**Seydou Keita & Malick Sidibé:** Photographs from Mali
20 September – 21 October 1995
Admission Free

Introducing the Exhibition
For Fotofeis '95, the second Scottish International Festival of Photography, The Fruitmarket Gallery presents the photographs of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, who both worked as commercial photographers in Bamako, the capital town of Mali. Their work provides a unique insight into West African society during this period, and raises critical issues such as wealth, social standing, and the growing influence of European culture upon West African society. The dignified, highly posed portrait photographs of Seydou Keita tell us much about the self-image of his sitters and how they chose to be perceived. Malick Sidibé's spontaneous photographs of the youth of Bamako, in contrast, capture the light-heartedness of the time. Both illustrate the gradual move away from tradition as European influence became more pervasive.

Organised by the Foundation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris, the exhibition was originally shown in two separate parts. The Fruitmarket Gallery Fotofeis exhibition therefore presents the opportunity to see both artists in one space for the first time – a rewarding experience.

Seydou Keita
"I took up photography in 1945 in Bamako. I had no help and knew nothing. I used a 6 x 9 camera that my father had brought back from Senegal for me; he had also given me money for film. That's how it came to me. In all sincerity, it is a job that I have tried to do as well as possible, I loved photography so much. At first, I photographed my family. And with them, some poses 'worked', others didn't. I started really badly: people moved and I must have been a bit shaky as well. In the prints, people came out a bit like skeletons. I asked the client for the price of the print in advance, then I made the print at Pierre Garnier's or at my elder brother, Mountaga's: Mountaga taught me developing. And the photos just didn't work, I was in trouble: the clients weren't at all happy….

In 1948, when Mountaga knew that I was skilled, he left me his laboratory. I did all the developing then, but only in black and white. Colour photos were around, but you had to send everything to France. In any case, it didn't attract me. For me, black and white was the thing. At that time, there were four photographers in Bamako: Youssouf Traoré, Boudjala Kouyaté, Mountaga Kouyaté and me, there was Moumoune Koné too. Malick Sidibé turned up later. We all did portraits, but people said that my 'cards' were the best. I had a Photo Keita stamp, which I put on my prints.

In 1949 I got a room and began with 13 x 18 negatives. The prints were the same format, that's why I preferred the 13 x 18. On the walls of my studio I exhibited

lots of models and samples of the photos I took: men and women half-length, alone, as a twosome, or even up to six of them together….

Clients would say: " I want to be photographed like that, you see? That's what I want." And that's what I'd do. But sometimes it didn't suit them at all. I would suggest a position which would suit them better, and then it was I who decided on the right position, I was always spot on. It took me just a few minutes, no more. A lot of clients came along, but Saturdays were best; sometimes there were over a hundred. At times there was even a queue. Well-off people, mostly civil servants and tradesmen. Even the first President of Mali came. I did the printing during the night and put the finishing touches the next morning, just before the clients came back to pick up their 'cards'.

With the 13 x 18, my first backdrop was a bed-cover. Later, I changed the backdrop every two or three years; that's how I work out the date of the shots today. Sometimes the backdrop went well with the clothes, especially the women's clothes. But that was just luck.

In those days, the culture of our ancestors was beginning to disintegrate; city-dwellers began to dress European-style, France influenced them. But not everyone could afford to dress like that. In the studio. I had three different European suits, with tie, shirt, shoes and hat…the lot. And some props: biros, plastic flowers, a radio set, and telephone. Clients could use them to pose with.

As far as women were concerned, dress hadn't changed much at that time. Western get-up, like skirts, appeared only in the late '60s. Women came in their big robes. So I would position them, then spread the robe out. It was absolutely vital that their finery came out in the photo. Hands, long, slender fingers, jewels; these were all very important – the women were very sensitive about that. It was a sign of wealth, elegance, and beauty.

I never saw or met any foreign photographers: I never went out. I didn't know their photos either. You never saw French magazines here, nor American ones.

I worked by both daylight and artificial light. Customers preferred my 'night photos' which were paler but I preferred natural lighting. Customers liked my photographs because of the clarity, the precision, because the lighting was good, and also because they liked the composition and backdrop.

When I look at my photos today, they haven't faded at all, they haven't changed colour… I always worked with the same camera, right to the end in 1977. I kept my negatives; they're all there, clients could ask me for new prints.

I stopped taking photographs when colour took over. Everyone likes it now, but its machines that do the work. Today lots of people get called photographers, but all the same, plenty of them don't know a thing."

Seydou Keita was born in Bamako, Mali, in 1923, and lives there still. Text translated and adapted from an interview with the artist by André Magnin in Bamako, August 1994.

Malick Sidibé

" I attended Bourgouni school, 160 Kilometres from Bamako, until I was sixteen. One day, the Head Teacher, having noticed that I was good at drawing, asked me to do three drawings, because the Colonial Governor of the Sudan was coming to inspect the school. He was the one who helped me enrol at Bamako National Art school in 1952, and I left in 1955 with a craft diploma in jewellery. Being a Peul, I was not very happy with this, as the members of this ethnic group do not work with their hands. At the end of the 1955 academic year Gérard Guillard, nicknamed 'Gégé the Film,' who came to the art school to look for a student who could decorate his shop and studio, Photo Service. I was the one who was chosen. Once I had finished the project, Gégé suggested that I should continue to work for him. So I became his apprentice and started to do little jobs round the studio: matting, mounting, processing and delivering finished prints. That was the time when I took my first photographs, in his studio, principally for Malian customers.

In 1956 I brought my first camera, a Brownie Flash, and took my first photographs on my own account, so my early works were done through Photo Service and Gégé paid me a percentage of the profits. When he gave up his studio in 1957 / 58 Gégé suggested that I should take over as manager, but I did not have the confidence. Various people managed it until 1962, when I left to open my own studio, Studio Malick. I had a 6 x 6 Agfa with a simple lens and a very durable 24 x 36 Foca Sport. As well as taking studio photographs I travelled more than 300 km in search of reportage. People asked me to take industrial photographs of road-building, laying tracks for railways, construction sites and so on.

I was lucky enough to be the only specialist in reportage in the whole of Bamako, apart from Sakali. Sakali was older than me and he had a higher status: above all he liked to photograph grand banquets, evening functions in the big hotels and important receptions. I preferred little parties and young people, but I also covered christenings, first communions, and weddings… On my bicycle I could cover as many as five parties in the same evening.

I knew nothing about foreign photography. We had no contact with it, and there were no magazines or books showing it here. We found out what was happening in Europe through films. Travellers brought European music here, and there was a record shop in Bamako, which introduced us to the Twist, the Jerk, the Cha-Cha-Cha, the Hula-Hoop, Cuban music, the first Rock records and American musicians like James Brown… Young people used their parents' record

players. They set up clubs in every part of Bamako named after their idols: the Sputniks, the Wildcats. The Beatles. The Black Socks… there were lots of them.

The kids organised parties at their parents' houses or in empty houses they rented, and everyone paid a small entrance fee. There were lots of opportunities to have fun. I have always been very fond of young people. As you know, respect for older people is very important in Africa. I was older than these teenagers, but I didn't want them to treat me with too much respect or else they would have been shy of my camera. Young people the same age as my children called after me in the street, "Malick! Malick!" and they still do. I still say to my contemporaries, "No, no, even if you are older you don't have to be embarrassed at being friends with young people." It made the photographs much better. I really liked taking photographs in clubs and going to film shows and plays even while I was busy with reportage. You have to enjoy yourself while you're alive: there's nothing after death. Film stars impressed the kids most, especially the students in town; it was very different in the country. Something I always felt, but it's only my opinion, is that kids really liked European music then because they could dance to it. Boys and girls could meet, touch each other, cuddle. In comparison, our traditional dance, the tam-tam, doesn't let you come close to each other.

There was no real rivalry between the different clubs except a certain competition for girls: the boys from one club would always try to attract girls from another one to prove that theirs was the best. The boys belonging to the club often dressed in the same way: same shirt, same belt, same shoes … Their clothes usually copied Western styles … You couldn't find Western clothes here, but we had good tailors who could copy them cheaply.

When it was really hot people went off to 'La Chaussée' or 'Rocher aux Aigrettes', where there was a waterfall. It's on the banks of the River Niger, about ten kilometres from Bamako. We made up picnics and spent the day there. The boys brought portable record-players and records, we made tea, went swimming, danced in the open air. I took lots of spontaneous photographs and was very happy with them. You could think that they had been specially composed, but often they happened naturally or accidentally.

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