

Maitres Fous

A film by Jean Rouch

Titles:

The Producer, in presenting these documents to the public without concession or dissimulation alerts you to the violence and cruelty of some scenes but wants to allow you to fully participate in a ritual that is a specific solution to the problem of adaptation and that shows indirectly how some Africans view our Western civilization.

This film won first place among ethnographic, geographic, touristic and folklore films at the International Film Festival in Venice in 1957

Pierre Braunberger presents a Pleiades films production, The Crazy Masters. A film by Jean Rouch, Sound recorded by Damoure Zika, Ibrahima Dia, Edited by Suzanne Baron, Sound Engineer Andre Cotin, Filmed during an expedition by the National Scientific Research Center and the French Institute for Black Africa.

Coming from rural areas to the cities of Black Africa, young men hurl themselves against mechanical civilization. Thus conflicts are born, as well as new religions. Thus, the Haouka sect was formed around 1927. This film shows an episode in the lives of Haouka sect members in the city of Accra, Ghana. It was made at the request of priests, proud of their art, Mountyeba and Moukayla. No scene is forbidden or secret but open to those who truly want to play the game. And this violent game is only the reflection of our civilization.

Video Footage Begins:

Naration: Accra, capital of the Gold Coast, is a true Black Babylon. Here, you'll meet men from all parts of West Africa Nigeria, Upper Volta, Niger, Sudan. They have come to live the great adventure of African cities. Here, traffic never stops. Noise never stops.

The most interesting group in Accra may be the Zabrama community. They are Songrai and Germa from the north. From Gao, and from Naimmy. They work as stevedores in the port. Sumuguru, smugglers; car-ya car-ya, carriers, Ras boys, manufacturers of tropical loam. Hygiene boys, mosquito killers. Cattle boys, cattle traders in the great markets of Accra and Kumasi. Bottle boys, empty bottle sellers. Tin boys who sell empty petrol drums. Timber boys selling timber, Gutter boys who tend the gutters of the city. Gold mine boys who work underground.

And, by day and by night, in the bars, "Weekend in California," "Weekend in Havana," you can hear the calypso from the West Indies. Every Saturday and Sunday, there are processions in the streets. These are Yorubas, celebrating a wedding. These are Hausa prostitutes protesting against lower wages. These are Daughters of Jesus, singing their faith in the streets.

5.00

All this noise, all these brass bands forces the men who have come from the north, from silent savanna, to seek some peace in the suburbs of the city. And there, every Sunday night, they go to ceremonies not yet known to us. They call the new gods, the gods of the city, the gods of technology, the gods of power, the Haouka. The meeting place of the Haouka in Accra is in the salt market. There, members of the sect meet every evening after work. They gather round Moukayla kiri, Moukayla of the salt. They pretend to read a paper, like Gerba, with his checkered shirt. And those who have not been possessed for some time sleep on the cots, indifferent even to the tunes played to the Haouka.

One Sunday Morning, in many wagons, trucks which pick up passengers, private cars or taxis, all the members of the sect leave the city. They drive off the main road on to one which is, perhaps, the first tarmac road in West Africa and is today overrun by grass. Then they walk for an hour to get to Mountyeba's compound. Mountyeba, a man from Niger, a cocoa farmer, and the high priest of all the Haouka. Colored rags flutter in the sky. They are the Union Jacks. Just below is a statue of the governor with his moustache, his sword, his guns, and his horses.

The first part of the ceremony is the nomination of a new member. This man has been sick for a month. For one month, he has one fit after another. He sleeps in the cemetery and digs up the corpses. Everybody knows that this man is possessed by a Haouka and Moukayla kiri, wearing his felt hat watches ??? He's not yet entitled to wear a pith helmet. In two or perhaps three months, he will be initiated, when he asks to be. But for the time being, he has simply been nominated. He takes out two wooden guns which he strikes together to imitate the noise of gunshot. He threatens the elders.

The nomination is over. Mountyebea has hoisted another Union Jack. The second part of the ceremony is the public confession. Around the concrete alter, the guilty Houka must confess their wrongdoings. One says "I've had intercourse with the girlfriend of one of my friends and for two months have been impotent." Another says "I never wash. I'm dirty. I'm not elegant." And another says "I don't care about the Haouka. Sometimes I even say they don't exist." One member has given a ram and a chicken. When the whistle blows, the Haoukas form two lines. The penitents on one side and the others facing them. One of Mountyebea's assistants, holding the sacrificial chicken, swings his arms to and fro, to tell the gods, "We give you this chicken, neither in front nor in back." The blood is poured on the concrete alter and on the termite hill previously painted black and white, and representing the governor's palace.

10:00

The penitents come before the blood-drenched alter to take a brief oath. They swear not to do it again. "If we do it again, we ask our Haouka to punish us by death." Then the penitents are sent outside the compound. They will have to be possessed before they are allowed back into the holy circle. In the spirit of purification, Mountyebea makes a libation of gin. He pours it over the olive(?) trees, the poles which hold the Union Jacks, and the governor's palace. On the governor's palace, a telegram, a movie poster for The Sign of Zoro. Below (?) is the secretary general where Mountyebea keeps the sacrificial eggs. A sentry is mounting guard and Mountyebea breaks the eggs over the steps and balconies of the governor's palace. It is ten in the morning. It rains. A one string fiddle is playing the Haouka tunes. Men are waiting. And Mountyebea has gone to sleep, resting his head on the governor's palace. They are waiting for a dog. Why a dog? Because it is a strict taboo. And if the Haouka slaughter and eat a dog, they will prove that they are stronger than the other men, whether black or white.

The guns, the red sashes are gathered around the altar. Then starts the dancing. Mountyebea is the first to dance. For all the Haouka must be possessed. The sentries surround the dancers. They carry the guns and the whips made out of pandanus. Gerba, one of the penitents, wants to join the dancers but he is not allowed to since he is not yet possessed. Mountyebea chases him off into the bush. The Important Man is also run out and sentries are placed all around the compound striking their wooden rifles together and stopping the penitents. All the sentries watch over those who are going to be possessed, aiming their rifles at them in standing or prone position. And the trance starts, slowly in the left foot then in the right foot. It travels upward to the hands, arms, shoulders, up to the head. And the first man possessed gets up. He is Caporal Garbi, the corporal of the guard. He salutes everyone. Then he asks for fire; fire to burn himself with to prove that he is no longer a man but a Haouka.

15:00

When saluted, one of the other men shouts. It is Gerba, one of the other penitents who was in the bush. Gerba is possessed by the Haouka known as Sam Kaki, the train engineer. The engineer [hooks up his shorts?] and gathers all of the rifles to carry them to the altar. The Corporal of the Guard is now wearing his red sashes. And the third Haouka rises. He is Captain Maynga, the Captain of the Red Sea who does a slow march; the parade march of the British Army. And here is a fourth man seized. He is Madam Loctoro, acting coy, the doctor's wife dresses in a woman's dress. The corporal of the guard goes on saluting everyone. And the engineer shuttles back and forth between the governor's palace and the alter. This one is Lieutenant Maynga, the Lieutenant of the Red Sea. Breathing becomes heavy. Eyes turn white. Next the Governor is reaching a climax. The Lieutenant calls for help and the Corporal of the Guard comes to the assistance of the Governor. The Governor is standing. He speaks French and insults everyone. He calls his Lieutenant and his Lieutenant makes a sign that means I hear you but I'm not here yet. And the Lieutenant stands to salute the Governor. The woman has fallen on the ground. She is Magazia, the queen of the Accra prostitutes. She is possessed by a she-demon, Madam Sandma. Madam Sandma was the wife of one of the first French officers to come to Niger at the end of the last century, Captain Sandma. Madam Sandma is now wearing a pith helmet and a dress. She inspects the new statue of the Governor and the Lieutenant breaks an egg on the Governor's head. Why an egg? To imitate the plume worn by British governors on their helmet. Here is the real governor at the trooping of the colors at the opening of the assembly in Accra. 18:31. Guns salute and amid the crowd, there are Haouka dancers looking for their model. And if the order is different here from there, the protocol remains the same.

The general staff is gathered together to inspect the governor's palace. The corporal of the guard stands at the entrance and the governor and lieutenant check the fresh coat of paint on the building. Mountyebea, the main in charge, is worried. If the governor complains he will be fined, a sheep or even a steer maybe.

This man, dressed in blue, is possessed by The General. The Governor insults the General and the Lieutenant gets into a rage and says "I'm going to bring the General back." The General gets really furious and says "it's always the same, no one will listen to me, the General." Then the Governor invites him to a roundtable conference.

20:00

The General calls his orderly. Soldier Tiemoko, nearly knocks himself out then gets up and comes to pay his

respects to his general. The other men who were in the bush are now possessed and come out: the Secretary General, Marimota the truck driver, and Major Mugu, the Wicked Major. The Wicked Major comes to pay his respects to the General who orders him "Burn yourself as the others did." And the Governor adds "show that you are really the Wicked Major." The major takes a very small torch and the General insults him and asks for a larger one. The major takes it and set fire to his Ryan (?) Shirt. They have to extinguish the Wicked Major.

Then the Governor calls together another roundtable conference. It is the conference of the dog. All the Haouka are now gathered and the dog is to be slaughtered and eaten. The Captain would like to slaughter the dog. But finally Moukayla Kiri, the quiet priest, cuts the dog's throat in order to avoid accidents (21:47)

And the Governor says "Keep quiet." And the General says "Keep quiet." And hardly has the beast's throat been cut than the Haouka move forward to drink the gushing blood or lick it off the alter stone. Madame Doctor starts cutting up the dog. The Captain places sentries and calls together another conference. The point is whether the animal must be eaten raw or cooked. "Nobody listens to me" says the General. "It's always the same." He insults his soldiers and for another minute to get the meeting going. The Captain tells the Governor "We must cook this dog so that we can take pieces to those who could not come." Marimota the truck driver suggests that he will transport the dog. And the Governor says "Haouka look: I shall teach you to carve a dog before you cook it." The Wicked Major gives the Governor unwanted advice. Then the Major says to Moukayla Kiri, the quiet priest, we must bring back bits of the dog to those who didn't come, and also some of dog soup. Meanwhile the Engineer travels back and forth between the sacrificial alter and the Governor's Palace.

As soon as the pot is boiling, the Haouka who fear neither fire nor boiling water dip their hands straight into the cauldron to fish out pieces of stewed dog. Bits of cooked dog are wrapped in banana leaves and empty bottles are filled with dog soup.

25:00

It's getting late. Trucks and taxis have been hired for the day and if the feast is not over soon, night fares will have to be paid. So, one by one the Haouka move away. The assistants guide them to the governor's palace where the trance is nearly over. However, Gerba, the Engineer refuses to leave. They have removed his ceremonial garb but he stays on and calls out to Moukayla Kiri, the quiet priest, He says "Moukayla, Moukayla, this year's festival was a great success indeed. Next year we must have two festivals, and we, the Haouka will be very pleased." And thus, from one festival, another is born. And even the Engineer finally goes away and night falls on the red rags, soiled cloths, and the governor's palace.

The day after, we went to see the Haouka in Accra. In the salt market, the quiet priest still rules and one after another the Haoukas join him. Here comes Major Mugu, the Wicked Major, who may be resuming a conversation he started yesterday with Moukayla. But today, the major no longer is important and his girlfriend is very happy. And, not far away, another roundtable conference is being held, but this time the point is not whether to eat a dog raw or cooked but simply to play cards. Madam Loctoro is to be found in Punjabi's shop. Madam Loctoro, the doctor's wife, is a rather effeminate boy who uses a lot of hair Vaseline but as a shop clerk is excellent. The corporal of the guard owns three trucks and holds the gravel monopoly for the Accra public works department. The Lieutenant is a pickpocket and always has customers under the arcade of the West African Trading Company. The General, in real life, is just a private. And by chance, we find the general staff of yesterday's ceremony in front of the mental hospital of Accra The Governor, The Engineer, and the Truck Driver, all three work for the Accra water works. Those who, like Gerba, were doing penance, have shaved off their hair and are no longer impure. And, when looking at these happy faces and being told they are among the best workers of the Water Works Department; when comparing these smiles with the contortions of yesterday, one really wonders whether this man of Africa have found a panacea against mental disorders. One wonders whether they may have found a way to absorb our inimical society.

29.30