

# PAULIN SOUMANOU VIEYRA

## (1925 - 1987)

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Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, the eldest of eight children, was born in Porto Novo, Benin (former Dahomey) on January 30, 1925. His great-grandfather, a Muslim Yorouba, was a member of a Bida royal family in Nigeria and was sent to Brazil as a slave. Following the 1835 Muslim slave rebellion in Bahia and emancipation in Brazil, Vieyra's great-grandfather settled in the former Portuguese slave port of Porto Novo (New Port), which was said to be a tributary of the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo. He brought with him a mulatto wife, the daughter of his former Jewish Portuguese master and a black slave, as well as the Portuguese last name Vieyra. Paulin S. Vieyra's father was a Yoruba railroad administrator. His mother, originally from Sierra Leone, was a merchant. In 1935, they sent Paulin, then 10 years old, to France to attend boarding school. In 1954, he graduated from IDHEC School with a thesis on cinema in French-speaking Africa. In 1955, Vieyra made history by directing the first substantial film by a French-speaking sub-Saharan African, *Afrique sur Seine*, 21-minute, 16mm black-and-white fiction film with Marpessa Dawn, star of *Black Orpheus* (1959). It was produced by the French Ministry of Cooperation, co-directed by aspiring filmmakers Jacques Melo Kane and Mamadou Sarr and shot by Robert Caristan. This quartet became known as « Le Groupe Africain de Cinema » (The African Cinema Group). Vieyra also served as a mentor and production director for Senegalese filmmakers including Sembene and Ababacar Samb Makaram and was a founding member of film institutions including The Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI) and the Pan-African Film Festival (FESPACO).

Samba Gadjigo

# Paulin Vieyra, Multifaceted Pioneer

## Lineage

Significant migrations characterize Paulin Vieyra's upbringing and professional life, reflecting some of the cultural intricacies and traumas that have shaped African Cinemas more broadly. Born in January 31, 1925 in Porto-Novo, Benin (formerly Dahomey), Vieyra's lineage can be traced in part to the Yoruba people. Vieyra's great-grandfather settled in the former Portuguese slave port of Porto Novo (New Port), a tributary of the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo, following the 1835 Muslim slave rebellion in Bahia and his subsequent emancipation in Brazil. Vieyra's last name, somewhat uncommon among West Africans, comes from his great-grandfather's Portuguese former master, a plantation owner in Brazil. Vieyra's father was a Yoruba railroad administrator. His mother, originally from Sierra Leone, was a merchant. In 1935, they sent Paulin, then 10 years old, to France to attend boarding school.

## Career

Vieyra's multidisciplinary career as a filmmaker, producer, and scholar is central to West African film history. In 1955, Vieyra directed the first substantial film by a French-speaking sub-Saharan African, *Afrique sur Seine*. This 21-minute, 16mm black-and-white fiction film with Marpessa Dawn, star of *Black Orpheus* (1959), was co-directed by aspiring filmmakers Jacques Melo Kane and Mamadou Sarr and shot by Robert Caristan. This quartet became known as The African Cinema Group. The film's ironic title highlights the incongruous locations of Africa and the Seine River in Paris, where Vieyra was the first African admitted to study at the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC, now known as La Fémis). Vieyra went on to serve as a mentor and production manager for Senegalese filmmakers including Ousmane Sembène and Ababacar Samb Makaram and he was a founding member of film institutions that have an enduring impact today, particularly The Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI) and the Pan-African Film Festival (FESPACO). Vieyra organized equipment and personnel for Sembène's *Borom Sarret* (1963), the first of many transformative films by Sembène. Vieyra produced *Le Mandat* (1968), *Taaw* (1970), *Xala* (1974), and *Ceddo* (1977). Vieyra wrote Sembène into film history with *Ousmane Sembène, cinéaste: première période, 1962-1971* and *Le cinéma au Sénégal*.

Vieyra returned to Dakar, Senegal, in the late 1950s, staying through the 1960s, where he took on a supervisory role at the *Actualités Sénégalaises*. Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of independent Senegal, had appointed Vieyra as the first director of the Senegalese Office for Radio Broadcasting and Television and the Science and Information Technology Research Centre to organize the media office in charge of news production, educational movie screenings, and state funding of film production and education.

Vieyra's position was crucial because, under colonialism, many European powers perceived cinema as a threat, leading them to impose strict limits on the production and distribution of African films, such as the Laval Decree of 1934 which effectively forced the creation of *Afrique sur Seine* in Paris. The British and French administrations had both developed systems of screening films in the colonized nations, often for propaganda purposes and the lieutenant governor had to authorize filming in the area. In reality, this meant that Africans were barred from filming in Africa.

As Vieyra wrote in *Le cinéma africain, des origines à 1973*, "In 1955, while a small group of Africans and Europeans discussed cinema in the smoke-filled rooms of Europe, no one paid them any attention. In wanting and in

working for the advent of an African Cinema, at the time, they fought for independence in their own way, since it was never in doubt that only the national sovereignty of African nations allowed the cinematographic expression of an authentic African reality.”

## Post-Colonial Figure

In the process of decolonization, Vieyra worked to reclaim and nurture African cinema through his governmental role, his personal filmmaking, and his doctoral work as well as through his support of other African filmmakers and of African film in general. As Senegalese television developed, he took a leadership role which he retained until his departure in 1975 from his position in the government. He continued to make films, including his only feature-length film *En résidence surveillée* [Under House Arrest], which he filmed while working on his dissertation on African cinema. He promoted African film through his published criticism. He collaborated with the notable cultural magazine and publisher *Présence Africaine*. In 1975 published one of the first histories of African cinema, *Le cinéma africain, des origines à 1973*. He received his doctorate from Université de Paris X in 1982.

## Vieyra and Sembène

In issue 170 (2004) of *Présence Africaine*, Sembène recalled the impact that Vieyra and their friendship had upon his own career and on that of others:

“... I went home to Senegal, where I found Paulin S. Vieyra in the role of the head of the cinema bureau. Every week, with his team of cameramen, he prepared newsreels... [and] gave cinematography courses to... Georges Caristan who would be my director of photography... I made it known to Paulin S. Vieyra my intention to go learn to make films. His response was direct: ‘That’s good; I’m here’” (21).

After enumerating Vieyra’s personal and professional significance for his career and choices, Sembène closes his essay, stating emphatically, “Without the existence of my strong and deep ties to Paulin S. Vieyra, would I have made films?” (22).

## Resurgence

Due to the hard work of Vieyra’s son, Stéphane, to revive his work, Vieyra’s digitized films have been screened internationally. *Lamb* (1963), *l’Envers du décor* (1981) and *une Nation est née* (1961) had their American premieres at the 2018 edition of the African Film Festival in New York. *Lamb* was an Official Selection at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival in the Classics category and it was shown alongside *Afrique sur Seine* at the 2019 edition of the Pan African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO). The recent publication of “In Translation: Paulin Soumanou Vieyra” by Mélissa Gélinas in the Spring 2019 issue of the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* indicates a resurgence of interest this pioneering figure among film and media scholars. Stéphane’s invaluable work has occasioned this workshop, and we look forward to the future publications, screenings, and conferences that our meeting in Bloomington will inspire.

## P.S. Vieyra's Timeline

- 1925 : Born in Porto-Novo (Benin) on January 31st
- 1935 : Began his studies in France
- 1952 : Became the first African student to be accepted at the prestigious Institut des hautes études cinématographiques in Paris
- 1955 : Shot (and co-produced) one of the first African movies, *Afrique sur Seine*
- 1956 : Relocated to Dakar, Senegal and joined the Ministry of Information, heading the Division for Senegalese Newsreels
- 1961 : Married Myriam Warner, a librarian, novelist, and poet from Guadeloupe, with whom he would have three children: Makandjou Ola Jacques (1961), Célia Monique (1964), and Stéphane Soumanou (1967)
- 1963 : Assisted Ousmane Sembène with his first film, *Borom Sarret* and directed *Lamb*, selected in the following year by the Cannes Film Festival
- 1969 : Co-founded the Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI)
- 1975 : Left his position in the Senegalese government and published the first history of African cinema, *Le Cinéma africain: des origines à 1973*
- 1981 : Filmed *En résidence surveillée*
- 1982 : Received his doctorate from Université de Paris X, under the direction of Jean Rouch
- 1987 : Died in Paris on November 4th

## P.S. Vieyra's Works

### Filmography

With Selected Annotations Courtesy of PSV-Films.

- 1954 : *C'était il y a quatre ans* [Four Years Ago]  
In this five-minute film, a student dances in his room to music that reminds him of his departure from Africa.
- 1955 : *Afrique-sur-Seine*  
This short film depicts African students in scenes of Paris, revealing the students' questions about their identities, their culture and their futures. In voice-over a male character asks himself if Africa is just in Africa, or if it is also on the banks of the Seine.
- 1957 : *L'Afrique à Moscou* [Africa in Moscow]
- 1958 : *Le Niger aujourd'hui* [Niger Today]
- 1959 : *Les présidents Senghor et Modibo Keita* [Presidents Senghor and Modibo Keita]; *Avec les Africaines à Vienne* [With the Africans in Vienna]; *Présence Africaine à Rome* [African Presence in Rome]
- 1960 : *Indépendance du Cameroun, Togo, Congo, Madagascar* [The Independence of Cameroon, Togo, Madagascar]
- 1961 : *Une nation est née* [A Nation Is Born]  
*Une nation est née* depicts the progression of Senegal from colonization to sovereignty, shown allegorically through scenes of dance and celebrations of its newly-reclaimed independence.
- 1963 : *Lamb*; Selected in the short film competition at the 1964 Cannes Film Festival, *Lamb* was honored again as a Cannes Classic in 2018. Called *Lamb* in Wolof, traditional wrestling, similar to Greco-Roman wrestling, is a prized national sport in Senegal. It has very particular and strict rules.

1964 : Avec l'ensemble national [With the National Ensemble]; Écrit du Caire [Written from Cairo]; Sindiely ; Voyage du président Senghor au Brésil [President Senghor's Trip to Brazil]  
Écrit du Caire reports on the Conference of Heads of State at the Organization of African Unity Summit in Cairo. Sindiely tells the story of a greedy father wishing to marry his daughter to a successful fabric merchant, despite her love for another young man. The hostility of the family makes the father yield to his daughter's wishes, allowing for the young couple to wed.

1965 : N'diongane

N'diongane is a short film based on a story by Birago Diop entitled "Petit mari." A hunter, killed by a lion, leaves behind a wife and two children. To show there's still a man in the household, his son takes the name of Ndion Gane, "Little Husband." This nickname attracts teasing from his peers. Hopeless, he runs away and drowns himself in the ocean. Beside themselves with grief, his mother and sister drown themselves in turn.  
1966: Le Sénégal au festival national des arts nègres [Senegal at the National Black Arts Festival] ; Môle  
In Môle, a young fisherman dreams of motorizing his boat to make his work easier. His dream becomes reality, thanks to his courage and his determination but causes conflict between traditional values and the modern notion of progress.

1967 : Au marché [At the Market]; La bicyclette [The Bicycle]; Le gâteau [The Cake]; Le rendez-vous [The Meeting]

1974 : Écrit de Dakar [Written from Dakar]; L'art plastique [Plastic Arts]

1976 : L'Habitat rural au Sénégal [Rural Settlement in Senegal]; L'Habitat urbain au Sénégal [Urban Settlement in Senegal]

1981 : Birago Diop, conteur [Birago Diop, Storyteller]; En résidence surveillée [Under House Arrest]; L'envers du décor [Behind the Scenes]; Les oiseaux [The Birds] A 28-minute film in color, Birago Diop, conteur is a biographical documentary of the titular storyteller. While most young West Indian and African Négritude writers choose poetry to express the search for their identities, Birago Diop situated himself at the heart of the world of African literature, adopting tales and novels as his means of expression.

En résidence surveillée is the only feature-length film directed by Vieyra. An African state faced with political and economic difficulties—In his doctoral thesis a young academic encourages a return to the sources of African cultural tradition while maintaining the gains of the West.

L'envers du décor, a 25-minute color film showing the making of Ceddo by Ousmane Sembène, one of the greatest Black African filmmakers.

1982 : Iba N'diaye, portrait d'un peintre [Iba N'diaye, Portrait of a Painter]

Iba N'diaye, portrait d'un peintre is a recorded interview between Paulin Vieyra and the painter Iba Ndiaye, who evokes the important periods of his life.

### Unfinished films:

1987 : Léopold Sédar Senghor, poète président [Leopold Sedar Senghor, Poet President]; Cheikh Anta Diop, chercheur, historien [Cheikh Anta Diop, Researcher, Historian]; Voyage en Toubabie [Trip to White People Land] ; Wolé Wolé Woï Woï

## Publications

« Le film africain d'expression française » [African Film of French Expression], African Arts, vol. 1, no. 3, Spring 1968.

Le Cinéma et l'Afrique [Cinema and Africa], Paris, Présence africaine, 1969.

Ousmane Sembène : cinéaste. Première période 1962-1971 [Ousmane Sembène: Filmmaker. The First Period, 1962-1971], Paris, Présence Africaine, 1972.

Le cinéma africain, tome 1 : Des origines à 1973 [African Cinema, volume 1: From its Origins to 1973], Paris, Présence Africaine, 1975.

Le cinéma au Sénégal [Film in Senegal], Brussels, OCIC ; Paris, L'Harmattan, 1983.

« Five Major Films of Sembène Ousmane », Film and Politics in the Third World, 1987.

Réflexions d'un cinéaste africain [Reflections of an African Filmmaker], Brussels, OCIC, 1990.

As translated by Mélissa Gélinas in "In Translation: Paulin Soumanou Vieyra," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, vol. 58, no. 3, Spring 2019.

and Claire Fouchereaux is currently an M.A student in French/Francophone studies at Indiana University Bloomington