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Stefanie Knauss

Series Review

AFRICAN FOLKTALES REIMAGINED

(6 Episodes, Various Directors, Netflix/UNESCO 2023)

Since the 1990s, African cinema has developed in national industries across the continent, both as the popular melodramas associated with Nollywood and in arthouse films that markedly depart from the cinema of misery and suffering previously associated with African cinema on the Western festival circuit. Films of diverse styles and genres reflecting African self-confidence while taking on the social and political problems of their context are attracting the attention of film critics and audiences in Africa and beyond.

A short-film competition sponsored by UNESCO and Netflix provides a taste of this new African cinema, its range of visual styles, forms of story telling, and issues to engage with. The six winners were supported in realizing their films, which were released on Netflix in March 2023 in the compilation *AFRICAN FOLKTALES REIMAGINED* (6 episodes, various directors, Netflix/UNESCO 2023), making this cinema accessible to a wider audience. The short films engage folktales in different ways: by explicitly drawing on traditional stories – imagined or with historical aspects – by focusing on mythical figures, or by developing their own folktales.

KATERA OF THE PUNISHMENT ISLAND, by Ugandan director Loukman Ali, begins with an animated sequence explaining the function of the (historical) island to which unmarried pregnant women were exiled. It then continues with the story of one of these women, Katera, who takes revenge on the man who killed her family and was responsible for her miscarriage. While the acting and dialogue are somewhat wooden in places, the clever animation and the visuals reminiscent of a Western in this story of a woman taking back power make up well for this weakness.

HALIMA'S CHOICE, by Nigerian director Korede Azeez, contrasts the traditional life of the village with a futuristic high-tech world in which humans can upload themselves into the virtual world Napata (also the name of the

capital of the ancient kingdom of Kush, today northern Sudan). A stranger (who turns out to be one of Napata's AIs) offers Halima the possibility of escaping from an unwanted arranged marriage into the beautiful, bountiful world of Napata, but she chooses the real world, determined to find her own way in it.

ANYANGO AND THE OGRE, by Kenyan director Voline Ogutu, begins with the tale of a woman whose husband turns out to be an ogre whom she has to kill to save herself and her children, set in an unspecified time and place of the past. This tale, at first read by the oldest of Anyango's three children, blends into their own story of domestic abuse, from which Anyango has to rescue her family. Anyango's "reality" is a dystopian world where suitable young women are selected to be married and live in the "blue zone", with all the material comforts of modernity, while single mothers and older women are relegated to the "grey zone", a dusty place of rudimentary huts and simple agriculture supplemented by foraging for food in the trash from the blue zone. Yet when Anyanga escapes to the grey zone, she is greeted by laughter, her children are whisked away to play, and what appears at first to be a poor and desolate place is filled with female companionship and solidarity.

ENMITY DJINN, by Mauritian director Mohamed Echikoua, focuses on the tradition of a djinn who can be anchored into a place by an amulet to sow discord and create conflict. This is first shown in the setting of a nomadic family whose members are all killed in a raid but for one small girl, whose touch makes the djinn disintegrate. Decades later, the girl has become an old woman, and the djinn appears again to haunt her family until she is able to use her spiritual powers to make it disappear.

Tanzanian director Walter Mzengi's short film *KATOPE* deals with the social stigma of infertility and childlessness and the challenge posed to a desert people by prolonged droughts. In her despair, a woman forms a girl out of clay, her "birth" marking the beginning of a drought. When the girl, Katope, encounters a strange black bird – possibly a herald of rain – the village elders decide that she is instrumental to the success of their rain rituals. While her mother tries to hold her back, Katope joins the ritual, which is granted success but at a cost: as the rain begins to fall, a close-up shows Katope's hand disintegrating under the water, explaining the years of drought which protected her life while threatening that of the others.

The final short film, *MAMLAMBO*, by the South African director Gcobisa Yako, returns to the issue of domestic and gender-based violence, connecting it with the tradition of a female water spirit, known under different

names across African cultures. A woman escaping from abuse tries to commit suicide in the River without Return but is rescued by an enigmatic woman living at the river whose responsibility it seems to be to save or at least provide a proper burial for the women who seek escape from violence in suicide. When the water-spirit woman succumbs to an illness and disappears in the river, the younger woman takes over her role as protector and savior of mistreated women.

While the films well reflect the competition's goal of "promoting diverse local stories",¹ three broad themes can be discerned across their wide range of visual styles (these include for example animation, realistic styles, the use of contrast of faded and oversaturated colors) and story lines told for the most part in an array of local languages. First, and most obviously, all the films center female characters, of all ages, from small girls to grandmothers, and the injustices that women face: being punished for pregnancy out of wedlock, pushed into unwanted marriages, forced to adhere to strict gender role expectations, as well as being abused and experiencing violence at the hands of men. These forms of sexism are clearly named and recognized in the films, yet their female protagonists are not represented as simply victims. Instead, they are shown to possess considerable inner strength and spiritual powers, and they claim the freedom to make their own choices. Interestingly, this focus on female empowerment and agency does not come with a one-dimensional characterization of all male characters as villains. While there are those men who abuse women (Anyango's husband, the "ogre", or Gregory, the murderer of Katera's family), there are also others who support their dignity, such as the nameless man who teaches Katera to use a gun when she takes revenge on Gregory, or Umar, the AI who offers Halima the option to upload to Napata, so that she has the power – denied to her by the male elders – to make her own choice about where her life should take her.

The second theme cutting across the films is the way in which tradition and past interact with the present or, in the case of *HALIMA'S CHOICE* or *ANYANGO AND THE OGRE*, even the future. The films show the past continuing to be present in the contemporary moment, in the experiences of individuals, the stories they tell each other, the customs that shape their lives. This blurring of the clear demarcations between past, present, and future is accompanied by a critical perspective on both traditional and modern ways of

1 UNESCO 2022.

life: neither romanticizing the past nor glorifying the possibilities of modern technology, they soberly point out the ways in which both can be harmful and how both can also offer positive resources for the flourishing of, especially, girls and women.

A third striking element is the attention that the films pay to the natural beauty of African landscapes in all their variety of lush green forests, lakes and rivers, mountains, and deserts. These images do not serve simply to satisfy Western expectations of seeing the Africa of safaris. They function to integrate their human protagonists into their natural environment, such as Katope into her world of the desert, even if it is also clear that living in such interconnectedness with creation is not necessarily easy.

MAMLAMBO's director Gcobisa Yako has highlighted in an interview that films can preserve traditional stories that might otherwise be forgotten under the influence of colonialism and globalization.² This compilation of reimagined or even new folktales suggests that films can do more than function as archives. As folktales themselves, offering new and old compelling stories to be told and retold, watched and rewatched, they tell us about the world with its hidden mysteries and about human life in it, the adversities faced by human beings and the resources they find to flourish.

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2 Gcobisa Yako in Kimeu 2023.