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TOWARD THE AFRICAN CINEMA*

By

Gilbert Minot

Guinea gained its independence in 1958 from the French. After independence one of the first tasks of the government and the Party was to organize a film production unit. Guinea was, if not the first, among the first states in Africa to devise a national cinema policy. So we created, as I said, a film production unit and started making documentaries and educational films. These documentaries cover different aspects of life, culture [and] traditional [activities] throughout the country. We set out to record these traditions and customs as well as the political and social life of the newly independent country so that all the Guinean people could see what was happening and to record it for the [future] generations who would later know how we lived in the early years of independence. We made films in various fields: technical, scientific and medical. Those films were very effective because, firstly, the people who appeared in them were Guineans so the audience could more easily relate to the people. Secondly, they were done in [indigenous] languages. We have also recorded events of Pan-African interest, like making a documentary about Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. As you know, when he was overthrown he came to Guinea and President Sekou Toure proclaimed him co-president of the Republic of Guinea. When Nkrumah died in Rumania some years later his body was flown to Guinea. We made films and documentaries about the man and what he stood for and his achievements. We did the same thing for Guinea-Bissau. As you know, we had been supporting and actively helping the PAIGC [African Party for Independence of Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands] in its struggle against the Portuguese colonial power. Amilcar Cabral, who was a great friend of President Sekou Toure, was assassinated in Conakry. We also made a film about Amilcar Cabral. These films have been shown at different festivals in Africa like the Ouagadougou Film Festival and were well received by the African audiences who were moved by these historical figures.

Humble Beginnings

The first [feature film] produced was in cooperation with the Republic of Morocco and is called *Amok*. It deals with apar-

*Mr. Gilbert Minot came to UCLA in the Winter quarter, 1983, on a Fulbright scholarship to do research on African images in Hollywood films. His close cooperation with Professor Teshome Gabriel, himself an expert in Third World films, led to an interview with *Ufahamu*. The present title is a reconstruction from that interview. A similar arrangement with another African filmmaker, Antonio Ole from Angola, is currently under way and will be published in a subsequent issue.

theid in South Africa and the Soweto events. We made another one called *Naitou* which is about a young orphan girl in a polygamous family. The film was made with the participation of the Guinean "Ballet Africain" and it's what you call a film-ballet, a type of film with no dialogue, only dancing, music and singing. But the plot [works] very well as it breaks all language barriers.

All these films have been shown in theater houses, but the two feature films have not had wide distribution in Guinea yet because we are still having some minor technical problems with distribution, publicity and so on. But I understand they will soon be released. For example, in Senegal I talked with a friend of mine a few days ago. He said that there is a big publicity campaign going on in Senegal right now for the film *A mok* and that it should be released in a few days.

...one aspect I haven't discussed is that we want to have all the facilities in Guinea so that we can produce a film without leaving Guinea. To that end, we have been putting together a laboratory for processing films, some studios for mixing and dubbing and so on. In one room we are putting in a complete studio production unit starting with the laboratory, with the sound department, editing and so on.

Our plans are to make more and more feature films without dropping the making of documentaries and education films. In that sense, we need to train more people in filmmaking. Right now there is only a small group of us, about a hundred of us, engaged in serious film production. We would like to quickly move to a greater production level. Right now we can produce one to two films a year so we would like this to increase.

Television is just beginning. I think we've had television for four years now, so we're still in the process of adjusting certain things. We have about four hours of television a day right now...any of our films can be shown on television, but the only restriction is that we want to exploit them commercially first before letting them be used on television. Talking about feature films, I have a friend, who is a movie director who has studied in Yugoslavia. The next feature film will be his. It's about the new generation, the youth and the problem of the new culture and the influence of foreign cultures on them, the adjustment they're going through. After that the next feature film will be done by me. It's about the emancipation of women. The party has always pushed the emancipation of women.

Guinean Experience

The special conditions under which we [achieved] our independence made our experience different from that of other African French-speaking states because after 1958 and the rejection of

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DeGaulle's referendum, all the French people left as fast as they could taking anything they could take with them and trying to sabotage those things which they could not take with them, so we were in a difficult situation at independence.... When we got our independence the government tried to promote our own music because before that there was only western music on the radio. At first, some people thought that no one would listen to the radio if there [was] no western music played. [But] for years Guinean radio played only Guinean music and people still listened to it and enjoyed it. In that sense, we have always been very much aware of the danger of letting our television be invaded by foreign programs. It is better to have a few programs and even to repeat them over and over than to let the foreign programs completely invade our screen.

On the Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers

The first group of participants who initiated and formed the Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers were from the Republic of Guinea, Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. We first discussed this in 1969 in Algiers at the first Pan-African Cultural Festival. I think the main purpose for creating that association was to gather all the African filmmakers and have them function through that organisation and discuss the other different problems and aspects of making and distributing films in Africa, and lessening the monopoly of foreign distributors on the African continent. The association worked for a while and was instrumental in establishing a film festival in Ouagadougou, Upper Volta, the first festival having been the Carthagian, Tunisian film festival. Very rapidly, however, the association kind of fell apart because of financial and geographical reasons. In a Pan-African organisation such as that where there are no permanent headquarters it depends on the people who are elected. Then you have a president who resides in one country, a secretary general in another country, and so on. It can't work that way, but we've been trying for a few years now to convene a congress of filmmakers in order to see how we could make a Pan-African organisation of filmmakers more efficient. The last time we almost had it together, the congress was going to take place in Gabon, but at the last minute, for reasons that I don't really know, it was cancelled.

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The Pan-African organisation of filmmakers has been trying to push the idea that if you're going to make a film, let's say in Guinea or in Mali, and you don't have all the technicians, you try to see if you can get those technicians from other countries, because you might have cameramen in Senegal and you need a cameraman in Guinea, for instance. Or, you might have a soundman in Guinea, and Senegal needs a soundman. So we need to establish a certain contact with the different cinemas in Africa. For instance, for the film *Azouk* we had technicians from Morocco, some

from Senegal and the rest from Guinea. We worked together, and then from that experience when we made the Guinean feature film *Naitou*, we had some technicians from Morocco [whom] we hired to help in the making of the film.

What is the African film?

I believe that one of the main problems is to have a certain financial independence. As long as you rely on western financial support to make a film, the film takes on a certain coloring because you have to make concessions when you accept the money. Only in a very unique situation would you get money without any strings attached. It is difficult to define what an African film should be or what is African film. I can say, also, that to have cinema such as that in France, Italy and America, you need to have that financial freedom from the colonial powers and you also need to control your own facilities; in other words you need to have them at home and to have African technicians. All these aspects are important because, from experience..., once we finish shooting a film, we take it outside of Guinea for processing, editing and so on and we have sometimes to struggle very hard with the European technicians who don't understand our perspective, our point of view. We might have some shots that we want to include in the film, we might want to insist more on this or that aspect of the documentaries. [But] according to their technical training and their ideology those things are not important, so we have to impose our view. I think to create this African cinema we cannot talk about one African cinema, but of several, according to the different states in which they are produced. After you've produced a certain number of films a certain personality, a certain image of that specific cinema starts to take shape.

The role of the cinema in Africa should first be to educate the people, through documentaries, of our culture, our customs, and so on, and through educational films, but we should not stop there. It is also very important to feature films in order to reestablish a certain image, a positive image of Africa on the screen. Even if these films are not shown outside Africa in the immediate future, that is not so important...what is important is to see more and more African films on the screen in Africa and to give the African audiences, who have been completely submerged by foreign (European, but especially American) films, an alternative, so that they can understand first what colonialism meant in Africa and the wrong it did, to make the people conscious of their heritage and for them to take pride in their heritage, because they've been brainwashed by the colonial powers and the colonial cinema during the colonial era to the point where they have almost lost their identity. I think we should reestablish our identity and take pride in our identity. I think motion pictures can accomplish that.

I think through motion pictures we can go over that problem, that handicap. Very few people read and write in Africa and with motion pictures we can dub a film in different languages and people can understand the film which is not true of a book, for instance. We can reach many more people with a film than with a magazine or a book. Even if the film is not understood by the people who view it, the images still have a certain impact. Sometimes a little explanation of the film is enough for people to follow the film. And I would say, for instance, that in colonial times they were showing films in French and English to people who did not speak these languages and yet the people took interest in the films. Those films were able to accomplish what they were supposed to accomplish.

Current Difficulties

The situation right now in practically all African states -- Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt -- is that when you shoot your film you have to send it to a European laboratory to have it processed. You're not in the same situation as here, for example, where you would screen your rushes every day to see what you've done the day before and then correct what needs to be corrected and so on. In the African situation you very often shoot the whole film before you see any rushes. You take the whole thing with you to a European laboratory and that's when you see what you've recorded for the first time. It's difficult to work in that manner. Another thing is the problem of finance. If you have enough money then you can send them the film and they send you the rushes that you can screen, not the same day, but at least you get an idea as you are shooting your film. The rushes come maybe three, four days or a week later. There is also the problem of maintenance of the equipment, getting it into top technical condition is difficult because of the weather conditions, humidity, heat and so on. So when you have technical problems with your equipment it can be disastrous because then you have to send it back to be repaired.

Now the African films are shown as much as possible throughout the country, but the problem is often that they are very expensive films because of the limited distribution those films get. Movie makers try to capitalize on the few they can sell or distribute and sometimes the cost is so much higher than other films that you are limited to buying them because there is no formal distribution through the normal channels. You buy the film and pay the money directly to the filmmaker. In Ougadougou they've been trying to put together a consortium for distribution and production. Now I don't know if it's going to work since it's in the first stages.

The African filmmaker is faced with many problems. You make a film and often you can't show it in your own country, because

it's banned for one reason or another. This has happened to Sembene Ousmane and to other people. In the best cases the film is okayed by the government and you can show it in your own country. I've seen filmmakers from Mali, Ivory Coast and so on become film merchants, taking their films from theatre to theatre settling deals with different theatre owners because [they] can't get [their] films [distributed] through the formal distribution channels. This is a long process. While [they are] involved in that, [they're] not producing anything, but just trying to get back the money [they have] invested in [those] films.

Solutions

From all the movies shown in a given country, a certain percentage should go towards promoting production. The money that is collected will then be available for different filmmakers who have produced screen plays to produce their films. We're doing [this] in Guinea, but that is also because we control the production, the distribution and most of the movie theatres. The government controls the national film enterprise [which] is responsible for importing all the films which are shown in Guinea.

On Co-Production

We had some contact with Soviet filmmakers who at one time had said they would be interested in co-producing a film with Guinea, but nothing concrete has come out of it yet. We got one Frenchman, an independent film producer, who came and was interested in making a film, but unfortunately the film he wanted to make was the same one that Sembene wanted to make on [Samouré Touré] so we couldn't give him the okay since Sembene had already an option in that, and we told the man that we would be more than willing to show him some other stories [which] might interest him. But he left and I think he was a bit bitter at not having had the opportunity to get the option. But we think that in the future we are not against making films in co-production with established filmmakers of international stature, but there is always a danger also because it's very hard to agree on all the details, but I think it can be worked out.

...Samouré Touré...was a great West African figure in the resistance against the French. He fought the French colonial power for sixteen years before he was exiled to Gabon where he died some years later. His military skill was compared by the French themselves to Napoleon's genius in warfare and so on. They had a very difficult time with him. He fought in Guinea, Ivory Coast and Mali areas because he was trying to recreate the Empire of Mali in a way, and he had established a certain domination of Dutch Guinea, Mali and Ivory Coast. So when the French were penetrating (the region) they came up against those parts of West Africa he controlled. If the French were to make a film on that it would not be to their advantage. They would not look too pret

On International Audience

For a film to reach an international level it has to have a very peculiar chemistry, I would say. You have to put certain ingredients together so that it will go over. One of them is casting, for instance, if you have a big name. If I make a film, for instance, on Samouré Touré and we have someone like Sidney Poitier playing the lead role you are assured of a certain international audience, instead of having a Guinean actor who is unknown. In the latter case, the film would really have to be of fantastic quality to go over internationally.... I think it's nice to draw an international audience, but at the same time I don't think it should be a worry while you're trying to make a film. You should make a film, I think, in terms of Africa first and then if it goes over well internationally, fine. And I think that if you really make a sincere, good film it will reach beyond the boundaries of Africa.

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