

HOW I SEE THE YORUBA SEE THEMSELVES

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Photographers and photographic studios are prevalent throughout many areas of Africa today, and particularly in West Africa many indigenous societies make use of photography. However, the Yoruba of western Nigeria, though not unique, are certainly exceptional in the extent to which they have integrated the medium of photography into many aspects of their culture.

The following photographic essay visually presents some of the results of an investigation which I conducted primarily in the Igbomina Yoruba town of Ila-Orangun during the summer of 1975. Ila-Orangun is a typical Yoruba community of about 30,000 inhabitants, which, at that time, had neither electricity nor running water. Despite the lack of modern facilities, the town supported ten flourishing photographic studios.

My observations of comparable material in the Ijebu-remo area and in the large cities of Lagos, Ibadan, and Kano strongly suggest that the use of photography in Ila-Orangun is typical of many Yoruba communities, and probably has much in common with other areas of West Africa.

I have shown elsewhere (Sprague 1978) that the Yoruba, at all levels of their society, have indeed integrated photography into both traditional and contemporary aspects of their culture; and that Yoruba photography is a genuine expression of the culture with unique symbolic meanings and functions and with an implicit set of culturally determined conventions governing proper subject matter and formal coding of the visual image. In the present introduction, I would like to outline my methodology for photographing and collecting this material and to present some additional contextual information to amplify the main points of the accompanying photographic essay.

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When I photographed in Nigeria, I mostly used a medium format camera and often a tripod. I always obtained the subject's permission and cooperation before photographing and invariably framed the subject straight-on. This turned out to be the way the Yoruba expected a good photographer to work, so I was immediately accorded respect among the Yoruba photographers and in the community, and I was seldom refused permission to photograph. I know that if I had been making candid photographs with a small camera I would have met with a great deal of suspicion and little understanding or respect.

Though our manner of working may be similar, my photographs are obviously quite different from those taken by Yoruba photographers. While photographing, I tried to be conscious of my own training in the Western tradition of documentary photography and to be aware of how this was influencing my seeing. The resulting photographs, I feel, contain a mass of visual details, frame by frame, which are structured by a combination of personal and documentary aesthetic considerations and anthropological insight. I hope that my photographs can be appreciated and understood on all these levels.

In addition to making my own photographs, I collected or copied examples of Yoruba photographs. These were obtained from both photographers and other members of the community. One of the best sources was the photographers' negative files. Some 300 negatives were viewed at each studio in Ila-Orangun, and each photographer was requested to make postcard-size prints (3½ in. by 5½ in.) of ten to fifteen selected negatives. These were selected on the basis of criteria established, in part, from a stylistic and subject matter analysis of 300 sample postcards kept by Sir Special Photo Studio for prospective clients to view. Briefly, these criteria were (1) that the photograph be a good example of a distinct subset of Yoruba photographs as previously defined by the analysis of Sir Special's postcards; (2) that the photograph be unique in some way or not fit any previously defined category; (3) that the photograph seem to contain anthropological information useful to Marilyn Houlberg, who was also in Ila-Orangun continuing her research on Yoruba sacred children; and (4) that the photograph particularly reflect my own personal aesthetic tastes.

The ten photographers in Ila-Orangun were interviewed, and they willingly discussed their profession and demonstrated their camera and darkroom techniques.¹ Also, members of the community contributed information about the subject matter and function of photographs that they owned. Yoruba photography in Ila-Orangun was studied, then, from the points of view of both producer and consumer as well as from an analysis of the photographs themselves.

The Yoruba consider photography a respectable modern profession for young people to enter, and though the vast majority of photographers are men, there are no stated restrictions against women. To

become a photographer a young person must first have completed primary six (sixth grade) and must then become an apprentice to a master photographer for a period of one to three years. He can then open a studio and practice photography, eventually attracting his own apprentices.

Photographers are highly organized. There is a local photographers' union in each town to which every photographer automatically belongs and which meets at least once a month. These local unions form regional unions which meet about every six months. The unions regulate the price structure of the various types of photographs and services, the details of apprenticeship, the professional conduct of its members, and so on.

The typical photography studio in Ila-Orangun is usually small but efficiently laid out. Double doors swing open to reveal to the passerby samples of the photographer's work. A backdrop hangs a few feet inside the studio with a bench for the sitter placed immediately in front of it. These backdrops are painted by sign painters in various shades of black, white, and gray. They often display a fascinating if naive use of Western perspective and usually depict a mixture of traditional and contemporary motifs. Behind the backdrop is a tiny darkroom, often without electricity or running water. Along one wall of the darkroom is a narrow table on which are set the processing solutions in enameled bowls from the market. A kerosene lantern with a red cloth surrounding the globe serves as a safelight. An old postcard-size view camera is installed with its back to a window for use as a solar enlarger, and a mirror, located outside the window, is tilted to reflect sunlight through the system. An enlargement is made by placing a negative in the back of the camera and projecting its image onto a sheet of photographic paper clipped to a vertical easel. Except for minor variations, this makes up the photographer's entire facilities.

Since about 1960, the traditional view camera has been increasingly relegated to the status of enlarger, as there have become available a variety of cheap and more flexible twin-lens reflex cameras taking twelve 2¼-inch-square negatives on inexpensive 120 roll film. However, the photographers still offer standardized photograph sizes based on the old British view camera negative formats.

The photographers of Ila-Orangun claim that practically any subject may be photographed except for those ritual objects, masquerades, and ceremonies which some segments of the public are traditionally prohibited from viewing. Also, they say that a good photographer will photograph whatever the client requests. Study of the kinds of photographs most commonly produced, however, indicates that the actual practice of photography is generally much more restricted than the limits claimed by the photographers themselves.

Yoruba photography in Ila-Orangun and elsewhere consists almost exclusively of posed portraiture of either single individuals or groups of people, and

these portraits are often commissioned in order to commemorate an event of some importance to the people depicted.² Though an important ritual object or prized possession such as a traditional sculpture or a new car might occasionally be photographed, such general subjects as landscapes, architecture, or ordinary objects and events are very seldom taken by local photographers.

Yoruba photography certainly shares some similar categories of subject matter and some formalistic conventions with other West African societies as well as with Western cultures, particularly the British. But cultural patterning exists, not only in the subtle differences in these conventions but, more importantly, in the unique culturally derived symbolic meanings and specific functions attributed to these seemingly similar forms.

What I call the traditional formal portrait (see Figures 10 and 13) seems to be in part a fusion of traditional Yoruba cultural and aesthetic values with nineteenth-century British attitudes toward the medium. Both the nineteenth-century British and the traditional Yoruba culture placed great emphasis on tradition, proper conduct, and the identity and maintenance of one's proper social position in society. Early British portraits and Yoruba traditional formal portraits visually codify these commonly held values by the dignified manner in which the subjects pose while wearing the proper clothes, and often displaying symbolic objects, which identify their social station in life. There are distinctions, however; British portraits also emphasize the Western values of individuality and even eccentricity, while the Yoruba traditional formal portrait is meant to memorialize the subject in terms of how well the individual has embodied traditional Yoruba ideals and fulfilled his given traditional position in Yoruba society. When the Yoruba subject dies, this is the portrait which might be carried in his funeral procession to particularize the ancestral *Egungun* (Schiltz 1978:51). It is the portrait which might be hung in his crypt or laminated to his tombstone and which might be published in memoriam each year in the *Lagos Daily Times*.

The manner in which the subject poses in the traditional formal portrait seems especially Yoruba because the pose is never seen in early British portraits³ but is commonly assumed by Yoruba in traditional dress. Also, the sculptural massiveness and bilateral symmetry of the pose relates directly to the form of Yoruba sculpture. (Another relationship between photography and the sculptural tradition is the practice of mounting a portrait on a thin sheet of wood and cutting it out to make a freestanding three-dimensional object (see Figures 9 and 11). Traditional Yoruba aesthetic values as outlined by Thompson in his discussion of Yoruba sculpture (Thompson 1971:374-381) are also apparent in the traditional formal portrait. The concept of *Ifarahon* ("visibility") is particularly important, as it is evident in many other forms of Yoruba photographs as well. *Ifarahon* implies a clarity and definition of physical form and line,

and a subsequent clarity of social and individual identity. This is emphasized in the traditional formal portrait by the isolation of the subject against a shallow neutral background, and in the inclusion of objects and clothing symbolizing the subject's position in Yoruba society. To give another example, in group photographs, symbolic objects are always prominently included to identify the particular ceremony or event. Also, the social hierarchy of the group is reflected in the physical positioning of individuals within the frame. The most important individual is seated (often in the traditional formal pose) in the center of the first row, with the next most important seated to his left. Persons of the lowest status stand to the back and edges of the frame. Children are exceptions, being allowed to squat or sit anywhere in the foreground.

Many Yoruba would not consciously know, or be able to articulate, how their photographs reflect commonly held values. However, most members of our own culture would find it equally difficult to explain the symbolic meanings of their own family photographs. Many members of both cultures share the common assumption that the photographic image is simply a visual record of the thing photographed, which serves as a memory device to bring to mind at some future time the people and events depicted. The actual structure and symbolic meaning are not consciously considered; they serve only to trigger the viewer's memory of the subject.

The Yoruba photograph itself, as an object, also serves specific functions in the community. Photographs are prominently displayed in the parlor or sittingroom of many private homes and at the front of many shops and offices. By displaying these photographs, the owner publicly acknowledges his respect for and involvement with the subjects depicted. There is often the additional implication of status: individuals of greater wealth and social standing will have more and larger photographs on display, and many of them may be elaborately hand-colored and framed, or occasionally made into a freestanding cut-out.

There are exceptions to the general function of the photograph as a literal record and memory device and as an object symbolizing respect and status. The photograph is sometimes believed to possess additional meanings and spiritual power, and can be used in traditional rituals. The most fascinating and widespread example is the integration of photography into the traditional beliefs and rituals surrounding twins. Because twins are sacred children with connections to the spirit world, it is especially important to show these children proper respect. The traditional procedure when a twin dies is for the parents to commission the carving of a twin figure, or *ibeji*, which then is used in the traditional twin rituals along with the living twin. Also, photographs are often made of twins and other young children to hang in the parlor with the other photographs of family members. Then, if a child dies, there is a portrait by which to re-

member it. However, the procedure becomes complex when one twin dies before a photograph has been taken of the pair. The living twin is then photographed, and this negative is multiple-printed twice to give the illusion of both twins together in the same photograph (Figures 14, 15, and 16 detail variations of this procedure). The most fascinating aspect is that in some areas it is now accepted practice for the twin photograph to be substituted for the traditional *ibeji*. The photograph is then kept on the twin shrine and is utilized in the traditional twin ceremonies.

The exact function of these twin photographs seems to depend in part on the religious convictions of the parents. Houlberg (1973) states that the Christian, and especially Muslim, prohibition against graven images has been a major influence in the simplification of *ibeji* forms used by Christian and Muslim Yoruba, and in the substitution of other objects, such as plastic dolls, for *ibeji* in the traditional twin rituals. Houlberg suggests in a more recent article (1976) that this prohibition has been a major influence in the substitution of photographs for *ibeji*. Through the use or possession of a twin photograph, Christian and Muslim Yoruba seek to distinguish themselves from believers in the traditional religion.

The cycle of substitution can, on occasion, come full circle when both twins die before any photographs have been made of them. Then, if the traditional *ibeji* are carved, they are sometimes photographed, and this photograph is hung in the parlor in place of the usual twin photograph.

I will conclude with some observations concerning the study of Yoruba photography. The large number of photographs available from individual Yoruba and from photographers' negative files form a vast visual data bank which is unique in that it has been generated entirely by members of a non-Western culture. This material might be utilized in a number of ways. The most obvious use would be simply to study the subject matter of photographs available in a particular community in order to discover the existence of people, ceremonies, events, and even objects which might not otherwise become known. Copies of these photographs could then be used to elicit more information from other members of the community.

More importantly, these photographs are "coded in Yoruba" and can give us much information about how the Yoruba see themselves and about their cultural values and perceptual view of the world. The following photographic essay attempts a visual presentation and analysis of Yoruba photography through the juxtaposition and sequencing of my own photographs with photographs taken by Yoruba photographers. I have tried to present this material in such a way that viewers can form their own opinions and compare them to my observations both in the photo essay and in this text.

However, a well-defined methodology does not exist for extracting cultural and other information from even our own photographic heritage of family snapshots and anonymous photographs, and the

formulation of a methodology for interpreting the heritage of a non-Western society has not yet been attempted as far as I know. The hope is that continued investigation of Yoruba photography will eventually lead not only to a better knowledge of how the Yoruba view themselves but also to a better cross-cultural understanding both of how we communicate through mediated images of the world and of the formulation of a methodology to analyze these images.⁴

NOTES

¹ I would like to thank the photographers in Ila-Orangun, and especially Sir Special Photo, for their cooperation in providing information and in allowing me access to their negative files.

² Newspaper photographers in the cities have adopted a more candid journalistic approach, but their range of subject matter is much the same—predominantly people at ceremonial or other newsworthy events. Many news photographs typical of Western papers, such as accidents, disasters, or action pictures of sports, seldom appear.

³ Many types of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British photographic portraits were looked at in detail. This included the work of artistic photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron (Gernsheim 1975), commercial studio photographs (Hillier 1976), and colonial British photographs of India (Worswick 1976).

⁴ The writings and research of Sol Worth have had a large influence on my own thinking and work, particularly his research with the Navajo published in *Through Navajo Eyes* (Worth and Adair 1972). I would like to dedicate this present work to his memory.

⁵ *Abiku* means literally "We are born to die." Children who are discovered to be *abiku* must be paid special ritual attention in order to keep them in this world, else they will surely die and return to their spirit world. See "The Concept of *Abiku*" (Mobolade 1973) for more information.

⁶ I would like to credit Marilyn Houlberg, who, through her research on Yoruba sacred children during a field trip to Nigeria in

1971, first heard of the existence of this particular twin photograph and its use in traditional twin ritual (Houlberg 1973). It was my fascination with this unsubstantiated fact that compelled me to undertake this investigation of Yoruba photography, which was conducted in part with Houlberg's assistance during the summer of 1975. Houlberg has previously published a similar photograph of Taiwo in connection with her discussion of new forms of *ibeji* and of twin photographs replacing *ibeji* (Houlberg 1976:18).

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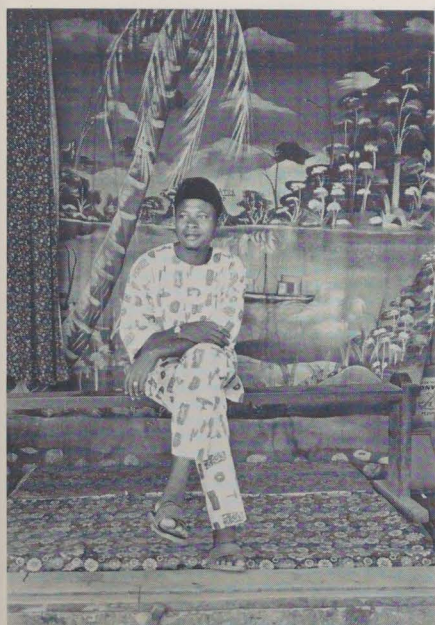


Figure 1 (a and b) —The photographer, Chief Atos, is shown standing in front of his studio, Chief Atos Photo, and posing before the canvas backdrop just inside his studio door. Chief Atos is not this photographer's real name, however; it is the custom that photographers be known and addressed by the name of their studio rather than by their own given name. Chief Atos Photo and the studios shown in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 6 are all laid out in a similar manner and are typical of many small-town Yoruba photography studios.

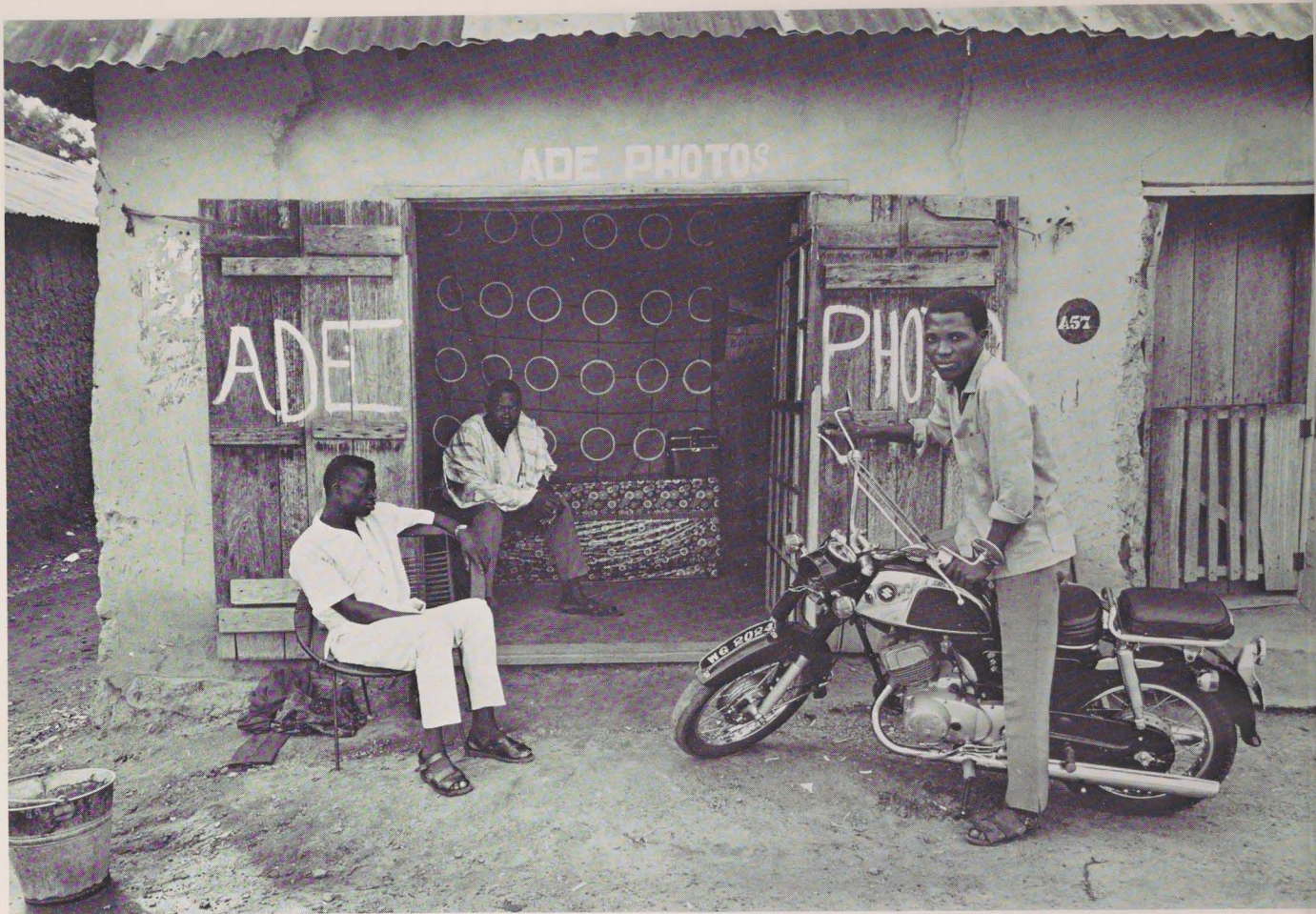
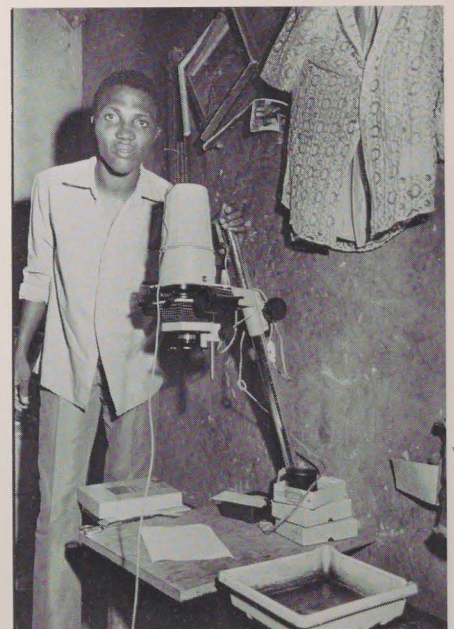


Figure 2 (a and b) —The photographer, Ade, sits on his motorcycle in front of his studio. Notice that his motorcycle headlight is missing; Ade owns the only enlarger in Ila-Orangun and utilizes the headlight as the light source for his enlarger. When Ade is at work in the darkroom, his motorcycle stands rapidly idling at the front of the studio, and an extension cord runs to its headlight in the enlarger.

All the other photographers in Ila-Orangun were still using their old view cameras as enlargers. However, power lines had been installed, and electricity was due to be turned on by the end of 1975. If Ade is any indication, the photographers will have quickly adapted to the availability of electrical power.



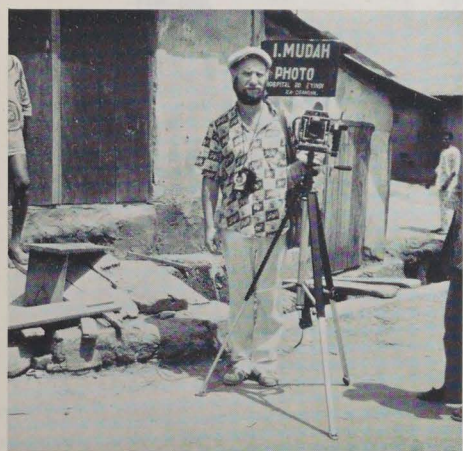


Figure 3 (a and b) —After I had taken my photograph of the two photographers, Oyus and Muda (with the camera), Muda requested that we switch places so that he might take my photograph in full sunlight. He claimed that he was the only photographer in Ila-Orangun who could make a good photograph in direct sunlight, and he wished to prove this to me by consciously breaking the convention that photographs should be taken only in diffuse light.

Munda later gave me a postcard-size print (3½ in. by 5½ in.) and the original 2¼-inch-square negative. I have printed the entire negative here. A person not familiar with Yoruba photographic conventions would probably look at this print and think the original negative poorly composed, with people cut off by the edge of the frame. However, a Yoruba photographer would know that convention dictates a vertical rectangular print of a one-person portrait and that the square negative was properly composed with this final print format in mind. Also, the Yoruba photographer would probably say that the photograph should not have been taken in direct sunlight.

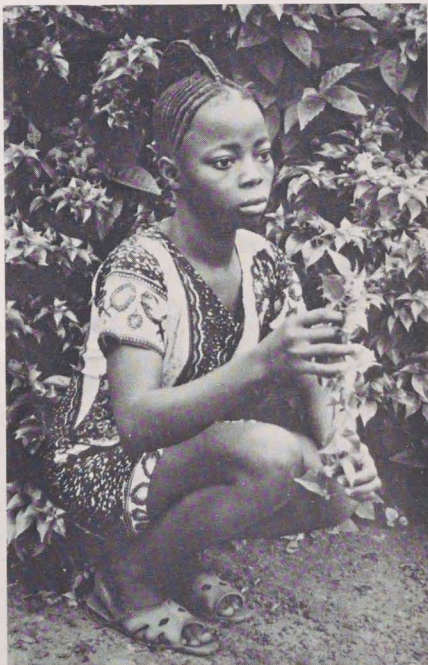


Figure 4 (a, b, c, and d) —This particular style of portraiture, which I call the squatting pose, is seen throughout Yorubaland: the four examples shown here are postcard-size prints (3% in. by 5% in.) collected from photographers in Ila-Orangun. This pose seems restricted to young Yoruba ladies dressed in contemporary styles, and may be a visual expression of the ambiguous position of Yoruba women in a changing society. In particular, this pose may be in part a fusion of the traditional deference behavior required of young women toward their social superiors, with the rather innocent physical allure shown in American “cheesecake” pinup photographs such as the one imitated on Oyus’ studio backdrop (see Figure 5). The impression given by this pose is of a young woman who, while maintaining her proper place in traditional Yoruba society, has turned her fascinated eyes on the modern world.



Figure 5 (a and b) —Oyus' Photo Studio exhibits all the typical studio features previously discussed. The backdrop is particularly interesting with its varieties of foliage and architecture, mismatch of perspective, and mixture of contemporary and traditional motifs. The motif of the 1950-style American pinup girl squatting on top of the modern skyscraper may be a visual representation of some of the contemporary influences implied in the squatting pose for the young Yoruba ladies seen in Figure 4.



Figure 6 (a and b) —The photographer “Sir Special” leans on his motor scooter outside his studio while a friend rides a plywood horse in front of the backdrop inside. The horse is a Muslim prop. Traditionally, when a Muslim returns from a religious pilgrimage to Mecca, he rides into his hometown on a white horse. However, because of the ravages of the tsetse fly, there are very few horses in West Africa. So the poor pilgrim must be content to symbolize the event by having his photograph taken on a plywood horse.

Props such as this horse are not always taken seriously. In fact, neither Sir Special nor his friend are entirely serious about the way they are posing for me here in these two photographs.

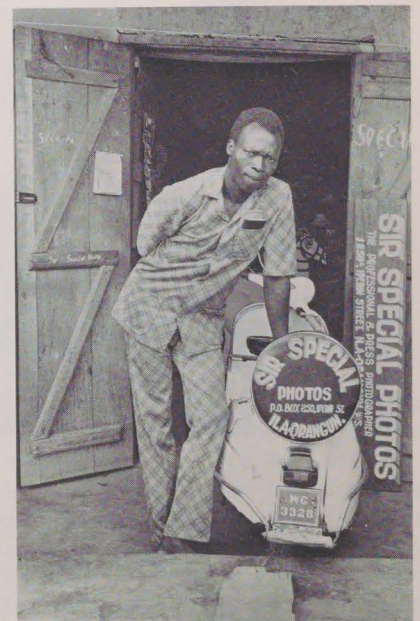




Figure 7 (a and b) —The two older girls have dressed up in what they consider modern dresses and "Afro" wigs in order to have their photographs made by Sir Special Photo. Sir Special posed them together and singly, first standing up, then in the squatting pose discussed previously. In my photograph of this event, Sir Special has a black cloth over his head to block the light and allow him to compose and focus more accurately on the ground glass of his twin-lens reflex camera, which he is hand-holding. When Sir Special was finished, the girls took off their wigs and revealed their carefully arranged traditional hairstyles. I immediately requested permission to make this photograph of them without their wigs.



Figure 8 —This is the interior of the bar at which we stopped for a beer before dinner practically every day after work. The bar is owned by this woman and her husband, who is depicted in four of the five photographs displayed on the wall behind her. The left-hand photograph shows one of their children with her prized possession, a tricycle; the second photograph shows the husband and a friend of the same age dressed alike; the third is a portrait of the husband; the fourth and fifth commemorate the husband's participation in the Ileya festival, which is symbolized by the ram. This display of visual imagery (a mixture of personal photographs and commercially reproduced images) is typical of many Yoruba shops and small-business establishments.



Figure 9 —The carver Yesufu Ejigboye, from the Ijebu-remo area, stands in his parlor surrounded by visual images. He carves both traditional sculpture and modern objects such as airplanes and the white rooster seen in the lower left side of the frame. He says these modern carvings are "like photographs," meaning they simply depict the subject but have no spiritual or ritual significance. The two lovely ladies on either side of the rooster are full-color magazine reproductions which have been cut out and mounted on thin board as freestanding sculptural figures. The large inflatable airplane is a recent addition, a gift from myself and anthropologist Marilyn Houlberg. See Houlberg's article "Collecting the Anthropology of African Art" (1976) for more photographs and information about Ejigboye.



Figure 10 —This woman is head priestess of the Abiku⁵ Society in Ila-Orangun. The shrine room is inside the door behind her, and above the door is a portrait of her mother, who was also a head priestess of the society. The portrait is in the particular style I call the "traditional formal portrait." This photograph could be as old as pre-World War I, which gives some indication of the length of time Yoruba photography has been associated with the traditional culture.

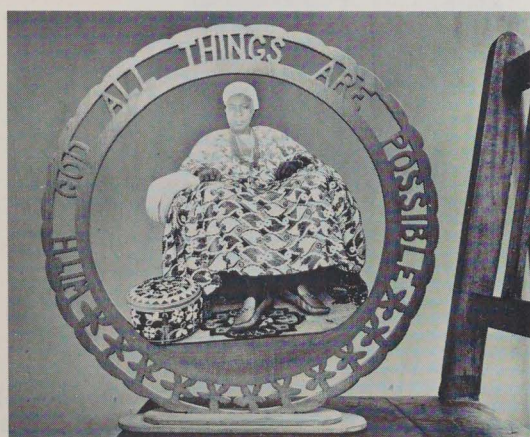


Figure 11 (a and b) —The Orangun of Ila-Orangun is the Oba (king) of the town and surrounding community. He is posing in the traditional formal pose in his private sitting-room in the palace. The horsetail flywhisk, necklace, beaded crown, and other beaded objects surrounding him are all symbols of his position as Oba. Notice the repetition of the same pose and many of the same symbols in all three of the freestanding cutout photographs on display.

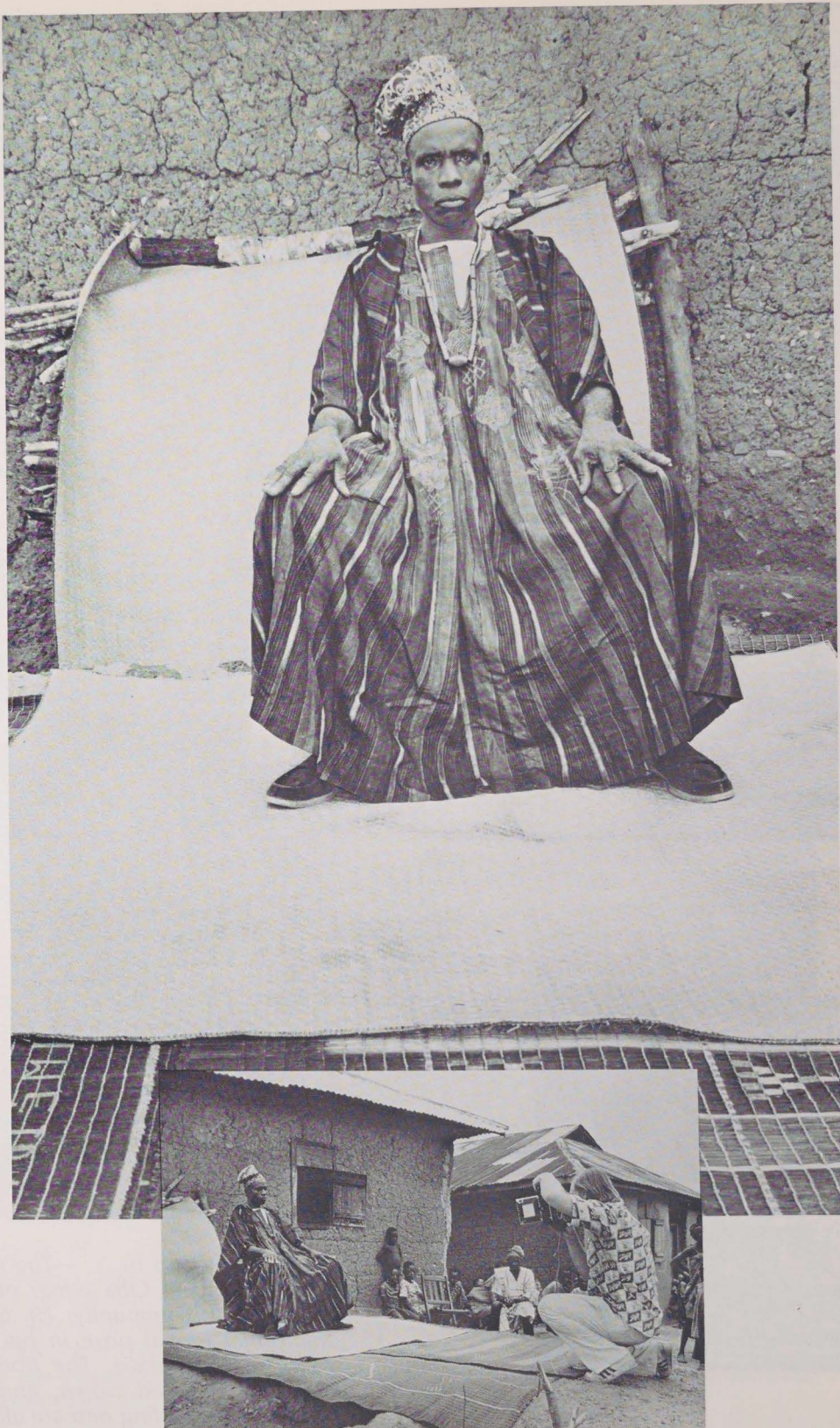


Figure 12 (a and b) —This man is an important chief and a babalowo (Ifa diviner), who is often summoned to the palace to divine for the Oba. He requested that I make a portrait of him, and he had his family set up the mats and background. He then proceeded to pose in the traditional manner. I consciously tried to make this photograph in the same way that a Yoruba photographer would make a traditional formal portrait. (The snapshot of me at work was taken by Marilyn Houlberg.)

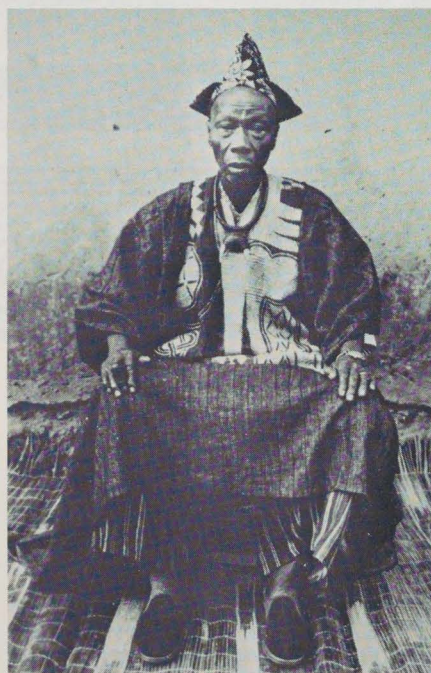


Figure 13 (a, b, c, and d) —These four examples display all the typical characteristics of the traditional formal portrait. Ideally, the subject is shown full length, seated in front of a neutral background. He squarely confronts the camera with a dignified but distant expression, wearing his best traditional clothes and displaying symbols of his position in traditional Yoruba society. Some variation does occur; commonly the subject is slightly cropped by the edge of the frame, and occasionally the subject will be smiling.

The four portraits are postcard-size contact prints (3½ in. by 5½ in.) made for me by the photographers of Ila-Orangun from glass-plate negatives I selected from their studio files. The original clients would have commissioned prints in a variety of sizes and types of frames.



Figure 14 (a and b) —This little girl, Taiwo, is holding a multiple-printed and hand-colored photograph which represents her and her dead twin sister sitting together. It is actually the same image of Taiwo printed twice. The blending of the two halves of the print is practically invisible, thus sustaining the illusion of twins being depicted in a single photograph. The photograph is used by her mother in place of the traditional *ibejì* (twin sculpture). It is kept on the twin shrine and participates in the traditional twin rituals.⁶

The small photograph of a typical pair of *ibejì* was collected from Ariyo Photo Studio. Ariyo stated that the client commissioned the original photograph to hang in the parlor along with the other family photographs, presumably because both twins had died before any photographs had been taken of them.





Figure 15 —In this example the twins were of opposite sexes. The boy has died and the surviving girl has been photographed twice, once as herself in her own clothes and once as her dead twin brother in matching boy's clothes. Both of these exposures were made on opposite halves of a single $3\frac{1}{2}$ inch by $5\frac{1}{2}$ inch glass-plate negative. The photographer, Simple Photo, has manipulated the background so that the line joining the two exposures is not readily apparent.

I requested that Simple Photo make a full-plate enlargement ($6\frac{1}{2}$ in. by $8\frac{1}{2}$ in.) for me in the same way that he would for a client. He mounted the finished enlargement in the usual manner on a 10 inch by 12 inch cardboard mount with a printed border.

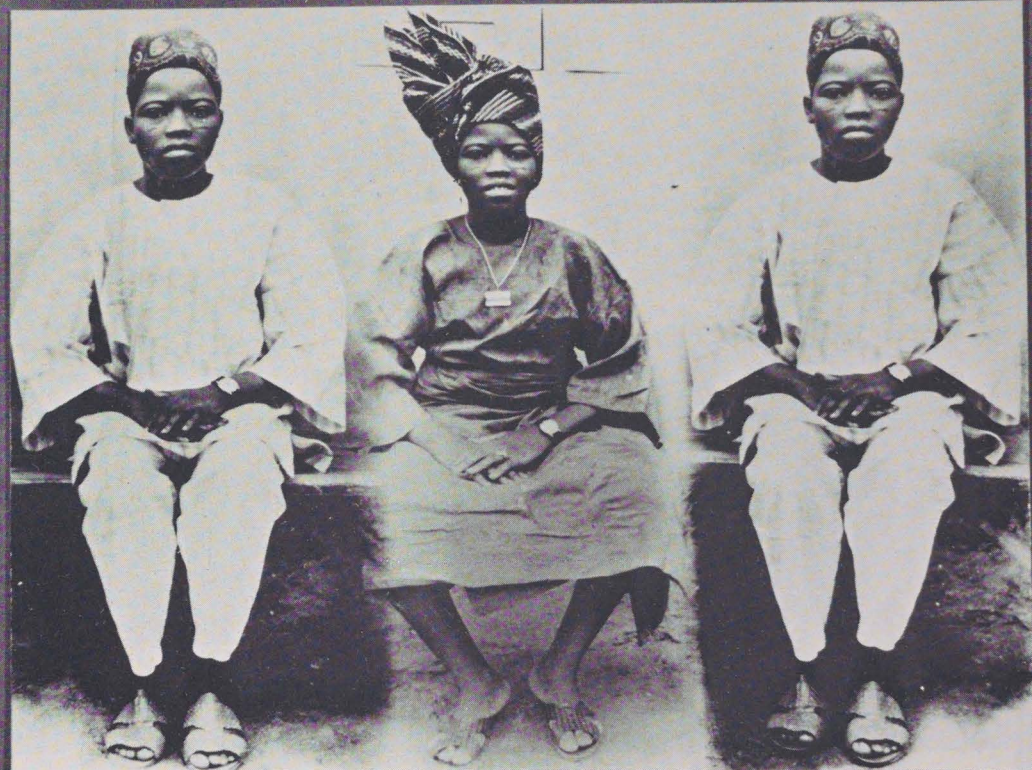


Figure 16 (a and b) —A rather rare example of triplets collected from Simple Photographer Studio. The twin boys have died, and the surviving girl has been photographed twice on the same $3\frac{1}{2}$ inch by $5\frac{1}{2}$ inch glass plate, once as herself and once in matching boy's clothes to represent both her dead brothers. The small photograph is a straight contact print made from the original negative. The mounted full-plate enlargement, made by Simple Photo, shows the male image printed twice, once on either side of the girl's image, to represent the triplets sitting together.

