

Reflections on the 15th Anniversary of the Documentary Film *Of Men and Gods/Des hommes et Dieux*, 2002

Interview with Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire, introduced by Katherine Smith

“*Nou mache ansanm*,” says Blondine, one of the *hommes* profiled in Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire’s film *Des Hommes et Dieux* (2002), as s/he explains how *masisi* (effeminate homosexual males) in urban Haiti survive with their dignity intact. *Nou mache ansanm* may be translated as “we walk together” though *mache* also means “to function” or “to work.” *Mache* encompasses the breadth of the film, which profiles the daily lives of a group of Haitian men who identify as *masisi*. The *masisi* walk together, traversing the urban landscape and claiming the right to visibility. The *masisi* function together as a family, as a community of sexual and spiritual affiliation. The *masisi* work together, in spaces typically gendered “female” (that is to say for women with female embodiments): the market and the beauty parlor. As the film makes clear, their labors also include maintaining reciprocity with the world of the saints and *lwa* (spirits).

Des Hommes et Dieux weaves through spaces of prayer, ceremony and pilgrimage, revealing intimate moments of pleading with the *lwa* and joyous communal celebrations. The central role of aesthetics is emphasized repeatedly, such as when Blondine says, “When you’re in a ceremony and you know how to dance, people will tolerate you even more.” Through the mastery of song and dance the *masisi* profiled in the film are able to demonstrate their devotion to the *lwa* and gain recognition from their communities of worship. All of the *masisi* have close relationships with *Ezili*, the *lwa* of feminine power and a frequent patroness of gay men and women. For some of them, *Ezili* is the cause of homosexuality, while others adamantly insist that they were born gay. To the filmmakers’ credit, these contradictions are allowed to remain unresolved as testimony to Vodou’s lived complexities.

The film was shot in 2002, before the premature and chaotic end of Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s second presidency in 2004, before the arrival of the United Nations “peace keeping mission” shortly thereafter and before the UN introduced cholera to the nation’s waterways in 2010. Into the vacuum of the receding neoliberal state, Evangelicals and NGOs were expanding. When the earthquake of 2010 hit, it accelerated the expansion of both religious missions and non-profits. The virulence of Evangelical anti-gay vitriol also swelled. Magloire remembers that there were death threats when the film was screened in Port-au-Prince; two years after the earthquake anti-gay protesters killed two men suspected of being gay, a first in Haiti.¹ The film captures a difficult moment in the country’s history from the perspective of a persecuted sexual minority. Lescot sees little reason to be optimistic about the present, which she describes as “even somewhat regressive.” The film remains vital because, as the filmmakers suggest below, it provides a lifeline for LGBT activists in Haiti as their struggle continues.

¹ See Durban-Albrecht’s contribution in this volume.

What was your original vision for the film?

Anne Lescot: The idea for the film grew out of a research project I was conducting on Vodou. During this research, I noticed that male homosexuality was very present during *sevis lwa* (ceremonies) and religious pilgrimages. I felt it was essential to know more about this phenomenon, to understand why homosexuality was expressed so openly in those spaces whereas it was not so visible within Haitian society at large.

Laurence Magloire: I had recently moved to Haiti for a sabbatical year dedicated to finding a film subject, and I met Anne Lescot who spoke to me about her thesis on “transgendering” in Vodou ceremonies. As a person who knew little about Vodou and its country of origins, the topic piqued my curiosity. We agreed we would explore this theme together, and then turn it into a film.

How was the film received within Haiti?

Laurence Magloire: It’s always been important to me to return what I film with Haitians to Haitians. Anne told me that Haitians were not ready to see this film. However I organized an outdoor film festival, as part of the 2nd Edition of Contemporary AfricAmerica Art Forum. The audience reception at Port-au-Prince’s public square Champs-de-Mars was electrifying. The public wanted more. As early as the following day, I noticed Haitians’ intolerance regarding this subject and we were attacked by the press and radio stations. Death threats were made to our lives if we tried to re-broadcast the film. This reaction caused us to rarely show it. Also, the debate that followed screenings was tempestuous. The film was even bootlegged by a crook who changed the its title and sold our work on the Internet and in Haitian diaspora stores.

However, the LGBT community and the institutions that worked on AIDS prevention adopted the documentary as an outreach activity awareness tool in their support and informational sessions. We must add that all but one of the documentary’s interviewees have died of complications related to AIDS. Many denied they were infected. After the film’s release, we continued to support them through their setbacks until their demise. The sole survivor, Jean-Marcel, recently became infected. His experiences during the filmmaking process and the relationships he developed as well greatly informed how he continued to live, contrary to the experience of his screen companions. For some members of Haiti’s LGBT community, the film enabled an auto de-stigmatization of individuals who saw men like themselves on a big screen, in a film.

What has happened with the film over the past fifteen years as it has circulated outside of the country?

Anne Lescot: The film has had an incredible life, and has circulated in more than a hundred festivals and thirty countries. What is interesting is that it is not only LGBT film festivals that screened it but also festivals that focus on Blackness and even festivals dedicated to religious life. Lastly, universities, especially in the United States, have been interested in the film to the point that it's been integrated into Gender Studies and Religious Studies courses.

Laurence Magloire: Indeed, we stopped counting after eighty international festivals. The film is always in demand according to reports we received from our distributors DER (USA) and Le Collectif 2004 Images (France). We recently signed with a third distributor in Canada, called Caribbean Tales.

How do you see the film in relationship to the current climate for LGBT creative and documentary initiatives within Haiti?

Anne Lescot: The current climate in Haiti is not very encouraging. It is even somewhat regressive. During its premiere and afterwards, the film generated many debates, some very aggressive. But it allowed certain organizations, artists and photographers to tackle "homosexuality" more freely in their work. Haiti finds itself in a paradox, between the need for some to express the society's multiple realities, one still full of taboos such as homosexuality to begin with, and also all that relates to sexuality more broadly defined.

Laurence Magloire: Indeed, many young filmmakers who envisioned making LGBT films have approached us and we have encouraged them to do so. In Haiti, *Of Men and Gods* has become a cult film seen only behind closed doors.