

Module 9 Overview

Module 9



This week, we'll be looking at African photography. The best part is the slide show of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé that you all will be viewing once you've done the readings for this week. Both Keita and Sidibé are absolute legends in photography and what you read this week will start to explain why.

We've talked a lot over the course of this semester about Western anthropology's complicity with European colonial projects in Africa. It is important to note that early anthropology was heavily focused on the biological and physical studies of humans, which made photography its great ally. Since the invention of cameras, anthropologists could record phenotypic differences in the people they studied. Invented in 1836, photography developed quickly, and while it was extremely cumbersome at first—replete with oversized glass plates coated with gelatin emulsions and needing to be developed on the spot—it was an amazingly useful tool.

When we talk about photography in representation, we have to talk about power. In photography, especially in its early anthropological applications in Africa, the photographer—usually a white male—held all the power of representation, with the black subjects having little or no say in how they were represented. Many times this involves nudity, especially when women were subjects. In this way, photography objectified African women and men and also violated many ethical ideas. Keeping in mind that for Africans, photography was often used to eulogize the dead and represent ancestors who had passed, then we begin to understand the even deeper violation that being photographed likely represented to many Africans. They were not given a choice. They were systematically photographed in order to be classified into different phenotypes, and often these images made their way into racist popular culture for public ridicule and amusement.

As the authors explain, anthropological interpretation of the body was conceptualized through physiognomy—the belief that facial and body features indicate specific mental and moral characteristics. The authors go further in investigating the power differential between the photographer and subjects by describing techniques like camera placement and lens angle, the position of the subject in relationship to the photographer, and the natural environment selected by the photographer to enact the subject's authenticity (and we'll leave that one in quotes). This discussion is especially important because conversation changes significantly when the tools of representation are in African hands. African portrait photographers like Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé were not anthropologists seeking to study the people in their photographs. On the contrary, the people in their photographs were family and friends and paying clients who wanted to look as good as possible for their portraits.

The authors of your first article, "Colonial Imaginary, Tropes of Disruption, History, Culture, and Representation in the Work of West African Photographers," do a great job of laying out some of the topics we've been talking about since we started Module Two on post-colonialism in African art, including the individuals who were so critical to these new ideological frameworks like Frantz Fanon, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Wole Soyinka, and Kwame Nkrumah. It is vitally important for you to understand the power of thought and theory in this decolonization process and how self-representations and conceptualizations by Africans themselves, as opposed to representations of Africa by Europeans or Americans, are so important to this process of decolonization. Having said this, we can begin to understand the enormous importance of the photographs of Malian photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé. What the authors of the first text explain is that the subjects of these photographs are the electorate who would cast the decisive vote for independence and initiate the radical break with colonialism. The men and women you see in these pictures are

testaments to a modern Africa full of the euphoria of independence, youth, and beauty. These photographers methodically documented an important milieu that negotiated space, bridging the gap between colonial and post-colonial identity, between the self and other, and between modernity and tradition.

The second article you're reading this week is written by the well-known film and cultural critic Manthia Diawara, who grew up in Bamako, Mali, and talks beautifully about the importance of Malick Sidibé's photography. After reading the article, you should not only be able to understand and articulate why Sidibé's photography was so important, but you should also be able to explain why James Brown, who was such a tremendously important figure in black popular culture both in the US and Africa, was referenced. Diawara has helped to popularize this useful notion of a diaspora aesthetic that is defined beyond national boundaries and that unites black youth through a common habitus of black pride, civil rights, and self-determination. He ends the article alluding to hip-hop culture and how it has fed into this diaspora aesthetic, inspiring youth all over the globe.

Your last item for the week is the R21 profile of Carrie Mae Weems, who appropriated early anthropological photographs in order to create critical artworks that speak to race, class, and power in representation. I hope you all enjoy the materials this week as much as I have.



Learning Objectives

Course Learning Objectives Targeted

- Critically engage with art historical texts related to African art by analyzing scholarly interpretations, methodologies, and debates, and applying theoretical frameworks to develop informed perspectives
- Compare and contrast different styles and genres of African art by analyzing visual elements, techniques, materials, and cultural contexts, and discussing how they vary among regions, ethnic groups, and historical periods
- Identify critical historical moments and art movements in African art by exploring key periods, such as ancient civilizations, colonialism, and contemporary movements, and their influence on artistic expression across the continent

Module Learning Objectives

- Analyze the impact of self-representation in African photography on decolonization efforts
- Explore the historical use of photography in early anthropology in Africa
- Compare the perspectives and practices of Western anthropological photographers with African portrait photographers like Keita and Sidibé.



Activities and Assignments

1. Read

1. [“Colonial Imaginary, Tropes of Disruption: History, Culture, and Representation in the Works of African Photographers” by Okwui Enzewe in Guggenheim Museum. “In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to Present.” 1996. \(https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587170/download?wrap=1\)](https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587170/download?wrap=1)
 2. [“The 1960’s Bamako: Malick Sidibé and James Brown” by Manthia Diawara in Elam, Harry and Kennell Jackson. Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture. Ann Arbor: U.Michigan Press, 2008. \(https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587171/download?wrap=1\)](https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587171/download?wrap=1)
 3. [Slideshow: Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé \(https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587163/download?wrap=1\)](https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587163/download?wrap=1)
 4. [The Self Portraits of Samuel Fosso ↗ \(https://www.guernicamag.com/the-self-portraits-of-samuel-fosso/\)](https://www.guernicamag.com/the-self-portraits-of-samuel-fosso/)
 5. [Black Beauty_ Photography Between Art and Fashion - The New York Times.pdf \(https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587184/download?wrap=1\)](https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587184/download?wrap=1)
2. Complete **Module 9 Discussion**
 3. Complete **Module 9 Quiz**

The instructional material listed above will help you understand expectations related to this module's topics, achieve the learning objectives and complete the assignment(s).