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Photographic Portraiture in West Africa: Notes from “In and Out of the Studio”

In a striking portrait of an elegant Senegalese woman dating from the 1910s, the sitter's self-assured presence fully engages the viewer (fig. 1). She looks into the camera, decidedly aware of the image that is being created of her likeness. For her portrait, she wore a long *boubou* and an array of jewelry: a silver ring, filigree-work bracelets, two necklaces, earrings, and golden pendants decorating her coiffure set in a style called *Nguuka*.¹ Carefully staged, this image was undoubtedly taken by a professional photographer who did not, however, leave a trace of his identity on the glass negative. An image of great beauty that is now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, it epitomizes a moment in which African photographers and their clientele embraced the medium of photography as a powerful tool with which to shape their own image.²

This photograph is one of nearly eighty images from the Metropolitan's holdings presented in the 2015 exhibition

fig. 1 Unidentified artist
(Senegalese). Portrait of a
woman, 1910s. Glass, emulsion,
6½ × 4½ in. (165 × 114 cm).
The Metropolitan Museum of
Art. Gift of Susan Mullin Vogel,
2015 (2015.499.14.1)



"In and Out of the Studio: Photographic Portraits from West Africa."³ Co-curated by the present authors and drawing on Giulia Paoletti's research in Senegal, the exhibition showcased one hundred years of portrait photography in West Africa, from the 1870s through the 1970s.⁴ Most of the photographs, the majority of which had never been shown before, were drawn from the Visual Resource Archive in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, with the addition of a few important works in the Department of Photographs.⁵ The installation sought to expand our understanding of West African portrait photography by rendering visible the broad variety of its practices and aesthetics. It juxtaposed albumen prints, postcards, real-photo postcards (postcards printed with photographic images), and original negatives taken both in and out of the studio by professional and amateur photographers active from Senegal to Cameroon and from Mali to Gabon. These photographic artists explored the possibilities of their medium, developing a rich aesthetic vocabulary through compelling self-portraits, casual snapshots of leisurely activities, and staged images against backdrops or open landscapes.

The exhibition offered its curators an occasion to study the Museum's collection and to showcase selected works in this first installation devoted solely to African photography at the Metropolitan. Building on the research conducted during that project, this article reflects on issues central to the history of African photography as represented in the Metropolitan's collection and defines themes that emerged.⁶ The article focuses on West Africa—one of the regions where photography arrived first on the continent—and

narrows the sphere of inquiry to portraiture. In surveying the history of photography on the continent, we found that portraiture is the genre that, more than any other, has inspired photographers and patrons alike. This is evident as one traces the founding of the first studios established in the coastal urban centers as early as the 1860s, and it continues to the present day with many artists reworking this trope. Portraiture is a fertile area of inquiry for it reveals changing perceptions and constructions of the self in the fine tension between authenticity and artificiality. In looking closely at specific works, this article will tackle the complexity of authorship and attribution, as in the case of postcards; the emergence of an extensive visual vocabulary of gesture; the place of amateur photographers within the canon of African photography; and the exploration of self-portraiture as a genre. As the literature on African photography is rapidly growing, curators and collectors across the world are encouraged to reinterpret their holdings and reconsider their selection criteria for acquisitions. This article seeks to raise questions and suggest possible avenues in interpreting, collecting, and displaying African photographs under a new light.

COLLECTING AND STUDYING AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FIELD

In 1969, when Nelson A. Rockefeller announced the transfer of the Museum of Primitive Art (MPA) to the Metropolitan Museum, it encompassed not only more than three thousand works of art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, but also the MPA's library, its archives, and what was then known as the Photograph Study Collection.⁷ This collection was a

fig. 2 Unidentified artist (Senegalese). Seated man, 1930s–40s. Gelatin silver print, 5¼ × 3¼ in. (13.3 × 8.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.2014.8.0272)

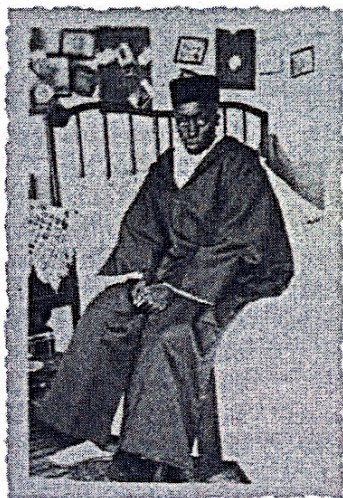


fig. 3 Mama Casset (Senegalese, 1908–1992). Two reclining women, 1950s–60s. Gelatin silver print, 5 × 6¼ in. (12.7 × 17.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.2014.8.049)





MAKING DISCOVERIES—DRAWING CONNECTIONS

In figure 5, a central figure sits in an armchair flanked by four younger men posing almost symmetrically. Two stand in back and two sit cross-legged on the ground holding similar postures along the vertical axes of the composition. Rather than being a group portrait, the placement of the figures draws attention to the central sitter—the patron of the photograph—who stares directly at the camera. The men's hand gestures, the direction of their gazes, and the employment of props indicate a carefully orchestrated composition that responds to the formality of the portrait-making situation. The painted backdrop recalls nineteenth-century aristocratic interiors and, combined with the complex *mise-en-scène*, speaks to the refinement and eminence of the principal sitter. Dating from the early 1880s, it is one of the earliest photographs in the VRA and one that opens questions of authorship and attribution.

Although the reverse of the print is marked by a rare stamp in purple ink that bears the name of the photographic studio—LUTTERODT & SON / PHOTOGRAPHERS / ACCRA (GOLD COAST) / WEST AFRICA—the identity of the author is not specified. Indeed, the Lutterodt family comprised several generations of photographers who worked in the Gold Coast and trained numerous apprentices in different locations where they established temporary studios. Photograph historian Erin Haney has documented the pivotal role of this family in shaping the history of photography in the region.⁴⁶ While the lack of a date on the vintage print made it difficult to identify which member of the Lutterodt family might have authored it, careful study of the stamp and the composition allowed Haney to attribute it to George and Albert Lutterodt.⁴⁷ The eldest of three brothers, George Lutterodt (1850/55–ca. 1904) was the first to open a studio, doing so with his son Albert in 1876. Deceased during the first four



The identities of the photographer and editor of this postcard are more difficult to recover than was the case of the Lutterodts since the postcard's label does not provide any information about them. Nevertheless, archival research brought to light other postcards showing the same backdrop and studio decor, suggesting that they were taken by the same person. In one of them (fig. 8), a man holds a kora, a stringed instrument used in West Africa. His pose and the photographer's low-angle shot reveal more of the painted scenery: thatched-roof houses in the distance on the left punctuate the vista beyond palm trees on the right and suggest a Senegalese village. This image of a kora player must have been particularly popular, as it can be found in various postcard series and formats with different labels and attributions. In one instance, the portrait appeared in a well-illustrated volume published for the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris, in which the photographer was identified as Hostalier.²²

Contrary to widely held assumptions, scholars have demonstrated that postcards were embraced by African photographers and consumers.²⁵ Among the former





fig. 8 Louis Hostalier. *Joueur de Cora*, Senegal, early 20th century. Postcard format photomechanical reproduction published by A. B. & C. Nancy, France; 5¼ × 3¼ in. (13.3 × 8.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archives, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.PC.AF.08)

fig. 9 Alphonso Lisk-Carew (Sierra Leonean, 1887–1969). *Bundoo Girls*, Sierra Leone, ca. 1905–25. Postcard format photomechanical reproduction published by Lisk-Carew Brothers, 5¼ × 3¼ in. (13.3 × 8.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archives, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.PC.AF.02)

all-female secret society in West Africa, the only society in which women are the wearers of masks during ceremonies that celebrate the end of the young initiates' training period.²⁷ Sande, as well as the initiation rituals that are fundamental to its role, is shrouded in secrecy. In figure 9, three young women pose formally in front of a painted backdrop that features both vegetation and an aristocratic interior. The central figure sits on a chair while her two associates stand on either side. They wear matching outfits that include a headscarf, bracelets, a necklace, babouches, and a cropped top with a geometric pattern. The central sitter and the woman at her proper left look at the camera; the two standing protagonists seem to give a hint of a smile.

In approaching this and other portraits from the same series, scholars have often focused on their documentary value—their ability to shed light on traditional institutions and ceremonies. More recently, specialists have dwelled on the complexity of these images and raised important questions regarding the relationship

between sitter and photographer, “public display and visual secrecy.”²⁸ How did Lisk-Carew obtain permission to photograph these individuals whose secret activities were not to be seen by non-initiates? Also, how does the photographic experience change when the author of these photographs is from Sierra Leone rather than Europe? Nanina Guyer argues that these images reveal that the sitters had embraced photography and that the photographer did not hesitate to stage and take creative liberties in composing his images, in a manner that was not, however, disrespectful.²⁹ In a similar vein, photography historian Julie Crooks emphasizes the merit of Lisk-Carew’s “disrupt[ing] the unfavorable depictions” of his fellow countrymen.³⁰

The intriguing images by Hostalier and Lisk-Carew raise substantive questions about the relationship between photographer and sitter, privacy and visibility, ethnography and portraiture. In defying expectations about the identity of the photographer or the patron,



Lisk-Carew Brothers, Photo., Freetown, Sierra Leone. Registered.
BUND OO GIRLS, SIERRA LEONE.



fig. 10 Unidentified artist (Senegalese). Five women with two children, indoors, ca. 1915. Glass, emulsion, $3\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$ in. (8.3 × 12.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.2014.8.003)



such portraits account for the ambiguity of images that acquire different meanings according to the context within which they are consumed.

NEW GENRES: MORE THAN A MÉTIER

In a photograph taken in Saint-Louis in 1915, three generations of women from the Dumont family pose as a group (fig. 10).³¹ As art historian Richard Brilliant argues, group portraits above all serve to document relationships among the sitters.³² The close angle of the shot combined with the posture of the sitters conveys a sense of these women's proximity and intimacy and contrast strongly with the studio portraits discussed thus far. The room is modestly decorated: hanging on the wall are a calendar for the year 1915, two small, framed photographs of young children, and a mirror reflecting the backs of the posing women.

Although this image belongs to a corpus that was first published by *Revue Noire* in the *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* in 1999, very little is known about the unidentified photographer.³³ Close examination of a group of seventeen glass plates in the VRA that are believed to have been created by this individual offers some clues to his or her identity.³⁴ It is almost certain that the photographer belonged to

the *métis* community, as almost all the images show members of this tight-knit social group. Alongside dozens of other families from Saint-Louis and Gorée, the sitters reflect a long history of *métissage* between Europeans and Africans that dates to the arrival of the Portuguese in Senegal in the sixteenth century. It also appears that the author was not a professional photographer. While sharing some of the features of a formal portrait, the print betrays photography's incidental nature.³⁵ The image is far from crisp and focused, with the standing woman slightly blurry—a little too late in striking her best pose.

It is clear from the images that this amateur took pictures during his or her leisure time, working outside the formal space of the studio. The photographer walked with a camera in and out of homes, through the city, using these real locations as backdrops. Starting in the 1880s, photographic cameras, which had been heavy and expensive and required technical knowledge to operate, became portable, relatively cheap, and automated.³⁶ Thanks to these advancements, photography became increasingly available to the rising middle classes. Photographers and their sitters could break out from the stiffness of the studio portrait: they could stage their joviality and, one second later, their melancholy.



Amateur practices as well as snapshot photography are two genres that have acquired significant currency in the field of photography at large, with some of the most prestigious art institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum, devoting exhibitions to the topic.³⁷ Yet within the field of African photography, research has focused mostly on amateurs working after the 1970s, when photography had become a “social imperative.”³⁸ Dating back to the first decades of the twentieth century, this group of seventeen glass plates seems to be one of the earliest taken by an amateur from West Africa. By approaching these works through the new authorial figure of the amateur, the tension between spontaneity and staging, leisure and labor becomes apparent, opening new dynamics in the nature of the photographic experience to be explored by the viewer and the researcher alike.

EXPANDING THE CANON: DIVERSIFYING STUDIO PRACTICES

If photographers such as Keïta and Sidibé, both Malians, are often too quickly labeled as the “fathers of African photography,” in the last fifteen years scholars have demonstrated that these portraitists are two among thousands of practitioners who popularized the medium during the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era in West Africa. Building on the literature, it is particularly revealing to consider the work of

renowned artists such as Keïta and to contrast their work with that of lesser-known photographers who were working in neighboring Senegal. This may allow researchers to trace continuities in visual language among these communities while concentrating on the articulation of each photographer’s aesthetic. While the human figure remains the subject, photographers have developed distinct formal compositions.

Born in Bamako, capital of Mali, in the early 1920s, Keïta learned darkroom techniques there from photographers such as the Frenchman Pierre Garnier and the Malian Mountaga Traoré. He launched his own studio in Bamako in 1948 and in just over a decade produced about ten thousand negatives of the Bamako elite. In these images, backdrops, clothing, accessories, and postures were meticulously and collaboratively selected to fashion the subject’s chosen identity. Yet it was Keïta’s camera that turned the sitter into a new Bamakois: his photographs contributed to the myth of Bamako as a cosmopolitan and modern city.³⁹ In one portrait, Keïta depicted a woman seated in front of one of his signature arabesque backdrops. She rests her arms on the back of the chair and stares directly at the viewer (fig. 11). Keïta closely cropped the image, calling attention to the woman’s elaborate jewelry, voluminous outfit, and intricate coiffure, presenting an aesthetic of abundance and opulence that speaks to her social status.

fig. 11 Seydou Keïta (Malian, ca. 1921–2001). *Untitled*, #313, 1956–57. Modern gelatin silver print (2001), 22 × 15½ in. (55.9 × 39.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Joseph and Ceil Mazer Foundation Inc. Gift, 2002 (2002.217)

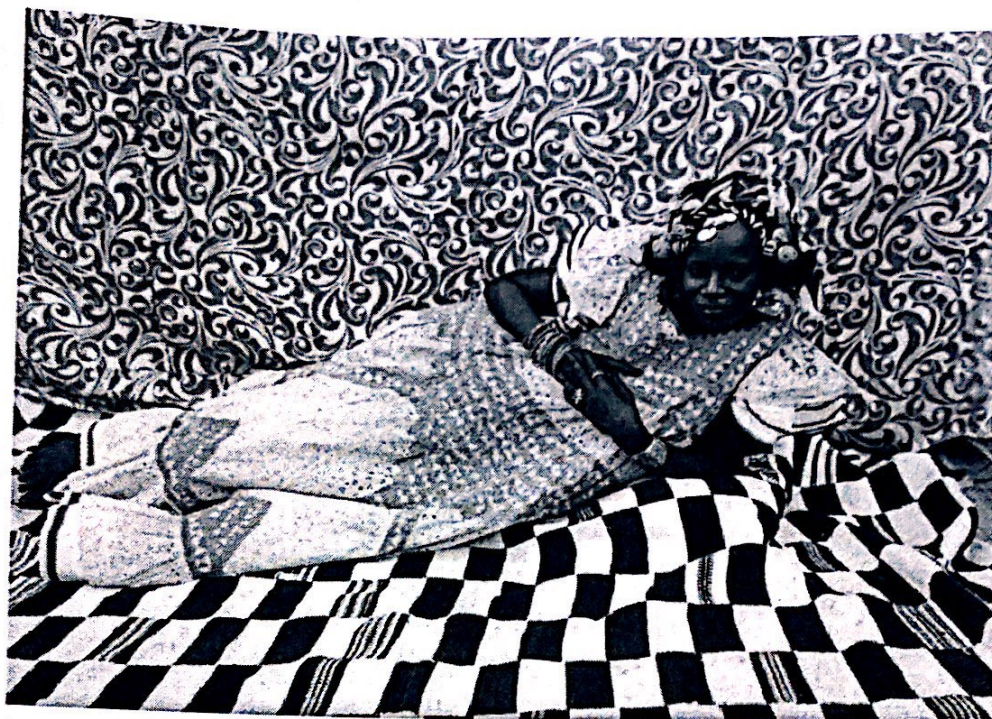
fig. 12 Unidentified artist (Senegalese). *Woman*, 1950s–60s. Gelatin silver print, 9½ × 7½ in. (24.1 × 18.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (VRA.2014.B.052)



PAOLETTI / BIRÖ 191



fig. 13 Seydou Keita. Reclining woman, 1950s–60s. Film, emulsion, 5¼ × 7½ in. (13 × 19 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Susan Mullin Vogel, 2015 (2015.499.2.1)



In a portrait produced about the same time by an unidentified Senegalese photographer, a woman also poses seated on a chair, this time, however, with her closed fist resting on her cheek (fig. 12). This photographer played with composition and artificial lighting, employing the latest artistic strategies and technologies. The backdrop here is monochromatic, functioning as a muted device that cedes the focus to the sitter. He manipulated the depth of field, making the sitter's face his focal point while blurring her arm and dress. With artificial lights, he cast strong shadows on to the sitter, creating a dynamic image that enthrones her, like an actress under a spotlight. The difference between these works by Keita and his Senegalese counterpart is their artistic intent and aesthetic bias. They show the products of two photographers, each of whom developed an idiosyncratically individual visual vocabulary while echoing the established vernacular of postures shared across West Africa.

Another juxtaposition may further explain this point. Comparing prints by Seydou Keita with those by Senegalese photographer Oumar Ka (born 1930) makes it possible to appreciate the wealth of approaches to portraiture in the region. Keita's tendency to fill the picture with bold patterns (figs. 11, 13) stands in dramatic opposition to the portraits by Ka, whose subjects are surprisingly enveloped in space revealing either the

edges of a monochromatic backdrop and the contours of the surrounding built environment (fig. 14).

Trained under the Senegalese Cheikh Kane, Ka began his practice as an itinerant photographer in 1959 before opening his own studio in the city of Touba, Senegal, in 1968.⁴⁰ Portraying the rural communities living in the interior of Senegal, he traveled from village to village, taking portraits with the only tools he could carry: his medium-format TLR camera and a folded monochromatic backdrop. Rather than cropping the image close to the sitter or modulating sharp tonal contrasts with backdrops the way Keita did, Ka maintained a distance from his patrons—individuals mostly living in rural rather than urban areas. His wide frames allow a glimpse of local architecture, private interiors, and open landscapes.

In his portrait of a man, a small monochromatic backdrop centers the sitter and defines the image as a formal portrait. The man's shirt, leather sandals, and loose-fitting pants, called *thiaya*, suggest that he was probably a mason who commissioned his portrait during an ordinary workday. Ka included the sandy streets of the Baol region, its overcast sky, and a building complex. He played with the different surfaces—the uneven white sand, the corrugated iron fence, and the cloudy sky—to create patterns that modulate and enrich the composition. In the unequal



Ka's fascination with his environment, or what he called the *décor*, comes to light.⁴¹ While different in their aesthetics and their clientele, both Ka and Keïta successfully visualized and shaped the aspirations of their sitters. The medium of photography allowed artists and patrons alike to express their concept of what modernity looked like—a concept that was constantly reinvented.

ON BOTH SIDES OF THE CAMERA

From the early days of portrait photography in West Africa, photographers were professionals who were aware of their role and their image, which they often articulated in carefully constructed self-portraits. The earliest self-portrait in the VRA is a formal representation of Alex Agbaglo Acolatse (fig. 15). Over the course of his long career, Acolatse performed in a series of self-portraits that pictured him wearing a range of outfits. Figure 15, probably dating from the 1910s, shows him dressed in a tuxedo adorned with lapel pins, sporting an elegant mustache, standing in front of an aristocratically decorated backdrop and behind a balustrade. In another image, possibly dating to the 1920s (fig. 16), he wears a suit pinned with medals, a bow tie, and a hat and holds a cane or an umbrella. He has shaved his mustache and is hardly

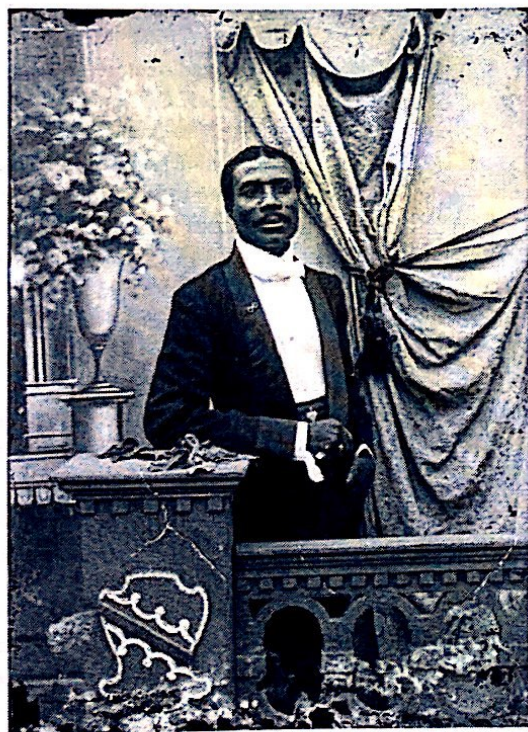
yet another one reproduced in Philippe Davia's monographic book on Acolatse's work: there he chose to represent himself dressed with the canonically foregrounding prestige cloth known as kente.⁴² Playfully foregrounding different aspects of his persona, he applied to his self-portraits the same conventions of portraiture he used for his clients.

Taken several decades later, in 1956, a rare self-portrait by Malick Sidibé was recently donated to the Metropolitan's Department of Photographs (fig. 17). In a clear break from Acolatse's formal portraiture, Sidibé is seemingly caught off guard as he looks surprised at the camera. Sitting at his desk, the twenty-year-old photographer turns toward the viewer, his face illuminated on one side by the natural light coming in the entrance to his studio in the heart of Bamako, Mali. The painted frame, added decades after the photograph was made, echoes glass painting traditions particularly popular in neighboring Senegal since the late nineteenth century.⁴³

Oumar Ka, in a self-portrait taken in Touba that dates from the 1960s, chose to picture himself in his role as a photographer (fig. 18). Snapping this image in a mirror, he is seen holding his camera. His glasses hanging from his left ear, and he wears a hat that identifies him as a Sufi follower of the Senegalese

fig. 15 Alex Agbaglo Acolatse. Self-portrait with balustrade and hanging, ca. 1910s. Glass, emulsion, 9½ × 7½ in. (19.1 × 24.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Susan Mullin Vogel, 2015 (2015.499.32)

fig. 16 Alex Agbaglo Acolatse. Self-portrait in bow tie and hat, ca. 1920s. Glass, emulsion, 9½ × 7½ in. (19.1 × 24.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Susan Mullin Vogel, 2015 (2015.499.33)





E IN WEST AFRICA



CONCLUSION

The photographic holdings of the Visual Resource Archive in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania,

a specific time and place and are the result of a long history that is both locally rooted and globally connected. These artists' paths and their images' journeys



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NOTES

- 1 The hairstyle, the *Nguuka*, which was in vogue in the 1910s and 1920s, identifies the sitter as a mature woman. Siga 1990, p. 38.
- 2 On the early history of photography in West Africa, see Schneider 2010 and Geary 2013.
- 3 The exhibition was held at the Metropolitan Museum from August 31, 2015, to January 3, 2016. This collaborative project involved the participation of many individuals at the Metropolitan Museum, including members of curatorial departments, the Imaging department, Design, and the Digital Media department, as well as specialists in the field. We cannot name all of them here, but we particularly thank the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, especially Sheena Wagstaff, for lending us an exhibition space and providing the necessary financial support, and Pari Steve, for extensive logistical support; the Department of Photographs, especially Jeff Rosenheim and Beth Saunders, for their enthusiasm for this project and invaluable advice on content and best practices for printing original and digital negatives, and writing labels, and conservators Nora Kennedy, Katherine Sanderson, and Georgia Southworth, for the love and care they gave in preparing the photographs for the exhibition; and in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Jennifer Larson in the Visual Resource Archive, for her masterly logistical oversight.
- 4 For her PhD dissertation (2015), Giulia Paoletti conducted more than two years of archival and field research in Senegal (2010; 2011–13; 2014), with trips also to France and Italy. Her research was supported by awards and fellowships from the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, among others.
- 5 Some of the works, such as the early portraits and postcards, entered the collection of the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (AAOA) mostly in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2014 the Visual Resource Archive (VRA) acquired an important ensemble of vintage prints and negatives from Senegal dating from the 1910s to the 1960s. In 2015 two donors came forward with gifts, and the VRA also purchased a set of portraits taken by Oumar Ka, a professional photographer working outside the main urban centers of Senegal.
- 6 For a description of the exhibition as it developed, see Biro and Paoletti 2015.
- 7 LaGamma et al. 2014.
- 8 Virginia-Lee Webb, the AAOA research curator responsible for some of these acquisitions, coedited a volume on the history of postcards precisely at that time. See Geary and Webb 1998.
- 9 While exhibitions of African arts at the Metropolitan Museum have regularly included photographs in a variety of formats, "In and Out of the Studio" was the first exhibition to focus solely on African photography, presenting the images as works of art rather than as historical documents.
- 10 By contrast, images of Africa's cosmopolitan, assertive elites were not disseminated in Europe, for the images sent to and circulated in the West were intended to serve colonial propaganda. Images by African photographers, intended for an African audience, cherished by their owners, sent to friends as souvenirs, kept in albums, or framed and hung in private homes remained mostly in Africa.
- 11 Sprague 1978; Viditz-Ward 1985; Viditz-Ward 1987; and Geary 1988.
- 12 According to Susan Vogel, in an email exchange with Giulia Paoletti, June 2015, "Africa Explores" was seen by well over 100,000 people and the catalogue's English version alone sold at least 10,000.
- 13 In the 1991 exhibition "Africa Explores," Vogel included photographic portraits by Seydou Keita that she had collected in Mali in 1975, as well as at least a dozen photographs by other West African photographers; she donated most of these to the Metropolitan Museum in 2015. In 1992, Revue Noire curated the exhibition "Revue Noire et les photographes africains" at the Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles in Paris, showcasing about ninety photographers. In 1991–92 the French photographer Françoise Huguier conducted research on Malian photographers that led to the organization of the First Biennial of African Photography in Bamako in 1994. Also in 1992, the joint effort among the Senegalese photographer Bouna Médoune Seye, Jean Loup Pivin of Revue Noire, and Bertrand Hosti of the Centre Culturel Français in Dakar resulted in the organization of the first edition of the "Mois de la photo." See Vogel 1991 and Amselle 2005, pp. 74–75, 97, 150–51.
- 14 See, for instance, Haney 2010; Vokes 2012; and Peffer and Cameron 2013.
- 15 The Metropolitan Museum was one of the participants in the *Préservation du Patrimoine Photographique Africain* (3PA); West African Image Lab, a photograph conservation workshop organized in 2014 in Porto-Novo, Benin. On some of the challenges of collecting and archiving African photography, see Morton and Newbury 2015.
- 16 Haney 2004a; Haney 2004b; Haney 2013, pp. 67–101; Haney 2014.
- 17 See Erin Haney's contribution to the Metropolitan Museum's blog in conjunction with "In and Out of the Studio": www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/now-at-the-met/2015/photographing-the-gold-coast. We thank Haney for generously sharing her knowledge and time in the study this work.
- 18 David 1992.
- 19 Schneider 2010, p. 134.
- 20 David 1978, p. 4; David 1986, p. 168.
- 21 On the technique of stitch-resist dyeing, see, for instance, Gillow 2003, p. 68.
- 22 Lasnet et al. 1900, p. 93.
- 23 Hickling 2014.
- 24 For a discussion of this issue, see Geary 1998; Hickling 2014; and Paoletti 2015, chap. 1.
- 25 See, for instance, Geary 1998.
- 26 Viditz-Ward (1985, p. 46) argues that the studio opened in 1905, whereas Julie Crooks (2015, p. 20) maintains that Lisk-Carew began his photography business in 1903.
- 27 Phillips 1995.
- 28 Guyer 2014, p. 411.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Crooks 2015, p. 27. See also Julie Crooks's blogpost for the Metropolitan Museum website in conjunction with "In and Out of the Studio": <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/now-at-the-met/2015/reinforcing-identity>.
- 31 That the sitters are members of the Dumont family from Saint-Louis was communicated by collector Xavier Ricou to Giulia Paoletti, Dakar, Senegal, 2013.
- 32 Brilliant 1991, p. 92.
- 33 Saint Léon, Martin, and Fall 1999, pp. 62–63.
- 34 The catalogue numbers of this group of negatives, which include fig. 10, are VRA.2014.8.001–VRA.2014.8.017. For an extended discussion about them, see Paoletti 2015, chap. 3.



- 35 Fineman 2000.
- 36 The introduction of dry plates, for instance, was one of the elements of portability that had an immediate influence upon the development of amateur photography. Black 1980, p. 149.
- 37 See, for instance, Nickel 1998; Fineman 2000.
- 38 Batchen 2001, p. 5.
- 39 This concept is elaborated by Manthia Diawara (1998).
- 40 For an extended discussion of the work of Oumar Ka, see Paoletti 2015, chap. 4.
- 41 Oumar Ka, personal communication with Giulia Paoletti, Touba, Senegal, December 2012 and January 2013.
- 42 David 1992, cover and p. 48.
- 43 On glass painting traditions, see Sylla 2001 and Renaudeau and Strobel 1984.
- 44 Oumar Ka, personal communication with Giulia Paoletti, Touba, Senegal, December 2012, January 2013, and April 2014.
- 45 See, for instance, Blier 1996 and Bigham 1999.

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READY TO WEAR

A conversation with Malick Sidibé

Michelle Lamunière

You'd be forgiven for thinking that this is the golden age of African photography. There have been exhibitions and magazines and scholarly monographs doubling as coffee-table keepsakes; in the recent hip-hop film *Belly*, a book of photos by the Malian portraitist Seydou Keïta takes pride of place in the protagonist's sitting room. The French curator André Magnin has brought African photography to market, and he's made celebrities of Keïta and of Malick Sidibé, another Malian photographer. Their gorgeous black-and-white portraits captivate Afrocentrists and art critics alike.

Sidibé is glad to have found an international audience for his work from the sixties and seventies, but his sudden Western renown seems almost anticlimactic. He's been famous in Mali for decades, and he continues to work out of the same small studio he opened nearly forty years ago.

Malick Sidibé was born around 1935 in Soloba, in the southern part of Mali. In 1952 he moved to Bamako to attend

the École des Artisans Soudanais, now the Institut National des Arts, where he studied jewelry making. Upon graduating, Sidibé was hired by a local European photographer to decorate his shop, Photo Service. Gérard Guillard, known affectionately as Gégé le Pellicule—literally, “Gégé Film”—later took Sidibé on as an apprentice. The young Malian bought his first camera in 1956, a 6 x 9 Brownie Flash, and began taking portraits in Guillard's studio. Guillard served the European clientele while Sidibé, along with other apprentices, took care of the Africans.

A few years later, on the eve of independence, Sidibé bought a full set of laboratory equipment from a departing Frenchman; in 1962, he opened Studio Malick at 30th Street, Corner 19, in the neighborhood of Bagadadji. The majority of Sidibé's customers wanted small prints that could be pasted into albums or exchanged with friends. A matte 9 x 13 cm print cost 200 CFA francs, and a glossy print cost 150 francs—about ten times the cost of a soft drink.

*Conversation translated
by Lia Brozgal*

*Malick Sidibé,
Untitled. No date.
Contemporary African
Art Collection—The
Pigozzi Collection,
Geneva*







met up with him there one languid afternoon while researching "You Look Beautiful Like That," a major exhibition of his studio work to be held at Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum this fall. I was assisted in my endeavors by Baba Maiga, a young Malian photographer.

Michelle Lamunière: I understand that you worked in other media before you started making photographs.

Malick Sidibé: Yes, it's true. For me, setting up a photo shoot isn't so different from drawing a scene: I decide what goes where, I decide how to pose the person in order to capture a certain physicality. So you see, it was kind of a natural path from drawing to photography, because both offered me the chance to create images. That's what I do with cameras, with shadows and light. You know, I really think the art of photography is in the studio—that's where you create the scene, pose your subjects. It's not like taking pictures of parties, where there's a big crowd and everyone's moving according to their own rhythms, doing whatever feels right.

On the other hand, the party photography was a lot more fun. There was always music and a nice atmosphere, not a hint of sadness. Since I didn't have to worry about fixing people's hair and posing them properly, I was able to create spontaneous images of joy—and in that sense, the party pictures were more interesting for me. Also, it was the heyday of my youth. And you've got to live out those moments, especially when you're young and you haven't yet succumbed to the wisdom of adulthood, the sense of restraint that you develop, little by little, with age. These days, when I see young

people dancing, I admire how well they do it, and I say to myself, "Hey, Malick—you're not so old!" Sometimes I think that youth, dancing, and joy are the only things that really matter in life. Don't you think? After that, it's all downhill. Those times were truly, truly joyful.

You have to understand what a big deal it was to be able to dance with a girl. For us, touching a girl was like touching gold. Nowadays, boys can do whatever they want: they have dance parties at clubs, usually unchaperoned. But for us, this freedom was a totally new thing.

ML: Do you think any of that had to do with Mali winning its independence from France in 1960?

MS: Yes, it did have to do with independence, but not necessarily colonial independence. There was another kind of independence, too. By 1956, Afro-Cuban music had hit Africa, along with European music, and this allowed young people to experience a new kind of freedom. Before, when things were more traditional, it was impossible for a young man and a young woman to even go near each other, let alone speak to one another. Girls weren't allowed out of the house in skirts. No way! So they wore *pagnes* over their miniskirts. When they got to the party, they would take off their *pagnes* and dance. You have to understand what a big deal it was to be able to dance with a girl. For us, touching a girl was like touching gold. Nowadays, boys can do whatever they want: they have dance parties at clubs, usually unchaperoned.





means of creating memories. People sometimes bring newborn babies to the studio, and in those cases, it's clearly a matter of creating a memory for the parents, for the mothers and fathers who want to remember their baby at that age. On the other end of the spectrum, I also have people coming in with their fathers, or their grandfathers, because they want to have an image of that person. These images are memories that people can keep in their family archives, for the children, for the grandchildren, for the great-grandchildren.

ML: Do people still come to your studio to have their pictures taken?

MS: For the moment, I've more or less taken a break from the studio. I open up sporadically, for holidays, things like that. Since I have a studio to run, I can't afford to charge the same price as someone who works as a freelance photographer. I have overhead: taxes, rent, that sort of

knew who Seydou was, but I kept my distance, and we never got to know each other personally. Here in Africa, there is a strong distrust of competition. Do you know what I mean? I couldn't simply wander over and pop into his studio, just like that. I am the younger photographer, and if I started showing up at his studio and then later on his business started to flounder, or the jobs stopped coming in, he might well think, "That young guy put a spell on me!" That's what kept me from going over to his studio.

In 1952, when I first came to Bamako, Seydou was already very well known: he had cars and all kinds of things. I was the only person in town who could repair cameras, so when his equipment broke down, he came to see me. That's how our friendship began: he would drop by from time to time, when he needed chemicals, or something. After he retired in 1977, he didn't really have much in the way of equipment anymore, so he would borrow things from me. These days, I don't worry at all about going over to his studio. At any rate, we didn't do the same kind of work, really. Our styles are completely different.

ML: Both you and Keïta take what seem to be very stylized images of women reclining. Is there a reason for that? Is there a visual tradition that you're both responding to?

MS: It all depends. Sometimes, a woman comes to my studio and she wants her picture taken with a radio. Sometimes, a woman comes looking for a more quiet, laid-back atmosphere, as if she were in her bedroom. If the photographer can sense what she wants, the end result can be very charming. There's a sort of serenity and ease, almost as if she was at

Color photography doesn't inspire the same kind of passion: anyone can snap a photo and give it to a Fotomat to develop. Back then, you only truly became a photographer once you knew how to print your own photos.

thing. So I really can't charge the going rate. But there are always some takers for this kind of work. Oh, that will never change. It's eternal.

ML: There are only a handful of African photographers who are well known in the West, and two are from Mali: you and Seydou Keïta. When did you first meet him?

MS: Actually, it's only quite recently that he and I have become friendly. I always







But still, I'm really happy to have my portraits shown so that people can discover them, too. In fact, I've taken more studio portraits than party shots. At my place I can photograph so many different kinds of things: shoes, watches, bracelets, shoulder bags, necklaces. That's what brings the women to my studio to have their portraits taken. They all want their photos taken with those things.

Baba Maiga: They want to show off their new braids!

MS: Right, the braids: every time the braids change, they want to have new photos taken. Every time there is a new fashion in dresses, they come to get their picture taken. Every time they get new shoes—everything! For women, particularly in an era where media is everywhere, fashion is a very strong force. There's a new style in Europe, and some Africans go there on vacation—barely a month passes, and the style has hit Africa. And then there's cinema, fashion magazines, all that. A clever photographer—particularly a studio photographer—can use these things to his advantage. Nowadays, even babies have to be well dressed. Don't get me wrong: a well-dressed baby is really nice. But you know how it is with children. It's the mothers who dress them up like dolls. For an African woman, a baby is also a doll. She has to dress the baby well, keep him looking clean, and make sure to get photos so that she can keep the memories. You'll see portraits of kids with impressive necklaces, dressed up like adults.

And it's not as if these mothers neglect their own appearance. Sometimes I even get women who show up for their portrait with perfume! They come with

makeup, powder their noses to make themselves prettier, and then spray perfume ...

BM: Perfume makes you more beautiful!

MS: Ha—that's it! That's how much Africans love photography. It's like religion.

ML: Are your photographs still circulated in Bamako? Do people know who you are?

MS: Oh yes! Definitely. Sometimes women from the countryside come to have me photograph them. They know who I am, and they know I'll take a picture they really like. One woman showed up here one time, and I heard her saying, "Malick, Malick!" I turned around, but she wasn't talking to me—she was talk-

Every time there is a new fashion in dresses, they come to get their picture taken. Every time they get new shoes—everything! There's a new style in Europe, and some Africans go there on vacation—barely a month passes, and the style has hit Africa.

ing to her son. Not only did she know my name, but she had named her son after me! I was shocked.

You have to remember, a good photographer is also a social animal. Do good work, and people love you. It's true: people love you. Because the customers don't really see the camera, they see you, the artist—you become the product they're buying. It's like sugar cubes in coffee: you stir the sugar into the coffee and it dissolves and enhances the taste.



For them, the photographer has the power to make them more beautiful—that's your role. So a good photographer gets to know everyone, people of many different generations. The other day, this one kid was walking by my shop, and he called out my name: "Malick, Malick!" His friends poked fun at him, but I shouted back, "Hey, I know you!" For him, knowing me is . . . well, it's really a neat thing for that kid. It's a source of pride.

Your customers don't really see the camera, they see you, the artist—you become the product they're buying. It's like sugar cubes in coffee: you stir the sugar into the coffee and it dissolves and enhances the taste. For them, the photographer has the power to make them more beautiful.

ML: I've heard you're doing a lot of work with young people, these days.

MS: Yeah, I'm working on this project using camera obscura—it's a very simple technique, a means of transferring an image onto a page without using a negative. We got some funding from a French organization called Obscura de France, and right now, I'm looking for some more funds. In the meantime, we're still working on it, and we're still taking "obscura" photos. I'm working with young kids from the neighborhood, some of whom have never taken photos before. It's a new experience for the instructors, too, because most of us have never worked with these kinds of cameras. Even for me: I've spent lots of time repairing cameras, but I had no idea you

could create an image with a simple little thing like that. Wow! That discovery was truly astonishing.

We've taken the name "Naye-Naye," which is Dogon for "light." It's great for children, even the ones who live in the bush or on the prairies, because anyone can do it, and you end up with fantastic images. I have two instructors working with me to train the kids. And there's a coordinator, a guy who is responsible for finding the students: kids who aren't working, kids who are in school, even handicapped kids.

ML: What about your own work? I hear you've been traveling quite a bit.

MS: Well, not long ago, a collector invited me to Munich. She comes to Mali regularly, and every time she's here we take trips together, because she likes to take photographs. She found a studio for me in Munich, and I did some work there; that was a very, very happy time. One night she and her husband were supposed to go a concert, and they missed the show because they were so fascinated watching me work, seeing how I make portraits. I did the same thing in Geneva. I took some really lovely pictures there: young people, old people. I also took pictures in Nantes. And just the other day, I got a phone call asking if I could go to Amsterdam to shoot some portraits. It used to be that there were always twenty or thirty people around my studio in Bamako, waiting to have their portraits taken; today, it's not like that. So when I get the chance to go other places and take photos, I'm happy. It keeps me young.









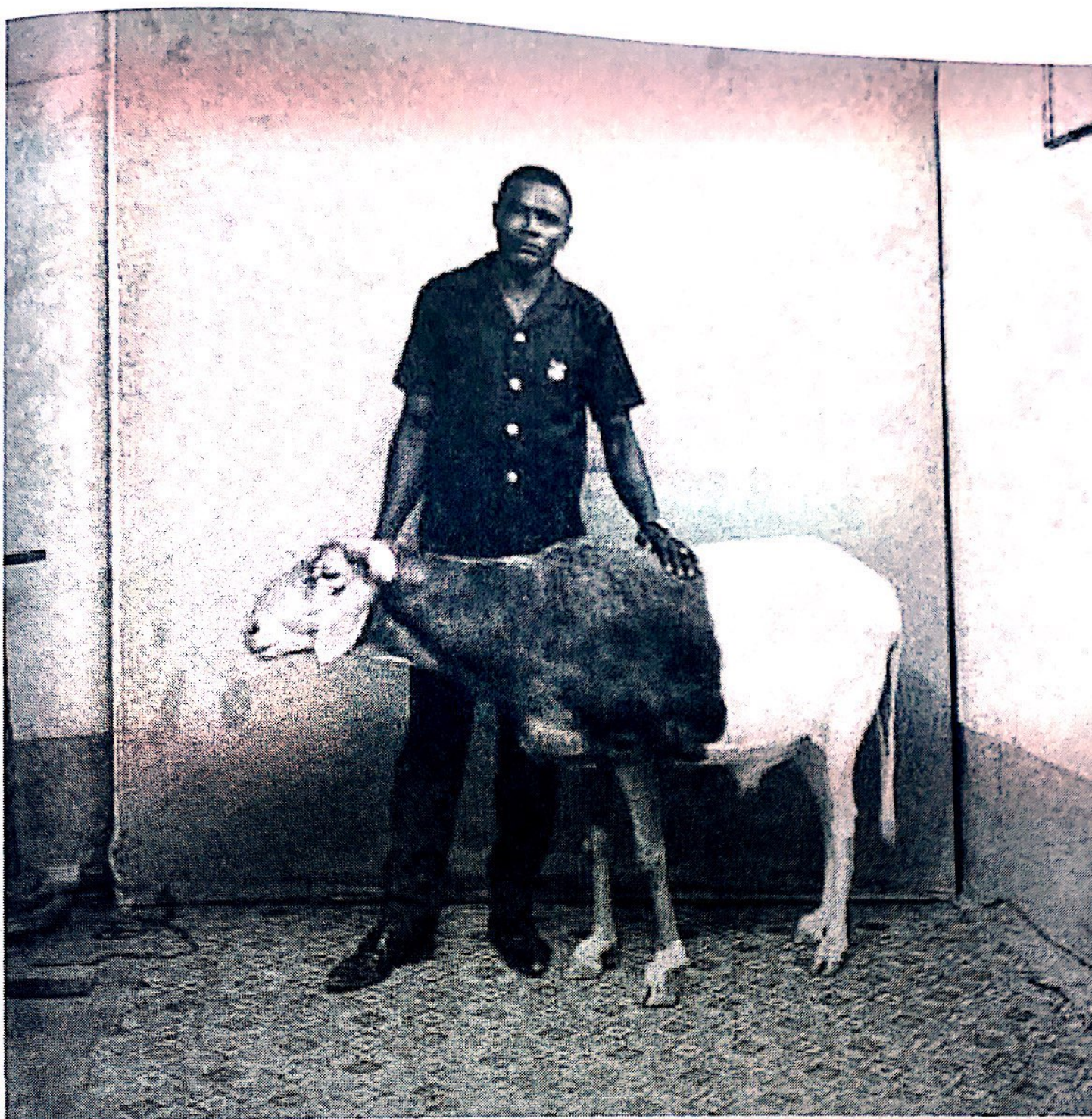


Malick Sidibé.
Untitled. No date.
Contemporary African
Art Collection—
The Pigozzi Collection,
Genève





















DRESSED IN PHOTOGRAPHS: BETWEEN UNIFORMIZATION, SELF-ENHANCEMENT AND THE PROMOTION OF STARS AND LEADERS IN BAMAKO

Ute Röschenthaler

Cloth has been described as a powerful means of expression and articulation in relation to politics, economy, ethnicity, age and gender. In this context, Jean Allman characterizes the capacity of dress and fashion as an 'incisive political language capable of unifying, differentiating, challenging, contesting, and dominating' (2004: 1). The integrating aspects of dress are most visible in uniforms. They make a specific cohort recognizable and reduce individual difference within a group, thereby emphasizing their sameness (Allman 2004; Hansen 2004; Mentges and Richard 2005). The equalizing properties of uniforms contrast starkly with the individuality of most other styles of dress, which enable self-fashioning and the expression of identity and personal status for the promotion and staging of the self (Eicher 2000; Schneider 1987; Taylor 2002; cf. Hansen 2004). As part of consumption habits, clothing has been understood as a strategy for social distinction (Bourdieu 1979), an expression of a process of social self-creation (Martin 1994; Miller 1987: 215) and an attempted realization of the image of a good life (Friedman 1994: 150). In the African context, this emphasis on individual style is particularly strong in the Congolese movement of the *sapeurs*,¹ who perfect the elegance of dress when they wear the original design labels they access during their trips abroad (Friedman 1994; Gandoulou 1989; Gondola 1999; Trapido 2011). In accordance with the well-known proverb 'clothes make people',² it is their expensive clothes that offer them access to opportunities that do not match their status.

Clothes, however, might also 'make' people other than those wearing them, when uniform dress is worn as a form of praise for celebrities or political leaders, as is described in this study of decorated cloth in Bamako. During one of my trips through the city's Grand Marché with my local assistant, Mahamadou S. Keita, in early March 2010, I noticed a young woman in a curious costume covered with various photographs of people connected by lines (Figure 1). We asked her

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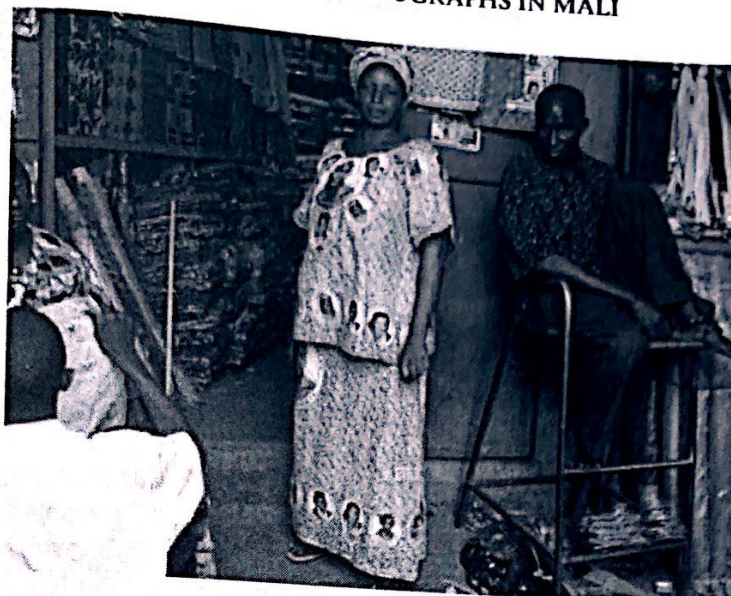


FIGURE 2 Dress for Mande Massa in the Grand Marché, 2010.

as with uniforms, the individuality of the wearer retreats in favour of the equality of the cohort. In contrast to uniforms, however, the photographs focus attention not on equality but on the person who is represented on the dress. Nevertheless, in some contexts the owners of the dresses display individual styles and preferences in the tailoring of the garments, and this makes them different from normal uniforms. The elaborateness of the dress reflects the means invested in the tailoring and also the attention the owner is trying to garner by wearing such a dress. There is a tendency for women from poorer backgrounds to own such dresses but they do not represent a specific social category. Each of the personalities printed on a dress attracts a different group of fans or followers, and their number increases and diminishes with the popularity of the individual or logo portrayed and with his or her ability to mobilize people. The market value of the cloth, which can differ greatly from its material value (cf. Appadurai 1986), also depends on this ability and the popularity of the personalities depicted.

In order to understand the local meanings of such clothing and their popularity in the 2000s, it is first necessary to examine the wider historical and social context of its diffusion and production. I will then explore how people in Bamako perceive such clothes, whether they are acquired as a gift or a commodity, the occasions during which such clothes are worn, and the relationship between the wearer and the individual portrayed.

THE PRODUCTION OF TEXTILES WITH PRINTED IMAGES IN MALI

Cloth decorated with photographs has been observed in Africa throughout the twentieth century. A glimpse into the fabric's history will help to explain the reasons for its great popularity in Bamako in the 2000s. Decorated textiles arrived in Mali with trade from the south, from the regions closer to the



Atlantic coast, where printed cotton cloth was first imported from Europe. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Dutch and British companies produced large quantities of cotton cloth intended specifically for sale in West Africa, where it was integrated into the existing practices of displaying prestige through clothing. It also served as a store of wealth and means of exchange (Picton 1995; Steiner 1985). Decorated wax prints quickly became popular and European companies eagerly adapted their commodities to African regional preferences of quality and design (Spencer 1982: 8). Around the same time, portraits of individuals (living and deceased) began to appear on such fabrics in Africa.

The first commemorative textiles, as cloths decorated with photographs are usually termed (Picton 1995; Spencer 1982), were imported from Europe to West Africa. John Picton (1995: 29) identified the first of such textiles in Ghana, which dated back to the 1920s. One is a fancy printed cloth from 1929 with a photograph of 'Mammy', a woman who presumably was one of the successful Ghanaian market traders.³ As wax prints are generally not a suitable medium for the detailed imagery of portraits, textiles with photographs are printed on 'fancy cloth', which is cheaper to produce and printed only on one side. The quantity of fancy cloth increased with the independence movements after 1945, and has continued to grow subsequently, as it is manufactured by local textile companies (Picton 1995: 61).

After independence, national textile manufacturers in the different African countries continued to produce cloths with photographs of personalities, particularly in the political domain (see Spencer 1982, who collected a great variety of such African fabrics dating from the 1960s to the 1980s). From the 1990s onwards, the liberalization of the market and new computer technologies further facilitated the reproduction of detailed images such as photographs on textile designs (Bauer 2001: 105). This allowed more individuals to commission such fabrics. The reach of these decorated cloths did not end at the frontiers of the strongholds of Islam. The cult of human images, as we will see, did not pose a particular challenge to Muslim traditions in southern Mali. There is, however, a clear tendency for people who wear dresses featuring photographs to come more often from the savannah and forest regions south of the capital than from the Sahel regions to the north, where the large *boubous* of dyed cotton are more popular than dresses made of wax or printed cloth.

It is not known exactly when Mali began to produce fabrics with portraits. Malian cotton production (for external markets) dates from the early 1900s (Roberts 1996), when Bamako grew into a city during French colonial times.⁴ The expansion of cloth manufacturing began in the 1950s, when the French Company for the Development of Textile Fibres (Compagnie Française pour le

³Picton found them in the Newton Banks Archives. At the time, these textiles were produced in Europe (mainly by Visco in Haarlem, Netherlands, and ABC near Manchester) and commissioned by African traders. In Ghana, they were sold by the United Africa Company (UAC). The second textile from 1929 carries a photograph of Nana Premeh, the Asantehene. Shortly afterwards, in 1931, an Ewe chief (Fiaga of Peki) and the Prince of Wales had their photographs on Ghanaian textiles (Picton 1995: 29). Printed textiles exported to Africa are normally of two types: wax prints (wax batiks) and non-wax prints (fancy or roller prints) (Picton 1995: 24-9; Steiner 1985: 91-5; Adenaike 1998).

⁴Bamako grew from a few hundred inhabitants in the 1850s to 1 million in the 1990s, and during the past couple of decades its estimated population has increased to 2 million (Meillassoux 1969: 4-9; Brand 2004: 61; Philippe 2009).



Développement des Fibres Textiles or CFDT) was responsible for facilitating cotton production in southern Mali. In 1974, at a time when cloth with photographs was already popular in Bamako, the Malian government and the CFDT agreed to create the Malian Company for Textile Development (Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles or CMDT) with several sub-factories. After independence in the 1960s, crowds of people wore the image of Modibo Keita on their gowns to support his socialist propaganda (Rillon 2010; see Ayina 1987 for Togo). Malick Sidibé's photographs also document young people wearing dresses with portraits at parties (Magnin 1998: 14, 31); however, nothing is known about the identity of those portrayed. Followers of Muslim saints were seen wearing similar fabrics in the 1980s (Soares 2004: 91).

Advances in the 1990s led to the partial privatization of the textile companies and eventually to a boom in decorated fabrics.⁵ Although the Compagnie Malienne des Textiles (COMATEX) remained state-owned, another cotton-processing company, Industrie Textile du Mali (ITEMA), was put up for sale.⁶ It was bought in 2004 by a Malian entrepreneur, Bakary Cissé, who had returned from Côte d'Ivoire during the civil war at a time when the Malian cotton industry was still performing rather well. He named the enterprise Bakary Textile Commerce Industries, commonly known as BATEX-CI in Bamako.⁷ Even though it faces competition from manufacturers from other countries, particularly from cheap Chinese textiles, BATEX-CI's customers appreciate its high-quality products. COMATEX and BATEX-CI each work together with special shops in different parts of the Grand Marché in Bamako where they sell their products to clients and traders; the latter resell them in smaller shops, and to petty traders who bring them to customers in the market or in the city's main streets.

State representatives more usually procure their textiles (with images) from the state-owned company, particularly those intended for state-related events. Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), President of Mali from 2002 to 2012, had his photograph printed on cloth in the hope of re-forging Malian national identity (Figure 3). In spring 2010, the state-owned shop displayed several types of cloth: one for Women's Day, one with the image of the (former) Malian head of

⁵Some 60 per cent of the CMDT's capital came from the Malian government and 40 per cent from the CFDT. Mali's relatively high cotton production continues to be supported by a number of policies: namely, guaranteed purchase, a fixed floor price, and credit for agricultural inputs (Teeft 2000; Moseley 2008: 84–6).

⁶In the 1980s, the ITEMMA printed several fancy cloths; one of them had a woman lamenting 'Si je savais' while the other had money and gold bars printed on it (Picton 1995: 126, 128). Like the CMDT plantations, the COMATEX factory is situated at Segou. Meanwhile, 80 per cent of COMATEX is owned by the Chinese company COVEC.

⁷BATEX-CI had about 745 employees in 2005. Before then, the state-owned company used to produce 10,000,000 metres of printed cloth annually; since privatization, the figure has been 23,000,000 metres, according to the article 'BATEX-CI remplace l'ITEMMA', *Afribone*, 7–11 March 2005: <<http://www.afribone.com/spip.php?article431>>, accessed 9 March 2009. At that time, the owner also had textile companies in Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Angola, Togo, Ghana and Congo-Brazzaville. Between 1998 and 2005, Mali was the largest cotton exporter in Africa, with an average production of 200,000 tons per annum until the prices on the world market fell, which led to financing problems and to farmers refusing to cultivate cotton. This is one reason why BATEX-CI presently receives only 20 per cent of the cotton it processes from within the country and imports the rest.





FIGURE 3 Textile featuring the former Malian president, Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), 2010.

state with the (now also former) Chinese president Hu Jintao, and one portraying ATT and Ann Veneman, the representative of UNICEF. They also sold great quantities of cloth with the logo of the fiftieth anniversary of Mali's independence and Women's Day (see also Pommerolle and Ngaméni, this issue).⁸ Other individuals preferred to order cloth from BATEX-CI because, as I was told repeatedly, they work quickly and produce high-quality textiles with the desired design.

BATEX-CI began the production of textiles with photographs in 2007. First they portrayed the religious leader Haïdara, then the radio presenter Mande Massa and the *griot* singer Babani Koné, followed by merchants, other religious leaders and school founders. In 2010, BATEX-CI offered a wide range of textiles with photographs: personalities portrayed included two radio presenters, Mande Massa and Dramane Djibo, well-known *griottes*, such as Djeneba Seck, Chéché Dramé and Nahoua Doumbia, and the singer Salif Keïta. They also produced a textile with images of the national football team (Figure 4), which was commissioned by the Association de Football du Mali, and two with the American President Barack Obama's portrait – one that showed Obama and his slogan 'Yes we can' (Figure 5) and the other with a picture of Obama and his wife, Michelle. I was told that the company had earlier designed fabrics with the image of the president's wife, with the Ouassoulou singer Oumou Sangare, and with many others that had long since sold out. A selection of textiles was displayed in front of the shop and visible from the market street.

BATEX-CI actively promoted the production of fabrics with photographs and sent out a mediator to approach public personalities and stars to provide their

⁸The textiles with the logo of the fiftieth anniversary of Mali's independence were very popular. We saw people wearing fiftieth anniversary dresses in 2010 in all corners of town, old and young of both sexes. Institutions and companies were free to use the anniversary logo in their own advertisements.



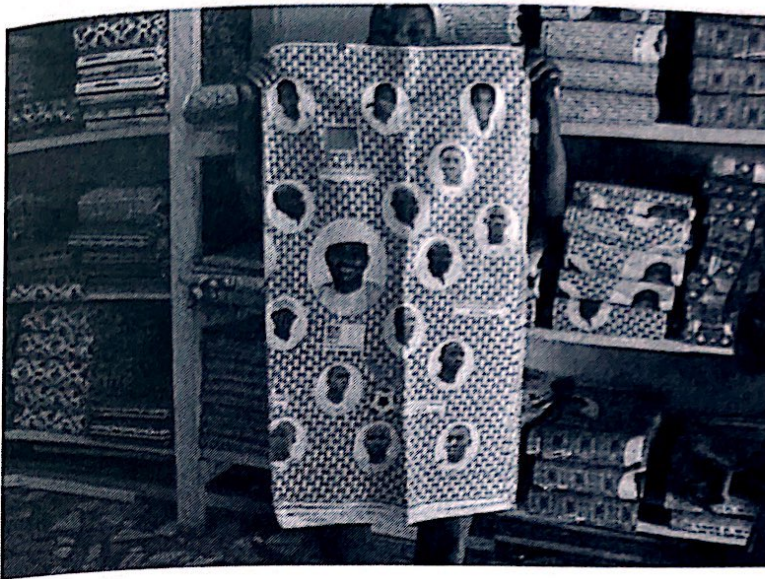


FIGURE 4 Textile illustrated with ATT and the Malian football team, 2010.



FIGURE 5 Dress with Obama and his slogan 'Yes we can', 2010.

likeness for textiles that the company would then offer to sell for them against royalties for using their image. This strategy has contributed greatly to the proliferation of photographs on textiles in Bamako. BATEX-CI prints these fabrics at its own cost and sells them for the celebrities in its shop. It also pays the artist royalties of 10,000 FCFA (approximately £13) for each bale sold, in exchange for permission to print her or his image. All parties are supposed to win from such a deal and the company assumes the risk of production and the sale itself.

An institution or individual wishing to have such a cloth places an order with either of the Malian textile companies that produce the fabrics, when they can



are arranged; these can include names, proverbs, logos and photographs. The designs are repeated across the cloth and are inspired by those on wax prints and other textile types from the portfolio of fabrics that BATEX-CI produces. These background designs consist of small floral or geometric patterns that are not supposed to be dominant or convey specific meanings. For example, *bogolan* designs, which are produced by cotton-processing companies in imitation of the well-known Malian mud cloth,¹⁰ are not found on these fancy cloths.

For African consumers, fabrics with geometric and floral designs – appreciated internationally for their aesthetic qualities – are often enriched with photographs as well as with other ‘speaking’ designs, images and symbols of modernity such as mobile phones, air conditioners or televisions. They might include anything from globally recognizable pictures to designs with culturally specific meanings. Proverbs and images of metaphorical statements printed on fabrics convey messages about interpersonal relationships that cannot be expressed verbally in the context of social hierarchies and that are only decipherable locally. Such fabrics with specific meanings can also be found in Ghana (Domowitz 1992); another example is the *kanga* cloths on the Swahili coast (Beck 2001). Fabrics on which photographs and logos are printed might be situated somewhere between culturally specific meaning and global comprehension depending on the degree of notoriety a personality, logo or brand has attained.

In contrast to fabrics decorated with floral and geometric designs, symbols of modernity, proverbs and metaphorical images, which have a longer-term appeal, the cloths with photographs are produced for and refer to a specific event such as a concert, the visit of an important personality or a religious ceremony, which means they have a large but shorter-term audience. Therefore, in Bamako, these cloths with photographs are called *textiles référentielles* or *textiles événementielles* (referential or event-related cloths), as the sellers in the textile shops explained.

They are cheap and have a limited lifespan or period of relevance. As a student in Bamako told me: ‘It is like a fashion – they are short-lived and not expensive. When one year’s edition is sold out, it is gone.’ In their endeavour to profit from them, the entrepreneurs with whose image the textiles are decorated look for opportunities to integrate them in recurring events, such as annual concerts or ceremonies, so that a new cloth has to be acquired again and again. After the event, these dresses serve in everyday contexts for housework or market visits only, continually advertising the person portrayed. In Bamako, they do not commemorate a person posthumously, unlike in Burkina Faso or Ghana, where, in addition to textiles with the image of the president, such fabrics are often produced for funerals to venerate deceased individuals and are kept by family members for remembrance (Spencer 1982).¹¹

¹⁰ ‘Le *bogolan*, c’est le textile qui parle,’ a seller of BATEX-CI cloth told me in spring 2010. Hunters are said to have worn the mud-died *bogolan* shirts, which had protective powers for them. In the past, the Malian *bogolan* had specific meanings, known to initiates only. This pre-colonial communicative power of textile designs was described by Calame-Griaule (1986). Mali has become well known for this cloth, which is produced in workshops and sold to global consumers (Rovine 2001).

¹¹ I carried out interviews on the topic in Burkina Faso in 2012. In the South West Region of Cameroon, such cloth is more usually ordered on the occasion of a chief’s installation festivities (Röschenthaler 2011: 408–9).



Such a fabric is a medium, like a second skin, that communicates and helps to advertise the personality whose image it carries. It also acts as an object that reminds people of the event at which it was worn. Many of these dresses periodically reappear in the public space in different colours and designs, indicating the temporal proximity to the event they advertise. Days and weeks in advance and afterwards, these dresses enable fans to recognize each other and draw attention to the event in a far livelier manner than the immobile billboards could ever achieve. The dresses also animate communication while people move around town. Wearing a cloth is a statement of belonging to a group or a promotion of an idea. It expresses a readiness to be identified with the image on the dress. Closely connected to these meanings is the value of the cloth, which largely depends on what or who is depicted on it. The fabric's market value reflects how such cloth is perceived, whether it changes hands as a commodity or a gift, and, to a lesser degree, whether it becomes a uniform or an individually styled dress.

BETWEEN UNIFORMITY AND INDIVIDUALITY: DECORATED CLOTH ACQUIRED BY OBLIGATION OR PERSUASION OR DUE TO ADMIRATION

The dresses made from decorated cloth reflect a range of social relationships that influence their respective meanings and value. I will show that the value of the cloth is connected to the form of acquisition – that is, by persuasion or obligation, or due to admiration and feelings of support. There is a tendency for the dresses of associations, which require their members to wear uniforms of wax cloth at certain events, to have the same designs and forms with little individual variation but not to carry portraits. Rather, dresses with portraits are worn in contexts where larger heterogeneous groups of people meet more voluntarily and the uniform with the photograph is often combined with individually styled dresses. The popularity of the person portrayed increases the market or sign value of the cloth and, in some contexts, encourages the individuality of the dresses, which reflects the amount of money wearers are ready to invest to tailor the cloth into clothing.

Uniforms and the acquisition of textiles by obligation

In Bamako, most of the uniforms used by home-town associations do not display photographs of individuals, particularly when all the participants have the same status. There are many such associations in Bamako. Migrants, even those who have lived there for generations, keep contact with their home villages because, in an insecure environment such as the African city, people continue to rely on their social networks from the countryside, regardless of whether they are kin, clan, the ethnic group or a social category¹² (Little 1965; 1973; Vaa *et al.* 1989;

¹²To these categories belong the free-born of different ethnic backgrounds, artists of different specializations (the praise singers or *griots* included), and the descendants of slave families (together, these three categories form a social whole). The families of traders and *marabouts* play a supplementary role in this social arrangement (Schulz 2001; Diawara 1996; 2003; Hoffman



2001). In Mali, such associations do not reproduce social categories (such as artisans, freeborn or former slaves) but rather they transcend them, reflecting the same regional origin or common social or urban professional interests. Migrants from abroad (particularly those from countries to the south) also form such associations. At festivities where members of the association celebrate together, they often wear uniforms of printed wax cloth with the same colour and design. When such uniforms are ordered from a textile company, all members are obliged to contribute to the production costs and subsequently buy the cloth before the festivities.

Associations' uniforms are decorated with a photograph of a member only when he or she is an outstanding individual or public personality. In such cases, these photographs begin to indicate an asymmetry in social relations. For example, members of the association for the Guinean migrants in Bamako had a uniform depicting the president of Guinea-Conakry in 2010¹³ and, in 2010, those from northern Côte d'Ivoire had dresses with the image of Ouattara, the former leader of the opposition party. An example in which the popular personality of an association declined to have his photograph printed on a textile is the well-known photographer Malick Sidibé. In 2010, the 'Association des ressortissants pour le développement des Yallonkoro Soloba', which unites Peul migrants from the Malian region of Ouassoulou in Bamako and of which he is a member, wanted to celebrate Sidibé's achievements, for which he had received a trophy. The members organized a concert in the garden of the Palais de la Culture in March 2010. For the event, they ordered a cloth that depicted the trophy and Sidibé's name, but not his portrait. They paid the advance and then bought the cloth to reimburse the association for its expenses. Women and men alike wore clothes that were made from the textile but varied slightly in style (Figure 6). Some people also wore T-shirts with his photograph.¹⁴ The goal of the textile was to raise funds to finance the event, not to make a profit.

Founders of private schools also require their students to acquire uniforms. Several school founders have profited from the business potential of such cloth. They order a textile decorated with their photograph and sell it at the beginning of the school year. The pupils' parents have to buy the decorated cloth to provide their children with the obligatory school uniforms. The individual differences in the uniforms are reduced here to a minimum and the cloth is produced and sold to make profit. This example also implies asymmetry between the popular figure and those wearing the clothes, as was the case with the previously mentioned political leaders and their followers who came from the same home region.

2000). The 'Mande world' includes the present states of Mali, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, the Gambia, Senegal, southern Mauritania, northern Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone and western Burkina Faso. The uniforms of home-town associations, professional groups and rotating savings and credit associations are widely known but are often found in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Women have been reported to be more active in associations than men. Personal networks are particularly important for women, serving to build relationships among different families and friends (Brand 2004: 79; Vaa *et al.* 1989).

¹³Many of the Guinean women sell Western textiles for the young at the southern part of the Grand Marché.

¹⁴The photograph is reproduced on a transparent cling film that is attached to a white shirt.





FIGURE 6 Concert in honour of Malick Sidibé, 2010.

Cloth disseminated as gifts worn as boubous and wrappers

Fabrics with the photographs of heads of state are found in many African countries (see Spencer 1982). Heads of state often face difficulties encouraging the population to buy fabric decorated with their portrait, and so they often give the cloths as promotional gifts that are usually distributed shortly before an important event. Most people told me that they were reluctant to wear clothes with such portraits, and only did this when the leader of their own political party was represented or when he was from their home region. I was also told that these textiles were mainly produced for women, and men were often given decorated T-shirts instead. Some politicians even provided the women with the money for the tailor to ensure that they would be able to wear the textile and not just put it in their cupboard, complaining that they cannot afford a dressmaker.

Merchants also followed suit and ordered cloths with their brands. Merchants, however, have never placed their portrait on the cloth, only their brands and logos. Like politicians, they try to oblige followers to wear dresses with their brands and logos, and distribute the cloth with their brand-name products as promotional gifts.¹⁵ Lobo Dramera is one such entrepreneur. In 2007, he ordered textiles decorated with his brands from BATEX-CI. His good customers received the 3 metres needed to make the classical women's dress – wrapper, blouse and head-tie – transforming the woman, so to speak, into a mobile human billboard. In spring 2010, Dramera began to distribute another cloth, which was decorated with his company logo, the logo of the fiftieth anniversary of Mali's independence and a

¹⁵During national fairs – in Mali, the annual fair is called the *Foire Exposition Internationale de Bamako* (FEBAK) – companies often order textiles with their logos and images of their products to decorate their stand. Their employees wear costumes made from the cloth during the fair.





FIGURE 7 Fabric showing Dramera's Santa Lucia spaghetti together with a logo for Mali's fiftieth anniversary, 2010.

package of Santa Lucia spaghetti (for which he has the sole licence of importation from Italy) (Figure 7).

Both merchants and politicians make promotional gifts to people in an attempt to persuade them to accept the gift – acceptance suggests a partial commitment – and wear the textiles by way of reciprocation. Customers agreeing to do this would, in effect, be promoting the products or political ideas of the suppliers – but they seemed reluctant to do so. In contrast to textiles that display photographs of stars, it was rare to see people wearing cloths printed with local brands or politicians. Where women did so at all, it was as simple *boubous* or wrappers rather than paying for a tailor to make them up – as was the case with fabric bearing photographs of stars or radio presenters. Wearing such a cloth appeared to evoke less pride.



Dresses that feature the picture of religious leaders are individually styled but decently cover the entire body. They differ from the dresses that have the images of singers and media figures, which exhibit the greatest individuality in style of all these dresses. Babani Koné was among the first of the *griotte* singers to have her photograph printed on a cloth, together with her name and telephone number, in 2007. The mediator of BATEX-CI approached her, she agreed, and several hundred bales with her image were produced. She received royalties for each bale the shop sold. She also acquired her cloths from the shop on consignment, and took them along to her concerts to sell them. 'C'est vendre son image,' some of her fans told me with admiration for her entrepreneurial skills: 'Elle [Babani] utilise son nom pour vendre les tissus ... et elle laisse son image partout.' Other *griottes* followed, such as Diallou Damba, Djeneba Seck, Nahoua Doumbia and the late Chéché Dramé, and also other female singers such as Oumou Sangaré. Salif Keita did so as well – but it appears that cloth depicting female singers sells better.

In 2010, two presenters on private radio stations likewise decided to have their image printed on textiles. One was Dramane Djibo from Radio Guintan, who has a large female audience and is known for his popular broadcast in which he promotes women's rights and interests. The other, Boubacar Konaté, alias Mande Massa – the 'Mande King' mentioned at the start of this article who was working at Radio Djekafo at the time – was even more successful (Röschenthaler forthcoming).

Mande Massa began broadcasting in Bamako in 1996, presenting a traditional form of theatre, the *baroni*, with a team of actors (in 2010, five women and one man). He explained to me that his aim was to sensitize social norms and mediate potential conflicts in the Mande family with entertaining role-playing. His programme is a kind of local soap opera and is very popular with women. In 2006, the Malian president honoured his broadcast with an award, and, a year later, Mande Massa organized his first concert to which he invited singers and musicians to perform as well as staging some pieces of *baroni* theatre. In 2008, he brought out the first cloths with photographs of himself and his team. He ordered about fifty bales, which were quickly sold. In 2009 and 2010, he sold more than 200 bales annually (a bale has fifty pieces of 6 metres each, so this equates to costumes for at least 5,000 people). The cloth sold well, and so, before his concerts, he produces cloth every year with a different design, colour and image. So far, he has brought out five different cloths for his concerts in the Palais de la Culture – the last concert so far took place in early March 2012, a couple of weeks before the coup. Until that time, Mande Massa had the second best-selling cloth, right after Haïdara.¹⁹

The 2010 concert I attended in the Palais de la Culture sold out on the spot (3,500 tickets). Large numbers of fans wore clothing made of the relevant cloth at the event, multiplying Mande Massa's image, with each costume tailored in a

sense of the word) (Soares 2005: 8, 181–209). In Burkina Faso, in 2012, I was also told that Muslims did not agree with placing photographs of individuals on cloth.

¹⁹In 2010, an entire bale of fancy cloth was worth 350,000 FCFA (depending on the quality), and one bale contains fifty *pièces* for two complete dresses – i.e. 100 sets of complete dresses (wrapper, blouse and head-tie). BATEX-CI sold one set of fancy cloth for 3,500 FCFA.



slightly different way. The audience members did not wear the old cloth from the previous year. An estimated 80 per cent of the audience was female, the majority young women. Some men wore Mande Massa shirts and trousers, but most of these were employed as helpers by the concert organizers. The hall vibrated with excitement when Mande Massa or one of the invited *griottes* reminded the audience of the women's important role for the nation, and when Mande Massa told them they were like the beautiful daughters and wives of the Mande King who loved their pride and beauty, and who needed their support.

Young women actively contribute to promoting the image of their stars and representing them in public spaces when they wear dresses with the same image. They have spent money not only to acquire the cloth but also to tailor the dress. Therefore, many women also indicate their love for an artist when they wear elaborately tailored dresses. In a visual way, fans and followers perpetuate the Mande social practice (carried out verbally by *griots* only) of praising or advertising venerated people. These are the kinds of acts from which commercial advertising has tried to profit, for example by creating love marks: these are brands that consumers buy because they love to identify with them (Foster 2008). As we have seen in the examples of Santa Lucia spaghetti, Maggi and Jumbo cubes, merchants as well as politicians have tried to seize this opportunity by buying decorated textiles in an attempt to encourage consumers, followers and supporters to wear them. Unlike the stars, they cannot sell these textiles in shops, and so they give them away as promotional gifts. They do not benefit directly from their sale, but can only hope to enhance their reputation or business through gift-giving. Most of the dresses with their image that their followers wear are simple in style, because people do not spend extra money to have them tailored. The stars and religious leaders, however, have been able to convert their fame into money by selling their image and making followers and fans support them in this venture. More than for the religious leaders, the dresses for the stars and media presenters clearly combine the uniform appearance defined by a specific colour and photograph with the individual styles carefully selected by the young women.

People's voluntary decisions to make the image of individual personalities their second skin does not amount to simple uniformity. It differs from a context in which one is obliged to acquire and wear a uniform because of membership of an association or a school, and/or because of a commitment to express belonging and corporate unity at a specific event. Whereas religious gatherings do not seem to encourage individual styles of dress, events hosted by media presenters and stars' concerts do. Here, the individuality in the tailoring of the dresses reflects the admiration (and the financial possibilities) of the wearer, who seeks out the opportunity to stand out as a fan in order to attract the attention of their preferred star.

DRESSES WITH PHOTOGRAPHS: A FEMALE POPULAR CULTURE

By attending the concert and wearing the cloth with a portrait, the young women express their love for the artist in a visual way. By wearing a dress that bears the same image, fans and followers express their belonging to a spontaneous group whose members come from various parts of the town and who have no common regional or ethnic background. These new forms of sociality differ from more obligatory forms of belonging to regional associations and social



categories. This belonging is driven by a different sentiment than affiliation to a professional or home-town association or a school. Instead, it reflects a sense of belonging to an 'imagined community', which in this case might rather be termed a 'community of sentiment' (Appadurai 1990; Schulz 2002).²⁰ These new forms of gathering take place in an urban context and highlight the fact that the city is a privileged place of cultural invention and for the creation of popular cultures (Barber 1987; Fabian 1998; Falola and Salm 2005), and an arena of symbolization (Amin and Graham 1997: 415). Events such as Mande Massa's concert open up new forms of sociality in the city and instance Karin Barber's idea of new forms of public in an urban context (Barber 1997; 2007: 137–74).²¹ The women who attend such events do not necessarily know each other – unlike the members of the home-town associations – and they know their star only through his radio broadcast and as a media personality, not as a person from a specific region in Mali.

The women who gather at such concerts represent communities of Mande Massa and other radio broadcasters' listeners. When they wear the dresses with Mande Massa's portrait, they recognize each other in urban space. My research shows that these women have come from less educated family backgrounds. They are petty traders, housewives, young women who work at home and do the cooking. Others come from rural areas to work as helpers in their urban relatives' homes. They include women who live with their parents and wives who often live in polygamous households where they have to cope not only with their co-wives but also with their parents-in-law, according to whose wishes they have to carry out the daily tasks in the same way as their own mothers have done earlier. Whether they are young or old, many of these women love to listen to the *griottes*' songs and Mande Massa's broadcast, feeling that they appreciate their hard work and take their worries seriously, and that they acknowledge their daily suffering and make them dream about a better future. In their songs, the *griottes* also refer to these women and their important role in society and the keeping of Mande values. Women appreciate the educational aspect of their praise songs, their moral character and consolation effects (Schulz 2002: 802ff., which also relates to song contents).²² This is even truer for Mande Massa's radio theatre *baroni*. He specifically addresses the women's hard work and suffering in their daily lives, and their difficult situation in current society. This helps to explain the particular success of the *griottes* and radio presenters with special women's programmes, as well as the fact that these women regularly acquire the cloths to advertise their idols.

Women have repeatedly told me that they wear the cloth because they love the *griottes* and radio presenters such as Mande Massa because they provide

²⁰The term 'imagined community', coined by Anderson (1983) in the American national context, became prominent in anthropological debates on various kinds of forged feelings of belonging and identity. For a criticism of the concept, see Tamir (1995). The young women's consumption of popular music contrasts sharply with the behaviour of young men, who often gather in small groups to discuss their concerns in so-called *grins* while drinking Chinese green tea.

²¹This publicness differs from that described by Habermas in Europe (Schulz 2002).

²²Dorothea Schulz has described such fan communities of female adolescents in Bamako and other parts of urban Mali in the late 1990s. She also noted that female consumption and fan culture are largely understudied (2002: 799).



entertainment, consolation and advice about how to define their role in the Mande social fabric within often polygamous families. Like the young woman at the beginning of this article, many women told me that they wore the decorated dress of Mande Massa and the *griottes* because of their great admiration for the celebrity, and that wearing the cloth was 'a way of supporting your star'. The women we interviewed at the market told us that they went to look for the cloth in the months before an event such as the Mande Massa concert, eager not to miss its appearance and to have their outfit in time. Others had been given the cloth as a gift by their sister, mother or husband. Outfits with portraits are not exclusively worn by women, but men only rarely wear textiles with radio presenters' or music stars' photographs on them. If they wear a cloth with portraits, they choose one with their football team or political or religious leaders, preferably from their home area.

The explanations of the women are corroborated by merchants and radio presenters. For the merchants as well as the celebrities, women are clearly the primary target group. Mande Massa told me in spring 2010 that he organized the concerts and invited *griottes* to reward women for their enthusiasm for his broadcasts. He also made textiles with images of his team available for them. Merchants such as Dramera also stated that their idea was to create textiles for the women to wear, and reflected that the goods represented on the cloth must be those that women use (a cloth with images of a brand of Chinese green tea would not be worn by women, he said). This reflects our observations in the public space, at concerts, and at other large events.

While merchants and radio presenters claimed to address women in general, women with a more bourgeois social status were less keen to wear textiles with photographs. When I showed her pictures of women wearing clothes with images of *griottes* on them, one young female graduate explained: 'They are paying [money] for the love they have for the artist.' And a young doctoral student explained: 'It [the textile] shows the love one has for a particular thing; it is something beneficial to identify with.' They both stated that they would not wear such dresses because they felt that a different, less educated class of people wore them.

Wearing these dresses decorated with the images of stars is a practice that is neither 'elite', 'bourgeois' nor 'traditional'; it also lacks purely commercial connotations. It is above all a popular culture of less educated women who do not belong to the growing middle or elite classes, thus rendering the term 'popular culture' difficult to delineate. The dresses form part of a fashion for women (see also Fokwang, this issue) who are dreaming of a better future. Radio presenters respond to these dreams, and the women who listen to them express their admiration through such textiles in the urban context. However, this sharply contrasts with the fashion of those with whose pictures they decorate themselves and who form part of a different class of people in the urban context.

SELF-CREATION, BELONGING AND STATUS ASYMMETRY

The individuals whose pictures are found on such textiles would normally not wear a dress made from fancy cloth – and particularly not one with their own picture on it. Furthermore, the singers and Mande Massa wear the most precious



and skilfully ornamented garments when they perform on stage. At Mande Massa's concert, for example, the prestige that expensive clothing represents was reflected in the spatial arrangement of the concert hall. The most important women and men sat in the first rows, wearing expensive dresses that matched their affluent status. The young women who wore the Mande Massa costumes and constituted the majority, in contrast, sat further back, accepting the social hierarchy corroborated by the spatial arrangement. Those who wear dresses with photographs thus publicly communicate a subordinated status in relation to the individuals whose image they wear and whose achievements they acknowledge. In these textile constellations, the relationship between the individuals on the cloth and the crowd wearing their picture on their clothing is asymmetrical, with fans multiplying and advertising the image of their stars in public space. As is characteristic for 'big men' more generally (Godelier and Strathern 1991), such acknowledgement is not permanent but needs to be maintained in a continuous struggle for appreciation. In contrast to *sapeurs*, who make use of the prestige that expensive clothes confer, cloth-wearers do not challenge established social hierarchies.

The asymmetrical relationship between a famous person and his or her community of followers encourages the prominent placing of photographs on clothing. While Sidibé declined to have his photograph printed on the uniform, a shift can be observed when one person is more prominent than the others in a supposed group of equals. This is evident in the home-region associations, as an individual from that same region who has become a politician might have their image printed on the association's uniform, as was the case in the examples from the Guinean and northern Ivorian associations.

These dresses express individual styles when worn by followers. This is most prominent when the dress displays photographs of a star. When young women wear dresses with photographs of their idols and collectively express their praise for the individual portrayed, they combine both their wish to express individuality by designing their own dress and collective sociality through uniformization. The eye-catching portraits again reflect the asymmetrical relationship between the fans and the celebrity who is depicted on their clothes. The dresses make the individual retreat into the background in favour of the promotion of another person, the prominent individual whose image is represented in the photographs printed on the dresses. The fans and followers who wear these dresses are women from poorer social backgrounds; the middle classes tend to be absent in this constellation. Thus, cloth might be considered to be a contributing factor in a cultural process that constructs class through consumer culture (Hansen 2004: 370) or else visualizes loosely connected female fan communities (Schulz 1998) from a certain social background. In this way, wearing a dress with the same photograph emphasizes not only connectivity (cf. Miller 2005: 6) but also its converse: exclusivity.

However, the class idea does not fit neatly into the pattern that this staging follows. The constitution of the followers is dynamic; it can encompass the female fans of an artist or large parts of the nation assembling for the president. It can expand according to the event; at best, it reflects a tendency in which less educated women show their affinities for wearing such clothes. The dynamics of the group goes beyond class distinctions. It is a fashion – a fashion from below – that comes and goes. It became prominent in Bamako during the 2000s due to evolutions in the textile sector, the liberalization of the market, the emergence



The portrait on a cloth increases or diminishes its market value. In Bamako, textiles that bear the portraits of politicians and logos of products are most often distributed as promotional gifts to persuade people to wear them, while fabrics that have the images of singers and radio presenters on them are profitable. The individuals and institutions working with such fabrics – the politicians, merchants, preachers, media presenters, musicians and founders of private schools – all seek to promote themselves and their activities by placing their photograph or logo on fancy textiles. The cloths with images of religious leaders and stars are sold in the market, while associations and schools require their members to buy the relevant fabric. Others give such cloths away as promotional gifts. The value of the cloth largely depends on its decoration and its capacity to transmit positive popular feelings. Almost paradoxically, both artists and popular religious leaders are able to sell these cloths for profit while the commercial entrepreneurs have to give the textiles away.

Dresses with portraits of singers and radio presenters reflect new social communities that share their love for stars – local celebrities whose art is rooted in Mande culture – and bring fans together irrespective of their geographic origin, thereby transcending neighbourhoods, ethnic groupings and social categories. Several strong tendencies are evident: the majority of the fans are women from poorer social backgrounds; the middle classes do not like to wear such dresses; and the portraits of important individuals from different sectors of society are represented on various cloths. While the stars and leaders themselves wear expensive dresses made of precious materials tailored in extravagant styles, the majority of the female fans' dresses are made from the uniform and cheap 'fancy cloth', which is acquired primarily for a single event to acknowledge their support in this asymmetrical symbiotic relationship. The women support and promote their star or leader when they collectively wear these dresses, which combine the concept of the uniform – which is otherwise made of cloth that does not feature portraits and is worn by members of associations that have a common home region or interest – with individual styles that express the preferences of the women. The clothes therefore make the person, and, in our case, they make two people at the same time: the women who wear them and – even more so – the stars whose portrait they bear.

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ABSTRACT

Most literature on cloth focuses on its capacity as a medium of identity construction in relation to politics, economy, ethnicity, age and gender. As such, the equalizing properties of uniforms are often contrasted with the creation of individual styles of dress. This article discusses a further dimension in the complexity of



the meanings of clothing: it explores the history, uses and local meanings of fabrics on which photographs of public personalities are printed in Bamako. In Bamako in the 2000s, entrepreneurs from different sectors of society, such as politics, religion, media, art, education and commerce, rediscovered this type of cloth as a business opportunity. They have produced decorated fancy textiles for events where large, heterogeneous groups of people participate most often, and where they multiply the image printed on their clothing. Some of these personalities distribute the cloth as promotional gifts, while others make their fans and followers purchase fabrics as evidence of their admiration. The uniforms decorated with photographs reflect a tendency towards asymmetrical relationships between the owners of the dresses and the personality depicted on them. Some of these relationships even encourage individual styles that transgress the uniform character of the dresses.

RÉSUMÉ

L'essentiel de la littérature consacrée au tissu porte sur sa capacité en tant que moyen de construction d'identité dans le contexte politique, économique et ethnique, ainsi que dans le contexte de l'âge et du genre. À cet égard, les propriétés égalisatrices de l'uniforme sont souvent mises en contraste avec la création de styles vestimentaires individuels. Cet article traite d'une autre dimension dans la complexité des significations de la tenue vestimentaire ; il examine l'histoire, les usages et les significations locales des tissus sur lesquels sont imprimées des photos de personnalités publiques à Bamako. Dans les années 2000 à Bamako, des entrepreneurs de secteurs de la société aussi divers que la politique, la religion, les médias, l'art, l'éducation et le commerce, ont redécouvert ce type de tissu en tant qu'opportunité commerciale. Ils ont produit des textiles élaborés décorés pour des manifestations rassemblant le plus souvent d'importants groupes hétérogènes de personnes qui multiplient l'image imprimée sur leurs vêtements. Certaines de ces personnalités distribuent le tissu sous la forme de cadeaux promotionnels, tandis que d'autres font acheter le tissu à leurs fans et sympathisants en gage de leur admiration. Les uniformes décorés de photos reflètent une tendance vers des relations asymétriques entre les propriétaires des vêtements et la personnalité qui figure sur ces vêtements. Certaines de ces relations encouragent même des styles individuels qui transgressent le caractère uniforme des tenues vestimentaires.

