



# LAGOS PECKHAM REPEAT

Pilgrimage to the Lakes

5 JUL - 29 OCT 2023

MAIN GALLERY & FIRE STATION GALLERIES

FREE

SLG

# INTRODUCTION

The South London Gallery's (SLG's) local area of Peckham is home to one of the largest Nigerian diaspora communities in the UK. It is sometimes called 'Little Lagos' in reference to its strong connections with Nigeria's largest city, which is one of the leading economic centres in Africa.

This exhibition brings together thirteen contemporary Nigerian and British-Nigerian artists to explore links between Lagos, meaning 'lakes' in Portuguese, and Peckham as a channel through which to address wider issues of migration. It is framed around ideas of pilgrimage, meaning journeys to a sacred or special place and, in this case, migration motivated by a search for a better life. At the heart of the exhibition is an exploration of the complexities of shifting notions of home and identity as generations of Nigerians settle in London permanently, return to Lagos, or move elsewhere.

Lagos was given its name in the 18th-century by the Portuguese who were the first Europeans to arrive in the area. It is a city surrounded by water and was a significant port during the transatlantic slave trade. Britain took possession of Lagos in 1861 and declared it a colony in 1862. Following Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960, migration between the two countries steadily increased. A trend for Nigerians to send their children to be educated in Britain had already been established by then.

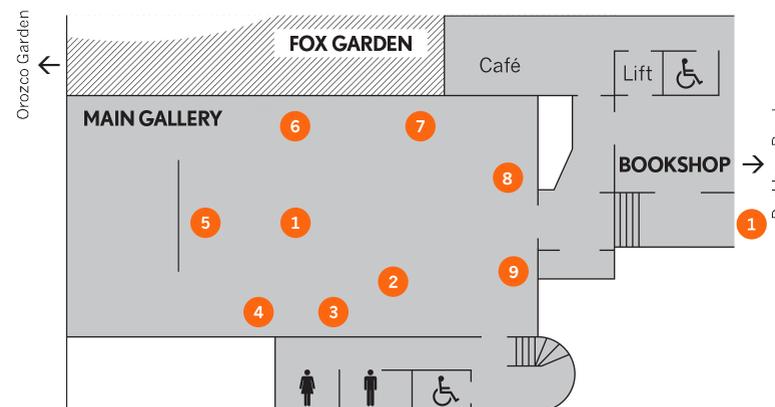
The first wave of Nigerians settled in Peckham in the 1970s and 180s following the economic crisis in Nigeria at the end of the oil boom, with many more arriving in the 1990s due to civil unrest. Opening shops and businesses, buying property and renting rooms to new arrivals, Peckham's Nigerian community became firmly rooted in one of the most multicultural neighbourhoods in London. Today there are several thousand Nigerians living in Peckham and more than 12,000 in Southwark.

Coming from very different perspectives in terms of their own relationships to Lagos, Peckham, Nigeria and Britain, the artists in the show explore issues of migration, transnational exchange, sense of place, colonial histories and contemporary metropolises through installation, film, photography and sculpture. The exhibition spans the SLG's main site, an outdoor sound piece, and three floors of the Fire Station so visitors have to make their own journey between the two buildings to see the exhibition in its entirety.

*Lagos, Peckham, Repeat: Pilgrimage to the Lakes* is co-curated by Folakunle Oshun, founder and director of the Lagos Biennial, with the South London Gallery.

You can read Folakunle Oshun's curatorial essay about the exhibition in this guide. A floor plan to help you identify works on display, along with information about individual artworks are also included.

# MAIN GALLERY



Audio work:

**1. Emeka Ogboh**

*Lagos Soundscapes*, 2023

**2.**

**Ndidi Dike**

*Deciphering Value: Economic Anomalies and Unequal Dependencies in Global Commodity Trade*, 2023

**3.**

**Emeka Ogboh**

*No Food For Lazy Man*, 2023

**4.**

**Temitayo Shonibare**

*I'd rather **not** go blind*, 2023

**5.**

**Victor Ehikhamenor**

*Cathedral of the Mind*, 2023

**6.**

**Christopher Obuh**

*No City for Poor Man*, 2014-ongoing

**7. Lagos Studio Archives**

*The Archive of Becoming*, 2015-ongoing

**8.**

**Yinka Shonibare CBE**

*Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, 14:00 hours, 1998

**9.**

**Yinka Shonibare CBE**

*Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, 19:00 hours, 1998

**1. Emeka Ogboh (b.1977, Enugu, Nigeria. Currently lives in Lagos, Nigeria, and Berlin, Germany)**

*Lagos Soundscapes, 2023*

Sound installation

Outside 25 minutes, Main Gallery 41 minutes

Courtesy the artist

This work transports the listener to the bustling streets of Lagos immersing the listener in a rich tapestry of sounds that define the city's vibrant atmosphere. The composition captures traffic, street vendors, melodic chants, and the distinctive music genre known as fuji. In addition, the artist has created a new sound installation at the entrance of the gallery. This installation highlights 'verbal mapping', an artistic expression inspired by the skilled Danfo bus conductors of Lagos. These conductors possess the talent for calling out bus stop names using freestyle-rap deliveries. Through the practice of 'verbal mapping', they melodically vocalise the bus routes, capturing the attention of potential passengers and informing them of upcoming stops at which to disembark.

**2. Ndidi Dike**

*Deciphering Value: Economic Anomalies and*

*Unequal Dependencies in Global Commodity Trade, 2023*

Mixed media and photographic print on acetate

Courtesy of the artist

This work explores the concept of value in global commodity trade. It reflects on questions of market value and material value, value to the individual and value to humankind, offering a critique of how value is ascribed - who benefits and who is exploited. This piece also connects Peckham and Lagos through a focus on the marketplace. It features images from Rye Lane, Peckham and markets in Lagos including Balogun, Ladipo, Katangua, and Yaba. The long strips of transparency reference the narrow pathways customers have to navigate when shopping inside Balogun market. Also featured are images of the London skyline and the coastline in Badagry, Lagos which was a port during the transatlantic slave trade. The objects included in the work, some of which have been sourced in Peckham, make reference to histories and politics of commodity circulation.

**3. Emeka Ogboh (b.1977, Enugu, Nigeria. Currently lives in Lagos, Nigeria, and Berlin, Germany)**

*No Food For Lazy Man, 2023*

Craft beer

Courtesy of the artist

"No Food For Lazy Man" is a popular saying in Lagos that encapsulates the hustle and bustle of the megacity. This saying extends to the hearts and minds of those who emigrate in search of a better life. This beer celebrates migrant resilience. It connects Peckham and Lagos through south London based brewery Orbit. It was fermented under Ogboh's *Lagos Soundscapes* so that the beer is, according to the artist, "vibrating to the sound of Lagos". The recipe uses English hop varieties along with Nigerian alligator pepper, calabash nutmeg and sugar cane.

*This beer is available to buy in the SLG Shop and café, South London Louie.*

**4. Temitayo Shonibare (b.1995, Nigeria. Currently lives in Nigeria and London, UK)**

*I'd rather **not** go blind, 2023*

Film, 26 minutes and 22 seconds

Filming by Yasmin Dankaro and Eddie Iyama

Wig by Solomon Paramour

Courtesy of the artist

This is a filmed performance which the artist staged on the London Overground train line between Dalston Junction and Peckham Rye. Public transport, especially in large cities, is a space with its own unique set of rules and social norms. The artist views this work as a social experiment to disrupt those social norms and blur boundaries between public and private space. Shonibare's face is completely covered by a long, strawberry blonde wig which she fiddles with throughout the journey, oblivious to the reactions of other passengers. The wig was inspired by a style advertised on a poster by 1960s and 1970s wig supplier, Frederick's of Hollywood. The artist has also commented that it is common for Lagos hair salons to feature posters similar to those that were advertised by Frederick's of Hollywood, due to the influence of American popular culture in Lagos. This commission involved collaborating with Peckham-based hairdresser Solomon Paramour who styled the wig.

**5. Victor Ehikhamenor****(b. 1970, Nigeria. Currently lives in USA and Nigeria)***Cathedral of the Mind, 2023*

Rosary beads, brass, thread, rhinestones on lace fabric and wood

Courtesy of the artist

This monumental piece evokes the destination of a religious pilgrimage and deals with themes of history, spirituality and religion. It is woven from mass-produced rosary beads which reference systems of belief, trade and globalisation. In formation behind the façade, are rows of Ìbejì statuettes. Ìbejì means ‘twins’ among the Yoruba, who see twins as divine or special children who bring prosperity to the household they are born into. Ìbejì are also closely associated with a deity, known as Òrisà Ìbejì. By including these statues, the artist opens a dialogue on the relationship between Western religion and Nigerian spirituality. This work also addresses rituals people may undertake when moving abroad. For example, it is not uncommon for Nigerians to pray in churches and other places of worship in advance of applying for a visa due to the difficulty of the visa process for Western countries.

**6. Christopher Obuh****(b. 1988, Delta State, Nigeria. Currently lives in Lagos, Nigeria)***No City for Poor Man, 2014 - ongoing*

Vinyl stickers

Courtesy of the artist

Eko Atlantic is a planned city of Lagos State which has been dubbed the ‘Dubai of Africa’. Obuh documents the scale of the development and its human impact. The artist interrogates the politics of space in Lagos, positioning Eko Atlantic as illustrative of deep socio-economic divides. For example, to make way for coastal developments such as Eko Atlantic it is not uncommon for the government to sanction forced evictions and the demolition of informal settlements.

In 2021 this happened at Tarkwa Bay near the site of Eko Atlantic. Eko Atlantic has also drawn criticism from climate advocates. To build the city, the Lagos State Government reclaimed 10 million square metres of land which was lost to the sea due to coastal erosion. It is argued that the development has exploited the ecological crisis while solidifying deep inequalities.

**7. Lagos Studio Archives (based in Helsinki, Finland)***The Archive of Becoming, 2015-ongoing*

Giclée prints on paper and original negatives

Courtesy of Lagos Studio Archives

*Lagos Studio Archives* is a cultural preservation project consisting of thousands of film negatives documenting Lagos studio portraiture from the 1970s to post-millennium. The artist Karl Ohiri initiated the project after he discovered that many archives were being destroyed and discarded by a generation of studio photographers who were part of a shift from analogue to digital photography. *The Archive of Becoming* is the first series from the project and features a collection of dilapidated negatives and prints made from the negatives. In their movement from Lagos to London they reflect the theme of pilgrimage within the show. Ohiri and his collaborator Riikka Kassinen are in the process of cataloguing and conserving the archive and developing plans for its permanent storage.

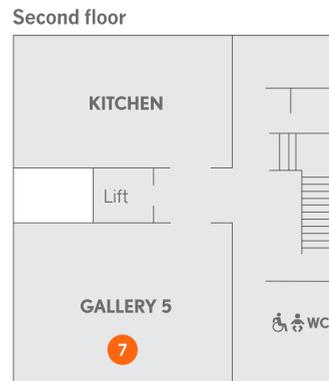
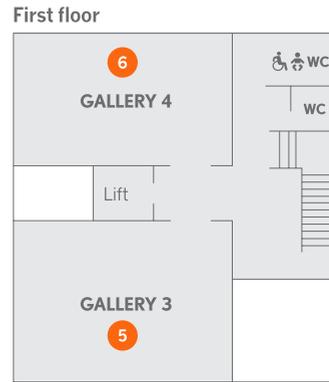
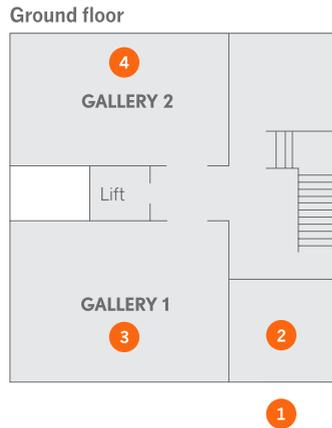
**8. & 9. Yinka Shonibare CBE****(b.1962, London, UK. Currently lives in London, UK)***Diary of a Victorian Dandy, 14:00 hours, 1998**Diary of a Victorian Dandy, 19:00 hours, 1998*

C-Type prints

Courtesy of the artist

These two photographs are from the series ‘Diary of a Victorian Dandy’ in which the artist Yinka Shonibare poses as a Black dandy. Shonibare describes the dandy as a figure who moves through the English upper-class as an “outsider who upsets the social order of things”. The photographs challenge social perceptions through the intersections of race, class and disability. This series of photographs was inspired by the British 18th-century painter and caricaturist William Hogarth who was known for his satirical social commentary.

# FIRE STATION



## Audio work:

- Emeka Ogboh**  
*Lagos Soundscapes*, 2023

## ENTRANCE

- Seyi Adelekun**  
*Àdìrè Wata*, 2023

## GALLERY 1

- Temitayo Ogunbiyi**  
*You will find Lagos in London Living*, 2023

## GALLERY 2

- Abdulrazaq Awofeso**  
*Avalanche of Calm*, 2022

## GALLERY 3

- Adeyemi Michael**  
*Entitled*, 2018

## GALLERY 4

- Onyeka Igwe**  
*No Archive Can Restore You*, 2020

## GALLERY 5

- Chiizii**  
*Research Room, Chapter 1.*  
*Nni Bu Ogwu (Food is Medicine)*, 2023

# FIRE STATION

## 2. Seyi Adelekun (b.1993, London, UK. Currently lives in London, UK)

*Àdìrè Wata*, 2023

Recycled plastic bottles, water, indigo pigment, natural dyes, yarn and galvanised steel  
Courtesy of the artist

*Àdìrè Wata* comprises hundreds of recycled plastic bottles filled with natural dye including indigo sourced from a dye centre in Abeokuta, a city near Lagos. The work is inspired by Àdìrè; meaning tie and dye, which is a traditional Yoruba visual art and textile technique known for its striking patterns and vibrant array of indigo hues. It explores the sacred power of water as a medium for memory, healing and transformation. Specifically, it focuses on the vital role water plays in the indigo dyeing process which forges an intimate relationship between the Aládìrè (a practitioner of this vocational art) and the Elu plant. The work also pays homage to enslaved Africans who carried the knowledge of indigo cultivation across the oceans during the transatlantic slave trade.

Pelican Plus Tenants and Residents Association and the SLG will host Adelekun for a residency on Pelican Estate, Peckham, throughout the run of the exhibition.

## 3. Temitayo Ogunbiyi

(b.1984, Rochester, USA. Currently lives in Lagos, Nigeria)

*You will find Lagos in London Living*, 2023

Steel bar, manilla rope and floor vinyl

Courtesy of the artist, supported by Concrete Projects

Temitayo Ogunbiyi is inspired by plants, maps, cooking traditions, and DIY gym equipment made of metal bars and concrete. She uses these references to connect people and places. This is an interactive sculpture on which children can play. The curving lines of the sculpture are based on an interpretation of the flight route between London and Lagos, and various paths between Heathrow Airport and the South London Gallery. Ogunbiyi has also considered the lines in hair, threaded hairstyles, the shapes of cooking vessels, plant roots and vines from ugu, yam, passion fruit and other plants that she observes during her daily life in Lagos.

*Children can play on the sculpture if they remove their shoes and are supervised.*

**4. Abdulrazaq Awofeso (b.1978, Lagos, Nigeria. Currently lives in Birmingham, UK, and Lagos, Nigeria)**

*Avalanche of Calm, 2022*

Pallet wood, acrylic paint

Courtesy of the artist and Ed Cross Gallery

Originally commissioned by Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

*Avalanche of Calm* is a representation of the modern city. The artist made this work shortly after moving from Lagos to the UK and it reflects his impressions of the UK. Awofeso is known for reusing materials such as shipping pallets to create his sculptures. This material refers to the international trade of goods and migration of people around the world. The mass of figures references the relative insignificance of the individual in megacities as well as the notion of a city as a place where people from all walks of life come together.

*Please do not touch this artwork.*

**5. Adeyemi Michael**

**(b. 1985, Lagos, Nigeria. Currently lives in London, UK)**

*Entitled, 2018*

Film, 4 minutes and 36 seconds

Courtesy of the artist

Through his recreation of the living room in his childhood home, Adeyemi Michael invites us to imagine his mother as he saw her when he was growing up. The film shows her wearing Yoruba ceremonial attire as she rides through the streets of Peckham on horseback. The voiceover is of her recalling her experience of moving from Nigeria to the UK. The artist notes that this work is a re-imagining of the first-generation immigrant experience as “triumphant, victorious, and celebratory”. In making this piece he was particularly interested in the image of European conquerors on horseback and wanted to subvert the Napoleonic colonial narrative of the conqueror by placing his mother in that position. Adeyemi also comments on the gracefulness of the horse’s movements noting “that is exactly what I’m trying to reflect, the women, the mothers, moving a whole family from one country to another, raising a family, making it look effortless”.

*Visitors can sit on the armchairs in this installation. Please do not touch any other items in this room.*

**6. Onyeka Igwe**

**(b.1986, London, UK. Currently lives in London, UK)**

*No Archive Can Restore You, 2020*

Film, 5 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

This work was filmed in the former Nigerian Film Unit which is located in the heart of the Lagosian cityscape. The Nigerian Film Unit was one of the first outposts of the Colonial Film Unit - a propaganda and educational film organisation of the British government. The building’s rooms are filled with dust, cobwebs, stopped clocks and old film reels. The abandoned condition of the building hints that people cannot and do not want to see the films it houses and their revelation of colonial legacies. Igwe’s work imagines ‘lost’ films from the archive in distinctive soundscapes, juxtaposed with images of the abandoned interior and exterior of the building.

**7. Chiizii (b. 1995, London, UK. Currently lives in London, UK)**

*Research Room, Chapter 1. Nni Bu Ogwu ( Food is Medicine), 2023*

Coloured pencil, acrylic, oil pastel on paper. Wallpaper, bleach, dye, denim, brass, Egusi, net, sticker, packaging.

The works in this installation are part of an ongoing research project titled *Nni Bu Ogwu, 2018 - present*, which means ‘Food is Medicine’ in Igbo. It explores the pre- and post-colonial Igbo diet. The Igbo people are an ethnic group in Nigeria primarily based in the southeast of the country. The research room concept was developed when Chiizii was on a residency in Lagos at Guest Art Space (G.A.S) and draws on her years of research into elements key to Igbo identity. During the residency she was particularly inspired by the impact of Igbo people on Lagos culture where the majority of the population is of Yoruba ethnicity.

*Residency supported by Guest Artists Space (G.A.S.), Lagos, Nigeria.*

*Please do not touch this artwork.*

Look out for the latest events and exhibition information at [southlondongallery.org](https://southlondongallery.org), via our monthly newsletters or social media channels.

### IN CONVERSATION WITH FOLAKUNLE OSHUN

Thu 6 Jul, 6.30pm, SLG, £6 / £4 concession

Join Folakunle Oshun, co-curator of *Lagos, Peckham, Repeat*, in conversation with artists Chiizii, Victor Ehikhamenor and Temitayo Ogunbiyi. The panel is moderated by Oyindamola Fakeye, Director of CCA Lagos, and the discussion will explore the themes in the exhibition.

### CALEB FEMI AT BOLD TENDENCIES

Fri 28 Jul, 7.30pm, £17, Bold Tendencies

Caleb Femi presents *STONE SEED* an immersive live performance that celebrates the power of Peckham. Experience the transformative energy of music, sound, and poetry by art concept hub SLOGhouse.

### FAMILY DAY

Sat 29 Jul, 12–4pm, SLG, Free

Join us for a fun and exciting day of art and play for families, inspired by the *Lagos, Peckham, Repeat* exhibition. Get involved with hands-on creative workshops, listen to stories and music, and grab some delicious Nigerian food.

### BOY.BROTHER.FRIEND

Sat 16 Sep, check the website for details

Kk Obi has programmed a day of talks, fashion and music to coincide with the exhibition. Obi is the founder and creative director of Boy. Brother.Friend, a magazine and digital platform which explores diaspora and male identities through contemporary art, fashion, and theory.

### SOUTH BY SOUTH

Sun 1 Oct, 5–8pm, SLG, £6 / £4 concession

This special screening and panel talk explores migration from Nigeria to non-English speaking countries, with a particular focus on Brazil. South by South is a quarterly film screening at the SLG focusing on presenting cinema from Africa and the diaspora. The 2023 programme is curated by Awa Konaté.

# LAGOS PECKHAM REPEAT

Pilgrimage to the Lakes

Essay by Folakunle Oshun, exhibition co-curator

Notions of identity and belonging usually call up monolithic geographies that can be imagined as origins, yet in Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) this sociologist and cultural studies scholar imagines the Black Atlantic as a 'continent in negative'.<sup>1</sup> Premised on the trade routes of slavery, this entity connects Europe, West Africa, and the Americas via a migratory loop to create other forms of belonging. Gilroy uses the idea of the Black Atlantic to elaborate the theory of double consciousness previously discussed by pan-African civil-rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). For both Gilroy and Du Bois, the concept of double consciousness refers to a source of inward "twoness" experienced by black and brown subjects in contexts impacted by white colonialism. As Du Bois puts it: 'An American, a Negro; [has] two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings.'<sup>2</sup>

In an attempt to capture and expand this double consciousness – the plurality of place and the rationale behind post-independence migration by Nigerian migrants – the exhibition *Lagos, Peckham, Repeat: Pilgrimage to the Lakes* focuses on the experiences of a selection of Nigerian artists whose practices have been shaped by their journeys away from home and back again. The exhibition explores the idea of pilgrimage as a journey made to fulfil a specific ritual or intention; in this case, the quest to find and make a new home, temporising the need for return, but equally initiating a cycle of sojourns. In the exhibition, a keen focus is placed on the totems and talismans that are carried along on such journeys to help re-enact the familiar. Equal emphasis is placed on the contextual significance of place. As Christian Norberg-Schulz, puts it in his book *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1980), 'Acts and occurrences take place'.<sup>3</sup>

Initially named Èkó, a war camp of the Benin Empire, and later christened Lagos by 18th-century Portuguese explorers, after a coastal city in southern Portugal, the Nigerian city of Lagos has for centuries, and continues to this day to establish itself as a West African trade mecca, whose unique status can be directly linked to its privileged geography, industrious citizens, and access to the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>4</sup> Defined by an intricate network of lagoons feeding into the Atlantic, Lagos was historically positioned, not just as a regional economic confluence to the rest of West Africa, but also as a strategic international port. It may well now be impossible to write about Lagos without referencing the all-too-familiar sentiment formulated by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, who in a 2016 interview with *The Guardian* newspaper, described Lagos as ‘the ultimate dysfunctional city’.<sup>5</sup> But while considering whether to own or disown this dysfunctionality, it is important to track down and evaluate the historical antecedents responsible for the city’s flamboyant character. Beyond depicting contemporary Lagos, the overriding intention of this exhibition is to portray the Nigerian migrant community in a factual and empowering fashion. There is no better illustration of this than an image from Adeyemi Michael’s film *Entitled* (2018), which portrays his mother in full traditional Yoruba attire, majestically seated on a stallion in central Peckham. The background seen in this image could be mistaken for the streets of Lagos as it bears the same familiar chaotic charm.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi suggests, though comparable to other cities, Lagos is unique in its disorderly functionality:

*As such, aspects of Lagos can be found in many global cities, from Cape Town to Doula, Cairo to Kinshasa, London to Berlin, New York to Shanghai, New Delhi to Sao Paulo. Nevertheless, it is plausible to suggest that Lagos’s conundrum of chaos and order is unique to it and cannot be found elsewhere.*<sup>7</sup>

It is this unparalleled mix of chaos and order that we seek to extoll, unravel, and distil in *Lagos Peckham Repeat: Pilgrimage to the Lakes*, an exhibition which curiously juxtaposes a megacity with a migrant neighbourhood that was historically referred to as a village.<sup>8</sup> Adopting the age-old algebraic formula of the simultaneous equation, we hope to explore potential variables to seek out a constant. A rendition of the sound installation *Lagos Soundscapes* (2023) by Emeka Ogboh, also included in *Lagos Peckham Repeat: Pilgrimage to the Lakes* features a constellation of beer crates designed by the artist as part of a Lagos-themed beer called *No Food For Lazy Man* created in collaboration with Orbit, a craft brewery in Peckham.

Considering insights premised on personal encounters with Lagos’ stifling yet enchanting embrace, it is easy to forget why Lagos is Lagos, and what makes it tick. Situated on a historic pre-colonial trade route, the British annexed Lagos from the Oba in 1861 and quickly established its fame throughout the erstwhile empire as the commercial nerve point of the most populous black country.

Though by the 20th century, a new colonial order was in place to dictate a totally different *modus operandi* in the organisational structure of governance and tax collection, Lagos held on to its old ways of informal taxation, which even the British colonial lords could not crack. To this day, the city remains one massive tollgate, with informal tax collectors known as *agberos* stationed at most bus stops to extract daily taxes physically and often violently from commercial bus conductors. This subtle description does not hold a candle to the intricacies that uphold this urban membrane which majestically floats on the surface of Lagos Lagoon and somehow refuses to sink.<sup>3</sup>

A walk through Peckham gives you a sense of why this miniature version of Lagos has acquired a reputation as one of London’s most culturally charged neighbourhoods. Gentrified as it may seem, its crevices and alleys are crammed with street food and African shops, some of which are Asian-owned, and the area is filled with the vibe, smell, and taste of quintessential Lagos. Generally, it is impossible to equate the architectural and urban landscape of Lagos – which remains a cacophony of colonial, non-aligned, and tropical urbanist design influences – to that of Peckham. Still, we must conclude that the dense social texture of Peckham, considering its visual, sonic, and linguistic aesthetic characteristics, is drawn from the same lake.

As we assess the similarities between these two places and the cultural contexts that connect them, it is expedient to address the circumstances that produced the mass exodus of citizens of the newly founded nation-state of Nigeria to distant corners of the world filled with uncertainties and unfriendly weather. In reassessing the gaze on this new-found state of independence, which was first experienced in West Africa by Ghana in 1957, and by Nigeria and a number of other West African countries in 1960 and beyond, it is necessary to evaluate the notion of independence in both its poetic and literal forms.<sup>9</sup> A first step would be, for a quick moment, to substitute the idea of ‘post-coloniality’ with ‘post-independence,’ the latter asserting the constitutionality and sovereignty of independence and taking responsibility for over half a century of self-governance.<sup>10</sup> In the opening pages of his book *African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence* (2015), the architect Manuel Herz expounds on this conferred version of independence, questioning the very nature of independence that is granted overnight. He ponders on the immediacy involved in conferring independence and the condition of a country before and after its ‘Independence Day’.<sup>11</sup> The second step would be to vehemently reject any ethnographic gaze on the historical documentation and contemporary life of Nigerians. This exhibition undoubtedly holds a mirror to that gaze.

Following a bloody military coup in 1966, with barely enough time for the realisation of the new-found independence to crystallise, it became clear to

Nigerians that this new state of self-governance would not be as great an experience as had been advertised. At the other end of the spectrum, Nigeria was swimming in wealth from crude oil, which had been discovered in commercial quantities a few years prior to independence. This new situation of deep uncertainties in the political sphere, dwindling living standards, and the destabilising rush to extract, control and monetise the recently discovered natural resources gave way to the initial post-independence thrust of migration from Nigeria to the United Kingdom, the United States, and other parts of the world.

In 2005, Nigerian superstar singer and rapper D'Banj released the smash hit *Mo Bo Lowo Won* under Mo' Hits Records. *Mo Bo Lowo Won* (which literally translates from Yoruba as 'I Escaped From Them') details the manoeuvres of an internet fraudster who miraculously evades the London Metropolitan Police.<sup>12</sup> Setting aside Ayo Shonaiya's debut film *King of My Country* (1997), this was the first time a Nigerian artist would use the world stage to graphically detail a lifestyle of fraud in the UK. It is of utmost importance, though, to note that the first wave of Nigerians to arrive in the UK and US in the late 1960s and early 1970s were categorically not criminals or fraudsters, but mostly students who came to advance their academic pursuits.<sup>13</sup> The dream at this time was to return home with a Master's degree, or better still, a PhD and take up a position which ultimately had to be relinquished by a British professor in a Nigerian university.

Dwindling scholarships due to government corruption back home, low prospects of a better standard of living in Nigeria, an incessant spate of military coups throughout the 1960s and 70s, not to mention the Nigerian-Biafran War escalated by British arms sales to the Federal Nigerian Government are just some of the reasons why many first-generation post-independence Nigerian migrants chose to move to the UK and remain there. It is safe to say that there are factors beyond the realm of beer parlour philosophy that led to the creation and formation of low-cost migrant communities like the one found in Peckham.<sup>14</sup> *Passport to Peckham* (2022) by Robert Hewison, a detailed documentation on the coming-to-be of Peckham and the wider south London commune, offers key insights into the history and specificities of migrant life in Peckham since the mid-20th century.

To anyone visiting Peckham for the first time, it may be difficult to imagine what the place looked like before its transformation by gradual but consistent recent waves of gentrification. It is also plausible to assume that the African and Caribbean communities, through their dogged pursuit of education and enterprise, have been able to stagger the gentrification in Peckham by buying up vast amounts of real estate. *Desmond's*, a sitcom which aired on Nigerian Television Authority Two Channel Five and the British network Channel Four throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, portrayed the stark realities of migrant life in Peckham. Among other

themes, the popular sitcom gave insights into the processes of gentrification as well as the odd relations between the neighbourhood's African and Caribbean migrants. A little over thirty years on, Peckham's changing landscape, now slowly encroached upon by fancy cafés selling quasi-Berlin standard cappuccinos and eggs benedict, may not survive the gentrification and regeneration which, despite optimistic opinions to the contrary, seem imminent.

Revisiting the long journey of self-actualisation that involved the artist Victor Ehikhamenor leaving Nigeria to seek greener pastures in the UK in the early 1990s, led him to create *Cathedral of the Mind* (2023), an interactive installation that takes a two-fold spiritual approach to the numerous hurdles involved in the excruciating migration process, chief of which is securing a UK visa. In Ehikhamenor's work, the classical façade of a Roman Catholic cathedral draped in prayer rosaries masks a cohort of *ibeji* twin sculptures on the reverse of the installation. The *ibeji* twins, which generally are carved as an effigy to symbolise or remember twins, are used in this situation as a direct metaphor to detail the duality and transmutation at the heart of migration. This double reality in harsh conditions can come into play upon arrival in the UK when the optimistic traveller is suddenly faced with the stark economic realities of migrant life. Back home in Nigeria, the proverbial 'Uncle London' is seen as privileged and enjoying the finer things of life abroad, while his actual life in the city may not be as palatable. The veracity of this work is reinforced by the imminent exodus of Nigerians to other parts of the world as a response to harsh government policies in Nigeria. *Japa*, a word which means 'to escape permanently', is the new slang young Nigerians use to classify this sojourn abroad.

While this exhibition tracks the antecedents of many of the participating artists, specifically in relation to their genealogy and movement around the world, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998) by Yinka Shonibare CBE invokes a period long before the curatorial framing of *Lagos Peckham Repeat: Pilgrimage to the Lakes*. Even as we can appreciate the fashion and aesthetic sensibilities of the Victorian age, Shonibare tactfully creates tension, reconfiguring the power dynamic which in this period was unapologetically imperial. In both photographs on display, we see the artist decked in the same noble regalia as his white counterparts. However, in Rembrandtian fashion, Shonibare curiously situates himself as the focal point of both compositions. A similar visual parallel can be drawn to the sixth studio album cover of American rap icon Jay-Z titled *The Blueprint* (2001) where the composition suggests the rapper is giving some instruction to his subordinates. It is clear from the aerial view composition that Jay-Z, a musician from humble beginnings, is the focal point, and he assumes a position of authority. Coincidentally, and thankfully so, the inspiration for this photograph taken by Jonathan Mannion was British photographer Jocelyn Bain Hogg's book *The Firm* (2001), which documents the lives of south London mobsters.

To better understand this juxtaposition between the city of Lagos and its miniature counterpart Peckham, it might be helpful to visualise the roads in Peckham as the lagoon and waterways in Lagos.<sup>15</sup> In terms of scale, it would likely take the same amount of time to swim the imaginary waterways of Peckham as it would to cross Lagos by car. Unfortunately, the infamously unpredictable Lagos traffic makes this impossible to calculate accurately. As the commute is made from the South London Gallery's Main Building to the Fire Station where the adjoining part of the exhibition is installed, an imaginary body of water emerges in our consciousness, channelling the historic transatlantic connection between Lagos and London and all the atrocities therein. 'Peckham is between places absorbed into larger identities, it is not pretty, but has a personality of its own'.<sup>16</sup> A visual from Judith Lou Lévy's award-winning film *Atlantics* (2019) comes to mind when thinking about transatlantic migration.<sup>10</sup> Christopher Obuh's large-scale prints in the main exhibition room of *Lagos, Peckham, Repeat: Pilgrimage to the Lakes* also tell a tale of a foray into the Atlantic Ocean, a more recent and equally staggering attempt by the Nigerian government to create an Abu Dhabi-style business district on the coastal waters of Lagos. The artist began in 2014 to document the construction work on the Eko Atlantic City, a land reclamation project by the Lagos State Government. Seyi Adelekun's dye installation *Àdìrè Wata* (2023) in the Fire Station also highlights this link with water, exploitation, and pollution. In a more ethereal fashion, Temitayo Ogunbiyi imagines the pedestrian routes between Lagos and Peckham with her metal installation titled *You will find Lagos in London Living* (2023). Equally, Abdulrazaq Awofeso reflects on the challenges of settling in the UK as a creative in a multicultural space. His installation, *Avalanche of Calm* (2022) attempts to capture the varied characters in society, all striving for the basics of life. Cut out of wooden pallets and representing various identities and backgrounds, Awofeso's figures are installed under a cloud which the artist suggests is a universal signifier of peace.

Staying with the metaphor of water, renowned sculptor and artistic powerhouse Ndidi Dike presents in the exhibition an archival inquest into the basis for the Nigerian-British relationship: commerce. Before there ever was a migrant community in Peckham, before ever there were talks of gentrification in this little urban village, and long before there was a pub called the Prince of Peckham, there was the Royal Niger Company, a British company extracting and trading valuable palm oil and timber in the territory that is now the nation-state known as Nigeria. The Royal Niger Company, previously called the National African Company, sold its stakes to the British government in 1899 for the sum of £850,000. A short version of this story is that there was growing discontent with the Royal Niger Company in the then-Niger Delta region where it operated. To quell these tensions, the company sold its holdings and, effectively, its territory to the British government. This company would later rebrand and return as Lever Brothers, now Unilever, to trade in household products and undertake construction projects in Nigeria and West Africa. Ndidi

Dike's installation *Deciphering Value, Economic Anomalies, and Unequal Dependency in Global Economy Trade* (2023) uses imagery and iconography from this period to make sense of her early years in the UK before moving back to Nigeria.

Taking another archival turn, British-born Nigerian artist Karl Ohiri leads us down a nostalgic memory lane with a selection of prints and negatives from his self-curated project, *Lagos Studio Archives* (2015-ongoing) which depicts the fashion consciousness and style of Nigerians from the 1970s to the post-millennium.<sup>17</sup> The negatives, which were first discovered by the artist in Lagos in 2015, raise three crucial questions: What constitutes an archive? Who owns an archive? What do we do with an archive? Though speaking about the legitimacy of the state archive, Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe offers some thoughts on the subject: 'This time of co-ownership, however, rests on a fundamental event: death. Death to the extent that the archived document par excellence is, generally, a document whose author is dead and which, obviously, has been closed for the required period before it can be accessed.' Mbembe goes further to suggest a spiritual dimension to archiving:

*Archiving is a kind of interment, laying something in a coffin, if not to rest, then at least to consign elements of that life which could not be destroyed purely and simply. These elements, removed from time and from life, are assigned to a place and a sepulchre that is perfectly recognisable because it is consecrated: the archives. Assigning them to this place makes it possible to establish an unquestionable authority over them and to tame the violence and cruelty of which the 'remains' are capable, especially when these are abandoned to their own devices.<sup>18</sup>*

Still on the subject of archiving, Onyeka Igwe's film *No Archive Can Restore You* (2020) exposes the relics of what used to be the Nigerian Film Unit and the undertones of a colonial past. Continuing with questioning the internal strife and tribal politics ensconced in Nigerian political history and social life, Chiizii explores what she terms the 'quintessential Igbo diet'. The research project, which was produced at the Guest Artist Space in Lagos, takes the posture of a constructed archive as it examines how food can be used as a medium to transmit pre and post-colonial variations of the Igbo diet and how art can be used to conjure cultural nuances.

Over and above the harsh truths of colonisation, neo-colonisation, and memories of migrant life in this culturally diverse neighbourhood of south London, *Lagos, Peckham, Repeat: Pilgrimage to the Lakes* highlights the contributions, significance, and transmuted heritage of the Nigerian community in Peckham, and the UK at large. If there is just one takeaway from this show, it is that the Nigerian migrant is more than an alien seeking 'Refuge';<sup>19</sup> the Nigerian migrant is a pilgrim on a journey for a specific reason – and destined to return home.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi's curatorial text for Emeka Ogboh's solo exhibition *Lagos Soundscapes* at Gallery Iman Fares, 2019.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Hewison, *Passport to Peckham: Culture and Creativity in a London Village*, MIT Press, 2022.

<sup>9</sup>Beginning with Ghana, all West African countries attained independence between 1957 and 1974.

<sup>10</sup>See the poem *A Song for Lagos* by Akeem Lasisi. Main thematic reference for Lagos Biennial 2019, *How To Build A Lagoon With Just A Bottle of Wine*, curated by Antawan Byrd, Oyindamola Fakeye, and Tosin Oshinowo.

<sup>11</sup>*African Modernism - The Architecture of Independence* is a publication and exhibition project by Manuel Herz, which opened at the Vitra Museum Gallery from 20 Feb – 31 May, 2015.

<sup>12</sup>D'Banj, *Mo Bo Lowo Won*, Mo' Hits Records, 2005, YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF88ZSnd9vs> [accessed 27 June 2023]

<sup>13</sup>See also *Beer Parlour Philosophy*, a play by Bode Osanyin, which detailed the shenanigans and wisdom spewed by drunken men in Nigerian beer parlours.

<sup>14</sup>Jide Olanrewaju, *A History of Nigeria*, Actualize Production, 2013, YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgrVHrTxvC8&t=730s> [accessed 27 June 2023]

<sup>15</sup>As Robert Hewison points out Peckham was previously bordered in the north by the Grand Surrey Canal.

<sup>16</sup>Robert Hewison, *Passport to Peckham*, 2022.

<sup>17</sup>See also in the exhibition the work of Temitayo Shonibare which references hairstyles of the 1970s.

<sup>18</sup>Achille Mbembe, 'The Power of Archive and its Limits', *Refiguring the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton et al., Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002.

<sup>19</sup>Refuge, the theme of Lagos Biennial 2024.

<sup>20</sup>Sunny Ade and his Green Spot Band (1971). *Ile Labo Sinmi Oko*, The Orchard Music (On behalf of African Songs Ltd), 1971, YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WifXxOLEJVo&list=RDWifXxOLEJVo&index=1> [accessed 27 June 2023]

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Cover image: Adeyemi Michael, *Entitled*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

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Image: Adeyemi Michael, *Entitled*, 2018  
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