

FILM REVIEW

Dieudo Hamadi, director. *National Diploma*. 2014. Original title: *Examen d'État*. 92 minutes. Lingala and French (with English subtitles). Congo RDC/France. Agat Films and Icarus Films. \$398.

Dieudo Hamadi, director. *Mama Colonel*. 2017. Original title: *Maman colonelle*. 72 minutes. Lingala and French (with English subtitles). Congo RDC/France. Agat Films and Icarus Films. \$390.

Icarus Films has made the work of Congolese director Dieudo Hamadi available in the United States for the first time with the recent release, both on DVD and on the subscription streaming platform Docuseek 2, of *National Diploma* (2014) and *Mama Colonel* (2017). Two additional short films by Hamadi are also available from Icarus as part of *Congo in Four Acts* (2009). Born in 1984 in Kisangani, trained in Kinshasa and Paris, and now based in Kinshasa, Hamadi has joined a small but growing group of internationally recognized African documentary filmmakers.

All of Hamadi's documentaries were shot in his home country of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Like Hamadi's first feature-length film *Atalaku* (2013), *National Diploma* and *Mama Colonel* were both prizewinners at the Cinéma du réel festival in Paris. *National Diploma* went on to be screened at the Toronto International Film Festival, the New York African Film Festival, and at festivals in Abu Dhabi and Taiwan. *Mama Colonel* won two prizes at the Berlin Film Festival and then competed in AFI (American Film Institute) Docs as well as Canada's Hot Docs International Documentary Festival. Hamadi's most recent film, *Kinshasa Makambo* (2018), premiered at the Berlinale and has since been screened around the world, bringing greater attention to the escalating political crisis in Congo in the wake of the death of opposition leader Étienne Tshisekedi in 2017.

National Diploma is set in Hamadi's home town of Kisangani in northeast DRC, the country's third largest city. The film's subject is the *examen d'état*, a national test taken by half a million young Congolese each year upon their completion of high school. Students must pass the test in order to continue their studies at the university level; it is the gateway to opportunity, the chance for a more prosperous future. Hamadi introduces his spectators to the students of the Lycée Athénée Royal, who attend classes in decaying buildings with broken windows, where teachers who are either underpaid

or not paid at all are often on strike and therefore do not prepare students adequately for the crucial exam. Moreover, since the state fails to pay teachers, students are required by schools to pay fees directly to the school or risk expulsion. Hamadi follows a group of students expelled in their final year, who decide to rent a house together and prepare for the exam without any institutional help. This preparation turns into cheating, without which, they are told by those who have gone before them, they will never be able to pass. As we observe these students, we learn about their lives outside of school: their close friendships, their families' financial hardships, and their reliance on evangelical Christianity. Hamadi's camera stays with the students until they receive their results, and we see the celebration of those who pass and the despair of the central character Joel when he fails.

Mama Colonel begins in Bukavu, then moves northwest to Kisangani along with its main character, Colonel Honorine Munyole, a police officer who in both cities has as her mission the protection of women and children. We are mesmerized by Mama Colonel Honorine's endless energy and compassion as, with only a small unit of policemen and policewomen to help her, she seeks out and offers support to victims of violence. She visits families in their homes, welcomes victims at the police station, and goes to market squares to encourage ordinary citizens to protect the children who are their future, to come to her with information about victims and perpetrators, and to believe and help women who reveal that they have been raped. Via Munyole's work, Hamadi focuses on the plight of young children accused of sorcery by parents and faith healers as well as that of women who were raped during the Six Day War between Uganda and Rwanda, fought in eastern DRC in 2000. In a compelling concluding scene, Munyole brings a group of abused children to a house shared by a group of abused women, suggesting to the women that by caring for the children they may also begin to heal themselves.

The languages of both *National Diploma* and *Mama Colonel* are those of Hamadi's home town of Kisangani—Lingala, French, and Swahili. Hamadi himself took the *examen d'état* in Kisangani, where over a decade later he would spend two months with his student protagonists before starting the filming, which lasted for four months. He spent a year in Bukavu and Kisangani shooting footage of Honorine Munyole. Intimately familiar with the difficulties faced by his characters, Hamadi has carefully structured his films to provide both overviews of a social and political context and the concrete details of individual lives. In his words, "What really interests me are little, individual, personal stories. Of course, the history and context are in the background, but my point is to tell stories of people; for me, the link with the audience is through emotion" (<https://filmmakermagazine.com/105005-you-must-be-reactive-in-the-face-of-danger-dieudo-hamadi-on-kinshasa-makambo/#.W5J29y2ZMSw>). Despite Hamadi's deep understanding of and connection to the stories he tells, however, he uses neither authorial voice-overs nor interviews in his telling. The only voice-overs in *National Diploma* are spoken by Joel, who early in the film explains that he must pass

the test in order not to remain a porter at the Kisangani market his whole life, and later describes his need for a marabout's protection while studying. *Mama Colonel* has no voice-over at all, and no words in either film are spoken in conversation with the director.

In the typology established by film scholar Bill Nichols, *National Diploma* and *Mama Colonel* are observational documentaries, a mode of nonfiction filmmaking that "stresses the nonintervention of the filmmaker" (*Representing Reality* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, 38]). And in the publicity for *National Diploma*, Icarus Films describes it as a verité documentary that offers "no overt political commentary." Yet in order to fully appreciate Hamadi's artistry, it is important to recognize that he served as both director and cinematographer for *National Diploma* and *Mama Colonel*, and that each film has been carefully shot, framed, and edited to convey a powerful story as well as a strong, if complex, message. Hamadi testifies to the failure of the Congolese state to take care of its most vulnerable citizens: children, students, and women. Unable to offer simple solutions, he provides vivid examples of Congolese men and women who are taking charge not only of their own futures, but also those of their friends and neighbors.

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