

PIECES D'IDENTITES

Notes for Viewing the Film

Before the film . . .

Read the essay on [Pièces d'Identités](#).

It may be useful to provide a little background information on Congo before viewers screen the film. When the European powers carved up the African continent in the late 19th century, the Belgian King, Leopold I, and other Belgian notables claimed the vast, mineral rich lands of the Congo River basin as their own. Even by the abysmal standards of colonial rule, the Belgian regime was unusually callous and brutal; thousands of Congolese died working under slave-like conditions in Belgian mines and plantations.

Belgium abruptly granted independence to Congo in 1960 and Patrice Lumumba was elected its first president. He was felt to be too independent or "pro-Soviet" for Belgium or U.S interests. After just a few months, Lumumba was deposed in a coup led by Joseph Mobutu and murdered, possibly with CIA involvement, in January 1961. For the next 30 years, Mobutu, a steadfast ally of the U.S., pillaged the country which he renamed Zaire. During his rule, he accumulated several billion dollars in personal wealth, a sum equal perhaps not coincidentally to the entire national debt of Zaire.

When Mobutu's health deteriorated in 1996, the country erupted into a brutal civil war pitting central government forces against a number of guerrilla groups. The situation threatened to flare up into a regional conflict since each group received support from a different neighboring African state. Eventually rebel commander, Laurent Kabila, triumphed and installed himself as the new president. He has proven undemocratic and unpopular himself so civil war continues to smolder throughout the country. As an example, the African portions of this film had to be shot in Cameroon because it was too dangerous to take a crew into Congo.

Filmmaker Mweze Ngangura made this film to speak to those whose families, migrated from Africa to Europe and now find themselves with questions about their origins. He hoped that this film would help them with these concerns.

After the film . . .

1. With the increasing pace of globalization, more and more Africans are immigrating to Europe and the United States. As a result, the experience of exile, whether forced or voluntary, and the conflict between cultural assimilation and retention, has become a major theme of African filmmakers. Remittances from absent family members in Europe play an important role in the economy of many African villages. How does director Mweze Ngangura portray the situation of African immigrants in Europe? How does it compare to the position of African Americans in the United States? Why do you suspect many Africans are left on the margins of European society, forced to dabble in petty crime and scams?

2. Mani Kongo's royal regalia symbolize his firm, unquestioned sense of his own identity. When he literally loses these in Europe, he is also threatened with a loss of dignity and worth. Many of the other characters in the film seem to be suffering an "identity crisis;" Mwana is hiding from her past, Chaka Jo is uncertain of his, Viva wa Viva thinks that his identity comes from what he's wearing. What does it mean to have left one culture but to be rejected or only grudgingly accepted by the nation where one resettled? Could this hostility actually cause immigrants to assimilate more slowly and to retain more of their original cultures?

3. In West and Central Africa, colonial officials and businessmen rarely settled permanently. How did this influence the way Inspector Jefke and his cronies from the Bar Katanga interacted with the Congolese? How have they tried to recreate these power dynamics with the Congolese immigrants in Brussels? Anti-immigrant violence is more marked in Europe than the United States, why do you think this might be?

4. Why do you think the director chose to film Mani Kongo's flashbacks to his pre-independence trip to Belgium in black and white while the rest of the film is in color? In particular, why have Belgian newsreels been used to represent this experience? Do you think Mani Kongo's impressions of Belgium changed as a result of his most recent experiences?

5. One of the most curious figures in the film is the spirit, Noubia (presumably named after the great African kingdom of Nubia in today's Sudan) who appears to Mani Kongo on the trolley. She is a composite character blending youthful rapper with traditional griot, a young European woman with animist spirit. What incident does she cite to show him what the real experience of the Congolese in Belgium has been? (The graves of Congolese brought to Belgium many years ago). Could she suggest the emergence of a hybrid or creole identity savvy in the ways of the city yet still in touch with the "wisdom of the ancestors"?

6. Congolese men are known across Europe as especially flashy dressers. In what sense would you call the petty crook Viva wa Viva a "fashion victim?" His outfits certainly couldn't be confused with Mani Kongo's regalia or any other traditional African style of dress, yet they are deliberately different from the kind of clothes worn by the average Belgian. Where do Viva wa Viva and many young people around the world look in order to find an identity and does it really challenge consumer capitalism or just absorb it?

7. At the end of the film, Mani Kongo, as well as his long-lost daughter Mwana, the kidnapped Chaka Jo and Mayele, the engineer, all return to Africa. Indeed Mwana will even do her long postponed medical training with a traditional healer in the village. Do you think the film is suggesting a literal return of the African Diaspora from around the world to rebuild the continent, as was suggested earlier in the century by Marcus Garvey among others? Or is this just a way of suggesting a return to traditional African values as an antidote to the decadence of the West? Do you think it might prove difficult to apply traditional African values to modern life?

8. The essay in the catalog suggests that the film tends to romanticize Africa, downplaying the difficulties of living there and the impediments to working for social development - topics which figure prominently in most of the other films in this collection. If Africa is a place of such promise, why we might ask, do so many Africans risk so much - discrimination, poor jobs, cultural alienation - to leave it? For example, you might talk about the civil war in Congo at the time the film was being made.

Country facts in brief:

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Location: Central Africa, northeast of Angola

Capital: Kinshasa

Independence: June 30 1960 (from Belgium)

Population: 49,000,511 (1998)

Ethnic groups: over 200 African ethnic groups of which the majority are Bantu; the four largest single ethnic groups are the Mongo, Luba, Kongo (all Bantu), and the Mangbetu-Azande (Hamitic).

Languages: French (official), Lingala (a lingua franca trade language), Kingwana (a dialect of Kiswahili or Swahili), Kikongo, Tshiluba and Lingala

Economy/Labor: Agriculture (65%), industry 16%, services 19% (1991)

GDP per capita: \$400 (1996)

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