Jean Rouch: Les Maîtres Fous

1953-1954, 24 minutes, color, 35 minutes
Jean Rouch (French anthropologist/film maker, born 1917)

Revolver, Frage an Werner Herzog: Wir sprachen gestern über einen Film von Jean Rouch, "Le Maitre fou". Jean Rouch behauptet, seine Kamera sei in Extase geraten bei diesem Ritual. Was halten sie davon?

Werner Herzog antwortet: In gewisserweise glaube ich ihm das. Und zwar insofern, als Kamera und Person fast nicht mehr unterscheidbar sind. Die Kamera war so einfach, eine kleine aufziehbare Beaulieu mit einer einzigen Optik - und damit hat er einen der zehn größten Filme aller Zeiten gedreht. Vermutlich hat er recht. Aber die Frage habe ich mir noch nie gestellt - das ist sehr interessant. Bei "Lektionen in Finsternis" gibt es auch Momente, in denen es so eine Art von Extasis der Kamera gibt - in denen man drüber hinaus tritt.
http://www.revolver-film.de/Inhalte/Rev2/html/Herzog.htm -

An ethnographic monument whose images of rituals involving trance, considered shocking at the time, appealed to the French Surrealists and also provided the inspiration for Jean Genet's vehement anti-colonial play Les nègres. Leaving this fascination for exotic spectacle (and Rouch's biased Marxist analysis) aside, the film sketches a penetrating portrait of altered rituals. The members of the Hauka movement in Nigeria, which was formed in the twenties, become possessed by the spirits of the colonial administrators and mimic the white man (and his wife). In 1953, before independence, Jean Rouch filmed a Haiku ceremony and explains who is imitating which colonial officer, while the participants strut past their "Government Palace" : a high, festively painted anthill. At the end the film-maker suddenly shows a great military parade not two hours away from this excessive "fancy-dress party", where the real governor is inspecting his troops. In Ghana, the British authorities banned the film for allegedly insulting the Queen. Rouch himself forbade the film to be shown to those whom he filmed during their trance. When they saw themselves in that state they again immediately went into a dangerous trance...
http://www2.centrepompidou.fr/beware/eng_mirror/maitre.html

Les Maitres Fous is about the ceremony of a religious sect, the Hauka, which was widespread in West Africa from the 1920s to the 1950s. Hauka participants were usually rural migrants from Niger who came to cities such as Accra in Ghana (then Gold Coast), where they found work as laborers in the city's lumber yards, as stevedores at the docks, or in the mines. There were at least 30,000 practicing Hauka in Accra in 1954 when Jean Rouch was asked by a small group to film their annual ceremony During this ritual, which took place on a farm a few hours from the city, the Hauka entered trance and were possessed by various spirits associated with the Western

colonial powers: the governorgeneral, the engineer, the doctor's wife, the wicked major, the corporal of the guard.

The roots of the Hauka lie in traditional possession cults common among the Songhay and Djerma peoples of the Niger River basin. Gifted men and women may enter trance and become possessed by any of a number of strong gods, such as Dongo, god of thunder and the sky.Supplicants consult the god through the trancing medium and receive advice about their problems, cures for diseases, comfort and support, or reprimands for their wrongdoings. Like these traditional possession cults, the Hauka sect co-existed with Islam and incorporated many Islamic saints and heroes into its rituals. Most of its adherents were Muslims.

Hauka first appeared in Niger, it is thought, in the person of a former soldier who participated in the savage battles of the second German offensive of World War I in 1917 and 1918, in which West African troops were decimated despite their spectacular performance. This soldier made the pilgrimage to Mecca and returned to Niger in the 1920s. In his village, in Rouch's account, he found the people "doing a traditional dance and the soldier was possessed, very violently possessed, and while possessed he said 'I am the avant-garde of the new gods who are coming from Malia [the Red Sea]. My name is Governor Malia and I am the first of the new gods who are coming and they are the gods of strength'."

The Hauka were quickly suppressed by the French authorities in Niger, with the support of traditional chiefs and priests who feared the popularity of the new movement and its challenge to established authority. But the Hauka cult spread, even within the jail walls, and by 1935 the British administration in Ghana again attempted to suppress it and to jail the cultists. Fires broke out in response throughout Accra, and eventually there was an agreement that Hauka priests would limit their ceremonies to certain places and to Saturdays and Sundays. This was still the case in 1954 when Rouch filmed Les Maitres Fous, which was banned by the colonial government in 1955.

The Hauka movement was a phenomenon of the colonial era. After the independence of Ghana in 1957, migration was controlled and many Hauka who had settled in Accra returned to Niger. Niger itself gained independence three years later, and the Hauka began to subside and to be absorbed into the traditional religious system. Dongo, for example, the old god of thunder, is now considered the father of the Hauka. As Rouch has pointed out, "there was no more colonial power and there never was a Hauka called Kwame N'krumah." The events filmed represent the end of the Hauka development. Today the film is shown in the villages of Ghana and in the Niger Cultural Center.

The imagery in Les Maitres Fous is powerful and often disturbing: possessed men with rolling eyes and foaming at the mouth, eating a sacrificed dog (in violation of taboo), burning their bodies with naming torches. Beyond the imagery, the themes are also powerful, and have had an impact in our own culture: Jean Genet's The Blacks was modeled upon the Hauka inversion in which blacks assume the role of masters, and Peter Brook's Marat/Sade was influenced by the theatricality and invented language of Hauka possession. Yet, as Rouch reminds us in an interview in Cineaste, possession for the Hauka cultists was not theater but reality. The significance of this reality is left ambiguous in the film, although Rouch's commentary suggests that the ritual provides a psychological release which enables the Hauka to be good workers and to endure a degrading situation with dignity. The unexplored relation of the Hauka movement to their colonial experience is perhaps the most intriguing issue raised by this ceremony in which the oppressed become, for a day, the possessed and the powerful.

http://www.xensei.com/users/docued/films/les-maitres-fous.html
http://www.der.org/films/mad-masters.html

Les Maîtres Fous (also known as The Mad Masters, The Crazy Masters and The Manic Priests), an anthropological film produced by the French anthropologist and film maker Jean Rouch during 1953-54, centers on an annual Hauka possession ceremony which took place near Accra, the capital of the then English colonial Gold Coast.

Jean Rouch's anthropological and film making activities which began in the 1940's have focused on the ethnographic study, analysis, and depiction of West African and French cultures. Throughout his career he has explored Songhay, Zerma, and Dogon culture, mythology, and history; migration in West Africa; ritual possession practices and ceremonies; contemporary African society; European and Black African race relations; and the impact of European colonialism in West Africa. He has worked in France, where he held several national appointments, as well as Niger, Mali, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Burkino Faso and Senegal. Over his career, he has also produced a number of anthropological and fiction films in collaboration with many French and West African informants. Through this process and his instrumental efforts and assistance in developing human sciences research and film making in Niger, Senegal and other parts of West Africa he has helped train many native social scientists and film makers. Other major works by Rouch include: La Chasse `a l'Hippopotame [The Hippopotamus Hunt] (1950), La Chasse au Lion `a l'Arc [The Lion Hunters] (1964), Moi, un Noir [I a Black] (1957), Chronique d'un E´té [Chronicle of a Summer] (1960),La Pyramide Humaine [The Human Pyramid] (1961), Jaguar (1967), Petite `a Petite [Little by Little] (1969).

The events depicted in Les Maîtres Fous are set in and around the city of Accra. The film centers on the annual possession ceremony performed by members from the Songhay and Zerma community in Accra who had recently migrated from Niger, Mali, and Burkino Faso. In the film, Accra is portrayed as a developing cosmopolitan city with peoples from various regions of West Africa. The Songhay and Zerma community featured in this film have migrated to Accra to share in the prosperity and economic growth in the region. Along with a host of cultural beliefs and practices, the Songhay and Zerma also transported their possession rituals and family of Hauka deities to the Accra area. The Hauka represent one of the recently arrived group of Songhay spirits in a historical succession of Songhay spirit possession cults which date back several hundred years. The specific origin of the Hauka cult occurred in French Niger during the mid-1920's. This family of spirits, consisting of "mad" colonial administrators, arose out of conditions created in 20th-century colonial West Africa. The spirits and particular ceremonial practices are manifest of Songhay and Zerma experiences under these circumstances.

Les Maîtres Fous has generated controversy since its first screening in 1954 at the Museé de l'Homme, Paris. It has been both strongly criticized and enthusiastically extolled by Western and African audiences. It was banned in Great Britain and in Gold Coast after its release in 1955 and awarded best short film at the Venice Film Festival, 1957. This public ambivalence to the film has resulted from the reactions to arresting and graphic images and scenes, as well as to the social and cultural significance of the activities depicted within the film.

The film opens with a brief explanation about the encounter between people from the northern and the southern regions and the discord created by the confluence of modern and traditional life in colonial Gold Coast. The film proceeds to portray Accra as a vibrant city where many groups and customs from West African have converged. This is the world the Songhay and Zerma must confront and adjust to as terms of their migration from their

traditional homes in Niger, Mali, and Burkino Faso. Then we see Songhay and Zerma migrants performing a range of daily work activities in the city. It is from this local urban context that the film moves to the bush where we see the compound where the Hauka ceremony will take place.

After entering the site the ceremony begins. Rouch talks the viewer through corresponding images and sequences of the ceremony. Through close proximity, the camera reveals the ceremonial activities performed by the high priest, initiates, musicians and witnesses. During the course of the Hauka ceremony we witness the penance of initiates, a blood stained altar, a caricatured fetish statue representing a colonial Governor-General, the sacrificing of a chicken, the Hauka spirit possession of mediums and their wild flailing, dramatic marching, hyper-extending appendages, the entranced mediums foaming at the mouth, the bare skinned handling of fire, the burlesquing of British military protocol, and the sacrifice, boiling, and consumption of a dog by the possessed mediums. As the ceremony closes to an end, it is pronounced a great success by the mediums and the Hauka spirits exit their mediums' bodies.

Rouch returns to the city the day after this extreme and physically demanding ceremony to show the contented participants back in their daily occupations. In closing, Rouch ponders the possibility that their religion and practices are a psychological palliative for dealing with the alienating contradictions of modern society.

The British Government censored Les Maîtres Fous because it mocked the British Governor-General and military protocol, which by extension, was insulting to British society and ultimately the Queen. In addition, sacrificial acts in the film were considered violent and cruel to animals. Rouch admittedly held a critical posture towards the European colonization of African societies. Les Maîtres Fous as a film was consistent with his views regarding on European colonial activities. However, the participants and actual ceremony, ritual, and practices shown in the film were native expressions. The Hauka possessions of the Songhay and Zerma function as an interpretation and recasting of their social realities. The ceremonies obviate the social and symbolic relationships existing within their immediate social realities. Thus Songhay religion and its practices help to delineate the social, political, and historical relationships which impinge on Songhay culture and society and also serve as a criticism and resistance to British and French control. As such, the British government was not only condemning the film, but was also condemning a community and set of cultural practices which was oppositional to their political and economic agenda.

The specific government policies and agencies exercised to ban this film are not found in the literature. This process and mechanism of its censorship require further investigation. Since Ghanaian independence in 1957, Les Maîtres Fous has generally been screened in ethnographic and documentary film festivals, film retrospectives, and anthropology and film courses. The film exists as an historical record documenting the religious practices of an ethnic group no longer living in Accra, the expressed aims of socio-cultural anthropology, and the colonial reality present in Gold Coast during the time of its production. Its censorship by the British serves as a reminder of the structures of power and domination during the European colonial project in Africa.

by JOSEPH J. GONZALES

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Maitres Fous, Les

Description: Les Maitres Fous is about the ceremony of a religious sect, the Hauka, which was widespread in West Africa from the 1920s to the 1950s. Hauka participants were usually rural migrants from Niger who came to cities such as Accra in Ghana (then Gold Coast), where they found work as laborers in the city's lumber yards, as stevedores at the docks, or in the mines. There were at least 30,000 practicing Hauka in Accra in 1954 when Jean Rouch was asked by a small group to film their annual ceremony During this ritual, which took place on a farm a few hours from the city, the Hauka entered trance and were possessed by various spirits associated with the Western colonial powers: the governorgeneral, the engineer, the doctor's wife, the wicked major, the corporal of the guard. The roots of the Hauka lie in traditional possession cults common among the Songhay and Djerma peoples of the Niger River basin. Gifted men and women may enter trance and become possessed by any of a number of strong gods, such as Dongo, god of thunder and the sky.Supplicants consult the god through the trancing medium and receive advice about their problems, cures for diseases, comfort and support, or reprimands for their wrongdoings. Like these traditional possession cults, the Hauka sect co-existed with Islam and incorporated many Islamic saints and heroes into its rituals. Most of its adherents were Muslims. Hauka first appeared in Niger, it is thought, in the person of a former soldier who participated in the savage battles of the second German offensive of World War I in 1917 and 1918, in which West African troops were decimated despite their spectacular performance. This soldier made the pilgrimage to Mecca and returned to Niger in the 1920s. In his village, in Rouch's account, he found the people "doing a traditional dance and the soldier was possessed, very violently possessed, and while possessed he said 'I am the avant-garde of the new gods who are coming from Malia [the Red Sea]. My name is Governor Malia and I am the first of the new gods who are coming and they are the gods of strength'." The Hauka were quickly suppressed by the French authorities in Niger, with the support of traditional chiefs and priests who feared the popularity of the new movement and its challenge to established authority. But the Hauka cult spread, even within the jail walls, and by 1935 the British administration in Ghana again attempted to suppress it and to jail the cultists. Fires broke out in response throughout Accra, and eventually there was an agreement that Hauka priests would limit their ceremonies to certain places and to Saturdays and Sundays. This was still the case in 1954 when Rouch filmed Les Maitres Fous, which was banned by the colonial government in 1955. The Hauka movement was a phenomenon of the colonial era. After the independence of Ghana in 1957, migration was controlled and many Hauka who had settled in Accra returned to Niger. Niger itself gained independence three years later, and the Hauka began to subside and to be absorbed into the traditional religious system. Dongo, for example, the old god of thunder, is now considered the father of the Hauka. As Rouch has pointed out, "there was no more colonial power and there never was a Hauka called Kwame N'krumah." The events filmed represent the end of the Hauka development. Today the film is shown in the villages of Ghana and in the Niger Cultural Center. The imagery in Les Maitres

Fous is powerful and often disturbing: possessed men with rolling eyes and foaming at the mouth, eating a sacrificed dog (in violation of taboo), burning their bodies with naming torches. Beyond the imagery, the themes are also powerful, and have had an impact in our own culture:Jean Genet's The Blacks was modeled upon the Hauka inversion in which blacks assume the role of masters, and Peter Brook's Marat/Sade was influenced by the theatricality and invented language of Hauka possession. Yet, as Rouch reminds us in an interview in Cineaste, possession for the Hauka cultists was not theater but reality. The significance of this reality is left ambiguous in the film, although Rouch's commentary suggests that the ritual provides a psychological release which enables the Hauka to be good workers and to endure a degrading situation with dignity. The unexplored relation of the Hauka movement to their colonial experience 1-S perhaps the most intriguing issue raised by this ceremony in which the oppressed become, for a day, the possessed and the powerful.

http://www.buyindies.com/listings/1/3/DERE-138.html

SYNOPSIS by Natalie Mildbrodt Date: 1998

A translation of the opening text in the film:

Venus de la brousse aux villes de l'Afrique Noire,
des jeunes hommes se heurtent 'a la civilisation m'ecanique.
Ainsi naissent des conflits et des religions nouvelles.
Ainsi s'est form'ee, vers 1927 la secte de Haouka.
Le film montre un 'episode de la vie des Haouka de la ville D'Accra.
Il a 'et'e tourne 'a la demande des pr'eatres,
fiers de leur a Mountyeba et Moukayla
Aucune sc'ene n'en est interdite ou secr'ete
mais ouverte 'a ceux qui veulent bien jouer le jeu
Et ce jeu violent n'est que le reflet de notre civilisation.

After they came from the bush to the cities of black Africa,
Young men come up against a mechanical civilization
Conflicts and new religions are born this way
Thus the Haouka sect was formed around 1927.
The film presents an episode in the lives of the Haoukas in the city of Accra
It was made at the request of the priests
who are proud of their Mountyeba and Moukayla
No scene is forbidden or secret,
But open to those who go along with the game.
And this violent game is only the reflection of our civilization

The film begins with footage of Accra, Ghana, a densely populated city on Africa's west coast. The story follows a few men who live in Accra, but leave some weekends to attend Hauka religious ceremonies in the woods outside the city. Most of the film records a day-long Haukan gathering for a possession ceremony. This particular ceremony was a yearly Hauka ritual, held in the Hauka high priest's compound. Rouch's footage and narrative illustrate the interaction between worshippers of Hauka Gods and the rituals these worshippers perform while in their religious trances. Animals are sacrificed, worshippers froth at the mouth and hold torches to themselves to demonstrate the depth of their trances. After a few hours, the ceremony breaks up and the Hauka drive home. The film ends with footage shot on the Monday following the ceremony. Rouch finds the men back in their everyday lives in Accra, working at their jobs.

CRITIQUE
Within Accra, Rouch establishes the presence of extreme polarity in West African culture. He records two parades, one by the Daughters of Jesus, the other by the prostitutes of Accra. Both are held in the downtown streets, and appear remarkably similar to each another. The city's split personality is a metaphor for the men's divided nature. They work diligently during the year and revolt against society's norms once or twice per anum.

To create an environmental parallel to their urban lifestyle, the men drive into the forest well outside Accra. When Rouch arrives with his camera, people have already begun to assemble at the remote site of the Hauka ceremonies. One of the first things he encounters is the effigy of the Governor who presides over the Hauka ceremony. The Hauka have created a religion complete with gods, rituals and a doctrine. The ritual dances begin almost immediately upon their arrival. Within hours the men have fallen into a deep trance. They have become impervious to pain and have taken on different identities. All the men choose to be someone whose life they covet for some reason. Men who are common workers in the city become a High Priest, Engineer, Corporal of the Guard, and Captain of the Red Sea, among others. They all choose identities in a social class elevated from their own. The Hauka religion has given them an opportunity to live out their fantasies of power. One man dresses as a woman, Madame Lokotoro, the doctor's wife. Rouch describes this man as effeminate when he goes to visit him the next Monday in Africa. Through carefully worded observations, Rouch suggests that the man who dresses as Madame Lokotoro, is a repressed transvestite who can only live out his fantasy to dress like a woman in an anarchic Hauka ceremony.

Ironically, the Hauka use a colonial social structure as a frame for their social rebellion. The most powerful men in the ceremony, all assuming roles which have been imposed on Africans by Western colonists, hold conferences to make decisions about important issues in the ceremony. They argue about when to sacrifice animals and whether to cook them. The men do not seem to recognize that they fervently emulate the social structure which causes their feelings of fleeting individuality.

The Hauka's struggle for recognition as individuals and their need for escape from the culture they find unnatural is valid, whether they objectively realize their motivations and influences or not. The men whose actions Rouch records are acting out their aggressions, lust for power, and sexuality within a structure that harms no one. The Hauka isolate themselves when they have ceremonies and therefore put only themselves at risk. As the film demonstrates, none of the Hauka are hurt by the possession ceremonies either. Indeed, the Hauka have found a ritualistic way to release the accumulated pressures of living in a `mechanical' society. While their frothing mouths and blood drinking might seem frightening to the rest of the world, we must remember that at the end of the weekend, these men return to their regular lives and workplaces to continue operating as productive members of a greater society. As Jean Rouch says of the Hauka possession ceremonies, "ce jeu violent n'est que le reflet de notre civilisation." ('This violent game is only the reflection of our civilization.')

Les Ma'eetres Fous is a documentary made in Rouch's characteristic cin'ema v'erit'e style. He used a hand-held camera with no unnatural lighting other than a flashlight, which occasionally reveals his subjects' faces in the dark. Rouch's approach lends an unpolished and truthful feel to the film. While this film does not offer "direct access to human realities", it does provide an "authored narrative about real lives."

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(Written by Natalie Milbrodt, MSU, 1998)

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mehr über den Film Reddy: The Poesis of Mimesis in Les Maîtres Fous

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