

# A Method of Documentary Photography and its Application in a Student Project of Acculturation in Bali

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## Abstract

I have devised a methodical research outline for students' final projects that involve photography as their main medium. The method accommodates the two major kinds of photographic project characteristics. The first is the conceptual or the commercial type, and second is the observational or the photo story type. This article focuses on a photo story type project by a student who has followed the method closely. Osel Gunarso focused his study on documenting a unique acculturation between Christian tradition and Balinese customs in the village of Blimbingsari in Jembrana County, Bali. Through ethnography and qualitative analysis, Gunarso achieved visual discourse for understanding a cultural phenomenon. Although he had beautifully exhibited his documentary project, it also projected several problems and issues that would be important to consider in future projects with similar conditions, especially undergraduate final projects that are confined to a single semester. Technical and non-technical issues in documentary photography become significant and therefore must be addressed in advance along with the methodology.

**Keywords:** documentary photography, visual method, ethnography, qualitative, cultural phenomena, acculturation, Blimbingsari, Christian, Bali.

## Abstrak

*Penulis telah membentuk sebuah panduan metodologis bagi karya tugas akhir mahasiswa yang menggunakan fotografi sebagai media utama mereka. Metode tersebut mengakomodir dua jenis karakteristik proyek pemotretan yang paling utama. Yang pertama adalah tipe yang konseptual atau komersil, dan kedua adalah yang observasional atau tipe cerita foto (photo story). Artikel ini terfokus pada tipe proyek photo story, terutama yang dilakukan oleh seorang mahasiswa yang telah mengikuti panduan metodologis tersebut secara cermat. Osel Gunarso melakukan studi untuk mendokumentasikan keunikan akulturasi antara tradisi Kristen dan adat Bali yang terjadi di desa Blimbingsari, kecamatan Jembrana, Bali. Lewat etnografi dan analisis kualitatif, Gunarso menghasilkan wacana visual untuk memahami sebuah fenomena kultural. Walaupun dia telah menghasilkan pameran hasil akhir proyek dokumenternya secara bagus dan indah, ada beberapa masalah dan isu yang muncul, yang menjadi penting untuk dipertimbangkan dalam perancangan-perancangan karya sejenis di kemudian hari. Perancangan karya tersebut khususnya yang mempunyai kondisi yang hampir sama dan sebuah karya tugas akhir strata satu yang terbatas dalam satu semester. Isu-isu teknis dan non-teknis dalam fotografi dokumenter menjadi signifikan dan harus disampaikan sejajar dan bersamaan dengan metodologi.*

**Kata kunci:** fotografi dokumenter, metode visual, etnografi, kualitatif, fenomena kultural, akulturasi, budaya, Blimbingsari, Kristen, Bali

## Introduction

The study of a culture through photography explores visual evidence that can be valuable to the understanding of that specific culture. This notion comes from the pioneering work of ethnographic film-makers, where different to tourists, they take

pictures not for nostalgia but rather for knowledge (Tomaselli, 1996, p. 2). This observational field work is known as visual anthropology or the analysis of patterns of culture through representation. In some cases it also falls into a field called visual sociology, depending on its method, conceptual emphasis, and research techniques.

Although anthropologists try to integrate themselves into the societies or cultures they are studying, visual sociologists however have a much closer relationship to theories of still documentary photography than do visual anthropologists to film theory (p. 4-5). In any case, in this visually driven age, visual data prove to be an increasingly significant part of research. It gives glimpses of real stories surrounding a certain community or a record of a cultural heritage left by ancestors. A primary approach in visual research is the generation and use of photographic still images, which is primarily used by ethnographically oriented researchers as an additional means of documenting social and cultural processes. Anthropologists and qualitative sociologists tend to be the main users of this method (Emmison & Smith, 2000: 22). It can, however, be used also by students of visual communication, as they also in a way try to communicate an understanding of a certain culture to an audience for a specific purpose. Through photography, specifically documentary photography, one can capture and convey “frozen” details of lives and culture that can be weaved together through a group of images that form a story, which sometimes words cannot describe, as Lewis Hine once said, “If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn’t need to lug a camera” (Sontag, 1977).

This powerful medium opens the opportunity for students to investigate, examine, and understand social and cultural phenomena around them (Lynn & Lea, 2005); sometimes even in faraway places, in a different city or island. Indonesia, with its cultural diversity, offers endless topics of unexplored cultural assets. Therefore, students are encouraged to delve into these priceless treasures. Through documentary photography, untold or forgotten stories can be revealed, and rich cultural heritage can be explored, documented, and preserved. Moreover, these stories and heritage are what is important that need to be communicated by Indonesian students in that in their representations, they also get educated with knowledge about parts of their culture and at the same time reflections about their own cultural identity.

I devised a methodical research outline to help students who are using photography as the primary medium for the final project (Kuntjara, 2009). In preparing the guideline, I had in mind two major varieties of photographic projects. The first is the conceptual or commercial type, which usually focuses on promotional or advertising needs. This type of photography project usually weighs on the technical and visual quality of the photographs to meet the exact requirements of the

original concept. The second is the observational or photo story type, which derives from photo-journalism (Kobre, 2004). This type of photography project aims for powerful images that can express a certain story, and usually relies more on intuitive shots to capture those “decisive moments.” Each type of photography has its own difficulties, but the two can be organized in process and writing in a similar outline. This article focuses on the latter type in the work of Osel Gunarso, a student of Visual Communication Design at Petra Christian University, who has created a final project focusing on the acculturation between Christian tradition and Balinese customs in a village called Blimbingsari, Jembrana County, Bali (2009). This project followed closely the methodological guideline. In the end, Gunarso has received high marks and has exhibited his photos at the department’s exclusive final project exhibition. In this review paper, I evaluate his research process and conclusion in order to also evaluate the devised research outline. Although Gunarso’s work was beautifully materialized, several problems and issues or limitations must be noted from his experience. Even if problems are contextual, some specific points of conclusion can be obtained and addressed for consideration in future projects of a similar nature.

## A Photography Project Method

The methodical research outline is arranged and systematically organized into five parts or chapters as in basic academic writings or final project reports. The basic outline, without going through alternative sub-chapters and after the Abstract, Table of Contents, and other preceding information, is as follows:

### 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. Topic Background
- 1.2. Focus of Discussion
- 1.3. Confines
- 1.4. Objective
- 1.5. Significance
- 1.6. Terminologies
- 1.7. Methodology
- 1.8. Research Project Diagram

### 2. IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

- 2.1. Underlying Theories
- 2.2. Primary Data
- 2.3. Secondary Data
- 2.4. Data Analysis
- 2.5. Synthesis

### 3. PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT

- 3.1. Planning & Time Table
- 3.2. Photography Concept

- 3.3. Photo Session 1
- 3.4. Analysis of Session 1 Photos
- 3.5. Photo Session 2
- 3.6. Analysis of Session 2 Photos  
(if needed, session 3 & its analysis, and so on)
- 3.(7.) Editing
- 3.(8.) Analysis of Editing
- 3.(9.) Additional Supporting Materials

#### 4. FINAL RESULTS

- 4.1. Selected Final Photos
- 4.2. Distribution and/or Presentation Settings

#### 5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1. Final Remarks
- 5.2. Suggestions

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

#### APPENDICES

Beginning with an introduction, it discusses the main topic or problem, or background of the research; focus of the issue; confines of the research if any; the objective and significance of the project for the author, the department, and the organization or institution or company that oversee the subject, and so on; some operational definitions or terminology; the methods used in collecting data, analyzing, and creating the photographs; and the diagram plan of the whole process of the project.

The second chapter consists of an identification of data and analysis. Data can be collected in a number of ways and weighed according to which of those data are primary and which are secondary. Some main examples would be interviews, initial surveys and observations, texts, and visual references of works from artists or photographers with similar visual or conceptual interest. It should be noted that this stage of data collection precedes the photographing of final images of the project. Therefore preliminary documentation such as photographing the points of interest is also encouraged as a resource for the real photo sessions. All of this would then be analyzed qualitatively in the development of a detailed concept of the story the student wants to convey.

Chapter three, which is quite different from other final project guidelines, addresses photographic concept development and process. It includes a planning and time table for scheduling photo sessions and setting weekly goals; the photography project's visual concept description; photo sessions (the number of photo sessions here is planned according to information gathered from initial surveys and interviews) and several samples of the photos; analysis of each session, technically as well

as non-technically, its failures and/or successes, evaluating whether the photos support the objective or not; technical editing by showing a few examples of before and after pictures; analysis of the editing and overall "package" to see whether as a whole, it has told the complete story and has met the objective; and the design of additional supporting materials, such as posters, catalogue, brochure, etc.

From chapters two and three, one finds that the main methodical orientation used here for documentary photography is ethnography. Through ethnography, the photographer must become a participant-observer or an observer-participant. The two must be in balance and considered contextually. Getting acquainted with the place and people of interest requires time and a respect on the part of the student. To be able to get "inside" a community and document its culture photographically, students must acquire interpersonal skills and have adaptability or tolerance for difference on a long-term basis (Ingledeu, 2005).

Through ethnographic study, the student photographer has the opportunity to probe a deeper understanding of the subject, and aim to capture behaviors, motivations, beliefs, interests and customs of the subject (Kuntjara, 2004). Thus, naturalistic research using qualitative methodology serves as the best approach in documentary photography. Self-involvement is necessary to be able to capture what Kratochvil & Persson (2001) suggest when they observe that "there is more to see and more that must be understood. There is the 'why' and the 'how' behind their actions." There is no other way of knowing or understanding a subject than by living and mingling amongst the subjects; sometimes participating in their actions while at the same time consciously and critically observing them and ourselves.

A photo story must also come in a package, meaning a group of photos telling one story. By seeing the whole picture, the viewer can gain wider and deeper perspectives about the subject matter or the story depicted, rather than seeing one or two of the pictures. With the "package," the viewer understands more about the subject in a much detailed and more intense way. And then there is the idea that the whole must be greater than the sum of its parts. The pictures themselves do not have significance unless they are shown as a whole to an audience. Therefore the photography project must also include a strategy for delivery or distribution of the photographs, usually by presenting them in an exhibition setting.

Different than photo essays that are argumentative or opinionated with a specific point of view, the nature of documentary photography is that it is supposedly neutral. It presents the pictures for viewers to judge for themselves from their intelligence and personal experiences, even their skepticism (Kratochvil & Persson, 2001). However, the objective and story of the documentary must be clear and consistent from beginning to end. Therefore, the analysis in chapter three is important to keep track of the results of each photo session. The student should ask himself or herself if the photo meets technical and non-technical merits. The technical aspect is quite straightforward in composition, exposure, lens, lighting, and artistic and aesthetic qualities. Non-technical aspects cover questions such as: Does the photograph depict part of the bigger picture? Does it stay true to the objective and the story or the title of the documentary project? Students must assess its merits and decide which pictures they want to keep and which they want to retake if possible. In a documentary photography project, a picture must not only be aesthetically pleasing, but it must tell an important part of the story, and vice versa. And eventually this picture would have to work together with other pictures to form the story. This is not an easy task.

Students are also reminded to know where they stand when they are composing a picture (Wenger, 2007). The angle and framing of the picture also suggests their position or the viewer's position in the story. From each analysis, photos must be selected and documented to keep a progress journal on the project. Analysis can be based on context of viewing, context of production, and specific conventions (Lister & Wells, 2001). Each photo must then be described and outlined in paragraphs, dealing the technical and non-technical aspects of why the picture has been selected. Students learn to encode as well as decode images as visual language (Kuntjara, 2008). Taking a picture is different than describing it in words. Both must go hand in hand for students.

Editing becomes an important issue in documentary photography especially in this digital age, because of the truthful nature it must convey. A basic rule for editing is being honest and truthful. From a technical standpoint, this means that there should be a limitation of color and contrast adjustments, as well as dust removal and cropping. Another basic rule of thumb for editing is anything that can be done in analog photography or in Adobe Lightroom software, an equivalent of the darkroom for the digital photographers, is acceptable. However, students must be very careful

not to overdo or distort what is depicted in the photographs. Although subjectivity is unavoidable, they must strive to be as fair and accurate as possible. Editing for dramatic moods or certain atmospheric quality is still tolerable, but it must be in line with the story that is being portrayed.

In the end of chapter three, a final analysis of the whole project must be elaborated. Do these selected photos do their job in telling the story? Do they convey enough of the story for the viewer? Do they depict the story truthfully? Is something omitted from the picture? Or is something unnecessary in the picture? Is the whole really more than the sum of its parts? Do they come together as a package that can be exhibited in a gallery?

The fourth chapter showcases all the chosen and finalized photographs. Each must then be given a title and short description. In this process students learn to direct the story as well as the interpretation of the viewer. Presentation of the photographs is also a task that the student must handle. How would the final project be presented? If it is through an exhibition, what would the exhibition be like? What kinds of supporting materials would it include? Students must explain the concept and projected exhibition of the photographs in detail and in drawing.

A photography exhibition is the expected final outcome of the project. Thus, a minimum of 20 medium to large scale photographs is established as a requirement for advancement to the final oral examination. This number has been decided in consideration of the number of images enough to cover a story, the number of slides students are usually expected to have in their portfolio for application submissions, and the load of work for an undergraduate final project. The reduction and selection process triggers students' critical thoughts on deciding whether a picture is important enough or not to be in the "package."

Finally a concluding chapter gives details of accomplishments and/or reflections of unsuccessful attempts, and suggestions of possible steps to be taken in future work on the project, or things that have yet to be conveyed in the documentary.

### **Acculturation: A Cultural Phenomenon**

Osel Gunarso, student of Visual Communication Design at Petra Christian University, focused his final project on a unique village of Blimbingsari, in Jembrana County, on the island province of Bali (Gunarso, 2009). Balinese people are predominantly Hindu, and have rich cultural traditions that

dominate their lives, from their arts to their rituals. One anomaly, however, exists in Blimbingsari. All of its citizens are Christian. Although they live a Christian life, they still adopt Balinese tradition in their everyday lives. It creates an acculturation that is unique to Blimbingsari. Gunarso, whose hometown is in Bali, was able to find this interesting phenomenon and wanted to document this piece of Indonesia's cultural heritage and show how it resulted in an interesting mix of cultural symbols. He also wanted to convey how differences can negotiate, adapt, and live together. Part of the aim of this project was to preserve such rare acculturation that has the possibility of diminishing in this global era, and to raise awareness of such unique cross-cultural unity.



**Figure 1.** One of Gunarso's photographs showing a representation of an acculturation in a statue of an angel with Balinese dress in front of Blimbingsari's temple-like church (Gunarso, 2009).

The Blimbingsari community came into existence in 1939 because of an exodus of Balinese Christians who had been under control of the Dutch, separating them from the Hindus because of social conflicts. Until today, Balinese customs still influence their lives greatly. This can be seen in the architecture of their homes and church, dresses and lifestyle. They have one church as their central focus for all Christian ceremonies. This church, which resembles a Balinese temple with a cross on top, becomes the main setting where

Gunarso photographs the evidence of acculturation. It is the heart of Blimbingsari. Ceremonials are celebrated communally and fervently with abundant ornaments and decorations just as with common Balinese-Hindu tradition.

Gunarso followed the method closely for this project. He had a heavy task at hand however, as he had to find many sites of acculturation in Blimbingsari. He had to not only photograph the mixing of symbols and ornamental motifs readily available at the church's exteriors and interiors, but also try to find evidence of acculturation in many other more significant elements of culture. These include rituals, the system of the community, art, language, and the people's behaviors. Such a task would require that the photographer have some background knowledge of both components of the acculturation. Having been born in Bali, Gunarso was quite knowledgeable of the common tradition there. Although a Buddhist, he has lived among Christians during his years in the university. By having this advantage of background knowledge and experience, he was able to sensitively find the images he needed to capture many clues of acculturation surrounding the church life in Blimbingsari without overlooking or taking things for granted. One example in Figure 2 is of mothers playing in the Balinese gamelan orchestra at church for an Easter ceremony. Such a scene would not be found in other Balinese gamelan orchestras because "traditionally" the players are men.



**Figure 2.** Women playing Balinese gamelan orchestra, commonly played by men. (Gunarso, 2009).

After several photo sessions and analyses, Gunarso was faced with limitations, as he was unable to capture the whole picture. There are other aspects of culture that are not visible in the photos he produced, such as the verbal language, behaviors, occupation, and life outside the church, i.e. in their homes. Another issue in such a project is the

limitation of time for administrative purposes. The final project must be finished within one semester. Therefore, Gunarso was only able to cover the Easter processions without covering another important Christian traditional celebration, which is Christmas. Thus a more complete picture of the acculturation was not possible, except if Gunarso were to postpone his graduation for a semester.

In the final analysis, Gunarso has demonstrated commendably a rigorous attempt at capturing, selecting, analyzing, and editing the photographs. The documentary photography achieved a balance between technical know-how and cultural sensitivity. However, it produced more of a visual documentation or evidence rather than a narrated story. In order to achieve a more thorough documentary, in this case, time seems to be the essential issue that limited Gunarso. We can conclude from this project several points of consideration and annotation to complement the methodological guideline.



Figure 3. An Easter procession. (Gunarso, 2009).

### Points of Consideration

The first point of consideration before executing such a project involving cultural studies is the limited timeframe of one semester. Therefore, there will be moments or events that cannot be

captured if they occur outside the semester, such as Christmas in Gunarso's case. Another aspect is that the ethnographical method takes time. There is very little time to get to know the subject, as has been described in the above.

Due to the time limitation, students should be encouraged to firstly try to find a research topic from their own cultural backgrounds or hometown, or a cultural subject about which they already have some background knowledge. This is to accelerate the progression of the project, allowing students to concentrate more on the documentary process.

As in Gunarso's case, the student must have knowledge of the history of each culture before such acculturation so that he or she will know exactly what is a result of acculturation and what is not. Without this background knowledge, understanding a culture can take a long time and would easily consume the semester, and the project would not have the sensitivity that a knowledgeable person might have. Although sometimes too much knowledge can also make one miss things that are taken for granted, therefore not realized and not captured.

The second point is that students must plan photo sessions far in advance of the initial surveys. This could be separated into categories whether they are special events or specific subject matters, such as a person or a place. And importantly, in a documentary project, observation is a continuous process throughout. Therefore, there can be arbitrary but important occurrences that may happen during the research time that could add significant depth to the project, such as births or deaths, weddings, etc. A photographer researcher must also be flexible when such occurrences do happen. This should be taken into account as well when developing the project plan.

The third point is that the difficulty of a documentary photography project lies in creating high quality work in both technical and non-technical aspects. Students should attempt to achieve both through careful and thorough analysis, at least in balance and in consideration towards the project's objectives and story concept. The photographs must not only be good visually, but they also have to be powerful or strong images. Therefore, all technical aspects must be considered, including equipment and weather conditions. Skills and experience in photography should also be inherent in the student. Without these, there will not be the instinct and sensitivity necessary to capture the "decisive moments" that make great photographs.

## Conclusion

Through an ethnographical method of documentary photography, Gunarso is able to achieve visual discourse for understanding a cultural phenomenon. It also projects several limitations and issues that are important for consideration in future documentary photography projects. Technical and non-technical issues in documentary photography prove to be significant and must be addressed along with the methodology. It is to be hoped that with future projects of a similar nature, more cultural traditions and legacies can be exposed and further explored. At the same time the methodology used will progress into more effective and helpful visual discourse, giving it more authority in research.

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