

The Sixties in Bamako: Malick Sidibé and James Brown

by Manthia Diawara

I was looking at a book of Malick Sidibé's photographs, put together by André Magnin (Scala Press, 1998), with my friend Diafode, who has been living in France since 1979. As we flipped through the black and white photos of our teenage years in Bamako, Diafode's attention was suddenly drawn by a photo of a group of boys entitled "Friends, 1969." "Les Beatles!" he exclaimed, and added, putting his index finger on the photo, "voilà les Beatles" ("The Beatles, there are the Beatles"). I looked closely at it, and before I could even say a word, Diafode started identifying them one by one: there was John Lennon, Ringo Starr, and all the other members of the Beatles of Medina-Coura, one of the hip neighborhoods of Bamako in those days.

Diafode and I spent that evening in my Paris apartment, looking at the Beatles of Medina-Coura and reminiscing about our youth in Bamako. Sure enough, I now could see Nuhun, aka John Lennon. He's wearing a "Col Mao" jacket with six buttons, just like the one John Lennon wore on the cover of one of the Beatles' albums. Nuhun now lives in Canada. And there's Cissé, aka "Paris," with his arm on Nuhun's shoulder. He's wearing a tight-fitting shirt, with a scarf à la Elvis Presley, a large belt, and bell-bottom pants. We used to call him "Paris" because he was so elegant and smooth. When he used to live in Bamako-Coura-a neighborhood on the southern tip of the commercial center-and did not have a motorcycle to come to Medina-Coura on the north side, he would walk for forty-five minutes to cross the busy commercial center, under the hot sun at two o'clock, to join the group at Nuhun's house to listen to music, play cards, and drink tea.

The elegance of Paris's style was also marked by a pack of "Craven A" cigarettes, which he placed in his shirt pocket while holding one unlit cigarette between his lips. He walked slowly through the busy crowd of the Market and across the railway, without losing his rhythm and without sweating a drop. When he arrived at Nuhun's place, his shoes were always shiny and his face was as fresh as ever. He would always say, "Salut, les copains" before taking a napkin out of his pocket, wiping off a chair, and sitting down. We used to say that one day, Paris would surely leave Bamako for Europe. With his Craven A cigarette and tailored shirts, he looked like the actors from the Italian photonovellas. Cissé, aka Paris, now lives in Canada too.

Other guys in the photo reminded Diafode and me of more Bamako stories. There is Addy, who went to Switzerland to study hotel management and returned to Bamako in 1970 with the first copy of the Four-Way Street album by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. We had organized "Woodstock in Bamako" with Addy's record collection. Since then, Addy had worked for hotels in Abidjan and Bamako before opening his own business in Bamako. That one over there is Niare, who's sitting on the floor and holding the album by Sly and the Family Stone that contains "I Wanna Take You Higher." Niare now works for the Malian government as an accountant. And in the back there, we have Amara, aka "Harley-Davidson," who is wearing a flowered shirt. In those days, everybody had to have a flowered shirt to feel part of the youth culture, not only in Bamako, but also in Paris, London, and Amsterdam. Harley, who is now an abstract painter and conceptual artist in Bamako, was even in those days a dreamer and a little bit on the wild side. He was convinced that he would seize history one day and become the center of it.

Malick Sidibé's photographs enable us to revisit the youth culture of the 1960s and our teenage years in Bamako. They show exactly how the young people in Bamako had embraced rock and roll as a liberation movement, adopted the consumer habits of an international youth culture, and developed a rebellious attitude towards all forms of established authority. The black and white photographs reflect how far the youth in Bamako had gone in their imitation of the world-view and dress style of popular music stars, and how Malick Sidibé's photographic art was in conversation with the design of popular magazines, album covers, and movie posters of the time. To say that Bamako's youth is on the same page as the youth in London and Paris in the 1960s and 1970s is also to acknowledge Malick Sidibé's role in shaping and expanding that culture. To the youth in Bamako, Malick Sidibé was the James Brown of photography: the godfather whose clichés described the total energy of the time. Inasmuch as today there is a desire to go back to the music and film of the 1960s and 1970s in order to give a meaning to that culture, we can also go back to Malick Sidibé's photographs to gain access to the style, vibrancy, and ethos of those times in Africa.

So implicated are Malick Sidibé's photographs in the culture of the 1960s that when we look at them, our youth comes back to life. They are the gateway to everything that was fashionable then; everything that constituted our modernism. They are a document through which one can see the passage of time in Bamako as marked by dress style (from B-boys to hippies), music appreciation (from Latin beat to James Brown), movies (from Westerns to *Easy Rider*), hair style (from Patrice Lumumba and Marlon Brando to the Afro), and dance moves (from the Twist to the Camel Walk).

In Sidibé's photographs, one can see the turbulence of youth and the generational conflict that characterized the 1960s. The desires of youth are inscribed in most of the photos as a determined break with tradition and as a transformation of the meaning of the decolonization movements of the 1960s into a rock and roll revolution. It is clear from Sidibé's photographs that what the youth in Bamako wanted most in those days was James Brown and the freedom and existential subjectivity that linked independence to the universal youth movement of the 1960s. The photographs show that, in attempting to be like James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, they were also revealing their impatience with the political teachings of the nationalist state and the spirit of decolonization.

As Diafode and I looked at these photographs now, more than a quarter of a century later, I felt a strange familiarity, a simultaneous desire and repulsion. I looked intently at every photograph in the book, each more than once, looking for myself, but at the same time dreading the possibility of finding myself there. These photographs are speaking to me now, not only as important aesthetic documents on the culture of the 1960s, but also as documents that both problematize the narrow meaning of nationalism extant at that time, and open the door for a Pan-African and diasporic aesthetics through rock and roll.

I am proposing here to go beyond the nostalgic function that the photographs served for my friend Diafode and me that night in Paris. This is not to underrate nostalgia as a significant element in photography and the other arts. On the contrary, photo albums and home videos of weddings and naming celebrations play an important

role in the lives of African immigrants in Paris and elsewhere. They protect them from the effects of segregation in the host country by providing entertainment and pleasure. They also constitute a link between the immigrants and their original homes, and thus foster a sense of community culture.

But to understand the conditions of emergence and evolution of Sidibé's formal style in these photographs, it is important to place him in the social and historical context of the 1960s in Bamako. Malick Sidibé was one of the first studio photographers in Bamako to take a lighter and cheaper 35mm camera outside, to house parties and picnics, in order to take pictures of young people. As he followed the youth, who themselves were following a universal youth movement, he discovered his style in photography, which I will call rhythmic or motion photography. But how did we arrive at the finished product that we have in this book today; how did the bodily dispositions and the structure of feeling of the subjects in Sidibé's photography change from those in the work of his predecessor Seydou Keita?

It is important to understand that at the time they were taking people's pictures in Bamako, neither Malick Sidibé nor Seydou Keita considered himself an artist. It is also important to understand that the types of photos each took and the perfection they both achieved in their work were a condition of the demand that existed at their respective times. Photographers in Bamako were no different than the barbers or tailors—they all beautified their clients or provided them with styles for the visual pleasure of people in Bamako. Their success depended on word of mouth, which contributed, as Pierre Bourdieu would put it, to increasing their symbolic capitals. They only became artists by first pleasing their customers, by providing them with the best hair styles, dresses, and photographs.

Seydou Keita's photography was both enhanced and limited by the economic, social, and cultural conditions prevailing in Bamako between 1945 and 1964, when he had to close his studio and become a civil servant for the socialist government in Mali. The people he photographed in his studio were from the middle class. They were from traditional Bamako families—businessmen and their wives, landlords, and civil servants (schoolteachers, soldiers, and clerks for the colonial administration). As a photographer, Seydou Keita's role was to make his subjects look like they belonged to the bourgeoisie and middle class of Bamako, to make them feel modern and Bamakois. The women were very beautiful, with their hair braided and decorated with gold rings, and their long dresses with embroidery at the neck. The men wore European suits or traditional boubous, and they exhibited their watches, radios, or cars. Seydou Keita produced artifice through studio *mise-en-scène* and makeup to ensure that every one of his subjects looked like an ideal Bamakois, a bourgeois nobleman or woman, or a civil servant invested with the authority of the colonial administration.

When independence arrived in 1960 and the colonial administration had to cede its place to the new government of Mali, people's relation to photography, as to many other things in Bamako, began to change. Civil servants were no longer content with their intermediary roles between whites and Africans; they were now competing with the traditional leaders for control of the country. They no longer wanted to mimic the colonial administrator in Seydou Keita's studio; they wanted to be seen occupying the colonial master's chair at the

office, his house, and his places of leisure. As these patterns of life changed in Bamako, new structures of feeling emerged and studio photography became devalored as something conservative and artificial. Soon the studio's customers would be largely composed of people who needed passport and identification photos and visitors from rural areas. Seydou Keita's reaction to the changes was also conservative: not only did he have problems with the new socialist government, but he also found women in pants, mini-skirts, and Afro hairdos to be neither beautiful nor religiously acceptable in a predominantly Muslim country.

Thus, the change in power from a colonial system to an independent state brought about a profound transformation in people's sense of aesthetics in photography. Young people especially began to look upon studio photography as old-fashioned or as something reserved for people who were pretending to be Bamakois. To be photographed in the studio was associated with being a fake and a powerless pretender. In other words, studio photography was seen as unreal, whereas realism had become the criterion for defining the new aesthetics of Bamakois photography. By insisting on realism, people were demanding a new photography that portrayed them as actors in situations, a photography that was neither a studio re-enactment nor an imitation of something previously done. The new Bamakois wanted to be filmed while he or she took the center of the action that was unfolding. Photographers therefore had to come out of the studio and follow the action wherever it was taking place.

It was these limitations of studio photography—a genre fostered by colonialism—that led to Malick Sidibé's emergence as the photographer of the young generation. While maintaining his studio—largely for passport photos and camera repair—Sidibé took his camera to where the youth were and photographed them there. I will therefore define the youth's sense of a new realism in photography less as an absence of artifice, *mise-en-scène*, and mimicry, but as something tied to the location and historical action of the subjects in the photos. In other words, each photo tells a story located in space and time that serves to empower the subject. The emphasis on action was meant to bring photography as close to live action as possible.

There is, however, another problem related to a change in power relations in Bamako that needs to be addressed when discussing Sidibé's photography. It would seem that his photos of young Bamakois are in contradiction not only with colonial-era studio photography, but also with the patterns of life that one would expect in a decolonized state. According to the famous theses on culture developed by Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, it is not only impossible to create a national culture under colonialism, but it is also equally evident that artifacts like these photos are signs of neo-colonialism and Western imperialism. Writing about African independence in the 1960s, Césaire stated that whereas the colonial era was characterized by the "reification" of the African, the transition to independence would give rise to a revival of his creative energies, and a recovery of his authentic ways of being that had been forbidden by the colonizer. Independence would awaken in the individual the African personality that had for so long been suppressed. For Césaire, "after the 'moment' of pre-colonial Africa, a moment of 'immediate truth,' and the colonial 'moment,' a moment of the shattered African consciousness, independence inaugurates a third dialectical 'moment,' which must correspond with a reconciliation of the mind with its own consciousness and the reconquest of a plenitude" ("La

pensée politique de Sékou Touré," *Présence Africaine* 29 [December 1959-January 1960], 67).

For theoretical purposes, it is important to retain Césaire's use of the terms "moment," "immediate truth," "own consciousness," and "plenitude." All of them refer to independence as an authentic state of being, a state of genuine creative and natural harmony between the pre-colonial past and the present. In contrast, the colonial and neocolonial state was characterized by assimilation, alienation, and depersonalization of the African. Authors like Césaire expected the continent to create a new man with an African style in politics and culture. Lumumba, Sékou Touré, and Kwame Nkrumah were the prototypes of the ideal post-independence image, and they were all fiercely nationalist, authentic, and anti-imperialist. That the images of the youth in Sidibé's photographs did not seem to reflect the Africa these leaders were attempting to shape has been interpreted as an indication of how alienated the youth were, as a sign that the youth were not in continuity with the political history of the nation. The photos could be said therefore to reveal the presence of neo-colonialism among the youth.

Indeed, in Mali, the socialist government created a militia in the mid- 1960s to monitor the behavior of the people in conformity with the teachings of socialism. This militia was aimed not only at abolishing traditional chiefs and other tribal customs, but also at correcting the youth's habitus. In Bamako, curfews were set and youth caught wearing mini-skirts, tight skirts, bell-bottom pants, and Afro hairdos were sent to reeducation camps. Their heads were shaved and they were forced to wear traditional clothes. The situation did not get any better for the youth after the military takeover in 1968. Even though the former regime was castigated for taking people's freedom away, for being worse than the colonizer in its destruction of African traditions, and for being against free enterprise, the soldiers who replaced the militia continued to patrol the streets of Bamako in search of rebellious and alienated youth. It was clear, therefore, that to both the independence leaders and the military regime in Bamako, the youth in Sidibé's photographs were not obeying the teachings of independence, nationalism, and tradition. They were mimicking the culture of the colonizer, which shut the door to authentic self-actualization.

Looking at Sidibé's photographs today, it is possible to see what was not visible then on account of the rhetorical teachings of revolution. It is indeed clear to me that the youth's refiguration of the independence movement, their appropriation of the political history of decolonization, and their representation of their freedom were all misrecognized by their elders. According to Bourdieu, one can obey the past without representing it, (Lecture on Edouard Manet, College de France, 2000). In assessing the youth's continuity with and transformation of the political history of independence in Bamako, it is therefore critical to look at the degree to which the youth had internalized and incarnated the lessons of the revolution. The youth had quickly internalized African culture, collapsed the walls of binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, and made connections beyond national frontiers with the diaspora and international youth movements. That the theory of decolonization could not recognize this at the time as anything but mimicry and assimilation is an indication of its failure to grasp the full complexity of the energies unleashed by independence.

First of all, the youth saw in the departure of the colonizer from Bamako an opportunity to seize the city for

themselves, to become the modernizing agents of their home town, and to occupy its leisure spaces. Independence also enabled them to exhibit African cultures that until then had been forbidden by the colonizer. Thus, they could go back and forth in history without interruption, and without the permission of the new government or the traditional religious and tribal leaders. The youth in Bamako felt free to pick and choose as a prerogative of their new freedom. Their dress style, their point of view, and their corporal hexus constituted a new habitus in Bamako that was misrecognized by their parents. What I call here "change of habitus," following Pierre Bourdieu, can also be understood through Raymond Williams's notion of change in patterns of life. For Williams as well, the training of youth in social character and cultural patterns may result in youth's developing its own structures of feeling, which will appear to come out of nowhere: "The new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities that can be traced, and reproducing many aspects of the organization, which can be separately described, yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and its shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling" (p. 49).

Clearly, what Bourdieu and Williams are saying is that one cannot predict the outcome of a revolution, nor the new habitus that will develop out of power relations, nor from where the youth will draw the resources for their creative and epistemological ideas. As the civil rights leaders in America have learned from the generation that succeeded them, it is much easier to liberate people than to tell them how to live their freedom. Unlike revolution, freedom cannot be taught-otherwise, it is a freedom that is no longer free, a freedom under-siege. The youth in Bamako did not want to be restricted in their freedom, and therefore used it to express the themes and aesthetics of Pan-Africanism, the black diaspora, and rock and roll-some of which were in continuity with the independence movement, and some in contradiction with it.

If one follows Bourdieu's statement that habitus + capital = action, the challenge in Sidibé's photographs becomes how to describe the components of the youth's actions, the extent to which they represent an accumulation of social and cultural capitals in relation with diaspora aesthetics and bodily dispositions that Bourdieu terms, appropriately, habitus. (Lecture on Manet).

The youth in Bamako, as in most modern African capitals in the 1960s, began building their social networks in high schools and soccer clubs. High schools were important centers of intellectual and cultural life in Bamako because, in the absence of a university at that time, they constituted the sites where the future elite of the nation gathered. Most young people in those days met at high school or at soccer games organized between schools, before forming their own clubs or Grins, to use the common Bamako term of reference. By the time high school youth had formed their own Grins, they had already self-selected among the masses of students, cemented their friendships, and developed attitudes and styles specific to them. They would have already chosen a name-the Rockers, the Temptations, the Rolling Stones, the Soul Brothers, the Beatles-by which they were known, and they spread their reputation throughout Bamako.

The name was not the only important thing about a club; it was also crucial to have a permanent location associated with it-e.g., the Beatles of Medina-Coura-a sort of meeting place or headquarters for the group, with a turntable and a good collection of records, magazines, and detective novels that club members exchanged

among themselves. Most Grins also had a shortwave radio which received BBC Radio, the Voice of America, and Radio France International. The Beatles of Medina-Coura regularly had the local newspaper L'Essor, and occasionally one could find French papers like Le Monde and magazines like Paris-Match and Salut les copains, from which they removed the posters of the Beatles of Liverpool, Jimi Hendrix, and James Brown to put on the wall. Finally, every Grin had green tea, which the members drank while listening to music and debating several topics of the world at the same time. Every club built its reputation and symbolic capital by accumulating these important resources at the headquarters, and by organizing parties and picnics to which rival members of other groups were invited. It has been estimated that by the time Malick Sidibé was at the height of his career, there were more than 250 clubs in Bamako (see Andre Magnin, Malick Sidibe).

Besides debating over favorite rock stars, political discussions constituted an important characteristic of Grins in 1960s Bamako. Indeed, the way the youth talked about the music, movies, or detective stories was always related to their own condition in Mali. They always made a comparison between themselves and the people they saw on album covers, magazines, movie posters, as well as fictional characters in movies and novels. They debated the rock stars' stances against the war in Vietnam, racial discrimination in America, the peace movement associated with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, and Muhammad Ali as the world's heavyweight boxing champion. Discussion of African politics was generally concerned with the heroes of independence-Sékou Touré, Lumumba, and Nkrumah-who defied France, Belgium, and England respectively. The youth elevated these freedom fighters to the rank of icons like Mao Zedong, John F. Kennedy, André Malraux, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro.

The Grins were important centers of social criticism about what was lacking and what was needed in Bamako. People talked heatedly about the government, the restriction of people's freedom, and the incapacity of African nations to unite. Some argued that neo-colonialism was the reason that the leaders could not get together, and that France and the CIA still had their hands in our affairs. People at the Grin also saw themselves as rebels in Bamako against traditional societies, which wanted to interject more religion into their lives and control the way they dressed and behaved. The youth thought of themselves as open-minded and tolerant toward each other, regardless of ethnic and caste origins. They therefore did not want to go back to the separation of people by tribe that was encouraged during the colonial era. They defined themselves first of all as Bamakois, Malian, and Pan-African, as opposed to Bambara or Fulani. Not only did the youth in Bamako organize their own Woodstock to listen to music in a public sphere and protest against apartheid in South Africa, Ian Smith's regime in Rhodesia, and the imprisonment of George Jackson and Hurricane Carter in the USA, but they also continued to resist the military dictatorship in Mali until its overthrow by a mass movement in 1992.

When I look at Sidibé's photographs today, I see this political action of the youth of Bamako: the way in which they transformed the themes of independence and adapted them for themselves, to the point of not being recognized by their elders. Because Bamako's youth could not content themselves with the mechanistic application of the political theory of independence, nor return to certain African traditions which would have

imposed limits on their freedom, they turned to Pan-Africanism and the African diaspora as powerful sources for the expression of their freedom.

The Impact of James Brown

Looking back at the period between the mid- 1960s and the early 1970s in Bamako, it is clear that the single most important factor, after independence, that introduced change into youth's habitus was their exposure to diaspora aesthetics through rock and roll and the Black Power movement. And in this respect, it is also clear from the visual evidence in Sidibé's photographs that James Brown was one of the most important reference that combined the ethos of black pride with the energy of rock and roll. As independence changed power relations in Bamako, the reception of diaspora aesthetics through popular culture opened the floodgate of youth's energy and creativity. The youth could see themselves more easily in James Brown or in a glossy photograph of a defiant Muhammad Ali, than in any other motif of independence at that time.

This enthusiastic embrace of popular culture from the United States may seem odd in a newly-independent socialist country like Mali. In Mali, as in other African countries, the U.S. had at that time been identified as the symbol of imperialism and capitalist exploitation. It is therefore crucial to explain what James Brown and other diaspora aestheticians from North America were able to provide to Bamako's youth that could escape the critical eye of anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism, but that was lacking in the other independence-era social and political formations.

The identification with James Brown was total and uninterrupted; from the way he appeared in album cover photographs-as if caught in the middle of a trance-to the way his music and dance provoked the youth to action, James Brown was captivating. The dress styles that James Brown's influence popularized among Bamakois included tight turtleneck shirts with buttons or a zipper, which the local tailors made from looking at the pictures on the album covers. The same tailors in Bamako also made the "James Brown" style of shorter, above-the-ankle bell-bottom pants; which were thought to enhance one's ability to dance the Jerk or the Mashed Potato.

In 1967, Malick Sidibé photographed two young women holding between them a James Brown album, *Live at the Apollo*, released that same year. I remember that white suits similar to the one James Brown is wearing on that album cover were all the rage at dance parties in Bamako. It is also a measure of the popularity of the *Live at the Apollo* album that it appears more often than any music album in Malick Sidibé's photography. There were also some songs on it, such as "Cold Sweat," "There Was a Time," "I Feel Good," and "It's a Man's World," without which no dance party in Bamako could rise to greatness. These James Brown hits, along with "Papa's Got a Brand-New Bag" and "I've Got a Feeling," remained at the top of the charts in Bamako for more than a decade.

One of the girls in the photo is wearing a sleeveless blouse and skin-tight pants, while the other has on a checkered mini-dress reminiscent of the Supremes. They are both laughing and looking into the camera, each with one knee bent forward and the other leg spread back as if to mark a dance step. The girl on the left, wearing the mini-dress, is holding the record album in the center, between herself and her friend. The other girl is pressing her body against the album as if she were dancing with it. The *Live at the Apollo* album thus

becomes an important part of the composition of this photo. Inasmuch as James Brown is clearly identifiable here by his picture and by his name written in big letters on the album, one can say that he has become the third person in the photograph. By putting him in the center against their hearts, the two young girls transform him from a lifeless photo on an album cover to an omnipresence in front of Malick Sidibé's camera. It is as if, in the photo, they were dancing with the "real" James Brown.

It is also important to understand that the presence of the album in the photo helps redefine the young women. By seeing themselves in James Brown, identifying with the Live at the Apollo album, and becoming one with their idol through dance, they change themselves. The person looking at the picture also begins to see the two girls differently. For him, they assume a new identity that is secular and cosmopolitan. They are no longer stuck in the Malian identities defined by the tribe or by Islam. For example, in Mali, young women were not allowed to be seen by their parents dressed the way they were in this photo. Such conduct would have been deemed indecent by Islam. When young women went to the Grin or to a dance party, they smuggled their pants and mini-skirts out the window beforehand, and then walked out the door dressed in traditional clothes. They only changed into their modern outfits once they were far from home and unrecognizable.

Clearly, therefore, diaspora aesthetics were opposed to the habitus imposed by tradition, home, and Islam, and which sought to control the young girls' bodies. In this sense, identification with James Brown was an indication of where the youth in Bamako wanted to be at the time of independence, and of nationalist leaders' blindness to these desires. In fact, the origin of this photo becomes indeterminate, as the two young women take on this new identity influenced by James Brown and diaspora aesthetics, one that had begun to emerge at the same time in Zambia, Liberia, Harlem, Senegal, Ghana, etc. The presence of James Brown in this photo helps therefore to explain the new habitus of post-independence, why young people dressed the way they did, and freed their bodies from the limitations imposed by older power relations.

I call this a diaspora aesthetic, as opposed to a Malian or even an African aesthetic, because it is defined beyond the national boundary and united black youth through a common habitus of black pride, civil rights, and self-determination. The civil rights movement in America and the worldwide movement of decolonization were resources for this new aesthetic, and James Brown was the dominant symbol for the youth.

James Brown, as a figure mediated through civil rights and worldwide decolonization, had become for the youth the link between the new freedom and an African identity that had been repressed by slavery, Islam, and colonialism. By that, I mean that there is a storehouse of African cultural and spiritual practices that had been forced into silence and rendered invisible by colonialism and Islam and that emerge to the surface when the youth enter into contact with James Brown's music.

It is no secret that both colonialism and Islam fought hard to rid Africans of their gods, rituals, and cultures. Colonialism imposed itself in a binary manner, collecting African statues and masks in order to burn them or send them to museums in Europe, and replacing them with the Bible. For both Islam and Christianity, polytheism was the root of evil, and they therefore sought to fill the African's need for several gods with one God. In the process, they banned the priests who represented different gods, and left the rituals and dances unattended by an intermediary between the people and their creator. This destruction of the spiritual and technical base of African cultures is eloquently described in masterpiece after masterpiece of the creative writing of Africa and the African diaspora. In Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, the African priest loses his place

in the harvest ritual to the Christian missionary. In Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, the anthropologist assists in the destruction of an African kingdom by collecting the masks and the oral traditions. In Maryse Condé's *Segu*, Elhadji Oumar's army of Jihad destroys the Bambara Empire, burns the fetishes, baptizes the king, and puts a Muslim priest in charge of Segu.

By the time of independence in the 1960s, therefore, what we call "African" had been changed through and through by Islam and Christianity. Most importantly, the connections with the pre-Atlantic-slavery African had been destroyed or forgotten. The rituals seen today, performed for tourists or at the celebrations of the anniversary of independence, are fixed in time and devoid of any spiritual and technical meaning. They can no longer cure an epidemic, nor teach people the meaning of a puzzle. The presence of Islam and Christianity also means that people adopted a different way of praying that excludes dance, as well as a different disposition of the body which involves submission to God rather than an imitation of God through dance. It is therefore safe to say that Africans, who were famous in the literature of primitivism for their sense of rhythm, were without rhythm at the time of independence.

James Brown's music reconnected Bamako's youth to a pre-Atlantic-slavery energy that enabled them to master the language of independence and modernity and to express the return of Africanism to Africa through Black aesthetics. The term "Africanism" has been used in a varied manner by diaspora authors and theorists, including Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) in *Blues People*, Robert Farris Thompson in *Flash of the Spirit*, V.Y. Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa*, and Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*. My use of "Africanism" here is closer to the way Baraka and Thompson have adopted the term, and to Houston Baker's concept of the "vernacular" in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*-all of which indicate the survival, transformation, and influence of pre-Atlantic-slavery African cultures on modernist cultures. By subverting Christianity and Islam as the spiritual guardians of modernity, Africanism endows itself with distinctive resources that my friend and colleague Clyde Taylor calls "pagan modernism."

To understand the impact of James Brown's music on the youth in Bamako, and what is here called pagan modernism, it is important, first, to make a detour to one of the pre-Atlantic-slavery cultures, which seems to have survived in James Brown's own performance. I refer here to the Dogon of Mali. According to Marcel Griaule, in his classic book *Dieu d'eau* (Fayard, 1966), Dogon cosmology revolved around men and women's desire to be perfect like the Nommo. The Nommo were twin offspring of Amma, the Almighty God. Unlike their older brother, the incestuous jackal, who was ill-conceived through a union between Amma and the Earth, the Nommo were perfect in everything they did. They each had male and female organs, and would therefore reproduce without the other's help. That is why the Dogon refer to the Nommo both as singular and plural; every Nommo is identical to the other, but also depends on the other like the left hand depends on the right. It is through their function in identity and binarism that the Dogon believe the Nommo to be part god and part human, part fluid and part solid, part water and part snake.

The symbol of Nommo-variable and unlimited in Dogon cosmology and iconography-is also the vehicle for language. For the Dogon, the Nommo revealed the secret of language to men in three stages, each

corresponding to a specific work and form of prayer. The first language, which is also the most abstract, came with the transformation of baobab barks into fibers with which to clothe the nakedness of the earth. Even today, the Dogon dress their masks and statues with these multicolored fibers that contain the most ancient language of Nommo, which is understood by very few people. The second language was revealed through the technique of weaving, and it was clearer, less sacred, and available to more people. Finally, the third language came with the invention of drums. It was a modern and democratic language understood by all. For the Dogon, mastery of these languages brought men closer to the purity and perfection of Nommo and placed them in control of their environment.

Through imitation of the Nommo's language, men could therefore partake of a divine essence and, like the eight ancestors of the Dogon, become Nommo themselves. If Nommo were in the drums that they had made to teach men language, then men, by beating drums, were speaking the language of Nommo, and they themselves were Nommo at that moment. As Ogotemmel, Griaule's interlocutor in the book, puts it, men were "learning the new speech, complete and clear, of modern times" (Dieu deau, 74).

When we return to James Brown in the 1960s and consider his impact on the youth of post-independence Africa, we realize his Nommo-like quality: the desire to elevate men and women to perfection. James Brown is a Nommo-known as "shaman" elsewhere in the world-part god and part human, who teaches the world, through his music and dance, the complete and clear language of modern times, and who makes Bamako's youth coincide with the Dogon desire for perfection. Just like the Nommo was one with the drum-the beating of which taught men the language of modernity-James Brown was one with his band, though his was never complete without his red cape and his invitation to the masses to become part of his groove. People often say that James Brown, the hardest-working man in show business, does not say much in his songs, that he is notorious for limiting himself to a few words like, "I feel all right," "You've got it, let's go," "Baby, baby, baby." In fact, James Brown, like the Nommo, uses his voice and vital power to imitate the language of his instruments-the trumpet and drums-to make his audiences understand better the appropriate discourse of our modern condition. James Brown's mimicry of the sound of his instruments-letting them speak through him as if he were one with them-communicated more clearly with his audiences the meaning of 1960s social movements than any other language at the time. By subordinating human language to the language of the drums, or the language of Nommo, James Brown was partaking in the universalization of diaspora aesthetics, the freedom movements, and the discourse of black pride.

The reception of the Live at the Apollo album in Bamako was due in part to the fact that it contained a complete and clear language of modernity with which the youth could identify. James Brown's didactic concern with history and the names of dance steps and American cities was an important factor of identification with the album for the youth who knew that their independence was tied to the civil-rights gains of people in the diaspora. If we take, for example, a James Brown song, "I Feel All Right," it is easy to account for its popularity in Bamako. James Brown begins the tune in a ritualistic manner by addressing everybody in the building. Like the high priest in a ritual about to begin, James Brown, calling himself the "groove maker"-as in rainmaker, the priest of a harvest ritual or funeral-makes sure everyone is ready for the amount of soul, or vital energy, that he

is about to unleash. He even summons the spirit of the Apollo Theater in these terms: "Building, are you ready? 'Cause we're gonna tear you down. I hope that the building can stand all the soul. You've got a lot of it coming." Then James Brown, at once the son of Nommo and Nommo himself, proceeds to explain the dance steps he is about to teach the world. He performs the dance a few times, asking the audience to repeat after him. Repetition is the key word here for diaspora aesthetics: it marks the rhythm and accent of this new language. By imitating James Brown, one becomes James Brown, just as the imitation of Nommo's acts brings men closer to him.

Interestingly, as in all rituals, there is the risk of impurity, of something not working properly, and therefore threatening the success of the performance. During the song, we hear James Brown struggling with a man who was not properly following the directions he was giving: "My man always got to get his own extra thing in there," says an amused Brown. But, luckily for the people at the Apollo that evening, the groove prevailed and the ritual was a success, as James Brown screams: "You got it? Yeah, you got it! Now, let's go!" It is at such moments that James Brown reminds us most of Nommo, who could empower men and women and put them in control of their environment.

In Griaule's book, Ogotemmeli states that the first dance ever was a divination dance: "The son of God spoke through dance. His footsteps left marks on the dusty dance floor, which contained the meaning of his words" (198). Ogotemmeli goes on to say that the masked society that performs the dance rituals symbolizes the whole system of the world. When the dancers break onto the scene, they signify the direction in which the world is marching, and predict the future of the world. Similarly, one can say that, in *Live at the Apollo*, James Brown-son of Nommo and Nommo himself-was speaking with his feet and tracing, on the floor of the auditorium, the divination language which contained the future directions of the world. The youth in Bamako as well were interpellated by this movement, the language of which was absent from the other political movements of the time in Mali. They found the political and spiritual articulation of independence through James Brown's music, and thereby could become Nommo themselves; that is to say, connect with the African culture of pre-Atlantic slavery.

Ogotemmeli, the Dogon philosopher, likes to state that, for human beings, articulation is the most important thing. That is why the Nommo provided men and women with joints, so that they can bend down and fold their arms and legs in order to work. According to Dogon cosmology, the Nommo had placed one pebble at every joint-at the waist, the knee, the ankle, the wrist, the elbow, the neck joint, etc.-to symbolize a Dogon ancestor that facilitated the articulation of the joint. The movement of every joint is therefore tied to the presence of Nommo, who blesses and instructs it. The concept of articulation is also important for the system of language that permeates all Dogon activities. Language, for the Dogon, is opposed to silence and nakedness, while being at the same time the essence of action, prayer, and emancipation. Language prolongs action through prayer, and articulation provides every language system with its accent, rhythm, semantic content, and form. Ogotemmeli states that for each one of the eight Dogon ancestors, there is a language which is different from the others, and which is spoken by people in his village. The way a specific language is articulated by a people can also be read through the way they dance and communicate with God. In a word, articulation determines for the Dogon the rhythm of the world by relating, through a system of alliance, left and right, up and down, odd

and even, male and female. It is thus easy to see how important the system of articulation was for both communication and aesthetics among the Dogon people. It was that which united opposites and created meaning out of seeming disorder, enabling men and women to enlist the help of their God and prolong their action on earth.

For me, the two components of diaspora aesthetics-repetition and articulation, in other words, the incessant presence of Nommo and the joining of opposites in time and space-were missing in Bamako before the time of independence. It obviously had been suppressed by colonialism and Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions, which understood modernism as teleological, lacking in repetition and contradiction. To state this differently, before independence the youth in Bamako were mostly Muslim boys and girls without rhythm, because they were detached from Nommo and other pre-Atlantic slavery cultures.

So imagine James Brown in Live at the Apollo when, in a song called "There Was a Time," he invokes Nommo in these words: "But you can bet / you haven't seen nothing yet / until you see me do the James Brown!" To "do the James Brown" in this instance is to speak a different language with one's body, to improvise a new dance different from the ones mentioned before, like the Jerk, the Mashed Potato, the Camel Walk, and the Boogaloo. It is to dance with Nommo's feet, and to leave on the dance floor the verb of Nommo, i.e., the complete and clear new speech of modern times. Finally, it is to perform one's own dance of Nommo, without an intermediary, and to become one with Nommo and James Brown.

In Bamako, in those days, James Brown's music had an intoxicating power to make you stand up, forget your religion and your education, and perform a dance move beyond your ordinary capacities. As you move your legs and arms up and down in a scissors-step, or slide from one end of the dance floor to another, or imitate the blacksmith's dance with an ax, your steps are being visited by the original dancers of pre-Atlantic-slavery African peoples. The Nommo have given you back all your articulations so that you can predict the future through the divination dance of the ancestors.

For Ogotemmeli, to dance is to pay homage to the ancestors and to use the dance floor as a divination table that contains the secret of the new world system. Clearly, therefore, what James Brown was preparing the world for at the Apollo was the brand new body language of the Sixties: a new habitus that would take its resources from the civil rights movement, black pride, and independence. The catalogue of dances that James Brown cites, from the Camel Walk to the Mashed Potato, is composed of dances that the Nommo taught men and women so they could clearly understand the language of civil rights, independence, and freedom.

In Bamako too, young men and women, upon hearing James Brown, performed dances that were imitations of the way Nommo swam in the river, the way the chameleon crawled and changed colors. The sun-dance of the Great Dogon mask, the thunder dance of the Kanaga mask, and the undulating movement of the snake were included too. In this way, the Bamakois took charge of their new situation, showed how the system worked, and predicted the future. Just as the Mashed Potato or the Camel Walk were coded dances that told different stories of emancipation, the dances the youth performed in Bamako were also expressions of independence and connection with the diaspora.

James Brown's music and other rock and roll sounds of the Sixties were therefore prefiguring the secular language that the youth of Bamako was adapting as their new habitus and as expression of their independence. The sweat on the dance floor, reminiscent of James Brown's sweat at the Apollo-itself reminiscent of the sweat that runs down the body of Dogon dancers possessed by Nommo, is the symbol of the new and clear language pouring out of the body of the dancers. James Brown, with his red cape, heavy breathing, and sweat, is none other than Nommo.

Looking at the Malick Sidibé photograph of the two young girls with the Live at the Apollo album, one revisits this new language and habitus of the Sixties. Curiously enough, at the same time that Malick Sidibé was taking photographs of the youth in Bamako, Ali Farka Touré, a blues guitarist from the North of Mali, was also imitating the songs from the diaspora. First, people would gather at night in schoolyards and cultural centers to dance to his modernized music. Then, Radio Mali in Bamako began to play his music on the air. There is one particular song by Ali Farka Toure from those days, "Agoka," which takes several riffs from James Brown's "There Was a Time." It is therefore obvious that the youth used independence as an opportunity to latch onto diaspora aesthetics, i.e., a pagan modernist style opposed to religious modernism and the "nationalist" and conversionist modernism of Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Jean-Paul Sartre-thinkers who could think of post-independence Africans only as part of the proletariat.

Copying the Copiers

In Malick Sidibé's photography, we see an encounter between pre-Atlantic-slavery Africa, the post-civil-rights American culture, and the post-independence youth in Bamako that produces a diaspora aesthetic. Thus, to say that Sidibé's photographs are "Black photographs"-as a photographer friend, Charles Martin, has stated to me-is to affirm his participation in the 1960s in shaping the new and universal look of the youth of African descent. Because Sidibé's photographs made Bamako youth so stylish, au courant, and universal, it was easy to identify with them. The youth in Bamako saw themselves in them, and they wanted to be in them, because the photographs made them look like the rock and roll idols and movie stars they wanted to be.

To say that the youth in Bamako saw themselves in Sidibé's photographs is to state that his style was modern, and that his photographs presented a Bamakois that was beyond tradition. By leaving the studio to follow young people outside, Sidibé was also discovering his style. At the conscious and unconscious levels, Sidibé's eye was being trained to recognize the youth's favorite movements and postures during dancing, their hairdos, and their dress styles. By following the youth, he began to acquire their aesthetic taste, instead of imposing old-fashioned photographic models on them. This is why the youth in Bamako considered Sidibé's photography to be realistic: he recognized their style and used his camera to immortalize it. Sidibé saw the emergence of a rebellious youth in Bamako who wanted to demarcate themselves from the rest through their love of rock music, dancing, and dress style. By photographing them in the manner in which they wanted to be seen, Sidibé too was able to distinguish himself from other photographers in the city.

Sidibé, then, copied the youth who themselves were copying rock stars and movie stars. And if we consider that the youth in Bamako acquired their habitus by carefully watching images of James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, James Dean, Angela Davis, Aretha Franklin, and Mick Jagger in glossy magazines and movies and on album

covers, it becomes possible to see these media outlets as important sources of Sidibé's style. It is therefore no exaggeration to state that Sidibé, who never attended a photography school, had learned from the best in the field. By following the youth of Bamako, who were wearing flowered shirts made by famous designers-because they saw their idols wearing them in magazine photos-Sidibé was getting his eye trained by great photographers. And by following the copy of the copy, he was internalizing the history of photography without knowing it.

It is possible to see the influence on Sidibé's photography of great contemporary photographers from Richard Avedon to Andy Warhol, as well as that of black-and-white movie images. But what is important about Sidibé's art is its ability to transform the copy into an original and to turn the images of the youth of Bamako into masterpieces of the Sixties' look. Looking at Sidibé's photographs today, it becomes easier to see how productive they were in the Sixties in shaping the youth's worldview and in uniting them into a social movement. In this sense, Sidibé is the James Brown of photography, because he was not only the number-one photographer in Bamako, but his photographs also helped universalize the language of the Sixties. Consider his single portraits of young men and women wearing bell-bottom pants, flowered shirts, and tops revealing the navels of the girls. It seems as if the individuals in the portraits define their identities through the outfits they are wearing. The bell-bottoms, in these pictures, become as much a feature of the portrait in claiming its position as a signifier of the Sixties and Seventies, as the person wearing them. In a way, the person wearing the bell-bottoms is, like a model, celebrating the greatness of the pants to the onlooker.

There is one particular portrait of five friends, all of them wearing the same color of shirt and bell-bottom pants. They are standing facing the wall, with their backs to the camera. What dominates the visual field in this portrait are the bright black-and-white colored pants, which come all the way down to the floor and cover the young models' feet. The rhetoric of the image implies that the five friends are identical and equal in their bell-bottom pants. In fact, this Sidibé masterpiece of the representation of the Sixties conveys a sense of redundancy, a mirror-like excess that keeps multiplying the image until it produces a dizzying, psychedelic effect on the viewer.

This photograph is still remarkable for the youths' daring and eccentricity in wearing the same outfit to a party. The expressionist patterns of their shirts and the black-and-white designs of the pants work together to produce a kitsch presentation, which erases individual identities and replaces them with a group identity. In other words, the portrait creates the illusion that we are looking at a photograph of a painting of five young men in the same outfit, instead of a live photograph. By wearing bell-bottom pants and sacrificing their individual identities for that of the Grin, or the new social movement, were indicating a break with tradition and their commitment to the new ideas symbolized by their eccentric outfits. Sidibé's photograph captures this moment of the Sixties as parodied by itself-a moment of humor and kitsch, but also a moment marked by the universalism of its language. In this photograph, we not only see the location of the Sixties dress style in kitsch-the artifice associated with bell-bottoms, tight shirts, Afro-hair, and high heels-but also the labor that went into getting it right. Sidibé's photography defined bell-bottoms for Bamako's youth and told them that they had to wear them in order to be modern.

I have argued that Sidibé attained mastery of his craft by copying copies; that is, by following Bamako's youth,

who were themselves following the black diaspora and the rock-and-roll social movement. It is now important to point out the significance of movement in Sidibé's art. We have seen that the youth's desire to have Sidibé follow them at dances and beach parties was based on their belief that studio photos were not real enough. For them, the way they dressed and comported themselves at the Grin and the parties was more original in terms of reproducing the energy and savoir-faire of the 1960s worldwide, than the *mise-en-scène* of the studio, which was stuck in the past. Sidibé had therefore to capture them in the details of their newly-acquired habitus. They wanted to be photographed looking like Jimi Hendrix, dancing like James Brown, and posing like someone in the middle of an action.

The subjects of Sidibé's portraits look like they are posing in the middle of a ritual. Their action can sometimes even reveal the content of the ritual they are performing. It is easy enough to imagine who was photographed in the middle of dancing the Twist, the Jerk, or the Boogaloo. It is even possible to hear certain songs while looking at Sidibé's photographs. In a way, one can say that the postures and the forms of the body's disposition in Sidibé's portraits contain signifiers specific to youth habitus in the Sixties.

Space is most significant in Sidibé's shots, because the subjects are moving in different directions and the camera needs to account for the narrative of their movement in the shot. A depth of field is always required in order to reveal where the dancers are going and where they are coming from. It is therefore through the configurations of space that Sidibé captures rhythm in his photographs. We see the characters leaning backward and forward, pushing each other around, or moving in the same direction to mark the groove, as in a James Brown song. Sidibé's portraits are possessed by the space, which they fill not only with the traces of the great music of the Sixties and the symbolic gestures of rock stars, but also with the spirit of great dancers, from Nommo to James Brown.

There is always a narrative going on in Sidibé's group portraits. Instead of the subjects revealing themselves for the camera to photograph, they engage in different activities, as if some of them were unaware of the camera's presence. We see this already in shots with three or four people: they treat the camera more as a spectator to an unfolding story than as the reason they are posing. Looking at the images taken on the beach, for example, we can see the complexity of narrative in Sidibé's photography and how the subjects seem to invite the camera to participate in its unfolding. Sometimes, each subject in a Sidibé portrait acts as if he were the main character in the shot. He attempts to achieve this level of characterization by manipulating the narrative time in the shot through a behavior that differs from the others. In one of the photos at the beach, there are six persons who all seem to be engaged in different activities. First, each individual is defined in space as if he were the focus of the shot and the others were there to enhance the *mise-en-scène*. Second, the facial expression of each one of the six people invokes a different emotion in the photo-contemplative, self-absorbed, playful, fatigued, or reacting to something off-field. At any rate, each of the characters in this shot seems to occupy a field of his own that is totally independent from the others.

I believe that this predilection for narrative indicates two things in Sidibé's art. First, the characters in Sidibé's photography pretend to ignore the camera, or not to act for it, or simply to be caught in *medias res*, because they are posing like their idols on record albums, movie posters, and magazines. They are waiting for the moment of the photo to be like James Brown and Nommo, and to become like gods of entertainment themselves. It is their belief that Sidibé's photos can transform them into stars, make them bigger than life, and

that is why they act so dramatically in the photos. Each of Sidibé's portraits looks like an actor in a black-and-white movie who has been asked to carry the action to the next level.

By capturing movement—an action caught in time and space, which here I call narrative—in his portraits, Sidibé also enables each character to tell his own story. This act is political, insofar as it allows the youth in Bamako to seize upon their own individuality, away from tradition and the high modernism of the independence leaders. By looking like the modern black image, deracinated from nation and tribe, the youth in Bamako were also showing their belonging to Pan-Africanism and the African diaspora. Therefore, to say that Sidibé's photographs reveal Bamako's youth as alienated is to address their politics, which were more aligned with the diaspora and the universal youth movement.

Finally, as I look at Sidibé's album with my friend Diafode, I think of the pervasive influence of Hip Hop in Africa and the rest of the world. The young people participating in the movement today in Bamako are the ages of Diafode's and my children. What Sidibé's photographs achieve is to teach us to be more tolerant of today's youth, to understand that their action is not devoid of politics, and to see in them the triumph of the diaspora.

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