

UNTAKEN PHOTOGRAPHS

The Personal and Relational Value of Field Photography among the Kággaba Community

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Abstract. This article proposes the phenomenon of ‘untaken photographs’ as a hybrid research-creation methodology that moves from representational photography to relational visual practice in the context of fieldwork with the Kággaba community in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia, and extends into digital media contexts. It shows why a photograph is sometimes not taken and the importance of preserving the moment only in the photographer’s memory. In an environment overflowing with digital images, we prefer the return to introspection, poetry, personal experiences, and a personal journal. The article emphasises photography as a way to relational knowledge and discusses how digital abstraction can foster deeper connections with the environment and people. The text combines reflection on the medium of photography with journal entries from the field to demonstrate how the photographic act is transformed in a situation

where the decision not to photograph becomes an approach that creates meaning.

Keywords: Kággaba, field photography, introspection, uncaptured photographs, the concept of memory, digital mediation, personal relationship to the image.

1. Introduction

In a contemporary media landscape saturated with images, the refusal to photograph can become a meaningful act of attention, restraint, and relation. The daily influx of photographs, videos, and digital artefacts creates an illusion of visual accessibility that often suppresses a deeper connection to the lived moment. This article attempts to show that a photograph does not always have to be taken to retain its meaning. Perhaps like a silence in a musical composition. On the contrary, preserving the moment in memory, introspective reflection, and poetic expression can provide a stronger, personal, and relational value.

Untaken photographs are moments in which the methodological chain from experience to visual fixation is deliberately interrupted. The aim of the article is to present the phenomenon of untaken photographs as a tool of reflection and an epistemological means that connects the photographer, the photographed persons and the environment in a unique relationship. This approach expands visual anthropology by integrating absence as a valid research material. Pink's sensory ethnography provides a methodological basis for this expansion by arguing that ethnographic practice should not privilege vision as the dominant route to knowledge. Visual materials remain important, but they are always embedded in multisensory environments and social relations. The untaken photograph therefore extends visual anthropology by asking what forms of knowing emerge when vision is decentered and when the researcher attends to sound, movement, touch, affect, atmosphere and memory (Pink, 2015).

The researcher's position in this context is that of an artist-researcher whose photographic practice is both the means of field engagement and the object of critical reflection. The camera is not used as a neutral recording device, nor is the diary used as a transparent account of experience. Both are understood as situated mediating practices shaped by the researcher's body, memory, cultural position, technical choices, ethical responsibilities, and relationships in the field. The methodology therefore accepts subjectivity not as a weakness to be eliminated, but as the condition through which situated knowledge becomes available.

The field work takes place among the Kággaba, also referred to in much anthropological and Spanish-language literature as the Kogi or Kogui, one of the Indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, alongside the Ikú, Wiwa and Kankuamo communities. Their territory extends across a highly diverse mountain system in northern Colombia. For the Kággaba, however, this territory cannot be reduced to geography or ecology. It is a sacred and relational field structured through ancestral law, ceremonial sites, paths, rivers, stones, mountains and obligations of care. The Sierra Nevada is thus lived as a cosmological centre and as a living system in which human and non-human presences are mutually implicated.



Figure 1. *Kággaba knowledge is closely associated with aluna, a generative dimension of thought, spirit, memory and potentiality that precedes and sustains the visible world. Spiritual authorities known as Mámás are trained to work within this order, maintaining relations between the community, the territory and the invisible forces that sustain life. Photography by the author.*

Kággaba knowledge is closely associated with aluna, a generative dimension of thought, spirit, memory and potentiality that precedes and sustains the visible world. Spiritual authorities known as Mámás are trained to work within this order, maintaining relations between the community, the territory and the invisible forces that sustain life. Their authority is not limited to ritual practice but extends to ecological, ethical, social and political responsibilities. In this context, visual representation cannot be treated as a neutral act. Photography introduces a technology of light, framing

and circulation into a knowledge system in which visibility is partial and where certain relations, practices and forms of knowledge are not intended for external display. This makes restraint, refusal and the untaken photograph central to an ethical methodology of field photography.

2. The Meaning Of Photography

Engagement with photography goes beyond pressing the shutter, composing through the viewfinder, or examining the resulting images. It encompasses the full spectrum of epistemic labour involved in photographic practice, including cognitive processes, the roles assigned to photography, the ways images are interpreted, observed, disseminated, and made accessible. This understanding of photography resonates with Pink's sensory ethnography, which challenges the reduction of ethnographic knowledge to visual observation or verbal description. For Pink, fieldwork is produced through the researcher's embodied, multisensory and situated engagement with people, places, materials and environments. Photography, therefore, does not simply record what is seen; it participates in a broader sensory process through which knowledge is felt, negotiated and made meaningful in relation to place (Pink, 2015). This expanded understanding of photography also resonates with Fackler's argument that photographic meaning is not produced through visibility alone, but through material, affective, and sensory relations between image, medium, body, and viewer. Photography therefore cannot be reduced to optical representation; it is also a mode of embodied encounter (Fackler, 2019). Photographs can maintain significance and resonance even when stored in archives. This sense of photographic evidence depends on the indexical logic of the analogue image, in which the photograph is understood as a material trace of an encounter with light, time, and presence, even while its meanings remain unstable and culturally mediated (Batchen, 1997; Doane, 2007). In a media-saturated environment, the photographic image and the experience of encountering it are becoming increasingly accessible and widespread and therefore less singular. Photography is losing aspects of its originality, particularly due to the extensive possibilities for image manipulation. In digital cul-

ture, the photograph becomes less a stable object than a mutable file, open to circulation, recombination, meta-data extraction, and algorithmic recontextualisation, which alters both its evidential status and its relation to memory (Fontcuberta, 2014; Ritchin, 2009; Van Dijck, 2007). This proliferation of visual material occurs without applying reduction, absence, or limitation as ethical and epistemological strategies in visual production, raising questions regarding the legitimacy, value, authorship, privacy, and meaning of photographic creation (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2013). Photography's authority as evidence is never innocent; it is produced through social, institutional, and technological conditions that determine what can be seen, recorded, circulated, and believed (Tagg, 1988).

Rather than understanding photographic materiality as something stable, purely physical, or attached only to the objecthood of the print, Fackler proposes a relational understanding of materiality: it comes into being through sensory contact between photograph and perceiving subject (Fackler, 2019, p. 520). This is particularly relevant to field photography, where the photograph's meaning is not contained solely in the image, but in the embodied conditions of its production, handling, recollection, and later viewing. In the absence of the camera, numerous phenomena remain unnoticed, lingering in the silence of their own existence. Through the camera, the photographer establishes a relationship with these phenomena, attributing meaning to them, while the observed elements reciprocally confer significance and purpose upon the photographer's own experience. The discovery of one element frequently triggers a sequence of perceptual openings, allowing additional phenomena to emerge and forming a mosaic of attentional focus. Visual compositions arise – unexpected, or aesthetically striking arrangements of light, colour, and form – revealing life even in the subtlest movements. Other agents in the environment alter the scene, generating new and indeterminate variations of reality. A segment of reality becomes the photographer's domain, delineated by the scope of her gaze, or more precisely, the reach of the camera. Beyond the limits of direct vision, imagination and creative projection assume prominence, informed and supported by knowledge, education, prior experience, cognition, and subconscious processes, which

operate in the background with a rhythm reminiscent of the perforated frames of a film strip. Such perceptual openings can be understood through Pink's concept of emplacement: sensory experience is not located solely inside the individual subject, but emerges through the relation between body, environment, memory and social encounter. The photographer's attention is therefore shaped by the terrain, weather, darkness, paths, bodily effort, and the presence of others. Field photography becomes an emplaced practice, in which seeing is inseparable from moving, listening, waiting and being affected by place (Pink, 2015).



Figure 2. *A segment of reality becomes the photographer's domain, delineated by the scope of her gaze, or more precisely, the reach of the camera. Beyond the limits of direct vision, imagination and creative projection assume prominence, informed and supported by knowledge, education, prior experience, cognition, and subconscious processes, which operate in the background with a rhythm reminiscent of the perforated frames of a film strip.* Photography by the author.

The camera functions as a collaborative partner for the photographer. Such collaboration can be understood through postphenomenological approaches to technology, in which instruments do not merely extend

human perception but actively mediate how the world appears and how subjects act within it (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2005). Even with complete mastery over the technical functions of the photographic apparatus, the camera maintains its own agency and expressive potential. As the temporal distance from the moment of exposure increases, individual photographs crystallise as discrete points within a broader, indeterminate flow of time. Initially, time resembles a river; with greater temporal perspective, it expands into an ocean in which unrecorded and forgotten events coalesce, while continuing to weave a network of individual sequences, causes, and effects that converge upon the moments successfully captured by the photographer. Over time, these images elicit a spectrum of responses, including disgust, confusion, surprise, estrangement, discomfort, joy, sentimentality, satisfaction, nostalgia, relief, or reverence, and at times, the reactions are reversed. Such shifting responses confirm that photographic meaning is affectively produced. Following Fackler, photographs should be understood not only as visual signs but as affective and sensory objects whose meanings emerge differently in each encounter with a perceiving subject (Fackler, 2019). Each photograph offers the potential for a unique reading with each encounter. Photographs may therefore be understood not only as visual records but as relational objects with social biographies, changing their meanings as they move through time, contexts, viewers, and forms of use (Belting, 2011; Edwards & Hart, 2004; Pinney, 2011).

The purpose of visual analysis is to apprehend reality from new temporal, spatial, and perspectival angles. In visual anthropology, photographs are not only illustrations or documentary supplements; they are research encounters, analytical objects, and relational artefacts through which knowledge is produced, negotiated, and interpreted (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015; Edwards, 2015; Pink, 2021). So, the photographer seeks to translate visual phenomena into verbal expression, effectively decoding the visual language into communicable concepts. This process establishes a bridge between the visual, often associated with intuition and aesthetic perception, and the verbal, which is linked to logic, factual content, and systematic knowledge. The photographer continuously interrogates her own perception: *What am I truly seeing, and why do I perceive*

it in this particular manner? She does not pre-compose images mentally; rather, she relies on a deep repository of visual experiences accumulated over time, many of which are no longer consciously accessible. She cannot fully anticipate the sensations she aims to encounter. For her, the process is defined by spontaneous discovery rather than deliberate staging. Subsequently, she revisits her photographs repeatedly, observing how they gradually form an interconnected system of relationships. If this process becomes overly constrained or excessively influenced by personal bias, it diminishes the depth and significance of the work for her (Collier & Collier, 1986).

Using an analogue camera entails a form of temporary detachment. The images remain contained within the exposed film reel, preventing immediate circulation or verification. Engaging in photography with an analogue camera functions as a means of attuning to presence and observation. From a sensory ethnographic perspective, this delay matters because it changes the photographer's relation to the field. Without immediate visual verification, attention remains with the situation rather than the screen. The latent image allows experience to remain unresolved, extending the sensory and affective life of the encounter beyond the moment of exposure. Analogue photography therefore supports a slower rhythm of perception, memory and later interpretation (Pink, 2015). The photographer deliberately avoids producing multiple variations of a single subject, despite the historical practice among photographers of capturing sequences of shots. The latency of analogue film gives the photograph a temporal thickness: before becoming visible, the image exists as a hidden material trace, binding the moment of exposure to later acts of development, handling, archiving, and interpretation (Batchen, 2001; Bate, 2010; Edwards & Hart, 2004). Over time, as she becomes accustomed to sequential shooting with a digital camera, the same approach with an analogue camera feels unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

The digital camera on her phone serves as a tool for obtaining immediate information about the images captured on film. This allows her to compose with greater accuracy, to assess the distribution of colour areas, and to identify elements she prefers to exclude from the frame. The analogue photographs are not

subject to post-production enhancement. The photographer converts the developed films into digital files to consolidate their existence within a single data set and to evaluate the recording experience in the context of the whole rather than in isolated fragments. In this way, she employs phone photography similarly to how instant Polaroids were historically used for commercial assignments and scene planning prior to exposing costly film in a camera. Contemporary instant photography primarily functions as a performative act: an event that materialises in a small, visually striking manner. It constitutes a ritual gesture accompanying a moment, combining curiosity, surprise, and the sense of a minor miracle as the image emerges on paper immediately (personal communication, 2024). Fackler's comparison of stereoscopic photography and Instagram complicates a simple opposition between analogue materiality and digital immateriality. While digital photographs may no longer register material history through stains, fading, fingerprints, paper texture, or chemical traces, they are not immaterial. Their materiality is displaced into code, interface, device, platform, circulation, and bodily interaction with screens (Fackler, 2019). This supports an understanding of digitisation not as the disappearance of photographic materiality, but as its transformation. Pink's framework also prevents the digital image from being understood as purely immaterial or purely visual. Digital photography reorganises sensory experience through screens, gestures, interfaces, storage systems and practices of circulation. The digital image is touched, enlarged, scrolled through, archived and revisited, so its meaning is produced through embodied interaction as much as through visual content (Pink, 2015).

Over time, the photographer moves away from this highly controlled approach. Excessive control over the image diminishes its affective and atmospheric intensity, rendering the work overly descriptive and lacking the emotional resonance she seeks. The photographic process becomes less mechanical and increasingly contextual, fostering a dialogue between the subject, the environment, and her intuitive engagement. A sensory ethnographic perspective helps clarify why excessive visual control may reduce rather than increase ethnographic understanding. Atmosphere, affect and sensory resonance often emerge through openness to

the unexpected and through bodily attunement to the field. The value of an image, or of an image deliberately not taken, lies partly in its capacity to preserve this felt relation rather than to exhaust the situation through description (Pink, 2015).

If we imagine the camera obscura as it was depicted by Leonardo da Vinci, the incident light always renders lines. This is an analogy of our relationship to the photographic image—that is, the claim that the way the external world is rendered is analogous to human observation. This is why photography as a medium achieved such success, as it reassured us and convinced us of the correctness of our view. Digitalisation has dismantled and dissected this continuum into small units. And now I can do two things. Either I can reconnect these lines so that they are—this is what a digital camera does with every shot. Or I can also assemble these units into entirely new configurations. I can superimpose a fictional image onto a real one. And this new opportunity—on the one hand, the ability to depict the external world, and on the other, to create entirely new models of reality—is the reason why digital technology has prevailed over analogue. (Müller-Pohle & Turek, 2005, p. 77).¹

The photographer becomes aware that her life unfolds behind the images. While exposing the film frame, she occupies a position at the periphery of the image rather than within it. Attempting to enter, she produces only two-dimensional representations of reality rather than lived experience. This constrains access to experience by positioning the eye at the camera's viewfinder. Through the act of writing, a temporal and cognitive detachment is established, imagination and memory are engaged differently, and processes of structuring and hierarchical organisation emerge.

As if life were taking place behind the images. When I take a photo, I am not inside but outside. When I see something I like, I want to experience it; I want to physically enter the image. And yet, it is not possible. But as soon as I experience something, I would immediately convert it to 2D, thereby voluntarily distancing myself from the real experience. (Author, 2019, unpublished diary).

The photographer recognises that establishing a controlled backdrop for the camera's gaze is not the objective. The untaken photograph belongs to a wider field of photographic memory in which absence, affect, and recollection shape meaning as strongly as the visible image itself (Bate, 2010; Campt, 2017; Hirsch, 1997; Kuhn, 1995). She refrains from exerting control where possible and approaches photography as a process of discovery rather than deliberate creation. Questions of authorship arise when photographic outcomes emerge from pre-existing conditions: to what extent can the photographer claim proprietorship over images, and to what extent do images possess autonomous agency within the field? Authorship manifests as a distributed phenomenon, arising from field experience, material conditions, and cultural context. In parallel with the stability and transformation inherent in photographic images, it reflects the enduring relational processes of observation, interpretation, and presence. Photography's permanence resides in the sustained dialogue between subject and observer.

During a moment of quiet, the Mάma initiates a dialogue, enquiring into the photographer's emotional state. Observing her frequent silence and solitary walks, he expresses concern regarding her possible sadness. The Mάma further elaborates on the significance of language and reciprocal communication—not solely non-verbal—as a ritualised mode of connection. He highlights the multilayered complexities of translation in the field: from Iku to Spanish, Spanish to English, and subsequently from English to Czech within the photographer's note-taking and dissemination practices. This recursive fourfold translation process underscores the intricacies of interlingual mediation and illuminates the epistemological challenges inherent in cross-cultural research.

While working in the Sierra Nevada among the community members, the photographer's motivation shifts away from capturing visually striking landscapes. Her practice evolves into a sustained commitment encompassing both her bodily engagement and her interaction with the environment. Representations of indigenous communities, their perspectives, and accumulated wisdom reveal inherent idealisations that create interpretive gaps. The non-transferability of the Kággaba way of life cannot be separated from its cul-

¹ The citation used in the text was translated by Author.

tural and environmental context, nor transplanted into contemporary society.² Kággaba life constitutes a complex system of values, traditions, and interdependent structures. The deeper the photographer engages with the Kággaba worldview and their ways of thinking, the more evident it becomes that full comprehension is unattainable: unless one is born into and socialised entirely within the Kággaba community, its principles cannot function, even when considered within another cultural framework.

In this chapter, photography has been introduced as an epistemic apparatus. Subjectivity is used as a methodological position. Rather than treating subjectivity as a limitation to be eliminated, the photographer's situated perception can be understood as part of the research apparatus itself: knowledge is produced from a specific embodied position, not from a neutral or disembodied gaze (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 2022). Since in this conception photography creates separation, in relational terrain this mediation can be problematic. Fackler's relational account of photographic materiality helps clarify the status of the untaken photograph. If photographic meaning emerges through sensory and affective relations rather than through the image-object alone, then the decision not to photograph does not simply produce absence. It preserves another form of material relation: one held in bodily memory, atmosphere, hesitation, ethical restraint, and later narration (Fackler, 2019). The decision not to photograph thus becomes an epistemological act. This refusal can be read not as absence, failure, or lack of data, but as an ethical and epistemological practice that protects relational boundaries and resists extractive forms of visibility (Azoulay, 2008; Simpson, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Pink's sensory ethnography supports this methodological use of subjectivity by rejecting the idea that ethnographic knowledge can be produced from a detached

or disembodied position. The researcher's sensory subjectivity is not treated as an obstacle to knowledge, but as the condition through which field relations become perceptible. What matters is not the elimination of subjectivity, but its reflexive articulation: how the researcher sees, hears, moves, remembers, hesitates and becomes situated in relation to others (Pink, 2015). In the following chapters, this approach will be explained in the context of the material generated during the fieldwork, including the theoretical basis of the topic and the cosmology of the Kággaba community. In the following chapter, the argument will be transferred to a specific field context, and the theory of distance will be confronted with the cosmology of Kággaba.

3. The Fieldwork Context

During expeditions and research with the Kággaba community in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta from 2019 to 2025, an extensive archive of analogue photographs and field diaries was created, containing detailed descriptions of everyday life and interactions, reflections on the work in progress, and photography as a medium and mediator of knowledge. Introducing the theme of unphotographed images emerged naturally as an answer to the question of arts-based research that the author asked herself as a photographer: How can native communities be photographed?

The theme of untaken photographs is closely linked to the environment of native communities, which, as a subject of photography and imaging in general, is historically controversial. It has not yet been resolved how to portray these communities in a way that does not accompany this narrative with stereotypes – romanticism, exoticism, and a decolonial approach – which paradoxically can historically accentuate the filter. The author takes into account historical contexts, working with ethics, but at the same time deviates from recording with a camera out of personal preferences. This means remembering situations without an intermediary (i.e., photography), because preserving a moment as a memory or poetic record provides a deeper understanding than the mere reproduction of an image, despite (or precisely because of) the environment of the jungle and mountains, which in itself is very visu-

² Throughout this paper, the autonyms (self-designations) of indigenous communities are used whenever possible. According to the Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC), these communities are identified as Kággaba (widely known as Kogi or Kogui) and Ikũ (commonly referred to as Arhuaco) in their own languages.

ally intense and conveys a strong experience. In addition, the theme also includes how the Kággaba spiritual authority Mamas sees a world based on darkness, which becomes the symbolism of the overexposed (invisible) image.

3.1 *Towards a methodology*

This study adopts a research-creation approach, understood as a mode of inquiry in which artistic practice and scholarly research are not sequential or hierarchical activities, but mutually constitutive processes. In research-creation, knowledge emerges through making, material experimentation, embodied experience, reflective writing, and critical interpretation. The photograph, the diary entry, the remembered image, and the digital transformation are therefore not treated as secondary illustrations of fieldwork but as epistemic materials through which the research question is formed, tested, and reconfigured. This approach follows understandings of research-creation as an interventionist and processual methodology in which creative practice generates forms of knowledge that cannot be produced by textual analysis alone (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012; Leavy, 2018; Loveless, 2019).

In the context of this article, research-creation designates the integration of analogue field photography, unpublished diary writing, sensory memory, ethical restraint, and digital abstraction. The method begins with situated bodily experience in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and moves through a series of material and immaterial transformations: from encounter to photographic exposure, from exposure to latent film image, from film to digitised file, from visual record to written reflection, and, crucially, from a moment not photographed to an image retained only in memory. The untaken photograph is thus not a failure of documentation but a research-creative event: a moment in which the chain of visual capture is interrupted in order to preserve relational, ethical, or affective intensity. This research-creation approach differs from a documentary methodology in that it does not seek to produce a complete visual record of the Kággaba community or to translate field experience into a stable archive of images. Instead, it asks how photographic practice

changes when image-making becomes accountable to relation, hesitation, memory, and refusal. The value of the research does not reside only in what is made visible, but also in what is withheld, remembered, written, or allowed to remain outside photographic capture.

Methodologically, the research-creation process unfolds through six interconnected operations:

1. Situated encounter — bodily and relational presence in the field among Kággaba and Iku community members.
2. Photographic attention — the use of analogue photography as a slow, material, and delayed mode of visual engagement.
3. Photographic restraint — the decision not to photograph certain moments because of ethical, relational, affective, or spiritual considerations.
4. Diary inscription — the translation of sensory and emotional experience into written, poetic, and reflective field notes.
5. Material transformation — the development, scanning, archiving, and digital reconfiguration of analogue photographic material.
6. Reflective interpretation — the later analysis of photographs, untaken photographs, memories, and diary entries as interconnected research materials.

The methodology follows a processual pathway that begins with physical experience in the field. This lived encounter gives rise to a material trace in the form of an analogue photograph, a physical imprint of light shaped by presence, attention, and proximity. The analogue image, as a tangible object, carries the temporal delay and material density of the situation from which it emerges. Through digitisation, it gradually enters the immaterial environment of digital media, where it becomes data, circulates within networks, and acquires new conditions of visibility and interpretation. The methodology follows this transformation from encounter to material trace and further into digital abstraction in order to examine how relational meaning is articulated, transferred, and reconfigured across these stages, and how the photograph functions as a bearer of lived relationship within shifting technological and epistemic frameworks.

The diaries record facts and physical and emotional experiences. The descriptions of the physicality of movement in the terrain, the tension of climbing rocks, fatigue and fear, as well as the perception of time and space, where the rhythms of day and night, sounds and light affect the photographer's psychological and physical state, show that the experience cannot be fully captured by technology. The poetic quality of the language, the descriptions of the river flow, the night, the wind and bodily manifestations create an archive of lived experience that cannot be replaced by a mere visual record. Pink's sensory ethnography gives methodological value to these descriptions because it understands routes, walking and movement as ways of knowing. The path is not merely a route toward a research site; it is itself part of the production of ethnographic knowledge. The body's negotiation with slopes, stones, humidity, darkness and rhythm becomes inseparable from what is learned in the field. The untaken photograph of Los Guácharos therefore does not represent a missing image, but an emplaced sensory event retained through movement, exhaustion, anticipation and memory (Pink, 2015).

Unphotographed photographs are a deliberately omitted materialisation of a moment. This approach allows for reflection and introspection, as the photographer preserves the moment in memory and diary entry, which strengthens the personal relationship to the lived experience. The word, description and diary reflections create a literary and visual image that is more sensitive than the photograph itself. Although memory is not pure immediacy, it resists technical fixation. Not capturing some scenes is also an ethical decision, protecting privacy and ritual boundaries of the community. Digital space becomes an abstract relationship – the photograph exists in memory, and files in an album in the photographer's mind under the title Unphotographed Photographs.

Untaken photographs represent the ethical and reciprocal dimension of fieldwork, protecting the privacy and ritual boundaries of the community, a path of introspective reflection and the possibility of preserving the moment through memory, possibly diary entries. In the first encounter with the

communities, it was revealed that the photographer disappears and becomes the camera. This was, after all, her role upon arrival in the Sierra Nevada, when she met the people of the Ikú community and was thus introduced – as a photographer.

Through repeated visits, sustained daily engagement, and the cultivation of relationships with community members, the photographer comes to recognise that she is no longer regarded as a detached observer but as a situated presence within the social field. Her personal attributes and demonstrated credibility, previously requested for disclosure, are now acknowledged and validated within this context; she occupies a role not of an external guest, but of an integrated participant within the collective.³ This positionality facilitates a mode of reciprocal recognition, reflecting a foundational principle and ethos of interaction among the Sierra Nevada communities. The practice thus enables the emergence of a distinct form of knowledge, grounded in enactment and participation rather than mere representation.

This approach creates conditions for new modes of perceiving and engaging cultural and natural experiences where the value of the image lies primarily in the personal experience. Words, descriptions and diary reflections create a literary and visual image that is more sensitive than the photograph itself. The image that exists as a possibility is the reward of the journey, the encounter, the relationship, not its visual evidence. Digital space becomes an abstract relationship – the photograph exists in memory. For example, when climbing the Los Guácharos cave, the photographer does not take pictures but nevertheless perceives the space, the movement of the birds and the man in the white dress. This image becomes a mental image that is richer in meaning

³ According to the Kággaba, a person is a node of living threads (shi) held together through necessary behaviours, rites, living patterns, responsibilities and even appropriate thoughts. This is guided by very elaborate sets of knowledge, teachings and stories called shibulama, which roughly translates as «threads of truth and energy». (Parra Witte, 2020, p. 5).

and more perceptually accurate than a photographic reproduction.



Figure 3. Words, descriptions and diary reflections create a literary and visual image that is more sensitive than the photograph itself. The image that exists as a possibility is the reward of the journey, the encounter, the relationship, not its visual evidence. Photography by the author.

3.2 Encounter with the Kággaba

The photographer is expected by three Mámas, and when she arrives at the village, she goes straight to them. There is a place on a raised rock to the side, where they have a seat separated from the dwelling. She swings up to them, sits down, and takes off her shoes. She immediately feels a good sense of rightness and inner calmness. Everyone greets each other. The Mámas read from the oracle of water bubbles and speak. The photographer is introduced and welcomed. A white string is tied to her wrist. Although the Kággaba people may appear untouchable, they also know what fear is. Children have been wearing protective bracelets on their chubby hands since they were babies.



Figure 4. After lunch it rains. Adults retreat into the darkness of their homes – women with children and men in nubue. Children run along wet paths encircling the houses. Intense male voices of the Mámas echo from the nubue; some women sit in front of the houses preparing threads for weaving. Still lifes of fruit and sleeping dogs under leafy canopies, on which raindrops drip in rhythmic regularity, the darkness of the entrance to a house filled with the quiet sounds of the presence of invisible people. Photography by the author.

When the photographer goes to unpack her things into the house, the inside of the house immediately fills with people. Children run around among the adults, and the house becomes a place of public gathering – a microcosm of the entire village. The Kággaba people begin to cook and put pots on the fire; the women take out the food brought from the lowlands and sort it like rare artefacts and arrange it in bowls on the ground like on the shelves of a pantry. They rinse a tin mug with a bit of water and pour freshly brewed coffee into it and hand it to the photographer. The leaf fans breathe into the fire and prepare arepas. They mould the dough in their palms and place it on a pan, squatting between the stones like on a throne. Their intense speech sounds through the house, instructing each other on what to do; one young woman spits, another hugs a child sucked to her protruding breast through the slit

of her simple white dress, and occasionally someone kicks a stalking dog with his foot. One of the Mámas sits outside the door and looks into the interior of the house, like into a peephole in a slide box, at life that flows through the house in an unwritten rhythm.

After lunch it rains. Adults retreat into the darkness of their homes – women with children and men in *nuhue*.⁴ Children run along wet paths encircling the houses. Intense male voices of the Mámas echo from the *nuhue*; some women sit in front of the houses preparing threads for weaving. Still lifes of fruit and sleeping dogs under leafy canopies, on which raindrops drip in rhythmic regularity, the darkness of the entrance to a house filled with the quiet sounds of the presence of invisible people.

The photographer carefully walks along the empty slippery paths, silently observed by adults and indirectly invited to play by children, who are the only ones who immediately make contact with the stranger's camera. The photographer responds through the camera case, into which she looks from above,⁵ so that the eye does not withdraw from the subjects behind the viewfinder and is always present, although at the same time busy connecting with the complicated optics of the camera.

April 16, 2021

In the evening, as I am lying in my hammock, a woman comes, spreads a sheet on the ground beneath me, lies down on it, and covers herself with a thin pink blanket. Her movement is imbued with such grace and dignity, even though sleeping on the ground may not be associated

with such a definition. Dignity is something I immediately recognise when I meet the Kággaba. Dignity is not a possession but a way of being – a quiet awareness of oneself in the world, which gives every action its gravity and beauty. It is the relationship between the body and the earth, the moment before movement, a calm without the need to calm down. Dignity pervading actions does not seek attention but affirms human being without defence or display. It is a poise that does not touch (has nothing to do with) the edges of pride. Even the smallest gesture – lying down to sleep, drinking water, greeting another – contains a sense of inner order, of being in balance with the surroundings. (Author, 2021, unpublished diary).

The next morning, the photographer sets off into the jungle, also known as the tapir forest. For her, the tapir represents a modern-day dinosaur, a surviving fragment of a prehistoric era. The jungle is wetter than the one she encountered on her first two trips in the south of the Sierra Nevada. The nights are warm on the slopes facing the sea, and the paths they follow are inhabited by an impenetrable density of greenery.

Kággaba men cut the way with machetes – now she can see what the machetes slung on their backs are for – and their sound cuts through the cathedral of the forest with the whistling song of the instrument before it falls victim to the jungle vegetation. The entrance to the cave, which is home to the birds called *los guácharos*, a nocturnal species resembling bats yet avian in nature, is very difficult. Moving up the slope requires full attention and physical balance, and one wrong step can cause a dangerous fall down between the trunks of the forest. The photographer negotiates with the landscape and grabs the hands offered by the Mámas, who silently guide her through the complicated terrain, as if she were trying to unravel a puzzle made of string. She trusts them because their cooperation requires complete trust. When the wooden sign LOS GUÁCHAROS on the tree announces the achievement of the goal, the landscape opens up before them: a wide rocky body with a cascading river overflow in the middle. The photographer does not go into the cave to look at the birds. She is exhausted and is afraid that she might get hurt on the next climb, this time along the smooth walls of the stone. She keeps what she came here for as an idea, a picture shrouded in the darkness of underex-

⁴ Literal quote: Nuhue is a multi-purpose building, part court-house, part council chamber, part school-room, and part dormitory. A large proportion of the time spent in there by vassals is passed listening to lectures of Mámas, which are called 'giving advice'. These may often become extremely vehement. (Ereira, 1990, p. 168).

⁵ This is a Yashica D camera, a binocular SLR camera with a viewfinder shaft whose bottom is formed by a focusing screen, so the photographer looks into the viewfinder from above.

posure, and confirmation that she has already chosen her reward on the way here. She knows the photograph of the Kággaba men inside the cave. The darkness is saturated with the squeaking sounds of the birds circling inside as if in a closed gift box, into which light flows through the ragged bends in the corners, and men in white clothes standing at the foot of the crevice, silently observing, stretching their necks to the ceiling of the closed convex space in the rock. The presence of humans inside the animal dwelling breathes an almost ceremonial life: the men are children inside the womb, which is also the universe.

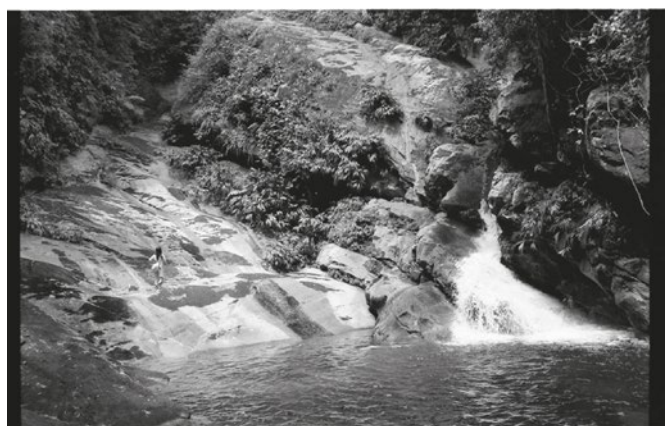


Figure 5. *She knows the photograph of the Kággaba men inside the cave. The darkness is saturated with the squeaking sounds of the birds circling inside as if in a closed gift box, into which light flows through the ragged bends in the corners, and men in white clothes standing at the foot of the crevice, silently observing, stretching their necks to the ceiling of the closed convex space in the rock. The presence of humans inside the animal dwelling breathes an almost ceremonial life: the men are children inside the womb, which is also the universe. Photography by the author.*

4. The Untaken Photographs Phenomenon

The photographer notices that her images have a code linking them to early photographs from the region. The visual similarity to images taken more than a century ago by Gustaf Bolinder between 1914–1915 and 1920–1921 sets off a tangle of questions about the theme of temporal continuity (Bolinder, 1918). After

developing the films from Nabusimake, the photographer discovers that some of the photographs could undoubtedly be confused with images taken more than a hundred years ago. They are peculiarly similar to photographs from that period! How does this relate to capturing an environment that has changed little over the centuries and to the life of photography, which has undergone enormous development during the time it speaks to us? Does this similarity perhaps indicate an unchanging cultural reality, or is it a consequence of the conventions of photographic representation of communities that create the illusion of timelessness?

The Kággaba's perspective of reality and worldview is not organised around observable items or visual clarity. They are based on the idea that reality is made up of linked fields that are altered by darkness. As Alan Ereira explained in a personal interview, he emphasised the importance of language through which we understand reality:

‘We know that every creation begins with something. Creation begins with words. All creation stories begin with words. In the English translation of the Bible, everything begins with divinity speaking. And speech itself is an act of creation. Two elements define creation: speech and light. Let there be light. Two forces brought together. That is how the world is made. That is how the world is made in our minds. It is built from words and light. But for the elder Kággaba-Mámas—those who speak only Kággaba—their words are of a different nature than ours. They are raised without light. Kept in the dark. Even now, this practice continues. At least seven young students are currently being brought up in complete darkness. Those are the ones you cannot reach—and should not be able to reach. Yet they are the ones who can see the world in ways we cannot. And that is what matters’ (Ereira, 2024).

Photography, a medium that materialises through the capture of light, engages with a community whose perceptual and cognitive foundation is cultivated entirely in darkness, presenting an inherent paradox. The Kággaba Mámas, spiritual authorities and custodians of ancestral knowledge, are frequently raised from infancy under conditions of complete darkness, disciplined

through strict regimes of diet, silence, and seclusion. Their perceptual practice is not symbolic but rigorously trained, cultivated, and deeply attuned to a reality constituted not by visible objects but by energies and intricately interwoven significations.

Perception through the mind and perception through photographic imaging constitute two distinct yet interrelated modalities. Mental perception operates internally, guided by intuition or reason, mediated by imagination, and often imbued with a spiritual dimension. Photographic perception, by contrast, projects outward, shaped by technique, framing, and material conditions. Their interplay is dynamic, alternately complementary and tensioned.

Within indigenous epistemologies, such as that of the Kággaba, where knowledge is conveyed not only through language but also through lived practices, alongside perspectives from Buddhism or European phenomenology, ‘seeing with the mind’ constitutes a non-representational mode of knowing. It engages perception through silence, intuition, and spatial resonance rather than optical devices. It manifests as an experience rather than a representation, resistant to direct translation into image, yet capable of contextual sharing. Fackler’s critique of ocularcentrism is especially useful in this context, as she warns against a tradition that treats sight as the privileged ground of truth, reason, and human agency. Such a critique supports a shift from photography as visual possession toward photography as situated, partial, and sensory mediation (Fackler, 2019, p. 520). As David Abram (1996) posits in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, sensory knowledge emerges as the world touching the perceiver—the world itself ‘sees us’, prompting a responsive interaction. Similarly, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 189) in *The Visible and the Invisible* articulates the notion of the ‘invisible’ permeating all visual impressions, positioning the body as both an instrument of perception and a co-creator of the space in which seeing unfolds.

We readily experience this paradox in relation to other persons; this stranger who stands before me and is an object for my gaze suddenly opens his mouth and speaks to me, forcing me to acknowledge that he is a sentient subject like myself, and that I, too, am an object for his gaze. Each of us, in relation to the other, is both subject

and object, sensible and sentient. Why, then, might this not also be the case in relation to another, nonhuman entity – a mountain lion, for instance, that I unexpectedly encounter in the northern forest? (Abram, 1996, p. 67).

A photograph is produced through light, captured on celluloid film, glass plate, silver halide crystals, or the sensor of a digital camera, and emerges from the interplay of optics, exposure, and technological mediation that structures perception. The camera operates with inherent biases; it is programmed to record the world in a particular manner (Flusser, 2007). Photography constitutes the camera’s language and thereby possesses the capacity to shape reality. Yet, a photograph need not function as a window onto the world; it can instead act as a map of consciousness, revealing not merely what the eye perceives but what the mind apprehends. The punctum—the subtle, unforeseen detail that pierces the viewer—derives not from the author’s intentional studium but from that which provokes, unsettles, or moves the observer (Barthes, 2005). At this juncture, photography engages the seeing of the mind, resonating without merely transmitting information.⁶ It becomes an extension of consciousness, a visual manuscript, and a mode of attending to the situated dynamics of space. In this sense, it parallels what the Kággaba Mámas define as knowledge in *aluna*, a perceptual realm accessed through attentiveness, and connection, enabling the recognition of the spirit inherent in rocks, rivers, and other elements of the environment (Ereira, 2008, p. 125). A Mاما practising in *aluna* does so without recourse to drugs, disguise, sacrifice, or ritual incantation, but through concentrated attention and presence (Ereira, 2008, p. 126).

⁶ Barthes defines study as a general cultural, social and intellectual interest in photography. Study refers to something visible and intelligible, which connects photography with general knowledge, experience and cultural context and evokes a general intellectual or aesthetic interest but does not necessarily produce a strong emotional impact (Barthes, 2005).

'I know how to call the rain,' they appear to be working with spells. In fact the Mámas neither submit humbly to gods nor cast spells to control them; they work in *aluna*, interacting with the ocean of spirit that is all life. The Mámas do not see themselves as magicians, obliging nature to perform at their bidding, nor as priests acting as supplicants to and intermediaries with a god or gods. They have simply been detached, by their upbringing, from complete immersion in the material world, and believe that they are therefore able to work with a clearer understanding in *aluna*. (Ereira, 2008, p. 126).

The photographic image frequently operates as a delimiting frame, establishing a separation between subject and object and between observer and world. Certain photographic practices, such as analogue methodologies or contemplative approaches to image-making, work to mitigate this separation. In these contexts, photography assumes the character of meditation or listening, allowing the observer to be affected by the image without necessitating intellectual or material appropriation.

Western epistemologies often link knowledge to visual perception, emphasising optical clarity, categorisation, and the measurement of discrete objects. By contrast, the teachings of the Mámas are rooted in an alternative ontology: knowledge arises not from light but from darkness. Mámas are trained to perceive the world through the mind rather than the eyes. Within *aluna*, no phenomenon exists in isolation; every entity is simultaneously a trace of past interactions and a potential for future ones. Although photographic images extend the activity of the mind, they remain partial—they fixate a fragment in time and space, removed from the continuum that generates them.

Photography presents the world as 'seen', whereas *aluna* exposes what lies beneath the surface: hidden structures, relationships, and presences that resist visual capture. Mindful perception attends to what exists in the interstices. Photography, particularly in digital form, enacts separation, freezing time, isolating objects, and privileging one layer of reality over another. An image may never fully convey a world constituted by the imperceptible. Nonetheless, it is possible to create images that do not prescribe understanding but instead invite engagement, offering a space for dwelling and presence without functioning as testimony.

5. Conclusion

This article has proposed untaken photographs as a relational and reflective methodology within field photography among the Kággaba community. Rather than treating photography only as visual evidence, it argues that the decision not to photograph can itself become an ethical and epistemological act. In moments where the camera would create distance, interruption, or exposure, withholding the image preserves intimacy, reciprocity, and respect for personal, ritual, and cultural boundaries.

The fieldwork shows that analogue photography, diary writing, memory, and digital mediation each shape experience differently. Analogue photography remains tied to physical presence and the material trace of light, while diary writing transforms lived experience into language. Digital media, by contrast, detach the image from its material origin and make it endlessly reproducible and reconfigurable. This abstraction reveals photography not as a stable object but as a structure of mediation.

In the Kággaba context, this distinction becomes especially significant. Their cosmology, grounded in darkness, *aluna*, spoken knowledge, and relational perception, challenges Western assumptions that knowledge depends on visibility and visual capture. Some experiences cannot be adequately represented through images; they must remain in memory, silence, or poetic reflection.

The main finding of this study is that an untaken photograph is not an absence or failure. It is a form of presence held differently: in memory, in relation, in the body, and in writing. By shifting attention from image production to attentiveness, restraint, and reciprocity, untaken photographs offer a way to rethink photography as a practice of care rather than possession.

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