

Laurent Bocahut and Philip Brooks, directors. *Woubi chéri*. 1998. 62 minutes. French. Côte d'Ivoire. California Newsreel. \$24.95.

Woubi chéri, directed by the filmmakers Laurent Bocahut and Philip Brooks (1953–2003), documents the lives of sexual minorities in Abidjan, the economic capital of Côte d'Ivoire and perhaps one of the most gay-friendly cities in Africa south of the Sahara. The film delves into the economic survival, interpersonal dynamics, and individual hopes and dreams of the “woubi” community and showcases activist methodologies and strategies that existed even before the development of widespread international concerns about human rights abuses within African nations. Interestingly enough, the film is much more open and frank in its depiction of LGBTQ activists compared even to more contemporary films such as, for example, *Born This Way* (2013) and *Call Me Kuchu* (2012), although these films may have been constrained by the very problem that is their main subject: the growing trend of government-sponsored antihomosexual rhetoric and violence. But this is one of the many reasons that *Woubi chéri* deserves renewed attention.

The main figure in *Woubi chéri* is the gregarious and militant Barbara, president of the Ivory Coast Transvestite Association (ICTA), who guides viewers as she and fellow ICTA members search for a secure site for an upcoming celebration. After a debacle during the previous year when the press learned of the gathering, took pictures of partygoers, and “outed” several members, Barbara and her organization desire a closed-off space unknown to anyone except for invited guests. The fear of being “outed,” then, is prevalent among community members. Still, the people who appear in the film address fellow Ivorians and other viewers with remarkable frankness. For example, Barbara explains the vocabulary they need to know in order to comprehend conversations by community members. She defines herself as a “travesti” (which is similar to, albeit not wholly synonymous with, “transvestite”) and also explains the words “woubi” (referring to men who have sex with men and perform typically feminine social roles) and “yossis” (men who have sex with both women and men and perform typically masculine social roles). Barbara also introduces viewers to individuals in the ICTA community. Laurent, a woubi, speaks about his love for Jean-Jacques, a yossi, and his hopes for their relationship. Two sex workers, Bibiche and Tatiana, discuss their lives as prostitutes and the material and financial benefits of sex work. While the narrative addresses the threat of public exposure and expresses the community members’ personal fears about being “outed” in the media, there is a remarkable sense of openness and also optimism in these conversations. Barbara’s militant stance, Bibiche’s adamant praise of prostitution, and Laurent’s unrepentant refusal of heteronormativity demonstrate the community’s unwavering protest against so-called “traditional” African values, and both the individual and communal conversations explore how this well-established community functions within Abidjan society.

Woubi chéri is therefore unique in its open and frank depictions of Abidjan’s woubi community, particularly because these interviews—unlike

those in *Born This Way* and *Call Me Kuchu*, which typically occur in private settings—take place in public spaces. *Call Me Kuchu* (directed by Katherine Fairfax Wright and Malika Zouhali-Worrall), is a film about the Ugandan activist organization Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) and the murder of David Kato, the public face of SMUG. It follows the organization's legal battles against a local tabloid for printing personal information of allegedly gay Ugandans and thereby inciting violence against the LGBTQ community. Although it explicates the local term “kuchu,” referring to the LGBTQ community, it does not explore its sociocultural specificities or highlight its more militant connotations. Similarly, *Born This Way* (directed by Shaun Kadlec and Deb Tullman), explores the necessity for safe, private spaces in Cameroon, especially after the murder of the Cameroonian LGBTQ activist Eric Ohena Lembembe but avoids any in-depth exploration of local identities. This is not an indictment of either film, for both powerfully showcase the unrelenting resolve of individuals and communities in the face of threats of physical violence and government oppression. Nevertheless, these films put a recognizably Western face on African communities and lack the kind of dynamic conversations about local identities and terminologies that are presented in *Woubi chéri*.

Throughout *Woubi chéri* Barbara's militancy includes her passionate belief in the artist's ability to create and reimagine the world. “You have to be creative,” she says, to “live life like an artist.” In one particularly powerful scene she leans against a tree along a river and sings about the spread of knowledge across Africa. She speaks of her “magic powder” and its power to distribute woubi-hood. As she underscores the necessity of her “work,” the image cuts to three young nude boys alongside the river. As one boy bends over to put on his pants his genitals are visible, and the image reinforces the dangers of homophobic declarations about homosexual influence upon African youth. Barbara's militancy emerges during a conversation with two female acquaintances in which she humorously explains how she has sex with men: “I often think of those I don't know as the opposing community,” she says. “I get into battle gear and I'm ready for you. . . . The enemy is out there, I have to load my guns and fight.”

Recent political and social turmoil surrounding homosexuality in Africa makes *Woubi chéri* a relevant historical document of queer African identities in the mid-to-late 1990s. The film highlights creative world-making through sexuality and gender while also recognizing the real-world financial necessities for survival. Whereas concerns about personal and communal safety propel the film's larger narrative, its disparate yet interconnected points of focus—on intimate relationships, social outreach, and economic survival—showcase how a singularly defined community contains a multitude of stories, perspectives, hopes, and dreams.

Matthew Durkin
 Duquesne University
 Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
 durkinm@duq.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2017.61