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# J. David Sapir: Photographs of the Kujamaat Jóola

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Toward an Ethnographic Photography

Curator's Essay

David Newman, Gallery Director

Indeed, what is this bizarre means of expression that reads you as you are reading it, that is able to accumulate knowledge about the practitioner at the same time as the practitioner uses it to accumulate and record knowledge?

Emmanuel Garrigues 1

For facts are *facta*, things made as much as found, and made in part by the analogies through which we look at the world as through a lens.

M. H. Abrams 2

Facts, you know, are not truths; they are not conclusions; they are not even premises, but in the nature and parts of premisses.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge 3

Thus values alter facts. The moment we love an image, it cannot remain the copy of a fact.

Gaston Bachelard 4

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, How can we know the dancer from the dance?

William Butler Yeats 5

J. David Sapir made the twenty two photographs in this exhibition in the course of anthropological field work with the Kujamaat Jóola in 1960-61, 1964-66 and 1970. The Kujamaat Jóola live in the region north of the Casamance River in southern Senegal; the approximately 85,000 Kujamaat join with other regional groups to form the Jóola, together numbering about 250,000. The Jóola live in small villages and practice subsistence wet rice cultivation. Along with the Balant and the Manjak to the south, the Jóola are among the few groups in Africa practicing wet rice cultivation. Since the 1940's the Jóola have also cultivated peanuts as a cash crop.6 These are propositions presenting facts about the Kujamaat Jóola. Sapir's photographs also present facts about the Kujamaat Jóola. They are, however, something much more than facts. These photographs entail a visual poetics, attending to the nuances of gesture and bodily expression that slip through the net of texts. They are attentive to their human referents as an other to be regarded with a circumspection and reserve based on respect.

Some context may make visible why this matters, perhaps matters more now than at the time these photographs were made. I shall address some aspects of that context, and these photographs, though my addressing of context and photographs does not itself escape from that context: there is no Archimedean point from which, Olympus-like, the field of photography and the various practices and images making up that field can be surveyed. This text inevitably remains within the field of discursive practices surrounding the practice of photography. I shall address first some issues of context, and then some of these photographs. The photographs are installed in a gallery; the photographer does not regard them as art. These photographs were made in the course of ethnographic field work, but were not regarded as part of that project. These matters raise some interesting issues: issues of how photography is practiced, of how photographs are disseminated and received, of the role of context in this dissemination and reception, of relationships between disciplines.

Between the making of these images and this occasion of their exhibition,7 three decades have passed, three decades which have been a tumultuous and contentious period with respect to the ways photographs are regarded. It is not too great an exercise of hyperbole to invoke the perennial trope of the twentieth century, crisis,8 as a description of the period: a "Crisis of the Real" seemed apt.9 While representations, especially photographic representations, had once seemed transparent, suddenly all seemed translucently mediated if not cloaked in opaque texts. Between the viewer and what is represented in photographs, not only the photographs as mediations, but the array of discourses which surround photographs in particular and representations in general are inserted. As Norman Bryson urged:

Between the subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses which make up  
visuality, that cultural construct, and make visuality different from vision, the notion of  
unmediated visual experience. Between retina and world is inserted a screen of signs, a  
screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena.10

In the case of photography, a medium that once seemed to many to be without mediation, so seemingly natural that W. H. F. Talbot titled his early landmark of the literature of photography *The Pencil of*

*Nature*,<sup>11</sup> visibility is conspicuously inserted in place of the simple unmediated vision imagined in the myth of the innocent eye,<sup>12</sup> which asserts a transparency of the medium. The photograph always exists in a context that is both physical and discursive: among other photographs, amid texts, on the pages of a book or journal, on the walls of a gallery, in a family album narrated by an oral tradition transmitted between generations. The physical and discursive context of the photograph conditions the situation of its facture and subsequent presentation, and consequently conditions the encounter of the photograph by the viewer, in concert with the preconceptions<sup>13</sup> the viewer bring to the encounter with the photograph. One mode of contextual conditioning of the photograph is its presentation engaging what Svetlana Alpers terms the "museum effect," the turning of whatever is placed in the gallery or museum space into art.<sup>14</sup> This is, as Alpers suggests, "a way of seeing," and obtains not only for objects of material culture repositioned from their original context of use to the "white cube"<sup>15</sup> of the museum or gallery. The gallery or museum is, at this time in our culture the locus where condition requisite to careful and sustained and intense seeing is provided, as Alpers suggests. Yet, as Susan Vogel urges, "Almost nothing displayed in museums was made to be seen in them."<sup>16</sup> This is a matter of some importance in considering photographs in general, the majority of which come to be apart from any consideration of their being art. A turn from a narrowly conceived art history of photography to a more broadly based consideration of photography within the cultural production and reception of images and representations in general is felicitous, in enabling all photographs to be critically and analytically engaged.<sup>17</sup> without the ex post facto aesthetic repositioning of photographs the origin of which is separate from consideration of their status as artworks.<sup>18</sup> And this is a matter of some relevance in considering these photographs. Sapir regards them as other than art:

I took the photos because I like taking photographs and considered my work as photography, and not something else, like ART, or some such.<sup>19</sup>

Thus positioning these works distances them from one way of regarding of the medium in order to situate them in another. The opposing terms engaged in this dichotomy would seem to be documentary and art. Compare Allan Sekula:

A curious thing happens when documentary is officially recognized as art. Suddenly the hermeneutic pendulum careens from the objectivist end of its arc to the opposite, subjectivist end. Positivism yields to a subjective metaphysics, technologism given way to auteurism. Suddenly the audience's attention is directed toward mannerism, toward sensibility, toward the physical and emotional risks taken by the artist. Documentary is thought to be art when it transcends its reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression of the artist.<sup>20</sup>

If Sapir did not regard these photographs as art, neither did he regard them, at least initially, as part of his ethnographic project:

At that time I thought of photography as very separate from the pursuit of ethnography, and I made no attempt to integrate it with my studies of Kujamaat language, folklore and social symbolism. Recently I have begun to consider the nature of still photography as a unique form of communication and thence its value for ethnography.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps one might regard these photographs as being to the ethnographic field work that was the occasion of their facture as the incidental music for a play is to the theatrical production which occasions

its performance: a part of a whole, conditioned by and predicated on that whole, but having an ancillary character with respect to that whole. Sapir notes that:

The photos, in their ensemble, said, or rather illustrated or better yet pointed to a something, concerning my African friends, that I never thought to record in words. In fact, that I could scarcely conceive of describing in words. Perhaps the photos caught no more than a 'brightening glance.'22

A sign that points to something is an index. A photograph is always of some thing, is always an index of some thing, which was photographed. A photograph is exemplary of what Charles S. Peirce distinguishes as an index, a sign related to its referent such:

that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object. . . . In so far as the Index is affected by the Object, it necessarily has some Quality in common with the Object, and it is in respect to these that it refers to the Object. It does, therefore, involve a sort of Icon, although an Icon of a peculiar kind; and it is not the mere resemblance of its object, even in these respects which makes it a sign, but it is the actual modification of it by the Object.23

Peirce amplifies the concept of the index with respect to photographs:

Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been reproduced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In this aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection24

The fundamental aspect of the photograph as index is the causal relation of image and thing imaged. A necessary condition of this causal relation is a co-presence during the facture of the image. Knowing this does not require resorting to semiotics; it is a commonplace for anyone who has exposed a photograph, though semiotics provides an analytical framework and terminology for addressing the experience. While in principle the photographer need not be present during the interval of exposure, the photographer's agency is necessary to the photograph's origin.

Given the status of the photograph as an index, the photographic description of what is photographed has a particularity that at once enables and limits the use of photography in recording data. As such, the photograph can serve as evidence of what was before the camera during the interval of exposure. But in the particularity of the description of what is photographed, the extension of the photograph qua evidence is limited. While propositions regarding the photograph may claim universal extension, the reference of the photograph itself is to the concrete particularity of what was photographed.

Many of Sapir's photographs represent events. Indeed, all people-in-the-world photographs may be said to be photographs of events in a broad sense. Events, like the discourse of conversations (itself a category of event), are temporally fleeting, appearing and disappearing. Photographs of events are fixings of this transient presence. Or more precisely, photographs fix aspects of this transient presence through the agency of interpretive acts of the photographer co-present in the situation of the event. The photographer's interpretive acts have their material correlate in the photograph in all its particularity. There is a reciprocity between the elements of the material cause of the photograph and the interpretive

acts undertaken by the photographer. One aspect of this is the effect of rendering what is in transient flux as fixed by slicing a brief interval from a larger interval of time. As John Szarkowski and photographers beyond number have noted, there is:

a pleasure and a beauty in this fragmenting of time that had little to do with what was happening. It had to do rather with seeing the momentary patterning of lines and shapes that had been previously concealed within the flux of movement. Cartier-Bresson defined his commitment to this new beauty with the phrase the decisive moment, but the phrase has been misunderstood; the thing that happens at the decisive moment is not a dramatic climax but a visual one. The result is not a story but a picture.<sup>25</sup>

While Szarkowski cites Cartier-Bresson's notion of the decisive moment and elucidates a commonplace of misreading, he reduces the notion to a formalism which obviates the referent of the photograph. It is useful to advert to Cartier-Bresson:

To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression.<sup>26</sup>

To recognize simultaneously the significance of an event and the precise organization of form giving the event its proper expression is to assert an equiprimordiality of signified and signifier. The photograph is made whole, in both the sense that the entirety of the image is made during the same interval, and the sense that a unity of form and content obtain from this initial interval. In this making, the photographer mediates between what is photographed and the photograph, a mediation that at once entails the objectivity of photography's indexical basis and the photographer's subjective choices. The photograph, product of an origin at once objective and subjective, is both a description and an interpretation. To engage the photograph as a document is to privilege the descriptive aspect of origin. To privilege the interpretive aspect of the photograph is to privilege the expressive aspect of origin. Privileging one term vitiates the other. But if all photographs are documents, in being indexically related to what was photographed, and all photographs are interpretations by virtue of the selective agency of the photographer and in consequence, a useful conception of documentary must be sought beyond the indexical and interpretive aspects of the photograph's origin. Both viewer and photographer have a share in this.

These two sets of contingencies, that of the photograph as index contingent on what was photographed and that of the photograph as the result of interpretive determination by the photographer's choices, make the photograph a nexus in which information about what was photographed combines with the cognition, emotion and ideological and aesthetic disposition of the photographer. *Pace* Sekula, regarded as subsuming the dual contingencies of indexicality and subjectivity, the photograph is regarded as exhaustively neither an objectivist positivism nor a subjectivist 'metaphysics';<sup>27</sup> rather, the photograph is better regarded as both at once. This is to say that how a photograph is regarded by the viewer entails the emphasis given its aspects and the disposition to regard the photograph in a particular framework. A viewer might regard a photograph as a document one moment, and as an abstract patterning of light and dark the next. There would seem to be no absolute determinate of how a given photograph is to be regarded. The whole is more than the parts: the photograph is more than its aspects, more than the various ways in which it may be regarded, more than the terms which may be predicated of it. That a given photograph can be regarded in multiple ways is not without utility, nor is it unusual. It is useful in allowing address of the photograph's functioning: of enabling attempts to answer how a photograph

elicits the particular response that it does. If this engages methods of analysis that are traditionally applied to visual artworks generally, this should not be surprising. An image is an image, however it is made (and granting that the materials of a medium are at once obdurate and supple, and are therefore of consequence to the possibilities that can be realized in an image).

Sapir's photographs tend to a classicism: a classicism as distinguished by Heinrich Wölfflin's dichotomies from baroque.<sup>28</sup> Wölfflin's dichotomies are: linear / painterly, planar / recessive, closed form / open form, multiplicity / unity, absolute clarity / relative clarity. They are not equally applicable to this body of images; they were constructed to distinguish Renaissance from Baroque painting. Certainly Sapir was not making photographs to exemplify these dichotomies. Nevertheless they are applicable, with care, to this body of images insofar as they distinguish one mode of image making from another. Sapir's photographs tend to a linear rather than a 'painterly' description of form: "Linear style is the style of distinctness plastically felt."<sup>29</sup> That is, perception of objects depends more on outline and surface than on mass; light and shade are not independent, and forms are distinguished rather than grasped in sum. This is in large measure a function of the light: with rare exception the light in Sapir's photographs is directional but relatively flat, shadows open, an overcast rather than direct sunlight. Persons cast no shadows, though the light is sufficiently directional to model the forms. It is also a matter of Sapir's printing: even when the light is contrasty and direct, highlights and textured shadows give a sense of palpable surface. Typical of Wölfflin's conception of classicism, Sapir's photographs frequently, though not always, treat the rendering of depth through a sequence of planes, and often emphasize definite vertical and horizontal opposed elements. The persons within Sapir's photographs form a unified composition in which, notwithstanding being parts of a whole, nevertheless maintain a degree of independence. Sapir's photographs frequently have a group of figures in the near to middle distance, in a plane more or less parallel to the image plane, the closed form establishing a sense of distance as much psychological as physical, an allowing of personal space for the persons photographed. In *Women Transplant, Men Cultivate, Working Together in a Co-op*, the plane of the group of figures is reiterated by the horizon line. In *Beating Afo Koli's Peanut Harvest, Women's Co-op* the plane of the women is reiterated by the clump of straw parallel to the image plane, as it is likewise reiterated by the darker brush closing the spatial recession of the image in *Boy Leading in Sheep at Beginning of the Rains, 1965*. In an analogous use of the layering of planes receding from the image plane, the edge of the concrete floor parallel to the edge of the image in the foreground of *Afo Koli, Majaku Day Labourer From Guinea Bissau, Afuru Koli, and Ejonk (the Three-Pawed Dog), 1961* serves to demarcate the space of the photographer and viewer from that of the persons photographed. The mass of figures in *Male Dancers, Cénceng* dissolve into the strong atmospheric perspective in proportion to their distance from the image plane; the head, proximal in the left, marks the foreground with its value contrast to the more distal figures. The young dancer in the center of the image, holding a sword pointed upward, blocks passage; behind him a man holding a rifle aloft with hand on barrel repeats the gesture of blocking

The persons in the middle distance of *Rest, During Co-op Cultivation* form a group reiterating the picture plane and horizon line, notwithstanding the open form established by the oblique ridges separating rice plantings. The oblique grid opening the space in two-point perspective is repeated in *Aliyu Koli Cultivates His Own Rice Field*. In both of these photographs, the grid of ridges between rice plantings is as geometric as the Cartesian coordinates of a map; nonetheless, it is of the earth, within and of the landscape, a boundary containing and excluding water and possession.

*The Woman With Stick, in Parade, Bitibiit* has the head and upper torso large in the frame, the closeness of photographer and woman enhanced by some cropping of the image. A curved stick extends from her right hand in the lower right corner to the center of the top edge of the image, obscuring her left eye. Her thumb presses against the stick as it is grasped by her fingers. Two tears have run from her right eye down her cheek.

*Mara Baji, Jifatu Koli, and Friend, 1961* is a photograph of three young children: Mara Baji and Jifatu Koli stand close together to the left, an unidentified young girl stands slightly apart to the right. The space is not specific; it is a plaza or courtyard or street anywhere. The ground is covered with sand, a wall is barely visible at the upper left corner; steps are visible at the center top. The young girl to the right holds her hand together over her and behind her head, stretching, with her left leg bent and her weight carried on her right leg. Her eyes are closed, her mouth a beatific smile. One notices first the figures against the ground, their disposition in the space and in relationship to each other, the gestures of their respective stances and their individual expressions. There are no cast shadows; the light is even, perhaps from an overcast sky. Finally, one notices the big toe of the girl's right foot, a bit spread from the other toes from the torsion of her contraposto, and remembers, kinesthetically, the feeling of stretching and turning one's body, one's bare feet in the sand, gritty between one's toes. It is exemplary of Roland Barthes' punctum.<sup>30</sup>

The sum of these tendencies within the several photographs is a sense of reserve. The circumspection and reserve that has its formal manifestation in these aspects of Sapir's photographs is the correlative of the photographer's circumspection and reserve toward the persons photographed. For all their reserve, these photographs are not instances of an "anomic flaneurerie."<sup>31</sup> They evince an engagement with and respect for the persons and the culture they represent; the reserve with which the photographer approaches the persons photographed is precisely a measure of that engagement and respect. If they were not made as a part of the ethnographic field work that occasioned their making, not made as a contribution to that field work, they were informed by it, and by a regard for other persons that transcends any question of methodology or discipline.

For a generation, approximately, the documentary has been somewhat eclipsed within the practice of photography as an artist's medium by the "directorial mode."<sup>32</sup> Perhaps 'somewhat eclipsed' is an understatement: for many, the documentary tradition within the medium is known, if at all, only across the rift of a discontinuity. In bridging that rift, and for the development of an ethnographic still photography, J. David Sapir's photographs of the Kujamaat Jóola are instructive even as they are instructive of the persons and culture they describe and interpret.