

Posing Questions: Identity Construction in the Portrait Studios of Bamako, Mali

By Jessica Owens

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Professor Sarah Miller

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University of California Santa Cruz

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The studio portraits of Malick Sidibé represent a unique moment in the history of Mali, in its transformation from a country under French colonial rule to an independent country under a Socialist government and later a military dictatorship. The portraits are visually simplistic in that they don't have elaborate lighting or show a mastery of printing technique and they depict everyday, middle class people; but their historical context opens up a conversation of postcolonial African identity construction that is still a pertinent subject of contemporary artists. The studio space carries a unique significance to this period in Mali's history as a place of refuge from the harsh, scrutinizing eye of the colonial camera lens. Photography studios were established first by French entrepreneurs and later by their Malian apprentices who embedded a new social element into the exchange that took place in the studio. Like Sidibé, his predecessor, Seydou Keïta, was one such apprentice that worked as a studio portraitist in the period leading up to Mali's Independence. Sidibé mostly photographed in the period after Independence and also took on another element to this documentation with his more candid shots of youth events in and around Mali's capitol, Bamako. The photographs of Keïta and Sidibé present the opportunity of being an active agent in constructing an individual's and a society's identity in a postcolonial period. Where contemporary artists of the Western world work to deconstruct the signs of identity and individuality in the image, the people of Mali collaborate with studio photographers to construct identities in order to come to terms with larger notions of nationalism and authenticity. This essay will reflect on Mali's history of colonialism, independence, and post colonialism, negotiated space, self-fashioning, studio and documentary photography and the Western world's response to such images in the 1990s. Bamako's studio portrait subjects lend themselves to the myth of Eurocentric modernity through self-fashioning in order to negotiate a

postcolonial identity and rearticulate the sign system that historically served to justify their colonization.

Roland Barthes' notion of mythology is useful in understanding how African colonial and postcolonial identity is configured around notions of European dominance and African subservience. Photography, historically, has been an instrumental tool in both colonial reinforcement of these mythologies, their presentation of Africa to the Western world, and later, as the medium through which Africans subvert this mythology and negotiate their postcolonial identity. Mythologies reified the position of colonizer over colonized and highlighted the binary between savage and civilized, modern and primitive. From the perspective of the European audience consuming images of the colonized African, there was always the need to view the *evolué* subject as a "poor imitation" of a civilized European, therefore the colonial endeavor would never culminate in a fully Westernized African that challenges his colonizer as an equal.¹ This is an interesting point when discussing the Western response to the work of Sidibé and Keïta, as the interpretation of these images may still be influenced by the history of ethnographic photography widely distributed in Europe and the United States. African interaction with the mythologies imposed on them results in mimicry and imitation. This is not, however, indicative of assimilation and agreement with this system of signs. This is something to be acknowledged when understanding the use of western objects as props for communicating a postcolonial identity rather than as a sign of neo-colonialism. It is also important to recognize that Africans did not share the impulse to "refashion the other, either in their own image or as mythological

¹ Kaspin, Deborah D, "Conclusion: Signifying Power in Africa," in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Paul Stuart Landau, and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 328.

opposite”² but there was the impulse to mimic the colonizer’s culture. I would suggest that in the case of Sidibé and Keïta, this mimicry was in celebration of European culture, occasionally tinged with satire. And as Deborah Kaspin reminds us, imitation is culturally motivated,³ and such motivation will be further explored in the later discussion of self-fashioning.

Mythology is thus the ideal outlet for challenging colonial rule as individuals subvert these mythologies and their signs by first internalizing them and then reshaping them in order to resist a passive, disempowered stance.⁴ Hudita Mustafa explores one such example of reconstituting European mythology in Senegalese popular portraiture. The photographic portraiture conventions introduced to Senegal in the colonial period visually translated the binary between civility and savagery. While those conventions still influenced the urban Senegalese photographers and their clients, they were reinterpreted as a binary of sophistication and rudeness, which represented a range of social personas to be embodied.⁵ It has been suggested that European mythology was reinterpreted as a means of distinguishing social class and aspiration among Africans, rather than racial difference between Europeans and Africans. While this suggestion has neo-colonial implications, it seems as though there is more political agency to be accounted for, specifically in negotiated terms of an African nationalism. This is most evident in the documentary series, *Party Photos* of Sidibé following the youth culture in Bamako in the 1960’s and ‘70s. As Mustafa suggests, this documentation both problematizes existing notions of nationalism at the time, and indicates the influence of Pan-African and Diaspora aesthetics.⁶ And once the postcolonial era began, the colonial mythology, the signs previously used to dominate

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 329.

⁶ Diawara, Manthia, "The 1960s in Bamako: Malick Sidibé and James Brown," in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry Justin Elam, and Kennell A. Jackson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 244.

colonized people, had already been “domesticated” or reconstituted for African visual expressions, resulting in a synthesized version, an African mythology so to speak.⁷ Thus, a “negotiated space”⁸ emerges between the markers of colonial and postcolonial identity, and an uncritical performance of the self becomes evident through posing and self-fashioning, the very evidence by which Barthes dismisses identity as purely construction.

In the period leading up to independence in Mali, there were many debates surrounding nationalism and the shape that African postcolonial identity should take. Of course, the theorization of the African identity was no easy task at this moment when many of these intellectual conversations were being formulated within European political and cultural systems. One widely supported ideology was centered on forming an African political tradition grounded in African historicity and synthesizing of African and European values.

Manthia Diawara notes another African writer and politician, Aimé Césaire, instrumental in the *Negritude* literary movement, who believed that in the postcolonial period Africans would return to an authentic self. The likeminded politicians that served as prototypes for this *Negritude* movement were all fiercely nationalist and anti-imperialist.⁹ But many pre-colonial African traditions had undergone a transformation into a synthesized tradition, heavily influenced by Christian and Islamic practice, or erased completely, particularly polygamist occult rituals embedded in cultural practices. Diawara disagrees with Césaire’s theory and uses the alienation of Mali’s youth culture to suggest otherwise. He states that Sidibé’s documentary photographs depict an undercurrent of resistance to the political views of Africa’s then leaders, highlighting a

⁷ Kaspin, "Conclusion", 333.

⁸ Mustafa, Hudita Nura, "Portraits of Modernity: Fashioning Selves in Dakarois Popular Photography," in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Paul Stuart Landau, and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 188.

⁹ Diawara, "The 1960s in Bamako", 248.

rift in continuity of ideas on nationalism and modernism. In the newfound Independence of Mali in the 1960s a Socialist government took power and implemented restrictions that primarily targeted youth culture; curfews, “reeducation camps” for those inclined towards afro hairstyles, bell bottom pants and miniskirts, and this enforcement was continued by the military dictatorship after 1968. The youth depicted in Sidibé’s *Party Photos* were evidently not in compliance with the accepted expression of tradition and nationalism held by their political leaders. The youth’s embracing of Western culture was a strategy for articulating their newfound independence, misunderstood as assimilation and mimicry that limited “authentic self-actualization”.¹⁰ Diawara notes, “The youth had quickly internalized African culture, collapsed the walls of binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, and made connections beyond national frontiers with the diaspora and international youth movements.”¹¹ The youth empowered themselves and structured their own notion of postcolonial identity using the language and signifiers of their colonizers while also feeding off of Diaspora influences. They recognized that nationalism restricted to African tradition of the past, would ultimately stifle self-expression and ignore the multicultural influences at work in Africa. In constructing a postcolonial identity, they engaged themselves in a dialogue of modernity, self-expression and multinational identity politics.

The political debates surrounding African identity in this period prior to independence are subtly articulated in the portraits that Keïta produces during the ‘30s and ‘40s. They are not explicitly problematizing colonial imaging or engaging postcolonial discourses, but still situating the subjects within the “ideological framework of the African experience”¹² of that time. They also present the influence of Islamic modernity over the region, further broadening the scope of

¹⁰ Diawara, "The 1960s in Bamako", 248

¹¹ Ibid., 249.

¹² Enwezor, "Colonial Imaginary, Tropes of Disruption", 32.

cultural exchanges that African was apart of. In the period after independence in 1960, synthesizing European cultural influences with traditional African values that were previously denied expression became a strategy for self-invention and carving out space for a postcolonial identity. One such example is the concepts of *fadenya* and *badenya*, derived from polygamy, that signify the complexity of identity and the individual in relation to the community, explained by Candace Keller.¹³ *Badenya*, which is understood literally as the connection between children that share the same mother and father, but more generally, connotes such characteristics as harmony, cohesion and societal obligation, and both intimate and larger communities. *Fadenya* literally, refers to the competition and jealousy between siblings that share the same father and have different mothers, but connotes individuality, identity and reputation building, and is often associated with youth.

Badenya is also associated with the notion of *jeya*, or clarity and structure, which visually referred to a sense of harmony and stability. Sidibé translated *jeya* aesthetics by composing group portraits into stable circle, rectangle, diamond and pyramid formations. He would also utilize soft, uniform lighting to give the overall effect of truthful, straightforward depictions. One such example is *Les jeunes circoncis et leur maître* [The newly circumcised and their teacher], 1983 (fig. 4) which documents an initiation into Jo society. The formation of the group suggests childhood innocence and education received from their wise mentor, guiding these youth to adulthood. There is a sense of community values being transferred from one generation to the next. *Fadenya* values were visually communicated through *dibi*, or darkness and obscurity, which took the form of ambiguity. The *dibi* aesthetic was achieved by an emphasis on decorative aspects like adornment, vividly patterned textiles and decoration. The aspect of ambiguity

¹³ Keller, Candace M, "Visual Griots: Identity, Aesthetics, and the Social Roles of Portrait Photographers in Mali," in *Portraiture and Photography in Africa*, ed. John Pepper, and Elisabeth L. Cameron (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2013), 364.

important to *dibi* was translated through obstruction of the face and body, as shown in Sidibé's portrait, *Portrait de Mlle Kanté Sira* [Portrait of Miss Kanté Sira], 1965 (fig. 3). Although this portrait is not overly decorative, it accomplishes the same isolation of the viewer that the patterned textiles do, and highlighting the sitter's individuality and independence. Her back is turned away from the camera and she looks over her shoulder but not directly at the camera. Her elaborately braided hairstyle, clothing and accessories accentuate the persona she has chosen to express. The glare of the glasses obstructs her eyes and obscures her identity, while she smirks away from the camera, increasing the sense of mysteriousness in her portrayal. Such portraits shroud their sitter in mystery and deny access to straightforward representation. Keller traces *dibi* back to a historical importance in *griot* performance and the psychological power of inaccessibility.¹⁴ *Jeya* and *dibi* connote binaries of social organization and tradition in the colonial and postcolonial period, of clarity and obscurity, the stable, dependable promises of community-based identity in dialogue with the dynamic, competitive self-constructed identity.

Now, shifting focus to the portrait photography studio, it was a site of social and cultural transactions and dialogues, for collaborations between the photographer and sitter. Keller suggests that Keïta and Sidibé took on the role of visual *griot*¹⁵, as they embellished and flattered the sitter with their loaded signs of visual representations. The portrait photographer's job was to emphasize some features while minimizing others in order to create the most flattering portrayal of the sitter. The sitter in turn constructs the environment that will provide the appropriate signifiers of their identity, choosing from a number of consumer goods, contemporary and traditional clothing items and decorative textiles, both personal and provided by the photographer, and piecing together an environment with a meaning of personal value to them.

¹⁴ Keller, "Visual Griots", 392.

¹⁵ "Visual Griot" is termed by Keller and is a western notion that is based on the verbal *griot* tradition.

Keïta's sitters were experimenting with various expressions of modernity, class distinction and aspirations. Male sitters primarily utilized these symbols of economic connectivity to Europe, while women focused more on traditional African dress and hairstyling, which held embedded meanings to a Malian audience. As Michelle Lamunière points out, "Photography allowed those who were not well placed socially or financially the means to experiment with these expressions of modernity."¹⁶ Experimentation, in Keïta's subjects related more to economic aspirations and the individual's place in Malian colonial society than the experimentation that Sidibé's subjects took on with identity and cultural engagement. Okwui Enwezor challenges the reading of Keïta's subjects as having a "petit-bourgeois attachment to Western fetish-objects"¹⁷ by suggesting three key points. First, this reading ignores the distinctly African aesthetics that hold weight over European aesthetics. Secondly, it doesn't consider the impact of Islamic modernity on Africans and the cultural exchanges between the two. And third, he suggests that there is evidence of a critique on colonial subjectivity and how it "sought to replace African memories with its own" because of the engagement these portraits have with other modes of subjectivity.¹⁸ The documentary photography of Sidibé reflects a shift in portrait conventions that imitate the more relaxed post-independence environment in Mali. They also indicate a distinct change in the intentions behind self-fashioning from purposes of class distinction and economic aspiration suggested in Keïta's subjects, because the youth culture at this time was actively rejecting colonial-era notions of this type of class (and tribal) distinction. Take, for example, the division

¹⁶ Lamunière, Michelle, *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé* (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 2001), 38.

¹⁷ Enwezor, Okwui, *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2006), 26.

¹⁸ Ibid.

of youth communities into *Grins*, or social clubs who fashioned themselves as rebels against more traditional societal distinction.¹⁹

Clothing and textiles play a special role in these portraits because of their potent signification. Many of the textiles have embedded meanings and phrases that would translate facts about the identity of the individual who owns them, that would be completely lost to someone outside of Malian culture without proper translation. Keïta's Untitled portrait (fig. 2) between two women holding their children, is actually expressing ideas related to the struggle of two women for the support of their shared husband, indicated by the name of the fabric they both wear, "the jealous dark eyes of my co-wife".²⁰ Portraits were also used to document and show off the new hairstyles and clothing of the sitter. These portraits serve as documentation of both changing fashion and trends in Mali as well as changes in social beliefs and practices. As Malian society became more relaxed in regards to elaborate hairstyles in place of headscarves and adoption of a more European-influenced style of dress, the photographs reflect these shifts, and act as a valuable socio-historical record. This is evident in the change of style of dress from Keïta's subjects to Sidibé's. In the '30s and '40s when Keïta's studio was in its heyday, women were expected to carry out Malian tradition in their more moderate clothing and dress whereas men were more inclined to adopt Western styles. By contrast, in the '60s and '70s, when Sidibé was documenting the youth of Mali, there were an increasing number of sitters, male and female, who donned Western garbs, shorter lengths and more relaxed styles for men, such as bellbottoms in place of suits. Clothing also played a key role in the imaginative and experimental aspect of constructing identity. Many subjects assumed the role of different characters and archetypes.

¹⁹ Diawara, "The 1960s in Bamako", 251.

²⁰ Lamunière, "*You Look Beautiful Like That*", 36.

Young male schoolteachers in the 1950s fashioned themselves as French dandies, or *zazous* to express their admiration for the French symbolists like Mallarmé.²¹ French and western “tough guy” film characters and tropes became popular with young men from the ‘50s to ‘70s. The clothing gave their wearers the opportunity to assume idealized identities and social roles, including the boxer, as exemplified in Sidibé’s portrait, *Boxeurs en démonstration* [Boxers giving a demonstration], 1965 (fig. 1). The men are posed in the studio as if they are in the midst of a boxing match. Two of them directly address the camera with an authoritative look while the other two are engulfed in the action. The four men are hardly contained in the frame of the image and the studio space; one man still wears his sandals. But the iconography of the scene has a distinct, authentic feeling that seems nostalgic of Western imagery. The sitters were performing for the camera but also for themselves, using representational tools as a means of social experimentation.

The use of Western commodity objects as props for portrait photography is of particular interest to the argument of constructing postcolonial identity. Posing with European objects as props can be interpreted as an assimilative measure but these photographs were circulating among African people and thus had different meanings than if they were made for a European audience. Lamunière suggests that the props were a way of “expressing urbanity and enthusiasm for modern life”²² But this is dangerously suggestive of the colonial photography in which Africans were posed with European objects to emphasize the civilizing effect of colonizing primitive people. In both of these instances, European modernity, as exemplified through consumer goods, is given precedence over African modernity and material culture. The

²¹ Keller, “Visual Griots”, 371.

²² Lamunière, “*You Look Beautiful Like That*”, 19.

functional role of the studio portraits also determined the interpretation of the western prop objects. While the colonial photography was produced for a Western audience's consumption, and was widely unavailable in Africa, the studio portraits were made for circulation among African people and thus the European objects held different connotations, and presented different information about the sitter to an African audience. In Sidibé's portraits we again see a shift in the number of props used in the '60s and '70s with many clients instead opting for the stark studio space. This may indicate a change in the preferred method of self-fashioning, shifting focus from external signifiers to the individual's look and personality, which happens to coincide with more relaxed attitudes towards European dress and clothing. Okwui Enwezor makes an important distinction in the following quotation:

The use of the props is not, however, a simplistic binary separation between Africa and the West, but could be understood as enabling the possibility of play the idea of constructing an image of the sitter, and thus the myth of status, that may be attributed to the objects employed in the game.²³

Props indicate an important aspect of identity construction in that it allowed play and experimentation, a construction of the myth of status. They also highlight the artificiality of self-fashioning; they confront the viewer with the notion of passing judgment of character based on material goods as signifier, and they seem to indicate that there is more going on beneath the façade.

Posing also indicates a distinction between colonial and postcolonial imaging of African people. For instance, the African subjects of colonial portraiture often don a passive or removed, upward gaze. This gives the viewer the dominating stance of looking down and over the colonial subject. Both Keïta and Sidibé's portraits are notably stark in the leveling and intensive gaze of

²³ Enwezor, "Gesture, Pose, Mimesis", 31.

the subject that imbues them with a sense of respectability. This distinction between colonial and postcolonial portraits indicates a straying away from the portraiture conventions, and towards a more African style. Two particular poses appear to stem from an African tradition of representation. One in which the subject is seated, roughly eye-level or slightly elevated from the viewer, legs slightly apart and hands resting on the knees or thighs, recalls the pose of African royalty. Another, is more casual with one knee bent and the foot planted firmly on a chair, and the elbow resting on the raised knee with the hand to the chin, indicating a stance of power, stability and authority. One pose which Keïta considers his innovation and which recalls the three-quarter position of classic Renaissance portraiture is referred to as the “angled bust portrait”. This engagement with compositional elements positions the sitter angled slightly to the left or right of the camera, which is angled in the opposite direction, and with the face positioned either straight forward or in three-quarter view, the torso appears to lean towards the edge of the frame, signifying prominent visibility and importance.²⁴ There are also poses that indicate a synthesis of European and African portraiture conventions, such as the odalisque. This pose stems directly from the European Orientalist tradition of depicting African and Middle Eastern subjects as an exoticized (and eroticized) other. Keïta and Sidibé both utilized this pose wrought with signification, on African subjects who were primarily fashioning themselves, often in a domestic manner, and for a private commissioned portrait. This reinterpretation of a pose that once left the subject passive as the object of desire, suggest a desensitizing and a disabling of that power structure. But for the African viewer this pose has different connotations, notes Diawara, as it is mainly associated with social status and unmarried women who invite suitors to their

²⁴ Keller, "Visual Griots", 380.

home.²⁵ The eroticism of the pose is still intentionally addressed, but in a way that suggest the agency of the female sitter and her self-fashioning.²⁶ The collaborative aspect of the portraits between the photographer and sitter, both of whom share a cultural dialect, create a space of representation that allows photographic conventions and their signifiers, to be internalized and reinterpreted.

Probably the most recognizable innovation of African portraiture is the use of bright and contrasting textiles as backgrounds. Keïta is perhaps the most well known example of this as he incorporated textiles in a variety of ways from 1948 to 1962.²⁷ His use of textiles emphasized the unique features of his sitters and created an elaborate noise of layered, clashing patterns and designs that illustrated the richness of the fabrics and their signified monetary value, but which also sharply contrasts to the painted scenery of colonial portrait backdrops. The emphasis on the distinct features of the sitter differs from the intentions of colonial photographers who often used images in aid of Eugenicist theories, because of the way that the portrait depicted the individual as beautiful and idealized versions of themselves. The use of textile backgrounds also made it possible for his studio to become a mobile site, which worked to highlight the artificiality of the studio as a constructed environment. This becomes evident in the foreground of the image, which, in many of Keïta's portraits, is just the dirt ground of his home courtyard or the streets of Bamako. Sidibé used a similar technique when he pulled the camera frame back far enough to reveal the mundane environment surrounding the backdrop and sitter. The portraits acknowledge the measured boundaries of their construction, as much as they acknowledge self-fashioning as construction. They then transcend those boundaries, perhaps suggesting that the constructions are

²⁵ Lamunière, "*You Look Beautiful Like That*", 31.

²⁶ Recalling such work of such contemporary African diaspora artist, Mickalene Thomas.

²⁷ Keller, "Visual Griots", 380.

the substance of identities of these sitters, so that they do not exist outside of life, but are in fact, intimately woven into those lived experiences.

Now, to speak of studio portraiture more generally, the first interest in popular studio photography is seen in the exchange of postcard-sized photographs that were traded and shared with friends and relatives, locally and abroad. This interest eventually moved on to larger scale portraits, typically of celebrities and political leaders, to be displayed in living rooms. Interestingly, Keïta and Sidibé have stated that they did not consider themselves artists at the time that their portrait photographs were made because of the focus on the commercial element of their work. By the 1940s and 50s portrait studios became popular destinations on Saturdays and around Islamic holidays to document the special occasions.²⁸ Lamunière suggests that the portraits exist on the “threshold of private and public life”²⁹ as they stood in as transactions of social exchanges and political standing, the scale of the image indicating the status of the sitter. The intentions behind creating studio portraits also changed from the period before Independence to the postcolonial period. Keïta photographed middle class people from 1945 to 1964 and he and his sitters were primarily concerned with representing themselves as a part of the bourgeoisie, modern *Bamakois* people.³⁰ In the period after Independence, people were less interested in being connected to the colonial administration and instead sought the power of their newfound economic and social independence. Enwezor suggests that to go to Keïta’s studio in this period meant to be included in the “emerging mythology of modern self-fashioning”³¹ and to be a part of a physical manifestation of postcolonial identity politics. Furthermore, the portrait is used as a semiotic device in which the sitter is actively engaging signs to construct their own

²⁸ Keller, "Visual Griots", 368.

²⁹ Lamunière, "*You Look Beautiful Like That*", 16.

³⁰ Diawara, "The 1960s in Bamako", 246.

³¹ Enwezor, "Gesture, Pose, Mimesis", 33.

representation, rather than the photographer acting as a detached, independent creator of the pictorial signs. The general style of the studio portrait, because of its obvious artifice, allows for a space in which, “people can safely explore what it might be like to be both postcolonial and without shame,”³² as Liam Buckley has stated in his discussion of *saay saay* or shamelessness. This concept seems to be an integral part of the posture of self-fashioning, but can also be understood more broadly as a key element that allows for a construction of identity, even by means of a European lexicon, after it had been denied for so long under colonial rule.

It is also worth noting that Keïta’s studio can be understood as spatially conceptual because of his use of textile backdrops, which links him to the African tradition of itinerant portraitists that were instrumental in challenging conventions of portraiture, and in ushering in a new African tradition of photography. As was mentioned previously, Keïta used his home courtyard as a studio space, but he was also able to travel around Bamako, incorporating architectural elements and landscapes as backdrops and settings. The studio itself was constituted of the textiles backdrop, which varied widely from solid colors to one or many patterned textiles, layered to create a rich, engulfing background. Sidibé carried on this tradition, later employing the same dense textile patterns, signifying the historical importance of this aesthetic trademark. But for Sidibé’s clientele, realism was becoming an increasingly important criteria for self-fashioning, leading him to more documentary style photography.

Sidibé was one of the first studio photographers to venture out and shoot with a smaller and cheaper 35mm. camera³³ in a photo-journalistic fashion. His series, such as *Party Photos*,

³² Buckley, Liam, “Portrait Photography in a Post Colonial Age: How Beauty Tells the Truth,” in *Portraiture and Photography in Africa*, ed. John Peffer, and Elisabeth L. Cameron (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2013), 310.

³³ As opposed to the conventional large format, glass-plated cameras of the studio.

indicates an attention to compositional elements, low angles and dramatic lighting. In this way one could say they are staged similarly to the studio portraits, but instead convey the message of candidness and youthful energy, the result of a musically fueled international youth movement. They seemingly capture the lively social events of Mali's youth culture, but in fact, such events at this time would have been under incredible scrutiny, and they were in many cases prohibited by law. These photos certainly don't depict Mali's youth in celebration of their newfound Independence, nor do they suggest that they were in agreement with the Socialist government's oppressive measures directed towards the youth's social interactions and their interaction with European pop culture influences. As much as Mali's Independence in 1960 signaled a dynamic political moment, the Western rock and blues music being introduced to Mali's youth in the 1960s became a catalyst of social and cultural change. Part of what made Sidibé in such high demand was the way in which he was able to represent the Bamako youth as "original" presentations of the Western sixties influences they were imitating. Diawara has stated that Sidibé's importance lies in his, "ability to transform the copy into an original and to turn the images of the youth of Bamako into masterpieces of the Sixties' look,"³⁴ which circles back to Barthes' notion of the myth and the way it interacts with systems of signs and signifiers, as Rosalind Krauss has discussed of the work of Cindy Sherman.³⁵ The European lexicon presents an "original" for which the youth of Bamako adopt in order to negotiate their postcolonial identity, thus exposing the very constructed nature of that identity. But this is no less authentic for them, as they navigate newfound political, social and cultural independence. Diawara also argues for a connection to the influences of a Pan-Africanism and Diaspora aesthetics on Mali's

³⁴ Diawara, "The 1960s in Bamako", 262.

³⁵ Krauss, Rosalind, "Cindy Sherman: Untitled," (1993) in *Bachelors* (MIT Press, 1999), 101-124.

youth culture, of the “modern black image, deraciated from nation and tribe,”³⁶ complicating the European influence in this equation, and further transfiguring it as a copy without an original, or perhaps a reconstruction of a construction. The focus on subjects engaged in activities, seemingly unaware of the camera, invites a type of voyeurism, and allows for the youth to convey an individuality not constricted by the politics of postcolonial nationalism and African tradition. One example is Sidibé’s, *Regardez moi!* [Look at me!], 1962 (fig. 5) in which he employs a low angle, flash and compositional elements of people moving into and out of the frame to convey a candidness and excited energy. None of the subjects seem to be directly engaging the camera, although it is likely that the main subject is performing in the photographer’s presence, but this creates a sense of the photographer as voyeur. The sense of realism that became popular for representational means, did not altogether dismiss the artifice of the studio portraits, but instead rooted it in action, as the constructed identity of the sitter took on real world environments. The documentary work of Sidibé can be read as an extension of his studio work, with similarly constructed spaces and situations and self-fashioning in order to accomplish the end goal of representing the identities of the subjects.

In the 1990s, Andre Magnin introduced Keita’s studio portraits and Sidibé’s documentary *Party Photos* to a western audience in two separate exhibitions, the 1991 “Africa Explores” show at the Center for African Art in NY and a 1995 show at the Foundation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain in Paris, respectively.³⁷ The response to these newly “discovered” photographers was overwhelmingly positive. But the decontextualization of these images from their original function of personal consumption diminishes them (both the physical photograph

³⁶ Diawara, “The 1960s in Bamako”, 265.

³⁷ Lamunière, “*You Look Beautiful Like That*”, 12.

and its subject) to an object given value by its presentation in a gallery setting. Interestingly, the intimate postcard sized photograph has stayed relatively consistent from the days of ethnographic photography, mass-produced for European consumers, to the studio portraits traded among friends and relatives in Africa. It was only until a European curator discovered the portraits that they took on a new form of large-scale, fine art photographs, framed and hung in a gallery. It is not surprising to equate the fetishization of African imaging, observed through the European collecting of ethnographic photography in the colonizing period, to that of the pieces sold for thousands of dollars in art galleries. The subjects still remain anonymous African people, but rather than the portraits being made by European people, they are the commissioned results of African self-fashioning in the studio. The transfer of power, from those privileged to make meaning of the intentions of the sitter, is again removed from the depicted subject, because of their anonymity in the gallery setting and their non-consensual display of these images.³⁸

Sidibé addresses this semiotic struggle for meaning making, in his series *Back Views*, which still engages with studio photography and notions of Western culture as signifiers in order to explore identity-making in portraits. It is based on the iconic exit scenes in western movies, where a character exits the frame with their back turned to the camera. This series plays with notions of empowerment of the subject, who ultimately denies the viewer of any indication of the appearance. This is rooted in the notion of the face as a site of identification, in both literal and abstract terms, physical features and character, and it challenges the convention of portraiture as a “purely mnemonic and identity-based function”³⁹ It also highlights an internality of the sitter, that is unavailable to the viewer and which poses the viewer as an outsider. Enwezor suggests that there is a shift from a dialectical to an analytical mode of African photographers with

³⁸ I have found no evidence of sitters being asked permission for their portraits to be displayed.

³⁹ Enwezor, *Snap Judgments*, 28.

Sidibé's series representing a sustained analytical mode that uses the dialectical studio environment.⁴⁰ The fact that these portraits were made specifically for a western audience, often using Western tropes like the odalisque, emphasizes a message of agency in African culture, identity and self-representation.

In appreciating the studio portraits of Mali's citizens, captured by the resolute eye of Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta, one must understand the historical context that presented such an occasion for these photographs to be made. But without that historical context, what is it that makes these portraits so potent, so timeless and so demanding of critical investigation? There is a sense of urgency in the subjects to be understood and furthermore to be validated, that is hidden under, or perhaps elevated by, the layers of artifice that give way to sincere intentions. Many of the portraits are humorous and unabashedly contrived, but they pose a potent question about the photographic lens as signifier, and how it is so deeply construed by relations of power. In the mythology that pervades the photographic practice historically in Africa, it is fitting that by the very means through which identity is exposed as construction, African subjects can assert their right to participate in that construction, and simultaneously contest that construction as authentic and purposeful expression.

40 Ibid.

Image Index

Fig. 1

Malick Sidibé, *Boxeurs en demonstration* [Boxers giving a demonstration], 1965, Gelatin silver print, 42 x 35 cm

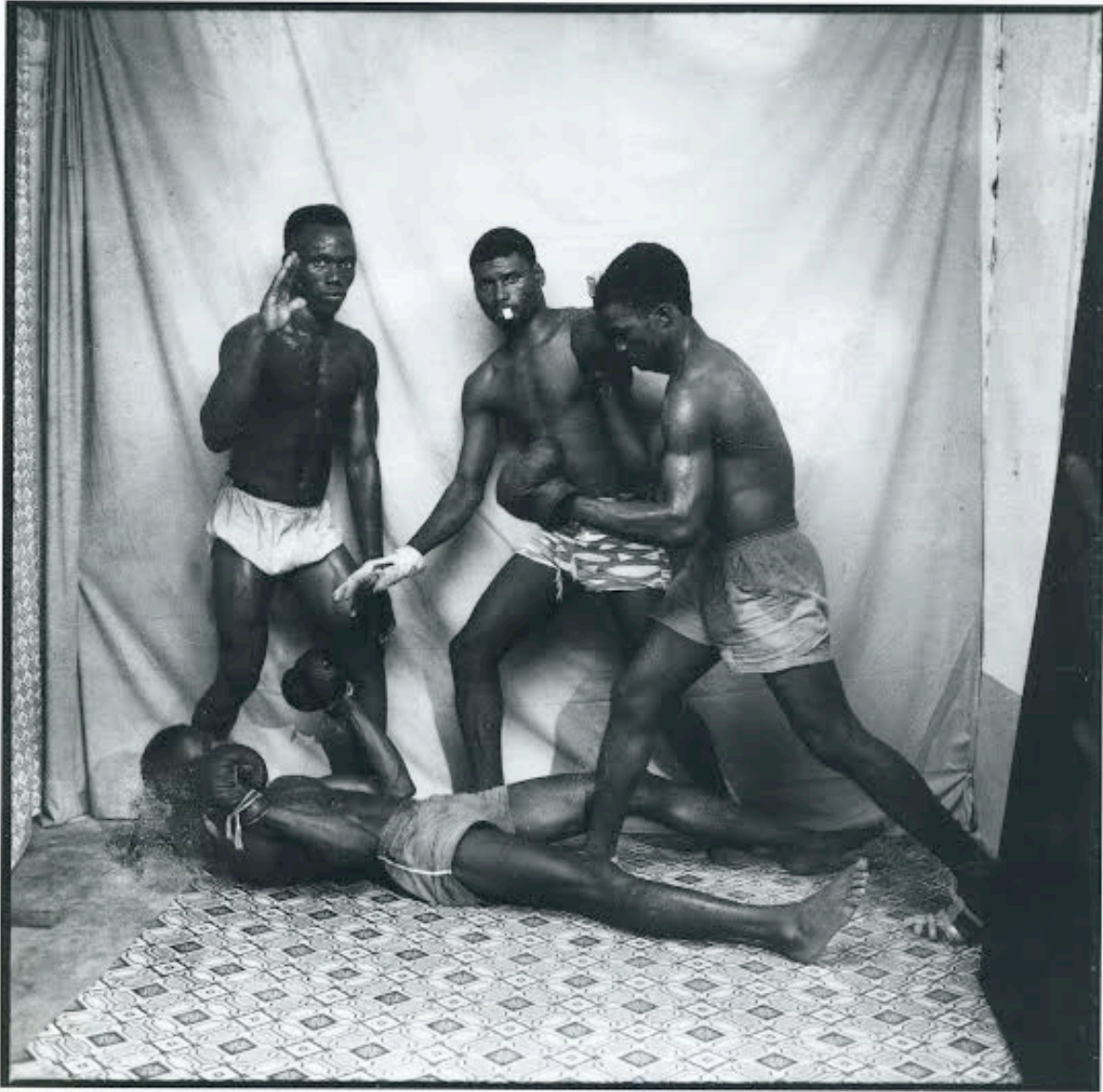


Fig. 2

Seydou Keita, *Untitled*, 1952-1955, Gelatin silver print, 77 x 60 cm



Fig. 3

Malick Sidibé, *Portrait de Mlle Kanté Sira* [Portrait of Miss Kanté Sira], 1965, Gelatin silver print, 53 x 42 cm



Fig. 4

Malick Sidibé, *Les jeunes circoncis et leur maître* [The newly circumcised and their teacher], 1983, Gelatin silver print, 77 x 60 cm



Fig. 5

Malick Sidibé, *Regardez moi!* [Look at me!], 1962, Gelatin silver print, 61 x 61 cm



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