

Journal of
Communication
(JCOMM)

Symbolic Representations
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CARI
Journals

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Social Media and Photography in Nigeria

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Abstract

The medium of “photography” has encompassed the world, but depending on the cultural context, it is characterized by different aesthetics that come with different associations and implications. Drawing on cultural anthropology and semiotic image analysis, this article contributes to research on cross-cultural aesthetics with a focus on Nigeria. Based on a sample of 100 Instagram posts with the hashtag #nigerianphotography, it explores how social conventions of art influence popular Nigerian photography and create a unique style: there is a strong focus on the staging of people, who are usually shown in front of simple backgrounds as full body shots. In addition, Nigerian photography places a clear emphasis on colour and heavy retouching. These aspects are seen as consistent with African art in general, which is often more concerned with conveying abstract concepts than authenticity. Thus, it can be stated that Nigerians appropriated photography in their own way, emphasizing the symbolic rather than the indexical function of photography. Nigerian popular photography can be understood as a continuation of classical African art rather than a break with its tradition.

Keywords: *Identity, Photography, Social Media, Aesthetics, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

This article deals with popular photographic aesthetics and its characteristics in Nigeria. Photography – the same technique everywhere – has yet produced different social uses and different looks in different cultural contexts. Nowhere is this more evident than on social media, where hashtags make it easy to compare.

Although this article was written from a perspective of cultural anthropology, it is not about the “ethnographic context” criticized by Jan Vansina (Vansina 1999), in which the historical development of the works receives little attention and the otherness, the difference from so-called “Western” aesthetics is in the foreground. Following Eberhard Ortland, we argue that intercultural aesthetics should “avoid the naïve universalist assumption that aesthetic concepts should be applicable invariably in any historical context, as well as the relativist resignation that ‘we’ will never know what all these things mean to ‘them’” (Ortland 2003, 130). The understanding of culture that underlies the article is based on interpretive anthropology, which, according to its founder Clifford Geertz, fosters a semiotic concept of culture (Geertz 1987, 9), in which elements can be “read” and “translated” with the help of an emic perspective.

AESTHETICS IN NIGERIA

In Africa’s most populous country, visual aesthetics play an important role. Thus, the film industry is second to the oil industry with regard to foreign exchange generation (see Iyama 2013): to say “that the Nigerian theatre and movie industry, especially Nollywood, for more than a decade has contributed immensely to the development of the country culturally, economically and socially is an understatement” (Edeki and Emeni 2019). There is also an active fashion design scene with creations that are echoed in many African countries, and whose designs and cuts have long since transcended African borders. As in many other African countries, hair art is omnipresent, as are sculptures, masks and paintings.

Pan-African tendencies are clearly visible in Nigerian visual aesthetics. The graffiti with which the students at the University of Nigeria Nsukka were allowed to decorate their outdoor theater offer an impressive example: more than 50% of the freely chosen motifs contained Pan-African aspects, e.g. depicting the outlines of the continent or showing people in traditional dress or with hairstyles from other parts of the continent. In photo shoots experienced in participant observation itself, there were clear references in styling to quite different parts of the continent, such as the Maasai from the Kenya region. However, no exact copy is attempted, but rather the visual elements of the other culture are used as inspiration. African aesthetics as a whole have long been defined as “aesthetic forms that evoke the image and emotions of Africa” (Oloruntoba-Oju 2012). Campbell writes about “a quest for unity amongst continental and diaspora Africans, a revival of undeniable so-called African traits and traditions, and finally, political and economic independence” (Campbell, 28), and Esedebe addresses a “belief in a distinct African personality, rehabilitation of African past [and expression of] pride in Africa” (see Esedebe 4, cited in Secovnie 2009, 32).

Nevertheless, the question arises whether one can speak of a common aesthetic at all with regard not only to a country like Nigeria with 215 different ethnic groups, but even to a continent with countless languages and cultural contexts. Therefore, the article will not expand its focus too widely.

PHOTOGRAPHY – A GLOBAL MEDIUM

With regard to early photography, the anthropologist Christopher Pinney notices an upcoming “anxiety about photography’s revolutionary introduction of a ‘sense of sameness in the world’, the mechanisation and industrialisation of perception, the rise of the ‘aesthetics of the same’” (Pinney 2006, 59). In contrast, he states that the richness of detail inherent in photography “produces a surplus and profane realism which exceeds the requirements of a narrow national iconography. Photography has too many meanings for any efficacious nationalist instruction” (Pinney 2006, 59). The question here, then, is whether a particular look of the photographs can be identified as typically “Nigerian.” Photography looks back on a long history in West Africa: “Photographs have been documented [...] since the mid-nineteenth century, very nearly synchronous with their occurrence in Europe and America” (Borgatti 2013, 324) and were not only used by colonialists, but very soon also by the local population. Thus, with regard to photography in Nigeria, one cannot mean speak of a foreign or even imposed technology.

Photographs can be analyzed on different levels, for example, with regard to the motifs depicted, but also the way they are depicted – for example, with regard to shapes and colours (see McNatt 2007) and the intended message of the images. In the scientific literature on photography, special importance is attached to portrait photography with numerous subgenres such as fashion, beauty, lifestyle, and event photography. Looking at social media, this is probably even more the case. Portrait photography is considered to be closely interwoven with the identity of the persons portrayed (see Barthes 1989, 89), as it not only allows the persons to preserve an “image” for posterity, but also to shape this image themselves to a certain degree (see Jerrentrup 2021, 69).

Culturally distinct conventions emerged early on in portrait photography: already in Victorian group portraits, it can be observed that “Westerners and Africans often present themselves differently to the camera – indicating a different aesthetic of self-presentation. Westerners in slacks affect a relaxed posture, with legs or ankles crossed, to show their dominance over the situation, as opposed to Africans in robes or wrappers, who sit squarely, staring sternly at the camera, with hands and feet visible – complete – as their way of showing control over the moment” (Borgatti 2013, 324). In addition to posing, styling and makeup, setting, and – especially in the context of recent photography and social media – editing has also gained increasing importance (see Hegert 2021). The practice of editing began very early in the history of photography, but has seen an even greater boost with the digital revolution, so that even amateurs often retouch their pictures.

Furthermore, it should be noted that photography has to be considered particularly important also in terms of its impact on other types of representation: photography has shown “effects on older [= previous existing] forms – not the least of which is the visual reinforcement of their identification with particular person(alitie)s. Older forms have also had their effects on the African portrait photograph” (Borgatti 2013, 315-317).

INSTAGRAM AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

After having looked at photography in general, the social medium Instagram will be in focus and with it the photographers’ aspirations to appeal to a bigger audience – thus, to create “popular” pictures, which becomes especially clear with publicly shared and hashtagged images.

Social media are defined as “highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content” (Kietzmann et al. 2011, 241). Instagram, unlike platforms like Twitter or Facebook, is based on photographs: it is not possible to post only text, unless it is designed as an image. Thus, Instagram is particularly suitable for analyzing popular cultural aesthetics.

Popular cultural aesthetics is closely linked to cultural identity, a phenomenon that is nowadays at the center of much research in the social sciences, as well as in psychology and art studies, because in postmodern times, identity is less than ever a “given” but has become a working project (see Ferchhoff 2011, 107). Cultural identity is defined as a value-based connection (see Szudra 2007), for which cultural traditions recognized as their own, shared customs and beliefs are fundamental (Bailey and Peoples 2011, 19). Differentiation is considered the basis for cultural identity because it is formed in distinction from others: who one is also or even foremost means who one is not (see Niekisch 2002, 27).

Yet, in the face of diasporas, multiple affiliations, and, in the case of African countries, the feeling of a Pan-Africanism, some definitional aspects appear a bit shaky. Identity is contested, may be fluid, and ever-changing, but still remains a fundamental need. The present work is intended to contribute to this topic, as photography has “significant effects on communication [and] identity” (Winston 2013, 2): presentation on social media – whether through self-portraits or images that mean something to oneself in some way – is how users communicate and construct something about themselves, about their personal, social, and cultural identities. Identity is one of the phenomena considered central in the social sciences today, precisely because identity is no longer or only given, but must be created. People belong, determined by their biology, but also by their choices, to different social categories such as gender, class, ethnic and religious groups or also to the scientifically and politically discussed category of “race.” To feel positive social identity, based on a positive self-evaluation, is a central need for people, so that in case of negative comparison results, group changes are aspired, new comparison dimensions are chosen or strategies of creative reinterpretation are used (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Narrative identity is also important here, “the stories people construct and tell about themselves to define who they are for themselves

and for others” (Mc Adams et al. 2006, 4). The dynamic nature of social media provides a suitable setting for these kinds of identity work.

Self-representation on social media has been assumed to have a particularly democratizing potential (see Farinosi and Fortunati 2020, 43; Duffy 2013), as people can shape their stories themselves here: not only can people select special moments for photos, but in the sense of staged photography, they can create these moments in the first place. In addition, photos can be easily edited with appropriate software that is now readily available. With themes that pick up on the *zeitgeist* or the interests of a group, potentially anyone can gain fame (Tomova 2017). However, this should not obscure the fact that people who are particularly present in social media, e.g. influencers, often belong to advantaged classes and have more money, more education, and better looks than others.

THE SAMPLE

To obtain a sample that was as independent of the researchers as possible, a new Instagram account was created and then the first 100 posts were selected under the hashtag #nigerianphotography, which directly addresses cultural or national identity. Students active on Instagram in the fields of “Media” and “Fine Arts” confirmed using the hashtag rather frequently. It is noticeable that the hashtag is often used alongside the hashtags #nigeria, #beauty, #Africa, and #africanphotography.

The sample was collected in April 2022, but as Instagram suggested the “most popular” posts, so some may well date back a year or two. All posts were publicly posted, and by providing hashtags, it is also clear that these are posts whose authors would like them to be seen by many people. This reduces ethical dilemma that can arise when, as here, an open-label study cannot be conducted.

However, this should not hide the fact that the hashtag is also used by people of non-Nigerian origin who spend their vacations in Nigeria, for example, although this is probably a very small proportion, according to estimates that take into account the image motifs and the image descriptions, a maximum of 5%.

In addition, it must be noted that of course not every photographically involved person from Nigeria uses Instagram, and even if they do use the platform, they may choose different hashtags or none at all. It is conceivable that those who use the hashtag are more intensely concerned with national or cultural identity. At the same time, these are people who obviously want to be found on Instagram, i.e. intend public attention. The photos in the sample were subjected to an ethnological content analysis (see Joffe 2011, 209), which sorted the images into various categories. Overlaps are certainly recognizable here.

First, stylistic characteristics were analyzed. The colour intensity of many images is striking. Larger areas are often found in a single, saturated colour. There were only 4% black and white photos and 1% colour key, a technique where the entire image is desaturated but one element, usually a brightly coloured one like a red apple in this case, is left in colour.

Furthermore, many photographs were obviously heavily retouched, especially with regard to skin editing, colour enhancement, and three-dimensional look.

Among the photos were mainly pictures of young women, in more than 40 % full body or nearly full body shots and in less than 30 % close-up. Nearly 30% of all photographs consisted of studio pictures against a monochrome background – including pictures of men and babies. Traditional-looking, often pan-African inspired clothing was seen in about 20% of the photos. At 3%, street photographs were quite rare in the sample, once as a fashion photo, once as a documentary image of a jam market, once as a fighting event. Landscapes were also only visible in 3% of the photos, once with an elephant, once with a cow and once with a cat in the foreground, thus no pure landscape picture. Food was also featured in 5% of the photos, twice as advertisements, i.e. in layout photos, three times as images of specific African dishes. Twice wigs or hairpieces were shown, once a historical statue.

INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

The data require an interpretation, which takes into account usage patterns of the medium, e.g. that in general, social media images are viewed on a relatively small smart phone and usually appear surrounded by countless other photographs enabled through infinite scrolling. This means, photographs should catch the viewer's attention and interest.

Furthermore, in order to be able to evaluate the numbers correctly, it needs some insights that at least allow for broad comparisons. Since one of the authors is from Germany, Germany was selected. However, the comparison with a European country like Germany is not unproblematic, since English is not spoken on a daily base in most European countries. As an informal survey with German students has shown, the two equivalent hashtags are used much less than Nigerians use #nigeria and #nigerianphotography. So, it can be assumed that more photos using #germany or #germanphotography are uploaded by tourists and not by Germans. According to the survey, the hashtag #deutschland, the German-language equivalent for Germany, is also used less frequently by Germans who would like to showcase their photographs, possibly because Germany has less of an emphasis on national identity due to its troubled history. Nevertheless, taking these aspects into account, the comparison shows a very clear tendency, a special selection of topics and type of presentation, which suggests conclusions about popular aesthetic aspects in Nigeria compared to Germany.

It was found that the hashtags #germany and #germanphotography showed more pictures of landscape, architecture and technology than #nigeria and #nigerianphotography. Under #germany and #germanphotography, too, photos of people clearly dominate with almost 75%. Yet, persons are usually more embedded in contexts, such as landscape, street, or interiors than in the Nigerian sample. According to Siegman (1980), the depiction of humans plays a particularly important role in African art. However, these depictions often refer to more abstract concepts: "African artists praise a carved figure by saying that it 'looks like a human being.' Artists seldom portray particular people, actual animals, or the actual form of invisible

spirits. Rather, they aim to portray ideas about reality, spiritual or human, and express these ideas through human or animal images” (Vogel 1986).

Then, as in other African art forms, saturated colours play a more important role in the Nigerian sample: McNatt (2007) states that in contrast to the primary colours in Europe red, yellow and blue, in Africa red, black and white are supposed to be the primary colours in large parts, as they appear in numerous traditional contexts, which may also be due to the availability of these colours. In fact, the photos in the sample also show a frequent occurrence of strong red but also green tones. Such saturated colours are less frequent in the comparison sample.

Furthermore, the sample showed a preference for full body shots, whereas the comparison sample preferred smaller image sections. This corresponds to Jean Borgatti’s research: in 2003, he took pictures of his research subjects in Okpella both as close-ups and as full bodies and let them choose which image they wanted to have printed out: he himself often preferred a narrower image section, whereas “they generally opted for a full-figure portrait, or as they put it, the ‘complete’ one” (Borgatti 2013, 325).

In addition, the strong retouching seems to move the depicted persons away from the individual towards an ideal image. Beauty plays a fundamental role here. Although the “Western” view of beauty often suggests a distraction from the essential, Liam Buckley points out that beauty, especially with regard to photography, is related to both modernization and moral health (see Buckley 2013, 296): “With increasing economic resources, broader sections of society can focus on beauty and develop their own concepts of beauty discursively. A national or regional beauty provides a way of organizing diversity according to a single aesthetic that cultivates and lays claim to the passionate engagement and interest on the part of its observing audience” (Buckley 2013, 296). Just as photography, retouching also has a long tradition in Africa. In the mid-20th century, for example, in Ghana, photographs were processed with graphite pencils to lighten the skin tone and reduce wrinkles to create an ideal (see Wendl 2001). In the sample, techniques like skin enhancement, liquify and dodge-and-burn make people more beautiful. It cannot be said with certainty whether the skin tones of the subjects were always lightened, since the original images are not known, but it often strongly gives that impression.

African art is generally understood to be symbolic rather than representative (see Omatseye and Emeriewen 2010, Arnaut 1991). The simplifications and exaggerations are often to be understood in a conceptual sense (see Adewumi and Faida 2017) in order to underline certain statements. Overall, Kehinde Adewumi and Samuel Faida come to the following conclusion: “Symbolism has taken the center stage in the artistic expressions of the traditional Africans” (Adewumi and Faida 2017). Despite these generalizations founded on perceived similarities in physical representation, patterning techniques and colour usage (see Makinde and Aremu 2014), African art is of course culturally defined and relative (see Oyinloye et al. 2020, Akpowowo 2010).

The so-called Western art, however, often refers more to visual, physiognomic similarity and personal identity, which developed in the period of Romanticism that brought with it the idea, “that personality may be communicated through idiosyncratic facial features and expression” (Borgatti 2013, 318). In several African cultures, on the other hand, social identity is emphasized with a stress on ideals of arrangement and expression (Borgatti 2013, 318). Social status is often expressed by certain accessories, and even in art forms such as representational Yoruba àkó art, there is a corresponding tendency towards idealization: “Photographers themselves often describe their role as similar to that of a praise-singer” (Buckley 2013, 303). This looks back at a long tradition: before the invention of photography, mirrors that were acquired from European slave traders, served a similar function. Even before, lackeys complimentarily described to chiefs how they looked after getting dressed. In this line, portrait photography and its presentation serve to enhance “the reputation and attractiveness of the sitter” (Buckley 2013, 305). In the connection of portraits with memory, Borgatti explains, that “in many non-Western cultures, memory may be seen as active, always in the present, a transaction or negotiation rather than a reproduction, much as portrait figures and masks *indicate* rather than *replicate* their subjects” (2013, 322).

CONCLUSION

Photography, “the preferred idiom of a new generation” (van Dijck 2008, 58) that has crossed all borders and through the help of social media made different styles more accessible than ever, still did not lead to a worldwide homogenous mainstream aesthetic. On the opposite, the medium not only encompasses various aesthetics, but also enables people to express their own ideas about aesthetics with their own cultural identity.

Looking at our sample, it can be stated that the Nigerian style of photography is less mimetic and more representational than other conventions. This puts it in line with African art traditions that go beyond the realm of photography and in which symbolic values play a particularly important role (see Christa 2006).

Let us briefly consider an example again: three-dimensional skin retouching (usually the “dodge and burn”-method) is currently a trend in many regions and cultural contexts and has been pushed by the beauty industry through products such as glow foundations and highlighters. However, skin retouching is much more discreet in the comparison photographs from Germany. In Germany, it is not only the real-life resemblance that apparently plays a bigger role, but also the perception of photography as a medium that – in contrast to other media or art forms – has a direct relationship to reality. In the vocabulary of semiotics, this has been called indexicality (see Barthes 1989). Indexicality sets photography apart from painting on the one hand and computer graphics on the other. This mindset has enabled German-born photographers such as Juergen Teller to gain fame with their snapshot aesthetic: these pictures feel “truthful” or “true” (even if the relationship between truth and photography, and photography’s status as evidence is highly debatable, see Cohen and Meskin 2010, 70, Berger 2000, 50). In Nigeria, on the other hand, the indexical function recedes into the background in favor of the symbolic one. “Truthfulness,” as it seems, is less

connected to visual resemblance, than to concepts that are embodied by the models, to what they stand for. Similar to Indian aesthetics (see Gutman 1982, 147) and similar as described by Borgatti with regard to old photographs, in Nigeria, there seems to be a preference for an aesthetic that features something absolute and consequently less enthusiasm about photography's potential to capture a fluid moment.

Thus, it can be stated that this analysis serves as an example of how popular photography forms different aesthetics depending on the cultural context and has by no means led to a standardization even in the globally operating realm of social media.

However, there are more aspects to be explored. It would be interesting to add a diachronic perspective, that is, to see if respectively how Nigerian aesthetics in the field of photography change over time. In addition, it may be telling to analyze other Nigerian media that include photographs, for example fashion magazines or brochures, in order to determine whether the findings apply specifically to Instagram or can be extended to different manifestations of photography. Particularly revealing, though methodologically very challenging, would be a comprehensive comparison between popular photographic aesthetics in different cultural contexts.

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