

FILM REVIEW

Katy Léna Ndiaye. *Money, Freedom, a Story of the CFA Franc / L'argent, la liberté, une histoire du Franc CFA*. 2022. 104 minutes. French and Wolof, with English subtitles. Senegal/France/Belgium/Germany. Icarus Films, Docuseek platform. No price reported.

Katy Léna Ndiaye's documentary *Money, Freedom, a Story of the CFA Franc* begins with two simple questions: "What is the CFA franc?" and "What is currency?" Ndiaye asks her interviewees for their definition of currency. Their answers include an institution that shapes behavior, something closely tied to language, and something entwined with authority and violence. Gradually, the film paints an increasingly intricate picture of the relationship between the CFA franc, officially created in December 1945 by Charles de Gaulle's provisional government, and the colonial system that it was designed to serve. We learn how this colonial currency has operated historically, and continues to operate, post-independence, as a tool of power and constraint across fourteen sub-Saharan African countries, despite the planned implementation in 2019 of the new ECO single currency. We hear of the brutal "shock" devaluation of the CFA franc in the 1990s, the introduction of the euro (as physical currency) in 2002, and the fixed parity between them. We also learn of deeper links between the origins of the CFA franc and slavery, specifically, the compensation granted by France to former slave owners following the 1848 abolition and the creation of the Banque de l'Afrique Occidentale in 1901 which would issue currency in France's colonies.


While the documentary, narrated sparingly in voiceover by Carole Karemera and Nafissatou Tine, uses a conventional interview format, interspersed with archival footage and sounds, apposite self-reflexive moments serve as gentle disruptions which fracture the one-way process of merely "extracting knowledge" from the filmed subjects. We are encouraged to take a proactive critical attitude toward the construction of the narrative. There is a shared commitment among the interviewees to reveal the realities of the far-reaching effects of monetary dependency. We are asked to listen to their insights with a sobriety that is kept in check by fleeting returns to the "invisible" filmmaking process, here made visible and rendered significant by Ndiaye's precise framing and editing: we see a makeup artist applying powder to an interviewee's face (the makeup artist appears in sharp focus in the foreground which highlights their presence, while the background, including the interviewee's body, is entirely out of focus), followed by a shot of Roland Colin, a former colonial administrator, remarking, "a few touch-ups?"; we see economist Kako Nubukpo take his seat in the interviewee's chair; Ndongo Samba Sylla, economist and

essayist, asks if the lenses of his glasses are clean, then, later, a moment of drama occurs when he looks straight into the camera, appearing to address the audience directly. We watch these men responding to the same archival clips that we too are shown, with the light flickering over their faces as voices of former ministers reverberate through space and time. This shared process of filmic excavation requires our involvement in its performance of “remaking” history. The silent, invisible workings of currency are rendered tangible. We study the colors and print design of bank notes, we see them being handled, we hear them rustle and tear.

In one sequence, Felwine Sarr speaks of the continued relationship of dependency between France and the regions where the colonial currency still operates. We see footage of Léopold Sédar Senghor, president of Senegal (1960–1980), followed by a series of audio segments from French presidents of the Fifth Republic. First, we hear a snippet from Emmanuel Macron’s speech (December 2019, Ivory Coast) on the planned reforms to the CFA franc. Macron’s acousmatic voice resounds as the camera moves slowly around the dark empty room familiar to us from the start (a visual memory of the narrator’s family home in Saint Louis). A gauzy muslin curtain blows in front of the camera, causing the image to appear blurred. Macron talks of France building a partnership “without inhibitions” with its former colonies, while the camera immediately undermines this claim by tracking toward a tall mirror, propped up against a wall. Macron declares “France has nothing to hide,” as we get closer to the mirror’s cracked, tarnished surface, spattered with spots of paint. We then hear the voices of François Mitterrand, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, Georges Pompidou, and Charles de Gaulle, all determinedly highlighting France’s important ties with its former African colonies. Meanwhile, the camera pans close to the walls, struggling to break free from the enveloping translucent fabric. We start to feel stifled, trapped in a haunting aural web of Eurocentric male discourse, but we are soon guided through the smoke and mirrors. Sarr later cites Albert Memmi’s classic text *The Colonizer and the Colonized / Portrait du colonisé, Portrait du colonisateur* (Gallimard, 1957) to explain the crooked interdependent relationship between colonizer and colonized, whereby, as Memmi writes of the colonizer, “the more freely he breathes, the more the colonized are choked.” Inevitably, Sarr indicates, the colonized people seek to recover their humanity by emulating the ways, knowledge, and lifestyle of their oppressors. By mixing fictive and documentary elements, blurring spaces of imagination with historical fact, Ndiaye ingeniously crafts an aesthetic language equipped to contribute to the resolute dismantling of this asymmetrical bond.

“I have a story,” the primary narrator (Karemera) announces, to which the secondary narrator (Tine) responds, “We’re listening.” Framed by this act of storytelling, the film shifts poetically and intergenerationally from the personal to the collective and from the past to the future. At the end we return to the locations shown at the start: evocations of the narrator’s family home and a farmer at work in a field with his horse. This time, it is the voice of the listener who says: “I have a story,” and the first voice responds “Tell me.” The speaker and listener have finally changed places, suggesting we have come full circle,

almost, but a transformation has occurred. Ndiaye's film calls on the audience, and the next generation of Africans, to take on the arduous decolonial task of "contesting acquired knowledge" by recognizing Africa, first and foremost, as the primary place of knowledge and invention. A new story is needed, a new vision is required for future generations that believe monetary sovereignty is possible.

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