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**NIGER DELTA FOTOTALES..... A View of the Niger Delta  
through the Lens**

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**Abstract**

This essay attempts a reflection on the exhibition *Niger Delta Fototales*, a photo exhibition showcasing PEOPLES, RELICS and ISSUES of the Niger Delta: Novotel Hotels, Port Harcourt, on the 50th anniversary Nigeria's Independence. I take it that at the heart of the matter of photography is "the photographic paradox", "the coexistence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the 'art'/the treatment; the 'writing'/the rhetoric of the photograph)". Beyond a mere reportage of this momentous event, I would attempt an exploration of these tenets of modern communication by interrogating the messages encrypted in a select number of images from this show utilizing the critical tools of contemporary scholarship in an attempt at explicating the nature of the photographic essay itself. In a reading that imbricates the value of the punctum in the analysis of the rhetoric of the studium, therefore, the groundings of the collaborative encoded features that intuit the photograph metonymically unfolds the contingent realms of memory and subjectivity.

**Key words:** - Niger Delta, Fototales, Peoples, Relics and Issues; Images and Words

Photographs have the kind of authority over imagination today, which the printed word had yesterday, and the spoken word before that. They seem utterly real! (*Walter Lippmann, 2003, p.25*). Photographs are not an argument; they are simply crude statements of fact addressed to the eye (*Virginia Wolf, 2003, p. 26*).

This essay reflects on the exhibition NIGER DELTA FOTOTALES, a photo exhibition showcasing PEOPLES, RELICS and ISSUES of the Niger Delta: Novotel Hotels, Port Harcourt, 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary Nigeria's Independence (01/10/2010). This exhibition serves two public purposes: (i) celebrating Nigeria's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary; and (ii) even in a more distinctive way: the appreciation of the entrant of photography as an art, documentary and as a professional engagement open to the amateur and little known personalities in the, otherwise, professional world of the trade.

The essay engages in a quest for the explication and, in an exposé addresses the imperatives of the visual media in the discourse of the existential realities of the Niger Delta: the story of the day to day, in the life of a people! In effect how photography in the narrative discourse of Nigerian life, with specific reference to the Niger Delta, serves as an agent of truth. In furtherance of truth, what is the location of the photographic image within what may be alluded to as the "linguistic/pictorial/cultural turn"? Photography is the magic of the "writing of light". Here it is the encrypting at one instance of the long story of "suffering, striving and doing", even indifference to the throes of despair, for the locales a mutual fate of imminent hopelessness and despair in spite of the natural endowments of the place. In fact, photography is a metaphysical craft grounded upon a desire for presence secured through an unmediated transcription of the reality in the Niger Delta. These images are no arguments; they are statements of the starkness and condition of the realities of the day to day- a witness to truth! (*David Philips, 1998; Susan Sontag, 2003*). The images capacity to signify cannot be underrated. I think this is the grounding upon which to foist the mainstays of this cache of benchmark images; all culled from the reel of folio images by more than a dozen photo essayists and enthusiasts.

The story is borne witness to the real by the earliest indigenous professional photographer Jonathan Adagogo Green (1873-1907), the veteran Sir M. M. Abassah and the prestigious SONY Photo Awardee' and distinctive Niger Deltan George Osodi; practicing free lance photo-journalists like Israel Ophori, Tuoyo Omagbe and Appeal James Agi. Amongst other contributors were University teachers, John Ogene and Timi Willis Ammah. The vibrant photo-journalist Juliana Eremina Jumbo was the lone female participant. The contributors list was, however, sealed with a mixed breed of passionate college educated amateurs and hobbyists. It is important to mention Pomtera Williams, repentant "militant" now trained photographer. In this cute collaborative social enquiry these all engaged in the encrypt age and embalming for all time the

camera images that state the protest suffering in the Niger Delta in the FOTOTALES.

The images are, therefore, readily classifiable into the following: - historical documents and mementos of both the pre-colonial time and place; the erstwhile story of the Nigerian civil war; and images of the real day to day in the places of the Niger Delta. The FOTOTALES exhibition is a record to the real, as incontrovertible as no verbal account, through the lens. These pictures bore witness to the real- since the veteran, freelance photo-journalists and the many amateurs and hobbyists collaborated at putting this show together under the purview of a keen curatorship that did enable the historical imagination in the matter. A digest of the NIGER DELTA exhibition catalogue's (henceforth NDF1) curatorial essay DO YOU REMEMBER (Frank Ugiomoh, 2010) is indispensable for a full enjoyment of the images in this show.

This essay initiates a story in which a brief definition of photography is addressed: telling a story using the visual and making critical statements. Furthermore the oeuvre of photography is explicated in the light of recent critical scholarship; hence an exposition of the plausible inflections of meanings. This essay, therefore, construes the FOTOTALES as an artwork reflective and emblematic of the Niger Delta condition utilizing the double cipher of Image and Text. Thusly, as a document in a dual sense it significantly deploys Image and Text to provide evidence for the character of the Niger Delta. In effect as a historical study document, the resultant product of that historical milieu, makes the FOTOTALES artwork more fully legible. It is a medium of communication. As a communicational or linguistic paradigm, therefore, it is a 'scaffolding' upon which the intentions, ideas, political and other messages of the photographers are conveyed to the target audience. Readings of select images culled from the exhibition itself are, therefore, undertaken in this paper. Hence the curatorial and poetic texts with the images, as analytical objects are sited within a predicative framework so as to be pertinent in a collaboration that permits the deployment of discursive protocols in the analysis. A conclusion reviews the very stratagems of the photo graphic essay; and draws attention to future research possibilities.

Nigerian tabloid presses are deeply "talkative" on the matter of the Niger Delta. The knack for commentary is replete. The issues are, therefore, dye stamped onto the very psyche of the Nigerian people. It was a major plank for the politicking that culminated in the august entrant to Aso Rock, 2011. The photographic image is of the most enduring value at telling the story, as alluded to by Walter Lippmann and Virginia Wolf (above). A photo exhibition is a relief from the vexatious reportage in the tabloids and the tedium of the "talkative" discourses of the Niger Delta condition. This exhibition latches on the value of the camera in its multiple and multiform attributes, utilizing the product image, to showcase the Niger Delta region within the following purview: People, Places, Issues and Relics, while securing a time depth that goes as far back as the late 1880s.

Time and space are the two basic means of experiencing history. The messages of histrionic moments are writ large on the pane of each frame. The exhibition was keyed on a story-line with the Jonathan Adagogo Green's collection of images. Its documentation theme was paradigmatic of renascent Africa. The images are mostly portraits of royalty drawn from the kingdom of Bonny. Images from a present day Niger Delta kingdom, Benin, follow immediately. These carry the viewer's eye onto the threshold of the present day. The images draw the attention of the viewer to the beauty that was in the pre-colonial states of the Niger Delta and the empires of the day: the glory and pride of a time long gone by, while at the same time deconstructing the fame and image of Africa they built. The next set of images showcase the splendor of the Royal court of Benin. In one word, these images reflect the status of a region that was prominent in the colonial Trade enterprise. These images further recall the days of the Niger Delta maritime dominance and the prominence of her institutions. These underscore the place for the roles and prominence of the royalty, even to the present day. However, images from the veteran photographer M.M. Abassah's collection jostle the viewers onto a disruptive episode in the region's history: the Nigerian civil war. These images are grotesque, even "surreal"! Images of the once glorious rich land chronicled by the Adagogo Green collection are sordidly juxtaposed with the images culled from the tropes of a conflict that threatened the unity of the great country.

Beyond the Relics, above, the rest of the images address the present: Issues of Environmental pollution and Issues of Ethics and Morality in a modern federation. A myriad of images on these themes dominate. For the space accounting of this reportage, however, it would be only convenient to make limited commentary, but draw attention to the following images: EVASIVE NIPA PALM Amadi Creek, PH (2010), Fig. 8 by Eremina Jumbo; Fig. 13 OIL POOL (2006) and OGONI OIL SPILL (2006), both images by George Osodi. The images Namasibi Kalabari Toru (2010) by S.Allen Orubu and Fig. 9 HOMEWARD (AFTER ANOTHER DAY) by John Ogene draw attention to the question of the key component of fairness in the distribution of the "good things" of the land in a federation: Housing and Transportation, for example. It is, however, heartwarming and informative to note the inclusion of images that may be captioned the Richland documentation, IGHUE FESTIVAL, OWU-ARU-SUN festival, etc; all chronicled in golden verse "It is a place where priceless treasure linger".....Annah Dornubari, 2010) These address the tourism and leisure potential of the land in spite of the, otherwise, parlous condition in the present. The images in this exhibition are structured to connect with the earlier images by the foremost master of the genre in the Niger Delta, Jonathan Adagogo Green. This keys the present images in a time frame. The present participants, living contributors, thusly, have assumed their own spaces in the discourse of the Niger Delta condition. This is the essence of the story FOTOTALES. The viewer is confronted with a basic theoretical format in which the very mystical art of photography, the presence/absence, is hinged.

"Creating space means naming the time that one has experienced. Anything that defines things binds them; it seizes what is immediately lively and wrenches it out of its obsessive twilight, in order to turn it into a free -standing form. Art is a naming, signifying act". (Beat Wyss, 1999, p.194) By recognizing what has been defined by time, therefore, each photographer has etched a niche in the space of our mutual consciousness. The images speak to us. Photography as an art form makes the experiences of the Niger Delta time spatially perceptible by forcing what is ever fleeting (in the Niger Deltans' existential indifference to fate and memory) into the framework of the symbol. The symbol is the tangible referent that finds signification in the frame work of time and space, the two basic means of experiencing history. These photo artists address the cosmopolitans not provincials. The images castigate the elite that have run the estates of the realm for the ruin and mess the ordinary folks are without choice mired in. It is a survival of the fittest for those who dare muster the tenacity and strength of spirit to face harsh survival, for example, the images: MANGROVE LIFE, Bayelsa 2007 Fig. 12; JUNKIE RIDE 2010, Fig11; and TIDE UGUTA 2008, Fig. 7. These are a surfeit of images reflecting the story of the every day in the face of poverty and the absence of infrastructure. The images on display in this exhibition address the intelligent and keen minds, the elite of the Niger Delta: the public made up of connoisseurs and collectors, the élan vital! These are the real culprits, the scourge of the land that these images address. However, these images undergird a common line of discourse for every one of us irrespective of gender, faith and clime. The curatorial line and the dirge of poetry concur thusly: "The photographs, therefore are pointedly structured to affect our power to connect with what this region can offer even in its parlous condition in the present" (Ugiomoh, 2010; Lucas Deinma, 2010).

### **The Images: A Reading**

This show, NIGER DELTA FOTOTALES, a photo exhibition showcasing PEOPLES, PLACES, RELICS and ISSUES of the Niger Delta, is about live photography. It would be proper, looking at the pictures, the documents and poster of the show itself; to reflect on select images and cite statements from the curatorial Forward and lines in the POETRY accompaniment (below) attempt a reading of the artists oeuvres. This would entail a reading of the troping mechanisms in specific photo-essays. These in various ways, foreground the dialectic of exchange and collaboration between the visual image and the word. These are the troping mechanisms that are indispensable aides in the decipherment of the images and the story in them. I will limit the analysis to five examples from the FOTOTALES: HOMEWARD, Fig.9, THE STRENGHT OF A WOMAN, Fig.10; JUNKIE RIDE, Fig. 10; and MANGROVE LIFE, Fig. 12. For the text I have culled excerpts from the POETRY accompaniments in the exhibition brochure itself.

"Upon the torrent of a rippling midnight sea,

Spending my cold night in no shelter  
But beneath the arms of nature coldness,  
Hoping to return home to my household with daily succor  
....To my oil polluted shores  
Retracing in paths  
My eyes grow dim  
When my rich heritage is wrestled away  
I am made vulnerable like a sculpture  
Still and still  
I dance to the holy tunes  
Yet they never stop preying on my living carcass  
Like a vulture  
.....I  
will labiate!  
Let me labiate let me play this ancient gong  
As I stand seaside with bottle of Schnapps...  
....And fight this battle above mortal combat  
That our farms will regain its fertility  
That this crude will not crush  
The fishes dead before they are born  
That my fishing net will be mended at the break of dawn."  
..... (Lucas Deinma, 2010)

The viewer is faced with a labyrinthine web for reflection. These are dialectical statements. It is a cornucopia of 'question and answer time' for the viewer. The photos take the viewer on a tour. This tour's time and space takes him/her through the entire life span of the Niger Delta. Deploying the strength of prose and the verve of the poetic imagination, in fact, there was a short rendition of poetry in the opening day, in the tight exhibition space! That sombre reading conjured the typical scenario of the existential day to day that FOTOTALES reflected. The very tight exhibition space was metaphorical for the very "tight" lives of the real people of this Niger Delta in spite of

the rich flora and fauna of the oil rich land. CAGED HOPE, the very first Black and White documentary image, and the accompaniment of poetry LET YOUR PICTURES SPEAK (NDF 1, 2010, p. 28) summed it all.

The FOTOTALES artists (henceforth FOTOTALES/ FOTOTALERS) oeuvres create a giant montage that encapsulates the entire Niger Delta region. The images present a hardy, courageous and long suffering people, carrying on the struggle for survival with a firm respite in God "beneath the arms of nature's coldness/ Hoping to return home to my household with daily succour (Deinma, 2010) in this, otherwise, rich lush country. In spite of the unfulfilled promise of a better life since independence in 1960: infrastructure, adequate transportation and a wholesome safe life, all alluded to in the poems, above; the will to carry on seems undimmed, the poet is emphatic. FOTOTALES is a reminder on the 50<sup>th</sup>. Anniversary! Look at the images HOMEWARD AFTER ANOTHER DAY fig 9; and THE STRENGTH OF A WOMAN Fig 10 and JUNKIE RIDE fig.11, both images on catalogue page 37. The images are, in fact, in traditional Black and White, monochromatic resolutions.

In these pictures the photo-artists deploy the aestheticizing picturesque devices of contemporary Pictorialist and Photo-Secessionist photography.<sup>9</sup> The photographers clearly deployed mid/ distant view points, a partiality for the use of the contrasts reinforced by the enhancement of the values of dark and light hued screens. These are all deployed to enhance the illusive imminent darkness and dusk. The technicalities of weak and indirect lighting; and the deliberate utilization of the silhouette are engaged in all pictures. But look at the picture HOMEWARD, Fig. 9 by John Ogene. It looks "staged", if not downright "cinematic" and "voyeuristic". In fact, the images are crudely lifelike. There is a distinct reluctance to use indirect lighting, a sure alternative for the enhancement of imagery. Little wonder, therefore, the mellowed and subdued naturalistic tint. These pictures are all real life renditions of the subjects. Both real exhibition photographs and catalogue renditions are "matted" non-glossy resolutions. Ogene's shot has transformed the subject matter. The image, hence, assumes more value for its "romantic" and "aesthetic" attributes. In effect arty antics like these detract from picture content attention. In fact, a compulsive fetishisation of photographic techniques is the real worth. These detract attention from the sobering subject and turn the discourse to the techniques of the trade itself. The status of the picture as a documentary is thus put in jeopardy. It is the distinctive clear cut studium that first and foremost holds and arrests the viewers' attention. Romantic and aesthetic antics are simply put, mere fancies! These simply play with detached forms in a vacuum of whimsy.

But look at T. Willis Amah's MANGROVE LIFE Bayelsa 2007, Fig. 12 - almost "staged", no arty allurements but straight documentary photography. Amah's image is a sketch pad portrait. The statements are clear reportage of the real: the

location is symbolized by the distinctive mangrove roots projectiles humped out in the background; the persona is a young fisherman pickin in an oversized pullover. Look at the characteristics of this face: sharp cornea seated atop popping eye balls, bulging out of deep furrows; stunted face with sunken jaws and kwashiokored legs of this, otherwise, agile handsome child. This child already has adult features, as a result of the hard life in the mangrove creek waters. The viewer is invited to look further: at the rugged cringed up arthritic features of the once boyish hands now crawled and tensed up adult like; as if in resignation, hence the gesture! But this image that stares out at you, the viewer, so menacingly has awesome power! This photograph reveals the hardness of outline produced by straightforward light and the deep focus of a large-format camera. The FOTOTELLER pointedly avoided the hallucinatory filminess that could have been achieved by the use of soft lighting and shallow focus. It is here simply an investment in the reality principle of the documentary as opposed to the fetishisation of optical techniques. MANGROVE LIFE Bayelsa 2007 is the accompanying text, given by the FOTOTELLER as journalist. The IMAGE-TEXT is significant to a reading. T. Willis Amah's statement here speaks volumes! The keen viewer is drawn to the existential day to day to ponder- Is Willis Amah utilizing this child's gaze to colour relations between the affluent life of the majority and the deprivation of the minorities? This image is a rude reminder of the reality out there! These folks are perceived as exotic, in fact, as living in a timeless presentness outside the real life of their country. For a twenty-first century modern urban exhibition viewer (in this society of spectacles) the image inures a clear injunction: a clear warning against the dehumanizing aspect of being a spectator. Amah's image has definite political, if not revolutionary undertones. This image is geared to a stirring of the exhibition goers out of the stupor and complacency of their own gaze. This image forces an awareness of the extent to which the gaze to which the picture answers is not merely an artistic one. It is the ultimate one of the FOTOTELER meeting the political codes of a consciousness. (Guy Debord, 19830. That larger discourse is, however, a matter that would engage a discourse larger than the purview of the present paper.

The FOTOTALER further punctures (Latin: -punctum) reality with the details of the live conditions of this over used mangrove swamp conveyance: the metal patch nailed down the under belly of the rugged craft itself, in its weather bitten and tattered condition. It is a biographical statement on the real condition of the typical life in the Niger Delta. The FOTOTALES is protest. The punctum deliberately draws attention to the contradictions in this Richland. No bubbly laughter on this child's face! This child epitomizes the harsh condition of the Niger Delta child. The content of the photograph, the composition elements that make up the story, is the real attraction that engages the spectator/the viewing public. These engage and inflections their function: inform and represent the *raison d'être* for the FOTOTALES, the signifier! The typical Niger Deltan viewer and keen traveler in the Niger Delta are straight away drawn to memory lane,

to ‘islands of predilection’!

The punctum, the stray, pointed detail that “pricks” or “wounds” the viewers’ eyes truly matter here. These details are causal, coded features that open the photographs metonymically unto a contingent threshold of memory and subjectivity. This is the rhetoric that transcends techniques but inheres in the picture, beyond what meets the eye in the look of the photograph. These stick to memory. The value of the FOTOTALES, therefore, is better served by pictures that “speak” the language of this rhetoric, not the usual blah- blah: technique, reality, reportage, art, etc; but making “the images speak in silence”. It is important to point out however, that colour and the techniques of photography are only artifices, cosmetics. Ogene’s artifices simply carry the viewers away, missing the definitive silent message in the metaphor of the “protracted discipline of women’s work”. Look at HOMEWARD again! The women are perpetually carrying the load on the only conveyance, the old bicycles; long suffering but “suffering, striving and doing” with a resolute indomitable will. Look at the woman in the left foreground. The conveyance is overloaded with sacks. The contours of the content these sacks convey are clearly etched out. The woman is managing to keep the bicycle with the load in some balance with her entire body hunched onto it like a lever bar. A boy child barefooted and half necked, clearly her only real aid, is truly simply slumped and seems to be collapsing onto the saddle in obvious exhaustion after the long day’s toils. The other three women are simply managing to keep their, otherwise over loaded bicycles in tow. The luggage, bulky sacks of farm produce and firewood, suggest a trip homeward after a hectic day. They simply plod on into the distant horizon. They seem oblivious of the other way-fearers, almost blurred out figures, in the left foreground. It is homeward as the title confirms. The man in the picture is truly leisurely pedaling home with a small pack on his saddle pouch. All the Six figures in the picture are depicted showing only Back-views. The principal conveyance is the bicycle! The road is a sandy patch, low vegetation in the right foreground but progressively dense shrub land on the left side of the road. It is shrub land not dense vegetation. The poetic lines "Come see our capture of display...The vegetation arranged in disarray!" (Deneinma, 2010) come to mind. The photograph suggests a road, and shrub land that would ultimately disappear in the misty horizon. The imagery of a winding up of human affairs is graphically implicated. This is a deliberate statement that ties snugly with the picture title. Images and text simply collaborate at telling the story. The photograph and the text are coequals, mutually independent, and fully collaborative. But these two relations are of immense significance in the discourse (rhetoric) of the composite elements that aid a reading of the story that the select pictures tell.

The pictures THE STRENGTH OF A WOMAN, Fig. 10 and JUNKIE RIDE, Fig. 11 by John Bayo Omoboriowo (in standard traditional documentary specification black and white “no touch ups” ) meet the criteria for a genuine documentary, less

manipulative but possessing a ‘special kind of authenticity’. Omoboriowo images possess directness and lack of pretentiousness, in fact, they convey a ‘cleanliness of presentation’ that I dare call ‘severe’ and ‘pure’ (Sontag 2003, pp. 27 & 77). The reference (the message) is poignant. THE STRENGTH OF A WOMAN is a regular sight in any locale in the Niger Delta; and for that matter a common sight in all rural settings in the country at large. The photograph depicts a regular woman engaged in her usual evening domestic chore, carrying a bundle of fire-wood for the home hearth; but look at the smile and the paper pack lemonade drink in her fingers. Omoboriowo cites a young city type woman: dressed in modern wrapper print and blouse. Her saloon hair-style is wrapped in a complimentary print head gear. In spite of her modern attire, this young maiden is conveying a bundle of firewood in traditional head-portage fashion. The young maiden is simply all smiles enjoying the lemonade in the paper packet. Wood is the staple cooking fuel in spite of the promise of gas and oil. She is simply oblivious of her lonely/deserted waterside setting but carries on with the task to the awaiting canoe: the only conveyance available! These elements “puncture” the studium and insinuate the condition of this image’s milieu. The image and the very picture title together encrypt the metaphor of “the protracted discipline of women’s work” (W.T.J. Mitchell, 2003). There is a deliberate lyricism in Omoboriowo images that bridge the grounds of the observer, the observed and the third party, as it were, who is the mystery second observer. It is a lyricism of ‘things’, a rubric that includes human beings, and a rubric meant to exclude only the rarefied, the insistently abstract. I regard this as an instance of a distinctive Omoboriowo artistic and compositional arty prefigurement of the documentary.

Photography relies for its authority on the innate belief that it is “real”/ “true”. This is the respectability of the trade; voyeuristic imagery simply perverts its status as the “pencil of light” in documentary genre. The attention of a keen viewer in this show is usually drawn to composition content, the ‘thing’ that arrests attention, slows down the visitors’ tour. I take liberty at citing criteria. Look at the above images, the first attraction is the general interest of the composition (studium). The viewer is further steered and sticks to look again in slow motion to imbibe specific elements in the picture. Such elements come up one after the other. These shoot out like arrows and pierce the viewer. This puncturing effect could be an emotional one. The viewer is automatically jolted onto a trail back on memory lane. They constitute ‘landscapes of predilection’, for the empathic viewer(s). Each of the photographers does reflect these elements and imbibed their value in their photo essays. These pictures can be rated on these bench marks for meeting the measure of FOTOTALES. It is significant to note that majority of the visitors to this show; even on the second day was drawn from the middle class of the population. This coloration of spectatorship, suggests an alert, educated segment of the population. It is now a popular practice in the metropolis to ceremonially come to witness photo exhibitions. It is usually a spectacle of visual

drama, popularly played out in the exhibition space, complete with a visuality that simply panders to memory and its consequent sublimation.

However, the pictures *Oil POOL* and *OGONI OIL SPILL*, Fig. 13 both by the distinctive photographer, George Osodi, take the viewer straight to the heart of the show, the matter of the new found economic boom resulting from the discovery of OIL in abundance in the region. The photographs restate the situation in its pictorial code, creating with its low angle view-point and wide-angle lens an impression of monumentality and strength. The punctum draws attention to a masculine figure “bursting” out of the frame of the picture space. It demands the viewers to note how gigantic the man’s blistered fingers (hands in cross wrapped formation behind) in a gesture of capitulation to fate and misfortune are made to look. The fingers are stained and the fingernails clogged in heavy grease. The view point and wide angle lens detail the worn out state of the footwear, in fact, the graphic true to life condition of heavy wear and tear. It is a gruesome figure of resignation/capitulation but undaunted hope reminiscent of the biblical “journey through the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 22) The otherwise lush waterside country landscape is depicted as desolate with only a few palm trees left in the distant horizon; and the waterfronts, a collage of oil polluted patches and decay. The result is the message these images declare; and the poet Lucas Deinma decries in the subtle lines "My eyes grow dim When my rich heritage is wrestled away....I am made vulnerable like a sculpture"..... (NDF 1, 2003) The poet further corroborates this symbolic undaunted hope in the closing stanza “I will labiate... Provoking our ancestors to dance” (Deinma, 2010). These photographs (find an immediate and transparent identity between the image (l’actualite) and referent. Employing the language of deconstruction, we may say that photography’s 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 unmediated transcription of the real (David, 1998). This FOTOTALER, foists his cerebral signature as a conscientious objector and crusader for the inviolate rights of the people to life and full suffrage in the country of their birth. Look at the images again, beyond the studium- recognize the imagery of resignation writ large in the “close up” enlargement of the stained hands crossed and in tied up fashion, fingers clutching a pair of oil and grease soaked slippers (one enlarged to puncture the view). This is further empathized in the dirge “the terrain which fed my ancestors with rich.....Has imprisoned me in freedom with famished belly...” Osodi and one other FOTOTALER, Eremina Jumbo bore witness to the hazard of oil spill, pollution and environmental degradation chronicled by the poet Lucas Deinma. Osodi has made these documentation themes the mainstay elements in a distinctive signature style of his work. The identities of these images are, thusly, culled from the discourses and themes that engage the m (all directed at drawing attention to the Niger Delta condition). These images are reminiscent of the works of the erstwhile social critique and commentator,

the cartoonist Dele Jegede of the Daily Times Newspapers; and the work of the phonocentric crusader Fela Anikulakpo Ransom Kuti (of blessed memory) readily come to mind.

FOTOTALES images are pointedly structured to affect the viewers' power to connect with the resources this region can offer even in its parlous condition in the present. FOTOTALES equally draws the viewers' attention to the capacity of the medium of photography as a censure. This censure captures an instantaneous distinctiveness of the Niger Delta scenario on paper. These images underscore the view that photography is the site of a simulacrum of the "real time and place".<sup>19</sup> This view of photography as "a mirror with a memory" has been overtaken by critical scholarship. These images are like engravings of words on paper. Any dark room adept transcribes a picture that way. It is important that the conscientious readers recognize that the world of dreams is in alterity to the world of the conscious bright day light. In the parlance of recent scholarship, the 'linguistic/pictorial/cultural' turn, the images capacity to signify cannot be underestimated. Signification implies the construction of layered meanings in the photograph by an active human intelligence. From this standpoint, FOTOTALES compositions conceived and actualized in the present go beyond 'a telling only of a story' replicated in the photographs but implicates the artists' agenda of a conceptual relation between images (that we readily identify in the picture) and its subjective affect.

From a Derridean perspective, therefore, it is important to draw attention to the structure of any one work of art. One makes of art in general an object in which one claims to distinguish an inner meaning, the invariant, and a multiplicity of eternal variations. Art is, in fact, more of "a portmanteau of provocative things" to think with, each of which has multiple connections to others, as this essay has amply demonstrated. These intellectual frames are conveniences for the decipherment ("seeing" or "reading") of "the photographic paradox": the coexistence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the 'art' or treatment, or the 'writing', the rhetoric of the photograph. These frames aid the "unveiling" of the pictorial images. In this regard FOTOTALES images are first and foremost fixed points of reference beyond their context of occurrence. The master curatorial commentary and the poets' dirges (in the regrettable absence of interviews with the photo authors) interfaced in the readings that anchor the viewers' reading of the images, part by a deliberate tie up with varied authorial intensions, but functions as the condition, as both document and frame (parergon) of their legibility. There is a semantic core to the FOTOTALES. The Formal interviews would have been an invaluable aide at their full verbalization. Suffice it, however to say, that the purpose of the curatorial commentaries and the poets' dirges may have filled this absence in the explication of form and meaning, signifier/signified aggregates. These two elements serve as anchors in the reading of the pictures. These aides have been invaluable at

unraveling the very essence of the technicalities of the media; and the mediation of an exteriorization of, otherwise, deep inaccessible authorial intensions. These are the supplements and frames that have enhanced legibility. The dialectic of discourse as alluded to draws attention to a distinct collaboration of words and images. This engenders a “calligram”, a composite text –image that “brings texts and shapes as close together as possible” (Mitchell, 1998). These troping mechanisms that underscore the collaborative features of word and image are the real fascination of the FOTOTALES. This curatorial “double cipher”, alliance of texts and visuals energizes and deepens the appreciation of the message that FOTOTALES puts across. The catalogue is indispensable to the full enjoyment and a digest of the real scripts that these images recite!

### Conclusion

FOTOTALES authenticates existence in the Niger Delta. Narrative is not mimesis. The story line reflects an unraveling of chained events that feature as sites in the discourse of the mainstays of peoples’ lives: infrastructure and adequate living conditions, etcetera. These sites are even named in portraits, the peoples delineated by habiliments and attires: EZE EGI of OGBA LAND, EKPEYE LOGBO of EKPEYE LAND, OBA N’EDO UKU AKPOLOKPOLO of BENIN, to mention only a few. Engagements are significantly constituted IGUE festival, COO MAIDEN DANCE, Fig 15; and indicated by picture captions. These images constitute shapes that have profiled the constitutive metaphors/ scaffoldings for the confrontation of the issues unraveled in the discourses in this essay. Ideas are shaped by discourses. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs indeed haunt the viewer. The images stick in memory as plates for permanent recollection. This is the mainstay of memory. The significant sign that FOTOTALES intuits is that of indifference and open resignation by the real people.

FOTOTALES updates the unchanging conditions in the Niger Delta. These images lay down routes of reference and serve as totems of causes: sentiments are more likely to crystallize around a photographic image than around a verbal slogan. FOTOTALES help construct and revise our sense of a more distant past, with the posthumous shocks engineered by the circulation of hitherto unknown photographs. These are sites of mediation, and the open negotiations for the ‘good things’ of life that good governance in a federation ought to put in place. FOTOTALES leave indelible illustrations as well as corroborate the chronicles in the other media, but specifically echoes the dirges of the poetic lines of Lucas Deinma.

These images now openly recognizable by everyone constitute part and parcel of the story that is dye stamped in all discourses/ conversations on matters of the Niger Delta region. They are locked in our minds, instructive for what should be done; the formation grounds for the amendments the situation demands. FOTOTALES is a

substantiating achieve of images that challenge the conscience of the "powers that be". These images which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, are meant to protest the failures of government in meeting the basic mainstays of the Niger Delta people lives. FOTOTALES poster ready as they are remain the most sustaining visual equivalents of sound bites! (Sontag, 2003). At this Jubilee occasion, FOTOTALES is a commemoration in no less blunt fashion than a postage stamp: important histrionic moments- pick any one image from the J. Adagogo Green Collection, for example. They are portrait statements that endorse triumphalism in the story of the NIGER Delta region. However, the surfeit of images showcase all the ugliness and all the "suffering and smiling"; and the collective failures of governments since Independence. They also invoke the miracle of survival and the possibilities for a beautiful future: "hat our farms will regain its fertility; and.....That my fishing net will be mended at the break of dawn" (Deinma, 2010).

FOTOTALES draws attention to the relationship of Images and Texts in telling a story. In fact, narratives emphasize the case of labyrinth and thread (Mitchell, 2003) "the maternal image repertoire" and the umbilical cord of language. This collaboration of Word and Image does underscore the suspension of the "scientific" and "professional" discourse of photography in order to cultivate photography's resistance to language. But allows the photographs to "speak" their own language, not "its usual blah- blah: Technique' 'Reality', Reportage', Art', etcetera. The photographic image here finds itself suturing, swallow tail joint fashion, with language. Thusly "the images speak in silence"!

The photograph is a coded message. All photographs are "analogical" in their coded structure. However, realism may be located in a different place. The realists do not take the photograph for a "copy 'of reality but for an emanation of past reality. It is "a magic, not an art." The poetic dirges lead on groundings for the story of the FOTOTALES images. In this discourse, therefore, the realms of Word and Image have been shown to share mutual migrations, exchange and intercourse in the 'unveiling' of the picture messages. Word and Image relations demonstrate the irregular, dissimilarities, and often improvised boundaries between "the realms of the visible" or the "seeable"; and "the realms of the verbal" or the "readable"; the relation between the "seeable" and the "sayable", display and discourse, showing and telling! (Mitchell, 1996) In fact, the exercise intuits the perception of impinged imagery on the mind. This is palpably achieved by way of the interface of the articulation of images and signs in language, and that of a formal visual/oral gestalt. The entire process is carried out on the scaffolding of the poetic, if you prefer, and the rhetorical uses of language. This grounding foists the uploading of the images. This in short- hand is the formation of the gestalt that is impressed on the mind, hence enunciating the "seeable". I have employed a two-pronged strategy of verbal/visual persuasion using the studium to define and explicate while exploring the relationship between Word and Image ,

reading “the ‘writing’ or ‘the rhetoric of the photographs’”, in unveiling the fullness of the messages in FOTOTALES. That was directed at a coordination of words in sequence from the text with a structure of select picture sites (culled from the images) in a reading of each select photograph. The exercise, therefore, takes the viewers beyond the uncoded message, the analogue onto the threshold of the coded message, the rhetoric/discourse of the photograph itself. FOTOTALES is futuristic and aspires to the critically modernist. The textual material is neither mere instrumentality in the service of visual messages nor mere grist for the mill of textual decoding. This exercise reflects and empathizes with the relation of language to visual representation.

In this world of the spectacle, saturated by words and images, it is important to note the complex suturing of visual images and speech, sight and sound. Look at “the variety and historical specificity” in the deployment of images, for example the image of women in an effort to underscore and publish the proverbial values of real silent hard workers in the field. This is put in the legendary metaphor the “protracted discipline of women’s work”: no walking away in disappointment but facing the task that must be done! Women’s roles have been that of the proverbial real load carriers, the true pillars on which society relies to carry on. Despite the pundits and the chronicling of the inertial pool of institutional failures in the Niger Delta, the figurative “protracted discipline of women’s work” (underscoring these inherent values and virtues of hard work and persistence even in the face of the impossible!) is truly the condition sine qua non for growth, development and progress. Ogene’s anesthetization and the fetishization of techniques of the trade in the photograph HOMEWARD almost obfuscate the silent underlying discourse of this image.

However, beyond the transfixing and anesthetization that these images crystallize, one is left to ponder their value. FOTOTALES stands for the new status of photography as the validating instrument of the new photo intervention on the Niger Delta condition. It has ushered in a formal change in order to affect the beholders’ understanding of what was formerly conveyed before the intervention of this new way of ‘seeing, the images. Artworks have been signs and statements that are in fact catalysts of social and cultural change. In the winds of change indicated by ‘the linguistic/pictorial/cultural turn’ FOTOTALES as an artwork is that change itself. The analytical object, FOTOTALES as a photo essay, was sited within a predicative framework so as to be pertinent to a discursive protocol. Specific images were interrogated in an attempt to see if each image was a representation, expression, reflection, or embodiment of its particular time and place. That is a historical sinecure of the story of the Niger Delta as encrypted in the photo- essays. The collaborative status of the image and text underscored the success of this intervention. It is however outside the purview of the present paper to pursue matters that may concern criteria for elaborating a classification of the ‘semantic carrying capacity’ of the medium of the photo essay as an art form. As a key stone enterprise in making the visible legible,

FOTOTALES opens up new ways of fabricating, sustaining and transforming the identity and story of the Niger Delta. A view of the Niger Delta through the lens should be construed, in my view, to mean two things: the lenses of the textual, writing; and the photographic images. These are neither generic nor abstract but simply put constructions of the specific times, places and displacements. The collaborative division of labor between the lenses: thread and labyrinth, voyeuristic representation, etcetera; and rhetoric's that script the images; constitute a schema paradigmatic of the troping mechanisms that I have employed in making the visible more legible. The political consciousness that these images engender as alluded to in the commentary on Willis Amah's image MANGROVE LIFE, empathizes with questions of representation. This pickin's eyes conjures a presence! Is this a starring down or a shared gaze? The purpose of the FOTOTALES documentary underscores social advocacy, beyond its underpinnings of power relations. It is important to note that photography is here grounded by J. Adagogo Green (1873-1907) as a foreign based Nigerian Art of representation. Adagogo Green's images were for the consumption of the colonial elite, definitely documentary for the master! However, this ingenuity adumbrates the vestigial constituents of Cognition for the matters of the Niger Delta. These are rite large in the panes of images and imageries that the present show stages in both dirges and the concourse of the reels of the photographer. These contiguous contexts of artistic practice do cross-pollinate each other! A critique of the FOTOTALES' Cognition of the Niger Delta would be a rewarding assignment for an exploration of the issues of power, manipulation and desire.

By opening a saloon for the show of all photographic images, FOTOTALES openly publishes the place of the amateur in the trade; while openly campaigning for the imperatives of a critical interest in the art genre in the region. The real task, in my view, is that of prefiguring the field of pedagogic engagement in an effort to locate the structuration for the entrenchment of hobbyists' interest in the genre. It is from the cadre of the hobbyists that the alert, educated public that is usually lured to the spectacle and drama inured in the exhibition spaces alluded to (page 5, above) would be drawn from. For this spectatorship to truly engage in her enjoyment of pictorial pleasure, she must deepen her reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation; etcetera) through "visual literacy". This is neither the maintenance of naïve mimesis, nor a renewed emphasis on the metaphysics of pictorial "presence". It is, rather a rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, discourse and figurality in the "pictorial turn". But taking a view of the picture from the standpoint of a "narrative turn", the images by Osodi, Omoboriowo and Amah draw attention to the symbolic nature of modernist interests: the fictive, the chronicle and the anecdotal. They all emphasize and situate the story they tell in definite environmental nodes. Several cinematic narrative angles: suggestive of temporality, compression and suspension of moments from a variety of perspective aid the actualization of the story of the

FOTOTALES. These manipulative nuances are in truth single moments deciphered from multiple camera angles. This is the wave of the times.

The realm of “high art” demands rare talent in the process of creation; but we can all contribute to the production and consumption of photographs. The medium permeates every aspect of our lives. Photography is largely driven by technique(s); and specifically by equipment, since the authorial hand is in fact invisible. A parting stance for further work, the keen viewer of these FOTOTALES images must have noticed, is the Still camera images: connecting the first- generation and second- generation of Niger Delta royalty. The multilayered presentness of these images portends opportunities for a look at the matter of memory itself. The double cipher of the photographic-essay (above) should leave every teacher and student alike, privileged to peruse these pages, with very graphic reasons for the immediate use they may put a picture to. It is apt to concede that since the Idea of eloquence falls as far below the Idea of painting as sight is more potent than words, it is wisdom to conclude "One picture is worth a thousand words!", as the Chinese saying goes.

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#### **Acknowledgements:**

1. ...“the protracted discipline of women’s work”, a metaphor borrowed from W.T.J Mitchell (2003) in respect of the unacknowledged hidden strength behind the men folk everywhere:-“suffering, striving and doing”, women the true pillars of society!
2. ... “The coded message” and “the message without a code” both phrases culled from Rolland Bathes (1977:19)
3. Topographic conventions: it is important to note the following topographic conventions employed in this paper (all culled from W.T.J. Mitchell, 1994):-
  - i. The typographic convention of the slash to designate “image/text” as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rapture in representation,
  - ii. The term “imagetext” designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text;
  - iii. “image-text”, with a hyphen, designates relations of the visual and the

*verbal.*



FIG. 1: KOO DANCE, OGONI DSC01893



FIG. 2: Mangrove Life DSC01897



FIG. 3: OIL SPILL DSC01898



Fig 4: Homeward DSC01899



FIG. 5: JUNKIE RIDEDSC01900

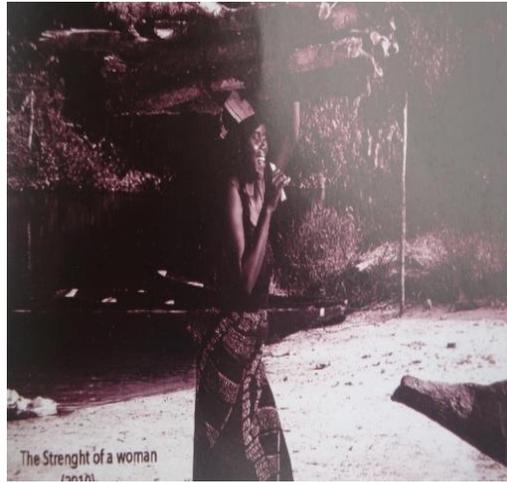


FIG. 6: THE STRENGHT OF A WOMAN DSC01901



Fig. 7: Evasive NIPA Palm DSC01904



Fig 8: Tide, Uguta DSC01906



Fig. 9: Serene Locale DSCO1909



FIG. 10: DSC01913

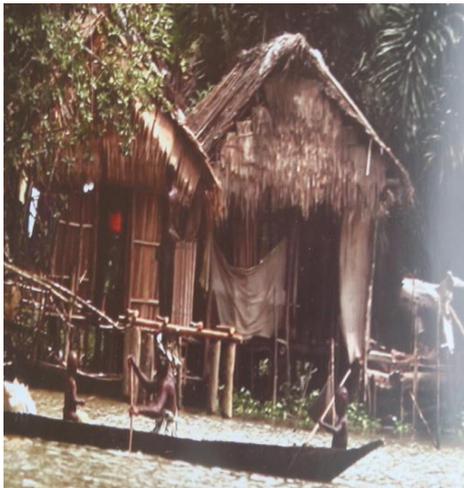


FIG. 11: HOUSING, IJAW DSC01915



FIG. 12: DSC01916