



PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO
AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

Blending French and African Identities

By Whitney Richardson Jan. 2, 2015

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In Nigeria, it's not just hair.

When the country celebrated its independence from Britain in 1960, a hairstyle called the tall house literally sprang up. Spiraling close to two feet in the air, the style — Onile Gogoro in Yoruba — was sported by women across Lagos, like a crown that symbolized the aspirations of a new and striving nation.

Through the following decade, hundreds of other braided styles could be discovered throughout the country, each carrying a distinct meaning. Elite families even had exclusive rights to particular styles, with mothers passing down the intricate details of their secret patterns to their daughters.

The Nigerian photographer J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere sought to preserve these traditions by creating a visual time capsule of close to 1,000 portraits of different looks — including braids, twists, plaits and buns. Before he died this year at the age of 83, Mr. Ojeikere spent more than three decades traveling across Nigeria to complete his most-recognized portrait series, “Hairstyles.”

In his book, “J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere: Photographs,” each black-and-white portrait is accompanied by a name to represent the style. “Coiling Penny, Penny” is designed in small sections, looped and decorated with small golden bells. In “Pineapple,” he captures a close-up of the back of a woman’s head. Tiny twists sprout from neatly designed rows on her scalp, closely resembling pineapple skin.

“To watch a ‘hair artist’ going through his precise gestures, like an artist making a sculpture, is fascinating,” Mr. Ojeikere once said. “Hairstyles are an art form.”

Mr. Ojeikere grew up in a small Nigerian village and bought his first camera at the age of 20. His persistence writing letters to the Ministry of Information requesting anything in their photographic department paid off with his getting a job as a darkroom assistant when he was 24.

A few years later, he joined the Nigerian Arts Council, where he was motivated to create his hair series as an independent project. During this time, he also took portraits of women wearing traditional head wraps, along with many unpublished photos of his country's evolving landscape.

As he slowly processed his film for "Hairstyles," he began to realize that his collection was not only capturing the abstract beauty of hair, but that he was also creating an anthropological survey of this fleeting aspect of his culture.

"All these hairstyles are ephemeral," he said. "I want my photographs to be noteworthy traces of them. I always wanted to record moments of beauty, moments of knowledge."

Roger Szmulewicz, who worked closely with Mr. Ojeikere in the 1990s, said that viewers of his work abroad were both awed and confused by the styles. "People are quite impressed by the artistic and visual way," said Mr. Szmulewicz, who owns and curates Fifty One, a gallery in Belgium. Then again, "people wonder why anyone would have such a hairdo," he said. "It's not something you do every week. It doesn't look comfortable."

Aside from the artistry of the hairstyles themselves, Mr. Szmulewicz said he believed that Mr. Ojeikere saw his work more artistically than even the most-recognized African photographers at the time — including Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita, who both documented popular culture in 1960s Mali.

Whereas the work of Mr. Sidibé and Mr. Keita presented everyday life in their home country, Mr. Ojeikere's portraits focused on the clean lines and shapes of the hairstyle — even while photographing women on the streets, at weddings and at parties.

"I think Ojeikere just thought that way," Mr. Szmulewicz said. "He knew he was making a register of everything that was done in Nigeria. He knew it was important work."