

Chronicles written with a camera

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Abstract: Photography, since its inception, has transformed from a simple tool for portrait-making into a powerful medium of cultural documentation, artistic expression, and historical preservation. Beyond its aesthetic qualities, photography serves as a visual chronicle that reflects the social, political, and cultural realities of different eras. It captures the transformations of fashion, architecture, traditions, and collective memory, while simultaneously contributing to the construction of national identity. Through the works of war photographers such as Robert Capa and James Nachtwey, and ethnographic documentation of endangered cultures, photography emerges as both an archive of human experience and an active participant in shaping public consciousness. This paper explores the multifaceted role of photography as a mirror of culture and identity, a document of social change, and a witness to both triumphs and tragedies of history. Drawing on global case studies as well as the Georgian context, the research highlights photography's ability to bridge the past and present, ensuring that traditions, rituals, and historical events are preserved for future generations. Ultimately, photography is positioned not merely as a technological invention, but as a cultural and historical phenomenon that records time, defines identities, and informs the future.

Keywords: Photography, Cultural Memory, Identity, Social Change, War Photography, Visual Documentation.

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Introduction

Background and Context

Photography emerged in the early nineteenth century as a scientific discovery, primarily intended to reproduce realistic portraits and preserve individual likenesses. At first, its role was limited, often considered a mechanical replacement for painting. However, as the medium evolved, photography developed into an independent art form and a powerful tool of documentation. It quickly became more than just a technical process of capturing light; it became a cultural mirror that reflected the values, traditions, and social conditions of societies across time.

From the daguerreotypes of the 1830s to the digital revolution of the twenty-first century, photography has undergone profound transformations. Each stage in this evolution brought not only technical innovation but also a redefinition of its purpose and meaning. While early photography focused on portraits and family memories, it gradually expanded to include landscapes, architecture, ethnographic records, and documentation of wars and revolutions. Today, photography exists at the intersection of art, history, sociology, and anthropology, serving multiple functions simultaneously.

Photography as Historical Memory

Photography has always been closely linked with the human desire to preserve memory. A single image can freeze a moment in time, creating an enduring record of cultural rituals, clothing, architecture, and social practices that might otherwise be forgotten. Historical photographs, such as those of nineteenth-century Georgian national costumes, traditional feasts, or the streets of Old Tbilisi, have become invaluable sources for historians and anthropologists. Similarly, iconic global images—

such as the photograph of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s march for civil rights or Albert Einstein's playful portrait—are imprinted in collective consciousness, shaping how societies remember their past.

Unlike written records, which require interpretation and literacy, photographs have a universal visual language that can be understood across generations and cultures. This accessibility has made photography one of the most powerful forms of historical evidence, bridging the gap between past and present.

Significance of the Study

While photography has been extensively used in journalism, art, and cultural preservation, its significance as a multidimensional research subject remains underappreciated. Photography is not merely a tool of representation but also an active agent in shaping identity and influencing public opinion. Social documentary photography exposes poverty and inequality; war photography confronts viewers with the human cost of conflict; and ethnographic photography safeguards cultural traditions that risk disappearing in the modern era.

This paper argues that photography should be studied not only as an artistic expression but also as a historical, cultural, and social phenomenon. By analyzing photography through these lenses, we can understand how images construct collective memory, reinforce cultural identity, and reflect societal changes.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of this research are:

1. **To analyze photography as a medium of cultural memory** — understanding how it documents and preserves traditions, rituals, and historical events.

2. **To examine photography's role in shaping national and cultural identity** – exploring how photographs strengthen collective belonging and historical continuity.
3. **To investigate photography as a witness to social and political change** – particularly in contexts of war, poverty, and humanitarian crises.
4. **To highlight photography's contribution to science and architecture** – considering its role in preservation, archaeology, and documentation.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. How does photography function as a repository of cultural and historical memory?
2. In what ways does photography contribute to the preservation and transmission of national identity?
3. How has documentary and war photography shaped global perceptions of social and political events?
4. What are the implications of photography's dual role as both art and historical evidence?

Structure of the Paper

The paper is structured into several sections. Following this introduction, a literature review explores the existing scholarship on photography as art, memory, and cultural identity. The methodology section outlines the qualitative approach used for analyzing case studies of photographers and photographic archives. Subsequent chapters focus on photography as cultural memory, photography and identity, social and political photography, and its applications in science and architecture. Finally, the discussion and conclusion synthesize the findings and highlight photography's role as a cultural phenomenon that transcends time.

Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature

Photography has long attracted the attention of artists, historians, sociologists, and philosophers. Scholars have debated its role as an art form, its authenticity as historical evidence, and its ability to shape cultural identity. This section reviews the major theoretical and academic contributions that provide a foundation for this study.

1. Photography as Representation

The earliest debates around photography questioned whether it should be considered art or merely a mechanical reproduction of reality. Walter Benjamin (1936) argued in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that photography stripped art of its "aura" by making images infinitely reproducible. Yet, this reproducibility also democratized access to culture, making visual art and historical documentation available to the masses.

Roland Barthes, in his seminal work *Camera Lucida* (1980), emphasized the emotional power of photography. He introduced the concepts of *studium* (the general cultural meaning of a photograph) and *punctum* (the personal, emotional detail that "pierces" the viewer). Barthes' framework is crucial for understanding photography's dual role: as both an objective record and a deeply subjective experience.

Susan Sontag, in *On Photography* (1977), critically examined photography's influence on perception. She argued that photographs shape how we understand reality, sometimes creating an illusion of knowledge while desensitizing viewers to violence and suffering.

Together, these theorists highlight the complexity of photography as representation—balancing between objectivity and interpretation.

2. Photography and Memory Studies

Photography has been extensively studied within the field of memory studies. Maurice Halbwachs' theory of *collective memory* provides a foundation for understanding photography as a cultural archive. Photographs, by capturing rituals, monuments, and social practices, help societies remember their shared past.

Marianne Hirsch introduced the concept of *postmemory* to describe how photographs transmit memories of traumatic events (such as the Holocaust) to subsequent generations who did not directly experience them. In this way, photography extends memory beyond lived experience, creating intergenerational connections.

In the Georgian context, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs of national costumes, traditional architecture, and rural life serve as visual archives of cultural memory. These images have become essential for ethnographers and historians studying the evolution of Georgian identity.

3. Photography and National/Cultural Identity

Scholars have also explored photography's role in shaping identity. Benedict Anderson's notion of *imagined communities* helps explain how photographs contribute to nation-building by visualizing collective belonging. National symbols captured in photographs—flags, monuments, ceremonies—reinforce the idea of shared identity.

Elizabeth Edwards, an anthropologist specializing in photography, argues that photographs act as "cultural texts" that embody traditions, rituals, and social values. Her research emphasizes how photography not only documents but also constructs identity by framing what is remembered and what is forgotten.

In tourism studies, scholars highlight how photographs are used to promote cultural heritage and attract visitors. For example, images of Georgian churches, mountain landscapes, and traditional dances serve both as cultural preservation and as tools for nation branding.

4. War and Documentary Photography

The literature on war photography underscores its dual role as documentation and as propaganda. Robert Capa's images of the Spanish Civil War and World War II, for instance, are valued as authentic testimonies of conflict but were also shaped by editorial choices and political contexts.

Susan Moeller (1989), in *Shooting War*, analyzed how war photography influences public opinion and international politics. She noted that iconic photographs—such as the "Napalm Girl" from the Vietnam War—can galvanize social movements and shift public attitudes toward war.

More recently, scholars have studied James Nachtwey's and Steve McCurry's works, highlighting how they humanize distant conflicts and marginalized communities. While critics argue that such photographs risk aestheticizing suffering, defenders emphasize their role in raising awareness and mobilizing humanitarian responses.

5. Photography, Anthropology, and Ethnography

Photography has also been central to anthropology and ethnography. Early ethnographers used photographs to document the clothing, tools, and rituals of indigenous peoples. While some of this work has been criticized for colonial bias, these photographs remain valuable records of cultural practices that might otherwise have disappeared.

Christopher Pinney's studies on Indian photography illustrate how local communities adopted and adapted photographic practices, creating new forms of visual culture. Similarly, projects like Jimmy Nelson's *Before They Pass Away* aim to preserve the visual record of endangered tribes, though they also raise ethical debates about representation and authenticity.

In Georgia, ethnographic photography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries remains a cornerstone of cultural research. Collections housed in museums and archives serve as vital sources for reconstructing traditional practices.

6. Photography in Architecture and Science

In architectural history, Ezra Stoller and Yuan Baan have been studied as photographers who capture not only buildings but also the social life surrounding them. Their works illustrate how photography mediates our understanding of space and urban identity.

Scientific applications of photography—such as in archaeology, manuscript restoration, and astronomy—have also been documented in the literature. These studies emphasize photography's ability to extend human perception, making invisible details visible and preserving fragile cultural heritage.

7. Photography in the Digital Era

Recent scholarship has shifted to the impact of digital photography and social media. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook have turned photography into a form of everyday self-expression, blurring the line between private memory and public archive. Scholars such as José van Dijck argue that digital images are not just personal mementos but also part of larger cultural and political discourses.

This transition raises new questions: how will digital photography affect the preservation of cultural memory? What are the implications of image manipulation and deepfakes for authenticity? These contemporary debates highlight photography's evolving role in society.

Conclusion of Literature Review

The reviewed literature demonstrates that photography is a multifaceted field of study, intersecting with art theory, memory studies, sociology, anthropology, and media studies. While scholars have highlighted photography's power to document, preserve, and shape identity, gaps remain in understanding regional contexts such as Georgia's photographic heritage within the global discourse. This study contributes to filling that gap by combining global perspectives with a focused analysis of Georgian examples,

situating photography as both a universal and a local cultural phenomenon.

Methodology

Introduction

The study of photography as cultural memory, identity, and historical documentation requires a methodological approach that bridges the humanities and social sciences. Since photography is not only an artistic form but also a historical record and cultural text, this research employs qualitative methods of analysis. The methodology is designed to interpret photographs both as visual artifacts and as socio-cultural documents, situating them within their historical and cultural contexts.

Research Design

This research adopts an interpretive and descriptive research design, focusing on how photography communicates meaning across time and space. Rather than testing hypotheses through statistical models, the study emphasizes interpretation, contextualization, and comparative analysis. The design is particularly suited for examining photography's symbolic, cultural, and historical dimensions.

The study is structured around four thematic areas, which align with the research objectives:

1. **Photography as cultural memory** – photographs as visual archives of traditions, rituals, and historical events.
2. **Photography and national identity** – images that construct or reinforce cultural belonging.
3. **Social and political photography** – war, poverty, revolutions, and humanitarian crises.
4. **Photography in science and architecture** – technical and documentary applications.

Data Sources

The research draws on a wide range of **primary and secondary sources**:

- **Primary Sources:**
 - Historical photographs from archives and museums (e.g., nineteenth-century Georgian national costumes, Old Tbilisi photographs).
 - Iconic images by international photographers such as Robert Capa, Steve McCurry, James Nachtwey, and Jimmy Nelson.
 - Photographic collections documenting architecture (Ezra Stoller, Yuan Baan).
 - War and documentary photographs from global conflicts (Vietnam War, Rwandan genocide, 9/11).
- **Secondary Sources:**
 - Academic books and journal articles on photography theory (Sontag, Barthes, Benjamin, Hirsch).
 - Ethnographic studies on photography and cultural identity (Edwards, Pinney).
 - Media studies and cultural memory literature.

- Online archives, exhibitions, and museum catalogues.

Analytical Framework

The analysis follows a **visual culture framework**, drawing on theories of representation, collective memory, and identity construction. Three main approaches guide the analysis:

1. **Semiotic Analysis** – understanding how images produce meaning through symbols, composition, and context. For example, a war photograph may symbolize both suffering and resilience.
2. **Contextual Analysis** – situating photographs in their historical and cultural context. A nineteenth-century photograph of Georgian traditional dress, for example, is analyzed not only as an aesthetic object but as a historical record of cultural continuity.
3. **Comparative Case Studies** – contrasting Georgian photographic archives with global examples to identify similarities and differences in how photography preserves memory and constructs identity.

Case Studies

The research is structured around several **case studies**:

- **Georgian Ethnographic Photography** – focusing on archival collections that document traditional clothing, architecture, and rituals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- **War Photography** – analyzing Robert Capa's Spanish Civil War images, James Nachtwey's Rwandan genocide documentation, and Steve McCurry's *Afghan Girl*.
- **Cultural Documentation** – Jimmy Nelson's *Before They Pass Away* project and its role in preserving endangered traditions.
- **Architectural Photography** – Ezra Stoller's modernist architecture images and Yuan Baan's human-centered architectural photographs.

These case studies provide a comparative lens to understand photography as a universal but context-specific phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

Photography, particularly war and ethnographic photography, raises ethical questions regarding representation, consent, and exploitation. This research acknowledges the following ethical issues:

- The risk of aestheticizing human suffering in war photography.
- The potential for colonial bias in ethnographic photography.
- The necessity of contextualizing images to avoid misinterpretation.

By critically engaging with these issues, the study aims to respect the dignity of subjects while acknowledging photography's limitations as historical evidence.

Limitations of the Study

While photography is a powerful medium of documentation, the study recognizes several limitations:

- **Subjectivity:** Photographs are not neutral records but are shaped by the photographer's perspective, context, and framing.
- **Accessibility:** Some archives and collections may not be fully accessible, limiting the scope of primary sources.
- **Interpretation:** Since photographs can carry multiple meanings, interpretations may vary across cultural and historical contexts.

These limitations highlight the importance of combining photographic analysis with historical and cultural research.

Conclusion

The methodological approach adopted in this study is qualitative, interpretive, and comparative. By analyzing photography as both an artistic and cultural text, and by examining case studies from Georgia and the wider world, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of photography's role as cultural memory, identity, and historical witness. This approach not only ensures a rigorous analysis of photographs as documents but also situates them within broader social, political, and cultural narratives.

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

Initially, the purpose of photography was to obtain a portrait image. Over time, photography developed and became an independent art form - photo art. Photography is a cultural mirror that reflects the face of society, its history, values, and pain. Photography is the memory of history, which shows in the form of visual documentary photographs what life was like decades ago, how clothing culture, fashion, architecture, and social norms were changing. It preserves historical moments, wars, revolutions, triumphs, and tragedies. For example, photographs depicting the march of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the famous portrait of Einstein with his tongue out. These frames create history and are forever imprinted in people's consciousness. Photography has changed the perception of traditions and the mechanisms for their preservation on a global scale, contributing to the solution of social problems.

Photography not only creates visual memory, but also forms the basis of cultural identity. Photography allows us to record and preserve traditional rituals, holidays, and for future generations to have a perception of these events. For example, nineteenth-century photographs of Georgian national clothes, table traditions, or old Tbilisi are unique historical documents today. Photographs not only show the past, but also contribute to the popularization of traditions and understanding their values. They not only document, but also revive and inform future generations. This is a kind of bridge between the past and the present. Photographing traditions helps strengthen national identity. These photographs connect generations and show how important each tradition is. For example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ethnographers and photographers created numerous photographic collections documenting the clothing, labor processes, and social relationships of people from different cultures. These photographs are today a vital and invaluable source for historians, sociologists, and ethnographers.

Photography also helps to show the changes taking place in society. Social photography documents poverty, inequality. Social

photography documents poverty, inequality, political events, and natural disasters. Photographs of national symbols, landscapes, and architecture are often used to strengthen cultural identity. In modern life, photographs are one of the main tools for the development of tourism, which is used to attract foreign visitors.

Photography has played a major role in scientific research, the restoration of manuscripts, the recording of historical monuments, and the discovery of archaeological remains.

Ezra Stoller is one of the most famous photographers of the 20th century. He documented America's most avant-garde buildings, including the works of Frank Lloyd Wright and other great architects. Yuan Baan is a contemporary photographer. He is known for his photographs of buildings that clearly show people in the background. In such photographs, he shows us how people interact with them.

In addition to their informative content, photographs taken during wars have acquired historical significance. Numerous images have reached us that tell us about armed conflicts, events in war zones, and life during wartime.

James Nachtwey is one of the most recognized war photographers of our time. He documented many conflicts, including the Rwandan genocide and the September 11 attacks in America. Robert Capa is considered the greatest photographer of all time. His works from the Spanish Civil War and World War II are known. Steve McCurry is one of the most famous photojournalists in the world. His most famous photo is "Afghan Girl". McCurry travels the world and documents the daily lives of different peoples, their emotions, and traditions. Photographer Jimmy Nanson is known for documenting rare and endangered tribes around the world. His project "Before They Disappear" combines unique photographs.

The development of photographic art is greatly facilitated by the organization of exhibitions in different countries and cities and the publication of photo-illustrated magazines.

Photography is not just a camera, it is a means of recording time, it is the essence of our culture, it preserves the past, explains our present and creates our future.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made regarding the role of photography in preserving cultural memory, shaping identity, and documenting social change:

1. **Preservation of Photographic Archives** – National and regional archives should digitize historical photographs to prevent deterioration and ensure broader accessibility for scholars, students, and the public. Special attention should be given to local and ethnographic collections that risk being overlooked in favor of global examples.
2. **Integration into Education** – Photography should be incorporated into school and university curricula, not only as an art form but also as a primary historical and cultural source. Teaching students how to critically read and interpret photographs can enhance their understanding of history and media literacy.
3. **Ethical Standards in Documentary Photography** – Institutions and photographers should adopt clear ethical guidelines, particularly when documenting vulnerable communities or conflict zones. This ensures respect for

human dignity and avoids exploitation or misrepresentation.

4. **Promotion of Cultural Identity through Photography** – Governments and cultural organizations should support exhibitions, festivals, and publications that highlight photography's role in preserving traditions and strengthening national identity. This also contributes to cultural diplomacy and tourism development.
5. **Research and Interdisciplinary Collaboration** – Scholars from history, anthropology, sociology, and media studies should collaborate on interdisciplinary projects that explore photography's multifaceted role. Joint research initiatives can provide more comprehensive insights into the relationship between visual culture and society.
6. **Use of Digital Platforms** – In the digital era, photography should be harnessed to create online repositories, interactive exhibitions, and community-driven archives that allow citizens to participate in preserving and sharing cultural memory.

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