

THE UNSUNG HERO WHO CAPTURED WEST AFRICA'S REBELS & DREAMERS

PHOTOGRAPHER SORY SANLÉ CAPTURED A CULTURAL EXPLOSION THAT REJECTED RURAL, PATRIARCHAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUES.

Invariably, when there's chatter in the western press about 20th-century portrait photographers who documented the nascent cultural emancipation in post-colonial Africa, three names crop up: Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta – both Malian – and the Central African Republic-based Samuel Fosso. They've all built up remarkable bodies of work: Sidibé's black-and-white snaps of fashion-forward Bamako youths; Keïta's predilection for elegant monochromatic tableaux with clashing patterns; and Fosso's intimate, at times satirical, self-portraits, pointing to a fragmented cultural identity. But it's nothing short of a curatorial crime that we haven't managed to dig deeper and shine a light on a broader spectrum of artists. As a result, new images and image-makers are still finding their way into our growing visual record of self-determination and dynamism in post-colonial African societies.

That's something French author and producer Florent Mazzoleni has unexpectedly found himself immersed in since 2011, when he began amassing hard-to-find vinyl records from Burkina Faso's Afro-funk (or "Bobo Yéyé") heyday of the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, he came upon Burkinabe Sory Sanlé's eye-popping photographs of a freshly cosmopolitan Bobo-Dioulasso (the country's second largest city), its singular energy, bustling youth culture and exuberant music community. It quickly dawned on Mazzoleni that most of the era's record sleeves had been the work of Sanlé, whose pictures eventually found their way into Mazzoleni's retrospective box set, *Bobo Yéyé: Belle Époque in Upper Volta*.

Mazzoleni has since taken on the role of Sanlé's archivist, single-handedly convincing him to stop burning his 200,000+ untouched negatives from the era. And over time, the 74-year-old came to see how his underrated body of work bears witness to a country undergoing swift cultural, economic and social transformations, torn between the pull of a modern European lifestyle and the region's time-honoured traditions. It's only been four years since his first exhibition at the French Institute of Burkina Faso, and this week marks Sanlé's first international exhibition at London's Morton-Hill Gallery, along with *Sory Sanlé: Volta Photo 1965-85*, a hardback book published by Reel Art Press. A career retrospective is also in the works at the illustrious Art Institute of Chicago, slated for May 2018. We reached out to Mazzoleni to learn more about the unsung man who documented Upper Volta's newly emboldened youths and sweeping sense of optimism with his Rolleiflex twin-lens, medium-format camera.

HE CUT HIS TEETH COVERING THE ACCIDENT BEAT FOR NEWSPAPERS

Sanlé began taking pictures in 1960, the year his country achieved independence (and was then the Republic of Upper Volta). After apprenticing with a Ghanaian photographer for a few months, the young Sanlé began covering car crashes for newspapers. "At the time, there were still some newspapers in Bobo, but very few cars on the road," explains Mazzoleni. "He would take pictures of wrecked cars and accidents. We have a whole series of such photos that hasn't yet been exposed." But very quickly, one of Sanlé's cousins funded his first pieces of equipment, he rented out a small space, and the Volta Photo portrait studio was born in 1965.

HIS PICTURES SPEAK TO UPPER VOLTA'S NEWFOUND OPTIMISM

Post independence, Upper Volta, a landlocked country sandwiched between Togo, Benin, Ghana, Niger, Mali and Ivory Coast, found itself at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. Especially the cosmopolitan city of Bobo-Dioulasso (Sanlé's hometown), with its sizeable Ghanaian, Malian, Ivorian and Nigerian communities who all flocked there to work. Sanlé's portraits lay bare a more liberal, insouciant and consumer-driven society quickly coming to the fore, with his subjects' Bob Marley and Bruce Lee T-shirts, fondness for cars, vinyl records, boomboxes and soft drinks. "A certain permissiveness was quickly allowed and people were able to relax," explains Mazzoleni. "Natural haircuts à la Nina Simone proliferated, as did bell-bottom trousers. Boys and girls could now have fun together, without worrying about the future. There was nothing calculated about it."

HE DOCUMENTED BOBO-DIOULASSO'S MUSICAL HEYDAY

Upper Volta long struggled to exert its cultural might throughout Africa and export its music beyond its borders, but what took place during that time within the country – and Bobo-Dioulasso in particular – was nothing short of a revolution. French yé-yé, Afro-funk, and Latin all collided in the performances of local heavyweights such as Dafra Star, Orchestre Volta Jazz, and Echo Del Africa. With Sanlé being the unofficial chronicler of daily life in Bobo, it's no surprise he also documented these band's comings and goings. "If you listen to some of their songs, they're full of emotion, depth, sincerity, and candour, which are all things you can feel perusing Sory's images," comments Mazzoleni. "Whether in his lighting choices, the details, the rigour, the costumes or the human expressions on display, there's something at once mischievous and whimsical about his pictures," he adds.

THE COMPARISONS TO SIDIBÉ AND KEÏTA MUST STOP

Such comparisons, while inevitable, ensure we cram all these greats into the "African portrait photographer" box. While these analogue titans spent decades building a consistent body of work with a clear through-line, Sanlé and Sidibé never even met, Mazzoleni points out. "At the time, there were hundreds of photographers toiling away across the continent. Right now, for instance, I'm working on the archives of Félicien Rodriguez, a Beninese contemporary of Keïta, who even got started before him, and let me tell you, the photographs are quite extraordinary. Ultimately, Sanlé was completely unaware of the value of what he was building, just like Sidibé."

HE DROVE HIS VAN AROUND BOBO TO CAPTURE ITS BOOMING NIGHTLIFE

After a full day's work at the studio, Sanlé would often travel to the city and its surrounding villages to photograph Upper Volta's youth. "I would drive down to some remote village in the bush and set up a player, a few records, some loudspeakers and a few lights and get the party going," Sanlé recalls in the hardcover book. "We started around 8 pm and people would tell me, 'Sory, you need to set the place on fire!' It would go on until 5 am." According to Mazzoleni, Sanlé found himself at the heart of a burgeoning movement that rejected rural, patriarchal and religious values. "There was a social dimension to his photos, without a doubt," he explains. "You might not know what you were eating the next day, but you would go dance with a girl, drink a Fanta, and be part of this cultural explosion."

HE SUPPLIED AN ABUNDANCE OF STUDIO PROPS

Everyone from funeral parlour drivers to pirate movie aficionados were welcomed into his studio, where they were offered hairbrushes, plastic toys, boom boxes, T-shirts, sunglasses – you name it. "Customers wanted to hold something in their hands," Sanlé recalls in the book. "They sometimes wanted to borrow suits, hats and neckties I had at my disposal." Mazzoleni considers Sanlé's studio to have been the ultimate democratic space, where rich and poor, young and old, Muslim pilgrims and Catholic nuns, little rascals and adorable girl squads alike found their place. "Sory was the chronicler of his time. He was a popular photographer but also a craftsman in how he treated his clients. He made many items available to those being photographed so they could escape for a bit and improve their day-to-day."

HIS BACKDROP ALLOWED HIS SITTEES TO DREAM

Beginning in 1973, Sanlé commissioned numerous painted backdrops for his studio. Mazzoleni explains there was a beach setting, which represented Abidjan; the big North American city; and an aircraft's boarding bridge, conveying that one was ready to fly. Sanlé remembers that most of his clients didn't have the means to travel very far. "Some of my customers were keen to travel in order to leave a souvenir behind them for their families as well as an escape from reality," he says in the book. "It mostly didn't work out as they would only travel as far as Mali or the Ivory Coast. I had this airplane design made in Bouaké in the Ivory Coast by a Ghanaian painter. The airplane background conveyed a true sense of departure, while the Volta Photo one, made by a local Bobo painter, was more urbane."

HE WAS A MAN OF HIS (ANALOGUE) TIME

Mazzoleni believes Sanlé was seen as a kind of “wizard” of his time in Bobo, as he owned uncommon tools, possessed a rare expertise and knew how to make prints. “Sory still walks the streets of Bobo today to take photos, and you quickly realise everyone knows him. He also does digital, but as he says, there’s a dilution of the photographic gaze. The photographer no longer holds the same social status as once was the case. Today, everyone can make films with their smartphones, in Burkina and everywhere else. So there isn’t the same need to document social life as one would back then.”

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