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# Métissage Culturelle: Identity, Aesthetics, and the Social Roles of Portraiture in Saint Louis du Sénégal

Shailee Wilson  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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Métissage Culturelle: Identity, Aesthetics,  
and the Social Roles of Portraiture in Saint Louis du Sénégal

Wilson, Shailee

Academic Director: DIALLO, Souleye

Project Advisor: SOULEYMANE, Ngom

University of San Francisco

Art History B.A

Darka, Sénégal

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## **Abstract**

With so clear a history, geography, and memory located in the colonial area, this study explores how contemporary St. Louis, du Sénégal expresses a synthesis of two identities. Métissage culturelle, defined as Franco-African mixed cultural heritage, is rooted in both the public and imaginative identities of St. Louisans creative, artistic, and political force, was heavily influenced by social upheaval and transformation post-Independence. This essay argues that nineteenth century portrait photography was an outlet for Sénégalais to create their alternative, self-defined identities in response to changes within their social and cultural environment. Portrait photography is discussed through two frameworks, the social role of the photographer and the agency of the individual. Photography is also discussed in terms of how it produces meaningful discourses by means of profiling, recording, and transferring newer ways of seeing.

*Art History, Cultural Anthropology*

## **Acknowledgements**

Many people contributed to this project in various ways. To everyone who took the time out of their busy lives to sit down for formal interviews, I thank you for sharing your experiences, sage knowledge and interests. To the entire staff of SIT, especially Souleye Diallo, Souleymane Ngom, and Bouna Fall, none of my discoveries would have been possible without your encouragement, deadlines, and guidance. And certainly not least, to my homestay families in St.Louis and Dakar thank you for giving me shelter, supporting my interests, helping me with my wolof, and instructing me on the art of teranga.

## **Foreword**

The past few months have been a critical time creatively and academically. Here in Sénégal, my initial interest in photography found untold inspiration; the West African country is a visual haven where people like to see and show. Take a look around and you'll find that photographs of people are hanging within private spaces, held together with tape, inside a lover's necklaces, keepsakes on a cab driver's dashboards, assorted in albums, and essential to the character of a workshops, t-shirt, and place. It all begins by sharing of a few photographs, especially those of people - the record of distant ancestors, of achievements of members of the family, of vanished modes of style in 20th ce. portraits - photographs allow the outsider a view from a distance. A simple interaction can lead to a meeting with a family history, as my experiences have taught me.

My discoveries of African photographic digital collect as well as the writings of art historians focusing on the importance of visual documentation and the biographical and historical value of personal accounts compelled me to deepen my understanding of the values that lay hidden in photographic images. I steered my research in a new, challenging direction to profile Sénégalais portrait photographers in the 20th and 21th century. I chose to study portraits in depth because they reflect how people want to project themselves socially, and they seemed to me to have the bearing on my attempts to examine the multiple ways in which Sénégalais assert their rights to self-definition. As we will see, the camera was appropriated to become a valuable asset against well worn visual clichés. To do this, I needed to find out how nineteenth century social identities were expressed and how they controlled the camera's ability to reflect what is placed before it. I also sought out opinions on the sources of 20th ce. photography, particularly portraits, and their function as an historical artifact of the past.

This study first overviews the nature of photography and introduces the historical role of photography in St.Louis, du Sénégal. Later, this study examines the significance of photography for a

community with a long memory of its eminent role in the colonial administration. With this examination of St.Louisian photographs and photographers, I hope to articulate how portrait photography is an ideal form to communicate cultural and societal transformations that fall outside of the national, public image. And I wonder, how does modernity and tradition coexist in St.Louisian photographic representations and what does this melange reveal about the present day lived experiences and historical legacy that has shaped people's lives there. Finally, this study includes a section on the treatment of historical photography in the permanent collection of the IFAN Museum in Sénégal's urban capital city of Dakar.

## **Introduction**

The role of photography in St.Louis, du Sénégal

Photography was taken up as a momentous form of portraiture during the mid-nineteenth century. Studio portraiture began to mushroom in Europe during the 1850s, and according to recent photographic studies, historians note that the demand for studio images found its most diverse and novel expression in West Africa beginning in the post-independence era of the 1960s (Peffer 4). The presence and popularity of portrait photography during this period was most notable in urban areas because the urban environments provided a new level of freedom, new avenues of pursuits, and diverse milieus of figures and personalities. Exceptionally, in the coastal town of St-Louis photography flourished among a growing African middle class. It is no surprise that St-Louis was one of the first to adapt photography to their social biographies. Saint Louis was a key site for developing elegance and particular norms of modernity in response to the implications of French assimilationist policy. The first European studio was opened here in 1860, and by the 1920's, African owned, urban studios were displaying portraits on their walls. In Sénégal's photographic history, the first generation of French-speaking African photographers received photographic training in French professional studios in Africa or in France itself and the early pioneers of the trade all hailed from St-Louis.

Photographs may not be more memorable than oral history in Sénégal; yet, grounded in a regional as well as local St.Louisian history, a reading of prevalent reforms reveals a collective history and shared sense of experience. Métissage culture in late-nineteenth and early twentieth century St-Louis provides the prime context for this study because it led to not only a proliferation of images made for the visual production of modernité and local St.Louisian identities, but to a series of artist's photography studios responding on this development. I argue that the burgeoning photographic movement pouring out of St-Louis during the twentieth century became a means of portraying a virtue of elegance and sophistication. Furthermore, the close proximity of the métis population in metropolitan



St-Louis to symbols of modernity, specifically the burgeoning photographic movement, afforded them strategies to fashion their representations to their liking. Subsequently, by the mid-twentieth century, a defining moment in this regard, St.Louisans photographers were responding to a desire to reflect the ideal characteristics of well-educated, virtuous middle-class to the wider community.

### **Historical and Academic Context**

The history of Saint Louis, du Sénégal shapes the larger process of identity formation and the development of photographic techniques in the region. This history left its imprint upon St.Louisian social identities and should be understood through the development of the métis class, and the strategies people employed to display themselves publicly.

#### Site : St-Louis du Sénégal

In 1628, the first French commercial institution was established near the island of St-Louis, Saint-Louis, du Sénégal became one of the major trading posts in Africa and, as a result, the coastal town became the earliest West African community to experience European education, culture and institutions. In his article, “Assimilation in Eighteenth-Century Senegal,” John D. Hargreaves explains that the nature of French influence on Sénégal was tri-fold. Historically, French assimilationist policy was not only an administrative regime but a cultural legacy that affected religion, formed European-type institutions by drafting civic rights, duties and civil government, and including French standards and values (Hargreaves 181). The transformation of St-Louis from trading post to colony, *comptoir* as it was called, occurred slowly in the early half of the 19th century. In the case of St-Louis, blurred cultural boundaries are

responsible for its growth “from comptoir to a city without developing the radical separation between African and European communities” (Hargreaves 153).

In 1848, St-Louis became one of the “four communes” along with Rufisque, Dakar, and Gorée. As the new century dawned, St-Louis prospered as one of the privileged cities within the French colonial administration where residents were eligible for French citizenship under the condition that they agreed to abide by French law<sup>1</sup>. In 1895, the French had succeeded in consolidating Sénégal administratively into the Federation of French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale Française) naming St-Louis the capital of l’AOF, and thus affirming French cultural expectations while strengthening St-Louis as a regional center of trade and commerce. Colonial installation in St-Louis followed the rubric of “la mission civilisatrice.” A method by which colonial production created schools, commerce, clinics, and military bases and instilled christianity, Western morals, and social infrastructures to advance the “assimilation” of the region.

Those who walked the sandy streets of St-Louis in the early years of the 20th ce. would have observed a port city renowned for its elegance and distinction. As a result of the presence of European traders, a new urban landscape and Sénégal’s first modern city formed in a manner that was not wholly Sénégalaise but not entirely French either. St-Louisian syncretism, defined as a cultural fusion of two entities, was bolstered by a high social class of female entrepreneurs. These Sénégalais women, signares<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1) as they were called, rose to prominence during the transatlantic slave trade through their work in public areas, primarily by their skills in negotiating the migration and settlement of slaves from the interior and navigating up the Sénégal river to mercantile trade depots. As merchants, signares acted as intermediaries and interpreters in the community both economically and culturally. Historian Hilary

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<sup>1</sup> Africans living outside of the four communes were considered “subjects.”

<sup>2</sup> Derived from the portuguese word senhora

Jones offers us a glimpse into the private and public lives of signares in her book, “Métis of Sénégal.” According to Jones’ extensive survey of colonial life in Sénégal, Saint Louis developed as a vibrant port in a way that operated differently than other ports in the Atlantic world (20 Jones). Signares undoubtedly demanded respect and authority within the colonial community as successful entrepreneurs who profited from the slave trade, but their interior lives, Jones notes, also included inter-racial ménages that provided the domestic needs of European men. She adds that the socio-political benefits of these temporary liaisons, “signares produced a group of men and women familiar with the region’s social and cultural environment who remained loyal to British and French authorities” (Jones 21). The advantages of these unions are multi-fold, first, trade relations improved between European traders on the coast and producers in the Sénégal river valley , secondly a class of individuals with blood ties to Europe were lent superior political power in an era defined by ideologies of race, class, and gender.

Men and women of mixed French and African racial ancestry referred to themselves as métis, a french term literally meaning “half-caste”. Family relationships within between Europeans and Sénégalais were constituted by a marriage custom known as “mariage à la mode du pays” and evidence suggest that these informal marriage arrangements were apart of, “l’originalité de la société saint-louisienne. . .” (Bonnardel 43) Despite intense scrutiny by the clergy who objected to unions that occurred outside of French civil law, these family relationships constituted the early co-existence of relations between European men and African woman (Jones 79). In this fashion, social and economic mobility depended on the the growth of métis lineages and patrilineal inheritance, “la fille mariée à la mode du pays prend le nom de son mari et fait les honneurs de la maison<sup>3</sup>” (Bonnardel 43). As the descendants of signares and

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<sup>3</sup> The bride in an mariage à la mode du pays arrangement takes the name of her spouse and the honor of his prestige.

European men, Hilary Jones best describes métis population as “in between citizen and subject” (Jones 32), and as one person stated, “ils étaient les français is du Afrique<sup>4</sup>” (Diagne, Golbert)

. Living in the four communes, the métis population benefited the most from their French civil status, French education, and the wealth in gold, real estate, and slaves passed down to them.

As religion and Christian orthodoxy took on new significance, the meaning of marriage also changed. For individuals of great social standing, the most advantageous marriage involved a union under French law with a priest officiating and the couple conforming to bourgeois expectations of marriage. For métis families, the symbolic capital conferred through these unions strengthened the family’s influence in business, politics, and society in the colony, consequently, a tight-knit group independent-minded families became the privileged class. Writing in 1853, Abbé David Boilat, son of a signare, deals primarily with documenting nineteenth century wolof culture in St.Louis in his book, “Esquisses Sénégalais,” French for “Senegalese Sketches.” Boilat underscored the marriage practices between two families of equal standing that defined the towns social stratification:

They then pass to a verbal contract whereby they acknowledge what each spouse brings: the parents, close allies, and friends all pride themselves in adding to the girl's fortune. Each one also furnishes their part in the celebration because outside of the guests, one must send dishes of food to the entourage of gourmets, the old signares and griots who will sing praises to the couple for eight hours. . . The day of the celebration the bride is adorned with all of the pompe africaine, that is to say her ears and neck are encircled with gold; she is dressed in *white*, surrounded by her parents, and followed by a multitude of domestics all luxuriously dressed and with their heads covered with Loid d’Or coins pierced in a manner to imitate a true headpiece” (35 Jones).

According to Boilat’s description, the emphasis families placed on bringing both West African and Western rituals into marriage customs is apparent. In contrast to marriage à la mode, Christian ordained

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<sup>4</sup> Personal interview translated into English: “they were the French of Africa”.

marriages combined wolof traditions of dowry and griots<sup>5</sup> and French bourgeoisie notions of courtship, and even a white wedding dress. Boilat's words present the importance of bourgeois respectability, but also, the importance of regional customs in the realm of marriage, family and kinship. This concept is considered further by Jones as she states: "signares, in particular, incorporated aspects of Islam and Wolof belief systems. . . In doing so, these women fostered a dual cultural outlook that distinguished them and their children. . . " Jones goes on to contextualize the elite's ability to employ French in some circumstances and Wolof in others in the foundation of 'a third space -- an urban Wolof town, St-Louis neither replicated European society nor directly corresponded to the societies of Sénégal's mainland' (Jones 33).

Métis occupied a position of high social standing in St-Louis during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most of the African women who established the first wave of métis remain anonymous or lost to history (Jones 39). Yet, the cultural flexibility that they embodied remained inherent in their offspring, growth and empowerment of the habitants,<sup>6</sup> and gave rise to the self-conscious representations of town residents that had unforeseen impacts on Sénégalais photographic portraiture. Sénégalais are the protagonist of these private images, and through the transfer of power in photographic imaging, they become agents who deliberately engage with new displays of distinction.

Moving forward in time, in 1947, St.Louisian writer Alioune Diop wrote candidly on the struggle of living in contradictory geographical and mental spaces when constructing and performing a sense of personhood. He internalizes this concept as "niam n'goura."<sup>7</sup> Niam n'gora is a self-reflexive wolof term

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<sup>5</sup> praise-singers

<sup>6</sup> Habitants, of part-African or African descent, are defined as free persons living on the establishment of the French colonies.

<sup>7</sup> Under Alioune Diop's editorship, the literary journal *Présence Africaine* published his article "L'Education Africaine".

that referred to ‘mentalement métisée’, or the mental fusion of cultural elements, and the tensions, contradictions and conflicts of carving a self-affirming African identity in the modern world. In awareness of western civilizations impact on his formative years of social and primary education, Alioune Diop recalls a period of searching for himself: “Neither White, Yellow, or Black, unable to return completely to our original traditions nor to assimilate to Europe, we had the feeling that we were a new race, mentally cross-bred, but one that has not been taught to know its originality and that had barely become aware of it (Coats 210).

## **LIT REVIEW**

A number of scholars have examined the formation and development of photographic portraiture in Africa. These studies have charted the development of photography by illustrating the many and varied ways photography functions in the construction of meaning. Much less attention has been paid to the relationship between the social history of cultural métissage and the practice of Photography in the area of St-Louis, Sénégal; however, the work of several particular scholars has given attention to post-colonial studies of West Africa and the lasting effects of culture on the photographic image.

“Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa” is an anthology of essays by scholars in the field of photography who offer interpretations on the cultural and historical role of photography in Africa. The twelve separately themed essays look at early photography, important photographers’ studios, and particularly of interest to this study, the uses of portraiture in the 19th, 20th, and 21st century. This work poses critical questions on the common culture of photography and the social and political implications of changing technologies for portraiture.

Hudita Mustafa, photographic writer and author of the article, “Portraits of Modernity: Fashioning Selves in Dakarois,” speaks on the different forms of creation and distribution of popular photographic portraiture in Dakar. Hudita Mustapha indicates, “women collect and display photographs of themselves dressed as elegantly as possible, a practice called *sañse*” (Mustafa 172). *Sañse* is the way that Dakar women ‘craft their social persona and they are usually dressed in embroidered boubous, gold jewelry, elaborate coiffures, and headscarves’. Her words emphasize the importance of portraiture to show how selves have been reclaimed and reformed through strategies of self-invention. Mustafa states, “in this context, the photographic collection, in the form of the album, becomes an African woman’s prize property and familial archive, continually reinvigorating sartorial display and distinctions” (Mustafa 175). *Sañse* is an instance where a Dakarois woman exhibits agency by the way that she fashions herself. As Mustafa further demonstrates, this concept extends to ideologies of wealth, status, honor, and prestige. Mustafa writes:

By the 1950s, a practice called *xoymet* in Wolof had made portraits part of bridal transfers in Saint-Louis. On her wedding night, a bride was carried to her husband’s home. His room would be temporarily decorated with ornaments and portraits borrowed from her neighbors and relatives. This must have provided a kind of introduction of her social network to the new family (Mustafa 177)

In this type of photograph, having a family portrait on the wall symbolized the presentation of a well-rounded, stable family. Furthermore, having a family portrait on the wall may have signified consent and good-will on the part of the in-laws.

Scholars of colonial theory have discussed the aesthetic strategies and artistic inventions the public brings to the co-authorship of meaning in photography. Hilary Jones offers a comprehensive overview of the history, politics and society of métis in “The Métis of Sénégal” and describes the social context of métis in the nineteenth century as a small group invested in wealth and influence. Hilary states,

“by the late nineteenth century, virtually all of the métis were related by marriage (Hilary 80). The public images of métisess and the visual markers that provide views of the daily habits of these families, such as their choices as consumers, the clothes they wore, the food that they ate, the dwellings that they inhabited, and most relevant to my research, the portraits that they sat for is noted. She writes, “photographs of métis taken in the last quarter of the nineteenth century depict the formal yet dignified image expected of the bourgeoisie” (Jones 91). The European trade houses and French merchants, officials, and tailors gave the métis population exclusive access to a sense of refinement, property, and modest luxury. She goes on to explain that the dress and comportment of the métis reflected their favor of the latest European trends and fashions which was decidedly different than the stylistic choices of their signar foremothers. Jones also pays close attention to métis men and the ways that they are depicted in photographs: “they typically wore tailored suits with jackets, vests, pocket watches, and European neckties. The men had elegant, neatly trimmed moustaches and sideburns or the goatee popular among the educated French elite. They wore their hair closely cut and parted on the side in a style appropriate for refined gentlemen” (Jones 91). Jones offers the reader further evidence of the ways that metis men and women adapted to dress, through the nineteenth century writer David Boilat’s commentary. According to Boilat, habitant men dressed “entirely à la française”<sup>8</sup>. These descriptions of physical appearance show that these outward symbols were one of the way the métis population distinguished themselves. To add, conforming their appearance to French styles undoubtedly elevated their respectability when conducting business and affirmed their social leverage.

In an analysis of the salon as an important center of domestic life, the portraits that métis men and women sat for are brought forth in a series of photographs that appear to conform to the idea of the

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<sup>8</sup> Translation into English: “Entirely like the French”.



“virtuous and well-fashioned life of the modern citizen” (Jones 93) Jones writes, “typically, photographs depicted people of mixed-racial heritage in a salon-like setting and posed next to or seated in ornate, high-backed Victorian chairs This trend can be seen in a salon-like setting and posed next to or seated in ornate, high backed Victorian chairs” (Jones 93) (Figure 1.2). These images offer an indication of the importance of imagining oneself as a respectable citizen. Jones goes on to underscore the ways that family households reinforces European tastes to establish a reputation : “the household served as the central location to exchange ideas and circulate capital between visiting foreigners and African townspeople. . . wives and daughters served as powerful vehicles in which to communicate the impression of a respectable household. And yet photographs reveal disruption in the typical image associated with the métis elit. In keeping with the style set by signares, African women continued to wear their hair wrapped in cloth” (Jones 94). Jones uses photographs as evidence to note the many ways that respectable métis stylized themselves and the versions of urban life they wished to convey. The photographers that staged these sittings in the homes of elite residents are not mentioned but this particular argument evidences the growing interests in projecting the image of a western-educated African town and the images that put métis families at the center of life in the colonies.

“The World and the Local Canvas: Visuality and Empowerment in Dakar”<sup>9</sup>, is Joshua Kemp’s dissertation on the use of photography and mass produced media images in Dakar. Kemp argues that Sénégalais visual expressions are in constant friction because Dakar is a contact zone between the village and the city. This idea is explained further through the use of photography and mass produced media images in Dakar as Kemp posits, “images provide a means of coping with that reality, and a means of eking out a measure of power and pleasure where there so often appears to be only

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<sup>9</sup> Kemp, Joshua. "The World and the Local Canvas: Visuality and Empowerment in Dakar, Senegal." Order No. 3335955 University of California, Los Angeles, 2008. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest*. Web. 7 May 2014.

adversity.” (Kemp 15). This perspective is useful because it focuses attention on the idea of one’s cultural identity being suspended between two associations, as a result, individuals cope and draw strength from the external symbols and narratives that tie them into a global culture.

In chapter three of his study, Kemp profiles the first photos and the early African photographs that shaped the photography industry in Sénégal. As an informed viewer, Kemp observes that the institutional framework and relations of power within colonial photography lure uninformed viewers to draw stereotypes and ‘to consume a reality constructed in specific contexts, by specific forces, for more or less defined purposes’ (83 Kemp). In Sénégal’s context, the medium of photography has historically been linked to colonial ethnographic practices in which case colonial “subjects” were not in control of how they were represented both in written and visually reportages. Rather, “the photograph is presented as data, free of the contamination of human individuality. In this way, the photography of the colonial administration rendered its subjects voiceless.<sup>10</sup>” (Kemp 61). The preservation and mapping of history is especially complex if we consider that photography is seldom free of bias. Kemp acknowledges the bias in a constructive discourse that allows us to form a base of knowledge and point of reference.

Finally, Kemp charts the emergence of studios within the history of photographic practice in St-Louis. He aptly notes the point where photography beckoned a commercial interest and provided opportunities for empowerment. He explains that this evolution had multilayered benefits for “individuals who found a new source of power in the act of having their image photographically reproduced. . . and by individuals who found in photography both a trade and an outlet for creative impulses” (70 Kemp). This explanation is derived from studying the pioneers of photography who “enjoyed a high social

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<sup>10</sup> The detail and formulaic composition of colonial portraits as detached, stiff, impersonal and the viewer’s perspective is either at eye-level with or above the subject. (383 Cameron)

status, enhanced considerably by the fact that the service they provided factored heavily in the social standing and self-image of their clients” (73 Kemp). Further in his analysis of photography, Kemp explains “at the time of its inception the medium had the effect of bestowing power upon on group and silencing another. As that power shifted, so did the emphasis on power shift in the direction of connection. As Africans took control of their own representation they achieved a new measure of power and began producing visual records of connection - to families, friends, places, events and ideas” (82 Kemp).

Isolde Brielmaier’s “Mombasa on Display: Photography and the Formation of an Urban Public, from the 1940s Onward” studies a similar social function of images through the way that they operate in particular settings. Brielmaier’s essay illustrates that the life history of images is continuously open to “imagine, negotiate, and produce new urban subjectivities.” (256 Brielmaier). Brielmaier studies the visual details in a series of photographs that provide evidence of a “modern subjectivity” (Brielmaier 256) that necessitated a different approach to photography in the ways in which sitters desired to be staged in front of the camera. In doing so, Brielmaier distinguishes that by the late 1950s and into post-independence 1960s, ‘the photography studio, in turn, emerged as one venue in which people carried out a process of identifying and constructing ideas of themselves” (Brielmaier 258) Clients never go to a studio by chance. They may be inspired by a special occasion, such as Tabaski or Christmas or a private one such as a Baptism, either way, Brielmaier claims that going to a photo studio is self-biographical and an attempt to show the world how you envision yourself.

## **Methodologies**

Role of the researcher

A good part of my research was getting a solid idea of how my questions fit into the larger dialogues about representations and the present day culture of métissage in St-Louis. There was no way that this project could have been undertaken without visiting St-Louis. The people I was relied on working with were mostly in St-Louis and I believe my findings benefited from learning from people and hearing experiences one-on-one. Thus, I spent ten days in St-Louis, from April 19 - May 1st. I focus on the island of St-Louis itself, which simply allowed for access to valuable locations, informants and resources. I had access to University Gaston Berger, Teranga FM, l'Institut Francais à St.Louis, and Le Centre Culturel Regional de St-Louis. Although, my research in St-Louis involved many trips to see old photographs but the majority of my archival research was conducted in Dakar.

### Research Methods

The broad collection of historical and archived photography mandated carefully thought out research methods. The first method employed in this project was a visit to several museums in downtown Dakar to observe and determine how accessible and relevant photographic collections are to Sénégal. This observation technique occurred twice throughout the study; the first time as a preliminary examination and the second as an assessment of how the historical interpretation interacts with the contemporary themes within the framework of my results and findings.

This study utilized secondary research collected through online databases and books from the libraries at the School for International Training, l'Institut Francais à Dakar, and the West African Research Center (WARC). Initially, I had been looking for too much information in identity politics and cultural theory, and I realized that most of that material covered pan-Africanism and Negritude during pre-Independence, or it spoke in broad terms about an “African humanity”, but it quickly became

obvious that the information that would be most relevant to my project was site specific historical literature: “Les Lumières d’une Cité Ndar” by Moussa Iba Amett Diop, “Esquisses Sénégalaise” by David Boilat, and St-Louis du Sénégal, Evolution d’une ville en Milieu Africain were essential insights into nineteenth century St-Louis.

The majority of the data in the study was collected through structured interviews with archivist, professors, art historians, photographers, and museum curators, and also informal conversations with a variety of Sénégalaise individuals and my homestay families. My academic advisor Souleymane Ngom provided me with preliminary information on names of possible sources, institutions, and professionals to pursue. After gathering a base of knowledge I began telephoning possible informants and setting up meetings in St.Louis, since I was ready to asked informed questions. I was able to find most of my interviewees through communication and networking. Thus, I was able to meet many of the important figures of St.Louis who gave me background information on the outlook of contemporary cultural metissage and their own experiences with the ambiguity of St.Louis’ evolving identity. I conducted a total of eight interviews and all of the interviews were conducted in French and translated into English by the researcher. It was challenging to express my academic and intellectual ideas in French but it asked me to interact and learn how to talk about these ideas with Sénégalais. To ensure accuracy each interview was tape recorded with the consent of informants.

My research has been rooted in a sociological frameworks that asks people currently living in St-Louis how they interact with their dual cultural heritage. The St.Louisian local art scene is very small, and this made it easy to contact people. I found myself opening questions to those within academic circles and St-Louisans familiar with it’s history, for example my homestay family in St.Louis. While

most of my informants spoke excellent French, I was prevented from interviewing some people with whom I was interested in speaking because I found out they spoke no French whatsoever.

Before each interview the interviewee was informed on the project's intent and purpose. I clearly explained my goals with an explanation of my background and what I was researching. Additionally, each informant was asked for permission to publish their names with my findings. From there the interviews consisted of direct questions that were aimed to gather specific information in my area of study. Open-ended questions were posed in order to obtain the most possible information and receive diverse responses. After each interview, informants were asked for additional resources or contacts in the field to aid further research. At first, interviews were geared towards discovering the effort being made to preserve cultural métissage and the effect the digital age is having on this process. This research also branched into incorporating formal and contextual analyses of single photographs and the participants personal experience with portrait studios and family photographs.

Many barriers accompany searching for photographic resources, and there is much difficulty ensuring consent to use copyrighted photographs. As a result, I had to stray from my initial aim of an in-depth photographic analysis of the work of Mama Casset. It was really hard to evaluate these photographs knowing that I would have to exclude copies in my paper. I spent a lot of time thinking about a photographic analysis and the visual points I wanted to get across to the reader that I pulled out au lieu de interviewee's ideas and secondary quotes. A final factor, it was increasingly difficult to not have access to the photographic collection of the Musée de Centre de recherches et de documentation (CRDS) in St.Louis because the museum is under construction until July 2014. The disadvantage of not using the CRDS's permanent collection of photographs was mended by the IFAN's rich collection of photographic and visual sources.

There were several failed attempts at contacting contemporary photographers. I wanted to speak with the people who create photography and on whom I was making claims, but I think I came away with slightly more well-rounded research talking to professionals in the critical and artistic domain. The issue of contacts is the most significant source of problems that affected my data. Aside from weak data from interviews with photographers, the rest of my data was strong. Many of the interviews seemed to speak to each other, and while the language barrier was not significant. Once or twice my tape recorder didn't pick up sound well, and I often was forced to leave out some piece of relevant information because the recording wasn't audible, in contrast to an actual communicative misunderstanding.

## **Findings**

### Métissage Culturelle

The area known generally as St-Louis is composed of three separate land masses: Sor, the island of St-Louis (Ndar in Wolof), and La Langue de Barbarie, a long stretch of land mass referred to in Wolof as Guet N'dar in the south and N'dar Toute in the North. On the second floor of the governance building at the center of the island, a reprinted copy of "l'Origine du Nom N'dar" by Ravane Boye hangs on the office walls of the Archivist Ngor Sène. The document offers one myth of the origin of the first Sénégalais in St.Louis: "le premier village de la region voisine de l'embouchure du Senegal fut fondé par Yammane Yalla, qui venait du pays de Woul avec sa femme<sup>11</sup>". The island of N'dar, was then the property of the king of Woul. In the Wolof tradition, names indicate hidden kin ties and maternal kin ties absent from official record. While knowledge of one's patrilineal lineage can unveil

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<sup>11</sup> Translation into English: Yammane Yalla, the founder of the first village in the region, came from Woul with his wife.

one's place in the social order, this information also remains part of the collective memory. Similarly, St.Louisans recognize that names evoke European or African kin ties. For example, the names Guillabert, Bancal, Devès, d'Erneville, and Crespin are métis lineages still recognized today for their contributions to politics, law, education and diplomacy in colonial and post-independent St-Louis.

While bi-racial métissage is often written about, St.Louisans living currently in St.Louis believe that the phenomenon has lost part of its novelty. The people I spoke with all seem to express recurring themes of tolerance, openness, and adaptability in the way that they view themselves. Whether by declaring outright that the connotations of racial métissage was an ideal promoted only by European settlers, or that their group actions and identities do not permit a closed mind frame, all of the St.Louisans with whom I spoke with saw it more as a historical role from which they were moving beyond. Further, this was made clear by a statement of Golbert Diagne, "l'image de St.Louis, appartient du monde. . . nous sommes devenu, par la force de choses et de l'histoire, du citoyen du monde. . ." <sup>12</sup> (Diagne, Golbert). Although everyone I interviewed was able to give me information on the history of signares and descendants of affluent métis families currently living in St-Louis, several responses were oriented toward promoting change and a vested interest to obtain recognition for their history. Diagne follows up with, "Saint-Louis à l'image d'une ville à la fois religieuse et culturellement riche où tout le monde peut se trouver, quelque soit leur origine et leur culture d'appartenance" <sup>13</sup> (Diagne Golbert). This statement serves as one example of how St.Louisans perceive their ability to renew and adapt to different cultures. This very dynamism can take on different meanings with different

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<sup>12</sup> Personal interview translated into English: "the image of St.Louis belongs to the world. We are now, by the forces of history, citizens of the world".

<sup>13</sup> Personal interview translated into English: "St.Louis has the image of a city both religiously and culturally rich where everyone can find some sense of familiarity and their home culture".



individuals but it the majority of my informants were always expressing a deep sense of respect, love, and openness to both the community it represents and the global community.

### “Doomu Ndar’ and ‘Dolli Ndar’: Social Theory and Cultural Logic

“Il est très courant d’entendre une personne dire [French] « je suis un vrai fils de Saint-Louis, » [Wolof] ‘Doomu Ndar piir laa<sup>14</sup>.’” (Ibrahima Sarr) Dr. Ibrahima Sarr offers these words on the concept of “doomu ndar,’ Wolof for child of St-Louis. The idea of doomu ndar is passed down from generation to generation. Usually it is a family member who can trace their lineage to an older generation living in St-Louis who tells what their grandparents did, where their great-grandparents lived, and the story of their family arriving in St.Louis. The doomu ndar, Saint Louisans by descent, are said to almost all have left the island of St.Louis. According to journalist, Golbert Diagne, “nous nous demandons, des doom n’dar. Pur et dur, nous sommes les St-louisans et nous ne débarassons pas. Les autres sont les sénégalais. Qui sont venu, qui sont dolli ndar. Mais dans le composition, dans la recomposition, c’est un ensemble qui composent le nationalité des authentiques sénégalais<sup>15</sup> (Golbert Diagne).

Sitting in Louis Camara’s living room and surveying his photos was quite different from flipping through the photo collection at IFAN. My interest in the images on the board led to another collection of images, an album Louis keeps in book shelf in his living room. Louis Camara, a well-known writer who has lived in St-Louis his entire life, I came to find, is an historian of sorts, a keeper of the oral history of St-Louis through his published novels and a keeper of the visual history of his own life, that of

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<sup>14</sup> Personal interview translated into English: “You often will hear people say, “I am a native St.Louisian,” ‘a child of St.Louis.”

<sup>15</sup> Personal interview translated into English: “We ask ourselves if we are the children of St.Louis. Through and through, we are St.Louisians and we cannot let that go. The others are Senegalese who have come here, who are the dolli ndar. But in the image and re-imaging, we are a collective belonging to an authentically Sénégalais togetherness”.

his childhood, and that of his community in St-Louis. The photographs he showed me trace almost fifty years of a relationship; they capture the confidence of youth up until the present. Of Saint Louisans surveyed, Louis Camara is one of the many individuals who can trace his family's heritage<sup>16</sup>. His family lived on the northern side of the island, and his great-grandfather was the commandant du cercle (personal interview).

Perhaps one of the most identifiable aspects in the way that individuals' ideas of how they relate to the island of St-Louis the vocabulary, and the human attributes they give 'her'. Louis articulates his biological and aesthetic connection to St-Louis in a moment of poetic honesty, "il y à un espace cordon ombilical. . . St-Louis est ma mère<sup>17</sup>" (Camara, Louis) His statement was carefully constructed to both say that he is historically a doomu ndar as well as clue one into the spiritual, symbolical complexity that communicates St-Louis role and place within his personal life. By recalling mother St-Louis, her children endow her with the guardianship of certain lineages and mark the her important role in the lives of those who are part of her heritage. Every St-Louisans understands and exhibits different stories, and details of how the depending on his/her individual connection, but each individual I spoke with expressed the larger aim of taking control and safeguarding the details that form the way St-Louis and her legacy is perceived.

"Ku Wat Sa Tàq Doo Tu Ñu La Xam"

Golbert Diagne, journalist at St.Louis's local radio station Teranga FM and long-time St.Louisian resident shared with me the wolof proverb "ku wat sa tàq doo tu ñu la xam<sup>18</sup>". The context

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<sup>16</sup> He knows that his great-grandfather followed a marabout to St-Louis.

<sup>17</sup> Personal interview translated into English: "There is an umbilical cord to this space. . . St-Louis is my mother".

<sup>18</sup>Translated by the researcher into English as: "If you get rid of what defines you, if you change what makes up your identity, you will lose the most essential aspects of yourself".

of this phrase is referring to St.Louis's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. According to Diagne, "dans le traditions purement Saint-Louisenne, il y un diction, une philosophie qui dit: si on perds son coiffure d'origine, parce que dans notre tradition chaque coiffure symbolise une famille, une religion, une sect, qui se dégage le coiffure, personne ne l'identite."<sup>19</sup> When I asked the Ben Jelloun, the director of le Syndicat D'initiative<sup>20</sup> in St-Louis, why St.Louisans hold this view so strongly, he input that that the "melange de la culture qui fait une facon de faire"<sup>21</sup> (Jelloun, Ben).

Whether on the north of south side of the island, everyday habits and individual choices are not beyond the reach of this idea. St-Louisans dress in formal western attire for the public, but how does appearance emphasize the development of aesthetic taste? In further discussion of strategies employed to visually communicate, Golbert Diagne spoke of how for three hundred years St-Louisans identified with French nationalism. He explained to me that because of its founding as the premier commune in Franco-Afrique, because the first lycée was founded in St-Louis, because it was the first port open to Islam, the first St.Louisans "assuraient un l'image."<sup>22</sup> Diagne adds,

. . . qui se fait affecter par le maniere de parler, la diction, l'articulation, le terme, le sonne de la voix. . . pendant beaucoup de temps, ils ont etait le dessous des autres. Et c'est normal quequel part apres l'indépendance, ce qui venaient ailleurs ou ce qui reste chez ailleurs, tentaient les St.Louisienues définissent. Ils ne sont pas définissent, ils ont civilisé. La culture est l'instruction font que nous créons la difference<sup>23</sup>(Diagne, Golbert)

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<sup>19</sup>Personal interview translated into English: "In the authentic St-Louisian manner, there is a saying, a philosophy that goes: if you lose your original hairstyle, because in our tradition each hairstyle symbolises a family, a religion, a clan, so if you take out this which defines you, no one will know who you are anymore".

<sup>20</sup> Official office of tourism.

<sup>21</sup> Personal interview translated into English: "a mix of cultures creates a unique perspective on life".

<sup>22</sup> Personal interview translated into English: "secured an image".

<sup>23</sup> Personal interview translated into English: "this manifested itself through a manner of speech, vernacular, lexicon, accents. . . For many years, they were underneath the others [French settlers]. It is normal that somewhere after independence, some people who come from elsewhere tried to define or determine them. They are not defined by anything, they are sophisticated. Culture is instructs our differences".

From the Sénégalais dress of signares to the mixture of style in the contemporary era, for many choices of garments, hairstyles, and accessories illustrate an affiliation with a multifaceted cultural identity. Ibrahima Sarr PhD adds to this, “on constate une volonté de mise en valeur du patrimoine, une revendication d’une identité locale plus ouverte, une ouverture plus marquée sur le reste du Sénégal, la promotion d’une culture métisse qui se trouve à la croisée des chemins entre l’Afrique Noire, l’Afrique Blanche et l’Occident<sup>24</sup>” (Sarr, Ibrahima) He goes on to mention other signifiers, such as, “cela sous entendu la possession, de manière intrinsèque, de beaucoup de qualités comme la piété, la bonne éducation, la téranga, la dignité de n’avoir jamais été soumis à l’esclavage, l’assimilation à la culture occidentale, l’érudition etc<sup>25</sup>” (Sarr, Ibrahima) To some extent, these material and immaterial possessions are swiftly changing in reference to the range of newer identities and global culture in contact with St-Louis presently, yet on the whole, the cultural signifiers of St-Louisians men and women advance their position as, “l’identite St.Louisienne, quelqu'un civiliser, et cultiver,” that is someone who is sophisticated and educated (Diagne, Golbert).

The very history of métissage in St.Louis says much about the communities cohesive sense of identification with French taste, yet, the hidden paradox, the citizens of contemporary St-Louis harbour different ideas about standards of taste and articulating Sénégalais ideas of cultural heritage. Believing that the Sénégalais culture is something worth actively loving, St-Louisians do not fit neatly into the expectation of a westernized post-colonial town. Recognizing and valuing their unique culture, as well as the specific set of historical and social factors that gave rise to that culture is currently being

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<sup>24</sup> Personal interview translated into English: “there is a willingness to put heritage, a claim of a more open local identity, more marked than the rest of Senegal’s openness by promoting Métis culture which is at the crossroads between Africa black, the White and West Africa.”

<sup>25</sup> Personal interview translated into English: “This is derived from an intrinsic values, many of these qualities such as piety, good education, teranga, and dignity have never been subjected to slavery, assimilation to Western culture, scholarship etc”.

accomplished, what is known, “Il y a les choses qui s’est passé, mais il y a les choses qui restent toujours” (Jellon, Ben) St.Louis relies on its cultural patrimony, but what do these new ideas of métissage culturelle look like and how might they be characterized?

Changing attitudes about social interests and social orders in the town occupies a prominent role as examples of St.Louisians constructing images of themselves. Although it is not altogether clear that their lives and daily routines are much different than other Sénégalais living in metropolitan cities, such as Dakar, the family ties bind St.Louisians men and women more tightly as a group, with their own iconography and material culture that serve as key elements in constructing their public image.

Decolonization and transition to independence, had an enormous impact on visual culture and social and cultural relationships to métissage. Professor Ibrahima Sarr Phd, a sociologist teaching at the Université Gaston Berger, puts this perspective in historical context in a discussion of decolonization:

Le résultat, surtout pour une ville qui a fait partie des quatre communes (où les habitants étaient considérés comme des sujets français), est qu’à un moment donné une association intrinsèque se construit entre le bien et l’occident, le mal et l’africanité. Avec l’indépendance territoriale, l’indépendance culturelle a commencé à se matérialiser par un retour progressif aux valeurs et pratiques culturelles traditionnelles. A Saint-Louis, comme partout ailleurs au Sénégal, il naquit une prise de conscience sur la culture comme élément d’identité et donc, la nécessité de s’assumer culturellement tout en s’ouvrant au reste du monde. Les Saint-Louisiennes sont donc conscients que leur culture est essentielle pour la reconstruction de leur identité corrompue et que nul autre qu’eux même n’est mieux indiqué pour valoriser cette culture et s’assumer culturellement.

The way that people define themselves in St-Louis is attached to the locality of St.Louis as a island with a long relationship with many different cultures of the world. Métis identity - along the lines of status, gender, and ethnicity - in St-Louis is not a defined category. As a result of St-Louis’s history and ongoing cultural exchange, identities have become a malleable forms constantly reshaped by the

cross-cultural relations. This fluidity also extends to the nine-teenth century construction identity that remains in intangible possession of St-Louis. St.Louisan culture is not solely composed French influence, but also includes the connection to religiosity, political movements, the struggle of resistance, food, dance, jazz, and individuals who have the power of changing what is valued. St.Louisans seem to be more interested in telling their own stories and the ways that their lives overlap with the history of St-Louis. These stories then become woven throughout the new constructions and views of the present.

### Making Meaning in the Museum

Finally, my research looks at the potential power of the museum to change what is valued and the way that these cultures are perceived. By asking how meaning is constructed and who is given a voice, I discuss the content and agenda of IFAN's documentation and conservation projects.

A conference held in St.Louis, Sénégal, from 25-27 January 1999, titled 'The Preservation and Promotion of the Photographic Heritage in West Africa' was the first meeting of its kind in the region (23 Cornwell-Jones) Attended by 35 museum curators and archivist from all over West Africa, it confirmed the increasing international recognition of the importance of historical photographs. The opening of an exhibition of 1950's photographs of St-Louis, Sénégal at le Centre de Recherches et de Documentation du Sénégal (CRDS) Museum launched the conference, and gave participants the chance to see a large number of studio portraits and documentary shots of St.Louis during that time. The photographs have since been brought to a wider public through publications and a number of following exhibitions. Thinking critically about the function and importance of museums in the dissemination of awareness, photographer Mamadou Gomis gives attention to the practical use of photography and the photographic image as "un outil indispensable," that is, indispensable tool.

L'image photographique, d'une part, contient une puissance de désignation qui lui assure sa qualité de base : montrer, attirer l'attention sur un objet ou un fait, (r)éveiller ou garder les souvenirs, éclairer sur des préjugés ou les idées reçues, créer une thématique. D'autre part, elle constitue une source d'orientation pour le chercheur : stockage d'informations à réutiliser ou source de nouvelles informations, repérage d'une situation.<sup>26</sup>

We know that photography carries traces of previous historical modes, former ways of viewing; yet, we also know that photography is an instrument of research and information. A highly valued artifact that contributes as the impetus of a new perspective, orientation, and/or discovery.

### Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN)

The immensity of the photographic record from the colonial period housed at the Institut Fondamental D'Afrique Noire Cheikh Anta Diop, IFAN, is suggested by the rows of large cabinets facing toward each other in a small room in the building. The entire photographic collection of the French West African colonial project resides in dozens of small drawers indexed by country of origin. The archive is managed by IFAN in a research facility that is intent on collecting and preserving the historical record of the photography as an apparatus of the colonial administration. In a conversation about the intent of IFAN, Madame Thiam, the current director responsible for making the collection available to students and researchers concerned with this history, expressed that "IFAN was founded in 1936 as the Institute Francais D'Afrique Noire<sup>27</sup>."

The photographic archive has its origins in the work of the French colonial administration. As the medium dove deeper inland, administrative colonisation advanced and as did photography's role in Sénégalais societies. In fact, in the case of colonial documentary photography, the role of images in Sénégal were primarily oriented toward heritage as an effort to show the world a previously unknown

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<sup>26</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>27</sup> Personal interview with Madame Thiam.

history. On the one hand, the images in IFAN's archive concern themselves with symbols of progress and the glory and industry of colonialism. French military companies, French-African soldiers marching down the tree-lined avenue, and Frenchmen in white starched suits and pith helmets, are common themes. Occasionally, the scenic beauty of St-Louis's coastline gives the viewer a glimpse of St-Louis's natural grandeur and the comfort afforded to Europeans in the colonial city. The second genre of images reflected in the photographic collection at portray a fascination with the "traditional Sénégalais". Many of these photographs depict images of woman at the market, amidst daily activities in rural village settings, pounding millet or dancing together.

In the context of photography dealing with people, there is a caption at the bottom back side of each image that names the individual by his or her ethnic group. The photographers of these portraits are mentioned as well. Viewing these photographs, I wonder, what do these people see? We don't know.

As a research institution, IFAN maintains the copyright and authorship of all 60,000 photos in their collection. For the past few years, a Monsieur Moustapha Niang and Madame Thiam have spent much of their careers showing these images, retrieving them from the dusty file cabinets. According to Monsieur Niang, they compose "le photographie patrimonial de l'institut". Concerning "le droit de l'image," et "une valeur de partage," moustapha believes that these photographs need to be thought of on several levels: the culture and beliefs of the sitter, the impact of the act of taking photography, and the gaze of the viewer. Lastly, the photograph must be considered beyond the visual and aesthetic appeal. Until Sénégalais took possession of how they wished to be represented, research on post-colonial archives should be taken advantage of as primary sources of visual texts informing public and private notions of self-representation.



## **Analysis**

In what follows, I consider how St.Louisians respond to historical change and global influences through an instrumental medium apart of this social commentary. The importance of photography in the making of modern nationalism happened gradually as progress and modernization in Sénégal began to offer a medium of visualizing a shift in aesthetic choices. While early Sénégalese portraiture photography resembled its European predecessor stylistically, twentieth-century St-Louisian photographers appropriated their hybrid heritage to develop new identities, values and trends. By taking an in-depth look at the photographs of Mama Casset, one discovers that these multilayered representation take on a cultural collision between Western and Sénégalais aesthetics that affect an understanding of themselves, and others.

### **Portraits: Motivations and Techniques:**

Using a camera is a form of participation and a photograph is the result of the contact between photographer and a person or event. Another dimension to photography emerges when the person in possession of the picture interprets the event that exists in the image-world that picture-taking has created. The act of photographing is more than passive observing. Essayist Susan Sontag explains that photographs give “. . . a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (Sontag 12) to those who have it in possession. When asked if he maintains a personal photo collect, Ibrahima Sarr shared that his family history seems to be handed down from older generations to younger generations, shared and recounted through personal souvenirs that keep these memories. In his words:

My father died when I was very young and the only link I have with him is through photography. Even the few memories I still keep about him (I’m aware they are a little distorted) came to me as I viewed family picture of my early age. So when I got to the

University and got a grant, one of the first dreams I fulfilled was affording a digital camera. Since then, I immortalize every family event and keep the collection in my computer. . . I hope I will be able to pass them onto next generation (Sarr, Ibrahima).

Personal photographs have sentimental value that will always recall their history in the way that they are learned and remembered. The relationship between the visual and personal is a very complex theme and very important to be aware of when we consider the possible types of voices and tones that photographs create. Creating a more complex message is another important part of changing representation. Personal family portrait photographs are tied to a larger discourse, the social recognition of people of the power of telling the story of individuals, and as we've seen many museums and artists are attempting to establish and add to the dialogue.

### Social Role of the Photographer

Photographs fill in blanks in our mental pictures of the present and the past and the use of photography in communicating a particular aesthetic is notable in the way that images constantly refer to chronology and geography. For example, the striking black and white portraits taken in St-Louis and Dakar in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s are sharply instructive to those unaware that the photography in Sénégal constitutes an important cultural phenomenon, where the intersection of Senégalais and Western values and influences are highly visible. Sénégalais photograph Mamadou Gomis speaks candidly on the virtues of photographs as spaces to display ideas, "il est «L'instant» qui nous donne le temps avec la photographie. Le voyage commence chez nous... On ne crée pas la photographie, on la recherche. Et elle reste le gardien des souvenirs"<sup>28</sup> (Gomis, Mamadou). Yet, of course, photographs

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<sup>28</sup> Personal interview translated to English: "It is the passing of time that gives photography its potency. Photography is grounded in our conceptions of time. We do not create the photograph, the photograph seeks its age. It remains the guardian of memories".

beg the viewer to ponder the power of time. Yet, as Mamadou eloquently states, photographs gain power from evoking and remembering the past.

Looking back at the urban imagining process, everything depends on the relationship between the photographer and the photo. Mamadou Moustapha Niang, conservateur heading the photographic collection at IFAN in Dakar, spoke about the 1950's and 60's photography in terms of the 'mise en scene' that the photographer creates. He mentioned that the symbolism within portraits are significant. When I asked Niang to give me an example of how the iconography in portrait photography changes he stated, "dans ce procès de transmission iconographique. . . Il y a l'évolution de la mise en scene.. parce que avant les années '50 et '60 souvent quand on voit un photo entre le mairée et l'épouse, c'est souvent l'épouse qui assis et le mari était debout. . . Et l'homme pose les mains sur l'épaule. C'est le posture des années avant 1960<sup>29</sup>" (Niang, Moustapha). With this understanding, Niang makes explicit that if you accept to be a photographer, then you become a story teller. There is a big story within the photo, the story of the photograph, the story of the subject, and the story of the posture that the photographer has chosen.

### The Agency of Individuals

Photographers often times directly compose the design of the portrait to create fluid narrative that leads the viewer's eye through the composition. A reading of the photographs of Madame Cassat, the first Sénégalais studio photographer (Mustafa 177), can further add on to an understanding of how early African photographer released, and amplified the voices of their sitters. Thus, allowing these individuals to consciously perform and record their manifold personalities in portraiture. In a collection

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<sup>29</sup> Personal interview. Translated into English: Then you have the evolution of the mise en scène .. Before the '50s and '60s, when we see a picture between husband and wife it is often the wife who is sitting and the husband who is standing with his hands on the woman's shoulder. This was the posture before 1960".

of 37 photographs taken by Mama Casset in his studio African Photo<sup>30</sup> are featured in “Mama Casset : Les Précurseurs de la Photographie au Sénégal, 1950”. The women being photographed settle into conventional and specific poses. Most of the women featured in the compilation are sitting in the upright position posing with folded arms or their hands either laid across their lap, or resting below their chin. Their pose generates a sense of formal balance, geometrical composition, and restrained energy. Each of Mama Casset’s images breaths the unpretentious dignity of the person it portrays, and in many ways the sitters choose to display clothing and jewelry that best served how and where these photographs were going to be shown. Hudita Mustafa has suggests that, “like masks, portraits are strategic presentations of partial-truths: women work on themselves as canvases of representation, navigating the relative risks of display and concealment to forage their social selves” (Mustafa 188). These individuals are each working in their own ways to create personal spaces that add to the discourses of cultural transmission and presentation.

Often with the use of props, patrons were able to self-consciously create, display and record various aspects of their identities, such as class differentiation, economic and social status, profession, political alliance, religious affiliation, and ethnicity<sup>31</sup>. Similarly, all of the women in Mama Casset’s portraiture are wearing elaborate jewelry, and traditional Sénégalais fabrics. Hudita Mustafa explains how African and Afro-Islamic dress styles often use volume, density and ornamentation to signify the prestige of the wearer: “The intricate draping and layering of these fabrics allows for both concealment and revelation of the body - the boubou may slip off the shoulder, the headscarf may slide in a breeze - creating a spectacle at once modest and also alluring or suggestive” (25 Mustafa). Mustafa’s notion of

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<sup>30</sup> Today in it’s place is a phone company shop.

<sup>31</sup> Quote provided by Canace M. Keller: “Malik Sidibé remarks, The mere fact that [an item] came from the West gave the wearer a certain kind of power, a kind of power that kids are looking for. Grown men too, I suppose”. (Keller 269)

how Dakarais women highlight trends that illustrated the cultural values and codes of Wolof society is incredibly important to proper contextualization.

Self-representations are important in how people think about themselves. The strong history and present day culture of formed by individuals “le photographe est «généreux» dans son regard, il partage<sup>32</sup>”.

This type of private portraiture appealed specifically to a Sénégalais clientele, families and the individual. Taken by Sénégalais for Sénégalais, the influence which Sénégalaise women wield through the photographer’s artistic frame insists that they are self-possessed and self-invented; here, the story is personal and it reveals how people can become vessels of a highly treasured culture. Mamadou Moustapha expressed his nostalgia for “souvenirs,” as he calls photos, in his opinion “totalement noir et blanc parce que, en fait, quand on voit le photo, j’ai l’impression de d’être devant réalité. Quand je vois un photo des années 1960’s de nos parent qui étaient bien habillés avec une parole vraiment naturelle qui faisait de coiffure inspirer de notre traditions, j’ai dit que ce photo ést beaucoup naturelle que les photos aujourd'hui” (Niang, Mustapha). There is a feeling of tradition in these photographs. What do the clothes say about who they are and what they believe in? For the family members of the sitter, the clothes are so meaningful that they become indexical signs of the individual. A viewer without the background knowledge of the sitter, uses the clothes, jewelry, poses, the facial expression, a legible visual text. Nevertheless, there is no mention of the sitter’s idealized personality, nor any reference to whether the props and costumes are borrowed. The photograph does not explain how or why the

## Future Visions

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<sup>32</sup> Personal interview translated into English: “The photographer is ‘generous’, he shares what he sees”.

In telling any story, the photographer cannot be the star of the tale, other people feature and contribute and their stories become the narrative. Nevertheless, standing behind a photographer's viewfinder is an intimate and overwhelming experience. Unlike a painter who begins with an empty canvas, the photographer's view finder is never empty. In deciding how a picture should look, a photographer may take dozens of photographs to precisely capture just the right look on film. In deciding what photograph to keep, a photographer makes formal decisions on lighting, aesthetic, texture, and geometry to produce an image that supports their own ethics of dignity, representation, and. Essayist Susan Sontag perceives that the ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: "There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way" (Sontag 17).

In recent times, the digital camera has revolutionized documentary photography. In the 1980's photography came out of the studio and into the streets.

Actuellement, les «jeunes» photographes africains sont engagés à tirer profits de leurs pratiques photographiques. A ce propos, la rue constitue pour la plupart d'entre nous la principale source d'inspiration. Cela est lié à une certaine idée d'indépendance par l'agencement osé, étonnant des formes et des couleurs, souvent inattendues qu'on y trouve. Presque rien n'est prévu, tout y est une inspiration non contrôlée, donc naturelle (Gomis, Mamadou).

Contemporary Sénégalais photographer Mamadou Gomis observes that because photography is widely accessible, individuals are able to improvise to create candid shots. This brings photography into the social sphere in a way that furthers favors Sénégalaise photographers and their own version of expanding self-representation. As Mamadou has observed, a new and empowering group of photographers participating in the documentation of history and the profession of photography will add a new perspective on the poetry and drama of everyday life.

## **Conclusion**

This study is an attempt to historically interpret a section of Sénégalais portrait photographs coming from photographs either born or working out of St.Louis. I reflect on the visual representations of Métis through a sociological framework that goes beyond racial métissage to address a progressive form of refashioning and adaptation. My argument that, as an arm of conscience, contemporary Senegalais photographers successfully appropriated the technique of photography as a device that posited artists and sitters as dual collaborators in the image-making process. The intricate historical and cultural details that go into shaping this argument are attributed to the knowledgeable people exemplary of my argument who could speak of it with very informed and experienced thoughts. I definitely would not have been able to do secondary source research without engaging in several dialogues between myself and St.Louisans who illustrated the complexity of these issues.

A research study with the same thesis in another country would be dealing with a different history and a different context. I would recommend that a future student who wanted to do this same project, it would be worth getting in touch with a wider spectrum of photographers operating both locally and internationally. I would have liked to look at the existence of contemporary portrait photography, but under the time constraints I was not able to devote enough time to properly focus on the large number of also recommend that contemporary. I think it would be fruitful to continue looking at self-representations during the digital age and how the large number of communities in Dakar come in contact with newer technologies that more readily create modes of representations. Lastly, the dissemination and circulation of photography in Dakar and the most iconic and identifiable motifs that contribute to it's symbols and aesthetics.

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### **Interviews**

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Jellon, Ben. Personal Interview. 22 April 2014.

Niang, Mamadou Moustapha. Personal Interview. 8 May 2014.

Sarr, Ibrahima. Personal Interview. 28 April 2014.

Sène, Ngor. Personal Interview. 24 April 2014.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### 1. La Vie de Mama Casset (1908-1992)

Born in 1908 in a well-to-do family in St.Louis, Sénégal, Mama Casset and his family moved in 1918 to the capital city, Dakar. In 1920, at the age of 12, he met the photographer Oscar Lataque and shortly after assumed the role of his assistant (10 Casset). He chose his next apprenticeship with the photographer Ben Hovan who had Sénégalaise clientele. After finishing his education at l'école de la rue Thionk, where he exchanged ideas with a number of future artists and politicians, including the writer Birago Diop, Mama Casset was hired by Tennequin who led the Photographic Counter AOF (Afrique Occidentale Francaise) but not without leaving his brother, Salla Cassette. Very quickly after, the opportunity to enter into the French army arose and Mama Casset was assigned to the Air Force where he realized many aerial photographs and numerous reports throughout Francophone Africa with a picture he often quoted "that the King of Morocco, Mohammed V." With the end of the second World War, Mama Casset left the army and created his photography studio in the Medina quarter of Dakar. He named it "Photographie Africaine" (pg. 11) but changed the name after his nephew invented "African Photo". His choice camera device was exclusively Leica and his success was immediate. His photography was iconic and each image was printed in monochrome black and white. St.Louisienne

photographer Bouna Medoune Seye presents an explanation of this effect in the words of Mama Cassat “Je ne peux que regretter la mort de la photographie dont l’acte de décès a été signé par l’avènement de la couleur et des laboratoires automatique<sup>33</sup>” (Gaye).

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<sup>33</sup> Quote by Mama Cassat translated into English: “I can only regret the death of photography whose death certificate was signed by the advent of color and automatic laboratories”