



PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO
AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

Young Africans, Wrapped in Tradition

By Whitney Richardson Mar. 2, 2016

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The young woman sat proudly, firmly placing her hand below her chin to profile her face. Colorful silk fabric was neatly wrapped around her chest, while the studio light and golden backdrop bathed her gently oiled skin. Small circular tribal markings were tattooed on her upper body. Her neck and wrists were adorned with layers of beaded jewelry.

Just a few hours before, she had been wearing jeans, a button-up shirt and stiletto heels.

This transformation was spurred by Joana Choumali, a photographer from Ivory Coast who has been documenting modern African women wearing their family's traditional clothing. She said these portraits allow her subjects to reconnect with their family history in a physical way.

"Even if we don't speak the language or don't go to the village every day, we are still African," Ms. Choumali said. "I think it's time to redefine what being African is."

That motivation came from her own experiences. Ms. Choumali, 41, was born and raised in Abidjan — Ivory Coast's economic capital and West Africa's most populous French-speaking city. She attended international schools and was surrounded by students from all over the world.

But at least once a year, her family would travel to Adaou, a small town in the southeast, to visit her paternal grandmother, Ettien Amalan Louise. The visits were brief, and Ms. Choumali often felt a cultural disconnect with her grandmother: They didn't speak the same language or have relatable life experiences. Ms. Choumali eventually got a top-level job at an ad agency, while her grandmother spent her life in the village working as a farmer and a trader.

When her grandmother died in 2001, Ms. Choumali realized how much of her family history would be lost because she had not been able to talk with her about her life.

"I felt like a part of me was going and part of my family was fading away," she said. "For a long time, I felt guilty. I thought, I don't speak the language, maybe I'm not that African."

In her portrait series, "Resilients," which was recently featured at the Photolux Festival in Lucca, Italy, sponsored by the African Artist Foundation, Ms. Choumali sought to document young,

professional African women — mostly Ivorian — who also struggled with the lingering guilt of not being able to relate to their family’s traditional past. Over the course of several months, each portrait session required intense research on the specific details of how the clothes, jewelry, skin and hair needed to be styled based on the specific tribe the family was from.

She initially found most of her subjects — lawyers, students, doctors and managers — on the streets of Abidjan. Her sole requirement for the portrait was that the women had to wear traditional clothing already worn by their grandmother or an older female relative. This was intended to “emphasize the link between past and present, and also the cultural heritage,” Ms. Choumali said. Inspired by the golden hues of Rembrandt’s paintings, she handmade a backdrop to give the portraits a “feeling of time travel,” she said.

Ms. Choumali’s interest in portrait photography began when she was 13; like many West African families, her parents hired a professional photographer to do a traditional family portrait at home. That same year, she received a camera for Christmas and said she had since been exploring how photography can address social issues. After quitting her job as an art director in an advertising agency, she became a full-time freelance photographer and has created her own studio in Abidjan.

Over the course of her “Resilient” series, women began reaching out to her to participate. Of her more than 30 subjects, a student studying in France came to her studio with her mother wearing a miniskirt and Converse sneakers. They had descended from the royal family of Grand Bassam, a city that was briefly the French colonial capital in the late 19th century. She had asked the king of Grand Bassam if she could wear her great-grandmother’s outfit for the portrait session (image above).

“The mother was so emotional,” Ms. Choumali said. “We don’t even know why we cried, but the energy was really special. I feel that they were feeling the same feeling as I felt — relieved and kind of reassured that they were also part of their culture.”