

FILM REVIEW

Jean Luc Herbulot, director/creator; Toumani Sangaré, director; Hubert Laba Ndao, director. *Sakho et Mangane*. 2021. French, Wolof. Dakar, Senegal. Canal+ Afrique. 50-minute episodes.

Sakho et Mangane is a new crime series created by the Franco-Congolese director and screenwriter Jean Luc Herbulot for Canal+ Afrique, the African arm of the French media giant. The series, now streaming on Netflix, was promoted for the extensive African involvement in its creative team. The episodes are all directed by Herbulot along with Toumani Sangaré and Hubert Laba Ndao. The series focuses on an elite crime unit in Dakar which is tasked with investigating a series of increasingly supernatural crimes across the Senegalese capital, to which the show's cinematographers seem to have had virtually unlimited access.

Shortly after its release, the creators of *Sakho et Mangane* were accused of plagiarism by the Senegalese rapper-director Mass Seck, who suggests that the show borrows his own concept for a Dakar-based crime show called *Division X-Dakar*, which he had apparently been shopping to Canal+ for years. ("Plainte contre Canal+ pour plagiat du film Sakho et Mangane," *Good Morning* [2STV Senegal, January 19, 2021], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPG8Vv-353k>.) One of the five lead writers for *Sakho*, the Senegalese screenwriter Augustin Diomaye Ngom, dismissed these allegations out of hand, telling Radio France Internationale: "The detective (*policier*) genre does not belong to anyone. No one can lock down the detective genre." ("Sénégal: la série «Sakho et Mangane» de Canal+ au tribunal de Dakar," RFI, April 15, 2019, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20190415-senegal-serie-sakho-mangane-canal-atterrit-tribunal-dakar>.) Ngom's point is well taken, but his defense raises an intriguing question. Could one in fact steal something like the detective genre? What would that look like, and what might it make possible?

But *Sakho et Mangane* is not very interested in such questions. At its core, we find a familiar staple of the genre: a hot-headed young officer and a more experienced older detective must become partners against their wishes to solve crimes that no one else can. As Lieutenant Basile Mangane, Yann Gael channels every younger half of the buddy cop archetype, ricocheting around

like a shaken-up energy drink and chewing the scenery with a pistol stuffed in the back of his trousers. Isaka Sawadogo is terrific and understated as Commandant Souleymane Sakho, an impossibly calm bundle of gravitas and vaguely pained expressions all wrapped up in an exquisite tan suit. The series also features a host of compelling (and at times rather stock) recurring characters. Most distinguished among these (although criminally underused by the show's writers) is Christiane Dumont as Sakho and Mangane's boss, Chief Mama Ba. Although the buddy cop trope is certainly venerable, the more relevant genre architecture here seems to be the recent wave of supernaturally-inflected crime series unleashed by *True Detective*.

For viewers interested in getting a taste of the series, the first few episodes offer the most coherent point of entry. Their storyline centers on an artifact that has been stolen from the Lébou, the indigenous communities of the Cap-Vert peninsula on which Dakar is located. The arc of these episodes puts in play a heady mix of contemporary themes, from clandestine immigration and the extraction of African cultural patrimony to the sexual politics surrounding Western researchers and debates around indigeneity in African megacities.

Later episodes are less successful at navigating the fine balance between the messy and the interesting as they churn through virtually every supernatural cliché one might auto-generate about West Africa—zombies, *gris gris* that make one bulletproof, witch doctors, succubi, and so on. Amid the mounting chaos of the back half of the series, one recurring and fascinating tension is what the show has to say about intraregional xenophobia. Senegal may be somewhat tritely described as a "land of mystery and modernity" in Episode Seven, but in *Sakho et Mangane* most (if not all) of the occult phenomena that our heroes must do battle with are coded as foreign to Dakarois. The occult often comes from elsewhere in this show, mainly from other African countries. At times this reads as a warning to urban cosmopolitans who have lost touch with their roots, while at other times it seems as if the show is proposing an overlay of the occult and the foreign with only the police being able to stand in their way (although this is complicated by the fact that Sakho is Burkinabé and may have supernatural powers of his own).

Overall, *Sakho et Mangane* is perhaps best understood as a preview of what may be to come as international conglomerates such as Canal+ and Netflix continue to commission content from African creators for distribution on the continent and abroad. Although the series is quite content to work within the confines of its genre, viewers may find its splicing of the topical and the occult to be compelling, or at least messily interesting.

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