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2020–2022

Jane Lombard Fellows

JORGE GONZÁLEZ

for Escuela de Oficios

NAYANTARA GURUNG

KAKSHAPATI

for Nepal Picture Library

EMEKA OKEREKE

for Invisible Borders Trans-African  
Photographers Organization

UNDERGROUND RESISTANCE

for Submerge Project

As for  
Protocols

Vera List Center  
Forum 2021

As for  
Protocols

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# GLOBAL VOICES

2020–2022

Jane  
Lombard  
Fellows

The Jane Lombard Fellows were finalists for the Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice. What follows are the essays written by their nominators for the prize jury in the summer of 2020.

NayanTara  
Gurung  
Kakshapati:

Nepal Picture  
Library

Naeem Mohaiemen

To better appreciate the Asia-wide impact of Nepal Picture Library, it is helpful to zoom out and observe two specificities. The first is the poisoned legacy between South Asian nations soldered by the British Empire, most familiar in the eighty years of border tensions between what Salman Rushdie called “midnight’s children”—India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Separated peoples continue to enact history wars over border lines that some refuse to accept; this is manifested not only in the post-1947 Indian annexation of Kashmir and the decades of conflict that ensued, but also in the rupture of “two-wing” Pakistan into independent Bangladesh and reduced Pakistan. The toxin of disputed geographies spills into both Sri Lanka’s Tamil-Sinhalese civil war and into Myanmar, which has been pushing the Rohingya

people into Bangladesh. The second aspect is the journey of the photographic image in South Asia, where technological limits and the rupture of events have led to collections of images being destroyed through neglect and subterfuge. This twinned context of neighbors as “intimate enemy”<sup>1</sup> and photography as a site of neglect inspired Nepal Picture Library to be a paradigm reset (for image, archive, and memory) that pushed against the vectors of antagonism and erasure.

Nepal has struggled with internal schisms that owe to both colonialism’s toxins and the effluence of postcolonial disappointment. From 1996 to 2006, Nepal was caught in a brutal civil war between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the government. The Peace Accord signed in 2006 ended a period of death squad

executions, massacres, kidnappings, and other war crimes. This internal war bore similarities to Maoist uprisings in northeast India, earlier uprisings of the Jumma people of Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, and the Mohajir Qaumi movement in Pakistan. In a subcontinent with multiple nations fighting against each other over British-drawn borders, internal minorities are subjugated to a degree matching what they faced under empire. The library project wanted to push back against this shared history of violence—the manifesto was to build a community memory and map of Nepalese peoples, cultures, and lives from collections of everyday snapshots that often recorded “unimportant people.” Through the dissemination of this project across Asia, the intent was also to push against the veil of ignorance about each other that fed border schisms and internal wars.

Photography archives, especially based on family and personal snapshots (the fragments that can make up national history), have often surfaced in environments where the state is actively destroying, or suppressing, official records. One practitioner is the Beirut-based Arab Image Foundation, which was founded in 1997 by a group of Lebanese photographers. Within this archive is an explicit linkage to the region’s upheavals—thus, the collection may be of studio portraits, but there will be within that a *Fedayeen* soldier dressed in fatigues and carrying an unloaded gun. In contrast, Nepal Picture Library focused on collections that were quotidian and comprehensive. It was also a divergence from the first Nepalese project that we encountered in Bangladesh in the early 2000s. Designed by senior journalist Kunda Dixit, the 2009 project *Nepal: A People’s War* premiered with haunting images of Maoist guerrilla fighters in hiding.

Dixit’s *People’s War* came from a journalistic impulse to document “important” events (Sanjay Kak’s *Witness: Kashmir 1986–2016* makes similar use of photographs). Nepal Picture Library proposed a different method—its co-founder NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati, and the supporting organization Photo Circle,<sup>2</sup> worked in a space of visual arts where photographs were a primary means of communication and exchange, especially in a South Asian context with many competing vernacular languages.<sup>3</sup> While Photo Circle and Photo Kathmandu established a reputation for showcasing beautiful photography, Kakshapati and her colleagues on the Library project built a database and living archive of everyday snapshots taken by families. The Library began with this appeal, and has kept its resonance for ordinary Nepalese: “Do you have old family photos sitting in

boxes, dusty and molding, close to destruction?”

While the initial call went out to everyone who may have personal snapshots, studio photographers are well represented, including Amrit Bahadur Chitrakar, Karuna Sthapit, Surendra Lawoti, Aata Husai Sheikh, Purna Bahadur Shrestha, and Ravi Mohan Shrestha. These images remind us of the Arab Image Foundation as well—both the variety and symmetry, in the way people pose for formal portraits with their families and loved ones. Posed portraits in front of staged backgrounds also come from personal home archives—the collections of Karuna Sthapit and Surendra Lawoti have many studio photographs, but they themselves are not studio photographers. Start delving into the Library’s searchable database (still a work in progress and in need of funds to make it truly comprehensive), and its thematic groupings reveal the beauty in the ordinary. “Politics” is one keyword, but far more numerous are the categories that matter to Nepalese across time—“Travel,” “Leisure,” “Fashion,” “Festivals,” and, for the union of the whole, “Weddings.” What does all this mean for a history of intertwined South Asia? This is where the open source, collaborative nature of Nepal Picture Library comes in. Their objective is to digitize and make available their full holdings online, with an invitation to researchers to dig through the collections, and from there write reports, make films, or give lectures based on the material. The library has been keen to not take on the authoritative “last word” on the meanings of these images. Rather they have left that to the viewer as a citizen-researcher.

I have mentioned the eroding condition of the archives in South Asia, accelerated by local climatic conditions, and also hostile state organs and officials. Writing about the destruction of the Bangladesh image archives, I wrote in 2012: “I asked the custodian where the originals were. The documents he had shown me were pristine yet distant, copies of copies. The originals are long gone, he explained. Every time there is a change in government, an official inevitably comes down to the storeroom and asks to see what is inside. With a tradition of abrupt and forced *pala bodol*, every state functionary assumes that nothing that came before his time will help his cause. Therefore, the safest path is to destroy all documents, which the official does with mechanical and unemotional efficiency.”<sup>4</sup> It is not only meddling bureaucrats that make records vanish, weather and related life-forms also eat away (figuratively and literally) at the archive. An anthropologist researching the roots of the idea of “Islamic banking” recently posted a heart-breaking photograph from the National



Nepal Picture Library, Patan Durbar Square, 2018. Photo by Chemi Dorje Lama. Local women visiting The Feminist Memory Project exhibition at Patan Durbar Square as part of Photo Kathmandu 2018.

Archives of Bangladesh. The ledgers of the British Colonial administration were too far in the past to be sensitive or censored. But when she opened up bound volumes that had not been touched in a decade, a small rivulet of paper-eating worms spilled out—the ledgers were scarred by dozens of worm food channels across each page.

Such archives face rapid decay in South Asia, and Nepal Picture Library's drive is to build a digital archive before materials are lost. There is an intensely urgent feel to the Library's communications: "If you want to contribute your photographs to Nepal Picture Library, digitization and archiving facilities WILL NOT COST YOU a single rupee." followed by "Please send us an email with your information and we will schedule a meeting as soon as possible. There is not a day to lose!" With this sense of urgency, Nepal Picture Library has become the repository for one of the largest image collections in Nepal within five years. Scanning from every vintage format, including glass plates, negatives, and printed photos, the current count is 120,000 images and growing. This spans 380 named collections (either after a photographer or a family), of which the largest are Sridhar Lal Manandhar Collection (9,000), Betty Woodsend Collection (6,000), Bikas Rauniar Collection (2,400), and the Amod Dev Bhattarai Collection (2,500).

Working with citizen-researchers, the Library has begun to produce curated exhibitions, books, and standalone websites as visitors find new ways to think through what arrives as a "raw dump" of images. Gleaning a sprawling catalogue, Nepal Picture Library has published the books *Facing the Camera—A History of Nepali Studio Photography* and *Juju Bhai Dhakhwa—Keeper of Memories*. A key publication that aligns with the Library's mission of fighting casteism, racism, and nationalism in South Asia is *Dalit—A Quest for Dignity*. This book collates photographs on Dalit (subaltern peoples within Hinduism's caste system) resistance over six decades using archival photographs to "demand an accounting of obscured histories" and the "processes of inclusion and exclusion." The commitment shown in *Dalit* expands further into a new project begun in 2019, which looks at the idea of "Indigenous Pasts, Sustainable Futures." Through archive building and storytelling, the Library reimagines conversations around traditional knowledge systems, and Indigenous ideas of futurity. Expanding from the book form, the online project *The Skin of Chitwan* looks at terrestrial change through images and sounds of personal memories of the past.

One of the Library's significant new projects,

*The Public Life of Women: A Feminist Memory Project*,<sup>5</sup> came to Bangladesh in the form of a traveling exhibition, and I saw it again in Delhi at India Art Fair. Building from a public call put out in 2018, the project collected photographs, letters, diary entries, pamphlets, and other formal and informal records documenting the role women have played in Nepal's contemporary history since the 1930s. It announced the challenge of a "past [that] needed to be freed from the grips of economically and culturally dominant groups." Standing at 8,000 photographs two years later, it has brought a feminist history of Asia outside the familiar stories of work in domestic spaces to take in the full possibility of participation in public life. In a fast-evolving economic scenario, South Asian women are now in factories, offices, and organizations in unprecedented numbers. This dramatic increase in women's public visibility, and men's fears of losing space and power, has faced backlash across India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The propaganda arm of that backlash has proposed that these jobs, and the necessity for women in those spaces, are "new," "imported," and in spite of a long history of local feminist organizing, "foreign." The response to these intrigues is the Feminist Memory Project, which insists, *we have always been here, and we won't go back inside*.

Nepal is a vital nerve center in the fight to reclaim a common memory, against the dark centrifugal forces that drive peoples further apart. The future takes shape because of this sharp look back at *where we came from*—to understand *where we go next*.

Nomination statement by Naeem Mohaiemen, August 2020

1 Nandy, Ashis. *Intimate enemy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

2 <https://www.photocircle.com.np/>

3 Mitchell, Lisa. *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India. The Making of a Mother Tongue*. Indiana University Press, 2009.

4 Mohaiemen, Naeem. "Prisoners of Shothik Itihash," *New Age*, March 31, 2012.

5 Video: <https://vimeo.com/359396369>.



# Emeka Okereke: Invisible Borders Trans-African Photographers Organization

## Naeem Mohaiemen



Lugards Rest House I, Lokoja, Nigeria, 2016.  
© Emeka Okereke. Courtesy of Invisible Borders Trans-African Project, 2016.

The last time I remember smiling at a newspaper was three weeks before global headlines were swallowed up by a living organism, when 2020 became *annus horribilis* (“terrible year”). I was in Dhaka in February working on a new film, and Emeka Okereke and the Invisible Borders team were installing their project at the national Shilpakala Academy. Emeka handed me a copy of *The Trans-Bangladeshi*,<sup>1</sup> a newspaper published jointly by Invisible Borders Trans-African Photographers Organization and Bangladesh’s Pathshala photography school. The immediate sign that something was pleasantly awry was the price—“Taka 0,” a gentle way of announcing a barter or gift exchange. The haunting cover photograph had both the Bangladeshi photographers I knew well (Sayed Asif Ahmed, Sadia Marium, and others) and a team of African writers and photographers who were on their first trip to Bangladesh. Captured by Emeka, the black-and-white image had a sepia sheen that rendered the team members copacetic beyond their passports, differences marked only by small glimmers of local fashion.

But what is *local* anyway? In Invisible Borders’ imagination, a shawl was equally likely to be a roadside find in Lagos or a gift from a Dhaka friend. In its staging, it also reminded me of Okereke’s images for an African road-trip (*Dilemma of a New Age II*, 2012)—the gas station attendant holding a petrol pump nozzle to his head, as if to say to a rapacious world: *you’re trying to kill me*. The lead news story in this Africa-Asia joint newspaper was

Kay Ugede’s “Let’s Try On New Clothes.” The rest of the newspaper alternated between English articles and Bangla texts from the local artists. Again, if to say: *those who know will read, we don’t always translate to make it easy*. Three weeks later, much of the world would go into the long lockdown—Invisible Borders’ beautiful project to break down checkpoints between African nations, and between Africa and Asia, suddenly faced a new opponent. Since March 2020, a hygiene regime has been attached to surveillance and border controls, the global movement of humans is seemingly at a hard stop. This is a necessary time to insist that the idea of a Trans-African Organization must not be allowed to perish in this pandemic. A dream of open borders—through journeys, stories, and images, between African and Asian nations—stands in contrast to the nightmares that have gripped our lives, accelerated by autocratic dictators, North and South.

For a decade, Invisible Borders has been committed to a journey that surpasses the incentive-reward system of contemporary art circulation. The making of work can be as heterogeneous and universal as we wish and will it. However, the majority of capital flowing around art distribution remains concentrated in Europe and North America. Because money always shouts, its selections and favorites try to stand in for all of contemporary art. A familiar journey is for the artist from the Global South to gain legibility and accelerated circulation through recognition by Northern

gatekeepers. Even the performance of authentic forms is striated with this wondering: *which audience matters?* From the beginning, Invisible Borders and its expanding team have insisted that the dialogue is between the many Souths, and not for a Western audience. In particular, the collective has taken on the format of the long-form road trip as a building block, focused on pulling together African nations through their peoples, rather than an obstinate state machinery.

Lagos, Nigeria has been the nerve center of the project since 2009, but from there the road trips radiate outward across the continent as part of a trans-African exchange. Starting as a project where artists took photographs as they crossed into each country, the project expanded to encompass literature, film, and performance art. Individual projects, such as a celebrated Lagos to Maputo 2018 road trip, stretched into fifty days with equal numbers of entries, from exuberant music videos to a sober assessment of Rwanda's post-genocide futurity. While real-time sharing and video diaries are a visible aspect of how the project makes itself known during and after a journey, this project is not concerned with the *over-production* of material and archives. Look closely at the mission statement and the emphasis is unmistakable: "*collective journey* of the participating artists who, during their *momentary* stops in capital cities"—the long travels are the point, not the arrival or destination.

This is not a project focused on grand outcomes or tangible milestones, as those favored by NGO-modeled arts funding today. A great volume of work is produced, but communications underscore the transformations and friendships among the artists on the long-distance bus. This is present especially in the focus on the after-life of the journey, when artists return to their own countries and cities. The focus on borders as lines to break and overcome gives Invisible Borders a possibility to create something new outside the nation-state form, and it is best expressed in the psyche and artworks made by the alumni of this project many months after the road trip has ended, when they are back in their own homes. Except the idea of a "home" in Africa has permanently changed, because of what the artists learnt from each other, in ways that are both symbiotic and friction-laden. The Congolese artist finds herself unable to stereotype Nigeria's oil-riches, and the Cameroonian photographer is haunted by the energy of a Kigali that defies Hollywood's *Hotel Rwanda*. Invisible Borders meticulously documents all works produced with different do-it-yourself (DIY), scrappy website hosting platforms (blogspot being the earliest) that also stand as testament to a

decade of technology shifts. Follow projects since 2009 and you can trace a repeated, looping, and accumulative line of movement, and a focus on what happens to the travelers afterward.

I started with a memory from Bangladesh, and this was not a random itinerary for the Invisible Borders Trans-African concept—rather, it universalized their idea of Africa. In 1972 Walter Rodney published the iconic *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Fifty years later, Invisible Borders audaciously proposes the contrapuntal arc: How Africa might show a path for building warm neighbors instead of hostile walls. After traversing the African continent, the project expanded to post-war Sarajevo for a road trip between Africa and Europe's former Socialist Bloc periphery. In a similar spirit, the team traveled in 2020 from various African countries to a central airport, and from there to Bangladesh. Finally, with a group of Bangladeshi artists, they set out to one of Asia's most heavily militarized map lines—the Bangladesh-India border, a site of shootings and killings by Indian soldiers of desperate Bangladeshi migrants. As anthropologist Delwar Hussain outlined in *Boundaries Undermined* (2013), this border is the site of lethal military surveillance, and at the same time it is a bustling microscopic scale city on a border line, where sexuality, commerce, bureaucracy, and leisure collide and overlap. It is this perpetual push-pull between danger and promise that is captured in Invisible Borders' joint project produced as a newspaper and exhibition this spring.<sup>1</sup>

The spirit of *more roads / less walls* is captured decisively in the images and prose that Invisible Borders has left for Bangladeshi artists to savor and build on in the coming years. The Islamic preacher who tries to pronounce Nigeria as "Nai-je-ria," the young villagers who ask with naivete about dreadlocks, and finally Innocence, a member of the road trip, patiently obliging requests for selfies from villagers who are meeting African artists for the first time.

Finally, I treasure a quiet image of three young Indians at the Hili border checkpoint between India and Bangladesh, eagerly snapping mobile phone images of the artists. Their easy smiles and enthusiasm stand in sharp rebuke to the heavily armed border guards of their own nation.

Nomination statement by Naeem Mohaiemen, August 2020

1 *The Trans-Bangladeshi*, Invisible Borders Trans-African Organization and Drik Network/Pathshala/Chobi Mela. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ma9\\_wFzNdWu0P8JsNeqwmHRq79wZ3nl/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ma9_wFzNdWu0P8JsNeqwmHRq79wZ3nl/view)