

‘Re la Tsoantso’ (‘Father of the Pictures’): Joseph Denfield’s Photography, 1944-1965

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This article explores the photographic work of Joseph Denfield, a medical doctor who rose to prominence as an amateur photographer and public intellectual in South Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It focuses on the manner in which and the extent to which Denfield participated in regional visual economies at different points in his career in order to establish his contribution towards visual histories in Southern Africa. Denfield experimented with various photographic genres, from ethnographic to pictorial work, which was widely circulated in salon exhibitions. Through a close reading of his photographs and writings relating in successive phases to his work in Northern Nigeria, Basutoland and East London, the article seeks to explore the wider frames of colonial photographic practice and their implications for creating alternative histories. Related to this is a reading of his photographs that he took at different stages against one another to figure out their shared visual grammar. This helps to deepen understandings around various genres of photography and to ask questions not simply about what historical photographs represent, but to interrogate how and why photographers did what they did.

Introduction

Now that the P.S.S.A. [Photographic Society of South Africa]² has come into being it should not be too difficult a task to delve into the history of South African Photography and Photographers and produce, perhaps in book form, an account of Photography in this country ... When and where was the first photographic studio set up in this country? Who were the first press photographers and when did a newspaper reproduce its first news photograph. When was the South African prints first accepted at the Royal?³

Thus wrote Joseph Denfield (1911–1967) in his monthly contribution as chairperson of Portfolios Committee of the Photographic Society of South Africa in January 1957. It marks a moment of transition in Denfield’s career from ama-

1 I am grateful to Andrew Bank and Gary Minkley for comments and feedback on the paper. This project is made possible by support from the South African Research Chairs Initiative of the National Research Foundation.

2 The Photographic Society of South Africa was formed in 1954. One of its earliest duties was to organise print collections from abroad and make them available to smaller clubs in South Africa.

3 Denfield Collection, East London Municipal Library [henceforth DC]: J. Denfield, Portfolios, Print Collections and Exhibitions Committee Notes, January 1957.

teur photographer to amateur historian. Denfield's expressed interest did eventually materialise in the book *Secure the Shadow: The Story of Cape Photography from its Beginning to the End of 1879*. This was published in 1970 and was co-authored by Marjorie Bull. It remains one of the key texts in photography literature as it is one of few studies on the continent that provide a detailed regional history of photographic practice.⁴

This essay examines the photographic work of Joseph Denfield himself. Denfield was, historically, both one of the 'founding fathers' of defining photographic practices and genres in and for Africa and South Africa, and one of the major figures in translating these histories and images into public forms of power and representation. As such, he figures amongst a small group of 'colonial' photographers that significantly shaped the visual economies of South Africa, southern Africa, and Africa more generally. His extensive body of photographic work allows for comparisons to be made as regards the particular subject matter represented, such as urban and rural, people versus landscape, West Africa and southern Africa. Denfield's archive consists of a set of documents that he donated to the East London Municipal Library in 1967. These range from speeches and articles he wrote in connection with his photography, to newspaper clips that librarians collected about Denfield. The bulk consists of material relating to East London history: both images and texts Denfield collected and wrote about the city, as well as numerous letters to individual and organisations relating to the history of photography. The documents have been filed haphazardly around his projects in different regions, that is, his photography in Nigeria in the mid-1940s, photographic exhibitions, photographic societies, the history of East London and the history of photography. Denfield did not donate his photographs taken in Nigeria and Basutoland. To access these I have had to re-photograph images that appeared in newspapers and journals, as well as download those available at the British Museum.

This essay does not seek to reinstate him as some form of 'hero', but rather, through a close reading of his photographs and associated writings in the archive, to critically explore the wider frames of colonial and post-colonial photographic practices, and their implications for creating alternative histories and forms of knowledge. It does this by uncovering his work as a photographer in southern Africa and to a lesser extent his later shift towards becoming a historian. I begin by providing a biographical context and provide an account of his early career as a photographer in Nigeria. While the focus of this paper is on his photographic work in southern Africa, his work in Nigeria can usefully be seen as a form of apprenticeship through which he acquired certain visual idioms which he developed in his work in southern Africa. I pay close attention to his photography and methods of work in Basutoland and eventually to how he became involved in producing regional histories of the Cape.

4 C. Harding, M. Frizot and P. Albert, eds., *A New History of Photography* (Cologne: Könemann, 1998).

Joseph Denfield: A Short Biography

While it may be argued that the pictorial turn in historical studies is relatively recent and that the regional visual economy remains under-researched, especially with regards to twentieth-century southern Africa, there is a growing scholarship that pays attention to historical photography in its depiction of identities and communities in the context of political change. Marijke du Toit, for example, has paid attention to photographs taken by the social anthropologist Ellen Hellman as part of her research in Johannesburg's urban slum-yards and black townships from 1933 to 1938.⁵ Du Toit's study contributes towards a movement that focuses on the documentary impulse in South African photography, which includes 'struggle' photographers such as those of Afripix in the 1980s,⁶ and more widely press photographers, particularly those associated with *Drum* magazine in its earlier decades, the 1950s to 1970s.⁷ This literature focuses largely on consciously or explicitly political photographic practice. However, there is also a growing scholarship that revisits photographic collections of an earlier period in southern African history. These are visual images that relate to regional histories of exploration, colonisation, knowledge production and captivity.⁸ One of the best examples of this scholarship is the edited and richly visual volume *The Colonising Camera*, in which the authors carefully traffic through archives of historical photographs in colonial Namibia. Of particular relevance to Denfield are the two essays that explore the photographic collections of colonial officers in South West Africa, C.H.L. ('Cocky') Hahn and Rene Dickman (1886–1955).⁹ Like Hahn and Dickman, Denfield can be anchored in a line of photographers that appropriated aspects of the colonial contexts in which they worked through visual symbols.¹⁰ Additionally, Denfield participated in various photographic exhibitions, in South Africa and abroad, and experimented with photographic genres which included what he called 'Native photography' (a genre typical of the colonial period) and pictorial photography. He also restored old glass negatives of photographs of late-nineteenth-century East London and had them published.

Born in England in 1911, Joseph Denfield entered the Charing Cross Medical School in 1936. He graduated in April 1941 with a B.Sc. and M.B.¹¹ He practised medicine at various appointments in London, but enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps in September 1942 at the height of the Second World War. While in uni-

5 M. du Toit, 'The General View and Beyond: From Slum-yard to Township in Ellen Hellman's Photographs of Women and the African Familial in the 1930's' in P. Hayes, ed., *Gender and History: Special Issue Gender and Visuality*, 17(3), 2005, 593-626

6 D. Kantz, 'Politics and Photography in apartheid South Africa', *History of Photography*, 32(4), 2008, 290-300.

7 See, for example, S. Lotter, 'Gopal Naransamy : A Photographer without Photographs', *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 33, Nov. 2007, 163-180.

8 P. Hayes, 'Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography', *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 33, Nov. 2007, 139-162.

9 See W. Hartmann, J. Silvester and P. Hayes, eds., *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* (Cape Town/Windhoek/Athens/: University of Cape Town/Out of Africa/Ohio University Press, 1998), especially W. Hartmann, 'Performing Gender, Staging Colonialism: Camping It Up/Acting It Out in Ovamboland', 156-163; P. Hayes, 'Northern Exposures: The Photography of C.L. Hahn, Native Commissioner of Ovamboland', 171-187.

10 L. Rizzo, 'A Glance into the Camera: Gendered Visions of Historical Photographs in Kaoko', *Gender & History: Special Issue Gender and Visuality*, 17(3), 2005, 682-713.

11 J. Denfield and M. Bull, *Secure the Shadow: the Story of Cape Photography from its beginnings to the end of 1870* (Cape Town: Terence McNally, 1970).

form, Denfield was sent to Northern Nigerian, then part of the British Empire.¹² It was in Nigeria that his photographic career started in the years from 1944 to 1946. He began by taking ethnographic images of various ‘pagan tribes’ and compiling ethnographic data. These were circulated in British and South African media. They were framed within the discourse of ethnography. A few, however, he sent to photographic circuits in which they were displayed for their aesthetic appeal.

Denfield relocated to South Africa in 1947 and settled in East London. While in South Africa he established a career for himself as a pictorial photographer to such an extent that he received 321 International Salon acceptances of his pictorial photographs. In 1959 he was made a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society and an honorary member of the Border Salon (encompassing East London, King William’s Town and Queenstown). As noted above, Denfield had started researching the regional history of photographic practice around this time. As part of this process he came across historical photographs and glass negatives of East London taken at the turn of the twentieth century. These he cleaned, restored and had reprinted. Such images were widely circulated in the city in exhibitions at the East London Museum and in the local newspaper, the *Daily Dispatch*. Eventually he collected and had published a select few in *Pioneer Port: The Illustrated History of East London*. In addition to publishing the photographs in the newspaper, Denfield also wrote regular articles that were brief histories of the town, which focused on ‘pioneering’ figures and moments, such as early clerks, sports clubs, schools and mayors. He also took an interest in photographing dilapidated sites and buildings, although these images were never circulated in public form. His interest in the history of photography did not fade, as his collaborative study with Marjorie Bull of the South African Library in Cape Town based on intensive archival work was published posthumously in 1970, providing an empirical history of early Cape photographers, and establishing Denfield’s reputation not only as a photographer but as a notable historian of photography in colonial South Africa.

A ‘Primitive Sanctuary’ in Northern Nigeria, 1944–1947

Christraud Geary uses the photographic phrases ‘in focus’ (suggesting clarity and sharp distinction) and ‘out of focus’ (implying blurred or not sharply defined) as useful conceptions to think about the ways in which people in Central Africa have been represented and imagined by Euro-Americans,¹³ that is in the ‘image world’¹⁴ generated by hundreds of thousands of photographs and reproductions through photography, printing technology, colonial history and physical anthropology. Paul Landau borrows the phrase ‘amazing distance’ from Michel de Montaigne to introduce a collection of essays that pays attention to how people have used images to draw together previously ‘unformed’ social meanings from their own societies as a means of connection with people from other societies.¹⁵ Landau adds, how-

12 DC, Denfield, ‘The Story behind the Pictures’, Unpublished manuscript, 1953.

13 C.M. Geary, *In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885-1960* (London: Phillip Wilson Publishers, 2002): 15.

14 Geary borrows this term from Deborah Poole to refer to the complexity and multiplicity of images and the flow of image-objects and associated ideas.

15 P.S. Landau, ‘An Amazing Distance: Pictures and People in Africa’ in P.S. Landau and D.D. Kaspin, eds, *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002): 3.

ever, that through history images of Africans and Europeans have both repelled one another and overlapped, that is, 'the West's distancing of image-Africa was met again and again by a sense of slippage towards or even congruence with it'.¹⁶ Both Geary and Landau essentially refer to making sense of, negotiating, dealing with and at times trying to ease distance (both real and imagined) through photographs and photographic practices. It is this unfamiliarity with and distance from the Other that is integral in Denfield's work, from his early photographs of the tribes of Northern Nigeria to his fading images of old East London. Throughout he attempts to engage his subjects along or outside particular time-frames, by bringing them 'in focus'. That is to say, his aim was to make the past knowable through photography, thereby easing this perceived distance.

It is the sense of the remote and the secluded that informed Denfield's photography in Northern Nigeria in the mid-1940s. When describing his arrival at the Kaduna Military Hospital where he was stationed, Denfield refers to 'a little army pamphlet in the mess, the object of which was, as stated in the Introduction "to give the average officer and N.C.O. on his arrival in Nigeria some idea of what he might expect from the country and its people"'.¹⁷ Such a pamphlet included brief information about the 'pagan tribes', including data about their characteristic languages, cultures, modes of dress, customs and physical appearance. For Denfield this was the motivation he needed to document such people. The existence of a few anthropological maps in the Denfield Collection suggests that he may have used these to guide his photographic work, particularly his grouping of subjects into various 'tribes'.¹⁸ Denfield took at least 400 photographs in Northern Nigeria which he divided amongst various ethnic groupings including the Rukuba, Jerawa, Biron, Irigwe, Tal, Chip, Sura, Ron and Kaleri or else groups associated with places as in the 'groups around Kafanchan', 'Rock pagans', or groups in 'Gotire country' and 'Jos plateau'.¹⁹

Denfield prepared himself by learning Hausa, the lingua franca of the northern areas. He relied on the help of local residents who taught him for four hours daily for several weeks. Armed with a second-hand Thornton Pickard reflex camera that took photographs of 2¼ x 3¼", he also managed to get assistance from two local residents, one of whom he refers to as Henry. One would act as interpreter and the other carried his equipment.

Denfield wrote of his photographic project of Nigeria as a means of 'making a permanent record with my camera of one of the most fascinating and interesting people'.²⁰ Elsewhere he referred to his aim to record 'as artistically as possible a civilisation which, under approaching modern influence, must one day inevitably end'.²¹ The notion of capturing images of 'disappearing tribes' was a stock motif in the discourse of the salvage anthropology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²² Denfield criticised what he saw as Europe's 'patronising air' towards

16 Landau, 'An Amazing Distance', 3.

17 DC, Denfield, 'The Story behind the Pictures'.

18 In these anthropological maps what is shown is the various locations of the Nigerian 'tribes'.

19 This is indicated in a text where he outlines possible chapter headings for a proposed pictorial book on Nigerian tribes.

20 DC, Denfield, 'Photographing Northern Nigeria'. Unpublished manuscript, n.d.

21 Denfield, 'Recording Life in Nigeria', *Photography*, Nov.-Dec. 1946, 19-23.

22 See E. Edwards, ed., *Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).



Figure 1: 'Nigeria half length portrait of Tal adult female, frontal with head turned to side', the British Museum, London.

African subjects.²³ His photography in Nigeria has some parallels with Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin's photography of the Bavenda in the 1920s and 1930s. Like Duggan-Cronin,²⁴ Denfield used careful arrangement and control over the visual field to create images of 'primitive' subjects.

Denfield's medical background arguably influenced his photographic work in his selection of the body as the central marker of difference, as well as in his microscopic, empirically detailed approach to representing his subjects. He operated within a largely positivist frame, seeing his project as contributing to the human sciences. As Frizot argues, there is a close relationship between photography and ethnography, because the body is seen to reveal something. It is simultaneously the last resort and the last obstacle, 'the point where a rupture is always possible in the search for knowledge, [and] the barrier at which looking generally stops'.²⁵

However, underpinning this there is a philosophical and self-conscious reflection that underpins Denfield's images. This, on my reading of the photographs, goes beyond a mere classificatory impulse. When viewing the collection as a whole, I get the sense that Denfield operated implicitly with a notion of depth similar to that articulated by Christopher Pinney, that is, with a sense that the surface of the photograph and, in some ways, the subject are a mirror of their internal

23 Denfield, 'Pagan Sanctuary', *Today: Photo World*, Autumn 1947, 53-56

24 See the essay in this journal issue: M. Godby, 'Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin's Photographs for *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa* (1928-1954): The Construction of an Ambiguous Idyll'.

25 C. Harding, M. Frizot and P. Albert, eds., *A New History of Photography* (Cologne: Könemann, 1998): 271



Figure 2: 'Three Eggon adult males crossing river on stepping stones', the British Museum, London.

selves.²⁶ His photographs typically undercut any sense of certainty. For one thing, the images draw attention to the dynamics of contact between the subjects and the photographer, suggesting that these are moments filled with uncertainty, negotiation, trepidation about appearing in front of the camera, and ambivalence about how to represent such subjects. This can be discerned in the ways in which the subjects engage with him through bodily gesture and eye contact, at times suggesting hesitation, at other times disapproval. These layers of complexity run counter to the captions and lists Denfield produced which simply enumerate different 'tribes' in alphabetical order and map them onto the landscape.

A detailed reading of two photographs will be used to support this argument. The woman in the photograph captioned 'Nigeria half length portrait of Tal adult female, frontal with head turned to side'²⁷ shows one side to the camera, perhaps at the instruction of the photographer in order to display the 'scarification' on her whole upper body as light falls on it. Yet the orderly pattern of 'scars' is impressive and elegant; delicate rather than strange. On the one hand, this could be read as an attempt to associate the exotic with the feminine photographically. The effect is sensuality with light on upper body, breast and scars, depicting femininity, even vulnerability, although the white marks on the woman's knees suggest that she had been involved in laborious work just before she was modelled. On the other hand,

26 C. Pinney, 'Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Post-colonialism and Vernacular Modernism' in C. Pinney and N. Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003): 202-220.

27 Photograph © Trustees of the British Museum.

her facial expression seems to invite us to interrogate the experience of being photographed, thereby partly undercutting the photographic subject's representation as out of time, drawing our attention instead to that very moment in which the photograph was created. If that is the case, then this photograph and others like it may be seen to function not simply ethnographically, but as images that draw attention to the experience of seeing, the dialectics of visibility and the associated relations of power. There is less emphasis on what the subject represents than on the site of the photographic production. This brings into play the photographer behind the camera, his modelling and his directions; the sense that the photograph was the result of a process of negotiating distance between them rather than merely an act of authority and control.

Similar in effect is a photograph with the caption 'Three Eggon adult males crossing river on stepping stones'.²⁸ On closer inspection there are four adult males crossing, as one is close to the river-side. Denfield is possibly standing or sitting on a rock nearby as the photograph is taken from the sides of the bodies, showing full length. There is thus some distance between photographer and subjects. The river is photographed to give a sense of perspective, of extending to the unknown, invisible distance. The river may also function to suggest some depth, an unknown in quantity. On either side of the river, on the river-banks, are trees and bushes echoing in their density this sense of mystery, of density as well as of barriers. The river is open, but it can only be crossed carefully by stepping over the rocks. The subjects are in the process of crossing from the right side (our and the photographer's perspective) to the left, carrying goods on their heads. Rivers enable connection, creating both a barrier and a means of transportation at the same time. The subjects are positioned along the same route and line, but at varying distances from the other side. One has nearly completed the crossing, while another has just begun. This mimics Denfield's own movement at the scene, engaging the distance between himself and his subjects, moving closer and closer with some difficulty and skill, carefully, in a zone he does not necessarily occupy every day. The river can be threatening to the crossers. It is possibly an unfamiliar locality, but it is also functional. This sense of perceived threat is perhaps an echo of Denfield's own experiences in the field. The far river-bank and beyond are out of our visual field, thus echoing this sense of depth and the unknown, of a bridging of boundaries, of a struggle to engage or negotiate distance.

Denfield wanted to publish a photographic book based on his time in Nigeria within an ethnographic discursive framework.²⁹ However, such a project did not materialise. Instead his images were circulated in other forms: firstly in a one-man exhibition held at the Ilford Gallery in London upon his return in early 1947. Significantly enough, he called the exhibition 'The Pagan Life on the Nigerian Plateau'. Secondly, various images were used as illustrations in British and South African publications between 1946 and 1948. These included *Pictorial Education*, *Illustrated London News*, *The Geographical Magazine*, the *Cape Times* and *African World*. In most instances, images were selected to depict African differ-

28 Photograph © Trustees of the British Museum.

29 This is indicated by notes with a list of the titles of chapters for a book in accordance with the above-mentioned tribal locations.

ence, in line with the colonial project of Empire. In 1947 Denfield donated 147 photographs from his collection to the British Museum. They were incorporated into the Ethnology Section and are still housed there today.

Although the images in such publications served a largely ethnographic illustrative purpose, Denfield also submitted his photographs to publications where they would also be viewed for their aesthetic qualities. As early as 1946 three of his photographs were published in the catalogue *Photography*, along with a short article by Denfield. In 1947 *Today*, *Courier* and *Amateur Photography* also published several of his photographs, thereby enhancing the circulation of his work in art circles.

Pictorial Photography in Basutoland, 1950–1956

Denfield boarded a ship at Southampton in 1947 and left England to come to South Africa. He ended up settling in East London.³⁰ This was characteristic of the period after the Second World War, as South Africa had a large settler population of English speakers and seemed to offer more stability than war-ridden Britain. The following year his wife Lea, an actress, joined him. Although not immediately, Denfield's move to South Africa in large part coincided with a shift towards pictorial techniques in his photography and a move away from ethnographic photography. Yet, as we shall see, his move towards pictorialism was still strongly informed by the 'native scene'. Denfield's early images of Nigeria can thus be usefully seen as a trajectory through which he developed the more sophisticated and careful techniques required in 'salon' circles.³¹ In such contexts photographs were judged not necessarily on their representational value but on aesthetics, technical composition, lines, shading, tonality, etc.³² In pictorialism the emphasis was on effective composition and developing images that are pleasing to the eye. This marked a shift in depiction of Africans as representations of particular tribes to framing them within the picturesque. In a speech delivered in 1952 Denfield explained:

Pictorial photography is not just recording what you see; it is interpreting what you feel. It is a function of the mind. A camera is of secondary importance. The subject matter photographed does not have to be beautiful. One can produce beautiful photographs of such sordid material as slums, poverty and even death. The object of the photographer is to exercise his creative ability so as to arouse emotion through the selective arrangement of his subject matter.³³

In his accounts of trekking through Lesotho, starting in 1950, we encounter some familiar scenarios. Once again, he employs 'native' guides or 'boys': Jacob in 1956, Morero, Tsestete, Ishmael and fellow photographer Jack Robinson

30 United Kingdom National Archives online, 'Outgoing passenger list, 1890-1960'.

31 Salons were essentially photographic exhibitions where the photographs were selected on the basis of careful attention to composition and aesthetic appeal.

32 J. Wright, 'Choice of Subjects for Salons', *S.A Photography*, 4(6), 1953, 1-3.

33 DC, Denfield, 'Recording Basutoland on Horseback', 1952.

in 1957, and Tindale in 1958. His 'boys' once again served as interpreters, guides and carriers of his photographic equipment. He also used them often as models in his images, though significantly Jack Robinson does not feature in this way in any of his photographs. Denfield did not account for his method of gaining entry into various villages in Lesotho. However, his accounts of his earlier methods in Nigeria do give some indication of his approach.

My usual approach was to contact the local village chief and make a tour of the village with him, distributing small presents to the inhabitants and speaking to them through an interpreter, inviting them to look at each other through the reflex view finder of my camera. This manoeuvre helped to demonstrate the innocuous character of my Thornton Pickard reflex. I usually put up at the local mud rest house for a couple of days, by which time the camera and myself were familiar objects, and not only could I then wander among the compounds recording the village life as it really was, but I was able to pose them ... Once they had agreed to have their photographs taken, I found them perfect models. They would remain completely still exactly where I placed them for any length of time and being accustomed to the glare of the sun, they were able to look almost directly into its rays without suffering any discomfort.³⁴

Through tours of the villages with the chief, Denfield acquired geographical, socio-political and cultural knowledge. More importantly, he made a point of becoming a familiar figure by distributing gifts and engaging in conversation. He tried to make his camera a familiar object by encouraging local people to look through its viewfinder. By physically demonstrating the technology of the camera to his would-be subjects, Denfield allowed the subjects to see each other and themselves as representations outside their bodies, legitimising his practice, and ultimately attempted to bridge the gap between oneself as physical subject and oneself as index. The camera was presented as a safe tool, quite productive and novel in fact. It became a form of technology through which he negotiated the distance between himself and his social world. It also became a tool through which he attempted to make his subjects knowable through visibility and description. Moreover, the performance illustrated that the photographic process was one of experimentation, persuasion as well as uncertainty. In describing the amount of control over the visual field in Basutoland he explained:

Many of my photographs have not only been planned in advance but rehearsed beforehand. I would ask the headman of the village to arrange to have a few horsemen or some boys on oxen or some women carrying loads of firewood or even sheep to be placed at my disposal, and having surveyed the territory, noted the varying lighting conditions I would then decide the best vantage point. I would then perhaps

34 DC, Denfield, 'Photographing Northern Nigeria', Unpublished manuscript, n.d.



Figure 3: 'Mother and Child' featured in *The Beauty of Basutoland* exhibition held in East London in 1953.

let the horseman practise coming into the picture, explaining how I wanted them paced, the direction they were to take and the speed they were to travel. I might make it three or four times beforehand and when I thought the lighting conditions and everything else just right, I would let them come in for the final shot and when they were in what appeared to be optimum position my shutter would click. The secret is in knowing when to click the shutter.³⁵

Not only does this highlight the extent to which Denfield exerted control over the visual field, but emphasises also his determination in consciously constructing an idealised landscape informed by a visual grammar of 'authentic African-ness'. Unsurprisingly then, various motifs feature prominently in his Basutoland photographs such as mountains, blankets, sunrises and the calabash.

This can be illustrated with reference to the photograph he titled 'Mother and Child', which appeared in an exhibition entitled *The Beauty of Basutoland* held in East London in 1953. The photograph features a woman posed in front of a hut entrance with child in arms. Both subjects look away from the photographer, but the stiff gestures seem to indicate a heightened awareness of the presence of the photographer. This image invokes the motherhood iconography with the subjects

35 Denfield, 'On Horseback through Basutoland', Unpublished manuscript, n.d.

located in the context of domestic space. The Basotho hut frames the subjects, but the interior of the hut is dark and its contents not shown, thereby creating the impression of lack, as opposed to providing evidence of everyday life and domesticity. Denfield was playing on notions of cultural purity, of the sense of a space untouched by modernity.

Whereas Denfield had gazed upon his subjects in Nigeria with a sense of the spectacle and the exoticism, in Basutoland he was more inclined to frame them in more universal terms using more universal tropes. Photographs such as 'Mountain Village', 'Returning Home', 'Women's Work' and 'The Earth is the Lord's' suggest in both the captions and content a familiarity and identification with his subject matter. While distance characterised his travels through Nigeria, the Basutoland images point towards a greater sense of harmony and intimacy. 'The Earth is the Lord's', for example, depicts a mountainous landscape with a male subject in the foreground pulling a horse and with his back to the photographer. The mountain creates a sense of the motion of waves, as though the man is about to enter the ocean that beckons. The river running in the centre of the image accentuates this, as it moves towards infinity, an infinity that is also suggested by the mountains as they recede far into the background.

When explaining why he chose Basutoland as his field-site, Denfield referred to the beauty of its mountains, valleys and hidden waterfalls, but also its remoteness: 'merely because other photographers were not crazy enough to attempt it'.³⁶ One could argue that Basutoland represented to Denfield 'a remote interior', one that offered possibilities of transcendence outside change and outside history in the context of rapid social changes and the disturbances that apartheid policies threatened to create in the 1950s. Nowhere in his writings does Denfield articulate a clear standpoint on the changes happening politically, whether in East London or South Africa. However, I would argue that some sense of his politics might be discerned in his deployment of visual motifs.

Denfield's use of mountains as a motif in his photographs is significant both symbolically and personally when we unpack Lesotho's history and relationship with South Africa. After gaining the 'protection' of the British Empire in 1868 and avoiding incorporation into the Boer-led Free State, Basutoland became a British protectorate under the authority of the British High Commissioner.³⁷ However, with the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, the possibility of incorporation into South Africa re-emerged and again in the 1930s during the premiership of Hertzog as well as during the period of the establishment of the system of self-governing homelands under apartheid during the 1950s.³⁸ According to Rosenberg, one response to this threat of incorporation was the emergence of a national identity that drew heavily on the mountain fortress of Thaba-Bosiu and its connection to Chief Moshoeshe, who, in the Lesotho origin myth, is said to be the founder of the 'Basotho' as a people.³⁹ In popular myth, it is said that the sides of the moun-

36 Denfield, 'The Story behind the Pictures', Unpublished manuscript, n.d.

37 K. Shillington, *History in Southern Africa* (Essex: Longman, 1987).

38 Shillington, *History in Southern Africa*, 167.

39 S. Rosenberg, 'Monuments, Holidays and Remembering Moshoeshe: The Emergence of National Identity in Lesotho, 1902-1966', *Africa Today*, 46(1), 1999, 49-72.



Figure 4: 'Song of Basutoland' featured in the 8th Singapore International Salon of Photography hosted by the Photographic Society of Singapore in 1957.

tains would rise up at night to protect Moshoeshoe and his followers from invaders and had eventually become the political centre of the nation. From about 1917 until Lesotho gained independence in 1966, the symbolic value of the mountain was harnessed and incorporated into resistance discourse, and became an increasingly important venue for meetings as it was integrated within heritage discourse. The symbolic value of Thaba-Bosiu extended to the idea of a pilgrimage to the mountains, whereby individuals would make a point of going to visit the mountain in times of crisis, to pray and find hope.⁴⁰ While he may not have appropriated the mountain motif with nationalist sentiments, Denfield employed familiar idioms of an intensely personal and transformative journey in his representations of the mountain. For Denfield, Basutoland represented an escape, perhaps a transcendental zone from change where he could invent or conjure up idealised landscapes. As he explained after his third pilgrimage:

There is nothing there to disturb one's peace. I have now spent three leaves there and have ridden almost 1500 miles on its bridle paths photographing the country ... I often look through some of them [the pictures] and realize that even in this atomic age there are places where one can find peace of mind and thankfulness in one's heart.⁴¹

40 Rosenberg, 'Monuments, Holidays and Remembering Moshoeshoe', 51,

41 Denfield, 'The Story behind the Pictures'.



Figure 5: 'His Silver Goblet' featured at the 7th Annual Exhibition of Photographs hosted by the Singapore Art Society in 1956.

This statement suggests that even though Denfield drew on the discourse of 'native authenticity' in his construction of the picturesque, his photographs were also intensely personal, an expression of a move towards greater intimacy, harmony and 'at-one-ment' with his visual field.

Consider, for example, 'Song of Basutoland'. The image features the motif of a mountain with a 'native', but this time with a child half-naked walking through the mountains. The sunset enhances the sense of romanticism. It is highly nostalgic with regards to the representation of landscape and 'rurality' or 'pastoralism'. The title refers to a sense of the rhythm or harmony of Basutoland. The image thus plays on notions of completeness.

A similar effect is created in 'His Silver Goblet'. The elderly man in the photograph drinks from his goblet almost indulgently, a sight Denfield turns into spectacle by zooming into it and subsequently turning the 'ordinary' into a sight of visuality. Denfield's own close proximity to the subject as well as the subject's to the goblet also depicts a degree of intimacy. This is further accentuated by layers of texture in the photography: the wrinkles of hands and skin, the rope from the goblet, the blanket and headgear merging, all suggesting a sense of unification.

Denfield's sentiments are probably most eloquently represented in his most widely exhibited photograph, 'The Valley Awakens'. At the centre of the image is a man on horseback with another riding alongside him. They pause and gaze upon the sunrise over a mountain landscape. Here we have the benefit of Denfield's own detailed recollections of the circumstances under which he produced the image.



Figure 6: 'The Valley Awakens' appeared in numerous exhibitions from 1955 onwards.

The mist was getting higher and soon the last layer would be leaving its temporary abode; however, I had to wait until the main mist had gone and then the smaller clusters would emerge from their deep hollows. The sun could just be seen and now a new layer of mist was released from its earthly home. I manoeuvred into position: the sun was now striking the tops of the hills and the light was not striking the tops of the hills and the light on the mist layer was being reflected on the valley below. A little more manoeuvring and the horseman was outlined against this light. Another picture was made. I called it 'The Valley Awakens'.⁴²

The preparation of this photograph evidently required extreme care and attention to detail and environmental changes. However, his recollections speak to a submission to natural forces. Here the photographer had to yield to the movements of the mist and the sun. He had to position himself effectively to be successful, but also to wait for change. Control over this visual field meant yielding to environmental forces. It is interesting to contrast this description with the extract quoted earlier about how, in cases involving human subjects moving through the landscape, the photographs were so carefully rehearsed as his human props were made to perform and repeat their performances before he 'click[ed] the shutter'.

It is instructive to compare the captions he had used for his photographs taken in Nigeria with those he used for his images in Basutoland. For earlier images he

42 Denfield, 'My Favourite Print', *Camera News*, Dec. 1955, 272-273.

used captions such as 'Kaleri Women', 'A Woman of the Chip Tribe' 'A Woman of the Suri Tribe'.⁴³ Now he described his scenes more subjectively and more lyrically with captions such as 'Where the Waterfall Ends', 'Riders on the Horizon', 'Calm is the Morn', or 'Morning Mist'. These descriptions are suggestive of transcendental or spiritual undertones, of an element of mysticism. For Denfield, Basutoland not only offered potential for picturesque photography, but it had become a place of retreat from modernity. This sense of nostalgia and refuge was expressed at times in words as well as in images.

It is not just the wanderlust that seems to draw me there year after year. What then is the secret of Basutoland? Perhaps I want to be on my horse again and feel the cool splash of water on my face as I cross a stream. Perhaps I want to ride through those valleys eating the peaches that grow in the little villages and hear the inhabitants call 'Here comes Ra le Tsoantso' (Father of the pictures). It may be that I want to be again on that mountain ridge where I can watch the mist break beneath me revealing a panorama of hundreds of summits.⁴⁴

There are interesting parallels here with the photography of the Native Commissioner of Ovamboland, 'Cocky' Hahn in the 1930s and 1940s. Patricia Hayes argues that Hahn romanticised colonial northern Namibia in a way that presented a set of homologies between nature and natives.⁴⁵ She argues that towards the end of his career as native commissioner, Hahn and his colleagues used photographs of tribalism as mementos of an 'untamed' Africa, signifiers of the region's wildness, openness and lack of modernity. Like Denfield's Basutoland, the northern territories of South West Africa were deployed visually as spaces 'where men still dream'.⁴⁶ Hayes points out that such a representational framework was the visual antithesis of the industrialisation and modernity of southern Africa. Arguably, Basutoland was being deployed in a similar way by Denfield. His images can be understood as a yearning for a space away from change, a pre-modern space to which he could retreat. His use of the mountainous landscape as a motif might be read as visual expressions of a man not fully identifying with South African politics and in particular with Afrikaner nationalism, but one caught between change and a British imperialist heritage. Basutoland offered him possibilities for imagining other worlds. This sense of retreat and refuge in the pre-modern through visual images has parallels with the literary oeuvre of Laurens van der Post. Wilmsen argues that Van der Post romanticised 'Bushmen' as Jungian archetypes of authentic humanity in reaction to the conflictual politics of the Cold War.⁴⁷

43 Denfield, 'Recording Life in Nigeria', 23.

44 Denfield, 'My Favourite Print', 272.

45 P Hayes, 'Northern Exposures: The Photography of C.H.L Hahn, Native Commissioner of Ovamboland 1915-1946' in W. Hartmann, J. Silvester and P. Hayes, eds., *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* (Cape Town/Windhoek/Athens: University of Cape Town/Out of Africa/Ohio University Press, 1998), 171-187.

46 P Hayes, op cit 172.

47 See E.N. Wilmsen, 'Primitive Politics in Sanctified Landscapes: The Ethnographic Fictions of Laurens van der Post', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21(2), 1995, 201-223.

From about 1952 Denfield's reputation as a pictorial photographer increased dramatically. He received awards of merit from photographic associations from the Johannesburg Photographic Society and the South African Salon of International Photography to the Mashonaland Photographic Society and the Photographic Society of America. The photographs of Basutoland were circulated widely on every continent in salon exhibitions. Denfield's work often contrasted significantly with that of other exhibitors because of his choice of subject matter. For example, two of his photographs, 'The Earth is the Lord's' and 'The Valley Awakens', were shown at the Photographic Society of America's International Photographic Exhibition at St Louis in 1957. In the catalogue they stand in contrast to other images such as 'The Blue Vase' by John B. Montgomery, whose image celebrates the aesthetics of domestic objects and their arrangement. Montgomery's photograph is an inner reflection on bourgeois living in contrast to the serene rurality suggested by Denfield's photography. Denfield seems to be celebrating the majesty and aesthetics of the mountains, as the picture is devoid of any signs of modernity or consumption or middle-class domesticity. Arguably then, by placing his images alongside such salon entries, Denfield was influential in promoting romantic notions of African simplicity and minimalism in its landscape.

Denfield was also influential in the South African context in promoting certain ideals for photographers. Between 1955 and 1957 he wrote monthly newsletters as Chairman of the Portfolios, Print Collections and Exhibits Committee of the Photographic Society of South Africa. He made suggestions about various aspects such what kind of visual themes one could focus on, including still life, architecture, table top, scientific/medical, natural history, news and underwater photography. Denfield was also influential in communicating with photographers overseas, organising print collections from abroad, and making them available to local photographic clubs in South Africa.⁴⁸ He encouraged wider links with regards to exhibiting outside one's country as well as promoting the importance of viewing images from abroad. His influence as a photographer extended to the speeches and toasts he gave regularly to the East London Rotary Club and the East London Photographic Society. Here he would usually promote the genre of pictorial photography.

One significant proposal he made for our purposes is the suggestion to start thinking about the regional history of photography, as discussed at the outset of this article. This he did while still active as an exhibitor of his Basutoland images. For Denfield the transition from expertise in a particular domain to its history seemed both natural and inevitable. In his earliest days as a photographer in Northern Nigeria as well as in his journeys through Basutoland, Denfield had sought to capture a sense of timelessness: 'natural' tribes without history in the former and a people (and especially a landscape) untainted by modernity in the latter. The transition towards an interest in the history of photography was made through a third distinctive phase in his photographic career: the engagement with old photographs of his adopted city, East London.

48 DC, Denfield, 'Portfolios, Print Collections and Exhibits Committee Notes', June 1955.

Encounters with Glass Negatives

In the late 1950s Denfield began an intensive project of tracing families of old 'Border' photographers. He requested their biographies and portraits. He recounted that while collecting one biography, someone sent him old glass negatives which had hitherto been gathering dust in a sideboard drawer. These were images of East London at the turn of the century.⁴⁹ For Denfield they represented more than examples of a particular photographer's work, but also 'invaluable historical documents, which could tell the story of East London far more authentically than the written word'.⁵⁰ He now began to search for information not only about the photographers, but also for old photographs and old negatives relating to the history of the city. He also extended his search to the Cape Archives and the South African Public Library, and began to show an interest in accumulating written sources of information about its establishment and earlier years along with these visual sources.

Patricia Hayes uses the term 'trafficking' to refer to a mode of working with photographs. Trafficking relates, in her analysis, to the mobility of visuals through reproduction, transportation and circulation. She asks us to think about how photographs or visual motifs are set in motion, about how they become unfixed and how they might lead to a wider reaction. This often translates into further interpretations within the genre or medium, more pictures in different media, texts that describe the pictorial, and in some cases actions that are highly visible.⁵¹ This concept of 'trafficking' can be applied to Denfield's work on the history of East London: his efforts at journeying through archives to compile visual histories of East London, at tracking the spaces, and at working towards reproducing and re-circulating these images in present-day East London.

One example of his recirculation of historical images is an article he published in the *Daily Dispatch* in the early 1960s. It features this photograph taken near Charles Street in 1897 depicting East Londoners waiting in Station Square during Queen Victoria's Jubilee celebrations in the city. The question underneath the photograph reads 'Do you remember?' This is particularly significant in that the image was reprinted in the black and white genre, conveying a sense of the nostalgia of a bygone era and lending it legitimacy as historical evidence. The flags that are part of the celebration flutter above the human subjects and reinforce the sense of nostalgia.

There are parallels that one may draw with images of the Voortrekker Centenary Celebrations in 1938. Nine replicas of Voortrekker wagons were built for this event, which McCintock argues was a vivid example of the reinvention of the archaic to sanction modernity. Each wagon became the microcosm of colonial society at large: of whip-wielding white patriarchs prancing on horseback, black servants toiling alongside, and white mothers and children sequestered in the wagon. The women's starched white bonnets were cast as signs of the purity of the race, the decorous surrender of their sexuality to the patriarch, and the invisibility

49 *Sunday Chronicle*, 27 December 1964.

50 Denfield, *Pioneer Port: The Illustrated History of East London* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1965): 5.

51 P. Hayes, 'Introduction' in *Gender & History Special Issue: Gender and Visuality*, 17(3) 2005, 519-537.



Figure 7: Queen Victoria: The Jubilee Celebrations, 1897 from the *Daily Dispatch*.

of white female labour.⁵² The photograph above also lends itself to a gendered reading, as men stand protectively behind women (adorned in similar bonnets). The women in turn stand close to a group of children. There are some men gazing from an elevated position on the roof of the station, further drawing attention to discrepancies between who is visible and who is invisible in the city, whose gaze is dominant and how widely that perspective extends in the public representation.

This photograph presents a gendered and racialised representation of East London. Both the time of the ‘original’ capturing of the photograph (1897) and the time in which the photograph was circulated (1962 and 1963) were important periods in the geographic mapping of East London through removals and the displacement of persons and families. Although East London was racially segregated from the beginning of its history as a colonial outpost, with the first ‘African’ settlement having been founded on the west bank of the Buffalo River in 1849, it was only in 1895 that city authorities officially created separate ‘African locations’ on the west and east banks of the Buffalo River.⁵³ This photograph was taken in an introductory period of institutionalised segregation, one in which black people were being relocated from the city centre.

Similarly, when the photograph was recirculated in the early 1960s, East London was again undergoing very significant reshaping. The Group Areas Act

⁵² A. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995): 371.

⁵³ L. Bank and L. Maqashu, *West Bank Land and Restitution Claim: Social History Report* (East London: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, 1999).

had been passed in 1950. The Minister of Native Affairs, Dr H.F. Verwoerd, visited East London in 1957 to investigate the housing situation. He was unequivocal in his vision for the future and insisted that all new African residential development take place 'outside the city'. Verwoerd's plan was to situate new 'dormitory townships' thirty kilometres outside East London, close to the borders of the Ciskei homeland. The East London City Council approved the creation of the new location at Mdantsane the following year. In 1959 municipal planners began to draft a master plan providing for the erection of 15,000 houses to shelter 125,000 people. By the early 1960s definitive steps had been taken to start demolishing the old location of Duncan Village (or Gompotown) and relocating its inhabitants to Mdantsane.⁵⁴ Denfield's construction of a pictorial history of old East London, with an emphasis on public spaces such as schools, beaches and hotels, thus took place during a period in which notions of belonging, space and landownership were highly contested. What he did was to represent the history of East London as one of black invisibility and of white dominance and patriarchy.

Hoffman argues that while serving as agencies in the historical transformation of culture, reproductive media have also reinvented history as visual, as a genre of representation that has in its turn acted to obscure the visibility of the historical process at work.⁵⁵ This is similar to what Trachtenberg describes as 'historicism-by-photographs', which refers to the notion that 'historical knowledge declares its true value by its photographability'.⁵⁶ Photographs in such a view gain value for historical inquiry as evidential material about the past. Edwards argues, for example, that in late-nineteenth-century Europe photographs became integral to attempts to order the world's diversity.⁵⁷ Scientific forms of conceptualisation and the equivalences they produced became a dominant visualising cultural force of the period. In the process, photographs and their evidential value were complex historical outcomes emanating from specific social practices and, in turn, created certain ways of seeing. In the specific case of the photographs of Joseph Denfield, we can see how his archiving and recycling of images in the late 1950s and early 1960s contributed towards particular ways of seeing the history of the city of East London.

Unlike his atemporal framing of tribes in Nigeria, these images of East London represented a specific period in history. Denfield took upon him the laborious task of cleaning images chemically and reproducing them through re-photographing. This task is both metaphoric and metonymic. In developing the glass negatives into positives, it is as though Denfield wanted to cleanse and 'correct' historical memory. Elizabeth Edwards invites us to note the correlation between the photograph as a material object and history as a discipline, an invitation that also draws attention to the openness and dynamic potential in both. She argues that both photographs and historical endeavour constitute 'a composite of

54 Bank and Maqashu, *West Bank Land and Restitution Claim: Social History Report*.

55 A. Hoffman, 'Introduction' in Hoffman, ed., *What We See: Reconsidering Anthropometrical Collections from Southern Africa: Images, Voices and Versioning* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2009):4-17.

56 Cited in C. Pinney, *Camera Indica*, 195.

57 E. Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photography, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford: Berg Press, 2001):55.

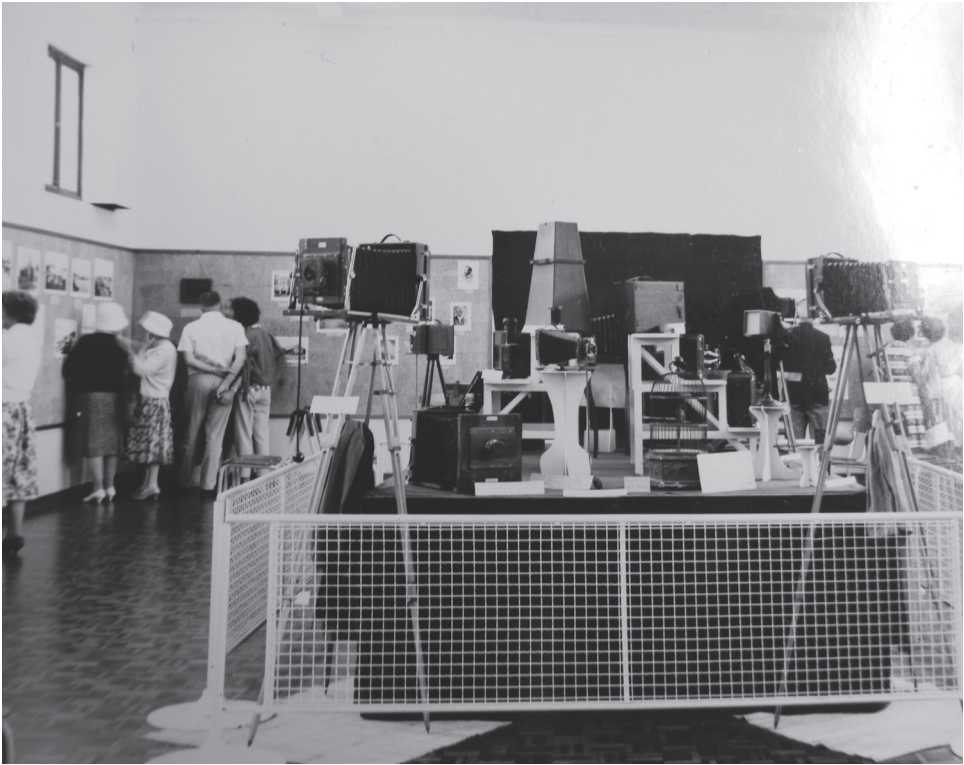


Figure 8: 'Our Town' exhibition, East London Museum, 1962.

fragmented, selective, exclusive, tentative, illustrative and suggestive relations rather than a sustained argument'. However, she points out that in some ways being disconnected from the time of its production, a photograph in an archive also functions to deny history.⁵⁸

Denfield held an exhibition at the East London Museum called 'Our Town' which opened on 18 December 1962.⁵⁹ It featured 100 reprinted photographs, all dating from 1880 to 1914, as well as older cameras that Denfield had collected. In the process of the exhibition he also took his own photographs of the evening. This small collection makes concrete Denfield's authority as a storyteller. Clearly Denfield was aware of the evidential power of archives, having spent much time in archives in East London and Cape Town. Moreover, he was aware of the particularly powerful evidential aura attached to photographs in this period. It was not enough simply to tell a story about photographers in an earlier period of East London's history; he had to enter the imagined archive by compiling his own story visually. This would help establish his own credentials as a historian and as a storyteller. This required that he stand back from the exhibition, photograph it and all of its elements.

⁵⁸ E. Edwards, 'Introduction' in Edwards, eds., *Anthropology and Photography*, 8.

⁵⁹ *Daily Dispatch*, 18 Dec. 1962.

The photograph reproduced here was one of his attempts to document his history-in-the-making (Fig. 8). Here the visitors have their backs turned. We can watch them witnessing the fruits of his labour. The cameras placed at the centre of the room were evidently the focal point and unifying link in the exhibition. We might imagine Denfield commenting in a guided tour on the power of this technology and the various types of machinery. In that space they almost take on the role of sculptures in an art display placed under the observer's eye. This moment powerfully invokes the connection between visual representations and storytelling. In this context, the dated images are used to talk about an East London of the past, a past that emerges via the technologies of cameras through the ages. In looking at a particular photograph that depicts the visitors looking at the dated images, with the cameras in the middle and foreground, they take on an almost sacred status, placed on an elevated table covered in black cloth and protected by metal bars around the table. In this sense, the machines become ritual objects or relics that visitors can engage only through sight rather than by touch.

This project of restoring and displaying old images was the turning point in establishing Denfield as expert on the history of East London. Situated between his earlier projects on regional representations of Africans framed within an atemporal framework and the later publication *Secure the Shadow*, it indicated Denfield's concern with preserving the past through the photograph in a period of rapid urban change. Denfield wrote regular articles in the *Daily Dispatch* between 1964 and 1965 about the city's history, focusing on its establishment as a modern space. The topics included the early municipal days, schools, trains and shipwrecks.

The publication of *Pioneer Port: The Illustrated History of East London* by Howard Timmins in 1965 was thus the culmination of some six or seven years of work on photographic and written histories. *Pioneer Port* offered a concise history of the town through text and image. Far from being nostalgic memoirs of the town, Denfield drew attention to the ways in which tragedy and struggle characterised the town's past. Newspaper articles such as that on East London's first school pointed out the ways in which conflict characterised this early period. Similarly in *Pioneer Port* Denfield narrated the context of each photograph in relation to the city's establishment. Many of these were stories of destruction, loss and tragedy as shown in photographs of shipwrecks and burnt buildings. The book constructed an image of an urban past characterised by catastrophe and disorder, from which a more 'functional' municipality emerged. Such a project, arguably, implicitly alludes towards a conquest of space at a time when (as we have seen) space was being contested along racial and class lines. The emphasis on building sites in both the book and the newspaper articles reinforces this, as buildings suggest structure, permanence and security. This doubtless relates partly to Denfield's own identity as a now long-time settler in East London. There was something mystical, intangible about the Basuto-land mountains that he photographed in the early to mid-1950s. His images of East London buildings, by contrast, offer a materiality, a physical presence that might suggest a man more fully anchored in his locality and white South African identity



Figure 9: An East London building in decay, c. 1965.

Ghosts of the City?

Christopher Pinney asks whether pictures have a different story to tell from written words or the spoken voice, a story told in part on their own terms.⁶⁰ The challenge to interrogate photography's own stories is particularly pertinent when paying attention to a set of photographs that Denfield did not formally circulate. As Denfield was writing about and exhibiting images of early East London, he also undertook a project of photographing older sites of city that were in decay or were being destroyed.⁶¹ It is difficult to understand Denfield's exact purpose in that these photographs have no accompanying text or context. This collection includes photographs of factory sites, shops, graves, the fire brigade and houses in various states of decay. In some ways the project of photographing these sites, though never fully articulated, can be seen as a continuation of his project in *Pioneer Port*, operating as some form of visual sequel, articulating another and more contemporary layer of historical change in the city.

Denfield's choice of subjects is significant. As Silvester has argued in the case of colonial South West Africa, the construction of brick buildings was visual proof of permanence and possession.⁶² He suggests that the physical and photographic

60 C. Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: the printed image and political struggle in India* (New Delhi & New York: Oxford University Press), 8.

61 These photographs were donated to the East London Municipal Library in their photo envelopes and with their negatives attached.

62 J. Silvester, 'Your space or mine? The photography of the Police Zone' in W. Hartmann, J. Silvester and P. Hayes, eds., *The Colonising Camera: photographs in the making of Namibian history* (Cape Town/Windhoek/Athens: University of Cape Town/Out of Africa/Ohio University Press, 1998): 138-144.

display of buildings represented a view of white settlers not only as builders, but also as architects imposing a sense of order and civilisation on a recalcitrant landscape. Arguably, through the photograph, Denfield attempted to recall and freeze a moment in time in the midst of rapid social change. This set of photographs of buildings in decay simultaneously points to change and possibly Denfield's resistance to it. Twenty years after leaving Nigeria, we now encounter again a concern with the past, with documenting signifiers of the past not through mapping on the body but in the architectural site. While he displaced his Nigerian subjects away from the flow of time, twenty years later he points his camera towards those sites that threatened to disappear.

Buildings, like identities, provide structures and a sense of foundation, and yet are vulnerable to change, abandon and obliteration. Undoubtedly Denfield was fully aware of the significant geographical and political shifts that were happening around him in the city. His photographs in some ways echo the very nature of 'destructive' change that was taking place with various zones being destroyed, families removed and relocated, sites replaced and renamed. Unlike the glass negatives of a Victorian East London which appealed to his romantic sensibility, this was the 'real' East London of the 1960s with its rapid and brutal changes undermining any celebratory sense of conquest over the city. I read these images as an expression of the dark side of East London's history. If the 1950s photographs of Basutoland were partly a visual expression of the ambiguities of white English settler identity, in the images he took of a dying East London he once again retreats to signifiers of the past that he had effectively romanticised in *Pioneer Port*.

Hayes and Bank have suggested that one of the significant implications of working with visual material is that it opens up questions of historical form or medium.⁶³ Visual materials are as much to 'think with' as they are empirical, evidential inscriptions. Much like his collection in the East London municipal library, Denfield remains largely an invisible photographer and archivist, with his work in contributing various 'histories' left intact and not placed under a critical lens. Denfield's body of work allows us to pay attention to moments in the African and southern African visual economy to figure out the ways in which moments feed into events, meanings and identities that characterised southern Africa at certain points.

Joseph Denfield died suddenly at his home on 30 June 1967.⁶⁴ *Secure the Shadow: The Story of Cape Photography from its Beginning to the End of 1879* was published three years later and seen through publication by his co-author Marjorie Bull. The book represented the culmination of years of extensive archival work, but also the expression of the late career shift from photographer to historian of photography.

⁶³ P Hayes and A Bank, 'Introduction', *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 27, Nov. 2001, 1-14.

⁶⁴ *Daily Dispatch*, 1 July 1967.