

*Research Africa Reviews*, Vol. 6, No. 2, August 2022

These reviews may be found on the RA Reviews website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-6-issue-2-august-2022/>

Candace M. Keller, *Imaging Culture: Photography in Mali, West Africa*.

Publisher: Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2021, 486 pages. ISBN # 9780253025579.

Reviewed by: Bruce Whitehouse, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Lehigh University.

Since the late twentieth century, connoisseurs of African photography have come to recognize the country of Mali as home to a particularly rich photographic tradition. *Imaging Culture* offers an expansive, well-researched exploration of that tradition, and of photography's place in modern Malian society. Keller, a professor of art history and visual culture at Michigan State University, uses ethnographic as well as archival research to document and interpret Malian photography from the onset of French colonization in the late nineteenth century to the dawn of the digital age. Her aim in this book is "to decenter the Eurocentric canon and destabilize its predominant understanding of photographic production," especially by emphasizing "local practices, perspectives, histories and innovations" (5).

Rather than imposing some ostensibly, universal, theoretical, or aesthetic framework on Malian photographers and their work, *Imaging Culture* seeks to enable the reader to understand them in the context of Mali's culture, society, and politics during the colonial and postcolonial eras. As Sarah Brett-Smith (2014) did for Bamana mud cloth and Ryan Skinner (2015) did for the Bamako music scene, Keller thoroughly grounds and historicizes her subject. She shows how photography — particularly portrait photography, but also reportage— came to occupy such a prominent place in the lives of modern Malians. The text, liberally illustrated with photographs, offers a unique visual perspective on a contemporary African society and its culture.

*Imaging Culture* is divided into two parts. The first part, "Development of Photography in Mali," consists of two chapters providing historical background. Chapter one traces photography's early development from the 1890s to the 1940s in the budding cities of what was known during the colonial era as the French Sudan. Photography was primarily used during this time as a tool of colonial administration, and was largely practiced by French photographers using local people as their

subjects (and, sometimes, as their assistants). The growing colonial bureaucracy's need for ID photos helped drive the expansion of photography, especially in cities and towns, during this period and eventually led African colonial subjects to become professional photographers as well. If portrait photographs remained prohibitively expensive for most people during this period (equivalent to half the price of a sheep in the late 1940s), they also became highly prized and invested with deep cultural significance.

Chapter two documents Malian photographic production from the end of the Second World War, focusing on the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, which Keller describes as the heyday of black and white photography in Mali. As the capital city, Bamako played the most important role in this scene, but Keller also documents the work of photographers in provincial towns such as Segou, Mopti, and Gao. Photography came to infiltrate the fabric of everyday urban life during its heyday as photographers, such as Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé known for their striking portrait photos, rose to success. Keïta and Sidibé occupy a prominent position in Keller's narrative, having helped to pioneer and popularize photography in Mali long before they gained international renown. Her interviews with photographers, including Sidibé, enable her to portray an artistic scene at its zenith in vivid detail. Photographs were a vital tool with which Malian people, during the run-up to independence, overcame demeaning colonial stereotypes and showed the world "a more desirable and empowering image of themselves as cosmopolitan, informed, and successful" (65).

Having set the historical stage for the emergence of Malian photography, Keller devotes the book's second part (also entitled "Imaging Culture") to placing this artistry within its proper cultural and social context. Her ethnographic methods and sensibilities come to the fore in this part as she unpacks the role of photographers in society and the profound meanings imbued in their photographs. While exploring social agency in chapter three, Keller highlights the contrast between the Manding concepts of *badenya*, meaning roughly "unity" or "harmony," and *fadenya*, meaning "rivalry" or "competition." These twin concepts, transposed from local kinship and household structure, shape Malian artistic production as well as social dynamics more broadly. Photographers' clients want to portray themselves as dutiful members of families, age-sets and clubs, thus aligning themselves with *badenya*; they also want to portray themselves as innovators and trendsetters seeking names of their

own, thus aligning with *fadenya*. Keller discusses, in chapter four, photography's ability to help someone establish and manage their public reputation as well as to guard their secrets; these roles put the photographer in a position very much like that of the griot in Malian society. Indeed, Keller points out, Malian photographers and griots have often shared the same spaces at important rituals and festivities and have understood their work in similar terms.

The contrast between two more concepts, *jeya* or "clarity" and *dibi* or "obscurity," is the subject of chapter five, which examines Malian standards of beauty (both of the human body and in a general aesthetic or compositional sense). These terms evoke much more than the placement of light and shade in a photograph; *jeya* is associated with many of the same social properties as *badenya* (e.g., cooperation, transparency), while *dibi* is associated with the properties of *fadenya* (ambiguity, mystery, and secrecy).

Chapter six turns to the vital spiritual forces of *nyama* and *baraka*, which are central to the understanding of agency and destiny and which photography is often believed to harness, sometimes in dangerous ways. A photograph captures the image or *ja* of its subject, and a human being's *ja* is spiritually joined with their soul; thus, "the immaterial dimension of photographs continues to render its subjects vulnerable" (352). Keller's discussion of the spiritual challenges raised by photography in this predominantly Muslim society, and the vulnerabilities that photographs produce for their subjects, is an apt precursor to her final chapter which considers the impact of international success for Malian photographers like Keïta and Sidibé. In the 1990s, as these and other Malian artists gained attention from new audiences in Europe and North America, new opportunities for recognition and reward were accompanied by new forms of expropriation and exploitation. Amid the proliferation of festivals and galleries showcasing works by Malian photographers, these artists and their subjects found themselves exposed to the risk of unauthorized and even predatory exhibition of their photographs abroad. Global success became an ambivalent experience for photographers and clients alike, who were now forced to confront questions of who owned their images and under what circumstances could it be displayed.

Accessible to students and non-specialists as well as scholars, *Imaging Culture* situates Malian photography as a distinctive product of its time and place. Keller writes that "comprehending Keïta and Sidibé's images, the cultural context in which they were created, and the role of the photographers and their studios in

their production requires looking beyond the surface of their images” (385). In this respect, her book permits readers to peer deeply into these images to grasp their many meanings, while also surveying more broadly the complex webs of meaning embedded within these images. In doing so, *Imaging Culture* contributes to a less Eurocentric understanding of the global development of photography.

### Works cited

Brett-Smith, Sarah C. *The Silence of the Women: Bamana Mud Cloths in Mali*. Milan, 5 Continents Editions, 2014.

Skinner, Ryan. *Bamako Sounds: The Afropolitan Ethics of Malian Music*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

### **Research Africa**

**Copyright © 2022 by Research Africa**, (research\_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA’s Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

**ISSN 2575-6990.**