Films of bard and actor Sotigui Kouyaté to be screened at Istanbul Modern Cinema

A “school of life” stretching from Africa to Paris and from theater to film

Istanbul Modern Cinema, in collaboration with the French Cultural Institute, commemorates actor Sotigui Kouyaté, whose career stretches from the African continent to Paris. The program which consists of seven films will be held between 6-9 December. “Until the day he died my father was my school. After his death all I have left is the school of life. He had exceptional and uncontrollable talent” says Sotigui Kouyaté’s son Dani Kouyaté who will attend the screenings of Genesis at 15.00 and Sotigui Kouyaté: A Modern Griot at 13.30 on Friday, 7 December, Kéita! Voice of the Griot at 15.00 and Little Senegal at 17.00 on Saturday, 8 December.

The legendary actor Sotigui Kouyaté who passed away at the age of 73 in 2010 was the leading representative of the West African oral culture of the griots – the caste of West African bards to which the Kouyaté lineage has belonged since the 13th century. Throughout his acting career, which started in 1966, the artist took part in numerous productions ranging from Shakespeare plays to the more experimental work he did with Peter Brook, his friend and mentor for over 20 years.

For over 40 years the Malian actor Kouyaté was an important bridge between Africa and Western culture. “The word is the weapon of the griot; one must know how to transport and make a vehicle of speech... which is a difficult art, the prerequisite of which is listening. I have found this listening attitude with Peter Brook” said Kouyaté who is renowned for his films and acting that emerged out of his association with Peter Brook. One of the few performers around whom Brook shaped particular projects for the Bouffes du Nord Theatre in Paris, Kouyaté played Prospero in William Shakespeare’s Tempest directed by Brook in 1990, bringing to the role the character of his culture in which the supernatural and the everyday mingle.

Kouyaté was born in Bamako, Mali’s capital; his family moved to Burkina Faso when he was still a young boy. He was the descendant of a nomadic caste of bards called the Griots responsible for recounting oral history through which the artist considered it his duty to resolve social conflicts. Sotigui Kouyaté, who throughout his life was one of the most visible actors of Africa, did not consider himself as belonging to any nation and claimed rather to be bound to the griot tradition.

With his tall, willowy figure the artist was an impressive sight. After working as a carpenter, teacher, and then captain of the Burkina Faso national team in 1966, Kouyaté made his debut as a film actor with the 1982 slave-history drama The Courage of Others. In 1984 he settled in Paris. An important part of Kouyaté’s artistic legacy is the Mandéka International Theatre, which he co-founded in 1997 in Bamako, the capital of Mali.

The program includes the following films: 1982 Burkina Faso production The Courage of Others directed by Christian Richard, Genesis directed by Cheick Oumar Sissoko, Little Senegal directed by Rachid Bouchareb, and London River in which Sotigui Kouyaté costars with Brenda Blethyn and which earned him the Silver Bear for Best Actor at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2009. Also screened in the program are documentaries Keita! Voice of the Griot by his son Dani Kouyaté and Sotigui Kouyaté: A Modern Griot by Mahamat Saleh Haroun.
The Courage of Others (Le Courage des Autres)
France, 1982, 92'
Director: Christian Richard
Cast: Sotigui Kouyaté, Baba Kouyaté, Mady Pafadnam, Amadou Banou
Language: No Dialogue
In this film with no dialogue set in a remote time in Africa, a band of horsemen raid a village and capture the men and women to sell them to slave traders. The leader of the village is also among the prisoners. A mysterious character then appears who, with his fiery eyes, tells the young leader about the importance of solidarity and gives him the power to help the slaves revolt. One of the rare films about slave trade from inside Africa, The Courage of Others is remarkable for its striking cinematography.

Keita! Voice of the Griot (Keita! L'Heritage Du Griot)
Burkina Faso, 1995, 101’
Director: Dani Kouyaté
Cast: Sotigui Kouyaté, Seydou Boro, Hamed Dicko, Abdoulaye Komboudri
Language: French, Bambara
“Everything started with a poor antelope” says Djéliiba and one day he can no longer resist the call of destiny and sets out on a long journey to the city. He goes to a young boy called Mabo Keita to tell him the story of his ancestors and the origins of his name. Mabo is enthralled by this exotic legend full of characters with mysterious powers and begins ignoring his schoolwork which creates tension in the household: though Mabo’s father encourages his son to learn about his culture through oral history, his more forward-looking mother believes he should receive Westernized education. A film which exhibits cultural transformation and in which tradition clashes with civilization and Darwin's theories taught at school clash with legends, Keita! brings together 13th century poetry with the picture of present-day Burkina Faso and sincerely questions the modernization process and climates in post-colonial Africa as it enters the 21st century.

Sotigui Kouyaté: A Modern Griot (Sotigui Kouyaté Un Griot Moderne)
Chad, 1997, 58'
Director: Mahamat-Saleh Haroun
Language: French
On his 60th birthday Sotigui Kouyaté returns to his native Bamako for the first time after 30 years. He recounts his childhood memories before the camera, talks about Africa, mentions his role as a bard passed on from father to son. Even though he lives and works in Paris Kouyaté is very much attached to his roots. He is both an urbanite and a clansperson and has interwoven these two personalities. In the documentary, as we try to learn more about one of the most prominent actors Africa has produced through various characters from the world of theater and film, we also discover him as a bard, a songwriter, and his healing power.

Genesis (La Genése)
Mali, 1999, 103'
Director: Cheik Oumar Sissoko
Cast: Sotigui Kouyaté, Salif Ketia, Keita Balla Moussa, Fatoumata Diawara
Language: Bambara
Adapting the story of creation from the Old Testament to Africa, the film delves into the deep roots of the continent to tell the story of the conflict between three clan leaders in Africa three centuries after the great flood. It tells the biblical story of shepherd Jacob, farmer Hamor, and hunter Esau through an ethnic strife that ravages Africa. Sissoko has set these three clans on the magnificent plateau of Mount Hombori which gives the impression that it is the beginning of the world. Producing pictures bursting with passionate colors and forceful acting, Genesis is a thought-provoking film about survival, superstition, and tribal solidarity.
**Little Senegal**  
*Algeria, 2001, 98'*  
**Director:** Rachid Bouchareb  
**Cast:** Sotigui Kouyaté, Sharon Hope, Roschdy Zem, Karim Koussein Traore  
**Language:** French  
After working for 30 years at the House of Slaves museum on Senegal’s Gorée Island, Alloune retires and sets out on a holy journey to find the descendents of his ancestors who were sold as slaves to the New World 200 years ago. His quest leads him to his nephew Hassan who works as a taxi driver in the neighborhood of ‘Little Senegal’ in Harlem. In *Little Senegal*, which was shown in competition at the 2001 Berlin International Film Festival, the director of Algerian descent has created an affectionate drama about otherness.

**London River**  
*France / UK, 2009, 88'*  
**Director:** Rachid Bouchareb  
**Cast:** Sotigui Kouyaté, Brenda Blethyn, Francis Magee  
**Language:** English, French  
Following the 2005 bombings in London an English widow crosses paths with an African forester; both have come to the city in search of their respective children. As this strange twosome track down their children they discover that they do not know much about their children who have left home and started living in the city. At first they are distant toward one another, but during the course of their quest among hospitals and morgues a dread sinks upon them drawing them closer as the need to understand one another emerges. A warm and sincere film with its plain story, political sensitivity, and, above all, Kouyaté’s acting which earned him the Silver Bear for Best Actor at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2009.

**Faro: Goddess of the Waters (Faro, La Reine des Eaux)**  
*Burkina Faso, Canada, France, Germany, Mali, 2007, 96'*  
**Director:** Salif Traore  
**Cast:** Sotigui Kouyaté, Balla Habib Dembélé, Maimouna Hélène Diarra  
**Language:** Bambara  
The village’s most precious treasure is the river which belongs to Faro, goddess of the waters. Zan, an engineer who returns to his village after completing his studies, tries to convince the tribal elder that building a new dam will bring prosperity to the village. The lives of the fishermen depend on these waters. The villagers believe that an accident in the river which ends with death is caused by Faro’s anger.