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Reframing Ethnography: Nigerian Photographic Autonomy and the Institutional Politics of Seeing

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Declaration of Originality

This Thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Photography and Visual Media. It is entirely the authors own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how contemporary Nigerian photographers challenge and reshape colonial visual regimes that have historically influenced representations of Nigerian life. From nineteenth-century ethnographic photography to current museum exhibitions, the study demonstrates that photographic meaning is not fixed within the image itself but is constructed through institutional, curatorial, and viewer frameworks. Drawing on the work of Akinbode Akinbiyi, Kelani Abass, Logo Oluwamuyiwa, and others, the research argues that Nigerian photographers have developed sophisticated visual strategies to oppose colonial perspectives. However, when these works are exhibited in Western institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, notably through their recent Nigerian–focused exhibition, New Photography 2023 (curated by Oluremi C. Onabanjo), tensions emerge between decolonial image-making and traditional museum structures. Utilising decolonial theories from scholars like Jennifer Bajorek, Mark Sealy, Tina Campt, Ariella Azoulay, and others, this analysis compares MoMA's exhibition with LagosPhoto Festival 2022, highlighting how locally rooted curatorial approaches can reassign interpretive authority. Ultimately, this thesis contends that meaningful decolonisation requires not only new images but also structural reforms within global exhibition systems.

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Introduction

Photography has long been central to how Nigeria has been visually imagined, both within Africa and across Western contexts. From the late nineteenth century onward, colonial ethnographic photography produced narrow and often harmful visual narratives about Nigerian people and cultures. These images did not merely document; they actively contributed to imperial knowledge production. By isolating bodies, emphasizing 'types' and circulating images through colonial archives and exhibitions for anthropological gain, photography became a tool for simplifying complex societies for European audiences.[1]

Fortunately, over the past several decades, Nigerian photographers have increasingly asserted authorship over their own visual narratives. Practitioners such as Akinbode Akinbiyi, Kelani Abass, and Logo Oluwamuyiwa have shifted attention away from ethnographic spectacle toward everyday urban life, archival rupture, and contemporary material realities. Their work signals not simply a stylistic change but a profound epistemic shift: Nigerian photography is now more about local expression than just being watched by the West.

Yet this apparent progress raises a critical question. If the makers of images have changed, have the structures that frame their meaning changed? More Nigerian photographic work is now being shown in Western museums, biennials, and commercial

[1] Elizabeth Edwards discussing the effects of 'de-classifying', in Anthropology and Photography 1860 – 1920, 1994, 13.

galleries that historically played a role in the display of colonial classification systems. Institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York now position themselves as global platforms for contemporary photography. Their exhibitions often foreground diversity and transnational inclusion; however, as aforementioned scholars of visual culture have and will express in this research, visibility within powerful institutions is never neutral.

This thesis starts from the idea that the meaning of a photograph depends on its relationships, not just on the image itself. Building on Ariella Azoulay's concept of the "civil contract of photography," this study views photography as a political interaction among the photographer, the subject, and the viewer. Meaning emerges not only from what is depicted but also from the context in which it is observed. Museums, archives, and curatorial frameworks, therefore, play a decisive role in shaping interpretation. When Nigerian photographs enter Western institutional spaces, they do not enter an empty, objective space; they enter environments structured by long histories of imperial collecting, art historical hierarchies, and entrenched habits of seeing.

The central argument of this thesis is that contemporary Nigerian photographers have indeed disrupted colonial visual tropes at the level of image production, but institutional framing in Western contexts can partially re-stabilise older hierarchies of meaning. This does not negate the importance of increased visibility. Rather, it complicates celebratory narratives of inclusion by demonstrating that decolonisation must operate at both the level of image-making and the level of institutional practice.

To explore this tension, the thesis focuses on two key exhibition contexts. The first is *New Photography 2023* at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by Oluremi C. Onabanjo, which marked the first time the series centred living West African photographers connected to Lagos. The exhibition provides a crucial case study of how Nigerian photographic practices are framed within one of the most influential Western art institutions. Through deep analysis, this thesis examines how exhibition's design, wall texts, and institutional positioning shape the reception of the work.

The second context is LagosPhoto Festival 2022, especially the exhibition Remember Me: Liberated Bodies, Charged Objects. Unlike MoMA, LagosPhoto functions within a postcolonial Nigerian cultural framework and engages audiences for whom Nigerian modernity is already an experienced reality. By placing these two exhibition frameworks, the thesis emphasises how institutional positioning significantly influences the interpretive landscape of contemporary Nigerian photography.

Methodologically, the research combines visual analysis, exhibition studies, and critical theory. It draws on political theories of photography, visual conditioning, imperiality and curatorial practice. Additionally, archival materials, curatorial statements, and critical reviews are used to ground the argument in verifiable institutional contexts. The following chapters trace a movement from colonial image systems to modern photographic independence, and then to the institutional politics that still influence how images are received. Particular attention is paid to how Nigerian photographers implement quiet observation, archival fragmentation, and infrastructural attention to resist ethnographic

legacies. At the same time, this research interrogates how Western museums may unintentionally reframe these works within narratives of discovery, emergence, or belated modernity.

Lastly, this study does not argue that Western exhibitions are inherently reductive, nor that indigenous platforms are automatically decolonial. Instead, it aims to outline the uneven landscape where contemporary Nigerian photography currently exists. In doing so, it explores what real structural change could look like in the global photography scene and what kinds of curatorial practices might better help Nigerian photographers maintain the independence they have already started to assert.

Chapter 1: Colonial Optics and the Legacy of Ethnographic Perception

When it comes to curating culture and perception, Kenyan author, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes;

> “culture does not merely reflect that history, or rather it does so by actually forming images or pictures of the world of nature and nurture. Thus, the second aspect of language as culture is an image-forming agent in the mind of a child. Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, individually and collectively, is based on those pictures and images which may or may not correctly correspond to the *actual reality* of the struggles with nature and nurture which produced them in the first place."[2]

While Thiong’o was more referring language, this concept can also be applied to the way we understand visual culture, especially in the context of ethnography. The photos we take to document different cultures hold a special place in our modern world - they're personal, yet also connected to bigger institutions and politics. At its core, ethnography is about looking closely at people, their behaviours, cultures, and the environments they live in, and then sharing what we find in a way that helps others understand.

Photography has long shaped how we view the world, and it's often influenced by those in power. When we look at pictures of people from different cultures, we're not just seeing them as they are - we're seeing them through the eyes of the person who took the picture. The photographer's choices (from framing to expression and editing) construct a version

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[2] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature, 2005, 15

of reality from the creator's perspective. There is no truly objective way of portraying people through photography, even in the practice of ethnography (a practice known to be intertwined[3] with the study of anthropology), as we inevitably impose our own emotions, biases, and *perceptions* on the environment, more importantly, the *people* being portrayed. This curated perception of a community can be empowering as well as reductive. When it comes to representation, Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said posed a crucial question for the medium of photography and power: "The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether all representations... are embedded first in language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer."[4] This shows how representation is never innocent, as it is always situated within structures of dominance, because when we look at ethnographic photographs from a historical period, we tend to interpret them as purely objective material that only informs us about an era of the past, when in reality, they aid our understanding of the kinds of environment captured in that setting, in a biased fashion.

An ethnographic photograph has the power to humanize a population, but it can equally distort, diminish, or stereotype. The power dynamic between photographer and a community becomes crucial as to who holds control over the narrative, and who is being represented through another's lens. The question of consent between photographer and

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[3] Signe Howell discussing the binding relationship between ethnography and anthropology, "Ethnography," in The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology, ed. Felix Stein, 2018, 1. Cited February 2026 https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/printpdf/262

[4] Edward W. Said, Orientalism, 1978, 22.

subject(s) is crucial when discussing the ethics behind ethnographic photography as American writer, Susan Sontag suggests that "Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder,"[5] this displays the camera as a weapon, capable of manipulating and taking ownership of anything in its path as photographs inherently have the power to manipulate both subjects and audiences.

This bias becomes very apparent when examining the harmful use of ethnographic photography under European colonialism in Nigeria in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Under European colonial rule, photographing Nigerians often placed them within a system of imperial power that claimed to know, classify and display them, resulting in many dehumanising depictions of the population. Cameroonian historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe argues that colonialism created not just political and economic domination, but an epistemic order whereby "From the colonial point of view, natives were not simply people without history. They were people radically located outside of time, or whose time was radically out of joint."[6] Colonial ethnographic photography was a part of this broader negation. These images, created by Western administrators, anthropologists, and ethnographers in West Africa, rarely aimed to portray individuals as

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[5] Susan Sontag, On Photography, 1977, 14-15.
[6] Achille Mbembe, chapter “Difference and Repetition”, in Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive, lecture text, Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2015, cited September 2025 https://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf

autonomous. Instead, they depicted communities as anonymous 'types,' stripped of names, history, and context.

Associate Professor (of African Art and Visual Culture at Michigan State University) Candace M. Keller claims that these ethnographic photographs aided in the "culturally largely imagined Western notions of African and Africans as exotic, primitive, isolated, and decidedly not modern – justifying the colonial project."[7] The use of the word 'imagined' stands out, as when one thinks of the concept of imagination, it is somewhat naïve and unserious, but to think that those same imaginings led to such a detrimental perception and representation of Nigerians makes one reconsider its power in visual culture. The relationship between imagination, perception and representation lies at the heart of how reality is visually constructed. Our perception is not just what exists 'out there'; it is shaped by cultural and ideological frameworks that influence how we see and understand the world see. Within colonialism, imagination came before perception, as Europeans saw Nigerians through the lens of myths (of savagery, primitivism, and exoticism) that shaped how they photographed and *represented* their peoples. The ethnographic photograph, far from being neutral, served as a stage for displaying racial difference and justifying European colonialism in Nigeria.

In the same way, we can see how imagination can lead to detrimental representation; this same concept of imagination also offers a means of resistance, as art historian

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[7] Candance M. Keller, Imagining Culture: Photography in Mali, West Africa, 2021, 22.

Christopher Pinney reminds us that "Photography is now being rephotographed"[8]. These photographic images are never simply static records of the past, but living materials that are re-worked, reframed, and reimagined. In her book, *Unfixed: Photography and Decolonial Imagination in West Africa,* Jennifer Bajorek furthers this notion, explaining how West Africans "used photography to open new routes and relays of communication; they creatively exploited its infinite capacities for recirculation and resignification; and they used its remarkable plasticity, lack of fixity, and aesthetic and referential open-mindedness to reimagine, and remake, their world."[9] While Bajorek was referring to the general shift happening in West Africa, by situating her findings in Nigeria (the most populous country in the western sector of Africa), one sees how these images (coming from studios, streets, and community spaces) became sites of re-photography as they revisit, re-pose, and reclaim how Nigerians *see themselves*.

Central to this shift was Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge (1911–1994), the first indigenous royal court photographer in Benin City[10], whose work during late colonial and post-independence Nigeria shows how ethnographic photography re-inscribed identity, heritage, and social change. Alonge's photographic career began during the late colonial period. Learning photography in Lagos during the 1920s, he later moved to Benin City (his native home) and by 1933 was appointed the official photographer to Oba Akenzua

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[8] Elizabeth Edwards, Anthropology and Photography 1860 – 1920, 1994, 90.
[9] Jennifer Bajorek, Unfixed: Photography and Decolonial Imagination in West Africa, 2020, 9.
[10] Flora S Kaplan, Fragile Legacy: Photographs as Documents in Recovering Political and Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin, History in Africa 18, 205.

II, the traditional ruler of Benin.[11] This role made him one of the first indigenous royal court photographers in Nigeria[12], a liberating step from colonial structures, in which Europeans dominated photographic production and authority.

In her research into West African photography, Bajorek notes that it "has emphasized the transformations facilitated by photography in the sphere of fashion, concepts of beauty, gender identity, racial identity, and marriage customs; in entrepreneurship... and new forms, and spaces, of collective belonging and affiliation"[13] These transformations imply the active role of the subject in crafting their independence, by choosing costume, pose, and props to signal new aspirations. Alonge adopted a similar approach to Nigerian ethnography, departing significantly from colonial practices. In 1942, he established the *Ideal Photo Studio* in Benin City[14], which became a centre for documenting residents of Benin City, social clubs, civic associations, and royalty, creating a broad visual record of life, ceremony, and social change from the late colonial period into Nigerian independence and beyond.[15]

Rather than objectifying subjects according to foreign biases, his work embraced *collaboration and agency*. Subjects selected their attire, props, and poses,

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[11] Ibid. 213.
[12] Ibid. 205.
[13] Jennifer Bajorek, op.cit. 23.
[14] Flora S Kaplan, op.cit. 213.
[15] Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art Brings 'Chief S.O. Alonge' Exhibit to Benin, Nigeria, September 13th 2017, cited February 2026 https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/smithsonian-s-national-museum-african-art-brings-chief-so-alonge-exhibit-benin-nigeria

asserting their own identities and aspirations through the image.[16] This mode of representation functioned as a liberating progression from the colonial gaze, enabling Nigerians to see themselves as dignified subjects of history. As curator Amy Staples observed, Alonge's photography "provided local residents — many for the first time — with the opportunity to represent themselves to themselves as dignified African subjects."[17] This was not just a stylistic choice but a deeply political one as photography became an instrument through which Nigerians could contest colonial narratives and articulate their own visions of identity and selfhood.

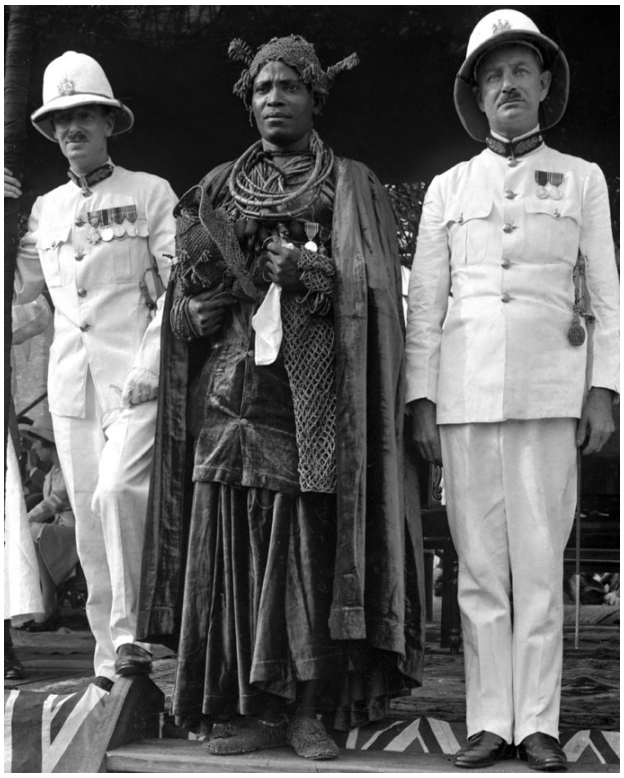

Fig. 1 The Earl of Plymouth visiting the *Oba* of Benin, Oba Akenzua II, Benin City, Nigeria, Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge, 1938

[16] Flora S Kaplan, op.cit. 222

One photograph that exemplifies Alonge's profound redefinition of ethnographic imagery is his image of Oba Akenzua II, in ceremonial regalia, standing alongside the Earl of Plymouth during the late 1930s. Initially, the image seems to adhere to traditional royal photographic standards, such as formal posing and symbolic clothing. However, upon further examination, this image marks a decisive visual breach from colonial representation. The image depicts the monarch adorned with coral bead regalia, intricately embroidered garments, and ritual objects associated with Benin kingship. Coral beads (historically reserved for the Oba and high-ranking chiefs) carry deep meaning in Edo culture, symbolising sacred authority, ancestral continuity, and divine sanction.[18] Their visual importance in the photograph is intentional. Alonge's photograph focuses on the details that bring the image to life, like the coral beads to the vibrant patterns, and the quiet stillness of the standing king who stands out from European counterparts. These features do more than decorate; they help tell a story.

Unlike many colonial-era photographs that treated Nigerian rulers as specimens to be studied, Alonge presents the Oba as a fully present and respected individual. The king stands at the centre of the image, not pushed to the side, or overshadowed by European figures. His calm, steady gaze commands a powerful presence. Instead of encouraging

[18] The British Museum catalogue on crown: regalia, cited February 2026 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1898-0630-5

the viewer to examine him as a subject of curiosity, the photograph asks us to acknowledge him with respect and recognition.

The image can also be interpreted as subtly predicting Nigeria's later political independence. Taken in 1938 (more than twenty years before independence in 1960), it hints at a gradual shift in who controlled how Nigerians were depicted and remembered. Even while colonial rule remained firmly in place, Nigerians were already beginning to reshape their own presence within photographic history. We see this in the Oba's calm and confident posture suggests a sense of continuity that extends beyond the empire. Colonial authority, by contrast, seems temporary, while indigenous leadership seems firmly established. Looking back, the image almost feels prophetic, showing how visual culture helped build confidence, cultural pride, and a sense of self long before political freedom was officially realised.

At the same time, the photograph does not pretend that colonial power did not exist. Instead, it reveals a moment of negotiation between two systems of authority. The British official and the Oba share the same frame, but the image does not turn into a display of colonial dominance. Rather than openly challenging imperial power, Alonge works more subtly. His approach is based on emphasis rather than removal. By giving visual priority to Benin symbols, dress, and presence, he gently shifts the balance of meaning. Without changing the reality of the encounter, he changes how it is understood, allowing indigenous authority to stand at the centre of the narrative. In a sense, Alonge liberated ethnographic photography from colonial narratives not by rejecting documentation but by

redefining its purpose. The camera no longer classified Nigerians for imperial knowledge but preserved their self-understanding.

The transformation initiated by photographers such as Alonge did not end with Nigerian independence in 1960. Rather, it opened a long historical process through which photography in Nigeria gradually moved away from colonial systems of classification toward self-definition. If colonial ethnographic photography stabilises African identity as timeless and primitive, contemporary Nigerian photographers instead treat identity as lived, shifting, and negotiated within modern life. Photography becomes less a tool for description and more a way of thinking through history, memory, and belonging. Bajorek argues that West African photographers used the medium not merely to record social change but to participate in it, emphasising photography's capacity to "reshape public and political discourse, and to facilitate new conversations."[19] In this sense, contemporary Nigerian ethnographic photography continues the decolonial work begun in the early 20th century by relocating authority from colonial thinkers to Nigerian image-makers themselves.

The Nigerian diaspora expands this meaning of the ethnographic by complicating the idea of a fixed cultural identity via location. When it comes to cultural diaspora, Jamaican-British sociologist Stuart Hall writes that "as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of big and significant *difference*… We cannot speak for very long,

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[19] Jennifer Bajorek, op.cit. 5.

with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side - the ruptures and discontinuities"[20] This exposes the vastness of cultural identity and therefore *representation* that comes from the Nigerian diaspora, deepening the decolonial potential of ethnographic photography. Colonial imagery depended heavily on the coloniser, who observed from outside and claimed authority through separation. Diasporic photographers challenge this structure by playing multiple roles at once, inside and outside, participant and observer, questioning who has the right to define. Nigerian identity is no longer measured against colonial expectations of tradition but understood through lived experiences that include migration, global exchange, and cultural mixing.

[20] Stuart Hall, Cultural Identity and Diaspora in J. Rutherford Ed. of Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, 225.

Chapter 2: Contemporary Nigerian Photography and Its Complex Visual Autonomy

Akinbode Akinbiyi (born 1946), Kelani Abass (born 1979), and Logo Oluwamuyiwa (born 1990) all demonstrate how this fluid liberation unfolds across *generations*. Each engages with ethnography differently: through curious observation, archival reconstruction, and urban re-imagination. Yet, all photographers share a common goal: dismantling inherited colonial narratives and replacing them with images grounded in Nigerian experience.

Fig. 2 *Bar Beach, Victoria Island, Lagos*, from the series *Sea Never Dry*, Akinbode Akinbiyi, 2006

Akinbode Akinbiyi's photography is rooted in movement. Working primarily in black-and-white film, he documents cities across Africa and Europe with a relaxed lens. His images in Lagos particularly resist a loud spectacle. Instead of dramatic events, he photographs

quiet, more everyday scenes: pedestrians, roadside vendors resting, and children wandering through the streets. This approach fundamentally challenges colonial ethnography. His photographs do not classify people; they accompany them. Akinbiyi's idea of Lagos is not an exotic landscape, but a shared environment shaped by memory, migration, and improvisation. In a recorded lecture, when it came to his approach to photography, Akinbiyi said, "I try to understand my environments… and then move through as gently as possible,"[21] which offers an important insight into how *Bar Beach, Victoria Island, Lagos,* should be understood. Akinbiyi's photography is not about capturing or possessing a moment. Instead, it is about sharing space. The word 'gently' is especially significant. It suggests care, humility, and restraint, an awareness that the photographer is entering a world that already exists independently of the camera. This attitude transforms ethnographic photography from an act of observation into an act of coexistence.

In *Bar Beach*, Lagos, it is presented without exaggeration or drama. The scene appears simple: figures dispersed across the frame, in what seems to be deep prayer, simply inhabiting space. Nothing in the image demands attention in an obvious way. There is no single central figure, no dramatic action, and no attempt to turn the location into a symbol of spectacle. Instead, the photograph allows space for stillness. The people in the frame are not performing for the camera; they are absorbed by their own will to exist as they

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[21] In Conversation: Photographer Akinbode Akinbiyi, video lecture, 30:25 Philadelphia Museum of Art, September 19, 2022, Youtube, cited February 2026 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mP9iNHaQGmw

have been. The viewer senses that Akinbiyi did not interrupt the scene but waited patiently for it to unfold on its own terms.

The composition reinforces this feeling. The vantage point sits low, most at eye level. The level of subtle choice changes how the viewer experiences the image. Rather than looking down at the subjects, a perspective associated with surveillance or authority, the viewer shares the same visual level as those present. Akinbiyi himself has noted that he was drawn to the presence of a child observing the older women nearby.[22] This layered act of looking, a child watching adults, photographer observing quietly, viewer entering scene afterwards, creates shared attention, not hierarchy. Seeing becomes relational, not possessive.

Central to this method is walking. Akinbiyi often describes himself as a "wanderer"[23], and this wandering is not incidental but foundational to how his photographs come into being. Walking allows the photographer to experience the city at the same pace as its inhabitants. In her book *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Rebecca Solnit describes walking as a state in which "the mind, the body, and the world are aligned,"[24] suggesting that movement produces a form of understanding rooted in presence rather than control. This alignment helps explain why Akinbiyi's images feel so deeply embedded in Lagos

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[22] In Conversation: Photographer Akinbode Akinbiyi, video lecture, 27:19
[23] Gallery label about Akinbode Akinbiyi from New Photography exhibition, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2023, cited February 2026 https://www.moma.org/collection/works/434678
[24] Rebecca Solnit, Wanderlust: A History of Walking, 2001, 5.

rather than extracted from it, as the camera moves through these shared moments rather than surveilling them.

Walking also reshapes the ethics of looking. Instead of approaching the city with a predetermined goal, wandering allows encounters to unfold gradually. Solnit writes that there are "surprises, liberations and clarifications"[25] that come from this process, through which knowledge emerges slowly over time. Akinbiyi's photographs reflect this accumulation of experience. Meaning does not come from decisive moments but in quiet observations like pauses, gestures, fleeting interactions that come from patience. The photographer doesn't control the environment, but instead learns from it.

It is this quietness that gives the *Bar Beach* its political strength. There is no visible protest or confrontation with colonial history, yet the photograph performs a profound shift in visual authority. Colonial photography often depicted Nigerians as objects to be studied, while Akinbiyi's work speaks with the environment he depicts. We see this through the older women on the beach, as they remain fully themselves in deep prayer, not symbols or representatives of culture. Their ordinary presence becomes enough. By focusing on mundanity, Akinbiyi restores dignity to the everyday lives in Nigeria. The act of praying, resting, or simply watching the sea becomes worthy of attention without needing explanation because the photograph suggests that modern Nigerian life doesn’t need to

[25] Rebecca Solnit, op.cit. 6.

be dramatised to be meaningful. In doing so, it rejects the colonial idea to define Nigeria through difference or spectacle.

The viewer's perspective also changes. Instead of consuming the image quickly, one is encouraged to slow down, taking in the openness of the beach and the quiet relationship between people and landscape. This slower form of looking leaves room for empathy, as one begins to feel present within the scene rather than positioned outside it. In this way, the liberation enacted by *Bar Beach* is both visual and psychological. Akinbiyi teaches viewers a different way of seeing, one based on patience, humility, and shared humanity. The photograph does not dominate its subjects or claim authority over them. Instead, it allows life to unfold gently, reminding us that everyday moments carry their own depth and meaning. Through this approach, ethnographic photography is transformed from a tool categorising and distancing people into a practice that fosters closeness, recognition, and mutual presence.

Fig. 3 *Casing History, Spilling Memories 1, Kelani Abass, 2022*

If Akinbiyi liberates Nigerian ethnography through mundane observation, Kelani Abass does so through reconstruction, interrogating the role of the photographic archive in Nigerian representation by dismantling the archive itself. *Casing Histories* recognises that colonial photography did not simply record reality but actively produced systems of knowledge about Nigerian subjects. By dismantling and reassembling archival materials, Abass exposes how these images were historically framed, classified, and preserved within a structurally prioritised colonial interpretation over indigenous experience.

When discussing the archive's power, British curator and cultural historian Mark Sealy writes extensively about the dangers of leaving colonial photographic histories uninterrogated. He argues that " a photograph of a racialized subject must be both located in and then de-located from the racial and political time of its making not solely articulated by its descriptive (journalistic) or aesthetic (artistic) concerns."[26] Photographs cannot be understood purely through visual analysis; they must be placed within the ideological conditions that shaped their production. Colonial photographs of Nigerians were never neutral as they were embedded in administrative, anthropological, and racial hierarchies that stabilise difference and justify imperial authority. To view such photographs without critique risks repeating the very hierarchies they helped construct. Sealy, therefore, insists on the urgency of critical intervention, warning against allowing " photography's colonial past and its cultural legacies in the present to lie unchallenged and un-agitated, or to be simply left as the given norm within the history of the medium."[27] This way of thinking reframes decolonization not as the rejection of historical images, but as an active process of disturbance, a refusal to accept the archive as complete or objective.

These statements are central to understanding the depth of decolonialism. They suggest that confronting colonial visual violence is a multi–step process: first, acknowledging the historical conditions under which images were produced, and then disrupting the meanings those conditions attempted to fix permanently. *Casing History's* archival

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[26] Mark Sealy, Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time, 2.
[27] Ibid

reconstructions aid in this act of decolonialism. Rather than preserving photographs in their original institutional order, Abass fragments, layers, and relocates them. The archive, once a space of authority, becomes open to reinterpretation and reclaimed authorship.

Professor of Humanities at Princeton University, Tina M. Campt, shares similar sentiments to Sealy in her book, *Listening to Images*, where she calls for what can be understood as a recalibration of the archive itself. Campt challenges the assumption that archival photographs are dormant records awaiting historians' interpretation. Instead, she argues that everyday photos show feelings and social connections that go beyond official or formal settings, describing vernacular images as "quiet, quotidian, " emphasising that photographs should be approached not as static documents but as living encounters with the people they depict. Through the practice she calls "listening to images,"[28] Campt proposes that viewers should pay attention to subtle gestures and expressions that reveal "alternate accounts of their subjects."[29]

Placed alongside Sealy's critique, Campt's framework deepens our understanding of Abass' work. If Sealy urges us to challenge the colonial archive by exposing its ideological foundations, Campt offers a method for doing so: slowing down our engagement with photographs and marginalised histories to allow them to emerge through attentive looking. Abass' reconstruction of archival materials in *Casing History* embodies this

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[28] Tina M. Campt, Listening to Images, 2017, 5.
[29] Ibid

process materially. By removing images from their original systems and embedding them within layered sculptural compositions, he transforms them from instruments of colonial knowledge into sites of dialogue and remembrance.

Importantly, this act of reconstruction does not erase humanisation. Colonial archives often reduced Nigerian subjects to anonymous types, stripping away individuality and lived context. *Casing History* reverses this logic by foregrounding fragmentation and incompleteness. The gaps, overlaps, and material interruptions remind viewers that history itself is partial and contested. In doing so, Abass reveals that archives are not neutral containers of truth, but evolving spaces shaped by power, memory, and interpretation.

Seen this way, Abass' work becomes a form of liberation within ethnographic photography. What was once a practice tied to colonial classification is reshaped into a way of reconnecting with history together. The archive is no longer something used to define Nigerians from the outside; it becomes a space Nigerians can return to, question, and reinterpret for themselves. By breaking apart the rigid order of the archive and encouraging viewers to look (and listen) more carefully, Abass turns photography from a tool of control into a means of reflection, understanding, and cultural healing.

Fig. 4 *Danfo Driver*, Logo Oluwamuyiwa, 2019

If Akinbiyi liberates Nigerian ethnography through quiet observation, and Abass through archival reconstruction, Logo Oluwamuyiwa does so by turning fully towards urban modernity. His work does not focus on revisiting history; instead, it explores what Nigerian life appears like as it happens in the present. Oluwamuyiwa belongs to a younger generation shaped less by direct colonial administration and more by the visual legacy it left behind. His photographs respond to inherited ways of seeing Nigeria by replacing them with images grounded in contemporary movement, infrastructure, and shared urban experience.

His series *Monochrome Lagos* focuses on the everyday structure of the city itself. Roads, buses, and congestion all become central to the composition. In *Danfo Driver* (2019), Lagos's informal transportation network becomes the space through which ethnography

is reimagined, the image centres on a driver surrounded by the dense rhythms of urban life. Yet, the driver is never isolated as a singular figure. He exists within a wider community that continues beyond the frame. Movement surrounds him as the city feels active even in stillness. This shift is important because it relocates ethnography away from the study of tradition toward the study of lived modernity and *evolution*. In their book, *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, both Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall argue that African metropolises have long been interpreted as "an object apart from the world, or as a failed or incomplete example of something else."[30] Colonial Photography reinforced this idea by presenting African environments as frozen moments rather than evolving realities. Cities, in particular, were frequently framed as incomplete or disordered versions of European modernity.

However, Oluwamuyiwa's photographs quietly challenge this notion. Lagos is not presented as chaotic environment lacking structure. Instead, order emerges through movement itself. The city organises itself through participation rather than imposed design. The danfo bus becomes central to this understanding. It is not simply a mode of transport, but a form of socialisation within an environment, as the driver, the centre of the image, is clearly embedded within his surroundings in the city of Lagos. Sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone's idea of "people as infrastructure" helps explain this condition. Simone argues that the functioning of many African cities depends on forms of

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[30] Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, "Writing the World from an African Metropolis," *in* Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*,* ed. Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, 2008, 9.

collaboration created by residents, emphasising "economic collaboration among residents marginalised and made miserable by urban life."[31] Infrastructure, in this sense, is not only material, but it is also social. *Danfo Driver* makes this visible. The driver does not represent isolation or hardship. Instead, he embodies connection. The bus links neighbourhoods, livelihoods, and daily routines. Community forms through movement. What might appear chaotic from a distance reveals itself as coordinated from within. The photograph, therefore, challenges colonial narratives that made African urban density appear as disorderly. Here, density becomes evidence of cooperation.

This focus on community fundamentally reshapes ethnographic photography. Earlier ethnographic images often separated individuals from their environments in order to classify them. Oluwamuyiwa refuses this separation, showing that identity is shaped through interaction, not just clothing or symbols. The city itself becomes a collective image. These informal systems often arise from shared resilience rather than absence. Author Mohammed-Bello Yunusa observes that these everyday efforts to address infrastructural gaps create "a politically characterised by struggle for a decent living and rights to the city."[32] Informal transportation networks, such as the Danfo system, develop from this environment. The composition of *Danfo Driver* reinforces this quiet politics. Layers of movement surround the central figure, suggesting that the image extends

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[31] AbdouMaliq Simone, “People as Infrastructure” in Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis, ed. Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, 2008, 68.
[32] Mohammed-Bello Yunusa, “Reflections on the DIY Paradigm and Urban Living in Nigeria,” in DIY Urbanism in Africa, 2020, 8.

beyond what is visible. Reflections in windows and overlapping lines from electrical poles suggest continuity rather than closure. This makes the viewer understand that this moment is only one fragment of an ongoing flow, showing that Lagos cannot be contained within a single frame.

Rather than observing the city from a distance, the viewer feels drawn into its rhythm, sensing motion even within stillness. The photograph encourages slower looking. Gradually, patterns emerge, including repeated gestures, shared spatial awareness, and the unspoken coordination that enables daily life to function. What first appears crowded begins to feel communal. Through this approach, Oluwamuyiwa extends the path set by photographers such as Akinbiyi. However, Akinbiyi moved gently through the city observing quiet encounters, Oluwamuyiwa turns the structure of urban life itself into visual language. Infrastructure becomes composition, traffic becomes rhythm, and community becomes form. The photograph no longer searches for cultural difference but reveals shared experience.

This outcome signifies a reversal of the traditional colonial visual hierarchy. Nigerian modernity is no longer measured against European standards of development or order. Lagos appears instead as a self-generating metropolis shaped by improvisation, cooperation, and collective intelligence. Modern life is not imported into the city; it is produced daily by those who inhabit it. Through this approach, Oluwamuyiwa liberates ethnographic photography in a new way. The camera categorises Nigerians or explains them to an outside observer. Instead, it moves with the city, acknowledging a community

already actively shaping its own world. Movement becomes belonging. Infrastructure becomes a relationship. The ordinary becomes enough.

Photographers such as Akinbiyi, Abass, and Oluwamuyiwa have redefined how Nigerian life is represented, making a clear breakthrough for the liberation of Nigerian ethnographic photography. As more Nigerian photographers reclaim authorship over identity, memory, and modernity, their work increasingly enters Western museums, archives, and exhibition platforms that were historically complicit in producing colonial ways of seeing. This movement creates a new tension: images that challenge colonial narratives are now interpreted within institutions built on those narratives, and the question therefore shifts from who makes the image to who frames its meaning.

Chapter 3: Institutional Sight and the Politics of Curatorial Power

Even when images themselves resist colonial narratives, the institutional structures that display them may continue to shape perception through inherited imperial curatorial bias. This is not simply an argument about individual curators or single exhibitions. It is an argument about these institutions' role in shaping knowledge and, therefore, representation. Author Ariella Azoulay's ideas of photography and visual culture are useful here. In her book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, she proposes that photography constitutes a political space formed through the encounter between three parties: the photographed person, the photographer, and the spectator. She writes that "the widespread use of cameras… has created a new form of encounter… opening new possibilities of political action and forming new conditions for its visibility."[33] That sentence points to the hopeful side of photography: it can open political space beyond borders and give people new ways to be visible and to act.

Azoulay also insists that the meaning of a photograph does not sit only in the object itself. Photographic meaning emerges from the relations surrounding the image. She cautions that these relations "are not mediated through a sovereign power and are not limited to the bounds of a nation state."[34]That is important because it suggests that photography can generate new civic relations that cross national lines. At the same time, however, her theory forces us to ask what happens when photographs travel into institutions that act

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[33] Ariella Azoulay, The Civil Contract of Photography, 2008, 22.
[34] Ariella Azoulay, op.cit. 22

like sovereign powers. Western museums have long performed sovereign functions in the realm of cultural meaning, organising via authorising interpretation, form standards, and regulating access. When Nigerian ethnographic images enter such spaces, the civil contract Azoulay describes risks being partially re-embedded by institutional authority.

Azoulay's additional reflection on institutions deepens this argument. In an interview about the making of her book, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, she remarked that "Imperial materialised in institutions: archives, museums, states."[35] This short statement is crucial for understanding contemporary museums. It asks us to look beyond individual goodwill and to inspect structural continuities. A western museum that now exhibits non-Western work might be progressive in intention, but if it remains built on the material logics of imperial collecting, classification, and display, simply placing new images on its walls does not, by itself, change the deeper epistemic conditions that shape how people are seen and known.

Understanding this is especially useful when we examine large Western institutions whose origins and resources are tightly bound to powerful economic networks. The Museum of Modern Art in New York is a case in point. MoMA was founded in 1929 by Lillie P. Bliss, Mary Quinn Sullivan, and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller as an institution devoted to modern art.[36]From early on, the museum relied on elite philanthropic networks for its

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[35] Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, “Potential History – Unlearning Imperialism” Interview by Jadaliyya, cited February 2026 https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40300

[36] Mission statement from Museum of Modern Art, New York, cited February 2026 https://www.moma.org/about/mission-statement/

growth. The Rockefeller family, in particular, provided crucial financial and institutional support as MoMA expanded and gained influence.[37] That history matters. As public health advocate, E. Richard Brown argued that the Rockefeller public health philanthropies "carried on the imperialist tradition, despite their humanitarian outward appearances."[38] Whether or not the founders intended to act as imperial extenders, the institutions they created operate within long histories of economic and geopolitical influence. Those histories shape the museum's practices of collecting, attribution, exhibition design, and global circulation of works.

The *New Photography* exhibitions have long positioned themselves as the "main channel"[39] for emerging, contemporary photographic practices with MoMA. Specifically, in their 2023 edition, their inclusion and sole focus on Nigerian photographers seemed like a long-overdue yet progressive recognition of African countries' centrality to contemporary photographic discourse. Curated by Oluremi C. Onabanjo, the exhibition focused on seven artists connected to Lagos, Nigeria: Kelani Abass, Akinbode Akinbiyi, Yagazie Emezi, Amanda Iheme, Abraham Oghobase, Karl Ohiri, and Logo Oluwamuyiwa, and was the first iteration of the *New Photography* series to centre a

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[37] Museum of Modern Art, New York, Arts and Culture, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, cited February 2026 https://www.rbf.org/about/our-history/timeline/museum-modern-art

[38] E. Richard Brown, "Public Health in Imperialism: Early Rockefeller Programs at Home and Abroad," *American Journal of Public Health* 66, no. 9, September 1976, 897.

[39] Statement on the origins of the New Photography exhibitions, Museum of Modern Art, New York, cited February 2026 https://www.moma.org/calendar/groups/1

specific global art scene and to foreground living West African photographers.[40] The exhibition anchored its narrative within the city of Lagos, as a social, spatial, and historical environment. Photography functioned as a narrative tool through which Nigerian artists engaged with everyday life, material conditions, and collective memory.

On the surface, this represents a significant institutional shift away from the marginalisation of Nigerian photographers within major Western collections. Within the broader trajectory traced through Nigerian photographic history, such inclusion confirms the success of Nigerian photographers' long fight for representational autonomy from colonial ideas. That visibility matters. It can produce new opportunities for acquisition, scholarship, and public attention. However, visibility alone is not neutral. In his book, *Ways of Seeing*, English novelist John Berger reminds us that "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe."[41] Berger's insight complicates what might otherwise appear to be straightforward progress coming from the MoMA and its inclusion of Nigerian photographers in *New Photography* (2023).

On one hand, the featured Nigerian photographers clearly resist colonial ethnographic tropes. Their images foreground everyday life, archival fragmentation, and contemporary urban modernity, strategies that directly counter the historically imposed gaze on African subjects. As previously seen, Akinbode Akinbiyi's quiet street scenes, for instance, refuse

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[40] New Photography 2023, exhibition page, Museum of Modern Art, cited January 2026 https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5525

[41] John Berger, Ways of Seeing, 1972, 8.

spectacle in favour of a gentle presence. His perspective of Lagos is not an anthropological site, but a lived environment shaped by memory and mundane encounters. Similarly, Kelani Abass' archival reconsolidates the authority of colonial ideas by fragmenting and re-layering historical materials. Logo Oluwamuyiwa's urban studies push Nigerian ethnography fully into the present, emphasising infrastructure, congestion, and modern circulation. Yet Berger encourages us to ask a deeper question: how are audiences being prepared to see this work? If viewers have been historically conditioned by colonial imagery that framed African subjects as ethnographic, exotic, or peripheral to modernity, those visual habits do not simply disappear when new photographs enter the gallery.

This tension echoes Azoulay's warning that citizenship within photographic space is unevenly distributed in *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Citizens, she notes, are often governed together with noncitizens yet "cannot be equally governed if they are governed with others who are not governed as equals."[42] When these non-Western images are displayed in a major Western Museum, they are at risk of being read through pre-existing frameworks. That risk does not mean a curator like Oluremi Onabanjo (who is of Nigerian descent and would have a better understanding of creating an exhibition so regionally specific) lacks good intentions. It means that institutions like MoMA can still carry older habits in how they work, through wall labels, catalogues, exhibition order, promotional

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[42] Ariella Azoulay, The Civil Contract of Photography, 2008, 22 – 23.

language, and decisions about what they collect. All of this influences how the viewer finds meaning. This is where the concept of curatorial primitivism is integral. Colin Rhodes, an expert in Fine Art and Art History, explores the concept of primitivism in modern art in his book, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, as he writes that primitivism "does not imply any direct dialogue between the West and its 'Others'…it refers to the *attraction* to groups of people who were outside Western society."[43] This concept of primitivism shows that this way of treating non-Westerns as raw resources for Western consumption perpetuates a certain exotic spectacle of African artists. In contemporary settings, this primitivism can appear more subtle. It may take the form of surprising an audience with 'discovered' artists, or framing work primarily in terms of cultural origin rather than formal or conceptual conditions. The work is included, but visibility is still conditional on the museum's terms.

To understand how curatorial institutions shape reception, it helps to contrast Western institutions with non–Western ones. LagosPhoto Festival provides a productive nuance. Founded in 2010 by Azu Nwagbogu through the African Artists' Foundation, LagosPhoto was created to reshape how African photography is seen and circulated. When being interviewed by *The British Guardian*, Nwagbogu explained that part of the festival's mission is to challenge "Afro pessimism,"[44] a way of seeing Africa that reduces its visual

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[43] Colin Rhodes, Primitivism and Modern Art, 2005, 8.
[44]Sean O'Hagan, "'We Have Lost a Limb': Azu Nwagbogu, the Visionary Curator Bringing African Art Home," The Guardian, November 10, 2020, cited February 2026 https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/nov/10/azu-nwagbogu-visionary-curator-african-art-lagos-photo-festival

life to suffering and lack. From its inception, LagosPhoto showed that African photographers are creators of knowledge, not just distant subjects.

Their 2022 exhibition, titled *Remember Me — Liberated Bodies, Charged Objects*, makes this curatorial stance explicit. *The Guardian Nigeria* described the exhibition as an invitation for viewers to "challenge the subjectivity of (colonial) archives, build and populate sustainable new modes guided by ancestral and contemporary wisdom."[45]This curatorial framing is significant as the exhibition's programming reframes photography as an active epistemic tool, with the festival's management also noting that participating artists engage "the language of photography to evolve a new language of engagement."[46] The festival thereby treats photography less as frozen evidence and more as a living practice that shapes memory, identity, and political imagination.

Additionally, it emphasises the festival's temporal ambition. Nwagbogu frames LagosPhoto as a platform that uses "the power of photography to bring the age-long into the present time… to show how photography can collapse past into present and future."[47] This mode of thinking resists the colonial habit of freezing African subjects in a supposed premodern state. It recognises that contemporary Lagos and its photographic practices

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[45]Eniola Daniel, “In Remember Me—Liberated Bodies, Charged Objects, Festival Interrogates Lens-Based Media Influence,” The Guardian Nigeria, November 27, 2022 , cited February 2026 https://guardian.ng/art/in-remember-me-liberated-bodies-charged-objects-festival-interrogates-lens-based-media-influence/

[46]Chris Onuoha, “Lagos Photo Festival 2022: When Images Recount Ordeal, Speak to Future,” Vanguard, November 7, 2022, cited February 2026 https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/11/lagos-photo-festival-2022-when-images-recount-ordeal-speak-to-future/

[47] Ibid

are both historically informed and looking ahead. The festival's institutional shape supports these aims. LagosPhoto works across public spaces in the city and engages local audiences through outdoor installations, talks, workshops, and educational programs[48]. Because it works in public and indigenous contexts, LagosPhoto produces a different kind of spectatorship. Viewers encounter photography within lived urban environments where the social life that produced the images is already present. The festival's programming also explicitly addresses questions of memory, restitution, and archive, with the African Artists' Foundation noting that its curatorial approach examines "the photographer's influence in shaping, archiving, and ordering the stories of communities and individual identities."[49]

Putting LagosPhoto alongside MoMA shows how institutional context matters. Both exhibitions feature Nigerian photographers who push back against colonial frames through their image-making, but the curatorial approaches differ. MoMA's exhibition encourages viewers to see Lagos through a Western institution’s perspective that remains rooted in traditional institutional practices. LagosPhoto's approach starts with a local, postcolonial critique and places photographs within the context of city life and community memory. This creates a different way of understanding. At MoMA, visitors may

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[48] Kalpana Sunder, “LagosPhoto 2023: Nigeria & Benin,” The British Journal, October 2023, cited February 2026 https://www.1854.photography/2023/10/lagosphoto-2023-nigeria-benin/
[49] African Artists’ Foundation, “LagosPhoto 2023 Press,” cited February 2026 https://africanartists.org/lagosphoto-2023-press/

be influenced by assumptions from previous Western displays. At LagosPhoto, viewers are more likely to be local people who already see Nigerian autonomy as normal.

This comparative analysis provides a practical outline of decolonisation. It is more than inclusion; museums must change not only who they show, but also how they present work and share interpretive authority. Practical changes include being open about provenance, writing wall texts together with artists and communities, creating community-led programs, borrowing works from Nigerian institutions instead of permanently acquiring them, co-curating with local curators and artists, and investing in Nigerian museums and archives. These steps help move interpretive power away from Western institutions and toward a more shared form of authority.

Emphasising the artist's voice by including catalogue and press statements that draw on local scholarship, and implementing interpretive programming that foregrounds local narratives reduce the risk that inclusive displays reproduce older habits. Publications and acquisition practices should be transparent about provenance and acquisition conditions so that museums do not simply absorb colonial archives without critical engagement.

There should also be more reciprocal exchanges and circulation. When works travel from Lagos to New York, for example, it should not be only a Western institution legitimising it. Loans can be made into partnerships that involve co-authored catalogues, shared exhibitions for local institutions, joint conservation training, and funding for local display facilities. In other words, visibility can be shared rather than kept limited.

Digital platforms also open new possibilities. Museums and other similar institutions can publish rich, multilingual online provenance records and invite commentary and interpretation from communities in Nigeria and the diaspora. These platforms can host recorded artist talks in which photographers discuss their own practice and can provide access to high-quality images for Nigerian schools and universities. That helps create multiple viewpoints rather than a single dominant perspective. However, we must not oversimplify or glorify technology. Online access alone is not enough. The deeper issue still remains institutional. Azoulay's reminder that imperial material is imperialised in institutions demands that museums uncover how their collections were formed, query acquisitional histories, and confess complicities. Only then can curatorial inclusion stop being symbolic and start being redemptive.

Another factor to consider is the audience's level of education. Museums can reframe how they prepare visitors to look. John Berger's point about conditioned seeing implies that education is central. Programs that encourage a slower, intentional way of looking at images, academic seminars that include regionally specific African photographic histories, and public talks that place exhibitions in both global and local contexts can help change how people interpret the work. When an institution foregrounds learning in its displays, the viewer is less likely to associate images from African countries (like Nigeria) with pre-existing narratives. Additionally, institutions' art history and curatorial studies should integrate photographic histories from African countries such as Nigeria, rather than treating them as optional. This would gradually change who becomes curators, critics, and conservators and, over time, reshape institutional culture.

Time is of the essence in this matter, as Nigerian photographers have already remade the ethnographic practice through photography, within and beyond the nation. They have shown that the camera can work against colonial logics and for dignity, memory, and urban life. But the meaning of their work continues to shift depending on where and how it is shown. Azoulay's 'civil contract' offers a hopeful framework, suggesting that photography can foster shared civic relations across borders. Berger's reminder about conditioned seeing grounds us in the human reality that while viewers come with bias, they also have the choice to correct it. LagosPhoto shows that when exhibitions are shaped within the continent, there is less need to translate the work for outsiders and more focus on local authorship.

The immediate task for Western curators, scholars, and institutions is as follows: continue to support Nigerian and other photographers' (within African countries) visibility on global platforms and interrogate the institutional arrangements that shape how visibility is read. That means changing acquisition practices, curatorial language, programming, education, and the distribution of interpretive authority. This will result in future exhibitions that not only showcase photography from African countries, like Nigeria, but also let it speak for itself.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how modern Nigerian photographers have changed how Nigerian life is seen in images and how organizations influence what these images mean. Throughout the chapters, a main issue has come up. Nigerian photographers have made good progress in challenging colonial ways of showing images in their work. But the places where their photos are displayed are still unbalanced and influenced by old imperial relations.

One clear finding is that current Nigerian photography shows strong independence in style and ideas. With a liberating foundation brought by Solomon Osagie Alonge, photographers like Akinbode Akinbiyi, Kelani Abass, Logo Oluwamuyiwa, and others now resist old colonial ideas by focusing on daily life, exploring archives, and highlighting infrastructure. Instead of showing Nigeria as just an object to study, these photographers want to show its complexity, changing moments, and real city life. Their photos do more than fight stereotypes; they make these stereotypes harder to believe.

But this study also shows that fighting stereotypes in images doesn't automatically mean the meaning is free from influence. Drawing on Ariella Azoulay's ideas, this thesis shows that meaning depends on how and where people view images. Western museums like the Museum of Modern Art in New York still hold power in deciding what images mean. Even when curators have good intentions, how they organise exhibitions or write about the imagery can subtly put Nigerian photographers back into familiar primitive narratives.

The case study of New Photography 2023 clearly shows this mixed situation. On one hand, it's good that a major museum recognizes Nigerian photography. On the other hand, such recognition can also reinforce the museum's authority as the main place that decides what modern photography is. The bigger question is: who really controls what these images mean? In contrast, the LagosPhoto Festival 2022 shows how local exhibitions can share this power differently. LagosPhoto doesn't see Nigerian photography as new or unfamiliar. It accepts Nigerian presence as a main idea. Its way of showing photos and engaging with visitors helps reduce the cultural gap common in Western shows. This doesn't mean LagosPhoto is outside global power structures, but it shows that local organization can change how viewers experience the work.

All these findings show that changing the way photography is seen is uneven and ongoing. Nigerian photographers have already changed the visual scene through their work. The slower change is happening within the institutions themselves. If Azoulay's idea that old imperial ideas are stored in archives and museums is true, real change needs to happen at a basic structural level, not just in what is shown.

Some important questions come from this research. First, how can Western museums go beyond just including Nigerian work and actually share control over its meaning? Second, what kind of long-term partnership between African and Western museums can avoid just taking and displaying work without giving back? Third, how can curatorial training incorporate more African photographic history as a core part, not just an afterthought?

Another question relates to audience reception. While this study has focused primarily on production and display, further research could examine how different publics (within Nigeria, across the diaspora, and in Western contexts) interpret these images. Understanding reception would deepen analysis of whether curatorial shifts are meaningfully altering perception or simply diversifying visual consumption.

There are also important gaps that future research could address. This research has focused on a specific group of photographers to build a clear analytical through-line. However, Nigerian photography is far broader and more regionally diverse than any single study can capture. Additional research might expand to include more women photographers or vernacular users, whose work is also reshaping the field in new ways. Furthermore, deeper engagement with Nigerian-based exhibition histories and curatorial practices would help rebalance the heavy focus often placed on Western institutions.

Despite these limitations, this research makes it clear that Nigerian ethnographic photography is a crucial site for understanding how visual culture participates in broader concepts of knowledge, power, and self-representation. The photographers examined here do more than document Nigerian life; they actively produce new visual dialogue through which Nigerian modernity, memory, and identity is comprehensible. The urgent task moving forward is not simply to make Nigerian photography more visible but to ensure that visibility does not remain structured by colonial habits of looking. In this context, decolonization requires sustained attention to who frames and circulates images, and who is authorized to interpret them. Only by addressing these complex questions can

photography (and its institutions) contribute to the fuller liberation of Nigerian visual self-representation.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1
Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge, The Earl of Plymouth Visiting Oba Akenzua II, Benin City, Nigeria, 1938
View: https://hyperallergic.com/rare-portraits-of-kings-and-commoners-from-19th-century-nigeria/

Fig. 2
Akinbode Akinbiyi, Bar Beach, Victoria Island, Lagos, from Sea Never Dry, 2006
View: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/434678

Fig. 3
Kelani Abass, Casing History, Spilling Memories 1, 2022
View:
https://www.moma.org/collection/works/434635#:~:text=An%20artist%20who%20“engages%20archives,many%20African%20countries%20gained%20independence.

Fig. 4
Logo Oluwamuyiwa, Danfo Driver, 2019
View:
https://smocontemporaryart.com/artworks/33-oluwamuyiwa-logo-danfo-driver-2019/