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## Conservators restore Africa's first animated film in colour

Nigerien pioneer Moustapha Alassane's stop-motion work Samba the Great is being screened in Bologna

[Nancy Kenney 24th June 2019 10:19 BST](#)



A scene from Moustapha Alassane's Samba the Great (1977) Courtesy of Institut Français

The French Embassy's Cultural Services in New York and New York University's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) programme have partnered with the Institut Français to restore an intriguing remnant of Niger's film history: *Samba the Great* (1977), a 14-minute stop-motion work that was the first animated film to be produced in colour in Africa.

Filmed by Moustapha Alassane (1942-2015), a pioneer of populist cinema who forged his reputation in the 1960s and 70s after Niger gained independence, the restored *Samba the Great* is being screened today in Bologna, Italy as part of the Cinema Ritrovato festival. A blend of puppet action and cartoon drawings narrated in French, it recounts the story of a West African princess who demands ever greater feats from a courageous noble who seeks to woo her and, equally important, make her laugh. Critics have interpreted Alassane's playful films, the focus of a retrospective last year at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as a form of political satire in disguise. His 1966 *The Return of an Adventurer*, for example, focuses on a young man who returns to his village in Niger with a suitcase full of cowboy gear after visiting the United States. (Mayhem ensues.)

Bill Brand, who oversaw the restoration as an adjunct professor with NYU's MIAP program at the Tisch School of the Arts, said the film was "in fairly good condition" but suffered from colour fading, dust, scratches, tears, gouges and chemical deterioration as well as conspicuous splices that made the frames appear to jump. After an original 16mm film and its sound elements were scanned in France and sent digitally via Dropbox, he and his graduate film preservation students used software to mitigate the dust, dirt and scratches. Conspicuous splices were concealed by replacing them with information from neighbouring frames, and colour was corrected shot by shot. New English subtitles were generated and synced to the soundtrack, and new digital masters of the preserved film were generated for screenings.

"When I saw the results, I thought I was watching a different film—there were so many details that I could see that were not there before," says Amélie Garin-Davet, a film program officer for the French Embassy's Cultural Services.

*Samba the Great* and *The Return of an Adventurer* are among the priorities on a list of 20 films that are being restored in an effort overseen by the Institut Français's Cinémathèque Afrique and the Centre National du Cinéma at de l'Image Animée in preparation for the Africa 2020 Cultural Season in France.