Patrick Willocq's *Songs of the Walés*
The Same but Different: Rituals and Surrealism

Azu Nwagbogu
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Mondher Kilani argues that the anthropologist on the ground knows that for his ethnographic journey to be successful, the natives must disturb and fascinate him simultaneously. This is why he beats them to the draw and equips himself with an ethnographic pen and the will to 'invent the possible'. Kilani's *L'invention de l'autre* (1995), like other texts of postmodern anthropologic literature, unveils the strategies of construction of alterity that dominate the ethnographic discipline, of which the aesthetics of the difference and the exoticising gaze are fundamental ingredients. As our social history teaches, the colonial enterprise lies in this primogenial idea of the impenetrability of the *other* displayed by the ethnographic approach, which prepares the terrain for first its helping hand, then dependence, then subjugation, conquest, domestication, and consumption.

Like the early ethnographers, Willocq is fascinated and enchanted by the way of life of the Ekonda Bantus and Pygmies of the Democratic Republic of Congo. For their part, the Ekonda were initially less interested by another curious white man concerned with making pictures of life in the Congo jungles. I first met Patrick when he was at the early stages of his fascination; at that time, it was the landscape and unspoiled nature of the Congo that intrigued him. He made the most brilliant aesthetic juxtapositions in his debut photo essay aptly titled *Bikoro Huts*, which was largely a tribute to the beauty of the unspoiled habitat of the Ekonda of the DR Congo. For Willocq, the road was a journey of self-discovery. The landscape and intricately sculpted design objects were his primary interest and focus – the people were secondary considerations. Unlike South Africa apartheid era photographs and paintings that represented an absent terrain devoid of people, as though to suggest that colonialists where discoverers of a new territory, Willocq's reluctance to photograph the locals was delayed until he – in his words – earned the right and their trust. When he did photograph them, there was an effort to shift the gaze away from the difference and toward common shared values between the communities. The focus was clearly away from the classical ethnographic gaze about how different they were from the established cultural and physical normativity, but more about how similar and ordinary it was to observe them. The colours and sensibility

betrayed a man laden with a tangible wistfulness. I soon learned from Patrick that he moved to the DR Congo, in his words 'at the age of six when your mind starts opening to the world'; and he left aged twelve, only to return twenty-seven years later to reinvent himself as an artist disillusioned with his previous life as a corporate mogul. Patrick stresses that the essence of his being was fundamentally shaped during those six years in the DR Congo, and that he felt the urge to reconnect with his early youth in his state of disenfranchisement.

However, as his interest and understanding grew, so too did his confidence and friendship with the Pygmies of the DR Congo. He starts learning about their very secretive rituals and spends up to three months at a stretch in the Congo jungles. It is endearing to witness the seriousness of his gullible honesty of belief in the veracity of tales that the locals share about their mythologies. He settles himself in the *darkness* of the African jungle and turns his exoticising gaze toward the female ritual of the 'Walé' ('breastfeeding mothers'), mostly practiced amongst the Batwa Pygmies in the Ekonda territory of the northern region of the DRC. He interrogates himself on the distance between himself and the *object* of his artistic research and ethnographic inquietude. But, unlike contemporary postmodern anthropologists, Patrick's confidence in his artistic means and friendship reshapes the community. It keeps him from fearing the problematics that rise from his authorial position, as an artist and ethnographer, or from the regimes of fiction at play in the images he is about to create. He is flattered by the title 'le frère des Walés' conferred upon him. Like the participant observer, he finds his native informants and collaborators who help him to set up a scenography, in which native female actors parody themselves and their rituality in front of his camera. As the artist says, 'toute cette énergie est orientée vers un seul but, la photo' ('all this energy is focused toward the same objective, the photograph'). The collective effort results in a playful, colourful *mise en scene* devoid of any descriptive claim, and rather devoted to a theatricalised and caricatured illustration of the Walé ritual that visually reinvents and immortalizes the dance spectacle created by the women. The naïve *mise en scene* images of the various series that form part of the book *Songs of the Walés* by Patrick Willocq reveals the rising of a new ethnographic subjectivity that operates from the realm of artistic production, after Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Malinowsky's diary. In line with a new generation of photographers working on the African continent, Patrick addresses the juxtaposition between the traditional and the contemporary through staged photography, while he marks a new take of the ethnographic turn in

contemporary art, in which cultural hybridisation results from a well-curated aestheticisation of the post-ethnographic individual. In this way, the paradigm of the ethnographer/artist as the author and creator of *cultures* gains a new affirmative status within the realm of contemporary art and the creative industries, in which the new narrator/artist is less invested by the concern about authenticity or veracity of his representations, and is more focused on his own invention of the possible. But can it really be that simple? Is there a moral dilemma? Is he an artist or a saviour?

We are used to seeing many photo books about *others* dramatized in the usual fashion: black and white – to confer authenticity and veracity – and photographed close up to make the subjects appear like objects. These safe, familiar photobooks are popular and make use of the accepted visual language to represent remote peoples living in precarious situations. I have coined the term 'Salgado effect' to describe images of colonies whose subjects are resoundingly muted. The great expectoration of our own prejudices is given free reign and projected upon them through the romantic rhetoric of loss: the message, *sotto voce*, is that these are diseased, soon to be extinct communities, when in truth the reverse is the case.

Willocq offers us the very opposite. But what do we call it, and how do we read the semiotics of his brilliance? Indeed, speaking with Patrick, you get the impression that he is not fully aware of his own genius.

James Clifford coined the phrase 'ethnographic surrealism', and he defined his expanded idea of surrealism 'to circumscribe an esthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions – that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious.'[1] It seems fitting as an apt description of the work of Willocq. There is a necessary reading of the semiotics of his arrangements within his *mise en scene*. There is an intuitive aspect of his staged image-making.

Indeed, there are still many communities, and not just in Africa, where the transition from traditional modes of communication based on oral story-telling and shared experiences remain unstained by the recorded and documented approach associated with the Hawthorne observer interference

[1] James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Surrealism', in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 23, no. 4 (October 1981), pp. 539–64, here p. 540.

of new and old technology by instruments like the camera. Photography, like ethnography, is always about others and this fascination with others; their modes of living, cultures, rituals, histories, and futures as narrated by another can be problematic. It is often contaminated by the exoticisation and eroticisation of the observed. It is an inescapable fact. In this work, *Songs of the Walés*, it seems like a procession, a religious journey. It is also a performative artistic gesture, in which the Walés and their collaborators are willing participants. It is a truism that photography changes the way we see, but it also changes the way people see themselves. Since Willocq's new explorations with the Congo Walés, nothing much has changed in the community, except a feeling of pride and respect in seeing their rituals re-enacted and documented in a colourful and animated fashion. The chief of the community, Bosembo, explains: 'This is what we have never seen of ourselves before now, and it makes us all proud to recreate and perform our rituals.'

Azu Nwagbogu
Founder and director of the African Artists' Foundation, a non-profit organisation based in Lagos, Nigeria and dedicated to the promotion and development of contemporary African arts and artists. He is also founder and director of the LagosPhoto Festival, an annual international photographic arts festival, which brings leading local and international photographers into dialogue with multifaceted stories of Africa. Nwagbogu has served as a juror for various international photography events.