictures for student cards—and the mobile photographers. Indeed, for many old photographers ruined by the color revolution, the making of black-and-white I.D. pictures is about the only work left but, as is the case for Augustt, they can hardly make a living out of it. Conversely, private-use portraiture indeed had an esthetic impact upon the making of I.D. pictures, in particular because the same photographers were producing both types of portrait.

For, despite the lack of esthetic intention, despite all the constraints inherent to their production, these pictures are undoubtedly portraits in the plain meaning of the word; not only because they relate to recognizable and identified models but also because the people portrayed managed to exist as subjects of their own images:

- because of the way they are gazing at the photographer, thus reflecting back onto the observer his or her curiosity;
- because they turn their faces slightly to one side, thus allowing some disorder to appear;
- because of the natural light, rather falling from above than coming from the photographer, which produces sharply contrastive portraits;
- and, above all, because of the various feelings (anger, shame) shown on their faces by these men and women [Figure 5].

Indeed, these portraits had a strange destiny, as some recently became art works exhibited all around the world[6] and bought by collectors once they were nicely printed on large-sized paper by the best laboratories in Paris or New York. As these photographs are much more widely exhibited and published than his studio works, they became emblematic of Augustt's work. The making of such "icons" implies nothing about their conditions of production,[7] maintains silence about their use, and about how and by whom they were selected in order to be converted into commodities with a value on the art market.

NOTES

1. As far as authorship is concerned, this photograph might have not been altogether made by C. Augustt, for at that time one of his relatives (a nephew called Jean Augustt) was helping him with shooting pictures in the villages. Nevertheless, C. Augustt has always taken care of the developing and printing of the I.D. cards by himself.
2. A box-camera is a big camera, locally manufactured by craftsmen in Ghana, which functions as a shooting camera and also a portable darkroom where the light-sensitive papers can

be processed once they have been exposed. It allows the photographer to manufacture portraits very quickly, as testified by the name of "wait-and-get" given to this technique. It is still used in some parts of West Africa, for the making of I.D. pictures only.

3. As the evaluation of Augustt's output is based on the number of negatives left in his archives, the number of pictures actually shot might have been larger.
4. Indeed, this technique was inspired by the anthropological method used at that time to study colonized people [Jehel 2000: 56].
5. These pictures remind me of pictures made in Algeria during the war there by Garanger [1982], a French army photographer whose job was to portray women forced to unveil themselves for the occasion.
6. The portrait which has been analysed in this paper has been exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum, in 1996, within the context of their "African Photographers, 1940 to Present" exhibition.
7. And when something is said, it is totally fictitious, as in this commentary intended to explain the circumstances of production of such portraits: "Equipped with his 'box', he would set off regularly by bicycle along the Ivory-Coast-Ghana border, and on village squares would take portraits from local farmers under the harsh sun, against a simple painted backdrop fixed to a mud wall." [*Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*, 1999: 98].

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