



**Professor Lisa Aranson on J.A. Green (A Pionier Artist
Photographer of the Niger Delta): Some Reflections and Harmonisation**

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Abstract

Jonathan Adagogo Green's photographic and artistic contributions working in his countryside, the Niger Delta of Nigeria is reviewed by Professor Lisa Aranson. Aranson in a public lecture presentation on the stand-point of art history thinks of J.A. Green as having operated in two worlds of which he is said to have initiated in the region. Aranson's lecture in the University of Port Harcourt (Nigeria) as a guest lecturer from Oxford University Cambridge, on Green's endeavours in this regard, is critically reflected upon and harmonized for a rounded historicisation.

Introduction

Art History sometimes gives me course for worry. For the expert is often times observing and considering the work of another artist primarily from historical perspective. The artist would therefore, be party to two intricate tools of intellectualism. He would have to analyze in these manners, and interpret as well, mainly from the narrative of what he views in an artistic work. There are, in the end, some unanswered questions because of dialectical paradigms he would have had to abide by in the study. This is more so when there is a cultural barrier between the art historian and the artistic work being dealt with. Prof. Aranson seemed to have had this problem of complexity in analyzing the pictures taken about a century ago by J.A. Green. A further reflection on this and the harmonization of the historical crafting is desirous to bring facts to bear on the ethics of our historical path. Observing the slides from Prof. Aranson's research, one notes that most of the pictures were taken from similar mind set by J.A. Green. Aranson however, tried to classify the pictures into those of the environment (landscape and watershape), ritual/performances, administration, architecture, arts and craft.

Reflecting on them, one could see that Green intended to specifically pass information on the land and people of the past of the Niger Delta that he could cover in them. While doing this, he documented some of the ways of life of the people, which perhaps he did not intend to showcase, since he had

for some of them, a passive knowledge, and sometimes did not reckon the import of some of such behaviour. Green did not acquire high education as to have become a famous intellectual even though he had the then rare skill of artistic photography.

Although one needs to see his entire collection to make fuller deductions, the much that had been seen as provided, are informative of the character, skill, interest and perhaps vision of J.A. Green. This is because he was not the only artist operating in the Delta at that time. There were for instance sculptors, carvers (who engraved too), line drawers and even other photographers from whose works one could gauge the pulse of Green and the region then. The Benin plaque has information on the famous Benin massacre (punitive expedition of British troops on Benin) of 1897.

Besides this, there are also other historical sources of information which can corroborate the objects and the associated information being seen, provided by an artist such as Green for example linguistic, ethnographic, archival, oral and related data.

Some issues of interest to the ordinary audience of Green's works are, the regalia of the traditional rulers, the environment especially the landscape and watershape, the dress patterns, the textile, the postures of individuals and persons at the different fora, the interior decoration (furnishing/organization of households especially the official ones, and elements of new administrative set-up such as forms of money (manilas, notes and coins). In all these, there are various dimensions to their historical understanding as could have been envisaged by the artist concerning the circumstance of the artistic provision.

The first clear indication of the pictures from Green's stable is the imbalance in appreciations; acceptance and general cognitive understanding of what the Europeans were up to in the Delta amongst the African niches that they came in contact with. The Africans seen in the pictures, one can observe, were at different times timid, over-zealous and indifferent about what the strangers were doing in their mist. They had deeper worries trying to make sense of all such contacts and relationship as initiated by the Europeans. Green and his camera were part of this general misunderstanding. For whereas Green knew to some extent the tool he was using and the skill to apply, he perhaps did not have complete knowledge of what they generally represented. He would have been seen by some of these Africans as treacherous, and unwise. The questions were asked about whom he worked for and who trained him, of which Prof. Aranson said she did not know. But operating at the time, if he did not represent the interest of the ones who brought the camera, developed the film and kept it well, he would not have operated for so long as he did and across such a wide geographical area from Efik and Ibibio areas, on the east to the Benin kingdom on the West of the Niger Delta.

Green's picture of king Ibanichuka being not in his official regalia but in a humiliating appearance similar to that of the then Oba Ovoranwem Nogbaisi of Benin, when the glorious kingdom was sacked by the British, were but calculated attempts to convey the information in the sense that they served as elements of dominance of the Europeans over the Africans. When the Europeans used such means as writing which many Africans could not read at that time, they alternatively used pictures which even young children can see and understand. When at about this time in 1895, the European traders attacked Onitsha on a similar reprisal as they did to the Benin kingdom, they documented in a letter written to their authority, that it was to teach the people the lesson which they would live to remember and never to attempt any form of provocation on the exalted Europeans but to allow them to have their way in another peoples land and sovereignty (Olisa 1972, Ischichei 1975). At the Onitsha event, for instance, they had burnt the town, its farms and food storages, causing the king and the people to desert Onitsha until they were compelled to make peace with their conquerors which enabled them to have their way with their system.

The images (portraits sculptures, casts, carvings) of the Oba of Benin at different times including the late 19th C. ones made by palace artists are a pleasure to behold (see Eghravbe 1960). Their praise songs even as in satire or ode are indicative of how ebullient, magnificent, and adorable they were. They showed that they were really respected and sometimes revered by all; not the sort of image that Green's picture portrayed of the Oba at the dusk of the 19th C. It is clearly indicative that it was intended to have him be looked down upon and not cherished and feared as in the past; again so they could have their way with the people and the system then.

Prof. Aranson's position in the nudity and half-nudity of especially the women in Green's pictures is neither here nor there. She informed the audience that it was a norm for the women to appear and move around in those ways. This jostled the women of today who heard her. That there were no braziers to veil the women's breasts especially would not imply that they did not have concern or worry about such. But she took particular interest on one of such pictures.

The one of a young woman, who she observed posed in a manner that is suggestive that she was made to do so in order to make a show of her breasts. The young woman (much like a teenager) in the picture knelt down and had only some strands of beads from her waist covering her pubic region. There is less doubt that the provocative posture was suggested if not commended by some, other than her will. Her innocence was violated in the picture and perhaps captured to satisfy the interest of someone. Using today's situation to further analyze this, one observes that similar pictures are still being taken of people and even in outright violation of the dignity of

women by people in the sex industry making pornographic films and printed publications which are very common in the Internet. Sometimes embarrassing information had filtered in concerning such women who were taken advantage of in this regard, to the extent that they are made to have sex with animals such as dogs. The abuse of the sexuality of people did not begin now, and even at about the last century, when Green covered the scene but goes far beyond the periods especially so among the so-called civilized societies who had at sometimes and in some areas, thrown morality to the refuse dump. The biblical Sodom and Gomorrah is a case in point.

Prof. Aranson responded to some ones curiosity, on why in a particular picture, a chief with four women (perhaps his wives) had two of the women with veiled breasts who were seated at the right side and the other two to the left side of the man left theirs bare, by saying that she did not know. Some people tried to suggest different reasons for that but there was no clear answer. In many areas of the Delta, even at present, certain behaviour are expected of certain class of women, especially with regard to the baring of certain parts of the body and this may well be the explanation for this. That is, according to the cultural dictates of the people in the picture at that time. Many things have since changed in the communities of the Delta since the coming of the Europeans and the attempt at Christianizing the people, and generally bring in western ideals. In Oguta, single young women are not allowed to bath with even their pants or any sort of clothing on, at the water fronts of especially the Ogbuide (the Oguta Lake) water. That right is reserved to women who are married.

At the water fronts in Oguta, all members of the families would use them especially in accordance to their linages. Those women who bathe naked at the water fronts would normally be not lustfully looked at; at least not by their own blood relations. They also do not carry themselves about in such state, in provocative manners. Therefore, there was a norm understood by the parties involved and obstruction of such, especially in the light of such abuse as noticed in the picture of the young woman, was not just frowned at but was punishable by the law of the land. The rights of women have been there amongst the Niger Delta people, even before the coming of the Europeans. Making them pose in some ways in the picture, amounted to some criminality against a defenseless, sometime naïve people. Naïve in the sense that, the import of the function of the camera on most of them was often not known to them.

The breasts have since served as sex organ besides being used to suckle babies. If the pictures were taken between the last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century, one would be surprised to see the women not minding their bare breasts at that time in the pictures.

The argument that it was simply the way things were in this respect is rather not well situated in the common reasoning. Before this time, Islam, Christianity indeed the African indigenous religions had already been used to enlighten people concerning such moral things as being properly clothed, not looking at people lustfully and the general sanctity of mankind, especially with regard to the immediate neighbours. To know that the women were not just women but wives of chief, makes it even more of serious concern to us at this time because such should have represented the 'elite' of the societies then and should know better in this respect.

In all the pictures, the women wore gloomy expressions on their faces as could figure out, and none seemed to bash or blush or make such face to show that they were caught almost pants down as is usual among normal women of all ages. Why would they prefer to leave their upper body bare when most of the men in the pictures covered their trunks? Were the men cold and the women hot? Or that the men had better clothing while the women had not as much? Why are all these, the opposite for many women who are becoming 'famous' for indecent dressing behaviour. Should an average women want to flaunt her body part as the breasts even then, it would be those whose breasts are still 'firm' and 'standing' as those of young maidens not as much of those in the pictures, being those with the older floppy or lobby (for especially the pregnant ladies) ones, would like to. These would not be shown off with, not even in the time before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, let alone in the late 19th century and early 20th century. This is supported by an old Igbo (Nigerian) saying "*ara a'dago m*" meaning "my breasts are now flat" so her value in terms of sex appeal is far reduced. What then really transpired? Why was Green relaxed taking the pictures as a Christian, before the people through whom he got the camera (the Christians)? Did he snap any of his mother, sister, wife, aunt and such relations in such appearances; otherwise, why not?

Since those pictures were not considered good for British readership, at that time, why were they taken, developed, printed, published and documented carefully and most probably in Britain. Through the years of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, to even the time of colonialism, some African women were violated by some Europeans which sometimes resulted into pregnancy. The 'half-cast' children born as a result were treated with disdain and sometimes were allowed to die or just be done away with. Many of the Europeans who fathered those children would reject them for the same reason of being identified with the African women in this respect. But such special breed of persons are noticed in especially the Niger Delta till date with some having names which are pointers to the circumstances of their birth.

With the lowering of the status of people around this part of the world, they began to struggle to upgrade their status by making effort sometimes

unwholesome in itself, so to be seen as people who are civil, and to be accepted by all. In recent times some communities have had to change their names because they sounded derogatory and not dignified and acceptable as they should be. A community few kilometers to the south of Oguta is known and called "Oburuoto" implying 'the naked people'. Perhaps they were going about naked at some point when others were already clothed and so the name was used in identifying them. But the fact about them and this name, is that, it is not their real name. The actual name was oburu-otua which sounded like Oburu-oto and which was a sort of fun saying of a rather interior and timid people. Oburuotua implies that their place was a place of abundance in food which was then called a dumping place but has been misconstrued to mean the naked people. They had born this name for centuries but recently (toward the end of the last century), had resolved to change it to something more suitable and acceptable to people. They now wish to be called Opuoma; Opu being one of their ancestors and 'oma' meaning good. But the old name had stock to people's mind and is readily used except when one is with the people in their community and is more conscious of the name being used in addressing them. All these are for the sake of acceptability of one amongst his peers or contemporaries.

Some of the communities which had the leprosy centres in their places and which the name of the disease has come to be permanently associated to them, have changed the names of their communities. For example, Itu in Akwa Ibom state that was known and called so, has changed its name to Ikot Ekpene. But for some people who are conservative and do not easily change with the trend, they still refer to the place as Itu.

Some of the chiefs of the Niger Delta between the 17th century and 19th were very powerful and influential. The British disliked this situation and saw it as threat to their innate ambition of taking control over the land and systems therein. They poised to grab these by hook or crook. So they first of all introduced some items that appeared wonderful even though they were commodities of trade that were even taken for granted in Europe and other places with about the same level of social conditions and technological developments. Some of such items were textile, gin, mirror, gun and cigarettes. They were not very useful in the economic development of these Africans but they carried the euphoria that added to the eventual submission to the domineering drive of the providers.

The respected individuals and groups of the Africans soon began to lose respect and have them taken over by the Europeans who were now judged super persons. It was in similar ways that the religions of these Africans suffered set-back and were upturned by those of the aliens in their land. Some of these were so influential that in distance places such as Oguta, some of the important persons took up their names and or appellations as a mark

of honour and pride. For instance, some Oguta persons including chiefs were addressed as Eze-Abraka, Nwa-Amakiri, Okrika-nwa-ero-nma, Nwa-Amadi, Nwa-Okrika, Nwa-Nembe etc. To reduce or end such, the Europeans might have asked a photographer to take a snap shot of them, looking not important but humiliated.

They did not stop at that, they sent some of such persons on exile to achieve their objective which sometimes included taking control of a lucrative trade from the indigenes. In this respect Obua Ajukwu of Oguta was exiled to Calabar where he died just like such persons as Nana of Itshekiri, Jaja of Opobo, Ovoranwen of Benin kingdom and king Igbanchuka of Okrika. In doing this, they had joined strength with some locals who perhaps were not in good terms or did not just like the heights or so, attained by their brother/neighbour. Green could have fallen into any of these categories in the interplay of things in the area. It seems more plausible that Green was commissioned, for he took some of the pictures without the knowledge of the persons involved in it and he travelled far and wide through the Delta doing about the same. Again his choice of the shots speaks volume about his orientation. Photographers were some of the important persons in this part of the world in the first half of the 20th century. In an area, there could just be one or two photographers and there were few laboratories located mainly in such place as Lagos. It was therefore, a business of specialists who were few and who had mainly the top echelon of the communities as their customers (at least until the end of the first quarter of the 20th century). Should Green be not stationed at a place then, he probably was sponsored. More so as it did not look like he had to return to the people he covered, to give them their pictures. Was he despised by his people or did he get punished by them? These are not known thus far but that he was sort of sleek is not in doubt. Prof. Aranson's choice of words in couching her topic is implicitly suggestive of that as well. Of the two worlds, did he operate on the home side and the alien side as photographer that has been judged artist, who is now being suggested to be honoured as pioneer in a field of endeavour. Art history is now a discipline and can easily identify the man as a protégée of the field even at the embryonic stage of its development. Green would have been one of the fellows that suited Stanley Elkin's *Sambo* Personality, operating within the African locality, where people saw such behaviour and individual as 'efulufu' (that is a worthless fellow) as Chinua Achebe would characterize him in his famed novel "Things Fall Apart". Some mindful Africans at that time had instead of being cajoled, coerced or hoodwinked into becoming such a person, committed suicide, eloped, or challenged the power that be, until anything punishment pronounced on him is met by him no matter the circumstance. Was Green a two sided person who would before the Europeans behave in the manner that he was accepted and used and as well

operates around his fellow Africans in an unsuspecting manner that he was cooperated with or just tolerated comparable to the tax collectors of that time? Sometimes, such master that would have been behind such a person would actually make the deal palatable and effective so much so that the contribution of the person would be rewarded beyond his time to even some of his relations. These for example, may be trained as a Christian priest or pastor or a techno-craft to the envy of others who were not exactly part of the deal. Such descendant relations of the *sambo* person would continue the course of the original master and generational *samboism* would be enthroned all in a bid to dominate by hook or crook.

Professor Aranson presented and informed her audience that the posture taken by a certain chief and few other people in one of the pictures taken by Green, in which they put out their hands over her knees while seated with their fingers spread out and not clenched, was an act of showing off their rings worn on their fingers. This was what she thought about, viewing the picture as an art historian, but when this writer investigated this sort of situation earlier, it was gathered that it was for different reason, that the people posed in such manner in pictures. He observed that the chiefs were not the only persons who acted likewise but that other men not titled, women and even children used such posture while taking pictures. Most of the chiefs at this period in the Delta did not wear rings and the act of people wearing rings especially for showing off, was not common. Rings in this area were not simply worn for adornment of the body but mainly as amulets and some form of weapons. Such amulet ring common among Oguta people, is the popular "*eti-ada*" meaning the one that causes someone to fall down instantly, once the person is hit by someone wearing it. There were different kinds that did not look very attractive and was not anything that the wearers readily show off that are commonly called "*irika*" among the people.

This writer was informed(see Okoroafor 1993) by a cross section of respondents in and around Oguta that the reason behind that behaviour is because people did not want to be seen as people suffering from leprosy especially, and such other diseases as those identified as *jiqa*, *ikpurikpu* and *kwarikwata* among Oguta people. They said that the people who suffered from such diseases, were usually ostracized by the society and sent out to places of treatment outside the communities such as the leprosy centres set up by the Europeans all over the region. The one in Itu is still cited by Oguta people when one walks as if he is hurt around the toes and the person is asked whether he is coming from Itu where he would have been treated of his leprosy disease (which was judged as never complete and over with). Sometimes one can hear the people taunt someone whose fingers appear not to be straight whether he is returning from or about going to Itu.

Prof. Aranson's position over general postures of the Africans as compared to those of the Europeans as is observed in some of Green's pictures as the balance and stability of the posture of the African as against those of the Europeans is not acceptable to this writer. In the pictures, it is also clear that the Africans were just beginning to recover from the shock of meeting the strangers (Europeans) with their accompanied elements such as camera and the pictures. The Europeans naturally would be more relaxed having experienced photography before then and having better knowledge of what it was about, the import and the foundation of it. They could be sure that they would get a copy and so on, but not same with the Niger Delta people seen in the pictures.

Till today, being camera shy is still a known manner of disposition of some people who for the majority are not acquainted with cameras whether photo or video. Such people especially among the children can go carrying before cameras, while some including adults may close their eyes inadvertently once the camera (especially photo) is shot at them. The ones who are used to the camera would be relaxed before it, just like the Europeans and would not be shy in any way about it or appear so over-zealous that he poses as if his eye-contact with the lens would make the camera snap. The Europeans who looked in other directions from the camera may use it to prove a point, that for instance, that the black man's (Green) shot is not important and should not be bothered about. He may be judged armature and insignificant and so not to be taken seriously but as more of a joke. One has seen other pictures of notable persons of European extraction and orientation. It may not necessarily speak about the good stability or balance of the Africans as against those of the Europeans. Rather it may be judged, to be, that the one was relaxed while one was not, before the camera. In Oguta, it was a common practice until very recently to take picture sitting on a chair or just standing but on a mat. Just like many people sometime had it, that pictures are better taken against the background of flowers or beautiful images. In some cases, people would take their old pictures and superimpose same on the favoured background of notable places and so on. This represents another line of photo trick as Prof. Aranson demonstrated (that the British journalists used Green's works to suit their obedient readers). The irony is that the same society in which there were rapists and people who made jest of the nudity of the Africans was the one being protected from having their eye see corruption, by viewing the nakedness of those Africans in the photos of the creative Green.

In another vein, Prof. Aranson expressed how impressed she was, on the skill of Green, particularly as he would choose a vantage point, to take his pictures, such as climbing up some heights and being on angles that enabled him have a sort of bird's eye view of the scenes he covered in his pictures.

This, he would have been taught by the one who directed him or that he worked for. Again common sense could have been employed to achieve that, since the objective was set out before him. Zacchaeus in the holy Bible(Lk. 19:1) was a short man; what he needed to do so to the see the Lord Jesus Christ who had a large crowd about him and his immediate followers, was to climb a tree around, so to have a better view of the Messiah. Zacchaeus believed in the Lord Jesus, understood his height disadvantage and knew the necessary thing to do to achieve his objective of catching a glimpse of the highly sort after master the son of David, and did so. He succeeded so much so that even the heavenly man on earth took notice of him upon all challenging circumstances. We had seen drawing of different situations (wars, contests, festivals etc.) in papers in history books which were worked on by earlier people and had benefited from such illustrative reconstructions. So this is common among artists of all ages that depended on not impressive skill but common sense in the first place and Green simply used such.

Prof. Aranson was surprised initially, about what was judged the leopard on the grave of one of the chiefs of the Niger Delta as she informed the audience, until she visited the grave site and saw that it was no more there after she confirmed that it was the same grave of the late 19th century chief whose name and date of demise and interment are still on the epitaph. Again, the cultural barrier caused the problem of analysis and interpretation until she had visited the cultural setting of the man whose grave's picture she had studied in faraway U.S.A. Some of highly exalted persons as the chiefs of the Delta, required as part of the burial rites, items such as leopard and even human being. The practice of head hunting among some of the Delta's communities is partly a fall -out of this practice. In Oguta for example, such chief would have achieved the feat of hunting leopard or tiger or lion and (a great feat for a man) or at least be able to pay for it when it is killed or caught in a hunting expedition before he is crowned. This was (even till date) very expensive and his people would have to do same as part of the burial process when he passes on. Their appellations would include "*Ogbu agu*" which means the one who is as powerful as being able to slain a leopard or a tiger or lion or even cheetah. The kinds of the tiger family and even the size would sometime be documented in the praise songs of the family attributing to that particular individual, whose prowess and brutality transcends as heritage to the descendants and the relations alike. For instance, this writer is from one of the royal ancestors in Oguta that is referred to as "*Ogbu agu odumodu*" that is the one that slayed a big lion with a big mane. The picture again would have been stage-managed for Green before he took it. Someone of Green's age and membership at the time would not be allowed to interfere in the burial rites of high chiefs being not an initiate of the cult and or guild of the place who are directly involved in doing some of the practices. But as was

obvious, there was no one in the picture. That it was left for him to take the short alone (whether by compulsion as was characteristic of the gun boat diplomatic attitude of the Europeans then in the region or by complicity, to show off, that they could do such so to elicit the envy of their neighbour and in that way put fear in them not to dare them in whatever way), is begging for further data interrogation. The body of such animal would usually be eaten by certain persons involved in the burial. In Oguta for instance the gall bladder would be taken to and drooped at the confluence of the beautiful uhammiri Oguta Lake and the longish pale colour Urashi (also called Orashi or Engeni by some Niger Delta peoples) river that runs through Oguta land rather dramatically. The skin, teeth, head and claws would be preserved. They form part of the royal regalia of the kings in Oguta till date. The king seats on the skin and has it also on the walls of his palace as ornament, wears the teeth especially the canines as pendant, keeps the head as special memorabilia and the claws are used for certain rituals, sacrifices and charm making.

Conclusion

This writer represented the immediate past king of Ugwu-Ukwu in Oguta named, HRM Nnani Onyegwu Mathew Iyasara from his early teen years from 1982 to 1995 and became well-schooled in the practice of Oguta's, royalty and socialization. He was the *Ishinma* of the late king, being the favourite nephew to the king. Some of the pictures taken of Oguta people who encountered the Europeans indirectly for the first time in their land are full of valuable information. What transpired have been taken and are being used to synergize evidence from other historical sources with which fuller and more reliable and comprehensive accounts are recounted of the people's past for it greater appreciation of and articulation, and subsequent development of the area. The intension here, is not show-case such, for it would take volumes and some have already been done by earlier and recent scholars especially of history. Such works can be consulted. For more details on such works please (see Alagoa 2005; 2007, Cookey 1997; 2010; 2016; Asiegbu 1974; Davidson 1964; English 1959; Forde and Kaberry (eds.) 1967; Crowder 1977; Okumagba 1978; Wils 1969; Ofonagoro 1979; Curtin 1967; Bolaji 1984; Nwosu 1983; Fajana and Biggs 1964; Johnson 1981; Grove 1967; Egharevba 1968; Allah 1995; Clarke 1969; Onyeneke 1967; Anyandele 1971; Nwala 1985; Tamuno 1972; Rudar 1969; Chrisholm 1962; and Agorua 2016), for a more effective use of the tools of modern historicizing, for especially people with lengthy pre-literate past of which art history can be benefited from if properly harnessed in the entire liberal word of art studies and particularly history.

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