Photographic Animateur
The Photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode* in Relation to Black Photographic Practices

David A. Bailey

My reality is not the same as that which is often presented to us in Western photographs. As an African working in a Western medium, I try to bring out the spiritual dimension in my pictures so that concepts of reality become ambiguous and are opened to reinterpretation. This requires what Yoruba priests and artists call a technique of ecstasy.¹

Rotimi Fani-Kayode

Before we deal with the work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode we need to locate the historical context and references in which his photographic images operated. In the UK, the social, political and cultural historical formations of racial identities have displaced black practitioners from ‘immigrant’ via ‘ethnic’ categories to the appropriation of the term ‘black’ within certain state institutional contexts. For black British photographers, these differences are specific cultural terms of reference that pinpoint the complex relations within which their work operates. Difference is a central element in explaining why photographers from Britain, who are black, are making very specific types of work at this historical moment. However, what makes the work of Fani-Kayode


* Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1953-1989) was born in Nigeria, the son of the present Balogun of Ife. The Kayode family of Ife traditionally holds the title of Akye (keepers of the Shrine of Yoruba Deities and priests of Ifa, the oracular spirit). He came to live in England after the 1966 military coup. His sense of the natural world, shaped in Africa, was further informed by the years he spent in the countryside of Gloucestershire and Somerset, where he went to school.

Rotimi Fani-Kayode studied Fine Art at Georgetown University, Washington DC, and at the Pratt Institute in New York. He experienced the New World as a revelation. It was in New York that he became seriously interested in photography. He returned to the UK in 1983. In recent years he lived and worked in Brixton, exhibiting in this country and abroad. He was a founder member and the first Chair of Autograph, the Association of Black Photographers.

He was much loved and respected, both for his work and for his personal integrity.
distinctive or different from other black photographers is not only the black male imagery, but his cultural experiences in Africa, America and England, which he has brought to his photographic practice.

One explanation for the homogeneous category of blackness lies within the legacies of essentialist politics that operated in Britain during the '70s and '80s. Race relation legislation, equal opportunity policies, political action within the community and voluntary sector, local/metropolitan political intervention by organisations such as the Greater London Council (GLC), resulted in the financial empowerment of some black groups with a view to making these groups visible.

It was in the realisation by black photographers during this period that they
were not being reflected within the gallery, publications and funding institutions, that they began to demand a share of the resources which they had been historically denied. But, the institutions were so preoccupied with financial needs at grassroot levels of black communities that they never got to the stage where any of these processes were questioned or critically assessed. This led to an essentialist notion of racial identities that constructed an 'authentic' black subjectivity which groups and individuals had to strive to emulate (and many did) in order to be recognised as black photographers. With the result that a reportage of black street life — in the style of 'Magnum' photography — became a common genre; and it seemed that any work that contested this pseudo-realist style, in terms of sexuality or de-constructive narratives, was seen as alien and not 'authentic' black photography.

There exists a situation that strongly suggests that when black photographers are shown, they are shown with no questions asked, and that nobody, except a black person, should be allowed to say if the exhibited work is good or not. However, most black photographers do not illustrate any uniquely black way of taking or using photographs. Quite the contrary. What is often shown is usually a hodge-podge of recognisable white styles. In other words, black photographers are shown not because their work is good, but because the photographers concerned are black.

The suggestion that black photography may only be criticised by black people should be preposterous. However, it seems that during the '80s everyone except black people discussed black photography. The GLC, GLAA, the Arts Council, the galleries, magazines and colleges were involved in a discussion from which a vast majority of black constituencies was excluded. Consequently, there was little critical assessment of the images in black photography. Moreover, the lack of a systematic documentation of black photographic work, taking into consideration a variety of critical perspectives, has led to a crisis that still remains unresolved.

This situation is particularly highlighted within the history of black practitioners in photography. Black people have been constantly struggling to carve out a particular self image (identity) in a medium that has often reproduced and reinforced racist ideologies in stereotypical forms, and, at the same time, reduced and limited black creative work to an essentialist style labelled as black photography.

However, with the end of the GLC era and continuing climate of Thatcherism, and within the climate of postmodernist debate, there emerged a shift in the work of some black photographers. The work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode represents a shift from the essentialist/authentic categories ascribed to black subjects to a situation where the photographer is re-positioning and setting himself a different agenda; and subverting the earlier categorisation of a homogeneous and essentialist black subject in black photography by placing importance on the different cultural terrains in which the work operates. Hence, the term 'Photographic Animateur' is used to stress the fact that Fani-Kayode is a cultural practitioner.

In emphasising the importance of ideology, the culturalist position has provided one of the most useful insights into developing strategies in making or constructing black images. Ideologies are in fact generated and reproduced in specific settings like the media, which produce social meanings and distribute themselves throughout society. It matters how we see ourselves and our social relations, because they enter and inform our actions and practices. Ideologies are therefore sites of a distinct type of social struggle.
In many ways, from a visual and theoretical standpoint, the agenda has changed. Now the central issue is to reposition the black subject at the centre of ideological discourse through the engagement of popular cultures, re-articulating the sets of relations to change the meanings.

Fani-Kayode’s work is part of a movement of black photographers who are engaging with popular cultural forms to change the dominant meanings through ideological struggle. A chain or set of relations that were fixed — essentialist, homogeneous — is broken by re-articulating the elements of photographic images differently.

By integrating conventional photographic genres with black subjects, these photographers are producing a different kind of discourse: they are not presenting ‘alternative’ or ‘positive’ images of black people within the established framework of landscape or/and portraiture, but are establishing a political dialogue using popular cultural forms and positioning black subjects at the centre. The point is to identify differences and contradictions within the work, looking at what particular techniques, styles, thematic concerns are used to attract particular audiences and bring out particular forms of black subjectivity.
It is not so much that black photography has discovered a totally new form/style; what is unique is the way in which black photographers, among whom Rotimi Fani-Kayode was at the forefront, were able to break away from the insular fixed genres of photography, and explore the notion of using a range of visual codes from different genres and a distinct set of cultural references, symbols and iconography to articulate their lived experiences.

It is this exploration which has brought to photography in this country some of its most innovative exponents who have been denied visible space in
magazines, galleries and publications. When they do get shown, the work is undervalued by ignoring the complex nature of its form, content and historical references and is seen as a poor emulation of its white masters.²

The translation of personal rage and desire into new images, subverting conventional perceptions to reveal hidden worlds, and the use of an imaginative investigation of particular themes, rather than photographic reportage, are central to Rotimi Fani-Kayode’s work:

In African traditional art, the mask does not represent a material reality: rather the artist strives to approach a spiritual reality in it through images suggested by human and animal forms. I think photography can aspire to the same imaginative interpretations of life ... Both aesthetically and ethically, I seek to translate my rage and my desire into new images which will undermine conventional perceptions and which may reveal hidden worlds. ... It is now time for us to reappraise such images and to transform them ritualistically into images of our own creation. For me, this involves an imaginative investigation of Blackness, maleness and sexuality, rather than more straightforward reportage ...³

The changing position which Fani-Kayode adopts places him and his work in various contexts: conventional portraiture shot with a medium format; use of a particular matt photographic paper that highlights a particular tonal range of a soft rich brown/black; use of non-reflective glass and a particular type of wood frame; and hand tinting selective areas of the print. Moreover, he photographs nude or semi-nude black males in certain poses with certain gazes, incorporating African symbolism/iconography through the African masks and garments worn by the models.

The combination of these elements indicates the multiple layers of the work, through which the artist positioned himself simultaneously within several cultural terrains. The use of masks and masquerade, the seductive look and pose, together with African iconography, suggest an engagement with hidden agendas, complex personas and identities, pointing to the fact that issues of black male sexuality are rarely discussed in black communities. Fani-Kayode’s subversion of the conventions of photographic portraiture and the image of the male nude take on board the idea that the struggle is within the cultural industries of representation, identifying photography as the site where that struggle should take place.

It seems that this is a postmodernist predicament of black photographers; a constant re-positioning of identities and agendas to locate the work within a political and social context. Fani-Kayode’s work offers a significant achievement in this respect.

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2 The Photographers Gallery, London, refused (three times) to show Fani-Kayode’s work on the basis that it was a poor imitation of Robert Mapplethorpe’s work.


The photographs in this article are being re-produced with the kind permission of the Estate of Rotimi Fani-Kayode. Captions for two photographs were not available at the time of going to the press.