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## 100 Years On

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**Some of Nigeria's iconic photographs are on show at the famous British auction house, Bonhams, London. A charity, Kola Aluko Foundation, is holding the exhibition to celebrate Nigeria's centenary. Adeola Akinremi who was at the exhibition in London, writes that the unique collection of photographs is a profile of Nigeria's greatness.** Selfies, smiles and excitement were all over the gallery as people exchanged pleasantries and remarked greatly about the collections. Iconic photographs that told the story of Nigeria's transfiguration from past to present were on display and they were simply eye-catching. From the charming Cathedral Church of Christ on Marina in the heart of Lagos to the firefighters who approached one of the most dangerous jobs in the world with gusto, despite the challenges they are confronted with, the images are the product, or rather distillation, of specifically Nigerian sensibilities shaped by cultural, social and ecological experiences of living in the country. Yes, the images' irresistible appearance and the stories behind them are too great not to command the kind of attention they are getting at Bonhams—Britain's pride and the world's largest auctioneers of fine art and antiques. To boot, their display in London to celebrate the centenary means more. Much more, the kind of crowd the exhibition pulled on the first day suggested just one thing: delight.

And like a true celebration, the unique spectacle of Nigeria's progress from the past to the present, with an eye on the future being promoted by the Kola Aluko Foundation in collaboration with Bonhams was clearly a showcase of talents mixed with history. Undeniably, art exhibitions are a regular event in London and the Britons, art collectors and visitors to the city know where to go. But not all exhibitions command the same attention. The Nigerian centenary photo exhibition at Bonhams on New Bond Street perhaps remains one of the most popular exhibitions to be attended by a crowd of colours from different culture in the city of London in recent times. The exhibition, an astonishing collection of photography documenting Nigeria's rich and diverse cultural heritage hosted by the Kola Aluko Foundation, a non-governmental organisation committed to change in Africa was opened to the public last Wednesday in London.

"Today, we proudly honour our heritage through the works of these photographers. These photographs here together in this place are historic. They offer us a different perspective on Nigerians. They tell the world a story," Mrs Teniola Aluko, a Trustee of Kola Aluko Foundation, said while welcoming guests to the exhibition. According to the promoter, an entrepreneur with interest in Oil and Gas, who is the Co-Chief Executive Officer and an Executive Director of Atlantic Energy, Mr. Kola Aluko, "this unique collection of photographs showcases the wealth of artistic talent in Nigeria over the last 100 years.

"We hope that this exhibition will inspire young Africans to pursue their talents and achieve success on a global scale." The exhibition, which will be on the display till July 31, was dedicated to J.D.Okhai Ojeikere, one of Nigeria's most accomplished photographers and a leader in his field. The Director of Contemporary African Art at Bonhams, Giles Peppiatt, said: "As our sales of contemporary African Art have gained recognition and set new world records for the artists of this huge and vital continent, we have increasingly come to appreciate the influence of this groundbreaking photographer. The execution of these diverse images by those who both preceded his mantle, is a fitting tribute to the best tradition of artistic dedication that captures and celebrates the spirit of Nigeria-Africa's leading economy-in its centenary year." Aluko further paid glowing tribute to Ojeikere whose works continued to live after him. "This unique collection of photographs charts the developments in photography as an artistic practice in Nigeria. Ojeikere, who died early this year and to whom this exhibition is dedicated, is an inspiration to all Nigerians and Africans. As the father of modern Nigerian photography he tells Nigeria's proud story, showcasing our rich cultural heritage to the world. He is a Nigerian leader who continues to this day to motivate and influence others," he enthused.

He added: "The Kola Aluko Foundation believes that every story of individual leadership has the power to inspire and affect change. "As a foundation, we are passionate about identifying and nurturing talented young African adults across all fields of endeavour to help them evolve into the new generation of leaders. In doing so, we hope that the young people we engage with will not only develop into leaders, but also become inspirational role models for

others. This is the cycle of change we want to foster.” In support of the foundation’s mandate to inspire, mentor and support future generations of African leaders, Aluko explained that a group of outstanding young leaders have been invited to see the exhibition in order to reflect and represent the manifold talent of Africa’s potential and future. The invitation to the young people from all over the United Kingdom to view the exhibition he said, “embodied the foundation’s fundamental themes and scope of work.” “Central to the foundation’s vision is the belief that leadership is above all a mindset and that large-scale social impact often starts with the individual. The foundation will focus on working with young people to instil a strong belief in their capabilities and their ability to succeed,” he explained.

Really, African photography has flourished as an art form, particularly in Nigeria where it has been at the forefront of creativity, with local artists providing innovative and striking forms of expression. The exhibition thus provided images of tradition alongside those of dynamic changes that have taken place in Nigeria in its 100 years of existence. So, the earliest photographs in the exhibition documented some of the most important African members of Lagos society, upon whom the British depended. The images included portraits of Mohammed Shitta Bey, the foremost palm oil trader of the Delta and head of Muslim community; Prince Oyekan of the Lagos Royal house and Otunba Payne, the first Lagos High Court registrar and a member of the Ijebu Ode Royal family. The exhibition presented a sample of themes and photographers, juxtaposing the contemporary with images from different historical moments that underline the long and varied history of Nigerian photography. For instance, it offered an image by Alfred Carew, a photographer who had a studio in Lagos and who photographed throughout southern Nigeria, both prior and after amalgamation from the 1880’s to the 1920’s. This image records the inception of Nigeria as a single country from the two prior protectorates. It was a consolidation of British colonial rule under Lord Lugards, who advocated a system of indirect rule through customary kings and chiefs. And Akintunde Akinleye’s account of a fire outbreak in Lagos State in 2010 in which the firefighters demonstrated courage in the face of their challenges as captured by the lens of his camera was a reminder of what happened in the early years. In the early years, Lagos was plagued by fires, but just a single fire engine was available for use for colonial emergencies. It was not available to the community at large. But in 1880, a campaign to train a crew of Lagosian firemen to operate the engine for the benefit of the entire city was run by the Lagos newspapers and exploits of the crew became a focus of local pride and photography. This time, Akinleye took a different approach in depicting Lagos firemen. He captured them at a decisive moment and thereby crystallised their actions. His images presented firstly a fireman controlling a fire, and in the subsequent image, cooling off in response to the extremes of heat to which he has been subjected. Clearly, both eras described the imprint of civic duty played against the visuality of available technologies for firefighting.

Themes like cosmopolitan styles then and now, courage and fire, amalgamation, Urban living, life and water, people and power were clearly seen on the wall at Bonhams The curator, Ayo Adeyinka, said: “It’s been

pleasurable. It's been a source of pride; when you are asked to curate, to contribute to the celebration of your country's centenary – you don't take it lightly. It's been pleasurable because I'm working with artists both alive today, and artists since passed. And you know, when you have the opportunity to dedicate a piece of your work to a legend like Pa J. D Okhai Ojeikere, in memory of his enduring legacy, it's a source of joy." Adeyinka, who is the founder and principal consultant at TAFETA, was supported by Charles Gore, a Senior Lecturer in the History of African Art at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS).

He described the process of selecting the photographs saying, "that was the hardest part of the exhibition. There were the archives for the pictures of Nigeria; let no one tell you otherwise, we were documented over time. "We might not have giant, reputable books and literature that show these pictures, but the pictures do exist. There are pictures from 1894, a lot of years before the amalgamation. There were Nigerian photographers, both by birth and by settlement. You have to remember, in the 1890s, there was no Nigeria, so in a sense, it was either you were born there, or you were a returnee slave, or you were part of the colonies, or you moved from Accra or Sierra Leone to Nigeria, and you lived in Nigeria, you were Nigerian by default. "So, you would see names like N.W Holmes, who is Nigerian – he lived in Nigeria for sixty years. He was of Danish African extraction. His photographs are here. So, the data was there, the archives were there, but they couldn't do a show that covered the whole historical spectrum. So, we decided to pick from the old and new shots and do a comparative study." The highlight of the exhibition was a donation to the foundation by Sesu Tilley-Gyado, an award-winning British-Nigerian artist and entrepreneur whose outstanding work of charity has been widely applauded.

Now the Kola Aluko Foundation has announced its intention to begin full scale operation in Nigeria in order to empower more young people and equip them with leadership skills through mentoring programmes that will prepare them for the future. Aluko, who made the announcement at the opening of the exhibition, said: "This centenary exhibition is the perfect place to celebrate and put the spotlight on the group of young leaders joining us tonight. Together, the foundation and these young leaders hope to communicate to other young Africans the value of aiming high, working hard and making a difference. "The foundation's programme of activities will start later this year with a series of unique competitions covering entrepreneurship, art, information technology and agriculture. More details will be announced over the next few months." Accordingly, the foundation will be headquartered in Lagos and focus its work initially on Nigeria, while expanding the scope of its activities across Africa through strategic partnerships with likeminded organisations.