

A WITNESS TO YOUTH CULTURE IN BURKINA FASO

By Fayemi Shakur Jan. 9, 2017

Florent Mazzoleni had been researching popular West African music and the history of artists from Burkina Faso when he grew entranced by the album covers shot by Sory Sanlé. Though the country was poor, its cultural scene was vibrant, especially as seen by Mr. Sanlé, a 74-year-old local photographer. Intrigued, Mr. Mazzoleni set out to find him.

"When I met Sory outside his studio, he was burning some negatives from his archives because he said people didn't care about the old stuff," said Mr. Mazzoleni, a French author and record producer. "I spent all night looking at his photos and negatives with a flashlight. He has tens of thousands of photos from the '60s, '70s and '80s. He gave me a box of negatives that I could print. That's how our relationship began."

Since that meeting, Mr. Mazzoleni has spent much time with Mr. Sanlé, helping the photographer preserve his work. He created a website for him and hopes to gain more exposure for Mr. Sanlé's contributions to the photographic canon. After his first exhibition curated by Mr. Mazzoleni in 2013 at the Institut Français du Burkina Faso, both in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, Mr. Sanlé was interviewed on national television and became a local hero.

Though Mr. Sanlé's work documenting the cultural scene is reminiscent of that by Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita — revered African photographers — he had been working more or less on his own. He never set out to become famous: In his hometown of Bobo-Dioulasso, one of the largest cities and cultural capital of Burkina Faso, he was seen as a craftsman. In some ways, his experiences show that although photography studios became popular in the 1960s in most major African cities, there is much still left to discover.

Mr. Sanlé began modestly with support from a relative who had established a driving school, the band Volta Jazz and Volta Photo, the studio where Mr. Sanlé began his photographic work. He documented vibrant periods during the two decades that followed Burkina Faso's independence from France, and was soon able to afford travel by motorbike and by car throughout the city, capturing a flourishing music scene, youth culture, dance parties, weddings and portraits, using the 6×6 format and up to 20 or 30 rolls of film in a day. He followed bands like Volta Jazz, Dafra Star and Echo del Africa when they played and sometimes illustrated their record covers, the same covers that caught Mr. Mazzoleni's eye.

"I'm preserving these records and photographs because there is a great wealth of culture that was produced," Mr. Mazzoleni said. "Sory was a democratic photographer in a good sense. Rich people, poor people, religious people, artists, musicians, everyone could become a hero at his Volta studio."

And now it is his turn to be lionized. Currently, he has a solo show at Galerie 127 in Marrakesh, Morocco, and he is continuing talks with museums and other institutions who are interested in his work.

In a short film produced by Mr. Mazzoleni, Mr. Sanlé speaks of the importance of memory: "You need to make a memory, step by step, so that you can pass down good memories to the young ones who'll come after you to those who have yet to be born. You may no longer be here, but your images will and they'll see them. Personally, that's why I love photography. If there is music, you need to have photos, too, in order to bring back memories. Photography is a witness to everything, marriages, baptisms... for me, without any photos, nothing actually happened."

Correction: Because of a reporting error, the name of a photographer was spelled incorrectly. It is Malick Sidibé, not Malick Sibidé.

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