



Fani-Kayode, Rotimi (1955-1989)

by Carla Williams

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Oluwarotimi (Rotimi) Adebisi Wahab Fani-Kayode became one of the most important black photographers of the late twentieth century, exploring in his work themes of racial and sexual identity.

He was born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1955. Fani-Kayode's family came from Ife, the Yoruba spiritual center. The Fani-Kayodes were of the family of the Akire, keepers of the shrine of Ife, the Yoruba oracle. His father was a high-ranking politician.

Although he was born into a family of privilege in both political and religious circles, he was dispossessed at a young age. Following a military coup in Nigeria when he was eleven years old, Fani-Kayode fled with his family to England where they sought political asylum. Although he spent most of his life in exile from his homeland, the iconography of the Yoruba culture nonetheless figures heavily in his photographs.

In 1976 Fani-Kayode traveled to the United States to study fine art and economics, the latter at his parents' insistence. He received a B.A. from Georgetown University in 1980 and an M.F.A. from Pratt Institute in 1983. By this time he was already making photographs of other black men in Yoruba garb, attempting to reconcile in exile his heritage with his homosexuality. He returned to England soon after his graduation from Pratt in 1983.

Race, sexuality, and nationality are inextricably linked in Fani-Kayode's photographs and writings about his work. In an often-cited essay, "Traces of Ecstasy," he explained, "It is photography, therefore--Black, African, homosexual photography--which I must use not just as an instrument, but as a weapon if I am to resist attacks on my integrity and indeed, my existence on my own terms."

His photographs are lyrical, sensual, sexual, and mythical self-portraits and portraits of other black and white men. They reflect an ongoing exploration of cultural, sexual, and racial identity and pride.

As a black man exiled in England from his African homeland, Fani-Kayode longed for his Yoruba culture, which, however, was not accepting of his homosexuality. This triangle of conflicts defines his work. He never exhibited his images in Africa, fearing that their explicit homoerotic content would damage his family's standing.

Fani-Kayode was also the rare African photographer whose work was purely artistic rather than documentary or commercial. Both his life and art were a dichotomy of revelation and suppression.

Fani-Kayode became a founding member of Autograph, the influential association of black photographers established in London in 1987, and was active in the Black Audio Film Collective.

Fani-Kayode provided the photographs and his partner, British photographer and filmmaker Alex Hirst (who died in 1994), provided the text for the publication *Black Male/White Male* (1988). The book includes Fani-



Rotimi Fani-Kayode.
Photograph by Robert Taylor Photography.
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Kayode's most straightforward images exploring masculinity and race, as well as tender portraits of men loving men, including the writer Essex Hemphill. Fani-Kayode and Hirst also collaborated on at least one photographic series entitled "Bodies of Experience."

Like many artists living with HIV/AIDS, Fani-Kayode addressed his illness directly. Particularly important in this regard is his photographic series "Ecstatic Antibodies."

Fani-Kayode died of AIDS on December 21, 1989. His influential career as an artist had lasted a brief seven years.

Following his death, Hirst signed both artists' names to works previously attributed to Fani-Kayode alone; hence, there is a persistent debate surrounding authorship of Fani-Kayode's photographs. A posthumous publication, *Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Alex Hirst: Photographs* (1996), further extended the debate.

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