

***The Drums, the Camera and the Man :***  
***« ciné-transe » in Jean Rouch's cinema***

***On filming drums and men***

*The field work*

First of all, I would like to point out that this presentation will focus on one particular aspect of the French documentary and film maker Jean Rouch, whose work is otherwise rich in diversity. This aspect is the “cine transe” .

Jean Rouch spent more than half a century, filming in West Africa. He spent most of it in the loop of the Niger River, among the Songhay, whose rites include the dance of possession. I would like to make clear that the problem for Jean Rouch, as a film maker, is not that the “geniuses” are invisible beings. On the contrary: they are made visible, through their incarnation by the dancers. The rules of the dance of possession imply that the genius can be identified through the behavior of the dancer, that embodies them. The film maker's role, is to make, the multiple layers of représentation, in this ceremony, visible.

I will concentrate on his short documentary of nineteen seventy one, *Tourou et Bitti, les tambours d'avant (Tourou and Bitti: The Drums of the Past)*. Through a study of this particular work, I will question Rouch's relationship to the filming of invisible objects. This study will lead me to explain one of Rouch's ambiguous filming technique, which he called the “ciné-transe”, meaning : the movie-trance, or the filming-trance, as we will see.

*Tourou and Bitti: The Drums of the Past* is one of Jean Rouch's masterpieces. Through a study of this film, I will concentrate on the problems specific to his work. One of these problems is the question of defining the “ciné-transe”. About the shooting of *Tourou and Bitti*, Jean Rouch declared: “At this moment I came up with an entire theory.” Through a precise analysis of the film, I will try to expose and to discuss what Rouch called his “theory”.

***I. The Credits:***

In *Tourou and Bitti*, Jean Rouch introduces his short film with spoken credits. The credits

are played along with a short sequence-shot of ten seconds, showing the granary for which the inhabitants of Simiri are seeking protection, by trying to make contact with the geniuses through possession dance. The fact that Jean Rouch recorded his own, solemn voice for these credits emphasizes the fact that he is aware of the importance of the work he's just accomplished.

In the credits for *Tourou and Bitti*, Jean Rouch announces that Daouda Sorko, the Zima priest's son, I quote: "has invited us" to a possession ceremony. The invitation is twofold (goes both ways): we do not know if Jean Rouch is invited as a witness or as a participant.

## ***II. Step in step.***

Before following Jean Rouch and the priest Daouda Siddo in the property's courtyard, I will make a short explanation of the possession trance, as being part of culture and not of nature. I will try to answer the following questions: how is possession trance understood in the loop of the Niger river, how his build the notion of personhood in the Songhay religion.

### **A. Possession trance:**

#### ***1. Possession trance in the loop of the Niger River.***

In order to get a better understanding of the rituals shot by Jean Rouch, I will now make a short point on the world order, as conceived by the Songhay. According to them, the geniuses who possess the men are called the "holey". They are similar to men in every way, apart from the fact that they are invisible and that they can move at an incredible speed. These geniuses are the masters of the first circle of heaven, and share the earth with the men. This is how Jean Rouch pictured the "holey" in his nineteen sixty work : *Songhay Magic and religion*.

#### ***2. On the notion of personhood in the Songhay religion: PP5***

The notion of personhood, as it is defined in the Songhay's religion, is important to understand how possession takes place. According to the Songhay, the word "person" refers to all the physical and psychological components, that make up a complete human being. Jean Rouch,

has worked on his particular definition twice. Firstly in his work : *Songhay Magic and Religion*. The second time was in his *nineteen seventy three* (1973) conference named : *On the Avatars of the Possessed Person [...] of the Film Maker and of the Ethnologist*. In these two communications, Jean Rouch approaches the Songhay notion of personhood in two different ways. I intend to show, that he evolved towards a model where the film maker and the possessed, share a similar nature.

In his *nineteen sixty* (1960) work, Jean Rouch has explained, that according to the Songhay, each existent being made by God, is composed of a body and of several spiritual principles. The body of each existent being, is called his “ga”, which means “this” or “he”. The use of the third person singular, creates a distance between someone's body and identity. The Songhay call the vital powers “Hunde”, a very complex notion. According to them, a person is composed of a great variety of fluences, which make up the individual's personality. Each existent being lives with a “bia”, a double, which lives as a shadow behind their left shoulder. Through this “bia”, this double”, all the existent being can communicate. During possession trance, the dancer's “bia”, is replaced with the genius's double. Then, the genius's double protects that of the possessed by hiding it, under the skin of a sacrificed animal. Music plays an important part in calling the genius. Jean Rouch's *nineteen seventy three* (1973) conference, *On the Avatars of the Possessed Person [...] of the Film Maker and of the Ethnologist*, has a meaningful title. The word avatar basically means: “transformation”. In the title of his conference, Jean Rouch puts the film maker on an equal ground with the possessed: they both are potential “avatars”. Jean Rouch probably had all of these notions in mind, when he followed the priest, Daouda Siddo, into the possession dance ground.

### B.In the footsteps of Jean Rouch:

In this sequence-shot, Jean Rouch starts by following the priest Daouda Siddo. He then goes on to film the dancer and the orchestra. The dancer greets the fiddler who calls the geniuses by holding his head between his hands. After a while, all the musicians stop playing. Jean Rouch **chooses** to go on filming, and the dancer is finally possessed. The orchestra starts again to play. A second dancer enters into a trance, and joins the first one. Jean Rouch then goes back to the orchestra, in order to film the two drums, that were the main characters of his film: *Tourou and*

*Bitti*. At the end, Jean Rouch goes back to the audience circle.

Even if Rouch himself is not possessed by a genius, he follows the same path as the dancers. He too goes to and fro between the Zima priest and the orchestra. He follows the steps that call the geniuses. Just like the dancers, he goes to greet the orchestra. Jean Rouch has spent many years among the Songhay, he already knows the step of the initiated dancers. In his *nineteen seventy-four* (1974) article, *The Camera and the Men*, he explains the importance of a mobile film camera in his work. I quote: “*I believe that the only way to film is to walk with the camera, to lead it where it is the most efficient, and to improvise with it a different kind of choreography where the film camera is just as alive as the men it films.*” This “way to film” is Jean Rouch's particular choice of setting. He intentionally makes the choice to abide to the formal confines of the object of the film camera. For example, his choice of the prime lens meant that he had to be close to his filming subject.

### C. The film camera takes part:

According to the Songhay of Simiri, the film camera is not only a mechanical object: they think that it can detect the invisible. Rouch has been visiting the Niger River peoples for decades. They have seen him following the dancers around with his camera, and these dancers were often possessed. According to them, if Rouch settled on a dancer, a genius is coming close to him. In *Tourou and Bitti: the Drums of the Past*, Jean Rouch chose to go on shooting even when the orchestra stopped playing; the possession took place the moment he got closer to the dancers.

Was Rouch aware of the fact that his film camera had become an object that called the geniuses, a drum of the present? The film camera has found its place in the Songhay imaginary world, just as the drums Tourou and Bitti had. I think that the foreign object has found its place in the Songhay possession mythology exactly because one of the ceremony's aims is to give way to the other.

### ***III. The problem of “ciné-transe”***

Jean Rouch also tried to fit in the Songhay mythology with his cinematographic practice. He called his experience “ciné-transe”. This notion is problematic.

## A.Doubting:

### *1.The making of “ciné-transe”:*

In his article *The Camera and the Men*, Rouch gave his definition of “ciné-transe”, I quote: “when the film maker really gets into his subject, preceding or following the dancer, he is no longer himself, he is turned into a “mechanical eye” with a “mechanical ear”. Through analogy with the phenomenons of possession, I have named “ciné-transe” this strange state of transformation of the film maker's personality.”

### *2. Is Rouch in a trance state?*

Was Rouch in a trance state while shooting *Tourou and Bitti*? It seems so: he follows the steps of the initiated dancers. He also holds a device that lets him in the ritual ceremony: the “mechanical eye” and the “mechanical ear”. And, according to the Songhay, his film camera can see the invisible: it can see the genius, approaching the “bia” of the initiated dancer, to possess him.

However, it turns out to be very difficult to believe that Rouch might be in a trance state while filming. I believe that the film was his own master at the moment. He knew what he was doing: there was little time before sunset, and very little film left. During the possession dances, he previously had the occasion to shoot, the film maker had been repeatedly greeted by the possessed dancers. Such greetings took time and used a lot of film. In *Tourou and Bitti*, Jean Rouch intentionally avoids the greetings of possessed dancer Soussigne Wazzi, in order to focus on the main subject of his film: the drums *Tourou and Bitti*. After avoiding Soussigne Wazzi, Jean Rouch stops his voice-over for over fifty seconds, the longest time in the entire film. He is recording a sound document of the subject matter of his film: the sound of the two sacred drums.

Rouch's intentional choice in *Tourou and Bitti* shows that no clear parallel can be drawn between the state of the possessed dancer and that of the shooting film maker. The analogy between these two states of consciousness, which Rouch has called the “ciné-transe”, is not useful taken out of its esthetic context, especially in the field of social sciences.

B. When the orchestra and the dancers follow the film maker, the dance is perfect. PP13

According to the Songhay, when the dancer conducts the orchestra, the dance reaches its state of perfection. One could wonder whether the dance could seem perfect to the Songhay when led by the film maker.

Such seems to be the case for Jean Rouch and the inhabitants of Simiri: they congratulate him. This is probably what priest Daouda Siddo meant when he congratulated Jean Rouch after the shooting of *Tourou and Bitti*, saying: “You've done well today!”

*Tourou and Bitti: the Drums of the Past* can indeed be seen as a cinematographic achievement. The dancers and the orchestra had been expecting the geniuses for four days when the shooting took place. Just before sunset, Jean Rouch decided to start shooting anyway, so as to keep an image of the drums Tourou and Bitti. At that moment, the geniuses became incarnate, just as if the act of filming had summoned them. Thanks to his knowledge of the Songhay culture, Jean Rouch managed to anticipate the steps of the possessed dancers. His experience, might have helped him intuitively anticipate the moment when possession would take place. That is what he said in his voice-over: “We should have stopped shooting, but we knew that something, eventually, was going to happen.” This is why he went on shooting even when the musicians stopped playing.

The fact that the dance reaches its perfection when the dancer leads the orchestra is easy to understand: at that moment, the genius is directly communicating with the men. The less skilled dancer can only abide by the rhythm of the music. It might be that Rouch found a way to make possession dance happen, thanks to his close dialog with the Songhay, and to his complete involvement with the ritual. During his years among the Songhay, Rouch has become their apprentice. The possession trances he shot were part of his initiation. The Songhay have deemed him worthy of leading the dance, just like an initiated dancer.

A teaching method consists in letting the pupil discover by himself the object of his lesson. In *Tourou and Bitti*, the Songhay put an end to Rouch's initiation: from then on, he can cause the dialog between the geniuses and the men. From that moment on, the orchestra and the dancers let the film maker precede them. Jean Rouch and the Songhay share the success of this successful “ciné-transe”.

**Conclusion: Then cinema and ethnology will become friends.**

I have shown that through the process which he called “ciné-transe”, Jean Rouch was not possessed in the way the Simiri dancers were: the film maker went on making intentional setting choices. However, I have also shown that the possibility of role reversal in possession dance also applied to the film maker. Just by being there, the film maker is fully taking part in the possession ceremony. I have shown that, in *Tourou and Bitti*, it is possible to think that the film maker caused the possession trance to happen. I believe that what Jean Rouch called the “ciné-transe” was in fact a desire which he partly fulfilled. He might have made up the notion using his desire to enter the ceremony he was shooting, all the while making his cinematographic practice richer with elements taken from the Songhay culture.

I believe that “ciné-transe” was to Jean Rouch an esthetic fulfillment of his anthropological ethic, which was based upon the principles of shared anthropology. Which for Rouch means : that the anthropologist must share his means of producing knowledge on the community he's studying with the members of that community. It would be impossible to turn the “ciné-transe” into a proper research method, because this notion is too closely linked with Jean Rouch's personal work. Rouch has not left any how-to regarding the way of entering into a state of “ciné-transe”. The “ciné-transe” is not something that can be reproduced. The fact that this experience cannot be repeated is a problem that demands further researches in the field of social sciences.

In spite of this complex legacy, I believe that “ciné-transe” should be used as a theoretical tool. First and foremost, this theoretical tool could be used for the ethical, practical and even political analysis of Jean Rouch's work. The process could then be extended to the analysis of other cinematographic documents. If we do not acknowledge the potentialities of this idea, we are shutting the door on a vocabulary that could be useful in the conceptualization of visual representations of extraordinary beings in ethnographic films. That is to say, a way to tell about the men who stage the non-representable, and about the men who question this staging through film.