

GEORGE OSODI

I would like to thank SITAC's invitation. My name is George Osodi, before I start my conference, I would like to briefly present my country. I come from Nigeria, in the west coast of Africa, we are 150 million, it is a very large and diverse country; we have plenty of oil. We are a democracy but I rather call it a 'unique system', a political system that is heavily influenced by power, by money. This contrast is exposed in the images I will present today.

I became a photographer because of the love I feel for art, I couldn't study photography, and instead I studied business, I have a degree in Business Administration. I worked for three years at a bank until I decided to become a photographer. Then I had to overcome many difficulties because photography wasn't considered a serious profession, nobody took me seriously, but as a banker I was a well-respected person. Actually, a lawyer friend questioned my decision and asked me how was it possible that I left the bank to become a photographer, and then she left me. I lost everything; I lost all my benefits at the bank, my partner, and my apartment. I was alone. It was a real disaster, talking about catastrophes and disasters. I think that in Nigeria many people have lost hope, they don't know what to do in the future, precisely for the preconceived notions, in my country there are many... They brand you if you are a lawyer, or if you are a doctor, if you don't have a 'serious' profession, no one takes you into account. And everyone asks you what are you going to do with your life.

I would like you to travel with me through some images, images of my country. First, I would like to tell you about my passion for all this issues that surrounded me, everything that is my country and other African countries. There are many concerns, many social problems, and for all these reasons is that I took the decision of becoming a photographer, a mean that truly allowed me to express these concerns and anxieties I felt. There are some images you would rather not see as they reflect a very sad reality.

It is sometimes hard to express through images. We have to be careful with what we say through them, they can be politically incorrect and you can lose everything, so I had to learn many tricks that have rescued me through my years as photographer, I started by developing my photography myself, observing in them an artistic expression, taking on account the colour and knowing as well that I wanted to achieve certain things, I wanted people to appreciate my work, appreciate the aesthetic even when many saw my work as political, as images that portrayed my political point of view. It was my intention that these pictures had aesthetic aspects although reality is sometimes stronger than images.

I would like to show some of the most popular images, one of my first projects in the delta river zone of Nigeria, a place where there is plenty of oil and a large dependence on this industry, almost 90% of the income actually comes from the oil industry and has ignored other sources of income that once prevailed such as fishing and agriculture. But moreover, this industry has helped the power elites to overcome, elites that dominate the country, as I mentioned, a toughly divided country, we are either up or really down. Those that conform the elites are really the least; there is a very insignificant middle class and a huge mass living in extreme poverty. In this image you can see a policeman carrying a gun and a young man painted in white protesting in the delta region. This photograph is part of a project that looked to present an historic moment of the country, during elections these kind of images appeared and disappeared on daily basis, and the question that raises is where is the government. Another image shows these pipes, you see these pipes all over the country, they are very important as the transport oil over the region, many visit this zone to see if it is possible to steal some oil and profit from it. These images also show pollution all over the region, complete desolation. Villages where it's never dark, because of the relentless oil wells flames. A polluted land that once was land of agriculture and has been lost by the oil industry, this happens and it is a clear example of the domination of companies such as Shell that come here and sweep everything, a real catastrophe.

Then, when I arrive there to work, I am shocked by the situation; these images try to portray my shock even if they are hard to achieve, as there are many interests, financial and political interests that have been created in the region. I had to go through the zone carefully, it took me five years to penetrate it and be able to take these pictures. For example, this image of two young boys selling Chinese products, today very common trend in Nigeria that many use to profit from it, the children sell these products, they skip school to work as retailers of Chinese products. Their parents allow this to have an extra profit for the family. It is a harmed region, a catastrophe. And yet, there are protests; most of them end up in violence.

Many of my photographs are example of Nigeria's reality, portraying also what I call 'leaders', men who pocket the money and never invest it in the country, housing projects literally in ruins, complete pollution... In 2009, we saw the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, everyone was alarmed, but for us it was not really that alarming, we have been living for the last fifty years in this reality summed with the 'new era', the era of gangsters, it has become an untamed place. Leaks and catastrophe is the every day, even so, people manage to survive, to make a profit from catastrophe, to resist scourge and live saying that we are fighting for our country when

actually most are pirates that profit from all these illegal activities related to the industry... They steal both from the people and the large companies.

The images of pollution are all over the region, the desolation and the hunger. Another project I worked in was entitled *Lagos Uncelebrated* which shows the city of Lagos, the largest city in the country where the 10% of the population of Nigeria lives, there are at least 50 million inhabitants and in some way, it is easier to earn a living here. We don't necessarily do well, but at least there is work. There are other cities that are some how invisible but in Lagos, money moves, things happen, as they say, the good, the bad and the ugly.

This project is about people trying to move ahead at all costs. Nigeria is a religious country by excellence, everybody believes in God and asks many favours and miracles... A perfect example of the 'mega city', although I have always questioned what this means. It is a city with little or no urban planning, everyone is fighting and trying to find some space. There is no infrastructure, and then everything becomes erratic, chaotic. Everyone is trying to move ahead, to cover his or her basic needs. In many cases, there are no electric services, or water, and people live with candles...

Nigeria, even though it is one of the most important countries in the world oil industry, oil is scarce, people even break the pipes to steal and most go unnoticed because people will do anything in order to survive. Then, other options such as the night life become a good source of income, people try to find ways to get fit, in order to find a job in the night clubs, like waiters or security guards. A constant fight for a place, for a job, everyone living on top of each other, streets are full, of business, of people, everything happens in the streets and everyone has learned to coexist because they do not have other choice.

But Lagos is a city where you can get stuck easily, lost; I don't think there is a worst place in the world... I don't know.

Another project, one of my favourites, consists in a trip I did all around the country. Nigeria is also a rich country in many ways. But Nigerian people always blame the devil, we blame him for any accident or misfortune, it is always the devil's blame. So I decided to tour the country by land and portray all this accidents, because in Nigeria you find many accidents in the roads, nobody respects the rules so this project is about this particular reality. I travelled all around documenting the accidents, the destroyed and abandoned cars, something that I have only witnessed in Nigeria, and fortunately I have travelled a lot. In many cases, people dismantle these wrecked cars to steal parts and sell them, the rests remain there for weeks, even months, no one really cares but what's weird is that this is too common. After all, the rich elite doesn't travel these roads. While I go through the country,

I also find political and social issues that I try to embellish in order to get the message through.

Another project I did in Ghana was entitled *De Money*, and it took place at a gold mine and narrates the story of Nigeria. People trying survive at any cost, paying any price. You see people scratching the ground for weeks just to get a small portion of gold equivalent of 10 dollars a week. No one sees or cares for the environmental disaster in the forest; the area is completely forsaken while you see the people struggling to survive. They don't have any education, they do not know about lead or mercury and the consequences and poisoning, they ignore the damage that the mines cause to the environment. Many of these 'mineworkers' die very young; they give their life in exchange of a small marble of gold.

To close up, I would like to show *Black Street*, a project that portrays another kind of catastrophe. Catastrophes can be both, natural or created by men, and in my country we live the second kind. It is not the natural catastrophe that affects us, those that are destructive such as the tsunamis or earthquakes; instead we suffer a different kind of catastrophes that are more overwhelming, the ones that are created by ourselves as society, an aggravating situation that is flogging the whole country. In Nigeria, we generate our own 'tsunamis'.

Black Street is about one of these created catastrophes, on how Nigerian women are 'exported' to Europe as prostitutes. In Nigeria, they go through a sort of initiation, a ritual that their own family conduct, like voodoo, they sacrifice animals to protect their daughters through their way, so they arrive safely as it is the family interest that they become prostitutes and send some money back home, to get by at any cost literally. They spend a lot of money in this rituals, more than 60,000 euros to take them securely to their final posting. They work as sex slaves until they can pay the family's debt and keep working to send more money to the family, if they are lucky they manage to escape and some of them seek asylum in some Muslim and Christian shrines, or other religions and beliefs. The women come from different regions of the country and establish in many European countries, so I did this project in order to portray this harsh reality, a reality where women realize that time is not a good ally for those engaged in this activity.