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## **The making of a community: The making of a photo collection in a rural community in Italy**

**Abstract:** Photos are by their very nature evocative objects (Turkle 2007). This paper investigates the ability of a photo's capacity to trigger narratives about the self and the past. It argues that the collection of historic, private photos and the creation of a public photographic archive build a sense of community. The paper is the result of an ethnographic work conducted in Lu (AL) between 2010 and 2012. In this village, the local museum curated a public collection of private and public photos dating from the late decades of the 19th century to the 1960s, in order to create a freely accessible internet archive. In a few months, in a village of about 1000 people, over 1000 photos were donated. On the basis of the collected photos, the museum organized periodical exhibitions that attracted many hundreds of visitors. The research investigates the entire process of photo collection, collective organization of a new photographic archive, its use for the organization of photo exhibitions, and the participation in these initiatives by local and foreign visitors. Focusing on exhibitions as an arena of social interaction in particular, the paper investigates how the evocativeness of a community's past can create a sense of belonging in the community, and that the very sense of community is negotiated and re-shaped.

**Key words:** photos, narration, evocation, community, photo collection, exhibition, Italy

### Introduction

The word "memory", Le Goff argues, "Points to a bundle of psychic functions through which man is able to actualize his impressions or past information" (Le Goff 1982, 1). These functions reach the individual sphere of remembrance. While chemical mediators and electric impulses are the basis of an individual's memory, gesture and speech, the narration of an individual's experiences – the individual's recollection – are the intangible substance of

collective remembering, the sense of belonging to a place, the sense of legacy and responsibility for a past. This "ethnic memory" (Leroi-Gourhan 1993) that avoids literacy nestles into private and public speech and represents an apparatus through which individuals create their being a community by placing themselves into the world and defining a space that is their own, the one of their community (Candea, 2008): an affective space made with people, objects, ways of thinking and speaking. The seminal works of Halbwachs (1992), and more recently the ones of Nora (1984-1992), Anderson (1983), Isnenghi (2010) and others (e.g. Turkle 2007, Edwards 2012) have drawn the attention on how this "ethnic memory", this narration curdles around particular artifacts, relics, monuments and places that become collective places of memory, *lieux de memoire* (Nora 1989), a community nurtures and frequents in order to keep its sense of integrity and a link with an ancestral past alive. The framed space of family photos play a similar role to the one played by rich portraits in a royal house, evoking the figures of the past and making the living being participant with the community and the deeds of their ancestors (Le Wita 1994). Those photos are evocative objects that "exert their holding power because of the particular moment and circumstance in which they come into the [individual]'s life" (Turkle 2007, 8). They trigger narrations and disclose individual and collective memories that come afloat laying the basis for a shared memory of a community.

On the basis of the ethnographic work conducted between 2009 and 2012 in Lu (AL), this paper investigates the making of a collective memory through the public interaction with historic photos presenting the history of the collective digital photo archive of the Associazione San Giacomo in Lu (Italy) and the public's engagement with the photos of the collection in the days of the first photo exhibition.

### A matter of community identity

Identity is widely debated in social sciences and humanities (Gleason 1983). Influenced by the American sociological traditions of symbolic interactionism, since the 1960s, this concept has become one of the keywords of social anthropology thanks to the works of scholars from the Manchester School. Since the 1990s and the rise of regionalist movements across the continent, the theme of identity has emerged as key in the anthropology of Europe, and specifically of Italy (Schneider 1998, Stacul *et al.* 2006, Grimaldi 2012, Remotti 2007).

Identity implies a communitarian belonging to a particular social group defined on the basis of an acknowledgement of distinguishing characteristics, which all the members share. Since the seminal work of Barth (1969), anthro-

pological studies have pointed out the mobility and situationality of this sense of communitarian belonging. They have above all investigated the process of constructing boundaries that underpins the definition of communality, and consequentially of otherness. Anthropological research helps to highlight how identity represents a fundamental category of practice, the starting point and the end result of a social process that links an individual with a wider group (Brubaker and Cooper 2000), a community in which the individuals ideally place themselves and feel to belong. While Candea (2008) suggested this sense of belonging may rise from a shared knowledge of places, things, people and their connections; the sense of belonging is also sustained by a collective memory: a shared understanding of what the past is from which the community and all its members descend.

Debating the economic transformation of the past three decades, Conner-ton (2009) Harvey (2010), Levi-Strauss (2003) and other scholars pointed out the interconnection between new forms of capitalism and rationalization of production and the erosion of the sense of community and the collective memory by imposing new, unsustainable forms of sociality. The debate opens the question about the possible tools communities have to maintain their cohesion, memory and identity. The case of Lu suggests photos may be one of those instruments.

## Lu

Lu is an Italian town situated in a part of the province of Alessandria known as Basso Monferrato. The town is about twenty kilometers from the towns of Alessandria, Casale Monferrato, and Valenza. Since most of the locals work in the three above-mentioned cities or in the large metropolitan areas of Genoa, Milan and Turin, Lu is today mainly a residential centre; few families are still running farms, businesses specializing in arts and crafts, or shops in the Lu area.

Despite the population decline registered during the twentieth and twenty-first century (from above 5.000 people in 1901, only 1200 remain), the town's economy only underwent a significant change in the Post-Second World War period. Agriculture flourished in Lu until the Second World War. After the war, in less than a decade, Lu became economically dependent on Alessandria and Casale Monferrato. Indeed, during the Fascist period the only way to escape the shortage of the agricultural economic system was to move to the main cities in Northern Italy or to move abroad. Subsequently, with the abolition of the Fascist law which controlled the movement of citizens across the Italian territory, and the improvement of both general transport infrastructure as well as local public transport, an increasing number of people were able to

find a job in the huge industrial centres of Turin, Milan and Genoa, and in the cities of Alessandria and Casale Monferrato. The Post-Second World War period proved to be an era full of new possibilities and, in a decade, the hill town of Lu changed radically, transforming from an agriculture-based community into a village of commuters and retired people. In the wake of this transformation, a number of civil initiatives aimed at promoting the cultural heritage of the community and its monuments were born.

One of the main architects of these transformations was the Associazione San Giacomo, a NGO that promoted the renovation of the churches, and financed studies about local history and language (Ranzato and Tizzani 2009). As a part of these initiatives, the Association promoted the institution of a local museum of religious art, the Museo San Giacomo. The making of the digital photo collection was one of the early campaigns promoted by the Museum.

### The making of the archive

The Associazione San Giacomo since the late 1990s was directly involved in the preservation of artistic heritage in the community of Lu (Ranzato and Tizzani 2009). Mostly religious buildings, paintings and statues were collected and renovated. While Renaissance and baroque churches were re-opened to believers along with the general public, the collection of religious artifacts paved the way to the founding of a museum. It was inaugurated in 2009.

During the first decade of activity, the Association received the donations of books and photos. In particular, an initial collection of about 100 pictures constituted the first nucleus of the wider future collection. They were mostly photos taken in the 1920 and '30s and portrayed the rural and urban landscape of the community, originally used as postcards by people of the village and visitors. Only a few individual and family portraits were included in this first lot.

Beginning with this collection, the members of the Associations in 2009 launched an open initiative. Starting with members of the Association (about 70 people in all) the association called for volunteers to share their photos with the association in order to create a comprehensive photographic memory of the community from the late 19th century to the post-WWII period.

Differently from other institutions, such as universities and research institutes that asked for the donations of family photos, the Associazione did not require the donation of a physical original copy of the photo. At the core of the initiative was the intention of creating an open digital archive that could be accessed by the public online and from which the Association would select photos to be published and used for exhibition on a regular basis.

In contrast to previous attempts at creating photographic archives, which failed due to a general reluctance of donating items considered heirlooms, this ini-

tiative was crowned by success. In two years over 1000 pictures were collected, digitalized (TIFF, 600 dpi) and made public firstly through the local monthly magazine, "Al País d'Lü" and then, in September 2010 with the first public exposition held at the newly established Museo d'Arte Sacra San Giacomo.

Thirty photos were selected, printed in A3 format, and displayed within the temporary exhibition room and in the alley of the museum. The exhibition lasted 6 weekends, closing in Oct. A €2 ticket was required for the visit of the museum and its exhibition. Despite the ticket and the short opening hours (Sat. 14-17, Sun. 10.30-12.30) over 400 visitors participated. That said, it is not the success in relative or absolute terms that is most relevant to this study. Rather, it is the context of the event, the ethnographical analysis of how a community's memory can be shaped through the public exhibition of historical photos that is so interesting.

### The making of a collective memory

On the 10th September, the Association inaugurated the exhibition. The small museum was packed with people hoping to find familiar faces, the faces of their ancestors, by examining the photos. The photos portrayed families, school children, festivals and landscapes of the village from the 1890s to the early 1950s.

While the crowd attests to the general interest in the show, as well as the widespread curiosity of the community in those artifacts, it was the more tranquil context of the days that followed that offer some insight into the shaping of communal memory.

It was September 25th. In the corridor, three men in their fifties were chatting, facing some of the pictures, while in the other room a grandmother with her grandson, about six-years-old, were looking at a photo. In it a group of eighteen-year-old army privates lined up in front of the civic tower. The grandmother pointed to one of those smiling faces.

"Look that one. He was your great-grandpa. The other over there was Giovanin... a friend of your grandpa's... they used to play cards together. I remember when he came to visit us during winter vigils."

The child was listening intently. He looked at the photo, then to his grandmother, then back to the photo, as the grandson began to make important connections between these two people.

Le Wita (1994) pointed out how family photos represented a fundamental tool in the transmission of Paris bourgeois family roles. Despite the difference in social and geographic context, the aforementioned scene suggests that the same conclusion can be drawn for a rural family in Italy. In viewing the photo, the woman recalled important personal stories and histories; a narration

that animated the picture and in so doing fragments of a history of a family and its society were narrated, transmitted to a new generation. While in *Le Wita* the memory seems only to be focused on the members of the family, the words of the woman tell us of the broader picture she explores. After the memory of his husband, she is moved to speak of Giuvanin, his career, family and death.

The interaction with the photo triggered a story that was not just about the family as a limited, bounded group, but of a wider social group, the village in which collective and individual deeds were localized. The narration was a lesson about a family and about a broader social group that coincided with the bounded community of the village. A form of generational transmission of knowledge concerning people, places, things and their connections and collocations; in other words, a form of transmission of a local identity from old to young people.

That said, a form of identity is also communicated and shared collectively among peers.

While the grandmother continued recounting her story to her grandson, the three men in the corridor were engaged in animated discussion. Notably, Barthes (1993) noticed that an image is not unequivocally connected with one and one only meaning. Although a photographer can try to convey information and feelings through the photo, what the photo means for the beholder is always the result of personal interpretation in which the original message is combined, informed and transformed by the very experience of the individual. The negotiation can be individually lived, but it can end up in an open discussion that involves more individuals. This was happening in the alley.

The men were watching a picture of the "Prevostura" site. In an intricate game of conjectures, they were attempting to understand when the picture had been taken and who the child in the foreground was. Many hypotheses were put forward. To prove each one, they were relying on memories of their youth, discovering convergences and divergences between their different recollections, the individual narrations.

The discussion lasted over ten minutes. In this recollective dance, the pieces of individual memory were gradually assembled to form a complete image. Those memories knit a collective oral history of the village where past and present, living and dead were linked and bound together in an intangible community fresco. This game was turning the silent and foreign land of the past (Bloch 1921) into a familiar place; "paese", a community, in Grimaldi's terms (Grimaldi 2012): a meaningful place where everybody knows everybody else and where they feel they belong and originate.

### An identity tool for a community

The fragments of ethnography I presented describe a situation that repeated over and over during the exhibition. Facing the photos, people discussed, narrated the past and actualized it into the present. As the ruins of Jerusalem are tools for the pilgrims to live, touch and experience "here and now" the grand narration of the faith (Halbwachs 1992), those photos were not just aesthetical objects. Rather, they were tools for remembering and re-living a family and collective past. By actualizing the past, linkages with past generations and a place were expressed and made meaningful. Thus, the old pictures that were exhibited, although just a replica of the original copies, jealously kept in drawers or framed on a desk, appeared a fundamental element to spark discussion and propagate the community's identity.

The case of Lu opens to a reflection about the challenges of the present and the erosion of the collective memory recently discussed by Connerton (Connerton 2009), and other scholars (Augé 2004, Grimaldi 2012, Grimaldi *et al.* 2011, Sennett 2008). In Lu the erosion of collective memory is not due to the imposition of new forms of capitalism, rather, it is a demographic change that coincides with the aging and the depopulation of the community. In the face of this slow decline and ruination, simple family photos appear as an important tool for a community: they are a collective tool for resisting against the oblivion because they are able to spark moments of collective discussion through which knowledge of the places, people and things that create community are shared and built. Since, as Candea pointed out, this form of knowledge can be considered as the basis for the sense of identity and individual's sense of belonging to a community, just as the photos can be seen as generators of a collective identity of a community.

The experience of Lu, moreover, sheds light on the value of a photo. It emerges that in the social trajectory I documented, the surface, the materials, the rarity of the artifacts have scarce importance. What is fundamental is the picture itself, its availability, fruition and discussion. Thus, the social value of a photo does not rely on a hypothetical antiquarian primacy of the artifact, rather, in the importance of reproduction and sharing that underpins the very making of Lu's archive. We can conclude that while Benjamin (2008) suggested the power, the uniqueness of a piece of art is in the very context of making the artifact, its knowledge and memory, the relevance of those photos, objects whose original context has been irremediably forgotten, relies in their reproduction allowing them to be shared in an exhibition and potentially online and in so doing triggering collective and individual memory.

In conclusion, photos appear to be a powerful tool in the creation of a sense of identity for a community: an identity that is not only transmitted linearly

from the elderly to the young, but also horizontally through sharing, exhibiting and discussing.

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*Pravljenje zajednice:*

*Pravljenje zbirke fotografija u jednoj ruralnoj zajednici u Italiji*

Fotografije su evokativni predmeti *par excellence* (Turkle 2007). Ovaj rad ispituje ulogu kapaciteta fotografija da izazovu naracije o sopstvu i prošlosti. Tvrdi se da je zbirka istorijskih, privatnih fotografija i stvaranje javne fotografske arhive čin koji gradi zajednicu.

Rad je rezultat etnografske studije sprovedene u Lu (AL) između 2010 i 2012. godine. U ovom selu, lokalni muzej je organizovao javno prikupljanje privatnih i javnih fotografija snimljenih u periodu od 19. veka do 60-ih godina 20. veka, kako bi bila stvorena javno dostupna internet arhiva. Za nekoliko meseci u selu od oko 1000 stanovnika, prikupljeno je više od 1000 fotografija. Na osnovu prikupljenih fotografija, muzej je organizovao izložbe koje su privukle sotitine posetilaca.

Istraživanje posmatra čitav proces prikupljanja fotografija, kolektivne organizacije nove foto arhive, njenu upotrebu u organizaciji izložbi fotografija i učešće lokalnih i inostranih posetilaca u ovom procesu. Akcenat je na izložbama kao arena socialnih interakcija, a rad istražuje procese evokacije prošlosti zajednice kao načina na koji se artikuliše osećaj pripadnosti, i toga kako se o smislu zajednice i zajedništva pregovara i kako se taj smisao oblikuje i preoblikuje u ovom kontekstu.

*Ključne reči:* fotografije, naracija, evokacija, zajednica, Italija

*Fabrication d'une communauté :*  
*Fabrication d'une collection de photos dans la communauté rurale en Italie*

Les photos sont par excellence des objets évocateurs (Turkle 2007). L'article examine le rôle de la capacité des photos de déclencher des narrations sur soi et sur le passé. Il soutient que la collection des photos historiques privées et la création des archives photographiques publiques agissent comme un processus de construction de la communauté.

L'article est le résultat d'un travail ethnographique mené à Lu (AL) entre 2010 et 2012. Dans ce village, le musée local a organisé une collection publique des photos privées et publiques couvrant la période entre les dernières décennies du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'aux années 1960, afin de créer des archives gratuites sur internet. En quelques mois, dans le village d'environ 1000 habitants, plus de 1000 photos ont été reçues au titre de dons. À partir des photos recueillies, le musée a organisé des expositions périodiques qui ont attiré plusieurs centaines de visiteurs.

Ce travail analyse le processus entier de collecte de photos, d'organisation collective des archives photographiques nouvelles, leur utilisation pour l'organisation des expositions de photos, et la participation à ces initiatives de la part des visiteurs locaux et étrangers. Particulièrement concentré sur les expositions qui sont une arène des interactions sociales, l'article examine le processus d'évocation du passé de la communauté comme un moyen grâce auquel le sentiment d'appartenance à la communauté, ce qui est le sens même de la communauté, est négocié et refaçonné.

*Mots clés:* photos, narration, évocation, communauté, Italie

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