By the 1950s, photographs became an increasingly familiar sight in popular print media throughout Africa. Commonly found in “modern” magazines, photographs were also enlisted to illustrate graphic novels that told dramatic pulp stories based on American models. This paper takes a closer look at one of these magazines—Atoka: The Yorùbá Photoplay Series—which was written in local Yoruba dialect, with stories inspired by local traveling theatre practices in southwestern Nigeria.

Although, Atoka was part of a continent-wide phenomenon of “photonovels”, it stood out by using photographs to address local audiences through sensory (visual, oral, etc), didactic (moral, comedic, etc) and discursive (political, religious, etc) registers. Amid historical debates about modernist consciousness, class, consumerism, and nationalism, Atoka offered an informal and highly dialogic space for public discourse. This talk will explore how artifacts of cultural histories mediated local, “national”, and pan-African discussions about cultural and political identity, even as African states navigated decolonization and its postcolonial aftermath.