

Allah Tantou

David Achkar

62 minutes, black and white and color, film, 1991

California Newsreel

Description

Guinean David Achkar's father was a dancer in the Ballets Africains during the continent-wide independence movement in the 1950s. A prominent figure in the struggle to assert African independence, he became part of the Guinean movement led by Sékou Touré, then a champion of pan-Africanism.

Upon freedom in 1958, Marof Achkar, of Guinean and Lebanese descent, became UN ambassador, and moved to New York with his métis (mixed culture) wife and family; David was born there in 1960. In 1968, Marof Achkar was recalled by the increasingly brutal Sékou Touré regime and disappeared into the notorious prison Camp Boiro. His family was exiled, unable to know his fate until many years later, after Touré's death and the institution of more open government.

Allah Tantou is a set of meditations on the world David Achkar's father knew and a re-imagining of the past, including his father's experience under torture. To do this, Achkar assembles a collage of provocative images and scenes. He uses his family's home movies--kids around a Christmas tree, dad in the driveway. He juxtaposes them with newsreel and film images of the public Achkar at the U.N., posing with Martin Luther King and other celebrities and politicians when he chaired the U.N. Commission on Apartheid.

Interpolated are scenes in which an actor plays the part of the imprisoned Achkar; the scenes and voiceover narration are drawn from letters the family was only given a few years ago. Here, the self-assured and elegant character of the historical footage becomes an anguished and increasingly disoriented lonely soul, gradually growing blind but ultimately returning to a sense of pride and destiny. On the soundtrack, overlapping and echoing rhetorical phrases about revolution and democracy echo grandly around the actor; they are the sound of destroyed hopes. The film ends with an image of a truck traveling down a nameless road, on an uncharted journey.

Style/Structure

The disparate images, sounds, objects and fragments function not merely as documents but as evocative talismans, indeed acting as memory itself at times. Each image, conditioned by others, loses its independent authority as historical proof and becomes part of a search for integrity and identity. Distributor California Newsreel notes, "In a cinematic tradition which has privileged the calm collective voice of the griot, Allah Tantou speaks with the fragmented, uncertain rhythms of the individual conscience." Achkar juxtaposes diverse, sometimes contradictory texts - documentary, newsreel, dramatizations, photos, journals to deny us a single, authoritative narrative space. Allah Tantou argues through its example that vigorous debate, candor and self-criticism are the pre-conditions for Africa's political and spiritual renewal. Achkar was highly conscious of the choice to use home movies reflexively and to use them to challenge official history. In an interview with Pat Aufderheide in 1993, he said, "What a film like this says is that 'history' is a collection of 'little histories,' petites histoires." He also saw the film as part of his own effort to establish an identity, with the establishing of what happened to his father, and the public reassessment of Sékou Touré's regime, as an element that contributed to his ability to construct a meaningful life. He saw himself as an in-between person, not only an exile whose family's revolutionary idealism was brutally betrayed, but also an orphan culturally: "I'm a métis

who doesn't have a country. I am black in Paris and white in Africa. Under these circumstances, you have to imagine even your own nostalgia. You create an image of your past that doesn't exist; you have always a compulsion to re-create things. But at the same time, the memory is still based on some real image, and that is what gives us the courage to go on."

Background on Director/Film

This was a first major film for David Achkar, who spent the bulk of his life (he died unexpectedly, at 38, of a heart attack in January 1998) in Paris as a political exile. He was active in the Paris theater scene, and also worked within the diasporic African filmmaking community there. The impetus to make the movie came with the arrival, more than a decade after his father's murder, of his father's letters to his family. He made the film in two stages, first launching it with \$4,000 of family money and then obtaining a \$30,000 grant from the French film ministry, as well as \$50,000 from the French Ministry of Cooperation, which assists cultural projects from former colonies, routed through the government of Guinea. His cousin (on his mother's side) played the role of his father.

Production Context

Allah Tantou was a frontal challenge to the hero-cult around the independence leader Sekou Touré and thus to an older generation of intellectuals and artists who were militant nationalists. It was also a break from major stylistic traditions in African film of neorealism and naturalism. Scholar Manthia Diawara said of it, "Better than any African film before it, Allah Tantou brilliantly redefines the documentary genre. Finally, it was a vivid example of exile cultural expression."

Achkar's evocation of his father's past, as part of the search for a present, was typical of other displaced or exiled filmmakers at the time. Lumumba: Death of a Prophet, by Raoul Peck and the work of Jean-Marie Teno, including *Chef!*, directly address the problems of suppressed history and discontinuity in recent African history. The film also joins other works exploring the situation of individuals crossing the borders not only of nations but of identities in a post-colonial period; the films of Ngozi Onwurah (*Coffee Colored Children*, *Body Beautiful*) and of Gurinder Chadha, including *I'm British, But...* are some of many such works.

Reception

The film debuted in Paris in 1991, to acclaim and to particular interest among the African diasporic arts community. It was also shown, with government permission, in Guinea. The film was used by the Group of Children of the Inmates of Camp Boiro, a group of relatives of those who had been persecuted by Touré, as a fundraiser. It was featured at the New York Film Festival with *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, which shared some stylistic characteristics. When California Newsreel decided to distribute the film as part of its Library of African Cinema series, an effort subsidized by the Rockefeller Foundation in promotion of international cinema, it became an established part of the film and African studies curricula in higher education in the U.S.

Discussion

How does the filmmaker make use of his family's photographs and videos? What is the relationship between family material and public and official images? Among human rights films, what charges and claims does this film make? Why is it important to the filmmaker that his father's prison experience be re-enacted publicly?

Further Reading

Aufderheide, P. (2000). Memory and history in sub-Saharan African cinema. In Aufderheide, P., *The daily planet*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 289-299.

Diawara, M. *African cinema: politics and culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Privett, Ray. (2000). Jean-Marie Teno's *Chief!* and the modernist pan-African cinema of exile. *Visual anthropology review*.

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