

 **Gouden Beer**  
74 Internationale  
Filmfestspiele  
Berlin

**idfa** International  
Documentary  
Film Festival  
Amsterdam

NA ATLANTIQUE

# DAHOMIEY

DE NIEUWE FILM VAN

**MATI DIOP**



*cinéart*

# PERSMAP



Documentaire - 2024 - BJ/FR/SN - 68 minuten  
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## **Distributie**

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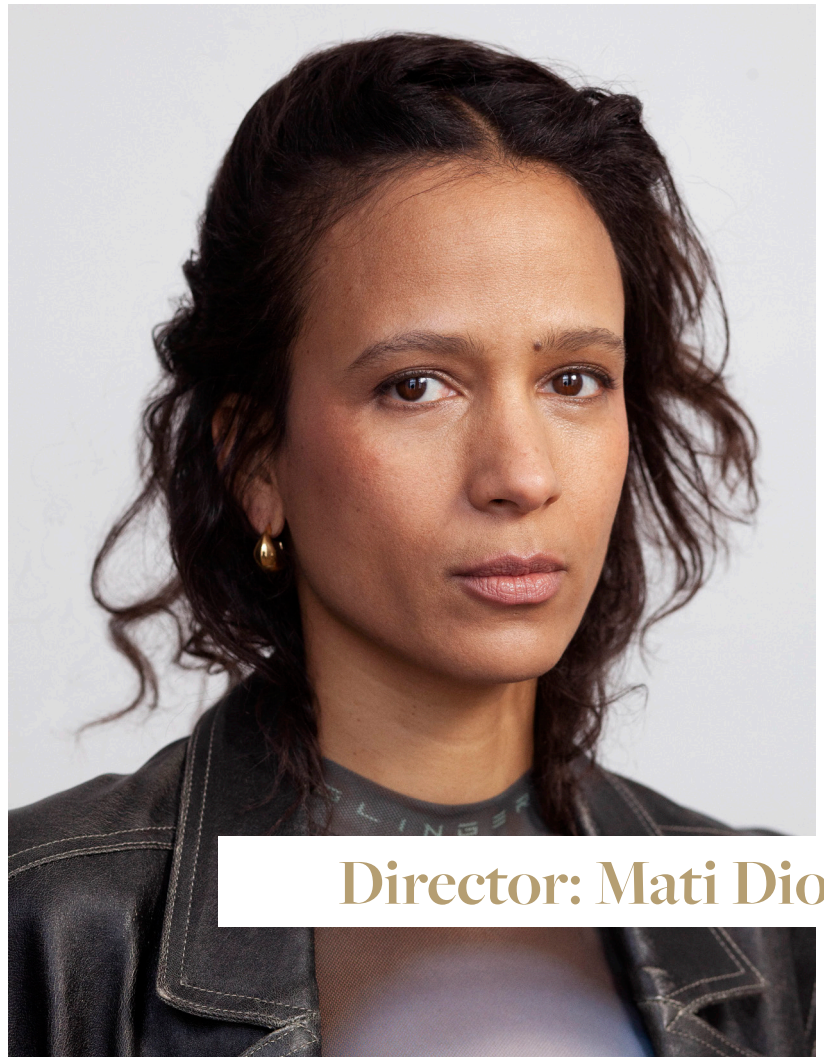
## Synopsis

DAHOMÉY is een unieke documentaire over het teruggeven van cultureel erfgoed, dekolonisering en tradities. In de film gaan poëzie, politiek en esthetiek hand in hand en bieden een verrassende kijk op deze actuele thema's. DAHOMÉY won de Gouden Beer (Beste Film) op het Filmfestival van Berlijn.

In de 19e eeuw zijn honderden historische en culturele kunstvoorwerpen uit het West-Afrikaanse koninkrijk Dahomey geplunderd door Franse koloniale troepen. In november 2021 staan 26 van die schatten op het punt om Parijs te verlaten en terug te keren naar hun land van herkomst, de huidige Republiek Benin. Maar hoe moet je je verhouden ten opzichte van de schatten van je voorouders, in een land dat tijdens hun afwezigheid zo is veranderd? De studenten van Benin gaan het gesprek aan en proberen het verleden een plek in het heden te geven.

Regisseur Mati Diop (ATLANTIQUE) heeft een heel eigen en originele vorm gevonden om deze artefacten een nieuw leven én een stem te geven. 'Intriguing... An invigorating and enlivening film' ★★★★★ (The Guardian)





**Director: Mati Diop**

## **Biography**

Mati Diop was born in Paris on June 22, 1982. Since the early 2000s, she has built an eclectic body of work that has won awards at numerous international festivals. Her first feature, *ATLANTIQUE* (2019), winner of the Grand Prix at Cannes, established her as one of the leading figures in international arthouse cinema and of a new wave in African and diasporic cinema. Her nomadic, lyrical and political cinema crosses boundaries between genres and formats, as an extension of her dual identity and proud Creoleness.

Mati grew up in a Franco-Senegalese family, with a musician father, Wasis Diop, and photographer and art buyer mother. She is the niece of Djibril Diop Mambéty, director of the cult movie *TOUKI BOUKI* (1973).

The formalism of her cinema is rooted in an early curiosity for the arts, particularly video and, above all, sound. At the age of 20, she started out working in theatre, designing sound and video creations for plays. Around the same time, she shot her first self-produced short, *LAST NIGHT* (2004). In 2006, she joined Le Pavillon, the creative laboratory at the Palais de Tokyo. After a brief passage at Le Fresnoy (National Contemporary Arts Studio), her meeting with Claire Denis, who cast her as the female lead in *35 Rhums* (2008), confirmed her desire to become a filmmaker.

So began an epic adventure in three chapters, based in Dakar, spanning a decade.

ATLANTIQUE (2019, Tiger Award at the Rotterdam Festival), MILLE SOLEILS (2013, Grand Prix at FID Marseille) and ATLANTIQUE form a manifesto that substantiates a political choice: militant cinema in Senegal, whose working-class youth will be its beating heart. From the phenomenon of undocumented immigration devastating Senegal's working-class youth to the defeat of the Wade regime in 2012, via the decline of Senegalese and, more broadly, African cinema, whose golden age was epitomized by the subversive and political work of her uncle Djibril Diop Mambéty, these films became the archive of an era and its contemporary issues. For the filmmaker, cinema is a tool of reconquest that reclaims missing images, questions representations rooted in colonialism, and invents heroes and heroines who have deserted the African imagination.

At the same time, Mati Diop made several shorts, including BIG IN VIETNAM (2011, Tiger Award at the Rotterdam Festival) and SNOW CANON (2012, premiered at the Venice Film Festival), which revisit favorite motifs and themes: the solitude of exiled bodies, cities and landscapes imbued with mythology and mystery, and the night out of which dances and ghosts emerge. These themes can also be found in TOKYO TRIP (2023) and IN MY ROOM (2020). Mati Diop continued her video work with LIBERIAN BOY (2015) and NAKED BLUE (2022), co-directed with Manon Lutanie. In 2020-2021, she also shot two music videos in Paris, for Bonnie Banane and Wasis Diop, as well as a commercial with Solange Knowles.

Selected in competition at the 74th Berlinale, DAHOMEY (2024), the director's second feature, shot in Benin, focuses on the restitution of royal treasures looted during colonization by France, reaffirms her artistic activism on the African continent..

## Interview with Mati Diop

**After the Grand Prix in Cannes, the selection of ATLANTIQUE in the shortlist for the Academy Award for Best International Picture, and Netflix US buying the film, you might have taken a more «mainstream» turn, but you're back with a film even more radical than ATLANTIQUE in its message and form.**

I came up as much in the mainstream as in counter-culture. ATLANTIQUE transposes the range of my cultural influences. With my first feature, I tried to stay as close as possible to my artistic language while consciously playing the game of more classical storytelling. With Dahomey, I went back to a freer writing and shooting process that was closer to my previous films.

The brutal shutdown imposed by the pandemic made me question the meaning I wanted to keep giving to my work as a filmmaker, and its political impact. While reflecting on the feature film to which I wanted to devote the next few years of my life, I kept working in a variety of formats. During lockdown, I was fortunate enough to receive a commission that allowed me to make a film alone, at home, using audio recordings I had made of my grandmother. After the soul-destroying whirl of the ATLANTIQUE promotional tour worldwide, making In my room with limited resources was a redemptive, reparatory experience that reminded me of my ability to make films «out of nothing.» A year later,

when I found out that twenty-six royal treasures from Dahomey were to be returned to Benin by France, I stopped what I was doing and decided to make a film about it.

### **What was the starting-point of Dahomey? What spurred you to make this film?**

When I first heard the term «restitution» in 2017, I was still writing ATLANTIQUE. As an afrodescendant filmmaker, the word resonated deeply within me. Fundamentally, the issue runs through my work. Also, **the films I made in Dakar between 2009 and 2019 speak to a process of Return: going back to my African origins, to a part of myself that was buried for too long under the hegemony of my Western environment.** Added to that, there was the troubling echo between the figure of the revenant in ATLANTIQUE, which I was just finishing writing, and the return of African artifacts to their native land. Restitution, Revenance, Return and Reparation came together in my head. As perplexing as Emmanuel Macron's announcement in Ouagadougou may have been for me, the project for «the repatriation of African cultural heritage within five years» was a shock because I sadly realized that I had never imagined the possibility of something like that happening in my lifetime, perhaps out of resignation. I had never imagined what restitution might actually look like, and while trying to visualize it, a film was already crystallizing in my mind. Initially, I envisioned writing a feature film that would chronicle the epic adventure of an artifact, from it being looted in the late 19th century to it returning home in 2075. It had to anticipate the future, simply because it seemed to me to be so unlikely that any restitutions were imminent or even that we would be alive to witness such a historic chapter. Even so, I had informed my producers, Judith Lou Levy and Eve Robin, that if repatriation of artifacts (from France to their country of origin) took place, I absolutely wanted to film it, so we had to stay on the alert, to be ready. We kept an eye on the press until the announcement dropped suddenly that twenty-six royal treasures from Abomey (Benin) had been selected for restitution on November 10, 2021, and we had to make the shoot possible. It was a race against time: asking for permission from the Beninese government to escort the treasures—the government became partner in the film while guaranteeing us the independence we insisted upon—while organizing all the logistics of a shoot going from Paris to Cotonou, where I had never been before. Shortly after starting work on the film, I decided to create a production company based in Dakar (Fanta Sy) to coproduce it with Les Films du Bal, from the continent.

### **How did you visualize Dahomey and over what period of time did you make it?**

The film took shape over two years, from 2021 to 2023, alternating phases of shooting and editing, while honing ever more the writing and the articulation of the different registers of language in the film, between documentary and fantasy. The four shooting periods were scheduled to coincide with the treasures' journey, starting with their departure from Quai Branly Museum, followed by the journey in a cargo plane to their arrival in Cotonou. Back in Paris, the editor (Gabriel Gonzalez) and I put together the first fifteen minutes of the movie.

The second shoot, in Cotonou, consisted of filming the installation of the artifacts in the exhibition space within the presidential palace by the team of Beninese curators, including Calixte Biah, whom we had followed since they left Quai Branly, and Alain Godonou, the curator of the exhibition. Once that sequence had been shot, I stayed in

Cotonou for over a month to prepare the second major chunk of the film, which focuses on how young people in Benin view the restitution of the treasures. I chose to give this the form of a great debate in an auditorium at the University of Abomey-Calavi.

After more editing, a third sequence was shot in 2022: the exhibition of the artifacts at the palace, reuniting the people of Benin with their repatriated treasures, and an initial fantasy sequence meandering at night around Cotonou.

The final phase of shooting consisted in filming another debate at the university to cover missing angles, and complete the nighttime roaming of the spirit of the treasures, in the presidential palace and city. In parallel with the various phases of shooting and editing, I worked with the Haitian author Makenzy Orcel on writing the text of the «voice of the treasures.»

**DAHOMEY is a film on the border between documentary and fiction. In the end credits, it says «written and directed by Mati Diop.» Can you talk us through notions of writing and directing this documentary?**

**What distinguishes documentary from fiction concerns above all the question of the writing process.** On top of the imperative need I felt to make this film, after ATLANTIQUE I also needed to re-experience a free writing and shooting process than on a work of fiction. **I like to break free of conventions about format, and I like the idea of reinventing my approach to the writing of it with each film.** I visualized ATLANTIQUE as a «Gothic tale». DAHOMEY is a «fantasy documentary».

If people come out wondering what it is that they just saw, having had a unique experience (while feeling some kind of emotion, of course), then I feel I have contributed to making cinema more surprising and innovative. That's also what I expect from a film, wherever it is from.

**In documentaries, the writing is first and foremost a point of view, on people or on situation. Writing begins with the film language that translates (or betrays) your relationship to the world, to other people and to yourself.** In the end, when you're watching a movie, whether documentary or fiction, the only question is whether cinema happens or not.

When I arrived at Quai Branly Museum with Joséphine Drouin Viillard, the DP, for the first day of shooting, when the artifacts were due to be removed from display and crated up, we didn't know what to expect and were very apprehensive of the museum's institutional environment. In *Statues Die Too* by Resnais & Marker (1953), one of the only films I had in mind as a reference, the shots of the statues verge on the sublime. It is at once a political manifesto and art film. I was aiming for the same aesthetic rigor but, **in a documentary, you cannot control everything around you. Only one take is possible, only one place to be. It's now..**

**The film quickly departs from pure reality by giving a form of life—a voice—to one of the artifacts...**

When I began filming, I was so steeped in the feature I had in mind that my approach to

reality was suffused in lyricism. I was looking at what I had already dreamed. The decision to film the treasures like characters with their own perspective and subjectivity enabled Joséphine and I to maintain a strong focus while grasping other dimensions that I wanted to make palpable.

**To my mind, the historical dimension of the moment had a mythical dimension that I wanted to transcribe through the manner of filming. To bring out the weight, density and texture of what was going on.** Often, reality produces pictures that are far more striking than anything fiction generates. I was astonished by the highly technical process that looked like a funeral ceremony, with a tempo set by the crating-up of each artifact to the sound of drills and construction site banging. We had indeed entered the era of museums' disquiet. The atmosphere was very solemn; you felt every passing second. History was changing direction; something was being reversed. Sometimes, everyday people turn into mythological characters or archetypes that must be acknowledged and made sublime. That is the case with Calixte Biah, the curator brought in by the Beninese government to fly with the treasures from Quai Branly to Cotonou.

Before coming up with the idea of having the artifacts talk, I wanted first of all to make their silence, which we recreated in sound editing and mixing with Nicolas Becker and Cyril Holtz, as audible as possible. It seemed to me to be the most eloquent way of restoring their power while evoking their secret, opaque and inviolable aspects. The particular sequence when the artifacts are installed in the exhibition space at the presidential palace was fine-tuned and rewritten in the editing suite. Back on Beninese soil, the artifacts open up to a new dimension of themselves. Through the observations on their «condition» read out by Calixte, a part of their history is restored through the marks of time. At the same time, the people looking at them and after them, and talking to them, perhaps also rediscover part of themselves.

**It's the story of a return told to us in the Fon language... Can you tell us about the choice of language? How, and with whom, did you come up with this «voice of the treasures»?**

**All the films I shot in Senegal are in Wolof. It's a highly political choice. Dahomey speaks first and foremost to the people of Benin, who must be able to hear and recognize themselves.** As subjective as it may be, the story of the voice of the treasures must be returned to them in the Fon language, which everyone in Benin speaks. Fanon says, «To speak one's language is to exist absolutely for the other». But it is also to exist absolutely for oneself. Dahomey approaches restitution from an African perspective that speaks to the universal, a prism that the West has always made its own. To flesh out the artifacts' subjectivity, I chose to give them «an inner voice,» translating the desire to release these artifacts from the status of objects, in which they have been locked since their abduction, by once more making them the «subject» of their own story, the protagonists and narrators of their adventures. **Giving the artifacts a voice and a story to tell, through the singular tale of their expropriation, meant choosing to evoke the condition of a plundered territory, a dispossessed nation, a community seeking sovereignty.**

For historical, political and (always) poetical reasons, I insisted on writing that story in



collaboration with a writer of Haitian origin. Practically all Haitians are the descendants of black slaves, mostly deported (in the early 18th century) from the Bight of Benin and West Africa, including Senegal. From the mid-18th century onward, the deported Africans came primarily from the Congo, and in total, before the Haitian revolution, the majority were from central Africa. Beyond the style that a writer or poet could contribute to the story told by the «voice of the treasures,» the Haitian resonance meant a lot to me. I was also looking for someone who would be able to write from the invisible world.

When Makenzy Orcel came on board, editing was already advanced, and the treasures' story had a specific place and role in the film (in the form of five distinct scenes). I knew what I wanted to hear from the artifacts, according to the symbolic spaces they were passing through, but I was looking for a language to say it in, which Makenzy provided. He drew much of his inspiration from shots in the movie. Once he had written his text, I in turn readapted it to the rhythm and musicality of the film.

Once the text was translated into old Fon, I called sound designer Nicolas Becker, with whom I chose to create the voice of the treasures. The recording took place in Benin, using male and female voices with very different tones. Back in Paris, we created a genderless vocal texture in deep, metallic frequencies. I wanted a texture with a futurist aesthetic, like a creature in a genre movie that would break with the whole folklore-and-tradition image in which «African ancestrality» is too often confined, and using «genre» to bypass that kind of stereotype. The music by Wally Badarou, who is of Beninese origin, greatly contributes to the fantasy dimension of the film. While that of Dean Blunt, who is of Nigerian origin, adds a more spiritual dimension.

**Youth is front and center of every film you made in Senegal. In Dahomey, likewise. How do you explain that choice?**

When I say that the issue of «restitution» runs through my work, I refer specifically to the films I chose to shoot in Dakar between 2009 and 2019. When young Serigne, in *Atlantiques* (2009), gives a first-person account of his migration journey, he becomes the protagonist and subject of his story. By devoting my first feature to young Senegalese who have died at sea while trying to make it to Europe, the primary aim was to leave a trace of a contemporary tragedy while trying to render its complexity in all its personal and existential dimensions. **The restitution of African cultural artifacts plundered during the French colonial period concerns first and foremost Africa's young people, whose voices had not been heard on the subject yet but were instead hijacked in political circles or cloistered in the academic field. It was necessary to shift the whole issue from the summit to the base, to create a space that might allow young people to identify this restitution as part of its history and reappropriate it. To create a space where they might be heard.**

**How did you approach that question with them?**

I dreamed up a great debate at a university, like a massive brainstorming session, to consider all the questions that this restitution raises and, above all, reveals. I wanted the debate to revolve around issues of history, vestiges and remembrance. **For me, the challenge was to find a way to create a space of free expression on a subject that on a**

**subject that belongs absolutely to the protagonists.**

With Gildas Adannou, a young filmmaker who was my AD on this movie, we held a casting call to put together a round table of a dozen students, researchers or young lecturers. I wanted them to be from different backgrounds and disciplines, from art to history via economics or social sciences. I met lots of people and held numerous interviews. We had to be absolutely sure everyone would defend a singular and personal point of view on the restitution of the treasures—gather together people who would voice a variety of opinions on the matter. I chose a location that seemed super-dynamic visually, as much for the perspectives as for the light. The raked seating responded to my desire for a chorus, an agora. Joséphine Drouin Viallard and I thought up a system with three cameras, which would bring to life each person’s intervention, as well as the audience and university life going on all around.

On the day of the shoot, I chose to broadcast the debate over the campus radio to generate more tension and urgency among the speakers, who knew a larger audience was listening. Irrespective of filming, it was legitimate for the debate to be aired and shared among as many people as possible. I gave Gildas, whom I had asked to moderate the debate, a list of all the questions I really wanted to ask these young people, and first of all, **how do you measure the loss of something if you never realized you lost it ?**

*Paris, January 2024*



# Artistic contributions

*WITH STUDENTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ABOMEY-CALAVI*

GILDAS ADANNOU  
JOSEA GUEDJE  
GAËL SANKARA DAAVO  
HABIB AHANDESSI  
ROSE OUEMEHO  
MARYLINE AGBOSI  
RAÏMI BASSITOU NOUATIN  
DIDIER SEDOHA NASSANGADE

IMELDA BATAMOSSI  
JOËL TCHOGBE  
DIANE CAKPO  
CHAMELIE DOGNON  
MORIAS AGBESSI  
GILBERT GODOVO

YVON KOSSOU-YOVO  
DONALD GBOSSA  
EDAH GONTRAN  
MESSI BOCO  
ODILON GBENONTIN  
KEVIN DA-SILVA

*THE TEAM OF CURATORS AND EXHIBITION MANAGERS*

CALIXTE BIAH

ABDOULAYE IMOROU  
PAUL TIMOTHEE DOTO  
JULES BOCCO  
RICHARD J. V. SOGAN  
DIDIER DONATIEN ALIHONOU

*AND EXHIBITION CURATOR*  
ALAIN GODONOU  
WITH THE VOICES OF  
LUCRECE HOUEGBELO  
PARFAIT VIAYINON  
DIDIER SEDOHA NASSEGANDE

*AND*  
SABINE BADJOGOUMIN

*WITH*  
DOWOTI DESIR

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MATI DIOP

*IN COLLABORATION WITH*

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PRODUCED BY

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GABRIEL GONZALEZ  
MAKENZY ORCEL  
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NICOLAS BECKER,  
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PRODUCTION MANAGER  
LINE PRODUCER  
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

GILDAS ADANNOU  
MARCO TULIO PIRES  
CHRISTIANE CHABI KAO  
AMA AMPADU

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