

Sory Sanlé's best photograph: the studio where dreams came true

By Edward Siddons

October 18, 2017

'We fulfilled people's fantasies. We gave them a chance to experiment, to escape their ordinary lives. The aeroplane backdrop was particularly popular'



'It was a way for people to feel good about themselves'... Autoportrait au Miroir by Sory Sanlé (1966) Photograph: Sory Sanlé

I grew up in a rural area of what is now Burkina Faso, but I moved to Bobo-Dioulasso, the country's second city, when I was about 17. There was a real buzz about the town. I started taking ID photos, straight-up portraits, for a small fee. With the help of my cousin Idrissa Koné, who was a musician and entrepreneur, I was able to set up a studio called Volta Photo. That's when it all began.

At first, I only had one backdrop, a set of Roman columns. But in my second studio, I had a bit more space, so I commissioned a few more from artists in Ghana and Benin. The aeroplane backdrop was particularly popular with young people who couldn't afford to travel. It gave them a chance to experiment, to escape their ordinary lives and play with elements of the modern world. My studio fulfilled people's fantasies.

I started providing props for my customers. Some of the women wanted their makeup done, some of the men wanted suits and ties. Our collection grew: we found Air Afrique flight bags, radios, telephones, lamps, record players, plastic guns – anything to help people make the picture their own. They could look richer, more fashionable, or just more fun: it was just a way for them to feel good about themselves, like the young man in this shot.

Fun was central to my work. If people didn't enjoy themselves, they wouldn't have come back. We would crack jokes, play music, laugh the whole time. Malians were always the highlight of my day: they would turn up with two, three, even four outfits. I couldn't wait to develop those shots.

Photography is a witness to everything, a kind of proof of life. When I started out, my nation was a French colony. A few months after, in 1958, we became an independent colony. Two years later, we were fully independent. Haute-Volta, as the country was known before 1983, flourished after independence, and the region experienced its own *nouvelle vague*. There were only a few photographers working in Haute-Volta at the time. Most were in Ouagadougou, the capital. I was one of the first in Bobo, and the first to use the name Volta. People were excited about the possibilities independence offered and played with new identities in the studio.

I would shoot all day and develop the photos all night. I did it all myself, only needing an assistant or two when trade was good. It was a craft and I wanted to perfect the technical side of shooting. I miss those days before digital. Now everyone's a photographer and that killed the trade for people like me.

Because for me, that's what it was: a trade. I never knew people would want to look at my photos. I just wanted to make a living, have fun, make sure my clients had the best time. It's strange to see people getting so excited about all my old photos today. I'm 75 now. I never thought this would happen.