

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

Mostly African Scenes, All by Africans

By HOLLAND COTTER

Photography can be a deeply passionate medium, and a sense of that passion comes across in "In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

This is not a show of the heart-of-darkness images — famine, disease, tribal conflict — that are the fodder for much Western photojournalism and that leave an indelibly negative impression of Africa on the public mind. Nor is it anything close to being a feel-good view of Africa as a touristic Eden.

Instead, it is a gathering of 140 stylistically and emotionally varied pictures by 30 African-born artists, many of whom have little more than a shared birthplace in common, but most of whom take some aspect of life in Africa as their subject. The results are as much fiction as fact, as often critical as celebratory, but the sense of a collective, engaged energy is unmistakable.

"In/sight," which runs in tandem with the exhibition "Africa: Art of a Continent," begins around World War II, when African independence movements were building a head of steam. Yet the show's opening photographs — formal studio portraits by Meissa Gaye (1892-1982) and Salla Casset (1910-74) of Senegal and Seydou Keita of Mali — are far from militant.

Wearing turbans and three-piece suits and chic caftans, the urban clientele depicted suggest the cultural variety of Africa in their wardrobes alone. The likenesses are often fancifully inventive: Mr. Keita places women in densely patterned robes against patterned backdrops to optically dazzling effect. But it is the alert confidence of the subjects and the tenderness of the recording eye that linger in the mind.

And for good reason. Tenderness is in short supply in early photographs of Africans taken by Europeans. Such images were as often as not used as ethnological data or as a species of barely disguised erotica. In them, individuals were reduced to curiosities and the irrepressible wealth of African cultures trimmed to a single, all-purpose fabric.

Exhibitions of African art even today tend to homogenize. But "In/sight," which was organized by Clare Bell, an assistant curator at the Guggenheim, and three independent curators, Okwui Enwezor, Danielle Til-



Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

An untitled portrait from the 1950's by Seydou Keita of Mali.

kin and Octavio Zaya, takes the opposite tack. The works seem to have been chosen precisely for their diversity, as if to argue against any notion of a continental sensibility.

Even a cursory glance proves the point. Mohammed Dib's dreamy image of figures slipping through shadowed streets in Algeria, Malick Sidibé's candid shot of young black couples cavorting in swimsuits on a beach in Mali and David Goldblatt's picture of grim-faced Afrikaners in South Africa emerge from utterly different ideological worlds, yet they are all African in origin.

Images dealing with spirituality are similarly various. In Kamel Dridi's sequential images of his Tunisian mother praying toward Mecca, her veiled figure is a blur of incorporeal light. In metaphorical images of Yoruba religious rituals by the Nigerian-born Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955-89), the artist's nude body projects a sensual homoerotic charge.

Stretching the frame still further are works that have no overt "African" content at all. Some are conceptual: the Zimbabwe-born artist Gordon Bleach photographs himself in slow exposure drawing patterns with a flashlight in midair. Others are profoundly personal: the disturbing photographs of stillborn infants by the Moroccan artist Touhami Ennadre were made in reaction to his own mother's death. Still others were made outside Africa altogether: La-

mia Naji's abstracted studies of Italian architecture are examples.

Ms. Naji clearly moves in a broad international mainstream, as do other artists in the show. Zarina Bhimji's photos of pathology lab specimens bear comparison with Andres Serrano's morgue series; Fani-Kayode's symbolic statements about being African and gay might usefully be contrasted with the genitally fixated and potentially racist images of black men by Robert Mapplethorpe. Each of these African artists demonstrates that "African art" cannot be defined by a fixed set of themes or styles.

At the same time, much of the work in "In/sight" does refer to the complex amalgam of events and attitudes that form the post-colonial history of the continent. This is literally the case in the gallery devoted to photographs from Drum, the influential magazine that in the 1950's and 60's documented African struggles for independence.

Here the epochal and the ordinary sit side by side. And from Gopal Naransamy's onstage shot of a joyous young Miriam Makeba, to Christian Gbagbo's images of boisterous election rallies, to Peter Magubane's pictures of a man gunned down in the street, this archival gathering is an enthralling show in itself.

But can even this factual record of the turbulence and enthusiasm of an era be said to constitute a portrait of Africa? The answer, of course, is no. The subject is simply too vast, too fluid, too contradictory. Yet over and over, portraiture — the effort to shape and fix an identity in a shifting world — is the theme this show revolves around.

It is there, for example, in the self-portraits made by the teen-age Samuel Fosso in the 1970's, in which, with mock gravity, he models a pair of bell-bottom trousers, then two different sets of underwear. And in the likenesses of Cairo shopkeepers by Nabil Boutros. And in Santu Mofokeng's desolate photographs of apartheid in South Africa, which he refers to as autobiography.

Perhaps the most embracing self-image, though, is by the 32-year-old Nigerian-born Iké Udé. His single work is a boxlike installation with cut-out windows. The exterior is plastered with pictures of a paradisiacal and "primitive" Africa clipped from magazines and travel ads; the interior holds photographic portraits of Mr. Udé's family, many close in style and spirit to the work of Meissa Gaye, Salla Casset and Seydou Keita, with which the show began.

This image, equally political and personal, brings the show full circle. It is naturally a circle with many missing links and a circumference as yet unmeasured. Still "In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present," which was produced by the Guggenheim, is an important venture into the terrain. And by sifting themes and raising ideas and remaining determinedly incomplete, it suggests an immense and exciting body of work waiting to be discovered.

"In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present" remains at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street, through Sept. 29.