

1 JEAN ROUCH AND THE SACRED CATTLE

Bernard Surugue

I met Jean Rouch in Niamey in 1966 when he was Director of the French Institute of Black Africa (IFAN – L'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire) in Niger, and I was a young music teacher. He immediately included me in his fieldwork, entrusting me with studying the music and dance of Songhay possession rituals. According to him, this required an aptitude in mathematics and music, but he made it clear: 'You'll see we understand nothing about them, but they're fascinating.' At the same time, I was ritually initiated by Hamidou Yayé, the custodian of all Songhay religious, magical and liturgical lore. We studied and produced musical and dance portraits of our mythological heroes. To this end, we made hundreds of sound and film recordings, the last of which featured in *Le Rêve plus fort que la mort* (*Dreams Stronger than Death*, 2002) under the virtuoso bow of Yayé, now over a hundred years old. We were all reunited at the open-air theatre of Niamey's cultural centre in February 2004 for the first screening in Niger of the film we had made together.

Here, in the form of a final farewell, are a few key moments in the life of Jean Rouch, a man who made his mark on his time as well as on all those who had the good fortune to accompany him.

An Idyllic Childhood

Jean Rouch was fond of recalling his childhood which, according to him, was among the happiest of his century. He liked to say that his story as an ethnologist and filmmaker started in early childhood when the gaze of one child met that of another: the young Rouch fancied himself as Nanook, another little boy who lived somewhere else. Robert Flaherty's Nanook, the little Eskimo boy, curling up snugly among the huskies, was a primordial encounter for Rouch. Along with dreams and projections a vocation was no doubt born that day.

These were Rouch's first steps in his attraction to the other, another mysteriously brought forth from afar thanks to a wonderful tool, that box of images – the cinema.

The youngest of the Rouch-Gain family, whose members were gifted in combining the arts and sciences, Jean continued the family tradition. Jules-Alfred Rouch, his father, was a naval officer, a meteorologist, an oceanographer companion of Charcot on the 'Pourquoi pas?' in the Antarctic and the author of several works of literature. In this scientifically-inclined family everybody painted, took photographs, sang and travelled. The fertile crucible of this extraordinary family fused art and science. Jean mixed with scientists and surrealist artists, delighted in the latest jazz and discovered peoples and countries according to the whims of his father. The adolescent changed *lycées* seven times and on each occasion had to make new friends by recounting the marvellous adventures he had had elsewhere. Furthermore, the talented and charming storyteller was a brilliant student. He passed his *baccalauréat* at 15 years old which opened the gates to the *grandes écoles*. He dreamt of going to the *École normale supérieure* to study mathematics and Greek, in his eyes indispensable subjects for dealing with 'these mysteries that are beyond me'.¹ Eligible for the *École polytechnique*, he went to the *École des Ponts et Chaussées* (the French National Engineering and Construction Academy).

Elegant solutions

As a young student, Rouch was somewhat 'smooth' in the *zazou* fashion of the day.² His precocious love of mathematics fed his taste for the 'elegant solutions' that allowed for the resolution of complex situations and intricate problems and found unexpected order in disorder. For him, the 'elegant solution' brought together tact, audacity and efficiency. It revealed the elementary simplicity of first truths. In order to arrive at it, he advocated the famous 'method of successive approximations' which he adapted after his fashion (see Kérisseil 2001: 180). This implied that whatever the circumstances he should never remain passive, he should unflinchingly seek to understand and reflect upon everything he was presented with and strive to interpret it. This at times created complicated situations so it was necessary to know how to disentangle oneself rapidly so as not to become their prisoner. Rouch would take malicious pleasure in seeing certain apparent disturbances that would allow him to search delightedly for the 'elegant solution' in order to set all concerned, especially his companions, on the right path. Rouch approached even the most serious questions with humour and malice, feeling a real need for the power of laughter, saying in the film: 'As I have said, laughter is sacred. So, superior men, learn to laugh!'

Rouch admired one of his professors at the École des Ponts et Chaussées, the engineer Albert Caquot (1881–1976).³ In 1930, Caquot announced the fundamental theory of adaptation stating that a structure is durable in so far as its distortion breaks down into a reversible process within the capacity of its endurance. This theory demonstrates the ability of materials to ‘memorise messages’ and to resist pressure. For Rouch, therefore, matter could be educated or influenced. With his indefatigable imagination, humour and poetic appetite stimulated by the surrealists, Rouch, along with his classmates Jean Sauvy and Pierre Ponty, made the fundamental theory of adaptation a rule for life – to resist all alternatives. He also kept in mind one of the other teachings of Caquot: ‘First you draw a bridge, then you calculate it.’ Rouch took this principle to heart, in the first instance in his real-life construction of bridges and roads in Africa and then in making his films: ‘You shoot a film first. You produce it afterwards.’

This charming and happy student life was cruelly interrupted when mobilisation orders arrived instructing Rouch, Sauvy and Ponty to report to barracks at the École Militaire du Génie de Versailles where the three companions had been enrolled. After the German offensive of 10 May 1940, before being able to exercise their *métier*, the future artists were sent as a matter of urgency to blow up the bridges of the Marne to repulse the enemy who had skirted the Maginot Line. Rouch was in charge of destroying the Château-Thierry bridge. Other bridges were blown up. Many died for nothing. The enemy got through. Such was the ‘phoney’ war, which would remain forever absurd and traumatic: ‘We travelled the length of France on bicycles, from the Marne to Limoges. Arriving in Limoges, you weren’t the same person. You felt an immense sadness that was infinite and inescapable.’⁴

A ship named ‘Providence’

After suffering the shame of defeat and having returned to occupied Paris, Rouch and his friends completed their final year at the École des Ponts et Chaussées. With diplomas nestling in their pockets they decided to leave the capital and enlisted in the Colonial Ministry. They were appointed as ‘Assistant Engineers of Public Works in the Colonies’ in October 1941, and at Marseilles they boarded the ‘Providence’ bound for Dakar with a common dream, to build the Trans-Saharan railway together. On arriving in Dakar their dream of teamwork went up in smoke, as they had to respond to the demands of a strict administration. The three friends were separated: Sauvy was appointed to a post in Guineau, Ponty to the navy in Senegal and Rouch to Niger.

This separation would prove providential for Rouch’s future. He was immediately fascinated by the great river Niger and the world of Songhay society. He

was taken on by the Niger Public Works to build roads from Niamey to Gao and Niamey to Ougadougou with vaulted Roman bridges because of the lack of concrete. Rouch had a veritable army of thousands at his disposal whom he came to know through their shared task. He had the uncanny explorer's knack to transform the many setbacks he encountered in the field into as many advantages.

One day, however, in the summer of 1942, at one of his construction sites at Gandel, not far from Niamey, something dramatic happened that marked a decisive stage in Rouch's ethnographic vocation – the tragic death of several of his workers during a storm of lightning that Dongo, the mythological god of thunder of the Songhay, had launched. Dongo, as was later explained to Rouch by Damouré Zika, one of his young workmen, held Rouch responsible for the deaths because he was building on the god's land. Thus, Zika and his family introduced Rouch to Songhay magic and religion during the burial and possession ceremonies that followed the deaths of the road workers.

It was Damouré Zika who enabled me first to attend fishermen's ceremonies, then introduced me to his grandmother, at Kalia's house. In the evening or on Sunday morning, in this mud hut in the Gawey district, we would both sit before the old lady who, in her soft voice, would tell 'the stories' that Damouré would translate. It was this worm-eaten wooden door to the hut which, for the first time for me, gave on to the African supernatural. (Rouch 1989: 13)

Despite – and perhaps thanks to – a reticent local administration who understood nothing about his attraction to ethnography, Rouch, attentive to the lives of others, slowly won the confidence of the river people in his own way and was already practising what later became 'shared ethnography'.

The oath of Bamako

At the end of 1942, the Americans landed and the French West African army joined the allied forces. As an anti-Vichyist and a committed Africanist, Rouch was expelled from the colony of Niger to Dakar.⁵ On his way, in January 1943, he met up again with his friends Sauvy and Ponty in Bamako. During this short 'historical encounter', Sauvy writes:

We climbed up to 'G Point', high land overlooking the city. There, sitting on the edge of the cliff we contemplated the bend of the Niger ... And so, Rouch and I, sensitive to the exceptional quality of the moment, became lyrical under the naturally ironic eye of our friend Ponty. 'When the war's over we'll come back here', Rouch declares. 'And we'll travel the length of the Niger

in a dug-out, from one end to the other, from the source to the ocean,' adds Sauvy ... And Rouch, who had already allied himself with Harakoy Dikko, the all-powerful female 'Boss' of the river, made it clear that the voyage would be made under her aegis. (Sauvy 2001a: 79–80)

In Dakar, Rouch was a faithful attendee of IFAN and its founder, Professor Théodore Monod, in taking part in the military training of the liberation armies in the city. Rouch and his companions trained the sappers from the *École du Génie de Versailles* to build floating bridges on Senegal's rivers in preparation for the battles in Europe. Later, the same exercise had to be repeated under enemy fire in support of the liberation armies crossing the Rhine. Rouch finally reached Berlin in August 1945.

Like many, Rouch remained discreet about this period – the last years of the war in Europe, the enormous suffering, a terrible test of humility, a human sacrifice that put everything in question. He often described to me this traumatic episode as the 'symphony of the desolation of the world'.

The roads to freedom

During these four mad years Rouch and his companions Pierre Ponty and Jean Sauvy paid their duty and took part in the war. Too many of their comrades paid with their lives or were wounded. They decided to do what they always wanted to and fulfilled their 'romantic-surrealist' oath devised three years earlier on the cliff's edge of G Point in Bamako. By amalgamating their three respective names, Sauvy, Ponty and Rouch invented a unique journalist 'personage' – 'Jean Pierjant'. Their quest was to discover new ways of life and to reveal them to the world.

During preparations, Rouch argued for equipping the expedition with a film camera, making it quite clear that photographs are all very well but they are a waste of time next to a 16mm camera. But how would they pay for it? Sauvy had bought a gold ingot in Guinea in 1941 and had carried it in his belt – like a *gri-gri* charm – throughout the entire war. He offered to trade it for the precious Bell and Howell 16mm camera bought at the flea market a day before departure. None of the three men knew how to handle a camera but all had been trained according to the method of 'successive approximations' that had been applied to engineering, to war and to filmmaking.

Thus they took off, placing all their confidence in the salvaged Junkers transport plane that carried the Liotard Expedition.⁶ After a stopover in Touareg country, the plane botched its take-off and broke its undercarriage. Rouch made the most of this stroke of luck to take his first lesson in cinematography with Edmond Sechan, one of the members of the Liotard Expedition.⁷ A replacement

plane left the trio at Gao where Sauvy wrote in his notebook: 'At last the glorious Niger, shining in the morning sun, as wide as the Thames at Westminster, flowing slowly eastward' (Sauvy 2001b: 18).

Cinema's good fortune: a broken tripod

While shooting the fast-moving water on the Niger river the tripod broke but Rouch continued filming. During the five months of travelling down river he realised that it was perfectly feasible to shoot with much greater mobility with the Bell and Howell propped against his forehead. With his innate sense of improvisation, his taste for 'successive approximations' and 'elegant solutions' he had simply invented a new way of filming which became a new school of filmmaking.⁸

The 4,000 kilometres of the river from its source to the ocean was covered aboard rafts and canoes in five months from 24 October 1946 to 25 March 1947. In this, the three companions accomplished an extraordinary feat recounted in newspaper articles for AFP, photographs and documentary films. This expedition prefigures the filmmaker's ethnological work: the ritual hunting of lion and hippopotamus, as well as encounters with the river-peoples, the phenomenon of possession, the amazing cattle, and much more. The very first film shot as a test with the Bell and Howell fixed on its tripod took place on an island near Ayorou and was entitled *La Chevelure magique*. The negative, carefully put in a barrel full of sawdust, was entrusted at the nearest airport to be sent to Paris. However, the plane was late arriving and the barrel, along with its precious contents, became dangerously hot having spent several days in the Nigerien sun. The laboratory could not do a thing with it and the film was lost. Only a few photographic images are left to testify to this first virtual film shot with the help of a tripod. The second film completed en route, *Au Pays des mages noirs* (1946–47), was projected at the Cinémathèque Française, as the accompanying film to Rossellini's *Stromboli* (1950). This was Rouch's entry into Cinema.

Liberté, égalité: the theory?⁹

Encouraged in his approach by Théodore Monod, and the anthropologists Marcel Griaule and André Leroi-Gourhan, Rouch threw himself into ethnography. He was convinced that there was a science which, while not exact, with the right questions might establish a new approach. To compensate for the inevitable faults of memory, he advocated photography and in particular the 'camera-stylo'. In September 1948, with a bursary awarded 'in commemoration of the Revolution of 1848', he again left for the field to rejoin his Nigerien friends Damouré

Zika and Lam Ibrahima Dia. One film followed another and, step by step, his Nigerien companions became real ethnographic and cinematic assistants. On returning to Paris, Rouch showed his films to Griaule and Leroi-Gourhan at the Musée de l'Homme. *Au Pays des mages noirs* (1946–47) was not shot as an ethnographic film. *Bataille sur le grand fleuve* (1951), a colour film about a hippopotamus hunt shot from January to May 1951, in which the hippo ultimately wins is without doubt the most obvious moment when ethnographer and filmmaker merge. Working at the same pace, Rouch made *Yenendi, Les hommes qui font la pluie* (*The Rainmakers*, 1951). On returning to Paris he defended his groundbreaking thesis under the direction of Marcel Griaule at the Sorbonne (later published as *La Religion et la magie Songhay*):

Next I went back to Fingoun to present the film for 'feedback' to those who'd battled with the river. I took a projector, a big white sheet and an electrical generator. There were four projections, one after the other. Mutual stupefaction. They talked about my work, what I was doing. Sound and image made the work about them accessible, which allowed for critique. The lion-hunter, Taillerou Koro, said: 'Come with me to hunt lion and you will indeed see lions.' It was the most important moment in my career as an ethnographer ... their view of my work. I found it was the only way to reconstitute my work.¹⁰

Rouch established a fundamental practice of ethnographic cinema: the validation of a film by the protagonists themselves. He extolled the method of 'feedback' as necessary to legitimate the work done, shared with the people filmed. For him, this essential step overcame academic caution.

The sacred cattle

The origin of the story of the sacred cattle, like the majority of stories that Rouch filmed, dates back to the period of 'Jean Pierjant' and follows the logic of the 'Oath of Bamako'. When Ponty, Rouch and Sauvy had arrived in Niger at the halfway stage of their journey they left the French empire to venture into British territory.

In 1948 Damouré Zika, who was a French state employee, had been unable to get a visa to leave Nigerien territory. As a replacement, Damouré suggested a young Peul shepherd named Lam Ibrahima Dia. Known as 'Lamido the little prince', Lam quickly became Rouch's cook and assistant cameraman. Later, he would become a sound engineer, then advisor on all matters Marabout, a mechanic and the official driver for the IFAN centre in Niamey and, finally, a rich farmer of the right bank of the Niger river irrigated with the help of the famous

Dutch windmills depicted in the film *Madame l'Eau* (1993). Lam, in 1948, a young apprentice Marabout, was returning from a journey on foot from Abéokuta, a Nigerien city lying between Ibadan and Lagos, to Niamey via Sokoto and had some extraordinary adventures:

He told us about this adventure and how he had passed through Sokoto where for the first time he had encountered extraordinary white cattle with no horns. Because of this, the Peul cattle breeders could not consume their milk because it was the devil's milk.¹¹

In fact, the cattle breeding never amounted to anything despite the recommendations of the veterinarian Mariko.¹² Rouch and his Nigerien friends invented a film, *Les vaches merveilleuses*, that told the story of the 'sacred cattle'. The film was never made but the story reappeared years later in the film *Le Rêve plus fort que la mort* (2002). In 1997, Lam Ibrahima Dia fell ill and died. In 2002 Rouch, who was deeply affected by this death, decided to make *Le Rêve plus fort que la mort* with me, in homage to the deceased. The film, improvised throughout, tells the story of the return of Jaguar who had made a fortune in Ghana and came back to Niamey in a smart Jaguar convertible.¹³ Damouré Zika improvised the role. But he understood that things were not the same anymore; everything had changed; the river had become capricious, the Marabout had forbidden sacrifices, nothing was as before. In Rouch's honour, Zika organised a celebration with his 150 children with a ritual including offerings and possession dances which, as before, took place under the 'musical protection' of the player of the single-stringed violin.

This was, in fact, also the occasion of Rouch's – alias Jaguar's – return to Niger to see his African friends again. Very much influenced by ancient tragedies and contemporary drama, Aeschylus' 'Persians', it gave Rouch the opportunity to relate the Dionysian vision of the world and its association with Songhay mythology.¹⁴ For the film, Philippe Brunet, professor of Ancient Greek, dramatist and stage director, rehearsed with Diouldé Laya, ethnologist and Hellenic scholar, at the Cultural Centre of the Niger Republic. He paralleled King Darius with the warriors of the Songhay Empire. The whole production was played and sung in ancient Greek, Songhay, Peul, French and Turkish. This opera of the desolation of the world recalled the origin of tragedy.

Not far away, graceful herds of the 'mythical, sacred' white cattle crossed the river. Guided by their inseparable Peul shepherds, they followed their ancient quest for unlikely pastures under the protection of the gods above and those below. Sitting on a dune by the river, in the shade of a caicedra tree, Tallou Mouzourane, the third member of 'Rouch's gang' in Africa for the past fifty

years (alongside Damouré and Lam) cast spells in the sand. Then, in the warm light of evening, in the midst of his herd, he sang and invoked the deceased Lam, the little prince. The departed friend thanked his 'father' Jean Rouch for having come to see him and his sacred white cattle without horns. Then, the hundred-year-old virtuoso Hamidou Yayé, with his 'Godié', a single-string viol, invoked the gods and goddesses of the mighty river.

'Rouch has left, he's not here anymore'

In February 2004, we were in Niger with Jean Rouch to prepare for a new film and for the African premiere of *Le Rêve plus fort que la mort* at the location where it had been filmed, the Franco-Nigerien cultural centre. The screening was to inaugurate a retrospective of cinema from Niger at which Rouch was the guest of honour. On Wednesday, 18 February 2004, I accompanied the daughter and granddaughter of Oumarou Ganda to the French Ambassador's residence to welcome 'uncle Rouch'. Rouch had discovered Oumarou Ganda in the Ivory Coast. This former soldier in the Indochina war was working as a docker; Rouch made him the hero of his film *Moi, un noir* (1958). This cult film marked the start of the *nouvelle vague* at the beginning of the 1960s. Ganda subsequently became a major filmmaker who, alas, was brutally cut down in the prime of life. We left for lunch at the *Roniers* alongside the river a little beyond the village of Goudel. It was here that Rouch and his group of friends used to take Idrissa Maiga's canoe to reach the middle of the river and swim in the fresh waters at the hottest time of day, impervious to the hippopotami while others took siestas in air-conditioned villas. Jean was in fine form and we discussed films in preparation, coming up with possible titles for the next one such as 'Eternity' or 'The True Lie'.

A few hours later on one of Niger's roads, identical to those that this engineer from the *École des Ponts et Chaussées* had built right back at the start of his career, Jean was heading for Tahoua. At nightfall, far from the protection of the Niger river, in the land of 'Mahama le touareg' – the fearsome warrior-spirit with 150 wings depicted in the film *Le Rêve plus fort que la mort* – death came upon Jean Rouch. 'Rouch has left, he's not here anymore' were his last words.¹⁵

Following both the national and ritual funerals, Jean Rouch lies in an extremely simple tomb adjoining the buildings of the Niger office of Public Works, his first employer in 1941. So, a life punctuated by struggle and creativity, all of which had been dedicated to the human sciences and filmmaking, was complete. This great 'zima', friend of men and gods alike, is now the eternal guardian of the curved Niger, the valley of universal culture, from its source all the way to the infinite ocean.

NOTES

- 1 One of Rouch's favourite expressions that he used in his later years was borrowed from Jean Cocteau's play *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel*: 'Since these mysteries are beyond me, let us pretend to be behind them.'
- 2 Like the elegant young 'zazou man' in *Jaguar* (1967) played by Damouré Zika.
- 3 Albert Caquot is one of the great engineers and builders of the twentieth century. As well as his role in aeronautics during World War One and World War Two, this scientist (and artist) made a crucial contribution to the field of the resistance of materials.
- 4 Jean Rouch in conversation with Pierre-André Boutang in *Jean Rouch, collection: Le geste cinématographique* by Patrick Leboutte and Marc-Antoine Roudil, 4-DVD pack compiled with the assistance of Bernard Surugue, Éditions Montparnasse, 2005.
- 5 He liked to recall one of his clashes with Governor Tobby of the Vichy regime who, after a somewhat stormy discussion, said 'Rouch, do you take me for an idiot?' Quick as a flash, Rouch replied 'No. But I could be wrong.' This reply appears again in one of Rouch's last films, *Dionysos* (1984).
- 6 In 1945, at the Musée de l'Homme from the war onwards, ethnologists in the resistance gathered as the famous 'Liotard Group' of new, young explorers – named after Louis Liotard who had been murdered in Tibet – under the aegis of the Explorer's Club. Liotard had organised the first major post-war expedition in Africa, the Ogooué-Congo mission, with Noel Ballif.
- 7 Edmond Sechan was in charge of the cinematography of many French films including *Crin blanc* (Albert Lamorisse, 1952), *Mort en fraude* (Marcel Camus, 1957), *La Grande frousse* (Jean-Pierre Mocky, 1964), *A Cœur joie* (Serge Bourguignon, 1967), *Le Pays bleu* (Jean-Charles Tachella, 1976), *La Boum* (Claude Pinoteau, 1980).
- 8 In 2002 in Gottingen, Rouch told me that his German friends had organised, much later on, a funeral ceremony at which the tripod would be symbolically buried and therefore abolished, thus freeing the camera and, at the same time, cinema.
- 9 This was the title of a film in homage to Théodore Monod, *Liberté, Égalité: la thèse* by Jean Rouch and Bernard Surugue (AMIP-IRD, 2003).
- 10 Jean Rouch in conversation with Pierre-André Boutang in *Jean Rouch, collection: Le geste cinématographique*.
- 11 Jean Rouch, proposal for the film *La vache merveilleuse* which became *Le Rêve plus fort que la mort* (2002).
- 12 Abdouramane Keletigui Mariko, esteemed veterinarian, is also the author of many books about the oral traditions of Niger.

- 13 In reality, it was the famous Bugatti car from *Petit à petit* (1968–69) which had to play the role.
- 14 'Et l'unique cordeau des trompettes marines' constitutes the entirety of the famous alexandrine 'Chantre' ('Singer') by Guillaume Appolinaire (1880–1918); the single line was added by the poet on the proofs of his 1913 collection *Alcools*. The translation is by Anne Hyde Greet. She notes that the alexandrine contains two puns: *cordeau*, 'cord', is also *cor d'eau*, horn of water (and possible *corps d'eau*, body of water); *trompette marine* is a 'trumpet marine' (that is, a medieval musical instrument with a single string) or, literally, a 'marine trumpet' (Appolinaire 1965: 44–5, 224) [Translator's note].
- 15 See the end of the Surugue & Riollon 2004 film *Le double d'hier a rencontré demain*.

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Surugue Bernard. (2007)

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In : ten Brink J. (ed.), Renov M. (préf.) Building bridges : the
cinema of Jean Rouch

Londres (GBR) ; New York : Wallflower ; Wallflower, 9-19.
(Nonfictions). ISBN 978-1-905674-47-3