

Title	Documenting the territory in Saint-Louis (Senegal): An interview with Mamadou Sellou Diallo
Authors	Sánchez, Laura Feal
Publication date	2024-11-01
Original Citation	Feal Sánchez, L. (2025) 'Documenting the territory in Saint-Louis (Senegal): An interview with Mamadou Sellou Diallo', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 28, pp. 34–47. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.28.02
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.28.02
Rights	© 2025, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
Download date	2026-10-13 00:50:55
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17070



UCC

University College Cork, Ireland
 Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Documenting the Territory in Saint-Louis (Senegal): An Interview with Mamadou Sellou Diallo

Laura Feal Sánchez

Abstract: Mamadou Sellou Diallo is an emblematic creative documentary professional in West Africa. He was involved in the establishment of the Master's in Creative Documentary Filmmaking (RDC) at the Université Gaston Berger in 2007, the Saint-Louis Documentary Film Festival (StLouis'DOCS) in 2014, the hosting of coproduction meetings focused on equity, called *Tënk*, and writing workshops and residencies. In this interview, we talk about the creation of these projects, specifically audiovisual ones, about their territorialisation and capacity to document a space in all its complexity, while revisiting specific examples conceived and recorded here.

The city of Saint-Louis (Senegal) is an ideal place to reflect on decolonisation, as it was at the very heart of the French colonial project, playing a leading cultural and economic role in the whole of West Africa during the first half of the twentieth century. Founded by French colonists in the seventeenth century, Saint-Louis became urbanised by the mid-nineteenth century. It was the capital of Senegal from 1872 to 1957, and the capital of French West Africa (AOF) from 1895 to 1902. Since 2000, the island of Saint-Louis has been listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Its strategic location made it the gateway to technological innovations from Europe: the first daguerreotype studio was set up here in 1860 (Revue Noire 1999), and in 1908 Catholic priest Daniel Brottier organised the city's first cinema screening in a cafeteria where the audience was mainly composed of French settlers and Africans in the employ of the colonial authority (Brigaud and Vast). Throughout the colonial era cinema was used as a tool by the colonial authorities in their "civilising mission" to control Africans. However, film screenings were gradually democratised, also reaching the African population.

Although the city's history has always been linked to the history of the cinema, it was around 2010 that a new era was unleashed, making Saint-Louis the "African capital of creative documentary". This involved the establishment of the Master's degree in Creative Documentary Filmmaking (RDC) at the Université Gaston Berger in 2007, the Saint-Louis Documentary Film Festival (StLouis'DOCS) in 2014, the hosting of coproduction meetings focused on equity, called *Tënk* (which means "to state a thought clearly and concisely"), and writing workshops and residencies.

Spearheaded by the French AfricaDoc network, these initiatives would not have been possible without the support and impetus of African professionals, who have gradually given meaning and ownership to these projects.¹ Mamadou Sellou Diallo, born in Senegal in 1966, is one such emblematic professional. Always present at the city's and the country's cultural events, he seemed the ideal person to discuss all the film initiatives that have been burgeoning in the three-century-old city for almost two decades. Listening to his experiences offers

insightful reflections on the impact on the area of these film production and exhibition strategies, one that questions the way we look at territory, ourselves and the structures in place.

We met on a warm July morning in a classroom at the Université Gaston Berger, where Diallo teaches documentary film production. He had kindly managed to spare a few hours just before the writing residency he was due to lead, and we began a conversation without looking at our watches. For me, it was a real pleasure to have this conversation. Having lived in Saint-Louis for thirteen years, I have had the opportunity to see how festivals “create the city” and how the cultural products they present broaden our imaginations beyond the physical to enter into dialogue with other ideas from other horizons and make us resonate with them.² In this interview, we talk about the creation of these projects, specifically audiovisual ones, about their territorialisation and capacity to document a space in all its complexity, while revisiting specific examples conceived and recorded here.

But first, let’s introduce him. Who is Mamadou Sellou Diallo and where does he come from?

LAURA FEAL: Director and producer, academician, lecturer in documentary film at the Université Gaston-Berger in Saint-Louis, involved in a number of initiatives in the Senegalese sector and elsewhere: tell us about your background and how you got to where you are today.

MAMADOU SELLOU DIALLO: My background is in literature. I’m a Lecturer in Modern Literature with a rather atypical background, which I combined with training as an actor, then director, at the Atelier de Recherche et de Pratiques Théâtrales at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar. I came to cinema through theatre. When I was preparing my Diplôme d’Etudes Approfondies dissertation (PhD Comps Exams), I came across the notion of documentary theatre. I found the concept quite intriguing, especially as it led to some innovative research into reality and the way in which it was used as material. I found this way of working with life stories, of giving them a theatrical quality, interesting and in keeping with my desire to question reality and “truth”. I ended up at the University of Grenoble, in France, thanks to a meeting with Jean-Marie Barbe, the founder of the Lussas/Grenoble Documentary School and the États Généraux du Cinéma. On my return to Senegal, from 2003 onwards, I spearheaded the development of documentary film in Saint-Louis as a lecturer and coordinator of the RCD Master’s degree in partnership with Grenoble University, and as a producer, setting up Les Films de l’Atelier, which has produced around fifteen films since 2005.

FEAL: Tell us about this Master’s degree programme, which ran from 2007 to 2017, and which has trained many West African documentary filmmakers who are still working in the sector. A real school. Where are we today?

DIALLO: The Master’s degree programme has had an absolutely magnificent decade: ten classes, around a hundred individual and collective films by students from eighteen African countries and France. It’s not pretentious to say that we very quickly became the training school for documentary cinema, the school of African cinema par excellence, given the results: the number of people trained who have been able to make a career, become author-directors, set up their own production company, become well known and establish themselves in the profession. I’m thinking of Aïsha Macky (Niger), Mame Woury Thioubou (Senegal), Ousmane Samassekou (Mali), Galadio Parfait Kaboré (Burkina Faso), Eddy Munyaneza (Burundi), Delphe Kifouani (Democratic Republic of the Congo), among others. Those who hold the reins

in the field of cinema in Africa largely belong to our Saint-Louis Master's family and its writing residencies.

After this first period, there was a pause due to the precariousness of subsidies.³ For us lecturers, the struggle was not just to resume, but to do so within an African economy. That's how the Master's resumed in 2023, thanks to the exclusive support of the Senegalese Ministry of Culture, through the Fonds de Promotion de l'Industrie Cinématographique et Audiovisuelle [Film and Audiovisual Industry Promotion Fund] (FOPICA). This is the first autonomous year of the programme, which still has the same mix of students from different countries. Now it is called the Master of Cinema, Audiovisual Production and Creation (CIRAC).

FEAL: Documentary film production proliferated in West Africa in the early 2000s. What do you think are the reasons for the appropriation of this genre by African artists?

DIALLO: I think that with the digital revolution of the 2000s and the introduction of lightweight technical equipment, documentary seemed to be the form most within the reach of Africans, who had easier access to the role of author-director. Digital technology offered the possibility of expressing oneself to the world and of experimenting with new narrative forms. Documentary also gave rise to a powerful trend of first-person films that showed that it was possible to narrate oneself, to regain the power to say what one thinks from one's own point of view. Many early films were told in the first person: personal stories, about subjects that speak to us, a cinema of proximity. We also reflected on this emergence in *La Diversité du documentaire de création en Afrique*, a book edited by François Fronty and Delphe Kifouani.

In my case, I made a film, *Le Collier et la perle* [*The Necklace and the Pearl*, 2008], about my wife and the birth of my child, which only documentary filmmaking and this lightweight set-up could make possible. The same goes for other films, such as *Les Larmes de l'émigration* [*The Tears of Migration*, Alassane Diago, 2010] or *L'arbre sans fruit* [*The Fruitless Tree*, Aicha Macky, 2016], which also speak in the first person.

Before filming others or looking outwards, we film what speaks to us in particular: stories from our families, our communities, our villages... So, this emergence that I was talking about, yes, it's technical, but also—I don't know if the word is appropriate—very sociological and very ontological. The power to say "I" and to realise that we are no longer solely in the collective "We", in the "We Africans". I remember a very powerful phrase in Alassane Diago's director's statement: "I'd like people to remember my mother's story when they talk about immigration". That's a very powerful statement in a director's political statement, because you are assuming your singularity.

It is not always easy to tell these stories because they are intimate, and sometimes they are stories of confrontation with one's own society. Documentaries require you to have a point of view, to say how you feel about things in relation to your own person.



Figure 1: Q&A between Mamadou Sellou Diallo (right) and the film director Alassane Diago at the StLouis' DOCS festival. 6 May 2023. Courtesy Estrella Sendra.

FEAL: Do you think there is a link with a particular political or ideological context coinciding with this emergence of African creative documentary?

DIALLO: There were common challenges: something that appealed to all those generations on a massive scale, so that the Senegalese, the Malians, the Burkinabe, etc. felt the need to say who they are. Let's not forget that politically we are in the late 1990s, early 2000s. We'd just come out of the Sankara assassination; we were at the beginning of the effervescence of the hip-hop movement in Africa; there was a youth revolution that would later, years later, gave rise to "*Y en a marre*" ["I am fed up"], "*Le balai citoyen*" ["The citizen broom"], "*Filimbi*" ["Whistle" (in Swahili language)], and so on (Dimé et al.). The revolution in Burkina Faso, which ousted Compaoré from power in 2014 and here in Senegal, which opposed Wade and his excesses, were filmed by documentary filmmakers such as Galadio Parfait Kaboré's *Place à la révolution* [*Place to the Revolution*, 2017] and Rama Thiaw's *The Revolution Won't Be Televised* [2016] with hand-held cameras. Katy Lena Ndiaye also made a film about the rapper Smoky titled *On a temps pour nous* [*We Have Time for Us*, 2018]. I think that on the African continent there is a common call to action and then, quite simply, there is a kind of collective emulation across the generations: we felt that with this tool there was an opportunity to express ourselves and address our community in an original way.

FEAL: In the Master's degree programme, you supervise students who have the practical task of writing a documentary screenplay and shooting the film in Saint-Louis. What do you mean by the term "documenting the territory"?

DIALLO: When we talk about territory, I immediately think of Deleuze's notion of deterritorialisation. For some people, Deleuze is a thinker of "becoming". I even make gestures

with my hands, because it's a way of recontextualising, of moving a device elsewhere and offering it a new arrangement, because everything depends on the cultural context in which it is set. In Saint-Louis, since 2007, we've created a new territory for documentary cinema, we've marked it out and we're trying year after year to find our own pathway within it: a unique event that would serve the city but above all the practice of cinema in Africa here and nowhere else.

FEAL: What does Saint-Louis have to offer a documentary filmmaker?

DIALLO: I think that the practice of documentary filmmaking opens up spaces for discussion, and in this sense, we are challenged by Saint-Louis, a territory whose reality is very powerful. There are environmental issues, like coastal erosion and the breach, in the area surrounded by water, called the *Langue de Barbarie*;⁴ and of course Saint-Louis' colonial past. The whole uniqueness of this city of *métissage*, of blending of cultures and peoples, lies in its own shifts and changes. It is an urban society confronted with its own geographical diversity: the Sor district, the island, crossing the bridge and disembarking at Guet Ndar⁵... another universe! It's home to a population of fishermen who maintain a kind of traditionalism but are confronted with extremely political and topical issues: the exploitation of wealth by Westerners, the management of fishing licences and emigration. It is a land of emigration precisely because it is a land of fishing... With these ingredients the territory becomes extremely rich. All the richer when those who look at it come from different territories: Congo, Burkina Faso, Mali...

It's amazing just how familiar the Senegalese can be with certain realities... We've had some rather unusual experiences here; for example, when foreign students took great offence at the presence of the statue of Faïdherbe, an absolutely revolting symbol of colonisation that bore the shameful inscription "*les sénégalais reconnaissants*" ("the grateful Senegalese").⁶ This drew the attention of their fellow Senegalese students, most of whom had never asked themselves the question. What's interesting is the combination of a territory of remarkable complexity and richness, alive and kicking, and the viewpoint of Africans who are strangers to this land, who bring a different vision, a different way of decolonising, in fact, because when you're in the thick of it, you're in your own reality and you may not have the proper distance. The collective emulation allowed us to sharpen our view of reality and to question it through the medium of film. The Saint-Louis documentary school was a place to do just that: to learn how to sharpen your eye.

FEAL: How do you support the students in this creative process?

DIALLO: There's a basic guideline: you must make a film in the geographical environment of Saint-Louis; and another guideline that goes with that: you have to confront reality. It's an exercise that every documentary filmmaker has to learn: get outside of yourself. The real thing is people, the human element.

One of my students recently began working on a film about her foot disability. She's a very intelligent girl but very introverted, who had to fight a lot to become the woman she is today. The film is very introspective. We had to push her to go and see other people. She came back absolutely shocked by the fact that there are people who look like her and who sometimes have extremely complex stories, even more complex than hers. She realised that she is not alone in the world and that, as a result, her film could be enriched by other perspectives and have a wider scope.

Reality is another territory that belongs to all of us. That's where the notion of territory is very fluid: we leave geography and enter the imaginary, a much wider space. There's an imaginary expression that I particularly like and that could shed even more light on this: the "documentary continent". An imaginary world apart, a constellation in the distance, a kind of vision (of reality), a way of looking at the world from a certain distance that invents documentary as a form of thought.

FEAL: What are we telling through this imaginary Saint-Louis?

DIALLO: We can tell a story that takes place in Burundi here in Senegal. In *Lettre à Lubumbashi* [Letter to Lubumbashi, 2015], Daddy Dibinga Kalamba recounts untold stories of his city, which for him is like Saint-Louis, by writing a letter to it. He allows us not only to visit Saint-Louis, but also to visit the memories of the city where he was born. In his film *Le Troisième vide* [The Third Void, 2016], Burundian director Eddy Munyaneza says that "any land can become a land of exile." It is thanks to the aesthetics of cinema that we can tell the story of exile through Saint-Louis. He has made a powerful film that shows how we feel through images, how we feel the emptiness inside us in a land of exile, precisely by mastering archive and newsreel footage...

In *Mon identité* [My Identity, 2017], Diane Kaneza discovers a sociocultural reality here that she didn't understand at first: "*Le cousinage à plaisanterie*", joking cousins.⁷ Coming from a country, Burundi, where the same question can lead to murder, she was shocked by how easy it was for people here to ask someone their family name and ethnicity, and how quickly it was laughed at. Her film takes the form of a letter to an imaginary friend back home, to whom she recounts this singular experience. It becomes an invitation to travel, to revisit history, to give news of other territories, to circulate worlds. And to do this, she uses every imaginable register, with a freedom of tone and register, and very endogenous narrative resources: African oral traditions, animation, role-playing, etc.

FEAL: Looking at your catalogue of over a hundred very diverse and varied titles on the same territory, I wonder if there are any films that still surprise you?

DIALLO: Of course! And that proves that it's not just a question of setting, because you can see the same streets and the same environment, but the way you film leads you into other worlds. It's about the way we look at things. For example, speaking of method, there's an almost categorical ban on filming the bridge at a certain point (at the exit on the left, towards the market).⁸ All the shots of the bridge are taken from there, because it gives a very postcard image of the bridge very quickly, very magnificently, very well framed in fact, but which then becomes the only way of seeing the bridge. To experiment with the documentary eye and the creativity of the eye, I invite the students to film the bridge in a different way. In fact, I was quite surprised to see how, in Ousmane William Mbaye's documentary *Ndar saga waalo* [2024], the bridge was filmed in a different way by shooting from underneath. We film Saint-Louis from every angle, but always refusing to be part of the dominant representation.

FEAL: Which is always the first, most obvious reflex...

DIALLO: Absolutely. But by forbidding them to use postcard images, it predisposes them to look for more cinematographic images and ask themselves: what is a cinematographic image? I think that's really the aim of the game: to go beyond the Saint-Louis setting to show that a production is an experience of the eye, an individual adventure. Yannick Edoh N'Tifafa

Glickou, a Togolese student, didn't like the bridge because it led to the statue of Faidherbe, so his question became: How do you film the bridge you don't like? In his film, and indeed in all the rushes, the images were totally disjointed, moving in all directions, he was filming his feet... it was really "bad imagery" if you like. I found it extremely interesting from the point of view of an author who questions reality through their own means. The documentary approach is a battle with reality. You shake up reality and it shakes you up too, and it's in this confrontation that a different view is born, a different account of reality.

FEAL: Very interesting. In that sense, from an aesthetic point of view, do you see any trends in the different generations or changes over the years?

DIALLO: When we talk about trends, I'm reminded of the reproach that some malicious people have made about AfricaDoc films: "all the films are the same". It's totally untrue, but it's also true: why shouldn't they all be the same? It's as if Africans of the same generation in terms of age and experience didn't have the right to feel in an almost similar way a kind of injunction and urgency of reality that made them act in the field of cinema with concordant political commitments. To tell the truth, I've never understood this unfounded criticism. We thought that questions of identity, of "who I am" or "what my culture is" were outdated, but we realise that they're not: we're only sixty or so years old as independent nations and so the question of colonisation and traditional structures remains extremely present.

Some of our films have been criticised for being socio-anthropological curiosities, but why not? Why, that for the first time Africans are massively able to film themselves, not make socio-anthropological films about rituals and so on? It's thanks to this that we've had films like *Comment je suis devenu diola* [*How I Became Joola*, Sébastien Tendeng, 2015], *Lebou* [Soukeyna Diop, 2024], *Fiifiré en pays cuballo* [*Fiifiré in Cuballo's Country*, Mame Woury Thioubou, 2018], and other ethno-anthropological focused films. Many of our students have this anthropological curiosity. But when you take them by generation, the films are not the same in terms of issues, themes, etc. and, year on year, we see more and more technical curiosity, which has allowed the insertion of animation, a bit of special effects, etc. For each generation there are pearls of genius. For each generation there are gems, powerful films that set a kind of example of gesture. If you look at it from the point of view of cinema, you can't reproach a filmmaker for always making the same film: Sembene made the same film, as did Djibril Diop Mambéty, if we consider the politics of the filmmaker, who in one way or another is affected by the same life issues, the same political tensions, the same ideology of struggle, a way of doing things, a personality of his own.

FEAL: We were talking earlier about the political context in which the documentary genre emerged here. Has this influenced the films? Would you say that these young filmmakers are interested in conveying political discourse through their films?

DIALLO: If you were looking for radically militant political films, it would be very difficult to find them. It depends on the personality of the filmmaker. I'm thinking of *Demain l'Afrique* [*Tomorrow, Africa*, 2012] by Galadio Parfait Kaboré, who is very militant by nature, a very revolutionary Sankarist. Or *Sunu biir: Nous-mêmes* [*Our Interior, Ourselves*, Yannick Edoh N'Tifafa Glickou, 2017], by the Togolese filmmaker who didn't like the bridge and was very revolted by this colonial heritage of Saint-Louis.

It should also be noted that, apart from very specific periods, such as the time of the "Y en a marre" movement, Senegal is not very conducive to a militant film of this kind, because

it is a very peaceful reality compared to other countries. There have certainly been recent political documentaries, such as those made by Katy Lena Ndiaye, *L'Argent, la liberté, une histoire du franc CFA* [Money, Freedom, a History of the FCFA, 2023] or Ousmane William Mbaye's *Mère bi* [Mother, 2008], *Président Dia* [President Dia, 2012] and *Kemtiyu: Séex Anta-Cheikh Anta* [2016], but they have reached the maturity of their careers. But if we're talking about the younger generation, who have entered the film industry through documentary filmmaking, we have activists working on social political issues, day-to-day politics. We're doing politics circumscribed to issues of identity for women, issues of emancipation and our place in the world, social realities that people face every day.

When Cameroonian filmmaker Joseph Dégramon Ndjom made a film called *Moi, bâtard* [*I, Bastard*, 2014] declaring, "I don't know my father, I'm a bastard, but I talk about it", it was an extremely powerful piece of social activism. When documentary filmmaker Alassane Diago decided to go naked and find his mother in *Les Larmes de l'émigration* [2010] it was a social revolution. The women in his community thanked him for making the film, saying, "You've shown us for the first time. Thank you for showing us what we are, what we endure here. Your mother's example is for all of us." It's a militant film in favour of this group made vulnerable by the emigration of men. We see social activism that puts the issue of women back at the centre, as in *Avec la femme, rien ne va...* [*With Women, Nothing Works*, Badiolo Coulibaly, 2014] or *Le Goût du sel* [*The Taste of Salt*, 2011] by Ndeye Souna Dieye or the films of Aicha Macky. In her documentary *Savoir faire le lit* [*Knowing How to Make the Bed*, 2013], the Niger woman takes an extremely combative approach to sexuality and sex education for women.

I remember a wonderful experience I had with *Le Collier et la perle* when a woman embraced me and thanked me, saying that the film took a loving look at our suffering bodies. It's one of the greatest compliments I've ever received as an author. When we talk about militancy, we mustn't forget how a film becomes popular because, as Bertolt Brecht said talking about theatre, it gives power back to the people by adopting their point of view, but by questioning that point of view to give them access to power again: to feel that they are also capable of talking about sexuality, that they are also capable of rebelling. The film *Face à face* [*Face to face*, Mame Woury Thioubu, 2009], in which the filmmaker describes how she felt ugly, a tomboy, is an unprecedented social audacity for these societies that impose on women to always be beautiful: if you're not, you must lighten your skin, put on a wig... look like a white woman. A woman, a director, who dares to say "I'm ugly" is still a revolution.

FEAL: So far, we've talked about films as an auteur process, but how and where do audiences receive these works? How do they react? From my own experience, I can see a certain difficulty in the reception of this genre, to which we are less used to in Senegal.

DIALLO: I'm particularly interested in this line of thinking, which ties in with Roger Odin's notion of "communication spaces" and with the notions of deterritorialisation and recontextualisation that we were talking about earlier. What happens in the documentary? What you say is extremely true: it's not easy to experience because people aren't used to it. We're used to fiction or television, but not to documentary, with its aesthetics and slow pace... We're dealing with something quite different. *Cinéma du réel* [realist cinema] takes us back to situations we see every day: someone selling fish in the street, for example. So, you have to go step by step until you come across centres of interest, strong words or conflictual situations to hook the audience.

At the same time, experience has shown that some films have been very surprising, because in this body of films, which doesn't immediately attract audiences, there are still films that shock and lead to certain discoveries: there's a different reality happening elsewhere that we've filmed, and so, it opens new possibilities. The documentary never ends with the screening, it opens another space for discussion and redistributes the word among the people, implying the extension of the message at our level. We were talking earlier about "empowerment".

There's a term I came across recently, coined by Bawa Kadadé from Niger, who did a Master's degree at Université Gaston Berger, which introduces the concept of "exposing people to documentary". I liked this expression. It denotes a kind of deliberate contamination, exposing people to radiation. In the long run this inevitably produces recognition of the form and gives legitimacy to documentary. I think that's what's happening in Saint-Louis.

FEAL: Exactly. I would like to know, in your opinion, what role a festival like StLouis'Docs plays in this "documentary exposure"?

DIALLO: For over ten years, we have been exposing people to documentaries and little by little, culture is taking hold. For example, for the past five years, we have been bringing documentary screenings from StLouis'DOCS to a small rural community like Gandiol, accompanied by authors and professionals who lead debates with the public and, in addition, the Pocket Docs, so that young locals can begin to learn and film the realities around them.⁹



Figure 2: Screening of Pocket Docs (short films) created by the youth of Gandiol at the StLouis'DOCS festival. 2 May 2024. Courtesy Laura Feal.

This "local cinema" means that the people you film begin to become familiar with and recognise the object. It's like a child who has been exposed to a museum since childhood; he

will certainly grow up with a curiosity for paintings. Little by little, Saint-Louis is exposing its populations to documentaries through the Festival StLouis'DOCS. There is a certain “educated” audience that we find every year, but there are also young people who are starting to like documentaries because they have been exposed to them. High-school students, who grew up watching films, develop a particular interest compared to others who have not had this access. This also means that when a film crew arrives in Guet Ndar, the population is more receptive, because they know what a documentary is, because they have seen, for example, what Sébastien Tendeng [*Cris du cœur (Cries of the Choir, 2009)*], Rosalie Gladys Bessini [*Boly Bane, 2012*] or Mariama Sy [*En attendant le deluge (Waiting for the Flood, 2013)*], filmed at home. I cite films that have helped people become used to seeing cameras in Guet Ndar. So even populations that have not been exposed to the culture of cinema or who are not educated, manage to recognise the medium and that is interesting. This practice of exposing people to documentaries works to create a feeling of hospitality that allows the documentary to be welcomed. I think that through these initiatives, Saint-Louis will become a vast space for communication around documentary film, thanks, not only to the number of people reached through the films that we show them—but it is also calculated—and responds to a community interest through a programme made of echoes and resonances. We document their point of view on the world, and we affirm it, showing films that depict similar realities.

FEAL: After fifteen editions of StLouis'DOCS, I wonder what the impact is on people who have had access to this body of films, carefully curated to create resonances?

DIALLO: It's very difficult to measure, but I think that, in the long term, it's through the little gestures that we say to ourselves “hey, something happened.” We must also add other initiatives, such as the screenings of Amina Awa Niang's collective, Écrans du Fleuve, which organises screenings in different neighbourhoods and is increasingly called upon to “find films that talk about us”.¹⁰ This helps to strengthen this hospitality, to create a kind of waiting situation that motivates receptivity. We can already see an elite audience—who go to the screenings of the Institut français or who work in the sector—and an audience driven by their own curiosity. The culture of documentary is taking hold, but it's really in the long term.

FEAL: It's special to have so many different perspectives on the same territory—either geographical or imaginary. In your opinion, what does this arsenal of audiovisual archives bring to Saint-Louis?

DIALLO: We come back to how the modern cinematographic universe resuscitates “the archaic universe of doubles” which Edgar Morin spoke about. I think that all these films (around a hundred) create a kind of archive of the imaginary museum around Saint-Louis. On the academic level alone, we can work on it for sociological or cinematographic approaches. We have an interest in ensuring that they do not age and continue to circulate for different purposes. All these films build the memory of Saint-Louis beyond what the colonial archives retain, beyond even the works... because we have documented a huge number of facets of the city: on the question of the environment, on the circulation of men and women... The film *An Burujdu* [Amidou Sogodogo, 2013] tells us about the first wave of Malian immigrants, who settled in the city in the nineteenth century and who merged with the local populations.

By filming, we make things complex and create new stories. This is the case of the documentary on the woven loincloth and the transmission of know-how [*Tressor tissé (Woven braid, 2017)*] by Mireille Niyonsaba, where the director goes so far as to open the suitcases of old people who have kept woven loincloths dating from the nineteenth century... it started from

a simple curiosity—about why women wear this cloth on Fridays—and ends up questioning how it is currently a woman of French origin who has started to weave loincloths, to keep them... The story changes and brings complexity to the subject of transmission, the safeguarding of memory, the blending of cultures and populations of Saint-Louis and speaks about our current events, our presence in the world today, comparing the use of the loincloth to that of wax cloth. We build memory by confronting the past with the present, always in connection with current issues and therefore, there is a kind of safeguarding but also the creation of a living memory.

FEAL: A new, updated, expanded memory?

DIALLO: The documentary allows precisely this almost literary effort to recreate a lost territory; living memory follows the march of time. We film contemporary history within the territory.

Notes

¹ Created in 2002 by Jean Marie Barbe, AfricaDoc (www.africadoc.org) is an African network of creative documentary cinema professionals, which has focused mainly on training and production, as well as North-South exchanges.

² Notably, the African documentary film festival of Saint-Louis, StLouis'DOCS (15th edition in 2024), but also the international contemporary dance festival Duo Solo Danse (15th edition in 2024) and the Saint-Louis International Jazz Festival (32nd edition in 2024).

³ The funding came from a North–South cooperation partnership between Rhône-Alpes (France) and Saint-Louis (Senegal). Rhônes-Alpes changed government in 2017.

⁴ In 2003, following floods of the Senegal River that threatened the island recently classified as a World Heritage Site, the Senegalese government decided to artificially open a breach 7 kilometres from Saint-Louis with the help of Moroccan technicians. Since then, the breach has continued to widen, towards the south, separating in two and increasingly nibbling away at the Langue de Barbarie, from about ten meters in 2003 to several kilometres today.

⁵ Fishermen's district of the city of Saint-Louis, located in the Langue de Barbarie.

⁶ Louis Léon César Faidherbe was a French general, governor of Senegal between 1854 and 1865, who justified the use of violence to defend “French interests” in Africa.

⁷ “*La parenté à plaisanterie*” joking kinship is a social practice typical of West Africa that authorises, or even obliges, members of the same family, certain family names, certain ethnic groups or inhabitants of a certain region, territory and province to mock or insult each other, without consequence. Included in 2014 in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

⁸ The Faidherbe Bridge is the only crossing point to the historic island of Saint-Louis du Senegal from the Sor district, and the symbol of the city.

⁹ The rural community of Ndiebene Gandiol is located 20 km south of Saint Louis, opposite the Langue de Barbarie where one of the Festival partners, the local association Hahatay, works. Pocket Docs is training offered by professionals from the StLouis'DOCS Festival to introduce students to documentary making using only a telephone as a tool.

¹⁰ Écrans du Fleuve is a cinema and audiovisual association from Saint-Louis, Senegal, created by the cultural entrepreneur Amina Awa Niang, who introduced the mobile film club “Aminata Fall”.

References

An Burujdu. Directed by Amidou Sogodogo, 2013.

Anthologie de la Photographie africaine et de l'Océan Indien. Under the direction of Jean Loup Pivin and Pascal Martin Saint Leon, Éd. Revue Noire, 1998.

L'Arbre sans fruit [The Fruitless Tree]. Directed by Aicha Macky, 2016.

L'Argent, la liberté, une histoire du franc CFA [Money, Freedom, a History of the FCFA]. Directed by Katy Lena Ndiaye, produced by Katy Léna Ndiaye, Oualid Baha, and Aurélien Bodinaux, 2023.

Avec la femme, rien ne va... [With Women, Nothing Works]. Directed by Badialo Coulibaly, 2014.

Boly Bane. Directed by Rosalie Gladys Bessini, 2012.

Brigaud, Félix, and Jean Vast. *Saint-Louis du Sénégal, ville aux mille visages*. Editions Clariafrique, 1987.

Le Collier et la perle [The Necklace and the Pearl]. Directed by Mamadou Sellou Diallo, Ardèche Images Production, 2008.

Comment je suis devenu diola [How I Became Joola]. Directed by Sébastien Tendeng, 2015.

Cris du chœur [Cries of the Choir]. Directed by Sébastien Tendeng, 2009.

Demain l'Afrique [Tomorrow, Africa]. Directed by Galadio Parfait Kaboré, 2012.

Dimé, Mamadou, et al. “‘Afrikki Mwindi’: Y'en a Marre, Balai Citoyen, Filimbi et Lucha – Catalyseurs d'une Dynamique Transafricaine de l'engagement Citoyen.” *Africa Development/Afrique et Développement*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2021, pp. 71–92, <https://doi.org/10.57054/ad.v46i1.747>.

En attendant le deluge [Waiting for the Flood]. Directed by Mariama Sy, 2013.

Face à face [Face to Face]. Directed by Mame Woury Thioubu, 2009.

Fiifiiré en pays cuballo [*Fiifiiré in cuballo's country*]. Directed by Mame Woury Thioubou, 2018.

Fronty, François, and Delphe Kifounai. *La Diversité du documentaire de création en Afrique*. L'Harmattan, 2015.

Le Goût du sel [*The Taste of Salt*]. Directed by Ndeye Souna Dieye, 2011.

Kemtiyu: Séex Anta-Cheikh Anta. Directed by Ousmane William Mbaye, produced by Laurence Attali, Ousmane William Mbaye, 2016.

Les Larmes de l'émigration [*The Tears of Migration*]. Directed by Alassane Diago, 2010.

Lebou. Directed by Soukeyna Diop, 2024.

Lettre à Lubumbashi [*Letter to Lubumbashi*]. Directed by Daddy Dibinga Kalamba, 2015.

Mère bi/Mother. Directed by Ousmane William Mbaye, Les films Mama Yandé, 2008.

Moi, bâtard [*I, Bastard*]. Directed by Joseph Dégramon Ndjom, 2014.

Mon identité [*My Identity*]. Directed by Diane Kaneza, 2017.

Morin, Edgar. *Le Cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire*. Les Éditions de Minuit, 1956.

Ndar saga waalo. Directed by Ousmane William Mbaye, Les Films Mame Yandé, 2024.

Odin, Roger. *Les Espaces de communications. Introduction à la sémiopragmatique*. PU de Grenoble, 2011.

On a temps pour nous [*We Have Time for Us*]. Directed by Katy Lena Ndiaye, Semfilms, Indigo Mood Films, 2018.

Place à la revolution [*Place to the Revolution*]. Directed by Galadio Parfait Kaboré, 2017.

Président Dia [*President Dia*]. Directed by Ousmane William Mbaye, Autoproduction, Les Films Mame Yandé, 2012.

The Revolution Won't Be Televised. Directed by Rama Thiaw, Boul Fallé Images et VraiVrai Films, 2016.

Savoir faire le lit [*Knowing How to Make the Bed*]. Directed by Aicha Macky, 2013.

Sunu biir. Nous-mêmes [*Our Interior; Ourselves*]. Directed by Yannick Edoh N'Tifafa Glickou, 2017.

Tressor tissé [*Woven braid*]. Directed by Mireille Niyonsaba, 2017.

Le Troisième vide/The Third Void Directed by Eddy Munyaneza, 2016.

Suggested Citation

Feal Sánchez, Laura. "Documenting the Territory in Saint-Louis (Senegal): An Interview with Mamadou Sellou Diallo." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 28, 2024, pp. 34–47. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.28.02>.

Laura Feal Sánchez is a journalist, project manager and expert in international cooperation who holds a degree in Anthropology of Art. For two decades, she has worked in several countries around Africa with different NGOs and agencies on gender, migration and rural development issues. Currently she is based in Senegal since 2012, where she coordinates the activities of the local association Hahatay, with a strong cultural component from a community approach. She has been a contributor to the Spanish newspaper *El País* and other media since 2018 and is engaged in different cultural initiatives as an independent researcher. She is a member of the Artistic Committee of the Saint Louis African Documentary Film Festival, StLouis'DOCS.