

SHIFTING IDENTITIES: CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY IN MALI

by

ALLISON M. MOORE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of
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Abstract

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Allison M. Moore

Adviser: Professor Geoffrey Batchen

Western audiences tend to be familiar with ‘African photography’ through the work of Mali’s two most famous studio practitioners, Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé. Yet Keïta’s and Sidibé’s striking black and white commercial portraits, taken in the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s in Bamako, no longer reflect current practices in the city. However, the surge of international interest in Keïta and Sidibé has ignited a new fascination with photography beyond the studio within Bamako itself. My dissertation examines this new ‘art photography’ movement, a term I use loosely to refer to various types of photography that have developed since the inauguration of the pan-African Bamako Photography Biennale (*Les rencontres africaines de la photographie*), in 1994.

Since its inauguration, the Biennale has inspired virtually all aspects of the growing art photography movement in Bamako. Its presence has stimulated the creation of new photographic institutions and aroused the ambitions of individual photographers. The Biennale provides previously unheard of opportunities for Malian photographers to exhibit, publish, and interact with other African photographers, and as such functions as a nexus for pan-African dialogues, and as a stepping stone to the global art market.

Yet, as the Biennale is funded and largely run by the French Ministry of Culture, it is emblematic of the cultural exchange between Mali and its former colonizer. I argue that it is necessary to understand the contradictions of the Biennale as constitutive of the insoluble problematic of postcolonialism, and I view the Biennale as a site of struggle for the assertion of Malian agency and identities in the realm of global culture.

Examined against the backdrop of the Biennale, the art photography movement in Bamako operates as a forum where local debates on culture, history, politics, and identity are taken up in visual form. Such debates also animate the circumstances surrounding photographers' production, most remarkably in the entrance of women photographers into the professional arena. I argue that the art photography movement constitutes an important cultural phenomenon of contemporary Mali, where the intersection of Malian and Western values and influences are highly visible.

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Introduction: Shifting Identities: Contemporary Photography in Mali

Western audiences tend to be familiar with ‘African photography’ through the work of Mali’s two most famous studio practitioners, Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé. **[Figure 1:1]** Yet Keïta’s and Sidibé’s striking black and white commercial portraits, taken in the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s in Mali’s capital of Bamako, no longer reflect current practices in the city. While studios still exist, and indeed have proliferated such that there seems to be one on every block, today’s color portraits lack the visual quality and historical punch of the earlier studio shots. However, the surge of international interest in Mali’s older, black-and-white pictures has ignited a new fascination with photography beyond the studio within Bamako itself. My dissertation examines this new ‘art photography’ movement, a term I use loosely to refer to various types of photography that have developed since the inauguration of the pan-African Bamako Photography Biennale (*Les rencontres africaines de la photographie de Bamako*), in 1994.¹

The most visible manifestation of Bamako’s increased photographic activity, the Biennale was initiated in response to the international fame garnered by Keïta and Sidibé. Since its inauguration, the Biennale has inspired virtually all aspects of the growing art photography movement in Bamako. Its presence has stimulated the creation of new photographic institutions and aroused the ambitions of individual photographers. The Biennale provides previously unheard of opportunities for Malian photographers to exhibit, publish, and interact with other African photographers, and as such functions as a nexus for pan-African dialogues, and as a stepping stone to the global art market.

¹ Literally translated as the “Meetings of African Photography,” but often referred to as the “African Photography Encounters” or “Bamako Biennale.” The sixth edition was also referred to as the *Biennale Photographique de Bamako*.

Yet, as the Biennale is emblematic of the cultural exchange between Mali and its former colonizer, France, it can also be seen as a spectacle of globalization, as part of the international trend towards glitzy art extravaganzas produced in ‘obscure’ locales. The Biennale is not, properly speaking, a Malian venture, as it is organized by the French Ministry of Culture and is funded by France and the European Union, much like the renowned Ouagadougou film festival in neighboring Burkina Faso. Debates rage over the pros and cons of the Biennale as a French and Malian cooperative effort, shifting between the sins of neo-imperialism versus the benefits of a new cosmopolitanism and the flowering of creativity that the biannual exhibition affords. While these arguments cannot be resolved until Mali has the financial means to support the Biennale – which will not be anytime soon – I argue that it is necessary to understand the contradictions of the Biennale as constitutive of the insoluble problematic of postcolonialism. Thus, I view the Biennale as a site of struggle for the assertion of Malian agency and identities in the realm of global culture.

Examined against the backdrop of the Biennale, the art photography movement in Bamako operates as a forum where local debates on culture, history, politics, and identity are taken up in visual form. Such debates also animate the circumstances surrounding photographers’ production, most remarkably in the entrance of women photographers into the professional arena. I argue that the art photography movement constitutes an important cultural phenomenon of contemporary Mali, where the intersection of Malian and Western values and influences are highly visible. I examine the particular, hybrid forms produced by these intersections and interactions, and attempt to evaluate the Malian agency in each situation, evidenced in some cases by the artists and sometimes in

the works themselves. In scrutinizing the specificity of how these tensions are manifested, I try to understand how art photography fits into Mali's cultural context; i.e., what does this new approach to photography mean culturally, politically, and historically? How is Malian 'art photography' received (or not received), internationally and locally, and what does this reception, or lack of, mean? Like popular music, another contemporary medium for which Mali is presently famous, but even more so, art photography is suffused with ambivalences, such that the movement could be said to symbolize Mali's contemporary, postcolonial situation.

While Mali is one of the financially poorest nations in the world, it is culturally one of the richest, internationally famous for its sculpture, masks, and performances, as well as textiles and cloth, ceramics, and ancient architecture. The Biennale intercedes dramatically across this axis of poverty and culture, which is most blatantly visible when Western curators stay in luxury hotels and participants from neighboring Niger sleep on local roofs. The Malian hosts, administrators and photographers, mediate between global wealth and local poverty, caught between French funding and the logistical difficulties of their nation's economic hardships. The art photographers in Bamako also mediate between traditional culture and modernity, a tension that many countries and societies face in this rapidly accelerating age, and one especially key in Mali, where traditional society is inseparably intertwined with the arts, but is rapidly eroding in the capital.

Photography in Mali has always embodied contradictions deriving from the colonial situation and its aftermath. With their conquest of the region in the 1880s, the French brought cameras, the devices of soldiers, colonial administrators, anthropologists

and Christian missionaries.² African photographers with close connections to the colonials opened Bamako's first studios in the 1930s, and portraits of the aspiring bourgeoisie became highly popular by the late 1940s. Since Mali's independence from France in 1960, studio portraits and press agency photographs offered competing histories of how the citizens of Bamako envisioned themselves as opposed to how the socialist leaders allowed themselves and their citizens to be portrayed. Under today's multi-party democracy, hundreds of studios operate in the capital, and Bamako is home to one of several photography biennales that exist in the world, which is especially noteworthy for occurring outside of the established Western art metropolises of London, Paris and New York.

With the recent rise of digital technology, photography, a flexible medium because of its ease of reproducibility, has become even more fluid. Images can be sent around the world in a few seconds, leaving aside the need for expensive printing materials, framing or paper. Even in Mali, where internet access is relatively rare, photographers are learning digital technologies and beginning to exploit opportunities provided by the internet. (The next few years may see dramatic changes in the art photography movement, since currently film cameras and traditional black and white printing techniques are primarily what are taught in the photography schools and programs). The recent development of art photography allows for more individual interpretations of national identity, as well as personal subjectivity, to circulate globally as images.

In this dissertation, my methodology takes account of the conflicting socio-political and historical forces operating on photographers, and presents a nuanced, "slice-

² Postcard production came later, in the 1900s.

of-life” approach to Mali’s art photography movement. I examine individuals’ professions, their artworks and projects, and various confluences of events within the broader socio-historical context of contemporary Mali. As a social history of art, this study includes discussion of the broader institutional framework operative in Bamako, yet views that framework as constructed by individual personalities and ambitions acted upon by historical and political forces. My thesis incorporates formal and contextual analyses of single photographs, and is informed by postcolonial theory and African feminist theory. Considerations of class, caste, ethnicity, and gender are included where important and possible. As art photography is a new cultural form in Mali, I situate the art photography movement within the broader context of photography in that country, and trace its genealogy through traditional arts, modern art, and studio photography.

My project grew out of two interests: admiration of Seydou Keïta’s incomparable photographs, and a fascination with the contradictory issues at play in the complicated terrain of African arts in the twentieth century, including tourist art, notions of authenticity, diaspora, and the postcolonial flux between ‘traditional’ and Western worldviews. After discovering that Candace Keller at Indiana University was already writing a much-needed dissertation on the history of photography in Mali, I chose to focus on the effect in Bamako of the ‘discovery’ of Seydou Keïta’s photographs in the West.³ This topic was suited to my training in contemporary arts and theory, as well as to my personal interests.

³ Candace Keller, “Visual Griots: Social, Political, and Cultural Histories in Mali through the Photographer’s Lens” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2008). Keller’s dissertation was defended on July 18, 2008 and thus was not available to me during the writing of this project, although she generously answered various questions in conversation while we were both in the process of writing.

Because I wanted to examine how Malian photography has been influenced by the forces of globalization after the founding of the Biennale, most of the photographs that I discuss in this thesis were published or exhibited by foreigners, usually Westerners, for a presumably foreign audience, although they were taken by Malians. Thus I examine their formal qualities from a Western perspective, trying to understand why these particular images were chosen. At the same time, relying on my interviews with photographers in Mali, I speculate about the *cultural* qualities of these forms from what I understand of a Malian perspective, i.e., what is their local meaning and interest. While I cannot claim to speak for Malians, I hope to allow the ideas of the photographers themselves, expressed in interviews and casual conversation, to shed some light on what their photography means, and how they perceive the new art photography movement. I also rely on existing scholarly research to come to my conclusions.

My information relies on a combination of first- and second-hand research. I visited Mali for two weeks during the 2005 Bamako Biennale, and returned for two months (which included a comparative week-long visit to Senegal for *Dak'Art* 2006, the Dakar Biennale) in the summer of 2006. With the invaluable help of Bakary Sidibé, who worked with me as both translator and assistant, I interviewed twenty-eight photographers working in Bamako. I first sought out photographers who had exhibited in Biennales or other shows, or who had been published in various books. Through these contacts and those provided by Mr. Sidibé and Candace Keller, I met other photographers who are trying to publish or exhibit, but who have not necessarily had success yet. I looked at unpublished photographs whenever possible, to better understand photographers' working methods and choices of subjects. However, in this dissertation, I

focus mostly on published or exhibited photographs because that is where the tensions between Malian and global culture are literally made visible in a form often accessible to a Western, as well as Malian, public.⁴ I also interviewed seventeen administrators, teachers, and project leaders at various photography and arts institutions. Much of my research is not specifically referred to here, but the many interviews and impressions from time spent in Mali provided a necessary contextual understanding of the art photography movement.

Of necessity, my research focused mostly on well-educated men who live in Bamako, and who typically spoke with us in French. These photographers could be considered ‘elites’ in terms of their level of education and class background (much like the scholarly American community for whom this dissertation is written). To attempt to balance this situation in terms of gender, I particularly pursued women photographers in a feminist vein, though they are relatively few and most have not yet made their names. This is in part because they are younger and in part because they face more difficulty as women operating in a still-patriarchal society. I also interviewed several photographers operating studios in Bamako who had little knowledge of the Biennale and were not particularly interested in it. This allowed a comparison between art photographers and studio photographers who view photography solely as a business.

Although this project examines photography in Mali, and therefore naturally tries to take account of Mali’s history, politics, society and culture, my analysis does *not* take an ethnographic or anthropological approach. Instead, I consider my methodology to be

⁴ While these photographs are technically ‘available’ to a Malian public, it is safe to say that few Malians are aware of these works. Books are expensive and thus hard to come by for many in Mali. Most of the pictures I discuss have been exhibited in Bamako, however, so they were available to the public for the month-long span of the exhibition. How many members of the local public actually visited is another story.

equally applicable to a dissertation written on photography in France, for example, which would naturally take account of the same issues – history, politics, society, culture - germane to French photography. This dissertation is a social history of art, not an anthropological study.

A difficult conundrum pervasive in all art historical scholarship, and particularly in photography, is the matter of taste, both personal and cultural. An art historian should include formal analysis of the pictures she discusses, but judgments made about form are subjective, informed by education, culture, and personal interest. In Mali, where emphasis on the visual is traditionally not as important as other concerns in art (as in many African cultures), it is particularly difficult for a Westerner to make judgments about form in photography. Yet the works that appear in publications or exhibitions have either been chosen by Westerners or meant for a Western audience, so Western perceptions of form were clearly operative in their selection. My approach to this problem was to listen to what photographers said about their pictures, while at the same time making my own judgments. In my writing, I have tried to consistently remind the reader that my opinion always comes (of course) from my subjective, individual and also Western cultural perspective, and to present the ideas of photographers whenever possible to provide their individual, as well as Malian, perspectives. I asked questions that I hoped would reveal certain opinions or biases about formal principles, and discovered that, just as if one interviewed thirty American photographers, the answers varied widely, especially as many of the younger photographers were trained at schools that teach aesthetics in a Western style.

I was originally somewhat discouraged on first viewing a number of photographers' works. Because photography is a modern medium, because many of these photographers are participating in international, Western-oriented exhibitions, and because Keïta's and Sidibé's photographs *are* so visually striking, I assumed that Malian photographers' works would be highly concerned with 'form' as it is understood in the West. However, distinctively composed and subtly printed pictures did not seem to be the main concern of most photographers, although there were exceptions. Also, for the most part, photographers did not experiment widely, either with visual approaches or with the medium itself, i.e. manipulating the negative.⁵ Pictures were sometimes a little blurry, as if the focus was not quite right, contrasts were undifferentiated, and often forms were not composed in a way that I, with my Western-trained art historian's eye, found interesting. However, the subjects and content of the photographs *were* always interesting, illustrative of an important cultural theme or concept that often became especially evident when the photographer told me what the photograph meant. In other words, a photograph often did not visually convey all of its meaning, especially to a cultural outsider such as myself. But when explained by its maker, it had unexpected relevance and depth.

This circumstance led me to ask: What is important in photography to Malian artists? How do *photographers* view the photograph? How does their passion for and fascination with this medium of modernity cohabit with their cultural upbringing? What does the shift of photography to become art in the Western sense mean? Is this shift visible in the photographs themselves? Like photographers anywhere, the photographers in Bamako with whom I spoke were excited about their prints, sometimes handing me

⁵ The use of pinhole cameras is an exception, but these were introduced by the European Oscura Association.

stacks of hundreds of pictures to look through. But usually they were more excited about their overall *professions* as photographers. One photographer, Racine Keïta, even told me that he never looked at his old photographs.⁶ Other photographers, although they agreed to be interviewed, did not show me any of their works. I began to examine how a ‘Malian worldview’ toward photography has resulted in different social practices and different approaches than those emphasized in the West. While I sketch some examples of how these different approaches are manifested in various pictures, most noticeably in two series by Youssouf Sogodogo and Joseye Tienro, and while I make claims about what photography might mean in Mali, this is an area that needs further research and requires a deeper inundation in Malian culture than my experience could provide.

Choosing images is a particular problem in photography, more so than in other arts, owing to the sheer number of pictures that most photographers take. One single eight by eleven inch contact sheet can contain one or two dozen images, while a painter might take years to produce that number of paintings. Because of the volume of photographic images accessible today, the brilliant, singular photograph is hard to appreciate, in contrast to a series that ideally illustrates a concept or a theme, and various ideas at play. When a series is shown, there is always the question, especially in publications, of whose choice has determined the theme. For example, when I talked to photographers who had been represented in the Biennale by two or three photographs, they told me they had actually submitted about a dozen, yet only a few had been chosen for exhibition. In many cases, it quickly became clear that a curator’s formal aesthetic had determined the choices. Photographer Amadou Baba Cissé, for example, had submitted a whole series to

⁶ Racine Keïta, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 19 June 2006.

the Biennale jury which depicted various uses of condoms in unusual situations. Cissé viewed this series as carrying an important activist content, as AIDS is a widespread problem in Mali that is rarely discussed. The series included pictures of children blowing up condoms like balloons, photos of condoms stuffed into wallets, sure to rip, crumple and decay in the heat, and several shots of a single condom, twisted and hanging from a nail. Only the latter had been chosen for the Biennale— the most formal, poetic, symbolic, and aesthetic pictures in the group – but these did not accurately represent the photographer’s own vision as he explained it to me. The Biennale curator had presented such a pared-down version of Cissé’s series that his work seemed almost misrepresented. Cissé did not seem to mind this, however, and seemed happy to have been included in the Biennale at all.⁷

As I was interested in the intersection of Western and Malian forces in the production of art photography, part of my dissertation is concerned with parsing out the factors which led to certain exhibition and publication choices. To avoid a similar misrepresentation myself, I have tried to see as many photographs as artists were willing to show me, but the works I chose to write about were necessarily limited, and usually had been published. For discussion, I often had to choose five, or ten, at most fifteen images from hundreds; and while sometimes I tried to choose *against* my taste, to focus on what seemed important to me from the photographer’s words, I also chose what works seemed best to me: i.e. the most complex and most interesting, either aesthetically or for conceptual reasons. Sometimes I chose pictures particularly to illustrate a point. After finding a number of photographers working in a very similar fashion on similar themes, I

⁷ He may have been cautious about revealing his opinion, or he may truly not have minded. Amadou Baba Cissé, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 12 June 2006.

also (true to my Western emphasis on originality) tried to discover what was rare, what stood out. This quality is germane to ‘art photography’ as it is understood in the West. And of course there are always unconscious, personal reasons for choosing works that cannot be fathomed. So, while I may criticize certain publishers and curators for putting their own spin on a photographer’s works, I am no doubt guilty of doing the same. Indeed, as is always true with photography, if the reader went to Bamako now, he or she would return with a different set of images, a different interpretation, and perhaps a completely different story. And in fact this would be a very Malian approach to history, as most people in Mali do not expect that one person’s experience should necessarily correlate with another’s.

While I focus on photography in Mali, and specifically on developments in Bamako, to celebrate art within the context of nationalism, or to make positive, uncritical claims for a ‘national’ art, is problematic. With regard to American art, Wanda Corn notes, “Exceptionalist studies today are considered forms of cultural aggression, compelling conformity of behavior and belief and asserting political claims for American national superiority.”⁸ Although I do not want to uncritically celebrate nationalist sentiments in the Malian context, national pride does take on a somewhat different meaning when operative in one of the poorest and least economically powerful countries in the world. ‘Malian’ identity is a concept that has only formally existed since independence in 1960, although notions of ‘nationalism’ were operative in the struggle for independence. The forced institution of borders to create the French Sudan means that various ethnic polities’ areas of habitation naturally over-spilled the new, national

⁸ Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), xiv.

boundaries. But after a century which encompassed colonialism, the liberation struggle, independence, socialist dictatorships, and democracy, nationalism has acquired an important resonance in contemporary Malian life, and culture in Mali has been a powerful means of reinforcing nationalist feelings.⁹ Malians also look back to their history of great empires – in particular the thirteenth-century Mali Empire, for which today's nation is named – with great pride. In fact, Malians cite their cultural heritage, adherence to tradition, and pride in their past as reasons for becoming one of the few peaceful democracies to survive the post-independence ethnic violence which suffuses most of West Africa.¹⁰

As nations are composed of many factions - ethnic, class, profession, gender - no single photograph or body of work can articulate a definition of 'identity' that will apply to the whole population. However, the "imagined community" of the nation is a strong force in people's views of their own self-constructions.¹¹ It is clear that among photographers working in Bamako – those who call themselves artists, those who exhibit internationally (or hope to), and those who work in the photographic institutions - that issues of cultural, political, historical, and national identity inform and often drive their production. As it is through Malian photographers Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé that

⁹ See William J. Foltz, *From French West Africa to the Malian Federation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 10. See also Mary Jo Arnoldi, "Overcoming a Colonial Legacy: The New National Museum in Mali: 1976 to the Present," *Museum Anthropology* 22 no. 3: 28-40 and "Bamako, Mali: Monuments and Modernity in the Urban Imagination" *Africa Today* 54 no. 2 (Winter 2007): 3-24. Susan Vogel refers to specific art forms, which are 'extinct' but which reinforce nationalist pride, as one of five 'strains' of contemporary African art. See Vogel, *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (New York: Center for African Art, 1991), 11.

¹⁰ Robert Maxwell Pringle, *Democratization in Mali: Putting History to Work*. *Peaceworks* no. 58 (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, October 2006), 16. <http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/pwks58.html>; accessed October 4, 2007.

¹¹ "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members. ... It is imagined as a community, because... the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal, comradeship." Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 7.

‘African’ photography has become popularly known, photographers working today may also be aware of the power of ‘Malian identity’ as a promotional quality in the view of the international art world. However, most photographers whom I interviewed denied that a qualitative ‘Malian’ photography exists, instead suggesting that each photographer works according to his or her own style. Paradoxically, this willingness to allow for difference is a highly *Malian* characteristic. My dissertation, which necessarily unfolds under national parameters, thus takes account of the complexities of nationalism and its contributions to photographers’ work.

Language was another significant issue in doing research. I speak French, but am not fully fluent in that language or in Bamana, and often had trouble understanding the Malian French accent. Thus I usually worked with Mr. Sidibé, who is fluent in French, Bamana, Fula and English. He often re-translated my questions, and the wording did not remain the same at all times as my original English intention. Although in some cases I tried to ask the question in several different ways, so as to get at my first meaning, in most cases I took this re-wording of questions by someone with greater expertise in the language than myself as an added benefit; to quote Mahmood Mamdani, I did not want to be “akin to those learning a foreign language who must translate every new word back into their mother tongue, in the process missing precisely what is new in a new experience.”¹² The re-wordings that Mr. Sidibé chose had more meaning than my original questions, which often did not make sense, not only I suspect linguistically, but culturally.

¹² Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 12.

A few points about terminology must be explained. While I use the controversial term ‘traditional’ to refer to ‘precolonial’ African arts (another controversial term), I use it with the understanding that traditions are transmogrified by social and local practices over time, and are not fixed, static and timeless entities. The use of the term ‘precolonial’ emphasizes the recent history of European conquest, as if thousands of years of struggles for conquest among various cultures and peoples within Africa itself were of lesser importance. I do not mean to make this presumption. But there is no term that easily designates “the area in West Africa that was to become the nation of Mali in 1960,” since various empires had different boundaries. Therefore I sometimes use the word ‘precolonial’ as a shorthand way to refer to the time before the French entered Mali in the 1880s, although I try to avoid it. As this dissertation focuses specifically on the colonial and independence eras, however, and on the colonially-introduced technology of photography, I feel that infrequent usage of the term is acceptable in this context.

Finally, a question was brought up when part of this dissertation was presented as a paper; namely, how do I differentiate between art photography and non-art photography? I explain this difference through *intention*, as in Western art. If a picture was taken because the photographer hoped to eventually exhibit or publish it, I consider it ‘art.’ Or, if the picture was eventually exhibited as art, even if taken for other reasons (self-motivated, or reportage), I also consider it ‘art,’ because that is how it is positioned by its maker. But as this dissertation shows, the boundaries between ‘art’ and other types of photography are permeable, and often depend more on one’s point of view and contextual circumstances than on any fixed notion of what art is.

I. Chapter Synopsis

My dissertation takes the form of six chapters, this introduction, and a conclusion. In the rest of the introduction, I provide a brief background of the history of the region that became Mali in 1960, and I include a discussion of postcolonial theory, elaborating on Homi Bhabha's conception of hybridity that governs this dissertation.

In Chapter One, I trace a trajectory from the 1880s, when photography arrived in the French Sudan with military expeditions, to the first African studio practitioners of the 1930s, to the international 'discovery' of Keïta and Sidibé in the early 1990s. I show how colonial forces introduced photography to the region, and how, when African subjects took up the medium themselves, they changed it to suit their cultural needs. At the same time, however, photography remained closely tied to French power, as the photographers came from elite classes who depended on the structure of the colonial state for their new status. The relations between photography and colonialism – which are embodied in an ambivalence that I label postcolonial – continue to inform photography after independence in various ways.

I also examine the social meaning of the most popular form of photography, studio portraits, in Chapter One. I look at the contradictions inherent in the medium of photography, itself a philosophical conundrum, as illuminated by the American pragmatist philosopher C.S. Peirce's discussion of semiotics. In contrast to Peirce and typical Western views of photography, I speculate on how a Malian worldview, as described by Kristina Van Dyke, may approach and understand photography differently, disregarding its claims to absolute proof, and instead appreciating photography's performative, social nature and its ability to create desired fantasies.

In Chapter Two, “Bamako Becoming Photographic,” I show what is meant by the claim that art photography in Mali embodies a “postcolonial problematic.” The international ‘discovery’ of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, and the consequent founding of the Bamako Biennale, were the prime instigators in the creation of an art photography movement in Bamako. This chapter examines the circumstances of Keïta and Sidibé’s exposure to an international audience. I investigate the various contributing factors to the sudden fame of African photography on the international art circuit, and discuss how that fame has manifested itself in the inauguration of the Biennale. I then discuss the Biennale – its structure, its organization, what it has accomplished and how it has changed over the six editions from 1994 to 2005. I trace the history of the Biennale as it has grown from a relatively small, mostly West African exhibition inspired by studio photography to a huge, sprawling conglomeration of images chosen by teams of curators that include all of Africa, the diaspora, and beyond. The Biennale stems from the international recognition of Malian photography and has offered local photographers an outlet of creativity. Yet the institution is largely funded by the French, who control the reins in most areas of production. The desire to show in the Biennale contributes to the production of individual photographers, who in some cases direct their work to fit with the stated theme by the senior curator. Yet, like many biennales world-wide, the Bamako Biennale maintains an uncomfortable relationship with its host city. I examine the ramifications of these contradictions, and discuss attempts to include not only Malian photographers, and institutions, but the public of Bamako in the Biennale proceedings.

Numerous photography institutions have sprouted in Bamako since the founding of the Biennale. In Chapter Two, I numerate these institutions and comment upon their

functions in contributing to the new art photography movement. Finally, I attempt to give a genealogy of ‘art photography,’ which is a new cultural form in Malian society, and I question what this new form means and how, although it may be threaded with postcolonial dilemmas, it is ultimately constituted by Malian values.

My third chapter, “Studio Photography Glamorized and Globalized,” examines changes in Keïta’s and Sidibé’s work after they achieved international fame. While the Biennale has given rise to art photography, I argue that the movement is complicated by the way art photography loses the social meaning integral to studio photography. I discuss particular instances of Seydou Keïta’s and Malick Sidibé’s responses to their fame by looking at Sidibé’s art project “Views from Behind” and Keïta’s collaboration with the magazine *Harper’s Bazaar* on a fashion shoot. Keïta’s project, in particular, illuminates broader controversies in the field of contemporary African art, and both projects illustrate the degree to which commercial ambitions and perceptions of one’s audience can influence an artist’s working method.

Chapter Four examines another form of Western intervention in Malian photography: workshops set up by European and American organizations or individuals with the proposed aim of using photography as a means to further self-respect and social change within a Malian community, usually focused on children. I compare the motives and results of various projects, questioning their long- and short-term efficacy, and speculate on what is specific to photography as a medium that lends itself to such efforts. As these projects are influencing the next generation of Malian photographers, I find the approaches revelatory, even, or especially, if the ultimate goal is not to create ‘art’ but to further values of self-respect and ambition. Finally, I look at the work of a teenager,

Mohamed Camara, whose impetus to become a photographer stemmed from an encounter with the author of one of these projects. This friendship eventually led to Camara's gallery representation in Bamako and in Paris, his subsequent solo exhibition at the Tate Modern in 2001, and his inclusion as the sole Malian photographer in *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary Photography* in 2006 in New York. The latter developments have positioned Camara as the most internationally known art photographer from Mali. Yet, paradoxically, Camara's lack of rigorous photographic training makes him an anomaly in the art photography scene, and his career and work highlight the vast differences between global and local concerns.

In contrast to Camara, whose work speaks only to an international or transnational audience, in Chapter Five I consider the work of two photographers, Youssouf Sogodogo and Joseye Tienro, who are using Malian idioms to create photography that would resonate with a local public, should that public ever be enabled to see it. I take the fact that four prominent photographers, including Sogodogo and Tienro, work or used to work at the National Museum as grounds for an investigation into the museum's history, function, and relationship to photography. I argue that the photographers' careers at the Museum have influenced their choice of photographic subjects and presentation, which I define as an archival approach to the preservation of culture and history. Yet, at the same time, Sogodogo's and Tienro's work de-centers the archive, highlighting its incomprehensive, variable character, even as their projects highlight similar qualities within photography itself. I suggest that their work continues the impetus of the museum to preserve patrimony, while offering a new approach in terms of form which mediates in a postcolonial manner between traditional arts and forms of memory, and contemporary

life in Mali. Sogodogo's and Teinro's work can communicate to both an international and a local, Malian audience, through the global, conceptual strategy of the archive, and through conventions borrowed from the locally accessible format of studio photography.

Finally, Chapter Six looks at the most dramatic change caused by the new art photography movement in Bamako: the growing presence of women photographers. The founding of a photography school for women in 1996, *Promo Femme: Center of Audio-visual Education for Young Women*, by a woman named Aminata Dembélé Bagayoko, has single-handedly changed the gender demographic in the photographic profession. I discuss the careers and production of five prominent female photographers working in different genres of their profession – as a studio photographer, as an illustrator for a language school, as a press photographer, and as artists. I look at the challenges these women face and the opportunities now afforded by Mali's democratic society and by the very same globalization that threatens to erase the specificity of Malian culture. I argue that their struggles for recognition in a male-dominated profession demonstrate a site of resistance against traditional patriarchal values that attempt to keep women subordinate to men. The entrance of women into photography in Mali is an unprecedented and dramatic change that postcolonialism and democracy has wrought; it heralds an exciting future.

Ultimately, my dissertation attempts to elucidate what I feel are the most important debates over cultural, historical and political identities that are engaged by contemporary Malian photography. As the fame of Keïta's and Sidibé's studio portraits, and the subsequent founding of the Biennale, have given rise to an art photography movement in Bamako, I argue that art photography illustrates pervasive tensions between

tradition and modernity in Mali, and that this new form mediates between positive and negative aspects of postcolonial society. Contemporary photography in Mali provides a fascinating case study of an instance where globalization meets culture and where Western notions of art meet traditional cultural precepts, forging new cultural forms.

II. Review of Literature

Malian photography, and African photography in general, constitute a rapidly expanding field whose publications date to the past decade. My study contributes to this still-sparse literature in several ways. First, it provides new information on previously under-researched areas of photography in Mali; namely: the art photography movement, which includes new institutions in Bamako; the Biennale's history and role in the dissemination of studio portraits and the development of art photography; photography used as a tool for community-building by development organizations, such as the Academy for Educational Development's Visual Griots and the Oscura Pinhole Photography Workshops; and the unprecedented emergence of women photographers. My study also theoretically and historically contextualizes photography in Bamako through the key notion of identity, examining how national, ethnic, gender, caste, age, and personal identities inform photographers' practice and are pertinent concerns in photographic works. This allows for a complex look at the visual process of subject formation in a culture undergoing rapid socio-political transitions. My dissertation also takes an institutional approach, examining the new institutions that have sprung up since the inauguration of the Biennale, as well as the Biennale itself, and the National Museum.

Several published books and articles provide a useful background for a theoretically sophisticated examination of Malian art photography's current production and reception. André Magnin's monographs on Keïta and Sidibé and the Hasselblad Center's monograph on Sidibé provide informative interviews with their subjects.¹³ Michelle Lamunière's exhibition catalogue on Keïta and Sidibé also includes interviews with both photographers and touches on many issues in studio photography that deserve further study, such as studio photography's relationship to colonial-era postcards, the use of backdrops, itinerant photographers, and aesthetic connections between studio photographs and traditional African practices, such as textile making and hairstyles. While the information these books provide is invaluable, and is sometimes extremely interesting for what does not 'match up' among sources, they are all monographic or dual monographs focusing only on Mali's two most famous studio photographers. As such, while providing information on individual practices and making many important images available, they do not give a comprehensive view of studio photography in Mali, and they contribute to the misperception of Keïta and Sidibé as the 'only' Malian studio photographers. The publication on Hamadou Bocoum by Svend Erik Sokkelund and Tanya Elder, as well as Amadou Chab Touré's short catalogue on Hamidou Maïga, both correct this misperception by offering images by two 'unknown' Malian studio

¹³ André Magnin, ed., *Seydou Keïta* (Zurich: Scalo, 1997) and André Magnin, ed., *Malick Sidibé*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Zurich: Scalo, 1998). *Malick Sidibé – Photographs* (Göteborg, Sweden: Hasselblad, 2003; Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2003). See also Michelle Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé* (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 2001; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

photographers, but each publication still relies on the traditional art historical monograph format.¹⁴

In contrast, Tanya Elder's 1997 sociological study of studio and itinerant photographers, *Capturing Change – The Practice of Malian Photography 1930s – 1990s* contributes greatly to an understanding of photography as a *practice* during the decades of the title.¹⁵ This book provides valuable information with a much wider, more comprehensive scope than any other available sources. However, Elder does not attempt to situate photography with regard to traditional arts or culture (such as griots). While she does attempt to incorporate Mande cultural concepts into her purview, the study is mostly Western-oriented.¹⁶ There is even less attention to cultural context in Érika Nimis's 1998 book, *Photographes de Bamako de 1935 à nos jours / Photographers in Bamako from 1935 to the Present*, which was the other major source for a history of photography in Mali while I was writing this dissertation.¹⁷ Elder's book also does not touch on the art photography movement, which was only nascent when she was doing her research. Nimis makes brief mention of the Biennale and discusses two photographers working as artists, but her history overall is slim, provides little social context, and often contradicts other sources.¹⁸ Keller's dissertation, "Visual Griots: Social, Political, and Cultural Histories in

¹⁴ Svend E. Sokkelund and Tanya Elder, *Hamadou Bocoum* (Copenhagaen: Fotografisk Center and Copenhagen Capital of Culture, 1996) and Amadou Chab Touré, *Hamidou Maïga: photographie des "Tomboctiens"* (Bamako: Galerie Chab, 2000).

¹⁵ Tanya Elder, *Capturing Change – The Practice of Malian Photography 1930s – 1990s* (Linköping: Linköping University, Sweden, 1997).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 101-103. Elder notes that this area needs further study.

¹⁷ Érika Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako de 1935 à nos jours / Photographers in Bamako from 1935 to the Present* (Paris: Éditions Revue Noire, 1998).

¹⁸ Nimis provides a brief treatment of the artists Emmanuel Daou and Alioune Bâ. Although we interviewed both photographers a number of times – Bâ in regard to his art, but also in regard to the positions he holds at Association Seydou Keïta and at Mali's National Museum – I do not discuss their art photography in this dissertation, not because of issues of quality, but because their projects did not fall under the scope of the topics I wanted to address.

Mali through the Photographer's Lens" (2008) will be a welcome and much-needed addition to these two sources.

While Elder and Nimis have attempted 'objective' histories of photography in Mali, the film and literary scholar Manthia Diawara, who spent his teenage years in Bamako, has written essays that provide an invaluable subjective, cultural understanding of the work of Keïta and Sidibé. Diawara's conclusions are especially interesting on the topic of the relevance of highlife music and youth culture to Sidibé's pictures.¹⁹ Robert Storr's article, "Bamako: Full Dress Parade," was also remarkable for its early appreciation of Keïta's works, and close reading of the Magnin monograph.²⁰ Elizabeth Bigham's 1999 analysis of Keïta's works in terms of Barthesian and Foucauldian notions of 'authorship' contributed an important, unsentimental, theoretical and contextual sally to the understanding of Keïta, and I take up a discussion of aspects of her article at greater length in Chapter Three.²¹

Several publications that include Malian photographers along with other West African studio photographers, such as *Snap Me One! Studiofotografen in Afrika*, edited by Heike Behrend and Tobias Wendl (Munich: Münchner Stadtmuseum and Prestel, 1998) and *Flash Afrique! Photography from West Africa*, edited by Gerald Matt and Thomas Mießgang, also contribute to broadening the West's understanding of African photography.²² Behrend and Wendl are venerable scholars whose insights into East

¹⁹ Manthia Diawara, "Talk of the Town: Seydou Keïta" in *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, ed. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 236-242. Also see Diawara, "The Sixties in Bamako: Malick Sidibé and James Brown" in *Malick Sidibé – Photographs* (Göteborg: Hasselblad Center; Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), 8-22.

²⁰ Robert Storr, "Bamako: Full Dress Parade" *Parkett* no. 49 (1997): 24-34.

²¹ Elizabeth Bigham, "Issues of Authorship in the Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta" *African Arts* 32 no. 1 (Spring 1999), 56-67, 94.

²² Gerald Matt and Thomas Mießgang, eds. *Flash Afrique! Photography from West Africa* (Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 2001).

African and Ghanaian studio practices, respectively, provide ideas for further direction of research into Malian studio photography. Neither author addresses art photography, however; and indeed, Mali's situation, because of the development of the Biennale, is unique in Africa. In contrast, Matt and Mießgang include several art and fashion photographers and provide valuable first-hand interviews, but their book lacks in-depth scholarly research.

While contemporary African scholarship that is limited to the development of a specific genre of art, such as this dissertation, are relatively few, several studies provided structural models and ideas that were important to my work. Elizabeth Harney's *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995* (2004) was a useful model of the political history of modern art in Dakar.²³ "Mystical Reproductions: Photography and the Authentic Simulacrum," the opening chapter of the exhibition catalogue *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (2003), which follows the migration of a photographic image of the Senegalese Saint Cheikh Amadou Bamba, inspired thoughts about the life of a photographic image within a particular local context.²⁴ Also in the realm of photography, although not African-oriented, Geoffrey Batchen's theoretical approaches to various neglected genres in the history of photography, such as vernacular photographs and *carte-de-visites*, and his emphasis on what a photograph *means* in the present, have greatly influenced my work. I rely heavily on Kristina Van Dyke's dissertation which argues for a 'genealogical' Malian

²³ Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁴ Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts with Gassia Armenian and Ousmane Gueye, *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003).

worldview.²⁵ Recent research on modern material culture and socio-political changes in Mali, such as Mary Jo Arnoldi's important work on nationalism in visual culture, and Dorothea Schulz's valuable research on new and hybrid cultural forms, such as music videos and women's clothing, also informed my ideas and provided inspirational examples.

There are a number of essays, articles and books that include important discussions of Malian photography, among other topics, and which offer theoretical notions on African photography in general. *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940-Present* (1996), a catalogue for a show at the Guggenheim Museum curated by Clare Bell, Okwui Enwezor, Olu Oguibe, Danielle Tilkin, and Octavio Zaya, which included Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, presents two essays in particular that theoretically problematize important aspects of African photography; namely colonialism and photography's relation to traditional ritual practices.²⁶ Various exhibition catalogues, including all of the Biennale catalogues, also provide important first-hand source information and often useful analytical essays. In particular, Okwui Enwezor's groundbreaking exhibition catalogue, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (2001) was the first work to account for the relationship between visual culture and politics in Africa.²⁷ This anthology includes relevant first-hand political statements and philosophical manifestos. Lauri Firstenberg's contributing

²⁵ Kristina Van Dyke, "The Oral-Visual Nexus: Rethinking Visuality in Mali" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2005).

²⁶ Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, "Colonial Imaginary, Tropes of Disruption: History, Culture, and Representation in the Works of African Photographers" and Olu Oguibe, "Photography and the Substance of the Image" in *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, ed. Clare Bell et al. (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 17-48 and 231-249.

²⁷ Okwui Enwezor, ed., *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2001).

essay on photography begins to synthesize the import of political theory in regard to African photography, but is not specific to Mali.²⁸ Conversely, my dissertation situates works squarely within their local contexts, and examines Mali's visual identity as represented in photography with regard to the nation's specific socio-political and historical context. Enwezor's catalogue *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (2006) provided an excellent essay about contemporary photography in Africa in the context of Afro-pessimism that has influenced my work.

These essays, invaluable and thought provoking, are the theoretical arguments in response to which specific, local histories need to be elucidated. Important as these works are in breaking ground in African photography, none of these texts discuss the specific ways in which the new form of art photography in Mali fits into older historical traditions of photography and art, involving local research and perspectives. Through my first-hand examination of contemporary art photography in Bamako, my study hopes to fill in one small gap in the many, many areas of African photography that deserve further study. Through my discussion of various genres, I hope to widen the perceived understanding of what 'African photography' is today, and to show how these various new genres contribute to a forum for debates about culture and identity in contemporary Mali.

III. Background of Mali

To understand the circumstances of how an 'art photography' movement gained momentum in Bamako, it is useful to provide some background information on Mali. A landlocked nation in West Africa, Mali shares borders and various ethnic populations

²⁸ Lauri Firstenberg, "Postcoloniality, Performance, and Photographic Portraiture" in *The Short Century*, 175-179.

with Senegal, Mauritania, Algeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, and Guinea.

[Figure 1:2] Almost twice the size of Texas and shaped like a butterfly on a south-western tilted axis, Mali's northern reaches are covered by the Sahara desert and the Sahel, a semi-arid zone. The southern area, where about ninety percent of the population lives, is composed of subtropical savannah grasslands, with a short rainy season that peaks in late summer. In other words, most of the time Mali is hot, dry and dusty, which means that droughts and desertification are serious issues, as roughly eighty percent of the country's livelihood is based on agriculture. The climactic conditions also take a toll on photography, affecting film, photographic paper, negatives, developing chemicals, and camera lenses. (For example, Seydou Keita's original, or 'vintage,' studio prints are now in relatively poor condition because of their age, while the preservation of his negatives has become a pressing issue). Western tourists tend to visit Mali in the winter months, when the weather is slightly cooler. As a consequence, the first photography Biennale was held in December; subsequent exhibitions have typically opened sometime in November.

Mali is one of the five poorest countries in the world, with high infant mortality rates, low literacy rates, and a relatively short life expectancy (about forty-eight years at birth). The country is extremely dependent on foreign aid. Much of Mali's agriculture is subsistence farming, dependence on livestock (cattle, goats and sheep), and fishing. Cotton and gold are the chief exports. In contrast to its economic poverty, Mali's culture is rich and varied, including many different kinds of music, performances, masks, sculpture, architecture, textiles, and pottery. Despite the severity of Mali's economic and geographic conditions, Bamako entertains a lively photography scene. As might be

expected, the expense of acquiring and maintaining quality photographic materials and equipment has created difficulties for many Malian photographers, and limits the possibilities of photographic institutions in Bamako. However, photographers and administrators have been creative in their response to difficult economic circumstances.

Contrary to the popular notion of Africa as a continent of small villages defined by ethnicity, three great empires reigned over the area that is now (more or less) Mali, succeeding one another from the 1000s through the 1500s.²⁹ The Ghana Empire, founded and ruled by the Soninké people, grew from the kingdom of Ouagadou in AD 400 to reach its zenith in the eleventh century, dominating the region's trans-Saharan gold trade. While animist, the Soninké rulers were tolerant of Islam, the religion of their trading partners in the East and North. In the late eleventh century, the Islamic Almoravid sect conquered the Ghana Empire and established a Muslim king in 1076, converting many Soninké to Islam in the process. The Soninké Empire fell to the neighboring state of Sosso in the twelfth century. In 1235, the powerful and legendary Sundiata Keïta, chief of the small Malinké state, established the Islamic Mali Empire. The Epic of Sundiata, which tells his story, is today considered the most important oral masterpiece of Mali. As the Mali Empire gradually lost control over its holdings in the mid-fourteenth century, the Songhay Empire of the eastern desert lands began to take over. The Songhay urban elites were Islamized under King Askia Muhammad Touré, although most of the population remained animist. In the late sixteenth century, the Moroccans regained control of their gold mines, and swept across the Sahara to capture the cities of Djenne and Timbuktu. In the resulting anarchic demise of the last great empire, several kingdoms emerged, ruled

²⁹ See Suzanne Blier, "Enduring Myths of African Art" in *Africa: The Art of a Continent: 100 Works of Power and Beauty*, ed. Tom Phillips (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 28.

by groups which today culturally dominate much of the country: the animist Bamana and the Muslim Mandinka (both Mande groups), and two Muslim Fulani sects (the Tukolor and the Maasina).³⁰

Almost all of the cultures in Mali were gerontocratic, patrilocal caste societies of aristocracy (nobles), traders and specialized professionals (power-wielding and mediating artisans and musicians), and slaves, either taken as prisoners of war or born into slavery (the two groups tended to be treated differently, and to hold different status in a community).³¹ In the late nineteenth century, power was interdependent among the first two groups (the artisans and musicians were usually only about five percent of the overall population), while slaves, in some areas the majority population, and in others a small percentage of the population, were treated much like slaves in the United States.³² There were several major differences – in West Africa, slaves had to farm for their own food, and so worked less hours per day for the master than in the US. Also, in West Africa slaves were sometimes able to win or buy their freedom, and in some communities, slaves were integrated into society after several generations, and thus were able to glean

³⁰ Although Mali has eleven major ethnic groups, Mande speakers (i.e. the Bamana, Malinke, and Soninké) “dominate the political and economic life of the country,” according to Pascal Imperato, *Mali: A Search for Direction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 84. This is particularly true of Bamako, which is the seat of government and which was also a Bamana-ruled town before colonialism. Dorothea Schulz notes, “the Bamana ethnic group... has played a very special and central role in postcolonial governmental attempts to promote national cultural traditions.” In “Competing Sartorial Assertions of Femininity and Muslim Identity in Mali,” *Fashion Theory* 11 no. 2/3 (2007): 263.

³¹ Gerontocratic means that society is structured in terms of age hierarchies, while patrilocal means that a married couple goes to live with the husband’s family. Most societies allowed husbands multiple wives. The ‘specialized professionals’ included *jeli* (in Bamana, or *griots* in French) and *nyamakala* (in Bamana) - blacksmiths, pottery makers and cloth dyers. The *griots*, musicians and oral historians, were attached to a particular noble family and sang its praises; they also mediated between rulers and their subjects. The *nyamakala* were involved in the creation and handling of powerful objects and materials, and in healing and circumcision. The sculptures and masks created by the *nyamakala*, or those who handle *nyama* (life force, magical power), have been the subject of much traditional art historical scholarship. See Tal Tamari, “The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa,” *Journal of African History* 32 (1991): 221-250.

³² Martin A. Klein discusses the different population make-ups in *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3-4.

certain privileges.³³ While the French colonialists tried to keep the situation of slavery quiet, Paris demanded its ban in 1905, legally freeing almost three million slaves across the Sudan.³⁴ Today, while the caste system still structures the social hierarchy, Claudie Gosselin claims that class is superseding caste, especially in Bamako.³⁵ Caste did not and does not determine whether a person became or becomes a photographer, because the medium and profession originated as Western technologies and were invented during colonialism, when traditional ways of life were beginning to break down.³⁶ However, the photographers whom I interviewed tended to be highly educated and thus would be considered as belonging to the elite class (a very small percentage of the population is educated beyond secondary school in Mali).³⁷

As can be seen from this brief history, certain characteristics are important for understanding the cultural, political and socio-historical context within which photography entered the region with the French, in the late nineteenth century. Mali's distance inland, and its reliance on agriculture and pastoralism in a sub-desert and desert climate, brought the French later to the region than to the coast.³⁸ Mali's ancient reliance on trade across the Sahara Desert with Egypt and the Mediterranean societies of North

³³ Claudie Gosselin notes that the latter circumstances have caused some scholars to describe African slavery as 'benign.' Gosselin, "Campaigning Against Excision in Mali: Global and Local Hierarchies, Hegemony and Knowledge" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2001), 154-156. Klein dryly notes, "Slavery was not an idyllic institution in Africa or anywhere else." *Slavery and Colonial Rule*, 13.

³⁴ 2,700,000 people were freed. Cited in Gosselin, "Campaigning Against Excision," 157-158.

³⁵ Gosselin, "Campaigning Against Excision," 72.

³⁶ Tamari, who did research specifically in Mali, notes, "The production of Western-type goods and use of Western-type techniques (as in carpentry, metallurgy, factory work, and auto repair) may be practiced by persons of any status." Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems," 232. My research did not focus on caste, but Keller supports this assertion (personal communication, Fall 2007). When Lamunière, Nimis and Elder speak of 'elites' practicing photography, it is not clear whether they mean 'elite' solely in terms of education and wealth, or if 'elite' also refers to caste.

³⁷ "In 1989, 95.4 percent of the adult population over age 25 had no formal education, 4 percent had attained a primary educational level, and 0.6 percent a secondary level." Cited in Imperato, *Mali: A Search for Direction*, 93.

³⁸ The French wanted to ensure that the British did not conquer the lands, as the first European presence in the region was the British.

Africa meant that ‘globalization,’ in the form of economic and cultural exchange with foreigners, was not new. Mali also has a long history of population migrations and intercultural exchange within West Africa, meaning that Mali’s ‘traditional’ cultures and their institutions were not fixed or static before colonialism, instead changing and mutating as various ruling powers rose and fell.³⁹ Religion in Mali was syncretic, with ancient traditions of animism that in many cultures were influenced by various sects of Islam, which spread throughout the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries, and continue to spread.⁴⁰ (Christianity accompanied the French invasion, but although photography spread with Catholic missionaries, the missionaries were not generally successful in terms of religious conversion).

Colonialism succeeded in Mali, and indeed throughout Africa, as a result of European countries’ more powerful military technologies. Its institution was supported by ideologies about race and ‘humanitarianism’ which masked brute economic and imperialist designs.⁴¹ Colonial rule brought technological modernity to the French Sudan; together the two forces wrought tremendous changes within almost all of the various societies of the region.⁴² France’s attempt to force societies with strong relationships

³⁹ Today, the emigration of youthful laborers to France continues to incite change, particularly eroding age hierarchies, as young men return with Westernized ideas and the economic power to implement them.

⁴⁰ While three main versions of Islam are popular in Bamako today, traditional art historical scholarship has typically been concerned with cultural forms, such as masks, sculptures, and architecture, produced among societies who practiced animist religions until the 1800 or 1900s, notably the Bamana, Senufo, and Dogon. Bamana mud-cloth (*bogolan*) has garnered more recent scholarship, as has Tuareg (Tamasheq) material and visual culture.

⁴¹ Mali’s current relation to Western nations involves a severe economic and technological power differential.

⁴² The Tuareg (Tamasheq), a northern ethnic group, were an exception in that their nomadic lifestyle was not radically affected by colonial rule, as they live in the desert. For the Tuareg, independence, when the sedentary nation-state attempted to co-opt their nomadic lifestyle, was the introduction of troubling lifestyle changes.

between kinship and civic power into a society based on administration, and divorced from kinship, was a crucial change, although one that did not completely take hold.⁴³

Another significant change was the unification of previously separate and sometimes factional kingdoms or oppositional ethnic groups into one colony, the French Sudan. These various polities were unified against their common oppressor under colonial rule, and the emphasis on unification and tolerance continued as a national value into the post-independence period, when Mali became a nation-state whose foundations were grounded not only in the long precolonial history of the region, but also in the violent transformations of the short period of colonial rule.

The clash between French imperialism and the worldviews of Mali's various cultures still reverberates within society today. Pertinent changes were caused by the introduction of previously unknown technologies, the re-shuffling and breaking down of the caste system and traditional social hierarchies, a decrease of animist practices, and the creation of colonial cities like Bamako, where people came from all over the region to create a culture of urban modernity very different from the rest of the country.

Although for hundreds of years West Africa was engaged in trade and cultural exchange with the Egyptians and the Phoenicians across the Sahara Desert, the arrival of the sea-faring Portuguese on the West African coast in the 1400s heralded an eventual economic shift away from the interior to the coast. For the area that would become Mali, a half-desert region whose Western border was over three hundred miles inland, this shift became imminent with the arrival of the French. The French settled the city of St. Louis in modern-day Senegal in 1659, but the colonization of the French Sudan did not begin

⁴³ While political parties in Mali are not formed around clans, kinship and familial relations are still integral to gaining a powerful position today.

until two hundred years later. French expansion across Africa was driven by the ambitions of General Louis Faidherbe, governor of St. Louis in the mid-1800s.⁴⁴ The Islamic Ségou Tukolor Empire was the most powerful indigenous state in the Sudan at the time, and was attempting to control the smaller, animist Bamana kingdoms. By 1879, Samory Touré, a Dyula imam-warrior, also controlled land in the southern Sudan. The Tukolor and Touré made treaties with the French which they believed would serve their own interests, as both posed France's biggest obstacles to conquering the area.⁴⁵ In 1887, the Tukolor signed the Gouri Treaty with France, so that the Tukolor Empire became a French protectorate.⁴⁶ Over the next decade a number of French military expeditions brought the region under French control, forcing the Tukolor leader into exile, then taking Macina, Bandiagara and Timbuktu in 1893, and finally conquering the southern Kéné Dougou kingdom in 1898.⁴⁷ The final decisive victory for the French in the Sudan occurred in the same year, when the Army captured Samory Touré in Ivory Coast.⁴⁸

Military forces had already taken over Bamako (a small town at the time) in 1883, when the ruling Bamana clan, the Niaré, accepted a French alliance to protect themselves from the Tukolor and from rival Bamana clans. During this period, in 1885, the Berlin Conference occurred, wherein fourteen European nations carved up the map of the African continent amongst themselves, launching the 'Scramble for Africa' and essentially 'legalizing' colonialism. However, despite the imposition of French rule, the

⁴⁴ Faidherbe was governor from 1854-1861 and from 1863-1865. See Imperato, *Mali: A Search for Direction*, 41.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 32-35, 41. For clarity's sake I refer to the colony throughout the period of 1898-1960 as the French Sudan, although other names were used until 1920.

⁴⁶ Ross Velton and Jolijn Geels, *Mali: The Bradt Travel Guide*, 2nd ed. (Bucks, England: Bradt Publications, 2004), 12.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Imperato, *Mali: A Search for Direction*, 45.

Tuareg in the eastern desert resisted until 1916, and various uprisings occurred in the west from the 1920s through the 1950s.⁴⁹

By 1960, organized agitation for independence from within the colony, in conjunction with a greater movement for liberation across West Africa, forced France to cede control. Thus the newly independent nation of Mali was born, tactically named after its famed predecessor, the fourteenth-century Malinke Empire. Mali's history under colonialism and after independence is further elaborated in Chapter One, within the context of the arrival of photography to the region.

IV. Postcolonialism

Scholars use the term 'postcolonialism' to acknowledge the ongoing effects that permeate formerly colonized nations in the persistence of certain governmental structures, official languages, educational systems, economic dependence, and social attitudes. In Gyan Prakash's words, "The postcolonial exists as an aftermath, as an after – after being worked over by colonialism."⁵⁰ Most theorists emphasize the *aftermath* aspect, meaning that postcolonialism is not merely a temporal demarcation that suggests that colonialism is safely in the past. Instead, the term encompasses a sense of wreckage, of destruction, and of continuing *effects*. Postcolonialism has been preferred to neo-colonialism, first because of the popularity of the prefix in contemporary scholarship (postmodernism, poststructuralism), and second, perhaps, because of the overly negative attribute of 'neo,' which implies a permanent lack of agency on the part of the formerly colonized country.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 50. I discuss the political and historical circumstances of the Tuareg in Chapter Six.

⁵⁰ Gyan Prakash, "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography" *Social Text*, no. 31/32 (1992), 8.

Postcolonial studies grew out of Edward Said's groundbreaking publication of *Orientalism* in 1978, which used a Foucauldian analysis to uncover and examine the biases inherent in the Euro-American study of the Middle East.⁵¹ That this theory was driven by postmodernism, with its questioning of European hegemonies of thought, is generally agreed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, the editors of the well-regarded anthology *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (1994), privilege the work of German philosophers Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School in their interest in discovering the structure of totalitarian regimes.⁵² Williams and Chrisman also emphasize Frantz Fanon's contribution, although they caution against lionizing him without attention to other prominent Caribbean, African and African American thinkers like Aimé Césaire, Leopold Sédar Senghor, and W.E.B. Dubois.⁵³ Like Said, none of the writers latterly mentioned use the term 'postcolonial' as such. The term has come into use with a contemporary generation of writers, like Gayatri Spivak (who has both embraced and disavowed the term and the theory), Homi Bhabha, and the unsympathetic Kwame Anthony Appiah.⁵⁴ While postcolonial theories vary, much like

⁵¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

⁵² Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, "Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: An Introduction," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Williams and Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1-20.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); Léopold Sédar Senghor "Negritude," in *Senghor: Prose and Poetry*, ed. and trans. John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 97-105; and W.E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

⁵⁴ See Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313 and *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 336-357. For other prominent scholars associated with the study see also Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System, I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); Aziz Ahmad, *An Intellectual History of Islam in India* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979); Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, trans. A.M. Berrett, Janet Roitman, Murray Last, and Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2004). For edited volumes see Gyan Prakash, *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and*

postmodern theories, I am interested in Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' (no matter how 'clichéd' it may appear to scholars who believe that it is outdated and that theories should be replaced every few years by new ones, like commodity fetishes).

An ongoing problem in postcolonial theory is the required constant self-reflexivity as to one's personal position vis-à-vis Western hegemony. This is an insurmountable contradiction, as any scholar who has managed to publish in the academic circles of the hegemonic West is obviously a benefactor of the very structures of institutional and class power that the theory seeks to expose. Thus Gayatri Spivak asks if the 'subaltern' can ever, actually, speak. While my project focuses on photographers who work in the liminal space between 'the West' and 'Mali,' I acknowledge that my subject position as a white, American, female art historian inevitably biases my work, and is necessarily an unresolved problem in this dissertation. However, I do not want to deny agency to the people whom I interviewed and whom I discuss in this work. All of the artists and administrators mentioned here wield varying but definite amounts of cultural, social, economic, and, in some cases, political power, both in their local community, and in their ability to produce images that can 'speak' to an international audience. Their profession *as* photographers (or as administrators contributing to the creation of culture) means that each person is an active agent in his or her destiny, despite the hardships that each faces as a citizen of Mali. While there is a definite imbalance of power that is created by my citizenship, by the fact that I am a researcher and writer who will create

Postcolonial Displacements (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) and Ella Shohat, Anne McClintock and Aamir Mufti, eds. *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). 'Postcolonialism' is now apparently going 'out of fashion,' having existed for over a decade, and the study is giving way to a new interest in 'transnationalism.' However, to me these terms constitute separate if related issues. As most of my writing focuses on Malian photographers *living in* Mali, which is a country whose culture is intertwined with nationalism and the history of colonialism, I prefer the term 'postcolonialism.'

my own analysis of the photography movement in English (which few of the people I interviewed read), I will also note that my brief interaction in their lives did not seem to be of particular long-term interest to them; in short, most people had other things to do than think about my esoteric dissertation being written in a foreign language in a faraway place.

While sociologists, political scientists and anthropologists tend to be interested in the concrete effects of postcolonialism, scholars working in the sphere of culture tend to be interested in its more abstract, theoretical effects (what can be teased out of texts – postcolonial theory grew out of literature studies). I am interested in tying together the concrete and the theoretical within the medium of photography, which is itself a concrete apparatus that produces tangible effects – namely, images - and intangible effects, such as how the processes of photography impinge on people's lives, and how images interact with how people imagine their lives, their communities, their histories, and their futures. As an art historian, whose work is to link facts with images in hopes of elaborating some kind of argument, I examine where the intangible effects of postcolonialism are elucidated and made visible within the photographs themselves.

David Chioni Moore aptly explains the key problematics of postcolonialism, both concrete and theoretical:

According to a rough consensus, the cultures of postcolonial lands are characterized by tensions between the desire for autonomy and a history of dependence, between the desire of autochthony and the fact of hybrid, part-colonial origin, between resistance and complicity, and between imitation (or mimicry) and originality.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ David Chioni Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post- Soviet?" *PMLA* 116 no. 1 (January 2001), 112.

An important term here is “between,” because an important aspect of postcolonial theory is an attempt to avoid binaries or dialectical oppositions, and instead to emphasize an intermingling of inseparable forces. Bhabha notes,

As a mode of analysis, it [postcolonial theory] attempts to revise those nationalist or ‘nativist’ pedagogies that set up the relation of Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition. The postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation. It forces a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres.⁵⁶

Bhabha terms this existence the “hybrid location of cultural value – the transnational as the translational.”⁵⁷ I believe that Mali’s art photography movement operates precisely at and as this hybrid location, where local traditions and globalizing Western influences are intersecting to create new cultural forms, some of which have more agency than others. Calling the development of art photography ‘postcolonial’ thus theorizes the possibility of new forms of cultural and communal engagement. Following Bhabha’s example, this thesis attempts to: “focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences.”⁵⁸ Such moments are visualized in photographs, and are embodied in photographers’ practices and processes. As Bhabha attests, “The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress.”⁵⁹ The examples covered in this dissertation do not form clearly demarcated moments of agency; instead, most situations express

⁵⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 173.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

contradictions, unexpected resonances, and surprising juxtapositions. In attempting to elucidate the specificities of each situation, photograph, or process, I hope to show how these contradictory and surprising circumstances can “confound” pre-supposed expectations and illuminate an understanding of contemporary Malian photography and society.

Malian society in the second half of the twentieth century, after the country’s independence from France in 1960, can literally be called ‘postcolonial.’ But to speak of Malian society in this time period as ‘postcolonial’ is not *merely* factual. The term also acknowledges the conflicting forces from the past that act on the present; the manner in which the cultures and ways of life that existed in precolonial Mali were permanently affected by their violent encounters with the culture of colonial domination. Specifically, in this dissertation I use the term ‘postcolonialism’ to encompass both the hybridity of contemporary society in Mali, and also the ambivalence that such hybridity necessarily embodies, a hybridity composed of the legacy of one culture’s domination over others. And yet, when culture is imposed from above through a hostile agent, as was the case with France and Mali, for a relatively short time (roughly half of a century), the power of the precolonial cultures can remain strong, and provide subversive moments, technologies, and imaginaries. I examine the specific situations in which hybridity is constituted within, around and through photography in colonial and post-independent Malian society. As my next chapter demonstrates, a first step towards that aim must address the development of photography as an art form in Bamako itself. As I explain the history of photography’s encounter with the peoples and cultures of Mali, I hope to show specifically *why* I consider photography in general to embody a postcolonial problematic.

Chapter 1: History of Photography in Mali

The international art world's recent fascination with two of Mali's studio photographers, Seydou Keïta (c.1921-2001) and Malick Sidibé (b.1931), has resulted in Bamako's rise to prominence as a center of African photographic production. Keïta's and Sidibé's striking commercial portraits of Bamakois under colonial rule and after independence caught the attention of the art world in the early 1990s, coinciding with Mali's shift in government from a socialist dictatorship to a Western-supported, multi-party democracy. Since then, Keïta and Sidibé have become indispensable to an emergent canon of African photographers, and their works have been exhibited internationally. The celebration of Keïta and Sidibé in their hometown of Bamako has also generated the development of the Bamako Biennale, a French-funded, pan-African photography biennale, with numerous unofficial 'off' exhibitions put on by local photographers.

The inauguration of the Biennale, founded because of the Western attention paid to Keïta and Sidibé, has radically altered the practice of many photographers in Bamako, sparking a revival of interest in black and white photography - which had gone out of fashion in the 1970s - and launching a new art photography movement. This chapter provides a history of photography in Mali before the founding of the Biennale, examining studio photography as it was practiced by a number of photographers decades before Keïta and Sidibé became internationally famous. Photography's arrival with colonial forces, its subsequent relationship to colonialism, its functions after independence, and its postcolonial ambivalences are traced. I examine studio photography's essentially *social* nature, and end with a discussion of how a Malian worldview may perceive photography differently than a typical Western approach.

I. Photography in Africa

Photography is omnipresent across Africa. Portrait photography, whether taken in a studio or by an ambulant or itinerant photographer, plays an important role in the social, political and aesthetic life of many African communities. Photographers are hired to document marriages, funerals, and other social events, and pictures are taken to commemorate special holidays. Newspaper photographs also contribute to the visual culture of many African cities, and photo-portraits of famous political leaders can be seen decorating clothing in many countries. Photography has also been incorporated into West African ritual practices.⁶⁰ But ‘art photography,’ as it is understood in the West, has only recently been practiced in much of Africa. While the pictorialists and Alfred Stieglitz struggled for the public recognition of photography as an art in the early 1900s in Europe and the US, the very notion of ‘art for art’s sake’ is a Western one. Before colonialism violently and permanently changed the fabric of society in the twentieth century, most African cultures integrated art into life, such that the objects we associate with African ‘art,’ such as masks and sculptures, or pottery and textiles, were used for spiritual, political, or functional purposes, although the aesthetic of any particular piece was also important. In Mali, works of art were part of material culture, embedded in the greater cultural, social, and political life of society, and usually carried *nyama* (in Bamana: power, or life-force). Their physical presence contributed to a greater ritual or

⁶⁰ As with Yoruba *ibeji* photographs and the Yoruba *ako* tradition. For a discussion of the use of photographs as *ibeji*, see Stephen F. Sprague “Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves” in *Photography’s Other Histories*, ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 252. Rowland Abiodun argues that the *ako* tradition has influenced photography in Yorubaland in his paper “*Ako*-graphy: Owo Portraits,” presented at the conference Portrait Photography in African Worlds, University of California, Santa Cruz, February 3-4, 2006.

performance. Art did not exist as a separate object to be hung on the wall or contemplated in isolation. Although Western ideas of art were inculcated into Western-style art schools founded by colonials, photography was rarely, if ever, included in the traditional Western curricula (painting, drawing, sculpture). Instead, photography in Africa, until the independence years, was used most commonly as portraiture, often stemming from the need for identity photos under colonial rule.

Art photography, then, is new to most nations on the continent, although a few galleries and museums are beginning to crop up. South Africa, always the exception, saw white pictorialists practicing in the late nineteenth century, and Cape Town today boasts a thriving gallery scene that contains photography in all of its forms, including the ‘global conceptualism’ internationally popular today.⁶¹ Photography as art is also popular in Cairo, Egypt, which supports The Townhouse Gallery and a number of internationally working photographers. Morocco has a burgeoning art photography presence, aided by Abdellah Karroum’s non-profit art space *l’appartement 22* in Rabat.⁶² In Lagos, Nigeria, the photography collective Depth of Field is significant in attempting to jump-start an art photography movement, while in Nairobi, Kenya, the Godown Arts Centre holds exhibitions and encourages artists and photographers to meet and work.⁶³ The Arab

⁶¹ The Market Photo Workshop has been particularly focused on creating interest in and support for photography. For reference to photography in various regions of Africa, see Kevin Mulhearn, “Photography in Africa: Central and West,” “Photography in Africa: East and Indian Ocean Islands,” and “Photography in Africa: North,” *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Photography*, ed. Lynne Warren (New York: Routledge, 2006), v. 1: 27-35. See also John Peffer, “Photography in Africa: South and Southern,” *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Photography*, 35-37.

⁶² Internationally celebrated artist-photographer Yto Barrada has revived Cinema Rif to show art films in her hometown of Tangier.

⁶³ DOF’s members include Kelechi Amadi-Obi, Uchechukwa James-Iroha, Toyosi Zaynab Odunsi, Amaize Ojeikere, Emeka Okereke, and Toyin Sokefun-Bello. Amaize is the son of J.D. ‘Okhai Ojeikere, whose work I briefly discuss in Chapter Five. Four future members met at the 2001 Bamako Biennale and subsequently started up the collective in their hometown of Lagos, an instance of how the Biennale promotes fruitful connections among participants. DOF counts Nigerian photographer Jide Adeniyi-Jones

Image Foundation, with offices in Beirut and New York, has an historical mission to preserve images from the Middle East and North Africa, from 1860-1960.⁶⁴ As can be seen, photographic institutions largely are generated within the cities and capitals, and few of Africa's fifty-four nations have formal photographic institutions, such as schools, museums, galleries, workshops or magazines. The relative sparseness of such institutions across Africa underlines the importance of the Bamako Biennale in creating a meeting space and exhibition opportunities for the continent's and diaspora's curators, critics, and artists, and makes the growth of Bamako's institutions that much more remarkable.⁶⁵

II. Photography in Mali

“From 1840, daguerreotypists were...experimenting...all along the African coast: from the Somali coast to Capetown and Saint-Louis in Senegal.”⁶⁶ While European daguerreotypists first arrived in coastal West Africa shortly after photography was invented in 1839, the new technology was slow to reach the interior, taking forty years to reach the French Sudan. Europeans opened studios in port cities by 1845; by the 1860s Africans had also established studios and were working as itinerant photographers.⁶⁷ Photography became an instrument wielded by colonialists to exert control over

and Akinbode Akinbiyi, a curator of the 2005 Bamako Biennale, as mentors. DOF members publish in the arts publication *Glendora Magazine*, based in Lagos.

⁶⁴ *Fondation Arabe pour l'Image* members include Barrada, the Lebanese-American artist Walid Raad, and the Egyptian photographer-artist Lara Baladi. <http://www.fai.org.lb/CurrentSite/index.htm>; accessed September 9, 2008.

⁶⁵ To count fifty-four African nations means counting Western Sahara as a country separate from Morocco, which is currently under dispute. Some of the artists shown in the Biennale have emigrated to Europe or, in a few cases, the US. Various European and American ventures, such as the German Goethe Institute, the Dutch Prince Claus Fund, the American Ford Foundation, and the French Jean-Paul Blachère Foundation contribute to burgeoning photography and arts programs in Africa.

⁶⁶ Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako*, 5.

⁶⁷ Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 14.

indigenous people in a variety of contexts.⁶⁸ The medium played an important role in military missions and enabled colonial administrators to survey the land and document new building projects. Photographs were used by missionaries to show evidence of their ‘beneficial’ work. Anthropologists used photography to classify and compare cultural traits and physical features using the pseudo-science of physiognomy. Images circulated in the form of postcards, supplying the settlers and those ‘back home’ with exoticizing shots of Africans and the African landscape, especially after 1908, when Bamako became the capital of the French Sudan.⁶⁹ Postcards of nude and semi-nude women were circulated as thinly disguised pornography.⁷⁰ While colonial photography varies in its subjects, approaches, contexts, practitioners, and intentions, photographs of Africans by Europeans were almost always de-humanizing and objectifying in some way. As Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson concur, “overwhelming evidence... indicates that the images produced a dynamic rhetoric of racial and ethnographic difference between white Europe and Americans and non-European ‘races’ and ‘places.’”⁷¹ Colonial photographs “most often envisioned their subjects as objects of both racial inferiority and fascination,” visually recreating the racist mindset and subjugating circumstances of the European-African encounter.⁷²

⁶⁸ Christopher Pinney, “Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism and Vernacular Modernism” in *Photography’s Other Histories*, 203.

⁶⁹ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 55-60.

⁷⁰ See Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and David Prochaska, “Fantasia of the Photothèque: French Postcard Views of Senegal,” *African Arts* 24 no. 4 (October 1991): 40-47, 98.

⁷¹ Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, “Introduction: Photography, ‘race’, and post-colonial theory,” in *Colonial Photography: Imag(in)ing race and place*, ed. Hight and Sampson (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Photography arrived in the French Sudan hand in hand with colonialism.⁷³

[Figure 1:3] The first documented photographs of Bamako and its denizens were taken on the Borgnis-Desbordes military expedition of 1883, which resulted in the capture of the city.⁷⁴ Nimis comments, “The most striking photographs are the portraits of the chiefs who compromised with the French.”⁷⁵ Bamako, formerly a declining village, was named the capital of the French colony in 1908 and grew quickly in size and influence. The city’s strategic location on the Niger River enabled Bamako to become an intermediary between the distant Atlantic and the ‘desert port’ of Timbuktu in the east, and the city prospered from its location as a center of trade, especially once the railroad to Dakar was begun in 1904 – built, of course, by forced labor.⁷⁶ (Seydou Keïta and Manthia Diawara both note the opportune location of Keïta’s studio near the railroad, a marker of modernity and urbanity that ushered in foreign travelers and new ideas).⁷⁷ The 1930s were years of rapid urbanization in Bamako, attracting rural workers from surrounding areas and causing the city’s population to increase greatly. The first photography studios were opened in this decade, when the city’s economy and population were booming.

Malian studio photography was born under colonial rule, and photographers of necessity had close relationships to the colonials. The Frenchman Pierre Garnier opened Bamako’s first studio, *Photo-Hall Soudanais*, in 1935. Tanya Elder describes the business as a store that sold photographic materials and as a printing center for other

⁷³ Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako*, 7-13. The area that is now Mali underwent various name changes under colonialism, finally settling on French Sudan in 1920. So as not to confuse matters, I refer to the area the French entered in the early 1880s, and eventually colonized, as the French Sudan.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 7

⁷⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 7. As Dakar became the center of French colonial rule, after the capital was moved from St. Louis, the railroad was particularly important; it began operation in 1923.

⁷⁷ Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 24; Diawara, “Talk of the Town,” 236.

photographers.⁷⁸ Garnier was just fifteen years old and fluent in Bamana, and after five years, he began to hire young Sudanese photographers to work for him. Photographers Youssouf Traoré, Mountaga Dembélé, and Seydou Keïta were among Garnier's employees, according to Nimis. (Keïta does not explicitly say that he worked for Garnier in his interview with Magnin, but he does say that Garnier taught him how to print, and it is hard to imagine in what other context Garnier, a French colonial, would have done so).⁷⁹ Dembélé began photographing in 1935, the same year that Garnier opened his studio, and eventually became the first African photographer to open a studio in Bamako.⁸⁰ Like many photographers of his generation, he performed military service during World War II, when the French conscripted Sudanese soldiers, called *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, to fight in special battalions. Traveling overseas during the war gave many photographers the opportunity to learn new techniques in France, and exposed them to new technologies. Dembélé returned in 1945 and continued his profession as a teacher of primary school education. Unfortunately, most of Dembélé's negatives are lost, but a surviving picture suggests that Dembélé may have pioneered the patterned, fashionably modern backdrop in Bamako for which Keïta became internationally famous.⁸¹ **[Figure 1:4]**

As it was for Dembélé, photography was a side-line for most of the first generation of African photographers, including Keïta, who was also a furniture maker.⁸²

⁷⁸ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 63.

⁷⁹ Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako*, 15.

⁸⁰ Also known as Mountaga Kouyaté, according to Lamunière. *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 22.

⁸¹ Reproduced in Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 23. Patterned backdrops are also seen in earlier Senegalese portrait photos, so the notion may have come from elsewhere; Dembélé was likely the first to use it in Bamako, as he was the first African photographer to practice in the city.

⁸² Elder, *Capturing Change*, 77. It was also a side profession for the French and Lebanese photographers (Bamako has a small community of Christian Lebanese, who settled across West Africa in the twentieth century).

Electricity was not common everywhere, so photographers had to come up with ingenious ways of printing and developing.⁸³ Keïta said that when he went to take identity photos in the bush, he would rig up a system with a kerosene lamp to do his printing.⁸⁴ Photographers would often also use a printing frame, making use of Mali's strong sunlight to create contact prints directly from negatives, and Elder notes that photographers also used lamps and bicycle dynamos (generators) as light sources.⁸⁵

According to Dembélé, Garnier was worried about competition and would not let any of his employees in the darkroom to observe his techniques. This anecdote highlights the hierarchical relationship between the French and Malian photographers. However, the relationship could also be beneficial - Keïta remarked in an interview with Lamunière that he learned some useful tips from Garnier, and in another interview with Magnin, credited Garnier with active interest in helping.⁸⁶ Dembélé created a darkroom for himself with equipment brought back from France, and several years later he taught Keïta how to print.⁸⁷ In 1948 Keïta began printing for them both at Dembélé's house.

To ensure enough light for a portrait, photographers posed their subjects outdoors, or in open-air courtyards. Backdrops were indispensable to create a 'studio' setting, in the form of sheets of cloth held or tacked up against a wall. Keïta's 'studio' was in many

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Magnin, *Seydou Keïta*, 11.

⁸⁵ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 76.

⁸⁶ Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 24 and Magnin, *Seydou Keïta*, 9. Regarding Garnier's withholding of crucial knowledge, Elder states, "He [Pierre Garnier] kept the printing process and later the film developing process hidden from African photographers." *Capturing Change*, 71.

⁸⁷ Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 24. Dembélé found a particular manual which he obtained in France very helpful for photographic information, according to Elder, *Capturing Change*, 73-75.

cases actually his courtyard, and his first backdrop was his bedspread.⁸⁸ Indeed, his works can be dated by his backdrops, as he used only a single cloth for several years at a time.⁸⁹

Until the mid-1950s, photographers used box cameras with glass negatives, from which they made direct one-to-one contact prints, resulting in small but detailed pictures.⁹⁰ According to Elder, reflex cameras began to replace the box cameras in the early 1950s.

The first portrait photographs in Mali were exciting events, generating an audience who gathered around to watch the photographer at work, such as in a photograph by Angolan-born Antoine Freitas in Belgian Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo), taken in 1939.⁹¹ **[Figure 1:5]** While the viewer of the portrait sees in the final result only the subjects of the photograph, removed from the courtyard or village context through the use of the sheet backdrop, the invisible crowd outside of the frame emphasizes the social nature of the occasion, as well as its importance. The act of having a portrait taken becomes a performance for an audience, highlighting the necessity of retaining one's dignity in front of a crowd of people. The process of having a photograph taken becomes as important as the final result, and thus is somewhat akin to traditional arts, which usually operate in a performative context. Christraud Geary corroborates that in West Africa, "These outside settings were mostly public – the photographer and sitter surrounded by curious onlookers. ...the sessions became performances for the camera *and* the onlookers. The photographic ritual would unfold under the close scrutiny of

⁸⁸ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 80.

⁸⁹ Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 33.

⁹⁰ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 85. Keïta said that he used a 6 x 9 inch box camera between 1945-6, from which no glass negatives remain. He then used a 9 x 12 inch camera, which he replaced with a 13 x 18 inch in 1949. Cited in Magnin, *Seydou Keïta*, 10.

⁹¹ See Agnès de Gouvion Saint-Cyr, "Antoine Freitas" in *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*, 18 and see also Elder, *Capturing Change*, 79.

spectators, not as a solitary encounter between photographer and client.”⁹² This emphasis on the social process of studio photography is one of the ways in which a Malian approach to photography differs from a Western mindset, which focuses on the print as the ‘final product’ and ultimate goal of the event.

Keïta was one of a handful of photographers working in Bamako when he opened his studio near the railroad in 1948.⁹³ He was trained as a furniture-maker, but took up photography when an uncle brought a Kodak-Brownie back from a trip to Senegal.⁹⁴ It seems likely that his training in woodworking, which requires a creative, well-practiced eye, manual dexterity, and fine attention to detail, contributed to his skill as a photographer. Keïta’s pictures are technically superior, and some have argued, formally stronger, than those of many Malian studio photographers. He continued to make furniture for ten years while working as a photographer.⁹⁵ Like Dembélé, Keïta served an African clientele, photographing the wealthy elite and those who worked in the colonial administration in the early 1950s. As photography became more popular and affordable, it spread to the bourgeoisie and to petty administrators, but “it still remained a luxury, primarily synonymous with social success.”⁹⁶ Keïta recalled that sometimes over a hundred people lined up to have their pictures taken on Saturdays, which shows the popularity of this new medium.⁹⁷

Most of Keïta’s pictures were taken in the last decade of colonial rule, and portrayed his subjects in dignified, often solemn poses, dressed up for the occasion,

⁹² Christraud Geary, *In and Out of Focus* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2002; London: Philip Wilson, Publishers, 2002), 112.

⁹³ Keïta was of Malinke ethnicity. His name links him to one of the most influential clans in post-independence Bamako.

⁹⁴ Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 23 and Elder, *Capturing Change*, 74.

⁹⁵ Magnin, *Seydou Keïta*, 9.

⁹⁶ Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako*, 56.

⁹⁷ Magnin, *Seydou Keïta*, 10.

sometimes utilizing props owned by Keïta himself, or sometimes bringing in their own sewing machines, bicycles, goats, or other valuable and prestigious items. **[Figure 1:6]** According to Manthia Diawara, Keïta's portraits visually reinforced the creation of a new and cosmopolitan identity: the Bamakois.⁹⁸ The various ethnic identities among the *métis* population in Bamako, composed of people who had come from all over the country for work, were fused into a new, urban, and modern identity. As much a bourgeois wish-fulfillment created through props, pose, backdrop and lighting as a reality, the Bamakois identity can be viewed as a kind of collective urban social imaginary, a simultaneous embrace of tradition and modernity performed by citizens in a dignified subversion of the colonial gaze.⁹⁹

For example, one Keïta portrait shows a young woman wearing a Western dress with puffed sleeves, the pale fabric printed with dark, fashionable polka dots the size of golf balls.¹⁰⁰ **[Figure 1:7]** She straddles a chair backwards, in what seems an unconventional pose that shows up in other Keïta portraits.¹⁰¹ The pose enables her to cross her arms on the chair's back and display her long, slender forearms, her wristwatch and square ring. The strong horizontals and slight diagonals of her crossed arms contrast with the verticals and slight diagonals of the chair's back below. Above, the woman's intelligent, composed and friendly face, on the verge of a smile, is set off from her neck

⁹⁸ Diawara, "Talk of the Town," 236.

⁹⁹ Firstenberg, "Photographic Portraiture," 175-159.

¹⁰⁰ Youssouf Cissé, an ethnographer who wrote captions for the images in *Seydou Keïta*, writes that the dress was called "morning rain" or "golf" because of the puffed sleeves. Magnin, *Seydou Keïta*, 277.

¹⁰¹ Keïta was inventive in terms of utilizing props, poses and angles to create different effects, and this included how he used the studio chair. Sometimes his clients rest one foot on it, the better for women to show off the fabric of their dresses or for men to show off their shoes. This pose also was common in later portrait photography – pictures by Hamidou Maïga, for example, use a similar stance. In Keïta's pictures, sometimes women sit on chairs set at right angles to the camera, so that the women turn to face the camera, resting their arms on the back of the chair, or they sit sideways and turn back to face the camera.

by a shimmering double strand of pearls.¹⁰² Her headscarf is tied in the fashionable style called “Marie Claire.”¹⁰³ All else is pattern, spheres shifting and morphing with the fabric pleats, and the fuzzy arabesques of the out-of-focus backdrop, flattened to abstraction.

In 2004, Allen F. Roberts justifiably complained that Keïta’s and Sidibé’s images are becoming iconic in the international art world, and tend to be viewed as representative of *all* of African photography.¹⁰⁴ While Keïta was among the first African studio photographers to be internationally recognized, and thus has received the lion’s share of international attention, it is important to remember that he was not the only photographer working in Mali during colonialism, much less in all of West Africa. (As mentioned, Senegalese cities like St. Louis and Dakar had a longer tradition of studio photography, owing to the longer presence of the French in the region). The same is true of Sidibé, who is garnering yet more attention, as he won the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Biennale in 2007. However, even more photographers were working during the era for which he is most famous, i.e. the 1960s, than in Keïta’s time.

The Bamako Biennale has been instrumental in attempting to oppose the perception of Seydou Keïta as the singular African studio photographer, although unfortunately early Biennale catalogues are difficult to acquire in the US. While photography spread more slowly to the rest of Mali than to Bamako, often arriving with missionaries, a number of photographers worked throughout Mali in the 1950s and ‘60s. The second and third editions of the Biennale, held in 1996 and 1998, respectively,

¹⁰² Keïta states that he often said, ““OK, look over here, try to smile a little, not too much.”” Magnin, *Seydou Keïta*, 11.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 277. “Marie Claire” presumably refers to the popular French women’s magazine.

¹⁰⁴ Allen F. Roberts, review, “*In and Out of Focus*, by Christraud Geary / *Photography’s Other Histories* ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson / *Hector Acebes, Portraits in Africa 1948-1953*, by Isolde Brielmaier and Ed Marquand,” *African Arts* 37 (Autumn 2004): 87.

showed a number of Malian studioists who worked in the smaller cities of Mopti, Kayes, Kita, Ségou, Timbuktu and Gao, including several Nigerian photographers who relocated to Mopti and opened studios in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰⁵ Félix Diallo (1931-1997), born in a missionary in Kita, opened the town's first studio in 1955. According to him, this was a challenge, as "nobody knew what photography was in Kita in 1955, mothers did not want their children to be photographed."¹⁰⁶ **[Figure 1:8]** Two brothers, Hassana Traoré (1930-1985) and Housseyni Traoré (1930-1996), began working as reporters in Mopti, Mali's second largest city, also in 1955, and opened a studio in 1960, and Elder lists four photographers working in Ségou alone. Their professions show their colonial, bureaucratic ties: Bogoba Coulibaly worked at the Mayor's Office, Amadou Toumani was employed at the Post Office, Gaoussou Sissoko worked in the Office du Niger (a colonial government office) as an accountant, and Montaga Kouyaté was a teacher.¹⁰⁷

Another photographer working in Bamako who has been exhibited and published posthumously was Abderramane Sakaly (1926-1988).¹⁰⁸ Sakaly was born in St. Louis,

¹⁰⁵ Shown in the 1996 Biennale were: Kélétiou Touré (b.1922), who was born in Kayes and was an itinerant photographer; Adama Kouyaté (b. 1927) who opened a studio in Ségou; Hamadou Bocoum (1930-1992), a teacher in Mopti who opened his studio in 1956; El Hadj Tidjani Shitou (b.1933), a Nigerian photographer in Mopti who opened a studio in 1971; and El Hadj Bassirou Sanni (1937-2000), a Nigerian photographer who settled in Mopti in 1962. His son Latifu Sanni (b. 1951) is also a photographer. See Louis Mesplé, ed., *2èmes Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine*, trans. Jed English (Paris: Extrait de Cimaise no. 244: 1996). Thanks to Candace Keller for sending me a copy of the second Biennale catalogue and for alerting me to the exhibition that she curated of El Hadj Tidjani Shitou's works at Indiana University, 2007. Shown in the 1998 Biennale were: Félix Diallo, the only photographer in Kita from 1955-1975, the Traoré brothers, and Touré M'Barakou (1922-1992), who was the first photographer in the Gao region. See Louis Mesplé, ed., *Ja Taa: Prendre l'Image: 3e Rencontres de la photographie Africaine, Bamako, 1998* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1998), 35-37. Thanks to Madame Coulibaly Diawara, who procured a copy of the exhibition catalogue for me. Another studioist who is still working, Hamidou Maïga (b.1932), worked in Timbuktu in the 1950s. He eventually left Timbuktu and has lived and worked in Bamako since 1973. Hamidou Maïga, interviews by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recordings, Bamako, Mali, 12 July 2006 and 17 July 2006. Also see Touré, *Hamidou Maïga*.

¹⁰⁶ Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako*, 11.

¹⁰⁷ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 77.

¹⁰⁸ Sakaly's pictures were reprinted for the 1996 Biennale by the Danish collector Svend Erik Sokkelund. Sakaly's and other photographers' negatives are in the hands of Sokkelund, whose research contributed to several Biennales. Sokkelund was involved in litigation in Bamako in 2006 because he was accused of

Senegal, of Moroccan parents, and he may have learned photography in the venerated studios of Meïssa Gaye and Amadou ‘Mix’ Gueye.¹⁰⁹ Sakaly relocated to Bamako, opening his own studio there in 1956. Sakaly continued to work until his death in 1988. Although Sakaly opened his studio during Keïta’s time, his production span is more concurrent with that of Malick Sidibé, who opened a studio in 1962, the year that Keïta’s studio closed. Sakaly’s North African lineage, and the fact that he was from St. Louis, where a racially stratified creole society (the society of the *signares*) had developed since the 1600s, may have given him a higher status among the French colonials and the upper stratified society than Keïta. Malick Sidibé noted that Sakaly had: “a certain class about him. He mainly photographed banquets in the big hotels, big receptions, and high society parties and evenings.”¹¹⁰ **[Figure 1:9]**

Like their clientele, the photographers themselves came from the newly elite classes. They had connections with either the colonial administration or the army, and came from wealthy families. Elder notes, “in most cases they [photographers] were literate and incorporated into the colonial administrative structure, as teachers or functionaries.”¹¹¹ Many had been educated by the “White Fathers,” a sect of Catholic

keeping negatives and not sharing the profits. In the case of this particular family, Sokkelund claimed that the negatives that he has are not worth any money because of their technical inferiority. When I interviewed him with his wife in Bamako in November 2005, he had that morning been released from prison after his wife had paid his bail, and was leaving shortly for Denmark. Svend Erik Sokkelund, interview by author, Bamako, Mali, 20 November 2005. On my return to Bamako in the summer of 2006 I was told that he had not returned to Mali. Sokkelund’s website sells Malian prints on the internet for exhibition and can be viewed on-line. On the first page he asks, “Do you want to rent an exhibition or buy a picture?” <http://www.african-collection.dk/english/kontakt.htm>; accessed July 29, 2008. Sakaly’s work also appears in *Snap Me One!* Sakaly’s son runs a studio in Bamako today.

¹⁰⁹ Érika Nimis, “The golden age of black-&-white in Mali,” in *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*, 115. St. Louis had daguerreotype studios since 1860. Meïssa Gaye was born in 1892 and seems to have begun photographing in the 1910s, while Mix Gueye opened a studio in the 1930s. Frédérique Chapuis, “The Pioneers of St. Louis,” in *Anthology*, 50-52, 54.

¹¹⁰ Magnin, *Malick Sidibé*, 36.

¹¹¹ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 77. Lamunière also notes that the first West African photographers were elites, usually part of a mixed society of Africans and Europeans. *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 14.

missionaries.¹¹² A few Sudanese photographers even worked for the colonial police, and thus were deeply implicated within the colonial system.¹¹³

Mali won its independence in 1960, joining neighboring Senegal in the Mali Federation, which ended within the year when relations between the two countries soured. Mali's new president, Modibo Keïta, had been a leader in the liberation movement. He turned away from Senegal's President Leopold Sédar Senghor, with his philosophy of Negritude, because of Senghor's close ties to France. Mali condemned France's Algerian War (1954-1962) and was unhappy with the fact that France still had 2,200 soldiers stationed in Mali, which shares a long desert border with Algeria.¹¹⁴ President Keïta, long a member of the Communist Party, instead looked to socialism and the USSR and instituted a one-party Marxist state.

One of President Keïta's early and unpopular moves was to localize the currency, inaugurating the Malian franc in place of the West African franc, which was backed by France. This decision caused a great deal of hardship to Mali's economy, and immediately created protests from merchants involved in regional trade. Smuggling and trade on the black market ensued. President Keïta was a harsh leader and brooked no dissent – according to Imperato, “When the people of the Bambara village of Sakoiba protested against his policies, its inhabitants were arrested, others invited to take their possessions, and the village physically leveled to the ground.”¹¹⁵ The Tuareg rebellion of 1961 was also dealt with in a brutal fashion, as the Army subdued the Tuareg through

¹¹² Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako*, 29.

¹¹³ Nimis mentions a Nabi Doumbia who worked for the police as a photographer. *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹⁴ Imperato, *Mali: A Search for Direction*, 130.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

aerial bombardments and by poisoning the desert wells.¹¹⁶ In 1967 President Keïta turned back to France, signing monetary accords to bolster the Malian franc. Afraid that the liaison was hurting his socialist reputation, President Keïta revived the Popular Militia to root out government corruption, composed of 30,000 young men who “manned roadblocks, conducted searches of home and person at will, detained many on the least pretext, and engaged in torture.”¹¹⁷ By 1968, discontent was widespread in Mali under Keïta’s repressive dictatorship. The Army removed President Keïta from office in a virtually bloodless coup, and took control over the state and its apparatus, installing a young lieutenant, Moussa Traoré, as leader.

After independence, photography blossomed in Mali. A number of older photographers in Mali today, like many of the senior professors of arts at the National Institute of the Arts in Bamako, were trained in the USSR, or in Soviet-bloc countries like Poland or the German Democratic Republic. According to Elder, returning students brought back cameras from the USSR to sell for profit. Malick Sidibé often acted as a business intermediary, buying cameras from students and selling them to photographers. Mountaga Dembélé notes that such cameras were not expensive at that time, so that many more people could afford the technology than previously.¹¹⁸ Studios became more plentiful, a photographic press developed - ANIM (*Agence Nationale d’Information Malienne*) - and pictures of President Modibo Keïta and other state officials were displayed everywhere, as well as shots of state functions, such as banquets, inaugurations

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 60-1. The rebellion ended in 1964, but the harsh treatment of the Keïta government left a troubled legacy for further relations between the state and the Tuareg.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 62.

¹¹⁸ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 81-84.

and dances.¹¹⁹ **[Figure 1:10]** Leaders in West Africa wanted to modernize their countries, and hoped to project an image of modernization through photography. Elder writes, “It was important to make the State and its representatives “visually” accessible to the populace.”¹²⁰ She notes that cars, modern architecture, men in modern clothing, foreigners, and parades were all popular subjects. *L’Essor*, still a widely-read paper today which is now available on-line, was the state-run daily, the only newspaper until the uprising in 1991. State photographers were sent to the USSR and Soviet-bloc countries for official training, in contrast to the apprentice-ship style of learning before independence.¹²¹ The images that circulated were heavily censored and ideological, so that, although photojournalism flourished under the new government, the notion that photographs depicted ‘reality’ was understood to be questionable.

In 1962 Seydou Keïta closed his studio at the behest of President Keïta, and began to take pictures for the government.¹²² Malick Sidibé opened his studio the same year. In contrast to Seydou Keïta and Sakaly, many of Sidibé’s early post-independence pictures leave behind the formal constraints of the studio. Instead, the photographer traveled to parties and outdoor picnics to capture a youth culture influenced by the groove of James Brown and the political notion of pan-Africanism. As Diawara attests, the youth of Bamako downplayed ethnic affiliations, such as Bamana or Malinke, Hausa or Fulani, in the spirit of a free and equal society united across Africa. Although capitalism in the United States was viewed unfavorably, young people in Bamako identified with the American Civil Rights movement, and the global youth culture of the late ‘60s. They

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 89.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 87-89.

¹²² These archives are not accessible. Candace Keller was told by various sources within Bamako that the negatives had burned in a fire. Personal communication, May 2006.

mimicked the look and style of rock stars like James Brown, whose presence was spiritually invoked via his picture on record covers in Sidibé's photographs.¹²³ Keller has also noted that the clothing styles and attitudes in Sidibé's pictures demonstrate a rebellion against the traditional aesthetics of older Bamakois, as well as the new curfews imposed by the socialist dictatorship.¹²⁴

"Dance the Twist," a 1965 party shot by Sidibé or his studio, shows the energy and excitement that Diawara remembers.¹²⁵ **[Figure 1:11]** A couple wearing a striped suit and a fashionably Western-styled dress are caught in the action of the title. The man, whose back is to the viewer, is in a low lunge, elbows akimbo, his knees deeply bent and the inside of his foot scraping the floor. His dynamic form, and the jaunty angles of his legs and flapping jacket, dominate the frame. His vigorous form is off-set by his partner in a white, sleeveless dress. Bent so that her figure and darting hands appear in profile, her face turns slightly back, caught in intense concentration. A pair of clapping hands peeks in on the left [cropped from the image shown due to scanner size]; men on either side of the couple plunge and whirl, while another stands coolly behind, slightly out of focus and vertically anchoring the picture. The finesse and energy of the dancers in their neat suits belies the dinginess of the room.

In-studio pictures by Sidibé also reveal the photographer's eye for energy and good-humor. **[Figure 1:12]** Sidibé's vertically striped backdrop gives a jazzy feel to his

¹²³ Diawara, "The Sixties in Bamako," 14-22.

¹²⁴ Keller, "Visual Griots': Identity, Invention and Style, One Aspect of the Social Role of Portrait Photographers in Mali," paper presented at Portrait Photography in African Worlds.

¹²⁵ I was told by Sidiki Sidibé, Malick's cousin and a former apprentice, that Sidiki had taken some of the reportage pictures outside of the studio that have now become famous. Malick has not acknowledged Sidiki's authorship, and Sidiki has not complained, apparently out of custom and politeness. Sidiki Sidibé, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 16 June 2006. It was typical studio practice in Europe and the US for the studio owner to take credit for all of the pictures. Keller states that this was also the case in Mali. Personal communication, August 2008.

studio shots, and the young people who posed for him seem at ease, often grinning and proudly showing off their bell-bottoms, fancy hats, and scooters – the new styles and prestigious items of the ‘60s and ‘70s. Their relaxed amusement and showy poses contrast sharply with Seydou Keïta’s overtly formal, dignified portraits.

Although it was supposed to be transitional, the military rule of Moussa Traoré lasted for eleven years, after which he engineered a transition to civilian rule with himself as president in 1979. Traoré retained socialism but relied even more heavily on France and the West for aid, badly needed when droughts in the 1970s and 1980s devastated crops and herds. The Tuareg especially suffered under the government’s neglect, inciting international outcry. The IMF and the World Bank became involved, requiring privatization and structural changes, and implementing financial policies that have since been shown to be disastrous. The US also donated a great deal of aid, and France eliminated some of Mali’s debt. Student and teacher protests against the government began in 1979 and continued throughout the 1980s. In 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall sent shudders across socialist Africa, and the student movement became more vociferous in their calls for change. In 1991 President Traoré was overthrown in a violent coup, and in 1992 Mali held free and open elections for a multi-party democracy. The lieutenant colonel who had led the coup, Amadou Toumani Touré (known as ATT, with the Francophone fondness for acronyms), was the temporary president until the democratic elections of April, 1992, and stepped down gracefully, ushering in a new era of legal rule.

Major technological changes occurred in photography in the time period before the transition to democracy, which contributed to the ‘deskilling’ of photography. Studios began to work in color in the 1970s, which greatly diminished the quality of the pictures,

as the color materials were of lesser quality. Photo-Kola was the first color lab to open in 1982, with Siriman Dembélé running the lab and keeping quality high. He soon left to work in a lab in Burkina Faso, however, and Tokyo Color, which had opened in Bamako in 1983, quickly became the most prominent color lab.¹²⁶ The reliance on high-tech cameras and local color printing labs with poor facilities has contributed to a lack of knowledge about lighting, proper composition, and the aesthetics of printing. While in the past photographers like Keïta and Sidibé learned their craft working as printers or assistants to other photographers, the deskilling of photography has enabled photographers with no training to open up shop, working either in a studio or as itinerants, with a resulting decline of aesthetic specialization. Today, digital is becoming popular among younger photographers who can afford it. They use photoshop programs to ‘fix’ portraits by lightening skin and removing wrinkles, which used to be done by hand. Video is also becoming more popular, for weddings and other events. ‘Social’ photography, or portrait photography and reportage, is still crucial to Bamako’s culture, as the sheer number of photo studios dotting Bamako’s streets attests.¹²⁷ **[Figure 1:13]** But black and white photography is no longer practiced in most studios, as customers desire color portraits, and, increasingly, color videos of important events.

The first Biennale was inaugurated in 1994, two years after Alpha Oumar Konaré became Mali’s second democratically-elected president.¹²⁸ Konaré, a former president of ICOM, the pan-African International Council of Museums, held degrees in history and

¹²⁶ Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako*, 87-88.

¹²⁷ A number of photographers I spoke to in Bamako referred to commercial photographers as “social photographers.”

¹²⁸ President Keïta was democratically elected in 1961 but the status of the election was suspect.

archaeology, and was devoted to improving Mali's cultural institutions.¹²⁹ Konaré supported cultural developments and brought the problem of cultural preservation to international attention.¹³⁰ Culture, always important in Malian constructions of nationalist identity, became even more so after independence, and Konaré's projects reflected and contributed to this emphasis.¹³¹ Konaré and his wife, Adam Ba Konaré, also placed great importance on national memory; such an interest would naturally include celebrating photography, with its close relationship to memory, through the advent of the Biennales.¹³²

The first four Biennales were held during Konaré's presidency, and with his support. Mali's political shift to democracy, and the stability and peace engendered by this transition, supported Bamako's development as a center for African photography. Western countries, particularly France and the US, supported the transition to democracy and desired Mali's official abandonment of Soviet-bloc socialism. The US donated aid with strings attached, requiring that Mali continue to follow certain steps towards a functioning democracy and economy. France, meanwhile, continues its colonial policy of cultural assimilation by financially supporting culture in Africa through the state-operated agency *Afrique en Créations*, which organizes the Biennale. Democracy also provided greater opportunities for women, and thus for women photographers, especially once Aminata Dembélé Bagayoko founded a photography school for women in 1996. Thus,

¹²⁹ Konaré was elected to a second five-year term in 1997, and then stepped down – a new precedent of following the legal term limit and ending the 'life-presidency' so common to African countries, and formerly common in Mali. Konaré was replaced by Amadou Toumani Traoré (ATT), the general who orchestrated the 1991 coup. ATT won the most recent elections as well.

¹³⁰ In 1995 Alpha Oumar Konaré utilized Mali's 1970 UNESCO convention to protect Mali's cultural heritage.

¹³¹ Rosa De Jorio, "Politics of Remembering and Forgetting: The Struggle Over Colonial Monuments in Mali," *Africa Today* 52 no. 4 (Summer 2006), 82.

¹³² Arnoldi discusses the Konarés's emphasis on "*le devoir de memoire*, the responsibility to remember" in "Monuments and Modernity," 11.

the history of photography in Mali has always followed political, social, and economic changes. Photographers themselves have been caught at the apex of the clash between precolonial and colonial Mali, and continue to elucidate these tensions and contradictions in their post-independence practice.

III. Social Photography

Malian society operates with a very high quotient of what social scientists call ‘social capital.’ According to David Halpern, social capital embodies “social networks and the norms and sanctions that govern their character. It is valued for its potential to facilitate individual and community action, especially through the solution of collective action problems.”¹³³ Complex kinship ties (such as *cousinage*, the relationship between families which are considered ‘joking cousins,’ who are required to help each other in times of trouble, and forbidden to do violence to each other), caste interdependencies, and a long history of inter-ethnic interaction in a harsh geographic environment has created a culture where people depend on each other for help and support to a high degree.¹³⁴

¹³³ David Halpern, *Social Capital* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2005), 4. The term ‘social capital’ was first used in 1916 by sociologist Lyda Judson Hanifan; it was reinstated by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1980s. The definition of social capital I prefer here is more in line with Anglophone sociologists like Halpern and Robert Putnam (see Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000)) in that it refers only to networks of relations. I do not use the term in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense, which he describes as “the totality of resources (financial capital and also information etc.) activated through a more or less extended, more or less mobilizable network of relations which procures a competitive advantage by providing higher returns on investment.” See Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of the Economy*, trans. Chris Turner (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2005), 194-5. I hesitate to transfer Bourdieu’s theory, embedded as it is in a greater theory and history of Marxism, wholesale to an African context, preferring to consider how and if the quality of what we term social capital exists and operates in Bamakois society.

¹³⁴ Imperato believes that this is in part due to ample land shared among a relatively small population for cooperative, beneficial uses (herding and farming). Imperato, *Mali: A Search for Direction*, 81-82. Pringle attributes Mali’s inter-ethnic tolerance to national pride in the Mali Empire, and the legend of the god-king Sundiata, who gave back the twelve Malian kings their staffs in order to allow them to each rule over his own land, although Sundiata was emperor over all. Pringle, *Democratization in Mali*, 13-14.

Studio photography can be understood as a way of reinforcing social capital, especially when one considers the whole process, from the beginning of a picture's creation when clients engage the photographer, to the continued function of the photograph after it is taken. In fact, studio photography is called "social photography" in Mali. Studio photographs function in local culture in a vernacular fashion, and Batchen notes that all vernacular photographs are "animated by a social dimension, a dynamic web of exchanges and functions."¹³⁵ This is especially the case in Bamako. Studio pictures commemorate religious occasions, celebrations and outings, and document gatherings of family, friends, coworkers and clubs. As discussed in Chapter Six, women were a particularly enthusiastic clientele, often having portraits taken to record and display new hairstyles, outfits, and adornments. Social connections of all kinds were also useful to photographers in learning and keeping up their trade. Photographers had to use familial and personal contacts in order to acquire cameras, equipment, and information from travels abroad.¹³⁶

The photograph's life after it was taken continued to further social capital. Photographs were usually printed as one-to-one contact prints, at small sizes, and were hung on walls, kept in albums at home and shown to guests, and sent back to families in faraway villages as tokens of familial connections and cosmopolitan aspirations. (The connections between urban and rural populations are often particularly strong in African cities like Bamako.¹³⁷ In fact, people in Bamako who are from the same village often create clubs to help support the village). Sending photographs to those back home

¹³⁵ Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies" in *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 78.

¹³⁶ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 74.

¹³⁷ Anthony O'Connor, *The African City* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1983), 21-22.

strengthen that relationship by sharing an urban experience with those in the village. Through the exchange or shared viewing of such photographs, the relationships depicted are reinforced through shared memories.¹³⁸ Mutual emotional dependency is increased and familial or friendship ties are self-reflexively strengthened through the very act of depicting and memorializing the relationship. Thus, the process of having pictures taken and viewed results in an increase of social capital among the participants, and emphasizes the process-oriented nature of photography in Mali.¹³⁹

Along these lines, Keller has argued that the Mande social concepts of *fadenya* and *badenya* are visible in the aesthetics of Keïta's and Sidibé's portrait photographs.¹⁴⁰ *Fadenya* and *badenya* are concepts derived from the practice of polygamy and its effects on familial relations.¹⁴¹ *Badenya* (translated as 'mother-childness,' derived from the relationship of one full sibling to another) embodies the social behaviors of cooperation, agreement and stability. *Fadenya* ('father-childness,' which connotes the spirit of competition between siblings with different mothers who must compete for their father's attention) connotes disequilibrium in society – the forces of competition, envy, and self-promotion. The tension between *badenya* and *fadenya* "should not be understood as a polar opposition, but rather as the intersection of two axes: the axis of individuality...and

¹³⁸ Batchen discusses the relationship of vernacular photography to personal memory in "Vernacular Photographies" and *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).

¹³⁹ Although private cameras are not as expensive as in the past, and therefore conceivably affordable to many people, it is the event of visiting the photographer's studio that continues to draw clientele, at least in The Gambia, suggesting a higher level of social capital in the overall process, according to Liam Buckley, during a discussion at the conference Portrait Photography in African Worlds. This was not my experience in Bamako, however – but as studio photography was not the focus of my research, I did not conduct a thorough survey.

¹⁴⁰ Candace Keller applied Patrick McNaughton's argument that notions of *fadenya* and *badenya* are central to Malian culture to Keïta's and Sidibé's aesthetics in her paper "Visual Griots" at Portrait Photography in African Worlds.

¹⁴¹ For an elaboration on the concepts of *fadenya* and *badenya* see Charles S. Bird and Martha B. Kendall, "The Mande Hero: Text and Context," in *Explorations in African Systems of Thought*, ed. Ivan Karp and Charles S. Bird (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980): 13-26.

the axis of group affiliation.”¹⁴² According to Bird and Kendall, Mande society is relatively static and stable, as the forces of *baden* prevail and provide group cohesion. However, the community also relies on the actions of the ‘hero,’ an individual who breaks with traditional societal rules, to protect and save the society in times of trouble, and thus depends also on fostering *fadenya* among its young men.¹⁴³ The extent to which Keller has found that social relationships are operative in the aesthetics of Malian portrait photography reinforces the importance of studio photography in facilitating the building of social capital within a community or neighborhood.

One example of how social tensions and forces embodied by the intersection of the concepts of *fadenya* and *badenya* are manifested in the aesthetics of a portrait photograph might be seen in Keïta’s picture of two identically-dressed women sitting next to each other, each with a child. **[Figure 1:14]** According to Youssouf Cissé, they are co-wives, and the fabric from which their clothes are sewn is appropriately called, “The jealous dark-eyes of my co-wife.”¹⁴⁴ Not only are their dresses styled exactly alike, with fashionable “airplane” sleeves, but their hair is also braided and bejeweled in the same style, called “coat-hangers.”¹⁴⁵ They wear matching headscarves tied in the same fashion, and almost the same jewelry (matching ropes of silver bracelets, strands of long cornelian beads, curled gold rings in their braids, and ringed earrings). The only sartorial difference between the women is that the one on the right also wears an elaborate choker necklace, and her sandals are of a slightly different make.

¹⁴² Bird and Kendall, “The Mande Hero,” 14.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴⁴ Magnin, *Seydou Keïta*, 275.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The two women sit close enough together so that their sleeves overlap and their arms almost touch. Though the message conveyed by their fabric (which may have been chosen for its meaning, or may simply have been chosen for its aesthetic attraction) speaks literally of a jealous or rivalrous relationship, the message conveyed by their identical dress and pose suggests closeness and harmony. By posing with their children, these women emphasize their fertility, as the status of being a mother is of the highest importance for women in Mali.

However, the children, whose relationship to each other is presumably of *faden* (having the same father but different mothers) do not share a similarity of pose, nor of clothing. The older girl leans on her mother's lap. With her gaze focused off above the photographer's head, she looks a little bored. The other child, a baby boy, sits on his mother's lap with his mouth open (no doubt in a sound of impatience with having to sit still), and looks compellingly at the camera. The woman on the right has her knees crossed, supporting the baby, so that her foot juts out toward the camera. Her features are larger and stronger than her fellow co-wife's, her head-wrap is a bit taller and more imposing, and her expression is calmer. She also seems to be slightly closer to the camera.

Thus, the woman on the viewer's right takes on a slightly more imposing and dignified presence in contrast to the other co-wife, whose facial expression appears a little surprised or resentful. The visual similarities of the women's attire, and the harmony implied therein (*badenya*) are set into visual tension by the slight differences between the women's expressions, and especially by the visual dissimilarities of the children, which suggests the children's rivalrous relationships in the family, and which suggest aspects of

fadenya. Even (or especially) if the women are good friends, as is suggested by their clothing choices, the photograph as it presents itself to a Malian viewer could be understood as embodying a particular combination or interaction between the axes of *fadenya* and *badenya* which contributes to what might be called a ‘social aesthetic.’ Keller and Vogel have suggested that the visual drama of Keïta’s photographs arises from his ability to capture on film, and thus make visually manifest, the social tensions between individuality and sameness, rivalry and cooperation – values which permeate the structure of Mande society.¹⁴⁶

While the social concepts of *fadenya* and *badenya* may have import into the social organization of a photograph, Arnoldi’s discussion of Mande aesthetics in the context of *Sogo bò*, or puppet theatre, may also be helpful in understanding Malian views of studio photographs. Arnoldi discusses the terms *nyi* and *di*, which constitute an art form’s “moral goodness” and its “tastiness,” respectively. According to Arnoldi, “*Di*...activates the *nyama* [spiritual or magical power] inherent in art through challenging and embellishing its form.”¹⁴⁷ Although photographers deny that *nyama* exists in photographs, the notion of an essential core (the most important property of a photograph is that the viewer can recognize the subject, so that his or her face must be clearly visible) embellished by adornments such as clothing and props, may be an operative aesthetic for Malian photography. Elder notes that when people want to have their photograph taken, they use the French term “photo” or the Bamana term “*dya*,” from *di*. *Dya*, according to Elder, can be translated as a “person’s double.” While there are four types of *dya*,

¹⁴⁶ My reading of this photograph was influenced by the helpful comments of Mary Jo Arnoldi. I heard Candace Keller’s ideas presented in the paper “Visual Griots” and Susan Vogel’s ideas in a paper presentation “Art History and Bad Housekeeping,” at Portrait Photography in African Worlds.

¹⁴⁷ Arnoldi, *Playing with Time* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 102.

according to ethnologist Youssouf Cissé, the second type, *dya yere-yere*, is the type seen in photography or film, a term that suggests a reflection, as in a mirror or in water.¹⁴⁸

Elder writes, “The term has thus entered into and become part of the daily language used for photography while at a deeper, metaphysical level it may be used by the population to understand what is happening during the photographic instant.”¹⁴⁹

IV. A Malian Approach to Photography

Since photography’s invention, philosophers and art historians have been at pains to describe what photography *is*. The nineteenth-century American philosopher C.S. Peirce, in his theory of semiotics, distinguished between Icons, Indices, and Symbols, all of which qualify under the general category of Signs.¹⁵⁰ The first class of signs, Icons, resemble objects or the relations among objects. Icons are meaningful independent of the existence of their object. All pictures are icons, but diagrams are also icons, because they resemble their objects. Or, as in one example, if two photographs are used to draw a map, the result is an icon.¹⁵¹ The second class, Indices, have a physical relationship to their objects, like a weathervane which is moved by the wind to point which way the wind blows.¹⁵² The third class, Symbols, requires an interpreter, i.e. symbols only have meaning within the context of a community that has designated their meaning as such. Words, for example, are symbols. Helpfully, Peirce considered the photograph in several of his examples. He states:

¹⁴⁸ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 101-102.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ See Charles S. Peirce, “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs” in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955), 107.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 105-6.

¹⁵² Ibid., 109.

Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection.¹⁵³

Here Peirce explains that photographs, while *seeming* to be Icons (the class to which all *pictures* belong, as he says earlier), are actually Indices. That is, they enable the determination of other truths, as icons do, yet they are constituted by the physical presences of the objects that they represent (i.e. the light bouncing off of the object acts on the chemical film; or, in a photogram, the object blocks the light and leaves its trace – its profile - directly on the paper). This makes sense when considering that some photographs – abstract shots, or some photograms, for example – do not necessarily resemble their objects in any visually recognizable sense, and yet they are created by virtue of the physicality of their subject, as the hole a bullet leaves in a molding is created by the physical passage of the bullet, even though the bullet is absent.¹⁵⁴ In other words, *all* photographs have an indexical quality, but *most* also harbor an iconic quality that corresponds to their indexical quality. (Thus they are somewhat like a yardstick, which not only resembles a yard, but actually *indicates* a yard).¹⁵⁵ It is the latter category that most people think of in connection with photography; i.e., the pictures which appear in newspapers, or are taken in portrait studios, or on vacation – pictures that are *supposed* to resemble their objects, in order to remember what a person or a monument *looked like*. These photographs carry an overwhelming sensation of *proof*, because their indexical quality *informs* their iconic quality. In this way, they also become Symbols, as it requires

¹⁵³ Ibid., 106.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 109.

the intellectual action of the interpreter – the viewer – to make the connection between the icon and the index.

And yet, anyone who has studied photography knows that the iconic quality can be faked or doctored. More importantly, even the indexical quality gives only a partial representation of a scene or moment. Photographs are constructed by the confluence of the available view with the photographer's eye and the camera's lens - they are not objective truths taken by an impartial machine. Instead, they are framed, sometimes posed, 'captured,' created. At the same time, it is the combination of photography's indexical and iconic qualities that gives the medium its fascination and its 'truthful' quality, differentiating it from other means of representation.

Although photography's 'truth claims' have been interrogated by scholars as suspect because of the distortions of perspective, focus, cropping, and darkroom manipulations, it is this effect of seeming to tell the truth about history, and forging an immediate connection to the past, that remains the basis of photography's power, even in the digital age. While European avant-garde photography divested the iconicity of a photograph from its indexicality, through abstraction and manipulation of the negative, camera, or subject, Malian photography almost exclusively relies on the confluence of the two qualities. In other words, it is the immediacy of history that gives most Malian photographs their relevance. Yet at the same time, as I will show, Malian approaches to photography do not adhere to truth claims as such.

In her study of Dina architecture, Van Dyke realized that she had "over-emphasized the place of material form" in her approach to her research in Mali.¹⁵⁶ She came to understand that, "Malian definitions of architecture are rooted in the conceptual

¹⁵⁶ Van Dyke, "The Oral-Visual Nexus," 3.

and performative more than in the material.”¹⁵⁷ She claims that, “The visible world is ever only partial in Malian thought and as such, it can not provide a foundation for knowledge. Representation, as an idiom of thought, models the world-as-known, instituting a relationship to the world that involves a will to fixity and mastery.”¹⁵⁸ In the West, photography is considered a highly accurate form of representation, as Peirce’s examples show. Much has been made of the photograph’s “will to fixity and mastery,” its collusiveness with colonial practices, its archival ability to order and flatten values, and its implications of an absolute truth or absolute proof (even when that truth is suspect). Scholars like John Tagg, Douglas Crimp, Allan Sekula, Liam Buckley, Elizabeth Edwards, and Christopher Pinney have revealed photography’s use in controlling populations and landscapes alike, through criminal mug shots, identification photos, anthropological or phrenological pictures, and aerial or panoramic views. Batchen has argued that the desire to invent photography “was a product of Western culture,” which occurred because of profound changes in Western society towards modernization in the early 1800s.¹⁵⁹

Yet when the first Malian studio photographers took up the medium for their own purposes in the 1930s, their approach, and those of their clients, emphasized photography’s *other* aspects - its unfinished, performative, and process-oriented nature, its ability to create wished-for fictions, and its elisions of essential known relationships, such as to whom a fountain pen prop really belongs. As Buckley argues in his study of studio photography in The Gambia, the *social processes* surrounding studio photography

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 52.

in Mali are as important, if not more so, than the ‘final product,’ or how the print looks.¹⁶⁰ This approach to photography coheres with Van Dyke’s description of oral culture: “Orality, as an idiom of thought, models the world-as-unknowable.... In addition, it proffers notions of time and history that are distinct from those of representation. Dynamic and ephemeral form, including speech and action, are privileged here.”¹⁶¹

In Mali’s traditional, oral and performative culture, the ephemeral qualities of action and speech are more important than fixed and recorded forms. The performance of posing for a studio photograph, and the subsequent print’s circulation among family and friends, which contributes to the creation of social capital, shows that studio photography is embedded in social processes, mediating between traditional oral modes of thought and the Western emphasis on representation introduced by French colonial rule. Traditional Malian cultures had no need to invent photography; as oral and genealogical cultures in which history is perceived as present, there is no fixed version of the ‘truth,’ and visual representation is suspect. Bamana sculptures and masks, for example, are not meant to provide exact representations of certain animals, instead merely suggesting their various qualities. Thus, when photography did enter Malian culture under the yoke of colonial rule, the ‘truth’ aspect of photography was questionable, because a Malian worldview understood in photography the aspects which a Western worldview repressed. Malian suspicion of visual representation meant that a photograph could not possibly be understood as a claim to an absolute truth, which itself was not a viable concept. Malian

¹⁶⁰ Only recently, with the advent of postmodernism in art, has the process of photography been privileged. But it is significant that these practitioners are considered artists who *use* photography, and not proper photographers. In the vast majority of photography – newspapers, internet, photo history, typical photography exhibitions, *process* is disavowed in favor of the ‘finished’, fine art print.

¹⁶¹ Van Dyke, “Oral-Visual Nexus,” 4.

studio photographers dilute or downplay photography's claims to 'truth,' instead taking for granted its ability to create illusions, its multiplicity, its process-oriented nature, and essential incompleteness.

While the dilemma of photography's relationship between 'truth' and 'construct' has motivated much recent Western academic scholarship, the naive notion that a photograph conveys an unadulterated 'truth' may belong only to a Western worldview. The notion of a photograph as a constructed image seems more consistent with how Malian perceptions of history are described by scholars, and Malian studio photographs bear out this idea. Van Dyke writes that Malians have a decided "lack of a shared historical narrative...[there] seems to be little or no regard for 'historical fact' – history is organized around relationships between people in the past and the present more than it is about recounting the 'factual' datum of events."¹⁶² According to Van Dyke, many scholars support "the comfort level Mande peoples have with the idea that elements of the past are manipulated and invented, transformed in their histories."¹⁶³ Barbara Hoffman writes, "Mande notions of 'meaning' are based on orality where no such systematic record has been kept or would have been considered important, where 'definitions' are contextually constructed and subject to alteration, to nuance, to subtle manipulation and even drastic change from one speech context to another, from one speaker to another."¹⁶⁴ This extremely relativist, or what scholars now call 'postmodern' approach - which denies the possibility of an 'objective' narrative, and acknowledges that history is always told to serve a particular interest - is reflected in photo studio practices.

¹⁶² Van Dyke, "The Oral-Visual Nexus," 48.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Barbara G. Hoffman, "Secrets and Lies: Context, Meaning, and Agency in Mande," *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 38 Issue 149 (1998), 88.

The studio portrait is always a constructed image, disengaged from its everyday context and displaced into an imaginary space by its backdrop (whether patterned or not). The use of props which do not belong to the sitter is not a falsification, but a wish-fulfillment. In other words, the photograph is considered *a priori* to be, not a record of how beautiful a person is at the moment that she has a new hair-do, but instead in a sense a *creation* of a woman's image to "look beautiful like that."

At the same time that photography in Mali is not expected to 'tell the truth', there is little interest in distorting the image to abstraction. Roland Barthes claimed, "It is the advent of the Photograph...that divides the History of the world."¹⁶⁵ The past becomes immediate, contingent with the present, and that facet of photography – its most remarked-upon characteristic - is naturally also important to a conception of Malian photography. In fact, the Malian photographers with whom I spoke with said that this was why Keïta's pictures are appreciated, and not for his striking aesthetics.

Christopher Pinney's attempt to find subversive qualities in Keïta's pictures is instructive here. Pinney has noticed that Keïta's patterned backdrops create a two-dimensional, flat surface that denies perspective, and believes that this formal effect has broader ramifications. He claims that colonial photographs emphasized rationality through their three-dimensionality: "Colonial depth practices implied, and strove to be guaranteed by, a photographic surface that was invisible. The surface was a window onto a field of spatial and temporal correlations that encoded a colonial 'rationality.'"¹⁶⁶ In other words, the imperial ends that colonial photographs served were visible in the structure of the pictures themselves. "What might be termed "colonial" schemata

¹⁶⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc., 1981), 88.

¹⁶⁶ Pinney, "Notes from the Surface of the Image," 203.

positioned people and objects deep within chronotopic certainties.”¹⁶⁷ In contrast, Pinney suggests, pictures by Seydou Keïta subvert the colonial pretext, eliding depth through clashing, intricate patterns which force the eye to linger on the surface.

In his introduction to the volume *Photography's Other Histories*, however, Pinney suggests that formal qualities do not necessarily express important aspects of a photographic image, which can be read as radically different depending on one's cultural and historical perspective.¹⁶⁸ Yet he proposes to find “a more nuanced reading of the affinities between particular discursive formations and the image worlds that parallel them, as well as a sophisticated analyses of their transformational potentialities.”¹⁶⁹

Pinney's articulation of the ‘surface’ of the image is terminally unclear, especially when he comments that, “‘Surface’ and ‘depth’ refer here not simply to sedimentary layers, but rather to more profound positionalities that fuse the ethical / political with the chronotopic.”¹⁷⁰ **[Figure 1:15]** While in his introduction to *Photography's Other Histories* Pinney argues that formal considerations from a different cultural context, such as the West's, are meaningless in another culture, in his own essay Pinney makes a claim for colonial subversion based on the formal analysis of Keïta's backdrops and patterns. Pinney's claim is romantic in bringing together formal qualities and contextual meaning. But one wonders what he makes of Keïta's later pictures which utilize a plain backdrop; or of pictures by Sakaly or other photographers who used plain backdrops; or indeed, of European colonials who also used backdrops that denied their subjects' “chronotopic

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 203.

¹⁶⁸ Pinney, “Introduction: ‘How the Other Half...’” in *Photography's Other Histories*, 3.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. Pinney writes, “That the formal qualities of images themselves may be in large part irrelevant is suggested by their historical trajectories and the radical revaluations that they undergo. If an image that appears to do a particular kind of work in one episteme is able to perform radically different work in another, it appears inappropriate to propose inflexible links between formal qualities and effect.” “Introduction,” 3.

¹⁷⁰ Pinney, “Notes from the Surface,” 202-3.

certainty.”¹⁷¹ Despite the inability to apply his argument to West African studio photography across the board, what Pinney draws attention to is the backdrop’s function in transporting the subject of a photograph out of his or her immediate context and into a non-existent, imaginary space. In Keïta’s pictures which use patterned bedspreads, this space signifies West African modernity, perhaps even Bamakois modernity, as the cloth was fashionable in Bamako at the time.¹⁷²

Pinney’s emphasis on “surfacing,” an idea he borrows and transforms from an essay by Olu Oguibe, would be better categorized as a different perception of photography that arises out of a different worldview.¹⁷³ Pinney equates Indian and West African “surfacing” with “the ways in which the use of backdrops, the creation of photographic mise-en-scène, and the postexposure manipulation of the image

¹⁷¹ While I have seen only a few pictures by most other Malian studio photographers, it is interesting that the only other photographer than Keïta (that I have seen) to use patterned backdrops was Hamidou Maïga, who worked in Timbuktu before moving to Bamako. However, it would be impossible to ascertain if that is really true, because so few pictures of the other photographers have been published. I have never seen a Keïta print or negative that used a painted backdrop or shaped cutouts – elements that are common in West African photography, and that were used by Abderramane Sakaly and Malick Sidibé. I suspect that those elements became fashionable later, in the 1960s. Hamidou Maïga also used the painted backdrop. All of these photographers worked at a later date than Keïta, who was forced to close his studio in 1962 to work for the newly independent government. The dating of most studio portraits is also shaky; and the majority of Keïta’s works have not been published.

¹⁷² According to Amadou Keïta (no relation), the patterned cloth was fashionable in Bamako at this time. Interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 21 July 2006. To transport the sitter to another realm seems the goal of not only Keïta’s pictures, but of much African studio photography, from the Likoni Ferry photographers’ collaged travel backdrops, to Ghanaian photographer Philip Kwame Apagya’s painted backdrops showing fashionable, modern interiors or airplanes, to the idyllic landscape color poster backdrops common in Bamako studios today. See Heike Behrend, “‘Feeling Global:’ The Likoni Ferry Photographers of Mombasa, Kenya,” *African Arts* 33 no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 70-77, 96 and Tobias Wendl’s interview with Apagya, “Photography as a window to the world” in *Flash Afrique!*, 44-55. See Chapter Six for further discussion of the poster backdrops in Mali. Also see the special issue “From The Background to the Foreground: The Photo Backdrop and Cultural Expression” in *Afterimage* 24 Issue 5 (March/April 1997), especially Arjun Appadurai’s article “The Colonial Backdrop,” pps. 4-10 in the same issue. Painted backdrops are attributed to the invention of photographer Antoine Claudet in London, where he patented them in 1841, and the technique was quickly embraced by most studios, especially when the carte-de-visite became popular.

¹⁷³ See Olu Oguibe, “Photography and the Substance of the Image,” in *In/sight*, 231-249.

demonstrate a concern with surface ... rather than its narrativized indexical depths.”¹⁷⁴

The aspects that Pinney finds of note in Seydou Keïta’s photographs – the way the backdrop, patterned or otherwise, removes the sitter from daily life and quotidian circumstances, the creation of the wishful ideal of the sitter’s visual identity through the use of props and dressing up, and the retouching or cropping of the final print to fulfill that ideal – to me suggest that Malians take a different *view* toward photography and portraiture than Westerners – a view that is perhaps more often seen in fashion magazines, where models are air-brushed, and appear in impossible or unconventional scenarios that accent their stylish clothes. In fact, perhaps a different system of aesthetics is operative than the Western formalism that Pinney tries to escape, but ultimately reinstates. Keller and Arnoldi offer other possible systems in their discussions of the social aesthetic that incorporates *fadenya* and *badenya*, or the form-oriented qualities of *nyi* and *di*.

In regard to art photography, it must be noted that Van Dyke’s research focused on rural areas and on local villagers, while the photographers with whom I spoke had mostly lived in Bamako and were highly educated in the French-Malian system. In other words, the art photographers’ experience embodies postcolonial effects to a high degree. It is questionable to what extent their worldviews resonate with the Bamana worldview (not dissimilar in this respect to other Mande, or even Fulani, worldviews) that Van Dyke describes. Van Dyke’s assertion – echoed throughout the scholarship of traditional

¹⁷⁴ Pinney, “Notes on the Surface,” 204. Instead of focusing on West Africa, it would have been more germane for Pinney to focus on East African photography in countries like Kenya and Uganda, where studio practices have been influenced by Indian émigrés, as Heike Behrend argued in her talk, “‘To Make Strange Things Possible’: Portraits as Photomontages of the Bakor Photo Studio in Lamu, Kenya,” presented at the Portrait Photography conference. See also Behrend, “Love à la Hollywood and Bombay: Kenyan Postcolonial Studio Photography,” *Paideuma* 44 (1998): 139-153.

African art – raises questions about photography in Mali: What *is* photography in Mali?

Is it important as a material object, or as an immaterial, performative process? Is the physical photograph a venerated aesthetic object, or merely a node that acts as a locus of social interaction, of recalling history, of evoking presence? In studio, or ‘social’ photography, the latter appears to be true. But the status of art photography is less clear.

Chapter 2: Bamako Becoming Photographic

I. The International ‘Discovery’ of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé

The aesthetic of Mali’s black-and-white commercial photographs was unknown outside of Africa until curator Susan Vogel exhibited Keïta’s and several other West African photographers’ pictures anonymously in *Africa Explores* at the Center for African Art in New York in 1991.¹⁷⁵ This landmark occasion put African studio photography on the global map, igniting a spate of ever-increasing exhibitions and publications, with the subsequent uncovering of studio photographers working across West Africa, as well as in Ethiopia, Egypt, South Africa, Sudan, and Algeria.¹⁷⁶ **[Figure 2:1]**

How was Keïta found to be the author of his pictures? As the curator and dealer André Magnin explains it, Magnin went to Bamako on behalf of millionaire collector Jean Pigozzi to seek the photographer immediately after seeing the anonymous pictures in *Africa Explores* in 1991. There Magnin met Sidibé, who introduced him to Keïta. This account appears in Keïta’s monograph, *Seydou Keïta*, edited by Magnin.¹⁷⁷ Keïta himself said that Magnin was in the company of French photographer Françoise Huguier (the

¹⁷⁵ Now the Museum for African Art. Vogel had collected negatives from a number of studio photographers across West Africa in the 1970s. Unfortunately she lost her notes and thus made the decision to reprint the works without the photographers’ permission and exhibit them anonymously, without attempting to discover who the photographers were. In the long view, Vogel’s ethical lapse has been vindicated by the renown of the images. She addressed this issue in a personal communication to Elizabeth Bigham, which Bigham published in her article, “Issues of Authorship,” 62. Vogel also publicly addressed this controversial error in her paper, “Art History and Bad Housekeeping” at the Portrait Photography conference.

¹⁷⁶ See Fall and Saint Léon, eds., *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*; Behrend and Wendl, *Snap Me One!*; Pierre Gazio, *Van Leo: Portraits of Glamour* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1997); Claude Iverné, “Soudan” in *Vies Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie, Bamako 2005: Un autre monde*, ed. Simon Njami, 144-155 (Paris: Éditions Eric Koehler, 2005); see also El Nour’s website at http://www.elnour.net/images/photographes/index_photogra.htm; accessed July 29, 2008; and see *Lazhar Mansouri, Photographe algérien* (Milan: Fondazione Mazzotta, 2003).

¹⁷⁷ Magnin, *Seydou Keïta*, 7-8.

founder of the first Bamako Biennale) when Magnin arrived at the studio.¹⁷⁸ Association Seydou Keïta (ASK) and Sean Kelly Gallery, who now represents Keïta, note that Huguier had become aware of the significance of Keïta's and Sidibé's works while organizing the first Biennale.¹⁷⁹ While Kader Keïta at ASK did not deny that *Africa Explores* was the first exhibition to publish the photographs, *Short Century* cites an exhibition at Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris in 1989.¹⁸⁰

While the exact history of Keïta's international 'discovery' is unclear, what is significant is that Keïta's and Sidibé's works were exhibited to much fanfare. After both Keïta and Sidibé were shown in the 1994 Bamako Biennale, a selection of the exhibition traveled to FNAC Étoile in Paris in 1995. The same year, *Seydou Keïta – Malick Sidibé: Photographs from Mali* was exhibited at Fotofeis: International Festival of Photography at the Scotland Fruit Market Gallery in Edinburgh. Within a few years the pair was exhibited widely across Europe. In the U.S., Keïta had his first retrospective in 1996 at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, and both he and Sidibé were included in curator Okwui Enwezor's groundbreaking exhibition *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*.¹⁸¹ Keïta's subsequent solo exhibitions at Gagosian Gallery first in Los Angeles and then in New York in 1997, with a prominent review in

¹⁷⁸ Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 48.

¹⁷⁹ Kader Keïta, interview by author, Bamako, Mali, 16 November 2005. Kader Keïta is the vice president of ASK and his relationship to the photographer is unclear – he is described variously as Seydou's 'cousin' by Marc Spiegler, "Negative Charges" *Art + Auction* 27 (February 2005), 96, as 'relative' by Michael Rips, "Who Owns Seydou Keïta?" *New York Times*, Sunday 22 January 2006, sec. 2, 32-33, and as 'brother' by Richard Vine, "Seydou Keïta Legacy Disrupted," *Art in America* 91 Issue 12 (December 2003), 31. On Huguier's influence, see also a leaflet published by Sean Kelly Gallery on the occasion of the exhibition, "Seydou Keïta: The Image King of Africa," January 8-March 4, 2006. Michael Rips states that Seydou Keïta met Huguier in 1990, and that she arranged a small exhibition for him "outside of Africa," where Pigozzi saw the pictures. "Who Owns Seydou Keïta?" 32-33.

¹⁸⁰ Enwezor, *Short Century*, 474.

¹⁸¹ *In/sight's* inclusion of sub-Saharan and North African artists of all races, and its inclusions of various genres such as portrait, art, and ritual photographs, as well as a section on the South African journal *Drum*, broke open assumptions about what African photography is, several years before the third Bamako Biennale in 1998 did the same.

the *The New York Times*, familiarized his works to an American art public on both coasts.¹⁸² Both Keïta and Sidibé also appeared in *You Look Beautiful Like That* at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum in 2001, and in Enwezor's groundbreaking exhibition, *Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* in 2001 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and then in 2002 at P.S.1. Contemporary Art Center in New York.

Magnin represented Keïta for almost a decade, until the photographer signed a contract with French dealer Jean-Marc Patras for the web-based gallery Eyestorm. Soon after, in 2001, Keïta signed a contract that stated Patras would represent him exclusively.¹⁸³ Keïta accused Magnin of forging his signature, which Magnin denies; but the slander has discredited Magnin's prints.¹⁸⁴ It did not help that Magnin's contract with Keïta had been based on an oral agreement. Patras, meanwhile, had made a contract with Sean Kelly Gallery in New York to represent Keïta. At the opening of Keïta's 2001 show at the gallery, Pigozzi stormed in and had to be removed by security. Keïta's family was also split over the controversy, although apparently the family is now in agreement. The controversy lies dormant because Pigozzi claims he does not have the money to continue the legal battle. At issue are 921 negatives that are still missing and were last seen in Magnin's hands, although Magnin claims that he gave them to a family member at Keïta's funeral.¹⁸⁵ These negatives were used to print many of the pictures now in

¹⁸² Margaret Loke, "Inside Photography," *The New York Times*, July 11, 1997.

¹⁸³ Spiegler, "Negative Charges," 100.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

circulation that have made Keïta so famous, and their loss, if lost they are, is a tremendous blow.¹⁸⁶

This brief exhibition history shows the extent to which the two photographers, and African portrait photography in general, were positioned as art by Western dealers and African curators alike. The pictures are usually reprinted at much larger sizes – up to four by five feet - than the original negatives, which were five by seven inches.¹⁸⁷ Value contrasts are also manipulated by printers. For example, Charles Griffin, who did the printing for the 2006 show at Sean Kelly, explained that he emphasized grayscale values, while the Gagorian Gallery prints of 1997 had flashier, stronger contrasts. Griffin had never seen a vintage print, however, in which the contrasts are said to be dull.¹⁸⁸ Despite the fact that many studioists' images across Africa have since become available to the international public, Keïta's and Sidibé's portraits are the most widely published and exhibited, and their images are the best-known.¹⁸⁹

Whether or not Huguier met Keïta's and Sidibé before or after *Africa Explores* – and most signs point to after – the founding of the Biennale, inspired by the promotion of their images abroad, has wrought vast changes in Malian photography. The international dissemination and local institutionalization of photography in Bamako have accompanied a shift in genre, both in terms of reception and production. The vernacular portraits of

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 100. Malick Sidibé worked at first with Patras but became dissatisfied and is currently represented by Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.

¹⁸⁷ When taken with the box camera.

¹⁸⁸ Rips, "Who Owns Seydou Keïta?" 33. I was shown prints at ASK in November of 2005 that I believed were 'original,' but I do not believe that they were actually vintage (perhaps it was an error in translation). They were matted so that I was unable to verify the studio stamp on the back, but in any event, they were slightly orange-tinted, low-contrast, and seemed water-damaged. I was also shown Keïta's negatives in the summer of 2006. I have seen vintage prints by other studio photographers of the same era, however, and while some are so low-contrast as to diminish the effect of the patterned backdrops, others are much higher.

¹⁸⁹ According to the photographers in Bamako, Keïta is widely published because he carefully preserved his negatives, not because his work is of higher quality than others. In fact, most find his photographs too busy because of the clashing patterns.

Keïta and Sidibé, originally intended for private, local use, have been received as fine art in Western museums and galleries. In response, photographers in Bamako have started to create and exhibit photography *as art*, a category that was previously unknown in Mali. The rest of this chapter discusses the Biennale, the circumstances of its founding, and the contradictory forces that the Biennale exerts on the contemporary photography scene in Bamako. I examine the problem of the Biennale *as biennale*, i.e. as an international exhibition, founded and curated by external actors, which takes place on Malian soil. Because of the Biennale's presence and the opportunities it provides, other new photographic institutions have since been founded in Bamako, including Association Seydou Keïta, the African House of Photography (*Maison Africaine de la Photographie*), and two private photography schools. The government-run college, National Institute of the Arts (INA), and the Balla Fasséké Conservatory of Arts and Multimedia (*Balla Fasséké Kouyaté Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers Multimédia*, or CAMM) in Bamako, a new, public, graduate school of the arts, now include photography programs, while the arts collective *Centre Soleil* holds occasional photography workshops.¹⁹⁰ Although Bamako does not have a comprehensive fine art gallery system, Galerie Chab was opened in 2000 by Amadou Chab Touré and deals solely in photography. The blossoming of these new institutions has contributed significantly to Bamako's burgeoning art photography movement. The hybrid, Euro-Malian nature of these institutions, and indeed, the organizational apparatus of the Biennale itself, show how the institutional structure of art photography in Bamako embodies a postcolonial problematic.

¹⁹⁰ The Conservatory is financed by the European Union and by PSIC.

II. The Bamako Biennale

The Bamako Biennale is the most concentrated site of struggle for the assertion of a ‘Malian’ identity in the realm of global culture. The Biennale is where the forces of globalism and postcolonialism converge, harboring intensely ambivalent tendencies. Founded in 1994 by two French photographers and funded by the French Ministry of Culture, the Biennale has generated a strong interest in art photography on the part of Malian photographers and provided a much-needed exhibition venue and meeting ground for photographers across the continent. The first Biennale celebrated Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, whose works’ ‘discovery’ generated the impetus for holding the Biennale, and included studio photographers, art and photojournalism from other West African countries and South Africa. Subsequent editions, held every two years except for a skipped year between 1998 and 2001, have vastly expanded the number of photographers and types of genres included, and the festival has taken on a truly Pan-African dimension. Yet the Biennale remains a controversial event within Bamako’s community of photographers, in part because of its nature *as* a biennale, and in part because it is largely controlled by the French government.

The Biennale is funded by the organization *Afrique en Créations*, which used to work under the auspices of *Association française d’action artistique* (AFAA), a government office supported by the French Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Cooperation.¹⁹¹ Since 2000, when the two associations joined forces, *Afrique en créations*

¹⁹¹ At the time of my research in Mali this was the case. In June 2006, however, the French government fused AFAA with ADPF (*Association pour la diffusion de la pensée française* / “Association for the diffusion of French thought”) into a new agency called CULTURESFRANCE, according to the new CULTURESFRANCE website, http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/actions-france_830/action-culturelle_1031/les-instruments_11307/france-culturesfrance_11308/index.html. Accessed July 29, 2008. *Afrique en Créations* still exists but is now part of a larger office called *Afrique et Caraïbes en Créations*. See the official website at:

essentially became the African division of AFAA, which supported artistic projects in France and around the world. *Afrique en Créations* began in 1990 as an independent colloquium of African and French professionals working in the field of culture. At the end of the colloquium, the organization was endowed with funding in order to promote contemporary African culture on the European market. *Afrique en Créations* also supports *Dak'Art*, Senegal's contemporary art biennale, as well as other music, dance, and film festivals. The two goals of *Afrique en Créations* are to support African cultural development and to provide African artists with access to the global market, and the services *Afrique en Créations* provides is considered a form of developmental aid.¹⁹² When *Afrique en Créations* was subsumed under AFAA, important changes in the aims and operations of the Bamako Biennale occurred, which seemed to delimit Malian authority in some areas, and to promote it in others.¹⁹³

AFAA itself was founded in 1922, under the suggestive name *l'Association Française d'Expansion et d'Echanges Artistiques*, and in 1934 changed its name to AFAA. Perhaps not surprisingly, no mention of colonialism appears in the AFAA literature and websites; and yet the organization was founded during the height of France's colonial rule, when France occupied many countries in Africa and elsewhere. The organization began as a scholarly community which became a state agency. Thus AFAA seemed to be an outgrowth of the French colonial policy of assimilation, which

<http://www.culturesfrance.com/africa-creating/afrique-en-creations-by-discipline/po16.html>. Accessed July 29, 2008.

¹⁹² Information pamphlet that I picked up from AFAA's office in Paris, August 2005, titled, "*Afrique en créations/The AFAA- A Users Guide*," p02. The countries which benefit from the aid are included in the ZSP (*Zone de solidarité prioritaire*).

¹⁹³ Mercier, Jeanne. "*Les Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie, Bamako 2005*," (MA thesis, École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2006), 18. Mercier recounts that it was impossible for her to gain access to archives or records about the Biennale at the *Maison Africaine de la Photographie*, and I experienced the same problem. I was told that there are no archives – for example, records of artists who exhibited or their works, or photocopies or digital images of them.

tried to enforce French culture on Africans and other non-French peoples. Today, its latest incarnation, CULTURESFRANCE, provides assistance to thousands of projects in over one hundred countries across the globe in a seemingly benign, but obviously ideological, form of cultural colonization.

The Biennale has changed and grown dramatically since its founding almost fifteen years ago. Françoise Huguier and Bernard Descamps, two French photographers, organized the first exhibition in 1994, and also ran the second edition two years later. Huguier had been working in Bamako as a photographer and had exhibited a show at the National Museum called, “*Sur les traces de l’Afrique fantôme.*”¹⁹⁴ Through this exhibition she met a number of Malian photographers, which inspired her to initiate a photography festival in the optimistic times after the transition to democracy in 1991.¹⁹⁵ The first edition focused mostly on West African photographers, although it also encompassed South Africans and even included two South African women, Jenny Gordon and Ingrid Hudson, at a time when such practices were not *de rigueur* in either France or in Mali. Now-illustrious photographers like Santu Mofokeng of South Africa, Samuel Fosso of Democratic Republic of Congo, Boubacar Touré Mandémory of Senegal and Rotimi Fani-Kayode, of Nigerian-British origin, were among the handful of artists exhibited in the first edition. Fani-Kayode’s Yoruba-inspired homo-erotic art was especially noteworthy, as the pictures would be considered shocking in Bamako and in most of West Africa. In Mali, Alioune Bâ, Racine Keïta and Django Cissé participated in

¹⁹⁴ Huguier’s title, *On the Traces of Phantom Africa*, refers to the French Surrealist ethnographer Michel Leiris’s famous book, *L’Afrique fantôme* (1934), journal entries and photographs published after his travels in 1931-1933 on the Mission Dakar-Djibouti as Marcel Griaule’s secretary-archivist. Huguier’s photographs taken while she followed in Leiris’s footsteps are the subject of her exhibition and book, *Sur les traces de l’Afrique Fantôme* (Paris: Maeght éditeur, 1990). Huguier’s photographs follow Leiris’s in their exoticization of African subjects.

¹⁹⁵ Interview by Balkissa Maïga, “Rencontre avec Françoise Huguier,” *BKO Photo*, mercredi 16 novembre 2005, no. 006, p.8.

the first show, along with Keïta and Sidibé. Archival press photographs from government agencies in Guinea and Mali were also included.¹⁹⁶ Although illustrated pamphlets describing the proceedings were printed, the first two editions did not publish actual catalogues. The Biennale thus demonstrated to local photographers that studio photography could be considered worthy of exhibition, and also provided examples of art photography by other Africans.

The second edition was broader, including photographers from East African and Southern African countries, such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia and Djibouti. A number of Malian studio photographers had been ‘discovered’ since the first Biennale, such as Adama Kouyaté, (b. 1927 in Ségou), Kélétigui Touré, (b.1922 in Kayes), Abderramane Sakaly, Hamidou Bocoum, and El Hadj Tidjani Shitou. Pinhole portraits from the *Oscura* workshops in Bamako, which are discussed in Chapter Three, were also shown.

For the third Biennale in 1998, Huguier and Descamps handed over the artistic direction to Malian artist Abdoulaye Konaté, who now heads the Balla Fasséké Conservatory of Arts and Multimedia in Bamako. Konaté is probably the best-known contemporary artist from Mali, and has since shown on the international circuit in *Africa Remix*, curated by Simon Njami in 2005. A Frenchman, Louis Mesplié, was named the financial director. The lack of trust involved in withholding financial direction from a Malian is obvious, although indeed the funding was provided by France via *Afrique en Creations*, which has been true for all of the Biennales. The third edition published a catalogue called *Ja Taa! “Prendre l’image”*, which translates as “Snap the picture!” in

¹⁹⁶ Onacig (*Office National du Cinéma de Guinée / National Office of Film of Guinea*) and AMAP (*Agence Malienne de Presse et de Publicité / Malian Press and Publicity Agency*).

Bamana and French. The use of Bamana, the lingua franca of Mali, symbolizes the fact that, of all the editions, the third Biennale incorporated the most Malian input and agency. (The first two Biennales did not have titles and the last four, all directed by Cameroonian curator Simon Njami, have been in French). The publication of the catalogue was financed by Prince Claus Fund, a Dutch non-profit organization that funds African endeavors.

The 1998 Biennale “professionalized” the program, according to Mercier, by inviting debates about technology, ethics, and the roles of photography in African cultures.¹⁹⁷ Another new aspect was sponsorship by Kodak and other photography companies, and financial support from the European Union. The show was also the first to include photographers from North Africa – an area typically not associated with ‘Africa’ in the Western mindset. As Mali shares its border with Algeria and has a long history of interaction across the desert with North Africa, this inclusion signals a Malian perspective instead of the typical French division between “*Afrique Noire*” – i.e. sub-Saharan Africa, and the Maghreb. The third edition also inaugurated the “*contours*,” or the “off” projects, a series of events designed to popularize the Biennale locally.¹⁹⁸

While the ‘focus’ of the third Biennale was on Ghanaian photographic practices, the show continued the on-going search for newly-rediscovered Malian studio photographers, exhibiting Félix Diallo from Kita, the Traoré brothers from Mopti, and Touré M’Barakou of the Gao region. The show also included two artistic projects from Mali, Emmanuel Daou’s “Masks and Symbols” and Mamadou Konaté’s series of

¹⁹⁷ Mercier, “*Les Rencontres*,” 18.

¹⁹⁸ The “*contours*” were funded by PSIC (*Programme d’appui et de valorisation des initiatives artistiques et culturelles*) and were run by Amadou Chab Touré. *Ibid.*, 19.

abstractions, titled “Everyday Finery.”¹⁹⁹ **[Figure 2:2]** Mamadou Konaté’s work is the only series that I have seen by a Malian photographer that is almost completely abstract, as abstraction and ‘avant-garde’ experimentation are not popular ideals among Malian photographers.

Between 1999 and 2000, *Afrique en Créations* merged with AFAA, which changed the priorities of the Biennale. At the same time, the European Union required AFAA and the Biennale organizers to make more attempts to include the local population.²⁰⁰ To this end, Abdoulaye Konate was appointed director of the festival, and Amadou Chab Toure was appointed adjunct curator to the chief curator. The fourth Biennale, held in 2001, augmented the format of the exhibition quite dramatically. The directorial appointment of the influential chief curator Simon Njami created striking changes. Among other achievements, Njami had co-founded the Parisian press *Revue Noire*, which publishes a magazine of the same name, and has published important books on African photography, including the only survey of African photo history to date, the *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* (1998). Njami brought money, resources (especially in terms of contacts with other photographers and curators), prestige, and visitors to the Biennale. The 2001 Biennale included more than 2500 images - Mercier notes that this figure is three times the number of images shown in any previous Biennale.²⁰¹ Amadou Chab Touré, who had recently opened Galerie Chab, organized a “Photo Street” for the “offs.”²⁰² After Njami took the reins, the event was held for a month instead of a week, 600 visitors attended, the Biennale was organized

¹⁹⁹ “Everyday Finery” was also included in the book *BKO-RAK*, discussed in Chapter Five. Abstraction and ‘avant-garde’ experimentation are not popular ideals among Malian photographers.

²⁰⁰ Mercier, “*Les Rencontres*,” 20.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 19.

under a theme, “Intimate Memories of a New Millenium,” and artists from the diaspora were included as a major presence for the first time.²⁰³ This last innovation is appropriate, as Njami himself belongs to the transnational cadre of curators and artists from Africa working on the international level. However, despite AFAA’s injunction to re-prioritize in 2001, Mercier notes that the Malian public “was never touched.”²⁰⁴ Njami has subsequently directed the fifth, sixth, and seventh editions in 2003, 2005, and 2007, respectively, and his rambling, inclusive, poetic-mystical and allusive style and stamp can be seen throughout the Biennale, particularly in the introductory catalogue essays.

Since its inception, and increasingly as it has expanded, the Bamako Biennale has been remarkable for its diversity of work, of genres, and of approaches, with attention paid to art, conceptual photography, photo essays, photojournalism, and commercial studio work across Africa, revealing socially important and visually exciting practices in Sudan, Egypt, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Brazzaville, Congo, to name a few. Installations have also been included, along with a smattering of film, video and performances, and projects with children in the ‘offs.’ Workshops and master classes have been held, sometimes for a week or a month in France or in Bamako, and are exhibited during the show; others are held during the actual Biennale, along with debates and dialogues. In 2003, the budget for the Biennale was \$1 million, of which more than three-quarters came from the French government and the EU.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ The organizers invited photographers from the black community in Great Britain. Other themes have been “Sacred Rites, Profane Rites” (“*Rites sacrés / rites profanes*”) (2003) “Another World” (“*Un autre monde*”) (2005), and “In the City and Beyond” (“*Dans la ville et au-dèla*”) (2007).

²⁰⁴ Mercier, “*Les Rencontres*,” 19.

²⁰⁵ According to Vine, “Report from Mali: The Luminous Continent,” *Art in America* 92 no. 9 (October 2004), 69.

After AFAA became involved with the Biennale in 2000, attempting to include the population of Bamako within the purview of the exhibition became a goal required by the EU, as mentioned. While the creation of the African House of Photography in Bamako (*Maison Africaine de la Photographie*) in 2004 was meant to allow a certain amount of Malian control over the proceedings, so far this has not panned out very successfully, according to director Moussa Konaté.²⁰⁶ However, in the 2005 Biennale, this goal was partially achieved through the exhibition “People of Bamako,” held at the Bamako Museum.

[Figure 2:3] With the assistance of the Malian photographer Amadou Sow from the African House of African Photography, Njami invited dozens of local households to lend family portraits taken by studio photographers. These small, weathered originals, taken over seven decades by Malian photographers, were displayed anonymously in long glass cases. In Mali, it is considered unacceptable to display a person’s portrait publicly without the subject’s permission, and so Sow explained that the reason for the anonymous display was that often the lender of the photo did not have or could not obtain permission from everyone in the picture.²⁰⁷ The pictures were also digitally scanned for preservation purposes, and the digital prints were included in the catalogue. Collages of the scans were also hung above the cases exhibiting the originals in the Bamako Museum, creating a more dramatic effect and allowing easy viewing from a greater distance.

While the exhibition hall was completely empty when I visited several days after the Biennale’s opening, Sow assured me that a number of lenders had come to the

²⁰⁶ Moussa Konaté, interviews by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recordings, Bamako, Mali, 14 and 20 July 2006.

²⁰⁷ Amadou Sow, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, 5 July 2006.

opening festivities. Considering that few local Malians attended or seemed to know about the Biennale's existence, "People of Bamako" was an important attempt to bridge the wide gap between the Biennale's international audience and its host city.²⁰⁸ Indeed, it seemed like a project that should have been included in the first Biennale, not the sixth – but such is hindsight. The project revealed the formatting changes, in size and print quality, undergone by the enlargements of Keïta's and Sidibé's works, by showing vintage 'vernacular' photographs. Yet "People of Bamako" also did not shy away from highlighting the reproductive nature of photography, and its most cutting-edge technology, by exhibiting the digitally scanned prints *along with* the originals. It is surprising to find an exhibition that both celebrates the singular, original print and yet highlights photography's multiplicity. Usually emphasizing the first aspect seems to necessitate the repression of the second in pandering to the market for 'original' prints.²⁰⁹ Thus, the exhibition demonstrated the complexities of Malian studio photography as well as of photography in general; a feat that few exhibitions in the West ever accomplish. The anonymity of the clients was also in this case matched by the anonymity of the photographers, in contrast to exhibitions that emphasize the photographer's production by only using his name.²¹⁰

As a pan-African exhibition funded almost exclusively by the French government and private French companies, the Biennale and its agenda are often in tension with the

²⁰⁸ This was based on observation of the Biennale proceedings – the group was so small that everyone met each other - and from numerous conversations with local taxi drivers.

²⁰⁹ Batchen emphasizes the problematic nature of photography's reproduction in his scholarship. See in particular, "Latent History," *Art in America* 96 no. 2 (February 2008): 54-57 and "Dreams of Ordinary Life: *Cartes-de-visite* and the Bourgeois Imagination," in *Image and Imagination*, ed. Martha Langford, 63-74, 266-268 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press & Le Mois de la Photo, 2005). The *Cinéma Numérique Ambulant* (Traveling Digital Cinema) has also been an important attempt to involve the local community, although it is considered part of the 'contours.' The *CNA* is discussed briefly in Chapter Six.

²¹⁰ This would also seem to have been a choice of the curators, since usually photo studios stamp the name of the studio on the back of the prints.

Malian photographic community, who expect more consideration of their views than tends to be awarded. Konaté, the Director of the African House of Photography, admitted that he has very little control over how funds are spent.²¹¹ However, the last Biennale has proved to be a partial turning point in terms of sharing certain forms of decision-making power. Youssouf Sogodogo, Director of the CFP, Bamako's private photography school, related that all of the black-and-white prints for the 2005 Biennale were printed at the school by Sogodogo and his students.²¹²

The proliferation of biennales in 'exotic' locales, often with little money, has been a recent addition to the globalization of the artworld. While it is often seen as another case of artworld excess, some of these exhibitions are in fact de-centering the artworld, allowing artists from the 'periphery' to show in global events. This was Richard Vine's assessment of the 2003 Bamako Biennale, which he praised in *Art in America* as the most exciting photography biennale, in terms of quality, in the world.²¹³ Vine writes that it was a "salutary shock to realize that, for a decade now, one of the world's best gatherings of fine-art photography has occurred biannually in one of the earth's poorest countries – a nation with an average income of less than \$300 per capita. Moreover, the event's participants are drawn almost exclusively from a continent whose resources have long been expropriated by foreign power or squandered by homegrown tyrants."²¹⁴ Yet, why should this be a surprise? Africa has been home to diverse and richly creative exploits for centuries. Luxury has never been a prerequisite for making great art.

²¹¹ Moussa Konaté, interviews, 14 and 20 July 2006.

²¹² Youssouf Sogodogo, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 8 July 2006.

²¹³ "For all the fashionable talk about a postcolonial redress of the imbalance between major cultural centers and a neglected "periphery," the fact remains that current art, and the critical and commercial attention it generates, still tends to coalesce where the money is – in New York, not New Guinea; in Basel, not Bakersfield." Vine, "Luminous Continent," 69.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

Bamako is one of a dozen photography festivals that have been proliferating with increasing speed since the Arles Photography Biennale was founded in 1969. (Paris's "Mois de la Photo" and New York's AIPAD, though long-running, are commercial ventures.) Photo festivals sprang up in Turin, Italy and Montreal, Canada in the late '80s, followed by Bamako and Tokyo in the '90s. Since then, biennales and festivals have appeared in Santa Fe, Houston, Brighton, England and Daylesford, Australia. Photography festivals have also blossomed in Asia in the past decade, showing up in Daegu, Korea, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Gunagzhou, China. A biennale was also initiated in Iran in 1989, but then lapsed until 2004.²¹⁵

Vine's surprise about the Biennale underscores the fact that the reception of the *Rencontres* has been limited, both locally and internationally. The lack of local press caused the Biennale to generate its own 'newspaper' celebrating all of the Biennale events, every day during the *semaines professionnelles* ("professional week", i.e. the first week of the Biennale that all of the international visitors attend). It is hard to appreciate this self-generated hype, although the reporting perhaps encourages a growth of local art criticism (of which there is almost none, because most people do not spend their leisure time viewing exhibitions). Other, even more self-congratulatory, projects left a sour taste, such as the documentary of the Biennale proceedings in 2005 that showed everyone

²¹⁵ *Les Rencontres d'Arles Photographie* was founded in 1969. AIPAD (Association of International Photography Art Dealers) founded 1979, has held long running commercial shows in New York and this year is inaugurating one in Miami. Paris *Mois de la Photo* has been held every two years since 1980. Turin, Italy founded in 1987. Montreal's *Mois de la Photo* started in 1989. Tokyo International Photo Biennale was founded in 1995. Iran's 1998 biennale lapsed, but re-opened in 2004. PhotoArts Santa Fe was founded in 2001 and held jointly with APIS, which was also held in Santa Fe in 1999. The Brighton Photo Biennale in the UK began in 2003. The Daylesford Photo Biennale in Australia was founded in 2005, as were festivals in Kuala Lumpur and Gunagzhou China in 2005. Dague, Korea held a biennale in 2006.

praising their own participation, in particular AFAA.²¹⁶ In any event, the self-generated paper and the video only served to reinforce community among the Biennale participants, and to exclude a local audience. However, certain journalists who seem to consistently cover the arts wrote several reviews of the 2005 Biennale for local Bamakois papers, including *L'Essor*, the oldest and most influential newspaper.²¹⁷ The reviews are not critical, but celebratory, and emphasize Malian participants.

In terms of international reception, by far the most press reviews have been published in French magazines and newspapers, earning reviews and mentions in *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Phare*, *La Tribune*, and *Libération*.²¹⁸ In 2003, *Le Monde* ran a positive reviews that covered two-thirds of the page, mentioning Van Leo, Santu Mofokeng, Ricardo Rangel, and Mohamed Camara, while *Libération* gave the 2003 Biennale a descriptive two pages and three images.²¹⁹ The Biennale was also mentioned in *Elle* and in *Jeune Afrique*; the latter published a variety of reviews, including a short piece on wrestling images from Senegal, and two longer, more comprehensive reviews.²²⁰ *Photo Nouvelles* and *Paris Photo Magazine* also took note. While *Elle* and *Vogue* choose an exotic image to accompany a brief and superficial text, most reviews engage with the premises of the exhibition and the intellectual position of the curator. The exhibition

²¹⁶ Perhaps this is unique to AFAA-sponsored events, or perhaps it grows out of the griot praise-singing tradition; further research on the topic would be interesting.

²¹⁷ Articles about the Biennale in each paper were always by these authors: *L'essor* - M. Konate, *Les echos* - Amadou Sidibé, and *le Républicain* - Assane Koné.

²¹⁸ Colonial affiliations tend to be reiterated in contemporary Africa, as artists usually flock to the country whose language they know. Thus many Malian and other Francophone West Africans (as well as North Africans, as is well-known), emigrate to France, while the Anglophone African artists often relocate to Great Britain.

²¹⁹ Emmanuel de Roux, "Rites, hommages et découvertes aux Rencontres de Bamako," *Le Monde* 31 octobre 2003 and "Bamako, bric-à-brac," *Libération* 27 octobre 2003, 33-34.

²²⁰ Nicolas Michel, "Honneur aux artists de l'image," *Jeune Afrique - L'Intelligent*, 12/18 octobre 2003 and Charlotte Cans, "Un havre de culture à Bamako," *Jeune Afrique - L'Intelligent*, 5/11 octobre 2003.

receives more attention in France in part because sections of the Biennale have regularly traveled to participate in the Arles Biennale.

A few Anglophone journals have run reviews, with Vine's four-page article in *Art in America* in 2004 by far the most comprehensive and informative.²²¹ As selections from the 2005 Biennale traveled to San Francisco in the summer of 2007, to be displayed in the city's new Museum of African Diaspora in a show called "Lens on Life," it will be interesting to see if the Biennale garners more attention in English-speaking photography circles. Certainly the artists themselves, except for invited 'guest' nations, like Ghana, Great Britain and Germany, tend to hail from Francophone countries. It is remarkable that many of the artists live and work on the African continent, at least when they appear in their first Biennale.²²²

III. Bamako Today

Keïta's and Sidibé's fame, and the inauguration of the Bamako Biennale, have triggered an excitement about photography in Bamako that is reflected in the proliferation of the city's many new photographic institutions. These institutions have distinguished Bamako as a singular city in Africa – only Cape Town compares. To understand Bamako's relationship to photography, it is helpful to know some details about the city, as conceptions about Bamako and "Bamakois" are important to the myth-making generated by Keïta's and Sidibé's portraits.

Approximately ten percent of the country's population lives in the capital, which sprawls on the banks of the Niger River and is bordered by the Manding Mountains.

²²¹ The review was published in October 2004, almost one year later than the exhibition.

²²² Often after a first major exhibition African artists emigrate to Europe or, less often, the US, where they might have a chance to make a career.

[Figure 2:4] Bamako is much more modernized than the rest of the country, with paved main highways and roads, and several tall buildings that lend the city a distinctive horizon line along the river's north bank, a privatized transportation system, electricity that usually works, chlorinated drinking water, a few grocery stores and internet cafes which cater to foreign aid workers, and a photo studio on almost every corner. The downtown is taken over by a huge open-air market, the vast Grand Marché, and in some parts of the city herds of goats and sheep stand across from vibrant nightclubs. **[Figure 2:5]** Like New York or London, Bamako gathers people from across the country. The mélange of ethnicities and castes, together with modernity and a weighty colonial presence, have produced its own unique, urban culture.²²³

In his characterization of six general types of post-independence African cities, Anthony O'Connor refers to Bamako as a 'colonial' city.²²⁴ A small market town ruled by the Bamana Niaré clan before colonialism, Bamako became the capital of the French Sudan and was retained as the capital after the country's transition to independence. Thus its government, infrastructure, socialization, community organization, population, social imaginary and physical spaces were reorganized and transformed by French rule to become economically, as opposed to spiritually, functional.²²⁵ Thus Bamako could be

²²³ Diawara, "Talk of the Town," 236. Gosselin uses the idea of 'mestizo logic' (see Jean-Loup Amselle, *Mestizo Logics: The Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998). She writes, "this particular hybrid construction of ethnicity that allows me to argue that in urban Mali, excision is to be understood in relationship to a (southern) 'Malian' culture – as opposed to for instance a 'Bamanan', 'Mandinka' or 'fulbe' culture. The crystallization of differences that is enshrined in the latter approach is more of an inheritance from a colonial administration that had a need to classify in order to govern more firmly, than an accurate reflection of a historically fluid socioscape." Gosselin, "Campaigning Against Excision," 55.

²²⁴ See O'Connor, *The African City*, 32-34. O'Connor wrote his book before the term postcolonialism became popular.

²²⁵ See Moussa Dembélé, "French Colonization and Urban Evolution in Djenné and Bamako," in *Globalization and Urbanization in Africa*, eds. Toyin Falola and Steven J. Salm, 217-247 (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), 241.

considered the *most* postcolonial of Mali's cities, in contrast to Djenne or Timbuktu, for example, which have been important trading centers since medieval times, but which are important today as historical and cultural sites, rather than as centers of governmental or economic power.²²⁶

I emphasize the peculiar circumstance of Bamako in contrast to the rest of Mali because it is precisely Bamako's 'colonial' quality, i.e. its highly postcolonial nature, which makes the city conducive to the growth of an art photography movement. While studio photographers, and eventually press photographers, worked in towns across the country, the two photographers who were first internationally 'discovered' hailed from Bamako. Indeed, Magnin only met Sidibé because he was looking for Keïta. Because Bamako has an airport and is a hub of transportation, it is today a way-station for tourists and scholars en route to the more art historically famous regions of Djenne and Dogon country; Vogel likely picked up Keïta's negatives in the 1970s on her way through Bamako, since her original research was conducted in the Ivory Coast. In other words, all of the characteristics that made Bamako an important center contributed to the eventual internationalization of Keïta – his pictures documented a wide variety of people because of his location, the same location encouraged his eventual discovery, no doubt through his local reputation. Similarly, the influx of modern imagery in Bamako – visible in newspapers, cinema, and billboards, would also have presumably created a public that was more visually oriented toward the two-dimensional form of photography than people

²²⁶ In his comparison on the French re-organization of physical space in Bamako and Djenne, and the subsequent reorganization of social space and thus the reorganization of the functionality of the city's spaces, Dembélé shows how Bamako was much more affected than Djenne by the French. Ibid. Both Djenne and Timbuktu are UNESCO world heritage sites. Many people in Bamako keep up close relationships with their home villages, and there tend to be groups (civic organizations) of members of a particular village. Dakar is even more quintessentially the 'colonial' city, as it was the capital of the whole of French territory, it had a much longer history of French occupation, and its location on the coast makes it more 'cosmopolitan' and in contact with international trade, trends, and ideas.

in villages who did not have access to modern imagery. Thus, studio photography participated in the modern visual culture of the city.

IV. New Photographic Institutions in Bamako

After the founding of the Biennale, a number of photographic institutions sprang up in Bamako, and other, already-established institutions began to promote photography in their programs. Bamako is home to three museums: the National Museum, a regional museum, the Museum of the District of Bamako, and the Women's Museum, founded by Adam Ba Konaré, the wife of former President Alpha Omar Konaré. The National Museum, which houses an important collection of precolonial objects and archival material, and which is considered one of the finest in West Africa, supports the art photography movement in several ways. Four prominent art photographers work or used to work at the National Museum, and the Museum sometimes exhibits photographic exhibitions and is one of the Biennale venues.²²⁷ The French Cultural Center (CCF, not to be confused with the CFP) is also an important institution with regard to international cultural offerings, such as films and performances, a vestigial continuation of the French colonial policy of cultural assimilation. The building contains exhibition spaces, a library, and an outdoor café. The CCF often displays local, contemporary photography exhibits and is one of the official venues of the Biennale. The café is an informal gathering area of internationals and expatriates, especially during the opening week of the Biennale. The Bamako Museum has also hosted Biennale exhibitions and local shows put on by the two photography schools. These institutions, with the exception of the Hampté Bâ, are

²²⁷ Usually the exhibitions document traditional culture, rather than showcase contemporary photography. The importance of the National Museum and its photographers are discussed further in Chapter Five.

centrally located in a part of the city dominated by colonial architecture. Indeed, an exhibition of colonial buildings was the theme of a photography show instituted by *Promo Femme*, the woman's photography school.

The Amadou Hampaté Bâ Cultural Center, named after Mali's most famous author, has hosted some of the Biennale's exhibitions. The Center was created for cultural festivals and music and dance performances. The Amitié Sofitel Hotel, a five-star hotel that is one of Bamako's two tall buildings, boasting a swimming pool and a golf course for expatriate aid and embassy workers, was the site of a number of the Biennale banquets, and hosted several of the international curators and artists invited by AFAA.

Association Seydou Keïta (ASK) was founded by Patras and the Malian photographer Alioune Bâ in 2001, shortly before Keïta's death. Patras is the secretary and Bâ is the president. He is also one of the National Museum's official photographers, and an art photographer in his own right, which is how he came to know Seydou Keïta. Patras has offices in Paris, and coordinates gallery shows with Sean Kelly in New York, which showed *Seydou Keïta: Image King of Africa* in the spring of 2006. Such a title distorts the historical situation, contributing to the iconicity of Keïta as the only photographer in Africa, while apparently referring to Keïta's name as heir to the legendary Sundiata Keïta (which give a rather romantic spin to Keïta's modern, bureaucratic era). The show did not offer much contextualizing information on specific photographs, merely repeating a few of the well-known facts of Keïta's studio practice, such as the use of props and backdrops. Thousands of Keïta's negatives languish in a metal trunk in the office of ASK, in temperatures of ninety degrees, due to the florid controversy between the

Pigozzi and Magnin team and Patras, which has made Keïta's prints virtually untouchable by the artworld because of their hazy legal status.

Although the Association has a gallery space, it is located in a rather inaccessible neighborhood where the old airport used to be, although it is a possible walk from the African House of Photography. Across the street from ASK, a decidedly different, collective arts venture, titled *Centre Soleil*, has hosted photographic and digital workshops, although its focus is on drawing, painting, bogolan and sculpture. The African House of Photography, home to the Biennale's organizational center, has two air-conditioned offices in a building with a lovely open-air gallery in which photographs are shown during the Biennale. However, the offices do not contain archives or an indoor, protected gallery space. **[Figure 2:6]**

Two private photography schools and photography programs at both the college and graduate government schools also contribute to the burgeoning art movement. The *Centre de Formation en Photographie* was originally called Helvetas. **[Figure 2:7]** It was founded in 1998 by the Swiss association Helvetas, but leadership and financing was shifted to Malian hands in 2004, along with the name change. The President works at the National Museum, and the Director used to work there but now is occupied full-time at CFP. The CFP offers a two-year course of study, where students learn about technological and aesthetic aspects of photography. An exchange with the Swiss school in Lausanne continues, so that a few of the students each year are Swiss. The CFP has encouraged women to become photographers by ensuring that each incoming class has an equal number of women and men. A representative project, called *Bio-Coton*, documents an organic cotton farm in a village which is trying to become productive and yet healthy.

[Figure 2:8] The other private school, *Promo Femme: Center of Audio Visual Education for Young Women*, was founded in 1996.²²⁸ While photography is taught at the public arts institution, the National Institute of the Arts (INA), there is only one photographer professor in residence, although other photographers like Diarra guest lecture. **[Figure 2:9]** INA also encouraged female students in photography.²²⁹ The new, public graduate school of the arts, the Balla Fasséké Conservatory of Arts and Multimedia, includes a photography program and has hired Amadou Chab Touré to teach aesthetics. **[Figure 2:10]**

Touré formerly taught at CFP, and now runs a photography gallery called Galerie Chab, which he founded in 2000. **[Figure 2:11]** He states that the market for such work is not strong, and that it is mostly composed of Western expatriates in Mali. Touré has sometimes organized or participated in the *Contours* (the ‘off’ exhibitions), and has exhibited most of the art photographers in solo or group shows. He also exhibits European photographers, and was planning to start showing Senegalese and other West African photographers. Along with all of the photographic institutions, many photography societies and organizations have been created that do not seem to have a physical space, but which are influential in encouraging members to learn about and discuss photography, and to inspire ideas about work as well as about funding. AMAP, the Malian press agency, still hires photographers as well.²³⁰

While all of the new photographic institutions promise increased opportunity for a developing photo community, few of them are solely Malian enterprises. The Biennale is a joint French-Malian production, funded by the French Ministry of Culture and the

²²⁸ For further discussion of women photographers and *Promo Femme* see Chapter Six.

²²⁹ *Le Centre de Formation en Photographie*.

²³⁰ Further discussed in Chapter Three.

EU, while the CFP was originally a Swiss-Malian organization called Helvetas, and retains its link with a Swiss art school, although it is solely Malian funded and run. ASK appears only nominally Malian; although headed by Bâ, who shows new exhibitions in the gallery, the actual handling and printing of Keïta's negatives seems to occur in the Paris office run by Patras. The Oscura Association was a European-based photo society that opened its Pinhole Workshops in Bamako in 1996, offering pin-hole cameras to children. This has since closed, while the American-Malian collaboration dubbed Visual Griots, with a similar program, was initiated in 2003. Although these hybrid European or American and Malian co-operations may smack of neo-colonialist imperialism, (some more than others), they are decisive contributors to the development of new forms of photography in Africa, and offer opportunities both for the reinforcement of a new understanding of African modernity and creativity, and for increased financial opportunities within Bamako itself.

Bamako, then, is in the process of *becoming* an important center of African photography, aided by the close relationships of the photographic community. In this postcolonial city, the growing art photography movement oscillates between coercive, globalizing forces and pertinent local meanings and aesthetics, embodying the postcolonial nature of Malian identity. Bamako's growing fame in photography circles proceeds apace, with an attendant emphasis within the city on art photography and a global flowering of interest in African photography. Although the vernacular photographs taken by Sidibé and Keïta have been shown mostly as art in a modern, Western sense, enlarged and admired for their fine art aesthetic, the international notice paid to these photographers has returned attention to Bamako by encouraging a contemporary art

sensibility among photographers currently working in the city. Yet, Bamako remains a city rooted in tradition and its photographers and photographic institutions are creating new forms of relationships and aesthetics that remain uniquely Bamakois, creating forms that cross boundaries between traditional worldviews and modern aesthetics, with a variety of results. The following chapter will examine some of these results, after examining the cultural modes out of which art photography has emanated.

VI. Genealogy of Art Photography

Because there was no tradition of ‘art photography’ in Bamako until the founding of the Biennale, the question of who became art photographers, and to which traditions they look back to or came out of, is important for explaining the movement’s presence and concerns today. Revisionist scholarship has combated an old stereotype that African artists are not innovative, but merely ‘copy’ traditions handed down from master to apprentice over the generations. The earlier argument was that traditional African cultures do not tend to value innovation, originality and individualism in the same way that those qualities are valued in the West. Various scholars have shown that the situation is much more complex; that traditions undergo constant modification, that artists *are* indeed concerned with invention, and naturally with skill, and that new forms can generate great excitement among artists. “We can now see that African art has responded to the social and political upheavals that have taken place all over the continent. ...New types of artists give expression to new ideas, work for different clients, fulfil new functions. Accepting the challenge of Europe, the African artist does not hesitate to adopt

the new materials, be inspired by foreign art, look for a different role in society. New forms, new styles and new personalities are emerging everywhere....”²³¹

In the *Africa Explores* catalogue, Vogel’s controversial categorizations of contemporary art, which she labeled ‘strains,’ initiated a serious dialogue about what contemporary African art is.²³² Vogel’s strains, under which objects in the exhibition chapters in the catalogue were organized, were: Traditional, New Functional, Urban, International, and “Extinct.”²³³ These were more complexly reiterated in V.Y. Mudimbe’s essay, “*Reprendre: Enunciations and Strategies in Contemporary African Arts*” in the *Africa Explores* catalogue as “currents” or “trends.”²³⁴ Although seemingly overlooked by Vogel’s critics, Mudimbe’s “currents” of “tradition-inspired,” “modern,” and “popular” cohere closely with Vogel’s “strains,” although Mudimbe emphasizes the importance of examining art from the perspective of social history, emphasizing discontinuities and breaks, in order to dispel any notions of a Jungian, universal African sub-consciousness.²³⁵ Still, both authors make an effort to differentiate among traditional, performative forms of art that create or release a sacred or magical power; works made by artists trained at a Western or Western-influenced academy; and art that would in the West be called ‘material visual culture,’ i.e., popular, local, without power, and not taught at an academy. While Vogel separates Christian or Islamic forms (i.e. non-animist

²³¹ Ulli Beier, *Contemporary Art in Africa* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968), 14, also cited in V. Y. Mudimbe, “*Reprendre: Enunciations and Strategies in Contemporary African Arts*” in *Africa Explores*, 280.

²³² For debates over Vogel’s assertions, see Robert Farris Thompson, “Afro-Modernism” *Artforum* v.30 (September 1991): 91-94 and John Picton, “In Vogue, or The Flavour of the Month: The New Way to Wear Black” in *Reading the Contemporary*, 114-126.

²³³ Vogel, “Foreword,” in *Africa Explores*, 10-11.

²³⁴ Mudimbe specifies that these are “currents (not categories),” “*Reprendre*,” 280.

²³⁵ Picton’s complaint directed at Vogel was that, “neither the categories themselves, nor the paradigm contrasts that underpin them, have their origins in the lives of the people whose things are the subject matter of ‘Africa Explores,’” “In Vogue,” 124. This criticism would seem to apply to Mudimbe’s “currents” as well.

religious forms) into “New Functional,” Mudimbe states that they “should be situated between the tradition-inspired and the modernist trend.”²³⁶

Studio photography, as a new technology introduced by the French for the purposes of commercial portraiture, developed under a different route than that of traditional arts *or* modern arts in Mali. Thus portrait photography would fall into the ‘popular’ category, but *art* photography would fall into the second, the one distinguished by artists trained at Western or Western-influenced academies. This is a rough categorization, however; some ‘art’ photographers were first and foremost studio photographers, i.e. they come to art photography from a ‘popular’ background. However, many studio owners, as well as photographers who never worked in a studio, were originally trained as artists in other fields, such as drawing, painting, or jewelry-making, at the National Institute of the Arts in Bamako (INA). Prominent older photographers were typically trained abroad during the socialist era, and today most younger photographers, and all of the women, have been trained in the new photography schools in Bamako. These photographers also often undertake apprenticeships at studios, however. One successful photographer, Mohamed Camara, whose work is discussed in Chapter Four, received no training at all before his breakthrough exhibitions. So it can be seen that most photographers who practice art photography cross over between the two strains or currents of ‘popular’ and ‘academically-trained artist,’ but that all are responding to the development of the Biennale as a showcase for art photography.

As in most African countries, ‘art’ as it is understood in the West did not exist before European infiltration and colonialism. Mudimbe explains, “what is called African art covers a wide range of objects introduced into a historicizing perspective of European

²³⁶ Mudimbe, “*Reprendre*,” 280.

values since the eighteenth century.”²³⁷ Sculptures, masks and costumes were used in conjunction with rituals, music and dancing, on religious, political, and social occasions, and acquired meaning in specific contexts. As mentioned, Mande societies were comprised of three castes, one of which was the *nyamakala*, or ‘people who handle *nyama*.’ This includes the male smith-sculptors and female cloth-dyers, who each handle healing arts and circumcision for their respective genders. Smithing or making Bamana mud cloth, called *bogolan*, requires handling *nyama*, power or energy that permeates living beings, and that can be harmful or healing depending on the situation in which it is released.²³⁸ The material ‘arts’ of smithing and cloth dying involve a lifetime of inculcation in Bamana spirituality, taught by an older, more experienced person. The objects are commissioned for a particular person or social group (i.e. a masking society) and carry a magical potency. Sarah Brett-Smith writes, “The primary purpose of Bamana ritual objects is almost never aesthetic pleasure....In fact, sculpture does not exist as a term.”²³⁹ Instead, the word *mako* is translated as need, necessity, or lack, and is included in the names of sculptures, such as in the phrase she quotes, ““wood carvings that fix needs.””²⁴⁰ Thus, according to Brett-Smith, the Bamana, “view carved objects primarily as solutions for urgent and inescapable needs.”²⁴¹ Photography is unlike traditional arts, in that, as a modern medium that developed under colonialism, photographers today hail from all castes, ethnicities, and economic classes, although many of the ‘art’ photographers mentioned in this dissertation tend to be elites. In contrast to the traditional

²³⁷ V. Y. Mudimbe, “African Art as a Question Mark” in *African Studies Review* v. 29 no.1 (1986), 3-4.

²³⁸ Often translated as ‘life-force.’

²³⁹ Sarah Brett-Smith, *The Making of Bamana Sculpture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 24.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

arts of Mali, whose creation and use are inseparable from cultural and religious uses, I was told by various photographers that their medium possesses no *nyama*, or magical power, although *gris-gris*, or negative magic, can exist in photography as in all areas of life.²⁴²

One aspect that photography shares with Mali's 'traditional' arts, however, is the transformation it has undergone, both locally when the medium received attention from an international audience, and internationally, when the work is exhibited outside of its original social context. The objects take on different meanings, from functioning in a social context to functioning as 'fine art.' Unlike studio photography, the shift towards creating art photography effectively limits its viewers to a mostly Western international audience, rupturing the social and communal ties to a local economy of exchange that studio photography still perpetuates.

The authors of *In/Sight* – Okwui Enwezor, Octavio Zaya, and Clare Bell - elide the problem of whether or not Keïta's work is 'art' by treating all African photography presented in the exhibition as art. Keïta and other studio photographers are consistently referred to as "artists," even while their practices as portrait photographers are elaborated.²⁴³ When looking at the history of African art, and indeed the history of Western painting, this is a viable position if one considers that the category of 'art' is not African in the first place, and that many photographs that were originally not intended as art are now displayed as art. However, as Rosalind Krauss has noted, the misconception of treating commercial or vernacular photography as art distorts or evades the historical

²⁴² Again this was not the focus of my study, nor am I trained in this field, so it is possible that photographers did not want to *admit* to *nyama*; but in any event, I found the medium to be mostly lacking in any sense of religion or spirit, except for photographers claiming that another person was trying to harm them when they developed a blank picture.

²⁴³ Clare Bell, "Introduction" in *In/sight*, 11.

circumstances that produced it.²⁴⁴ While I am sympathetic to Enwezor's position, I believe it is useful to make distinctions between how art and photography functioned in their local communities and how they function when released into the art world at large. While traditional arts are associated with *nyama* and performances, African entrepreneurs who discovered the burgeoning European interest in African 'curios' began selling off powerful masks and sculptures in the late 1800s. Soon African carvers began creating objects solely for the Western trade, and not for local use, resulting in what is now called tourist or 'airport art.' Such work is now practiced by hosts of carvers in the long stalls of the *Artisanat* across the street from INA.

INA itself was founded under colonialism as the *Maison des Artisans Soudanais* in 1932, to keep alive traditional arts in a modern context.²⁴⁵ What the West deems modern and contemporary art forms, such as painting and sculpture, were introduced into Mali by the French during colonialism, and were taught at INA. After independence, INA's role was to teach traditional arts forms as well as modern art forms, so that students upon graduation could relocate to rural towns and villages to teach traditional arts in a nationalist revival. Many professors at INA studied in the USSR or Soviet-bloc countries, when socialist realism was predominant in those countries.

Photography did not enter the curriculum at INA until recently.²⁴⁶ The school's French benefactors promoted 'traditional' Western art, i.e. drawing and painting and sculpture, as opposed to the medium of photography, whose validation as art was still

²⁴⁴ See Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View" *Art Journal* 42 no. 4 (Winter, 1982), 311-319.

²⁴⁵ Imperato, *Mali: A Search for Direction*, 94.

²⁴⁶ According to Youssouf Traoré, the Audio/Visual Section was initiated in 1976, when he began teaching there as the photography professor. Keller, email communication, August 20, 2008; Youssouf Traoré, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 4 July 2006.

tenuous in France. Photography as art was practiced by very few artists at INA until Keïta's and Sidibé's fame revolutionized the field. As noted, many of today's photographers, including Malick Sidibé, studied at INA before becoming art photographers. (Sidibé was trained in jewelry-making). The art photographers welcomed the creative opportunities afforded them by the Biennale, which opened up traditional notions of photography.²⁴⁷ As many art photographers hail from either studio or fine art backgrounds, or, like Malick Sidibé, both, the opportunities that the Biennale afforded in terms of conceptualizing the function of photography was, in a word, exciting.

Working in black and white is for many the surest sign of the *artist* as photographer, although with digital a few are also beginning to work in color. The success of Camara, the young artist who was given a solo exhibition at the Tate Modern in London, and who had worked with a color digital camera, may have increased photographers' appetite for color.²⁴⁸ Complete abstraction is not appreciated; I saw only a few truly abstract images – in the style of Rodchenko or Moholy-Nagy, for example – by a handful of photographers. Similarly, I rarely saw pictures that were composed of unusual viewing angles, extreme contrasts, unrealistic color choices (though almost no one works in color), or unexpected subjects. While *formal* innovation was not the main concern of most of the photographers with whom I spoke, the excitement about pursuing subjects other than portraits for photographers was palpable.

When using Mudimbe's categories in the situation of Mali's art photography movement, I believe it is also helpful to distinguish between artists trained in Western academies, and artists who are trained in Western-oriented academies *within* Africa. For

²⁴⁷ None of the women had studied at INA, although INA now teaches women as well as men. All of the women had first attended *Promo Femme*.

²⁴⁸ A few work also in color – Racine Keïta, Mamadou Konaté, Alimata Traoré, Penda Diakite.

example, the artist Allan deSouza emigrated from Kenya with his Indian and African parents at the age of seven. Trained at Goldsmiths in London, exposed to Marxist theory at the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program in New York, and now working in Los Angeles, deSouza cannot be pigeon-holed as belonging to a singular identity, even one as broad as 'African' or 'Asian,' although he participates in group shows of both identifications. He is, more accurately, a transnational artist whose work illuminates the interstices of cultural, national, and racial boundaries. While he has been included in the 2005 Bamako Biennale, as well as in *Africa Remix* and *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, his profile of education in the most elite art institutions of the Western metropolises positions his work differently than any of the photographers from Mali, all of whom have been educated either in that country, or in the outmoded art schools of the former soviet-bloc.

While most of the art photographers whom I interviewed belong to the 'educated elite' in Mali, as indeed was the case when photography first began to be practiced by Africans, 'elite' in Mali does not carry the same connotation as 'elite' in France or the US.²⁴⁹ The only Malian photographer whose work has been shown in the vein of international conceptualism is Mohamed Camara, who did not study in art school at all.²⁵⁰ Many photographers graduated from INA in other fields, and turned to photography after their more traditional arts training. Others came to art photography

²⁴⁹ "Students, especially those in secondary and postsecondary schools, are a privileged elite in Mali, although they rarely see themselves as such." Imperato, *Mali: A Search for Direction*, 90. A recent scenario that highlights the elite education of some studio photographers can be seen in the example of H. Matene Y. Diallo, a young photographer who had opened his studio, Dial-Style, shortly before we interviewed him on June 8, 2006. (Unfortunately for him, he unknowingly opened his studio two doors down from the popular studioist Mamadou Konaté, so he was not getting much business). Diallo had recently graduated from college in Algeria. Upon his return, after being unable to find steady work in a bank, for which he had earned his degree, he utilized his computer, printer, digital camera and photoshop program to set up a fully digital studio.

²⁵⁰ His work is discussed in Chapter Four.

from a studio or itinerant background, while many of the younger photographers had studied at CFP, and, if they were female, at *Promo Femme*. While it has become a divisive issue among African artists who show abroad, and while I do not want to act as an arbiter of ‘authenticity,’ or to judge who is or who is not ‘African,’ an analysis of the socio-historical context in which Malian photographers work makes it necessary to point out this difference. An artist’s training typically influences not only an artist’s work, but also his or her perception of who an audience may be, not to mention what career opportunities might be available.

I believe that art photography, in its hybrid location between popular studio photography, rife with social, local meaning, and the Western-slanted aesthetic of the contemporary international art world, can, at its most powerful, offer several areas of liberation. The first is found in the creative possibilities that art photography offers its practitioners. A new field is opened where none was before, drawing artists trained in more traditional media, as well as those who never dreamed of becoming artists until they took up photography. With this unleashing of creative energies, new *forms* of memory and interaction can be discovered. Keïta’s and Sidibé’s responses to this new freedom are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Studio Photography Glamorized and Globalized

The globalization of Malian photography has occurred on many fronts, but in all cases the initial impetus of internationalization can be traced back to the West's 'discovery' of Keïta and Sidibé, and to the continued international interest promoted by Bamako's hosting of the African continent's only photography Biennale. The rest of my dissertation examines various circumstances that have resulted from this remarkable situation.

Globalization is broadly defined as the movement of ideas, capital and populations across national boundaries, occurring as a result of the integration and interdependence of economic markets. While the definition of globalization is neutral, the effects are generally viewed as negative, except by conservative economists. Critics of globalization cite negative consequences for nations with less power, generally those of the so-called "Third World," whose populations are exploited by richer countries with devastating consequences on the environment, economies, and culture. Global corporations founded in wealthy Western countries attempt to infiltrate and monopolize the varied cultures of the world, exploiting cheap labor and contributing to an eradication of cultural difference. This fundamental power differential has to be acknowledged, as seen for example in the difficulty Malians have in obtaining a visa to travel to the US or France, or the fact that most of the audience at the Essakane festival of the desert near Timbuktu is composed of foreign tourists. But this does not mean that 'Malian' culture cannot ever transform 'Western' idioms, nor that Malian artists are entirely without agency in their transactions, or that their works do not further a certain image of Mali in Western eyes that may gradually inform and transform ignorant or dismissive Western

gazes.²⁵¹ Photographers themselves have benefited from the post-independence restructuring of social and economic hierarchies, so that they have more resources for realizing their goals than most Malians. The recuperating agency that Bhabha alludes to, in his theory of hybridity, can be seen through careful examination of the circumstances in which photographic images and ideas about them are circulated, exhibited, published, and put into use.

The following chapter looks at how the international fame of Keïta and Sidibé affected their own production. I take two examples, Seydou Keïta's 1998 fashion shoots for *Harper's Bazaar* and Malick Sidibé's conceptual photography series "Vue de dos" ("views from behind"), as opportunities to elucidate several key dilemmas in Malian photography and in contemporary African art scholarship.

II. Social vs. Art Photography – Sidibé's "Views from Behind"

Despite its controversial status, the founding of the Biennale was the touchstone for the development of art photography in Bamako, according to virtually all of the art photographers whom I interviewed, and almost all of the photographers spoke positively about the Biennale.²⁵² The first edition of the Biennale highlighted Keïta's and Sidibé's portraits, which were originally created for vernacular use, as commercial studio portraits for local circulation and distribution. Commercial studios did not create art photography as it is understood in the Western sense, but the change in the *monetary value* of Keïta's

²⁵¹ Obviously in the sphere of art history, the modernists' response to African masks in the early twentieth century is one such example; the popularity of rock or hip-hop as a global cultural idiom speaks to the African influence in a more historical view. Suffice to say that 'American' culture, itself a hybridized 'melting pot,' has been produced through the migration, among others, of millions of Africans during the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

²⁵² It is possible that this was out of politeness, or out of the danger of criticism causing them to lose a chance at exhibiting, but many also seemed genuinely happy about it.

and Sidibé's portraits accompanied a change in their *artistic value* as well. Accordingly, Keïta's and Sidibé's works are often displayed as art at international exhibitions, with little contextual background, and printed at art market sizes and with art market production values.²⁵³ At Keïta's last show at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York in early 2006, for example, all of the pictures were blown up to life size and beautifully printed with strong contrasts.²⁵⁴ The prints that Keïta and Sidibé actually sold on a day-to-day basis were roughly the size of postcards and were printed at less intense value contrasts due to the lack of quality materials and air conditioning available. **[Figure 3:1]** While the changed context in which Keïta's portraits are shown in the West have prompted various critiques, it is important to note that he consented to this re-contextualization, and indeed was proud to see his work printed so large and with such sharp contrasts.²⁵⁵

The art photography movement's lack of local social meaning and audience accompanies a lack of legibility to that audience. The change from commercial studio photography to art photography has an important social dimension in Mali, and Malick Sidibé exemplifies the community-oriented, socially-involved values of the former. Although he is a world famous photographer, Sidibé can still be found at his studio in the neighborhood of Bagadiji every workday when he is home in Bamako. He welcomes anyone who visits, and greets everyone who walks by. Family and friends sit, talk, and drink tea outside the studio, as they do at most business establishments in the city. In an

²⁵³ Batchen notes the relationship between Keïta's originals and his gallery prints in "Does Size Matter?" *Camerawork: Journal of Photographic Arts* 30 no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2003), 6-12.

²⁵⁴ According to Rips, the printer for the 2006 exhibition at Sean Kelly Gallery, Charles Griffin, stated that he had never seen a vintage photograph by Keïta. Griffin also prints photographs for Cindy Sherman and Hiroshi Sugimoto. "Who Owns Seydou Keïta?" 33.

²⁵⁵ "ML: What are your thoughts about the enlargements that have been made from your negatives for recent exhibitions of your work in Europe and the United States?"

SK: "You can't imagine what it was like for me the first time I saw prints of my negatives printed large-scale, no spots, clean and perfect. I knew then that my work was really, really good." Lamunière, interview with Seydou Keïta assisted by Baba Maiga, trans. Lia Brozgal in *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 47.

interview with Njami in 2001, Sidibé speaks about his love for photographing people, and about the “new mentality” held by today’s photographers. He says, “Today...I often have the feeling that photographers think only of money. We were professionals and also had to earn our living, of course. But there is no passion today.”²⁵⁶ Sidibé’s comment about money echoes Frederic Jameson’s characterization of postmodernism, which he sees as predicated on a new phase of global economics he calls multinational capitalism.²⁵⁷ The shift to a capitalist money economy enforced by colonialism in Mali had ever-deepening ramifications for the communal nature of precolonial society. Sidibé, who worked in the post-independence era, comments on the gradual changes in society that have occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century:

In our day, we lived in a community and were always together. The family was of great significance. Today, by contrast, the world has become much more individual. Music is a good example: at concerts the audience sit there passively, listen and applaud. But they should be taking part. In our days, we barely noticed the musicians; we listened to the music and danced until we were dripping with sweat...Today the ‘star’ is separated from the audience. This is something I cannot understand.²⁵⁸

The tension between individual and community is particularly strong today in Mali, as Dorothea Schulz has noted.²⁵⁹ Before colonialism, an individual’s role, in terms of life choices such as whom to marry, where to live, and what to do, tended to be subsumed to the community under strongly delineated roles, designated by age, gender, and caste. Today, especially in urbanized Bamako, social hierarchies are breaking down and traditions are changing. The Western

²⁵⁶ Malick Sidibé, interview with Simon Njami, “The movement of life,” in *Flash Afrique!*, 96.

²⁵⁷ See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

²⁵⁸ Sidibé, “The movement of life,” 96.

²⁵⁹ Dorothea E. Schulz, “Music Videos and the Effeminate Vices of Urban Culture in Mali” *Africa* 71 no. 3. (2001), 345-372.

emphasis on individual freedom has instigated young people's rebellion against societal constraints. The shift to a capitalist economy and a high rate of unemployment for youth contributes to such tensions. Whereas in precolonial society these youth would have had a proper role and position in society (though subordinated to elders), now many lack an area into which they can fit as productive members of society. Such tensions are felt particularly in families, of immense importance to Malians, because of the 'disrespect' shown to elders by youth. Sidibé's analysis of the changes that music has undergone can equally be applied to photography, in that art photography lacks the social and communal value that studio portraits emphasized, and to which they contributed. Sidibé himself dislikes abstract photography that does not show the viewer's face or body, and therefore cannot speak to a broad, popular audience.²⁶⁰

Sidibé's series "Views from Behind" becomes particularly interesting with regard to legibility, communal values and globalization. While retaining the studio format, Sidibé has recently taken pictures of mostly female models with their backs turned. Several of these pictures were included in the 2003 Hassleblad Award book *Malick Sidibé: Photographs*. In an interview, André Magnin asks Sidibé, "For the last two years you have taken photographs without being commissioned to, like your photographs from behind. How did you come upon this idea?" Magnin's question highlights the fact that Sidibé has taken up the mantle of 'art photographer' by choosing to photograph without commission. Sidibé responds, "Like me you have undoubtedly noticed that, in the street, the men walk behind

²⁶⁰ Malick Sidibé, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 20 June 2006.

their women. They see them from the back, then they pass them and turn to look at them from in front. Only the photograph can tell you if you look nice from behind.” Sidibé’s last sentence disingenuously suggests that the women desire to have the portrait taken in order to see their own derrieres (as if two mirrors would not work just as well). But this contradicts the fact that Sidibé paid the models to take their pictures, and not vice versa.²⁶¹ When I asked Sidibé about the series, he again explained that women look beautiful from behind, i.e. that sexual attraction was the impetus (at least, for the pictures of women). Indeed, in Malian culture the rear end is considered the sexiest feature of a woman’s body (in contrast to breasts, for example, which tend to be considered more functional than sexy). The photographs of women from behind, particularly the ones wearing bras who are partially undressed, are meant to be beautiful and titillating, in the same vein as the Western tradition of the erotic nude or semi-nude. **[Figure 3:2]**

“Views from Behind” was also printed in a chapbook by Amadou Chab Touré called *Malick Sidibé: Photographer*.²⁶² The selection of the works and the way they are positioned in publications affects the reader’s understanding of the series. On the first page of the book appears, “Views from behind: photographs, from 1977 to 2000.” This is the only place in the book that gives dates; thus, the implication is that Sidibé began this series in 1977. However, close observation of the images themselves suggest a somewhat different story. The pictures taken before Sidibé became internationally famous always show the subject’s face, looking over his or her shoulder, so that the “View from the back” clearly

²⁶¹ Malick Sidibé, interview, 20 June 2006.

²⁶² Amadou Chab Touré, *Malick Sidibé: photographe* (Montreuil-sous-Bois: Éditions de l’Œil, 2001).

constitutes an innovative variation on the studio pose that still function as portraits for which someone would pay money, because the person is recognizable. **[Figures 3:3 & 3:4]** In contrast, the pictures taken *after* Sidibé became famous show only the backs of figures' heads. **[Figures 3:5, 3:6 & 3:7]** (One clue is that the studio floor is the same in all of the later pictures, a low 'stage' of tiny linoleum squares, which in the other pictures are hidden by various patterned coverings).²⁶³

On the one hand, the collected "Views from Behind" do reveal Sidibé's ongoing interest in photographing a person from behind. On the other hand, an important break occurs after Sidibé's exposure in multiple exhibitions and publications in Western countries. To photograph a person without showing his or her face violates the very point of the studio photograph. Sidibé said as much himself in an interview, claiming that if one cannot recognize the person in a picture, the picture is no good.²⁶⁴ Thus it is clear that, after coming into contact with the international art world, Sidibé modified and expanded his conceptualization of photography. To include all of these pictures as if in one series stretches the conceptual point of the project, and contributes to the repression of Sidibé's pre-discovery portraits as commercial work, and not as 'art' in the Western sense.

In the recent series from behind that have been published, three pictures of men from behind are shown, not on the stage of the studio itself, but in other contexts. Two are of Sidibé's sons, Amidou and Siné, and one shows a friend of another son – this is explained in the titles in the back of the book. In one, Siné wears a sharp suit and a fedora, and carries a slim briefcase. **[Figure 3:5]** His dark

²⁶³These pictures share similarities with the 2000-2002 pictures reproduced in Hasselblad's *Malick Sidibé: Photographs*, and one, "Large family from the rear" (Hasselblad, 99) is reproduced in both volumes.

²⁶⁴Malick Sidibé, interview by author, unrecorded, Bamako, Mali, 22 November 2005.

silhouette presents a striking contrast to the light-filled dirt courtyard he is walking through, with its odd piles of rubble, a rusted metal bucket on its side, and a rickety cinder-block wall with a man's face peering enigmatically between the chinks. This picture plays on the juxtaposition of the wealthy, mysterious man with the everyday, impoverished background. The suggestion is of agency: an African man taking control of a situation despite difficult physical circumstances, or, perhaps, complicity: the rich men who succeed through corruption. The interesting ambiguity produced by concealing the man's face sets this picture firmly in the realm of art, as opposed to studio, photography.

Some pictures *are* set in the studio, and if the subjects were facing forward, would constitute a typical studio portrait. These pictures clearly reverse the terms of the Western gaze, as Candace Keller has suggested, since they were produced after, and obviously in response to, Sidibé's Western exposure.²⁶⁵ They explicitly confound the local logic of the studio portrait, which is above all to recognize the subject. Only one of these is printed in the monograph, titled "Large family from the rear." **[Figure 3:6]** Whether this conceptual strategy is ultimately successful or interesting depends on how it is meant and how it is understood.

The last type of pictures shows women, often with their shirt or blouse removed, from behind. **[Figure 3:7]** These pictures function like "Large family," but in the context of the lone woman, the pictures take on the erotic dimension referred to by Sidibé in his interviews. These pictures *enhance* the women's sexiness by portraying their derrieres, and at the same time protect their identities. The pictures sexually objectify, or celebrate, their subjects, depending on one's

²⁶⁵ Keller argued for this reading in "Visual Griots," Portrait Photography in African Worlds.

point of view, taking female studio portrait further toward the flirtation with the photographer and the titillation for men that is already implicit in studio photography. Sidibé's frank acknowledgment of his reasons for taking the "Views from Behind" complicate the notion that the pictures refuse the Western gaze, as they also celebrate feminine beauty as appreciated by male Malians, and in doing so, contribute to the objectification of women. The power of Sidibé's "Vue de dos," altogether, turns on the knowledge of his earlier studio practice. While those earlier portraits have been said to capture an era in Bamako's history, what does it mean when today's pictures show people facing away? Does Sidibé's comment about the degeneration of society into individualism and material gain inform these pictures of Malians who turn away from the present, and from the Western audience who embody those values? While the meanings of "Vue de dos" obviously fluctuates, between pictures and between audiences, the conceptual move that Sidibé took to produce the pictures, generated from an earlier interest in posing his clients, shows the photographer's creativity and ability to adapt to the changing times.

III. Keïta's Tourist Art

Like Sidibé's series, Seydou Keïta's fashion shoots for the May 1998 issue of *Harper's Bazaar* also reflect a conscious attention to a Western audience, but in the context of a restricted collaboration with the editor of the magazine, Sarajane Hoare. Hoare chose the clothing designs (brought with her from New York fashion houses), the models (young women she and her assistant hired in Bamako), and the

backdrops (bought at a market in Bamako).²⁶⁶ Elizabeth Bigham, whose article regarding authorship and Keïta first brought the *Harper's* piece to scholarly attention, comments that it is unclear to what extent Keïta was able to exert artistic control beyond these limitations.²⁶⁷ The short text accompanying the photographs, written by Eve MacSweeney, refers to Keïta as “the surprise darling of the fashion world,” because of his 1997 shows at Gagosian Gallery in New York and Los Angeles, and as a “local hero” in Bamako. Hoare is quoted on her reasons for flying to Mali to persuade Keïta to create the shoot. Hoare describes Keïta’s pictures as: “classic portraiture at its best. It’s amazingly sophisticated documentation, very beautifully done, and each photograph would be achieved with just one shot, which makes modern photographers look so wasteful.” Hoare’s appreciation of Keïta’s thriftiness is the only reference to the economic disparity between Bamako and New York, although again it is implied when MacSweeney writes, “instead of their own clothes, the models are wearing designs from the likes of Gaultier, Galliano, and Givenchy, paired with African-inspired turbans.” Further on, captions to the photographs reveal that a scanty lycra tee shirt cost \$435.²⁶⁸ Most clothing items pictured ran between \$1000 and \$2000, while one gown from Chloé cost \$3050. In 2006, the estimated per capita income in Mali was \$470.²⁶⁹

For what one might expect of such a fashion-world folly, the *Harper's* article is surprisingly accurate about Keïta’s work and circumstances. The choice of

²⁶⁶ Eve MacSweeney, “Sunday Best” *Harper's Bazaar* (May 1998): 172-179.

²⁶⁷ “The extent of Keïta’s involvement is unclear: *Bazaar's* fashion editor selected the models, backdrops, and clothes, and the constraints of the magazine format may have determined some aspects of the composition and camera angle.” Bigham, “Issues of Authorship,” 65.

²⁶⁸ MacSweeney, “Sunday Best,” 174.

²⁶⁹ US State Department Website. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2828.htm>. Accessed November 10, 2007 and August 1, 2008.

the term “hero,” for example, might seem inflated and corny, but in fact, according to Manthia Diawara, it is the correct local term for a man from Mali who has become rich and famous abroad.²⁷⁰ The description of Keïta’s portraits as “artwork...which grew from his years as a portrait photographer” is not inaccurate, although a reader might prefer a more nuanced analysis. As Keïta’s commercial portraits for the international artworld were printed by another person, and were exhibited and sold as art in the contemporary West, technically the ‘art’ did ‘grow out’ of the studio work, as MacSweeney writes. Yet, while the article contains no inaccuracies, the glib writing and the lack of background context skim superficially over the historical circumstances of Keïta’s studio practice, and represses the economic inequity between New York and Mali.

In the 1999 article in which she addresses the *Harper’s* pictures, Bigham applies notions of authorship from Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault to Seydou Keïta’s production, arguing that the art pictures shown at Gagosian and the vintage prints of the 1950s were created by two different ‘authors,’ both named ‘Keïta.’ Bigham argues that the 1950s pictures were a result of collaborative authorship shared between Keïta and his sitters.²⁷¹ Bigham’s use of the term ‘authorship’ instead of the more conventional terms of ‘sitter’ and ‘photographer’ highlights the contribution of Keïta’s now-anonymous

²⁷⁰ Diawara notes how the legend of the heroic Sundiata Keïta and his empire is still present and operative as an important heritage and force in the imaginations of many Malians today, and how the young men who emigrate to France live for their acclaim as heroes when they return to the world of Mande. Diawara is critical of this power, experienced at its height when griots lavish such men with praises, because he feels it stands in the way of rational modernization. See Diawara, “Return Narratives” in his book *In Search of Africa*, 86-119 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

²⁷¹ Bigham claims that the issues of re-authorship involved – such as Andre Magnin’s choice of prints and informative interviews in the Seydou Keïta monograph, which is the primary source of information on Keïta, as well as the new size of the prints, gallery/museum setting, and the new audience with no personal connection to Keïta’s work – also separate ‘Keïta’ the 1950s commercial portrait author from ‘Keïta,’ the 1990s ‘author.’

clients in creating such striking and historically resonant pictures. The term also serves to differentiate the different contexts of printing, production and reception that Keïta's work has undergone.

Bigham's article appeared in *African Arts* several years after Sidney Kasfir's impressive deconstruction of the concept of 'authenticity' was published in the same journal in 1992.²⁷² Notions of authenticity derive from traditional African arts' interaction with the Western market beginning in the late 1800s. The problem surfaced almost as soon as African art was sold to Europeans, since there became an economic incentive to create "fakes," i.e. to carve sculptures or masks for Europeans, instead of for use in a local community. In 1976, the question of authenticity became so pressing that *African Arts* published an issue solely devoted to the topic. The journal gathered prominent Africanists to air their opinions on the problem of authenticity, and most argued that it must be seen as a continuum, not a dichotomy. An indigenous artist making work for his or her own culture was defined as the most authentic, while a European who carves an African mask was considered to perpetrate the most egregious example of fakery. The devotion to such questions demonstrates that, by the 1970s, the crisis over authenticity had become severe. The questioning of authenticity occurred at the same time that revisionist art history scholarship was examining the effect of the market on African arts, and an important volume which examined this problem was published in 1976 by Nelson Graburn, the first book to be published on tourist arts as a genre.²⁷³

²⁷² Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow" *African Arts* 25 no. 2 (April 1992): 41-97.

²⁷³ Nelson H. H. Graburn, ed., *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

Created by Westerners to promote values of Western heritage, such as the importance of the singular artwork, Graburn notes that the notion of authenticity fuels the traditional African art market by rewarding scarce ‘authentic’ works with high prices. Authenticity also elevates African cultures as ‘purer’ and ‘more meaningful’ than modern Western cultures, often leading Western scholars to ignore all traces of modernization within the ‘other’ culture and consider any sign of modernism or European influence as an impurity. For Graburn, authenticity “is a culturally constructed concept that has important meanings for the consumers and increasingly the producers of these art forms.”²⁷⁴ Authenticity cannot be jettisoned as a category, however, because of its meaning in the discourse of African art history, but its limitations should be acknowledged. Cultural constructs reflect power differentials and the promotion of certain definitions of art over others can be seen as cultural and social expressions of dominance. In his epilogue to *Unpacking Culture*, a volume that addresses the quandries raised by tourist arts around the globe, Graburn notes that Marvin Cohodas, another author in the anthology, shows that: “the imprecation of authenticity is a device for maintaining power and stratification in colonial systems.”²⁷⁵ The imposition of the Western construct of authenticity diminishes the worth of the work of thousands of artists and creates a market hierarchy that tends to benefit wealthy Europeans and Americans more than Africans.

Tourist art, or ‘airport art’, exemplifies the problems with the hierarchy created by ‘authenticity.’ Tourist art lies at the bottom rung of this hierarchy, yet it is hand-made by

²⁷⁴ Graburn, “Epilogue: Ethnic and Tourist Arts Revisited” (335-353) in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* ed. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 351.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 352.

carvers who are often, though not always, trained in traditional modes of craftsmanship. The production of tourist art varies from works made by individual carvers to factory-like conditions of collaborative effort. No matter the circumstances, however, tourist art has traditionally been considered inauthentic by African art scholars because it is not used in indigenous cultural ceremonies. Behind this distinction lies an understanding of the important difference between a Western definition of art and the artifacts used by many African cultures in social, political, and religious ceremonies. The use of African art in religious ceremonies has been compared to that of European medieval art, whose importance and power was due to the sacred context of its use as well as its formal qualities. Yet such a hard and fast distinction between art and artifact becomes immediately problematic when considering specific examples, such as the Ife bronze heads, about which little historical context of use is known, but which clearly are naturalistic, highly-skilled examples of brass workmanship that were, at the time of their discovery, considered comparable to ancient Greek art.

One reason tourist art should not be ignored is that the African tourist art trade flourishes with an economy that keeps millions of people employed. For example, in 1981, in western Nigeria, twenty percent of men living in rural areas were estimated to be involved in secondary craft enterprises, and in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, nearly a third of the labor force was involved in craft production.²⁷⁶ Acknowledging the importance of this kind of art production, as well as its variety and interaction with traditional art practices, is necessary to gain a complete picture of art history in Africa today. The contradictions which abound in the distinctions of authenticity and its particular relationship to the arts

²⁷⁶ Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art: An African Semiotic System in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Plenum Press, 1984), 25.

of Africa are, however, a double standard when compared to meanings of authenticity in Western art. For example, a crude painting by Picasso on a ceramic plate is considered authentic, but if Lamidi Fakeye, a contemporary Yoruba sculptor, makes a carving for the tourist market, his work may be considered inauthentic by strict traditionalists.²⁷⁷ African artists who supplement their income by producing tourist art often do so anonymously in order to protect their artistic reputation.

Kasfir argues that the scholarly obsession with authenticity both embodies a contradiction and connotes a repression. She writes, “Ironically, what we could call canonical African art - that which is collected and displayed and hence authenticated and valorised as ‘African art’ - was and is only produced under conditions that ought to preclude the very act of collecting.”²⁷⁸ In other words, African art is authentic when it has had no contact with Westerners, and yet it only becomes prized by Westerners when they can buy or steal it. The ‘contamination’ by any form of European influence - usually seen as synonymous with modernization - makes the work less desirable to the European collector, who wants to deny the impact of his or her own culture on other cultures. Therefore, the discussions of authenticity in *African Arts* can be seen as the proliferation of an anxiety in Western scholarship about its own repression or denial of colonialism and its effects on African societies and art.

Kasfir published her article when the furor over the term was reignited in contemporary African art circles, soon after Andre Magnin, a deputy curator of the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Georges Pompidou, was hired

²⁷⁷ In a similar vein, the artistic work done by women – pottery, weaving and cloth-dying – was denigrated by the Western focus on the work of male sculptors, but recent scholarship, particularly on *bogolan* cloth, has begun to correct this situation.

²⁷⁸ Kasfir, “African Art and Authenticity,” 42.

by Italian venture capitalist Jean Pigozzi to start collecting contemporary African art. Together they created the influential Contemporary African Arts Collection (C.A.A.C.) out of Pigozzi's deep pockets.²⁷⁹ Pigozzi's embrace of 'self-taught' African artists who had been shown in *Magiciens* positioned the C.A.A.C.'s artists as 'authentic,' in contrast to the Western-art-school trained, diasporic artists often shown by transnational curators like Njami and Okwui Enwezor.²⁸⁰ While the issue of training is an important factor in an artist's style of work, and while an artist's country of residence affects his or her exhibition opportunities, as there are so few exhibition venues on the African continent, Pigozzi's neo-primitivist and patronizing attitude has earned him much criticism.²⁸¹ His financial ability to create and show major contemporary African exhibitions at a time when very few museums were inviting such shows meant that his 'story' of contemporary African art might be seen as 'the' singular history of contemporary African art, which was infuriating to many.

To return to Seydou Keïta and Bigham, I bring up the term 'authenticity,' despite its retrograde connotations in African art history, because it is around the *moral* judgment of authenticity that Bigham's article revolves. While Bigham avoids using the word, no doubt because of its implications, she calls the fashion shots a "simulacrum" of Keïta's work, which implies that she does view them as inauthentic. Though her use of notions of authorship borrowed from Barthes and

²⁷⁹ *Magiciens* showed internationally-known Western artists like Richard Serra with less well-known (at the time) artists from around the world, including Bodys Isek Kingelez and Chéri Samba.

²⁸⁰ 'Self-taught' is usually an appellation that denies other forms of teaching than academically trained artists, such as apprenticeships. As seen in Chapter One, Seydou Keïta claimed to have been 'self-taught,' yet also worked for Pierre Garnier and owed much to Mountaga Dembélé, as he has acknowledged. Enwezor has been a primary champion of contemporary African arts for decades, and co-founder of the important *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*.

²⁸¹ On the question of artistic training, see Vogel and Mudimbe's categories discussed in Chapter Two.

Foucault is a revelatory way of examining Keïta's portraits – and certainly one that takes into account the complexities of photography as a medium – in the instance of the *Harper's* pictures Bigham's approach conceals an underlying moral judgment based on 'authenticity.' Bigham argues that "authorial specificity" is what "may be too easily elided in the ongoing re-authorings of his work," and she asks for further research into, "what, from his clients' perspective, set his work apart from that of his competitors, and perhaps offer some sense of how clients perceived their own authorial roles."²⁸² She argues, "Without a contextualized understanding, it is all too easy for Keïta's images to become more permanently re-authored by their new viewers and in their new contexts. ...it is all too easy for the specificities of this work and its authorship to be glossed over, taken at face value, or to *circulate simply as simulacrum*."²⁸³ (My emphasis).

Bigham's desire to understand how Keïta's clients perceived their portraits is obviously important, but it is a very difficult, time-consuming task that can never, inevitably, be completed, which is no doubt why it has not yet been undertaken. And such an effort would still be only one narrative about the past influenced by the present – it would not re-create Bamako in the 1950s. Despite this important need, separating Keïta's work into different 'authors' is ultimately not the most productive way of returning meaning to Keïta's 1950s portraits. For example, one might ask, how many different 'authors' are there? Should the 'Keïta' of 1948 be separated from the 'Keïta' of 1951? Bigham does not consider the

²⁸² Bigham, "Issues of Authorship," 66.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 67.

selection of portraits to which the public has been given access.²⁸⁴ Out of estimates of between seven thousand to thirty thousand negatives,²⁸⁵ perhaps several hundred have been printed and circulated publicly. No one knows the full extent of the variety or similarity of the photographers' images. Does each individual photograph need a separate author, or should the 'author' be grouped by different years, different backdrops, or different practices? Keïta's practice in the 1950s not only informed, but made possible his work in the 1990s, so to understand the 1990s fashion shoots it is necessary to know about the 1950s portraits, which also makes the idea of a '1990s Keïta' problematic. Another problem with Bigham's argument is that other photographers from Bamako and various Malian cities have been published whose works lack the imperative visual effect of Keïta's pictures, and thus it seems that, despite the importance of Keïta's clients in creating their striking images, it was largely Keïta's skill that created such a powerful body of work, setting his clients' pictures apart from other Malian studio photography. Thus, while Keïta's clients are still collaborators, there does seem to be a 'Keïta' effect, skill, or eye, that makes his authorship paramount.

However, if one considers both of Bigham's 'Keïtas' to be the same person, a different story emerges – one less imbued with moral judgment about his 1990s work. A venerable Malian photographer in his seventies, who had closed his studio a good thirty years earlier, and who had laid down his camera in 1968, was approached by an American fashion editor, who offered Keïta (no doubt) a good

²⁸⁴ Keller pointed out this fact to me in a personal communication, August 2007.

²⁸⁵ These estimates range between those of Association Seydou Keïta and of Magnin.

deal of money and the chance to work in color.²⁸⁶ These pictures may be Keïta's very first efforts in color - although Bigham acknowledges the two color pictures in the *Harper's* series, she says nothing about them. It is not known which pictures were *not* printed, nor, as Bigham says, how much control Keïta exerted, over what he shot or what was printed, but it can be assumed that he was paid for the shoot. In other words, Keïta was returning, after a long absence, to a commercial practice, but for a Western client, in a situation where the commissioner of the picture was different from the person portrayed, and the point of the shoot was not to capture the sitter for posterity, but to advertise the clothes the sitter wears.

Bigham comments that fashion essentially brands 'looks,' and in this case, she argues that *Harper's* recreates the Keïta 'look' while losing the local meaning of the 1950s shots.²⁸⁷ While signature stylistic attributes signify 'Keïta' – the use of black and white film, the African models, and their fashionable clothes with strong patterns juxtaposed with backdrops bought in Mali - the pictures lack the qualities that make his 1950s photographs so striking. **[Figure 3:8]** The reason why, though, is muddled by considerations of 'authorship.' It is not just the women and men pictured, but their *reason* for being pictured; the props and clothes do not look like those in the '50s portraits, and so the total sum of the parts ends up as culturally 'wrong,' i.e. they do not match up visually with one of Keïta's 1950s portraits.

For example, one color photo in *Harper's* shows a woman reclining on her elbow on a pile of folded blankets, wearing Isaac Mizrahi's "ethnic ball-gown."

²⁸⁶ Apparently when Magnin first met Keïta, the photographer was not doing well. Pigozzi was quoted by Speigler as saying, "He was not in great shape, practically starving, suffering from cataracts," in "Negative Charges," 97.

²⁸⁷ Bigham, "Issues of Authorship," 65.

[Figure 3:9] The woman seems to be wearing a Russian peasant or Swedish milkmaid style corset, which barely contains her cleavage, and a wide, puffy skirt. These styles are not traditionally Malian; indeed, they are not traditionally African. In a 1950s studio portrait, the model would have removed her decorative Manolo Blahnik shoes and set them neatly on the ground next to her or in front of her, as women do in many Keïta portraits. People in Mali, like people in the US, do not wear shoes when they are lying in bed, which is always the *mise-en-scène* when a client lies down for a portrait. The model also grins toothily – an expression rarely, if ever seen, in Keïta’s formal pictures.

In another *Harper’s* frame, the models are shot from a low angle, which is noted by Bigham. **[Figure 3:10]** What she does not mention is the effect of the low angle, which is to elongate the already tall, slim women further. Yet such an aesthetic of women’s bodies belongs to Western fashion, not Malian fashion, which traditionally has admired strong women who can work hard in the fields, and voluptuous women who appear fertile. It is unlikely that if Keïta wanted to make the women “look beautiful like that” (the famous phrase that he told his clients), he would emphasize their height and thinness to such a degree. In fact, almost all the models, with their self-conscious grins, look more like they are posing for Malick Sidibé than for Keïta. Only the unreadable expression on the model in the middle of the three women reaches beyond the contrived setting of the picture. While the clothing patterns do clash with the chosen backdrops, the designs are not of the same flora or fauna designs so common to Keïta’s clientele. (One can often see the repetition of fabrics among different clients, sewn in different styles, which must

have been fashionable at the time). The *Harper's* models wear almost no jewelry – most women who posed for Keïta showed off their jewelry if they had it – and if the folded cloths in the *Harper's* shot is meant to signify prestige items, as in one 1950s portrait where a woman lies on five layers of blankets, I have never seen a woman resting on *folded* blankets – they are always spread out on the bed, again, in the bedroom *mise-en-scène*. **[Figure 3:11]**

Keïta's *Harper's* pictures utilize textile backdrops, but, although genuinely 'Malian' (since they were bought in Bamako, as the article points out) these backdrops are a different type of textile than what Keïta typically used, and they create a different visual effect. Keïta's backdrops were of cloth fashionable in the 1950s, 'wax print' fabric based on Indonesian designs, made in Dutch factories and shipped to Africa.²⁸⁸ While this is still often the case today, tastes and styles have changed. Hoare also made use of Fulani *koso walan* backdrops, which appear in Keïta's photographs relatively rarely.²⁸⁹ **[Figure 3:12]** In Keïta's pictures it seems likely that the backdrops were traditional Fulani blankets, which took much craftswomanship to make and which could cost as much as a goat. However, in the fashion shoots the fact that the backdrops were chosen by Hoare at the local market probably means that they are, essentially, 'tourist art,' blankets made in roughly the same style as traditional Fulani *koso walan*, but which lack important social meaning, and which probably utilize some aesthetic innovation in their designs.

²⁸⁸ "Because of the Indonesian prototype, these cloths became known as wax prints, although in reality no wax as such ever comes anywhere near them." John Picton, "Colonial Pretense and African Resistance, or Subversion Subverted: Commemorative Textiles in Sub-Saharan Africa" in *Short Century*, 161.

²⁸⁹ I suspect that Keïta's pictures which show *koso walan* were taken when the client owned the blanket and wanted it to be exhibited in the photograph.

When Keïta used such geometric blankets, they usually appear as blankets on beds, and not as backdrops.²⁹⁰

In the *Harpers* pictures, the signifiers do not make sense – at least, in terms of the 1950s portraits. They have been thrown together from a purely visual interest in Keïta’s works but do not cohere into the readable whole that one at first expects. Thus the fashion shoot is like *bogolan* cloth made for tourists. *Bogolan*’s abstract symbols, when created for local use, embody powerful meanings to the women who made them; but when *bogolan* is made for the tourist market, the symbols are thrown together purely for the sake of visual effect and *mean* nothing, except that they are made for tourists.²⁹¹ **[Figure 3:13]** These pictures are, essentially, Seydou Keïta’s tourist art, created for a commercial, Western market. The jumbled signs here create a story, not only about Mali, but about the relationship *between* Bamako and New York, a relationship which emphasizes Bamako’s effort to please and New York’s frivolous use of relatively large amounts of money.

Yet, none of what occurs in the *Harper*’s scenario seems vastly different from Bamakois culture, aside from the amount of money involved. Women in Bamako will spend a good deal of their own, or their husband’s, income to dress themselves up.²⁹² Hoare was savvy in noticing the affinity between Malian studio

²⁹⁰ Only one picture in the Magnin monograph shows a woman pictured with the *koso walan* as a backdrop, according to Youssouf Tata Cissé in Magnin, *Seydou Keïta*, 127. However, in one of the most famous photographs, a woman lies on a bed covered with a *koso walan*, Magnin, 44, and in two others, women also lie on these blankets (117, 125). In three photographs in Magnin, the *koso walan* is used as a mat (48, 172, 231). I have noted that *koso walan* backdrops appear much more frequently in the studio photographs of Hamidou Maïga, a photographer who worked in Timbuktu in the 1950s. It may be that the traditional blankets were not fashionable or modern enough for most people in Bamako. It is also the case that a small percentage of Keïta’s actual output is available in print.

²⁹¹ For a fascinating discussion of the many forms that *bogolan* has taken, see Victoria Rovine, *Bogolan: Shaping Culture Through Cloth in Contemporary Mali* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

²⁹² Schulz, “Competing Sartorial Assertions,” 260, 275-6.

portraits and fashion photography. It is safe to say that, in the *Harper's* fashion shoot, the collaboration is between Hoare and Keïta, or between *Harper's Bazaar* and Keïta. If any person is qualified to be a fashion photographer, it is Keïta, who knew how to help a woman show off her most beautiful attributes and stylish adornments. The history of photography, like the history of art, is rife with after-the-fact 'artists' who also worked commercially. Bigham's refusal to engage with the terms of the *Harper's* pictures represses what is common to photography. Indeed, the problem of authorship is notorious in photography, a problem hardly limited to Mali, or to Seydou Keïta in particular. Bigham acknowledges these points briefly, but loses sight of them in the quest to "emphasize the collaborative authoring of Keïta's portraits precisely because this quality may so easily be obscured given the remarkable renown....that he has achieved in the international art world."²⁹³

Bigham castigates the Western art world for its repatriation of Keïta's images and calls for further research into the 'origins' of his photographs. The subtle intonations of morality are hinted at by the fact that, for all of Bigham's interest in calling attention to anonymity, she does not mention the name of Sarajane Hoare, the *Harper's* editor who hired Keïta for the shoot. But Bigham's interest in returning past meanings to Keïta's photographs, as to artifacts, has a pitfall, in believing that such meaning *can* be retrieved, and that his pictures in the present do not contain value without that meaning. Batchen writes, "Any study of vernacular photographies must of course trace the presence of the past, but as an

²⁹³ Bigham, "Issues of Authorship," 58.

erasure (an absent presence fissured through and through by differences and contradictions) motivating the object in the present.”²⁹⁴

While Keïta’s individual clients’ meanings have likely been lost – as they are lost in virtually all vernacular photography - it is worthwhile examining what meanings are *gained* by the re-contextualization of Keïta’s work as art in the West. Most reviews have commented on how his work has been re-presented, so the interested viewer can easily learn basic information, such as the fact that the originals were one-to-one contact prints, the pictures use props owned by Keïta himself, and they were sent to relatives and kept in photo albums. The vintage prints I have seen by many photographers tend to be damaged and faded, the contrasts were bland, and the pictures were too small to convey much drama. However, blown-up, his pictures look magnificent. He portrayed his sitters as dignified, gorgeous, and familial. The enlarged prints demonstrate the incredible technical acumen and formal eye that Keïta employed, as well as the burgeoning import of the anticipatory moment in which he worked. They are documents of an exciting time in African history: the foment of independence froths on the surface of his pictures, reflected in the sitters’ determined gazes, their confident juxtaposition of adornments and props signaling tradition and modernity held together through force of will.

This re-contextualized meaning, this new story about pre-independence subjectivity in Africa that Keïta’s large prints tell with emotional immediacy, is important for Americans to see. It is more important, in some ways, than it is for them to know that small prints decorate photo albums and deep-blue walls in

²⁹⁴ Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” 79.

distant Bamako, or that photo studios dot the cityscape, or that a sitter's striped suit or plastic flower was lent by the photographer. Despite her claimed adherence to Barthes' notion of authorship, Bigham ultimately refuses the point of his theory – to free the viewer, allowing him or her the ability to read meanings applicable to his or her own time and frame of reference. Bigham's emphasis on an impossible return to the past denies the very important impact that these visual, aesthetic artifacts - the wall-sized Keïta prints shown at Gagosian and Sean Kelly - have in a society that so rarely recognizes Africans as anything other than poor and diseased. Here, in Bamako in the 1950s, Africans were modern, proud, wealthy, and about to take control of their own destiny.

Chapter 4: The Next Generation

This chapter examines the photographic intervention of Westerners into the Malian cultural sphere under the auspices of humanitarianism. International projects like the pan-European OSCURA pin-hole camera workshops, the American-Malian collaboration “Visual Griots,” and Frenchman Antonin Potoski’s projects with Malian youth become instances of global interpenetration that bear scrutiny. This type of photography is generally *not* associated with fine art, nor is it commonly discussed in art history, but it nonetheless has been encouraged by the founding of the Biennale, and its presence as a new form of photographic genre bears marked notice. The possible influences of this type of photography were most striking in the meteoric rise of Mali’s latest art world star, the young photographer Mohamed Camara, who earned a solo exhibition at the Tate Modern in 2004 at the age of nineteen.

The use of photography as a driving force in humanitarian projects directed towards children is not unique to Mali. Around the world, a number of projects have been created that provide children in difficult circumstances with cameras and then encourage the children to photograph their environment, in an attempt to cultivate the children’s self-expression and confidence. **[Figure 4:1]** Perhaps the best known of these projects is Zana Briski’s “Kids with Cameras,” documented in the recent film *Born into Brothels* (2003). Briski, an American photojournalist, traveled to Calcutta intending to take photographs of prostitutes’ children, who live their entire lives within the brothel walls. Instead, Briski ended up committing three years of weekly workshops to working with children and photography. Her project eventually provided funding for the children’s

educations, since they were not permitted by law to attend regular school. Another older, and also successful project, Fotokids, begun in 1991 in Guatemala by an ex-Reuters photojournalist, Nancy McGirr, also included an education requirement and involved the significant and long-lasting presence of the organization in the community. Shooting Back, an American project begun by Jim Hubbard to teach photography to homeless children in Washington, D.C. in 1988, also seemed to have had great success and an important presence in the community.

In Africa, associations that provide children with cameras have mushroomed in recent years. Their efforts have come to light mainly through exhibitions or publications, and information about them can sometimes also be found on the internet. The Senegalese photographer Sada Tangara has become known in Europe for the pictures he took as a young teenager of his fellow homeless children in the *Man-keen-en-ki* society founded in Dakar. Briski's Kids With Cameras has set up in Cairo. In South Africa, The Children's Rights Centre encouraged abused children to document their circumstances and advocate for themselves, with the help of community organizations. And in Rwanda, Through the Eyes of Children was founded as a photographic workshop in 2000 by David Jiranek, now deceased, for children living in the Imbabazi Orphanage, and sells prints on the web for funding.

The occurrence of such organizations seems particularly prominent in Mali, where the founding in 1994 and continued presence of the Biennale has encouraged various forms of photographic development within the country. The Oscura pinhole workshops, an organization that began in Europe, opened in Bamako, Mali in 1996 and lasted for five years, and participated in two Biennales. A young French photographer,

Antonin Potoski, published a book and created an exhibition of photographs by young photographers from Dogon country, in a culture where photographing by outsiders can be particularly fraught with consequence. Most recently, a Malian-American collaboration through the Academy for Educational Development called Visual Griots initiated workshops and showed the resulting photographs by children from the Malian villages of Damy and Kouara at Association Seydou Keïta during the 2005 Bamako Biennale, and in the US, first in Washington, D.C. in 2006, from where it also traveled to New York, shown at the World Financial Center Courtyard Gallery, in 2007, and will be included in an exhibition at the Smithsonian's Heritage Gallery in 2008.

I. Oscura Pinhole Workshops

The dynamics of these associations vary from organization to organization. A rather whimsical and poetic international collaboration of French and Spanish origin, Oscura is a multi-faceted organization, whose members are self-described as an architect, an iconographer, a salesperson, a philosopher, a squatter, an art historian, a cartographer, a laboratory assistant and a photographer. Oscura functioned for several years in cities like Saint Denis, France and Ankara, Turkey before opening up shop in Mali under coordinator Elisabeth Towns. According to the organization's statement, Oscura investigates the periphery of metropolises or the centers of fractured cities, focusing not on world capitals but on smaller cities that have influxes of immigrants and a dynamic of rapid change: "Saint-Denis rather than Paris, Ankara rather than Istanbul, ...and Rubi rather than Barcelona."

[Figure 4:2] In the Malian cities of Mopti and Bamako, Oscura operated workshops for children in difficult situations who often slept on the streets. The children were taught how to make a pinhole camera from a milk carton, and then to expose and develop the print. Towns describes the effort as collective: “the pictures have been done with and by Malian people in Mali, on the initiative and the management of our association.....the “shot” is a result of a mutual aid, a collaboration between several participants.” Oscura places great importance on the whole process of using the pinhole camera, emphasizing the difficulty in taking a recognizable picture with a simple milk carton. **[Figure 4:3]** Making the camera, taking the time to find an interesting shot, and then taking yet more time to properly expose and then later develop the film; all involve the participant in a way that using a digital camera or simple point and shoot generally does not. The irregularities and distortions of the final photograph reveal the camera’s pinhole origin, in a sense rendering visible both the crude instrument and the delicate process of its operation.

[Figure 4:4] Towns explains that Oscura’s main objectives are “social, artistic, educative, and cultural. Pinhole workshops are...a kind of tool for strengthening the social fabric while producing pinhole images of demanding, exacting quality.” At the same time, Oscura’s philosophy appears to be open-ended, encouraging daydreaming, creativity, and awareness of the holistic process of pinhole photography. Certain educational steps became necessary to implement during the workshops, such as teaching children to sign their names or how to tell time so they could develop the film. The fact that Oscura operated in Mali for five years indicates a long-term commitment to the project, and indeed Oscura was forced to close only because the organization was unable

to find partners in France to help continue to fund the initiative.²⁹⁵ Although Towns tried to work with several professional, commercial studio photographers, she said that she ended up disagreeing with them about objectives and approaches. However, Amadou Baba Cissé is still committed to the pinhole project. In truth, it seems unlikely that a typical Malian studio photographer would appreciate either the deliberate distortions of the pinhole camera, or the aimless, poetic approach to subject matter encouraged by *Oscura*, since the photographer's job is to show the subject clearly and visibly looking his or her best in a standardized manner, for a certain fee. **[Figure 4:5]** The process-oriented approach of *Oscura* may however be relevant to a Malian understanding of how photography is important, as I will discuss in relation to a second project with the Dogon of central Mali.

II. *Les Dogons par les Dogons*

While *Oscura* was operating in Bamako and Mopti, a private project was initiated in Dogon country by the young French photographer Antonin Potoski. The Dogon live in relative isolation in the Bandiagara escarpment in the middle of Mali, in a region south of the Sahara along the Niger bend. Potoski lent his digital camera to seven Dogon “children” (although one source said they were aged thirteen to twenty-nine) for five weeks. A short, twenty-six page book was published by Editions de l’Oeil in 2001 with photographs by “two girls and five boys,” also described as “seven young villagers,” whose names cannot be found anywhere in the book. Potoski wrote the accompanying text. Although Potoski does not himself describe his intentions, the back of the book

²⁹⁵ A private organization, *Oscura* did receive support from ENDA (Environmental Action Development Mali).

states, “While Dogon country is overtaken by the fashion of cultural tourism, these photographs constitute the first description of the world by seven of its young inhabitants.” (My translation). The last line of the text on the back cover reiterates that here is “the first photographic description of the Dogon by themselves.” Potoski did not go out hunting for images with the Dogon photographers, but at night it was he who made the aesthetic selections, with people crowded around to watch. Out of two thousand pictures that were taken, he saved seventy onto diskettes. Potoski writes that the Dogon photographers were not as interested in the selection of saving certain pictures, as in the *process* of taking pictures. The thrill of having the camera for a day was an important responsibility, as was setting out to “research ideas.” **[Figure 4:6]** As Potoski notes, the aspects that usually take center place when foreigners take pictures of Dogon country – cultural and religious rituals, social behavior, or architecture and art - become decorative backgrounds for the interests of the photographers, who take pictures of games and activities, cliffs and flowers, friends and family (presumably, since we’re never told who is in the pictures), and their clothing and accoutrements. **[Figure 4:7]**

On the one hand, *Les Dogons par les Dogons* seemed conceptualized as a response to the tourist’s gaze, to which the Dogon are particularly vulnerable, as their striking architecture and art and ancient way of life entices many tourists to pull out their cameras. **[Figure 4:8]** Yet, at the same time, Potoski’s book and exhibition also capitalizes on the “fashion of cultural tourism” in its attention to an attractive subject presented in a format that omits key information regarding the intentionality and subjectivity of the Dogon community in which Potoski worked. One assumes that Potoski received permission from village elders to undertake his five-week sojourn, but it is not

discussed in the text. Also lacking are the names and ages of the “young photographers,” at least one of whom, if twenty-nine, was older than Potoski himself. And Potoski leaves out the standards or criteria that he used to make his aesthetic choices for the book and exhibition, which must have been quite stringent if they enabled him to whittle down two thousand images to a mere seventy shots, even though he writes that they are “almost the photographs of ‘photographers.’” While the use of quotes would seem to indicate that the category “photographer” is under question, the fact that the only professional photographer governed the aesthetic selection process seems to deny that attempt at derailing the professional hierarchy.

In fact, it is not the questionable notion of professionalism that is at issue, but the lack of recognition that a potential aesthetic other than the Western professional framing eye might be operative here. Van Dyke argues that an understanding based merely on visuality can only encompass superficial and partial knowledge in Malian thought.²⁹⁶ She notes that the Western interest in artistic forms in Mali often misses the point, because it is how an artwork is performed and conceptualized that is important. Van Dyke instead believes “that Malian visuality may be productively conceptualized through an engagement with the structures of *oral thought*.”²⁹⁷ (my emphasis). The fact that the Dogon photographers are not allowed to tell their stories or participate in the selection of the photographs for the book – and the fact that they might not be so interested in the mere visual reiteration of the photographs – suggests that an attention to the oral culture of the community might be more useful when attempting to display the Dogon world by the Dogons themselves.

²⁹⁶ Van Dyke, “The Oral-Visual Nexus,” 4.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

III. Visual Griots

A more recent venture and a project of the Academy for Educational Development in Mali, Visual Griots, like *Oscura*, involves an American-Malian collaboration. Americans Shawn Davis, Nestor Hernandez and Sora Devore joined with Malian Jude Thera of the NGO Association Vigne, as well as Malian photographer Alioune Bâ and apprentice photographer Amadou Sow, to teach photography workshops for four days in two rural Malian towns. **[Figure 4:9]** The project went to Damy and Kouara, where the Bwa ethnic group, a minority in Mali, live. The villages both had schools, and so sixth graders, the oldest kids in school, were selected for the workshops. The children used ordinary cameras and the film was sent away to be developed and printed, since the town did not have running water or electricity. The project was goal oriented, with the aim that the students would have a substantial body of work at the end of the week, and indeed a number of the photographs were exhibited in the 2005 Bamako Biennale. The exhibition subsequently traveled to the United States to be shown in various venues. **[Figure 4:10]** However, the project did not remain in the community past its completion, according to Davis.

Visual Griots, a hybrid English-French term for the Malian *jeli*, was named by Hernandez. As Keller has argued, photographers in Mali like Malick Sidibé have today taken on the mantle of the griot, traditionally a singer and a historian. On the one hand, to give the moniker to children who have not yet earned the political wisdom of the griot tradition is improbably stretching the Malian meaning of the term. However, in the West, griot is fast becoming a word used and appreciated, often in particular by African Americans, to refer to a West African storyteller who conveys a community's historical

heritage. The appreciation of the term has also accompanied the internationalization of Malian music. The term visual griot has migrated to southern Africa and is used by a Namibian social documentary photo association as well. So although in local meaning the term Visual Griots may not be entirely accurate, the name was clearly chosen in its broadest sense to incorporate an aspect of Malian culture for an international audience.

Although Visual Griots clearly has good intentions, and provided unheard of opportunities to the youth, the project seems to lack a certain awareness of Malian aesthetic approaches to photography. In terms of aesthetic choices, Davis worried before the first class that, “We’ll end up with lots of pictures of stiff people with downcast eyes.” This is a telling comment. In fact, in much of West Africa, it is considered unseemly to display strong emotions during a portrait; to laugh or make broad physical gestures, and ham it up for the camera is improper and disrespectful. This seriousness can be seen in Keïta’s portraits, although Sidibé’s portraits – of rebellious youth in an exciting, post-liberation age – obviously contradict this idea, showing clients who loved to strut and preen for their portraits. Since Davis was working in rural and isolated areas, people may have been more restrained, however. Stiffness may make for less visually interesting photographs to a Western eye, but such poses speak visually about other important social aspects to a Malian eye – about the subjects’ character, role in the family or society, and propriety.

Davis also discussed the choice of “what to include, what not to include” in a picture with the children. This choice is not explained, but suggests that a preconception based on American photographers’ inundation in the photojournalist aesthetic may have determined those choices. **[Figure 4:11]** Sharing aesthetic preferences across cultural

boundaries can be a tricky enterprise, as Davis reveals in another anecdote. When Davis took the children to see the “International Exhibition” at the National Museum in Bamako, one of the boys responded positively to Nigerian photographer Uchechukwa James Iroha’s dramatic color prints of cows being butchered. Davis, worrying that the boy was responding too excitedly to the violence and blood, was surprised to discover that the boy associated the pictures with a feast, commenting happily that “soon everyone will eat.” It is not always clear that two viewers will read the same meaning in an image.

Indeed, Malian aesthetics seem to be at work in several photographs in the Visual Griots project. **[Figure 4:12]** A picture by Chantal Kamaté of two teenage boys with their arms about each other’s necks resembles some of Malick Sidibé’s famous shots in its head-on approach and capturing of the boys’ visible camaraderie and stylish flipflops, watch chain and sunglasses. A photograph by Alice Kamaté also seems to refer to studio portraiture, perhaps literally. **[Figure 4:13]** A woman in a patterned skirt stands before a vertical, geometrically patterned matt, while her eyes and those of the woman caught in casual laughter on the right are focused on something outside of the frame. One suspects that Alice Kamaté is documenting a studio photographer’s formal sitting. Both pictures perhaps show the effect of long traditions of West African studio photography on children trained to take pictures by Westerners in a week.

The three initiatives which I have described - the Oscura pinhole workshops, *Les Dogons par Les Dogons*, and Visual Griots - have surprisingly varied circumstances, and seem to have been conceived for different aims among varied populations. What is clear across the board, however, is that young Malians learned new skills and responsibilities and seem to have found pleasure and, it might be inferred, an increased self-confidence,

along with some understanding of photography, from developing an 'eye' to learning to make pinhole cameras, develop film and print. So far the Malian associations seem relatively short-term projects. This is unlike Fotokids or Kids With Cameras, whose primary goal seems to have been both to remain in the community and to provide education over a long time period, which is clearly important in providing children with the ability to make their own decisions. As an art photography movement begins to develop in Bamako, and as all forms of photography seem likely to increase because of the presence of the Biennale, it will be interesting to see if these Malian children from different ethnicities and communities, who have been exposed to new ways of visualizing their surroundings, will continue to participate in photography in other ways.

In any event, the publication of images by Malian children in the West is important in providing an alternative to the mostly negative, de-contextualized photographs that continue to inform many Westerners conception of Africa as a helpless continent of disease and famine, populated by starving children, victims and dictators. **[Figure 4:14]** Alternative views are needed. For example, while a *New York Times* ad capitalizes on photos of children with cleft palettes meant to induce horror and thus charitable cleft surgery, Germain Kamaté's picture of a man in a wheelchair going about his daily business – a typical sight in Mali, where polio is still a common cause of paralysis - shows the normality with which illnesses and their resulting deformations are generally accepted in Africa. But the Western point of view, though important, should not be the only one of concern. The meanings and uses of photography in a community like the Dogons should be understood in a *Malian* context. And that context should be provided as much as possible to Westerners as well.

IV. Mohamed Camara Comes to the Alps

Whether or not *Les Dogons par les Dogons* properly acknowledged its authors, the book itself, and Potoski, had a momentous effect on a teenager in Bamako named Mohamed Camara. Camara was born in Bamako, had grown up in Abidjan in neighboring Ivory Coast, and was living again in Bamako as a teenager. Potoski befriended Camara and showed him the book of Dogon photographers. Camara felt that he could do as well at photography as the Dogon ‘youth,’ and so Potoski contacted the publisher, *Éditions l’Oeil*, who agreed to lend Camara a digital camera provided that he used it. *Éditions l’Oeil* subsequently published Camara’s pictures in 2002, accompanied by a poetic text written in French by Collette Fellous.²⁹⁸ *Chambres maliennes (Malian Rooms)*, as Camara’s pictures were titled, were exhibited in 2002 at Galerie Chab in Bamako and at Pierre Brullé Gallery in Paris, traveled to Italy as part of *Africalia* and ended up in a solo exhibition at the Tate Modern in 2004.²⁹⁹ The series was also included in the 2003 Bamako Biennale – Camara was the only Malian photographer to be shown.

When Camara received the camera from the publisher, he began to take pictures on the street, but quickly discovered that passersby became angry, as it is considered impolite to take someone’s pictures without permission in Mali.³⁰⁰ This public antipathy to photography is not new: Seydou Keïta also mentioned that, when he first began photographing in the 1940s, “to take photos like that in the

²⁹⁸ Collette Fellous, *Mohamed Camara: photographe* (Montreuil: Editions de l’Oeil, 2002).

²⁹⁹ Apparently the Jean-Paul Blachère Foundation also supported the publication or the artist in some fashion, as Blachère is thanked in the book.

³⁰⁰ Other photographers whom we interviewed also alluded to this problem; in particular, Alimata dite Diop Traoré.

street caused all sorts of problems.”³⁰¹ Camara also worried that his camera would be stolen. Thus he turned to photographing the rooms in his family’s and friends’ compounds. The pictures for which the young artist Mohamed Camara earned his solo exhibition at the Tate Modern in London were of these rooms, often playing off the light entering through transparent curtains covering windows or doors. As Jonathan Jones notes in his review of the Tate Modern show in London’s *The Guardian*, compounds in Mali consist of rooms or small buildings clustered around a central, open courtyard, whose entrances and windows are covered only by curtains.³⁰²

Camara’s pictures juxtapose the everyday and the mysterious, revolving around the intimacy, privacy and openness in these scenes. We catch glimpses of young men and women obscured by curtains or netting, seen through windows, shadowed in doorways, asleep or lost in thought, seemingly oblivious to the camera. **[Figure 4:15]** A naked woman poses with arms outstretched, veiled in an ectoplasmic mosquito net whose top bobs above her head. **[Figure 4:16]** The rich, deep blues of painted rooms play a supporting role; this is a common color in Bamako, according to Camara because it is the cheapest color. The interiors are mysterious, places for dreaming, half-clothed, while outside fully-dressed people walk purposefully, ride bicycles, or hold up a soccer ball, framed by the dark windows and floating curtains. **[Figure 4:17]** The obvious poses – a boy seen through netting, the girl in the mosquito net, the hand in the window – blend with the seemingly un-posed, such as the man looming in the doorway holding a dead

³⁰¹ Magnin, *Seydou Keïta*, 9.

³⁰² Jonathan Jones, “Boy done good,” Wednesday, October 6, 2004, *The Guardian* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2004/oct/06/1>; accessed September 6, 2005 and August 7, 2008.

squirrel, wearing raggedy shorts. [Figure 4:18] The vase of flowers on the ground next to a sleeping woman creates a nineteenth-century portrait, while the floating soccer shirt hung in the window contrasts with the gently blowing ruffled edges of patterned, translucent door curtains. [Figure 4:19] The pictures are sensual yet modest; sex is imminent but just beyond view.

Camara's view of a teenager's desires, an interior dream-world, caught halfway between childhood and the prosaic responsibilities of adulthood, struck an international chord. The show at the Tate Modern exhibited the *Chambres Maliennes* as well as twenty new photographs from 2004, and a video. Jones' review was inappropriately titled "Boy Done Good" – which toes the line of racism as Camara *was* a teenager, although nineteen years old, but one wonders if the reference to 'Boy' would have occurred to Jones if Camara were *not* African – not to mention the bad grammar of the colloquialism, which hints at an immigrant's language skills. The "crucial question" he forgot to ask is if Camara *even* considers his pictures to be art. Considering the story that Camara relates to Jones – the impetus to take the pictures as a result of seeing artists published in a book, and the subsequent staging of certain pictures – one wonders how Jones defines art.

While Camara's earlier series present an internationally recognizable view of teenagers in Bamako, locally rooted in a poetics of place, his more recent work addresses the changes in perception afforded him by his international travels. More obviously staged, retaining the odd and yet touching campiness of the dreamlike setting, but to a heightened degree, Camara's later works playfully touch on the ironies of foreign culture experienced as difference in a series called "Christmas

Cactus.” (2004) **[Figure 4:20]** “Help help M. Blachère, Tarzan is caught in his lianas,” shows the artist bare from the waist up and wrapped in a blue vine of Christmas lights. He walks through a tangle of these glowing vines, which dangle and hang from trellises in a staged setting reminiscent of a department store’s back room. The Jean-Paul Blachère Foundation has supported Camara and other photographers in Mali, so Camara’s title mocks the often neo-primitivizing, patronizing air of such foundations (like AFAA). He also suggests that the ‘lianas’ that ‘Tarzan’ is caught in, or perhaps the troubles that Africa is caught in, are products of the glitzy, superficial, capitalist West. **[Figure 4:21]** In another picture, Camara sits in baggy basketball shorts and no shirt in an arching throne of strung lights, again reminiscent of a department store display. A lit Santa with goofy, giant shoes lurks behind Camara, whose figure is darkly silhouetted against his throne, and strung lights and tree branches animate the scene. **[Figure 4:22]** In a third, Camara, barely visible, peeps out from a white feather boa, sitting bemusedly on the floor next to a silvery lit Christmas tree, snowman and reindeer, while above him the words “*Joyeuses Fêtes*” are written in lights. **[Figure 4:23]** In “The Cactus of Siberia: Mohamed and the Mountains,” he stands in skintight blue trunks and sneakers outside on a porch against a backdrop of snowy mountains, in a clever play on the phrase supposedly uttered by the prophet Muhammed – “If the mountains will not come to Mohamed, Mohamed will come to the mountains.” All of these pictures play on the disjuncture between religious, cultural, and literal climates, highlighting the exoticism of snowy, Christian France in all of its glamour and superficial rituals.

Camara's relation to the art photography movement in Bamako is interesting. While photographers his age, like Fatoumata Diabaté or Harandine Dicko, set store in learning the mechanics of black and white printing at the CFP, Camara leapt straight to the international stage working in color with a digital camera. The juxtaposition of delicacy and obviousness in works, his perceptive ability to take the everyday dissolution of adolescence as his subject, followed by the fanciful reflections on cultural differences between France and Mali, Europe and Africa, and the deskilling of his medium,³⁰³ place his work squarely in the 'First World' realm of conceptual art. His story shows that, in this era of de-skilled, conceptual art-making, a person with no training or background in the arts can be deservedly exhibited in international exhibitions.

Yet Camara's pictures, ambiguous, amusing and chic as they are, seem unlikely to be understood locally, either as serious art or serious photography. In contrast, the next chapter discusses works which would seem to operate equally forcefully in a global or a Malian context.

³⁰³ Many of his early pictures were taken at low-resolution, meaning not enough pixels per image to allow for high-quality prints.

Chapter 5: Archival Memory: Photographers at the National Museum

One noteworthy element of the art photography movement in Bamako is that four of the city's most prominent practitioners work or used to work at Mali's National Museum. Aboubakrine Diarra, Alioune Bâ, and Joseye Tienro are officially employed as photographers, and are currently in the process of digitizing the collection's archives. Former museum employee Yousouf Sogodogo used to work in the textiles preservation department and now is director of the CFP (*Centre de Formation en Photographie*), Bamako's most comprehensive private photography school. Sogodogo was trained as a painter at the National Institute of the Arts (INA), and began working in photography in the 1980s, before the founding of the Biennale. Diarra, a photographer at the Museum, is President of the CFP, and teaches photography classes at the National Institute of the Arts, the government arts college. He was trained as a photographer in France. Bâ, who works with Diarra at the Museum, is the president of Association Seydou Keïta, and guest lectures at various photography and arts programs in Bamako, Bâ first exhibited his work at the Hôtel de l'Amitié in Bamako in 1990, and in France and Denmark in 1993, before the Biennale was founded, and has participated in numerous international exhibitions since then. Tienro also graduated from INA and now works in the digital lab at the museum.

These four photographers play active roles in the Bamakois photographic community as teachers, mentors, administrators, and trailblazers. All of the four have exhibited in at least two Bamako Biennales. They have also exhibited internationally, and their works have been published in Mali and France. As such prominent photographers, they are role models who influence younger photographers and who create opportunities

and set the direction for art photography in Bamako. This chapter examines two of these photographers' artistic production in light of the nature of their employment at the National Museum. I argue that their 'art photography,' labeled thus because it was produced specifically for publications or exhibitions, stems from ethnographic, archival, and memorial impulses inspired by the function of the National Museum itself. As such, these bodies of work participate in a postcolonial process of reinvention of older cultural forms. These works embody the tensions between modernity and tradition that permeate contemporary Bamako life. Further, the works serve to reinforce notions of 'Malian' identity, locally and on the international stage, by contributing to a nationalist understanding of history, politics, religion and culture. As such, I see these works as contributing to the implicit dialogue about memory and cultural preservation that unavoidably undermines the Museum's mission.

The chapter begins by explaining the importance of cultural patrimony to Malian identity, explores the difficulties facing its preservation at the National Museum, and discusses photography's crucial role in the process of preservation. I examine the contradictions between the Western, archival approach to cultural exhibition promoted by the Museum, and the traditional, genealogical understanding of history and culture practiced before colonialism in what is now Mali. I elaborate upon the notion of the archive, arguing that an archival approach both underlies, and is subverted by, the projects of Sogodogo and Tienro, which work to bridge the gap between Malian and Western aesthetics, and in doing so provide new forms of art that operate within Bhabha's hybrid location of culture.

The art projects by Sogodogo and Tienro can also be seen as part of a larger genre of work that I have labeled ‘cultural photography,’ for lack of a better term, which documents various aspects of Mali’s culture for patrimony and posterity. Almost all of the photographers with whom I spoke in Mali practice cultural photography as part of their typical professional duties. The prevalence of this work was at first surprising, but in the context of Malian culture, the abundance of ‘cultural photography’ makes perfect sense, as it both emphasizes and reinforces the importance of culture to Malian constructions of identity.

The preservation of cultural patrimony, called *facen* in Bamana, is an issue of tremendous political and artistic importance in Mali. Traditional ceremonies and ways of life are changing quickly, or altogether disappearing, in the face of increasing modernity and globalization, while precious artifacts are looted and sold on the black market because of the country’s extreme poverty and inability to regulate significant archeological areas.³⁰⁴ Tensions between tradition and modernity inform virtually all aspects of life in Mali today, and particularly affect the roughly ten percent of the nation’s population who live in Bamako, which is by far the most urbanized city in Mali. Such tensions present themselves in the artistic and cultural forms that are so integral to

³⁰⁴ Because of Mali’s economic poverty and the voracious international antiquities market, the looting of undocumented archaeological finds and treasured or forgotten objects reached an emergency crisis in the early 1990s. In 1995 the issue became so urgent that Mali became the first African country, in fact the first non-Western nation, to submit a request for the protection of cultural property under the 1970 UNESCO Convention. See Maria Papageorge Kouroupas, “U.S. Efforts to Protect Cultural Property: Implementation of the 1970 UNESCO Convention” (32-37) in *African Arts* 28 no 4 (Autumn 1995): 33. The US adopted a prohibition against the illegal importation of objects from the Niger valley. In a special 1995 issue of the American journal *African Arts* devoted to this topic, an article by Samuel Sidibé, today the National Museum’s director, described the situation. A note from Mali’s first president under democracy, Alpha Oumar Konaré, also the former President of the International Council of Museums, a pan-African organization, supported the decision. The Museum and the government thus both took decisive positions on this controversial issue. This problem is common to other countries around the world, although Mali’s extremes of cultural wealth and material poverty make a particularly volatile combination.

Malian identity, and thus come to the fore in photography, which participates in each realm because of its unique ability to function as both an art and a medium of visual documentation.

The National Museum in Bamako is Mali's primary government institution officially devoted to the preservation of the country's varied forms of culture. The Museum's mission statement supports the "collection, restoration, conservation and diffusion" of Mali's cultural patrimony.³⁰⁵ As in most museums, photography plays an essential role in the execution of the National Museum's mission. Elizabeth Edwards notes, "the modern museum object is defined by a series of documenting photographic practices: accession photographs, conservation photographs, X-ray and infra-red photographs revealing unseen depths of the object."³⁰⁶ Photographs record an artwork's original condition at the time of its accession, thus aiding conservation efforts later on, and allow conservators to see underneath layers to discover information about the object's creation. Photographs also allow objects to be archived, to be filed in data systems so that a museum employee can 'view' the work without having to enter storage and be concerned with damaging a delicate object.

At Mali's National Museum, supporting contextual photographs also contribute to archivists' understandings of how an object functioned in its original context. For example, a photograph that shows a mask performing in a ritual might provide useful information about the nature of the ritual, the role of the mask within the ritual, where it

³⁰⁵ "Le musée a pour mission la collecte, la restauration, la conservation et la diffusion du patrimoine culturel national". <http://www.museenationaldumali.org.ml/historique.html>; accessed October 13, 2007. Since fall 2007 the website has changed and the mission statement no longer appears. See <http://www.mnm-mali.org/sommaire.html>; accessed August 7, 2008.

³⁰⁶ Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2001), 77.

was performed, and for whom. Such information, combined with written documentation, can provide a sense of the mask's original life before it was accessioned. In fact, as Edwards comments, "Photographing objects was (and still is) integral and crucial to the apparatuses through which ethnographic and museological knowledge was made."³⁰⁷

Photography's peculiar qualities as a medium make it especially useful to museums, both for archiving objects, and for reconstructing an object's history and the circumstances in which it was performed. Preserving the past for the sake of memory is in fact photography's most appreciated attribute. For Barthes, our relationship to history becomes more immediate and contingent when we are able to see a photograph. Since photography was invented, "henceforth the past is as certain as the present, what we see on paper is as certain as what we touch."³⁰⁸ For any historical project then, such as a museum, photographs are crucial in attempting to recreate the past. Photographs are also objects, free-floating pieces of paper disengaged from their context of origin. To a viewer who knows nothing about the conditions of when a photograph was taken, much of the picture's meaning is often lost. The photograph can then take on new meanings as an individual viewer contextualizes it within his or her own frame of reference. However, despite the loss of original context, the photograph's ability to show something immovable (such as the Djenne mosque), or to capture an ephemeral moment (such as the annual community act of replastering the mud surface of the mosque), suits the needs of the museum in recording history. The referential character of the photograph, and its accompanying freedom from the physical constraints of time and space, its object-ness as

³⁰⁷ Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 51.

³⁰⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 88.

it were, together ensure its usefulness for documentation, especially when contextual evidence is recorded along with the picture.

While the National Museum collects traditional artifacts and artworks, the ephemeral nature of performances, hairstyles, skin decorations, commemorative shrines, temporary paintings on buildings, and ritual activities, all of which are integral to the performance of and understanding of the collected objects, pose challenges to documentation and exhibition. Yet it is the performative nature of traditional art – its ephemeral attributes and its non-material meanings - that gives masks and sculptures their power. Such attributes can best be documented by photography, or increasingly by the related media of film and video (although the non-material meanings, and the temporal ‘life’ of the object, still vanish). Photographs of artworks are particularly useful as archival resources in recording and keeping track of a museum’s objects, providing an ease of reference and comparison that video or film, as time-based media, cannot.

The opportunities afforded by the Museum’s emphasis and dependence on photographs make it a natural magnet for ambitious photographers in Bamako, where an established role of ‘art for art’s sake’ photography barely exists. The separation between artists who work in photography and commercial photographers, somewhat forced even in the US despite art schools’ insistence on photography departments, has only recently become a possibility in Bamako. Thus it is not surprising that four of the most influential photographers in Bamako work or used to work at the National Museum. How these photographers conceive of art photography, and the bodies of work that they have created, stems in large part from their duties as official preservationists of *facen*, their nation’s cultural heritage.

In Mande culture (to which Bamana, Mandinka, Maninka, Malinke, Mandingo, Manya, Dyula, Kuranko, and Wangara ethnicities trace their ancestry,³⁰⁹ and which is culturally dominant in Mali), Téréba Togola explains that *facen* is:

what we received from a deceased father, and, by extension, the ancestors. The *facen* (whose best equivalent in English is ‘cultural heritage’) comprises a vast array of tangible and intangible elements: land, wealth, ritual objects, art work, knowledge and traditions. To the Bambara and most Mande groups, the *facen* reinforces the liaison between the living and the dead (who are considered an integral part of the community). It ensures the group’s cohesion and maintains its cultural identity.³¹⁰

As in many African cultures, Mande spirituality vitally invokes the presence of ancestors. The deceased are considered present at all times, and are appealed to and appeased in various ways. History is understood as intimately connected to the present; in a sense, it *becomes* the present. While this trait may have been influenced by Islam, precolonial cultures in Mali forcefully harbor this view. Kristina Van Dyke describes the precolonial Bamana worldview, for example, as operating with a genealogical view of knowledge and history - one that emphasizes fluidity, orality, the constant presence of a living history in people’s imaginations, and their own personal interpretation of that history, in contrast to a Western fixed and static notion of one singular linear history that exists solely in the past. She writes, “In fact, because history is perceived to be uniquely positioned according to whomever is telling it, because it is not perceived as a linear trajectory but rather is open to selective association between present and past but always filtered through the present, with this perspective stressed, there is nothing consensual or

³⁰⁹ Bird and Kendall, “The Mande Hero,” 13.

³¹⁰ See Téréba Togola, “The rape of Mali’s only resource” in *Illicit Antiquities: The theft of cultures and the extinction of archaeology*, ed. Neil Brodie and Kathryn Walker Tubb (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), 250-251. Now deceased, Togola was the National Director of Cultural Heritage in Mali. Because of Mali’s concern for its patrimony, it stands to reason that the documentation of rituals, festivals and activities makes up the bulk of many photographers’ repertoires. Documenting such art is often seen as an art in itself.

totalizing about it.”³¹¹ In Mali, history, lineage and culture are inextricably bound together; one cannot be imagined without the other. The *facen*, the cultural patrimony, reinforces the relations between the present and past, between the deceased ancestors and the living, through forms of knowledge and moral authority passed on into the present. The *facen* also reinforces cultural identity among a society; in fact, the *facen* in some sense *gives* the society its particular cultural identity, as *facen* includes the particular forms used by Bamana peoples, for example.

Malian cultural forms, or manifestations of *facen* in the arts, music, architecture, and religions of Mali, are both nationally and internationally celebrated. By ‘Malian culture,’ I mean ‘traditional’ performances, dances, masks, sculptures, clothing, jewelry and music hailing from various ethnic groups as well as ‘modern’ innovations, like pop music and studio photography. Unlike in some African countries, a number of ethnic groups in Mali have ancient and distinctive sculptural and masking traditions whose physical objects are preserved in the National Museum, as well as in countless Western museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Since sculpture was at first the only type of African art accorded attention by early twentieth-century Western scholars, certain Malian ethnic groups that create masks and sculptures – notably the Bamana, the Senufo, and the Dogon – have been internationally recognized by museums, scholars and collectors in the West for over a century, and are the source of many studies and publications. Thanks to the sculptural traditions of these groups, an industry in ‘airport art,’ or sculptures and masks made for tourists, is lively and present today. Bamana *ci wara* headdresses made for tourists, to use a popular example, can be found

³¹¹ Van Dyke, “The Oral-Visual Nexus,” 49.

for sale in New York at flea markets, in boutiques, and on the street outside of art museums. In Bamako, masks and sculptures can be bought at the Artisanat in the Grand Marché (the market that spreads across the center of downtown Bamako), and in upscale boutiques in neighborhoods where many Western development workers live.³¹² Thus, most Malians, and certainly most photographers, are well aware of Mali's cultural riches, as both intrinsic within the culture, and also as something desired by foreigners, especially wealthy Westerners.

Mali's architecture, traditional festivals and its hand-made material culture - pottery, and textiles, especially *bogolan* cloth - are also well-documented by scholars and appreciated by tourists. The ancient city of Djenne has been placed under UNESCO protection for its *banco* (mud-constructed) architecture, including the famous mosque, while the oldest written manuscripts in Sub-Saharan Africa are under preservation in the fabled city of Timbuktu. **[Figure 5:1]** The Tuareg nomads in the northeast desert region are celebrated for their distinctive desert culture, dress and camel sports, while performances and events of all sorts, such as the marionette festivals in Segou, draw researchers and tourists alike. Festivals celebrated by performances in some cases have an ancient lineage and are held for a mostly local audience. In other cases, the performances are new, or inventive variations on older performances, while the audience is largely made up of tourists, such as at the Essakane festival located about forty-five miles from Timbuktu, to which few non-local Malians can afford to travel. In contrast,

³¹² The Artisanat was founded during colonial rule to support the making of traditional crafts, and is now under the aegis of the Ministry of Tourism. Malians do not tend to buy local sculptures to decorate their homes, preferring Western decorative objects. However, national cultural festivals and youth festivals have kept interest in certain traditional forms alive. See Mary Jo Arnoldi, "Youth Festivals and Museums: The Cultural Politics of Public Memory in Postcolonial Mali" *Africa Today* 52 issue 4 (Summer 2006): 55-76. Additionally, some cultural forms remain important in villages even if not in modern Bamako, and others that were formerly performed for village events are now performed for tourists.

the fishing festival at San is performed mostly for locals. Most if not all of the photographers whom I interviewed had taken pictures at such cultural events.

While cultural forms are an important source of symbolic pride for many Malians, and contribute to the economic subsistence of the country, national ideology has also placed importance upon *facen*.³¹³ As Arnoldi notes, state-sponsored festivals attempt to inculcate notions of pride and connection to their heritage in local Malians, while the international trade in tourist art provides jobs. Foreign tourism in areas like the ancient city of Djenne and treks in Dogon country also generate livelihoods among local guides and artists. Thus, photographs that depict the varied aspects of Malian culture, or ‘cultural photography,’ as I call it, have the potential to reach a wide and varied audience, both of Malians and international tourists, and as such, the subject matter of ‘cultural photography’ is popular indeed.

Mali’s National Museum is a crucial institution with regard to issues of cultural preservation, documentation and patrimony. The Museum originated during the colonial period in 1953 as a branch of IFAN (*l’Institut Français d’Afrique Noire*), which was founded in 1936 in Dakar, Senegal, the center of French colonial power in West Africa.³¹⁴ Nationalized at Mali’s independence, the museum was supposed to “play an important role in the scope of reinforcing national unity and contributing to the valorization of authentic culture,” but that was impossible because of lack of funds.³¹⁵ In fact, the museum had virtually ceased to exist by 1976, when a renovated mission statement and

³¹³ Pringle writes, “arguably the single most important factor in Mali’s democratization process: the sense of pride that the Malians have in their own history.” Pringle, “Democratization in Mali,” 13.

³¹⁴ The Musée Soudanais de Bamako functioned as a temporary holding center for objects on their way to Dakar.

³¹⁵ “Il devait jouer un rôle important dans le cadre du renforcement de l’unité nationale et contribuer à la valorisation d’une culture authentique” <http://www.museenationaldumali.org.ml/historique.html>; accessed October 13, 2007.

new policies were developed to update the Museum's function.³¹⁶ **[Figure 5:2]** Along with the Museum's reorganization, a new layout and buildings were designed by French architect Jean-Loup Pivin to reflect the traditional Malian (called Sudanic or neo-Sudanic) *banco*, or mud-constructed architectural style, in an attempt to recuperate the traditional process and make the museum seem more accessible to its local population.³¹⁷

However, turning to a French architect highlights the postcolonial nature of the Museum itself, such that the museum's architecture becomes a metonym for its ideological presence. The Museum hopes to foster an appreciation of precolonial cultural traditions as a way to regain pride in Malian heritage, and to reinforce a sense of national identity.³¹⁸ Arnoldi argues that the Museum is a site "for constructing a national culture" and that the Museum "has marshaled a constellation of historical memories, symbolic forms, and cultural practices in the service of this nationalistic project."³¹⁹ The Museum's collections and documentation are impressive, and invaluable to preserving Mali's history. But as Van Dyke notes, and as is obvious if one spends any time at the museum, "most Malians view it as largely irrelevant, a site for Western tourists."³²⁰ The Museum functions like a Western museum, presenting static objects from different cultures in vitrines, supplemented by wall text. As scholars of African art recognize, this form of Western presentation thoroughly distorts the original context in which masks or

³¹⁶ Van Dyke, "The Oral-Visual Nexus," 82 and Arnoldi, "Overcoming a Colonial Legacy," 28.

³¹⁷ Arnoldi, "Overcoming a Colonial Legacy," 29. Pivin contributed to the early editions of the Bamako Biennale, and also contributed to the additions.

³¹⁸ Arnoldi, "Youth Festivals and Museums," 55-56.

³¹⁹ Vogel has noted the symbolic capital of traditional art turned nationalist symbol as a general phenomenon across Africa, which she labeled 'Extinct' in one of her five 'strains' of contemporary African art. Vogel, *Africa Explores*, 10-11.

³²⁰ Van Dyke, "The Oral-Visual Nexus," 78. In 1999, Arnoldi also noted that adult Malians did not tend to use their leisure time visiting the museum. See Arnoldi, "Overcoming a Colonial Legacy," 29. School groups appear to be the only Malian visitors, so perhaps when today's youth reaches adulthood they will see the museum as more relevant.

sculptures functioned. As in many African countries, Mali's traditional cultures utilized an oral and performative enactment of rituals through songs and ceremonies, involving music and dancing in conjunction with the appearances of sculptures or masks. **[Figure 5:3]** A mask's power and meaning were dependent on the context in which it was performed. For example, a *komo* mask, one of the most powerful and dangerous masks of the male Bamana and Senufo *Komo* societies, and one that is normally hidden for most of the year except to appear in a *komo* ceremony, loses its power when the mask is relocated to the confines of the Museum and displayed under static and constant visibility.³²¹

In Van Dyke's description of Malian precolonial, 'genealogical' history, the role of the visible is but one part of a vast system of knowledge and experience, in contrast to the West's obsession with visibility as the most important way of securing knowledge.³²² Van Dyke argues that French colonialists were threatened by the opposing notions of time, materiality, and history under which traditional cultures operated. She claims that the French founded the Museum to control and make sense of the oral cultures of Mali, with their vastly different genealogical and performative notions of time, history, and culture, by archiving what the West considered important and could *see*; i.e. the material objects. The National Museum thus functioned as an attempt to understand and assert power over Malian cultures by collecting the physical objects left over from ephemeral and performative traditional ceremonies. This method of control was accomplished by archiving and documenting the material artifacts of oral Malian cultures. By removing those artifacts from their context, their meaning was severely diminished and their power

³²¹ Arnoldi, "Overcoming a Colonial Legacy," 35.

³²² See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Jay shows how recent French philosophers have turned away from this visual emphasis, a legacy of the Enlightenment.

was leached away. The Museum today embodies the contradiction of the French (and the West's) exhibition practices of African art, which is so different in tenor from how Malians understand culture as to seem meaningless at best and harmful at worst (in that powerful objects, meant to be hidden at most times and whose visual emergences were surrounded by rituals, performances and careful guarding of their sacred power, are now permanently visually presented as static, harmless objects in the Museum). The powerful clash between precolonial "Mali" and Western notions is reiterated here, where the necessity of documenting patrimony for posterity conflicts with the very forms that patrimony once took.

The National Museum's fundamentally contradictory nature does not mean that the institution is ineffectual or unimportant. Though the museum lacks local adult attention, school children visit the museum as part of their curriculum. For today's young Bamakois, raised in the city, traditional rituals are foreign to their lives. As traditional cultures become less known and less powerful, the Museum's role becomes more and more necessary to protect the remnants of a certain history and way of life. Since its reorganization in 1976, dedicated to overturning colonial collecting policies, the Museum has also focused on acquiring and exhibiting objects in media the French did not consider important, such as textiles and pottery, and concomitantly widening its attention to acquiring pieces and documentation from underrepresented ethnic groups who did not create carved wooden sculptures, such as the Sonrai, Tuareg, Minanka, and Bobo.³²³

³²³ Arnoldi, "Overcoming a Colonial Legacy," 29-31.

Indeed, from an international point of view, the National Museum of Mali is considered vibrant, “one of the most dynamic museums in West Africa today.”³²⁴ The National Museum owns a superb collection and provides excellent and informative exhibitions and outreach programs. It is the nature of the Museum *qua* museum that is fundamentally problematic.³²⁵ While the Museum has worked hard to “overcome its colonial legacy” through new outreach, collecting and exhibition policies, one could argue that such an attempt is doomed to at least partial failure. Despite “Africanizing” the Museum’s presentation, the Museum’s very structure embodies the contradiction of Western practices of exhibiting African art, and as such could be said to embody the contradiction of postcolonialism.³²⁶

Like the Museum itself, art photography in Bamako is fraught with postcolonial contradictions, to the extent that conflicts over identity and modernity characterize the very project of art photography in Bamako. In relation to Bamako’s burgeoning photography movement, the Museum plays an ambivalent role. Museum employees who work in photography such as Diarra, Bâ, and Tienro have access either to the darkroom or to computers for processing their personal work; thus, the Museum unofficially supports the work of Diarra, Bâ, and Tienro, and officially has lent its traveling exhibition hall to the International Exhibition of the Biennale. However, the Museum’s director, Samuel Sidibé, trained in France as an archaeologist, is dubious about the long-

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

³²⁵ In contrast, Van Dyke praises the ‘culture banks’ in more remote Malian villages, in which villagers deposit objects but their meanings are kept within the community, and the community has say over how those objects are presented to Western tourists. Van Dyke, “The Oral-Visual Nexus,” 2.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 83. However, Arnoldi notes that in the 1976 reorganization of collection policies, the definition of the object to be collected was widened to include its associated documentation. Arnoldi, “Overcoming a Colonial Legacy,” 31.

term value of Mali's new artistic photography, and is reluctant to buy contemporary works, although the Museum owns photographs by Keïta and Sidibé.³²⁷

I believe it is highly significant that four of the most influential 'art' photographers in Bamako, in terms of teaching, their own personal work, and their institutional capacities, work or used to work at the National Museum.³²⁸ They are elite government workers highly educated in the French-influenced system, and several were also artists educated at the National Institute of the Arts, which was founded under colonialism to promote Western modern arts as well as modernized traditional arts.³²⁹ Thus, the postcolonial nature of their training and museum employment highlights the more general postcolonial problematic of photography in Bamako. While I do not mean to imply that these photographers' jobs contribute to the bloated bureaucracy that troubles Mali's nascent democracy, an unfortunate relic of colonialism, these photographers' prominence suggests that 'art' photography in Bamako, like in the West, has been adopted by a certain class segment of society that is not the majority of the population, and that enjoys more privileges than most. Sogodogo, Bâ, Tienro and Diarra occupy (or occupied) prestigious positions in one of the most highly-regarded museums in West Africa, and such positions require a high degree of education, meaning that these photographers are among the well-educated 'elites' of the country. Sogodogo, Bâ and Diarra have all spent a number of years studying in Europe, and Sogodogo and Tienro both graduated from the National Institute of the Arts (INA). Accompanying benefits for working at the Museum include comfortably air-conditioned offices, up-to-date

³²⁷ Samuel Sidibé, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 14 June 2006.

³²⁸ In fact, Bâ, Diarra and Sogodogo are three of the most influential photographers in Bamako; only Malick Sidibé has more clout, due to his age and his international reputation.

³²⁹ Joseye Tienro and Youssouf Sogodogo were trained at INA.

computers, Internet access and an air-conditioned darkroom; all highly-prized and uncommon benefits for most Bamakois, either at work or at home. **[Figure 5:4]**

It can be assumed that the photographers who work at the Museum are well-informed about its ethnographic mission. Diarra, Bâ, and Tienro all work in the Audio/Visual department,³³⁰ where their duties include documenting, preserving, archiving and digitizing images of the Museum's extensive collection. The project of digitization acts as an ongoing reminder of the importance of preserving culture, which has been a major issue since the Museum's founding. Their work also requires the photographers to travel to 'traditional' performances and events throughout the country, in order to photograph and video the proceedings.

Of course, preserving culture via photography is not solely the province of the National Museum. Studio photography has done the same, in what one could argue is a manner much more integrated with societal norms, values and desires, since the first studios opened in the 1930s. Lamunière writes, "the fact that images privately commissioned for domestic settings were often shared with the larger community conferred special status on photographers as creators and guardians of visual memory."³³¹ Candace Keller argues that many studio photographers in Bamako conceive of themselves as 'visual *griots*.'³³² The *griot* in Mande culture is an oral historian who comes from a particular caste, and who relates a selective history through traditional

³³⁰ In the interest of limiting the scope of this project, I only asked them about photography. Racine Keïta is the only photographer I know also working creatively in video; but there are likely others.

³³¹ Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 13.

³³² Keller, "Visual Griots," Portrait Photography conference.

means, in performances and praise songs for the ruling caste.³³³ While I did not find that photographers considered themselves *griots* (and some were even offended at this suggestion at first, as *griots* are looked-down upon by the freeborn/noble caste), after an explanation some photographers acknowledged that the role of the photographer in preserving memory had a similar function to that of a *griot*.

Considering the role of *griots* in Malian society, I think the comparison brings out some useful distinctions but is ultimately a grafting of Mali's culture as Westerners understand it onto Malian photographers. In studio photography the function of historical memory is contained *within* the photograph itself, and by the people who appear in the picture, and who keep and display it. While some studio photographers do seem to have an incredible capacity for remembering the specific circumstances of a portrait (particularly Hamidou Maïga), it must be remembered that they themselves often did not even know their subjects. In Maïga's case, usually the portraits of government officials were what he remembered, as an American photographer might remember taking a picture of Bill Clinton. Thus, the photographer is not the *griot* so much as the *photograph itself* becomes a kind of *griot*, the vessel of historical memory. However, I have been assured by Candace Keller that Malick Sidibé considers himself a visual *griot*. To me, this suggests his canny awareness of how Westerners conceive of the *griot* (the *griot* has also become, in America, an important symbol of West Africa without a nuanced understanding of how the *griot* functions, a way in which terms migrate across the diaspora and come to take on new or altered meanings). The use of the title "Visual Griots" for a photography project with children (see Chapter Four) works under

³³³ The griot question is a complicated issue. In my own research, I found that few photographers conceived of themselves as "visual griots;" at least, not until we explained to them the concept and connections between their work and the griot's traditional role, from our perspective.

American assumptions (appropriately, as it is being exhibited in the US), as opposed to the notion that children could be *griots* in their own culture.

In Mali, which has little history or literature from the colonial period written from the point of view of Africans, and whose traditions are mostly oral (except for the Arabic manuscripts in Timbuktu), photography is especially important as tangible heritage and material documentation. When I asked Malian photographers about who had most influenced their works, or, as we generally translated the question, which photographer or photographers had most inspired them, the names of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé were most often invoked. Although Keïta's and Sidibé's popularity is no doubt due to their international and local fame, and the not-incidental fact that Sidibé's family has benefited financially from his illustrious career, the reasons they were appreciated turned out to be significantly different from why they are famous in the West.

While international writers wax poetic about Keïta's striking compositions and especially the clashing patterns of clothing and backdrops in his photographs, the formal aspects of his work did not impress many of today's Malian photographers. **[Figure 5:5]** Instead, the patrimonial quality of Keïta's works was mentioned time and again. Keïta's photographs are appreciated for showing "ancestors," the grandfathers and grandmothers of today's generation, in the styles of the late '40s and '50s. In Mali, photography only became affordable to most people during Keïta's time, i.e., from the late 1940s onwards. Studio photography was the only type of photography popular among Africans under colonialism – "art" photography as such was virtually unknown. Africans did not appear often in press pictures during colonial rule, and after independence the press was strictly controlled by the government. Until the 1970s people relied on studios for pictures of

family and friends; and many still do.³³⁴ Thus, Keïta's pictures are among the only pictures of the era showing Africans in their own self-conscious representations. Whereas in the US we have a photographically-saturated culture exacerbated by advertising, film and television, in Mali a photographic visual culture only began in the 1930s and still does not amount to the barrage of photographic images that overwhelm the visual landscape of many American cities. **[Figure 5:6]** In Bamako in 2006, for example, only a few billboards used photographic images; for the most part billboards were painted, and the kind of constant photo-image advertising seen in the US on the outsides of buses, the insides of subways, and along the street is mostly absent in Bamako.³³⁵

Despite Bamako's relative dearth of photographic images in comparison to the West, however, the amount of visual images that circulate in the capital is still much greater than such imagery in the rest of the country, particularly in small villages. As Manthia Diawara has recounted, "Malick Sidibé's photographic art was in conversation with the design of popular magazines, album covers, and movie posters of the time."³³⁶ Sidibé's clients borrowed poses from the cinema - French films and Westerns shown in local theaters - and from record covers featuring James Brown and other rock groups. The fact that Keïta's studio was located near the cinema has often been noted. The presence of newspapers, particularly today, where newspapers abound and images are common (albeit, black and white and of generally poor print quality) emphasize

³³⁴ Even with the increasing affordability of easy-to-operate cameras, studios would do a strong business in Bamako today if there were less of them. As it is, with so many studios, the prices must be kept low and clientele are divided among them.

³³⁵ Many people do have television, however, which is changing the visual culture - weddings and funerals are now often videotaped instead of being photographed. In Abderramane Sissako's 2006 film *Bamako*, the photographer makes a video of the wedding which occurs as a counterpoint to a legal tribunal, which is the main event of the film.

³³⁶ Diawara, "The Sixties in Bamako," 9.

Bamako's modernity and its familiarity with the photographic image, which no doubt influenced the growing trade of studio photography over the years. Today, television images and especially music videos, which illustrate new renditions of centuries-old traditional songs as well as innovative music, are especially important in terms of the visual culture of how women in particular perceive of themselves.³³⁷

It is also important to consider what *kind* of heritage Keïta and Sidibé preserve. While 'art' photographers in Bamako tend to be familiar with Keïta's and Sidibé's images, they also must certainly be familiar with their own family photo albums, which, it can be assumed, encase similar types of portraits of family members and friends. Keïta and Sidibé's photographs participate in constructing an ideology about Bamako's and Mali's past that is the stronger for its lack of corroborating photographic sources, and the fact that most photographers today were not alive during that past. That this construction is both a truth and a fiction speaks to the nature of studio photography – as Diawara notes, the photograph participates in creating an identity of *Bamakois*, a person who exhibits cosmopolitanism, urbanity, and beauty. The emphasis on Seydou Keïta's preservation of memory, then, has important implications for today's photographers. Although only one photographer, Emmanuel Daou, has consciously taken up Keïta's style in a post-modern homage, many appreciated the cultural work that Keïta's photographs perform in preserving history and memory for posterity. While the photographers whose work I discuss here may not seem visually to share much in

³³⁷ For the prominence of television in Mali's visual culture today, see Dorothea Schulz, "Music Videos and the Effeminate Vices of Urban Culture in Mali," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 71 no. 3, (2001): 345- 372 and "Drama, Desire, and Debate: Mass-Mediated Subjectivities in Urban Mali," *Visual Anthropology* 20 (2007): 19-39.

common with Keïta or Sidibé, certain bodies of work seem to stem directly from an impulse to preserve *facen*.

I. The Archive

The notion of ‘the archive’ becomes a useful concept for understanding the work of the photographers at the National Museum, and why it is appreciated by a Western audience. The archive, a Western, administrative system of organizing documents that contain information, was introduced to Malian cultures by colonialism. In its most literal and prosaic form, the archive is a regulated way of breaking down knowledge into discrete sections, which then can be grouped together by their similarities. The ‘rise’ of the archive coincided with the nineteenth-century European anthropological project of documenting Africans and other non-Western peoples so as to ‘prove’ European racial theories constructed to justify colonialism and European dominance. The archive as a philosophical problem of modernity has been addressed by such contemporary philosophers as Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Giorgio Agamben, among others, as a way of problematizing the historical systems by which knowledge is regulated, categorized, distributed, stored, and interpreted.³³⁸ The archive is thus viewed as a problem of modernity, of the vast systems of social, juridical, and scientific regulation and rationalization spawned by the Western Enlightenment.

Although archives have existed for thousands of years, such as the library at Alexandria (a ‘non-Western’ example), Thomas Richards makes a convincing case for

³³⁸ See Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

the rapid development of archival projects in the West, and what could be called an accompanying ‘archival mindset’ during the nineteenth century that coincided with British imperialism.³³⁹ Richards notes that the vast expansion of collections at such institutions as the British Museum benefited from the plunder supported by Britain’s imperialist power. Today, Western museums with substantial holdings of African art often owe portions of their collections to collecting practices under colonial rule, which were often unethical. The sack of Benin City in 1897, which finalized the process of bringing the area that would become Nigeria under British rule, and which resulted in the looting of the Benin bronzes now housed in the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is one of the most egregious examples.³⁴⁰ But Richards also points out that, when Britain did not have as much physical control over its colonies as desired, documentation of the colonies gave Britain the illusion of that control. Richards notes, “the British viewed their empire as an immense *administrative* challenge”³⁴¹ (my italics) and that it was “much easier to unify an archive composed of texts than to unify an empire made of territory.”³⁴² The fantasy of empire was not merely supported by archival documentation of the colonies, but in a sense was *conceived* of through collecting and organizing vast amounts of data about the territories Britain had conquered. Richards makes a strong case regarding the 1885 Berlin Conference, the infamous high point of the “Scramble for Africa,” which resulted in the African map’s division amongst fourteen European nations. These boundaries remained theoretical for a good decade or two after

³³⁹ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993).

³⁴⁰ For more on the relationship between Great Britain’s perception of Africa and Britain’s collection and exhibition policies of African material culture, see Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

³⁴¹ Richards, *The Imperial Archive*, 1.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

the Conference, until the various European powers were able to defeat local African governments with improved weapons and armies inoculated against disease. In what Richards' views as Britain's ultimate fantasy, the collection of factual information from the colonies and other territories was meant to be unified into a singular fount of comprehensive knowledge. According to Richards, "This supplanting of power by the force of knowledge is one of the hallmarks of the twentieth century."³⁴³

Britain's dream of dominance through the control of knowledge can as easily be ascribed to France. While "the imperial archive was [only] a fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire," this 'fantasy' held great importance among colonial administrators.³⁴⁴ France used complicated networks of administrative systems to rule its territories in West Africa, where it arbitrarily divided, documented, and archived its subjects. Van Dyke supports this theory in her assertion that Mali's National Museum under colonialism functioned to control the material artifacts of Mali's cultures.

The very act of taking photographs has often been equated with creating an archive. The photograph flattens any scene, portrait or object into a two-dimensional representation that can be filed by subject, date, location, photographer or a myriad of other categories. A performance of a mask becomes a photograph, as does an image of the mask itself. **[Figure 5:7]** Difference is reduced to an apparent, purely formal, sameness – as Allan Sekula writes, "The archive is a vast substitution set, providing for a relation of general equivalence between images."³⁴⁵ Benjamin Buchloh also notes

³⁴³ Ibid., 7.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.

³⁴⁵ Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive" *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 17.

“photography’s innate structural order of the archive, its seemingly infinite multiplicity, serialization and aim for comprehensive totality.”³⁴⁶ Sekula addresses the historical intersection of photography with the archive in nineteenth-century Britain, where he sees the photograph as a primary tool in the categorization of the ‘other’ (in this case, criminals). Sekula notes that, after the British Gaols Act in 1823 and Metropolitan Police Acts of 1829 and 1839, which standardized juridical procedures, “a new object is defined – the criminal body - and, as a result, a more extensive “social body” is invented.”³⁴⁷ Even though photographing criminals by the police did not become a common practice until the 1860s, Sekula believes that the potential for regulation was perceived as early as the 1840s, shortly after photography was invented.³⁴⁸

If the ‘criminal body’ was defined in London in the 1840s and assisted by the invention of photography, one can only imagine that the ‘colonial body’ was not far behind, especially as photography traveled to sub-Saharan Africa immediately after it was announced in 1839.³⁴⁹ The ‘colonial body’ in Mali began to be defined for the French in the early 1880s, when the first photographs of Bamako and its citizens were taken, although parts of West Africa and its peoples were photographed from as early as 1840. Thus the construction of a generic African ‘colonial body’ occurred in France at about the same time as the ‘criminal body.’³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶ Benjamin Buchloh, “Gerhard Richter’s Atlas: The Anomic Archive” in *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*, 85.

³⁴⁷ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 4-6.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁴⁹ Larry W. Yarak discovered an entry in the Elmina Journal in the National Archives, The Hague, Archief van de Nederlandsche Bezittingen ter Kuste van Guinea which told of a Captain Bouet who made a daguerreotype on shore. See Yarak, “Early Photography in Elmina” *Ghana Studies Council Newsletter*, No. 8 (1995), accessed at: <http://people.tamu.edu/~yarak/photo-el.htm> on August 11, 2008. Thanks to Geoffrey Batchen for calling my attention to this reference.

³⁵⁰ Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako*, 7.

While Sekula's text does not address colonialism in particular, he importantly notes the prevalence of phrenology, or the notion that character can be determined by the shape of a person's head, as a discourse in society that he believes shaped portrait photography in Europe and the US. This racist pseudo-science discriminated against people of color and Africans in particular on the basis of superficial physiognomy. Much early anthropological photography follows from this notion, objectifying the subject and turning him or her into a foreign and exoticized body to be studied. Such photography commonly represented Africans until local populations developed their own studios.

Projects that critique the notion of the archive have become prevalent in Western contemporary art, following or generating the theorizing of the archive. Perhaps most famous in the realm of conceptual international art are the works of German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. The Bechers' black and white, deadpan photographs formally invoke the rhetoric of the archive, in presenting a typology of obsolete structures, such as cooling towers or water towers. **[Figure 5:8]** Each picture in a series utilizes the same lighting, viewpoint, focal length, and camera angle as almost scientific controls, thereby emphasizing the similarity among the towers, and the small variations that differentiate them. Because of the highly regulated format and presentation of the cooling towers, which are always exhibited as a series, the Bechers' project has been considered a deconstruction of the archive. Magnani writes of the Becher's images:

It is only through their participation in a system of presentation, under the model of the archive, that the single images gain a significance which is larger than their particular instances. At the same time it is the process of ordering itself that comes under scrutiny as the implication of an abstract procedure are exposed through a mode of representation that replciates it.³⁵¹

³⁵¹ See Gregorio Magnani, "Ordering procedures: Photography in recent German art" *Arts Magazine* 64 (March 1990), 82.

As the ability to generate an archive is a defining characteristic of photography, it is not surprising that archival practices can be found in photographic studios in Bamako. A number of photographers with whom I spoke believed that an important reason for Keïta's fame was the fact that, unlike most studio photographers, Keïta carefully stored and preserved his negatives. Most photographers left their negatives to the photographer who inherited their studio, who often threw them out. Sidibé has also stored his negatives, and his former clients sometimes come by the studio asking about old pictures they had taken years ago but never claimed, in hopes of benefiting from Sidibé's fortune. But like Keïta, Sidibé does not file his prints or negatives by client's name, but by month and year.

II. Youssouf Sogodogo's "Braids"

While Youssouf Sogodogo, like most photographers, has worked on a variety of projects and subjects, his series that depicts girls' and young women's hairstyles closely fits an archival paradigm.³⁵² Not coincidentally, given the contemporary art world trend of interest in archival artworks, of all Sogodogo's photographs, this series has been the most published and extensively exhibited. "The Braids of Mali" appeared in the monograph *Youssouf Sogodogo: Photographs* (2000), accompanying an exhibition at Galerie Chab, and was included in the exhibition catalogue *BKO-RAK: Photographers*

³⁵² This is based on the works that I saw by Sogodogo. He did not show me unpublished works. The series of hairstyles are also the most-often published works.

from *Bamako and Marrakech* (1998) and in *5 Photographers from Mali* (1996).³⁵³

Several works from the series were also shown in the 2005 Bamako Biennale's International Exhibition, the primary and most prestigious venue.

Sogodogo is one of the most prominent photographers in Bamako, a position comparable to Alioune Bâ's, both in terms of teaching and participation in international exhibitions. He is a former employee of the Museum, where he worked as a conservator of textiles, and was in charge of climate control of the Museum. Sogodogo came to Bamako after a stint as the Director of the Sahel Museum in Gao, in Mali's remote eastern desert region. Sogodogo is now Director of the *Centre de Formation en Photographie* (CFP), Bamako's private, two-year photography school, where he is fully occupied with teaching and administrative duties.

Like a number of art photographers, Sogodogo was trained in the arts – he received a degree in painting from the National Institute of the Arts (INA) in Bamako. Sogodogo's photographic background is unusual, however, in that he never worked in or owned a studio. He took up photography while living in Gao in the 1980s, when he began to photograph the hairstyles of his daughter, her friends, his wife, and their neighbors.³⁵⁴ The earliest published photographs of Sogodogo's braids are dated 1983.³⁵⁵ **[Figure 5:9]** Thus, Sogodogo began the "Braids of Mali" series a decade before the Biennale was inaugurated in Bamako; i.e. before the notion of art photography began to seriously circulate among Malian photographers.

³⁵³ *BKO-RAK* also includes works by Malians Amadou Traoré, Mamadou Konaté, students of a prytaneum in the town of Kati, Mali, and the Moroccan artist Hicham Benohoud. Antonin Potoski, who published the book of Dogon photography, and who helped Mohamed Camara, was also the impetus behind these three publications.

³⁵⁴ Sogodogo said that he was attracted by the cultural differences of the region. Youssouf Sogodogo, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 8 and 15 July 2006.

³⁵⁵ *Youssouf Sogodogo: photographies* (Paris: Les Éditions de l'Oeil, 2000), unpaginated.

In fact, it seems that what motivated Sogodogo to take pictures, according to the monograph's essay, was the museological desire to preserve culture, and Sogodogo's museum employment seems to have inspired that desire. After relocating to Bamako in 1985, Sogodogo worked as a textile conservator at the National Museum. Textiles and bodily adornment, including hairstyles, have much in common. Both utilize abstract and decorative patterns in inventive combinations, are usually designed and created by women, and are most appreciated when worn by women.³⁵⁶ In fact, before identity photos became the staple of the profession, pictures of women, dressed up to display a new outfit or hairstyle, composed the bulk of studio photography. In an interview, for example, Malick Sidibé related that a woman came in to his studio to have her hairstyle photographed every time she had a new one.³⁵⁷ Photographers often set up shop next door to tailors, or vice versa, demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between photography and bodily adornment in Mali.

Female beauty and adornment are vital and significant aspects of Malian culture, and hairstyle is an important component of a woman's aesthetic presentation. *Youssouf Sogodogo: Photographs* is edited and has a forward written by Antonin Potoski. The Malian critic, philosopher, teacher, and gallerist Amadou Chab Touré discusses the importance of braiding and adornment in an accompanying essay titled "The heads of

³⁵⁶ The appropriation by male artists of women's traditional (i.e. 'craft') techniques is not unlike the European male modernists' appropriation of textile patterns and collage, traditionally seen as 'women's work.' This male, fine-art appropriation of forms traditionally created by women can be seen across West Africa – for example, modernist Uche Okeke (Nigeria) makes use of *uli* painting motifs, which were traditionally the province of women, and the *bogolan* fine artists in Mali are mostly men, even though *bogolan* was traditionally made by women.

³⁵⁷ Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 37.

women turn.”³⁵⁸ Touré notes the cultural significance attached to the treatment of hair throughout an individual’s life, beginning at birth: **[Figure 5:10]**

In Malian society, the first adornment for hair is the *rasage*, the shaved head, which is the first artistic intervention authorized on the body of man. In an aesthetic ritual which accompanies the name-giving, the *rasage* signifies that hair can’t grow according to its own nature. On the contrary, it should be exalted with all kinds of adornments.³⁵⁹

This passage shows that, in Mali, like in much of Africa, the body becomes a site for the expression of meaning through aesthetic manipulation. As art is inseparable from culture, so is it inseparable from the body, on and through which culture is expressed. Terence Turner notes that the “surface of the body becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted and bodily adornment...becomes the language through which it is expressed.”³⁶⁰ It is through bodily adornment that social identities are communicated. A great deal of significance is attached to hairstyles, in particular, because the head is generally considered the locus of power, the place from which personality and intelligence emanate.³⁶¹ Many hours of effort can be put into hairstyling, and in former times, or in present-day rural areas, a particular hairdo might even take days to finish. Specific hairstyles are worn to celebrate a marriage, commemorate a death, or to mark various other rites of passage.³⁶² Such styles vary from culture to culture. For example, as Touré explains, when a little Khassonkée girl first learns to walk, her head is

³⁵⁸ Amadou Chab Touré, “*Les têtes des femmes tournent*,” in *Youssouf Sogodogo: photographies*, [unpaginated, 6 pps.]

³⁵⁹ Touré, “*Les têtes des femmes tournent*,” p. 1 of text.

³⁶⁰ Terence S. Turner, “The Social Skin,” in *Not Work Alone: A Cross-cultural View of Activities Superfluous to Survival*, ed. Jeremy Chermak & Roger Lewin (London: Temple Smith, 1980), 112. Quoted in Arnoldi, “Introduction” in *Crowning Achievements: African Arts of Dressing the Head*, Arnoldi and Christine Mullen Kreamer (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History/UCLA, 1995), 10.

³⁶¹ Arnoldi, “Introduction,” 9-10.

³⁶² “Special hair styles and head-wear often figure prominently in rituals for major life passages such as birth, coming of age, marriage, and funerals.” Ibid, 15. Also see Esi Sagay, *African Hairstyles: Styles of Yesterday and Today* (London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1983).

decorated with little tufts of hair on front, on the nape of the neck, and on each side of the head.³⁶³ Various hairstyles can also signify more pedestrian meanings. For example, in the 1950s, a girl who was too timid to go out wore a “Saturday night” hairstyle that signaled her availability for a date.³⁶⁴

Touré’s descriptive text not only informs its reader of such cultural customs, but also quotes the senior hairstylist and president of the braiders’ association in Bamako, and comments on modern innovations, such as how the *rasta* style has become popular in Bamako because it takes less time, money and effort due to the use of synthetic extensions.³⁶⁵ However, while Touré’s essay is generally informative, it does not apply specific descriptions or meanings to Sogodogo’s particular images.

A book published by Éditions Populaires du Mali in the 1970s, *Traditional and Modern Hairstyles of Mali*, also attests to the cultural importance of women’s hairstyles.³⁶⁶ A short text accompanying each photograph provides basic information about the hairstyle, such as its name and sometimes its local meaning.³⁶⁷ Traditional ‘beauty’ hairstyles of different cultures are shown, such as the Bozo, Bamana, and Fulani, along with hairstyles for young brides, hairstyles to prevent divorce, and to ward off the evil eye. Children’s hairstyles offer hope for a long life or help to prevent misfortune.

True to its title, *Traditional and Modern Hairstyles of Mali* also includes a wide variety of modern hairstyles which are not identified by ethnicity, in contrast to the

³⁶³ Touré, “*Les têtes des femmes tournent*,” p. 2 of text.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4 of text.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5 of text.

³⁶⁶ Barthélémy Koné and Mamadou Koné, *Coiffures Traditionnelles et Modernes Au Mali/Traditional and Modern Hairstyles of Mali* (Bamako, Éditions Populaires du Mali, n.d.).

³⁶⁷ The book is written in French, English and German, and *not*, significantly, in Bamana, thus it was clearly published for an international audience and for elite, well-educated Malians (while it exhorts women, in fact few women could read French in the 1970s). Yet it remains for the Malian historian to contextualize the photographs.

traditional hairstyles. In West Africa in general, Arnoldi notes, “Many popular hair styles are given local names that relate them to contemporary events or highlights local notions of modernity.”³⁶⁸ Some modern styles in Mali are named after specific geographic locations important to the local economy, such as The Road to Koulouba, The Bend in the Niger, The Abidjan Road. Others sites are more general - Roundabout, Waterfall, Watertower, The Work Site. Some names are conceptual: Friendship, Hope, Liberty, while others are political: Organization of African Unity, Liberation, and Negritude. Still others memorialize important events, such as The Olympic Games. **[Figure 5:11]** One style, worn to commemorate General Charles de Gaulle, mimics the military headgear worn by the victorious *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, Malians (and other Francophone West Africans) who were conscripted into the French armies to fight in various wars, including WWII.³⁶⁹ Older pictures, clearly studio photographs, show headscarves tied in the style of Versailles, Louis d’Or, Apollo II, and Marie Claire, giving concrete representations to noteworthy or fashionable political and cultural figures or institutions.³⁷⁰ Modern hairstyles tend to change much more quickly than traditional hairstyles, as they carry less specific cultural meanings and are related to shifting fashion trends.³⁷¹

Quoting the foreword of *Traditional and Modern Hairstyles* at length is worthwhile in order to show the cultural consequence attributed to hairstyles in Mali. Beginning with a praise song for women that identifies them as African, Malian, and universal, the foreword goes on to explain that:

³⁶⁸ Arnoldi, “Introduction,” 24.

³⁶⁹ “There is a hairstyle worn in memory of General de Gaulle. It imitates the military headdress of the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* when they returned home in triumph.” Koné and Koné, *Coiffures Traditionnelles*, 15, 158.

³⁷⁰ While the book states that photography and text is by Mamadou Koné, it is unclear whether some of the older pictures, clearly studio photographs, originated from the author’s own studio.

³⁷¹ “Hair styles and hats that are not associated with ritual contexts often undergo the most rapid transformations responding to the dynamics of fashion and taste.” Arnoldi, “Introduction,” 24.

Hairdressing is an art. Like any other plastic art, it penetrates us and stirs us to our very depths through its delicacy and the great diversity of the language it speaks. This book is more than just an album; it is an absolute living encyclopaedia of the beauties of our land. It is also a message to the whole world, particularly to the men and women of Mali so that they shall discover themselves and develop their Mali personality to the full. It teaches us to take stock of our own worth and impose on the outside world a respect for the true dimensions of our negro sense of what is beautiful. The various style [sic] of hairdressing evolved by the genius of the people constitute the plastic and extremely intimate expression of a heritage which is deeply rooted in our traditions.³⁷²

The paragraph above expresses, in remarkably florid yet concise prose, the interrelated cultural connections between hairdressing, art, beauty, moral purpose, dignity, self-respect, and pride in one's cultural heritage. Hairdressing is an art even as sculpture is an art. It is also a language, a means of signification, a way of communication, so that the book itself, with its photographs of styles, becomes an encyclopedia. The sense in which hairstyles, and Malian culture, are essential to Malian identity is shown in the phrase, "develop our Malian personality to the full" in a "message to the whole world." The text embodies the Malian precept of teaching - the book does not simply provide knowledge, but also *instructs* the reader on how to behave, and on the importance of culture and of taking pride in culture. Further, it shares Mali's cultural heritage with 'the world', i.e. Westerners, through its languages.

Woven through the book are references to post-independence nationalism, to 'Malian' as opposed to 'tribal' or ethnic identifications – the 'Mali personality.' National unity is the goal, expressed through the cultural form of hairstyles. This notion is made explicit later in the book: "the tribal period is over, independence

³⁷² Koné and Koné, *Coiffures Traditionnelles*, 3-4.

and modern means of communication have enabled the races to mingle constantly.”³⁷³ Unlike many African nations, Mali’s political parties have not been allowed to form around the basis of ethnic groups, and Mali’s ethnic tolerance has often been cited as an important reason for its stable democracy.³⁷⁴ When one recalls the inter-ethnic violence that has troubled so many post-independence African regimes (and of course it is a global problem, from racist inequality in the US to the Israel and Palestine conflict), the national unity created through the de-emphasis of ethnic ties appears a political revelation.

The last line of the foreword in *Hairstyles* exhorts: “So, women of Mali, wear your hairstyles proudly, for they are the soundest basis of your dignity and of your personality and an assurance that your beauty will survive.”³⁷⁵ The text rhetorically reminds women that the book’s photographs will preserve their beauty. This passage also shows the moral weight attached to a woman’s beauty and careful adornment, because in Malian culture beauty is considered a moral, communal good. One takes care of one’s appearance out of respect for society. More specifically, Schulz suggests that looking beautiful has socio-cultural ramifications related to a woman’s status and reputation in a community. In present-day Bamako, the richness, quality and beauty of a woman’s clothes show that she has a goodly amount of social capital, because she received these gifts from others on account of her charm.³⁷⁶ Hairstyles contribute to a woman’s good

³⁷³ Ibid., 49.

³⁷⁴ The Tuareg situation is the only major ‘ethnic’ conflict in Mali, which Susanna Wing describes as relating more to the clash between nomadic lifestyle with a national government than having to do with ethnic intolerance. For further discussion, see Chapter Six.

³⁷⁵ Koné and Koné, *Coiffures Traditionnelles*, 4.

³⁷⁶ Schulz, “Competing Sartorial Assertions,” 261.

looks, enabling women to create various personas, and allowing women to signify certain meanings without words. Arnoldi writes, “Hats and hair styles... need to be understood as one of the technologies that people use to construct social identities and to produce, reproduce, and transform their relationships and situations through time.”³⁷⁷ Hairstyles are a cultural form that becomes a vehicle for expressions of pride in ethnic and national identities, tradition, modernity, moral purpose, and fashion.

In Sogodogo’s monograph, *Yousouf Sogodogo: Photographs*, the pictures of braids are divided into two series: “The Gao Notebooks” and the more polished “Braids of Mali.” **[Figures 5:12 & 5:13]** The two series appear to show the progression in conceptualization from Sogodogo’s first prints, presumably taken in Gao, to a more ‘finished’ version of the series, which also appears, with some modifications, in the other book, *BKO-RAK*. **[Figure 5:14]** In “The Gao Notebooks,” dates and notations that Sogodogo wrote or stamped on the backs of the photographs appear next to the images, which are remarkably similar, in pose, angle and expression, to American yearbook photos. Some styles from “The Gao Notebooks” are named, such as “*chapeau*” (hat), while others are dated. Confusingly, at least one picture appears to have been taken in Bamako, not Gao, as BKO prefaces the name of the girl, Fatoumata Tadjou, written in Bamana. However, Sogodogo generally does not note the girl’s ethnicity, age, or name, or the name of the style. Nor does there seem to be an attempt to collect *all* of the

³⁷⁷ Arnoldi, “Introduction,” 10.

current styles, or even one example of each variety. As a museological project, then, this is half-hearted at best.

In fact, it is the removal of these written markers of identification that renders the series attractive to an international audience, that distinguishes it from the obvious and unpalatable anthropological project, that makes the archive implicit and not explicit: that make the series, in a word, ‘art.’ The description of Sogodogo’s series in the 2005 Biennale catalogue suggests that it is *beauty*, and not comprehensiveness, that Sogodogo is after. “You have to say that the beauty, the gentleness and the messages conveyed by those braided heads put me under their spell,” says Sogodogo.³⁷⁸ However, his private intention to preserve hairstyles for posterity - his apparent interest in doing so is shown by the fact that he carefully *dated* all of these images - suggests a more “museological approach” than simply an interest in beauty. Sogodogo’s awareness of a broader, historical sphere - not a personal posterity, but a broadly conceived cultural posterity - marks a difference in photographic perspective, and suggests an appeal to the universal (or at least communal) that is the province of the international artist.

While it is possible that Sogodogo was familiar with Koné’s book, I did not see it in any of Bamako’s bookstores, nor at the National Museum, which would be the most likely venue for it. In contrast to Sogodogo’s “Braids,” Koné’s *Hairstyles* shows a wide variety of styles, contrasting traditional with fashionable, contemporary styles. Whereas *Hairstyles* makes explicit the connections between culture, history, instruction, beauty, moral purpose, self-respect, citizenship, and national unity, and creating pride in Mali’s

³⁷⁸ Njami, ed., *Un autre monde*, 38.

place in the larger, global context, “Braids” renders these connections implicit. In Sogodogo’s case, it could be that, as Koné claims in *Hairstyles*, “Historians contemplating photographs of Mali women will immediately be able to put this picture into its proper context” - something impossible for a non-Malian audience.³⁷⁹

In “The Gao Notebooks,” Sogodogo’s double portraits of a number of girls, first of their head from one side and then the other, the better to show off intricate asymmetrical braiding or differences in a hairstyle from the front to the back, shares a typological theme with the photography of Western anthropologists who objectified Africans, treating them as scientific examples and photographing their physical features from front and side, as one would photograph a specimen. **[Figures 5:9 & 5:15]** In contrast to the intentions of anthropological photography of the colonial period, however, which were to find phrenological ‘evidence’ of supposed African inferiority, or to document an exoticized people for comparative purposes, Sogodogo documents young girls’ hairstyles in order to preserve an important aspect of Malian culture. He began photographing models with whom he had a personal relationship, as they were friends of his daughter. His project *was*, however, ethnographic in origin: Sogodogo grew up in Sikasso (in southern Mali) and is of the Senufo ethnicity, and he has remarked that he originally was fascinated by the beautiful hairstyles of the Songhay girls and women in Gao, in Mali’s northeastern region. As the director of a museum, he would no doubt be very familiar with the anthropological photographs that documented many cultures’ adornments and accoutrements, as well as objects, during and after the colonial period. But the nationalist atmosphere that has been created since Mali’s independence gives

³⁷⁹ Koné and Koné, *Coiffures Traditionnelles*, 4.

Sogodogo a more privileged insider status than most foreigners would have. As a Malian, Sogodogo understands the significance of hairstyles as markers of social status and stages of life, and all of the moral importance that looking beautiful carries in Malian culture.

While at first they may seem similar, the differences between colonial anthropology and Sogodogo's pictures can be distinguished formally. It is obvious in part because some girls wear modern dress. But the girls' responses to the photographer also differ. **[Figure 5:16]** For example, an unclothed little girl, recently bathed and still wet, looks up at the viewer with a confiding and unselfconscious smile. Despite her youth, the girl's small hoop earrings and large, almond shaped eyes give her an air of sophistication. Her hair sprouts from her head in several tightly coiled shoots, like the bare branches of a baobab tree. The picture is cropped at the girl's waist, and she seems to be standing comfortably, probably posed, in front of a hanging sheet, whose bottom and the edge of one side can be seen behind her. Her head is tilted a little forward and her eyes meet the viewer's gaze, betraying pleasure and a sense of her personality.

The presentation of Sogodogo's "Braids" in two different books shows some striking differences in the overall effect of the series. In the earlier publication, *BKO-RAK: Photographers from Bamako and Marrakech* (1998), the series appears more archival. Only "Braids" are included in *BKO-RAK*, not the "Gao Notebooks" images. BKO is the airline acronym for "Bamako" while RAK stands for "Marrakech," so the book's title self-consciously shows off its modernity and plays to an international audience, as flights often stop over in Morocco on the way to Mali, and vice versa.

The thirteen photographs by Sogodogo in *BKO-RAK* are technically excellent prints, utilizing strong contrasts and subtle intonations to maximum pictorial

effectiveness. Each is the same size, almost three by four inches, and surrounded by an approximately two inch margin (the book itself is small). **[Figure 5:17]** In contrast, in *Yousouf Sogodogo: Photographs*, “Braids” are presented without a margin so that the image takes up a full page, and the image itself is much larger, approximately six by nine inches. (The girl on the left in Figure 5:17 is the same as the girl on the right in Figure 5:18, but seen from a different angle. The straight-on view from the top in *BKO-RAK* again emphasizes a more formal, typological image than the side view, reiterated by the hairstyle’s own parted grid, which is confused from the side by the twining coils of hair). **[Figure 5:18]** The effect in *BKO-RAK* is to separate the images, making them seem more like typologies. **[Figures 5:13 & 5:14]**

In most images in *BKO-RAK*, the girl’s head occupies about the same amount of the space in each picture. Except for the little girl mentioned previously and one other (a girl who looks severely at the camera, while another girl holds a blond doll in the background, apparently wearing the same hairstyle), the view typically shows only the tops or the backs of the girls’ heads, and not their faces, in a depersonalizing manner. **[Figures 5:14 & 5:19]** While such works may recall a certain formal similarity to the American artist Lorna Simpson’s early works, such as “Stereo Styles” (1988), the intent is different. **[Figure 5:20]** Simpson deliberately de-personalizes her figures by using the same model for a single work, and by cropping the model’s face or showing her from the back, in order to create ambiguity. This aesthetic tactic suggests a kind of universality, while reminding the viewer of the unavoidable, physical signifiers of race and gender - the model could be anyone (who is black and female). While the importance of hairstyling to African American culture is an important theme in Simpson’s work, her use

of text complicates her meaning in “Stereo Styles,” forcing the viewer to consider the semantic gap between word and image, causing a recognition of the visual implications of a chosen identity, which contribute to a social stereotype.

Sogodogo’s work, in contrast, includes a variety of poses which often *do* show the faces of his different models - but almost none of these images were chosen by Potoski for *BKO-RAK*. Sogodogo’s series as shown in *BKO-RAK* emphasizes the effect of picture selection to slant a series one way or another – in this case, towards an archival effect more in keeping with conceptual art photography by famous international artists, like Simpson or the Bechers. The effects of cropping, presentation and choice of images makes Sogodogo’s oeuvre in this book highly standardized, ‘archivally’ standardized, which has the effect of highlighting the differences in the actual hairstyles, and downplaying each individual girl’s personality.

Unlike *BKO-RAK*, the later monograph, *Youssouf Sogodogo: Photographs* (2000) contains both “The Gao Notebooks” and “Braids.” The “Gao” pictures are presented as authentic images, as they are printed, apparently, at the original size (small, one by two inches), with ruffled edges and flawed printing.³⁸⁰ When two pictures of the same girl are available, they are shown opposite each other on the same page, and often the text that Sogodogo originally wrote on the back – usually the name of the hairstyle – appears next to the picture in French, in longhand. The “Braids” pictures, meanwhile, are presented separately, without text, and each takes up a full page. Again, the printing is uneven, and the photos are cropped closer to the girls’ heads, to make the pictures seem

³⁸⁰ Most photographers do not have air conditioned darkrooms, so photographic materials do not retain their full power. It is also difficult to obtain high-quality solutions and paper, because they are expensive, and may be unavailable in isolated areas like Gao.

more like almost life-sized portrait close-ups than like an archive of hairstyles. **[Figure 5:21]** The girls' faces are often visible, with somewhat self-conscious or amused expressions, which creates more variety in the series, and makes it much less archival. Unlike in *BKO-RAK*, Touré's contextualizing essay in *Youssouf Sogodogo: photographs* provides the reader with insight into how hairstyles function in Malian culture. The differences in the two books show how Sogodogo's series was positioned differently in France and in Bamako itself. Touré's gallery caters to non-Malian locals, Western expatriates, who are likely more interested in learning about Malian culture than the art-oriented crowd where the French exhibition took place.³⁸¹

At the time that Sogodogo commenced his series, Nigerian photographer J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere was also documenting hairstyles in his native Lagos. Ojeikere's series of women's hairstyles was first published by André Magnin in 2000, so it is possible that the publication of Ojeikere's book was inspired by Potoski's publication of Sogodogo's series in 1998.³⁸² While Ojeikere was published after Sogodogo, his book is much more accessible to American audiences than Sogodogo's, due to the financial backing of Magnin and the prominence of Scalo press. **[Figure 5:23]** The production values of the book are stronger and the pictures are printed at a much larger size, but most noticeable is the way that Ojeikere's hairstyles are pictured. The camera angle is almost always from the back, with the hairdo and a bit of neck standing out against a transparently white background, like a glossy museum piece. While earrings or jewelry might sometimes show, the clothing, which adds so much pattern and

³⁸¹ Amadou Chab Touré, interviews by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, 11 November 2005 and 12 July 2006.

³⁸² Sogodogo, interview, 8 July 2006.

variety to a picture, usually does not. In addition, the model's face rarely can be seen. All of these traits coolly emphasize the typological qualities and thus the *archival* effect of the series in a formally slick manner.

Although Ojeikere began his career as a studio photographer and never worked in a museum, the same impetus seems to have motivated him as Sogodogo. Ojeikere specifically characterizes his work within the context of preserving cultural heritage, and emphasizes the social and cultural importance of hairstyles in Nigeria. Sogodogo's and Ojeikere's common interest in creating a photographic archive of hairstyles speaks to the cultural importance of the role of hairstyles in West Africa. The creation of hairstyles plays a strong social and cultural role in many African communities, and so the selection of Sogodogo's series for the 2005 Bamako Biennale also speaks to a pan-African sensibility.³⁸³

The 'archival impulse' revealed in Sogodogo's hairstyles series contains postcolonial tensions.³⁸⁴ As previously stated, the National Museum itself embodies a forceful contradiction between oral, present, genealogical culture and a Western, temporal, regulative understanding of history. Sogodogo's visual, as opposed to oral, presentation of culture emphasizes his orientation to his own culture through his work at the Museum and his educational background. It is also the province of a photographer to focus on the visual. The archival approach that Sogodogo adopts tends to mimic the same scientific, documentary, archival urge that drove both anthropological and museological photography. This implication of complicity with Western forms of oppression adds a

³⁸³ While it is true that hairstyles in the West can suggest certain fashion influences, and while braiding has obvious importance in African American culture, Western culture in general does not seem to attribute the depth and specificity of meaning to hairstyles and to bodily aesthetics as Malian, and many African cultures, do.

³⁸⁴ Hal Foster, "Archival Impulse," *October* no. 110 (Fall 2004), 3-22.

frisson of tension to the series, and I believe it is what makes the series resonate for a Western audience. In fact, it is possible to view Sogodogo's work as a critical response to anthropological objectification, in that his pictures often show the personality of the young women.

However, I believe there are many layers to Sogodogo's project, which speak to different audiences. It is also important to understand Sogodogo's work in a Malian context, as a conscious project of preserving cultural manifestations in the face of a rapidly deteriorating loss of heritage in the postcolonial moment. Sogodogo's work recognizes that new forms of memory must be created and new forms of artistic tradition must be enacted, especially in Bamako where tradition is quickly losing ground. That his series also 'performs' in an international context suggests the cross-over between local meanings and international aesthetics utilized by certain artists like Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Gabriel Orozco, to name two more famous examples.

However, Sogodogo's series is not quite as archival as it seems. The presentation can be manipulated, as it presumably was by Potoski, to create a more or less archival effect.³⁸⁵ The inclusion of such photographs as the small, smiling girl in "Braids" also provides an antidote to the regulating and objectifying gaze of the archival photograph, allowing Sogodogo to subvert the system that he has set up. Jacques Derrida notes that the term 'archive' comes from the Greeks, in reference to the house where the *archons*, the city magistrates, lived.³⁸⁶ Derrida connects the legality of the documents in the archive, and their power to "speak the law," with their function "of unification, of

³⁸⁵ Sogodogo stated that Potoski chose the images for the exhibitions. Sogodogo, interview, 8 June 2006.

³⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. David Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2-3.

identification, of classification.” According to Derrida, the archive does *not* allow for “any heterogeneity or *secret* which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner.”³⁸⁷ Sogodogo’s “Braids” appears at first to be a unified series of pictures that identify and classify various hairstyles. Within Malian culture, these hairstyles have important meanings that contribute to social power. Yet, certain pictures in “Braids” subvert the archival paradigm which the series seems at first to embrace, by refusing to provide much identification or classification, and by including heterogeneity, such as the smiling young girl. While Sekula notes the ability of photography to create an archive, he also comments upon its disruption of the archive: “This archival promise was frustrated, however, both by the messy contingency of the photograph and by the sheer quantity of images.”³⁸⁸ Barthes also speaks of photography participating in the vast disorder of the world.³⁸⁹

Thus Sogodogo’s project fluctuates between the museological and the artistic, which is precisely why it is able to speak to Malian, African, and Western audiences. Sogodogo problematizes the archive – he uses an archival approach to structure his series, which would seem to be purely documentary, but then he does not remain true to the archival format that he sets up. He includes pictures that show and inspire emotion, and makes no attempt to capture and record *all* of any particular style, or to classify the styles beyond the occasional scribbled name or stamped date. When seen from a Malian perspective, the archive is only a partial form of knowledge. Sogodogo’s series assumes that, ultimately, the archive *cannot* be completed, it cannot show or record all of what is known about hairstyles. To reiterate Van Dyke, “The visible world is ever only partial in

³⁸⁷ Ibid., *Archive Fever*, 2-3.

³⁸⁸ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 17.

³⁸⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 7.

Malian thought and as such, it can not provide a foundation for knowledge.” (KVD p3 tk) Instead, Sogodogo points toward certain aspects that are intriguing, delightful, nostalgic or emotive, gesturing towards a larger world of social memory, which no one viewer can possibly comprehend.

III. Joseye Tienro and Nationalist Memory

In contrast to Sogodogo, whose pictures celebrate an aspect of Malian beauty and socio-cultural importance, Tienro incorporates the notion of cultural preservation into a more politicized arena - that of national history. His 2005 series, “The Forgotten Heroes,” documents war veterans, most of whom live in the House of Veterans (*la Maison des anciens combattants*) in Bamako.³⁹⁰ Eight black and white photographs from this extensive series were displayed in the International Exhibition during the 2005 Biennale, and three were published in the catalogue, along with another that was not exhibited. In poses similar to those struck for studio portraits, the veterans face the camera, or turn at a slight angle, with dignified, solemn expressions, wearing medals and hats that exemplify their services. One picture shows a memorial at the House of Veterans, and another shows certificates and photographs hanging on a wall at the House.

According to Tienro, the idea for the series came from a desire to honor his father, who is himself a veteran.³⁹¹ Tienro was not sure exactly in which war his father had

³⁹⁰ *Les oubliés de la médaille*. Elsewhere I refer to this series as “The Forgotten Medal-Winners,” but the translation “The Forgotten Heroes,” while less literal, seems to be more accurate in the sense in which Tienro talked about the series. Tienro asked permission of veterans at the House and visited four times during the shooting of the series. He described his work at the National Museum as preserving culture. Joseye Tienro, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali 1 July 2006.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

fought, noting that his father rarely talked about this part of his past, but Tienro believes that he fought in the Algerian War (1954-1962), in which the French conscripted Sudanese soldiers to defend Algeria's colonial status. This bitter and bloody war, in which the French freely used torture to subjugate and gain information from their prisoners, remains an ugly stain on France's history – not unlike its history of colonialism in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, Tienro stated that there is no stigma attached to Malian veterans in the Algerian War, although they fought for the French and defended colonialism in another country. This is because they were conscripted and had no choice.³⁹² When Tienro brought the catalogue home to his father in the village of Diel-N'gosso, the photographer remarked that his father spent the whole day looking at the pictures, with the implication that his father was very moved by and proud of the series. Although the portrait of Tienro's father does not appear in the catalogue, it was included in the exhibition, where he is shown holding a knife and wearing a hat with a rosette.³⁹³

Tienro does not currently run a studio, but he operated one in Djicoroni-Para, a neighborhood of Bamako, between 1989 and 1991, and at first glance “The Forgotten Heroes” might seem to be constituted of studio portraits.³⁹⁴ The full, angled, and half-length poses of the veterans, both standing and sitting, would be common to any studio photographers' repertoire. By choosing to photograph veterans, however, Tienro emphasizes values of nationalism and patriotism in his choice of subject. Tienro described his choice for the series as a response to the rapid modernization which has resulted in young people who forget the past, which is particularly rampant in Bamako,

³⁹² After Mali achieved its independence in 1960, the Malian government was highly critical of France's war with Algeria.

³⁹³ Tienro, interview, 1 July 2006.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.* See also Njami, ed., *Un autre monde*, 120.

along with an increasing disrespect for traditional hierarchies of age. These pictures are also archival in focusing on one specific type of subject, and they also reiterate studio portrait practices.

In Tienro's series, the veterans do not smile. One man wearing a boubou and a skull cap sits against a wall in which the decorative cement openings of windows are visible behind his left shoulder. **[Figure 5:23]** He adopts a pose that can be seen in many of Keïta's portraits of men sitting - leaning back with his knees pointing out, so that the material of the pin-striped boubou spreads across them, relaxed hands placed on his thighs. Sprague has described this same pose in portrait photographs among the Yoruba of Nigeria in the 1970s; the pictorial effect is of an imposing dignity.³⁹⁵ This veteran displays his diploma on his shoulder, the writing facing him but upside-down to the viewer, in contrast to the other veterans, who wear medals and regalia. The man in the boubou seems more proud of his education than of his military service. He looks straight at the camera, which has caught him a little to the side, creating a more dynamic portrait than a straight-on view would capture. His face is composed but deeply lined, his expression unreadable. His is the only published portrait in which his eyes visibly gaze back at the viewer, giving this portrait a particular poignancy. In most of Tienro's series, like in Seydou Keïta's portraits, the men display cool and composed features, signifying

³⁹⁵ Sprague argues that this pose conveys the traditional Yoruba aesthetic characteristics of *jijora*, *odo*, and *ifarahon*. "The concept of *jijora* – mimesis at the midpoint – implies the work should exist somewhere between complete abstraction and individual likeness.... *Odo*, depiction midway between infancy and old age, at the prime of life....and *ifarahon* 'visibility,' implies clarity and definition of form and line, and a subsequent clarity of identity." Stephen Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves," (240-260) in *Photography's Other Histories*, 246. Nigerian photographers often traveled to other countries and participated in the spread of studio photography across West Africa, according to Érika Nimis, "Nigeria: The Photographic Giant," at http://www.africultures.com/anglais/articles_anglais/39nimis.htm; accessed August 12, 2008.

the importance of reserve and control that is held in esteem in Malian culture, and emphasizing the age of the veterans and the distant era in which they fought.

In the other photographs published in the catalogue, two men wear suits and ties, finely dressed for the occasion of the portrait. **[Figure 5:24]** One, an elderly-looking man, stands in front of a building wall, which creates the effect of a plain portrait backdrop, down to the rough edges where the wall meets the crumbly earth – usually the edges of a cloth backdrop are similarly visible. His hands are as gnarled as the carved cane on which he leans. The veteran wears a round cap set at a slight angle, and his too-large jacket hangs almost to his knees. Altogether the effect is both serious and jaunty at once. Although his eyes are in shadow, his mouth is offset by a ring of white mustache and goatee. A rosette is pinned on the right lapel, while a set of six medals on the left suit-breast drag the jacket down into shadow. The white, diagonal stripe in his tie echoes the stripes on his rosette, and becomes the focal point of the picture, emphasizing the odd juxtaposition of civilian dress and military medals.

The other veteran in a suit appears in a half-length bust, gazing into the distance and viewed at a side angle. Like the man with the cane, this man also wears a rosette on his right lapel and a phalanx of medals on his left breast, but a series of pins and medals also trail down his right lapel. The man's horizontal metal tie pin visually connects the medals across his chest, echoing and off-setting the metallic thread in his tilted, African-style cap. Though his face is lined, his hair is dark, giving him the appearance of a powerful politician, or a benign dignitary. In contrast to the men in suits, a fourth veteran in the series wears a shift, and appears to have been caught in mid-conversation, giving the picture a snap-shot appearance different from a formal portrait. His service is shown

by the military beret he wears with an insignia, and a medal which can barely be seen, as the portrait angle obscures the view. **[Figure 5:25]** The man stands in front of a building with a thatched roof, suggesting that he was photographed in a village and not in Bamako.

As a series, the pictures retain a pathos implied by the title. Tienro's choice of subject in showing respect to his elders, including his father - his literal patrimony - gives a different impetus to his preservation of history than the version formally recognized by the National Museum. Tienro memorializes the figures of a modern, colonial and postcolonial history, in contrast to preserving the artifacts from the centuries before colonialism.³⁹⁶ Like Sogodogo, Tienro appears to be influenced conceptually by his work at the museum to take an archival, or museological approach, while his formal approach appears to be influenced by studio photography. At the same time, also like Sogodogo, Tienro creates ambiguity and subverts his own archival approach by refusing to provide certain key information about his subjects, such as in which wars these heroes fought, or for what services they received their medals. In other words, although he gathers together the subjects classified under a certain type – hero – he does not provide the specific information which would make the art project become truly archival or museological. Instead, Tienro's series recognizes more generally the importance of heroes in Mande culture, and preserves their portraits for history.

Although Tienro may perhaps rightly view the veterans as mostly forgotten, the heroism that Tienro alludes to is an important facet of Mande culture, and the impulse to

³⁹⁶ Although the International Exhibition was held in the temporary exhibition hall of the National Museum with the Museum's permission, the Museum's Director and staff did not participate in any of the Biennale's selection procedures.

memorialize such heroism is prolific in modern-day Bamako. Monuments and memorials to various wars and heroes in Mali's history dot virtually every intersection of the capital, becoming necessary navigational landmarks in a city notorious for its lack of street signs and decent maps. Most of these monuments are recent constructions; the government built more than twenty-five public monuments between 1995 and 2005.³⁹⁷ A number of these commemorate anti-colonialist heroes, political struggles (the war for independence in 1960, the recent battle for democracy in 1991), and ethnic accords (the Peace agreement with the Taureg in 1995). In other words, Mali's recent political history has been "symbolically inscribed," in Arnoldi's phrase, within the capital's own streets and intersections, despite the National Museum's emphasis on history prior to colonialism and de-emphasis of the twentieth century. Tienro's project dovetails with this eruption of government-sanctioned political memory; but the poignancy of his subjects' expressions and poses exceeds such banal patriotism, emphasizing the individual sacrifices made by each man.

Tienro explained that his series fit the theme of the Biennale - "Another World" – in that these men had lived in 'another world' during their time in the military.³⁹⁸ This situation is common to many African countries under colonialism, where soldiers were conscripted to fight in distant wars that had little to do with their own situations, so it is not surprising that Tienro's theme was appreciated by the Biennale curators. According to Diawara, the role of the hero in Mande culture still resonates strongly in modern-day Bamako, even though the age of heroism dates back to the reign of Sundiata and the

³⁹⁷ Arnoldi, "Symbolically Inscribing the City: Public Monuments in Mali, 1995-2002," *African Arts* 36 no. 2 (Summer 2003): 56.

³⁹⁸ Tienro, interview, 1 July 2006.

Mande empire of the thirteenth century.³⁹⁹ The visual similarities to Keïta's portraits also suggest Tienro's interest in preserving history, providing dignified visions of men who are considered heroic in Mande culture, as fearless warriors, even though in today's rapidly changing era of fading memory, their exploits might be overlooked.

The projects of Sogodogo and Tienro both stem from a museological interest in the archival preservation of cultural and political memory in pursuit of one topic – i.e. Braids or Heroes. At the same time, both series *refuse* classification and identification, relying on the knowledge of the viewer to identify a subject's ethnicity, social milieu or military affiliation with his or her specialized knowledge. This refusal both undermines the archival and anthropological ordering systems of the Museum, and participates in a Malian, genealogical, view of history and knowledge, in which the visible is only one part of a vaster, unseen world, and in which gaining knowledge is a process of a lifetime. For Westerners, this refusal of naming and classifying can be seen as subverting the ordering structure of the archive; for Malians, the viewer with the most cultural or historical knowledge is privileged. Certain markers, like the 'roundabout' hairstyle, or the war that a particular medal refers to, can only be known by cultural insiders; and even their knowledge is imperfect in some cases. What is understood by everyone within the culture, however, is the *significance* of hairstyles and their relation to women's beauty. Likewise, it is the *importance* of male heroism in Mande culture, and the *knowledge* of Mali's difficult political changes over the past century, from colonialism to the struggle for democracy, that is understood through Tienro's series.

³⁹⁹ Diawara, *In Search of Africa*, 88-94.

While Sogodogo's project began with an ethnographic impulse, it participates in the nationalist project of refusing to classify ethnicities, instead grouping various women's hairstyles under the general name of 'Mali.' Surely many Malians will be able to identify an ethnic group's style, but that connection is left to the viewer. While Tienro's project seems like a memorial, it is not clear which wars the soldiers fought in, or what their roles were. (For example, one wonders if Tuareg soldiers from the Tuareg rebellion are included, or the dictator Moussa Troaré's soldiers, who lost in the 1991 coup). Thus, for a viewer who cannot recognize the medals worn by the veterans, Tienro's project blends all heroic efforts into a more general concept of Mande heroism, while attempting to address the loss of cultural and historical memory that pervades contemporary culture in Bamako. Again, as in Sogodogo's series, the ability to gather information from the photographs depends upon the knowledge that the viewer already harbors. While this absence may be seen as a lack of necessary knowledge to Western viewers, Van Dyke comments, "Individuals in Mande culture do not assume that everyone has equal access to or knowledge of this world. The unknown or unmarked is an important concept in its own right."⁴⁰⁰ The idea that knowledge must be earned, and that it must come from a deep level of cultural immersion, runs through both of the artists' attitudes.

The paradoxical combination of archival and Malian forms in Tienro's and Sogodogo's series reflects the postcolonial tensions present in the function of the National Museum where the photographers work (or worked). The hybridity of the two series grows out of the reinvention and reworking of important cultural themes through

⁴⁰⁰ Van Dyke, "The Oral-Visual Nexus," 42.

the filter of photography, with its innately archival capacities. The resultant form is uniquely suited to photography, departing from a traditional, oral and genealogical preservation of cultural history, such as that handed down through the songs of the *griots*.

Yet Sogodogo's and Tienro's projects retain great local importance and can be understood as new artistic forms that are unique to the cultural and historical circumstances of present-day Mali. Through the presentation of important cultural themes – heroism, and women's beauty and bodily adornment – disengaged from particular ethnicities, the works reinforce a 'Malian' identity, both within Bamako and internationally. Thus, "Braids of Mali" and "The Forgotten Heroes" contribute to the implicit conflict over memory and cultural preservation that underlies the Museum's mission. As such, these projects embody the debates over tradition and modernity in contemporary Mali, as hybrid forms that contribute not only to the preservation of the past, but respond dynamically to the ever-changing conditions of the postcolonial present. The problem, as has been noted for all of the art photographers, is that the local audience who would respond to these new forms of work is limited, because few Malians visit the National Museum, where both series were exhibited during the 2005 Biennale. If local Malians should visit, however, the two series' affinities with traditional studio photography, and their socio-historical importance, would make the pictures visually and culturally accessible, which is no small feat.

Chapter 6: *Promo Femme*: Promoting Women Photographers in Bamako

While Bamako has become internationally famous for its photography, and the city's male photographers are starting to build art-world careers, women photographers are only just beginning to make their presence known, both locally and internationally. Until the nation's transition to democracy in 1991-2, Malian society maintained patriarchal gender roles. This meant that women did not enter male professions such as photography, although a few may have participated behind the scenes of a family-run studio. However, a new photographic institution blossoming in Bamako is dedicated to providing young women with professional opportunities in photography. Founded and run by Aminata Dembélé Bagayoko in 1996, the school, *Promo Femme: Center of Audiovisual Education for Young Women*, has had a striking effect on the gender demographic of photographers working in Bamako.⁴⁰¹ **[Figure 6.1]** Most, if not all, of the female photographers working in the city today attended this school, and attribute their current status as professional photographers to its existence.

Four years after Mali's first democratic election, and two years after the first Bamako Biennale, Bagayoko established *Promo Femme* as a private venture, assisted by Canadian government funding.⁴⁰² The school was formally approved by the Malian government in 1998.⁴⁰³ Although *Promo Femme* initially offered a two-year program of education in the basics of film photography, Bagayoko soon recognized the inability of students to afford such a lengthy course of study, and the school now provides a single year of instruction.

⁴⁰¹ *Promo Femme: Centre de Formation en Audiovisuel pour Jeunes Filles*.

⁴⁰² Aminata Dembélé Bagayoko, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 25 July 2006.

⁴⁰³ Information pamphlet, "*Notes techniques sur le centre promo-femme*," (Bamako: Promo Femme, 2006).

Students learn to shoot in black and white and color, and to print black and white photographs in a chemical laboratory. Digital photography has also become a feature in the program. Prominent professional male photographers, like Malick Sidibé, Alioune Bâ, and others, often participate in teaching seminars, and the school received support in its early days from the National Institute of the Arts, which includes a photography program in its curriculum.⁴⁰⁴

Since its founding, *Promo Femme* has forced a key intervention in the forum for postcolonial debates over issues of identity, modernity, culture and politics initiated by the new art photography movement. The presence of the school has created an opportunity for women to exercise agency as image-makers, thereby shaping local and international perceptions about gender and photography in Mali. *Promo Femme's* graduates are slowly transforming discourses about photography, identity, and nationalism in Bamako. In addition, as working photographers, *Promo Femme's* graduates are negotiating female identity in Bamakois society in ways previously unavailable to them. By examining the professions, works and collaborative relationships of five graduates of *Promo Femme* who are working as photographers, I hope to reveal an active arena of contestation over the roles of women pursuing professional careers in Mali's increasingly modernized and democratized society. I also examine the ramifications of the shift that occurs when women, normally the focus of a studio photographer's gaze, become photographers themselves. I discuss the subjects and themes on which women photographers have focused, either by personal choice or to which they were directed to by virtue of professional opportunities. I consider whether and how these topics differ from those chosen by men, and what that means in terms of

⁴⁰⁴ Bagyoko, interview, 25 July 2006.

women's ability to shape perceptions in society. Finally, I consider how photography as a medium particularly lends itself to furthering such debates and opportunities for women.

This chapter begins by exploring the historical and political context of the founding of *Promo Femme*, and describes the school's aims and curriculum as professed by its director and founder, Aminata Dembélé Bagayoko. I then examine the careers and production of five prominent former students now working in various capacities: Penda Diakité, who opened a photo studio in Bamako in 2002; Alimata dite Diop Traoré, a fledgling press photographer; Kadiatou Sangare, a photographer employed by a language school; and two photographers working primarily as artists, Oussa Pangassy Sangare and Fatoumata Diabaté. I examine these women's individual bodies of work within the context of their professions. While all five have publicly exhibited their work as art, examining their careers by different photographic genres shows the inroads these young women are now making into formerly all-male occupations, and shows the extent to which photography by women is interrelated with broader discourses about democracy, tradition, modernity, nationalism and patrimony.

I. Feminism in Mali

Nowhere in Malian society are the effects of modernity, democracy and globalization more evident than in the increased opportunities now available to women. While Bagayoko's *Promo Femme* has initiated a striking social and political change in the realm of photography, the conditions of possibility for the founding of the school and for the subsequent successes of its graduates emerged from broader political and societal transformations. Erika Wilson notes three dominant discourses in contemporary Malian

society which professional working women must negotiate: that of traditional culture(s), Islam, and the state.⁴⁰⁵ The state's transition to democracy has promoted a rejuvenated discourse of equality between the sexes, in contradiction with the patriarchal discourses of traditional cultures and various sects of Islam.⁴⁰⁶

While these discourses may be hegemonic, in that they are entrenched within and sanctioned by powerful societal or governmental forces, Wilson claims that they are not totalizing, in part because of their competing ideologies. In the spaces afforded by the conflicting agendas of democracy, Islam and traditional societal mores, women can seize agency to actively fashion their identities.⁴⁰⁷ Obviously, the discourse of democracy provides a supportive impetus towards pursuing a photographic career; yet harmoniously melding this professional identity with societal and religious demands (often strongest in the form of familial pressure, support, or obligation) is a challenge faced by the graduates of *Promo Femme*.

Gwendolyn Mikell has noted two important trends related to feminism in Africa: that the struggle for women's rights has been linked to times of political transitions (especially to democracy), and that feminism has been constructed around somewhat different concerns than in the US.⁴⁰⁸ Both are true in Mali. Before colonialism, women's and men's roles were strictly defined within the various cultures which now make up

⁴⁰⁵ Erika Wilson, "Navigating Competing Discourses: Narratives of Womanhood in Bamako" (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2000).

⁴⁰⁶ While women's equality has been nominally on the Malian political horizon since independence, in actuality women have held little political power, and patriarchal traditions remained largely in place socially. See Gosselin, "Campaigning Against Excision," 51-52.

⁴⁰⁷ Wilson, "Navigating Competing Discourses," 13.

⁴⁰⁸ Gwendolyn Mikell, "African Feminism: Toward a New Politics of Representation" in *Feminist Studies*, v. 21 no. 2 (Summer 1995): 405-424. She writes, "the greater willingness of African women to embrace feminist politics and gender representation in the 1990s is traceable to the current national crises and political transitions which have been occurring throughout the continent over the past fifteen decades." 408.

Malian society. All were patriarchal, although to a lesser or greater degree. In traditional Tuareg society, for example, women had greater freedoms and power than in the Bambara culture. Mande culture, which accounts for about half of the population, and whose cultural heritage predominates in post-independence Mali, traditionally has denied women vital access to direct forms of power.

Theoretically, colonialism introduced an advance in women's political viability in Mali. After French women received suffrage in 1944, the National Assembly was pressured to allow similar rights to the women living in France's colonies. Thus, the right to vote in the French Sudan was extended in 1951 to any woman who had borne two children. As large families are the norm in Mali and children are highly desirable, this law affected a large proportion of the female population; and indeed, the number of total voters in 1951 rose tremendously from previous elections as a result.⁴⁰⁹

However, the oppression of colonialism still loomed larger than any superficial panaceas offered by the French government. In fact, the Malian women's movement began during the late colonial period and its struggles were inseparable from the liberation movement, which resulted in national independence in 1960.⁴¹⁰ The USRDA (*Union Soudanaise Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*), the French Sudan's branch of the anti-colonialist movement in Francophone West Africa, offered to endorse women's emancipation as an aspect of its agenda in exchange for women's support of the liberation cause.⁴¹¹ Indeed, the struggles against colonialism and neo-colonialism have constituted an important facet of African feminism in general. In Mali, prominent

⁴⁰⁹ Susanna Denholm Wing, "Constitutional Dialogues: Participation and Citizenship in the Transition towards Democracy in Mali, 1991-1999" (Ph.D. thesis, UCLA, 2000), 6-7.

⁴¹⁰ Jane Turrittin, "Aoua Kéita and the Nascent Women's Movement in the French Soudan," *African Studies Review* v. 36 no. 1 (April 1993): 59-89.

⁴¹¹ Turrittin, "Aoua Kéita," 74.

feminist Aoua Kéïta noted in her autobiography that the struggles were necessarily inseparable.⁴¹² She herself had studied in France, where she must have noticed the burgeoning struggle for women's equality. Along with this experience, Kéïta's traditional family background, where she observed the patriarchal power differential between men and women, and her experiences as a professional midwife, in Mali and in other African countries, heightened her feminist sensibilities.⁴¹³

Kéïta was elected the first female deputy to the national assembly in the new Republic of Mali, where she worked with others to reform the marital code.⁴¹⁴ The national women's organization, *Commission sociale des femmes*, for which Aoua Kéïta and another woman, Mariam Travélé, were responsible during President Modibo Keïta's regime, had an agenda of sexual equality and focused on women's issues.⁴¹⁵ However, the 1968 coup forced Aoua Kéïta into exile, and in any event the *Commission* had not contributed to a radical change in equality. The women's organization, *Union Nationale des Femmes du Mali* (UNFM), founded in 1974 under the dictatorship which had followed the 1968 coup, was limited by President Moussa Troaré's repressive government and was largely powerless.⁴¹⁶

However, Malick Sidibé's *reportage* of the 1960s records a sense of equality apparently felt by young people in the newly independent, socialist state. [Figure 6:2] In Sidibé's pictures, girls in short skirts hold up James Brown records and participate in the parties and *grins* (social clubs) with boys. Such behavior was not sanctioned by either

⁴¹² Ibid, 63. USRDA was the Sudanese limb of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 66.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁴¹⁵ Gosselin, "Campaigning Against Excision" 51.

⁴¹⁶ Imperato, *Mali: A Search for Direction*, 89. Also cited in Gosselin, "Campaigning Against Excision," 52.

parents or the state, and so girls would leave home at night in traditional dress and change their clothes once they arrived at a party or a *grin*. Through Sidibé's photographs, Manthia Diawara, who was a teenager in Bamako at the time, brilliantly analyzes the pan-Africanist and diasporic 'habitus' of the post-independence era's rebellious youth movement. He sees the youth enacting a new form of critical independence through their identification with African American rock stars, in particular James Brown, and with the 60s global youth movement. What Diawara terms the youth's 'habitus,' after Pierre Bourdieu⁴¹⁷ – their forms of dress (afros, bell-bottoms, and mini-skirts) and 'bodily dispositions' – were misunderstood by older generations and the state as neo-colonial, because they did not seem authentically African and instead embraced the capitalist, imperialist West.⁴¹⁸ The government recognized such behavior as a danger to its hegemony, however, by sending culprits to re-education camps. In the attempt to impose control over the bodies of young women, the three discourses of tradition, the state and Islam were in agreement at that time, although each had its own broader, conflicting agenda.⁴¹⁹ While Diawara does not discuss whether young women felt empowered in a feminist sense, Sidibé's pictures show that young women of the '60s shared critical attitudes towards the hegemonies of the state, traditional culture, and Islam. Thus, while wearing short skirts was considered complicit with sexism by certain feminists in the American context in the 1970s, in the Malian context of the 1960s, the desire of young women to take control of their self-presentation embodies a feminist and anti-hegemonic

⁴¹⁷ Diawara, "The Sixties in Bamako," 12.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

self-assertion.⁴²⁰ This becomes particularly clear when considering the cultural importance placed on women's beauty and bodily adornment in Mali, and the association of modesty with proper feminine behavior according to Islamic ideals.⁴²¹

After the 1991 coup which overthrew Moussa Traoré and ushered in the new, multi-party democracy which exists today, Malian women gained empowerment and increased their participation in politics "more than ever before."⁴²² As the fall of the Soviet Union galvanized political transitions across Africa, Mikell notes that, "The 1990s post-cold war environment provides the first chance that most Africans- in particular, women of different ethnic and religious communities – have had to participate in a serious way in deciding the legal and constitutional rights of people in their own countries and the desired forms of government."⁴²³ With democracy, modernity and the gradual loosening of strict social hierarchies, especially in Bamako, women became able to hold political office in Mali, and to work in professional positions formerly reserved for men.

However, movements toward equality have been uneven. While women's rights may be constitutionally guaranteed in the new democracy, in actuality women are discouraged from equality by long-standing, patriarchal traditions dating from before colonialism. Hence, women raised in a traditional society who desire a professional career are positioned in the disjuncture between competing discourses, those that support

⁴²⁰ Dressing like Americans also suggests Malian identification with the United States's nascent Civil Rights movement, which itself was influenced by African independence movements.

⁴²¹ Schulz, "Competing Sartorial Assertions," 261.

⁴²² Turriffin, "Aoua Kéita," 85. Turriffin comments that in 1993, two women were elected ministers in the democratic government.

⁴²³ Mikell, "African Feminism," 409.

professional and civil equality, and those that discourage women's attempts to gain more control over their lives.⁴²⁴

The second trend Mikell noted in terms of African feminism bears importance when trying to understand the goals and results of feminism in Mali. While women fight for equality and the right to work outside the home in traditionally male professions in Africa, marriage and motherhood are still generally seen as of paramount importance.⁴²⁵ Pringle comments, "The ability of educated, middle-class Malian women to compete effectively with men is still limited, yet on balance it compares favorably with the situation in the United States and many other developed countries."⁴²⁶ However, women in Mali tend to maintain their identity as 'female' and differentiate themselves from men, in contrast to the US, where women in positions of power have asserted their equality on the basis of *not* differentiating themselves from men. Turittin notes that Aoua Kéita often praised her fellow feminists for their militancy *and* their attractiveness, reminding them of their valuable identity as childbearing women.⁴²⁷

Indeed, the dichotomy between the childless career woman and the stay-at-home mother, still unfortunately a cause of factionalism in the US, seems irrelevant in many African societies. One primary reason is that Malian women's extended families enable women to have children and still pursue a career. Pringle suggests that it is the accessibility of child care at home by extended families or servants, as well as Mali's traditional reliance on a farming economy, that renders this choice moot. Bagayoko, the

⁴²⁴ Wilson, "Navigating Competing Discourses," 13. Wing notes the strength of traditional law in outweighing constitutional law. Wing, "Women's Rights in West Africa: Legal Pluralism and Constitutional Law," abstract for paper presented at American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Boston, MA, 2002.

⁴²⁵ Mikell, "African Feminism," 412.

⁴²⁶ Pringle, *Democratization in Mali*, 39.

⁴²⁷ Turittin, "Aoua Kéita," 84.

founder of *Promo Femme*, is herself a grandmother, and she stated that many of her students were mothers as well as photographers.⁴²⁸ While I did not specifically ask the female photographers whom I interviewed about marriage or children, as I did not generally ask men, sometimes the topic came up inadvertently; for example, when we interviewed photographers at home.⁴²⁹

In her discussion of Malian feminism, Turittin suggests that, during the struggle for liberation, there were two types of feminists, female and male.⁴³⁰ According to Turittin, female feminists are motivated by dissatisfaction with their inequality and their life situation, while male feminists are motivated by a more general desire for the greater good of society.⁴³¹ This is somewhat of a false distinction, in that surely women are also motivated by more than a personal desire and no doubt desire broad social change, and that men are likely to be motivated personally through relationships with particular women. Nevertheless, Turittin highlights the point that a feminist movement *does* generally include, if not require, the support of men.⁴³²

In Bamako, institutions and individuals - male photographers, administrators and teachers - have strongly supported female photographers in their nascent careers. For example, Bamako's other private photography school, the *Centre de Formation en*

⁴²⁸ However, when I asked permission to photograph Bagayoko, who was holding her infant grandson at the moment, she requested that I frame the shot to exclude his presence from the picture, apparently desiring to separate personal and professional life.

⁴²⁹ Most of the interviews with both female and male photographers occurred at their workplaces. In several cases, we interviewed photographers at home and then we were taken to visit their studios, which were located nearby.

⁴³⁰ Turittin, "Aoua Kéita," 61.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*

⁴³² David Moore, *Myths of the Sex War: What Women and Men Really Think of Each Other*, unpublished book proposal. Moore's study, based on analysis of polling statistics, argues that, "The fight for women's equality is not a war between women and men, but a war between *some* women and men against *some other* women and men," 1. He states, "Men have long played roles in the improvement of women's status, and they have – at least since the advent of modern polling – expressed as much support for women's progress as have women," 2.

Photographie (CFP) pursues equality of the sexes by ensuring that each incoming class of students is half female. The CFP also assigns projects that encourage an ideology of equality. In 2003, Kadiatou Sangare, Diabaté, and Traoré all participated in a CFP-sponsored exhibition titled “Women Looking at Women.”⁴³³ Seven female photographers from the school joined female interlocutors to interview and photograph famous women in Bamako.⁴³⁴ Through pairing the CFP students, fledgling professionals, with journalists and women who already have made their names and careers, the CFP encourages the students to view the professionals as role models and perhaps even mentors. The CFP’s Swiss origins – the school was run by Helvetas at the time - must have provided the original impetus for equal treatment, but admirably the school seems to have kept the policy despite its transition to Malian tenure. While the teachers at CFP are currently male, the director, Youssouf Sogodogo, has been very supportive of Diabaté, and she works now in the school as an assistant teacher.⁴³⁵

At the government-run National Institute of the Arts (INA), female students are also encouraged to undertake photographic training. While it is likely that women, like men, were first admitted to INA under the auspices of traditional arts, I read several final theses by women working in photography who had received the highest marks in the class.⁴³⁶ While institutional encouragement for women in photography seems thus

⁴³³ “*Regards de femmes sur des femmes.*”

⁴³⁴ Youssouf Sogodogo, interview by author, unrecorded, Bamako, Mali, 20 November 2005.

⁴³⁵ Fatoumata Diabaté, interview by author and Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 27 July 2005.

⁴³⁶ Sarah Brett-Smith has written that women *bogolan* dyers acquire and express knowledge in their works differently from male sculptors. Women learn knowledge in a more abstract method that is contingent on context. See Brett-Smith, “The Knowledge of Women,” in *Anthropologies of Art*, ed. Mariet Westermann, 143-163 (Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2005). I do not believe this difference has an important bearing on differences between genders in the field of photography. Traditional *bogolan* is practiced largely by rural women inducted into traditional Bamana knowledge by elder women, while the female photographers I interviewed are urban, and were educated in the French system like their masculine

wholeheartedly present, some individual male photographers have also taken on young women as protégées, helping them to exhibit their work.⁴³⁷ Many of the more prominent male photographers received their training in the USSR or in France, which may have influenced their supportive attitudes towards women. In general, however, while male photographers whom I interviewed generally acknowledged the ability of women to be photographers, several informal, objectifying discussions of women among certain male photographers did not suggest an attitude of respect or equality.⁴³⁸ However, even Malick Sidibé, who practiced his career solely in Mali until the 1990s, appeared to be supportive of women photographers, judging by his willingness to give lectures at *Promo Femme* and to display the work of Ouassa Sangare, among others, outside of his studio during the 2005 Biennale.⁴³⁹ Youssouf Sogodogo commented that the occasion of Diabaté's winning the AFAA (*Association Française action artistique* is the government organization that funds the Bamako Biennale) prize will act as a wake-up call to male photographers, proving that women photographers can outshine men.⁴⁴⁰

counterparts. The difference between the uses and meanings of traditional, magical Bamana knowledge and photographic knowledge is also important. I am grateful to Youssouf Traoré, the photography professor at INA, for telling me about these students and lending me their theses to read. Traoré, interviews by author, digital recordings, Bamako, Mali, 4 July and 14 July 2008. See Awa Koné, “*La photographie en tant que moyen de lutte contre le chômage*” (Rapport de Fin des Cycles, Institut National des Arts, Mali, 2006); Siaka Sanogo, “*Rôle de la photographe dans la sauvegarde des masques et statuettes Senoufo au Musée National*” (Rapport de Fin des Cycles, Institut National des Arts, Mali, 2006); and Nana Flama Samake, “*La photographie documentaire en tant que moyen d'identification et de classification des objets au Musée National*” (Rapport de Fin des Cycles, Institut National des Arts, Mali, 2006).

⁴³⁷ Alioune Bâ, who works at the National Museum, has taught women in techniques of video and photo, and Amadou Sow at the House of African Photography was helping to coordinate an exhibition that included Alimata Traoré. Amadou Baba Cissé worked with the French woman Elisabeth Towns on OSCURA, and had traveled on a photo shoot with Ouassa Sangare. Harandine Dicko and Fatoumata Diabaté, both protégés of Sogodogo, have traveled and worked together in and outside of Mali.

⁴³⁸ My presence as a woman may have influenced responses as well.

⁴³⁹ Sidibé's generosity is well-known. Another example is his support of Biennale photographers by displaying their work outside his studio, which is sure to receive well-placed international visitors during the Biennale week – even though Sidibé himself does not feel that ‘art’ photography is good photography.

⁴⁴⁰ Sogodogo, interview, 8 July 2006.

The Biennale has also provided a model of equality by including women photographers in exhibitions and as curators. The first edition was co-founded and co-curated by French female photographer Françoise Huguier, with Bernard Des Camps. Only two South African women were exhibited in the first Biennale, but the exhibition has become more inclusive since 1994. Although Simon Njami has curated the past three editions, a woman, Michket Krifa, curated an Algerian press photography section (in which a surprising four out of nine photojournalists were women) in the 2005 Biennale.⁴⁴¹ In that Biennale, women were as well-represented as (or better than) in typical Western museum shows: almost one third (eleven out of thirty-seven) of the artists in the International Exhibition were female.

II. *Promo Femme*: Center of Audiovisual Education for Young Women

While the social and political conditions that have allowed *Promo Femme* to flourish were created by Mali's transition to democracy, Bagayoko remains the primary force behind the school's founding. **[Figure 6:3]** In the most obvious sense, Bagayoko's capabilities, her passion, acumen and insight, and her training as a female educator, enabled her to single-handedly change photography's gender demographic in Bamako. Madame Bagayoko, as she is called by her students, is not herself a photographer, but worked first in the public sector as the director of an *école supérieure*, after receiving an advanced degree in social services.⁴⁴² *Promo Femme* grew out of and is supported by the Association for Women's Education and Community Support (AFFAC), of which Bagayoko is also the president. AFFAC is an NGO that was founded in 1989 to create

⁴⁴¹ Njami also curated the 7th Biennale, which was held in November 2007.

⁴⁴² Bagayoko, interview, 25 July 2006.

professions for educated and illiterate women who lack familial support.⁴⁴³ The organization's first programs involved the traditional female arts of dyeing, sewing and *bogolan* cloth making, which underwent a revival in the 1980s-90s because of its use by the fashion designer Chris Seydou, and ironically is practiced now in Bamako mostly by men.⁴⁴⁴

According to Bagayoko, the idea to create a photography school for young women was inspired by the Biennale and by the popularity of photography in Bamako. Her initial aim was to encourage young women to earn money through any type of profession. Bagayoko noticed that young men in Bamako were drawn to photography when faced with unemployment (which is very high in the city), because it is relatively cheap to acquire a camera, and working as an itinerant photographer requires little capital.⁴⁴⁵ Tanya Elder mentions that, in her study conducted in the towns of Mopti, Segou, and Kayes between 1993-96, where she interviewed twenty-five studio photographers, more than ten street photographers, and twenty-one mobile photographers, she met only one female photographer, Fanta Sidibé.⁴⁴⁶ While these towns are admittedly smaller than Bamako, and less 'cosmopolitan,' in that they have fewer resources and less access to international trends, trade and ideas, it was the noticeable lack of women photographers that caused Bagayoko to found *Promo Femme*. Bagayoko was also quick to apprehend the importance of the Bamako Biennale's inauguration in 1994, both in attracting international attention and in increasing the opportunities and

⁴⁴³ *Association pour la Formation Féminine et Appuis Communautaires*

⁴⁴⁴ See Rovine, *Bogolan: Shaping Culture Through Cloth in Contemporary Mali*.

⁴⁴⁵ See Koné, "La photographie... contre le chômage."

⁴⁴⁶ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 96. In fact, Elder notes that a lab technician believed she was actually in Mali not for research, but to look for a husband: "According to him, my study centered on *men*. I kept retreating to some quiet corner...to 'interview' *men*," 35.

popularity of photography in Bamako. Bagayoko thus founded *Promo Femme* with the aim of providing professional options for young women through photography.

The *Promo Femme* website further explicates Bagayoko's reasons for opening the school, as well as her ultimate objectives for the project.⁴⁴⁷ The school is "concerned with multiplying the domains of education for young Malian women who have not, for various reasons, continued their studies."⁴⁴⁸ The school's information pamphlet has been updated since the website, however, and mention of the opportunity for girls who have not finished their education is dropped from the pamphlet. The text goes on to note that, since young men without education can make a good living from their work as photographers, it would be worthwhile introducing young women to this path by providing them with a good education.⁴⁴⁹ The pamphlet makes clear Bagayoko's acumen in positioning her school with relation to Bamako's reputation as the center of African photography due to the Biennale. She clearly states the aim of the school's role is to change the gender demographic of photographers in the city, and acknowledges its success in already beginning to do so. On the first page, the pamphlet states:

Until recently in Mali, photography was considered a profession reserved solely for men. With the creation of the center, *Promo Femme*, and the education of the first female photographers, this opinion is now a distant memory. More and more young women occupy the milieu of Malian photography. Bamako is the capital of African photography, and all opportunities are available to young women photographers to take their

⁴⁴⁷ <http://promofemme.courantsdefemmes.org/index.html>. Accessed August 30, 2007.

⁴⁴⁸ "*L'idée de création d'un Centre de formation en audiovisuel est venue dans un souci[sic] de multiplier les domaines de formations des jeunes filles maliennes qui n'arrivent pas, pour diverses raisons à continuer leurs études. Pour cette catégorie de filles au Mali il n'existait que des Centres de coutures et de teintures. De ce fait nous avons estimé qu' étant donner que les garçons photographes, sans formation, vivent bien de leur travail, pourquoi ne pas introduire les jeunes filles dans cette voie avec une bonne formation.*"

<http://promofemme.courantsdefemmes.org/index.html>. Accessed August 30, 2007.

⁴⁴⁹ "*Notes techniques sur le centre promo-femme.*"

place. To do this, the center will create a partnership with any services that are open to the development of this profession.⁴⁵⁰

The stated aims of *Promo Femme* are to:

-Diversify the opportunity of education of young Malian women who have not had the chance to continue their studies.

-By the year 2007, educate three hundred young women in photography and videography.

-Perfect the work of graduates and of other women who already work in audiovisual media.⁴⁵¹

Other short-term goals are to increase the capacities of the center by acquiring more equipment, and to make presentations to the public to assure the school's ability to finance itself. A longer-term project is to create three photography agencies, and the eventual aim is to make *Promo Femme* a multi-functional center for various professions by 2010.

The pamphlet was not available when I visited in July 2007, although it was later printed out for me. This suggests that the pamphlet and website were written with possible donors in mind, as the internet is not yet very popular or practical as an information resource in Bamako. In fact, the students related that they had heard of it

⁴⁵⁰ "Jusqu'à une date récente au Mali, la photographie était considérée comme un métier réservé aux hommes exclusivement. Avec la création du centre promo-femme et la formation des premières filles photographes, cette opinion n'est plus qu'un lointain souvenir. Les jeunes filles occupent de plus en plus le milieu de la photographie malienne. Bamako étant la capitale de la photographie africaine, toutes les opportunités sont à la portée des jeunes filles photographes pour se faire de la place. Pour ce faire, le centre a tissé des relations de partenariat avec tous les services qui oeuvrent pour le développement de ce métier." From "Notes techniques sur le centre promo-femme."

⁴⁵¹ "Diversifier l'offre de formation des jeunes filles maliennes qui n'ont pas eu la chance de continuer leurs études."

"Former d'ici l'an 2005 deux cent (200) jeunes filles à la photographie et vidéographie."

"Assurer le perfectionnement des sortantes et des autres femmes qui travaillent déjà dans l'audiovisuel."
<http://promofemme.courantsdefemmes.org/presentation.html>. Accessed August 30, 2007.

through either word of mouth (Diabaté, Kadiatou Sangare) or on the radio (Diakité).

Bagayoko explained that, like most institutions in Mali, the school is always searching for further funding. She obviously operates under a feminist agenda to give young women equal professional opportunities to those already available to young men in Bamako.

So far, the school has been highly successful in educating female photographers. Since its opening in 1996, the Center claims to have trained an impressive 177 young women, of whom about one third are still working in photography.⁴⁵² A dozen are working at O.R.T.M., the national radio and television station.⁴⁵³ More than twenty work for communication agencies, such as television stations or newspapers, in Bamako. One graduate works for the press and takes nearly all of the reportage photos for the Ministry of the Promotion of Women, Children, and the Family, and thus covers the first lady of Mali, Madame Touré Lobo Traoré.⁴⁵⁴ One graduate is involved with the Mayor of the District of Bamako, and documents all of the events of the district with photography or video. More than thirty do photographic or video reportages for marriages, baptisms, graduations and other types of events, while five have opened their own studios. Many who did not give up their cameras were obliged to stay in training with the owners of studios, where they earn nearly nothing. The center wants to create three photography agencies in order to support these women economically.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵² “Notes techniques sur le centre promo-femme.”

⁴⁵³ *Office de Radiodiffusion -Télévision du Mali*

⁴⁵⁴ The pamphlet does not name names; it is not clear if the woman who works for the press was Alimata Traoré, since Traoré was an unpaid intern at AMAP. I received the pamphlet several days after the interview and was not able to schedule another to answer these questions because of time constraints.

⁴⁵⁵ “Notes techniques sur le centre promo-femme.”

Bagayoko takes an active role in helping her students to continue their education and professions after *Promo Femme* by helping her students find internships throughout the city. She also arranged for the students to hold exhibitions. For example, Fatoumata Diabaté and Alimata Traoré all participated in a show on the subject of “Colonial Buildings” held at the Musée du District de Bamako in 2002. Through the network of her graduates and in connection with other institutions, Bagayoko has created viable professions for her students.

III. Women and Studio Photography – Penda Diakité

The practice of studio photography in Mali has traditionally depended on strictly defined masculine and feminine roles. In her 1997 study of studio and itinerant photographers, Elder noted that women comprise the bulk of a photographer’s clients.⁴⁵⁶ Elder relates that, in the course of a day, photographer Sorry Kouyaté took, “eight photographs of children, six photographs of couples, five of men and *fifty-six pictures of women*, either on their own or together with friends.”⁴⁵⁷ (My italics). While studio photographs are taken to commemorate major events and holidays, and to record familial relations and friendships, aesthetic occasions, like acquiring a new dress or hairstyle, also serve as a pretext for visiting a studio. In Malian society, women are particularly celebrated for their looks: “that most authentic of our possessions – the traditional, pure beauty of our women.”⁴⁵⁸ Women spend a good deal of time, preparation and money on decorative adornments - beautiful dresses, jewelry, tattoos, hairstyles, and henna patterns for the palms and feet - and often have a picture taken to record a new hairstyle or a

⁴⁵⁶ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 221.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 221-2.

⁴⁵⁸ Koné and Koné, *Coiffures Traditionnelles et Modernes*, 4.

newly tailored outfit.⁴⁵⁹ This was so common that many photographers set up shop next to tailors, or vice versa.

The mark of a good photographer is to not only capture, but enhance, and even participate in creating, a woman's beauty. Diawara notes that Seydou Keïta's photography performed two functions, "a decorative one that accentuates the beauty of Bamakoises and a mythological one wrapped up with modernity in West Africa."⁴⁶⁰ Bamako is known for its beautiful women – "*A Bamako les femmes sont belles* in the words of the popular song"⁴⁶¹ – and, as Diawara also shows, a woman's beauty itself is related to her sophistication, her urbanity and her modernity. "For women, Keïta's camera was a guarantee of beauty, fulfilling the truth of their being Bamakoise. His portraits were said to make any woman beautiful, giving her a straight, aquiline nose, emphasizing her jewellery and make-up, and capturing a sense of her modernity through the attention paid to her high-heel shoes and handbag."⁴⁶² As Diawara notes, a studio photographer plays an active part in constructing the woman's beauty, by posing her in a certain way, through providing modern props and a fashionable cloth backdrop, and through lighting effects and sometimes even retouching. When viewing a Keïta photograph, the quality of the shot is obvious. **[Figure 6:4]** Women are caught in fascinating poses, their skin glows, and their clothing shows to glamorous effect. Keïta himself told women, "You look beautiful like that," when he asked clients to pose a certain way.

⁴⁵⁹ This practice is common across West Africa. In Dakar, the practice is given a name, *sañse*, when women have photographs taken of themselves in elegant dress and then display these pictures in albums and frames. See Hudita Nura Mustafa "Portraits of Modernity: Fashioning Selves in Dakar's Popular Photography" in *Images & Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 172.

⁴⁶⁰ Diawara, "The Talk of the Town," 242.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 236.

Elder and others have noted the importance of the male studio photographer's social skills in interacting with female clients. Especially for itinerants, who can become intimately involved in a client's family life, flattery and flirtation are critical skills practiced by photographers to encourage a female client to feel at ease and to reveal her most engaging and beautiful self. Meanwhile, the photographer must also muster diplomacy in negotiating the business relationship in a way that is not threatening to a woman's husband. Jean François-Werner believes that one important social skill for an itinerant photographer is to be serious, to "stop running after women."⁴⁶³ In other words, flattery and flirtation must remain superficial, at a professional level, for the photographer to acquire the best business results. Elder also describes one particular photographer's way of 'working' a party, where he singled out one beautiful woman to photograph, thereby (in his words) inciting envy in the rest, who then demanded his attention.⁴⁶⁴

Such gendered conventions reveal the inherent bias faced by female portrait photographers, who cannot be expected to as successfully manipulate the flirtatious photographer/client relationship in a society with strict norms of heterosexuality. It is not surprising, then, that only one of *Promo Femme*'s graduates whom we interviewed, Penda Diakité, chose to open her own studio.⁴⁶⁵ **[Figure 6:5]** Diakité opened *Photo Studio: Afrique Vision* in 2002, close to her home in the Lafiabougou neighborhood of Bamako, three years after finishing her study at Promo Femme.⁴⁶⁶ Following graduation,

⁴⁶³ Jean-François Werner, "Les Tribulations d'un photographe de rue africain," *Autrepart* 1 (1997), 136-137. Also cited in Elder, *Capturing Change*, 223.

⁴⁶⁴ Elder, *Capturing Change*, 222.

⁴⁶⁵ According to *Promo Femme*'s pamphlet, only five graduates in total have opened a studio of their own. Admittedly, opening a studio is a much more expensive venture than simply becoming an itinerant photographer, as it requires overhead costs such as rent, electrical bills, equipment and laboratory supplies.

⁴⁶⁶ Fatoumata Diabaté related that another graduate of *Promo Femme*, Awa Fofana, also runs a studio. Diabaté, interview, 27 July 2006. Several other female studio owners were listed in a city-wide directory of

she had pursued several internships – six months at Studio Prophoto in the Hippodrome neighborhood and three months at the National Center for Health Education and Information.⁴⁶⁷ Diakit  also spent six months at Lion Photo, a reputable Korean color lab in downtown Bamako that handles much of the work for itinerants, where she gained experience in ‘point of view’ (framing the shot), mini portraits, and identity photos.⁴⁶⁸ Diakit ’s curriculum vitae advertises reportage in weddings, baptisms, conferences and other ceremonies.⁴⁶⁹ Diakit  also participated in several workshops at Centre Soleil d’Afrique, including one that focused on digital training, and her work was displayed at Galerie Chab in an exhibition titled, “Colors of Women” in 2003.⁴⁷⁰

According to Diakit , her initial desire to attend Promo Femme occurred when she first heard an advertisement for the school on the radio. She asked her father to let her attend, but he told her she was crazy (literally, “you are sick”).⁴⁷¹ However, she remained firm in her aspiration, and when she asked her father again several months later, he relented and agreed to pay the fee.⁴⁷² Diakit  evinces a strong determination that attests to the difficulty of becoming a woman photographer in Bamako. She related an amusing but telling anecdote about a client who thought that her male assistant was the photographer,

photographers and artists. The CFP is committed to having equal number of male and female students. Sogodogo, interview by author, notes, Bamako, Mali, 20 November, 2005.

⁴⁶⁷ *Centre National d’Information d’Education pour la Sant * (CNIES).

⁴⁶⁸ Lion Photo was opened in 1993 by Kim Chi Noun according to Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako*, 91.

⁴⁶⁹ The emphasis on baptisms seems strange in a predominantly Muslim country, but was common to many photographers’ resumes. Indeed, Christian ceremonies seemed to be a focus of interest for a number of photographers, perhaps because it is so unusual. Christianity is also growing in popularity in West Africa, even in Mali.

⁴⁷¹ “*Tu es malade.*” Penda Diakit , interview by author and Bakary Sidib , digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 8 July 2006.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*

and gave her a hard time upon discovering that she was the studio owner, but eventually came around and allowed her to photograph him.⁴⁷³

The desire of the sitter to create an ‘improved’ identity is a consistent theme in African studio photography. The collaboration between the photographer and subject in the creation of the sitter’s idealized identity has been discussed by Diawara, Enwezor, Oguiibe, Lamunière, Magnin, Behrend, Wendl, and others. In Keïta’s case, Lamunière notes, “While the photographers’ role was to fulfill their sitters’ wishes, they also asserted their artistic will. Keïta describes how his sitters selected the pose they wanted, but says he felt that he always knew which one was better.”⁴⁷⁴ Sitters contributed by dressing up for a picture, and bringing prestigious or beloved items with them. Photographers offered props and encourage sitters to pose in an attractive stance. In Yoruba studios, subjects can be posed and then framed as if on television;⁴⁷⁵ in Nigeria and Ghana, photographers have used painted backdrops; in Kenya, Likoni Ferry photographers create a *mélange* of backdrop materials (banners, posters, plastic flowers, and the like) that disconnects the subject from any specific place, projecting the subject into a ‘global’ space.⁴⁷⁶

However, times have changed in Bamako. While older studio photographers, like Hamidou Maïga and Malick Sidibé, used painted backdrops, the backdrops are no longer in use. Today, all of the studio photographers in Bamako own poster backdrops, large photographic color spreads which they buy at the local store. (One photographer, Mamadou Konaté, uses abstractly painted or tie-dyed backdrops because they are

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 32.

⁴⁷⁵ Marilyn Houlberg, “Feed Your Eyes: Nigerian and Haitian Studio Photography” *Photographic Insight* no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1988), 4.

⁴⁷⁶ Behrend, “‘Feeling Global’: The Likoni Ferry Photographers,” 76.

unique). Common themes are elaborate gardens, with fountains and sculptures, a lake with a mansion in the background, green topiary gardens with palm trees and mirrored reflecting ponds, a conservatory rose garden with a white wicker rocking chair (in front of which the photographer Amadou Traoré had placed his own white wicker chair for the sitter). Almost all of the backdrops that I observed were dominated by blues and greens, with a prevalence of water imagery and lush vegetation. As half of Mali is composed of the Sahara desert and the Sahel, a sub-desert zone, and even the southern areas like Bamako are parched most of the year, the backdrops served as refreshing views which remove the subject from the dust and heat, the difficult geographical conditions that aggravate the country's poverty. Indeed, the sitter looks either like she is on vacation in a distant, beautiful land or like he lives in a mansion in a landscaped, European countryside. These backdrops tend to be dislocated themselves, with conflicting locational signifiers, such as the Polynesian sculpture and the brick wall (Hawaii or England?).⁴⁷⁷

Despite the poster backdrops, the notion of identity creation and its attendant mythology seems, in this era, somewhat over-inflated. In the Bamako studios that I visited, the commercial, poster backdrops seemed the only part of the experience that suggested a different identity, and I rarely saw them used. In fact, one photographer told me that only rural people – considered country bumpkins, he implied - still use the poster backdrops, because a newcomer to the city believes that, if he or she sends such a picture back to the village, people will believe it is 'real.' Thus, it seemed that a sophisticated city dweller would not choose to be photographed in front of the backdrops. This was only one photographer's anecdote, however, which is belied by the portraits that Penda

⁴⁷⁷ These backdrops are likely created by digital means.

Diakité showed me. Clients prefer the “*fond abstrait*,” or plain white backdrop, for identity portraits. If in the 1950s, “Having one’s portrait taken by Keïta’ signified one’s cosmopolitanism,” today the commercial backdrop seems to signify modernity and urbanity for rural villagers, but to indicate a lack of sophistication among Bamakois themselves.⁴⁷⁸ This distinction highlights the vast difference in amenities, education and attitude between the capital and the countryside in Mali.⁴⁷⁹

Liam Buckley observed that, in The Gambia up until the mid-1950s, studio photographers spent a good deal of time carefully posing a person out of respect for his or her *jikko*, a kind of magical power of personality. Today, however, photographers try to avoid *jikko* because of its danger, and instead use many props that contribute to cutting-edge fashion, a sense of living in the present.⁴⁸⁰ In Bamako, the amount of time a person spends posing has also been much reduced from the 1950s, when Seydou Keïta was most active. Keïta relates that he would spend up to an hour posing someone, while I observed various studio photographers, and was posed myself by several, in all of one or two minutes.⁴⁸¹ However, my understanding (although admittedly this was not the focus of my research) was that advanced technology, like automatic focus and lighting, had decreased the posing time.

Though most portraits I observed were taken for identity purposes, I did see a mother bring in a baby girl with a new doll in packaging, clearly bought for the occasion

⁴⁷⁸ “It registered the fact that the sitter lived in Bamako, had seen the train station, the big market, and the central prison, and went to the movies [all located near his studio]: in short, it signified that the sitter was modern.” Diawara, “Talk of the Town,” 236.

⁴⁷⁹ Even though it is also important to remember that many city dwellers travel back and forth to their home villages.

⁴⁸⁰ Liam Buckley, “Self and Accessory in Gambian Studio Photography.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 16 no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2000–2001): 71–91.

⁴⁸¹ Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, 24.

of the photograph, and another young woman who changed her blouse in the studio for the occasion. Thus the tradition of bringing in valued items for a picture, and being concerned with dress, still seems strong. The uses that a studio photograph is put to once it is taken home may also contribute to the identity creation of an individual, as in the past. For example, a wedding photograph may be displayed on the wall of a couple's living room, contributing to the memory of a presumably happy day and further strengthening the couple's bond.

Diakité's studio photographs do not betray a noticeable difference from the pictures of other studios in Bamako. **[Figure 6:6]** She owns several of the commercial photo backdrops popular at other studios I visited, and has experimented with text banners that criss-cross her backdrops. One, which shows text that reads 'Happy New Year, 2003,' shows a turquoise pool, behind which palm trees, the ocean, and striking rock formations suggest a tropical paradise. The young woman wears a Western-style tight jean skirt and a close-fitting gold blouse, with mod leather shoes, giving her a fashionable, modern and young look. **[Figure 6:7]** In another, two friends sit back to back on the floor, posed in a way that shows their warmth for each other while displaying a sense of fun and informality. Normally people do not sit on the floor as it is considered undignified. They sit in front of a color poster backdrop of a lush topiary garden, behind which meanders a wide and glassy green river. The women both wear slacks and Western-style tank tops, again showing their modernity, although the woman on the right is more 'dressed up,' i.e. she wears a formal blouse, while the woman on the left wears a tank top with letters on the front. Both of them have taken off their shoes, and the woman on the right has placed her shoes neatly in front of her, pointed to the right. This pose

with the shoes removed can be seen in some of Seydou Keïta's portraits as well, and it suggests that the women are pictured as if at home, and also that they desire to show off their fine shoes. **[Figure 6:4]** About the portrait on the right, Elizabeth Bigham writes that the shoe, "is simultaneously a blunt commodity fetish and an expressive individual emblem that has been arranged by the photographer on an elegant axis with the sitter's handbag and face."⁴⁸²

The juxtaposition of this attribute with the 'park' in the backdrop suggests that the backdrop was chosen more for its decorative qualities, than to convey an attempt at 'realism.' As Diakité's pictures use the backdrop, it may be more preferable to young people. Then again, since these were pictures that Diakité had on hand, they may have been of friends.⁴⁸³

Diakité's work has appeared in several publications and exhibitions, but she explained that most of her art photographs unfortunately had been lost in a fire in 2005. She cited portrait photographers Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta as important influences, Sidibé especially. She said that he shows what we would not otherwise know without photography.⁴⁸⁴ Diakité seems to echo Barthes' sentiment: "Perhaps we have an invincible resistance to believing in the past, in History, except in the form of myth. The Photograph, for the first time, puts an end to this resistance: henceforth the past is as certain as the present, what we see on paper is as certain as what we touch."⁴⁸⁵ Like Keïta and Sidibé before her, Diakité participates in the continuation of a vernacular, community-oriented preservation of an individual's past.

⁴⁸² Bigham, "Issues of Authorship," 59.

⁴⁸³ This idea was suggested by Bakary Sidibé.

⁴⁸⁴ Penda Diakité, interview, 12 July 2006.

⁴⁸⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 87-88.

IV. Language School – Kadiatou Sangare

For the other women with whom I spoke, opening a studio was not an immediate goal. Kadiatou Sangare (no relation to Oussa Sangare) holds an internship at a national language school in Bamako called *Institut des langues Abdoulaye Barry* (ILAB).⁴⁸⁶ Sangare attended CFP after *Promo Femme*, like Traoré and Diabaté.⁴⁸⁷ Her job illustrates the indelible connection between photography and cultural identity.

ILAB is an important resource for national and international scholars of Malian culture, because the institute provides instruction and transcription in all of Mali's many languages, including the very difficult languages, like the Dogon dialects, or obscure languages spoken by only a small population. ILAB's photographers illustrate brochures, and photograph the various villages, costumes, and hairstyles of different ethnicities in order to provide cultural awareness in language-learning. Hence, the photographer's job is not unlike the job of the photographers at the National Museum, but the pictures are used for the purpose of teaching and preserving the language, and not for the preservation of the objects or ceremonies themselves.

Abdoulaye Barry devoted his life to politics, and was a professor of Bamankan at the National Institute of the Arts. The language institute was founded in 1991, the year of democracy. In 2006, on the 15th anniversary of ILAB, the Minister of Education

⁴⁸⁶ *Institut des langues Abdoulaye Barry* (ILAB). It was Kadiatou Sangare who took us to meet Madame Bagayoko, as there was some confusion between her and another woman directing an art school who was also calling herself "Promo Femme."

⁴⁸⁷ Alimata Traoré and Fatoumata Diabaté also attended CFP (formerly Helvetas).

organized a conference on “Decentralization and the national languages,” where it was noted that the majority of citizens do not speak the official language, French.⁴⁸⁸

The debates over national languages have been of tremendous importance in Africa, and in postcolonial studies (which tends to focus on literature, and thus language). The question of whether someone writes in a native or former colonial language determines the writer’s audience, but also, rather unfairly, pinpoints the author’s position on the spectrum of “authenticity.” Photography might seem to evade this conundrum, and indeed photography can be ‘seen’ by all, operating superficially as a universal language. And yet, as this dissertation hopefully shows, studio photography takes on vastly different meanings depending upon its audience, and few art projects encompass international as well as Malian concerns. What is seen in a photograph takes on different meanings depending on the knowledge that the viewer brings to the picture.

In any event, ILAB shows that issues surrounding the use of national languages (as opposed to the official language of French) occupy a space of heated debate and particular importance in postcolonial Mali. The ILAB photographer’s job, to ‘illustrate’ a living language, shows an emphasis on the inseparability of language from culture, of visual effects from mental constructs. And, as Mali’s democracy has been said to succeed largely because of decentralization, the connection between languages and decentralization then takes on political importance. The governmental push in Mali since the 1990s to celebrate and appreciate the nation’s diverse cultures, while assuaging ethnic disputes, is furthered by ILAB. Sangare’s position emphasizes the importance that

⁴⁸⁸ Amadou Waïgalo, “15e anniversaire du décès d’Abdoulaye Barry: Les langues nationales pour affermir la décentralisation,” *Africone.com* (2 October 2006). www.africone.com/article.php3?id_article=4546; accessed November 15, 2008.

photography plays in contributing to the national dialogue about cultural identity versus national identity, and democracy and decentralization.

The one series of pictures that Sangare showed to me were of a Christian ceremony that she had taken while a student at the CFP. These pictures were typical of such a reportage, sometimes showing individual portraits, and sometimes the overall ceremony. Christianity is growing in Bamako, but the exoticism of the subject seemed to make it a popular one for a number of photographers. **[Figure 6:8]** One picture by Kadiatou Sangare shows a man wearing a shirt printed with men of the church, one who looks to be African and another who may be the pope. This picture takes the form of a typical studio portrait, but the man's shirt makes it especially interesting, and visually suits the theme of the series.

V. Agence Malienne de Presse et de Publicité – Alimata dite Diop Traoré

Like Sangare, Alimata dite Diop Traoré works as an unpaid intern, but at the Malian government press agency, AMAP (*Agence Malienne de Presse et de Publicité*). Founded in 1992, after the transition to democracy, AMAP grew out of the press agency ANIM (*Agence Nationale d'Information Malienne*),⁴⁸⁹ which was the organ of the socialist government and was founded after independence in 1960. A number of ANIM's photographers studied in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and Czechoslovakia. ANIM issued from a photographic archive service created in 1956 by

⁴⁸⁹ Pascal Martin Saint Léon and Jean-Loup Pivin, "The official agencies" in *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*, 198. Nimis contends that AMAP was created in 1960 and makes no mention of ANIM. Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako*, 97.

two French men.⁴⁹⁰ **[Figure 6:9]** Photographs printed by ANIM did not appear with the photographer's by-line, and the same is true today for AMAP, except for certain AP photos.⁴⁹¹ Like most press agencies in socialist, post-independence Africa, ANIM followed the official party line and did not criticize the state.⁴⁹² By the mid-1990s, the number of photographers at AMAP had dwindled to six.⁴⁹³ Today AMAP has only a few working photographers. The staff, including all of the reporters, was composed of men, except for Traoré, which suggests the challenges she faces as a young woman new to the field.

Traoré studied at the CFP after graduating from *Promo Femme* in 2003, and her curriculum vitae notes a three-month internship at ORTM. Traoré received family support for her choice of profession – both of her parents have been unusually understanding and supportive, especially her mother. She also cited the role model of an aunt who had also been a photographer, though the aunt had since left the country.⁴⁹⁴ Traoré works with a digital camera, and is able to make use of the technology available to her at the AMAP offices, which includes a computer.

Traoré chose the series of photographs shown here that focus on women and children, which were taken in Missira, a Bamako neighborhood.⁴⁹⁵ **[Figures 6:10 & 6:11]** Her pictures have an off-the-cuff aesthetic, a sense of humor that suits the attention-grabbing techniques necessary for a photojournalist. Her work plays on strong,

⁴⁹⁰ Dagara Dakin, "La presse et la photographie (1960-1990)" in *L'Afrique en regards: Une brève histoire de la photographie*, ed. Martin van der Belen (Trézélan, France: Filigranes Éditions, 2005), 68.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako*, 97.

⁴⁹⁴ Alimata dite Diop Traoré, interview by author and Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 21 July 2006.

⁴⁹⁵ Traoré exhibited in "Women Looking at Women," which may have contributed to her interest in photographing women and children. At Promo-femme, as well, the students are encouraged to do projects on various women's professions.

often humorous visual contrasts, which often take the form of visible tensions between modernity and tradition. In one, a boy holds a huge metal basin on his head, his fingers barely stretching to the top. His cool, mirrored sunglasses give him a knowing grin, in contrast to a younger boy off to the right, whose interest, pleasure and shyness in the photographer's presence clearly shows. The basin, a symbol of labor, dominates the picture frame, its blue, scratched paint mirroring the pattern on the boy's Western shirt, a cast-off of a wealthier culture.⁴⁹⁶ Another frame shows an older woman, who gives a sweetly toothless smile, as she passes by a wall on which there is a painted advertisement of a smiling young woman selling juice in French, which most women in Mali cannot read. The old woman carries wash utensils in a basin on her head and her wizened arm reaches up as the painted girl's young arm reaches down, framing the older woman's head. The contrast between the wizened, hard-working older woman and the cheery, attractive girl in the advertisement would be heart-wrenching if not for the older woman's pleased grin. In another picture, a woman stops on the street to adjust her headscarf and looks severely at the camera, while behind her looms a young man on a motorbike. The open sewers that run next to the road are visible. Another photograph shows little boys running with their arms full of firewood, almost more than they can carry. One is dressed in Western cast-offs, the other in Muslim wear. All of these pictures capture daily life in Bamako, where such juxtapositions, such signs of Western influence and affluence, constantly intermingle with local traditions and poverty.

While clearly on a path to a career as a photo-journalist, Traoré also exhibits photographs as art, and was in fact collaborating with photographer Amadou Sow on an

⁴⁹⁶ Clothing donated in the US to groups like Salvation Army gets sent to Africa, where it is sold on the cheap.

exhibition when I met her, on a theme of women and children. (Sow works at the African House of Photography, the Malian institution that produces the Bamako Biennale). In an interview after the exhibition “Women Looking at Women,” Traoré said, “I dream of being a great artist, a star if you like, who exhibits all over the world.”⁴⁹⁷ She also said that she had been fortunate in having supportive and understanding parents, especially her mother, and that if she had to choose between getting married and her career, she would choose a career. This was a question apparently asked of every female photographer interviewed, which is instructive, as it shows the extreme importance placed on a woman’s marrying and bearing children in Malian society.

VI. Art Photography – Ouassa Pangassy Sangare and Fatoumata Diabaté

Once the province of studios, newspapers, and postcards, photography’s artistic possibilities were vastly opened up by the Biennale, and new opportunities in *genres* of photography allowed for significant changes in the *gendering* of photography.

Oussa Pangassy Sangare was among the first students to attend *Promo Femme*, and is one of the most internationally established of the five photographers, and is a groundbreaker in photography. She practices art photography and reportage, and has traveled and worked widely in West Africa and Europe, as well as across Mali.⁴⁹⁸

Sangare uses both film cameras and digital, and has branched out into video and film as well. Sangare has also worked with a number of prominent male photographers, such as Alioune Bâ and Amadou Baba Cissé, and she cites Bâ, Malick Sidibé and Mamadou

⁴⁹⁷ “Je rêve déjà d’être une grande artiste photographe, une star si vous voulez, qui va exposer dans tous les pays du monde ! J’avoue que si un jour je devais choisir entre un homme et ma carrière de photographe, je choisirais ma carrière...” in “Regard de Femmes,” *Afriphoto* (23 novembre 2003) <http://www.afriphoto.com/index.asp>; accessed April 2, 2007.

Konaté as mentors and teachers. Sangare contributed work to several editions of the Biennale in the ‘off’ exhibitions. She was included in the 2005 Biennale as one of an international roster of photographers who had participated in a masterclass held in Bamako in February 2005.⁴⁹⁹ Sangare is a mentor and support for younger female photographers like Alima Traoré.⁵⁰⁰ Together with Penda Diakité and another *Promo Femme* student, Awa Fofana, she created a short-lived agency for women photographers with the help of the arts collective *Centre Soleil*, in 2002.⁵⁰¹

I did not see enough of Sangare’s work to discuss it at length, but her production did typically focus on women. One picture that was striking was a close-up of an albino woman who seemed to have a troublesome rash, or perhaps a bad sunburn. Albinos suffer great discrimination in Mali, although the prominence of the renowned albino singer Salif Keïta is probably helping to make people a little more comfortable with the condition.⁵⁰² Sangare had wanted to expose the difficulties of the woman’s ailment. This was one of very few photographs that critically examined social or political problems in Mali.⁵⁰³ I do not think this is merely the legacy of decades of a government-censored press; it is also an aspect of Malian culture to downplay the difficulties of life and to celebrate beauty, as the studio photographers do. **[Figure 6:12]** In the two pictures shown here, it is possible to see Sangare’s concern with social realities. One example shows someone pushing a coffee dispenser down the street, showing a glossy advertisement of a happy, attractive and well-off young couple enjoying “the taste of life.” Coffee is a Western affect, as most

⁴⁹⁹ Njami, ed., *Un autre monde*, 195.

⁵⁰⁰ Traoré, interview, 21 July 2006.

⁵⁰¹ I was unable to interview Awa Fofana because she was not in Bamako in the summer of 2006.

⁵⁰² It used to be Bamana tradition to sacrifice an albino in times of great trouble.

⁵⁰³ Yacouba Dembélé had taken pictures of a boy climbing into a big trash bin, and people cooking food near the open sewers (common), while Amadou Baba Cissé, who was mentioned in the introduction, took pictures of condoms.

Maliens prefer green tea, strongly brewed. The emptiness of the street opposite the coffee pusher, which takes up much of the picture, subtly belies the joy the couple feels in their taste of life. In the other picture, a very young baby is sleeping on a pile of cloths (a clever way to keep the baby safe while the mother attends to a task nearby, no doubt). Still, the image of the small baby, by itself on the ground, and the title, “We, the children,” suggests that Pangassy identifies not only herself, but some kind of community – women? Maliens? - with the helpless child. Remarkably, this picture avoids either kitsch or pathos, strangely indeterminate as it is to the child’s situation.

On the day of our second interview in June 2006, Sangare was critical about the difficulties she has faced as a woman in her profession. She was heading to France to participate in a workshop with Konaté and other photographers, so it seemed that her career was progressing despite her troubles, but she explained that the emotional and psychological difficulties of being a female photographer were weighing on her. Like the other women photographers, Sangare had received familial support in her choice of profession. Sangare’s father was himself an amateur photographer, and had given her a camera at the age of twelve or thirteen. However, she related that few male photographers took her seriously as a woman, and that it was harder to find work and exhibitions.⁵⁰⁴

Another photographer who said in an interview that she considers herself an artist is Fatoumata Diabaté.⁵⁰⁵ She won a major award, the AFAA Prize for Young Artists, at the 2005 Biennale for her series on the Tuareg, a nomadic ethnic group who lives in the

⁵⁰⁴ Kadiatou Sangare, interview by author with assistance of Bakary Sidibé, digital recording, Bamako, Mali, 24 July 2007.

⁵⁰⁵ Diabaté, interview, 27 July 2006.

Sahara desert in northern Mali.⁵⁰⁶ Four pictures from Diabaté's Tuareg series were also exhibited as a selection from the Bamako Biennale in *Lens of Life*, curated by Simon Njami and on exhibition at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco, from May 18-September 23, 2007.

At the time Diabaté won the AFAA prize, she was a twenty-five year old student at the CFP, and a protégée of its director, Youssouf Sogodogo. After graduation, Diabaté spent the summer of 2006 in Bordeaux, France participating in a photography workshop. For the Tuareg series, she and a fellow male student, Harandine Dicko, traveled to Essakane, Mali for the Festival of the Desert, a three-day-long event run by the Tuareg and supported by the Malian Minister of Culture, with French funding. Diabaté and Dicko wanted to shoot the series as part of a class assignment; such cultural festivals are typical subjects in a photographer's repertoire. The Essakane Festival is performed largely for wealthy tourists who fly into Timbuktu or Bamako for the event, which boasts some of the best musicians in the world. Mali is renowned for its contemporary musicians, such as the deceased Ali Farka Toure, Salif Keïta, Oumou Sangare, and Amadou and Mariam. The Tuareg rock band Tinarewen was active in the founding of the festival, which is an attempt – and apparently a successful one – by the government to pacify the Tuareg through appreciation of their music and culture.

Relations between the Tuareg and the Malian government are troubled, involving a long-running dispute whose roots lie in precolonial antagonisms. The nomadic and semi-nomadic Tuareg's traditional livelihood involved trading via caravans across the Sahara desert. Although there is no single entity such as a 'Tuareg nation,' they are

⁵⁰⁶ I use the term "Tuareg" because that is the title of the series; however, the people call themselves Tamasheq, or Kel-Tamasheq ("people who speak Tamasheq").

unified by their language, by their Islamic religion and by cultural beliefs and lifestyles.⁵⁰⁷ Like most peoples of Africa, they were subjected to the arbitrary national boundaries drawn up by European nations during the 1885 Berlin conference, such that the original area that the Tuareg inhabited (namely, the Western Sahara Desert) is now divided among the northern areas of Mali and Niger, parts of Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Nigeria, and the southern reaches of Algeria and Libya. The Tuareg were notorious for their refusal to succumb to the French, and their way of life and culture remained largely unchanged during colonialism.

Since independence, the Tuareg in Mali, who comprise less than ten percent of the nation's population, have been at odds with the Malian government, which was located in Bamako and run almost exclusively by other ethnic groups from the south.⁵⁰⁸ The first Tuareg rebellion in the early 1960s, shortly after independence, was brutally repressed, allowing grievances to fester. As the Tuareg were notorious for banditry and extortion of the agriculturists who shared their territory, most of Mali did not look favorably upon their uprising; but the newly-minted Keïta government was vicious in its suppression. Serious droughts in the 1970s and 1980s and economic neglect by the Malian government spurred another rebellion in 1990. Thus the second Tuareg rebellion, which began a year before the 1991 coup, proved a test of the new democracy's ability to compromise and respond humanely to the uprising. Fortunately, the democratic Konare government took careful steps to initiate a long-term peace process, which involved, among other efforts, allowing Tuareg rebels into peace-keeping Army forces in the

⁵⁰⁷ Arnoldi writes, "While there is no single unified Tuareg entity, they all speak dialects of Tamacheq, they are Muslims, and they share certain social and cultural institutions, beliefs and practices." Arnoldi, "Wrapping the Head," in *Crowning Achievements*, 133.

⁵⁰⁸ Reuters, "Mali's Tuareg rebels agree timetable to disarm," (20 February 2007) <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L20638876.htm>. Accessed September 6, 2008.

northern desert regions, and encouraging appreciation of Tuareg culture, music, jewelry, and dress.⁵⁰⁹ A monument in the city of Timbuktu commemorates the Tuareg's formal relinquishment of their arms in a 1996 ceremonial burning of weapons. The integration of the Tuareg continues to be the greatest ethnic conflict faced by Mali as a nation, and insurgency has flared up as recently as June 2006, when rebels briefly and violently occupied two desert towns, Kidal and Menaka. Whether these attacks were political statements or merely banditry is uncertain, but southern Malians tend to fear the worst because of the past history.⁵¹⁰

Thus, the exhibition of Diabaté's series, "The Tuareg: Gestures and Movements," in the Bamako Biennale in November 2005 held a strong political resonance. The significance of Diabaté's series was likely lost on most Western and possibly some African members of the audience, as the exhibition lacked explanatory wall text for specific works, to the show's detriment.⁵¹¹ As the Tuareg population crosses national boundaries, the Tuareg conflict affects a number of African nations; Niger in particular is under increasing fear of major insurgency at this writing, while the Algerian government mediated the peace in Mali in 1995 and also brokered an agreement in early 2007 between the Malian government and the Tuareg. Diabaté's series thus takes on a pan-African significance appropriate to the Biennale, as her theme is relevant to nations on both sides of the Sahara, in both the Maghreb and the Sahel. In an even broader sense, the

⁵⁰⁹ Kalifa Keita, "Conflict and Conflict Resolution in the Sahel: The Tuareg Insurgency in Mali" (Report, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, May 1998), 19.

<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB200.pdf>. Accessed on November 12, 2007.

⁵¹⁰ According to Pringle, before granting independence to Mali and other African nations, France briefly considered creating an independent pan-Sahara desert state for the Tuareg because of oil interests; Mali and other nations were strongly against it and it did not occur. Pringle, *Democratization in Mali*, 31.

⁵¹¹ Unfortunately the subsequent, partial show in San Francisco at the Museum of the African Diaspora did not rectify this lack.

ethnic tensions arising from arbitrarily drawn colonial boundaries are an unhappily familiar story to many African countries.

While presenting a project of pan-African significance, Diabaté also addressed a topic that succinctly illustrated the Biennale's theme, "Another World." The implication of the title, in contrast to other, Western-oriented art Biennales, is an understanding of Africa as 'worlds apart' from the West. The Tuareg live in 'another world' even in Africa - the world of the desert. The French have always romanticized the Tuareg, who are descended from the Berbers in North Africa and whose lifestyle is considered foreign and exotic even by many Malians.⁵¹²

As if to emphasize this 'other worldliness' of the Tuareg environment, Diabaté used a grainy, soft focus approach for the series. She and most CFP students typically use black and white film, as that is considered artistic in Bamako. Dark forms contrast against pale sand, thrown into relief by the bright desert light. Diabaté's formal composition tends to rely on repeating forms - women, water bottles, camels' necks, camels' heads - to create contrast and continuity, resulting in somewhat mysterious but recognizable scenes through close-ups that leave out overly-informative details. In one, three or four figures, their heads and bodies completely wrapped in the robes typically worn by Tuareg women, lie on their stomachs with their backs to the viewer, apparently conversing. Perhaps they are watching the festivities or relaxing in a tent, but their forms and intent are inherently mysterious. **[Figure 6:13]** In another shot, a laughing boy sits high atop a camel, his head turned. The fringe of dark hair on his head mirrors the bowl-like swoop of the saddle below him. The strong verticals and diagonals created by the boy's figure

⁵¹² Pringle, *Democratization in Mali*, 31.

and saddle are anchored by the boy's arm, a horizontal line which extends across the picture and is picked up by the reins.

In many of Diabaté's photographs, the striking and exotic shapes of camel accessories – decorated saddles, bridles, and reins, quite unlike more generally familiar equestrian gear – provide the formal interest. Dark reins, lines on a rider's boubou, and camel collars trace a rough horizontal across a row of camel's necks, like pale vertical poles, while the central rider's billowing, patterned costume creates a Seydou Keïta-esque backdrop. In another frame, the black lines of several camels' nostrils, mouths, bridle loops and reins trace a graceful web against the pale sand. **[Figure 6:14]** In Diabaté's most dramatic picture, exhibited in the Biennale, a rider's dark sash swoops diagonally down and is mirrored by the camel's brilliantly white, upturned head. The decorative knots and reins create a triangle below, stabilizing the composition. **[Figure 6:15]** In both this picture and the latter, the cropping of the camels' and their riders' heads shows that form is Diabaté's primary concern. As camels are not common in Mali, except in the desert regions, some of Diabaté's pictures traffic a bit in cultural exoticism.

Diabaté's interest in showing what is distinctive about the Tuareg culture – their unruly camels, their concealing headscarves, their tents which speak of a transient lifestyle, and the sublime and breathtakingly hot desert where they live – bears a certain resemblance to the 'cultural photography' discussed in Chapter Five. Indeed, the festival at Essakane is designed for and attended largely by tourists, since few Malians can afford the long and difficult trip to such a remote region. But Diabaté also shows how Tuareg are similar to other Malians. In one picture, a man carries rolled up prayer mats, which all Muslim Malians - roughly 90 percent of the population - use. **[Figure 6:16]** In another, a

man eats from the ubiquitous plastic bowl and cheap metal fork, while another man sits in a tent near a bunch of plastic water bottles. The water bottles carry multiple meanings, as they speak to the presence of tourists (the only people who buy water in Mali), but empty bottles are also recuperated for various purposes, most commonly for washing in pit toilets. **[Figure 6:17]** A more explicit picture shows a tourist with sunglasses in the background, in focus, looking at a woman, probably a performer. Diabaté combines an ethnographic interest with an emphasis on form that results in very beautiful pictures, many of which are rather romanticized, but some of which also show the realities of Tuareg life at the festival.

[Figure 6:18] Diabaté’s photograph of a woman with a pointed head wrap echoing the pale tents behind her seems to have a particular cultural, or ‘ethnographic,’ significance. Women own their own property in Tuareg culture, and their tents are inherited; thus “Women’s tents represent the continuity of their own line.”⁵¹³ While head-wraps are common across Mali, the fully-concealing wrap of the Tuareg women, and men’s turbans, are distinctive, and contribute to the Tuareg mythology. Although turbans are common to many Muslims, among the Tuareg these practices carry important social meanings beyond Islam, signifying “fundamental notions of Tuareg social relationships.”⁵¹⁴ Tuareg cover their heads in order to conceal emotion, and as a reminder to exercise self-control in social relationships. The mouth, to which the woman points, can be seen as allowing gossip to escape and must be protected. (All uncovered orifices are seen as entry points for evil; more pragmatically, in a desert wind, for uncomfortable

⁵¹³ Susan J. Rasmussen, “Urban and Rural Performances of Tuareg Smith Women” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 59 no. 4 (Winter 2003): 497.

⁵¹⁴ Arnoldi, “Wrapping the Head,” 127.

sand).⁵¹⁵ While women's headdresses do not tend to cover the mouth as men's do, still the cultural importance of the mouth is suggested in this gesture, emphasized by Diabaté's apt title, "Gestures and Movements."

The conceptual range of the series is many-layered. As the Tuareg live uneasily within Mali, romanticizing their culture and emphasizing its beauty and uniqueness encourages viewers to discount negative stereotypes. At the same time, reminding viewers of the Tuareg's similarity to other Malians contributes to an ideology of tolerance and acceptance. On the other hand, choosing to show the festival but not revealing it as a tourist festival is a bit of a distortion, in that the Tuareg perform this festival for tourists and this is not in some ways indicative of their daily life. However, the final choice of the Biennale selections resided with the curators; the pictures that Diabaté showed to me, and that were framed for an exhibition at the CCF, would have added depth to the series. A snapshot of the Tuareg peace patrol riding in a jeep with machine guns, which I saw on my own journey to Timbuktu, would no doubt be too dangerous to be attempted, but such a picture would have added a certain realpolitik to Diabaté's romantic vision. However, anyone in Mali should have understood, merely from looking at Diabaté's pictures, their political import. Thus her series operates in a traditional Malian fashion, where the visual relies on a fuller knowledge held by the viewer.⁵¹⁶

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 137.

⁵¹⁶ In general, Malian photographers seemed to shy away from politics, violence and disease as topics for their work, with the notable exception of the socially-minded Amadou Baba Cissé and Yacouba Dembélé.

Diabaté reported a positive experience from the workshop in Bordeaux, and explained how winning the AFAA prize had changed her life.⁵¹⁷ While Diabaté's mother had always supported her unconventional choice to pursue photography, her father had not understood her passion or professional goals; that is, until Diabaté won the prize. Winning the prize showed him that her work was taken seriously by others, which changed his own attitude, and now he is also supportive of her career.⁵¹⁸

While familial relationships are obviously important to photographers, the social relationships between the *Promo Femme* graduates whom I have discussed also have created an atmosphere of mutual support. The women often work together on collaborative projects and maintain ties with *Promo Femme*'s founder Bagayoko to further their professional capacities. Thus social capital, which is important in most Malian endeavors, seems to be especially important for, and well-utilized, by women photographers, to support their forays into the masculine-dominated world of photography. *Promo Femme* has contributed to the careers of its graduates not only through the photographic education it offers, but also by creating an informal network among its students. Recently, five *Promo Femme* students (including Traoré, Diabaté, Oussa Sangare, and Kadiatou Sangare) participated in *Cinéma Numérique Ambulant*, a French-run traveling project of digital street scenes taken during the day, and projected at night on walls of the same neighborhood where they were taken.⁵¹⁹ *CNA*, as the initiative is called, was included among the 'off' projects during the 2005 Biennale.⁵²⁰ This project

⁵¹⁷ A number of prizes are awarded at the Biennale, and this one was specifically awarded by *Association Française action artistique* (now CULTURESFRANCE), which funds and runs the Biennale.

⁵¹⁸ Diabaté, interview, 27 July 2006.

⁵¹⁹ Fatoumata Diabaté, Oussa Pangassy Sangare, Kadiatou Sangare, Alimata Traoré, and Awa Fofana participated.

⁵²⁰ The initiative was coordinated between CNA and the French photographers' collective *Tendance Floue*.

is particularly interesting for its attempt to incorporate the general public into the Biennale event, and for bringing photography “to the street,” as it were.

Diabaté’s experience winning the AFAA prize suggests that the future looks bright for the upcoming generation of female photographers (the oldest whom I included here is only thirty). The art photography movement’s hybrid, postcolonial status as a liminal space operating between traditional photography and a globalizing Westernism has afforded women increased opportunities in photography, for it is often Western institutions, or French-trained prominent male photographers, who have supported these young women and helped make possible their careers. However, Bagayoko’s influence as the founder of *Promo Femme* is the basis of the opening up of opportunities, which are furthered by the cooperation and support the school’s graduates provide each other. The personal qualities of resourcefulness, strength and determination to succeed of these women, along with familial support as they break into a traditionally male profession, should also be emphasized. Photography’s qualities as a medium – its versatility in various capacities, from illustrating language texts, to recording weddings, to contributing to the newspaper and to becoming an art - also contribute to its becoming an important professional opportunity for women. While women in Mali may have received limited international recognition as of yet, this situation is bound to change, provided the Biennale continues to function and promote African photographers.

While the emergence of women into the Bamakois photographic community is unprecedented and exciting, there does not seem to be a ‘feminine’ aesthetic in the pictures that I saw, and the photographs by women do not seem to share any particular traits in common. The one commonality that I noticed was that women are pushed,

usually by their school's agendas, but also sometimes by their professions, and sometimes also by personal interest, to focus especially on women and children as subjects. However, this is a common topic for male photographers as well, and seems to stem from the cultural circumstances that made women the primary clients of studio photographers; i.e., the gender divisions in Malian society that emphasize women's roles as child-bearers above all (which leads them to take pride in their beauty as representative of their fertility). However, when schools like *Promo Femme* and the CFP encourage female photographers to take women as subjects, usually those have been in areas of women who work. Again, this is not new in Malian society – women work very hard in rural Mali, as well as in Bamako – but the emphasis has no doubt reinforced the photographers' own awareness as cultural workers, and the value placed upon their activity is enhanced.

Conclusion

This dissertation highlights what I believe are some of the most salient facets of the art photography movement now occurring in Bamako as a result of the inauguration of the Biennale. The blossoming of Euro-Malian photographic institutions in Bamako, Keïta's and Sidibé's projects realized after their portraits became internationally famous, Sogodogo's and Tienro's adaptations of the portrait photography genre to emphasize cultural and historical preservation in a museological manner, Camara's pensive and playful gambits, Western interventions on behalf of youth through the medium photography, and the professionalization of female photographers - all illustrate key tensions pervasive in contemporary Malian society at large. All of these projects embody cultural hybridity, meaning that all of these facets constitute various configurations of a fusion between Western and Malian values, forms and meanings. Sometimes this fusion enables Malians to exert agency on their circumstances, and contributes to the creation of new cultural forms. In some cases, the fusion mostly reiterates hegemonic influences. Such projects can be seen as culminations of postcolonial affects in concrete form, embodying the ambivalences that permeate modern Malian life.

Photography in Mali has always embodied dialectical tensions. The medium was invented in France and England, and introduced to the Sudan by the French military and missionaries as a blatant tool of subjugation, and as an aid to colonization and religious conversion. When Malian studio photographers took up the medium in the 1930s, they instead emphasized the social and performative aspects of photography. The performance of posing for a studio photograph, and the subsequent print's circulation among family

and friends, which contributes to the creation of social capital, shows that studio photography is embedded in social processes, mediating between traditional, oral modes of thought and the Western emphasis on visual representation introduced by French colonial rule.

The shift to art photography out of social, or studio, photography, means that Western idioms are more present than ever, such that the photographic projects examined here embody the tensions between Western and Malian worldviews. The art photographers whom I discuss operate within a highly postcolonial situation, as educated elites who embrace a Western understanding of art, but who also perceive of themselves as culturally ‘Malian.’ Their circumstances and projects – the *processes* in which they participate and that they create – have origins arising from various histories – that of photography in Mali, of colonialism, of tourist art, of ‘traditional art,’ of modern art, of pre-colonial Mali – which have coalesced in the new institution of the Bamako Biennale. Through careful examination of the specific forms, processes, and circumstances of various photographic projects, I show how postcolonial tensions are manifested in art photography in complex and specific ways.

The professionalization of female photographers is the most dramatic change that the coming of the Biennale and the art photography movement has created. The efforts of Aminata Bagayoko and her students to change the gender demographic in photography has had important ramifications for the Bamakois community, even as it reflects the upheavals that democracy has created in society. These women photographers are living the effects of what I, and they, view as positive changes in society, and are furthering those changes with their choices and determination. In this case, postcolonial effects are

beneficial to these photographers, as their pride and enjoyment in their professions makes clear. To follow these women's careers as they mature, and to see what *Promo Femme's* long-term effects are on the Bamakois photographic community, would be an important area of research to pursue.

It would also be interesting to discover if some kind of resolution can eventually be worked out between the Biennale and its Malian hosts; but this will most likely rest on the Malian government's ability to fund the festival. Although culture is indeed important in Mali, it is hard to imagine that money would be spent on the Biennale when it could better go toward serving seriously deprived communities.

Another critical aspect for further research will be to see if Bamako's small community of art photographers can find a way to connect their work to their local audience. Youssouf Sogodogo's and Joseye Tienro's projects, as well as the "People of Bamako" exhibit at the Biennale, are steps toward crossing the divide between a local audience and the globalizing forces that animate contemporary art photography in Mali today.

As I mentioned in my introduction, studies of the development of specific genres of contemporary art in African contexts are rare. This study hopes to open up further areas for research in Bamako's contemporary photography movement, and to also provide the beginning developments of a model for how an art history can be written that is sensitive to the complexities of the postcolonial situation, in all of its ambivalent and dynamic forces.

Appendix: List of interviews

Interviews conducted in Bamako, Mali:

All interviews were digitally recorded except for those marked with an asterisk.*

NAME	DATE	LOCATION
Alioune Bâ	11.19.05	Association Seydou Keïta
	6.13.06	Association Seydou Keïta
	7.15.06	Association Seydou Keïta
	7.13.06	National Museum
	7.19.06	National Museum
Abdoulaye Baby	6.17.06	his studio
Aminata Dembélé Bagayoko	7.25.06	Promo Femme
Massa Camara	7.24.06	ILAB
Amadou Baba Cissé	6.12.06	his studio
	6.15.06	his studio
Django Cissé	6.15.06	his home
Alexi Coulibali	7.26.06	Jamana
Emmanuel Daou	6.12.06	Studio Photo Nature
	7.6.06	Studio Photo Nature
Siriman Dembélé	7.4.06	his home
	7.20.06	his home
Yacouba Dembélé	7.1.06	outside the Palais de Congres,
	7.9.06	his studio
Fatoumata Diabaté,	7.27.06	CFP
	Penda Diakité	7.8.06
		7.12.06
H. Matene Y. Diallo	6.8.06	Dial-Style Studio
Aboubacrine Diarra	6.19.06	National Museum
Harandine Dicko	6.17.06	CFP
Alimata dite Diop Traoré	7.21.06	AMAP
	Hama Goro	7.12.06
		7.25.06
Mamadou Papa Kante & Abdoulaye Kante	7.1.06	their home and studio
	Amadou Keïta	7.20.06
		7.21.06
Racine Keïta	6.19.06	his studio
Abdoulaye Konaté	7.17.06	Conservatoire Balla Fasséké
Mamadou Konaté	6.9.06	Studio Kela Phox
	6.21.06	Studio Kela Phox
Moussa Konaté	11.21.05*	House of African Photography
	7.14.06	House of African Photography

	7.20.06	House of African Photography
Garba Maïga	11.20.05*	CFP
Hamidou Maïga	7.12.06	Studio Sankore
	7.17.06	Studio Sankore
Souleymane Ouologuem	7.27.06	Institut National des Arts
Kadiatou Sangare	7.24.06	ILAB
Ouassa Pangassy Sangare	11.19.05	Association Seydou Keïta
	6.20.06	her home
Raoul Abdoulaye Senogo	6.16.06	his studio
Malick Sidibé	11.22.05*	his studio
	6.20.06	his studio
Samuel Sidibé	11.18.05	National Museum
	6.14.06	National Museum
Sidiki Sidibé	6.16.06	his home
Alou Sissoko	7.19.06	AMAP
Mamadou Sissoko	11.20.05*	CFP
Youssouf Sogodogo	11.20.05*	CFP
	7.8.06	CFP
	7.15.06	CFP
Svend Erik Sokkelund	11.20.05*	Association Seydou Keïta
Momadou Soumare	11.20.05*	Association Seydou Keïta
Amadou Sow	6.13.06	House of African Photography
	7.5.06	House of African Photography
Jude Thera	7.28.06	Association Vigne
Joseye Thienro	7.1.06	National Museum
	7.13.06	National Museum
Amadou Chab Touré	11.19.05	Galerie Chab
	7.12.06	Galerie Chab
Amadou Traoré	7.22.06	his home and studio
Youssouf Traoré	7.4.06	Institut National des Arts
	7.11.06	Institut National des Arts
Interviews conducted in Dakar, Senegal:		
Youma Fall	6.5.06	Dak'Art, Senegalese exhibition
Fatou Kandé Senghor	7.30.06*	her studio
Interview conducted over email:		
Shawn Davis	4.15.06	internet

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