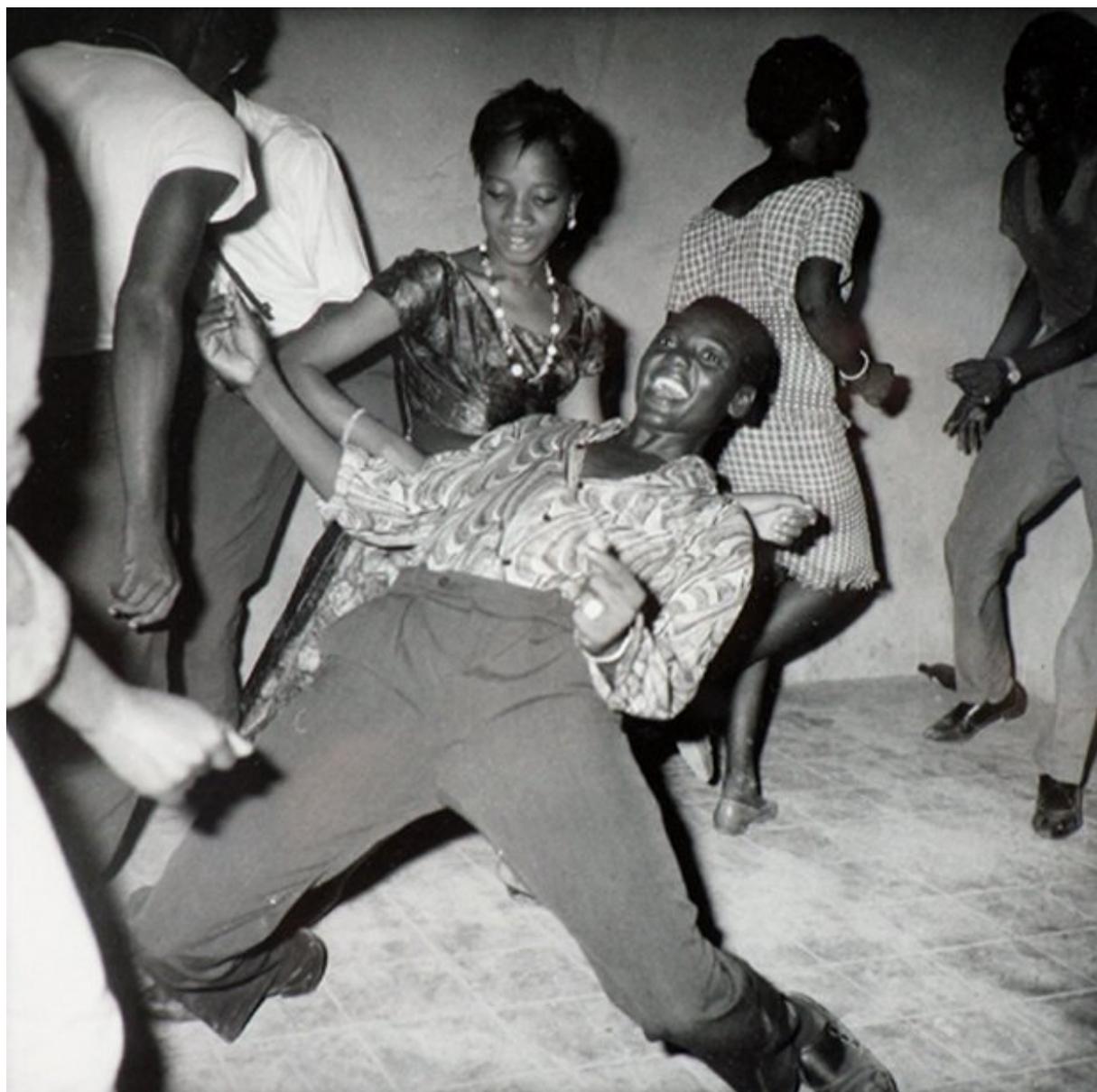


Malick Sidibé obituary

Photographer whose portraits captured the energy of post-independence Mali

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Regardez-moi (1962) by Malick Sidibé, who had a gift for immersing himself in the action while remaining an almost invisible presence. Photograph: Malick Sidibé/Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Malick Sidibé, a photographer who came to be known as “the eye of Bamako”, has died, aged 80, in the Malian city whose people and culture he captured so vibrantly in his black and white images. “It was like a place of make-believe,” he said of the atmosphere in Studio Malick, which he opened in Bamako in 1958. “People would pretend to be riding motorbikes, racing against each other. It was not like that at the other studios.”

Though blind in one eye from a childhood accident, Sidibé began working as a roving photographer in 1958 and, in the early 1960s, documented the nascent youth culture in Bamako in the wake of Mali’s independence in 1960. His vast and methodically organised archive was “rediscovered” by western curators and art dealers in the early 1990s and he was belatedly canonised as an art photographer. His work has since been exhibited throughout Europe and America and, in 2007, he became the first photographer – and the first African artist – to receive a Golden Lion award for lifetime achievement at the Venice Biennale.



Malick Sidibé in 2006. Photograph: Andre Durand/AFP/Getty Images

Sidibé was born in the village of Soloba, in what was then French Sudan, probably in 1935, although the exact date is unknown. As a young boy, he worked the land and herded animals until he was chosen by the village chief to be the recipient of a scholarship given by a white school in Yanfolila. There, his skill at drawing led to him being selected for the School of Sudanese Craftsmen (now the Institut National des Arts) in Bamako. When the French

photographer Gérard Guillat approached the school to find a pupil who could decorate his studio, Sidibé was chosen.

In 1956, having become Guillat's studio assistant, Sidibé purchased his first camera, a Brownie Flash. "He didn't teach me how to take photographs," he said years later of his unorthodox apprenticeship, "but I watched him and I understood how to take photographs. I did the African events, the photos of Africans, and he did the European events – the major balls, official events."

In 1958, Sidibé opened his own studio in the Bagadadji quarter of the city, one of the few areas there to have electricity. By the early 1960s, as [Mali](#) emerged from French colonial rule, Sidibé had established himself as the country's only travelling documentary photographer. By bicycle, he went to graduation celebrations, dances, beach parties and the capital's many nightclubs to shoot Bamako's often stylishly dressed youths at play. He frequently worked through the night printing the photographs so that a selection would be hanging on the walls for perusal when his subjects arrived a day later to choose their favourite.

Some of his best known images were taken in this period, including [Nuit de Noël, Happy Club](#), 1963, in which a young smartly dressed couple dance barefoot with their heads touching at an outdoor party. Though it was taken during a curfew in Bamako, it captures both the energy and the confidence of the time as well as a moment of intimacy that seems almost choreographed in its composition.

That energy was often reflected in his titles: *Dansez le Twist* (1965) captures a group of young people gyrating wildly to the latest western dance craze at a house party, while [Regardez-moi](#) (1962) centres on a young man showing off his dance moves to his fellow revellers. Both were shot as if from the midst of the action and, in their joyousness and spontaneity, suggest the newfound confidence of the young in a country shaking off the restrictions of colonialism and also Sidibé's gift for immersing himself in the action while remaining an almost invisible presence.



Malick Sidibé's studio in Bamako, Mali. Photograph: Joe Penney/Reuters

Music, in the form of imported pop, soul and rock'n'roll, was central to this new mood of self-expression among young Malians. "Music was the real revolution," he once noted, and his photographs often carry the pulse of their unheard soundtrack. "We were entering a new era, and people wanted to dance," Sidibé recalled later. "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."

In the 1970s, Sidibé turned away from observational documentary to embrace studio photography, which was an established tradition in Africa, not least in Mali, where the older [Seydou Keita](#) was considered a master for his formally beautiful large-format portraits. Sidibé reinvigorated the genre by encouraging his subjects to be more animated and to bring their own props, whether a beloved record by James Brown or a newly bought motorbike. Others brought their donkeys or goats.



Deux amies Peulhs. Photograph: Malick Sidibé/Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

His small studio, just three metres by four, was draped in fabrics and, alongside his equipment, contained two large boxes, one filled with hats, the other with ties, in case his sitters needed their outfits accessorised. It became a mecca for youths wanting to pose in their brightly coloured shirts and western-style flared trousers, as well as families who wanted to mark a family event such as a christening or a wedding.

“I did a lot of the positioning,” Sidibé said later of his looser, more playful approach to portraiture. “As I have a background in drawing, I was able to set up certain positions in my portraits. I didn’t want my subjects to look like mummies. I would give them positions that brought something alive in them.”

In the early 1990s, when Malian musicians such as [Salif Keita](#) and [Ali Farka Touré](#) were also attracting a wider audience in Europe and America, both Sidibé and Keita’s photographs caught the attention of the western art market and he sold most of his vast archive of negatives. His second career as an art photographer began. The small photographs that had once appeared in living rooms across Bamako, sometimes displayed in hand-painted frames

created by his neighbour, Checkna Touré, were now printed big and in high contrast black and white for exhibition in galleries and at festivals and art fairs around the globe.

In 1997, the pop singer Janet Jackson won a Grammy award for her video [Got Til It's Gone](#), which drew heavily on the style and energy of Sidibé's photographs from the early 1960s. All this raised inevitable questions about cultural appropriation, but the cheerful Sidibé seemed to thrive on his newfound fame and belated recognition.

Sidibé won the Hasselblad award for photography in 2003 and the Infinity award for lifetime achievement at the International Center of Photography in New York in 2008. His work is held in many collections including those of the Museum of Modern Art [in New York](#) and [San Francisco](#), the [Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York](#) and the [J Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles](#). When Sidibé was awarded the Golden Lion at Venice in 2007, the art academic and former MoMA curator Robert Storr said: "No African artist has done more to enhance photography's stature in the region, contribute to its history, enrich its image archive or increase our awareness of the textures and transformations of African culture in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st than Malick Sidibé."

He is survived by three wives and 17 children.

- Malick Sidibé, photographer, born c1935; died 14 April 2016

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