

Film Review

The Diambourou: slavery and emancipation in Kayes – Mali [DVD], by Marie Rodet and Fanny Challier, London, School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London, 2014, £12.00

Over the last few years, a growing number of historians have directed documentary films. Combining written and visual narratives, movies can be more effective than written works in providing the public with a multidimensional view of the subjects and objects studied by scholars. Africanist historian Marie Rodet has directed a powerful and beautifully conceived documentary film based on several years of archival research and extensive fieldwork in the region of Kayes in present-day western Mali. *The Diambourou* is unique in documenting the history of Kayes, a region composed of several villages settled by slaves and former slaves from other neighboring areas, especially Bougoni and Sikasso in the province of Wassoulou (southwestern Mali).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Samori wars ravaged present-day southern Mali. In the 1880s, because of the advance of Samori's troops, the populations of the south, especially the inhabitants of Wassoulou, attempted to leave the region. Those who were not able to flee were either killed or made captives. The growing number of captives produced during these wars contributed to escalating the slave trade in the region. Some of these captives were sold and sent into slavery to Kayes. In 1883, present-day Mali was conquered and colonized by France, and the colony became a part of French Sudan. Although the French administration officially abolished slavery in 1905, the process of emancipation was slow and lasted until the middle of the twentieth century. Following abolition, as the film explains, some former slaves decided to stay on in the villages of their former masters. Others chose to return to their regions of origin. But some groups created new independent communities with freed slaves such as the Diamborou in the region of Kayes. In addition, at the end of the nineteenth century during their campaigns in Mali, the French had created liberty villages (*villages de liberté*) in order to accommodate the slaves who had escaped from their masters. These communities preceded the creation of Diamborou communities. Rodet's film explores the oral histories of the members of these communities of former slaves by examining their diverse traditions and the various ways they were formed.

Most of the interviews presented in the documentary were filmed in 2010. According to one informant, the term Diamborou refers to people who love freedom and rejected subjugation. A scene on the very site of the former slave market in Kayes features Gaoussou Fofana, the curator of the Médina Fort. He explains that captives were sold in the market either to be enslaved locally or to be exported. He notes that particular neighborhoods formed the Liberté quarter, whose inhabitants were freed slaves, although the majority of the population settled in the surrounding areas of Kayes. For example, one commune is still called Liberté-Dembaya, because its settlers are people from Dembaya. Another informant, Bougary Diakité, shows his father's notebook indicating the names of all the villages of the district with their respective populations. He also reads a colonial document explaining that this administrative subdivision was created to host former captives of 'various races', but with a majority of Bambara. This diversity of ethnic groups made the administration of the district very difficult.

Fakoly Keita, from a village in southern Kayes, explains that at the time of his grandparents and great grandparents, there were merchants from Sikasso and Ségou who brought enslaved men and women to the village who were purchased from other traders and sold locally. Doro Traoré, head of another liberty village near Kayes, explains that a man called Bakary Maïta would send his own

slave to Banamba to buy slaves and bring them to the area. Over the years, according to Traoré, he was able to bring hundreds of slaves to the region. Kani Sawane, a woman in a village in southern Kayes, comments that her grandfather was a Fulani trader in Koulou-Koulou. She recounts that her grandmother was captured and brought to the village. She also explains that a slave could not marry the slave owner and was also not allowed to marry any members of his owner's family. Consequently, as an enslaved woman, her grandmother could not become a member of the master's family, contradicting the usual emphasis on the benign character of slavery in Africa.

Some parts of the documentary feature elements of the cultural heritage of former slaves and its linkages to their regions of origin. In a scene filmed in Dialafara, another village in southern Kayes, two women dressed in similar fashion perform a 'slave dance' called 'Diondonké'. The audience follows the dance by clapping their hands, and the other men and women join the two dancers. The cultural heritage of former slaves is also associated with a form of nostalgia for their homeland. In the village of Wassala, a former liberty village east of Kayes, there is a particular kind of horn called *balafon*. Adietou Siby, from a village east of Kayes, explains that the people from Wassoulou brought the instrument to the area. He remembers how his mother used to cry when she listened to its sound, as it reminded her of her homeland. Another informant tells a story of a woman who ran away after listening to the sound of the *balafon*.

Other oral histories, collected by Marie Rodet, emphasize the intrinsic violence of the wars that contributed to increase the slave trade in the region. Moussa Coulibaly, a man from a village near Kayes, explains that when Samori attacked the area, his ancestors fled the village. According to him, before arriving in Fula, they were very thirsty. As the bodies of many people killed were floating in the river, they had to move the corpses in order to be able to drink water. Because of the great violence generated by the wars, his ancestors could not return to their region of origin. Another man, Abraham Sangaré, also from a village near Kayes, tells about the violence employed by the Samori troops against the local populations: they expelled people from their homes, burned their huts and even opened the abdomen of pregnant women to see the position of the fetus. Ultimately, people fled their villages because of the war and the wars motivated their migration to the region of Kayes.

The theme of separation of families so prevalent in the stories of slavery in the Americas is also present in the oral histories of the members of these communities. Adietou Siby reports that Samori's troops captured his grandmother and her brothers in Wassoulou. Although the siblings were sold and separated, his mother was brought to Kayes. He mentions that her grandmother was a stranger in the new village. Although she was able to marry, he does not have any family on her grandmother's side. Another informant, Coumba Diallo, from a village north of Kayes, explains that her mother, a Fula woman from the region of Toro, left her region of origin because of the Samori wars. The men were sold, but the women were shared among the warlords. Sibi Traoré, from a village north of Kayes, explains that at the time of the Samori wars, the troops encircled, attacked and destroyed the village. His grandfather was the head of the village and his father was his oldest son, who was recruited by Samori's troops to fight the war.

The figure of the evil master also appears in the oral accounts documented by Rodet. To Samba Kanouté, from a village north of Kayes, a bad master was 'capable of anything', even insisting a woman stop breastfeeding in order to work. He also notes that there were many slaves in the 'Diambourou' zones, all of them having escaped slavery. Sega Diarra confirms Kanouté's memories: he states that men and women would hide in the caves during the period of the Samori wars to escape slavery, and then would resettle in other areas. Sako Diakitè, head of the village of Monzona-Kéniéfè, explains that the ancestors of the people living in the village came from Faraba, in Wassoulou, during the Samori wars. At the time, they were sold into slavery to the village of Diongaga, and remained enslaved there until the abolition of slavery, and then resettled in the Diambourou's village.

The film describes the long process of the abolition of slavery in Kayes, which continued throughout the twentieth century. To emancipate themselves, slaves also organized revolts that gave birth to the Soninké villages of Bouyagui, Bangassi and Bokoambi. For example, the father of Samba

Kanouté, from Bouyagui, fled because of the wars. Kanouté explains that at the time of his father's arrival at Soninké, slavery was abolished by the French administration. However, although freed, the former slaves were denied access to the land, and then decided to move to Bouyagi where they could own land. According to Malé Kanouté, head of the village of Bokojambi, they settled in this area because after the harvest the nobles wanted to force them to share their crops. Doro Traoré, head of Bangassi-Liberté, also emphasizes that the abolition of slavery was a complex process, as it was followed by conflicts with the former masters and administrators. In response, according to this account, they rebelled and the slaves were liberated, and this is why they have Bangassi-Liberté. Stating, 'liberty, fraternity, equality! This is us!'; Traoré subverts the official history through the appropriation of a slogan popularized during the French Revolution. In doing so, he constructs a different narrative, underscoring that the slaves were not liberated by the French administration, but obtained equality through liberating themselves as rebel slaves did in the French colonies such as Saint-Domingue one century earlier.

Through her film, Rodet dismantles the myth of slavery in West Africa as a benign institution. The film shows that despite the official abolition by the French administration in 1905, slavery remained alive for several decades, leaving important marks that are still visible today in Kayes. Although explanatory texts and maps are included in some sections of the documentary, for the average viewer the film could use some additional information on the history of Kayes. However, there is no simple and easy treatment for a complex topic such as the one explored in the film. *The Diamborou* can certainly be used as a rich pedagogical tool that encourages critical thinking, especially if accompanied by scholarly articles on slavery in West Africa. More importantly, however, Rodet should be congratulated for the esthetic qualities of her film. Among others, she avoids three traps commonly found in works of this kind. First, the movie does not follow a linear narrative. This structure encourages the spectator to think about the nuances of the institution of slavery. Second, the movie does not have excessive textual explanation. Third, Rodet resists the temptation to appear in the screen as a protagonist, and rather allows the voices of the members of the various communities (informants) to be the central element in the film. She provides space for the viewers to listen to the discourses and observe the gestures of the interviewed informants. The film's scenes highlighting the body and facial expressions of the members of the community, as well as the colors and textures of Kayes's landscape, make Rodet's first documentary film provocative and esthetically sophisticated. For all these reasons, I highly recommend the film not only for scholars in African studies, but also for graduate and undergraduate students and the general public interested in this important topic.

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