

Image Making: The Spectacle of Photography and Text in Obituary Programs as Contemporary Practice of Social Visibility in Southern Nigeria

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Abstract : During funeral ceremonies, it has become common for attendees to jostle for burial programs in some southern Nigerian towns. Beginning from ordinary typewritten text only sheets of paper in the 1980s to their current digitally formatted multicolor magazine style, burial programs continue to be collected and kept in homes where they remain as archival documents of family photo histories and as a veritable form of leveraging family status and visibility in a social economy through the inclusion of lots of choreographically arranged photographs and text. The biographical texts speak of idealized and often lofty and aestheticized accomplishments of deceased peoples, which are often corroborated by an accompanying section of tributes from first the immediate family members, and then from affiliations as well as organizations deceased people belonged, in the form of scanned letterheaded corporate tributes. Others speak of modest biographical texts when the deceased accomplished little. Usually, in majority of the cases, the display of photographs and text in these programs follow a trajectory of historical compartmentalization of the deceased, beginning from parentage to the period of youth, occupation, retirement, and old age as the case may be, which usually drives from black and white historical photographs to the color photography of today. This compartmentalization follows varied models but is designed to show the deceased in varying activities during his lifetime. The production of these programs ranges from the extremely expensive and luscious full colors of near fifty-eighty pages to bland and very simplified low-quality few-page editions in a single color and no photographs, except on the cover. Cost and quality, therefore, become determinants of varying family status and social visibility. By a critical selection of photographs and text, family members construct an idealized image of deceased people and themselves, concentrating on mutuality based on appropriate sartorial selections, socioeconomic grade, and social temperaments that are framed to corroborate the public's perception of them. Burial magazines, therefore, serve purposes beyond their primary use; they symbolize an orchestrated social site for image-making and the validation of the social status of families, shaped by prior family histories.

Keywords : biographical texts, burial programs, compartmentalization, magazine, multicolor, photo-histories, social status

Conference Title : ICAHVC 2021 : International Conference on Art History and Visual Culture

Conference Location : Toronto, Canada

Conference Dates : July 19-20, 2021