

**ASO EBI: FASHIONING SELF THROUGH  
PHOTOGRAPHY AND 'FASHION'  
MAGAZINES IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

In Nigeria, fashion and photography have become powerful forces in the construction of self. In this essay, I see photographers as central players in this development, and I examine the intersections of aso ebi, photography and popular media consumption - in the form of popular magazines - in Lagos. The essay argues that photography and fashion are mutually interdependent in the Lagos social circle. It argues that aso ebi dressing, and fashion as such, are taken more seriously in Lagos parties due mainly to the activities of a group of photographers especially connected to what is known as 'fashion' magazines in Nigeria. The essay discusses how photographers and 'fashion' magazines frame visual experiences and encounters through the styling and dissemination of images of people in aso ebi and various forms of 'traditional dresses'.

**Introduction**

In Nigeria it could be said that photography is inextricably linked to the development of certain kinds of visual culture and sartorial practice. As the textile markets opened up and dress styles became more ubiquitous in the later period of the twentieth century, these developments have been met with an expansion in the photography industry. The number of photographers has

grown every year since the first photography studios opened in Lagos in the 1880s. Visual cultural practices were heightened by the emergence of the Nigerian movie industry otherwise known as Nollywood and the emergence of what is today commonly known as 'fashion,' 'style' and 'event' magazines. This was around the 1990s and the role of photography, in these developments, is no doubt significant. The glamorous images found in these magazines exemplify the commodification of realms of contemporary life and dress style.

In Nigeria, fashion magazine is a common term used to refer to some home spun, soft sell publications that are produced by individuals who mask as publishers. There are two categories of these magazines. The first category can be slotted into the narrow space of 'glossy magazine,' in that sense, because of some mild touch of professionalism, their use of high resolution photographs, and the manner in which they feature 'events' of the high society and royalties. The second category, which are also called 'style' or 'event' magazines, operate on the banal level with some poor quality photographs, occasional grammatical errors in the captions and in-texts; they also defy most ethical practices and are composed of photos of people (especially women) dressed in mainly 'traditional' dresses. Most often the first category shows events such as weddings, birthdays, burials among others while the second show mainly only people (especially women) dressed in various forms of 'traditional' dresses. Most of the publishers of the second category are barely educated people that care less about the quality than the financial benefits of the publications. In Lagos alone there are more than 70 types of these magazines of which any detailed stocktaking of their names might seem futile. In this essay, I have used few of the magazines which typify the general convention to

investigate the nature of *aso ebi*, popular photography and dressing.

### **Photography As Cultural Intermediary**

While it could be said that photographers and these magazines provide a cue for the construction of modernity in the lives of certain Nigerians, it is also possible to borrow Pierre Bourdieu's idea of 'cultural intermediary' to think about the role of photographers and these magazines in the dissemination of dress style in Lagos. Bourdieu initially used this term in *Distinction* (1984) as part of a more general discussion of the supposed expansion of the *petit bourgeoisie*, to include such occupation as journalist-writer, and writer-journalists and the 'producers of cultural programmes on television and radio'. In his later works in the fields of cultural production, he extended this term to discuss a range of professions involved in the symbolic production of meaning around such areas as art and popular culture. These occupations are involved in taste-making or delineating and shaping of the ways in which we encounter and make sense of cultural artifacts. According to Bourdieu, understanding the production of the things we consume as 'culture' requires understanding the production of symbolic meanings around goods: these goods are shaped and styled for our consumption by a host of occupations, some of which Bourdieu himself mentions as photographers, fashion journalists, art and literary agents. These agents are responsible for translating goods into commodities, moving between two realms of 'production' and 'consumption' and therefore are responsible for framing or promoting culture within the capitalist marketplace.

Indeed it may be appropriate to describe photographers as

cultural mediators especially given their position as authors of symbolic meanings - transforming visual experience into consumable articles. In Lagos, there are few ways in which one can see photographers performing some of the works of mediation. Bourdieu's later use of the term is suitable to enable their inclusion. Here I refer to itinerant photographers in Lagos taking photos in weddings, parties and other events and ensuring that the photographs are consumed through their publication in the 'fashion,' 'event' and 'style' magazines. The publisher's intentions are always to market their photographic business and their magazines through photos of people in current 'traditional' dress styles. In this process the photographs enter into the wider discursive framework of consumption, mediation, and public appropriation (whereby the tailors steal from the designs). In other words, the photographers engage in a systematic control of the visual culture of magazine viewership.

Images are not only produced and consumed; they also circulate within societies and across social and cultural boundaries. It is necessary, at this point, to understand how these images move from "the world of the photographer and the photographed" into the realm of the very public image world of the city and what happens in the process. This practice could be historically traced to the earliest form of printing technology in Nigeria. Christaud Geary traced the earliest form of printing technology, in West Africa, involving transfer of photographs into magazines and post cards, to established photographers such as the Lisk-Carew brothers in Sierra Leone and Holms in Ghana and Nigeria. These photographers sent their images to Europe, through postcard runners (men employed by publishers to drum up business) where they are printed in different forms. In the case of magazines, there

were direct and indirect ways for publishers to acquire images by African photographers. Well-known professionals like Shanu had the necessary connections. His pictures illustrated *Le Congo Illustre* although a good number of the published ones were those abandoned by the owners who could not pay for them. Geary remarks that as these images journeyed from the private sphere into the public realm, they transformed from individual statements of the sitters and meanings delimited by personal experience and knowledge of place and time, into consumable goods removed from their origins.

In Nigeria, the emergence of new forms of subjectivities in the twentieth and twenty first centuries allowed photography to be integrated into the lives of people through the magazines. Photographs of people dressed in different styles of similar patterned cloths (aso ebi) taken in weddings and other occasions are removed from their original meanings and launched into consumable images of fashion and design styles for the general public. This attitude reflects the modern age especially in terms of what Elisabeth Edwards describes as the "rapid industrialization of image production that transformed the entire visual economy into 'new and homogeneous theatre of consumption and circulation.'" The emergence of the so called 'fashion magazines' answers the question of the radical tempo of modernity moving to inflict the world with the craze of print capitalism that equally created space for the type of photographs discussed here. As will be shown in subsequent discussions these types of photographs elicited different responses and conveyed multiple meanings.

### **Lagos 'Fashion' Magazines As A New Departure In The Discourse Of Postcolonial Subjectivities**

The discourse of postcolonial subjectivities has often provided a comfortable platform for authors to interrogate the emerging and changing circumstances that attended - and are still attending - Africa before and after colonialism. It is not my aim, in this paper, to accommodate the intimidating literature of such discourses rather I want to think of how an understanding of the emergence of 'fashion' magazines in Lagos could serve as suitable index to chart a new intellectual course. In this respect I tend to view Lagos fashion magazines as a sort of vista to a new epistemological framework and a counter to the discursive paradigm of postcolonial subjectivity that has not completely answered Richard Webner's question of how "the subject's subjectivity is subjected to the subjunctive." Susan Reynolds describes the 'subjunctive' as an indeterminate space in which social relations are continuously entangled, in which irrational emotions are expressed." This description suggests that no matter how the subject's autonomy is constrained, the subject still finds a space to express his/her subjectivity. In this respect I view the emergence of the Lagos fashion magazines as a response to the "proliferation of mimetic technologies" which has made cultural production an increasingly important cultural resource. If one considers the predominance of the Western magazines and 'Hollywood' movies in the Nigerian popular space in the early periods of independence and their displacement and replacement with a home spun cultural economy, starting in the early 1990s, then the reality of an urgent discursive shift becomes clearer. Contrary to the symbolic inversion discussed by Heike Behrend in her piece on Kenya photography, which falls into the trap of what Roland Barthes describes as the

forces of the social world which constrain writing, my understanding of postcolonial subjectivity reflects not in the mimetic activities of the subject but in the continuous strive by the subject to gain full autonomy. While other writers such as de Boeck believe that the postcolonial subject of the Congolese youth living along the geographic, ethnic and cultural borderlines adopt powerful and forceful filmic images (cowboys, gangsters, ninjas) to make sense of the indeterminate powerless spaces in which they live, the postcolonial subject of Nigerian women in the twenty first century adopt 'forceful' images of 'traditional' dress styles in the local 'fashion' magazines to create an independent cosmopolitanism that to them is quintessentially 'Nigerian'. They make attempt to copy reality not from a western prescription as advocated by Behrend and de Boeck but from a culture which one must adopt an epistemological flexibility to define and understand. In comparison, the Nigerian women's style of dressing is different from the Congoloses youth: while the Nigerian women look inwards, the Congolese youth look outwards such that in both one finds a kind of inversion that answers to different conceptual paradigms. I believe this paper might have attempted such paradigm shift through a recovery of individual voices in the present Lagos social circle.

Nigerians had, as at the 1960s, cultivated the habit of publishing the photographs of their 'events' and ceremonies in the newspapers. By then, although there was virtually no advanced printing technology - and the cameras were still not available as they are today - to engender the kind of radical publications that prevail today in Lagos - one could occasionally spot few photographs in the daily newspapers of people who had celebrated one ceremony or the other. For example, on Tuesday August 10,

1965, the Daily Times of Nigeria reported, beneath a family photograph, "Mr. Godwin Anih of No. 40 Babani Street, Ajegunle, Apapa Lagos and his wife celebrated the naming ceremony of their newly born baby. Their child received the name Juliana Nwakaego Anih. Picture shows Mr. and Mrs Godwin Anih and little Juliana Anih on her mum's arms." Similar reports, in fact followed a weekly routine in the Daily Times and certain individuals looked forward to it. This was probably the only way most photographs of private 'celebrations' got to the public view and it was remarkably a significant achievement for those whose photos were published. The reason for this being that since newspaper viewership was one of the indications of a bourgeoisie pastime, during the early nationalist period, for one's photograph to appear in the few newspapers then was regarded as a remarkable feat and a sign of modernity.

### **Aso Ebi And Fashion Magazines**

In recent times as technology radicalizes all aspects of modern life, thus ensuring a most effective and dynamic publication process, the fashion magazines in Lagos become ubiquitous. The magazines rely on the images of what is known as aso ebi in Nigeria. I discuss aso ebi because it could be said to have occasioned the emergence of the 'fashion' magazines and it has, in fact, become a major dress habit in social ceremonies in Nigeria and the West African sub region. In Yoruba, aso means cloth while ebi means family. So literally, aso ebi means family cloth. Aso ebi however refers to identical uniformed dressing worn by members of a particular family or groups of friends and well wishers during important events such as weddings, parties, and birthdays among others. The origin of this practice is not known but some historical

documents and oral history suggest that it must have been made popular by the Yoruba age grade system with major flowering with the coming of capitalism.

Aso ebi has generated a significant amount of controversy and discourse in the domain of everyday conversation among Nigerians at home and in the diaspora such that the use of such terms as "aso ebi is our culture" and "aso ebi is a Nigerian tradition" take on a descriptive connotation that begs deeper inquiry. A controversy nonetheless lies in the ensuing discourse of tradition and modernity: how aso ebi dresses, which incorporate major modern elements, have become naturalized as "traditional." Leslie Rabine examines how the notions of "traditional" could be likened to a cultural myth invoked by the Senegalese to describe "the flowing garments as well as hand-dyed, hand-woven and colourful print fabrics." This type of flowing garment is often called boubou which according to Hudita Nura Mustafa is an African style which goes beyond "nationalism and a revival of tradition" but instead is an "African modernity developed through cosmopolitanism and crisis."

It is noteworthy that the Yoruba hold dress and fashion in high esteem. Being well dressed played a significant role in the Yoruba class system with much importance being attached to the size, colour, quality and quantity of fabric. The Baptist missionary, W.H. Clarke, during his sojourn in Yorubaland between 1854 and 1858 observed that the Yorubas attached much importance to dressing and that their love for fine clothes was unparalleled. Clarke, however, recognized the ubiquity of a variety of dresses with stylish and colourful collections, in Yorubaland, that one could find in any part of the civilized society.

Uniformed dressing or aso ebi was well rooted among age

grades in Yorubaland where fraternal bond is achieved using dress. William Bescom traced the origins of certain types of dress materials to Yoruba age grade which used the fabric as aso ebi. He observed that "a Yoruba gentleman dresses well and keeps good company, and men and women's clubs have their own distinctive clothing by which members can be recognized. Titilola Euba remarks that the wearing of aso ebi by age grades signifies the solidarity and sense of purpose of those age grades who forge a common front in the service of their community and for individual progress. The Drewals also attributed uniformed dressing to the virtue of comradeship which has its origin in the pairing of Yoruba Gelede masquerades. They write: when two partners make a pact and adopt a common secret name, they often choose to dress alike and may be mistaken for twins." It should be noted that in Yorubaland brotherly love describes a twin-like intimacy between two individuals as if they were born to the same mother.

Anna Okon in Sunday Punch newspaper of March 28, 2010 reports that "traditional ceremonies present avenues for the display of a style blend involving the uniform popularly called aso ebi." She went further to state that the "colours of aso ebi uniform lend an overall peacock or rainbow hue to the atmosphere, while the styles themselves become items for fashion magazines." Okon's observation may well be common knowledge for a typical Lagos socialite but it does not intend to detail the processes needed to bring the aso ebi styles into the fashion magazines she mentioned. The first stage in this process involves the clicking of a camera by any photographer; a practice much echoed by Elizabeth Wilson's observation that "it was the camera that created a new way of seeing and a new style of beauty for women in the twentieth

century." In Lagos, photographers travel from one 'ceremony' to another searching for people dressed in unique aso ebi dresses to photograph. For example, the photographer, Shedrack, whom I met at a wedding ceremony in Lekki Peninsula of Lagos, showed me his photos that were published in Treasure Life Magazine (figure a) and confirmed that many of the dress styles were taken in a wedding and that most of them are aso ebi dresses. According to Shedrack, "I like the aso ebi thing because it has allowed me to still remain a contractor to some of these fashion magazines such as Treasure Life Magazine ." The manner in which Shedrack goes about his business of getting photos for the fashion magazine is clearly evident here. As I watched Shedrack, he approached one of the aso ebi ladies and explained himself as a photographer of Treasure Life magazine (figure b). Not caring for a detailed explanation from Shedrack the young girl posed for the camera (figure c).



**Figure a. Shedrack of Treasure Life fashion magazine**  
**Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.**



**Figure b**  
**Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.**



**Figure c**  
**Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.**

My interrogation showed that there is virtually a non existence of an ethical dialogue between the photographer and the photographed. Both have silently conceded into a mutual understanding which Shedrack elucidated further: "We don't charge them any money but they appear on the fashion magazines" and when I questioned what the photographed stand to gain, Shedrack said, "they are happy to be seen in the magazines."

The effect of Shedrack's job and then the publisher is seen among the magazine vendors and people who buy the magazines. For example, Johnson Uzoche, (fig. d) a vendor along Tejuosho Road in Yaba, Lagos told me that a lot of women come to buy the fashion magazines from him; some buy it because their aso ebi photos appeared on them while others intend to use them as fashion catalogue to copy unique designs for their 'traditional' dresses. He confirmed that his greatest sales as a vendor come from the so called fashion magazines. Chiagozie Maduka remarked that a copy of the fashion magazine allows her to flip through the pages and get the best designs for her tailor and that gives her an opportunity to be voguish. Chiagozie was flipping through a copy of ThisDay Style magazine and she showed me a page which reads, "Aso Ebi : Family Pride or Commercial Gimmick?" (fig e). She said her mother who actually owns the magazine refused to lend anyone the magazine because she wanted to copy the design of two women dressed in aso ebi, inserted in the middle of the article (figures e).



**Fig d.**  
**Johnson Uzoche, Tejuosho Road, Yaba, Lagos, March 2010.**  
**Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.**



**Fig e.**  
**Thisday Style Magazine, Vol. 14 No. 5145**  
**May 24 2009. p. 69,**



***Fig e. detail***  
***Thisday Style Magazine, Vol. 14 No. 5145***  
***May 24 2009. p. 69,***

In the transformation from private to public image the aso ebi photographs which get published in these magazines cease to become objects of personal consumption but an article of public appropriation. These appropriations, most often, mirror mainly different elements of fashion narratives and cosmopolitan lifestyle. It is important, therefore, to note that the publishers use photographs to construct their messages "in that photographs always carry with them the connotation of photographic truth yet are also a primary source of fantasy." Elisabeth Wilson remarks that the great promise of photography was that it would tell the 'truth' yet the 'truth' of photography is only a more

convincing illusion, selection and artifice lurking behind the seeming impartiality of the mechanical eye. Photographs derive their power from evoking both evidence of the real and a magical quality that can prompt emotion in the viewer. They are, in Charles Peirce's terms indexical, and thus carry the meaning of offering a trace of the real. It is through complex compositions of photographs, texts, and graphics that these magazines speak to their customers. Through a combination of indexical signs, such as photographs and symbolic signs in the form of texts, these magazines construct selling messages of dress style. As an indexical sign, a photograph carries the cultural weight of depicting the real and relaying a sense of authenticity.

Furthermore, that photography is central to the business concern of the Lagos fashion magazines also reflects in the importance attached to photography. This is evident from the caption on page 30 of Today's Fashion: "want your party photographed? call Femi on 08055273211, Sunday on 08029119773, Shola on 08062336685" (fig f) and on page 18 of Style Royale: "your event needs coverage? Call Udo: 08066738663, Emma, 08028979482" (fig. g). Captions as these serve as useful sources for viewing the marketing tactics of photographers while offering a perspective perhaps more representative of the general Lagos 'fashion magazine' scene. Aimed at those aspiring to hold 'parties' or 'events,' these magazines, at the same time, outline the structure and organization of the dress business of the times: "our simple objective is to mirror what people wear to functions. We intend to be the magazine that all the fashion-conscious men and women would pick up when talking of styles." In this way the viewers are constantly reminded that slogans such as 'what people wear to function' and 'covering one's event or party' are, above all,



a primary concern of the magazines. In other words, the texts accompanying the photographs promote a discourse of dress style and sartorial elegance.



**Fig. f.**  
**Today's fashion Vol. )2, No. 06, page 7.**  
**2009**



**Fig g.**  
**Style Royale, Issue No. 7, page 8.**  
**2009.**

On the other hand, in some magazines, the photographs are inserted into the social discourse of public visibility, prestige and class which assumes that people want to see themselves (and be seen) in public spaces through the magazines. This is observed by Top Style magazine: "Top Style was at the wedding celebration of Oby and Ebere Nnanyelugo; Ifeoma and Dubem Aroh recently. See the full story in pictures. Do you have a special event or celebration coming up this season? Call our team of professional photo journalists on 08036565474 today, and see your event featured in full colour in our next edition" This statement above demonstrates the editor's ultimate ability to come to grips with Nigerians' expressions of modernity. The texts are based on the assumption that Nigerians' penchant for 'events and celebrations' and their demands for the services of the photographer are perhaps expediently linked together. .

In line with the perceptions, of such magazines, that there is an already public acceptance of an overt visual showmanship, against a more covert sartorial glamour and display, the publisher of Trade Fashion and Events magazine, Akin Williams remarked that most people want to see themselves in public places and that this practice has commercialized photography. Many publishers have resorted to this type of publication because they have seen that through pictures in these magazines people have become increasingly interested in being seen in fashionable dresses in society magazines. People call us on phone and ask us to come and cover (photograph) their events and they demand the photographs to be published in even two editions. We sell our magazines and sometimes charge these people for covering their events. From Williams' remarks, it is precisely evident that the photographs largely define the features of the magazines which

are located at the centre of representations of people in various forms of costumes. Through this method, the magazines play a central role in the construction of popular ideas about dressing, lifestyle and glamour. One can say that the photographs invite viewers to imagine themselves within the world of the photographed, a world that works by abstraction, a potential place or state of being situated not in the present but in an imagined future with a promise to the viewer that a certain fashionable dress and lifestyle can be possible. Again that most of these photographs depict mainly women may suggest that, in Nigeria, photographers' understanding of fashion is typically linked to women. However, like fashion itself, women in aso ebi photographs may become emblematic of a certain visual delight which viewers seek when they flip through the pages of these magazines. In reading such photographs one assumes that aso ebi fashion has become a 'feminized' concern which is also inextricably tied to photography. Stuart Ewen argues that "frozen images in style magazines have become a model from which people design...themselves" while Christopher Breward remarked that "it is arguable that in a century defined by an explosion in communications media that the magazine image, rather than first-hand observation of the clothing itself, has dictated both consumer choice and fashion. Again Wilson noted that fashion magazines indulge the desire of the viewer who looks at the pictures and hankers for the perfect being reflected in the pages, while also simultaneously engaging with femininity that is constantly being redefined. In Lagos while one may not rate these magazines in equal terms as the Western models referred to by Ewen, Wilson and Breward, no doubt, they have seen massive expansion and consumption among varying audiences in Nigeria in recent times. While Wilson notes that

"photography paradoxically enhanced both the mystery and the suggestiveness of fashion," photography has also, through the help of advanced printing technology, achieved what Breward described as "democratization of the fashionable image" typified by the type of dresses the magazines portrayed.

Most photographs in the magazines present figures of glamour that viewers envy and wish to emulate; people who are presented as already transformed. John Berger remarks that "the state of being envied is what constitutes glamour." The idea of glamour is, therefore, central to photography in the manner in which consumers of the magazines hanker for the dress styles and lifestyles that are portrayed in the magazines.

Inside most of the magazines, men and women dressed in 'traditional' dresses become the 'speaking' subjects of a symbolic system which inseparably entangles signs of socialization and sartorial performance within the image of a well dressed body. In some sense this attitude has given impetus to newer forms of dress styles in Nigeria towards the end of the twentieth century, as many Nigerians abandoned Western styled dresses in favour of the supposed 'African styles'. Elizabeth Hackspiel noted that "since the 1980s West African fashion has turned away from the readymade clothes in Western style" towards 'African' fabrics. Although Hackspiel's observation was apt, it did not go further to suggest what might have occasioned this tendency. It is therefore a postulation which I put forward that the ubiquitous nature of these magazines in Lagos might have had an overwhelming effect in increasing the image of 'African' fabrics as objects of desire.

The photos in these magazines not only allowed, especially, women to document the emergence of new styles of sewing, but also entreat them to construct 'perfect selves' perhaps in

accordance with Hudita Mustapha's remark that "photos and fashion are bridges for the emergence of other selves." Through a creative combination of textual and photographic information, the publishers offer a luminous framework through which the viewers might negotiate a more complex relationship between clothing, identity, image and desire. In conforming to the photographic convention of the Lagos fashion world, therefore, photographers aim for elaborate 'traditional' costumes and thus invent a metropolitan sartorial vision of what (in their thinking) is quintessentially Nigerian. Viewers are incited by the photographs to seek individuality by conforming to particular standards of beauty, dressing and poses. Photography thus actively speaks to viewers about their desires and aspirations and appears to offer solution to perceived problems of self-representation, self-actualization and self-image.

### **Aso Ebi Photographic Poses**

By pointing out stylistic conventions in aso ebi photographic poses, I try to construct some accounts of the photographic culture of Nigerians towards 'events' and 'celebrations.' The spatial arrangements of aso-ebi photographs are quite interesting. It has already become a convention for photographers to adopt different kinds of arrangement weddings. In most of the weddings I attended in Lagos, there was always a special time for what is known as photography session at which time the 'director of photography' takes charge. In Kemi and Olumide's wedding for example, the director of photography is a young lady who at a point directed the aso ebi ladies to file up in a single line. (figure h).



*Figure h.*  
*Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.*

Every other freelance photographer that attended this wedding must adhere to the director's prescriptions which at this time are considered more important than anybody's views. Normally in most aso ebi photographs it is observed that the normal interaction between people is halted and in its place is an invented formal pose that assumes some playfulness. This is depicted in figure i where the director of photography asked the aso ebi ladies to pair with the groom's men and ordered the groom's men to do anything they liked with their aso ebi ladies. There is a highpoint in the drama as one of the groom's men carried his girl up to the exhilaration of everybody (figure i).



**Figure i.**  
**Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.**

This drama is obviously being enacted for the camera and most of the scenes are captured.

Kingsley Chuks of Photo Kingdom Studios in Surulere Lagos has added a touch to this same dramatic episode in his ten years of photographing weddings and people in aso ebi uniforms. He actually dramatizes a scene and thus, like few other photographers, breaks away from the humdrum stereotype of conventional poses of aso ebi. In figure j, he told me that he intentionally asked the people to perform the act which he directed. What seemed a serious wedding ceremony transforms into a ludicrous theatricality and thus offers a seemingly comic dimension to serious photographic business.

Viewing these photographs prompt us to reflect Halla Beloff's position in the construction of family and social history. There are personal and social rules and etiquettes involved in these constructions. Beloff remarked that in our representation of family

history, we tend to refrain from showing 'work': "We do not show the hurly-burly of argument, boredom, disagreement, preoccupation, sadness - none of these are allowed to exist. They are expunged by two maneuvers - the narrow focus of events snatched, and the commands of 'the pose.'" This statement speaks to the photographs in these magazines. People appear to be engaged in poses that corroborate the selectivity or 'partiality' of the camera lens. The invention of social rules and etiquettes that Beloff mentions does not refer to the camera alone but involves the dresses also. Reaffirming Beloff's claims, Thorstein Veblen appropriately captures this attitude in the dress styles of his Leisure Class studies. In an articulate mixture of wit and candor, Veblen noted that "the woman's high heeled shoes much like the long skirt makes any, even the simplest and most unnecessary, manual work extremely difficult." Much of Veblen's attack on modern society's sartorial style is directed at mainly women, especially the superfluous apparel of the Victorian lady which, as Veblen argues, inhibits labour and thus ensures "the physical infirmity of the wearer." There is however, a striking similitude between the Victorian English lady and the present day Nigerian version of aso ebi wearers both of whom seem to fall within the category of Veblen's "conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption" in their style of costume. They however aptly reflect in Veblen's observation that the wearer of such dresses does not and cannot habitually engage in useful work.

In Lagos, for example, the habitual engagement in useful work falls within the working days of the week while weekends invite the use of such conspicuous apparels as aso ebi dresses which, in Veblen's terms, abhors labour. Veblen's views suggests a commonality that might exist in, terms of, the dos and don'ts of

both the camera and aso ebi dress in social ceremonies. Both force people to adhere to certain behavioural norms. While the camera willy-nilly captures methodical poses in such ceremonies, the aso ebi dresses certainly invents a walking style that might inhibit movement. For in certain circumstances the head scarf (gele) does not approve of certain unusual head movement. And if, as Nnenna Nwike said that, the preferred shoes for aso ebi are high heeled shoes then a strict application of gentility in motion is preferred to an impulsive, swift pace to prevent accidental fall in line with Veblen's witty observation.

Weekends are always colourful periods in Nigeria because it is the period when most weddings and ceremonies take place. For example, people dressed in aso ebi uniforms are common sights on the streets of Lagos on weekends. This attitude, according to Shedrack, has made weekends a productive period for most photographers. The ordinary everyday dresses give way to the colourful, flamboyant, aso ebi 'traditional' dresses which ultimately lure the camera lens into the beautiful spaces of their resplendence.



**Fig. j**  
***Bunmi and Ade's's wedding***  
***Photo: Kingsley Chuks, Lagos, 2000.***

### **On Photographic Self-objectification**

On November 30 2009, I attended a wedding party at the Sonya area of Lagos. The venue of the wedding was a vast expanse of an empty land which approximated the size of a football field located at the Sonya vicinity along Oshodi - Apapa express way in Lagos. The wedding ceremony was between Uju and Tony, Tony being the younger brother of the owner of Capital Oil limited in Lagos who actually owns the space of the wedding ceremony. Part of my reasons for attending this party was to understand the nature of social ceremony in Lagos and the attitudes of Nigerians towards it. I also wished to understand how photographers operate in such social gatherings where dressing usually taken seriously. A total of more than ten photographers were present in this wedding. Some of the photographers wore uniformed black T-shirt with an inscription of 'Crew' on the backs and most of them searched for guests who dressed in unique styles. There were many guests dressed in different forms of aso ebi uniform. Benson Uchendu was determined to take as many as "fifty pictures and deliver them to the owners before the wedding party ends." In the bid to meet this target, Uchendu photographed everyone including those who did not demand for the photos. When I asked Uchendu whether people did not feel embarrassed when he photographed them against their wishes, he confirmed that most times people want to be photographed believing that they will appear in the fashion magazines.

During Uju and Tony's wedding I had approached a certain young man with my camera and explained that I am a researcher interested in photographing aso ebi dressing. Without allowing me to conclude my explanation he summoned his friends and told them that I am a fashion photographer who wants to take

their photos. His friends all came and posed for me. I was summoned by some other guests dressed in aso ebi to 'snap' them. Among the people who requested that I take their photos included Victor Okereke, who asked me to photograph him with his friend, Kingsley, in their aso ebi uniform (See fig. k).



**Fig k.**

**Victor, first from left.**

**Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor, Lagos, November 2009.**

Victor, however still not caring to understand the motives of my mission requested to know the particular magazine the photos will appear in and the possible date of the publication. My explanations could not still convince him that he would not see his image in any of the ubiquitous 'fashion' magazines around Lagos. As soon as I was about to leave, another person, Kene asked me to photograph him. Taking various positions with his friends, Kene asked me after each 'snapping' to show him the photos through the screen of my digital camera. He believes that these photographs are remarkable for various reasons: that the photographs will remind him of the day Uju wedded Tony and that this is also an

occasion for him to take photos since according to him he never visited a photography studio. Every shooting led to another and gradually the whole friends and aso ebi groups in the wedding started converging as I became the potential photographer of this wedding. After apparently getting tired, I declined further requests to photograph on the ground that I was not a 'photographer' but persistent pleas by a certain Osaz Omigie saw me taking the final shot for the night. (see fig. l).



**Figure l.**

**Osaz first from left.**

**Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor, Lagos, November, 2009.**

In Lagos, photographic representations and dress styles are two instances that flow in tandem with the pulsating network of sociality. What really sparked this attitude was the ubiquity of the so called fashion photographers which made people to dress in their best dresses while attending any social function in Lagos. This is in accordance with people's belief that every occasion is a potential opportunity for one to appear in any of the omnipresent fashion magazines in Lagos as seen in Victor's case above.

Therefore one should see these occasions as a space for competitive fashion display. In what Halla Beloff described as "social identity constructing" what manifests between the photographers and the photographed in Lagos social functions remains a negotiation that opens up spaces for the people to appear in photographs in ways that construct their own 'social identity.' Through this process the photographed engaged in what Eve Arnold called "self-consciousness-unconsciousness" by which the photographed, already aware of the photographer's role, always tried to "pose for snapshot." Nkem Mgbemena asked me to photograph her as she consciously put a phone in her ear pretending to answer calls from someone (see fig. m).



***Fig m, Nkem Mgbemena***  
***Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor, Lagos, November, 2009.***

Nkem's attitude however, confirms Beloff's "rules of poses" which "must allow us to show ourselves in some socially correct manner." Hudita Mustapha remarks that "posing, whether in

the mirror, during a ceremony, or for a portrait involves a positioning, both material and representational." Roland Bathes however, substantiates this notion: "I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing." Similarly John Ryan has established a parallel between a pose and rhetoric. While debunking pose as rhetoric Ryan maintains that a pose is an act and that "every pose even the pose of authenticity ...poses something." In line with Ryan it seems that what Mgbemena is posing is her act of phoning or answering the call. Her pose is thus contrived and lends itself to the magical presence of the camera. I have therefore, in this wedding, transformed the pose of Nkem Mgbemena into a portrait genre which Max Kozloff described as "the theatrics of conscious self-proposal." In other words Mgbemena has proven that the camera alters attitudes towards the body and self-presentation. Beloff initially noted that, wedding photographs can be seen as an index of fashion, personal preference and photographic development of both pictures and the professionals who take them.



***Fig m, (Detail), Nkem Mgbemena***  
***Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor, Lagos, November, 2009.***

The posing convention developed by Mgbemena is the type that obviates the real and institutes a world built on methodical performances and automatism. That Mgbemena did not achieve her pose by accident appears to confirm Pierre Bourdieu's notion that "popular photography eliminates accidents or any appearance that dissolves the real by temporalizing it." By always capturing moments which have been disengaged from the temporal flow, popular photography loses its clout of indispensable movement by escaping the balance or elegance of a motion as eternal as the social meaning it embodies; it locates itself outside of time and imposes a solemn poise upon the sitter.

### **Decline Of Studio Photography In Lagos**

However despite being a threat to the studio photographic practice in Lagos, photography has, through weddings, become an integral part of a new consciousness industry that merged modernity and tradition together. Conscious of the possibility of having a photographic shot "most people dress to be photographed when attending any occasion especially in Lagos where a lot of photographers attend these ceremonies. If you stay in the studio hoping to get customers then you are wasting your time as people no longer visit studios." When I visited Omawunmi in her home in Surulere, she showed me her two albums and pointed out the two most important photographs in the album which she confirmed were snapped at her friend's wedding. She told me that she has never been to any photographer's studio and yet has a whole album of stylish photographs: "I can tell you that I don't know the road to any photography studio but I have many pictures even more than those who visit the studios. More than five photographers I visited in Surulere confirmed that people don't come to studios as

they do in the 1980's and in fact Abey studio told me that he hits the street in order to make a living: "I go out to weddings, functions and events without which I might not have any job." Weddings, therefore, have become part of the broader avenues through which photography reaches the wider public. It shows that studio photography have become seriously threatened through this process. While people dressed up and visited photography studios during weekends in the 20th century in Lagos, people dress up and attend parties on weekends in the 21st century.

### **Conclusion**

With the emergence of the 'fashion magazines' in Lagos, the relatively unobtrusive dresser no longer merged with the crowd and swam through it unheeded. In Nigeria, the ostentatious theatricality involved in phenomenon such as, the ones referred to as, 'occasions' and 'events' forced women into an exposed participation in social activities where they posed for the camera knowingly and unknowingly. The glamorous spectre and appeal of aso ebi dressing promises a visible prominence that allows the 'fashion magazines' to keep afloat in line with society's demands. However as a response to consumer needs, the publishers of the so called 'fashion magazines' and their photographers operate within the matrix of modernist discursive practice that commercializes glamour. Thus, viewing photography as a business enterprise, Lagos street photographers may have confirmed the view that "modernization becomes a ceaseless and self-perpetuating creation of new needs, new consumption and new production." In this essay, I have through some ethnographic and historical survey showed that photography promotes a special kind of visual culture through the magazines. The essay may have demonstrated that



photography promoted aso ebi, dress styles, fashion and sartorial practices through what is known as 'event,' 'style,' and 'fashion,' magazines in Nigeria, and that the growth of these magazines is premised on the desires of people to appear in public spaces through such magazines.

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