

## Chapter 4

# Ontology of photograph among the Tigania: Inquiry into the relation of Meru culture and modern technology

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### 1. Introduction

Today, most Amîrû of the Tigania are likely to keep photographs in a well-ordered form in an album or casually in a box. It is not rare to see some families put an extended portrait photograph in a frame and hang it on the wall, similar to a piece of furniture. These photographs are taken at various opportunities: *arusi* (wedding ceremony, *mûranû* in Kîmîrû), *mathiko* (burial ceremony), parties (*kîatho/kîbaatithio*) regarding relative's gathering, baptisms and the ceremony performed when circumcised boys complete their isolation period, school events, family trips, and other occasions, such as Christmas. This has been an ordinary and familiar practice for the Tigania people, and in Kenya, in general.

A photograph is a device that 'makes an instant of climax in family life everlasting' (Bourdieu 1965:24), but 'the instant' that is captured differs across societies. For the Amîrû of Tigania, the person is the focus, and one of the features of their photographs is that they only contain people: family members, friends, distant relatives, and even neighbours' children. Very few photographs of landscapes, which provide a panoramic view of an event or nature or animals, are taken. Even in photos of family trips, the scene of the landscape is the background and people are in the central foreground. This is somewhat different from photographic compositions made by the Yoruba, an ethnic group in West Africa, that include various objects and furniture with photographs of people (Sprague 2003). Hence, when an outsider, like myself, looks at these photographs, unless they are about easily identifiable events such as weddings, funerals, and baptisms, understanding the context can be challenging. Confronted by piles of photographs that are randomly kept in envelopes and drawers, to understand each one, I had to enquire about each photograph.

Photographs focusing on people are just what the Tigania people want. For them, how an event unfolds is an everyday reality that is taken for granted, and there is no need for photographs to convey when an event took place and what type of event it was. What is important is who was present, who was with whom, and how they behaved (including their expression and attire). As the Japanese anthropologist Suzuki stated reflectively, photographs that an anthropologist would expect are different from those they have (Suzuki 2015: 221-222).

The socio-cultural connotations of photographs in Meru culture (*mîtûûrîre ya Amîrû*) cannot be overlooked. In Amîrû culture, specific events and knowledge are widely kept secret, except for specific personnel. Ishida calls Amîrû society 'a society that conceals individuals' (Ishida 2019: Chapter 2), where the uniqueness of individuals is de-personalized in the cultural process, and individual events traditionally merge into the background of social structure. To

keep photographs means that such events and personhood remain in the visible form. Thus, photographs that reflect individual events and personal appearance faithfully are the opposite of Amĩrũ culture, which tends to adhere to structural amnesia.

This paper aims to examine how photographs are encompassed into everyday life and articulated with Amĩrũ culture, describing the sociological characteristics of photograph in the Tigania. The scope of this discussion is up until August 2019, when I conducted the final research for this paper,<sup>(1)</sup> and is limited to physical photographs made by developing negatives or printing digital images. Although the Tigania people have begun to use mobile phones for taking and storing pictures, a form of photography that local majority keep is still classical at research time. My focus upon the material form of the photography will deepen our understanding of the ontology of photograph that has long lasted among the Amĩrũ of Tigania.

I conducted anthropological research on Tigania people living in Athwana sub-location, an administrative unit of Mikinduri East Location, Mikinduri Central Division, Tigania East District. Athwana is situated to the east of Mikinduri (or Mikiindũri in Kĩmĩrũ) market, which has traditionally been a centre of the south-western area of the Nyambene Ranges. This paper is based on case studies of 33 households (*mũcĩĩ*) in Athwana, and the data were collected through participant observations and interviews with family members of these households (see Table 1). In this chapter, I will describe the specific cases, as illustrated in Table 1. In addition, my focus was on camera people (*ariingi mbicha*)<sup>(2)</sup> and studios who are important agents of producing photographs. Hence, my research includes interviews and observations of local camera people not only in Athwana but also in Kĩgũũchwa,<sup>(3)</sup> the neighbouring location of Mikinduri Central Division, because the activities of camera people extend beyond the administrative borders. Further, I visited several photo studios in Mikiindũri Market, Kĩgũũchwa, and Meru town.

## 2. General features of photograph among the Amĩrũ of Tigania

While the photograph has long been established as a form of art, Amĩrũ attitudes to photographs are classical and realistic. For them, photographs are merely a medium of memory (*kũriikanna/mũriikanna*) that faithfully reflect the reality of the past rather than a medium of expression of metaphoric meaning created by the photographer. There are few interpretive or imaginative attempts to translate complex meanings from a photograph (cf. Kuhn 2002). The following narrative from a middle-aged man (No. 29) reveals the well-known, but a simple agency of photograph that evokes the reality of the past:

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<sup>(1)</sup> My anthropological research regarding this theme was conducted in February 2017, February 2018, August 2018, and August 2019. However, this paper also made use of my experience, knowledge, and data from before 2017.

<sup>(2)</sup> In this article, the term 'photographer', which implies aesthetic orientation and technological excellence, is distinguished from 'cameraperson' (*mũriingi mbicha*) who takes pictures for other people without the above orientation.

<sup>(3)</sup> Kĩgũũchwa is one of the research sites that Anne-Marie Peatrik selected for her comparative study of traditional Meru culture (Peatrik 2019).

**Table 1. Households Interviewed**

No	Status of Interviewee	Nthukî	Mwîrîga	Album	Remarks
1	Husband	Rubetaa	Antûbaita	○	Njûrînceke Member
2	Husband	Ratanya	Amûthetu	○	Njûrînceke Member
3	Wife	Ratanya	Antûbaita	○	(H) Former Businessman
4	Wife	Ratanya	Andûûnne	○	
5	Single	Guantai	Andûûnne	○	
6	Husband	Rubetaa	Anthîrra	○	Former Teacher
7	Husband	Rubetaa	Andûûnne	×	Former Policeman
8	Husband	Guantai	Andûûnne	○	Former Restaurant manager
9	Husband	Mîrîti	Amûthetu	○	
10	Wife	Rubetaa	Andûûnne	○	(H) Former Chief
11	Couple	Guantai	Antûanthaamma	○	Businessman & Teacher
12	Wife	Ratanya	Antûbaita	×	(H) Businessman
13	Husband	Rubetaa	Abboondiî	○	Former Businessman
14	Wife	Ratanya	Abboondiî	○	
15	Wife	Mîrîti	Andûûnne	×	
16	Couple	Mîrîti	Andûûnne	○	(Both) Teachers
17	Wife	Guantai	Andûûnne	○	(H) Businessman
18	Family	Ratanya	Andûûnne	○	Father, Son (1977), Daughter (1980)
19	Wife	Mîrîti	Amûthetu	○	
20	Husband	Rubetaa	Andûûnne	×	Former Teacher, MC
21	Husband	Guantai	Antûanthaamma	○	Policeman
22	Wife	Guantai	Antûbaita	○	Mother & Daughter (1996)
23	Husband	Ratanya	Antûbaita	○	Former school staff
24	Wife	Gîchûûnge	Antûbaita	○	Former Migrant Labourer (Nairobi/Nanyuki)
25	Wife	Guantai	Antûanthaamma	×	
26	Husband	Ratanya	Antûanthaamma	○	Tailor
27	Couple	Guantai	Antûanthaamma	○	
28	Family	Rubetaa	Andûûnne	○	Mother & Daughter (1995)
29	Husband	Mîrîti	Antûanthaamma	○	Teacher
30	Husband	Guantai	Antûanthaamma	○	Businessman (Meru Town)
31	Couple	Rubetaa	Andûûnne	×	
32	Wife	Guantai	Antûanthaamma	○	
33	Wife	Gîchûûnge	Antûbaita	×	Teacher's Certificate holder, (H) Businessman

Notes: (H): Husband, Number in Bracket: year of birth

'If you look at a certain picture, that one will tell you, remind you...it will explain what kind of event took place. That is meaning. For example, a burial ceremony. In that picture, they look sad, and they were not happy. So, you will know this was a sad ceremony'. (August 11, 2019)

The well-known power of photographs that enables us to revive memories and emotions vividly is also evident. Some people burst into tears just from looking at a photograph. For example, this happened to a mother (No. 3) after her daughter died in a traffic accident in Nairobi. Nevertheless, this depends on the individual. This power that photographs have is not always effective; as an elder (*mûunjûri*)<sup>(4)</sup> said, 'a photograph is a mere shadow. It never answers a question' (August 16, 2018). So much so, that I was once told by an elder (No. 26) that 'there is no meaning. It is a waste of time' when I was attempting to check each photograph (August 15, 2018).



**Figure 1. Decorative photograph taken at graduation (No. 32)**

It is still not the case that Tigania people look at the photograph from an aesthetic point of view. While the photograph is the product of 'a hybrid network of humans and machines' (Taki 2003: 21-22), the existence of the photographer merges into the background of the machine that automatically captures the likeness of reality. Even when aesthetics becomes an issue, for the Tigania people, attention is directed not to the composition of the photograph and the camera's specification or shooting technique, but to the flamboyant decorative frame with

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<sup>(4)</sup> *Mûunjûri* has a special meaning in the Amîrû culture. He is a member of the council of elders (Njûriîncheke) which I will mention later.

flowers and letters (i.e., Happy Moments, Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, see the Figure 1). This style of photograph is very popular, and needless to say, this is a new preference brought about by advancements in technology. In addition, as decorative frames require a personal computer, printer, and design template, it is a difficult task for local camera people. Conversely, those camera people who can provide this type of photographs are well known in the surrounding areas.

Although the Tigania people hang framed photographs on the wall and sometimes prefer decorative frames, they rarely take out and look at photographs or albums in everyday life. For many villagers, photographs are not something they enjoy by looking at them daily or by actively taking photographs, but instead, they are something to be kept as evidence to be used when they want to justify or supplement what they believe in and what they think; in this sense, photographs are treated as an archive.

Subsequently, photographs can be seen as a ‘personal archive’ for preserving events and appearances. However, it is worth noting that photographs kept in a well-ordered form of an album or casually in a box are also considered the ‘family archive’, as these photographs mostly belong to *mûcîî*, and not a specific person. One man (No. 16) said that his father had many photographs but these photographs was being held by his first-born daughter, who married out to another *mûcîî* (her husband’s natal place); ‘that is not good. We must take it back to our *mûcîî*’ (August 11, 2018). This narrative typically indicates that photographs belong to *mûcîî*. As other examples, photographs that a husband and wife collected in the past became mixed property after marriage (No. 11); and a father said that he had a photo album, but in fact the album was managed by his daughter who used to organise various photographs (No. 18). This is one of the reasons that their album or photographs include many relatives and friends whom



Figure 2. Eulogy (No. 3)

the parents/children have never seen. Thus, the boundary between family archive and personal archive is ambiguous. However, younger generations tend to keep their photographs in their own album or box as a personal archive. In these cases, children pick out their favourite photographs (mostly photographs of their parents) from family albums and add them to their own album. In this way, personal archives sometimes become absent from family archives.

Although people rarely look at these photographs as part of everyday life, there are times when people look at photographs seriously. As a middle-aged-man said, 'these photographs will be used for preparing a eulogy' (August 12, 2018). Soon after a person has died, family members normally look for an adequate photograph and reprint it for a eulogy. Figure 2, which I extract a part (one page) from a eulogy, illustrates how many photographs can be used in a eulogy. Finally, a eulogy is distributed to participants of the *mathiko* (burial ceremony). Thus, personal and hidden photographs are transformed to social and public beings.



Figure 3. Album of arusi (No. 21)

The way that photographs are kept seems not to reflect social stratification necessarily, as indicated in Table 1. People living in poverty often have albums, and several wealthy families keep their photographs casually in a box or envelopes. However, wealthy families tend to arrange photographs in order of when the occasions happened and make a stunning *arusi* album. For example, the interviewee (No. 21) keeps an album and videotape concerning the *arusi* that he held in 2012 (Figure 3). They hired a company in Meru town that has professional staff for taking photographs, editing videos, and preparing albums. Wealthy people also tend to hang their portrait photographs in a frame on the walls of their house. In addition, the eulogies of wealthy family members are more sophisticated than eulogies for less wealthy family members. In comparison to a wealthy family (see, Figure 2), a eulogy for less wealthy family members only has words without photos; if photos are attached, they are monochrome.

In relation to this, there may be a possibility that women or wives tend to manage family photographs. As indicated in Table 1, many wives agreed to be interviewed and for their photographs to be checked. As a good example of this, one male participant (No. 26) said, 'there

is no meaning. It is a waste of time' and stopped the interview half-way through (August 15, 2018). In contrast, the camera people are all male, as I will describe later. I have heard that there are some female camera people, but I did not meet any of them, apart from a female employee of a company. I think that taking and managing photographs loosely depends on gender-based divisions of labour.

### 3. Social agents in the photography network

#### 3.1. Collecting photographs

A middle-aged-man (No. 8) bought an analogue camera in the 1990s when he had worked as a restaurant manager in Nairobi. He had used his camera for private purposes, and his album contains many photographs he had taken in Uhuru Park, the Kenyatta International Conference Center<sup>(5)</sup>, and other places from that time.

However, this is a rare case, as very few people take photographs and print them by themselves. Most of the photographs they have were taken by camera people. For camera people with a digital camera and printer, ceremonies, especially *arusi* and *mathiko*, provide business opportunities; hence, they often appear in these occasions, but they rarely appear on occasions such as a small *kiatho* or birthday because the number of participants is limited. During *arusi* or *mathiko*, a cameraperson prints out the photographs immediately after they have taken and displays them on a rope at the event (Figure 4). The participants can then look at the photographs and buy the ones they want. Many people buy photographs regarding themselves, family members, distant relatives and friends they do not regularly see as a memento; however, this is a recent practice. Up until the 1990s, when the camera people used films, they had to develop the films in Meru town. The camera people at that time would attach the negative to the



**Figure 4. Selling photographs in arusi (2012)**

<sup>(5)</sup> The Kenyatta International Conference Center was renamed 'Kenyatta International Convention Center' in September 2013 on the occasion of marking its 40th anniversary. But as photographs many people kept at my research time had been taken in the age of old name, this paper unitarily uses the old name.

developed photograph, visit each household, and try to sell them their photographs. A former cameraperson (No. 5) recalls that while it was costly to travel back and forth to Meru town, he made a profit because there was a demand.

Also, people sometimes casually take their photographs in a studio when they had an occasional day out in Nairobi or another large city, on special days such as Christmas, and after church services. Most studios have the plain background screen which is used to take ID photographs and the background screen with so fantastical pictures of cities and nature. When there is a special occasion such as Christmas or elections, they provide appropriate backgrounds that employ the features of particular occasions to meet the customers' needs.

Businesses of this kind seem to be common in sightseeing spots in Kenya. In places such as Nairobi and Mombasa, there have been many camera people and studios that were closely connected. And, studios provide backgrounds that employ the features of particular localities.<sup>(6)</sup> An older man (No. 2) carefully kept an old (monochrome) photograph taken in a Nairobi studio in the early 1970s when he had worked as seasonal migrant labour. Such styles gradually spread to other regions. For example, the original owner of Meru Photo Studio in Meru town was from Agikuyu community.

Furthermore, they exchange photographs with relatives and friends. One mother (No. 22) said that most of the photographs she had were obtained through exchange. Although one man (No. 31) only has one framed (monochrome) photograph, he does not appear in its photograph, and it reflects only his sister's family as his sister visited him and gave him the photo as a memento. In particular, upper primary and secondary students often exchange photographs with close friends so that they do not forget each other after graduation. As another example, my research assistant enclosed his photograph in a letter to his pen pal. Sometimes, photographs from student years have words stuck on them that have been cut out from newspapers or



**Figure 5. Student years (No. 5)**

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(6) Behrend (2003) reported how cameramen and studios was active and flourished in Mombasa.

magazines (Figure 5). These words could be lessons for life or words of encouragement. For example, one wife (No. 27) attached the sentence, 'Challenging is imaginative and ability to work', on an old photograph. This is a 'decoration' appropriate for students. These photographs of the student years are also taken by the camera people. Local camera people would visit the school every time an event takes place, from a minor event to graduation ceremonies, and take photographs and sell them.

Thus, camera people and studios are indispensable agents in considering the ontology of photographs in a local area. In the following section, I will focus on these in more detail.

### 3.2. Camera people and studios

As the background to the many photographs that are circulating or exist among the Tigania, here I will describe, first, the activities of individual camera people and, second, photo studios. All personal names are pseudonyms to retain the anonymity of the participants.

Steven, who comes from Athwana, became a cameraperson in 1997 soon after he finished Form 4 of high school. At the time, his late brother, who was a teacher, bought an analogue camera (KODAK) so that Steven could earn an income as a cameraperson: 'I was willing to engage in camerawork because I saw a famous cameraperson and knew that it (camerawork) was good business' (February 10, 2018). The 'famous cameraperson' was John, whom we will discuss later. He mainly took pictures at local *kiatho* and baptisms, with his friend who helped check the names to sell the photographs afterwards. He developed negatives in Meru town and wrote the names on the back of each photograph by referring to a name list. After that, he visited the houses of everyone he took pictures of and sold the photographs at a rate of Ksh. 20/= per photograph, and attached the negative to each photograph. He said, 'It costed Ksh. 300/= for one film. I mostly used two or three films for one event. One film enabled me to snap 40 shots. Simply calculating, I got Ksh. 1600/= to Ksh. 2400/= per event. Even after the expenses for transporting, hiring an assistant (friend), and developing negatives were deducted, I got quite a pure profit'



Figure 6. Many cameramen in one occasion (1998)

(February 10, 2018).

As a cameraperson does not require particular skills and anyone can become one with just a camera, it was a suitable part-time job for jobless young people. In the 1990s, there were many camera people such as Steven and they seemed to earn an income (Figure 6). Steven stopped being a cameraperson in 2000 because he got a job as a hotel manager, and this income was more than that of a cameraperson.

Mwenda, who also comes from Athwana, has been a cameraperson since 2005. He belongs to a carpenter group based in Mikiindûri and works as a cameraperson whenever people need him. He saw that other camera people earned quite a lot of money and decided to become a cameraperson: 'at that time, my friend taught me how to use an analogue camera. He was also a famous cameraperson, though his main occupation was as a primary school teacher' (February 11, 2018). As his first camera was analogue and as there was no facility for developing film in Mikiindûri, he had to go to Meru town to develop his negatives. In 2013, he bought a digital camera for Ksh. 15000/= in Nairobi, and since then he has not needed to go to Meru town. However, he does not have a printer and still has to print his photographs at SABA SABA Photo Studio in Mikiindûri market where it costs Ksh. 10/= for each normal-sized print. He sells one normal-sized photograph for Ksh. 30/= and sells king-sized photographs for Ksh. 50/=, which are the standard prices in the area. Mwenda said 'everybody knows me, and hires me for taking pictures. I am mostly invited to small *kiatho*. Yesterday, I just worked at a birthday *kiatho*' (February 11, 2018).

John, living in Kîgûûchwa, has been a famous cameraperson. His reputation reaches as far as Athwana because he is one of a few people in the area who can create a decorative photograph by using their personal computer and printer. Subsequently, many people in Athwana have photographs that he took and printed. When I asked people who edited their decorative photographs, many people mentioned his name, and so it was easy to recognise his work. John said, 'Some years ago, I gave my own USB memory to a friend and asked him to purchase a decorative design template in Nairobi' (February 13, 2018). While John sells photographs at the same price as other camera people, decorating the photographs is free-of-charge. His career began in 1996; soon after finishing Form 4 of high school, John got a job at the Friends Photo Studio operating in Mikiindûri, which has now closed down their business: 'I learned many things about cameras and techniques there. And I knew photographs was a good business' (February 13, 2018). After finishing work at the Photo Studio, he continued to be local cameraperson and has used several cameras. Now he has a printer, a personal computer, and a single-lens reflex camera (NIKON), which he purchased for Ksh. 50,000/=. He makes temporary studio in a courtyard of *mûcîi*, by pitching a background screen of pictures or plain screen in accordance with customer's needs. John does not like printing photographs directly at the event, soon after taking the pictures, because he is concerned with the quality of the photograph printing. All of his work is undertaken at his house. However, his income is not only from being a camera person but also from working as a barber (*kinyozi* in Kiswahili) and selling tea leaves.

Similarly, David comes from Kîgûûchwa and has experience of working in a photo studio.

He worked at Mt. Kenya Photo Studio in Nyeri for five years (2006–2010), and at that time he bought a digital camera (Fuji Film). Returning to his homeland, he became a ‘mobile cameraman’ (in his expression). However, he has never owned a printer and printed his photographs in Meru Photo Studio (Meru town). He operated Nyambene Photo Studio, near Kîgûûchwa market for about three years (2016–2018). Half of the office space was for the photo studio, and the other part was for *kinyozi*. He withdrew from there because his income was not enough to maintain the office space. He transferred his business to his *mûcîi* in Kaliene, an area halfway between Mîkiindûri market and Kîgûûchwa, and he operates both a *kinyozi* and a canteen, aside from working as a cameraperson. When I visited his business site in August 2019, his new photo studio next to the canteen was still under construction. He said: ‘If the studio is attractive, people will come to me’ (August 14, 2019).

Interestingly, local camera people seem to think of their work not so much as a passionate or worthwhile job but as a business. Even John, who has influenced other local camera people, views camerawork as a business first: ‘photograph...I love it. But it is an income-generating project!’ (February 13, 2018). However, there is now little room for optimism. Life cannot be sustained by camerawork alone. As John and David said, the time when their business makes the most money is during Christmas and New Year. Subsequently, they work as camera people concurrent to working as a carpenter, undertaking agricultural activities, or managing other businesses (*kinyozi* or canteen).

From here, I will focus on photo studios. In Mîkiindûri and Meru town, many photo shops can print digital data and several shops with studios.<sup>(7)</sup> Maintaining a studio is costly; it costs several thousand Shillings (about Ksh. 5000) per year for a license. However, the benefits of having a studio have now diminished. For example, when I met a woman in her late twenties at Nax Digital Photo, Meru town, she said, ‘I don’t like to take pictures in a studio. I take pictures in various settings. Photographs in the background of nature and photographs with friends are better’ (August 9, 2019). The majority of customers certainly visit Nax Digital Photo to print their own photographs that they took somewhere else or to take ID photographs (Ksh. 100/= per 4 passport sized photographs). According to the owner,<sup>(8)</sup> the studio is mostly used for taking ID photographs using a plain background, except for during Christmas and New Year. This situation is also the same at Meru Photo Studio, which is a long-established shop with a developed studio. According to my observation and interviews with staff, there are not many customers who use the studios today. Thus, the cost performance of running a studio seems to be ineffective.

Many owners understand this cost and have developed various methods to eliminate waste. For example, Mkenya, a famous photo shop in Mîkiindûri, has no studio for reduction of

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<sup>(7)</sup> In each area, I conducted research at the major studios; Meru Photo Studio and Nax Digital Photo in Meru town; and SABA SABA Photo Studio and Muchui in Mîkiindûri. Though I visited at Mkenya and Monalisa in Mîkiindûri, these have no studio.

<sup>(8)</sup> He was also a ‘local photographer’, and worked in his homeland region (Imenti). Calling him a photographer is more suitable as it matches his aesthetic sense.

cost (license fee), and uses a plain wall in the corner of the office to take ID photographs. John, a cameraperson in Kígúúchwa, claims to have an ‘instant’ studio, which does not exist officially. In this way, his ‘instant’ studio is his way of cleverly getting around the audit.

Rather than creating an income from studio photographs, the income of photo studios is mainly developed from printing digital images, making photocopies (Ksh. 3/= per paper), laminating, selling photo frames with extended original photographs, and other services (i.e., preparing pamphlets or eulogies). As with Meru Photo Studio, when analogue cameras were used, local camera people came to develop films, and now the reputation as a long-established store attracts old customers, such as Steven and David. In contrast, Nax Digital Photo has gained a reputation from the quality and speed of its printing since it started operating in 2017.

The situation and operation of photo studios in local areas seem to be different from Meru town. Referring to the difference, I will consider how two photo studios in Mikiindûri operated to earn an income.

SABA SABA Photo Studio, which opened in 2006, is today the most famous studio in Mikiindûri. During Christmas and New Year, their studio is decorated with special background screens and ornaments, and they change these decorations every year. According to the staff, while the Christmas season is a major event, this is just only one of the times that people use this photo studio. Other opportunities include school holidays when the studio is popular with students and Sundays. For the latter, the photo studio is very close to St. Massimo Catholic Church, the biggest church in the area, and many attendees of the church service come to take their picture on the way home. Further, the staff attend local events, especially *mathiko*. One staff member said, ‘*arusi* require permission. We must be invited to take a picture. But we are free to go inside *mathiko*’ (February 12, 2018). They can print digital images and sell photographs at the event (see Figure 4), and they spend the whole day there, using a printer and several batteries. Thus, the SABA SABA Photo Studio endeavours to keep their studio attractive and engage in the photography business in the field.

Muchui has run his own photo studio alongside the main road to Kunati from Mikiindûri market since 2005. His studio is not organizational but purely an individual enterprise. He has a



**Figure. 7 Photo studio (Muchui)**

fantastical backscreen at his studio (Figure 7), which enables customers to experience an 'imagined journey' (Behrend 2003). He also goes out to various events (*arusi*, *mathiko*, and ceremony performed after circumcision), and hires two or three friends who help him with his camerawork. According to Muchui, he has two printers, as he is concerned about 'printer damage'; one for his studio and one for fieldwork.

Further, in his words, he specialises as an 'art worker' (designer) painting and preparing various designs for events. This is the advantage he gets by getting invitations *arusi*: 'When I go to an event, I am busy with artwork and camerawork. I must sometimes concentrate on artwork. So, I need help' (February 12, 2018). In fact, he began his career as an art worker rather than cameraman. After finishing class 8 of primary school, he was first interested in artwork and developed his art skills. The reason that he bought first (analogue) camera is for design and artwork as well as private purposes. Through interactions with John, who often appeared in this section, he began working as a cameraperson at a studio, and since 2011, he has used digital cameras (NIKON and SONY).

In this way, the photo studio staff in Mikiindûri take business trips to events held in local areas. It is easy for them to get information about and invitations to events because they are rooted in the area and have information networks through the traditional social structure (*mwîrîga*, *nthukî*, and relatives) and friends, and because of their reputation in Mikiindûri. Further, they own must-have equipment (several printers and batteries), which enables them to go out on business trips.

#### 4. Articulations of photograph and Amîrû culture

Photograph that can capture reality faithfully fixes certain events and individual uniqueness at a certain point and conveys them to distant persons and places, and even to the future. It is such an effect of photograph that I, as an anthropologist and outsider, can look at photographs. These effects have a tense relationship with Amîrû culture. In this section, I will demonstrate the articulation between such photographs and Amîrû culture.

##### 4.1. Cultural restrictions of photograph

One of the features of Amîrû culture is to hide knowledge and events from certain people through the restriction of entry and through secrecy. As examples, here, I focus on *kianda* and Njûriîncheke.

First, *kianda* are small and simple huts, which are made of banana leaves, for isolating circumcised boys. The boys spend about three weeks in a *kianda*. During this period, entry to the *kianda* is strictly limited to *mûgwaati* (the caretaker of that boy) and other specific people such as masked dancers (*m'nkûûrri*). What happens there is kept secret to uncircumcised boys and women in general. Taking pictures of activities and people inside a *kianda* is banned. After a period of isolation, people are permitted to take photographs, and there are many photographs of the ceremony of boys coming out from the *kianda*.

Second, the Njûriĩncheke (Council of Elders)<sup>(9)</sup> is an association initiated through special procedures, which plays crucial roles in the legal and political functions of community life. In their own house (*nyûũmba ya Njûri*), the Njûriĩncheke engage in various activities such as meetings for the community administration and settling of disputes in traditional ways. One of the features of Njûriĩncheke is its secrecy for which it is categorized as a secret association. *Nkûrûũmbû* (non-initiates), women, and uncircumcised boys are strictly prohibited from entering the *nyûũmba ya Njûri*. At the same time, it is a taboo for members of the Njûriĩncheke to disclose information from the activities of the Njûriĩncheke to any person who does not belong to the Njûriĩncheke. This taboo is also applied to the police and even the President of Kenya unless they are an initiated Njûriĩncheke elder. Similar to the *kĩanda*, taking pictures of their activities inside the *nyûũmba ya Njûri* is forbidden, and a *mûũnjûri* explained that this taboo was explained when he became a Njûriĩncheke member. It is the fact that, as Rimita reported (1988:48–50), this secrecy is protected by an oath at the time of initiation into the Njûriĩncheke.<sup>(10)</sup>

As everyone in the community knows the rules about the *kĩanda* and Njûriĩncheke, no camera people dare to enter and take pictures inside *kĩanda* and *nyûũmba ya Njûri*. Needless to say, there are also no Njûriĩncheke members who take pictures of their activities and inside their house. I could not find photographs on this topic; instead, there are photographs of the ritual performed when circumcised boys come out from the *kĩanda* and of fellow elders taken as a memento outside the *nyûũmba ya Njûri*. While they love photographs, they prioritize the rules of their culture.

The negative attitude of the Njûriĩncheke to photograph is sometimes salient. The Njûriĩncheke hold a celebratory parade for new Njûriĩncheke members. When I tried to take a picture of a Njûriĩncheke's parade in Mikiindûri market, outside a *nyûũmba ya Njûri*, a *mûũnjûri* quickly came to slap my camera and warned me: 'Don't take any pictures!' Someone also muttered: 'Respect culture!' (August 27, 2011). Even though the Njûriĩncheke's parade and *arusi* are the same celebrations, the cultural connotation is extremely different.

Interestingly, the Njûriĩncheke do not recognize photograph as evidence (*ũkũũji* or *okoie*) in settling disputes. During my interview, a *mûũnjûri* mentioned the reason as follows:

Is the picture evidence? That is a mere shadow (*kĩruundu*). It is like a dead person. It never answers a question, doesn't it? We must have an oral conversation (*kwaarria tũkaarranĩria bwega*) with the persons concerned. When you have a case, you must show yourself physically. (August 16, 2018)

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<sup>(9)</sup> Initiating the Njûriĩncheke was traditionally an automatic process after circumcision for all men of Meru because the Njûriĩncheke belong to an upper part of an age-grade system. Today, all men of Amĩrũ do not necessarily become members of the Njûriĩncheke. For the contemporary procedures (especially payments) and reasons for becoming members of the Njûriĩncheke, see my paper (Baba 2014).

<sup>(10)</sup> For the general process of initiation rituals, see Rimita (1988:47–51) and for a comparative perspective, see Peatrik (2019).

He added that the Njûriñcheke emphasised the ‘eye’ and the ‘mouth’: eyewitnesses and narratives, respectively. This kind of metaphoric expression was heard from many *mûñjûri*, and they added the ‘head’, which means memory; ‘memory is in my head (*kiongo*)’. When settling disputes, the Njûriñcheke require that the complainant and the defendant must be present physically and give oral information to them directly. If a complainant was injured by someone, they must show his injury in front of the Njûriñcheke. Although photographs certainly enable the ‘person’ to be present, this ‘person’ cannot talk to the Njûriñcheke. This is the reason why the *mûñjûri* calls them a ‘dead person’ or ‘shadow’. As he stated, Njûriñcheke does not regard photograph as a verbally communicative agent like a living person. This expression of a ‘shadow’ or ‘dead person’ is related to the lack of an attempt to interpret and extract complex meanings from a photograph.

Another *mûñjûri* said, ‘Njûriñcheke follows the footstep (*ikinya*) of the Njûriñcheke founder, namely *Kaûrrobechaû*’ (February 19, 2017). *Ikinya* connotes a meaning of instruction and manner (*mîtîrîre*) to be followed. His narrative also explains another reason why the Njûriñcheke do not recognize photographs; because the founder did not use cameras and photographs. However, these attitudes and notions are not necessarily shared among all members of the Njûriñcheke in this area. Another *mûñjûri* said, ‘Our (Njûriñcheke) style may be old and out of date. We don’t merely know a way of how to use photographs for dispute settlement skilfully’ (August 12, 2018). This *mûñjûri* implies the possibility that photographs and activities of the Njûriñcheke are articulated harmoniously. He may feel the current of the times. When I observed people coming into Nax Digital Photo, Meru town, a man came to print photographs to prepare a traffic accident certificate. It is now certain that photographs are already recognized as evidence in many social domains.

#### 4.2. Beyond structural amnesia

Amîrû culture works to prevent the individual’s life and character from being prominent, which is a function of structural amnesia. Eight age-groups (*nthukî*),<sup>(11)</sup> each covering 15 years, constitute the cyclical time awareness of a cycle of 120 years (c.f. Nyaga 1997). The names of each age group have been fixed and will reappear in a cycle of 120 years. People’s memory of genealogy does not go very far. Individual ancestors are forgotten, and only age groups that go through cyclical time survive. Recapturing a historical event is based on age groups and not individual ancestors. The Amîrû notion of the individual sees individuals as simply ‘water’ that fills an everlasting ‘container’ (age group) in a particular era. Also, even if the *mwîchiaro*<sup>(12)</sup> possess the power to cast curses, it is thought to come from belonging to a certain clan, and not from an individual’s character or capability (Ishida 2019:45). Similarly, when a masked dancer

<sup>(11)</sup> The eight age-groups are *Îthariî*, *Mîchûbû*, *Ratanya*, *Rubetaa*, *Mîrîti*, *Guantai*, *Gîchûûnge*, and *Kîramunya*.

<sup>(12)</sup> Ishida has long conducted research on *gîchiaro* in Îgembe, considering the characteristics of the whole Amîrû culture (e.g., Ishida 2008; 2006).

(*m'nkûûrrî*) appears in the final stage of the circumcision isolation period, it is difficult to identify the dancer because of the mask and in any case, the dancer is not supposed to be identified (Ishida 2019:22). Furthermore, when the Njûrîincheke deals with conflict, it is their collective ruling, and no individual name is revealed even if there is an elder that stands out. The supernatural power of the Njûrîincheke, which includes both blessings and curses, belongs to the collective body, and not to specific individuals. In short, individual lives and characters merge with the background and disappear in this cultural process of de-personification. From this feature, Ishida calls Amîrû society 'a society that conceals individuals' (Ishida 2019: Chapter 2). Thus, such a socio-cultural system is clearly contrastive to the photograph that fixes the unique individual forever.

However, there is a unique practice in Amîrû culture in which an individual leaves their footprint (*îkinya*) for posterity. This emerges in the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. I speculate that this relationship provides the space for photograph to connect to the socio-cultural system without conflict. Here, let me examine this form of articulation.

The intimate relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is widely found in African societies, and Amîrû society is no exception. When schools break for a long holiday period, grandchildren living in cities would often visit their grandparents' in rural areas to spend time together. Grandparents not only look after their grandchildren well but also teach them a variety of things such as how society works, *gîchiaro*, proverbs, and life skills (cooking, sewing, and so on), and therefore they are very dependable.<sup>(13)</sup> An educated mother, who wanted her daughter to receive a good education, said while holding her infant in a *leso* (colourful cotton cloth, *leecho* in Kîmîrû) 'I will teach Meru language (Kîmîrû) first. We can wait for English. As grandparents only know Kîmîrû' (August 17, 2012). This demonstrates the importance of grandparents. In particular, the *ntaau* (or *ntaagu*) relationship, which refers to a special relationship between one grandparent and one grandchild who then call each other *ntaau*, is important. This is evident in the practice of naming grandchildren after grandparents (see Ishida's article in the present volume; Ishida n.p.). The names given to grandchildren include the names of their grandparents (namesake) as well as names that come from their character, demeanour, or achievements. The demeanour or characteristics of the grandparents are called '*îkinya rîa ntaau*' (footprint of *ntaau*). When we look at grandchildren's names, we can, therefore, imagine what kind of person their *ntaau* (grandparent) was; for example, Nkatha means one who is generous and always greets everyone with a smile; Kîremi (male)/Karîmi (female) is someone who works hard in the farm; Gîtoonga is a rich man, mainly because of his large herd of cattle; Kîmaathi/Kamaathi seeks for something or labours to acquire wealth; and Ntoongai/Kaangai is a child born during the rain or survived death at some point or another.

In Amîrû society in which individuals become concealed in structural time, the transmission of *îkinya rîa ntaau* is a way in which individuals are saved from being forgotten.

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<sup>(13)</sup> Grandchildren perform a ritual, a '*kûthaarima*' (blessing), for unfortunate incidents that are caused by an ancestral spirit (*kîruundu*); see Matsuzono's article in the present volume.

As characters and demeanours of a *ntaau* (grandparent) are handed down in the form of names, grandparents continue to live socially even if they are physically dead. Considering that the *ikinya* is the behaviour to be followed, it may be possible to say that grandchildren are the ‘reincarnation’ of their grandparents. In this way, to have grandchildren who inherit their *ikinya* is a cherished form of ‘happiness’ in Amĩrũ society.

However, it is worth noting that names handed down from grandparents are general and never unique. There are many people with similar names. Without an explanation about the reason of naming, we cannot know how grandparents are unique. What guarantees the uniqueness of grandparents is actually the anecdotes about them. Photograph complements an anecdote regarding the name, illustrating the visual image of the grandparents. This kind of function is a point of harmonious articulation between photograph and Amĩrũ culture. As one woman (No. 16) said, ‘Photograph is just a feature reference!’ (August 11, 2018). This perspective seems to be widely shared; many elder people leave their photographs to their families so that their grandchild and descendants can recognize them (No. 2, 4, 15, 23).

It is unclear if photographs that capture someone’s life course have brought about a new form of *ikinya*. Although the roles of photography in Amĩrũ culture seems to be moderate and complementary, socio-cultural importance of the ‘feature reference’ is noteworthy. First, photograph is a reliable media for saving grandparents from oblivion. In the past, the personality of grandparents (especially *ntaau*) was vested in names and anecdotes, but now, photographs add features of their appearance to make these more realistic (Figure 8). The agency of photograph in limiting structural amnesia cannot be overemphasized. Second, photograph creates an opportunity to explain anecdotes. During my research, I encountered many situations of children interestingly looking at old photographs with me because the photographs were usually hidden in an album or a box and the children then asked their parents or grandparents questions about unfamiliar persons in the photographs. This conversation has an educational effect in terms of learning about Amĩrũ social relationships. The emphasis is on the order of the



**Figure 8. Preserving personal appearance of ntaau (No. 25)**

story and photograph, which is reversed. Looking at photographs introduces storytelling, and specific types of conversation would not be evoked without photographs. Such an agency of photograph in generating narratives regarding human relation cannot be also overemphasized. In next section, I will examine another change emerged with the introduction of photograph.

## 5. Collection and connection

During my research on photographs, I noticed that many people have photograph with similar backgrounds in Nairobi; a statue of Jomo Kenyatta, a legendary leader of the nation, and the Kenyatta International Conference Center (hereafter, KICC). Together, the statue and KICC, for its proximity, have become an integral background for photograph (Figure 9), and hereafter, I will call this type of photograph 'KICC photograph'.

The statue and KICC were established in 1973,<sup>(14)</sup> and since then, they have become the most famous sites in Nairobi for foreign tourists as well as Kenyan people. KICC was the highest building in Nairobi until many higher buildings were constructed in the 1990s. Even today, many tourists visit this location and take pictures with the background. There are usually several camera people waiting at the locations with single-lens reflex cameras. They print digital images on the spot and sell them for Ksh. 100/= each. Most photographs that I confirmed in Athwana were taken by camera people working at this location.

Importantly, the statue and KICC have been symbolic objects in terms of national memory and one of the images for representing Kenya, as these landmarks have been adopted on the note (Figure 10). Although a new note will replace the old note,<sup>(15)</sup> the image will remain the same. This indicates how Kenya, as a nation, adheres to this image.

During my interviews, this photograph reminds people of when they took it; for example, when they were working in Nairobi as a restaurant manager (No. 8); when they visited Nairobi for working as a part-time carpenter (No. 18); when they went to Nairobi to participate in a music festival (No. 16); and when they led a Church group to Nairobi (No. 20, Figure 9). As the KICC photograph is also exchanged or given among certain social relationship, some people explained to me the social relationship through which they exchanged or received. For example, a middle-aged-man keeps the KICC photograph that initially belonged to his late older brother, who was a former teacher (No. 5). A woman has the KICC photograph that one of her sons presented to her as a memento because he lives far away (No. 12). Another woman was presented the KICC photograph of her mother's brother by her mother who had kept it (No. 31).

However, it should be noted that their memories are limited to how and when they got the KICC photograph. Namely, the KICC photograph does not evoke various and deep memories or re-create the past through interpretations. The significance of retaining the KICC photo needs to be understood from another perspective, aside from memory and interpretation, which is open to another ontology of photograph among the Tigania people.

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<sup>(14)</sup> Construction of KICC began in 1967 and was completed in 1973.

<sup>(15)</sup> In 2019, the changeover to a new note is gradually progressing.



**Figure 9. The KICC photo (No. 20)**



**Figure 10. Old note of Ksh. 100/=**

As a clue, I refer to the case of a middle-aged-man (No. 5). He has collected many photographs and attaches them on the wall with many posters, maps, and calendars. Thus, his room is filled with visual images (Figure 11). As Sontag argued, he is 'collecting the world' by collecting photographs/visual images (1977:10). As a result, he feels surrounded by relatives, friends, national politicians, animals (lions, cheetahs, buffalo, and reindeers), nature, and even Usama Bin Laden. Photographs reduce temporary and spatial distance with objects and connect these on a flat surface beyond time and space. This connection are very real for him because they all exist/existed on the earth's surface. The point here is a kind of feeling that he exists in the world with others. In this way, his purpose of collecting photographs is the collection itself,



**Figure 11. A wall of his living room (No. 5)**

which evokes the feeling of being-in-the-world-with-others,<sup>(16)</sup> rather than for memory.

This argument indicates a change of perspective to photograph, which emphasises flat expansion rather than depths, connection rather than interpretation, and index rather than symbol. This perspective will enable us to understand another significance of having photographs such as the KICC photograph, not for memory. The KICC photograph intermediates the connection of the person who is now living in a local area to Jomo Kenyatta, KICC, camera people, Nairobi, people who have the same photograph, and even people who have passed away. This connection is not symbolic, but indexical because of the fact that all persons and things in the photograph are/were undoubtedly being-in-the-world.<sup>(17)</sup>

## **6. Concluding remarks**

My interest in photograph goes back to an *arusi* I attended in 2012, where many people bought photographs that were displayed on a rope for sale (Figure 4). I had not seen this in Papua New Guinea, another country of my anthropological research. Further, in the social lives of people in Athwana, I sometimes realized that many people carefully kept photographs in albums, envelopes, or on their shelves. Conversely, photographs were sometimes controversial during my research on the Njûriîncheke. These experiences also stimulated my interest in photograph, similar to the comparison with the village life in Papua New Guinea. After writing a thesis on the Njûriîncheke (Baba 2014), I began my research on photography.

This paper belongs to the genre of vernacular photography (e.g., Pinney and Peterson 2003), but this paper is not directed to post-colonial studies (e.g., Wright 2013) nor the entangled history between photography and anthropology (e.g., Pinney 2011), although I am aware that photographs among the Tigania are embedded in social and historical contexts.

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<sup>(16)</sup> This expression and insight are derived from Moutu's reading (2007) on *Naven*, an analytical ethnography which G. Bateson wrote about Iatmul society in Papua New Guinea.

<sup>(17)</sup> The photograph as an indexical sign is a classically known conception in arguments of photography (cf. Maekawa 2019).

Instead, as I demonstrated in the introduction of this paper, my focus is on the relation between photograph and Amĩĩrũ culture, especially an aspect of conflicting powers; while the photograph preserves realities beyond time and space, Amĩĩrũ culture has tendency of structural amnesia. As I illustrated in the first half of this paper, keeping photographs has become an everyday practice among the Tigania, which has considerably owed to activities of local camera people and studios with the business minds. In the second half, I argued the aspects of photograph's articulation with Amĩĩrũ culture. Restriction and rejection are still robust, and photograph does not still have the impact of changing Amĩĩrũ culture. Although the photograph certainly becomes an agent of social interaction or a minor vehicle of changes, the role of photograph in Amĩĩrũ culture is still moderate and complementary. The feeling of being-in-the-world-with-others through collection is not contradictory to Amĩĩrũ culture because the worldview that the world consists of various components (for example, humans, animals, and nature) is inherent in Amĩĩrũ culture and everyday life. So far there is no noticeable conflict between photograph and Amĩĩrũ culture.

However, if I could collect data showing that photographs evoke acts of re-creating the past or reflective relations to other photographs, different arguments would develop so as to merge into post-colonial studies and historical entanglement, referring to the problem of 'post-memory'.<sup>(18)</sup>

In addition, as Amĩĩrũ societies are changing rapidly, my argument might already be old. The practice of photography is ever-changing. In August 2019, I took part in two *arusi* but did not see any camera people. Both of the *arusi* were attended by large groups of people, but the participants took pictures using their smartphones and the *arusi* planners hired professional camera people who came from a company in Meru town. In one *arusi*, a video was recorded using a drone, which a professional camera person manipulated. In this way, local camera people had no space for their activities. Of course, I don't think that local camera people might have vanished because they would be needed in small or minor events. However, the era of the cameraperson surviving without a printer and a personal computer will end near future.

Further, the materiality of photographs, on which my thesis is based, will fade away with the process of moving towards digital data. Although I do not know when digital data will become dominant, digital data will undoubtedly change cognitive attitudes toward photograph that I argued here. Also, research should be conducted in terms of 'post-memory', which will change my conclusions. Thus, my argument is already open to alternative discussions and re-assessments.

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<sup>(18)</sup> Post-memory is a specific form of memory created through generational distance and 'is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connections... its connection to its objects or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation' (Marianne 1997:22).

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