

SORY SANLÉ'S VINTAGE PORTRAITS OF BURKINA FASO'S PEOPLE IN NEWLY INDEPENDENT WEST AFRICA

Written by Katy Cowan

Sory Sanlé: Volta Photo 1965-85 is a fascinating collection of black and white photographic work by Sory Sanlé, an eminent portrait photographer from Burkina Faso, the landlocked country in West Africa formerly colonised by the French, then known as Republique de Haute-Volta.

Born in 1943 in the Nianiagara district of Bobo-Dioulasso, the country's cultural and socio-economic hub, Sory began his career in photography in 1960 – the same year his country regained its independence. Working as an apprentice to a Ghanaian photographer, he learned to process and print the photographs he took with his Rolleiflex twin lens camera.

He began documenting the city on his motorbike, capturing its centuries-old traditions and evolving identity in the wake of African independence. He worked as a freelance reporter, on official assignments, and illustrating record sleeves, but his real passion was studio work.

In 1960 Sory opened his own portrait studio in Bobo-Dioulasso under the name, Volta Photo, where he photographed the city's inhabitants. He shot them with an original wit, energy and passion – men, women, young, old, confident, vulnerable, elegant, carefree – while capturing the natural fusion between tradition and modernity. His work conveys a youthful exuberance in the wake of the first decades of African independence. In many ways, his subjects also illustrate the remoteness and melancholy of African cities landlocked deep in the heart of the continent. The powerful poignancy with which Sanlé captured his subjects at this particular moment and place in time is what distinguishes him from his contemporaries.

Sory Sanlé: Volta Photo 1965-85 is available in a stunning new book dedicated to Sory Sanlé's photography and will be accompanied by his first international solo exhibition at Morton Hill Gallery, London, running until 27 October 2017.