

FILM REVIEW ESSAY

Moustapha Alassane, a Retrospective of an Adventurer

Moustapha Alassane (1942–2015) occupies a singular place in the history of cinema; he was not only a pioneer of Nigerien cinema, and of African cinema more generally (he directed *Aoure* in 1962, a year before Sembene Ousmane's *Borom Sarret*, which is usually considered the first fiction film ever made in Africa by a black African), but he was also the first African to direct animated films, with *La Mort de Gandji* in 1965. With tireless curiosity, Alassane experimented with cinema his entire life, never limiting himself to one style. He played with techniques of animation (stop-motion, puppets, CGI) as well as various subjects and genres (documentary, western, social satire, oral traditional tales) and built his own cameras, which earned him the nickname of the “African Méliès,” bestowed by Paulin Soumanou Vieyra. His inventiveness and taste for parodic humor about post-independence Nigerien society gave shape to a very eclectic filmography and great singular artistry; Alassane reinvented his art at every film he made.

Trained as a mechanic, Alassane was a self-taught artist who would later collaborate with the French ethnologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch as well as the Canadian animator Norman McLaren. He became a prolific director, even though he struggled to obtain state financial support, wearing many hats in the film chain (producer as well as educator). A fiercely independent spirit, he opened his own open-air movie theater and traveled throughout Niger to remote villages as an itinerant film distributor, showing his favorite films alongside his own creations.

I became familiar with his work in the early 2000s; the energy of *Kokoa* and the humor and subtle social critique of *Bon Voyage*, *Sim*, and *Le Retour d'un Aventurier* made a strong impression on me. Despite the fact that he was a very important figure in early African cinema, Alassane's films were still rarely seen; they had been shown in Niger and at international festivals, albeit not extensively. When news of his passing broke (on March 17, 2015, in Ouagadougou), I thought that a retrospective of his work, the first ever in North America, was overdue.

Through the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in New York, Audiovisual Attaché Mathieu Fournet and I, in the capacity as the Film Program Officer, had over the years regularly organized and supported film

series of Francophone African cinema in the United States (featuring films by Abderrahmane Sissako, Quartiers Lointains, and Rabah Ameur-Zaimeche, to name but a few). Our first step was to determine which of Alassane's films were available, and where. At that point, there was only sparse information to be found about Alassane, and searching, one could instead easily stumble upon a namesake soccer player.

I turned to the Cinémathèque Afrique of the Institut Français in Paris, which hosts an important collection of films directed by Francophone African filmmakers (created in 1961 by the French Ministry of Cooperation). They had nine films directed by Alassane in their possession: prints in 16mm, some in beta—formats that have become rare and complicated to screen as they demand special equipment. In addition, none of the films had English subtitles, so the project would require difficult translation work.

We discussed the retrospective project early on with Josh Siegel, Senior Curator of Film at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and he confirmed the institution's interest. The dates were set a few months later: May 12–15, 2017, more or less 18 months away. We needed that time to organize the event, do some research, and translate the dialogues.

MoMA's retrospective presented nine films by Alassane and two more about his work: a black and white "making of" by Serge Moati, *Les Cowboys sont noirs* (1966, 15 minutes), shot on the set of *Le Retour d'un Aventurier*, as well as Christian Lelong and Maria Silvia Bazzoli's documentary, *Moustapha Alassane, cinéaste du possible* (2008, 90 minutes). This selection—if not exhaustive, since Alassane made about 30 films—demonstrated the incredible versatility of his work.

The Institut Français provided essential help by supporting the translation of the dialogues of the films from French into English. These translations were used as electronic subtitles, a technique that manually processes each line of dialogue live during the screening; this was the only way to make the screenings happen. Although complicated and tedious, electronic subtitles are often used for rare foreign films that were not released in English-speaking territories. The Institut Français had renewed the rights of the nine Alassane films for non-commercial screenings, so they were made available to the venues for free.

We invited Moustapha Alassane's son, Razak Moustapha, to attend MoMA's retrospective and introduce the opening night program. Razak Moustapha, who lives in France, had collaborated with his late father on several films as an animator. Unfortunately, administrative hurdles prevented him from making the trip; he instead wrote a note for the audience which I read during the opening night introduction. Christian Lelong (who passed away in 2020) made the trip to present his film.

Other prominent guests included Mahen Bonetti, Executive Director of African Film Festival, Inc., and Jamie Berthe, associate faculty at The Gallatin School (NYU), both of whom introduced programs and gave their outlook on Alassane's filmography. The response from the audience was positive, it was a discovery for many viewers. The press coverage was alas very limited, except

for a few pieces¹; perhaps because of a lack of curiosity from editors about a “niche” series or lesser-known directors (who would precisely need that visibility!)

I reached out to other venues, which quickly expressed their interest; after the first stop at MoMA, the retrospective traveled for over two years, which represents a rare length and breadth of interest. In 2017 it was shown at Philadelphia (Lightbox Film Center), Cambridge (Harvard Film Archives), Columbus (Wexner Center for the Arts), Louisville (Speed Art Museum), and Los Angeles (REDCAT), followed in 2018 by Berkeley (BAMPFA) and Austin (Austin Film Society), in 2019 by Montréal (la cinémathèque québécoise), and back to New York City (Metrograph).

The retrospective brought attention to Alassane’s work on a much larger scale; inquiries about the series also came from venues and festivals abroad. The next step after the retrospective then came naturally, to find a way to make these films more accessible to theaters and more largely available to the public. I contacted Bill Brand, Adjunct Professor at New York University’s Moving Image Archiving Preservation program, and we initiated a partnership together—NYU MIAP, the Cultural Services of the French Embassy and the Institut Français—to restore *Samba le Grand*, the first animated African film in color, directed by Alassane in 1977. The project would be part of MIAP’s training in a class taught by Brand. The restoration of *Samba le grand* in 2K format made the film available in DCP with English subtitles.

The world premiere took place at the festival Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna (Italy) in June 2019, and afterwards traveled to other festivals in Europe, and back to New York at Metrograph in November 2019, where we also presented some never-before-seen CGI musical short films, courtesy of Razak Moustapha. This restoration partnership continued in 2020 with *The Draughtmen’s Clash (Le Damier)*, a 40-minute film from 1996 by Congolese filmmaker Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda, and *Trésors des poubelles* (1989), a series of five shorts by Senegalese documentary filmmaker Samba Félix Ndiaye.

There is, of course, more to be done to highlight Alassane’s incredible legacy. This retrospective is one example of the difficulties a programmer can encounter when working to screen African films, although we were fortunate that some prints were still available. Many important films by prominent filmmakers remain challenging to find for cinephiles, and they are therefore largely underseen, whether on screen or on major streaming platforms. The reasons can vary from issues of rights, formats, and existing material to subtitles, preservation, or simple lack of knowledge or interest from the industry. Several projects have finally and fortunately begun to correct this misstep, through new restorations and releases (Djibril Diop Mambety’s *Hyenas*, Med Hondo’s *Soleil Ô*, Ousmane Sembene’s *Black Girl* and *Mandabi*, to name a few), but there is crucial work still to do in programming, distributing, preserving, and digitally releasing the work of generations of filmmakers to enable them to be seen and appreciated by a larger, eager audience.

In 1967, Alassane too expressed frustration over his films' lack of visibility, in a different context that still cruelly resonates today: "None of my six films, and similarly none of those of most of my colleagues, are known to African audiences. Europeans, who maintain a monopoly on distribution in Africa, will not program us, neither me nor my colleagues nor any African director. So why bother producing, if you don't know where to be distributed..."².

Despite a touring retrospective and growing attention to his remarkable work, Alassane's films are still not readily accessible for cinephiles. They are not distributed in North America, nor are they available on streaming platforms or DVDs (except one French DVD released in 2009 which includes four films). For film programmers, the restoration of *Samba le Grand* and the films presented during the retrospective can be booked for non-commercial screenings through the Cinémathèque Afrique of the Institut Français.

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Notes

1. "The Animations and Improvisations of a Trailblazing Nigerien Filmmaker," *Hyperallergic*, May 12, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/378773/the-animations-and-improvisations-of-a-trailblazing-nigerien-filmmaker/>. The series at Metrograph in November 2019 was covered by The New York Review of Books and mentioned in the New York Times.
2. "Brève rencontre avec Mustapha Alassane réalisateur du 'Retour d'un aventurier,'" *Le Monde*, May 9, 1967, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1967/05/09/breve-rencontre-avec-mustapha-alassane-realisateur-du-retour-d-un-aventurier_2628437_1819218.html