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**AN INTRODUCTION TO  
MALIAN PHOTOGRAPHY**



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1. Her doctoral thesis work has appeared in this publication: : Photographes d'Afrique de l'Ouest : l'expérience yoruba, Paris : Karthala, 2005.

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# AN INTRODUCTION TO MALIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

BY ERIKA NIMIS

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## THE BEGINNINGS OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN MALI

From the moment of its invention in 1839, photography was introduced to the African continent, but in an uneven way. Because of the heavy material requirements it required, it remained confined to the great coastal urban centres that had been in contact with Europe since the 15<sup>th</sup> century...

Handling this new tool also proved challenging in this region of the world, where climatic conditions were hardly favourable. But as of the 1880s, instant photography started to develop: in the United States, Kodak marketed a 9x12 boxcamera for use by the general public.

At this time, although Freetown, capital city of Sierra Leone, numbered seven studios run by African photographers, in French-held territories (such as Dakar or Porto-Novo), the only photographers to be found were French. Photography initially served as an essential tool for colonial undertakings, motivated for the most part by the search for new economic outlets.

## Scientific and military expeditions

Among the first explorer-photographers, Jules Itier travelled to Senegal and Guinea as early as 1842. At the time, he produced daguerreotypes, of which, unfortunately, no trace remains today. He was not the only one to use photography to document his travels – indeed, the entire scientific community had set to recording these “first contacts”. But all this photographic production remained first and foremost a testament to a strongly ethno-centrist European civilization, with its desire to label everything, as if in a large living museum.

Photography became the privileged medium of most of the main figures of the colonial conquest, starting with military men. The idea of organizing photographic missions alongside military expeditions quickly came to pass. In 1862, industrialist Disdéri - who contributed to the popularization of photography with the invention of the cheap, standardized ‘business card’ format - suggested the creation “within the army, of the fast, exact and powerful means that photography puts into our hands today”. During the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, soldiers and travellers criss-crossed the region of modern-day Mali: Paul Soleillet (1878-1880), Joseph Gallieni (1880), Gustave Borgnis-Desbordes... The latter entered Bamako, a city of strategic importance, on 1 February 1883, in the midst of a fierce battle between the French and the great chief Samori Touré, the main challenger to colonial expansion. The first photographs taken in Bamako probably date from this period of military conquest. The photographs produced by the [Borgnis-Desbordes mission of 1882-83](#) contained sites, landscapes and portraits - grouped or individual - of African men and women employed for their knowledge of the local area and languages... These interpreters, guides, riflemen and baggage-carriers were the first points-of-contact between the military mission and the local populations.

The role of the colonial army in the diffusion of photography reaches its peak during the two world wars, which indelibly marked first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the First World War, a little more than 40.000 Malians were sent to fight for France. During the Second World War, the material and human costs borne by French West Africa (AOF) were even greater. Some of the elder photographers in Bamako perfected their technique during their enforced stay in Europe.

## Religious missions

For missionaries, as well as the military, photography became an indispensable tool, as is still evidenced today in the vast photographic records left behind by religious missions.

In Mali, the Fathers of the Holy Spirit were the first to settle - opening a mission in Kita in 1888, followed by a second in Kayes in 1893. Following their lead, the White Fathers settled in Ségou, then in Timbuktu in 1895, to cover the entirety of present-day Mali from 1901 onwards.

Kita, a village occupied by French troops from very early on in the colonial campaigns, became one of the first centres of Catholicism in Mali. Photographer Felix Diallo was born at the Kita mission in 1931. The first picture of him as a child - in the company of his sister - was taken by a White Father. However, outside of the mission, photography didn't seem to take hold: when Diallo set out on his own in Kita, he ran into serious difficulties trying to ply his trade. "In Kita, in '55, nobody knew anything about photography. The mothers did not want to have their children's photograph taken", and a similar sentiment prevailed amongst the elderly, who very often refused to go in front of the lens.

## Colonial civilians

In addition to explorers, soldiers and missionaries, the activities of regular civilians, civil servants or tradesmen, who came seeking fortune in this remote region should not be overlooked.

To fulfil its dreams of grandeur, France launched a vast campaign of public works (roads, railways, bridges) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Starting at the end of the 1880s, Ernest Portier, "Director of Railway Services in French Sudan", took a series of photographs documenting the construction of the Upper Senegal railway. This great undertaking - which required the forced labour of hundreds of thousands of Africans displaced for the task - was also an opportunity to establish new cultural and technical links between native populations and the colonials.

The upheavals caused by colonization over a very short time, was a favourite subject of colonial photographers, who generated a vast quantity of images exalting these "Empire builders".

## BAMAKO, A COLONIAL CAPITAL

### An inland city

Bamako is a city whose geographical situation makes it a nerve centre for commercial transaction: a river city, with an agricultural and commercial vocation, and a crucial stopover for merchant caravans. Bamako was not born solely from the will of the colonial power in the 1880s. “Trade had long flourished there; it was, on the Niger River, the most remote depot the caravans of the Moors of the Sahara could reach, where they traded with the Mandinka of the West” (Cape. Piétri, 1885).

On 4 December 1920, Upper Senegal and Niger became the French Sudan. Little by little, a different Bamako emerged: as a strategic communication point, the city underwent an accelerated urbanization from the 1930s onwards, with a massive influx of labourers from the surrounding regions. In the period before the Second World War however, in line with other interior cities such as Ouagadougou, Bamako did not experience the same development as the richer coastal cities, which were more densely populated and marked earlier by European presence.

### The first traces of commercial photographic activity in Bamako

The first tangible traces of commercial photographic activity date back to the 1930s, at the beginning of Bamako’s explosive growth. Previously, commercial photography in Bamako existed almost exclusively through the production of postcards. From 1900, François-Edmond Fortier, the most famous of postcard producers, passed through Bamako just before the city became the colonial capital, in 1906-1907.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the names of certain photographers gained in notoriety: Mr. Merle, Bamako’s very first photographer, and Mr. Andréef. It was around the same time that Pierre Garnier cornered the Bamako photography market.

In the 1930s, in tandem with the arrival of colonial families, the trade of luxury goods developed in Bamako. Thus began the ‘Pierre Garnier era’ and, following in his footsteps, the very first generation of Bamakois photographers.

## WHERE IT ALL BEGAN... PHOTO-HALL SOUDANAIS

There is a risk of over-stating the role of a man who, after all, was merely a “photo-film dealer”. However, it was certainly Pierre Garnier who opened the first photography shop in the Sudanese capital in 1935. P. Garnier was only 15 years old and already spoke fluent Bambara. All the older generation photographers remember him and refer to him as Bamako’s first photographer.

From 1935 to 1954, he devoted himself entirely to his Photo-Hall Soudanais, working very early on with Sudanese employees of his own age. He had one big advantage: he was able to speak the local language, which facilitated contact not only with his employees, but also with his Sudanese customers, amongst whom were photographers Youssouf Traoré, Mountaga Dembélé and Seydou Keïta.

Photo-Hall Soudanais covered all of the interior of French West Africa. Its principal customers were civil servants based as far away as Côte d’Ivoire, Dahomey (modern-day Benin) and Togo. The store was a great success, which was due in part to how very little competition it faced inland. In almost twenty years of existence, the only time the studio’s activity dwindles was during the Second World War.

Felix Diallo, from Kita, started as a cleaner in the store, before starting out in photography in 1952, learning to compose shots, after a lengthy apprenticeship in the “ceremonial” work of the darkroom. He went on to learn how to handle the camera, by listening to the advice that P. Garnier shared with his customers.

In addition to the sale of material and products, developing films for private individuals by correspondence, P ierre Garnier’s shop also offered identity photos and portrait photography renowned throughout the French Sudan. Photo-Hall Soudanais contributed to the emergence of a first generation of Malian photographers, who frequented the store, either as employees or customers.

## PIONEERS: TALENTED AMATEURS

The 1930s saw the birth of the very first generation of Malian photographers. A great majority of them were in permanent contact with the colonial community.

### Their path

This entire generation, with a few rare exceptions, were schooled ‘with the Whites’, which was not very widespread at the time. Born into notable local families for the most part, they benefitted from family relations.

Administrators, but also soldiers, would act as springboards. The brother-in-law of Barou Keïta, a soldier from Martinique based at the camp in Kati, introduced the young Barou to photography in 1936. The latter obtained his first camera from France by collecting points from Melia cigarettes packs. Thanks to his soldier brother-in-law and to the empty packs of cigarettes, which he collected in the camp, he became one of the leading photographers in Bamako.

In the 1950s, Malick Sidibé came to the attention of the regional commander in Yanfolila for his drawing talent, and thus turned away from his destiny as a “son of a peasant herder in the bush”, to be taught at the Maison des Artisans Soudanais, in Bamako.

But photography remained a highly censored activity, which existed first and foremost to serve colonial interests. The censor monitored and limited access to photographic trades in the French territories.

Generally, the first photographers were colonial civil servants, mainly teachers. By taking commissioned photographs during his spare time, Mountaga Dembélé, although still an amateur, managed to earn a living as a professional. Even now, the majority of photographers follow this same path. In colonial times, it was a prestigious occupation: the teacher was a respected and heeded authority.

In the bush, the first photographers found themselves caught between two worlds: the ancestral, and the colonial, which had to be dealt with. Such was the case for Barou Keïta and Felix Diallo. Mountaga Dembélé,

“teacher-photographer” transferred all over French Sudan, was able to spread photography outside of the principal cities.

### Adapting techniques to local conditions

Photographers - especially when in the bush, but also in towns, where only the European districts were reliably served by electricity – had to draw on their ingenuity to develop and shoot their pictures. Mountaga Dembélé used the dynamo from his bicycle, as one of his pupils or children turned the pedals. He also used daylight, and the light from Petromax lamps (burning petrol fumes). Indeed, as he was busy during the day with his job as a teacher, he could only devote evenings, after nightfall, to his photography. “People came to my house. My bedroom became a studio.” “I shot and printed film all in the same night”; and the next morning, “when I left for work at the school, Madam was busy with the glazing”, on a car windshield. The principle of direct printing, with a printing frame, was followed by all photographers of the time.

### First customers

In the 1940s, the first craze for portrait photography swept through Bamako. In the African districts, outside of the colonial centre, photography was practised outside, in the courtyards of smallholdings, with a sheet as background or a simple blank wall. Photographers worked from home, in their courtyard. They could also work off-site, in spite of the rather cumbersome material (a 13x18 apparatus). Their principal customers were close relations and, more generally, notable figures in society. Photography was not yet widespread and remained the prerogative of a certain ‘elite’, an urban population which took a greater interest in the role of the photographer than the countryside population, who remained little concerned with the technological contributions of the Europeans.

## THE 'GOLDEN AGE' OF PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIOS

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the French colonies in Africa awoke to a new world. The moment had come for a movement towards greater equality and a growing political conscience was emerging. Between 1949 and 1959, the population of Bamako doubled. In this changing atmosphere, photography moved into its second phase of development in the French Sudanese capital.

### The frenetic evolution of the photographic trade

The upswing in photographic activity in Bamako in the period immediately following the war saw a plethora of new shops being opened by French and Lebanese traders. These new stores competed with the one, which, until then, had monopolized the market: Photo-Hall Soudanais.

Mr. Arys opened *La Croix du Sud*, and, at the same time, P. Garnier closed Photo-Hall Soudanais. Thereafter, Mr. Thuillier became the owner of *La Croix du Sud*, and remained at its helm until 1993, when he sold his shop to colour lab Express Photo. *La Croix du Sud* was, for the second generation of Malian photographers, what Photo-Hall Soudanais had been for the first.

In 1955, Gerard Guillat, who had initially come to Bamako to manage *La Croix du Sud*, employed a young graduate of the *Maison des Artisans Soudanais*, Malick Sidibé, to decorate his own store; *Photo Service*. G. Guillat - soon to be known as "Gégé la pellicule" ('B-Roll Gégé') - did studio photography, but also a little photo-reportage around the region. His customers were, for the most part, soldiers and civil servants of Koulouba (the hill where the residence of the governor was situated). He ended up leaving Bamako in 1958. *Photo Service* did not disappear immediately however: it was taken over again soon thereafter by Mr. and Mrs. Touveron, and survived until 1962.

Since 1960, independence had brought with it a decrease in European presence within the commercial sector. In 1962-63, Mrs. Touveron became Mrs. Rolde and a new store: *Photo Ciné*. The new shop was located very close to *La Croix du Sud*. Fierce competition arose between the two stores.

The Lebanese community in Bamako is relatively ancient. From 1945 to 1964, it settled more definitively in Bamako, having been more nomadic for a long time. Two Lebanese-owned stores have remained famous to this day: Photo Club, open for business in the years 1958-59 and Photo Service, which welcomed customers from 1962 to 1970.

### Seydou Keïta, portrait photographer

While the small French-Lebanese photographic community started to expand, unbeknownst to them a group of Bamako photographers began developing thriving photographic activities, one of the leaders of which was Seydou Keïta. Seydou Keïta has maintained almost his entire catalogue of images as one and for this is considered the 'Father of Malian photography', thanks to the various exhibitions that allowed him and his work to become known in many Western countries.

Born in 1921 in Bamako, he did not come to photography in the usual way, that is to say via the colonial administration: he was a cabinetmaker by training. He was initially introduced to photography by his friend and teacher, Mountaga Dembélé, after the Second World War. Following a few attempts with a Kodak Brownie (6x9 format), he truly took up photography as a trade in 1949 and bought a second-hand 13x18-format camera from Pierre Garnier. He set up a studio in his backyard in Bamako-Coura. It is thought that Mountaga Dembélé, who lived on the same block as Seydou at the time, entrusted him with the enlarger he had acquired in 1947 when his teaching obligations took him inland.

Armed with Mountaga Dembélé's advice, S. Keïta came into his own as a talented portrait photographer and welcomes the 'elite' of society at the time in his home studio until 1962, when he took up a post with the Malian administration and became a photographer with the Ministry of Security. Seydou Keïta spoke little about this 'second career', which ended in 1977. He died on November 22, 2001.

For nearly fifteen years in the 'New Bamako' (Bamako Coura) - a bustling district at the time - Seydou Keïta welcomed Bamako inhabitants, who primped and preened for the occasion. Photography was still the prerogative of people with a certain social status - wealthy, or at least wanting to appear wealthy. To help his customers feel like a superhero in front of the camera when the shutter clicked, the photographer provided a multitude of

accessories - clothing and furniture to fit any situation: *“in the studio, I had three different European suits, with tie, shirt, shoes, hat... the works. And all manner of accessories: pens, plastic flowers, radio-sets and telephones that I made available to the customers”*. Pedestal tables and tablecloths could also be found amongst the available props. Besides the background, made from fabric - either plain or patterned - hung in front of the wall of Keïta's house, this use of accessories recalled the ceremonial aspect of European photographic studios in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Keïta's portraits are a treasure trove of information about the evolution of Malian society on the road towards independence. The outward signs of wealth and of social position are clearly visible in the majority of the portraits. The practice of portrait photography gradually opened up to all the layers of the town population, but remained a luxury, which rhymed above all with social success.

### Sakaly and Sidibé: the arrival of photo-reportage.

For the small band of Bamako photographers, independence marked the end of colonial restraints. From then on, photographers could leave their studio and explore the outside world, especially as new techniques (medium and small-format cameras, flash...) reached Mali around this time. The nascent Republic of Mali celebrated its birth. The hour called for optimism. In the first years under Modibo Keïta, photo-reportage blossomed, with two new names at the forefront that would come to be known throughout Bamako: Sakaly and Sidibé.

Abdourahmane Sakaly, of Moroccan descent, was born in Saint-Louis in 1926. He probably came to photography towards the end of the 1950s. His first studio opened in 1956. Today, his archives are very methodically preserved in boxes arranged by year and month. There are two boxes per month: one contains the negative prints from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month, the other continues from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the end of the month. The precise date is indicated on the envelope, which contains the negative prints taken that day. Sakaly, just like Keïta, preciously guarded his archives; initially to satisfy any customers who might seek reprints.

To find out more about Sakaly's beginnings, we questioned Barou Keïta (the very same who became a photographer in 1936, thanks to Melia cigarettes). During the interview, the elderly photographer declared a great admiration

for Sakaly as a generous, and very popular man. Sakaly's house was busy at any time of the day or night: "It was always packed - in front of our door you could find fifteen people, friends all, just chatting." Born in 1920, he was forty when he became a photograph printer at Sakaly's studio. He developed and printed at night, "from 8 in the evening to 4 in the morning", then went to work in the fields: "I had thirteen hectares and sixty ares. I wasn't born to sleep!"

The customers flowed into the studio: "sometimes, we went through ten to twenty rolls of film per day", whereas "the others did nothing"; "we blew away all the other photographers in Bamako". It is certainly true that Sakaly remains etched in the Bamako consciousness as 'The' photographer of the city in the immediate aftermath of the independence. Many Bamako families have one or more portraits from the Sakaly studio in their photo albums. Upon his death in 1988 all the corporation members of the GNPPM (National Association of Professional Photographers of Mali) made a gesture of solidarity towards his family.

Sakaly was both a studio photographer and a reporter. He and his apprentices or colleagues went out to photograph all the areas of Bamako life: from adverts to school pictures, encompassing accidents, society evenings, official portraits - first Modibo Keita and then Moussa Traoré - ... Covering official events was, for a long time, one of many engagements held in monopoly by Sakaly: "We trained many people, those attached to the Ministry of Information, the official photographic service created shortly after independence.

*Sakaly was older than me, and had a certain class: he mostly covered large banquets and evening events in large hotels, and important receptions. As for me, I preferred smaller parties and young people, but I also covered christenings, communions, weddings..." remembers Malick Sidibé.*

Born in 1936, Malick Sidibé was "the only one of my family to have left and been schooled by the Whites, in Yanfolila", and then to have moved on to Bougouni. In 1952, he enrolled into the Maison des Artisans Soudanais in Bamako, and then, with his newly held diploma, he was hired by Gerard Guillat in 1955. Initially, he worked on the cashier's desk in the store, little-by-little being introduced to, and familiarizing himself with, the work of the photographer. He carried out his first photo-reportage assignment in 1957. G. Guillat left Mali in 1958, leaving the running of

his business to a manager until 1962. He would continue to maintain a correspondence with Mr. Sidibé, and even proposed that he take over the store in his own right. But the latter preferred to go a different way, and Photo Service became the property of a Lebanese businessman.

In 1962, Malick Sidibé opened his own studio, a more modest affair, in the bustling district of Bagadadji (which he keeps to this day). In 1968, at the “time of records” (and of regime change), the Malick studio, at the corner of 19<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> streets, attracted its fair share of regular customers. The studios of the district remained open a good part of the night, because customers abounded in the evening.

Malick Sidibé and Abdourahmane Sakaly both shot in 6x6 format, using exclusively black-and-white film. From 1966, Malick adopted the 24x36 format, but only for photo-reportage (he kept the 6x6 for the studio). The flash was another great innovation that appeared at this time. Since its inception, photographers and their customers couldn't picture photography without it. Mr. Sidibé relinquished photo-reportage in 1976, with the arrival of colour photography, and primarily became a “camera repairman”, until he gained international fame in the 1990s.

The respective paths of S. Keïta, M. Sidibé and A. Sakaly are a good illustration of the realities of photography in Bamako from the 1950s into the 1970s.

## **PHOTOGRAPHY MAKES ITS WAY INTO MALIAN SOCIETY**

### News from the East...

During the difficult years of socialist rule under Modibo Keïta, Mali quite naturally turned its gaze to Eastern European countries. During the '60s and '70s, these new arrivals from the East played an active role in various fields of economics and politics in Mali.

The young Malian state sent its students to be trained in Eastern Europe. Among them were many future photographers, including: Mamadou Kanté who, on his return to Mali in 1964, opened a studio in the district of Médina Coura. Others, like Siriman Dembélé and Mamadou Wellé

Diallo, benefitted from the very thorough technical training dispensed in Europe. So much so that, unbeknownst to one another, they each had the same ambition - to open the first laboratory capable of developing colour photographs in Mali, at the end of the 1970s.

For two decades, a policy of technical co-operation was conscientiously maintained between Mali and Eastern European countries. It is especially visible in official press photography, as embodied in the ANIM (the Malian national information agency) created in 1962. The ANIM became the AMAP (Malian Press and Publicity Agency) in 1992, but remained under-resourced and devoid of means of modernization for many years, at the first stirrings of the world economic crisis. Nevertheless, in December 2007 the AMAP signed a partnership agreement with the New China Agency, continuing the tradition of looking to the East for co-operation, and demonstrating a greater desire for “improved cooperation to better showcase the real image of ‘The South’ in the Western World”.

### A diversifying practice

In a few years, photographic activity quickly diversified in Bamako. The beginning of the 1970s was marked by an upsurge in the numbers of newcomers to the photography trade.

Baba Traoré is one of the Bamako figures who broke through during this period. Trained by Gérard Guillaud, he was employed at Photo Service until the store's closing in 1970. The following year, he opened his first studio - Photo Royal - in the district of Dar Salam. In 1975, having known great professional success, the studio moved to the commercial heart of Bamako. Ten years later, it even had a ‘minilab’, keeping pace with the latest practices in the field, which was rare for a studio photographer who learned his craft ‘on the job’. One similar case is that of Gaoussou Dao, the owner of five studios, including two equipped with a ‘minilab’ (in Sikasso and Bamako). He too had a studio on the (very centrally-located) Avenue de la Nation, from 1979. Bernard Koudemedo, known as Ben, of Beninese origin, Secretary General of the GNPPM (from 1988 to until his death in July 1995), opened his first studio in Bamako in 1975. This brings us to discuss the large foreign presence within the photography profession.

During the 1960s the ‘boom’ in the profession saw the arrival of many

photographers from coastal countries, particularly from Anglophone countries such as Ghana and Nigeria.

There was a very strong demand for ID photos in the years following independence, as they were needed for a succession of elections. This led to the emergence of street photographers offering, for a modest sum, 'instant' ID photos. These street photographers worked close to the markets, in towns as well as out in the bush, with wooden cameras made by local artisans, with a lens for focusing, but with neither diaphragm nor shutter speed settings.

In Bamako, the 'koun don wola' ('those who put their head in the hole') are installed alongside the hairdressers, beside the great mosque, and since the early 1960s, the ritual is always the same... The Ghanaians seem to have been the first to have used this technique.

### A growing practice

Although photography reached all layers of the population from the 1960s, as identity photos became obligatory, many taboos and apprehensions surrounding photography persisted in Malian society for a long period.

At the time of film photography, the photographer was an oddly-separated figure, either admired or scorned, depending on the photographer's particular recollections. He carried out more and more photo-reportage work (with the arrival of flash photography), covering the ceremonies, which mark the life of every family, starting with baptism and marriage.

*In Bamako, every marriage had its official photographer: it was initially a sign of 'class', an 'asset to the celebration'. The photographer became part of the spectacle: the more his bulb flashed, the more satisfied the customers. Certain photographers, aware that people mostly wanted to hear the crackle of the flash, went as far as not putting any film in their camera, to manage costs, as the resulting shots would only be bought in small number.*

The photographer must know how to attract customers, and how to gain their trust, by looking after their image: he is constantly canvassing for business, travelling to meet his customers, all with aim of creating a loyal customer base. Through such kindness and modesty he can even end

up becoming a friend to all the family. The primary quality required of a photographer, besides technical skill, is to be very sociable, knowing how to make himself popular.

It was predominantly in rural areas that customers are more recalcitrant. Photography, even if only in an embryonic state, was now necessary for inhabitants of the bush, who often required ID photos for administrative purposes. Bush photography was mainly practiced on market days.

## THE ADVENT OF COLOUR

Colour photography grew in the West in the 1960s. In Mali however, as in the majority of the countries of French-speaking Western Africa, labs specializing in the processing of colour film didn't arrive until the early 1980s.

### Colourful beginnings

Well before the 1980s, colour photography was available on the Malian market, although rare and expensive: the films were processed abroad, by correspondence, in specialized laboratories in France.

The need for colour made itself felt right from the beginning. Mountaga Dembélé colourized his black-and-white portraits using a brush, coloured paper, and a little water.

From 1975, customers started to demand colour photographs. As the sole intermediaries between the labs and customers willing to pay the price for a colour photo processed in Dakar or in France, studio photographers of the time made large profits. The demand was such that, in 1982, the first initiative to build a laboratory was undertaken in Bamako: Photo-Kola. 'Kola' means 'to wash' in Bambara: in French-speaking Africa, to 'wash a photograph' means to develop it.

Siriman Dembélé is the person responsible for the installation of the first colour laboratory in Bamako, completed by the German firm, Agfa. The market research undertaken before the opening of the laboratory

predicted sufficient demand to expect to process around fifty films per day. However, the laboratory was quickly overwhelmed by demand. This 100% Malian initiative would try to continue for a time in Ségou, eventually disappearing completely in 1985, forced out by stiff competition with a Japanese company.

From 1983, *Tokyo Colour*, in spite of high prices, attracted a loyal customer base. From 1985, the laboratory, installed not far from the Ministry of Security, also incorporated a studio (for Polaroid ID photos) and a shop. The Ministry was a useful neighbour, as the majority of its identity papers were processed there.

### The recent expansion of colour laboratories.

In 1986, Boureïma Keïta opened the first *Express Photo* in Bamako. A second store followed in 1988. By the mid-90s, Photo Express had eight stores, including six in Bamako and two inland.

From 1993, Photo Express held an exclusive contract with Kodak for Mali and thus also acted as a supplier for all the other laboratories (except those operated by the Asian owners).

Other, more modest, initiatives also emerged: certain studio photographers or European-trained technicians, such as S. Dembélé, set up their own businesses. Others who followed this path include Baba Traoré, proprietor of Photo Royale and Gaoussou Dao, owner of Photo Kyassou. They were experienced in the field and built their businesses through passion and a thirst for success. However, career paths such as these are rare, because such 'sole-trader' enterprises are fraught with risk.

Among other Malian-owned-and-operated laboratories, honourable mentions should also go to Baba Doumbia (Arc-en-Ciel laboratories) and Siriman Dembélé, the pioneer of colour photography in Mali who, in 1991, opened Colour Bank.

Each of these lab owners or managers received regular training and the latest technological innovations from the large photographic firms. However, their new-found prosperity was put in jeopardy by the sensational entry into the colour photography market by South Korean firms.

The Lion Photo lab opened its doors in 1993, right in the centre of Bamako, and rapidly claimed its place in the market. The Korean presence grew year-on-year, weaving a network of independent laboratories, but which all followed the same business model and adopted the same marketing strategies. Itinerant photographers comprised the majority of the customer base of these Korean labs.

The Korean labs followed policies that fostered the growth of the phenomenon of the 'itinerant' photographer. It is true that such policies were upheld in practically all the city's laboratories, but the Koreans were, by far, the most efficient. In Bamako, this 'customer-based' strategy bore fruit: the Lion Photo laboratory was permanently busy. Many young itinerant photographers used it as their base.

With the success of Lion Photo, other Koreans settled in Bamako, such as Korean Photo, which opened in 1995, in the Hippodrome district.

The rising popularity of digital photography over film photography would go on to considerably change the market some fifteen years later, with the creation of labs entirely dedicated to digital prints.

### Traditional structures undermined...

Studio photographers were the first to suffer with the arrival of colour. Up to that point, they held a monopoly over the darkroom (i.e. the development and printing of films). However, as colour photography began to take the place of black-and-white images, it was no longer profitable for them to practice black-and-white portrait photography or photo-reportage. Identity photos remained the last gap in the market that they could still fit for profit. But they faced competition from the itinerant photographers in this domain, as the latter too could also create black-and-white ID photos from colour film.

Little by little, photography studios began to disappear in the 1980s. Those still active today, barely ticking over, make their living almost exclusively from identity photos. The older photographers preferred to fold up and take an early retirement. The young people who entered the profession just before the arrival of colour photography find themselves faced with enormous obstacles to overcome.

Studio photographers trained in black-and-white take a dim view of colour photography. However, they did not turn their backs on the itinerant photographers: some even sought to help them, in an effort to share their knowledge. Others collaborated with them in the production of identity photos, which they printed in black and white, the sole guardians for the moment of this craft knowledge.

With their studios deserted, photographers were forced to find alternate solutions, including diversifying their services by obtaining video equipment, and offering the 'greatest' innovation. But obtaining new equipment meant going into debt, and precious few managed to get out of it... In recent years, the rapid emergence of digital photography, despite high material costs, has further darkened the future for studio photographers, whose darkrooms are now definitively relegated to the status of museum pieces!

## THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' REACT...

### A desire to organize themselves: the GNPPM.

In view of the growing difficulties facing the profession, a group of photographers tried to react by gathering as many of their professional colleagues together as possible behind a unifying idea: the standardization of photography tariffs.

Born in December 1987, the Malian National Association of Professional Photographers, chaired by Malick Sidibé, officially came into existence in 1988. Its influence grew, with sections created in secondary cities and representatives spread throughout the country.

In order to become a member, the primary condition is to be "a professional and holder of a licence so stating". The union, whose primary objectives are to set standard prices to be respected by all members, studio and itinerant photographers alike, and above all, to structure a profession which needed formal recognition and written statutes, was unable to keep its promises.

The prices fixed by the group were never respected: competition was too wild to be able to apply them without 'ruffling some feathers', at least as the majority of its members saw it.

### The itinerant photographer phenomenon

There is not one, but several types of itinerant photographer. What they do have in common though is that they do not have a studio, and thus have greatly reduced overheads.

The vast majority of these itinerant photographers seek first and foremost a job that is easily accessible and with low entry costs: all that is required is a cheap camera and some rolls of colour film. With the advent of digital photography, start-up requirements have become even simpler. Among the other advantages offered by this mode of work: the ability to learn quickly 'on-the-job', and flexible work schedules.

Itinerant photographers work in the economic sector known as 'the black market'. Those who work in this precarious environment are, for the most part, students and other young people. They are "young people who, unemployed and without other outlets, took up photography." They consider themselves photographers "of necessity", but 'professionally', they don't call themselves photographers.

Moussa Traoré, a photographer since 1980, "(takes) in-home photographs, but is planning a modern studio", just like Kaly Diawara who would like to extend the range of services he can offer, with a particular interest in the methods used to print a photograph onto all kinds of supports. Both are experienced itinerant photographers who have since turned professional, and thus legally declared operations. They both have a 'personal strategy' to create a loyal customer base and charge rates in line with those of the studios. They belong to this 'other' category of photographers - older - who include in their ranks former students or former civil servants, especially teachers.

Sometimes, they keep their teaching jobs and practice photography in their spare time to supplement their income. This is a situation common to most, if not all - itinerant or studio - photographers working inland. Just as Mountaga Dembélé did in the 1940s and '50s.

In these examples there is an evident continuity between the colonial period and the current period: the teacher would likely be the designated person, and it is especially true in bush, to carry out the function of photographer.

The majority of itinerant photographers are, however, simply regular citizens who have found in this work a relatively easy means to provide for their everyday needs. Very often without any experience, they go out hunting for customers, offering cut-price photos. The majority of these itinerant photographers can be found at *Kim Lion* which, when compared to the other photo labs in Bamako, stands out as a true photo-processing 'factory'.

## THE LIFE OF A PHOTOGRAPHER IN BAMAKO TODAY

### A profession in disarray...

The recent upheavals, over such a short time frame, have put the already-fragile status of the profession in danger. Even the very competence of the photographer is being called into question. Can 'photographer' still be considered an occupation in its own right in modern Bamako? Where is the line between professionalism and amateurism?

The processing laboratories, which had already shaken the foundations of the profession, engaged in a ruthless price war, especially following the devaluation of the franc CFA in January 1994. Another war is fought between licensed establishments (the processing labs and specialized photography stores), which sell colour film and other accessories such as batteries, and the vast network of black-market street peddlers offering - often fake, mostly from Nigeria - equipment.

### A time of crisis?

The production of colour photos, processed by machine (either from film or digital sources), has never been as large or as cheap, especially when compared to the traditional black-and-white production of the photography studios until the early 1980s. *Photography has become an everyday commodity, a routine fact of daily life for Malians.*

What do the first photographers of 1940s - with their solid practical and theoretical knowledge transmitted to them by the colonial visitors and who were passionate about their trade - and the young itinerant photographers of today - without experience of the trade and largely indifferent to photography, which is simply a means to earn a living for

them – have in common? Their amateur, undeclared status - working on the black-market, their activities hidden from the State. But if the former can honestly be described as professionals, by dint of their vast knowledge of photography, the latter need put in little effort in terms of formal study or apprenticeship to set themselves up as a ‘photographer’. Wherein lies the fault? With the increasingly sophisticated cameras, which require a simple push of a button to get the shot? With the colour processing labs that take care of development and printing, leading to widespread ignorance regarding the associated techniques? However, we cannot simply ignore the recent explosion in photographic output: if photography is losing out in terms of quality, it is gaining in terms of quantity.

This difficult period, as the photography industry searches for new paradigms, is experienced differently by studio photographers, itinerant photographers and lab owners, the latter being the big winners from the successive ‘revolutions’ - first colour, then digital - which contributed to trivialising the photographic act in Mali.

### The “Digital Revolution”

At the dawn of the new millennium, digital photography has quietly settled into everyday life. Photography professionals are the avant-garde of a revolution that will allow a thorough democratization of photography. Each individual now possesses the tools that enable him to document his own life, to share his images and to receive other peoples’ on his smartphone. But professional photography has not disappeared because, even in the era of the selfie, there is still the need for a trained eye to cover parties, ceremonies and other events, and create professional portraits. The greatest challenge of the ‘digital revolution’ resides in conservation: how, for example, can we efficiently preserve the memory of photographs which are only rarely, if ever, physically printed?

### Around the “Rencontres africaines de la photographie»

In December 1994, the first “Rencontres africaines de la photographie” (Encounters with African Photography) were held in Bamako (renamed «African Photography Encounters» in 2005), a salutary initiative which brought the presence of such African photography, resourceful in the face of often difficult working conditions, to the attention of Western

photography circles. Seydou Keïta, 'discovered' in 1992, as well as Malick Sidibé (awarded a Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in June 2007 for his lifetime's work), used this event in Bamako as a springboard for their careers. «Encounters with African Photography» has made it possible for future Seydou Keïtas to emerge, to affirm the quality and specificity of African photography, and to offer the necessary support to these photographers, these 'makers-of-images' who have a role to play in the construction of the Africa of tomorrow . This event must be a part of «a program of inter-African actions (...) devoted to African photography, including research and training projects, exhibitions, encounters, publications», with the ultimate goal to «index, before it is too late, the collections of historic documents that are poorly conserved or unfairly ignored».

With each edition that took place, the organizers realized that these missions, written without any particular thought to the Bamako context, were out of step with the realities on the ground, and that the events were having difficulty attracting a local audience, hence the increased efforts, with each new edition, placed on marketing and communication.

In Mali photographers, but also cultural actors in other domains, dream of further «Encounters». Since the launch of this event, voices of protest have risen in the press to criticize the lack of involvement of Malian photographers in the organization of each «Encounter». At the very first edition in 1994, representatives of Malian photography launched a call to greater support and mutual aid and poured their hopes into the creation of a 'Maison de la Photographie' which could be used as meeting point between African photographers and those from other continents. Ten years passed before this project finally came to fruition. In 2003, the Maison Africaine de la Photographie opened its doors in the shining new buildings of the National Library of Mali. However, today, it is already under threat of closure as it is failing to fulfil the purposes with which it was tasked, including that of offering support to the emerging Malian photography scene.

Promoting photography, also, and above all, means opening training centres. In 1996, a professional training centre for young girls opened in Bamako, in the Lafiabougou district. Upon its closure in 2003, its mission was taken over by another project, the Centre de Formation en Photographie (CFP - Photography Training Centre), launched by the Swiss NGO, Helvetas. The CFP became completely independent in 2005.

The promotion of photography also includes opening permanent exhibition spaces, such as the Chab Gallery, located at Bamako-Coura and launched in 2000 by Chab Touré, a professor of philosophy at the National Institute of Arts. The Chab gallery moved to Ségou in 2010, where it was renamed “Carpe Diem”.

Something unquestionably arose at these “Encounters”, but it still has trouble making its mark and seems even today to be unknown to most Bamako inhabitants, even if the next biennial event, scheduled for November 2015, after a four-year interruption caused by the Malian crisis of 2012-2013, is forecast as “the edition of New Beginnings”.

© Malick Sidibé – Courtesy Collection Zinsou, Cotonou



Malick Sidibé  
*Devant les disques /  
In front of the records*  
1972

© Malick Sidibé – Courtesy Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris



Malick Sidibé  
*Vue de dos / Back view*  
2001

© Malick Sidibé – Courtesy Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris



Malick Sidibé  
*Combat des amis avec pierres /  
Friends fight with stones*  
1976

© Seydou Keïta /SKPEAC – Courtesy Collection Zinsou, Cotonou



Seydou Keïta  
*Sans titre / Untitled*

© Seydou Keïta /SKPEAC – Courtesy Collection Zinsou, Cotonou



Seydou Keïta  
*Sans titre / Untitled*

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Seydou Keïta  
*Sans titre / Untitled*