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## Film, Two Way Mirror of the Dogon Society

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## Film, two way mirror of the Dogon's society?

Definitions are limiting. Limitations  
are deadening. To limit oneself is a  
kind of suicide. To limit another is a  
kind of murder. To limit poetry is a  
Hiroshima of the human spirit. Danger:  
Radiation.  
in T de Bromhead

1978 is the year the idea of organizing “Regards Comparés” was born. The issue was to show the evolution of how society is represented in ethnologist films, journalist films or explorer films<sup>1</sup>. Through the screening of many movies between 1978 and 1988, ethnologists and filmmakers thus rediscovered, the Bushmen of the Kalahari, the Yanomami Indians, the Dogons of the Bandiagara Cliff, the Inuits, or the various populations of New-Guinea. The originality of these events lies in bringing different outlooks to bear upon the same society. The stylistic evolution of the movies and the

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<sup>1</sup> The initiators of this event were, J.M Arnold, Secrétaire Général des rencontres de l'Audiovisuel scientifique, directeur du Serddav puis du CNRS AV, M.Delorme, Responsable des Manifestations au Serddav puis au CNRS AV, J.Rouch, Directeur de Recherche au CNRS, Secrétaire Général du Comité du film ethnographique.

diverse origins of documents made it possible to grasp the gradual transformation of both the ethnologist and society.

The Committee of Ethnographic Film Media proposed collaborating with the CNRS Images/Média to organize in 2000 a second “Regards Comparés” on the Dogons, in tribute to Germaine Dieterlen who passed away a year before. From the filmography established in 1998<sup>2</sup>, comprising over sixty titles, a selection was established by Laurent Pellé and myself.

Putting in parallel the “Regards Comparés” of 1981 and this year allows one to appreciate clearly the role of film in the dynamics of social representation of the Dogons. On this account, let us call to mind the categories created by Leroi-Gourhan in 1948. “The ethnographical qualification can apply to research film, scientific recording, public documentary, or films about exoticism. All fall under the chapter of travel film and milieu films shot without any scientific intention yet imbued with ethnologic value upon exportation...”<sup>3</sup> Those categories highlight how the milieu film “unconsciously harbors scientific values most evident in changing the viewer’s perspective.»

The first event centered mostly on movies directed by Jean Rouch and Germaine Dieterlen. In 2000, the purpose was to set forth an array of movies that insisted more on the evolution of stand points and on the plurality of perspectives on the Dogon society. Besides this cinematic production, the vast majority of

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<sup>2</sup> Filmography that I established in 1998 and published in a report of liaison Mere Sungu n°5 Janvier 1998

<sup>3</sup> A.Leroi-Gourhan, “cinéma et sciences humaines- Le film ethnologique existe-t-il ? “*La revue de géographie humaine et d’ethnologie* n 3, 1948...”

actual publication or research on the Dogons rest almost exclusively on ethnographic literature that takes no account of this cinematic production.

Since 1977, I have been staying regularly in Dogon country, in the Ogoleye district of the town of Sangha, a magnet for tourists, journalists, politicians and travel guides. I was therefore in a good place to observe the gradual rise of tourism, the appearance of antique dealers, and the frequent guided tours of “the Griaule House”<sup>4</sup> as a living museum. I became an object of curiosity on a par with the Dogons. On seeing in the living representative the “Griaule School”, the tourists could hardly suppress their desire to “take a snapshot”<sup>5</sup>. Was I a stuffed ethnologist or ethnologized ethnologist? It became quite difficult, given these conditions, to ignore the mirror effect.

Because of my education of filmmaker and field it seemed to me essential to look into the cinematic corpus that has accrued over time and its influence on the dynamic imagery of the Dogon country and society in the grip of these three scourges “drought, locust, and tourism”<sup>6</sup>.

Among the “Regards Comparés” organized between 1978 and 1989, only those on “the Dogon of the Bandiagara cliff” allowed local sources. Among the participants in the debates was Koguem Dolo, one of M.Griaule’s local sources at the time of the encounter with Ogotemmel and Amadingué Dolo, head of the Mask Society, who had known Griaule when he was 16 years old. That year, Sekou Ogobora Dolo, head of the Awa’s Mask Dance Company and of the Office of Sangha Guides, was invited to participate at the event.

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4 Irony of fate, if my memory serves me right, this house was built after the death of Marcel Griaule.

5 As such, let’s remember that if many researches are using this “Griaule’s School” formula, few are defining it. J.Clifford propose an interpretation in *Malaise dans la culture*, Paris, ENS des Beaux-Arts, coll. Espaces de l’art. 1996

6 Joke that I have often heard from the youngsters of the Ogo’s villages.

The issue of tourism in Dogon Country<sup>7</sup> and of the use of masks outside their ritual context were sensitive questions.<sup>8</sup> It therefore seemed necessary to invite a Dogon native whose personality did not match the stereotypical image of the tradition. Sekou brought an interesting testimony on the working conditions of tour guides, on the specific demands of tourists, as well as the reasons behind his reorganizing a company of masked dancers, the same way his father Ogobara had done 30 years before. To enable him to discover the many films shot in the Dogon Territory, most particularly in the Sangha Region, seemed to me especially important in light of the fact that directors, except ethnologists filmmakers, do not usually show their movies to the concerned population.

In 1981, the first Griaule Movie opened the film festival. Shot in 1931, *Au pays dogon* showed various aspects of daily life and religious ceremonies. The great bulk of films, directed by Germaine Dieterlen and Jean Rouch, focused on large ceremonies like the Dama, the Sigui or some less spectacular funerary rituals. Two Anglo-Saxons films documented the making of masks<sup>9</sup>. Francis Caillaud's film<sup>10</sup>, directed in 1970, gave a monographic personal look to an overall view of the Dogon society. Although these films were directed by professionals, Jean Rouch kindly invited me to show a documentary I had shot in 8mm<sup>11</sup> and that pointed out the direction of my research: to focus on the everyday life's topic of women and women-related

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8 *Les masques, Ethnologie savante, ethnologie autochtone* A.Doquet Karthala, 1999

9 *African carving the dogon Canaga mask*, 1975 20mn Elliot Eliosofon Film Study Center. Harvard University.

10 *Les Dogons*, 1970 70mn Réalisation F.Caillaud

11 *La fabrication de l'huile de sa*, 25mn 1980 BPI- Ministere de la Coopération.

activities.<sup>12</sup> In the presence of such brilliantly filmed ceremonies, of the craft and display spectacular masks, my heartfelt intention was to contribute to unveiling the preparations behind the rituals.

A look at the titles<sup>13</sup> of the 2000 “Regards Comparés” film selections suggests divisions in terms of the monographic intention and quality of the movies<sup>14</sup>, in terms of geographic attractiveness (often at the expense of the natives)<sup>15</sup>, in terms of souped-up titles ready for an audience<sup>16</sup>, in terms finally of the Dogon terminology<sup>17</sup>. Is this concern for authenticity, for a less distorting mirror?

It’s interesting to study carefully the audio commentary in these films. They almost completely overshadow the speech and dialogue of the protagonists. Similarly obvious is the off-screen commentary leading the viewer’s attention to notice how the Dogons have retained their customs and traditions. Notwithstanding the ongoing debate about the relevance of using audio commentary, music, and subtitles, a chronological screening of the whole film selection on the Dogons suggests that, until the late eighties,<sup>18</sup> almost all the movies involved a voice-over that

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12 For the present moment my research project could be defined as such “Men and women cooperation in the ritual context”

13 As soon as 1985 Claudine de France brings up interesting elements of reflexion concerning the commentary. She reads the title as an early form of commentary. *Image et commentaire: Du montré à l'évoqué*. Hors Cadre n°3 1985 pp133-153.

14 *les Dogon, Au pays des Dogon, l'Art chez les Dogon, Au pays dogon*

15 *Au Mali, les falaises de Biandiagara, Falaises de Biandiagara*

16 *La falaise du diable, les acrobates du Pays dogon, D'où viens-tu l'Afrique buissonnière,*

17 *Gaba, gaba chasseur de venins, Inagina, l'ultime maison de fer, Togu na and Checko, Signi synthèse, tchoumpa! les enfants du tourisme, Arama so les mots de la sécheresse, Yoro le grenier vide, le Dama d'Ambara, Ibani ou l'écharpe bleue, Jon jonu-ne, territoire de la folie*

18 We are not counting in this category films directed by J.Rouch et G.Dieterlen upon which we will come back ulteriorly.

singled out the director's interests for attention.<sup>19</sup> This type of representation reduces a society to the items selected by the director. The single-minded focus on masks in these films confirms this.

A favorite with filmmakers, masks are featured in almost every movie, whatever its topic may be. The mask typifies the Dogon society of which it seems to be the core element. It almost seems a necessary fare of Dogon movies. In the late Sixties, in response to the request of certain filmmakers, the Dogons started laying out their masks outside of a ritual context<sup>20</sup> along certain sacrifices<sup>21</sup>. Thus mask craftsmanship is bared before the curious public. This behavior gives rise to notable contradiction: on the one hand, the voice-over prohibits identifying the mask bearer and craftsman, on the other hand, it involves breaking the taboo against images of the making of masks and against breaking the ritual practice. This contradiction in the end provides the dramatic drive of most films and calls into question the status and role of eyewitness, filmmaker, and viewer.

This stereotypical outlook turns the Dogon society in an exotic pilgrimage center. Three films shown in 2000 directly address this question by presenting the stories of characters of surprising diversity: French teenagers of Malian descent, a Japanese actor living for few weeks in a Dogon village, a few Afro-Americans

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19 Besides the silent films which don't comprise oral commentaries, we can give the following list of movies without illustrative commentaries of images: *Tchoumpa, les enfants du tourisme*, A. Bonche, *Arama so, les mots de la sécheresse*, N. Wanono *Gestes du regard* J. Agnel. The question of commentary is in the bibliography.

20 *Maskentänze in Sanga* 1966, 14 mn réalisation D. Lutz et Herman Schenkler. IWF. Allemagne.

21 *The art the dogon* (dated in 1988 though one of the film character died in 1977. There is thus a mistake in dating the movie. It rather should have been shot around the late sixties early seventies) Production Metropolitan Museum of Art (USA)

in search of their roots<sup>22</sup>. The latter, for instance, began their trip in Gorée, in the former slave house, now a museum, before traveling into the Dogon country. At the end of the movie, the director's voice laments over the mutual fascination between tourists and Dogon. Following this directorial realization, the group of friends is shown paying for the staging of a mask dance. This considerable film production on the Dogons leads me to think that these television films are a reflection of our society. A careful screening of these Dogon television movies uncovers the rules of seeing by which we live. It is a negative image or a two-way mirror on our own society.

Do the films assembled by researchers lead us to the same quandary?

To advertise the new research orientations practiced in Dogon country, films by Alexandre Bonche<sup>23</sup> and Denise Dia Barros<sup>24</sup> were selected in 2000.

They dealt respectively with the tourist problem and another, rather unknown, aspect of that society: the treatment and perception of madness<sup>25</sup>. Another of my films<sup>26</sup> addressed the exodus problem, conversion, and drought. These movies are all works in progress produced independently of the television industry. The voice-over, when it exists, is limited to the bare minimum to allow the viewer insight into a given aspect of the Dogon

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22 *D'où viens-tu l'Afrique buissonnière*, 1991 52mn Réalisation Sene Absa Moussa Mali. *Journal de voyage*, 1996 30mn Réalisation: M.Kuraoka (Japon) *Diasporic Conversation* 1999 52mn Réalisation Mantia Diawara USA

23 *Tchoumpa ! Les enfants du tourisme*, 1999 30mn. Réalisation A. Bonche Produit dans le cadre de son DEA de sociologie et de Sciences Sociales.

24 *Jon Jonu-ne, Territoire de la folie* 1999, 25 mn Réalisation Denise Dias Barros et Gianni Puzzo (Brésil).

25 Let us recall the works of P. Coppo and his team that published many texts on traditional medicine and psychiatry. Titles worthy of mention are *Médecine traditionnelle, psychiatrie and psychologie in Africa* (Roma : Il pensiero scientifico editore) 222 p. 18 pictures

26 *Arama so, les mots de la sécheresse*, 1990, 40mm, directed by N. Wanono and A. Hardy.



society with no claim of exhausting it or snapping its traditional ways out of time. Along with this variety of movies, so suggestive of future research paths, the works made by Germaine Dieterlen and Jean Rouché between 1969 and 1998 present an essential range of the Dogon ceremonial customs. Anchored in rigorous observation of rituals, these films remained in obscurity for many years, until new research cast a new interpretive light on their contents. The voiceover was created over repeated viewings by the two ethnologist filmmakers.

In 1998, I organized the screening of the Sigui ceremony in some of the villages in which the movies were shot. In this manner, the projector, generator, and the white sheet were set up on the Tay de Yougo Dogorou and the Bongo main squares. For many years now, young people ask me, at the outcome of the screening, to show the movie without the obfuscating voice-over. Once a school principal asked me to show a movie of rituals he had never seen:<sup>27</sup> - Could movies become a living history book, the « accurate » archive of a lost world ?

In concluding this presentation of this great filmography, some research inroads need mentioning.

What is the connection between ethnographic literature and these films? Barring any opposition between research films and tourist movies, since the diversity of this filmography is its main strength, a kind of typology nevertheless emerges. To begin with, one could set up an analytic grid identifying a few relevant features—directorial choices which included fictional effects, topics, titles, soundtrack options and voiceover.

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<sup>27</sup> I remember a particular screening near a village in Yendouma where school teachers wanted to see the dailies of the shooting of a funeral and coronation ceremony of the hogon of Arou, shot by P. Lourdou and myself in 1992.

This would clear the way for determining whether the thematic content of movies matches the research topics of ethnographic literature and whether those influence the making of movies. Already a close affinity emerges between literature and cinema, as per G. Dieterlen and J. Rouché's *La Dama D'Ambara*, whose audio commentary rests on M. Griaule's *Masques Dogons*.

Moreover the various filming of the Sigui ceremony provide a guideline for further filmic investigations<sup>28</sup> that went into making *Sigui Synthese*.<sup>29</sup> Other documents can supplement new field research, such as "Tchoumpa ! les enfants du tourisme" by A. Bonche whose movie touches upon tourism and perception of otherness in Dogon country, or again, one of my movies, "Arama so, les mots de la secheresse", on the topic of the economically induced transition through religious identities among some young people.

Lastly, cinema sometimes introduces a fictional element<sup>30</sup> to convey certain aspects of Dogon culture hard to capture by running commentary. In time, then, films gain autonomy from the written texts.

Going back to A. Doquet<sup>31</sup> and A. Bonche's<sup>32</sup> question on the role of traditional ethnographic literature and films in creating a frozen image of Dogon society, a few elements should be kept in mind.

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28 « Les cérémonies soixantenaire du Sigui chez les Dogon » *Africa*, XLI, 1, janvier 1971, pp.1-11.

29 *Sigui Synthese* 1981, 135mm. Directed by Jean Rouch and Germaine Dieterlen.

30 A film with a fictional framework is *un enfant d'Irelli*, 1958, 13mn, by M. Marret. Or *Demain au bord du fleuve*, 45 mn, 1987 by N. Wanono. Or *Tafe Fanga*, 1997 80mn by Adama Drabo (Mali).

31 Anne Doquet, op. cit. in particular Chap. 7 on the ethnological situation (pp. 207-241).

32 Op. cit.

Only very lately have the movies of J. Rouch and G. Dieterlen show in television<sup>33</sup> and, as already mentioned, these screenings took place in Dogon villages around the wider Sangha area. By contrast, films produced by television crews, often in the very same spots, were broadcast during prime time with good coverage by the printed press. It is therefore crucial –to emphasize the explicit or implicit references to ethnographic literature and to acknowledge the impact of such documents on tourists—to try, also, to lay out the main element of those images that went into building this tourist-friendly Dogon society. Given that Griaule remains the center of public attention<sup>34</sup>, could we not suggest that this character has been raised to ancestral status<sup>35</sup> ? Tour guides often rehearse this piece of lore : « Marcel Griaude was initiated by one of the village elders who transmitted his knowledge to him. This great man built a dam and the people honored him by celebrating his funeral. »<sup>36</sup> For the young tour guides, often outcasts themselves, identifying with this celebrity allows them to take possession of a society that ignores them, causing them to create a traditional universe and find justification by means of a mythic mediator, Griaule, known by all tourists.

There is, to me, no current relevance to the conflict between a society frozen by the need to perpetuate its stereotype and research (filmic or written) stuck on the need to produce an authentic body of work. Should we not embrace a more dynamic outlook allowing the Dogon society to get back some form of autonomy and recapture its own history ?

33 *Chronique d'une passion. 50 ans de recherche sur les dogons*, television production shown on Arte in 1997 at 11pm.

35 Danouta Libersky and C. Henry quoting Hertz : « It is of little importance to know whether this new image will endure in the consciousness of survivors, since the last ceremony is designed to erase the memory of the dead (...). But even forgetting is not a strictly negative process : it implies a labor of destruction » (1928 : 76, note 2). They add : « In light of this remark, there is cause to suspect that the long process starting with the death of a person does not follow the same pattern depending on whether it leads to complete oblivion, the remembering of only a name, or to a cult of ancestor worship that also can take many different forms. Henry, C. and Libersky, D. 1991, pp. 7-14.

36 *Funérailles Dogon du professeur Griaule* 1956 18mn François de Dieu.

Rossellini once said <sup>37</sup>: « I believe we must find a new basis on which to build and represent man such as he is, deep in the link he extends between poetry and reality, desire and action, dream and reality. »

Nadine Wanono

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<sup>37</sup> Brunette, Pierre, Roberto Rossellini, 1937 Oxford University Press.