

# An Imprinted History of Lifeworld and Family Dynamics in Africa: A Case-study of Senegalese Keepsake Pictures

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Place of fieldwork: Republic of Senegal

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- Research background

Invented in the early half of the twentieth century, photography turned its fascination to colonies with the heightening of imperialism. Images of local people were sold as postcards or showcased at world expositions. Africa was not an exception. Due to the pronounced primitive representations of local people that echoed imperialistic interests of the day, photography was considered an unfamiliar cultural practice in the local cultural milieu especially because of its foreign/western origins.

In fact, previous studies report that Africans who were given special rights to live in Senegalese colonial cities had requested local photographers to take pictures in their homes. Today, photography is not only a medium that is indispensable for commemorating rites of passage and holidays, but also one that allows the transmitting of past records and memories to posterity.

- Research purpose and aim

This research aims to trace the creation of photographic culture in Senegal from a historical perspective. By elucidating the role of photography used in the Senegalese lifeworld context, I aspire to unthread this historical process from a local perspective. Lifeworld signifies an everyday world constructed by elements like experience, consciousness, value or practice that is shared within a social group. Studying the use of photography within this context may allow a reinterpretation of the history and dissemination of photographic practice from a local viewpoint. Additionally, a historical observation that utilizes the photographic function of recording makes it possible to identify changes of customs, families and values.

- Results and achievements of fieldwork

Fieldwork was based in Dakar, while also extending to the former capital Saint-Louis and inland areas like Podor and Kaolack. I interviewed 35 studio photographers, 110 people who have commissioned keepsake photos, 3 photographers working in research and educational institutions and 19 press photographers. I also conducted archival research at the National Archives of Senegal, the Fundamental Institute of Black Africa (IFAN) and the Center of Research and Documentation of Senegal (CRDS). The principal results are as follows.

Archival research at the CRDS allowed me to confirm a close relationship between drawings and

photography. Not only did Senegalese people decorate their homes with glass paintings and drawn pictures through the ages, but also call photographs <nataal> (drawing) or <portale> (portrait) in the Wolof language. Such words suggest a close affinity between drawings and photographs.

Historical pictures housed in the above institution showed that studios incorporated murals, curtains, phones and sofas to create a space resembling a reception room. While this is an ongoing tradition, murals have diminished with the appearance of posters that are cheaper and easier to replace. Photographers renovate their studios before the two Muslim holidays, *Korite* and *Tabaski* because they are the busiest days of the year. Young girls and couples constitute the majority of customers and indicate that picture taking in studios is principally a cultural practice for young people.

Interviews with clients showed that while people engage photographers to take pictures for them, the shooting itself takes place in their homes. More specifically, clients choose to take pictures in the reception room that is believed to be the most “civilized” and “presentable” space in the house. In Senegal, most banquets of weddings and christenings takes place in the house and guests often animate their conversation in the reception room.

For this reason, it can be said that keepsake pictures are principally taken on special events (when the sitter is dressed up). Young Senegalese people go between different realities, the studio on holidays (a place for young people) and their homes (a world with different norms shared with family members and the elderly), and capture various self-images in keepsake pictures.

- Implications and impacts on future research

For the following six months I intend to present a paper that will allow me discuss and reexamine primary sources collected through this fieldwork and prepare for further readings and writings for journals.

I also intend to examine the continuance and difference of photographic traditions in other countries. For example, in Europe, studio photography is said to have originated from portraits, partly because photographers imitated the painter’s way of decorating studios. Such a study may allow further understanding on the different developments of photography in various cultural contexts.

Overall, by pursuing this short-term project, I aspire to elaborate my next research plan and continue to collect primary sources through household research.

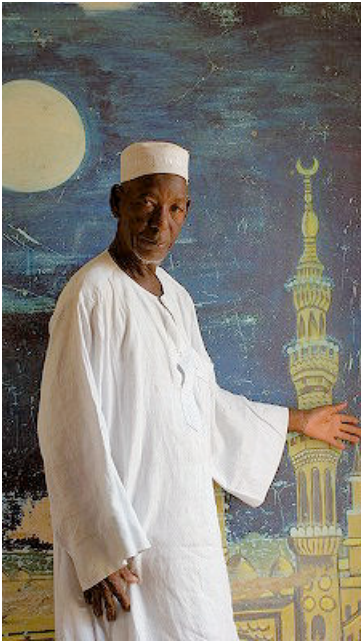


Figure 1. Oumar Ly at his studio in Podor.

Oumar Ly has been running his studio since the 1960s. His existing mural depicts the holy city of Mecca.



Figure 2. Interior of a studio in Dakar.

This room imitates the reception room found in most Senegalese homes.



Figure 3. Keepsake pictures taken in the studio. (Photographer and date unknown).

Although this belonged to woman A living in Dakar, her mother archived the photo in the family home in village G.