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Wallpaper\*

# YOUTH IN REVOLT

Sory Sanlé's potent portraits of West African youth culture in the 1970s captured Burkina Faso at a pivotal moment of emergence. Now in his 70s, the photographer has been living in relative obscurity, an unsung bastion of Voltaic photography's golden age – until now



*Le Pirate, 1974*



*La Jeune Malienne, 1970*



*Les Gentlemen de Cocody, 1978*



*Yamaha de Nuit, 1972*

‘The main streets of Bobo-Dioulasso were lined with trees, a heritage from colonial times,’ reminisces Sory Sanlé. ‘We had gardens, markets, music kiosk, open-air bars and dancing. Life was cheap and everyone could have a ball. You could always go out and have some fun.’

Ibrahima Sory Sanlé was born in 1943 in the rural Nianiagara district of Burkina Faso – at that time Upper Volta, an French colony in West Africa.

As a teenager, Sanlé traveled to the nation’s capital, Haute-Volta, in search of work, and found himself as the young apprentice of Ghanaian photographer Kodjo Ademako. A youth from the sticks, Sanlé learned to process and print photographs in the dark room, and how to use a Rolleiflex twin lens camera.

Burkina Faso’s independence from France took place in 1960. That same year, as Sanlé approached his 18th birthday, he returned to his regional capital Bobo-Dioulasso and, with the help of his cousin Idrissa Koné, launched Volta Studio – Bobo’s first photography studio.



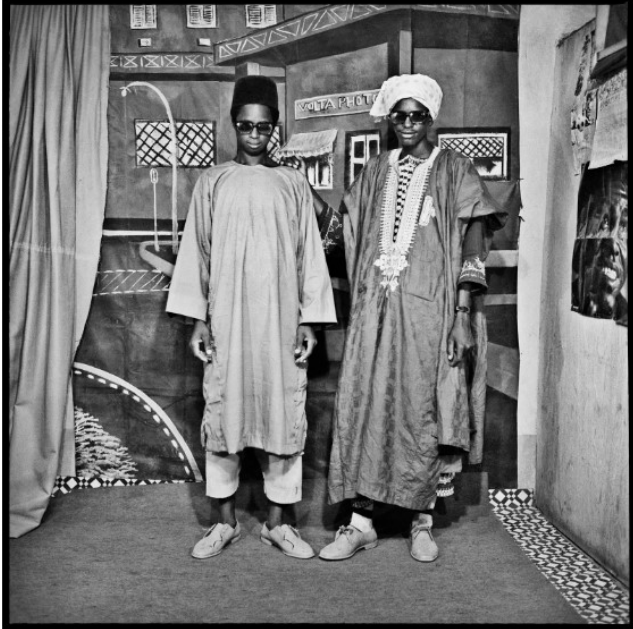
*Belle de Jour, 1975*

*Abou de Boxeur Dafin, 1968*

Sanlé would take monochrome portraits using his Rolleiflex in 6 x 6 format. ‘I charged 100 francs for a photograph of eight by 13 centimetres,’ Sanlé says. He animated the studio with painted backdrops from artists in Ghana, Benin and Ivory Coast. Music would play from records or a radio. ‘People didn’t know what to expect, but soon my place became very busy. They came as they were, and I made them look nice: suits for men, make-up for women.’

Seen now, Sanlé’s photographs have the potency and power of a nation of people at a pivotal moment of emergence. The country was reinventing itself, joyfully expressing a newfound and hard-earned freedom after 70 years of often brutal French rule.

They called it *Les yéyé* – a term coined from Edgar Morin’s album *Bobo Yéyé*. ‘It was a boom time,’ Sanlé says. Bobo’s nightlife was exploding, while two international cinemas opened, inspiring many of Sanlé’s youths to dress themselves as cowboys, pirates and knights in his studio – or merely to pout moodily at the camera in their most statement threads.



*Les Deux Fermiers Peuls, 1977*



*Les Afro-Pop, 1973*

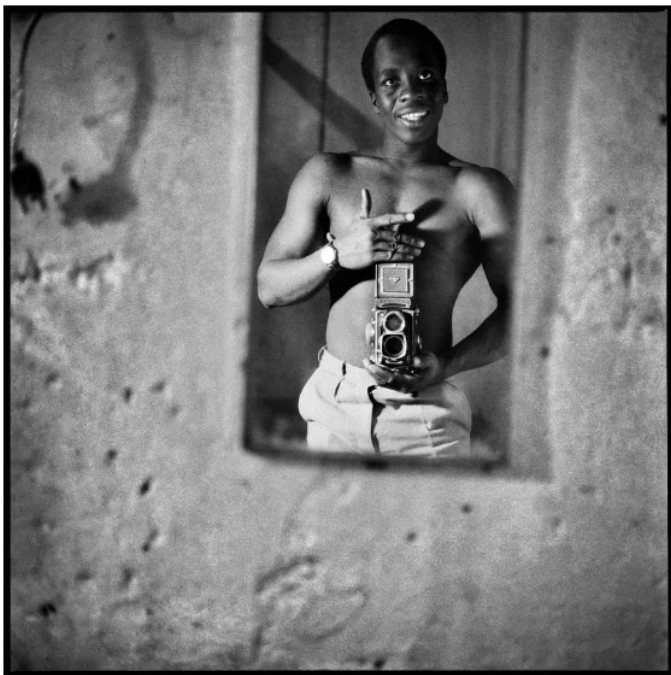


*Chasse-Spleen, 1972*



*Chez Inter Music, 1976*

**‘There were cars, bikes, movies, records, fashion and design – everything was possible back then. Hopes were high and dreams were ripe.’**



*Auto Portrait au Mirroir, 1966*



*Les Deux Amies Au Pagine, 1972*

Burkina Faso quickly began to urbanising, opening up to new influences from an Africa nation which, as a whole, was throwing off the colonial yoke. Sanlé would photograph visitors from Mali, the Ivory Coast and Ghana and then, that same day, photograph local Fula farmers who had travelled to the big city to have their portrait taken. In doing so, Sanlé caught a new nation balancing its ancient traditions with an intoxicating sense of modernity.

‘I was just in the right place at the right time,’ Sanlé says. ‘I saw how countryside traditions mingled with modern city life. People were eager for – I couldn’t help but see that through my lens.’



*Mali Djeli, 1984*



*Je Suis dans le Coup, 1980*

Sanlé has found fame in the August of his life, his work unearthed from private collections in recent times. This might so easily have never taken place. He was approaching 70 and living in peaceful obscurity in Bobo when a French music producer, fascinated by the album covers Sanlé had shot in the 1960s, managed to track him down. 'When I met Sory outside his studio, he was burning some negatives from his archives because he said people didn't care about the old stuff,' Florent Mazzoleni told *The New York Times* last year. 'I spent all night looking at his photos and negatives with a flashlight.'

Sanlé's work is now being exhibited all over the world, including a new major show at The Arts Club in London. And, although he's not planning on going on Instagram anytime soon, he still takes photographs on a daily basis. 'Everyone thinks they can replace a photographer,' he says. 'But I don't complain, I still walk everyday around Bobo's central market and take digital pictures of my old customers. We have to live with our times.' ★

*Images courtesy of the artist and David Hill Gallery. 'Sory Sanlé' is on view 24 September – January 2019; The Arts Club, 40 Dover Street, Mayfair, London, W1S 4NP; [www.sorysanle.com](http://www.sorysanle.com), [www.theartsclub.co.uk](http://www.theartsclub.co.uk)*