WHO
A BIGSAS Photography Project by Aderemi Adegbite

Edited by Gilbert Shang Ndi
WHO
WHO

A BIGSAS Photography Project by Aderemi Adegbite

Edited by Gilbert Shang Ndi
Table of Contents

Foreword by *Ute Fendler*  
Introduction by *Gilbert Shang Ndi*  
Project WHO (with participants’ reactions)  
Project Concept by *Aderemi Adegbite*  
Artist’s Biography
The publication “WHO” testifies to the convergence of an artist’s work, the philosophy of a graduate school and the cooperation between a photographer and students.

Having been the Dean of the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies since the very beginning, the photographs that the Nigerian photographer Aderemi Adegbite had been taken during a residency in Jakarta (Indonesia) touched me in a particular way as they seem to transmit the core idea of BIGSAS, namely the idea of an academic family that shares work and life experiences for the period of the PhD studies which is and will be the basis for a long lasting network.

The photos show young persons behind whose image always was another layer, a second photo with the silhouette of another person. For me, these photos captured the relatedness across temporal and spatial boundaries of individuals.

In the artist’s statement, Adegbite mentioned Ifa, the Yoruba system of knowledge, behind which lies an understanding of the oneness of existence. As he also used slates as the wooden tablets used for writing and memorizing but that also allow to erase and to write again, the idea of the palimpseste in the transmission of knowledge, history and memory was added to the idea of human relationships.

We started to exchange about the idea of how the philosophy of BIGSAS could be reflected in such a work as his photography project “time out”.

While working in Bayreuth with the PhD students at BIGSAS, he happened to see the blackboard which replaced the slate, but which still stands for teaching and studying, for a continuous change while adding layers of knowledge.

The title was inspired by a word written on the blackboard, which he kept for the project. I particularly like the title as it is a question without a question mark. It indicates the genuine interest in the person one encounters, the moment of contact and exchange. The lack of the question mark takes away the interrogative character that could be implicit in a question raised during the first encounter, namely where the person comes from, which – voluntarily or involuntarily – produces a certain categorization. So asking “who” without the question mark means to me the deep interest in the individual, an open encounter – independent of categorizations as far as possible.

The book is an invitation to participate in ongoing encounters in the realm of a large and growing community.
On Knowledge and Family: The BIGSAS Exhibition Project “WHO”

Not to know what has transacted in former times is to be always a child. If no use is made of the labors of the past ages, the world must remain always in the infancy of knowledge.

(By Marcus Tullius Cicero in Tom Standage’s “Cicero’s Web”, Writing on the Wall, 2013)

The Ancient Roman philosopher, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC – 43 BC) was an avid proponent of the exchange of knowledge at a time when the craft of writing was rudimentary and the means of dissemination was limited. Thus, the wax tablet, a wooden slate, strikingly similar to modern day iPad, was the wall on which he shared both private messages and manuscripts of his works with close friends and members of his family. His messenger had to travel long distances to deliver the texts on the slate (some of which got partially erased and re-inscribed on the way) and to get the feedback from his interlocutors. The interlocutor would then erase the inscriptions, partially or wholly, using the coloured wax with the flat end of a stylus. That seems like a tedious transaction when judged through modern eyes, but it made the best possible use of available means to enhance knowledge sharing and affective ties amongst friends, family members and fellow writers. Oftentimes, some of Cicero’s messages got “re-tweeted” and so many of his texts went “viral” in his age. Cicero’s is a single example amongst various trajectories of writing and knowledge diffusion in different parts of the world. From modest and rudimentary beginnings, techniques of writing and knowledge diffusion are some of the areas to which different cultures of the human family have contributed various components, cumulatively leading to the complex technologies of writing and communication in modern pedagogy. The pen, the paper and the ink have hardly travelled the same road.

The exhibition project “WHO” realized by the Nigerian multimedia artist Aderemi Adegbite captures the dual relationship of knowledge / family in a way that is fundamental to life in the Bayreuth International School of Graduate Studies (BIGSAS). Drawn from the artist’s own personal relationship with knowledge, religion and family legacy, this project enables a reflection over the trajectories of modern knowledge acquisition spaces; knowledge sharing amongst colleagues and the undocumented (and perhaps undocumentable) archive of the family spirit that has developed in BIGSAS over the years.
The Private-Public Slate

The individual portraits, exhibited on the corridor of the BIGSAS Head Office certainly call for multiple interpretations. Each portrait emerges amidst an intensively inscribed slate that condenses multiple forms and cultures of writing. The slate becomes a space of contact, interaction, dialogue, intersection and revision amongst various disciplinary codes and literacy cultures. The inscriptions on the slate’s surface, ranging from mathematical (in)equations, drawings, mnemonics, ideograms, pictograms, to seemingly meaningless scribbles in a mixture of colours, all form parts of a complex meaning making process. It is difficult to decipher the order of precedence of the inscriptions and to say with certainty which ones are modifications of the original. More than the closed book, the epitome of uncontestable and non-negotiable knowledge in hegemonising epistemology, the blackboard and the slate stand as more dynamic spaces of experimentation and openness to contrariety and difference. Like the palimpsest, long effaced words and phrases often resurface with renewed strength to interlock with new signs and symbols, engendering uncommon collocations of meaning. The road from the ancient papyrus, slate, through Arpanet, to the modern tablet is a long and complicated one. But at the same time, it is synonymous to the academic biographies of students of different generations, reflecting the constantly changing modes of textuality and meanings.

The autobiographical process of meaning construction is influenced both by what is learnt formerly and what is acquired beyond the four walls of the classroom. With the slate, the process of inscription does not only take place under the strict eyes of the teacher, but also after school hours, when the learner can experiment with new ideas with liberty. Thus, the exhibition project “WHO” takes place in the interstitial space of the corridor, caught between formality and informality. The inscriptions on the slate might seem chaotic, but they reflect the complex process of knowledge formation, which is open-ended and indefinite. In a typical academic setting, the to-and-froing of the candidate with supervisors and mentors; private discussions with colleagues; the unexpected resurfacing of a long-forgotten idea and individual afterthoughts lead to the deconstruction, multiple revisions and eventual reconstruction of ideas. At the end, the draft is re-read and re-written until it reaches a point of acceptability by the candidate, the supervisors and the mentors. After the defence, several portions of the “final” text still have to be re-written and up-dated, revised, published, reviewed ... 

The slate is the first social media, what is written on it becomes re-inscribed and re-written by other mates and peers. More so, the slate takes a rather haptic dimension in the form of graffiti which, at a certain time in the Greek agora, represented a space of sociality, dialogue and exchange of private and public opinion. Prior affirmations are liable to be contradicted, complemented and supplemented by subsequent inscriptions. At the height of the Athenian city’s democratic spirit, the graffito was
brought closer home whereby people wrote on the walls of their own houses or those of their friends and neighbours in a conversational and friendly but also critical spirit. It tested the limits of one’s openness to friendly critique and the architecture made room for these spaces of inscriptions.

**WHO in the BIGSAS Family**

If a picture speaks a thousand words, it also triggers a thousand questions. The instinctive question we pose to ourselves when faced with a portrait photo is “who?” This question, with its cognates like “who are you?” or “who am I?”, are in reality more complex than meets the eye. While you can provide answers to them, the best responses might as well come from people who “know” you. More so, any responses to them end up in a life story, unfinished as it may be. Every life story involves other “characters” in specific spaces of interactions be they in settled spaces or the more interstitial spheres of the corridor, the balcony, the veranda, the staircase, etc.

Thus, the “who” of the individual is not dissociated from the “who” of the group, the “others” with whom that individual shares a common space. The *Dasein* is part and parcel of *Mitsein*. As an academic, you would notice that, from the nursery school to the university, you have certainly spent as much (if not more) time with your peers and colleagues as with your actual biological family. In other words, you belong to another family composed of schoolmates and colleagues. When negotiated with ingenuity, the two dimensions of family, biological and academic, can become mutually reinforcing and strengthening. While the biological family is a universal structure in every culture, the conception of your academic or professional milieu as family depends on the degree of mutual trust, exchange, solidarity and group ethic/dynamic.

For close to ten years of existence, BIGSAS has not only been a vibrant space of intellectual exchange but also a hearth of affective ties akin to family life, especially for its members who come from several different locations, countries and continents. It is home away from home. Mutual experiences and friendships have developed amongst the Junior Fellows (doctoral students of BIGSAS), thereby constituting vital elements of their entire life stories. As the Bayreuth author, Jean Paul, once wrote in a letter to his Jewish friend Emmanuel Osmond with whom he shared “family” ties and discussed the first drafts of his texts over bottles of beer: “You and I belong together. Our acquaintance is brief, but our relationship is eternal” (*Ich und Sie gehören zusammen. Unsere Bekanntschaft ist kurz aber unsere Verwandtschaft ist ewig*). This might be true for many in BIGSAS. The ideas and moments shared in seminars, workshops, colloquia or private spaces are part of a family building process. They permit Junior Fellows to “know” one another; and accordingly construct patterns of interpersonal expectations in specific situations; develop certain transnational and intralingual idioms; participate in conscious or unconscious spatial practices.
In a Socratic spirit, knowledge exchange provides a space of lively exchange that enhances not only the intellect but enable affective ties amongst learners and ethical obligations towards the other. In such a space, relationships are not just instrumental but rather based on mutual needs and ethical responsibilities. In most African cultures, the family is the first space of cultural knowledge acquisition that places emphasis on the interconnection between science and ethics for the preservation of human and socio-cultural values. In such a space as BIGSAS that combines academic exchange with a family spirit, the family head is not someone who talks down on the family members, but one who “relates well with others”, a “kindhearted” and “caring” “visionary” and “mastermind” who, in spite of their busy schedule would not cease to ask every member “Is everything ok?”; one for whom this question is not just rhetorical or routine, but a genuine desire and steadfastness to solve, where possible, any issues concerning members of the academic family.

The BIGSAS family is always in transition. Generations of students come in distinctive blocks but leave in intersecting waves, depending on the accomplishment of their Individual Research Training Plan (IRTP). Thus, certain ties of friendship are cut short and new ones are re-negotiated between the out-going and the in-coming Junior Fellows. Knowledge about others is always in transition and revision. More so, individuality does not unfold itself in a self-evident manner. A part of the self always transcends and transgresses the “knowable” limits. Meanwhile, character traits are re-defined over time and in different spaces. However, with the alternating arrivals and departures, there are always some traces of memories of past Junior Fellows to be carried over to the new generations. In this way, the family is always renewed and re-dynamized. While Junior Fellows might miss former colleagues who have returned home after studies, at the same time, they have the opportunity of making new friends and building bonds with in-coming colleagues.

Apart from the purely academic milieu, Junior Fellows share many spheres of interactions and undertake varied social roles and responsibilities. Beyond the strictly academic activities, the Junior Fellows are social beings interacting in varied domains with regard to shared socio-cultural activities, sport skills, religious beliefs, culinary interests, and other hobbies. In some of these spaces, some Junior Fellows assume official or officious leadership roles least suspected by others. In any case, the gamut of Junior Fellows leadership talents and positions is wide. Did you ever know that, Afonso is a pastor? Did you know that Didérot is the best BIGSAS dancer apart from being the face of HIV-AIDS research in BIGSAS?

“Who is with whom”: In the BIGSAS family, different sub-groups always emerge, sharing closer time and ties. Sometimes, these ties are based on field of study, batches, particular theoretical frameworks, mutual interests in some transdisciplinary topics, etc. Thus we come to have duos and trios etc. in a way that is specific to the BIGSAS Family. We do not think of one without the other(s). When one sees Tamer’s portrait,
one might immediately pose the question: Where is Jimam? Where is Bakheit? The image of Tamer reminds one of other faces that are absent. The portraits go as far as reminding one of specific catchphrases, idioms or buzzwords that characterize everyday encounters and dialogues amongst colleagues and friends in different spaces of interaction. Consider Tamer’s comment to Jimam on the latter’s Facebook wall: “How is the family, and Buhari?” The syntagmatic occurrence of “family” and “Buhari” in one sentence might seem incompatible and incongruent, but it is a logical connection within the everyday idioms shared by colleagues in their reading space. “How is Sudan today?” Did you ever know that the “communist but cool”, “warm”, “friendly” Tamer is otherwise known as Mr. “Sudan”? Did you also know that the very name “Azza” means Sudan? So we have Mr./Mrs. Sudan whose faces remind us of knowledge they share with us about their country. When you here of the name of the country “Sudan” (or any other country represented in BIGSAS) don’t the images of some BIGSAS colleagues flash your imagination before any official insignia of that country?

“When is Who”: Every portrait photo captures the face at a particular point in time. As members of a family, we come to “know” each other’s faces and the conditions under which a specific facet comes to the fore. On looking at each portrait, the question one would ask is: When was this picture taken? Is it “typical” of that person? Is there any form of role-play in the way the subject of the portrait poses for the camera? You may notice that sometimes the very face on the photo is a reflexive gaze by the photographed subject. Thus, the picture becomes a picture of the picture. Here is how Rose looks like when she is “thinking of (or picturing) what to say”. Is Serawit, the “real human being”, presenting her “real” face or the face of the “funny” colleague that she is? Musa, “the mentor” is a “man of (sometimes) few words”. When, then, are those specific moments when Musa spills the words? With whom? Which of the “Musas” is on the portrait, the man of usually few words or the more expressive and chatty one?

“Who with what”: What objects do we identify some members of the BIGSAS Family with? Have these become part of their personalities and daily identities? Sometimes, dress codes can have their say. Think of Didérot and Augusto’s emblematic “Dina Bell” caps and then you will remember their kin brother Halkano, a BIGSAS Alumnus. The family members can also share a variety of idioms that take particular meanings within specific contexts and are only decipherable and intelligible to the select few who share the well-knit network. The idioms are rooted in the common practices and interactions of everyday life. Sometimes common words take supplementary meanings. Have you ever met the “powerful” Emmanuel of BIGSAS? How is your work and which “analytic framework” are you using? From the wall, we come to know through that Augusto is “FCB forever” but we are left to ponder what “FCB” stands for. Matthew is also referred to as “Messi”. Is he a fan of the Argentine star or does he exercise brilliance on the pitch in a way that is redolent of Messi? This form
of communication again refers us back to a certain tradition of graffiti space whereby very private messages can take place in the public arena in a coded language that does not necessarily avail itself to the general public. The inscriptions on the walls are not conceived as written speech, but as oral articulations, texts based mainly on colloquial terms, in-jokes, puns, and specific shorthand that choose their readers selectively. We gain new names in different contexts within the family, “Rose” becoming “Rosa” with the new inflection bringing an affective twist to the original appellation. Writing on the wall therefore does not necessarily stand as an idiom signifying clarity but might constitute a riddle that needs to be resolved.

Sometimes certain members are associated with certain habits or rituals at specific times. For example, during break time, for which the German “Pause” is a choice code switch amongst some Junior Fellows, a bottle of beer can provide the key to Matthew’s smiles and add a particular dimension to his “humorous” and “sociable” character. A glass of (Kenyan!) tea, a cup of coffee, a bottle of coke from the Mensa are parts of Tamer’s daily ritual. As for Liliane, a cup of tea is welcome but not sufficient. Thus, the revealing packets of “gari” on the cupboard of her work station.

Gari was and (perhaps still) is to many secondary school students, in parts of West Africa, an indispensable ingredient in the reading process. But there is more to gari. It stands for a culture of sharing amongst students. By the way, who can forget Lillian’s unparalleled Saturday cuisine in the general kitchen that sometimes turns the Bussardweg students’ hostel into a space of communal and intercultural encounter amongst Junior Fellows and non-Junior Fellows alike? You won’t also forget the informal patent rights owned by some Junior Fellows over the preparation of certain foodstuffs in the BIGSAS setting. Whenever West African puff-puff shows up on the menu of a BIGSAS colleague’s defence, you may not be mistaken in thinking that Liliane and/or Lohna could have worked behind the scenes. Lohna’s basket of spices on the wall certainly adds a peculiar Nigerian “Flavour” to the combination. Think of (“Mama”) Liliane and Lohna and remember Magdalene (former BIGSAS student) and her delectable East African chapati pancake that has for long been the favorite of Junior Fellows and Jury members during BIGSAS defences. Different generations, similar habits, same generosity. But some roles are hard to fill in the family: Think of Maggie’s habitual post-defence song which unites the candidate, the audience and the jury in one joyous chorus! As a form of representation, the wall provides us a template through which to visualize both the former and the prospective Junior Fellows.

“Who”: The invisible woman

Did you say “woman”? What makes her a woman? What meaning do we make of that silhouette and how does it inform our ways of seeing? Is s/he looking at us or turning his/her back against us? Could it be the figure of the night reader, that solitary
scholar who treads the workstation corridors at night, devours all the theories in the
dark and only goes home to begin their night at dawn, as others wake up to a new
day? Beyond an independent self, could it rather be the unknown dimension of every
one of us? Can we ever know enough about others or ourselves in terms of strengths,
hidden talents and possible soft spots? Are human beings thoroughly transparent and
readable to themselves and/or to others? Can the picture capture (depict) the self
without capturing (appropriating/limiting) it? Don’t we to some extent instinctively
elude any conclusive picture of our face when faced with the camera shot?

“Me!!!!!”

“Who is hiding from us?”

“Mmmm”

“This is me!!!”

“Hallo!”

“How do you feel my talk with your back against me?”

“Was ist los?”

“Please don’t hide, even if…”

“A woman?”

“Larissa?”

Looking at the flurry of comments that scramble for space on the wall of the invisible
figure, one might wonder like that famous graffito written severally on the walls of
Pompeii in Ancient Rome, “Oh wall, I am amazed you haven’t fallen down, since you
bear the tedious scribblings of so many writers.” (Tom Standage). One would perhaps
hope that the person behind the figure (if ever there is one) will own up and declare their identity. Perhaps the scribbled and cancelled text is the signature of that person. “Is it Larissa?” But we are not sure she could be the author of the statement “It is me!!!!” So, who is this me? Who am I?

May be there is a darker and oneiric interpretation of that absent presence. Think of the images of the dead who remain in our midst long after they are gone, reminding us of the momento mori of life. Think of portrait photography in Victorian England where the family album was a means to pay the last respects to the deceased. Given that the daguerreotype camera was a luxury to many families, it is when the family member died that the need to take a family photo became urgent. “On some occasions eyes would be painted onto the photograph after it was developed, which was meant to make the deceased more lifelike” (Bethan Bell). Looking at some Victorian family photo, you would thus see a horde of siblings gathered around their parents, looking perfectly alive whereas one of them, perhaps the seemingly liveliest of all, is not alive. He or she is just propped up for the family photo.

After nine years of existence, none of Mother BIGSAS’ family members has to be propped up for a photo. They are all alive! It is very common to celebrate what has happened, and forget that the greatest events in history are those probabilities that never materialize(d), the eventful non-events. Thus, as she strikes 10, to have all of her family alive is an occasion for real celebration for BIGSAS.
WHO
I deeply treasure the delightful moments of encounters in BIGSAS with fellow PhD students from different countries and disciplinary backgrounds. Our engagements cut deeper than just academic exchange. In one of our “over-lunch” discussions I remember discussing US elections with some colleagues, passionately arguing in favour of the democratic candidate Bernie Sanders and making the point that he might succeed in taming America’s wild capitalism and corporatism. Since then, some colleagues call me “communist”, as you can see in the comment made on my wall. The fact is, to paraphrase Chomsky, the US policy has been pushed too much to the right to the extent that any argument for social security coverage is slammed as “communism”. This is just an example of the crosscutting discussions and exchanges we enjoy within the BIGSAS family.

_Tamer_

_Tamer Abd Elkreem_
_Sudan_
_Member of BIGSAS since April 2011_
_Alumnus since June 2016_
_Title of dissertation: “Power Relations of Development: The Case of Dam Construction in the Nubian Homeland, Sudan”_
Going out for my daily activities, to an event or on a trip, and not taking pictures is very unlike me. It would mean that I am indisposed or something is definitely wrong somewhere. This partly explains my love for pictures and willingness to participate in the project “Who”. Photographs are important to me as they help me capture every moment of my life in ways that words cannot. From these captured moments in photographs some of my best moments in life have emerged. Through photographs, I am able to reflect on the lived moments to the extent of getting emotional. I am able to intimately explore realities and moments that cannot be owned or captured again. In this light, my exhibited portrait establishes a link between the moments and memories of the BIGSAS family with whom I am currently living and the perceptions my family members (colleagues) have about me. As the days turn into weeks, weeks into months and months into years, when the mind becomes unreliable and a bit amnesic, photographs will be the only link between the present and the past.

Morenikeji

Morenikeji Asaaju
Nigeria
Member of BIGSAS since April 2014
Title of project: “Women and Marriage: An Exploration of Changes in Marital Relations in South Western Nigeria, 1914 - 1965”
The idea of the exhibition is very interesting. BIGSAS has a unique working environment, unlike many other Graduate Schools, the number of the admitted PhD candidates is large and they come from different parts of the world with the majority from African countries. Therefore, one cannot pass by any corner of Bayreuth without spotting one of them. It was a good opportunity to meet many people and establish good friendships during my time in BIGSAS. We always gather formally (during workshops, seminars, colloquia, conferences, etc.), or informally (celebrations, parties, festivals, etc.), to exchange our thoughts as well as exchange amiability, love and appreciation. I personally believe that these unique experiences shaped my self-identity and how I view the world.

**Azza**

---

**Azza Mustafa Babikir Ahmed**  
**Sudan**  
**Member of BIGSAS since April 2012**  
**Title of project: “Place Identity and Urban Planning, the case of Tuti Island, Khartoum, Sudan”**
“My photo” speaks for itself and my colleagues are authors of their comments about that photo.

Asaf

Asaf Augusto
Germany
Member of BIGSAS since April 2015
Title of project: “North to South Migration: Portuguese labour migration to Angola”
In my view, the exhibition has really portrayed how BIGSASians are connected as a family. My portrait shows an easy-going PhD student. The comments by colleagues on my wall are sincere feelings and thoughts of who I am, in spite of the fact that some were a bit exaggerated. When I look at BIGSAS, I see a big family of Africans and non-Africans who have built strong ties of friendship, networks and relationships beyond BIGSAS. Greetings to everyone!!!

Lohna

Dr Lohna Bonkat
Nigeria
Member of BIGSAS since April 2011
Alumna since December 2015
I didn’t understand the whole project until much later. But once I got to learn about it, I was impressed with the creativity with which the artist approached BIGSAS as a family. Among many others, it was interesting to read the comments colleagues and friends posted next to the exhibited pictures. I think the anonymity created for commentors a space to express their genuine views of each one of us. With regard to the comments on my wall, “Uncensored”, I found it a striking and intriguing comment about myself and it provoked me into asking whether or not it is a commendable way of being.

Serawit

Serawit Bekele Debele
Ethiopia
Member of BIGSAS since April 2012
Alumna since August 2015
The first meaning behind the concept of family is a group of people who share the same parentage and ancestry. They are closely related by birth and marriage. When people from different “primary families” come to live together, sharing the same education environment, workstation, common aims (producing PhD, for example) and partaking in each other’s happiness and difficulties, this gives birth to another type of family. The “Who” photo exhibition portrays the life of a group of people who live and share extended family issues.

When I look at the photos on the BIGSAS corridor wall, each photo compels me to remember past experiences I had with the person behind it. First of all, myself! At the same time, I can’t stop myself from dreaming about the near and distant future of the BIGSAS family members of today. Each comment on each photo confirms the “familiness” of BIGSAS. If living together means maintaining or managing day-to-day peaceful or difficult circumstances, the orientation of each comment shows that the BIGSAS family is not different from other families. Every comment portrays the role the commentator and the person commented play in the “household” of our large BIGSAS family.

*Didérot*

**Didérot Mellie Djiala**  
Cameroon  
*Member of BIGSAS since April 2011  
Alumnus since April 2017  
Title of project: “Inscription de l’audience dans les affiches des campagnes de sensibilisation contre le VIH/SIDA au Cameroun: Analyse sémiologique”*
I was really happy to be part of project WHO by Aderemi, whom I met before in Lagos, during my research. While he was shooting, he showed a lot of interest in my individual project and my connection to BIGSAS. Though I am not very active within the Graduate School at the moment, I always see my fellow colleagues as an extended family and know to whom I could turn to to actually get advice or just have a good conversation.

I studied photography and my project also deals with images and I can say that his photographs (and I include his previous works here as well) are amazing and I loved my portrait, which is a rather rare experience.

Katharina

Katharina Greven
Germany
Member of BIGSAS since April 2012
Title of project: “A Place of Belonging – The ‘Phantasy Africa’ within the Archive of the European Art Patrons Ulli and Georgina Beier”
Not so a familiar face, but I say Hello! 😊

We don't know how to say.

I love you! 😊
As someone who does not like taking photographs, it took a bit of convincing for me to be part of this project. The comments on the image are interesting, with many asking WHY I was hiding. I would however choose to see it as a WHAT question: What prompted me to choose not to show my face and what message was I possibly trying to communicate?

Being part of the BIGSAS family has been a great experience so far and I am excited for the remainder of my program. In this regard, I think the portrait is a reflection of what goes on around us and behind the scenes to make BIGSAS BIGSAS. We might not know all the faces, we may not understand the role everyone plays, but this does not negate the crucial position of every unit of the BIGSAS fabric. Faces don’t legitimize people, people simply form faces as we recognize and qualify them.

_Invisible Face_
The display of my portrait along the corridors of the BIGSAS Secretariat reminds me of the value of my old family photos which are so precious to me. The fact that I grew up to realize that we have so few family photos from when I was young, and that many of them were not preserved, affects my current attitude to photography. I take a lot of photos with my family whenever I have the opportunity; and alone when I am away from them. The comments on my wall function in the same way as my family photo albums in my home country, Nigeria. My family enjoys entertaining visits from members of the extended family and of course family friends with the large photo albums the majority of which are mine. Now that the world goes digital, we entertain our guests with a combination of the hardcopy and digital albums on the smart TV screen.

I have the same experiences from both written and verbal comments on my “WHO” photo wall. I found the comments and discussions very valuable because, for me, people are the mirrors in which we see ourselves. In other words, it tells me about “WHO” I am from the ‘outsiders’ cum my BIGSAS family members’ perspectives in the same way other members of my nuclear and extended family do, which I consider a very important interface for reflection. At the same time, the photos trigger discussions about the imaginaries of African diaspora here in Europe the same way they do when I am in my home country.

Musa

---

Musa Ibrahim
Nigeria
Member of BIGSAS since April 2014
Title of project: “Media, Religion and Public Sphere: Religious Contestation between Hisba, Censorship Board, and Local Film Practitioners within the Northern Nigeria Sharia Context”
The Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies, BIGSAS was established in November 2007 under the Excellence Initiative of the German Federal Government and the state governments.

More than 200 persons build the BIGSAS nuclear family. These are the currently 95 PhD students (whom we call “Junior Fellows”); the 99 alumni (once a BIGSASian always a BIGSASian!); the 26 Principal Investigators (whom we call “Senior Fellows”); the three Postdocs; the colleagues from our six Partner Universities in Africa (Addis Ababa University (AAU), Ethiopia; Moi University (MU), Kenya; Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (UEM), Mozambique; Université d’Abomey-Calavi (UAC), Benin; University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa; and Université Mohammed V de Rabat (UM5R), Morocco); and the members of the BIGSAS management team. The extended BIGSAS family includes all Affiliated and Associated Senior Fellows (two different groups according to their involvement in BIGSAS), all Associated Junior Fellows, and all guests of BIGSAS (since the beginning almost 600 guests from all over the world from over 20 different disciplines in the humanities, cultural and social sciences).

It was the founding Dean of BIGSAS, my colleague Ute Fendler, who drew our attention to a young and very interesting young Nigerian artist, Aderemi (Remi) Adegbite. Remi’s photographic work has a very touching power. We invited him to Bayreuth to experience our family. He chose the blackboard (or rather greenboard) as a common background and connecting link for the pictures of some of the family members with items he intuitively related to them.

In my case, the context was the defense of one of our Junior Fellows, now alumnus. I was the chairperson of the examination committee. Remi experienced the atmosphere of an academic debate in BIGSAS and combined the dissertation of the Junior Fellow with my person.

The first reaction to my photo was “You relate well with us!!” to which I replied by using a quote from a beautiful calendar I got as a gift from a member of the management team: “Meine Mitmenschen sind wie Spiegel für mich” (My fellow human beings are like a mirror to me). And to the next reaction “caring” I answered with another quote: “Liebe ist die beste Medizin. Mich selbst und andere zu lieben, kann wahre Wunder wirken” (Love is the best medicine. To love myself and others may work wonder). My answers reflect my deepest conviction of how to interact with the members of our family. I am sincerely grateful for this extraordinary gift of leading the graduate school and thus caring for the BIGSAS family.

Prof Dr Dymitr Ibriszimow
Germany
Member of BIGSAS since 2007
Professor of African Linguistics and Dean of BIGSAS

Dymitr
I associate exhibits with museums and with evidence in court cases. So, I felt quite strange to be an exhibit. A mix of being exposed – on a corridor wall to all who pass by, albeit enclosed – in a frame and by the rest of the surrounding exhibits ... all waiting for a ‘judgment’ by a ‘jury’ of friends who in some ways have been a family.

To me, BIGSAS as a family experience is a conversation. A series of conversations, a give and take and exchange. So my favourite wall comments were those that continued conversations that I had had with specific people face to face, or that in one word captured ideas and sentiments shared – somewhat like sharing a private joke in public with a friend: just by exchanging glances you both know what you mean.

My relationship with photographs – do I have one? I enjoy photographs, both looking at them and taking them. They are a way of stopping a moment, and reliving it over and over every time I see the photo.

Rose

---

Rose Kimani
Kenya
Member of BIGSAS since April 2013
Title of project: “Exploring the Constructions of Community Radio in Kenya: A study of perceptions and participatory processes among community radio actors”
First of all, I will introduce myself. I am mama Ngawa, the Cameroonian Queen Mother. Cameroon is a bilingual country but as a good francophone, I will continue in French. This is also the advantage of studying with BIGSAS where you can write in the language you understand better.

Je remercie tous ceux qui se sont arrêtés pour laisser des commentaires sur mon portrait. Je me réjouis de savoir ce que pense autrui de moi. Les commentaires sur mon portrait vont dans deux sens. Mama, cool the best, ... tiennent probablement de ma sociabilité vis à vis des autres. Par contre, j’aurai bien aimé que le commentateur qui m’a laissé une équation mathématique la résolve. En ma qualité de linguiste, mathématiques na big wahala oh. Je l’interprète comme une équation difficile à résoudre mais je lui dis: come close and you will enjoy Mama Lili, la Grande Royale, as one BIGSAS Alumnus usually calls me.

BIGSAS, ma deuxième famille. Etre membre de cette famille multiculturelle est une très belle expérience pour moi. Arrivée en 2013 camerounaise, je repartirai dans quelques mois métissée. I can dress Kente from Ghana, enjoy chapati from Kenya, attieke and degue from Côte d’Ivoire, etc. Is food also part of PhD?

Lili

Carline Liliane Ngawa Mbaho
Cameroon
Member of BIGSAS since April 2013
Alumna since January 2017
Title of dissertation: “La vente des produits de santé dans les cars interurbains au Cameroun : une analyse interactionnelle”
As a first-timer to the multi-disciplinary academic structure of BIGSAS, I have experienced debates that are both healthy and controversial; there has been a lot of fun, critical discussions, but also tense exchanges. It is the ability to negotiate all these multiple spaces of interaction that makes the BIGSAS environment vibrant and unique. This point reflects a comment I found on my wall for the WHO project. That somebody would think that I am a pastor reflects the different expectations colleagues hold of peers. Although I think it is venerable, I also know that my critique of certain aspects of Christianity makes it difficult for me to be a successful priest, even though I never thought of being one. Indeed, the photos and comments on the wall show the subjective interpretations from peers. In my case, I see a positive outlook that people have of me even though I rarely think of myself that way. It is this vibrancy that I will miss above all.

Matthew

Matthew Sabbi
Ghana
Member of BIGSAS since April 2012
Alumnus since July 2016
Title of dissertation: “Local State Institution-Building and the Unfulfilled Promise of Participatory Development: The case of Ghana”
The artistic innovation of the Project “Who” was very impressive and “powerful”. All the comments written on my wall were positive and “morally boosting”. The wall provided me with an opportunity to post a pictorial sketch of the analytic framework of my research. It was rather unfortunate that the negative comments posted by some anonymous persons on the wall of others created some tensions. Art is about creativity and the guest artist took the challenge to do something new. I hope that the lessons learnt from that tension contribute to make subsequent initiatives more dynamic.

Emmanuel

Emmanuel Sackey
Ghana
Member of BIGSAS since April 2013
My portrait on the wall captures what I do most of the time: studying and reading things related to “Syntax”, the topic of my doctoral dissertation which has become part of my (academic) life. I think the comments on my wall depict what I strive to be, “kind and friendly”, “very communicative” and to open up to everyone. I like to regard my colleagues with esteem and consideration. Since these comments are apparently written by colleagues who know me relatively well, I feel proud and grateful that they outline the above as my qualities. Photos are an undeniable part of my life. In my home in Angola, I have very beautiful photos with my family on the wall of the dining room which remind me of past moments. When I look at my portrait in the midst of other colleagues, it gives me a sense of belonging to something big, a large entity. BIGSAS is doing a wonderful job. We really feel that we are one family wherein everyone is accepted.

_Afonso_

_Afonso Teca_
_Angola_
_Member of BIGSAS since April 2013_
_Alumnus since October 2016_
_Title of dissertation: “Estudo da voz verbal em Kizómbò (H.16k)”_
The entity called BIGSAS is way more than just a structure facilitating PhD research. I have learnt year-by-year how unique and precious BIGSAS is. Now Aderemi shows up and offhand grasps so many essentials of BIGSAS and its qualities. When he talked with me about his project, I was immediately convinced by his approach as an artist. He created a true portrait of BIGSAS – not that much of me as a person, but he combines an individual’s portrait with the portrait of our work and the spirit we find in BIGSAS. A portrait is an artistic representation of a person – it gives us a kind of Wikipedia definition of a person – in which the face and its expression are predominant. The intent is to display the likeness, personality, and even the mood of the person. For this reason, in photography a portrait is generally not a snapshot, but a composed image of a person in a still position. Aderemi, a photographer by heart, reaches far beyond his craft. He shows in a very thorough way that art can grasp something like a family spirit, like work flows and rhythms. He also creates something that could be called a communicative interface. But to turn the spectator of visual art into an active participant in the project “art” seems to be yet another challenge. Thanks Aderemi for this felicitous portrait of BIGSAS.

_Ulf_

---

**Dr Ulf Vierke**  
Germany  
*Member of BIGSAS since 2010*  
*BIGSAS Senior Fellow, Teaching subject: Arts in Africa,*  
*and director of the Iwalewahaus*
The individual portraits exhibited on the floor of the BIGSAS office: Pens and blank self-stick notes were available for all BIGSAS members to leave anonymous comments on the blank spaces below the portraits.
Growing up, at age four, my first space of knowledge was the blackslate on which the teacher would write alphabets on one side, and alphanumericals on the other side with sticks of calcium sulphate, known as chalk. My encounter with notebook was at age seven, which marked the beginning of my primary education and subsequent pursuit of knowledge that has not stopped. Then, the class teacher would write on the blackboard and the pupils would transfer the text onto their books. Here, the blackboard replaced the slate. This is a road we have all travelled as students at a certain stage in our lives; but it didn’t stop there. Side by side with “regular” classroom was the Arabic school, where I learnt about Islam and its tenets.

My first lesson at the Arabic school was taught through the “Walaa”, the Islamic slate. At first, I thought I was returned to the primary school again, but the style and mode of writing, from right to left instead, clock-wise so to speak, of Arabic made the difference. With time, I got used to it. And I could write on the Islamic slate with the same speed as I did with my pre-primary school slates.

In my most recent photographic project, Al-Ikhlas: The Purity/The Refining, I returned to that childhood, by tapping from the idea of occupying the space that the Islamic Slate taught me, especially the fascinating multiplicity of its layers of the body of knowledge: deep reflection, artistry, and spirituality. In turning these into a useful tool, I “hacked” family stories, “stamped” them on Islamic slates, but with the energy now diverted toward exorcising the ghost of my conflict with Islam as practiced by extremists today.

The blackboard has over the years changed phases but not in purpose. It has remained a space for exchanging knowledge, even as a Web-based learning management system (LMS) designed to fully support online courses or provide a space for face-to-face course supplementation by Blackboard Inc. This interface has proved very useful for online interactions and discourses. Although, I remember the weekly painting of the chalkboard with mixture of charcoal powder and water in order to enjoy crystal clear legibility; but that was back in the days of my primary education now eroded by technology and science.
A description of the project as well as a short biography of Aderemi Adegbite who had been an Artist in Residence at BIGSAS for several months accompanied the exhibition.
In retrospect, as a BIGSAS Visiting Artist in 2015, I found the idea of the constant exchange of knowledge which goes on between Senior Fellows and Junior Fellows as a visual language vividly represented on the blackboard in one of the workstations: a grid of five parallel lines on the blackboard set the tone for the inconsistent equations and torrent of texts, in several colours that form the rhythm on the lines. Then, the blackboard became a scholarly canvas on which I portray the BIGSAS Family.

WHO, the project’s title, was adapted from the pool of texts on the blackboard. This title posed a question without a question mark. The portraits of Fellows sitting on the text “WHO” posed the visual question: who is this or who am I? Often times, we assume that we know our family members, and take for granted many things, until we uncover new knowledge and/or things about them, after which our opinions may/may not remain the same. Indeed, there are secrets within every circle; the family is not an exception. Secrets are kept both between parents and their children, and siblings from each other; the same goes for couples who may appear outward thoroughly compatible and happy. This visual question begs for answers from the BIGSAS Fellows, regarding their colleagues that are featured in the portrait, as part of this project.
Biography of the artist

Aderemi Adegbite is a multimedia artist who uses photography and video art for his works. He considers photography and video art as tools to engage society in discourse. As an interdisciplinary artist, Aderemi’s current focus questions individual realities and truth(s) that stretch across the societal fabric as constants for an elastic socio-system. He is interested in how past experiences of being part of a family (agonies, joys, businesses, travels and religious beliefs) reshape the individual’s present conditions, and serve as catalysts for “the” surrealist future. The psychological effect of the idea “one for all, all for one,” is at the centre of his new interventions through photography and video art.

Aderemi’s photographic and video works have been exhibited at the Biennale Jogja XIII in Indonesia, Lagos OPEN RANGE in Nigeria and Mali, Lagos Photo Festival in Nigeria, FRAMES Projecting International Photography Festival in Scotland, Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, Egypt, One Minutes Foundation in Amsterdam, Slade Centre for Electronic Media in London, Skoto Gallery in New York, Centre for Contemporary Art in Poland among others. His documentary work on Immigrant Community, Neckarstadt, featured as a solo exhibition “Through My Eyes” during Bundesfachkongress Interkultur 2014 held in Mannheim, Germany. Also, he was the official photographer of the international theatre festival Schwindelfrei Theater Festival held in Mannheim in September, 2014.
Contact

Postal address:
BIGSAS
University of Bayreuth
D-95440 Bayreuth
Germany

Visitor’s address:
BIGSAS
Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 3
D-95445 Bayreuth
Germany

Phone:  + 49 (0)921 55-5101
Fax:       + 49 (0)921 55-5102
E-mail:   BIGSAS@uni-bayreuth.de

BIGSAS is funded by the German Research Foundation as part of the Excellence Initiative.
Imprint

Project realised by Aderemi Adegbite & edited by Dr Gilbert Shang Ndi
Advisory Team: Prof Dr Ute Fendler and Juliane Fender
Design: Regina Fettköther (wunschpunkt.de)

Photo credits:
Aderemi Adegbite owns the rights to photographs and pictures.
BIGSAS owns the rights to photographs on pp. 11, 13, 15, 17, 54, 56.

© 2017
All rights reserved.
Printed in Germany