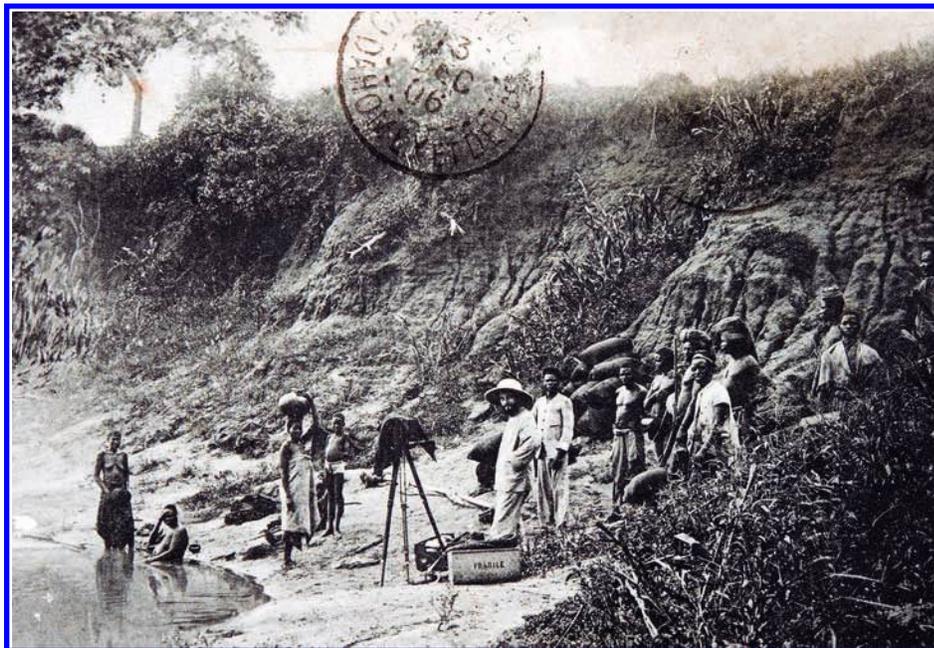


African Photography

by Charles Gore

Anyone who has attended life cycle events in Nigeria, such as weddings, funerals, and other social occasions, will have encountered the ubiquity of the photographer. His or her role has expanded since the beginning of 1990s to include the filming of such ceremonies, which, much like the photographs that decorate the walls of the parlor, can be displayed to visitors. These present to the visitor the social biography of the household. There are also widespread practices of commemoration that make use of photography and video by exploiting their status as tangible records of past events or scenes in order to elicit memory. In funerary rites across southern Nigeria, the very materiality of the photograph can contribute to the spectacle and its performance with close kin members dancing with the framed image of the deceased to honor the individual's life and contribution to the family or lineage. Funerary rites vary from locale to locale and yet photography and video in their dissemination through a variety of media, whether newspaper obituaries and memorials or featured in funeral and subsequent one-year, five-year, ten-year, or later announcements on local television channels, have served to define commonalities of public performance that cut across linguistic or cultural boundaries.

Photographic images are transposed onto fabrics to be worn at events and subsequently to commemorate them. Here they assert collective identities, whether of the family, religious group, political party, or other allegiance. Individuals commission personal photographs for a host of reasons (including the ubiquitous selfie), as mementos, as exchanges with friends and kin, as modes of self-presentation (both factual and aspirational), as well as to comply with the exigencies of institutions, whether the ID cards demanded by nation state, the issuing of licences that identify the holder, or in commercial firms for security. Indeed, in Benin City one famous charismatic chief priest, Ohen Nomayisi, who led a shrine dedicated to the local deities Olokun, Ogun, and Eziza, issued laminated ID cards to the members of his shrine community and likened them to the security ID cards of Nigerian National Petroleum



"The decisive moment" is always constructed by the photographer, c. 1900.

Photo: Postcard collection of Charles Gore

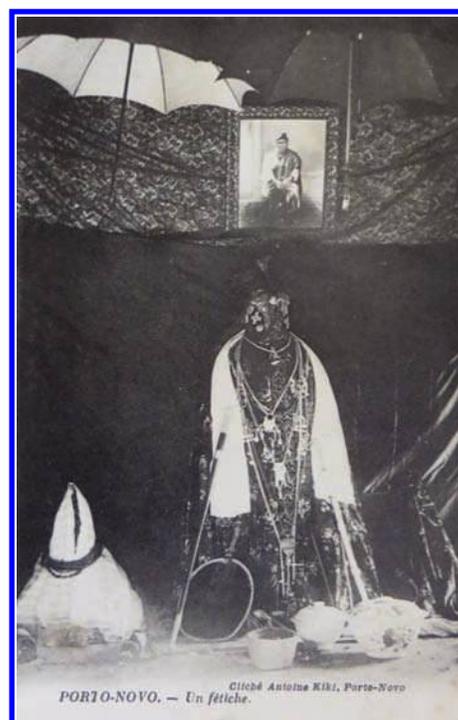
Photograph c. 1920 in Porto Novo by Antoine Kiki from Côte d'Ivoire. It commemorates a shrine to a deceased elder whose clothes and photograph also feature.

Photo: Postcard collection of Charles Gore

Company (NNPC), based only a few avenues away. In this way he asserted the modernity of his shrine, whose long-standing capabilities (drawn from the metaphysical agencies of Edo culture) were able to address and resolve any contemporary exigency, personal or institutional, that may trouble one of his devotees.

Tagg has commented on photography's mobility and its capacity to be constituted in diverse ways within specific and differing historical trajectories (Tagg 1983:63). This is immediately evident in any region of Africa where photography is embedded in differing local cultural practices and significances. However, photography's localized spaces of practice and representation are situated within specific social formations composed by the intersections of local elements with the impositions and appropriations of regional and global elements. Photography offers a conceptual yet sensuous image space that contributes to these configurations of local modernities.

From the outset, photography and its modes of mechanical production of the image were revolutionary in challenging prior modes of representation. The photographic image appeared indexically, linked by its light-sensitive procedures to the subject matter inscribed within its framing, and offered a veracity that differed to prior modes of representation. Its technologies had only been publicly available for less than a year when the American writer



Edgar Allan Poe wrote in the popular *Alexander's Weekly Messenger* (1840:2) about the remarkable new properties of the daguerreotype, observing that

in truth, the Daguerreotypic plate is infinitely (we use the term advisedly) is *infinitely* more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands. If we examine a work of ordinary art, by means of a powerful microscope, all traces of resemblance to nature will disappear—but the closest scrutiny of the photogenic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented.

(continued on p. 4)



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Photographic technologies and their new modes of representation captured the imagination wherever they were displayed, having dispersed rapidly around the world during the 1840s. However, the procedures involved, whether in the daguerreotype or the calotype process (reverse printing from a negative image) devised by Talbot, were cumbersome and required skill and knowledge to operate successfully. This gave rise to the professional photographer who disseminated such images on a commercial basis. Advertisements offering the skills of African professional photographers are documented in newspapers at Freetown in Sierra Leone since the 1850s (Viditz-Ward 1987:510–18) and are but one example of the way in which photography flourished as a local practice on the African continent. In an advertisement appearing in the *Gold Coast Times and Cape Coast* in 1883 (Blair 1883), the African photographer John M. Blair extolled the qualities of photography, stating that:

In common with the other departments of the arts, Photography has had the additional “BOON” conferred upon it during the last few years, so now no common place photos can be found a place with in the range of the circle. From

the studio of the writer may be had pictures of excellent quality, correct as to likeness, perfect as to definition and durable, besides being calculated to remain unchanged for many years..... Instantaneous pictures of Children – Groups – Landscapes and Views may be taken and may also be had on reasonable terms.

Clearly, local practices of photography also participated in its regional and global discourses, due in part to the travel circuits of photographers, the importation of technological innovations from Europe and the United States, as well as of its journals (that, alongside debates as to what constituted the essential characteristics, nature, or art of photography, also gave detailed scientific instruction in how to take photographs). Like many other professional photographers in Europe and Africa, Blair also practised allied professions, in particular as an architect and chemist—the former required an understanding of visual form in the design of space, while the latter directly informed his expertise in the ongoing developments and innovations in the printing and fixing of photographic images.

For the most part, histories of photography in Africa written in the twentieth century focused on the colonial gaze, with attention centered predominantly on the output of Euro-

(clockwise from top left)

Ancestral shrine at the ceremony of Eho, dedicated to the deceased father, which is held in November. There are photographs of the celebrant’s great-grandfather, Chief Orokhiri, who served Oba Ovonramwen; his grandfather, Chief Igiebor, who worked for the British administration; and his father, Chief Eson, who worked in the Nigerian civil service. The photographs are linked to the *ukhure* (rattlestaff) that is placed on the shrine at the end of the burial rites, and the deceased has become an ancestor.

Photo: Charles Gore, November 1994

Photographs of the late Chief Inneh in 2004 heralding his funeral. They are juxtaposed with the cloths that well-wishers and friends of the family wear at the funeral to show their collective support.

Photo: Charles Gore, August 2004

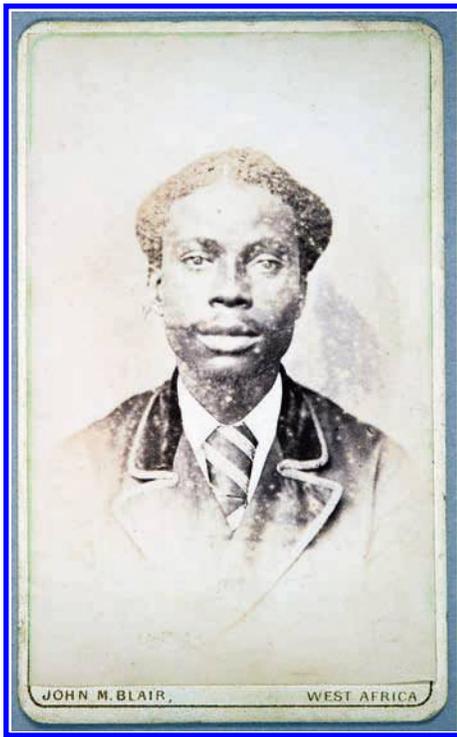
During the funerary rites of the late Chief Inneh, the youth of the Igun ward parade throughout the ward’s streets, singing laments and praises while dancing with an empty coffin and his portrait.

Photo: Charles Gore, August 2004

Chief priestess Osagie at her shrine, dancing in possession by Oba Esigie. The cloth has a photograph of the late Oba Erediuwa at his installation as king. The royal image underlines her relationship to the metaphysical power of Oba Esigie.

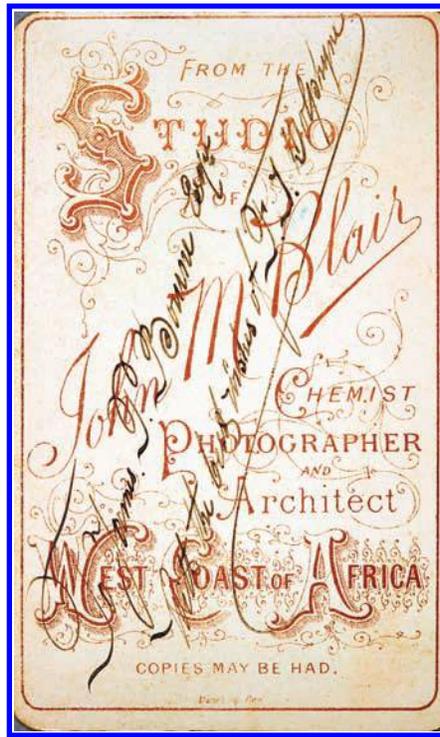
Photo: Charles Gore, November 1994





pean and American photographers (notable exceptions include, for example, Sprague [1978] and Viditz-Ward [1987], who were themselves practicing photographers). Until the 1990s, photography by African photographers was indelibly linked to the framing of the “studio” and usually delineated as a self-explanatory commercial activity rather than art practices that merited the attention of art historians and other researchers. The initial championing of particular photographers in the 1990s, such as, for example, Seydou Keïta, Malick Sidibé, or Samuel Fosso, as comparable with practitioners within Euro-American discourses on photography, was defined by a heuristic device that emphasized the photographic archives they had themselves assembled of their work. This conceptualization of the archive offered a criterion to separate them from the flourishing economic market of competing photo studios found throughout Africa. However, such a positioning was soon undermined, as it was evident that most professional photographers in Africa retained their archives as necessary part of professional practice—as was indeed salient in advertisements appearing in nineteenth century African newspapers, which often stated that further copies were always ready along with a stock of other images for the discerning purchaser. This can be seen in Blair’s advertisement cited earlier.

Despite the upsurge in research on photography in the African continent, the category of the “African” photographer is problematic despite its attention to local agency. It presupposes certain assumptions that are contradictory and essentialize certain positionings. As the illuminating blog *Africaisacountry.com*



so appositely highlights in its website name, Africa is a problematic unit of classification that writes out much of the continent’s diversity as well as its historic and ongoing relations to other continents. Moreover, it often entails a conceptual demarcation of a Sub-Saharan Africa. Deconstructing the “African” photographer is perhaps necessary in order to contextualize him or her within local social formations with particular modes of visuality (and materiality) that shape local iconographies as well as the significances that are thereby entailed. In so doing, one can start to ask questions about the creative interventions of the individual photographer to instigate innovations or incremental changes within particular trajectories of practice and patronage, something that is as salient for the contemporary photographer within and beyond the African continent. An understanding of locality also needs to take account of the various and more extended networks in which the photographer is situated and how this gives rise to multiple positionings that change over time. Interconnected networks both mediate and afford possibilities for the photographer(s). In the examples presented within this issue of *African Arts*, evaluating the photographer(s) in overlapping and diverse networks provides a means to deconstruct notions of the “African” photographer and thereby take account of divergent trajectories of photography, both individual and collective, that are not circumscribed by cartographies of the local, regional, or intercontinental. Moreover, these networks offer a subversive slippage that undermines or is autonomous to the discourses constituted within the politics

(left)
Portrait by the photographer John M. Blair c. 1880s. The back of the carte de visite advertises Blair’s other professions as architect and chemist.

Photo: Carte de Visite Collection of Charles Gore

(below)
Reflexive self-portrait by Isaiah Adeoye Ojo, taken on New Year’s Eve 1934, wishing good fortune and prosperity to all his clients.

Photo: Postcard collection of Charles Gore

of identity associated with such cartographies and offers instead multiple identifications that enable other possibilities.

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1. Christraud M. Geary Christraud M. Geary is Teel Senior Curator Emerita of African and Oceanic Arts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Photo Essays editor for African Arts. cgeary@mfa.org . 2017. From Context to Text: African Arts and Photography, 1967–2017. *African Arts* 50:1, 22-31. [[Citation](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)] [[PDF Plus](#)]