

Book Review

Book Reviewer - Samuel Okoro

Title:

**African Photographer J. A, Green:
Reimaging the Indigenous and the Colonial**

**Edited by: Martha G. Anderson and Lisa Aronson
with Ebiegeri Joe Alagoa, Tam Fiofori and Christraud M.
Geary**

**Publisher: Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2017, Pages:
397**

Paper Back

Introduction

Reenchanting Art Historical Methodologies in the Photo Narratives of Artist Photographer Jonathan Adagogo. Green

This review addresses the discursive frames of narrative analysis adopted to expound and implicate meaning in the body of photographs attributed to Nigeria's supposed first artist photographer Jonathan Adagogo. Green. The photographs of J.A. Green became the data for analyzing the sociocultural and political history of the Niger Delta, through the collaborative efforts conducted by a group of scholars within the humanities, whose research culminated with an anthology of narratives credited to the photographer entitled "*African Photographer Jonathan A. Green: Reimagining the Indigenous and the Colonial.*" To apprehend the diverse modes to which the contents of his photographs have been communicated, it is expedient to

emphasize within multidisciplinary methodologies, the interactive context in which the photographs derive multiple layers of meaning. Bearing in mind the origin of the Ijaw artist photographer and the implication of the book title "***African Photographer Jonathan A. Green: Reimagining the Indigenous and the Colonial***", J.A. Green is transposed from a previous anonymity tag phrase of "*hiding in plain sight*" to now being proclaimed with a rather ambiguous expression "*African Photographer*." In as much as the theme by implication disaffirms the photographer from his state of origin, it tends to appeal to a broader scope of audience readership. For Emeritus Professor E. J. Alagoa as well as for all four narrators, J.A. Green had built his photography career through the connection he shared with the CMS (Christian Missionary Society), who had stationed in Bonny amidst British political inversions. Despite his anonymity that lingered for over a century, after his death in 1905, the research on him unveils the dynamics of his photographic career, and now accords him recognition amongst the international landscape of professional artist photographers who operated in the later part of the 19th century along the Niger Coast region of West Africa.

In the book, the historical picture of the Niger Delta environment before the era till when J.A. Green operated is presented as a foreground by Emeritus Prof. Alagoa of the Department of History at the University of Port Harcourt. In his discourse, eight photographs in the whole are placed to support his narrative panel which accommodates how commercial and missionary enterprises coalesced with British activities to be a turning point that transformed the local environment in the Niger Delta and by consequence funded some of the subject matter composed in J.A. Green's photo archive. He refers to the photo of the Miller Bros factory built in Abonnema as a focal point to industrial activity, and how military fortifications were set up by traders to protect their trade in palm oil and kernel. He further explains the house structure (*wari*), a sociopolitical system of governance in Bonny that enabled mobility of its members upward through merit and ability to elaborate on the existing political landscape at play before British sovereignty usurped it. The reference he makes to the interface after the Berlin conference in 1895 which resulted to European scramble for African territories, and thus unduly legitimized British colonial invasion in overturning the governing

system in the Niger Delta, uncovers Western hegemonic agendas.

Though Alagoa makes no detailed description of subjects in the photo composition, it holds as proof to justify what Roland Barthes often termed a 'certificate of presence,' which evidences the eventualities referenced. The photographs thus affirm and elicit the semiologic articulations that Alagos shares regarding the sociopolitical, economic, and religious narratives of the Niger Delta. On this note, the photograph is therefore considered an ideological message bearing in mind the dimensions in theoretical and critical analysis at work in the narrative contexts that follow.

Christraud M. Geary's narrative compliments Alagoa's overview of the sociopolitical landscape as she engages specific discussions regarding the lives of photographers who operated under the socioeconomic currents of West African Coastal communities. In her narrative, she provides a background history of African photographic practitioners and presents traces of the career and oeuvre of some prominent African photographers who preceded J.A. Green, and as well contributed to setting the stage that shaped his career. Prominent among the early image makers, she makes mention of Sierra Leonean Francis Wilberforce Joaque, John Parkes Decker from the Gambia, and Niels Walwin Holm.

In accounting for the drifts encountered in attempts to investigate and access African photographic archives, Geary establishes the varied views of three scholars from a psychoanalytic perspective. She pinpoints the vastness of the file that is both complex and complicated as a fundamental challenge for researchers and brings to the fore a core problem of unacknowledged authorship. She argues that in as much as African photographers and the people they depicted painted a scenario of Africa and Africans, they remained anonymous as contributors to the archives.

Geary perspective on the issue of authorship further unveils how photographs of African photographers and their European counterparts were often reprinted and redistributed in various material forms around the globe. Amongst the material forms of reproducing photos, picture postcards, produced in European printing houses, remained popular. Green's patronage with postcards was mediated through other photographers who made contact with European printing houses and as such had the advantage to have their

names stamped on the postcards. These accounts reveal why some of the iconic photos apparently taken by Green bore *N. H. Holm* as the stamp name.

In subsections of the narrative, she situates concrete iconographic interpretations of pose in African photographic characters accomplished by Greens predecessors. In one example, she connects a pose in the woodcut of L. Breton based on a photograph by Francis Wilberforce with the ancestral altar screens (*duein fubara*) from the Kalabari Ijo region, and makes reference to the scholarly research by Nigel Barley, who suggests that portrait photography may well have influenced the production and motifs of such ancestral altar screens. The suggestions by Barley as well as Geary's denotations on the influences of the photographic pose to the Kalabari ancestral screens establishes a consensus of similarity in central pose evident in both compositions and thus account for the value index it attributes in memorializing and celebrating the qualities of leadership. A typical example of how formal/iconographic analysis reveals ideological orientations within a given sociocultural space.

In the part two section of the book, Art Historian Prof. Lisa Aronson of Skid Moore College further brings to the fore the life of J.A. Green, his career and the portrait representations he made within Niger Delta sociopolitical and cultural spaces. Her biographical approach to unearthing the life and career of J.A. Green tends to address the issue of anonymity previously pointed out in Christruad Geary's narrative. Aronson's extensive research provides details of Greens background, his upbringing and also considers the geographical scope of his practice bearing in mind his patrons and how he organized the business. Aronson admits two significant sources that served to enable a reconstruction of the life and work of J.A. Green, which was his photographs and the oral history made available from family members and relations of Green in Bonny.

The construction Aronson gives to the life, career and the entire oeuvre of J.A. Green encapsulates the compositional and social modalities of analyzing photographic data. The social pattern which incorporates anthropological analysis, patronage analysis, photo – elicitation and documentation are germane methods that unveiled Green's life and career. On the other hand, she employs the

compositional study to describe the formal structure of Green's photographic design and style. In her interpretations on the subjects of most of Green's photographs, she provides a background history that was either culturally, religiously or politically negotiated circumstances that initiated the composition.

In the segment that follows, Prof. Martha Anderson takes cognizance of the general experiences of expatriates who were resident in the protectorates of the lower Niger and considers a variety of tales that allude to diverse interpretations held about Africa and Africans, as a link to augment European spaces in J.A. Green's oeuvre. Anderson distinguishes J.A. Green's business career as a photographer and his political position with the British, noting that, though his photographs may have promoted empire building, his business strategy should not be mistaken for political allegiance of any sort. Her research on novelists such as Bindloss and other narrative documents by resident Europeans regarding the colonial landscape and their subsequent experiences became the avenue for making meaning out from Green photographs. Her interest in portraying diverse European views, agenda, and motivations, compliments for the lack of interest Africans exhibit towards the Europeans subjects J.A. Green photographed. African disinterestedness to European subjects and perspectives tends to delineate European colonial history by African residents and as such make unwarranted historical assumptions regarding precolonial era in Sothorn Nigeria.

The research explicitly documents the life and career of Nigeria's first artist photographer J.A. Green of Ijaw nativity and significantly recognizes his oeuvre internationally, within the academia as well as among the social sphere of professional artist and photographers. The typologies characterized in most of Green's work and how the narrators in the book have utilized diverse methodologies to address peculiar humanitarian issues establish the role of visual literacy in the telling of history regarding the Niger Delta. Investigations into the content of his photographs now reveal the socio-cultural and political landscape of pre-colonial Nigeria within selected theoretical frameworks that related the character of art forms with the style of the age. Pre-colonial Nigeria was marked by an upsurge of political rivalry triggered by European cultural

imperialism. The evaluations reached in identifying the role of his photos served to manifest the peculiarities of his style which are now determinate and will endure as symbolic artifacts for further art historical discourses.

The weight of the research on Green and the accolade it attracts coupled with the international recognition now accorded to his works establishes previous suppositions argued by artist photographer Tam Fio Fori, and Professor Frank Ugiomoh. Their frames of reference address a repositioning of the history of modern art and photography in the history of Nigerian art history. On this supposition, the research would have archived its aim within the academia as it inspires and reechoes what Stuart Hall calls “imaginative rediscovery” where the past is approached, not as an antiquarian past time but rather seen as an objective influence on the present that must be detected essentially to mediate in the current historical situation.

References

- Tam F. F. (2011). Nigerian Artist photographer in his article in The Guardian of 16th September 2012 narrates Prof. E. J. Alagoa's official visit to His Royal Highness, Amanyanabo of Bonny, accompanied by pioneer founders of the photographer, in August.
- Ugiomoh, F. (2011) On The Modern and Contemporary in Nigerian Art, News Letter, No.11, CCA Lagos, p 8.
- Anne D' A. (1991), *Methods and Theories of Art History*, Laurence King, 2005, p. 78, citing Stuart Hall, in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* Lawrence and Wishart, 1990: 222