

# Seydou Keita

From 1948 until 1962, Seydou Keita was the most successful commercial portraitist in Bamako, the thriving capital city of the French Sudan (now Mali). An important French colonial center, Bamako was both a major trading station and transportation hub. Its role as a commercial crossroads brought a variety of international influences to the city, and the Bamakois experienced what could be described as the birth of modernity in West Africa.

Having a portrait taken by Keita in Bamako at this time signified one's cosmopolitanism. It was fashionable for Bamakois men to dress like Europeans: if they did not own a European-style suit, Keita would lend them one. Women's fashion was still predominantly African in style, but Keita emphasized what were considered attributes of elegance and beauty, such as jewelry and long, thin, fingers. Keita gained a reputation of being able to make any woman look beautiful. Keita's studio was in close proximity to the popular Soudain Ciné, one of the first movie theaters in the region, and often the macho male stances and amatory female poses seem as if they could be straight out of a B-movie still. Outside his well-located studio, directly in the town center near the train station and the zoo, there could often be found long lines of customers ranging from shopkeepers to office clerks to the President of the Republic. In the interest of time, Keita took only one negative per customer, never more, and claims that he was "never mistaking." He would print during the night and spot in the morning just before the clients came to pick up their portraits.



Africa

Committed to studio photography, Keita repeatedly used the same settings, props, and poses for his sitters. Although he made available to his sitters a variety of props - plastic flowers, glasses, fountain pens, clothing - his backdrops were always fixed. He changed them only every two or three years, a practice that later helped him to date the photos. He has said that if his patterned backdrops enhanced a woman's dress, it was sheer luck.

Due to his immense popularity and widespread reputation, in 1962 Keita was named official Malian photographer, a position he held until 1977. During this time he recorded all the important official events of the newly independent country of Mali. These photographs are the property of the government and inaccessible to the public.



Mali

In 1991 André Magnin, curator of the Pigozzi Contemporary African Art Collection, Geneva, visited an exhibition of traditional and contemporary art at the Center for African Art in New York, where he discovered three exceptional portraits by an unidentified photographer from Bamako. Inspired enough by the images to travel to Mali to find the photographer, Magnin initially sought the help of Malick Sidibé, another well-known Malian photographer, who immediately identified the work as belonging to Keita. Magnin's first meeting with Keita marked the beginning of an ongoing collaboration to promote Keita's work. Since 1993 exhibitions of his photographs have been staged throughout the world.

Keita stopped photographing when, as he describes it, "color photography took over," explaining that "people like it now but machines are doing the

work. Many people call themselves photographers nowadays, but they don't know anything."<sup>2</sup> In an interview in 1995/96, he said, "What I would really like to do now is take pictures of the rural people during harvest-time and the ritual ceremonies that go on around them. That's when the true essence of Mali comes out."<sup>3</sup> Now retired, Keita spends most of his time going to the mosque, looking after the homes he has built, and working as a mechanic.

---

<sup>1</sup> From an interview with Seydou Keita,  
<http://www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/keita/default.html>

<sup>2</sup> Seydou Keita, in an interview with André Magnin, in Seydou Keita, ed. André Magnin, Scalo Zurich-Berlin-New York (1997), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 14.