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DAHOMEY

A FILM BY
MATI DIOP



LES FILMS DU BAL and FANTA SY present



DAHOMÉY

A FILM BY
MATI DIOP

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The kingdom of **DAHOMÉY** (Danhomé in Fon language) is a former African kingdom located in the south of today's Republic of Benin. It was founded in the 17th century by King Houegbadja. Under his reign and that of his descendants - a three-centuries dynasty - the kingdom was a considerable regional power, with a highly structured local economy, prosperous transatlantic trade, a centralized administration, a system of taxes and a powerful army including the famous Amazon women (Agodjié). In 1892, under the reign of King Behanzin, Colonel Dodds took Abomey, the kingdom's capital, and in 1895, Dahomey became part of the French colonial empire. When it gained independence on August 1st, 1960, the country became the Republic of Dahomey.

ABOMÉY, was the «capital» or, more precisely, the seat of the kingdom of Dahomey. The Houegbadja dynasty that reigned from the 17th to the 19th century turned it into a real city-state. Impressive palaces, lively court arts and crafts and Vodun religion practicing could be found on every street corner. Through Abomey city each king made his mark, aligned with their motto: «Dahomey always greater!». With agricultural development and the slave trade, Abomey was a crossroads city. Its palaces with exceptional universal value are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

- CHRONOLOGY -

1890

War breaks out between France and Dahomey following differing interpretations of the Cotonou Agreement and the Protectorate of Porto-Novo.

November 17, 1892

French troops enter Abomey and pillage the palaces and city. Dodds and his troops seize royal objects.

1893-1895

General Dodds donates the objects to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (now the Musée de l'Homme), including the 26 artifacts now repatriated. From 2000, these were kept at the Musée du Quai Branly.

1957

Repatriation to Ghana of an Ashanti stool by the Queen of England during celebrations to honour the country's independence.

1960

The Congo asks Belgium to move the Belgian Museum of the Congo to Kinshasa.

1969

Publication of the Pan-African Cultural Manifesto of Algiers insisting on the need to recover artifacts and archives looted by colonial powers.

1975

A hundred items from the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium are returned to Kinshasa following long negotiations.

June 7, 1978

The Director-General of UNESCO, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, makes a plea to restore the balance of global cultural heritage between the northern and southern hemispheres, advocating the "return of an irreplaceable cultural heritage to those who created it".

1982

Pierre Quoniam, then director of the Louvre Museum, publishes a report in favour of the repatriation of African heritage. None of his recommendations are acted upon in the four decades that follow and his report is forgotten.

August 26, 2016

Patrice Talon, President of the Republic of Benin, makes an official request to the French government to return cultural objects looted during colonization.

November 28, 2017

French President Emmanuel Macron, in a speech at the University of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), spoke out in favor of a possible return of African heritage to Africa by 2022.

November 23, 2018

Presentation of the report «Restituer le patrimoine africain», commissioned by Emmanuel Macron from Bénédicte Savoy, a French art historian, and Felwine Sarr, a Senegalese economist.

November 19, 2019

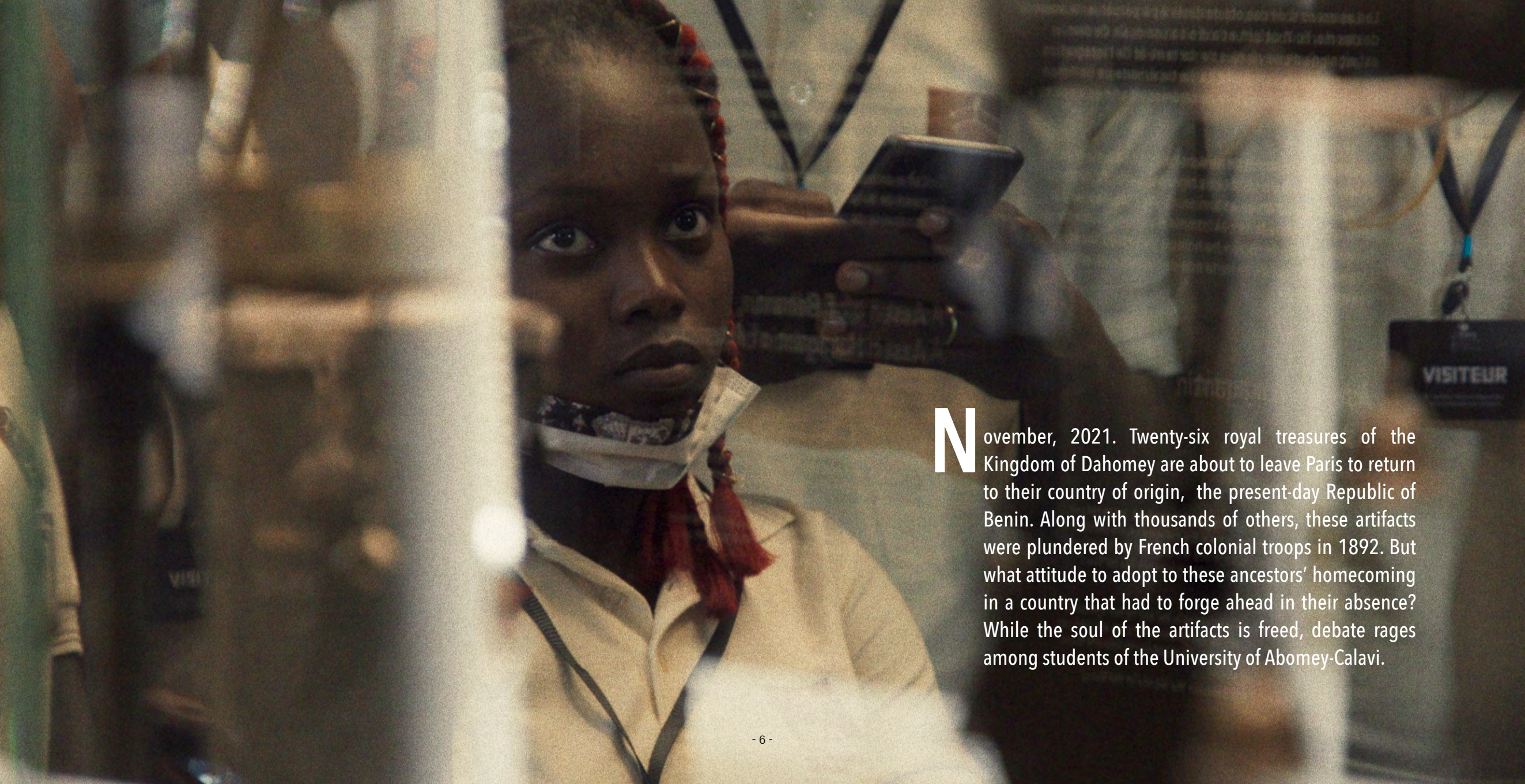
France returns El Hadj Oumar Tall sword to Senegalese President Macky Sall.

December 24, 2020

The French National Assembly passed law no. 2020-1673 on the restitution of cultural property to the Republic of Benin and the Republic of Senegal. This law specifies that the actual restitutions must be made within one year.

November 10, 2021

The 26 works returned by France are now back in Benin.



November, 2021. Twenty-six royal treasures of the Kingdom of Dahomey are about to leave Paris to return to their country of origin, the present-day Republic of Benin. Along with thousands of others, these artifacts were plundered by French colonial troops in 1892. But what attitude to adopt to these ancestors' homecoming in a country that had to forge ahead in their absence? While the soul of the artifacts is freed, debate rages among students of the University of Abomey-Calavi.

INTERVIEW WITH MATI DIOP

After the Grand Prix in Cannes, the selection of *Atlantics* in the shortlist for the Academy Award for Best International Picture, and Netflix US buying the film, you might have taken a more «mainstream» turn, but you're back with a film even more radical than *Atlantics* in its message and form.

I came up as much in the mainstream as in counter-culture. *Atlantics* transposes the range of my cultural influences. With my first feature, I tried to stay as close as possible to my artistic language while consciously playing the game of more classical storytelling. With *Dahomey*, I went back to a freer writing and shooting process that was closer to my previous films.

The brutal shutdown imposed by the pandemic made me question the meaning I wanted to keep giving to my work as a filmmaker, and its political impact. While reflecting on the feature film to which I wanted to devote the next few years of my life, I kept working in a variety of formats. During lockdown, I was fortunate enough

to receive a commission that allowed me to make a film alone, at home, using audio recordings I had made of my grandmother. After the soul-destroying whirl of the *Atlantics* promotional tour worldwide, making *In my room* with limited resources was a redemptive, reparatory experience that reminded me of my ability to make films «out of nothing.» A year later, **when I found out that twenty-six royal treasures from Dahomey were to be returned to Benin by France, I stopped what I was doing and decided to make a film about it.**

What was the starting-point of *Dahomey*? What spurred you to make this film?

When I first heard the term «restitution» in 2017, I was still writing *Atlantics*. As an afrodescendant filmmaker, the word resonated deeply within me. Fundamentally, the issue runs through my work. Also, **the films I made in Dakar between 2009**

and 2019 speak to a process of Return: going back to my African origins, to a part of myself that was buried for too long under the hegemony of my Western environment. Added to that, there was the troubling echo between the figure of the revenant in *Atlantics*, which I was just finishing writing, and the return of African artifacts to their native land. *Restitution, Revenance, Return and Reparation* came together in my head. As perplexing as Emmanuel Macron's announcement in Ouagadougou may have been for me, the project for «the repatriation of African cultural heritage within five years» was a shock because I sadly realized that I had never imagined the possibility of something like that happening in my lifetime, perhaps out of resignation. I had never imagined what restitution might actually look like, and while trying to visualize it, a film was already crystallizing in my mind. Initially, I envisioned writing a feature film that would chronicle the epic adventure of an artifact, from it being looted in the late 19th century to it returning home in 2075. It had to anticipate the future, simply because it seemed to me to be so unlikely that any restitutions were imminent or even that we would be alive to witness such a historic chapter.

Even so, I had informed my producers, Judith Lou Levy and Eve Robin, that if repatriation of artifacts (from France to their country of origin) took place, I absolutely wanted to film it, so we had to stay on the alert, to be ready. We kept an eye on the press until the announcement dropped suddenly that twenty-six royal treasures from Abomey (Benin) had been selected for restitution on November 10, 2021, and we had to make the shoot possible. It was a race against time: asking for permission

from the Beninese government to escort the treasures—the government became partner in the film while guaranteeing us the independence we insisted upon—while organizing all the logistics of a shoot going from Paris to Cotonou, where I had never been before. Shortly after starting work on the film, I decided to create a production company based in Dakar (Fanta Sy) to coproduce it with Les Films du Bal, from the continent.

How did you visualize *Dahomey* and over what period of time did you make it?

The film took shape over two years, from 2021 to 2023, alternating phases of shooting and editing, while honing ever more the writing and the articulation of the different registers of language in the film, between documentary and fantasy. The four shooting periods were scheduled to coincide with the treasures' journey, starting with their departure from Quai Branly Museum, followed by the journey in a cargo plane to their arrival in Cotonou. Back in Paris, the editor (Gabriel Gonzalez) and I put together the first fifteen minutes of the movie.

The second shoot, in Cotonou, consisted of filming the installation of the artifacts in the exhibition space within the presidential palace by the team of Beninese curators, including Calixte Biah, whom we had followed since they left Quai Branly, and Alain Godonou, the curator of the exhibition. Once that sequence had been shot, I stayed in Cotonou for over a month to prepare the second major chunk of the film, which

focuses on how young people in Benin view the restitution of the treasures. I chose to give this the form of a great debate in an auditorium at the University of Abomey-Calavi.

After more editing, a third sequence was shot in 2022: the exhibition of the artifacts at the palace, reuniting the people of Benin with their repatriated treasures, and an initial fantasy sequence meandering at night around Cotonou.

The final phase of shooting consisted in filming another debate at the university to cover missing angles, and complete the nighttime roaming of the spirit of the treasures, in the presidential palace and city. In parallel with the various phases of shooting and editing, I worked with the Haitian author Makenzy Orcel on writing the text of the «voice of the treasures.»

***Dahomey* is a film on the border between documentary and fiction. In the end credits, it says «written and directed by Mati Diop.» Can you talk us through notions of writing and directing this documentary?**

What distinguishes documentary from fiction concerns above all the question of the writing process. On top of the imperative need I felt to make this film, after *Atlantics* I also needed to re-experience a free writing and shooting process than on a work of fiction. **I like to break free of conventions about format, and I like the idea of reinventing my approach to the writing of it with each film.** I visualized *Atlantics* as a «Gothic tale». *Dahomey* is a «fantasy documentary».

If people come out wondering what it is that they just saw, having had a unique experience (while feeling some kind of emotion, of course), then I feel I have contributed to making cinema more surprising and innovative. That's also what I expect from a film, wherever it is from.

In documentaries, the writing is first and foremost a point of view, on people or on a situation. Writing begins with the film language that translates (or betrays) your relationship to the world, to other people and to yourself. In the end, when you're watching a movie, whether documentary or fiction, the only question is whether cinema happens or not.

When I arrived at Quai Branly Museum with Joséphine Drouin Viallard, the DP, for the first day of shooting, when the artifacts were due to be removed from display and crated up, we didn't know what to expect and were very apprehensive of the museum's institutional environment. In *Statues Die Too* by Resnais & Marker (1953), one of the only films I had in mind as a reference, the shots of the statues verge on the sublime. It is at once a political manifesto and art film. I was aiming for the same aesthetic rigor but, **in a documentary, you cannot control everything around you. Only one take is possible, only one place to be. It's now.**

The film quickly departs from pure reality by giving a form of life—a voice—to one of the artifacts...

When I began filming, I was so steeped in the feature I had in mind that my

approach to reality was suffused in lyricism. I was looking at what I had already dreamed. The decision to film the treasures like characters with their own perspective and subjectivity enabled Joséphine and I to maintain a strong focus while grasping other dimensions that I wanted to make palpable.

To my mind, the historical dimension of the moment had a mythical dimension that I wanted to transcribe through the manner of filming. To bring out the weight, density and texture of what was going on. Often, reality produces pictures that are far more striking than anything fiction generates. I was astonished by the highly technical process that looked like a funeral ceremony, with a tempo set by the crating-up of each artifact to the sound of drills and construction site banging. We had indeed entered the *era of museums' disquiet*. The atmosphere was very solemn; you felt every passing second. History was changing direction; something was being reversed. Sometimes, everyday people turn into mythological characters or archetypes that must be acknowledged and made sublime. That is the case with Calixte Biah, the curator brought in by the Beninese government to fly with the treasures from Quai Branly to Cotonou.

Before coming up with the idea of having the artifacts talk, I wanted first of all to make their silence, which we recreated in sound editing and mixing with Nicolas Becker and Cyril Holtz, as audible as possible. It seemed to me to be the most eloquent way of restoring their power while evoking their secret, opaque and inviolable aspects. The particular sequence when the artifacts are installed in the exhibition space at the presidential palace was fine-tuned and rewritten in the editing suite. Back on

Beninese soil, the artifacts open up to a new dimension of themselves. Through the observations on their «condition» read out by Calixte, a part of their history is restored through the marks of time. At the same time, the people looking at them and after them, and talking to them, perhaps also rediscover part of themselves.

It's the story of a return told to us in the Fon language... Can you tell us about the choice of language? How, and with whom, did you come up with this «voice of the treasures»?

All the films I shot in Senegal are in Wolof. It's a highly political choice. Dahomey speaks first and foremost to the people of Benin, who must be able to hear and recognize themselves. As subjective as it may be, the story of the voice of the treasures must be returned to them in the Fon language, which everyone in Benin speaks. Fanon says, *«To speak one's language is to exist absolutely for the other»*. But it is also to exist absolutely for oneself. *Dahomey approaches* restitution from an African perspective that speaks to the universal, a prism that the West has always made its own. To flesh out the artifacts' subjectivity, I chose to give them «an inner voice,» translating the desire to release these artifacts from the status of objects, in which they have been locked since their abduction, by once more making them the «subject» of their own story, the protagonists and narrators of their adventures. **Giving the artifacts a voice and a story to tell, through the singular tale of their expropriation, meant choosing to evoke the condition of a plundered**

territory, a dispossessed nation, a community seeking sovereignty.

For historical, political and (always) poetical reasons, I insisted on writing that story in collaboration with a writer of Haitian origin. Practically all Haitians are the descendants of black slaves, mostly deported (in the early 18th century) from the Bight of Benin and West Africa, including Senegal. From the mid-18th century onward, the deported Africans came primarily from the Congo, and in total, before the Haitian revolution, the majority were from central Africa. Beyond the style that a writer or poet could contribute to the story told by the «voice of the treasures,» the Haitian resonance meant a lot to me. I was also looking for someone who would be able to write from the invisible world.

When Makenzy Orcel came on board, editing was already advanced, and the treasures' story had a specific place and role in the film (in the form of five distinct scenes). I knew what I wanted to hear from the artifacts, according to the symbolic spaces they were passing through, but I was looking for a language to say it in, which Makenzy provided. He drew much of his inspiration from shots in the movie. Once he had written his text, I in turn readapted it to the rhythm and musicality of the film.

Once the text was translated into old Fon, I called sound designer Nicolas Becker, with whom I chose to create the voice of the treasures. The recording took place in Benin, using male and female voices with very different tones. Back in Paris, we created a genderless vocal texture in deep, metallic frequencies. I wanted a texture with a futurist aesthetic, like a creature in a genre movie that would break with

the whole folklore-and-tradition image in which «African ancestrality» is too often confined, and using «genre» to bypass that kind of stereotype. The music by Wally Badarou, who is of Beninese origin, greatly contributes to the fantasy dimension of the film. While that of Dean Blunt, who is of Nigerian origin, adds a more spiritual dimension.

Youth is front and center of every film you made in Senegal. In *Dahomey*, likewise. How do you explain that choice?

When I say that the issue of «restitution» runs through my work, I refer specifically to the films I chose to shoot in Dakar between 2009 and 2019. When young Serigne, in *Atlantiques* (2009), gives a first-person account of his migration journey, he becomes the protagonist and subject of his story. By devoting my first feature to young Senegalese who have died at sea while trying to make it to Europe, the primary aim was to leave a trace of a contemporary tragedy while trying to render its complexity in all its personal and existential dimensions. **The restitution of African cultural artifacts plundered during the French colonial period concerns first and foremost Africa's young people, whose voices had not been heard on the subject yet** but were instead hijacked in political circles or cloistered in the academic field. **It was necessary to shift the whole issue from the summit to the base, to create a space that might allow young people to identify this restitution as part of its history and reappropriate it. To create a space where they might be heard.**

How did you approach that question with them?

I dreamed up a great debate at a university, like a massive brainstorming session, to consider all the questions that this restitution raises and, above all, reveals. I wanted the debate to revolve around issues of history, vestiges and remembrance. **For me, the challenge was to find a way to create a space of free expression on a subject that belongs absolutely to the protagonists.**

With Gildas Adannou, a young filmmaker who was my AD on this movie, we held a casting call to put together a round table of a dozen students, researchers or young lecturers. I wanted them to be from different backgrounds and disciplines, from art to history via economics or social sciences. I met lots of people and held numerous interviews. We had to be absolutely sure everyone would defend a singular and personal point of view on the restitution of the treasures—gather together people who would voice a variety of opinions on the matter. I chose a location that seemed super-dynamic visually, as much for the perspectives as for the light. The raked seating responded to my desire for a chorus, an agora. Joséphine Drouin Viallard and I thought up a system with three cameras, which would bring to life each person's intervention, as well as the audience and university life going on all around.

On the day of the shoot, I chose to broadcast the debate over the campus radio to generate more tension and urgency among the speakers, who knew a larger audience was listening. Irrespective of filming, it was legitimate for the debate to be aired and shared among as many people as possible. I gave Gildas, whom I had

asked to moderate the debate, a list of all the questions I really wanted to ask these young people, and first of all, **how do you measure the loss of something if you never realized you lost it ?**

Paris, January 2024







Photo © Henry Roy

MATI DIOP

Mati Diop was born in Paris on June 22nd, 1982. Since the early 2000s, she has built an eclectic body of work that has won awards at various international festivals. With her first feature film ***Atlantics*** (2019), winner of the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival followed by ***Dahomey*** (2024) awarded by The Golden Bear of Berlinale, she has established herself as one of the leading auteurs of international cinema and of a new wave in African and diasporic cinema.

She grew up in a french-senegalese family, between a musician father, Wasis Diop, and a photographer and art buyer mother. She is the niece of Djibril Diop Mambéty, director of the cult Senegalese film ***Touki Bouki*** (1973). Her nomadic, romanesque and political cinema which challenges the boundaries between genres and formats is an extension of her mixed identity.

Her formalist approach is rooted in an early curiosity for the fine arts, particularly video and sound. At the age of 20, she began working in theater, creating sound and video

for plays. In 2004, she shot her first self-produced short film, **Last Night**. In 2006, she joined Le Pavillon, Palais de Tokyo's artist-in-residence programme and research lab. After a brief passage at Le Fresnoy (National studio of contemporary art), she's chosen to play the female lead in Claire Denis' **35 Shot of Rum** (2008). Her encounter with the French director confirmed her desire to become a filmmaker.

And so begins the composition of a Dakar epic in three chapters that unfolds over a decade. **Atlantiques** (2009, Rotterdam Festival Tiger Award), **A Thousand Suns** (2013, FIDMarseille Grand Prix) and **Atlantics** form a manifesto that signs a political choice: a cinema committed to Senegal, with its working-class youth as its beating heart. From the phenomenon of clandestine immigration that devastated Senegal's working-class youth to the deposition of the Wade regime in 2012, and the disappearance of Senegalese and, more broadly, African cinema, which golden age was embodied by the subversive and political work of her uncle Djibril Diop Mambéty, each film is an archive of an era and its contemporary issues. For the director, cinema is a tool of reappropriation to restore missing images, question degrading colonial representations and invent heroes who have deserted the African imagination.

In parallel, the filmmaker made several short films, including **Big in Vietnam** (2011, Tiger Award at the Rotterdam Film Festival) and **Snow Canon** (2012, selected at the Venice Film Festival), which explore recurring motifs and themes of her cinema : the solitude of exiled bodies, cities and landscapes imbued with mythology and mystery,

and nights from which dances and ghosts emerge. These themes are echoed in **Tokyo Trip** (2023), produced for Chanel, and **In My Room** (2020), commissioned by Miu-Miu. She continues her video practice with **Liberian Boy** (2015) and **Naked Blue** (2022), co-directed with Manon Lutanie. Between 2020 and 2021, she also shot two music videos in Paris, for Bonnie Banane and Wasis Diop, as well as a commercial film with Solange Knowles.

With the creation of **Fanta Sy**, a film house based in Dakar, she pursues her artistic commitment on the African continent.



ARTISTIC CONTRIBUTIONS

WITH STUDENTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ABOMEY-CALAVI

**GILDAS ADANNOU
JOSEA GUEDJE
GAËL SANKARA DAAVO
HABIB AHANDESSI
ROSE OUEMEHO
MARYLINE AGBOSI
RAÏMI BASSITOU NOUATIN
DIDIER SEDOHA NASSANGADE**

**IMELDA BATAMOSSI
JOËL TCHOGBE
DIANE CAKPO
CHAMELIE DOGNON
MORIAS AGBESSI
GILBERT GODOVO**

**YVON KOSSOU-YOVO
DONALD GBOSSA
EDAH GONTRAN
MESSI BOCO
ODILON GBENONTIN
KEVIN DA-SILVA**

THE TEAM OF CURATORS AND EXHIBITION MANAGERS

**CALIXTE BIAH
ABDOULAYE IMOROU
PAUL TIMOTHEE DOTO
JULES BOCCO
RICHARD J. V. SOGAN
DIDIER DONATIEN ALIHONOU**

AND EXHIBITION CURATOR
ALAIN GODONOU

WITH THE VOICES OF
**LUCRECE HOUGBELO
PARFAIT VIAYINON
DIDIER SEDOHA NASSEGANDE**

AND
SABINE BADJOGOUMIN

WITH
DOWOTI DESIR

CREW

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY

MATI DIOP

IN COLLABORATION WITH

IMAGE

JOSÉPHINE DROUIN VIALARD

EDITING

GABRIEL GONZALEZ

TEXT « VOICE OF THE TREASURES »

MAKENZY ORCEL

PRODUCED BY

EVE ROBIN, JUDITH LOU LEVY, MATI DIOP

SOUND

CORNEILLE HOUSSOU, NICOLAS BECKER, CYRIL HOLTZ

MUSIC

DEAN BLUNT, WALLY BADAROU

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

GILDAS ADANNOU

PRODUCTION MANAGER

MARCO TULIO PIRES

LINE PRODUCER

CHRISTIANE CHABI KAO

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

AMA AMPADU

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