



## ***I ka nyè tan: you look beautiful like that.***

***“Seydou Keïta: Mid-Century Modern” at the Wedge Gallery***

***By Ruth Kerkham***

In the mid-twentieth century an urban buzz rang through the streets of Bamako, the capital of Mali which had been colonized by France in the late Nineteenth Century. After the Second World War there was an explosion of industrial growth in this West African city that ran along both sides of the Niger River - the lifeblood of a largely arid region. Railway tracks built in the 1920s linked Bamako to Dakar, the capital of Senegal, opening up a landlocked Mali (then called French Sudan) to an Atlantic seaport, and in turn connecting West Africa to Paris and the rest of the world. As a booming trade centre post-war Bamako became the envy of many other West African cities. The Bamakois could not only boast of their pivotal train station, but also of the famous Marché Rose, the Soudan Ciné, a zoo, a post-office, a prison and a hospital (now the *Institut National des Arts*). With a cosmopolitan flair, Bamako inherited a modernism that it would soon share with much of West Africa. At the core of constructing this contemporaneity was Bamakois photographer, Seydou Keïta, a confidant image-maker and a mid-century modern.

By inheriting modernism from its parental France, Mali did not obsequiously succumb to a European modernism, but creatively engendered a *mélange* of modes that made up its own sense of Africanicity. The over-simplistic dichotomy of colonizer/colonized heavy-handedly differentiates between the victimizer and the victimized and does not take into the account the subversive extricating acts that the “colonized” often carry out. While the city of Bamako is indeed deeply influenced by the culture and fashion of France, as Keïta’s portraits show, the Bamakois and other urban Africans who travelled through Mali, consciously projected a sense of self that manifested their own interpretation of progress and prosperity with the epitome of poise.

The significance of these photographs, taken predominantly between 1949 and 1964, is that they cleanly cut through Western stereotypes that portray Africa almost exclusively as a war-torn continent riddled with disease and poverty. Instead, Keïta’s images, unadulterated by the Western lens, portray a vibrant society spirited with urban funk and with the resolve that brought about independence in 1960. It is important to realize that Keïta never photographed his subjects with an audience in mind (certainly not a North American one), nor did he seek subjects that might have gratified a pre-established agenda. He simply photographed whoever passed though

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his commercial studio, which, strategically located near the hub of the station, attracted numerous traders, industrialists and entrepreneurs.

Although ingenuous in their making, the interpretation of these images is not altogether uncomplicated, especially in the light of Africa's relationship to France. The deliberate self-projection as a cosmopolitan, à la mode society was registered in the use of props and attire. Those who sat before Keïta's lens would often bring with them their prized possessions that not only displayed their wealth, but evinced an impeccable modernness. For example, if you owned a bicycle, an infrequent circumstance in 1950s Mali, you would not think of being photographed without illustriously clutching it to your side. Other faddish indicators included radios, record players, sewing machines, wristwatches, alarm clocks, telephones, fountain pens, plastic flowers and, of course, an abundance of jewellery. At this time men had started to wear European clothes such as trousers and jackets, especially those who worked in downtown businesses, although they usually reverted to a loose fitting *boubou* in the relaxation of their homes, partly due to the heat. Women, however, only began dabbling in European dress in the 1960s. As such Keïta's portraits capture an unique era of symbiotic change and eclecticism that render his images as utter visual splendour.

Richly printed fabrics clash and coalesce as in one of Keïta's most famous images of a reclining woman where elegant arabesques, a delicate floral, bold checkers and polka dots squeeze into the tight frame with remarkable clarity. The ease with which these seemingly colliding patterns coexist is symbolic of the cultural conglomeration that paradoxically compels a sense of repose. While the woman's Africanicity is literally branded onto her forehead in the form of tribal scarring, the tilt of her headdress, coiffured "à la de Gaulle" after the way General Charles de Gaulle tilted his kepi, pays allegiance, if inadvertently to France. Lounging comfortably in her *boubou* she seems untroubled by the projection of her image, yet she suavely cloaks her very conscious effort to expose her wristwatch as signifier of her modernness. (This becomes more evident in viewing a larger body of photographs where wristwatches routinely sneak out of both traditional and European clothes).

In other images young men slickly hang around like tough-guy hipsters, eager to emulate Eddy Constantine, James Bond, James Brown or whoever their heros might be, and beautiful young women pose on a Vespa with uncannily contemporary vogue. Such youthful desire to shape one's image after those that we deem more glamorous or celebrated than ourselves pays little attention to the distinction between colonizer and colonized, and is as much a part of Parisian life as Bamakois life. However, in a few of Keïta's photographs the knowledge of France's dominant position over Mali at the time, lends itself to disquietude, such as in the image of two toddlers dressed in European outfits and blond pom-pom hats or wigs. This work seems to foreshadow Yinka Shonibare's performative photographs where he dresses up in the extravagant

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costumes and golden locks of wealthy British Lords, staging a tight-rope stunt between Nigeria and Britain. However, while Shonibare's work drips with irony and wit, it is precisely the lack thereof that makes Keïta's photograph disturbing.

Despite such occasional moments, the overall feel of these remarkable black and white photographs is that they portray proud, dignified and beautiful Africans. We can look at this body of work and declare with gusto the Bamakois saying, "*i ka nyè tan*".

**"Seydou Keïta: Mid-Century Modern" is curated by Robert Osbourne and Kenneth Montague at the Wedge Gallery, forming part of the Contact 2000 photography festival. Ten photographs are exhibited, each personally signed by Seydou Keïta. The exhibition runs from May 7 - May 31, 2000.**

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