How Beyoncé and Jay-Z put a visionary African film back in the spotlight

Touki Bouki was a commercial flop in 1973. But the arresting image used in the couple’s latest tour has sparked new interest

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The image is arresting: a man sits astride a motorcycle, the handlebars adorned with the giant skull of a zebu, its horns forming a wide skeletal embrace. His head is turned; something beyond the frame has caught his attention. Seated behind him is a woman, her hands on his shoulders, staring straight down the lens. To some, this photograph will be instantly recognisable as a homage to Touki Bouki (the title means “The Hyena’s Journey”), generally credited as the first African avant-garde film. The fact that the couple in the modern restaging are Jay-Z and Beyoncé, with the image spearheading the promotional campaign for their On the Run II world tour, has propelled this little-known but visionary Senegalese film into the spotlight some 45 years after it was made.

Jay-Z and Beyoncé leave the UK this weekend with praise for the two-and-a-half hour stadium extravaganza ringing in their ears. In the Observer, Kitty Empire called parts of the show “unbearably exciting”, while Rachel Aroesti in the Guardian declared it “staggeringly impressive”. It’s tempting to hope that even a handful of the millions of fans who flock to the tour between now and October will investigate the film that has been one of its inspirations.
Difficult to see since its initial release in 1973, *Touki Bouki* re-entered circulation 10 years ago when it was restored as part of the World Cinema Project by Martin Scorsese, who called it “a cinematic poem made with a raw, wild energy”. It was filmed in Senegal for about $30,000 by the actor-turned-director Djibril Diop Mambéty and tells of the young cowherd Mory (Magaye Niang) and his student girlfriend Anta (Mareme Niang), who dream of fleeing the dusty, desperate streets of Dakar’s Colobane district for Paris. But the prospect of leaving home is a complicated one for these Africans inculcated by colonialism.

*Touki Bouki* was radical in resisting the social realist tradition already sweeping through African cinema in favour of a more impressionistic, herky-jerky romanticism reminiscent of Godard. “What matters here is not realism,” wrote the critic Amy Taubin when the film resurfaced briefly in New York in 1988, “but how film as one form of storytelling reveals the collective fantasy of a culture. The couple’s escape attempt might have happened, or it might have been imagined by the man, the woman or both as they lay dreaming in the sun.”

![Magaye Niang as young cowherd Mory, and Mareme Niang as his girlfriend Anta in the 1973 film. Photograph: Photo12](image1)

Reality, memory and daydreams flood into one another through sophisticated cross-cutting and dislocations of sound and image: the roar of Mory’s motorbike plays over a shot of cattle, while Josephine Baker sings of “Par-ee, Par-ee, Par-ee” as the camera surveys the parched rural landscape.

That song makes several crackly appearances, though each time the stylus skips back so that we never hear more than a few seconds. The song is doomed to be stuck in its groove, dreaming of better things but never quite getting there - much like Mory, who freezes on the gangplank, tormented by the memory of a cow being dragged unceremoniously to slaughter. Mambéty wasn’t the first film-maker to equate doomed humans with their bestial equivalent - Eisenstein used the analogy in his 1925 film *Strike* - but the colonialism that has left Mory alienated at home, yet unable to escape, gives the material a powerful new tenor.

The picture won prizes in Cannes and Moscow but was poorly received at home. “Here in Senegal, it was a big commercial flop and was taken off screen after only four days,” recalled Ben Diogaye Bèye, its assistant director. “By showing the fantasies of the youth of Colobane, Djibril also brought out their defects and they did not forgive him for that.” He didn’t direct another feature until *Hyènes* 19 years later in 1992. Magaye Niang attributed this extended gap to Mambéty’s perfectionism: “His aim was to make masterpieces.” The director’s own explanations tended toward the cryptic or whimsical. Shortly before his death from cancer in 1998 at the age of 53, he was questioned about his lack of productivity. “I had a love affair with a princess called Tortoise,” he said.

Though Mambéty died young, *Touki Bouki* has had an unusual and extended afterlife. It continues to be highly regarded, and not only by Scorsese. The black British film-maker John
Akomfrah has called it “an absolute gem” and “the one indisputable masterpiece of the African avant garde.” Mambéty’s niece, the actor and film-maker Mati Diop (herself the daughter of the renowned musician Wasis Diop), directed the 2013 semi-documentary *A Thousand Suns*, which centres around a public screening of *Touki Bouki* and asks why Niang, like the character he played, never left Senegal. “Touki means ‘to travel’ and you are stuck!” his friends taunt him. “You should have travelled!” The film ends with a poignant phone conversation between him and Mareme Niang, who did make the break, like her character Anta, and now lives in Alaska.

Diop has professed herself “a little troubled” about the appropriation of *Touki Bouki* by Jay-Z and Beyoncé. “It looks like it’s an art director who brought them the image, and no one has been concerned about what artistic and political story is behind it,” she told *Libération*. “It is depressing and fascinating at the same time, the unbearable lightness of the mainstream.”

It is certainly unfortunate that the couple invoked the glories of African cinema on a tour that doesn’t call at a single country on that continent. Perhaps in the wake of their tumultuous relationship, and the references that On the Run II makes to their personal ups and downs, they were drawn merely to the incendiary nature of its vision. “*Touki Bouki* was conceived at the time of a very violent crisis in my life,” Mambéty once said. “I wanted to make a lot of things explode.” As Scorsese later observed: “That’s just what he did. *Touki Bouki* explodes one image at a time.”

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Classic African Films N°2: ‘Touki Bouki’ by Djibril Diop Mambéty

BY
Basia Lewandowska Cummings

This is, perhaps, one of my favorite films of all time. A shifting and fragmentary tale of two young lovers — Mory and Anta — and their attempts to flee Senegal for Paris, ‘Touki Bouki’ is Djibril Diop Mambéty’s masterpiece. It fizzes with wit and acuity, it diagnoses the ambivalence toward the colonial master and the at times surreal practices of ‘traditional’ culture.

My reading of the film is undoubtedly influenced by the following quote, a manifesto of sorts, from Mambéty:

“The word griot...is the word for what I do and the role that the filmmaker has in society...the griot is a messenger of one’s time, a visionary and the creator of the future.”

In comparing himself to the traditional storyteller figure in West African society, Mambéty bridges the divide between what was considered ‘traditional’ and modern, defying the colonial logic desiring to cast the native population as inherently anti-technological. In his comparison, Mambéty invokes the fragmentary, questioning narrative — deeply embedded within aural traditions — and fuses his filmic sensibility with this social practice. As a result, many Western critics argued that Mambéty’s films were ‘poorly constructed’ (see e.g. Melissa Thackway, Africa Shoots Back, 2003, p.78), but this digressive narrative style can be observed in Mambéty’s ‘Le Franc’ (1994), Med Hondo’s ‘Soleil O’ (1969) or Sissako’s ‘Octobre’ (1991), all of whom employ a challenging structure which can be traced to a style of oral storytelling.

What this narrative style does is provide an insight into the value of a people and their social structure (through Mory and Anta, we are shown how the status quo of Senegalese society is negotiated by a younger generation), while using traditional means to diagnose a contemporary reading of the present. It’s a flow of exchange between old and new, a negotiation, perhaps perfectly embodied in Mory’s motorbike — a slick piece of machinery adorned with the horns of a bull. But, it is also important to note that while I’m tracing a symmetry between the griot style of storytelling and
orality 'at work' in Mambéty's filmmaking, I'm not transposing one onto the other; it's not the case that oral literature is inherently cinematic, but rather, that through negotiation one can empower the other.

An apt example of Mambéty's style in 'Touki Bouki' is a sharp cut between a young boy (Mory) riding a bucking cow, accompanied by a soundtrack of glittering kora music, to — in a split second edit — an abattoir where bulls are being slaughtered, the screaming sound of animal terror tearing the viewer away from the previous tranquil scene. From the dreamy calm of a pastoral history, to the brutality of industry, mass production, 'the market', Mambéty's edit is at once a critique of a nostalgia for Senegal's 'pure' pastoral, pre-colonial past, and its (then) current position as part of the French Empire. This edit shows Mambéty's penchant for discontinuity, for symbolism, and for a stultifying lyricism, perhaps I'd even go so far as to say a kind of percussive editing rhythm, as if perhaps Tony Allen were at the cutting table.

But further than just his narrative style, Mambéty seems to embody this position of a 'modernist' griot, using contemporary modes of visual storytelling to further the narrative arts he was born into. And why not? His films are excellent examples of how the contemporary can be read through the (re)construction of myths and narratives from a collective memory — breathing life into the space occupied by a set of symbolic codes of both tradition and modernity, that through his films are rendered synchronous and simultaneous, a point Imruh Bakari makes brilliantly in the book 'African Experiences of Cinema'. A notion of modernity, in this context, is powerfully wrenched from its Western stronghold, used instead to attest to what Bakari calls 'the complex tonality of the African experience'.

So, while Mory and Anta trick and swindle their way closer to Paris, Mambéty tests certain situations and norms; he demonizes the 'revolutionary', he shows a gay character, he shows sex between two African people in a way rarely ever shown before; full of tenderness, eroticism, reclaiming love and intimacy from the stereotypes of Western presentation. Mory and Anta make love in the shadow of the motorbike, on the edge of a cliff. It's a breathtaking scene, their impassioned gazes slowly drowned by the repetitive crashing of the waves.

Throughout the film they are intimately tied together. However, in the final moments when they finally board the boat to go to France, Mory is overwhelmed as he sees the horns of his motorbike, and runs back to land to find it. In doing so he abandons Anta to travel alone. Manthia Diawara notes that this is typical of the griot narrative, which flirts with change but ultimately restores order by returning to the traditional. Mory flees back to the medina (the slum), restoring him, and the narrative, back to tradition.

But Mambéty also subverts this unconditional return. Through his depiction of their dress and behavior, Mambéty demonstrates that the contemporary youth are multi-sited; when their actions denote one place, their dress reveals another place. Mambéty has therefore employed a typical griot narrative, but subverted it. Despite ultimately restoring the narrative to the blissful calm of the traditional herdsman scene that traverses the arid landscape of rural Senegal, Mambéty has consistently fused traditional symbols to modern modes of being, most strikingly in Mory's motorbike.

* You can watch 'Touki Bouki' on Mubi (by signing up to their service — they have many fantastic films on their site), or you can watch it on The African Film Library for $5.