

## The 74th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 3

# Golden Bear winner *Dahomey* and *Which Way Africa?*

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The awarding of the top prize, the Golden Bear, at this year's Berlin Film Festival to the documentary *Dahomey* by French-Senegalese director Mati Diop (*Atlantics*, 2019) is an indication that the dominant influence of identity politics in the cultural sector is losing ground. Endless discussions about structural racism and the priority of gender politics evade the roots of social problems and are designed to distract from the essential, burning class questions in society.

*Dahomey*, running less than 70 minutes, deals with the legacy of colonialism. In connection with the renowned Benin bronze sculptures, there has been increased discussion in recent years about the return of cultural artefacts expropriated during the “scramble for Africa” by the colonial powers. Countries such as France and Germany have recently signed agreements and returned some of the artefacts to their countries of origin.

In November 2021, 26 art works made the return journey from Paris to Benin (which includes the former Kingdom of Dahomey, in existence from approximately 1600 to 1900). The works were looted by French colonial officials at the end of the 19th century. A film team is present and the director brings the 26th art object, a statue of King Ghézo, who ruled from 1818 to 1859, to life. In a dark, ghostly voice, the figure relates its mixed feelings about returning home after 130 years in captivity. They fluctuate between the “fear of not being recognised and the fear of not recognising anything.”

The reception of the repatriated works in Benin is a major state affair. Fireworks go off, but everything is alien to No. 26. There is the modern government palace—gigantic by the standards of the old kingdom of Dahomey—where an imposing female Amazonian figure is supposed to symbolise the fight for independence. No. 26 is not yet familiar with cars and modern roads.

Today's rulers stride down the stairs in contemporary dress with heavy gold jewellery and adorned with traditional patterns, providing a hint of the splendour of past days. A young, helmeted construction worker approaches the precious cargo from Paris with curiosity.

The arrival of the statues does not trigger general euphoria in Benin. Students discuss it. One of them feels no connection to the “stuff,” which he never learnt about at school, he explains. Another young student declares the historical artefacts fill him with patriotic pride. A third says contemptuously that it's just a political campaign by French president Emmanuel Macron and Patrice Talon, president of Benin, to polish up their poor image with the population.

Others are also suspicious. One student calls for the promotion of local languages. She only speaks French, but is not French herself. Another declares: if it were really about promoting culture, then everyone should have access to the art works, but for poor people from remote villages the costs of travel make that impossible.

Also, why, after 130 years, have only 26 of the more than 7,000 looted cultural artefacts been returned? How long will the entire process take? One student is convinced that only a pan-African revolution can lead to real self-determination, but then the question is, who can be trusted to carry this out? No. 26 also asks this.

*Dahomey* does not provide ready-made answers, but director Diop is obviously concerned with such issues and the questions raised by those in her film. The massive size of the independence statue cannot hide the fact that the country's formal “freedom” in 1960 has neither overcome the effects of colonial oppression nor enabled Benin's own culture to flourish. In fact, Benin is one of the poorest countries in Africa and the world. In 2019, the official poverty rate stood at 39 percent, while

underemployment was 72 percent and the informal employment rate, 90 percent. The political and legal system in the country is notorious for its pervasive corruption.

The students' discussion is inevitably influenced by notions of black identity and a pan-African path. But alongside a distrust of the former colonial powers and anger about their neo-colonialist crimes, there is a healthy mistrust of the venal, grasping elites ruling in their own country, who clearly show no interest—to say the least—in the general population rediscovering their own history and culture.

Like other international film artists, Mati Diop demonstrated her solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, and called for a ceasefire at the festival's closing award ceremony, declaring: "To rebuild we must first restore, and to restitute we must do justice. We are among those who refuse to forget ... I stand with Palestine."

### ***Which Way Africa? (À quand l'Afrique?)***

*Which Way Africa? (À quand l'Afrique?)*, a 90-minute documentary by French-Congolese filmmaker David-Pierre Fila, recalls the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 and its consequences for Africa, especially the Congo. Under the leadership of France, Germany, Great Britain and Portugal, 14 countries—the various large and small imperialist powers—met in Berlin to divide up Africa between them, exploiting the continent's riches and raw materials at the expense of the African population. Not a single African representative was invited to or involved in the Berlin meeting.

The film uses old photographs to show the extreme forms of exploitation employed by the colonial powers (in the case of the Congo, Belgian imperialism) to build infrastructure in the process of robbing Africa of its valuable resources. These photos are contrasted with images of how Africans today construct buildings, clearly with an obvious new sense of self-confidence and independence, but still with quite simple means and materials.

As is true in the case of Dahomey, the independence of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has not begun to solve the problems of poverty ("widespread and unchecked" across the entire country, says the World Bank) and social backwardness. It too is one of the poorest nations on earth, with some 62 percent of the population subsisting on less than \$2.15 a day.

*Which Way Africa?* makes the point that the nationalist leaders who emerged across Africa in the postwar period failed to deliver on their promises (many of them, in fact,

accompanied by "anti-imperialist" rhetoric). Interspersed with political commentary in the film are poetic observations on the scenic beauty of Africa.

Like the Beninese in *Dahomey*, the population of the Congo is struggling to learn and understand its history. How can the future be shaped? Both films refrain from openly advocating black nationalism or Pan-Africanism.

However, a much sharper understanding of the national and international social dynamics is needed, provided only by the Theory of Permanent Revolution, fought for by the Trotskyist movement.

Formal independence in Africa at the beginning of the 1960s did not and could not solve the tasks of democracy and genuine independence because the native ruling elites remained tied by a thousand threads to the imperialist powers and were deeply hostile to their own labouring and peasant masses. The latter only fill them with fear and loathing.

The Cold War enabled the local bourgeois layers for a time to manoeuvre between the great powers and the Soviet Union and—as in Benin—even cloak themselves with a "socialist" mantle, while doing nothing to genuinely touch the privileges of local elites and capitalist private property.

In the intervening decades, however, these societies have been transformed by global economic processes, which have produced powerful battalions of the working class. This is one of the reasons why art object "No. 26" feels so out of its depth. Just under 14 million people live in Benin, a very small country; by 2050, according to UN calculations, there will be 24 million. Neighbouring Nigeria has 220 million inhabitants, with 16 million living in the largest city of Lagos alone.

Overcoming economic misery, backwardness and neo-colonialism requires the mobilisation of this enormous social force as part of the global working class. This in turn is inextricably linked to the overthrow of capitalism and the construction of a socialist society on a global scale. This is the only road out of poverty and social desperation.



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