

International Journal of Arts and Humanities
(IJAH)

Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 5(1), S/No 16, January, 2016:13-27

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v5i1.2>

**Drivers Dexterity: George Osodi's Oeuvre on Safety on the
Nigerian Road**

Graves, P. Nelson, Ph.D.

Department of Fine and Applied Arts
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt,
E-mail: pelgraves@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper attempted a reading of the Nigerian condition using the censure of images culled from an exhibition by the Nigerian photographer George Osodi. Drawing attention to the shapes of the images and imageries that constitute the profile of the condition of a major infrastructure, the road and transportation, I have employed these as vestigial to a narrative that embodies diverse contexts. These inflect the identity and history of the Nigerian nation in general. Using the photographic image as the censure on which the fleeting memoriam of the discourse of the day to day lives of *the real people* of Nigeria an essay ensues: “*Art makes the experiences of time spatially perceptible by forcing what is ever fleeting into the calm framework of a symbol*” (Beat Wyss, 1998) Reflecting, therefore, on the consequent rhetoric's inherent in the *linguistic/pictorial/cultural turn* and the techniques deployed by the photographer to affect presence, I have engaged a reading of the existentialist world view that has shaped the mentality of the real people, hence their conditions of life in contrast to that of the privileged few; in the utilisation of a derelict infrastructure. The image is, therefore, utilised as the symbolic scaffolding that holds the story. The symbols inflect an identity and history. In furtherance of the employment of symbols, I have drawn

attention to the place of the photo and the phono-centric images as invaluable synergy in the actualisation of a synchronic analysis. Drawing attention to the *'pains of others'* this essay explores what is to be done.

Key words: G.O's oeuvre, driver's dexterity, shapes/images, "the real people"

Since its invention, photography has been repeatedly promoted as a realism offering an immediate and transparent identity between images and referent. Employing the language of deconstruction, we might say that photography's constitutive discourses have framed it within "metaphysics of presence" in that, for these discourses, photography is a metaphysical project founded upon a desire for presence secured through an unmediated transcription of the real. Posited in this way as a mode of representation that most readily replicates an eidetic perception (as an identity of picture and perceptum), photography might be cited as a paradigmatic instance of logo centrism. (David Phillips, 1998, p.155)

This essay engages in a quest for explication and in an enquiry asks the question: how photography in the narrative discourse of Nigerian life serves as an agent of truth. In furtherance of truth what is the place of the photographic image within what may be alluded to as the *"linguistic/pictorial/cultural turn"*. As David Phillips puts it succinctly, the images capacity to signify cannot be underrated. This I think is the grounding upon which to foist the mainstays of George Osodi's (henceforth, G O/ G O's) photographs in this essay.

This essay, therefore, initiates an overview in which a brief definition of photography within its traditional dispositions is drawn attention to; telling a story using the visual and making critical statements. Furthermore G O's oeuvre is explicated in the light of recent critical scholarship as the noted Nigerian art historian and critic Frank Ugiomoh points out in the catalogue, "George Osodi's photography embodies narratives of diverse contexts that inflect the identity and history of the Nigerian nation in general" (Ugiomoh, 2009). Hence, an exposition of plausible inflections of meanings in G O's work would be evaluated here. A reading of specific G O's works selected from the exhibition *Driver's Dexterity* has inspired this commentary. Similar social criticisms are a commonplace diet in the contemporary phonocentric media in Nigeria. The selection showcased in *Driver's Dexterity* is a brief account taken from GO's book of images *The Devil's Dexterity*. The images focus on the use and abuse of the road in Nigeria. The photographic images are hereby perceived as symbols in one medium pursuing the same messages of social criticism and discourse. These works of art document the way the *real people* (as G O often refers to ordinary folks) react to their environment in the course of the everyday, both passively and actively. Art produces world images! In the ensuing analysis, therefore, G O's *oeuvre* is framed as a necessary

censure; in fact, a template upon which to foist an accounting: the anesthetising contours of the day to day world of the *real people* of my country with unnerving distance and sobriety.

Nigerians and the tabloid presses of their country are deeply “talkative” on the condition of the country. From the Pepper Soup joint to the Beer Parlor; and even to the very citadel of power, Aso Rock, the knack for rudderless commentary is commonplace. The issues that engage these talkativeness consist of matters of the very existential day to day national survival, often times culminating to the more austere: matters of the celebration of life and death. Yet, of what value is photography to *the real people*? The photograph is of the most lasting value beyond the tabloid texts at evaluating the very day to day as the subject of this essay will show. The photograph is a relief from the vexatious reflections in the tedium of the talkative discourse of the Nigerian condition. (Cf. Wole Soyinka, 2005)

G. O’s script thunders down to the public, to use a phrase credited to Theodore Adorno (1999), “*like a sergeant major to a new recruit!*” The share dimensions of the images in their plain frames jut out billboard-like in any normal exhibition space. These frames rumble down the sharp message of the reality of the condition of the Nigerian road and its use and abuse. Each picture speaks a thousand words! This art form meets and addresses the Nigerian elite; the provincials and unlettered are simply pawns, mere victims in the chequered experiences of their own country. Time and space are the two basic means of experiencing history. The message is *writ large* on the pane of each frame; “the Road,” “irresponsible citizenry on the prowl,” in spite of the law and even in the very presence of the law enforcing agent. This is blatantly reflected in the photograph entitled *Home Coming Kano* depicts (fig. 1). The viewer confronts each picture firstly as a rude reminder of the reality that he/she languishes in. However, simultaneously a fantasy about the real situation as it downs on him/her; the exposition jolts the viewer to the realm of fictionalisation. In the process a narrative of the discourse of the messages of each picture ensues. By recognising what has been defined by time, the artist G O assumes his own space in the discourse of the Nigerian condition. This initiative of G O approximates to a reflection on the artist and the value of his/her work. Thus, these photographic works of art capture for posterity the state of things in Nigeria. G O seizes the commonplace experiences of real people. These are transient in the existential every day. He utilises the camera to capture these twilight moments; and makes them significant. Thusly, he crystallizes them for posterity (Beat Wyss, 1999). G O’s photography as an art form makes the perception and experiences of Nigerian time spatially discernible by an act of coercion that forces the event the camera has captured, which otherwise may have gone unnoticed (in the Nigerian existential indifference to fate and memory) into a composed agenda or a symbol.

The symbol is the tangible referent that finds signification in the framework of

time and space, the two basic means of experiencing history. This photographer-artist addresses the cosmopolitans not provincials. G O castigates the elite for the ruin and the mess the ordinary folks are mired in. It is the survival of the fittest for those who dare muster the audacity to face harsh survival; for example, the images *Home Coming Kano 2007* (fig.1) and *Katsina- Sokoto 2007* (fig. 2); *Agege 2006* (fig. 3), and *Goods Only 2008* (fig.4); *Oshodi Market 2007*(fig.5) - all a surfeit of images reflecting the condition of the polity with respect to this matter of a key infrastructure: “the road” and “transportation”. The rude and ordinary folks, pitiable, are at the mercy of the crashing fate of death and disfigurement. It is the thrashing of the elements when the inevitable happens on “the road.” Thus G O’s work is for the gifted community consisting of *aficionados* and collectors, the *élan vital*! These are the real culprits that the images address. It is from their ranks that the oppressor class emerges.

However, a good picture is worth a thousand words, as the Chinese say. The censure of photography is an invaluable tool in accessing the phenomenology of the condition of a key infrastructure like the road and an accounting for the lives of the “*real people*” that face it on a day to day basis. This essay, therefore, employs a reading of G O’s perspectives for an accounting of the dynamics, firstly through a general analogy of the themes and ideas that underlie his images. In fact, through an iconographic analysis of five specific images mentioned above I hope to establish access to a reading of the lives of the *real people* in the Nigerian condition.

A Reading of Osodi’s Oeuvre

In the foreword to the exhibition *Driver’s Dexterity* (2010) that inspired this essay it is made explicit that; “George has an eye for a story. The story he tells now is one of intervention and faith. He captures the dramatic in an artistic, even romantic fashion. There are tales of hope and survival, bravery and bewildering actions, labels and stereotypes and attitudes to our own life outcomes.” Most graphically G O, in the same text (4) starkly states: “*Driver’s Dexterity* was born out of curiosity having survived a number of notable road accidents; one particularly very serious. It is a body of work.more conceptual framework than previous documentary work. I explore the vulnerability of life as a contrast to the tragic beauty of the landscapes and hope to, through these images; inspire something deep within the mind of the viewer.”

G. O’s agenda is mapped by a personal vision to bring to the public attention the “sorry state of things” in the transportation and road sector. The Images of transportation: - *Lagos –Ibadan Express Road* (fig. 6), *Katsina- Sokoto 2007*(fig. 2), *Goods Only 2008*(fig. 4), *Home Coming Kano 2007*(fig. 1); and *Agege 2006*(fig. 3), in one go tell it all! *The road situation in Nigeria is presented in the most grotesque of images, simply put death awaits the road user: - Lagos- Ibadan Express Way* (fig. 6). The viewer is faced with a labyrinthine web for reflection. These are dialectical statements. It is a cornucopia of ‘question and plausible answer’ time for the viewer. I

think this is the real value of these pictures.

The artist's *oeuvre* covers the entire Nigerian site. *G O* presents the people as *hardy, courageous* and *longsuffering* in spite of the travails of their lives in an oil rich country. In spite of the unfulfilled promises of a better life – infrastructure, roads and adequate transportation and safety- the will to carry on seems inexhaustible. The caption on one lorry, in *Goods Only* (fig. 4) enunciates a philosophical line '*Dogaro A' Allah Hutu*' (Literally means- reconciliation of one's fate in God is the secret to happiness) '*we live in the hollow of His hand*'

However, the viewer's attention is drawn to one specific picture '*Goods Only*' again, the viewer is drawn far into the background to the elite Jeep luxury four-wheeler (fully air-conditioned with occupants in blissful revel) cruising away into the horizon. The artist paints the picture of a few people in heaven here on earth and the multitudes in the open heat of the sun. It is a collage of Nigerian faces in their varied regalia, town people on the move ramped sardine can-like in an open mammy wagon ; three men distinctly perched on the tail board in spite of the ominous sign '*no standing*'. But they carry their fates hinged on the belief in a God who never fails. The prominent tailboard Hausa captions, culled from this faith in a philosophy of a God who never fails, captures it all: - '*Zaman aure yaƙi kayan daki*' - *half bread is better than none* and '*Dogaro ga A'allah Hutu*' - *faith in God grants peace of mind*'. Bold and distinct, these statements graphically express the *raison d'être* for the people's condition.

In the picture titled *Home Coming Kano 2007* (fig.1), the artist projects a group of five; the title suggests- a family with teenage age daughter ensconced with a giant '*Ghana must go*' bag, containing possessions tightly sandwiched between herself and the biker's front wheel cross bars, one hand in clutched grip of a brief case; the rest of the family is tightly packed cruising home on this *akwquallan* Suzuki motor cycle. This picture captures the stark reality of poverty and want. The calm demeanor, dusty feet in plain plastic slippers, even the biker wears no specification boots but mixes the clutch grip with a bottle opener in one finger. The looks on the biker's and the man of the house's face suggest the morbid fears of the road in this old rickety conveyance, but in total they surrender *carry on!* The same ambience of resilience and resolve to *carry on* in spite of the forebodings: dangers of accident and even death, the ordinary folks carry on with the search for the opportunities open in their new destinations. The images tell the story of the ruggedness, resolve and resiliency of *the real people* in spite of the real condition of life and impossibilities in their present dispensations.

Emphatically, the photographer personalizes the collapse in law and order; the conveyances in both pictures must have passed law enforcement officers on the road. At least one picture reports of the indifference of one law enforcement officer. He is engrossed in other matters; he does not care to even notice that the motor conveyance bears no registration plate. The over loaded conveyance is on its own. The *Mitsubishi*

Long bed Extended Cab Pickup truck in the picture *Katsina-Sokoto* (fig. 2) tells the same story of gross indifference to the plight of the ordinary road user. In spite of the miserable condition in this open truck conveyance, it appears the only choice of travel for the people, ordinary folks. The ordinary folks in their hurry to their varied destinations are indifferent to the mode of travel. These folks are geared in varied sweat jackets and winter caps ready for the harsh winds. The Long bed Extended Pickup compartment of this *Mitsubishi* truck is not only filled up with people and baggage in a cramped up condition; most travelers are actually precariously perched on the collapsible trailer metal back latch and even on the trailer straight side latches- '*Ghana must go bags*' hanging out on one tent post and human legs dangling out loose from all sides. It is a long journey, this trip! Their fates reconciled to a God who never fails. '*Dogaro Ga A' Allah Hutu*'! They carry on endorsing for all time sake the ordinary man's predilection – '*half bread is better than none*', "*Zaman aure ya fi kayan daki*", as the Hausa say.

These pictures are interesting and important sensors for this essay. *Oshodi Market 2007* (fig.5) is an interesting view of a typical melting pot in Nigeria. This picture draws attention to the market place as the main public space in Nigerian towns, cities and villages. It is a common meeting ground where all the people irrespective of class converge. It is the turf of engagement for the entire population. This is the port of convergence, all roads and rails either empty out their passengers, luggage and goods here or at least stopover. The distinctive points that strike the viewer are obviously the long loaf of railway carriages bursting through a crowded make-shift railroad market; the sea of colourful king size umbrellas and the multitude of people in varied postures engaged in their varied transactions are sandwiched by the shanty metal sheeted stalls on the right of the picture and on the left by a snake –like curve of railway carriages. This train is either not in motion or slowly swishing away to the principal railway station, Agege.

It is a typical mid-day market scene; the real people are in the thick of the business hour. In the other left extreme the picture of a tight space is compounded by a fleet of yellow buses hemmed in by the local Oshodi sky line in the extreme left end. Apart from the smoke filled air in the distant background sky –emanating from possible local cooking and fire from nearby market dumps- it is a regular busy market. Every man/woman and child is engaged in the business of the day-the search for daily bread and opportunities open in the day. It is a bee hive of activities. All sorts of wares are displayed either on the ground, on makeshift market stalls under the king-size umbrellas or carried on the head and hawked. The foreground of this picture captures the view of the engagements of the real people. The scene is emblematic. To the left side precariously wedged to the rail tracks king-size umbrellas shade in the busy foodstuff traders. Onions, tomatoes and canned cooking condiments well-arranged are on display. To the right of centre foreground the principal local staple garri; and other

grain foods are prominently displayed for the shoppers. This is a domestic food commodities market, not a farm produce distribution market. The attire of the shoppers- youthful men in safari suits and young women clad in simple blouses on casual slacks – suggests town people on a regular day's shopping spree for cooking condiments.

The market spaces spread onto most of the left side of the Oshodi- Agege motor road, in fact on both sides of the rail track shoulder. This is ideally a prohibited space. In spite of the imminent dangers and the proximity of even death, the people are indifferent; it is business as usual. To the left of the stationary carriages is a dilapidated rail linesman's monitor house, still stuck out high up in the open for every one's attention. It is illegal to have market traffic within the track shoulder that accommodates this installation. No one seems to care, buying and selling is the matter. The dilapidated and abandoned linesman's monitor house is a *leitmotiv* of the general condition of the abandonment of the major mass conveyance in Nigeria's principal commercial city, Lagos *Eko*, as the locales call her! Wither way they may have come from, the crowd of shoppers and traders mill on indifferent to fate and weather conditions in a vulnerable market location. This market place, principal urban open space for commerce is a jam packed sardine can-like but the real people mill through like soldier ants pursue the dreams and interests of their every day, come rain come sun!

These five pictures paint a picture of a people resigned to a belief in a God who never fails. This is amplified in the philosophical captions on the mammy wagon conveyance in the picture *Goods Only 2008* (fig. 4): '*Dogaro ga A'allah Hutu*' and the emblematic proverbial statement '*Zaman aure yafi kayan daki*'. These philosophical lines of concession and acceptance, in my view, suggest the crass resignation of the *real people* to fate; and an obvious pandering to a mediaeval consciousness. The impression, therefore, is that of a people who have abdicated their rights as citizens of the here and now; cringing instead to the motherly arms of heaven. Instead, I see these pictures pointing to this sorry situation, but metaphorically inserting a message: man must assert his own will against a harsh de-spirited world which has scattered its own dizzying arbitrariness like stumbling blokes on his path. The only conciliatory element the individual must not lose in these circumstances is his/her identity. It is up to the individual in this day and age to assert his/her individual will against a fate that threatens at times to overwhelm him/her with its ferocity. It is such steadfastness in pursuing one's own dreams and goals in the face of all the practical travails of life, even in the folly of failure that should be the overriding ethos that would install the true status of citizenship. But let the matter lay here until latter.

At the other end of the road fate or fatality, for these irresponsible transgressions and irresponsibility of the citizenry, is greeted with the images of death. Real death without traces of the remains of the dead is evidenced by mangled metal.

The image *Lagos- Ibadan Express Road (fig.8)* and a few others is a sordid reminder of this fate. The images in this picture lack any direct engagement with real flesh and bloodied people. The artist seems to deliberately avoid any signs of social relations but imbibes abstractions. For in these pictures the Road has ceased to be the environment of engagement. Instead, in a modernist stance the artist-photographer GO introduces a conceptual *generic and subjective interior space*. This technique to my mind suggests “*a more conceptual framework*”. G. O. dares a further inclusion mechanism, utilizing the very presence of death in a most vulnerable scenario, a drastic bloody pool on the road, the images constitute a tableau that inspires the real people’s minds (Osodi, 2010:3/6). This is a self-styled instance of “*straight*” *photography*. It is the modernist artist-photographer’s search for modernism’s plenitude and unimpeachable search for self-presence. Beyond a faithful transcription of the real event, the artist metaphorically insinuates a narrative that queries an identity and history of this peculiar condition of the Nigerian road. In these pictures, therefore, there is an obvious shift in this master’s documentary photo genre. The series do suggest an intensified desire for ‘presence’ in the image.

George Osodi’s photography is a crusading critique of the Nigerian status quo. These photographs on the theme of Road and Transportation (and their associated hazards) find immediate and transparent identity between the image (*l’actualite*) and referent. Employing the language of deconstruction, we might say that photography’s constitutive discourses have framed it within a ‘metaphysics of presence’ in that, for these discourses photography is a metaphysical project founded upon a desire for presence secured through an un mediated transcription of the real” (David Philips, 1998). The artist, G O, henceforth foists his cerebral signature as a conscientious crusader of the inviolate rights of the people. This is vintage Osodi. The identities of these photographs are thusly culled from the discourses and the themes that engage them. Exploiting the technicalities of the camera trade, G O uses mid/distant view points, employs a partiality for the contrasts of darkness and dusk; and the utilisation of the silhouette in somber mood to capture the story. The master shows a reluctance to use indirect lighting. This gives the image a subdued /mellowed naturalistic tint. In fact, the respected writer and critique of photography Susan Sontag alludes to this, thusly ‘*But by flying low artistically, these pictures are thought to be less manipulativeAnd less likely to arouse facile compassion or identification*’. (Susan Sontag, 2004)

G. O’s images of a key subject matter on the Nigerian catalogue of woes; tagged an exhibition featuring contemporary images on the concerns of “Road Safety”, grounds photography as a censure. This framework presents an instantaneous distinctiveness of the entire scenario in a reproduction on paper. These images emphasise the view that photography is the site of an un- intervened re-enactment, in fact, a simulacrum of the real time and place. This view of photography as a mirror with a memory, has been overtaken by critical Scholarship.

G O's pictures are an engraving of words with light on paper. Any darkroom adept transcribes a picture that way. It is important that the conscientious reader realises that the world of dreams constitute a broad brush that stands in sharp contrast to the world of the conscious bright daylight. These images are fixed points of reference beyond their context of occurrence. For in view of photography's place within the *linguistic/pictorial/cultural turn*, the image's capacity to signify cannot be underestimated. Signification implies the construction of layered meanings in the photograph by an active human intelligence. From this standpoint, G O's compositions conceived and actualised in the present go beyond a telling only of a story replicated in the photographs. These images implicate the artist's agenda of a conceptual relation between image (that we readily identify in the pictures) and his subjective affect.

From a Derridean perspective, therefore, it is plain that art serves varied purposes. There is an inner meaning, reflective of the constant and unchanging. These reflect the semblances of things as they are. However, multiplicities of interpretations arise through the varied lenses that the readers' standpoints assume. As the Chinese say, "one picture is worth a thousand words". In this regard G O's pictures are first and foremost fixed points of reference beyond their context of occurrence. Moreover G O's documentation of, otherwise, fleeting moments on the real experiences of the road becomes a framework of a symbol for the viewers' reading. This makes for a spatial repository for experiencing time in the narrative. The master's commentary in the catalogue anchors the viewers reading of the image (in part by a deliberate tie up with an authorial intention). This is of immense value. It serves as a formal template that mediates a critical deciphering of the layers of meanings and messages in these, otherwise, plain but beautiful pictures.

G O's photographs/images are narratives of the condition of the life of the Nigerian people. A people coping, in spite of the harsh circumstances of day to day survival *irk out a living*. "*Zaman aure yafi kayan daki*" - "*half bread is better than none*" as this Hausa tailboard of the mammy wagon in the picture *Goods Only 2008*(fig. 4); and the equally audacious statement, "*Dogara ga A 'Allah Hutu*" on the banner-like mud slipper of the wagon thunders. Narrative is not mimesis. The story line reflects an unravelling of chained events that feature as sites of the urgency of the matter of a key life wire that a people's lives depend: road and adequate transportation. These images constitute shapes that have profiled the constitutive metaphors for the confrontation of the issues that underlie the discourse in this essay. Ideas are shaped by discourse. The significant sign that G O's images intuit is that of indifference and resignation by the *real people*. It is at this juncture that a reading proper of this critique of the condition of the lives of the *real people* takes a deeper layering.

The pictures of the lives of the real people take on a deeper layering in these visual statements. These images instead empathise with the real condition of the

people's lives: deprivation, abject poverty and hardship; a life that reflects the attitude "survival of the fittest", a danger-filled risky existence and the horrors of the road in a derelict infrastructure. Using visual constructs like the signification of the contrasting modes of travel in the pictures *Goods Only 2008*(fig. 4), *Katsina- Sokoto* (fig. 2) and *Agege 2006* (fig. 3) G O draws the viewers' attention to the plight of the ordinary man: resignation to fate (symbolised by the "sardine can-like" crowded conveyance) and an ego-centred luxury laden travel style of the *bourgeoisie* (symbolised by the ride in the background). The faces of these real people are not smiling faces. These are calm determined faces indifferent to the *wahala* that characterises their everyday lives of endless grind and turmoil. These faces discern a capacity to carry on. The faces in both pictures are representative of the teeming youth of our population. The young man with both legs hanging out over the back latch frames of the open truck in *Katsina-Sokoto* (fig. 2) is equally grasping the tent post of the truck; but in his left hand grasp is a leather portfolio- like travel kit. This is distinctly of special value to this youthful traveler; hence it is not consigned to the heap of sacks and 'Ghana must go' bags.

The pictures are equally a revelation. For example the philosophical captions; '*Dogaro ga a'allah Hutu*' in the picture *Goods Only* (fig. 4) and the equally graphic statement '*Zaman aure yafi kayan daki*', also in the same picture, both reveal the deep seated streak for the mediaeval in the peoples' thinking. It is truly common place, expressed in common everyday conversation. Statements that concur with similar streaks of surrender to a God who never fails are readily on the breath of the ordinary people everywhere you go in Nigeria. It is replete in the Pidgin English statement '*how we go do ame, God dey*', a common place once there is either a jam or a disjuncture in things. This statement is readily transcribed in every day conversations even in local languages. This relapse for the easy path of self-pity and a resignation to fate draws attention to an overriding belief system that panders to a mediaeval consciousness. This tendered image and that captured in the visuals are a direct testimony about the worldview that encapsulates these ordinary folks at all time.

The photographer G O, therefore, invites the conscientious viewer to a journey through the Nigeria of the real people. In these visual narratives, therefore, through a path that is a reality out there but that may have been less travelled by the viewers, we are invited to see and look at what reality is out there. It is a mission of rediscovery for some, a ghastly first time for many and a simple return to a scenario long ignored for all. We admire the beautiful pictures but we are drawn to a deep sigh and reflection ensues. The images have secured an unmediated transcription of the real Nigerian condition. This is the tender of an identity and history as it stands. In these symbolic images, the viewers are confronted with an endless labyrinth for reflections. The images embody narratives of the road and transportation infrastructure that inflect an identity and history. This is of immense dialectical value, the essence of this display of images. What should be done? The images and the underpinnings of the philosophical

attitudes that have undergirded the profiles of the real people offer an alluring invitation for rehabilitation and a retooling for the ordinary people. Instead the message to the teeming masses of the real people of Nigeria is simply a call for the abandonment of these anachronistic sentiments of monarchism; in this day and age imbibe the realities of our freewheeling republicanism: you have a right to be here, seek out the proper avenues for pursuing and earning these rights! This is the wave of the future. Instead of a resignation, the synchronising inflective layering of meaning addressed for both the gifted community of aficionados and collectors, the *élan vital* (above) and for all and sundry is a call to the imperatives of our republican status. It is a call for *the real people* to take up the gantlet, get up and stand up their rights and place in the new dawn-Nigeria, as she celebrates her fiftieth anniversary of independence. This demand of her peoples calls for an engagement with government and the commitment to the realities of a modern statehood not a pandering to the sentiments and follies of an antediluvian time and place. It is a demand, therefore, for the upliftment of the soul of the ordinary folks; for the man dies in the acquiescence of suffering and hardship.

G O's pictures are not merely beautiful images; they are geared to stir a reflection on issues surrounding roads, safety and values for life; and to ginger the viewer's reflection on human factors which we could possibly influence. The images draw attention to the plight and condition of *the real people* but address the intelligent gifted community to look and see what could be done. The young man grasping the tent post with one hand and a portfolio-like kit in the other in the picture *Katsina-Kano* (fig. 2), the crowd of stern but middle class attired youth in the other pictures *Goods Only* (fig. 4) and *Home Coming Kano* (fig. 1); the early riders in *Agege 2006*(fig. 3) and the youthfully attired smart people in *Oshodi Market* (fig. 5) are representative of the new generation. These must be part of the dream of republican Nigeria. The salient message is that of a re-engineering and retooling through education of the youth of the now and future for a life of more responsible citizenship, self-reliance but a keen engagement with the discourses of life itself and matters of self-government, participatory democracy and national development.

Osodi's agenda is mapped by a personal vision to bring to the fore the abject condition of the life of the *real people* who have been subjected to the rape of their own environment. It is a censure for the exploration of the dialectic at play in the lives of the people. This is graphically expressed in the chain people/ road, human *wahala* life/ environment, and interactions/relationships, etcetera. In a seemingly endless labyrinth of reflections the dialectical value of the images is served. The photographic essay reflects people in real life encounter with the stark reality of their lives in an, otherwise, oil rich nation. In spite of this reportage the Nigerian predilection for the twin habit of cursing at suffering and the swearing at the cause of the situation is *writ large* in the tirade of every day conversation. It is a daily commonplace in our 'society of spectacle'. But are we the viewers inured – or incited to challenge if not change it all by these

images? We must take a fresh look at the matter! The images of the hard life, suffering and the evident poverty that these cache of pictures conjure challenge us to think about the reality around us: - hardship amidst plenty! These images illuminate without simplifying. They complicate without obfuscating the revelry of the evening after a hectic day. To ignore the messages is both irresponsible and dangerous.

G O's images are reminiscent of the works of the erstwhile social commentator, the cartoonist Dele Jegede of the Daily Times, and that of the phono-centric crusader Fela Anikulapo-Kuti (of blessed memory). In our time, however the images are in synchronisation with the works of other social critics and crusaders in the photo and phono industries. The pictures of other compatriots in this *genre* -Bunmi Azeez and Akpokona Omafuaire; and the voice of Chinagorume Onuoha, alias AfricaChina readily come to mind. The images of G O and the sounds of AfricaChina stand out in this genre of social commentary and criticism. In this wise both media are represented by their leading icons of the day. G O and AfricaChina are leading icons in the discourse of and engagement with the Nigerian condition. Such a synergy I think aides in forging a synchrony that unravels the Nigerian condition hinting at a historicity as harboured in the image. This discourse pits man as the creature who relates to a public. Each work of art (image in photographs and voice in phonographs) is essentially aimed at the conscious citizenry.

The conscious citizenry is forever inundated in the media and tabloid presses by the evidence of “*the pains of others*”, we are yet to increase our capacity to do something about it. Nigeria's urban culture is incensed by the sensibility in a world shaped by mechanical reproduction of images/imageries. This is the leading phenomenal pathfinder in our guiding preoccupation with the yearning call for equality fraternity and egalitarianism. These images of people - the real people - draw attention to the fact that things must not be left to an abstraction called government; but it is up to the citizenry to stand up and seek their right to be here in the polity called Nigeria. However, that call demand s a break with even the anachronistic belief in a benevolent motherly heaven and a God out there, as reflected in the captions on the mammy wagon in *Goods Only 2008* (fig. 4). Instead the new trend should be an emphasis on a government out there and active participation by the real people in meaningful engagements with government in matters that directly concern them. This is the thrust of the new dawn.

Exhibitions are occasions for a stock taking of the “condition of things” in the land. They are now “must go” occasions for they offer an informal *aide de memoire* for the vignettes of our daily lives: our history. The images and the voices that eternally inundate our public spaces as constant reminders of the condition of the lives of *the real people*: but they equally state their strong faith in spite of the grind. This strong faith is encrypted in the ontology of the people's cultural history. It bespeaks of a proud

renascent past, a humble present and the paradoxical story of modern Nigeria: a story of grace and resiliency with limited resources in the midst of plenty, in an environment that is constantly and rapidly deteriorating. These signs from the images and the voice medium constitute a graphitti that inundate memory. They never go away! Images and voices call for more than one reading. For the images do not arouse facile compassion and identification. These images challenge the consciousness of the critical citizenry. For in a world where most people are engaged in the onward rush to meet ends and maximize all opportunities it is the pictorial image that lingers on in memory. The photographic image in spite of the voice in an age of the pictorial/cultural/linguistic turn remains quintessential, in any attempt we make to get a reality we desire to relate with, possess and effectively change. Images stimulate the verves of creativity. The image has always preceded words, but it is important for words to define the content of visual experience. Photographic images as this exhibition has amply demonstrated offer a glimpse into a world that is hitherto absent from our purview in the onward rush and bustle for the opportunities that life may offer. Images offer opportunities for commandeering invaluable knowledge. These images are bound to outlive their creators and the things they represent. In this regard they are inestimable in aiding the tracking of the past in an ever changing present.

George Osodi's images go beyond the showmanship of the anesthetizing and picturesque devices of contemporary *Pictorialist* photography in its mechanical devices. Instead they draw the perceptive viewer to a much more intense level of seminal appreciation of his subjective interior space. It is an analogy that transcends the mere surface appearances of images. These images, therefore, allude to an explication of their deeper/inner essences: these photo-images reflect related shapes and the artist G O's feeling on the subject of the road, safety and transportation in Nigeria. Deploying a standard modernist privileging of inner depth over external appearance, these photographs are not merely beautiful pictures to adorn the collector's walls. They are, in fact, constant reminders of the obligations of citizenship. There is an obvious semantic core claimed by this artist. Photographic images have been the censure on which the fleeting memorial of the discourse of the day to day lives of *the real people* in Nigeria is essayed. It bristles with a sense of commitment: to seeing the real world of the masses of the Nigeria to which we belong. G O's images may serve the purposes of 'shock therapy' for the exclusive classes' bourgeoisie, momentary shudder for a large percentage of the population of regular town people, but that of cold complicity for the oppressor classes. But the images show no dead bodies in spite of the grotesqueness in some content, for example *Lagos –Ibadan Express Road* (fig. 6). Stern hope, faith in a better tomorrow and a sense of public decency, the images tell you of the ordinary people of Nigeria. This pale sternness is like the sheet that spares us the sight of mutilated bodies. *Tomorrow go betta!*

References

- Adorno, T. in Beat Wyss (1999) *Hegel's Art History and the Critique of Modernity*, Cambridge University Press, p. 189.
- Driver's Dexterity* (2010). An Exhibition Catalogue featuring Contemporary Images by George Osodi, The Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria limited (SPDC) and & The African Artists Foundation (AAF), p. 1.
- Phillips, D. (1998). Photo-logos: Photography and deconstruction. In Cheetham, M.A., Holly, M.A. & Moxey, K. (eds.). *The subjects of art history, historical objects in contemporary perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 155.
- Soyinka, W. (2005). *Interventions I*. New Bodija, Ibadan: Book Craft Ltd. p. 194.
- Sontag, S. (2004). *Regarding the pains of others*. New York: Picador Press, pp. 26-27.
- Ugiomoh, F.A.O. (2009). Pale reflections and fables of life: George Osodi's real people of the Niger Delta, in *Camera Austria (Graz), Nr. 106, June*, p. 23.
- Wyss, B. (1999). *Hegel's Art History and the Critique of Modernity*, Cambridge University Press, p. 194.



Fig. 1 Coming Kano 2007



Fig. 2 Katsina-Sokoto 2007



Fig. 3 Goods Only 2008

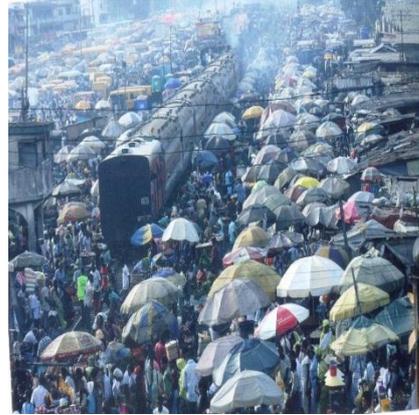


Fig. 4 Oshodi Market 2007



Fig.5 Agege 2006



Fig. 6 Lagos-Ibadan Express Road

africancitiesreader@chimurega.co.za

Paper for second edition african cities reader (Title of essay GEORGE OSODI
OEUVRE ON SAFETY ON THE NIGERIA ROAD)

N/B for all images on George Osodi exhibition- see www.georgeosodi.co.uk