



APPRECIATING ‘OKHAI OJEIKERE’S PHOTOGRAPHY

By **Tam Fiofori**

A Review of the monograph J. D. ‘Okhai Ojeikere published by C. C. A. Lagos, at its launching at the Metropolitan Club, Victoria Island, Lagos, on Thursday 15th October, 2015.

The great Chicago Blues and Rock ‘n Roll guitarist-singer Bo Diddley had a hit single entitled *You Can’t Judge A Book by Looking at the Cover*. However, in the case of this book *J. D. ‘Okhai Ojeikere* under review, its cover; a combination of a stunning Black & White photograph of a very ingenious thread-made hairstyle and the imaginative graphic design faithfully allude to what to expect in the inside pages of the book.

The spontaneous verdict arrived at, by looking at the cover of this book, is re-affirmed by a cursory flip-through of the inside pages. This verdict, is that the monograph *J. D. ‘Okhai Ojeikere* is an excellently produced book; particularly in terms of the Ojeikere images that are very faithfully reproduced and, in some cases improved, in this extraordinary book.

In many ways, this is no surprise, as this book confirms Bisi Silva and CCA’s regard for and, pursuit of the highest level of creativity and excellence in the arts. Both Bisi Silva and CCA, therefore, deserve to be highly commended for

producing this excellent and educative book on J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere and his body of work.

Paradoxically, this book, however, in some way is definitely a book of redemption for Bisi Silva herself; in terms of her evaluation and curatorial respect for Nigerian photographers and their work. It is also an acknowledgement of Bisi's sincere willingness to explore, learn and, open her eyes wider and keener, so to say; to what was literarily happening right under her nose. By some quirk of coincidence, Bisi Silva's CCA was set up in the same building as a professional photography laboratory run by Ojeikere's daughter-in-law and, patronised by Ojeikere himself to produce his new large-sized digital prints.

I will digress a bit here and delve into history and, my personal and professional involvement with the late Okhai Ojeikere for a period of well over twenty years. As Bisi always reminds me, Pa Ojeikere was your friend. Indeed he was a very good friend and, a friend to many other people too. Such was his nature.

It is a fact that the trio of me, Jide Adeniyi-Jones and Don Barber discovered Okhai Ojeikere when we were in the process of forming the Photographers' Association of Nigeria-PAN. We needed a father-figure role model for the position of President of PAN.

We had approached the late Peter Obe and Matthew Faji and, both turned us down. When we however approached Okhai Ojeikere, he graciously and immediately accepted and, became our distinguished President. Modest, extremely open-to-all, he was a true leader that brought calm and genuine comradeship to PAN which had a membership of over fifty. He got to meet very many younger photographers in different genres he wouldn't have known and, in turn, we all marvelled and became more appreciative of his great body of work.

When he had an early exhibition of his Hairstyles at the Goethe Institute in Lagos, I contributed some text for the catalogue. His big break came in 1998 when at the suggestion of Pascal Ott, the French curator-publisher Andre Magnin came to see me and requested I take him to Nigerian photographers whose work he could publish in the mould of Mali's master photographer Malick Sidibe. When I took Magnin to meet Ojeikere in his Ketu residence, Ojeikere calmly went into his office and brought out huge books containing

thousands of neatly-arranged and meticulously itemised contact sheets of Hairstyles, Headgears and Traditional Cultural Festivals.

Magnin was completely bowled over and speechless as he admiringly looked at thousands of Ojeikere's photographs on Hairstyles in particular. In a mellow mood of non-verbal communication; it seemed that Ojeikere was telling Magnin, "I have been waiting for you for a long time, now make your choice." My respect for Ojeikere was magnified many fold; seeing the sheer volume of his stunning body of work dating back to the sixties, so well catalogued and professionally presented. I also recognised a bed-fellow who shared my philosophy of "first do the work, it's time to be widely seen and acknowledged will surely come!"

Naturally, Magnin made an offer and, wanted an immediate deal. He wanted a few prints which he would show his principal in Paris and, offered the possibility of doing a book on Hairstyles and a string of exhibitions worldwide. He dropped a few thousand US dollars as a deposit to sweeten the deal. And so, Ojeikere's first monograph entitled Photographs organised by Andre Magnin was published in 2000 accompanied by a solo exhibition at the Foundation Cartier for Contemporary Art in Paris.

I recall vividly that when Pa Ojeikere initially had doubts about Magnin's offer in 1998, I told him, "let your photographs have a new breath of life beyond your office and library." They certainly have done so in a big way across the world. And when Magnin came for Ojeikere's funeral in Lagos in 2014; though he was heartbroken he proudly informed Amaize Ojeikere, Pa Ojeikere's manager that his father's work was now on permanent display in the section for World Master Photographers at the Museum of Modern Art-MOMA in New York City.

It is befitting that the second monograph on Ojeikere; *J. D. Okhai Ojeikere*, which we are celebrating today, is published by the Centre for Contemporary Art – CCA and edited by Bisi Silva.

This book has come fifteen years after the first book. In between, Ojeikere's work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions in Finland, Switzerland, Germany, France, Japan, Austria, America, Great Britain and of course Nigeria. Magnin and Silva have been responsible for this trajectory of exposure which has culminated in well-deserved world fame for Ojeikere and his body of work.

For some Nigerian photographers like me, Silva and CCA was some sort of an enigma at the beginning. We wondered why she preferred to bring in lots of foreign photographers to come and talk down to Nigerians as experts; especially as the tradition of photography in Nigeria was over a hundred years old and so-called local photographers like J. A. Green and, many others after him, had been internationally acclaimed.

Like I mentioned earlier she finally saw the light and, discovered that in local parlance, “what she was looking for in Sokoto was right there in her sokoto.” It certainly took Bisi Silva some time; with help from some Nigerian photographers to fully appreciate the relevance and brilliance of Okhai Ojeikere’s body of work.

In examining the genesis of this book; the events and directions that eventually led to its production, are directly the results of the curatorial excellence in the many major exhibitions organised by Bisi Silva herself and those she did in collaboration with other curators. This book is an extension of the first book by Andre Magnin as both of them give due prominence to Ojeikere’s work and, in this monograph in particular, much care has been taken to expose Ojeikere’s versatility and stamp of confidence in various genres of photography.

This book is the first of CCA’s publishing initiative. It is a 304-page book with 220 black and white images and the odd colour photograph. Its contents include a Foreword by Bisi Silva, Founder and Director of CCA, Lagos, an Introduction: Framing the Moment by Aura Seikkula and Bisi Silva; Shooting Stars: From the WCA to Lagos Island by Erin Haney; Ojeikere and the Architectures of Photography by Ikem Stanley Okoye; sections of specific images on Architecture, Headgear, Hairstyles, Portraits and People.

Other essays are Turning Heads: Process and Production in Ojeikere’s Hairstyles by Antwan I. Byrd; Sites and Lives: J. D, ‘Okhai Ojeikere’s Portraits of Modernity by Bisi Silva and J. D. Ókhai Ojeikere in conversation with photographers Don Barber and Jide Adeniyi-Jones.

Then there are very informative and useful sections – Index of Images; Installation Views; Chronology of Ojeikere’s Life and Artistic Career; Bibliography, and Public and Private Collections; Exhibition History; Contributors and Acknowledgements.

The contents and chapters make this book a very well-thought-out encyclopaedic document on the master photographer J. D. Okhai Ojeikere. It is therefore a must-have book; a leisurely coffee-table book that offers beautiful photographic images for the entire family to admire over time. In this sense it also continues a new format of the photo-album which conveniently serves the age-old tradition of entertaining visitors.

It is a source of information for scholars, artists and the general public, which should be stocked in public and school libraries as well as homes. It is the ideal research document as well as a testimony of Nigerian photography as great art!

As she states in the Foreword Silva informs that the preparation, commitment and collaboration for this monograph started in 2009 when CCA's formal relationship with Ojeikere started. The catalyst for this collaboration was the invitation to organise an exhibition in Mumbai, India. Then came the 2010 CCA Lagos exhibition *Sartorial Moments and the Nearness of Yesterday*.

CCA's most extensive collaboration with Ojeikere occurred in 2011 when 200 Ojeikere images were presented across three large gallery spaces in an exhibition *Moments of Beauty* co-curated with Aura Seikkula at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki Finland. In many ways this exhibition which featured the diverse genres in which Ojeikere had worked was the guiding blueprint for this monograph. In my film *J.D.Okhai Ojeikere: Master Photographer*, made in 2013, he gushed with pride about this exhibition in which he was the star attraction and was opened by the President of Finland.

Bisi Silva's essays in the book, including that co-written with Seikkula, reflect her understanding of the progression in Ojeikere's growth in creativity and the expansion of his photographic horizon. She fluidly connects Ojeikere's photographic journey within the socio-political dynamics of Nigeria during his six-decade long career.

Unfortunately, I find the other essays a bit tedious and overloaded with art criticism jargon. They are pre-occupied like European art critics and historians and, their Nigerian counterparts in the Diaspora, with definitions of contemporary and modern art and where to fit Ojeikere's work within these definitions. They re-emphasise my belief that in their trade words must overwhelm images; a position I disagree with.

Erin Haney's pre-occupation with speed and photography is quaint, especially her line that, 'Ojeikere realised long ago that his lens couldn't stop this creative and destructive momentum- he could only use it to gauge the speed of change.' Ikem Okoye in his interesting comparisons between Ojeikere's work and architectural design and space raises the question of whether photography in Nigeria can approach the realm of art.

Ojeikere in my film, categorically states that, "Photography is Art and, only God can control the art instinct in you." He also states that his inspiration is a divine intervention which explains why he decided to take photographs of everything to do with culture and life in Nigeria; including nudes. "The woman figure is beautiful, it is a work of art by God," Ojeikere says.

In his photographic journey from a rural setting to city skyscrapers, Ojeikere in his 60-year career as a mostly self-taught yet assured and excellent professional photographer, he had a fixed-minded ambition to become a master photographer. He was a pioneer in advertising photography.

Hence for me, the most interesting chapter in this book is the long conversation Ojeikere had with the photographers Adeniyi-Jones and Barber. Jones noted for his lyricism and Barber with his passion for technical mastery are able to guide Ojeikere to talk about photography which was his life.

I recommend this book purely on the strength of Ojeikere's images. You will never tire looking at them as they reveal new things at every look. They pose oblique questions. Who were the hairdressers who originally fashioned these spectacular hairstyles? Why have thread-made hairstyles disappearing? Is it because they give the wearers headaches and how has the change from these traditional hairstyles to modern processed hair affected our economy and the trade itself? There are more questions than answers.

Ojeikere's work is deceptive in its supposed simplicity. Forget all the theories about framing and gaze. Just admire his photographs in which we can see our grandmothers, mothers, sisters through the ages; their addiction to the fashion of their time and their proud boldness in coming out to be photographed.

Pa Ojeikere jokingly told me when I was making my film on him, "Tam you are making my visual obituary." He died unexpectedly less than a year after that. Bisi Silva concludes her foreword by writing that, 'Finally, one of the biggest inspirations for pursuing this book was Ojeikere himself. His support

and encouragement over the past five years contributed significantly to the project's ultimate realisation and it is for this and more that this book is dedicated to his memory.'

Pa J.D.Okai Ojeikere was a great man who did great work. Support this book and keep OJEIKERE and his work for ever alive. Thank you..

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