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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Akounak tedalat taha tazoughai (Rain the color of blue with a little red in it) by Kirkley

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and speak to or indeed over one another. Andro Papa offers a toast to mothers: “Mother is at the root of everything. She is the most important person in our lives,” to which Legashvili replies with a toast to *all* women. The film concludes with a ten-minute, minimally edited sequence of all the central performers singing together at the grape press to distill the theme of unity.

Much like *Swiss Yodelling* but to a somewhat lesser extent, the film attempts to identify and preserve what is considered to be that “essence” of a singing tradition that is seen to be under pressure by the forces of modernity. However, the film relies less on the analysis of musical form and technique to explain these ideas and more on the people and discourses that give meaning to the practice of music as part of their everyday lives. Lomidze and Zemp seek out a diverse coalition of voices to give the music and the film meaning. The perspectives they offer are sometimes critical and confrontational, if not explicitly so, then implicitly through subtle acts of shade throwing. But the playful friction within these moments is part of what gives life to the film and the musical culture it represents.

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Akounak tedalat taha tazoughai (Rain the color of blue with a little red in it). Directed by Christopher Kirkley. Written by Mdou Moctar, Christopher Kirkley, and Jerome Fino. Original music by Mdou Moctar. Sahel Sounds, l’Improbable, and Tenere Films. In Tamasheq and Hausa, with English and French subtitles. DVD and digital, 75 mins. 2015. www.sahelsounds.com.

As its Tamasheq title suggests, *Akounak tedalat taha tazoughai* is an adaptation of and homage to the 1984 cult classic film *Purple Rain*. Whereas the original features the late American pop icon Prince in a loosely autobiographical drama about his struggle to make it in a competitive Minneapolis music scene, *Akounak* resituates this story in the Tuareg guitar world of Agadez, Niger. The star in this case is guitarist Mdou Moctar, who has worked closely with director Christopher Kirkley for several years on Kirkley’s record label, Sahel Sounds. While a handful of documentaries about Tuareg guitar music have been released in Europe and North America in the past two decades, most are more or less stylistically conventional, featuring interviews and narration. Situated among these films, *Akounak* stands out for its alternative way of portraying this musical world through fictional drama. The film will therefore interest viewers who seek a more visceral sense of popular music in the Sahel and Sahara regions of northwest Africa, as well as those who wish to explore alternative ethnographic methods in film or other media.

Since the early 2000s, Tuareg guitar music has been popularized by performers like the group Tinariwen and the artist Bombino, extending its reach beyond its origins in northwest Africa (particularly in Mali, Niger, Algeria, and Libya). Documentary films, music journalism, and scholarship released over this period tend to highlight the story of this music—particularly its origins in fomenting armed rebellions in the early 1990s against the Malian and Nigérien states where Tuareg constituted marginalized minorities and its role in promoting Tuareg language and cultural heritage preservation. Through *Sahel Sounds*, however, Kirkley has begun shifting away from this narrative to place emphasis on contemporary Tuareg guitar as a youth popular music, where cell phones, motorcycles, and romance dominate over the earlier generation's emphasis on political action. Indeed, *Sahel Sounds* rose to prominence with *Music from Saharan Cellphones* (2011), a compilation of recordings collected by Kirkley in northern Mali that were circulated via Bluetooth and memory cards. *Saharan Cellphones*, like *Akounak's* self-proclaimed telling of a “universal story of a musician trying to make it ‘against all odds,’” pursues relatively mundane aspects of daily life to cut through the sensationalism of the dominant rebellion narrative.

This approach uses the language of familiarity as a means to translate the lives of youth in the Sahara—a region generally known abroad these days through reference to terrorism, migration, and other crises—for global consumption. Yet, paradoxically, this very recognizability became the grounds for sensationalism. Kirkley first imagined *Akounak* as a sort of joke—*Purple Rain*, but in the Sahara!—but also saw the model of the Prince film as an ideal means by which to hype a musician and generate an international tour. (Prince's unexpected death in 2016, not long after *Akounak* was released, was coincidental.) He originally intended to work with a Mauritanian guitarist, but after considering their already-fruitful partnership, he decided to work instead with Mdou Moctar.

Besides the goal of promoting Moctar's music, however, Kirkley also saw *Akounak* as an opportunity to explore alternative modes of storytelling. He draws particular inspiration from the French ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Rouch, who worked extensively in Niger and is known for his contributions to *cinéma vérité* and for his “ethnofictions,” films that tell fictional stories set in real ethnographic situations. For example, Rouch's *Moi, un noir* (1958) features Nigérien migrants living in Abidjan whose identities as actors and as subjects of the film are largely indistinguishable.

Similarly, with Kirkley at the head—a self-described “guerilla ethnomusicologist” with funding via a Kickstarter campaign and limited experience in filmmaking—*Akounak* strove to appeal to both international and Tuareg audiences as a project of intercultural production. It was filmed over ten days in Agadez, drawing together Kirkley, Moctar, French video artist Jerome Fino, and a team of Nigériens as actors, writers, and translator; most of them had no

prior experience in these roles. Unsurprisingly, the final product is sometimes rough around the edges, with some scenes performed awkwardly, recorded with poor audio quality, or filmed through a dusty lens. These qualities ultimately do little to detract from the compelling cinematography and soundtrack; instead, they are integral to the ethos of both cinema verité and the DIY (do-it-yourself) culture of many underground labels like Sahel Sounds.

While *Akounak* draws heavily on the imagery and plot of *Purple Rain*, during production Kirkley and his colleagues would discuss how to adapt its finer details to suit the Agadez guitar scene and Tuareg audiences. Certain parts of the original story were abandoned, such as its depictions of domestic violence and intense sexuality; others were re-created in ways that were more meaningful to Nigériens, including the vicious competition among musicians (manifesting in the theft of one of Moctar's songs via cellphone) and the conflict between father and son about performing music. These adaptations, among other aspects of the film, have elicited controversy among some viewers. Several Americans have expressed skepticism to me about *Akounak*'s emphasis on cellphones, motorcycles, and romance, questioning whether these elements serve to promote the Sahel Sounds brand and downplay the ongoing political challenges confronting Tuareg communities. Yet the young Tuareg viewers with whom I discussed the film are generally less concerned about these issues than about its representation of competitiveness among musicians. While they are excited to see a Tamasheq-language film featuring one of the region's star guitarists, they find it to be an imbalanced portrayal that focuses on divisiveness rather than community solidarity, which was a fundamental value among the founders of Tuareg guitar who sang for political mobilization.

These competing perspectives are perhaps inevitable with a project that aims to please audiences rooted in disparate cultural worlds. Indeed, the less-than-graceful Tamasheq gloss that Kirkley uses for *Purple Rain*—"rain the color of blue with a little red in it"—draws attention to the untranslatability of incommensurable linguistic values, not only exoticizing Tuareg but also emphasizing that part of the point of *Akounak* is that it be understood as an experiment in intercultural media production. After all, if the title owes to the absence of a Tamasheq word for "purple," Kirkley could have easily selected a close approximation, such as "indigo" (*billa*), famously known as a dye for Tuareg cloth. With other films currently in development, we can look forward to future unorthodox ethnographic projects from Sahel Sounds.

Reference

Magnoli, Albert, dir. 1984. *Purple Rain*. Warner Brothers. 111 mins. Feature film.

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