

# AFRICAN WOMEN IN CINEMA: AN OVERVIEW<sup>1</sup>

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African cinema born during the African independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s re-appropriated the camera as a tool to counter the colonialist gaze that had dominated representations of Africa up until that time. The emergence of women in African cinema coincided with this nascent period during which a cadre of film professionals positioned themselves for the creation of a veritable African cinema culture. One such professional of note is the pioneer of Senegalese media culture, Annette Mbaye d'Erneville: feminist, journalist, writer, communications specialist, media activist and culture critic. The first Senegalese to earn a degree in journalism, she studied in Paris in the late 1940s, and since returning to Senegal in 1957 she has devoted her life to the cultural politics of the country, forging important institutions such as the Association Sénégalaise de la Critique Cinématographique, Rencontres Cinématographiques de Dakar (RECIDAK), and the Henriette Bathily Women's House.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Guadeloupean Sarah Maldoror, who was born and raised in France, joined forces with artists from Africa and the Caribbean during a time of heightened cultural, intellectual and political discovery. In the early 1960s she went to Moscow to study filmmaking.

<sup>3</sup> Having already joined the pro-independence movements, it is not surprising that her films would take on similar anti-colonialist themes. She has been a mentor and role model to many African women filmmakers, notably Togolese Anne-Laure Folly Reimann, whose film *Sarah Maldoror ou la nostalgie de l'utopie* (1998) traces her own life as filmmaker *engagée*.

Several women were among the film professionals who established the Pan African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) and the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI), both created in 1969. These two exemplary African cinema institutions continue to be a reference for continental co-operation and organisation in the area of culture. Zalika Souley, trailblazing actress from Niger, served on the founding committee of FEPACI, while Burkinabé Alimata Salembéré, one of the founding members of FESPACO, and whose compatriot Odette Sangho was also a member, presided over the organising committee of the first festival. The documentary *Tam Tam à Paris*, made in 1963 by journalist Thérèse Sita-Bella, was among the entries at the festival and is considered the earliest film by an African woman. Four years later, in 1967, Ghanaian dramatist and writer Efua Sutherland collaborated with the US television network ABC in the production of *Arabia: The Village Story*, a major documentary film. These pioneering women continued in their respective fields of journalism and drama, having made only one film, a common practice among the women who also utilise the moving image as a mode of expression in their chosen career. Moreover, recent developments in the seminal organisations FESPACO and FEPACI attest to the desire to continue to include women in key decision-making positions. Seipati Bulane-Hopa of South Africa served as general secretary of FEPACI from 2006 to 2013, and at the 23rd edition of FESPACO, in 2013, women took on leadership roles – one of them as president of the main juries. At the same edition, Alimata Salembéré was in the spotlight as guest of honour, in recognition of her pioneering role in the organisation.

The 1960s also witnessed the first World Festival of Black Arts, a seminal event hosted in Senegal in 1966, during which Safi Faye, Senegalese film director and ethnologist, and the first sub-Saharan African woman to direct a commercially distributed feature film, would

enter a world that would change the course of her career (Pfaff 2004).

The 1970s, a decade of unprecedented global focus on women, heralded a call to action in all spheres of women's lives: the declaration of the United Nations Decade of Women (1976–1985); the evolution of a universal women's rights movement; and the maturation of second-wave feminism, which would influence the development of women's studies in the academy, feminist film theory and a critical inquiry into the visual representation of women all brought about global changes. A noteworthy development during the decade was the emergence of the bilingual feminist research group the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), created in 1977 and based in Senegal. Moreover, from this defining decade emerged a sustained presence of African women filmmakers. Pioneer Safi Faye recalls the curiosity in the early 1970s around her enrolment at the *École Nationale Supérieure Louis-Lumière* in Paris as the first African woman to attend the prestigious film school.<sup>4</sup>

The internationality of the UN Decade of Women engendered the notion of a global sisterhood, though not without tension<sup>5</sup> – at five-year intervals (1975, 1980, 1985) three conferences were convened on three continents, in America, Europe and Africa (Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi respectively). With it came a flurry of research, conferences, reports and monographs, reflecting the diverse experiences of women around the world. For example, in 1978 women scholars throughout the African continent participated in a study visit organised by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa to conduct research on African women in the media (Anani, Keita & Rahman 1981). One of the first of its kind, the study's purpose was to analyse images of women in the media and the representation of women in policy-making positions in the African media. One of the principle premises postulated was that if there was an increase in the number of women representatives in media policy-making decisions, there would be the likelihood of more positive images appearing in the media, since a cadre of women in positions of power would serve as role models. Similarly, in 1984, in preparation for the final UN Women's Decade Conference, and in collaboration with the Association of Women Professionals in Communications, AAWORD organised the seminar 'Women, Communication, Development:

What perspectives for Nairobi 1985?' This initiative underscored AAWORD's understanding of the importance of women at the intersection of media and African development.

In the 1980s many African women's films reiterated the themes of the UN Decade for Women. It is no coincidence that during and after the UN Decade for Women there was a surge of African women filmmakers and, correspondingly, international visibility of these filmmakers and their films, many of which focused on the subjects of women and empowerment, calling attention to economic, social and cultural development from the perspective of women. The 1980s also witnessed a remarkable growth in film production by women. Many of the first generation of Burkinabé women passed through the doors of the Institut Africain d'Education Cinématographique (INAFEC), the historic film school based in Burkina Faso (which closed in 1987). Similarly, the first wave of Kenyan women film practitioners appeared during the early 1980s, many of whom studied at the Film Training Department at the Kenya Institute of Mass Communication. This impressive showing confirms the observations of Kenyan scholar Wanjiku Beatrice Mukora that women performed a key role in shaping a national cinema in Kenya (Mukora 1999).

In the final decade of the 20th century a combination of disparate movements would be instrumental to the professionalisation of African women in cinema and their growth throughout the continent and beyond.

The strengthening of networks through organising, outreach and advocacy during the 1990s ensured a visible continent-wide and international presence. Having already developed a framework for action at the seminal 'Colloque Images de Femmes', the women's film forum at Vues d'Afrique (Montreal) in 1989, the genesis of an organised movement emerged. The 12th edition of FESPACO in 1991 marked a historical moment for African women in the visual media as they forged a framework for the organisation that is now known as the Pan-African Union of Women in the Image Industry.

Paradoxically, at the end of the Decade for Women in 1985, second-wave feminism started to wane, with a post-feminist discourse arising in the 1990s and asserting that feminism had achieved its goal of eradicating sexism and confronting masculinity and machismo. At

the ‘L’Engagement de femmes cineastes’ roundtable organised by the Cinemas of the South Pavilion at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival (Africultures 2008), the use of the word ‘generation’ initially suggested a shift in attitudes about and among women.

Veteran filmmaker Moufida Tlatli recounted her experiences as a young student at the ‘l’IDHEC École Nationale Supérieure des Métiers de l’Image et du Son’ in Paris in 1968, at a time when women were expected to settle into careers as film editors or script supervisors. Her younger counterparts talked about very different experiences, much more on par with their male counterparts. The most edifying aspect of the discussion was its inter-generational and inter-continental focus on the plurality of experiences across generations, ethnicities, cultures and locations. Personal histories and post-colonial legacies were part of the mix of a very exciting dialogue among women of the South in general, and of African women in particular, who expressed a genuine willingness to address the complex issues in their experiences head on. In spite of the generational shift in experiences *vis-à-vis* women’s role as film practitioners, the current practices and experiences of women in Africa echoed those sentiments expressed by the first generation of African women film practitioners. For instance, as I have explored elsewhere:

feminists [sic] film studies that emerged in the 1970s were centred around the term “women and cinema” as [their] point of departure ... [whereas] Safi Faye of that generation had already taken a non-gendered position, thus not distinguishing herself from a male filmmaker: “I do not make a difference between Safi the woman or Safi the man”. This position echoes the present-day sentiments of Osvalde Lewat, who comes from a later generation of filmmakers, [and who] brought into question the gendering of the term *cineaste* in the colloquy title at Cannes (Africultures 2008) that specified “women cineastes” (Kelly & Robson 2014).

The increased migration of Africans to North America for study and work, coupled with the coming-of-age of Africans born and/or raised in the African diasporas of the West have resulted in changing dynamics in the construction of identities and their politics. These conditions have informed how African women are utilising cinema

to examine their social, political and cultural location, which is contextualised within the larger framework of post-colonialism, encompassing a Duboisian ‘double consciousness’ (Du Bois 1903) and a Fanonian ‘black skin white mask’ (Fanon 1967). As early as 1972, Safi Faye explored the notion of dual identity in the film *La Passante*, as a young woman navigates between French and Senegalese cultures. More than a generation later, Afro-Europeans – born and/or raised in the West, who have both European and African parents, or who have migrated to Europe (and now call it home) – also negotiate an Afro-European identity. However, these contemporary filmmakers pose questions on the contemporary issues of nationality, citizenship, integration, clandestine migration and the plight of the *sans-papiers*. And, not unlike their elders, layered within these themes are also questions of Euro-centred aesthetics, values and attitudes about beauty, culture, dress and behaviour. Filmmakers of this generation include Franco-Burkina Fasoan Sarah Bouyain (*Children of the White Man*, 2000 and *The Place In Between*, 2010); Franco-Congolese Claude Haffner (*Footprints of My Other*, 2011); Belgo-Congolese Pauline Mulombe (*Everyone has Reasons to be Angry with their Mother*, 2010); Paris-based Rwandan Jacqueline Kalimunda (*About Braids*, 2003); and Cameroonian Pascale Obolo (*La Femme Invisible*, 2008).

While much focus has been placed on African filmmakers who migrate to European metropolises to work, there is also an increasing number of filmmakers who journey to North America, both to Canada and to the United States. Furthermore, the 1990s witnessed a first generation of ‘hybrids’, born in the USA to African parents, who are grappling with and confronting issues of duality and fragmentation, as well as notions of home. Among these are Eritrean-American Asmara Beraki (*Anywhere Else*, 2012) and Sierra Leonean-American Nikyatu Jusu (*African Booty Scratcher*, 2008).

Identity has been a persistent theme in African filmmaking since its inception. The idea of a ‘triple consciousness’ explored by Akosua Adoma Owusu problematises the theme of dual identities in *Me Broni Ba* (2009), and is a more recent phenomenon experienced by this generation. They are not among the historical African diaspora known as African-American, yet are not wholly African in the sense of culture and language. None the less, they embrace both cultures and view the

world much more universally, including their ancestral homes as part of the measure of their identities. On the other hand, the omnipresence of ‘African-American’ history and culture encourages an identification with this dominant ethnic minority that is so present and defined in the culture of the US.

The first decade of the new millennium witnessed the rise to pre-eminence of the Internet and the digital dominance of new media, which have become essential to the work of African women film practitioners. Websites and blogs are a popular means to showcase artists’ statements, biographies, filmographies and trailers. Online video hosting and sharing sites such as YouTube, Dailymotion and Vimeo have enormous potential in the areas of African film spectatorship and distribution. The phenomenal success of social networking utilities such as Facebook and Twitter has also not gone unnoticed by African filmmakers. On a continent that has been frustrated by the difficulties of communication, these digital platforms have been an important means for networking, especially to exchange current information and up-to-the-minute activity. This burst of energy fostered by these unprecedented media tools may indeed suggest that a new era has begun. While this is an exciting and potentially game-changing development, it must be viewed with equal caution as the digital divide continues to plague Africa in particular. As the Internet becomes the standard for communication, those in the more impoverished parts of the African continent who have limited access to these communication capabilities will be rendered less visible or left out completely.

At the start of the second decade of the millennium the African Union declared 2010–2020 the African Women’s Decade. Since the end of the UN Decade for Women in 1985, the achievements of a generation have come to fruition. The hope is that the efforts of women since the inception of African cinema some half a century ago will continue to serve as a model for this generation of women who, having learnt important lessons from their elders, will forge ahead into a future that has many more opportunities, resources and possibilities.

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## NOTES

- 1 Versions of this article have been published in: Kelly & Robson (2014) and in Ellerson (2012).
- 2 See Institut Panos Afrique de l'Ouest (The Panos Institute West Africa). 'Femmes africaines des médias: Portraits de journalistes et de cinéastes africaines'. January 2005. [Online]. Available: [http://www.panos-ao.org/ipao/IMG/Femmes\\_Afric\\_Medias.pdf](http://www.panos-ao.org/ipao/IMG/Femmes_Afric_Medias.pdf) (accessed 1 March 2014).
- 3 While in Moscow, Maldoror met the late Ousmane Sembene, who is regarded as the father of African cinema, while studying on a scholarship at the Gerasimov Institute

of Cinematography (VGIK) (formerly known as the All- Union-State Institute of Cinematography). Josephine Woll traces the connection between the Soviet Union and francophone African filmmakers who trained there, noting that in the 1960s and 1970s the Soviet Union offered support to sub-Saharan African countries (In Pfaff 2004).

4 Interview with author, February 1997 at FESPACO in Ouagadaougou, Burkina Faso.

5 The Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) was created in order to address Western feminist hegemony on women's studies, feminist ideology and research on women in general, which became increasing visible during the United Nations Programme for International Women's Year in 1975 (see AAWORD 1982).