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passing girl; riverside--AN ESSAY ON CAMERA WORK
A Video by Kwame Braun, 1997

Complete text of narration, all spoken English and subtitled Twi (in italics)

We've stumbled into the Akwaambo festival in Agona Swedru in the Central Region of Ghana. It's no particular research interest of ours, but it's colorful and lively, so I've taken out my camera...

Young Woman
Twa! Twa me! (*You: take my picture...*)

...And someone's invited us up to their balcony for a good overview of the great swirling tides of people below.

From there I get this shot of a little girl, passing--I assume--with her mother and older sister. I don't recall taking the shot, or why she caught my eye--perhaps it was the pattern of cloth she shares with her sister. It's not an especially good shot, no significant information stands out from it, yet I find myself circling back to this footage.

It's a brief shot--a little over 11 seconds long--but it contains almost the entire course of our ephemeral interaction.

I spot her, start the camera. She sees me, looks away, looks back as simultaneously I zoom in. Then she breaks into dance, exclaims, salutes, waves, shrugs. I stop the camera. Here's the next shot...

She sees me, watches me. She looks away. After a moment she looks back. Now she is scowling slightly. Suspicious? Apprehensive? Is *obroni* really watching her? He is! A greeting, a beautiful smile, then the frown returns, the wave loses its lift, the smile droops into a pout of disappointment, she looks away and shrugs...

How did she know that my interest in her was over? But of course, she didn't: she simply decided I wasn't watching her at all. We had our one real moment of connection, her second look simultaneous with my zooming in, but *she* doesn't know it. All she saw was a man with a camera, who didn't respond to her wave. Only I know that we connected, only later, reviewing the tape. Our relationship is asymmetrical, asynchronous. It exists entirely on videotape.

Furthermore, the tape is my possession. By extension the relationship--or at least all evidence of it--is also my possession, and I am making use of it. Of course I have not secured her permission

to do so. Her permission would not mean much anyway, because she is unlikely to comprehend what I can do with her image.

What concerns me here is the imbalance inherent in the shot, the license I take in using it: I have control of the shot, and she doesn't.

This disparity is nothing new to documentary filmmaking, but it's new to me. I don't know my legal rights regarding "fair use" of this footage, nor, frankly, what the current thinking is among my documentary and ethnographic filmmaking colleagues. I suspect most Americans wouldn't waste any time fretting about it; after all, it's a simple, inconsequential tourist's shot of a cute little girl who smiles and waves. It doesn't reinforce negative stereotypes of Africans; its relatively meager content seems to hold little potential for misinterpretation, and it is highly unlikely it will expose her to harm.

On the other hand, many Ghanaians would question my use of it--mostly, I would guess, for its sheer banality, vaguely undignified for that. They wouldn't censure my use of it--it's simply not something they would choose to show.

I haven't done a systematic study, but hours of guided perusals through Ghanaian photo albums suggest to me that for many Ghanaians, photography (and by extension video) is best used for formal portraits: self-consciously posed presentations of the self to the camera. In Ghana, the subject *gives* the photograph as much as the photographer *takes* it. Supplementary to portraiture, photographs can be mementos of significant events, similarly self-consciously presented. One almost never sees truly casual "snapshots" of daily life, candid views of people off-guard, or non-events.

Video is used with much the same sense of occasion. A videographer, engaged to document a wedding, festival, or funeral, restricts himself to moments of ritual significance, the key celebrants, and a register of important guests.

An outsider who confines the use of his camera within these conventions will most likely not be seriously obstructed. It is only when he diverges from the norm that people will start, quite naturally, to question his motives, sometimes to assume the worst. "For what purpose do you intend to use these photographs?" I was frequently asked. Some people know that Africa is often seen as backward and poor, and think I will use the pictures to hold them up for ridicule. Others think that I will make money from my photography. Profit is often the first motive attributed to the stranger with a camera, as perhaps it should be. Can I truthfully say I do not hope to profit from my pictures?

This issue was at the heart of our dealings with the people we came to Ghana to study, the veteran actors of the "concert party" traveling theater. Catherine Cole, my partner, was preparing for her doctoral dissertation, an ethnographic history of the concert party, while I was shooting footage for a documentary on the same subject.

Catherine Cole

Can you stand, stand and do it?

Y. B. Bampoe

Stand?

Catherine Cole

Stand. Or do you want us to...

Kwame Braun

She wants you to dance..

Y.B. Bampoe

We, we stand for money. (laughter) Do you want us to demonstrate for all these people to see it ajar? Eh, Amma, be careful.

We stand for money. Mr Bampoe is teasing us, but he and his partner, Acquah Hammond, the Jaguar Jokers, are professional entertainers, and they know that an interview is a performance. People have paid good money over the years to hear them joke and sing, and to watch them clown. So why should they perform for us for free?

Jaguar Jokers (singing)

We are the famous Jaguar Jokers, staging here tonight.

Opia

Kofi? Wobedidi, w'ate? (*Kofi? You're going to eat.*)

Mr Bampoe has always been a shrewd manager of his professional advantage, but in recent years Ghanaian entertainers in general have become zealous about their entitlements under new copyright protection laws. While these have applied mostly to the composition of songs, they are readily understood to apply to one's image as well. After all, one's image is personal property, and therefore something someone can steal. As musicologist John Collins commented to me, copyright consciousness can be seen in Ghana as a variation of the old superstition: photographs don't just steal your soul, they can pirate your material as well.

Clown

Meedi. (*I'm eating...*)

So what am I up to with my video camera? It's already perceived as primarily a moneymaking tool for entrepreneurs. But for concert party actors it's also part of a rival entertainment form, the so-called "Ghanafilms". These are locally-made low-budget narrative features often shot, edited and circulated on ordinary, consumer-grade VHS equipment. With only a small generator, VCR and monitor to carry, a Ghanafilm producer can reach the concert parties' core audience in the villages and provide them with more entertainment variety for less money. There was no question in my contacts' minds that I was a business opportunity.

I agreed to shoot and edit this Ghanafilm adaptation of a play by the veteran troupe Kusum Agromma in exchange for permission to cover their life on the road.

This was only one of a variety of approaches we made to reach accommodation with our concert party contacts. We gave honoraria for interviews, and bought rights to performances. We sponsored a conference and paid dues to the performers' union. We have signed releases and contracts for everything.

I think these frank negotiations of our various self-interests were critical in demonstrating our seriousness and regard. I think the ritual of contract and payment were seen as dignifying signs of respects. While some of our relationships remain no more than friendly business arrangements, in the best of them, respect gave rise to trust, and trust to friendship. With our friends, our work together was a collaboration, a project we held in common to create a chronicle of the history, practices, and traditions of their profession, the concert party.

While I revel in the license my friends gave me to shoot unhindered in their world, I yearn for the liberty to shoot as freely everywhere I go. For ultimately my project is larger than simply a history of the concert party. Ghana is not just my field, it's my birthplace: I lived here for most of the first eighteen years of my life, and I want to lay claim to the images of my childhood, images that are the foundation of my sensibility and vision.

This is clearly not a simple claim. I am from this place, but not native to it; my experience of it has always been somewhat separate. Of course, to most Ghanaians I'm just another European adventurer. I don't even speak much of any local language. I am one of the *yevu*--one of the whites--whose presence has bedeviled this place for centuries and whose intentions must always be carefully examined. I am constrained by the same inhibitions as any outsider with a camera and a conscience, with my only distinction my sense of nostalgic entitlement.

But I ride on the ample coattails of my parents' reputation. Here among the Tongu Ewe of the lower Volta, I am still the beneficiary of their legend, even now after they have been gone for 18 years, as long a period as they were here. At the hospital landing, the boatmen and their passengers don't question my prerogative to videotape them; if there are objections they don't voice them. They don't know what I'm doing, but they know who I am: *Braunvi*, Braun's child--Kwame or Kwasi they can't quite remember which. As my father's son, my activity, unfamiliar as it is, can be sanctioned. They think I'm also a missionary doctor, and that I am somehow doing my work, my little Steadicam some sort of surveying tool for the new waterworks.

Does their misunderstanding negate my prerogative? Perhaps; it certainly complicates it. But they do have prerogatives of their own, and they don't hesitate to exercise them.

We've brought my visiting brother-in-law to see the village of Mafi-Tswala, not far from my parents' old post. Once again we've stumbled into an occasion, the periodic consecration rituals of the village's important coalition of shrines.

Welcomed and given seats, we watch for a while in amazement while the possessed priests and priestesses dance and display. Then Bosumfo Ahorga, the head priest, asks where our cameras are. He instructs us to get them.

Bosumfo is an old friend of my parents'. The story of how they managed to penetrate the village's seclusion to hold child welfare clinics there, and how they came to prize Bosumfo's charisma and insight, was for many years my father's most successful missionary deputation sermon in American churches. He told how, after the rapprochement, Bosumfo instituted new sanitation taboos, enforced my mother's child health directives, and supervised the building of public latrines and a school. My father and he on occasion even referred patients to each other, as each came to appreciate the ways in which the other's methods could compliment his own. Bosumfo even allowed many of the villagers to become Christians, though he himself continues to practice his own beliefs. Ever the pragmatist, his libations now call ecumenically on Jesus, Mohammed and the Buddha in addition to the usual gods and ancestral spirits.

Certainly it is Bosumfo's esteem for my father (and the eternal hope that some money will come of it) that opened the door for us here in Tswala, but we had already started to build an independent relationship with him. Catherine and I had met Bosumfo a couple of years earlier when he inexplicably turned up in LA. We'd made an impression on him then by bringing him a bottle of gin, and drinking most of it with him, something my father would definitely never have done.

But it was neither as a courtesy to me nor as a gesture to my absent parents that Bosumfo called for my camera. He was assigning me a role in the ceremony. When after a few minutes of shooting it became clear that I did not understand my assignment, someone came to direct me, moving me systematically around the perimeter of the gathering: I was to chronicle who was there in attendance.

When I got back around to Bosumfo, he greeted the camera in much the same way he had greeting the possessed *akomfo* who came before him, as though the camera was also an attending spirit.

After that, I was free to shoot what I wanted. People performed for me or ignored me as they wished, but I was now part of the event. Any doubts I had about my status and undeserved privilege dissolved away, suspended by the role Bosumfo had created for me, independently of my intentions, but entirely in concert with my own desires.

In much of Ghana, where public performance is so routinely part of community life, children perform with impressive self-possession and dignity. They are applauded not as precocious miniatures of adult expertise, but for their diligence in enacting the roles appropriate to them as children, roles no less integral to the event for being children's. Thus with these new roles of ours: they are appropriate to us as outsiders, yet integrated into the whole. And they are larger than anything we could have devised for ourselves.

Yet they are of course just beginnings, foundations. If my new role's legitimacy derives from my parents' accomplishments and Bosumfo's authority, I can still build upon it for myself with my camera. Catherine's role may derive from mine, but she's claimed her own through her aplomb in speaking Twi. Her brother's role derives from both of ours, and is distinguished by his willingness to dance.

I played the tape for Bosumfo, the next time he visited us in Accra. He watched it intently, his face inches from my little LCD video screen, pointing to the tiny whirling figures and naming them to himself. Afterwards, he told us he was happy that the tape would return to America with us, for people to see. I don't know what he intends to come of this display. He didn't instruct me further to whom I was to show it, or in what context, so I can only assume he trusts me to do the right thing. He's made his own assumptions about my purposes.

In our self-absorbed resolve to defuse charges of cultural domination and paternalism, our guilt becomes a sort of pride, and the charges self-fulfilling. We create an imbalance by assuming an imbalance. So convinced we are of our own disproportionate power and privilege that we fail to notice that others do not recognize this inequality, and continue to behave as though they in fact are the ones who can afford to be accommodating.

Back at the riverside, a small boy, peering under my arm, has finally penetrated the mystery of my technology and runs to get into the picture himself, to play his part. He easily accommodates me and simultaneously his own simple purposes. This is the way of children. Of course I can't make the same claim for the adults, yet I believe that they too will find uses for me as they see fit. They will integrate me--and my camera --into their world, just as they have already integrated bicycles, missionary hospitals, and years of paradoxical contact with the West.