

**CULTURAL MEMORIES IN SPATIO-TEMPORAL CONTINUITY:  
INTERROGATING THE LIVING RECORDS OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ART OF  
J. D. 'OKHAI OJEIKERE**

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**Abstract**

African coiffures, beyond fashion, are living records of socio-cultural identity and creative expression that require preservation and continuity. This study examined the body of works (hairstyles and headgears) of a photographic artist, J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere (1930-2014) and evaluated his diverse archiving efforts that serve as a vital tool for art-historical documentation. The spatio-temporal continuity of the photographed African coiffures predated and inspired contemporary digital platforms, contributing to sustainable visual memories. The study adopted a qualitative approach through interviews, critical observation, formal analysis and review of related literature, identifying a continuous path of object recording. Findings reveal that the photographs were intentionally documented as art-historical objects, classified in stylistic genres and chronologically arranged. The artist's photographs ultimately objectify indigenous culture, facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer, and provide educational resources for future studies. In conclusion, integrating digital recording into the preservation of cultural practices can help protect Africa's intangible heritage and reaffirm its identity in a globalized world.

**Keywords:** African coiffures, Art archiving, 'Okhai Ojeikere, Photography, Visual Documentation

**Introduction**

Coiffures in Africa have long served as markers of ethnic identity, social status, age, spirituality, and communal belonging. The stylistic patterning of the African head-dressings are in the same genre as other similar patterned arts such as body art, wall decoration, cloth design and mat weaving. According to Abban and Oteng (2022), hairstyles are visual languages through which

individuals communicate cultural affiliation and social values. As intangible heritage, they embody narratives that cannot be preserved solely through oral tradition. Visual documentation, particularly through photography and digital archiving, offers an enduring means of safeguarding these expressions. Photography has historically played a crucial role in recording cultural practices and aesthetic traditions. In Nigeria, the pioneering work of J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere (1930-2014), who meticulously photographed women's hairstyles and headgears over several decades, stands as a profound testament to the role of visual documentation in preserving cultural identity (Blaffer Art Museum, 2005). Johnson Donatus Aihumekeokhai, Ojeikere (popularly known as J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere) was a renowned Nigerian photographic artist. The veteran portrait and documentary photographer was born in Ovbiomu-Emai village, Owan-East Local Government of what is now known as Edo State. Ojeikere was trained by a local photographer, Albert Anieke, in Abakaliki, Enugu. Ojeikere completed his formal schooling at St. Bernard Catholic School in Ihievbe in the then southwestern Nigeria. This is the only specific institution mentioned in available biographies. He did not receive formal tertiary art-school training in photography; instead, he was largely self-taught. After buying his first Brownie D camera at age 20, he learned the rudiments of photography with help from a neighbor. His professional development skills were built through on-the-job experiences, such as, working as a darkroom assistant at the Ministry of Information in Ibadan from 1954, and later he became a studio photographer for Television House Ibadan in 1961. Later roles with West Africa Publicity and the Nigerian Arts Council further honed his craft. Between mid-1950s and 1961, he was a photographer with the then Ministry of Information, Western Region and Africa's premier television station, Western Nigeria Television (WNTV), Ibadan. After working with the government, he took up another job as Chief Commercial Photographer and Head of Photographic Department at Lintas Limited (now Lowe Lintas). He left Lintas in 1975 to set up a studio named Foto Ojeikere. In his over five decades' career that traversed public service, corporate employment and independent practice, Ojeikere also worked in diverse themes and in over 30 solo and group exhibitions around the world, showing the diversity of his themes. But his last two exhibitions, *Networks and Voids* held at Omenka Gallery, Ikoyi, Lagos and *Voyage Retour* at Federal Government Press Building, Broad Street, Lagos, seemed to have summarized the photographer's adventurous lens as a parting gift to his admirers.

### **Problem and Objectives of the Study**

In the present digital era, archiving technologies and online platforms now extend the legacy of 'Okhai Ojeikere by enabling broader access, research, and reinterpretation of traditional forms (Shyngle, Aruoture & Haruna, 2024). A lingering problem for African traditional coiffures in the face of modernization, migration, and western beauty-influences is that many indigenous head-dressing styles risk fading into obscurity and socio-cultural irrelevance. It has been observed that African coiffures are endangered by cultural erosion, lack of systematic documentation, and limited representation in global heritage archives (Mabotja, 2024). Many traditional hairstyling

techniques, once transmitted through apprenticeship and communal interaction, are gradually disappearing due to urbanization and the dominance of foreign beauty standards. The absence of structured digital repositories means that these forms of expression risk being forgotten or misrepresented (Matjila, 2020). There is, therefore a pressing need to investigate how photography and digital archiving can document, preserve, and disseminate the aesthetic and cultural significance of African hairstyles for future generations. Against this background, the objectives of this study were:

1. to examine the cultural and historical significance of African head/hair dressing styles as a visual heritage.
2. to explore how photography and digital archiving contribute to preserving African hairstyles, particularly evaluating the relevance of 'Okhai Ojeikere's photographic archiving as a tool for cultural identity, preservation, education and continuity.
3. to analyze the role of photography in art-historical documentation and preservation of African iconography.
4. to propose contemporary strategies from the data analyzed, strategies for sustaining African coiffure styles through visual and digital documentation.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This visual arts study adopted a qualitative methodological approach because it is art-historical and required a participatory field investigation. The field investigation was made up of interviews with Mr. Amaize Ojeikere (2024), a living son of 'Okhai Ojeikere, who is also a practicing photographer himself and owns a studio in Lagos, and interview extracts from Bisi Silva (2013), who curated one of Ojeikere's major exhibitions. Also included in the method were the critical observation of the objects that were photographed by the artist and formal analysis of some purposively collected object types, selected through stylistic patterning. Archived photographs were downloaded from the internet, and through the review of related literature, a continuous path of object recording.

This research is hung on two theoretical frameworks, the theory of Iconology and of Social Change. The theory of iconology was developed by German-Jewish art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) and is the interpretation of the meanings of forms of artistic objects. In this paper, the theory is applied in the iconographic description, classification, and symbolisms of Ojeikere's photographed headgears and hairstyles. In the application of the theory of social change, Karl Marx (1818-1883) is the foremost proponent of the theory of social change, even though several other philosophers expanded and applied it. According to this theory, a society evolves into higher levels or a more complex society through external influences or by generating change within itself. The processes of change can be (a) evolutionary (b) cyclical (c) economic (d) functionalist or (e) conflict. The application of the theory of social change in this paper shows that external influences

on traditional African coiffures cannot be controlled or exterminated, an enduring legacy, such as Ojeikere's photographs, can be living records that serve as reminders transcending generations, cyclically and evolutionarily.

## **Results:**

### **Ojeikere's Photography: A Tool for Preservation**

Photography functions as both an artistic and ethnographic medium that captures the materiality of cultural practices. Ndu (2025) describes Ojeikere's photographic documentation of Nigerian hairstyles from the 1960s to the 1990s as representing one of the most significant visual archives of African hair artistry. His images transcend simple portraiture; they transform everyday hairstyles into sculptural forms that celebrate African creativity. Each photograph captures the intricacy of design, the dexterity of hairdressers, and the cultural meanings embedded within each style. Ojeikere's work also exemplifies how photography transforms intangible heritage into a lasting visual record. His images have become educational resources, used in art institutions and exhibitions to teach younger generations about cultural aesthetics. Staugaitis (2018) reveals that other contemporary photographers working in Nigeria, such as Andrew Esiebo (b. 1978) and Medina Dugger (b. c.1980), continue this tradition by using photography to explore identity, gender, and heritage. Through their lenses, hairstyles become testimonies of resistance, pride, and cultural continuity. According to Ndu (2025), there are so many ways to style hair that choosing one becomes almost impossible, because every technique offers its own creative voice. Braids, cornrows, and plaits go beyond grooming; they become structures of identity, memory, and beauty. Each style can be shaped, layered, or patterned until it transforms into an artwork in its own right. This idea is clearly reflected in the photography of Ojeikere, whose portraits celebrate the sculptural possibilities of African hairstyles. Through his lens, everyday hair designs become architectural forms (Fig. 2), cultural symbols (Fig. 6), and visual poetry (Figs. 3 & 5). His work shows that hair is not just styled, but crafted—an art form carried proudly on the head.



**Figure 1:** *J.D 'Okhai Ojeikere. Agaracha I. Photo, Black & White. 100cm x 100cm*  
1974. Source: Blaffer Art Museum (2005)



**Figure 2 :** *J.D 'Okhai Ojeikere. Mkpuk Eba II. Photo, Black & White. 100cm x 100cm. 1974.*

Source: Blaffer Art Museum (2005)



**Figure 3:** *J.D 'Okhai Ojeikere. Ife Bronze. Photo, Black & White. 60cm x 50cm. 1972.*

Source: Copyright Blaffer Art Museum (2005)



**Figure 4:** J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere *Ito Lozi I*. Photo, Black & White. 60cm x 50cm. 1971.

Source: Artsy: <https://www.artsy.net/artist>



**Figure 5:** J. Okhai Ojeikere, *Ito Lozi II*. 1971. Source of Photograph: Artsy

(<https://www.artsy.net/artist>)



**Figure 6:** *Okhai Ojeikere (right), with co-exhibitor, American painter, Gary Stephens, during one of his last two exhibitions in Lagos. Source: <https://www.ff-projects.com/artists/jd-okhai-ojeikere>*



**Figure 7:** J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere during one of his exhibitions. Source: <https://www.fff-projects.com/artists/jd-okhai-Ojeikere>

## **Discussion:**

### **African Indigenous Coiffures: Artistry, Symbolism and Functions**

African coiffures as a phenomenon extends far beyond fashion or physical appearance; it is a deep cultural, historical, and spiritual expression that embodies the essence of African identity. Throughout the continent, hair-styling has served as a symbolic language through which individuals and communities communicate values, statuses, and heritage. Every braid, twist, knot, or cut is often identified with a name that is commensurate with their meanings, shaped by artistic and oral traditions, creativity, and visual history. The phenomenon of African hairstyle, therefore, represents a living archive of social and artistic consciousness that evolves while maintaining continuity with ancestral roots. In many African societies, the human head is regarded as a sacred space, a point of spiritual energy and connection with the divine. This is often evidenced in the representation of the head as proportionately 1:3 of the human body in African sculptures. (Fig. 8) Hair, being the most visible part of this sacred zone, becomes a means of expressing the inner self and societal belonging. Hairstyles often signify stages of life, childhood, adolescence, marriage, motherhood, or initiation into adulthood. Banks (2000) confirms that among the Yoruba, Igbo, Zulu, and Himba, for instance, hairstyles are intricately linked to rites of passage, marking transitions and affirming social identity. The act of hairstyling is also communal, involving touch, conversation, and bonding, especially among women. It is in this intimate and creative process that values, stories, knowledge and wisdom are transmitted across generations, turning hairstyling into a socialized art form.

The artistry of African hairstyles is remarkable in its diversity and inventiveness. From the architectural height of Yoruba *Shuku* (Fig. 3) styles to the intricate *cornrows* of West Africa and the sculptural *dreadlocks* of East Africa, these hairstyles reveal mastery in design and symbolic meanings. They often reflect the natural environment, spiritual beliefs, and aesthetics of beauty particular to each community. Hairstyles have served as identifiers of ethnicity, clan, social rank, and even political allegiance. In the Benin Kingdom, for example, royal women wore elaborate hairstyles that communicated their proximity to the palace and their ceremonial importance. Similarly, among the Fulani and Maasai, hair patterns distinguish gender roles, age groups, and cultural affiliations.

During the colonial period, African hairstyles took on new dimensions as instruments of resistance and self-definition. The imposition of Western beauty standards devalued African hair textures and styles, associating them with inferiority. Yet, African communities continued to preserve

traditional hair practices as acts of defiance and cultural preservation. In the postcolonial era, the revival of natural hair movements and the celebration of Afrocentric aesthetics have reaffirmed hair as a statement of pride and identity. Artists, photographers, and scholars have documented hairstyles not only as aesthetic practices but also as historical evidence of endurance and creativity.

In contemporary times, African hairstyles remain dynamic and globally influential. They inspire art, fashion, and digital media, serving as platforms for cultural dialogue and innovation. The popularity of braids, locs, twists, and afros in international culture has drawn attention to African aesthetics, and it also raises conversations about cultural appropriation and ownership. For many Africans, however, hairstyling continues to be a form of personal and collective storytelling, a way of asserting visibility in a world that once sought to silence indigenous beauty. Ultimately, African hairstyle as a phenomenon represents more than adornment. It is a philosophy of being, a visual expression of identity, spirituality, and history. It connects the past with the present, the individual with the community, and tradition with modernity. Through its resilience and reinvention, African hairstyling demonstrates how culture lives through art, memory, and the human body itself.



**Figure 8:** *Salawu Olona, Soldier. Wood. 40cm. 1960.* Source of Photograph: Babalola, S.A. (2016)

## Historical and Cultural Context of African Hairstyles

Hairstyles in Africa are deeply rooted in the continent's cultural systems. They have historically communicated social roles, ethnic affiliation, marital status, and religious beliefs. Among the Yoruba, elaborate braids and sculptural hairstyles such as *Shuku* (Fig.4) or *Kolese* were indicators of social maturity and femininity (Kayange, 2018). In the Igbo and Akan traditions, hairstyles functioned as visual emblems of beauty and pride (Idenze, 2025). The process of hairstyling itself was communal, serving as a medium of storytelling and bonding, particularly among women. Colonial and postcolonial encounters, however, disrupted these traditions. Western education, religion, and media propagated alternative standards of beauty that often devalued African aesthetic practices. (Black, 2025). The act of straightening or covering African hair with wigs, made from straight hair, became a symbol of assimilation. Despite these pressures, African hairstyles have remained resilient cultural signifiers, continually reinterpreted by new generations of Africans both on the continent and in the diaspora.

## The Legacy of J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere

Ojeikere's preservation of African headdresses and hairstyles through photography and digital archiving is not merely an act of documentation but an affirmation of identity and resilience. Photography transforms ephemeral art forms into enduring visual testimonies and memories, while digital archiving ensures their survival and accessibility in a rapidly changing world. These technologies together bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. The study finds that visual documentation serves multiple purposes: it educates future generations, strengthens cultural pride, and provides artists and designers with references for creative innovation and continuity. Moreover, it challenges the historical erasure of African aesthetics within global art historical repertoire by repositioning hairstyles as legitimate and sophisticated art forms. In this light, heritage preservation becomes both a cultural and political act. By visually recording and digitally archiving African hairstyles, societies reclaim ownership of their narratives and resist homogenizing global beauty standards. Such efforts align with UNESCO's advocacy for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and promote cultural sustainability through digital means. J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere is recorded in history as a cultural archivist and a pioneer of Nigerian photography. With a career spanning more than 50 years, Ojeikere is revered as one of Africa's most influential photographers. His work is not based on commercial photography, but rather on in-depth cultural documentation. He created more than 10,000 photographs, most famously the *Hairstyles Series*, which painstakingly documents traditional Nigerian hairstyles and their development starting in the late 1960s. He has international recognition. Unlike many African photographers of his period, his work is included in museum collections worldwide and has been shown in exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, Tate Modern, and the Met. In terms of form and technique, Ojeikere's mostly black and white

photographs are praised for their formal clarity, sparse backdrops, subdued lighting, and almost methodical attention to composition, especially when it comes to highlighting form with haircuts shot from precise angles. The anthropological value of his photographic archives preserves a visual legacy that is rarely caught at that scale or depth in African photography, functioning as a cultural and historical record. Stylistically, Ojeikere's work is timeless and worthy of study because of his subtle, classic aesthetics, which prioritizes cultural form over flash. His systematic investigation of vernacular culture has had a direct impact on later generations of photographers, encouraging them to view ordinary life as deserving of artistic and ethnographic study.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Ojeikere's Photographic Art and the Future of African Cultural Heritage**

African hairstyles embody centuries of aesthetic ingenuity, social structure, and cultural symbolism. Yet, their intangible nature makes them vulnerable to loss if not properly documented and preserved. Photography and digital archiving provide effective tools for safeguarding this heritage, allowing it to be studied, celebrated, and transmitted across generations. The pioneering works of photographers such as Ojeikere demonstrate the power of the visual image to preserve memory, while digital platforms ensure that this memory remains dynamic and accessible. Digital archiving extends the power of photography by ensuring the accessibility, preservation, and dissemination of cultural materials. A digital archive of African hairstyles can serve as a dynamic repository for visual culture, allowing scholars, artists, and educators to study and reinterpret heritage. Platforms such as Google Arts & Culture, online museum collections, and African visual culture websites already provide spaces for such engagement, though representation remains limited. Digitization also democratizes access to cultural knowledge. It allows young Africans, including those in the diaspora, to reconnect with their roots through interactive media, virtual exhibitions, and online learning resources. Digital tools such as 3D modeling and augmented reality can further enhance preservation by capturing hairstyles in motion and spatial context. However, challenges such as inadequate funding, technological infrastructure, and intellectual property rights must be addressed to ensure the sustainability of these archives.

To preserve African hairstyles as living heritage, there is a need for collaborative efforts between artists, educators, cultural institutions, and digital technologists. Establishing regional digital archives, promoting visual heritage education, and supporting local documentation projects can help sustain these cultural expressions (Sackey, 2022). Through photography and digital archiving, Africa's hairstyles continue to speak, not only of beauty but of history, identity, and belonging. Decades after his death, Ojeikere's enduring documentary aesthetics continue to have an impact, having laid the groundwork for Nigerian culture's visual archive. His legacy is based on formal innovation and cultural preservation. Ojeikere's genius is essentially found in the prism of cultural

archaeology. Ojeikere exhibited extensively throughout his career, participating in over 30 solo and group exhibitions worldwide before he died in 2014. His work has continued to be exhibited internationally since 2014. For example: Group presentations and exhibitions through major collections at galleries like Fridman Gallery (2025) and museum shows like *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi* (2025–26). Large survey exhibitions, for instance, the 2025 “An Exacting Eye” showcase at *ART X Lagos*. Exhibition databases currently show at least 35 exhibitions attributed to him in total.

### **Recommendations**

Several recommendations are proposed to strengthen documentation, accessibility, and heritage transmission. These recommendations aim to guide educators, cultural institutions, policymakers, and artists in sustaining this visual tradition for future generations.

- i. Cultural institutions and creative organizations should establish regional and national digital archives dedicated to African hairstyles to ensure systematic documentation and long-term preservation.
- ii. Art educators should integrate visual heritage studies into their curriculum, using photography and digital media to help students understand the historical and cultural significance of African hairstyles.
- iii. Governments, NGOs, and cultural bodies should support local documentation projects by providing funding, training, and equipment for photographers, researchers, and community historians.
- iii. Collaboration between artists, digital technologists, and cultural custodians should be strengthened to develop innovative platforms that make visual archives accessible, interactive, and culturally relevant.

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