

Impact of Lagos Photo in Mainstreaming Photography as Visual Art in Nigeria

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Abstract

More than ever before, the medium of Photography has gained wider acceptance in Nigeria as a mainstream art form in exhibitions and in art festivals. Previously regarded as mere result of a mechanical process, products of Photography are now viewed as part of a wider image-making culture in the visual arts of the 21st Century which the artist uses as a tool, like other art forms to frame statements on relevant issues. Using Lagos Photo, a platform established by a Nigerian artist and entrepreneur in 2010, this paper examines the trends and developments that led to the status of photography as contemporary art medium in Nigeria. In its 8th year, the festival has contributed immensely in constructing a new identity for Photography as an authentic art medium in Nigeria. This paper situates the achievements of Lagos Photo within the wider matrix of what Silva (2018) calls “other successful precedents and lineages” in the history of the development of photography in Nigeria.

Keywords: Lagos Photo, African Identity, Photography, Festivals, Exhibitions, Workshops

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1. Introduction

Lagos Photo is an annual festival of photography which was founded in 2010 under the auspices of Lagos based African Artists’ Foundation. It is exclusively dedicated to the promotion of photography in Nigeria and Africa in general. Since its inauguration, Lagos Photo has organized exhibitions, competitions and workshops featuring some of the best photographers on the continent and while also serving as a development platform for aspiring photographers. The festival motivates photographers to express themselves within the framework of African identity and experiences. Its inauguration brought to Nigerian photography markedly different facilities in terms of scale, presentation and visibility within 8 years of its existence, feats that both past and present platforms have not achieved. In a recent interview, Azu Nwagbogu, the founder of Lagos Photo, claimed that “there really was nothing at the time (he started Lagos Photo) that served as a template” and that “everything was new, and photography was very under-appreciated at the time,”. While it is evident that Lagos Photo has done much in advancing the promotion and practice of Photography in Nigeria, critics consider it overreaching not to acknowledge that there have been a long and illustrious history and trajectory in Nigeria that is almost unparalleled across West Africa. This is attested to by the several scholarly, critical and curatorial initiatives that exist, though not systematically documented or presented.

The veteran photographer, critic and writer, Tam Fiofori, is an embodiment of these precedents as he has been practicing photography, carrying out documentations, writing reviews and articles on Nigerian photography singlehandedly over the past 3 decades. He has within these years also fought for more visibility and the acceptance of Photography into the mainstream of visual arts in Nigeria through advocacy. Fiofori is well-known for his rich archives of memorable photographers and key national events in Nigeria such as that of the 19th century Nigeria (Ijaw) photographer J.A Green, the FESTAC '77 arts festival and the coronation of the Benin monarch, Oba Erediuwa, in 1979.

Though mainstreaming of photography in the visual arts may appear recent, yet it has always been discussed. Many artists, curators and critics agree that photography is art, but they also point out the obvious disparities that have hindered its full mainstreaming or acceptance as Visual Arts at different points in various parts of the world. An obvious point of difference is the mechanicality of the camera as a tool, and the “problem of sales occasioned by the unwillingness of many collectors to buy works of photography” as an investment or for its value as art (Fiofori, 2009).

Despite these seeming downsides, however, photography has continued to gain wider acceptance and visibility in exhibitions and discourses in art more than ever before as more artists continue to take to the medium to create art and thus express themselves. This development is captured in the activities and progress of Lagos Photo within its 8 years of existence, from 2010. Lagos Photo has become a veritable platform through which photographers have advanced their art, leading to the establishment of what Nwagbogu (2015) calls “a community for contemporary photographers that unite local and international artists” and thus has continued to play vital roles as “a major art platform in Nigeria.” Lagos Photo has therefore played a catalysing role in the acceptance and mainstreaming of Photography as Visual art. Oshun (2018) observed that Lagos Photo was

founded at a time that little was being done to take up the hard work of documenting photography in Nigeria. Oshun's observation affirms the critical intervention that the Lagos Photo festival represents in the development and history of Photography in Nigeria.



Figure 1, An exhibition of (works of) photography at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, 2015.

2. Photography as art

It was initially thought that the camera, as the tool for photographic enunciation would constitute a handicap to the photographs' acceptance as art since it was believed that Photography as an art form was solely dependent on the camera as a tool. But Oguibe (2004) argues that the photographic essence resides not in the details and mechanics of reproducing but in the signifiatory possibilities of the emergent forms. From the moment of its birth, photography had a dual character-as a medium of artistic expression and as a powerful scientific tool. It arrived Africa on November 16, 1839, the same year that Daguerre announced his invention in France and less than two months after the English gentleman, D.W. Seager made the first daguerreotype in America. In fact, at the experimental stage of Daguerre's camera, several of his earliest plates were still-life compositions of plaster casts after antique sculpture (Daniel Malcolm, *The Met Heilbrunn*, 2004). The first images taken in Africa were by an amateur photographer, Horace Vernet in 1839. After his pictures reached Europe, photography and the camera would become a permanent part of European campaign of exploration in Africa. These pictures captured images that artists were entrusted to render earlier.

As stated by Firstenberg and cited by Agbo (2016), from Europe to Africa to Asia and the Americas, photography introduced a new visual trope. The abiding reality of photography soon spread to other parts of Africa including Nigeria. The manipulability of the functions of this new medium hastened its acceptance and it soon broke into the mainstream culture in the various parts of the world where it was introduced. Between the late 19th century and early 20th century, photography was not only engaged in portraiture as was common with painters at the time, it also became a means of recording the social changes, especially at the time when colonialism was taking its roots in Nigeria. The first notable indigenous photographer of recorded history in Nigeria is J. A. Green who was already making photographs at the point of the emergence of Nigeria's artistic modernism. He documented the ruptures and flusters of tradition and modernity as both existential and alternate realities born out of the binaries and encounters between new and disparate cultures and religions.

From the early twentieth century to the colonial period especially at the eve of independence in Nigeria, the history of photography as it relates to mainstream art is comparatively sketchy. In most books on Nigerian art, photography and other aspects of art such as textiles and graphics are usually excluded in favour of painting and sculpture. So, even with the acceptance of photography in many parts of the world as a tool for artistic expression, its appreciation as art was still uncertain. This can be seen in the well-illustrated and often generously rehashed history of Nigerian modernism is often written without the inclusion of an acclaimed photographer like J. A. Green, whereas Aina Onabolu, a painter who lived and worked in the same era is solely credited with the title of the father of Nigerian modernism. This disregard of the active presence of photography by history calls to question the often-stated assertion that photography is art. This also throws up the fact that the medium of photography has largely been detached and has been in a floating state even when for many decades it has been theoretically recognized as art and has been proven as a medium of art for advertisement and propaganda.

For centuries, artists have played the role of making portraits and documenting events through the medium of painting and sculpture. But the advent of photography has altered and made easier and less stressful this historical painters' and sculptors' role. As a result, the earliest genre of photography was portrait making and

through this, individual photographers just like the sculptors and painters, gained fame and significance through their skill in manipulating the camera just like the painter did with his colours and brushes. Several Nigerian photographers played vital roles in the documentation of the emergent history of Nigeria in the form of portraiture and events like colonialism, the independence struggle and cultural ceremonies and festivals such as the coronation of kings and masquerade outings. The introduction of photography as one of the mediums of recording royal activities is pertinent here, for example, the ancient Benin Empire has for centuries engaged royal court artists who made royal busts with mediums such as ivory, bronze and wood. The appropriation of photography as one of the mediums to record its extensive royal rituals shows the willingness to explore new artistic media available to the centuries-old Benin kingdom, in alignment with its rich tradition of art patronage which has had an enriching effect of power and prestige on its monarchy.

Despite its relevance as an art form in Nigeria, during art exhibitions, photography is often under-represented except when photographers independently organize their usually rare photography exhibitions. The struggle for recognition, acceptance and authenticity for photography in Nigeria by its practitioners continued until the recognition of photography as art in the year 1989. Prior to that time, it was only pre-1950s or pioneers of photography practicing mainly in Europe and US that were considered artists and their works studied and recorded. It was usual for photography to have a mono (one track) exhibition just like other art forms such as painting or sculpture. However, between the 1970s and the 1980s photography became incrementally more visible in the visual art scene. These photographers used the idiom and formal language of photography to create works that were “indistinguishable at large from the rest of the image-making process and were manipulatable rather than clinical” (Oguibe, 2004). Photography thus became more appreciated as a contemporary art medium despite having been a popular medium of enunciation and representation since the late 19th century.

Mainstreaming photography has been gradual, however, in the several documented histories of Nigerian modernism and postcolonial modernism, photography is either completely absent or incidentally recognized as what should be an important part of a wider artistic narrative. Some key textbooks on African art such as *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth Century Nigeria* by Chika Okeke-Agulu, 2015, *20th Century Art of Africa* by Kojo Fosu, 2003, *Contemporary African Art* by Sidney Kasfir, 1999, did not capture the contributions of photography as part of their stories. However, Olu Oguibe’s book, *The Culture Game* (2003) has one of his essays, *Photography and the Substance of the Image* dedicated to the validity of photography as visual art. From 1989 to the mid-1990s a number of African art exhibitions took place in various cities in Europe and America. These exhibitions, namely: *Magiciens de la Terre*, Paris, 1989; *Africa Explores*, New York, 1991; *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, London, 1995, also failed to include photography in their discussions, despite the existing robust practice of the art within the periods covered by the exhibitions. Nevertheless, in 2001 an exhibition of photography from West Africa sub-region, titled *Flash Afrique* was held at Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna which in my consideration is a photographic response to the other art exhibitions in the West mentioned earlier. The question is, why is photography always treated separately instead of as an integral part of the wider art history? There have been efforts made to correct this trend in the past and even in contemporary Nigeria art. In the struggle to mainstream photography into the visual art sector in Nigeria, one figure stands out. Tam Fiofori, who in 2009 affirmed the acceptance of photography worldwide as art, has built an impressive archive comprising reviews, articles on Nigerian photography over the past three decades. This, he has done to achieve visibility and acceptance for photography within the visual arts mainstream (Silva, 2018). A book edited by Professors Martha G. Anderson and Lisa Aronson has been published in honour of the pioneering work of Jonathan Adagogo Green by the University of Indiana.

3. Lagos Photo Festival and the Mainstreaming of Visual Arts in Nigeria

The Lagos Photo initiative which began in 2010 is specifically dedicated to local and international photographers who express themselves within the framework of African identity and experiences. Lagos Photo also has an educational component which has led to the nurturing of a pool of talented young photographers equipped with the skills to investigate Africa’s historical, cultural and contemporary social issues. Lagos Photo’s mentorship programme targets early University graduates with backgrounds in art, design, and architecture, and supports them in creating photography-based public space interventions.

The Lagos Photo festival is a departure from the beaten part of negative narrative about Africa. It distorts the concepts of ethnographic framing and gaze, of the noble savage and dystopia which have led to the concentration of narratives on Africa, in the international media around certain stereotypes such as disease, death, destitution and displacement (Nwagbogu, 2015). To do this, Lagos Photo seeks out well-thought-out long-term projects conceptualized by artists and photographers from various parts of the globe.

In traditional African societies, art appreciation is usually public and participatory whereas most modern art events are usually staged in art galleries and other elitist spaces with the intent to target the elites. But art displayed in public spaces (outdoors) are without social gradients so art appreciation is democratized. Lagos Photo from its inception has made outdoor installation of images in public spaces (such as roundabouts) around

the city of Lagos a permanent aspect of the festival (Nwagbogu, 2015). The general public- taxi drivers, street hawkers, and passers-by become participants in experiencing the beauty that would have been the preserve of a few. Nwagbogu explains that the attraction of the public space initiative is its facilitation by established professional architects, scientists, sociologists, artists, curators, cultural theorists, and urban planners.



Figure 2, Akintunde Akinleye/Reuters: **Lagos Paradox**, 2010. ©LagosPhoto.

Lagos Photo's inaugural festival was held in 2010 with the theme *No Judgement: Africa under the Prism*. It featured a total of 25 artists made up of 11 Nigerian photographers and others selected from parts of Africa, Europe and America. Among these photographers are Tam Fiofori, George Oshodi and Akintunde Akinleye. Other photographers included in the festival are Viviane Sassen (who exhibited her work titled *Flamboya* and works from her dream series which explored the existential and imagined realities of Africa), Akintunde Akinleye's *Lagos Paradox* and Adolphus Opara's documentation of the increased popularity of Rugby, a sport that combines the rules of football and Rugby, capture the historic rustic, lively and bustling character of the city of Lagos.



Figure 3, George Osodi, **Bar Beach**, 2010.

What's Next Africa? The Hidden Stories was the theme of the second Lagos Photo festival held in 2011. It continued with the festival's goal of bringing together photographers from various parts of the world. The emphasis was on documentary photography and one of its interesting outcomes was *Everyday Africa*, which was first conceived by Peter Dicampo a former US Peace Corps volunteer who launched his Photography career in rural Ghana and Austin Merill, a renowned writer based in the United States. Nana Kofi Acquah, Glenna Gordon and other photographers who work with Africa focus were invited and they met during Lagos Photo 2011, using *Everyday Africa* as a platform to showcase stories that are not frequently represented about everyday people in Africa. From LagosPhoto, there are now *Everyday* projects replicated in many parts of the world, creating a global community on Instagram, where issues about the struggle with identity and representation are not only about Africa but about other continents.

In the third year of the festival in 2012, the theme was *Seven Days in The Life of Lagos*. The participating photographers focused their lenses on Lagos, the host city of the festival and the art and culture melting pot of Nigeria. The photographers randomly captured the energy of the city, freezing perceptions of disorderliness while finding order. The idea was for the photographers to have overarching conversations with facets of the city while capturing their individual narratives. Aspects of the city ranging from fashion to night life received the attention of the photographers under such themes as music, leadership, family, and social issues like migration and the image of the city. Lagos therefore becomes a subject that informs its residents and others even as it provides a spur for reflection on itself.

Still dwelling on the city of Lagos as a theme, the 2013 edition of the festival was based on the paradoxical title *The Megacity and the Non-city*. Capturing the paradoxes that define Lagos becomes a stimulus for artists to “explore how the development of urban centres in Africa and the technical advance of photography have transformed our sense of place in a globally connected world.” In her work under the Afronauts series, Cristina de Middel brings to bear a relaxed understanding of photography by wavering equivocally between facts and fantasy in such a manner that enthusiasts desire more. Samuel Fosso, one of Africa’s most renowned photographers, achieves a similar ambiguity in his *Emperor of Africa* series which trails his signature portrait photo style. He is known to style himself after real and fictional characters he has encountered, read about or watched on television. Fosso is dressed in a Mao Zedong- style apparel which seems to make commentary on China’s growing influence on Contemporary life in Africa. According to Nwagbogu, “retelling Fosso’s story to young artists is with the hope that they will find creative answers to tackle whatever impediments that may arise in their quest for creative expression.”

The theme for 2014, *Staging Reality, Documenting Fiction*, takes a slant from documentary style towards the search for new truth based on the awareness by Photographers that new audiences can be reached with their visual stories. They visualize stories that are pertinent but often forgotten, as seen in Patric Willocq documentation of folk rituals and cultural norms of new mothers of the pigmy tribe in the Congo. His work is created with performative images which convey the evolution of an organic culture of respectful communal living. The work *This is what Hatred Did*, which is based on Amos Tutuola’s book *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*,” and Cristina de Middel’s new series produced in Makoko, documents the landscape of Lagos still playing on the binary between fiction and fantasy as Makoko assumes a metaphor for the bush of ghosts in Amos Tutuola’s 1954 novel.

Themed *Designing Futures*, the 2015 Lagos Photo explored the fragments and coherent totality of Africa in the design matrix and using it as a platform to discuss our past present and future intents. The theme highlights crucial aspects of “making” that come into play in African creativity. It applies photography in its factual and conceptual modes, while allowing ample interpretation and negotiation of the ecology of image, identity, culture and desire while referencing textiles, portraiture. In these precincts, Delphine Gatinois, a French photographer reaches to mysticism and the supernatural, tapped from the plant kingdom even when the theme addresses the future, her exploration- the vegetation seems to go back to the past instead of the future.

A Nigerian photographer Ima Mfon, through his series “Nigerian Identity,” contests the superficial tourist photography approach to peoples who may be unfamiliar to the photographs viewers. Mfon broaches the challenges of identity that confronted him when he lived in America-where the black skin tone is perpetually homogenized and framed.” The skin tone of her images is made rich, deep and beautiful to celebrate defiantly the skin colour that has brought about marginalization and oppression. In a project titled *The Prophecy*, a cooperation between photographers fabrice Monteiro, a Senegalese Fashion and Costume designer Doulsy (Jah Gal) and the Ecofund organization, raised awareness on the pollution in Senegal which was achieved using surreal images that are made partly with garbage.



Figure 4, Ima Mfon,
Nigerian/Identity-Untitled 1, 2010.



Figure 5, Ima Mfon, Nigerian Identity-*Untitled 4*, 2010.

The 2016 edition of Lagos Photo, titled *Inherent Risk; Rituals and performance*, explores the role of acts of repetition that shape gender, image identity, social agency, power and social constructs in contemporary society. Three artists showed recent series namely Kudzanai Chiurai (Zimbabwe), 'Genesis' Lorenzo Vitturi (Italy) showing 'The Balogun Particle and Jenevieve Aken (Nigeria) showing "Great Expectations." The photograph becomes a cognitive instrument of reality because it is not just an image; it is also a record, a document, a message and a construction.

In its 8th edition held in 2017, Lagos Photo's exhibiting photographers under the theme *Regimes of Truth* focused on how photography embodies the cohesion, and the juxtaposition of truth and reality in contemporary society. Their inspiration was based on the writings of some of the 19th and 20th centuries' most influential literary realists and intellectuals namely Gustav Glaubert's *L'Empire de la Bêtise* (the Empire of Stupidity), Orwell's creation of "double think" from his dystopian novel "1984," as well as the writings of Foucault, Achebe and Huxley all possessed foresight about contemporary society. *Regimes of Truth* shows exciting new works by acclaimed artists such as Samuel Fosso whose series "Black Pope" delves into the politics of religion and explores the often shied-away-from reflections on religion in Africa.

Apart from the yearly festivals at various times, Lagos photo has collaborated with Archive of modern conflict in creating three curated exhibitions based on extant images. The first is an exhibition of the behind-the-scene images that deals with the nature and manifestations of "good" and evil colourfully satirized by sequencing to create added meanings. The second exhibition was based on an archive about photo Jounese, the first Cameroonian colour Photographic studio based in the country's capital city Yaoundé. The extant images reveal the transformation of Cameroonian society over a period of forty years and how globalization is affecting the Cameroonian society. The third project is a wildly humorous collection of taxidermy images of the eccentric Duc d'Orleans, a man who believed that his destiny was to die in battle. This series reveals a sardonic humour of a man far ahead of his time. The captured juxtaposition of images of where a lion grazes peacefully next to a lamb and in another where a lion strolls by a camp tent, using taxidermy as the basis for deception.

4. Successful precedents and lineages in Nigerian Photography

As has been noted earlier, unlike the mainstream modern art in Nigeria there is no coherent history of Photography in Nigeria. But the art curator, Bisi Silva, believes there is an urgent need for a critical discourse on photography and a good starting point should be the history that already exists. This she argues will ensure against 'emptying-out' a place to justify the activities of some others. This sequence narration is exemplified in African oral storytelling traditions like the griot system of the Yoruba *orikis* and other variants in many West African tribes or nations, in which people proudly have their lineages recited (Silva, 2018). Such referencing is important as one for example cannot talk about Lagos Biennial without making reference to ARESUVA or discuss ART X without mentioning Art Expo. The historical precedents in Nigerian Photography stand tall, and the lessons are most exemplary and worthy of addition to the great contributions of curators and artists in Nigeria. The hard work of LagosPhoto should be a part of the history of photography and should not be a sharp break from it.

One of such notable developments is the founding of the Association of Nigerian Photographers in the 1990s which since its existence has held two major exhibitions. The first of the exhibitions was held in 1998 and it included 36 participating photographers while the 2nd exhibition was held in 1999 with 40 photographers. These unprecedentedly large-scale exhibitions of works of photography were held a decade before the founding of Lagos Photo. These developments present interesting precedents that can provide the background upon which we can appreciate not only the activities of Lagos Photos festival but also the history of photography in Nigeria. In terms of documentation, one of the aspects for which Lagos Photo has received praises; it is noteworthy that Tam Fiofori has a huge archive of documented texts, writings, and reviews that highlight photography practice in

Nigeria dating back from 1890 to the present day.

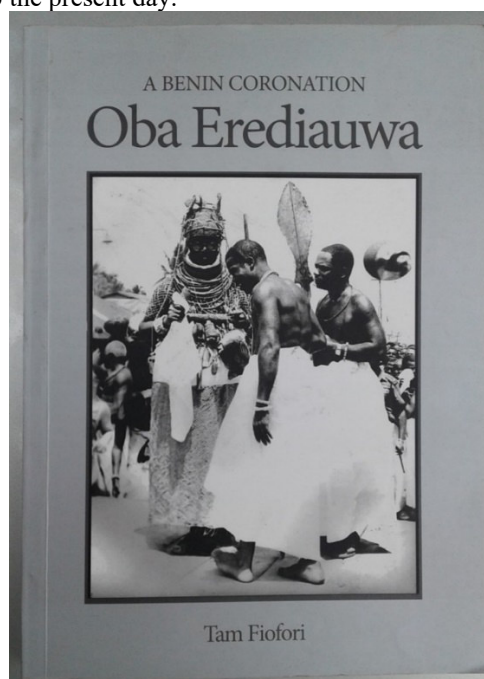


Figure 6, Tam Fiofori, *A Benin Coronation: Oba Erediauwa*
a book on documentary photographs of Benin Monarchy, 2004.

There are equally other fragments of materials like the fascinating photobook of the Nigerian civil war years by late Peter Obe, the ace Nigerian photographer who covered actions and events at the frontline of some sectors of the war. Obe's photographs for example appear relevant to the theme of the 2017 Lagos Photo festival– "Regimes of Truth" (Silva 2018).

Tracing successful precedents and lineage will serve to connect dots of history to bridge the past with the present. In an interview in Art Africa magazine, Nwagbogu had stated that "there really was nothing for me at the time that served as template. Everything was new, and Photography was under appreciated at the time. If the validity of the above assertion is subjected to a critical assessment, it may flounder because while the level of appreciation may not be compared to what exists today, there existed an appreciable level of appreciation prior to the year 2010. And this cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand. If it is considered that the context at the time such as the limited availability of formal and informal schools for photographers in Nigeria, the relative progress and development may better be appreciated. Through an ecosystem of workshops, informal meetings, collaborations and support for each other amidst limited funding, photographers in Nigeria had gone on to achieve great heights – having major solo/group shows both in Lagos and beyond and winning major awards (three of them from the Bamako encounters between 2003 and 2009). The period before 2010, especially within the first decade of the 21st century, also saw the rise of the art of photography and many of the photographers having their work published either as monographs or as part of major publications. All these were happening before the founding of Lagos Photo. It is therefore not factual according to Okereke, for Nwagbogu to insinuate that "there was no template before the founding of Lagos Photo."

Critics like Okereke insist that not recognizing successful precedents and lineages is an attempt at high-jacking the history of Nigerian contemporary photography by LagosPhoto. Also, some critics argue that Lagos Photo panders to the new middle class, the elites as well as international cultural tourists. There is also the argument that Lagos Photo serves, more than anything else, as a tool for the promotion of cultural classism and has done very little to contribute to the actual development of art and photography beyond pandering to the romanticization of Lagos by the international art world and feeding the illusion of a new middle class in a city where most of its 17 million inhabitants are impoverished.



Figure 7, A Lagos Photo outdoor exhibition at Falomo Roundabout, Ikoyi, Lagos, 2015.

5. Lagos Photo Initiative in the context of Nigerian Photography

There are obvious challenges in maintaining historical lineage, south of the Sahara as the Colonials always have their own records, which was not interested in highlighting the talent and their connection to history. As a result, there is always a disjointed and truncated history when certain accounts are written. But we must not continue to write ourselves out of history. Though Lagos Photo has its short comings, but from the beginning it was created as a platform for many photographers both locally and internationally to find expression bearing in mind the pitfalls of previous initiatives. Lagos Photo therefore has built the latitude and has overtime become documented in the consciousness of Nigerians.

What is it about Lagos Photo that has made it continuously relevant for more than eight years? There are numerous art institutions in Lagos which are still nervous about their goals concerning large scale physical space, diversity, and intentions. It is perhaps because more than other available alternatives, Lagos Photo currently provides many of the formally non-existing systematic documentations and presentations, references and varied opportunities in the past at an institutional level. Books, journals, institutions, interviews are the ingredients that serve to deepen the activities of Lagos Photo. Unfortunately, part of the long-term rewards of such intentionality, is owning narrative (Oshun, 2018).

6. Conclusion

Lagos Photo through its short history has made significant impact in the mainstreaming of Photography in Nigerian contemporary art space. Through its curatorial regimes, photography has become a better appreciated form of art through which a lot of narratives have been passed to a wide audience both locally and internationally. This has earned it a certain right to the ownership of narratives. But the assertion “that there was nothing at the time that served as template in Nigerian Photography at the inception of Lagos Photo” amounts to the initiative writing itself out of history as there were several other relevant precedents and lineages in Nigeria that provided the background to the significant work being done in photography by Lagos Photo.

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