Fragile Legacy: Photographs as Documents in Recovering Political and Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin

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FRAGILE LEGACY: PHOTOGRAPHS AS DOCUMENTS IN RECOVERING POLITICAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY AT THE ROYAL COURT OF BENIN

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I

Introduction

Photographs create a tantalizing sense of "being there" while history was being made. They offer a means of entry into cultures that are historically non-literate, stimulating informants' memories and linking their oral traditions to specific events and persons in the culture. Their research potential in West Africa and in Nigeria, in particular, is only now being recognized (Edwards 1990; Kaplan 1990: 317-319; Scherer 1990: 131, 135, 139, 141, 145; Sprague 1978; Viditz-Ward 1985; 1991). The focus here is on photographs connected with the royal court of Benin, and with ongoing ethnographic field work initiated in 1982.[1] Special attention is given to photographs taken between 1926 and 1989 by S. O. Alonge, the first indigenous and Benin royal photographer. His work illuminates political and cultural history, and contributes to the beginnings of a history of photography in Nigeria.

Evocative images have been used to illustrate books and articles about West Africa since the early days of nineteenth-century photography. Studies of visuals, however, taken in Nigeria by indigenous photographers and reported systematic uses of photographs in research designs are still rare (Borgatti 1982; Kaplan 1980, 1991a, 1991b; Karpinski 1984; Sprague 1978). Most research extant on early uses of visuals has been on cinema (Rouch 1975a, 1975b). There has been serious interest in the condition and circumstances of Nigeria cinema and filmmakers, and a desire to create a history of African film (Mathias 1986). The impetus to codify and to create methods for the study of film and stills in anthropology points to a growing awareness of their potential as much more than entertainment and illustration. Photographs are best been as behavior and ideas captured and expressed in imagery, and studied much as we do material culture.

Since the invention of photography in Europe in 1839, and during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Africa, photography was concentrated in European hands. As noted above, some work on indigenous West African still photography was begun in the last decade, and it contributes to a history of photography in this populous region. Viditz-Ward has written about the career of an important Creole photographer in Freetown, Alphonso Lisk-Carew, who opened his own studio in 1905 (1985: 46; 1991). *The Red Book of West Africa* (London, 1968) published portraits by George A. A. Da

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Costa, who was active from 1895, and work by N. Walwin Holm, who opened his studio in Lagos in 1897 (Monti 1987: 8, 164, 166). Holm became the first colonial photographer to be enrolled as a member of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain. Holm's son, J. C. A. Holm, ran his father's photographic business in Lagos before he opened his own branch in Accra in 1919 (Monti 1987: 164, 166). B. M. A. Da Silva, another African, worked commercially in Lagos in the 1920s. These men, together with the Lisk-Carew brothers, Dionysius Leomy in Freetown, and F. R. C. Lutterdodt, who worked in various parts of West Africa, comprise the handful of indigenous photographers about whom there has been some current biographical investigation (Monti 1987: 172). To those pioneers should now be added the name of S. O. Alonge, who has worked since the 1920s at the royal court in Benin (Kaplan 1990).

II

Background to Fieldwork

Benin City, and the *oba*'s Palace within it, have been major political, religious, and administrative centers for over eight hundred years. The city was the capital of the Benin empire, which stretched from beyond Lagos in the west, to beyond the Niger river in the east, across most of what is today southern Nigeria, and dominated the area from medieval times. Benin was the only major forest kingdom to predate foreign contact at the close of the fifteenth century, and the last to lose its autonomy at the end of the nineteenth century. It remained an important center throughout the colonial period, when it was part of the Western Region, and later the Midwestern Region. Today, it is the capital of Bendel State, one of the current twenty-one states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The present *oba* of Benin, Omo N'Oba N'Edo Uku Akpolokpolo Erediauwa, is 38th in direct line of descent in the present Second Dynasty, which is traced back to the twelfth century. The *oba*'s Palace occupies an ancient site in the heart of Benin City. The site, presently dated to the thirteenth century, may eventually be dated to the eleventh century (Connah 1975: 248). It was and remains the heart and center of religious worship and native law and custom for the Edo-speaking peoples in Nigeria, for whom the *oba* of Benin is a living god and a revered traditional ruler.

Fieldwork in Benin was devoted to describing and analyzing the roles of the royal women in the palace (Kaplan 1984).[2] The intent was to interpret the corpus of art associated with them and to position the works in the larger context of the court (Kaplan 1992). Benin art has long been famous for the naturalism and sophistication of its style, and the technical achievements of its "lost wax" bronze castings, which constitute the largest body of such works south of the Sahara.[3] The known corpus of art is the product of hereditary royal guilds which worked under the aegis of the *oba* prior to British conquest. Other objects were made in ivory, iron, wood, terracotta, corals, cloth, leather,

and various perishable materials. The art dates from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Some two thousand works were carried off by the British in 1897. Perhaps 10% of this corpus either represents and were used by women, or may be associated with them, and was the ultimate object of my study.

The art of Benin constitutes an ancient and enduring legacy that, along with the more ephemeral and fragile legacies of oral tradition and photographs, can be used to recover culture history (Kaplan 1990). These sources must be used judiciously and in conjunction with the records of early travelers and traders, missionaries and mapmakers, medical and military men, and available archeological and ethnographic data. Ethnohistorical records sometimes included photographs as well as drawings, that now repose in the archives, libraries, and albums of trading companies, missionary societies, museums, private homes, and government offices, still to be discovered. Photographs taken by Europeans and others taken by indigenous photographers, as well as contemporary photography, must be made part of an explicit and comprehensive research design. Fresh insights into the past as well as the present were attainable in Benin because it remains the most intact and functioning ancient royal court in Nigeria (Kaplan 1991a).

III

Photographs as Documents in Benin

The Binis' enthusiasm for photographic images is attributable to their strong sense of history and desire to record it. This applies to the personal and familial as well as the public and political arenas. Photographs documented the past and added a modern, visual dimension to art and oral tradition which also finds expression in parables, stories, song, dance, dress, and ritual. The possession, display, and giving of photographs is elaborated in this culture, in the way pottery had been among the "poblanos" in Mexico (Kaplan 1980; 1991b).

Several nineteenth-century photographs associated with the British conquest of Benin were located in England and used in New York in the exhibition and catalog, *Images of Power: Art of the Royal Court of Benin*, (Kaplan 1981). They were also used as blowups for historical and contextual background in the Benin National Museum exhibition, *Art of the Royal Court of Benin*, (Kaplan 1985). The photographs excited great interest in Benin among the local people, especially the one of *oba* Ovonramwen in chains being sent into exile at Old Calabar in eastern Nigeria (Figure 1).[4] Except for a few centenarians, most Binis had never actually seen him, and word of his photograph in the exhibition at the National Museum spread quickly through the city. The photographs also documented the impact of conquest on the kingdom and its treasures (Figure 2), by making clear why Benin artisans and others have suffered the culture loss and dissociation from heritage encountered in ethnographic research (Kaplan 1991a).[5] The export of thousands of art works from the *oba*'s Palace, the exile of the *oba*, and an interregnum of

Figure 1

oba Ovonramwen under arrest aboard the British Protectorate yacht, *Ivy*. Photograph by J. A. Green, 1897. Manchester Museum, University of Manchester.

Figure 2

Members of 1897 British military "Punitive Expedition" in burned palace of the *oba*. Photograph by R. K. Granville. Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford.

seventeen years led to disruption of palace life and production of art works until the rightful heir, *oba* Eweka II, was restored to the throne in 1914 (Figure 3).

These photographs convey a sense of accomplishment, and document the hegemony attained by the British over Benin. *Oba* Ovonramwen is shown seated on the deck of the Protectorate yacht, *Ivy*, guarded by British-trained members of the Niger Coast Protectorate Force (Figure 1). The chains worn by the *oba* are visible beneath his velvet robe that reaches to the deck. But he is seated, a mark of high status in African society. This is consistent with what I was told by informants in Benin about reports from Old Calabar that the exiled *oba* was treated differently from other captives and with "respect." His capture and exile, recorded for posterity, were an obvious source of satisfaction for the British, who fought so hard and waited so long to win control of Benin and its lucrative trade. In questioning informants about the use of this photograph in the shows and publications, I found no objections or sense of "humiliation" associated with this portrayal. Rather, they commented

Figure 3

oba Eweka II, was restored to the throne by the British in 1914, and reigned until 1933. He rebuilt the *oba*'s palace, and quietened the confusion that had marked the seventeen-year interregnum in Benin.

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that it was a historical fact, and in any event, the *oba* could not be diminished in their eyes—or replaced by a more willing substitute—as the British learned in the interregnum. I myself never saw the *oba* as defeated in that photograph, but have always been struck by the sense of restrained power that emanates from him, despite the chains.

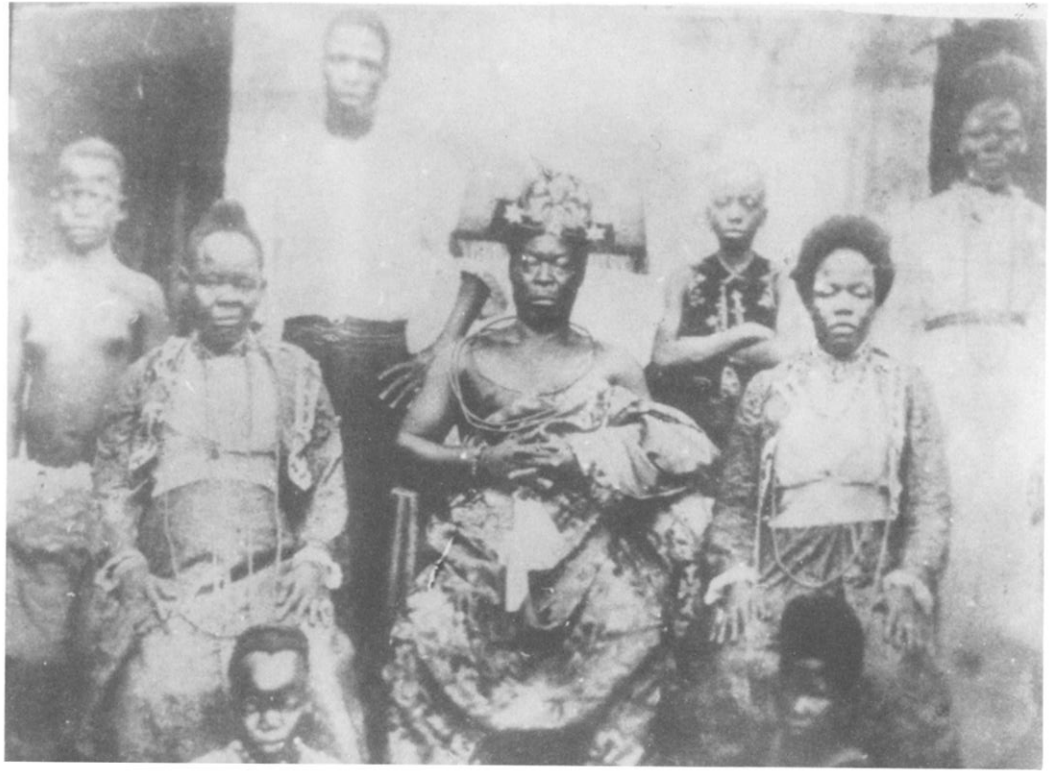

Figure 4

oba Ovonramwen (center) in exile, at Old Calabar, Nigeria. Seated with him (left to right) are Queen Egbe and Queen Aighobahi. Standing behind the oba (left) is his son, Prince Usuanlele, (right) Prince Uyiekpen, and a daughter, Princess Orinmwiame. Girl at extreme left appears to be an attendant; those seated on the ground are children or grandchildren. Photographer unknown, taken between 1898 and 1900. Reproduced by S. O. Alonge in 1934; the print made available to author by S. O. Alonge, 1987.

Disheveled members of the British "Punitive Expedition" of 1897 were photographed smiling and jaunty among the looted Benin royal treasures in bronze, ivory, and wood (Figure 2). The burned palace, its thatched roof gone, is open to the sky, and the art collected from the labyrinth of royal shrines, storerooms, and chambers awaits collection and shipment abroad. The display of the objects on the ground, without regard for their use as religious and ritual works, makes it clear the photograph was intended to impress people at home. There is no guilt shown, only triumph on the smiling faces.

The oldest known historical photograph of *oba* Ovonramwen with his queens was taken in exile by a European sometime between 1898 and 1900 (Figure 4). The *oba* is seated with two wives, and some other adults and children. I was interested in obtaining this photograph, and managed to get a copy in the course of fieldwork. I had heard from a few elderly informants that the *oba* had taken two wives with him to Old Calabar, but I had been unable to discover which ones they were. With the photograph, Chief S. O. Alonge aided me in recovering the identities by sharing it with various old friends and relatives (Alonge, personal communication).

The occasion for the photograph is not now known. It is a family portrait that is a curious mixture of European and traditional Benin elements: *oba* Ovonramwen assumes the typical Benin formal pose, being seated, center, hands clasped, facing front. He wears a rich cloth, tied in traditional style around his waist, and the upper part of his body is exposed. He wears as well several strings of corals around his neck, wrists, and ankles. His head is covered. The style of his hat appears to be of European origin, but it is decorated and worn according to Benin tradition. The *oba*'s wives wear decorous European dresses of turn-of-the-century design. Their hair is not dressed in the style of Benin queens. They are also seated, facing front, hands on laps, wearing several strands of coral beads. The young woman standing at the extreme right in the photograph is similarly dressed; her stance indicates she is a daughter and princess (Orinmwiame) rather than a wife. A prince (Usuanlele) stands behind the *oba* and the young boy with folded arms between the two is a prince (Uyiekpen) as well. The girl at the extreme left in the photograph is naked from the waist up, and is undoubtedly an attendant to the queen. In the old days, such attendants to the queens, the *oba*, and important chiefs went totally naked although young girls wore some strings of beads about their waists. The two smaller children seated in front of the queens must be children or grandchildren of the *oba*. This early group photograph of the royal family, shown in exile, may be compared with later royal family groupings for style and content. It was a valuable document in my research that tied oral tradition to specific events and actors, and supplemented and stimulated informants' memories concerning the exile of Benin's last independent king.

IV

A Royal Photographer

S. O. Alonge, the first professional Benin photographer in the city, is a chief in the Iwebo palace society, and the man chosen as court photographer by *oba* Akenzua II during his reign from 1933 to 1978.[6] Alonge offers an insider's view of Benin society, its ideas, values, and ethos. His images project a sense of personal success and pride under the changed conditions wrought by colonialism. Personal attainment, valued by the Binis, is reflected in his photographs of school graduations, social club memberships (Figure 5), family celebrations, and participation in civic and ritual events. The photographed subject shows pride in dress, wealth, status, and associations with others (Figure 6). Alonge also recorded important events in royal rituals, like the final and elaborate traditional burial ceremony for *oba* Akenzua's mother (Figure 7). He photographed a proud *oba* Akenzua II displaying the royal regalia of his grandfather, Ovonramwen, that was returned by the British to Benin in 1938. The photograph was widely published at the time (Figure 8).

For nearly sixty years, Alonge, as owner of the Ideal Photo Studio, worked both inside and outside Benin City. He had first-hand knowledge of the persons and events he was called on to photograph. For a young and ambitious man with talent in the 1920s, photography was to prove a lucrative profession. Before he went to Lagos in 1925, Alonge was a laborer, often just carrying water, and when he was not doing wage labor, he would accompany his father to their farms, miles away from Benin City, to get yams. A few years after the death of the Iyase Obaseki in 1920, Alonge went to stay with a cousin in Lagos in order to learn a trade. While there he became interested in photography through a neighbor who was a photographer. Alonge's personal recollections indicate that a number of Africans were working in Lagos in the early 1920s, and he remembers that the first photographer came to Benin from Lagos, and was from Sierra Leone (Kaplan 1990).

From his apprenticeship in Lagos, 1925-1926, to his return to Benin about 1930, Alonge was not only a recorder and observer, but a participant in the ongoing social and political changes. His work has particular significance because of the long period covered and the subject matter, especially with regard to the royal family (Figure 9). He remains a working photographer today, and he generously made some eight hundred prints, glass plates, and film negatives available, although some were in poor condition due to the deterioration caused by the heat and humidity. The photographs comprise a visual history of major events and personages associated with Benin.

Alonge did his earliest photography at his family house, #8 Ugbague Street, Benin City. He also taught a cousin, who was a teacher, how to be a photographer. From 1929 to 1930 Alonge traveled by bicycle to Ishan to photograph at government schools at Uromi, to Irroua, to Ikpoma, and to Ewu governmental school. At the schools the teachers would gather together, and

Figure 5

Benin Social Circle (founded 1937), at visit of Dr. Nnamidi Azikiwe (center left) to Benin City. With him are the club's president, E. O. Igbinigia, then secretary of Benin Native Council Authority (center right), and the principal of Edo College, Mr. Moloku, (seated extreme left), and other members, all of whom were civil servants or businessmen; the women were wives of the members. S. O. Alonge, an original member of the club, appears standing (extreme left, rear). Photograph by S. O. Alonge, 1937.

Figure 6

Chief H. Omo Osagie, Iyase of Benin, greeting the President of Nigeria, General Yakubu Gowon, Benin City, *ca.* 1964. Photographed by S. O. Alonge. Collection, Flora S. Kaplan.

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he would take photographs of classes at the year's end. He would print at night, having transported his chemicals in a fitted box; and he supplied prints at the price of ten shillings for three copies, and a set of full-plate size 8-1/2" x 6-1/2". Alonge opened his first studio, separate from his home, at Mission Road, in 1942, though he still had to photograph outdoors for the light (Figure 10). When electricity came to Benin in 1945, Alonge got it within a month. He had his studio, showroom, and darkroom inside from then on.

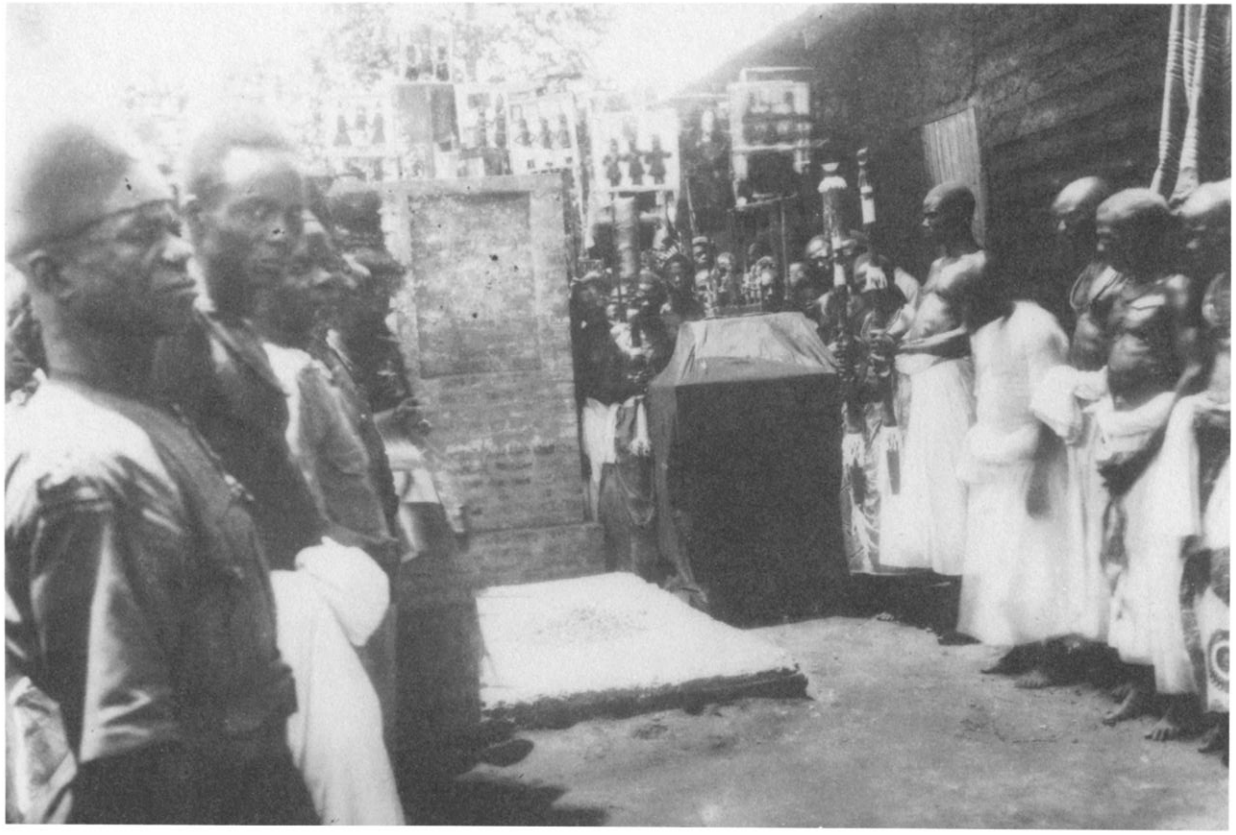

Figure 7

Final burial ceremonies for mother of *oba* Akenzua II, declared queen mother posthumously. "Ekasa" dancers display by her tomb at Uselu. The black box or *oton*, is seen at the right side. Photograph by S. O. Alonge, *ca.* 1935. Collection, Flora S. Kaplan.

Alonge's work provides a chronicle of technological developments in photography in Benin. His photographs, first in black-and-white, then hand tinted, and later in color, were taken with a variety of cameras. At the outset he used a box Brownie and a standing camera, then a Rolleflex and other 35mm cameras, and finally high-speed film. The standing camera used 7-1/4" x 5-1/4" glass plates and had to be loaded at night. According to Alonge, the single-lens reflex camera was much easier to use, but the standing camera gave the best images. About 1938 Alonge got "cut film," which he uses even now.

Benin photographs by Alonge were intended for his subjects, for private home use, and for his personal interest in building a visual record. These

Figure 8

oba Akenzua II holding coral regalia of *oba* Ovonramwen, returned by the British to Benin in 1938. Photograph by S. O. Alonge, about 1938.

Figure 9

His Royal Highness, Prince Solomon Igbinoghodua Aisiokuoba Akenzua as Uko-Ne-Iwebo during the coronation ceremony where he was crowned the *oba* of Benin. Photograph by S. O. Alonge, 4 October 1979.

Figure 10

S. O. Alonge, Benin City, 1942. Self-portrait taken outside his new photographic studio at Mission Road wearing formal attire and carrying gloves. He is in front of a special background ordered from England, which appears in many of his subsequent studio portraits.

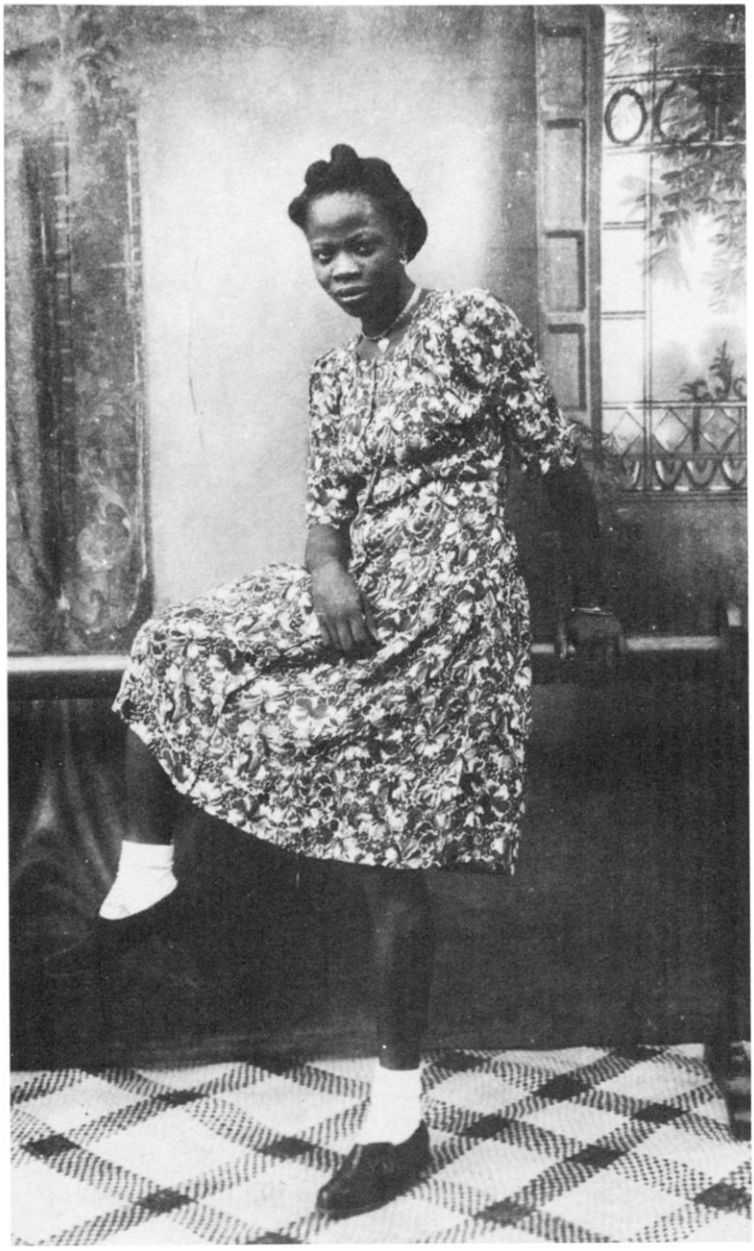

Figure 11

Benin schoolgirl on holidays at home, ca. 1942, in Western dress. Photograph by S. O. Alonge. Collection, Flora S. Kaplan.

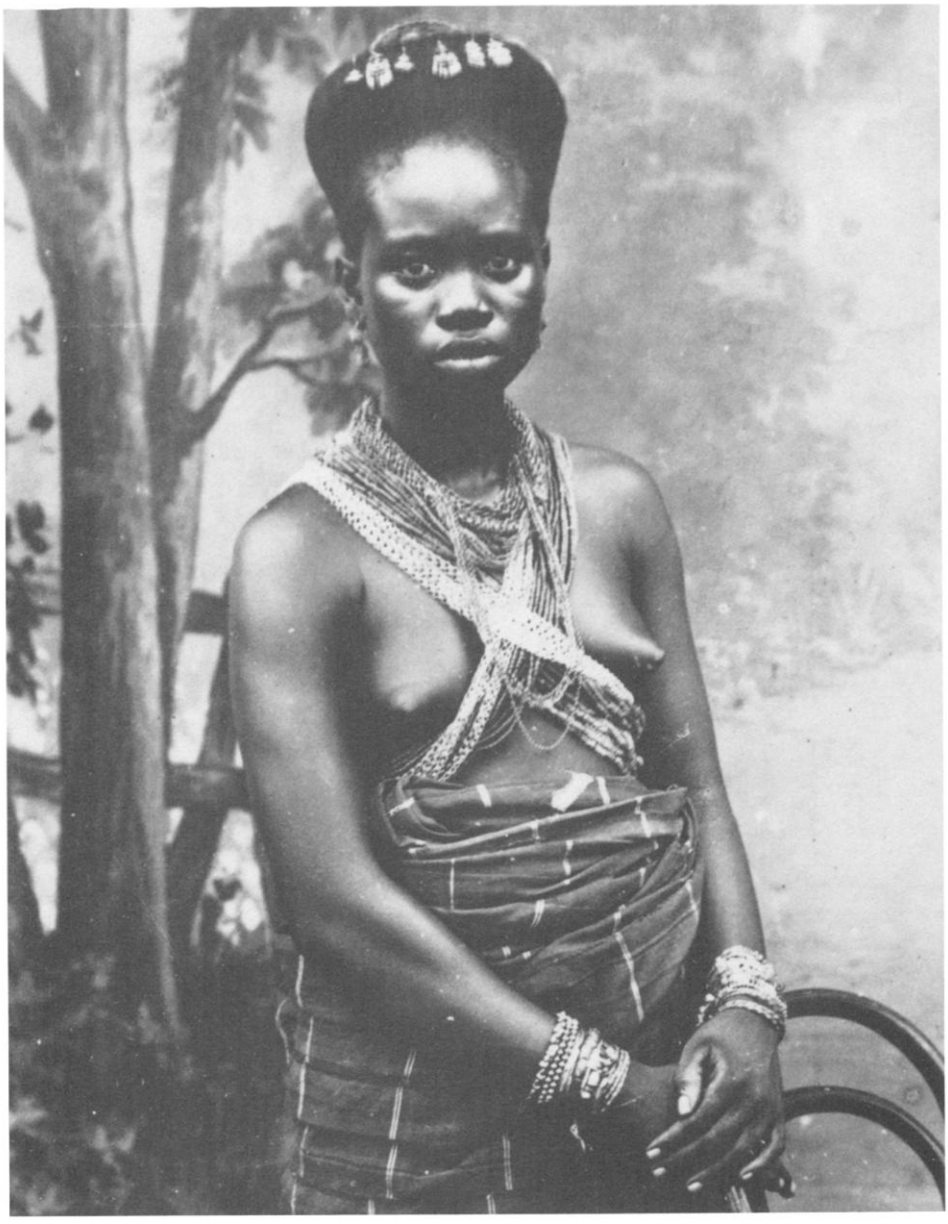

Figure 12

"Portrait of an African Lady about 1890s." J. H. Swainson Collection, National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, Liverpool Museum.

Benin photographs by Alonge were intended for his subjects, for private home use, and for his personal interest in building a visual record. These images stress Benin assertion of self in changing conditions and are in marked contrast to those taken by Europeans.[7] Alonge's pictures are neither staged and managed for dramatic effect nor are his subjects dressed by him to create an "ethnographic present" that did not exist, like some photographs of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century North American Indians (Scherer 1975: 75, 77). Alonge's subjects chose their own attire and presented themselves to the camera in preferred cultural attitudes (Figure 11). In contrast, the early British photographs in Benin convey a sense of satisfaction in the capture and domination of an indigenous people. Benin practices like polygamy, religious ceremonies, colorful dress or semi-nudity, and exotic locales were recorded by British photographers as much to impress the people back home as to satisfy their own curiosity about the people and places they now dominated (Figure 12). The British rejoiced in the spoils of war, and they radiated an aura of pleasure in the good life in the exotic locale.

Alonge's work calls to mind that of James Van Der Zee (1978) in New York City, in its comprehensive coverage over time and in its insider's view of a complex, vital, and changing society. The work of Alonge constitutes social documents that mark events in the reign of *oba* Akenzua II, which include independence in 1960 and extend to the present day. His work was recognized early on by the British, and he recalls proudly that he, a native Edo, was asked to take photographs for the colonial administrators in the 1930s and 1940s. When I asked Alonge which photographs he considered special, he singled out a photograph of *oba* Akenzua II and the governor of Western Region with visitors to Benin (Figure 13) and a photograph of the laying of the foundation stone for the Secretariat at the time the Native Authority was first established in Benin City. His only photographs of the British queen were taken at the 1956 meeting of Elizabeth II with *oba* Akenzua II at the Benin airport. On another historic occasion, the camera recorded the *oba* shaking hands with Princess Alexandra on a visit to Benin in 1963 (Figure 14). This was an exceptional event, since it is taboo for a woman to touch him, other than his wives and children.

V

Uses of Ethnographic Photographs

From my first meeting with the queens and from visits to Benin homes and offices, it was soon apparent that photographs were seen and felt as a powerful medium in the culture. All homes, from the wealthiest to the poorest, displayed photographs in a similar pattern, differing only in number, source, and the means of the occupants. The images were hung at eye-level or above, near the ceiling of the sitting room, and evenly spaced around the walls (Figure 15). In poorer homes the images might be cut from newspapers, magazines, and calendars, or pictures might be purchased to express admiration

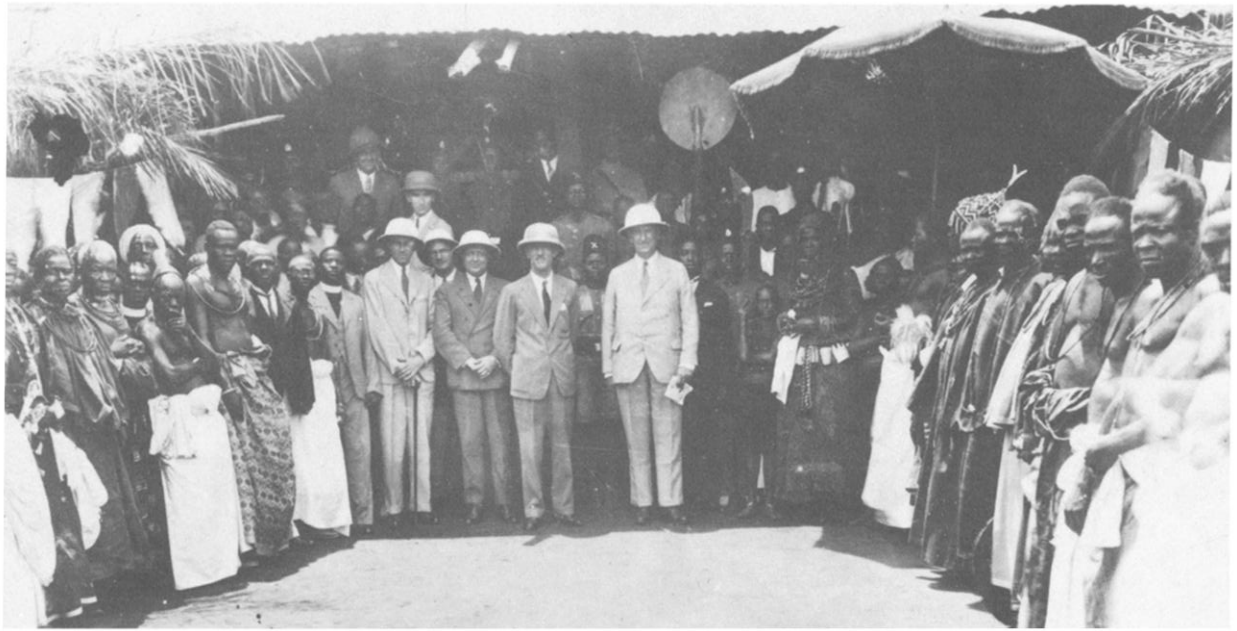

Figure 13

Visit of Earl of Plymouth (center) to the *oba* of Benin (right), at the *oba*'s palace. With Lord Plymouth (left) are Governor Hunt, the Residentof Benin Province , A. S. Hughes, and several district officers in Western Province. Also shown are distinguished chiefs and others, Rev. Ohuoba, Chief Legemah, Chief Obahiagbon, and including (left) the first Benin reverend of the Anglican Church and the postmaster (in English suit), among the first western-educated people in Benin. Some traditional chiefs (right) include Chief Okoro-Otun, the *Iyase* of Benin, Chief Osague, Chief Edo (Esamo), among many others. Photograph by S. O. Alonge, July 24, 1935.

Figure 14

The *oba* greets Princess Alexandra at Benin City, 1963. Right is *oba* Aderemi, *Oni* of Ife, Governor of the Midwestern Region. Between the *oba* and the Princess is Chief S. L. Akintola, Premier of the Region. Photograph by S. O. Alonge. Collection, Flora S. Kaplan.

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and approval of public figures, like the president of the country, the *oba* of Benin, the governor, and so on. Pictures printed in color were most admired. In wealthy homes there are generally two sitting rooms: an outer one for general guests, formal occasions, and large numbers of people to be received; and an inner sitting room, where intimate friends and family were received. Whereas formal portraits and photographs of public figures and important persons might dominate the outer sitting room, the interior one contained family photographs along with those of relatives and friends who might also be important people. In the case of the royal family, differences in display of public and private persons and family members tended to emerge, and their sitting rooms include more intimate views of public figures, as well as formal portraits not for popular consumption (Figure 16). In the most affluent Benin homes, photographs are propped on a carved wood frieze or a valence for drapes; the surfaces of end tables and other furniture are used in addition to the

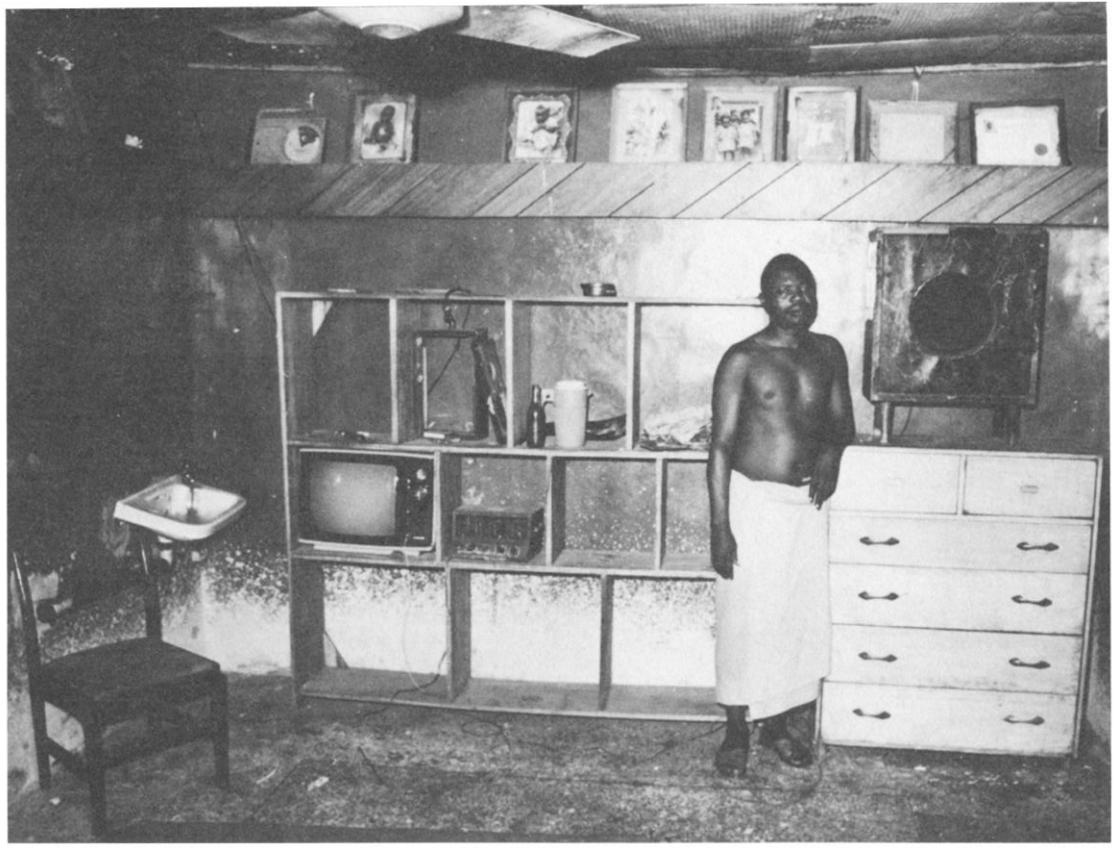

Figure 15

Sitting room of Mr. Osahon Uhunwagho, Benin City. Photograph by Prince Adeleke Oyedemi, Ebutte-Metta, Lagos, Nigeria, 1987. Collection, Flora S. Kaplan.

walls, the primary surfaces for display. The use of photographs in home decoration are also public and private statements about the status and connections of the family, ethnic and familial history that show who they are and what events and other gains have been made over time. The display of a photograph of an important person speaks of personal contact and a possible relationship, and most important, of access to people with power and influence. Binis are highly cognizant of the value of an image and its display in the society. "Ownership" is a matter of great importance in all things, and with all people.

Figure 16

Sitting-room of Princess Uki Egbe Akenzua, Benin City. Photograph by Prince Adeleke Oyedemi, Ebutte-Metta, Lagos, Nigeria, 1987. Collection, Flora S. Kaplan.

Wealthy people frequently hire photographers and filmmakers to record events such as title-takings, weddings, naming ceremonies, christenings, and funerals—including memorial services and celebrations of anniversaries of the deaths of parents that usually involve feasting and dancing, complete with rock bands. Such celebrations for well-known people may be shown on television news programs. Families also purchase television time to show funeral tapes and obituaries that feature a photograph of the deceased parent or relative. The newspapers in Benin, too, are full of such paid announcements. Photographs of the dead and funerals are meant to portray how the person really looked just before he or she died. This differs from our practice where a younger image is often chosen for obituaries and reflects the high value we place on youth, whereas the Binis value age. Since many people in Benin bear the same names, photographs of the deceased are posted on streets, signposts, and in rooms so that the person who died can be identified and the program of observance made known. Mourners also wear small photos of the deceased on their clothing to show that they are family members or are with the group who are "following" them. The black box, *oton*, the symbolic coffin of the dead, that is paraded through the streets of the city, carries a photograph of the deceased.

Those who attend a funeral or its anniversary are usually given a souvenir of the occasion in the form of serving trays, cake plates, carrying bags, and other things that can be imprinted with a photograph of the deceased. These are intended for either daily use of display by the recipients. The souvenir is graphic evidence of a person's association with known and important people who can afford to distribute them. Photographs used in this connection serve a practical purpose and express the important values of individualism and personal attainment. Photographs with their accompanying announcements proclaim the age of the person, enumerate his or her offspring, the nature of the celebrations to take place, and the social clubs, associations, and organizations to which they belonged during their lifetime. Thus, photographs, the various announcements, and funeral celebrations proclaim the importance of age, children, proper burial, size of family and following, sociability, and association with others—all of which are highly valued in Benin society. They are the means by which an individual attains wealth, status, and recognition in life.

VI

Exchange of Photographs

Photographs are important in Benin not only for display in various contexts, but as a medium of exchange. On arrival in Benin and at my first meeting with the royal women, Queen Eson, the *oba*'s senior wife, presented me with two photographs of herself taken at her title-taking ceremonies. She had carefully inscribed one of them on the back; and it was clearly intended as a mark of favor. Later, I was given photographs by Queen Ohan Akenzua and

other queens and informants. In return I took many photographs of them and presented them as gifts. On return trips to Benin in subsequent years I found my earlier photographs among those displayed on sitting room walls and propped on friezes. People told me enthusiastically that my portraits of their old father or mother were being saved for their funerals (Figure 17). At first, this was unsettling until I realized it was meant as a compliment when requests for photo sessions steadily increased.

People "posed" for me willingly, and asked for photographs of themselves. They had definite ideas about how to present themselves for the camera, which made me aware of our cultural differences in what a photograph should be and how people should look in it. They invariably wanted to be shown either at rest or seated, whereas I preferred to shoot them in action: moving, working, or carrying out an everyday task. They wanted to present themselves as composed and serious, and not talking, laughing, or gesturing, as I would have liked. When several people were involved they would group themselves spontaneously facing the camera, and here they would sometimes allow themselves a smile, especially if they were young and could not contain their glee at being photographed.

People put on their best clothes, or brought several changes of clothes to the shooting, and usually chose the objects or location where they wanted to be photographed, "managing" this event as they are wont to do others. So, for example, a female potter I started to photograph at work disappeared into an inner room from the courtyard. She soon emerged in a newer and more modern-style blouse, *buba*, and wrapped skirt, to which she added a matching head tie to complete the outfit. She struck several stiff poses for me, and then requested I take some pictures of her with a very large pot made by her mother fifty years earlier. Afterwards, she resumed work and I was able to photograph the entire sequence of manufacture of ritual pottery. But only with her in her better clothes—with photographs of herself having been taken at rest and composed, in a manner that denoted status—and after she had managed to obtain a historical record of her deceased mother's impressive pots. Her behavior in regard to photographs was a signpost to important ideas and values in Benin.

In the course of fieldwork I shared my family photographs with the royal women, my closest informants, in response to their inquiries about my husband, children, brother, mother, and father. They asked to keep some, after studying them carefully, and by the time I left Benin my store of mementos was depleted. Among Binis photographs are exchanged between persons who either are related or well known to each other—between brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, and close friends. As one informant put it: "Before you can send or give a photograph to a person, they must be part of you already."

Photographs taken to mark important events are given to friends and those who took part in those events, without asking. They validate existing relationships and can be used to establish a new relationship as well. Taking someone's photograph "is like being honest with them." Although they are not confused with the person, photographs are viewed as being part or a "piece

Figure 17

Benin centenarian, 105 years old, founder of livestock union of women traders. Photograph by Flora S. Kaplan, 1986.

of the person," and as sharing, apparently, in their identity. A chief told me that when the queens asked for my personal photographs, "it was because they considered you a friend already, otherwise they would not have asked. If you are a friend then everything about you is of interest." Still, it was rare in the forty family albums I examined in Benin and in the sitting rooms of family houses to find photographs of friends who were not also relatives. The exceptions displayed were usually those of leaders, political and public personalities, and distinguished people; others were encountered in albums devoted to public events like title-takings, where the size and composition of the person's following are socially, politically, and economically significant.

In the field the Binis imposed their sense of history on me and my activities. It was their idea for me to be included and photographed on important visits, i.e. 'historic' occasions from their point of view, like the first visit to the queens at the *oba*'s Palace (Figure 19), and the first visit to the queen mother, Iyoba, at her palace at Uselu. My presence and attendance at events like funerals, and my eventual departure from Benin (marked by a gala party given by Queen Ohan Akenzua) were recorded on videotape and still photography. Copies of these and other tapes were presented to me on leaving by one of the princes who had arranged, on his own initiative, to document my presence in Benin. They kept copies for themselves. This attention embarrassed me, and it was only later, when I left the field and began writing, that I fully appreciated their sense of history was both deeper and more heightened than my own.

VII

Benin Queens and Photographs

In my ethnographic study I made use of a collection of photographs from diverse sources, and these were informed by the description and interpretation of the royal women. I began with some ten historic photographs from European collections, and a dozen of museum antiquities; eventually, my collection included some one hundred photographs given as gifts, and more than three thousand images I took myself, as well as the nearly one thousand photographs I examined and those I received from S. O. Alonge's extensive collection. The ones used mainly comprised portraits of individuals and groups, members of some twenty families and royalty. Group photographs of schools, clubs, societies, and other social organizations were the next most numerous category; and public events, such as visits by distinguished persons commemorating political, social, and educational occasions were an important category in recovering cultural and political history in Benin.

Aside from the photographs in public arenas, family photographs were common. I examined more than forty family albums belonging to members of the royal family, and recorded such private events as weddings, naming ceremonies, christenings, awards, promotions, and title-takings. There were many photographs of children taken at different ages, often with other siblings

Figure 18

The author with the queens at the harem, the *oba*'s palace, Benin City, on the occasion of the first visit with the *oba*'s wives. Photograph by George Kaplan, 1982.

and relatives. This is consistent with the great value placed on children in Benin. The custom of not making spontaneous direct references to deceased persons, especially children, made the albums very valuable in learning the genealogy and history of the families and the names and numbers of offspring and relatives a person might have had. My direct questions were tolerated, but answered only reluctantly.

These albums defined the "family" as they wished to define it in a polygamous society. Each of the several wives of a man (and of the king) would have her own albums from which his other wives were usually conspicuously absent. The husband was included in each album, along with their courting scenes, wedding, and children at various stages of development, from christenings and naming ceremonies to school photographs and travel snapshots. The wife's own mother and father and siblings (usually of the same mother) and her relatives might comprise the other albums. Public figures and important events might also be included. The albums were a rich source of information on how kin and social groups defined and presented themselves through photographs. Each wife's albums emphasized her own offspring, the father, and their relations. Scarcity and the cost of cameras and film meant that most photographs in albums were taken by professional photographers hired for the occasions. Additionally, I viewed a dozen private videotapes of weddings, title-takings, and funerals, which are increasingly popular with more affluent women and men.

VIII

Conclusions

The use of Benin photographs began with research in 1979 for an exhibition at New York University and a desire to include women in the presentation (Kaplan 1981: plate 10) (Figure 19).[8] Eventually, women became the topic of my fieldwork in Benin, and the as yet unknown queen, a friend. It was she, Queen Ohan Akenzua, who first introduced me to the photographer S. O. Alonge, and it was listening to their comments and memories of people in his photographs that led me to consider using them for research, given my prior use and experience with photographs in the field (Kaplan 1980). The introduction led to Alonge's first gift of photographs to me (twenty-two black-and-white prints). Others followed from various informants and later, the queen mother, *Iyoba*, gave me several pictures of herself as a young woman at court, and some taken at her title-taking ceremonies, 17 August 1981, at Uselu. Her photographs, as well as those of other queens, linked memory to oral tradition, and stimulated, supplemented, and supported ethnographic study (Figure 20). The titles and status of individual wives were identified. Extended genealogies of polygamous families were established, and the task of encompassing the scope and size of the royal family, which numbers in the hundreds, was made less formidable.

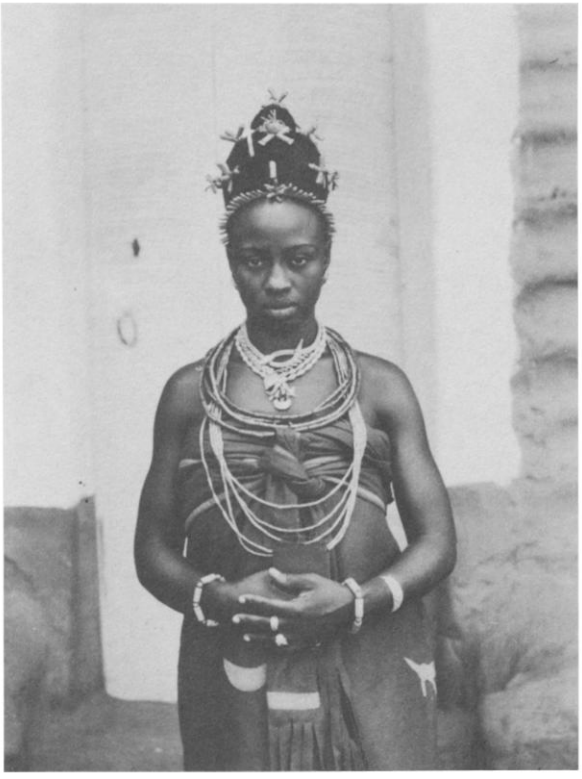

Figure 19

Queen Ohan Akenzua, shown at *oba*'s palace, during the *Igue* festival, 1953. Photograph by Ian Brinkworth, former district officer, Benin City. Used in exhibition, *Images of Power* (1981), plate 10, p. 79.

Political change, as well as cultural change, in Benin was documented through photographs, and was compared with known historical outlines, and arranged chronologically. The impact of colonialism and change are evidenced (Figures 1/ 2/ 8/ 13/ 14), beginning with the British conquest. I also secured information on family and social relations (Figures 5/ 7/ 15/ 16/ 20), along with insights into Benin values and definition of self (Figures 5/6/8/9/10/11/12/18), and attitudes toward age and death (Figures 7/8/17). They maintained the importance of individual achievement and making a "name" for oneself and, consequently, for one's family, honoring the ancestors of one's family and ethnic group, having a large extended family, exuding well-being via body size, dress, and ornament, and achieving prestige and status that ultimately finds public expression in funerals and anniversary celebrations. Objective measures of relative status, prestige, and wealth

Figure 20

oba Akenzua II (extreme right) at annual *Igue* festival, surrounded by his wives and children, 1956. Photograph by S. O. Alonge. Collection, Flora S. Kaplan.

(Figures 3/4/6/11/14/15/16) and change were studied and compared through photographs.

Results showed that these reflected remarkable continuity with the past, at the same time that new means of expressing underlying ideas were being invented and adopted, e.g., western furniture and clothing, modern art and graphic images, as well as old ways, like having many wives and children. Exchange of photographs, their importance, and ethnographic uses represented widely-held values in Benin that stressed being sociable, being popular, and having extensive networks (Figures 4/5/6/8/9/15/16/17/18/19/20). Photographs made significant events and people visible, comparable, and capable of pursuit with informants, despite changes in custom, style, and material culture over time. Thus royal women, offspring, and members of the court were identified and located for interviews. Through these collected images the royal photographer himself was revealed as a participant and observer, and as a source of oral history and the history of photography in Benin, and in Nigeria. Photographs appear to be a modern expression of the historical sensibility that pervades Benin culture; and like the famed Benin bronze plaques, photographs, though more fragile, proved to be historical documents worthy of study.

Notes

1. I wish to express my deep appreciation to *Omo* N'Oba N'Edo Uku Akpolokpolo, *oba* Erediauwa, the *oba* of Benin, who made possible my fieldwork, which began in 1982 and continued through 1990. He was also kind enough to review and comment on this paper. I am also grateful to Chief S. O. Alonge for his photographs, commentaries, and supplementary materials; to Ambassador Chief A. Y. Eke, Priest Osifo Ebohon, and Edwin Erhabor who were, among many informants, especially helpful; to Mr. Patrick Oramah and Victoria Oramah, who kindly arranged for photos; to Princess Uki Egbe Akenzua who graciously made arrangements for photos; and to the *Iyoba*, the queen mother, who kindly allowed photographs of her personal sitting room to be taken.

2. Research was carried out while a Fulbright professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, and at CenSCER (Center for Social, Cultural and Environmental Research), at the University of Benin, 1983-85; and continued in 1986, 1987-90. The exhibition, *Art of the Royal Court of Benin*, was organized on behalf of CenSCER for the university in cooperation with the N. C. M. M. (National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria) in 1985.

3. The term "bronze" is used here to gloss the works from Benin that include brasses as well as the leaded brasses, which are true bronzes.

4. I wish to express my sincere thanks by Dr. G. H. A. Bankes, Keeper of Ethnology, the Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, for assistance in obtaining a print of this photograph and for permission to publish it.

5. Particular thanks are due Elizabeth Edwards, Archives, Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford, for granting permission to publish, and in making the print available.

6. Chief S. O. Alonge has generously shared with me his intimate knowledge of Benin society, gained over more than sixty years of work as a photographer, and as a chief in the Iwebo palace society. His gifts of photographs, numbering in the hundreds,

have enriched and illuminated my studies and publications. I am truly grateful for these gifts and for his friendship in the pursuit of our mutual interests in photography.

7. Yvonne Schumann, Curator of the Liverpool Museum, was kind enough to secure the print reproduced here, for which I am most grateful. I am indebted to Peter Karpinski for permission to publish Figure 13.

8. Ian Brinkworth kindly permitted use of his excellent field photographs also earlier, in connection with *Images in Power: Art of the Royal Court of Benin* (Kaplan 1981).

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