

Photography and academic research

Images in post-truth era

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Title: Image **re-enactions in the Arhuaco self-representation practices**

Panel: Politics/Archive - Power and Politics in Times of Crisis

When Gustaf Bolinder, a Swedish ethnographer, conducted his fieldwork in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in the early 20th century, he thought he was documenting disappearing cultures inhabiting that picturesque part of Colombia. A century later, a group of prolific indigenous communicators from the region used Bolinder's images as an inspiration to re-enact their traumatic history. The Zhigoneshi collective, led by the Arhuaco Amado Villafañá, became the voice of the region and role model spokespeople for many indigenous communities of Latin America. Taken out of the original contexts, Bolinder's images acquired more flexible meaning than initially intended. To add to the complexity of the re-appropriation of meaning, Villafañá bases his filmmaking on the idea of creating a dialogue with more contemporary (mis-)representations of his culture. As a result, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta became a battleground for interpretation and meaning of the images taken in the Sierra by different authors. How far could we trust in the research value of images which are constantly taken out of the context and re-appropriated? The power struggle between the photographer and the photographed is only an interlude to the complexity of the situation when it is no longer guaranteed who can be the author and who is the target audience and meaning-making force. In the face of that, can a photograph be trusted as a social research tool to represent social reality? Finally, who wins the battle over the image meaning - does the internal point of view have more value than the trained eye of the outsider? And can a photograph serve a double role of art and social science? With all these questions in mind, perhaps Bolinder's prophecy was not about disappearance but transcending the old meaning and gaining agency.

My argument for this paper is a questionable position of archive photography as a research tool in the era of uncontrollable re-use and re-cycle of images in multiple contexts.

Let me paint the background picture: we are in contemporary Colombia, in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region, inhabited by 4 indigenous nations: the Kogui, the Arhuacos, the Wiwa, and the Kankuamos.

When Gustaf Bolinder, a Swedish ethnographer, conducted his fieldwork in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in the early 20th century, he thought he was documenting disappearing cultures inhabiting the region. Both his photographs and his writing convey a deep sense of sadness over the changing situation in the Sierra, where the Capuchin mission, stabilised in the region in 1914, had a strong influence over the Arhuacos, one of the four indigenous nations inhabiting the place. In 1914-15 In the same year, the Capuchins arrived in Nabusímake and established their mission there, which had a long-standing consequences for the community. According to Murillo, through their teaching, the Capuchins not only altered the style of life typical of the Arhuacos, but they also forbade the use of indigenous language.¹ The Capuchins stayed in the Sierra till they got finally expelled on 7th August 1982.²

Bolinder's first visit to Nabusímake, the Arhuaco capital, occurred in 1914 - 1915, and this was when he took a photograph of an indigenous girl tied to a pole, among others. On his second visit, five years later (1920-1921), he photographed a scene with one of the missionaries and an indigenous man having his hair forcibly cut. In his notes taken during that visit, Bolinder expressed his nostalgia about the culture which he predicted was about to disappear. Seeing a big difference between what he observed between his two visits (short hair of the children, uniforms, plots of lands, prayers),³ he lamented that the culture he was observing was soon to be seen only in films or in museum displays. Years later, all 42 photographs he took during his visits were recovered from European archives by the anthropologist Yesid Campos and his study group, Asociación del Trabajo Interdisciplinario, and delivered to the indigenous authorities in the Sierra. They are now kept in an album called 'Fotografías de Nabusímake en 1915 (Gustaf Bolinder)', created and by an elder, Manuel Chaparro, often remaining an inspiration for the reflection about the past. (Muñoz 2017: 377). Other images document more repressions imposed on the Arhuacos by the missionaries.

Re-appropriation of the images

¹ Murillo, 2001: 58.

² Murillo, 2001: 60.

³ Muñoz, 2017: 386.

Almost a century after Bolider's visit, a group of prolific indigenous communicators from the region used these images as an inspiration to re-enact their traumatic history. The Zhigoneshi collective, led by the Arhuaco Amado Villafaña, became the voice of the Sierra and role model spokesperson for many indigenous communities of Latin America. Their use of the archive images was meant to add authenticity and evocative power to their storytelling and testimonies.

In 'Nabusímake, Memories of Independence' made in 2010, Villafaña uses his family history to teach three of his children (Ángel, Gunza, and Dilia), and his audiences, the tragic history of the Arhuacos in the past decades. The film starts with re-enactment of the scenes of Capuchins' arrival to the Sierra as documented by Bolinder. Capuchin's presence in the region resulted in long-term severe persecutions against the Arhuaco culture and their way of living. Villafaña not only used the images as an illustration of the persecutions imposed on the Arhuacos by the Capuchins, but he also used present-day actors to re-enact the images. He also introduced new elements in his reenactments (like the figure of the apostolic vicar, who was not in the original photo). According to Catalina Muñoz,

In Villafaña's documentary, the scenes captured in four separate photographs are brought together into a single moment in time: the children exercising, the tied Arhuaco man, the hair-cutting scene, and the tied girl. The photographs are re-signified in an interesting exercise of cutting and pasting instants from the past. In the process, the photographs lose their initial ethnographic interest and become supplies in the task of constructing memory.⁴

Villafaña personally narrates the story, exploring archival photographs, and embarking with his children onto a journey of discovery of their past. As a part of this journey, they visit places which could give them some answers about their history. Among others, they venture to Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano in Bogotá (Colombian Filmic Patrimony) to watch an archival film by Vidal Antonio Rozo, 'El Valle de los Arhuacos' (The Valley of the Arhuacos), made in 1964. The film represents the Arhuacos as the incarnation of alcoholics who have a pact with the devil, and this, no doubt, contributed to Villafaña's aversion to Western representations of his people. Commenting on the film, Villafaña underlines the importance of remembering the past and the urgency to pass this knowledge onto future generations.

⁴ Muñoz, 2017: 390.

Flexible Meanings and Construction of Memory

What might have skipped Villafaña's attention is that the first image might have potentially been taken before the Capuchins settled in Nabusímake. Bolinder's caption for that image mentions that she was punished for a theft,⁵ which suggests that the girl was punished by the traditional Arhuaco communities, and not the Capuchins. However, Villafaña's interpretation of the image is not necessarily a manipulation, as the way the images are kept together in the same album today might suggest that they indeed were taken during the same time, that is, after Capuchin's arrival. As such, this re-contextualisation of the meaning might be based on Villafaña's innocent assumptions rather than the willingness to hijack the meaning for his own purposes.⁶ The story of Bolinder's images is interpreted in a similar way not only by Villafaña. In 'Camino en Espiral: Yo'Sa Ingunu', Natalia Giraldo Jaramillo adds the following caption when reproducing the image of the Arhuaco girl tied to the pole: 'Niño amarrado por los misioneros Capuchinos. Imágenes que muestran los vejámenes físicos realizados por los Capuchinos a indígenas Iku.'⁷ *This only reinforces the possibility that the mis-interpretation of the images by Villafaña might not be necessarily intentional.*

Muñoz points to the plurality of potential interpretations of the images which might be used in two different contexts: indigenous and non-indigenous ones.⁸ The initial one was as Bolinder's ethnographic document. Muñoz proposes that:

Today, some Arhuaco use them for different ends. They have recently incorporated them into narratives about their past, mobilised to strengthen their cultural identity and legitimise claims to autonomy. As such, the uses of these photographs can be interpreted as part of a wider Arhuaco effort to produce counter narratives of self-determination.⁹

The subsequent film, 'Resistance on the Dark Line,' also features the re-enactment of the meeting with the Capuchins, which only proves how deeply the collective relies on these archive

⁵ Muñoz, 2017: 381.

⁶ Muñoz, 2017: 382.

⁷ Child tied up by the Capuchin missionaries. Images which show the physical humiliations carried out by the Capuchins on indigenous Arhuacos; Jaramillo, 2014: 125.

⁸ Muñoz, 2017: 375.

⁹ Muñoz, 2017: 376.

images to give credibility to their statements. This ‘film in the film’ is accompanied by voiceover commentaries from the director, giving instructions to the actors: ‘camera, action!’

This heavy reliance on the archive materials points to the role of photography in the construction of memory and ‘the process through which the pictures become vehicles in the production of narratives about the past.’¹⁰ Villafaña contests the dominant external narratives by creating his indigenous narratives using not only foreign technologies, such as photography and video, but also foreign archival images. He subverts power reactions by ‘claiming the ownership of history-telling for the Arhuaco, who are now telling the world the history of their suffering under the mission.’¹¹ Muñoz claims that by doing so, Villafaña ‘contests Western historical narratives- by producing local one - while inventively partaking in Western storytelling technologies.’¹² His re-appropriation of these images serves the purpose of ‘strengthening cultural identity’:¹³ ‘He wants to produce Arhuaco narratives of their collective stories, that in denouncing foreign abuse portray the community as strong and resilient’, where the images tell the story of ‘empowered indigenous resistance.’¹⁴ Muñoz concludes that:

Arhuacos are not merely passive subjects of the imperial gaze; they can stand both sides of these photographs, also observing, interpreting and reusing the tools of colonisation in their struggle for resistance, self-representation and self-government. [...] An indigenous media-maker re-signifies anthropological photographs from the early twentieth century, but his contemporary use is not entirely detached from a colonial history of which he is a part of.¹⁵

I agree with Muñoz that ‘These contemporary Arhuaco uses emphasise indigeneity and authenticity in an era of multiculturalism. The authenticity that Bolinder sought to capture is now emphasised by the Arhuaco for different purposes and under new circumstances.’¹⁶ Also, ‘the

¹⁰ Muñoz, 2017: 382.

¹¹ Muñoz, 2017: 390.

¹² Muñoz, 2017: 390.

¹³ Muñoz, 2017: 387.

¹⁴ Muñoz, 2017: 387.

¹⁵ Muñoz, 2017: 377.

¹⁶ Muñoz, 2017: 387.

production and dissemination of indigenous narratives about the past that denounce outside intervention in their culture and territory' can be seen as a form of a resistance.¹⁷ Villafaña really understood the potential of using new media 'for the defence and conservation of the land, languages, culture and identity of the indigenous peoples of the Sierra.'¹⁸

Context makes the meaning

The Arhuacos' achievement to expel Capuchins, preserve their culture, but also to become an active voice advocating their indigenous pride is really admirable. I conclude this section with Schlegelberger's words:

Es de admirar cómo los Arhuacos en contra de la prognosis de Gustavo Bolinder han sobrevivido con su cultura hasta hoy. No los hemos encontrado cerrados, como se los describe, cerrados sino interesados y - con el tiempo que se necesita para familiarizarse un poco - también acogedores. Lo que sí es verdad: saben resistir sin ser violentos. Esa actitud admirable debe tener su fundamento en la religión cuya ley es la de mantener el equilibrio.¹⁹

By using Bolinder's images as a starting point for re-enactions in his films, and effectively presenting them in the context different to the originally intended by the ethnographer, Villafaña managed to re-appropriate the meaning. The re-enactions serve to bring more historical value and prove the filmmakers' agency in this new situation where they are no longer mere subjects but the agents of transcended meaning. They actively participate in the dialogue around the meaning of the images of the Sierra, both in relation to the films made by the external filmmakers (such as Vidal Antonio Rozo) and the archive photographs by Bolinder. Even more importantly, they **ensure that they are in full control over what is represented, how it is represented, and what it means (!)**.

¹⁷ Muñoz, 2017: 388.

¹⁸ Muñoz, 2017: 388.

¹⁹ It is to be admired how the Arhuacos, contrary the prognosis of Gustavo Bolinder, have survived with their culture until today. We have not found them closed, as they are described, but interested and - with the time it takes to become a little familiar - also welcoming. What is true is that they know how to resist without being violent. This admirable attitude must have its foundation in the religion whose law is to maintain balance.

Schlegelberger, 1995: 64.

Keeping that in mind, and considering how fluid and changeable the meaning can be, are we safe to place our trust in images as a research tools? There is no doubt about the authenticity of Bolinder's photographs, and the documentary values in Zhigoneshi's films; however, this does not seem to be enough to secure the ever-unattainable quest for objectivity. Are we not just switching the point of view of who delivers the message, for whom, and in which contexts? The power struggle no longer happens between the filmmaker and the subject, but between whoever owns the meaning. Also, no matter how deeply embedded in fact and archives, the film will always remain on the boundary between art and social science, despite of the authors' fierce denial of any artistic ambitions. As seen in the accompanying video, even the documentary form is also 'directed' to ensure the impact of the narrative and storytelling, especially with foreign audiences in mind.

As we could see, the post-truth era's complexity also relates to taking images out of their original context and re-signifying. The circumstances of the presentation for the audiences is where the meaning gets shaped. The power struggle is no longer about who takes the photo - the power struggle is about who owns the meaning. Zhigoneshi collective is extremely prolific in assuring the full control over the meaning of all the images ever taken in the Sierra. Is it attainable? In the contemporary situation where the context of reception can no longer be secured, how can we ensure any control over the intended meaning, knowing that taking things out of the context could dramatically shift it?

Conclusion

In Conclusion, this case study demonstrates that photography's ambivalent status is not a new phenomenon. By placing Bolinder's images in a new context and using them as an example of archive material of historical value, we can observe how malleable the meaning can be depending on the context. Villafaña's intention was to strengthen the credibility he needed to build a resistance of his peoples. As such, images become a political tool to gain power in the times of crisis.