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Life With Nigeria's Party People

By Whitney Richardson Jun. 29, 2016

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Andrew Esiebo's fascination with Lagos's party scene is rooted in his childhood, growing up in the hectic megacity. On the hottest days, young men and women packed the street corners in his neighborhood, while Afrobeat and dancehall music blasting from small radios entranced the crowds.

One day when he was 9, Mr. Esiebo was sent to run an errand for his mother. Instead, he was sidetracked by a neighborhood street party, captivated by the sight of several men swiftly moving their bodies to reggae. With an unexpected boost of confidence, he abandoned his errand and danced into the middle of the crowd.

A few decades later, Mr. Esiebo is still finding his way into the middle of a festive scene, but this time as a keen observer. Hoping to "capture that resilient spirit of Lagosians," Mr. Esiebo, 37, spent the past three years working on "Highlife," which documents the Nigerian city's dynamic party scene.

"The parties are a reflection of young people today — there's money coming into more people's hands," said Mr. Esiebo, who grew up in working-class neighborhoods between Lagos and Ibadan, Nigeria. "The parties are diverse and have different statuses of people."

Mr. Esiebo's fondness for documenting intimate communal spaces began with his barbershop series in 2013, when he traveled around West Africa photographing how men of different social classes presented themselves.

His photographs of Lagos's parties can also be seen as a survey of Nigeria's broad spectrum of wealth. According to projections by the United Nations, the expansion of Africa's middle class is just beginning in Nigeria, which has Africa's biggest economy and is projected to overtake the United States as the world's third-most populous nation by 2050.

At more than 30 parties, Mr. Esiebo aimed to capture a variety of events, ranging from six-figure traditional weddings to late-night street parties. Each of his frames seduces you, welcoming you into this world of momentary closeness. Sweaty bodies are illuminated by the familiar glow of

disco lights. At other parties, Champagne bottles dazzle with sparklers as designer purses litter the tables.

He also captured moments as tensions erupted at an overcrowded nightclub (Slide 19), but said he rarely encountered problems when he went out. He said he intentionally concentrated on the positive aspects of the party experience.

“We have this stereotype that you don’t go out in the night, it’s dangerous,” Mr. Esiebo said. “But for me, it’s amazing how the street gets so busy, because people are out there partying.”

To ensure access to high-profile events, he said the D.J.’s became his gatekeeper, giving him free rein to glide through the crowds.

The D.J.’s also became a slight obsession, Mr. Esiebo acknowledges. Watching some of his favorite ones captivate the crowd — including the Nigerian artist D.J. Obi — was partly how he timed his shots. There were instant hits that he knew would get any crowd going, including the Nigerian pop star Wizkid’s “Ojuelegba,” a song partly about the struggles he endured early in his recording career (first song in the Spotify playlist above).

Other Afropop hits dominating the party circuit, including Wande Coal’s “Ashimapeyin” and P-Square’s “Shekini,” (above) are known for fusing traditional Afrobeat with hip-hop — with early inspirations from Fela Kuti, the Funkies and Tony Allen.

“Nigerians are drawing inspiration from what they see through the media about parties in the other parts of the world,” Mr. Esiebo said. “Then they match it up with the spirit of Lagos.”

What exactly is that spirit of Lagos? According to Mr. Esiebo, “It’s a spirit of never giving up.”

“You keep fighting until you get what you want,” he said.