

FILM REVIEW

Marie Clémence Andriamonta-Paes, director. *Fahavalo: Madagascar 1947*. 2018. 90 minutes. Malagasy and French, with subtitles in seven languages. Madagascar. Laterit Productions. \$3.99 on Vimeo.

From the opening ancestral prayer to the final reading of a letter of encouragement to family members still embroiled in the events recounted, *Fahavalo: Madagascar 1947* features moving interviews, stunning photography, historic and contemporary contextual footage, and accordion-infused music, bringing to life what has been called the Malagasy Uprising, Insurrection Malgache, or Malagasy Revolt (1947–1949).

Written and directed by Franco-Malagasy filmmaker Marie Clémence Andriamonta-Paes, the award-winning *Fahavalo* is a powerful documentary grounded in the voices of those whose first-hand experiences provide a local perspective missing in most official accounts of the insurrection. *Fahavalo* translates as “enemy”—a term used conflict-wide, capturing the messiness of the uprising and underscoring its complexity and the many “enemies” it created. The documentary gives voice to individuals who lived through the rebellion, each providing details of how the insurrection started, who was involved, why it happened, how it played out, and the consequences and developments which resulted. Their stories reveal the lives and experiences of rebel soldiers and of civilians who fled to safety; of women and children, one born to a mother hiding and living deep in the forest; of members of political parties entrenched in opposing sides of the conflict; and of conscripted soldiers required to enforce French colonial rule. Their memories recount fighting, hiding, suffering, capture, imprisonment, and resistance. Recollections paint pictures of the strafing of bullets from airplanes; of parachutists, executions, and massacres; of machetes and spears against Kalashnikovs. Coming from different regions and ethnic backgrounds, the individual stories illuminate how they lived, fought, worked, and survived during these tumultuous years.

The interviews and close-up shots of the elders in their home communities and on location of the events being recollected often recount stories never before shared for fear of repercussions. The heartfelt memories of personal hardship are interwoven with recollections of historical events,

including the French-English conflict in which Britain conscripted African troops to overthrow the French Vichy supporters in Madagascar. The elders recount their oppression under French colonial rule, including forced labor building railways and roads; incarceration for singing songs critical of France or neglecting to pay taxes; and their land being occupied. Their memories are corroborated by French newsreels reporting the pacification of the rebels and the protection of French interests, and by the National Archives' long lists of individuals under suspicion of revolutionary or anti-colonial behaviors.

The French had promised independence to Madagascar in acknowledgement of Malagasy soldiers helping France fight Germany during World War II. Yet Charles De Gaulle reneged on this promise. Instead, at the conclusion of the war, the surviving soldiers were sent home to Madagascar and expected to resume their lives as colonial subjects, working on coffee plantations and elsewhere. Independence wasn't realized until 1960. By 1947, therefore, many had had enough.


Fahavelo's interviews, however, include people from both sides of the conflict. And although their stories provide the basic information about their identities and convictions, it may initially have seemed helpful to have a bit more explanation regarding the elders' ethnicities and affiliations to explain their varying allegiances. Yet not doing so underscores the messiness and complexity of the rebellion. And leaving the narratives uninterrupted by maps and other explicatory segments maintains the centrality of the individual stories and provides universally relatable accounts. For viewers familiar with the terrain and history, however, the specific details and place names bring to life what the participants and their families and communities endured. Moreover, the film's end credits list each elder by location, and Andriamonta-Paes' website, *fahavalo-film.com*, provides additional information.

To further provide a Malagasy perspective on the events, *Fahavelo* is organized by themes, each introduced with a Malagasy term and its definition: *Tabataba* (political turmoil), *Vazaha* (Europeans, French, English), *Mamaly* (response revenge, rebel), *Ady* (discord, conflict, fighting, war), *Ombiasa* (seer, diviner, healer), and *Miakatra* (to rise, to surrender).

Elders describe life challenges during the conflict, such as how to start a fire, as well as spiritually powerful aspects of life, such as how to use the fire-starting equipment as protection from bullets, spiritual beliefs and protective medicines, divination, and visions of spirits who advised them in their time of need. Their recollections are interspersed with supplemental imagery that contextualizes and brings to life the recounted memories. Black and white historic video footage of life from the 1940s, much of which has never before been aired, provides compelling scenes of daily life—from Malagasy involvement in the French army to making coffee, cutting sugar cane, cooking, walking along the road or railroad tracks, selling merchandise, traveling by ferry or pirogue, or building a mud house.

Fahavelo follows other highly acclaimed and award-winning films produced by Laterit Productions—co-founded with Andriamonta-Paes'

husband, Brazilian filmmaker and cinematographer Cesar Paes—which aspires to “better cross-cultural understanding.” It is a well-researched documentary, whose long list of contributors and scholars attests to the depth of coverage, and whose interviews provide a window into the profound and sometimes contradictory life experiences of Malagasy during a time of great strife. For these elders, this life-changing time remains vivid, and this documentary brings their history to light. *Fahavalo* ends with the reading of a letter of encouragement: “violent winds are battering our dignity. Comrades in the struggle, be determined, steadfast, courageous... After night always comes morning. Never lose sight of your goal. Because after winter always comes spring.”

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