

A story. Conversation with Malick Sidibé

by Laura Incardona

“I have always had a talent for observation. I like to watch people, trying to understand them, to make a contact with them. In Africa the respect which is due to your elders is very important, it is part of our tradition and a strong value still. I have always been treated with respect because, even at the start of my career as a photographer, I was older than the young men and women I used to portray at the parties, but I never wanted to be treated with deference: it would have made people feel uneasy and my photos would have suffered from it, the spontaneity I was looking for would not be there. I have always loved to be in the company of young people: new energy, and changes that move the world come from them. I don't believe that looking back at the past too much has any meaning: what counts is knowing where you come from, but also being able to move forward, to make progress is likewise important. Ant this power is in the hands of younger generations.

Starting from late fifties, when I began to work, everyone knows me in Bamako, and even now children in the street call me «Malick, Malick!». That pleases me, I would not want them to feel in awe of me. I am well known throughout the Country, people keep coming into my studio shop from far away, even from abroad, and not only Europe or the United States, to be photographed by me. All this is part of a mysterious plan. I grew in Soloba, a village around 300 kilometres from Bamako, the capital of Mali, in the 1930's. My father had decided that I was to be the educated son. So, he sent me first to Yanfolila, the school of the Pères Blancs, and later to Bougouni, 160 kilometres from Bamako. We travelled to school on foot, stopping several times to sleep at relatives' houses; we used to come back home only on holidays, it was like an adventure. I was very gifted in drawing and one day the school principal assigned me the task of making three paintings to offer to the Governor of the Sudan Territory (that was how Mali was called before gaining independence from France), who was coming for a visit. Thanks to his help I was enrolled at the Ecole nationale des Arts in Bamako, in 1952. Three years later I graduated in jewellery-making: I was the best student, but I was not satisfied, traditionally my people - the Peuls - are not craftsmen but herders. When I was called again by the school to decorate the studio shop of Gérard Guillat-Guignard, a French photographer, I accepted out of curiosity. When I finished my work he asked me to stay as his apprentice; I answered that I would stay for one year, after which I would decide what to do. I started as a cashier and shortly after that I became his assistant. I liked photography, it was a much faster and easier way to portray people than drawing. In 1956 I bought my first camera, a Brownie Flash with which I started taking my first photos and photo-reportages; Guillat-Guignard used to pay me with a share of the takings. In the late fifties, when he left the shop, he asked me to take it over, but at the time I was not ready for it. Finally in 1962 I opened the Studio Malick, in the popular neighbourhood of Bagadadji: I became the photographer of Bamako's young people. Riding my bicycle I could cover up to five events a night, and there were also ceremonies, christenings, and weddings...

In the middle of the night I would go to the studio where I developed the films, made proof sheets and, after having slept just a few hours, waited for the clients who came to pick their portraits, which I would then print and deliver. The sixties and seventies

were very happy, but also hard-working years, I used to spend months away from home, from my family. At the time having fun was easy: with little money in your pocket you could spend the weekend in the clubs, treat your friends with drinks and the girl you liked with a roast chicken. Organising a surprise party cost even less, you started on Friday for the preparations, as on Saturday afternoon all the girls came home from their colleges and everything had to be ready.

Everyone wanted to dance, to be beautiful. The true revolution in Mali had not been political: Western music had brought it about. Before you could not dance up close. With the rhythms coming from Cuba, the songs of the Beatles or James Brown boys and girls could touch, or embrace, each others. Their elders, their parents did not approve, but could not oppose the change coming with the tunes from the record player. Clubs would appear in every neighbourhood in Bamako with their captivating names: Les Chats Sauvages, Les Aristos, Les Beatles. Young men would rent records, buy food and drinks and the party would start. You enticed girls from other clubs with the best songs, the best food. Western fashion was also very popular: we knew what was happening in Europe and in the United States through cinema. In town there were excellent tailors and having them sew a balloon skirt similar to the ones created by the great French couturiers or bell-bottom pants cost very little. Often friends of the same clubs had the same outfits made by tailors with identical fabrics. This is a tradition that has remained alive for important events. During the hot season, parties were held on the banks of the Niger river: a few kilometres from the city there are nice beaches, where young people used to spend the day. There also, I took many photographs. In my files, in the boxes where I neatly store negatives according to the year and event, there is the history of Mali. And I remember all the names, all the kinships of the people I have photographed. Recently a young boy came to the Studio and after looking at him I said: «You are the son of so and so...». He was amazed, almost scared, because he did not know me, but I searched in one of my boxes and I showed him his father's portrait as a young man. I can hardly forget a face, I recognise similarities surfacing in the next generations.

I am a true witness of the changes in my Country. Because photography does not tell lies, at least black and white photography, which I have always done. This is why I strongly believe that my photography is much more truthful, real and direct than any word. It is simple, anyone can understand it, and it tells an epoch, without deception. Mine has never been an academic photography; when I was young we did not have access to photographic books and magazines like you do today, we did not know the work of other photographers. My studies of art, painting and drawing did certainly help me in the composition of images, in the sitting of people who come in my studio to be photographed.

Humanity has always searched for immortality in painting or poetry, in writing, but in the past only kings and the wealthy could have their portrait made. My father never saw his image, apart from the one reflected in a mirror or on water. Photography is a way to live longer, even after your death. I believe in the power of image and this is why I lived all my life making portraits of people in the best possible way, trying to give back to them as much beauty as I could. This is why I always try to make people I photograph feel at ease, because life is a gift from God, and should be better lived with a smile on your face. Too often is Africa's image linked to pain, poverty, misery. Denying this reality would be foolish, but Africa is not only that, and this is what I have

always wanted to depict in my images. Here we say that you are truly poor if you do not have anything to eat, but I have also seen many people with beautiful houses lead desperate lives.

In recent years I have been travelling around the world, bringing my photographs from Africa to Europe, Asia and the United States. I am very happy and proud of these recognitions and I thank God for it, I am just a tiny speck in His wondrous plan. I like seeing new towns, so beautiful and different from mine. But I could never leave Bamako, its red earth streets, the wealth of Africa. I love meeting young people, speaking with them about my experience and listening to their questions. I have said it at the awarding ceremony at the Venice art Biennale in 2007: I am just a small African man who has narrated his Country, always amazed by the tribute the world has been paying me. Today there are people who call me an artist. I still prefer to be called a photographer."