From Orality to Visuality: Panegyric and Photography in Contemporary Lagos, Nigeria

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Photography, moreover, began, historically, as an art of the Person: of identity, of civil status, of what we might call, in all senses of the term, the body's *formality*.[1]

It was not on the exalted heights of autonomous Art that photographic portraiture made its lasting place, but in a profane industry which furnished the cosier spaces of the bourgeois home. And not only there.[2]

Ovation heads the pack of a new line of self-projection magazines that started blooming in Lagos, Nigeria, about the mid-1990s.[3] The magazine averages about 125 pages per issue, of which only about 12 go to advertisements.[4] The rest is filled with photographs that depict politicians, businesspeople, and sports and show business stars enjoying fruits of their extraordinary achievements—posh homes, exquisite-looking spouses, well-connected friends, adequately fed and peaceable children, sumptuous parties—on festive occasions. The photo spreads and brief accompanying

1. Roland Barthes,*Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1981), p. 79; hereafter abbreviated *CL*.

2. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis, 1993), p. 58.

3. Other Lagos magazines in this group include *Accolade*, *Crystals*, *Empire*, *The Entertainer*, *Events International*, *Fame Weekly*, *Gallery*, *Global Excellence*, *Reality*, *Society Celebration*, *Vintage, National Encomium*, *Encomium Weekly*, and *E Lifestyle*. *Agoo*, *Ancorra*, and *Sankofa* are published in Accra, Ghana. *Encomium*'s profile of Dele Momodu describes *Ovation* as "the reference point" for its type (Kunle Bakare, "At Home in London with *Ovation*'s Publisher Dele Momodu," *Encomium Special* [Dec. 2002]: 61).

4. A good part of the magazine's production cost is covered with appearance fees that many of the photographed subjects pay to have their pictures printed. According to the publisher, "If you are paying Sunny Ade [a very popular Nigerian musician] to come and perform at your party, so why should I come and do it for free? Sunny Ade is a praise-singer; what *Ovation* would do for you is also praise singing. So why should you pay one and not pay the other?" (Dele Momodu, interview by author, Accra, Ghana, 12 Aug. 2008).

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stories say very little about the biographical peculiarities and uncommon gifts that produce the uncommon success to which the glamorous photographs attest. When it was founded, *Ovation* sought to work within the image-restitution discourse about Africa; the continent suffers from rampant negative depictions of its situation in global media. Such representations do not resemble the wide variety of life on the ground; sympathetic media leaders, better if they have African roots, are duty-bound to correct the distortion. The initial continental ambitions notwithstanding—and despite the relocation of its headquarters from London to Accra and its coverage of events in Ghana, Gambia, Jamaica, and black Hollywood—*Ovation*'s core market is in Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora. The Nigerian focus of the magazine is obvious in the overwhelming presence of that country's wealthy within its pages and the prominent placement of Nigerians on the covers. The editors have yet to crack the market in the Maghreb and South Africa. East African events rarely appear. As this essay demonstrates, specific practices of the magazine tie it to Nigeria organically.

The magazine's cozy coverage of the rich and famous irks many serious Nigerian cultural and literary critics who believe that *Ovation*'s style resembles praise singing too closely. An interviewer confronted the publisher in an undated dialogue published in a defunct Nigerian celebrity gossip website: "We have heard people criticizing *Ovation* magazine, saying it is a photo album. What is your comment on this?" Dele Momodu responded:

> It is a photo album. Every magazine must have a concept and its target audience. There are various magazines on different topics and issues like cars, motorcycles, health and beauty and fashion fair. So why is *Ovation* different? It is a photo album magazine that covers weddings, funeral and chieftaincy title ceremonies, house-warming, and so on. If you want to read about serious news, go and buy magazines like *Tell* and *Time*. If you want a photo album, go and buy *Ovation*. *Ovation* is out to celebrate people's successes and achievements.

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> We do not cover just the rich, but also the poor who have risen through the ranks and become successful.[5]

Momodu maintained this stance when I repeated the concern to him in an interview in August 2008: "I don't judge people. They say, 'No, you should judge people.' No. I'm not carrying out any investigation, hearsay upon hearsay. 'I hear say Abacha stole money.'"[6] Praise singing, Momodu insisted, facilitates the gathering and dissemination of some types of information that high-minded assumptions of so-called serious journalism foreclose. Because *Ovation* does not peer too closely into the sources of its subjects' wealth, members of the Abacha family did, for example, lower their guard and expose signs of their fortune, ill-gotten or not, to the photographer.

In this paper, praise singing is a serious subject. My central proposition is that the Nigerian magazine culture embraced *Ovation* because the magazine successfully translated into photography the panegyric tendency that pervades popular, self-projection arts in the underlying Yorùbá cultural environment of southwestern Nigeria. The subgenre of Yorùbá panegyric that *Ovation* reworks into the photographic medium is *oríkì bọ̀rọ̀kìnní*, praise chants of the eminent. The magazine's title, which can easily be rendered as *òkìkí* (loud adulation) in Yorùbá, replicates the audience response goals of *oríkì* praise poetry, traditional hegemony's preferred mechanism of generating acceptance. This paper analyzes *Ovation* to outline ways of placing contemporary African cultural forms in a long perspective and to propose an example of how intermediality operates today in popular cultures.[7] I offer a brief overview of the cultural environments that nursed the emergence of *Ovation* and a close reading of selected photographs to account for how the magazine constructs social eminence. In the concluding section, I propose that a poetic understanding of photography, as opposed to theatricality and/or melancholic substitution, represents the best way to think about the type of festive portraiture practiced in *Ovation* and its imitators.

5. "Dele Momodu (Bob Dee): Q & A," *Gisters,* "www.gisters.com/profiles/bob_q_a.html" (this website, accessed 7 Nov. 2004, no longer exists). *Tell*, in the mold of American *Time*, is a Lagos weekly "hard" news magazine.

6. Momodu, interview by author, Accra, Ghana, 12 Aug. 2008. General Sanni Abacha was Nigeria's military ruler from late 1993 to June 1998. In one Nigerian English dialect, "I hear say" means, "I heard it said that."

7. "Media are intermediary by definition, but they also act as intermediaries among themselves in that they mirror, quote, overlap, and correct or censor one another" (Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology," *Critical Inquiry* 31 [Winter 2005]: 314).

Ovation's Immediate Contexts

It is easy to dismiss *Ovation*'s genre as a Nigerian domestication of similar popular celebrity publications in Europe and America. The bases for such a comparison are undeniable; the foregrounded stories and pictures of the rich and famous, for instance, place *Ovation* in the same genre as *People* (American) and *Hello!* (British). Kunle Bakare, publisher of *Encomium* magazines, admitted that he fell in love with America's *National Enquirer* when he first encountered the format during his journalism studies at the University of Lagos.[8] The magazine's quirks appealed to him greatly, and he sought employment after graduation at *Prime People*, the oldest of the celebrity news vehicles in Lagos. Zina Saro Wiwa's positive portrayal of *Ovation* in her documentary *Hello Nigeria!* also suggests that the Nigerian magazines' similarities to the British *Hello!* are too numerous to be coincidental.[9] Close studies reveal, however, that *Ovation* is neither the *National Enquirer* nor even Nigeria's *Prime People,* and the difference goes beyond naming. First, any Lagos-based magazine with *people* in its title follows the *National Enquirer* scandal-mongering model and not *Ovation*'s praise of high celebrity. Furthermore, from its inception, *Ovation* distinguished itself by emphasizing pictures over words. It does not report gossip, carries few interviews, and minimizes verbal narratives. None of the ostensible American and British antecedents focus on pictures of well-coiffed individuals in well-choreographed circumstances as overwhelmingly as *Ovation* does. Unlike the popular American and British celebrity publications, images that can embarrass or expose character flaws in the rich and powerful do not appear in *Ovation*.

The pervasive Yorùbá cultural presence in Lagos, combined with the publisher's advanced training in the workings of Yorùbá cultures and arts,[10] are foundational elements in the success of the pictorial magazine genre that *Ovation* heads. Variants of the Yorùbá panegyric tradition have long been the staple of southwestern Nigerian verbal popular culture. In music, rare is that popular lyric in Yorùbá that does not rely on effusive commemoration of persons, social groups, ideals, events, objects, aspira-

8. Bakare, interview by author, 19 June 2006, Lagos, Nigeria.

9. Zina Saro-Wiwa, "Hello Nigeria! Notes from Director Zina Saro-Wiwa," www.africafilmny.org/network/interviews.html?http://africafilmny.org/network/news/lsarowiwa.html. See also Saro-Wiwa, "Nigeria's New Celebrity Class," *BBC News*, 29 Dec. 2004, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4119365.stm

10. *Ovation*'s publisher earned a baccalaureate degree in Yorùbá studies at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife—an institution that is well known for its leadership in advanced studies of Yorùbá literature and culture—and is therefore well schooled in elements of high Yorùbá culture and arts. His graduate training in Literatures-in-English from the same university included a rigorous study of the artistic and social dimensions of oral traditions.

tions, and divinities. Even non-Yorùbá, Lagos-based singers have developed forms of praise epithets to match the rhythms of their ordinarily nonpanegyric musical forms and idioms. Oliver de Coque, a highlife music great who performs in the Igbo language, incorporates a formulaic Yorùbá epithet into his praise song for the predominantly Igbo members of the People's Club of Nigeria, at the end of which he sings two Yorùbá lines in praise of the Aláàfin of Ọ̀yọ́, Làmídì Adéyemí, as a gesture of gratitude for the honor that the king bestowed on a member of the club.[11] The same happens when the *jùjú* music superstar Sir Shina Peters praised in Yorùbá language a wealthy Igbo man partly by converting Igbo rallying phrases into an appellative panegyric.[12] In contemporary Lagos, the urge to praise has crossed ethnic particularities.

Praise singing has infiltrated Lagos-based popular culture not because some inexplicable dynamism directs Yorùbá verbal arts but because the Yorùbá panegyric is a supple and versatile form that has always been open to reinterpretation and improvisation. In Yorùbá oral traditions outside of Lagos, for example, *oríkì* ("appellative poetry") is a popular form whose performance is not restricted to particular divinities, professional groups, festivals, or communities. Lineage praise poetry, for instance, can be performed in the sedate style of itinerary chanters or the frenzied recitations of the hunters' guild. Lines about the peculiar attributes of deities, great diviners of the past, and even the divination God himself are found in prognostication verses *(ẹsẹ ifá)*. Ògúndáre Fọ́nyánmu, a neotraditional poet, has performed a praise chant of the Christian God in *ìjálá,* a performance mode traditionally reserved for the worship of Ògún, the hunters' patron deity. The praise form is so responsive to new usage that Karin Barber calls it the basic intertext of Yorùbá poetry.[13] To further underline the openness of Yorùbá panegyric, it should be noted that the form could be turned upside down for comic and satiric effects such that negative attributes, such as indolence and dexterous pickpocketing, can be praised alike.

In Ọ̀yọ́ Yorùbá societies, every individual acquires at least one name that expresses the parents' wishes and aspirations: auspicious luck, beauty, bravery, great wealth, and so on. As individuals grow, they acquire appellative attributes in commemoration of skills, physical appearance, profes-

11. "Kó máa ró/ ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀ Aláàfin" (let it shake resoundingly / the Aláàfin's beaded gourds) (Oliver de Coque and His Expo 76, *I Salute Africa* [ORPS 126, 1982]).

12. The phrases are "igbo kwenu" and "zobu, zobu." Since Peters, other musicians have used the "kwenu" formula to denote the Igbo ethnicity of their subjects of praise.

13. See Karin Barber, "Yoruba 'Oríkì' and Deconstructive Criticism," *Research in African Literatures* 15 (Winter 1984): 497–518. See also her "Text and Performance in Africa," *Oral Tradition* 20 (Oct. 2005): 264–77.

sional acumen, individual predisposition, relationships, and so on. The greater an individual's achievements, the more extensive the attributions acquired. As Adeboye Babalọla puts it, "àkànpọ̀ àwọn ẹyọ-oríkì báwọ̀nyí . . . l'ó ńdi oríkì jántìrẹrẹ, oríkì bọ̀rọ̀kìnní" (attributes accumulated over time . . . fill up long poems by which the eminent are hailed).[14] On festive occasions, entertainers and praise chanters throw the accreted, head-swelling epithets at civil society leaders judged to be deserving. Those among the wealthy who gain the attention of poets are deemed lucky and, partly by patronizing praise singers, act like they appreciate the special favors of the goddess of commerce. According to Babalọla, the truly eminent are those who, having been favored by the deity of commerce, have accumulated more than adequate wealth to fulfill all obligations, including the call of glamour.[15] In their proper contexts, the words of an effective poetic recognition would affirm the eminent subject's honorable position and swell the listener's head. To paraphrase Babalọla, the praise poem becomes a thing *(ohun)* whose successful production confers prestige *(iyì)* and honor *(ẹ̀yẹ)* and provokes pride *(ìwúrí)*. Praise chants stoke euphoria and put the addressed self in the best sociocultural light because they conjure through verbal imageries the extraordinary achievements *(iṣẹ́)*, pedigree *(ìbánitan)*, peculiar physique *(ìrísí)*, and uncommon acts *(ìhùwásí)* of the subject of praise. The poems exaggerate abilities, understate deficiencies, and deflect weaknesses with flattering word pictures.

Ovation, like traditional orature and contemporary popular music, adulates individual achievements. In both traditional oral poetry and *Ovation*'s printed photographs, wealth, or its manifestation at high-scale social gatherings and in tangible consumer products, plays a decisive role in the content and form of the panegyric. Wealthy merchants, manufacturers, charismatic preachers, bankers, doctors, lawyers, entertainment and show business stars, and prominent politicians receive the greatest attention. Nonparodic depictions of teachers, researchers, university professors, diviners, or farmers—professional acclaim notwithstanding—are rare. Those who work with the mysteries of physics, mathematics, and engineering may be glamorous in folk imagination; however, their hardy ways do not respond favorably to panegyrics. *Ovation*'s mass distribution platform and the relatively affordable cost of accessing its pages open up the print panegyric form and democratize the self-projection market. Readers can glean the "photo album" of the social activities of eminent people and

14. Adeboye Babalọla, *Àwọn Oríkì Bọ̀rọ̀kìnní* (Ibadan, 1975), p. 5; hereafter abbreviated *AO*.

15. "Eni t'ó Ṣoríire dé'bi pé ajé bá a Ṣòrẹ́; ó rí owó lò dáadáa, lati gbọ́ bùkátà, ó rí jẹ, ó rí mu, ó sì rí Ṣe fújà" (*AO*, p. 5).

celebrate their achievements vicariously. The moderately eminent can also sponsor the printing of photo albums of their own rites of passage celebration in *Ovation* by paying appropriate coverage fees.

Ovation's editor acts like a self-conscious panegyrist. Like the traditional poet, the editor places himself at the center of his operations, fully involved in sourcing events to be covered and supervising how the product will be delivered. In striving to be like his patrons, *Ovation*'s editor also illustrates a profound difference between the oral poet and the magazine entrepreneur. In the traditional hierarchy, the panegyrist is by definition uneminent; he or she is not a *bọ̀rọ̀kìnní*. Whereas the praise singer of the past—often times called *alágbe* ("beggar") in Yorùbá—was a maker and seller of other people's eminent aura, the contemporary photo praise-portraitist sells reproducible, tangible items that can, independently of the patron's presence, be multiplied, packaged, and sold (or exhibited) many times over. Even when issues of the magazine are specially retitled for the patrons, the portraits remain the intellectual property of the publishing company and not the persons they praise. Unlike the traditional praise singer, the editor controls an image brokerage he operates beyond the presence of his patrons. Traditional praise singers do sell their poetic reputations. But their trading practices do not transform into the type of eminence enjoyed by *Ovation*'s publisher, one that can be commodified independently of the praise singer's person. Although the traditional praise singer manufactures verbal images solely for others to consume, the contemporary editor sells as part of his trade his own tangible image as a high achiever whose praiseworthiness is not tied to his expertise but what he has acquired with his profits. Whereas chanting appellative poetry connotes the performer's lack of signal eminence in the traditional model, the modern commodity system enables the magazine editor and publisher to convert images into wealth-yielding products such that editorship of a successful praise-singing vehicle itself unequivocally signifies eminence.

How Does *Ovation* Celebrate?

The primary measure of eminence in *Ovation* is the degree to which photographed sumptuousness can exemplify the celebrants' achievement. Indicators of abundance include a crowd of well-appointed guests of high social and political ranking, wearing expensive body adornments, gathered at exclusive locations like posh hotels, and with best-selling musical entertainers at hand. The more of these indicators that are photographed at an event, the more eminent the gathering and the higher the celebrant's

place on the social ladder. When the celebrant is yet to rise to the top of the scale, the pictures are presented, mainly through suggestive captions, as prefigurations of great achievements. A young man's wedding presupposes bounteous progeny and manhood; a birthday connotes gratitude. Funerals of the old are depicted as culminations of high achievement, and the rare representation of the death of the young often laments the unfortunate abbreviation of an unfolding greatness.

The *Ovation* photo spread processes material acquisition and consumption patterns into an overpowering visual energy that compels viewers to see conspicuous consumption as the just reward of ambition. The photographed size and scale of what has been accumulated and consumed project the size and scale of the celebrant's leisurely expenditure and invite the reader/viewer to imagine what is unspent. Repeated poses of different celebrants and guests in numerous variations of four-by-three-inch prints, especially when they appear in designated event colors or specially selected fabrics,[16] create visual vastness. The magazine gestures towards representing individual distinction with intimate portraits of principal celebrants wearing recognizably expensive clothing and jewelry and also with full-length shots of celebrants with well-connected persons like state governors, business leaders, politicians, and neotraditional chiefs. For the super-rich, a whole issue might be created and named for the individual celebrating some new achievement.[17] Whatever the occasion, the *Ovation* celebrant occupies the symmetrical center of the frame in different pictures taken with other affluent-looking people. Subjects in the group photograph are usually standing, arranged to form an arch around an empty foreground. Except for occasions that involve well-known personalities, photo captions often leave out individual names and identify individuals, especially groups, with either the celebrant or a relative or friend who invited them and in whose honor they have bought their common attire. A caption might say, "Friends of the Bride" or mimic the titling style of artistic portraits, as in, "Men in Blue." In the *Ovation* coverage, the celebrant's retinue need not be

16. The Yorùbá term for the practice of ordering a common outfit for a party, *aṣọ ẹbí* (family outfit), is used all over southern Nigeria.

17. For example, *Ovation Igbinedion* (fig. 1) contains portraits of family members of Chief Gabriel Osawaru Igbinedion of Benin City and pictures of events related to his seventieth birthday celebrations and associated ceremonies at Okada University, founded by Igbinedion. Although the 176 pages of *Ovation* 121 are about the April 2010 wedding of Jameel Disu and Bella Adenuga, daughter of Michael Adenuga, one of the heaviest hitters in top Nigerian business circles, the issue is not renamed for them.

known by name; showing up in numbers to honor the celebrant is enough as a sign of eminence.[18]

I have selected the magazine's coverage of one subject for close reading. The year 2003 was particularly good to the Pittsburgh- and Harvard-educated retired General Buba Marwa because "within those twelve glory-filled months, he commemorated his fiftieth birthday, and honors kept flying at him from all over the world."[19] The former military governor of Lagos State, later owner and operator of a commercial passenger airline, presidential candidate, and Nigeria's High Commissioner (ambassador) in South Africa, received an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the Outstanding Leadership Award from the Center for Multicultural Leadership at the University of Kansas, where he endowed the Marwa Africana lecture series. He was also decorated with a Nigerian national high honor, Officer of the Federal Republic (OFR). Any one of these occurrences is a good ground for one great *Ovation* celebration. All of them occurring within one year creates a perfect season.

Although Marwa celebrated all these achievements in 2003, only the two covered in *Ovation* will be discussed. The cover picture for the end-of-a-glorious-year coverage shows Buba Marwa with his wife and four young children (fig. 2). The portrait places the patriarch, the main celebrant, in the middle of the frame. Unlike southern Nigerian men who pose in colorful outfits for family portraits, Marwa wears, as his northern Nigerian compatriots tend to do, a simple black caftan with white stripes. The patriarch's subdued appearance contrasts with his youthful wife's bright complexion and clothing. The children's placement anchors symmetry in the frame. Two girls in matching skirts and blouses are at extreme ends. One of their younger siblings, a boy, stands at the center of the frame behind the parents, placing one hand each on the father and the mother.

18. Profiting from widely circulated photographs has a long history in Africa. N. Walwin Holm opened the first studio in Accra in 1883 and in 1897 became the first African photographer to be granted membership in the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain. George Da Costa opened shop in Lagos in 1895. F. R. C. Lutterodt, who also operated in Cameroon, Gabon, and Fernando Po, owned a studio in Accra. The precocious Alphonse Lisk-Carew, at eighteen, started a photo shop in Freetown in 1905. See Vera Viditz-Ward, "Alphonso Lisk-Carew: Creole Photographer," *African Arts* 19 (Nov. 1985): 46–51, 88 and "Photography in Sierra Leone, 1850–1918," *Africa* 57 (1987): 510–18. Malick Sidibé, who started mid-twentieth century in Bamako, captures the commercial inspiration for popular photography in Africa with these apt words: "it wasn't the love of the camera that first drew Africans to photography, it was the promise of financial gain and respectable employment" (quoted in Michelle Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé* [New Haven, Conn., 2001], p. 22).

19. Whyte Eberekpe, "Mohammed Buba Marwa: Nigerians Gather to Honour a Man of Destiny in the Capital City, Abuja," *Ovation* 70 (n.d.): 122.

FIGURE 1.

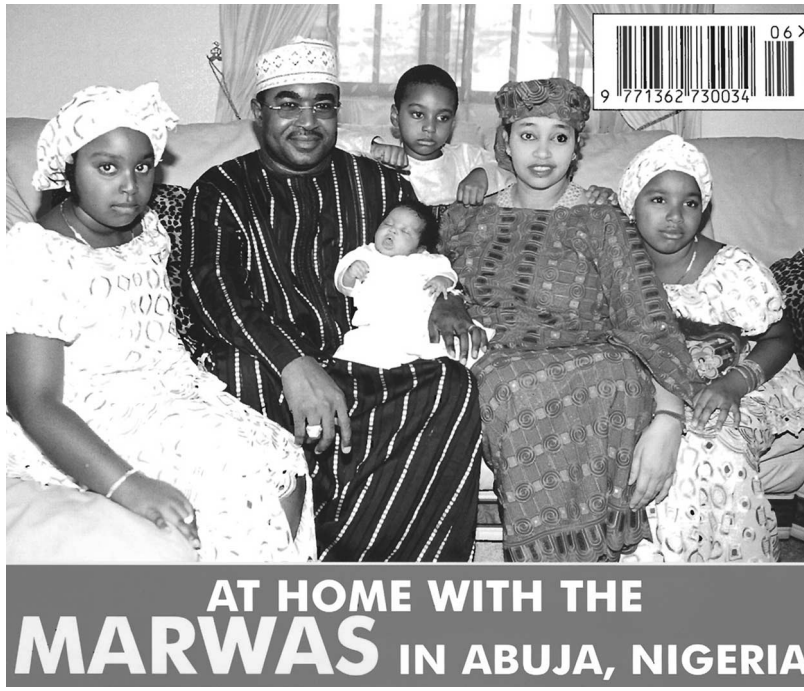

FIGURE 2. Segun Shobiye, cover image, *Ovation* 70 (n. d.).

The newborn, placed symmetrically below a male sibling, is held on the father's lap. In the inside spread, two women identified as Mariam Buba Marwa and Rahmat A. Marwa are at the end-of-year party. If these are the celebrant's conjugal relations, their relaxed and amicable presence at the celebration further enhances Buba Marwa's stature as an honorable person and affirms the ex-governor's credentials as an excellent manager of his domestic affairs.

Five issues earlier, General Marwa celebrated his University of Nigeria honorary doctorate degree and a chieftaincy title from a nearby eastern Nigeria community with friends and well-wishers drawn from many sectors of Nigerian high society. The two honors conferred by town and gown make Marwa into a person of considerable appeal to both high academic and civil systems of recognizing merit. Besides a few snapshots taken at the university's formal ceremony, academics are not featured in the coverage. Unlike his dull showing in the cover family portrait described above, Marwa puts on bright colors at both the university and community awards. Both events took place in southeastern Nigeria.

The coverage of the university event would have been an ordinary *Ova-*

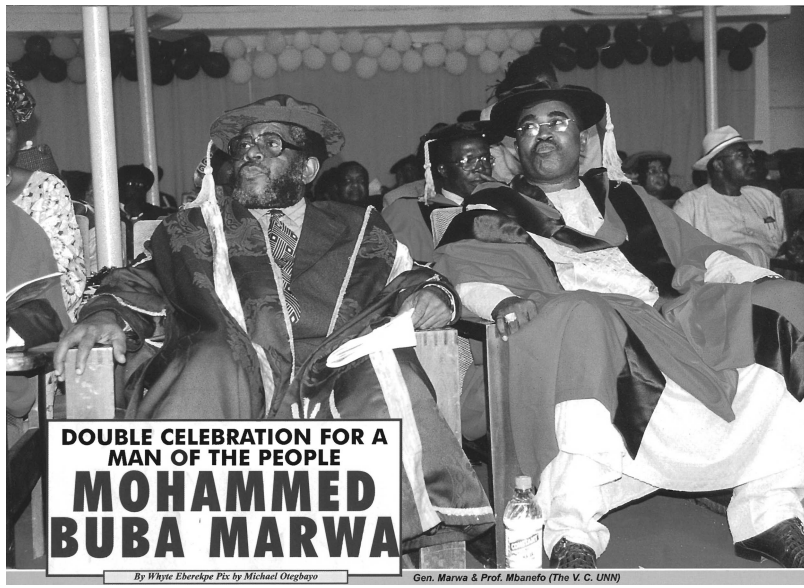

FIGURE 3. Michael Otegbayo, *Ovation* 65 (n. d.): 186.

tion report about an important big man except that something odd stands out in the half-page lead picture (fig. 3). Although not agitated, the celebrant is active in a way that does not match the staid repose of *Ovation* high celebrity. Marwa's puzzling, perhaps flippant, pouted lips depict that rare moment in which an *Ovation* subject exhibits a remotely ironic emotion. Of course, Marwa may be squirming pleasantly at the exaggerations and other unduly officious gracefulness the university orator is spouting about him in the formal citation. Nonetheless, within the magazine's conventions, the governor's bemused demeanor surprises. No other picture taken at the university ceremony shows anybody smiling. The celebrant's pout is thus remarkable. Other pictures that show Marwa smiling while wearing an academic gown were taken aboard his Albarka Airlines jetliner. On one level, Marwa's un-*Ovation* behavior at the graduation ceremony belongs to the university, the natural home of pouting, where one can thumb one's nose at authority. In this regard, Marwa is no different from Professor Mbanefo, the university vice chancellor and his official host. The honoree even wears a studious pair of eyeglasses like other academics at the occasion. He stares in the same direction as Mbanefo. On another level, the depiction is utterly ironic in that the characteristic behavior of university folks that the camera catches Marwa mimicking here is usually severely punished by the celebrant and his military cohorts when they hold public

office. Mbanefo's watchful look suggests that he is simply going through the motions. It is not quite certain that Marwa wants to be at the event; nor does it appear that Mbanefo, looking away from his honored guest, wants Marwa there.

There are good reasons that the two prominent subjects in this picture do not want to be together in the same frame. Mbanefo is probably wondering why the university is throwing away its highest honors to a prominent leader of one of the many military juntas that ruined the Nigerian university system. As if to explain Mbanefo's sour look, the short narrative that accompanies the picture notes the dilapidation of the university—"one hopes that the crumbling physical structures of the university are not symbolic of a more significant deterioration in the intellectual and academic sophistication that this great university was once known for"—but fails to link the acts of people like the honoree to the deplorable situation.[20] Since *Ovation* is neither *Time* nor *Tell*, the shallow analysis cannot rile the reader. What is important to a critical viewer of this praise picture is the crack in the construction of relentless pleasantness projected in the magazine's well-chosen depictions of eminence. While it would have been more satisfying to know whether the eminent person is having a good time or is dying to get out of the stuffy gown, it cannot but be noticed that Mbanefo's un-*Ovation* showing in shaggy beard and unglamorous thick and wide glasses constitutes a pictorial warning to anyone aspiring to eminence not to follow him. The professor's face models almost perfectly the stereotypical academic whose unsmiling ways Ebenezer Obey depicted in a very popular song in 1971 with a phrase that later became an epithetic formula for characterizing academic-minded persons: "alákọ́rí akadá to ńrojú kóíkóí" (the relentlessly sour-looking, hardheaded, studious one). In the cultural narrative that subtends this picture, the individual who follows Mbanefo will only end up handing out emblems of achievement to those who own airlines and become military governors.

Outside the university, *Ovation*'s typical mannerisms return and all nuanced quibbling is abandoned. At the community ceremony at which Marwa is installed as the first Ochi Oha (Father of the Poor [or People]) of Umuozzi and his wife as the first Nne Oha (Mother of the Poor [People]),[21] the pictures are unambiguously cheerful. The emblematic portrait of the event transforms Marwa into a modern, eminent southern Nigerian at home in indigenous traditions (fig. 4). The image contrasts sharply in its

20. Eberekpe, "Double Celebration for a Man of the People: Mohammed Buba Marwa," *Ovation* 65 (n.d.): 190.

21. I thank Anthonia Kalu and Chiji Akoma for the translations of these titles.

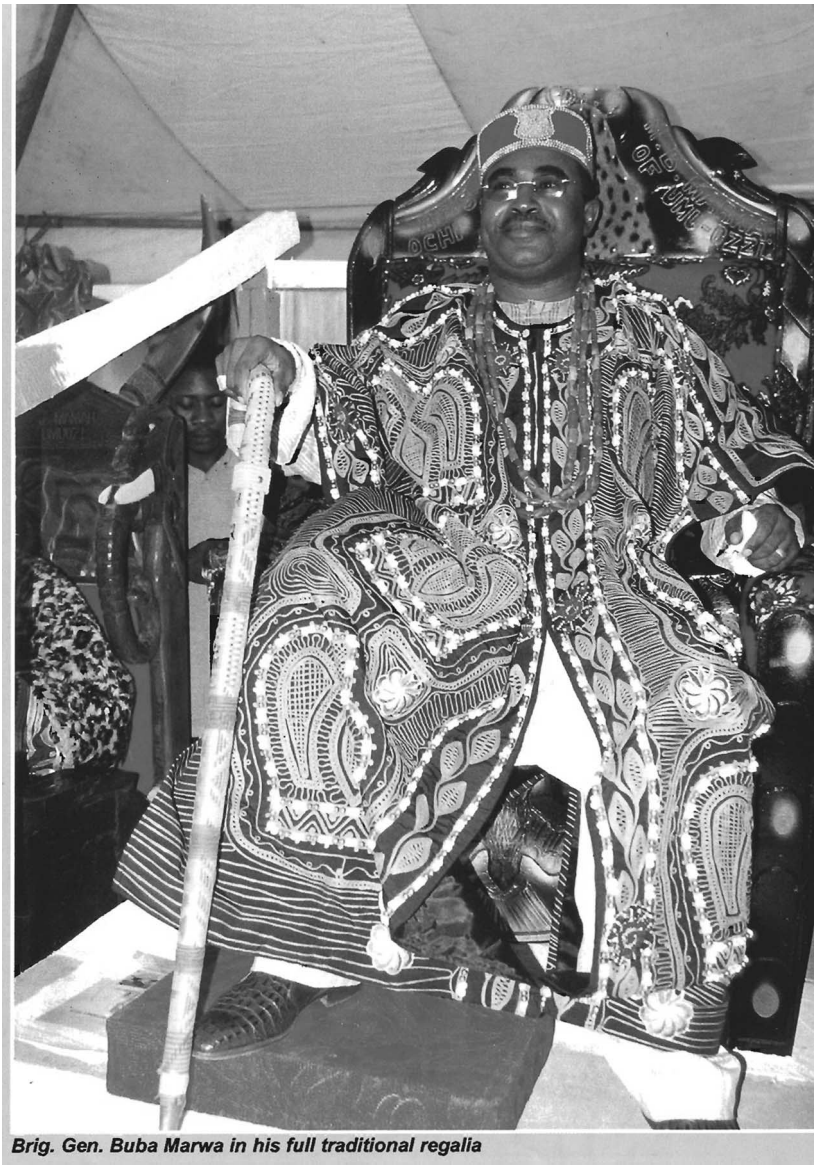

FIGURE 4. Michael Otegbayo, *Ovation* 65 (n. d.): 191.

colorfulness, massiveness, and pose with the one projected in the northern Nigerian family portrait discussed above. The latter picture depicts the eminent one all by himself, not quite disdainful, but definitely without much interest in the photographer. Unlike the homely persona projected in the family picture, the chiefly body presented here does not carry a child on his lap. The eminent subject of this portrait sits as if he knows what is required for a Yorùbá, southwestern Nigerian, photographic preservation of an occasion like this, although the event takes place in the southeast. Marwa is a northern Nigerian Muslim, honored with a traditional office in southeastern Nigeria, and appears for his official chieftaincy title in a southwestern Nigerian pose. The magazine thus helps the aspiring president construct a pan-Nigerian public persona. Its management of Marwa's "lofty," "famed," and "mighty" pose establishes the candidate's credentials for the highest national office that he was seeking at that time. [22] The key to that presentation is the "Yorùbá traditional pose" that, according to Stephen Sprague, requires the photographed person to present him or herself in the

> best traditional dress . . . squarely facing the camera. Both hands are placed on the lap or on the knees, and the legs are well apart to spread the garments and display the fabrics. The face has a dignified but distant expression as the eyes look directly at and through the camera. Symbols of the subject's position in Yorùbá society are worn, held, or placed conspicuously near by. The photographer enhances the sense of dignified stateliness by a camera viewpoint either level with the subject's waist or looking slightly upward, as if from the position of one paying homage.[23]

Marwa's picture obviously quotes these conventions: his legs are spread wide apart; he sits on an ornately decorated thronelike chair with his title carved on the back; the intricately beaded cane he holds in his right hand is part of the official insignia that include three coral bead necklaces, a toga embroidered in gold, and the red hat also trimmed with gold embroidery. The subject confronts the camera from high above, and his face, although small in comparison to the abundant signs of office, commands the viewer to salute and ovate.

To acknowledge that the photographic presentation I have, after Sprague, called the Yorùbá pose has been in use in West Africa throughout

22. Alan Trachtenberg, "Brady's Portraits," *Yale Review* 73 (Jan. 1984): 250.

23. Stephen F. Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves," *African Arts* 12 (Nov. 1978): 54.

Fig. 13. Photographer unknown, *Nana Kwabene Wiafe II, Omanhene of Ofinsu, Ashanti, Gold Coast, BWA,* c. 1900–15. Postcard, gelatin silver print (cat. no. 9).

FIGURE 5. Photographer unknown, in Michelle Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That,* p. 29.

FIGURE 6. From Stephen Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves," *African Arts* 12 (Nov. 1978): 54.

the twentieth-century and that it is not reserved for the use of the already eminent but is a compositional convention of respectful self-projection, I would like to draw attention to three other portraits: (1) an early twentieth-century postcard picture of Kwabena Wiafe II, the Omanhene of Ofinsu, Ghana (fig. 5); (2) the picture of the king of Ìlá Ọ̀ràngún taken by Sprague in the 1970s (fig. 6); and (3) formal portraits of nonroyal Yorùbá female and males also taken by Sprague (fig. 7). Except for the beads, each chiefly item of adornment—footrest, footwear, voluminous robes, some headdress item, and a wrist ornament—is repeated in the portraits of General Marwa, the Omanhene, and the Ọ̀ràngùn, although the earliest picture is separated from the latest by eighty-eight years. The Omanhene and the Ọ̀ràngùn, like Marwa, seem pleased with themselves. Unlike Marwa's, their offices are truly traditional. Neither of the kings has a higher civil office to seek; the Ọ̀ràngún is, by tradition, already second only to the gods. Their sedate but slightly anxious appearance suggests that they have civic responsibilities and contrasts with Marwa's entitled pose. In these pictures, eminence is not an abstraction; it consists of the recognition that tangible acquisitions compel.[24]

24. *Ovation*'s pictures, like Matthew Brady's portraits in nineteenth-century New York, procure and dispense "vicarious excitement, a glimpse into the lives that seem magical, glamorous, and mysterious" (Trachtenberg, "Brady's Portraits," p. 235).

FIGURE 7. Sprague, "How I See the Yoruba See Themselves," *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 5, 1 (1978): 25.

Visuality in Orality

Whether it is construed as a historical unconscious, amenable to modifications, or as a deliberately chosen approach to recording historical experience, orality-to-literacy paradigms have enabled theorists of African culture to create unified accounts of African cultures from premodernity to postmodernity.[25] However, my presenting the use of photographs in contemporary southwestern Nigerian magazine culture as an extension of the traditional panegyric form is not meant to add another layer of evidence to the perpetuation of oral traditions in African consciousness but to describe the workings of intermediality in contemporary southwestern Nigerian culture. I do not think of the antecedent appellative tradition of praising the eminent in Yorùbá *oríkì* as lurking deep in the cultural psyche of readers and publishers until an educated, modern publisher enlivens and brings it into consciousness in the print magazine business. To the contrary, visual sensibility is a major resource in oral traditions. What the mouth proclaimed in traditional appellative poems, particularly those composed about the eminent, relied on what the eyes passed on to it.

In Babaloḷa's *Àwọn Oríkì Bọ̀rọ̀kìnní*, figures of representation derived from sight are the most frequently used means of establishing characteristic qualities of poetic subjects of praise, even when the distinctions are abstractions like grace, kindness, mirthfulness, and so on. To highlight the diminutive physical stature of a socially eminent person, for instance, the praise singer speaks about the advantages of a hawk's light weight to its dexterous flight maneuvers and describes the praised as "pẹ́npẹ̀ bí àṣà" (weightless like a swift hawk in motion). By presenting swiftness and smallness as essential to the eminent being of a hawk, the simile naturalizes remarkable predation and decouples social distinction from large physique. A tall person is likened to the broad side of a bolt of textile ("namu bí ọwọ́ aṣọ́"). A full-bodied man is said to be rotund like a gaboon viper ("kọ́rọ́bọ́tọ́ bí ọká"). Like the hawk imagery noted above, this simile joins unmistakable predatory qualities to visibility. Two common epithets for highlighting sincerity as a praiseworthy attribute liken the subject to unblemished whiteness: "abínú ífunfun bí ẹmu" (one whose inside is white like palm wine foam) or "abìsàlẹ̀ ikùn bíi tákàdá" (one whose inside is like a plain sheet of [white] writing paper). A brave warrior is "àdáńlá b'èèkù yàmù" (hefty cutlass with a sturdy handle), and someone who can hold his or her drink is "olójúiná" (one with fire in the eyes). A cunning individual

25. See Abiola Irele, "The African Imagination," *Research in African Literatures* 21 (Spring 1990): 49–67; Isidore Okpewho, *Myth in Africa* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 155–221; and Harold Scheub, "A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literatures," *African Studies Review* 28 (June–Sept. 1985): 1–72.

is said to be "kọ́í bi igun ilé" (edgy like a house corner). In performance contexts, these epithets are used as if they were proper names. Thus, the sincere person is not merely compared to palm-wine froth; with the epithet expressed grammatically as a nominative, the sincere person turns out to be one who has converted his or her inside into some palm-wine-froth-whiteness that all can see. The drunkard is not a fiery-eyed person but one whose eyes are made of fire's redness. The nominalization processes convert visual observations into evocative peculiarities that turn on specular perception.

Traditional poets use visual contrasts to order attributes and to convert prosaic signs of high status—money, big house, and royal parentage—into depictions of eminence. The physically challenged Prince Afọlábí is obviously well endowed materially. But stating the bare facts of wealth and royal birth alone do not constitute praise poetry. The poet makes memorable texts out of the facts by creating verbal pictures made out of visual contrasts and juxtaposition. The tall and long-necked Fágbèmókùn, a king of Ìpetumodù, is "Ajígalọ́rùnbíi-ìyàwo" (he that is long-necked like a nubile bride); the curvature of his back is compared to the rounded tip of a mountain peak ("tẹ̀ lẹ́hìn bíi òke") (*AO,* p. 32). The poet associates Rùfái Àjàní Adégoróyè's height with the volume of textile needed for adorning his body: "a-gùn-t'ậsọ-ílò" (tall enough to use swathes of textile) (*AO*, p. 46). In the Afọlábí text, the poet invents a causal link between the prince's sparse physical presence, dark skin ("dúdú"), and social eminence ("ọlá")—*dúdúparíọlá*—as if the skin complexion is deliberately acquired to frame the upper limits of *(ìparí)* of wealth. All who can see should have noticed Afọlábí's dark skin. What they would never have known until told by the poet is that the prince orders the complexion to polish his eminence. The phrasing turns the prince's visible exceptional skin color into an index of exceptional wealth. When the poet hails Afọlábí as handsome and monied ("ọlẹ́wàlówó") (*AO*, p. 17), both the beautiful dark skin and money are used to denominate eminence in a complementary fashion. A similar logic is evident in the description of the fleet-footed Àbá-nikán-ńdá-Àmìdá as "igbó fi dúdú ṣ'ọlá" (the dense wood's eminence shows in its darkness) (*AO*, p. 49) and Sèèdùn Olúwòó as "adúbíàrán" (*AO*, p. 53)—dark-skinned like a bolt of shiny velvet. Afọlábí's magnanimity is also constructed with a visual contrast: hefty but not vengeful, "atóbi-má-rằn'ró" (*AO,* p. 18). The heftiness of this phrase refers to his social standing and not his physical stature. The epithet juxtaposes a naturally intimidating visual proportion to an equally noticeable social largeness but softens the intimidating appearance with adorable moderate behaviors.

Countless Yorùbá sayings urge individuals to give due attention to vi-

sual self-presentation as means of controlling how they will be perceived by others. Creating a pleasing visual appearance is a cardinal principle of self-presentation and self-composition about which one must show the utmost care. The proverbial phrasing "ìrínisí nìsọnilójò" (how one is viewed circumscribes the esteem one garners) blatantly associates projected self-worth to physical presentation, particularly physique and adornment; abundant midriff in a male still suggests well-being in some quarters. Necklaces of deep blue glass beads *(sègi)* imply opulence. Body art, clothing, headgear, and footwear, the estimation of whose social worth depends heavily on sight, are deemed to be reliable markers of achieved or desired social status in men and women; hence, the beaded crown shows a king, and the variety of necklace worn depicts the type of chief ("adè orí la fi í mọba, ìlèkè la fi mọ'jòyè"). The shape of headgear can indicate age, social status, and vocation that the wearer wants to project at a particular time. One remarkably counterintuitive proverb ties the concept of the person as socially recognized—progeny, wealth, profession, class, and so on—to visual presentation and self-showing by flatly declaring that "aṣọ là nkí, a à kí'nìyàn" (verbal pleasantries acknowledge the garment and not the person). In the following lines, the cotton plant is praised for the honor it does to the human body, even at interment:

> *Òwú là bá gbìn; a à gbin'dẹ* (We should plant cotton; brass is not virile)
> *Òwú là bá gbìn; a à gbìn'lèkè* (We should plant cotton; beads are not virile)
> *Àtidẹ, àtì lèkè, kò séyìí tíí bá ni í dé horo òkú* (Neither brass nor bead follows the dead to the grave)
> *Aṣọ nìkàn níí bá ní i lọ* (Only cotton is that loyal)[26]

These lines connect appearance and clothing to organic planting and harvesting. The most loyal acquisition, as far as the body's social life is concerned, is clothing, the epitome of bodily adornment that accompanies the dead to the grave. The lines rank perishable, organic cotton higher than materially more durable brass and beads, probably because clothes define social existence in inimitable ways. Systems of clothing obey nature and culture and follow a life trajectory. Brass and beads, although subject to the wearers' caprices, too, are products of mere technical know-how.[27]

26. These lines are from a response Rowland Abiodun gave to an early version of this paper at the African Studies Association, New Orleans, 11–14 Nov. 2004; my trans.

27. Another poetic fragment makes a special plea that the cotton plant be treated with care in appreciation of the generosity of clothes to the human body, even after death:

> E je á ṣegi òwú lóore
> Èèyàn to bá règbonse

Yorùbá oral traditions bind a truthful mouth's proclamations to what the eye has seen first ("ohun tójú bá rí ló yẹ kẹ̀nu ó sọ") and never the other way around. Only a lying mouth will speak first and then hunt for visual confirmation. Of course, a sweet mouth can embellish figures of sight. If, however, the mouth's sweetness intrudes so much as to be suspect, the speaker's integrity and intent are usually the problem and not spiced speech as such. Why is the mouth subjected to the rule of the eye, given that the mouth produces something tangible, but the eye does not? The simple answer is that the eyes' work passes through other organs like the mouth, the hand (drawing, sculpting), or the foot (drawing, dancing, movements, and so on) in order for other seeing people to share in the reproduction. Results of the eyes' observations are preserved and/or materially realized only in the movement of manufacturing organs that cannot on their own completely make things up. Every instance of painting, poetry, and so on accounts, as it were, for some funds earlier drawn from the eyes. Verbal and graphic imageries make the debts tangible and re-present to the eye what the eye made possible in the first place. Thus Yorùbá idioms express accomplished stylization in fashion, sculpting, painting, architecture, and so on as debts repaid to the eyes ("jẹ ojú nìgbèse"). Poetry, oratory, and music are never represented analogously as owing the ears or mouth a debt. In the fragment of Afọlábí praise epithet discussed above, the poet's eyes saw a short man, but the poem describes a person who cannot be cheated by taller people. That is, poetic words do not exactly replicate what

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Ko mo fewé òwú nùdí
Öjo a bá kú
Asö ní í sin 'ni
. . .
Asö lèdídí ènìyàn

Let us show kindness to the cotton tree
Anyone who goes (to the bush) to relieve him/herself
Should not use the leaves of the cotton tree to clean up
On the day we die

Cloth will be used to wrap us for burial
. . .
Cloth is the covering for the human body

[Quoted in B. Akíntúndé Oyètádé, "Body Beautification," in *Understanding Yoruba Life and Culture*, ed. Nike S. Lawal, Matthew N. O. Sadiku, and Ade Dopamu (Trenton, N.J., 2004), p. 402]

See also Henry John Drewal, "Pageantry and Power in Yoruba Costuming," in *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, ed. Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz (The Hague, 1979), pp. 189–230.

the eyes see because what proportional scaling demands, even in stylized distortions, in sculpture and other grossly visual arts does not apply in poetry. In the poet's mouth, Afọ́lábí's diminutiveness signals his invulnerability to maneuvers of the physically tall; his exceedingly dark complexion enters the verbal/poetic studio as the equivalent of expensive glass beads. In short, the poetic mouth always says something different from what the eyes see.

A comparative analysis of the situation in another West African society, even if brief, might be helpful here. When André Magnin asked the celebrated Malian photographer Malick Sidibé to confirm the critical consensus that he distinguished himself artistically in postindependence Malian portrait photography by recording without prejudice the processes of rapid modernization embodied in the lives of the youths, the theory of practice he offered defies the dichotomy of modernity and tradition pursued in standard critical commentaries on African photography:

> I always photographed with the intention of satisfying the customer. All my photographs were done with this perspective. I wanted and felt obliged to give my clients their very best image. As in my drawings I looked for beauty in my photographic images. A client who poses any old how will not be satisfied with his picture, it will not please him and he will not return to the studio. So it is up to the photographer to look for a good position, a good angle, to limit the faults so that the portrait shows him to his best advantage. That is in his interest and in my interest. That is why *I say that the photographer, the portraitist and reporter that I am, must be like a "griot". . . . I must flatter and beautify the client as does a "griot."*[28]

Probably surprised by this poetic view of portraiture that binds a quintessentially modern machine of ego projection to a traditional verbal practice, Magnin pushes for further clarification: "The 'griots' form a caste; they are considered to be genealogists, historians. They have a social function which the photographer does not." But Sidibé insists on the similarities between his vocation and those of the traditional raconteur: "The 'griots' can allow themselves everything because they know the history of the families. It is true, a photographer does not achieve this dimension, only producing an image. If the client is satisfied the photograph is published and I am a good photographic 'griot.'" In the rest of the interview, Sidibé dis-

28. Malick Sidibé, "In My Life, as in Photography, I Have Told the Truth and I Have Given My All," interview by André Magnin, *Malick Sidibé—Photographs,* ed. Magnin (Göttingen, 2003), p. 79; my emphasis; hereafter abbreviated *MS*.

closes nothing more about his aesthetics despite Magnin's prodding for how the photographer "revealed" the youths' "expression and well-being." When further pressed to "speak of the technical aspects of photography," Sidibé responds with an account of his favorite cameras, films, and lens *(MS,* pp. 79–80).[29]

I find Sidibé's words striking because they suggest that portrait photography, like praise poems, traffics in egos and selves without concealing its own status as a commodity. Both photographic portraits and appellative poetry, many times driven by the profit motive, position bodily adornments, fashion sense, professional calling, fame, notoriety, and other measures of desire and achievement as self-projection validators. Portraits, verbal or photographic, present themselves as fulfillers of aspirational needs, perhaps the most important of which is the urge to have a portrait taken or a few praise lines chanted.[30] Although Tagg is writing about portrait photography's origin in painting, the following words apply as well to the verbal panegyric: "To 'have one's portrait done' was one of the symbolic acts by which individuals from the rising social classes made their ascent visible to themselves and others and classed themselves among those who enjoyed social status."[31] In Sidibé's Mali, at least to the photographer himself, a common thread joins praise poetry's cultural work to portrait photography's.[32]

African Photography in High Theory

Until very recently, African photographic practice was generally neglected by cultural commentators because of the peculiar difficulties one faces if one takes the ethnographic route through which other arts like

29. In a different context and language, Abiodun argues for the validity of Sidibé's perspective of visual processes: "The visual artist uses his or her *oju-inu* ('inner eye') and *oju-ona* ('design consciousness') . . . to select, combine, and represent specific colors, patterns, motifs, and aspects of the subject matter in order to communicates its *aṣẹ* with the maximum visual impact" (Rowland Abiodun, "Understanding Yorùbá Arts and Aesthetics," *African Arts* 27 [July 1994]: 76). Although he is a fan of Malian popular photography, Manthia Diawara expresses misgivings about the social value of the griot's projection in "The Song of the Griot, " *Transition* 74 (1997): 16–30, esp. pp. 26–27.

30. See, for example, Diawara, "The Song of the Griot," pp. 29–30.

31. Tagg, *The Burden of Representation,* p. 37.

32. As in *Ovation*, a considerable part of Sidibé's work documents youth culture. Like *Ovation* magazine reporters, Sidibé followed his clients to their chosen locations and events, including "family celebrations (weddings, baptisms) or to bare-earth dances" and "added prestige to the occasion" (*MS,* p. 77). Although Sidibé's clients had very modest acquisitions to show for their lives in the city, they still "came to the studio with their latest riches. They came because of them." They yearned for their portraits to say, as *Ovation*'s subjects do with much grander possessions, "look at me with my bag, my watch, my spectacles, my shoes, and my clothes, look at me with my moped" (*MS*, p. 78).

music and the plastic forms gained academic attention.[33] It was assumed that the mechanical nature of the relationship of the camera to the photographed subject is so direct and impersonal that it leaves no room for the insertion of any aesthetically significant differences that can be attributed to the operations of cultural difference. The situation began to change gradually toward the end of the twentieth century with African photographers gaining attention in prestigious European and American museums and galleries. Even then, creating an African photographic criticism is somewhat tricky. Writing about the Africanness of a photograph for no reason other than the historical contingency of the photographer and the subject living in Bamako, for example, is bound to trigger the suspicion of essentialism, that inordinately feared term whose virtues have been rendered ambiguous in postmodern critiques of nationalism. The absence of precolonial practices of mechanized light writing, which critics could argue are cultural antecedents for Seydou Keita and Sidibé (Bamako), Alphonso Lisk-Carew (Freetwon), Sunmi Smart-Cole (Lagos), and others, creates a historiographic hardship that other Africanist art and cultural historians do not suffer. These are the historical conditions pressing on the following statement:

> For photographs to have any meaning beyond their functions as memento mori and as instruments of evidence and record, we must acknowledge another stabilizing factor: the gaze, that which Gordon Bleach has aptly termed 'the negotiated space of viewing.' When we take on Africa as the subject and African photographers as the interlocutors in this 'negotiated space of viewing,' the difficulty of interpreting what has been encoded as visual truth arises. Because there is now no prior existence of a language per se with which to discuss photographic activity in Africa (although photography in Africa is no different from that in any region of the world), what is revealed in interpreting the gaze or the field of vision is its implicit contest for the power of ownership.[34]

33. See, for example, Sprague, "How I See the Yoruba See Themselves," *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 5 (1978): 9–28; Christopher Pinney, "Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism, and Vernacular Modernism," in *Photography's Other Histories*, ed. Pinney and Nicholas Peterson (Durham, N.C., 2003), pp. 202–21; Diawara, "Talk of the Town," *Artforum* 36 (Feb. 1998): 64–71 and "The Sixties in Bamako: Malick Sidibé and James Brown," in *Malick Sidibé—Photographs,* pp. 8–22; and Margaret Thompson Drewal, "Portraiture and the Construction of Reality in Yorubaland and Beyond," *African Arts* 23 (July 1990): 40–49, 101–2.

34. Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, "Colonial Imaginary, Tropes of Disruption: History, Culture, and Representation in the Works of African Photographers," in *In/sight:*

Enwezor and Zaya are trying to manage a paradox here: if the photographic phenomenon has no peculiarity in Africa—since the mechanical processes need not be tropicalized to produce the necessary effect—why should, and how can, the critic speak of African photography? They argue their way out of the contradiction by recommending that photographic practices should be seen not as completely natural chemical reactions but as results of the immersion of chemical and optical machineries in local sociocultural conditions. While, on one hand, local history is not a precondition for photographs to form physically, on the other hand, subjects presenting themselves to the camera and the circulation of photographs as objects of reflection subsist heavily on cultural (and historical) contingencies. But as Geoffrey Batchen argues, in iterative motions like "camera placement, the position of the photographer in relationship to the subject, and the 'natural' environment selected by the photographer to enact the subject's authenticity," it is obvious that capturing difference is inherent to photography.[35]

Enwezor and Zaya make sense of mid-twentieth-century African photographic aesthetics by appealing to terms broadly drawn from francophone postcolonial literary and cultural criticism. They contrast representative Malian photographers to negritude poets and adjudge the photographers liberated from the need to evoke tradition to justify their aesthetic choices.[36] Photo portraitists, unlike the poets, construct anxiety-free, modern Africans:

> Nowhere in their works do we detect the sitters' desires to live in that so-called Negro-African museum. In fact, what we see is their reluctance to be confined in such a natural-history or ethnographic setting. Looking at the majestic portraits of the worldly and sophisticated men and women who frequented the studios of these photographers, we find the unique intersection and cross-referencing of notions of tradition and modernity. Even Senghor himself sat for a portrait by Salla Casset. These photographs produced just before World War II and thereafter contest Senghor's Africanité, an ideal rooted in almost incontestable, primal authenticity, which was drawn from the power-

African Photographers, 1940 to the Present, ed. Clare Bell et al. (New York, 1996), p. 21; hereafter abbreviated "CI."

35. Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), pp. 25–26. See chapter 1, "Identity," for a discussion of the intractable troubles that the medium's peculiarities have created for conceptualizing the history of photography.

36. They start at the interwar years because archival storage beyond that point is unavailable.

> ful residues of oratory and represented by the griot and traditional folklore. ["CI," p. 28]

External factors of intellectual milieu and internal close reading do not quite support this historiography. The combative response of anglophone writers and critics to Senghor's negritude would not unfold until after 1960, the closing year of Enwezor and Zaya's historical period. Moreover, the work of the alleged antinegritudists do not oppose Senghor's as it is starkly presented here.[37] Furthermore, the claim that negritude is "rooted in an almost incontestable, primal authenticity" grossly distorts the true shape of the archive, at least in poetry.

One can easily dismiss the notion that post-World War II African photography approaches modernization without tradition's baggage, as if the camera magically robbed the photographed subjects of their facility of received codes of self-presentation. A glance at the works of Sidibé and Seydou Keïta, to name two well-known modern West African portraitists, reveals that the subjects these artists photographed constructed majesty mainly in the traditional attire of the griot's world; bellbottom pants, ill-fitting suits, and the use of electronic gadgets as signs of affluence mainly speak of youthfulness, daring, risk, and sometimes mockery. In Sidibé's and Keïta's portraits, grandly showing does not seem to be the aim of subjects in oddly fitting jackets. Loftiness comes from codes lifted from tradition: flowing robes for men, elegant boubous for women, an ample physique and healthy children for both genders. Beyond the youths' donning nonnative casual wear like swimsuits, plastic flowers, garish sunglasses, and so on, one cannot find textual evidence for the claim that there is a "vehement cultural and ideological" dispute between the photos and the nationalist intellectuals. Enwezor and Zaya overplay the evidence when they interpret the casualness of some of the youths in the portraits as confirmation of their supreme comfort in the forms of appearance that history had willed to them and not at all concerned "by the questionable episteme of ethnographic delectation and otherization" ("CI," p. 28).

The city-dwelling youths in suits and ties photographed by Keïta and Sidibé constructed with their clearly uneasy, playful wearing of modernization an otherness against their compatriots left in the village. Yet this is not enough evidence to say that the photographed youths are not Africans in the Senghorian way. One does not lose one's lineage appellation just because one lives in the city, wears a suit, or has been to Paris or London.

37. Wole Soyinka, for example, is not uniformly antinegritude. Very few texts are as trenchantly Africanist as the philosophical defense of Yorùbá viewpoints (or what Soyinka presents as such) in Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge, 1976).

Senghor, wearing a dark suit, well fitted of course, posed for a studio portrait for Casset. Enwezor and Zaya adapted an antiauthenticity paradigm to make their contentious claims in their pioneering analysis: "What we seek to reveal is a whole transactional flow that refutes both Senghorian negritude's salvage paradigms and a complacent Western historicity of morbidly inscribed ethnographic yearnings, lusts, prejudices, appropriations, and corrosive violence" ("CI," p. 29).

Enwezor and Zaya's application of the tradition of theatricality in portraiture, especially the predominance of the spirit of contingency, in their understanding of African popular photography may be useful for repudiating some elements of cultural nationalist thinking. It is clear, for example, that conventions of mid-twentieth-century Malian commercial portrait photography might have enabled individuals to inventory elements of their urbanized existence with self-selected props and gestures from the corpus historically available to them. Contingency and theatricality fail, however, when they lead to the claims that playful individuals somehow enthusiastically "witness their own . . . transformation as well as the disappearance over time of customs and cultural symbols" ("CI," p. 34). This view extends too far the melancholic (mourning) concept of the photographic image. As Enwezor and Zaya construe it, the African photographic text "has deposited in our care, for our gaze to linger upon . . . the traces and imprints of vanished moments, while it leaves unaccounted the motivations behind the making of individual photographs" ("CI," p. 20). But neither mourning nor identity, per se, explains, for example, the *Ovation* photographic artifact whose ego-supplementing motivation is prominently advertised in images and captions. It does not look like *Ovation* photographs want to function like lifeless memorials; they blare their goals like social heralds and announce an eminence that is either directly here or about to appear.

In "Photography and the Substance of the Image," Olu Oguibe proposes a deeply engaging historicist-functionalist framework for understanding the life of photographic images in Africa. Working primarily with the evidence of "verisimilar representation" in *àkó* funeral effigies among the Ọ̀wọ̀ people in southwestern Nigeria, Oguibe, following Abiodun,[38] argues that *àkó* funerary woodcarvings record the essential identity marks and proportions of the deceased but eschew "photographic realism" because they are invocation aids used by descendants to hail the dead. "The eyes of the effigies are always wide open," for instance, "because the de-

38. See Abiodun, "A Reconsideration of the Function of a Àkó, Second Burial Effigy in Ọ̀wọ́," *Africa* 46 (1976): 4–20.

ceased to which they refer must keep awake on the other side, watchful over the living." In other words, the imagistic showing not only extends existence but tangibly manifests the survivor's wish fulfillment. Hence, Oguibe concludes that in *àkó* figures,

> we find a different kind of portraiture: representation as anticipation. The verisimilitude we are introduced to is a meditated gesture between faithfulness and faith, between reflection and projection; it is a configuration of representation as both reflection and invocation beyond the limitations of transparency. For that which projects, that which anticipates and conjures, though faithful it may yet be to appearance, cannot be transparent since to be transparent is to convey that which already exists, that which precedes rather than supersedes the agency of its representation: to remain, as it were, within the reaches of death. The essence of verisimilitude here is not transparency but efficacy, the fulfillment of an intent beyond the materiality of the image.[39]

Portraiture here is not a memorial because it does not aspire to approximate the departed. The dead have become something else that is not visible to the naked eye. The departed cannot by themselves be represented. The loss cannot rise to the level of a pathology. The *àkò* figure helps speculate about the departed and anticipate what they have become as ancestors.

The *àkó* model of figuration could be found in other invocatory artifacts like twin *(ìbejì)* carvings and *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* masques, both in southwestern Nigeria.[40] When a twin dies, it is not uncommon for parents to sustain an appearance of togetherness, despite the death, by commissioning portraits that duplicate the surviving person in a single frame. Carrying photographs of the deceased during funeral processions in Ethiopia and southwestern Nigeria also falls into the same class of picturing. In Oguibe's propositions, photography is rapidly assimilated into African ritual practices mainly because mechanical reproduction "offers the unique ease of combining possibilities of fidelity not readily available to the human agent with those of manipulability requisite to the fulfillment of the essence of the image."[41]

39. Olu Oguibe, "Photography and the Substance of the Image," in *In/sight,* p. 240.

40. For an introduction to these practices, see Robert Farris Thompson, "Sons of Thunder: Twin Images among the Oyo and Other Yoruba Groups," *African Arts* 4 (Spring 1971): 8–13, 77–80; Timothy Mobolade, "Ibeji Custom in Yorubaland," *African Arts* 4 (Spring 1971): 14–15; and Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington, Ind., 1983), pp. 152–221.

41. Oguibe, "Photography and the Substance of the Image," p. 247.

Oguibe argues that Africans' assimilation of photographs into a special occasion like the funeral betrays a general attitude; regardless of stylistic and technological differences between wood carving and light writing, in the African milieu continuous making and remaking is more important than taking in the creation of visuals. Construing images as products of a making imagination rather than as taken constructs, Oguibe suggests, better reflects the life of the photograph in African societies. In other words, neither the medium, nor the subject depicted, nor the artist's technique, all processes of taking photographs, expresses the essence of the image as Africans consume it. The making of the object, which includes the specific manner the consumer materializes it in use, carries more weight. The scandalous thought Roland Barthes once pondered aloud presents Oguibe's point in clearer relief. Barthes says:

> I may well worship an Image, a Painting, a Statue, but a photograph? I cannot place it in a ritual (on my desk, in an album) unless, somehow, I avoid looking at it (or avoid its looking at me), deliberately disappointing its unendurable plenitude and, by my very inattention, attaching it to an entirely different class of fetishes: the icons which are kissed in the Greek churches without being seen—on their shiny glass surface. [*CL,* pp. 90–91]

Nigerians and Ethiopians, Christians included, place pictures in funeral rituals not as substitutions for a source of melancholy but as instruments of agential invocations. The photograph does not immobilize the irremediably past presence of the dead but reminds the living of transition's perpetuity. No particular presence is unsurpassable. Living, after all, does not end at the cessation of breath. The image is not a lifeless reproduction of the once living but a testimony to the existence of the departed somewhere else, as something else, interacting with the living here now in another form. Oguibe's sense of the image is not anything like Barthes's "that-has-been" (*CL,* p. 77). It is not a reproduction of an unrepeatable eventuality that took place in front of a specific camera. The presence that stood in front of the machine that recorded the paraded image of the deceased is out there, but in a changed form, a palpable variant of which might be the photographic image itself. The existence in the image has passed on. The photograph presents not the person that stood in front of the camera but the trace made by that body in the life of the user or consumer.[42]

42. Even Barthes admits that a person that presents a body to be photographed "makes another body" for himself and "transform[s]" himself "in advance into an image" (*CL,* p. 10).

While Oguibe's thesis represents a great advancement over the one that constitutes mid-twentieth-century West African photographic practices of self-showing as a radical counterdiscourse to nationalist ideologies, there is a difficult limit posed by the long history of taking practices in Africa he asks historians to rethink. *Ovation*, like *Drum* and *Roots* before it, distributes secular, worldly, taken images. Taken images of the politically important are also found in monumental sculptures that dot African public spaces. To explain these images, as I have done in this essay, we have to go to panegyric poetry, a form in which the end product is not meant to preserve the dead in life but to rally the prompt commemoration of a still-living ego.

In the forum I am configuring, contingency and theatricality do not capture the essence of panegyric image making.[43] At the banal level, the properly eminent is always still in the *Ovation* portrait. Only young, aspiring subjects are to be found engaged in any motions. At a more serious level, the panegyric form the magazine quotes abhors death as permanent disappearance and is incompatible with the melancholic view of images as lifeless preoccupation. Adulatory and invocatory image making—verbal portraits, wood (*àkó*) carvings, and photographs—commemorate transformative living without ceasing. This is the theoretical spirit *Ovation* keeps alive in its massive spreads, repeated poses that place the celebrant at the focal center, and even the occasional rewording of its title to advertise the largesse of the exceedingly wealthy. In its ideal form, the panegyric portrait hails living consumers into conformity by asking them to adore the eminent in a manner that leaves no room for questioning. There are no white spaces in the *Ovation* spread. The *Ovation* image enchants not because of the theatrical antics of its subject but by its quoting the panegyric impulse for adoration. The magazine's considerable focus on guests reiterates the importance of followers to true eminence. The ambience of depth and girth produced by repeated photographs of celebrants and their guests in the uniform colors of specially ordered attires leaves no room for reasonable doubts about their eminence. *Ovation* pictures do not inform and, by design, cannot invite arguments. The primary reason the picture of an unoccupied expensive automobile is placed prominently in the photo spread of the wedding ceremony of the daughter of a wealthy man is to reiterate the tangibility of accomplishment. *Ovation* pictures fail to inform because the coverage, like praise poetry, tends to be formulaic. This could

43. For implied theatricality in photography criticism, see Michael Fried, "Barthes's Punctum," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Spring 2005): 539–74. Of course, this is not to say that theatricality is strange to the panegyric; after all, Nigerians love to speak of verbal gymnastics!

be due to the similarity of the formal celebrations reported. More important, the *Ovation* picture cannot inform because it deliberately elides historical cognition; for instance, the magazine is numbered but not dated. The publisher's claim that the strategy of eliding dates, probably created to manage the perception of long intervals between issues of the magazine, creates an air of timelessness for the covered events might not be mere bragging. The magazine's practice actively privileges events, people, and places and deemphasizes time. Surprises seldom occur because the *Ovation* photographer lacks an intention towards specific subjects and events covered. Like the verbal panegyric, the magazine works hard to produce an unretractable homage to eminence.