



FILM AFRICA 24: OPENING NIGHT

Dahomey

Dahomey

Directed by: Mati Diop

©: Les Films du Bal, Fanta Sy, Arte France Cinéma

Production Companies: Les Films du Bal,

Fanta Sy, Arte France Cinéma

Line Production: Hiris Production

In association with: Saturday Films

International Sales: Les Films du Losange

Produced by: Eve Robin, Judith Lou Levy,

Mati Diop

Line Producer: Christiane Chabi Kao

Associate Producer: Ama Ampadu

Les Films du Bal (Producers): Judith Lou Levy,

Eve Robin

Fanta Sy (Producer): Mati Diop

Hiris Production (Executive Producer):

Christiane Chabi Kao

Production Manager: Marco Tulio Pires

Production Accountant: Marine Ducros

Location Managers: Abou Bakar Badarou,

Joel Chabi-Kao

2nd Unit Director: Christophe Nanga-Oly

Assistant Director: Gildas Adannou

Casting: Mati Diop, Gildas Adannou,

Didier Sedoha Nassangade

Written by: Mati Diop

Adaptation/English Subtitles: Simon John

In Collaboration with – for the Cinematography:

Joséphine Drouin Viillard

Visual Effects Designer: Maxime Villemard

In Collaboration with – for the Editing:

Gabriel Gonzalez

Music: Dean Blunt, Wally Badarou

Sound: Corneille Houssou, Nicolas Becker,

Cyril Holtz

Dialogue Editor: Maxime Saleix

In collaboration with: Makenzy Orcel

(‘voice of the treasures’)

Voices: Lucrece Houegebello, Parfait Viayinon,

Didier Sèdoha Nassègandé, Sabine Badjogoumin,

Dowoti Desir, Micheline Ayinon, Bicarel Gnikipo,

Nadia Vihoutou Kponadou

France-Senegal-Benin-UK 2024

68 mins

Digital

This screening will include a pre-recorded intro from the director, Mati Diop. There will also be further introductions from patrons and organisers prior to the screening.

A voice floods the dark screen as if bellowed from beyond the grave: ‘I have in my mouth the aftertaste of the ocean.’ The unearthly message arrives in strangled Fon, one of the major Indigenous languages of Benin, formerly Dahomey, where it was ‘officially’ supplanted by French amid nearly a century of colonisation. Conquest erases and revises; feverish endeavours to remake the conquered often succeed, tragically enough, in an enduring, generational estrangement – from the past, from the self – but there exists a haunting. How better to reconcile such a perverse, ongoing intrusion than to rescue the voice of a people who have always written their histories with their tongues?

Mati Diop roused wrathful phantoms from the seaside of Dakar, the capital of Senegal, for her oneiric feature debut *Atlantics* (2019), adapted from her 2009 short *Atlantiques*, and turns to revenants once again for her new film *Dahomey*. We begin not in the West African kingdom for which the documentary is named, but in present-day Paris: flickering monochrome CCTV footage captures the empty, bleach-white basement corridors of the Musée du quai Branly, where 26 royal treasures (including sacred altars), pillaged from Dahomey during the French invasion of the 1890s, are prepared for their journey back to Benin, as promised by President Emmanuel Macron in November 2021. Among these relics is the regal wooden statue of King Ghezo, ruler and subsequent rulers in Abomey, Dahomey’s capital, from 1818 to 1858. The statue narrates the film, recounting his shadowy captivity abroad and his heavy ambivalence as he finally embarks on his voyage home. In voiceover he confesses, ‘I’m torn between the fear of not being recognised by anyone and not recognising anything.’

At least two other kings join Ghezo on this pilgrimage, his direct descendants Glele, in the shape of an intricately carved lion-headed effigy, and his heir Béhanzin, depicted as half man, half shark. Ghezo, frozen in a pose of noble resistance, fist raised, is voiced by the Haitian author Makenzy Orcel, who also wrote his own lines – lyrical interludes that give a textured, intimate shape to Diop’s otherwise observational portrait.

At the Toronto Film Festival this year, *Dahomey* emerged as one of the most formally experimental films – one of the most ambitious too, despite clocking in at just 67 minutes. It’s a characteristically hybrid project for the genre-defying filmmaker, blurring the bounds of nonfiction and fantasy. Diop and cinematographer Josephine Drouin Viillard chart the artefacts’ journey with what at first seems a curiously measured gaze, all sleek wide frames and minimal flourish. Along with Ghezo’s sombre musings, Wally Badarou and Dean Blunt’s electric, ghostly score with its tidal synths and alien inflections (strongly reminiscent of Fatima Al Qadiri’s soulful, gothic music for *Atlantics*) casts a dream-like veil over clinical proceedings: the fastidious care with which the sculptures are packaged, the forensic appraisal of their condition. Moments of emotion spill from the margins: the spirited parade that welcomes the looted treasures’ homecoming; nighttime sequences in the presidential gardens while Ghezo omnisciently surveys the transformed streets of his youth; the Beninese conservator who sings quietly to the recovered sculpture before him.

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IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Halloween Special Screenings: Halloween

Sat 26 Oct 18:20; Sun 27 Oct 16:20;

Wed 30 Oct 20:40; Thu 31 Oct 21:05

The Pilger Effect

Mon 28 Oct 18:15

Armenian Shorts + live electric cello accompaniment by Artyom Manukyan

Tue 29 Oct 18:30

Save the Green Planet! Jigureul jikyeora!

Wed 30 Oct 17:50 (+ Q&A with director

Jang Joon-hwan); Sat 30 Nov 20:30

Preview: No Other Land

Wed 30 Oct 21:05

Film Africa Closing Night:

Black Tea + intro and Q&A

Sun 3 Nov 17:50

Vera: End of an Era + Q&A with Brenda Blethyn,

Ann Cleeves and guests

Tue 5 Nov 18:10

London Korean Film Festival Opening Gala:

Victory bik-to-ri + Q&A with director Park

Beom-su

Wed 6 Nov 18:45

Art of Action: The Train + intro with Christopher

McQuarrie and Eddie Hamilton, presented by

London Action Festival

Fri 8 Nov 20:30

London Korean Film Festival Closing Night Gala:

Love in the Big City Dae-dosi-ui Sarang-beop

+ Q&A with director E.oni

Wed 13 Nov 18:45

Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band: Still Barking – Colour

Me Pop + Q&A with band members and special

guests, hosted by Samira Ahmed

Thu 14 Nov 18:15

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 18 Nov 18:30

Preview: Moana 2 + Q&A with David Derrick Jr,

Jason Hand, Dana Ledoux Miller, Christina Chen

and Jared Bush

Sun 24 Nov 10:30

Art of Action – Special TV Preview: SAS Rogue

Heroes + Q&A with writer Steven Knight and

cast members (tbc)

Tue 26 Nov 18:15

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The collective grief and unspoken rage remain occluded in the pristine beauty of these early sequences, which are no mere exercise in style. *Dahomey* plunges viewers first into something like the vacuum of context in which these idols long resided, on hostile soil, trapped behind glass to bear the cold scrutiny of unknowing and careless onlookers – shorn not merely of knowledge, but of the elaborate human networks that long charged these artefacts with meaning. Later in the film, a student deems museums a distinctly Western institution; these spaces may or may not find that resolving their promise to inform and edify imperils their respectability when they so often operate as displays for the spoils of war and imperialism. (The British Museum, for example, is in possession of nearly a thousand artefacts from Benin alone, to say nothing of many more thousands from China, Ethiopia and so on.)

Dahomey has obvious traces of Alain Resnais, Chris Marker and Ghislain Cloquet's short documentary *Statues Also Die* (1953) – to which, incidentally, the artist Isaac Julien staged his own quasi-sequel in 2022 with his arresting five-screen installation *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*. In the original film, a bracing anticolonial critique, the French actor Jean Négroni declares, 'When men die, they enter history. When statues are dead, they enter the realm of art.' The museum, he posits, is 'the place where we send Black things'. In *Dahomey*, the figure of King Ghezo describes his condition as 'Cut off from the land of my birth as if dead. There are thousands of us in this night.' It turns out that this repatriation is just a sliver of what has been plundered; an estimated 7,000 artefacts still languish in French custody. Consider, too, that Dahomey, itself a once prosperous, conquering nation, is perhaps best remembered for its role in the domestic and transatlantic slave trades. There is, at once, an inescapable, if unannounced kinship between the statues and the many, eternally lost tribes whom the Dahomey (by no means alone) delivered to the Europeans. But if *Statues Also Die* considers this displacement a kind of death, *Dahomey* contends that culture, art, is an animate, deathless thing; the sculptures themselves betray the human need to give it form.

The latter half of the film surrenders to passionate debate between students at Benin's University of Abomey-Calavi as they decide what to do with the salvaged vestiges of their heritage. In these conversations, the crown treasures become not simply part of, but an emblem for all that has been stolen from them: a collage of thwarted inheritance which includes language and historical icons (replaced by the Europeans – such as Plato and Aristotle – who dominated their education). Beyond the issues of restitution, the meagre and transparently patronising political efforts of the French, this dialogue equally announces the communion between the ghosts of the past and the bodies that still persist in their fight: a natural extension of the project Diop has undertaken consistently, from *A Thousand Suns* (2013) – a companion piece to her uncle Djibril Diop Mambéty's 1973 masterpiece *Touki Bouki* – to *Atlantics*, where the living became sleepless vessels for their lost dead. Such a film yields no easy resolutions; there are none to be had. A younger generation crowds around the statues of old kings and the complicated tapestry that is their history; in them, it becomes endless.

Kelli Weston, *Sight and Sound*, November 2024