

SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAYS

CELEBRATING AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTISTS

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Amy J. Staples, Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan, and Bryna M. Freyer, eds. *Fragile Legacies. The Photographs of Solomon Osagie Alonge*. Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution/National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria. In association with D. Giles Limited, 2017. 210 pp. Black-and-white and color illustrations. Forewords. Prefaces. Benin Timeline with Maps. Notes. Selected Bibliography. Acknowledgments. Index. \$33.00 Paper; \$42.00 Cloth. ISBN: 9781907804991 and 978096500156.

Joshua I. Cohen, Sandrine Collard, and Giulia Paoletti, eds. *The Expanded Subject. New Perspectives in Photographic Portraiture from Africa*. Munich: Hirmer, 2016. 128 pp. Black-and-white and color illustrations. Contents and Acknowledgments. Preface. Artist Biographies. Author Biographies. Colophon. \$42.80. Cloth. ISBN: 9833777426327.

It has only been in the past few decades that the photographic legacies of African photographers have become known outside of the localities in which they functioned. In large measure, the obscurity of the work of these talented men and women has been due to the fragility of their photographic records, the focus of their work on limited geographic locales, and the dominance of European photographers in representing Africa and its peoples.

There is now an abundance of evidence informing us about the works of many African photographers beginning as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. It is also clear that Africans enthusiastically adopted Western photographic techniques as they became available. Many operated photographic studios in urban centers, where they catered to local populations. The people they served often desired to be photographed not necessarily as they were, but as they wished to be seen. In this regard, they were similar to

Western clients in Europe and North America in their desire to be visually portrayed in the best manner possible.

Some African photographers, such as Alphonso Lisk-Carew (1883–1969) of Sierra Leone, ventured outside of a studio setting in order to photograph a broader world, rich in cultural traditions and beautiful landscapes. These images were seen by large audiences beyond Freetown as Lisk-Carew created popular postcards that depicted his vision of Sierra Leone.

Among the European photographers who created an impressive number of postcards was François-Edmond Fortier (1862–1928). A prolific French photographer, he began his career in a studio in Saint-Louis in Senegal. He later opened a photographic studio in Dakar. Fortier eventually ventured outside of his studio and became a documentary photographer. He photographed the lives and cultures of numerous African peoples in French West Africa. These field photographs and those he created in his studio were later transformed into postcards. It is estimated that he published some three thousand postcards. These found their way into private European photo albums, postcard collections in Europe and elsewhere, and onto the pages of important ethnographic publications. It was through these postcards that Fortier's photographic legacy was preserved.

Unfortunately, the documentary photographs of many of Africa's photographers fell victim to adverse climatic conditions. As a result, a number of negative and print collections disintegrated over time and are now permanently lost.

In *Fragile Legacies*, Amy Staples and her colleagues recount the remarkable story of their efforts to preserve the photographs of a highly talented photographer from Benin City in Nigeria, Solomon Osagie Alonge (1911–1994). They also provide an in-depth biographical account of Alonge's photographic career set against the broader canvas of Benin's ancient and contemporary history. Divided into six chapters and an Epilogue, this volume was published following an exhibition of Alonge's photographs at the National Museum of African Art and later at the National Museum of Benin.

Alonge began his career as an apprentice in a photo studio in Lagos. He later opened his own photo studio in 1930 in Benin City. Then, in 1933, he was appointed official court photographer to the Oba of Benin, a position he held until 1979. This position enabled him to photographically document not only court life and ceremonies but also a variety of public events. In 1956, for example, he photographed the arrival of Queen Elizabeth II at the Benin airport.

In 1942, Alonge opened the Ideal Photo Studio in Benin City. He attracted numerous patrons, not only because of his compositional talents, but also because of his darkroom expertise. Together, these resulted in exceptionally high-quality photographs. Alonge was keenly aware of the risks to his ever-growing archive of glass plates and film negatives. He took exceptional care in classifying and storing them. As a result, the contents of his photographic archive remained in very good condition despite adverse climatic conditions.

The effort to preserve Alonge's photographic legacy and bring it to wider audiences was initially undertaken by Flora Kaplan, an American anthropologist. A close friend of Alonge, she eventually came into contact with Amy Staples, Senior Archivist of the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. Staples and Curator Bryna M. Freyer, along with Kaplan, then began the long and complex process of launching an international effort to preserve Alonge's three thousand images and make them accessible to large audiences.

This undertaking involved Alonge's family, the Oba and his court, patrons who had been photographed by Alonge, and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria. With the help of Samuel Nogieru Arasomwan, Alonge's longtime assistant, Staples and Kaplan were able to identify some two hundred residents of Benin City who had been photographed by Alonge.

The Ideal Photo Studio collection was eventually sent to the National Museum of African Art, where it was digitized, and in 2014, the exhibition opened—*Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge: Photographer to the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria*. In 2017, the exhibition was sent to the National Museum of Benin.

Fragile Legacies is a unique volume. It not only visually presents the photographs of an exceptional African photographer, but it also describes his place as a social documentarian at the intersection of the colonial era and Nigerian independence. In addition, it chronicles the collaborative efforts of multiple parties to preserve Alonge's photographic legacy and to make it available for public viewing in both Nigeria and the United States. Amy Staples and her co-authors are to be congratulated for producing a meticulously researched, well-written, and visually impressive volume that is a pleasure to read.

Western interest in African portrait photography had a meteoric rise in the 1990s. The initial catalyst for this were exhibitions in the West of the work of the Malian photographer Seydou Keita (1921–2001). Keita opened a portrait studio in Bamako in 1948, which remained active through the early 1960s. Promoted by Western backers, museum exhibitions, publications, and commercial galleries, Keita's work also stirred interest in other African photographers, including fellow Malian, Malick Sidibé. Yet, the prevailing discourse on African photographers often makes no mention of European photographers contemporaneously active in places such as Mali. Among them was Michel Thuillier, who presided over a photography boutique, *La Croix du Sud*, in Bamako from 1968 to 1993.

While the focus of interest in recent decades has fallen in Mali on the works of Keita and Sidibé, others such as Abdourahmane Sakaly (1926–1988) received scant attention. Part of the reason may be that Sakaly was born in Saint-Louis, Senegal, to Moroccan parents, and came to Mali in 1946. In 1956, he opened his Studio Sakaly. During my years in Bamako in the 1960s and 1970s, he was then the most famous photographer in the city. His corpus of work, like that of Thuillier, is outstanding. As the above comments indicate, scholarly research into the relationships between European, expatriate, and local African photographers is much needed.

The Expanded Subject was published in conjunction with an exhibition at Columbia University's Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, held between September and December 2016. It features the works of four contemporary African photographic artists, Sammy Baloji (Democratic Republic of Congo), Mohamed Camara (Mali), Saidou Dicko (Burkina Faso), and George Osodi (Nigeria). As the authors note in their introduction, these photographic artists have pushed the boundaries "to such an extent that one might reasonably ask whether these works should be regarded as portraits at all" (15). In reality, they appear to be experimental creations that defy conventional standards of portraiture.

As the authors cogently note, much of what they term contemporary African photographic portraiture documents marginalized groups, humanizing them in order to heighten awareness around their conditions (17). Other forms of contemporary African portraiture focus on the photographer who mimes familiar genres, but cloaked in theatrical costumes. Such exaggerative portraiture obviously challenges the Western concept of creating a likeness in a portrait. If classical portraits were in a sense mimetic, these newer creations are suffused with imaginative interpretations and an intent to confront colonial-era standards imparted to African photographers.

How contemporary African photographers express the elements of this new canon is discussed in detail in artist-specific chapters, as Sandrine Collard so eloquently explains. Sammy Baloji, for example, created collages from past colonial-era portraits. In so doing, he invites viewers to become aware of the travails of time past, thereby attempting to impart relevance to the suffering of current generations.

Joshua I. Cohen discusses the work of Mohamed Camara of Mali. Interestingly, Camara's focus is on himself and how he perceives the world around him. He often uses the photographic device of seeing the outside world through windows and doorways or through parted curtains. Thus, many of his photographs are staged to a certain extent. In a sense then, he does not attempt to replicate reality, but rather to create a *mise en scène* that evokes previously reflected concepts that are then digitally memorialized.

Saidou Dicko of Burkina Faso produced shadow theater as a young man. As Sandrine Collard explains in her chapter on his photographic works, he has now centralized shadows, usually of people, in his art. Dicko does not stage his shadow portraits. Rather, he photographs shadows of people he encounters on the streets. However, the shadows depicted in several of the photographs in this chapter appear to be of the same person.

While Collard provides an extensive discussion of Western perceptions of silhouettes and shadows in art, she does not explain their powerful metaphysical meaning in West African religions. For among the Mandé people, who populate the world in which Dicko lives, the shadow is one of two elements of the human soul. At death, it is reincarnated into the soul of the next infant born into a family. Thus, shadows for the Mandé are very powerful manifestations intimately connected to the inner spiritual life of people, other living things, and even inanimate objects.

The final chapter in this volume is devoted to the Nigerian artist George Osodi, authored by Giulia Paoletti. As she observes, his photographs invariably contain people. However, their presence is sometimes minimized or obscured. What is more important for Osodi is the relationship of the person to the surroundings depicted. As a social activist, Osodi created photographs that engaged both urban beauty and blight, the struggle of Niger Delta inhabitants against environmental degradation and political corruption associated with oil exploitation, and other social and political issues.

The Expanded Subject raises the question of whether African contemporary art photography is or is not portraiture. This is a difficult question, given the volume's internal diversity. While the works of some artists fall within the boundaries of portraiture, the works of others do not. What is clearer is that African contemporary photography as discussed here is but one stream in a broader world of present-day portraiture creation in Africa. That said, the authors of *The Expanded Subject* are to be congratulated for their lucid and engaging description of newer avenues of African photographic expression.

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EAST AFRICAN CHRISTIAN NETWORKS

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Andreana C. Prichard. *Sisters in Spirit: Christianity, Affect, and Community Building in East Africa, 1860–1970*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2017. xiii + 339 pp. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$39.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-61186-240-9.

Jason Bruner. *Living Salvation in the East African Revival in Uganda*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2017. xi + 191 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$24.95. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-58046-584-7.

These two studies of Christianity in East Africa are welcome additions to the expanding corpus of scholarship that seeks to uncover the frequently ambiguous ways in which European missionary traditions were appropriated and re-fashioned by African peoples. Both Andreana Prichard and Jason Bruner consider African initiative to have had greater room for maneuver in this process than some other influential treatments, notably by Jean and John Comaroff, allow. Prichard, indeed, is bold enough to assert (152) that