SORY SANLÉ
VOLTA PHOTO 1965-85

Belle de Jour, 1975

Morton Hill

www.morton-hill.com info@morton-hill.com

"Mr. Sanlé's work documenting the cultural scene is reminiscent of that by Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita.... and now it is his turn to be lionized." The New York Times

Belle de Jour, 1975

This young lady was also from the Farkan neighbourhood. She must haven been around 16 years old. I can't tell as I never asked people for their IDs. I can't remember her name but she was very beautiful, most certainly from the Dafin tribe. Headscarves were really trendy at that time. She must have come from a well-off family as these items could be quite costly!

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Gare à Vous!, 1978

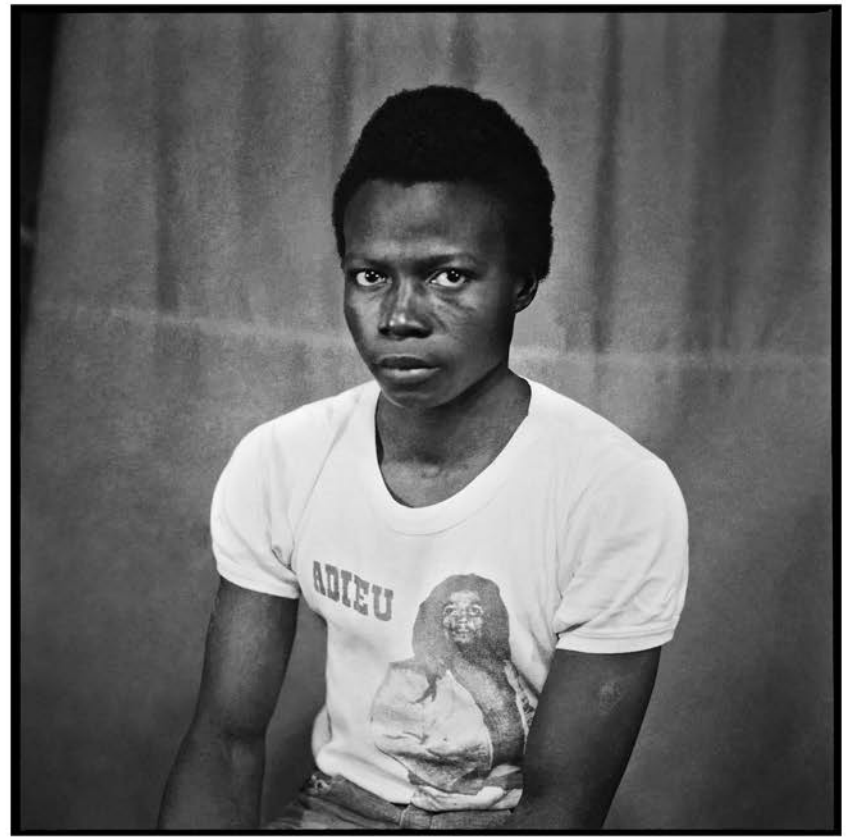
Another fidgety Fula guy. He just had fun climbing on his motorbike. He wanted to show off to everyone that it was his own bike. He could enjoy himself tremendously, just having a look at that picture.

Le Vendeur Sénégalais qui Fume, 1972

This was taken in my Diaradougou studio. That guy was a nomadic street seller from Senegal if I remember correctly. He was selling all kinds of glasses and playing the lottery as the ticket from his jacket shows. Like many other Senegalese from Bobo, he must have taken the train from Dakar to Bamako and from there down to Bobo- Dioulasso, crossing through Bougouni and Sikasso in Mali.

Je Suis dans le Coup, 1980

These are two young Fula people from the Farkan area. These T-shirt pictures were mostly used for ID purposes. The *Adieu Bob Marley* top is from 1981 as a tribute to the recently deceased reggae artist. The *I'm In* T-shirt is probably from around that time too.



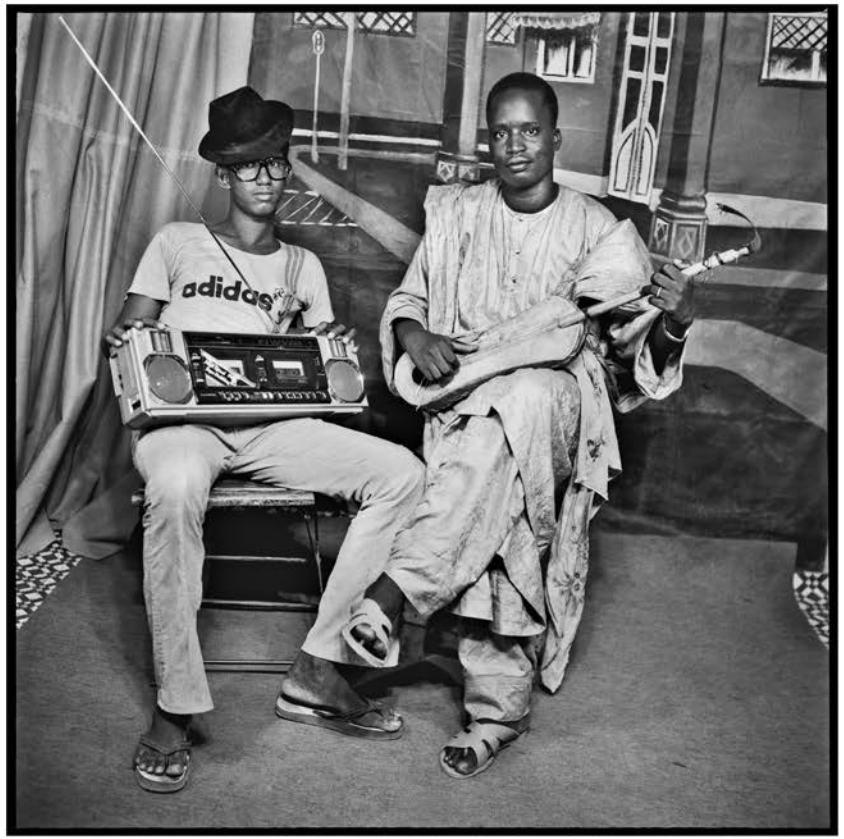
Adieu Bob Marley, 1981

Le Plus Boy, 1972

Here's another young Malian guy. A Malian guy cannot wear a suit without having his picture taken. You had to immortalize him. Men and women alike. They all brought suits and loin clothes. It was like a theatre play, with several pictures taken for every garment they brought. It was taken in my Diaradougou studio.

La Juen Malienne, 1970

This is a young Malian girl from Diaradougou neighbourhood, where I opened up my first photo studio in the spring of 1960, a few months before Upper Volta independence. I was not even 18 years old and my cousin Idrissa Koné had helped me out to buy some photographic material. Diaradougou was full of life and it was mainly a Malian community. The atmosphere was ripe with songs, griots and dances from Mali. So most of my early pictures, at least in the 1960s, were pictures of Malian people.

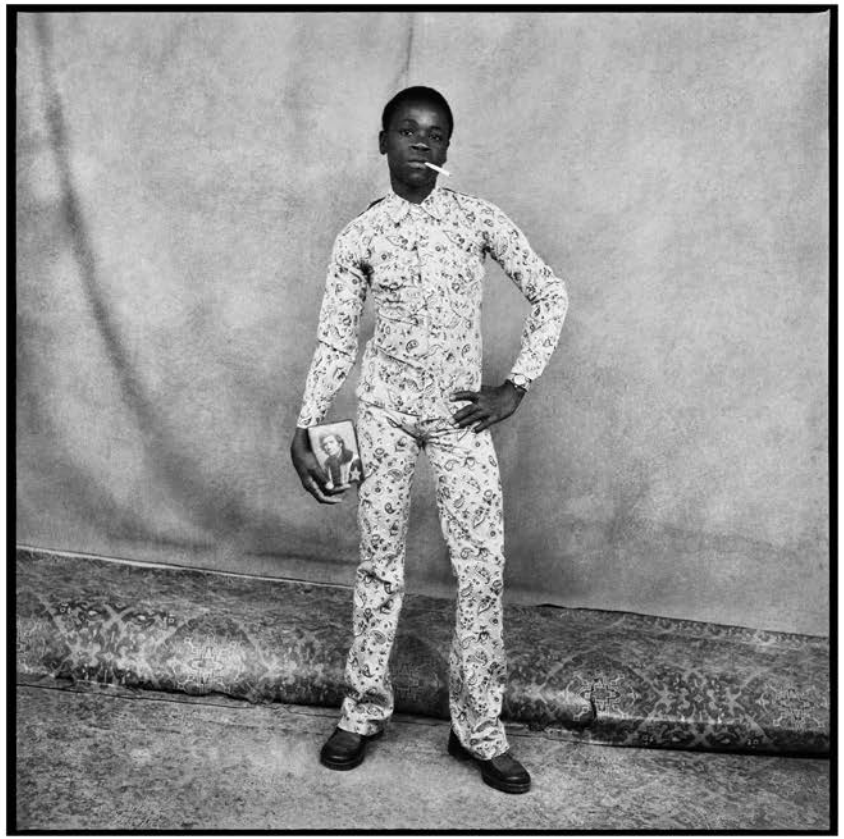


Mali Djeli, 1984

These fellows were Fula people from neighbouring Mali, most certainly hailing from the Kenedugu region, across the border from Bobo. They were griots. So every time they came to Bobo, they would come to my studio and sing praise songs for me. They were looking for a free shot. As far as I remember, I never did that for them. So they kept singing songs to other people in order to get some money and to have their pictures taken by me. They wanted to look as nice as possible. They basically earned their money from praising people.

Chez Inter Music, 1976

This shot was taken inside Inter Music, one of the city's most famous record shops. I think the manager's name was Siaka, the one who is sitting on the counter. It was a popular hang-out for Bobo-Dioulasso's youth. Other record stores in town were Etablissements Antoine D'Albin, Carrefour du Disque, Music Hall, Black Soul Music, Voix de l'Afrique and Amadou Diallo's shop.

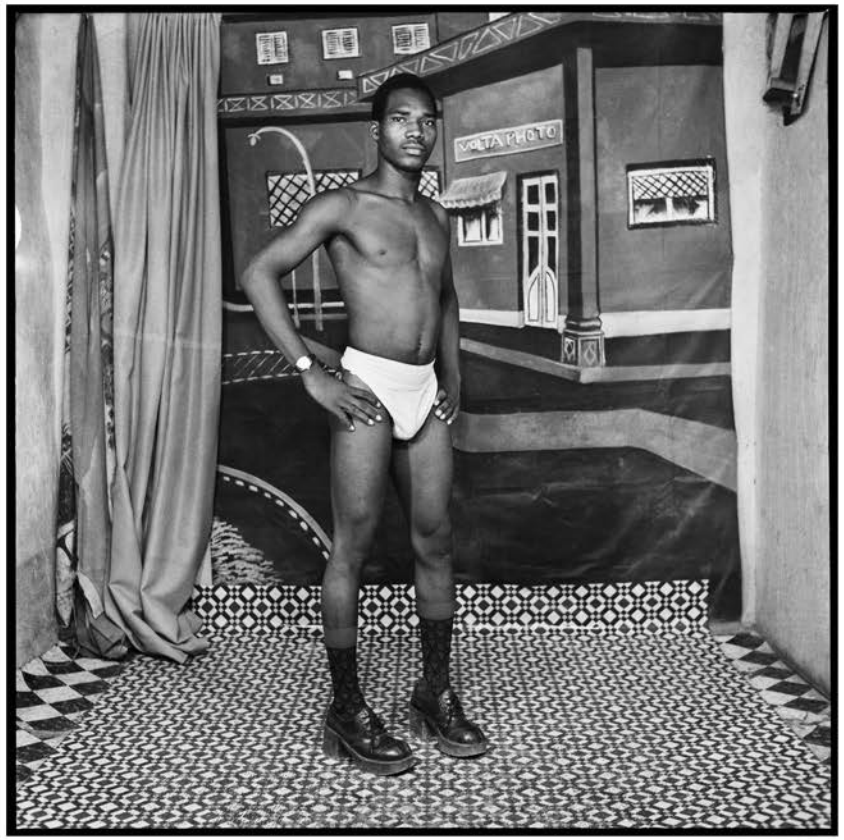


Jeune Fan d'Eddy Mitchell, 1974

That young Dafin guy was most certainly an Eddy Mitchell fan, a French yéyé star, who you can recognize by the postcard in his hand. I would gather magazines such as *Salut Les Copains*, whose posters and postcards I used to decorate my studio. This guy, like many others, put a cigarette in his mouth even though he most certainly didn't smoke. He wanted to emulate someone he idolized, like an actor or musician pictured in a magazine.

Bien Cravaté, 1969

A really well dressed Fula man taken in Diaradougou, in the late 1960s. Before posing for me, some people would arrange their eyebrows with mascara. They would also ask for a comb. They did their own hairstyle and powdered themselves in order to prevent perspiration dripping when the picture was taken. They would even bring their own suits.



L'homme en Slip, 1975

This Fula guy wanted to show off. His brother lifted weights and so did he. He wanted to show how fit he was. If he liked his shape, he would do anything and have many pictures taken by me.

2CV Bricolée, 1968

Habib was a young mechanic from Diaradougou. He designed and created his own vehicle from a 2CV base. He was parading for the Independence Day on 5 August. There was a large column of cars patrolling across town. And Habib was one of them. This was taken across the street from my studio in Diaradougou. The rent was 7,500 francs until 1973. But the price then tripled and I had to move to the boulevard in Farkan for a more reasonable 5,000 francs.

Chasse-Spleen, 1972

Every year I was busy photographing Djombolai ceremonies, which usually came after Ramadan. That one was shot in my Farkan studio. She's getting ready to dance all night long, using her fly swatter as a tool. I was only asking 300 francs for three pictures so many people came over during ceremonies time, once a year, including these young ladies.

Les Deux Amies au Pagne, 1972

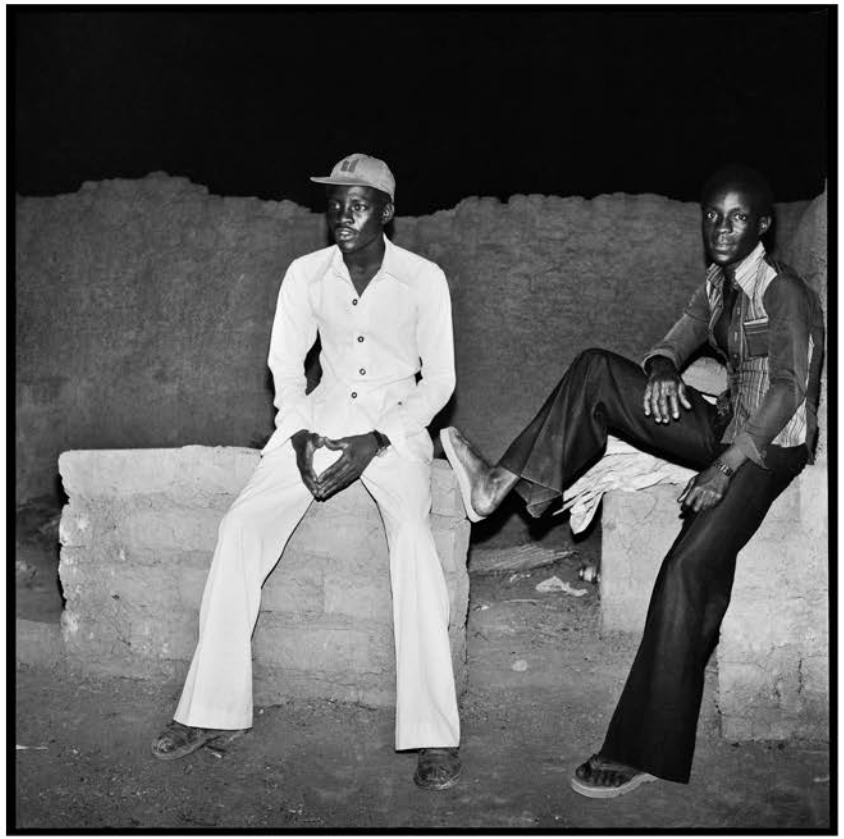
These two young ladies were close friends from Bobo. They almost look like Malian girls and they were very seductive. In my studio, I provided powder, make-up and a hairbrush for the ladies. For this shot, I decided to add some wax cloth as a backdrop to combine it with the floor, with a popular black and white pattern.

Le Pistolero, 1975

This hat and long coat definitely came from one of the yougou yougou places. But for once, it is not my pistol. That guy had his own weapon and wanted to emulate Django, a movie character he really loved.

Le Pirate, 1974

This young guy had just watched a pirate movie, run back home to make an outfit and come straight to my Farkan studio to hand me 100 francs in order to catch a glimpse of his homemade outfit. He just wanted to emulate that pirate he had seen. He must have watched that movie, probably with Errol Flynn, at the Sya movie house, near the boulevard. There were two other movie houses in Bobo back then, Cinéma Eden and Cinéma Normandie in Koko neighbourhood. It inspired many youths to dress up like movie stars, especially as cowboys, pirates or knights.



Le Repos des Danseurs, 1978

That was taken during a dance party I held in a village called Bama around the Kou Valley. Every month or so, I would drive down to some remote village in the bush and I would set up a player, a few records, some loudspeakers and a few lights and get the party going. We started around 8 p.m. and people would tell me, “Sory, you need to set the place on fire!” It would go on until 5 a.m. These fellows dressed up in their best and danced all night long. I took that picture in the wee hours when they were taking a break from dancing.

La Relève, 1982

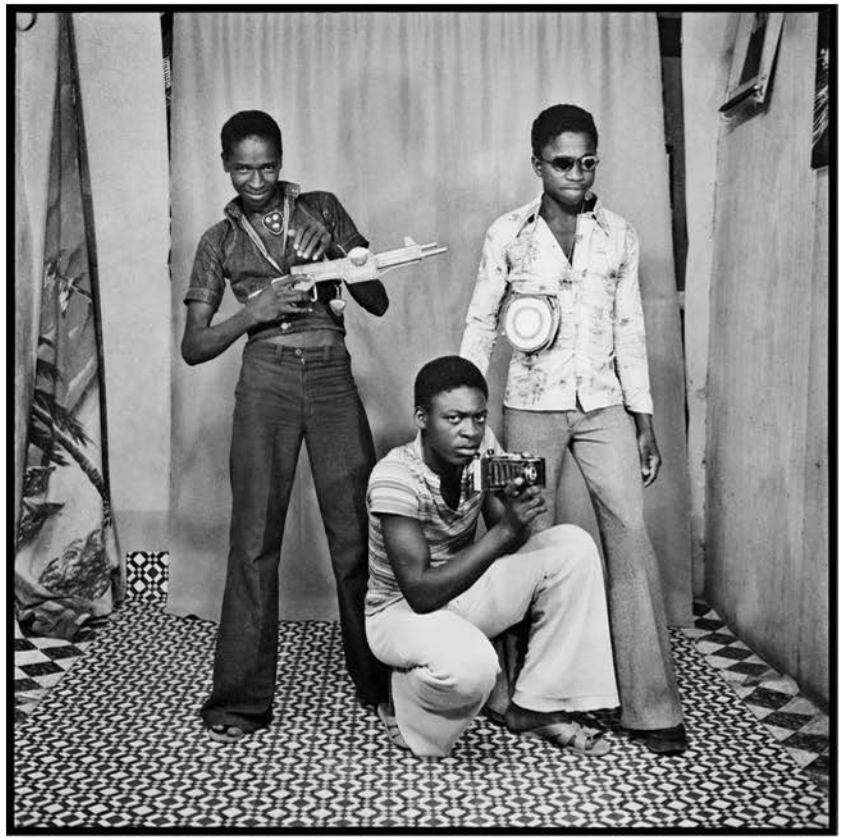
Some teenage Malian people posing for me. They were hot, they wanted to show their attitude but most of the time they could only afford one picture. I think they came to see me a few times though.

Les Jeunes Mélomanes, 1974

Another youth group from my Farkan neighbourhood. I had a few records, which were used as symbols of modernity. Uninvited people would join in. At that time life was really cheap and everybody could have a ball. Everyone was free to go anywhere, at any time, it wasn't dangerous. A chicken cost 250 francs and everyone could eat well back then.

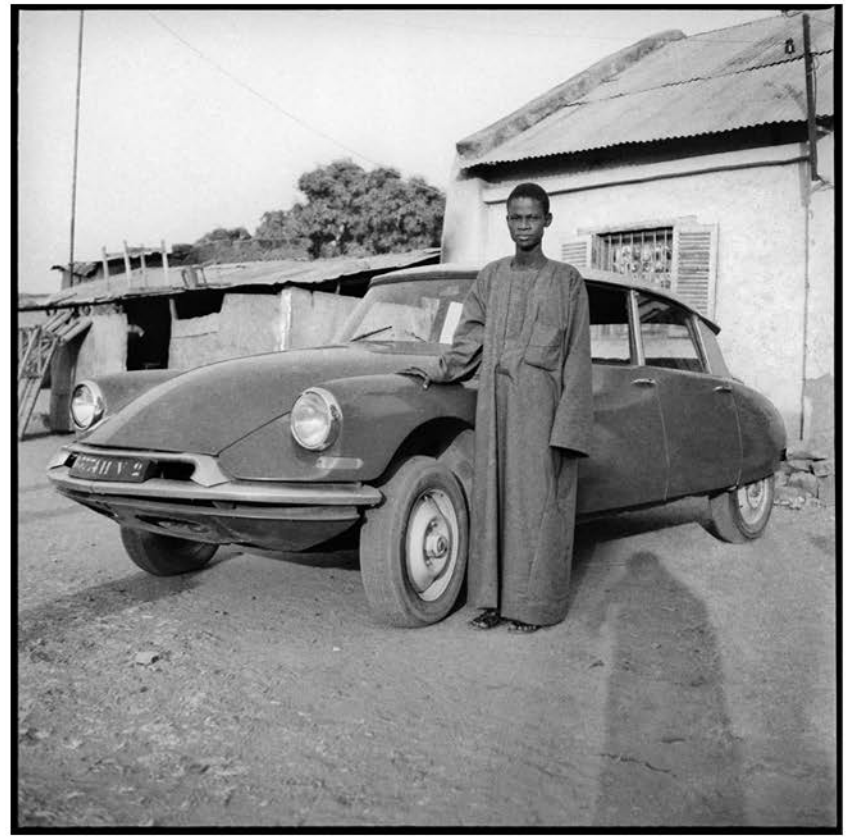
Les Gentlemen de Cocody, 1978

These are the three gentlemen from Cocody, a popular beach place in the Ivory Coast and a dream for many Voltaic people. Malian people were so enamored with photographs. Senegalese liked them too, and Voltaic Mossi people also liked them. But no one could top the Malian. That guy on the right pretended to smoke. He just embellished his own reality.



Les Trois Amis, 1976

I had to have objects and accessories in my studio in order to keep the customers satisfied. So I had plastic toys, glasses, radio, plastic flowers, etc... Customers wanted to hold something in their hands. They sometimes wanted to borrow suits, hats and neckties I had at my disposal. I paid for that too. And I paid for wigs and make-up for women. These young guys clearly had a ball, using one of my cameras too.



La DS et Son Ombre, 1972

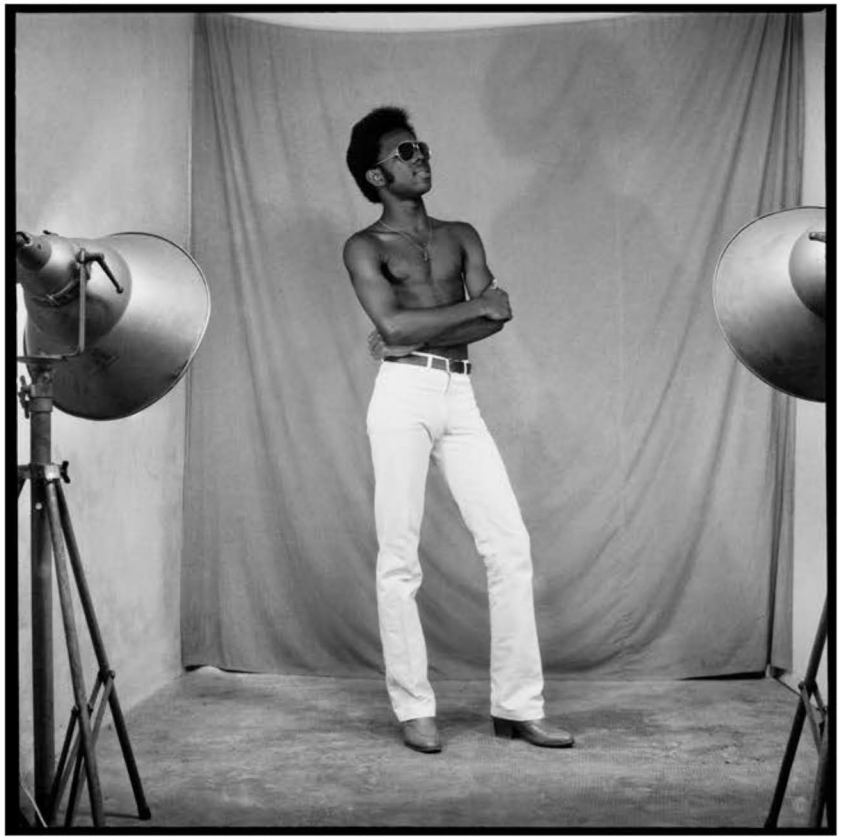
This fancy DS car belonged to Ousmane Monrovia, an older Voltaic trader who was in the clothing business. There was just one other DS car in Bobo, which was owned by a certain Patté and it had buffalo horns mounted on it! This shot was taken on the road to Mali, around Sourgoutien, an extended Bobo neighbourhood.

Allo? On Arrive!, 1978

Some of my customers were keen to travel in order to leave a souvenir behind them for their families as well as an escape from reality. It mostly didn't work out as they would only travel as far as Mali or the Ivory Coast, a very popular place for Voltaic people. But most of the time, they just pretended to travel. I had this airplane design made in Bouaké in the Ivory Coast by a Ghanaian painter. I would also find most of my photographic material in Bouaké when I took the train. This airplane background conveyed a true sense of departure, while the Volta Photo one, made by a local Bobo painter, was more urbane.

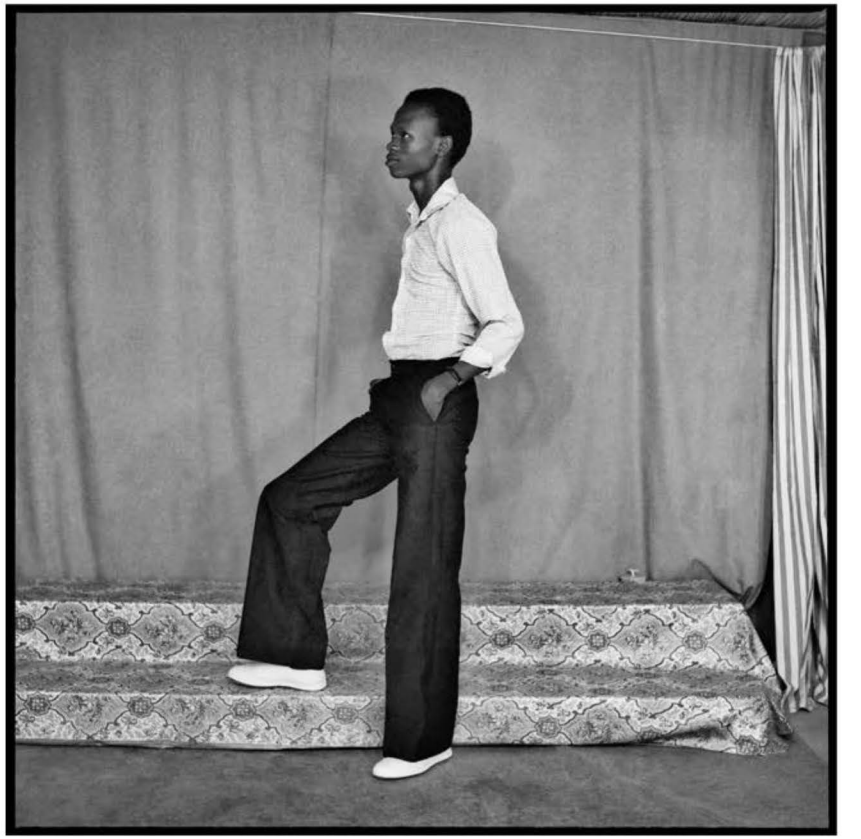
Les Afro-Pop, 1973

That was a youth group from Farkan. A few of them were practicing karate with me. They were trendy, always changing their clothes. They were not married yet so they were free. They all had nicknames. They were always looking for money in order to organize parties and invite girls over. And they would love to have their pictures taken too!



Elvis, 1974

That young guy's name was Siaka Ouattara but he was also known as Elvis. Always very fashionable, he was keen to show how fit he was. I took quite a few pictures of him but this may be the best one. He looks like an American star. Elvis was a dancer and a singer with the local Bobo orchestra, Echo del Africa Nacional.



Regard Sur Le Présent, 1973

I think that was a young Malian guy named Ali. He was just passing through Koko and Acartville areas and came to my studio walking up the boulevard. He seemed so fragile and yet con dent, looking towards the future.

Portrait au Tapis, 1971

Another shot taken in my first Volta Photo studio in Diaradougou. The woven carpet came all the way from Niger. Diaradougou was a tremendous community. But little by little as the economy declined, activity decreased. Malian Fula people travelled all the time. At the end of 1985, there was a brief war between Mali and Burkina Faso, the new name of Upper Volta. Many Malian people left Bobo-Dioulasso after that conflict. Some came back in the late 1980s but the heyday had already passed.

Danseuse de Djombolai, 1975

Another Bobo girl before Djombolai ceremonies. They would either wear their bras or pose bare breasted, depending on their own morals.

Yamaha de Nuit, 1972

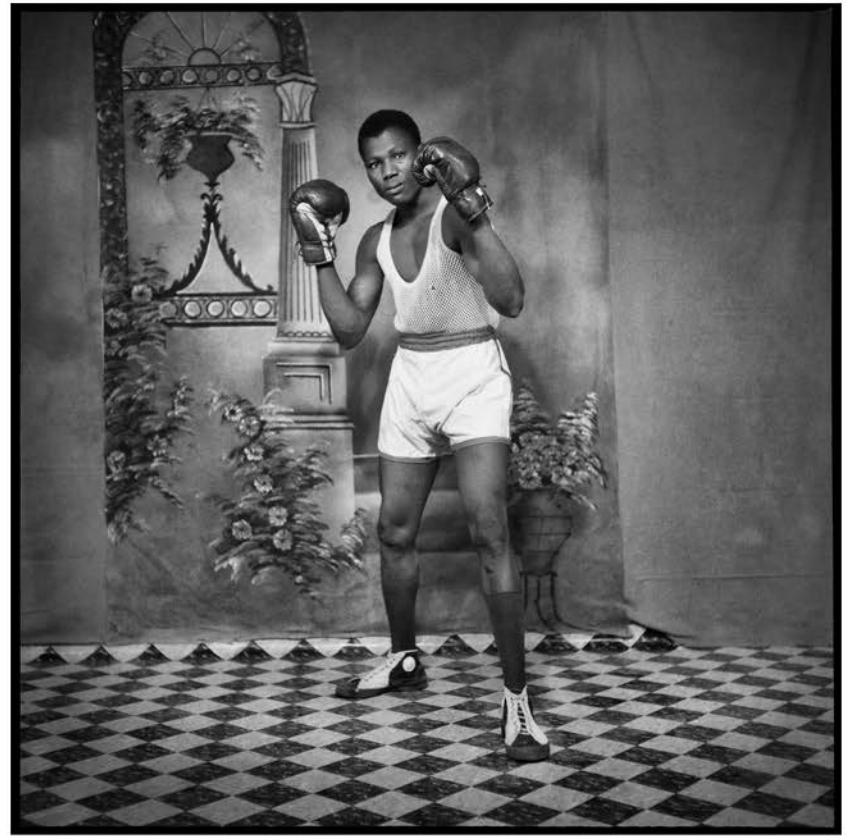
That guy had a nice Yamaha motorbike and he wanted to have a shot with it. I had never seen him before or after. We had to go into the studio with his. This was a night shot for sure as I was using my spotlights on this one. We would sometimes be open until 2 a.m. for our night clients! And at 6 or 7 a.m., we were back into the studio with my apprentices. We worked hard and there were many clients back then.

La Balade en Ville, 1972

That man really enjoyed having his picture taken with his car. This was shot in front of the Inter Music record store in one of the Diaradougou main dust roads. I don't remember his name.

Jeune Danseuse de Kouroubi, 1976

This young girl was dressed especially for a Kourouby or a Djombalai ceremony. It was a period of celebration. Bobo or Dioula girls dressed up like that in order to dance and ask for some money. They dressed like that for one or two days, with non-stop dancing until the wee hours of the morning with the sounds of percussion and tama drums.



Abou le Boxeur Dafin, 1968

If I remember well, that young Dafiin guy was called Abou, from the Diaradougou neighbourhood. He came straight after his boxing practice to have his picture taken in my first studio. He was in very fine shape. Boxing and karate gave us flexibility. We could even slap our opponents in the face with our feet!

Joany Compaoré et Son Ami Guitariste, 1972

That policeman, Joany Compaoré, was my friend. We were lifting weights and practicing karate together. He was with one of his friends who used my acoustic guitar. Joany was one of Baba Moussa's men, Bobo's fabled police officer celebrated in the first recorded Volta Jazz song around 1968. Joany was smart and he had a great sense of detail. He later moved into politics, moving to Ouaga and becoming an advisor to the capital's mayor.

Les Deux Fermiers Peuls, 1977

Two young Fula friends. Like many others, they had just earned some good money selling their cattle at the slaughterhouse. They had their pictures taken, they partied, drank alcohol, before going back to the bush. They were clearly not made for the city. They just went to drink by the buvettes and get the pictures I had taken of them. I made some good money with these people!

Le Commandant, 1976

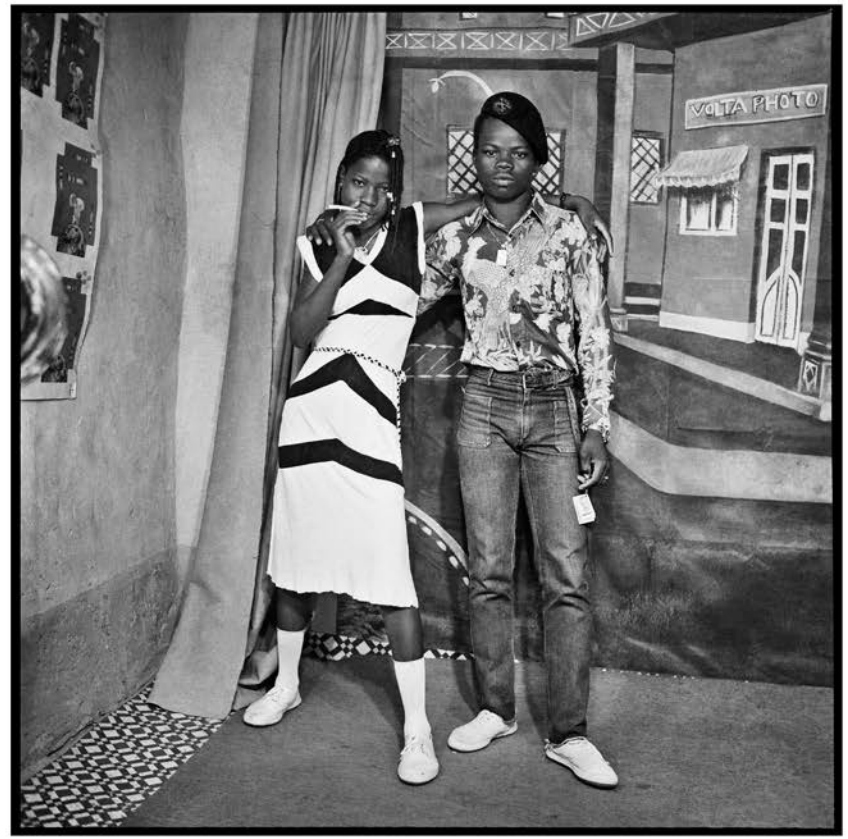
That guy was a funeral parlour driver! I had already taken a few pictures of him. And one day he came up with this airplane suit, looking smart in this costume, especially the way he wore that commandant hat.

Les Chaussures de Riches, 1975

These young Fula also pretended to smoke like famous people. They were just coming from the slaughterhouse. They had sold their beef and cows, so they were spending the money they had earned. They wore plastic shoes, also known as “rich’s people shoes”, very practical to work in the fields and to cross shallow waters.

Je Vais Décoller, 1977

Some of my customers were keen to travel in order to leave a souvenir behind them for their families as well as an escape from reality. It mostly didn't work out as they would only travel as far as Mali or the Ivory Coast, a very popular place for Voltaic people. But most of the time, they just pretended to travel. I had this airplane design made in Bouaké in the Ivory Coast by a Ghanaian painter. I would also find most of my photographic material in Bouaké when I took the train. This airplane background conveyed a true sense of departure, while the Volta Photo one, made by a local Bobo painter, was more urbane.



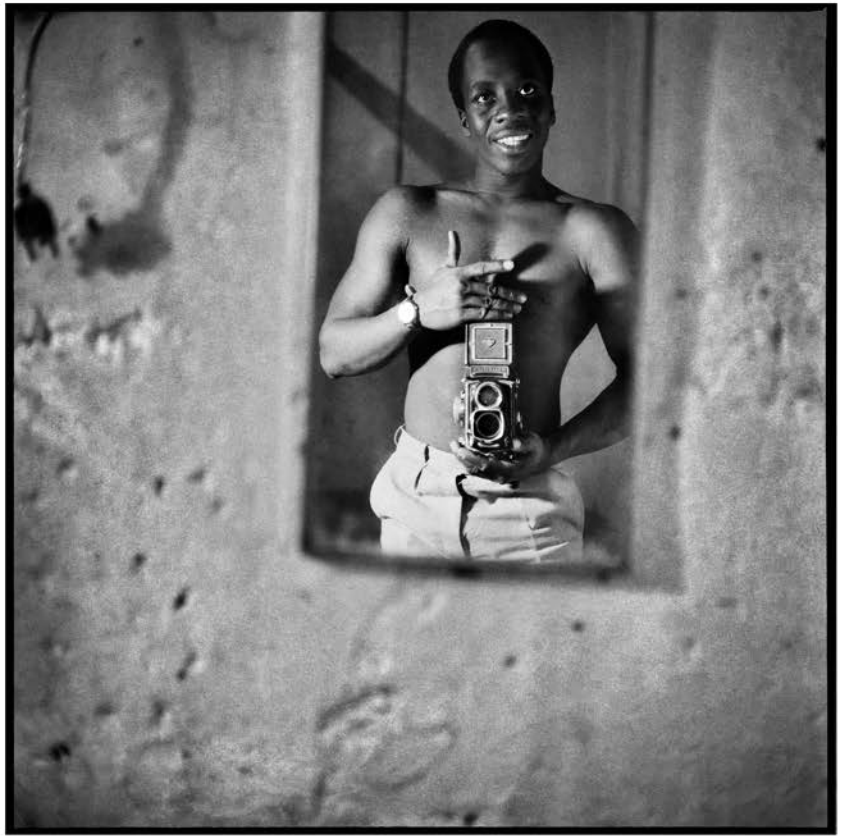
Les Amoureux Yougou Yougou, 1980

These two friends, most probably lovers, were not part of the Revolution started by Sankara in 1983, as one could imagine. His beret came from a yougou yougou, the kind of place which sold second-hand clothes, mostly from Europe and America. So this is not a political beret! The young girl was of Fula origin.

"Photographing Burkina Faso's burgeoning pop culture in its first years of independence, Sory Sanlé captured his nation's musical titans, vibrant nightlife and expressive street style in all its striking glory"
Black + White Photography

La 4L et Son Maître, 1970

This Renault 4L car was the property of Souleymane, my brother's friend. Whenever there was a dancing night or a party in town, he was always waiting for his customers outside of the venue. He would charge 50 francs for a ride, half of what I asked for a photograph.



Autoportrait au Miroir, 1969

Very early in my photographic career, I asked myself whether or not I could take pictures of myself without my apprentice. My first try and it worked. I think it may be the first image I took of myself. This one was shot in my second studio in Farkan, just in front of the boulevard, Secteur 02. I wanted to document the evolution of my shape. I was lifting weights and learning karate. I went to the gym to exercise and to practice karate every day after work. There was about a dozen of us young men and we went to a small place to eat grilled meat afterwards.

"You need to make a memory, step by step, so that you can pass down good memories to the young ones who'll come after you and onto those who have yet to be born. You may no longer be here, but your images will and they'll see them" Sory Sanlé

All photographic prints are available at the following sizes:

20 x 16 in (50 x 40 cm)
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All prints are signed, dated and numbered by the photographer in pencil, and gallery stamped on verso.

"He portrays his subjects with wit and energy, but with a winning fondness, too" The Telegraph

Ibrahima Sory Sanlé (b. 1943) started his photographic career in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, in 1960, the year the then-named République de Haute-Volta gained independence from France. He opened his Volta Photo portrait studio in the same year and working with his Rolleiflex twin lens medium format camera, Volta Photo soon became recognised as the finest studio in the city. Sanlé's uniformly square black and white images possess a unique creative flair and optimism that epitomises Voltaic photography's unsung golden age.

Morton Hill and Reel Art Press have co-published *Sory Sanlé – Volta Photo 1965-85*, the first book of Sanlé's work, which is available now.

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