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Family Portraits in Rural Indonesia: Photography and Ethnographic Knowledge

Simone Kate Alesich

This paper explores a number of family and individual portraits taken on fieldwork in rural Indonesian villages, and how they can be used to reveal ethnographic information about the subjects. Formal family photographs are generally characterised by strict conventions and stiff groupings, suggesting that they are an artificial construction rather than a 'natural' representation of a group of people. And yet 'natural' photographs are arguably no more 'natural' than 'posed' photographs. In the former case, the photographer chooses the time and framing of the shot. In the latter, the subjects themselves exercise agency in determining how and when the photograph is taken. Thus family portraits reveal a wealth of ethnographic knowledge on representations of the self and agency in representing oneself to others. Photographs work dialectically with text, to allow various representations and interpretations of the subjects and the argument, to produce ethnographic knowledge that is significantly informed by a visual component.

Keywords: Visual anthropology; Indonesia; Photography; Fieldwork; Agency; Media

Introducing my Field Sites

In 2004 I spent twelve months conducting fieldwork in two fairly remote villages in Southeast Sulawesi. My research focused on health and childbirth practice in rural areas, and how this was responding to the government health system and an Australian maternal and child health project. These two villages are in rural areas in a poor province. One has limited access to electricity, and both have a number of satellite televisions where they experience the rest of Indonesia, and the world, through televised images. Cameras appear rarely in these villages. The only time I saw a still camera other than mine, it was brought by a guest to use at a formal wedding.

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Since I had a camera in the villages for the whole time I was there—an essential tool for most fieldworkers these days (Collier 1967)—it gave people an unparalleled opportunity to have their photos taken and engage in constructing visual images of themselves in new ways.

In taking photographs for my fieldwork research, I was often frustrated by the response of villagers to my photographing. Every time my camera emerged, I became involved in a contestation of how the photograph was taken: who was in it, what they were wearing, where and when the photo was taken. On occasions too numerous to count, villagers would respond to my camera by changing into more suitable clothes, gathering the appropriate people and standing in the right place. ‘Now, you can take the photo,’ they would tell me.

Using my camera became even more difficult due to my naïve generosity in giving away photos of villagers. When I began fieldwork I thought initially that giving photos would be one way in which I could establish a rapport and contribute to the villages where I was living (see Collier 1967; Sanjek 1990). Suddenly my camera became a contested item. ‘Have you got any more film yet?’ people would ask. Saying yes meant that I was obliged to take their photo, indeed to take a number of photos of them until the film had ‘run out’. This frustrated rather than enhanced my fieldwork. I became reluctant to bring out my camera or take a photo, since this would expose the availability of my camera, and film, to others. In the first village where I conducted fieldwork, Waangu-angu, the family who looked after me suggested that perhaps I should hide my camera when others were around. I should only take photos of them.

In the second village where I conducted fieldwork, Linomoiyo, the issue became yet more complicated. One enterprising mother asked for me to take a photograph of her child, and then offered me some money to have the photo enlarged to put on her wall. I soon had frequent visitors, families or mothers with children, who would turn up at the house where I lived with their hair done, dressed in their best clothes, and then explain that they wanted their photos taken. Towards the end of my stay there, one man said to me in some indignation ‘I haven’t had my photo taken yet!’

In part, this relates to the visibility of the camera, and the photo-taking act. Similarly I chose not to carry my notebook around, preferring to observe and take mental notes of conversations and write them down later. Both the camera and the notebook were intrusive: marking me out as different and delineating my research acts from my more innocuous ‘living in the village’ acts. It was at the same time more honest, since villagers became aware of the research through the acts, and more intrusive, with some villagers expressing their discomfort with the technology and the notion of being recorded. As a visual tool, the camera became a focus of interaction that often distracted from the main purpose of my fieldwork (see Collier 1967).

My solution was to ask for permission to take photographs, which led to the situation I just described. Rather than capturing what I regarded as an interesting ‘natural’ scene of everyday life, I ended up with dozens of photos of groups of people,

dressed in their best clothes, standing stiffly as they stared unsmiling at the camera. These photos did not represent what I was seeing. Attempts to take 'natural' photographs of people in suitable settings to represent my fieldsite were continually thwarted, and the most useful images to my fieldwork: such as photos of sick people, particular rituals, and childbirth, were particularly lacking. It was not until I read a short paper by Gary Kildea that I became somewhat reconciled to the plethora of portraits that I had from my fieldwork.

Natural vs. Posed Photography

'People are not acting unnaturally when they "pose" for a photo "self-consciously"' says Kildea (Kildea & Wilson 1986, p. 16). 'On the contrary they are acting naturally'. I felt compelled to re-examine these photos from my fieldwork to see how the subjects acted 'naturally', to see how the conventions of photo-taking revealed particular types of knowledge about the people I was working with, their relationship with one another and how they portrayed themselves to the outside world. Villagers produce meaning and establish a sense of agency over the photographs in a way that a so-called 'natural' photograph does not achieve. This set of images compares a number of posed photographs with more 'natural' photographs that I took on fieldwork (Figures 1–6).

The natural photograph is a convention that relates to Western experiences of the camera in the twentieth century, and in anthropology (and later documentary and tourism) through representations of the Other, often with reference to an idea of the savage or primitive, in images (see also Pinney 1997). 'Natural' photographs show the Other in settings that are thought to reveal something in non-narrative form about the subject's relationship to their environment, and visual representations of their culture. For example, I was often interested in taking photographs of people going about their daily tasks: farming, fishing, fetching firewood and water, cooking and cleaning, in their day-to-day clothes. These images, while reflecting daily life where I was, also reveal its Other-ness: the poverty, as revealed in their simple clothes and limited work tools; and the exoticism of daily chores made interesting by the different way in which they were conducted.

On the other hand, photographs in which the subjects themselves choose how they appear allow the subjects much greater agency, in contrast to the more limited agency of the photographer. Wearing their best clothes, makeup and hair neatly dressed, they are able to present a self to the camera which is removed, and preferable, to the mundane chores of everyday life. An appearance of wealth, beauty and idleness, is important in these images: directly contrasting with the menial, poor and unglamorous lives they generally lead.

A number of conventions were common to each portrait that I took (see Figures 7 and 8). It was often of a young child, a group of children or a family. People would make an effort to wear their best clothes, and the photo was taken in a position deemed to flatter the group: often outside, with some flowers nearby. This became



Figure 1



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 6



Figure 2



Figure 5

Figures 1–6 Comparisons of formal and informal portrait photos.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figures 7 and 8 Formal photographic conventions.

increasingly difficult in the dry season when all of the flowering bushes withered, and I observed to a friend that they could no longer have their photos taken with flowers, since there were no flowers blooming. The participants would invariably stare unsmilingly at the camera, bringing to mind early Victorian photographic portraits,



Figure 9



Figure 10

Figures 9 and 10 Comparing with 19th century portraiture.



Figure 11



Figure 14



Figure 12



Figure 15



Figure 13

Figures 11–15 Formal family photos.

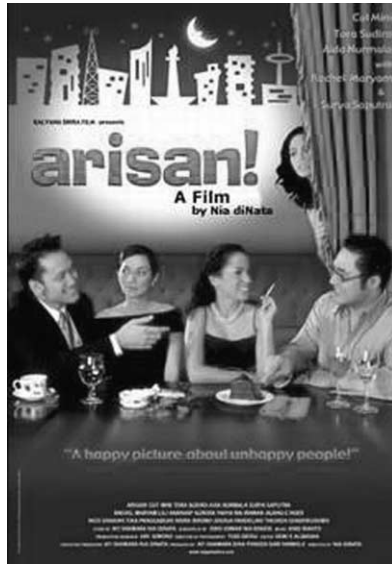


Figure 16 Image from Indonesian media.

and the images in Figures 9 and 10 show a comparison of a portrait that I took, compared with a nineteenth century portrait (Preziotti n.d.). These photographic representations starkly contrast with the everyday appearance of villagers. Sontag writes that:

In photography's early decades, photographs were expected to be idealised images. This is still the aim of most amateur photographers, for whom a beautiful photograph is a photograph of something beautiful, like a woman, a sunset. (Sontag 1979, p. 28)

Photography is about performance, and the projection of a particular, constructed, image, that stands outside everyday life. The family portrait may have become a



Figure 17



Figure 18

Figures 17 and 18 Photos taken by villagers themselves.



Figure 19



Figure 20

Figures 19 and 20 Informal and formal photos of a birth ceremony.

significant ‘visible cultural form’, equivalent to the image of a death ceremony or wedding (Banks & Morphy 1997, p. 5). The features of a formal family photo—the clothing, location and timing—give a sense of the ritual nature of formal photography.

Photography as Performance: Representations of the Self

One important feature of photography for villagers is to allow them to represent themselves to other villagers. The next set of images shows a number of these formal photos (Figures 11–15). Many of the photos I took were used for just this purpose: displayed in people’s own houses to present a particular representation of themselves as wealthy, beautiful and idle. This representation would surely be contradicted by the everyday life displayed by the occupants of the house themselves: a glamorous photo displayed in a room with threadbare furniture (if any at all) in a basic wooden house with a bare concrete floor. But this performance is important. By alluding to an image of themselves as successful, villagers engage in a dialogue with other villagers and the outside world.

Wealthier houses display photos in their front rooms: family portraits, photos of their young children, or a photo of a graduation. Poorer houses, like the one where I lived with the village head’s family, may only have had one or two photos, often damaged past repair. Photos reinforce the difference between rich and poor. Studio portraits borrow from a long-established tradition which reflects the upper and middle classes. But while I was researching in these villages, poorer people had a greater opportunity to display themselves through photography.

While on fieldwork, the village head, who was my host, wanted to show me a photo. He disappeared into the bedroom, reappearing with a photo which he carried gingerly. He gave it to me, saying: ‘This is a photo of my parents’ wedding’. I held the photo carefully, but the image was difficult to see. Most of the photo had been destroyed, probably by humidity and mould, and only the faces and shoulders of the couple were still somewhat visible in amongst the greenish-grey swirls. The village

head's two-year-old son grabbed excitedly at the photo. 'Be careful with that,' the village head admonished him.

A common use of photography in villages is to record significant life-events, such as marriages and deaths, for each family to construct a portrait-chronicle of itself (Sontag 1979, p. 8). But the family photos that I took were largely removed from the general focus on photography at life events: such as births, deaths and marriages. My photographs were more accessible, allowing people to explore new ways of using photography to create meaning in their lives.

In rural Southeast Sulawesi, photography may also be the only opportunity for villagers are able to portray themselves to the outside world, since most media is a one-way interaction. Television is the most popular and common form of media in rural villages, but while the glamorous actors and singers are displayed on television for villagers to see, villagers do not have the same opportunity to display themselves to others. Figure 16 shows a typical image from Indonesian television (Tanu n.d.). As Heider (1991, p. 1) suggests, 'movies are cultural texts', thus villagers engage with visual images presented on television to construct their own images of themselves.

Although portrait photos of villagers may be contradicted by the evidence of their daily life, it is a similar performance to the mass media, which portrays an idea of national Indonesian culture represented by citizens who are beautiful, wealthy, pale-skinned and tertiary-educated. These citizens appear in numerous soap operas, advertising and game shows primarily oriented towards the middle class. The majority of Indonesians, and particularly those in rural Southeast Sulawesi, do not have the glamorous houses and expensive lifestyles that are displayed on Indonesian television. By taking glamorous photographs of themselves, villagers engage their images in this idea of Indonesia, an Indonesia represented through sanitised, idealised images of itself (see Heider 1991).

The next two images are some photos taken by villagers themselves (Figures 17 and 18). They tend to be less formal, since they were taken by, and of, young people. Looking at these photos, we could interpret that they suggest more contemporary styles of photography, capturing images of smiling groups of young people engaged in recreational activities. This contrasts with the more formal appearance of the portraits that I took, but maintains a sense of idleness which reflects wealth and the leisure time it provides.

Photographing the Other

Although photos taken in my fieldsite are used by villagers to represent themselves to one another, they are also used to represent the Other to a Western audience. Apart from myself, most of the villagers in my fieldsites have little opportunity to meet Westerners or get a sense of the academic world to which my research is directed. Formal photos such as family portraits confound the tendency for Western audiences to exoticise the subjects in the same way as natural photographs in which the exotic is

part of what is intentionally captured in the image (see also Pinney 1997). Looking at one of my photos, an Australian friend of mine commented with some surprise that the subjects wore similar clothes to herself. Formal, posed photographs, where the subject chooses the time, location and appearance of the photo, allow the subject to look back at the audience, to play a part in determining what is seen and how they are constructed by viewers.

For anthropologists, significant meaning can be drawn from non-textual forms such as photography, music and film, which enhance and enrich the textual knowledge of journal articles, books and theses (Collier 1967; Sanjek 1990). While conveying a significant amount of information not contained in the written word, photographs in themselves are unable to incorporate a narrative. Neither does still photography have the same temporal dimension as a written ethnography, thus photography does not challenge the written word in the same way as film. A photograph is a moment in time, giving us a brief glimpse of characters and events that can be explored more deeply in film. However photography should not be dismissed so quickly as merely 'illustrative' or 'descriptive'. This visual medium, and staged family portraits in which the subjects play an active role in constructing the image, reveal a wealth of ethnographic knowledge on ways of seeing and representing oneself, and conceptualising and engaging with the world (see Banks & Morphy 1997, p. 22; Collier 1967).

In the family portrait, the subjects actively engage in the process of representation that is so much a part of anthropology (Banks & Morphy 1997, p. 2; Pinney 1997). But the anthropologist must still play a part in interpreting the photos (Collier 1967; Sanjek 1990). This highlights the importance of the written, or narrative, component, to accompany visual material. These photographs that I took may not have much to do with my own thesis topic, on health practice, although they do reveal that illness and childbirth is not seen as performative in the same way as a haircutting ceremony or a wedding, where I was given a prized position and asked, 'do you have your camera?' In one instance, however, a family chose to recreate a birth ceremony to be captured in a photo. The images in Figures 19 and 20 compare a staged ritual to one that I photographed as it actually occurred.

The active engagement of villagers in the construction of their own portraits reveals much about their notions of self and interaction with the outside world. Photographs work dialectically with text, to allow various representations and interpretations of the subjects and the argument, to produce ethnographic knowledge that is significantly informed by a visual component. Photography enhances as well as accompanies the written ethnographic accounts (see Collier 1967). Thus family portraits reveal representations of the self and agency in representing oneself to others.

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