

# Using a camera in ethnographic fieldwork : an attempt to explore caring relationships

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# USING A CAMERA IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

An attempt to explore caring relationships

Text and Photos: *Jana Gerold*

When we look at anthropological publications, photographs are mainly used for either documentary or methodological purposes. Photographs are sometimes introduced as «realistic presentations» of what was studied and occasionally they seem to be deployed in order «to prove» that the researcher was actually there. Other researchers use photography as a method, informants take pictures and then discuss their meaning. Alternatively photographs are deliberately constructed with the support of informants. Finally photographs may also be produced to better recall interview partners, to remember situations and feelings – to have something «tangible» to relate to.

Whilst fieldwork photographs might be produced for a variety of purposes, we should all ask ourselves how the camera influences the interaction between ethnographer and informant. Although it is crucial to obtain informed consent before taking a photograph, we must also consider if the subject of the photograph is aware of future uses of their picture. Did I as researcher anticipate that her picture would be used as an illustration for the research project website? And did I tell her?

In a research project on old age, health and care in urban Tanzania, I photographed interview partners whenever I was permitted to do so. A colleague's advice to take along a portable printer and immediately hand back the photographs to the portrayed proved invaluable. After returning from fieldwork and by looking at the collection of photographs, they not only evoke vivid memories and associated feelings but also intensify interpretative meanings and transform aesthetic values. The diversity of meanings of photographs and their interpretations depend on the «eyes of the beholder», as Sarah Pink argues: «The meanings of photographs are arbitrary and subjective; they depend on who is looking. The same

photographic image may have a variety of (perhaps conflicting) meanings invested in it at different stages of ethnographic research and representation, as it is viewed by different eyes and audiences in diverse temporal historical, spatial, and cultural contexts» (Pink 2001: 51).

In pairing photographs and text in the following, the aim is not merely to «translate visual evidence into verbal knowledge, but to explore the relationship between visual and other (including verbal) knowledge» (Pink 2001: 96).

## The photographs on relationships

Relationships among elderly persons living in a poor neighbourhood in urban Dar es Salaam unfold in a context of a minimal social welfare state. It is very common to experience economic hardship during old age, yet, solitude is seemingly less experienced. The elderly are committed to maintaining a variety of relationships, which mostly involve grandchildren, spouse and siblings.

## Intergenerational relationships

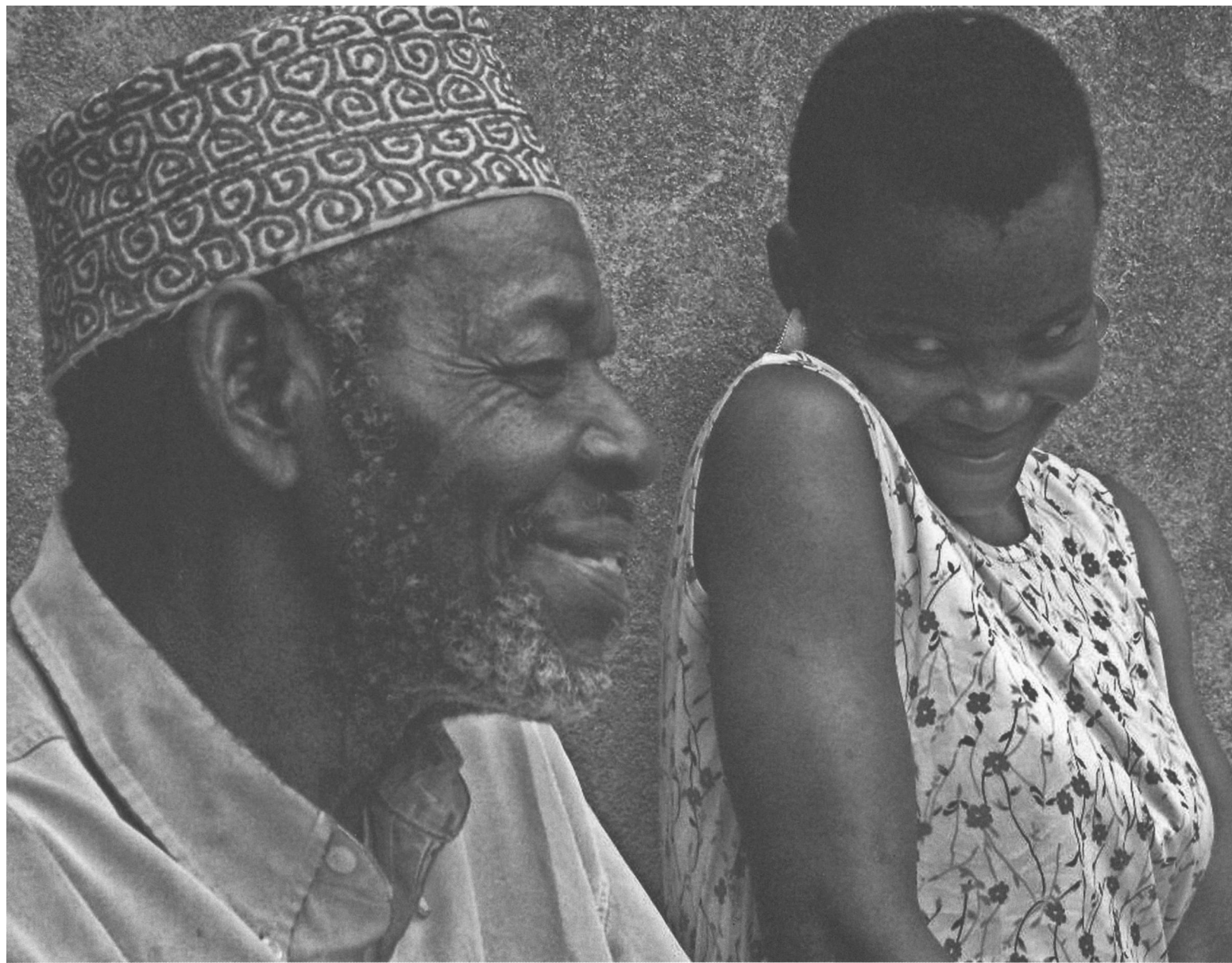
Alina (**cover photo**) is the third wife of Hamisi, who is now more than 80 years old. They do not have a child in common, but raise the two-year-old granddaughter of Alina. Alina's daughter remarried, and left her daughter with her mother. Although Alina struggles daily to provide enough food for the small family, she does not want to recall the times without the granddaughter. She addresses her granddaughter using the Kiswahili term for grandmother, *bibi*. This dem-













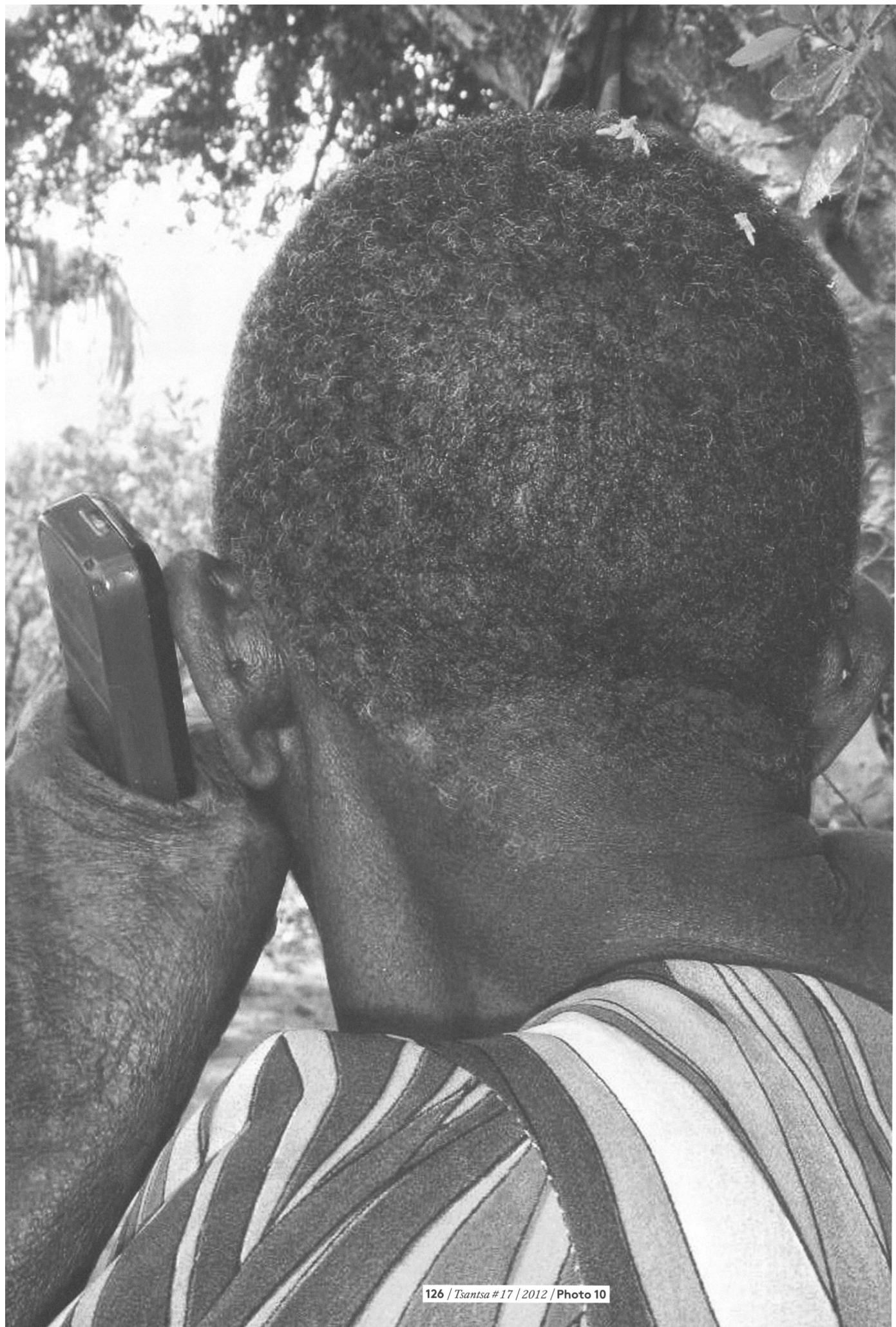














onstrates her fondness for her granddaughter and the special nature of their relationship. Grandmothers and granddaughters usually develop an exceptionally intimate relationship, as grandmothers are in charge of teaching reproductive health issues. After girls reach puberty and before they get married, special ceremonies are held, where grandmothers initiate girls into womanhood. The teachings involve topics such as sexual pleasure, sexual practices, hygiene, the reproductive cycle and the handling of marital conflicts. The beginning of womanhood is symbolically consummated when grandmothers hand over their strings of beads to their granddaughters who wear them around their waists as a marker of their sexual maturity. Grandfathers are in charge of teaching life's secrets to their grandsons. Hamisi however finds it difficult to pass on any experience to his grandson, Goodluck (**photo 2**), since he «saw everything already». He would rather just listen to his grandson's stories, as he tells him how he got drunk for the first time with his friends and passed out behind the school building. A grandfather, Hamisi claims, is not in the position to discipline the grandson, however he feels proud when Goodluck turns to him for advice.

### Spouse relations

Relationships undergo challenging dynamics. Both couples, Salum and Halima (**photo 3**) and Neema and Omari (**photo 4**) were constantly arguing with each other during our interviews. The couples' history is somewhat similar, both men divorced their respective wives over thirty years ago, but in old age, these wives were asked by their children to care for their former husband. During the interview Salum and Halima fought over an unsettled property inheritance and Neema and Omari argued over food preparation. The photographs, taken during the interviews, however reveal little about these quarrels.

When I first met Abedi in 2010 (**photo 5**), he had just married Azana. He was very proud of having a wife half his age and enjoyed the playful comments of his peers. When I met him one year later, he was silently grieving Azana's sudden death but had already married Zera (**photo 6**). His peers had recommended Zera to him, so that he would have somebody to prepare his food, wash his clothes and «just be there» for him.

### Member relations

Many elderly people were active members of at least one group. These groups for instance facilitate collective claims towards the national pension scheme on outstanding pension

benefits (**photo 7**), or help their members with projects for their livelihood security (**photo 8**) or promote health campaigns in the neighbourhoods.

### Virtual relations

Yusufu (**photo 9**) bought his mobile phone after he was able to successfully participate in a community chicken-breeding project. Now he can easily consult his sister Mariam (**photo 10**), who lives 200 kilometres away, when making decisions about issues such as the arrangement of burials and the management of conflicts. However, in general, mobile phones were not only used for emergencies, but to maintain and renegotiate existing social relationships. Even though the number of contacts onlystored in the phones varied between 11 and 117, elderly people reported having regular conversations with a handful of contacts. Such contacts are maintained through regular or even spontaneous calls in which various ritual greetings often consume much of the conversation. Nevertheless, these ritual exchanges about nothing specific are perceived to reaffirm relationships which can then be drawn upon in times of need.

### Conclusion

The relationships depicted in this photo-essay are shaped by different and divergent intentions, expectations, potentials and necessities and thus result in the effect that they are not stable over time. They are multifaceted social interactions, where elderly persons often act either as care receiver or care provider. Care relationships and care practices are not only individual obligations and personal challenges, but also expressions of changing social norms.

## REFERENCE

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