

SOWING SOMANKIDI COURA

Edited by
Raphaël Grisey
in collaboration
with Bouba Touré

A GENERATIVE ARCHIVE



Table of Contents

5	101	188
Introduction	Interview	Our Lives and Struggles
Raphaël Grisey	Ladji Niangané	in France. Photographs
10	107	by Bouba Touré
Somankidi Coura,	The Politicization and	
1977–1980	Visibility of West African	
Photographs by	Immigrants in France in	
Bouba Touré	the 1970s. The Activist	
14	Trajectories of ACTAF	
IMMIGRATION –	and Révolution Afrique	
WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?	Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye	
CULTURAL ASSOCIATION	and Jean-Philippe Dedieu	
OF AFRICAN WORKERS		
IN FRANCE (ACTAF)		
22	132	224
Interviews	Somankidi Coura,	Our Lives and Struggles
Bouba Touré	1977–1980	in France. Photographs
31	Photographs by	by Bouba Touré
Figuring Fallow Time		
Part One		
Raphaël Grisey		
45	138	231
Interview	Interview	Interview
Ousmane Sinaré	Bakhoré Bathily	Siré Soumaré
49	139	242
Plantations and Cooperatives.	Interview with	Interview
The Colonial Coercion	Sidney Sokhona in	Mady Koïta Niakhaté
Economy and Postcolonial	<i>Cahiers du Cinéma</i>	
Developmentalist Agrarianism	N° 285, February 1978.	
Romain Tiquet	(Safrana)	
68	157	251
Somankidi Coura,	Sidney Sokhona	Since I Don't Want to Die,
1977–1980	interviewed by	I'm Walking with Time
Photographs by	Catherine Ruelle and	Olivier Marboeuf
Bouba Touré	Guy Henebelle in	
79	<i>CinémAction</i>	
Things and Their Proper	No. 8, 1979.	
Places. Notes on the		
Photography of Bouba Touré		
Tobias Hering		
	165	261
	TRAANA	Interview
	A theatre script	Goundo Kamissokho Niakhaté
	by Bouba Touré	
	181	267
	Traana	Discussion: Goundo Kamissokho
	Adapted by Kàddu Yaraax	Niakhaté and Mady Niakhaté
	and Raphaël Grisey	
		273
		Figuring Fallow Time
		Part Two
		Raphaël Grisey
	302	
	Exhibitions	
	312	
	Biographies	



My ongoing exchanges and correspondence with Bouba Touré over the course of more than a decade are presented here; a book to be considered as an elaborated step of an enduring process. This research stemmed from my desire to make films in light of Bouba Touré's photographic archive and my experience at the Somankidi Coura cooperative. Later, the work extended to include the turbulent ecologies surrounding the cooperative's coming into being: from the emergence of the immigrant workers' struggles in France in the early 1970s, to the postcolonial and environmental implications of the 1973 drought, to agricultural technologies and policies, to the toughening of migrant policy in Europe, and finally to the production and circulation of images associated with all of this. These ten years have included long fallow periods, emerging archives, discussions and film screenings in multiple constellations. Most of the process of researching, digitizing and connecting scattered materials, placing them in perspective and regenerating them through various collaborations, was done directly with Bouba Touré, while some of it was informed by our discussions.

This book is a trace of this research and these collaborations. It includes certain voices that have long accompanied the project, and new ones as well. The 'partiality' of this book invites future images and connections: a film I plan to make based on moving-image archives, the continuation of my collaboration with Kàddu Yaraax—this time at the Somankidi Coura cooperative, revolving around a theatre-play written by the founding members of the cooperative in 1976—and their project to create a documentation center on site. This book is also an assemblage of distinct voices whose possible links are supple enough to occasionally form motifs that will arise and dissolve in line with the affinities, alliances and ecosystems that interweaving with the trajectory and the history of the Somankidi Coura cooperative. The cooperative's history proceeded through detours, departures and returns; it produced changes of perspective and scale, which transformed and diffracted the dominant colonial, nationalist, revolutionary and pan-African narratives. The cooperative found soil and image qualities that could engender a different way of thinking about subsistence agriculture, the rural exodus, immigration and ecosystems, against the tides of a post-colonial necropolitics built on nationalisms and a neoliberal paradigm. It was also generated in the fabric of relationships and a cine-geography.

This cine-geography involved education infrastructures like the Université Libre de Vincennes, the liberation movements in Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique, night courses in the immigrant workers' hostels, old colonial or state agricultural infrastructures, termite networks, tree nurseries, Bouba Touré's image archives, as well as alliances and friendships like the solidarity between left-wing parties and immigrant workers, between ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France), French farmers and the liberation struggles in the former Portuguese colonies, between Sidney Sokhona's films and the ACTAF project, as well as my ten-year collaboration and friendship with Bouba Touré. Sketching these relationships, whose traces are atomized in various archives (both public and private) implies also considering the variations, heterochronies, affinities and antagonisms between the actors, as well as the challenges and risks of appropriation, so that these can be made into a subject of reflection for the present and future.

The voice and images of Bouba Touré—a photographer, filmmaker, activist, farmer, actor, writer, projectionist and cofounder of the cooperative—irrigates the book and *walks with time* as he says in his video *Bouba Touré, 58 rue Trousseau, 75011 Paris, France*. The selection of his photographs presents a forty-year practice that turned into a chronicle, of the life and struggles of immigrants in the Paris region, and of the Somankidi Coura cooperative in Mali. The transcriptions of some of our interviews reveal an intergenerational biography, which is projected not only into fictions about ancestors who are interpreted and reincarnated, but also into speculative fictions on the future of images, animist ecologies and the traces of migration, which range from soil overturned by bombs in Verdun, to Parisian asphalt and the ploughed earth on the banks of the Fankhoré River.

In the text *Figuring Fallow Time*, I look back on my collaboration with Bouba Touré, on the desire to make, regenerate and cultivate images, to consider new fertile grounds in relation—through kinship or friction—to the history of the cooperative. My text is partial and speculative. It was written with an ear to the different voices that make up this book, in order to encourage transversal readings of the texts, narratives and images.

Romain Tiquet effects a shift in scale by beginning with the history of the Diakhandapé sisal plantation (whose ruins are located across from the site of the Somankidi Coura cooperative) through colonial archives, in order to speak about the ideology of “*mise en valeur*” [the imperative to make valuable] applied to human and material resources during the transition between the colonial period and nation-building phase after independence.

Tobias Hering presents a new take on the *Poetics of Relation* dear to Édouard Glissant, in light of the photographic practice of Bouba Touré. Putting *Things and their proper places* in the All-World of migrations and fugitivities consists in arranging refuges and related temporalities, and requires more than archaeological observation.

Interviews conducted in 2007 and 2008 with various founding members of the Somankidi Coura cooperative structure the book in a similar way. The interviews with Ousmane Sinaré, Bouba Touré, Bakhoré Bathily, Siré Soumaré, Ladji Niangané and Mady Niakhaté were conducted as part of preparatory work on my 2008 film, as a way of getting acquainted. The interviews were guided by a few recurrent questions about the individual experiences that led to the choice to emigrate and led to ACTAF’s political activities in hostels and factories, and about the emergence and foundation of the cooperative, its organization and the regeneration of its motif 30 years later. In connection with these interviews, a 1976 report on the founding of the Somankidi Coura cooperative, written by members of ACTAF, is reproduced here.

Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye and Jean Philippe Dedieu recount two trajectories, that of ACTAF, from which the cooperative world emerge, and that of the group *Révolution Afrique*. They also explore how immigrant workers took action in the 1970s as part of left-wing organizations and African liberation struggles. The text highlights the appearance of a new Paris cartography drawn by the hostels in which the struggling immigrant workers lived. The names of these places became banners and activation points.

In her interview, Goundo Kamissokho talks about the emergence of the struggles and the organizing of the Somankidi Coura women’s association,

which she represents; she speaks of the dominant role of rural women's groups in URCAK (l'Union Régionale des Coopératives Agricoles de Kayes / Kayes Regional Union of Agricultural Cooperatives). To a certain extent, this interview outlines two translation problems: that of translating the cooperative's purpose into other forms, and the fact that Goundo Kamissokho was the only French-speaking woman I was able to discuss with at the time.

The book reproduces two nearly complete interviews with Sidney Sokhona, whose films are a part of the history of the immigrant workers' struggles and that of the cooperative. His 1978 interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma* with Serge Daney and Jean-Pierre Oudart appeared upon the release of the film *Safrana or Freedom of Speech*, a fictional account of a project by ACTAF members to return to Africa. The changes in perspective on immigration and emigration are reflected in some revealing misunderstandings between Sidney Sokhona and his questioners. The interview in *CinémAction* — conducted by Catherine Ruelle and Guy Henebelle a year later, when Sidney Sokhona had returned to Mauritania—goes back over his individual journey and also emphasizes the collective forms of production used for *Nationalité: Immigré*, his first film, and *Safrana or Freedom of Speech*. It also evokes the links between his films and those of Med Hondo.

Olivier Marbœuf speaks of many-handed narratives, string games that have the ability to transform through takes and retakes, and he speculates on what is and could become a cinematic subsistence agriculture, in forms of film production as well as in the spectrum of kaleidoscopic new takes on situated motifs.

A debt-ridden farmer sends his son Samba to work in the city, despite his mother's objections. Finding himself out of work, he immigrates to El Dorado. In Paris he discovers life in the immigrant workers' hostels. Samba is the main character in the play *Traana*, written by Bouba Touré in 1977 shortly after returning to Mali to found the cooperative. The facsimile of the play is accompanied by its January 2017 adaptation by the theater-forum company Kàddu Yaraax, based in the Yarakh district of Dakar.

This adaptation was created during a writing workshop that I organized and filmed with the Kàddu Yaraax troupe.

Finally, the book reproduces a conversation that took place at Espace Khiasma in 2014 between Olivier Marboeuf, Karinne Parrot of Gisti (Groupe d'Information et de Soutien des Immigré-e-s/Immigrant Information and Support Group), Tobias Hering, Bouba Touré and myself, revolving around Bouba Touré's photographs and the film *Nationalité: Immigré* by Sidney Sokhona, and looking back on migration policies and their influence on the forms that the migrant struggles assumed.

I would like to give special thanks Bouba Touré for his collaboration, and for allowing me to use his photographs and documents, which make up a significant portion of the book. I also wish to thank the members of the cooperative for their trust, and to express my gratitude for the voices that accompany this book, and for other voices that do not appear here, but were extremely valuable in the process of preparing the book and setting up the collaborations that made it possible. I would also like to give special thanks to Marie-Hélène Gutberlet for her priceless regular editorial advice, as well as Chiara Figone and the team at Archive Books for the graphic design and preparatory logistics.

La naissance
d'une
conscience
en Afrique

"The birth of a consciousness in Africa,"
Written with pen on a slide, 1980's.
Bouba Touré archives.





**Preparation of the land with help
from the inhabitants of Somankidi,
agricultural cooperative of Somankidi
Coura, Mali, February 1977.**

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



Construction of the first canal with termite soil with help from the inhabitants of Somankidi Village, agricultural cooperative of Somankidi Coura, Mali, February 1977.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

After land preparation, members of the agricultural cooperative of Somankidi Coura, Mali, May 1977.

Irrigation system, first canal and stilling basin construction, Somankidi Coura, Mali, February 1977.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



IMMIGRATION – WHAT IS THE SOLUTION ?

Sons of peasants, we have experienced the hard labor of the land, which we left to improve our living conditions. But being illiterate, or of modest education, we did not immediately find the means appropriate to our ambitions, flattered by the “dazzling successes” of some comrades who returned to the village after a stay in France (costume — radio — etc ...) Because of this, tempted by immigration, we found ourselves in France, like so many others.

Arrived in this country “of dream”, ... what have we found?

A job? Certainly ! But hard, painful work!
 Housing? Certainly! But lamentable conditions of hygiene!
 A total change of scenery!

After several years of hard labor, we are aware that we cannot remain caught up in this infernal circle of continual trips and returns, without a definite plan for returning to the country.

Coming from agriculture, it seemed natural to us to return to the land; And being immigrants, it seemed positive and indispensable to us to exploit and develop the knowledge of each other, acquired during our years of immigration. Hence the initiative of a return in a group.

From meetings to meetings, ACTAF activists—after having exposed and discussed their project with their brothers in the homes—set up a group of 14 people, who decided to take agricultural training and go back to Africa together.

In the foyers the most frequently asked questions are:

- How will you organize your training before you return?
- What country are you going to? and why ?
- Will you help other groups in the future to make the same experience?

To these justified questions we answer:

We are not unaware of the existence of private French organizations, which propose to help the development of Africa. We have written to some of them, such as ACCIR, CIMADE, and CCFD. The members and supporters of these organizations, and above all their leaders have, through their good-will, dedication and total commitment to our cause, allowed us to receive agricultural training in families of farmers in la Marne and in Haute-Marne, where we shared family life as friends during these six months.

est possible de suivre une formation agricole telle que nous l'isons souhaité, dès que les familles d'exploitants de la Pologne et de la Haute-Pologne que lesquels nous avons partagé avec eux la vie de famille pendant les 5 mois.

o IMMIGRATION - QUELLE SOLUTION ? o

Tenté par la situation sociale et morale facilité dans notre pays.
Nous les conditions de tout temps, nous remercions également M. Amadou M'BAKALI, Secrétaire général de l'UNESCO qui sur son initiative et son appui personnel, nous a aidé et nous aide encore dans notre travail d'immigration.

Fils de paysans, nous avons connu les durs labeurs de la terre que nous avons quittée pour améliorer nos conditions de vie. Mais étant illétrés, ou d'instruction modeste, nous n'avons pas trouvé sur place les moyens à la mesure de nos ambitions flattées par "les réussites fulgurantes" de quelques camarades rentrés au village après un séjour en France (costumes - radio - électrophones - etc...) De ce fait, tentés par l'immigration, nous nous sommes donc retrouvés en France, comme tant d'autres.

Arrivés dans ce pays "de rêve", qu'avons-nous trouvé ?

Un travail ? certes ! mais un travail dur, pénible ! Un logement ? certes ! mais des conditions d'hygiène regrettables ! Un dépassement total !

Après plusieurs années de travail, dans des conditions de vie difficiles, nous sommes conscients que nous ne pouvons pas rester pris dans ce cercle infernal de continuels allers et retours, sans projet de retour définitif au pays.

Issus de milieu agricole, il nous a semblé tout naturel de retourner à la terre ; et immigrés, il nous a semblé positif et indispensable d'exploiter, et de développer les connaissances des uns et des autres, acquises durant nos années d'immigration. D'où l'initiative d'un retour en groupe.

De réunions en réunions, les militants de l'ACTAF après avoir exposé et discuté leur projet avec leurs frères des foyers, ont mis sur pied un groupe de 14 personnes qui s'est décidé à suivre une formation agricole et retourner ensemble aussitôt en Afrique.

Dans les foyers, les questions les plus souvent avancées sont :

- Comment allez-vous organiser votre formation avant votre retour ?
- dans quel pays allez-vous ? et pourquoi ?
- aiderez-vous d'autres groupes dans l'avenir à tenter la même expérience ?

A ces questions justes, nous répondons :

Nous ne sommes pas sans méconnaitre l'existence d'organisations françaises privées qui se proposent d'aider au développement de l'Afrique. C'est ainsi que nous avons écrit à certaines d'entre elles, telles l'ACCIR, la CIMADE, et le CCFD. Les membres et sympathisants de ces organisations, et surtout leurs responsables, par leur bonne volonté, leur dévouement et leur adhésion totale à notre cause, nous

Parce que nous savons que seules les groupes formés et organisés sont en mesure de faire face aux innombrables difficultés qui sévissent en Afrique principalement dans nos villages.

These organizations facilitated, both through material and moral help, our return and our settlement in our country.

We thank them very much, we also thank Mr. Amadou MOK-TAR M'BOW, Dr. GI of UNESCO, who, through his enduring interest and permanent support, has helped us and still helps us in our work in organizing this project.

Lastly, we would like to express our thanks to the people, who have given us their support. We say that, not to throw flowers at each other, but to simply express our gratitude. But we are aware that the best testimony will be the success of our project, we are committed to it.

To the question concerning the country of settlement, we respond: MALI, in the region of KAYES.

Why Mali and precisely this region of Kayes? Simply because it was in Mali, that we were offered the conditions that we considered indispensable for the group.

The region of KAYES is located in the Senegal River Basin, 95% of the immigrant workers, Senegalese, as well as Mauritanians are from this region. The inhabitants of this region are not only bound by the phenomenon of migration but also by the sociological, political and especially economic life of the Senegal River.

For this reason, our group, which is composed of Malians, Senegalese, Guineans and Voltaic, considers that irrespective of the reasons given above, its establishment in one country and not three or four at a time is dictated by a concern not only for efficiency but also for unity.

We are certain that the real unity of Africa will be achieved, not by discourse, but by the combined and consequent efforts of all its sons.

Since economic action is the foundation of this certain unity, we are reassured in advance because we are confident in ourselves that the action of our group will represent a solid link in the chain that will liberate our peoples from domination and underdevelopment.

Finally, to the question: Will you help others to follow your example?

Our response is: Our group intends to create the basis of a structure that will be promoted. That is to say, the possibility of forming several similar groups in Mali - and Senegal - and Mauritania; By immigrants, who like us, decide to return, or by young people who are left on-site in our villages.

To these future groups in Mali – Senegal – Mauritania and elsewhere, we will give our support, and this to the extent of our possibilities. Why should we give priority to groups? Because we believe that only trained and organized groups can cope with the countless difficulties that prevail in Africa, especially in our villages.

- 2 -

ont permis de suivre une formation agricole telle que nous l'avons souhaité, dans des familles d'exploitants de la Marne et de la Haute-Marne chez lesquels nous avons partagé en ami la vie de famille pendant les 6 mois.

Ces organisations par une aide matérielle et morale facilitent ainsi notre retour et notre installation dans notre pays.

Nous les remercions de tout cœur, nous remercions également Mr Amadou MOKTAR M'BOW, Dr GI de L'UNESCO qui par son intérêt et son appui permanent, nous a aidé et nous aide encore dans notre travail d'organisation de ce projet.

Vont enfin nos remerciements aux personnes qui de loin ou de près nous ont apporté leur soutien. Nous disons cela, pas pour jeter des fleurs aux uns et aux autres, mais pour témoigner notre reconnaissance le plus simplement. Mais nous sommes conscients, que le meilleur témoignage sera la réussite prochaine de notre projet, nous y sommes engagés.

A la question touchant le pays d'installation, nous répondons au MALI dans la région de KAYES.

Pourquoi le Mali et précisément cette région de Kayes ? ... simplement parce que c'est au MALI, qu'on nous a offert les conditions que nous jugeons indispensables pour le groupe.

La région de KAYES est située dans le Bassin du fleuve Sénégal, les travailleurs immigrés maliens - sénégalais - comme mauritaniens sont à 95 % originaires de cette région. Les habitants de cette région ne sont pas seulement liés par le phénomène de l'immigration mais également par la vie sociologique - politique et surtout économique du fleuve sénégal.

Pour cette raison, notre groupe qui est composé de Maliens - Sénégalais - Guinéens et Voltaïques, considère qu'indépendamment des raisons précitées, son installation dans un pays et non dans trois ou quatre à la fois, est dictée par un souci non seulement d'efficacité mais aussi d'unité.

Nous sommes certains que l'unité réelle de l'Afrique se fera, non pas par des discours, mais par des efforts conjugués - conséquents et continus de tous ses fils.

L'action économique devant être le fondement de cette unité certaine, nous sommes rassurés d'avance parce que confiant en nous-mêmes que l'action de notre groupe représentera un maillon solide de la chaîne qui va libérer nos peuples de la domination étrangère et du sous-développement.

Enfin, à la question : aiderez-vous sur place d'autres à suivre votre exemple ? nous répondons : notre groupe entend créer les bases d'une structure qu'il se propose de promouvoir. C'est-à-dire la possibilité de constituer plusieurs groupes semblables tant au MALI - qu'au SENEGAL - et MAURITANIE ; ceci par des immigrés comme nous décidant de retourner, comme par des jeunes restés sur place dans nos villages.

A ces futurs groupes du Mali - du Sénégal - de la Mauritanie et d'ailleurs, nous apporterons notre soutien en priorité, et ceci dans la mesure de nos possibilités. Pourquoi en priorité à des groupes ? Parce que nous croyons que seuls les groupes formés et organisés sont à même de faire face aux innombrables difficultés qui sévissent en Afrique principalement dans nos villages.

.../...

We are now appealing to all those concerned about the condition of migrant workers and the economic development of Africa to support these initiatives. There is no development possible in a country, which is emptied of its driving forces, and for these expatriate driving forces there is no dignity.

The dignity of Africa and Africans demands the return of all expatriates, so that together we build the Africa of tomorrow.

As for our group, the first party will leave Paris on 2.12.1976 and meet in Kayes on 15.1.1977 to begin the first work of clearing.

Our place of settlement is 18 km downstream from Kayes. Precisely on the right bank of the Senegal River in the great plain of Somankidi, and 4 km from the same village of Somankidi. On the other side, there is the town of Samé with a seed farm and an agricultural school. Our goal in 1977 will be the clearing and irrigation of about 20 hectares. This plain of 600 hectares offers great possibilities, especially in double cultivation. Its full development will be carried out by us and other groups in the years to come after the construction of the great Manantali dam upstream of Kayes.

This project will allow the irrigation of thousands of hectares throughout the Senegal River basin. In the meantime, we will have to make do with 60 irrigable hectares. This represents 120 ha in wintering crops; a negligible area in Africa for 14 people.

For us, breeding will no longer be an activity separated from agriculture. These two activities represent a whole.

The rational exploitation of 60 hectares irrigated crops and livestock farming will be a fairly large activity to occupy all the members of the group throughout the year; because the problem in Africa today is to find a viable activity for young people in our villages during the 6 months of the dry season. It is during this dormant period, that the young people go to look for work in the cities and end up migrating to help their families to live.

It is due to finding a solution to this set of problems, that our group, all immigrant workers, organized this return. And that is understandable, because one is never better served than by oneself.

We are confident for the future !!

CULTURAL ASSOCIATION OF AFRICAN
WORKERS IN FRANCE
163, Bd de l'Hôpital
75013 PARIS

- 3 -

A présent, nous lançons un appel à tous ceux qui se soucient tant soit peu de la condition des travailleurs immigrés et du développement économique de l'Afrique, de soutenir ces initiatives. Il n'y a pas de développement possible dans un pays qui se vide de ses forces vives, et pour ces forces vives expatriées, il n'y a pas de dignité.

La dignité de l'Afrique et des Africains exigent le retour de tous les expatriés pour qu'ensemble nous construisions l'Afrique de demain.

En ce qui concerne notre groupe, une première partie quittera Paris le 2.12.76 et se donne rendez-vous à Kayes le 15.1.77 pour commencer les premiers travaux de défriche.

Notre lieu d'installation se situe à 18 Km en aval de Kayes. Précisément sur la rive droite du fleuve Sénégéal dans la grande plaine de Somankidi, et à 4 Km du village même de Somankidi. En face sur l'autre rive, la ville de Samé avec la ferme semencière et l'école d'agriculture. Notre objectif en 77 sera le défrichage et l'irrigation d'une vingtaine d'hectares. Cette plaine de 600 ha offre de grandes possibilités surtout en double culture. Sa mise en valeur totale se fera par nous et d'autres groupes dans les années à venir, après la construction du grand barrage de Manantali en amont de Kayes.

Cet ouvrage permettra l'irrigation de milliers d'hectares dans tout le bassin du fleuve Sénégéal. En attendant, nous devrons nous contenter de 60 ha irrigables. Ce qui représente 120 ha en culture d'hivernage ; superficie non négligeable en Afrique pour 14 personnes. Pour nous l'élevage ne sera plus une activité séparée de l'agriculture ; ces deux activités représentent un tout, un ensemble.

L'exploitation rationnelle de 60 ha irrigués en double culture et l'élevage représenteront une activité assez importante pour occuper pendant toute l'année tous les membres du groupe. Car le problème à l'heure actuelle en Afrique, consiste à trouver une activité viable pour les jeunes de nos villages pendant les 6 mois de saison sèche. C'est pendant cette période creuse que les jeunes, partent chercher du travail dans les villes et se finissent par s'immigrer, pour aider leurs familles à vivre.

..... c'est pour trouver une solution à cet ensemble de problèmes que notre groupe, tous travailleurs immigrés, avons organisé ce retour. Et cela se comprend, car on est pas mieux servi que par soi-même.

Nous sommes confiants pour l'avenir !!

ASSOCIATION CULTURELLE DES TRAVAILLEURS

AFRICAINS EN FRANCE

163, Bd de l'Hôpital

75013 P A R I S

à Yacké

5/5



Collective house in the village of Somankidi
Coura, Mali, July 1987.

Dramane Diaby, brother of Bouba Touré
and other relatives near the Senegal River,
Somankidi Coura, 1979.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



Billboard for the agricultural cooperative
of Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1980's.

Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Bouba Touré, interviews

In the Soninké community, when a child is born, the mother doesn't leave her hut for seven days. After seven days, the child is given a name and its head is shaved. The wise men and the elders would gather for what is now called "baptism". When I came out of the hut with my mother, it was the rainy season. I was named Samba, the name given to the second boy in the family – my mother already had a boy. Then I was given the name Banta, the first name of my mother's father, and then I was named Bouba. So I'm Samba Banta Bouba. My mother always called me M'paba or Samba. On the second day, everyone went farming. In order to reach the fields, you had to cross the river Khassankonlé, which runs behind the village of Gotéra, one kilometre south of Tafacirga. The river had plenty of water. People crossed it in a canoe or swimming. The babies were put in calabashes. My grandmother put me in a calabash, but she didn't realise I was too heavy. My mother was still standing on the shore waiting for the canoe. In the middle of the river, the calabash

turned over and I was gone. I was only one week old. Everyone started screaming, and the women who could swim dove into the water along with my grandmother. One woman had the idea of running along the river – the water was relatively clear, so she dove and managed to catch me by the foot. For a moment she thought it was a fish, but then she realised that the skin wasn't as smooth. She pulled me out of the water like that, grabbing hold of my foot. People thought I was already dead because quite some time had passed. The woman had the idea of lifting me up by the feet, so the water rushed out and I cried. For me, there's no doubt I wasn't meant to die like this – impossible. The events I had already experienced were so terrible that I wasn't simply going to drown. This woman saved me. She had to save me anyway. They say that if I hadn't been saved, my grandmother would have drowned herself out of sheer guilt.

That day, my mother and my grandmother promised this woman that once I would have grown up, my first harvest would go to her. In the Soninké community, young boys of a certain age are given their own field. They get help sowing, but then they



Cissé Banta Soumaré, mother of Bouba Touré, with her goats, Singalou, Mali, 1976.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

have to maintain and harvest it. I've kept plenty of photographs of that woman. At that time we only fed on what we cultivated ourselves. The boys were initiated by receiving a field. They got help clearing and sowing, but they maintained it all by themselves. I must have been six or seven years old. That year, I harvested a lot of corn and millet. Once I had harvested my crop, I gave everything to this lady. I remember bringing her the baskets. She then called me Khassankonlé – the name of the river. As though I was born in the river.

I was born in Tafacirga. It was the colonial administration that decided which year you were born. They simply gave you a date of birth. Several of us were born the same year. That year was an unforgettable year for the region: France sent a regional governor to Kayes called or nicknamed Lagache – incidentally, we were called “the children of Lagache” – who was very tough on the population. Did he receive orders or did he act on his own initiative? He requisitioned all the crops – surely on an order coming from the French mainland. The crops were picked up by trucks and canoes and requisitioned to Kayes, from where they were

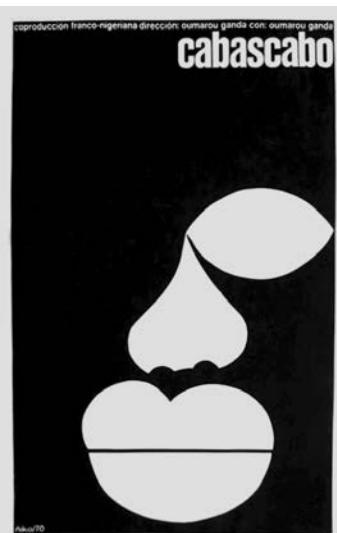
taken by train to Dakar. I think they were intended to feed the soldiers. Anyway, we were born that year. It was the year the colonial administration decided to make people pay taxes in money. This was between 1945 and 1948. Before that, taxes were paid in kind. Villages had to give a certain number of tons of rice, corn, millet or peanuts. The peanuts went to the Lesieur vegetable oils factory in Dakar. The rest fed the Senegalese Tirailleurs [riflemen] of French West Africa. Well, that's what people said at the time. Some called us “the children of Lagache”. Lagache, Lacache ... I can't remember, but in any case he was an extremely hardnosed governor. Today you would say he was a fascist. France didn't care about what happened to the people in the colonies. There may have been local protests by individuals or leftwing people, but the majority of the French population and the government didn't care. I was born at that time.

Only boys were registered. The colonial administration wasn't interested in girls. It was interested in us for war and forced labor. The Dakar-Niger railway line was built through forced labor. People weren't paid. When the administration came



A veteran of the French colonial army in Indochina, returns to his home town in Niger to the acclaim of friends and relatives. After losing all his savings, he decides to go work the land.

Stills from *Cabascabo*,
by Oumarou Ganda, 1968.



Poster of *Cabascabo* design by Antonio Pérez González (NICO), ICAIC, Cuba, 1970.

looking for us, we tried to hide. I was registered against my will as I was returning from the river with my grandmother. We ran into civil officers who were sitting under the palaver tree in the village. I could no longer hide. I witnessed how all the boys were hidden when whites came to the village. They had collaborators who gave them the names. If you didn't show up at the name call, your father was taken in your stead.

One day a stranger passed behind the river at Tafacirga. I was coming back from the river with my grandmother, I was carrying calabashes on my head. I was raised by my grandmother. I used to go to the river with her and the other women. I was always with the women, it was only later that I had contact with men. Even when I was older, I stayed with my grandmother all the time. My grandmother had had many more girls than boys. My grandmother convinced this man to come and take a rest in the village as it was very hot outside. He was on his way to another village several kilometres away. At home, she gave him something to eat. In rural Africa, you don't let a foreigner eat alone. You often sit your child next to him. She made him some



Village of Singalou, Mali, November 1976.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

porridge and said to me: "Sit next to the stranger." When we had finished eating, my grandmother put a mat and a cushion on her floor so the man could rest. He slept. When he woke up, my grandmother gave him water and he went to wash himself. Before he left, he called me. I went to sit next to him. He put his hand on my head and stroked my hair: "When he'll be grown up, he too will join the whites." My grandmother started crying. At the time, all those who joined the whites did so to go to war. Chances were you never saw them again. "Don't cry!" he said. "This time, it's not to make war. It's for work." I was five or six years old, and this has stuck with me ever since. Can you imagine? Someone you've never met before saying something like that? "This time..." Those are the words that have stuck with me since.

This isn't my first physical presence on this earth. I have the impression, the feeling, the certainty that I've already been here, that I left and that I came back. If I had written down everything in my first life as I do now, I would have facts to support what I say. But I could neither read nor write. I know I had another life before I was called Bouba

Touré, before I came to work in factories in France. I had already come to Europe. My life didn't begin the moment I was born in Mali. My life began something like several centuries ago. I think I'm not the only one. I was haunted by my previous life when I came here. I had already come here in another context and for other reasons. I'm talking about my grandfather, who I'm reincarnating. He came here in 1914–1918, against his will. He didn't choose to be in the French army and he came here to fight the Germans. I can't talk about myself without talking about the person I'm incarnating. My entire story starts there.

I came to France in 1965. It's only a date, as I had already come to France long before. My father asked me to find work in France and send him money. I could have said no, I'm not going. I was good at school, I could have become a good marabout and have people working for me like the Tourés. I never said no. I could have stayed in Senegal, in Tambacounda, where I worked for Moussa Diallo, the first deputy of East Senegal. He paid me every month. He told my grandfather that I shouldn't go to Europe, that I should stay here,



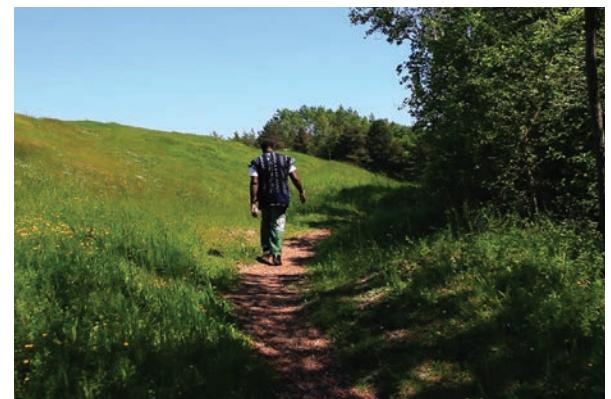
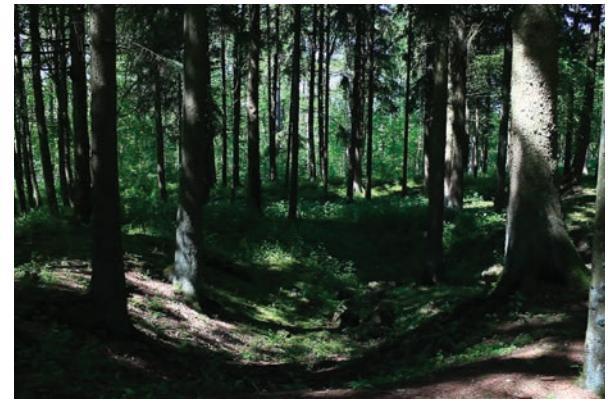
Battle of Verdun, 1916, photographer unknown.

that he would take care of me and send me to school so that I wouldn't need to work in the white man's factories. My father didn't want me to stay in Tamba. I couldn't have told him I didn't care and wanted to stay. As soon as I got here and started working in the factory, I swore to myself I wouldn't spend my entire life there but do something else. I could no longer behave like before, when I was a soldier for the French army. There is little difference between being a soldier and working in a factory, aside from the danger. In the Kayes region, all the able-bodied and young had been drafted for the First and Second World War. I was lucky not to die. I left and went back to France to work. But there was no way I would live like before.

They went to the villages and gathered all the young boys who were there with me. The fit and the young were examined in Bakel or in Kayes, they looked at their muscles, at their health. They were put on a train to Dakar. From Dakar they were sent to Europe. I've always been strong because I've been fed with my mother's milk. When my mother didn't have enough milk, I was fed with goat's milk as my grandmother had lots of goats.

I've never been thin. Among these young people, some returned, but unfortunately the majority didn't. I was lucky enough to return. When my grandfather died and I was born – in other words, when I came back to earth – my grandfather's friends came to see me and told me that I had been lucky to go away and return. I remember this. In Africa, the concept of definitive death doesn't exist. People knew nothing about hell and heaven. Death implied a return and was always celebrated. People danced and sang next to the deceased for several weeks. They praised him by telling what he had done. This is no longer the case since we have adopted other concepts. Fortunately, it doesn't affect me because I've lived another life. Hell and paradise are an invention by others, I don't believe in them. My heaven and hell are here and now.

At the time of my grandfather, in 1914–1918, they came to the villages and took all the able bodied, all the boys. They asked for money from the village chiefs, and if they didn't pay up, they went to prison. So they were forced to summon all the boys. The colonists chose those who were fit and drafted



them into the army. That was in my grandfather's time, my father's time. They issued a draft call in the entire region. My uncle, who fought in Indochina, told me the same thing. I was still young at the time of independence. After independence, the African leaders did the same. They summoned everyone to the township, to the main square, and then they chose. It was a colonial practice – no one enlisted of his own will. My grandfather served in the army against his own will. He was lucky to survive and to return – the others are all dead. "I left and I returned", he said. I believe permanent death does not exist.

One day in Avallon, France, a very old gentleman who could have been my grandfather told me he was sure he had fought with me in the Great War. He asked me how come I hadn't grown old. He told me what we had gone through together. After my grandfather's death, his friends also spoke to me as if I had left and returned. They say I look a lot like my grandfather. This story really impressed me. "Do you remember how we fought the Germans together?", he asked me. "There weren't many whites among us, there were many Africans.

Bouba Touré in Verdun, 2012.
Stills (rushes) from Raphaël Grisey.



I recognise you!" This was in Avallon in 1969. I replied that it wasn't me but perhaps my grandfather. But my grandfather is me. When I went to these remote places in the east of France, they weren't unknown to me. When I visited Verdun, I felt strange. I was in a state of... I can't even tell you. I had an incredible affinity with this gentleman. We got along really well. He was the father of a friend, Claude, with whom I worked in a mail-order shop.

They were a family of peasants, and this was the time of rural exodus. One day this friend invited me to spend a weekend in Avallon with his grandparents. That's how I met his grandfather, a war veteran. As soon as he saw me, he said: "You've not aged a bit – I can't believe it. I'm old and you're still young. How did you do it? Do you remember?" He started to tell me what he had done with the Senegalese Tirailleurs. "Do you remember that day with the Germans? We had nothing to eat and nothing to drink." Then he patted me on the shoulder saying: "How come you haven't grown old?" I told him he was probably speaking about my grandfather. But this was me, because I'm the reincarnation of my grandfather. I didn't tell

him. I'm not sure he would have understood, but still I was convinced that's how it was. During the war I was cannon fodder like everyone else. But we had something to protect us from the bullets. The bombs could crush us, but something ancestral protected us Tourés. We escaped the bullet showers thanks to that. Maybe that's why I wasn't killed. We would make a request to the ancestors. We explained to them that we were going into such and such a situation and asked them to be spared from the bullets, wherever they came from. Until today, when I go to a migrant hostel, I am asked if I still have my ancestor's powers. I say I do. I was fortunate enough to have been given these powers from an older uncle. Since I'm living my second life, it's something I had already before coming to France, before coming back to France for the second time.

My mother's family, the Soumarés, have power over snakes. Every family has their own thing. Even after the arrival of Islam, families held on to their ancestral beliefs. The great drama today is that we confuse culture and tradition with religion. Today, those who call themselves Muslims dress like Arabs. And yet Arabs will never dress like Africans, they



Bouba Touré in Verdun, 2012.
Stills (rushes) from Raphaël Grisey.

will never wear big boubous. When it was hot, my grandfather, on my mother's side, wore a big cotton boubou. He told me to come with him. We went around the village where there were plenty of trees. They were sacred trees. It was ecological. There were plenty of trees, but we only collected dried-up trees and branches for cooking. Later, people began to think it was Allah who made the trees grow. But Allah didn't make any tree grow in the Sahel. Trees must be maintained and planted. If you think it's Allah who makes them grow, you cut them down and the desert grows.

With my grandfather, we went into the bushland behind the village when it was hot. He spread out his boubou on the ground and called the snakes. "Come on, it's too hot, you're thirsty. I'll take you to the river. Come on." I could see the snakes crawling out from everywhere. Once his boubou was filled, he poured it out into the river. You could see the snakes were happy. There were all kinds of snakes. I looked on – I was afraid but he reassured me. On our side of the river there were trees. On the other side – today in Mauritania – there was sand. The snakes came from there, climbed up the trees, and slipped into the water when they were hot.

Here's another story. I was seven or eight when I was looking after my little sister who was sleeping while my mother was working in the fields. She had put us to sleep on pagnes [wrap skirts] under a tree. The pagnes attracted the snakes, which surrounded us and protected us from insects that might have stung us. Once I woke up and saw a snake right next to me. I was afraid. My mother came running and told me not to be afraid, that it was there to protect us. This has remained with me ever since. In Samé, opposite from where the cooperative was founded, there were many snakes. There was an old man from Samé Wolof who had power over the snakes. This old man gave us powders from plants or some kind of tree and told us to put it in the porridge. We mixed it up and drank it to protect ourselves from the snakes. For me, it was special because I was a son of a Soumaré, so I was already protected.

Interviews by Raphaël Grisey,
Paris, 2006 and 2010



Raphaël Grisey in Hyde Park, London, 2011.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

Figuring Fallow Time

Images Appear

We first met in the context of a community of images. You came to my mother's place for dinner. You ate little, and as soon as we had finished eating you were quick to set up the slide projector by the fireplace. You came once or twice each year upon returning from your trips to Mali. I saw your slides of the Bamako markets in Kayes, the cooperative, portraits of the founding members, children, women, the Senegal River, the irrigation system, fields of onions and okra, as well as banana plantations. You also showed us photographs of demonstrations, and of your friends in the workers' hostel on rue de Charonne and in the Pinel hostel in Saint-Denis. You made the images speak, and the images spoke to you. It was not just a travel story, and there was something in the complex arrangement of your images that was hard for my childish eyes to penetrate.

While your hand focused the lens for each new image that appeared on the living room wall, your voice described the relationship between the cooperative you had founded, and the everyday lives and struggles of immigrant workers in France over the past 50 years. Your narrative tied together the scattered places appearing in the images. It strove to fill the space between the slides, recreating and producing traces of your story, reconstructing its path, going from the condition of an immigrant worker from a farm to the future of the cyborg farmer, informed by the ancestors you will all have become.

Your return to France in the 1980s, after having founded the Somankidi Coura cooperative on the banks of the Senegal River, confirmed that your life and activities were now spread among several places. Here you had become the ambassador of the cooperative, of your project, for hostel residents and everyone else. Over there you were an occasional farmer, as well as the spokesman or image-man for the condition of immigrant workers in France, a smuggler. And this was done through the production and distribution of your photographs from hand to hand in villages and hostels.

One day — I think it was for my fifteenth birthday — you gave me my first camera, a Nikon FM2, the same one you had used to take your photos in the 1980s. A few years later, while studying at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, I used your camera to take photos along the Canal Saint-Denis, not knowing that I was very close to the Pinel hostel in Saint-Denis where you had stayed after arriving in France in 1965, the place where you had caught tuberculosis because of the housing conditions, and where you had come to the brutal realization that an African consciousness needed to emerge among the immigrants. I made my way from the “center” to the “periphery”, photographing and interviewing residents of Aubervilliers and Saint-Denis. That part of the world is a precipitate of the history of labor and immigration.



First images shot in Bouba' Touré's apartment, 2006.
Stills from *Cooperative (rushes)*, Raphaël Grisey.

Bouba Touré going from his flat
to the foyer Charonne.
Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008.

I met a family from Portugal including a father who had grown up in a shantytown in La Plaine, a family of Algerian squatters who disappeared between two meetings, a homeless man retrained as a security guard who communicated with the world over the short waves of his CB radio, a West Indian who lived in his van and grew peyote to speak to his ancestors, a Tunisian father who was looking for other men in a wasteland at Porte d'Aubervilliers, Congolese Kimbanguist evangelists, as well as Romanians from the center of Epinay-sur-Seine. My political and social education was constructed in these return trips between Paris and its suburbs. Intuitively and naively, I tried to draw links between segments of the population that I thought were not speaking to one another, by trying to understand the paths taken by the people in front of me, and to see that this was an All-World.¹ It seemed to me that the suburbs were much less segmented than my privileged city center, whose residents' privileges included mobility and free circulation through territories.

In a seminar at the École des Beaux-arts in Paris,² I met Sophie Haluk, a photographer who was then working in immigrant workers' hostels. She had known you for a long time and you had done many programs together on independent radio. In 2000, I spent two months in Mali assisting a French artist in residence, Olivier Leroy. I was overwhelmed by the postcolonial situations that were persisting, by the expatriates around the swimming pools in Bamako, and by the French Cultural Center's power over the art scene. When I went to Sangha with Leroy and the Dogon artist Amahiguéré Dolo, an old man introduced me to a child and said the boy was his father. I had lost my own a year earlier. I tried to understand where I had arrived, to make sense of it. I vomited on the land of the ancestors on the clifftop, after drinking too much dolo, the local beer, right beside Germaine Dieterlen's house.

I returned from those two months feeling dumfounded and disappointed, somewhat like Michel Leiris's narcissistic experience in *Phantom Africa*, a book I would only read a few years later. During my trip I only read *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* by Marcel Griaule. I had come too soon and I was misinformed.

I got back in touch with you, wanting to take another look at your photos, which I could only vaguely remember, so that I could connect my experiences in the suburbs and in Mali with your images, and understand what had driven you to take them. I suggested that you come and show your photographs in that seminar. You were unsure of what to make of my enthusiasm as a young student. And then one day I decided to go to your place—or maybe you had invited me—to take a close look at the archives of your work and have a chat. I started filming in your small apartment on rue Troussseau. You left me to it, and started telling your stories.

1 Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-monde* (Treaty of the All-World), Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1997.

2 The seminar *Des Territoires* (1994–2005) at ENSBA, Paris.

You were born under the colonial regime, living with your mother, your grandmother, and your grandfather Soumaré who protected you from snakes. You grew up hearing stories about the roundups inflicted on earlier generations, recruited against their will during both world wars or sent to forced labor sites. Someone came to the village to record your birth year, which was all the information they needed if they wanted to recruit you in turn. After independence, this enabled you to get a French identity card, come to France and make several return trips even when new anti-immigration laws were becoming rife. You told me that future generations would no longer have that option, and would be forced to settle, in either the village or the hostel.

Your grandfather was taken to Verdun, and was one of the few to return. When he died, the elders recognized him in your boyhood face, and they called you by his name. Later, a traveler making his way along the Fankhoré River told you that you too would go abroad, but also that THIS TIME you would not be going to fight a war. You saw these things as signs of your earlier lives. While living in hostels and working in factories, you very quickly learned that you had not come here to reproduce the forced cooperation between France and Africa that your ancestors had suffered.

It was not long before you suggested going out instead of talking and being filmed. We went to eat mafé in the hostel on the corner of rue de Charonne, and visited your sons in room 111. You put me in the picture by taking me to the hostel so I would start to understand. I saw you doing portraits for anyone who needed them, for work or for family back home. You gave them photos you had taken of their village during your last trip. You offered advice to the youngest. You showed them images of the cooperative's fields and new crops, telling them about what you had achieved over there; you encouraged them to consider this as an alternative to hostel life.

You told me that during the hostel struggles of the 1970s, there were a lot of conflicts with elders who did not understand your anger, who could not comprehend having French friends and girlfriends. They wanted everything to go well with their managers and said you were there to work. Now you have taken the place of those elders, but you still reject the reproduction of emigration and the inevitability of the rural exodus that preceded it.

Bouba Touré and a friend in room 111, photographs of Bouba Touré on the walls, Foyer Charonne, Paris, 1993.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.



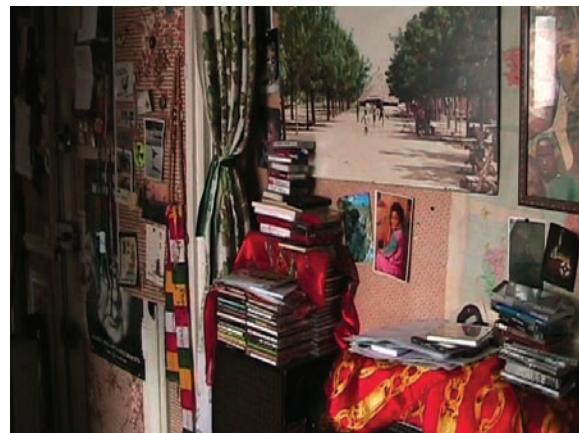
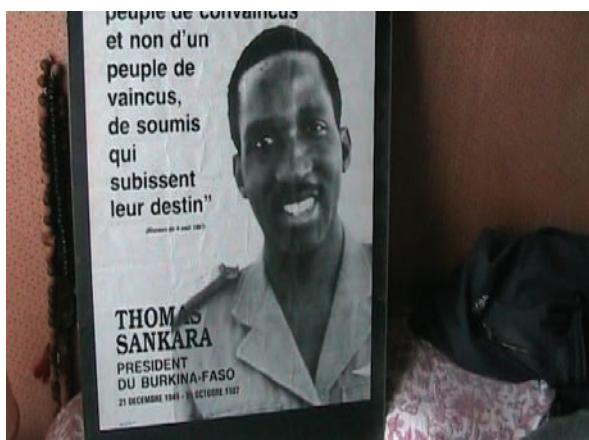
Image Migration Junction

Then after the hostels, you took me to the cooperative. Between 2006 and 2008, I accompanied you in France (Paris) and Mali (Somankidi Coura) to make a film, *Cooperative*. The film connects your everyday work as a photographer with that of the cooperative. I filmed hostels and demonstrations, the banks of the Senegal River, the cooperative, the village, the fields, the colonial ruins and the Kayes market. At that time, my understanding of the emergence of the cooperative was still elusive. Initially I perceived it as a radical break, after years spent in factories. But was it also the beginning of relationship-building and dialectics that had never stopped? At the cooperative, the founding members all told me the same story, with minor variations. It was a collective story that had already been written, reworked, almost established in advance, in order to be projected into the future, addressed to future generations as well as to your contemporaries both here and over there, defending a point of view and a perspective. Thirty years later, this position was harder for me to discern in view of the number of day-to-day problems and the intense pace of the work in the fields that I observed at the cooperative. How was one to understand the initial strength you had needed to escape from the immigration centrifuge, from the rural exodus, from the weight of the traditional system, to try and get beyond the contradictions and failures of the liberation movements in order to tackle that new battleground created by the drought and erosion affecting the Sahel? When you returned to Mali after the 1968 coup d'état, the people who considered themselves most revolutionary took this to mean that you were traitors. The villagers themselves thought you were madmen at first, not understanding why someone would want to return to poverty far away from their family, and your families complained about no longer receiving money.

When I was starting to edit my film, you bought a camcorder and shot your first moving images one morning in 2008 at your apartment on rue Troussseau. The same day, you gave me the cassette and asked me to look at it and make good use of it. In a single, one-hour sequence shot, you filmed your apartment, the walls covered with images ranging from posters of independence heroes to photos of the cooperative and letters from your father asking for money. Then you describe your life in Paris, meditate on your practice as a photographer, and comment on the hunt for foreigners that had just taken place in South Africa. You put on Indian music to accompany words you repeat, between laments and songs of revolt. Those words are like a breathing that enables you to bounce off another image that speaks, that speaks to you.



Still from *Cooperative*, 2008.



That's because African consciousness is still asleep.
 African consciousness is still asleep. African consciousness is still asleep.

It makes me cry. It makes me cry. It makes me cry. It makes me cry.

One day Africa will wake up and say enough! Africa will wake up and say enough! Africa will wake up and say enough! Africa will wake up and say enough!

I'm sad. I'm sad. I'm sad. I'm sad. I'm sad.

The alarm clock has to ring. The alarm clock has to ring.

Yes. The struggle. Yes. The struggle. Yes. The struggle. Yes. The struggle.

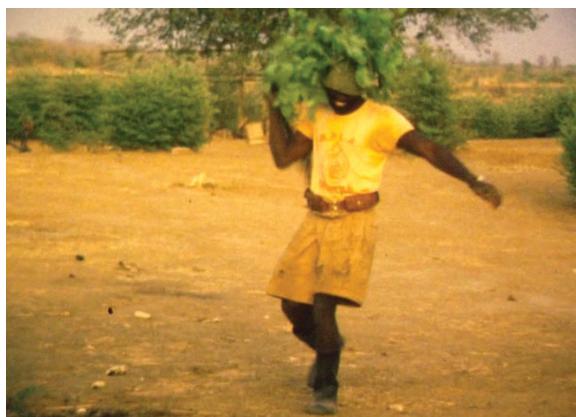
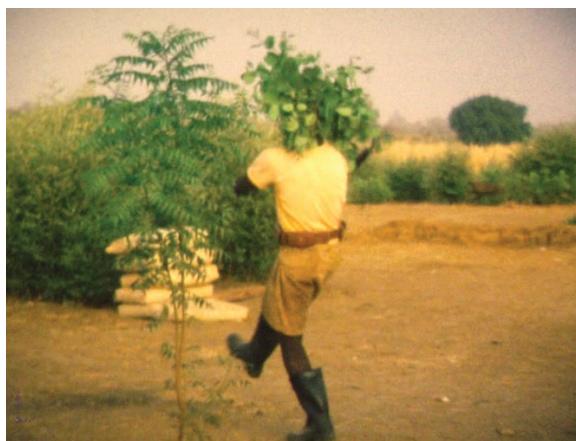
Life is a battle. Life is a battle. Life is a battle.

At the end of the video, you speak of the African women who live in France, of their courage in the face of the patriarchal system they confronted. If you were president, you would only have women as ministers. Your video is an introspection and a moment of attention that reaches out to the world in a multifarious, kaleidoscopic address through the prism of images. It reminds me of Robert Kramer's *Berlin 10/90*, which consists of a one-hour sequence shot confined to a Berlin bathroom after the fall of the wall. You gave me the responsibility of taking care of your video. I suggested doing a cut and calling it *Bouba Touré, 58 rue Troussseau, 75011 Paris, France*, and it became a film. I continued editing my own film with an eye on yours.



Stills from *Berlin 10/90*
 by Robert Kramer, 1991.

Stills from 8mm film by Monique Janson,
Somankidi Coura, 1977.



Apparition of Archives

In 2008, I exhibited our films, *Cooperative* and *Bouba Touré, 58 rue Troussseau, 75011 Paris, France*, at the art center in Chelles, France. Your film was presented on a monitor and the sound was played through several speakers. Your voice filled the exhibition room while my film was presented in the confined space of a black box. Side by side, through intersecting and vanishing points, the two films harmonized two points of view revolving around the same subjects: images, migration and the cooperative.

During this period, you received 8mm films by post containing images of the founding of the cooperative, and I was eager to see them. They were shot by Monique Janson, a French farmer with whom you had done your agricultural training in 1975 and 1976.

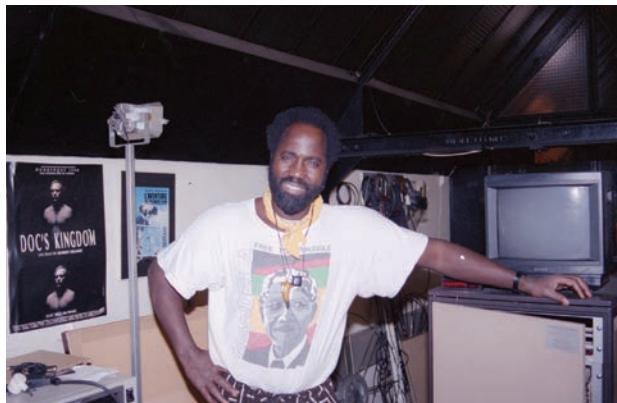
In the first amateur film from 1977, after a shot of the river, the crops and irrigation, one sees you dancing with a hunter's rifle wearing a t-shirt of the MPLA³ which you supported at ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France). You have branches on your hat, and you are wearing high rubber boots that suggest you have just returned from the fields for irrigation, along with shorts that end above the knees, the same ones that all of you wore, and that shocked the villagers. You are doing that futurist dance to threnodies that seem to come from a Fula flute. The film is silent and musical.

The second film from 1979 starts and finishes like a travel film: a tourist visit to Dakar, a tracking shot from a bus showing Fula villages, arrival at the cooperative, a visit to the fields with the group and the French farmers. Then the filming suddenly becomes very detailed, lingering over the work in the fields, the irrigation system, the location of the site, a members' meeting, women working on the banks of the river, the tea ceremony. These 8mm films are amateur films. They are amateur in Maya Deren's sense: affectionate, loving images that show the relationship linking the filmmaker to the subject.⁴

Later, you showed me a 16mm reel on your shelf. You had marked the date of the moment when you had been given the box, and added your initials, which you put on all of the objects you keep. Your grandfather had left few traces to guide you. You do it so those who follow you can more easily retrace earlier paths. This was the copy of *Nationalité: Immigré* that you had screened in hostels throughout France in 1976, before leaving in November that same year to found the cooperative.

3 Movimento Popular de Liberaçāo do Angola (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola).

4 Maya Deren, Amateur Versus Professional: "The very classification 'amateur' has an apologetic ring. But that very word—from the Latin 'amateur'—'lover' means one who does something for the love of the thing rather than for economic reasons or necessity."



Bouba Touré in Cinema L'entrepôt,
May 19, 1993, Bouba Touré archives.



Film still from *Nationalité: Immigré*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1975.



Bouba Touré in his flat
on rue Rousseau, 1984,
Bouba Touré archives.



Still from *Safrana or
Freedom of Speech*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1977.

You spoke of *Nationalité: Immigré* as a film in which everyone took part in the shooting and logistics in one way or another. The film was shot during the rent strike at the Riquet hostel, in which Sidney Sokhona lived at the time, and which you also visited regularly.

We did not have a 16mm projector. I managed to access the film through the Cinémathèque Afrique at the Institut Français. I was expecting to see a film similar in tone to the activist films made at the time, but instead I discovered a film that criticized these, and it was the first time I had seen a film made by an immigrant worker about his own condition. Then I discovered *Safrana or Freedom of Speech*, Sidney Sokhona's second film.

While I was filming at the cooperative, you spoke to me of someone who had never contacted you again after filming, and you said you had felt betrayed by him. I did not think much about it at the time, since I was more interested in filming my own images.

Could you have been talking about Sidney Sokhona and *Safrana*, which you were unable to see when it was released? You were already working your fields when the film came out in cinemas. When you got back to France in 1981, Sidney Sokhona had made his own return to Mauritania, with a new project for a film, one that he would never make after getting caught up in the political power game. The script for *Safrana* was based on the story of your departure project. Should you have been credited as a co-writer? Was that also the reason for the dispute?

Safrana or Freedom of Speech recounts the everyday lives of four immigrants, and their experiences in factories through flashbacks, as they head to the countryside to meet French farmers in preparation for a return to Africa, where they will do some farming themselves. In other words the film is more or less a reinterpretation of your own story.

The activist journalist Catherine Ruelle, who was Sidney Sokhona's girlfriend and the film's producer at the time, later told me⁵ that the shoot in the countryside had been done in Côte d'Or with farmers from her family's village. The farmers questioned by the four characters are critical of new production tools, agricultural machines, intensive farming and the endemic rural exodus. The rural farm world that the protagonists discover is pervaded by ancestral practices; a water diviner does a demonstration for an actor, who is taken aback. New technologies are evaluated for their use-value and durability, as well as from an ecosystemic perspective. The history and concerns of this farming world resonated with the irrigated subsistence agriculture you wanted to implement when you returned.

Your experience in Champagne and in Marne was rougher: some farmers wanted to make you work hard (delighted to have low-paid labor, I imagine). Most of them practiced forms of intensive farming that were not easy to translate for your project, and then there was the pervasive

⁵ Interviews with Catherine Ruelle in 2015 and 2016.



After the theoretical agricultural internship, members of the ACTAF (Cultural Association of the African Workers in France) with their hosts, Haute-Marne, Courcelles-sur-Aujon, France, May 1976.

Bouba Touré, Ibrahima Camara, Mady Niakhaté, Bangaly Camara, members of the ACTAF in their dormitory, agricultural internship in Haute-Marne, France, May 1976.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

racism and conservatism. This generated heated discussions, and though they were less idyllic than in Sokhona's film, they were certainly productive. In 1976, a drought hit the French countryside, and you observed how the authorities and farmers organized their response. With the farmers you forged relationships that were perhaps more intense and substantial than those you had established with activist leftist groups and others during your stays in France. These encounters yielded results. Farmers of the agricultural association ACCIR,⁶ who financed your training, continued to support you for many years, and came to visit you in Somankidi Coura. These are the same people who filmed you in 1977 and 1979. Like *Safrana*, you would only see those images thirty years later.

As these archives emerged, I got a sense of how the founding of the cooperation had been preceded by a slow process of learning images, politics and farming. To understand, I needed to take a detour through the fiction in films by Sokhona, who focused on the creation of subjects through the experience of the struggles in France's public realm. The departure plan had been based on knowledge acquired while struggling to improve living and working conditions in France, with the help of training in labor jobs and the French language provided by the hostels' night courses; you learned how to find your place in the multitude of radical left political movements, how to spot incomprehension, misunderstandings, and paternalism; you had taken this knowledge gained from many locations and placed it in perspective within your association, ACTAF, to project yourselves further.

Watching Sokhona's films and the amateur footage by French farmers, I had the desire to screen and present them alongside our own. It was an assemblage of films, of actors, that matched each other and echoed the assemblages you had made, unmade and remade with your images on bedroom walls in the hostels and other places you had inhabited.

Every point of view had changed through intersections with other people's perspectives. The variations and motifs of one single story were recast through different methodologies, mediums and technologies.

Nationalité: Immigré clearly and virulently responded to a certain type of paternalistic activist cinema existing at that time, and entered into dialogue with Med Hondo's films. *Safrana* was a cinematographic reiteration of your return project. The 8mm films echoed your first photographs of the founding of the cooperative. My own film *Cooperative* started with a consideration of your photographs, and was then edited with an eye on your film *Bouba Touré, 58 rue Trousseau, 75011 Paris, France*, which you had perhaps made out of a desire to respond to my production.

» See Page 273 for
Figuring Fallow Time
– Part Two

6 Association Champeigneuse de Coopération Inter-Régionale.



Bouba Touré in a Sans-Papiers demonstration in Paris and Ousmane Sinaré irrigating a banana field. Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008.



Preparation of the land, with Bouba Touré,
Seydou Traoré, Ousmane Sinaré, Mady Niakhaté,
Bakhoré Bathily, Somankidi Coura, January 1977.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

Ousmane Sinaré, interview

I was fortunate enough to be spotted by the Grand-Bassam Football Club while playing street football with my buddies in Burkina. I was also scouted by ASSEC Mimosas, a big club from Abidjan that still exists today. All my friends were able to continue their studies abroad. Some went to Europe to study or play football. I found myself alone and decided to leave to France on my own. I worked to save up money. One day I met a French man who supported the team and we started chatting at the Hotel Ivoire. I told him that I also wanted to try my luck in France but didn't know how to go about it. He offered to help me if I had transportation. In order to leave, you had to have proof of accommodation on arrival and a passport. It wasn't as complicated as now. He gave me enough money to cover living expenses for three or four months.

At the time, I wanted to become a sports photographer. I said to myself that if I made it to France, I could learn the job. I didn't go to France, like others did, with the aim of becoming rich and then returning to Africa. I left in 1972, and this friend

welcomed me into his family. I was allowed to stay because I got along well with his children, I took care of them. I took photography courses by correspondence, I learned how to develop black-and-white photographs, but I quickly stopped. This is when I ran into Karamba Touré, whom I had first met in Ivory Coast. He gently nudged me into becoming a political activist. For me, money was not the main issue back then.

In Paris I lived on my own. Karamba Touré would come by and drag me along when important decisions were taken at ACTAF. At the time I was not as militant as some, I was less active but I closely followed everything that was going on, the meetings as well as the activities. I was one of the youngest, together with a Senegalese called Bangaly. We didn't become active until some time later. Even before we decided to return to Africa, we organised creative evenings to support the countries that were in the process of liberation: Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. There was also Palestine. We supported them in our own way. We raised money through dances or dinners that we called 'African Nights'. The proceeds allowed



Moussa Coulibaly, Fode Moussa Diaby and Mady Niakhaté, preparation of land, agricultural cooperative of Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1977.

Preparation of land, with Bouba Touré, Seydou Traoré, Ousmane Sinaré, Mady Niakhaté, Bakhoré Bathily, Somankidi Coura, January 1977.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

us to buy clothes and medication and collect all sorts of other products. Doctors who were sympathetic to our cause gave us their stocks of unused medication, which were sent to Angola to treat the wounded.

Our organization brought together all the Africans living in Paris, including West Indians, who wanted to be politically active. There were even French spies within the organization, so everything that went on was reported directly to the authorities. Karamba had been in France for a quite some time when he started talking to me about returning to Africa. I sensed this was an opportunity I had to seize. After all this time in France, he had decided to return to Africa. If I stayed in France, was I sure to succeed one day? Or would I eventually follow suit? I made a quick decision: I didn't see any reason to stay. I informed my boss. He was also a friend. He tried to help me by telling me not to return to Mali because it was one of the poorest countries in Africa, it was very hot and nothing would grow there. He shared his thoughts because he knew Africa and the Kayes region very well. When I told him we were going to farm, he told me to go south – not near Kayes, because that wouldn't

work. I had my own ideas and merely wanted to know what he thought. I informed Karamba, Bouba and the others of my decision. We started meeting on Saturdays in order to decide what we were going to do, how to get organised and how to finance the whole operation. Today there are plenty of NGOs in Africa, but back then that wasn't the case. The only NGOs were the CCFD [Catholic Committee against Hunger and for the Development of the Third World] and La Cimade [French organization advising immigrants on their rights].

My wife is of Burkinabé origin. Her father was a trader who supplied all the workers of the local sisal plant with cola nuts and peanuts. He had settled in Samé too (opposite Somankidi Coura). This is how we got to know each other. We got married in Samé, in the home of the driver of the cooperative. I stayed in his home. In the beginning of our marriage, we lived in Somankidi village, so we had to commute six kilometres every morning. Then we decided to settle in Samé, which meant that we had only to cross the river. We had several accidents with the canoe in the rainy season due to currents, thunderstorms and wind gusts. That's when we decided to settle here.



Bangaly Camara, Bouba Touré and a snake during the preparation of land, Somankidi Coura, 1977.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Ousmane Sinaré and the collective's water pump. Still from *Cooperative (rushes)*, 2008.

We asked the village of Somankidi and the owner of the land for permission. He told us that since his birth he had never witnessed any flood on this strip of land during the rainy season, even though there was a pond. That's how we were allowed to build. The strip of land on which the houses stand is not part of the sixty hectares given to us by the state. It was the villagers who gave us this land. Later they regretted it, because no one thought we would hold out. They started cultivating nearby. I don't think they would have given us sixty hectares if they'd thought that we would hold out.

The construction of the channel from banco [mud bricks] took 55 days, I believe. We climbed all the way up there to collect the soil from termite mounds, which we carried down in baskets on our heads. We had help from a topographer and two technicians. We brought the soil, watered it and shaped it into a dam. The channel is 1,300 metres long. The distribution basin is halfway, 515 metres, down the channel. The villagers of Somankidi came down to help us for two days, but apart from that we did everything ourselves. Each week, a new supervisor was appointed. Everyone had to be there at a fixed hour. If you were

not there at 7:15, you had watch over the field all Sunday while the others were resting. Everyone showed up at 7, and only the site manager had the right to set the agenda, so you couldn't argue. That's how we managed to construct the channel, which was hard work.

Fortunately we had just been to work on French farms – if we had come to Africa directly from Paris, none of the founding members would still be here today. Ladji had trained as a mechanic and I was his assistant. I worked with him for eight years. When Bouba's brother Dramane arrived, I took over as manager from Ladji, and Dramane became my deputy. I knew the engine very well, and I was called upon in case of a problem. Today I've probably lost my touch a bit, but we're still managing. We installed our first pump as soon as the channel was built in 1977. It was a three-cylinder Lister pump, which was bigger than the one we have now. This pump lasted eleven years. We arrived here with two Lister pumps, which were reputed to be good for use in hot countries and particularly sturdy. I maintained the second pump with Dramane. At some point it broke down and we wanted to repair it, but the spare parts would have cost over two million



Ruins of Diankhandapé Plantation,
view from the village of Samé, 2017.

Photographs by Raphaël Grisey.



francs CFA. So we found a less powerful pump, which prompted people to buy individual pumps.

There were plenty of shrubs on the plot, wild baobabs and fig trees. We first cleared the bulk of it and then rented a bulldozer, for which we negotiated a good price. The guys from Operation Arachide had bulldozers, so we asked to rent one of their bulldozers for three days. Eventually we had it for sixteen days to do all the uprooting.

We found at least ten snakes a day, short snakes. We took photos, but I don't know what happened to these. With Bouba, after cutting shrubs, we often spotted large snakes. They're not harmful unless you touch their tail. When they're under a shrub, they put their tail down, they tuck it under their body. You can even walk on them, they won't touch you. Except if you touch the tail, which happens rarely. We were lucky not to have had any accidents of this type.

In the beginning, if we hadn't been so strong-willed, we couldn't have done all this. While we cleared the plot, we were brought food, we ate and immediately got back to work. It wasn't until we had finished clearing that people from Somankidi came to farm

here. The land belonged to them, but they weren't cultivating it. There were elder Mossi in Samé who had come here in the colonial era to work on the plantations and in the sisal factory. I often talked to one of them. He was the driver of our group, the only guy I could talk to in Mossi language. He sought to establish contact with me as soon as he learned that I was a Mossi. Whenever I wanted to talk about something else than the cooperative, I went to his home.

At the time, the Burkinabé were reputed to be good workers. Many Burkinabé participated in the construction of the railway, and some settled wherever they had been taken to. From Kita to Thiès – not only in Samé – you will meet Mossi families who have settled down. Well, at least those who survived, because many of them died. I don't want to go into this ... The factory in Samé paid more or less well, so Burkinabés worked there. In colonial times, the colonists went as far as Burkina Faso to fetch workers. The ancient chiefs of Mossi tribes often took people captive and handed them over to the colonists. These are the people who came to the factory and stayed. Back then, if you'd done something wrong,

Plantations and Cooperatives

The Colonial Coercion Economy and Postcolonial Developmentalist Agrarianism

As a historian, I have had the opportunity to examine the history of agricultural policy in West Africa, particularly through the analysis of coercive forms of workforce mobilization in Senegal in the context of colonial French West Africa and its use of forced labor, but also in a context of nation-building after the country gained independence. The area where the Somankidi Coura cooperative is located was not central to my research, but I am nonetheless familiar with the dynamics at work in the region because I based some of my work on forced labor experiences during the colonial era in Mali, then known as French Sudan. This was particularly the case while researching the social history of workers on sisal plantations in Senegal belonging to a company that also owned plantations in French Sudan (Rodet and Tiquet 2016). One of the Sudanese plantations was very close to where the cooperative was to be set up a few decades later. The site still contains ruins of the old sisal plantation buildings. They are vestiges of the colonial period, material traces of a past that is still vivid in people's memory: that of colonial violence, more particularly of the forced labor inflicted to keep the plantation running.

This text is the result of several exchanges with Raphaël Grisey, who was looking for a writer capable of describing the historical and economic context surrounding the establishment of the Somankidi Coura cooperative.

The aim of this text is to historicize—to use historical jargon—the site where the Somankidi Coura cooperative was set up. I will begin with this site, which was the scene of major political and economic upheavals over the course of a few decades, and then I will gradually broaden the field to

if you had stolen something or done something bad, and you made it to Samé, the authorities could no longer arrest you. As soon as you arrived, you were asked: 'Are you ready to work in the factory?' If you agreed, there was no problem, you could remain, but if you refused, you weren't allowed to stay overnight and you had to leave immediately. In the colonial era, you had electricity in Samé, you had everything, you even had a movie theatre in the building just in front of the water drainage basin. People were working, they were going to the movies and all that. If you decided to build your own hut, the colonists gave you money because you were brave. That's how the village was created. The village of Samé (plantation) was created in 1906, I believe. When I arrived here, I talked a lot to the old Mossis who had come here in colonial times.

One of the old Mossis from Samé used to drive the village chief to the school in Médine. The chief was a descendant of a slave. The old Mossi from Samé used to drive as well the son of the man who had cleared and cut the first tree to build his house. There was no school in Samé at that time, the nearest school was ten kilometres away from Kayes.

The man who'd cleared and cut the first tree to build his house came from Nioro, in the Sahel. He was the commander who had been appointed to head the company (the plantation). He was a little like a village chief. The father of the former village chief had been the slave of the man who cut the first tree in Samé. I found the old Mossi who drove them to school. I talked to him a lot. His son is here as well, he kept the rifle his father carried with him when he went to the other side of Kayes. Because at the time, there were lions and hyenas. On Sunday evenings, he would leave the village with the old village chief and the son of the site manager and drive them to the school of Médine, where the fort stands. He took them there on Sunday nights and went to get them and bring them back to their families on Saturdays. I also met other elders who had worked for the factory. That's how I learned the history. I wanted to understand why they were there. I even helped some of them to retrace their family name, their actual Burkinabé surname. Here, all the Burkinabès were called Traoré. But in fact, not everyone was originally called



Children searching for metal on the site
of the former Diakhandapé Plantation.
Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, Raphaël Grisey.



Ousmane Sinaré and a friend whose father
had been deported and forced to work in the
Diankhandapé Plantation on the sites of the
former cinema and the basin to
wash the sisal fibers. Stills from
Cooperative (rushes), 2008, Raphaël Grisey.

examine successive agricultural policies, from the end of the colonial conquest to the first years of independence; policies that changed this part of Mali near Kayes at the Senegalese border. It is necessary to look back at the past to better examine the present: from a sisal plantation that was the scene of colonial economic coercion, to the attempt to implement a cooperative movement in the 1960s, a key element of the agrarian, African socialism advocated by Modibo Keita, the first president of the Republic of Mali.

Colonial “*Mise en Valeur*” and Forced Migration

From the time of the colonial conquest phase in West Africa, France applied economic and agricultural policies ranging from a *laissez-faire* system primarily based on commercial interests, to authoritarian interventionism based on control over agricultural production or the forced recruitment of workers.

The establishment of Native Provident Societies (NPS), which were like collective storehouses overseen by the Cercle Commander with the help of village chiefs, is emblematic from this perspective. Being a member of an NPS soon became compulsory, and under the pretext of preventing shortages, NPSs mainly served as a means for the colonial administration to control farm production and meddle in the management of stocks of provisions and seeds (see Sow 1984).

Moreover, with regard to the control of work, under the pretext of addressing worker shortages and the supposed “laziness” of the “indigenous people”¹ in the colonies of the former French West Africa (FWA), forced labor became the foundation of colonial intervention in the recruitment

¹ I have used quotation marks because this term, rich in connotations, primarily corresponds to the administrative category used by the colonial administration.

Traoré. I spoke to them, and now their children are bearing their real Burkinabé names. When I came here, this was my first task. There were Burkinabés in Samé, in the village Dar e Salam, in Laina. I found a guy called Mossi, although he wasn't a Mossi. On the day of his birth, an old Mossi came to visit his family, and so his father called him 'Mossi'. But then people thought he was a Mossi. It was talking to him and the old man who had come round his family's house the day of his birth that I understood what had happened. The guy was in fact of Fula origin.

In Samé, the director of the agricultural training school dismantled all the sheet metal from the factory buildings and sold it. He even had the aluminium pipes and valves unearthed and tried to sell them to some Senegalese. I urged the villagers not to let it happen. It was their heritage. The villagers then went on the attack. They went to see him, and everything he had unearthed was picked up and taken to the village. When something was sold, the money was redistributed. I was one of the people who encouraged the villagers to do that.

The heads of department destroyed a lot of things in these buildings. In the warehouse and the workshops there was still a lot of sheet metal. It would have been possible to restore these buildings. But they simply dismantled everything, especially one of the heads of department who felt he wasn't paid enough. In the village, he was a bit like the muezzin or the president of the Republic. Everyone was afraid to criticise him. Along the river there was still a forest, there were fruit trees, but all of it was destroyed while we were there. The cinema was used by people to keep their livestock. It was a park. But they destroyed everything, they took everything away. Only the electric poles had already been removed before we arrived. The water tower was still there, although it wasn't working anymore. The UNDP (United Nations Development Program) financed another water tower and buildings to get the agricultural school started. They installed a generator that consumed four hundred litres of petrol a day. They had the funding, but it was all eaten up. All of this last a mere six years before everything went bust. They financed it for three years and then they left.



Romain Tiquet



Graffiti and school furniture in the ruins of the sisal plantation buildings. Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, Raphaël Grisey.

of an “indigenous”, mainly peasant workforce, for the sake of sacrosanct “*mise en valeur*”.²

The imposition of forced labor in the colonies was more than simply a means of mobilizing manpower. It must be understood as a specific form of governmentality, a control system satisfying the colonial obsession with making people work and bringing order to society.

Immediately after the conquest, in order to justify the systematic use of coercion in recruiting populations and putting them to work, the colonial administration implemented a process to legalize and legitimize economic duress in these territories. This involved discourse and rhetoric revolving around education and civilization through work, as well as the implementation of a set of legal standards framing and institutionalizing the use of coercion in the recruitment of labor (the *indigénat* system, labor requisitioning regulations, etc.).

In the context of the Empire’s “*mise en valeur*” program, the colonial administration started a series of major projects specifically aimed at ensuring France would be well-supplied with raw materials (cotton, peanuts, cacao, and various minerals). This is why sisal plantations came into being shortly after the First World War, mainly in French Sudan and Senegal. Rich in fibers, sisal subsequently inundated the market in France, where it was used to make fabrics, rope, bags, etc.³

2 Loosely translating as “making valuable”, this expression refers to development and improvement in the French colonial context.

3 From sisal harvesting and fiber processing by colonial forced laborers to its transformation into rope by female workers at rope factories from the Seine to the Havre, the sisal production and transformation chain involved labor exploitation in the colonies as well as in France.

Others returned to Africa after us and followed in our footsteps. They came down all the way to see us to get a better idea before settling themselves. They settled in the area of Soboku and Lani. Their story is different because they returned directly to their native village, which wasn't the case of any of us. On the Senegalese side, some people have returned to their villages. The idea was born in Somankidi Coura. A lot of things were done after us. For our children it will be something else, but socially it's been a success. I would even go as far as to say that the SESCOMs, the health centers and all that, started here. Before us, no one talked about that. No one talked about schools, nobody financed them – it all started here.

There isn't a single child that doesn't work in the fields. My children went to the fields this morning, although I didn't tell them to go. They had a job to finish, so they left on their own. Tomorrow I won't be here, so they asked me how they should plan their day. Tomorrow they will bind and hoe the chilli plants before watering them the next day. If I'm not there, they do the job. I have no worries in that respect. When my eldest son is here, he doesn't even want

me to go to the field. Siré's child, who lives in Paris right now, goes to the fields whenever he returns.

If we want the children to take over from us, they must know that they are going to take something out of it. I worry sometimes, but I think it won't be a problem. Not all children will do this – which, incidentally, wouldn't be a good thing either – but some will accept to take over. We had an ideal, but our children don't necessarily share this ideal. Our children were able to study, so do they see the world the same way we do? That's a question we're asking ourselves. But I think something will happen. I'm not saying that our children will necessarily stay here like us, but I'm sure our achievements won't be lost.

**Interview by Raphaël Grisey,
Somankidi Coura, 2007.**

In French Sudan, the agricultural firm Société Anonyme des Cultures de Diakandapé (SACD) was founded by two brothers, Louis and Marius Renoux, not far from the cooperative's current site on the other side of the Senegal River. After various mergers, the SACD owned a total of 6 plantations (Samé, Diakandapé, Dar Salam, Dialla, Kayes Ndi, Ambidédi). The brothers also invested in Senegal, creating the firm Société des Plantations de Casamance (SPC) in 1928 in Kolda. These plantations in the valleys of the Senegal River and Casamance River (sisal requiring a lot of water) were enormous, covering areas of 3000 ha (SACD) and 2000 ha (SPC)⁴.

The land for these plantations was purchased directly from the colonial state. After the conquest in West Africa, the legal question arose as to who should be considered the owner of the conquered lands. The colonial power proceeded to despoil "vacant, unowned lands" on a massive scale in favor of the French state, refusing to recognize the existence of "indigenous rights" to these lands.

The sheer size of these plantations raised the need for more labor, requiring recruitment on an unprecedented scale. Due to the local populations' pointed refusal to harvest sisal (salaries being derisory, sisal not being a food-producing crop and its harvest being dangerous because of the many thorns on the plant), the plantations soon found it impossible to recruit the necessary workforce. They therefore sought help from the colonial administration and "indigenous" chiefs, who were cogs in the central apparatus of everyday coercion. In zones containing plantations, the administration required that every village – through the canton⁵ and village chiefs – supply the sisal plantations with a specific number of workers. This solution soon proved to be inadequate and ineffective because of the local populations' resistance to recruitment. The Sudanese and Senegalese administrations therefore decided

- 4 Sisal cultivation was introduced fairly late in the French Empire, compared with German East Africa, which had imported this agave from Florida in the late nineteenth century, and was producing 2800 tons of fiber per year by 1908. In the French colonies, the first sisal bulbils, sourced from Mexico, were planted in 1898 in a test garden in Kati, French Sudan.
- 5 Every territory of FWA was made up of "Cercles", which themselves consisted of cantons containing villages.



Anonymous Society of the Cultures of Diakandapé –
Bearer shares of 100 Francs. Document issued
from the online auction website www.delcampe.net

to requisition from Cercles further afield, even from those in other FWA colonies. Thus the colonial authorities organized forced labor migration from eastern French Sudan, especially from Haute-Volta (present-day Burkina Faso), which was viewed as a “labor reservoir” at the time.

Once recruited, workers were grouped on the plantation in camps set up near work sites. A self-sufficient village was created (with huts, an infirmary and a shop) for workers whose day-to-day lives were strictly regimented: the time of departure to the work sites, meals, breaks, and the return to the village at nightfall. Working conditions on the plantations were extremely harsh. Accidents occurred regularly, and in 1937 the administration even ended up intervening to suggest to the SACD that it supply workers with overalls or leggings to protect them from pricks, wounds and infections caused by handling sisal plants⁶.

Certain images from colonial films or postcards show the abusive working conditions on these plantations. A postcard from the early days of the plantation in Kayes – printed as part of a collection by Albaret (a professional photographer based in Kayes at the time) – shows young sisal plants as far as the eye can see, the photographer having taken the photo from a fairly high angle to stress the idea of immensity. The photo was probably taken in 1920, since the plantation was set up in 1919 and the stamp on the postcard indicates Upper Senegal and Niger, which was French Sudan's name until 1921.

This postcard was intended to show the agricultural activities of French colonists. In the foreground is an African plantation worker, blurred because he is moving. Wearing little clothing, he is working the land, leading a horse. A segment from a colonial film⁷ shows a tractor passing in the fields, and then shirtless plantation workers are seen busily cutting sisal leaves that are much taller this time, and have prominent thorns.

6 Archives Nationales du Sénégal (ANS), K311(26), Governor of FWA to Mr. Renoux, Director of Société des cultures de Diakandapé. Measures to take to protect workers against thorn pricks from sisal leaves. 27 November 1937.

7 Gaumont Pathé Archives 1920PGHI 00461 “Géographie, sous la direction de Maurice Fallex Professeur agrégé au Lycée Louis le Grand – Afrique Occidentale Française / Zone soudanienne / Le Haut Sénégal”.



At mid-distance on the postcard there are two men, one on horseback. They are not very clear. Both are wearing colonial outfits, watching as the man works.

This postcard is reminiscent of images of slave plantations in the United States: black workers in the fields and guards on horseback, a gun or whip on their shoulder, ready to quell resistance or any attempt to escape. It shows the violence of social relations in colonial society, and the predatory obsession of France's economic policy in the African territories.⁸

Many of these postcards were produced by France-based companies which sent photographers to the site, that is to say they were produced by the colonists themselves. Colonial administrators, soldiers or entrepreneurs mailed them to their families back in France. These postcards transposed the culturalist fantasies and stereotypes that French society associated with the colonial territories, and showed France's supposed deeds in Africa by depicting numerous economic and agricultural infrastructures built by the French (ports, bridges, railways, roads, plantations, etc.).

It should be noted that there were also women and children on the sisal plantations. To ensure their family's subsistence on the site, women and children looked after feeding the male workforce, and they also took part in agricultural work. They helped their husbands and fathers to cut sisal or make piles to increase their output and make it a better day. When children reached the age of twelve, they were paid 1.50 francs per day and received a meal. Children under twelve and women received no remuneration and had to live on their husbands' and fathers' rations, since they were not hired directly by the company, which simply regarded them as contributors to domestic work. In 1929, there were thirty women working for SACD out of 1160 workers, meaning there was one cook for around 38 workers.⁹

Since colonial archives very much concentrate on the operation of the colonial administration, local populations appear in them mainly as statistics. For the archives, these anonymous men and women who made contributions through the military, taxation and forced labor only became actors when they threatened the colonial order.

8 This postcard also recalls images of European industrial workers subjected to similarly difficult working conditions and constant productivity monitoring by the company.

9 ANS K192(26), letter from an inspector of administrative affairs to the lieutenant governor of French Sudan. A/s. Main d'œuvre contractuelle dans la région de Kayes. 15 December 1929.

Over the years, a variety of discreet, quiet acts of resistance weakened the forced labor system on the sisal plantations. Worker desertion was the most common of these. This form of insubordination was used particularly in border regions, where emigration to another British or Portuguese colony (especially Gambia and Portuguese Guinea in the case of Senegal) offered the simplest means of escaping French colonial pressure. These escapes were not just the acts of isolated individuals; they were also organized by groups. Even whole villages moved to neighboring colonies (Tiquet 2014). Also very suggestive were workers' "bad faith" attitudes and the slowness with which they carried out their tasks. These attitudes were explicit manifestations of discontent. The intentional slowdown on work sites, disparaged by the colonial authorities as the population's "natural indolence", appeared to be a necessary tactic in a constant, discreet struggle against a colonial authority obsessed with productivity and high outputs in the context of rapid industrialization in France.

During the Second World War, there was a dreadful increase in the forced migration of populations to sisal plantations. Classified as a national defense resource, sisal had to be mass-produced in a very short timeframe. The Renoux brothers took advantage of this particular context to demand even more labor from the administration. Under the Vichy regime, the colonial administration abandoned the few liberal reforms adopted under the Popular Front (revoking union independence and regulations concerning the work of women and children, and suspending the 1930 Forced Labor Convention).

Migrations and forced labor for sisal companies took a heavy economic, demographic and ecological toll on the sisal plantation region of Kayes. Another detail clearly shows the extractive and predatory ambition of the sisal plantations' operational system: the administration's and the planters' relationship with the earth. A parallel can be drawn between the violence inflicted upon men and women in the context of forced labor and the violence inflicted upon the soil. The overuse of the soil, which was not allowed to lie fallow, eventually hampered sisal growth and exhausted the fields for generations. Some colonial agricultural engineers had warned about the rapid exhaustion of the soil on sisal plantations, not out of concern for the environment but rather from the perspective of capital accumulation: if you exhaust the soil right away, your crops will fail the following year, resulting in losses for the company.



Temporary migrant workers occupying a house.

Cattle and herdsman crossing the ruins to the Senegal river.

Former sisal fibers washing basin.

Ruins of Diankhandapé Plantation (Samé).

Photographs by Raphaël Grisey, 2017.

For example, in 1942, a report on sisal cultivation stated that the Renoux brothers had no experience with sisal cultivation, and that the excessive size of the plantations coupled with the lack of crop regeneration through premature cutting was going to hinder the growth of the leaves and eventually deplete the quality of the fiber: “the result of these misguided ways quickly became clear, since it led to an overall decrease in the output of the plantations, which were producing nothing more than short, thin leaves yielding poor fiber, spread over wide areas and therefore difficult to transport.”¹⁰

Even though forced labor was introduced and justified by the colonial authorities as a transitional phase between the abolition of slavery and the implementation of a salaried “free labor” market, the widespread use of coercion had the opposite effect, since the authorities placed an “inexhaustible” workforce at the disposal of private companies. Coercive recruitment and embedded workforces made it unnecessary for private companies to improve working conditions and create voluntary employment practices, since they were guaranteed to receive the laborers they needed. They found themselves spared the task of reproducing labor power.

The Postwar Period: Rural Development and the Participation Myth

After the conclusion of the Second World War, the planters and the administration increasingly lost interest in sisal. Production in French Sudan and Senegal was negligible in the context of a rapidly expanding global market. Although FWA supplied nearly a quarter of the amount that France needed prior to the Second World War (45,000 tons), the federation produced only 500 tons in 1951¹¹.

Furthermore, the political context had changed. The Brazzaville Conference of 1944 began a new era in the management of the Empire. The guiding lines of the conference could be summed up as follows: the transformation of the colonial Empire into a French federation of associated populations and territories,¹² a new economic policy based on the rejection of autocracy and the Colonial Pact, and the implementation of a planned and managed economy. The Brazzaville conference stated a position in favor of eliminating forced labor, but only suggested limited measures for the implementation of a free labor market. In this context, the administration started refusing to supply workers to the plantations owned by the SACD and SPC, explaining that this decision reflected “the French government’s clearly

10 ANS, 1R58, note on sisal, 22 December 1942.

11 ANS, 2G51/55, annual economic report from Senegal, 1951.

12 Embodied by the French Union created in 1946 after the promulgation of the Lamine Guèye law abolishing the “*indigénat*” regime and granting French citizenship to all nationals of FWA.

expressed intention to restore a free labor market as soon as possible [...].¹³ It was only after the Houphouët-Boigny law was passed on 11 April 1946 that forced labor was abolished in the French colonies. This law marked a break that was both fundamental and paradoxical because it abolished practices that were supposed to have ceased after France's ratification of the Forced Labour Convention in 1937. It was a change of attitude that heralded the decline of the sisal companies, which were unable to adapt to the economic situation because of their excessive reliance on the colonial administration. The SACD and SPC's business gradually declined, until sisal plantations disappeared in the 1950s.

This new political and economic context heralded the implementation of a new colonial system. Having germinated at the Brazzaville Conference and having underpinned political and social reforms since 1946, "modernization" discourse was then taking shape, based on a new argument that abandoned the idea of the "*mise en valeur*" of the colonies in favor of "economic and social development for the benefit of rural populations". The essential question being discussed at that time could be summed up thus: how can development have a beneficial effect on the population's living conditions, and especially on the colonial economy?

In the field, this change of paradigm translated into the establishment of development plans and investment funds like the Fond d'Investissement pour le Développement Economique et Social (FIDES / Investment Fund for Economic and Social Development) in 1946, and the Fond d'Équipement Rural et de Développement Economique et Social (FERDES / Fund for Rural Facilities and Economic and Social Development) for more local development in 1949.

The FERDES was primarily intended to finance a "major program of small works" that prioritized the construction of "local roads", bridges, dams, clinics and rural schools in order to develop agricultural communités. In theory, the FERDES operated based on the wishes of the community (village, association, cooperative), which requested works and committed to paying one third of the cost with either money, volunteer work or supplied materials. If a project was approved, the territorial budget covered the second third of the cost, and the federal budget covered the last third.

The implementation of FERDES projects reflected a new idea taking shape in colonial discourse, namely that local populations should participate in their own "development". A new persuasion vocabulary appeared in the late 1940s, based on a discursive arsenal revolving around modernization—with all of the culturalist prejudices this implies—calling

13 ANS, K290(26), response from the governor of FWA to the director of SPC, 13 May 1945.

Ruins of an irrigation system, erosion and the making of "banco" (adobe). Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, Raphaël Grisey.

for the populations' participation and goodwill in carrying out public works. In this late colonial period, the participation of rural populations was a cornerstone of colonial conceptions of "development".

There were of course still many acts of resistance—refusal to work, emigration—and the rural populations' palpable defiance of the colonial authorities continued. For these populations, the notion of public interest and voluntary participation seemed more like the fantasy of certain "developers" and colonial administrators than a concrete reality. How could it have been otherwise? How is it possible to imagine that from one day to the next, a population that had spent decades under the heel of a foreign power, working for free in the fields, plantations and roads, would collectively and spontaneously decide to voluntarily participate in an updated version of "*mise en valeur*", newly labelled "economic and social development of the colonies"?

To get around the defiance of the populations, it was not unusual to see the introduction of "obligatory volunteer work" orchestrated by canton or village chiefs, forcibly mobilizing an area's populations to construct public facilities or prepare agricultural land. Even if the colonial system was trying to evolve towards increased participation by the population, mentalities and certain practices remained unchanged.

Rural Animation, a Cooperative Movement and Postcolonial Policies

The 1950s were marked by the colonial authorities' drive to "modernize", but also and especially by the development of anti-colonial movements that sounded the knell for the Empire. Guinea's leader Sékou Touré said NO to de Gaulle's referendum on the French Community, and his country became the first of the FWA territories to gain independence. The rest of the federation's former territories soon followed, achieving sovereignty in 1960. This turn of the page brought new political figures into the international arena who embodied the new postcolonial era in sub-Saharan Africa. Sékou Touré in Guinea, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Mamadou Dia in Senegal, and Modibo Keita in Mali were among those who advocated an agrarian, African socialism as the best way to make their countries a success¹⁴.

National development involved nation and citizen building, as well as economic and social construction. National development proceeded by means of the boosting of agricultural communities and the mobilization of the rural masses for the national project.

These "fathers of independence" launched extensive political and economic reforms intended for the peasantry, which made up 80% of their

14 In this context it is worth noting the pan-African union attempted by Keita's Sudan and Senghor's Senegal within the short-lived Mali Federation (1959-1960).

countries' populations. It was a time of economic planning and basic rural development that established new relations between the state and its people. The state became the agent of economic impetus and control, in a spirit of total severance from the colonial period, which had been very much based on "indigenous" chiefs prepared to commit all kinds of abuses.

The planning launched by postcolonial elites reflected the desire to build a national economy based on a dynamic agricultural sector and on the implementation of an industrial fabric that could meet the needs of the whole territory and its people. Planning was aimed at increasing production by modernizing agriculture and providing it with new equipment, while giving the state a preponderant role, substituting for private initiatives that were considered corrupt and ineffective.

To mobilize the agricultural communities, Modibo Keita in Mali, Mamadou Dia in Senegal and Sékou Touré in Guinea pursued major policies of *animation rurale*, or rural animation. "Animation" was viewed as a broad educational tool in the service of development structures. Their primary aim was to technically and morally train and animate rural populations and give them responsibility. Clearly defined educational action would lead them to take charge of their own development. The population was supervised by a small group of organizers tasked with training administrative and technical managers of this animation at the local level. Each village was the local center of the population's economic, political, social and cultural activity, and all of a region's villages, taken as a whole, constituted the basic cells of development. An animation center was set up there. Through this network of basic cells, a program of local development activities was implemented, devised in theory by the populations, and then negotiated with the organizers and administrative supervisors. The originality of rural animation lay in the fact that there was only one government partner on site, unlike the dominant presence of the chiefs during the colonial period. The objective was clear: the aspirations of the villages had to reach the highest level of the state through rural animation centers, so that the government could orient its actions in accordance with the peasants' needs.

One of the key elements of this rural animation was the elimination of the old Native Provident Societies (NPS) and their replacement by a peasant cooperative movement that advocated community values and re-emphasized work on the land. This cooperative movement, found in most francophone West African countries, were intended as a means of organizing the agricultural policy that was making a clean break from the trading economy characteristic of the colonial period.

The organization of networks of cooperatives had two principal aims: to improve the production, supply and marketing of peasant products, and increase financing possibilities in order to end the dependence that the rural masses had experienced under the colonial regime.

For postcolonial elites, the cooperative movement became a central tool of peasant socialization. This is how Mamadou Dia defined the cooperative movement in Senegal:

“The cooperative movement in Africa is developing specifically in the context of that international policy which views cooperative organizations as quintessential tools for liberating underdeveloped countries. After the signatories to the Atlantic Charter adopted a clear anticolonial stance, it seemed necessary to set up an economic system capable of ensuring the development of the territories, with a view to raising their populations’ living standards, and with a view to their future emancipation.” (Dia, 1952).

Followed by Léopold Sédar Senghor:

“[...] The more the cooperative movement evolves, the more its political dimension will be asserted, and past that threshold, cooperation is no longer just an efficient marketing and production technique. It will increasingly appear to be an essential work and life organization body, giving the socialist society its basic cell”.¹⁵

Modibo Keita made a similar point:

“It is essential for Mali to have a stable, coherent, dynamic economy. This economy will be based on the peasantry, which makes up around 90% of the population, and on a modern industry. Through cooperation and agricultural modernization, peasants will be offered the means to raise their living standards and meet the requirements of increasingly accelerated social evolution”.¹⁶

In Mali, rural animation and the cooperative movement were implemented to support president Modibo Keita’s migration management policy. In Keita’s view, the many migrations of Malian populations, internally and to other African countries, were emptying the countryside and would eventually hinder the smooth running of the national project (Gary-Tounkara 2003). The authorities therefore launched a major “return to the land” policy, with the aim of getting peasants to settle in rural regions in order to develop agricultural communities and accelerate the development of the young country. This policy, which was also found in other West African countries like Guinea and Senegal, was somewhat reminiscent of a certain agrarist discourse that had already existed in the French colonies during the interwar period (Chauveau 1994).

15 Léopold Sédar Senghor quoted by Gentil Dominique (1986, 77).

16 Speech to the National Assembly in Dakar, April 1959. [http://modibokeita.free.fr/](http://modibokeita.free.fr/Discours.html) Discours.html (accessed 20 April 2017).

Furthermore, it should be noted that as soon as Mali achieved independence in 1960, the state laid claim to all land subject to common law, establishing the state's primacy over land and its absolute power to make decisions about the how country's lands were used.

The Malian authorities' planning of the agrarian economy concentrated on the establishment of collective farms that were supposed to belong to all Malian citizens, with profits from harvests going to cooperatives, which in Mali were called Groupements Ruraux de Production et de Secours Mutuel (GRPSM). GRPSMs were village-level production cooperatives, the basic cell of agricultural life.

As Mali's first Minister of Rural Economy and Projects Seydou Badian Kouyaté explained: "The community that has always existed despite the noxious elements that colonialism introduced must be set up at the village level. The cooperative will interest those who live together, those who work together [...]. The village will therefore be the production and marketing cell [...]."

In keeping with the "scientific socialism" advocated by Keita, only cooperatives were able to change production relationships and technically revolutionize production methods. GRPSMs were relays between the village and the state for the supply and marketing of products to Mali's two largest state companies: Office des Produits Agricoles du Mali (OPAM) and Société malienne d'import export (SOMIES).

Another element of the cooperative movement in Mali was the partisan management of the organization of rural communities. Political committees of the Sudanese Union, Keita's political party, were wholly responsible for the life of the cooperatives and collective farms. Thus one could discern the materialization of the desire to nationalize commerce and supervise rural communities through the managers of the cooperatives.

Even if the project was attractive on paper, the reality was far from living up to the plan's ambitions. The framework of the cooperatives set up in the 1960s was in fact quite weak. Because of the political authorities' lack of resources, many peasants never saw the arrival of a cooperative or the operation of a collective farm. Furthermore, there was a certain discernible corruption of the system. OPAM bought the peasants' surplus harvest below cost, worsening the economic problems in rural communities, and in a sense reproducing the much-decried colonial trade system (Gary-Tounkara 2003, 57).

The political exploitation of the cooperative movement also had the consequence of alienating peasants from cooperatives and collective

farms, since they did not want to work for the party (*ibid.*). Moreover, some of the managers of the cooperatives, members of the Sudanese Union, diverted their usufruct in the collective farms for personal use. Thus rather than being partners, the cooperatives became cells of the state apparatus, benefiting the holders of political power.

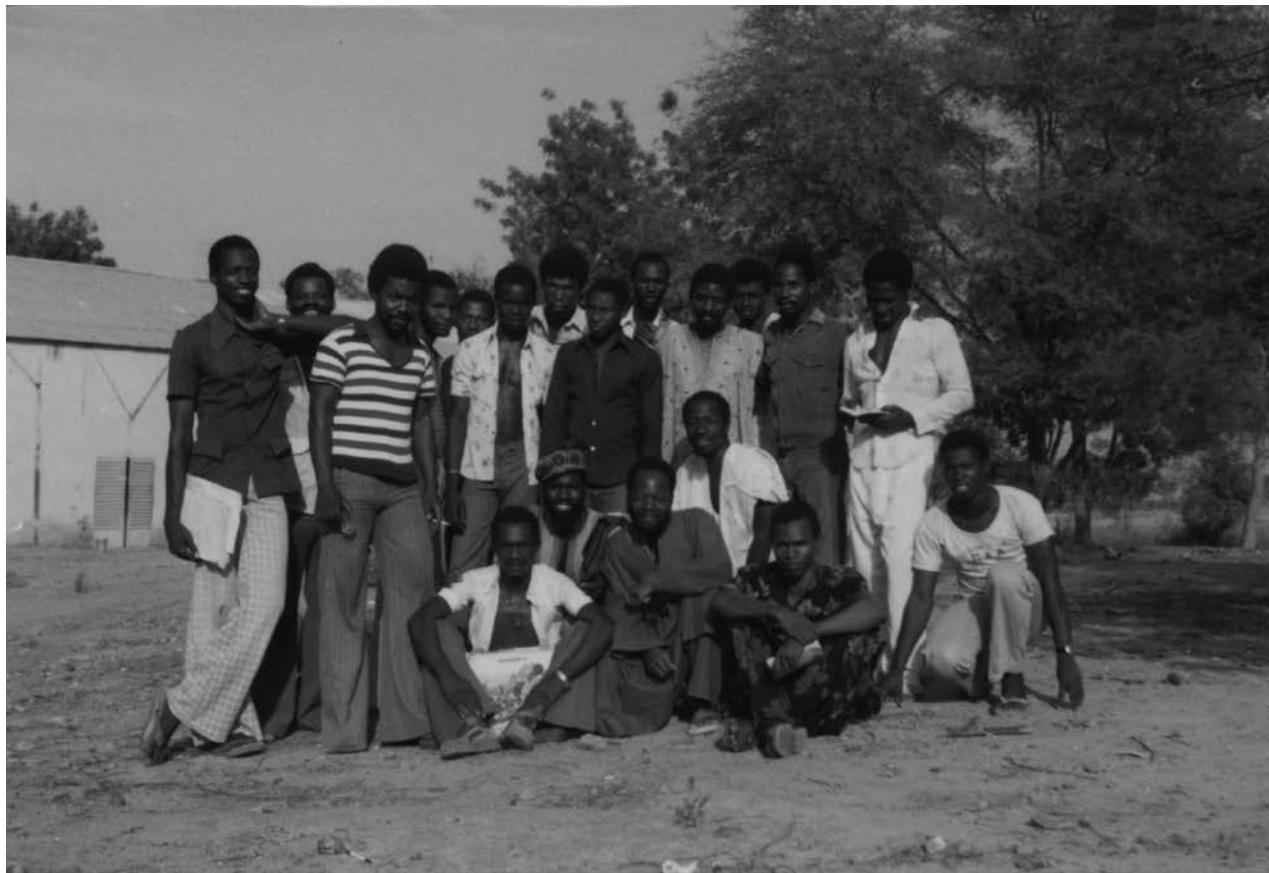
Finally, it is also necessary to mention the erroneous, reifying image that Modibo Keita—and other West African leaders—had of rural populations. For example, he evoked the “socialism of the ancestors”, the fantastical idea that the “traditional” peasantry possessed an innate collectivism, a notion that did not take account of local particularisms and individual dynamics (age and gender relations, the influence of hierarchies within villages). Consequently the peasant, who was either alien to these structures or unhappy with them, would abandon the collective farm to sell his crops (peanuts, cotton, etc.) through unofficial channels, often in favor of private trade.

The limitations of the agrarian policy implemented in Mali could be found in systems elsewhere in West Africa, in Senegal, Guinea and Burkina Faso to a lesser extent: rural development policies that had a limited impact, a wide disparity between national discourse about boosting agricultural communities and the reality in the field, and overly ambitious projects that went too far and were often corrupted by bureaucratic elites who appropriated peasant profits for their own personal use.

In November 1968, Modibo Keita was overthrown by a military coup led by Moussa Traoré, and the socialist option was abandoned in favor of a more liberal policy. This period also marked the beginning of a change of course in the governmentality of the country. Like most West African states, Mali was then delegating whole swathes of its sovereignty to trans-national actors, international institutions and NGOs (see Mann 2015).

In 1976, members of ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France) originally from Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Guinea Conakry submitted a request for a field along the Senegal River (which is where most of France’s sub-Saharan African immigrants were from). The only positive response came from the Malian authorities, specifically from Amara Danfaga, who was then governor of the Kayes region, which had the highest level of migration to Europe at that time. At a time when Malian agricultural communities were emptying of people heading to Europe, he gave his full support to the ACTAF initiative.¹⁷

17 He himself initiated a market gardening cooperative in 1970, “Danfagadougou” a Bambana (Bambara) word that translates as “Danfaga village”. <http://base.d-p-h.info/fr/fiches/premierdph/fiche-premierdph-3109.html> (accessed 6 April 2017).



Somankidi Coura cooperative members visiting
the Agriculture Research Center of Samé
Agricole, Mali, March 1979.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.



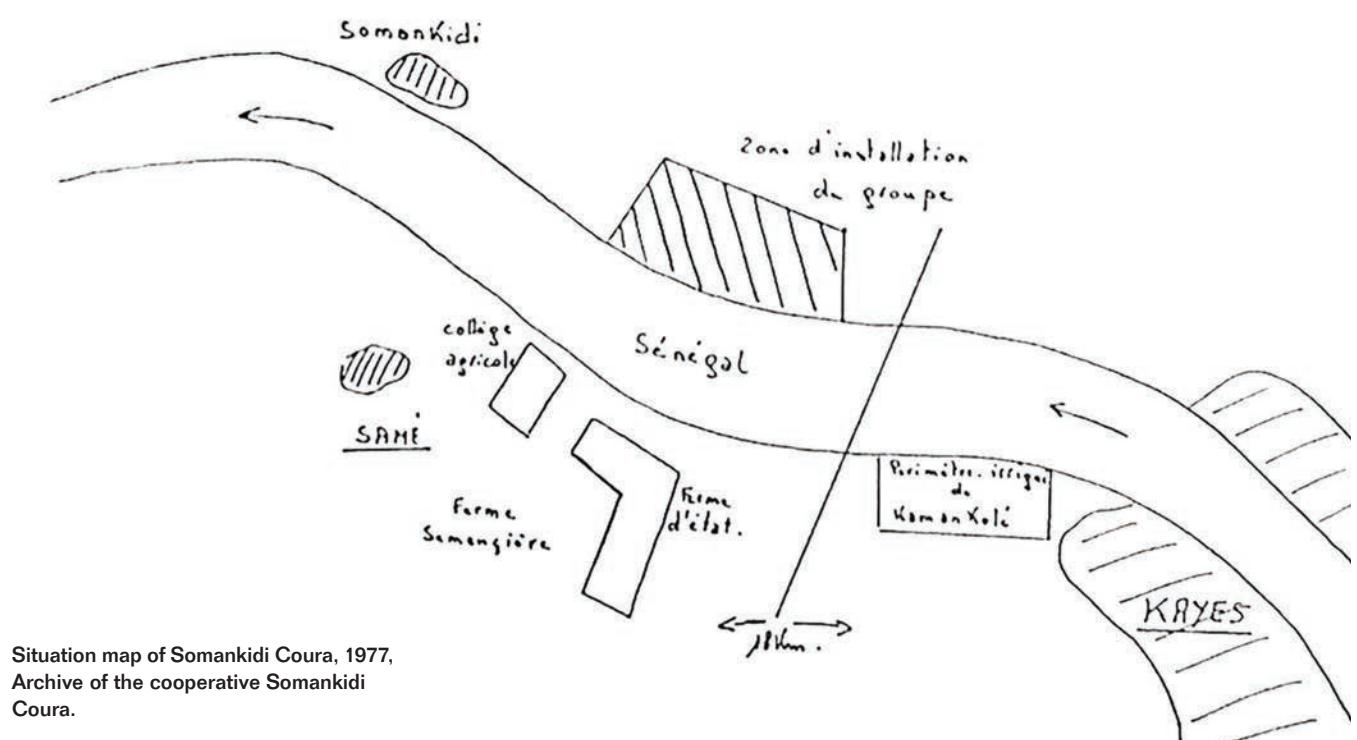
Former granary building of the Groupement
Rural of Samé Agricole, Mali, 2017.
Photograph by Raphaël Grisey.

The Somankidi Coura cooperative was established in a region, on a territory, that was the scene of multiple historical episodes, from the colonial period characterized by predatory exploitation of workers and land, to the attempt by Mali's first independent president Modibo Keita to develop agricultural communities and lead his country's return to the land. However, in contrast to the forced migrations of the colonial period or the managed migrations implemented by Modibo Keita after the country gained independence,¹⁸ the ACTAF initiative revolved around another type of mobility: a voluntary migration, an intentional "return to the land" from Europe, towards Africa, outside of any migration management policy.

18 Or in France, "return assistance" implemented by Giscard d'Estaing's government, providing a subsidy of 10,000 francs to immigrants who permanently returned to their country of origin.

Bibliography

- Dia Mamadou, 1952. Contribution à l'étude du mouvement coopératif en Afrique noire, troisième édition, Paris: Présence Africaine.
- Rodet, Marie et Tiquet, Romain, 2016. "Genre, travail et migrations forcées dans les plantations de Sisal au Sénégal et au Soudan français (1919-1946)". In I. Mande et E. Guerassimoff (ed.), *L'apostolat du travail colonial. Les engagés et autres mains-d'œuvre migrantes dans les empires, XIX^e-XX^e siècle*, Paris: Editions Riveneuve.
- Sow, Abdoul, 1984. *Les sociétés indigènes de prévoyance du Sénégal des origines à 1947*, PhD thesis in history, UCAD.
- Tiquet, Romain, 2014. "Migrations protestataires et résistances au travail forcé en AOF, 1900-1946". In *Hommes & Migrations*, no. 1307.
- Gentil, Dominique, 1986. *Les mouvements coopératifs en Afrique de l'Ouest*, Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Gary-Tounkara, Daouda, 2003. "Quand les migrants demandent la route, Modibo Keita rétorque : 'retournez à la terre !'. Les Baragnini et la désertion du 'chantier national' (1958-1968)". In *Mande Studies*, no. 5, 2003.
- Chauveau, Jean-Pierre, 1994. "Participation paysanne et populisme bureaucratique. Essai d'histoire et de sociologie de la culture du développement". In J.P. Jacob and Ph. Lavigne Delville (eds.), *Les associations paysannes en Afrique : organisation et dynamiques*, Paris: Karthala.
- Gregory, Mann, 2015. *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.





Bouba Touré, preparation of land,
Somankidi Coura, May 1977.

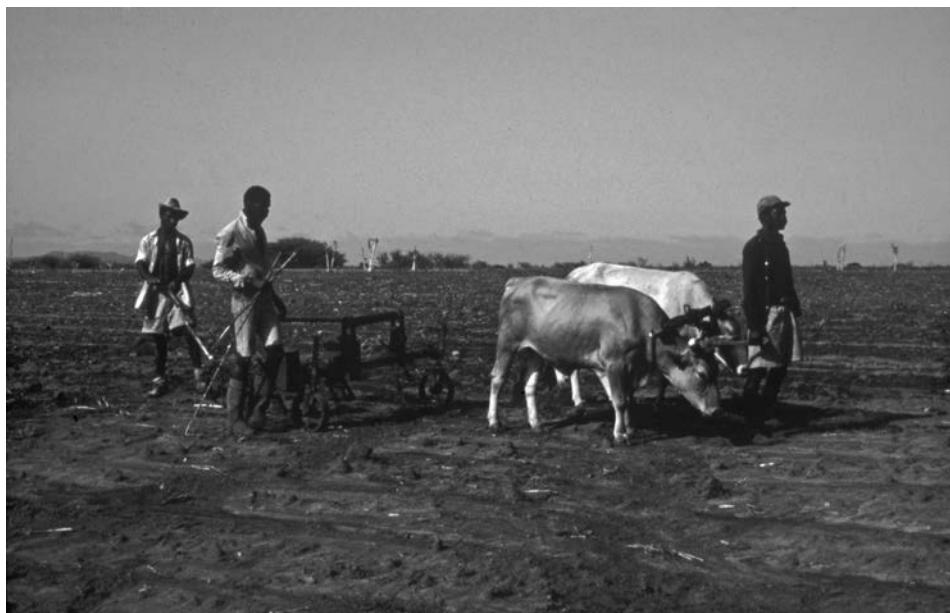
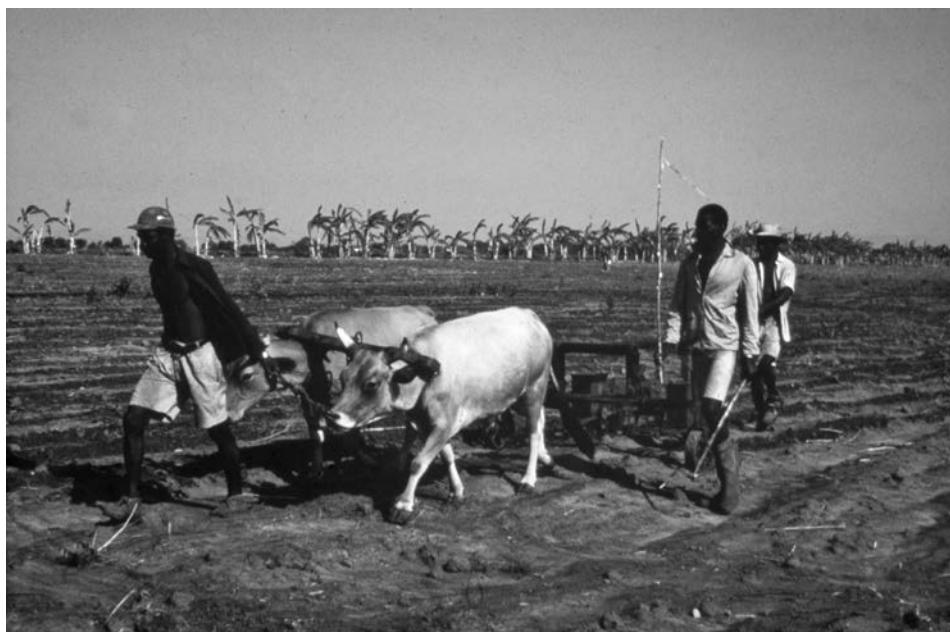


Photo shoot during the preparation of land, with Karamba Touré, Bakhoré Bathily, Ibrahima Camara, Siré Soumaré, Fode Moussa Diaby, Bangaly Camara, Ousmane Sinaré, Moussa Coulibaly, Seydou Traoré, Ladji Niangané, Mady Niakhaté, Samba Bâ, Fabourama Sissoko, Somankidi Coura, Mali, January 1977.



Preparation of land and uprooting along the Senegal River, Somankidi Coura, Mali, January 1977.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.





Plowing the land, Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1978.
Photographs by Bouba Touré.



Sorting corn seeds, Somankidi Coura, Mali, April 1978.

Seeding corn in the fields, cooperative of Somankidi Coura, Mali, April 1978.



Herenten'qu

Koodu Koo'du fèttén yà ní
 Herenten'qu dàgá dò 'ñagame
 Baalu dan'ma fèttén yà ní
 Herenten'qu dàgá dò 'ñagame
 Jaahunu dan'ma fèttén yà ní
 Herenten'qu dàgá dò 'ñagame

Koodu Koo'du fèttén yà ní
 Herenten'qu dàgá dò 'ñagame
 Gara-n-gal'lu dan'ma fèttén yà nf
 Herenten'qu dàgá do 'ñagame
 Siiri lijaa'ne fèttén yà ní
 Herenten'qu dàgá dò 'ñagame

Hérintinkhou

It is the seed of who and of whom?
 Hérintinkhou disappeared with compost
 It is the seed of all the Bâlou
 Hérintinkhou disappeared with compost
 It is the seed of all Diahounou
 Hérintinkhou disappeared with compost

It is the seed of who and of whom?
 Hérintinkhou disappeared with compost
 It is the seed of all indigo workshops
 Hérintinkhou disappeared with compost
 It is the seed of the tasty squash
 Hérintinkhou disappeared with compost



After seeding the fields, young adults from Somankidi, cooperative of Somankidi Coura, Mali, July 1977.

Bouba Touré with seed-calabashes and a pandi (pickaxe), Somankidi Coura, Mali, July 1977.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



Planting fruit trees on the land
of the cooperative, April 1978.

Fruit tree shoots before planting,
cooperative of Somankidi Coura,
Mali, April 1978.





Millet field and Baobabs, Somankidi, Mali,
January 1977.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



Construction of the second canal with help from Somankidi inhabitants, cooperative of Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1979.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.





New York, 1981. Photograph by Armet Francis.

Things and Their Proper Places. Notes on the Photography of Bouba Touré

... not an inch of this world devoid of my fingerprint.
Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*

1 (2008, 58, 75011)

At some point I asked myself when I had seen Bouba Touré for the first time, and I realized it must have been in the video he shot in 2008 in his apartment on Rue Troussseau in the eleventh arrondissement of Paris. In this video he introduces his viewers (who are they?) to the place where, he says, he spends a lot of time and where his dearest photos are displayed on the wall. The place and the photos of someone who “doesn’t want to die”, as Bouba Touré goes on to tell us. Then, about a minute into the video, a full-length mirror comes into view and in it—hardly surprising—we see for a second the man who is holding the camera, who now says: “Time is infinite and there are always things to do”.



Video still from *Bouba Touré, 58 rue Troussseau, 75011 Paris, France*, 2008.

I only know his former apartment from this video, *Bouba Touré, 58 rue Troussseau, 75011 Paris, France*. Since then, he has moved to Pantin, where I have visited him twice. The video is a simple and at the same time complex self-portrait, using the walls of his apartment to tell the story of his life with direct voice-over. The life of a Malian emigrant in Paris who feels connected to the world and the innumerable struggles for independence, liberation, and justice that have been waged in the past five decades. Some in faraway places, some nearby. Mandela, Cabral, his mother. The CGT, the Sans Papiers movement, the film *Safrana* by Sidney Sokhona in which Bouba Touré played a leading role. Thomas Sankara, who will only die if we let him. And again and again Somankidi Coura, the cooperative in Mali that Bouba Touré helped found in 1976.

In his apartment, nothing is arranged—or rather, everything seems arranged, but arranged by necessity. Even though virtually everything on these walls—posters, postcards, photos, flyers, CD covers—has a date on it, or is given a date when Bouba Touré speaks about it, none of the objects are there to represent either their uniqueness or his singularity. The dates, written mostly in black or blue marker, mark the moment when the trajectory of the object crossed Bouba Touré's life: the date a CD was given to him, a book was bought, a note written or received, a flag brought home from a rally. Yet this is not Bouba Touré's “private collection”. The fact that at some exact point in time these objects became *his* doesn't make them less universal. They testify to a collective history in which Bouba Touré feels entangled, for better or for worse.

As I was writing “necessity”, above, I was thinking of a John Berger quote —“What you kiss or bang your head against”. Things that are too precious to ever give up, or too pressing to be ignored. Looking up the quote again, I find that Berger meant it to illustrate the idea that “[n]ecessity produces both tragedy and comedy” (Berger 2003, 12). His thoughts in this essay, “Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible (for Yves),” stroll along a path laid out by Chinese painter Shi Tao, who noted that “the brush is for saving things from chaos” (*ibid.*, 16). I don't think that *chaos* is a term Bouba Touré would use to situate his practice, nor would he claim to be saving things by keeping them, or people by photographing them. But he might accept the idea that his way of dealing with things contributes to a support structure that helps him, and those he engages with, resist subjugation. Such solidarity is positioned not against chaos in the sense of an ontological disorder, but rather a man-made disaster, deliberately perpetuated injustice and a history of violent denial and active oblivion. “The mess that the world produces and the mess that produces it,” as Jared Sexton has put it, referring to what Hortense Spillers has called “the world's mess”. It might sound too optimistic, but I want to say that it is because the world was made into what it is that

it can also be unmade. And I think it is safe to say that the empathy and the fury, the sincerity and the exuberance in Bouba Touré's practice can only be understood when it is seen as a means of unmaking the world.

Unmaking the world is probably based here on the same convictions and day-to-day experiences as those that made Frantz Fanon come to the conclusion that "[t]here will be an authentic disalienation only to the degree to which things, in the most materialistic meaning of the word, will have been restored to their proper places". (Fanon 2008, 5) Things *and people*, one might be quick to add, yet I think there is an important distinction in Fanon's writing, as well as in Bouba Touré's activist engagement, between restoration and return—or, in other words, between material justice and a return to wherever one considers "home". Once material justice, things restored to their proper places, has been fully accomplished, there will be no need to die in exile—not because nobody will be tempted to leave home anymore, but rather because exile won't be a predicament in a world no longer segregated into bastions of pay-per-day living and areas that are gradually becoming uninhabitable. In fact, a sturdy materialism would have to insist that the foremost political gain of economic justice will be that henceforth there will no longer be any "improper" places for anyone to be in. That is when things will have been restored to their proper places. Bouba Touré's photographic practice, I would argue, is an ongoing effort to shelter and keep track of things that remain to be restored to their proper places. His is a safeguarding practice, and at the same time it is a form of constructing the place it anticipates. This is why I think his photographs are both places for things and things in themselves. They are meant to be given, handled, shipped, and displayed, and to eventually reappear in new photographs which, on another itinerary, will repeat the same journey differently. Bouba Touré is an impatient historiographer, living for the time when things will have been restored to their proper places. From time to time, his desire for that time to be *now* is overwhelming.



"To see high our history, I make photographs – Bouba 05/92"
Pantin, France 2013, Still (rushes)
from Raphaël Grisey.

2 (1938, 1947, 1987)

Since Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, written in 1938/39 and first published in 1947), the return to the post-colony has typically been depicted as a sobering if not devastating experience of deracination. The Caribbean (here Martinique) to which Césaire returns in this seminal poem stands out as a native land that registers all its children as uprooted by birth. This is because, at the base of the colony, and older than it, was the concept that the owner of the land is he who coerces others to work it. The humiliation of slavery, however, is not expended in being forced to labor while being excluded from the profitable exchange of labor's fruits; it has its roots in the fact that in this exchange the slave him- or herself is turned into a commodity. It has often been noted that the slavery system, whose primary and most profitable product was the slave, not only coincided with but indeed funded European "modernity" and that it was a preliminary stage to all subsequent conditions of labor under capitalism. A preliminary stage in the form of an organized excess in relation to which other forms of coercion would be legitimized. The recent wave of "Afro-pessimism" has provided us with the fundamental reminder that the founding experience of modern capitalism was extracted from the suffering of Black people, that this experience has produced not only the Black subject but also the supremacist disposition of the white subject, and that this formative experience continues to haunt Black subjectivity today — not merely as a historical burden, but as an everyday experience of "continual Black relegation". (R.L. 2013, unpaginated)

I am quoting these lines of history and thought not to make a point of reference, but rather a point of non-reference—to refer, perhaps, to an inability to refer, because I might not be equipped for the challenge of a critique springing from the "ontology of Black suffering" that Afro-pessimism has reasserted in recent years. I feel more at ease quoting (and embracing) Édouard Glissant on the epistemological and ethical merits of Creolization rather than bracing myself and what I write for an ontology of suffering I am ill-positioned to account for. I find the concept of Creolization as "a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open" (Glissant 1997, 34), and the image of the *jardin créole* in which nothing is autochthonous and everything that exists co-exists, to be more inviting than an insistence on the necessity to act on Black suffering by "putting the White out of the picture", as Frank B. Wilderson III frequently puts it in *Red, White & Black*. This is meant both in the literal sense—as in "offing" white bodies on the cinema screen—and in the sense of seeking adequate revenge within the regime of gratuitous violence against Black bodies that is still in place in the world. This strain of Afro-pessimism seems to partly consist in denying Black subjectivity an easy way out of this cycle, while suggesting that for the white experience there is no way in.

Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* might seem to be an equally history-laden proposal to forge—from the gestures of defiance and recoding, *marronage* and *détournement*, that made physical and social survival possible in and despite the plantation system—the weapons for a less combative and more optimistic engagement with “the Other”. “Our boats are open and we sail them for everyone”. (Glissant 1997, 9) Paradox? Delusion? Glissant's language, and language is at once site and weapon in this scenario, is inclusive as well as extensive. It allows for antagonisms to come together in the same sentence, and for words to become clearings that can be reached from many directions. “The place was closed, but the word derived from it remains open”. (ibid., 75) Placing the site of the plantation and not the figure of the slave at the center of the scenario does make a substantial difference. Yet I think the two aspects should not be pitted against each other, because they are both vantage points from which to describe the same furrowed space. If Glissant might be seen as “evad[ing] the nagging burden of proof of abolition,” as Jared Sexton has claimed (to no one in particular), his continued insistence on *discontinuities* and his scavenging in the “ruins of the Plantation system” (ibid., 72) can hardly be construed as making peace with the past (or with the present, for that matter). If we can't speak of discontinuity, however, then we cannot speak of the maroons, either, who created discontinuity through defiance.

From the erratic absence of a maroon (named Gani), Glissant once wove a blanket of stars covering the forest (in the 1987 novel *Mahagony*). A pattern of softly flickering lights is made (for those in the know) from the spots where the women have hidden nightly rations of food to help Gani (who has left the enclosure) hold out as long as possible. “The inhabitants would peek through a crack in their huts into the nightly mass of forest punctured with these lights, which from time to time would expire like dwindling fireflies. It looked as if the sky was spread out like a blanket over the blackness of the earth”. (Glissant 1987, 66) When, in *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant returns to the plantation matrix as the “opaque source” from “which our common future takes its chances” (Glissant 1997, 73), he does not do so in the name of naïve dialectics (i.e., with the idea that something good must have come out of it), but in order to salvage the ingenuity of those past survivors for the struggles of today. Darkness and silence are not absolute. If, in Glissant's thinking, the plantation does not appear as a dead end, but is instead studied as “one of the bellies of the world” (ibid., 75) from which emerges “a deferred or disguised speech in which men and women who are gagged keep their words closed” (ibid., 73), he is making a point, a choice even, about today, for what to do with what is there (here and elsewhere): memory, language, music, crops, “the cry of the Plantation, transfigured into the speech of the world”. (ibid.) A fragmented and dispersed speech, a narrative, a literature created under “the obligation to get around the rule of silence” (ibid., 69). For Glissant, the writing of this speech was clearly a joyful task. The erratic movements of this writing, the “errantry,” constitute not an aimless wandering of the desperately uprooted but the very *poetics of relation*. These poetics must no longer answer the question: “Relation between what and what?” (and may react in a blissfully unruly manner to the order, “Your papers!”); rather, they can finally consist of a practice that creates what it asserts and asserts what it creates, one that, instead of digging up (and claiming) roots, finds (and creates) kinships.

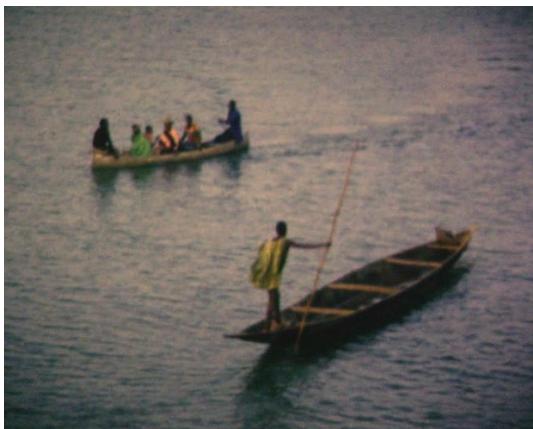
3 (1976, 14, 500, 1976)

In 1976, Bouba Touré returned to his native region in the north of Mali in order to help found Somankidi Coura, an agricultural cooperative on the banks of the Senegal River. The photos he took on this trip show typical settler activities, such as clearing the land, designating sites for houses and crops, digging trenches for irrigation, burning brushwood, eating from large open fires, washing the dishes in the river, and resting in the shade of the trees left standing. A reel of film shot on 8mm by a friend from France shortly afterward (the fields in full growth) starts with an image of two boats crossing a large river in opposite directions. This river is the Senegal, on whose banks the cooperative was founded.

"The location where we will settle is 18 km downstream from Kayes. On the right bank of the Senegal River, to be exact, in the great plain of Somankidi, and about 4 km from Somankidi village. On the other side of the river, just across it, lies the village of Samé with the seed farm and the agricultural school. Our goal for '77 is to clear and irrigate some 20 ha of land."¹

While a lone man in a canoe steers away from the camera, the boat moving toward us is carrying six people. One of them is standing and steering the boat with a long paddle. He lets the current turn the boat in a half-circle, then waves, possibly to the person filming. I pause the film there, and instantly the still image of a group of people in a boat surrounded by water recalls other images, such as those excessively disseminated images of African refugees trying to reach European shores (the perspective of a camera filming from an elevated position reinforces this allusion, since most images we get to see of refugees in boats are taken from helicopters or larger boats and typically frame the refugee boat such that it appears surrounded

1 This and the following quotes are from a press communiqué that the group issued before their departure. Translation from French by the author.



Still from 8mm film by Monique Janson, Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1977.



The Senegal river and the collective water pump of the agricultural cooperative of Somankidi Coura, 1989. Photograph by Bouba Touré.

by water, lost at sea). When I let the images move again, the frame widens and I see that the boat has reached the shore and that the group is about to disembark. A river ferry, public transport. The Senegal River remains a prominent site during these eight minutes of 8mm film and it also appears in many of the photographs Bouba Touré has taken over the years. The river is the lifeline of the cooperative—without it, it wouldn't exist. Of particular importance, therefore, is the gasoline-driven pump that pumps water from the river into a basin from which point irrigation trenches spread it to the fields. The canals are built from termite soil—the adobe of termite mounds, which is known to make excellent building material. Bouba Touré has explained to me that one must take only the upper part of the *termitière* and only during that time of year when the termites are busy down below with breeding and reproduction. Later, the termites will rebuild their mound. Termites are abundant in most parts of West Africa, and that river never runs dry.

"Why Mali, and why exactly this region around Kayes? Simply because it was in Mali that we were offered the conditions we deemed indispensable for the group. The Kayes region is situated in the Senegal River basin; 95% of the immigrant workers from Mali, Senegal and Mauritania are originally from that region. The inhabitants of this area are linked not only through the shared experience of emigration, but equally by the socio-political and particularly the economic facts of life along the Senegal River".

Founding the cooperative was a straightforward thing. The project was initiated by a group of West Africans who had emigrated to France in the 1960s and who, ten years later, realized that what in their time had still been an adventure for a few had become a compulsory ordeal for too many. They were disillusioned with their own aspirations and with French society's readiness to consider them as equals. They had experienced segregated life in the *foyers*, the dormitories for male migrant workers, unequal payment and career opportunities, everyday racism. Most of them had also accrued sobering experiences within the French Left and



Termite mound, Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1980's.

Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Somankidi Coura, 1979.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

the labor unions, which had fed on the internationalist spirit of the late 1960s but showed little interest in seriously decolonizing their own ranks and thinking. This particular frustration with what should have been a more reliable solidarity is a consistent element in films made by African filmmakers in France from the mid-1960s onward (e.g., Med Hondo's *Soleil Ô*, 1969, and *Les bicots nègres vos voisins*, 1972), and it also created the momentum for the two collective films Bouba Touré participated in, *Nationalité: Immigré* (1975) and *Safrana ou Le droit à la parole* (1977), both directed by the Mauritanian filmmaker Sidney Sokhona.

The first film introduces the viewer to the basic facts of labor migration to France and to the everyday lives of immigrant workers. It mixes staged scenes and cinéma vérité to denounce the living conditions of the notorious foyers as well as the various profiteers of the status quo within and outside the diaspora community. In an article written for *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1976, Serge Daney described *Nationalité: Immigré* as “a voyage to the country in which everything can take place on paper. Paper as a place in which the powers that be demand their dues in concrete terms (‘Your papers, please!’); paper on which another authority claims and braces up (flyers, posters, books); paper on which an authority fantasizes (paper as utopia, just as one remarks: ‘It looks beautiful on paper, but ...’). (Daney 2014, 217)

This paper-ridden country is of course France, seen from the perspective of immigrant workers, for whom things written on paper have a different significance than they do for resident activists. Writing about *Nationalité: Immigré*, Daney realizes how the struggle for immigrants’ rights, which created new alliances in the early 1970s, involved a lot of paperwork, and how an activist who wanted to be of use “had to be of use with the pen”. (ibid., 215) His text is addressed to those who have frowned upon Sokhona’s film, because it “touches upon that which the leftists precisely eschew (the necessity of legal agreement)”. (ibid., 217) If spewing malice at bourgeois bureaucracy was (and still is) an integral element of leftist militancy, it also was (and still is) the same bureaucracy with which immigrant workers maintain their notorious paper-made relations; they frequently have to remind the administration of what is written on paper (in the law) to their own advantage. If the struggle is for rights (and it is), it is for rights that are written or should be written.

The land had been given to them by the Malian government. It was a time when most countries in the Sahel were suffering from the effects of drought and the loss of harvests, and when the economic relations France maintained with these countries were increasingly seen as a new form of colonialism. Against this background, the photos of cultivated fields, irrigation trenches, the water pump, and the river, must be seen not as mere documentation of the stages of a process, but as a celebration of each step of the way as a step against the odds. Somankidi Coura became a success story, all the more so when, a few years later, the debt regime of the “structural adjustment” deals between the so-called developing countries and the World Bank began to strangle what little subsistence farming had survived in the region.



Still from *Nationalité: Immigré*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1975.

“The profitable exploitation of 60 ha of land in double culture and the stock-farming constitute a task important enough to keep all members of the group busy throughout the year. After all, the current problem in Africa is for the youth in our villages to find an occupation that gains them a living even during the six months of dry season. During this barren period the young people will typically move to the cities for work and then often end up emigrating, in order to earn a living for their families. In order to find a solution for this cluster of problems, our group — all of us immigrant workers — have organized this return. It is an obvious thing to do, because the best kind of help is when you help yourself.”

Today, Somankidi Coura counts some three hundred inhabitants; it is still organized as a cooperative, and it celebrated its fortieth anniversary in January 2017. The second film that came out of Sidney Sokhona’s collaboration with the workers in the foyers and activists like Bouba Touré (who had quit the factory after a few years and become a cinema projectionist), is a fictionalized account of how this cooperative came into being. *Safrana* visibly profited from better funding than *Nationalité: Immigré*. Not only was it shot in colour, but its narrative rigor also suggests that there was time to write a script and that the film was produced in a more or less conventional way, with reliable shooting schedules and prepared sets. Even though most of the cast consisted once again of amateurs (among them Bouba Touré), their often precarious existence does not seem to have directly influenced the making of the film in the way it obviously did in *Nationalité: Immigré*. In the latter film, the unguarded gazes of onlookers exposed real-life irritation about black people operating a camera in public, and narrative consistency was pieced together from footage shot without a permit over four years—whenever there was enough money to buy the next reel of 16mm film.² Politically, too, *Safrana* was made from a more favourable vantage point. Shot in 1976, it recounts, in retrospect, how a group of West African workers who had had enough of French racism and calculating solidarity, with the help of some people “useful with the pen,” organized six-month internships with farmers in the French countryside in order to prepare for what could be called an organized retreat from France to Mali, where they planned to found an agricultural cooperative on the banks of the Senegal River.

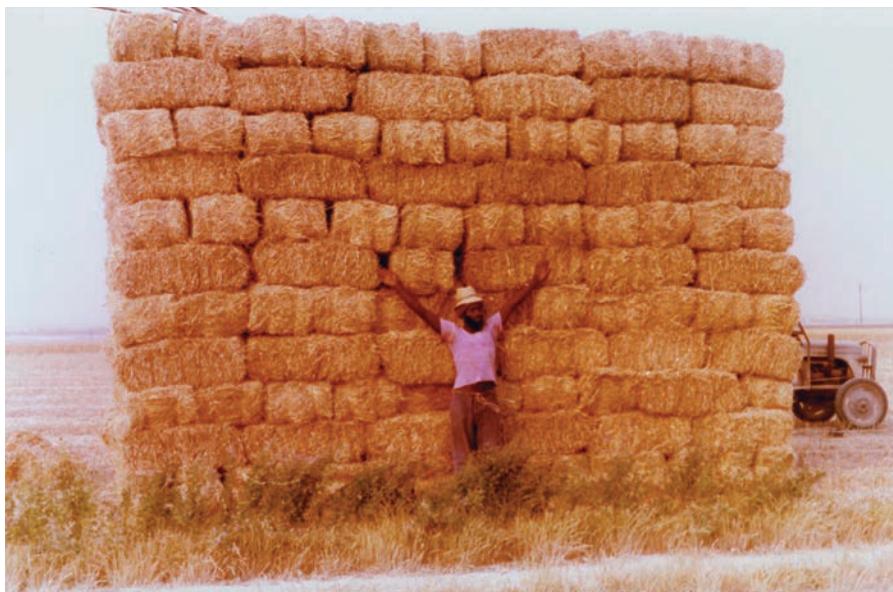
The farms on which the fourteen interns learned the basics of ploughing, digging, and raising cattle and poultry in the summer of 1976 were all in the *département* Haute-Marne in northeastern France. The film’s slow pace and softly lit scenes in the countryside remind me of scenes from some films of the 1950s and 60s—Jacques Becker’s *Casque d’Or*, Agnes Varda’s *Le Bonheur*, Alain Resnais’s *La guerre est fini*, for example. Though they all share a wary disbelief in the way they look at the countryside idyll, it is important to note that for the protagonists in *Safrana*, the escape to the countryside *does* lead to a happy ending, whereas in the earlier films the countryside inevitably becomes the scene of doom and betrayal. Here

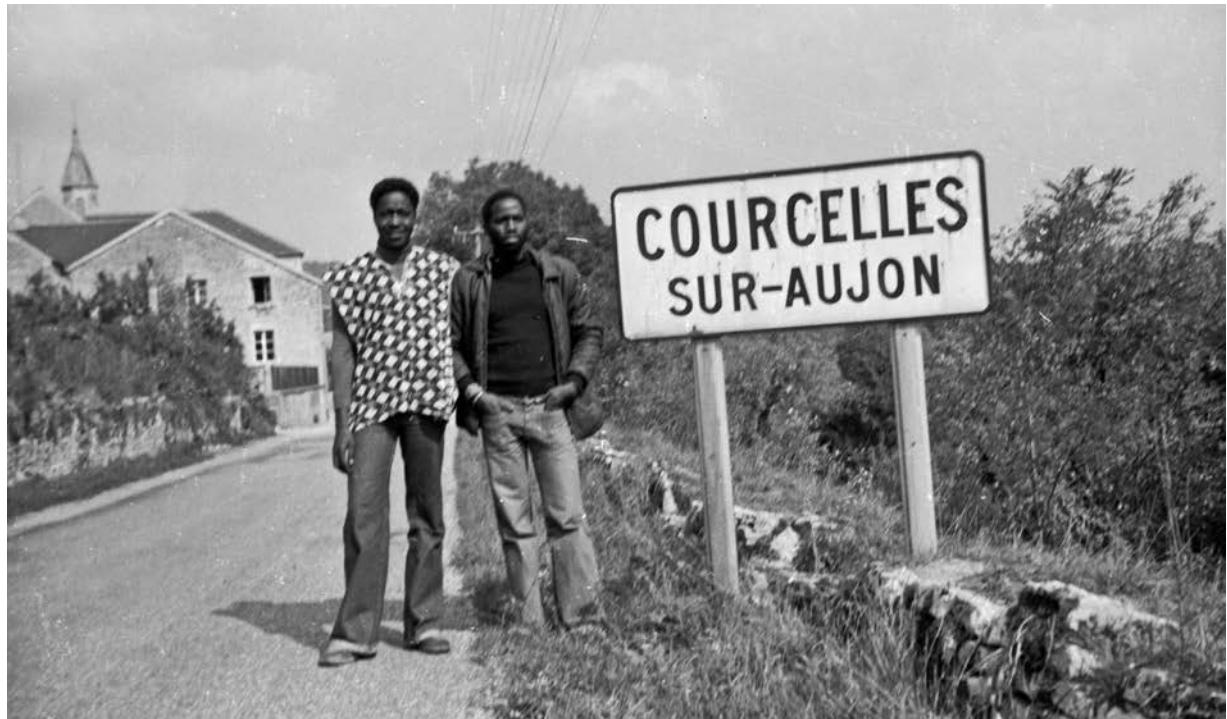
2 In an interview with *Cahiers du cinéma* (conducted by Serge Daney, Serge Le Peron, and Jean-Pierre Oudart), Sidney Sokhona talks in detail about the making of *Nationalité: Immigré*. (*Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 265 [March-April 1976], pp. 25–33). Following the interview was Daney’s article “Sur le papier” (“On Paper”), which I quoted from earlier. *Cahiers du cinéma* would subsequently publish an interview with Sokhona on *Safrana* in issue no. 285 (February 1978).

again, as in the differing sensitivities toward paper, we might note a discrepancy between the aspirations of migrant workers and the political imagination of middle-class urbanites. The peasant-migrant solidarity that Bouba Touré and his companions experienced during their stay in Haute-Marne would have been out of reach to those whose ever more sectionalized struggles depended on visibility and lobbying in the capital.

In the photos that Bouba Touré took in Haute-Marne during the internship (and on visits in later years), there is a curious sense of amusement on people's faces; they are amused, I suppose, not by the fact of their being together, but by their conviviality being photographed. They might wonder what somebody else would see in these pictures, and yet it doesn't seem to worry them in the least. Some of the photos made me think of yet another film, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub's *Too Early, Too Late*, whose first section largely consists of long pans and static shots of rural towns and villages in Brittany. Over these shots, excerpts are read from the *cahiers de doléances*, the lists of grievances farmers of that region made to the clergy in pre-revolution France, which Friedrich Engels quoted in a letter to Karl Kautsky in 1889. In this film, shot in 1980, we see the plastered wall of a house on which somebody has written in red paint: "Les paysans se revolteront 1976" (the peasants will rise up 1976). In a way, *Too Early, Too Late* is all about the non-appearance of this revolt, the absence of peasants, and the blatant fact that whenever peasants *have* revolted, it is the bourgeoisie who have reaped the profits. It might have been the year "1976" that triggered in me the link between Bouba Touré's internship in Haute-Marne and this film, but it was one of his photos in particular that I overlaid with the shot described above: a photo of Touré himself leaning spread-eagled against a towering stack of straw bales — higher even than the house with the writing on the wall in the film. While the vertiginous effect of the "1976" shot in *Too Early, Too Late* emanates from a promise written in future tense whose non-accomplishment already lay in the past, today we can read Bouba Touré's playful victory pose as fully embracing of a proud future.

Bouba Touré during his agricultural internship, Haute-Marne, France, 1976. Bouba Touré archives.





Bouba Touré and Siré Soumaré, Courcelles-sur-Aujon, Haute- Marne, May 1976.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.



"The peasants will rise up 1976," still from *Too Early, Too Late*, Jean-Marie Straub & Danielle Huillet, 1981.

Dear Bouba,

I assume that you are still in Mali, Somankidi, and that you might not have access to the internet there. Nevertheless, here is a question I have: you once spoke to me about Jean Robinet, the writer from Haute-Marne—or so I think. I did a little research about the name, and here is a homage text that I found:

<http://histoirepatrimoinebleuvillois.hautetfort.com/archive/2010/09/16/jean-robinet-l-ecrivain-paysan-s-en-est-alle.html>

That's him, isn't it?

But what was your relation to him?

Did you meet him personally? Was it his farm where you did your internship in the seventies? I don't remember the exact circumstances, only the name has stuck in my memory [...]

Salut Tobias!

I am well and have returned from Mali a few days ago. I am lucky that it's not cold here. Ok, I reply to your question concerning Jean Robinet. I knew him well in his village in Haute-Marne. He's a papa! It was thanks to one of his sons that I got to know him in 1985, '86. I knew the family. I was a brother to his children. Their mother, Jean Robinet's wife, considered me her son! And he gave to me and signed for me many of his books, which are all about rural life. His passing has touched me a lot. That's life! Well, I hope you're doing well. I hope we'll see each other; I send you all my friendship. Bouba Touré.

And I forgot to specify that it was not at the Robinets' that I did my six months internship before going back to Mali to found Somankidi Coura, our cooperative. Bouba Touré.

4 (24, 93, 1966)

In *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (W or the Memory of Childhood), Georges Perec writes about the Parisian house he was born in on Rue Vilin:

"The building at number 24 is made up of several modest one- and two-storey constructions around a small and distinctly squalid courtyard. I don't know which part I lived in. I haven't attempted to go inside any of the dwellings, which are inhabited nowadays mostly by Portuguese and African immigrant workers, since I am in any case convinced that it would do nothing to revive my memories." (Perec 1996, 48)

Perec had returned to the address where he had lived the first few years of his life. It was from here that he was taken away to the safety of a countryside refuge in the Isère region, just as his mother was about to be deported and murdered in a German concentration camp. When I picture



Bouba Touré, Jean Robinet and relatives, 1981. Photograph by Bouba Touré.

him turning his back on the building and walking away, something in me wants to call him back, to challenge his weary assumption that entering the building would do nothing to revive his memories. What makes this passage painful for me is Perec's dismissal of any possibility that entering the house and talking to the new tenants could be relevant to the story he is trying to tell. The fact that the new tenants are mostly Portuguese or African immigrants indicates that, in Perec's view, nothing could be further from his own story than these people's lives. Their presence on the street where he was born seems to signify the irretrievability of the past and the brutally indifferent course of time. So I find myself imaginatively lingering on the doorstep of this building, wishing Perec would have listened to the stories of those who live there now and written about their lives within the parameters of his own story, the story of someone who, after all, writes "because we lived together, because I was one amongst them, a shadow amongst their shadows, a body close to their bodies". (ibid., 42)

But then things, people, were deliberately kept apart. The foyers were (and still are) not "normal" living quarters. They provide cramped and overpriced housing for people whose chances on the regular housing market are curtailed by legal discrimination and flat-out racism. Access to the housing is controlled and restricted; visits must be announced in advance and are only allowed at certain times and under certain conditions. A typical reason to refuse outsiders access has always been fear of political agitation. Bouba Touré has described this situation in his autobiographical book *Notre case est à Saint-Denis* 93; in one chapter, he recalls the awkwardness on both sides when he starts up a casual friendship with a colleague from the factory.

Even if 24 Rue Vilin, the building Georges Perec turned his back on, had not become a foyer but was still a regular apartment building, the sense of alienation Perec describes non-deliberately brings to mind this deliberate segregation, the wilful production of parallel worlds whose long-term effect is persistent ignorance of each other's situations and views. Bouba Touré's photographs act on and against these circumstances. Yet, if the original impulse to take them was the need to convey an insider's experience of life in the foyers, the photographs were rarely reproduced outside the context of those whose day-to-day life they document. They record a life for those who live it, and circulate mainly within networks of kinship and solidarity. These networks are not limited to the West African diaspora, but encompass a wide range of politically active groups, and what makes Bouba Touré's photographs special is the fact that the photographic act as social praxis becomes subject matter in the photographs themselves. It chooses the frame, it sets the focus, and it results in the reappearance of images within other images, as a form of *mise en abyme*: a story within a story, an image within an image. An invitation to zoom in and find, not the same story or the same image, but the same story differently.

Bouba Touré recalls that he took his first photographs in 1966 when he was asked by French activists to document the conditions of the Saint-Denis dormitory he was living in. A very simple and straightforward business, it would seem. Photographing things that were not available to everyone's gaze. "It was a Kodak Retinette", he told me in an e-mail, "and this is how I became a photographer of our actual life in France". The key word here is *our*. It points to the fact that although these photographs are meant to show what is not often seen, none of them was ever taken in the belief that it was revealing a secret. While for the "general public" the life of West African immigrants in France was largely invisible, what the photographs show are things and scenes that are well known to many, because they come from the shared life of a community. Bouba Touré's photographs speak simultaneously to a shared knowledge and to oblivion, and their agency might consist in their existing in and making tangible, rather than obliterating, the space between the two.

They are about the discrepancy between being visible and being seen, and about the fact that things can become *painfully visible* because of the very fact that most of us are unable or unwilling to see them. Even when these photographs are taken in intimate spaces, they never seem to speak of a solitary encounter, they never posit the subjectivity of a gaze or the exclusiveness of a moment. Everything that can be seen in them has been seen many times before. They make me want to tweak John Berger's well-known verbalization of a painting's basic message, "I have seen this", to "We have seen this". The claim to be depicting things exclusively or for the first time can only be made in defiance of the sociality of everything a photograph can possibly show. The question, of course, as so often, is, who is this *we*?



Bouba Touré and a friend,
migrant worker hostel Foyer
Pinel, St Denis, 1971.
Bouba Touré archives.

In one of the first conversations I had with Bouba Touré about this book, he told me that he didn't feel comfortable with the idea of mixing the photographs of life in the foyers and the political struggles in France with those of Somankidi Coura, the cooperative in Mali. He said that they had been made for different purposes, and that they tell different stories: while for him Somankidi Coura is a success story, the photographs taken in France over the last four decades testify to a great failure. When he showed me what he considers one of the most painful photos in his collection, I wasn't able to see right away where the pain was coming from. It is a photo of a young man stretched out on a simple metal-frame bed. The bed is made, and he is dressed and facing the camera. On the wall behind him is a short bookshelf containing a handful of books and several posters, photos, papers, and postcards. The photo was taken in a Paris foyer in 1998, and the pain it causes Bouba Touré comes from knowing that the man is lying on the very same bed that his father had occupied for more than ten years. The failure this photo documents is the fact that despite the relentless campaigning for economically fair relationships between Europe and Africa and for non-discriminatory treatment of migrant workers, despite the demonstrations, squats, and hunger strikes that Bouba Touré has supported and documented from the 1980s up to the present, nevertheless at some point the young man in this photo decided that his only chance in life was to follow in the footsteps of his father and become a migrant worker in France. For the one who took the photo and knows the backstory, the photo is about the cycle that continues on this very bed, the painful relationship that a person is forced to have with an earlier generation's choices and failures.

5 (1996, 3, 1976)

I have described this image from memory and thus in a general way, since I wasn't able to identify it with certainty among the photographs saved on my desktop. There are many similar ones; the man on the bed has been a recurring image over the years. We were clicking through a series of photographs when Bouba Touré told me the story of this young man, which is similar to many other such stories. (I am not sure whether he told the young man in the photo that he was lying on the same bed his father had lain on.) The relentless recurrence of the same framing, the same bed, the same pieces of basic furniture—bookshelf, chair, desk—and the more or less identical arrangement of the few personal objects in the small space designated for such temporary occupation make the scenes look like variations on a stale dream compulsively restaged. There is neglect, compromise, and deprivation in these images, and the only thing that seems to work against the defeatism is the equally persistent recurrence of the photographer taking them.

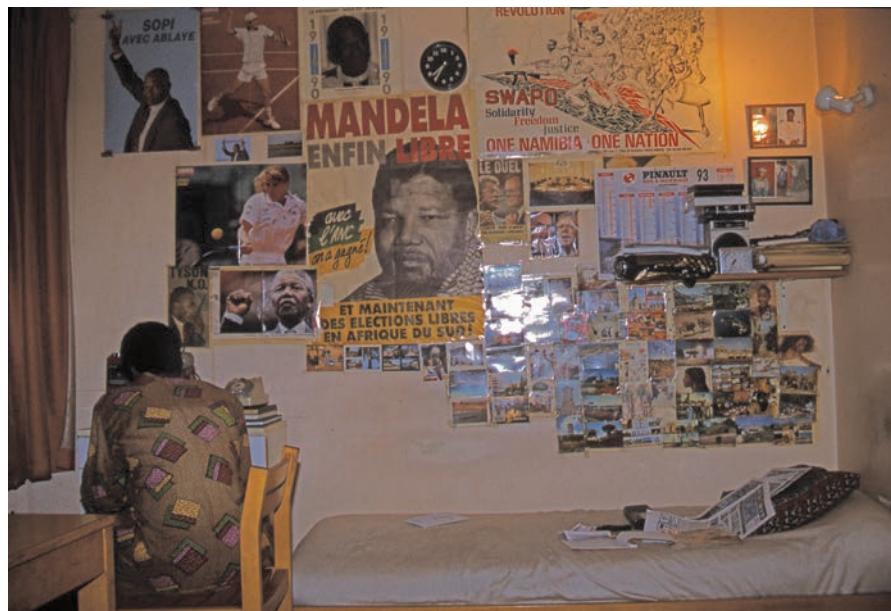
Often, Bouba Touré is more familiar with the dormitory rooms than those who live in them. He has seen the same shelf being cleared and filled again and again. His persistence has built up trust, familiarity, and filiations, and this all shows in the photos. Interestingly, even though he frequently uses a flash to compensate for the irregular lighting in the dormitories, and even though the scenes in his pictures are saturated with the ordeals of lives made precarious, his foyer photos are never intrusive. Even a top-down shot of an additional mattress crammed under a bunk bed in an already cramped room does not come across as documenting misery. I cannot fully explain this effect, but I suspect that it has something to do with the awareness that even when there are far too many things in too little space, even if things are not “in their proper places”, they are still *somebody’s* things, dignified by somebody’s life, however transitory their presence in it. And while the numerous photographs taken during the *Sans Papiers* struggles of the late 1990s inside squatted public buildings and churches document the extremely precarious and often desperate situation of the protesters, they also show their demands, written on the walls, the shared determination, a sense of togetherness and even conviviality that is not thwarted by the makeshift mattress arrangements, generic sleeping bags, and belongings in blue plastic sacks. Misery and intrusion only enter in a series of snapshots taken at the height of the church squatting in 1996, when a press corps teeming with cameras enters the scene as entourage to political functionaries expressing their concerns about the “humanitarian crisis” (or so I assume). Faced with a benevolent visitor bending down to them and shaking their hands, the same men who in Bouba Touré’s earlier photographs are seen resting on their mattresses to gather strength for the next stage of the struggle are suddenly made to appear weak, even ailing, and the squat comes to look like a sick bay.

**Sans-Papiers occupation of the Halle Pajol, April 1996, Paris.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.**



In almost all of Bouba Touré's photographs, it is apparent that those in the picture have agreed to participate in the photographic act as part of a narration that continues beyond the specific moment and room. This is indicated by, for instance, the photos pinned to the walls, sometimes framed and often taken by Touré in other locales. Some of them are double portraits taken at festive occasions like weddings or birthdays; others depict demonstrations in Paris or informal gatherings in public spaces; some bring in the cooperative Somankidi Coura with wide-angle shots of cultivated fields or the river. Banners and slogans that Bouba Touré rarely fails to capture during a demonstration or sit-in can also occasionally be seen on these walls (and on those of his apartment), next to world maps or newspaper clippings about Nelson Mandela, Barack Obama, or Steffi Graf. If we look at Bouba Touré's collection as an archive, we keep finding elements from it doubled inside the frames.

I would argue that in Bouba Touré's body of work the photographic act consists first and foremost of a triangular *relation* (with the more active meaning this term conveys in French, and which Glissant employs in his *Poetics of Relation*) between the photographer, those who are being photographed, and a community, however large, they both feel affiliated with. The terms upon which participation in this act is accepted vary, and that, too, comes across in the photographs themselves. A certain agreement becomes part and parcel of the photographic act, a unison in stark contrast to the typically patronizing assumption of an implicit "deal" struck between the photographer and those photographed, a temporary joint venture between two parties we are expected to construe as opponents.



Room of the activist Samba Keïta,
Foyer Charonne, Paris, 1991.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

A significant distinction among the various photo series is whether a photo is meant to promote a positive image or to act as a description intended to cause alarm. Typically, the first type of photo is taken to be sent to friends and family in other parts of France or in their countries of origin, while the ones depicting the hardships of life in the foyers are intended as proof of the shortcomings of France's treatment of migrant workers. The latter has been a constant source of motivation in Bouba Touré's work. He is thus a kind of double agent, not in any nefarious sense but in the sense that, while he acknowledges his companions' need to send reassuring images to those who are emotionally close but physically out of reach, he finds it equally necessary to challenge the often euphemistic discourse on emigration by revealing the drastic conditions of exile. The two types of photos exist side by side. Rather than seeing them as blatantly contradictory (in the name of a rigid conception of what reality truly looks like), they should be seen as expressions of a practice that strives to exist in and make sense of two worlds, or rather, the "all-world", to borrow again from Édouard Glissant, *le tout-monde*, in which discontinuities are not only the residues of ruptures, but also proof of the detours that have made it possible to speak.

This awareness of differing and often equivocal messages travelling throughout diaspora networks harks back again to the pivotal moment in 1976 when Bouba Touré and his comrades decided to found the cooperative in Mali:

"As sons of peasants we have known the hard labor demanded by the land which we decided to leave in search of better living conditions. Having been either illiterate or of modest education, we haven't found the conditions that would have allowed us to live up to our expectations, which had been flattered by the flashy successes of some friends who returned to the village from abroad (clothes — radios — record players — etc.). Hence, here we are now, in France, tempted by immigration like so many others."

It is curious to see the same props that the communiqué lists as the ingredients of a petty dream (clothes—radios—record players—etc.) often appear in the staged or seemingly casual portraits that Bouba Touré regularly takes of tenants in the foyers. A series of some twenty or thirty photographs taken in the late 1980s at the Charonne foyer in the eleventh arrondissement (close to Bouba Touré's former apartment) stands out for me, because it appears to have been taken in a concerted action over the course of a day or two, at the end of which everyone was supposed to possess a presentable full-length portrait of himself. While each of these photos was probably meant to be sent to a different destination to serve as proof of the depicted person's well-being, as a series they reveal the dress-up nature of what took place in front of the camera—in a comical way, which I assume was not lost on those who took part in it.

Almost none of these portraits was made in the actual room in which the person in the picture lives. Many of the men are posing outside, on the sidewalk, sometimes leaning against a car that is not theirs.



Residents, migrant worker hostel
Foyer Charonne, Paris, 1991.
Photographs by Bouba Touré.

Two men, each of them sitting in front of a white wall in the limelight of Bouba Touré's flash, are holding the same cassette player.

Several portraits are made on a stretch of lawn in front of a brick wall entirely covered by thick green ivy. Bouba Touré recalls that it was the lush and natural appearance of the ivy that made this framing attractive for most, even if the lawn was really just a patch between the building and the fence.

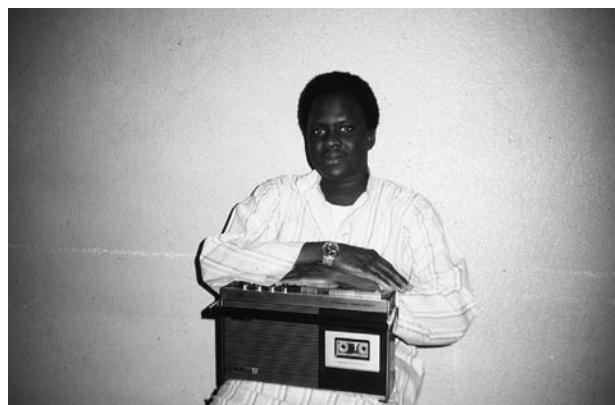
None of the photos was taken in a workplace, and all hints as to what the men do for a living, factory work or menial jobs, are carefully avoided. Clothes, composure, and setting either suggest a leisure mode or are designed to depict an office job by including a leather briefcase, a telephone, or a desk.

One of the men is photographed in the projection room of the cinema in which Bouba Touré worked at the time, with film cans on the floor and a switchboard behind him providing a professional setting. A leather briefcase and a phone held to his ear complete the impression that the man is at work.

Looking through these pictures, however, also means having to respond to the gazes these men offer the camera, and I must admit that I find their expressions difficult to interpret. I assume, from Bouba Touré's explanations, that what I am looking at are staged and more or less euphemistic setups, but then what to make of their expressions? How relate the pride, sincerity, timidity, joviality, or roguishness expressed in them to the assumption that they think they know something their observers don't? Or do they? Maybe we should assume that what we are not given to see is not so much hidden or camouflaged, but rather entrusted to a tacit agreement. Maybe their gazes are merely inscribing these photos into the shared understanding that posing in ill-fitting clothes in staged surroundings with borrowed accessories is a way to take hold of one's image, to wrest one's appearance from the grip of a reality that offers very little space for manoeuvring.



A friend in the Cinema L'entrepôt, Paris, 1993.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Souleymane Diabira, called "The socialist", and another resident of the migrant hostel Foyer de la Petite Pierre, 11th district, Paris, 1991.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

6 (1932, 1937, 2017)

Walter Benjamin's remark that "a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through" (Benjamin 2005, 576), reminds us that any attempt to say something about the past is situated in the present. We should also note, however, that the metaphor Benjamin employs—the excavation site where the researcher is described as a man digging with a spade—is itself situated in a particular landscape, where history is layered like strata and research is a matter of vertical digging. Contained within this idea is the assumption of soil that hasn't shifted, that wasn't ravaged; it is the image of a static site in which elements have remained in place over generations, and time has settled in layers like humus, thick and heavy, not fleeting like sand, or ephemeral like water. It is not, in short, a site for diasporic histories. Benjamin's short and oft-quoted text "Ausgraben und Erinnern" (Excavation and Memory), was written in 1932, at a time when his chosen life abroad was about to become a forced exile from which he would never return. Five years later, in a famous text about the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov that evolved into an essay on storytelling, Benjamin describes a landscape "in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body". (Benjamin 2006, 362) This body, and by extension, we, humanity, Benjamin notes, have lost the capacity to tell stories. "It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences". (ibid.) It can be argued that this loss of coherence in a war-torn landscape was never fully recognized by those European societies it affected, and that the havoc wreaked in wars up to now is the doing of people who cannot endure the silence inflicted by what they keep defending as their (or "our") way of life. We should also note that this silence had set in much earlier, that "explosive seeds of absence" (Glissant 1989, 9) had been sown in the Atlantic for centuries, in water, which holds nothing and where digging is undertaken in vain. The findings will be elsewhere.

But elsewhere is a place. And this place can be found on rich, fertile soil, on humus, thick and heavy, where digging is not useless, but creates a grid of ditches "making profitable the exploitation of 60 ha of land in double culture", and more. What probably made Bouba Touré hesitant about mixing the photos of the cooperative and those of the foyers in the same volume was his awareness that the interpretation of the images would totally depend on the beholder. Does a particular photo document the life of someone tragically torn (apart) between "two worlds" or rather someone playfully spread-eagled between, and firmly rooted in, several places? In many ways, Benjamin's figure of the storyteller in

whom two archetypes “overlap”, “the tiller of the soil” and “the trading seaman” (Benjamin 2006, 363), can be seen as a response to the “difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us”, as Édouard Glissant would put it some fifty years later. (Glissant 1997, 18) If “[i]n this context uprooting can work towards identity, and exile can be seen as beneficial” (ibid.), it remains our task to fully comprehend what this means today, when we must concede that theoretically embracing a “new nomadism” has done little to prevent, in practice, the growing of new and yet increasingly atavistic forms of nationalist paranoia.

At the end of this text, I realize I have come close to calling Bouba Touré’s practice a poetics of relation, an extensive practice that strives to not only maintain a relation but to safeguard what is relative: “the thing relayed as well as the thing related”. (Glissant 1997, ibid.) I’d like to compare Bouba Touré’s “rooted errantry” to the process of weaving, but I must concede that the metaphor doesn’t quite fit. He seems to be the weaver *and* the thread *and* the shuttle, and so are his photos: shuttling and weaving, each of them already patterned by the process it is just about to enter.

Works Cited:

- Walter Benjamin, 2005 (1932). “Excavation and Memory”, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, Marcus Paul Bullock and Howard Eiland, et al. (eds.). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Walter Benjamin, 2006 (1940). “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, quoted here from: Dorothy J. Hale (ed.), *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900–2000*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.
- John Berger, 2003. “Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible (for Yves)”, in John Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Aimé Césaire, 2001 (1947). *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, translated by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.
- Serge Daney, 2014 (1976). “On Paper”, trans. John Barrett, in Tobias Hering (ed.), *Der Standpunkt der Aufnahme. Point of View*. Berlin: Archive Books.
- Frantz Fanon, 2008 (1952). *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Charles Lam Markman. London: Pluto Press.
- Édouard Glissant, 1987. *Mahagony*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Édouard Glissant, 1989 (1981). *Caribbean Discourse*, trans. J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia.
- Édouard Glissant, 1997 (1990). *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- R.L., 2013. “Wanderings of the Black Slave: Black Life and Social Death”, unpaginated, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wanderings-slave-black-life-and-social-death> (accessed May 2017).
- Georges Perec, 1996. *W or the Memory of Childhood*, London: Harvill Press.
- Jared Sexton, 2006. “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word”, in *rhizomes* 29 (2016), unpaginated. <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sexton.html> (accessed May 2017).
- Bouba Touré, 2015. *Notre case est à Saint-Denis 93*. Mayenne: Éditions Xéographie.
- Frank B. Wilderson III, 2010. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Filmography:

- Bouba Touré, 58 rue Troussseau, 75011 Paris, France* by Bouba Touré (F 2008, 28 min)
- Soleil Ô* by Med Hondo (F 1969, 98 min)
- Les bicots nègres vos voisins* by Med Hondo (F 1972, 190 min)
- Nationalité: Immigré* by Sidney Sokhona (F/MAU 1975, 69 min)
- Safrana ou Le droit à la parole* by Sidney Sokhona (F/MAU 1978, 99 min)
- Casque d’Or* by Jacques Becker (F 1952, 96 min)
- Le Bonheur* by Agnès Varda (F 1965, 79 min)
- La guerre est fini (The War is Over)* by Alain Resnais (F 1966, 121 min)
- Trop tôt, trop tard (Too Early, Too Late)* by Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub (F 1981, 105 min)



Woman recording a message for her son in
France, Somankidi Village, Mali, March 2000.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

Stills from *Yeelen* by Souleymane Cissé, 1987.



Ladji Niangané, interview

I studied in Kaolack, Senegal, until 1968, the year of social upheaval in both France and Africa. The student revolt started and set ablaze not just France, but the whole of Africa and the rest of the world. Schoolchildren and students became aware of their condition and engaged in militant and trade union action to demand their rights. I was a high-school student during the strikes of 1968. After that, I emigrated for family and economic reasons. For us, emigration has a cultural and traditional character. Since the time of empire—the empire of Ghana, which was one of the first—emigration among my community, particularly the Soninké, has been a cultural phenomenon. Initially there was no economic purpose. For every young Soninké, initiation consists of going out into the world in order to discover other cultures, other realities, yet without settling anywhere permanently. No matter how long you stay, you must eventually return and continue to live with your family. For me, it started in 1968. I was in charge of the school movement at the time. I was dismissed from school because I was in charge of the students and some-

how a leader of the student movement. This forced me to emigrate. As the good Soninké that I was. My emigration began in the Congo. I stayed for two years in Congo Brazzaville and Congo Kinshasa. In 1970 I left the Congo for France, where I joined friends who had been there for some time. I had two main objectives when I emigrated to France: it was an initiation and I wanted to continue studying.

I arrived in France in February 1970. I joined my friends and my parents in the 20th arrondissement, Rue Buisson. After working in small companies for several months, I was given a five-year contract by the state-owned Renault factory in Billancourt. At Renault, I continued to be politically active, as I'd always been. I was a trade union activist and staff representative for the leftwing CGT (General Confederation of Labor), trying to defend and be a spokesperson for migrant workers. Renault Billancourt was one of the biggest factories in France. The saying went that when Renault sneezes, the whole of France catches a cold. This was because Renault was the linchpin, one of the key elements in trade union life and France's economy. During those five years I fought a lot for the cause



Renault-Billancourt strike, May 5, 1968.
Photograph by Gerald Bloncourt.

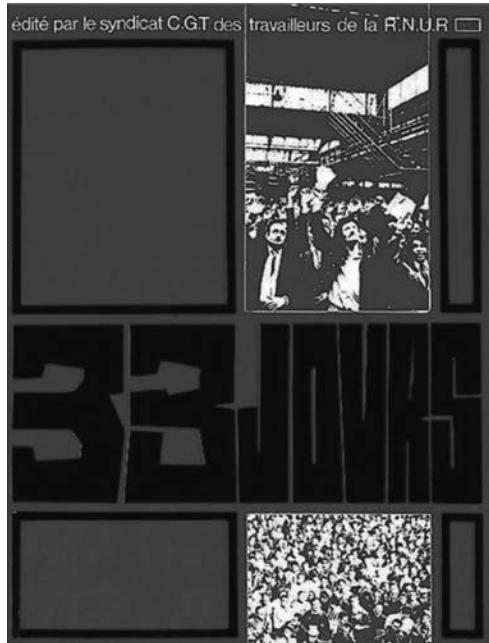
of our compatriots – not only the Africans but also the North Africans, the Czechoslovaks and the workers from Eastern European countries. Militant life taught us a lot about trade union action and the country's economic, social and political system. This became an asset for me—an asset not many migrants have. For most of them life was all about métro, boulot, dodo [commute, work, sleep], as they said at the time. We had another option, namely, militant action in order to educate and inform migrant workers about their condition and the phenomenon of immigration.

At Renault I worked in the supplies department. We provided sheet metal to the guys working on the big presses and manufacturing the doors and hoods of the cars. I was supplying equipment for the finishing work. It was put on pallets and placed right under the machine with a forklift.

The works council was managed by a joint trade union committee. It offered training courses for migrants but also French workers who wanted to improve their mathematic skills. These courses were held outside of working hours. I attended French and mathematics classes to raise my levels. Simultaneously, I attended

the New University [Université nouvelle], where I was taking a degree in political economy. This university is well known to all communist militants. It was there that the senior cadres of the French Communist Party were trained. I obtained a degree in political economy from the New University. Then I took a technical degree in accounting at a vocational school. I obtained an accountant's licence. The advantage of being at Renault was that I worked part-time. One week I worked from morning till 1PM, so I was free in the afternoon to take classes, and the next week I worked evenings so I could take courses in the morning. But it wasn't exactly easy to do both—you had to be seriously motivated and courageous.

Our struggle wasn't confined to Renault. The 1970s marked the beginning of the migrants' struggle against slumlords. The big problem with immigration was housing. People lived in unbelievable conditions that weren't worthy of a developed country such as France. We supported our compatriots in their fight against these slumlords in order to improve their living conditions. There wasn't a single migrant hostel in Paris or the wider region where we didn't put up



33 jours en Mai, by Francois Chardeaux, 1970. A film on the strike of the Renault-Billancourt factory in 1968.

a fight. This went on for at least a dozen years, until real estate companies like Sonacotra began to build slightly more decent housing for immigrants. The history of this struggle is not well known within the African community; there is little awareness of the problems related to our living conditions and the actual causes of our emigration.

Most ACTAF militants were very committed. We were about a hundred. Every weekend we took time off to visit homes, talk to African workers and organise literacy classes. Even before we started thinking about returning to Africa, there was this fight against the slumlords. We worked together with French activists from organizations supporting migrant workers or affiliated with leftwing and far-left parties. Many French were supportive of the immigrant workers' cause and wanted to fight illiteracy, the housing situation and working conditions in factories as well as raise public awareness about the whole situation.

The fight for better living conditions for migrants in Europe and France started in 1968 and it peaked in the early 1970s. Another important event took place: Portuguese colonies fighting for their independence.

As Africans, we were very sensitive to this armed struggle by our brothers in these colonies: Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique. We wanted to create an organization that aimed to bring together African workers, promote literacy among them and raise public awareness about their everyday difficulties. We founded ACTAF, the Cultural Association of African Workers in France.

The name was to obscure the fact that it was an essentially political organization, because we didn't want to get in trouble with the police and the authorities, who had infiltrated immigrant workers' and student movements. In the 1960s and '70s, there was a police department called SIAT (Inter-Ministerial Service for Technical Assistance) that focused exclusively on immigrants and students. It was a branch of the French police that was set up to snoop on African militants, students and workers and tried to undermine their militant actions. We used the term 'cultural association' as a cover-up. That said, we did actually organise cultural events: we screened films in migrant hostels on weekends, we organised conferences and debates. These were underground films from Angola, Guinea-Bissau and

Stills from *No Pincha!* by Tobias Engel, René Lefort & Gilbert Igel, 1970.



Mozambique made by committed French activists who had been on the frontline. We screened these films in the hostels or in large spaces that were used for press conferences.

These films were never shown on television. The only way to see them was during conferences and screenings in local youth centers [Maisons des Jeunes]. The militant community in France at the time was very active and supportive. It was French people who did this political work of informing and raising awareness. They were part of the extreme left and did all this work at their own expense and in their individual capacity. They weren't funded by NGOs or associations – they had their own convictions, their own philosophies. Their films were screened all over Europe as they travelled a lot to show them. Working with militant doctors, we collected blood and sent it to the frontlines. Every weekend we skimmed migrant hostels for donors, taking them to these doctors who were supporting the cause of these liberation movements. There were many wounded, so they needed a lot of blood. We organised this with French and African people. We collected clothes that were also sent to the

fronts in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau. We worked together with representatives of those movements in France. We did this for three or four years. When these colonies became independent, we set our focus on another problem. This was the beginning of the drought in Africa in 1973. As an organization of immigrant workers, we were very sensitive to this issue. We received a lot of letters from our parents. Images on television showed the distress caused by the drought. Our families had nothing left to eat. We were worried.

As members of trade unions and leftwing parties, we also collected funds that were sent to Africa. These funds were entrusted to NGOs to provide food support in disaster areas. People hadn't harvested anything and had lost all their livestock. For us, it all started from there. We asked ourselves if there was really no solution to the draught. We had a debate within our organization. As Africans, we had to reflect and meditate on the causes of the drought and possible solutions. At ACTAF, we decided to set up a think tank of ten people to find out how Asia had managed to reach food self-sufficiency. Once it had been

à apprendre ce qui correspond
aux conditions de nos pays.
c'est à dire à assimiler
l'expérience qui peut nous être utile .
Si nous étudions ce qui est positif
à l'étranger, ce n'est pas pour
copier, mais pour créer et compter
sur nos propres forces .

**Extrait d'un discours
du Président MAO**

“... The other consists in putting our brains to work, and understanding what is compatible with the conditions in our country, that is to say assimilating the experience that can be useful to us. If we study what is positive abroad, this is not in order to copy it, but rather to create something and rely on our own strengths.”

Quote from a speech
of Chairman Mao.

set up, this commission went to all bookshops and libraries in France to buy magazines and books on the Asian experience in agriculture. The commission worked hard for at least five months. It went through all the relevant documentation and reported the findings of its research to all the members of the organization. It pointed out that Asia had achieved self-sufficiency in food through hydro-agricultural development and water control policies. It's true that Africa is particularly vulnerable to drought and the vagaries of climate, but paradoxically it's also a continent that has sufficient rainfall. There are many streams and lots of ponds. If this potential is available, why not try to replicate the Asian experience and make agricultural adjustments and control the water supply? This was the conclusion we reached.

We figured that if we wanted to achieve food self-sufficiency, there was no alternative. Eighty percent of African immigrants come from rural areas. This rural environment is characterised by agro-pastoral activities, mainly agriculture. Today this agriculture is still in an archaic state, left to itself. This situation discourages young

people and encourages emigration. In Africa, if we want some kind of heavy industry, it can only be agriculture, because it concerns eighty percent of its population. People derive their income from agriculture and livestock. If you don't prioritise agriculture in current development policies, you're not getting to the heart of the problem. To put into practice all this work we had done in France, we figured that as young Africans we had to modernise our agriculture, look at it from a different angle, find other methods for agriculture to become an incentive and feed the population.

We realised that we had to take advantage of being in France to see how French agriculture worked and therefore leave our milieu of immigrant workers in the Paris region. August was nearing, so we could use our annual leave to meet farmers. We contacted farmers' associations asking if they would take us in. We targeted one organization in the Marne region. In August, about twenty of us travelled to the Marne and the Haute-Marne to see what the reality of farming was like before launching into



ACTAF members in the fields de Courcelles-sur-Aujon, Haute-Marne, France, 1976.

Siré Soumaré, Mady Niakhaté, Bangaly Camara, Courcelles-sur-Aujon, Haute-Marne, France, 1976.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

further actions. There was a great deal of back and forth between Paris and Châlons-sur-Marne, where the organization in charge of these courses (ACCIR) was based. It was during this training that the coin dropped. We asked ourselves how we could replicate what we had learned and what it took to farm in Africa. This preparatory process took two years before we eventually arrived in Mali.

ACTAF was not only composed of Malians – there were also Senegalese, Mauritians and Guineans from all over Africa and even from the diaspora. Members from the Antilles took part in the preparatory process. African immigrants to France originate predominantly from three countries: Mali, Senegal and Mauritania. The great majority of our immigrant workers come from the Senegal River basin. After our training, we contacted three countries to inform them about our project. We wrote to the governments of Mali, Senegal and Mauritania, telling them that we were groups of African workers who wanted to return to the Senegal River basin to start an agricultural cooperative and farm. We didn't want to settle outside the river basin. Had we gone to Guinea or to areas more suitable to

agriculture such as the region around Bamako, for example, our experience would not have benefitted other migrants. We wanted workers returning for their annual leave to see what we were doing, what we had achieved. We wanted to give them something to think about, make them realise that they could stay at home and have a job, lead a better life and have an outlet for their produce. We limited ourselves to the Senegal River basin.

Mali responded favourably. They welcomed us and agreed to provide the necessary land for our cooperative. You had to be highly motivated and politically committed in order to leave behind your life as an immigrant and throw yourself headfirst into an experiment and adventure whose outcome was totally unclear. But thanks to our conviction and our training as activists, we didn't ask ourselves too many questions. We simply had to succeed, otherwise we would have jeopardised any prospect of a return and reintegration or the possibility, for African youths at least, to stay at home and live by their own means. We fought against all kinds of difficulties, and today we can say that we have something to show for it. Our experiment was

The Politicization and Visibility of West African Immigrants in France in the 1970s. The Activist Trajectories of ACTAF and Révolution Afrique¹

In the early 1970s, West African migrants² in France developed in a political landscape thoroughly remapped by the dynamics of the post-imperial French-African area and by the political changes that May 1968 brought about in France as well as in Africa. Increasingly politicized in France, immigration became a crucial issue in bilateral relations between France and its former colonies. During that decade, post-colonial migrants were permanently relegated to the status of "foreigners".³ Their activist positioning can only be understood in light of the political and social changes taking place in their countries of origin and residence, examined through a transnational approach that makes it possible to analyze the circulation of identities, ideologies and social movements beyond nation-state boundaries.

- 1 This article builds upon elements of socio-historical research conducted by Jean-Philippe Dedieu and Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye on the history of mobilizations in France's migrant worker hostels in the 1960s and 1970s. It is the first phase of a project that Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye is beginning in 2017, on the history of the Coopérative agricole multifonctionnelle de Somankidi-Coura (CAMS / The Somankidi-Coura Multipurpose Agricultural Cooperative).
- 2 In this text, the expressions "West African migrants" and "Sub-Saharan migrants" are alternatively used to designate the geographical origins of people from francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, who emigrated to France in large numbers following independence, beginning with those from Mali, Mauritania and Senegal. It is important to note that during the 1960s and 1970s, the French state made extensive use of administrative categories like "black Africans" or "other Africans" in order to racially distinguish these migratory flows from those coming from North Africa.
- 3 This has been established by socio-historical studies on immigration to France (Noiriel 2007) and supported by more recent studies by historians of Africa (Cooper 2014, Mann 2015).

unheard of, we were guinea pigs. But we opened up another way to kick-start the development of our countries.

We arrived in Mali at the end of December 1976. We all met up on January 17, 1977 in the village of Somankidi, where we were welcomed. We contacted the regional authorities who had supported our plan. After the formalities, we began to work the fields within the agreed perimeter. We discovered our site, measured the sixty hectares that were made available to us and made topographic surveys. Simultaneously, a hydro-agricultural survey was conducted to prepare the installation of the channel and the distribution of water. We devised a work schedule. We started clearing and uprooting the bushes, which took us at least five to six months. Then we constructed the channel for the irrigation of the plots. The channel is 1.3 kilometres long and entirely made of clay. We constructed it manually, without any mechanical gear. Youngsters from Somankidi helped us finish the work before the start of the rainy season. In the meantime, I went to Dakar to purchase a motor pump that would bring the water from the river to the collecting basin and

dispatch it onto the irrigation channel when it wasn't raining. We weren't able to finish everything we'd planned before the end of the rainy season despite working ten hours a day on average.

It wasn't easy: besides work on the plot, there was a lot of paperwork to take care of. We had to do all these things at once. The first year was an insightful experience that enabled us to better understand the scope of the work for which we'd come. It was a year of trial and error that we weren't expecting to produce miraculous results. When we arrived here, the life of the group resembled life in the barracks.

The fact that we accepted these circumstances was again down to our experience as activists, to our political training. Without this experience, we couldn't have done it, we wouldn't have accepted it. We engaged in activities that people in our community didn't understand. We fetched the water from the river ourselves, we cooked in turns for everyone without distinction. We lived an incredible communitarian life. People were really asking themselves questions. Some said it was collectivism because we shared everything among us: work, social life, food. In terms of farming, everything was shared. All the

Conservative decolonizations did not put an end to the protest processes that had marked the imperial era and contributed to the development and spread of anti-imperialist ideals in France and its colonies. Associations called *amicales*, created by the single-party governments in Africa to control immigrant populations, were a gradual response to the proliferation of organizations challenging French migration policies and African authoritarian regimes. Among these, the case of the Union générale des travailleurs sénégalais en France (UGTSF / The General Union of Senegalese Workers in France) is a special case. Founded in the late 1950s by the Senegalese authorities, its secretary general Sally N'Dongo freed himself from Dakar's supervision. While maintaining ambiguous relations with Léopold Sédar Senghor's entourage, he made this association into an organization that supported struggles for dignified housing and working conditions in France, which were linked with a condemnation of neo-colonialism inspired by N'Dongo's connections with neo-Marxist and Third-Worldist anthropologists.⁴

During the 1970s, both West African and North African migrants joined organizations that were emerging or being rebuilt in France after the events of May 1968. New organizations were being formed that broke with the older dynamics of associations and were supported by radical left-wing groups. Taking an approach similar to that of the Mouvement des travailleurs arabes (MTA / Arab Workers' Movement),⁵ they linked the struggle for better living and working conditions in France to mobilizations revolving around the political and social situation of Africa itself. These were *specifically*

⁴ Including Pierre-Philippe Rey, and even more so Claude Meillassoux, who closely collaborated on books edited by UGTSF and published by Maspero (Dedieu 2012a).

⁵ Le Mouvement des travailleurs arabes (MTA / Arab Workers' Movement) was founded during the National Conference of African Workers in June 1972 in Paris. It was made up of immigrant students and workers primarily from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia (Hajjat 2011).

equipment we had was shared. There was nothing individual. When we had something personal, we would happily share it. Of the fourteen men, only two were married. Their wives joined us later to support us and do the cooking. Otherwise it was we, the men, who cooked and did the dishes, who went to fetch water from the river and collected wood. You can't lead such a life without a minimum of discipline and sacrifice. This produced the results we were hoping for.

We were essentially a group of young bachelors. The wives of the two married men lived in their native village. None of us came from the place where we settled for this experience. When people got married, things were divided up. Each family was given a home and kitchen. This improved the food situation and the living conditions.

What really changed as we went from bachelors to married men is the *popote*, or common meal. *Popote* is an expression shared by all former migrants. We adopted it during our long stay in Europe. On Sundays, we would generally eat what we called *repas améliorés*, 'improved meals', consisting of salad and tomatoes. The rest of the week, we had

big meals: couscous, macaroni... Before, we used to do everything together.

Once we were married, everyone had their own household, and cooking was done within each home. Then, after a few years, collective exploitation turned into individual exploitation. We kept some collective plots, but each of us received an individual plot. Some got married with women from neighboring villages, others with women from their native village. Some got married after a few months, others waited a year. We were young adults. You absolutely had to marry if you wanted to be a respected and respectable person in this traditional environment. Since we had no prospect of returning to France, because our return to Africa was permanent, it was better to get married in the environment in which we were living or in one's native village. The cooperative is divided into sections. Some look after the agricultural machinery, others are in charge of farming or rearing cattle. Before returning to Africa I had trained in agricultural machinery at the Lycée de l'Oisellerie, an agricultural high school in Angoulême. Back in Africa, I took charge of the set-up and maintenance of the pump. I was in charge of the equipment for five

aimed at Africans, unlike inclusion processes being implemented at the same time by French parties and unions like the Confédération générale du travail (CGT / General Confederation of Labor) and the Parti communiste français (PCF / French Communist Party). They also sought to unite their members *transversally* beyond their nationalities and social statuses.

The renewal was in fact profound. On the one hand, it was *generational* since it concerned the mobilization of young adults born around 1950, some of whom experienced May 1968 in France or Senegal as students or young workers. On the other hand, it was *social* since these organizations brought together workers and students. This distinction, which had long been prominent, especially in the colonial era, was starting to weaken. With the growing economic crisis, African students were receiving increasingly small scholarships, if they were not simply cut off by African regimes seeking to repress dissidence, forcing some of them to work, and also to live in hostels intended for migrant workers. Conversely, a growing number of Sub-Saharan African laborers arriving in France without literacy skills were taking professional training courses offered by universities and a few companies.

To outline the political opportunities that opened up during this period, this text follows the trajectories of two groups, both created in 1971: the Association culturelle des travailleurs africains en France (ACTAF / Cultural Association of African Workers in France)⁶ and Révolution Afrique.⁷ The examination of Révolution Afrique alongside

⁶ L'Association Culturelle des Travailleurs Africains en France (ACTAF) was registered at the prefecture on 28 June 1971. See ACTAF file, Archives of the Préfecture de Police (henceforth APP).

⁷ Archives and testimony indicate that Révolution Afrique was active from 1971. See the memoirs by Gilles de Staal (2008) as well as the file on this organization (APP, deposit 143 W 8).

years, after which I trained colleagues who replaced me. Maintenance includes changing the oil and filters, draining the engine to let out the air—it's basic care. For serious breakdowns, we have a person who runs a mechanical workshop at URCAK [Kayes Regional Union of Agricultural Cooperatives]. But within each cooperative, we trained pump operators to do the maintenance and minor repairs. We didn't have a lot of machines. We had the motor pump, some animal-drawn ploughs and a small tiller. We didn't have a tractor because we wanted to make sure our experiment could be reiterated and adapted. Other groups wouldn't have followed our example if they'd thought that we had prospered thanks to tractors. We did not opt for mechanization but animal traction because it's available to everyone. It was a political choice.

It wasn't an easy decision, and we had many arguments among ourselves. One group favored mechanization, the other was against it—they were in the majority. Mechanization is still not welcome in Africa today because it has harmful consequences from an ecological, environmental and economic point of view. Our soils are very fragile. Tractors

break up the texture of the soil and foster erosion, thus threatening the ecosystem. Economically speaking, people have little purchasing power, which means that tractors are not profitable. Finally, people lack the skills to use it, look after it and maintain it properly. This means that today mechanization is neither desired nor desirable, because it's not in line with our level of development. It's a choice. The aim was neither to stop emigration nor to slow it down, but to show that there are other possible ways of development for those who want to stay, other things that young people can do. Our experience is not limited in time and space; it's valid today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. It can be tried out by individuals as well as by groups in need.

It should also evolve into a national policy for the reintegration of young people, for the struggle against unemployment and rural exodus. Agriculture is our heavy industry. If it is not boosted by incentives, we cannot create an appetite for it. Activity must be sustained and maintained. It's not as if groups woke up one morning and had land, a motor pump, a structure, seeds ... The prerequisite are accompanying measures enabling young people who

the contextualization of ACTAF is in no way an attempt at exhaustiveness. The loose constellation of organizations initiated by or mobilizing West African migrants is particularly difficult to reconstruct because of their sheer number, their secrecy under police surveillance, as well as the short-term fluidity of their individual and collective positioning. Nor is the objective to erase the differences between them. These two groups differed in terms of their status and their positioning on France's radical left-wing landscape. In its early stages, *Révolution Afrique* was an offshoot of *Révolution!*, a French organization that grew out of a 1971 split in Communist League by members critical of the dominant Trotskyist line. ACTAF was made up of activists with much more diverse political affiliations ranging from unionists of the Confédération générale du travail (CGT / General Confederation of Labor) to members of groups identified as "leftist". Despite these differences, during the very limited period of 1971 to 1976, ACTAF and *Révolution Afrique* shared similar objectives and repertoires of collective action. Their activists initially undertook to mobilize for common causes in Africa and France. Then they attempted to recruit members and take action in the same places, primarily in the migrant worker hostels of the Paris region. Finally, they planned returns to Africa, projects that were not only bitterly debated but also implemented very differently by these two organizations.

make this choice to solve the problems they may face.
Emigration as initiation is a cultural characteristic shared by all peoples throughout the ages. People have always wanted to explore other realities, other cultures and other living conditions. This will remain true for years to come. And it applies to Europe as much as to Africa. Staying at home and observing only what happens there doesn't make any sense. All education policies are aimed at exploring the world, at understanding that we are not alone in our environment, that the world is a global entity in which the lives of communities unfold. Economic emigration exists, but what has caused its sharp rise? Rural poverty. In our discussions on immigration, we talk mainly about economic reasons but we ignore its role as a cultural initiation.

We started this experiment in France in 1976, and it was implemented in Africa in 1977. It became a blueprint. Other groups followed in our footsteps. Our project also inspired many individuals who didn't necessarily want to farm or raise cattle, but who decided to work in the transport business or to launch small and medium-sized enterprises. It has triggered various return and reintegration

measures. It inspired the French government's return and reintegration policies. Our return is older than Giscard's million. We regretted not getting that money. If the fourteen of us had received it, we would have had fourteen million [old French francs] in all. At the time the French state started talking about reintegration and co-development. But their vision wasn't in line with the way we considered our return, which had to be voluntary and participatory above all. This problem must be solved.

**Interview by Raphaël Grisey,
 Somankidi Coura, 2007.**

Chronologies. Three Possible Paths To Activism

The After-Lives of May 1968

The “discovery” of post-colonial immigration by the Left and radical Left in France dates back to May 1968 and its “after-lives”, to use Kristin Ross’s (2005) expression.⁸ Although immigrant workers had been active before and during those events, they were “the people completely forgotten in the Grenelle agreements” (Boubeker and Hajat 2008, 81). In the period after 1968, they nevertheless became one of the populations whose support was actively solicited by “leftist” movements and by the PCF and CGT (which feared competition from those movements), as well as by a broad spectrum of charitable associations or partisan organizations like the Parti socialiste uniifié (PSU/ Unified Socialist Party). The events of 1968 therefore marked the beginning of a decade that saw the emergence of the figure of the “immigrant worker” (CEDETIM 1975). This period, particularly the first half of the 1970s, was characterized by “the intensity of foreign worker mobilizations in factories” (Pitti 2008, 97). Strikes and demands called particularly for French and foreign workers to be treated equally: “Equal pay for equal work”. To this end, they relied on the doctrine of labor internationalism that the leaders of the major confederations were vehemently demanding in their speeches, though this was regularly challenged on work sites or by calls for protectionism at union conventions.

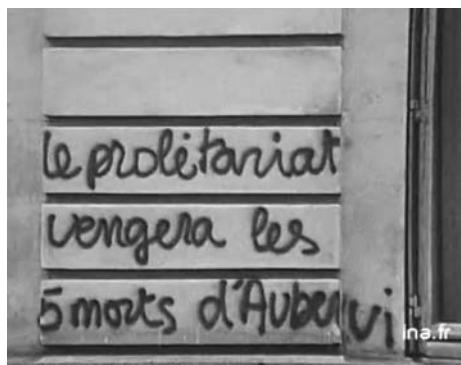
1968 also has meaning as a chronological milestone in the politicization of African militants as a global event in the 1970s that took shape in both France and Africa, particularly in Senegal.⁹ In ACTAF there was Ladji Niangané, who had been expelled from the secondary school in Kaolack for his activist activities as the “head of the school movement” and “leader of the student movement”, leading him to emigrate first to Congo-Brazzaville, then to France. Similarly, Révolution Afrique recruited several Senegalese who had been socialized as secondary school students or young workers during the events of May 1968 in Dakar, including Amadou Kane and Mamadou Mbodji. These trajectories show the intersection or continuation of political paths and socializations in Africa and France.

8 See the studies by Yvan Gastaut (2000) and Daniel A. Gordon (2012, 157).

9 On May 1968 in Dakar, see the book by Abdoulaye Bathily (1992) as well as recent studies by Françoise Blum (2012) and Omar Gueye (2017).



“French Migrant Workers United,”
Atelier populaire ex-École des
Beaux-Arts, poster, May 1968.



Funerals of the five migrant workers killed in the Aubervilliers fire.

Film stills from *Un malien d'Ivry*, INA, 1970.

The Aubervilliers Casualties of January 1970

On the night of January 1st 1970, four Senegalese men and one Mauritanian man died of asphyxiation in a hostel in one of Paris's inner suburbs. Located at 27 rue des Postes in Aubervilliers, the hostel was registered with the police prefecture and managed by a Senegalese association whose representatives had close links with the consulate (Dedieu 2012a, 37). The event immediately attracted considerable press coverage in France (Gastaut 2000), as well as in West Africa, though to a lesser degree since the Sub-Saharan regimes did not want the public to see their inability to protect citizens abroad (Dedieu 2012b). On January 10th, the funerals of the five who had died in Aubervilliers gave rise to a large protest in front of the Paris morgue located at quai de la Rapée. This was followed by the occupation of the headquarters of the Conseil national du patronat français (CNPF / National Council of French Employers) by a group of Maoists and intellectual activists like Marguerite Duras, Jean Genet and Pierre Vidal-Naquet (Gordon 2012, 101). At the same time, another protest initiated by Gilles de Staal and Madeleine de Beauséjour assembled activists and hostel residents at the Thiais cemetery. Gilles de Staal viewed this as the starting point for "tenant committees" in immigrants' hostels (Staal 2008, 40-41). Finally, a press conference was held by the Mouvement contre le racisme et pour l'amitié entre les peuples (MRAP / Movement Against Racism and for Friendship Between Peoples), at which Sally N'Dongo spoke to condemn the tragedy.

The fatal fire on rue des Postes was a turning point in the politicization of the immigrant issue by France's radical Left. It also gave rise to defensive stances by representatives of communist municipalities, who were being blamed for their management of immigrant worker housing. The mayor of Aubervilliers, André Karman, condemned the shameful passivity of the African embassies and consulates. At the same time, this drama revived preexisting networks, especially those of the Associations de solidarité avec les travailleurs immigrés (ASTI / Associations for Solidarity with Immigrant Workers), which were rooted in Catholicism, and the first of which dated back to 1962 (Abdallah 2000, 16). Thus it was a time of considerable mobilization, even if multiplicity of sites chosen for demonstrations on a given day gives a sense of the competition between organizations.

The Aubervilliers drama was emblematic of the immigrant condition, becoming compulsory material for activist documentary films, books and magazines of that time. The investigation into the fire was one of the main themes of Marcel Trillat and Frédéric Variot's film *Étranges étrangers* (Scopcolor 1970). It was also mentioned in several other films of that period (Perron 2009, 77), as well as in the newspaper *Révolution Afrique*, contributing to a new level of visibility for West African immigrants in France, and to the establishment of a collective memory of the activist networks that either supported them or were initiated by them.



Detective Shaft discovers a slave house in a hostel in Paris. After a fight and a fire, five people are found dead. Still from *Shaft in Africa*, 1973, by John Guillermin.



Film stills from *Étranges Étrangers*, [Strange Strangers], by Marcel Trillat & Frédéric Variot, 1970.

The Portuguese Colonies' Independence Struggles

Beyond the general political context marked by post-May-1968 mobilizations and by the specific politicization of the housing issue, the independence struggles of the Portuguese colonies were a recurring, even ubiquitous reference in the pages of the newspaper run by activists of *Révolution Afrique*. There were many articles written on the subject, some of them illustrated by photographs, symbolizing solidarity with these revolutionary movements and calling for the complete, permanent decolonization of Africa.

Activism in support of Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique echoed the third-worldist movements that had emerged after the Algerian War and intensified with the Vietnam War and the “tricontinental revolutions” (Liauzu 1986, 74). Support for these latter independence struggles—which were marked by the resort to armed struggle—made it possible to unite the organizations working in African immigrant circles in France. It supplied its own succession of extraordinary events and emblematic figures sanctified by death, such as in the case of Amílcar Cabral, founder of the Parti africain pour l'indépendance de la Guinée et du Cap-Vert (PAIGC / African Party for Independence in Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands), who was assassinated in January 1973 in Conakry, Guinea.

Furthermore, solidarity with these struggles extended to a pan-African area, in which independent Algeria, which had triumphed over colonial France, played a central role as a place of passage and convergence for revolutionary groups (Byrne 2016). Another newspaper of the time that focused on the Portuguese colonies' liberation struggles, *Libération Afrique* — founded in 1967 by PSU activists and run from 1972 to 1976 by the networks of the Centre socialiste d'études et de documentation sur le tiers-monde (CEDETIM / The Socialist Center of Studies and Documentation on the Third World)—received its information and images via Algiers (Kalter 2013, 363). The connection to Algeria and more broadly to North Africa was also central for ACTAF: donations of blood and clothing collected in hostels were forwarded to fighters via Algiers (Soumaré 2001, 9); in July 1973, Karamba Touré, then secretary general of ACTAF, attended the First Pan-African Youth Festival, held in Tunis.

Thus support for the armed struggles in the Portuguese colonies constituted a uniting event because of its pan-African dimension, but also



Portrait of Amílcar Cabral,
insert in *Révolution Afrique*,
1973.

Karamba Touré with the Angolan delegation at the Pan-African Youth Festival in Tunis, 1973.
(from the website of the Karamba Touré association).



because of its revolutionary component, which contrasted with the independences negotiated between France and the home countries of most of West African migrants. The beginning of Siré Soumaré's memoirs, entitled *Après l'émigration, le retour à la terre*, situates the very genesis of ACTAF in activism in France in support of the struggles in Africa.

Activist life in France.

Everything began with a support committee created in 1970 by immigrant workers in France, named the Support Committee for the Struggle of the Portuguese Colonies. Its goal was to help our brothers in the Portuguese colonies (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape-Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe) to regain their independence and dignity. This committee was open to all Africans and to anyone with African roots (Caribbeans, black Americans, etc.).

The members' activities consisted in encouraging immigrants to show solidarity with our brothers in the Portuguese colonies through donations of blood and old clothing for fighters on the front. After being collected, this blood and clothing were handed to the French Secours Populaire, which forwarded them to the front lines in the name of the African workers' support committee in France.

The French government of the time was one of those providing material and financial support for that colonial war being waged in Africa by the fascist Portuguese government. Consequently, any association, committee or even individual suspected of sympathizing with those freedom fighters could have problems with the police, who were monitoring everyone's movements. For strategic reasons, this committee therefore changed its name to Association Culturelle des Travailleurs Africains en France (ACTAF), which seemed much more neutral than the previous name, but it did not give up its activities and goals.

[...]

For six years—that is to say from 1970 when the committee to support the Portuguese colonies was created, to 1976 when the core leaders of ACTAF returned to the country—ACTAF activists fought for the workers' cause, focusing on housing and deportations. Thus we spent our free time in hostels between weekly internal meetings and public events.

Source: Soumaré, *Après l'émigration, le retour à la terre*, 2001 (pages 5–7, extracts)

Action Sites, Networks and Repertoires

Names of Hostels, Names of Struggles

The activism of Révolution Afrique and ACTAF was carried out and based in migrant worker hostels, which were then home to the vast majority of West African immigrants (Dubresson 1975). These hostels were called “*foyers*”, a designation that covered a very wide variety of collective housing, including furnished rooms, hotels or privately managed furnished apartments. The term could also designate facilities managed by semi-public organizations like the Société nationale de construction de logement de travailleurs (Sonacotra / National Society of Worker Housing Construction) founded in 1956 during the Algerian War, or by charities. These charities, most of which received public subsidies from the Fonds d'action sociale (FAS / Social Action Fund), were created in the 1960s to deal with the housing crisis faced by the West African population¹⁰. They converted industrial or public buildings into dormitories or, more rarely, invested in new buildings. By moving people out of unfit housing and into these new *foyers*, West African workers were grouped together, often by the hundreds, creating new opportunities for collective protest (Dedieu and Mbodj-Pouye 2016). Some students living in university residences or apartments were increasingly paying regular visits to these hostels *foyers* in the context of activism or more ordinary socializing.

Africanist studies have stressed the role of *foyers* as accommodation sites and meeting points for village communities originating from the colonial era (Manchuelle 2004). They have emphasized how migrants formed groups on the basis of a region or village (Diarra 1968, Quiminal 1990, Timera 1996), as well as migrants’ efforts to reproduce local hierarchies and turn *foyers* into replicas of their home villages (Daum 1998). Doubt was increasingly cast on the possibility of control by elders and by the village group, as a result of social changes that were being provoked by emigration and by the politicization of certain residents (Samuel 1975).

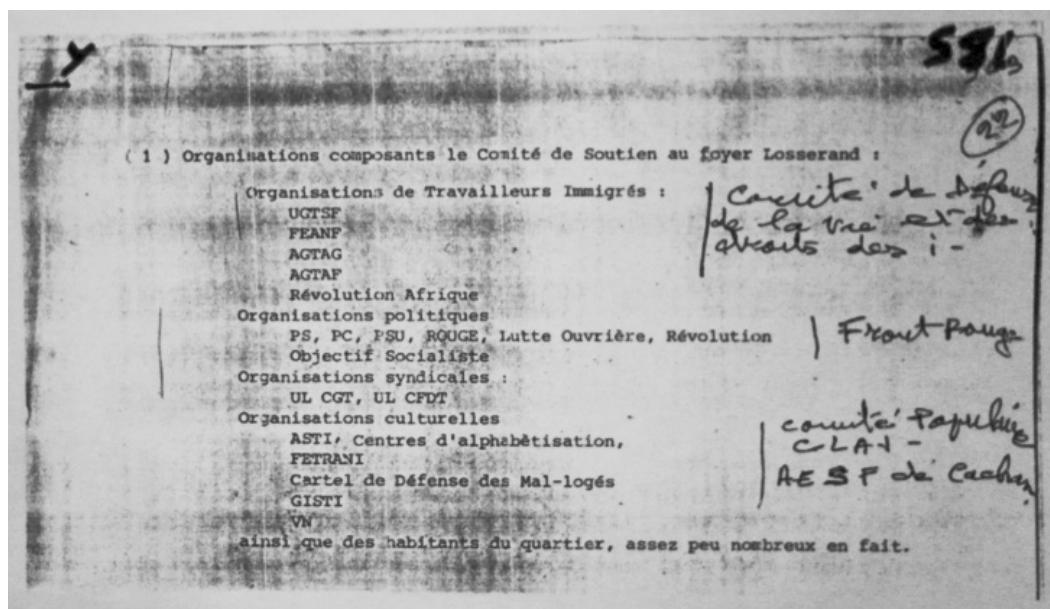
Beyond links established through kinship, language, regional origins or nationality, the struggles that developed in the context of *foyers* brought out the specifically urban dimension of these places, making it possible to create inter-*foyer* networks based on affinities and activism. Bisson, Charonne, Drancy, Pinel, Pierrefitte-Lénine, Raymond-Losserand and Riquet, to mention only a few, were of course the names of communes or streets. These names increasingly symbolized *foyers* and, by metonymy, movements or memories of struggles, testifying to the migrants’ deep, lasting rooting in Paris and its suburbs. The *foyers* were originally places to which Sub-Saharan migrants were assigned and relegated, but they became places that they claimed as their own. Their paths from one *foyer* to another and from one suburb to another created a new political geography whose boundary lines they drew collectively themselves.

¹⁰ These included the Association pour la Formation Technique de Base des Travailleurs Africains et Malgaches (AFTAM), the association Soutien Dignité aux Travailleurs Africains (Soundiata) and the Association pour l’Aide aux Travailleurs Africains (ASSOTRAF).

Finally the *foyers*—because they were made available to migrants or controlled by public authorities, and were sometimes linked to the consular authorities of the countries of origin (as in the case of Aubervilliers)—were the first places to be the subject of demands for dignified housing conditions. They gave rise to migrant mobilizations at the level of the neighborhood, then at the level of the city, whose elected representatives were regularly either challenged or solicited as mediators, contributing to making *foyer* residents part of the local partisan and political landscape. From the early 1960s to the very beginning of the 1970s, rent strike movements spread through Paris' inner suburbs (Dedieu and Mbodj-Pouye 2016). This was particularly the case in 1969 at the Ivry *foyer* and the Pinel *foyer* in Saint-Denis (where Bouba Touré and Siré Soumaré of ACTAF resided), mobilizations that the Aubervilliers tragedy gave increased legitimacy and visibility.

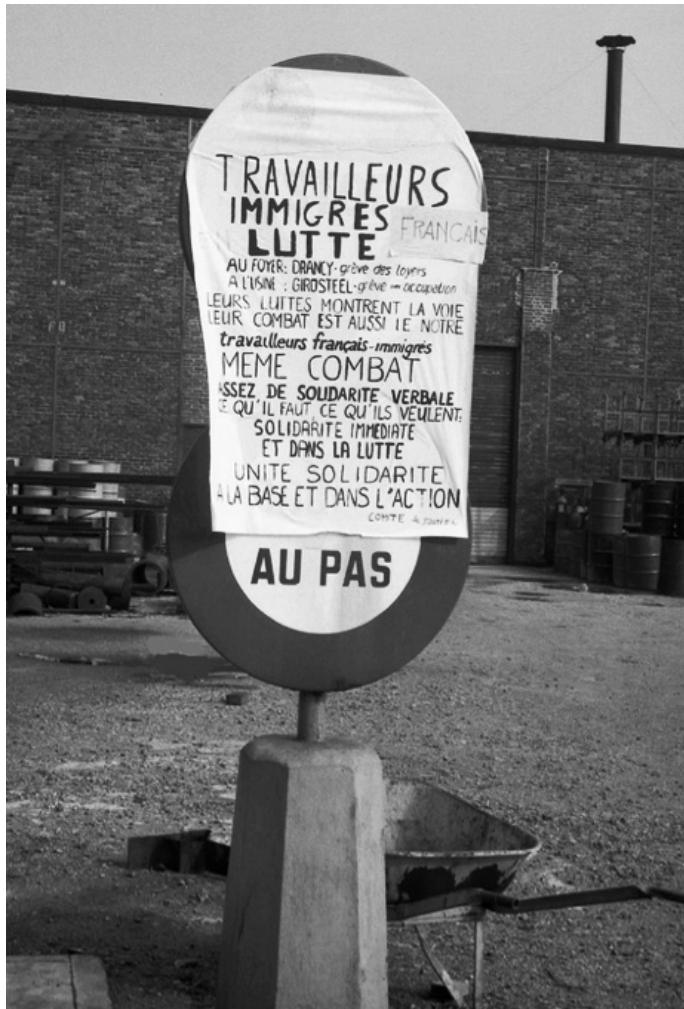
One of the most significant strikes concerned the mobilization of residents of a Paris *foyer* located at 214 rue Raymond Losserand in the 14th arrondissement. This former laundry was one of the first industrial buildings to be converted into collective housing by the Soundiata in 1963. Ten years later, over three hundred black African workers lived there, including five members of ACTAF: Bakhoré Bathily, Moussa Coulibaly, Fode Moussa Diaby, Mady Niakhaté and Karamba Touré. In April, residents were informed that they would have to vacate the building due to an urban renovation operation being undertaken in that arrondissement¹¹. The municipality made several proposals to rehouse residents in the 13th, 19th and 20th arrondissements. These offers were rejected. The residents demanded that they not be separated. They also pointed out that many of them worked in neighboring arrondissements or in automobile factories in the west of Paris. They set up an "African

11 This information comes from the Monique Hervo collection, deposited at the Institut d'histoire du temps présent (henceforth IHTP), Paris.



Source: Monique Hervo Archives.

Gérald Bloncourt, strike and occupation of Girosteel in Le Bourget, 24 February 1972, Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration.



Workers' Committee" (also called a "Struggle Committee") with one representative delegate from each room. At the same time, a local support committee was set up that included neighbors who were themselves also affected by the urban renovation operation. Among the *foyer* struggles of that period, this mobilization was unique because of the amount of support it received, and because it attempted—even if unsuccessfully—to achieve coordination between all foyers involved in protest actions.

As in the case of Aubervilliers, there was wide media coverage, extending beyond the radical press and the closest support networks. François Mitterrand, the architect of the Union de la Gauche (Union of the Left) and the first secretary of the Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party), visited the site on January 19th 1974. There he declared that "the disastrous housing conditions imposed on the African workers who live here are much less acceptable than what I myself had as a prisoner of war in Germany".¹² Despite their efforts to coordinate with other striking *foyers* and their wide-ranging support, the residents were finally evicted on January 26th 1974. They were irreversibly dispersed among five Paris *foyers*.

The *foyers*, which were points of departure for specific struggles revolving around the issue of housing, ended up also being sites of solidarity

12 Dispatch from Agence France Presse (AFP), 19 January 1974 (Monique Hervo collection, IHTP).

with workers' struggles like the mobilizations of the early 1970s by immigrant workers at private and public companies like Renault-Billancourt, Peñarroya and Girosteel. Girosteel was a metallurgical factory located in the Paris suburb of Le Bourget. It was the scene of a dispute in 1972 when its workers, mostly immigrants, condemned "particularly hard working conditions", "low wages" and "ethnic management of the workforce" (Vigna 2007, 123-124). A poster outlined how to take action, both in workplaces and at home: "AT THE FOYER: DRANCY – rent strike" and "AT THE FACTORY: GIROSTEEL – strike – occupation". These slogans came from the richness and circulation of repertoires of collective action within populations long viewed as simply "acted upon".

Ideological Differences, Political Alliances

In ideological terms, *Révolution Afrique* can be identified as a more clearly anti-institutional group than ACTAF. *Révolution Afrique* started out as an offshoot of the Trotskyist organization *Révolution!*, which grew out of a minority strand within the Communist league whose members were sensitive to the Cultural Revolution in China and particularly interested in the issue of immigration in France (Salles 2005, 101-102). The stance of *Révolution Afrique* quickly became a source of internal tension to the point of resulting in the creation of the *Organisation des Communistes Africains* (OCA/Organization of African Communists) in April 1976, in order to give it full autonomy of action.

Although protective of their independence from *Révolution!*, the activists of *Révolution Afrique* were nonetheless in ideological solidarity with radical left-wing groups highly critical of the PCF and CGT. This "revolutionary" identity and "leftist" stance were far from always being fully accepted within the *foyers* themselves. The Drancy *oyer* began a rent strike in December 1971, following a mobilization initiated in the neighboring hostel in Pierrefitte that was home to the first African activists of *Révolution Afrique*. This same *oyer* was the subject of a struggle for influence between African revolutionary activists backed by their French comrades and delegates with close ties to the PCF supported by the communist municipal council, a struggle that gave rise to a fight, after which African activists were brought back in line (Staal 2008, 117).

ACTAF assembled activists from a wider range of partisan and union backgrounds compared with *Révolution Afrique*. ACTAF certainly counted among its members some activists identified as "leftists", such as Karamba Touré.¹³ However, others were unionized by the CGT, such as Fode Moussa Diaby, Siré Soumaré, or Bouba Touré, or were even staff representatives of the CGT like Ladji Niangané. Links with the confederation were strong enough that in 1972 it supplied ACTAF with premises at 163 boulevard de l'Hôpital in Paris's 13th arrondissement, which it used as a headquarters and meeting space.¹⁴

13 According to notes by French police, Karamba Touré was "linked to Maoists from the former Proletarian Left (Renseignements Généraux, "Afrique et Dom-Tom", 2 March 1974, Archives Nationales (henceforth AN), deposit 19870623/1).

14 Letter by André Mesas, Secretary General of the union center in Paris's 13th arrondissement, 26 June 1972 (ACTAF file, APP).



Film stills from *Journée Portes Ouvertes à Drancy*,
by Révolution Afrique Group, 1971.



Film stills from *Nationalité: Immigré*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1975.

However, the ideological divergences between ACTAF and Révolution Afrique did not preclude shared action. The strike at the Losserand *foyer* was a chance to establish closer ties, as shown by a document listing the many organizations supporting the residents' mobilization.

The changing ideologies and shifting strategic alliances of these organizations highlight the difficulty of precisely reconstructing the activist landscape of those years. Despite these tensions, it is still possible to discern common political and cultural references. In pursuit of the May 1968 movement, collective creativity reflected the desire to shift the boundaries of art and politics and develop a radical esthetic serving the cause of emancipation: "resistance arts".

Political Representations, Cultural Repertoire

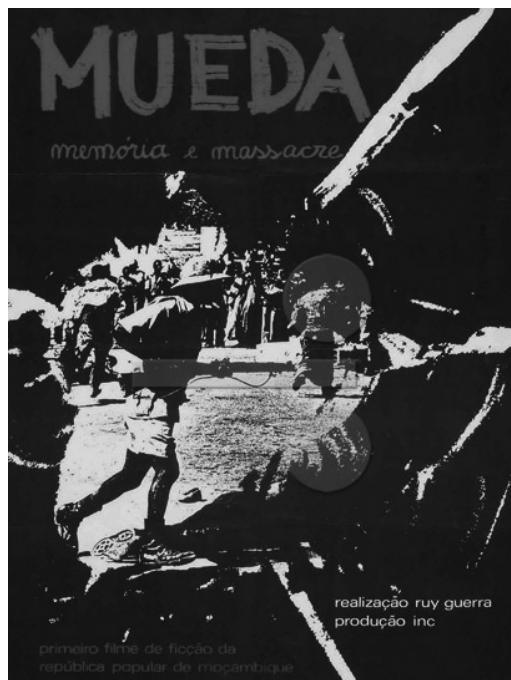
In the 1960s, the living and housing conditions of West African migrants were the subject of several documentaries by professional filmmakers. Documentaries such as Jean-Luc Leridon's *Travailleurs africains* (1962-1963), Jacques Krier's *Ouvriers noirs de Paris* (1964) and Jean Schmid's *Afrique des Banlieues* (1967) filmed the basements, slums and *foyers* in which Sub-Saharan workers found refuge, and collected accounts from these workers, sometimes even against their will. If one views these documentaries attentively, one sees how difficult it is for the migrants to assert a positive visual representation of their social group (Dedieu 2012b).

In the 1970s, new approaches were experimented with from an activist perspective. Even though the *foyers* remained a reservoir of images for TV and print journalists, they increasingly became places of cultural productions and activities created by the activists themselves.

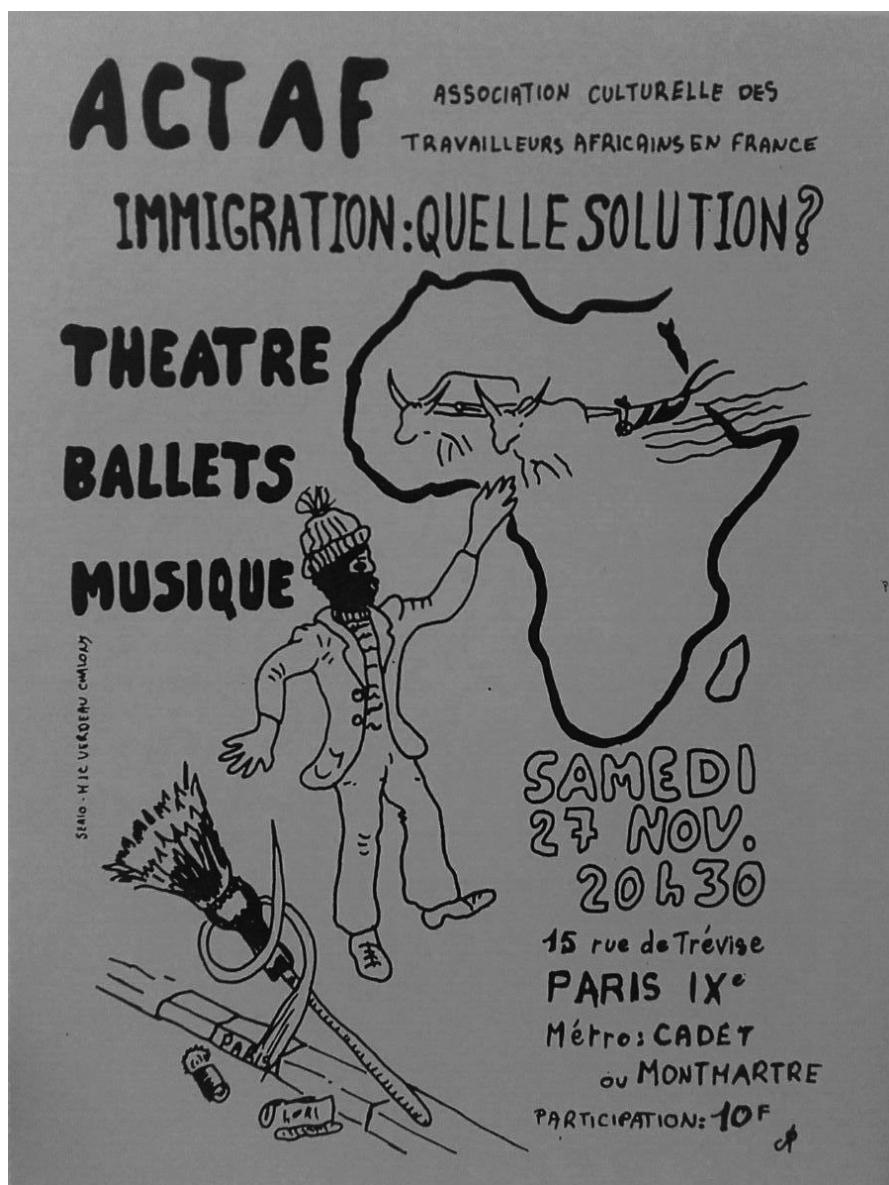
In 1972, Révolution Afrique took advantage of a day of discussions and activities held in the striking Drancy *foyer* to shoot a film entitled *Portes ouvertes à Drancy* [Open Doors in Drancy]. It was filmed by Richard Copans — who was then a member of Révolution!¹⁵ — and edited by Madeleine Beauséjour, who had co-founded the group with Gilles de Staal.¹⁶ It places particular emphasis on the views of activists, while also showing the radical graphics of the group's eponymous newspaper. *Portes ouvertes à Drancy* is far from being an isolated case or a visual exception. From 1972 to 1975, young Mauritanian filmmaker Sidney Sokhona shot the film *Nationalité: Immigré* during a rent strike at the Riquet *foyer* in Paris's 19th arrondissement, where he himself lived. The filmmaker played himself in the film, and as characters he brought in the people involved in this strike, whether they be residents or literacy monitors, staging them in scenes inspired by another Mauritanian filmmaker, Med Hondo. *Bicots Nègres vos voisins* [Wogs and Negroes, Your Neighbors]

15 Richard Copans was later to become affiliated with the activist group Cinélutte. Interview with Richard Copans, Paris, 11 December 2015.

16 A copy held by Samba Sylla, a Révolution Afrique member, was deposited in the Archives départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis. Another copy was digitized by Tangui Perron. We thank him for making it available to us.



Poster and film still from *Mueda, Memoria e Massacre*, Ruy Guerra, 1981.



Flyer for the theatre play *L'immigration : quelle solution?* [Immigration: What is the Solution?] by ACTAF, 1976. Cooperative Somankidi Coura archives.

by Hondo, *Portes ouvertes à Drancy* and *Nationalité: Immigré* were the key films cited by *Révolution Afrique*.¹⁷ Sidney Sokhona continued his work on the immigrant condition with the 1976 film *Safrana ou Le droit à la parole* [Safrana or Freedom of Speech], which explored the farming vocational training that ACTAF members undertook in France. As the filmmaker explained in an interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Oudart and Daney 1978): “What is positive in *Safrana* is that by becoming politically aware of reality, people question their own identity: who am I and what do I belong to?”. Bouba Touré was one of the actors in the film. After initially working as a laborer after arriving in France in 1965, Touré completed a Certificat d’aptitude professionnelle (CAP / Vocational Training Certificate) as a projectionist in 1971, then began a career as a photographer, exemplifying the diverse nature of African activists’ involvement in photographic professions.¹⁸

In addition to making films and participating in film productions, ACTAF and *Révolution Afrique* turned to theater. The political and educational use of theater was common in activist circles at that time (Hadj Belgacem 2016). In 1975, the first Festival of Popular Theater by Immigrant Workers was held in Suresnes thanks to support from the Comité catholique contre la faim et pour le développement (CCFD / Catholic Committee Against Hunger and for Development) and from La Cimade (Escafré-Dublet 2008, 15). *Révolution Afrique* created a theater company in which its African activists teamed up with young laborers and students, in collaboration with a group of exiled Brazilian artists (Staal 2008, 150-151). Their play “Ankê Misskinnê !” was described as a “montage of historical documents and personal accounts collected within immigration struggles and in Africa”.¹⁹ In 1976, ACTAF’s members turned to dramatic expression as well. Shortly after returning from their training, they staged the play *L'immigration, quelle solution?* in order to explain their project and their reasons for returning to Africa (Soumaré 2001, 24).

Besides being the subject of performances, *foyers* were also sites of film screenings, showing the films that had been shot inside them and others that explored more distant conflicts. The very fact of having filmed *Portes ouvertes à Drancy* enabled *Révolution Afrique* to turn one *foyer*’s political and cultural intervention tool into a vehicle for new interventions in other spaces. The film was screened during the Semaine d’action et d’information des travailleurs africains (African Workers’ Action and Information Week) held in November and December 1972, which featured a range of documentaries that explored the Algerian War and labor conflicts in France. Likewise,

17 See for example *Révolution Afrique*, no. 17, November-December 1976, p.15.

18 Interview with Bouba Touré, Paris, 13 October 2016.

19 This description comes from the newspaper *Révolution Afrique*, no. 17, November-December 1976, p. 15. In Soninke language, “An ke misikiine” means “You, the poor one”.



« ANKÈ MISSKINNÈ »
un théâtre des travailleurs africains

La pièce est un montage de documents historiques et de témoignages recueillis dans les luttes de l'immigration et en Afrique. Retraçant l'établissement de la domination impérialiste, sous le colonialisme direct et par le système des indépendances néocoloniales, et les luttes populaires contre l'exploitation, en Afrique et jusque dans l'immigration, le montage exprime l'idée que les luttes de l'immigration contre l'exploitation capitaliste en France font partie de la résistance et des révoltes des exploités d'Afrique contre les régimes néocoloniaux.

—culture



Le groupe théâtral
« Travailleurs africains »

Le groupe théâtral « Travailleurs africains » est constitué de militants des comités de travailleurs africains. C'est un groupe issu de diverses expériences partielles, telle celle du Collectif d'Agitation Bourgeoise de Barbes.

Le groupe théâtral africain a une histoire de lutte encore récente mais riche. Par voie de conséquence, la différence d'autres groupes nationaux, tel les Algériens, il n'existe pas encore un accès culturel de notre immigration, intégrant à la fois la richesse du fonds culturel populaire du Sénégal, du Mali, de la Mauritanie, et l'expérience de l'exploitation, d'oppression et de lutte de l'immigration.

Les comités de travailleurs africains, qui inscrivent dans leurs objectifs l'unification des différents courants anti impérialistes de l'immigration dans une organisation de masse unitaire des travailleurs africains en France, estiment que l'action sur le front culturel est un puissant levier d'unité nationale et de classe de l'immigration d'Afrique Noire.

Une des tâches de l'heure est donc de travailler à faire naître cette culture de lutte, parmi les Africains exploités en France. Cela veut dire pour nous

à la fois puiser dans le fonds de culture populaire africaine et, à la fois, travailler en étroite liaison avec les luttes, les comités de travailleurs, de locataires, tenir compte des idées les plus modernes qui naissent dans ces luttes.

De ce point de vue, retracer et construire une histoire des opprimés d'Afrique, sous l'angle de la lutte des classes, telle qu'elle existe dans la mémoire profonde du peuple, et non dans celle des historiens bourgeois.

Il s'agit pour nous de donner un coup d'envoi à une activité culturelle qui peut surger à tous les tourments des luttes et constituer un ciment unificateur de l'immigration.

Cela ne peut se faire sans combattre les idées propagées par la culture africaine néocolonialiste. Combattre le mythe de l'authenticité qui vise à séparer la vie et le destin des peuples d'Afrique des combats et bouleversements qui touchent les autres peuples, et qui trace un trait d'égalité entre la « culture » des bureaucratiques bourgeois africains et ce qui peut être celle des paysans pauvres et des ouvriers. Combattre le goût du folklore qui n'est

que la forme actuelle de la manipulation des peuples opprimés par les classes et nations culturellement dominantes. Combattre enfin, ici, la nostalgie, forme apolitique de production culturelle nationale, qui reproduit, sans critique, dans l'immigration, les pratiques culturelles traditionnelles africaines, ce qui a un rôle compensateur entre l'isolement social et culturel de l'immigré, mais qui n'invite qu'au fatalisme et n'offre aucune perspective de combat contre le système qui, ici et en Afrique, nous conduit à émigrer.

C'est de ce point de vue que nous avons écrit cette pièce Anké Misskinne et que nous la présentons. C'est sur ce bilan des expériences passées que le groupe s'est formé pour le Festival.

Depuis deux ans, une recherche que nous pensons proche de la nôtre retrace, par le cinéma, l'histoire des luttes de l'immigration. Les films les plus connus sont : Journée Portes Ouvertes à Drancy (Révolution Africaine), Bicots Nègres non Voisins (Med Hondo), Nationalité Immigré (Sidi Sokhouna). Cela constitue un encouragement pour engager le travail sur le terrain de l'expression théâtrale.

Le groupe, qui présente là son premier travail, espère jouer après le festival dans des salles des quartiers immigrés et dans des foyers en lutte.

Kaddu Beykatt
lettre paysanne

On peut voir en ce moment à Paris le film « Kaddu Beykatt » de Safi Faye. C'est un documentaire qui montre la vie quotidienne dans un village sénégalais. Le film ne montre pas ce que fait l'Algérie, l'Afrique, mais montre la lutte contre Senghor et autres charlatans, ce n'est pas non plus une histoire inventée avec un héros qui réussit toujours à en sortir. Non c'est la réalité, c'est la misère. Et cette réalité est un acte d'accusation terrible contre Senghor. La culture force de l'arachide a appauvri la terre et les paysans, mais enrichi les exploitants. Le pouvoir de l'Etat bourgeois, l'ONCAG, les flics et les gendarmes, la propagande pourrie du Soleil, n'ont qu'une seule fonction : forcer le paysan à cultiver toujours plus d'arachide, à se faire toujours plus exploiter, et faire la répression quand il refuse.

En ville, c'est le chômage et l'arrogance de la bourgeoisie, comme cette bourgeoisie qui demande au jeune de frapper à la porte avant d'entrer, mais refuse après de le payer pour son travail.

CINEMA

Mais le film, parce qu'il est vrai, va plus loin que le simple constat, et permet de tirer des leçons politiques. Et d'abord, qu'il n'y a pas de solution individualiste à la misère, le départ vers l'Algérie ou l'émigration en France ne permettent pas d'en finir avec la misère. Les militants de l'immigration, le savons bien maintenant, et dans nos lettres au village, de plus en plus, nous refusons de mentir sur notre exploitation et notre misère ici. Les solutions à la misère ne sont pas non plus les propositions intéressées des technocrates de l'ONCAG ou de la SODEVIA, qui disent aux paysans : « Vous ne savez pas cultiver, on va vous apprendre, mais achetez nos semences, nos houe, nos charrettes, etc., et on se paiera sur votre récolte. » Face à la politique bourgeoisie, les paysans opposent leur politique, aux phrases ridicules de Senghor et du Soleil, ils opposent la réalité de leur misère, à la solidarité nationale contre exploitants et exploités, ils opposent leurs intérêts de paysans pauvres. La politique, pour eux, c'est celle qui leur permet de comprendre les mécanismes de leur exploitation, et les moyens de leur lutte. La leçon du film est donnée par le vieux qui dit : « On a fait la grève de l'arachide ; la récolte a diminué de moitié, les dettes, grâce à notre lutte, ont été annulées, et le prix de l'arachide a augmenté. C'est la politique des exploités, c'est la politique révolutionnaire.

Ce film de dénonciation et de réflexion (qui n'a coûté que 75 000 F.F.) devrait être vu par tous les travailleurs. Il est scandaleux (mais ça ne nous étonne pas) qu'il ne soit pas diffusé au Sénégal, et que à Paris il ne passe que à la Clef. Nous devons demander aux cinémas de quartiers et de banlieues, à Paris et en province, de le passer, à la place des Django-Karaté. Nous devons utiliser le cinéma et le théâtre comme les enfants du village montrent dans le film pour dénoncer l'exploitation et la répression, pour construire notre culture de lutte.

Moussa Toukara

La Clef : métro Censier-Daubenton ou Monge, permanent de 14 heures à 24 heures. Billet à 14 F. Étudiant et chômeur : 10 F.

Bouba Touré received one of the few copies of *Nationalité: Immigré*, which he screened over the years in *foyers* as well as in Maisons des jeunes et de la culture (MJC / Youth and Culture Centers) in Paris and throughout France.

“Film on the struggle of the black and Arab African workers of the Drancy *foyer*”
“Film on the struggle against the FONTANET circular”
“Film on Amílcar Cabral’s last speech”
“PCF policy in the face of the Algerian people’s liberation struggle”
“The united struggle of French and immigrant workers at a paint factory”
“No Pincha”: in the resistance movements of Guinea-Bissau
“Soleil O”, African film
“Why immigrant laborers are forced to leave the sticks. How we are exploited.”
“LIP” Film by workers at the LIP factory, engaged in a struggle for 7 months

List of films screened during the Semaine d’action et d’information des travailleurs africains.²⁰

The cultural activities of the West African migrants did not fail to raise the French authorities’ suspicions. Thus the director of Établissements d’aide aux travailleurs migrants [Migrant Worker Aid Associations], which grouped *foyers* managed by the social aid bureau and was answerable to the Paris Prefecture, informed one of its organizers in the mid-1970s that “the Administration believes that it is an inopportune moment for Sydney Sokhona’s film to be screened” in *foyers*, and asks him to make sure that “this prohibition is respected”.²¹ African authorities were also concerned about the impact that the actions of these activists could have on their states. Thus Samba Sylla recounted that during his visits to Mali, national security agents would present him with cuttings from the newspaper *Révolution Afrique*, proving that the Malian government was monitoring the political activities and cultural productions of West African groups in France.²²

20 List appearing in a note dated 13 December 1973 (“Révolution Afrique” file, APP, deposit 143 W 8).

21 Note by the director of the Migrant Worker Aid Associations, 17 November 1975 (Archives de Paris, deposit 2024W 2).

22 Interview with Samba Sylla, Paris, 12 May 2015.

Return Plans

ACTAF and Révolution Afrique were increasingly subjected to reality checks that forced them to review and redraft their initial return-to-Africa plans, the framework of which they had developed in France. ACTAF imagined the return of its members in a cooperative context with an agricultural aim, while Révolution Afrique rooted its own in a clandestine context with a revolutionary aim. The Sahelian droughts and the economic crisis in France precipitated their reflection on the nature and urgency of a return to Africa.

French Return Policies, Droughts in Sahelian Countries

Following the 1973 oil crisis, the deep recession that hit France led the public authorities to implement policies intended to slow migratory flows and organize the return of migrants to their countries of origin. Entry and residency conditions became stricter from one year to the next. The French government officially suspended immigration in 1974. In 1977, Lionel Stoléru, the labor secretary responsible for manual workers and immigrants, implemented a public return-assistance measure that was condemned by leftist radicals and moderates alike. These return policies were based on the idea that migrants could contribute to the development of their country of origin, and that this would help regulate immigration through development (Dedieu 2012a).

The droughts in the Sahel in the early 1970s reinforced this developmentalist paradigm with regard to the African states, echoing their own more longstanding desire to control emigration. Modibo Keïta had taken a firm stance against emigration even before becoming the first president of Mali, a country that had served as a labor reservoir for coastal countries during the colonial period, along with Upper Volta. He accused departing workers of deserting the nation-building project. During the 1960s, the Malian authorities tried to control the circulation of migrant workers by introducing a pass (Gary-Tounkara 2003), while Malian government representatives visiting France encouraged migrants to return to their country.²³

The emigrants themselves, confronted with media coverage of the drought and increasing pressure from their families, also found themselves on the front line. Collections took place again, but this time they were directed at the countries of origin and overseen by NGOs. In a context of multiple injunctions to return, what needs to be understood is how the migrants themselves re-appropriated this idea. According to sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad, returning was not only “the desire and dream of all immigrants” but also the imposition and product of the state’s view that they were nothing but “dismissible people” (Sayad, 2006). Between these two extremes, the return plans developed by Révolution Afrique and ACTAF reveal how the two groups positioned themselves in relation to the policies developed by France and by the African states, and also in relation to the developmentalist ideology that was gradually penetrating charitable organizations and international solidarity associations.

23 An article published in *L’Humanité* on 21 January 1965 stated that the mayor of Kayes, the secretary general of the government’s party Sudanese Union and the consul general of Mali, visiting several foyers in the Paris region, “indicated that the Malian government wanted to stop all emigration of the workforce abroad, and it invited those who were unemployed to return home”. The article mentioned similar statements by a deputy from Senegal (APP, A10, 1965-1973).

Revolutionary Return, Cooperative Return

The collective nature of the return was the decisive element that made both groups' approaches sharply contrast with the injunctions of the time. In consequence, the chosen sites thwarted expectations of a return "home". The return plans initiated by ACTAF and *Révolution Afrique* foresaw members of various nationalities settling on a common site, that is to say a site that would not be the home village of most of the activists. In this sense, the pan-African dimension of ACTAF's first endeavors, as well as the discourse and practices of *Révolution Afrique*—whose newspaper sought to cover a broad range of political situations on the continent—played a central role. Nevertheless, this stance did not mean that members' distance from their home villages did not subsequently play a decisive role in the internal dynamics of these two groups.

However, there were clear divergences in their positioning with regard to local authorities and in whether or not their development project materialized, reflecting their different political stances and the sociological nuances of their members. *Révolution Afrique* set its sights on a revolutionary return. This was given concrete expression in the summer of 1976 through the creation of a sub-group called "Retour en Afrique" ("Return to Africa"). This project gave rise to internal dissension, particularly causing a divide between African and French activists. It developed at a time when activists who had been twenty-five years old at the beginning of the movement were approaching the age of thirty. Several African members of the group explained that for them, abandoning their studies or their job, and especially leaving France at a time when entry conditions were becoming stricter, presented them with choices they saw as irreversible, whereas for activists holding French nationality, withdrawing back to France would remain an option if the project were to fail.²⁴ Furthermore, this project was being discussed at a time when the group's situation was becoming increasingly tense. In December 1976, the OCA was dissolved by France's Minister of the Interior, forcing members to operate in secrecy. This decision—the first of a series of prohibitions against associations that were made up of foreign activists and were considered too close to the radical left—was both an opportunity for a very large mobilization and the source of material problems and considerable constraints. The sub-group "Retour en Afrique" ended up instigating a few returns to Senegal in connection with a bookshop project in Thiès, but this did not lead to the establishment of a permanent program. Mamadou Konté, one of the group's charismatic figures and one of the main African organizers, undertook to set up and produce concerts. This activity, initially intended to finance return projects, later became a project in its own right, completing the separation from the group.

24 This is true of Samba Sylla, born in 1948, who had joined *Révolution Afrique* around 1972, and Modou Mbodji, also born in 1948, who became a member upon arriving in France in 1973.



The french peasant of the ACCIR and the member of ACTAF repairing seeders, Somankidi Coura.
Still from a 8mm film by Monique Janson, 1979.



Sans-Papiers demonstration after the occupation of the St. Bernard Church, June 30, 1996, Paris.
Photograph by Boubba Touré.

In the case of ACTAF, its inclination to mount a concrete return project motivated the group from June 1974, according to Siré Soumaré (2001, 9). Unlike *Révolution Afrique*'s projects, it was a matter of "returning to the land", in the words of their own report. The aim was to promote a model that included an irrigated area and a cooperative, in line with an internal consultation. According to Ladji Niangané, in the group's discussions in France prior to departure, the Asian experience was taken as a model for achieving food self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, the project was implemented in the context of experiments with large development programs by the Organisation pour la mise en valeur du fleuve Sénégal (OMVS / Organization of the Promotion of the Senegal River) and the Comité inter-États de lutte contre la sécheresse au Sahel (CILSS / Inter-State Committee of the Struggle Against the Sahel Drought)²⁵, with support from non-governmental organizations working in the Senegal River basin.

Unlike *Révolution Afrique*, which could only contemplate a clandestine return, ACTAF endeavored to negotiate its return with the African authorities themselves. Mali agreed to their request for a settlement site and lands to cultivate, and even offered them official honors when they arrived. Beyond initial support from the CGT and migrant support associations, the return project mobilized non-governmental organizations as well as associations linked to the agricultural world, many of them Catholic. Thus the Association champenoise de coopération inter-régionale (ACCIR / Champagne Association for Inter-Regional Co-Operation) gave sustained support to ACTAF's project. It offered training courses, sought partnerships with such groups as the Comité catholique contre la famine et pour le développement (CCFD / Catholic Committee Against Famine and for Development) and the Cimade, while project oversight was entrusted to the Association œcuménique pour le développement (ACOEDEV / Ecumenical Association for Development). The project took shape through the creation of an organization under Malian law that became the Coopérative agricole multifonctionnelle de Somankidi-Coura (CAMS / The Somankidi-Coura Multipurpose Agricultural Cooperative).

Despite this wide-ranging support, the project asserted its independence with regard to partners and in relation to discourse advocating the return of migrants. In 1979, when ACCIR asked for ACTAF's support to initiate other returns from France, it refused on the grounds that: "given the immigration climate, this departure could have been interpreted as support for the French government's policy of seeking to send all immigrants away [...] at a time when Giscard d'Estaing's government was offering ten thousand French francs to any immigrant who wanted to return home" (Soumaré 2001, 95). Although ACTAF's independence from Moussa Traoré's military regime remains unclear, accounts emphasize that the choice to return to Mali under a dictatorship met with incomprehension, indeed criticism (Granotier 1977, 135), testifying to the paradoxes of collective action in situations of extreme political constraint.

25 L'Organisation pour la mise en valeur du fleuve Sénégal (OMVS / Organization of the Promotion of the Senegal River) was founded in 1972, while the Comité inter-États de lutte contre la sécheresse au Sahel (CILSS / Inter-State Committee of the Struggle Against the Sahel Drought) was founded in 1973 in response to the severe droughts that hit the Sahel, and it initially brought together states like Mali, Mauritania and Senegal.

Tracing the itineraries and interactions of the activists of ACTAF and Révolution Afrique sheds light on a world of common political causes and references ranging from ideals of third-worldism to dreams of self-management (*auto-gestion*) in line with the May 1968 movements in France and Africa. Their paths reveal that the *foyers* were never just enclaves isolated from the turbulence of the world and driven solely by the reproduction of social customs and hierarchies that were quite often reified. They reveal the multiple geographies of migration, which were formed through the circulation of people from one bank of the Mediterranean to the other, and were often woven—in the course of political and social changes—from the circulation and collective formation of ideologies, identities and repertoires of collective action from one region of origin to another and one suburb to another.

Despite their different evolutions, ACTAF and Révolution Afrique had to face similar dilemmas in their relations with the authorities and institutions of their countries of origin and residence. Révolution Afrique's radical project ran up against the decline of third-worldism and the French state's repression of radical left-wing organizations. ACTAF's cooperative project was gradually incorporated into the developmentalist plans that were emerging in the 1970s to stem migratory flows and support the disengagement of Sahelian states from their traditional fields of intervention in favor of non-governmental organizations (Mann 2015).

These divergences explain the sharply contrasting memories left by these two organizations. The cooperative founded by ACTAF became a basic reference in grey and anthropological literature to highlight co-development projects run by migrant associations, without any mention being made of the complexity of individual and collective stances with regard to national programs and those run by non-governmental organizations. Largely missing from the political history of African immigration, the trajectory of Révolution Afrique still needs to be written beyond the one auto-biographical account published by Gilles de Staal, in order to reconstruct the dynamics of another group tormented by multiple injunctions, and to understand the ebb and flow of the revolutionary utopias of that decade.

Bibliography:

- Bathily, Abdoulaye, 1992. *Mai 68 à Dakar ou la révolte universitaire et la démocratie*. Paris: Chaka.
- Blum, Françoise, 2012. "Sénégal 1968: révolte étudiante et grève générale", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 59, no. 2, pp. 144-177.
- Boubeker, Ahmed and Abdellali Hajjat (eds.), 2008. *Histoire politique des immigrations (post)coloniales*. France, 1920-2008. Paris: Amsterdam.
- Byrne, Jeffrey James, 2016. *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Centre d'études et d'initiatives de solidarité internationale (CEDETIM), 1975. *Les immigrés: contribution à l'histoire politique de l'immigration en France*. Paris: Stock.
- Cooper, Frederick, 2014. *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dedieu, Jean-Philippe, 2012a. *La parole immigrée. Les migrants africains dans l'espace public en France (1960-1995)*. Paris, Klincksieck.
- Dedieu, Jean-Philippe, 2012b. "S'engager dans l'image. Migrants ouest-africains et journalistes français dans les années 1960", *Ethnologie française*, 42, no. 4, pp. 811-822.
- Dedieu, Jean-Philippe and Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye, 2016. "The First Collective Protest of Black African Migrants in Post-colonial France (1960-1975). A Struggle for Housing and Rights", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 6, pp. 958-975.
- Daum, Christophe, 1998. *Les associations de Maliens en France: migrations, développement et citoyenneté*. Paris: Karthala.
- Diarra, Souleymane, 1968. "Les travailleurs Africains noirs en France", *Bulletin de l'I.F.A.N. Série B* 30, no. 3, pp. 884-1004.

- Dubresson, Alain, 1975. "Les travailleurs Soninké et Toucouleur dans l'Ouest parisien", *Cahiers de l'ORSTOM*, 12, no. 2, pp. 189-208.
- Escafré-Dublet, Angéline, 2008. "L'Etat et la culture des immigrés, 1974-1984", *Histoire@Politique*, 1, no. 4, p.15.
- Gary-Tounkara, Daouda, 2003, "Quand les migrants demandent la route, Modibo Keita rétorque: 'Retournez à la terre': Les 'Baragnini' et la désertion du 'chantier national' (1958-1968)", *Mande Studies*, 5, pp. 49-64.
- Gastaut, Yvan, 2000. *L'immigration et l'opinion en France sous la Ve République*. Paris: Seuil.
- Gordon, Daniel A., 2012. *Immigrants & Intellectuals. May '68 and The Rise of Anti-Racism in France*. Pontypool: Merlin Press.
- Granotier, Bernard, 1977. "Immigration et expression théâtrale", *Travail théâtral*, no. 26, pp. 134-138.
- Gueye, Omar, 2017. *Mai 1968 au Sénégal. Senghor face aux étudiants et au mouvement syndical*. Paris: Karthala.
- Hadj Belgacem, Samir, 2016. "Le théâtre au service de la cause immigrée (1970-1990)", *Plein droit*, no. 109, pp. 36-40.
- Hajjat, Abdellali, 2011. "The Arab Workers' Movement (1970-1976): Sociology of a New Political Generation", in Julian Jackson, Anna-Louise Milne and James S. Williams, eds. *May 68. Rethinking France's Last Revolution*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 109-121.
- Kalter, Christoph, 2016. *The Discovery of the Third World: Decolonization and the Rise of the New Left in France, c.1950-1976*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Liauzu, Claude, 1986. "Le tiers-mondisme des intellectuels en accusation. Le sens d'une trajectoire", *Vingtième Siècle* 12, no. 1, pp. 73-80.
- Manchuelle, François, 2004. *Les diasporas des travailleurs soninkés (1848-1960). Migrants volontaires*. Paris: Karthala.
- Mann, Gregory, 2015. *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Noiriel, Gérard, 2007. *Immigration, Antisémitisme et Racisme en France, XIX^e-XX^e siècle: discours publics, humiliations privées*. Paris: Fayard.
- Oudart, Jean-Pierre, and Serge Daney, 1978. "Entretien avec Sidney Sokhona", *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 285, pp. 48-54.
- Perron, Tangui, ed., 2007. *Histoire d'un film, mémoire d'une lutte*. Paris: Scope and Montreuil: Périphérie.
- Pitti, Laure, 2008. "Travailleurs de France, voilà notre nom." Les mobilisations des ouvriers étrangers dans les usines et les foyers durant les années 1970", in Ahmed Boubeker and Abdellali Hajjat (eds.), *Histoire politique des immigrations (post) coloniales. France, 1920-2008*, Paris: Amsterdam, pp. 95-111.
- Quiminal, Catherine, 1991. *Gens d'ici, gens d'ailleurs: migrations Soninké et transformations villageoises*. Paris: Christian Bourgois.
- Ross, Kristin, 2005. *Mai 68 et ses vies ultérieures* (translated by Anne-Laure Vignaux). Brussels: Complexe and Paris: Le Monde diplomatique.
- Samuel, Michel, 1975. *Le prolétariat noir africain en France*. Paris, Maspéro.
- Sayad, Abdelmalek, 2001. "Le retour, élément constitutif de la condition d'immigré", in *L'immigration ou les paradoxes de l'Altérité. Tome 1. L'illusion du provisoire*. Paris: Raisons d'Agir.
- Soumaré, Siré, 2001. *Après l'émigration, le retour à la terre. L'exemple de Somankidi-Koura*. Bamako: Jamana.
- Staal, Gilles de, 2008. *Mamadou m'a dit. Les luttes des foyers, Révolution Africaine, Africa Féte...* Paris: Syllepses.
- Timera, Mahamet, 1996. *Les Soninké en France, d'une histoire à l'autre*. Paris: Karthala.
- Viet, Vincent, 1998. *La France immigrée. Construction d'une politique (1914-1997)*. Paris: Fayard.
- Vigna, Xavier, 2007. *L'insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68. Essai d'histoire politique des usines*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.



Somankidi village, Mali, 1977.

First anniversary of the agricultural cooperative of Somankidi Coura, January 16, 1978.

Regional officials, first anniversary of Somankidi Coura, January 16, 1978.

Ladji Niangané, Mady Niakhaté, Moussa Coulibaly, Oussama and Fodé Diabira, village chief of Somankidi, January 16, 1978.

Ousmane Sinaré and women of Somankidi, first anniversary of Somankidi Coura.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.





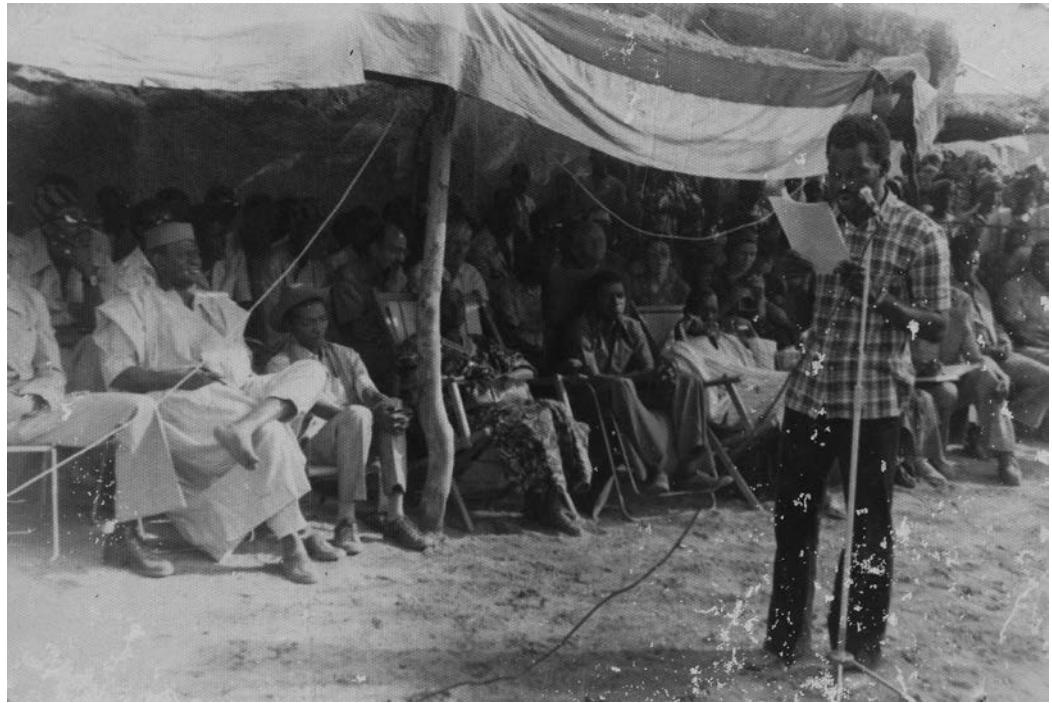
Welcoming committee and horse dance,
first anniversary of Somankidi Coura,
January 16, 1978.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.





Bilboard with photographs of the group installation and of the theatre performance of the play *Immigration : quelle solution ?* Immigration: What Is the Solution? I. Ibrahima Camara and Fodé Moussa Diaby, first anniversary of the agricultural cooperative of Somankidi Coura, January 16, 1978.

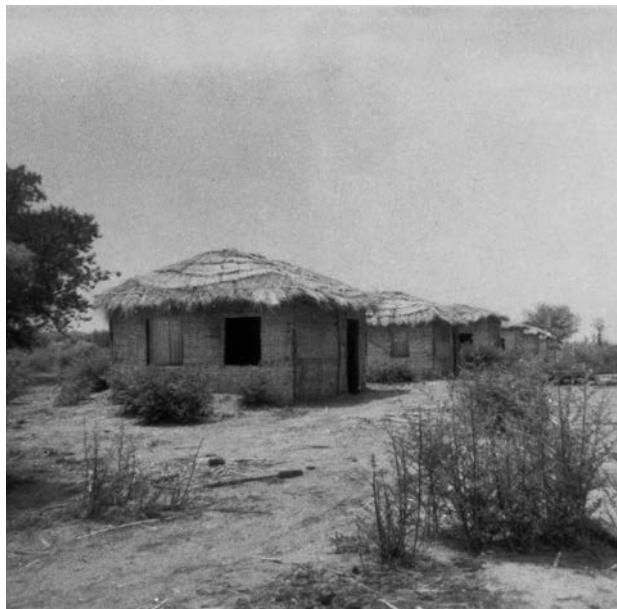


Ladji Niangané, first anniversary of the agricultural cooperative of Somankidi Coura, January 16, 1978.

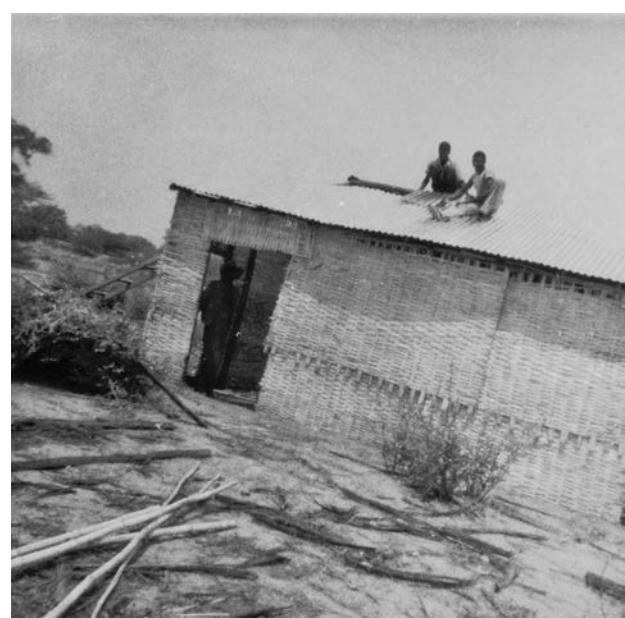
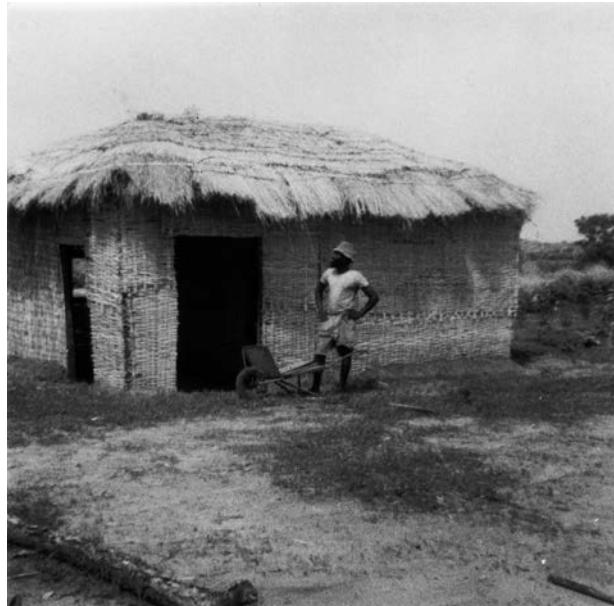
Members of the Somankidi Coura cooperative and members of the ACCIR association, 1979.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.





Stills from the 8mm film by Monique Janson,
Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1979.



Construction of the first houses in Somankidi Coura,
1977-1978. Bouba Touré Archives.

Bakhoré Bathily, interview

I should make a pilgrimage to France. I left there thirty years ago. I should go and see my old friends, the places where I used to live, the comrades. I left in 1976. On 14 December 1976. In the meantime, there have been lots of kids, lots of births and lots of deaths.

I left to France in 1969. I arrived in Paris on 14 July 1969. The French were parading for their National Day. I arrived there with my suitcase. I went to Montreuil. I could still be living there. I lived on Rue Franklin. I spent my first night in Rue Franklin. A few days later I moved to the 14th arrondissement. I stayed there for five years. Then we went to the 13th arrondissement, Rue du Chevaleret. I stayed there for two years. Then we had to move out again. We were relocated to the 14th arrondissement, to the Raymond Losserand Migrant hostel on 3/7 Rue des Arbustes. This is where we started to plan our return to our home country. This was in December 1976, with a group of fourteen people composed of Senegalese, Malians, Guineans, and Burkinabés. I've never returned to

France since. I live here. We dedicated our lives to the land. Our goal was to fight famine. To some extent we had to fight emigration – not openly but in our own way. We had to show that you could do something back home, that you could lead a life there. The proof is that thirty years on, here we are. We somehow managed and we're not desperate. We have a garden, machine, families, children, women... I think that's what really matters. I don't disapprove of emigration, but I think that those who haven't had the opportunity to leave, those who remain there, should do something. They must do something. Those who have emigrated and those who are here could complement one another: you're doing a little bit here, he does a little bit there, and if we put it all together, it becomes something big.

In June 1964 I lost my uncle, who had brought me up. His name was Tambo Bathily. He was the dean of the village, a very wise and friendly old man. When I lost my father, at the age of seven, he took charge of me and raised me until I was fifteen. I had a big brother who lived in France. He returned to the village when he learned that our uncle had

Interview with Sidney Sokhona
in *Cahiers du Cinéma* N°285,
February 1978
(Safrana)

Cahiers: *How did you get the idea for your second film, Safrana or Freedom of Speech, and how did you manage to make it?*

Sidney Sokhona: I'm quite convinced that I wouldn't have been able to make the film if I hadn't already made *Nationalité: Immigré*. The film was put together outside of normal production processes, but went a bit better than *Nationalité: Immigré*. That time we had almost nothing, but for *Safrana* there was money from selling the first film to two or three countries. The technical team and the people who act in the film agreed to work on a participatory basis. When the film was shot (it was completed in nineteen days, in Paris and the countryside), the Ministry of Cooperation (which all black-skinned filmmakers have dealt with; it usually buys the non-commercial rights to African films before production and gets copies for cultural centers in Africa once the film is finished) paid



Film stills from *Safrana or Freedom of Speech*, Sidney Sokhona, 1977.

died. He stayed in the family for a few months. I asked him to let me go. I asked him once, twice, three times. The third time, he agreed. In 1968 I took my first trip to Bakel, Senegal. I worked there as a seasonal worker for six months, after which I returned to the village.

Then I left to Dakar with the aim of travelling onto to Paris. I arrived there on 14 July 1969. My big brother lived in the 14th arrondissement, Rue Raymond Losserand, so I stayed with him. Slowly but surely, I began to make friends with people from my country, from other countries and from France. We slowly got to know each other.

My job was to put up wallpaper in homes. I worked as an unskilled laborer. I wanted to get rid of this job and learn an actual profession. I was trained in industrial electrical supplies in Marseille, where I stayed for six months. But the moment I finished my training coincided with our plan to return to Mali. So I put the job aside and started planning my return. Had it not been for our project, I would have earned a lot of money and had a proper job. But I would have remained abroad, which would have been a pity as well. We all ended up in

France. There were several nationalities among the members of the group: Malians, Senegalese, Mauritanians, Guineans, Burkinabés and even West Indians. We worked for three or four years within ACTAF. At the time, several African countries were fighting for their independence, including Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. We already had a certain degree of political

the laboratory based on a two-page document that explained a bit about what we wanted to do, but in a very moderate form. Today the film is done and the ministry no longer wants to speak about it. Ok, it's done, it's done. After presenting it to the C.N.C., we received 100,000 francs through the "Advance on Completed Film" program. Those 100,000 francs went to pay participants and cover some of the inflation. The distributor paid for the rest. In all, the film cost 300,000 francs without inflation—400,000 with.

C: Your second film differs from the first one primarily in that it's fictional. On the other hand, it's a fiction that refers to something that happened in reality, those training courses that African workers took in the countryside. Can you talk about that?

SS: In *N:I*, there was already a fictional perspective. If my next story has nothing to do with immigration, I'll film it one hundred percent as fiction. For two reasons. Firstly because of who I'm speaking to, that is to say immigrants themselves, and there's a chance that it will also be released in black Africa: for many of these people, it's not possible to follow quick commentary, read French, or even hear the words spoken by the actors. This makes it difficult for documentaries because in documentaries, words take precedence over images. Through fiction, even if you don't understand the words, it's possible to

consciousness, so we weren't going to sit idly by. Although we couldn't fight on the frontlines, we knew we had to do something. Our parents were at war and needed blood, medication, clothing and other support including money. We didn't have any money but we could send them what we had: our blood. We could collect medication and clothes and send them to the front. [Amílcar] Cabral was heading the PAIGC at the time. Everything we received was sent to Angola. Everything that needed to go to Mozambique was sent directly to the commander-in-chief, Samora Machel. We sent everything to the leaders in the respective countries, who took it directly to the front. This was what we did outside of our cultural work. We continued for several years until these countries had gained their independence. We did the same thing in Vietnam. We did a lot of actions there.

Our association was called ACTAF, the Cultural Association of African Workers in France. We conducted actions in various countries and various migrant hostels, not just in Paris. We organised screenings of films shot in Africa, mostly taken during the great drought in 1973. People were dying of hunger, it was hard to watch.

follow a person entering through a door, going out through another door, and based on this you can get a minimal understanding of what's going on. The second reason is that fiction breaks a bit with traditional leftist cinema, where the people in front of the camera never stop talking. I think a politically engaged film can use other weapons, reach a large number of people, and above all take cinema into account. People go see a film to explore a certain subject of course, but you have to express that subject in a way that will be absorbed very simply. With the films I'm talking about, either you like them or you totally reject them because they have nothing to do with cinema, because it's more of a speech or a book than a film.

*C: Instead of using a kind of broad activist script, you constructed both *N:I* and *Safrana* as a series of immediately understandable short scripts that interlink and separate...*

SS: For *N:I*, there were a few short written scenes, but you couldn't say there was a shooting script. *Safrana* was more written, except for the "country-side" part, which wasn't written at all aside from the trainees' dialogue. The farmers were entirely free to say what they wanted. I tried to integrate those farmers into a narrative—in which they controlled their own words of course. It's not a documentary, even if it is live, and even if I didn't know what they would say when I filmed.

Animals died. People were living skeletons who had nothing to eat and no access to healthcare.

We had to try and find a solution quickly in order to raise awareness about the misery suffered by our fellow countrymen. We figured that we needed to return home with volunteers, that we had to settle at a geographical crossroads, because it became obvious that the French authorities would sooner or later limit or stop immigration altogether. We wanted to go ahead before that happened, we wanted to stop before we would be told to do so. The fact that we settled here was not a coincidence. There are potentially better places than this. But we chose this place because it lies at a crossroads. You have the Senegal River, the road from Dakar to Bamako that crosses the Kayes area and the railway. We settled here so that those coming from Senegal, Mauritania or Guinea could see what we were doing. Because even here, you can find what it takes to survive, you can live. True, you earn a lot in France. But what we earn here, we earn it peacefully, we're not being rushed, we don't get up at five in the morning, we're not being asked to show our ID or

There are several kinds of left-wing cinema. When you see films made in France, in Latin America... there are several styles. I categorically reject a style often found in France: reciting a text in front of the camera. The thing is immediately theoretical, not concrete. If it's about a strike, someone will speak for twenty minutes and they'll show it for two minutes. When I try to denounce prostitution for example, I show it. This is one of a number of things that can be understood cinematographically, not just politically.

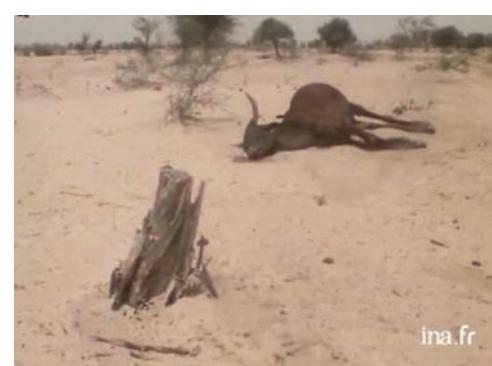
C: *What you're describing is how activist films were made a few years ago. Today there's a fairly widespread return to fiction.*

SS: That cinema existed when I made *N:I* around 1972. If people are going back to another kind of cinema, all the better. Since *N:I*, I've tried to consolidate this trend, to move more and more towards fiction. In *Safrana* there are two parts. The training course is the primary element of the film. It's something new: the fact that Africans would leave Paris and do a training course in farming, because they want to go home and be part of the reality of their own country—all of that was new. But *Safrana* is also an explanation: of why those people had that idea, how they got there. If that wasn't explained, people wouldn't understand anything in the film. It's a film that speaks about training courses in farming, but three-quarters of

residence permit. I prefer the little I earn here. I don't condemn immigration, but I believe it's better to find a solution back here. Those who can't find a solution back here will still be going elsewhere. But you shouldn't just leave and die in the shit. I'm against it. Dying in the cold—I'm against it. You have to leave in an official way. I'm against getting on a boat full of people and going off to die in Gibraltar. The reason we are here is to curb this kind of emigration a little bit. Sooner or later it will stop. Two years after our departure, Giscard [the French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing] introduced the 'system of the million'. Immigrants who volunteered to return home were paid one million [old francs]. We said we preferred our own million to Giscard's.

Our project was to return and share the burden of poverty, fatigue and illness with our parents, but also to appropriate and work the land. We wrote to the Malian, Senegalese and Mauritanian governments asking them to give us a plot of land so that we could settle down and do something, set an example for our countrymen. We said we wanted land that was situated at a crossroads

it is about something else. What's very important to me is that at the time when I made *N:I*, immigrants had reached a certain stage that made it possible to reach a further stage, which we see a bit of in *Safrana*. The strikes in the Sonacotra hostels and the politicization of immigrants were what pushed them to go further, to consider the question of returning to their country of origin. Between 1966 and 1972 when I was living in a hostel, it was inconceivable that an immigrant in a hostel would say: "I'm going to do a training course in farming". As is stated in the film, immigration not only served to alienate us, it also taught us to be ashamed of what we used to be. Today, every immigrant who hasn't developed a political awareness sees himself as a laborer more than a farmer. That's a good or bad position depending on your perspective. In Africa, farming is rejected by the powerful people who are the limbs of those regions. I should point out that it's also caused by the politics over there. What's positive in *Safrana* is that by becoming politically aware of reality, people question their own identity: who am I and what do I belong to? So this agricultural training exists, it was done. The film was made before those courses took place; right after the film, a training course was taken by fourteen Africans from Mali, Haute-Volta, Senegal and the Ivory Coast, but they all left France for Mali on November 5th 1977. They chose that country because it's one of Africa's



The Sahel drought in the news on ORTF, June 11. 1973, INA.



Bouba Touré with his peasant host
in *Safrana or Freedom of Speech*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1977.



Bouba Touré with the family of Gabriel Janson, agricultural
training instructor, Grandes-Loges, France, May 1976.
Bouba Touré Archives.

poorest regions, and they're in the process of doing their first experiment. It's harvest season right now. What was positive about my collaboration with them was that they're people who had a fairly accurate understanding of the situation. When they decided to do that training, the French government thought that maybe, with unemployment on the rise, this was a good way to get Africans to go back to Africa, so it offered them grants, which they rejected. They took those courses on their own, directly with farmers, without going through schools. Their idea was to learn a minimum that could be adapted to the economic and political conditions back home and then—village communities naturally existing in Africa—arrive in a village and work. The plan was to work there for two years, then go to another village and teach others what they know. Out of the fourteen of them, no two chose the same specialization: for one it was irrigation, for another it was breeding, and so on. I should mention that in *Safrana*, I also try to show the time when these trainees didn't have the political ability to do that training. What were they at the time? I tried to trace each person's earlier life, when he was a garbage man, unskilled worker, laborer, unemployed person, his relationship with immigrants, with French people. The training they did was real. They went to see farm workers. They worked with them. What I wanted to put in

so that people who left to France or came back from France could see what we were doing, so as to set an example and show them that you can live back here, that you can succeed. We said we would settle in the first country that would reply first.

Mali replied first. They wanted us to settle in Sélingué, but we preferred to come to Kayes because that's where most emigrants come from. In the Circle of Kayes and Yélémané, eighty percent of people try to emigrate. Along the river, the situation is the same: in the Senegalese regions of Futa and Matam and in the Mauritanian region of Gorgol. If we could settle in Kayes, we could show the people who go back and forth what we were doing and raise their awareness.

Fourteen of us came back—each of us will tell you the same story. Before we left, we trained with farmers in the Haute-Marne and Marne. I was in Guyonville, a small village in the Haute-Marne. Each of us spent six months with a farmer who instructed them. We worked in the fields for three weeks, then we attended agricultural school for a week, where we had theory classes.

the film could seem almost utopian as a point of departure—the idea that Africans are going to take courses from French farmers—since the economic reality back in our country isn't the same at all. This is why at the beginning of the film, it is said that it's up to us to adapt what exists here to conditions back at home. Those people who did the training, I saw them more as people who went to get information, do interviews—as journalists in a sense.

C: Actually, we were quite surprised never to see them working.

SS: We didn't want to prepare anything. We stayed less than a week. I arrived with the people who ask the questions, and the farmers answered as they wished. Those people in the film were trainees. I wanted them to act like journalists and, in terms of their clothes, I wanted them to wear sneakers for example. They didn't work but they asked questions. In my view, the important thing in French agriculture is the historical past. In our country, agriculture isn't being developed or encouraged at the present time, but French farmers can tell us what farmers here were like fifty years ago, what they're becoming today, even though small farmers have practically ceased to exist and everyone is becoming a farmer-laborer. All of this is very important for us. People who are going to face up to this reality in their

I lived with Jean-Michel Bresson, a friendly man with whom I got along well. Thanks to him I gained valuable knowledge on agriculture, but also on French social and political life. I learned a lot.

During the training we lived with French families for six months. In my eight years in France, I had been meeting French families for an hour or two, maybe a day, but never more. Living for six months in someone's house, in someone's room, was an incredible experience. We cried when we left, there was quite a lot of affinity between us.

After our return to Africa, some of them visited us in Somankidi Coura during their annual leave. After the agricultural training we left immediately without returning to Paris. Upon our arrival in Mali, we had agreed to meet up in Kayes. We went in two groups. The first went by plane, the second by boat. The first group arrived in Kayes on 13 December 1976.

Myself, Karamba Touré and Siré Soumaré went by boat because we had to transport the agricultural

country have to expect all that. Through colonization and the current governments, everything is modeled on the West. Today, working the land isn't encouraged but, as stated in the film, tomorrow the big land-owners could come and turn farmers and their sons into agricultural laborers with the regime's support. These are the reasons why I think it's more important to go and ask questions about the past, about the experience and reality of today, than to spend three months on a tractor—especially if there won't be any tractors back home when we get there...

C: *With regard to what you've just described of the fiction in this film, what sorts of reactions have you received from people who are politicized, from activists? Do they understand what you're doing? Do they approve?*

SS: So far I've done screenings for audiences that mostly consisted of farmers. They supported the film every time, pointing to the new way I've portrayed farmers. All of the screenings in the provinces went well. In Paris, in discussions, people said the farmers are too nice. They aren't racist, whereas in the part of the film that takes place in Paris, people are racist or violent. And those who really liked *N:I* were surprised I'd do a film like *Safrana*, which they found too pleasant, not harsh enough. Overall, these reactions confirmed my approach. There isn't just one way. People expected a film

along the lines of *N:I*—a bit of political awakening and some protest struggles. I still completely stand by *N:I*. I defend it as much as I defend *Safrana*, but you also have to take account of reality. Even the people we see struggling in *N:I* have gone in different directions today. Today, immigration has almost become a staple for everyone. Some people make films on immigration because it does good, others because it sells. And when the subject is immigration, I think it's very bad to stress destitution.

In *Safrana* I reject this, explaining that immigration is precisely at the stage where it's criticizing this emphasis on destitution, saying it's dangerous. The French people who come to see this kind of film can be easily persuaded by telling them to go see the people who live in basements in the 18th arrondissement, those whose livers have been ravaged by tuberculosis... I say that the reality isn't this, but much more importantly that immigrants themselves have started to develop political awareness, assert their identity, take control of their own destiny and fully discuss whether or not they should get involved with the labor class. Whether it's done by journalists or viewers, emphasizing destitution only gives them a bad conscience. Since the Second World War, that kind of message is what has been separating the French laboring class from immigrants, and immigrants from one another.



The protagonists interviewing the farmers in *Safrana or Freedom of Speech*, Sidney Sokhona, 1977.

C: *In the first part of the film, one also constantly gets the feeling that all of the French people who are supporting and working with immigrants are very remote from them at the same time. In this sense, you're even more radical than in N:I: whether it's the role of the leftist educator, or the dialogue between the unionist and the laborer who's leaving the factory to take the course, or the the truck driver who seems like he's there but not there...*

SS: When making the film, I wasn't sure that someone who'd liked *N:I* would like *Safrana*, which is not to say that no one could like both. For me *Safrana* is the continuation of *N:I*. During the period when it was made, in relation to the reality of that period, there was a certain number of shots—the very structure of the film—that we had no choice but to include. Maybe for the first time, people were seeing things they'd never seen, so it was a lot easier for them to accept it. In my opinion, people are also unsure about whether a film on immigration should be cinematic. What bothers them a bit in *Safrana* is the technical aspect.

N:I was in black and white, and there was a certain intentional poorness. It would be unthinkable to film an immigrants' hostel in color. A lot of people have a hard time with

tools we'd been given in France as well as our comrades' luggage.

Everything that couldn't be shipped by plane was hauled onto a 404 Peugeot pick-up with a tarpaulin top that we drove to Marseilles and put on the boat. Upon our arrival in Dakar, we met up with the other comrades in Kayes.

Once all of us had got together, we hired a truck to get to Somankidi. Before arriving there, we contacted the village chiefs and notables explaining to them that we were given sixty hectares from the state and asking them to provide accommodation until we built our own houses on the site. The village chief, Mamadou Boubou Diabira, welcomed us and gave us a house. Only two of us, who were married, went to live elsewhere. We stayed there for five months.

Of these sixty hectares, we managed to convert twenty into farmland that could be irrigated properly and worked during the rainy season and the off-season. We worked together as a group for fifteen years. But when the families began to grow, it seemed better for each family to take care of

the structure of *Safrana*. Moreover, I think it's very false to try and compare Paris with the countryside. Personally I know Paris a lot better, because I've been living there for ten years. I completely stand by the relationship I show between French people and immigrants. The only difference relative to the time of *N:I* is that back then the radical left, even with its million stupidities, was getting involved in the hostels. There were the strikes in the Sonacotra hostels, which we talk about in the film. For the first time we said to the French: "We made that, we live in that, we know that. Let's discuss it." For the first time, immigrants themselves determined their own demands, saying "support us" to the French instead of listening to them tell us to do this and do that through the guy who came to write the leaflet, as happened at the Riquet hostel. A while ago, the Sonacotra hostels wanted to do a demonstration, but the Left said it had more pressing problems!... There's a very big difference between Paris and the countryside. I won't use the example from the film, but that of the fourteen comrades who spent six months on farms, where relations with the farmers were very good. Aside from a few Africans who have a few French friends, most immigrants only have working relationships with the French.

itself. Each family was given a plot of land that would allow it to educate its children, keep them busy, introduce them to agricultural work and motivate them.

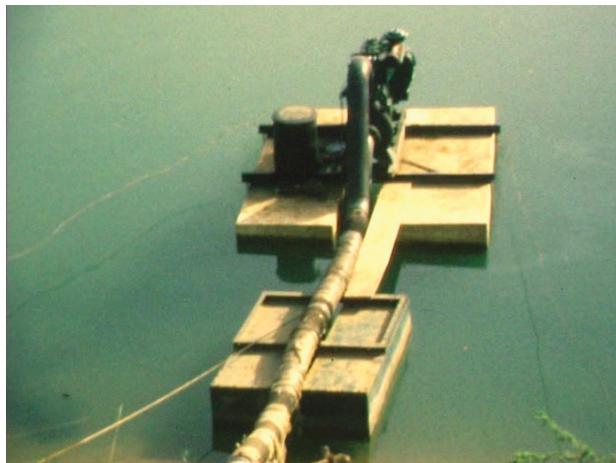
If the children aren't motivated, the village will disappear after we die. I worked for my father. So my children must be able to work for me. That was always the goal. We shared everything and so there was work for all the members of the family.

When there's a problem we can't solve, we get together quickly, exchange our views and try to find a solution then and there. The cooperative looks after the individual and its members. We also provide mutual assistance and share the motor pump. The members of the cooperative don't receive the land permanently. You are given land if you farm it. If you don't farm it, it will be taken away from you and given to someone else.

The motor pump is a collective tool, it's there for everyone. But demand is now greater than supply. The farming surface is so large that the engine can't irrigate it all at once. We were forced to share and make small groups of two or three people



Stills from the 8mm film by Monique Janson,
Somankidi Coura, Mali 1977.



who take turns organising the purchase of fuel and irrigating together. But we still have problems because the engine can't irrigate everything, as it's very old and the surface is very large. The pump is working too much, way too much. For example, Dramane, who looks after the pump, has one plot that is four hundred metres away from the engine, and others that are closer. It's difficult to irrigate distant plots simultaneously. Even with a bigger engine, there would be too many of us. We are eight families, and there are more than fourteen plots in different areas.

There are plots with banana plantations, plots with tomatoes, cabbage, onions and chillies that aren't next each other. If you haven't finished watering your plots in one day, you have to wait ten days before continuing. This has led people to buy small motor pumps. I have a 5-hp pump. When I need to water the onions, I put in four litres and I water. Dramane and Ladjé have the same pump. The engine never gets to rest. It's running from 7 am to 6 pm every day. That's why we bought a small individual unit. It allows us to give the big engine a little rest and to speed up things. This is our third engine since 1976.

We came here with two 30-hp Lister 3, a German brand, if I'm not mistaken. We put up the first one, which lasted twelve years. I think the second one lasted just as long. The third one is a Lister HR2. It's weaker than the previous ones.

Before we got here, this was a forest. All sorts of animals lived here. When we arrived, people said we were crazy: 'They're sick. Who wants to live and work here with all these snakes? They're going to get killed.' You wouldn't believe how many snakes we killed. The people of Somankidi know.

They used to have fields here but they abandoned them because of the snakes. God helped us. We cut the trees and uprooted them, we developed the land and started working. It took us forty-one days to clear, uproot and dig the main channel. I wrote everything down in my notebook, I counted the days. I was in charge of all the works. I recorded peoples' absences.

There was no absence and no delay. Latecomers were fined. If you wanted to go somewhere, you had to ask for permission. There was military discipline. If you made a mistake, you were punished. That's what made us succeed. It was strict, there

Two guys can work ten years at Renault, clocking in, maybe going to eat in the canteen together, but aside from that, each of them takes his own bus and goes home. Their relationship is imposed by the employers, a relationship of constraint. You can't chat while the production line is operating. Whereas in the countryside, the trainees were embraced by the famers there. They shared the same living room and ate at the same table. The relationship couldn't have been the same. Of course this is not to say there was no racism in the countryside. But when people live together, they get to know each other more quickly. Relationships have the chance to improve.

Here in Paris, even two French people who've lived in the same building for ten years don't know each other.

C: *But there's racism on both sides. The whole sequence with the French couple trying to pick up the black man is a rehash of a racist fantasy on your side...*

SS: Even a student from Africa can't understand that scene. What I tried to show was how far exploitation goes. Today they still go looking for blacks and Arabs to sexually satisfy young women who've married old industrialists for example. Everything is a financial relationship. Not just

the immigrant's work in the factory, but his very self is merchandise. Here again not everyone can refuse. You have to reach a certain level of political awareness, where you know it's a relationship that doesn't last, a bulk relationship, the kind where they need you today, they take you in, and then afterwards you leave.

Lots of workers I know can see this scene in a positive light, whereas a student who lives in a university residence and has the possibility of dating women in a normal way can't make sense of it. He'll say it's a pure invention, whereas in hostels, all the guys will tell you, maybe not in front of everyone: "Exactly the same thing happened to me."

C: *What I find interesting is that scene's status in the film. It's actually a very realistic scene, but it's also presented as a fantasy you're throwing in the viewers' faces. It seems to me there's a certain provocation.*

SS: In my film, everyone empties his pockets and says: "This is what I have." Everyone tells his own story to himself according to whether or not he has reached that level or surpassed it. That's where everyone takes out his baggage. So it can be brutal for someone who's never heard of that story, but for someone who's lived through it, it's one more joke, which they're getting beyond, but only now—and unfortunately, not everyone sees it as a joke.



Bangaly Camara and Moussa Coulibaly irrigating the fields, Somankidi Coura, Mali, April 1978. Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Stills from *Safrana or Freedom of Speech*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1977.



Sowing the fields in Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1977.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

C: *I was thinking of that point mainly in relation to French viewers...*

SS: Yes, there's that scene, and there's also the dog scene where lots of French viewers say: "That's not possible." Those things also existed and continue to exist. If French people found that scene normal, this would mean either that they were all aware of it, or that they had the same living conditions as immigrants. Unfortunately the rule of capitalism, of everything that exists today, is to divide people. It's perfectly normal for a French person not to believe that scene because it's not his reality. A French person could come out with things that would totally shock an immigrant.

C: *In the pickup scene and the scene with the little dog, there's a slapstick element in the tone that's bound to be disorienting for the Parisian viewer...*

SS: It's a scene that exists in the film in relation to other scenes. It's very meaningful to me because in a nutshell, I project a whole experience. There's that guy who returns to the hostel, the one who was haggled over, then suddenly the radio in the car plays a very happy song. Right after that song, there's a news report enumerating catastrophes taking place all over the world. A bit later, there's a so-called representative of our continent speaking, and people can deduce what they want from his

words. We see the close collaboration of a certain number of francophone African governments with France's current administration. To those of us who are no longer African, are not French, but are immigrants pure and simple, this confirms that we can no longer expect anything from them or from France. For the struggle, this is very important. What's important to me in this scene is to say that this exists, and say how it can be understood. Like in *N:I*, when we show beds, all we are doing is showing beds and that's enough.

There's something else that throws people off here, in the film's structure. I'm very interested in fiction and at the same time I'm combatting myths, symbols that have been very awkward and even oppressive for us, like James Bond, cowboys and so on. In this sense, the profusion of heroes and characters in the film is meaningful. Life is made by people, and these people need to be seen in terms of classes. It's at this level that the problem can be dealt with. The character who kills everyone, is stronger than everyone—I try to fight against him as well. It's a film that calls itself into question. People will be having a laugh and suddenly it becomes sad or even dramatic, and then they're laughing again. It's a form that people aren't used to, but if we want to start with reality, that's what reality is. For example, people could be in the middle of drinking champagne, having fun, when

was a sharia, a law that you had to respect. No one was above it, not even the president—back then it was Karamba. If someone wanted to visit their sister in Kayes, they had to ask and we would decide whether it was useful or not.

The first task was to remove and uproot the trees in order to clear the land. You can't irrigate, farm or plough in a field full of roots. We used machines to remove the wild fig trees. After that we had to plough. At the time there weren't many tractors around. The town of Kayes had only three tractors, which belonged to the public works department. We asked them, and they came to plough. We were then able to use the daba [hoe] and work manually. The second year we had the means to pay for ploughing oxen. The main channel was built with soil from termite mounds. We couldn't just use any soil for the channel. The soil had to be sticky. We removed all the termite mounds we could find in the area. The channel is 1.3 kilometres long and entirely built from termite soil. We went to get termite soil with the pick-up, even if it was two kilometres away. This took us twenty-one days. We cracked open the mounds with pickaxes, filled

the earth into the tarpaulin with shovels and poured it into the pick-up. We went back and forth all day, alternating days of transporting with days of building. Once the soil was spread out, we got water from the river. During the building process, we watered the soil to make sure it was compact.

To waterproof the soil, you only need to run water through the channel once. Termites play an important role in this process, as they take the earth from God knows where in order to build their homes. This earth is different from other soils in that it's sturdier and more resistant. The termites transport the earth rolled up into small balls, which they drag to the mound. These little balls are like grains of millet. When you look at them, you see that they're damp, as if someone had poured water on them. Only termites or scientists know more about this. If it hadn't been for the women, we wouldn't be here today. Bravo to the women! When we arrived, only two of us were married—Siré Soumaré and Moussa Coulibaly. It was their spouses who took care of everything: cooking, fetching water, doing



Film stills from *Safrana or Freedom of Speech*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1977.

the laundry, cleaning from morning till evening. They worked all the time we were in the fields. One by one, each of us got married. The women were together all the time. When we were out in the fields, Coulibaly's wife invited all the women to her place, where they exchanged ideas. They helped us a lot in our work. Hats off to these women! They're still playing this role today. We shared all our difficulties with them. They were there whenever needed. When we asked them to go to the market and sell tomatoes at 3:30 in the morning, they got up. Whenever we needed them, they got up. When it was harvesting time, the women took charge of selling the produce. In short, they did everything.

I really thank them and take my hat off to them. When we arrived, we built fourteen houses. The houses were made from kilinti. We went to Kéniéba to buy thousands of kilinti. But it didn't work. Initially, Bouba Touré would cross the river at night and sleep here on his own. But that didn't work because there were too many parasites—termites, for example—which kept on destroying the wood. And the wind was too strong, especially

someone leaves and gets run over by a car... Life is like that, but cinema doesn't show that to us. We're free to reject the cinema that has alienated us. In a film, when someone calls a taxi, he doesn't have to go searching for it. He lifts his arm, the taxi appears and there's never any problem with money. Whereas in reality we know there are people who kill each other for that.

C: *There's a strange sequence, the one with the water diviner. Did he appear on his own and you kept him, or was it planned?*

SS: We come from a Muslim-majority country, where religion plays a big role. Back home, people wait for rain in order to farm, and if the rain doesn't come, they say it's a faulty year, a catastrophic year, whereas people living on the river could do some irrigation. Among the French farmers, I chose a certain number of archetypes, like the carpenter who was gradually forced to leave the land, and another one struggling to live on a small farm. The water diviner's role is to find water. That's extremely important for us and I wanted to meet one of them. In the village where we shot the film, I only knew one person who introduced us to others. When we went to see the water diviner, he showed us several watering places he'd found. Like all the other farmers in the film, he stands by what he says. The way he was filmed, the way I concentrate on him, is due to the fact that I come from a region where

for straw huts. So we replaced these houses with constructions made from *banco* [mud bricks].

We were a group of friends who didn't know each other at the outset. It was through our common goal that our friendship developed. That goal was to fight famine. In our group there were Senegalese, Malians, Guineans, Burkinabés and Mauritanians. There were even Tanzanians and West Indians, but they weren't able to join us here. The West Indians returned to Paris, they didn't come all the way down here. The ones who did were Senegalese, Malians, Guineans, Burkinabés and Mauritanians. The Mauritanian guy left us in Senegal. We arrived together in Dakar, but then he turned around and went home. We continued, which is how we became friends. We didn't know each other. My native village, Diakhandapé, is three or four kilometres away from here, the president's village is eighty kilometres away. My neighbor back there is Burkinabé, my neighbor opposite is Senegalese, the other neighbor is from Yélemané. We got to know each other as immigrants, and we gathered around common objectives. This is what created a symbiosis and made us become a team. Those of us who are over there [in France] aren't

this phenomenon isn't known at all. For me, as a filmmaker, there were two aspects: since I didn't believe in it, there was a certain insistence on my part, as if the reason for showing him would materialize in the shot. On the one hand, there was the water diviner doing a demonstration on a source that had already been found, which eliminated the search in favor of the explanation: how should the digging be done when a source is found? How deep is the water? And so on. I'm very glad that guy's in the film because for us, for African farmers, it's one of the main problems today: where can water be found? At the same time, there's also the aspect that makes you say: this is something we've never seen—is it true? Is it not true?

C: *You film him a bit like a white sorcerer—half sorcerer, half scientific experimenter...*

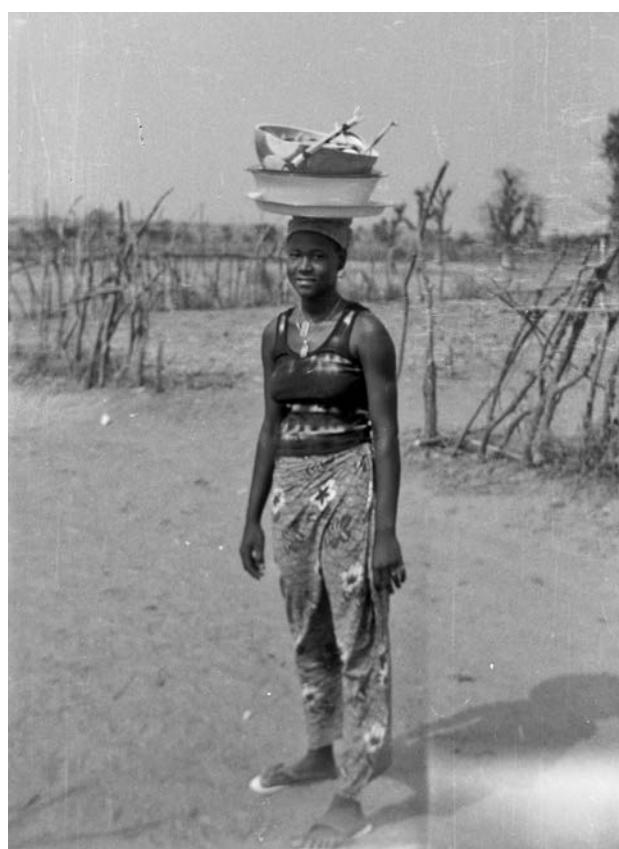
SS: The words *sourcier* [the French word for "water diviner"] and *sorcier* [sorcerer] are similar but I don't think so. His technique is similar to certain African techniques. It happens quite often that a person distinguishes himself through individual knowledge in Africa. It might be an elder, a fetish-priest... In Africa, the word "wise man" is used more than the word "sorcerer".

I wasn't trying to make fun of him, nor did I take him to be a sorcerer. I had a passion for filming him, as if I wanted to prove to people that it would work.

C: *Very generally, in the oral tradition in African culture, are there elements of how a story is told—the kind of story, the kinds of characters, etc.—that could be used in cinema?*

SS: First it must be said that in Africa today, we have production problems, money problems. Cinema is a Western phenomenon, a money phenomenon. I don't know a continent richer in the spoken word than Africa. There are many heroes, many stories that people tell each other. Still today, given that there aren't schools everywhere, in the countryside that's how people are educated. For cinema, the problem of the script practically never arises, except if one wants to film something absolutely new of course. For the film I'm currently preparing on Africa, I'm thinking in Saracole language, but when I transcribe it into French, at least fifty percent of what interests me doesn't appear, since French is so weak on that level. All African stories are fiction, and when you hear a griot singing, when you understand the words, not only is he telling a story but he's setting the scene at the same time. He's describing the position of the horse's mane, the color of the rider's cap and so on.

C: *So the idea is to shape your films through a succession of scripts that stem from the African tradition?*



On the way to the river, Somankidi village, January 1977. Photograph by Bouba Touré.

SS: For my next film, yes. For the first two, there was a bit of the African tradition, but since the problems are explored from here, they're all influenced by the experience of immigration. To represent immigration, I created various short sketches, while creating cinema that is not a product of discourse, but conveys discourse through these little scenes. This isn't contradictory: that's how stories go in Africa too. When you go under the discussion tree, there are very, very bright people telling stories that last the whole day. You can be almost sure that some of them will tell you a story every time they meet you on a street corner.

C: *Is the fact of being an African filmmaker who works in France a positive thing overall in your view? Is it temporary? How do you see your situation?*

SS: I think it's negative for two reasons. When I made *N:I*, I was in the middle of the immigration reality. Unfortunately today, whether you're making left-wing or right-wing cinema, there are very often things you can't avoid. The very image created around cinema is a myth. For seven or eight years I never left Paris because I didn't have the means, but because of the fact that I'd made a film, I was offered tickets to the United States, to Africa and so on. And unfortunately, since cinema is made with money, you're very often in debt and it's only by selling your film through those festivals that

there just for themselves, just for their own good. They're there for all of us.

I constructed a building this year, but I didn't do it myself. My children did it. My children are emigrants and I'm benefiting from it. That's why I can't be against it.

Something else: the experience I have today, I didn't acquire it here but in France. It's in France that I became aware. You had to go to France to become aware of this political aspect. What I know today, what I can judge today, what I can bring to my village, my region and my country, I don't think it would have been possible if I had stayed home like the others. Thank God, I know what to do and what not to do.

Our example was followed by others who came after us. Several groups of immigrants returned home. There's Guakoura, Soboku, Sélingué and Fégu. There's many of them. We have a regional union of agricultural cooperatives (URCAK) that brings together all the cooperatives created here

you'll succeed in paying back your debts, or even keeping afloat if you want to make another film. For an immigrant trying to stay true to himself, that's very negative. As soon as you make a film about a given condition, one that still exists, it's true that it needs to be shown to the outside world, but in relation to that condition, those trips alone place you on the outside. I hope *Safrana* is the last film I make about immigration. Today I want to go back home. Being a filmmaker in Africa is complicated. There are problems that are difficult to resolve, and the cinematographic apparatus is outside the country, so you can only go temporarily to shoot, and then you have to go away again to edit it outside.

For exiled filmmakers like myself, the Sembène case is very important. Despite millions of problems, he managed to stay connected with reality, whereas those of us who are here, maybe it's easier for us to say what we want to say, but we're outside of reality, even outside of our own immigrant reality. As soon as you're making cinema you're no longer an immigrant.

So I think African filmmakers should go back home and try to become a part of the reality of their country, like every African worker who has developed awareness.

C: *Maybe this is a good time to talk about your next film, which you want to shoot in Mauritania...*

or in France. There are fourteen projects from France that have joined the union. The example we set was followed.

**Interview by Raphaël Grisey,
Somankidi Coura, 2008.**

SS: I've provisionally named this project *The Last Colonizer*. To me, the last colonist isn't European, it's the one we made at home, it's our own brother, the black man, the Arab. It's the story of twin brothers, one who came to France and another who stayed behind. The film begins with the first brother's deportation. We see him at an airport in an African capital. I try to show that this person—who was deported because he'd more or less participated in rent strikes before developing awareness—passed through that same airport two or three years earlier; probably with an attaché case and three-piece suit even though he was a garbage man. He pictures that time, and then sees today. He goes into working-class districts where there are hundreds of people who want to go to France. He tells them Paris isn't good, that there are shanty towns and all that. People remind him of what he'd said himself three years earlier—he'd returned with slides of the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, saying: "that's France". At the same time, I play with what people think of France when they've never seen it. So this guy returns to the village. One of the colonists who ruled over this region dies. Through this colonist, the elders recall images of colonization, comparing them with images of today, those of black power. I show the colonist making inhabitants do forced labor, but we quickly arrive at images of today, with tax collection police who, if a cow is about to give

birth, wait until the calf is born to collect extra tax. Or when the foresters need money, they come near the village, start a fire and then go to the villagers saying: "You started the fire, now pay this fine.", and so on. It's a film that also explores the problem of the differences between Moors and blacks in Mauritania. When it comes to power, there's an agreement. They walk in twos: one black, one white. When they arrive in a Soninke village, the black man is the subordinate and the Arab is the chief. The roles reverse when they go to an Arab village... It's complicated.

Interview by Serge Daney and Jean-Pierre Oudart





Gassama Touré and Demba Diawara,
Somankidi Coura, Mali, May 1993.

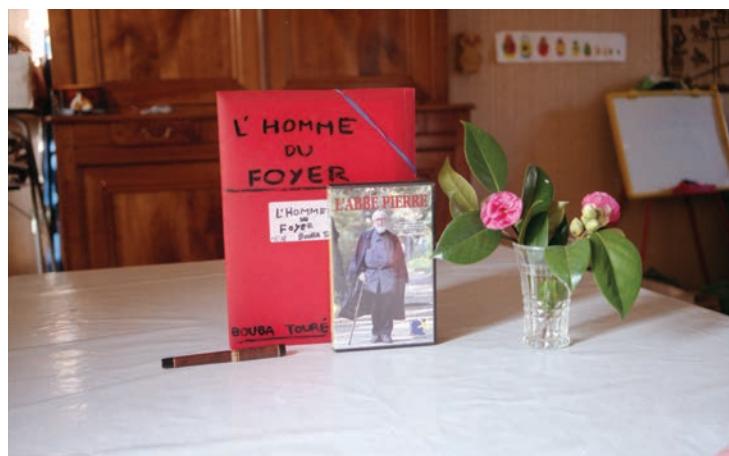
Concert during a wedding ceremony,
Pierrefitte, France, April 1993.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

Camp of evicted african families in Cachan, August 18, 2006.

Manuscript of the text "L'homme du Foyer"
[The Man of the Hostel], Le Mans, France, November 1993.

Bassa Niakhaté, Somankidi Coura, Mali, May 1993.



Lyrics of the song *Bul ma Miin*,
Orchestre Baobab, 1970's.

Don't be too attached to me
Don't be attached to me until you forget about me
Then it will be hard

Life, you know how to betray
You deprived me of my father and my mother
I you proise me my child, you are deceiving me

I do not eat anymore, I do not drink anymore
I do not lie down anymore, I do not sleep anymore
If you promise me my child, I do not believe you

It was on a Wednesday during Ramadan
He/she said goodbye to me, saying he/she was
coming back
Since then, I have not seen my child

Oh being lonely, oh being lonely
Oh being lonely in this life
My child gone this way

Bul ma miin, Bul ma miin
Bul ma miin ba fatte ma
Kon mu ŋaaw

Adduna yaa mëna wor
Xaň ma ndey xaň ma baay
Boo ma digee sama doom nax nga ma

Lekkatuma, naanatuma
Tëddatuma, nelawatuma
Boo ma digee sama doom nax nga ma

Alarba la woon ci weeru koor
Mu taggu ma ne ma maangi ŋëw
Boobu ba téy gisuma sama doom

Woy wéét, woy wéét
Woy wéét adduna
Sama doom dem na nii

Lyrics of the song *Bul ma Miin*, written by Sidney Sokohna and Sidi Insa Wade for the film *Safrana or Freedom of Speech*, 1977.

Don't be too attached to me
Don't be attached to me until you forget about me
God is great ! I won't cry mother and father, Faama,
you replace my parents.

Listen to the story of this man who lived in his
illage with nothing. Once, he got some money.
He greated the dependents he took care of and
said : « I go to the city and I come back »

When he entered in the concrete jungle, he met
a rich metropolitan woman. She married him for
his body. He forgot about his family. Time flew.
One day, the woman got bored and provoked him.
He got angry and she left with his great fortune.
He remained alone, powerless and poor.

He went back to those he had forgotten. Once in
the village, he find his daughter he left when she
was a baby. He asked her : « Cumba N'Doli N'Doli,
where is your mother Dadi ? – Mother prepared
me some porridge and left to sell her water. –When
your mother Dadi will come back, tell her that a
man without beard and in bad shape came over, ate
the oat and ran away. »

Don't be too attached to me
Don't be attached to me until you forget about me



Stills of the film *Safrana or Freedom of Speech*, 1977.

Sidney Sokhona interviewed
by Catherine Ruelle and
Guy Henebelle in *CinémAction*
No. 8, 1979.

Catherine Ruelle: *Sidney Sokhona, you arrived in France at the age of fourteen, one migrant worker among others. Your first film, Nationalité: Immigré, recounted your experience and that of the other migrant workers who were with you in the hostel on rue de Riquet, where you lived for six years. What exactly where the conditions under which you came to France?*

Sidney Sokhona: Tachott, the village I lived in, is completely cut off from the world, even from other Mauritanian towns during the rainy season, but it's a Soninke village, and most of the Mauritanian workers in France are Soninke. I had uncles who'd "done France"! When I was in primary school, they sometimes came to Mauritania on vacation, and gave us the idyllic image of France that was circulated for a long time. In this sense I was more or less encouraged to emigrate. Also, I thought it was better to come and study in Paris. Those who've studied abroad have a slight superiority over others. That was my reasoning at the time. At that age, I didn't consider of the consequences. So I left without a scholarship. I didn't even worry about that, because I didn't think there could be financial problems in France, especially given that those who came back to the village always had money, and at that time we didn't know what they'd had to go through to get it.

Since I was only fourteen years old, I was forced to doctor my identity card, by writing a false date of birth. From Tachott, I went to Dakar in a bush taxi. At the time this cost 3,000 FCFA (60 francs). I stayed in Dakar for three months. My uncles in Paris had sent me a bit of money to keep me going there while I waited for them to send me the travel money. Among the Soninke in Paris, there are school funds that workers pay into, which among other things are used to pay people's travel expenses and so on. When I got the travel money, I left. At the time, in 1966, emigrating wasn't as difficult as it is today. Workers were needed in Europe. So I took the boat from Dakar to Marseille and entered France as a "holidaymaker". I had around



Stills from *Nationalité: Immigré*, Sidney Sokhona, 1975.

a thousand French francs on me, just to prove that I wasn't going to steal something the second I arrived! I didn't even have a passport, just an identity card marked "farmer's son". How could a Mauritanian farmer pay for a vacation in France? But at the time this didn't bother anyone!

I took the train from Marseille to Paris. I was with people who'd already "done France". In the boat, I'd formed a certain idea of France. Even in the taxi I took from Gare de Lyon to the hostel, seeing the city, the large buildings, I thought it was all beautiful. But when I got inside the hostel, and saw that it wasn't much different from the Soninke district in Dakar, I was deeply disappointed. As an immigrant worker said, here we're in a well, and when you fall in a well you stay there! So my first disappointment was the housing. In a hostel like the one on rue de Riquet, we slept 50 to dormitory. But this wasn't the most disastrous thing! That came next. When I started going out, having contact with people. When I realized that my uncle's salary wasn't enough to pay for my studies, or to support both of us, that I'd have to work, that in the factories they were looking for men in their prime rather than teenagers, that I had no scholarship and couldn't study... All of these problems accumulated day after day, and my disappointment got deeper and deeper. Today when I think back, I see that it was difficult and enriching in equal measure. But that was the period when I started becoming self-sufficient.

CR: *How did you start working?*

SS: Through a laborer who lived in the same hostel, I found work with a cleaning company that used us as "cleaning men" for 3 francs per hour. I went to school in the afternoon, but there were problems at school too, and this is what later led me to Université de Vincennes. At the end of 1967, I passed a competitive exam given by the FPA, which sent me to Charleville-Mézières to do an electricity internship. After returning to Paris, I worked for a company that employed me as a switchboard operator, then for Crédit Lyonnais until 1975.

CR: *How did you make the transition from oblivious teenager to the struggle and the hostel strikes in 1971?*

SS: It was a logical consequence. I had come to France with my head full of idyllic images. It's

very hard for a Mauritanian farmer to imagine that there could be tramps here, or people who sleep on the street! I arrived in France in a state of deep oblivion! But then when you enter into life, reality and work without any transition, you're confronted with the law of supply and demand and in the factories, you also discover a tradition of struggle. Through the strikes and through direct relations between bosses and laborers, which doesn't exist in African villages, consciousness grows... I lived in that slum-hostel on rue de Riquet... and there were the five people who died at the Aubervilliers hostel: three Senegalese and two Mauritanians who'd made a fire because their hostel wasn't heated, and died of asphyxiation... Other things like that... This is what motivated our first strike movements, which were not political. We went on strike, not because we thought we had the right to strike but because we were afraid of dying. Through that struggle, we gained a certain experience and our action became increasingly politicized. Personally, at the beginning I wasn't very politically aware. If I rose to "the front line", this is explained by the fact that out of 300 workers in the hostel, there were only around twenty of us who spoke French. There was a certain number of young people like myself serving as a liaison between the workers and the public services, for example to discuss formalities, procedures and so on. When we went on strike, there were many interventions, by the police two days after we started, and then they cut off the water. We needed to do what was necessary, talk to people. We became more or less active members of the struggle. This is also when France had just gone through May 68, and the radical left was still full of energy. Leftists were heavily involved in the hostels, and we were constantly in contact with them. It was all of those events, those discussions, that placed us at the head of the struggle. These small day-to-day experiences trained us.

CR: *Is this the experience that gave rise to Nationalité: Immigré?*

SS: It was that strike to some extent, recounting my own experience and that of people I knew. At the time, I was also attending the university in Vincennes, which is not just any university. All the struggles outside had an impact there, on the way

they teach there as well, and all of this increasingly motivated me to participate, reflect and film.

Guy Henebelle: When, how and under what conditions did you make that first feature-length film? Had you made short films before? What was your budget and how did you get the money?

SS: That film was in fact my first feature-length film, and I hadn't made any short films before. In 1972 I wrote a script entitled "The Orphans of God", which I haven't yet been able to make. As you can easily imagine, *Nationalité: Immigré* was made under the most difficult conditions, since I started filming without any money at all. I shot the first scene in 1972, and while doing other manual work, I continued sporadically filming with the small amount of money I earned from that work. For example, it's happened that I've had to wait three months before being able to film a scene, or develop a scene I've already filmed.

Since I had no producer, from the outset I had no illusions and I suspected things might go as they did. The only help I got (but it was vital) was from all the friends, technicians, actors or workers playing themselves who agreed to work without being paid. Jean Rouch also lent me an editing and mixing studio for two months.

GH: In relation to others, your film has the particularity of offering an insider's description of the struggle of an African workers' hostel on a rent strike. How did you go about it? Did you live in that hostel?

SS: I did live in the hostel in question. I stayed there for six years. So everything I criticize in my film is something I experienced myself. I also witnessed the launch of the strike. At the beginning, people had trouble getting organized, because the prefecture and the hostel owner played upon the disagreements between the Sarakole, the Toucouleur and the Bambara, or between young and old. Because of this it took a year before everyone could go on strike. The strike was based on the fact that ever since the hostel had been created, living conditions there had been appalling. There were only two water taps and two toilets for three hundred tenants, who still had to pay a prohibitive rent every month. At the particular moment when the strike began, the situation

had become untenable. There were broken windows, the water had been cut off and so on.

Our strike lasted two years, and during that time we held "open hostel" days, as well as events at the markets and discussions with other hostels. Throughout this period, our demand was to be rehoused as a group in a new hostel. The prefecture and many French people thought that rehousing three hundred immigrants together would mean recreating a ghetto, but that's a false notion, because if we'd been rehoused separately, we could no longer have given help to each other as we still do, for example when people who are unemployed or sick need to be sent back to Africa. My film explores immigration from the inside, firstly because I had the feeling this was something that had never been done before; secondly, having experienced these conditions myself, I couldn't film like someone arriving from outside with a camera and tape recorder; and thirdly, I felt obligated to make that film. As for the script, any tenant of the hostel could have written it, because it reflected the exact reality of life in the Riquet hostel. Initially, the script wasn't written, but you could say it was improvised, because each scene was very clear in my mind, as was its connection with other scenes. Before filming each sequence, we all discussed it—the actors, technicians and workers.

GH: Judging from certain parts or certain formal ideas in your film, it seems that you've been influenced by your compatriot Med Hondo. I'm thinking of the shots that pop up now and then of the character sitting in an armchair, and other comparable details in terms of style. Do you think this approach, which uses a certain intellectual abstraction, "works" for a non-intellectual audience, and even for an intellectual audience at another level?

SS: First of all, I don't think I'm influenced by Med Hondo, because after screening this film, I had a long discussion with Med, and we didn't see any resemblance between his films and mine. Having said that, cinematographically, there is a certain kind of writing that was necessary for what Med wanted to say and for what I had to say, and the same kind might be necessary for anyone else speaking of the same subject. So it's not surprising that from the outside, people see similarities between films of that sort.

Nevertheless, I think there is a big difference between my film and Med's films. As for the shot of the character sitting in an armchair, he came to mind immediately to represent a number of people I knew during the hostel strike, who held very "revolutionary" views but were actually isolated from the masses. If I present a character sitting in a forest, this is only to represent that isolation and nothing more. As for "intellectual abstraction," it's true that this is used a lot in cinema to simplify certain things, but I tried to use it as little as possible, because it doesn't "work" for some audiences, and is even less effective with an audience of Arab or African workers. But if an image like that seems to be imposing itself, I don't think it's absolutely necessary to do without it, because after all,

a film isn't "a sequence" but "a whole" developed technically and politically.

To get back to my specific case, in all the discussions I listened to or participated in, viewers mostly said they'd been moved, and spoke of the simplicity of the images and sound, and of how everything else seemed quite secondary.

GH: In this connection, could you describe your political and esthetic approach in this film?

SS: As for my political approach, it's very simple: being an immigrant myself, I wanted to use cinema to condemn the immigrants' conditions and all of the false ideas surrounding immigration. If there are four million immigrants in France, this is no accident. It was also necessary to condemn the wall that exists between immigrants and the vast majority of French people, since this majority still takes a very positive view of the fact that immigrants work their nine or ten hours per day and then disappear underground until the next day! I also attempted to show that if we wanted to obtain fair satisfaction of equally fair demands, we could only do this through agreement and unity, consciousness and obstinate struggle, which can prove to be profitable. As for esthetics, strictly speaking there was no "approach", but this emerged on its own through my way of handling the subject. From the outset, I didn't allow myself to use meaningless slogans. And whether a film is political or not, I think it has to be well made, but without letting esthetics take precedence over the message and the personal accounts. For example, filming in CinemaScope or with big camera movements and artistic blurring is no good if you have nothing profound to say.

CR: What was your progression from Nationalité: Immigré to your second film Safrana or Freedom of Speech?

SS: They show two different periods of immigration, but one thing is certain: in both films, I rejected miserablism, humanism and pity. In *Safrana*, I thought it was more important to show that immigrants were taking control of their own fate and having a full-fledged discussion on whether or not to collaborate with the French labor class. Humanitarian paternalism



Film stills from *Nationalité: Immigré*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1975.

contributed to dividing the labor class from immigrants, or dividing immigrants amongst themselves. The main thing was not the bad living and working conditions, but rather that immigrants were starting to become conscious of their condition and know what conditions they wanted. So *Safrana* is the continuation of the first film. If there's a difference between the two, it's that immigrants passed a turning point. However, only a minority have become conscious. There are still shantytowns, slum-hostels, and people working under the table and not rebelling. When I say immigrants today are getting involved in political struggles, I mean that some of them are considering questions they would never have been able to formulate in the past. In this film I explore the problem of returning, of reintegrating into the countries of origin. An immigrant who isn't politically conscious can't consider that question. To do so it is to shatter the myth, to dare to say that France is not the land of plenty. It's also to consider your situation "politically", asking yourself: what world do I belong to? Who am I? After that, either you continue living and struggling here, or you consider the problem of Africa. Even if today's Africa is economically and politically dependent on the West, if there's going to be a liberation tomorrow, it's up to Africans to bring it about. So my role is to go back and get involved in the reality to understand it and fight. Also, in Africa's development, you also have to take account of farming. Our societies are 85% rural. But there are a thousand ways to farm. I'm not talking about the way it's currently done for export by state companies or by big landowners who use underpaid, underfed laborers. In Africa, there is no way for rural populations to farm profitably. The problem isn't a lack of arable land, it's that they're not allowed to have the technical minimum. In my view, farming doesn't exist in Africa. Everything has to be redone. I warn those who are currently considering the problem of returning to the land: what sort of return is it? What kind of farming? For whose benefit? This is why I chose those French farmers, because what interests me is their experience. They weren't randomly selected, they're some of the thousands of small farmers whose existence is threatened every day by large farms. This is the part of their existence that interests me, as it

relates to the past and to the reality here. So it's important for people from back home who want to return to the land to at least get advice from French farmers and know the path they followed.

CR: *What's new and interesting in this film, compared with others on the subject, is that you base it on something real: an agricultural training course taken by African workers before returning to their country and becoming part of that reality.*

SS: Yes, but *Safrana* is also an explanation of why those people arrived at that idea. How they put it into practice. That has to be the starting point for understanding the film. When immigrants took part in political and economic struggles in France, this is what motivated them to go further, to consider the question of reintegration. This used to be unthinkable, because as is said in the film, immigration not only alienated us, it also caused us to become ashamed of what we used to be. An immigrant who hasn't developed political awareness rejects farming out of hand. The cause of this is the policy pursued there. I think it's a positive thing to consider the question of one's identity. This is what I wanted to show in *Safrana*.

As for the agricultural training, it exists. It was done by fourteen Africans from Mali, Haute-Volta, Senegal and Guinea who went back to Mali. Right now they're in the harvest season. What was positive, and also benefited their collaboration with me, was that they are people whose attitude is quite fair. When they started the training, the French government offered them scholarships, which they rejected—maybe telling themselves that was just another way to get Africans back to Africa! They did their training by contacting the farmers directly, without going through an agricultural school. Their idea was to learn the minimum that could be adapted to the economic conditions in our countries, and when they returned, since village communities exist naturally in Africa, they would work in one village for two or three years, and after teaching a certain number of things to the farmers, they would go to another village. At the moment they're in Somankidi near Kayes, in Mali. No two of them specialized in the same particular field: breeding, irrigation, aviculture. So in *Safrana*, I show the life they had before, the rung they occupied on the French social

ladder, the relationships between them, between themselves and French people, and the moment when they started considering taking the training course and returning home. This could seem utopian, and that's why I started the film with a quote from President Mao who said: "There are two ways to learn: A dogmatic way that consists in borrowing everything, whether it suits our country or not. The other consists in putting our brains to work, and understanding what is compatible with the conditions in our country, that is to say assimilating the experience that can be useful to us. If we study what is positive abroad, this is not in order to copy it, but rather to create something and rely on our own strengths." I told the actors what questions to ask, but the farmers answered as they wished. For both the labor class and the peasantry, the historic past is more important than any comparison. Back home, farming is neither developed nor encouraged. Here small-scale farming is dying out. But a farmer can say what farming was like fifty years ago, and what it is today. This is very important for us, because we're going to face this situation, since through colonization and the current government, everything is modeled on the West. Having said that, when it comes to immigrants, I'm not claiming that farming is the only solution. I just think it's an option that shouldn't be neglected.

CR: *When you filmed Nationalité: Immigré, you found a specific language. Did you formulate it consciously before shooting the film?*

SS: In art, when you make something, it's often something you've seen done before. I've filmed shots that I didn't expect to have much impact, whereas on the contrary, viewers were very struck by them, such as the black door the immigrant passes through to find work.

Nationalité isn't a film with a script that was written and filmed shot by shot. The prolonged production helped me a lot. In four years I learned new things, discovered enriching elements, changed the direction of certain elements of the film, but each shot was conceived consciously.

CR: *Did you use a lot of symbols in that film?*

SS: Yes, but in fact the symbols always stemmed from the dearth of resources. To express what I

wanted, I would have needed 120 meters of film. I only had 30, so I tried to find a way of expressing the same thing with the little I had.

One example is the scene where a young African bribes a Frenchman in return for documentation that enables the young man to find work as a garbage collector... To film that, a whole scene would have needed to be set up, with two days of shooting and so on. So I decided to express the same thing symbolically: hands exchanging money and paper. That's an example of a scene that was very conscious, very well-thought-out, but conditioned by thrift. Because of my limited resources, I was forced to simplify things. It's a form of cinematographic research...

CR: *In your second film, you already had a greater mastery of cinematographic expression and you also sought to give the film a particular form: a splintered narrative, interrelating stories, flashbacks...*

SS: There's one thing that people forget: the link between the two films. There's the me who made *Nationalité* during a certain period of my life, and then there's the me who made *Safrana* during another period in my life. *Nationalité* has a particular form and content, even if the symbolism is tied to the budget. I designed *Safrana* to respond to a lot of things. I primarily wanted to avoid humanitarian reactions and I wanted the people to define themselves. *Nationalité* hasn't received much criticism, and that's not normal. The way I showed the immigrants, hostels and so on made people feel guilty, and think they had no right to criticize me because in their eyes, as an immigrant I was in a better position to speak about the problem. But if I decide to screen a film, to go somewhere and present it, I'd like to learn new things that I can only know through feedback from the audience.

Many people decided to forget *Safrana* because of how the immigrants are filmed, instead of seeing the progression from my first film. If I had made a kind of sequel to *Nationalité*, it would have gone differently. But the reality is that in France today, not even half of immigrants are conscious of their situation and they live outside of all politics. There are people who only think about dancing, having fun, who play the game they're offered. There's

that division between French people and immigrants, those immigrants who are ashamed of their color and think the reason they're the target of racism is that they're black. They don't ask themselves if racism exists between whites, between blacks and so on.

In *Safrana*, I also wanted to show a performance, to stage something. I think *Safrana* is just as powerful as *Nationalité*. It's just has a different kind of power, that's all. In it I also show that immigrants are no longer those people from 1966, who were told: "Live in the cellar and work"; they're people who've learned to say "no"! And it's because of this "no" that viewers very often think we're preaching at them or exaggerating, because they don't think immigrants have reached that stage. I'm wondering if their racism isn't backward. The normal immigrant is supposed to be the oppressed immigrant, and this is the only image people have of immigration. Today, I'm trying to say that immigrants are still oppressed, but they've gained an advantage over the time of *Nationalité*: they're fighting back.

CR: *You've been back in Mauritania since 1978. Did the return to the African reality give you a shock?*

SS: In any case, I don't think it's possible to assimilate here. Even after I'd been out of Mauritania ten or twelve years, in both bright and dark times I still missed something that was back there. Returning to my village was difficult. You rediscover something very calm, people who explain everything through religion, who don't examine problems in terms of class struggle or politics. It's different in Nouakchott for example, where student movements were quite prominent and there was a certain kind of struggle. However, on the human level, this is very important: if I achieved a certain level of consciousness here, the point was not to go back to my village and say Paris is paradise without talking about the reality of the condition of migrants. But when you speak politically to explain the form of exploitation that migration represents, people in the villages think you're saying those things to discourage them from migrating! Yet because of the economic situation, they're forced to migrate! People want to you express a view about Paris that's different

from the one we offer them. There's a lot of awareness-raising to be done, and it will take a long time. I thought I'd find people who were starting to consider the problems, but today in those regions, France is more fashionable than ever.

CR: *Doesn't that reality force you to re-examine your cinematographic perspective?*

SS: That mentality reinforces my idea that it's necessary to work in my own country, and that cinema is a weapon that can be used to raise awareness. This inevitably entails a change of perspective. There's already the fact that words don't have the same meaning! One example is the word "communist". Here it's an ordinary word that might even lack meaning. In Africa, with the influence of religion, "communist" means "devil". So someone coming back from Europe can't express himself as he does in here. It's up to us, in the arts, to get our message across in a meaningful way. We're have no choice but to take the local reality into account. We're no longer "engaged" just because we use strong words. We're no longer "political" just because we know how to make ourselves understood by the people who interest us, that's to say the class we belong to, or the one we're working for and condemning. One can be Marxist by doing simple, concrete things that might be less exciting, but they take account of the reality of the people in our country. Today's Mauritanian farmers aren't ready to take to the streets. So I'm sure that the form of expression, the cinematographic language I'll use won't be the same as the one in *Nationalité*: *Immigré* or *Safrana*, and the project I'm preparing will be formally different, even if the political line will be the same.

Interview by Catherine Ruelle and Guy Henebelle.

Filmography:

Safrana, or Freedom of Speech (1977)

Director: Sidney Sokhona

Writer: Sidney Sokhona

Director of Photography: Jean-Pierre Laforce

Editor: Danièle Tessier

Actors: Denis Parichon, John Ousséini,

Jean Baptiste Tiemele, Bouba Touré

Music: René Porker, Moussa N'Dongo, Sidi Insa Wade

16mm, 35mm, color, 98 minutes.



Theatre Forum group Kàddu Yaraax reading *Traana*,
a theatre play by Bouba Touré from 1977, Mboro,
Senegal, 2017. Stills from Raphaël Grisey.

PIECE THEATRALE
DE
BOUBA TOURE

TRAANA

(migrant temporaire)
(en langue Soninké)

Avant-propos

Cette pièce théâtrale retrace ma vie au village et ma vie d'immigré. Quelles sont les raisons qui poussent l'africain du village à quitter son milieu, discussions au sein de la famille, avec le père, la mère qui ont chacun une réaction différente, deux émotions différentes, deux sensibilités différentes, aussi.

Les raisons de ce départ du village ?

Elles sont identiques pour tous les jeunes villageois d'Afrique, qu'ils soient du Sénégal, du Mali ou de la Mauritanie, principalement au bord du fleuve Sénégal.

La plupart d'entre nous sont immigrés dans nos villes ou en Europe, et en France en particulier.

Notre désarroi et notre désillusion face à l'immigration.

Les difficultés de tous les jours en tant que villageois dans ces villes de "rêve". Certains d'entre nous ont certes, trouvé du travail mais lequel ? Un logement, oui mais lequel ?

Notre accueil en France n'a pas été celui que nous espérions.

2

Nous croyions être des "privilégiés", des mieux traités pour des raisons historiques, culturelles et économiques qui lient la France à l'Afrique. Mais la réalité est autre. Le sort des africains en France reste précaire.

Peut-être qu'une meilleure compréhension entre nos deux peuples est en cours par l'ouverture de portes culturelles.

Cette pièce théâtrale n'a pas été écrite pour accuser qui que ce soit mais simplement dans le but d'informer pour mieux réagir.

Pourquoi quittions-nous nos villages, nos femmes et nos enfants ? Depuis la colonisation effective, soit depuis 1857, les paysans africains payaient les impôts aux colons en nature et ce jusqu'en 1948 l'année où il a été décidé de les payer en argent. Cette situation aggravait déjà nos conditions et s'aggrava encore davantage après nos indépendances en 1960. Le résultat ? Nous immigrons pour de l'argent.

Pourquoi avons-nous faim, aujourd'hui ?

Parce que certaines mesures économiques de nos gouvernants nous contraignent à produire des cultures en vue d'exportation soit vers nos villes ou en Europe directement au détriment de nos cultures vivrières.

Avons-nous choisi de vivre célibataires en France ?

Non, parce que nous ne trouvons pas de logements adéquats.

Pourquoi vivons-nous dans des foyers avec des lits superposés ?

Parce qu'il n'y a pas assez de foyers construits pour nous et il est difficile de trouver un logement chez le particulier.

Plusieurs hommes dans une seule pièce pour y vivre est-ce un choix ?

Non. Certes, nous vivons en communauté en Afrique mais nous ne vivons pas dix dans une chambre, loin s'en faut.

Les exigences de la plupart de nos gouvernants sont telles que nous, les paysans, nous ne sommes pas toujours en mesure de les satisfaire sur place.

Un pays qui consomme plus qu'il ne produit est un pays condamné à la dépendance, à la mendicité internationale et menace sa jeunesse à l'immigration hors de ses frontières.

C'est le déclin et la décomposition ne tardera pas.

Cette pièce théâtrale est un appel à tous ceux qui s'intéressent aux problèmes de l'Afrique, à nos dirigeants en particulier, afin de veiller à ce que la jeunesse villageoise ne soit plus dans l'obligation d'immigrer dans nos villes ou en Europe pour des raisons alimentaires.

Une autre coopération entre la France et l'Afrique est en marche car elle est envisagée et voulue par nos deux peuples. Celle-ci est culturelle. Cette volonté de coopérer autrement est surtout manifestée par le monde paysan de la France et de l'Afrique.

Je remercie tous ceux et celles qui participent au développement et à la diffusion de cette pièce.

Je la dédie à tous ceux et celles qui consacrent leurs moments précieux à la lutte contre l'humiliation et l'injustice, à tous ceux et celles qui sont emprisonnés ou exilés à cause de leurs opinions politiques, à nos frères d'Afrique du Sud, victimes du racisme et du terrorisme d'Etat de l'apartheid, à tous ceux et celles qui se mettent debout contre l'arbitraire des hommes au pouvoir de tout bord et de tout pays, à tous nos camarades syndicaux licenciés à cause de leurs activités militantes et enfin, à tous ceux et celles qui crient NON au racisme, aux rancunes et à la haine entre les hommes.

BOUBA TOURE
20 juin 1977



Theatre Forum group Kàddu Yaraax rehearsing *Traana*, a theatre play by Bouba Touré from 1977, Mboro, Senegal, 2017. Stills from Raphaël Grisey.

TRAANA

ACTE 1 - SCÈNE 1 : travaux champêtres au village

(récolte en collectivité, chants en choeurs)

SCÈNE 2 : tout le village est réuni pour accueillir les gens de l'Etat qui sont venus demander l'argent (impôts) aux villageois.

Le responsable de l'Etat s'adresse aux villageois : (tout en français mais traduit en Soninké)

nous sommes venus vous venir car cette année la vie est difficile pour nous. Nous n'avons pas assez pour payer les fonctionnaires. Moi qui vous parle, je ne suis pas payé depuis 3 mois. L'Etat est pauvre. Le gouvernement nous a chargé de venir vous dire ceci : chaque villageois doit payer 3500F CFA (70FF). Il ne compte que sur votre aide. Voilà le but de notre visite.
Assalame !

(Silence de mort dans les rangs des villageois avant que le chef de village ne réponde)

Le chef du village : Diakité, on a entendu ce qu'ils viennent de dire (Diakité traduit en français) les gens du pouvoir. nous aussi, nous sommes pauvres mais c'est l'Etat, malgré tout, nous ferons ce qu'il nous exige. Que peut-on ajouter d'autre ? Mais nous demandons au chef de l'Etat de nous accorder quelques jours de délai.

Le responsable de l'Etat : Diakité, dis au vieux que nous passerons d'ici une semaine ramasser l'argent. Dis-lui que l'Etat les remercie beaucoup car ils sont généreux. Je les salue très bien à mon nom personnel. Assalame !

Fin de la réunion avec les représentants de l'Etat, rideau.



Theatre Forum group Kàddu Yaraax rehearsing *Traana*, a theatre play by Bouba Touré from 1977, Mboro, Senegal, 2017. Stills from Raphaël Grisey.

Une famille villageoise (6 personnes). Le père se réuni avec son fils, la mère et ses deux filles et la griot.

Le père : Songalo, lui, le griot, dis à mon fils que moi je ne sais plus quoi faire. Autrefois, nous cultivions pour nous, rien que notre nourriture. Mon grand-père cultivait un peu de tout : du riz, du manioc, du mil, etc... On ne manquait de rien. On n'avait pas besoin d'argent car on payait nos impôts aux Blancs en nature. Il est vrai qu'on cultivait du coton ou de l'arachide pour eux mais nos greniers étaient pleins. Les Blancs sont partis, nos propres enfants les ont remplacés. Voilà maintenant, il faut payer de plus en plus d'impôts.

L'année passée, j'ai vendu les deux vaches qui nous restaient mais cette année, Songalo, je ne sais quoi faire. Mon fils, Souly est notre seul espoir. Bientôt les impôts. Bientôt les cotisations pour le parti du Président de la République. Bientôt la dote qu'il faudra commencer à verser aux parents de sa fiancée. Songalo, dis à mon fils que je n'ai plus de solution. Sa mère est là.

Silence. La mère et les deux filles préparent à manger tout près en écoutant le père.

Songalo transmet les paroles du vieux à son fils : tu as entendu ce que ton père vient de dire ? A présent, tu es un homme ! Prends tes responsabilités. Honore ta famille car le jour de la honte n'est plus loin pour nous, villageois. Allah nouari ! (Allah merci).

Souly, le fils répond à son père : mais papa, ne serait-il pas mieux que je parte pour la ville comme tous les autres de mon âge ? Je sais que là-bas, je pourrai vous aider mieux en vous envoyant des mandats. Regardes le père à Samba, il n'a plus de soucis d'argent depuis que Samba a trouvé du travail à Dougouba.

Le père : oui, mon fils tout compte fait, je crois qu'il n'y a que cette solution : que tu ailles en ville pour travailler comme les autres jeunes qui y sont déjà. Maintenant tu as 15 ans et

tu es assez grand pour pouvoir te débrouiller et nous aider avec toute ta force. Tu es notre retraite, mon fils. Nous ne comptons que sur toi !

La mère : Souly n'ira pas à Dougouba car il est trop jeune. J'aurais d' soucis pour lui, je n'ai que lui, c'est mon seul fils et je deviens vieille, fatiguée, très fatiguée !

Le père : Souly ira à Dougouba car c'est mon fils. Moi, j'ai travaillé pour mes parents, j'ai leurs bénédictions. C'est grâce à cela que j'ai pu t'épouser et mis Souly au monde ! Il est mon sang !... il a ma bénédiction et celle de mes ancêtres, Allah sera avec lui, il ne souffrira pas. Il est même prêt à supporter toutes les contraintes pour mieux nous servir.

Le fils : maman, papa a raison, je serai plus utile en ville qu'ici. Je suis assez courageux et grand pour pouvoir me débrouiller tout seul et dès que j'aurai trouver du travail, je ne vous oublierai pas pour les mandats. Je viendrai vous voir et je me marierai. En tout cas il faut que je parte en ville !

La mère : que puis-je ajouter d'autre ? Vous, les hommes, vous décidez ! nous, nous n'avons qu'à nous incliner ! Mais ton départ m'accablera et me mettra dans le rang de celles qui sont déjà épuisées par des soucis maternels. Quand pars-tu ?

Le fils : après demain, maman. Ne pleure pas ! Je ne t'oublierai pas...

Rideau

SCENE 3 : Souly est arrivé en ville et rencontre 5 copains au chômage

N'golo, le premier chômeur : qu'est-ce que nous faisons aujourd'hui ?

Demba, le second chômeur : si on allait prendre du thé chez Paté ?

Boubou, le troisième chômeur : du thé ? Je veux bien mais moi seul je ne peux pas supporter les frais car je n'ai plus d'argent.

Waguy, le quatrième chômeur : moi, j'apporte le sucre !

Souly, le cinquième chômeur : moi, je ne peux rien apporter car voici deux mois que je suis dans cette foutue ville sans travail, sans rien. Et pourtant mon père compte sur moi. J'aurai mieux fa d'écouter ma mère plutôt que mon père ! ..

L'un des chômeurs : regarde moi ça, tu arrives et tu commences à te plaindre ! Qu'est-ce donc deux mois à côté de 3 ans Voici 3 ans que je traîne ici. Je ne peux plus comp ter les paires de sandales usées à force de marcher pour chercher du travail. Maintenant, j'en ai marre de chercher, j'attends, et pourtant moi aussi mon père attend mes mandats. Si Dieu le veut, je trouverai un jour ! Ho, les gars, si on avait de l'argent, je connais un marabout qui peut nous trouver du travail chez un touba. Il a placé Boubacar comme boy il y a longtemps. Marabout peut faire tout grâce à Allah ! Allah est bon et grand !

L'un d'eux : écoutez-moi ça ! Allah est bon et grand, depuis quand ? S'il était si bon et si grand, il n'y aurait pas tant de misères. Et tous ces maux qui s'acharnent que sur nous, les pauvres. Allah est bon ! (exclamation) Et pendant ce temps, Allah que fait-il ?

L'un d'eux : je t'interdis de dire du mal de Dieu !

L'un d'eux : va au diable avec ton Allah ! (l'autre réagit en fonçant sur celui qui nie dieu, les autres interviennent pour éviter la bagarre).

L'un d'eux : évitons d'en venir là, surtout aujourd'hui où chacun devrait (le sage) avoir pitié de son propre sort. Nous devons plutôt agir pour sortir du gouffre où nous sommes. Je vous propose qu'ensemble, nous allions voir Tiémoko que je connais et qui vient de France. Nous tirerons certainement profit de notre visite Oui ! Il connaît la France !

RIDEAU



Theatre Forum group Kàddu Yaraax rehearsing *Traana*,
a theatre play by Bouba Touré from 1977, Mboro,
Senegal, 2017. Stills from Raphaël Grisey.

SCENE IV : les chômeurs chez Tiémoko

L'un d'eux : Tiémoko, il y a quelques années tu nous quittais pour la France, le pays des blancs. Les difficultés s'aggravent ici. Nous avons quitté nos villages pour venir trouver du travail car là-bas nos chefs ne cessent de réclamer l'argent à nos parents. Et en plus, il ne pleut plus comme avant. Nous ne savons plus que faire. Nous sommes venus prendre des conseils auprès de toi qui viens de France et qui sais beaucoup de choses !

Tiémoko : hé oui mes frères ! vous êtes malheureux ici, dans cette ville et aux villages, vous souffrez de la sécheresse. Malgré tout, nos chefs vous demandent de l'argent. Moi qui viens de France je ne connais pas la misère. Là-bas, j'ai gagné ma vie, car tout manœuvre que je suis, j'ai gagné 150 000F CFA (3000FF). La France mes frères, c'est le bonheur ! Ho, toi qui étais à l'école Mamadou, tu as bien appris ça non ? C'est la vérité ! Moi, je ne savais pas avant d'y aller. La France est belle !.. La France est riche !... La France, c'est la joie !... Le travail à Paris, c'est facile comme de l'eau à boire car il y a Simca, Renault, Citroën et beaucoup de patrons préfèrent nous que les Français parce que nous ne sommes pas difficiles. Si vous partez, une seule chose à éviter : la protestation. Vous savez que les blancs qui étaient chez nous n'aimaient pas ça, donc les patrons là-bas, pareil !... Pour mieux aider nos voisins dans les villages, c'est en France qu'il faut aller !

Tous les chômeurs : c'est là-bas qu'il faut aller !

L'un d'eux : mais Tiémoko, que faire pour partir en France ?

Tiemoko : venez me voir, je vous mettrai en contact avec un certain Moussa qui est commerçant et qui peut vous aider à partir d'ici

RISETAU



ACTE II - SCÈNE I : arrivée de Samba dans le foyer de travailleurs africains en France. Dans ce foyer, les activités sont diverses, les uns écrivent des lettres, les autres expliquent les papiers administratifs pour ceux qui ne savent pas lire et écrire.

Souly
Samba : je cherche mon cousin Bakary Traore, il habite ici dans ce foyer rue d'Auservilliers.

Bakary se lève et se dirige vers Samba. Salutations et salutations, présentations.

Bakary : Souly, tu es venu comme ça sans nous avertir ? Et comment ton voyage s'est passé ? Et avec quel argent tu as pu payer le transport ?

Dans le foyer, tout le monde est en train de jouer à la belote. Certains écoutent le tierce à la radio.

Souly
Samba : voilà Bakary, mon voyage a été très difficile. Depuis 5 mois que j'ai quitté mon village et je suis resté à Dougouba où beaucoup de mes camarades y sont encore. Tous veulent venir bako (Europe) Bakary, la vie est dure chez nous.
 A Dougouba, mes amis et moi avons connu un certain Tiémoko qui venait de France . Après nous avoir tout dit sur la France, c'est lui qui m'a donné le billet dont je ne connais pas le montant mais je dois lui rembourser 500 000 CFA (10 000 FF) six mois après mon arrivée.

Etonnement !!!!! Hum !

L'un d'eux : comment vont les choses aux villages ?

Souly
Samba : tu sais là-bas la vie est dure. Les gens du gouvernement ne cessent de nous réclamer de l'argent. Ils comptent beaucoup sur nous il faut leur envoyer des mandats, ils n'attendent que ça. C'est pourquoi moi aussi je suis venu ici.

Soul
Sory : oui, Samba, tout ce que tu dis est vrai. Beaucoup d'entre nous ont connu les mêmes difficultés, les mêmes pour tous ! Mais qu'en faire ? Nos dirigeants mènent la belle vie avec les mandats qu'envoie à nos parents. Et ici, en France, nous avons beaucoup de problèmes à affronter. La police peut nous contrôler quand elle veut, elle peut nous expulser quand elle veut. Par contre, les citoyens français en Afrique sont respectés et traités comme des humains. Mais ne perdons pas l'espoir, peut-être qu'un jour le peuple français se mettra de notre côté pour nous soutenir contre les injustices qui nous frappent. Le mot solidarité est plus qu'nécessaire à l'heure où les immigrés sont devenus des boucs-émissaires en France. C'est la nouvelle France qui a peur de son avenir, c'est grave.

Sidibé : Bakary, je dois m'en aller, donne ça à Samba pour son ticket métro et bus.

Bakary : merci, mon frère. Soul, Sidibé est un ami qui habite au foyer d'Aubervilliers, il vient nous dire bonjour souvent. Il te donne ça pour ton ticket de métro.

Soul
Samba : merci, Sidibé. En Afrique Tiémoko m'a dit que je vais habiter à 5ème étage, où ça se trouve ?

Bakary : il a raison de demander. Le foyer a trois étages et tu as deux superposés, ça fait cinq étages !

RIDEAU

Scène II :

L'un d'eux : comment faire pour résoudre tous les problèmes politiques et économiques qui se posent à nous là-bas en Afrique ?

L'un d'eux : oui, c'est une très bonne question qu'il a posée. Il y a des solutions à chaque problème de la vie même si cela demande du temps. C'est l'avantage qu'a l'homme. Vous savez que l'Afrique a été balkanisée en 1995 à Berlin en Allemagne de l'Ouest par des Européens ? Chaque pays

d'Europe voulait avoir sa part de gâteau dans notre continent. Ils nous ont partagés comme une pomme. Il y avait cinq qu'on appelle l'Afrique francophone, l'Afrique lysophone, l'Afrique anglophone et enfin l'Afrique belge. Ils ont créé de petits Etats sans qu'aucun d'eux ne puisse se prendre en charge économiquement. C'était bien calculé, la dépendance s'est créée.

Mais nos aînés ont commencé à revendiquer l'indépendance et l'ont obtenue sans avoir le courage de modifier les structures mises en place par les colons à savoir la création de ces frontières artificielles qui ont tracé les pays tels que le Sénégal, le Togo, la Côte d'Ivoire, la Mauritanie, le Mali, etc... Tous ces pays individuellement ne pourront jamais s'en sortir.

L'unité du continent est la seule garantie pour nous sortir de la misère. Ce ne sont pas des aides humanitaires même de plusieurs milliards qui résoudront nos problèmes.

Nous, les paysans, nous sommes les premières victimes de la situation actuelle de l'Afrique.

Nous devons en prendre conscience !

RIDEAU
FIN

BOUBA TOURÉ
20 juin 1977

Stills from *Traana* [Temporary Migrant]
by Kàddu Yaraax and Raphaël Grisey, a film
based on the theatre play of Bouba Touré from
1977, Yarakh, Dakar, Senegal, 2017.

Traana

A theatre play by Bouba Touré in 1977, adapted by Kàddu Yaraax and Raphaël Grisey, 2017.



(Peasant song)

The rainy season, only braves face it.
The field is wide, I envy you, you spend the day
under the heat of the sun.

Men in the fields, thank you.
Men under the sun, thank you.

Women in the fields, thank you.
Women under the sun, thank you.

The peanuts are ready to harvest,
let's go pick them up, sons of Senegal.
Let's go to work, the country is ours,
is ours is ours.

A relative:

Mr the representative of the state, the chief says
that you can speak.

State representative:

After the salutations, I have to tell you that the
state is poor now.

We don't have any money left.
Even me, I haven't been paid since three months
like the other officials.
This is why we came here to tell you this: Each
villager will have to pay 3 500 Francs CFA.

The father:

Diakité, tell to the state representative that we have
listened to everything.

The state is the state. But we are also poor. What
else can we say? Never the less we will do what it
requires from us. But tell him that we ask the head
of state to give us a bit of time to collect all the
money.

State representative:

We will come back in a week to take the money.
Through my voice, the state is greeting you.

The father:

Souly
Sangalo.

Sangalo, the griot:
Touré.



The father:

Songalo, you the griot, tell my son that I don't know what else to do. In the past, we cultivated for ourselves, only for our own food. My grand father used to grow a bit of everything. Some rice, some corn, some manioc, some millet etc. Nothing was missing. We didn't need money because we were paying the whites in kind. Songalo. It's true that we cultivated cotton or peanuts for them. But our granaries were full of millet. The white went away and our proper children replace them. And now we have to pay always more taxes. Last year, I sold the two cows that were left. But this year, tell my son that I don't know what to do. I tell you Songalo, soon, soon come the taxes. Soon the contributions for the party in power. And soon the dowry that one will have to start to pay for the parents of his fiancée. Songalo, tell my son that I don't what to do. He is my hope and his mother is here.



Sangalo, the griot:

Souly, did you understand what your father just said? Now, you are a man. Take your responsibilities. Honor your family because the day of shame is not far for us, the villager. Take your responsibilities, thank's god.



Souly, the son:

Dad, wouldn't it be better that I go to the city like the ones who have the same age than me? I know that over there, I could help you better by sending you mandates. Look at the father of Samba. He doesn't have money problem anymore since Samba found a job in Dougouba.

The father:

Yes, my son. Altogether, I think the solution is that you go to the city to be able to find some work. Look at you. You are 15 years old. You are old enough to find a job there and help us. You are our only hope. Go my son.

The mother:

Never. Souly won't go to Dougouba. He is too young. I would have to worry for him. I only have him. He is my only son and I am getting old and tired. Very tired.

The father:

Souly will go to Dougouba. Because he is my son. I worked for my parents, I have their benediction. Thanks to that I could marry you and bring Souly to the world.

Sangalo, the griot:

You said it Touré.

The father:

Souly won't suffer there because he has my benediction and the one of my ancestors. Souly, don't be scared. You are our pension. Go my son.

Souly, the son:

Mother, dad is right. I'll be more useful in the city than here. I am courageous and old enough to get along alone. When I will find a job, I won't forget you. I'll send you some mandates. I'll come back here, I'll get married.

Sangalo, the griot:

Touré Mandé Mory, well said.

Souly, the son:

Mother, the only solution is to go to the city.

The mother:

What else can I say? Men have the last word. I have no choice than to accept. But your departure will weigh me down and put me with the ones who have maternal worries.

When will you leave?

Souly, the son:

The day after tomorrow.

[song]

I'm thinking of the separation. To find each other again belongs to God.

It's hard to be separated from one's own child. I'm thinking of the separation.

Help, help mother, the cries of pain are gone where we didn't expect. Help, help.

Souly, the son:

Mother, don't cry. I'll come back.



The author:

This theatre play traces my life in the village and my life as a migrant. What are the reasons that push young Africans to leave their environment? They are identical for all the youth from Senegal, Mali, Mauritania or from the Senegal river banks. This theatre play hasn't been written in order to accuse anybody. But simply in order to inform to better react.

Bouba Touré, June 1977.

An unemployed:
Shall we do some tea?

An unemployed:
Alright, I can bring the sugar.

Souly, the son:
Me, I have nothing to bring. I am in this damned city since already two months without job, without anything. However, my father counts on me a lot. I should have listen to my mother instead of him. Sidi, an unemployed:

He just arrived and he starts to complain. Two months? Two months compared to three years? My dear friend, this has been three years that I muck about in this damned city. Without work. Without anything. I can't count how many sandals I worned out walking to search for some jobs. I don't find any and my parents wait as well for my mandates. My friends, if we had a bit of money, I know a marabou that lives in this neighborhood and that could help us to find a job by the white people. He himself placed Boubakar as a boy a long time ago.

An unemployed:
Boubakar?

Sidi, an unemployed:
Yes. God is good, god is great.

An unemployed:
Sidi, don't start with that.

Sidi, an unemployed:
My friend, with this marabou, god is good, god is great.

An unemployed:
Since when are you here? You since three years. Me, two years. Souly, two months. Two months that he is here. Where has been your god during this time? Where is your god? Did you find some job? You found nothing. You tell me god is good. To be able to make tea, we have to ask contributions. Where is your god? God isn't good.

Sidi, an unemployed:
You are not allowed to speak like that.

An unemployed:
Go to hell with your god.

Tiémoko:
We should avoid to go this far. From now, everyone should have pity of his own fate. Take this my brothers, I think this is enough to pay for the tea.



An unemployed:

Sidi, give me that. I'll get the tea later.
I keep the money.

Sidi, an unemployed:

Tiémodo, you come from France. Can you give us advices to get out of this abyss?

Tiémodo:

Yes, my brothers. You are unhappy here and in the village you suffer from the drought. The worse is that our chiefs are always asking money to our elders. But me on the contrary, I don't know misery. I earn my money working as a laborer. I earn 150 000 Fcfa in one day. My brother, France is happiness. Mamadou, you have been to school, you learn about this, right? That's the truth. France, this is joy. This is happiness. This is paradise. Find a job in Paris is easy like drinking water. Yes, because there is Simca, Renault, Citroën, etc...

The bosses prefer us than the French people.

Because we aren't difficult. If you go there.

They don't like protest. You know: even the whites that were by us here, they didn't like it.

Over there, this is the same. Protest has to be avoided. But to bring our elders out of the abyss, we have to go over there.

An unemployed:

We have to go over there.

Sidi, an unemployed:

We have to go over there?

Souly, the son:

We have to go over there.





(Song)

**Pirogue, oh! Pirogue done in two halves.
If one half breaks the pirogue capsizes, oh!
Fishermen, the pirogue went to the sea.**

**Look at the sea, it is wide, sea to infinity.
The car doesn't go there, the train doesn't
go there, only the pirogue goes there.**





Souly, the son:

Guys, wake up. It's time. We have to go to work. It's time. Over there in Africa, Tiémoko told me that I was supposed to live on the fifth floor. Where is that?



Sidi, an unemployed:

You are on the third floor, you have to go on the bunks beds to reach the fifth floor.

Souly, the son:

Let's go, it's time.

An unemployed:

Guys, have a good day.

Sidi, an unemployed:

Our welcome in France hasn't been what we thought. We thought to be privileged, better treated.

An unemployed:

But this is not the case.

All together:

We want documents.





Sans-Papiers after the eviction from the St Ambroise Church and Japy Gymnasium, Paris, March 24, 1996.

Madjiguène Cissé, spokesperson of the Sans-Papiers from Halle Pajol and St Ambroise Church (St Bernard), demonstration of March 30, 1996, Paris.

Women in the Sans-Papiers' occupation of Halle Pajol, June 1996.

"March of the St Ambroise Women for the regularization of the Sans-Papiers," Paris, May 11, 1996.

A griot singing in the Sans-Papiers Women's March in front of the Hôtel Matignon, May 11, 1996.

Occupation of the Halle Pajol by the Sans-Papiers of St Ambroise, April 1996.

Solidarity demonstration for the Sans-Papiers of St Ambroise, June 15, 1996.



Sans-Papiers Demonstration, Paris, June 30, 1996.

Beginning of the Sans-Papiers occupation of the St Bernard Church after the Halle Pajol, June 30, 1996.

In front of the St Bernard Church during the Sans-Papiers occupation, Paris, August 1996.

Danielle Mitterand visiting the St Bernard Sans-Papiers on hunger strike, August 1996.

Eviction of the St Bernard Sans-Papiers, August 23, 1996.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



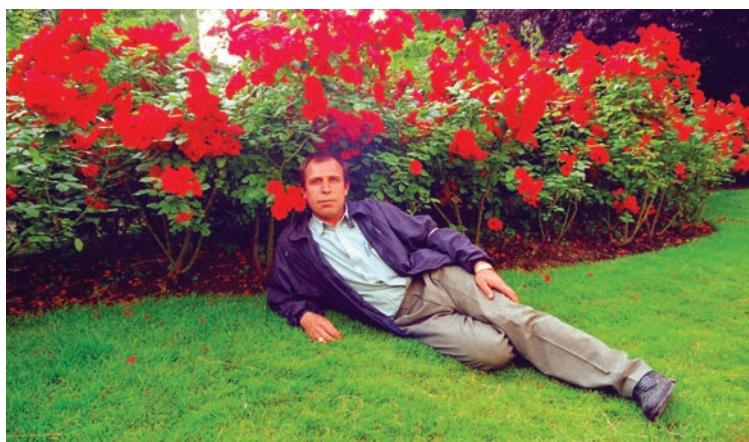
Diadié Koné, former
St Bernard Sans-Papiers,
Sans-Papiers March, Paris,
June 12, 1998.

3rd collective of Sans-Papiers
demonstration at the
Place de la République, Paris,
July 8, 1998.

Sans-Papiers March,
Paris, June 12, 1998.

Emmanuel Terray in the
Sans-Papiers March,
June 12, 1998.

Sans-Papiers from
the 3rd Collective,
July 16, 1998.



Flyer distribution from a resident of the migrant worker hostel Foyer Charonne, demonstration, Paris, July 11, 1998.

Sans-Papiers on hunger strike from the 3rd Collective of Sans-Papiers, Batignolles, Paris, July 23, 1998.

A man from the 3rd Collective, Paris, September 1999.

3rd Collective of Sans-Papiers demonstration, Paris, July 29, 1998.

Demonstration of the 3rd Collective of Sans-Papiers, Paris, September 10, 1998.

Sans-Papiers demonstration in front of the Bobigny prefecture, May 29, 1998.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



Maison des Ensembles,
rue d'Aligre, September 1999.

Looking at the photographs of Bouba Touré,
Maison des Ensembles, headquarter of the Sans-
Papiers coordination 75, Paris, September 1999.

Sans-Papiers of the Maison des Ensembles,
rue d'Aligre, November 17, November 19,
and December 7 1999.





Sans-Papiers collective from the Maison des Ensembles, rue d'Aligre, January 11, 2000, Paris.

Maison des Ensembles, rue d'Aligre, January 11, 2000.

Demonstration of the Sans-Papiers from the Maison des Ensembles, January 15, 2000.

Demonstration of the Sans-Papiers from the Maison des Ensembles, Hôtel de Ville, January 24, 2000.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.





Sans-Papiers at a anti-WTO demonstration, Paris, November 27, 1999.

Solidarity demonstration with the Sans-Papiers 3rd collective, Paris, December 4, 1999.

Migrant workers and solidarity demonstration against the eviction of 100 inhabitants after a raid in Foyer Terres au Curé, 13th district, Paris, February 13, 2008.

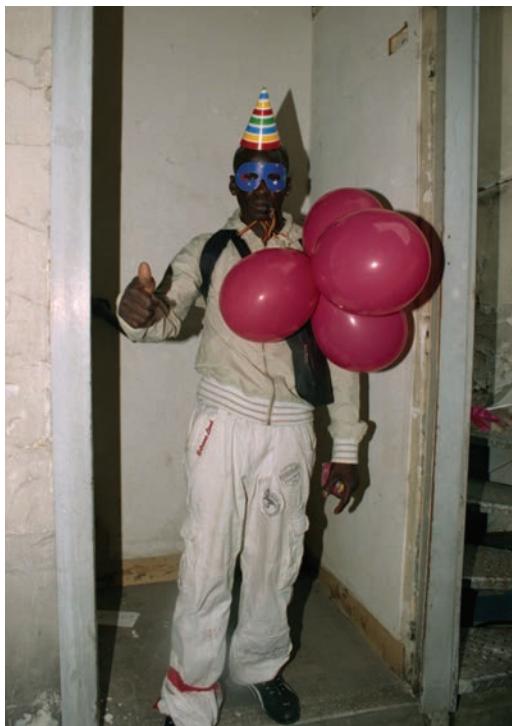
Demonstration Blvd du Temple, after the eviction of the Bourse du Travail occupation, Paris, June 29, 2009.

Camp, Blvd du Temple, July 12, 2009.

Rue Baudelique Sans-Papiers occupation, Paris, July 18, 2009.

Occupation of the 14 rue Baudelique, former local of the Social Security administration, Paris, September 3, 2009.





**Preparation for a demonstration,
occupation of rue Baudelique,
Paris, October 7, 2009.**

**Sans-Papiers of rue Baudelique
demonstration, Blvd Barbès,
Paris, September 16, 2009.**

Migrant workers' strike and occupation in front of an Interim job agency, Blvd Magenta, Paris, September 17, 2009.

Occupation of Manpower interim job agency, St Lazare, October 28, 2009.

Sans-Papiers demonstration, Paris, October 10, 2009.

Occupation, Place de la Bastille, June 16, 2010.

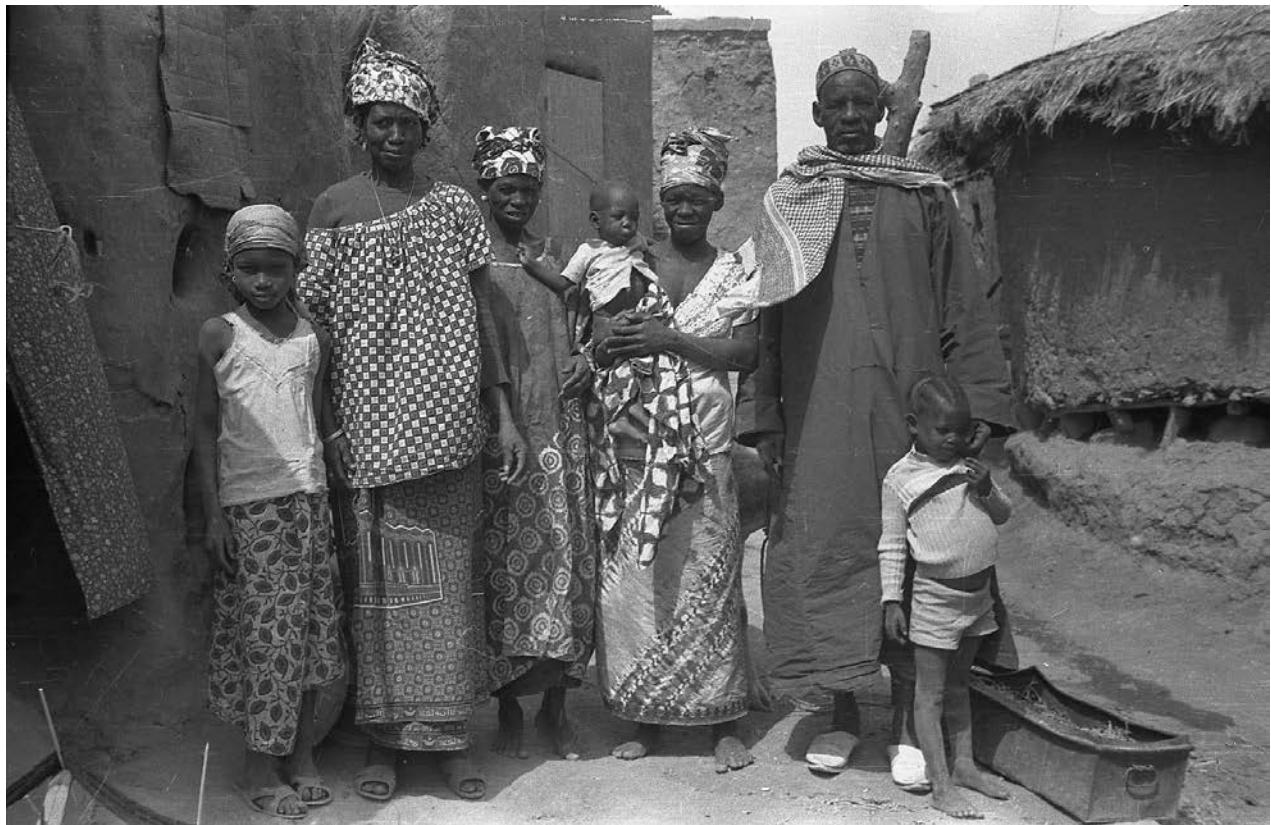
Occupation, Cité Nationale
de L'Histoire de l'Immigration,
Paris, October 2, 2010.

In the occupation of the
Cité Nationale de l'Histoire
de l'Immigration, Paris,
December 2010.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

Relatives of Bouba Touré,
Tafacirga, Mali, 1976.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



Bouba Touré during a house painter training session
with migrant workers, Paris, 1973.
Bouba Touré archives.

**Discussion between Raphaël Grisey,
Bouba Touré, Olivier Marboeuf,
Tobias Hering and Karinne Parrot
(GISTI)¹ around the photographs of
Bouba Touré and the film *Nationalité*:
Immigré by Sidney Sokhona at
Khiasma Art Centre, April 8, 2014.**

197

¹ GISTI, Groupe d'Information et de Soutien
des Immigrées / Immigrant Information
and Support Group.

Raphaël Grisey: We're going to show a series of photographs that you started taking in 1966, after your arrival in Paris. I met you a long time ago, you were a friend of my family's. Back then you used to show slides to your friends and in migrant African workers' hostels. That's how I discovered your images of Mali and the Somankidi Coura cooperative. It wasn't until much later, when I went to art school and started practicing photography myself, that I became interested in your work again. These images are from your archives. I scanned them over the past few years, initially in view of the film *Cooperative*, now with the idea of making a publication.

Bouba Touré: This gentleman here is my father. This is my mother with her goats, she had lots of goats. Since I've taken up photography, I've photographed the daily life of the village every year I've returned. My father was probably sad, because when migrants from my region arrive in France, they have to send lots of money to the family. My mother never asked me anything. But the fathers considered that even if you couldn't return to visit them, you had to send money. I

gave my father what I had, but he thought it wasn't enough. He wasn't happy at all.

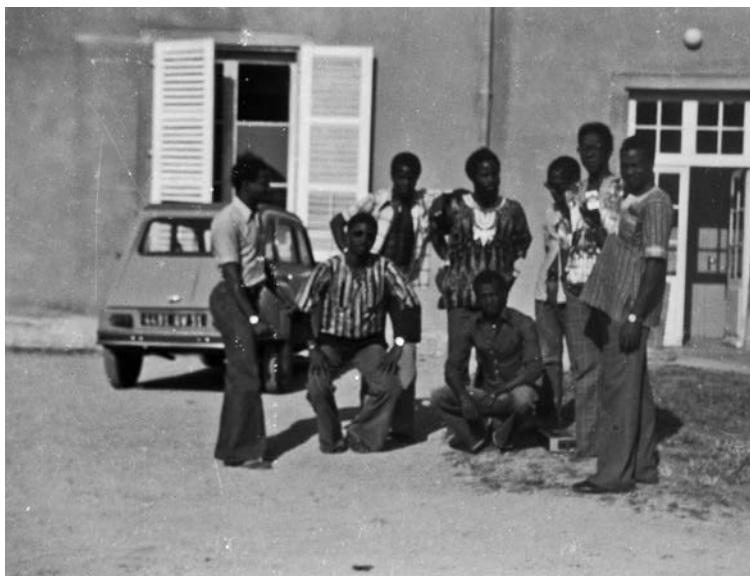
Olivier Marboeuf: In which region is this?

BT: It's on the banks of the Senegal River. The village is called Tafacirga. We are – in quotation marks – three kilometres away from Senegal.

I say "in quotation marks" because the notion of border didn't exist for us. It's a western notion. I'm on the Malian side, over there is Senegal and Mauritania, but these are the same families. Some became Malians, other Senegalese or Mauritanians.

This is my father with his young wife. Luckily for her, she got fed up with my father after a while and left him. She was very young. That's what many families who have only daughters dream about, namely, to marry a girl to a dad who has a son in France. The money I sent to my father, he gave it to his wife, who gave it to her parents. It's a business... These are family pictures.

RG: I used your family pictures as a possible starting point for a story. But there are many other possible starting points. What about these images?



Bouba Touré and Ibrahima Camara, Les grandes-Loges, Champagne, France, 1976.

ACTAF (Cultural Association of the African Workers in France) members during their agricultural internship, Courcelles-sur-Aujon, Haute-Marne region, France, May 1976.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



BT: This was in summer 1973. I was working in a company. I needed money for the family, so I couldn't take a vacation. I went to work there for a month. There were Portuguese, North Africans... They were surprised to see me, because at the time few Africans worked in construction. Now it's different. They're my friends from that era.

In 1975, 1976, we were able to spend six months with farmers preparing for our return. I was a projectionist at the time, others worked in factories. We figured it wasn't responsible to leave to Africa straight away without preparing. Some had tried, but they had failed. We first had three weeks of practical training. At the end of the month, we gathered in an agricultural college to discuss what we had done and to take stock. We were in the Marne and the Haute-Marne – remote places where they had never seen blacks. Except for the elders, who had seen black soldiers during the war. This caused a few problems – I won't go into details – but some of the people who took us in thought we had come to work rather than learn. They made us work – and I'm choosing my words – like negroes. But we already had a strong political

consciousness – I was influenced by May 68. They were very surprised by our reactions, the way we defended ourselves when we said we hadn't come to work but to learn things. Little by little they understood. Some were furious because they hadn't expected this to happen.

RG: It will be interesting to discuss this in light of the film *Safrana*, which portrays an other French peasantry.

BT: This is in the village, the day we arrived. In Mali, the land belongs to nobody. They reinstated an ancestral law after independence, which stipulates that the land belongs to those who work it. When we arrived, we went to a place that traditionally belonged to the Diabira family – the common name of the family that had settled here first. When we decided to clear the land, we went to the village and had a big party. I didn't know this village before, but they spoke the same language, Soninké. This is the day of the inauguration of the works. Here we are with the chief of the village of Somankidi.

RG: To implement your project, you sent requests to three countries, and the first one to answer was Mali,



Demba Niangané, father of Ladj Niangané, helping Bouba Touré to sell the first tomato harvest in the neighboring villages, Somankidi Coura, Mali, February 1979.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



which offered you land near the village of Somankidi and the town of Kayes.

BT: That's right. In our group, there were Malians, Senegalese, Mauritanians, Guineans and Upper Voltans from today's Burkina Faso. That shows you that borders were not our thing. We sent requests to three countries that were plagued by emigration: Mali, Senegal and Mauritania. If you see a black man in France sweeping the streets, you can say an wujomu to him and he will answer you because he's a Soninké. He comes from Mali, Senegal or Mauritania. We are in the majority there, at least in the class of manual laborers. We asked these three governments because we had understood since our arrival in France that this form of migration wasn't good for us. Neither for us nor for the host country. We had to find an alternative to people coming here to work and support their families. The only solution was to develop agriculture. We are rural countries. So we asked Senegal, Mali and Mauritania. This was the time of [Léopold] Senghor, everyone knows about his relations with the West. Moktar Ould Daddah from Mauritania didn't reply to us. Mali responded first and let us decide where we wanted to settle. We chose

the Kayes region, the region of the Senegal River valley. We chose this place. It was bushland, so we uprooted the trees, cleared the area and put the land to use. This is us working, we're in the process of clearing and uprooting the trees. There were snakes, as you can see. The area was untouched, so there were many snakes, but none of us was bitten thanks to the fetishes, thanks to the ancestors' powers. They gave them something to eat and to drink. I slept on the most venomous of snakes but it didn't manage to bite me. My mother's ancestors had power over the snakes. I don't have this power but none of my mother's children can be bitten by a snake, that's for sure. We took turns cooking. This made the villagers laugh because they'd never seen a man cook. We didn't have any women with us. We had to do everything by ourselves. Here we are washing ourselves in the river. You can see how happy they were to be photographed... But later they chided me for it. Here we are doing the laundry. The local women used to make fun of us. They'd never seen a man do the laundry or the dishes. But for us, there were only women on the banks of the river.

RG: Everyone was single except two of you, right?



Selling tomatoes in Somankidi village, Mali, February 1979.

A peasant worker irrigating on the first canal, cooperative of Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1979.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



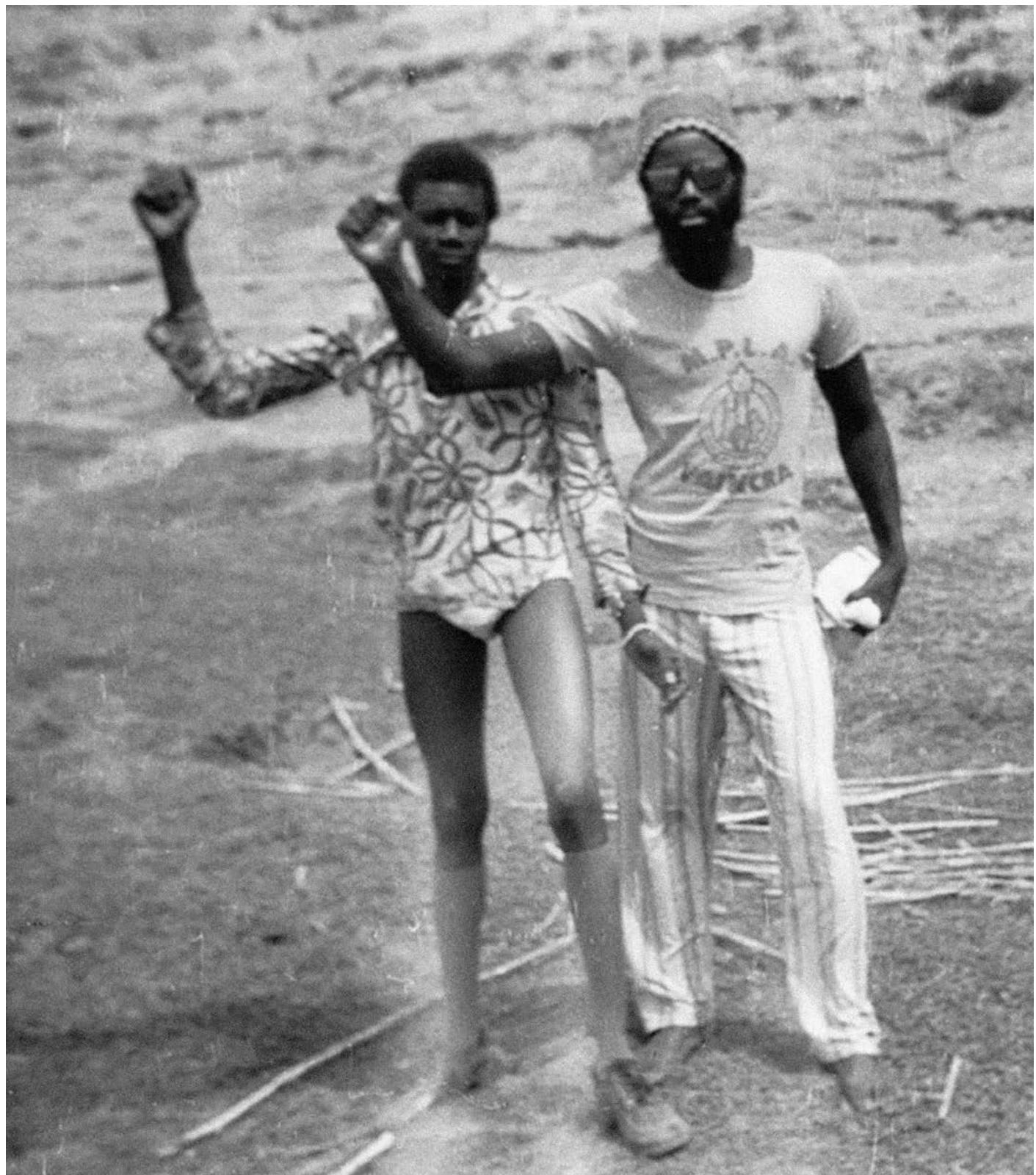
BT: Yes. But even these two men had their wives join them later. We were a bunch of boys. On this image, we've started irrigation. Bananas – they mainly served to shield the land from the wind. Now, during the rainy season, that's what we call subsistence crops. After the rainy season, we grow bananas, tomatoes, salads and onions, a lot of onions. The cooperative is one of the leading producers of onions in the region. This is thanks to the irrigation system and the knowhow we have gained. Initially, it was essentially bananas, papayas and vegetables for our own consumption, as we didn't quite control the whole process. Now we're growing all types of vegetables. People buy them on site. This is in 1977, when the villagers lent us a hand. All the young people from the village agreed to lend us a hand because there were only fourteen of us. We were never fourteen on the job because some of us had to cook. We were six kilometres away from the village. We hadn't built our own village yet. Four people stayed behind: two brought the meals and two more did the cooking. Ten of us worked in the fields. One day the villagers came to help us out. The first channel was built with soil from termite mounds. It's compact soil. We've done more work on it since and

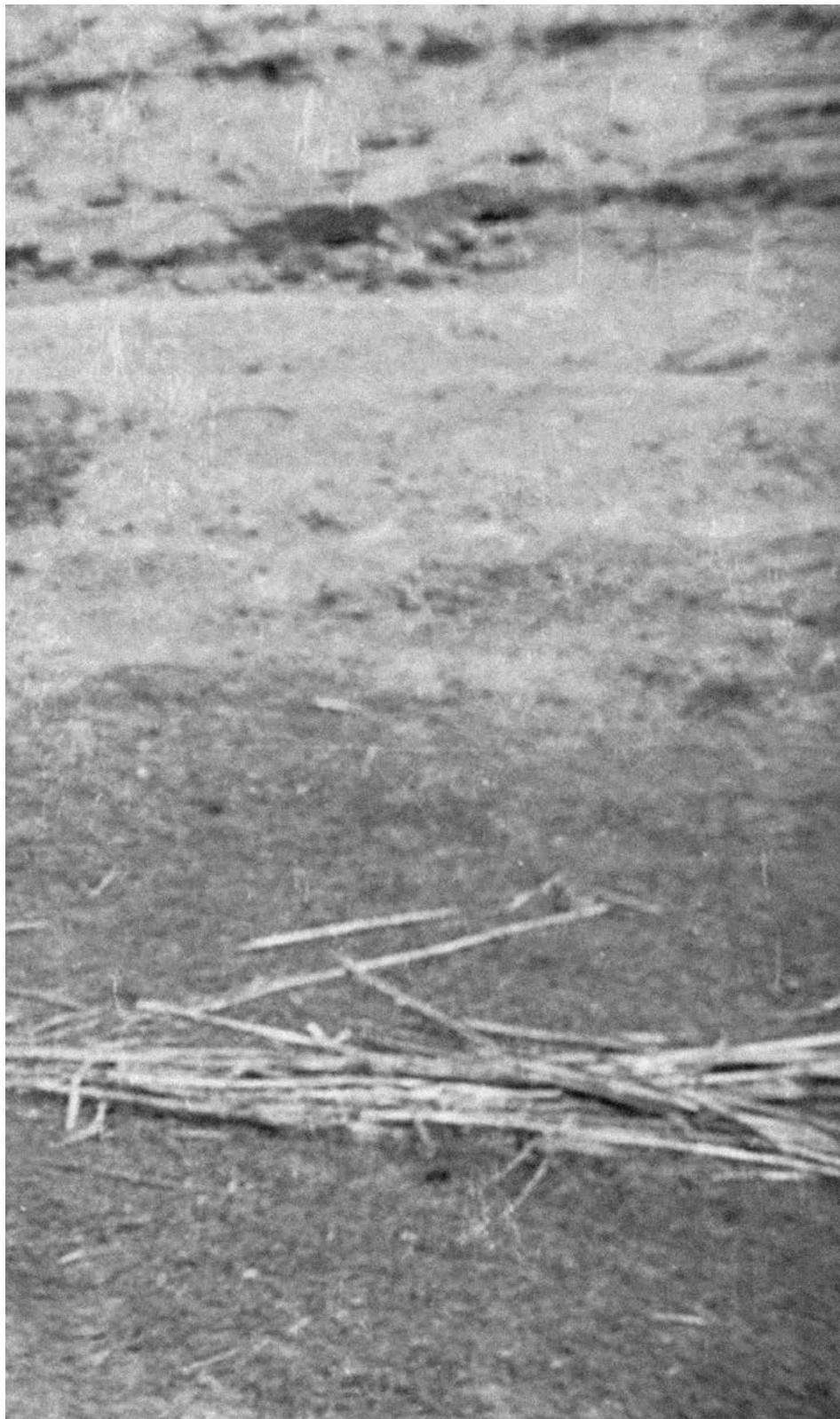
paved the channel. There I am with a cousin, we're raising a fist in a sign of victory.

RG: You're wearing an MPLA T-shirt.

BT: Yes, it was the time of the independence wars in the Portuguese-speaking countries, that is, all the countries colonised by Portugal. They fought hard to gain independence. No wonder, because they were rich countries, so the Portuguese refused to let them go. We supported their struggles. They became independent after the Carnation Revolution in 1974, when the revolutionary military deposed Salazar. The MPLA was the party fighting for the independence of Angola, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. Friends in France had produced the T-shirts and gave them to us.

OM: Initially, [Amilcar] Cabral worked as an agronomist for the Portuguese government. One of the MPLA's strategies was linked to the land – they mined the whole country to make the land unfit for settlers and prevent them from farming. After independence, they spent a lot of time de-mining. This explains the food solidarity of surrounding countries.





Bouba Touré and Kaba Tounkara in the dry bed
of the Senegal River, Somankidi Coura, Mali,
January 1977. Bouba Touré archives.



Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008,
by Raphaël Grisey.



RG: The ACTAF, the Cultural Association of African Workers in France, was a kind of cover-up for your group. It also organised numerous solidarity actions for the liberation movements in Portuguese-speaking countries. This involved film screenings, blood banks and clothing donations, for example. These moments were important for the politicisation of the group and the idea of the cooperative.

BT: Absolutely. We had already developed a strong political consciousness but ACTAF allowed us to become aware of our housing conditions. France offered us work but we had to find accommodation by ourselves. The state didn't deal with migrant housing. We had to fight to get the state to acknowledge our living and housing conditions. Although Sonacotra had been established in 1945, it wasn't catering to migrants. Thanks to the migrant movement from 1970 to 1975, Sonacotra homes are now inhabited by migrants.

Tobias Hering: I have a question about Cabral. Before he became the leader of the liberation movements in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, Cabral was an agronomist. And land policy played an important

role both during the struggle and after liberation. Were his writings accessible in those days and did they play a role in the discussions around the cooperative's strategies and your decision to return to Africa?

BT: No. We only learned later that he had been an agronomist. It was his struggle for independence and against colonialism that was known to us and inspired us. The films we saw were guerrilla films shot in the bush. We screened these films in migrant hostels, but we were unaware of Cabral's writings on agriculture.

RG: Maybe Mao's writings were better known?

BT: Yes, we were much more Maoist. Mao too took agriculture seriously. One of his lessons that was relevant to us was that no people can develop if it is assisted. Obviously, the millions spent by France in Africa have no effect. We migrants send a lot of money to our countries but this will not work. French cooperation with African countries has created a system of dependency on France that we seem unable to get rid of.

Bouba Touré going to the field in Hô Chi Minh sandals, Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1977. Photograph by Bouba Touré.



RG: To answer Tobias's question about what motivated the cooperative's project, it may simply be as well that most of you had peasant origins.

BT: Now we are starting to see people from cities migrate to France, but in my generation, it was mainly rural people, people from the villages. Incidentally, that's why we created the hostels. We invented the hostels because we weren't used to living alone, we liked to live in groups.

But unfortunately, the living conditions were not the same: back home, I shared a hut with a friend and we had girls come over; here, we were ten or fifteen sharing a room ... It was normal for us to return to agriculture as we were rural people.

Question from the public: Were there also North Africans among the members of the ACTAF?

BT: No, in fact. There were only black Africans essentially. Our headquarters were in a CGT union building in the 13th arrondissement, as we had political affinities with them.

OM: It should be noted that France didn't deal with immigrants in the same way depending on

where they came from. Freedom of movement in France was not the same for Algerians, Moroccans or Malians. The same was true for the possibility of doing business. For example, why are cafés in France run by Kabyle people? Because only Kabyles were allowed to open cafés in France. Special favours were organised in a very precise way. Paradoxically, the Algerians were those who, after the conflict, enjoyed the biggest freedom of movement in France, while people from other countries were subject to bilateral agreements with very specific clauses. Togo, for example, had big accounting schools, and therefore only people pursuing this type of activity had the right to enter France. You will find a lot of Togolese accountants in France because it was one of the activities that allowed them to come into the country.

That's why black Africans were granted immigration and family regrouping rights later than North Africans, which resulted in struggles that weren't synchronised because they couldn't enter France at the same time. As a black African, until the 1970s, you couldn't enter France as easily as people from countries of the Maghreb, which



Irrigation of cabbages in off-season,
Bouba Touré, agricultural cooperative
of Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1978/1979.

Photograph by Bouba Touré.

lead to a fragmentation of struggles. The law on family regrouping also encouraged West Africans to settle down, which wasn't the case before as they were mostly single men. People think it was a single movement at the time of independence, but it's important to remember that these were several movements. Returning to the question of documentation, I wanted to know if, at the time, it was important for you to document all this. We were talking about Mao, but we could also talk about the Cubans and their cinema. Their political stance was that images of the struggles had to be created with the help of films that became extremely influential throughout Africa. Cabral sent people to Cuba in order to train in film and come back to document the struggles. Were you aware back then that you had to create images in order to achieve certain things or was it just personal documentation?

BT: I always wanted to take pictures. Now, having seen them, my friends agree to cooperate, but initially many of them refused. "You're getting on our nerves with that camera of yours!" I always wanted to take pictures wherever I went. But it was only later that I realised what I could do with them. I said to myself

that we weren't eternal. I told them I was taking those pictures because I didn't want to die. I know that photographers don't die. Now, for every important occasion in the village, they want me to exhibit the photos. At first, I did it only for myself.

RG: Can you talk about the economics of this image production? Did you have film rolls? How did you develop the films?

BT: I gave the film rolls to friends who were visiting and asked them to have them developed in France. Later, there was a lab in Kayes, fifteen kilometres away, where I developed some of my films.

OM: For how long had the group worked in the cooperative by then? Did people go back and forth between France and Mali or had they already settled?

BT: We left for five years to do all the work. After these five years, everyone was free to do whatever they wanted. But our aim was to dissuade our brothers from migrating to France. That was the objective. When we arrived, our parents, who were used to receiving money from us, weren't happy. My father wasn't happy when I came back. As I was

Immigration de nos chers
Contre saison de 1978-79



15 MARS 1979

Boubba
MM

there now, I had no more money to send him. Half of the cooperative left and half remained. They now have grandchildren, and their children are married. The village has grown a lot.

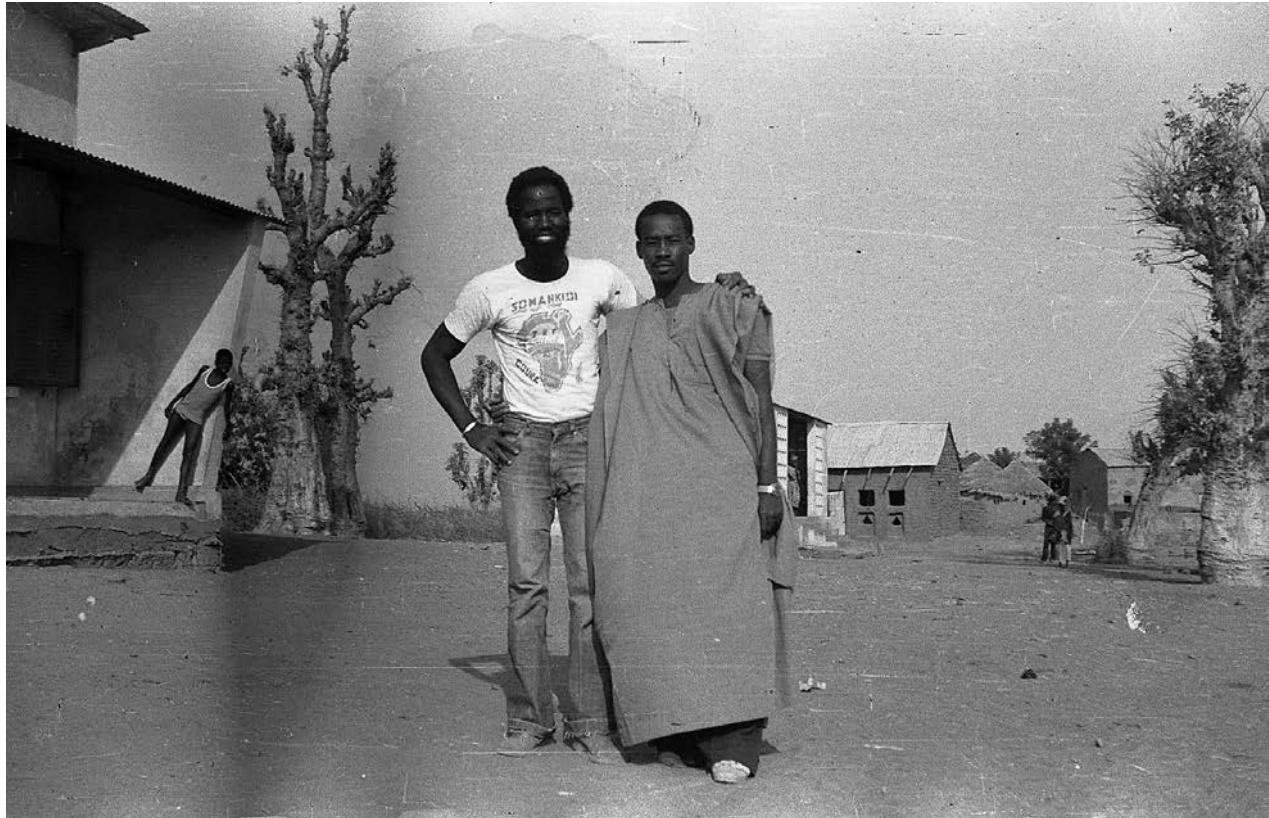
Question from the public: Considering the different nature of the soils and the climate, were you able to use the techniques that you'd learned during your training or did you have to adapt them to the geography of the country?

BT: We already knew that not everything we'd learned on a technical level was going to serve us back there. The endurance required, the demanding nature of the land – if we'd gone there straight away, we wouldn't have been able to work for eight or nine hours a day. The training allowed us to understand that when you're a farmer, there's no Saturday or Sunday. But there were many things we did back there, such as the channels, that we hadn't picked up in France. In Mali, despite the military dictatorship, agriculture was taken seriously. Each region had its agricultural instructors, who had been trained in Eastern Bloc countries. When Mali became independent, the socialist government

refused cooperation or assistance by France. Therefore many young people were sent to Eastern Bloc countries to train in engineering and agronomy. They had specific training even for basic agriculture. The technique used for our channels was imported from Nigeria. Instructors were put at our disposal to teach us how to do all the works you see. We had never uprooted trees. We learned a lot of new techniques out there.

OM: How did the idea of the cooperative come about, the idea to organise yourself to fight rural exodus? Was it your own idea or had you heard about similar experiences? What were the coop-erative practices in Mali like when you started?

BT: It all developed shortly after independence because the government wanted to encourage agriculture. There were many (state) cooperatives, but between 1960 and 1968, due to repeated attempts at a coup d'état and the interference of France, they didn't survive. We had leaders with good ideas but French policy was very damaging. Many agricultural cooperatives had been well developed, with statutes and everything. But despite the dictatorship, some



Bouba Touré and Moussa Traoré, first school teacher of Kotera, Tafacirga, Mali, 1976.

Pupils from the first school in Kotera, near Tafacirga, Mali, 1976.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

services held on. As for the idea of a cooperative, we simply had no other solution. To prevent our brothers from coming to France, we had no alternative but to develop agricultural labor. But there was no cooperative in our region. The instructors who helped us came from other parts of Mali. In our region there was only emigration. People believed this would solve the problems of starvation and poverty. We had a governor, a préfet, who understood that if this continued, there would be only women and children left in the villages as all the men would leave. He very much encouraged us to settle.

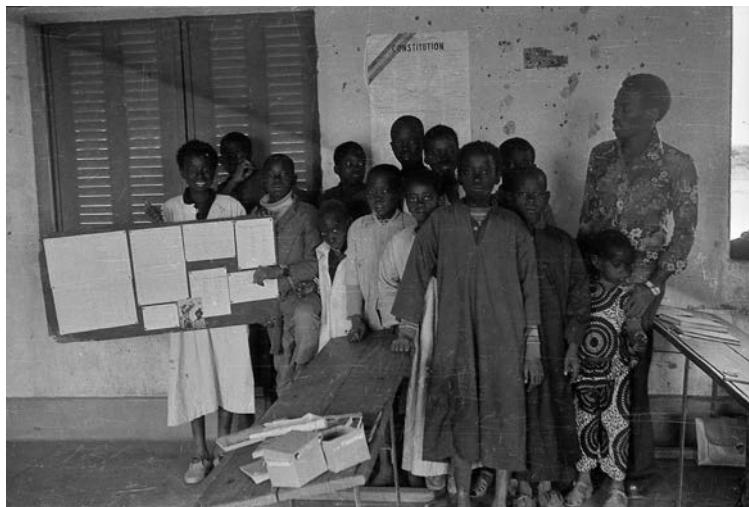
There you see the roots of baobabs that we dug up by hand. The villagers thought we were mad. There were only fourteen of us and we needed a lot of willpower to do something that could set an example for our three countries. It worked. We were the only ones at the time, but now there are many vegetable farmers in the area. Here we see a djembe. All important works and gatherings are accompanied by music. The four djembe players are there to encourage the workers. The man standing on the channel is the instructor who showed us how to do it. The soil that you see is termite soil that we

collected in various places using wheelbarrows. Here's a termite mound. We broke them up but we were careful, we didn't go all the way to the bottom. The working termites are at the bottom and only leave the mound at night. We built the channel with that soil. Here we are in Tafacirga, my native village. A school is being constructed. Here are the future pupils. In my village there was no school for my generation. We managed to build a school in our village.

OM: When you say you've managed, do you mean this was also done by the migrants?

BT: Yes. When I came to France, I couldn't read or write and I didn't speak French, but at the time it was easy to find work. Back then, the steel factories, the construction and transport companies and the warehouses sent people to the migrant hostels to hire us. You just had to be strong. Having suffered from being unable to read and write, we felt we had to build a school in the village for the next generations. In the region of the Senegal River there are many schools and even some hospitals that were built by migrants, not by the states.

OM: Could you put the cooperative in perspective?



You've outlined the reasoning behind your project, the idea that agriculture had to be developed for the men to stay in the region. This idea gave rise to the cooperative project from 1975 to 1977. Thirty-five years later, how do you view the current situation of the cooperative? What did it produce? Has the original objective been achieved – somewhat, partly? What new realities did it create?

BT: We're split over this. The example we tried to set has worked up to a certain point. But it hasn't worked as well as we would have liked. Unfortunately, you cannot say that our action has stopped emigration from our area, but as I said before, this was the first time that someone ventured into market farming here. Throughout the region and in the three countries, there are now market farmers everywhere. We were the first to demonstrate that in spite of temperatures of 45 degrees, you could grow crops thanks to irrigation. There are areas now that are better organised than we are. On the food level, things are going very well.

OM: And what hasn't worked so well? The political project behind it all?

BT: Emigration is a complex problem. Young people back there see people working in the fields in the heat and then they see the emigrant who comes home with a car or a motorbike. I've spoken to young people who paid seven thousand Euros for a visa. There's a dreadful business going on in the French consulates, a business in which French officials are involved. They know there is a lot of demand, so visas are very expensive.

I spoke to a young guy who told me he paid seven thousand Euros to get from Bamako to Paris on a three-month tourist visa. I said to him: "With seven thousand Euros, you could have done something here". He worked for three years to be able to pay for his visa.

OM: The lack of farmers is also a problem in France and in the rest of the world. Particularly if we're talking about demanding agriculture – not intensive agri-culture. It demands hard work. The global issue is how to use the land, how to farm it sustainably. Was it not Cabral who said that it's not enough to use the land but that it has to be farmed sustainably?



Onion seed fields, Somankidi Coura, 1989.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

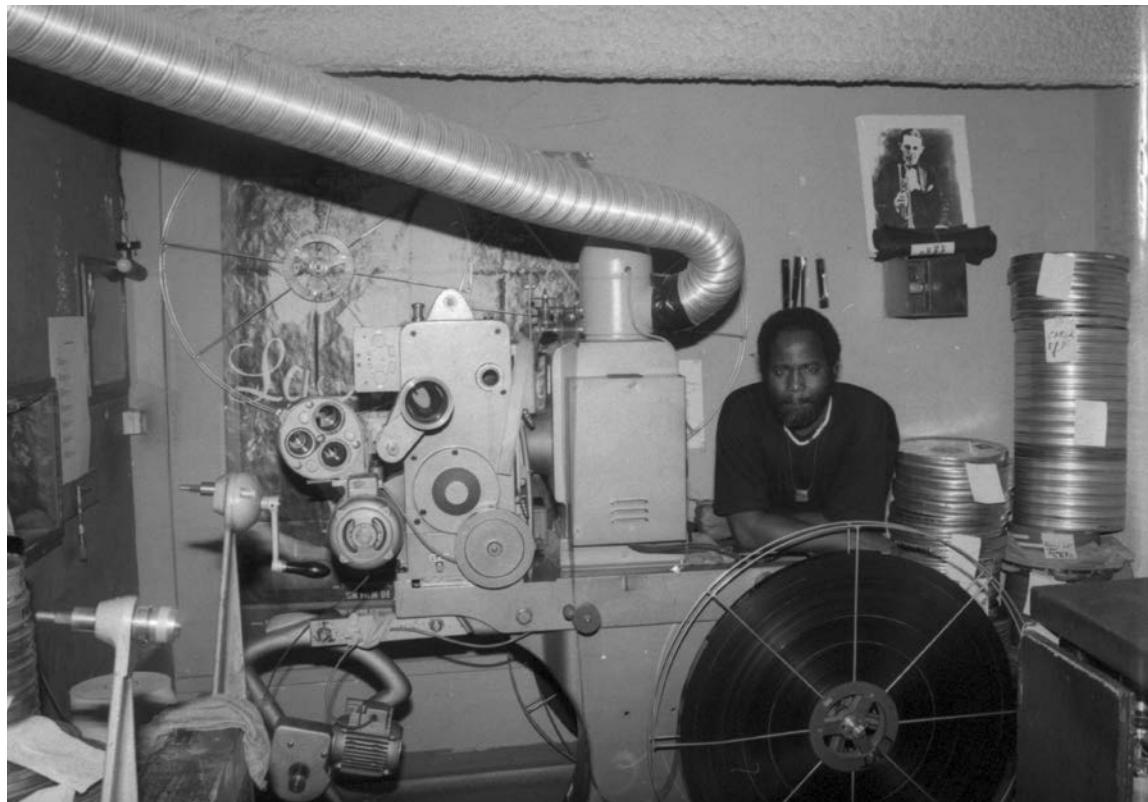
BT: We are the leading producers of onion seeds in the region. We're doing very well now. This hasn't stopped immigration but it has improved the lives of the people who live there. Many people have come to our village to train and become market farmers like ourselves.

Question from the public: Farming is not a highly valued activity, and the media are advertising Europe as an Eldorado. Are cooperatives a viable solution in light of globalisation and competition? Does Europe flood sub-Saharan Africa with cheap products, and do local farmers manage to sell their produce to the local people? Do people abandon the land because of this commercial competition from subsidised European countries?

BT: That's not yet the case in our region. All our produce is sold. It's mainly subsistence agriculture. Every African farmer supports several people. For the time being, we don't buy anything from outside. Incidentally, that was the objective. We live from what we produce ourselves. We're producing a lot of bananas, and the money from that is used to buy rice. That's the only thing we buy from outside. Apart from that, we eat mainly millet and sorghum.

OM: You're combining an economic project around food autonomy and settlement against emigration with a political project around the independence movements of the 1970s. What was the relevance and the lifespan or development of this project? Did it extend beyond the cooperative towards developing an African conscience? Was the African conscience born with the cooperative?

BT: Absolutely. This consciousness was born from our experience in the migrant hostels. We were ten to fifteen in a room. When the Vincennes Faculty was created in 1968 with the aim of enabling workers to have access to education like anyone else, all its professors were leftwing. I learned photography on the job, but that's where I learned my job as a projectionist and where I graduated. Just like Sidi Sokhona, who wanted to make films. After this training, we asked ourselves questions about the future of our brothers who had stayed there. It allowed us to realise that the future was not about sending money and that we had to develop agriculture by ourselves in order to allow our parents to eat what we produced.



Bouba Touré in the projection room of L'entrepôt cinema, Paris, 1997. Bouba Touré Archives.

RG: Here, we see you in a room with posters of Sidney Sokhona's film *Nationalité: Immigré* and Souleymane Cissé's *Finye* [The Wind].

BT: Yes, I was a projectionist at the time so I had all these film posters. There you see me with the ticket sellers and in the projection booth of the cinema L'Entrepôt.

TH: *Nationalité: Immigré* was filmed between 1972 and 1975. The legal situation for immigrants to France changed a lot in 1973. Could someone expand on what it was like before?

BT: My generation didn't need residence permits. We were born during the colonial period. When we came to France, we didn't need a residence permit. In 1973 Giscard [d'Estaing] introduced the residence permit. There were differences between countries. For Senegal and Ivory Coast – countries that France thought it controlled – there was a three-year residence permit. For countries like Mali and Guinea, the residence permit had to be renewed every year. I wasn't affected by this, because I already had French nationality. Anyone from my generation could acquire it if they applied for it.

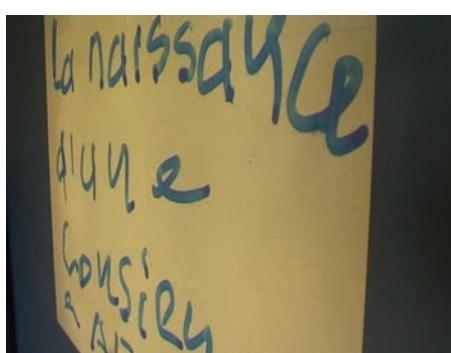
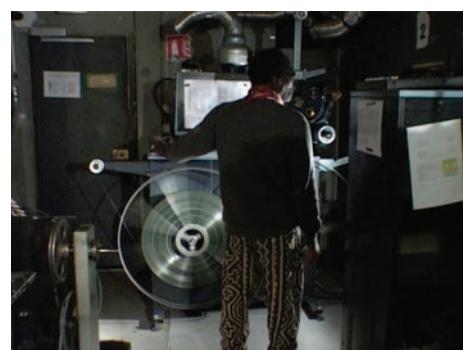
In 1981, when the Left came to power, they introduced a ten-year residence permit for everyone. We had housing issues but no paper problems.

Karinne Parrot (GISTI): In the 1970s, there was a whole series of laws. Officially, it was the bosses who brought the people in. There were laws, from the 1945 ruling through to 1970. Immigration wasn't a free ride in theory. In practice, as there was a need for labor, those who didn't require a visa simply came and got a job. They were officially recognised later and had access to social security, etc. There was no residence permit, but that wasn't a problem. The problem of legal residence arose in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis and unemployment. Before, there were laws that simply weren't applied in practice.

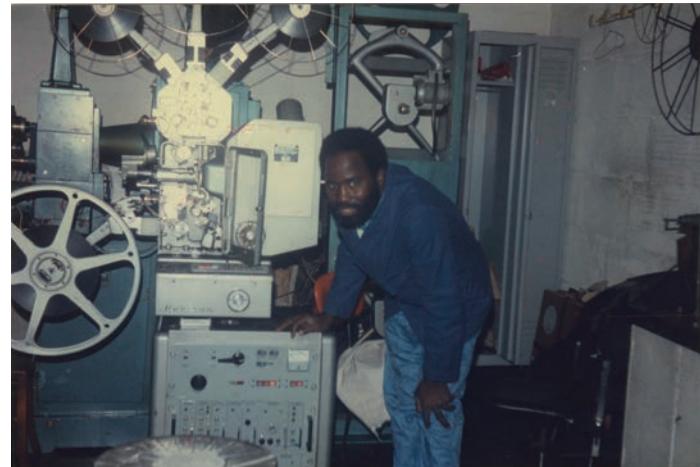
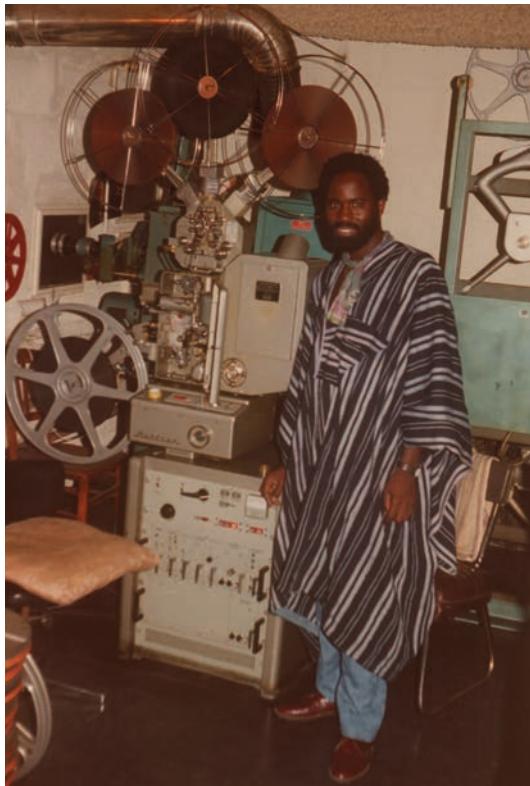
OM: There are two stages in this migratory movement. First of all it was about labor – mostly men who came alone to work and who lived in homes. Then, there was a change with the right to family regrouping, which allowed families to settle in France. This changed the situation completely for both countries. It's from that moment on that Malian families started considering having children here and



Bouba Touré in the cinema L'entrepôt, Paris.
Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008,
by Raphaël Grisey.



Slideshow by Bouba Touré in foyer Pinel, St Denis.
Video stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.



Bouba Touré in the cinema L'entrepôt, Paris, 1989. Bouba Touré archives.

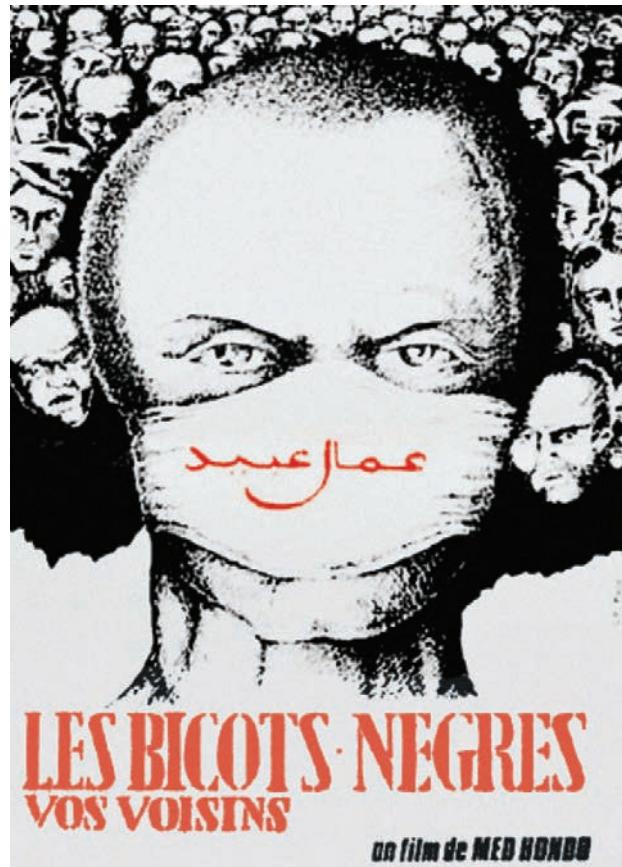
cut all ties with their country of origin. Before, the Malian community was going back and forth, and younger people replaced the older ones.

BT: I travelled all over France with this copy of *Nationalité: Immigré*, which Sidney had given to us. The film was screened in cinemas and universities with a left leaning. It was shown for three months at the cinema 14 Juillet Bastille, where I hosted the debates. It was partly thanks to documents like this that our living conditions improved. The hostels built at the time were run by the police and the conditions were harsh. The French government felt it had to monitor us, make sure we remained in our place and eliminate disruptive elements.

Many of us were expelled during the 1968 uprising. I was working at the Chausson factory. We thought France was doing us a favour by giving us work and letting us send money to our families. I couldn't read nor write when I arrived here. The bosses realised that some of us could do more than work in a warehouse, which is what I was doing. Every six months we passed psycho-technical examinations to assess our intellectual capacities. They saw that I could do

other things, so I became a welder. Chausson was a subcontracting plant working for Renault, Peugeot and Simca. When I was working as a welder, I was lucky to have a colleague with me. I was paid 400 francs a month, he was paid nearly 1,500. At the end of the month we received our pay in cash in an envelope together with the pay sheet. We compared what we were earning. He told me that the employers brought in migrants in order to exploit them and that everyone should be paid the same. "Equal work, equal pay." That was our claim in 1968. In the beginning, it was really hard to go on strike because the elder people in the homes didn't understand. We'd come here to work – going on strike was political.

RG: According to our research, *Nationalité: Immigré* was the first film to be shot in a migrant hostel by one of its inhabitants. Sidney Sokhona plays his own role in it. It's a first-person movie. Sidney Sokhona assisted Med Hondo on his film *Wogs and Negroes, Your Neighbors*. Med Hondo adopted a different point of view, a different perspective in his films. What do you think about the specificity of Sidney Sokhona's approach compared to Med Hondo's?



Poster of *Les bicots-nègres, vos voisins*
[Wogs and Negroes, Your Neighbors],
a film by Med Hondo, 1972.

Film stills from *Les usines Chausson*, pickets
closing the gate of the factory, strike of 1975.



Poster and T-shirt printing in support of the residents' strike from the hostel foyers of Sonacotra. Free University of Vincennes, 1976.

Entrance of the Free University of Vincennes, 1980.

Photographs by Jean-Louis Bossier.



Usines Chausson, May 1968.
Photograph by Jean Marie Quintard.



Film stills from the last scene of *Soleil Ô*,
Med Hondo, 1969, and from *Nationalité: Immigré*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1975.



BT: We were trained in Vincennes. Med Hondo is not known in France because he is a militant filmmaker. *Lumière Noire*, for example, was only shown at the cinema L'Entrepôt. It's about how immigrants were controlled under the Chirac and Pasqua governments. It's thanks to Med Hondo that Sidney Sokhona was able to develop his own brand of cinema.

RG: The scene in the stadium at the beginning of *Nationalité: Immigré* recalls sequences from *Soleil O*, and the forest allegory at Fontainebleau is reminiscent of another scene in a forest at the end of *Soleil O*, where the forest appears as a refuge, a place of politicisation and a maquis.

OM: *Nationalité: Immigré* is a hybrid, it's several films in one. The director uses *mise-en-scènes* to convey the information. There is a second protagonist, a cameraman who seems to be from the Communist Party...

RG: And who in fact looks very serious and comfortable in his role. In *Safrana*, the characters and their roles are more clearly defined: the leftist, the unionist, etc... In *Nationalité: Immigré* we're not always sure how to interpret the *mise-en-scènes*.

In *Safrana*, the misunderstandings and differences between the leftists and the immigrants – with some claiming to know what struggle and information are all about – are more explicit.

TH: Sidney Sokhona's two films describe the political space in which immigration was constructed as a fact. They show how this political space affects several actors – not only the immigrants but also those who try to support their struggle and express their solidarity, and that this also opens up different forms of exploitation or complicity with the state.

This space becomes ambiguous, as it's no longer clear who helps whom and who is on which side. This is what makes these two films unique. Med Hondo's films are not as explicit in their questioning of the political space and forms of solidarity. It's a slippery terrain between mutual aid and solidarity, between complicity, exploitation and racial discrimination. This is uniquely expressed in these two films, and I believe that's why they should be shown again. This ambivalence is still present today in similar situations. The space in which we act today in Europe is also defined by the situation and the



Film stills from *Nationalité: Immigré*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1975.



legal framework within which we can act, and it isn't always easy to know how and where to act.

RG: There is a kind of realism in the relationship between migrants and the outside world that is specific to these two films. I hadn't quite noticed the scene of the slumlord who doesn't understand the migrants' demands. He's convinced that illegal migrants want to have more rights than the French. Sokhona shows a long series of misunderstandings, which bear evidence to his great listening and observation skills.

BT: When I lived at the hostel, we were forbidden to have visits from outside people. I took evening courses in French, so my friends would ask me to come around to my house. That's when I got the idea of taking pictures to show them where I lived. That's how I started taking photographs.

The managers were aware of the conditions in which we lived and didn't want the leftists or anyone else to see that. After a while, it became public knowledge that they wanted to lock us up so that no one would see our housing conditions. No French person was allowed into my home – forbidden for French people!

It wasn't written anywhere but that's how it was. They even convinced some of our colleagues to guard the entrance and prevent French people entering.

KP: We see the ambivalence of the bearded man who is presented at the end as the lawyer of the home who helps the other guy leave the police station. We see the cop arrest Sidney Sokhona and we see him leaving the station with this lawyer. You sense that this lawyer could be a cop too. This might be a professional quirk, but I read this as a questioning of the struggles that take on a legal form. When the government started to control immigration, it created illegal immigration, which became a fact. We put people in an illegal position, we created the need for human traffickers and people who make money from it. Some wanted to counter this situation with legal arguments, saying their rights must be defended.

Around 1972, for example, a shed was discovered in Marseilles where Algerians who were waiting to return home were confined – a sort of early illegal retention centre. By appealing to the law, we've eventually achieved legal administrative detention



Demonstration of Sans-Papiers from Maison des Ensembles, Hôtel de Ville, Paris, January 25, 2000.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

centres, as provided for in the law, with prescribed periods of detention. So what has the legal struggle, with its abstract fundamental rights, ultimately changed in reality? From a few hundred foreigners in detention centres in the 1970s, the number has risen to 25 000 a year in mainland France, and 50 000 if we take into account Mayotte and other overseas territories. So it's not clear whether the struggle has been effective in defending the interests of the people. The law is showing its limits. The real problem lies further up the road, in the fact that we create illegality, that we create situations where people are illegal and have to pay bribes to find jobs, where they have to pay human traffickers and put their lives at risk in order to come here. We create illegality and then we create people who need lawyers to help them.

OM: In this film we see how immigrants speak up for themselves as they demand the right to live together – this is a turning point. Here we see a negotiator in dialogue with an immigrant, whereas ten years earlier he would have spoken for him. The position of the lawyer would have eliminated the very possibility of the immigrants speaking for

themselves. Something is affirming itself, something that anticipates the struggles to come, where the migrants will speak up for themselves. What the negotiator says is speech translated into what we consider to be a right or lawful way of living here, while, for example, the request to be housed together is not something that we would have brought up publicly. Instead there is the concept of individual housing. In the Bara foyer in Montreuil, this was a source of endless discussions because we wanted the elders to be relocated to other places with better conditions. But there is also a macroeconomic scale to take into account here: in a hostel you can eat for one Euro because the food is made for thousands of people. Economically, it's better to eat at the hostel, because if you're alone, feeding yourself will cost you ten Euros. There's a technical aspect to all of this. The film begins like a western militant film, framing the problem as though a critique of the French by the French, but then the film is carried by the migrants. From this point of view, it's a key film.

KP: What is also obvious is the police presence. Thrusting people into illegality by creating a right



Residents from Foyer Charonne at work,
Boulevard Poissonnière, Paris, April 1997.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

of residence also means that you have to shut your mouth, and that if you don't shut your mouth, you will be expelled. This continues to be a very important threat, which has a huge social function. If you're an illegal immigrant and your boss doesn't pay you, you shut your mouth, and what's more, you can't make any political waves because it's like a constant sword of Damocles over your head. It's the double sword of Damocles: exploitation and silence, because you cannot make any political claims. This remains extremely strong today. We're somewhat protected by the European Court of Human Rights. Say, you're a stranger, you're married and without child, and you've lived here for forty years – if you get caught with a small quantity of drugs, you're immediately sent back to your country of origin, with which you have no more ties. Even in terms of delinquency, you're not fully accepted. This also continues to weigh on foreigners in Europe.

OM: I really like the music, which reminds me of African bush cinema music, which was produced a lot in France in the 1980s, although here it's in the harsh context of the 1970s. It's not a common sound for a film that takes place in France.

BT: We recorded a griot for some scenes, and for the rest we used Ravi Shankar.

TH: *Afrique sur Seine* by Paulin Vieyra also resonates with this film in terms of the music. Its soundtrack is based on the sound archives from the Musée de l'Homme, and the entire film was shot in Paris. In *Afrique sur Seine* the music is nostalgic. Here, the music is more resistant and it doesn't refer to a homogeneous past. It's like a sting that won't surrender and won't disappear.

Transcription by Raphaël Grisey.



Film stills from *Afrique sur Seine*, 1955
by Paulin Vieyra.



Film stills from *The Negative Hands*, Marguerite Duras, 1979.



Still of *Un malien d'Ivry*, INA archives, 1970.
Marguerite Duras in a demonstration after the funerals of the
five immigrant workers killed in the Aubervilliers fire.

Indi'relle yo rel'le
 Indi'relle yo rel'le
 Indima'relle yo rel'le
 N gà na Indi kó baa'ne
 Kóonì nì sìnmàyún ná dàgá, ì ná rì
 N gà ná Indi'relle kó baa'ne
 N sìnmàyún na dàgá, ì ná rì
 N sìnmàyún tèllé mínnà yì dé
 N sìnmàyún tèllé Din'be yì dé
 'Baaba 'Muusa de'be Din'be
 N hàabá Jàahàrì Jéydì de'be Din'be
 Kúndá Jéydì de'be Din'be
 Màhànmàdù Jéydì de'be Din'be

Indi'relle yo rel'le
 Indima'relle yo rel'le
 Án gà na nì 'róonó Din 'be yì dé
 Kóoni m'án gàn tí Allà sàg'án ná ró
 Kàmà-n- túnkà-bànnán sàg'án ná ró
 'Baaba 'Muusa sàg'án ná ró
 'Baaba Jàahàrì Jéydì sàg'án ná ró

Ò kú n'à mùkkú sòrón yà yí
 T'o kú n'à mùkkú rí'yaáanòn yà yí
 'Liñoye wá de'be 'káráná
 Yé i ti 'siroye wá de'be 'káráná
 'Liñoye gàn ná de'be 'káráná
 'Siroye gàn na de'be 'káráná
 Mà Kàyédi Din'be gà ñà 'kaajo
 'Muusa Jéydì de'be Din'be
 Màhànmàdù Jéydì de'be Din'be
 Ànsùmàanà Jéydì de'be Din'be
 Indi'relle yo rel'le
 Indi'relle 'toxo naa'me
 Mà jàmà haayin'delle 'toxo naa'me
 Indima ri yó rel'le
 Indima haayin' delle rí yó rel'le

Bóorè[n] nà 'kànmún yà
 X'á hàqilén nà kágándàaré
 Sègérál[n] kén nà téñ gùrdá
 X'a hàqilén nà tábén yà yí
 Indi'relle ri kó baa'ne
 Mà jàmà haayin'delle rí kó baa'ne
 Yélli killún gà n'in 'malí dé
 Pa'ri killi gilluún gà n'in 'málí dé
 Yélli killún gà n'in 'málí dé
 Pa'ri [hò-n-] làqì làatún gà n'in 'málí dé
 Yélli killún gà n'in 'mali dé
 NDàkáarù killún gà n'in 'málí dé
 Jàlì Jóobù killún gà n'in 'málí dé
 'Lenme 'sooma gà ná jàajè
 'Sooma dà kánñèn 'kútú 'guufa
 Xáalísí xúllén ña 'sentaade
 À dà kán-mórómóllèn naá ten'boora
 Mùusà Jéydì jàlán yà ní
 Jàahàrì Jéydì jàlán yà ní
 Lásásáná Jéydì jàlá sòomá

Indirellé Ô rellé
 Indirellé ô rellé
 Indima rellé ô rellé
 As soon as I sing Indi
 My thoughts flail in all directions
 As soon as I sing Indirellé
 My thoughts flail in all directions
 Where do they fly to?
 My thoughts fly towards Dimbé
 Dimbé village of my father Moussa
 Dimbé village of my father Diahari
 Dimbé village of Kounda Dieydi
 Dimbé village of Mohamadou Dieydi

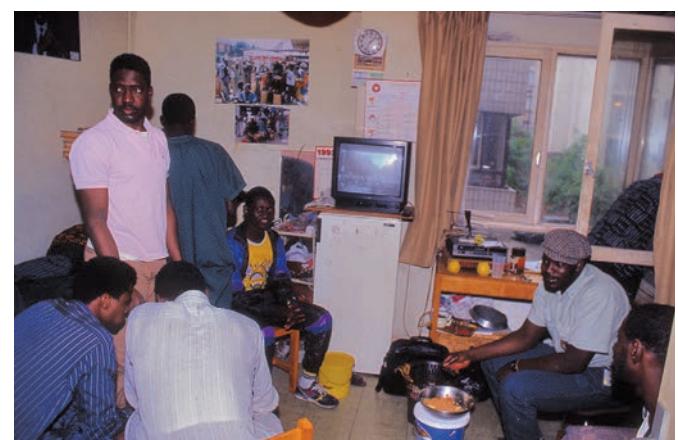
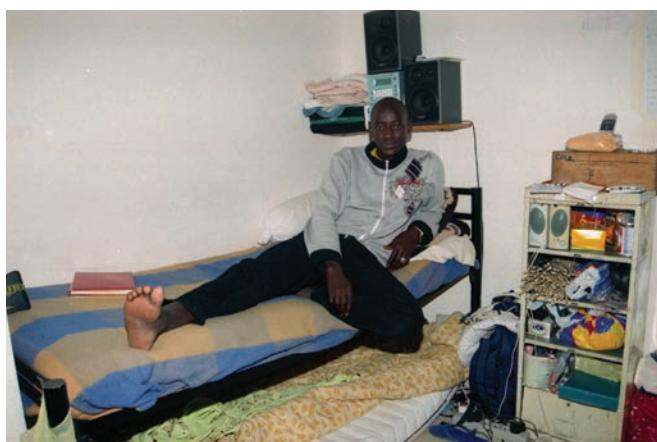
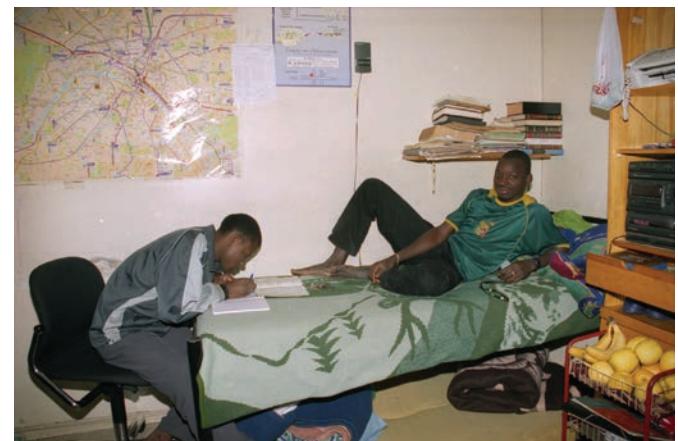
Indirellé ô rellé
 Indima rellé ô rellé
 To enter in Dimbé
 Streng is with you to urge the will of Allah
 Streng is with you to urge the will of Lord the Wealthy
 Streng is with you to urge the will of father Moussa
 Streng is with you to urge the will of father Diahari

We learn about it with the others
 We learn about it with the ones from elsewhere
 One says that well-being can destroy a village
 One says that generosity can destroy a village
 If well-being could destroy a village
 If generosity could destroy a village
 Kaédi's village would have fell into ruins
 Moussa Dieydi's village would have fell into ruins
 Mahamadou Dieydi's village would have fell into ruins
 Anthioumana Dieydi's village would have fell into ruins
 Indirellé ô rellé
 Indirellé, song with an eternal name
 Hayindellé, song that everybody admires
 Here is the Indirellé song
 Here is the song that everybody admires

The turtledove is in the sky
 Its spirit in the area for treshing the millet
 The partridge is on the wood strain of the field
 Its spirit at the bottom of the seed hole
 What is the object of Indirellé
 What is the object of the song that
 everybody admires?
 Let the roads bring me happiness
 Let the long roads leading to Paris bring me happiness
 Let the roads bring me happiness
 Let the distant doors of Paris bring me happiness
 Let the roads bring me happiness
 Let the roads leading to Dakar bring me happiness
 Let the roads leading to Diali Diop bring me happiness
 Let the eldest of the family come back
 covered with wealth
 The elder with the hairstyle set with gold
 With a pure silver comb
 With the golden nuggets of the size of an ointment
 It is the blood and the net of Moussa Dieydi
 This is the blood of Diahari Dieydi
 He is the eldest son of Lassana Dieydi



Diadié Sidibé with his colleagues at work, Paris,
December 1997. Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Looking at the photographs of Bouba Touré,
room 111, Foyer Charonne, Paris, 1992.

Room 111, migrant
worker housing
Foyer Charonne,
December 4, 2003.

A young man who takes
over the bed of his
father, room 111,
Foyer Charonne,
November 24, 2009.

Room 111,
Foyer Charonne,
September 4, 2010.

Room 111,
Foyer Charonne,
December 7, 2004.

Room 111,
Foyer Charonne,
November 7, 2010.

Photographs of Bouba
Touré on the walls,
room 111, Foyer
Charonne, 1992.



Collecting money to send home to the village of Yaguiné, room 111, migrant worker housing Foyer Charonne, 1991.

Phone call, room 111, Foyer Charonne, Paris, 1991.

Room 111, Foyer Charonne, Paris, 1993.

Room 111, Foyer Charonne, July 4, 2006.

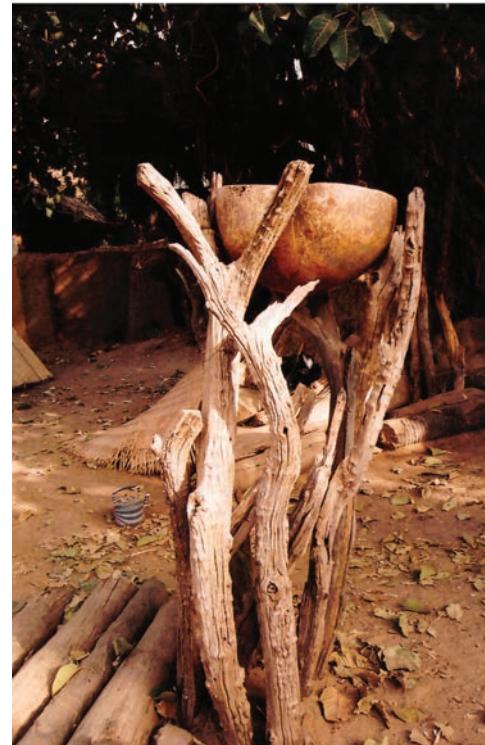
Room 111, Foyer Charonne, November 2012.

Room 111, Foyer Charonne, October 11, 2011.

Room 111, Foyer Charonne, May 31, 2014.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.





Sans-Papiers demonstration of residents from Foyer Charonne, Paris, July 11, 1998.

Demonstration with Sans-Papiers from Foyer Charonne, Paris, Blvd Poissonnière, 1992.

Writing a letter to home, Room 111, Foyer Charonne, 1992.

An elder of Foyer Charonne, Paris, 1990.

Calabash for offerings to the ancestors and ask wishes, Yaguiné village, Mali, 2007.

Room 111 with a picture on the wall of the calabash for offerings to the ancestors in Yaguiné village by Bouba Touré, Foyer Charonne, January 3, 2004.



Party in Foyer
Charonne, 1990.

Dress, sewing workshop, Foyer
Charonne, November 1995.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

A sunday in the yard of the
migrant worker housing Foyer
Charonne, Paris, 1991.

Sewing workshop in the base-
ment of Foyer Charonne,
Paris, January 1994.

Sewing workshop, Foyer
Charonne, Paris, 1990.



Corridors, Foyer Pinel, St Denis, November 19, 1999.

Room 5, Foyer Pinel, St Denis, November 1999.

Hairdresser, Foyer Pinel, Saint Denis, 1999.



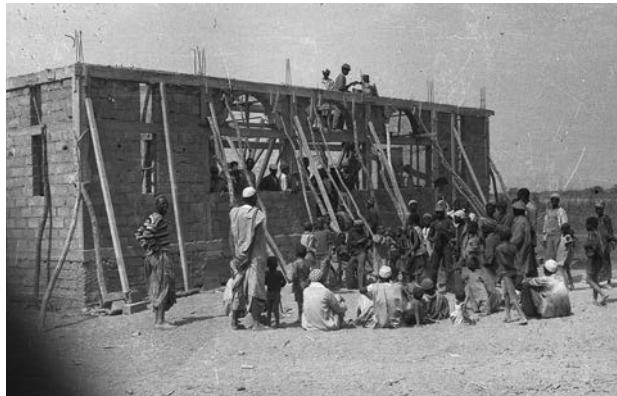
Room 5, Foyer Pinel, Saint-Denis, 1991.

Room 5, Foyer Pinel, Saint-Denis, November 19, 1999.

Room 5, Foyer Pinel, Saint-Denis, May 4, 2004.

Foyer Pinel, Saint-Denis, February 15, 2005.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



Bouba Touré and Sallou Gandega,
in front of Foyer Pinel, St Denis, 1971.

Construction of Tafacirga village's Mosque financed
by the diaspora, Mali, November 1976.

Senegal River in Tafacirga, Mali, February 2004.

Room 5 with photographs of Tafacirga by Bouba Touré
on the walls, Foyer Pinel, St Denis, October 25, 1999.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



View of Tafacirga, native village of Bouba Touré and Siré Soumaré, February 2004.

Siré Soumaré, room 5, Foyer Pinel, April 1996.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

Siré Soumaré, interview

I came from the same village as Bouba Touré, Tafacirga. Bouba is a cousin by the way. His maternal grandmother and mine are from the same father and mother. I'd been thinking of going to Europe since my earliest youth. I've always had this in my head. I really wanted to go to Europe. As soon as I'd left school, my aim was to leave. My parents didn't want me to leave but I eventually managed to persuade them to finance my journey from Zaire.

I met Bouba during my first week at the Pinel migrant hostel. He was very courteous. I gave him the latest news from the village and he talked to me about France. He encouraged me and advised me about how to behave in French society. He gave me good advice. He told me that I'd come here to work, only to work, and that I shouldn't indulge in drugs or alcohol. When you're in the prime of life, there are many temptations, but you have to stick to your ethics. Secondly, he encouraged me to work on my French in order to improve my intellectual capacities and to follow the evening classes after the work at the factory. I followed his advice – if I hadn't, I would

have remained at a very low level, since I'd only attended school for six years. It's thanks to evening classes and contacts with people that I was able to reach an acceptable level, which today allows me to say what I think, to express myself effortlessly in French, which is an important asset. I came to France via the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire, in 1971. I went to live with a cousin who ran a shop, hoping to earn enough money to pay for transport from Kinshasa to Brussels and onto France. I lived six months in Zaire before getting a ticket for Belgium. My big brother, my cousin, gave me the ticket. In Brussels I took the train to Paris, Gare du Nord. At Gare du Nord, as I was illiterate, I had no trouble finding the migrant hostel. I took a taxi, which took me to the hostel on 43 Rue Pinel in Saint-Denis. That's how I got there. It took me six months to get my first job.

At the time, you had to obtain a permit from the National Immigration Office (ONI). To obtain this permit, you had to be endorsed by an employer. But employers in turn required the permit to hire you. They wouldn't hire you unless you had that permit. So it was a conundrum: employers couldn't hire you



The elders from Tafacirga in Foyer Pinel,
St Denis, June 1997.

without the ONI's permit, and the ONI couldn't give you a permit without an employer guaranteeing you a job. That was the whole problem. It took me six months to get this famous permit. Once I had it, I could work in the building sector as a tile cleaner. Then I switched businesses, doing part-time work. The last company I worked for in France was Christofle, the Christofle works in Saint-Denis, which produces silver and gold cutlery. It was my last job before I went back to Africa permanently. I was there for two and a half years. All in all I stayed five years in France. I also worked in a metalworking company in Gennevilliers called Pélachaud. We produced wheel rims. I was an 'all-hands' worker, which means I was polishing the rims, removing the bumps and defects with a wire brush. One year on, I landed in hospital. I was living in a hostel where the living conditions were bad, and I was breathing in factory fumes on a daily basis. My body and my health declined. I fell sick, I had a bladder infection that landed me in hospital for two months.

It was after this operation that I decided to stop working in a metalworking company and started temping. We knew that the hostels were places where the Africans came together. Other people had told us

about life in the hostels. But we had a skewed image of what to expect because they didn't tell us the whole truth. For them, France was a promised land where life was good and things were plenty. They didn't tell us exactly what the living conditions in the hostels and factories were like. They painted a bright picture of France. So when you enter a hostel for the first time, you're bound to be disappointed. That's what every African will tell you. At first, the hostels don't match up with the image in your head, your vision of France. Back in the villages, it was our cousins, the first emigrants to have left, our brothers and friends who had been lucky enough to leave before us, who were telling us about this fascinating El Dorado that attracted all of us. For them, life there was a total success.

They sent us pictures of them standing next to telephones, sitting on motorcycles, wearing a suit and tie – things we knew nothing about. For us, wearing a suit and tie meant you were a boss, a toubab. When you receive a picture like that from a peasant boy with whom you used to plough the land, with whom you did a lot of work, when you see that he's arrived in France and wears the clothes of people



Room 5, Foyer Pinel, St Denis, October 25, 1999.
Photographs by Bouba Touré.

who are socially above you, you say to yourself that he has succeeded. This encourages you to believe that you too have to go there in order to be like him. For us, the suit and tie by and large symbolised economic and social success. When you arrive in France, however, when you confront everyday reality, you realise that things are not quite that way. Of course, life is very different and some things are easier, but on the downside, you experience total frustration. You're not in your natural environment, the way of life differs in all respects, from food to social contacts. There is a gap, a harsh and systematic distinction between what you've learned here and the new life you are trying to lead.

In Africa, people make contact very easily. Even when you meet someone you don't know, you ask them what they're called, and sometimes we make fun of each other based on our kinship. Soumarés and Bathilys, for example, make jokes, tease and insult each other, even if they've never met each other before. This doesn't exist in Europe. If you go on the subway in Europe, how many people will you see greeting each other? People don't care to greet each other. If you greet a stranger, they

might greet you back if they're nice. But if they're not, they will say: 'Do we know each other?' This is a cultural shock. When I visit members of my family, we sit down and we share the little food we have. In Europe, if you want to go around to someone's house, you have to warn them beforehand or be invited. You can't just ring by someone's house because they're a cousin or a relative. Here, on the contrary, if you visit a cousin, he will give you a roasting because you don't come round more often.

I knew a cousin who was living at the Pinel migrant hostel, who let me stay with him for five months. He gave me money. I took the bus every morning to go from one company to the next asking for a job, from 7 in the morning till noon. I did this systematically for five months, except on weekends, until I came across the rare bird: a metalworking company that was ready to hire me without the ONI permit. Without any papers at all. I knew the conditions would be hard, but it was the start of winter, so I had no choice. All I wanted was for a boss to take me on so that I could obtain a social security number and then apply for the ONI permit. That was the condition. My cousin, Toulé Soumaré, stayed in France with his family and children. He



Room 5, photographs of Tafacirga and of the fields of Somankidi Coura on the walls by Bouba Touré, Foyer Pinel, St Denis, June 7, 2003.

Photograph by Bouba Touré.

brought his family over, his children got married and became French nationals. Each time I return to Paris on an invitation by one of our [the cooperative's] partners, I spend a couple of days with him. It's my second family. He lives in Saint-Denis, a few steps from the Cité Floriane. He only ever came here once, on a three-night stopover. The day of his arrival coincided with the birth of my youngest boy, Ishara.

All the people here come from different hostels and different backgrounds. We met or got to know each other through our political activism. Beyond that, we didn't know each other at all. We met at ACTAF, and that's how we founded the village. The organization was created in 1971 to assist freedom fighters in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. We got together to exchange ideas, collect clothes and give blood. With the help of the Secours catholique français [French Catholic Relief Services], we collected all this and sent it to the frontlines. We supported the former Portuguese colonies in their struggle for independence and freedom. After they had gained their independence, we figured it was time to move on to another strategy: either staying

in France or returning to Africa with an agro-industrial project. The idea germinated just like that, and we considered it for a number of months. Then we decided to get training so as to familiarise with French agriculture. After this initial training, we made an assessment of what we should keep and what we should reject, and we eventually decided to return to Africa permanently. The war in the Portuguese colonies was over, and now our second fight was against underdevelopment and emigration. The cause of emigration among Africans is mostly poverty, since people don't have jobs or a prospect of a better life. But we realised that the main provider of jobs in Mali, and in Africa in general, was the land. If we increased the value of this land, surely everyone would have a job and we would all live relatively well. That was our goal.

We contacted potential donors and partners for the training, the implementation of our project and the clearing and uprooting work. We were fourteen men of four different nationalities who embarked on this adventure. Five years on, several people had defected due to economic difficulties. We experienced drought: the first year was pretty



Departure to Somankidi Coura, Mali. Siré Soumaré, Bakhoré Bathily, Karamba Touré and friends with the canvas-covered Peugeot 404 in front of foyer Losserand, November 1976.

From the website of the Association Karamba Touré.

much a failure, as we didn't harvest what we'd expected. Our entire business and investment plan was wrong, so we had to think again. Those who thought it was all a failure or a pipe dream quickly lost courage and left us. Those who remained still nurtured the hope that by hanging on we might one day come good, despite all the imaginable difficulties – economic, social, moral, political – that a human community brings with it. But thank God, we managed to create this village. We are now part of the peasant elite of the region and even the country. We have contributed to the political development of the region, and some of us are active in the political sphere on the local, regional or national level.

I myself am sitting on the board of a consular chamber, the last of Mali's chambers of agriculture, which has regional chapters. There is a chamber of agriculture in every region. I'm the chair for this region, which has allowed me to sit in the National Federation of Chambers of Agriculture of Mali, which brings together nine chambers: eight regional chambers and the chamber of the district of Bamako. It's called the Permanent Assembly of

the Chambers of Agriculture of Mali, and I'm the second vice-president at the national level.

I never enlisted with a political party. I prefer to campaign within the chambers of agriculture, in corporations and in political bodies, to take responsibility in corporations, to create NGOs and cooperatives. Many people quiz me about this, some even chide me for it, but the right moment hasn't come yet. And maybe my temperament would prevent me from being a good politician. Not to forget that politics in Africa has a bad reputation. A good politician is an accomplished demagogue most of the time – you must know how to lie and be good at treachery. This is what you need to excel in politics in Africa. You have to switch between parties, say 'no' today and 'yes' tomorrow depending on your short-term interest. There are no ideals or convictions in current politics. It's difficult for me to be politically active in these conditions. If you have ideals and strong convictions, you'll have a hard time succeeding in politics. That's what bothers me. I prefer to defend the interests of farmers through various corporations. I work the land and I live off it. It's

First general assembly of the Multifunctional Agricultural Cooperative held in November 20, 1978.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.



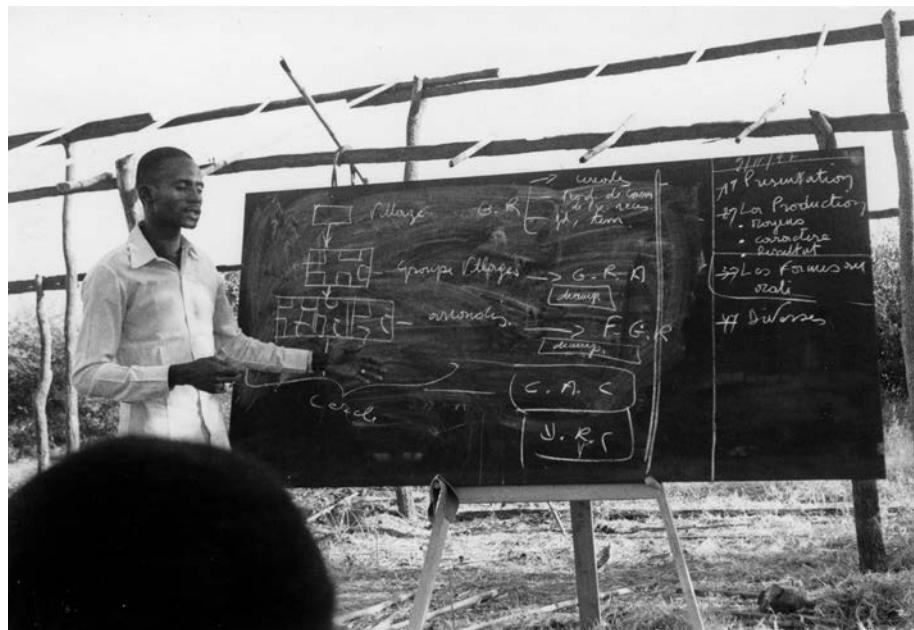
La 1^{re} Assemblée générale de notre
Coopérative Agricole Multifonctionnelle
qui s'est tenue hier mercredi à
Soranké-di-Goana le 20 - XI - 1978



Bouba Touré

15 MARS 1979

Instructor and jurist giving information on the different cooperative status' in Mali, Somankidi Coura, November 9, 1977. Photograph by Bouba Touré.



my main income. I don't have a salary and I have no immunity – all I earn comes from my field. I own a banana plantation of about one hectare and an onion field of half a hectare. I have a few heads of cattle, sheep and cows. This is how I make a living for my family, my two wives and my five children. Returning to Africa wasn't an obvious choice. It was a very difficult decision. It was a dream, if not an adventure. You sometimes ask yourself: How did we get this far? Now that I'm 56 years of age, would I be able to do what we did, with all its difficulties, pitfalls, blows and failures, if the opportunity came around again? As the believers say, man follows his destiny, and so it's destiny that let us build this village. But it wasn't easy.

Our partners compared us to the kibbutzim in Israel and the kolkhozes in the Soviet Union. The kibbutzim are based on religious ethics, they are a cornerstone of the state of Israel. You are inspired to do something if you think it's sacred. The kolkhozes in turn were linked to a political system. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, they have disappeared. They obeyed a political ethic and political precepts. The case of Somankidi Coura

is different from both. We don't follow a religious ethical code nor a predefined political concept. We follow our own conviction, our own vision of social transformation, our own conception of a social project. It's this challenge that we've been taking on for thirty years. Despite the difficulties, we created a village, we created a civilisation. A civilisation of common work and mutual aid. We are proud of that because it's been a lot of work. We have done the jihad, we've fought against our own impulses, our own desires. Jihad doesn't necessarily mean taking up the sword and cutting someone's head off – it means to control one's desires and be ready to face any difficulty in order to transform society for the good. This is what we've been doing for thirty years.

In 1982 Bouba Touré returned to France against his own will. But in his heart he is still with us. He follows through his commitment, although he isn't here physically, but he returns for several months every year. He supports us with what he can do in France. There was a conflict around the vision, conception and structuring of the group. As far as the equipment was concerned, for example, some wanted to buy a tractor, others didn't. The party that



A griot from Diakhandapé singing and encouraging three actors playing the role of Mady Niakhaté, Siré Soumaré, Bouba Touré. Stills (rushes) from *Cooperative*, 2008.



Bouba Touré going to wash dishes in the Senegal river, Somankidi Village, Mali, 1977.

On the way to the river to wash dishes, Somankidi, Mali, January 1977.

Mady Niakhaté, Siré Soumaré, Bouba Touré washing dishes in the Senegal river, Somankidi, Mali, January 1977.

Bouba Touré, Mady Niakhaté, Bangaly Camara, Ibrahim Camara on the way to the river to wash dishes, Somankidi Village, Mali, January 1977.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

was against tractors won with the blessing of our partners. During these conflicts, some felt frustrated and left. Living in a community wasn't always straightforward. You had to take turns cooking with people who couldn't cook and who had never worked together before. You had to decide who was going to use the axe, who was getting the machete, whose turn it was . . . There were endless discussions. We often argued while working in the fields. After eight hours of work, everyone was exhausted and edgy on the way back home. It took some composure to stay calm and you always had to keep in mind the common goal that brought you here. For those of us who, back in France, had been used to going to the dance hall or visiting their friends on weekends, it wasn't easy. Not to mention the people who suspected us of not being real farmers. Some doubted that we had come to farm and suspected that we were into politics. Our parents said we were worthless and that we should have stayed in France rather than devote our lives to farming, the most ungrateful occupation in the world. They wouldn't give us their blessing as long as we'd stay here. These were daily difficulties.

We were treated as useless, highwaymen, ruffians from France, idlers that had been forced into farming. We had to shut our eyes to stay focused. But none of this deterred us from our goal for a single moment. We continued on our little journey to obtain the results we see today. We're proud of this – we don't live in luxury, but that was never our goal, otherwise we would have stayed in a big city in France. We wanted to set an example and build a social model that would be able to transform our agriculture. The village lives mainly from its agricultural and livestock resources and gets by without any external help. We're not artificially propped up by a few donors. If all the villages in Mali reached the same levels of production as us, would the country still be considered the poorest in the world? Far from it, because we live relatively well: our children go to school, we take care of our health, clothing, leisure. That is the fruit you harvest from the field. I think it's a good example for the country. From the outset, our project was to have a vision, to set an example. And it worked.

Interview by Raphaël Grisey,
Somankidi Coura, 2008



First banana harvest,
Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1979.

Dramane Diaby, brother of Bouba Touré,
Somankidi Coura, 1979.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

Baay Demba Waar !
Baay Demba Waar Njaay
Baay Demba Waroo
Waaroo Njaay !

Waar waa ko yobbu geej
Coxolaan yaa ko may ndox

Mu naan ba mandi
Rabi-all yaa ko sang ak njoor

Baay Demba Waar !
Baay Demba Waar Njaay
Oh ! Demba Waar,
Oh ! Waar Njaay !

It was the work that brought him to sea
It is the spirits of the sea who gave him water

He filled his belly with it
It was the wild beasts who wrapped it in a white cloth

Waaroo Waar !
Waar dem na gèej
Waaroo waar
Waar dem na gèej Sàmba
Gooroo goor bu kenn daw
Bu kenn naani
Yaay Faatu fattalikul
Li ma la waxoon biig
Bu naaj tangee
Ma ne bu naaj tangee
Ci lay jambaar di feeñ

Oh work!
The laborer went to sea
Oh work!
Oh ! The laborer went to sea
Let no man flee
Let no one drink
Mama Fatou, remember
What yesterday's night said
When the sun is at the zenith
When the sun is at the zenith, I say
Then one discovers the brave

The Wolof legend says that Baay Demba Waar worked the land with his daba from morning until night until he reached the ocean and drowned. (Excerpts from *Work in Senegal in the 20th century*, Babacar Fall, Khartala Publishers, 2011).

Mady Koïta Niakhaté, interview

I grew up in Niogomera, 157 km from Kayes, in the Circle of Yélémané. I thought of emigrating in 1968. I knew people my age who had already left for France and Ivory Coast. I felt I had to leave and look for ways to improve my parents' life. That's the purpose of emigration. We saw that those who lived in Europe could help feed their families in case of drought. We saw that some of them came back to pay taxes or even managed to save money to buy livestock.

In 1968 I went to Abidjan, where I spent two years. On 30 August 1970 I arrived in Paris, France. I came to France via Belgium in a taxi. Some of my relatives had been in France since 1968, others since 1963 and 1964. They lived in migrant hostels. Before you left they would give you their contact details – no phone number, as there weren't any mobile phones back then, but their names and the address of their hostel. They either picked you up at the station or you took a taxi to get to their hostel. The taxi drivers knew all the hostels for Malian immigrants. There weren't as many as now. I started taking evening classes right away. In the hostels, one room was

reserved for free classes held by French or African students. I continued taking classes until the end of 1976, the first two years at the hostel and then, once I was literate, at the Alliance Française. I went there straight after work.

I was working in a small delivery company that used small three-wheeled vehicles. We were out all day and it nearly ruined my health. Then I worked for a few months in a military clothing manufactory. We produced bags, belts, parachute ropes – all kinds of army equipment. Next I worked in an industrial paint company. Eventually, I took up work as a laborer in the Maréchal factory, which manufactured windscreen wipers. I attended evening classes to improve my French and took in-house internships and technical classes to become a parts manager or controller a few months later. I left the company during a strike in 1976.

I first met the people of ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France) when they started organising debates about the problems in the hostel in which I lived (Foyer Losserand). I became a member shortly afterwards. We



Moussa Coulibaly and Ousmane Sinaré during the agricultural internships, Haute-Marne, 1976. Photograph by Bouba Touré.

organised film screenings to facilitate encounters between immigrants and French people. The films documented the underground struggles for independence in the Portuguese colonies: Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. We were in contact with the leaders of these movements.

They had representatives in Paris. They sent us films, which we screened in the hostels. On some evenings the films were followed by a debate on these struggles, which were conducted with little means compared to Portugal. They deserved to be helped. At ACTAF, we collected clothes and gave blood that was sent to the wounded on the frontlines. We also collected money. These countries' independence from Portugal in 1974 coincided with the drought in the Sahel in 1973, which affected all of Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso). After these countries had become independent, we asked ourselves what to do next. Should we continue to campaign in France? What would it take to go back? After careful consideration, we realised that the noblest endeavour would be to return to Africa and devote ourselves to farming. The images of the

draught on French television and in newspapers showed people starving, but also lakes and rivers drying up. They were compelling images. It wasn't usual to see people dying of hunger near a lake or a river. The river can feed you if you are free. It was this awareness that prompted us to return and devote ourselves to agriculture.

In May 1976, before returning to Africa, we decided to undergo practical training. Everyone handed in their letter of resignation to be able to take part in the training. We had six months of practical training in French peasant families in the Haute-Marne and the Marne. I spent four months in the Haute-Marne and then two months in Châlons-sur-Marne with a fruit farmer. After these six months, we travelled to Somankidi in December 1976. We officially started working on 17 January 1977. We were somewhat surprised to find that the peasants of the Marne and the Haute-Marne didn't so much farm as breed livestock. I learned to work with them on a daily basis. These peasant families were not exactly open-minded and had no idea of how people lived in Africa or elsewhere. We arrived in the homes of peasants who knew nothing of life beyond their county or



Seed nursery, Somankidi Coura, 1978.

village. Our stay coincided with the 1976 drought in France. We witnessed the solidarity between peasants, how the government intervened to help them and how important this was. Grain had become so rare that they brought it to the Haute-Marne all the way from the Côte d'Or. The drought in Africa had happened in 1973, and in 1976 it was France's turn. Some breeders, who were overwhelmed by the problem, even committed suicide after watching their cattle die without being able to do anything. The government had to mobilise the army to supply the breeders in hay. This taught us how to act in the event of a severe drought, and through our training we even participated in the general effort.

I was a born peasant. My father and my grandfather had been peasants. But we did traditional farming. There was no mention of plough, tractor, seed selection, manure quality or sowing dates. Technically, there was no follow-up. When we started our training, we realised that there were plenty of things to consider, systems to put in place, calculations to be made. We alternated a week of practice with a week of theory in an agricultural centre, where we reviewed everything we had done

and seen. There were technicians who taught us about profitability and soil and plant behaviour, which enabled us to take in all this data.

We knew life would be hard in the beginning for a group of people who had left France in order to build a village in the middle of nowhere and start farming without any means. We hadn't attended any schools, we weren't engineers or agricultural technicians. We expected the worst to happen. We knew that the first and second year and the time up to the fifth year wouldn't be easy. We were prepared accordingly. But we were convinced that farming would allow us to lead a better life. In 1977, the first year, we experienced a drought. We thought the winter yield might feed us during the counter-season but things turned out differently, as we harvested next to nothing. So we had to buy food before the fruit and vegetable production began to take hold. Fortunately, what we sowed in the first counter-season came out very well. Cabbages, onions, tomatoes – everything sold very well. From one difficulty to the next, we've been able to overcome them all to this very day.



Baobab, Kayes region, 2016, Mali.
Photographs by Bouba Touré.

When we got here, it was almost a forest. In a single campaign, from January to June, we cleared and uprooted twenty-five of the sixty hectares and constructed the main channel ourselves. Bouba Touré moved to the plot a year before us. He didn't want to commute between Samé and Somankidi Coura in a dugout canoe, so he slept in his field. While we crossed the river after work, he spent the night there. But considering what he saw and heard, we realised it wasn't easy – you had to be really courageous to do that. The inhabitants of Somankidi claimed there were devils in this place. They had tried to cultivate the land before us and said it was inhabited by evil spirits.

In any case, people said the place was haunted. But despite this we kept going. A technician advised us to construct the channel entirely from termite soil. Termite soil is a very stable soil, so it was ideal to make the channel hold up. We went very far to collect termite soil, which we brought back in a wheelbarrow. We constructed 1.3 kilometres worth of channel like that. We picked up the termite mounds, filled them into the wheelbarrows and brought them back to the channel. When there are termites on a plot,

they diminish its workable surface. The earth you see on the termite mound comes from deep down, it's the soil the termites use to build their home. If you look down into a mount, you'll see that there's plenty of empty space. When you irrigate near a termite mound, the water goes directly into that hole. The termites bring up the soil from deep down. The larger the termite mound, the larger the hole. Where there is a termite mound, nothing can grow, because the soil that has been brought to the surface is not arable. It's living soil. I mean it's not dead. If you try to grow something around it, it doesn't yield anything because it lacks humus. It's hard soil, clay soil. The termites take their soil from deep down, where there is no arable earth. If you bring it to the surface, it will not yield anything. Not even grass will grow around a termite mound in the rainy season.

A termite mound in a room or in a house means the house is already doomed, because it will collapse shortly. Termites first eat into the walls and the wood. They cause a lot of damage. You can't sleep in the same room as a termite mound, it's simply impossible.



Termite mound, Somankidi Coura. Still, Raphaël Grisey, 2017.

When we were young, the elders told us that termite mounds were the houses of the devils. We shouldn't step on them because they were inhabited by devils. That's what people were saying. When we started breaking up the termite mounds to construct the channel, people thought we had a secret, a means to chase the devil and catch him. They didn't understand how we could touch something they were afraid of. The problem with termite mounds is the termites and the queen. As long as there is a queen, a termite mound will always reconstruct. It's an organism that lives to protect the queen. The people of Somankidi thought we had a secret way to break up the termite mounds, to break the house of the evil genies. They didn't understand. Bouba is all for nature, it's his philosophy. You mustn't beat the donkey, you mustn't beat children. That's his personal conviction. I don't know why he's against the disappearance of termite mounds. Maybe he has his reasons. For me, if there is a termite mound in a field, the owner isn't happy. It's okay in the bush but not in a field, where it's really harmful. It eats up the surface and you lose water during irrigation, and water is money.

When we settled here, you couldn't see Somankidi, not even from Samé on the other side of the river – that's how many trees there were. How far have you got to travel nowadays to see trees like these? You won't find any jujube trees anymore like the ones we have here. Everything has been cut down. People have no policy to preserve the environment. They don't see this as their problem.

We put everything down to God, but it's not he who takes the axe to cut trees. It's us humans. That's the big problem in Africa. We cut. We cut without realising that there will come a day when nothing's left. You won't find a single place from Kayes to Matam as green as Somankidi Coura. There are no more trees along the river.

Every year a war is being waged here, even on the river. People cut down everything, supposedly to grow rice crops during the floods. For a while it was forbidden to clear the land around here. There were all kinds of trees. But one day, they came and cut everything down. When will people become aware of this problem?



Sombi porridge breakfast before going to the fields, Somankidi Village, Mali, January 1977. Photographs by Bouba Touré.

Gathering before going to the fields, Somankidi Coura, 1978.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

The hot winds are blowing away all the good arable land, leaving nothing but stones and hard earth. We're starting to experience problems. People tried growing corn in the rainy season. The first and the second year it worked well, but now it's failure after failure. There's no more arable land. Trees no longer prevent the wind from carrying away the arable land along with the dust. The impact is so down to earth, so concrete, and yet people fail to see this as their problem. When you talk to them, they tell you that God will bring a lot of water. You can't have life without trees and water. If you cut the trees, you won't have any water either. Trees and water go together. We bought the motor pump collectively. Then we paid into a common fund through our union (URCAK) to collect 6 million francs CFA in case the pump needed replacing. You must repay the whole price of your pump before you can get another one from the union in case it breaks down. If you don't pay back, URCAK has the right to take the pump away from you. It's a sustainable system at a time when money is becoming scarce. The small pumps only work for fruit and vegetable farming along the river. You can't use them on the

banana plantations further back, because it takes too long. For this purpose, we use the large pump in turns. Small pumps allow you to chose your type of farming. You can't start to sow your seeds before everyone else if you don't have the small pump, because with the big one, everyone must wait their turn. We worked collectively for fifteen years. During the first five years, we even ate together. After fifteen years, we began to divide the land between the families, so that women and children would learn how the cooperative worked. The regulations of the cooperative stipulate that if you're not a member, you don't have to work. Women have been formally incorporated with the same rights as the men. At first, they were excluded from the cooperative – they were only associate members – because we thought their membership might be problematic and become a source of internal conflict.

Interview by Raphaël Grisey,
Somankidi Coura, 2007.

Kanda-'sootaana 'yo

Kanda-'sootaana 'yo

Gida-n-'yugu-kanda-'sootaana 'yo

Kòotán rí

Kanda-'sootaana 'yo

Gida-n-'yugu-kanda-'sootaana 'yo

Kòotán 'háyí

Nbáaré léelè (tàanú 2)

Nbáaré ñúmàn dàllà gun'ne

Tùgáyèn nà ró

Sòogò-líkkigùmén yà ní

Tùgáyèn nà ró

Sànmì-n-líkkigùmén yà ní

Tùgáyèn nà ró

Kàndàgùmén yà ni

Tùgáyèn nà ró

Sòogò-n-kàndàgùmén yà ní

Tùgáyèn nà ró

Sànmì-n-kàndàgùmén yà ní

Tùgáyèn nà ró

Nbásá-n-dórókogúmèn yà ní

Tùgáyèn nà ró

Wàaxì-n-dórókogúmèn yà ní

Tùgáyèn nà ró

Biyègùmén yà ní

Tùgáyèn nà ró

O you who stuff the basket overflowing with millet

O you who stuff the basket overflowing with millet

O brother who stuffs the basket overflowing with millet

Here comes the day [of recognition]

O you who stuff the basket overflowing with millet

O brother who stuffs the basket overflowing with millet

Here is the day [of recognition]

Too bad that the friend has delayed [to return] (bis)

Too bad that the good parent stayed a long time abroad

To him all our gratitude

It is the owner of the loads of small millet

To him all our gratitude

It is the owner of the loads of big millet

To him all our gratitude

It is the owner of the baskets of millet

To him all our gratitude

It is the owner of the baskets of small millet

To him all our gratitude

It is the owner of the baskets of big millet

To him all our gratitude

It is the owner of the basin boubous

To him all our gratitude

It is the possessor of the boubous "wakhi"

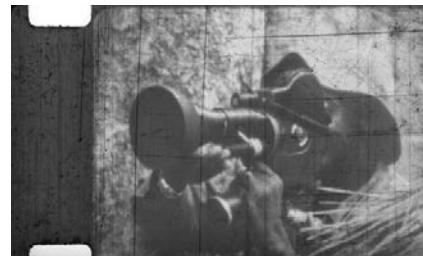
To him all our gratitude

It is the owner of the money notes

To him all our gratitude



Threshing the millet, Tafacirga, Mali, 1976.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Sana na N'Hada at the proclamation of the independence of Guinea Bissau, 1973.



Josefine Crato and students from Guinea Bissau in Cuba, 1969. Still from the unfinished film *6 Anos Depois /6 years after* by Sana na N'Hada, Flora Gomes, José Cobumba and Josefina Crato, 1979–1980.



Film still from *La reprise du travail aux usines Wonder* by Jacques Willemont, 1968.



Film still from *Reprise* by Hervé Le Roux, 1996.

Since I Don't Want to Die, I'm Walking with Time¹

— So what's going on? Don't you like it here?
— I'm leaving to do practical training in agriculture.
— And become a farmer? Listen Mr Coulibaly, progress is farmers leaving the land to become laborers. That's how it's always been and that's how it always will be.
— *Safrana or Freedom of Speech* by Sidney Sokhona, 1978

A Multi-Handed Narrative: Takes and Retakes

For quite some time I have been exploring the theme of “the properties of soil”, which I once tried to untangle in the form of an exhibition that bore this title at Espace Khiasma in 2015. The polysemy of the name of this exhibition was not innocent, and it is part of an ecology of names that is an important component of my work. How does the slave rid himself of the ascendancy of the master's name, considering that the slave's condition is a particular experience, very different from that of a poor worker insofar as the slave has given up the human condition to become an object, a piece of furniture that bears his buyer's countermark? In previous performances and texts I have explored the question of names as important artifacts of colonialism, and considered ways of dealing with this heritage poisoned by a cooking process—that is to say a sorcerous chemistry that penetrates and produces the body through the mouth. As I do later in this text, I tried to develop the idea of retaking names as an alternative to their rejection/suppression, in order to unsettle their opaque surface and replay their history. Without going into a detailed examination of the question of cooking (which involves gestures of possession retaking and reversal that I borrow from production systems in voodoo culture), in the present text I explore another way of placing names at the heart of a translation and displacement operation: activating them as a motif through a collective practice like a string game, in order to move them away from what they capture or designate. Like cooking, it is all about moving away from the uniqueness that a name is supposed to designate in terms of property or identity, in order to move it towards a play of interpretations and reinterpretations. When I have tried to deal with my own relationship with names—in my writing as well as in my curatorial practice—I have often left them with no object to name, like a vagabond, a “thief with fresh hands.”² They often long precede what they might designate, and ultimately never really designate at all. They stay on the threshold, like troublemakers in the neighborhoods of object, bodies and situations. They are reserves of meaning that need to find their cropland and be found by it.³

1 Bouba Touré, quoted from one of his films.

2 Quote extracted from the text “An Ecology of Shadow (Speak Low)”, reading given at Gasworks (London) in 2017.

3 On this subject, see Louis Henderson's fascinating text: “Compost in the Créoile Garden: The Archive as a Multispecies Assemblage”.

They wait like seeds—and each seed is a bomb that explodes several times in several different ways. In a sense, I have always let things name themselves, even if today I have to admit that this practice, which lets the name come of its own accord, immediately produces a mask, a shadow, and that we are now forced to find our way through the darkness this name casts around places and things.

Exhibitions are not a matter of invention, but rather of attention—to chemical process, alliances, silhouettes, shadows and counter-shapes, attention to what is happening, coming and arising. It takes something that we do not yet know and makes it public. It is a multi-voiced narrative that is not the presentation of a result, of the visible consequence and material proof that something happened beforehand. It is rather an attempt to produce an entropic situation that could—through montage effects (both from decisions and from letting go)—give rise to something unexpected, uncertain, something not yet captured by words, which intrudes upon the space made possible by the presence of the works and by their untimely dialogue. The name does not emerge from all of this unscathed. It is thickened for lack of clarification. Like a mask, it is changed by the ceremony.

To return to that first exhibition at Khiasma (we could just as well speak of publication): among other works, I invited films by Louis Henderson and Filipa César, as well as a video installation by Raphaël Grisey, *A Mina dos Vagalumes*, which reused sequences from the film *Remanescentes*, in which he connected two systems and levels of ownership of soil in Brazil.⁴ When I undertook an interpretation of Grisey's cinematographic work with Bouba Touré, it occurred to me that it might be possible to continue certain threads of a conversation, on a path full of detours where the voices of the two other artists still circulate in benevolent shadows.⁵

All of this could be summed up by the string games dear to Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway and their companions in thought, where every hand has fun expanding the motif drawn by others. And this idea of a many-handed narrative made by taking and retaking could very well apply to what is created in cinema by Touré/Grisey—to name them as the filmmakers and as a duo of characters, since they constantly navigate between these two realms of utterance.

It is my turn to get involved in this game and take advantage of the chance to plunge my hands back into the motif of the properties of soil, in order to continue weaving it and speaking about its uncertain landscape.

4 *Remanescentes*, a feature-length documentary by Raphaël Grisey, chronicles the day-to-day life of two quilombos, communities of descendants of former slaves. One is coming into being, or rather trying to become visible again, in a valley threatened by an international mining company. In the city, the other one is being invaded by property speculation, while the women of the community put up a strong fight to preserve what remains and reconquer the despoiled lands. *Remanescentes* is a documentary essay on the quilombola question and Brazil's complex relationship with its own origins. Raphaël Grisey follows various land right struggles simultaneously and weaves them together, while immersing the viewer in the cosmology of Brazil's "Maroon" culture.

5 Building upon the exhibition "The Properties of Soil" at Espace Khiasma, Filipa César and Tobias Hering offered the symposium "Encounters Beyond History" in Guimaraes, Portugal in December 2015. By considering the relationship with a collection of archives from the early days of cinema in Guinea-Bissau, it offered other perspectives on, and approaches to, this same subject.

Cinema's Food Crop: Returning Different

The properties of soil. The expression presents two quite opposite realities as one single crystal diffracting different narrative beams. On the one hand, it is a proprietary politics of soil, either private or public, defined by an appropriation of space that goes hand-in-hand with control over its use and the right to circulate on it. But maybe more importantly, this appropriation prohibits its adaptation and the creation of a provisional soil and the equally provisional community (culture) that could grow from it. A right-of-use culture. This would presuppose a consideration of the conditions for a conversation with the soil, and therefore its multiple properties would have to be taken into account as the vocabulary of an animist narrative. These properties would need to be attributed practices and scales, ways of doing with, of caring, to constantly preserve and redefine the soil at the same time, by rearranging layers of meanings and stories. It is a conversation gesture that would translate a future construction through a "retake" of heritage—in the sense of a new way of understanding heritage and reinterpreting it as a kind of music—an antidote to conservative melancholy and its accompanying story of loss. It is a story of loss that eats into emotions, and uses other means to pursue the production of a colonial psyche stuck between an obsession with the essentialized repetition of tradition and a fantasy of progress that presupposes its destruction. To understand this, I think it is important not only to grasp that colonies are in a first phase—being not just sites of captured resources, but also social, cultural and technical experimentation laboratories—but also to see how they subsequently transformed with decolonization into generators of a new traditional Western fantasy, based on the myth of the lost paradise. This is how one should understand the amendment proposed by Christian Vanneste in 2005, which loomed up in the National Assembly like a specter in the dead of night.⁶ It attempted to enshrine in law "the positive role of colonization". Yet the same year, the French suburbs were thrown into a state of unrest after the deaths of two youths, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, an event that recalled another story—a necropolitical one—of French populations from the former colonies.

It is also a matter of getting away from the interpretation of traditional culture that sees it as essentially a product of changelessness, as opposed to a progressive, modern gesture, a movement of emancipation and development, and instead seeing it as one single culture of the radical, even though here I would like to see nostalgia and the culture of the new take over from the defeated gestures. Gestures that regrasp and displace, that produce some different sameness, a return to the surface of the old, as a humus of futures. To understand the ecology of these gestures and develop it as a motif, one must specify its scale, that of the conversation with the soil evoked above, which annihilates its intensive

6 On this subject, see "La Possession de Vanneste", by Olivier Marboeuf, published in the magazine *Mouvement* (Paris) in 2012.

exploitation. This is why food agriculture interests me for its level of attention—and why it is useful as a motif for mapping out the ecology of other practices, including (as we will see later) that of a certain kind of cinema that I am calling for. But make no mistake. This is not a focus on the small scale as such, but on the possibility of producing larger, more transnational motifs from a network of situated motifs.

Amílcar Cabral, an agronomist by training who became the leader of the Parti Africain de l'Indépendance de Guinée et du Cap Vert (PAIGC / The African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde), was quick to sense the need to direct attention to the properties of soil in Alentejo, in Portugal's arid south, while the state was putting all of its energy into accumulating new colonial properties. In Cabral's eyes, aridity was not an inevitability, but rather a sign that it was necessary to pay attention to a broader spectrum of interlinked factors, an invisible ecology of relationships and interdependencies.⁷ One could describe this brief overview of the situation produced by the colonial paradigm thus: attention to property rather than to the properties of soil.

Even if this could appear incongruous at first glance, I thought it would be interesting to attempt to draw lessons from a certain way of working the soil, as a way of understanding the ecology of a kind of cinema that combines different image temporalities. A cinema that is something of a temporal medium, which makes possible multiple versions of films, and moves away from the masterpiece as an object that encloses meaning, by offering itself as material for other stories. "Since I don't want to die, I'm walking with time" Bouba Touré says in a voiceover to one of his videos. And he gives us room to think that this is the voice of the film itself, a film that, like a soil, reconstitutes itself and never dies, that is to say it never becomes a vestige, an artifact of the past, but rather a humus that is active in the present of other films. And to draw a parallel between food agriculture and a certain way of cultivating images, of producing a cinema of the future with material accumulated from a past that constantly returns by being displaced, something that is remarkably exemplified by a film like *Handsworth Songs* by Black Audio Film Collective. A cultivated cinema that replays time and feeds on the compost of films that preceded it in an impure form, in which all types of heritage play the roles of poltergeists. The story loses its hierarchy and its order between things. The living transform the dead into partners in struggle.⁸

Maybe it would be appropriate for the Afrofuturist dimension of Raphaël Grisey's work to be situated here, in the way it creates a cinema that mobilizes the ghosts of other cinemas, a film that revives other films, a work as a possible, provisional organization of a community of

7 On this subject, see "Mined Soil", a film-essay by Filipa César (2014), who literally presents Cabral's knowledge-return ritual as an antidote to the Portuguese soil crisis.

8 I am quoting the film *Handsworth Songs* by Black Audio Film Collective.



Film stills from *Handsworth Songs*, Black Audio Film Collective, 1986.

specters. This is why I am treating the Somandiki Coura cooperative venture and its multiple narrations as a single gesture, which I see as having something of the nature of a retaking and fertilization of composite soil. The narrative that Raphaël Grisey develops does not erase its predecessors, but converses with them in a narrative string game of intersecting voices. It is a game he cultivates but did not invent, because already in 1977, Mauritanian filmmaker Sidney Sokhona got Bouba Touré to play his own role in *Safrana or Freedom of Speech* Bouba Touré himself never stopped migrating from one perspective to another: emigrant, immigrant, factory worker, photographer, then filmmaker-chronicler of illegal immigrant struggles and of the cooperative's venture.

This game of deterritorializing / reterritorializing practices is the very essence of what underlies the singular Somandiki Coura gesture, because the French countryside is where those migrant workers met with local farmers and learned practices that they could implement upon returning to the Kayes region on the banks of the Senegal River. There was a transposition of tradition, that is to say a retake of heritage, a recreation, an invention of geography that closely relates to the cine-geography at play in the work of Touré / Grisey. By saying "Touré / Grisey", I am trying to convey that it is a cinema doubly affected by the practice of these two filmmakers / characters, that it is the production of a hybrid narrator who is spoken by the film more than he speaks it. Because although Raphaël Grisey is the one pulling the strings today, Bouba Touré has contributed to producing an invaluable continuity between the fate of yesterday's and today's migrant workers, a documentation of a minority, in which he never stops speaking from a situated point of view, thus recasting his body as one of the territories on which the history he is recounting was inscribed—something that I see as the characteristic feature of the history of immigration.

But in this game where each motif is only a provisional landscape of strings, other figures can still appear and populate the narrative. Thus we could carry on repeating the mantra that supplies new interpretations with each new cycle: "Since I don't want to die, I'm walking with time", and this would be the grandfather speaking, the one who comes back in Bouba's body, the grandfather who fought for the French army in the trenches of Verdun during the First World War, a soldier of whom Bouba is convinced he is the reincarnation. History makes a first return in the body itself, but it does not repeat itself. Bouba made the journey to France as well, but it was a different journey to a different France. But it does not repeat itself particularly because, as Roland Barthes said, the grandfather is already in the realm of fiction, of a motif that Bouba reinterprets. Like his worker / actor / filmmaker status, with Bouba reincarnation signifies a different ecology of the double, a return-chronology that is not a cyclical time but rather a spiraling time in which everything replays differently. Everything that returns comes back displaced and on the move, walking with time.

An Event and its Narrative: A Story Politics

The advent of state post-truth—which to some extent takes over from the hackneyed grand narratives of colonial modernity as a tool of inequality essentialization and as the infantile melancholy of the powerful—gives even more urgency to American scholar Donna Haraway’s call to invent new narratives as antidotes and possible spaces of care and transition—I stress the idea of narrative as both a material and a tool for producing a transmission situation. And this is not a question of imagination, like fables that stem from pure fantasy. The stories that matter attentively cultivate the most discreet facts of the past, rooting themselves in the present where we get them to grow and make themselves into footholds, into fulcrums and perspectives for a possible future. Haraway translates a story politics and the need, from a post-Marxist perspective, to retaliate on the territory of narratives—situated narratives the must confront those of the deadly supremacy of white males, and also confront the major multi-purpose revolutionary ideologies. Understanding that it is not just a matter of changing the narrator, but changing the method and scale of narratives. Thus cultivating a constellation of little stories that extend through capillary action, through the networking, transferal and smuggling of knowledge. But also and especially cultivating motifs that can be extended, stories that can be replayed, recipes that can be interpreted. An expanding narrative ecology where the narrative never restricts its possible epilogues and versions. It stays at the level of its enunciation community, like a food crop, out of a necessity of close relations that does not compromise the possibility of global alliances and distant translations / transductions.

The Fiction of Another Story

In my view, the dialogue at the beginning of this text—a snippet extracted from the famous film *Safrana or Freedom of Speech* by Sidney Sokhona—is a perfect introduction to a present-day attempt to consider the Somankidi Coura cooperative’s venture from the particular angle of narrative. Because although it is necessary to first study it as a singular event—in its historical context, in order to detail its ecology, its stages, its incredible successes as well as its contradictions and blind spots—I believe it is no less important to consider it as a motif, a narrative that breaks with tradition, a different story. A story which is different in that through its various alliances, strategies and geographies, it launches a rear attack on a certain established order in the relationship between the north and south, between France and a formerly colonized West Africa. This applies to economics, but also to a symbolic regime of seduction—which becomes relevant in our case as soon as we take the political power of narrative seriously and appreciate the way it assigns, produces and administers bodies and desires. In other words, returning to one’s country means considering another hypothesis, a counter-narrative that turns its back on the magnetism of the body of France. Do not misunderstand: it is not so much or solely about a logic of country, territory or soil, but about a clause added to an established narrative that unfolds in people’s imaginations: about

France as an Eldorado, a land of plenty, and exile as the only solution for an African man who wants to provide for his close ones.

Disproving this imaginary France is not just important for migrant workers, it is a necessity for everyone who detects in state narratives the very essence of a melancholic politics, capable of imagining neither a different story nor a different development in the struggles. In his film, Sidney Sokhona always uses the same dark humor to depict the relationship between the activists and the migrants who have decided to go back to their home country and farm the land. While the activists fight for the rights of workers being exploited at factories, the migrants are taking off, to literally and doubly go further. The migrant worker, having come out of his strict invisibility, is still nothing but a silent body, an object on which the struggles between bosses and activists hinge—a typically self-centered French story. No one attributes to this body the possibility of making an autonomous decision, stating a possible future, spinning a narrative thread that is definitely not favorable to him, creating his own montage.

If Sokhona made the film of this different story not without malice, this was probably in order to cultivate it, to discard its singularity so that it can become a narrative of possibilities, a fiction that, as Bruno Latour has said, is not so much about placing reality at arm's length (something that could be opposed to the documentary genre), but about making a constructed, tooled form of reality. A form that I will call a motif in order to return to the idea of that string game and the possibilities it offers in terms of intervention and development through other hands and voices. When Raphaël Grisey films the retaking of that motif, he extends it, withdraws it from its historical stratum, brings it back into the future. *Xarassi Xanne* [crossing voices], the film he is currently working on, echoes a first film *Cooperative*, which he made in 2008, and which already featured Touré/Grisey. By allowing himself to return to it, he asserts the possibility of an open-motif cinema and the possible extension of the cine-geography that populates it.

Gidi 'gidi Sànbúyàayé

Gidi 'gidi Sànbúyàayé
Gada 'gada Sànbúyàayé
Lèelán wà dò túròn ɳá.
San'ba xà wá dò gídí-n-tá
N ná 'légé tòngórè dá
N ná ñàxa tòngórè dá
Tòngórè gà gùnnén dì
Tòngórè, 'ho liŋe

Guidiguidi Sambu Yâyé

Guidiguidi Sambu Yâyé
Gadagada Sambu Yâyé
Around the fig tree flutters the blackbird
In the surroundings of the bottom of the hill
Samba is bustling
I will dance for the little melon
I will celebrate for the little melon
Small melon of the scrubland
Small melon with a delicious flavor



'Duna su dà yillèn ña du'gaane

Everyone put in heaps of millet

'Duna su dà yûlèn ña du'gaane

Everyone put in heaps of millet

'Duna su dà móllèn ña du'gaane

Everyone put in heaps of beans

Bíri 'Danko

O Biri Danko

N hàabá dà kánñèn ña du'gaane

My father put in heaps of gold

Xúnbà Maama 'Danko

O Kouumba Danko

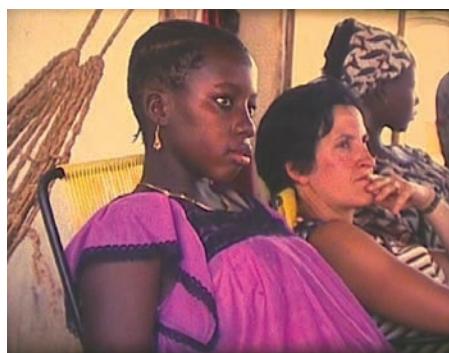
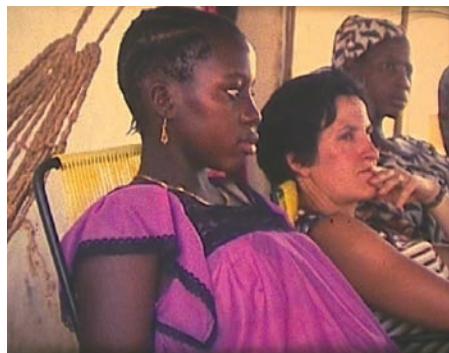
N hàabá dà góðèn ña du'gaane

My father put in heaps of pure silver

Excerpts from *Traditional Songs of the Soninke Country*
Ousmane Moussa Diagana (L'Harmattan, 1989).



Banana field, Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1980.
Photographs by Bouba Touré.



Goundo Kamissokho. 8mm film stills from 1979,
Somankidi Coura, Mali, by Monique Janson.

Goundo Kamissokho Niakhaté, interview

I know that the men decided to return to Mali to farm the land and stop being immigrants. I was a little girl at the time. I was betrothed at the age of six. I don't know much about their struggles in France. I'm not in a position to speak about this because I wasn't there. I know they faced many problems. They struggled. There were different nationalities, so they wrote to different countries, and Mali was the first to respond. They had decided to go to the first country that would answer their call. They told their parents they were coming back to work. People thought they were mad. Who wants to leave France to farm the land in Mali? Some parents disagreed. They were convinced you couldn't make money in Africa. After two or three years they started to understand. Not everyone can be an emigrant. If everyone goes away, who's going to be left? Some leave, others remain. Emigration won't solve all the problems. And even if it resolves certain problems, it also causes damage. We're used to emigration but it has its advantages and disadvantages. We don't share other people's ideas.

In the beginning there were few women. We crossed the river in the morning, we prepared the food and ate together with the men. After all the marriages, everything was divided up between families. Everyone was now cooking at home.

When the president of the cooperative agreed to give us three hectares, I told him that I couldn't accept his offer informally. I went to see the commander in Samé and asked him for an official document signed by him, the president and myself. I'm personally keeping this document. It proves that the president of the cooperative has agreed to give the women three hectares of land. After all the plots had been distributed, the men gave the women a piece of land. We farm it as the women's collective field. Collective fields are called solidarity fields. Their proceeds go towards URCAK [Kayes Regional Union of Agricultural Cooperatives] and its functioning. We designated some energetic women to run a test on that plot. Each group cultivated a quarter of a hectare. We look at the yield and pay the money. It's our contribution to the running of URCAK. This year, we are participating in the functioning of URCAK. Not every part of the sixty hectares had been developed, the three hectares given



Souaré Diaby and Goundo Kamissokho going to work in Kayes.

Goundo Kamissokho at her office of the URCAK in Kayes.

Collective fields of the Association of the Women of Somankidi Coura.

Stills (rushes) from *Cooperative*, 2008.

to us had not been developed. I personally managed to find partners. French Cooperation financed the development. We also had a partnership with the state to pay for the survey. To develop the land, we had to clear it and build irrigation channels. Not all of the land had been uprooted. We paid for laborers and installed pipes. This cost us five million francs CFA. We did that in 1992.

Our partner from Kaïni was mainly concerned with the women's problems, with irrigation, development, health, schooling and literacy. They supported women who couldn't read and write or who had health problems. The project is now completed, but we worked a lot with them. This programme allowed me to receive training and do research trips. If I'm here today, it's thanks to this project. This was all before I became president of the women's section of URCAK. I travelled to other countries to receive training before I became a trainer myself. This project has done a lot for the Kayes area. They constructed dams and wells for villages with water supply problems. We had already been given bits of land before that. But these plots could be in different places year on year... We wanted our own plot and

stay in the same place. The men began to understand that we couldn't stay behind and work for them like low-paid laborers. We wanted something else. We had to obtain a part of the land. Men have the right to own land, but we also have this right because we are their wives. We'd rather stop working than be paid 7,500 or 10,000 a month. They acknowledged that we were right and agreed to give us land – three acres.

They told us we had to get by with that. They had enough land, so they couldn't refuse. Some of the plots we cultivated already belonged to the family, part of it was even given to friends. Farming is for the family. Just like the men, women face expenses for the children. If we remain idle, it's the men who have to give us money, which means we will always have to ask for it. But if you work, you don't have to ask your husband for money. They saw that this was the reality. Each woman received two plots, three hectares in all. In addition to the three hectares, we were given a piece of land that had not been allocated during the initial development.

Men and women are mentioned in the statutes of the cooperatives. There are cooperatives and women's associations in every village. Some women's



Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008,
by Raphaël Grisey.

organizations are registered as cooperatives. We could do the same but it would cause a lot of problems. I prefer us to remain an association. When you're a cooperative, there are things you can't do – the rules are different. We're not strong enough to be a cooperative. We import products for resale. As a cooperative, you can't buy products and sell them on, and exporting your own produce is not as easy.

URCAK's strength today is its women. We are twenty times as numerous as men. There are 6,819 women – well, already seven thousand in fact, because there have been new memberships. URCAK today is the women. It's the same in Somankidi Coura, where women are much more numerous than men. We have collective fields and individual fields. The collective fields are for the organization, while the individual plots are for their owners. We cultivate a part of it collectively in order to pay for small expenses without everybody having to contribute individually. It's the association that pays the 25,000 francs CFA for the URCAK memberships. That's what our organization can do. When foreigners are visiting and when we need to buy foodstuffs, we can use that fund as well. If the motor pump breaks down, if we have small

expenses for the collective fields such as seeds and fertilizers, we can take the money from this collective fund. For all these expenses, we cultivate a small plot, which covers the association's expenses – this is how it's done everywhere.

The collective fields are used for the association's expenses, the individual fields for personal expenses. We prefer to remain an association of women, we don't want to meddle in the men's affairs. We don't have the same ideas. Men think themselves superior to women, so I can't work with men. We can be in the same office or in the same organization but not in the same cooperative, no way. I can't get along with men because we don't share the same ideas. Women get on very well among themselves, they listen to each other and understand each other. For men, women are their property, their slaves. That's what they say. It's bad, but that's what you call dictatorship. We can't work with these people. They're our husbands, we can help them if they have problems. But we can't be in the same cooperative.

Interview by Raphaël Grisey,
Somankidi Coura, 2008.



Cooking mango jam, association of the women of Somankidi Coura, Mali, 2016.

Women's teaching class, Somankidi Coura, Mali, May 1993.

Souaré Diaby after the harvest of the women's collective fields, Somankidi Coura, 2017.



Dado Niangané, during the harvest of the women's collective fields, Somankidi Coura, 2017.

Onion harvest, Somankidi Coura, March 2015.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



**Stall of the cooperative of Somankidi Coura
in the market of the city of Kayes, Mali.
Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.**

Goundo Kamissokho Niakhaté: Women used to talk to men as though they were still slaves. But that's over now, there's been a revolution. Slavery is over. We are totally autonomous now.

Mady Niakhaté: If she's really serious, we'll kick her out. Like Sarkozy did. We'll send her back to the sender (laughs).

GK: You can't do that. We won't go back to what we used to do. We want to move forward, not backwards. We want change. Men and women on an equal footing. We will become like France. (laughs). We told them we wanted to help them and work on a voluntary basis rather than be paid fifty francs CFA an hour. We told them we couldn't go on working like that.

MN: We as members of the cooperative weren't paid.

GK: Some of us earned 10,000 or 12,000 francs CFA a month, depending on the number of hours we worked.

MN: If we hadn't done that, we would have had a problem in terms of organization.

GK: The women wouldn't have come to work so early. We were always the first in the fields. We suffered: they came to our houses, asking why we were still there and urging us to go to work. My husband was the supervisor.

MN: I traumatized them.

GK: He had his notebook in hand and wrote down at what time the women arrived in the fields or when they were late (laughs).

MN: It was the same as in a factory. We had been factory workers back in France. And after we had completed our agricultural training, we adopted the same rhythm, the same cadence.

GK: All the women gathered at my house for breakfast. We had coffee together, and after lunch we had tea. At 4 in the afternoon the women split to prepare dinner. Today we are scattered because of the children, because each of us must look after their family. We don't have as much time as we used to. Before, we were all together with the men, we played cards, board games or Belote. Everybody mixed and mingled. We had time to chat under a tree while having tea or doing embroidery. I was chosen to inform the men that they had to give us a part of the land to cultivate. They first lent us a piece land but it wasn't official. There were only nine of us cultivating it. Later we were given three hectares behind the channel. We made do with what we had, we found partners to get funding and clear the land, we went to see a coordinator who works with many associations. She financed the survey, after which we



Stall of the cooperative of Somankidi Coura in the market of the city of Kayes, Mali. Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.

submitted the project to French Cooperation, which financed the development of the three hectares of land. There is another part that we cultivate during the rain season. I'm the only woman who speaks a little French. Some of the women went to school but they had learning difficulties. I quit at the end of primary school. At the time, they [the men] only spoke French. They spoke a little Soninké to us but they couldn't speak their native language without mixing in some French.

The women chose me because they know I can defend myself. You must have the courage to say things. I had the courage to speak up to Mady. Then I prepared myself to face Siré Soumaré, the president. I told him: 'Siré, we've really done enough for you. We're tired. Now we want to have our own plot.' After that we were given the three hectares behind the channel. We farm our plot but we continue to help the men in the fields. Women have a hard time. During the week, when the children go to school, they have too much to do: they prepare the food, they do the dishes, they work in the fields and they go to Kayes to sell the produce. Sometimes the men have to help the women as well. The laborers working for the men sometimes give us a hand – that's normal. This is a matter of solidarity

between the women and the men, as we help each other out. For example, the women can't do the irrigation works. It's the men who do this. But when it comes to weeding, sometimes it's the women who do it in the men's fields. Women are better at it than men. It's an exchange. First we weed our own field, then we help the men. Some fields can wait because they take longer to become unworkable. On Saturdays and Sundays the older children also help with gathering wood, which avoids us having to buy it. Do you remember our revolt? The men had told us to go pick the chillies. We refused. We didn't agree with the men.

MN: You had the right to say so.

GK: We did say so. One day will you give us as much land as you own yourself? You have more rights than us. Why do you ask us to help you then?

MN: It was the men who wanted to create an organization for the women. When we were preparing the project back in France, dozens of people pulled out at the eleventh hour. We realised we had to be careful. We'd suffered in France, we'd come all this way, whereas the women had only joined us recently. We had to be careful and not take them in as full members

On the way back after a day of selling crops
in the market of Kayes, Mali.
Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008.



right away. The women of the cooperators were not members of the cooperative. After five years, when we saw some of these women's motivation and commitment, we let them in. They became full members of the URCAK. But they had problems speaking in public during meetings. That's when they asked permission to create their own organization, which would allow them to hold their own meetings and take their own decisions. Their organization was created within the cooperative, so it's autonomous.

GK: It wasn't you who gave it to us – we took it ourselves. We decided all on our own. We're not cooperators, we don't share your ideas and we can't work with men. We can help them but we cannot be in the same cooperative. We formed our own group and got along on our own. Our association was officially registered as 'L'émigration ne connaît pas les coutumes' [Emigration Ignores Customs].

MN: This means that emigration ignores the individual's ethics. If you're a stranger somewhere, it's hard to know what your ethics are back home, the place you come from. They became cooperators before creating their organization.

GK: You're talking nonsense.

MN: Why don't you stop?

GK: It's you who keeps talking about the same thing. I've already said that men are in a cooperative, and the women in an organization. We've already talked about that. You men are full of grand words.

MN: Does the law say that?

GK: Which law?

MN: The law that stipulates your acceptance into the cooperative.

GK: We're not in it. You say we are, but we don't have the same rights.

MN: Which rights are you talking about?

GK: Stop trying to round the angles – we don't agree with you. I arrived here in 1978, and the women weren't even workers then. We all started our hardship and struggle together.

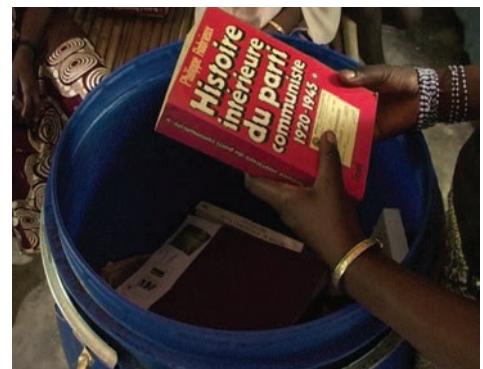
Conversation recorded by Raphaël Grisey,
Somankidi Coura, 2008



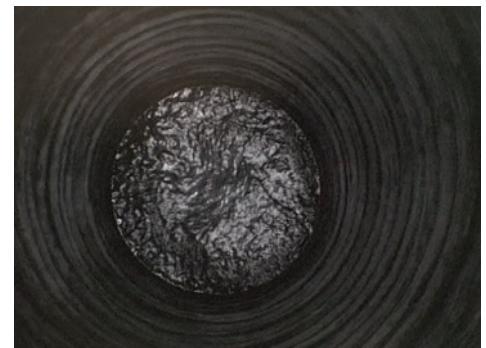
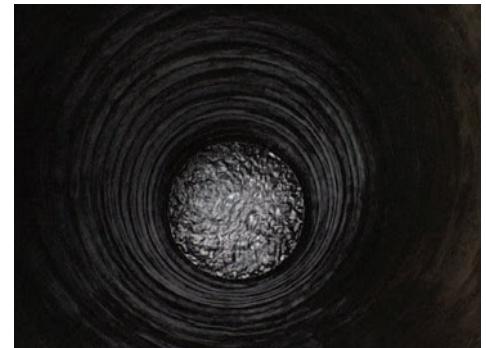
The well of Somankidi Coura,

Mali, 2015.

Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Opening of the Parisian library of Bouba Touré
brought to Somankidi Coura, Mali.
Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008,
by Raphaël Grisey.





Bouba Touré in the Photolab King Stars, Belleville, Paris, 2006,
Stills (rushes) from *Cooperative*,
by Raphaël Grisey.



Sorting out negatives for digitalization, Pantin, Paris, 2015.

Figuring Fallow Time [Part Two]

Cine-geographies and Infrastructures

I wanted to understand the networks, friendships, affinities and institutions that had made up the cine-geographies⁷ of those first assemblages. What did the digitization and redistribution of previously undigitized images and archives imply in terms of the divergences needing to be reduced, or on the contrary emphasized, between those actors, those producers, and those generations? In this research, how could one avoid “*lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connections*,” keeping in mind that “*some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination*.⁸”

Finally, what can be done so that the divergences in these new connections between images and narratives and their placement back in circulation can assume the form of a regeneration rather than a catalogue?

The chronology of the production and (re)appearance of the archives, images and narratives becomes so complex that it starts to twist and diffract. The heterochronies of the connections, emergences and returns has led me to view my research as a speculative practice. Seriously taking these heterochronies into account makes it possible to translate the cooperative’s experience in time, newly projecting it as a possibility, just as its initial movement was. Thinking of these images and narratives in terms of relations between infrastructures of different scales also reveals a deep time, that of the soil, climate and plants.

Farm Films

Sidney Sokhona was often at the University of Vincennes, and he worked as Med Hondo’s assistant on his film *Wogs and Negroes, Your Neighbors*, and also attended workshops given by Serge le Péron.⁹ Serge le Péron was a member of the Cinélutte group, which made some of its films amid the strikes and struggles of immigrant workers.¹⁰ Sidney Sokhona’s *Nationalité: Immigré* was a response to those activist films on the immigrant workers’ cause. One of them, *Journée Porte Ouverte à Drancy*, on the 1971 hostel strike by immigrant workers in Drancy, was

7 The term is taken from Ros Gray & Kodwo Eshun’s text, “The Militant Image: A Ciné-Geography”, *Third Text*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2011), pp. 1–12.

8 Donna Haraway: “A Cyborg Manifesto” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, Simon During (ed.), Routledge, London, 1993, p. 281.

9 Interview with Sidney Sokhona in Dakar, January 2017.

10 Cinélutte: *Jusqu’au bout*, 1973 – *La grève des ouvriers de Margoline*, 1973.



Poster of *Kaddu Beykat* [Letter from My Village], Safi Faye Archives.



Viewing *Kaddu Beykat* [Letter from My Village] in the Arsenal Cinema Archives, Berlin, 2014.

made by Richard Copans for the neo-Trotskyist group Révolution Afrique. Richard Copans told me that a few years earlier in 1969, he had gone to Senegal with Madeleine de Beauséjour — one of the founders of the group Révolution Afrique — to film the agricultural cooperatives. The plane tickets to Dakar were paid for by the Black Panthers. They strayed towards Tambacounda and ultimately did not find an agricultural cooperative. They filmed in the villages, but the rushes did not match the utopia they were seeking, so the film was never completed.¹¹ They had come too soon in search of an example like Somankidi Coura. In their revolutionary haste, they were too impatient to show the dramas of the region's peasants.

In 1976, the year when Bouba Touré and his associates left to found the cooperative, several films were released in which the main protagonists were farmers, soils and arable lands under the sway of colonial history and the governments in power after independence.

To film *Harvest: 3000 Years*, Haile Gerima travelled from Los Angeles to Ethiopia, his country of origin, which was then in the grip of a civil war after the overthrow of Haile Selassie, who had failed to resolve problems linked to the 1973 drought and famine. Gerima presented the landless farmers of a valley in the grip of a tyrannical landowner. A former farmer, one of the wretched of the earth, who had become "the village fool," speaks of his participation in the liberation struggles against the Italians, and encourages the peasants to rise up against the landowner.

The film is punctuated by close shots of land turned over by the farmers' ploughs, and long panoramas showing the farmers making their way through the fields in the valley, up into the heights where there is a road (built by the Italians) leading to the city where the landowner lives. The film ends with the landowner's murder by the village fool, who takes his own life before the soldiers arrive.

At the cooperative, you would have said "the land belongs to the people working it." But as founding member Bakhoré Bathily said, "The land isn't permanently given to the member. We give it to you if you work it. If you don't work it we take it back and give it to someone else."

Safi Faye released *Letter from My Village* a year earlier. She filmed her father Fadial's native village in southern Senegal (later returning there to shoot many other films¹²). The film illustrates a letter from a farmer's daughter addressed to the world. It opens with work in the fields and a Serer proverb: "The land doesn't lie." To make the land fruitful, sacrifices are offered

11 Richard Copans first discussed the subject with Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye in 2015, then I reconfirmed it with him in 2016.

12 Including *Fadial* (1979), *Goob na Nu* (1979), *Selbe* (1982) and *Mossane* (1996).



Film stills from *Mirt Sost Shi Amit* [Harvest: 3,000 Years] by Haile Gerima, 1976.

to the Pangool ancestors. Children under a palaver tree mimic government agents coming to collect taxes from farmers who are penniless after a poor harvest. One farmer is tortured and killed by being doused with DDT, in order to make an example of him. The peanut monoculture implemented during the colonial era and continued by the Senghor regime after independence has eroded the soil and dismantled the village's system. When the price of peanuts falls, or the drought's effects are felt, the farmers are no longer able to pay their taxes and feed themselves. The acidity of the peanuts renders the land infertile. There is a drama that runs through the film, about two characters, a young man named Ngor and his sweetheart Coumba. Ngor has to go to Dakar to work and earn the marriage dowry. The job-search scenes are reminiscent of the Paris scenes in *Nationalité: Immigré* in which Sidney Sokhona is repeatedly turned away. When Ngor returns, the wedding can finally take place, as the radio broadcasts its propaganda: in 1970, the state forgives the farmers' debts and distributes free peanut seeds and fertilizer. But as Safi Faye tells us: "Peanut farming erodes the soil, exhausts the land. We need diversified farming." "The letter is from me, the rest from my farmer parents."

Safi Faye's insistent filming of her village reminds me of that insistent photographing of the Somankidi Coura cooperative and of the hostels in order to take care of, and feel responsible for, a plot of land, a community and ecosystem. This is just like your care and responsibility for your archives and for the land in Somankidi Coura, the same care I would like to bring to the set of images and narratives I am reconstructing.

You could have said: "The photos are from me, the rest from the cooperative".

During a conversation with Safi Faye, I learned that Haile Gerima was the distributor of *Letter from My Village* in the United States when it was released. For several years, Safi Faye and Haile Gerima screened *Letter from My Village* and *Harvest: 3000 Years* side by side.

Safi Faye and Sidney Sokhona associated with each other in the 1970s at the Museum of Man, in its cinema along with Jean Rouch. Had Safi Faye influenced Sidney Sokhona's decision to make a film about farmers?

You yourself screened *Letter from My Village* at the 14 Juillet Bastille cinema and the Entrepôt cinema, and looked after the reels.

At the time, these two films showed the urgent need — which is just as glaring today — to question the colonization of soil, not only that of abstract geopolitical territory, but that of the farmer who walks the land and that of



Film stills of *Kaddu Beykat* [*Letter from My Village*], by Safi Faye, 1975.

the humus. In those films, soil is no longer a nationalistic territorial theme, but a way of relating to the world, a fair-use principle within ecosystems. These films suggest that independence movements forgot to decolonize lands and farmers, that the dismantling of colonial forms of ownership and the transition to national ownership failed with regard to the users of the land, those who work it.

Safi Faye's film condemns while trying to preserve and leave traces. Though she did not grow up in the village she films, it is her family's village. She filmed it with wide shots, showing places from a certain distance. Is this distance her own or an anthropological distance accompanied by a desire to encompass a whole?

Haile Gerima's *Harvest: 3000 Years* calls for revolt and joins forces with the protagonists and the humus, but with no possibility of acting from a distance. These films make a return to a place of origin. But this return is not an essentialist one, and is only made through a diffraction, the distorted mirror of a disappropriation, and a distancing of the author before the films are written.

I see your return — after a detour through Europe — as an Afrofuturist one. You had not originally planned a return to your homes, but rather a pan-African return to an emigration junction; it was a return to ancestral practices, to customs, those of subsistence farming, but all of this was also diffracted and transformed. In short, it was a return to the future in forms needing experimentation and regeneration. Your return was undertaken in a heterochronic, multi-situated relationship to technologies and was not positivist or exclusively local. No spacecraft was needed to leave. A few plane tickets and a canvas-covered Peugeot 404 were quite enough. Nor did you need a tractor to work the land; you could initially make do with animal traction and pairs of Hồ Chí Minh sandals to walk the land and not damage the soil. You had to assess what could be done so that the cooperative project could self-regenerate and remain neither a revolutionary utopia that is constantly postponed nor the dystopia of planned rural exodus. Could we speak of a realistic Afrofuturism, if this is not an oxymoron?

The flashbacks in *Safrana* while you are on your way to the countryside, and the wait for your departure once you were with the farmers — which did not appear in the film — reinforce this dual projection into the past and future. The fictional account of the cooperative was written based on a reconsideration of your past as immigrant workers and farmers, in order to navigate into future.



Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008,
by Raphaël Grisey.

Irrigating and Filming

During an interview conversation with Elke Marhöfer and Mikhail Lylov in 2012 about the film *Trop tôt, trop tard* [Too Early, Too Late], Jean-Marie Straub¹³ spoke of how it was possible to link irrigation to the moment in filmmaking when one finds one's point of view for a take.

"This phrase, 'the viewpoint of the take', bothered me. The take is the result, and the viewpoint is what one searches for in order to achieve that result. And that involves driving around the village a lot, going up and then going down until one finds that spot from where one can simply see something. Where one sees something. It's important to repeat that. And then one discovers that in a village the search often ends where the water tower stands, for needless to say the water can be fed to the entire locality. And the standpoint from where the locality can be supplied with water just also happens to be the filmmaker's standpoint, who is likewise attempting to show an entirety. Hence the take of a village then operates like an irrigation system. And Brecht would say: What one films then belongs to the irrigators. What one reveals belongs to the irrigators; the world belongs to the irrigators. But that is humbug."

The image ecosystem, the kaleidoscopic geometry of viewpoints and filming technologies connect and find affinity with the riverside ecosystem and with irrigation technologies. You were told that here, never in human memory had the river run dry or overflowed its banks.

In images produced at the Somankidi Coura cooperative, one finds an intersection between the viewpoint of the take and the irrigation system. The collective pump on the riverbank and the redistribution basin seem to attract all of the image producers who visit the cooperative. The irrigation system supports and structures its partisan's filming process. The partisan must change his production system to support the irrigators. Instead of an affiliation and a take, it is a mutual affinity that links their perspectives to the irrigation.

French farmers visiting the cooperative in 1977 — the same ones who hosted ACTAF's 14 members in Champagne for agricultural training before their departure to Mali — filmed the irrigation system, the canal and the collective pump with their 8mm camera similarly to how I was to film it thirty years later: one sees the same analytical shots following the trajectory of the water from the Senegal River to the pump, from the pump to the distribution basin, from the basin to the canal, from the canal to the furrows, from the furrows to the seeds. You also photographed these same places year after year: the German Lister 3 pump that Ladji Niangané brought back from Dakar, the distribution basin that you built with Siré Soumaré, the canal made of termite mound soil making the first irrigations possible, the banks and riverside inhabitants, the water. Your images have a duration that the others lack. Your shots accompany the time of the seasons through the years.

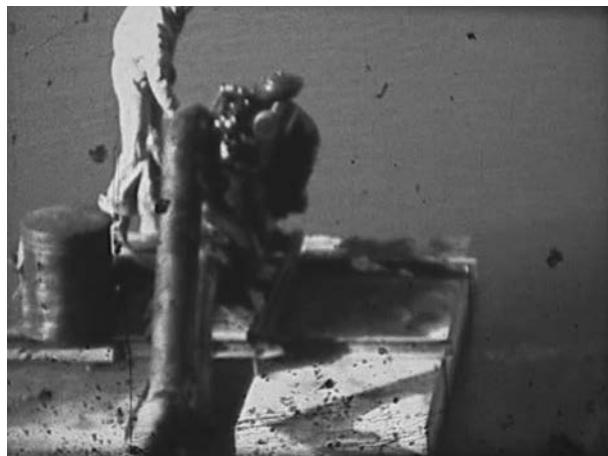
Is the complete take evoked by Straub a panopticon? It entails responsibility on the part of the photographer, like that of the irrigators. But although this take is partial, producing a partial perspective,¹⁴ the linking of several takes produces diffractions. And in the absurd game evoked by Straub in reference to Brecht, belonging is always postponed and recomposed. Would the world not belong to the light-diffracting water rather than to the irrigators?

13 *Standpunkt der Aufnahme / Point of view*, edited by Tobias Hering, Archive Books, 2013.

14 Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives,' *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988).



Raphaël Grisey



8mm film stills from 1979, Somankidi Coura, Mali,
by Monique Janson.



Video stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.

Figuring Fallow Time – Part Two



The Senegal river and the collective water pump of the agricultural cooperative of Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1989. Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Video stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.



Irrigation of the gardens, Somankidi Coura, Mali, March 1979. Photograph by Bouba Touré.

Transitional Infrastructure

The village of Samé, across from the cooperative, was founded in 1906¹⁵ on the Diakhandapé sisal plantation during the colonial period, to accommodate forced laborers from Haute-Volta. After independence, a Rural Group was built on its ruins. Under the dictatorship, this was turned into an agronomic training center. The UNDP invested a few years there. Fula herdsmen and their cattle cross the ruins to reach the river, using some of them as enclosures. Temporary peasant-workers find refuge there for the season. You were given lands on the other side of the river.

Well before independence, the cooperative movement had long been discussed as a potential driving force for the economic and social development of future socialist African nations.¹⁶ It was based on the idea of a proto-socialism in the very organization of the villages.

The new independent states attempted to break up the cast system that had been manipulated by the colonial power, which had appointed “indigenous” chiefs as intermediaries between the colonists and peasants, trying to establish a direct connection with the producers — yourselves, the peasants. This gave rise to the Rural Groups in Modibo Keïta’s Mali. These state cooperatives represented a desire to perfect “cooperation, a path to a regenerated African humanism” (Mamadou Dia, 1952), a form of socialism with no labor class.

I like to think that the cooperative, whose founding members were originally from Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mauritania, was an association-scale reconstruction of the transitional infrastructure of the short-lived Mali Federation, which, in 1960 at the time of independence, only existed for a few months before being dissolved. It included Mali, Senegal, Benin and Burkina Faso. It was a tangible if ephemeral product of the pan-Africanist project. Independence elites were themselves unable to regenerate pan-African themes and resist nationalist models. Your project was aimed not at one specific country, but at a rural Africa that knew emigration, drought and rivers.

When you arrived in Somankidi in 1976, Modibo Keïta had been in prison ever since the military coup orchestrated by Moussa Traoré in 1968. He was to die a few years later. The state had started withdrawing the application of agricultural policies even if food self-sufficiency continued to be invoked as a reason of state. This withdrawal became even more brutal and accelerated when democracy returned with the neoliberal policies of Alpha Oumar Konaré and the IMF. However, in the beginning, the cooperative benefited from Modibo Keïta’s agricultural infrastructure and the socialist solidarity that had endured under the dictatorship. You told me that some of the few agricultural trainers who came to give you a hand at the very beginning had been trained in eastern countries.



Film still from *Happiness* by Aleksandr Medvedkin, 1935.



Film still from *Trop tôt, trop tard* [Too Early, Too Late] by Danièle Huillet & Jean-Marie Straub, 1980.

15 See the 2008 interview with Ousmane Sinaré in this volume.

16 Mamadou Dia wrote his contribution to the study of the cooperative movement in black Africa from 1952.



F.A.O. billboard in the ruins of the Diakhandapé sisal plantation, 2017.



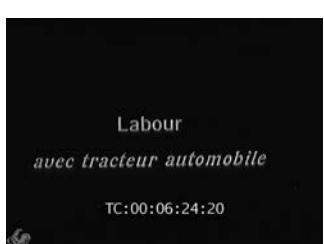
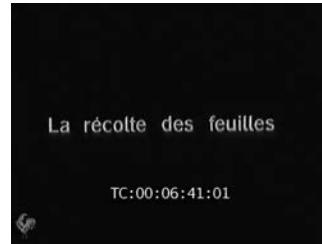
Mali Federation stamp, 1960.



Termites in the ruins of the Diakhandapé sisal plantation buildings.

Children playing in the ruins of the Diakhandapé sisal plantation.

Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.



In 2017, the private archive company Pathé-Gaumont, that owns the most significant French colonial film archive, demanded fees of 200 €/min. (for films over 5 min.) and 300 €/min. (for films under 5min.) to screen them without a time-code in an educational context.

The Drought's Image Factory

The drought in the Sahel and the images it produced, contributed to accelerating and developing new forms of solidarity, humanitarianism and governmentality disconnected from political states.¹⁷ This was before the IMF's reconstruction plans and the NGOs' neoliberal models of the 1980s. I looked into this production on the sidelines of my research. The TV images coming from the Sahel, combined with the letters and stories of your close relations, had accelerated the decision to return. In those images, I saw the continuity of colonial infrastructures, but also the emergence of a range of farmer alliances and attempts to decolonize the new developmentalist paradigm in the context of the emergence of a radical ecology.

A 1919 colonial propaganda film entitled *Géographie* contains a few shots of the Diakhandapé sisal plantation,¹⁸ across from the current cooperative. The film inspects regions of French West Africa the way one inspects subordinate troops, or components of an assemblage before creating a montage, going from picturesque sites and local festivities to industry and transport infrastructures, in order to promote the “modernizing mission” of the colonial project. A panoramic shot shows an expanse of agave crops. Does this also correspond to the irrigation system's redistribution point on the plantation? A tractor conspicuously passes in front of the camera, then we see the painful, barehanded harvest, the drying and defibration of the plant by forced laborers. The intertitles reinforce the already palpable intentionality in the shots. We see these same images in a variety of other colonial promotion films, framed by other intertitles, none of which references the filming site in this case.

The sisal seeds were imported to Africa from Mexico by German and French biologists in the late nineteenth century. After being dried and defibrated, the sisal from the plantation was sent to Saint-Louis by river or to Dakar by train, then turned into rope by laborers in factories in The Havre. Another film by Pathé,¹⁹ taking the same approach of describing a production process, revealed the female laborers' working conditions, which were similar to those of the plantation's forced laborers.

The colonial film archive and the 8mm films shot by French farmers at the cooperative in 1977 and 1979 share certain features: their travel stories, their picturesque quality and the exoticism of certain shots. Also similar is their descriptive analysis of technology — the production of the sisal plantation on the one hand, and that of the irrigation system on the other, both recorded on celluloid.

But between these two approaches, there is a transition from the glorification of an intensive, dominant colonial monoculture based on forced labor, to support for diversified subsistence agriculture; a transition from a developmentalist propaganda subjugated by colonial industrial capitalism, to a form of partnership in a development process that attempts to become

17 Gregory Mann, 2015. *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel. The Road to Nongovernmentality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

18 Gaumont Pathé Archives 1920PGHI 00461: *Géographie, sous la direction de Maurice Fallex Professeur agrégé au Lycée Louis le Grand – Afrique Occidentale Française / Zone soudanienne / Le Haut Sénégal*.

19 *La ficelle pour moissonneuse lieuse* / Gaumont Pathé Archives PR 1924 52 1.





Dry bed of the Senegal River, Somankidi Coura,
Mali, January 1977. Photograph by Bouba Touré.

decolonized and durable. We see the transition from death technology to creolized technology, from the so-called educational films of a paternalist state to loving amateur film.²⁰ Between these two sequences, missionaries from the colonial period turned into reformed Third-Worldists.²¹ In the 1970s, points of agreement on action strategies emerged between these Third-Worldists and certain anti-imperialist movements. “They are working in concert, with a common goal: to help demonstrate the links between the countries of the North and South, and above all, to devise forms of intervention that provide fulcrums to effectively change the course of events here and over there.”

The history of the cooperative’s collaboration with its partners stems from these convergences. Perhaps your partnerships with the La Cimade, the CCFD and ACCIR, whose members were to film you, would never have come into being without your shared interest in the new battlefield presented by the drought, with all its political, ecological and logistical consequences here and over there.²²

You were convinced that the 1973 drought and famine in the Sahel were a direct consequence of colonization and its continuation through co-operation between France and Africa. You were not alone. Sally N'Dongo, UGTSF and the group Révolution Afrique held the same view.

INA archives show post-drought cloud seeding by the French army over the Sahel under the aegis of the ministry of collaboration. The commentary has the same tone as the colonial propaganda film.²³ This time, it explains the process of cloud seeding with sodium chloride over the Sahel. Whereas the United States and other countries reacted to the drought quickly through the soft power of NGOs like USaid, Africare and Rains (Gregory Mann, p. 175), in France only left-wing solidarity groups like AFASPA did the same, not, however, without paternalism. The filming of cloud seeding was a communication gesture by the French authorities that was late with regard to the famine.²⁴

In response to the promotion of geoengineering in time of crisis, new necropolitics emerged, that of images of famine orchestrated by directors of mass-media publications. Images of undernourished children (the same type of iconography used during the Biafran War of 1967-1970) and of columns of refugees were to be the stock in trade of many of the NGOs that have come into being between then and now. This pornography of misery,²⁵ the return of an infantilizing narrative about the continent’s populations after the liberation struggles, rekindled the anti-colonial war on the territory of images.

20 See note 4.

21 France’s most progressive Third-Worldist organizations were La Cimade, which had supported Algerian independence, and the CCFD (Comité Catholique contre la faim et pour le développement / Catholic Committee Against Hunger and for Development) founded in 1961, which had produced a multiform critique of several reasons for the drought and famine in the Sahel.

22 Philippe Malvé, *La naissance du “Tiers-mondisme” en France, campagne contre la faim et solidarité avec le Tiers-monde* / Revue Tricontinentale, Famines et pénuries, 1982, Maspero collection, p.107.

23 See note 18.

24 Cloud seeding was first tested by the United States before the Second World War in secret military programs, with the goal of potentially using it as a weapon. France was promoting war weapons as development tools after decades of soil exhaustion through intensive farming on plantations in the colonies.

25 Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo, Film *Agarrando Pueblo*, 1977.



Our Africa, Debates on the Third World, by The General Union of Senegalese Workers in France (UGTSF).



TV news from the ORTF, April 6, 1974, INA archives.



Still from *Ici et Ailleurs* [Here and Elsewhere], by Jean-Luc Godard, Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean Pierre Gorin, 1976.

You told me that these images upset you, but not in the same way as the family in *Ici et ailleurs* [Here and Elsewhere] by Godard, Miéville and Gorin. I would argue that it was against this image regime that you, Bouba, fought with your camera and your very few rolls of film, in order to open the possibility of other images of Africa in the time of famines, single-party governments and civil wars.

I would mention a third archive in this production of images of the drought: amateur 8mm films again,²⁶ this time made by Larzac farmers during the 1974 Harvest Festival, organized in “solidarity with the Third World”. This was the largest demonstration held on the Larzac Plateau in the movement’s ten-year existence from 1971 to 1981. The Larzac struggle is the story of a farmer alliance that succeeded in aggregating a broad spectrum of other struggles in France and abroad, a loose conglomeration of leftist groups — LIP laborers, immigrant workers, conscientious objectors, and budding radical environmentalists²⁷ — to stop a military base from expanding onto agricultural lands. This movement shared the immigrant workers’ view that the 1973 drought and famine were a consequence of post-colonial cooperation between France and the Sahelian countries. The wheat collected during the 1973 Harvest Festival was taken to a country in the Sahel by farmers from the Plateau. You preferred to grow it yourselves. Yes, this symbolic gesture was clumsy and paternalistic. This same plateau was where the farmer confederation was launched in 1987, a farmers’ union that would later ally with landless farmers in Brazil and jointly organize the first anti-globalization and anti-GMO demonstrations in the 1990s. You were on the plateau in 1973 with three other members of ACTAF. You had jumped on the bus with the Communist Party delegation. Your friend and ally Sally N’Dongo gave a speech to the dense crowd covering the plateau. Were you there as representatives of the immigrant workers’ struggles, or already as activist farmers?

I like those images because they remind me of the amateur footage by the French farmers who filmed the foundation of the cooperative. Also because Larzac’s climate, topology, soil and vegetation remind me of those in Somankidi Coura. This is nothing like the revolutionary fable *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, cited by Mao in his speech and by Joris Ivens in his film on the Cultural Revolution. We are more in the territory of *Nos peuples sont nos montagnes* by Amílcar Cabral. The geological strata of the karstic plateau are visible on the dolomitic peaks that loom up from the site where the conglomeration of groups and protestors have assembled. The plateau becomes a stage just as much as it stages the protestors. Its fragile soil becomes the center of a political activity. The state did not appreciate the value of this land and wanted to claim it in order to shock it with bombs and artillery. The farmers of the plateau wanted to care for it, plough it.

26 These archives were used in the film *La Lutte du Larzac*, 2003, by Philippe Cassard (<https://archive.org/details/La.Lutte.du.Larzac>).

27 I am thinking of the group Survivre et Vivre, co-founded by mathematician Alexander Grothendieck.



"Decolonize the earth"
 "Peasant, laborers, french, immigrants, united in the struggles..."
 "Peasant workers"
 "The soil to the ones who cultivate it."
 "Peasants = Life. Army ???"

Stills from 8mm amateur films shot by Larzac peasant activists during the Third World Harvest in 1973 (excerpt from *La Lutte du Larzac*, 1996).



Raphaël Grisey



Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008,
by Raphaël Grisey.

Termites

You used termite mound soil to build the cooperative's first irrigation canal. An instructor had suggested using it. Was that a regional practice, a situated knowledge, or was it a multi-situated knowledge and technology, repeated and validated in training from state instructors? The termites' galleries live alongside the irrigation systems, the infrastructures of the ancestors' world, the former networks of the state agricultural cooperatives and the more autonomous ones that you were in the process of spreading in the region. This cohabitation was not without unexpected developments, and it became complicated when the termites ate your first houses.

During my first shoot for the film *Cooperative*, I wanted to show the destruction of a termite mound by a peasant-worker on a banana plantation, with permission from the owner of the field, in order to capture the things you had done when settling. The peasant-worker did not want to dig to the bottom. At that moment, you emerged from an adjacent field to tell me to stop. We decided to film our discussion next to the termite mound.

I learned that a local belief prohibited digging to the bottom of a termite mound where the queen lives; as long as the queen has not been destroyed, the termite mound can be regenerated. Mady Niakhaté, the owner of the field, was unconvinced that this regeneration was useful in his field. In your view, the fact that termite mounds are inhabited by djinns, and that one therefore does not touch them in practice, was an example of the ecological foundations of local knowledge. In our discussion, there was no clear line between what belonged to the realms of life and nonlife, and initially I did not understand this ancestors' ecology. I had been mistaken in naively believing that a recreation of the destruction of a termite mound in front of the camera could become a motif in the film evoking the technological interdependence with termites, with the small lumps of impermeable soil that Bakhoré Bathily had mentioned to me in an interview a few days earlier.

Mady Niakhaté later explained to me that termite mound earth is alive because nothing grows on it. Termite mound earth comes from the depths, below the thin layer of arable earth on the surface. It is a clay soil that lives, unlike dead soil made of decomposing matter, humus. The man who had authorized me to destroy the termite mound saw life in the clay soil without mentioning that of the termites.

People from neighboring villages recognized that you had powers which enabled you to touch the termite mound, to settle amid the djinns. You had shifted the line between life and nonlife, merely in the time it had taken you to settle between a geosystem and an ecosystem.

It is on this line that Elizabeth Povinelli defines a *geontological power*,²⁸ a power that, beyond or through biopower, defines, in its own interests, the strict limit between life (ontology) and nonlife (geo), enabling a distinction to be made between those who believe and those who know. A distinction of colonial authority. “*The attribution of an inability of various colonized people to differentiate the kinds of things that have agency, subjectivity, and intentionality of the sort that emerge with life has been the grounds for casting them into a premodern mentality and a postrecognition difference.*”²⁹

28 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Duke University Press.

29 Ibid p. 5.

It is this *geontological* power that validated the exhaustion of plantation land, and at the same time relegated all situated knowledges to the realm of beliefs during the colonial period. You used it carefully when considering various agencies.

You uprooted all of the trees on the 25-hectare savanna you had developed. Then you proceeded to plant fruit trees around the fields and along the banks. You transformed a savannah ecosystem into an ecosystem of gardens and fallow land. A satellite view of the cooperative shows an oasis of green along the river. One would need to travel a long way downriver to find others. The cooperative is fighting against deforestation. The lack of trees is accelerating erosion along the river during the rainy season, but most importantly it is impoverishing the soil. Trees prevent desert dust and sand from accumulating in the fields. It is that same Sahelian dust that the winds carry to the Amazon in drought years, fertilizing it with phosphorous particles.³⁰

The cooperative's plan was to get distant geosystems and ecosystems to play off one another on interconnected local levels—those of struggles, images, plants and soils. I am not in a position to quantify them. I do not wish to define their value based on their quantity or scarcity, but rather attempt to present them in an intensity regime in the public realm, and include their quality in a total value.³¹

Regeneration

One morning in 1982, the cooperative experienced a pepper strike. Goundo Kamissokho, Ndiaye Diaby, Souaré Samassa Diaby, Dado Niangané, Fune Niakhaté and the women of Somankidi Coura refused to harvest peppers as long as they were not given their own plots to cultivate. Goundo Kamissokho was delegated the task of negotiating with the president of the cooperative. The members gave them plots of land to develop, as well as full member status. But the cooperative was not providing them with the forum for dialogue they needed³² so they preferred to become autonomous, organizing themselves into a women's association while continuing to collaborate with the men. Goundo Kamissokho, who is now a representative of Mali's female farmer associations, told me that the vast majority of the members of the cooperatives, groups and associations that now make up the Union régionale des coopératives agricoles (URCAK / Regional Union of Agricultural Cooperatives) are women. The women's association in Somankidi Coura has collective fields, and it jointly manages its finances and harvests. They have adopted the practices that the unmarried founders used upon their arrival, but abandoned after starting families.

30 Comment le Sahara nourrit l'Amazonie (2015, March 2). Available here: https://www.sciencesetavenir.fr/nature-environnement/comment-le-sahara-nourrit-l-amazonie_14856

31 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “(life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value” in *e-flux journal* #79 – February 2017.

32 See interview with Goundo Kamissokho Niakhaté in this volume.



Magasin of the cooperative of Somankidi Coura in the market of the city of Kayes, Mali. Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.

The irrigated farming that you were among the first to practice became commonplace, and the technique was shared throughout the region. This transmission was helped by Radio Rurale de Kayes, the region's first free radio station, which you founded in 1988 through URCAK. It also broadcast in Senegal, Mauritania and Mali.

Seed farming, one of the cooperative's main activities, became necessary in the war against the patented seeds of multinationals, which proliferated in the 1980s. URCAK became one of the region's main producers of seeds for farms, ensuring that seeds were diverse and accessible. Some of you got involved in regional and national chambers of agriculture as representatives or coordinators. Others became active defending farm seeds in the Sahel against GMOs, their patents and the seed legislation supporting them.

A principle of regeneration defined the cooperative. It was necessary that the pattern could be seen, multiplied and reappropriated, from different connected partial perspectives, carefully and without hasty reproduction.

Public Spaces and Species

The images, the situated knowledges that I discovered and that were appearing to me, became part of my experience and understanding. This might explain my enthusiasm and my urgent desire to show these reservoirs of images and narratives, and to extend it to the consideration of other films, other archives (whether activist or colonial). This also made me understand your composure, Bouba, the composure of someone who has been circulating these images from one close friend to another for a long time, in a fluid group of transmission spaces.

But there was a trap in this urgency. The very principle of collections and archives is also tangled up in colonial history, in taxonomy, typology and racialization, all of which required attention. The categorization systems, terminologies and vocabularies needed to be redefined.

These soils, these images could not be cared for through hasty seeding that would destroy the systems. Fallow time had to be considered. Fallow time is not a time of rest, waste or abandonment, but one of regular plowing, which is at the heart of agropastoral farming. This was the misunderstanding that underpinned colonial agronomy and its intensification of production through the concentrated use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides. Its negation, its exclusion from the colonial universal value, and from the ecologies giving rise to images, generated the demand for life to spring from the soil—a selected, exclusive life—and for the accelerated circulation and hypervisibility of images.³³

When a photographic emulsion or a soil has been overdeveloped or poorly developed, it darkens and becomes impoverished. The black box of digital image processing and its algorithms, the patents of GMO seeds, can

³³ But plowing also has to be carried out in relation to the qualities of the soil. Overplowing led to the *Dust Bowl* in North America in the 1930s, plunging the world into its first major economic and ecological crisis.

reproduce colonial development myths if one is not paying attention. One must open those boxes, find farm seeds in them and do the painstaking work of understanding, redefining and transforming the technologies.

The contents of those reservoirs called for attention to their fallow period. Digitizing archive images was not the equivalent of making them hypervisible and accelerating their circulation. Thought needed to be given to the form and conditions of their apparition in public space.

Public space as defined by Hannah Arendt is a space of deliberation and action, free from subjection to necessity.³⁴ But freeing oneself from subjection to necessity in order to achieve “pure” action is no easy task: it is a matter of intervening in public space and having a hold over it. Sidney Sokhona’s two films accurately portray how difficult it was for immigrant workers to situate their struggle in this space.

Public space is subject to an appropriation and a doxa. It is not easy to find the public space that suits us, a common space where one can take action without being relegated to the status of an immigrant in your case, or in my case without inadvertently finding myself in the position of the positivistic philanthropist showing solidarity, the country priest. This requires soil, reservoirs and refuges, which one must take care of in the fallow ecology.

Once, over a meal, you told us a story about being questioned by the police in the Paris metro. A policeman asks for your residence permit. You reply that you do not have one. The policeman is insistent and you confirm you have no residence permit. He asks you to follow him to the police station. You comply. In front of the station, the officer rephrases his question: so you don’t have your residence permit? Again, you reply that you do not. “You have no papers? No papers at all?”. You reply: “Yes, I have my identity card. But that’s not what you asked for”. The policeman is surprised and disconcerted. You press the point: “You asked for my residence permit and not my identity card, right?”. You often tell many variations of this story, which draws uneasy laughter from your listeners. You grab the police’s ordinary racism by the horns and take it to the police station to explain yourself. I hope the policeman remembers you. We have not forgotten him because he is still there, representing order and moral values in the racist and insidious public space.

This reminds me of the struggles in the hostels, and especially the temerity and logic of your resolution to return. You had confidence in the future and there are always ways to awaken people’s consciousness. You forwent all of the action modes preached by the left, following a trajectory that no one was expecting. Your work’s public space is the kind in which this type of action is possible. It is an action that redefines migration in the migrants’ own words, and reveals the brutality of migration policies and structural racism. I am once again thinking of Hannah Arendt and her text *We Refugees*, and of how the racialization of your skin complicated the possibility of action in public space.

34 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998, 70.



Bouba Touré, antifascist demonstration, Berlin, May 1, 2011. Photograph by Raphaël Grisey.



Celebration of the communist federation of the Gard region, 1981, Le Vigan.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Demonstration in support to the Nationalist Liberation Socialist Kanak Front (FLNKS) with Jean Marie Tjibaou, Paris, February 1985.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

You abhor the word “*sans-papiers*” [“person without papers”], and when talking about hostel residents, you refuse to make any distinction between those who have papers and those who do not. You are all together; some people just have administrative problems to resolve, and need a hand. This category, which appeared when migrant policy was being toughened, only atomized the migrant struggles. You also noticed that the history of these struggles was being transmitted neither in migrant communities nor in the villages. When spokespeople for *sans-papiers* received their papers, they often abandoned the coordinated effort, the collective. New arrivals reproduce the gestures of the generation that fell silent.

Similarly, the sub-Saharan immigrant workers’ movement was often dissociated from that of the North African immigrant workers, because they were staggered over time as a result of migration policies that segmented struggles and categorized identities that had already been established by colonial policies. This reservoir and archive constituted by your images and by those films are also a refuge from which one can criticize systems of national belonging and insistence on integration and assimilation, as well as deadly reproductions of paternalist systems.

As you say in your film, you join all kinds of demonstrations, all kinds of struggles: every year you support Gay Pride, attend the political meetings of the African opponents you defend, and support the struggle against raising the age of retirement. We ran and hopped over the low walls of Berlin’s Schrebergarten alongside hooded anti-fascists dressed in black to try and stop a neo-Nazi march on the first of May. You spent a lot of time at the Nuits Debouts, which piqued your curiosity. At *sans-papiers* occupations everyone knows you. You were an enthusiastic supporter of the Kanak independence movement. And for some time you have been going to see the refugees at La Chapelle every day, trying to penetrate the language barrier.

How can all the encounters along your path be characterized? Ours and the many others that have punctuated the return journeys of your life? As Jared Sexton said on the subject of coalitions, to speak of alliance means to take the risk of always returning to “a logic of identity and difference, of collective selves modeled on the construct of the modern individual, an entity whose coherence is purchased at the expense of whatever is cast off by definition.” Does that mean it is necessary, as Wilderson says, “to shit on the inspiration of the personal pronoun *we*”?³⁵

You have had a variety of experiences of this *we*: first that of ACTAF, itself part of the *we* of the solidarity movement against the Portuguese colonies. The radical Left’s alliance with immigrant workers was sometimes more complicated than it appeared. The pervasive paternalism, indeed the racism of French laborers prevented the emergence of a lasting *we*. Was ACTAF’s use of premises belonging to the CGT an act of pragmatism or an alliance? As Fred Moten asked in a very different context, was it about pillaging critical institutions?³⁶



“A police state does not advance France” Pantin, France, 2013, still (rushes).

35 Jared Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” in *Rhizomes* Issue 29, 2016. <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sexton.html>.

36 Fred Moten / Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons*, London: Minor Compositions, 26.

You recently criticized me for placing too much emphasis on the ambiguities within solidarity movements. Sidney Sokhona's radical analysis in his films and interviews made me pay attention to this, and it reflected the risks that my own practice could encounter. You instead stress the transformative encounters that shaped you at every stage of the path you followed: the stranger by the river who told you that you too would go to France but differently from your ancestors, the French laborer at Usines Chausson with whom you compared pay slips, who convinced you of the need for common political action demanding "equal pay for equal work". They were regenerated affinities defined in words that were your own, which did not reproduce oppressive categories. In your relationship with the French farmers in Marne, was *ours* a question of kinship, filiation, friendship or affinity? There was a spirit of cooperation, and emotions that went beyond mere alliance. A duration, a permanence also — a permaculture.

Filiation does not correlate with transmission. Some things are unsaid and you are well-placed to know it. Friendships and affinities make possible a transmission, a refuge, a "*debt without creditor*," without intercessor, "*debt as its own principle*."³⁷

This is surely where our practices in this project intersect: moving forward with the knowledge and debts of past struggles, so that certain conclusions can be drawn, and errors avoided. If nothing is left behind and everything is left behind, how can this observation make the lines move? The fugitive day-to-day lives of *sans-papiers* and of many migrants, their resistance to migration management policies recall the preservation of the ontological totality³⁸ that the salve system was unable to include, the runaway, the liberated slave, what remains, the irreducibility and sensuality of social noise.³⁹ It would also be a mistake to think of these alliances in terms of simultaneity and synchronization. One cannot consider the decolonial project without examining its heterochronies, the conflicts of one generation and the question of whether or not they were taken into account by another generation.

The patriarchal colonial system, migration management and its counterpart in the traditionalist system reproduce oppressions and allocated roles (the child sent to migrate, the girl married too young, etc...). Your photographic practice and the cooperative create transmission spaces where (agri)culture and education advance together without severance, without division. Your reservoir irrigates memory to link gestures and temporalities, echoing the irrigation of the fields, the collusion between the river and the people. Its permanence, its insistence reflect the continuity of oppressions and of these resistances in a twofold movement. As Denise Ferreira da Silva says,⁴⁰ your practice endeavors to escape modernist thought's triad

37 Ibid, p.66.

38 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism – The Making of a Black Radical Tradition*, UNC Press.

39 Fred Moten & Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons*, Minor Composition Press.

40 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "(life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value" in *e-flux journal* #79, February 2017.

of *determinacy*, *separability* and *sequentiality*, to escape the violence inflicted on racialized people in the indifferent ethics of public morality. Your recent images of refugees who have spent years sleeping on the streets of La Chapelle in Paris provides us with an insistent reminder of this.

The creativity produced by migration must be placed at the center of political practices, constitutions and jurisprudence, shielded from migrant management and forced labor. We try to do it in our infrastructures of affinity. We must try to do it without idealizing, without minimizing or equating the different types of violence that can precede and drive a certain type of migration. Placing multi-situated knowledges at the heart of one's attention can produce relationships with people, connections that make it possible to redistribute these linguistic, racial, religious, national and class categories, to make them complex, multifarious and inseparable.

Action in public space is limited if it only concerns humans or life. To this *ontological totality*, the people of the river add a consideration of a decolonized agronomy, of knowledge that connects understanding of both plants and soils, the worlds of life and nonlife, with a view to a regenerated permanence. The cooperative's project contains the idea of the work to be done so that the earth endures. It defines a project based not on the principle of extracting nonlife and life, but on that of building and taking care of new connected geosystems and ecosystems.

» See Page 31 for
Figuring Fallow Time
– Part One



Blvd de La Chapelle, Paris,
October 11, 2016.

Avenue des Flandres,
October 31, 2016.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.



Moussa Sissoko, Amidou Traoré and Gimba Sissoko, griots of Diakhandapé village and inhabitants singing and reenacting the arrival of the people of Somankidi Coura.

Stills and song excerpt from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.

Come to welcome the workers
Come to welcome the workers
Come, come
Come and see the brave people
Come, come
Come to welcome the workers
Come to welcome the workers



Everybody must come

They came to cultivate
They leave France to work
They made the gardens
They got along with everybody



Come to welcome the workers
Come to welcome the workers
Come, come
Come and see the brave people
Come, come
Come to welcome the workers
Come to welcome the workers

Look at the fourteen people who arrived
They used the pirogue to go from the village to the fields
At the beginning, they had difficulties
But now everything is alright
They are Bambaras and Soninkés
Pullars and Kassonkés
You are welcome



Look, they are getting out of the pirogue
They went through difficult moments
Look carefully, look carefully
They came here to make the gardens
They named them Somankidi Coura
That's how they came to make the gardens
Look, they are getting out of the pirogue
All the village is here and see
That's how they came from France
They came only to work in the gardens
Look, they are going up
Look at these workers who came from France





40th Anniversary of Somankidi Coura, Mali,
exhibition of the photographic archive of
Bouba Touré, January 2017.
Stills from Raphaël Grisey.



**Siré Soumaré, Ousmane Sinaré, Bathily Bakhoré
examine the archives of Bouba Touré.**



40th Anniversary of Somankidi Coura, Mali, exhibition of the photographic archive of Bouba Touré, January 2017, Stills from Raphaël Grisey.



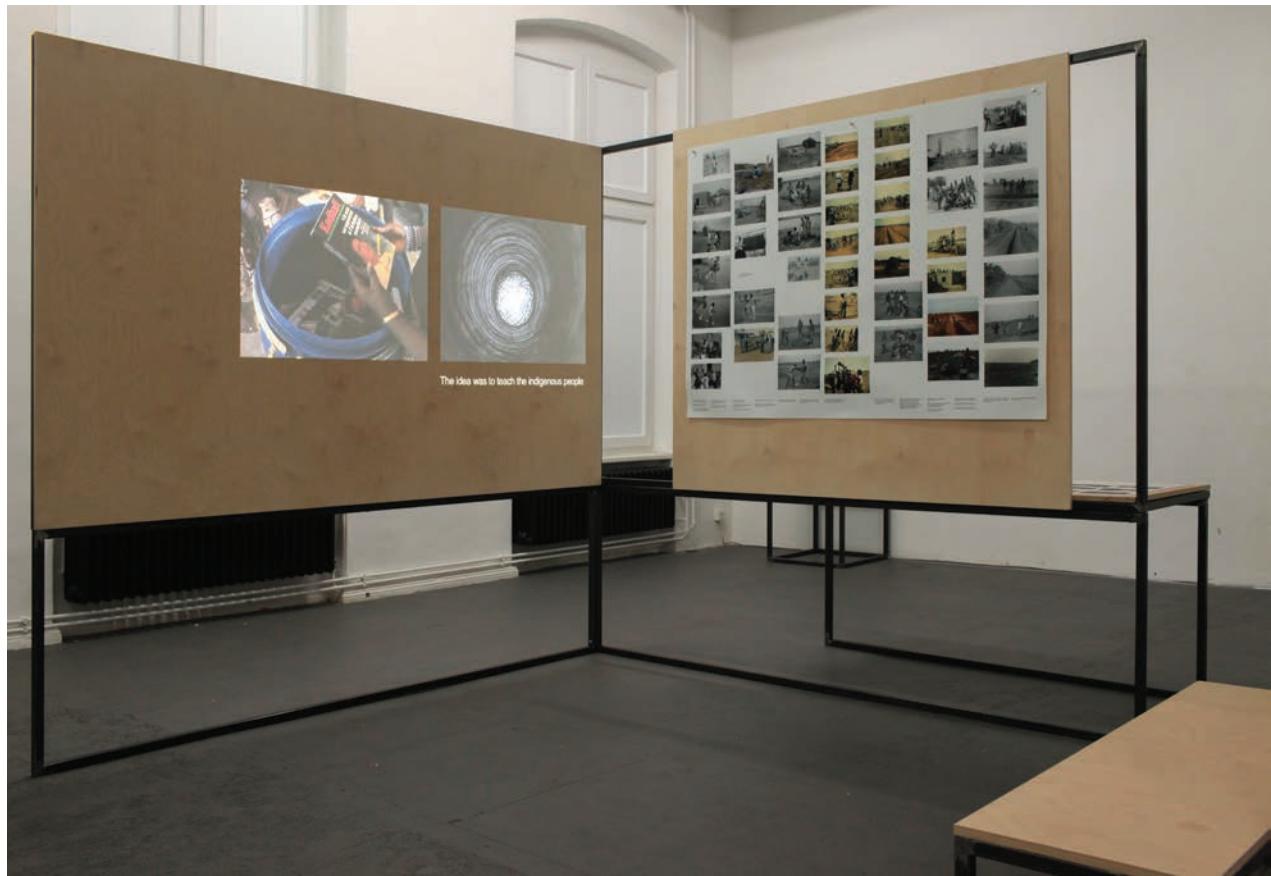




Sowing Somankidi Coura – A Generative Archive, an exhibition conceived by Raphaël Grisey in collaboration with Bouba Touré, including works by Révolution Afrique, Safi Faye,

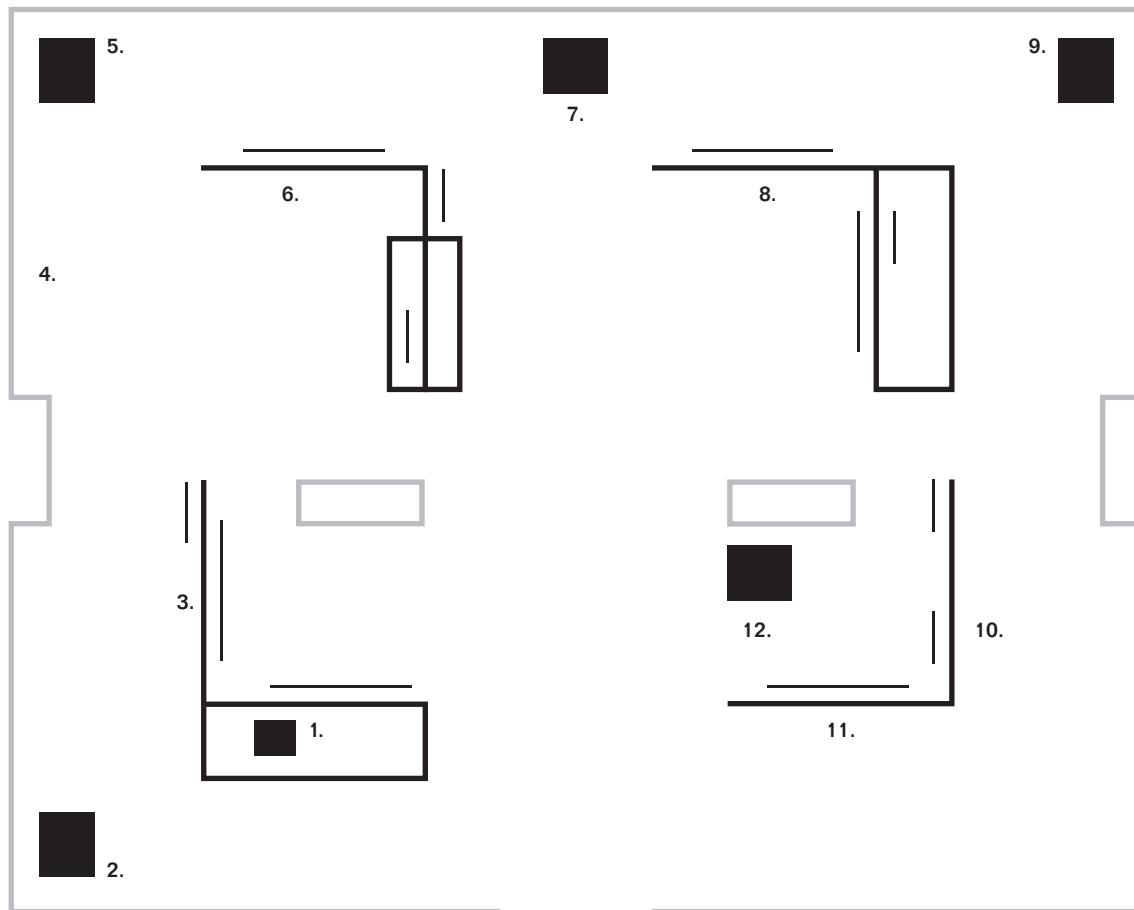
Raphaël Grisey, Sidney Sokhona, Bouba Touré, Kàddu Yaraax, and exhibition-display designed by Lorenzo Sandoval. Archive Kabinett, Berlin, 2017.

Photographs by Raphaël Grisey.









Photographs by Bouba Touré
twelve inkjet prints

1.
Drancy, journée Portes Ouvertes
[Drancy, Open-Doors Day], 1971, 27'
Group Révolution Afrique

2.
Nationalité: Immigré, 1975, 70'
Sidney Sokhona

3.
Queen's Garden, 2017, 13'
Raphaël Grisey and Bouba Touré

4.
Somankidi Coura, 1977–1980
Slideshow by Bouba Touré

5.
Kàddu Beykat [Letter from My Village],
1975, 90', Safi Faye

6.
Safrana or Freedom of Speech,
1977, 98', Sidney Sokhona

7.
First visit to Somankidi Coura,
Mali, 1977, 8mm film by
Monique Janson, a peasant from
Champagne region, 6'

8.
Second visit to Somankidi Coura,
Mali, 1977, 8mm film by
Monique Janson, 20'

9.
*Géographie – Afrique Occidentale
Française / Zone soudanienne /
Le Haut Sénégal*, 1909, 3'
Gaumont Pathé Archives

10.
La ficelle pour moissonneuse lieuse,
Date unknown (1920's), 4'
Gaumont Pathé Archives

11.
Notre vie en France [Our Life in France],
1990's. Slideshow by Bouba Touré

12.
Traana [Temporary Migrant],
2017, 25'
Raphaël Grisey and Kàddu Yaraax

13.
*Bouba Touré, 58 rue Trousseau,
75011 Paris, France*, 2008, 29'
Bouba Touré

Biographies

Bathily Bakhoré

From Diakhandapé, a Soninke village on the banks of the Senegal River. After his schooling in Somankidi village, he left for France in July 1969. He was a laborer at Paul Dimas, a wallpaper factory in Montreuil. He resided in the migrant worker hostel Foyer Arbustes (Raymond Losserand) in the 14th arrondissement in Paris with his big brother, where he met Karamba Touré, Balla Moussa Diallo, Moussa Coulibaly and Mady Niakhaté. He co-founded the ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France) in 1971. He trained with French farmers in the Haute-Marne in 1976. He arrived in Somankidi in 1977 with Siré Soumaré and Karamba Touré passing through Marseille and Dakar and works in a multipurpose way at the Somankidi Coura cooperative. Bathily Bakhoré joined the ADEMA political party at the end of the dictatorship in 1991 and became a communal and regional leader of the party for several years.

Ibrahima Camara

Born in Bakel, Senegal, Soninke region. After his schooling, he arrived in Paris in the early 1970s. He lived in the 11th arrondissement of Paris with a cousin, and is a worker. He co-founded the ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France) in 1971. He did a traineeship in livestock, market gardening and accounting in Marne in 1975 and 1976. In 1977, he was the accountant of the Somankidi Coura cooperative. In the late 1980s, he left the cooperative to settle in Dakar and manage the property of his trading father.

Bangaly Camara

Born in the Soninke village of Bokeladji, in the region of Futa in Senegal near the Senegal River. After his schooling, he arrived in France with his brother in the early 1970s and worked as a laborer. Bouba Touré took him to the ACTAF in 1974 and introduced him to the project of the cooperative. He trained in market gardening in Marne in 1975 and 1976. He was assistant accountant of Ibrahima Camara in Somankidi Coura since its foundation. He married a woman from Samé, Fatou Coulibaly. He left the cooperative in 1986 to return to France and became a concierge in a social housing project in the Paris suburbs. His son, Kandé Camara, is an architect.

Moussa Coulibaly

Born in Lambatara, Soninké village in the Kayes region, Mali. He arrived in France in 1969 and stayed in the Foyer Arbustes (Raymond Losserand) in the 14th arrondissement in Paris with Fode Moussa Diaby, Karamba Touré, Bathily Bakhoré, Fabourama Sissoko, Bala Moussa Diallo and Mady Niakhaté. Coulibaly was a laborer at the Marchal factories with Mady Niakhaté in Issy les Moulineaux and co-founder of the ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France) in 1971. He received training in market gardening and breeding in Haute-Marne. He was co-founder of the cooperative in 1977 and settled there with his wife Assa Soukho. He is the head of the village of Somankidi Coura from its foundation until today.

Jean-Philippe Dedieu

Research fellow at the Center for International Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (CIRHUS) at New York University. His work focuses on the political history and sociology of African migration. He has published *La Parole Immigrée. Les Migrants Africains dans l'Espace Public en France, 1960-1995* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2012) and the dossier "Working with Frames of War", *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 8(1), 2017. He was recently awarded a Weatherhead Initiative on Global History (WIGH) Fellowship at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University.

Dramane Diaby

Born in Singallou near the Senegal River. He is the young brother of Bouba Touré and joined the cooperative group from the beginning in 1977. He took over his brother's plots in 1982 and became a member of the cooperative. He is married to N'diaye Diaby and Souaré Samassa.

Fode Moussa Diaby

Born in Kankan in Guinea Conakry in a Malinke family, arrived in France in the early 1970s. He worked as a company representative and was a member of the CGT. He joined the ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France) later. He trained in Haute-Marne in 1975 and 1976. He moved to Somankidi Coura in 1977. With Seydou Traoré, he was the driver of the cooperative. He married Astou Traoré from Samé, a village nearby the cooperative. In 1984, he moved to New York to work as a taxi driver. He accumulated savings in order to carry out new agricultural projects back in Guinea. He died in 2014.

Balla Moussa Diallo

Born in the Khassonké village of Séro, Kayes region, Mali. He arrived at the Foyer Arbustes (Raymond Losserand) in the 14th arrondissement in Paris in the early 1970s. He co-founded the ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France) in 1971. He made his training courses in Haute-Marne in 1976, co-founded the Somankidi Coura cooperative in 1977 but left in 1979 for personal reasons, to live in his home village where he has been a farmer since.

Idrissa Diara

Born in Djidjieny near Bamako in a Bambara family, moved to the cooperative in 1999 as a farmer on behalf of Siré Soumaré, before becoming a co-operator at Somankidi Coura.

Raphaël Grisey

Born in Paris in 1979, lives and works in Berlin and Trondheim. Grisey uses video, editorial and photographic works to gather or produce narratives about the politics of memory, migration and architecture. The book *Where is Rosa L.* (2001-2006) and the film *National Motives* (2011) study the ghosts of various political regimes in the public spaces of Berlin and Budapest. Through diverse documentary, fictional or essayist forms, Grisey's films and installations deal with contemporary social and political issues such as migration and postcolonialism in France (*Trappes, Ville Nouvelle*, 2003; *Cooperative*, 2008 and *Becoming Cooperative Archive* 2015 – in collaboration with Bouba Touré). He collaborated with Florence Lazar on the films *Prvi Deo* and *Red Star* (2006), which deal with post-war former Yugoslavia. Recent film projects were made in France amid students' strikes (*The Indians*, 2011), in China amid Mingong peasant-workers (*The Exchange of Perspectives*, 2011), in the social housing complex of Pedregulho in Brazil (*Minhocão*, 2011), in the Brazilian Positivist Church in Rio de Janeiro (*Amor e Progresso*, 2014) and around marooned quilombola communities in Minas Gerais (*Remanescentes: A Mina dos Vagalumes*, 2015). His work has been shown in various film festivals such as FID Marseille (FR), Hotdocs Vancouver (CA), Doc Lisboa (PR), Forum Doc (BR), Rencontres Internationales, Berlinale Forum Expanded, Underdox (DE). As well as in art centers including: Kunsthalle Budapest (HU), Centre Pompidou, Rennes Biennale, Art Center Les Églises Chelles, Passerelle, Espace Khiasma, CPIF (FR), Casa Encendida (SP), MAM São Paulo, MIS (BR), MCA Chicago (US), Uqbar, Savvy Contemporary, NGBK, Halle Für Kunst Lüneburg, Archive Kabinett, Heidelberger Kunsthalle, Neuer Aachener Kunstverein (G), 10th Contour Biennale (BE), 2nd Yinchuan Biennale (CN). Fellow of the Norwegian Artistic Research Programme (2015–2018).

Tobias Hering

Born in 1971, lives in Berlin. Independent curator, researcher and writer. He has been artistic co-director (with Marie-Hélène Gutberlet) of the collaborative research "Visionary Archive" at Arsenal - Institute for Film and Video Art (Berlin) from 2013 to 2015; he has contributed as a writer and curator to the ongoing project *Luta ca caba inda - The struggle is not over yet*, initiated in 2011 by Filipa César, Suleimane Biai, Sana na N'Hada and Flora Gomes, which is dedicated to the archive of the National Film Institute of Guinea-Bissau; and he is the co-curator with Annett Busch of *Tell it to the Stones*, an exhibition and retrospective dedicated to the work of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub at Akademie der Künste, Berlin, in 2017. Tobias Hering is

the editor of the anthology *Der Standpunkt der Aufnahme - Point of View: Perspectives of political film and video work* (Archive Books, 2014), co-editor (together with Filipa César and Carolina Rito) of *Luta ca caba inda: time place matter voice* (Archive Books, 2017), and co-editor (together with Catarina Simão) of the upcoming DVD edition *Specters of Freedom: Cinema and Decolonization*, published by Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art.

Olivier Marboeuf

Author, performer, independent curator and the founder of the art center Espace Khiasma, which he has directed since 2004 in Les Lilas (in the outskirts of Paris). He has developed a program centred around social realities and contemporary politics, that associates performances, debates and exhibitions, questioning the place for discourse and oral expression in the arts. Interested by the dynamics of narrative speculations as tools for critical theory, his research has progressively led him to explore contemporary cinematographic practices (collaborating on exhibitions with Vincent Meessen, Alexander Schelow, Sandy Amerio, Matthieu K. Abonnenc, Butler & Mirza) Since 2010 he has produced films for exhibitions, which are subsequently presented in diverse festivals in France and abroad. In 2013 he participated in the creation of a production company, Spectre, whose objective is to offer a structure of support for ambitious projects of artists and filmmakers; among them: Louis Henderson, Filipa César, Ana Vaz, Eric Baudelaire, Ismaël Bahri, Jean-Charles Hue, Dorothée Smith. As both author and performer, his writing uses the story as theoretical form. Recently he has published several texts and given lectures and performances that question unnamed forms and which consider the body as the site of a minority historical tale. Amongst these: *Un corps sans nom (A Body without a Name)* in *L'Esprit Français* (La Découverte, 2017), *Donner corps (To give form)* in *L'Histoire n'est pas donnée, contemporary art and post-coloniality in France, The Performative Transmission of Political Archives: Between Secrets, Shields and Ruses* (Archive Books, 2017), *Souterrains (Undergrounds)* (Archive Books, 2017), *L'institution gazeuse (The Gaseous Institution)* (performance 2015), *Deuxième Vie (Second Life)* (performance, 2014).

Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye

Research Fellow in Anthropology at Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and member of the Institute des Mondes Africains (IMAF), Paris. From 2011 to 2017, she conducted a research project combining ethnography and socio-history among West African migrants in and around Paris. She explored their experience of migrants' hostels called "foyers" at a time when this type of housing was abandoned. This project resulted in two articles published in 2016 in *Genèses. Histoire et Sciences Sociales et American Ethnologist*, as well as a collaboration with photographer Anissa Michalon. Currently based in Bamako, she is initiating a new project called "Mobility in situ: Debating emigration and return in Western Mali," as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow (2017-2020).

Goundo Kamissokho Niakhaté

From the Soninke village of Niogomera, close to Yélimané (Kayes). Her name, Kamissokho, translates to "working the land one year and harvesting for 100 years". She married Mady Koïta Niakhaté, one of the founders of Somankidi Coura, in 1978. Like all the other women of the cooperative, Goundo Kamissokho was an agricultural worker without having the status of cooperator, she was delegated by the group of women in 1982 to demand the acquisition of land for them. In 1982, she co-founded the Women's Association of Somankidi Coura and worked in the collective fields for women. President of the Rural Women of the Kayes region since 2000, she supported the establishment of the first health center in the region of Somankidi. She became President of the Rural Women of Mali in 2010, and lives between Bamako and Somankidi Coura. On 8 March 2017, International Women's Day, she organized a demonstration in Somankidi Coura.

Mady Niakhaté

Peasant from the Soninke village of Niogomera (The Place of the Camels) close to Yélimané (Kayes). He arrived in France in 1970 in the migrant worker hostel Foyer Arbustes (Raymond Losserand) in the 14th arrondissement of Paris where he met Bathily Bakhoré, Karamba Touré, Balla Moussa Diallo and Moussa Coulibaly. After a traineeship, he was chain controller in the Marchal factories, which produces car windscreen wipers, in Hauts-de-Seine, Issy-les-Moulineaux. Niakhaté co-founded the ACTAF (African Cultural Association of African Workers in France) in 1971 and completed his training courses with French farmers in Haute-Marne in 1975 and 1976. He settled with the group in Somankidi in 1977 and married Goundo Kamissoko in 1978. At the JRF (Rural Youth of the River) and then at the CAMS (Multifunctional Agricultural Cooperative of Somankidi Coura), he was in charge of production and later of the flow and supply. He was also responsible for the agricultural commission at the URCAK (Regional Union of Agricultural Cooperatives in the Kayes Region). Since 1987, he is responsible for the onion seeds and their marketing with Siré Soumaré and Ladji Niangané.

Ladji Niangané

From the Soninke village Ballou in Senegal (region of the Senegal River). He was a militant during the student strikes of 1968 in Kaolack. After two years of trading in Congo Brazzaville and in Zaire, he arrived in France in February 1970 and lived in the migrant worker hostel Foyer Bisson in the 20th arrondissement of Paris. He worked at the Renault-Billancourt factories as manufacturer and became a union steward for the CGT. He is a co-founder of ACTAF and did a traineeship in mechanical agriculture in Charentes while the others did their agricultural internships. He co-founded the Somankidi Coura cooperative in 1977 and married Oumou Diara, a native of Samé Wolof that same year. Niangané was the Secretary-General of the CAMS (Multifunctional Agricultural Cooperative of Somankidi Coura) from 1979 to 1980. He also co-founded the URCAK (Regional Union of Agricultural Cooperatives in the Kayes Region) where he was in charge of training, especially the training of women together with Goundo Kamissoko. He was elected peasant representative to the High Council of Local Authorities in 2005 and later to the national territorial authorities. From 1986 to 2000, he was president and trainer at the Subregional Agricultural Training Center in Selibaby (Mauritania), Kayes (Mali), Bakel and Tambacounda (Senegal). Since 1989, he has been a member of the PARENA party and is a political activist at the CMP (Convention of the Presidential Movement). In Somankidi, he was deputy mayor from 2005 to 2010 and communal adviser since 2016.

Karine Parrot

Member of GISTI (Groupe d'Information et de Soutien des Immigrées / Immigrant Information and Support Group) and law professor at Cergy-Pontoise University. The GISTI is a French non-profit organization for human rights created in 1972 to protect the legal and political rights of foreigners and immigrants and to advocate freedom of movement across borders. It provides information and support to immigrants through its knowledge of immigration law, French, European and, in some respects, international, and its experience of immigration practices. It defends foreigners, offers training and publications and participates in the debate on migration policies.

Ousmane Sinaré

Born in the Ouagadougou region in Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) in a Mossi family. He arrived in France in 1972 and worked as a babysitter and cook for a French family. He returned to the ACTAF through Karamba Touré and trained as a mechanic in Marne in 1975 and 1976. He moved to the Somankidi Coura cooperative in 1977. He married Batou Coulibaly, a native from Samé village, whose Burkinabe family had been deported and forced to work in the Diakhandapé Sisal during the colonial era. In the 1980s, Sinaré trained as a veterinarian in Kayes. Sensitive to intensive agricultural policies in his country of origin, he engaged in anti-GM

movements. Active member of the URCAK, he has been representing the union since the 1990s in these movements and participates in interregional meetings on this issue in all the countries of ECOWAS. He is a member of the BEDE, association for the defence of biodiversity and the promotion of peasant seeds.

Fabourama Sissoko

Born in the Khassonké village of Logo, Kayes region, Mali. He came to France in the early 1970s and co-founded the ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France) in 1971. Sissoko took part in agricultural and masonry courses in Haute-Marne in 1976. Co-founder of Somankidi Coura, he settled there with his wife Sira Sakiliba. Together with Bouba Touré he was the group's mason and driver. He left the cooperative in 1978 to practice agriculture in his home village.

Sidney Sokhona

Born in Tachott, Mauritania, in 1952. He worked in Paris as a day-laborer, sending remittances home to his village, before enrolling in film classes at the Free University of Vincennes with Med Hondo and Serge Le Peron where he met Bouba Touré. He was the assistant of Med Hondo on his film *Bicots-Nègres, vos voisins (Wogs and Negroes, your neighbors, 1974)*. His first feature, *Nationalité : Immigré* released in 1976, was shot during the struggles of the migrant workers' hostel Foyer Riquet, where Sidney Sokhona lived at the time. In 1978, Sokhona released *Safrana or the freedom of speech*, a fiction around the return to the land of a group of migrant workers. The scenario is based on the story of the members of the ACTAF and of the Cooperative of Somankidi Coura. He returned in 1979 to his home country with a new film project on slavery and colonization in Mauritania, which remained unrealized. He rapidly entered local politics and worked successively as the ambassador of Mauritania in France in the 1980's under the military regime, and as secretary for the president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. He is currently developing a private TV channel in Mauritania.

Siré Soumaré

From Tarfacirga, a Soninke village in the region of Gadiaga along the Senegal River in Mali. He went to the public school of Kotéra, founded in 1958. He travelled to Zaire (now, Democratic Republic of the Congo) in the late 1960s and arrived in France in April 1971. He lived in the migrant worker hostel Foyer Pinel in St. Denis with Bouba Touré, where he worked as a tile washer in the basement of the building, in metallurgy and later as warehouseman. In 1974, he worked for Christofle, a silverware company in St Denis and joined the CGT. He co-founded the ACTAF in 1971 and trained among vegetable farmers in Haute-Marne in 1976. He is the president of CAMS (Multifunctional Agricultural Cooperative of Somankidi Coura) since 1981. He is one of cooperative members already to have married upon his arrival in Somankidi Coura in 1977. He was President of the Chamber of Agriculture of the Kayes Region from 1987 to 1997. He was also President of the URCAK from 1983 to 2016. In 1987, Siré Soumaré, Mady Niakhaté and others are the first to embark on the production of peasant onion seeds in the region. Since 2015, he has been engaged in fish farming parallel to his agricultural activities.

Samba Sy

Fula breeder from the Kayes region, Mali. He is responsible for raising livestock (goats, sheep and cattle) at Somankidi Coura since 11 February 1990 (the day of Nelson Mandela's release) and lives there with his family and his wife Founti Diallo.

Bouba Touré

Born in 1948 in Tafacirga near the Senegal River in the former French Sudan that became Mali, and lives in Paris, France and Somankidi Coura, Mali. He went to school in Tambacounda, Senegal, before emigrating to France in 1965. Touré lived in the migrant worker hostel Foyer Pinel with Siré Soumaré. From 1965 to 1970, he worked in the factory Chausson and took part in the strikes from 1966 to 1969. After studies at the Free University of Vincennes and in Montrouge in 1969, from 1971 he worked as a projectionist at

Cinema 14 Juillet Bastille and in Cinema L'entrepôt, Paris. A photographer since the 1970s, Touré has been documenting the lives and struggles of migrant workers' movements, as well as the foundation of the agricultural cooperative of Somankidi Coura in Mali. Since 2008, this working photographic archive has been complemented by video productions. Touré co-founded the ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France) in 1971 and the Cooperative of Somankidi Coura in 1977 after agricultural internships in Marne and Haute-Marne (France). He has collaborated with Raphaël Grisey on the projects *Cooperative* (2008) and *Becoming Cooperative Archive* (2015-). In 2015, he published the book *Notre case est à Saint Denis (Our house is in Saint Denis, Éditions Xéographes)*. Since the 1980s, Touré has exhibited works and given talks in France, the UK and Germany in associative and migrant workers hostels' circles and more recently at the Contemporary Art Center Les églises, Chelles; Goldsmiths University; Savvy Contemporary, Berlin; Arsenal Kino, Berlin; Documentary Forum, HKW, Berlin; Espace Khiasma, Les Lilas; festival Theaterformen, Braunschweig; The Building, E-flux, Berlin; B-Movie Kino, Hamburg; Caméra des champs Festival, Ville-sur-Yron; Archive Kabinett, Berlin; Spectacle cinéma (USA).

Romain Tiquet

Postdoctoral researcher at the University of Geneva. He completed his thesis in the History of Africa at Humboldt University in Berlin on the coercive forms of labor mobilization in Senegal during the colonial and postcolonial period (to be published in 2018). His research interests include the history of work in West Africa, a social history of decolonization on the continent, and more recently a history of post-independence national development and construction in Africa. His latest publications are: with Marie Rodet, 2016. "Gender, Labor and Forced Migration in Sisal Plantations in Senegal and French Sudan (1919-1946)". In I. Mande and E. Guerassimoff (ed.), *The Apostolate of Colonial Labor. The Engaged and Other Migrant Workers in Empires, 19th-20th Century*, Paris: Editions Riveneuve. 2017, "Challenging Colonial Forced Labor? Resistance, Resilience and Power in Senegal (1920s-1940s)", in *International Labor and Working Class History*; "Civic service and development: a utopia at the heart of relations between the army and political power in Senegal (1960-1968)", in *Afrique Contemporaine*.

Karamba Touré

From Kenieba where he attended public school, son of a marabout and Malinke notable of the region. He arrived in France in the 1960s and lived in the Foyer Arbustes (Raymond Losserand) in the 14th arrondissement of Paris together with Fode Moussa Diaby, Bathily Bakhoré, Mady Niakhaté and Moussa Coulibaly. In 1971, he co-founded the ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France) and became its General Secretary. In 1973, he represented the ACTAF at the Pan-African Youth Festival in Tunis. He was also, at that time, Deputy Secretary General of the General Union of Malian Workers in France (A.G.T.M.F.). In 1974, he was one of the initiators of the return to the land project. He participated in the agricultural internship in Haute-Marne in 1975. At the end of 1975, Karamba Touré is part of the ACTAF delegation who will meet the authorities and notables of the village of Somankidi to prepare for their return. In December 1976, he left with Siré Soumaré and Bathily Bakhoré from Marseilles to Dakar with a Peugeot 404 filled with the personal belongings of the founding members. In January 1977, he settled in Somankidi. He was the first Secretary General of the JRF (Rural Youth of the River) until 1979. In 1982, he left the cooperative of Somankidi Coura. He died in January 1984 in an accident in the Mande. His brother, Kouréssi Touré, was the first cardiologist of Mali.

Seydou Traoré

Originally from Sikasso in the south of Mali, moved to Paris in the 1960s. He worked as a laborer and joined the trade union movement. He co-founded the ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France) in 1971 and later the cooperative of Somankidi Coura in 1977. Together with Fode Moussa Diaby he was the driver of the group. He married Fatoumata Sissé, a native of Sikasso. He was the

second president of the CAMS (Multifunctional Agricultural Cooperative of Somankidi Coura) from 1980 to 1981. In 1981 Traoré returned to Sikasso and worked as a driver in public transport. He retired in 2017.

Kàddu Yaraax

Theater Forum company founded in 1994 based in the Lebou village of Yarakh in Dakar and active throughout Senegal. Trainers regularly host Forum Theater workshops for troops from different cities. Kàddu Yaraax works with the tools of the Theater Forum, a branch of the Theater of the Oppressed founded by Augusto Boal around the precepts of the pedagogue Paulo Freire in the 1970s. It uses singing, dancing as well as poetry in collective writing of scenarios. The Kàddu Yaraax Association supports community awareness of all forms of social oppression such as Hann Bay pollution (Dakar), the AIDS epidemic, the consequences of emigration, racism, armed conflicts and intensive farming. The organization is community-based. It has 17 active members, contact persons, who live in the project's fields of activity and also brings together around thirty people who support and encourage its initiatives. The mission of the association remains the organization of community responses through strategies of diverse social animation. It also works in partnership with public authorities and NGOs to solve socio-economic problems related to, for example, environmental degradation and de-schooling. The association is also active in promoting new development themes, such as a "community school", promoting solar energy, and human rights. In 2017, Kàddu Yaraax and Raphaël Grisey collaborated for the interpretation of *Traana* (Temporary Migrant), a play written in 1976 by Bouba Touré.

Organizations

ACTAF

(Cultural Association of African Workers in France)

The ACTAF was founded in 1971 as a Support Committee for the Struggle of the Portuguese Colonies. Of Pan-African sensitivity, its members come mostly from West Africa but also from the rest of the continent and the West Indies. In 1973, the Support Committee for the Struggle of the Portuguese Colonies became ACTAF, the name was used as a cover for the militant activities of the group. It organized concerts, festivals and film screenings in the homes of African workers. Around the liberation struggles in the Portuguese colonies, ACTAF organized screenings of films shot in the scrubland, blood donations and clothing collection, coordinated in the homes of immigrant workers to be sent to the front. Since its inception ACTAF has also been working to raise awareness of the struggles of immigrant workers for better working and living conditions. It supported actions for Palestine and Vietnam. Since 1973, the organization has been working actively to respond to the drought crisis in the Sahel. As early as 1974, the option of a return was being prepared. About a hundred people went to work in 1975 for one month in the Marne and Haute-Marne, then a smaller group in 1976 for 6 months. 14 people left for Mali in November 1976. The Somankidi Coura cooperative was founded on 17 January 1977.

CAMS

(Multifunctional Agricultural Cooperative of Somankidi Coura)

The CAMS is a cooperative of Malian law founded in 1978 on the lands of Somankidi Coura. The statut 'multifunctional' allows the cooperative to diversify its production as it sees fit.

JRF

(Rural Youth of the River)

The JRF association, is the first name that the members of the ACTAF gave themselves after their arrival at Somankidi in 1977. A few months later they founded the village of Somankidi Coura, which, in 1979, became the CAMS (Multifunctional Agricultural Cooperative of Somankidi Coura).

Kayes Rural Radio

The radio was founded in 1988 on an initiative of the URCAK, Kayes Rural Radio is the first free peasant radio station in the Senegal River region. Published in French, Soninké

and Pullar, it gives practical information on the rural world, promotes irrigated food crops and Soninké culture. It broadcasts on the air in the border regions between Senegal, Mauritania and Mali and is now available on the Internet. The headquarters and recording studios are based in Kayes, Mali. Demba Traoré, a native of Bakel and his wife Astou Goundiam, responsible for literacy in Soninké and French women of the URCAK, have been the leaders since 1989. The couple lived for several years at Somankidi Coura in the 1990s.

Somankidi Coura Women's Association

The association was created in 1982 after the "chili peppers strike" during which the women of the cooperative claimed land for their own use and benefit. The association has collective fields whose benefits can be used to support women in need within the association or for other groups of women farmers in the region through the URCAK.

Révolution Afrique

The group was founded in 1971. With Trotskyist and Maoist tendencies, it is constituted by activists from the Trotskyist journal *Revolution!* and African migrant workers. The group organized a large number of actions in the homes of immigrant workers and produced a newspaper accompanying the liberation struggles of immigrant workers in France and those of the African continent. Like ACTAF, in 1973, the group questioned the possibilities of a return from the underground to activate revolutionary cells. The group produced the film *Open Doors in Drancy*, in 1971 around the occupation and strike of the migrant workers' hostel of Drancy. The activities of the group stopped in 1979, among other things because of the failure of revolutionary returns on the African Continent.

URCAK

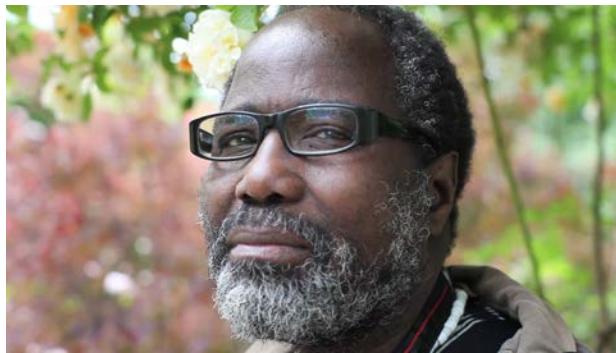
(Regional Union of Agricultural Cooperatives of the Kayes Region)

The union was created in 1982 by members of the Somankidi Coura cooperative. It aims at harmonizing the production of agricultural cooperatives in the region created by former migrants or by groups of villagers and creating solidarity among them. It sets up agricultural and technical training courses. The URCAK also grants credits financed by the solidarity fields of each of the cooperatives. The vast majority of URCAK members are women groups. The union counted already more than 7,000 active female members in 2008.

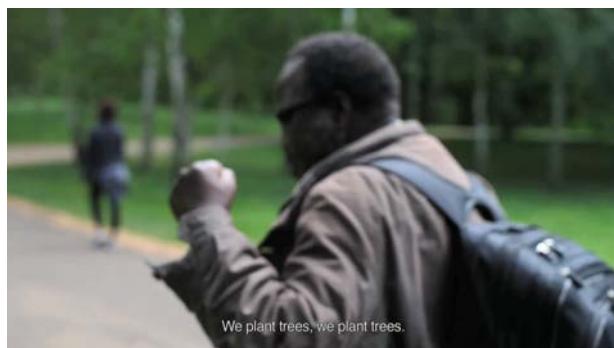
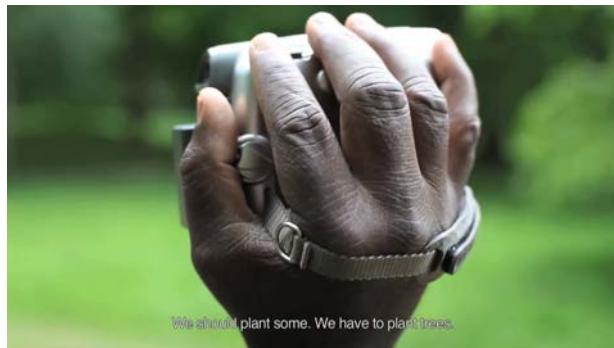
COPROSEM

(Coopérative des Producteurs de Semences maraîchères du Mali)

Founded in 2015 with the initiative of the Somankidi Coura Cooperative, it was the first to produce its own basic seeds of onions in Mali. The COPROSEM aims to broaden the peasant seeds producer circle in Mali and to coordinate their production and the sells. The COPROSEM produce and distribute nowadays onions and gombo (okra) seeds in partnership with national laboratories for seed production. It actively struggles against the use of patented seeds by multinational such as Monsanto and Bayer and promote the rights of the peasants seeds and their producers.



Stills from *Queen's Garden*, a film by Raphaël Grisey and Bouba Touré, London, 2017.







We would like to thank the following people for the interviews and discussions that were indispensable in shaping the contents of this book:

Catherine Ruelle, Richard Copans, Annett Busch, David Rych, Filipa César, Ibrahima Wane, Tobias Hering, Olivier Marboeuf, Karinne Parrot, Sidney Sokhona, Safi Faye, John Akomfrah, Kodwo Eshun, Kerstin Meyer, Nicole Wolf, Shela Sheikh, Ros Gray, Nida Ghouse, Jocelyne Grisey, Jean Combette, Kári Hildársdóttir Grisey, Patricia Reed, Volker Moritz, Martine Pifre and Nikolaus Perneczky.

We would particularly like to thank Marie-Hélène Gutberlet for her invaluable remarks, and for her insightful eye on the editorial process.

The contributors of the book: Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye, Romain Tiquet, Jean-Philippe Dedieu, Tobias Hering, Olivier Marboeuf, Bouba Touré, Sidney Sokhona, Siré Soumaré, Ousmane Sinaré, Bathily Bakhoré, Ladj Niangané, Mady Niakhaté, Goundo Kamissokho Niakhaté, Karinne Parrot.

For the reproduction of certain photographs and documents, we would like to thank Chantale Touré and the Karamba Touré Association, Samba Sylla, Tangui Perron, Ousmane Moussa Diagana, Siré Soumaré, Marcel Trillat, Frédéric Variot, Monique Janson, Souleymane Diabira, Gérard Bloncourt, Armet Francis, Association Accir, Monique Hervo archives, Tobias Engel, René Lefort, Gilbert Igel, Ruy Guerra, Jean-Louis Boissier, Med Hondo, Jean Marie Quintard, Babacar Fall, Sana na N'Hada, and Hervé Le Roux.

The founders of Somankidi Coura:
Siré Soumaré, Ousmane Sinaré, Siré Soumaré, Bathily Bakhoré, Ladj Niangané, Mady Niakhaté, Bouba Touré, Karamba Touré, Fabourama Sissokho, Seydou Traoré, Moussa Diaby, Bangaly Camara, Bala Moussa Diallo, Ibrahima Camara, Dramane Diaby, Assa Soukho and Mariam Soumaré who were there from the beginning.

The inhabitants of the cooperative Somankidi Coura:
Gundo Kamissokho Niakhaté, Souaré Samassa, N'diaye Diaby, Dramane Diaby, Moussa Coulibaly, Founty Diallo, Samba Sy, Dado Diakhité, Oumou Diara, Dado Niangané, Maro Niakhaté, Fune Niakhaté, Maimouna Bathily, Awa Bathily, Batou Coulibaly, Mina Diallo, Salia Soumaré, Assa Coulibaly, Ara Traoré, Idrissa Diara, Haby Diara, Ousmane Keita, Ibrahima Traoré, Saly Soukho and all the children born in Somankidi Coura.

The people of Somankidi Village and especially the Diabira family that donated the land to the cooperative members.

The organizer of the Radio Rurale de Kayes (Kayes Rural Radio) Demba Traoré and Astou Goundiame.

Thanks to the peasants from the Marne, Haute-Marne, Ardennes and from elsewhere through whom the ACTAF members were able to complete their six-month internships. Thanks to ACCIR, Cimade, CCFD, UNESCO (and his former director Amadou Mahtar M'Bow), Anne Meyer, Dominique Tessier, Bruno Besnard, the Robinet family, Club Rotary du Mans, Jocelyne Beucher, and all the friends that closely supported (or continue to support) the cooperative.

The inhabitants of foyer Charonne, foyer Pinel and those from other migrant worker foyers in France.

In Dakar: The theatre group Kàddu Yaraax, Seydou Ndiaye, Diol Mamadou, Leity Kane, along with the actors Mamekagne Diatta, Dame Hane, Yasmine Diop, Masseye Ndiaye, Meme Bassene, Cheikh Ndiaye, Moussa Kalamou, Pape Sidy Sy, as well as all participants in the workshops that led to the adaptation and representation of *Traana* in January 2017.

The team at Archive Books and Archive Kabinett:
Bertille Bodin, Paolo Caffoni, Chiara Figone, Alima de Graaf, Kaia de Graaf, Ousmane Ndiaye Figone and Nina Miriam Ndiaye Figone, Seydou Ndiaye, Annika Turkowski, Anne Retsch.

Sowing Somankidi Coura
A Generative Archive

Edited by Raphaël Grisey together with Bouba Touré

Texts and interviews:
Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye, Romain Tiquet, Jean-Philippe Dedieu, Tobias Hering, Olivier Marboeuf, Bouba Touré, Sidney Sokhona, Siré Soumaré, Ousmane Sinaré, Bathily Bakhoré, Ladj Niangané, Mady Niakhaté, Goundo Kamissokho Niakhaté, Karinne Parrot.

Translations: Matthew Cunningham, Boris Kremer
Proofreading: Annika Turkowski, Patricia Reed, Martha Sprackland

Design: Archive Appendix
Printing: bud, Potsdam
Print-run: 800

First printing 2017
© 2017 the artist
the authors and
the photographers

Published by
Archive Books
Müllerstraße 133
13349 Berlin
www.archivebooks.org

Distribution
Belgium, France, Luxemburg:
Les presses du réel
www.lespressesdureel.com

Europe: Anagram books
www.anagrambooks.com

Australia & New Zealand:
Perimeter Distribution
www.perimeterdistribution.com

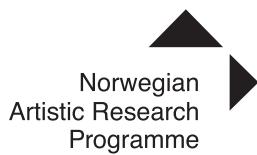
USA:
RAM publications +
distributions, inc.
www.rampub.com

ISBN: 978-3-943620-67-2

Published with the support of:



Centre national
des arts plastiques
(aide à l'édition),
ministère de la Culture
et de la Communication



STIFTUNG KUNSTFONDS