

The Telegraph

Malick Sidibé, photographer – obituary



Malick Sidibé in 2007 Credit: Courtesy Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris

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Malick Sidibé, who has died aged 80, was the first African photographer to gain international acclaim; with his celebratory images of Mali's youth in the mid-20th century he captured a wave of positivity as their country shifted from French colonial rule to independence.

Before Sidibé the photography of West Africa had largely been limited to topographical works and photojournalism focused on conflict, famine and disease.

Sidibé redressed the balance. "For me, photography is all about youth," he told The Daily Telegraph in 2008. "It's about a happy world full of joy, not some kid crying on a street corner or a sick person." From the 1950s to the 1970s, he documented a lively period of change in Mali's capital Bamako. In his disarming studio portraits, traditional dress gave way to zoot suits, flares and porkpie hats, while in the discos and on the streets he snapped revellers twisting and jiving and teenagers showing off their mopeds or football skills.



Nuit de Noël (Happy Club), 1963, by Malick Sidibé Credit: Courtesy Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris

His pictures revealed Mali as a third-world country that rather than being shackled by poverty was unconstrained by excess consumerism. “In the West people have to have all this stuff to be happy, but we don’t have this system,” he said. “But physical poverty doesn’t mean moral poverty. In Africa we have moral riches and happiness in our hearts.”

Malick Sidibé was born in either 1935 or 1936 (he was not sure of the date) in the village of Soloba in what was then French Sudan (now southern Mali) near its border with Guinea. His family were peasant farmers. As a child Malick worked herding animals before becoming the first member of his family to attend a white school. “We knew nothing of the outside world,” he recalled. “We were enclosed in a capsule.”

At school he discovered that he had a talent for drawing (using coal rather than chalk). He won a book on the paintings of Delacroix and his female classmates asked him to illustrate their handkerchiefs. In 1952 he moved to Bamako to study at the École des Artisans Soudanais and soon became interested in photography.

Buying his first Kodak Brownie camera, he worked as an assistant to Gérard Guillet, a society photographer who covered the city’s colonial events. Guillet would photograph European gatherings and Sidibé attended African ceremonies such as christenings or weddings.



Moi Seul, 1974 Credit: Courtesy Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris

In 1962 Sidibé opened Studio Malick, where he cultivated a festive atmosphere, bringing informality and a sense of fun to his portraiture, which often included his subjects' prized possessions: guitars, cassette players, shotguns and cattle.

Meanwhile, he became a lively fixture in Bamako's nightlife, shooting roll after roll of film into the early hours. "We were entering a new era, and people wanted to dance," he remembered. "Music freed us. Suddenly, young men could get close to young women, hold them in their hands. Before, it was not allowed. And everyone wanted to be photographed dancing up close." His studio remained popular throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

By the late 1980s, however, fashions had moved on, and he was working as a camera repair man. During the following decade the French photographer Françoise Huguier and the curator André Magnin salvaged his reputation, staging an exhibition in Paris at which his work was celebrated as a time capsule. International art publishers, such as Steidl, then produced books of his photographs.

Sidibé worked with black and white film throughout his career. "I can do my own developing and printing. A good photographer should always do that," he said. In the early 2000s his *Vue de Dos* series of back views of women wrapped in striped and chequered robes used his monochrome approach to striking effect.



Sidibé in 2006 Credit: AFP

Sidibé exhibited widely from the early 1990s until the end of his life, with retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Barbican in London. His many awards include the Hasselblad (2003) and the World Press Photo awards (2010) and in 2007 he became the first African to be presented with the Venice Biennale's lifetime achievement award.

“To be a good photographer you need to have a talent to observe and to know what you want,” Sidibé said in 2010. “Equally, you need to be friendly, sympathique. It's very important to be able to put people at their ease. It's a world, someone's face.”

He is survived by three wives and 17 children.

Malick Sidibé, born 1935 or 1936, died April 14 2016

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2016/04/28/malick-sidib-photographer--obituary/>