



Article: New Photo Histories in West Africa (Abstract)

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New Photo Histories in West Africa

Erin Haney

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The first photographs created in west African cities appeared within a couple months of Daguerre's announcement. Since then, the histories of west African photographers have proven central to regional and global artistic histories, but access to photographs in west Africa has been obscured by unforgiving climates and the exigencies of keeping collections in family archives and collections. Audiences in west Africa have preserved, altered, treasured, and created distinctive modern genres of photography from the mid-19th century—with profound importance for our increasingly global senses and histories of the medium (and attendant lacunae). Photographers, owners of these collections, curators and scholars have been long-concerned over this precarious state of conservation; studio and civic collections representing patrimony of tremendous national and global importance. Yet effective conservation and preservation plans for photo collections exist in only a handful of public institutions in the region, and many of those important early initiatives have been defunded.

Different conceptions of the medium's qualities are illustrative. For example, concern for any 'original' plays out very differently in west Africa. During meetings with photographers in Lagos in spring 2014 and the 3PA workshop at École du Patrimoine Africain, Porto-Novo, Benin, varying definitions of what a photograph is, and has been, reflect the material realities of photography's progression through the 20th and 21st centuries in these creative contexts. Photographs have been painted and retouched by artists and series of owners; glass plate negatives scraped and reused by studios; and crates of negatives and plates thrown into the sea by family studio owners. Photography has melded into and borrowed from other genres and more durable media including painting, sculpture, and drawing, as well as been the object of serial rephotographing. In other locations, the circumstances of climate (including the extremes of desert and tropical areas), civil war, and other kinds of dislocations rendered significant collections lost. It is in dealing with these kinds of uncertainties and ephemerality that underpins many of photographers' and artists' choices since the 1960s in particular: to print, with what, and for whom.

So far, attention to west African photographic artistry and collections has yielded frustratingly ambiguous results. Curators and collectors in Europe have taken credit for revealing luminous examples of west African photographic traditions to the world (and its markets). At the same time, this publicity has resulted in individuals and institutions borrowing, selling, stealing, and profited enormously from the removal of these collections overseas. The rise of curators, new generations of photographers, and arts initiatives across the African continent has coincided with sporadic investments in photographic education initiatives, arts infrastructure, and biennials funded from Europe. This effect compounds the dilemmas that photographers and the owners of collections are facing: how to preserve their collections sustainably, ensure the longevity of analog and digital archives, and expand access to those who cannot yet access it—local, African,

and global audiences. Such questions inspire a rethinking of the principals of value, the roles of institutions, and the global locations and circulations of photographs.

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