PRE-PUBLISH VERSION:

Saleni, photograph me! On photographic representation and the person in Tigray, Ethiopia[1]

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> The images in circulation in a particular culture act to mould and set limits upon how each of us will 'see ourselves' and 'others'. Although we are never totally fixed by these images, they do shape our sense of reality (Martin & Spence 2003:403).

INTRODUCTION

Photographs from Ethiopia have had, and continue to have, a disconcerting tendency to represent people as victims of famine and war. This is not to deny a striking aspect of recurrence in the long and otherwise proud national history of Ethiopia. What is regrettable, however, is that this appears to be virtually the *only* representation of the Ethiopian people that is given space in Western mass media. Likewise, I am intrigued by another image, perhaps less obvious, but just as much a stereotype, 'the exotic Africa', as it is produced in large coffee table books about the African people and their traditions. In reality, monumental photographic works such as Leni Riefenstahl's (1976) *The People of Kau* and Carol Beckwith & Angela Fisher's (1999) *African ceremonies* constitute, as do the image of catastrophes, not just from Ethiopia, but from Africa in general, what I consider to be a highly objectifying gaze upon bodies. According to Donna Haraway, 'others' are often represented in ways that does not allow them '…*not* to have a body' (Haraway 1988: 575, italics in original). These seemingly diverse pictures of people either dying or dancing do not just exclude, as Terence Wright (2000) points out, the historical and political contexts, they also exclude what in my opinion is equally important, the specific subjective circumstances concerning a person's self-identity.

It was with this sense of unease that I first travelled to Ethiopia and Eritrea as a freelance photographer in 1993, looking for other pictures. I was painfully aware of the fact that as a white, Western photographer I would have to relate to a past history of photography as one means of legitimising colonial and imperial repression, as well as

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the *voyeurism* inherent in our (Western) fascination with people who have historically been defined as ‘the exotic other’. In their critique of photographs in the magazine *National Geographic,* Catherine Lutz & Jane Collins (2004) identify how different ‘gazes’ constitute ideological positions – established *in* the picture by the photographer, as well as *in* the context of its use– which enable the reproduction of stereotypes about ‘the others’. This does not mean that every Western photographer automatically exercises power through a colonial gaze. To avoid these pitfalls however, the photographer needs to enter into a dialogue with those photographed, have a good general understanding of photographic representation, as well as exercising self-reflexivity.

Besides, power can be challenged, and gazes can in themselves be challenging. In Ethiopia I have experienced that people often have an attentive way of looking, which could be understood as a person’s alert presence through his- or her eyes. This is an unflinching gaze; it meets you head on – challenging you – or looks at you curiously, trustingly or teasingly. ‘*Saleni*, photograph me! *Salina*, photograph us!’ It was often enough to walk around with my camera over my shoulder; the people who wanted to have their picture taken would approach me themselves.[2] Both the act of photographing and the actual photographs thus enabled social encounters, and as such comprised one methodological approach, together with participatory observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews, during my anthropological fieldwork in Tigray in northern Ethiopia in 2002 (Mjaaland 2004).

In this article I will discuss how photography, applied methodologically, can provide one approach for understanding processes through which self-identity is produced and reaffirmed. The types of photographic representation preferred by Tigrayans themselves will be discussed in relation to a local understanding of what constitutes the ‘person’ with concepts such as personal integrity and bodily autonomy being central to my argument. Since photography, being a modern medium, is deeply rooted in Western conventions and changing ideologies relating to photographic representation of the person, it is important to identify the role photographs play in social practice in Tigray, and thereby, more specifically, what photographs help to define and produce, within this particular cultural, political and socio-economic context.

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[2] Alula Pankhurst notes that during his fieldwork at a new settlement in Ethiopia ‘…settlers were very keen to have their pictures taken, and once I had given a few people prints the demand became so persistent that I stopped taking pictures altogether’ (Pankhurst 1989: 20).

PHOTOGRAPHY AS METHOD IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

My reason for using photography as a methodology was that I wanted a more precise understanding of how Ethiopians themselves wanted to be photographed, how they preferred to present themselves, and which pictures of themselves they appreciated. I did not start from the assumption that photographic representation is an objective, value-neutral medium for recording anthropological data (which I, at any rate, believe is impossible on account of its fragmentary character in relation to both time and space). On the contrary, I used photography methodologically as part of an interactive *process* in order to gain knowledge through experience, obtaining what David MacDougall (1998) calls 'affective knowledge'. Viewed in phenomenological terms, the world is not something, which we passively perceive as a separate object. Rather, it becomes meaningful when actively directed towards our own consciousness. Knowledge, from this point of view, therefore presupposes the participation of an (inter)active subject. Following Bill Nichols, I therefore think that it is fruitful to base the methodological use of photographic practice on '…a *politics* of phenomenology, a recognition of the priority of experience not as a structure to bracket and describe but as the social ground or foundation for actual praxis' (Nichols 1991: 232, italics in original).

The analytical perspective for my argument is the discursive aspect of photographic representation and practice linking up with what John Tagg (1988) calls the 'rhetoric of photographic documentation', and which is based on photographs being *perceived* as realistic and consequently authentic. It is therefore implicit in the medium that it can constitute a specific understanding of the world and the people in it since the photograph, more often than not, is interpreted as a *true* representation. Photographic discourse therefore implies that photographs do not just represent, but ideologically based, also define and produce. Furthermore, this allows photographs to be exploited in processes that precisely aim to define and produce, as is the case with the formation and management of identity. According to Tagg, photographic representation does not simply involve describing the person; it *inscribes* onto that person a particular identity. In Tagg's opinion, the use of photographs for state purposes, such as identification and surveillance, work also to individualise the person '…as a pinning down of each individual in his [or her] own particularity' (Tagg 1988: 92).

On the other hand, it is important to have in mind that it is not just the photographer who controls, through positioning[3] and selection, the production of meaning in a photograph. In so far as pictures come about through various kinds of interaction, the person being photographed, albeit to varying degrees, can also influence what pictures are produced. But intended meaning can also be overruled by the consciousness of the viewer of the photograph, who brings his or her own personal experiences and subjective memories to bear on it. Similarly, the production of meaning can also be influenced by diverging cultural codes as well as the specific ideological standpoint of the viewer. This makes photographic meaning, as Stuart Hall proposes from a constructivist perspective, 'relational' (Hall 1997: 27). Furthermore, photographs form relationships with existing pictures – both private and public – that 'resonate' (MacDougall 1998: 70). This implies that the visual stereotypes that have been established about Ethiopia can form a backdrop for the interpretation of newer photographs from the same location.

But as opposed to Roland Barthes (1993), who considers the possibility that even when photographs are coded, they also contain uncoded elements, what MacDougall defines as 'the free-floating signifiers that escape from explanation' (MacDougall 1998:72), Tagg (1988) asserts that photographs are fundamentally meaningless, and that it is the context that imbues pictures with meaning.[4] The challenge for photography as a methodology in social anthropological research, therefore relates to the '*control* of meaning' (MacDougall 1998: 68, italics in original), or lack of control due to the 'information overload' (Lien 1998) or *excess* (MacDougall 1998), which exists not just within, but continues beyond, the frame of the photograph.

This point also demonstrates, when debating photographic representation and its relationship to reality, that the analytical perspective chosen makes a crucial difference for the interpretation of the photograph. C. S. Peirce's (1958-60) semiotic theory, in which he introduces the concepts 'icon', 'index' and 'symbol', has been utilised to interpret photographs as bearers of meaning. According to Peirce, an icon is

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[3] Carey Jewitt and Rumiko Oyama (2003) use the phrase 'semiotic resource' for the photographer's positioning or 'point of view'. The angle used by the photographer in relation to his subjects is seen as constituting a 'meaning potential' (in contrast to the term 'code', which implies a more fixed interpretation). The meaning potential on a vertical axis relates to what degree of symbolic power (or lack thereof) is involved in the relationship, whilst the meaning potential on a horizontal axis relates to the closeness or remoteness of the relationship. But as we do not normally reflect on the interpretation that we make, semiotic resources act as a visual *habitus*.

[4] According to Susan Sontag (1977), Wittgenstein's view of language that 'the use is its meaning' can also be applied to photographs.

characterised by its resemblance to the object, and can therefore act as a *substitute* for it. The key characteristic of an index is that it creates a connection to the object, or the referent, in the consciousness of the viewer by way of *indication*; it points to the referent. The interpretation of a symbol, furthermore, is based on a rule or convention. Peirce himself emphasises that photographs – due to their extraordinary relationship to the referent – must be considered indexes, albeit with iconic qualities. But there is also a symbolic aspect to photographs, as interpretation is based on our general perception of photographs as *correct* depictions of the world. According to Susan Sontag (1997), the 'photographic distortion' – the difference between the way in which cameras and the human eye depict and interpret perspective – was often commented on in the early days of photography. Since then we have become accustomed to a "photographic seeing', which is, in reality, a distorted one.

Following Mette Sandbye, photographic realism is based on *belief*, a 'mental realism' arising from emotion, memory and recognition (Sandbye 2001: 37), and that photographs *per se* have shaped our understanding of what realism is. Sandbye's proposal, which strikes me, as being productive, is to combine different analytical perspectives in order to reflect the complexly diverse aspects of photography – discursive analytical and contextual approaches, as well as the semiotic interpretation of photographs as signs, combined with a phenomenological approach to the analysis of photographic meaning. Apart from using the photographs as a narrative strategy, the reason for my choice of methodology is therefore not the *belief* that I can uncover 'truth' through individual pictures. Rather the research experience from Tigray convinced me that, when looking at trends within an extensive archive of comparable visual material[5] in the context of other relevant data, it is possible to discover *traces* of socio-cultural perceptions that otherwise would not have been attributed (sufficient) significance.

THE 'PHOTOGRAPHIC SITUATION'

One cannot assume that photography has a role to play in the Tigrayan socio-cultural context. Most of the people of Tigray (83%) eke out a marginal existence through farming, trying to survive on what is often arid and depleted soil, using low-technology

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[5] The visual material from Tigray (1993-2002) includes my own photographs, the work of local photographers, children's photographs, popular commercial reproductions of paintings of religious figures associated with the Ethiopian orthodox church and photographic portraits of famous (mostly Indian and some American) actors.

tools. The entire population of the region, estimated to be 3.8 million at the turn of the millennium, has on one or more occasions been affected, directly or indirectly, by extreme, life-threatening situations and the loss of loved ones through war and famine. The general living conditions in the region can be described as being under constant pressure, both environmentally and economically.

Nevertheless, photographers, not just in the larger towns of Tigray but also in smaller villages with markets where farmers come from rural areas to sell their produce, are available. It is also common, albeit not on a Western scale, to collect photographs of family, friends and oneself, often placed in small albums with plastic pockets. The photographs show people, alone or with family and friends, on special occasions (for instance Christmas, Easter and New Year) or important life cycle events (such as christenings, weddings, and increasingly common, graduation). These situations and events are considered 'photographable' (Bourdieu 1990: 6), and as such can work to generate status or reinforce social standing within this specific cultural context. If friends or relatives who have not been seen for a while come to visit, the photographs are taken out of the old ammunition box under the bed, or from a plastic bag containing personal possessions hanging from a nail on the wall.

Being photographed in Tigray is also an event in which the subjects play an active and self-conscious part; so active that I had to sacrifice one of the main principles of documentary photography (and anthropology), the imperative on *non-intervention* (Nichols 1991). Below I will therefore discuss a situation which demonstrates how being photographed was handled by the subjects themselves [Fig. 1].

I went to visit a family that I had photographed the previous year when they were sowing sorghum. I remembered them particularly well because their only daughter, who was around ten years old at the time, sowed the whole field herself, although they had sons who could have done the job. She did not let herself be put off by me crawling around photographing her. Most people would have stopped working immediately and posed for a photograph, or refused to have their picture taken in their work clothes. On the same occasion I had photographed her mother at home, making coffee. Her posture was humble, her gaze appeared calm, and a goat had settled comfortably under the bed behind her. When I showed her the pictures from the previous year, the woman immediately started commenting on the details in the picture: the old tin that they still used for clean water; the small coffee cups, of which there had been six, only four of

which remained; the colour of her shawl, blue last year, but now a barely definable grey; and the dress, once white, now brownish, resembling the colour of the soil that they lived off. Since her husband was not present on any of the pictures from the previous year, we agreed to take new pictures. They started arranging the coal stove and the coffee pot, the little table for the coffee cups, the low dining table and the green plastic mug with home-made millet beer, *sewa*, all of which were things with cultural significance and value in social situations. Both of them changed clothes, the woman into her newest dress, which she admitted was not quite new anymore, and the man into an army-green suit. Then they posed frontally, side by side, with serious expressions. Later the husband took out his semi-automatic weapon, which he had used when serving in Badme during the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000), his ammunition belt with grenades and two spare magazines. Afterwards he changed into civilian clothes and the traditional, thick, white cotton shawl, or *kuta*, which is worn by men, taking on the guise of a respected, elderly man with his walking stick. She took out her thin, white shawl, or *netsela*, worn by all women who want to demonstrate their respectability.

The items and clothes chosen indicate which material objects that work to confirm self-identity and social status in this specific cultural context (rural Tigray), and thus these attributes can themselves be interpreted as indexes. Gender identity also plays a role. In the various photographs, the husband displays both his identity as a soldier with *habbo* (courage, strength, and implicitly, virility), as well as authority and social status of the older generation. Women made up around 30 percent of the soldiers in the TPLF – the Tigray People's Liberation Front (Hammond 1999, Young 1997) in its struggle against the Derg military regime (1975-91), but I have yet to experience one of the former female fighters ask to be photographed with a weapon, in the way that men often do, whether or not they have actually been soldiers. This does not necessarily mean that the women have not kept photographs from the front in which they pose in their uniforms and carry weapons alongside men. But they cannot use these photographs in the same way that men can to confirm their self-identity in civilian life, as the female fighters were challenging culturally accepted norms of what it means to be a woman. Normative gender identity in Tigray idealises motherhood and a more held back role for women, even if this ideal does not necessarily correspond to what women actually do in practice (Mjaaland 2004). Consequently, women tend to put on their best dress and (gold) jewellery when photographed, thus playing on this idealised womanhood, which

sees beauty as symbolic capital, with gold and clothes indicating social status. Being photographed making coffee, in the way that the woman described above was, represents a chance to confirm this culturally accepted womanhood, as the coffee ceremony falls explicitly within the female domain, and is described as *behaltina*, our culture, by the women themselves. Interestingly, the coffee ceremony is also an established index of Ethiopian hospitality, pointing to an important aspect of national identity.

What to my mind is most interesting about the situation described above is the joint involvement of the couple in staging it. By playing an active part they contribute to producing a representation of *their* choice. Moreover, they do this not just on the basis of whom they feel they *are*, but equally importantly, how they want to be *seen*. The way they pose, facing the camera apparently with emotional neutrality, resembles the studio convention that was established in Victorian Europe when photography was still a new invention. However, it is important to establish whether this is merely the expression of a potentially universal convention, or if it is rooted in a local understanding of the person. For example, that the husband and wife stand next to each other in a way that offers no visible sign of affection between them, confirms the cultural norm for married couples in Ethiopia when they show themselves together in public. When two of the youngest children are included in the picture, they hold their arms around them; he holds the son, she the daughter. In the photograph, the children occupy the (visual) gap between the man and woman; at the same time, signifying the bond between them. This point is significant, as, without offspring, love between a man and a woman is considered meaningless.

I have chosen to use the term ‘photographic situation’ about situations like the one described above, implicitly drawing on Max Gluckman’s (1959) concept of ‘social situations’. My methodological strategy has been to participate actively in various photographic situations [Fig. 2] in order to learn through experience how these situations are handled by the actors themselves, both alone and in relation to others. My impression is that the actors, as the above example shows, use the situation to produce – within the framework of commonly known photographic conventions and cultural symbols – a self-image that potentially confirms their notion of personhood. Having said this, it is important to understand that the photographic situation includes other actors who are not shown in the picture. The minimum requirement is for the photographer to be present, but in Tigray there is often a whole group of people

commenting on, and giving advice to, the people who are going to be photographed, basing their suggestions on local photographic as well as social conventions.

Sarah Pink views '…the practice of photographing as a dynamic relationship between those who occupy the spaces on both sides of the viewfinder' (Pink 1999: 83). Who has the final defining power in the photographic situation is therefore not always given in advance, which supports my view of the photographing itself as a social situation.[6] The negotiations between the actors present enable the production of a preferred self-representation, as well as the confirmation of social relationships (in terms of who is pictured with whom), making it analytically meaningful to view the photographic situation as an arena for discursive social practice. But before continuing my discussion of the connections between photographic representation and the person in Tigray, I will look at some conventional (Western) assumptions about the photographic representation of the person as a basis for discussing local perspectives.

THE PHOTOGRAPHICALLY REPRESENTED PERSON

Art historian Sigrid Lien (1998) defines three conceptual portrait categories reflecting different interpretations of what a photograph of a person actually portrays. As early as the 19th century, there was '…a widespread belief that the "trace" produced by a photograph could be directly interpreted as an impression of the human psyche' (Lien 1998: 26). Whereas the psychological portrait, or the modern character portrait, is expected to capture a true picture of this (inner) self, according to Lien – and consequently assumes the actual existence of such an *authentic* self – typological portraits focus on the individual as a 'type', both as the product of and '…emblematic of the society and the time in which they lived' (Lien 1998: 128). The (post-modern) view of portraits as 'masquerade', on the other hand, focuses on how the apparent neutral surface of these portraits is '…constantly being threatened by a kind of underlying subjectivity' (Lien 1998: 91). This final category provides the foundation for my own understanding of portraits, where in my role as a photographer I have not intended to uncover a 'true' self, but have, rather, accepted the masquerade as an expression of a continuous negotiation between subjective self-imagining and normative social and cultural implications. In my experience, this last portrait category also has

[6] The problem, according to Pink, is that this blurs what is considered to be a necessary boundary between the researcher and the researched, because the situation that is documented has been triggered by this relationship itself. Instead of avoiding this situation, I treat knowledge production as an interactive, affective process.

relevance in Tigray (although the concept is not used locally). This is because people implicitly relate to the discursive aspect of photographic representation, and therefore the ability of photographs to produce an idealised self-image.

But the question then remains what kind of data about the person can be generated from photographic situations in Tigray? Analysing the photographic situation, it could seem relevant to use Erving Goffman's (1959) concepts of frontstage and backstage. In my opinion, however, Goffman's dichotomy between controlled frontstage performances and the more expressive performances that are allowed backstage is all too static, not least because it implies that the latter is more genuine and authentic than the former. Richard Jenkins (1996) questions the existence of a clear divide between personal and social identity, and thus captures the ambivalence implicit in self-presentations – regardless of arena – and furthermore addresses the continuous identity management at stake. He believes that identity can never be taken for granted, that it must always be established, and can, therefore, only be understood as a process. Photographic situations provide an opportunity to observe self-presentation, and consequently aspects of on-going identity management. But, just as importantly, for me these situations initiated dialogue, and within the context of the reciprocity of social relations, the photographs initiated new social situations as well as conversations that included criticism of the pictures.

The most common complaints made by the photographed in Tigray are that their skin colour looks far too dark – as dark skin qualify for the derogatory term *baria*, or slave – and likewise that a picture is 'incorrectly' cropped, if it does not show the *whole* person. As I had made an effort to find out how people wanted to be represented, I complied with their wish for light complexions by always using the flash. But as evoking empathy (in the viewer of the photograph) requires physical proximity between the photographer and the photographed, I did not always include their feet.

The above criticisms imply an understanding of the photographic representation of the person that deviates from what I, with my Western cultural background, would take for granted, where, based on the psychological portrait, the face and particularly the eyes are interpreted as mirroring personality, independently of the body as a whole. In Tigray, on the other hand, my photographs were generally considered incomplete if they did not include the physical appearance of the whole body of the person, and were

classified as *tebalashiw*, or damaged, if parts of the face were hidden by shade.[7] This local understanding of the person implies an integrated entity in its wholeness, which in relation to photographs manifests itself as an emphasis on physical *visibility* – as opposed to understanding the physical body as an index for the person's non-visual qualities (e.g. Pinney 1997). This emphasis requires that the wholeness has to be clearly visible in a frontal pose[8] – hands by one's sides, with a neutral expression – a convention that local photographers tend to comply with [Fig. 3]. Half figures and more expressive postures (as for instance the asymmetrical pose, with the person's weight on one leg and one hand resting on the hip) are also used in photographic studios influenced by the latest trends. The latter are often considered more provocative, and women in particular risk challenging their respectability. Furthermore, people of both sexes can be classified as *gurenya*, arrogant, a derogatory term that can make the person (too) visible and exposed; a point that I will return to below.

'WHOLE BODIES'

According to Karl G. Heider (1976), 'whole bodies' provide a norm for visual ethnographic representation that make is possible to represent contextualised action. The question is how much context Heider considers sufficient to represent a situation 'truthfully'? A photographic representation will inevitably be a fragment in time and space, dependent on the positioning of the photographer. By comparison, it is worth pointing out that ethnographic text has always, in Marilyn Strathern's words, been composed of '…cut-outs, bits extracted from context, brought together in analysis and narrative' (Strathern 1994: 213). Besides, Heider's argument primarily focuses on people's emblematic characteristics and what they are *doing*, not on their self-identity. I must nevertheless admit that when I started including whole bodies in my pictures, I noticed that most of the men in rural Tigray wore shoes; either cut out from old car tyres or the moulded plastic ones, *kongo*, whilst a considerable number of women did not wear shoes at all.

[7] Christopher Pinney (1997) uses a similar example in his book *Camera Indica. The Social Life of Indian Photographs.* It is also interesting to note that visual culture in Tigray has a connection with India through Indian films that are available on video, and through popular posters of famous Indian actors. The posters decorate bars and restaurants, as well as private homes.

[8] There is potentially a great deal to be said about what Sigrid Lien calls 'the rhetoric of posing' (Lien 1998: 90). The aspects covered by this article are primarily based on the feedback that I received from the people I had photographed themselves.

The way I cropped the pictures, allowing for fragmentation of the body, was chosen as the best way of communicating a close relation, and thereby enabling empathy and 'resonance' (Wikan 1993), even if this strategy meant that the subjects would potentially see themselves as less whole. My considerations thus assume a (Western) viewer of the picture. Taking photographs from a long distance makes it more likely that the person is objectified, forcing the viewer into a role as *voyeur*. A similar point made by Wilton Martinez (in Udo Krautwurst 2002) is that ethnographic films, based on Heider's abovementioned ethnographic norm, fail to evoke identification in the viewer. The ethnographic imperative of whole bodies (and non-intervention) therefore tends to distance us from, rather than increasing our understanding of the 'other'. In Tigray, however, the local understanding of what constitutes a representation of the person coincides with this ethnographic imperative. This means that my own photographs was situated in a tension between the photographed person's self-image (in Tigray), and the photographer's need to communicate interpersonal empathy to a (Western) public. At the same time, this obvious dilemma highlighted aspects of a local understanding of personhood, which pointed to the importance of an analytical focus on 'wholeness'.

In order to clarify some relevant aspects relating to how the person is understood in Tigray, it is fruitful to look at what threatens this wholeness, understood here as personal integrity and bodily autonomy. However, the application of the concept 'autonomy' in the Tigrayan cultural context has to incorporate a more ambivalent understanding of the term, than simply assuming one individual in one body and the ability of one actor to act independently, as an axiomatic fact. The possibility that various incontrollable forces may take possession of a person's body continues to be a widely held belief.[9] One example is the discourse relating to *buda*, an ambiguous human being with the ability to transform him- or herself into a hyena at night. Buda can cast 'the evil eye' on other people and 'eat' them from within. This implies that your personal integrity and bodily autonomy can be threatened through the act of being *seen*. Jealousy and envy[10] are the emic explanations for why buda casts his or her evil eye on

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[9] Although the TPLF according to Jenny Hammond (1999) worked hard to eradicate traditional practices and what they considered being superstition, the discourses relating to buda and other uncontrollable spiritual forces persist.
[10] Harald Aspen's research amongst the Amhara in Mafoud in northern Shoa, Ethiopia, also confirms the central role that this occupies in people's everyday lives: 'the theme of jealousy and envy is a constant threat to peoples' peace and well-being, and very often it looms in the background of other cases of health problems, conflicts, etc' (Aspen 1994:301).

you. This discourse can therefore be linked to the generally unpredictable distribution of, and access to, limited resources in Tigray, understood both in material and symbolic terms (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997).

What is relevant for the discussion here is that this discourse affects how people present themselves in their daily lives, not on account of a direct association of the photographer's lens with the evil eye[11], but because it is important for people in Tigray not to stand out by having more than other people. And as Jeremy Bentham argued concerning his *Panopticon* of 1791 (Batchen 1999): knowing that an unpredictable power can see you, but not knowing *when*, means that the person has to control him- or herself continuously. Jacques Mercier similarly comments on this fundamental ambivalence towards being seen: 'In a general way in Ethiopian society, the eye represents beauty; it is also powerful, even death-dealing' (Mercier 1997: 94). In this context, people are in a continuous process of negotiating their self-presentation, in order to safeguard their integrity as (whole) persons.

Senni – teeth – said a woman in a derogatory tone, when expressing her disapproval of her daughter's smile in a photograph (which to my mind was beautiful). By smiling she had made herself all too *visible* (and vulnerable), as someone could catch sight of her joy, inadvertently giving rise to jealousy that could hit back on her. Controlling the way in which one presents oneself also involves keeping quiet when required. In other words, 'shutting up' – verbally, emotionally and physically – is considered a necessary virtue for the person in Tigray.

A VISUAL, BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

There are various reasons why expressing too much can constitute a threat to people in Tigray. Historically, political opposition has been associated with various forms of persecution. Although it is their comrades from the TPLF who provide the power base for the EPRDF[12] government in Ethiopia today, opposition against the government is still seen as dangerous, even in Tigray (e.g. Aalen 2002, Tronvoll 2003). It is therefore advisable to lay low, value the virtue of silence and keep your real opinions to yourself. However, the cultural practice of *qinné*, which involves making information ambiguous

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[11] Donald N. Levine believes that there was a fundamental change of attitude towards photography in Ethiopia in the 1950s and 60s. Whereas previously people in rural areas had objected to being photographed precisely because of this association with the evil eye, suddenly visitors with cameras started to be '…deluged with requests for photographs. In the interim the peasants had been exposed to numerous photographs of the Emperor and high government officials and had observed their local authorities seizing every chance they could to be photographed' (Levine 1967:88).

[12] Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

by using words and expressions with double meanings (Levine 1967), allows for some expression of controversial opinions.

Similarly, it is important not to reveal biographical data about oneself, such as one's baptismal name and birth date.[13] This is associated with a discourse on the *debtera*, a 'sorcerer' who can use the Ethiopian orthodox church's holy books – in addition to biographical information about the person – to influence both benign and malign forces, resulting in illness and death, or in the person being cured. The abovementioned reasons for self-control, which involve being able to contain oneself or simply 'shut up', thus make 'silence' an important aspect of social practice. The apparently less problematic[14] use of the *silent* representation of the person – the photograph – led me to look at these different aspects of silent practices in relation to one another. The following incident turned out to be decisive for considering this as a productive approach.

I was on my way by bus to Aksum in Tigray to develop the rolls of film from my past few weeks of fieldwork. A man in military uniform, who I assumed to be in his late 40s, entered the bus at the same time in Shire/ Endaselassie. He had quite a lot of luggage: a bag, a backpack, another bag with a paraffin cooker, an umbrella, a walking stick (he had clearly been injured) and a gold frame with photographs behind glass. A woman said goodbye and left. He sat down beside me whilst trying to find space for his luggage. I was entrusted with holding his golden frame, and since I did not have anything else to do while waiting for the bus to leave, I started to investigate the photographs. I then asked him whether the children on a colour photo were his children. He said yes, and told me that he had five children. Two older black and white photos showed two of his other children, he explained, his wife and himself. He went on to tell me that he had three children in Shire. I asked him whether he had fathered children with two different women. He laughed, apparently a bit embarrassed at my direct question, which I knew it was bad manners to ask someone I had only just met. But I also knew that this was probably the only chance that I would actually have to ask him. He answered in the affirmative, 'but' he added, 'my home is in Aksum'. He told me that

[13] The baptismal name which is different from the person's official first name is kept secret. Similarly, it is seen as far too risky to reveal your actual age (it is usual to subtract 2 to 5 years).
[14] Here I am referring to the local use of photographs in personal/private and social contexts, and not political. My presence as a photographer in Tigray has not been considered equally unproblematic by the authorities.

he had served four years in Badme during the two year long Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000). ‘It was extremely hard,’ he said, ‘four years is too much’. The picture frame also contained a black and white photo of him, a cousin and his brother in uniform. He told me that his brother had been a *tegadalay*, a fighter in the liberation struggle against the Derg military regime. His brother’s identity card was in the frame, along with three colour pictures of himself from his time in the army: in training, with a stick serving as a weapon; posing with a friend and communication equipment; and with three friends, him carrying a *kalashen*, the common name for all half-automatic weapons similar to the Russian Kalashnikov, with ammunition hanging around his neck. I felt that I was holding his life in my hands as the bus raced along the bumpy road. After a while he had managed to sort out his luggage, and asked to get the gold frame with the photographs back. ‘It must not break’, he said, taking it carefully as if his own life was at stake.

The soldier whom I met by chance on the bus was not the only person to travel home from the war with fragments of his life in a gold frame (generally acquired shortly before returning home), containing the pictures that they had taken with them to the front (to help them remember the people they had left behind), pictures sent to them by their families, and photographs taken of them during their time in the army. The Ethio-Eritrean war created a boom for the photography market in Tigray, the northernmost region of Ethiopia, which borders Eritrea, and where the war took place. Soldiers on leave went to the photographer to send pictures home, to reassure their families that they were fine (or, in other words, that they were still ‘whole’). They also went to photographers with their new friends and girlfriends, relationships in a state of flux due to the deadly effect of war itself, and that in any case most probably would end when the war was over and the soldiers returned home. Photographs were taken to help them remember, but the gold frames with photographs can also be seen as a strategy used by the Ethiopian soldiers to redefine themselves after the traumatic events of the war.

In Tigray, painful memories are expected to be carried by each person in silence, and in general, there are no arenas for emotional expression beyond the institutionalised mourning rituals associated with death – the burial and the period of mourning, *hazen*, which lasts for seven to twelve days afterwards. In his study from Tigray during the Ethio-Eritrean war, Kjetil Tronvoll (2003) emphasises, however, that silence does not necessarily imply a lack of communication but, rather, marks a shift to non-verbal

communication. Silence does not, therefore, automatically constitute repression, and must be understood as a coping strategy in a climate of political distrust, and as Dag Nordanger (2005) points out in his study on trauma management in Tigray after the same war, socio-economic uncertainty. Furthermore, I realised that giving vent to strong emotions such as sorrow or jealousy was seen as opening up to dangerous forces. When a person 'cracks up', these forces – either put into motion by a debtera, *Shetan* (the devil himself) or other evil entities like *djinni* – are given the opportunity to enter the person's body. This reinforces the emotional turmoil, resulting in intensified sickness and, further, possible death.

Keeping quiet, and shutting up through emotional self-control, is what is needed to reaffirm the wholeness of a person. According to Nordanger this stands in stark contrast to Western trauma management, which is based on release and ventilation, on 'letting it out'.[15] In Tigray this strategy would constitute a risk to a person's integrity and bodily autonomy, not only on account of dangerous forces gaining access to their body, but also because tears, as Nordanger points out, is understood to tap and break down the body itself. Photographs as a visual strategy may therefore represent a potential opportunity to make the self whole again, through reaffirming the person photographically. This is precisely because photography is capable of '…disguising the profound incongruities and disjunctions on which identity is necessarily based' (Hirsch 1997: 101). Since some of the photographs in the soldiers' gold frames also include family and friends, they also reinsert the individual in a relational framework.

From this perspective, photographs are understood as part of discursive processes that confirm the person's self-identity, as well as his or her position within social relationships. Interpreted this way it is, however, important to bear in mind that this also involves the possibility, as noted by Gillian Rose (2001), to reject and discard a particular representation, if the photograph does not correspond with one's self-image. In Tigray I was often accused of failure as a photographer if the picture did not liken what the person thought was a correct self-representation. However, the photographs that the person accepts can be used to produce a *visual* biographic narrative[16], enabling

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[15] Discussions with Dag Nordanger have played an important role in the development of the main argument in this article.

[16] Anthony Giddens (1991) claims that producing a particular biographic narrative plays an important role in constituting a person's self-identity. The problem is, as I read Giddens, the implicit presumption that the person produces only *one* such narrative, and likewise the assumption that biographical information is actually shared in social contexts. None of these assumptions can be taken for granted in Tigray, where people may manipulate and

the confirmation of self-identity within the context of a cultural imperative that stresses the importance of shutting up and keeping quiet about that which could make the person vulnerable in a social context.

CONCLUSION

Olu Oguibe focuses on the many varied uses of photography as 'a technology of the self', enabling *ritual self-imaging* (Oguibe 2001: 116-7). Likewise, Sandbye emphasises the way in which photographs stop time and make us stand back from the picture and see ourselves from the outside.[17] Photographs are therefore '…fundamentally linked to the process of *becoming* a self in time and space' (Sandbye 2001: 15, my italics). The discursive aspect of photographic representation also implies that the pictures we choose to hold on to do not merely document our lives – involving both memory and amnesia – but is a constitutive part of the processes through which self-identity is produced, reaffirming us as persons in our own image.

My experience from Tigray is also that this phenomenon is not limited to a Western cultural context. But without knowledge of the cultural context in which the photographs were taken and used, it would be difficult to differentiate between a Western ('old-fashioned') studio convention and the specific socio-cultural use of photographic representation in Tigray, as they are, from mere appearances, easily confused. It is also worth noting that there is no similarity in socio-cultural meaning between the risk of standing out in everyday life – implicit in the discourse on the evil eye – and being made *visible* through photographic representation. A reason for this is to be found in the distinction between the lack of control over one's own body inherent in the discourse on the evil eye, and the potential power to define oneself generated by photographic self-representation. Oguibe (2001) suggests that the photograph 'promises' – in contrast to the evil eye – a form of (photographic) eternity, which makes sense in a situation characterised by an overhanging existential insecurity.

Only through an exhaustive understanding of the cultural context is it possible to see how photographic practice adapts to the local situation. A comparative assessment of an extensive photographic material from Tigray, combined with an understanding of

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withhold biographical data about themselves, as well as produce several different biographic narratives. I also believe that it is far too limited to interpret the biographic narrative purely as a verbal strategy.

[17] According to Jacques Lacan (1996), it is during the mirror stage that the 6-18 month-old child first sees him-herself as an (mirror)image, albeit wrongly interpreted as another person, starting off a identification process associated with this (idealised) image.

the local importance of not ‘cracking up’, gave meaning to the requirement of wholeness in the photographic representation of the person. The photographs thus represented one approach to understanding socio-cultural processes that presume the imperative of keeping quiet and shutting up – not only in order to safeguard one’s self-identity, but equally importantly, to be able to succeed as a social actor.

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