

Postcards: A Neglected Source of Anthropological Data

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INTRODUCTION

Postcards became popular as a means of communication and with collectors from around 1890 and for the next fifty years some millions were produced on high definition paper about every conceivable subject and record in detail whatever the camera aimed at. Many were exchanged and contain no more than the addressee and led to the accumulation of postcards in collections. Probably over a quarter of a million postcards were produced by Indian publishers. As sources of anthropological data, they are available in large quantities on most public activities.

THE COMMERCIAL POSTCARD

The human eye and the words of informants are intrinsically biased by biological reality and social environments and can only relate to their lifetimes, but with postcards one can only guess at the reasons for their printing other than that they were produced for sale and that they were presumed to have some commercial value. They were certainly not produced for the latter use by social scientists.

In most cases we do know who took the pictures and thus they are for social sciences purposes neutral data from which visible information can be taken and assessed. The quality of their production is usually so good that it is possible to read street names, shop signs, the composition of crowds, the details of personal ornamentation and fashion and the names on monuments which are indistinct to the human eye.

These postcards are an additional asset for researchers as they are usually out of copyright or even if their producers are known, they are often untraceable or have gone out of business long ago. When such data is printed in books, then copyright rests with their owners and publishers and copyright becomes an expensive issue.

One suspects that unused postcards come from the family albums of long dead tourists but many of these both from them and residents have been posted. Thus the data comes from both a known

location and have been dated and post-marked if only to show that they have passed through the locations depicted; in many cases the trivialities of the message parallels current use of mobile phones.

It is not only the enormous numbers of cards which is of interest but the ways in which they provide data for specialised interests which dealers can remember and sell. There are periodic direct sales and auctions of postcards in Britain, USA and mainland Europe and a regular monthly sale in London would average over a hundred dealers. Most such sales would have an average of fifty thousand cards on offer from the equivalent of a few rupees to several hundred pounds sterling each. Whether one finds cards connected to a special social science interest is often more a reflection of the time available for looking than their intrinsic rarity

The General Availability of Postcards Related to Special Interests

If they were scarce in relation to particular interests, their value would be muted by their rarity, but this is not the case. It is not known how many were in fact produced even by known publishers since serial numbers are often duplicated and more popular scenes were reprinted under different numbers and by different publishers. In some cases it is not clear how many photographers were publishing in a particular country at any time. Some fifty different photographers were active in Burma during this period and perhaps half that number in the Sudan.

A French photographic firm Lucien Levy whose cards are all marked LL, has probably produced a hundred thousand cards of France, the 1914-18 War, North Africa, Egypt, Palestine with rarer cards from Russia, Indo-China and Australia. These cards provide a rich mine of social information since only a very small minority of cards involving people are posed. Ahuja an Indian photographer in Burma probably produced a thousand cards of which the majority are related to Buddhist worship. Most Christian missionary organisations produced their own postcards to illustrate their work and the

surroundings such as the several hundred tribal life series of the American Baptist Mission in Burma

Similar huge quantities were produced in India reflecting the British military and civil presence there and their interest in the strangeness of Indian life particularly Hinduism and the extremes of devotion. Particular historical periods produced large numbers of cards. Crete was the centre of international tension from the 1890s over Ottoman suzerainty until its union with Greece in 1910. The island was then a condominium administered by soldiers from Britain, France, Italy, Austria-Hungary and Russia and resulted in at least two thousand cards about these forces and Cretan life.

RECENT USES OF POSTCARDS

It would seem that social scientists have been lagging behind in their use of postcards. Geographers have used postcards of beach scenes to show their formation and erosion over time. The preparation for the invasion of Europe in 1944 used beach postcards such as an LL card of the beach at Arromanches which showed the composition of the beach and the height of the cliffs. The reconstruction of destroyed historic buildings in Europe was aided by the postcards of their details in sequences of cards.

There are general articles in postcard magazines on postcards related to special events such as railway accidents, the Suez canal, British military buildings in the East, ethnographic tattoos, a Lipton series of tea production in Ceylon and a French monograph on sexually oriented postcards in French colonies as well as their occasional use in the historical sections of travel handbooks. Overall there has been no systematic use of this source in social science research.

In economically developed countries newspapers usually have libraries of their own back numbers but not the originals of the photographs printed. Such data is not available for most of the world and certainly not for the period in which postcards flourished. Thus they remain a dispersed source of data which has not suffered from institutional neglect and decay; their individual ownership means that they come sporadically onto the market and in a good state of preservation. Particular interesting postcards are just as likely to appear in small local or provincial sales as in the big city ones.

The Uses of Postcards for Anthropological Research

- a. *Costume.* Postcards of individuals show costume in relation to occupation such as the extraordinary apparel of posing Swahili prostitutes, an English woman carrying a sunshade while riding a horse in competitive jumping in India and Hindu holy men. Crowd scenes show the costumes of a range of ages for both sexes as to the appropriate clothes for promenading, watching sport, pilgrimages, church going, relaxing on the beach, and for a range of occupations cremating dead bodies in Banaras to gardening in the estates of the wealthy and farming generally. Family photographs show not only the costumes appropriate for each age and sex but what is correct for particular family occasions and in many cases servants are present and even named. Even though Muslim women may be heavily veiled, shoes and socks are visible as do varieties in the form of their veiling from that of Algiers women walking in the street and wealthy women in Cairo with coach and footmen.
- b. *Costume in Relation to Occupation.* While cards of actors and actresses are extremely common in Europe and show off current fashions, those of Burmese performers show their specialised costumes which partly imitate court costumes from before the British occupation. Those of warriors may exist no longer but those of initiates merit comparison with modern data. Posed photographs illustrate how Burmese wished to be depicted with some of the women smoking huge maize leaf cigars.
- c. *Physical Appearance.* Groups of Burmese and Indian hill people not only show their poverty in comparison to urban dwellers, but their physical condition such as the presence of goitre and malnutrition as do scenes of opium smokers.
- d. *Composition of Crowds.* Data on who participates or looks on at religious ceremonies is always scarce even if it is supposed to be official. The ages and sexes of participants at Banaras, the onlookers of Hindus mutilating themselves in honour of Murugan in Singapore, the blessing of fishing boats in Crete and those making offerings to the Buddha in Rangoon. Who promenades and

who sits on the beach and who waits on stations for trains.

- e. *Personal Ornamentation*. How people decorate themselves by the arrangement of their hair, physically changing their appearance by stretching their ear lobes, lips, skull formation and necks as well as the cutting of cheeks and foreheads in the Sudan and Nigeria. Ornamental and protective tattooing on faces, arms and bodies and protective amulets which can often be enlarged for details. The wearing of rings, bangles and the many ways in which accessories are added to costume by flowers, sticks and decorative ribbons. The wealth and status of the wearers is as visible in Egypt as it is among the Parsees of Bombay and among Kachins of north Burma by the number and quality of these ornamentations.
- f. *Composition of Work Groups*. Who is planting, harvesting and ploughing. And who are the crews of rice boats on the Irrawaddy. Rare cards showed a caravan of many hundred porters walking across the central plains of Tanganyika in the German era and the composition and size of a German military column moving out of Kilwa complete with flags as well as the dignitaries meeting the German Colonial Minister on his visit to Dar es Salaam and the workers in sisal processing factories. An even rarer card showed a meeting of British and French officials in the Ledo enclave in the Sudan and the nature of the ceremony. Official ceremonies are commonly represented and numerous cards of the Delhi Royal Durbar are common.
- g. *Buildings and their Planning*. Postcards of 'native' life often show the style of housing and how they are built and the juxtaposition of houses in a village. One of spirit shrines among the Nyamwezi of Tanzania showed that there has been no change in their form in a century.
- h. *Religious Ceremonies*. Many show popular ceremonies such as the annual parade for the sending of the carpet from Cairo to Mecca to cover the Kaaba, processions on elephants in honour of the Buddhas's tooth in Kandy, Ceylon, fiesta parades and processions in honour of particular devotions in Roman Catholic societies and the pulling through the streets of huge carriages in honour of

Hindu deities. Others show Muslim prayer both individually and in disciplined lines, with women segregated at the back behind screens and the overflow praying on the walls, tombs of saints and the ways they are decorated and the visits to them on holidays. Many show how altars were decorated and what types of offerings and the flowers used which were placed before statues of the Buddha. Construction and decorations on graves in New Guinea, the Kachin uplands of Myanmar and prayer flags on hill-tops in the Himalayas. It seems unlikely that any book contain pictures of Tibetans dismembering bodies. River baptisms for African converts.

- i. *Tribes*. Under the title of 'typical' there are series of postcards showing people from different hill tribes in Burma and others such as the Nuer, Danakil, Shilluk and Dinka from the Sudan. A rarer series shows the Andaman islanders in some detail. All such cards show people in forms of behaviour which no longer exist.
- j. *Occupations*. Specialist crafts are shown such as the carvers of Buddhist statues and in the form of particular crafts such as the construction of outrigger canoes in Ceylon Market selling shows both vendors and buyers. Shilluk hippopotamus hunting equipment, canoes and hunters in the Sudan.
- k. *Hostile Depictions*. Since most of these cards were produced for a Western market some show aspects of Asian and African life to be regarded as uncivilised and violent. Mutilation of bodies in North-West frontier fighting, Chinese executions postcards are unlikely to be found in official publications.

CONCLUSIONS

It is not only that there are so many millions of postcards which are potentially available but that in comparison to the illustrations in books which are shared with anyone who cares to read them, they are sources of data which are personal to the researcher. They can collect cards for their own research purposes and what they find in cards and their numbers is almost as personal as field work.

It seems likely that they are more postcards of Sudanese and Andamanese tribal life than

have been published in books and unlike the photographs in the collections of specialised institutions, they are negligible problems over copyright and attribution. Postcard dealers often have their rarer stock on computers and many will look for specialised needs.

It is not so much looking for postcards to illustrate a particular theme such as scenes connecting religion and violence and the environment (Tanner and Mitchell, 2002). A range of cards can be examined and data seen in them can be further developed by fieldwork and in libraries. Informants can be asked to comment on what they see in cards shown to them.

Anthropologists should see postcards as a valuable source of data for ways of living which may no longer exist and which can be invaluable for comparative purposes. There may be written

descriptions of long gone activities with a small number of illustrations but none can be as comprehensive as postcard photographs which record not only what was intended but much ancillary data.

KEYWORDS Quantity. Accuracy. Resource. Historical comparison. Range of interests.

ABSTRACT Thousands of postcards exist covering public activities in Asia and Africa for which very little other data exists. This data is a valuable resource for anthropologists for comparison to contemporary activities which is both cheap and out of copyright as well as a source for original research

REFERENCE

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