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*Journal of Environment and Culture* promotes the publication of issues, research, and comments connected with the way, culture determines, regulates, and accounts for the environment in Africa or any other parts of the world. It is interested in the application of knowledge, research and science to a healthy, stable, and sustaining human environment.

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*Editor-in-Chief*  
*Journal of Environment and Culture*  
Department of Archaeology and  
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Ibadan, Nigeria.  
e-mail: journalculture@yahoo.com

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## Photography as Art: Characterizing Dotun Okubanjo as a Photographer

Ohioma I. Pogoson

### Abstract:

This paper classifies and analyses the creative pictures of one of Nigeria's foremost photographers with formal western training in photography. Dotun Okubanjo used his photographs of the late fifties and early sixties to impact society, then as now. His personal story exemplifies the changing status of the profession within the society thus providing useful insights to the political and social economy of the period. Dotun Okubanjo's photographs eventually catch up with the idea of, and that photography itself is a creative, rather than a mechanistic process simply because it is a product of a technological innovation. Dotun Okubanjo's photographs are incontrovertibly the product of the creative manipulation of the camera, the creative selection of his subjects and the creative production of the individual photographs themselves. He shot photographs only in black and white.

In every photographer there was a painter, a true artist,  
awaiting expression. - Pablo Picasso

Materials for this paper were collected between 2008 and now during my various trips and interactions with the photographer, Oloye Dotun Okubanjo, ARPS.

The fine arts of painting and sculpture are precursors of the camera and its products, called photographs (Sandler 2002). From the earliest times, sculpture and painting were the major means of representing humans and the environment for diverse purposes including recall and record-keeping, aesthetic appreciation, symbolic interpretation, imaginative expression (Rosenblum 1997), social control, sympathetic magic, ritualistic participation, religious devotion, etc. Needless to say, these were not areas of satisfaction that were mutually exclusively fulfilled by works of visual arts, for these artworks could serve a combination of functions at



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one and the same time. The meeting between traditional painting and sculpture on the one hand and photography on the other, catalyzed art photography or what is sometimes now called creative photography ([www.visual-arts-cork.com/fine-art-photography.htm](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/fine-art-photography.htm)).

Art photography (Fried 2008) is loosely defined as the addition of creative abilities and innovation to the technicalities associated with the use of the camera and/or the selection and manipulation of the subject through the creative use of the camera in the composition, printing and production of the picture. This kind of photography started as a result of the responses and challenges that the camera posed to the artist, and vice versa, to creatively and innovatively use the technological gimmick called the camera in order to compete with pictorial and sculptural artists. The camera had the capacity to reproduce two-dimensional representative images of whatever it recorded, from landscape scenes to portraits. The camera was also capable of recording perspectives and foreshortening with accurate and uncanny exactness. Painters and sculptors were still coping with these otherwise technical artistic challenges when the first cameras were brought to the scene. Above all, the camera also possessed the capacity to freeze time in an exact, perhaps indelible, manner that no other known device could do, as of then. In these capacities lay the power of the camera. The camera thus became the cream of technology and therefore posed huge revolutionary challenges to artists and consumers of reproduction images alike. The resulting art photography, therefore, is not necessarily a new endeavour but one that has been on for as long as perhaps photography and the camera it have been in existence, or since humans started to play with new ideas with the camera.

Generally speaking, however, art photography is difficult to define even though we often think that we have an idea what it is and should be. This is largely because the value of a work of art depends more or less on the kind of eye with which the beholder looks at it, and aesthetic judgments cannot be universally accepted. As an endeavour, "art photography" has gained prominence and benefitted tremendously from innovation and creativity over the years even though it still lacks a precise universal definition. Creative photographers have shot and developed pictures that have made them become very popular; such pictures have been sold for huge sums of money and are held in some of the most influential collections (Frosh 2003). These photographs have been transformed to the status of art not just by the creativity involved in their production or their subject matter but also in their presentation, as in their being framed like traditional paintings or being put on display in exhibition galleries alongside traditional artworks (Pogoso & Akande 2011). Pablo Picasso, one of the greatest artists of the 20th century, said in a reaction to the camera and photography that, "I have discovered photography, now I can kill myself. I have nothing else to learn" (<http://www.photoquotes.com>). Discounting the hyperbole in this statement if we can, it is obvious that Picasso placed painting and photography on the same level, at least. But then, again, concerning the issue of understanding the relationship

between art and photography, Picasso, commenting this time on the futility of a comparison of both, said that, "two of the most frustrated trades are dentists and photographers: dentists because they want to be doctors and photographers because they want to be painters" (<http://www.azquotes.com>). Such was the intensity of the debate on photography and art at the turn of the century. Today, not much is left to be said about issues of definitions since photography stands now on its own and is held high among other creative endeavours. Photography is now taught alongside the fine and applied arts in many art schools all over the world (e.g. Brochure of the Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Environmental Design, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria Academic Programme). Photography is exhibited in some of the best and most famous museums and galleries and has attracted equally high attention from art collectors, art critics, art historians and aestheticians.

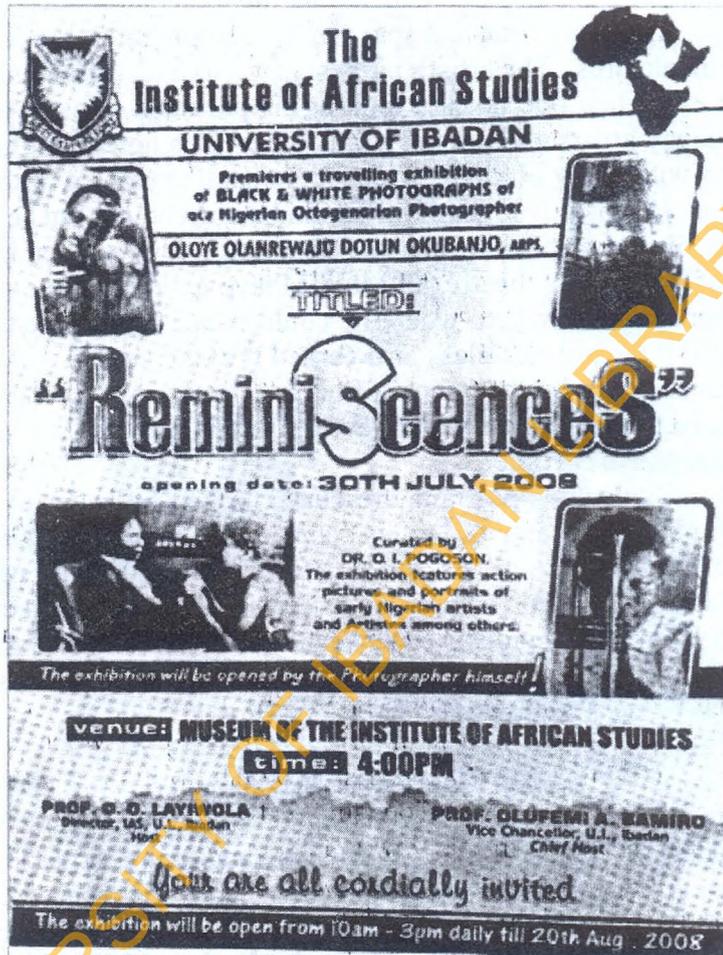
In the Nigerian context, I would like to start by looking at the profiles of the photographers as bases for assessing and putting their works in the compartments that they might fit into. Largely speaking, photographers existed in perhaps every community a short while after photography was introduced into Nigeria. Just as there were photographers in Lagos, Ibadan and the other major towns (Nimis 2005), so also were they in smaller towns and villages to service their catchment clientele (Nimis 2011). There were even itinerant photographers who cater for the needs of people in remote areas as well as serving as agents for the cross-fertilisation of photographic ideas and techniques across the country. The clientele of photographers in the major towns consisted of the entire citizenry. Therefore, the photographers took pictures for social events in addition to satisfying all the other documentary needs of the population; for instance, the taking of passport photographs and the recording of sundry happenings. Later, there came photographers who worked with the newspapers as photojournalists and those who, for some reason or another, had access to the upper political class (Elebute 2009). Therefore, a class dimension somewhat enters into this discussion in that these Nigerian photographers were more or less restricted by their access to individuals in society.

Dotun Okubanjo had moved from being a telegraphist to becoming a photographer-politician in and around the Osogbo area (Pogoso& Akande 2011). While there, he actively mixed with the *creme de la creme* of the period either taking their pictures or discussing politics and the general social environment. He had been actively involved in the politics of the Action Group with Chief Obafemi Awolowo who, in fact, advised him to go abroad for further studies. We learn from Dotun Okubanjo that two prominent ministers of the Western region government at the time were on hand to witness his departure for the UK at the Ikeja Airport, Lagos (Okubanjo 2007). All of these clearly confirm his membership of a particular privileged social class. This, therefore, forms the basis of my discussion of his pictures. But before I embark on the discussion of the pictures, let me state that, according to Dotun Okubanjo, he abruptly abandoned photography in 1971

after his friends denigrated him at a social lunch gathering (Okubanjo 2006). Even at this time, he told me, he had a state-of-the-art Mercedes Benz car and was without any doubt moving in the upwardly mobile and professional social class. The real problem was, however, that photography had lost much of its prestige and had grown to become so commonplace as to be referred to as a prestigious profession, especially among the elite group that he associated with.

Between 1957 and 1971, Dotun Okubanjo continued to shoot photographs in the major towns of Osogbo, Ife, Ibadan and Lagos. But it was after his return from the UK, that he was appointed to work with the Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, whose official portrait remains one of Dotun Okubanjo's most famous works. While working with the Prime Minister, he was permitted a generous budget that allowed him to travel and photograph different places in Nigeria. He travelled in the eastern and northern parts and his pictures from these places are represented in this book. His works, therefore, apart from the portraits for which he was well noted and renowned in the UK and Nigeria, are classified for the convenience of discussing them into "buildings and landscapes", "advertising and still life", "socials and related events" and "others", a category used here to imply, if you like, photographs not included in the other subheads.

What distinguish Okubanjo's photographs from those of many of his contemporaries are his choice of subjects and his presentation of them (Pogson & Akande 2011). His portraits, like all his other pictorial compositions, are unique and telling both aesthetically and now historically as all photographs are wont to be if preserved over a long time. Indeed, he has pictures of some of today's historical figures in Nigeria, an indication that he truly was a top-class photographer of his time. It is also worth mentioning here that after he abandoned photography, he still had the good sense and judgment to preserve, in the best possible manner, all the over 6000 pictures that were gathered from his studio when he folded it up. The pictures were very carefully arranged, boxed and kept in a special room in his home, until posterity revealed their potential when a small collection of his pictures were inadvertently brought to my attention at the Institute of African Studies Photographic Collection, University of Ibadan. I curated an exhibition of these photographs in mid-2008. The poster advertising the exhibition accompanies;



*Plate1:Poster Advertising The Exhibition of Dotun Okubanjo's Pictures 2008*

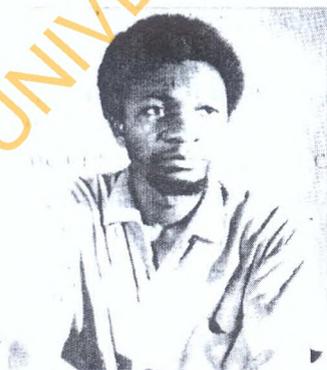
Since then, the photographer has actively pursued the revitalisation of his collection, calling huge amounts of resources to ensure that a documentation of them is done. Today, over 40 years after Dotun Okubanjo quit photography, his works are now good reference materials for not only historical discussions of his subjects; they also remain indelible visual reminders of the people and the environment that were his subjects.

### The Portraits

Dotun Okubanjo is incontrovertibly a portraitist. This is most easily exemplified in the lopsidedness of the photographs in his entire collection. Over two-thirds of his entire collection is made up of portraits of people. In these portraits too we do see

the artist as a truly creative person, manipulating light and shade, the environment and his subjects, and the time and space of his equipment to produce some of his daring artistic pictures. The artist's interest in artists and artistes is something that catches the eye when one takes a look at his portraits. Easily identifiable are pictures of many artists and artistes of his time. It is noted that he had personal relationships with many of them. This fact in itself says a lot of things about the photographer. He not only loves the artists and their products but he was so often to be found in places where art was the business. No wonder he combed the University of Ibadan arts theatre, all MbariMbayo exhibition openings at Ibadan, Osogbo, Lagos and elsewhere where he could locate his beloved subjects. His association with the political class also earned him the permit and access to their social events at which he took some of his best portraits. As the small array of pictures chosen from that class would reveal, Dotun Okubanjo was a photographer of first-class rating in his time.

Dotun Okubanjo's portraits are characterized by a desire to match and combine the physical characters of his subjects and their professions, where his subjects are his favourite artists and artistes. In his portraits of Soyinka, for example (Plate 2), Okubanjo freezes his subject in a time that most exemplifies his artistry even when he is obviously posed. One of Soyinka's eyes is accentuated and the other de-accentuated by Okubanjo's deliberate use of light that slits Soyinka's face into two parts, producing a dark and a brighter side, giving each eye the characterization that was typical of Wole Soyinka at the time. In his portrait of the famous woodcarver, Lamidi Fakeye (Plate 3), we also find Dotun Okubanjo presenting him more or less in the "macho" aggressive depiction typical of sculptors, especially woodcarvers. In the way and manner that he captures and freezes the arms of the great carver, we are left in no doubt that his profession is one that requires brunt and full force to cut and shape the wood as well as brains to make something out of it. Some of the artist's works displayed behind him attest to his success.



*Plate 2: Wole Soyinka,  
Playwright, Ibadan, 1965*

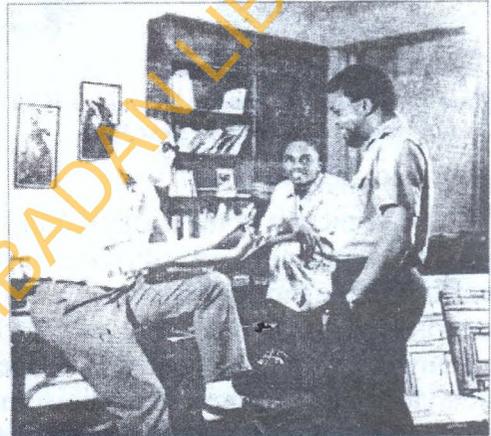


*Plate 3: Lamidi Fakeye,  
Artist-Carver, Ibadan, 1965*

The portrait of the children of YemiLijadu (Plate 4) is also one picture that reveals Okubanjo's uncanny ability with the camera in portraiture. In this particular picture, three children of the same parents are taken in a group yet we find that each of them exudes strong individuality. The point here is the photographer's ability to capture this, given the nature of children and the age of his subjects in this picture. In his other portraits, be they of performing musicians, artistes, artists or playwrights, as in the case of the picture of Eldred Fiberesima and others at the writer's workshop in Lagos (Plate 5), we find Okubanjo at his very best. Particular attention is required to be paid to his portraits for their worth as photographs that speaks.



*Plate 4: Children of YemiLijadu, 1968*



*Plate 5: Fiberesima and Some Artistes, Artist' Workshop, Lagos, 1964-1967*

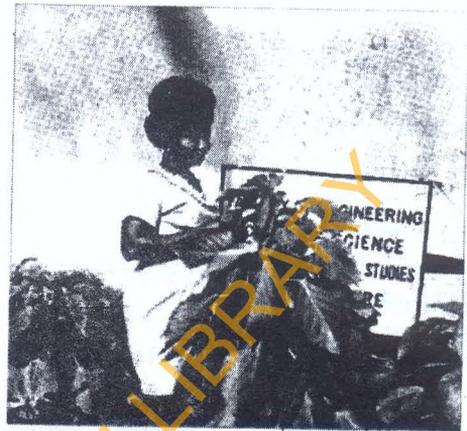
### Socials and Related Events

As indicated earlier, Dotun Okubanjo was a photographer of the highest class during his active photography years. This ensured that he was in the midst of the people in the social circles that most demanded his services and were comfortable with him. Thus, he was popular at what we would call the celebrity weddings, parties and social gatherings of his time. Many of the pictures in this category are evidence of his position as a high society photographer and at the same time as a true professional. His picture of the wedding of Emeka Anyaoku (Plate 6), the former Commonwealth Secretary-General, is indicative of his professionalism and social status even though it may be argued that the former Secretary-General had not entered into that high office then. The point here is that Emeka Anyaoku was already on the way up and was clearly upwardly mobile. His best man was Gamaliel Onosode, who was an industry captain who needed little introduction. Standing beside the happy couple is a revealing tableau of the times when films had to be well managed and the printing process also required expert handling. Suffice it to add that at this time both film and the other development and printing processing materials were expensive to the extent that a good photographer had

also to be proficient in the economics and management of materials.



*Plate 6: Wedding of Emeka Anyaoku With Gamaliel Onosode As Best Man, Lagos, 1964-1966*



*Plate 7: Matriculating Student, University of Lagos*

The picture of the matriculating University of Lagos student (Plate 7), like most of Okubanjo's over 40-year-old photographs, provides incontrovertible evidence of the times when the pictures were taken. This is one picture that makes one wish that one could find the subject therein to see her reaction to the photograph so many years after (especially if she does not have a copy of it any more). From her hairstyle to her mini dress, to her poise and pose beside a flowering "monkey's tail", a not so common plant these days, by the University of Lagos "Senate House" near a signboard pointing in the direction of the Faculty of Engineering, one is able to appreciate the power of photography as evidence. Consider for a moment, the changes that have taken place since this picture was frozen in time. We hardly find that plant around today. To be optimistic is to assume that the lady in the picture certainly would be at least a grandmother now. There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that the physical environment where the picture was made is no longer the same. This photograph is thus a tool to reminisce over the time it was made.

As with all old pictures, we are affected by Okubanjo's work in different ways. If we relate with the people in them we may be awed by their physiognomic changes. The environment where the pictures were made, if known to us, may have undergone significant changes and this may affect our feelings. The very fact of the movement from black and white to colour photography is today a cause of nostalgia. Black and white pictures are now valued for their uniqueness and age. Therefore, we may be affected in more ways than can be imagined by pictures of this type. They are also valued for the expertise that went into their making considering that these days to make photographs, colour photographs at that, has become more user-friendly and commonplace. Suffice it to say, therefore, that the social history in the pictures in this category of photographs is invaluable in teaching us about the times when they were made.

## Buildings and Landscapes

It is certainly quite permissible to ascribe the role of a documentarist to the photographer when one ponders the pictures in this category. It is quite understandable that in these pictures people were located in their environment and workplace, or in social activities, but at that time I must admit it would have been rather hard to understand the artist's interest in construction sites, buildings and landscapes. His pictures of parts of Lagos at the time when modern facilities were creeping into Lagos are very important. In those days, Lagos by night was not a dark zone. I suppose it would be strange to many younger people these days to see this picture with streaks of reflections of light on the metal hand railings and kerbs of the bridge that was photographed by night (Plate 8). If bridges were lit at this time, surely most homes would have electricity.

The Cross at the Chapel of the Resurrection, University of Ibadan (Plate 9), is another interesting picture. Sharp and clear from the base up to where the cross begins the top of the Cross is deliberately faded off and away in contrast to the dense vegetation in the background. This is a very far cry from what is present there today. Indeed, the whole environment around the Cross, but the Cross itself, has changed. This leaves a lot to be said of the developments that have taken place around the Cross over the years, and the reasons for them have become a topic for discussion. Buildings and landscapes are undoubtedly prone to changes over time, and so they form excellent material for historical reminiscences. As we look through the photographs in this category from the shot of a landscape in Ikoyi, Lagos (Plate 10) to Tinubu Square in Lagos (Plate 11), to the headquarters of the G.B. Olivant trading company (Plate 12), we find monumental changes that remind us of where we are coming from. The pictures themselves have the best technical finish in terms of their being clear and sharp and being properly placed in the frame and in terms of their development and printing. As visual historical documents, the pictures in this category are important. The collection of the artist boasts several hundreds of similar pictures that are at present being digitalised and archived for posterity.

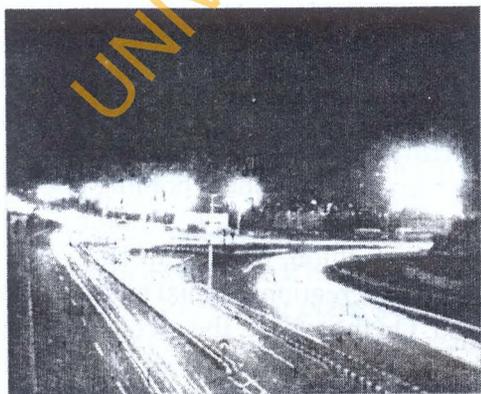


Plate 8: Lagos by Night, 1966-1968

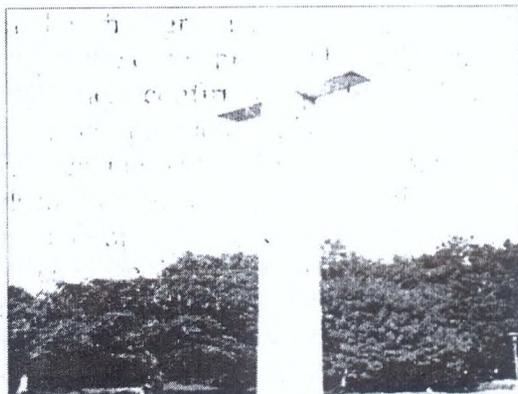
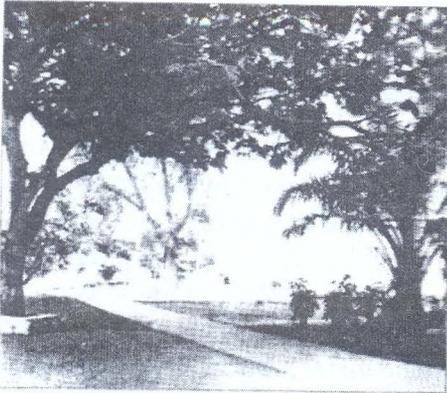
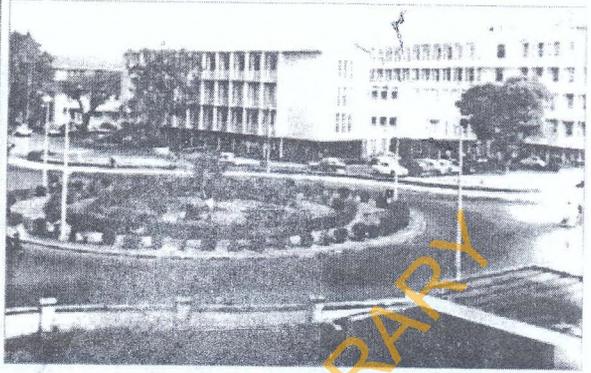


Plate 9: University of Ibadan Cross, Ibadan, 1966



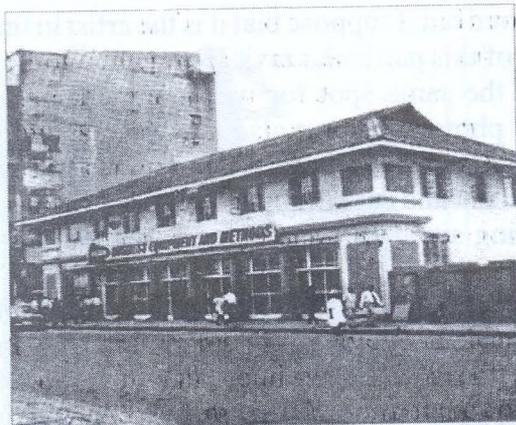
*Plate 10: Landscape, Ikoyi, Lagos, 1965*



*Plate 11: Tinubu Square, Lagos*

### **Advertising and Still Life**

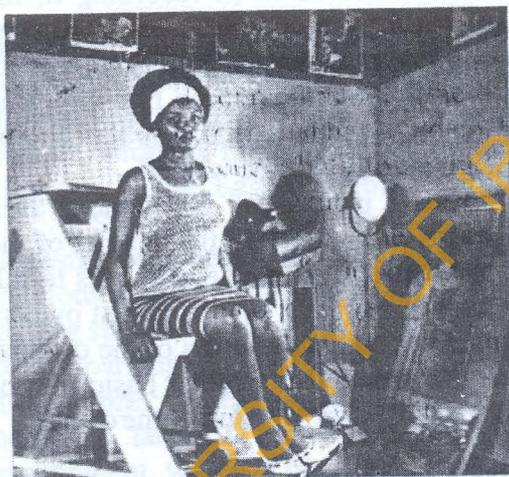
Interviews with the photographer-artist revealed that he took a number of pictures which were inserted in handbills, magazines, newspapers and billboards for the sale purpose of advertising particular products being introduced into the market, or for increasing people's awareness of them. He was also on occasion invited to fashion shows where African couture was displayed. In these endeavours, the artist showed his deep understanding of the products he was asked to shoot for advert purposes. Often in still-life, many of the products had to be placed in positions to give them maximum benefit and to make them attractive to the potential consumer. The Morris truck 'on advert (Plate 13) is seen here taken from a height to accentuate the bed that made this vehicle the workhorse of the period. In Modupe Alder's studio advert (Plate 14) for what the artist cannot now recall but I suppose would be fashion and dress, we see the beautiful model posed on a pedestal to give prominence to her apparel, starting from her "stileto" shoes to her miniskirt and tight fitting net blouse covering her camisole. These are all reminiscent of women's fashion today and indicative of the cyclic nature of fashion. The picture also gives us a glimpse of the photographer's studio at the time. Hanging on the walls behind the model are some of the pictures he had made, his equipment and some studio furniture. All of these confirm the professionalism of the artist and the seriousness with which he approached his job. Also worth discussion is "Fashion Shots for Amber Magazine" (Plate 15). In this picture the artist poses three formally dressed models in a relaxed atmosphere holding glasses with drinks and chatting as if in a formal dinner or cocktail event. According to the artist, this picture was composed to showcase the fashion, poise, gait and life in Nigeria about 1965. It captures and concretises the recreational social possibilities that were open to the middle class of the period. On the whole, the pictures in this category, like those in the other categories, are statement-making energetic pictures that are now valued for the way they bring the past into living memory with the present.



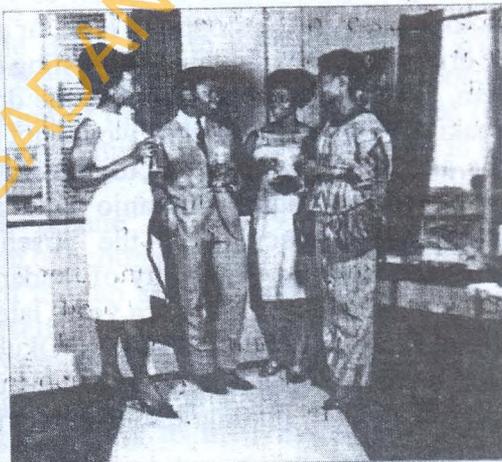
*Plate 12: G.B. Olivant Company, Lagos, 1968*



*Plate 13: Advertisement for Morris*



*Plate 14: Modupe Alder, Model, Lagos, 1965*



*Plate 15: Fashion Shots for Amber Magazine, Lagos, 1965*

### **Others**

It is merely for want of a better word that I have chosen "others" to include basically Dotun Okubanjo's pictures that I do not necessarily think fall into the categories that have been discussed. "Public Taxi" in Lagos in 1971 (Plate 16) is the picture of perhaps an old model of the Datsun, now Nissan, brand of cars. The car is photographed obviously in motion and, as we can easily recognise, the shot is near perfect in freezing the subject. There are no blurs that distort motion. The picture is so sharp as to make it nearly possible to identify the face of its right side passenger and even the number plate, yet we can guess that the photographer is located on the other side of the street. It is noticeable that while the car is very sharp in contrast, the

building in the background is dull and blurred out. I suppose that it is the artist in the photographer that has advised the choice of this particular taxi. He recalled that to make this picture, he had stood around the same spot for well over forty-five minutes waiting for the right moment to photograph, but also the right taxi that would capture what he had in his mind. For the purposes of understanding historical changes in the physical environment and car designs, one could compare and contrast this taxi shot and surrounding situation in 1971 with similar ones anywhere in Lagos today!

In the photographers "A Scene from Niger State" (Plate 17), Dotun Okubanjo captures two people, one clearly oblivious of the camera; in a tradition uncommon in the south-western part of Nigeria. Carrying loads on the head is not common among men in this part of the country. As we see, these are not even young men yet they bear what look like pots of water. Coming from where he is, this sight must have affected him so much as to want to record it. In recording it, the photographer said he stopped a little far away from his intended subjects and asked the driver of the car they were travelling in to go and ask for road descriptions from them. He had of course schooled the driver about how to position himself when speaking with them so that he would not be a part of the picture. In this way he was able, after several quick shots, to capture their image the way he wished.

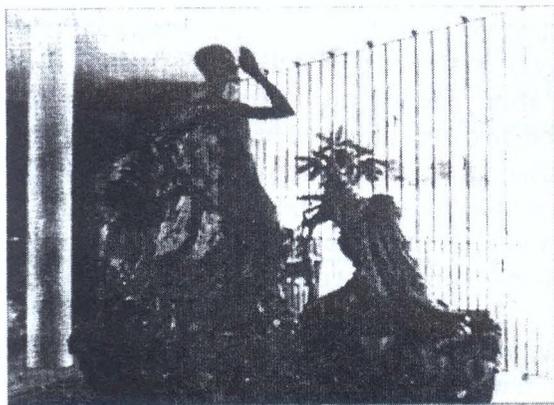
Oloye Dotun Okubanjo also made the picture of the famous Ben Enwonwu's wood sculpture - the "Risen Christ" (Plate 18), in the Chapel of the Resurrection at the University of Ibadan. Interestingly, this sculpture was to fall victim to fanatical iconoclasm years later. Although saved by its vigilant owners but not without some damage to it, Okubanjo's picture reminds us of the original wood sculpture. The author of the picture deliberately breaks the basic rule of picture making by photographing it from the back, that is, from inside the church.



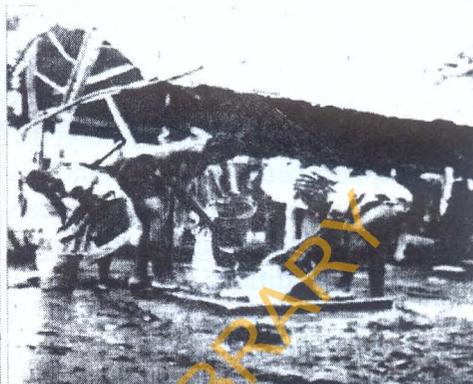
*Plate 16: Public Taxi, Lagos, 1971*



*Plate 17: A Scene from Niger State*



*Plate 18: The Risen Christ at the Chapel of The Resurrection, University of Ibadan*



*Plate 19: Students at Mayflower School, Ikenne*

According to him, his intention was simply to mystify the wood sculpture like the mystery of the risen Christ in the Bible. But to do this required great technical proficiency because pictures and their outcomes depend on the exposure of the subject to light for the precise duration of time. He said he took over 100 pictures before he finally found one that excited him enough to be included in his Kingsway House, Lagos, exhibition of 1960.

"Students at Mayflower School, Ikenne" (Plate 19), is particularly interesting here because it is a combination of action photography. There are four oblivious students washing at the base of the tap and we find each of them at varying stages of their tasks. The school itself, established by Tai Solarin, is noted for its Spartan philosophy and approach to education. It is no wonder then that the photographer made the bold attempt to capture these young female students doing their own laundry. From their dressing in shorts to their hairstyles and the environment, we see a picture that accentuates the philosophy that has been well associated with the proprietor and the school for about half a century now.

### **Conclusion**

Dotun Okubanjo was among the earliest Nigerian photographers to receive formal training in photography. Educated in the UK and returning home shortly after, he benefitted tremendously from the opportunities that were available to people with professional qualifications in the immediate post-independence period in Nigeria. From the time he returned to Nigeria from the UK and took up appointment in the Federal Ministry of Information before being posted to work directly under the Prime Minister to the time he abruptly quit photography in 1971, he exerted great impact on the environment and the profession that sustained him. As it has been noted earlier, he never really did quit photography as he would want one to believe, otherwise he would not have had the good sense to store his works with the intent of finding a place for them at some point in time. He is a photographer through and through as his extant works now testifies.

Dotun Okubanjo's works are to be appreciated for no other reasons than their aesthetic, historical and sociological qualities today. His very practice of photography in those heady years just after independence attest to the way the political economy of the time played a role in determining what subject-matters the photographers could capture in their individual oeuvres. One might want to say that he was fortunate in the social circles in which he moved and operated. But that is not all about his work in photography. And to limit oneself to just the bare facts of the material conditions in which he worked is to miss out on the appreciation of the high artistic impact he achieved, a quality that is evident so many decades after he stopped work as a photographer for reasons that are ultimately class-centred. He brought a remarkable degree of artistic flair to bear in his shots, and he used his camera to accumulate documentary materials that are of relevance in telling the story of his society at a crucial point in time, after all, photography indeed is always the record of a point in time.

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**Ohioma I. Pogoson:** Reader, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

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