

# **DIGITIZING IBADAN**

## **Explorations of the Photoblogosphere as a Site of Resistance**

by

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[www.picturingnigeria.com](http://www.picturingnigeria.com) -- a website designed for the project.

**A project paper**

**presented to Ryerson University and York University**

**in partial fulfilment of the**

**requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**in the Program of Communication and Culture**

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## **Declaration Page**

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## **Abstract**

The camera has been actively involved in the framing of African people. Popular images of the African continent seldom deviate from the normalized visual rhetoric, primarily depicting exoticized images or the extremities of civil unrest, famine and disease.

*Digitizing Ibadan* is a photographic exploration of the city of Ibadan, Nigeria. Residents of Ibadan were invited to visually (re)present their perceptions of the city. Over a period of four weeks, hundreds of digital images were recorded and stored on [www.picturingnigeria.com](http://www.picturingnigeria.com) – a website designed for the project.

The website was designed to display everyday life and everyday sights, allowing for the interpretation of these ordinary acts (of recording and displaying images) as democratic and meaningful. The idea is that a website hosting digital images (in photoblog format) could be established as a site of resistance. This website represents an endeavour by the everyday citizen to recontextualize photography as a social discourse.

## Acknowledgements

Some of the ideas articulated in this project paper have been advanced in some of my previous academic writings. Sections were presented at the *Re: Activism* conference in Budapest, Hungary in 2005 and the *Photography and the City* conference in Dublin, Ireland in 2006.

I am indebted to a number of people for their roles (either direct or indirect) in this project. I would like to thank Lila Pine for her supervision and invaluable suggestions. I would also like to thank Dr. Fred Fletcher and Don Snyder for their critical feedback and advisory assistance. Likewise, Dr. Amin Alhassan shared his wealth of knowledge and his suggestions were a guiding light.

Furthermore, I would also like to acknowledge the roles of my colleagues in the Communication and Culture program at York and Ryerson Universities in Toronto Canada, whose discussions sustained my work. I would especially like to recognize the roles of Christopher Cachia and Neil Thomson. A nod of acknowledgement also goes out to Wasim Ghani for his insightful conversations. I also appreciate the efforts of Jennifer O'Leary, Roxann Penny and Greg Dube - their editorial skills and advice were important. Special thanks also go to Kristina Opavska, Sylvia Andrev, Allan Kareithi and James Olaleye for their support throughout my academic process.

This project could not have been completed without the help of Tayo Olaleye whose knowledge and navigational skills granted me a unique view of Ibadan. I would also like to thank Dr. Femi and Maria Olaleye for their resourcefulness and support. I should also especially thank Tope Okikiolu and Dele Akintola for offering their time and

effort as pioneer collaborators, recording digital images of Ibadan. I am also grateful to Eric Kigathi of Fairfield Data Services for technical assistance.

Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude to my friends. Without them my work would have been more challenging; their support was indeed exceptional. I also owe a great deal to those nameless people that walk across my lens. Without them, several images would not have the meanings that they currently satisfactorily convey. Finally, as this project is open to contribution, I would like to thank future contributors in advance.



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## About the Project

### Description

Digitizing Ibadan is a photographic exploration of the city of Ibadan, the capital city of Oyo State, Nigeria. The project was designed with the aim of inviting residents of Ibadan to visually (re)present their individual perceptions of their city, providing a space for them to do so. A website was designed to host images recorded by volunteer contributors. Over the course of four weeks, hundreds of digital images were recorded and stored on this website. The website also permitted other contributors that were not part of the initial recording to submit images to the site. Therefore, image by image, one of the goals of the project is to build a composite picture of Ibadan – a commixture that permits varying visual perspectives. The hope is that the projects pay homage to a historic, interesting and diverse city.

### Initial Participants

This project began with three initial image-creators. I, in conjunction with two other people, recorded images of Ibadan. My selection of collaborators was based primarily on convenience. Through word of mouth, I found individuals that were willing and available. Since the process of recording images required a certain amount of free time, the collaborators ended up being non-working class individuals and they did most of the recording during the day. I selected a mixture of sexes in an attempt to further diversify the participants.

#### *Olatokunbo Olaleye (Me):*

I was not born in Ibadan, but my family and I have lived there for several years. At the time I recorded this project, I had spent most of my life split almost equally between

Africa and North America. However, in many regards, Ibadan is still a place I call 'home'. Yet, all my photographic knowledge was acquired in the West. Therefore, I have always been increasingly wary of my photographic eye. I often strive to resolve this tension, hoping that 'neutrality' would manifest in my work. While terms like neutrality and objectivity are contentious in photographic discourse, I still try to record the world as I see it as opposed to advancing a repertoire of imagery that suggests the way I want the world to be seen. I try to produce photographs that are revealing, without being didactic. These distinctions however readily become obscured in photographic practice. If the camera is to have a social function, its deployment cannot be based on neutrality. Nonetheless, I considered this project a discovery process.

Additionally, Webster warns against the potential for "ineffective" communication when photographers take their placement in different environments for granted (132). While I maintain that I am not necessarily ideologically committed, photography is not an objective medium; therefore, at the very least, I sought to neutralize any potential bias that my photographic eye might have by including other participants.

*Tope Okikiolu:*

Tope was born in Ibadan and has lived there for most of her life. However, she readily admits that she has lived in the city for too long. She would someday like to live in another city, but she is undecided as to where this might be. She personally prefers small to mid-sized cities and would perhaps like to visit Port Harcourt, Nigeria someday. In her spare time, she enjoys travelling, reading and cooking. Tope is a Pure and Applied Biology graduate from one of Nigeria's leading state universities.



*Dele Akintola:*

Dele was born and bred in Ibadan. He is currently the co-owner of a livestock and feed mill in Ibadan. He enjoys travelling for consultancy trips or supervising projects related to his work. His first engagement with a camera was perhaps five or six years ago. Dele finds photography very interesting; if he had a camera he would take photographs regularly.

### On Ibadan

Ibadan, home to Yoruba people of the old Oyo Empire, is a city rich in history. It is a city of 5 million people and was once the largest in Africa. It is home to Africa's first television station as well as one of the oldest universities.

My personal connection with Ibadan started in 1991 when my family moved from Ilorin to 'the big city'. For me, the move implied a proximity to Lagos, the country's most populous city and (then) national capital. I can still remember the view that opened up as one approached the city. I still see the palm trees that lined up either side of the motorway; I still see the University of Ibadan campus and the Ferris wheel from Trans Amusement Park that overlooks the city. If I were to describe my first impression of Ibadan, I would say it was colourful chaos. Brown and yellow commuter buses filled the congested streets, hawkers poached around slow-moving vehicles as they came into traffic or *go-slows* as they are popularly called. Kiosks lined the edges of the streets and a wave of corrugated iron sheets - the most common material used for rooftops - stretched in view as far as the eye could see.

Whichever way I try and justify my focus on Ibadan, my conclusions remain the same. To my disappointment, the visual spectacle of Ibadan only exists in the minds of

people who have been there. When away from Ibadan, I have often found it too taxing to find images that effectively describe - or even contradict - the Ibadan that I have committed to memory. Until now, there are very limited ways of seeing Ibadan. It is my hope that this project would add a new dimension.

### On Digital Photography

I would like to mention that it is presently a significant moment to work with digital cameras. Digital cameras flash in cafés and coffee shops; tourists bend, rotate, pose and lean on major city streets. The photographic community is being made to readjust to new forms of images as well as the tools for their creation. It is observable that digital image recorders - whether standalone devices or embedded products - are becoming increasingly commonplace. Their intrinsic bond to domesticity and consumer culture suggests that we will all have to engage with these devices some day.

Therefore, previous positions on the new age of *hyper-photography* could have never been more relevant. Webster could have been talking about digital photography when he posited the requirements of the 'new photography'. He writes:

Put summarily, the new photography insists that we recognize image creation as an attempt at communication. It contends that photography and photographers should realize that their central endeavour is to communicate through photography. Necessarily this requires coming to terms with the social in photography. In turn it insists that a photographer recognizes his role in society. It is no longer adequate, says the new photography, to learn a list of photographic techniques. There is consequently a question of interpretation, communication and social analysis. It is no longer sufficient for the photographer to see himself as a narcissistic artist who produces pictures solely for personal satisfaction (Webster 4-5).

More than ever, there is a new placement for photography in the realms of culture and communication. The image-maker is now assigned a new responsibility that

surpasses uninspired finger movements. While I am not trying to advance digital photography as 'the' new photography, I would maintain that it is 'a' new photography and, like all other forms of representation before it, it will eventually become antiquated or redefined, morphing into a new comprehension. Confronted with several tools with which one could explore a city, this project specifically utilizes a digital camera. I have selected a Nikon D50 digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera as well as a Nikon Coolpix 4800 digital camera. I would like to maintain that the digital camera has further conflated the distinct characters of the professional and the amateur.

While there were other mediums that could have been employed for this project, I felt the camera was well-suited. I have particularly been fascinated with and comfortable behind cameras. Several years ago, I became attracted to the simplicity of the device. Through this small instrument, I was able to interact with the moment at hand. It enabled me to easily capture them, ensuring that an expression of the past was always present. I also became interested at control that the camera gave me. With this unassuming device, I could I could control how I chose to arrest an instant.

*Who is a photographer?*

My personal belief is that anyone can take a good photograph. In fact, I would even maintain that anyone can take a great photograph. However, this does not mean anyone can be a good photographer. The distinction, I advance, is realized through consistency. A good photographer can consistently produce good images and great photographers produce great images time after time. Notwithstanding, there is an implied democracy in the camera. Access to one suggests that the operator has a *chance* to strive for greatness - or at the very least produce a good image. However, aesthetic evaluations



of images are subjective, thereby conflating comprehensions such as 'good', 'bad', and 'great'.

Quality assessments aside, anyone who can operate a camera can take photographs. Scott describes the in-built amateurism that is a feature of photography (30). The camera - no longer an instrument of a select few - has been domesticated and has made its way into the household in the form of a commodity. According to Slater, photographic equipment and images "enter the family in the form of consumer goods" (129). He describes how the Eastman company (now Kodak) as early as the 1880s, redesigned the photographic camera, converting it into an easy-to-use commodity (Slater 136).

We now see the world 'photographically'; we are in a position where we rely on photographers to make a visual sense of the world. As Susan Sontag points out, "Photography implies that we know of the world if we accept it as the camera records it" (23). Therefore one must ask: Who is the photographer? How does he or she qualify to be one? Does he or she become one by virtue of owning a camera? Or should we simply concede that anyone that records photographs is a photographer? As John Berger points out, "[e]very image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinite number of other possible sights" (qtd. in Scott 23). For Berger, "a photograph is a result of the photographer's decision that it is worth recording that this particular event or this object has been seen" (292). Webster carries on with this point, challenging the 'seeing is

believing' aphorism, maintaining that photography should be perceived as a 'selection and interpretation' of the world (20). Therefore, photographers are not "truth recorders".

Consequently, this understanding diminishes the autonomy of the camera and places some agency into the hands of the photographer. I would like to maintain that digital photography has in fact increased the number of would-be photographers. I use 'would-be' precisely because I remain unresolved on who should be assigned the label. Perhaps the term "image-makers" could provide some flexibility.

### On Photoblogs

Photoblogs are like visual diaries. The photoblog is an externalized internal view of the specifics of the author's world. The individualization implied by the photoblog already pre-empts the inherent criticism of it being non-objective (subjective). Unresolved – and equally implied – is the combination of (1) the pseudo-objectivity or *ojiji otito*<sup>1</sup> in photography and (2) the implied honesty in diaries (even visual ones).

Photoblogging epitomizes the merger of two radical media. Photoblogs are open environments which facilitate participation and inclusion. An increasing number of people are able to present their visual perceptions to larger audiences. Walter Benjamin cites a democratization of art that has the potential to emancipate, maintaining that the revolutionary potential of the new technologies depends on the role in the production process of the author (Scannel 85).

### Methodology

#### *Photographic Component*

I would like to credit the works of classic photographic practitioners such as Paul Strand, Henri Cartier-Bresson and, more recently, Jo Spence for their influences on my

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<sup>1</sup> Yoruba for 'shadow of truth'

photographic development. In addition, years of constant practice prepared me for this project. I had extensively photographed several cities worldwide including cities in Canada, Cyprus, England, Hungary and the United States. In recording this project, I did not depart from my previous photographic method. Generally, I approach each location by looking for themes; I also look for 'dots' and 'hidden links' that when connected, help generate those subtle impressions that infuse meaning into my images. My intention was to have an exploratory experience. Therefore, I went into Ibadan looking to 'discover' rather than looking to 'create' or 'frame' in any particular way.

There is no easy way to acquire temporal knowledge of a city besides maintaining a substantial physical presence in it. But what qualifies as substantial presence? In order to effectively express deep-rooted and impressionistic representations of a city based on perception, one must be able to identify with (lose oneself in) the environment. This is not to disregard images recorded under different circumstances; however, I would like to maintain those images serve a different purpose. For this project it was important that I (re)embedded myself in the city I intended to photograph.

While I did not attempt to remove the 'human' from the 'urban' experience, there were no particular 'subjects' - the city itself was the subject. People inevitably appeared in the images only as relevant parts of the city; they appeared as long as their presence gave meaning to Ibadan. The point I am trying to convey is that I did not necessarily want to record portraits.

#### *Web Component*

The website designed for this project was constructed with a delicate balance of functionality and aesthetics. It was of great importance that the final site was easy to use.



The programming language used was Php; it was selected because it is particularly useful for the creation of dynamic web pages<sup>2</sup> and it is an open-source<sup>3</sup> language. A few features of the site are listed below.

- The site hosts images that have associations with keywords. The images also have short captions. This was done to make the site searchable by keyword.
- The images can be organized by contributor, and set tags and is displayed by the date they were added to the site.

Several deliberate decisions dictated the design. Some of the reasoning is explained below.

Captions – The site is able to display a short title as well as a description for each image. Users can add captions to images. The relationship between images and text is a complex one. Webster describes the need for anchoring images with text, as well as the potential for the resultant promiscuous meanings, from the use of captions (162). There is no easy way to eschew this ambiguity. Open interpretations of the images are anticipated and welcome. Therefore, on first glance of the images, there is little text associated with them; however, the site is designed in a way that users can engage in a dialogue about each individual image through the ‘Comments’ feature.

Multilanguage – The site can be navigated in English, Yoruba and French. English was chosen because it is Nigeria’s official language. The site can also be viewed in Yoruba – the language native to Ibadan. French was included as an afterthought since most of the project was conceived in Canada whose official languages are English and French.

Furthermore, several other West African nations are French-speaking.

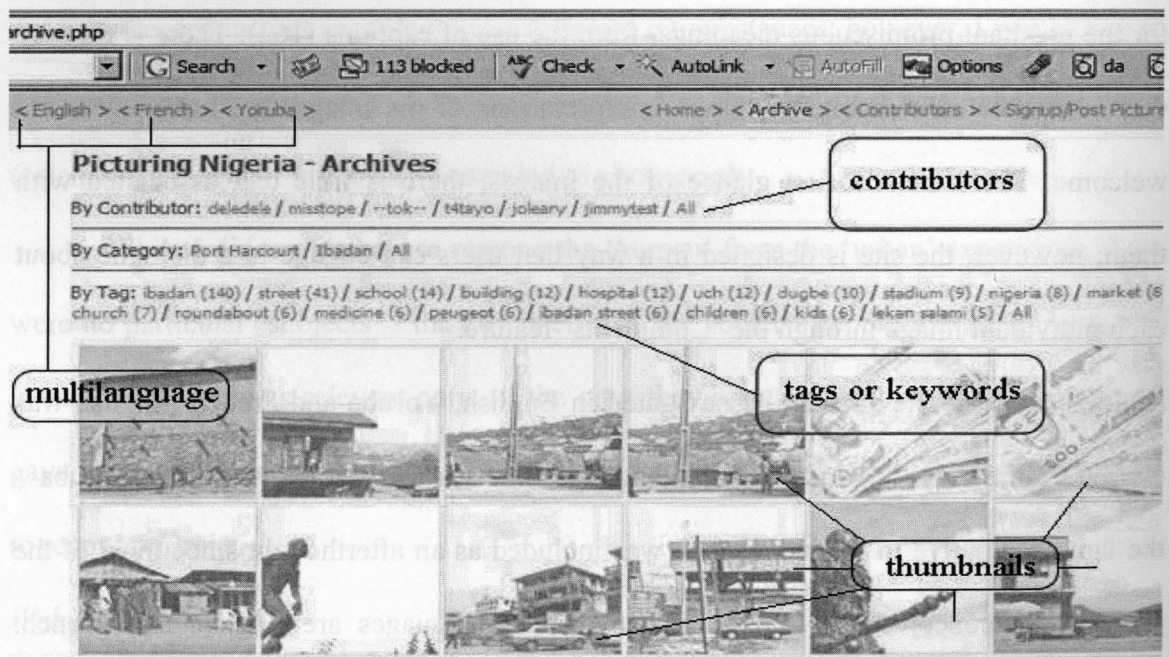
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<sup>2</sup> Dynamic web pages are web pages that contain changing or non-static content

<sup>3</sup> Open-source applications are applications where the source code for their creation is available to the public for modification and unrestricted use.

Thumbnails – The site stores images in an archive. The images are presented in automatically generated thumbnails places side-by-side. In this presentation, several images are juxtaposed to create an arranged collage of images. It has been theorized that photomontages can potentially make social relations visible (Wells 215). Berger has also written about the political uses of photomontage (qtd. In Wells 215). The collage of images can be rearranged depending on which keyword is selected as a filter. For instance, if the viewer wanted to view all images that have been tagged with the word ‘street’, the page would populate and display all street images from the project, thus reconfiguring the selection and order of images in the archive.

Comments – It is important to facilitate some dialogue between contributors and viewers. The inclusion of an open interface for discourse further collapses the division between photographer (image producer) and audience (viewer).



Screenshot from [www.picturingnigeria.com/archive.php](http://www.picturingnigeria.com/archive.php) illustrating a number of key features.

## **An African History of the Photography and the Internet**

### **Africa and Photography**

It would be unfounded to advance the idea that the African continent has been under-photographed. The camera made its way into Africa through early missionaries and explorers (Acebes 9). Since its introduction, it has been actively involved in the framing of African people. Certainly, contemporary images of Africa are recorded everyday. However, the most circulated images primarily fit into limited categories. They are either the highly-consumed exoticized images that present the continent as an anomaly – an “other environment” that is uniquely different from the West - or they are images of sensationalized news stories. In addition, most of these images seldom deviate from the normalized visual rhetoric, primarily depicting the extremities of civil unrest, famine and disease. Therefore, Africans are not afforded the luxury of the visual records of the ordinary aspects of everyday life.

The digital image has found a natural home on the World Wide Web. The convergence of various electronic devices has also facilitated its propagation – pictures are now available in a range of formats on various platforms. There is an increased move for digitization as establishments such as museums, galleries and media houses begin to accommodate new formats.

The majority of circulated images of Africa and its people are not by Africans. Olu Oguibe offers that Mehmet, the Khedive and vice-regent of Egypt, was a fore-runner in the creation of the earliest photographic images; however, he acknowledges a subsequent periodic gap where there were no records of images attributed to African photographers (567). In describing *Africa Inside*, a unique compilation of images from an



exhibit comprised of all-African artists, the authors suggest that the consideration that “[...] Africa is being photographed by Africans is something that likewise could escape attention, as the photographs which we see everyday are almost without exception made by Western photographers” (Melis 6). While there are numerous practicing contemporary African photographers - compilations such as *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* indicate this – their images are not propagated to the extent of their non-African counterparts.

The condition described above is not a uniquely African experience. It could be said to be paradigmatic of nations in the developing world. Therefore, colonization and its resultant exploitation, as well as the presence of a long-standing capitalistic imbalance, become logical and quick conclusions. While it may be true that the digital divide is an obvious explanation for the aforementioned situation, even so, this model is too simplistic. One must, for instance, explain the continuous reification of the cameraman as the ‘sole-recorder of images’ in certain cultures. According to Tobias Wendl, African photographers “initially encountered strong resistance to their work, owing to a commonly-held belief that being photographed could lead to losing one’s soul or being harmed through black magic” (150). Similarly, Nicholas Monti advances the existence of “possible cultural impediments” such as “superstitious misgiving with the camera and its magical abilities” but quickly goes on to clarify that these sentiments were not unique to an African context (qtd, in Oguike 567).

As a child growing up in South Western Nigeria, most photographs were taken only on “special occasions.” A birthday would be characterized by a visit to the photographer’s studio for a portrait. Likewise, Christmas and Easter would not be



complete without a trip to the same studio with the entire family dressed in matching attires. This was common practice year-after-year. Maxwell advances the idea that studio photography became popular because studio recordings were the first instances in which colonized people could frame their portrayal. She explains: "Colonized people saw [...] portraits as a mechanism by which to recover pride and dignity. [...] they were probably the first images over which colonized and indigenous peoples exercised any semblance of control" (13).

Therefore, the roots of such photographic practices might not be exclusively capital-related. The absence of cameras as everyday objects is in the same way cultural. Although the reasons why photography is not social practice in Nigeria, for instance, might be related to the fact that until recently, items like cameras were only viewed as articles of ostentation, the absence of the camera is also resultant of cultural practice. It is the coalescent effect of these two conditions – cameras being unaffordable and photography not being a social activity – that is responsible for the state of photographic representation in former colonies.

While it does not precede the invention of the camera, Foucault has extensively introduced the panopticon as a foundational structure in demonstrating the use of vision to maintain social order. What Foucault does exceptionally well is implicate the eye's (hence, vision's) presence - as well as its absence - in the implementation of power. Yet, the camera's path to order and delimitation is somewhat different. Although the colonial mission was characterized by bloodshed, the camera's is quite similar to the panopticon – their sole requirement being a 'gaze'. For a moment, the camera and the panopticon run parallel. Therefore, it might be beneficial to amalgamate the camera's colonial history

and Foucault. In the aftermath of the establishment of a colonial order, there was no longer the “need for arms, physical violence, [nor] material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze [...]” (Foucault 155).

*The Echoes of Visual Regimes:*

The camera has been implicated in the construction of knowledge with its long-standing link to empirical vision. In the late nineteenth century, colonial administrators “engaged in the practice of craniology, which advocated the measuring of heads to classify people according to race, temperament and intelligence” (Acebes 9). Furthermore as Spurr comments, “the process of ordering implicit in scientific classification appealed to colonial administrators because it allowed them to manage the threat posed by racial and cultural difference” (qtd. in Maxwell 3). McQuire notes the camera’s general use in “constructing a topology of racial and cultural ‘others’ in anthropology and ethnography” (39). To chart the placement of the photographic image in the maintenance of visual order, one can look to painting, one of the medium’s predecessors. Long before the widespread use of the camera, images had already been implicated in the occlusion of different ways of seeing. In an illustration on how visual knowledge is formed, Smith describes the practice of “visual regimes of colonization” in settler colonies from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century (483). Smith defined practices of calibration, obliteration and symbolization that were at the heart of colonial mapping. Vestiges of some of these processes still remain intact and in operation.

Smith defines symbolization as “[t]ransforming the world of experience by treating selected parts of it, or certain relationships in it, as representative of an abstract idea (such as beauty)” (484). In his analysis, he reviews the portrayal of the Australian

continent, describing how early settlers documented the landscape to support their ideological vision of the terrain. This selective viewing can also be found in most surveys of photographic images of the African continent. Specific constructions of African imagery based on abstract ideas of what images of African images should look like have become visually normalized. The effect is in turn exaggerated when these images are presented on the Internet. This happens because these constructions are limited; these images are subsequently replicated, through duplication and emulation, thus, maintaining and reinforcing the ideological view.

In addition, search engines have become shortcuts to visual information. A review of the first page returned from keyword searches for the terms “American” and “African” on the search engine Google produces two unique types of images (Google Images). The most common “American” images are of the flag of the United States of America, while the most common “African” images are of indigenous Africans in ethnic attire. While one set affirms a nationalistic presence, the other can be argued to be limited to stereotypes. Search engines are not being advanced as the primary sources of (visual) meaning. Counter arguments can be advanced in several directions, analyzing the real implications of search engine results. There is little escape for anyone from the reductionism that results from pictorial representation; however, the African is exceptionally unfortunate.

Furthermore, highly-popularized imagery of African people often consists primarily of exoticized images. This tradition has been in place since the colonial obsession of the “other.” A review of photography books such as *Hector Acebes: Portraits in Africa* and *In and Out of Focus* provides images that are unsurprisingly familiar. Common are images of individuals in brightly coloured traditional attire. They

are usually heavily-decorated with neck ornaments. They also have beautifully-patterned hairstyles and are wearing large earrings. Both male and female subjects usually have their breasts exposed. These representations are not inaccurate because they are *false*, they are inaccurate because they rigidly maintain, and primarily advance a *certain* representation that will continue to persist in the absence of other images. Interestingly, there might not necessarily be any visible changes to this exoticism in the near future. Exhibitionism and the tourism industry are now closely linked. Consequently, the need for Western capital almost confirms that this arrangement will be sustained. It is in the interest of several African cities to maintain this performative stance in order to encourage tourism; for better or for worse, they remain in a state of exoticized preservation. For instance, speaking on African tourism and globalization, Edward Bruner offers that “[t]he Maasai [of East Africa], of course, are well aware of the discrepancy between their lifestyles and their tourist image, and they manipulate it, but there are many complexities in this situation. Some Maasai who have become performers in the tourism industry display themselves for tourists, to be observed and photographed, and if asked, they do it for money” (89). Furthermore, Meaghan Morris suggests that toured communities are often required by the state to “live out their manufactured ethnicity for the gaze of the other” (181). There are undoubtedly other visible forms of these displays in the tourist industry; however, this remains slightly off topic.

#### *Digitizing the Colonial Postcard:*

In the colonial picturing that Smith describes, the natives were notably absent. For Alloula, on the other hand, it is their inclusion that forms the basis of one of his central arguments. Speaking on the depiction of the Algerian woman, he is quick to censure the



postcard, implicating it in the perpetuation of stereotypes (520-1). Alloula states that the postcard is an active part-taker in the violence of the colonizer (521); according to him, "it extends its effects; it is its accomplished expression, no less efficient for being symbolic" (521). He maintains that, "[i]t becomes the poor man's phantasm" (521) as it becomes "their pseudoknowledge of the colony" (521).

Alloula's photographer performs multiple roles; for him, the camera-bearer becomes the viewer, the voyeur, the westerner and the colonizer. In the aftermath of the atrocities that are associated with colonial conquest, Alloula expresses a superior and order-establishing gaze that the photographer possesses over his subjects. Further readings of Alloula confirm that once this order has been challenged, the photographer reacts and does not wane until its eventual reinstatement.

If Alloula's apprehensions about the colonial postcard were heavily-embedded in its availability and propagation, then his anxieties can only be aggrandized in the age of digital media. For, the 'four by six' on recycled paper is dead - digitized images are the new postcards. "The postcard is everywhere," Alloula commented, "covering all the colonial space, immediately available to the tourist, the soldier, the colonist" (520). The digitized image mimics and eventually transgresses the colonial postcard in almost every sense - it is extremely mobile and its propagation and consequent availability is far more extensive.

Increasingly, the average day in Western societies is becoming punctuated by desktop escapism, cyber-travel and miniature bursts of 'savesaver expeditions'. For the white-collar worker, these serve to augment the two-week annual vacation. This desktop escapism can be likened to what Alloula described as the "seductive appeal to the spirit of

adventure” (520). In an age of search engines, the digitized image is perhaps the most convenient contrivance for making visual sense of geographic space. The Internet has become the source of phantasms – the location of “pseudo-knowledge” (520). With computer technologies becoming more and more accessible, the words of an unknown columnist now have a rejuvenated resonance. “Now for an absurdly small sum, we may become familiar with [...] every famous locality of the world ...” (D.P. qtd. in Sontag, 184).

I have maintained that there is a limited variety of images of Africa currently available on the Internet. However, as we adapt to new image formats, I can foresee this changing in the near future. Nonetheless, my presentiments are that I can only anticipate the production of two distinct kinds of images. In the first instance, digitization projects will facilitate the reproduction and propagation of already recorded colonial photography – images that have been argued to have served specific functions in the visual framing of colonized people. The other set of images that will make their way to the Internet are the contemporary images recorded by Western travellers, anthropologists and photographers. The problem with the first kind of images is that in the absence of alternative images to counter them, it will be left to human agency to recognize that a large number of them are ideologically constructed images that are being unearthed from a colonial past.

This second set of images to be included online is arguably less problematic. A side-by-side analysis of two different compilations of images might be helpful here. The first compilation, *Africa Inside*, consisting of images recorded by only African photographers has been mentioned earlier. The second compilation (coincidentally similarly) titled *Inside Africa* showcases the work of German photographer Deidi von

Schaewen. While a review of both books assuredly confirms stylistic differences, it might be tasking to prove an inherent 'Africanness' in the all-African compilation. Therefore, a call for Africans to record images of Africa should not be misunderstood as an attack on the integrity of the work of non-African photographers. The point is that they will continue to remain on the periphery, thus unable to objectively visually speak for the African continent. This is evidenced in the "visible detachment" that Acebes noted between non-African photographers such as Casimir Zagourski and their subjects (9). Jean-Loup Pivin also describes a "tangible quality of awkwardness and distance" that was exhibited in photographs recorded by non-African photographers (28). Therefore, the need for contemporary image production by Africans of themselves becomes essential. Nevertheless, the hunt for 'Africanness' in photographic imagery cannot be advanced as the ultimate solution to the problem of African pictorial representation. Yet, there remains a legitimate call for images from within.

On one hand, a critique of the embarking on a project that would generate new African images would be centred on the very logic of consumption. For the anti-consumerists, a descent into the level of image-consumption that is characteristic of industrialized nations is perhaps something to be avoided. This position advances disengagement and seclusion. Unfortunately, this position also possesses its own problems. This is because it echoes the developmental discourse that relegates third-world nations to untouched sites that must for some reason be protected. On the other hand, an image-creation project can be advanced so as to ensure that there is visual participation. Still, this position also has its challenges.

Oguibe commendably brings to the limelight George Da Costa, a Nigerian photographer who in 1920 was described as “the ablest and best-known professional photographer in Nigeria” (567). He further describes Da Costa’s photography as “lead[ing] [...] to a cosmopolitanism steeped in awareness of other cultures, a world of burgeoning elite and savvy literati [...]” comparing his images to imagery found “in contemporary portrait painting of the period in Europe and North America” (568). Regardless of Oguibe’s position, the main point is this: works such as Da Costa’s have been and only will be items reserved in infrequently-opened pages of history books and in the basements of ever-antiquating art museums. The works of these photographers will remain in unitary isolation unless more efforts are in place to ensure that photographic representation becomes a new focus of African expression. The need for more images arises so as to facilitate participation and engagement in a visual playing field that is rapidly leaving the continent behind.

I would like to advance the idea that digitized images recorded by Africans and rendered online is an essential progression to bridging a currently existing and systematically widening image gulf. Furthermore, more contemporary images of the African continent must be recorded. Importantly, these images should be recorded by Africans. Mazrui engages with the idea of archiving, contrasting it with oral tradition. He concedes that archival tradition was weak in Africa (76). He explained the tendency of indigenous African cultures to “refuse to regard the past as a bygone or the present as transient” (77). He says “[i]f the present is not transient, why bother record it” (77)? He however concludes that “[a] new archival order in Africa could help change the continent fundamentally” (Mazrui 78).



If we are to draw any closer to the concept of a global village, then spaces such as this image divide must be filled - increased participation becomes a necessity. As mentioned earlier, cameras have been involved in the construction of knowledge - these constructions have been proven to be faulty. Just as well, cameras can be involved in a reconstructive process. Equal representation and related concepts are humanist positions that remain part of an idealist dream. A complete or accurate visual construction of our world is admittedly an aspiration. Nonetheless, if one must attempt to make complete sense of the world, one must be willing to accept variegated perspectives.

### Africa and the Internet

The Internet had a late introduction into the African continent. At present, most internet users reside in Egypt, Morocco and South Africa (Internet World Stats). Although Africa has registered a significant growth in the number of Internet users in the last decade, as compared to the other continents, Africa is still notably behind. At current estimates, there are only about twenty-four million Internet users in Africa – this figure represents only fewer than three percent of the population (Internet World Stats).

## **The Photoblogosphere as a Site for Resistance**

### Introducing the Photoblogosphere

Recently, a combination of a number of concurrent trends has once again brought the camera into the forefront of social debate. Firstly, technological innovation - fuelled by an increased demand - has led to a consistent decline in the cost of cameras. Thus, of late, there has been increased accessibility of photographic equipment to the ordinary consumer. The camera is quickly establishing itself as a metaphor for vision itself. As Scott writes, “[t]he camera sees an alternative, parallel, or imbricated reality to which we must accustom ourselves, for the camera is the eye of modern technology, and this is the eye we must adopt to if we must not become ‘the illiterate’ of the twentieth century” (19).

Secondly, the development of the Internet has also played a significant role in an image renaissance. It has thus far served as a tool that facilitates the display and mobility of digitized images. The recently acquired status of the World Wide Web as conduit for global information flows has garnered it significant attention, marking it as the leading media technology of the last decade. The increasing accessibility of the internet and the constant reduction of the barriers to entry have enabled more people to take on authorial and content-production roles.

These overlapping factors have led to the emergence of photography as an increasingly popular practice. The development of ‘instant stories’ that are almost immediately buttressed with pictorial representations has become a trend that we as a society are rapidly becoming accustomed to. We are also experiencing newer ways in which more individuals engage with photography and the World Wide Web.

The concept of resistance is not without its ambiguities. As Rebecca Raby relates, “[h]ow we conceptualize resistance hinges on our differing theoretical understandings of power and subjectivity” (152). She proceeds to attempt to define resistance by comparing modernist and postmodern understandings of the term.<sup>4</sup> Resistance can take several forms; locating sites of resistance can include – but is not limited to – creating spaces that sustain oppositional views to cultural forms. I describe resistance throughout this paper as the combination of activities that serve to undermine the dominant meaning.

In 2004, the term “blog” – a contraction of web log (or weblog) – was on Merriam-Webster’s 10-words-of-the-year list (BBC). Todd Stauffer defines a weblog or blog as “a website that is designed to be updated with items in a linear, time-based fashion, similar to a personal journal or diary, except that the contents are meant specifically for public consumption. Often implemented using special software, weblogs contain articles or entries that are grouped primarily by the date and time posted (4). They serve as web diaries, available to the public viewed by more than a quarter of internet users (Raine). The photoblog therefore, is a blog containing primarily images; although most photoblogs do contain some text, their main focus is on digitized images.

If we understand the traditional photojournalist as a fused character, a centaur, juxtaposed with the twin responsibilities of photographer and story-teller, photoblogging redefines this comprehension, implicating the photojournalist’s mythical trait of uniqueness, making him or her appear more commonplace. The dispersion of burgeoning media technologies not only challenges pre-existing technologies, but also the professions that support them. This sentiment is manifest in the revived protectionism

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<sup>4</sup> For further reading, see “What is Resistance?” in *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, June 2005, pp. 151-171

demonstrated by journalists in the wake of a seemingly adulterated version of their work. The appeal of the photoblog is that participatory requirements are considerably low. Armed with access, images and basic computer skills, hypertextual representation becomes a possibility for anyone with will. Sites such as Google-owned Blogger.com and Typepad.com permit virtually anyone a voice on the World Wide Web.

It is perhaps fallible to limit the apprehensions of concerned journalists to protectionism or a nostalgic fetishization of an effacing profession; however, in any era defined by allegations of mass deception and falsified news stories, one must wonder where people would obtain factual information. Juxtaposed with the irony of fair and balanced reporting, media images are filtered and mediated so much that they become questionable. Words such as 'terrorism,' 'peace,' and 'freedom' - to name a few examples - are now associated with specific ideas and images. The superimposition of certain ideological constructs in images now appears as an act that must be contested. Although all images bear some sort of ideology, some images are more politically charged than others.

Photobloggers thus play into the 'myth of neutrality' as their images are perceived to be products from insusceptible parties, unaffiliated with the mainstream media. Through digitized images, the ordinary individual is able to take on a voice. In discussing minorities in the media, Larry Gross rightfully stated that "[t]he most effective form of resistance to the hegemonic force of the dominant media is to speak for oneself" (418). Consequently, individuals, previously excluded or dehumanized in the dominant portrayal, now have the ability to capture and produce their contextual framing.



Photoblogging still remains at the centre of the debate between art and mechanical production. Today, we are bombarded with a plethora of images. Images exist because they can. Testifying to the difference between the photograph and the painting, and essentially to the distinction between mechanical production and older, non-mechanized, art-creation processes, Sontag relates that the existence of one photograph implies that there will be others (166). Therefore, as millions upload images onto the web, one must consider if their actions are radical or merely reflections of their passivity. Benjamin cites photography as the “first truly revolutionary means of production” (224). Photography debased notions of authenticity, thus redefining the role of art, by arming it and making it political. A postmodern outlook has since formalized a disbandment of segregations of ‘high art’ and ‘low art.’ These divisions have been reduced to subjectivity-regulated types of art, from which individuals now conveniently choose. Nonetheless, vestiges of these aesthetic separations still remain.

Photoblog hosts such as Blogger and Flickr design their pages so that within minutes an individual site can be set up, displaying images almost immediately. There is not much difficulty in photoblogging. It is standard, template-based and mass produced. A reading of Adorno and Horkheimer could suggest that this new form of expression supported by the large-scale production and exchange of digital images cannot be revolutionary. In their works, the duo hardly assigned any form of agency to audiences of mass produced cultural products. Frankfurt School loyalists may label photoblogging a demonstration of “pseudo individuality.” Adorno and Horkheimer comment on the delusion of the pseudo individual as he or she is seemingly free yet “actually the product of [society’s] economic and social apparatus” (155). Adorno believed that the

heteronomy of mass culture put it in conflict with the potential to yield anything self-governing and true to itself" (Scannel 85). For Adorno, mass production and consequent stylization, implied standardization and was thus void of any creative input.

However, as photoblogging rises to a socially significant scale, one must consider whether its legitimacy is undermined by the volumes of people engaged in it. Whose voice shall be heard when everyone starts talking? Consider the work of Sam Javanrouh, whose website "Daily Dose of Imagery"<sup>5</sup> hosts his camera-view of life in his city. He undoubtedly records compelling urban images; however, just as he captures the best of Toronto's cityscape, he also records the simplicity of indifferent items on his computer desk. Also consider Andrew Bermondsey – an individual who becomes known only after 'photoblog' is run in a Google search engine.<sup>6</sup> To attain that level of indexical relevance, his site must have had to register an enormous amount of hits, reaffirming its popularity. Accordingly, images that characterize Bermondsey's life in London are easily accessible – it is now public knowledge that he has been taking photographs since he was ten.<sup>7</sup> Two questions raised by reviewing these two different photoblogs are the following: One must ask if their images left the realm of personal use into a space of greater social importance, considering that they are both relatively popular. Secondly, one must ask why their view should supersede anyone else's.

The flexibility of what can be termed 'postmodern art' – constructed as a limitless concept – can in fact be limiting. Here, discussions around photography as art and photography as social practice are brought to the forefront. At present, almost every noun

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<sup>5</sup> <http://wvs.toleftpixel.com>

<sup>6</sup> His site <http://www.andrewor.com> is one of the first personal photoblogs that appear when one searches for the word "blog" on Google's search engine.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.andrewor.com>

strives to be a prefix for 'blogging.' In the vein of early Frankfurtian thought, it would be normal to make the distinction between serious and casual photobloggers, separating thought-provoking posts from posts such as Pritsky's catblogging.<sup>8</sup> However, in making such separations, one repeats the same dualism act that Adorno is often decried for. Therefore, one must ask whether all uses of photoblogs are valid, or whether their uses in fact matter. This deliberation – which considers notions of authenticity and validity – becomes interestingly similar to the discussion about citizen journalists and professional journalists that appeared earlier on. The absence of these delineations potentially leaves photoblogging in a conflicted stance.

The presence of cameras and digital images are developments that are rapidly becoming familiar features of everyday life. The state apparatus of observation and control has descended into the hands of everyday users. "On the one hand, cameras arm vision in the service of power – of the state, of industry, of science. On the other hand, cameras make visions expressive in the mythical space known as private life" (Sontag 177). Surveillance is no longer restricted to clandestine mechanics of black pods affixed to the roofs of urban malls and institutional hallways, nor to the slow-rotating cameras perched in the corners of public offices. The tools of observation are now in the hands of citizens – we click, point and snap at each other in our own reflexive self-scrutiny. This is the new culture of self-surveillance, where digital records are not restricted to tourists, strangers, and erstwhile forms of 'others', but are created for their sake - photographs are taken plainly because they can be taken.

Along with notions of self-governing creativity derived from the use of digital technologies are the contradictory implications fostered by mass indulgence in these

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<sup>8</sup> <http://dohiyimir.typepad.com/photos/catblogging/> is a photoblog with primarily images of cats.

technologies. According to Jameson, “aesthetic production has become integrated with commodity production [...]” (553). Additionally, Adorno’s views on consumerism are fittingly described as pessimistic. Explaining the mode in which consumers engage with the production industries he maintains “It is not simply that they are duped: they are active agents in their own duping” (qtd in Peters 64). The relevant question is whether one should then be quick to simply find solace in postmodernism.

Postmodern photographers like Sherrie Levine, through the reproduction of classic works, created new images that challenged and compromised capitalist ideals (Conner 107). However, even with the acknowledgement of new sites of resistance through the uses of new media technologies, one cannot help but proceed with caution - it would be delusional to ignore that it is in the nature of capitalism to stultify and reinterpret activities that antagonize it.

In the first instance, corporations have begun to invest in photoblogs in order to turn profits. GetLocalNews.com has started to hire ‘citizen journalists’ who will be paid to write stories (Gilbert). Consequently, the days of blogging as an autonomous exercise might in fact be numbered. Leading camera manufacturers would be satisfied to align themselves with the discourse of subversion, as long as such practice increases sales of digital camera units. According to Barker “consumerism is at the heart of a postmodern culture that is constituted through a continual flow of images that establishes no connotation hierarchy and no sense of value” (165). Furthermore, even though of only anecdotal relevance, the sale of the *Lomo* bears testimony to the ability of capitalism to expropriate – and, with considerable subtlety, deride – the subaltern. A vestige of communist innovation, the *Lomo Kompakt Automat*, a simple retro point-and-shoot



camera, was a recommended accessory for “every respectable Communist” and was used to record the “last gasps of Communism” (Lomographic Society). Now this instrument of Communist ingenuity is available for purchase online.

But if consumerism is prefigurative of the potential for resistance through the use of the consumed products, then a few contentious items come to light. Firstly, such an exercise – as it exists - presents itself as an irony. Consumerism is being reinforced under the guise of resistance. Secondly, the inequality of cultural capital implies that resistance – described here as resistance through the consumption of technological products – cannot be mounted by the technological have-nots. Therefore, one must ask if photoblogging can be a practice that would help to subvert dominant media images in developing nations. Certainly the potential exists, but the real question is whether it is a practical possibility.

According to Kahn and Kellner, “alternative subcultures [...] become involved in the Janus-faced process of attempting to transform dominant codes even as they become appropriated, commodified, and redefined [...]” (299). Yet, amidst all the gloom, Barker states that “[w]here resistance is taking place, it is most commonly happening ‘inside’ consumer lifestyles, transforming commodities, and using the mass media. There is no outside to consumer culture from which external resistance can be mounted” (171). Therefore, we can only be implicated by our indulgence in consumer culture. Absolute detachment is impossible; however, this does not necessarily render attempts at subversion futile.

Hence, photoblogs elevate the common web user to a publisher of visual content. While some constitute a conscious assault on social order, others merely exist to fortify other

aspects of everyday life. Accordingly, we remain perched, looking onward to see if it will constitute a truly free and democratic form of expression, or if it will become a temporary fad. It has been noted that activity and resistance are not one and the same (Barker 170). The incessant blinking of shutters, coupled by bandwidth strains resulting from uploads, will not necessarily antagonize cultural power or demand shifts in social order.

According to Sontag, “[i]n the form of photographic images, things and events are put to new uses, assigned new meanings, which go beyond the distinctions between beautiful and ugly” (177). It is possible for the images on photoblogs to transcend mere aesthetic judgements. Benjamin believed “new forms of cultural technology could bring about a heightened presence of mind” (Nehring 31). However, Adorno criticized Benjamin, concluding he was “too enamoured with popular culture” and “was way too optimistic about the revolutionary potential of mechanical reproduction to change the power relations of capital [...]” (Franklin 7).

Photoblogging perchance, represents a passive and insentient endeavour by the everyday citizen to recontextualize photography as a social discourse, insofar as the contents of these blogs, their representations and expressions structure social affairs and issues in manners that prompt awareness to societal concerns. Photobloggers are in fact creating unique contemporary cultural artefacts transporting their own gaze across deterritorialized space. Gross notes that “The ultimate expression of independence [...] from the dominant culture’s hegemony is to become the creators and not merely the consumers of media images” (Gross 419). Photoblogging can also become an apparatus for exploring the place of the image in contemporary society. Photoblogs are beginning to present themselves as a demonstration of how engagement with new media forms can

become grounds for contestation of dominant media representations. There is a significant amount of research to be done regarding the effective use of photoblogs in the mechanics of resistance - only the future will determine if the potential for human agency in photoblogging emerges.

### Delimiting the Photoblogosphere: Discussing the Limitations of the Digitized Image and Photoblogs

#### *The Digitized Image is Ordinary*

Photography is in the middle of a revolution. The potent merger of the Internet and the photographic image has been attributed with creating authorial positions for the ordinary individual. Nonetheless, it is worth considering that the uploaded image, by virtue of its presentation on the Internet, becomes ordinary. The Internet is saturated with images. This effect has in turn, diminished the value of the image on the Internet. Furthermore, the ability to record more photographic images, coupled with the ease of propagating these images can overemphasize the image-creator's selection of a certain moment, thereby potentially amplifying banality.

*The Ever-Expanding Image World:* Increasingly, we are being bombarded with more and more images. With the advent of more portable recording devices and the relegation of film, there has been an increase in converged devices. The digital camera has been the beneficiary. Nearly twenty percent of Internet users own a mobile phone with a digital camera embedded (Infotrend "Nearly 20% ...") with an estimated nine hundred million of them to be shipped by 2009 (Infotrend "Worldwide Mobile ...").

Industrialized societies have turned citizens into image-junkies (Sontag, 24). More and more photographs are being created. Slater speaks of "an everyday world

increasingly flooded with images and image-centred activities” (137). The image-world is a consumption-based world where “the freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself” (Sontag, 179). Synchronous with the increase in production is the increase in the rate at which images are consumed as commodities. Sontag analyzes both layers as she describes an intricate succession, where the creation of photographic images is justified by their consumption. According to her, “[a reason] for the need to photograph everything lies in the very logic of consumption itself. To consume means to burn, to use up - and, therefore, to need to be replenished. As we make images and consume them, still we need more images; and still more” (179). The entry of digital cameras has also intensified the image production process. Images can be created and disseminated at a much faster rate. Moreover, digital storage is also an upfront cost; after an initial investment, the recurring cost of film is eliminated. According to McQuire, “[w]hen everything is a potential photograph simply because it can be so easily taken, there no longer seems any reason to stop taking” (McQuire, 57). Hence, there is the temptation to leave the finger on the shutter-release button; there is no expense, no consequence, and no reason not to.

*The value of the personal photograph on the web:* According to Berger, by their nature, photographs have little or no property value because they have no rarity value” (291). Benjamin states that the work of art has always been reproducible as imitations and replicas have always been created (49). According to him, “mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (53). Although a painting was reproducible, the ease of retaining precise consistency



between copies was conceivably tasking. However, the lithography and later the camera altered this relationship.

The 'aura' of the personal photograph on the Internet is long-departed. The moment an image becomes digitized and made accessible online, it can be disseminated across great distances in seconds. The uploaded image is ordinary, in the sense that it has been dissociated from its twin characteristics of "distance" as well as "uniqueness in time and space" (Benjamin, 52). Through duplication it becomes ordinary. Everyone that wants to can possess a likeness of that image. Therefore in its liberation and transmission, there is also an unavoidable loss.

The digitized photograph lends itself to replication as well as propagation much more than the printed image. The mere fact that a photograph is on the Internet already defines it as something that is accessible; hence, an object that is relatively easy to reproduce. Resistant to this model are well-protected stock images. They are guarded, presented in small resolutions or in watermarked versions in an effort to preserve the original. Recently, peer-to-peer networks have come into the limelight as they are used efficiently to transfer any type of data. Their overall impact is still yet to be seen.

Presently, it is debatable whether the new uses of our ability to create and share images are being used to create a better understanding of our world. The answer lies somewhere between self-indulgent activity, where one turns the camera on oneself for the mere sake of it, and premeditated praxis, where the shutter is clicked for a specific reason. Nevertheless, I maintain that the uploaded photographic image is ordinary. At current levels, the production of photographic images has exceeded their consumption. Like any other commodity, an overwhelming supply has unavoidably resulted in market

saturation. The effects of this surplus are obvious. The value of the digitized photographic image on the World Wide Web has diminished and will continue to do so. As Berger rightfully noted that “If everything that existed were continually photographed, every photograph would become meaningless” (292).

### *The Limitations of the Use of Photoblogs in Nigeria*

One cannot dissociate the economic realities of photography from the individuated image-making processes; they are omni-present, inescapable. While the haven of a photoblogosphere in Western societies is within reach – the stark contrast in developing nations only serves to remind us that liberation through technological products may not be the path to versions of utopia. However, not all the limitations of photoblogs are necessarily economic. There are identifiable impediments to the realization of active resistance through the use of photoblogs.

*Economic* - Throughout the process of recording this project, I came across very few people with digital cameras. While traditional film-processing and image scanning technologies were not hard to come by, the costs involved did not seem affordable to the average Nigerian. After pricing low-end digital cameras, it was discovered that they start at roughly ₦25,000.00<sup>9</sup>. The Gross National Income per capita in Nigeria is approximately ₦58,000.00<sup>10</sup>. It is unlikely that the average Nigerian would be willing to spend so much of his or her income on a digital camera. I soon realized that a heightened sensitivity was required. When I held my camera and pointed it at a subject, I was aware that most would be unable to reciprocate the act - even if they wanted to. Rugg articulated the placement that photography potentially imposes on those behind the lens.

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<sup>9</sup> Roughly \$192.00 CAD at the current exchange rate of \$1CAD to ₦130.

<sup>10</sup> Roughly \$450.00 CAD at the current exchange rate of \$1CAD to ₦130.

She offers that “[p]hotography exposes the individual to the harsh light of constant scrutiny, opens up the possibility of being looked at without being able to return the look” (Rugg 136).

Additionally, although access to internet facilities is on the increase, most people can only afford to work online at cyber cafes. The per hour rate for web browsing ranges from ₦60.00 to ₦100.00<sup>11</sup> per hour. While this is not outrageously expensive, one has to compare these figures to the average income. Therefore, activities that are not seen as essential, such as photoblogging, may not easily become constant practice. A report on African Broadband and Internet markets suggests that “[s]till, the high cost of accessing the Internet in Africa is a serious constraint on economic growth. In more than half the countries in Africa, one year of Internet access costs more than the average annual income” (<http://www.biz-lib.com/ZPB91359.html>).

Without unnecessary commentary on the relationship between economic conditions and social conditions, a general comment on the experience of photographing in Nigeria is due. I have just offered that digital cameras were uncommon in Ibadan. A digital SLR was however exceptionally rare. I was constantly being reminded to be security conscious.

*Technological* – There is a significant lack of technological devices to facilitate Internet-related activities in Africa. While there have been recorded increases in Internet usage, it remains a commodity for “well-educated, wealthy families, primarily in the major urban areas” (<http://www.biz-lib.com/ZPB91359.html>). Perhaps most importantly, in stark contrast to the often crowded cybercafés of the major cities, only 1.1% of the Nigerian population use the internet (Internet World Stats). However, it is comforting that this

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<sup>11</sup>Roughly \$0.46 CAD to \$0.77 CAD at the current exchange rate of \$1CAD to ₦130

meagre number is at least representative of a 789.4% growth over a five-year period (Internet World Stats).

*Cultural* – I have mentioned the reified placement of the photographer in Nigerian society. He or she (usually a ‘he’) is assigned the title of ‘image-recorder’ and the suggestion of another ‘ordinary’ individual fulfilling this role is out of place. The only other person that is expected to record images is the photojournalist. Therefore, there were significant challenges for anyone that did fit into the aforementioned categories. From my interpretation of the glances I received, my conclusion was that several onlookers could not understand why I would be taking an image of a seemingly empty street. They would look at me then at the street and then back at me in confusion.

Moreover, the definitions of public and private spaces in Ibadan (or Yorubaland) seemed to be in conflict with the practice of constant photographic recording. I, much like my collaborators, was constantly discouraged when we tried to photograph certain locations. Generally, people became greatly concerned when a camera was pointed in their direction. In almost all cases, they were worried about doing (or being caught doing) something wrong. I deduced this based on the questions I was often asked. Public spaces like markets were not always welcoming to the camera. For example, one of the most outstanding experiences was when I tried to record images in Lekan Salami Sports Complex<sup>12</sup>, one of the city’s (and the nation’s) notable sports complexes. Certainly, I imagined there could be few places more public than a soccer<sup>13</sup> stadium. The security guard at the entrance approached me as I began taking photographs of Lekan Salami’s<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Formerly Adamasingba Stadium

<sup>13</sup> Called football

<sup>14</sup> Lekan Salami was an Ibadan politician after whom the stadium is named



statue. He immediately wanted to know who I was and chastised me for not requesting prior authorization from him. This experience was quite typical.

These responses are genuine reactions embedded in a culture of respect and models of hierarchy, where 'authorization' is often needed to proceed. In some instances, they proved unnecessary, dated and limiting. Having said this, several people were welcoming to the camera lens, offering information on the sites being photographed.

Digital photographs now serve to conflate the separations between public and private domains. Photography has always done this, but it is clear that this effect has been amplified. The odd glances I received when I carried a camera can be interpreted as a reaction to an uncommon practice. These glances were perhaps the same when, several years ago, cellular phones flooded the country and began to feature in public places. About five years since their introduction, these devices, as well as varying methods of their use, is now commonplace. Several Ibadan residents have camera phones. Perhaps there is still hope for the digital camera.

While this project borrowed certain techniques from classic documentary photography, the process of recording was improvisatory rather than a record of 'what is'. This decision was an attempt to acknowledge the responsibility of the filmmaker for their own visual perspectives. I recognize that I am responsible for my visual selection, the manner in which I frame, crop, edit and present my images.

Nonetheless, I always strive to record compelling images with a synergy of style and meaning, as ambiguous as those terms are. While aesthetic standards and political views vary from individual to individual, politics and aesthetics do not have to be isolated. The ideal work would fuse the two into a cohesive unit.

## Locating the Audience

One of the major goals of the project was to create a site where people who live in Ibadan can offer their visual perspective of Ibadan. Then, one might conclude that, the site is for the people of Ibadan. However, it is not that straightforward. If the site seeks to create an oppositional view that will seek to subvert dominant media representations of people of Ibadan then it would have to have a broader audience. As a result, I have concluded that the audience for this project is best left open. More importantly, the focus is on the producers of its content.

In a segment titled *Africa by Africa* in his essay titled “The Icon and the Totem”, Pivin explains what contemporary African photographers are trying to do. He says “[o]ur ambition is [...] to have these pictures play a part in an African view of Africa, both for the continent itself and for the world at large (30)”. In many regards the goals of this project are similar.

<sup>13</sup> Formerly Adamasongba Stadium

<sup>14</sup> Called football

<sup>15</sup> Lekan Salami was an Ibadan politician after whom the stadium is named

## **Image Analysis**

### Aesthetics and Politics

This project has sought to serve both political and aesthetic ends. While the politics of this project has been quite explicit, it is worth mentioning that it will not escape a certain level of aesthetic/artistic evaluation. According to Webster, the politics of photography is obvious, but the aesthetics is harder to judge (147, 8). The photograph has long been politicized. Webster offers that “the new photography insists that nothing escapes the political arena. [...]. All photography today comes under the gaze of a piercing political eye” (140).

However, in making an argument for ‘everyday meanings’ Willis argues that new boundaries have to be drawn around the domains of what can be termed as ‘art’. He argues for the inclusion of “expressive forms, practices and resources and materials through which people symbolically portray their meanings” into areas of “aesthetic realization” (75).

While this project borrowed certain techniques from classic documentary photography, the process of recording was impressionistic rather than a record of ‘facts’. This decision was an attempt to acknowledge the responsibility image-creators have for their own visual perspectives. I recognize that I am responsible for my scene selection, the manner in which I frame, crop, edit and present my images.

Nonetheless, I always strive to record compelling images with a synergy of style and meaning, as ambiguous as those terms are. While aesthetic standards and political views vary from individual to individual, politics and aesthetics do not have to be isolated. The ideal work would fuse the two into a cohesive unit.

### Triple Heritage

Urban spaces are constantly in a state of flux. The visual topography of any city is a consequence of several underlying factors. While focusing on economics, politics and religion, Mazrui in his book *Africans: A Triple Heritage* advances the idea that most of Africa has a 'triple heritage'. Summarily stated, a triple heritage represents the three main cultural influences - traditional African heritage, Western Culture, and Islamic Culture – that are responsible for the continent's current state of affairs.

The geographical region currently recognized as Nigeria is the final product of the struggles and negotiations of old imperial powers. Although fairly stable for the last forty years, even the current comprehension still strives for permanence. The greatest challenge to date to the nation-state of Nigeria was the Civil War of 1967.<sup>15</sup> In its aftermath, the proposed breakaway nation of Biafra failed in its secession attempt. However, more recently, a resurgence of secession movements in the oil-rich south and south-east parts of the country has increased political tension. Also, in October 2002, based on an old English and German agreement, the International Court of Justice ruled that Nigeria should hand over the oil-rich Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon. This transfer process has finally commenced.<sup>16</sup>

Nigeria is also home to more than four hundred unique ethnicities. These groups are largely – and problematically – categorized into three main groups. These categories are based on geographical region as well as cultural and linguistic similarity. Yet, aside from ethnic variations, there is also a religious complexity. The introduction of Islam in the northern parts of the country and Christianity in the south keeps the nation religiously

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<sup>15</sup> For more, see <http://biafra.info> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biafra>

<sup>16</sup> For more, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bakassi>



fragmented. These movements are the two most influential impositions that altered the already existing complexity.

A visit to Nigeria, and several other parts of West Africa, would confirm features of Mazrui's triple heritage which are often visible in varying aspects of everyday life. The interrelations of Africa's triple heritage have created layers which are difficult to separate. As opposed to a focus on the relationship between colonizer and colonized – which generally tends to focus solely on the Western influence on former colonies – a triple heritage analysis shifts its emphasis to religious and cultural forces that interplay in a range of combinations to shape affairs in the African continent. Steed and Westerlund also acknowledge a triple heritage. According to them the “indigenous religious heritage [...] colours the Nigerian character of the two main religions (Steed and Westerlund 10)”. However, this comprehension suggests that it is the nature of Islam and Christianity that is affected by indigenous religions.

Although Mazrui's piece does not directly engage with visual culture, his writing constructs several images; the book also features several photographs. For instance, as an indication of the visual presentations of Africa's multiple heritages, his book contains an image of a mother and a daughter dressed in contrasting attires (35). Other illustrations include an image of a mosaic wall in Meknès, Morocco (139), Masai women outside their home in the Great Rift Valley, Kenya (214), Akosombo Dam, Ghana (227) and cultivators of land in Nigeria (219) and so on.

Importing Mazrui's framework and applying it directly to images is a tangential continuation of his advancements; the concept of a triple heritage presents itself as a convenient tool for the analysis of images of Ibadan. Even Mazrui mentions that Africa's

triple heritage can be studied “most vigorously in west Africa” (93). I have chosen to analyze five select images that demonstrate this concept.

- i. DSC\_1180.JPG (see Appendix) – A mosque encompasses most of the frame. However, in contrast the signage outside reads, “Foursquare Gospel Church, Zion City, Odo Ona” with an arrow pointing to the right. At first glance, it seems that the sign is for the mosque, however one quickly realizes that the sign indicates that there is a church to the right of the mosque.
- ii. DSC\_1172.JPG (see Appendix) – In this image, there is a group of women leaving the Christ Apostolic Church at Odo Ona in Ibadan. The first lady is dressed in non-traditional clothing. She is wearing a Nike hat. The women behind her are dressed in colourful traditional clothing.
- iii. DSC\_1232.JPG (see Appendix) – This image is of the Sabo area of Ibadan. In view - left of the middle - is the Sabo Mosque. The street in front of the mosque is sectioned off. There is a sign that says “No Road”. On the street, there are hundreds of Muslims participating in Friday prayers. Behind the mosque, one can see more of the cityscape as it rises on an elevated plane.
- iv. DSC\_1330.JPG (see Appendix) – This image is of the Mapo Post Office. The post office is presumably an old building, residual from pre-colonial times. Just outside of the building, a mat-seller sets up a colourful array of traditional mats. She sits passively under a makeshift shade, waiting for buyers. She is on the street level while the Post Office is just above her.
- v. DSC\_1341.JPG (see Appendix) – This image is an Ibadan street scene. There is a couple on the left dressed in contrasting but colourful traditional attires.

<sup>15</sup> For more, see <http://biabfa.info> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibadan>

<sup>16</sup> For more, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibadan>

They seem poised to walk towards the right of the frame. On the right of the frame, headed in the opposite direction are three people. A young school girl – still in her uniform – leads the pack. Behind her, there are two men, dressed in non-traditional outfits. In between the two sets of people, a woman dressed in a mixture of traditional attire and non-traditional attire squats, doing something that is not apparent.

While it may not be possible to recognize all heritages in all images, it is easier to recognize at least two elements. In the described images, one easily notices mixtures of a variant of Westernization, an Islamic cultural presence and a residual traditionalism that remains persistent in spite of the presence of the aforementioned influences. For instance, as evidence of the religious multiplicity that exists in Ibadan, DSC\_1180.JPG has a church and a mosque in close proximity. At first glance, the sign for the church could be mistaken for that of the mosque. In DSC\_1172.JPG, several women leaving a Christian establishment are adorned in a range of outfits. The most outstanding is the lady in the Nike hat. While uniquely out of place when compared to the women behind her, such a sight is not misplaced in Ibadan. DSC\_1232.JPG also comments on Ibadan's heritages. Overlooked by the rest of the city, the Sabo Mosque uniquely occupies the frame. The street in front of it is filled with several praying Muslims. One can almost section the image diagonally as the unique architecture of the mosque is cast against the contrasting structures that line the cityscape.

DSC\_1330.JPG, the picture of the Mapo Post Office, is quite detailed. Right in the interior regions of the city, the post office stands above a traditional mat seller. These colourful mats have a range of uses. Still used in place of sofas and other furniture in

several places, they equally serve as sleeping mats, or prayer mats. Additionally, DSC\_1341.JPG shows two opposing forces in a head on collision. The individuals in the traditional outfits on the left seem as if they are anticipating the impending advances of the non-traditionally dressed trio marching towards them from the right of the frame. In the middle, a woman squats with a mixture of both attires (traditional and non-traditional) alluding to the eventual outcome of their engagement. Even though not all images recorded show elements of a triple heritage, it is evident that these forces exist and are still at play in the visual understanding of Ibadan. More accurately, they are more pervasive and exist as forces, particularly in the political arena while visually, they are less abrasive but remain expressions of these interrelations.

Ibadan is a unique city to photograph in. The most recent definitions of modernization and international development by which most third-world cities are often measured by is limited to the degree by which these cities change to resemble their western counterparts. Consequently, the presence of high-rise buildings, wide expressways and other infrastructure often imply progress. These present only a West versus non-West dichotomy, where advancement can only be accomplished at the expense of the old and more traditional features of the city. Mazrui's "triple heritage" acknowledges a slightly less simplistic model and describes a different system that is readily identifiable in West African cities and their contextual placement within the nation.

Being the second largest city, it cannot be isolated from the ethnic, religious and political tensions that define that country. The impact is often seen in a flux of migrants that return to the city in the wake of these crises. Yoruba society remains quite



conservative and deeply religious. Nevertheless, Ibadan still contains these religious mixtures quite well. For instance, it is understood that certain roads would be sectioned off to accommodate Moslem Friday prayers; Christian megaphone rallies are tolerated as well. In addition, annual traditional festivals still take place, causing large sections of the downtown interior to be closed off to traffic. Mazrui comments on the adoption of religion in Yorubaland and how it is often politicized. He offers that the Yoruba are agitated more often by ethnic concerns rather than religious issues (Mazrui 137).

It would be unfortunate if it is inferred that multi-religious engagement in Ibadan – or Nigeria as a whole – always results in violence. There is a contrasting lived experience in which people generally co-exist harmoniously. Everyday life continues with a mixture of hope and unpredictability.

#### Viewing Ibadan: Discussions on Architecture and Urban Chaos

Previously, I had mentioned that my first impression of Ibadan was a version of chaos. I advanced this because I remember being bombarded with various external stimuli – sights, sounds, and visions – at an unprecedented pace and in a seemingly unordered fashion. I have since had cause to reconsider. Admittedly, the label of ‘chaotic’ was drawn from retrospective analysis – there is no way to determine if I would have referred to Ibadan as ‘chaotic’ had I written about it then. Simmel paints a fitting picture of city life when he describes it as “the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impression” (qtd in Hannerz 314).

However, in trying to advance the main thesis that “all cities have an order, and that order is intimately (and ultimately) related to culture via schemata” (56), Rapoport

maintains that urban order is established and becomes recognizable through a cumulative 'adding up' process (56). Rapoport provides the following:

These cognitive schemata which guide decisions made in a given cultural context, can be conceived as models which makes possible the statement that all cities, like all built environments, have some order in the sense that none of them is a random assemblage of elements but a systematic arrangement of elements (56).

He illustrates this by describing in an Indian city an array of things that are seemingly chaotic to presumably a non-native observer. He suggests that one must understand certain 'cues' to realize a strong sense of order (62).

While, I can extrapolate that an increased degree of cultural understanding is required in identifying urban patterns across cities, Rapoport's position is cleverly disarming. For a critique of the layout of such an urban space – even when emanating from visible and easily recognizable socio-spatial challenges, such as traffic congestion, poor drainage, hazardous building juxtapositions and so on – would be reduced to a lack of understanding of the cues of the urban environ in question.

Rapoport's stance also excuses lack of foresight and poor city planning. While his 'inherited Lego' model makes sense, it does little to acknowledge the forced decisions that city administrators must engage with in order to proceed with the city's development. From my observation, this is the case for a city such as Ibadan, for it is a city that sporadically expanded in different directions. In fact, a reading of Rapoport assigns some agency to the 'denial' of order and consequently (potentially) equates it to 'a form of order' (61). This is a position I have difficulty fully agreeing with. While denial may be a conscious action, locating 'order' still becomes tasking.

Lewandowski, on the other hand, offers a more general view, as she talks about post-colonial Madras, India. According to her, religion and culture “continue to be reflected in the built environment of the post-colonial nation” (237). She offers the following:

As a system of nonverbal communication, the built environment must be decoded by those who use or observe it. In the course of time, as society changes, so does the built environment; new buildings forms may appear, and existing buildings may be used for new purposes. But the changes reflect a larger pattern emerging in society as a whole (237).

Lewandowski's verbiage is slightly more flexible and points towards a more amorphous and consequently more accurate description of urban expansion.

Ibadan, like any other city appears to be in a constant state of construction. While vestiges of the historic legacy will still continue to live on, a new version of Ibadan is always growing underneath. Nonetheless, Nigerian architecture has always had a unique character. Even in new buildings, one may discover the persistence of traditionalism. Newer buildings – especially residential structures - are created in a very Nigerian definition of modern. The most successful ones fuse a functionality and design to create a unique aesthetic. For instance, the typical residential structure is fenced all around. The wall is then topped with spikes shaped like spear-ends to keep away intruders. These in turn form a unique pattern across the perimeter of the wall. Other houses have spirals of barbed-wire or broken glass along the wall. While, these designs are not uniquely Nigerian, they have become an integral part of the peripheral Nigerian architectural design. As an individual, my analysis of Nigerian architecture has been purely observational and very limited. I have discussed it in passing as it features in some of my images. Perhaps more qualified individuals should engage with the topic in great detail.



## Conclusion

When I first started exploring the photoblogosphere as a site of resistance, in 2005, I presented a paper at the *Re: Activism* Conference in Budapest, Hungary. At the end of my presentation, a member of the audience shrugged his shoulders and asked “Where is the resistance”? The conference had taken place within months of the London bombings<sup>17</sup>. The young man cited instances where people had endangered their lives and had scaled barriers set up by police and security services to use electronic devices such as camera phones to record what they were witnessing. These were the first images to be made available to the public via the Internet.

Without disregarding the politics of the actions of such content-creators, I wanted to tell my questioner that sensationalized opportunistic photography was not my focus. In contradistinction, I was more interested in the subtle recording of everyday life that begins to have meaning and establishes and reaffirms a consciousness that might have been previously ignored or taken for granted. Although commenting directly on dissent in labour relations, actions like those described by Scott were closer to the forms of resistance I was trying to locate. He described how peasant farmers resisted authority in subtle ways. According to him, their actions may be pervasive but never “contest the formal definitions of hierarchy and power” (93). The definition of resistance that pertains to this photoblogging is mostly located within action. It is identified in the processes of recording and uploading photographic imagery. While these processes also amount to an expansion of pictorial meaning, the mere evocation of this shift, resulting from the actions of individuals who participate, constitutes resistance.

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<sup>17</sup> On July 7, 2005, four suicide bombers detonated explosives in London’s public transport system, killing fifty-six people and injuring over seven hundred others.



In all the metropolises I have photographed, I have always noticed common denominators – chains that link one city to another. My attention has been drawn to the interrelationships between these seemingly disjointed urban experiences as well as a characteristic undercurrent of city life. When one closes one's eyes, one is still engulfed by an identical auto-human murmur that is paradigmatic of urban living. Yes, while no two cities are the same, they are often not that dissimilar from each other.

For instance, I have never visited Rio de Janeiro; nonetheless, every time I see images of the *Cristo Redentor*<sup>18</sup> atop the peak of the Corcovado, another visual image immediately comes to my mind. In almost corresponding fashion, the large mast, on one of Ibadan's highest points, performs as a transposable structure. The mast's religious symbolism is inescapable - the mystical array of trees in the *Igbo Alagada* that leads up to the structure, is rumoured to be a venue of ancestral spiritual sacrifice.

This project is an exploration of the idea that photoblogs could be established as sites of resistance to dominant pictorial presentations. The photoblog was particularly identified as a potential location of resistance to deep-rooted visual mores. In evaluating the completed work, I maintain that this project has been successful in rupturing a mimetic tradition. But does this amount to resistance? If at all resistance is to be mounted and sustained, its primary source cannot be a single location – a multiplicity of locations must be established. Hence, if the photoblog is the location, then multiple locations must be created. This means that more photoblogs similar to the one created for this project must be added to the photoblogosphere.

The assertion still remains the same. Under certain conditions, photoblogs can be effective tools for presenting an alternate view of the world. In no uncertain terms, the

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<sup>18</sup> Portuguese for 'Christ the Redeemer'

conditions for establishing the photoblogosphere as a site for resistance in Ibadan were less than ideal. Still, this project has been able to identify these them, evaluating these requirements practically and realistically.

The expectation is that *Digitizing Ibadan* will continue to evolve. This evolution is admittedly hard to predict. For instance, the volumes as well as the kinds of images that future participants would choose to upload (if they choose to) remains unknown. Nonetheless, the project design is fairly elastic to incorporate the probable directions in which it could grow. Currently, pictures of cities other than the pilot city can be added to the project.

The goal of this project was to create an online archive – a body of images that could visually define the city of Ibadan. In the end, with the aid of collaborators, a body of work that was visibly absent has been created. My hope is that the project will expand. According to Mazrui “Africa’s own identity requires self-awareness, and Africa’s self-awareness requires a scientific and human archival tradition” (79). The need for this tradition to be initiated and sustained cannot be overemphasized. While this project has focused on the city as a site, it has also looked at the presentation of self and aspects of one’s everyday life. A number of photographers and writers have taken up the idea of self-presentation and have either written about it and infused it in their work. For instance, Strindberg’s self-portraits were taken to assert and present himself to others in the world (Rugg 88).

Incidentally, this project has also responded to the question: What is Ibadan? However, what Ibadan is – its meaning – cannot be fixed. My interpretive definition of Ibadan, as well as those of other contributors to this project, is subject to change. In

addition, our visual perspectives are not the only available ones. Nonetheless, my view is unapologetic. I intend to avoid 'defensive photography'. This is to say, I have no intention to strive to produce 'glossy' images of Ibadan in order to advance some notion of 'development'. Such a project, I leave in the hands of the Ibadan Tourism Board. Nonetheless, there is the tendency to readily accept the idea that urban areas in certain countries are inferior. Webster is quick to criticize what he relates as an 'ethnocentric' view:

Moreover, if culture is predisposed towards conservatism, it is also not surprising that it parades its own way as superior to others. One way of resisting change and to keep things the way they are, is to insist that different places are inferior (119).

In evaluating the need for contemporary images, I wonder if this project has been an unnecessary celebration of certain moments. For photography is history. It is preserving a moment for longer than its actual life. Every image in this project is a frozen moment – a moment that has become history immediately after it was recorded. Like these moments, this project could soon become dated. However, it is my hope that this photographic exercise translates into a continuous process.

I would have liked to be able to further investigate how these images are received and interpreted. However, this is a project that I leave open for another time – and perhaps another person. Viewed through my cynical mind, I have little faith in a technological revolution; however, through a viewfinder, I see much differently. It is hoped that this project does not end here. With this conservative step, I hope I have established something that will seek to make a gradual change – or at least help create a new and dynamic meaning. In Ibadan, several things have changed over the years. The taxi cabs are no longer yellow and brown – they are now white with horizontal greenish-

blue stripes. The Ferris wheel at Trans Amusement park no longer adorns the city's skyline – the venue appears to be derelict and most views of the wheel are now concealed by vegetation as well as new structures. The building I called home appears vacant, rundown. The walls fight a silent battle with time, crawling weeds and blades of grass. The chipped paint, the decaying wood and the rust of the garage door show that there have been casualties. But I believe we must continue to photograph. Perhaps the photoblogs could relocate the image from the realm of personal satisfaction to a larger audience. Even if unintentional, the narcissistic artist is forced to become a social commentator.



## Appendix

Select Images	53
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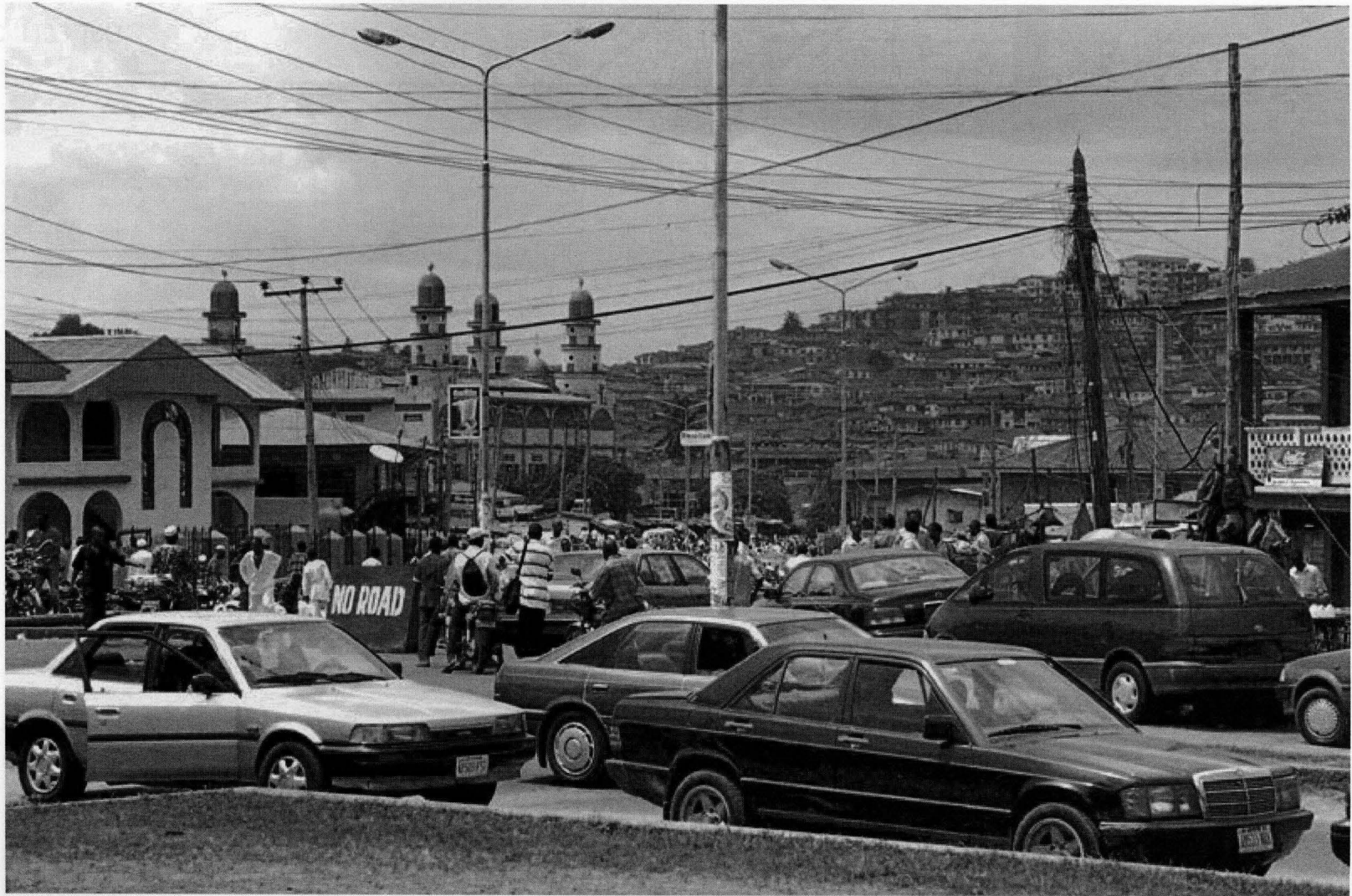


DSC\_1180.JPG



DSC\_1172.JPG





DSC\_1232.JPG





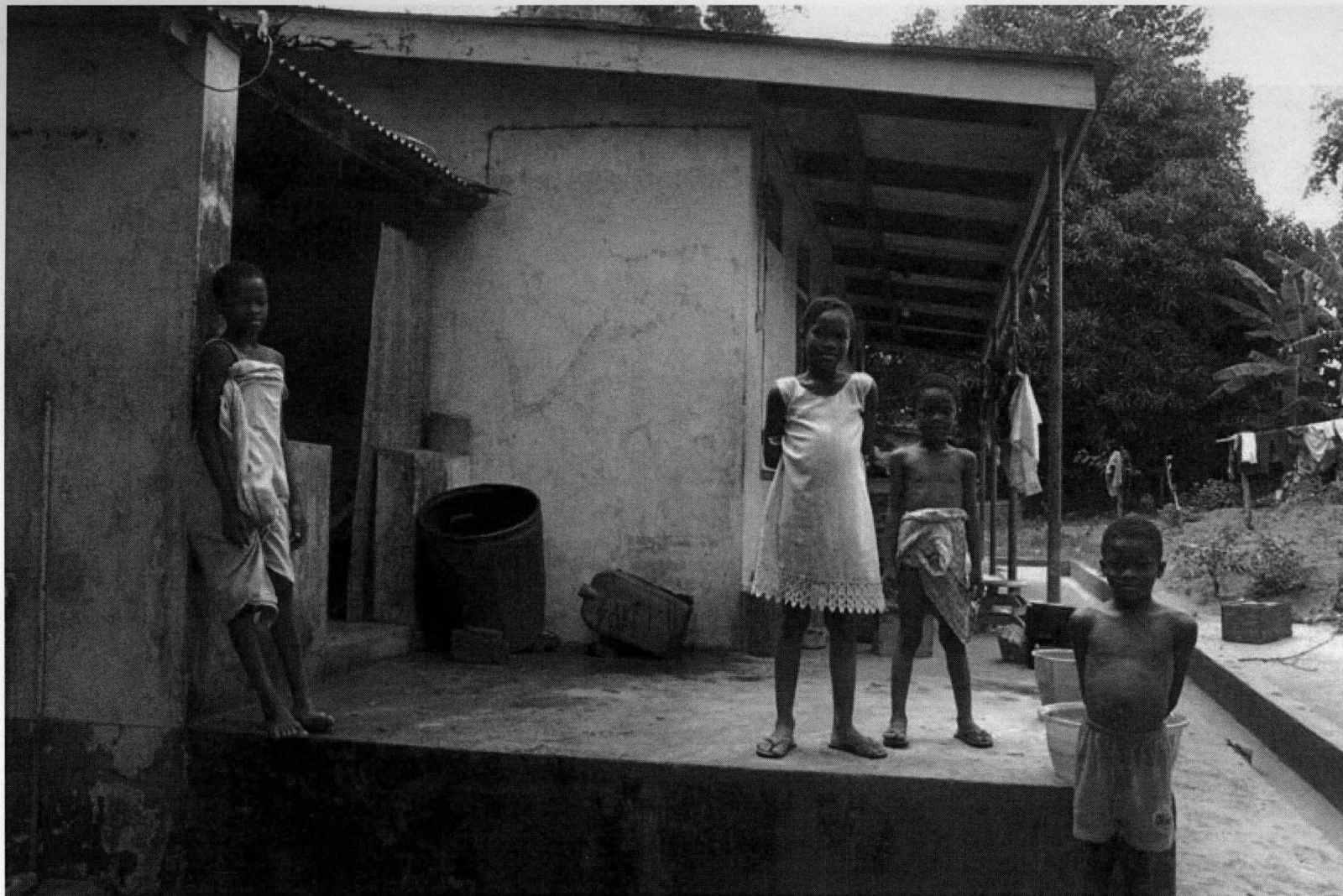
DSC\_1330.JPG

D20



DSC\_1341.JPG





DSC\_1029.JPG



DSC\_1226.JPG





DSC\_1462.JPG

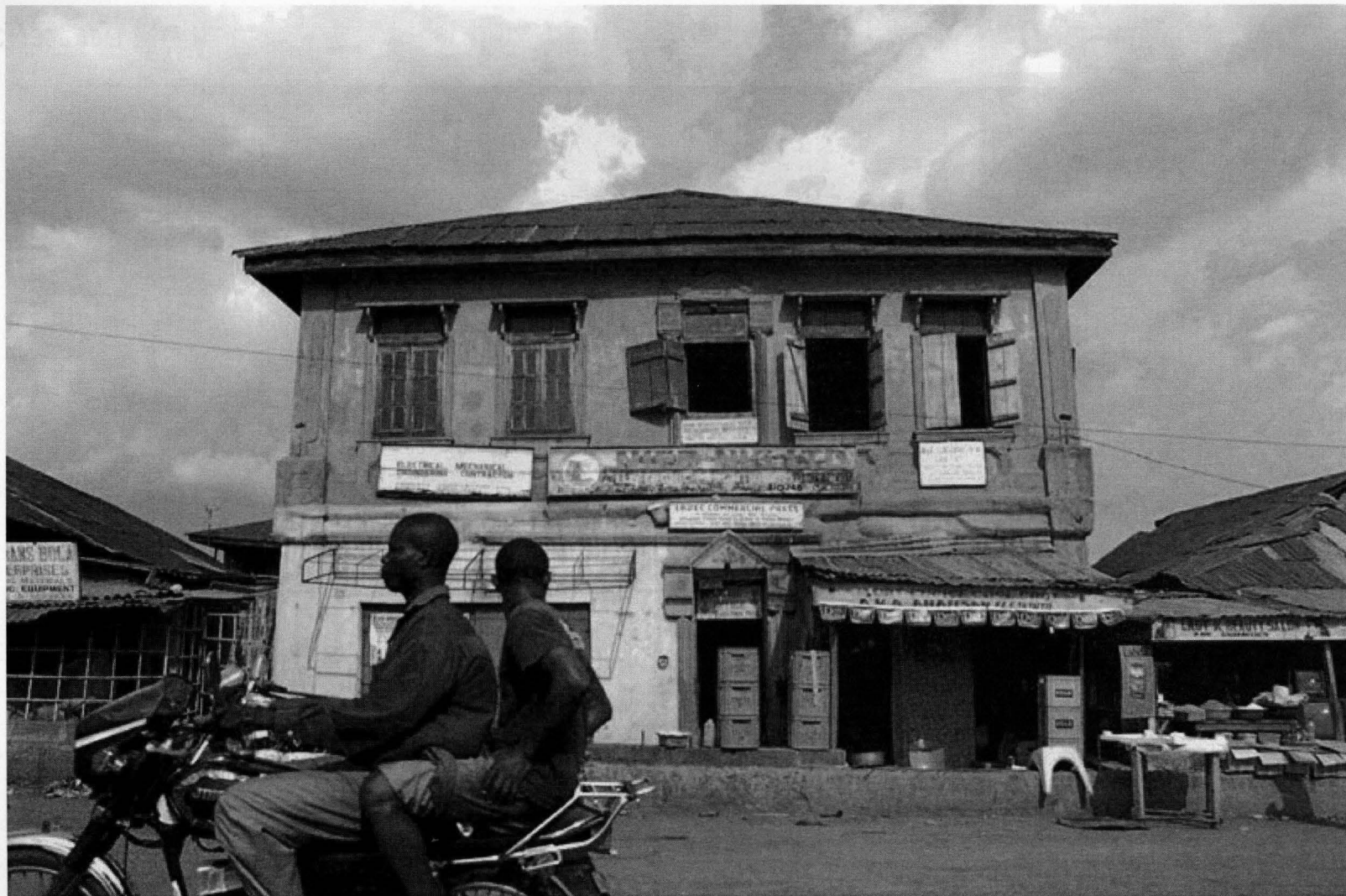


DSC\_1196.JPG





DSC\_1327.JPG



DSC\_1343.JPG





DSC\_1571.JPG

### Select Journal Entries

For me, the process of taking photographs in Ibadan was an academic exercise as much as it was a personal exploration. For the duration of the project, I kept a journal, periodically recording my experiences during the project. The entries shed some light on my reflections on the city and different people I engaged with.

#### May 27

I walked with my father and brother through the downtown area. My eyes unlocked various places in my memory. The mind is never completely *formatted*. I noticed the old road to our former residence; I noticed the last place I had haggled for a pair of shoes – old signs had meanings, but I couldn't remember why. I saw the old Leventis building. I once had lessons there. I remembered a young girl who was strangely fascinated by me. I used to walk home with her after the lessons.

We drove towards Lekan Salami stadium. My dad went to the bank while my brother and I waited in the car. My brother stopped talking suddenly, pointing out of the car window. It was the girl from the lessons! She looked the same – dark and pretty with flowing, long (artificial) hair. Today she looked focused. I did not call her; I let her go. I watched her as she tried to hail a cab. I sank into the car seat.

#### May 28

I attended church today; feeling quite inadequate with my Yoruba, I opted for the English service. The church was a small, straightforward building – it had a typical cemented floor that was overlooked by an elevated stage that was barricaded to look like

a balcony. Some ladies wore big tilted (Victorian-looking) hats while others were dressed in *ankarras* and other traditional prints. Most men wore ties. Behind the pulpit on either side were the 'hidden doors' – as child, I had always wondered who could gain access to those privileged rooms. The praise singing segment fluctuated between English and Yoruba. Still, I could not escape Yoruba. I was able to hang on, recalling choruses from memory.

Sunday school was more nostalgic. It took place in a small room with a low ceiling and open windows. The floor was cracked and the room was lit only by the morning brightness. It reminded me of elementary school – in fact of every classroom I had ever sat in. It was while sitting, watching people engage in religio-cultural discussions that I came to a realization. I would not be able to take photographs as easily as I thought I would. Seated there, I felt like an outsider, like an impostors. Children stared at me and their parents stole glances through the corner of their eyes. I was a familiar stranger. I tried to imagine me or anyone else taking photographs of people in the room. Camera? Here? Why? Culture is not ordinary.

### May 29

I stretched on the bed, staring up into the darkness above. I was listening to Lemon Jelly on my mp3 player and recalling the day's events. My dad had taken my notebook for repairs. He maintained that electronic devices were cheaper to fix in Nigeria. For someone that almost shelled out \$1500 CAD on a new machine last month in Toronto, I really had nothing to lose. He even said he might throw in a laptop case. We got the family desktop working and I showed my family *some* pictures.



## May 30

We set out to photograph our old residence – the last place I truly called ‘home’. The estate had since fallen apart. Its buildings were engulfed in bushes and the car carefully pushed past low-hanging branches. Our house used to be the very last house. As we rolled up to it, I noticed that, like everything else in the estate, it had gone to decay. I took out my camera for the first time. I clicked away, seeing things in new ways. The current inhabitants of the main house seemed to be away, but the kids that lived in the boy’s quarters peeked at me under the guidance of their young teenage sister. I introduced myself and took shots of them as I asked them about the compound’s fixtures – the sour orange trees, the mango tree, the snakes and so on. They were not shy and smiled at the lens. I walked away smiling, asking them to venture to stay in school.

## Visitation Conventions

Uncle Segun is my mother’s cousin. He looked the same – tall, lanky and bespectacled. I wanted to photograph him right away, but I had to follow the Yoruba visitation conventions.

Minute 1: Prostrate before everyone that is older than you.

Minutes 2-7: Respond to general questions about your welfare.

Minutes 8-15: Mandatory consumption of refreshments

Minutes 16 → Passively tune in and out of the older peoples’ conversations while making funny faces to keep the kids entertained.

Uncle Segun’s kids seemed exciting. Maybe I’ll get to see them again.



## June 6

Today, my brother provided transportation for Dele and Tope to record their images. He offered to drive them to anywhere in the city they were interested in photographing. Our first stop was Tope's old high school. We waited outside while she disappeared beyond the gates.

About half an hour later, she re-emerged. She seemed quite disappointed. The school officials had prevented her from taking pictures. They had in fact strongly discouraged the use of any images she had already created. The officials had been suspicious, quizzing her, trying to make sure she wasn't doing anything investigative.

Dele had a bit more success; he was a bit more daring, shooting first and entertaining questions later. In fact, this is how he generally approached the city. He got accustomed to the D50 fairly quickly and in fact seemed to really enjoy the process. I wouldn't be surprised if he ends up investing in a camera in the future.

We started out in the interior of Ibadan and then later dissected the city in convenient diagonals. Dele often ordered the car to stop and then disappeared deep into crowded areas beyond sight. Tope equally had some success. A man asked her to photograph him. He leaned against an expensive Mercedes and smiled glowingly until she was done.

## Glasses

Designer glasses from Westport, USA - \$410.00 USD

2 Frames from Ibadan, Nigeria - \$3.60 USD

Installing 2 pairs of prescription lenses in Ibadan - \$18.40 USD

Total cost of replacing 1 pair of glasses made in Westport, USA and stolen from Guelph, Canada with 2 pairs of glasses made in Ibadan, Nigeria - \$22.00 USD

Savings - \$388 USD

### June 16

I am 95% done with my final paper. I needed to research a few things online, so I walked to my dad's office, taking along my camera. When I got to the lab, the administrators were absent. I sat for an hour, working out the costs involved in opening and running a cybercafé.

At the end of the day, I returned to Ibadan with my father. We swung by the repair shop to pick up my notebook. It seemed to be working again – the repair man had said it had given him some difficulty. We stopped at Ogbomoso to pick up my mom and her eldest sister who now performs the role of 'grandmother' for the (maternal side of my) family since my grandmother's death in 1993. The two sisters had gone to a funeral.

### June 17

My mother thought it would be good idea for me to attend my cousin's son's naming ceremony. This way, I would get to see several family members at one venue and avoid going to visit them individually. It made sense, so I went along to Lagos.

My mom has 8 siblings of which 6 are still alive. I had particularly wanted to see one of my aunts. I always remembered her as the happiest one of my mother's sisters – she always seemed to be smiling.

Later, the room filled up with cousins. It took a couple of glances before a lot of them could recognize me. As I sat there, I realized that that was ironically the first naming ceremony that I had ever attended. I was a bit reluctant to pull out my camera, but when the official photographers were tardy, I had no further hesitations. It was nice to photograph the event. I didn't take as many shots as I should have, but I was pleased nonetheless. I had found the perfect balance between attendance, participation and recording. It was considerably hard to record candid photographs. Every time I pointed the camera at a group of people they seemed to freeze and quickly adjust into preset poses.

Later on, I got a chance to meet with a few of my cousins. The most exciting was Auntie Sade (yes, like the jazz singer). She walked up to me and asked if I knew who she was. I said "No" – I felt I could be unapologetic after several weeks of either straining my memory or feigning familiarity until I remembered. After she introduced herself, I gave her a big hug. Although I had certainly heard of her, I was not so sure I had ever met her before. I remember her sisters once spent a few days in our house when I was probably ten. Later on, I talked with her for a bit. I discovered she was easy to talk to and very down-to-earth - and that was before she told me she liked me hair. It's quite unfortunate that I hadn't met her before now. She would've made a nice big sister.

### June 18

My computer died again - so much for inexpensive repairs. Anyway, it was worth a shot. Without a steady supply of electricity and a working computer, I had no choice but to go to Ilorin. Fortunately, I had not unpacked, so I gathered my bag and got prepared for the



4-hour journey. As we approached the outskirts of the city, a crowd was gathering. I immediately knew something quite unfortunate had happened. We drove by the lifeless body of a young man; he had most likely been hit while trying to cross the road. His body was bent in quite an unnatural manner. I saw him quite late – passers-by had covered him with leaves.

We stopped at the house my father had recently built for his father. There, we met my step-grandmother as well as one of my aunts. I probably saw them over ten years ago. I was taken to visit my step-aunt. To be honest, I am not sure I had ever seen her before.

She seemed to recognize me though. When we got to Ilorin, we stopped by to visit another one of my aunts. She insisted that I go visit my cousin – I call her my favourite cousin. We went to the same high school and I tried to look out for her. It was an absolute pleasure to see her again. She'll become a doctor in a year or so.

#### June 19

I got up early and started finishing up my project paper. My dad and I later went to the computer repair shop for the umpteenth time. We also went to a cybercafé where the connection was painfully slow. I sent an e-mail to my committee to try and schedule a date for my project defence.

At around 5.30 p.m., my dad arranged for me to use the lab at his office for a few hours. It was nice of the lab administrator to come in after office hours. I was able to send a few casual e-mails. We later returned home and watched Tunisia lose to Spain in a Germany 2006 World Cup match.

June 22

I had been in contact with Gbenga, an old friend from high school. He had driven out to meet me. We once shared a locker in our dorm room. The last time I saw him was over nine years ago. He had rounded out over the years but his face had hardly changed.

Gbenga and I had a couple of drinks at a restaurant close by. He then took me to go meet several of our old school mates – a lot of them were medical students at the university. Incidentally, my 'favourite' cousin also went to school there. I met a number of old school mates. To my relief, the awkward hierarchical command of 'seniority' had dissolved and we were all able to engage with each other respectably as individuals.

Gbenga had a 'photographer' take my picture. It was one of the few times my picture was taken by someone else in Nigeria.

My cousin later showed up and we chatted for five minutes. She wanted to come and see me later on, but we both had extremely busy schedules. I insisted that we took a picture together. I remembered the last time I tried to take a photograph with her (my last week in high school), she was considerably difficult. The eventual shot was awkward; we both appeared separated and seemingly disinterested. I reminded her and she almost covered her ears, embarrassed. This time, we stood side-by-side and smiled at the photographer. I didn't like his choice of backgrounds, but I am curious to see the picture. Gbenga has promised to scan it and e-mail it to me.

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