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Ça bousculait! **(It Was Happening!)**

1956, *l'heure de la descente* (quitting time), 18:00 (6 p.m.), rue de la Jaille. In the neighborhood of Saint-Louis known as Sor, Doudou Diop, an accountant in the French army and a well-known stu-

dio photographer, returned from the army base where he worked to his home every evening and prepared to open his studio. The hour marked the end of the workday for those who work for wages at fixed hours. In the sandy street outside Diop's house (the photographer later moved with his family to another part of Sor), one is, today, still keenly aware of the sense of movement and sonorous exchange of greetings as people pass by. It is easy to imagine the scene in an earlier era, as friends, neighbors, and clients gathered outside the photographer's studio. Some would have been there to have their pictures taken; still others would have come to pick up the portraits that they had taken a day or two before, or to accompany a friend. In Saint-Louis as in other large cities in l'Afrique Occidentale Française (the AOF), *les salariés* (those earning cash wages) were frequently employed in jobs in the colonial administration and related colonial institutions, like the photographer himself. Such employment conferred status; it connoted a high level of education and therefore of literacy in French; and it facilitated access to cash.¹

Diop is deceased, but in 2007 I was fortunate enough to visit his family's Saint-Louis home, where I looked at the remains of his studio archives and conducted a series of interviews with his son, Guibril André Diop. Diop's negatives are long gone: some have been destroyed, others taken to Europe by curators and collectors. Few prints remain in the house, and the majority of those that remain are either family photographs or those found in the photographer's sample album. On the second and third days of my visit, I rephotographed a selection of prints from this album. André lives in Dakar, but he had



AFRICAN PHOTO
ONIAS M. CASSET
DAKAR - MEDINA

driven to Saint-Louis a few days before our meeting in order to celebrate the Tabaski holiday with his extended family.² He is a sculptor who has garnered significant international recognition and is a visible presence on the Dakar art scene. In Dakar, André has a studio of his own, in the historic arts complex known as the Village des Arts. Doudou Diop was born in 1920; his wife, Ndèye Teinde Dieng, in 1930; André (named for his father's father), in 1953. André does not know the exact date on which his father opened his studio, but he does know that his father was, at the time that he was born, already a skilled photographer—because it was his father who took his baby pictures.

My contact with the Diop family was brokered by Bouna Medoune Seye, a Senegalese photographer, artist, and filmmaker who, in 2007, was living in Paris but happened to be in Dakar at the same time that I was that year. (Bouna passed away, as I was finishing this manuscript, in December 2017.) Bouna had known Diop well during his lifetime. In addition, Bouna had acted as a de facto custodian of Senegalese photography history: brokering connections between local photographers and collections and French curators and collectors; organizing an important photography festival (le Mois de la Photo de Dakar [Dakar Photography Month], which preceded the Rencontres de Bamako, the well-known African photography biennial, by several years); and managing the archives of several Saint-Louis-based photographers. Because it had been arranged by Bouna, my meeting with André quickly moved from circumspect to warm, and already by the afternoon of the first day we were laughing freely as we looked at and talked about photographs together. Our conversations were punctuated by periodic visits from André's mother and the photographer's wife, Ndèye Teinde Dieng. At first a silent presence who sat in an armchair and listened as we spoke, she herself did not venture to speak until what I had thought would be the final afternoon of my visit. When she did speak, it was with a revelation that surprised everyone that day, and that caused me to rethink my itinerary.³

His eyes filled with boyish glee, André described the scene in the street outside his father's studio. He told me that his father opened his studio at 6 p.m. and that the crowd would begin to form shortly thereafter.⁴ From the age of five or six, his job had been to hand out numbers to the clients waiting in the line that formed on the busiest days. André is a grown man now, twenty years my senior, tall, grizzled, and soft-spoken. But, as he animatedly described this scene, it was easy to picture him as a boy, swelling with pride and the sense of responsibility as he worked his way down the line: "Toute la ville est venue" (Everyone was there), he said to me, and "Ça bousculait!" (It was bustling!). French curator Frédérique Chapuis, who interviewed the elder Diop during his lifetime, relates a similar story about the crowd of clients waiting in the

1.4 (PREVIOUS PAGE) Double portrait of girls with a telephone. Photograph: Mama Casset. Dakar, Senegal, 1950s. Courtesy of the CRDS, Saint-Louis, Senegal.

street outside his studio. She reports that, by 7 p.m., there could be up to fifty clients waiting in line.⁵

The image of the crowd has become, today, a commonplace in the critical and curatorial literature on studio photography in west Africa. Seydou Keïta, the now world-famous studio photographer from Bamako, is rumored to have had more than 30,000 negatives in his archives when he was “discovered” in the early 1990s by the French photographer Françoise Huguier. Curator André Magnin, the other French national who helped to make a global *succès fou* of Keïta’s images as they began circulating through museums and art galleries all over the world, estimated that Keïta had between 30,000 and 70,000 negatives in his archives in Bamako before he (Magnin) began exporting them to France.⁶ In the 1950s, at the peak of Keïta’s studio career, the population of Bamako (at the time that Keïta was working, the capital of French Soudan) was 100,000.⁷ Could one photographer really have photographed 30 percent to 70 percent of the city’s population? Even if we allow for clients who made repeat visits (of which there were many, judging from the portraits by Keïta that have been published in the exhibition catalogues), the figures are staggering and evidence of photography’s popularity in Bamako in this period. Also important in Keïta’s case was the influx of nonresident clients, who had their portraits taken as they passed through town on the Dakar-Niger railway.⁸

Keïta once told Magnin in an interview, “There was always a crowd around my studio, and I was working all the time. All the elite in Bamako came to be photographed by me: government workers, shop owners, politicians. Everyone passed through my studio at one time or another. Some days, especially Saturdays, there were hundreds of people.”⁹ Keïta’s description of this scene reveals a central tension that arises between claims made for the crowd and those made for the elite status of a given studio’s clientele. This tension is almost certainly a reflection of the rapid urbanization that was taking place, in the late colonial period, in the AOF and in Bamako in particular, where urbanization was linked to the accelerated development of colonial infrastructure and the swelling ranks of associated administrative personnel.¹⁰ It may also be a reflection of increases in physical mobility (consider, again, railway traffic) and in social mobility, exemplified in the new, distinctly urban identities that were being expressed in photographic portraiture.

Malick Sidibé, another photographer who worked in Bamako starting at a date slightly later than Keïta, said to Simon Njami in a 2001 interview, “Studios

had plenty of work and there were always customers. Because they often came after work, the studios remained open until late into the night, and I employed a boy to make a note of the orders.”¹¹ Sidibé’s account confirms, like Keïta’s (and like André Diop’s account of his father’s Saint-Louis studio), a marked expansion in the market for portraiture in urban west Africa at this moment. It also brings to light a small but significant difference between the day-to-day rhythms of Keïta’s and Diop’s studios: Diop opened his studio at the end of the workday, whereas Keïta operated his studio full-time.¹² Diop’s hours of operation were shorter, and his studio business was concentrated in the space of limited evening and weekend hours. And yet, as Sidibé underscores, most clients came after work. This detail suggests that the bulk of any studio’s business was likely to have been confined to evenings and weekends, and it points, yet again, to the social class of these photographers’ clients: salariés affiliated with the colonial administration (those who had a “workday” measured by clock time). It also gives us a hint as to the mood of those who flocked to Diop’s studio in the evening hours. After work, they were likely to feel sociable and relaxed. Vital to add, in the six years between 1954 and 1960, Sor’s population grew by more than 50 percent.¹³ This factor is indispensable in setting the scene, and this growth would have amplified the sense of sociability.

Early Luminaries

It is instructive to place what we know about Diop’s studio in Sor against the backdrop of Saint-Louis’s earlier photography history, which dates to the middle of the nineteenth century, when the practice of portraiture first took root among the city’s island elites.¹⁴ The first commercial studio of which we have a record in Senegal was opened in Saint-Louis, in 1860, by a black photographer who was neither local nor African-born. This was the studio of the African American daguerreotypist Augustus Washington, who emigrated from Hartford, Connecticut, to Monrovia, Liberia, with the financial support of the Connecticut Colonization Society in 1853.¹⁵ The son of a freed slave and born in Trenton, New Jersey, Washington was an undergraduate at Dartmouth when he began making daguerreotypes in commercial practice in Hartford.¹⁶ After arriving in Africa, he was active in itinerant practice in cities up and down the western coast. Records indicate that he operated commercial studios in Sierra Leone, Gambia, and Senegal as well as Liberia. A number of daguerreotypes survive from Washington’s Hartford and Monrovia years, but no daguerreotypes from his Saint-Louis years have been found.¹⁷

Érika Nimis has observed that there were close historical connections between the development of commercial photography and the migration of freed slaves on both sides of the Atlantic. She notes, in her indispensable history of





Yoruba photographers in west Africa, that, in the nineteenth century, a disproportionate number of photographers working in itinerant practice across the region were either freed slaves or the descendants of freed slaves. This can be explained, she suggests, in part by the exceptional social status of formerly enslaved people and the unprecedented forms of physical and social mobility that accompanied their geographic and cultural displacement.¹⁸ Nimis cites, in this respect, the influence of the British Royal Navy's blockade of the Gulf of Guinea on the composition of coastal west African populations after the end of the legal slave trade in the nineteenth century. During the blockade, the British routinely seized ships carrying illegal human "cargo," and between roughly 1808 and 1870 they "liberated" tens of thousands of formerly enslaved people in west African port cities that were often very distant from those from which they had set out.

To call these formerly enslaved people "free" is misleading, in more ways than one. Many were held prisoner in camps for extended periods against their will. Others were sold into indentured servitude or forced to work as apprentices to Europeans. And yet these people (sometimes called "recaptive Africans" by the British) shared a common experience of displacement, and they played a monumental role in the constitution of new urban cultures and communities in west Africa. Arriving in cities like Monrovia and Freetown, these

1.5 (PREVIOUS PAGE) Portrait of a woman wearing "libidor" (gold coins likely descended from the "louis d'or") and butterfly hair ornaments, shot on the reverse diagonal angle (with the sitter's back and the nape of her neck visible). Photograph: Doudou Diop. Saint-Louis, Senegal, 1970s. Courtesy of Guibril André Diop. Reproduction: Djibril Sy.

1.6 Portrait of a woman reclining on linoleum. Photograph: Julien Lopez. Saint-Louis, Senegal, 1970s. Courtesy of Julien Lopez. Reproduction: Leslie Rabine.

people found themselves in ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous urban settlements that were defined as much by African displacement as they were by European settlement, and where they lived and worked alongside free black Americans, like Washington, and they were integrated into existing urban populations in unprecedented numbers. Although Nimis's research concentrates, specifically, on Yoruba photographers working in west Africa, her work establishes important connections between the commercial development of photography and successive waves of migration and displacement on both sides of the Atlantic and, as such, her work provides an important context for locating Washington's practice in the wider Atlantic world.¹⁹

It is no accident that these intensely urban and cosmopolitan coastal west African settlements gave rise to the first generation of local, African-born photographers.²⁰ As Julie Crooks eloquently argues in her research on photography in Freetown, coastal west African cities were heterotopias in the strict (Foucauldian) sense, intimately connected to the world economic system but under unprecedented conditions and through unique protocols.²¹ Adding nuance to our appreciation of this uniqueness, Erin Haney notes that, in many cities in coastal west Africa, photography was not generally associated by local practitioners or their clients with either Europe or Europeans.²² Many of these same conditions were present in Saint-Louis, whose history parallels that of cities like Freetown, Cape Coast, and Monrovia in key respects. Saint-Louis was not in the zone directly affected by the British blockade to the south, but its citizens had long had special juridical and political standing as inhabitants of one of the original *quatre communes* of Senegal, and, in the nineteenth century, the city came to be dominated by a large and radically heterogeneous *métisse* (or Creole) community. To be sure, the experiences of the formerly enslaved people who were released in cities like Monrovia and Freetown and those of the *originaires* living in the *quatre communes* of Senegal were distinct, yet all of these cities were privileged sites of intensive urbanization and creolization, which shaped coastal west Africa throughout its modern history and which made the region fertile ground for the commercial practice of photography.

Little is known about the period between Washington's 1860 stint in studio practice in Saint-Louis and the first decades of the twentieth century, when the first permanent studios emerged. Nimis, Crooks, Haney, Jürg Schneider, and Vera Viditz-Ward have all established, in pathbreaking original research, that by the last two decades of the nineteenth century African-born photographers were working in independent practice in cities up and down the continent's Atlantic coast.²³ Yet all of the photographers whose images have been identified or whose careers have been documented appear to have



1.7 Portrait of Tola Wade. Photograph: Émile Sursock. Saint-Louis, Senegal, 1950s. Courtesy of Abdourahmane Niang. Reproduction: Leslie Rabine.

been Anglophone and (with the exception of Washington) to have set out from British-controlled territories, and little is known about the activities of Senegalese photographers in the final decades of the nineteenth century, despite vital research by Philippe David and Patricia Hickling on French photographers in Senegal in this period.²⁴ Chapuis notes that, in 1908, French photographer Étienne Lagrange trained an African assistant in his Saint-Louis studio.²⁵ This is the first documented reference we have to an African-born photographer working in Saint-Louis. His name remains unknown.

The first Senegalese-born photographer to have made his mark in Saint-Louis in the early decades of the twentieth century is Meïssa Gaye (b. 1892, d. 1993).²⁶ Gaye's legacy is unrivaled in Senegal, although, today, his photographs are difficult to find.²⁷ The celebrated Senegalese writer Aminata Sow Fall reminisces about the experience of having her portrait taken by Gaye when she was a little girl in Saint-Louis, in a lyrical essay titled "Vague Memory of a Confiscated Photo."²⁸ In one of the rare pieces of scholarship ever to have been published on Gaye, Chapuis notes that he had established a part-time practice as a portraitist in Saint-Louis by 1912 or 1913.²⁹ He subsequently moved to Conakry and, in 1923, to Dakar, and we know that he worked at least part time in studio practice in both cities. In 1929, Gaye moved to Kaolack, where, again, he worked in commercial studio practice, before returning to his native Saint-Louis to open a studio on a quasi-permanent basis in the 1950s.³⁰ Significantly, Chapuis cites five cities in which Gaye is known to have practiced photography professionally: Conakry, Dakar, Kaolack, Saint-Louis, and Ziguinchor.³¹ It is notable that this list encompasses many of the AOF's most significant port cities, a fact that can be explained by Gaye's formal employment in the French customs service. In addition to the advantages conferred by other positions in the colonial administration (social mobility, access to cash), his day job as an employee of the customs service afforded him exceptional physical mobility, access to transportation networks, and opportunities for travel.³²

Photographers of the independence generation, too, often spoke to me explicitly of the importance of physical mobility, transportation networks, and freedom of movement to their practice. Rather than mobility between different cities within a single territory or country, however, this later generation spoke more often of their freedom of movement within a given city. They drew explicit connections between freedom of movement and more abstract ideals of freedom, including those associated with the coming of independence, a theme to which I will return.

The last great names in living memory in Senegal include Émile Sursock, a Saint-Louis-based photographer reported to be of Lebanese heritage (figure 1.7); Caristan, a photographer of Antillean heritage (sometimes identified as Guianese) who operated a well-known Saint-Louis studio (starting, roughly, around 1945); and Mama Casset (b. 1908, d. 1992) (figure 1.4).³³ A Saint-Louis native, Casset apprenticed with French photographer Oscar Lataque starting in 1920 before

going on to open his own studio, African-Photo, in Dakar's Medina neighborhood. Opening their studios slightly later were Mix Guèye (b. 1906, d. 1994), who apprenticed with Tennequin (Avenue Roume, Dakar), and Salla Casset (b. 1910, d. 1974), Mama's younger brother, whose Dakar studio was called Sénégal-Photo. The younger Casset was among the first Senegalese photographers to embrace the new practices and genres of "official" and "political" photography, and he is best remembered, today, for his photographs documenting the new Senegalese political class.³⁴ Among Doudou Diop's direct competitors in Saint-Louis was Doro Sy, who also ran a studio in Sor in roughly the same period.³⁵ Elsewhere in Saint-Louis, Julien Lopez, a Senegalese photographer of Cape Verdean heritage, opened his studio, Photo Artista, in the early 1960s (figure 1.6). Lopez is still living, although he is said to have destroyed a significant part of his own studio archives by throwing his negatives into the Senegal River after the transition to color left him feeling demoralized in the 1980s.³⁶

Numbers of Prints, Darkroom Schedules, and the Interval

Another possible indicator of photography's popularity is the number of prints that photographers delivered to their clients after a given portrait session. In interviews in both Senegal and Benin, I found that photographers and their families were quick to volunteer the numbers of prints that were delivered to clients and corresponding prices. This concern with number reflects the development of the technology in the postwar period, which led to a proliferation of hand-held cameras that produced images in smaller formats and which expanded access to darkroom equipment. Both factors encouraged the practice of making multiple prints and contributed to lower printing costs. The concern with number also reflects the explosion of ID-card photography that took place in the immediate post-independence period, which created a nearly limitless market and became a critical source of revenue for local studio photographers.³⁷ The standard number of prints that photographers and their families quoted to me ranged, with very few exceptions, from two to four. André Diop told me that his father charged 50 francs CFA (Communauté financière africaine) for one portrait, with the client receiving two 13×18 cm prints (roughly 5×7 inches) for that price.³⁸ In 2009, when I interviewed Cosme Dossa in Porto-Novo, he told me that he made four prints per client, at "postcard" dimensions, for which he charged 350 francs, with this higher price potentially reflecting the old CFA franc, prior to the 1960 redenomination.³⁹ Dossa became the first official photographer of the colonial territory of Dahomey in 1957, just a few years after he had opened his studio, and the years of his professional practice corresponded almost exactly





1.8 (PAGE 52) Portrait of a smiling woman. Photograph: Zinsou Cosme Dossa, Porto-Novo, Benin, 1960s. Modern print made by Léonce Agbodjélou with the photographer's permission. Courtesy of the family of Zinsou Cosme Dossa.

1.9 (PREVIOUS PAGE) Portrait of a woman in front of a cinder-block wall. The sitter's pose approximates what is sometimes called the "traditional" west African pose, with the sitter's torso square to the camera and her fingers clearly displayed. Photograph: Zinsou Cosme Dossa, Porto-Novo, Benin, 1960s. Modern print made by Léonce Agbodjélou with the photographer's permission. Courtesy of the family of Zinsou Cosme Dossa.

to Diop's (for examples of Dossa's studio work, see figures 1.8, 1.9, and 1.10). In the published interview with Magnin, Keïta says that he always made a "minimum of three" prints.⁴⁰

In 2011, I met and interviewed Baudelaire and Ézéchiél Mèhomè, two sons of the Beninese photographer Édouard Mèhomè, who opened his Porto-Novo studio around the same time as Dossa, or just slightly later. Baudelaire is, today, also a professional photographer, operating out of one of two studio locations that had been used by his father.⁴¹ In 2011, Baudelaire and Ézéchiél told me that their father always made six prints, thus earning him the affectionate nickname "Six-copies."⁴² The number is a reflection of Mèhomè's involvement in ID-card work, and six, his sons explained, was two more than the prevailing standard of four copies made for a client commissioning an ID-card photograph at the time. Jean-François Werner notes that the Ivoirian photographer Cornélius Yao Augustt Azaglo also made four prints for clients commissioning an ID-card photograph.⁴³

As will already be clear, prices and numbers of prints were only partially standardized and could vary between different cities in the (ex-)AOF and, within a single city, between neighborhoods. Many factors contributed to these variations, including client demand, darkroom access, darkroom skills, and the availability of photographic supplies—particularly photographic papers. It is also important to note the occasion marked by a given photograph, for this occasion often dictated the number of people who might want a copy of the photograph. Also critical was labor time, which could be limited, as we have seen, by a photographer's other professional commitments. In Diop's case, his studio hours were limited by his accounting job; in Dossa's case, by his work as a government photographer. Beyond studio hours, labor time also entailed darkroom work, and most photographers began the work of developing their films and printing immediately after closing their studios. If they were making contact prints, darkroom work usually took place on the premises; if they were using an enlarger, it could involve a trip to the darkroom of another photographer across town (this other photographer would also take a cut of the price). Keïta told Magnin that, at busy times, he stayed up printing in Mountaga Dembélé's darkroom until dawn.⁴⁴ Long hours spent printing were a touchstone of my conversations with photographers, and photographers or their families often reported that printing ran late into the night.

In Saint-Louis as in many other cities in the region, custom dictated that the client pay for the prints on the day of the portrait session, returning to claim them a day or two later. This rhythm calls attention to an obvious but easily overlooked fact: that a client commissioning a portrait always paid at



least two visits to the studio. The interval that separated these visits has occasionally been explored by scholars and other cultural commentators, and it has sometimes allowed latent social and cultural as well as technical dimensions of the portrait session to become visible. This interval is famously exploited by Ousmane Sembène in his 1968 film, *Mandabi* (The money order), based on his 1965 novel of the same name, in which a key plot sequence is organized by the protagonist Dieng's attempt to obtain an ID-card photograph for the first time. The sequence opens with a comic (and, for scholars of photography, riveting) scene in which Dieng is seen wandering down Avenue Blaise Diagne in Dakar, which is packed with shop-front photography studios.⁴⁵ Dieng looks haplessly at the sample boards displayed outside their doors as he tries to settle on a photographer, before finally being taken in hand by a photographer's assistant who steers him unceremoniously into his master's studio. There, Dieng is asked whether or not it is for an ID-card photograph (*identité*) and has his picture taken. Tantalizingly for us, the photographer in the film, Ambrose, is played by a famous Senegalese photographer whom I mentioned earlier, Salla

1.10 Portrait of four schoolgirls in matching dresses. Photograph: Zinsou Cosme Dossa, Porto-Novo, Benin, 1960s. Modern print made by Léonce Agbodjélou with the photographer's permission. Courtesy of the family of Zinsou Cosme Dossa.



1.11 Group portrait of the Porto-Novo photographers' union. Clockwise from center: Joseph Moïse Agbodjélou, Jean Dotonou, Édouard Mèhomè, Joseph Avognon, Zinsou Cosme Dossa. Photograph: Édouard Mèhomè. Porto-Novo, Benin, 1962. Courtesy of Baudelaire and Ézéchiél Mèhomè.

Casset.⁴⁶ After the appropriate interval, Dieng returns to the studio to claim his photograph, only to face unexpected obstacles. Several further scenes are organized by Dieng's attempt to claim his ID-card photograph, to no avail, and it soon becomes clear that his antagonists have enlisted the photographer and his assistant in their nefarious plot.

These scenes, however else we may choose to interpret them, suggest that, in the 1960s, a visit to a photographer's studio to commission an ID-card photograph would have been a familiar ritual for Senegalese viewers—one that could have comic as well as, perhaps, more sinister overtones. The fact that, in this popular movie, a visit to commission an ID-card photograph merited a cameo appearance by a real-life studio photographer only adds to the impression that photography and photographers were deeply woven into the warp and weft of everyday life, and it confirms that at least some photographers attained celebrity status.

Researchers who have addressed this interval have tended to focus on the inverse situation, in which a client failed to return and therefore abandoned his or her photograph at the studio (rather than the photograph's being withheld by the photographer from the client). Some scholars speculate that at

least some of these orphaned photographs were the offspring of illicit love affairs: portraits of lovers that were never claimed because the affair had already ended, or because the couple was afraid to return.⁴⁷ In another unexpected yet likely common scenario, Liam Buckley notes that, in The Gambia, many of the photographs displayed in photographers' studios are actually portraits of debtors.⁴⁸ These are the clients who, whether exceptionally or because it was not always the custom, did not pay in full up front, and who could not claim their portraits due to insufficient funds. Werner confirms the existence of this same class of unclaimed image in Côte d'Ivoire, where he observed, during his research, that the prints adorning the walls of photographers' studios were often those of debtors.⁴⁹ To this already evocative scene, Werner adds this detail: "In Senegal, photographers hang the portraits of clients who owe them money upside-down as a form of public humiliation."⁵⁰ This act of displaying debtors' portraits upside-down in an act of public shaming is a powerful illustration of studios' function as public spaces, or, in the words of Thomas Mießgang, as meeting places of "public and private spheres," in which photographs entered into extended chains of economic transactions and broader social and cultural rituals.⁵¹ In fact, Buckley observes, in his doctoral research on studio photography in The Gambia, that, according to the photographers he interviewed, between 20 percent and 30 percent of photographs were never picked up.⁵² This number is surprisingly high, and it suggests that these unclaimed images, whatever the reason they were left behind, may account for a disproportionate number of the vintage prints that have moved into Western collections, the bulk of which have been sold to collectors by photographers and their families rather than by clients.

What Is in an Angle?

In looking through Diop's sample album in Saint-Louis, I noticed that in many of his portraits the subject is shot, posed, or printed along a pronounced diagonal angle. Thanks to this angle, the sitter appears to be tilted to her right and often to "lean in" to the lens, with her torso turned toward the camera at a slight angle in an illusionistic second plane (see figures 1.2, 1.3, 1.12, 1.13, and 1.14). This angle first came to the attention of Western critics and curators through exhibitions of Keïta's photographs in the 1990s, and, in more than one published interview, Keïta actually claims to have invented this angle.⁵³ For Senegalese interlocutors, however, I discovered that the pronounced diagonal angle was closely identified with Senegalese studios, and, indeed, variations on this angle can be found in the archives of many Senegalese photographers. Beyond Diop's studio, this angle is frequently seen in portraits by Doro Sy, his neighbor in Sor, and in portraits by Mama Casset in Dakar.⁵⁴ (See also figure Intro.1, taken







in Dakar by an unknown photographer.) Despite Keïta's claim to have invented this angle, its prevalence in portraits from Senegalese studios taken in the same period, or in an even earlier period, suggests that it very likely traveled from Senegal to Bamako, and not the other way around. Casset, for example, entered professional practice a decade before Keïta, beginning his apprenticeship in 1920 and independent practice in 1925.⁵⁵ Pascal Martin Saint Leon and Jean Loup Pivin note that both Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta were familiar with Casset's work.⁵⁶ And, in the last interview that he did before his death, with Lydie Diakhaté, Keïta mentions Casset by name.⁵⁷ All of this suggests that he may have been influenced by the Senegalese photographer. A variation on this angle can also be found in portraits by Diop and Casset. In this variation, the sitter is turned ever so slightly *away from* the camera, her torso still on the diagonal, such that her upper back, the nape of her neck, her shoulder, and details of her hairstyle are exposed (figures 1.5 and 1.13).

Critics and curators who have written about the pronounced diagonal angle in Keïta have interpreted this angle as an expression of agency. More specifically, they have seen in this angle evidence of a newfound African assertiveness, which they have sought to link to the larger social and political struggles that were taking place in French colonial territories at this time. Okwui Enwezor, Lauri Firstenberg, and Candace Keller, for example, have all claimed to see in Keïta's photographs a sense of dynamism, movement, and self-awareness that bears explicit witness (in Firstenberg's words) to a "transfiguration of the African self from object to subject."⁵⁸ Firstenberg goes on to argue that Keïta's portraits "animate both stage and sitter, reconfiguring the gaze as a medium of agency," such that we recognize "a look of resistance in the gaze of the African."⁵⁹ Keller maintains that the diagonal angle conveys "the emotive quality of strength and independence."⁶⁰ In a parallel vein, Enwezor styles Keïta's photographs "a visual archive" of "resistance and transformation."⁶¹ Although he does not speak explicitly of this angle, Enwezor argues that the colonial subject ceases to be visible in Keïta's photographs: "To look at Keïta's portraits of the urban inhabitants of Bamako is to witness the near disappearance of colonial subjectivity."⁶²

When these and other contemporary interpreters have turned their attention to studio photography dating from the post-independence period, this romantic vision of a resistant photographic subject gives way to a kind of ludic celebration of postmodernity. This approach valorizes the "subaltern

1.12 (PAGE 58) Portrait of a young woman in the style sometimes called an angled bust portrait (shot and/or printed on the diagonal). From the sample album of Doudou Diop. Saint-Louis, Senegal, 1970s. Courtesy of Guibril André Diop. Reproduction: Djibril Sy.

1.13 (PAGE 59) Portrait of a young woman shot on the reverse diagonal angle (with the sitter's back and the nape of her neck visible). From the sample album of Doudou Diop. Saint-Louis, Senegal, 1970s. Courtesy of Guibril André Diop. Reproduction: Djibril Sy.

1.14 (PREVIOUS PAGE) Angled bust portrait of a young man in a coat and tie. From the sample album of Doudou Diop. Saint-Louis, Senegal, 1970s. Courtesy of Guibril André Diop. Reproduction: Djibril Sy.

backdrop” and an emergent “surfacism,” which, it is argued, is distinct from a preoccupation with fixing the subject in a system of Cartesian coordinates, considered to be a hallmark of colonial-era photography. Christopher Pinney, for example, in his introduction to an early and highly influential volume of scholarship on non-European histories of photography, argues for the existence of a “vernacular modernism” that eschews “colonial strategies of depth and indexicality.”⁶³ This approach was even more effectively popularized by Arjun Appadurai in his essay, “The Colonial Backdrop,” in which he describes the postcolonial subject’s photographic “resistance” to “the realist pretensions of photography.”⁶⁴ Enwezor has made similar claims for the transformation of the photographic medium, in contemporary photography from Africa, into an instrument for the description of “passionate bodies,” or bodies “without limits, that are not circumscribed.”⁶⁵

I have written elsewhere about the conceptual limitations of approaches positing an aesthetics of resistance or of liberation that can be seen in a photograph and, specifically, of approaches celebrating the free play of supposedly postcolonial photographic signifiers, thought to “resist” the look and feel of colonial-era photography.⁶⁶ Such approaches often lead to distortions in historical periodization. (Were all colonial-era photographs characterized by attempts to “fix” the colonial subject in a Cartesian grid of power relations? Are all postcolonial photographs attempts to “free” that subject?) Such approaches tend furthermore to disregard the nuances of specific practices of image-making and specific histories of circulation, leading to simplistic conceptual binaries (domination versus subordination, oppression versus resistance, subjection versus agency). Finally, such approaches have construed the supposed fixity of the photographic image as a political ruse—rather than, say, as a cultural preoccupation or as one aesthetic effect, among others, of photographic technologies—thus offering us little traction on the significance of particular images. For these and other reasons, approaches positing an aesthetics of resistance end by downplaying the extraordinary aesthetic and referential openness of every photograph and by flattening the richness and complexity of west African histories of photography.

It is helpful to recall, here, the critiques to which scholars working in an array of disciplines and in diverse geographic and cultural contexts have subjected this type of binary thinking. Scholars such as Karin Barber, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Simon Gikandi, and Stephanie Newell, working in colonial contexts in Africa and in postcolonial contexts globally, have emphasized the ways in which (to quote Newell) people living under colonial conditions “participated in the production of their own conflicted identities through the

simultaneous endorsement and critical reformulation of colonial modernity.⁶⁷ Collectively, these thinkers suggest, agency and autonomy did not always manifest in the name of “resistance” and could be just as forcefully expressed in moments and contexts in which colonized people became “active agents in the making and remaking of their colonial worlds.”⁶⁸ Rather than reproducing interpretive lenses that see only violence in colonial-era photographs, and that see all postcolonial photographs as a reply to this violence, these scholars give us a more nuanced view of strategies for responding to colonialism and imperialism as epistemological projects, and they help us to sketch wider possibilities for, and experiences of, photographic agency.

Approaching the question, as it were, from an opposite angle, historian Mamadou Diouf has suggested that the so-called pronounced diagonal angle may be traced to the influence of portraits of movie stars associated with well-known Parisian studios, such as Harcourt.⁶⁹ Affirming, at least implicitly, this interpretation, Diakhaté opens her interview with Keïta by drawing an explicit analogy with Harcourt.⁷⁰ Lending credence to this theory of Harcourt’s influence is the fact that cinema more generally appears to have exerted an outsized influence on west African studio portraiture in this period. Other scholars have traced the influence of particular movies on particular photographs, and there is abundant evidence that portraits of movie stars, together with film stills and other publicity images, circulated widely in the region. Youssouf Tata Cissé, who compiled the captions to Keïta’s photographs that have been published in exhibition catalogues, describes several of his sitters as striking poses in imitation of the B-movie characters played by movie star Eddie Constantine, including, most notably, secret agent Lemmy Caution.⁷¹ In a recent exhibition catalogue of work by Oumar Ly, we see a film still hanging on the wall of his studio in Podor, Senegal. The image appears to be from a film shot in North Africa or in the Middle East, underscoring the importance of cinematic influences from beyond Europe and America.⁷² We know that movie news and star gossip were circulating in cities in the AOF from at least the 1930s.⁷³ On the verso of photographs from family collections in Dakar, one finds the stamps of studios bearing the names Studio Photo Star and Studio Hollywood, both at addresses in Dakar’s Medina. In Porto-Novo, Édouard Mèhomè called his studio Studio Photo Vedette, or “Movie Star Photo Studio.” Not surprisingly, given Diouf’s and Diakhaté’s references to Harcourt, portraits from that well-known Parisian studio seem to have had a particular cachet in the AOF, and,

in 1953, two Harcourt portraits were published in consecutive issues of the illustrated magazine *Bingo*: one of Ousmane Socé Diop, the celebrated Senegalese novelist (then the magazine's editor), the other of Lamine Guèye, the celebrated Senegalese politician (and, at the time, mayor of Dakar). Neither portrait features the angle in question, yet their publication establishes beyond the shadow of a doubt that photographs by Harcourt were circulating in the AOF in this period, and that at least some local audiences would have been familiar with them.⁷⁴

The imitation of cultural forms and practices associated with colonization may be both a sign of cultural ambivalence toward and a creative response to colonization.⁷⁵ To read, as Diouf suggests we may read, the pronounced diagonal angle that we see in portraits taken in west African studios as an imitation of, or as influenced by, portraits that were taken in Parisian studios is not to deny that this angle might have been an expression of agency. On the contrary, such influence is a potent reminder that modernity is predicated on what Appadurai calls everyday acts of “self-imagining.”⁷⁶ Following the logic of Appadurai's own arguments, this type of influence cannot be reduced to some unthinking compulsion to imitate and rather signals the inherently contradictory dimensions of modernity, and these images are evidence that west African photographers, together with their subjects and their publics, enlisted photography in making and remaking, through these acts of imagination, both colonial and postcolonial worlds.

André told me that the poses assumed by the subjects in his father's portraits were usually chosen by the photographer, almost never by the subject. This detail suggests that the pronounced diagonal angle may have originated, during the portrait session, with the sitter's pose, but that it was just as likely to have been introduced by Diop, and, as some images strongly suggest, after the portrait had already been taken, during printing (figures 1.2 and 1.12).⁷⁷ In this case, the angle would have been introduced into the image without the sitter's participation or even knowledge, complicating received notions of photographic agency still further and reminding us of a wider world of negotiations between the subject and the photographer. Whether introduced in negotiation with the sitter or without his knowledge, these angles likely also reflect increased opportunities for darkroom experimentation by African photographers. Historically, it is important to underscore that, in the years immediately preceding and following the Second World War, most African photographers working in studio practice in the AOF were making contact prints without an enlarger, or they had only very limited access to one—usually by renting or buying time in a darkroom belonging to a French (or, in some cases, Lebanese) photographer.

In her meticulous early research on the photography history of French Sudan, Tanya Elder notes that, “in Segou, Mopti, and Bamako before 1950, the indoor studios were generally the property of either the French and Lebanese who could afford to have electric generators or rent space in the electrified parts of town.”⁷⁸ By the early 1950s, however, increasing numbers of local, African photographers had begun to acquire enlargers. Surely it is no accident that the pronounced diagonal angle appears to have become popular at the very moment that printing was becoming a space of greater playfulness and technical experimentation for African photographers.

Judging from his studio records, which contain extensive documentation of his equipment orders, Diop owned more than one enlarger. As if in open acknowledgment of these nonlinear and unresolved genealogies, when I asked André about this angle and its possible significance to his father or his clients, he said, simply, “It was the style.”

Vaccinostyl(e)

Other photographs that I saw in Diop’s sample album hint at the aesthetic, and other, importance of opportunities for technical experimentation by African photographers. Few photographs do so more vividly than a hand-colored portrait of a Senegalese soldier wearing the uniform of the new Senegalese army taken in the first year of independence, in 1961 (figure 1.1). André told me that his father had hand-colored this photograph using a technique that he called *vaccinostyl*. It involved placing pigment in the tip of a discarded vaccination needle or stylus and then applying the pigment by lightly scratching the surface of the print.⁷⁹ André told me that his father salvaged the needles from the French army hospital, to which, as an army employee, he had privileged access. The *vaccinostyl* technique achieved a remarkably subtle tonal range that translates only partially in digital reproductions of these photographs. Here, the technique was used to add the colors of the flag of the newly independent Republic of Senegal—red, yellow, and green—to the soldier’s beret, epaulets, and arm badge, suffusing them with a subtle radiance that is only just discernible in the reproduction of the image shown here.

Smallpox and other vaccinations were deployed in the AOF in the context of colonial public health campaigns. The instruments used to carry them out were, objectively, instruments of a very particular kind of colonial violence, and public health campaigns and their attendant epistemological and technological apparatuses played an overdetermined role in the colonial history of west Africa. In colonial vaccination campaigns, the needle and, with it, the equivocal promise of colonial modernity, breaches, ever so slightly, the colonized person’s

skin. In the colorization technique devised by Diop, the needle breaches the surface of the photograph. I do not believe it is an accident that, in 1961, Diop used this technique to bring out the colors of the flag in the army uniform of the new, postcolonial state. The technique of colorization by vaccinostyl here produces a decidedly postcolonial photograph, for reasons connected not only with this date, but also with the fact that the vaccination needle has been used to rework colonial history—aesthetically, on the surface of the photograph and, on a still deeper level, in the phenomenological and embodied relationship of the photographer to the army, of the soldier to the state, and of the new uniform to the larger project of state formation.

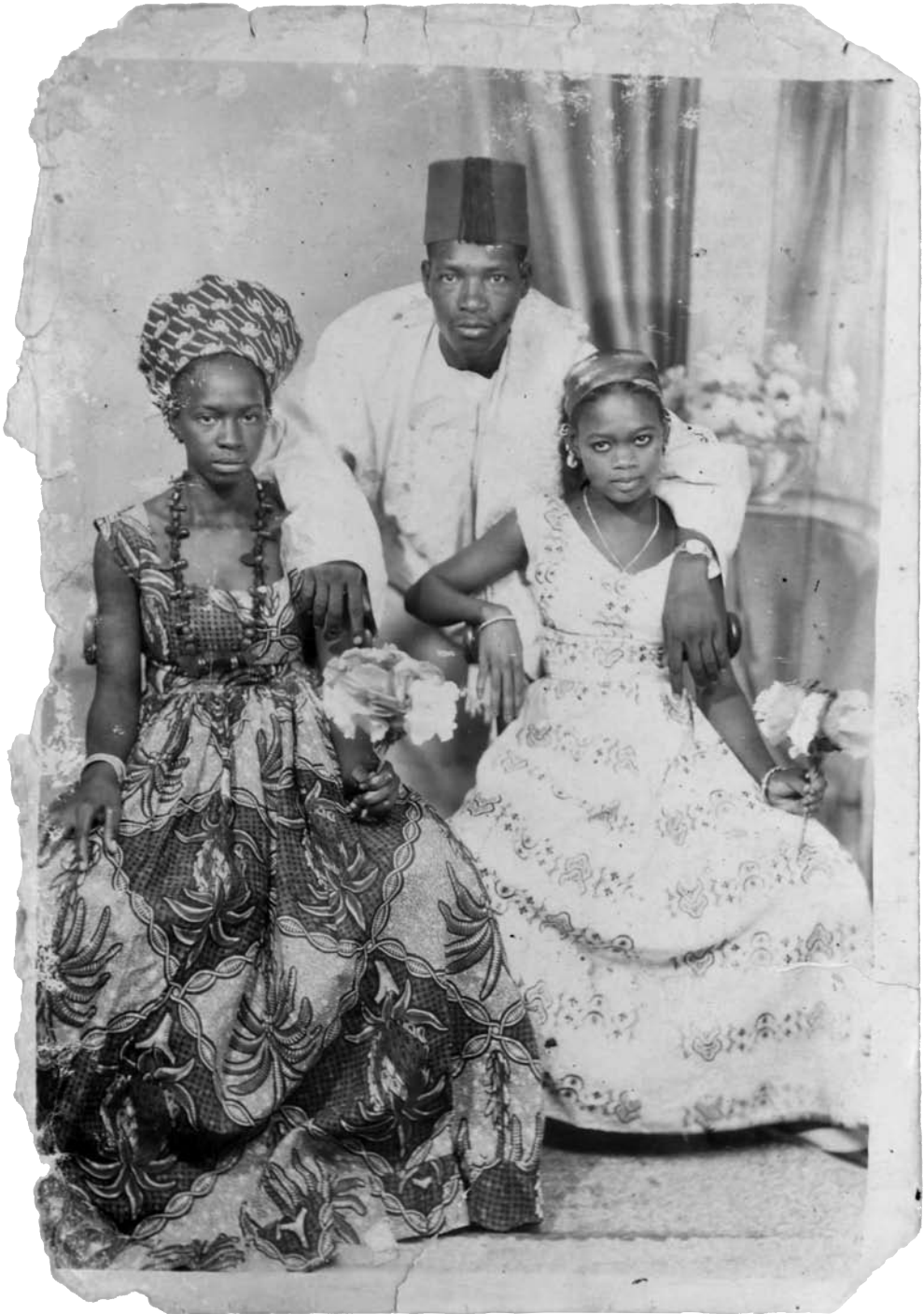
Diop's appropriation of the vaccination needle, along with the images it produced, escapes ready categorization by simplistic conceptual binaries. This appropriation cannot be reduced to an act of photographic "resistance," but it *can* be considered an act of critical reformulation and a reimagination of colonial technologies, one that points toward a postcolonial and even decolonial strategy. Vaccinostyl illustrates the way in which decolonial uses of the medium and, by extension, decolonial images were born in close proximity to and often out of intimacy with colonial culture.⁸⁰ At the same time, the photographer was almost certainly thinking, in his experiments, only about color. His desire to experiment with, and expand, his colorization techniques reworks, reimagines, and transforms colonial history and, simultaneously, the history of photography.

Economic Thresholds

In 2007, on my last day in Saint-Louis, I asked André Diop, again, about the price of a photograph. Were his father's photographs really so affordable for such a large number of people? I had been debating prices and questions of affordability with friends in Dakar just the week before. When I told my new friends in Dakar that I was going to Saint-Louis to look at "old photographs," they could not conceal their disdain for the wealthy Saint-Louisians who, in their view, had been little more than flunkies of the colonial administration. In one particularly memorable conversation, my friend Abdou said: "Ce n'était pas à la portée de tous" (Not everyone could afford it). Abdou was adamant in his belief that, in the 1950s and 1960s, very few people in Senegal could afford to have a portrait taken in a photography studio. As he intoned the simple phrase over and over, "Ce n'était pas à la portée de tous," it sounded increasingly bitter, and I changed the subject.

Many months later, as I looked back at my interview notes, I saw that André had used exactly this same phrase, no less emphatically, to make the

1.15 (NEXT PAGE) Portrait of Aïssatou Ly (left), with a friend and her paternal uncle, Salif Ly. Photographer unknown. Pikine, Dakar, 1969. Courtesy of Aïssatou Ly. Reproduction: Leslie Rabine.



opposite claim in Saint-Louis. When I asked him whether or not a portrait taken by his father was really so affordable for so many people, André said, “C’était à la portée des gens” (People could afford it).⁸¹ The tension between Abdou’s and André’s accounts no doubt registers deeper tensions between urban and rural populations (Abdou’s parents had originally come from a rural area north of the Senegal River), as well as broader theoretical tensions structuring ideas and definitions of affordability, participation in institutions connected with colonial administration (and therefore, often, in wage labor), and social class. These open onto other, still larger questions—about value, about the extent of west Africans’ participation in the formal franc economy, and about the circulation of photographs as commodities, all of which are inextricable from claims about photography’s popularity in this period.

I had been waiting to ask about the economic threshold of studio patronage for a long time. Years before I had ever traveled to west Africa, I had been mystified by the prices cited in the Keïta literature, as I sat poring over the exhibition catalogues in a university library in California. In the early years (he began practicing professionally in the late 1930s), Keïta is said to have charged 25 francs for a 6 × 9 cm print, 100 francs for a 9 × 12 cm print, and 150 francs for 13 × 18 cm. In the 1950s, prices were much higher: 300 francs for a photograph taken in natural light, 400 francs for a photograph taken using electric lights (clients were expected to offset the cost of the electricity).⁸² At first glance, Keïta’s prices seem to have been significantly higher than Diop’s, although, again, it is likely that the 1960 redenomination of the franc accounts for at least some of these discrepancies, and in interviews it was often very difficult to tell whether old or new franc prices were being quoted. (To this day, I suspect that both old and new franc prices were quoted, inconsistently and anachronistically, in interviews.) Dossa, the photographer from Porto-Novo whom I mentioned earlier, told me that he charged 350 francs for a portrait, providing four prints to the client for that price. Dossa also told me that he offered special discounts (*tarifs promotionnels*) to drum up business when things were slow, suggesting that prices could also vary according to fluctuations in demand, whether seasonal or in response to competition.⁸³

It is furthermore difficult to draw conclusions about the value of a photograph on the basis of franc prices alone, and meaningful comparisons between the franc prices cited by photographers working in different cities and territories are elusive. Historical price and wage index information that has been published for the AOF affords only the roughest comparisons between prices in different territories in the late colonial period, and only the vaguest comparisons are possible between the price of a photograph (which, as far as I know,



1.16 A portrait session in progress, most likely in the courtyard of the client's home. Photograph: Zinsou Cosme Dossa, Porto-Novo, Benin, 1960s. Modern print made by Léonce Agbodjélou with the photographer's permission. Courtesy of the family of Zinsou Cosme Dossa.

does not figure in official administrative records) and other consumer goods.⁸⁴ A more sustained inquiry into questions of both price and value would, at a minimum, require access to more meaningful data, beyond those compiled by colonial administrators. Such an inquiry would also have to grapple with the much messier theoretical question of whether a photograph's value can even be expressed in monetary terms. Such questions have always been central to the history of photography, but the question here becomes, how best to frame them in the late colonial context in west Africa?⁸⁵

Scholarship on the democratization of photography in Europe and North America has often linked the development of the medium to the rise of industrial capital. Perhaps best exemplified by the theoretical writings of Walter Benjamin and, later (and given a somewhat different emphasis), Allan Sekula and John Tagg, a central strand of the dominant Euro-American theories of photography has focused on the medium's disarticulation of precapitalist experiences of community, collective memory, and historical consciousness (Benjamin); its facilitation of experiences of bourgeois individualization; and its intensification of processes of commodification through the promotion of principles of substitutability and exchangeability between persons (Sekula,

Tagg).⁸⁶ In urban west Africa, by contrast, the evidence strongly suggests that processes of industrialization and commodification, so vital to photography's European and North American histories, were less directly implicated in the democratization of the medium. Given the specific ways they *were* implicated, we must rethink these terms.

On the question of class in particular, it is illuminating to return to the status of Sor. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Sor is often called a *quartier populaire*, today as in the period that Diop's studio was in operation (roughly 1957 to the late 1980s). I have translated this as a "working-class" neighborhood, yet it is in many respects inaccurate to call this or any other Saint-Louis neighborhood "working class." Even if, in the 1950s, when Diop first opened his studio in Sor, his clientele comprised in large part *salariés*, they would statistically have represented less than 10 percent of the city's population, and, whatever their number, they would not have fit comfortably into familiar (Western) definitions of either a bourgeois or a working-class subject. The city was never really an industrial center, with the acceleration and intensification of industrial production and attendant processes of proletarianization that industrialization entails. It was, rather, a commercial center, and as with most coastal west African cities, wealth accumulation in Sor was, for the first two centuries of its existence, derived from long-distance trade in raw materials and in human labor power, in the form of enslaved Africans trafficked by Europeans to the New World. There is a consensus among historians that the transatlantic slave trade had an enduring impact even on much later economic realities in west Africa, even if there is little consensus as to how this impact can be measured.⁸⁷

We do know that Saint-Louis's economic and political fortunes changed radically, like those of other coastal cities, as a result of the abolition of the legal slave trade in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁸⁸ After abolition, Europeans in west Africa devoted renewed energy to the trade in gum arabic and to agricultural exports. Dakar was closer than Saint-Louis to agricultural regions, and it was better suited to the construction of a modern, deepwater port. The transition of Senegal's (and, in the late colonial period, the AOF's) largest commercial center, and the eventual transfer of the colonial capital from Saint-Louis to Dakar, was, with the construction of Dakar's port, a *fait accompli*. If Saint-Louis was the capital of a pre-industrial colonial territory, in other words, Dakar was the capital of a rapidly industrializing one (or so, for a few short decades, the French hoped). As it ceded commercial power to other port cities, Saint-Louis became home to an expansive colonial bureaucracy (and, it is interesting to note, given Diop's colorized photograph of the

Senegalese army soldier, to the largest concentration of French military forces in the AOF).⁸⁹ At the same time, even in large cities such as Saint-Louis and Dakar, those earning cash wages would have participated in the formal franc economy, in the 1950s, in a limited way.⁹⁰ Even today, many west Africans participate in a limited way in the formal economy, a potent reminder that both industrialization and urbanization have their own distinctive histories in the region and cannot be grasped within Euro-American frameworks or explained by diffusionist models.⁹¹

Finally, questions of price and value open onto much larger questions about photographers' economic status, as well as their clients': questions about access to cash, about the consumerization of cameras and photographic supplies, and about the articulation of west African markets with metropolitan distribution networks. These distribution networks become increasingly interesting—if also, in many respects, increasingly baffling—to consider in the final decades of the official colonial period, at a moment when European and American manufacturers and suppliers of cameras, films, and papers were seeking to develop consumer markets in Africa. These distribution networks were not just grafted or superimposed, as I suggested in the introduction, onto much older networks that followed African trade routes (inland rather than coastal); they were never actually realized in the way that European and American manufacturers and suppliers had envisioned them. Nor were they ever actually realized in the way that African photographers and consumers had hoped. The uneven development of these networks is yet another reminder that we must proceed with caution when attempting to assess the impact of consumerization, of capitalism, and of metropolitan actors more generally on the democratization of the medium in west Africa.

In the end, André seemed less concerned with the social or economic status of his father's clients, or even with the number of people who passed through his father's studio, than with the mood that prevailed. This came through in the phrases that he used to describe the scene in the street outside his father's studio: phrases like "Toute la ville est venue," which means, literally, "Everyone was there," and which also conveys the sense of an intensely social scene, a see-and-be-seen type of experience. A similar sense came through in André's description of the scene as "bustling": "Ça bousculait!" This phrase conveys the density of the crowd—the idea that it was really packed—but in a broader sense it conveys the idea that the scene around the studio was "happening"

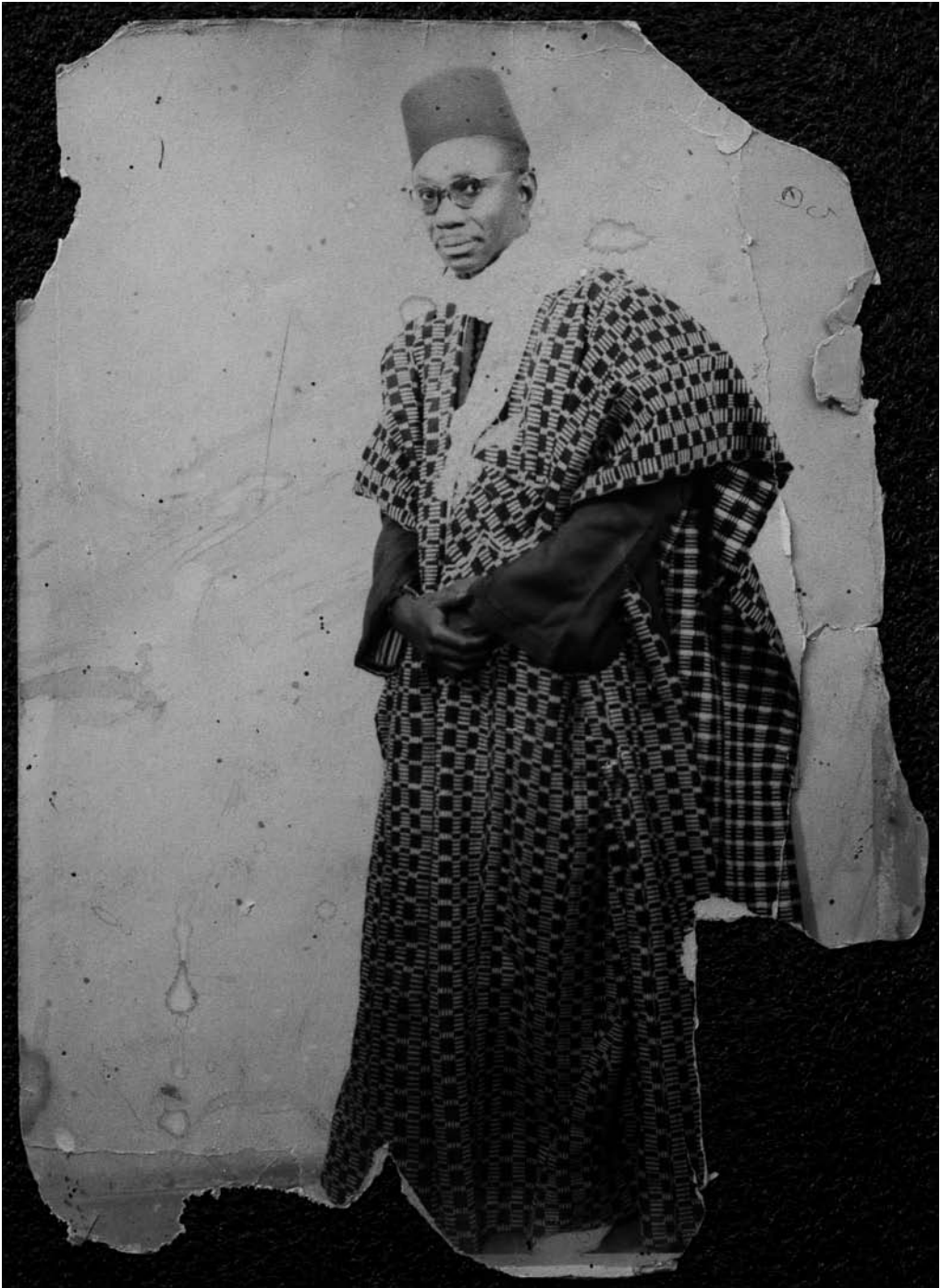
Any adequate translation of the phrase, or indeed of the scene, would have to convey dimensions of a local photographic experience that connected Saint-Louisians to other people in the city and in the neighborhood. At the center of this scene, the portrait session was also “happening,” an event that was exciting both to witness and to be a part of, and that opened onto wider channels of experience.

Methodological Reflection: Where Is Photography’s Field?

One afternoon during my 2007 visit to the Diop family home, I stood chatting with André in the courtyard, where I was taking a break from rephotographing his father’s prints, when Ndèye Teinde Dieng, the photographer’s widow, approached me and made an unexpected revelation: she told me that she had done much of the printing in her husband’s studio.⁹² Over a few short minutes that changed everything, she described the work that she had done, in Wolof, with her son acting as translator. (Like many women of her generation, she understands French but cannot speak it.) Ndèye Teinde Dieng told me that her husband had taught her to print because he had to get up early in the morning to go to his accounting job. After he closed his studio for the day, Diop would develop his films before handing the printing over to her, and she stayed up printing while he slept. In other words, it dawned on me as she spoke, these were not really, or not only, her husband’s prints that I was rephotographing. They were also hers.

Ndèye Teinde Dieng was clearly enamored of darkroom work, and her love of printing came through as she talked to me about the different papers she had used. Her hands nimbly conveyed the tactile nuances of each paper’s texture and finish with an almost voluptuous pleasure. Some had been matte, some glossy. It was as if she were feeling, as she described to me the experience of their texture and finish, each paper. She explained to me the importance of using different temperatures for the various baths. When she picked up a print from the stack that I had been rephotographing to illustrate, rubbing its matte surface, it was as if she were remembering the experience of making it. Like Keïta describing his work to Magnin in Bamako, Ndèye Teinde Dieng emphasized the large number of clients that passed through her husband’s studio, and she grinned as she described the number of prints she had to make some nights. There were so many that she had to be creative in finding new places to hang them, in every nook and cranny of the room. As she narrated, laughing, the experience of being overwhelmed by prints, she mimed the motion of hanging them up to dry on the clothesline behind us, where the family’s laundry had been hung.

1.17 (NEXT PAGE) Self-portrait of the photographer. Photograph: Doudou Diop. Saint-Louis, Senegal, late 1960s/early 1970s. Courtesy of Guibril André Diop. Reproduction: Djibril Sy.



Ndèye Teinde Dieng's revelation was surprising not only to me but also to others who were present that day. It also called into question the core methodological predicates of my own and others' research. Whom had I chosen to interview and why? Was it more important to focus on the photographs that it felt I was, in one sense, always chasing, or to seek out, instead, these stories? These two objectives—seeking out images and seeking out stories—are not, in principle, mutually exclusive, yet I discovered in the course of my research that, practically speaking, they often were. For structural reasons connected with the state of the archive and the state of “the field,” as well as for reasons connected with the timing of my research, studio photographers' archives had, by the time I arrived in Saint-Louis in 2007, already been picked over by the curators and collectors who brought west African studio portraiture to the attention of an international public in the late 1990s, almost always by exporting vintage prints and negatives to cities and countries in Europe and North America. For this and other reasons contributing to archival loss in the region, the photographs are increasingly rarely to be found in the places where the stories still are. At the same time, in the absence of these photographs, the stories are increasingly difficult to elicit. Add to which, the independence generation is leaving us at an alarming rate. As people die and as photographs continue to leave the continent (often as a direct result of a photographer's passing) for collections in other parts of the world, the race to “capture” both images and stories can seem increasingly urgent—and not only for the foreign researcher, whose position nonetheless becomes ethically and politically trickier as the distance between those who have the photographs and those who have knowledge about them widens.

Friends and colleagues with whom I discussed Ndèye Teinde Dieng's revelation in Senegal, both during that trip and later on, were unanimous in their view that it would have been exceptional for a woman of her generation to work so extensively in the darkroom. The view that her knowledge was exceptional was expounded, on the day itself, by my driver, who had overheard us talking from a corner of the courtyard where he was napping in the shade. Later that same evening, as we made the trek out to the dorms at l'Université Gaston Berger where I was staying, my driver could not refrain from rehashing the episode and voicing his astonishment. He told me that he had never before heard a Senegalese woman of her generation talk “like that [*comme ça*].” What did he mean, “like that”? A woman, he said, who had that kind of technical knowledge. Not by a long shot a feminist (we were forever feuding, in ways that I had not anticipated, as we clashed over his enforcement of local gender norms), my driver could not conceal his admiration for her. He told me

that his own mother and Ndèye Teinde Dieng (then seventy-seven years old) were exactly the same age. In Dakar the previous week, my driver had almost refused to deliver me to an interview because it was taking place in a bar—the very interview, with Bouna Medoune Seye, that had led to my visit to Saint-Louis to interview Diop’s family. Things had ended on a sour note, although I got the interview in the end. Rather than quelling the frustration that still lingered (it was clear, on both sides) from this particularly bad recent feud, my driver’s grudging admission of respect for a woman made me all the more keenly aware of the obstacles that certain gender norms—enforced usually by my driver but now, I had to admit, by myself—had posed to my research thus far. When he dropped me off at the dorms, I felt, more than ever, frustrated by his attempts to control my movements, and by my own blindness.

In a conversation we had in 2008, Fatima Fall, director of the Centre de Recherches et de Documentation du Sénégal, a vibrant regional museum, library, and archive in Saint-Louis that houses an important photography collection, told me that she had never met or heard of a woman of this generation who had been so deeply involved in studio practice on the technical side.⁹³ Still, Fatima, like other interlocutors in Senegal, made it clear that Ndèye Teinde Dieng’s involvement in printing in the darkroom, although exceptional, was not implausible. Women in Senegal, particularly in Wolof contexts, often hold prominent economic roles, and they can be highly visible in public life.⁹⁴ Like women in many parts of west Africa, they are extremely active in (and even dominate certain sectors of) commercial life, affording them opportunities to amass wealth and property over which they often have a great deal of personal control and affording them greater independence than women living in many other parts of the world.

My conversation with Fatima, the museum director, ended on an awkward note when she asked me whether I had recorded my conversation with André’s mother or perhaps shot it on video, thus documenting it in a form that would be accessible to local people. I did shoot some video on my cell phone (the first phone with a “built-in” camera that I had owned), but it is too low-res to use. The feelings of frustration, even shame, sparked by my failure to prepare adequately for fieldwork were driven home in another conversation that I had with André in Dakar some time later. He told me that, although he had known that his mother had sometimes “helped” his father in the studio, he had no idea that she even knew how to print until the day that she told me this in the courtyard. Ndèye Teinde Dieng’s revelation was made spontaneously, not in the context of a formal interview—in that sense, it was poorly timed. (I could not have anticipated that she would share this information, so how could I

have been prepared?) On the other hand, when I first made plans to visit Diop's house, I had not even thought to ask whether the photographer's wife was still living. Even after I had met her, it did not occur to me to interview her, and I focused my energies on her son. In another sense, however, the timing of her revelation was perfect, for it led me to question many of the decisions that I had made, and it became a catalyst of future research.

My memories of those first interviews that I did in Saint-Louis, in 2007 (the first that I ever did for this book), are memories mainly of frustration and self-doubt. Fatima was the first but not the last person to ask me whether I had shot any video of my conversation with Ndèye Teinde Dieng. The still camera I had brought along was also woefully inadequate, although this came as less of a surprise. In London just a few weeks before, I chanced to meet Christopher Pinney, the well-known scholar of photography in India. Pinney had urged me to spare no expense on my equipment and to bring the best camera that I could afford. I promptly disregarded his excellent advice—in large part because, as a woman traveling alone, I was afraid of bringing expensive equipment to a country where I had never been before. I worried that traveling with an expensive camera would increase my chance of being targeted for unwanted attention of various kinds. Making everything worse, it seemed that I was always hungry, and, by the time I arrived in Saint-Louis, I had basically been living on Nescafé and baguette for days. In Dakar the previous week, I had begun skipping meals to avoid eating with (being lectured by) my driver. In Saint-Louis, the strenuous work of rephotographing prints seemed always to get underway just as the midday meal was being served. So I skipped lunch and that day, too, found myself both faint with hunger and buzzed on caffeine as I teetered in high heels, in the late afternoon, in the sandy courtyard. Heels, I had been told by a friend and experienced scholar of photography in west Africa, as I was packing for Senegal, were a “culturally appropriate” way to look dressed up with a minimum of effort. She emphasized that I would have to dress up if I wanted to be taken seriously in local professional contexts. This, too, turned out to be excellent advice—except that I had never worn high heels before. As I wrestled, precariously, with sun, sand, and tripod, attempting to rephotograph prints in the courtyard, I felt feminized in all the worst ways, by my hunger, my footwear, and the constant bullying of my driver—also culturally appropriate but much less novel.

As I look back on them now, those long afternoon rephotography sessions were filled with frustration, but also with wonder, and I now see that they taught me to value the uncertainty and unpredictability that are constitutive factors of all “fieldwork.” This uncertainty and unpredictability, and our responses to them, are, I now understand more clearly, more than any artificial distance or construction of place, essential elements of “the field.” Simplistic as it may seem, this view is consistent with those of anthropologists who have theorized the possibilities and limits of ethnographic fieldwork. Johannes Fabian, a founding father of anthropological auto-critique, points out the ethnographer’s habitual failure to recognize the “contemporaneity” of the ethnographic relation, which, by definition, extends to both parties.⁹⁵ And yet, in attempting to grapple with this contemporaneity, it seems worth asking, beyond questions about the possibilities, and limits, of feminist solidarities articulated from wildly different vantage points, as well as questions about my own gendered feelings of inadequacy, whether photography is itself more generative of certain types of uncertainty than other objects. Doesn’t every photograph invite new, and shared, reflections on contemporaneity? I am thinking, to be sure, of what is often called, today, the “social life” of photographs and also of the profound reliance of *all* photographic interpretation on social relations (whether in “real” time or some other kind of time).

These and other unresolved methodological questions about the nature and status of ethnographic research on photography might also be put into dialogue with Carol Magee’s and Joanna Grabski’s cogent reflections on *the interview* as a tool for research, specifically, on African art. In these reflections, Magee and Grabski eloquently foreground the “temporal fluidity between past and present” afforded by the interview as a form. They furthermore emphasize, in their interrogation of the interview as a tool for art research, that conversations unfold in a triangulated relation with the art object, and the demand, produced through this triangulation, that both parties account, in their conversation, for multiple and overlapping sites and contexts of that object’s (ongoing) production and interpretation.⁹⁶ Not unrelated to this observation about triangulation, it is basically impossible to get access to other people’s photographs without entering into an infinite web of complex social transactions in which the researcher and the “respondent” talk, and indeed never stop talking, in a dynamic relation with the photograph. Yet every photograph is itself, in the moment of interpretation, liable to catch all those who look at it in another such relation, which is not to say that we are symmetrically caught.

More concretely, when it comes to the unpredictability of real-time social relations—as well as dumb luck—I think of my meeting with Bouna, without which I never would have been introduced to the Diops. The meeting had gotten off to a rocky start, yet in the end things went remarkably well. What would have happened if I had not been fighting with my driver and had actually arrived on time? If my friend and de facto fixer Lamine had not joined us? A hip-hop band manager, concert promoter, and general man about town, Lamine had enough street cred for both of us. Yet I had come by his phone number quite by chance a few days before my flight, when it was given to me by another American scholar whom I had met, totally fortuitously, at a public lecture. Bouna's phone number had likewise been shared with me through a series of chance encounters, given to me by a Dakar-based curator whose email had been shared with me by a San Francisco-based curator, to whom I had been introduced by another scholar, again totally fortuitously, while standing outside another public lecture.⁹⁷

This was hardly the only count on which I was lucky. My meeting with Bouna took place in Dakar in the short span that fell, that year, between Tabaski and Christmas, and I met André Diop for the first time a few days later. This timing proved to be critical, although I had not understood this at the time. Tabaski is the most important religious holiday in Senegal. People travel long distances to be with their extended families. Sheep are slaughtered. Guests are invited into the home. The holiday mood worked very much in my favor during that visit, for it gave me an unprecedented level of access to large family gatherings, in which cameras and photographs often featured centrally. It also made me feel personally vulnerable, and therefore all the more keenly aware of my own “social position” as a researcher. For, as it happened, my meeting with Bouna took place on Christmas Eve, which my partner and child were celebrating without me back home. I had not even realized what day it was until I walked through the door of the bar called R&B, where I was meeting Bouna. As I walked through the door, these two letters, “R&B,” brought visions of Americana dancing into my brain, and I began to feel homesick. The only problem was that I could not remember which home, exactly, I was sick for. Just a few months earlier, I had moved with my family from California to London for a new job. On Christmas Day, when I finally got through to my daughter, then five years old, on the phone, I tried to picture her standing in front of our Christmas tree, but faltered when I could not remember what our London house looked like. I noticed that her accent was changing, just before we said goodbye.

A week or so later, I fired my driver. Before my next trip, I bought a much better camera and learned how to use it. I have since learned to walk in high heels. I have never again traveled for research without a video camera. This is not to say that I have gained any more control of these unpredictable social relations, in real time or otherwise, but I have become much more attuned to the need for compromise, and opportunities for collaboration, that this unpredictability presents. I have also come to understand that my own vulnerability—whether stemming from unpreparedness, gendered forms of insecurity, or still other factors—has exposed me to forms of compromise and collaboration to which I had previously been blind, and it has made me more liable to enter into certain kinds of conversations, all of which has been indispensable to my research.

It was immediately clear that the revelation made to me by Diop's wife in Saint-Louis that day would have methodological implications. But what would they be? Photographs by Diop have appeared in international exhibitions and been published in books and catalogues. Ndèye Teinde Dieng likely printed some of these photographs, but she has never been named or credited in these projects. At a minimum, I knew that I would have to name her in this book. On another level, her revelation highlights the immense gaps in knowledge that persist. Many of these gaps are, today, only being aggravated by the surge of interest, globally, in studio portraiture from west Africa. As vintage prints and negatives are sold overseas, they move farther away from the individuals whose stories illuminate their histories. The flow of photographs out of west African collections onto the art market, even as it has opened the world's eyes to a more vivid image of African modernity, has often had the effect of reducing our opportunities to translate these stories and to capture or produce certain kinds of knowledge. These questions are methodological, but they are also entangled with more explicitly ethical and political questions about the neocolonial nature of the art market and about the relationship to that market of our own research. More than once it has been suggested, in the Q&A sessions after formal presentations of my research, that the exporting of prints and negatives from African to European and North American collections poses no methodological problems, given the technological reproducibility and essential appropriability of photographs. The images themselves are, without a doubt, infinitely appropriable, but the histories

they bear are not. (And since when has the appropriability of a thing ever excused its appropriation?)

A few years ago, I ran into Mamadou Diouf, the Senegalese historian, at an event on Senegalese photography that was being held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Photographs from Senegalese collections have recently flowed into the Met's collections, reminding us that New York, too, is part of "the field.") When I mentioned to Diouf that I had met a woman of the independence generation who had done extensive darkroom work in Saint-Louis, he seemed less surprised than some others I had told. The public conversation on the stage that evening had already turned to questions connected with the state of the research, but it was not until the formal Q&A had ended that I approached Diouf to discuss Ndèye Teinde Dieng and her revelation. Another member of the audience joined our conversation and asked why, if women had had technical knowledge of photography, they had not run their own studios. Diouf responded by saying that, in Wolof contexts, it would have been acceptable for a woman to be involved in a business venture, and even to develop highly specialized technical knowledge, but that it would not have been acceptable for her to represent this type of business publicly or to interact directly with clients.

Diouf's perspective on this behind-the-scenes nature of women's involvement in studio practice underscored a further question that had bothered me for years. Why did Ndèye Teinde Dieng choose to share this information with me that day, when she had apparently not ever shared it with any other researcher? (At least a half dozen researchers or curators had passed through Diop's home before me.) In another recent conversation, my friend and colleague Leslie Rabine, who has done research on photography in Senegal since the 1980s, ventured her own hypothesis about this timing: that Ndèye Teinde Dieng felt inclined to disclose her darkroom experience to me because she saw me as another woman with technical knowledge of photography. The hazards of feminist solidarities articulated from the vantage point of white, college-educated women in the "intellectual North" are, today, well known by all. But it has long struck me as significant that Ndèye Teinde Dieng chose to speak to me about her knowledge of printmaking only *after* she had listened to me speaking to her son for several days, and only *after* she had watched me rephotographing prints for several hours, some of which she herself had made.

Both Diouf's and Leslie's observations about Wolof gender norms illuminate one further aspect of this revelation's timing. Diouf had intimated that, at the time that she would likely have begun working, in the late 1950s or early 1960s, it would not have been appropriate for Ndèye Teinde Dieng to speak

publicly about her involvement in the darkroom, out of respect for her husband. Surely she would have continued to observe this silence several decades later, when other researchers and curators had visited Diop's house before me and interviewed the photographer. That is to say, it seems unlikely that Ndèye Teinde Dieng would have spoken about the extent of her involvement in printing in front of her husband, and unlikely that, when other researchers visited during his lifetime, she would have spoken to them at all. In this respect, her decision to reveal what she did to me could have had less to do with her (or my own) capitulation to Senegalese, or American, gender norms than with the out-of-joint rhythms of my visit: I showed up at the house only after the photographer was deceased, and most of the photographs already gone.

More research remains to be done on the involvement of women in studio photography in west Africa. The scholar and curator Renée Mussai has done extensive original research with a female photographer who worked in Ghana, in the years roughly between 1940 and 1960, and the publication of her research is eagerly awaited.⁹⁸ Laurian Bowles recently published her research on Felicia Abban, a female photographer who operated a studio, Mrs. Felicia Abban's Day and Night Quality Art Studio, in Jamestown, Accra, starting in 1953.⁹⁹ In 1974, *Amina*, the women's magazine that was the counterpart of the illustrated magazine *Bingo* (which I discuss at length in chapter 3), ran an



1.18 Four unidentified press photographers. Photographer unknown. Dakar, Senegal, late 1960s/early 1970s. Collection of Ibrahima Faye and Khady Ndoye, courtesy of Gnilane Ly Faye. Reproduction: Leslie Rabine.

extended feature on two female photographers in Togo, Mme Agbokou and Mlle N’Kegbe (no first names are given).¹⁰⁰ I myself have seen a single photograph in a Senegalese collection, from the late 1960s or early 1970s, in which a woman appears in a group portrait of four photographers (figure 1.18). I have not been able to identify this woman, although I recently stumbled across a reference in an unpublished master’s thesis to the first female photojournalist in Senegal, Awa Tounkara, who started working for *Le Soleil* in 1972.¹⁰¹ Judging from her appearance, the woman (possibly Tounkara) who stands with her camera in this photograph would have been just slightly younger than Ndèye Teinde Dieng.