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Photography: A Tool for Historical Records in Nigeria

Ohionma I. POGOSON and Abiodun O. AKANDE

Abstract

History is either oral or written. Whichever of these forms it assumes, one thing is clear; it brings to memory records of past or present events, places or situations. The question of two or more people experiencing the same or somewhat similar graphic imagery of oral or written history becomes pertinent. This situation is improbable. However, with the aid of photographs, the graphic representation of an event is frozen in time and space, thereby making it possible for a number of people to view the record of a past event that they may not have witnessed. With video, we can even hear voices and experience life in such events. Using pictures from old newspapers, published books and from private collections, this essay attempts a pictorial social, cultural and political history of the country. It also appraised the development of photography in Nigeria. This essay avers that photography is a veritable tool for documenting historical records for posterity and an endeavour that should be encouraged and communalised.

Key words: Nigeria, history, photography, chronology, document

Introduction

Right from the time of its arrival in Nigeria, photography had been widely embraced, especially in the south-western parts of the country. The advent of photography coincided with the influx of missionaries and the subsequent colonisation of Nigeria. From that time, photography has metamorphosed from the ordinary art of picture taking for entertainment and decoration to become a tool for recording practically all-major historical events. This paper identifies landmarks, social histories, and political, cultural events in Nigeria and individual histories with the aim of reiterating photography as a tool for recording these events and to demonstrate its potential in Nigeria history. It avers that many histories, personal or official from the time photography first reached Nigeria to the present, can be chronologically presented in photographs. It also establishes that photographs can be put together to elucidate written history and that they can serve independently as the history of Nigeria on their own. The paper contends that while written history may contain and convey personal nuance or the individual acuity of the writer, photographs, where available, can help to some extent, to clarify issues of ambiguity in history. The paper employed the use of primary and secondary sources of information for its data. The primary sources include old photographs and records from the Nigeria National archives and interviews with pioneering Nigerian

photographers. Materials from textbooks formed the secondary source of information.

According to Eriberto (2006: 87), Jackson, a field researcher, felt more like a camera than a field note when he was in the field gathering data. This statement is not an attempt to relegate the importance of field notes which is still a crucial part of recording field data; rather, it shows the importance of picture over written words. It further reveals that every time the writer goes to the field, he attempts to store the picture of events in memory. The position of Eriberto can be said to lend credence to Morton's (2005: 390) assertion that photographs are indeed the starting point in field research, a mental kick-starter for a complex series of related objects, events, sceneries and histories through time and space. By implication, Morton postulates that a picture of an event is capable of stimulating the brain to recall other related events in memory. It is on this premise that this paper argues that photography is a form of historiography.

There are writers who have argued on the problems that photography may pose to history, however, despite all the criticisms levelled against the use of photographs in field works and historical studies, its veracity is evident in its *frequent and fluid*, as Schroeder (2003) puts it, use for historical, anthropological, scientific, judicial and civil evidence. Much more, governments and organisations have found photography a valuable and dependable instrument in their operations. Indeed, colonial masters and governments of Nigeria after independence made profuse use of photographs to elucidate many of their reports.

The history of photography in Nigeria predates the coming of the colonial masters. Coupland (1928) notes that the earliest surviving photographs from the interior of tropical Africa are probably those made by John Kirk between 1858 and 1862. Echeruo (1977) states that as early as 1860, photographs were being taken in Lagos (Nigeria).

Erika (2005) suggests that the first photographs in West Africa probably arrived in Lagos via ships from Europe and America. She further observes that in the 19th century, there were great commercial links between Lagos, Lome, Accra, Sekondi, and other major cities along the West African coasts. Erika opines that the coastal regions of West Africa were thus probably the first to be impacted by photography. From the coastal regions photography moved into the hinterland. Lagos was therefore probably the first to enjoy the novelty of photography.



Figure 1. Map Showing Major Cities in South Western Nigeria.

Source: Authors

In this paper, the photographs dealing with the historical developments in Nigeria are classified into five groups, based on their chronological sequence. It then discusses the political, economic and cultural developments during each period as they pertain to the photographs. The periodisation is discussed as follows: 1. pre-colonial period; 2. colonial and early independence period; 3. post- independence period; 4. 1970–1990 (post-colonial period); 5. recent developments. It should, however, be pointed out that this periodisation does not suggest sharp temporal discontinuities from one period to another, since the events of one period often dovetailed into others.

Pre-colonial Period

Pre-colonial times in Nigeria were mostly photographed by missionaries, explorers and journalists. The abolition of slavery in West Africa around 1833 (Oduntan, 2011: 32) had, perhaps, the most impact on the history and use of photographs in Nigeria. A large number of returnee slaves were resettled in West Africa, especially in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Returnee slaves possessed different skills and trades which they had acquired while in America and Europe. Erika (2011) indeed suggests that the origin of photography in Nigeria can be traced to the returnee slaves of the nineteenth century. At this time, according to her, slaves who just gained their freedom while in Europe and America had learnt the trade, took to photography and eventually dominated it on their return to Africa. The first professional studios were said to have opened in Lagos as early as 1880 (Erika, 2005). According to Adeniyi-Jones (1984), the first African to own a studio in Nigeria was Walwin Holm. He had his studio on Tinubu Street,

Lagos. These early studios were owned by Sierra Leoneans, Liberians and Brazilians; most of whom were freed slaves or their descendants. The sprawling town of Lagos was an economic nerve centre in Nigeria; it had many large supermarkets where it was possible to find a lot of goods, including the latest photographic equipment. It was here that the first colour laboratory in Africa was opened at the end of the 1960s (Erika, 2011).

The pioneering photographers formed the intellectual elite in Lagos and other cities like Abeokuta and Ibadan. Among them was George S. A. da Costa, who had a studio in Ricca Street, Oke Popo, Lagos. He is noted for his colonial government commission to photograph the construction of the railway from Lagos to Jebba in 1900. Macmillan described da Costa as the best-known photographer in Nigeria (Macmillan, 1920). Today his photographs are historical testimonies of the construction of the old Lagos to Jebba railway track.

Christian missionaries were also active photographers at this time. They also took a lot of photographs during their missionary activities in Nigeria. Although the photographs were not necessarily taken with the intention of recording history, but the frequency with which they took the photographs was continuous and their sheer number today make them veritable historical materials for understanding church history in Nigeria. The landscapes of church surroundings, the dressing mode of the members of the clergy and church events, among other things, were recorded. According to Erika (1998), missionary photographs turn out to be excellent and rich sources of information about the missionaries themselves and their subjects (see plates 1, 2, 3 and 4).

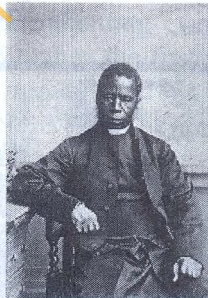


Plate 1
Samuel Ajayi Crowther
Source: googleimages.com



Plate 2
The Ake Church Abeokuta - 1888

Source: Unknown



Plate 3
Members of the Lower Niger Conference Group (CMS)
With Bishop Ajayi Crowther in the front row at the centre - 1880

Source: Unknown



Plate 4
Church Missionary Society Group – 1885

Source: Unknown

In plate 1 is the picture of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, an African who became a Bishop of the Church Missionary Society (Christraud, 1991). When compared, plates 1 and 3 depict Ajayi Crowther at different stages of his life. Plate 1 shows Ajayi Crowther at the prime of his life, while plate 3 is a photograph of the same personality at an old age. In plate 3 Ajayi Crowther is with other clergies of the lower Niger conference group.

Plate 2 is a picture of Ake Church in Abeokuta. The picture was taken in 1888. It can be observed from the photograph that the tower in the facade of the church building, in the background, is higher than the remaining part of the building. This architectural style dominated church architecture in the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries in Nigeria. The picture also attests to the usually serene environment of churches at that time. This kind of serenity can only be compared with the one perceived in John Constable's painting of the "Salisbury Cathedral."

At the outset, the missionaries took photographs as records of their visits to Africa, but the frequency and sequence with which they took the photographs were so high that an assemblage of their photographs has now turned out to be strong evidential chronological record of their missionary and evangelical activities.

Explorers and anthropologists also took photographs in attempts to give graphic illustrations of their research. Cole (1995) in fact observes that photographs are a means of depicting the conditions encountered in foreign lands; and without knowing it, these explorers took photographs that today serve as graphic history of not only their activities but the history of Nigeria; its landscape, seascapes, communities and forests. Apart from the photographs taken by the missionaries and explorers, journalists of this period also contributed in documenting events of this time. Journalism in Nigeria can be traced to 1859 when the first bilingual (English and Yoruba) newspaper, called *Iwe Iroyin*, published by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Abeokuta, started. Six other newspapers had joined *Iwe Iroyin* by the second half of the 19th century. The most popular ones were published in Lagos; they included *The Pioneer* and *The Advocate*. At the outset, most of these newspapers did not use photographs in their publications, probably because of the technicalities involved in printing pictures alongside with texts in tabloids, but as technology advanced, it became easier to break photographs into low resolution tones for offset printing machines, which were later introduced. When this technology had become fully mastered, the use of photographs became frequent in the newspapers.

Colonial and Early Independence Period

The colonial period in Nigeria was between 1900 and 1960. At this time, photographs were beginning to be used by colonial masters for administrative purposes and for documenting their wide-range activities in

the colonies. Photographs thus became an instrument of record keeping. Photographs were used by colonial officers to elucidate the reports of what they met in the colonies. Indeed, some of the earlier known photographs in Africa were taken by Western colonial photographers. An example of such photographs is that of Captain Bower (plate 5), a British administrative officer in Ibadan, which was taken around 1893 (Omojola, 1999). Omojola suggests that this picture is one of the earliest evidences of photography in Nigeria (Omojola, 1999). The photograph is a portrait of Captain Bower with a dainty moustache; clean trim hairline and wearing a military dress with medals and trophies. This picture is reminiscent of a quintessential British District Officer (DO). It is a picture that encapsulates history.



Plate 5

Captain R. L. Bower (c. 1893)

First British Administrative Officer in Ibadan

Source: Akinyele, J.B. 1981. *Iwe Itan Ibadan ati Die Ninu Awon Ilu Agbegbe re,*

Bi Iwo, Oshogbo, ati Ikirun, Ibadan: Board Publications. 212.

Another early picture from Nigeria in the period under discussion is that of the captive Oba Ovoramwen of Benin aboard a ship (Plate 6) on his way to exile after the British expedition to Benin in 1897 (Christraud, 1999). In the photograph, Oba Ovoramwen is seated on an "ordinary" chair, he is dressed in a piece of cloth tied around his body, from his chest to the legs, his head and chest are bare; "the king" is unkempt and morose. Historical literature, most certainly, cannot adequately convey the obvious dejection in the eyes of the revered Oba Ovoramwen of Benin as shown in the picture in Plate 6. Hard as the historian may try, it is impossible to describe the exact mood of the Oba as seen in the picture.



Plate 6

Oba Ovoramwen of Benin aboard a ship on his way to exile after the British expedition to Benin in 1897

Source: Unknown

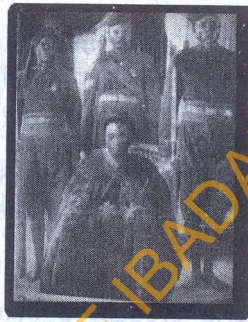


Plate 7

Oba Ovonramwen as he sailed from Benin to Calabar, where he died in exile

The West African Pilot, March 3, 1938, p. 1

Source: National Archives of Nigeria

By the first half of the 20th century, a number of newspaper proprietors had started to publish printed news daily and some periodically. Some of the early newspapers include: *The Nigerian Pioneer*, a weekly newspaper established in 1921; *The Nigerian Advocate* established in August, 1923; *The Daily Times of Nigeria* established in 1926; *West African Pilot*, established in November 22, 1937; *The Nigerian Tribune*, established in November 16, 1949; *Daily Express*, *West African Publicity Company*, and *Nigerian Spokesman*. These publishing outfits engaged photographers to record events for their newspapers.



Plate 8

Obituary Column

The Nigerian Spokesman, January 5, 1950, p. 3

Source: National Archives of Nigeria

Professional photographers were invited to record road and bridge construction works, which were to be part of the report of the colonial officers. Among these photographers was J.W. Rowland, the Lagos surgeon and photographer who recorded early colonial penetration into Lagos (Killingray, 1989: 201). There was also M. C. P. Sofolue, based in Igbosere Road in the 1930s. He was the first Nigerian photographer to be attached to the government house in Lagos.

The adoption of photography as a means of record keeping by the colonial government in Nigeria brought a number of commissions to photographers. Without their knowing it, the photographers were recording the history of Nigeria. Photographers were employed to record engineering construction sites as well as other government businesses. As indicated earlier, G.S.A. da Costa for example, was employed to cover the construction of the railway in Lagos to Jebba in 1900 and from Jebba to Kaduna between 1909 to 1911 (Killingray, 1989). Some of Da Costa's are also records the social life of 'Lagosians'. In one his photographs: five men posing at the back of a house (Plate 9). In the picture, two men in the same attire are in standing position with their left hands in the pockets of their trousers, while three others, in black suits, sit with crossed legs ostensibly to achieve some kind of balance and symmetry.

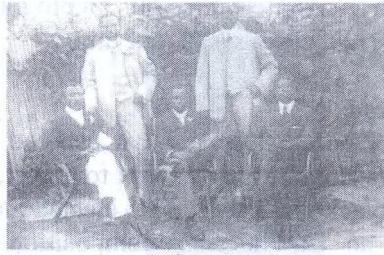


Plate 9

A Group of Nigerians at Home by George S.A. da Costa c. 1920

Source: Erika Nimis, *Photographes d'Afrique de l'Ouest: L'expérience Yoruba*.

Jackie Phillips, another pioneering photographer of the same period, was commissioned by the *Daily Mirror* newspaper to cover the “Centennial Festival” of Britain that was held in London by the British home government for the *Daily Mirror*. He was invited by the British home office alongside other Nigerian and British photographers to cover the 1956 visit to Nigeria of her royal majesty, Queen Elizabeth II. Other private photographers photographed several popular events and marketed their pictures to the general populace. One Samuel Olatunbosun Olofin, an Ibadan-based photographer, confirmed that he earned substantial profit from the photographs he took during the visit of Queen Elizabeth II (Omojola 1999).

According to Japhet (2010), another photographer of this period was J. D. Okhai Ojeikere, popularly called “Kenturkey Photographer.” In 1954, he was the assistant laboratory officer for the Ministry of Information in Ibadan. Alongside his full-time employment, he was constantly practising photography privately at the University of Ibadan campus, recording pictures of the social life of students on campus. According to Japhet (2010), Ojeikere later became famous for documenting the transformations and variations found in the traditional hairstyles worn by women in Nigeria. His photographs depict the various hairstyles of Nigeria. Ojeikere’s documentation of hairstyles is unprecedented in the history of Nigeria and this brought him to lime light. His photographs are today historical documents that can convey the historical development of Nigerian hairstyles with or without any written literature. They continue to be exhibited all over the world.

The activities of Joseph Denfield, a British ethnographer in Nigeria, is notable in the Nigeria historical landscape.. Born in England in 1911, he graduated with a B.Sc. and an M.B. in medicine (Denfield and Bull, 1970). It was in Nigeria that his photographic career started in the years from 1944 to 1946. He began by taking ethnographic images of various “pagan tribes” and compiling ethnographic data. The photographs he took were circulated

in the British and South African media. His photographs are records of several Nigerian cultural characteristics at that time.

Post-Independence Period

One of the major political events that ushered in the 60s was the general elections of 1959. The election brought to power, for the first time, a central executive with a black majority. It also elected members of the upper and lower houses, with an 'all-Nigerian' composition. At this time, the British administration in West Africa was preparing to grant independence to its colonies. Ghana had gained her political independence earlier in 1957. Nigeria was therefore strongly agitating for independence. The agitation for independence was especially intense in the Western region. Photographers for the newspapers had prepared very well for the election. Burgeoning photographers and professionals were not left out; they all covered the elections. Independence celebration followed in 1960. Today, the memories of these events are preserved in the photographs that can be found in the National archives and various government holdings.

The establishment of more media houses also contributed to further promotion and propagation of the use of photography. *The Daily Times of Nigeria* (DTN), *Federal Ministry of Information*, *Daily Service*, *Daily Express*, *Western Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation*, *West African Pilot*, *West African Publicity Company*, among others, created full and part-time employment for photographers. Their engagements included photographing newsworthy events. Their photographs complemented news-stories. They also made "picture news", a genre where pictures are used solely to convey news-messages. Photographs were also used in obituary advertisement columns (Plate 10). Many photographers, apart from their official engagements with the media houses, had their own private studios in the towns where they worked. Many of the social engagements, which took place during weekends kept the photographers very, busy.

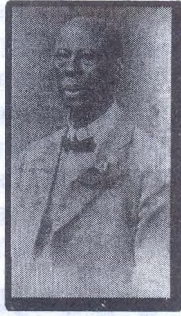


Plate 10

Photograph from Obituary Advertisement Column

The West African Pilot of January 7, 1938 p. 6

Source: National Archives of Nigeria

In 1963, Nigeria became a Republic and consequently a sovereign nation. The event was elaborately celebrated and photographed. The 1964 and 1965 regional and general elections that ushered in the governments of Chief S. L. Akintola in the Western region and Tafawa Balewa at the centre were richly-photographed and documented. Indeed, these photographs are the concrete material evidence of those events today. Because of their newsworthiness, photographers of the different newspapers fully cover the various events. The elections were copiously photographed by *The Daily Times* of Nigeria, *Morning Post*, *Daily Express*, *The Nigerian Tribune*, *Lagos Weekend* (published by The Daily Times of Nigeria (DTN)), Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation, *West African Pilot*, and West African Publicity Company.

Peter Obe who covered most of the political events that led to Nigeria's independence was also involved in the photographing of the post-election mayhem of 1964 and 1965 (Elebute, 2009). Some of the events of the January and July 1966 coup d'état, a violent strike on the Nigerian polity, were also captured in pictures by Peter Obe. His collection of photographs has already been compiled into a book (Obe, 1986). Today, the photographs of Peter Obe are the repertoire of images of the first Nigerian coup. When the Biafran civil war broke out in Nigeria in 1967, Obe, risked his life to cover the gruesome war and he was celebrated for his bravado. Ekpei (1986) notes that photographs from the battlefield were used by both the Nigerian government and the Biafran rebels as means of propaganda, visual proof of atrocities and claims of victory. A number of soldiers also brought home photographs from the battlefield.

The 1960s witnessed a tremendous increase in the number of studios, and by 1963 there were already 397 professional photographers in Ibadan alone. Mathew Faji was a celebrated photographer of the 50s and

60s. He covered, with Peter Obe, the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Nigeria and the Nigerian civil war.

A number of early photographers were reporters for The Daily Times of Nigeria. Among them were Jackie Philips and Billy Rose, photographers of repute, who had their studios in Surulere. The two photographers made photographs and used them as postcards. This project was initially widely accepted but later lost its charm.



Plate 11

Association of Photographers in Ijebu-Igbo by Crosby Photos, 1967

Source: Erika Nimis, *Photographes d'Afrique de l'Ouest: L'expérience Yoruba.*

In the northern parts of Nigeria, photography did not receive as much attention as it did in the coastal regions. According to Erika (2005), the spread of photography to the north, especially Kano, was due largely to the efforts of Ijebu traders from the south-western part of the country. Ijebu people are noted for being artisans and technicians. They learnt different sorts of trades such as photography, auto repairs, electrical repairs, carpentry, etc. They were reputed travellers into the interior of the country in search of areas where their business and training would yield them high profits. “Kunle Koya Photo Studio”, owned by an Ijebu man, opened in Sabo Gari, Kano, around 1967. For a long time, it was the only photo studio in Kano. The studio covered different types of social ceremonies in the social lives of the people.

Generally, acceptance of and developments in photography were rather slow in the interior of the country (Erika, 2005: 86). It was only by the end of 1980 that the first major photo studio owned by a Hausa man opened in Kano. The name of the studio was “Wazobia Photo Studio and Video” and it was located in Emir’s Palace Road. The photo studio only succeeded in recording the social life of the people in its environ.

1970–1990 (Post-Colonial Period)

In the late 70s photojournalism had started to take a strong footing. Photojournalism is a form of journalism in which photographs are meant to

speak for themselves. Interest and specialization in different aspects of photography started to develop as Nigerians started to read and understand through pictures. Apart from studio and outdoor photography, documentary and industrial photography also emerged. Some photographers specialized in portraiture while others focused on landscape and environmental photography. The late 70s indeed witnessed the exploitation of photography for commemorative purposes and for advertising. Photographs of commemorative events were used for post-cards, postage stamps, souvenirs and posters (see plate 12). They were used in postage stamps to document important cultural, social or political events or people in Nigeria.



Plate 12
Poster Commemorating the FESTAC '77
Source: alfredsupik.com

Special festivals and ceremonies were documented with photographs. The 2nd Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77) that took place in Nigeria in 1977 was profusely photographed and documented. During this festival, some burgeoning photographers again came to limelight. Matthew Faji's action photographs during the FESTAC are well spoken of. Fiofori (2011) attests to the skills of Matthew Faji. He describes Faji as a national hero and a photographer of great repute. He discusses Faji's unique action photographs taken during the FESTAC.

It was at the post colonial in Nigeria period that one of the greatest innovations in photography, was introduced; digital photography. It is a method of making images without the use of the conventional photographic film. Instead, a machine called 'scanner' records visual information and converts them into codes of 'ones and zeroes' that a computer can read. Digital photography lend itself to manipulation by means of various computer programs. Digital photography is now widely used in advertising and graphic designs. It quickly replaced conventional photographic technology.

Today, digital cameras are available for both professional photographers and amateur enthusiasts. The more expensive professional

cameras function like 35mm cameras but record the picture information as pixels or digital dots of colour. The finer the pixel of a camera the higher is its resolution and the higher the resolution, the sharper the image. After taking pictures, the user can connect the camera directly to a television set through a video player or a computer; thus a group of people or family can view the pictures together. Alternatively, image files can be transferred to a home computer, stored on disks, or sent to friends via electronic mail.

Many, if not all, photographers of the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s used digital cameras. Professional photographers of this period, such as Sunmi Smart-Cole (Olatunji, 1991: xvi) made pictures of all sorts of subjects including, but not limited to, natural events and the environment, thus adding people and the landscape to pictorial history of Nigeria. A large number of Smart-Cole's pictures are in black and white. He is noted for manipulating gray-scale to achieve solidity in his works. Some of the titles of his photographs are: "Save the Trees" (1983), "Wole Soyinka" (1983, Plate 13) and "Stop Environmental Pollution" (1988). Ogunbiyi (Ogunbiyi 1984) describes him as a hard-core professional who applied the rigours of technique to his works.

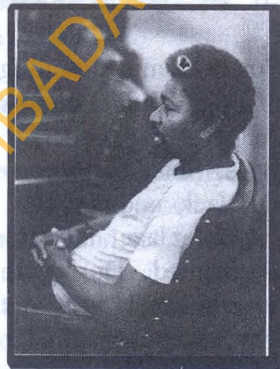


Plate 13

Wole Soyinka by Sunmi Smart-Cole - 1983

Source: *The photography of Sunmi Smart Cole*. Daily Times of Nigeria, 1991.

Other photographers of the 90s include Don Barber and Philip Trimnell (Lawal 2003:16). Barber was born in 1956. He opened a photo studio, first, in Ikeja, but later moved it to Surulere. His subjects are portraiture and still-life compositions (Lawal, 2003: 25). Among his works is "June 12" (1993) which portrays a historically important event in the history of Nigeria. It depicts the injustice perpetrated by General Ibrahim Babangida's regime in annulling of the election won by Moshood Abiola on 12th June 1993. It is also a reminder of the political mayhem that followed the populace's rejection of the presidential annulment.



Plate 14

“Bose” by Don Barber – 1998

Source: A. A. Lawal, “Photography as Art: A Study of Sunmi Smart-Cole, Don Barber and Philip Trimnell’s Photographs.” Unpublished M. A. Dissertation, Ibadan, Institute of African Studies, Uuniversity of Ibadan, 2003.

Philip Trimnell is another photographer of repute at this period. His subjects cover environmental and social documentary photographs. Some of his works are “Lagos Marina” (1998, Plate 15) and “Nepa.” Trimnell’s “Lagos Marina” depicts Lagos cityscape, an industrial and highly populated city. The picture catches the mood of Lagos. The picture is a view of the great Marina car park against the background of Lagos skyscrapers. In the background are towering skyscrapers. The cars and buildings appear jam-packed showing that Lagos is a very congested city.

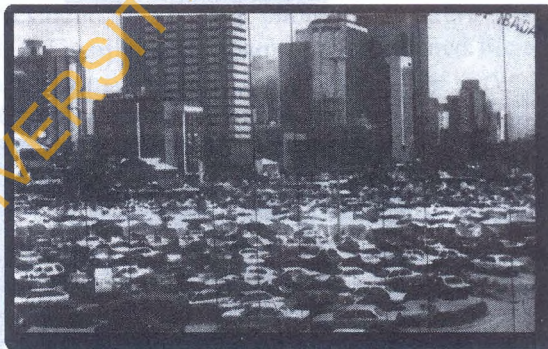


Plate 15

“Lagos Marina” by Philip Trimnell – 1998

Source: A.A. Lawal, “Photography as Art: A Study of Sunmi Smart-Cole, Don Barber and Philip Trimnell’s Photographs.” Unpublished M. A. Dissertation, Ibadan, Institute of African Studies, Uuniversity of Ibadan, 2003.

Many photographers of the 1990s in the south-western parts of the country were located on campuses of universities and polytechnics and they recorded a lot of the social life of students on campus. They also delved into what is called 'action photography'. These were photographs taken with telephoto lenses that blur the background. Sometimes photographers asked their clients to jump up and while still in the air, they would take the shot. To make these photographs some clients were asked to throw their bags in the air, and while the bag was still in the air (plate 16), the photographer would take the picture to capture the action still in motion. Also, furry toys such as teddy bears, tigers and lions started to show up in picture compositions at this time (Plate 17). The photographers' subjects posed with these sometimes life-size toys. Another common composition is one in which groups of friends were asked to stand akimbo, or backing one another in twos. The photographic gamut created by the photographers on campuses can serve to tell, among other things, the history of fashionable photograph-taking trends and dressing patterns among the Nigerian youth over time.



Plate 16

Action Photography (2011)

Source: Collection of B-Best Photos, Oyo



Plate 17

Models posing with a furry tiger (2011)

Source: Collection of B-Best Photos, Oyo

Around this same period, exhibitions of photographs began to take place. Although such exhibitions were few, they enjoyed the patronage of art lovers. Photography now came alongside art, even in exhibition halls. Embassies, museums, corporate bodies and galleries now began to sponsor photo exhibitions. Celebrated photographers also organized public talks and workshops. In academia, photography gained recognition as a necessary tool for research, historical and visual studies, especially for Africa.

Recent Developments

As the technology of photography continues to develop day by day, its use for historical documentation increases. Electronic technology has taken over the camera and therefore the manual rudimentary photography of old became obsolete. Photography and other image-making technologies such as computers (and graphic arts) have overlapped. Almost all image-making systems are now compatible. Hand-held telephone sets, with the right software, are compatible with digital cameras and can receive and transfer information and pictures from one to another. Digital cameras can be connected to the computer and the computer to photographic printers. Computers and mobile phones are manufactured with cameras (popularly called webcam). Many of these hardware come with bluetooth, a wireless technology that enables devices to connect (without cables) to one other, even to the internet, and exchange materials.

Events that were not ordinarily covered by photographers are now being photographed. For instance, George Esiri extravagantly covered the 2010 Nigerian presidential election campaign in about 10,000 photographs. The photographer travelled with the presidential campaign team all over the country and after the campaign, he organized an exhibition in Abuja, tagged "The People's President." Fifty-two photographs were displayed at the exhibition. President Goodluck Jonathan himself opened the show. Without doubt, Esiri's photographs will now and in the future serve as a historical coverage of the 2010 presidential elections in Nigeria.

Art collectors in Nigeria have also realized the importance of photography and have started to build photo-libraries and collections. Prince Yemisi Shyllon, Nigeria's foremost art collector, recently organized competitions in photography. Shyllon's art foundation, Omooba Yemisi Adedoyin Shyllon Art Foundation, invited entries for its annual photo competition. The contest was open to amateur and professional photographers. The intention of the organisers is to build a library of photographs that can be useful to people who want to see them for leisure and for researchers who may need them for historical or documentary reasons.

Conclusions

Photography in Nigeria has not been limited to leisure; right from colonial times, colonial officers have used it as a tool for elucidating reports sent to Britain. As established above, important historical events in Nigeria have been well documented via photographs. These events range from missionary activities (1800s) to colonial engagements and independence celebrations (1900-1960), the several military coups, the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970 and the Festival of Arts and Culture of 1977, and the ubiquitous application of photography of the 80s, the annulled June 12 elections of 1993 and, recently, the Goodluck Jonathan 2011 campaign activities. They all highlight Nigeria history.

Apart from political history of the country, land and cityscapes, social lives and personalities have been subjects of modern professional photographers. The photographic collection of Dotun Okubanjo (Pogoso, 2011) contains pictures of deceased eminent personalities such as Amos Tutuola, D. O. Fagunwa, Obafemi Awolowo, Anthony Enahoro, Nnamdi Azikwe and Tafawa Balewa, all-important people in Nigerian cultural history. Sunmi Smart-Cole in his own collection has photographs of Lagos cityscapes and important personalities like Wole Soyinka, Nigeria's only Nobel Prize winner. Philip Trimmell's photographs are also landscapes with special interest in Lagos, undoubtedly Nigeria's most vibrant city and commercial capital.

The coverage and sequence with which the history of Nigeria has been documented in photographs make it possible for this essay to suggest that photographs can be used, not only as a tool for elucidating written history of Nigeria, but as a free-standing repertoire of the history of Nigeria. The possibility of the use of photographs independently as history is evident in the obituary programmes printed in Nigeria today. It is commonplace to find programmes dedicating the centrespread or their last few pages to photographs of deceased people from their youth to adulthood. Such photographs are usually with little or no texts. They are meant to be a visual presentation of the life history of the deceased (see Plate 18).

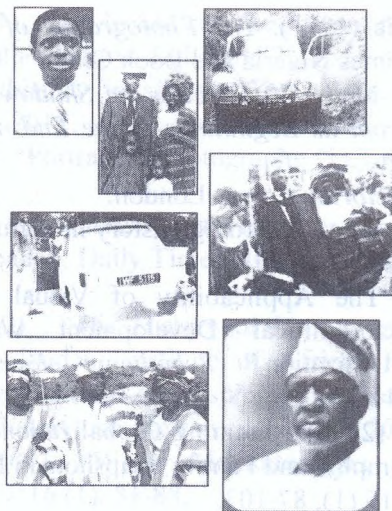


Plate 18

Some of the photographs at the centre spread of Late Chief Professor Oludare Olajubu's (1933-2012) burial programme.

This paper is aware of the possibility of manipulating photographs to add and delete, to and from, its original features. It therefore assumes that photographs are not deviously manipulated to alter them. All the illustration used here are "true" pictures. Beyond the shortcomings that may be associated with photography, this paper avers that photography remains an unparalleled graphic report of a situation, event or thing at a particular time. Moreover, such graphic representations, with or without explanation, can be read by others who were not at the location of the event, and meaningful conclusions can be drawn from pictures. This paper also asserts that there are enough photographs in government and private collections in Nigeria that can be put together, with little or no literature, to relate the history of Nigeria, and that these photographs events can be arranged in a chronological order.

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