

Twilight of the studios

Jean-François Werner, 1993

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After doing extremely well in the 1960s, studio photographers are now deep in a crisis from which they seem unlikely to emerge. The arrival of colour photography, Korean minilabs and itinerant photographers needing no particular skill to practise their profession, have placed studio-based photographers in a very difficult situation: unlike the itinerants, they were faced both with overheads and the « democratization » of the identity photo trade that had come to represent their sole source of income. The example of the Ivory Coast provides us here with a chronicle of a death foretold.

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An examination of photographic activity in West Africa reveals that the vast majority of professionals exercise their activity in what is called « family (domestic) photography ».¹ Owing to unfavourable economic conditions, the practice of amateur photography by the inhabitants of this region of Africa has yet to become widespread. The opposite phenomenon can be observed in industrialized Western countries, where after the Second World War the popularization of photography led to elimination of many neighbourhood photographic studios.

Despite the fact that the practice of amateur photography in Africa is still limited to a relatively affluent minority, studio photography has suffered from a deep structural crisis since the early 1980s. This transformation has either eliminated or threatens the survival of professional photographers such as Mama Casset, Seydou Keita or Cornelius Augustt, whose work is doubly marked by the mastery of their craft and their respective artistic sensibilities.

The following article will attempt to explain the factors that have led to the ruin of hundreds of West African studio photographers. The role played by the owners of the colour laboratories will be discussed, as will be that of the new generation of itinerant photographers who currently dominate the market. We will also examine the situation of the remaining traditional studio photographers as the 20th century draws to a close.

1. By which is meant images characterized by the nature of the referent - effectively, portraits. This is an activity touching practically all social classes and geographical regions, easily accessible and destined for private rather than commercial use.



In the 1980s, the golden age of the studios, photographers were solidly established in their neighbourhoods and appreciated by the local population, for whom they played an important role by visually documenting the events of individual lives and the life of the community. These men (women did not engage in the profession) were generally non-nationals who had emigrated from neighbouring English-speaking countries (especially Ghana and Nigeria) to open studios in cities such as Niamey (Niger), Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina-Faso), Abidjan, Bouaké and Korhogo (the Ivory Coast).

During this period, black-and-white studio photography was both immensely popular and governed by strictly-defined aesthetic norms. The demand came from all classes of the population, including the poorest members of the urban and rural proletariat. In addition to this activity, the need for identity photographs, which had always constituted an essential part of the business of the studios, increased sharply owing to new obligations regarding their use on identity cards, drivers' licences, school applications and a variety of other administrative documents.

At the same time, photographers increasingly began leaving their studios to document private events (marriages, baptisms and funeral ceremonies), and public events (the visits of politicians and sports competitions), and even began working for the police (car accidents, homicides, etc.). Their work was facilitated by the arrival of compact 24 x 36 mm flash cameras, which replaced the bulky studio box cameras and the need for artificial lighting.

In the early 1980s, colour photography made its appearance in the region. For studios which experienced a heightened demand for portraits using the new colour medium, the effects were initially positive. Given the higher prices charged for colour portraits, the available income of photographers increased sufficiently to permit the purchase of motor cars, which increased their professional mobility. The increased income also permitted the renovation of studios (the creation of new decor, the installation of a telephone and air-conditioning, etc.) and the acquisition of new cameras using the 24 x 36 cm colour negative film - a norm imposed by the new development laboratories whose automatic machines accepted only that format. The older cameras and studio equipment were thus progressively phased out.

The Ivory Coast, via France, played a decisive role in the introduction of colour photography in the region. In effect, colour film was initially marketed and distributed by a French firm, Direct-Film, whose laboratories were in France. Exposed film was thus collected from a network of local depots and sent to France for development. The completed prints were then sent back to the Ivory Coast by mail. A local laboratory eventually opened in Abidjan, and by copying the same system used by their French competitors, succeeded in gaining the monopoly for colour development until the arrival of the Japanese-made Noritsu minilabs.

The majority of the owners of the new automatic colour development systems were Asians (principally South Koreans). After initially dominating the market, they were joined by African businessmen and Lebanese investors. An analysis of respective market share in 1995 reveals that in the Ivory Coast (which has a population of approximately 12 million), fully half of the 85 laboratories in the country belonged to Asians and only a third to Ivory Coast nationals. The proliferation of these laboratories was naturally detrimental to the studios, except when their owners had enough capital to invest the several hundred thousand French francs necessary for the purchase of the same system.²

Ultimately, the introduction of colour film and laboratory processing has had disastrous consequences for the traditional activities of the studios, to the point where it now threatens their very existence. All of the purely technical operations that they had previously carried out (film development and prints) are today done by sophisticated minilabs capable of processing hundreds of rolls of film per hour. The role of the photographer, whether professional or amateur, has been reduced to that of simply taking pictures - an activity which in itself requires no special talent or competence.

The situation has favoured the massive influx of formerly jobless young men who today offer their services as portrait photographers throughout West Africa. Lacking the financial means to establish permanent studios, this new generation of itinerant photographers methodically canvasses the region's cities and rural villages in search of potential clients. Their mobility and low overheads permit them to charge prices significantly lower than those charged by the studios (which are obliged to pay rent, various taxes and telephone and electricity bills), giving them rapid dominance of the family photography market.

2 - Although the devaluation of the CFA franc (the franc of Francophone Africa) in January 1994 stimulated the local economy, it also made the purchase of imported products even more expensive.

trait photographers

For these young photographers, their professional training could be obtained in a number of ways: a long apprenticeship in a studio (perhaps several years); a short apprenticeship (three to twelve months) or simply hands-on experience. With the exception of a minority capable of developing film and prints, their professional competence is limited to posing their subjects and taking their pictures, skills which are much the same for all photographers, whether based in one location or itinerant.

The itinerant photographers invest little in their equipment;³ conversely, the possession of a bicycle or a small motorbike is a valuable tool for rapidly covering a territory which, according to the size of the area in which they exercise their professional activity, can range from an entire city to simply a neighbourhood.⁴ Day and night, with their distinctive camera bags slung across the shoulder, they canvass their territory and in particular its most-frequented places: markets and bus stations, churches, temples and mosques, restaurants, night-clubs, hotels and swimming pools, schools, military barracks, etc. In the larger cities, each photographer has his own speciality, such as bars and nightclubs or the exclusive contract for a particular school.

Photographing domestic events, although an intermittent activity, is particularly profitable, whether the photographs are directly commissioned by the organizers or the result of the uninvited presence of the photographer. Given the competition among photographers, it is not unusual for them to come to blows outside the local town hall where, on Saturday mornings, marriages are performed in succession. Traditional ceremonies, religious celebrations and funerals also constitute choice subjects for these photographers.

Since the public's taste has shifted from posed portraits to more spontaneous, natural and even « candid » photographs, the traditional studio photographers currently occupy a negligible portion of the market: their professional activity and economic survival are now principally based on identity photographs. Recently however, even this last bastion of their activity has been eroded by the encroachments of the ubiquitous itinerant photographers and the replacement of the traditional identity photograph by tamper-proof snapshots taken by official government photographers.

Although the itinerant photographers' access to the market for identity photographs has until now been limited by their lack of development equipment and ignorance of the necessary techniques, the situation is changing in their favour. This is less because of the acceptance by studio photographers - desperate for additional revenue - of the need to develop the films of itinerant photographers in their laboratories than because of the new possibility offered by West African minilabs of producing black-and-white prints from colour negative film. For the first time, the studio photographers have succeeded in acting as a group to persuade the laboratory owners to refuse this practice, which would have put many of them out of business. Faced by the progressive erosion of their traditional activities, studio photographers have attempted to use their professional association to protect one of their last remaining markets: stu-

- dent identity photographs.

At the beginning of each academic year, hundreds of thousands of students require such photographs for their registration files. In the Ivory Coast, local chapters of the Synaphoci⁵ obtained the exclusive rights to student identity photographs from the school principals of their respective regions. At present, however, certain laboratories have succeeded in persuading the local authorities to open this extremely lucrative market to their own photographers.

Today, the laboratories have succeeded in laying down the law: on the one hand they pay their affiliated photographers less than the established standard rates and on the other, they have also created their own professional association which now competes with the Synaphoci. Their motivations are purely financial: a maximum of profit in a minimum of time. Given the fierce competition for clients, each camp makes an all-out effort to attract them. As one development laboratory owner put it, « In the Ivory Coast today, it's the laboratories who decide who is a professional or not. For example, if someone starts taking pictures for a living, even on a part-time basis, we accord him professional status as soon as he becomes a regular customer. » Accused by the studios of lowering professional standards, the laboratory owners defended their position with the assertion that technical progress and affordable, sophisticated cameras made it easier for more people to attain professional results, and that the distinction between professionals and amateurs was no longer valid. Furthermore, the laboratories argued, it was absurd to deprive newcomers of the opportunity to earn a living from photography by imposing technical competencies that were totally obsolete.

Under the guise of good intentions, these self-serving rationalizations were in reality an effective commercial strategy for gaining new clients. In addition, the laboratories offered services ranging from temporary office space with telephone and mail facilities, lounge areas with television, and discounts or gifts for repeat customers. No efforts were spared to attract new business and ensure the loyalty of customers who were quick to change to laboratories which offered even more. Speed of development was another important factor which attracted itinerant photographers to the laboratories, since their remuneration depends on their being able to distribute the finished photographs of marriages, baptisms, business meetings, religious ceremonies or other group events to the participants before they disperse.⁶

To satisfy the demand, the laboratories have opted for speed rather than quality. The development machines have been modified to run faster, the chemicals are changed less frequently and prints are made on cheaper paper. The results are often mediocre, a problem which is accentuated by the heat and humidity of the climate. All of these factors present a potential long-term threat to the photographic market itself: the quest for rapid profits may well backfire when people begin seeing the images on the photo-souvenirs they expected to last a lifetime fading to nothing in the space of a few years.

Behind the mask of the paternalistic behaviour of the laboratory owners lies a strategy of total market domination, as was revealed in their recent victory over the studio photographers of Bouaké in February 1996.



Photography Jean-François Werner 11

In collaboration with the Synaphoci, these photographers organized a boycott (which included pickets at the doors) of the Bouaké laboratories in an attempt to obtain lower prices for film processing. After pretending to negotiate, the laboratories not only maintained their prices, but also succeeded in putting a competing laboratory that was actually offering lower rates in a nearby city, out of business.

The studio photographers are the ultimate losers in this war which is not only economic and technical but also symbolic, for it is also centred around the laboratories' power to determine who is considered to be a professional photographer and who is not. Whatever the outcome, it is clear that the ongoing activity of studio photographers is doubly threatened: on one hand, the technical skills on which they have established their professional identity and commercial activity have gradually become obsolete; on the other, the demands of their customers have also changed, resulting in the progressive erosion of their traditional client-base. The most dynamic of the studio photographers have managed to adapt themselves to the new conditions, principally by becoming as commercially aggressive and mobile as their itinerant competitors. The older studio photographers, unable or unwilling to change their methods, have seen their business dwindle away. A number of the latter (originally emigrants from other countries, but often established for decades in their country of adoption) have found themselves in a particularly tragic situation: unable to make a living

where they are, while at the same time unable to return to their countries of origin, with which they have broken all connection.

THE CURRENT STATE OF STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE IVORY COAST

It was within the context of this crisis that I began investigating the activity of all photographers, whether studio or itinerant, in a secondary city of the Ivory Coast - Bouaké, population 500 000 - in 1994.

There were 85 studio photographers practising in Bouaké at that time. All were men and, on average, older than their itinerant colleagues. The question of nationality was another decisive factor separating the two groups. A full 80 per cent of the studio photographers were foreigners, while the same percentage of itinerant photographers were Ivory Coast nationals. The studio photographers were relatively well educated and, like the itinerants, many of them had previously practised other professions. For two-thirds of the studio photographers, their choice was motivated by a personal attachment to the profession rather than purely financial reasons. Many of them used terms such as «love» or «passion» to describe an activity which for them was both a source of pleasure and the means of earning a living. At least half of the studio photographers had learned their craft as assistants or apprentices to members of their own family already established in the profession.

3. In general, their equipment is relatively unsophisticated: a basic 24 x 36 mm camera with a standard 50 mm lens and a flash unit.

4. The phenomenon of itinerant photographers is not limited to cities. In the rural regions, young villagers practise this activity as an additional occupation between the planting and harvesting seasons.

5. Created in 1982 to defend the interests of professional photographers, the Synaphoci (Syndicat National des Photographes de la Côte d'Ivoire) accepted numerous members in the 1980s on the basis of criteria which were never clearly defined.

6. In the larger cities, some laboratories are open 24 hours a day on holidays such as Christmas, Tabaski, Easter or New Year's Eve.

Portrait photographers

The skills they acquired (in the absence of formal theoretical training) were principally of a practical nature: posing subjects, operating the camera and lighting systems, film development and print-making.

THE STUDIO

By definition, studio photography requires a fixed locale. Many of the studios were easily identifiable by names which recalled their function, such as the Studio du Nord; Studio Photo Plus; Studio Photo Central; Photo Studio Welcome; Studio Photo Cosmos N°1, etc. In general, photographers rent suitably-situated commercial space and divide it (using partitions or curtains) into three distinct areas: the waiting room for clients, the room where the photographs are actually taken, and the darkroom.

The waiting room also often serves as an office in which the commercial transactions between the photographer and the client are carried out. As such, it is usually equipped with a desk (or a counter) and one or more chairs. The walls are covered with samples of the photographer's work, typically colour portraits and black-and-white identity photographs, all of which were commissioned but never paid for by their clients.⁷ In the studios which are still in business today, these photographs often reflect the efforts made by photographers to adapt to the latest styles and the public's demand for novelty. Still other images may adorn the walls: advertising posters from the suppliers of photographic products; calendars distributed by the laboratories, illustrated with scenes from Japan or Korea; postcards and official portraits of political leaders, religious dignitaries, sports stars, etc.

The actual studio (the room in which the photographs are taken) is always separated from the waiting room/office by a partition or curtain to preserve the sacrosanct privacy of the client and photographer. The studio lighting is totally artificial and generally consists of a series of ordinary light-bulbs or fluorescent tubes. The drawbacks of such lighting systems are that they tend to blind clients with their harsh glare and further increase the heat in the already airless room. The stifling heat in turn augments the client's lack of comfort and the haste of the photographer. The subject usually poses before a painted backdrop (urban scenes or rural landscapes) or a large colour poster representing an « exotic » landscape (snow-covered Alps, for example) whose purpose is to create an impression of being somewhere - or someone - else.⁸

The use of backgrounds is complemented by the possibility of being photographed in front of coloured curtains which can be changed during a single shooting session. Colours are chosen to provide the best contrast with the subject's clothing or skin-tone. The attention given to the latter factor is regarded by both parties as being of extreme importance. In general, photographers attempt to lighten rather than darken skin-tones, and the majority of the development laboratories have adjusted their machines to produce lighter hues. In addition to the backgrounds, the studios offer a variety of accessories (props), ranging from artificial flowers and plants to elegant wrought-iron balconies, a variety of seats (traditional stools and modern armchairs), end-tables with false telephones, etc.

These stereotyped elements appear with astonishing regularity in photographic studios across West Africa. Clients desirous of « dressing up » can also select appropriate clothing (such as sports jackets, dark suits, white shirts, ties and hats) kept by the photographer for that purpose. Studios are also equipped with dressing-alcoves complete with mirrors, combs, hairbrushes and talcum powder for absorbing perspiration.

TAKING THE PORTRAIT

Without exception, all the photographers interviewed possessed at least two cameras. The first (a medium-sized or 24 x 36 mm format) is permanently installed on a tripod, and serves for black-and-white identity photographs. The second (always a 24 x 36 mm camera equipped with a flash unit) is used for colour studio portraits as well as for exterior work (special events or commercial photography and portraits taken at the client's home).

Film is obtained on the informal market (also known as the « underground » or « black » market) at prices lower than those current in the shops. The film used is invariably 135-format in colour or black-and-white and 120-format exclusively in black-and-white. The informal market for photographic supplies came into existence in the late 1980s, following the bankruptcy of several Abidjan wholesalers (and in particular, the distributor of Kodak products).

The technical approach of studio photographers is essentially empirical. For example, although the majority of their Japanese-made 24 x 36 cameras come equipped with a light-meter as standard equipment, most studio photographers employ the same shutter speed and diaphragm opening, and adjust for light values manually.⁹ For exterior shots, photographers use one of two habitual diaphragm-openings, depending on whether the subject is in the sunlight or shade.

THE DARKROOM

The portion of the studio reserved for developing and printing film is generally cramped (sometimes no larger than a closet), lit by an ordinary light-bulb (covered in red paint or black paper), without running water and usually cluttered and dust-filled. The lack of ventilation and the heat favour the decomposition of the development chemicals and print-paper. The enlarger (often an ancient model) is generally on a wooden table, but is only used for producing black-and-white identity photographs. The remaining accessories include plastic development pans and occasionally tongs, clips and a calibrated print-cutter.

Chemicals, developing baths, fixing solutions and print paper are obtained either on the informal market or from merchants, who enjoy a flourishing trade. In general, the photographers complain about the irregularity of supply, the poor quality of the products offered to them and the lack of variety. As for chemicals for fixing and developing, known as « medications », ¹⁰ these are available only in powder form.

Once prepared, these products cannot be kept for more than a few months without deteriorating, which penalizes photographers for whom business is slow.

The straitened circumstances prevailing in their darkrooms have not prevented West African photographers from producing excellent photographs and at times, even veritable works of art. Their creativity and ability to improvise have triumphed over technical conditions which are far removed from those recommended by the instruction books. Film is manually developed, being passed in successive movements in and out of three different chemical baths. The temperatures of the chemical baths are never monitored; reserves of new chemicals and unexposed prints are regularly exposed to levels of humidity and heat which rapidly affect their quality.

THE PRESERVATION AND ARCHIVING OF NEGATIVES

Although the majority of the photographers interviewed were perfectly aware of their right to royalties³ in the event of the reproduction of their photographs, their economic situation has become so difficult that it is rare for them - particularly the older generation of studio photographers - to refuse a cash offer for the outright purchase of the original negatives. The physical preservation of their negatives leaves much to be desired. Even if certain photographers stock their negatives in pro-

tective cellophane envelopes and classify them in chronological order, the majority take no special precautions for their preservation. Some photographers even admitted that, after moving to a new studio or upon their retirement, they threw out hundreds of negatives which they considered to be valueless. When negatives are preserved, it is only because of the potential client demand for new prints: it is for this reason that when a studio is sold to a new owner, the previous photographer's negatives are included along with the furnishings and equipment as a package deal.

DAILY ECONOMIC SURVIVAL

The preceding description of photographic activity in West Africa would not be complete without calling attention to the economic and material difficulties experienced by many of its professionals. Although the majority of photographers who were interviewed described the current situation as critical, given the lack of relevant economic data (most photographers do not keep records of their business activity), it is impossible to evaluate this precisely.

What is clear, however, is the shabby state of the studios, the financial problems of the older generation of photographers (unpaid rent and electricity bills, etc.) and the necessity for some of them to sell part of their equipment, often to younger itinerant photographers.

For the majority of the studios, identity photos remain the principal and often only source of revenue, far ahead of colour portraits. Even this activity has become minimal (in general, only a few clients per day) and has resulted in the necessity for finding complementary sources of income. These secondary activities can range from the sales of non-photography-related products (gasoline, newspapers, charcoal, etc.) to hairdressing (a Nigerian speciality) and the rental of chairs and canopies for outdoor events and ceremonies.

It is within the context of this profound professional crisis that, since 1990, a wide variety of individuals (specialists of art and culture, representatives of foreign cultural agencies and non-governmental organisations, historians, collectors, art merchants, etc., the majority of whom are European) have discovered African photography. The effects of this belated recognition of what is regarded as a new chapter in the history of African art has benefited a handful of photographers. Conversely, at the present time, this new development has had little effect on the even more pressing need for the conservation of Africa's unique and precious cultural heritage.¹¹

Jean-François Werner

7. In Senegal, photographers hang the portraits of clients who owe them money upside-down as a form of public humiliation.

8. In Ghana, the painted canvas backgrounds (often with a different scene appearing on either side) exhibit a wide variety of themes (urban scenes, well-furnished home interiors, luxurious villas with swimming pools, expensive automobiles, mosques, gardens, etc.). This phenomenon may explain why Ghanaian photographers have resisted the current crisis more successfully than their other West African colleagues. (See Tobias Wendt's observations on this subject.)

9. The practice can be ascribed to the difficulties of obtaining replacement batteries for these light-meters as well as their inaccuracy after being subjected to the usual operating conditions (heat, humidity and repeated mishandling).

10. Its probable origin was in the period when these products were sold in pharmacies - a practice which continued until fairly recently. On another level, it also evokes their utilization in processes which in the popular imagination are invested with a quasi-magical quality.

11. Although a project (under the auspices of the West African Museum Programme) for the preservation of the West African photographic heritage has recently been set up, it applies only to public collections and totally neglects the problem of the immense quantity of negatives and photographs existing in private archives.