

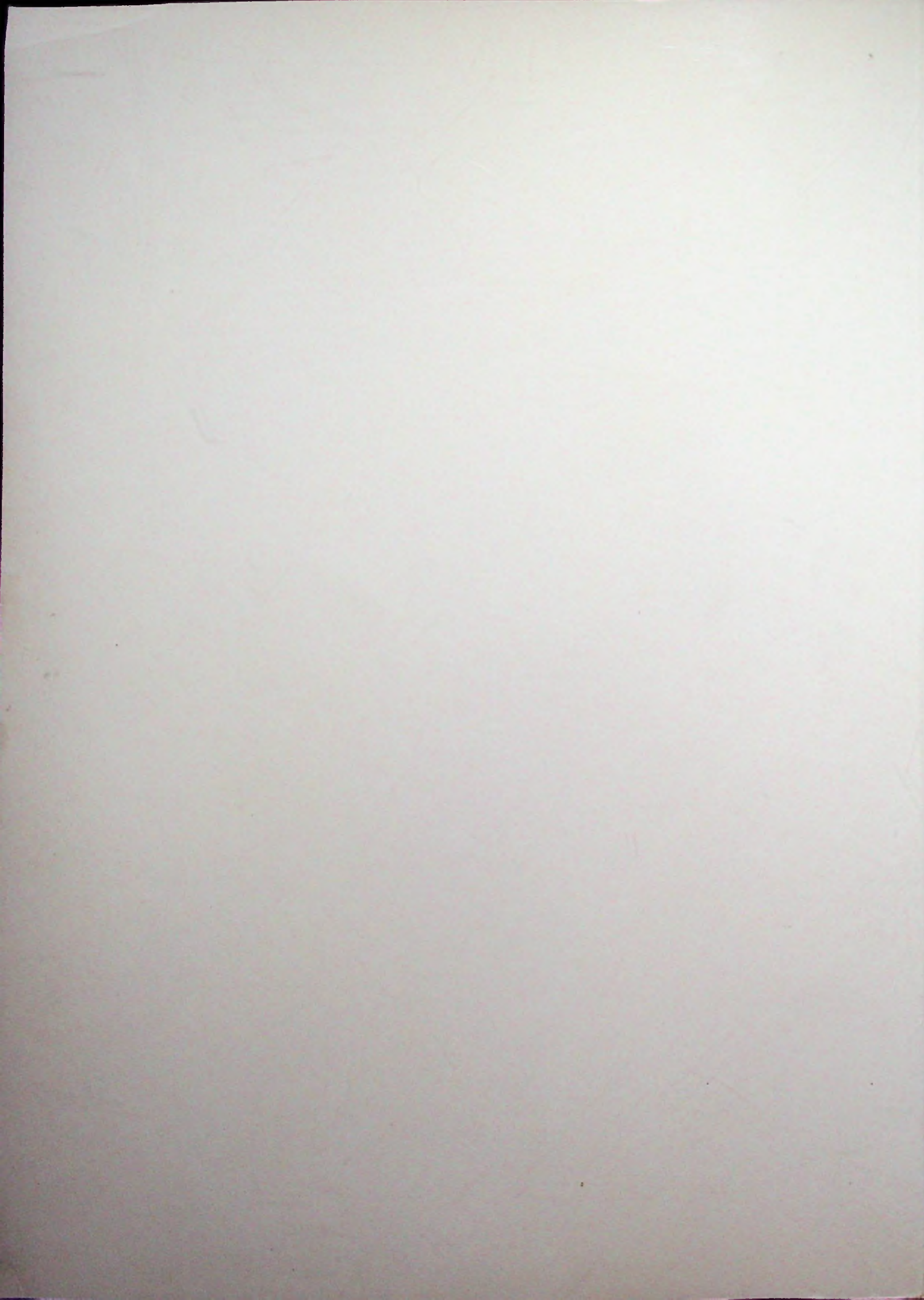


Ambivalent



Photography and visibility
in African history

Edited by Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley



Leslie Witz

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Chapter 9

PHOTOGRAPHING ASỌ EBÌ

Of Surfacism and Digitality

OKECHUKWU NWAFOR

THIS CHAPTER looks at the relationship between cloth, self-fashioning, and digital photography in Nigeria. The conjunction between cloth (*asọ ebì*) worn on physical bodies and digital manipulation on virtual bodies may represent a new form of sartorial elegance and cosmopolitan fashionability that needs investigation. The chapter examines how *asọ ebì* fashion evokes a compelling form of visual culture in Nigeria in which glamour is symbolically inscribed on the surfaces of photographs using digitally manipulative means. Under the theoretical rubric of surfacist aesthetics, the chapter attempts to articulate how the seeming banalities and facades of late capitalist sensibilities are played out within a fusion of fashion and photography in urban Lagos.

Asọ is a Yoruba word that means “cloth,” and *ebì* in Yoruba means “family.” Thus, the literal translation of *asọ ebì* is “family cloth,” and historically, it is thought to have originated among the Yoruba who live in the western part of Nigeria. In earlier times, *asọ ebì* revolved around the narrow categories

of family networks: the man, the wife, their children, their relatives, and the extended families. The cloth was especially employed during funerals, where relatives of the grieving family wore the same, uniform garment to differentiate themselves from the crowd. From the 1960s, *aso ebi* began to be redefined in line with the cultural and socioeconomic changes that came with late global capitalism. Within *aso ebi* practice in the city of Lagos, meanings of friendship, solidarity, camaraderie, and wealth have undergone radical transformations as more people have migrated to the city since Nigeria's independence in 1960. From the 1970s through to the 1980s, individuals were compelled by economic conditions to adopt new modes of *aso ebi* practice. For example, the types of textiles used for the cloth expanded to include cheaper materials imported from China and elsewhere. In addition, instead of offering *aso ebi* for free as in the past, individuals sold it to their friends, and with such transactions, politics of exclusion and inclusion ensued.

From the 1990s to the 2000s, the rise of digital photography and the emergence of radically new printing technology ushered in a new mode of fashioning *aso ebi*. By this period, an increasing visual agency was beginning to manifest itself among city dwellers through such devices as camera phones. Similarly, there was an explosion of other, cheaper digital devices and technologies among professional and amateur photographers. What distinguished professional photographers in the city was their ability to exhibit expertise with the new digital photographic media. Most photographers made use of digital cameras and bought digital printers for producing quick passport photographs along the side streets. Others equipped their workplaces with computers and learned the new digital technology of CorelDRAW and Photoshop. Social events were again integrated into this new digital wave. Photographers attended weddings, took photographs, rushed to digital laboratories, printed their photographs, and swiftly delivered them back to the owners of the images.

The intersections of sartorial practices with this new digital movement cannot be overemphasized. Instant picture taking and the act of dressing up for occasions were intertwined. Today, in fact, the central element of social events often revolves not around food or any other item but around *aso ebi* fashion. The importance attached to the cloth also influences its relationship with the digital medium. Photographers digitally manipulated the *surfaces* of their *aso ebi* photographs at the request of their customers for the purposes of excluding or including certain elements and props.

I use *asọ ebì* to show that textiles have taken a preeminent position in the discourse of identity and its intersections with photography in contemporary Nigerian society. Here, *asọ ebì* clothes, serving as textiles, allow Nigerians to redefine their relationship to a certain urban fashionability that was disseminated by Western sartorial styles and photographic genres. As a result, *asọ ebì* serves as a vehicle to address the substantiality of the surface in photography as initially proposed by Christopher Pinney in relation to Indian practices.¹ In this chapter, by looking at *asọ ebì* photographs—those I personally took at weddings in Lagos and those taken by Kingsley Chuks—I move Pinney's notion of surfacism into a broader set of cultural issues in Lagos. I participated in about ten weddings in that city and also worked with other photographers who took photos at Lagos weddings. In addition, I interacted with photographers in their studios as well as computer operators and their clients around the Egbeda area of Lagos. In this chapter, I draw on ethnography, art historical models of visual studies, and literary theory in an attempt to explore how combined methods of analysis can raise research questions beyond conventional theories of visual analysis.

THE VISUAL ECONOMY OF SURFACISM

In Animasaun Digital Studio in Lagos, the role of each computer operator is to ask the customer whether he or she would want a special surface treatment in the photos. Some monetary negotiation may be entailed, for the price goes up with this service. A special surface treatment requires the computer operator to use CorelDRAW or Photoshop to enhance the beauty of the photo through surface effects that will make the faces or backgrounds glow and shine. In employing the CorelDRAW or Photoshop digital software to alter bodily accoutrements in photography, it is assumed that a visual language is being invented with the development of the new electronic capital, such that the embellishment of the human figure attracts more money. This might be seen as an effort to render the physiological effect of this form of photography in a way that will bring out the optical impact of shine. Photographers such as Kingsley Chuks in Lagos—and computer operators at Animasaun Digital Studio—play with the surface quality of photographs and, in the process, fashion a visual language that is tied to the new capital of computer and digital technology.

Krista Thompson has described surfacism as “a concentration on the materiality or visual texture of objects within or of the picture plane.”² Surfacism deals with highly structured and elaborately refined objects and their manner of representation, which is also highly refined. Artists and photographers have used surfacism to emphasize the materiality and haptic quality of objects.³ In regard to the visual economy of European art, John Berger argues that two historical developments boosted the development of surface aesthetics—namely, “the invention of oil painting as an art form in the sixteenth century and the formation of new wealth and new moral economies surrounding capital.”⁴ He remarks that through the use of oil paint, artists such as Hans Holbein the Younger developed “the language of tactile sensation” and attained a sense of illusionism, tangibility, texture, luster, and solidity in what they portrayed. Through the medium of oil painting, Holbein peopled his entire picture plane with objects, scrupulously detailing the surfaces in such a way as to convey “a sense of touch.”⁵ In his painting *The Ambassadors* (1533), two statesmen, Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve, are adorned in exquisitely and highly embroidered garments in the British court of King Henry VIII. Their elegance, majesty, and pose direct the eye around the surface areas of the painting, which is inhabited by a collection of material possessions, including objects symbolic of the sciences and arts. In the work, with the exception of the merchants’ skin, almost all other surfaces, including the textile paraphernalia and the aesthetically structured instruments, convincingly announce the visual intensity of their surface details.⁶ Berger relates this new tactile rendering of the material world in oil paint to the “new power of capital” and “new attitudes to property and exchange.”⁷ In art historical terms, this painting is reminiscent of a visual antecedent of the fashioning of power and prestige through material possessions. From its earliest inception in European art, Berger contends, surfacism gave visual form to a way of seeing that was confined to the market economy, new forms of self-fashioning, and the optical effects achievable specifically through oil painting.

Although Berger traces the origins of surfacism to the sixteenth century, some art historians connect surfacist practices with aesthetic pursuits that flowered in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Svetlana Alpers, for example, notes that Dutch painters of the seventeenth century were overly preoccupied with the surface characteristics of things and often treated their works naturalistically, like a mirror or a map.⁸ Similarly,

Christine Buci-Glucksmann also remarks that artists of the Baroque period embellished the surfaces and surroundings of their paintings with a superabundance of decorative details.⁹ She asserts that surfacist aesthetics disfigure the visual image by showing its dependence on the materiality of the painting medium, which acts as a mirror image.¹⁰ For Buci-Glucksmann, Baroque surface aesthetics were visibly manifested on normalized models of visibility in such a way that their means of construction, especially through the medium of the mirror image, were made visible.

It is important to look at surfacism within a broader historical perspective of colonial and postcolonial visual culture. George Lau notes that the intensive modification of exterior surfaces in Recuay culture was a strategic field for negotiating status and identity. The style's principal media (pots, buildings, sculptures, textiles) formed part of political programs, both modest and grandiose, of chiefs and their close relations.¹¹ Citing James Gibson, Lau notes that "at the interface between mediums and substances, surfaces are where the action is."¹²

Lau's surfaces invoke resemblances between objects, different media, and materials, and he argues that surfaces can be more than inert bearers of images. They can have their own agentive qualities.¹³ In a much broader expansion of these agentive qualities, many authors have explored the sensorial properties of surfaces such as color, brilliance, shine, sharpness, and size, and they suggest how these qualities can embody and engineer cultural patterns in extraordinary, unpredictable ways.¹⁴ As will be shown in subsequent discussion, the surfaces of Chuks's photographic works, with their colors, their tactile materiality, and the flatness of their shapes, engineer the local cultural forms of *asọ ebì* visibility in Lagos.

Elucidating the historical conditions under which surface aesthetics figured in the past may offer insight into their production in the visual economy of postcolonial photography. Christopher Pinney observes that surfacism has characterized much popular small-town Indian photographic practice. Again, one could argue that surfacism can be seen in the use of backdrops and the creation of the photographic *mise-en-scène* by West African studio photographers in the twentieth century.¹⁵ In this manner, surfacism becomes an engagement with the superficial accoutrements of the image rather than a "narrativized indexical depth."¹⁶ To explain this further, Pinney's subsequent arguments on photographic surfacism identify the surface not as a layered phenomenon but rather as a practice that negates

the chronotopic parameters of earlier European photographic exposures, including those linked to early European travel and the much-discussed ethnography in colonial states. Pinney has argued that the implication of colonial depth practices implies a surface that was constantly rendered invisible.¹⁷ In this manner, it is assumed that photography is a spatial-temporal phenomenon that must follow a narrative sequence, rather than an object that is bounded by a flat pictorial space. Such photographs being an index of peregrination and ethnography are opposed by the reworked photographs in virtual digital studios in Lagos that I discuss here, which are taken in a time-bound space but are transformed into “achronotopic” spaces through the digital medium. Unlike in Berger’s sixteenth-century paintings, the naturalism and realism in the picture plane of these photographs are replaced with a flat pictorial surface that does not convey a specific sense of time and space.

FROM ANALOGUE TO DIGITAL

When I visited Shegun Adekoya in his studio in Segan Street, Egbeda, Alimosho, Lagos, he told me that he bought a digital camera in 2003 and a computer and small digital printer in 2005. He added, “I use my printer to print only passport photographs but I go to commercial digital printing laboratory to print bigger sizes of digital photos.”¹⁸ In Adekoya’s studio, there were no studio props or other paraphernalia to show that photos were being taken in that location. Instead, he informed me, most of his photographs were taken at “events.” Adekoya claimed that he edits and reworks many photographs he takes at weddings with Photoshop and that any photographer who does not do that is considered a bad photographer.¹⁹

He made use of Photoshop software in working over the surfaces of the photos, recontextualizing some of them in a way that gave them the impression of having a studio setting before taking them to Animasaun Digital Studio for printing. It is obvious that “the shift to the digital has shown that photographs are simply raw materials for an endless series of digressions.”²⁰ Further inquiry at Animasaun shows that the technicians use CorelDRAW to impose several surfaces on the background. I spoke to a young woman who worked as a computer technician. She was flanked by many photographers who yelled at her to attend to their photos. In one encounter, she cut the borders of the photograph using a digital tool,

then pasted it on a certain background. Most often, the background she used was a textile-like material manipulated from a combination of several images downloaded from Google images and elsewhere. The style of manipulation left no one in doubt about her proficiency in the digital medium. She also made use of what she described as “noising,” which she defined as “the smoothening of the body surfaces to achieve an effect that is beautiful.” After noising, she went further to digitally decorate the bodies. Starting at the face and then moving to the clothes, she dexterously added shiny effects to the picture.

At that time, there were about ten more digital printing studios in the Egbeda area of Lagos alone, and there were always about a thousand photographers who patronized a particular studio in a day. In Animasaun Digital Studio, for example, there were around ten computer operators in addition to the chief computer technician. Each operator attended to a particular photographer at a time, and each photographer directed the operator accordingly in terms of digital manipulation of the surface qualities of his or her photograph. Physical backdrops similar to those used by such early photographers as Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé in Mali and J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere in Nigeria²¹—who worked with analogue cameras—have been replaced by nonmaterial backdrops of the digital computers. Technology thus shifts the manipulation of the physical, tangible photographic *mise-en-scène* to manipulation of the intangible digital surfaces. This practice is what is obtainable in the city of Lagos and, indeed, other Nigerian cities on an almost daily basis. However, weekends mark the height of this practice because that is when many social events happen.

On weekends, more individuals leave their homes in the morning only to return in the evening with scores of beautifully designed photographs bearing a background that never existed in their imaginations. These digital backgrounds and beautifully manipulated clothes and bodies comprise the selling power of the photographs. There are several possible reasons for this new idiosyncrasy. Didier Gondola has suggested that “the social and economic chaos that characterizes the African city grafts itself onto the bodies of youths.”²² From this perspective, getting shiny, digitally reconstructed bodies consummates the city dwellers’ entry into the world of perfection. It provides them with a symbolic satisfaction of abundance and prosperity, thus allowing them to reproduce a body that is an alternative metaphor for a chaotic social world.²³ Most of the female social celebrants on weekends in

Lagos bedeck themselves in dainty aso ebi dresses. In posing for the camera amid the chaos of city life, the body is regenerated; it finds its redemption, and it lives and shines in the cult of digital manipulation.

In Nigerian society, excess in all its ramifications is the hallmark of wealth. It is a society where the idea of class values and social status are always enacted by visible emblems of affluence in social gatherings: mon-eyes exchanging hands and textile materials being displayed. When one views Figure 9.1, for example, and sees how the photographer Mbadimma Chinemelum inserts his clients into a sea of excessive textile overflow, one understands that any lack in the individual's persona is believed to be ultimately transcended in the emerging photos. Mbadimma confirms that his clients prefer photos with excessive textile decoration, "especially [those] in which both the clothes and bodies have been 'beautified' with Photoshop."²⁴ He said his clients are always happy to see themselves with "beautiful skin and shiny dresses." Thus, beautiful skin and shiny dresses together serve as the transformative surface process required to engender a new being; they are a consummation of the technological invention, of the digital software, required to arrive at the new self.

Figure 9.1 Adamma. Onitsha, 2013. Photograph by Mbadimma Chinemelum.



It is crucial to highlight a key dimension of the rise of *aso ebi* fashion in contemporary Nigerian social settings, as this will help to clarify the surface discourse in this chapter. Over the years, *aso ebi* has devolved into superficiality. The rise of digital photography and the invention of digital software such as Photoshop and CorelDRAW in the year 2000 coincided with the importation of cheaper textile materials used for *aso ebi* fashion. Both the digital software and *aso ebi* fashion are, I argue, embedded in surface treatments and the reconstruction of reality. When the deep human relationships that *aso ebi* expresses die, digital photography and profuse textile decoration help to resurrect them. Damaged by strange ambiguities of unstable social relations, *aso ebi* is constantly reinvented in the dream-like screens of the digital photographer, where estranged lives are painstakingly united by software.²⁵ Any unseen distance, difference, or exclusion is reconciled by the intimacy invented by digital photography in which the bodies now unite in the seeming uniformity of textile materials.

DIGITAL “SNAPPING” AS GROUP CURATING

At 10:00 a.m. on 15 June 2010, I went to All Souls Anglican Church in Lekki, Lagos, which was the venue for the wedding between Longfellow Okon and Nkechi Igwe. I had been invited by a friend who happened to be among the *aso ebi* women attending the ceremony, and I made my intentions clear to her that I would be coming with a camera to photograph the occasion. When I reached the venue, none of the guests had arrived. I was seated outside the church premises with a few photographers who had arrived uninvited to do “photography business” (as is the norm at most public functions in Lagos).²⁶ At about noon, the couple arrived escorted by a group of *aso ebi* women, including Chinyere, who had invited me. As soon as they alighted from their car, Chinyere summoned her *aso ebi* friends, and they positioned themselves in a group and invited me to snap photographs of them. After the first snapshot, they all swarmed around me—already aware that I work with a digital camera—to view the pictures from the screen of my camera. One of the women, Uju, complained about the way she positioned her head in the photo and insisted that I delete the image and snap another one. Not wanting the rest of her friends to do the same, I decided to take several shots and then select the best. After this round of snapping, however, Obioma complained about her eyes in one

of the photos—she had looked away from the camera, unlike her friends who were gazing at it—and demanded that I delete it. In fact, from the numerous photos I had taken, she asked me to print one in which she thought she looked beautiful. As I watched other friends of the celebrants snapping each other, I realized the same process I underwent with the *aso ebi* women was being enacted everywhere. Some friends snapped while others swarmed around them to check what the photos looked like.

My photographic experience on that occasion was marked by a constant intervention of the photographed because of the digital camera I was using. There was an interactive forum between me and the *aso ebi* women. Such interactions reenact, enhance, and alter body gestures and poses during photographing, and the sense of aesthetic in the occasion is heightened by viewing the image through the screen of my digital camera. And the competitiveness invoked around glamour is such that when all the women saw themselves on my camera screen, some believed they were less beautiful and wished the photo to be deleted and the whole process repeated. In this manner, deleting becomes the forte of the digital mode as opposed to the analogue camera. Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis argue that the delete button constructs the logic of a photographic rectitude and infallibility.²⁷ During the process of my snapping, the screen of my digital camera served only as an arena for the instantaneous invention of personal beauty within group expressions of glamour. The digital screen became a tangible surface offering immediate creative insight about images that are already visually accessible. This is where the surface becomes an index of group glamour and romanticization.

In Pinney's understanding, the surface entails "the dialogical spaces of face-to-face encounter."²⁸ In the studio, the encounter is between the photographer and the photographed, but in the digital mode during social events, the face-to-face encounter is transferred to the digital screen, where it becomes a process of engagement between the photographer, the referents, and the screen.

Again, those photographed are not interested in the space-time conjunction of the image. Rather, the focus is on the surface of the image itself and how it can be a site for possible reconstruction. In the group digital photo sessions in which I participated as the photographer (unlike in the analogue world where the photographer retains independence), photos are not just passively allowed to inhabit the camera but are acted upon on

the spot—actively created, posed for, and reconstructed. The photos are revised to form or illustrate surface narratives, revisualized, and set into animated dialogue with people. In this instance, one could see that the first phase of the photo's creative process begins on the screen of the digital camera. Instant viewing on my screen is akin to the immediacy of vision, something the analogue camera cannot offer.

Rubinstein and Sluis observe that “during the first years of the ‘digital revolution,’ digital technology was largely inserted into the framework of existing traditional photographic practice.”²⁹ Globally, the 1990s were characterized by a radical change from analogue technology (darkroom tradition, chemical processing, and film) to digital technology in image treatment.³⁰ The color printer and Photoshop displaced the photo lab and darkrooms. It became more convenient for many photographers to replace their photo lab with digital apparatuses, given the possibility of making prints without a home darkroom and also given the restorative ability of the digital mode. Rubinstein and Sluis note that “the advent of affordable, consumer-orientated digital cameras introduced amateur photographers to several technological innovations which contributed to dramatic changes in popular photographic practices.”³¹ In 1995, the first digital consumer camera with a preview screen was invented, making it possible to preview an image before it was actually taken.³² Two remarkable achievements, the screen and the delete button, were the reduction of the time entailed in taking a picture and viewing it.³³ This introduced some flexibility into picture taking and allowed new scope for the perfection of the process.

Immediacy, a term employed in film theory, also applies to the way in which digital cameras provide an instant vision of events. Joseph G. Kickasola remarks that immediacy is a modest term that is phenomenologically true for all of us; it is a term with a refreshingly consuming, sensational quality capable of provoking our “sense” of the indexical, without fully engaging that faculty.³⁴

Digital photography has a capacity for intense and participatory meaning making. In digital snapshots, agency is offered on the screen of the camera, which is the immediate arena of engagement for the subject to discuss the layers of meaning contained within the photograph. It is, therefore, experiential in a way that offers the photographed an opportunity to “curate” the photographic process. An important feature of this mode (as against the analogue camera) is that it no longer affords the photographer

a dominant voice in the curation of the photographic process, nor does it offer him or her room to impress a singular, personal narrative upon group displays. Rather, with subjects looking through the screen of the camera and commenting on what they see, photographing becomes an active process of group participation and interaction. During my photography session, the fact that Obioma wanted to position her face in the same manner that her friends did reflects Geoffrey Batchen's view that "as a collective activity of picture-making, snapshots show the struggles of particular individuals to conform to the social expectations, and visual tropes, of their sex and class."³⁵ In the *aso ebi* photo I took, everyone simultaneously desired to adhere to the popular notions of looking beautiful in the photo. Could digital snapshots be described as odes to conformist uniformity, in the manner in which Obioma and her *aso ebi* friends desired to conform to conventional practice of being photogenic? That she and her friends wished to look beautiful and insisted on deleting the supposedly ugly photos perhaps shows that a sense of conformism is prevailing in perceptions of how one must look in a photo.

ALTERED SURFACES

One day, Kingsley Chuks took me to his studio, where he had reworked some of the photos he took at a wedding in Lagos. Since a great percentage of guests who attend parties dress in *aso ebi* in present-day Lagos, most of his photos were of people in *aso ebi* uniform. However, the celebrants had requested that he treat the photographs thoroughly before making an album for them. He actually informed them that he would alter the photos to create variety. He started by altering the backgrounds of certain images. Particular women in *aso ebi* were given a different background that utterly changed the photos, making it difficult to identify the original context in which the images were taken. More than six of the photos were given backgrounds with the use of Photoshop (Figures 9.4, 9.5, 9.7, and 9.9), whereas the original photos retained the original background.

Chuks might well have attained a certain level of renown in his professional career. And what he did with Photoshop allowed me to discover new areas of engagement with contemporary postcolonial photography. This photographic attitude did not exist in 1960s Nigeria when, according to Pa J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere, "most weddings usually had one commissioned

photographer hired most of the times by the bridegroom.”³⁶ Pa Ojeikere, who owns a photo studio along Ogubanwo Street in the Ketu area of Lagos, achieved international acclaim through a book about him published by Andre Magnin. Ojeikere told me how he had covered weddings in the 1950s and 1960s and actually showed me some photos he took on those occasions. “I used to be the only photographer in most weddings I covered,” he said. (These days, by contrast, there are usually innumerable photographers at most social occasions.) Figure 9.2 shows an *aso ebi* group photograph from a wedding that Pa Ojeikere covered in 1969; he actually took no more than thirty photos that day. In contemporary weddings in Lagos, almost everybody has a camera of some kind—whether a handheld camera, a camera phone, or an automatic analogue camera. A question then arises: could this photographic ubiquity aptly fit into what Batchen describes as the “boring pictures” and “snapshots” category³⁷ or what Patricia Hayes (in this volume) describes as “empty photographs”? This issue constitutes another area of scholarly engagement beyond the scope of the present study.

Chuks’s own photos differ markedly from those of Ojeikere. In what is something of a deviation from the normative and institutionalizing assumptions of mainstream photographic practice, Chuks has highlighted the importance of the surface located on the image and the various invented contexts it undergoes in the digital studios of the photographer. As this suggests, the very materiality of the digital object is not the mechanical and the physical.

Figure 9.2 *Aso ebi* group photograph. Lagos, 1969. Photograph by J. D’Okhai Ojeikere.





Figure 9.3 *Asọ ebi* women. Lagos, 2009. Photograph by Kingsley Chuks.



Figure 9.4 *Asọ ebi* women against a Photoshopped plain background. Lagos, 2009.
Photograph by Kingsley Chuks.

Figure 9.5 *Asọ ebi* women against a Photoshopped textile background. Lagos, 2009.
Photograph by Kingsley Chuks.



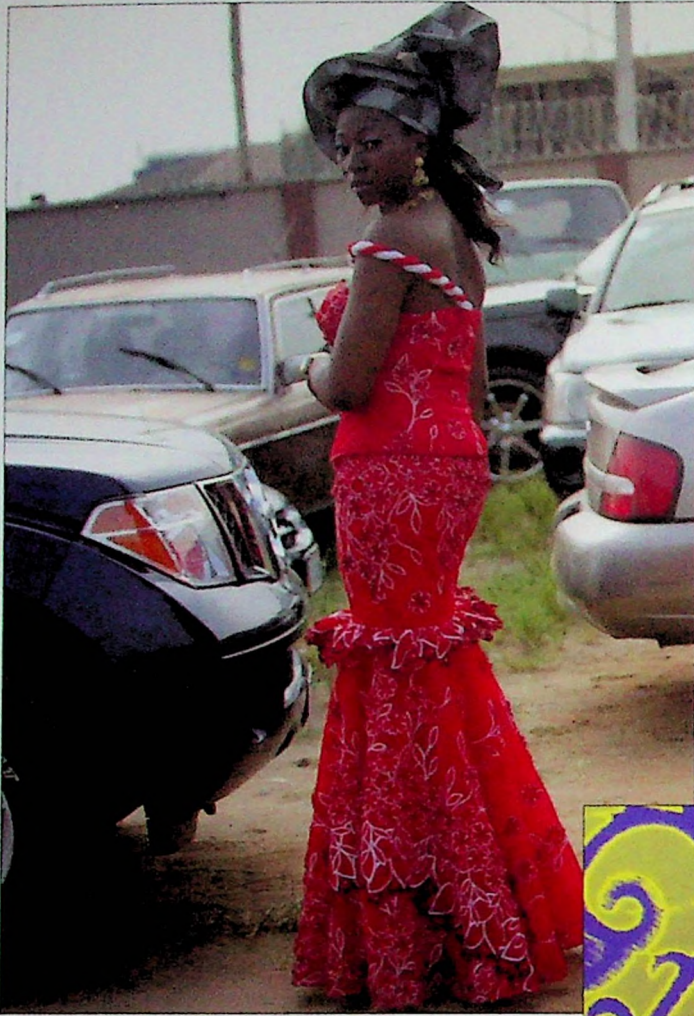


Figure 9.6 *Aso ebi* woman in red. Lagos, 2009. Photograph by Kingsley Chuks.

Figure 9.7 *Aso ebi* woman on a Photoshopped textile background. Lagos, 2009. Photograph by Kingsley Chuks.

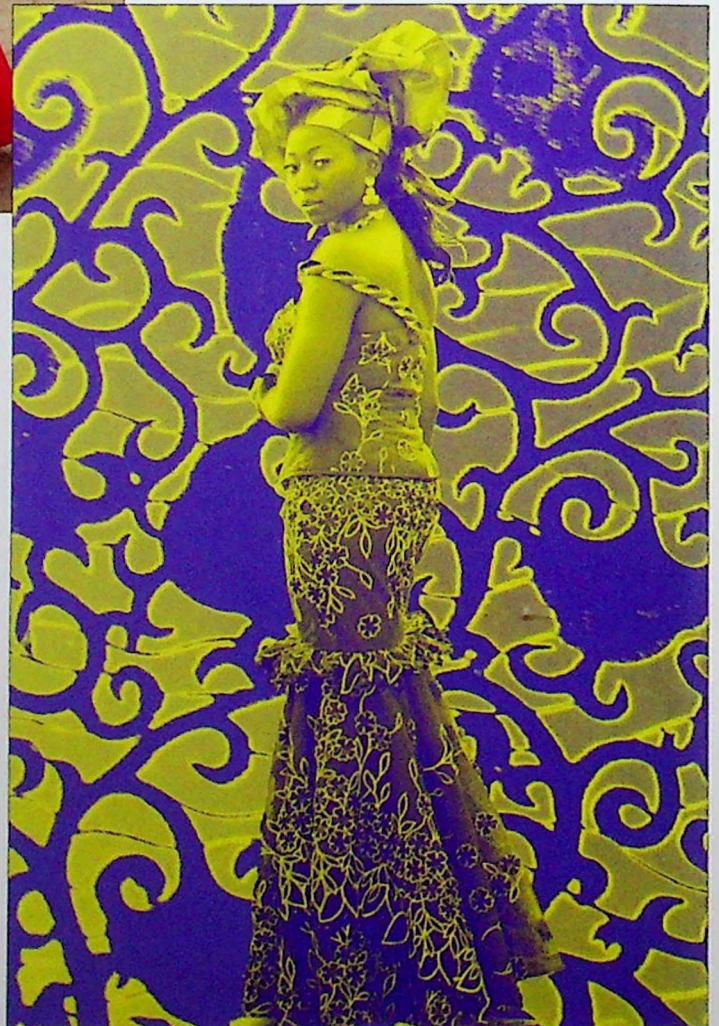




Figure 9.8 Family members of the bride in *aso ebi*. Lagos, 2009. Photograph by Kingsley Chuks.

Figure 9.9 Family members of the bride in *aso ebi* with a textile background with additional figures (in Fig. 9.8) Photoshopped out. Lagos, 2009. Photograph by Kingsley Chuks.



In a vivid description of Seydou Keita's photographs, Kobena Mercer observes that "with various props, accessories and backdrops, the photographer stylizes the pictorial space, and through lighting, depth of field, and framing, the camera work heightens the *mise-en-scène* of the subject, whose poses, gestures and expressions thus reveal a self not as he or she actually is, but 'just a little more than what we really are.'"³⁸ In his description of Sizwe Bansi's fascination with the photographic medium, Olu Oguibe notes that "the photographer's studio was the chamber of dreams, the laboratory for ritual alchemy, where reinventions and transfigurations were accomplished."³⁹ These comments by Mercer and Oguibe recognize the fact that the pictorial space is located in the real studio of the photographer, where real clothes and backgrounds and props are used to reveal a self that is not very real. In the context of my discussion regarding Kingsley Chuks and his *aso ebi* photographs, the pictorial space is most often located in the digital studio of the computer, which allows him room to perform all the decorative activities on the surface of the photograph. In the process, the pictorial surface becomes more surreal than real. The surface is shifted from the factual, concrete exploitation of the physical body and space in the studio of the photographer to the manipulation of the nonphysical body and spaces of the computer. There is a sense here in which the image figures as a finished product, thus denying viewers access into its interiority. If the wedding arena provides a transparent and translucent avenue into the cultural and social circumstances of the image, Chuks's background creates an opacity of the image. It masks multiple, mysterious processes and systems. In other words, by delinking the physical sites of wedding ceremonies, Chuks's photographs emphasize a new kind of geography, privileging immobility and stasis over what Stephen Groening calls "place-loyalty."⁴⁰

Thus, Chuks has shown that the nature of digital photography is not presence and history but translation and modification. Separated from the presupposition of truth, his digital image is no longer bound by the conventions of truth. It is free to be as expressive as a painting. The photos live up to what Pinney describes as the "refusal of the realist chronotopes,"⁴¹ by stripping away all the "organizing principles of Cartesian perspectivalism or the surface arts of describing,"⁴² as seen in Figures 9.3, 9.6, and 9.8. I suggest that Chuks's deliberate obliteration of the Cartesian perspectivalism amounts to what Deborah Poole describes as "hiding what lays hidden underneath the untidy surface details."⁴³ It could also mean excluding from

view what Elizabeth Edwards calls a “visual excess” of context and the “off frame.”⁴⁴ If we think through Edwards’s phrase here, it further suggests that this visual excess begets the surface details that threaten to undermine the very subjects Chuks aims to enunciate. This creative subversion functions as an erasive medium and closely reflects what historical oil paintings did with the pictorial surface of the image. Norman Bryson has argued that historical oil paintings first erase the surface of the picture plane: “Visibility of the surface would threaten the coherence of the fundamental technique through which Western representational image classically works the trace, of ground-figure-relations.”⁴⁵ Chuks, by placing figures against a monochrome, bright gray background (Figure 9.4), literally pulls the ground from the representation, highlighting the organizing structure and the erasive illusion of Photoshop editing.

In Figures 9.5 and 9.7, Chuks’s employment of such a textilelike background extends into a broader engagement with the history of post-colonial photography, which foregrounds the historical relation between photography and textile commodities in the African context. An interesting metaphor to tinker around with, especially in the visual loudness of textiles in West Africa, is what Krista Thompson calls “the visual scream of the commodity,”⁴⁶ in which the fascination with the visual appeal of textiles resonates across both fashion and photography. The attraction that textiles possess as a form of personal adornment and visual representation may be seen as a means of articulating visual subjectivity in Africa outside of Western economies of vision: it is no longer an antifashion to appear in public photographs dressed in “traditional” textile materials.

In keeping with the revelatory potential of surfacist aesthetics, textiles, as used by Chuks and some recent African photographers, mark the invention of a new aesthetic vocabulary that borders on the architecture of flatness and depthlessness. This reconfigures the social relationship in a much broader context that suggests “shine” and “surface form” in, for example, Yoruba body politics.⁴⁷ Indeed, shine is associated with the surface aesthetics in certain African body politics because cloth and the body are seen as surfaces upon which beauty is inscribed, and both are at the center of human relationships.⁴⁸ As Will Rea argues, “Through the surfaces, bodies present themselves to be seen, whether these are actual human bodies or spirit bodies or indeed sculptures, but they are not necessarily seen by themselves.”⁴⁹

Considering the nature and stylistics of Chuks's surfaces (often through textiles), one may need to invoke George Lau's argument that the role of surfaces extends to "covers for the human body and forms that are likened to the human body, personal ornaments, attires and their essential role for personal and collective identity."⁵⁰ From this, one can identify a striking homology in Chuks's attempt to (re)construct the surface of the photographic "spaces" using textiles, through which he fashions both personal and collective visual identities, and the fact that the same textiles are employed to fashion aso ebi bodies in the figures. For Lau, there are parallels that suggest cognate expressions of a cross-media style based on enriching surfaces—by perceiving and rendering design through background space. The background space constitutes the arena where time and space experience a dramatic reconfiguration. And for this reason, there is a need to reflect on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope in relation to time and space.

Bakhtin describes the chronotope as a site within a narrative where time and space "thicken" and merge, each assuming the qualities of the other.⁵¹ He goes to great lengths to categorize the various chronotopes, such as "the chronotope of the road," "the chronotope of the drawing room or salon," and "the chronotope of the idyll." To this list, I would add the "chronotope of the photograph" as the surface where the magical emanation of the image comes into confluence with the surreal pictorial space. With digital technology, this surface becomes the site in which time and space are made to undergo achronotopic transformation so that the image and its referent are on equal terms.

With the increasing proliferation of images in our everyday lives, time is no longer perceived as the passing of a continuous action, confronted with the logic of the analogical pointers of a watch or the time-space fixer of the analogue camera; rather, the notion of time is now digital and of discontinuous and ubiquitous character (omnipresent). The notion of displacement and of intervals (as it was) is gone, and time acquires a different dimension that is arbitrary, intensive, and diverted from traditional parameters. The spatial-temporal changes introduced by Chuks are in line with Lev Manovich's observation that "the digital object presents a new functioning of space and time, info-subjectivity, new dynamics of cultural production and consumption."⁵² In this regard, time in Chuks's photos never exists in the pictures. The spatial-temporal relations in the image have

been frozen into a digital reconstruction that is only possible on the surface of the photos. Chuks reminds us that through Photoshop editing, we live within a logic of an indefinitely present time that constantly subverts our relation with the past and the future and with memory and forgetfulness. In this sense, new circumstances of temporal apprehension are established through a digitality that stretches and subverts the logic of realist times.

Surfaces have been theorized as extensions of the body and mind, intended to be layered and networked.⁵³ A logical argument here is that in Chuks's digital system, the viewer can no longer be immersed in the photograph; neither can viewers pierce their ways through any wedding context. In Figures 9.3, 9.4, and 9.6, the discarding of formal photographic structures of linear perspective and decisive moments during the events photographed—as seen in Figures 9.2, 9.5, and 9.7—foregrounds a tendency to dislodge the spatial-temporal flow in favor of a creative enterprise in the Photoshop medium.

My further inquiries about the people Chuks photographed and the circumstances surrounding the digital photographs yielded some interesting results. The women in Figure 9.3, according to Chuks, are members of the Egbeda Social Club who asked him to remove them from the occasion.⁵⁴ So the assumption here is that there is a quest for detachment or, put differently, a desire to be removed from an occasion by the clients. It is something of a discovery to realize that most people photographed by Chuks do not care whether their space is invaded by intruders during the actual process of photographing. He told me that some *asọ ebì* groups he photographed did not ask intruders to stay away from the photo shooting, knowing full well that these individuals would eventually go away during editing. He said that some of his clients demanded that those who did not appear in *asọ ebì* be Photoshopped out of the group. Elsewhere, I have addressed the issue of exclusion in *asọ ebì* at certain wedding parties, where those who did not appear in *asọ ebì* uniform were denied food and certain other wedding gifts.⁵⁵ Now, a similar exclusion is being imported into photography. According to Chuks,

Those who did not dress in *asọ ebì* sometimes did not fit into the group photograph. For example, during the photo session in some weddings, when a call is made for a group photograph of friends of the bride, everybody comes out dressed in *asọ*

ebi. You would notice that the group would not be happy to allow anyone not dressed in similar *aso ebi* as them to join the photograph because the person, according to them, will spoil the photo.⁵⁶

Clearly, the art of surfacism achieved through Photoshop editing achieves a number of effects. First, it lives up to the aesthetic expectations of clients. Second, it excludes undesirable elements. Third, it seems to (re)invent a virtual studio space inside the computer screen. And again, it could be argued that in some instances, it is marked by a sense of exclusivity: a need to ward off invaders.



In this chapter, I have suggested that *aso ebi* may have informed the revolution seen in digital Photoshop editing among Lagos photographers. The urge to appear in fashionable *aso ebi* dress has influenced the surface reconstruction of most wedding photographs. I have shown that the proliferation of photographers at social events in Nigeria is a trend that came with the new technological capital of digital cameras and the digital photo lab. Photographing now offers a creative platform to alter surface qualities of many photos taken at weddings and other social occasions, thus removing them from the time and space of such events to an invented time and space. In this chapter, it is assumed that what obtains in recent times in Lagos popular photography—and in certain postcolonial photographic practices—is a mobile studio where the props and studio spaces have been replaced by the digital technology of Photoshop studio spaces. And as a result, the Photoshop software has helped certain *aso ebi* groups possess their own spaces and exclude those who do not abide by the same codes of uniformity.

NOTES

1. In providing a vivid explanation of these surface effects within the context of postcolonial photography, Christopher Pinney makes a comparison with Baroque and suggests that it contains similar elements, such as the “refusal of narrative, perspective, and detachment.” In Pinney’s extrapolation, whereas early Euro-American modernist paintings may take the viewer through carefully constructed distance

and space, a local Indian painting reverses this linear visual trope into a flat, systematic representation. See Pinney, "Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism, and Vernacular Modernism," in *Photography's Other Histories*, ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Peterson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 210; Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004).

2. Krista Thompson, "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," *Art Bulletin* 91, no. 4 (2009): 485. Surface has been theorized in many instances in art history. For example, Siegfried Kracauer notes that surface, with its emphasis on "materiality, shallowness, and proximity, rings of capitalistic commodification and the newly industrialized modern world." Similarly, Walter Benjamin links the withering of the aura to technological reproducibility, and indeed, in a more elaborate manner, Vilém Flusser has suggested that "the specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time is what is known as 'imagination,'" a practice he connects to what he calls "historical consciousness and history." Thus, one can argue, following Flusser, that through imagination, the photograph demonstrates the defeat of the material thing and of the concept of ownership. For more on the history and theory of surface, see Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 17; Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography", in Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 47–64. Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography" in Benjamin, *One-Way Street* (1979; repr., London: Verso, 1997), 240–57; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) 4–11, 42; Stephen Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves," in Pinney and Peterson, *Photography's Other Histories*, 257.

3. Thompson, "Sound of Light."

4. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 84.

5. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 82.

6. Berger, 88.

7. Berger, 88.

8. Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

9. Buci-Glucksmann cited in Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1988), 17.

10. Buci-Glucksmann in Jay, "Scopic Regimes," 17.

11. George F. Lau, "The Work of Surfaces: Object Worlds and Techniques of Enhancement in the Ancient Andes," *Journal of Material Culture* 15, no. 3 (September 2010): 259–86.

12. Lau, "Work of Surfaces," 264.

13. Lau, 264.

14. Mary W. Helms, *Craft and the Kingly Ideal* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993); Christopher L. Miller and George R. Hamell, "A New Perspective on Indian-White Contact: Cultural Symbols and Colonial Trade," *Journal of American History* 73 (1986): 311–28; Nicholas J. Saunders, "Biographies of Brilliance: Pearls, Transformations of Matter and Being, c. AD 1492," *World Archaeology* 31 (1999): 243–57; Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

15. Pinney, "Notes from the Surface."

16. Pinney explains narrativized indexical depth as the discourse of photography that borders on early European travel. He posits this as a photographic system that mapped the world as a picture. Using Samuel Bourne's 1866 "Narrative of a Photographic Trip to Kashmir," Pinney unveils this "paradigmatic text of the normative practice" whereby photography was understood as a view of the world in spatial-temporal certainty. This view of the world also involves forays in which lives became measured in terms of their "exploits" and the exploitation of the world as perspectivalized picturesque entity. According to Pinney, this system negates contemporary African and Indian postcolonial photography, which is concerned with a realm of the denarrativized, deperspectivalized surface effects that operate in a zone of tactility quite different from the detached viewpoints advocated by early European practitioners such as Bourne. See Pinney, "Notes from the Surface," 207–8.

17. Pinney, "Notes from the Surface," 203. On how colonial backdrops act "as sites for the production of various cultural imaginaries," see also Arjun Appadurai, "The Colonial Backdrop," *Afterimage* 24, no. 5 (1997): 4–7.

18. Adekoya Shegun, interview with author, 12 April 2009, Lagos, Nigeria.

19. Shegun, interview.

20. Run Bunnet, *How Images Think* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2004), 28.

21. Seydou Keita lived in Bamako, Mali, from 1921 to 2001. He was a self-taught portrait photographer. His portraits gained international acclaim through the studio he opened in Bamako in 1948. Malick Sidibé (1935 to 2016) gained a reputation for his black-and-white photographs of ordinary Malians in the 1960s. Sidibé and Keita were considered Mali's most important photographers of the mid- and late twentieth century. Sidibé's portraits exemplify the dynamism and vigor of urban life in Bamako as African cities slowly emerged from the grip of colonial rule. The photographs reveal a deep search for urban fashionability and subjectivity amid the desperate pursuit of power and a political future for postindependent African nations. Their style involved the use of brightly colored textile backdrops that often created a formal conflict with the striped textile dress of the subjects. Aihumeke-okhai Ojeikere (J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere [1930–2014]) was a Nigerian photographer who had his studio in Ketu, Lagos. Ojeikere's passion for photography became manifest in the 1950s when he purchased a modest Brownie D camera without

flash and had a friend teach him the fundamentals of photography. His initial career was as a darkroom assistant in 1954 at the Ministry of Information in Ibadan. His interest in African women's fashion style could be seen from the depiction of African hairstyles as a deft architecture of beauty and an apt display of Nigerians' decorative art of the body. See J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere and André Magnin, *J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere: Photographs* (Zurich: Scalo, 2000); Harry J. Elam, Jr., and Kennell Jackson, Jr., eds., *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Michelle Lamuniere, ed., *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait—Photographs of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

22. C. Didier Gondola, "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth," *African Studies Review* 42, no. 1 (1999): 31.

23. Gondola, "Dream and Drama," 31.

24. Mbadimma Chinemelum, interview with author, 20 August 2013, Lagos, Nigeria.

25. I have argued elsewhere that the economic crisis engendered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Structural Adjustment Programme in Nigeria in 1986 impoverished the poor and demobilized the middle class and the rich. This occasioned the struggle for economic and class reinvention by the distraught middle class, which found justification in public visibility. I also noted that the profligate corruption engendered by the Nigerian military in the 1980s, which cast an ambiguous veil around the image of those connected with the ruling cabal, resulted in the inevitability of positive image laundering through the print media. That is of particular concern to this study because the arrival of digital media has replaced the print media and comes in tandem with the fulfillment and realization of the dreams in the ever more distraught socialscape of the middle class and the poor. However, if, for example, "the 1980s politicians, the wealthy, the celebrities, traditional rulers, high government officials, policy makers, generals, and influential leaders in every field sought public acceptance of their already questionable image (especially their questionable connection with the military cabal) through the print media," the middle class and perhaps the poor in present-day Nigeria may have emerged as the iconic champions of the vibrant popular culture of digital media under the current economic meltdown. The question is, in a country such as Nigeria, where the concept of "bigmanism" has an arrogant connotation and overbearing influence on the rest of the population, how can the big men constantly compete with and even challenge these unparalleled and ubiquitous digital tendencies invented by the middle class in order to assert their influence as big men themselves in all their ramifications? See Okechukwu Nwafor, "Photography and the Spectacle of Aso Ebi in Lagos, 1960–2010" (PhD diss., University of the Western Cape, 2012), 252.

26. This type of photographic business is sometimes referred to as *kpa* *kpa* *kpa* in Nigeria. It involves street photographers who crash public events and take

photos randomly and then make the printed copies available for the guests before the end of these events. Sometimes, skirmishes have erupted among the photographers in a bid to win prospective clients, and thus, the first photographer to print the photos and rush back to the scene makes more money and gets paid by the clients, to the detriment of the rest.

27. Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, "A Life More Photographic: Mapping the Networked Image," *Photographies* 1, no.1 (March 2009): 13.
28. Pinney, "Notes from the Surface," 208.
29. Rubinstein and Sluis, "Life More Photographic," 11.
30. Rubinstein and Sluis, 11.
31. Rubinstein and Sluis, 11.
32. Kimio Tatsuno, "Current Trends in Digital Cameras and Camera-Phones," *Science and Technology Trends* 18 (2006): 36-44.
33. Rubinstein and Sluis, "Life More Photographic," 12.
34. Joseph G. Kickasola, "Cinemediacy: Theorizing an Aesthetic Phenomenon," accessed 28 July 2010 at <http://www.avila.edu/journal/kick.pdf>, visited 28 July 2010.
35. Geoffrey Batchen, "Snapshots, Art History and the Ethnographic Turn," *Photographies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 133.
36. Pa J. D. Ojeikere, interview with author, 15 March 2010, Ketu, Lagos.
37. Batchen, "Snapshots."
38. Kobena Mercer, "Home from Home: Portraits from Places In Between," in *Self Evident* (Birmingham, UK: Ikon Gallery, 1995), cited in Pinney and Peterson, *Photography's Other Histories*, 78.
39. Olu Oguibe, "The Photographic Experience: Toward an Understanding of Photography in Africa," in *Flash Afrique!: Photography from West Africa*, ed. Thomas Miessgang, Gerlad Matt, and Barbara Schröder (Göttingen: Steidl, 2002), 15.
40. "Place-loyalty" is Groening's term for the new spatial categories promised by travel, which connects one to the physical spaces of one's own surroundings as one moves via modes such as the bus. According to Groening, this is destabilized by air travel, for example. I use Groening's word in this context to mean the physical spaces connecting one to one's memories. Stephen Francis Groening, "Connected Isolation: Screens, Mobility, and Globalized Media Culture" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2008), 24.
41. Pinney, "Notes from the Surface," 208.
42. Thompson, "Sound of Light," 498.
43. Deborah Poole, "An Excess of Description: Ethnography, Race, and Visual Technologies," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005): 164.
44. Elizabeth Edwards, "Beyond the Boundary: A Consideration of the Expressive in Photography and Anthropology," in *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, ed. Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 53-80.

45. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 111–17.
46. Thompson, “Sound of Light,” 498.
47. Will Rea, “Finding Your Contemporaries: The Modernities of African Art,” in *Identity Theft: The Cultural Colonization of Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 152.
48. Okechukwu Nwafor, “Of Mutuality and Copying: Fashioning Aso Ebi through Fashion Magazines in Lagos,” *Fashion Theory* 16, no. 4 (2012): 493–520; Okechukwu Nwafor, “The Fabric of Friendship: Aso Ebi and the Moral Economy of Amity in Nigeria,” *African Studies* 72, no. 1 (2013): 1–18.
49. Rea, “Finding Your Contemporaries,” 152.
50. Lau, “Work of Surfaces,” 263.
51. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and the Chronotope of the Novel,” in Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 202.
52. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 45–48.
53. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Carl Knappett, “Beyond Skin: Layering and Networking in Art and Archaeology,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 16 (2006): 239–51.
54. Kingsley Chuks, email conversation with author, 19 October 2010.
55. Nwafor, “Fabric of Friendship.”
56. Chuks, email conversation.



'Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History [...] is an edited volume whose contributors inhabit that space of ambivalence through their long-standing engagements with visual material, particularly photographs, but extend these conversations to other historical material that pertain to visibility, on the continent.' – Phindi Mnyaka, senior lecturer in history at UWC.

'Ambivalent develops a powerful and coherent set of arguments about the inherent ambiguities of photographs and photographic interpretations, in both colonial and post-colonial settings.' – Richard Vokes, University of Western Australia

Ambivalent gathers a new generation of scholars based on the continent to offer an expansive frame for thinking about questions of photography and visibility in Africa. The volume presents African relationships with photography – and with visibility more generally – in ways that engage and disrupt the easy categories and genres that have characterised the field to date. Contributors pose new questions concerning the instability of the identity photograph in South Africa; ethnographic photographs as potential history; humanitarian discourse from the perspective of photographic survivors of atrocity photojournalism; the nuanced passage from studio to screen in postcolonial digital portraiture; and the burgeoning visual activism in West Africa.

As the contributors show, photography is itself a historical subject: it involves arrangement, financing, posture, positioning and other kinds of work that are otherwise invisible. By moving us outside the frame of the photograph itself, by refusing to accept the photograph as the last word, this book makes photography an engaging and important subject of historical investigation. *Ambivalent's* contributors bring photography into conversation with orality, travel writing, ritual, psychoanalysis and politics, with new approaches to questions of race, time, and postcolonial and decolonial histories.

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