



African Biennale of Photography Returns to Mali Amid Unrest



Part of “Telling Time,” the main exhibition of the African Biennale of Photography, in Bamako, Mali. Credit Saskia De Rothschild

Faceless health workers in biohazard suits representing the fear of Ebola. Preachers with black spheres for heads showing the dark effects of religious obscurantism. Images conjuring a political leader’s life had he not been assassinated.

These are some of the realities imagined by photographers for the 10th edition of Bamako Encounters, the **African Biennale of Photography**.

After four years of waiting, hundreds of photography devotees, including journalists, artists and students, gathered here last weekend in Bamako, the Malian capital, to welcome back one of their key cultural gatherings. The cancellation of the biennale in 2013, because of political turbulence and war, seemed to have left an unsatiated need for this continent’s visual storytellers to show their work, and organizers received more than three times as many submissions as in previous years.

Today, parts of Mali’s central and northern territories remain a menacing no-go zone where just last week, Reuters reported that government troops said they had killed Islamic jihadists suspected of attacks in the region. An invisible line, running along the Niger River, has torn the country in two as it struggles to rebuild a common identity.





The opening of the biennale on Saturday. Credit Habibou Kouyate/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“The Islamists’ ideology and fanaticism spreads by destroying culture and diversity,” said Samuel Sidibé, delegate general of Bamako Encounters. “The best way to fight it is by encouraging people to confront diverse perceptions of reality and creating dialogue.”

More than 100 photographers, from 20 countries, were chosen to exhibit their images during the fair, which runs through Dec. 31. In the main pavilion of the National Museum, the exhibition “Telling Time” allowed spectators to witness how the unending decades of dictatorship, the colonial timelines, sudden coups and violent bursts of revolution have influenced the way African photographers capture the instant.

“My starting point for the Encounters was to look at the Malian insurrection as part of the continent’s present, and see how photographers tell its story,” said Bisi Silva, the artistic director for the event. A Nigerian curator and founder of the Center for Contemporary Art in Lagos, Mrs. Silva chose time — and more specifically the temporality of her continent — as the focal point of the biennale.

On the walls, the reinterpretations of sepia-toned archival portraits were displayed side by side with the apocalyptic visions of a fictitious present by the Malian photographers Emmanuel Bakary Daou and Aboubacar Traoré.

In his “Inchallah” series, Mr. Traoré’s subjects have their heads trapped inside black spheres that represent how blinding religious ideologies may be. “With that on your head, you can’t think and you can’t see, so you are bound to kill yourself or other people,” said the artist.



“Inch’Allah” (2015). Credit Aboubacar Traoré

In 2012, when jihadists took control of the Malian north, one of their first actions was to ban music and television. “I don’t think they mentioned photography specifically, but they banned any representation of reality that is not by God,” explained Mr. Traoré, who has been a photographer for 15 years.

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Though he doesn't live off his art — he earns a living photographing weddings and commissioned portraits — the biennale is still his only chance to show what he calls his “conceptual work.”

Organized by Mali's Ministry of Culture and the Institut Français, a French state-funded institution, most of the funding necessary to produce the biennale still came from outside the country this year. “Our leaders need to understand that spending money on culture is crucial,” Mr. Sidibé said. “It's great to build hospitals, but you also need to educate people and help them understand multiple identities can coexist.”

Over the years, many have criticized the biennale for being a bubble that doesn't reach local populations. One effort conducted by the biennale is “100 Schools,” which allows 10,000 local students to visit the numerous exhibition spaces.

“Making it ‘popular’ has always been the challenge,” said Simon Njami, who has organized four past biennales. “People are intimidated, they don't go to the museum naturally, except on wedding days to pose for photos.”



"Le Temps Ebola" (2014). Credit Bakary Emmanuel Daou

Two decades ago, two French photographers envisioned the event as a way to shine a light on two Bamako studio artists, Malick Sidibe and Seydou Keïta, who then became widely known internationally. In 1994, the opening of the first edition coincided with a foreign effort to help Mali's democratic transition. After dark years of dictatorship, the event carried a political message, just as this year's comeback signaled cultural resurgence to many fairgoers.

In her essay “Studio Photography in Mali,” the art historian Candace Keller explained how photo studios have always been places of expression for local residents. “Significant personal events such as weddings and baptisms as well as the Muslim holidays of Ramadan and Tabaski occasioned portrait commissions,” Dr. Keller wrote. “Clients donned new outfits, hairstyles and accessories, and arrived at the studio ready to immortalize their idealized depictions.”

Today, photo studios are still legion on Bamako streets. Most of them offer parallel services such as mobile phone repairs, photocopy services and billboard printing to stay afloat financially. Pro-Photo Chez Baby has been a key location on Nelson Mandela Boulevard for decades. Abdoulaye Baby hasn't closed shop despite



facing the fierce competition of cheap cellphone cameras. "Instead of visiting the photographer, now everyone wants to be a photographer," Mr. Baby said, adding that he made only a quarter of what used to earn. "But photography still feeds a lot of families in Bamako. We have a role as the guardians of people's images."

At the Blabla, a bar in the Hippodrome neighborhood, the photographers Yo-Yo Gonthier and François Xavier Gbré had plastered every available wall with their prints. Inside, Mr. Gonthier's black-and-white trees towered above the art-scene crowds. Outside, Mr. Gbré's cutouts of derelict statues cast shadows on the walls of the surrounding wasteland.

The day after the opening, the Memorial Modibou Keïta, another of the official exhibition spaces, was empty, except for three security guards, a lonesome tourist and two young Malian women, there to sell refreshments.

They wandered in front of "Bori-Offering to the Head," a series by Ayrson Heráclito, portraying people sleeping, amid mounds of African foods used as sacrificial offerings. "I don't know anything about photography, but I like these; they speak to me," said one of the vendors, Salimata Kanti.

In another room, she joined her friend in front of the images of the South African photographer Nobukho Nqaba. They were staged scenes of women wrapped in the blue-and-red woven plastic bags that now mean traveling and migration to most. "This is my favorite because these are the bags we carry when we go to the village," said Mrs. Kanti. "This is our life, it talks about Africa." Fewer than a dozen people had walked in that morning, she said.

But photographers across the city were hard at work capturing families in their moments of joy. Sundays in Bamako are for weddings, baptisms and dressing up. Digital representations of life came filing into the studios' computers, imprinting the instants forever. "Portraits are part of the celebration," said Mr. Baby, the studio photographer. "A memory no one can ever take from us."

Correction: November 2, 2015

An earlier version of this article contained an incorrect online link. The link was to a Nigerian newspaper called The Guardian, not to The Guardian based in Britain.