



The Black Photo Album

Santu Mofokeng

Some of the images in the photograph album compiled by photographer Santu Mofokeng date back to the late 19th century, revealing a little-known world. In a country caught in the grip of racism and attempts at Darwinian classification, these photographs depict black men and women who belonged to the working and middle classes that the South African authorities wanted to erase from the history books.

These are images that urban black working- and middle-class families had commissioned, requested or tacitly sanctioned. They have been left behind by dead relatives, where they sometimes hang on obscure parlour walls in the townships. In some families they are coveted as treasures, displacing totems in discursive narratives about identity, lineage and personality. And because, to some people, photographs contain the shadow of the subject, they are carefully guarded from the ill-will of witches and enemies. In other families they are being destroyed as rubbish during spring-cleans because of interruptions in the continuity of the history they represent or disaffection with the encapsulated meanings and the history of the images. Most often they lie hidden to rot through neglect in kists, cupboards, cardboard boxes and plastic bags.

If the images are not unique, the individuals in them are. Painterly in style, most of the photographs are evocative of the artifices of Victorian photography. Some of them may be fiction, a creation of the artist insofar as the setting, the props, the clothing or pose are concerned. Nonetheless there is no evidence of coercion. When we look at them we believe them, for they tell us a little about how these people imagined themselves. We see these images in the terms determined by the subjects themselves, for they have made them their own. They belong and circulate in the private domain. That is the position they occupied in the realm of the visual in the 19th century. It was never intended that they should be hung in galleries as works of art.

Extracts from *The Black Photo Album, Johannesburg (1890-1950)* by Santu Mofokeng.

Santu Mofokeng was born in 1956 in Johannesburg. A black photographer heavily committed to the fight against apartheid (see the account of his experience), he has been a researcher at the Institute for Advanced Social Research at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg since 1992. He has collected old family photographs from people living in the townships of Johannesburg.

Photographer HF FINE STUDIO ©
26 West St. Johannesburg, 1900.

Rozetta Dubula and friends.

Rozetta Dubula, born Duma was born in Thaba-Nchu 1901. Her granddaughter, who was named after her, knows little about her life.

Albumen print



>

UNKNOWN photographer ©
Boshoeck, 1900.

Cleophas and Martha Moatshe.

Cleophas and his wife Martha were from Boshoeck where he was a moderator in the breakaway Anglican church. He died in 1923 from « drie dae » (three-day) influenza. This information is from Moatshe Mohlakeng, Randfontein. Albumen print.

Their significance lies outside the framed image. They were made in a period when the power of the South African state was being entrenched and policies towards people the government designated as «natives» were being articulated. It was an era mesmerized by the newly discovered social sciences, such as anthropology, which was informed by social Darwinism. It was a time which spawned all kinds of « experts » (so dearly loved by politicians), who could be conjured up to provide « expert knowledge » on any number of issues, including matters of race. Race thinking was given scientific authority in this period and was used to inform state policy on « the native question ».

Officially black people were frequently depicted in the same visual language as the flora and fauna - represented as if in their natural habitat - for the collector of natural history or, invariably, relegated to the lower orders of the species on occasions when depicted as belonging to the «great family of man». Designated « natives », a discrete group who were considered « in a sense citizens, but not altogether citizens » (Cecil John Rhodes), these people had images made of them which contributed to schemes of «authoritative» knowledge about the natives and served no small part in the subjection of those populations to authoritarian

Images informed by this prevailing ideology have been enshrined in the public museums, galleries, libraries and archives of South Africa. In contrast, the images in this book portray Africans in a very different manner.

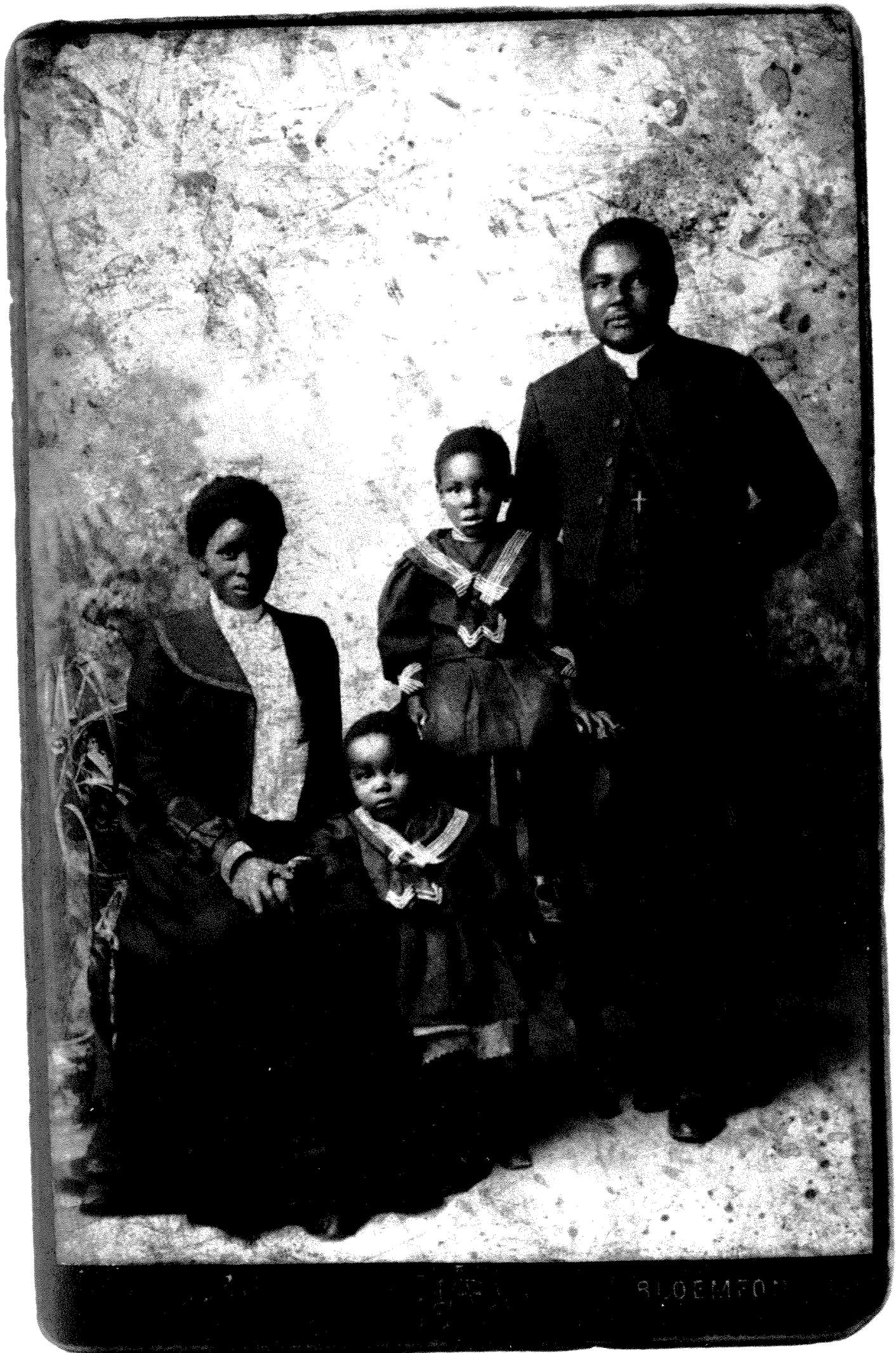
Yet all too often these images run the risk of being dismissed or ignored as merely bourgeois. However, it should be pointed out that right from the turn of the century and even earlier there were black people who spurned, questioned or challenged the government's racist policies. Many of those integrationists were people who owned property or had acquired Christian mission education, and considered themselves to be « civilized ». These people, taking their model from colonial officials and settlers, especially the English, lived a life in manner and dress very similar to those of European immigrants. The images reproduced here reflect their sensibilities, aspirations and view of themselves.

The beauty of these photos makes me wonder if they are not some kind of trick or illusion. The veiled, time-worn image has taken on a silvery sheen that reflects like the dirty puddle of my memory. Images of people in a state of contemplation, self-dramatization - or maybe - at a moment of

Photographer DEALE © >
Bloemfontein,

Orange River Colony, 1890.

Bishop Jacobus G. Xaba and his family. Bishop Xaba was the presiding Elder of the AME Church in Bloemfontein 1898-1904. The church participated strongly in the events leading up to the formation of the South African Native National Congress in 1912. This photograph was found in a wooden box labelled (in Afrikaans), « Aan M.V. Jooste van die personeel van Die Vaderland ». In the box there were 68 images including one of « Their most Gracious Majesties, Edward VII and Queen Alexandra - in their robes of State ». This box belongs to Moeketsi Msomi whose grandfather, John Rees Phakane, was a bishop in the AME Church.



BLOEMFON



A world between the real and the imaginary, made of insignificant experiences noted and pulled out of context. Moments reduced to simple apparitions, flashes of reflected light captured and stored in the film's memory. An obscure assemblage of lives called up, then forgotten.

This selection of photos was initially conceived as a metaphorical biography, although I now have doubts about this aspect of my approach. The tendency of the pictures towards the obscure, the weird and the allegorical directly reflects my personal choices. Like Ezekiel in the Bible, I embrace the apocalypse. I could blame my parents for my obsessive desire to explain and analyse everything, and to find the detached beauty of truth insignificant; yet the foundations of my character are hidden elsewhere and have to be looked for in my history between 1956 and today, during the time of apartheid. These photographs explore a part of my being which up until now I had neglected - my spirituality, I mean. There are several possible explanations for my repression of it: its ambivalence, the embarrassment it causes me, the fear of the political and the loss of direction it can give rise to.

This exploration is a personal attempt to come to terms with my own schizophrenic existence. The expression I've chosen as a title for this series - « Chasing Shadows » - may sound fanciful, but in African languages its meaning is the exact opposite. « Shadow » does not conjure up the same image or significance as the word *seriti* or *is'thunzi*. This word cannot easily be given a single meaning. In everyday use it can mean equally aura, presence, dignity, confidence, strength, spirit, essence, prestige or wellbeing. It can also express the experience of being loved or feared. A person's *seriti/is'thunzi* can be positive or negative and exert a powerful influence. Having a good or bad *seriti/is'thunzi* depends on the whims of enemies, witches, relatives dead or still living, friends and acquaintances, circumstances and time. Having one's own *seriti/is'thunzi* and defending it against the forces of evil, or attacking the *seriti/is'thunzi* of those perceived as enemies, preoccupies and torments many Africans. Even those not directly concerned are at least conscious of *seriti/is'thunzi*, although this consciousness is often denied, especially by the African elite living in contact with South African whites.

<

UNKNOWN photographer ©
Johannesburg, 1900.

Tokelo Nkole with friends. Tokelo Nkole was a great follower of Marcus Garvey and he also worked with Alan Paton at the Diepkloof reformatory School before he died in 1940. This image belongs to the Ramela family of Orlando East. The information was supplied by Emma Mothibe.

Silver gelatine print.

UNKNOWN photographer © >
Johannesburg, 1900.

Elizabeth and Jan van der Merwe. Elizabeth and Jan were siblings born to a family of « inboekselings » in Lindley, Orange River Colony now called the Free State. Inboekselings loosely translated means forced juvenile apprenticeship in agriculture. Her family became prosperous livestock and grain farmers at the turn of the century.

This information was supplied by Emma Mothibe.





<

Photographer SCHOLTZ STUDIO ©
 Lindley, Orange River Colony, 1900.
 Ouma Maria Letsipa and her daughter, Minkie Letsipa.
 Maria was born to a family of « Inboekselings » in Lindley, Orange River Colony now called the Free State. « Inboekseling » loosely translated means forced juvenile apprenticeship in agriculture. Her family became prosperous livestock and grain farmers at the turn of the century. The image belong to Ramela family of Orlando east. This information was supplied by Emma Mothibe.
 Albumen print.

I grew up on the threshing floor of the faith, a faith as much ritual as spiritual: a bizarre cocktail embracing pagan rites and Catholic beliefs. While aware of my reluctance to become entangled in this universe, I identify with it: and this does not seem to me out of the ordinary. Yet I always try to avoid the trap of its hypnotic embrace, which seems to deride my patiently cultivated indifference and self-confidence. I feel myself ambivalent about my ambivalence, embarrassed by my embarrassment.

This project took me into places in which the real and the unreal freely intermingle, and in which my knowledge of photographic technique was tested to the limit. While the pictures are a record of rituals, fetishes and places, I am not sure I have caught on film the essence of the feeling I thought I was showing. Perhaps I'm looking for something that refuses to be photographed. Perhaps I've only been chasing shadows.

Santu Mofokeng

Photographer >
 ALI WAL NORTH LOCATION SCHOOL ©
 P.G. Mdebuka.1900.

At the back of this print is written « A present from (and stamped P.G. Mdebuka – Location School, Aliwal North) to Jane Maloyi ». PG Mdebuka was hymn composer and minister of the methodist church. This photograph was found in a wooden box labelled (in Afrikaans), « Aan M.V. Jooste van die personeel van Die Vaderland ». In the box there were 68 images including one of « Their most Gracious Majesties, Edward VII and Queen Alexandra – In their robes of State ». This box belongs to Moeketsi Msomi whose grandfather, John Rees Phakane, was a bishop in the AME Church.
 Albumen print.

Albumen print.

