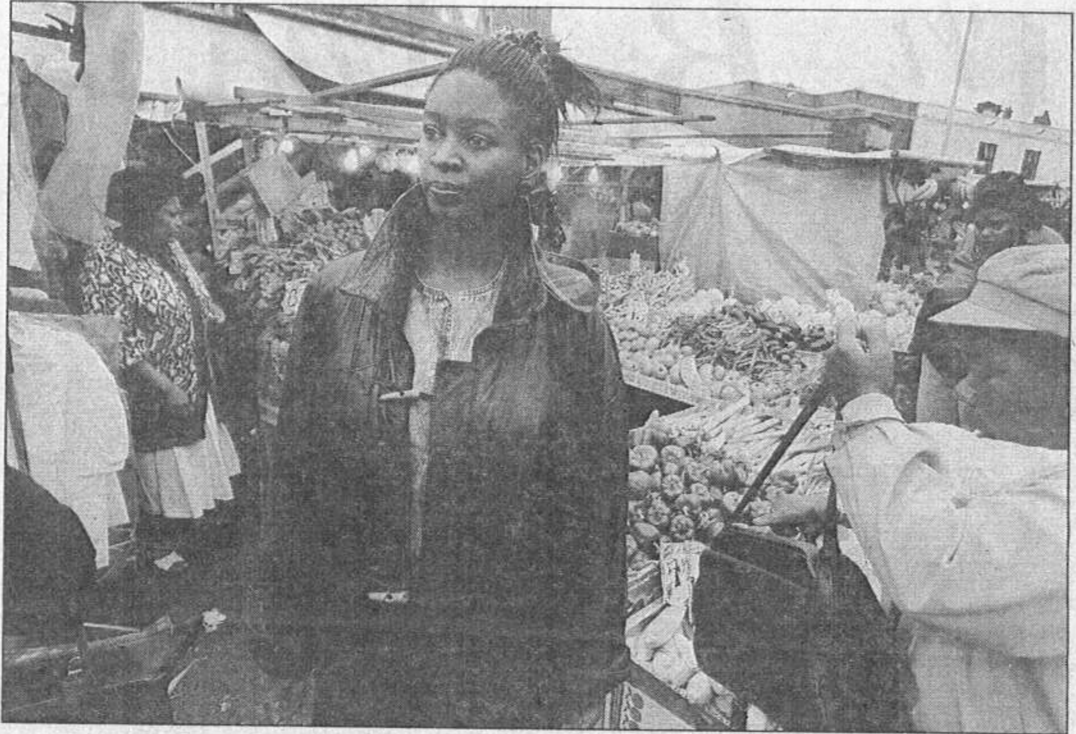
Weekend Guardian



*Adeola Solanke on the challenge of being 'an African abroad'*

# A life lived here and there



● **Adeola Solanke . . . very much at home at the market in Dalston**
PHOTOGRAPH: SEAN SMITH

## Home Front

THE ODDEST thing I learned at school was that not all children have brothers and sisters they haven't met. But in my experience, that of an African born in England, having close but geographically distant family (three elder sisters in my case) is unremarkable.

Like many of my friends ("British born", as we're classified in Nigeria), I have always felt as much a part of my parents' country as I have of England where I have always lived. Sometimes, especially after the first time I visited Nigeria as an 18-year-old in 1982, I have felt more a part of "there" than "here". The food, the clothes, the music, the customs, the sound of the Yoruba language, the ubiquitous Muslim prayers (though I'm not a Muslim) and the sheer energy zapping around in places like Lagos; all signal "home" to me as much as a red London bus or a wet Saturday afternoon.

Growing up in London in the Sixties I distinctly remember watching TV footage of the Biafran war and listening, cross-legged, to grown-ups debating the rights and wrongs of Nigeria's civil war as though it were taking place in our very front room. To them, "there" was here and integration and assimilation were irrelevant because they were only passing through.

I imbibed part of this mentality: the borders of the British Isles have never framed my sense of national consciousness. "But you were born here, you are British," schoolfriends always insisted. Yes, I am, but I'm a Nigerian too.

My parents, both Yorubas from Western Nigeria, came to London in the Fifties to study: my father for his law degree, my mother to upgrade the midwifery certificate which she had already obtained in Nigeria. We (myself and my three sisters and one brother who were born in London) became an inconvenient cause for them to delay their return home.

In the end we stayed for the reason they came: education outside a system which was increasingly wracked by economic, political, religious and social tensions. Today, there is a mini-exodus of young people leaving Nigeria in search of work.

I AM STILL amazed at how casually we became part of Britain — and stunned at how unprepared the system was for our presence. One Classics school textbook I was given in the sixth form informed me that Athenians were superior to modern Westerners in the same way that Europeans were superior to Africans! Information available in schools and through the media about Africa is still scant, and generally gives a negative image.

Luckily, images of a different order also get through. Pictures from "home" would and still do arrive. Our family albums are updated with snaps of sisters, uncles, getting on with the ordinary things in life like weddings, naming ceremonies, funerals, etc. Not a famine or drought in sight.

In Nigeria I'm often seen as a Black American. People still exclaim "Are you a Nigerian?" when I mention my name after interrupting some comment about me they've carelessly made thinking I can't understand the language.

The biggest barrier is the residual colonial mentality which ascribes status to "Oyinbo" or the English. Mix that with the generally snobbish and insular attitude towards outsiders that many Africans have, and you have an instant dilemma: I find myself treated with an odd combination of disdain and deference.

At one point I felt awkward about being born abroad, especially in the company of Nigerians. I hated my accent, and my typical English reserve which stood out a mile amidst African spontaneity. I also didn't understand all of the social etiquette that structure relationships in Yoruba (and other African) society.

One blunder was to put out my hand to greet an elderly aunt. She kindly, but definitely, informed me that the gesture was rude coming from someone young to an elder.

Nowadays, though, I have not so much a feeling of sitting on a fence between two cultures, as grazing in either as suits my whim. I consider myself an African abroad. What my children will make of being Africans born of Africans born abroad is another matter altogether; but Africans they will be.

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and useful. But the most chilling message comes when Grmek charts the wilful tardiness of the official response, not only to gays but to the threat to the blood supply. In 1977, the virus had contaminated American blood banks. Suspicions about this started in summer 1982. Their correctness was demonstrated by the autumn of 1983. No effective counter-measures were taken before spring 1985.

All these books are outsider, or top-down, views of the crisis. Cindy Patton's *Inventing Aids* (Routledge, £8.99 paperback/£35 hardback) is from within the beast, testing and combating the consequences of prejudice and neglect. She asks in whose interest it is to see Aids as an emergency. For those experiencing Aids, it is not an emergency but a constant. As friends and loved ones receive diagnosis or succumb to illness, "it occurs to us that this is our lives now, and things will never go back to the normal we once knew."

All the chapters are pointed and relevant, but perhaps the most important contribution is Patton's continuing interrogation of what she calls the "Aids industry". She laments the passing of the early responses, when there were few distinctions between the organisers and activists, people with Aids and sympathetic medical workers. Increasingly, we have constructed new divisions, between "experts" and "victims", "professionals" and "volunteers". The result, she argues, is a radical disempowerment of the communities most affected.

This important emphasis is explored further in essays on caring, nursing and counselling in two collections, one American and the other British. The latter, edited by Peter Aggleton, Graham Hart and Peter Davies (*Aids: interventions, response and care*, Falmer Press, £11.95 paperback/£26 hardback) consists of papers from the fourth Social Aspects of Aids conference. It opens with a characteristically sprightly discussion of Aids and modernity by Simon Watney that puts the epidemic into a historical and cultural perspective.

The US collection, edited by Dorothy Nelkin, David P Willis and Scott V Parris (*A Disease of Society: cultural and institutional responses to Aids*, Cambridge University Press, £9.95 paperback/£30 hardback), adopts a similarly wide brief. There are several outstanding contributions. The essay by Stoddard and Rieman argues that, despite the moral panic, there was a striking absence of punitive medical and legal interventions against people with Aids, compared with earlier epidemics. They trace this back to the gains of previous campaigns: "Aids is the first public health crisis to arise after the midcentury civil rights movement."

Richard Goldstein, in his analysis of artistic responses, brilliantly shows how the initial reactions to Aids were dominated by a series of binary oppositions between the "implicated" and the "immune". This allowed the attribution of guilt, and the drawing of the boundaries around those who saw themselves as innocent. Both these essays, like Patton's book, take for granted the importance of community responses. The validation of community, Goldstein argues, is at the centre of the art that positions itself inside the epidemic.

A history of Aids must inevitably be many things, many histories. What it should not be is a top-down history, because that loses a crucial dynamic of the crisis, certainly in western countries. What differentiates this epidemic from others is that the lead in combating it has often been taken by those most affected. In the process, the meaning of community and of self-activity is being transformed. A proper stock-taking must take this into account. Too few "epics", graced as they may be by papal endorsements, do that.

# Exposures

**FAMILY SNAPS: THE MEANINGS OF DOMESTIC PHOTOGRAPHY**
**Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (editors)**
Virago, £14.99

*Elizabeth Wilson*

This book seeks to grapple with the abiding, poignant pleasure vouchsafed us by that common yet iconic object, the personal snapshot. It all begins with George Eastman and Kodak, and Don Salter's article gives us an illuminating history of Kodak's virtual creation of a mass market (mass movement might almost be a better term) for cameras, film, and the preservation of the ephemeral moment.

Like flies in amber, our past selves are preserved. Just as dried flowers, however, can never conjure up a summer's day, but only its absence, while the piece of wedding cake in its silver box crumbles to dust, so snapshots never bring back the past, but emphasise rather our distance from it. "Now is past," as the 18th-century poet John Clare wrote.

Simon Watney muses on the irony of happy family photographs in which he, a little boy, is actually the emerging gay man. Several of the contributors explore the gap between the stereotype of happy family life and hidden realities of conflict and violence; they note how the snapshot transforms lives perhaps riven with bitterness and disappointment into an image of contentment as couples, children, aunts and uncles squint into the sun.

As part of an effort to move beyond this image of happy families, Jo Stanley, Terry Dennett and Patricia Holland look at the ways in which social groups at work and leisure have or have not been "snapped". As Holland puts it, "there comes a point when private photographs become public documents: when personal memories reveal, with startling clarity, the movements of social groups." Sometimes the link between the personal and the social is seamless; Adeola Solanke's vibrant essay about being Nigerian and yet British as well (this doesn't do justice to her complex yet clear identity) is a beautiful example of the way family photographs connect to community and nation. "The . . . struggles of the newborn nations to create a sense of self parallels, on some levels, the struggles of my generation, born in exile, to do the same."

In some of the pieces, photography even becomes a peg on which to hang a rather different article. Stuart Hall's insightful piece (one of the most interesting in the collection) about the representation of West Indian immigration in *Picture Post* in the 1950s is really about the social-democratic and "social problem" approach of that magazine, while Leanne Klein's discussion of marriage bureaux and of South East Asian brides for British men does not quite do full justice to the issue.

And there are implications in this whole project that seem to me to be assumed rather than argued through. What if personal memories have no collective resonance—or the wrong ones? Is it somehow better—more politically correct—when the camera grasps a more public world, moving away from excessively privatised concerns? Sometimes this concern to work against the grain of our taken-for-granted assumptions about snapshots seems too worthy, almost puritanical, reminding us constantly of multiple oppressions lest we should wallow too long in a glutinous sea of nostalgia.

I am slightly uneasy, because I feel that the editors have not fully brought out just how ambivalent an enterprise theirs is. We are invited to reassess and enjoy more fully this pastime, home photography, but on one condition—that we use our enjoyment to uncover oppression. Only on those terms may we investigate our past.

A book such as this naturally reminds the reader of her own memories preserved in boxes and albums of lost time. Yet the past does not automatically bring affirmation and a renewal of self-identity. One of the photographs of my mother I find most poignant shows her seated in some dusty colonial club. She looks ill at ease in her 1920s finery, and stares with pathetic defiance at the camera. Yet, in this context at least, she is not the oppressed, but an oppressor. The path to rediscovery and identification is blocked forever; nostalgia and affirmation are simply not adequate in the face of the waiter who bends towards her, subservient, with white gloves and silver salver. For he, of course, is black.