

AFRICAN FILM: THE HIGH PRICE OF DIVISION

by

Renee Poussaint

An examination of the development and current state of African film brings with it a strikingly and seemingly inevitable unfolding of internal divisions and conflicts which, though in a sense involuntary, are no less damaging to the constructive development of African film. These divisions are to a large extent reflective of more sweeping political and sociological problems facing the continent today, and can only be understood in that greater context. The post-independence struggles of the individual African nations are strongly reflected in the birth pangs of this new cinematic art form which is fighting its own battle for recognition and independence.

The most immediately noticeable division within the all-encompassing category of African film is a geographic one. It quickly becomes apparent that the term African film may mean different areas to different people. It may signify North African film, Francophone African film, or Anglophone African film. Although these divisions are not desired on the pan-Africanist level, there is tacit acceptance of their existence in the very fact that no one thus far has been able to present an authoritative analysis of African film without adhering to those divisions. For example, the veteran Senegalese filmmaker, Paulin Vieyra, in writing his article "Le Film Africain" (*African Arts/Arts d'Afrique*, Vol. 1, No. 3), limits himself explicitly not only to those films "d'expression française", but implicitly to French African films produced in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet simultaneously, in tracing the beginning of "le film africain", Vieyra states: *One can date the birth of African film from the year 1924. In this year, a Tunisian, Sama Chikli, made a short film entitled "Ghezal la fille de Carthage".* Thus, Vieyra establishes the birth of African film in a North African country.

On the other hand, Guy Hennebelle in *L'Afrique Littéraire et Artistique* (No. 4, April, 1969) maintains that:

African cinema is emerging little by little from a vacuum. It is hardly necessary to recall that up to 1960, as the historian Georges Sadoul wrote, no integrally African film has been made.

Hennebelle prefers to date the commencement of African film

with the appearance of Ousmane Sembene's first feature, *Barom Saret* in 1963. Several other critics consider Paulin Vieyra's *Afrique-sur-Seine* (1956) to be the first truly African film. In any event, there is tacit agreement that the history of North African film, which predates the 1960's and 1950's, falls into an isolated, separate category of its own.

This geographical division is further adhered to in such articles as Henry Morgenthau's "On Films and Filmmakers" (*Africa Report*, May-June, 1969), which goes into detailed analysis of at least ten Francophone African films, but excludes any mention of North African film, and makes no more than brief reference to one Anglophone African film by "a Nigerian director" (unnamed). The recent African Film Festival held in Ouagadougou, Upper Volta was almost exclusively a showing of French West African films, with only one North African entry, *L'Aube des Dammes*, by Ahmed Rachedi, and one film each from Ghana and Sierra Leone (titles not given. See "Africa's Film Festival" by Marie Claire Le Roy, *Africa Report*, April, 1970). Survey articles on African film such as that included in *Cinema 70* (January, 1970, No. 142), give pages of data on individual films and filmmakers in French-speaking Africa, but are reduced to sketchy references when speaking of cinematic activity in English-speaking Africa. Apparently, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria have produced some films, but there is "no cinema reported elsewhere". Cinematic production outside of French West Africa, so far as the international public is concerned, seems to exist largely on the level of rumor and hypothesis, with brief and frustrating reference given to "a Nigerian director" and "entries" from Sierra Leone and Ghana.

UCLA's recent African Film Festival (November, 1970) was a reflection of this general state, in that what had originally been conceived of as a festival encompassing all areas of African film production became, through force of circumstance and lack of tangible information, Phase I of an African film festival, i.e. French West African films, with Phase II, i.e. English African films, to be presented "at a later date". One of the filmmakers who attended the UCLA festival, Mr. Bassori Timité of the Ivory Coast, responded to inquiries as to this curious division by stating that he and his fellow French West African filmmakers were similarly confused and dismayed at the situation. He maintained that sincere efforts have continuously been made by his colleagues to elicit the participation of their English-speaking counterparts in various festivals and conferences on film, but with no success. He expressed his personal concern at being unacquainted with the work of these other

filmmakers, but could offer no tentative explanation of, nor solution to, the problem. This apparent wall, all the more impregnable for its lack of tangibility, makes progress in the development of certain areas of African film difficult, in that the strength of unified numbers is essential to effective action. This is particularly true in terms of the all-pervading difficulties of distribution of African films in Africa.

Both individually and collectively, the African filmmakers at the recent UCLA event decried the impervious, profit-making monopoly of film distribution in Africa by the two French companies SECMA and COMACICO. These companies continuously flood Africa with second-rate French and American films, while refusing to handle African films on the basis of their supposed lack of ability to attract substantial audiences and therefore profits. Ousmane Sembene, a well-known Senegalese filmmaker, has referred to the distribution situation in Africa as *a permanent scandal*. *All the movie theaters in our countries are the property of two French monopolies: COMACICO and SECMA. The first controls 84 theaters, and the second 56. The few movie houses belonging to Africans must go through COMACICO and SECMA to supply themselves with films. These two companies establish, according to their wishes, the programming, regardless of local censure. I reproach these two companies (as do the majority of my colleagues) primarily for their total failure to contribute to the development of African cinema.* (Sembene Interview, *L'Afrique Littéraire et Artistique*, No. 7, Oct. 1969).

Equal dissatisfaction was expressed by the filmmakers with the current arrangement whereby their films are edited and processed in France by French technicians who have little understanding of or sympathy towards the African filmmaker's orientation, but have a great concern for their costly services. The filmmakers' current difficulties in unification amongst themselves negate the implementation of any sizeable pressure group or the establishment of an independent alternative processing-distribution arrangement. As a result, they must fall back almost exclusively on their individual national governments for support of their efforts.

Here again, further division is evident. On a very fundamental and pragmatic level, most African governments cannot afford to subsidize their own film industries. Their priorities in the face of rapidly expanding populations and only moderately increasing technology must be maintained on the level of the absolute necessities: food, housing, education, employment, health, etc. Their resources are limited and the demands upon them tremendous. Naturally enough under

the circumstances, cinema, which is generally considered a luxury industry, can receive only minimal attention, if any.

The African filmmaker, on the other hand, sees the development of African film as an essential aspect of his country's growth. Several filmmakers at the UCLA Festival related scenes of polite but frustrating visits to the offices of their respective national governments where their requests for financial support were regretfully, but firmly turned down:

The Senegalese filmmakers recognize that the issue of government backing for producers is open to disagreement, but they resent the fact that the government has not even seen fit to create outlets for independently produced works. ("Engaged Film-making for a New Society" by Robert A. Mortimer, Africa Report, November, 1970).

The African filmmaker is thus faced with the necessity of bridging another cleavage, this time between himself and his government in terms of the relevancy and urgency of film as such. Should he fail, and the limited funds which are infrequently available be withdrawn completely, there are few alternative means of survival.

On the other hand, there are potential problems inherent in his possible success; for should it occur that the government becomes the primary source of support for the African filmmaker, might it not then follow that they would also become the primary authority on the structure and content of the films produced? Hilary Ng'weno, former editor of *The Nation* (Nairobi) has spoken of his own relationship with government authority:

Now when I'm in Africa and I'm trying to use film either to reach the university students or reach the masses for purposes of changing society, the first question I have to ask myself before I produce a film is whether it will ever be shown to the people that I want (to see it)...If it can't pass through the government censorship, and you're still committed to the idea of film, then you have to do something about your film so that it passes through the government censorship and retains a little bit of your message. There's no guarantee that when the message gets by it will still be in the original form that will have the same effect, but for us living in Africa, this is the only way we know of changing society. (H. Morgenthau, Africa Report, May-June, 1969).

The question of the African filmmaker's relation to his

government was raised several times both formally and informally at the UCLA Festival. There was some feeling among those who attended the screenings that the films, on the whole, were notably "tame" in terms of a critical treatment of current problems in their respective countries. Moustapha Alassane's (Niger) lively animated *Le Voyage de Sim* was a satiric look at the immense pomp and circumstance involved in state visits by African government representatives to other countries. In a discussion following the film, when questioned as to the reaction of his government to the implicit criticism in the short, Mr. Alassane began by replying that those government officials who had seen it were generally favorable, if not enthusiastic about it. He felt that the film's animated form made its message more palatable to the officials, and he conversely seemed to imply that had the form been more realistic, government censure would have been expected. As the questioning continued with the inquiries emphasizing the inherent criticism of the government shown in *Le Voyage de Sim*, Mr. Alassane progressively stressed the positive aspects of state visits, e.g. good will, morale of the people, etc., and seemed to prefer that his film be accepted simply as a casual satirical experiment in the use of animated form, rather than the semi-revolutionary critique others might have wished it to be.

One of the only other films shown at the Festival which dealt openly and forcefully with the internal difficulties of post-independence was *Cabascabo* by Oumarou Ganda of Niger. This film related the conflicts and difficulties encountered by an African soldier returning from the war in Indochina and attempting to readjust to his society. Mr. Ganda, who played the title role, dealt directly with such problem areas as prostitution, official governmental blackballing of private citizens, the continuing presence of whites in positions of authority, etc. Due to the anti-hero nature of the central character, however, the film left the audience in some doubt as to how much of Cabascabo's difficulties were a function of his own personality quirks as opposed to inequities in the society as a whole. At any rate, some general social criticism did emerge from the film, as Mr. Ganda apparently intended, for as he said in an interview included in *L'Afrique Littéraire et Artistique* (No. 4, April, 1969):

For me, filmmaking represents a means of social rather than political action. In our countries, cinema must be related to education and relaxation. At the same time, it must not fail to deal with situations reflecting political circumstances.

On the other hand, Ousmane Sembene's *Mandabi* ("Le Mandat")

is highly structured to designate the ills and enemies of Senegal's progression towards egalitarianism. The film itself was outstanding among the other Festival entries, both in terms of its highly skilled, sophisticated technical level, and its powerfully dramatic content. Sembene points an unwavering finger of accusation at the emerging elite class of intellectuals and petit bourgeoisie who continuously and methodically exploit the people in every conceivable way; he shows the brutal insensitivity of a bureaucracy grown unworkable due to its very size and complexity; he reveals Dakar as a city divided in such a way as to push the poor and illiterate into crowded enclaves where they have no alternative but to figuratively feed upon each other.

In "Le Mandat", I denounce in a Brechtian manner, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie upon the people. This bourgeoisie, which might be called transitional, is a special kind of bourgeoisie, not so much composed of property-holders (but it's coming, it's coming), as it is of intellectuals and administrative workers. This bourgeoisie uses its knowledge and position to keep the people under its domination and enlarge its fortune. (Sembene Interview, L'Afrique Littéraire et Artistique, No. 7, October, 1969).

It is not surprising that this excellent film received less than enthusiastic reactions from Senegal's government.

While popular interest (in "Le Mandat") ran high, there was a kind of official non-recognition policy during "Mandabi's" run in Dakar. The daily paper, "Dakar-Matin", did not review it while it was being shown publicly. It is true that shortly after the Venice award, it had been given an official gala showing in the handsome Sorano Theatre to the diplomatic corps and high officials, by invitation only; but the government made no attempt to bring the film to the public; "Mandabi" reached the man in the street only because one of the French distributing companies, COMACICO, was convinced that it was a profit-making enterprise. (Engaged Film-making for a New Society, Africa Report, November, 1970).

Sembene is considered by many to be the "father" of African film, and it is certainly true that his works are far more advanced on virtually all levels than are those of the majority of his fellow filmmakers. His success, however, has not endeared him to his country's government, and the financial and other support which permitted the creation of his earlier, critically acclaimed works (*Barom Saret; La Noire de...*) came not from Senegal, but from private, pri-

marily foreign sources. *Mandabi* was produced solely with funds from a French film company, and Sembene has been severely criticized for this.

A few malicious people reproach me for having made films with French money. In fact, it was with an advance on receipts granted by Malraux that I was able to make "Le Mandat". I reply that, in effect, it's a contradiction. But I had no choice: between two contradictions, one must choose the smallest. I had two solutions: take this money which enabled me to find a French producer and make my film, or refuse the money and not make the film. It is very clear, very simple, just as two and two make four. If an African country had proposed a budget, I would have accepted it joyfully. This was not the case. I take money where I find it. I am ready to ally myself with the devil if he will give me the money to make films. (Sembene Interview, L'Afrique Littéraire et Artistique, No. 7).

According to Sembene, the only condition of this support was that the film be produced not only in the Wolof language, as he wished, but also in a second French version. There was, however, no interference in either the structure or content of the film. There seems to be an implication in both Sembene's own remarks and the actual reaction of his government to *Mandabi* that similar freedom might not have been possible had his government been the film's primary financial supporter.

Sembene is well-established enough now in the international cinema arena to go largely his own way with his work. Because of this, he speaks out clearly and frankly in his critical evaluation of his country's progress. Film for Ousmane Sembene is first and foremost a political activity.

What interests me is to expose the problems confronting my people. I am not an intellectual of the left. In fact, I am not an intellectual at all. I consider film as essentially a means of political action. As I have always said, I make reference to Marxism-Leninism. I am in favor of scientific socialism. Yet, as I always attempt to be precise about it, I am not an advocate of "socialist realism" nor of a "billboard cinema" with slogans and demonstrations. To me, revolutionary film is something else. And then, I am not naive enough to believe that I can change Senegalese reality with one film. On the other hand, if we can come together as a group of filmmakers, each making films oriented in the same manner, I feel we could exert some small influence on our countries' destinies. (ibid.)

His anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois orientation is definite and uncompromising. Sembene makes films of and for the masses of Senegalese people. His works all stem from a definitely discernible ideological base which is in direct conflict with a government firmly devoted to capitalism and to the creation and maintenance of an elitest bourgeoisie or *classe dirigeante*. It is of particular note that no Europeans are in any way featured in *Mandabi*. Sembene is obviously focussing attention away from the concept of the white man as enemy and central mover of African affairs, and is concentrating solely on the black man as the determining agent of his own destiny. This is fundamentally an extremely positive image, for he deals with Africa and Africans not in terms of their reactions and responses to white oppression, thereby making them no more than extensions of the white ego, but rather Sembene confronts his people as whole beings whom he states through his critical vision are capable of and solely responsible for their direction. His criticism is biting and painful, however, to a government which is still in the process of defining itself. To expect that government to give major support to the expansion and dissemination of that criticism amongst its people is perhaps expecting far too much.

The other filmmakers participating in the UCLA Festival seemed to have chosen to avoid or perhaps felt no need to experience similar confrontations with their respective governments. The themes most frequently dealt with were: the African in exile (*Concerto pour un Exil*); the adjustment difficulties for the African returning from abroad to his native country (*La Femme au couteau*, *Cabascabo*, *Le Retour d'un aventurier*); conflicts within traditional culture (*La Bague du Roi Koda*); the new class of African estranged from traditional values (*Le Rêve d'un Artiste*, *La Femme au couteau*); and aspects of African art and culture (*Delou Thyoussane*). These themes, as treated in the films, have little, if anything, to do with political or social activism, and therefore, pose virtually no threats to the individual government administrations involved. The selection of relatively non-controversial themes may not necessarily ensure government financing, but it apparently does negate the probability of active government opposition. This can make for a relatively conservative group of films and filmmakers who, though not necessarily reactionary, can hardly be called catalytic revolutionary opinion-makers either.

This highly charged question of the filmmaker as revolutionary was strongly and fairly emotionally dealt with at the UCLA Festival in one of the discussion sessions with the

visiting filmmakers. Mr. Joseph Kiboko of Congo-Kinshasa was vigorously criticized for the content and purpose of his film, *The Secrets of Nyamulagira*. The film is a straightforward tourist travelogue on the Congo designed to attract Europeans to the country. Among the scenes included were shots of a modern swimming pool with only whites in and around it, and pictures of wide, busy streets and modern skyscrapers. The only brief depiction of Africans in the film at all was a shot of a local market scene, crowded, noisy and cluttered, and another picture of a group of Pygmies dancing around a camp fire. The Blacks in the audience particularly found it appalling that an African would make a film which differed in no way from earlier films made by whites designed to attract white tourists to exotic lands with assurances that the natives were picturesque, but safely and distantly controlled. As the questioning continued, it became increasingly clear that Mr. Kiboko was himself quite embarrassed and displeased with the film. His basic reply to his critics was that the film was commissioned by his government, and it was part of his job to make the film. The discussion was made even more difficult by the necessity of translating from French into English and vice versa. By the end of the session Mr. Kiboko had emerged in the eyes of a number of people in the audience as a total sell-out and a supporter of neo-colonialism and exploitative government authority. He was seen to be the personification of much of what Ousmane Sembene's films decry. Some of this may indeed be true. Certainly, in collaborating on such a film, Kiboko not only failed to contest his government's more reactionary tendencies, but actively participated in the creation of an instrument which appeared largely racist and elitist in form. However, the situation was not as clearly defined as it appeared — and here an additional source of division must be considered — for much of what Mr. Kiboko was urgently trying to convey to the audience in French, was not precisely conveyed to the audience by the State Department translator in English. Whether involuntary or not, several subtle distortions and omissions were definitely made in translating Mr. Kiboko's answers to his critics which gave a nebulous and none too accurate picture of Kiboko's position.

For example, at one stage, Mr. Kiboko said that the film shown, *The Secrets of Nyamulagira*, was not characteristic of his work, and that he had made another film, independent of government control, called *The Private Trip of President Mobutu* which was much more in line with what the audience favored. However, Mr. Kiboko specified, he had been "unable to bring the film with him to the States". He did not specify what exactly prevented his bringing that particular work; however, the implication was clear that he had not

willingly left the film behind. The translator then proceeded to explain to the audience that yes, Mr. Kiboko had made another film, but that he, Mr. Kiboko, was in such a rush when packing to leave for the States that he had "forgotten" to bring it. Such an explanation is so obviously inane that one was forced to assume that either Mr. Kiboko was a fool or that he considered the audience to be a gathering of fools. In fact, of course, neither was the case. However, this remark and a number of similar subtle distortions which followed served to generate a general lack of communication. Had the language barrier not been present, the audience's impression of Mr. Kiboko might have been more sympathetic.

The entire question of language is central to all African filmmaking, and is far from being resolved. It is a problem which divides not only nation from nation, but citizen from citizen. There is, of course, the immediate contradiction inherent in Africans expressing themselves in the languages of the colonisers, and this was a recurring criticism made of the films at the Festival. It is justified most often in the pan-African terms of the unification of the continent. However, the very fact that French-speaking African filmmakers and English-speaking African filmmakers are apparently not only mutually unacquainted with each other, but also with each other's work, would seem to weaken this argument somewhat. African film at the moment is rigidly divided in terms of language, with virtually no interaction. Dreams of a continent-wide association of African filmmakers with modern production and distribution facilities are difficult to realize when the filmmakers cannot or will not understand each other.

The use of European languages in African films further serves to cut the filmmaker off from that very segment of the population his films are theoretically designed to attract-- the masses. As Sembene has said, the majority of African people may not be able to read, but they can understand the media of film. If given something they can relate to, Africans have proven to be avid moviegoers. Certainly, if African filmmakers are to become financially independent and create a secure home base, they must get the people to come to their films. And it is equally certain that people do not flock to see something which is unintelligible to them. A number of African filmmakers argue that the use of indigenous language would cut them off from the lucrative international market, and make their work virtually unknown outside of their own countries. It is further argued that without the potential for international exposure, the major French film distributors will not agree to handle their films.

Inherent in these arguments seems to be a fundamental lack of willingness or ability to rely on the African market as a potentially important major supportive base. It seems to be inconceivable to a number of African filmmakers that they might survive and even prosper by practising their art primarily for their own people, with little concern that their talents be lauded in European cinema circles. It is indeed true that the two French distributing companies have been reluctant to handle African films, and it is generally agreed that this reluctance is due to their belief that African films are not profit-making ventures. As a result, they have flooded the African market with badly made European and American action films which provide enough visual diversion to remove the necessity of relating to the dialogue. There are many excellent European and American films which COMACICO and SECMA probably refuse to handle on the basis that being non-action films, they require an understanding of the story line and, therefore, the language which the majority of the African people do not have. Unless African filmmakers are to be reduced to duplicating Grade D foreign films, they must find an alternative means of allowing their audiences to comprehend and thus appreciate their films. Certainly such films as *Concerto pour un Exil* and *Une Femme au couteau* would be largely unintelligible to the average African worker, both on the level of language and content.

Once again, Ousmane Sembene has taken the lead in dealing effectively with the problem of language by producing *Mandabi* in Wolof, the language of 85% of the Senegalese population. The film is then subtitled for distribution abroad. The reception of *Mandabi* among the Senegalese people has been enthusiastic.

The most frequent popular reaction to "Mandabi" was "Bahrna", Wolof for (roughly) "Good, that's right". Europeans viewing the film in Dakar were aware that Senegalese viewers, responding spontaneously to the Wolof dialogue, felt a kind of pride of ownership in it; it stirred a significant sentiment of national honor. ("Engaged Film-making for a New Society"; Africa Report, November, 1970).

Attention should also be given to Ganda's *Cabascabo* which was filmed at least partly in his country's major language. It would appear that if an African filmmaker is to address himself to his own people (which should be his primary concern) he cannot do other than use the language of his people.

Perhaps the use of English and French has a more fundamental and subjective basis than those arguments put forth by the filmmakers themselves. The language division is indi-

cative of another barrier increasingly evident in African societies - that of class. Those who speak the language of the colonisers and received their education in the colonisers schools generally form a definite minority elite in African countries - the very elite that Sembene so vigorously condemns. The divisions between this *classe dirigeante* and the masses exists not only on the linguistic and materialistic levels, but on the psychological and emotional as well. Were the differences in European and indigenous languages non-existent, these groups would still have difficulty in communicating, for on the basic level of life-style and orientation, they speak different tongues.

This would seem to apply specifically to the African filmmaker who in most instances has necessarily lived and received his training abroad, and then returned to his country as an accepted member of the bourgeoisie. His distance from the people has frequently been expanded to the point where he feels a definite sense of estrangement from the traditional culture. His are the problems of the modern urban man: his feelings in exile, his relationship with white peers, etc. Naturally enough, when he conceives of a film, it is in those terms which he understands. His problems and vision of the world are not those of the average African. And by choosing to make his film in a European language, he is automatically choosing his audience. He is ensuring that those who view and understand his film will be other members of his group, others who, like himself, have known the pain of exile, interracial intimacy, etc., others who will sympathize and therefore approve of what he has done. Were he to make the same film in the country's indigenous language, thereby making it possible for the masses to see and understand it, their probable lack of empathy with his vision and consequent rejection of his film would serve to crystalize the already existing but suppressed rupture between him and his people. He would have to acknowledge the fact that he does not, in fact, make his films for the people. If there is indeed any validity to this hypothesis, it is all the more understandable why the majority of African filmmakers adhere so steadfastly to the relatively safe confines of European languages. Most westerners will accept uncritically an African's film simply because it was made by an African, which is still a rarity, and therefore, as precious as a new archeological find. The African people, however, are far more likely to look at his film and say quite simply: "This is nonsense. What is he talking about? What does it have to do with me as an African?"

Indeed, this is the fundamental question which African

filmmakers seem unable to resolve - what do their films have to do with Africa? What should their films do for Africa? Who are they talking to? What are they really trying to say? Does it have anything to do with Africans as Africans - and indeed, should it?

The problems faced by African peoples as newly independent nations are shared across the continent by North African, French West African, and English-speaking African alike: poverty, health, education, social inequities, etc. There is involuntary unity there. On the other hand, African filmmakers do not yet seem able or willing to determine any unified attempt to involve film as an effective tool in confronting these problems. And yet they must, for it is impossible for them to exist and grow outside of the struggles of their people. In Africa, the struggle is one of daily urgency which pervades every facet of life. To be part of African society is, at least for the foreseeable future, to be part of the struggle. That film can be used as an effective arm of independent revolution to sensitize, educate and mobilize the people for the struggle has been well proven elsewhere in the Third World, noticeably in Latin America. African filmmakers cannot afford the divisions they now permit; they cannot afford to leave those important questions unanswered. Indeed, unless they come together soon to grapple with the problems dividing them now and define their role in their people's struggle, Africa may well decide that, until the battle is won, it cannot afford them.

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