

Jean-Marie Teno's Documentary Modernity: From Millennial Anxiety to Cinematic Kinship

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Abstract: This article examines discourses and cinematic representations of modernity in two documentary films by the Cameroonian director Jean-Marie Teno. In the first of these films, *A Trip to the Country* (2000), Teno investigates how ideals and aspirations of modernity as a state-sponsored project in Cameroon have their roots in the colonial period, and his film is characterized by a strong sense of anxiety linked to the turn of the millennium. In the second, *Sacred Places* (2009), modernity is given a different affective resonance and is linked to the pleasure of cinematic consumption in Ouagadougou as Teno situates African cinema in relation to its "brother," the djembe drum. I argue here that a shift occurs between these two films and their affective engagements with modernity; this is a transition from a sense of millennial anxiety to a thematics of what I call "cinematic kinship." I ultimately suggest that this shift allows Teno to outline new social roles for the African filmmaker as well as new relationships between African cinema and local publics.

Résumé: Cet article examine les discours et les représentations cinématographiques de la modernité dans deux films documentaires du directeur camerounais Jean-Marie Teno. Dans le premier de ces films, *Un voyage au pays* (2000), Teno étudie comment les idéaux et les aspirations de la modernité (un projet parrainé par l'État au Cameroun) ont leurs racines dans la période coloniale, et son film est caractérisé par un fort sentiment d'anxiété associé à la fin du millénaire. Dans le deuxième intitulé *Sacred Places* (2009), le principe de modernité est présenté avec une résonance affective différente et est lié au plaisir de la consommation cinématographique à Ouagadougou, alors que Teno compare le cinéma africain à son "frère artistique,"

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le djembé. Cet article démontre que chaque film s'engage dans un rapport affectif différent avec la modernité; le sentiment d'anxiété du millénaire ressenti dans le premier film laisse place à une thématique différente que j'appelle "la parenté cinématographique" dans le deuxième film. Cet article suggère en conclusion que cette évolution permet à Teno d'esquisser de nouveaux rôles sociaux pour le cinéaste africain ainsi que de nouvelles relations entre le cinéma africain et les publics locaux.

Keywords: Modernity; Teno; kinship; documentary film; development; spectatorship

The Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Marie Teno's documentaries *A Trip to the Country* (*Vacances au pays*, 2000) and *Sacred Places* (*Lieux saints*, 2009) were released nearly a decade apart, but in spite of this interval, both films contribute to a conversation about tradition, modernity, and globalization in post-Cold War and postmillennial Africa that has preoccupied scholars and fellow filmmakers, Western and African alike. These two films acknowledge the fundamental, and at times problematic, inseparability of "traditional" and "modern" cultural politics in contemporary Africa. They also point to the ways in which this inextricability fosters new relationships to the global economy and helps to determine how cinema might represent Africans' uncertain expectations for the future. This article examines the distinct interventions into this conversation made by *A Trip to the Country* and *Sacred Places*. I argue that a crucial shift characterizes the relationship between these documentaries, a shift that reimagines the more abstract relationship between modernity and cinematic storytelling in postmillennial Africa. In the earlier film, Teno interrogates troubling, paradoxical ideologies of modernity and state-sponsored development in Cameroon amid the vagaries of the millennial moment. In the later film, however, this anxiety both informs and gives way to a series of aesthetic concerns and to an exploration of the creative possibilities opened up by the challenges that modernity and globalization pose for African cinema. This shift does not describe a progression or regression in the strict sense; it signals instead how for Teno modernity represents an affective paradox, holding together a deeply felt sense of political disquiet and the everyday pleasures of cinematic consumption.

Many of Teno's films delve into the ethnographic, exploring how ordinary people negotiate disparate ideologies and imaginings of modernity in their everyday lives. From *Chef!* (1999), which deals with masculinity, the family, and authoritarian politics in Cameroon, to *Africa, I Will Fleece You* (*Afrique, je te plumerai*, 1993), which takes up corruption, the single-party state, and the insidious residue of colonial-era politics in Teno's home country, much of his cinematic oeuvre is given over to working out how politically loaded ideals of modernity and development intersect with intensely local social and cultural debates. Both *A Trip to the Country* and *Sacred Places* represent particularly striking examples of Teno's thematic preoccupations, and when taken together they stand out for their persistent willingness to draw the question of modernity into the ambit of contemporary African cinema.

As I demonstrate in my reading of these two films, for Teno documentary narratives of modernity in Africa both require and contribute to a broader metanarrative about African cinema, one that highlights the role this metanarrative plays in the creation and representation of African publics.

Filmed in 1998, *A Trip to the Country* charts a reverse migration of sorts, from the Cameroonian capital, Yaounde, where a young Teno moved to attend high school in the 1960s, to his home village in the west of the country. In this documentary Teno blends personal reflections on what the ideals of modernity and development meant in the immediate postindependence moment with conversations with contemporary city-dwellers and villagers who shed light on how these earlier aspirations have been translated into the present. Taking viewers on a road trip to his hometown, Teno comments on how the ideology of “tropical modernity” that coincided with France’s civilizing mission in West Africa has informed contemporary development policies and local experiences of modernization. As he points out at the end of the film, this exploration reveals a telling paradox: in the city, “progress” is moving backward, whereas in “traditional” villages new possibilities for consumption are “smothering thought” in the name of development.

Sacred Places, by contrast, does not evince the same sense of anxiety about modernity’s constitutive uncertainties. This documentary takes place in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, home to the biennial Panafrican Film and Television Festival (FESPACO), and follows the daily life of a poor neighborhood that boasts a popular *ciné club*—a makeshift movie theater showing often illicit copies of African and foreign films to rapt local audiences. *Sacred Places* also focuses on a young djembe musician and artisan who philosophizes at length about how this traditional drum is the “big brother” of the cinema form. Teno’s film both examines and enacts this familial relationship, which I term “cinematic kinship,” a form of “documentary consciousness” (to borrow Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenological phrase [1999:241]) that emphasizes how nonfiction cinema creatively experiences its proximity to other artistic forms, a proximity mediated, crucially, by diverse understandings of what “modernity” might mean. Although the storylines of *A Trip to the Country* and *Sacred Places* appear quite different, when taken together they jointly investigate the affective, aesthetic, and political consequences and afterimages of cinematic encounters with modernity in Africa.

Scholars and critics echo many of the paradoxes identified by Teno as his cinematic narrative of modernity shifts between the two films. As Charles Piot (2010:20) points out for the Togolese context (which, he argues, holds for everyday life in West Africa more generally), “privation” and “invention” represent two sides of a Janus-faced modern moment that sees traditional cultural politics replace “untoward pasts” with a strong sense of futurity. This “nostalgia for the future,” as he calls it, helps us better understand how in Teno’s documentaries those left by the wayside in state-sponsored development plans might still experience the present as a historical conjuncture offering intense creative possibilities. Following along with Piot’s diagnosis of nostalgia, invention, and privation allows us to take seriously James

Ferguson's (2006:176,192) cautionary suggestion that to read African social realities as so many "alternative modernities" risks obscuring very real global inequalities that are also part and parcel of modernity taken in its broadest sense. Jean and John Comaroff respond to Ferguson's concerns in a way that is quite reminiscent of how Teno deals with the shifting, problematic meanings of "modernity" in *A Trip to the Country* and *Sacred Places*. The Comaroffs (2012:11–12) view modernity as a "concrete abstraction [that] . . . has realized, marked forms in the world . . . but also exists as a reified order of imagined, transactable value." From this point of view, "modernity" refers at once to abstract ideals (often glossed as or subsumed into a discourse of "modernization" in Western thought) and to everyday categories that are inhabited by social actors who carefully make those categories their own. As we will see in what follows, the individuals in Teno's films wrestle with so many "vernacular" modernities, as the Comaroffs call them, while the grand narrative of modernity-as-abstraction weighs heavily on their everyday lives as well. What ultimately becomes clear in the transition from *A Trip to the Country* to *Sacred Places*, I suggest, is that cinematic narratives of this concrete abstraction also betoken new social roles for the African filmmaker and a recalibration of African cinema's relationship to local publics.

***A Trip to the Country* and the Ideology of Modernity**

Halfway through *A Trip to the Country*, Teno's westward itinerary takes him through the small town of Nachtigal, on the banks of the Sanaga River, where the local economy has been hit hard by long-delayed repairs to a ferryboat that once drew throngs of passengers and merchants to the area. As the camera pans over disused, rusted machinery and out over the empty Sanaga at twilight, Teno remarks in a voice-over that the sight of the river calls to mind an "unfinished" popular folktale from his childhood. In a far-off land divided by a river, a river monster demanded the sacrifice of a virgin during each year's rainy season before he allowed boats to cross. People had grown so accustomed to this ritual that they no longer even challenged it, instead viewing the sacrifice as "a time of great festivities" until they thought to offer the fiancée of a famous warrior, Dinga, to the monster. Dinga bravely fought and defeated the monster, freeing the villagers from its demands. At this point the children's story ends, comments Teno cryptically before revealing the rest of the tale: "Counseled by his advisors, Dinga became the richest man in the region since he threatened to release the monster if people didn't pay his tax, which was worse than what the monster had demanded. It seems that this is the law of the market. And ever since, generosity and solidarity are just distant memories."¹

The film then shifts abruptly from this newly completed folktale to the residents of Nachtigal's own memories of what life was like when the ferry was running, but it is worth lingering on Teno's narrative intervention for what it reveals about the pervasive sense of anxiety in his documentary. We can certainly read this folktale as an allegorical narrative of Cameroon's

transition from colonialism to the neocolonial excesses of Paul Biya's one-party state, and it would be tempting to consider the story's last line as expressing nostalgia for an anticolonial solidarity that never actually existed.² However, in the broader context of the film it is Teno's rather sardonic aside about the "law of the market" that stands out, since *A Trip to the Country* is primarily concerned with Cameroon's uneven integration into the world economy and with the ways colonialism and globalization (and their attendant discourses of "modernization" and "development") ideologically bleed into one another. As Teno explains, speaking about his 2004 film, *Le malentendu colonial (The Colonial Misunderstanding)*, "The humanitarian aid workers have replaced the [colonial-era] missionaries. Colonization has changed to the costume of globalization and in Africa no change is in sight: always a little more charity and a little less justice" (quoted in Diawara 2010:315).

Thus Teno's folktale condenses and evokes a set of cultural and political concerns that recur throughout the film. Often these are expressed with a particular sort of urgency reflecting the millennial context of the film's production. We can take as an example a particularly telling comment from early in the film, as Teno takes us through the Yaounde neighborhoods of his youth, streets now littered with the carcasses of old cars, which he reminds us were once the chicest symbols of postcolonial aspirations for modernity. Amidst the proliferation of all this trash (to reference the cinematic category theorized so provocatively by Kenneth Harrow in his 2013 book of the same name), the camera focuses briefly on a decrepit water fountain, "where we had our first kisses." As we see a young boy filling a bucket from a hose, Teno remarks wryly that "the slogan 'running water for all in the year 2000' will soon become 'running water for all in the year 3000.'" This millennial sloganeering bespeaks an anxiety about a certain idea of the future, a sort of sanitary modernity that appears destined endlessly to recede. Teno maps his own, more personal, misgivings onto the broader anxieties of the nation when he reveals shortly thereafter the more personal impulse driving the documentary's narrative impetus: in undertaking his journey westward, he seeks "to confront my youthful hopes and certitudes with today's reality." Like the fountain, rustic Cameroonian villages like Teno's hometown were supposed to disappear with the advent of modernity; and like the slogan about public water, Teno's personal objective in the film, couched as it is in confrontational rhetoric, evinces the disheartening (if inevitable) non-coincidence of the present and the future that characterizes the temporality of the film's journey.

The sense of millennial urgency that runs through the film does not, for all that, preclude moments of levity, as Teno occasionally winks and nods to his viewers by highlighting the hilarity revealed by certain narratives of development espoused by the state. Passing through the town of Ebedda, not far from Nachtigal, Teno makes a seemingly impromptu stop at the local subprefecture in order to interview the government official overseeing the development of the town. Named after a German explorer who was also a special commissioner for Togo and Kamerun, Nachtigal stands in for the nation's

history under colonial rule. By contrast, Ebebda (“the city of the future,” according to local administrators) has seen significant growth following the construction of a bridge and a highway that attract traffic and commerce from all over the region, although the town still lacks drinking water. “Out of curiosity I went to meet this government official, an important and very busy man,” Teno remarks sarcastically as his camera zooms out from a close-up shot of a poster of Paul Biya and pans diagonally down to introduce the functionary in question who is lazily leafing through a newspaper. Teno keeps the poster’s legend, identifying its subject as Biya, in the corner of the frame as he asks the official to introduce himself. The latter obliges, smirking coyly as if he is in on the joke, and identifies himself as Jean-Jacques Biya the Second, closing the nepotistic circle that Teno’s camera has just opened up. During their conversation, the president’s relative expounds on the ways the state’s presence in Ebebda has changed the local culture for the better: before, there was “too much freedom, too much debauchery,” although Biya does not do Teno the favor of explaining what these assertions actually mean. The state’s goal, he goes on to explain, is to “change the mentality” of the villagers by providing them with a bona fide highway and electricity, yet he never manages to articulate explicitly the causal logic that links development/modernization with state-sponsored cultural change. Biya boasts of Ebebda’s new “geo-strategic” status as it evolves into a city, but when Teno asks him whether he has plans for the year 2000 he only smiles and scoffs, replying, “The year 2000, that’s in two years! How can I plan for two years ahead?”

Biya’s rhetorical question is the culminating point of an interview full of vacuous platitudes that end up weighing all the more heavily on Teno’s narrative precisely because of their humorous emptiness. The subtext of this sequence, which jumps back and forth between street scenes and clips from the interview in Biya’s office, is that the transition from village to city life has indeed provoked an ontological-cultural shift, but one for which the state is unable to account adequately. The humor here, I think, moves in two directions at once: it points simultaneously to the short-sightedness of official discourses about modernization and daily life and, in a much darker vein, to the everyday uncertainties that arise as narrative by-products of the stories the state tells about itself—hence, for instance, the shot of two women triumphantly hailing the arrival of electricity in Ebebda while, in the same breath, admitting that the town’s water remains polluted and undrinkable. Fredric Jameson, in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992:200), refers to the co-presence of these directions as so many “layers” of social experience that are lived firsthand before being “reprocessed” by media and state actors who control the representations of everyday life. Teno’s use of humor in this sequence signals the uncertainties and anxieties that slip through the cracks of “official” forms of reprocessing, elements of social life that escape the state’s representative purview but which, for him, documentary cinema is able to grasp.

Teno’s arrival in his home village of Mbieng coincides with the local *congrès de développement*, a festival that sees the return of young people who

have moved away to the cities (in search of education or jobs) and who reunite with their parents and elders to participate in community development projects and hold talks on the village's future.³ Throughout this final section of the film, Teno juxtaposes shots of village elders decrying the loss of a sense of cooperation among the younger generations with shots taken at parties and a road race that lay bare the extent to which the *congrès* is now beholden to "the goddess of modern times: advertising." For the older members of the community, consumption has become the order of the day during the congress and pride of place is no longer given to the implementation of meaningful local projects that are designed to benefit the village and bring generations together. These lamentations signal a thematics of kinship that is strikingly different from the one that, as we will see, takes center stage in *Sacred Places*: in this earlier film, kinship becomes the metaphorical vehicle through which Teno captures and conveys millennial anxiety in its most stark expression. As such, it indexes both a very real sense of generational continuity that appears to be under threat as well as a sense of rupture brought about by the very ideology of development that once promised to renew local kinship ties but that now privileges consumption and sponsorship. As one middle-aged resident puts it, "Before, the congress was for the whole family; it was a way to improve the neighborhood for the benefit of all. But now, some elite members of the family have seen that it's a way to earn a little money, and that's what has changed the congress."⁴ A source of and metaphor for anxieties about the future, kinship reveals the constitutive paradoxes of development ideology and, at the same time, functions as the raw material upon which that ideology acts.

A Trip to the Country leaves us at this impasse, with Teno referencing feelings of helplessness as he describes "a long journey to arrive at a dead end." It is purposefully unclear here whether he is referring to the film's geographic trajectory or, on a broader level, to the nation's ideological cul-de-sac. Cinematically, though, this move allows Teno to sidestep the totalizing perspective of the documentarian as "the almighty voice-giver," in the words of Trinh Minh-ha (1993:96), "whose position of authority in the production of meaning continues to go unchallenged. . . ." Teno's position is not, for all that, necessarily self-effacing; but it does strategically drown itself out by continually challenging a set of aspirations—held by Teno and his compatriots, alike—that persist problematically in the postmillennial moment. Documentary form for Teno, then, does not so much "give voice" as it gives the lie to certain ideological assumptions and installs itself in the cracks of prevailing political narratives that risk hitching (colonial) pasts to (globalized) futures all too seamlessly.

***Sacred Places*: Cinema, the Djembe, and Storytelling**

Sacred Places tackles many of the same issues as *A Trip to the Country* (the powerful role of "tradition" in a globalized moment, the politics and poetics of consumption, and the creation of local narratives of modernity, to name

but three), yet it lacks the tense affective urgency that pervades the earlier film. It does not seek to offer an easy way out of *A Trip to the Country's* dead end, but rather it refracts the question of cinema's relationship to modernity through a new optic—much like how one turns a kaleidoscope to see a new pattern and image made from a different configuration of the same tiny mirrors inside. The millennial anxiety that provocatively overdetermines our viewing experience of *A Trip to the Country* is channeled here into questions of aesthetic creativity and local spectatorship, since in this documentary one of Teno's overarching interests concerns the future of African cinema's relationship to African publics. I suggest that from this perspective, *Sacred Places* does not attempt to erase this anxiety or sublimate it into a cinematic *Aufhebung*; such a reading would graft an all-too-perfect solution onto the thorny problems that haunt Teno's work and would view the films too neatly as bookending each other. Instead of aiming for such a resolution, what drives this later film is an open-ended willingness to explore the creative possibilities opened up by the fraught emotional investments Teno reveals in the earlier one. In certain respects, *Sacred Places* has a tighter, more conventionally focused narrative structure, complete with developed characters (playing themselves), including Bouba, the owner and manager of the ciné club in Ouaga's St. Léon neighborhood, and Jules César Bamouni, the djembe-maker and musician who sees the traditional drum as aesthetically inseparable, yet not indistinguishable, from cinema. The film sketches a portrait of everyday life in the neighborhood and of the everyday consumption of world cinema, yet it also asks a pointed and occasionally uncomfortable question of its own medium, namely: how and why does African cinema “unsee,” to borrow an expression from novelist China Miéville, the very African publics it represents on screen as filmic subjects in the stories it tells?⁵

Sacred Places documents the informal consumption of (pirated) Western and non-Western films in Bouba's ciné club, but Teno is intent at the same time on telling the story of local desires for African films, of people's willingness to constitute themselves as a market for films they feel tell stories about their lives.⁶ At stake here is not so much what Mbembe (2010:227) calls the “circulation of worlds,” but rather an “Afropolitan” circulation of logics of consumption. As Bouba explains, however, this process of self-constitution is stymied by the economies of distribution of many African films.

My film fans [*cinéphiles*] really like African films. But I must say African films are expensive. They're made here, but we can't access them as easily as European, American, Bollywood, or karate films. . . . But today, Africans really want to see their films. In the ghetto, in the neighborhoods, everyone wants to see African films, to see their own actors. These films tell our stories, show our traditions, our history. . . . They are very popular, but they cost too much. We can't afford them. . . . But African directors and producers need to conquer this market. . . . You have to start at the bottom. Go out into the ghetto. That's where it's happening, we're the ones who love these films.

Bouba's comments mobilize a vocabulary of possession ("their films," "their own actors," "our stories") that, paradoxically, is also implicitly tied to a vocabulary of cinematic expropriation and alienation. The everyday lives and cultural practices of African publics make their way to the big screen but seem destined primarily for spectators elsewhere; meanwhile, films from various elsewhere are the only ones that are truly economically viable in a "ghetto" cinema like Bouba's, but they are left to resonate on a much less personal level for local audiences. The circulation of illicit copies of African films (such as Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* [1989]) in the ciné club represents one creative workaround to respond to local demands for local films, but even this solution highlights the short-circuiting of a presumed organic link between these films and African audiences. Ouédraogo himself, in a brief interview scene from the end of the film, references this creative piracy approvingly yet admits that his international funding sources prevent him from taking ciné club spectators seriously as consumers.⁷ Further, Bouba's remarks echo Teno's own concern for organicism which, he informs us early on, motivated the documentary in the first place: "Twenty-five years after my first visit to Ouaga, what is left of the dream of the pioneers who saw film not only as entertainment, but also as a means to educate the masses?"⁸

As viewers, we are given to understand that this early question and the organically didactic role of cinema it expresses will act as narrative scaffolding for Teno's documentary as a whole. While this is true to a certain extent, the question obscures as much as it reveals since it says nothing about the ways in which the presence of the djembe drum will inflect the documentary's approach to film. Nor does it foreshadow how the presence of Jules-César—at once drummer, artisan, and amateur philosopher—will become aesthetically necessary for *Sacred Places* to be able to engage meaningfully with cinema at all. In short, the question artfully elides the constitutive detours the film will need to take in order to be "about" African film, and it does not indicate how cinema and the "traditional" djembe will vie for pride of place in what follows, like siblings jockeying for position before a family portrait is snapped. The thematics of kinship untangles itself here from anxious questions of development, as was the case in *A Trip to the Country*, and congeals instead around questions of spectatorship, consumption, and aesthetic pleasure.

Throughout the film, scenes featuring Jules-César and his djembe punctuate Teno's investigation of Bouba's ciné club and its impact on the reception and perception of films, African and non-African alike, in the neighborhood. The relentlessly joyful beats produced by Jules-César function almost as acoustic dissolves, transitioning between sequences dealing with the club and those open-air conversations between the djembe artisan and the documentarian in which the latter strives to capture the aesthetic specificity of the traditional drum in the midst of "modern" desires for world cinema and for access to the global markets for African films. Close-up shots of Jules-César's disembodied hands on his djembe

testify to the stubborn presence of an artistic form whose local importance is undeniable (and always seemingly within earshot) yet whose relationship to cinematic modernity is never explicitly theorized by Teno in any authoritative voice-over. Instead, he leaves it to his protagonist to account for the persistent relevance of the djembe and traditional artisanship; he does so not in defensive or overly formulaic justificatory terms, but rather by expansively naturalizing their contingent cultural and aesthetic proximity in the cramped social space of the working-class St. Léon neighborhood. “Cinema can’t ignore my djembe and my djembe can’t ignore cinema. They go hand-in-hand,” declares the charismatic Jules-César reflecting out loud on the role cinema plays in the neighborhood. Teno responds to this comment with a bit of provocation, asking whether cinema has replaced the djembe. His protagonist, smiling, responds with a proverb before concluding that “the djembe and the cinema are like brothers. The djembe is the *koro*, the cinema is the *dogo*. The *koro* is the older brother, he tells the story. For me, the djembe is like a *koro*, it tells stories, and its stories can also be made into films. So, cinema is the *dogo*, which means the little brother.” Teno objects playfully and reverses the terms of the analogy; notwithstanding this reversal, though, he adopts Jules-César’s metaphor of kinship as an aesthetic grammar through which to understand the djembe’s relationship to African film. Since, from this point of view, the drum and the film make and remake each other’s stories, it follows for Teno that to tell the story of cinema and its modern publics in St. Léon is also perforce to tell the story of its traditional brother. “So cinema had a brother!” exclaims Teno. “A big brother at that. To find out how cinema was doing in the neighborhood, I went looking for Djembe, the brother so long ignored by the Lumière brothers, the Dardenne brothers, the Coen brothers . . . and by me, too.”⁹

That this detour is necessary helps to explain the alternation between sequences featuring Bouba and the ciné club and those where Jules-César’s personality seems to overspill the camera’s frame. We can consider, for instance, a scene that nearly immediately follows Bouba commenting on the desirability of local markets for African films: this lengthy scene, one of the film’s most absorbing, sees Jules-César tightening and stretching the skin on a djembe he is making for a client, sweat dripping off his face as he lovingly tests the skin’s tautness. Teno’s camera slowly zooms in and out as we see the artisan’s muscles strain, and we have no choice but to let the almost melodic squeaking of the tightened ropes holding the drum’s skin in place wash over us. With very minimal prompting from Teno (indeed, this sequence has few words at all), Jules-César explains that he’s “giving a sound” to the djembe before he ties the final knot around the skin and launches into a catchy, fast-paced solo. Given Bouba’s comments on the production and distribution of African cinema in the preceding sequence, it is difficult not to view this artisanal interpolation as fundamentally prescriptive: what we witness in this scene is a sort of open access to the highly local production of the djembe for local consumers, a productive process

that, we can infer, is not accessible in the same way for lovers of African films. Tellingly, Teno offers no commentary on this sequence and cuts away abruptly to another scene featuring Bouba deciding on which DVDs to put on the club's program that night, but the lack of voice-over only intensifies the prescriptive nature of the sequence. The djembe here tells a story for its "little brother," the cinema, a story of its own relations of production, of local production for a local market. This "story," told only visually and accompanied by the sounds of the djembe, stands in stark contrast to the story of production and distribution communicated earlier by Bouba, and Teno seems to wonder here just how this story might one day be told by cinema in Africa.

In *A Trip to the Country*, then, modernity appears either as a sclerotic, top-down ideology with colonial residue or as an everyday form of false consciousness. By contrast, in *Sacred Places* cinema's modernity in this small Ouaga neighborhood is championed by resourceful piracy (thereby forcing open the market to local actors that mainstream African cinema often "unsees") and by an intensely productive confrontation with a local art form it can no longer ignore. As I have stressed, though, this confrontation between cinema and the djembe is not agonistic but appears as a series of exchanges between siblings, and the productivity of this familial proximity allows us to observe how Teno funnels the pervasive anxiety from his earlier film into an exploration of cinematic kinship. This formulation takes seriously Lévi-Strauss's (1969) classic observation that complex exchanges are at the heart of all kinship relations, and it provokes Teno to highlight how local negotiations of cinema's modernity are predicated on the fundamental, if unexpected, permeability of the aesthetic frontiers separating cinema from other (traditional) art forms. Crucially, Teno both thematizes and enacts this experience of kinship. First, thematically, by making *Sacred Places* as much about the djembe as about the video club, Teno evinces a keen understanding of the fact that his film must tell the story of the djembe if it is to engage in any sort of commentary on cinema at all. Second, he incorporates this consciousness of kinship into the very form of his documentary, forcing his own narrative to pass through the stories the djembe tells about itself and, by extension, about film as well.

Although the experience of cinematic kinship thoroughly mediates Teno's narrative about local negotiations of cinematic modernity, the word *modernity* is spoken only once in the film, near the end—but in such a way that it indelibly colors all that precedes it. Teno informs us that his time in St. Léon represented a step toward the rediscovery of "the heritage of our ancestor, the griot, condemned to the wilderness by technological progress, but whose modernity has returned to haunt sites and places, even the most sacred." These are the closing words of the film, as Teno ends with shots of Jules-César pensively smoking a cigarette. However, such concluding remarks go beyond establishing any facile, one-to-one equivalence between the djembe artisan and the figure of the traditional griot storyteller who was "modern" all along and who returns, ghostlike, to exact aesthetic revenge

on the technology that sidelined him. Instead, the comments (and the exchanges inherent within cinematic kinship generally) point more deeply to the radical diffusion of traditions of storytelling in the contemporary moment, such that the feedback loop between the tales the two metaphorical brothers tell each other becomes more pressing than ferreting out what belongs to “tradition” and what to “modernity.” Teno’s foregrounding of cinematic kinship thus prompts him to substitute a filmic vocabulary of creativity and exchange for one of anxiety without thereby nudging his priorities away from the tradition–modernity conversation.

Conclusion

Once the screen has gone black at the end of *Sacred Places*, Teno leaves us with two quotations that speak to the social role of the African filmmaker. The first of these is Sembene Ousmane’s assertion that “the African filmmaker is like the griot, who resembles the troubadour from the Middle Ages: a man of learning and wisdom who is the historian, the storyteller, the living memory, and the consciousness of his people.” The second, from Djibril Diop Mambéty, couches a similar sentiment in almost messianic rhetoric: “Griot is the word that corresponds to what I do and to the role the filmmaker plays in society. . . . More than a storyteller, the griot is a messenger of his time, a visionary, and the creator of the future.”¹⁰ Both of these citations serve to historicize concerns for the social function of storytelling in African cinema, and the gesture of their inclusion allows Teno to pay tribute to this history even as he divests himself of its vanguardist aspirations. The ambiguity inherent in this gesture of homage and distancing helps explain the use of citations in which the figure of the griot appears alongside those of the filmmaker and the storyteller. As Christopher L. Miller (1990) has argued, in Mande society griots are simultaneously held in reverence and fear since their ability to work with dangerous and powerful forces (such as speech) marks them as powerful yet troubling social actors. The ambiguous social role of the griot is reflected in Teno’s equally ambiguous self-positioning in relation to his cinematic predecessors, individuals to whom he is deeply connected but from whom he ultimately departs. Further, these strategic quotations bring the precarious griot figure into the postmillennial cinematic present and locate the griot not necessarily as a vanguard but as an individual who speaks to and reveals unsettling yet productive paradoxes in the language of film. Teno thus shows himself to belong to what Manthia Diawara (2010:95) calls “the new wave of African filmmakers” for whom the contemporary is not just a historical conjuncture but also an aesthetic and political question to be addressed. When he shifts from *A Trip to the Country* to *Sacred Places* he problematizes the contemporary in this manner, and at the same time articulates a social identity for the African filmmaker that departs from the one espoused by his forbears.

My comparative reading of these two films relies on the fact that each one deals with what I have referred to as modernity’s affective paradox by

linking it to the African filmmaker's new social roles. In the earlier film the filmmaker appears fundamentally vulnerable, hardly a vanguard, prey to the same anxieties, misgivings, and dashed hopes as those he films. From this point of view, one of the filmmaker's primary skills lies in rendering that anxious tension, as well as his own vulnerability, cinematically accessible to diverse audiences. In the later film, by contrast, the authority of the filmmaker as storyteller appears radically diluted, in constant contact with other art forms that have their own stories to tell, and outmaneuvered by savvy local publics who make cinematic stories meaningful by consuming them outside official or intended networks of distribution.¹¹ In this case, the filmmaker's role is to demonstrate that these processes of dilution actually open up creative possibilities for cinematic storytelling and do not threaten cinema's aesthetic prerogative.

The shift in the roles and social functions of modernity that occurs between *A Trip to the Country* and *Sacred Places* also sets in motion a metanarrative about cinema, its storytellers, and its publics. Millennial anxiety and cinematic kinship are not antithetical thematic problems in Teno's films, but contribute rather to two chapters of this metanarrative that ultimately charts transformations in the filmmaker's relationship to his own medium and other aesthetic forms. As these two documentaries make clear, these transformations both promote and rely on new affective and political dimensions of filmmaking and storytelling that speak to new communities of spectators as well as to "traditional" forms of artistic expression.

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Notes

1. Translation slightly modified. The majority of Teno's films have U.S. distribution, and as such they have English subtitles. Unless otherwise signaled, for simplicity's sake I quote from these subtitles. Occasionally, though, I incorporate my own translations from the French in Teno's films, either for additional clarity or to supplement what had to be cut from the English subtitles for brevity and readability.
2. In this respect, we could read *A Trip to the Country* as a later cinematic companion piece to Mongo Beti's well-known *La France contre l'Afrique: Retour au Cameroun* (1993), in which the famous novelist returns to his home country in order to document entrenched corruption, political sclerosis, and the dire effects on ordinary people of ideologies of development and modernity. That Beti actually makes a cameo appearance in Teno's *Chef!* only encourages us to identify such continuities across genres, texts, and historical moments. In a different register, Mbembe (2001) incorporates Cameroon into many of his reflections on discourses of governance and political imaginaries in contemporary Africa.
3. Piot (2010:152) discusses an identical event in the Togolese context, highlighting along with Teno the renewal of kinship ties and the often "starry-eyed" fundraising schemes concocted during discussions about how those who have moved away can help those who remain to develop the village (by constructing schools and infrastructure or via reforestation projects, for instance).
4. Translation slightly modified.
5. Indeed, the central conceit of Miéville's novel, *The City and The City* (2009), offers an intriguing conceptual vocabulary for thinking through this question of Teno's. Set in the far reaches of Eastern Europe, the novel deals with two city-states that are geographically coterminous yet awkwardly and bizarrely divided:

the cities are woven into each other and residents learn how studiously and carefully to “unsee” the people and places of the other city—even and especially as these may be right next to them. In a similar vein, in *Sacred Places* Teno wonders how African cinema manages to exist alongside African publics, and even to represent everyday life on the continent, without “seeing” ordinary Africans as potential, or even vital, consumers of African films.

6. In a convincing Rancièrian reading of Teno's work, Harrow (2013:49) recasts what I refer to as the self-constitution of spectators as a market outside that market's internal logic in more political terms. For Harrow, the “quartier setting” and the space of the film club allow for a “new configuration of *le commun*.” This political reading thus duly emphasizes reception and exhibition.
7. In a brief essay, Teno (1996:71) seems to recast Ouédraogo's concerns in much starker binary terms, asserting that cinema in Africa must “choose between immediate profitability . . . or making a contribution to the necessary reflection about freedom, at the risk of becoming unpopular.”
8. Thus, like *A Trip to the Country*, *Sacred Places* begins with a question that links a personal reflection to a broader history—in the first case, the history of the nation, and in the second, the history of African cinema.
9. Translation slightly modified.
10. Translations slightly modified for greater specificity.
11. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1996:162) gesture broadly toward this second point when they write that “Altered contexts [of reception] . . . generate altered readings.” Thus they stress that readings of films take place as much “vertically,” between the spectator and the filmmaker, as they do “horizontally,” between diverse viewers and communities. Additionally, writing specifically about Nollywood, Onookome Okome (2007:6) echoes my phrasing and refers to “*ad hoc* spaces of seeing” and “uncontrolled sites of consumption” when discussing the ways popular audiences consume videos in Nigeria.