

Recovering Lost Voices: Working with Archival Photographs

ABSTRACT: This paper describes a project with the Melanau communities on the Mukah and Oya Rivers in Sarawak, Malaysia, using photo elicitation in conjunction with historical photographs sourced from the original negatives in the Sarawak Museum archives. Selected photographs from the collection are presented to illustrate their ethnographic significance and to argue that such projects also create an opportunity for the living representatives of the depicted culture to salvage something valuable for themselves from these fragments of the past.

Introduction

While museums and historical archives typically include collections of photographs amongst their documentary and material resources, many collections are divorced from the context of their origins, separated from the persons who produced and used them (Nordstrom 1991:207). In some cases, the photographer has provided archival information which assists with the reading of the image. But in images of the colonial past in particular, we seldom hear the voices of the subjects captured within the image, of those who were witnesses to the making of the image, of those who know the background story behind the image, or the biographical details of the human subjects involved.

Decontextualization is not merely a physical construct; it also has cultural, social, political and cognitive dimensions. Thus the methodology chosen for this project was motivated by a concern to reunite, as far as is possible, image and context in the interest of adding to and broadening the discussion. There are sound epistemological reasons for doing so. The reflexive turn in the social sciences has raised our awareness that photographs – as historical and cultural documents – are never neutral. Rather, they are “representations of reality, not a direct encoding of it” (Banks 1995:2).

In an unpublished paper, Worth (1977:1) talks about language in terms of a “semiotic code...We know those semiotic codes so well that we ‘know’ immediately when we do not speak another’s language, and we also know that there are many languages...different from our own”. He goes on to lament the fact that this recognition “does not seem to extend to