



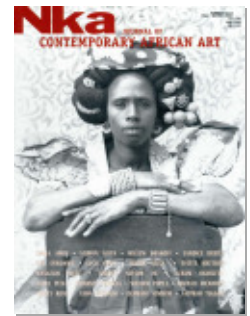
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The Last Interview: Seydou Keïa 1921-2001

Lydie Diakhaté, Emoretta Yang

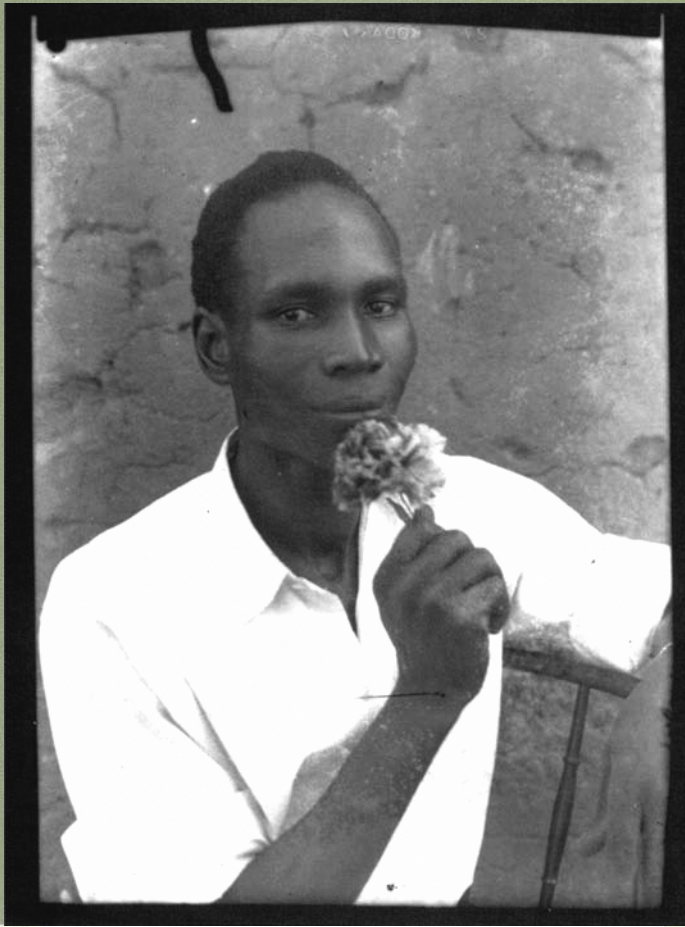
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Self-portrait, 1949
silver gelatin print, edition of 10, paper: 24 x 20 inches
image: 22 x 15-1/2 inches (approximately), framed: 32 x 24-5/8 inches

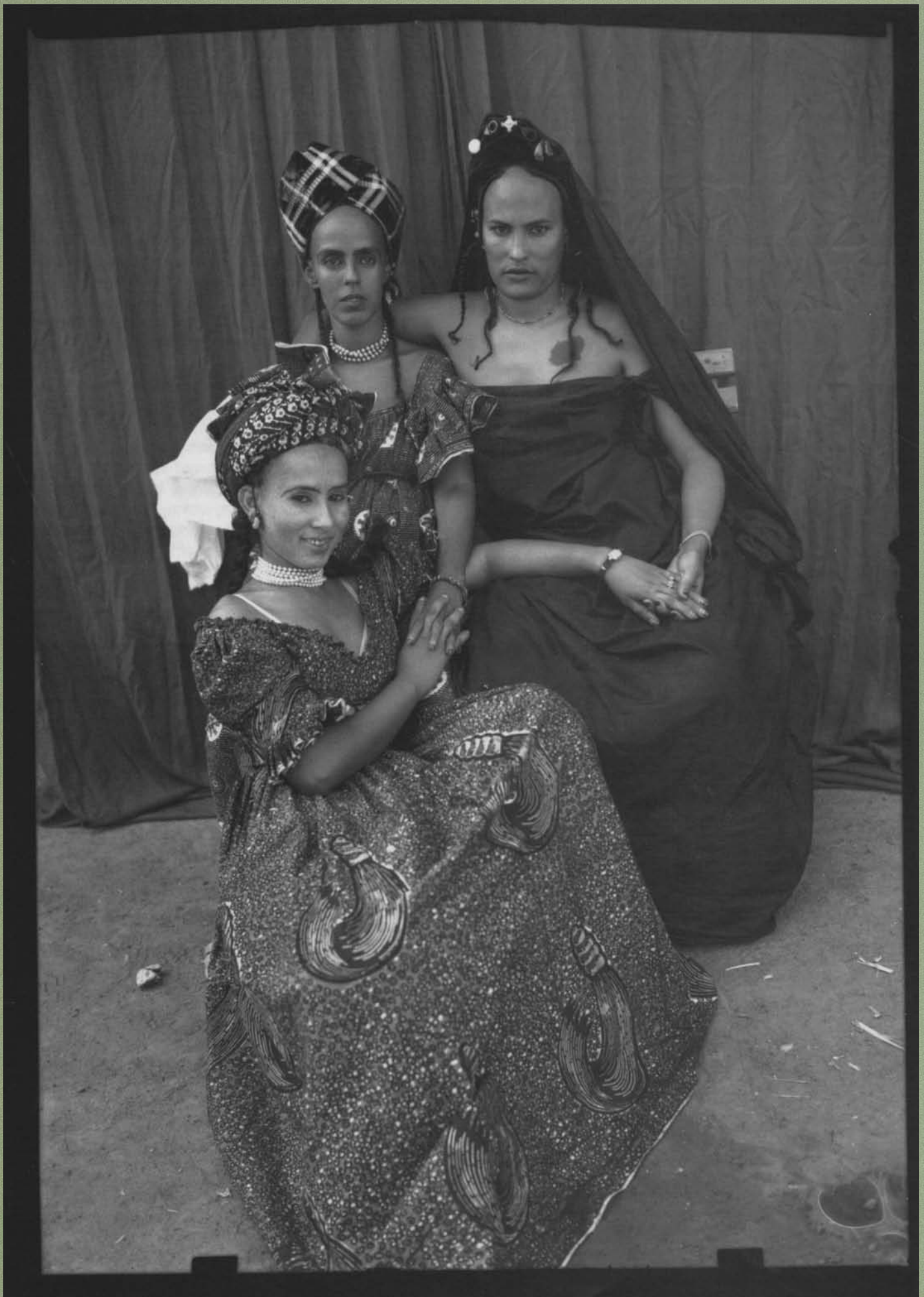
The Last Interview SEYDOU KEÏTA 1921-2001

Lydie Diakhaté Seydou Keita was a sage, a poet of the intimate. In his photographs, he unveiled the beauty of each of his models with discretion; without intending to, he wrote the history of Bamako starting in the days before independence. None of his photographs was shot by chance but was the product of a very personal approach to composition. And, in spite of that very personal feeling, each image introduced a more general discourse, one that resonated with society in the Sahel and with the world outside in the years from 1935 to 1965. Seydou Keita belongs to that group of exceptional artists who bear witness to their times.

Though his work is a mixture of delicate and rugged elements that can sometimes appear austere, everything in Seydou Keita's photographs is sensitivity and generosity. His work calls to mind Nadar, who sought, according to his own words, "to find that instant of comprehension that puts you in touch with the sitting subject, that helps you to get an overview of the subject and guides you toward the habits, the ideas, the character of the person, allowing you to achieve the realization of an intimate portrait."¹ Seydou Keita's work also reminds us of the portraits done by the Harcourt studio, through whose rooms everyone who was anyone in the artistic, political and international worlds of Paris during the 1830s-1860s had to pass.² In 1957 Roland Barthes wrote: "In France, one was not a significant player unless one had been photographed by the Harcourt studios," and only through the medium of those portraits would that player "rediscover his intemporal essence."³ Without knowing it, the individ-

uals in Seydou Keita's clientele, in rediscovering their intemporal essence, became immortalized and entered into the legendary history of Bamako. Mothers, fathers, married couples, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, the young and the old: with their coiffed heads, their braided hair, gathered and adorned, wearing the great formal robes called *boubou*, or in some fancy suit appropriate to the occasion, in the iconography of Seydou Keita, the subject accedes to the sublime and the pose becomes ritual. A new look is imposed, a new artistic expression, a new mythology. There are three sources that provide the emotional underpinnings out of which realities and dreams are brought to view. The first is of Seydou in his quest for immutable perfection, because for Seydou as photographer, the subject must offer the best of himself or herself. The second is the subject who wants to achieve his or her personal dream, because, for the duration of a sitting, he or she becomes a unique being in a privileged moment in time, an almost unthinkable experience in African societies in general, and the image crystallizes this moment and renders that intimate dream beyond time. The third source is the city of Bamako, as it attempts to affirm its authenticity through its ancestral culture and its capacity to assimilate the influences of the world outside.

The portraits of Seydou Keita impose themselves on the viewer in a face-to-face encounter, creating an intimate dialogue that crosses geographic and cultural boundaries. Conducted with physical gestures, between bodies that resonate with the conversation, this dialogue is permanently displayed in the refined poses of the subjects in the photographs: in an embrace



Untitled, #12, 1952-1955, silver gelatin print, edition of 10. paper: 24 x 20 inches, image: 22 x 15-1/2 inches (approximately), framed: 32 x 24 -5/8 inches

or a hug, in hands that join together or are gracefully posed on a shoulder or an arm.

These are photographs that, with their characters and props, tell us stories and reveal Malian society of the particular era in which they were taken, with the dreams and aspirations of that society. Beauty and elegance occupy the place of honor. The draped forms of the capacious robes, or the motifs of the dyed fabrics that are used as backdrop establish a visual rhythm in the gaze of the beholder. The accessory is never just a superficial adornment. Whether it be a radio set, a car, or a motorbike, the object that accompanies the sitter in the photograph can re-frame the instant in a time and a space in which tradition and modernity mingle side by side. The work of Seydou Keïta leads us along the trail of a society already in movement towards interaction with the entire world.

With generosity and humility, Seydou Keïta would build his whole life around one passion: photography. His international career will be launched in 1993 at the photography conference in Rouen, and his first exhibition in the city of Bamako, his hometown, will take place only at the time of the photography conference in 1995! It is an acknowledgment that comes late in a life in which artistic and professional recognition will be mostly absent in light of his compatriots' lack of interest in photography and art in general

Destiny! The blink of an eye! His last exhibition took place in the prestigious surroundings of the Sean Kelly Gallery, from December 8, 2001, to February 2, 2002, in Chelsea, the trendy New York neighborhood known as an international center for the visual arts. Galleries with majestic spaces sit next to warehouses that house machine repair shops and maintenance

garages for utility vehicles, trucks, and the like. The smells of machine oil, the whirring of engine motors, the blue of workman's uniforms, the pounding shocks of jackhammers, all make up an environment familiar to Seydou, who, after having retired from the profession of photography, had his darkroom transformed into a mechanic's garage.

I first met Seydou Keïta in 1995, at the time of an exhibition of his photographs in one of the suburbs just outside Paris, Montreuil, a town known as the second capital — after Bamako — of Mali. Immediately, I was charmed by the man and by the artist. We chatted together, for the last time, in the summer of 2001. Seydou Keïta has left our world and pursues his path in the images of our memories. Let us find him once more in his words, his stories, and his life.

¹ Gaspard Félix Tournachon, called Nadar, photographer, airman, draftsman and writer, born in Lyon (1820-1910). He photographed all the well-known personalities of his era.

² The Harcourt Studio was established in Paris in 1934.

³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1957.

Lydie Diakhaté: How did you become a photographer?

Seydou Keïta: When my uncle returned from a trip to Senegal in 1935, he gave me a wooden box camera, in 6 by 9 format. At the time, I was a cabinet-joiner, working with my father, making furniture. With this little camera, I began taking photographs of the apprentices. I bought my film supplies at the shop of Pierre Galuet, a European. One day, he asked me why I didn't develop my own film, since the supplies were available. So I bought a bottle of developer and a bottle of fixative. I started to develop film at home. I made all my little



Untitled, #58, 1950-1955, silver gelatin print, edition of 10. paper: 24 x 20 inches, image: 22 x 15-1/2 inches (approximately), framed: 32 x 24 -5/8 inches



Untitled, #59, 1956-1957, silver gelatin print, edition of 10. paper: 24 x 20 inches, image: 22 x 15-1/2 inches (approximately), framed: 32 x 24 -5/8 inches



Untitled, #42A51, 1950-1955, silver gelatin print, edition of 10, paper: 24 x 20 inches, image: 22 x 15-1/2 inches (approximately), framed: 32 x 24 -5/8 inches

prints. At the time, I was making 6 by 9s. It took me two years to be able to get to this point. You couldn't make out anything on my first prints. The pictures of people looked like skeletons. I was around thirteen years old. I was so upset when the photos didn't come out! When I finally succeeded in making some good portraits, I bought a 9 by 12 camera, which used plates. Afterwards, in 1949, I rented a room. It was in that room that I made the best photographs. Making prints was quick. I printed with a film-holder. I could make at least twenty photographs in an hour. People started to see the photographs around town. Then they started to come to ask me to write my address on their photo. From that moment on, my work began in earnest. When my father saw this, he said to me, "You've got two rooms over there; you should use them for a studio."

LD: So you never had any trouble with your family in becoming a photographer, at a time when photography was not a common line of work?

Seydou Keita: My father always supported me. I never took any courses in photography. I never studied it; I never went to school. I learned it just like that, by doing it. I had to, since my livelihood depended on it. I worked for my daily bread, to feed the family. They didn't have any choice; they went along. I took only portraits, ID photos, family photos, souvenir photos. For an 8 by 12 print, I charged 100 francs CFA. The way I learned, I had to see what I had done wrong on the rolls of film.

LD: Did you have any difficulties under the colonial regime?

Seydou Keita: No. No one ever bothered me. If you want to be a mechanic, you have to learn how; you're free to learn. If you want to be a photographer — so much the worse for you — just go ahead.

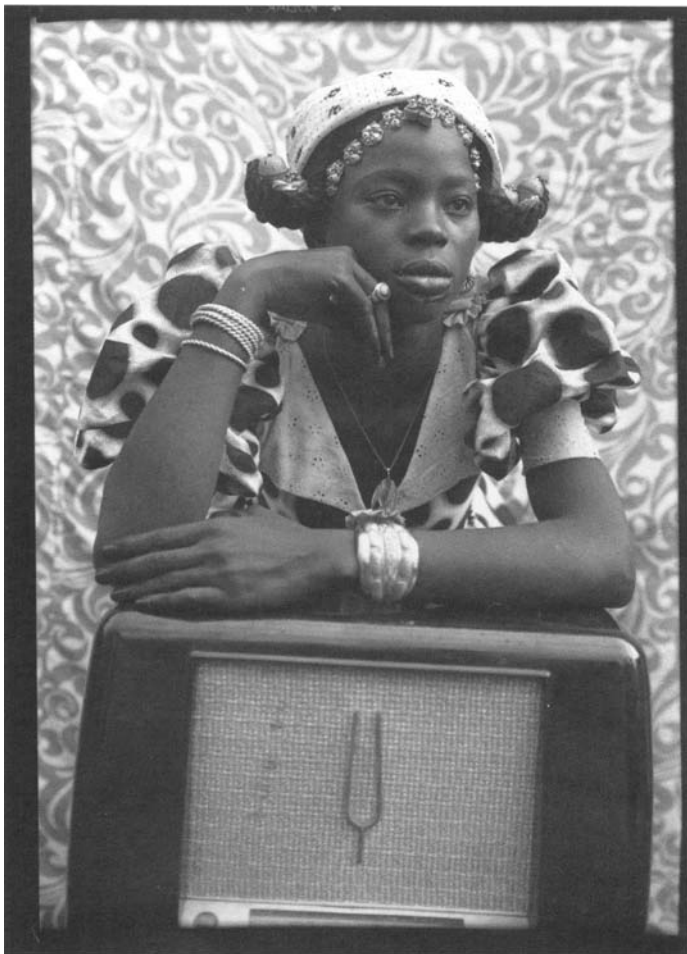
You're the one who buys the supplies; you only have to do as you like. The French government was happy when you learned a line of work. No one prevented anyone from that. Everyone was free.

LD: In making a beautiful photograph, what was important to you in the presentation of the subject?

Seydou Keita: You shouldn't let people just sit like that and photograph them. That's no good. I had to pose them, to position them in the best possible way to try to add something to the figure, to embellish the person. That's why so many people would come to make appointments with me. You have to pose them. There are some people whose profiles aren't that attractive, but viewed from the front, it's very good. A good photographer is an artist. You have to be, because that's the only way you support yourself. When other people see these photographs, they want to be photographed the same way. That's why I exhibited all my publicity samples on large placards. People come by and choose their poses.

LD: What was the role played by clothing and other props?

Seydou Keita: You had to be well-dressed. Young people dressed in European-style clothes. But for women, there were the trends in fashion. Many women wore the large *camisole* [translator's note: *camisole* in Malian French refers to a kind of spacious blouse covering the top of the body], or a blouse in the Senegalese style. You also had to be well adorned. When they got dressed, women wore gold everywhere on their heads, and when they braided their hair, they put gold on their braids. In my studio, there were cars only for the clientele: a Peugeot, a Dauphine, a Versailles, and an American model called the Sylla. I had three Vespas [translator's note: a brand of motorscooter], three bicycles, a tandem bicycle, two radio sets. When



Untitled, #82, 1956-1957, silver gelatin print, edition of 10. paper: 24 x 20 inches, image: 22 x 15-1/2 inches (approximately), framed: 32 x 24 -5/8 inches

you had a car, at that time in Bamako, you were well placed among the best people. As for myself, I didn't drive, and I didn't take leisurely drives in my car. I bought the cars only for my clientele. The cars brought in a lot of money for me.

LD: In those days, women were more beautiful than now!

Seydou Keita: Oh, yes! You won't see any more like that, unless you go into the countryside. Oh la, yes! You can't see a woman with her hair done up like that anymore. Bamako women fooling around with their hair, that's all over with. Nowadays, girls only want to dress in slacks and skirts. Before, wearing a skirt—but now, people might say, come on, you're not going to start that all over again. It's formally forbidden. It's not pretty. A woman should never let anyone see her...—ah, no! It's not good. Miniskirts and boyfriends—those were forbidden in Muslim law. A lot has changed now.

LD: You were witness to the evolution of Malian society as it moved into modernity. Did that make you sad, a little?

Seydou Keita: It has changed a lot. Our exhibition was done here, in Bamako. They brought in a lot of women college students. When they saw what women used to wear, they said to me, now that is really bad. Absolutely. But in earlier times, dress was better. Women dressed in skirts, you realize what effect that has, here, for us in Africa! I'm not speaking about the Ivory Coast; they follow the Europeans, okay, they dress no matter how. But at home in Mali. No. No.

LD: What gives you the greatest pleasure in photography?

Seydou Keita: When I pose people, when I frame a shot, when I develop the film and print it, when I see the final print, the shots. What I like most in the darkroom is to see the picture as it emerges. When you see that, you're happy. You know immediately if you have done good work. That gives you courage. When you have done good work,

you are happy all the time! That is why I used to spend the whole night working. I worked all through the night. That was on portrait photographs, in the larger format, 13 x 11. But to be a good photographer, you also have to know how to receive and welcome people. Without that, you can't make good photos. You have to be happy and light-hearted with the clientele. Then they, too, will be happy.

LD: In fact, with your photographs, you are telling us stories. Your stories, it's like going to the movies!

Seydou Keita: (Laughter)

LD: Why was photography so successful in the 1940s?

Seydou Keita: Photography had a lot of success. People admired my work so much, everyone came around. There were people who came from Senegal, even though there are photographers over there. Mama Cassé was over there. All the same, they would come to me. People came from the Ivory Coast, from Nigeria, a little from all over. That's when I started to make beautiful photographs. But some didn't like having their photograph made at all because they feared being revived afterward, once they were dead. Adults didn't like to have their photos taken for this reason, but young people didn't give a damn about it! They came to have their photos taken at any time. Alone, in groups, for a close-up or a full-length portrait. For them, having a souvenir photo was a pleasure!

LD: In 1960, independence was declared; what happened for you as a photographer?

Seydou Keita: All the European photographers went home. The national security service came to see me to get me to work for them: "You must do your duty, Seydou, your duty for the State." For my part, I was convinced. I know that what they told me was reality. Everyone must do what he can for the State. I was able to work for two more years in my studio, then they told me, "You can close your studio, Seydou, since we are in a socialist country, and everyone must work for the State." I closed the studio. In 1977, I asked for retirement, I was liberated, and I became a pensioner.

LD: But contrary to what one might imagine, your career as a photographer doesn't stop there!

Seydou Keita: One morning I was there in my little darkroom, which had been transformed into a mechanic's garage, and I was fixing my motorcycle engine. Three gentlemen who came from France told me that they were looking for Seydou Keita, the photographer. It so happened that my hands were covered with oil. I said, "That's me." They said, "No, that can't be, you're a mechanic. We're looking for a photographer." I said, "But, sir, go into the back room, open up the crates, and you'll see filing boxes. Each box contains almost 110 or 120 negatives in cartons." Each of them took a box and opened it. In one rush they ran outside to look at the negatives. The men told me to have confidence in them. They were going to take the negatives to the French Cultural Center to have them verified. But the same day, they left for France. Three months later, they called me at the French Cultural Center by telephone. I was—they asked me if I could go to France. Me? How could I go? I didn't have any money! Decranne, the director, said to me, "Seydou, all you have to do is accept; they will make all the arrangements. And so, they're the ones who have paid for me to travel all over in France, America, and Japan.

LD: Some say that your photography is like a symbol that revealed the modernity of Bamako in the same way as the railway, the cinema, and even, the prison.

Seydou Keita: That is true. In my country, the railroad counted for a lot. To go to Kayes, you took the train. For Senegal, the same thing. The railroad was famous. As for the prison, everyone knew it as well. When you did something bad, the judges were there. They judge you, and then there has to be a place to keep you. The prison was a house of correction.

LD: And what about the cinema?

Seydou Keïta: The cinema! Now, that has evolved! Everyone talked about the cinema. Saturday, Sunday, everybody went to the movies. But it was the same everywhere. When we went to Spain, in Berlin, at night, in the middle of the day, people went to the movies. When the movie began, you would think that you yourself were a part of it. You're sitting in front of the screen, but except for the whirring of the film projector, you would think you were sitting in the middle of the people on the screen. When the camera passes near a hill, you think you're about to touch the hill. You feel you have to duck out of the way.

LD: What changed in Bamako with photography?

Seydou Keïta: Bamako changed with independence. But for photography at that time, there were fewer photographers because photography was not considered valuable. All the photographs I made were made for my clients, but afterwards, they tore them up. I saw them everywhere: beautiful photographs torn up. I asked them, "Why do you tear up the photographs?" They replied, "Well, if we need them, we'll go have ourselves photographed again." I said, "But how long has it been since you were last photographed? If you tear up this one, you'll go have a new one taken, but it won't be like the first one. You're already beginning to get older." You have to understand what a photograph is. It's a good souvenir for an individual, and above all, for a family. Today, Bamako is full of photographers.

LD: Was it important for you to save all your negatives?

Seydou Keïta: Yes, very important. I preferred to keep all my negatives in case people wanted to duplicate them. The date is on the back of the card that I give out [translator's note: presumably the card on which the photograph was mounted]. I arrange all my negatives in boxes with the date. When someone wants to have his photo reprinted immediately, I go back into the dark room and print it. If you throw the negatives away, you double your work. And printing the new shot can never reproduce the original, the first one.

LD: When young people come to see you, wanting to become photographers, what advice do you give them?

Seydou Keïta: "It's very good." I encourage them. "The photo is good. But the camera you're working with now, I don't know it". I've always been familiar with the darkroom. But now, all that is over with. In the old days, during the colonial period, we worked in black-and-white. You had all the materials available. Today, when you want to make a print, it's a big problem. You root all around in the marketplace, but you won't find black-and-white supplies in 18 by 24 format. Now, all these young people have become photographers, and everyone works in color. There aren't a lot who do their own laboratory work. They don't know how to develop film, and they don't know how to print. They take their photos to a photo lab, which processes them. I'm against that. They need to learn how to develop and print the photographs themselves. And they call themselves photographers! Going to school is fine. I used to shoot from morning to evening. At midnight, I would begin developing my film. Four hours later, I made my prints. I didn't sleep. At noon I went to bed to rest, perhaps for an hour. I had too much work. Snapping a shot is easy, anyone can do it. The true photographer is the one who frames the shot, develops the film, and prints it.

LD: Over the years, you have stored away a treasure-house. In your work as a photographer, what are the photographs that you are most proud of?

Seydou Keïta: I couldn't choose from my own work, because there are so many of them. There are too many, way too many. There are a lot of photographs. When they were exhibited, it made such an impression on me. There, I saw my work. It was after the exhibition was mounted that I knew that I had truly done some beautiful work.



Untitled, #23, 1952-1955, silver gelatin print, edition of 10, paper: 24 x 20 inches, image: 22 x 15-1/2 inches (approximately), framed: 32 x 24 -5/8 inches

When I saw the photos in the enlarged prints, I was happy that there were no mistakes and that the execution was correct. Nowadays, I can no longer do the same thing. Because of my eyesight.

LD: When you traveled to Europe, you met other photographers; did you appreciate any of their work?

Seydou Keïta: Ah, yes, over there, those are real photographers. Great photographers. They've made excellent photos, top-notch.

LD: But you, too, are a great photographer!

Seydou Keïta: No, I am not a great photographer. I've never made photographs at that level. I would have wanted my son to learn photography the way you must learn it, in Europe. To know what photography truly is. Here, no one knows what a photograph really is. A few months after you make some photographs, you see them tossing around in the street, people throw them out. When I see that, I feel really sick. People let their children handle photographs, and there they are, playing with them, creasing them. Here, in my own home, I have seen people tear up photographs. That means that no one knows what a photograph truly is. In Europe, you'll never see that. No. The photograph that you see in the newspaper, perhaps you might see that one in the trash can. But the two or three portrait prints, taken in the photographer's studio, mounted on cardstock, which you've received as a gift, you'll never see those in the trashcan. People keep those. They put them into albums. *They* know what a photograph is. But we, here, we don't know.

Translated from French by Emoretta Yang

Lydie Diakhaté is a Cameroonian Paris-based journalist and editor.