

# Feminist Africa 16

## African Feminist Engagements with Film

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# Editorial: African Feminist Engagements with Film<sup>1</sup>

Yaba Badoe, Amina Mama and Salem Mekuria

Feminist Africa is 10 years old! To celebrate we have a bumper issue on one of the most vibrant and dynamic cultural arenas of our times – African film-making. True to FA's founding editorial policy, this issue focuses on feminist engagements with film in various African contexts. To do justice to this rich and rapidly changing arena, we have drawn on a diverse community of film-makers, critics, film scholars and theorists in many ways. Firstly we have drawn our inspiration from their work, by attending many screenings and festivals over the years. Our issue co-editors, Yaba Badoe (Ghana/UK) and Salem Mekuria (Ethiopia/USA), both highly accomplished film-makers themselves, have worked closely with the Editor and the FA team in Cape Town, to co-edit and produce FA 16. Our combined expertise adds up to over half a century of experience in all aspects of film-making and film scholarship, not to mention all the hours that we –like most of you – spend in lifetimes of viewing and interpreting films for the sheer pleasure of doing so, and engaging with the challenges of being critical spectators and theorising film from our multiple subversive perspectives.

The perspectives of our contributors –makers, organizers, distributors, theorists and critics of film– all offer to deepen and nuance our understanding of the manner in which we engage with various aspects of film and the film industry. These include the history of colonial subjugation and enslavement, as well as contemporary global cultural regimes, all of which have operated to erase and mis-represent women from Africa and to service the appetites and cravings of others, in ways that were often at the very least inimical to our well-being. Gayatri Spivak came up with the powerful term 'epistemic violence' to convey the deleterious impact of being subjected to the determinations of others. Even before film was invented, African women were represented in ways that have given us concern for generations. Consider the numerous

iconic representations of Saartje Baartman, who, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, was exhibited at festivals and fairs to a public fascinated by the 'spectacle' of her body in a cage at popular freak shows.

These obstacles mean that we have an especially hard time mobilizing resources to make films at all. This is all the more evident when we wish to make films that speak to our conditions, challenging the existing fictions that misrepresent and distort our realities if they do not completely erase us.

In this issue we explore a number of key themes that characterise Africa's rapidly evolving cinema industry, and its shifting fortunes since its inception as a powerful medium that has been grasped by African men and women determined to 'dismantle the master's house'<sup>2</sup>.

All three of us met up while participating in the symposium on "*African Film, Video & the Social Impact of New Technologies*" organized by the Council for the Development of Social Science in Africa (CODESRIA under the auspices of FESPACO 2011). During this remarkable festival we met and kept company with many exciting film makers, and were struck by the number of relatively young women from all over the continent who have emerged onto the cinematic landscape during the last 10-15 years. It was at this meeting that we approached over a dozen women film-makers and invited them to contribute to Feminist Africa. The more we learnt about the arduous conditions they must navigate to see any of their work come to fruition, the less surprised we were when later in the process, many of the submissions we had solicited could not be completed, given the demands of actually making films on shoestring budgets. Two of the founders of African film studies - Manthia Diawara and Kofi Anyidiho, facilitated the CODESRIA symposium with the gravitas lent by their gray hairs, and by the presence of an avid group of students from NAFTI (National Film and Television Institute) also in attendance. Not surprisingly, the commercial success of Nollywood took up an inordinate amount of the discussion, but so did its endless pandering to misogynistic fantasies about evil women getting their come-uppances. Nigerian film-maker, Tunde Kilani, led both an appreciation and critique of Nollywood, to argue for a greater use of the rich wealth of African literature in film-making, and greater participation from women. Judith Kibinge presented a well-researched history of film-making in Kenya, reminding us that cinema history for most of our 54 nations is thin at best, and sorely in need of excavation and critical reflection. Finding her happily caught up in shooting her latest work and unable to write for us, we pursued

this commitment to largely unwritten history with the feature contribution of diasporan scholar and organizer, Beti Ellerson. Her contribution to African women's film and film studies has been substantial over many years, much of it available online at the website of the Center for the Study and Research of African Women in Cinema, and the blog of African Women in Cinema, ([www.africanwomenincinema.org](http://www.africanwomenincinema.org)) that she established in 2004. Ellerson prefaces her feature with Kadidja Pâté's account of her first cinematic encounter with film in 1936 before moving on to "explore the tenets of an African women cinema criticism and its application at the emergence of an African cinematic practice some twenty years later." Following Kadidja Pâté's account, as recorded by her son Hampâté Bâ, Ellerson discusses the importance of developing film criticism and film theory that articulates African perspectives on film, before proceeding to discuss the representation of women and gender relations in the work of several of the best-known African women film makers, and the many challenges that must be scaled by those idealistic and tenacious enough to pursue this powerful craft. Ellerson has also interviewed just about every African women filmmaker on record, so we have also included a gem from her collection – an interview with the Zimbabwean novelist, filmmaker and festival organizer, Tsitsi Dangaremba.

Also in 2011, the African Women's Development Foundation and the Lagos-based Lufodo Academy of Performing Arts organised the *African Women in Film Forum: In Audio, Pictures and Text*. Held in Nigeria's high octane cultural capital, Lagos, the forum was attended by a cross section of women film- and video-makers, from both commercial and independent film sectors, making it a landmark event that introduced a new level of seriousness into the discussions of film and its implications for women and gender relations in African contexts. The Forum showed that while we have good cause to critique many of the low-cost productions appealing to the imagined banality of audience tastes and flooding a rapidly growing and increasingly global commercial market, we can also be excited by the future potential arising from the growing number of women involved at all levels of the film and media industries, from the poorly paid acting roles and the on-the-spot improvisations that commercial videos seem to rely on, to more technical roles in production and film direction.

Some – like Sandra Mbanefo Obiagwu poet, writer, film producer, director and a communications teacher – have worked on many fronts, ultimately establishing their own production companies. In conversation with Nana

Sekiyamah of the African Women's Development Fund during the *African Women in Film Forum* Obiagwu describes her film-making as motivated by her distress at the endless parade of witches, corrupt urban gold diggers, and sexually corrupt students who figure in so many popular Nigerian films. Similar motivations have inspired all the contributors to this issue, who as women, have taken up the tools that will change the limited and distorted representations of women that have held sway since the earliest colonial propaganda films were broadcast to mystify Africa's restless people by colonising their minds – and so dull the capacity for the creativity and imagination that are as key to resilience as to resistance. African women film-makers channel Amílcar Cabral's insights – whether they have read his writings or not – evidenced by their struggle to develop a cinematic language attuned to the lived realities of African people – women and men. Aminata Oudreago put it succinctly in her conversation with Beti Ellerson, when she points out that:

"Women of the Diaspora and African women do not live the same reality. Our problems are similar but are not posed in the same way. ...We asked the women of the African Diaspora to let us first talk among ourselves before meeting them. (p. 50)

The challenges are clearly being met in a range of innovative ways that testify to the huge creative energies of African women and the resilience and persistence that has seen a growing number work their way into a realm that has always favoured men, and that has contributed to the subordination of women. The surest answer to this cultural onslaught lies in the hands of the growing population of women-who-are-increasingly-feminist film-makers, screen-writers, producers, camera-people, light and sound experts and editors – we need to develop critical consciousness among the film-making community in Africa, and among the viewing public. The tired refrain from film-makers and distributors is that they must pander to 'audience tastes' in order to sell. This does little to excuse the excesses of cheap commercial video makers, and the content is often so bad that it may well be a gross underestimation of the intelligence of audiences that are diverse, and global. Lindiwe Dovey, South African film-maker, scholar and festival organizer argues that African independent cinema has been feminist in its orientation since its inception, referring to the powerful celebrations of African women – past and present – in the work of the man most-recognised as the founding father of African cinema – Sembene Ousmane (1923-2007). Whether or not

one elects to call him a feminist film-maker, it is clear that his contribution has been highly influential in ways that Dovey explores.

Salem Mekuria's feature also acknowledges Sembene, for his contribution to the subversion of colonial and nationalist gender discourses, and his influence on her film-making. She describes how studying his work and those of his contemporaries:

"has been invaluable in developing my understanding of cinema's vast potential to transform the unbalanced relations between the dominant and the dominated. Their works demonstrate how social change has its deepest roots in self-realization and how the creative filmmaking process provides a quasi-ideal space in which to critique the status-quo and to experiment with the possibilities of more just social relations to develop (Mekuria p. 10).

Indeed, not only do Sembene's films include positive characterisations of women, but he repeatedly draws on past and present gender relations as a key trope for critically exploring the politics of all forms of inequality. His films have variously provided powerful critiques of class society (*Borom Sarrat* 1963), racism (*Black Girl* 1996) nation, religion and official mythologies of nation (*Ceddo* 1976 ), rampant corruption, and polygamy (*Xala* 1975) the human cost of African women migrants' participation in the global care economy (*Black Girl* 1996), the life struggles that see a sexually exploited schoolgirl become a successful urban entrepreneur who can choose her own path and partner (*Faat Kine*), or his final tribute, *Moulaade* (2004), which explores women's courageous resistance to the dangerous practice of genital cutting. Twelve years before this film, another African cinema giant, Cheik Oumar Sissoko had made *Finzan* (1992) featuring two rural women who rebel against the practice of genital cutting and wife inheritance.

One might equally name Djibril Diop Mambety (1945-1998) as a key critic of the gender status quo. His much shorter career was dedicated to the idea of '*cinema de poche*' by which he meant films for and about ordinary people. Also entirely in local languages (but not excluding occasional Wolof appropriations of French), his films are significantly more experimental, maverick phantasmagoric tales of oppressed ordinary people and their strategies for surviving despite postcolonial injustices that predate the 'high theory' academic discourses on the condition referred to as 'postcoloniality'. His 3 part series 'Lives of Ordinary People' includes *Le Franc* – the hilarious tale of an ill-fated lottery winner, set in the context of structural adjustment,

with intensifying poverty and hardship characterising the lives of most Senegalese people. *La Petit Venduese de la Soleil* (*The Little Girl Who Sold the Sun* 1999) completed posthumously, draws connections between poverty, class, gender, age and disability. Mambety skilfully presents these being played out among the street hawkers of Dakar through the tenacity of his lead character – a young girl unafraid to contravene the gender conventions of her community, no matter what.

Mekuria's feature traces the inspiration and evolution of her powerfully original *oeuvre*, evolving across continents beginning with documentaries in African American history including the Harlem Renaissance through to her questioning and carefully studied documentation of a deeply intimate personal story in *Deluge* (1996) that reveals the unmitigated horrors of the Mengistu regime, to her current experimentation with form using triptych video installations.

After the CODESRIA workshop, the remainder of our days in Burkina Faso were devoted to savouring an atmosphere animated by thousands of ordinary Burkinabes flocking out of their workplaces to view even the most sophisticated *auteur* films, and as eager to see the latest in African cinematography as the cosmopolitan collection of directors, producers, jury members and critics who were also in attendance. We too found ourselves viewing as many films as possible, in an effort to slake the great hunger experienced by all African film fans, who rarely get the chance to view many of the films produced by and for African audiences, and with our multiple and endlessly intriguing realities in the sights of lenses that search far deeper than the whites of our eyes.

Yaba Badoe 's feature discusses the long journey that culminated in *The Witches of Gambaga* (Ghana/UK 2010) in an essay that includes her personal narrative of how the film was inspired by a long sleepless night in the community of condemned women. She also raises many of the challenges facing those interested in finding a cinematic language for representing women's lives in a world that has a pre-ordained grammar that is also related to the matter of funding. This theme is addressed by veteran Egyptian documentary filmmaker and film activist, Jihan El Tahri, in a feature that reflects on the strategies she has had to develop to navigate structures of representation that effectively preclude the development of independent voices and perspectives on the world.

Iman Kamel's deeply personal and artistic documentary *Beit Sha'ar* (Nomad's Home) was inspired during a period of wandering and soul-searching in the Sinai Desert, which led her to return to film the Bedouin women who captivated her poetic imagination. Her account of the frustration felt by her camerawoman suggests that Kamel's interest may have been stimulated rather than deterred by the fact that filming the faces of women is forbidden.

It is a less-than-widely understood fact that the highest honor at FESPACO – the award of the Yennenga's Stallion to the Best Feature Film – pays a tribute to legendary Princess Yennenga – who is credited with being the founder of the Mossi people in what is now Burkina Faso. Even less known is the fact that she is believed to be buried in Gambaga, the village in Northern Ghana where the witches camp, featured in Yaba Badoe's film, is now located. This valorisation is little more than symbolic, given that no woman has been awarded Yennenga's Stallion since its inception. However, Burkinabe/French Director Sarah Bouyain's impressive transnational feature *Notre Etrangere* filmed in Burkina Faso and France won a European Union Award presented under the auspices of FESPACO 2011.

FESPACO's record is in stark contrast to the accolades bestowed on women at the first Luxor African Film Festival in February 2012. The Festival's two top awards went to women. The Greater Nile Award for Best Film: the Golden Mask of Tutankhamen was awarded to Ghanian-Kenyan Hawa Essuman for her film *Soul Boy* and The Special Jury Award: the Silver Mask of Tutankhamen to Taghreed Elsanhoury of Sudan for her film *Our Beloved Sudan*.

## Endnotes

- 1 We owe a particular note of thanks to the judges and organisers of Africa's largest Film Festival – La Festival Pan Africain d'Arts Cineastes (aka FESPACO), because we first met to conceptualise *Feminist Africa 16* as their guests, over the dusty tables of La Village D'Artisans in Ougadougou, between the thrilling screenings of the latest in African film.
- 2 Reference to African-American poet, Audre Lourde 'Sister Outsider' (1984, The Crossing Press).

# Representation and Self-Representation: My Take

Salem Mekuria

Ousmane Sembene, the late Senegalese film director/novelist and the patriarch of African cinema, refers to film as a school of history, and confers on filmmakers the great responsibility of re-writing the history of our people. Films, Sembene said, should teach us to read and to know and to enhance our sentiments. For centuries, in Western literature and art, then in cinema beginning with the earliest films made at the turn of the century, our histories and our images have been the subject of manipulation and denigration. We have been relegated to the margins and used to reinforce, please and glorify Western desires. The earliest film practitioners, adventurers and explorers sought out to fix their gazes on the superficially observed differences of the “other” and typified exoticism as the true representation of our identities. D.W. Griffith revolutionized the cinematic art by culminating his experimentation in montage with “The Birth of a Nation” and achieved this feat by exploiting the fear of difference already present in the tainted relationships between the races.

The immense power of cinema in conferring identities emanates from the fact that it is so close to real life. Since the beginning, mainstream practices as represented by Hollywood have been striving to make this an indisputable fact by the seamless productions blurring the difference between the real and the imagined. Much has been written about how any form of visual production, and specially film, is a product of social, historical, cultural, political and economic forces; that there is no work of art, film, literature or other cultural product that can claim to be transparent of hidden meanings. The artists’ interventions, both conscious and unconscious, are selective and are mediated by their positioning within the context of these forces. But for the average

viewing public, separating fact from illusion is not a given. Critical viewing or close reading and interpreting the language and signs of cinema are often not part of general education.

Filmmaking in Africa by Africans is a fairly recent phenomenon in comparison to Western filmmaking history. This huge creative potential is hamstrung by the lack of infrastructure, resources and production experience inherent in the persistent state of underdevelopment. Carol Mundy Lawrence, a pioneer African American producer and director said that: "Whatever the reason for your decision to become an independent filmmaker, it must be strong enough to spur you to excellence and nourish you through many painful hours of disillusionment, not to mention high levels of frustration and budgets so tight they cut off your circulation."<sup>1</sup> Far more importantly it is compounded by the near total absence of education in film production or critical discourse about film in all its forms, followed by the lack of critical writing that could contextualize, guide and spur the growth of productions that are showing sporadic signs of life. The works of Ousmane Sembene and his contemporary pioneering cineastes remind us just how critical it is to understand that signification or representation cannot be separated from the myths and ideologies that provide context and meaning to them. At the same time we must remain vigilant to the fact that these same myths and ideologies can be used to oppress and deprive certain groups of their right to define their own identities. Moreover, it is important to develop the language of self-articulation by skillfully adapting and mastering the technologies of cinema. In this way we can advance practices that can truly capture and reflect the complexity of African realities.

Sembene and the other pioneers of African cinema explored various styles to identify what kind of practices would be appropriate to respond to the challenges inherent in such a project. The strategy that I find most appealing has been one in which master narratives become the object of analysis and critique, subverting the validity of such narratives, while at the same time appropriating and enlisting its tools of representation to serve these ends. Sembene and his contemporaries, and those that have followed in their footsteps provide us with ample evidence that African stories lend themselves to exquisitely accomplished cinematographic and montage. Take *Ceddo* (Sembene, 1976) and *Sarraounia* (Med Hondo, 1986) for example. In *Ceddo*, Sembene critiques the encroachment of Islam and

European colonialism by showing us how the oral customs of the local tradition get silenced when Islamic written law prohibited its practice. In *Sarraounia* Hondo tells the story of a West African queen who, despite the superior war machine behind it, devastates a French colonizing army in the late 19th Century. These two films are masterpieces of cinematic achievement. By appropriating the best style of classic story telling with pageantry and costumes, they present epic narratives of slavery, religious invasions, and colonial wars, featuring strong female characters. Sembene's *Faat Kine* (2001) features a successful modern businesswoman and single mother who rose from the ashes of shame, disowned by her father for her pregnancy out of wedlock, to raise two children and run her business. In a characterization unusual for many African films, a man also raises his three children alone. This film is exemplary both for its unflinching critique of women's marginalization in modern African societies, as well as its celebration of women who are successful, are conscious of their oppression but also of their power to pursue and achieve their goals. These films are visually sumptuous, beautifully shot and edited with complex characters and intellectually exciting narratives.

Studying these pioneers' work has been invaluable in developing my understanding of cinema's vast potential to transform the unbalanced relations between the dominant and the dominated. Their works demonstrate how social change has its deepest roots in self-realization and how the creative filmmaking process provides a quasi-ideal space in which to critique the status-quo and to experiment with the possibilities of creating films that foster and promote ideals of more just social relations.

I was lucky to have entered filmmaking at a time when theorization and re-assessment of issues of representation were taking place on many fronts. Being a product of the political and cultural awareness of the 60's and 70's it was natural for me to gravitate toward ideas and thoughts that challenged the dominant representational hegemony. Starting in the late fifties, Third Cinema theory had been making progress among filmmakers hailing from the so-called Third World. Its vision promised a genuine alternative to Eurocentric theories; a future in filmmaking in which we would develop a film language of our own; where Third World leaders would establish and nurture film industries in their countries encouraging experimentation and practices to advance its agenda. I was a student of this worldview.

The vision, short-lived as it was, tantalized us with the possibility that artistic and political liberation were at hand. It energized the production of some of the most exciting films, especially in West Africa, Latin America and South Asia; films that engaged with rigorous formal concerns, infused with deeply political content and commitment toward the fight for liberation.

On the heels of Third Cinema came feminist film theory and criticism led by Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Post-colonial and cultural studies further expanded the field, opening newer and more complex ways of conceptualizing and representing difference on film. The gaze of cinema was recognized not only as male but colonial as well. It was probably the most exciting period for a filmmaker to come of age.

I locate my work within this practice of critiquing / subverting / negating the dominant forms of representation. I am a filmmaker trained on the job and not academically trained in theory and analysis of cinematic forms. Nonetheless, I decided that if I was going to engage in the practice of filmmaking, it was important to understand these regimes of representation.

I started my work as an independent filmmaker in 1987. My initial focus in my first project was on African American history, *Our Place in the Sun (1988)*, a 30-minute documentary about the century-old presence of African Americans on Martha's Vineyard, an island associated with images of the white leisure class.

While I was making *Our Place in the Sun* I met the late Dorothy West, then an octogenarian whose family had been coming to the island since she was a baby. I discovered that Ms. West was a writer and one of the last remaining members of the great Harlem Renaissance. Her father who was born a slave and had been freed when he was 7 years old, had come north soon thereafter, and within a few years managed to become a successful businessman, setting up a middle class life for his family in Boston. West's only published novel at the time, "The Living is Easy", provides a scathing look at middle class Black Boston. A mixture of personal memory, archival footage and photographs, *As I Remember It: A Portrait of Dorothy West* (1991) narrates West's story, alongside that of other Black women artists of the period. In addition to my deep curiosity about African American history, I was interested in interrogating the erasure and/or deliberate neglect of women's participation in the artistic events of the Harlem Renaissance. West's story bridged Martha's Vineyard, Boston and New York. I was able to present an evocation of Boston's Black history, the first major

Black literary and artistic movement and, most importantly, glean the history of the women of the Harlem Renaissance about whom little had been known. Some of the most exciting parts of the film are the precious moments when Dorothy West's personal recollections take us into little explored areas of African American life at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

While working on this film, I found myself constantly drawn into the news of the deteriorating political situation in Ethiopia. The repeated famines and the endless civil wars continued to dislocate and displace thousands of people, turning them into images of faceless masses, never-ending food lines and dusty processions into exile. Millions were stranded in neighboring countries that were not much better off than Ethiopia. Also, for the first time in the history of Ethiopia, women were fleeing from the country in large numbers. In between waiting for more funding to finish Dorothy West's portrait, I started researching what eventually turned into *Sidet: Forced Exile* (1991), a 60 minute documentary portrait of three Ethiopian women exiled in the Sudan.

In *Sidet* I wanted to personalize the stories, name the individuals and explore refugee women's narratives. The largest numbers of Ethiopian refugees were in the Sudan. I was interested in observing the conditions under which these exiles fared, having exchanged one chaotic situation for another. Sudan in 1990 was not a particularly welcoming place. It was a year after the current Islamic regime, led by colonel Omar al-Bashir, had overthrown President Sadiq el Mahdi. Instability reigned as Bashir and the National Salvation movement tried to consolidate their power. Everything was scarce. Moreover the refugee population was caught between the wrath of the people who blamed them for all the economic and political turmoil, and the government that found an easy scapegoat in their presence. At the same time, the war in the south was escalating and the government accused Ethiopia of supporting it. Filming refugees at this time was not the wisest move. According to a friend, who called me from Khartoum sometime after we returned to the US, we were the last film crew able to leave with our films intact!

*Sidet* represents my effort to express the stories of the Ethiopian women I met in Sudan, to pay homage to their resilience, their multi-faceted struggle, and their survival under the harsh circumstances they endured there. Despite their dire situation, they showed incredible courage and hope for the future. What I captured on film reflects some of these ideas. I completed *As I Remember It* and *Sidet* in 1991.

I started working on *Ye Wonz Maibel (Deluge)* (1997) immediately after I finished these films. The momentous events taking place all over Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, culminating with the fall of the Soviet Union and the ensuing tumult all across the Eastern block, spilled over to Ethiopia. In April, 1991 the military dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam was driven out of power, weakened by the loss of Soviet support, drained by the double-pronged wars of the Tigrean People's Liberation Front and the Eritreans' struggle for independence from Ethiopia. In June 1991 I bought a hi-8 video camera and went to Ethiopia with the vague idea of recording the end or the beginning of something. I wasn't prepared for the horrors I found.

My intention was to try to capture narratives of what had happened during the military regime's elimination program known as the Red Terror, when, between 1976 and 1979, hundreds of thousands of people had been murdered. After spending a number of years sorting through hours of oral histories, visual documents and official narratives I had collected, I decided that the stories were too complex and too massive to contain within one hour using the what-happened-when style of documentary. As I was struggling to decide how best to tell this story, I came in contact with, and was greatly influenced by, documentaries from the London film workshops, a movement that was experimenting with and breaking new ground in hybridized story telling. Films such as Black Audio and Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1987) and Sankofa Film and Video Collective's *The Passion of Remembrance* (1988) presented visually exciting and poetic narratives of very complicated histories using personal reflections and reactions to events. Because of my training in public television, I initially resisted using the personal voice for such a public story as the Red Terror. But once I chose to locate the stories of my brother and my best friend in the big events that led to the Red Terror, I found that I had become part of the story.

What is the role of the individual in perpetuating such national tragedies, be it famine, war or political terror? What motivates us to love or to destroy? What turns good to evil, nobility to cowardice, vision to nightmare? All of us had started out with a vision for a better Ethiopia. Where and when had idealism metamorphosed into nightmare? Focusing my lens on searching through my own history, I wanted to look into my family's experiences in the hope of illuminating larger truths. What would I have done if I had been there?

It took 5 years of agonizing, deep emotional swings and mercurial changes to find the story that finally became *Deluge*. I was faced with images of death every day through those little TV screens in the editing room. My brother and my best friend had been murdered. Most of my compatriots from the student movement who had gone back home to join the revolution had also ended up dead. Hundreds of thousands of students and young intellectuals were randomly massacred. With emotional support from my daughter, my family and my friends, who regularly reminded me to stay steady and focused on the importance of the story that had to be told, I kept working until I found the direction the film needed to take. *Deluge* is by far the most challenging film I hope I will ever have to make. It stands tall as an intimately personal commentary, as a political and national history, as a eulogy not only to my brother and my best friend, but to lost innocence as well as to grand visions. In this regard, it is the most satisfying film I have made so far. Though many of the questions I started out with remain un-answered, the long and complex journey of its making has had a profound impact on me as an individual and as a filmmaker.

After *Deluge* I started experimenting with a fresh approach with which to articulate the post-mortem of the gaping mass graves dotting the landscape in Ethiopia. Returning to Ethiopia more frequently made me aware of the serious breakdowns, the seismic rifts that had sundered families and communities. I felt that the traditional documentary form was not adequate to capture this disconnection and fragmentation. As I mulled over which direction to take, I received an invitation to participate in the 2003 Venice Biennale with a new work. I seized this opportunity to experiment with fragmented structures, using a traditional art form of the triptych as the vessel. *Ruptures* (2003) became my first three channel video installation.

My choice of style was undoubtedly informed by the fact that painting in triptych is a traditional Ethiopian art form to which I have had much exposure. It is a widely used system of representation in Orthodox iconography, highly developed over centuries throughout the country. As the child of an Ethiopian Orthodox priest, I was always drawn to the iconic paintings and manuscript illustrations found in many Ethiopian Orthodox religious texts, church murals, as well as on wood panels illuminating religious narratives. Thus the triptych format refers not only visually to this traditional art form, but also to the core beliefs of the Trinity in Ethiopian Orthodox faith. Appropriating this formal

motif gave me a chance to propose a kind of hybridity that embodied existing traditions within modern technological and stylistic forms. I use this form to re-work the traditional content into images that refer to a variety of real and invented histories, including the myth of the Queen of Sheba, the Adwa victory and the piles of trash in Addis Ababa city dump.

For Ethiopia, the 20th century started out on a glorious note with Emperor Menelik's resounding victory over the Italians at Adwa in 1896. It was the first such defeat of a European power in the hands of an African nation. I was able to acknowledge the pervasive nature of the triptych art form in Ethiopian art and life, comment on the universalizing linearity of Ethiopian history, and critique the inadequacy of Western art forms to represent the complexities of the cultures and histories I was dealing with.

I also re-contextualize *Deluge in Ruptures*. In *Deluge* there are references to dirt, to trash and to sifting through debris at the mass grave sites. In addition to scenes of mass graves, there is a moment in *Deluge* when a mother appears standing at the edge of an empty mass gravesite to tell the story of how her son's body was tossed into a truck "as if he were dirt."

While attempting to film at the trash dump, *Deluge* was my passport for entry. When I arrived at the site, I was met by a group of young men who wanted to know what I was doing. I explained my intention to film there. They immediately surrounded me and my friend, started asking what I planned to do with the film, told me that many tourists often came to film promising they would come back with help and never do. In short, they would not allow me to shoot that day, because their group leader was not there anyway. As we engaged in a heated debate about the merits of an Ethiopian filmmaker doing it as opposed to foreigners, a man in his early 20's with sunglasses and a jogging suit strolled into the middle of the group demanding what was going on. I told him of my intention to film there. He asked if I was really a filmmaker, and enquired as to what films had I done that he would know about. I mentioned *Deluge*. Of course he hadn't seen it. I told him that it was about my brother and my best friend who was killed during the Red Terror. His face and posture changed, head hung down as if to hide his emotion and in a subdued voice said that his brother was also killed at that time. I promised to give him a copy of the film. After watching it a week later, he offered that he and his group would escort me to the dump anytime I needed to film there.

As a reflection on the transience of history, memory and identity *Ruptures* expresses the collective despair I felt about the state of the nation. But it also problematises the tendencies of representing as either/or the political or economic realities we face – for example, traditional/modern, developing/developed, under-developed/developing, etc. In the images of the installation the pre-historic, the pre-modern, the modern and the post-modern exist simultaneously side by side, more accurately representing the present-day realities of Ethiopia. With as few words as possible, relying on the power of the images, overlaying new and old sounds, juxtaposing and comparing them, I present new paths for interpreting this complex century in Ethiopian history, providing viewers with an acute sense, and feeling, of Ethiopia.

On another level, *Ruptures* marks a form of independence for me, a kind of self-reliance that by-passed the need for large fund-raising. I shot all of the new video footage for *Ruptures* with a small digital camera. I have continued to shoot entire projects including both versions of *Imagining Tobia I, II* (2006, 2007) and the most recent triptych, *Square Stories* (2010). I continue to explore different forms of visual story telling that make my filmmaking journey exciting and rewarding. I have grown in confidence as a filmmaker and will continue to grapple with the ever-increasing challenges of representing African stories.

## Endnotes

1. Black Women Film & video Artists, Jacqueline Bobo, ed. p. 93

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## Salem Mekuria: Filmography

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Writer, Director, Videographer, Producer

*Imagining Tobia*, I and II, (2006, 2007) Triptych Video documentary Installations

Writer, Director, Videographer, Producer

*Ruptures*, (2003), Triptych Video documentary Installation

Writer, Director, Producer and Videographer for most of the documentary

*Ye Wonz Maibel - (Deluge)*, (1997) a 60 min. documentary

Writer, Director, Producer and Videographer for some of the documentary

*Sidet: Forced Exile* (1991) 60 min. film documentary

Writer, Director, Producer

*As I Remember It: A Portrait of Dorothy West* (1991) 56 min. documentary

*Our Place in the Sun* (1988) 30 min. video documentary

# New Looks: The Rise of African Women Filmmakers

Lindiwe Dovey

In this article, I draw on my experience not only as a researcher and teacher of African film, but also as an African film programmer and film festival director over the past ten years, from 2001 to 2011. The article thus shifts between descriptive and prescriptive registers; at turns analytical, it also takes on the tone of a feminist manifesto at times. I draw on the approach of discourse analysis, offering critique of three of the (male-authored) films that were screened as part of the Africa-related film programme at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), to suggest what is potentially lost through a lack of attention to African and African diaspora women's filmmaking, in both the scholarly and programming realms. The article can thus be considered as, on the one hand, a gender-based analysis of three recent, celebrated films by and about Africans, and, on the other hand, as a justification of why I made the decision to make 'African Women Filmmakers' a focus of my programming of the festival Film Africa 2011 (see [www.filmafrica.org.uk](http://www.filmafrica.org.uk)). I do not address the structural and institutional barriers here, as these are yet to be properly studied.

## **A Male-authored, Feminist Cinema?**

It is an understatement to call the body of work generally termed 'African Cinema' profoundly feminist. From the earliest days of non-commercial, expressive, African-authored film production on the continent in the 1960s, to the present moment, there has been a consistent stream of films that focus on strong women characters, powerful and positive matriarchal cultures, and a critique of tyrannical, patriarchal cultures – whether colonial, neo-colonial or postcolonial. The feminist basis to much 'African Cinema' is one of its most remarkable, common features – and a feature that has not been highlighted

and discussed sufficiently in African film scholarship, which is still relatively impoverished when it comes to gender analysis (see, however, Dovey 2009, Ellerson 2000, Garritano forthcoming, Magogodi 2003, McCluskey 2009, Murphy 2000, Ouzgane 2011, Tcheuyap 2005, and Thackway 2003). While the idea of an 'African Cinema' is a myth – it is now generally acknowledged that there are multiple African cinemas (Barlet 2000) – it is, nevertheless, important to recognise how rare it is in the history of cinema that filmmakers from a particular region have *collectively* paid such attention to upholding the value of women and to critiquing patriarchy. When watching African films such as *Borom Sarret* (dir. Sembene, 1963), *Black Girl* (dir. Sembene, 1966), *Emitai* (dir. Sembene, 1971), *Sambizanga* (dir. Maldoror, 1972), *Ceddo* (dir. Sembene, 1976), *Sarraounia* (dir. Hondo, 1986), *A World Apart* (dir. Menges, 1988), *Finzan* (dir. Sissoko, 1989), *Flame* (dir. Sinclair, 1996), *Fools* (dir. Suleman, 1997), *Taafe Fanga* (dir. Drabo, 1997), *Karmen Geï* (dir. Ramaka, 2001), *Sia, le rêve du python* (dir. Kouyaté, 2001), *Kare Kare Zvako* (dir. Dangarembga, 2002), *Moolaadé* (dir. Sembene, 2004), and *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (dir. Dornford-May, 2005) – to name only a few of relevance from the canon – one begins to sense how differently African directors (or those who have lived for long periods in Africa and worked with Africans) have tended to centre women in their films compared to, for example, French directors. Jean-Luc Godard once said that cinema revolves around two atavistic imageries and imaginaries: war and women's beauty. Women's beauty may be featured in certain African films (such as *Karmen Geï* and *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*) but the kind of voyeuristic, pleasure-driven male gaze identified by Laura Mulvey thirty years ago (Mulvey, 1975) and used as a tool of critical analysis by countless feminist film critics to date has simply not been present in most African films – at least until recently, with the advent of Nollywood and its spin-offs across the continent (see Garritano, forthcoming, for the first sustained critique of gender representations in African video film).

The female characters in the classic African films listed above are unconventional, rounded, sometimes idiosyncratic, sometimes fighters – in the broadest, most positive sense of the word: they are women prepared to go out to work to support their husbands and families (for example, the wife of the cart driver in *Borom Sarret*, who – when her husband comes home empty-handed – leaves their compound in search of work); they are women willing to stand up for their beliefs and convictions (for example, the women

in *Emitai*, who resist the French army attempting to forcefully recruit their husbands to fight in World War II; and Maria, in *Sambizanga*, who walks for days to find her husband, Domingo, who has gone missing in the Angolan Liberation War); they are women unafraid to engage in political combat or to critique patriarchy and corruption (for example, Queen Sarraounia in *Sarraounia*, a historical figure who bravely fought against the French colonial forces, and who is celebrated in West Africa for the sensitive and compassionate way in which she treated Africans from tribes other than her own; Karmen in *Karmen Geï*, who critiques government and police corruption in contemporary Senegal; Collé in *Moolaadé*, who risks her life by protecting young girls who do not wish to be circumcised); they are women who – if they have no other choice – courageously sacrifice themselves to save their children and communities (the mother in *Kare Kare Zvako*, who – in the face of her husband’s greed at a time of drought, remains resilient and courageous), or to make a statement (Diouana in *Black Girl*, who chooses to commit suicide rather than resign herself to the bondage in which she is held by her white French employers in Antibes); they are women who claim ownership of their own sexuality and power (the women in *Taafe Fanga*, who make use of their power when one day they are magically transformed into the men of the village; U-Carmen in *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, who invests in her sense of self even in the face of abuse by men; Karmen in *Karmen Geï*, who is luminous in her polysexuality). They are women who speak out, stand up, and even take up arms when they see necessary. They are not always easy to characterise as ‘positive’ or as straightforward ‘heroines’; but the creation of perfect women has never, of course, been the aim of feminism. The aim of feminism has been to establish the humanity of women – women’s fundamental equality to men where human rights are concerned (as Gloria Steinem has noted, in this vein, feminism is much more a celebration of women’s differences from one another than their similarities, since the ultimate goal of feminism is to have women recognised as unique individuals rather than as part of a stereotyped group).

As I have begun to suggest, then, the record of African male filmmakers is astonishing when it comes to the representation of women. Furthermore, African male filmmakers have long engaged in stringent critiques and censures of patriarchy by parodying men and ‘masculine’ antics in their films (see Tcheuyap 2010 for some discussion of this trend). In this sense, they

would seem to have worked in concert with African male writers, who have tended to (self-critically) represent men – across generations, social and ethnic and class groups, and races – as problematically mired in destructive cycles of violence, often initiated through the impotence occasioned by colonial violence, but also integrated into contemporary cultures in Africa. The recent edited collection, *Men in African Film & Fiction* (Ouzgane, 2011), reveals the startling prevalence with which African male writers have taken it upon themselves to challenge the dominance, arrogance, and violence of their own gender group. Both tendencies on the part of African male filmmakers and writers – to celebrate women and to critique men – can be considered part of a broader, progressive postcolonial trend of self-critique by African artists, a trend that I have analysed in depth elsewhere (see Dovey 2009).

Given the overwhelming feminist approach by many African male filmmakers, how does one begin to offer valid or useful critique of the relative absence, historically, of female-authored perspectives in the African film *oeuvre* without becoming obstructed by identity politics? Such a critique would probably best be grounded in a thick description, arising out of several deep ethnographic studies, of the institutional and structural constraints to women entering and remaining within the film industry, within Africa and internationally. What it is possible to emphasise, even in the dearth of such studies, is that Africa is no exception when it comes to the relative lack of a female presence in the most glamorous and important jobs in the industry. There are many women involved in film administration, in the running of film festivals, and working as actresses, but there are far fewer working as film producers and directors. Distributors such as Women Make Movies (<http://www.wmm.com/>) and film festivals such as Birds Eye View (<http://www.birds-eye-view.co.uk/>) exist in some of the most populous and cosmopolitan global centres – New York and London respectively – precisely to rectify the significant gender imbalances that one finds across all aspects of the film industry, globally; according to the Birds Eye View festival organisers, women make up less than 10% of film directors and less than 15% of screenwriters internationally (<http://www.birds-eye-view.co.uk/198/about-us/about-us.html>). Specific, ethnographic studies of various African film and media organisations and institutions are urgently needed to begin to understand why it is that, in the African context, African women have not enjoyed a sustained presence.

In the absence of more thoroughgoing studies, what can be said in general terms is that filmmaking in Africa in the postcolonial period has been dominated by men, with very few women directors emerging – particularly in the realm of feature-length fiction filmmaking – until recently. Most of the films listed above – which could be characterised as feminist – were made by male, not female, directors. Many of the great women directors who emerged on the continent in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s – such as Sarah Maldoror, Safi Faye, and Anne Mungai – have made very few films. Those that they have made have not been widely screened, and sometimes do not exist in modern, digital formats. For example, Sarah Maldoror’s film *Sambizanga* (1972), which was the first feature-length fiction film to be made in Africa by a woman, exists on one, sole, 35mm copy with French subtitles. When we screened this print at the festival Film Africa 2011 in London, we needed to simultaneously project English subtitles on to the print, which is also not in a very good condition. One wonders, under such circumstances, why a film such as *Sambizanga* has not been deemed worthy of restoration by, for instance, Martin Scorsese’s World Cinema Foundation (which recently restored Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambety’s classic film, *Touki Bouki* [1973]) or the Cineteca di Bologna in Italy (which, in the past few years, took on the task of restoring the first anti-apartheid film, Lionel Rogosin’s *Come Back Africa* [1959]). A film such as *Sambizanga* should, quite simply, be available. Made at the height of the Angolan liberation war, by a woman who had worked on films such as *The Battle of Algiers* (dir. Pontecorvo, 1966) and been involved in liberation movements across the continent, the film is a treasure of human history not only because of its artistic and creative merits but also because of the significant events that had to be confronted in, and were incorporated into, its production. Analysis of why it has been so difficult for leading female filmmakers such as Sarah Maldoror and Safi Faye to make as many films as their male counterparts requires critical attention if we are to write a comprehensive feminist critique of the history of filmmaking in Africa.

At the same time, studies are needed to explain the more encouraging, positive recent developments when it comes to gender equality in the African screen media industries – such as the interesting fact that women are at the forefront of the contemporary rebirth of filmmaking in Kenya, where young female directors such as Hawa Essuman, Wanuri Kahiu, Judy Kibinge, Ekwa Msangi-Omari, and Zipporah Nyaruri have been the pioneers of this

movement. In general, a shift appears to have occurred in the past decade that has seen many new, dynamic African and African diaspora women filmmakers appear on the screen media scene, such as (and including those above): Yaba Badoe (Ghana/UK); Jihan El-Tahri (Egypt); Osvalde Lewat (Cameroon/France); Branwen Okpaku (Nigeria/Germany); Zina Saro-Wiwa (Nigeria/UK); Akosua Adoma Owusu (US/Ghana); Caroline and Agnes Kamy (Uganda); Rungano Nyoni (Zambia/UK); Ariane Astrid Atodji (Cameroon); Minky Schlesinger (South Africa); Khetiwe Ngcobo (South Africa); Sara Blecher (South Africa); Fanta Regina Nacro (Burkina Faso); Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe); Dyana Gaye (Senegal); Omelga Mthiyane (South Africa); Peace Anyiam-Fiberesima (Nigeria). The fact that a Facebook group called 'I'm African. I'm a Woman. I Make Films' has recently been started also seems to suggest that African women are now taking control over their own representation (in both senses of the word). It is the work of many of these African women directors that I have programmed for Film Africa 2011, in acknowledgement of this exciting flourishing of female directors on the continent and in the diaspora, and also to combat some of the ongoing problems inherent in certain male-authored visions of (African) women, which I discuss in the next section of this article.

What factors have led to this rise in African women making movies? Why have major international film festivals –such as Cannes 2008 – finally started paying attention to these directors? ( A number of African women were invited to participate in a special focus on women directors there by the French organisation Cinémas du Sud).

### **What Women (Don't) Want: Representations of Women in the Toronto International Film Festival's African/Black Programme**

It is with the assumption that it is easier to analyse problematic rather than positive gender representations that this next, analytical section of this article proceeds. This is because, as I have pointed out above, it is not homages to African women that feminists seek as much as a natural acceptance of women's humanity, in all its facets. It is far easier to point out when this humanity is not being respected than when it is being summoned, for in the latter case it becomes unremarkable.

Most scholars of African screen media agree that the representations of women in many African video films, and particularly those made in the Ghanaian and southern Nigerian video film industries, are highly problematic

(CODESRIA conference at FESPACO 2011). Carmela Garritano (forthcoming) has done extensive research on the representation of women in Ghanaian film which, I hope, will set the scene for further, probing research into the representation of women in popular, mass screen media across Africa. While such research is urgent, my own concern here is not with such popular African expression but rather with the insidious representations of women that creep into films that would seem to self-consciously fashion themselves as artistic, avant-garde, theoretically informed, intellectual, and even feminist, and which circulate in that largely “closed-loop”, elite environment of prominent international film festivals (see Ogbechie 2010).<sup>1</sup>

I do not have the space here to adequately theorise the kind of spectator produced at such film festivals, or the way that a specific kind of cinematic ‘taste’ is often peddled and reinforced at such events (see Bourdieu 1984). The construction and place of audiences within filmic worlds and contexts is central to my current research and will be the focus of my next book, which aims to analyse (international and African) film festivals and their relationships to African films, filmmakers, and audiences. But I do want to acknowledge that there is a kind of tacit contract established between filmmakers and audiences at renowned film festivals (such as the Toronto International Film Festival, Cannes, and Rotterdam) that recognises similarity in class background and educational level. Most of the filmmakers and audiences are well versed in cinema and can speak in sophisticated, analytical ways about it. The filmmakers who attend such festivals to show their work would thus seem to invite the kind of critique that I am going to offer, as would the programmers.

The Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), often cited as the most important film festival both in industry, artistic, and audience terms, currently employs nineteen film programmers to select the roughly three hundred films that make up its annual programme. Of these three hundred or so films, in 2011, about twenty films had some relationship to Africa (through having an African director, African setting, or African characters). For films with Africa-related content to occupy approximately seven percent of the programme is a relatively positive statistic where a major international film festival is concerned, given the general lack of interest in African cinema by the global film industry. TIFF is rather unusual in this respect, largely due to the fact that its co-director and the person responsible for TIFF’s programming vision is Cameron Bailey, who has a background in and passion for African and black

cinema. Although Africa is no longer one of Bailey's programming regions (he now focuses on the US, UK, Europe, and Asia), seven of the forty films he programmed for TIFF 2011 had some relationship to African and black culture. TIFF also employs a specialised African and Middle Eastern film programmer, Rasha Salti; at TIFF 2011, ten of Salti's fourteen selected films had an African focus.

While the attention to African and black cinema at TIFF is to be highly lauded, and the 2011 programme of Africa- and black-related films was on the whole impressive and progressive, a gender analysis of three of the male-authored films screened can help to give a sense of what may be lost on the front of gender equality in representational terms by privileging male-authored works about Africa, Africans, and black identity, and what may be gained through more gender balance in screenwriting and directorial perspectives in the industry when it comes to African and black identity. I do not have the space to engage in a comprehensive, close analysis of these films here; my interest is more in giving a sense of the collective impression the viewer gains of contemporary gender relationships, and representations, through them.

There are two important points to be made before I begin my analysis. First, none of the films which I am going to critique was made by a sub-Saharan African male director, and – given my overview of the feminist perspective of many sub-Saharan African male filmmakers above – this would seem significant. Related to this point is the fact that Rasha Salti is Lebanese and is much more versed in Middle Eastern cinema than African cinema. The second point relates to who, beyond TIFF, is likely to have access to and watch the films I discuss below. It is important to note that each international film festival has a particular identity, and that TIFF prides itself on being an *audience* festival (Bailey 2011) – open to the public (as long as people can afford the high price of the tickets, and are prepared to wait in very long queues for them). Most significantly, sales agents and distributors closely monitor audience reactions during screenings at TIFF because the festival is considered a litmus test for which films are likely to play well to a global audience and therefore which films to pick up for mainstream distribution.

*Dark Girls* (dir. Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry, USA, 2011), *Death for Sale* (dir. Faouzi Bensaidi, Morocco, 2011), and *The Invader* (dir. Nicolas Provost, Belgium, 2011) are all well-made, entertaining films with – on the

whole – significant aesthetic and ethical value. *Dark Girls*, made by veteran director Bill Duke in collaboration with first-time director D. Channsin Berry, is a documentary that deals with the phenomenon of what the filmmakers call ‘colorism’ – prejudice *within* a generally demarcated ‘racial’ group against those with darker skin tone.<sup>2</sup> *Death for Sale* is a moody, Moroccan film noir, set in the impoverished seaside town of Tetouan, that focuses on three young male friends – Malik, Allal, and Soufiane – who are attempting to escape their poverty; the film is the third feature by rising Moroccan director Faouzi Bensaïdi.<sup>3</sup> *The Invader* marks a stunning debut feature film by the young Belgian director Nicolas Provost; it stars the up-and-coming Burkinabé actor Issaka Sawadogo as Amadou, an African migrant to Belgium, and his relationship to a wealthy white woman, Agnès.<sup>4</sup> And yet, all three of these films – as important as they are – embody, to some extent, problems that one can associate with a long history of the stereotyping of women in cinema, as identified and analysed by Mulvey in 1975.

The website for the film *Dark Girls* calls it ‘*the* story of color, gender, and race’ (my emphasis; <http://officialdarkgirlsmovie.com/>); the indefinite pronoun ‘a’ would have been a more appropriate marker, acknowledging what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi has called the ‘danger of a single story’ ([http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html)). By emphasising their own subjective approach to the topic, the male filmmakers might have cleared themselves of the possible critique that one could level against this film, which is that it partly participates in the very thing that it attempts to critique: prejudice against people based on their appearance (and, in this case, specifically skin hue). For, in its valuable critique of the shocking bias against women of darker skin tone – not only by people outside of their ‘racial’ group, but also from within it – the filmmakers unwittingly end up emphasising the (stereotyped) connection between women and physical appearance. In their Third Cinema-like attempt to encourage women of darker skin tone to (re)claim their beauty – the film ends with the militant injunction ‘Dark girls rise!’ – the filmmakers, in some moments, would seem to suggest that the most significant problem that a woman can encounter in her lifetime is to be deemed unattractive by men.

The film lays bare the problematic of colourism and also the great pressures on women of all skin tones to live up to a (generally media-produced) notion of beauty. In terms of the problematic of colourism, the film focuses in

particular on the extent to which African American men (seemingly) reject choosing African American women as their long-term partners, which has led to the (perhaps) concerning statistic that 41.9% of African American women in the US have never been married as opposed to 20% of white women in the US. (There may, of course, be other factors at play that enable one to view this as a statistic not of victimhood but of agency).<sup>5</sup> In terms of the pressures on all women to conform to a particular aesthetic ideal, the film cites a Dove survey that points out that 75% of women experience self-loathing related to their appearance at some point in their lives. While these statistics can ignite important discussions, the assumption that arises from the conflation of these statistics within the film, it must be acknowledged, is somewhat problematic: the assumption is that women are victims (darker-skinned women are not *in charge* of their relationship destiny, but are *rejected* by men; women are victims of a false consciousness imbued by media stereotypes surrounding female beauty).

This representation of women as passive rather than active in their fate is reinforced through several revealing comments by men and women in interviews throughout the film. 'The darker the fruit, the sweeter the juice' is a refrain that arises in the film via the voices of both men *and* women. While, on the one hand, the inclusion of and emphasis on this refrain would seem to be a well-meaning attempt by the filmmakers to encourage darker-skinned women to feel more positive about themselves, it can – on the other hand – be read in a more sinister light, in its obvious association between women and food to be consumed. In one of the interviews in the film, a young African American man takes this metaphor even further, arguing that darker-skinned women are 'more organic' than lighter-skinned women and, since he personally prefers darker-skinned women, he must therefore be 'vegetarian'. While this statement appears rather harmless – and, in fact, made the audience at TIFF 2011 laugh – it does make the viewer ponder, afterwards, what the more general significance of this comment is within the entire film. The placement of the comment reveals no scepticism on the part of the filmmakers; rather, it forms part of one strand of the film – a politicised strand that urges darker-skinned women to feel better about themselves. Darker-skinned women watching the film are thus asked to appreciate this young man's comment as an assurance that there are *some* men out there – *even* African American men! – who in fact prefer women like themselves.

However, at the same time, all female viewers of the film are asked to accept hearing themselves spoken about as food to be consumed. Perhaps I am more sensitive than I should be on this point, but such metaphors conjure in me memories of other films made by African directors that critique the use of these very metaphors, particularly in South Africa – the country that I come from, and which has one of the highest rates of abuse of women by men. In South African director Lovinsa Kavuma's film *Rape for who I Am* (2005), which deals with 'corrective rape' of lesbians in the country, a father justifies raping his daughter with the following saying: 'If I grow a peach tree, I should be allowed to eat the peaches off it.' And in leading South African filmmakers Ramadan Suleman and Bhekizwe Peterson's film *Fools* (1997), the male discursive practice of linking women to food to be consumed is suggested as one of the justifications used by men to rape women, and is severely critiqued.

The films *Death for Sale* and *The Invader*, as fiction rather than documentary films, are problematic in their treatment of gender in a slightly different way. Whereas *Dark Girls*, in its (commendable) attempt to critique colour prejudice, ends up contradictorily emphasising the importance of women judging themselves based on their physical attractiveness, *Death for Sale* and *The Invader* rehearse stereotypes on the level of characterisation and narrative. In both cases, the blow to the directors' otherwise profoundly complex representations of gender arises in the final sequence of the film, as a kind of atavistic return to the male suspicion that women are both the access to everything valuable in the world (and access to Life itself), and inaccessible in that they are not to be trusted. *Death for Sale* is, until its final moment, a very moving – even heart-wrenching – tale of how young people living in small-town Morocco, with few financial resources and no employment opportunities, are trying to make lives for themselves. The romantic relationship between Malik and Dounia, a prostitute with whom he falls in love, is given the central and overarching place in the film; Malik and Dounia's innocent love for one another appears to be the one reprieve in an otherwise sad and compromised world governed by police corruption and the oppression of the poor by the wealthy. This relationship is also the catalyst for much of the conflict in the film, however.

The film's opening scene involves one long continuous shot of the three young male friends and partners in crime – Malik, Allal and Soufiane – wandering down a street, arms affectionately thrown around each other, talking and laughing. In one of the following sequences, Malik notices Dounia

standing at a look-out point and is struck by her beauty. They fall in love, and start a relationship. Much of the film's narrative from here on revolves around Malik and his male friends' scheming as to how they can make some money to escape their situation; and Allal and Soufiane's jealousy that Dounia is depriving them of more time with Malik. Allal frequently warns Malik that Dounia, being a 'whore', will betray him. One night Malik returns to the room he shares with Dounia and finds Allal there; Dounia is in the bathroom, crying. Allal tells Malik that Dounia agreed to sleep with him for money and leaves. When Dounia emerges from the bathroom, however, she tells Malik that Allal raped her. As a spectator made to see Malik and Dounia's love as the redemption for the desperation surrounding them, and to desire their escape from this context, one willingly believes Dounia. At the end of film, Malik and his male friends embark on the robbery of a jewellery store that will give them their freedom; both Allal and Soufiane are shot dead. Malik escapes the police with the jewellery and manages to reach the bus station where he has planned to meet Dounia and from where the two will flee to happier pastures. It is with delight that the spectator witnesses Malik's escape and anticipates the film's happy ending, with love winning out over police brutality and social repression. But then the blow comes. When Malik and Dounia meet at the station, Dounia suggests that it is dangerous to carry the jewellery in a bag; she says that she should hide it on her body. Malik agrees and Dounia races to the women's bathroom. When Malik finally realises that something is wrong, it is too late. He enters the women's bathroom and sees the jewellery bag lying on the ground, empty. Dounia has betrayed him. The final shot of the film shows Malik return to the look-out point where he first spotted Dounia. The camera follows Malik but then continues tilting and tilting until it shows Malik upside down, his world turned topsy turvy – not by what one expected – the poverty of his town, the police corruption and violence, the social injustice, but by a woman – and, furthermore, a prostitute. This final shot of the film is directly opposed to its opening, in which one is reminded of Malik's closeness to these two, male friends. The implicit suggestion is that his male friends would not have betrayed him; he made the wrong choice by falling in love with a 'whore'. Most worryingly, one is left – after Dounia's betrayal of Malik – wondering whether she in fact told him the truth when she said that Allal raped her. We are thus confronted with a rehearsal of the oldest stereotype of women in the book: the 'whore' who cannot be believed or trusted.

As is well known, the other side of the coin of this stereotype is the woman as perfect, intact, virgin territory; the woman as Myth and Motherland; the woman as openness, innocence, and access (see Stratton 1994). This is the stereotype of the woman that Nicolas Provost takes up, plays with, and complicates in *The Invader* – until the final moment in the film, in which he compromises the complexity of his gender representations. The film's opening sequence is bound to become legendary; the first shot is an overhead close-up of a very white, naked woman's body, focusing on her vagina. The shot tilts down then pulls out to show the woman, who we then learn is lying on a nudist beach, rise and walk confidently towards the water. She gazes intently at something. The director cuts to show us what she is gazing at. It is two black men in the waves, one flailing, the other heaving, trying to help the other. The one who is trying to help is bare-chested, and undeniably beautiful. It is clear that he and his friend are illegal immigrants who have swum to European shores from wherever their boat deposited or abandoned them. The director cuts back to the striking white woman; her expression is one of wonder and desire. One assumes that the gaze of the camera is now conflated with the gaze of the beautiful black man in the waves. The camera looks slightly up at the white woman via a low shot. She is not only desiring but powerful. She is the threshold to Fortress Europe.

The viewer soon realises that the film's opening sequence is a preamble, almost imaginary. We do not see the striking white woman again. However, she becomes replaced, in the main narrative of the film with another arresting, white woman: Agnès, an extremely wealthy woman whose exact profession remains unclear, but who it is subtly suggested is a patron of the arts. Amadou (the black man we see in the opening sequence of the film) meets Agnès accidentally, after he wanders in to an open lecture from the street. At this point in the film we have seen Amadou's cherished, sickly friend disappear and his attendant anger at his boss (who smuggled Amadou and his friend into Belgium) for doing nothing to help his friend when he was ill. Amadou destroys his boss's car, then heads out on to the streets of Brussels. After their meeting, Agnès tries to set Amadou up with a gay male friend of hers who is attracted to him; but Amadou only has eyes for Agnès. Eventually Agnès gives in to Amadou's persistent attentions and they share a night of passion in an apartment that she owns (kept precisely for conducting extra-marital affairs with different men, we later learn). The scene is visually astonishing

in the way that the colour palette of celluloid enhances the difference in Amadou and Agnès' skin and hair tone: she is as white and blonde as he is black and dark-haired. They are both beautiful in a conventional way. However, the scene of their lovemaking has something sterile about it. With Agnès holding herself up against the floor-to-ceiling glass wall of her high-rise apartment, and Amadou and Agnès not looking at each other, there is no tenderness or softness in the experience. It is glassy, transparent and superficial. One feels that the sequence is shot from Agnès' perspective that it is she who is approaching the experience in this way. This is confirmed in a later scene, when Amadou observes her ferrying a different man into the car park of the apartment building. Amadou, in contrast, appears to develop real feelings for Agnès. The smouldering intensity of the way he looks at her does not seem opportunistic; the narrative does not appear to be developing, at this point, into a story of how a black African man and illegal migrant to Europe attempts to use a wealthy, white, European woman to gain access to European resources. It seems to be a narrative about (one-way) love and desire in spite of huge discrepancies in wealth and social class. Amadou most probably loves Agnès and is using all that he has – his physical beauty, and his charm – just as anyone would do to try to win her affection.<sup>1</sup> The moment when Agnès discovers Amadou's real situation is painfully intense and one can almost empathise with Amadou's descent into despair and fury after Agnès rejection of him. These are complex characters and the profound individuality and uniqueness of the story sets it apart from many other contemporary films about African migrants living in, or trying to come to, Europe.

It is only in the final sequence of the film that Amadou and Agnès devolve into stereotypes. In a semi-imaginary scene, Amadou walks naked into Agnès bedroom. He stops and stares at Agnès, who lies sleeping beside her (also sleeping) husband. This scene reminds the viewer of the opening scene of the film, in which the naked white woman on the beach stares at Amadou with desire and power. While one remains sympathetic towards Amadou and his outsider position within the clean, glassy, inaccessible world around him, it's as if the filmmaker has after a compelling film lazily (or excessively) resorted to an ending that is as opaque as it is stereotyped. One finds, in this ending, the conventional 'auteur' tendency not to want to even try to explain what has happened in lieu of elusiveness and intrigue. One also finds, however, the predictability of a certain type of representation of women; we are

confronted with a reversal that repeats the longstanding, tenacious narrative that associates women with land with territory to be conquered, with the 'nation' itself. The (feminised) black Africa that white colonisers wanted to 'penetrate' is converted here into the white woman representing Europe both the barrier to entry and the best means of access. While the film might be attempting to offer a postcolonial critique of this conflation between (black and white) women's bodies and the nation, the fact that Nicolas Provost has emphasised in interviews and Q&As that the film's opening credit sequence image (a beautiful, doubled image of cars moving through a tunnel that resembles the Stargate sequence in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*) represents both Amadou's passage towards Europe and the vagina, does make one question whether the stereotype is not being activated rather than critiqued.

### Conclusion: The Other Half

While one would certainly not want to argue that all men fall into sub-conscious sexist patterns when representing women, or that all women inevitably make films that treat women as human beings (there are plenty of examples to the contrary in both cases), there is an ongoing need to remain alert to the ways in which (heterosexual) male desire for women might filter into male-authored films and compromise otherwise progressive representations of women. What is at issue here is not characterisation in and of itself. There is no inherent problem with a male director making a film about dark-skinned women's sad desire to try to lighten their skin; about a prostitute in a small Moroccan town; about how a black African migrant desires a white European woman. The problems arise in the unwitting contradictions in a film's message (*Dark Girls*); in the repetition of the age-old narrative of female deceit trumping even the deceit of the state (*Death for Sale*); and in the (postcolonial) reversal of the sexist (colonial) myth that women's bodies can stand in for geographical territory that men will ultimately conquer or attempt to conquer (*The Invader*). The fact that all three of the films analysed in this article are extremely complex, and have feminist elements, makes these problems all the more sinister, and all the more in need of separating out and analysing. The so-called 'post-feminist' era in which we are living thrives precisely on such contradictions, feeding women – on the one hand – with messages of liberating themselves from being

shackled to an emphasis on physical appearance and sex appeal, and – on the other hand – with messages that suggest to women that their chief asset will always be their physical appearance and sex appeal. While feminists such as Catherine Lumby have convincingly argued that modern women should feel justified in claiming ownership over their physicality and sexuality, too much relative emphasis on the superficialities of physical appearance will surely encourage anti-intellectualism in the younger female generation.

While sub-Saharan African male directors, as I have argued above, have tended to offer progressive, feminist representations of African women, it appears that male directors from other contexts have not necessarily learnt from their sub-Saharan African counterparts. There is constantly the danger of monolithic male views of (African) women – what Adichie calls ‘a single story’ – presiding. Furthermore, one simply cannot have a heterogeneous view of the African continent and its diaspora if fifty percent of its population does not have a cinematic voice. As I have argued above, it is nearly impossible to articulate the characteristics of a ‘positive’ representation of African women; however, in conclusion, I do want to say that I hope that the collective impact on audiences (however ‘elite’ these audiences may be) of the films by African and African diaspora women that I have selected for Film Africa 2011 is an understanding of how much more varied and diverse a perspective we gain of Africa when the films of its women are included. A third of the films that we showed at Film Africa 2011 were written and/or directed by women, not as an act of charity or affirmative action, but as a real reflection of the great rise of African female filmmaking talent, on and beyond the continent.

Notably, very few of the films made by African and diaspora women that I watched in my programming for Film Africa 2011 focus directly on ‘women’s issues’. Rather, what one appears to find here is something similar to what is happening more generally in the field of African filmmaking, as South African director Teddy Mattera alluded to, when he said at the 2007 New York African Film Festival: ‘We have been the object of the gaze. We don’t want to return the gaze, we want to look elsewhere.’ While some recent films by African and African diaspora women filmmakers that were screened at Film Africa 2011 – such as the experimental, alt-Nollywood films of Zina Saro-Wiwa, *The Deliverance of Comfort* and *Phyllis* (2010), and Yaba Badoe’s *The Witches of Gambaga* (2010) – offer important, urgent feminist critique, others – such as Salem Mekuria’s *Square Stories* (2010), Akosua Adoma Owusu’s *Drexciya*

(2011), Nadia El Fani's *Lenin's Children* (2007), Rungano Nyoni's *Mwansa the Great* (2011), Sara Blecher's *Surfing Soweto* (2011), and Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2009) – display a different kind of confidence, the confidence that seems to say 'Don't make assumptions about what or who I am, or what kind of film I want to make.' Many of the films focus on male protagonists (for example, *Square Stories*, *Lenin's Children*, *Mwansa the Great*, and *Surfing Soweto*), something which would seem to suggest that these female directors (whether consciously or not) position themselves as 'nego feminists'. Nigerian feminist scholar and activist Obioma Nnaemeka coined this phrase to refer to 'a feminism of negotiation' and a 'no-ego feminism' in which women do not see men as the *other* but as the necessary *other half* to any conceptualisation of what it means to be human (2004). Similarly, the Senegalese director Joseph Gai Ramaka has posed a provocative question about the nature of ways in which people (and especially filmmakers) look at other people: 'is it to be the Other as what [she] is and whom I am going to dissect or, alternatively, the Other in so far as I feel an affinity with [her] and [she] with me?' (quoted in Barlet 2000: 9). While African male directors have, on the whole, upheld the value of women in their films, contemporary African women directors are giving us a 'new look' in African cinema – one that suggests an affinity between filmmaker and subject and which is rooted in the profound respect for each human individual that is necessary to overcoming the scourges of racism and sexism.

## Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Neal MacInnes for introducing me to Ogbechie's work.
2. Bill Duke has long been involved in the US television and film industries, as an actor and director. He is best known for his direction of some episodes of the television series *Hill Street Blues* and *Miami Vice* in the 1980s. In the 1990s he directed crime dramas such as *A Rage in Harlem* (1991), and comedies such as *Sister Act 2* (1993). Notably, he mentors young African Americans in the film business.
3. Faouzi Bensaïdi is a middle-aged Moroccan filmmaker, actor, and installation artist. His entry into the international film circuit occurred in 2003, when his film *A Thousand Months* screened in the 'Un Certain Regard' section at the Cannes Film Festival. The film does not appear to have had a wide mainstream release or to have attracted much critical attention, and Bensaïdi did not make another feature film until *Death for Sale* premiered at TIFF 2011.
4. Nicolas Provost is a middle-aged Belgian filmmaker and installation artist who spent ten years living in Norway. He trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, Belgium, and calls his work 'a reflection on the grammar of cinema and

the relation between visual art and the cinematic experience.' *The Invader*, which he calls 'a social thriller about an anti-heroic illegal immigrant and his struggle for economic and emotional survival in the new world', is his debut feature film (see <http://www.nicolasprovost.com/#/bios>).

5. See the work of feminist legal scholar Angela Onwuachi-Willig for comprehensive engagement with the racial politics surrounding love, romantic relationships, and marriage. In her work more generally, Onwuachi-Willig challenges, from a critical race perspective, 'the accepted notion that whiteness is pure and blackness is impure' (2007: 2454). She highlights the fact that 'Among racial and ethnic minorities, Blacks have the lowest rate of intermarriage with Whites' (2007: 2456) and that 'even in 2005, the historical process of the United States disallows biracial individuals, who may be just as much white as they are black, to claim that they are white, while fully allowing them to assert a black identity' (2007: 2453). In other work (2009) she critiques the 'invisibility' of and implicit discrimination against multiracial couples in US law. Collectively her work provides a clear picture of continuing institutional racism against Blacks in the US context (and just how much of an institution 'whiteness' itself is); she thereby provides telling clues as to why 'colorism' exists and why African American women, in particular, might find themselves excluded from the institution of marriage more than women of other racial identities.

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# Reflections on Cinema Criticism and African Women

Beti Ellerson

In accordance with the griot oral tradition, “Le dit du cinéma africain” (A Tale of African Cinema) by Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1967), relates a rare testimony on the early history of African experiences with the moving image. In this captivating tale by the inimitable storyteller of African history is the extraordinary story of Kadidja Pâté, his mother. Her fascinating and edifying encounter with early cinema provides a unique introduction to research on African women and film criticism.

Hampâté Bâ recalls as an eight-year-old, the first film screening held in his native village Bandiagara, Mali in 1908. The local colonial governor had ordered the religious leaders of the village to attend a film screening, and concerned about this “satanic ghost ready to trick the true believer”, they gathered to find a way to sabotage the event. Though she was not present at the screening, Kadidja Pâté, a devout Muslim, continued to embrace this collective belief. However, in 1934, still under the 1908 interdiction of the marabouts of Bandiagara, and to please her son, she accompanied him and his wife to the movie theatre.

Research on early cinema and spectatorship of that era underscores the near-universal response of amazement and wonder in the first decades of the birth of cinema. Audiences in both westernized and non-western societies experienced the stunning effect of this new technology. Hence, it is not surprising that even the learned leaders of the small village of Bandiagara, Mali had awed reactions, encouraging their extant opposition to the veneration of images under Islam. At the same time that Hampâté Bâ presents an introduction to early African experiences in cinema, his story also explores the relations of power between coloniser and Africa at the site of the image

and spectatorship, and the negotiation of endogenous (religious) beliefs with external cultural forms.

The most intriguing aspect of the story and a useful example for my work, is the absolute transformation of Kadidja Pâté, from a young woman who in 1908 accepted the elders' belief that cinema was evil, to a mature woman in 1934, who had evolved into an independent thinker critically engaging its possibilities. In this study, Kadidja Pâté serves as a conduit of sorts to the emergence of an African women's cinematic gaze; demonstrating her ability to interpret, discern and demystify the moving images of her time, a time when cinema was just developing and taking shape. When Hampâte Bâ's story begins, a mere decade and a half had passed since the first public screenings of the moving images in the 1890s in Europe and North America, at the time of Kadidja Pâté's first encounter with cinema in 1934, the sound era had just emerged. Though an untrained spectator, she was able to draw lessons and benefit from her first experience at the movie theatre. Her interpretation of the screen as metaphor, her ability to observe, differentiate, compare—likening the screen to an intermediary between the Maker and the viewer, is indicative of a perceptive cultural reader able “to develop [her] own beliefs into firm ideas and not through passive conformity.” Her reflection, I would venture to say, is the earliest evidence of an African woman's experience of cinema. She recounted it to her son in this way,

“When we entered the cinema, before the film you showed me a large white cloth on which a beam of light was projected, which would then become images that we could look at and recognize. You also showed a small enclosure situated rather high above us. You told me that it was in this box that the machine that spat images was located.

In this box there are several openings through which light shines; ending on the large white cloth. As soon as the operator—whom we do not see—begins his work, some noise comes out of the enclosure. It passes over our head while we are thrust into a deep darkness—a metaphor of our ignorance of the unknown. The light came from the small enclosure in measured portions, in thin lines, rather than all at once.

We were facing the large white cloth. It was only when looking at it that we could clearly see, make out and understand the images that unfolded in front of us. We could see horses run, men walk, and villages

emerge. We saw the thick vegetation in the rural area, the blooming countryside, the plain sharply fall away. All of this as if in a long dream, clear and precise, as if dreaming in a waken state.

After having watched the large white cloth for a long time, I wanted, in its absence, to perceive with my eyes alone the images that came from the little house. What happened to me? As soon as I turned directly towards the opening in the little house, the beam of light that came out blinded me. Although the images were in the rays, my eyes were not strong enough to detect it. I closed my eyes in order to concentrate, but my ears continued to clearly discern the sound that accompanied the streams of light.

I found myself in the following situation: First, when I watch the big white cloth, I see the images and hear the sound. I benefit from both the image and sound. But, on the other hand, when I only use my eyes, looking directly at the projector, I only hear the sound. I am not able to stand the powerful light, it blinds me. At the same time that there is some good in it, there are also disadvantages.

This deduction leads me to the conclusion that as long as the cloth is essential to clearly see the images and discern the origin of the sound, a mediator is needed between God and us, to understand the divine message." (Bâ, Amadou Hampâté, 1967. Translation from the French by author)

The purpose of including this long excerpt is to draw from Kadidja Pâté's first cinematic encounter with the moving image to explore the tenets of an African woman's cinema criticism and its application at the emergence of an African cinematic practice some twenty years later. It is extremely significant to have an oral testimony transported into text of such a historical event that occurred more than 75 years ago. It is also significant that it has not elicited much scholarly interest, although this may be due to its obscurity—tucked away as the introductory text of a French language catalogue on ethnographical films on Africa originally published by UNESCO in 1955. Pâté's testimony is vital to the ongoing efforts to forge an African perspective on the image in general and African cinematic representation in particular. While it would be twenty years after Kadidja Pâté's 1934 cinematic encounter before the emergence of an African cinematic practice, and thirty years before an African would direct a film on the continent, the span widens

when considering an African engagement with film criticism, although Paulin Soumanou Vieyra pioneers a historiography of African cinema in the late 1960s. The lack of a veritable foundation within which to debate, discuss, exchange discourse and forge a theoretical framework endogenous to African cinematic realities has been an ongoing concern since the creation of a continental cinema infrastructure in the 1960s.

Continuing the work of Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, also known as the father of African film criticism and history, Burkinabé film critic Clément Tapsoba (1995) asserts that African film criticism is an intermediary between the public and the filmmaker, and hence it should first be an encounter with the people to whom it informs, guides, and enlightens, which in return provides the necessary feedback to the filmmakers. Film criticism must reveal not only multi-layered meaning to the public, but it must also find the most appropriate technique for the creation of meaning. Influenced by Vieyra's (1990) work on oral tradition and film production, Tapsoba (1995) asserts that evolving from a culture of orality, African filmmakers have always reflected the close links between their film narratives and traditional stories. However, the new demands of cinema on the one hand and the changes in attitude of the African public as a result of foreign images on the other, are factors that call for a new approach to African cinema for both the filmmaker and for film criticism. He notes that increasingly, African filmmakers must combine the social function of their work with the aspect of entertainment, while still retaining its own identity, as the preservation of identity is the fundamental challenge they face confronted with the tendency toward the standardisation of world cinema by Hollywood. Hence, he insists that African film criticism must be endogenous and inward looking. He reminds us of the reflections of Vieyra: "criticism is born with the object that it critiques. It develops and is also strengthened in time because the art evolves, people become more knowledgeable and thus more demanding." Similarly, Imunga Ivanga (2005), Gabonese filmmaker and director of the Gabonese National Centre of Cinema, paraphrases Cheikh Anta Diop as he urges Africans to be the ones "to generate their own theoretical, conceptual, psychological, psychoanalytical, and aesthetic language and categories, which will not be indebted neither to Oedipus or Electra."

Togolese Anne-Laure Folly Reimann (2000) follows this reasoning vis-à-vis her view of the role of African cinema whose endeavour is to restore its

values within a thought system that can no longer survive in this era unless it is disseminated beyond its borders. Africa has alternative values that it must learn to impart and exchange with others. According to her: “the world is evolving in such a way that we will interchange with each other no matter what. Everything is interconnected, and if we express our culture, the logic of the system is such that it will be shared elsewhere as well.”

These irrefutable conclusions draw attention to what Tapsoba views as the major obstacles in the development of an endogenous African cinema criticism: the shortage of film production, the lack of distribution and venues for exhibition and hence an absence of an African public to view African films. Tapsoba expresses his concern at a growing tendency towards western hegemony of African cinema criticism. In many cases western critics and scholars have access to African films before the African critics and the African public and hence from this privileged position assume the right to define, categorise and assign meaning, appropriating an important part of African cultural heritage.

Imunga Ivanga (2005) has other concerns that are equally compelling. He poses important questions: what is film criticism? What purpose does it serve? And moreover, should it serve a purpose? According to him, the educational aspect that can result from these questions may be of interest to an African public that has not yet entirely integrated reading and writing in its traditions. While paradoxically, radio, television and film can be defined as constituents of neo-orality as they have continued success among the African population. The challenge is that access to these reflections must often pass through the written word, and thus it is necessary to create places of debate that would take this constraint into account. It is for these same reasons that Tsitsi Dangarembga (1997) finds filmmaking more applicable to the African context than literature, as films reach a wider public. Similarly, she observes that “to understand a film you don’t have to be educated to the same extent where you do when you have to pick up a book.” Since she writes in English she must take into account that all Zimbabweans do not read in English, “whereas even if a film is in English, I think if it is made well enough, a person can probably understand what is going on.” Taking this consideration into account, Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe (WFOZ), initiated outreach to remote regions in Zimbabwe, using film as a means to engage with the messages in the films so that the young women especially, may recognise, examine and discover possible solutions to the problems that affect them.

Continuing Imunga Ivanga's (2005) query on the role of film criticism: For whom is African film criticism intended? Who are the intended viewers of African films? As African films are notoriously inaccessible on the continent, they are invisible to African audiences. And thus, asks Imunga Ivanga: Who sees? Who reads? Who sees what? Who reads what? And under what conditions? If the notion of an African gaze continues to concern African filmmakers and critics it is because it is imperative to assert an African specificity facing a standardised universalism, not only in the form of added testimonials attesting to its existence, but more importantly as an agent of a world that has inscribed it no place on the world map. In the same way, Folly Reimann (2000) asserts that power comes from those who say things. There is a widespread attitude that if one does not express oneself, has nothing to say, then one does not exist; and that the problem is that culturally speaking, Africa does not say things. That there is the perception that what is important is not told, or is expressed discreetly, or is told only to one another, by word-of-mouth. She perceives that the attitude among Africans is that a culture that exposes itself disintegrates, agreeing that in some ways it may be true, that the notion of the total diffusion of something corresponds to losing something of one's essence. Echoing Vieyra's reflections above, Folly Reimann observes that changes occur in the West and then are reproduced and diffused. And through this diffusion, a mutation occurs. These notions and values are transmitted elsewhere, which are then modified and changed by the receiver and hence these values evolve. Whereas in African societies, these values once transmitted, are kept and applied throughout one's life. "I think that we are a bit lost in our international discourse to the extent that we no longer exist. Now we must say something."

What then do African women say? What is an African woman's cinematic voice? How do they speak through film? How do they express their vision to their societies and to the world? How do they inscribe their écriture into their work? What are the issues related to the creation of an African women's film criticism? What are the elements needed to develop it? Why is it important that it be endogenous—that African women themselves formulate the theories and discourse? How would this discourse be encouraged and sustained beyond the film festival forums and occasional conferences and meetings that have given it voice? How can film production be enhanced in order to build a collection of quality works? How can an endogenous African women cinema

studies be reconciled with the dominance of western feminist film criticism that interprets female representation and women's filmmaking practice within western canons and paradigms? Under what conditions are African women able to forge a critique that is meaningful to their experiences? Folly Reimann (2000) proposes an African woman's perspective as an alternative discourse as "their perspective does not simply analyse things; they live them."

During my work on the African women in cinema project that culminated with the *Sisters of the Screen* book and film, many of the women were asked about their perspectives on African women cinema criticism, feminist perspectives on cinema, the African female gaze, and female sensibility. Since the publication of the book in 2000, I have continued interviewing women, collecting their perspectives along the way. There is an emergence of a cadre of African women doing advanced study and research and showing increased interest in the area of cinema studies. Congolese filmmaker Claude Haffner; Ghanaian Joyce Osei Owusu; Kenyans Wanjiku Beatrice Mukora and filmmaker Anne Mungai; Agatha Ukata from Nigeria; Hadja Maïmouna Niang from Senegal; South African Lizelle Bischoff; Zimbabweans Chido Matewa and filmmaker/writer Tsitsi Dangarembga, among others, are in the process of completing or have completed their graduate work in cinema studies in the past decade, though for the most part in non-African universities. Aminata Ouedraogo (2000) has noted that while there is an under-representation of African women in film criticism involving written works; on the other hand, there is a visible presence of women at film debates at film festivals, film forums and ciné-clubs on the continent. Her assertion underscores the arguments by Tapsoba and Vieyra, that the role of criticism is to directly engage the public, who in turn become more knowledgeable and discerning.

The recent debates at the International Images Film Festival for Women in Harare in November 2011 also addressed these assertions. *Nyaminyami Amaji Abulozi/Nyaminyami and the Evil Eggs*, a complex film full of metaphors and cultural specificities, which premiered at the festival, left the Zimbabwe audience grappling for answers to the many issues the film brought out. This latest film by Tsitsi Dangarembga recounts the tale of a dweller of the deep water of the Zambezi River who seduces a starving villager. Out of the same water, the great snake goddess Nyaminyami sends her messenger to deliver the village from evil. However, the magic staff of the messenger is not powerful enough to save the people. For in this world, the sweet little eggs

are also devilish. A biblical story of redemption is narrated in this musical adaptation of ancient Tonga folklore. After the premiere, an impassioned debate ensued regarding a range of issues related to the film: the technical aspects, the manner of storytelling, and the theme itself, which to some seemed outdated, or worse, insulting to Africans for its perceived cannibalism. Deputy Minister Jessie Majome, who was in attendance, highlighted the importance of developing an audience that may learn to truly appreciate cinema and noted that this screening/debate forum provided the context for critical engagement. Moreover, Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe (WFOZ), a vital institution for the empowerment, promotion, and celebration of Zimbabwean women in cinema, has extended its outreach to the villages where there is limited access to cinema culture in order to continue these types of debates. Tsitsi Dangarembga's response during the debate echoes the above points regarding African cultures of orality and the importance of drawing from traditional stories, and the menace of western narratives dominating African cinematic representations. She had this to say:

"As far back as 1998 we have talked about audience building. The late Ousmane Sembene talked about being able to read a film like being able to read a book. Because our diet of film has been so poor we are lagging behind. I think we do a disservice to ourselves when we say "Let's make a film that always looks like *Farafina*" or whatever. Yes there is room for these kinds of films. But to say that this is the highest level that we as Zimbabweans can go to, this is the only level that we can consume, I think that we are not doing ourselves a favour. I am trying to push boundaries. I am trying to say to Zimbabweans that you are not intellectually deficient film viewers. There are films that you can understand at a higher level. If you really only want to go into a theatre as if you were in a bear hole and go 'ha, ha, ha' all the time then maybe you are missing the point of some of the aspects of film. We need films like that, but we also need people who can enjoy the whole spectrum of film, so I think this is a real healthy debate. For us to say as Zimbabweans we cannot enjoy more intellectual films; I think that is a terrible indictment on us. It means a whole world of films is passing us by." (Dangarembga Tsitsi, 2011)

Addressing the role of orality in African cinema, Olaf Koschke, the producer of *Nyami Nyami and the Evil Eggs* invoked the tradition of the renowned

films of West Africa in search of a genuine Southern African film aesthetic which may play an important role in representing Zimbabwean society and constructing a Zimbabwean film identity. And hence through the Zimbabwean oral tradition, a Zimbabwean film language may be constructed. The late Djibril Diop Mambety of Senegal immediately comes to mind. Drawing directly from the storytelling tradition of the hyena as trickster he made the iconic film *Touki Bouki* and a little less than twenty years later, the highly acclaimed *Hyenas*. As if summoning the pre-African cinema experiences of Kadidja Pâté, Mambety recalls as a child using shadow theatre behind a white cloth to re-enact people walking and horses running. And following her wise counsel to close one's eyes in order to concentrate, Mambety closed his eyes, and from within the rich culture of Africa constructed his cinema. Also from this illustrious group of filmmakers, his compatriot Safi Faye, who is also an anthropologist, draws from the oral tradition to tell her stories through film. Returning to her native Serer community as researcher, and knowing very little about her own history, she was surprised to find that the oral historians of her village could trace Serer history back seventeen generations. Through oral storytelling Safi Faye gives voice to the living archives of Serer history in the 1979 film *Fad'jal* in which she cites Amadou Hampâté Bâ's famous quote: "in Africa when an elder dies, it is a library that has burned down." In her 1996 film *Mossane* Safi Faye uses a different approach while continuing to draw from the Serer oral tradition. Employing representations of the Pangools—spiritual ancestors of the Serer, fictionalised rituals, and the incantations of Yandé Codou Sene, the late griot of the defunct poet-president Leopold Sedar Senghor, she relates the story of the Serer myth that every two hundred years a girl is predestined by her beauty to a tragic fate. Yandé Codou Sene's haunting voice introduces the eponymous protagonist as she baths in the mythical Mamangueth, and at the end of the film at the site of her death, she sings praises to the most beautiful girl in the world. Intertwined with the enchanting mythical Pangools, the stunning rituals and the evocative praises of Yandé Codou Sene, are the everyday experiences of 14-year-old Mossane, in love with a young university student but already promised to a man who has built a small fortune in Paris. And hence, the traditions of the village of Mbissel are confronted with the external modernities of westernised education and the lure of wealth in a European metropole.

As African filmmakers attempt to work within an African cinematic

landscape, using the oral tradition paradigm, there are nonetheless, some obstacles. As was highlighted in the debate in Harare, audience members have their own notions about visual representations of tradition, and in the case of the 1997 screening/debate of *Mossane* at FESPACO in Ouagadougou, one viewer already had a fixed idea of the filmmaker as anthropologist and what the film signified—that the fictionalised rituals and narrative necessarily had some tradition-based reality. Unlike the insightful exchange at the *Nyami Nyami and the Evil Eggs* screening, the *Mossane* debate degenerated into Safi Faye having to defend her work and her choices—though in all fairness, there were also moments of tension in Harare. In the case of *Mossane*, however, the viewer, having already framed Africa as an anthropological study, seemed not to be able to listen to the filmmaker and accept her role as storyteller (Ellerson, 2004). Wajuhi Kamau (2000) of Kenya discerns another drawback to the oral tradition paradigm. In her view, there is a dearth of female role models in women’s stories drawn from the oral tradition and in some cases the perpetuation of stereotypes of women. While there are some less than flattering aspects in the narratives of oral tradition, such as the “ugly” hunchbacked Sogolon of Soundjata, the strong female characters such as the legendary Sarraounia and Yennenga, warriors in Burkinabè and Niger history, respectively, present exemplary female role models. Moreover, the Golden Stallion of Yennenga, the representation of the grand prize of FESPACO, astride a horse in warrior pose, is the ultimate honour to women. Though the greatest tribute will be to the woman who finally wins the award, as a woman has never been a laureate of the Golden Stallion of Yennenga in the more than forty years since the inception of the festival.

Maspeke Sekhunkhuni (2000) director of the Newtown Film and Television School in Johannesburg, South Africa raises fundamental issues as it relates to women and their integration into the filmmaking process and the extent to which they are able to express themselves as Africans and women in their films. Viewing the context of filmmaking as male-centred, created within male frames of reference, and coming to cinema with very little cultural capital in terms of confidence, authority and acquired knowledge about the image, its relationship to the viewer and the theories of film language, understanding the eye of the camera, and the function of editing in the filmmaking process, African women must learn how to confidently express themselves as filmmakers. Maspeke Sekhunkhuni’s approach is to demystify cinema.

She considers the effect that the construction of film equipment may have on women who are already intimidated by the male-dominated context of filmmaking. At the time most of the equipment was still bulky and heavy, she urged the women to remember the heavy buckets that women carry on their heads, that women too have the physical strength to handle the equipment. Moreover, she observes a disproportionate interest in becoming actors rather than filmmakers, as women are often the cinematic screen object, and hence the significance of the role of awareness building during the recruitment process to emphasise that women are capable of directing, of learning the skills to be camera operators, and other roles in the film production. Fanta Nacro's desire to empower women in cinema was immediate, at the start of her directing career during her first film, *Un certain matin*, a short fiction film released in 1991 whose aim was to demystify cinema in Africa. Five women, three of whom were African, held important posts on the crew. She recalls: "There is a tendency in film schools to channel women in the areas of make-up artist, script supervisor, and editor. Yet women are equally competent with the camera and sound equipment. It is for this reason that I gave the key positions to women." (Sama, Emmanuel, 1992)

Many African women come to cinema with other professional experiences, with advanced academic degrees, or emerge from other disciplines such as visual arts, theatre, journalism, literature, anthropology, sociology, psychology, museum studies, art history, architecture, education, geography, communication theory, development studies, law, medicine, international relations, political science, and business. They come increasingly from backgrounds in film theory and criticism, all of which strengthen their position to theorise about their own work and expectations in terms of audience reception and efforts toward consciousness raising. One need only read interviews and artistic statements and transcripts of colloquia and keynote addresses to see the depth of critical engagement with their films and African films in general, as well as their capacity to make broader connections within an array of issues. Though not necessarily as a searchable collection or ensemble that names it a body of work, increasingly there is scholarship and documentation on which they can build. The intersection of theory and practice is, in fact, the methodology among African women, rather than the academic criticism and study that is the tendency elsewhere. On-the-ground, community-based issues are important to African women

film-makers rather than theory for theory's sake, criticism for the sake of criticism. They continue to create cinematic institutions and initiatives such as film festivals, film organizations, newsletters, ciné-clubs, pitching forums, production companies and hence are well positioned to critically engage with the films and the audiences who view them.

African women have held some key positions in film institutions and in government ministries focusing on culture, education and women, where they can influence policies and make decisions on state, continental and international levels. Pioneer filmmaker and ethnologist Miriama Hima has been both Niger's culture minister and ambassador to France. Burkinabè Alimata Salembéré, a founding member of FESPACO founded in 1969 and secretary general in 1983-1984, served as culture minister and general director for culture and multimedia for the International Francophone Organisation. Moufida Tlatli has been named cultural minister by the incoming Tunisian government. South African filmmaker Seipati Bulane-Hopa, currently the General Secretary of FEPACI, the first time a woman has occupied this position, holds upon her shoulders a continental structure, that at its inception in 1969, had as its vision to protect, promote and advance the interests of African film practitioners, and through the development of a film industry, serve the needs of the continent. Under her leadership she continues to uphold this mission, asserting: "we must aspire to that which necessitates measures that compel us toward creating tangible tools that help us create an infrastructure that is robust and responsive in managing African audiovisual cinema institutions" (Bulane-Hopa, Seipati, 2009). FEPACI is the same organisation for which actor Zalika Souley of Niger was a founding member in 1969. She also served as president of l'Association des Actrices Africaines/ The Association of African Actresses, though it has not been very active in the last decade. Pioneer journalist, feminist and cultural activist Annette Mbaye d'Erneville of Senegal, has been at the forefront of Senegalese cinema culture. She is the founder and director of the Maison de la Femme Henriette Bathily (The Henriette Bathily Women's House). She was the founder and director of RECIDAK, Rencontres cinématographiques de Dakar, annual film festival and was also a founding member of the Association Sénégalaise des Critiques de Cinéma (ASSECCI), the Senegalese Film Criticism Association. She envisions the role of women as cultural producers in this way: "The goal is to allow women to express themselves, to be witnesses to their era and to reflect a

realistic image of Africa in their own lives.” Jane Munene Murago of Kenya, who founded CineArts Afrika in 1990, is chairperson of the Kenya National Film Association and the Eastern Africa regional secretary of FEPACI. Wanjiru Kinyanjui, also from Kenya, teaches film production at Kenyatta University and has done research on audience building and the influences of the emerging Riverwood cinema culture, in which she is a very active. In addition, she co-ordinates the Future Filmmakers Workshop at the Kenya International Film Festival, which gives her the opportunity to work with participants to demystify cinema. Zambian Musola Cathrine Kaseketi, who has a physical handicap, created the Views Images Film Festival in 2010 with the aim of celebrating the abilities of women with disabilities through film. The South Africa-based Women of the Sun, is an organisation created to promote women in cinema, to exchange resources and facilitate training and skill development through a variety of initiatives. In addition to coordinating the organisation’s activities, executive director Eve Rantseli organises the Women of the Sun Film Festival. The very useful Women of the Sun website <http://www.womenofthesun.org.za> is an important source for information regarding projects and the current activities of women in cinema in the Southern African region. These examples of initiatives and women who have forged and sustained them, attest to the scope and breadth of possibilities in the development of an endogenous African women’s cinema criticism capable of embracing the plurality of the continent and drawing directly from its cinematic realities.

How do I, an African Diasporan, locate myself in this call for an endogenous African women cinema criticism? While the meeting of African women at FESPACO in 1991 was hailed as a historical moment for continental discourse, one event within it was a fragile moment in African-Diasporan relations among women in cinema. At one point at the start of the meeting, there was a call for all non-African women to leave the room—men, white women and African Diasporan women, among whom was Guadeloupean, Sarah Maldoror, a pioneer in filmmaking in Africa. I did not attend FESPACO that year but heard about the details afterwards. This misunderstanding continued to concern me as I prepared my project on African women in cinema, which culminated into the film and book *Sisters of the Screen*. During my interviews I asked women who attended their perception of the event. Aminata Ouedraogo, general secretary of the Pan-African Union of

Women in the Image Industry/l'Union Panafricaine des Femmes de l'Images, the organisation that emerged from this meeting, described its purpose:

"The objective of the workshop was first to pay homage to the African woman for all the work she has done in front of and behind the camera, and to make this work known to the international and local public. It was not a workshop organized to fight against men. It was an event organized with FEPACI and FESPACO, in agreement with all the concerned officials of the country. This permitted us to bring together some fifty women, with different perspectives and from different countries. It allowed us to see that, in fact, there are many women who work in this industry, who have various funding needs and diverse problems, and thus it was important to find out what solutions were needed, as well as to exchange ideas."

I asked her about the decision to include only African women in the forum and her perception of the disappointed response of Diasporan women. She replied:

"Women of the Diaspora and African women do not live the same reality. Our problems are similar but are not posed in the same way. ...We asked the women of the African Diaspora to let us first talk among ourselves before meeting them. Since [the two groups] did not speak the same language, in terms of experiences, and since we did not speak about the same things, we could not understand each other.... I think that if we really want to work together, we can go beyond these misunderstandings. We have a saying that goes: 'In the mouth the tongue and teeth mix together, but sometimes the teeth bite the tongue.' Thus, in life, we may come together, but a misunderstanding may happen. However, there must be a dialogue to resolve this misunderstanding."

The reception of the film *Sisters of the Screen: African Women in the Cinema*, distributed in the United States by Women Make Movies, in my view has been mixed. I have been told that including this event reinforces divisive stereotypes about tensions between Africa and the Diaspora. I try to explain to my African American students that the diasporan preoccupation with hair, the black female body, and identity may be less important to African women living in Africa. With the coming of age of African women born in the West, issues of racialised identities are now being negotiated in their films too. Examples can be found in Cameroonian Pascale Obolo's, *Femme*

*Invisible* (Invisible Woman), Ghanaian-American Akosua Adoma Owusu's, *Me Broni Ba* (My White Baby), Rwandan Jacqueline Kalimunda's, *Histoire de tresses* (About Braids), and Nigerian Dami Akinnusi's, *Bleach Me White*. What remains important are all the lessons learned in the ongoing growth of African women cinema studies and criticism, and the value of documenting the cinematic experiences of African women from their perspective, told and written in their own voices. I remain committed to the idea of a sisterhood through cinema, where language is not a barrier, where geography is not an impediment, and where the screen becomes the meeting point for all the stakeholders: directors, producers, actors, festival organizers, critics, and audiences. And drawing from the wisdom of Kadidja Pâté, the screen becomes the intermediary through which the moving image is viewed, interpreted and understood.

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# Challenging the Status Quo: A Feminist Reading of Shirley Frimpong-Manso's *Life and Living It*

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## Introduction

At the beginning of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the media have become a catalyst for different kinds of social transformation across the globe. In today's world, old and new media combine as a site of influence, control and innovation; the primary means through which information essential to the working of most social institutions is transmitted. The media provide multiple fora for public debates, spaces in which "various groups and institutions struggle over ideologies and the definition and construction of social reality", thus making them a major site for the definition of meaning, a place where the changing culture and values of society and groups are constructed, and reproduced, or changed (Levy & Gurevitch, 1994; Line, 1993; McQuail, 1994).

Ghanaian films, like films elsewhere, are key sites where gender identities are constructed and contested on a regular basis. Some argue that images of women are often depicted in such a way that the exploitation and marginalisation of women is reinforced. The images we consider here range from negative through neutral to positive. Contemporary films are largely governed by what Ukadike (2003:140) has termed "the logic of the popular" where the mundane takes on a representational importance. Working in a male-dominated industry located in a patriarchal society, filmmakers tend to reproduce dominant ideologies within this logic of the popular. Many popular films draw on melodramatic elements where good and bad are interlocked in countless conflicts, followed by a moralising denouement. As such female characters tend to come to disastrous ends. In the neutral category, women are granted equality, progress and power, yet these strides have a price; perhaps because women's "waywardness" threatens the socio-political status quo. Women in this mode usually challenge the hierarchical gender *status quo*. At the other extreme women are constantly

portrayed in limited domestic roles that reinforce society's perceptions and limit women's prospects. We are of the view that if films were to foreground the full range of contributions women are making and capable of making to self and society, then societal perceptions of them would be broadened, a view shared by many critics (Ellerson 2000:6). As things stand, the onus rests on women filmmakers to intervene and create perceptions that challenge the *status quo* and counter male dominated representations.

Across the African continent, research and scholarship has shown that over the years African women filmmakers such as Safi Faye (Senegal), Anne Mungai (Kenya), Flora M'mbugu-Shelling (Tanzania), Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), Fanta Regina Nacro (Burkina Faso), Anne-Laure Folly (Togo), Ngozi Onwurah (Nigeria), Salem Mekuria (Ethiopia), Moufida Tlatli (Tunisia), Assia Djebar (Algeria), and Wanjiru Kinyanjui (Kenya) have created new cinematic aesthetics and creatively refashioned representations of women within their respective countries. In Ghana, however, the evolution of women's filmmaking merits a great deal more attention than it currently receives in mainstream film scholarship. A number of questions arise in thinking about women filmmakers in Ghana. For example: how have Ghanaian women filmmakers engaged with feminism? To what extent have they explored the trajectories of African feminist ideas in their works? How do they portray women? Do they share any recurring motifs? What challenges have they faced in bringing a wider range of women, their lives and experiences to the screen? These are pressing and valid questions that we are exploring in our work. In this article, however, we offer an African feminist reading of one of Ghana's most successful contemporary filmmakers, Shirley Frimpong-Manso, and analyse how she represents women in her debut commercial film, *Life and Living It*. We've decided to focus on this film because it foregrounds male characters while adopting a feminist perspective, which sets it apart from many female-themed films that abound in the commercial film industry in West Africa.

## Women in Filmmaking in Ghana

Women filmmakers in Ghana, as in other parts of the world, are in the minority. This state of affairs can be located within the larger context of African women in cinema. In her work *Sisters of the Screen: Women of Africa on Film, Video and Television*, Beti Ellerson observes that the evolution of African women filmmaking practice in the 1960s and 1970s was sporadic. She notes that in

subsequent decades there was a gradual increase in women's visibility on the cinema landscape (2000: 3). This observation serves as an important reference point because even though Ghana's engagement in filmmaking dates back to the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) of the 1940s, women were not involved for another two decades. Records show that the first Ghanaian woman to be involved in film production was the renowned dramatist and scholar, Efua T. Sutherland, who in collaboration with the US television network, ABC, made the television documentary *Araba: the Village Story* in 1967. In the film, Sutherland documents her Atwia Experimental Community Project, which has been recognised globally as a pace-setting model for the popular Theatre for Development<sup>1</sup> program (Ellerson 2000; Anyidoho 2000).

After Sutherland, Ghanaian women's involvement in filmmaking as producers and directors only became apparent in the early 1990s with the development of video feature film in the country. The works of Aveh (2010), Garritano (2008), Meyer (1999, 2010), and Sutherland-Addy (2000) are instructive on the emergence of the video film phenomenon in the late 1980s, as well as the contexts from which the video films are produced and consumed. Moving from a state funded industry to a more commercial and independent video film industry provided a springboard for a number of independent filmmakers including women. Over the years women producers such as Hajia Hawa Meizon<sup>2</sup>; Nana Ama Boateng<sup>3</sup>; Cecilia Oppon-Badu<sup>4</sup>; Naana Mensah<sup>5</sup>; and Akofa Edjeani Asiedu<sup>6</sup> have joined the local video industry, as have a growing number of directors: Veronica Quashi-Nai<sup>7</sup>, Afi Yakubu<sup>8</sup>, Vera Mensah Bediako<sup>9</sup>, Josephine Anim<sup>10</sup> and Grace Omaboe.<sup>11</sup> In addition to this, there are filmmakers who have directed and as well as produced video features. This category includes: Veronica Cudjoe<sup>12</sup>, Nana Akua Frimpomaa<sup>13</sup> and Shirley Frimpong-Manso.<sup>14</sup> These women have begun to make an impact that is worth exploring from a feminist perspective. Frimpong-Manso, in particular, demands attention, because unlike many other commercial female filmmakers, she endeavours to inject a feminist perspective in her films. The difference between her and most of the other female filmmakers we have mentioned in this paragraph is that she takes on the challenge of slipping a feminist message into a commercial art form within a West African commercial film context that thrives, overwhelmingly, on stereotypes. Thus, in this paper, we focus on the manifestations of Shirley Frimpong-Manso's feminist sensibility in her interventions with the media and how she inscribes these in *Life and Living It*.

## Shirley Frimpong-Manso and Feminism

Frimpong-Manso's media work has always been feminist-oriented, reflecting a locally-grounded gender awareness that continues to be very much in evidence in some of her later works as a filmmaker. Programs she hosted on radio, like *The Battle of the Sexes* and *Afrakoma*<sup>15</sup>, were designed to redefine and assist the contemporary Ghanaian woman with gender struggles and tensions in society. Her involvement in organising the prestigious *Miss Ghana Pageant* (not necessarily a 'feminist' project) for five consecutive years was devoted to encouraging Ghanaian beauty queens to embark on national projects, and help improve the lives of marginalised groups in society, notably women and children. This work reflects her particular vision for women's self-determination and her commitment to helping women rediscover themselves and embrace new identities. Through her creative work, it can be argued that she also subscribes to the agendas of promoting gender equality, social and economic justice and taking on broader struggles for freedom of both women and men as articulated by many African feminists.

In addition, Frimpong-Manso has sought to create a distinct feminine space on commercial media through hosting television programs such as, *Personality Kitchen* and *Different Shades of Blue* where she highlighted gender issues that were hitherto rarely seen on screen. In interviews Frimpong-Manso describes how while growing up in Ghana, the images of women she saw on screen were that of witches and *juju*. Aware of many alternative images and stories that were not being told, she has made it her mission to produce these alternative images and tell her own stories.<sup>16</sup> Most of her films manifest this vision.

Frimpong-Manso graduated as a film director in 2003 at the National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI) in Accra. She is the Chief Executive Officer of Sparrow Productions Limited, a media production company she established and has managed since 2003. Women characters who are dynamic, active and articulate populate her narratives. She released her first feature film, *Life and Living It* in 2007, and since then has been making features consistently. She won the Africa Movies Academy Awards (AAMA), Best Director Award in 2010 for the production of *The Perfect Picture*. Her film, *A Sting in a Tale*, also won her the AAMA, Best Sound Track Award in 2010 and Audience Favourite-Narrative Feature Award at the 18<sup>th</sup> Pan African Film Festival (PAFF) in Los Angeles.

Shirley Frimpong-Manso has been described as a feminist mainly because she has had the courage to explore alternative conceptions of women's identities. In one interview she states: "I have been called a bit of a feminist ... I would like to promote the cause of women, especially African women and so you will see that some of my movies, you know, are into that direction. I am trying to make a point"<sup>17</sup> Given such a statement, it is worth asking the question: To what extent does *Life and Living It* engage with African feminist ideas? And how do these work to redefine shifting identities in the cosmopolitan setting of the movie?

### African Feminism as an Analytic Framework

Petty (1995) has pointed out that it would be inappropriate to uncritically use Western feminist film theory as the basis for examining the depiction of women's contemporary social position in Africa. She suggests that an African feminist framework that is sensitive to local contexts provides a more effective tool for analysing African women's cinema (Petty 1995). Accordingly, this paper adopts African feminism as an analytical framework for examining Frimpong-Manso's first feature film, *Life and Living It*.

To talk about 'African feminism' is not to suggest that there is a single, coherent body of knowledge that distinctively and intellectually addresses the subject matter. Indeed, African feminist writers such as Adeleye-Fayemi (2000) and Wolpe (1998) have respectively pointed out the lack of conceptual clarity and the difficulty in presenting a coherent state of feminist scholarship in Africa. Yet as Mapedzahama (2008: 117) notes, "though feminist concerns cannot be generalised across the African continent, fundamental commonalities exist to justify the case for 'African feminism'". Nnaemeka (2003: 361) points out that there is a, "pluralism of (African feminisms) that captures the fluidity and dynamism of the different cultural imperialism[s], historical forces, and localised realities conditioning women's lives". Sylvester (1995: 953) has also observed that Steady's much earlier depiction of African feminism suggests that African women, irrespective of where they are located, have "enough elements of context in common to form a standpoint fundamentally different from any that Western feminists construct." Despite the diversity of feminist thought in Africa, there are some shared values and debates that can be referred to in analysing the feminist influence in African films. It is worth noting, however, that two broad strands can be delineated within African feminist discourse: a

liberal, more popular strand espoused by feminists such as Nnaemeka, and a more radical strand advocated by feminists such as McFadden. While McFadden (2003) is referred to briefly in the discussion on female sexuality/sexual liberation, the bulk of the analysis and discussion in this paper draws from the liberal strand of African feminist discourse.

Priorities set within the framework of African feminist ideology, according to Harrow, are largely concerned with the promotion of gender equality and social and economic justice (1999: 225). Nnaemeka suggests that African feminist thought is rooted within the realities of African environments and African worldviews (1998: 9), and we acknowledge that there are many 'African environments and African worldviews which are especially relevant when considering local filmmaking. Ama Ata Aidoo also emphasises that "African women struggling both on behalf of themselves and on behalf of the wider community [are] very much a part of our heritage" (cited in Nfah-Abbenyi 1997: 10). In other words, African feminists express their own ideas and struggles for women's freedom within African societies.

Feminism in Africa manifests itself through its own specificities and precepts. It addresses issues as they relate to the lives of African women and their situation. Within the liberal strand, the concept characteristically respects the conventional notion of motherhood or women's biological and social roles as mothers, though it questions obligatory motherhood (Davies 1990) and urges women to define themselves beyond motherhood and becoming wives (Arndt 2002: 72). Equally relevant is challenging patriarchy through negotiation, compromise, inclusiveness, and collaboration. Consequently, gender equality and power are seen in a continuum of sharing, interdependence and complementarities where men are involved in the process of advancing women's independence. The liberal strand of African feminism believes in accessing power "not in the absolute but in relative terms, in terms of power-sharing and power ebb and flow" (Nnaemeka 1998: 11). It is not opposed to African men but challenges them to be critical of the cultural practices and structures that oppress women. This indicates that a strong strand within African feminism operates within a cultural and ideological framework that values men and gender difference. It also suggests that many African women who identify as feminists have no interest in being like men or setting themselves against men; even though they seek equality they appreciate the "intersections of difference" (Arndt 2002: 59). This, therefore, is

a liberal position insofar as it seeks equal rights for both African women and men in the existing society<sup>18</sup>. *Life and Living It* opens up an important space for exploring these more liberal, and popular conceptions.

To examine *Life and Living It*, we consider the above-mentioned articulations of African feminism to interrogate the text and to identify and analyse themes that flow out of it. In so doing, we also acknowledge and apply what has been termed “autobiographical investment” – our own location and experience within the Ghanaian cultural context. In line with the autobiographical investment approach, we use our experiences of gender and gendered issues within the Ghanaian cultural setting as an additional tool/lens to make sense of the narrative and the text. This combined approach helps us to analyse images of the women we meet in *Life and Living It*, and tease out manifestations of Frimpong-Manso’s feminist sensibilities. It also allows a simultaneous recognition of social structures that constrain marginalised groups, in this case women, as well as the alternative ways of appropriating their agency and resistance to dominant forms, identities and values (Kellner, n.d.). Such a methodological approach helps us examine the ways in which Frimpong-Manso uses the medium of film to negotiate women’s identities.

### *Life and Living It*

The film chronicles the lives of four male friends: Kente, Jerry Klevator, Ray Austin, Ato Yawson and the women in their lives, as the latter pursue gender equality and social and economic independence. The camera guides the audience through some of the intricacies of adult life in an urban, elite society in Ghana. Kente, an up-and-coming musician who is also a bar manager, faces the possibility of losing his son, Eric, to his former partner, Erica Darko, and her new husband, Frank Baafi, a lawyer. To defend his rights to his son, Kente secures the services of Leticia Morgan, a young, intelligent, female lawyer. Meanwhile, his friend, Jerry Klevator, a medical surgeon, is still attracted to Karen Yawson, a woman he once dated but who is now married to their friend, Ato Yawson, an advertising manager. Though Karen is a trained nurse, Ato has decided she should stay at home till she gets pregnant and they have a baby. Jerry senses Karen’s frustration and informs her about the recruitment of senior nursing officers at the hospital where he works. Karen decides to apply and gets the job; at which point Ato’s insecurities about his wife pursuing a career come to the fore.

In another thread of the narrative, Ray Austin, one of the four friends, is a dance trainer who pursues older, wealthy, married women, 'sugar mummies', who tend to be generous to him. When Frances Bonsu, one of his sugar mummies, gets a divorce from her husband in the hope of having a committed relationship with him, Ray decides to quit the relationship because he does not 'do commitments'. Instead, he is attracted to Leila Klevor, Jerry's younger, unmarried sister, who is also not ready for a serious relationship. Ray ends up in the hospital after Jerry punches him when he finds out Leila has spent the night at his house. Ato also picks a fight with Jerry when he finds him and Karen engaged in what he calls, 'some lovers' talk'.

Eventually, after a series of mistaken assumptions, intimacies are renewed and new relationships develop. Jerry realises there is nothing going on between Leila and Ray and so he reconciles with him. Ato learns that there is nothing between Karen and Jerry and asks for forgiveness. Kente wins custody of his son, Eric, and falls in love with Leticia Morgan, his lawyer. The narrative ends with all the friends celebrating Kente's victory in the custody case with champagne. At first glance the film comes across as a story about love triangles and relationships. However, a close reading reveals how it subtly challenges entrenched societal conventions, and advocates alternative roles and identities for women, and also men. To a certain extent, *Life and Living It* can be seen as a 'modernist critique' of the 'traditional' assumptions and temptations that are reflected in, and reflective of, gender relations in contemporary urban Africa.

### **The Professional Woman and Cultural/Societal Conventions**

*Life and Living It* exhibits an African feminist awareness by presenting alternative roles and identities for women, while utilising societal conventions to portray acceptable behaviour. The film's middle-class setting gives stature to female characters portrayed as professional, career women. While celebrating the professional woman as positive, Frimpong-Manso also prescribes and proscribes behaviour that goes with such roles. Right from the beginning of the film Frimpong-Manso shows her awareness of the power struggles that often exist between men and women in the domestic spheres of a Ghanaian environment. In examining these struggles, she critiques the structures that oppress both men and women. The first notion the film interrogates is the common belief that higher education qualifications and economic

independence for women make them rebellious and corrupt, especially in relation to the domestic sphere.

The first female character the viewer is introduced to is Erica. Characterised as a successful career woman, complete with husband, son, house help, big house and car, she represents urban elite women. However, the first impression one gets of her is not positive. Erica behaves improperly, by local standards. When the film opens, Erica walks in sharply dressed for work and sees Kente playing with Eric, their son:

Erica:           What the hell is this?

Kente:           Oh, I was just asking him what he wanted for his birthday.,

Erica:           I'm bloody late for work.

In the middle of this conversation she berates her house help for letting Kente into the house. These actions demonstrate that Erica is a powerful woman.

In the same opening scene, Erica's husband, Frank Baafi, discovers her talking to Kente. He looks at them both in an almost sheepish way, and says to her: 'You coming?' He then gives her a kiss and heads off. Frank Baafi's behaviour demands analysis. In a Ghanaian context the fact that Frank steers clear of the encounter between Erica and Kente suggests that he understands that his wife is capable of taking care of herself. He doesn't have to intervene to 'protect' her. Such a reading fits well into African feminism's view that women can take care of their own affairs and should be treated as equal to men. An alternative, perhaps more plausible reading is that Erica is such a domineering character that Frank knows not to interfere in her business. This latter reading is borne out in a later scene when Erica explicitly orders Frank to tell his subordinate at work, Leticia Morgan, to stop working on the child custody case that she, Erica, is involved in with Kente.

Erica's spiteful behaviour is explored in a scene in which she confronts Kente after she has been served with a letter indicating that Kente wants to defend his rights to his son. The confrontation is captured in the following dialogue:

Erica:           (Angrily) You bastard! You think you can scare me into giving you my son?

Kente:           He's my son too.

Erica:           That's what your stupid little mind tells you.

Kente:           Are you saying that Eric is not my son?

Erica:           Why don't you figure it out?

Kente: (Amused) You're such a liar. Look, let's not get into this only-mothers-can-tell stuff, we've gone beyond that. You must take me for a real big fool. I will get my son if it's the last thing I do.

Erica: Look, you're not going to win Kente. Your pathetic low life can't possibly make any Judge put the care of a child in your hands. Children are naturally given to their mothers. And in my case I have what it takes to look after him. And what do you have? Nothing! Nothing because that's exactly what you will have after you've dragged your filthy ass through court. Nothing, because I will make sure you never see him again; don't push me.

The narrative resolution of the custody issue later on, suggests that the filmmaker does not condone such aggressive behaviour. Hence, in redefining new identities for women the film is cautious. The characterisation condones the social norms that render it unacceptable for a woman to speak to a man in such a manner, no matter what his status or offence. Moreover, her choice of diction places her as deviant (i.e. she is a 'bad feminist' or 'bad woman') and, therefore, punishable. Frimpong-Manso seems to be making the point that the struggle for African women's rights is not analogous to disrespecting men or dominating them. The liberal strand of African feminism advocates power sharing. In Erica's case this seems to imply that both parents should have equal rights to a child; a point of view Erica obviously disagrees with. In exploring the dichotomy of unequal gender power relations, the film explicitly favours equal power sharing between men and women, rather than shifting power away from men to women. The film makes it clear that not all professional women are as arrogant and obnoxious as Erica, but its narrative resolution sees her punished through the loss of her child, and works as a cautionary tale.

After his experience with Erica, Kente believes all professional women are like her. To change this prejudice, Leticia is presented as a foil to Erica. Through Leticia Frimpong-Manso celebrates the positive aspects of female professionalism, achievement and good conduct. At their first meeting Kente is rude to Leticia because her professional 'look' reminds him of Erica. The film sets Kente on an educational journey of transformation. By choosing such a path for Kente, Frimpong-Manso seems to be suggesting that men

are capable of giving up their prejudices; an assumption implicit in the broad African feminist commitment to working with men to solve gender and societal issues. Hence, Leticia, a competent lawyer who believes in social justice, does not allow personal matters to get in the way of her job. Despite his hostility to her, she succeeds in defending Kente's rights to his son. She does this by showing that Erica, is not, in fact, the type of 'responsible African mother' she would have everyone believe. Leticia proves Erica has abandoned her six-year-old daughter from a previous relationship, because the girl is handicapped. In the end Erica's loss of her son demonstrates Frimpong-Manso's disapproval of 'mothers' who abandon their disabled children, and her endorsement of the notion of complementarity.

Frimpong-Manso challenges the status quo by sending a clear message that gender-specific roles can be transformed. Not only does she signal that men have the potential to be the primary carers of their children, she also suggests that the legal system in Ghana is prepared to challenge the accepted cultural norm of making the care of a child a woman's sole preserve. Leticia's role symbolises the non-absolutist orientation of African feminism that power can be shared (Nnaemeka, 1998). Leticia's role also sits well with Ama Ata Aidoo's claim that African women have a history of struggling on behalf of themselves and the wider community. For Kente and his friends who celebrate his success in winning custody of his son, can be seen as microcosm of the wider community.

Within the framework of African feminist thought, Leticia's role can be interpreted as one of tutoring both men and women. In maintaining her professionalism by agreeing to represent Kente in the custody case, she teaches the female audience that women can behave according to strict, ethical standards in the struggle for social justice, irrespective of the gender involved. The lessons for the male audience are even more obvious and apt: it is through Leticia's actions that Kente learns that not all professional women are self-centred and arrogant. African feminist analysis suggests that changing men's attitudes towards women is a key to women's empowerment (Mikell, 1997: 1-5). This approach is underscored by the filmmaker's portrayal of Leticia and Kente. Through them we see the principle of complementarity at play with men and women working together to achieve social and economic justice for all in society.

## Alternative Roles/Identities for Women and a Complementary Role for Men

Frimpong-Manso delineates new identities for women through critical examination of the complex negotiations of gender relations. Even though there is every indication in the film that some women have broken down barriers, it appears that there are some women who still remain within prescribed roles. Karen, for example, is a trained nurse, but she does not object to Ato's insistence on her staying at home until they have a child. Initially, she believes she is lucky to be a stay-at-home wife while her husband works. However, when she gets bored and finally decides to go back to work, she faces tough opposition from her husband. It would appear that Ato hides his insecurities behind the excuse of wanting a baby to maintain his patriarchal position and to prevent Karen from pursuing a career. He claims that at work an unscrupulous man could lure Karen to do things against her will. He also claims that Karen's pursuit of a career will make it more difficult to have a baby. Such claims, seen through the African feminist lens, can at best be described as patriarchal and condescending as they fly in the face of gender equality. The film narrative reassures the viewer that Karen is not that gullible. Here, the tenet of complementarity between the sexes, comes into play again. If women can be potential partners in solving men's problems, men can be partners in ensuring independence for women. Thanks to Jerry, Karen decides to apply for the job at the hospital. Kente then helps Ato understand Karen's need for a career. After learning his lessons from Leticia, Kente is in a better position to educate Ato and allay his fears. In line with the African feminist motif, the onus falls on Karen to change her own situation and end her frustrations and loneliness at home. Karen achieves equality through determination and negotiation. Ato does not openly object to her attending the interview, but after he learns of her success he feels uncomfortable. Karen then negotiates, pushing Ato to accept her decision. She reminds him of all the sacrifices she has made for him and tells him that she wants him to support her dreams. Ato, finally aware of his wife's need, puts away his pride and gets over his fear. Karen pursues her nursing career and attains social and economic independence. As she excels, she finally conceives a child. One could argue that Frimpong Manso's message is that women are able to have successful careers, fruitful relationships, and become mothers – women can have it all. Femininity and feminism are not mutually

exclusive. Karen therefore embodies the contemporary Ghanaian woman who not only occupies her prescribed gender position as a wife and mother but also assumes new identities hitherto unchartered.

## Female Sexuality

The way in which Frimpong-Manso explores women's sexuality in *Life and Living It* is worthy of attention; especially in the light of McFadden's observation that African women's sexual and erotic inclinations have been systematically suppressed, leading to a "muting of feminist sexual memory and instinct" (2003:1). Throughout the film, Frimpong-Manso's women, whether married or not, are portrayed as sexually active and uninhibited in exploring their sexuality. Thus, Karen, for example, can make sexual advances to her husband, even when he is late for work. Fiona and Frances, though married, also seem unrestrained in exploring their sexuality with Ray. Fiona even tries to convince him to come with her to California, so that they can continue their relationship. McFadden (2003) has argued that African women's sexual expression is a fundamental right and the film seems to echo this by empowering women to explore their sexuality and challenging the "vigilant cultural surveillance" that seeks to silence their "feminist sexual instinct" (McFadden, 2003:1).

Yet, on another level, one can argue that there are also tensions within the film, which can lead to multiple readings where women's sexual freedoms are concerned. While Karen explores her sexuality within the confines of her marital relationship, Fiona and Frances both do so outside their marital union, with the same young man, Ray. The fact that they both end up rejected could imply that marital infidelity comes at a price. This suggests Frimpong-Manso's support for the institution of marriage and heterosexual monogamy. Karen has to deal with her attraction to her ex-boyfriend, Jerry, and Ato with the advances of Susan, his secretary. Even though the film suggests Karen and Jerry dated before she got married to Ato and they are still attracted to each other, her present status as a married woman who loves her husband, prevents them from pursuing their desires. In a similar vein, Ato resists the temptation to have an affair with his secretary, contesting the prevalent stereotype of African men as perpetual predators. The film thus challenges the status quo while setting clear limits to sexual freedom.

*Life and Living It* further explores yet another complex heterosexual gender relationship between an older married woman and younger single man. Within the Ghanaian cultural context, the 'norm' has been that older men go in for younger women. By doing the exact opposite, the film subverts patriarchal domination in this sphere of relationships. Frances is a forty-eight-year old, wealthy woman who runs her own business and likes to date younger single men because she believes, "they are more agreeably refreshing." She is tough, educated, and intelligent. She has travelled extensively and speaks English, French, and a little Portuguese and Spanish, in addition to several indigenous Ghanaian languages. Although she is already married to a young man she pursues Ray and buys him a car. Frances' friend, Abena, hints that such behaviour may be Frances' way of controlling everything in her life.

Culturally, Frances's situation is complicated because in this kind of relationship there is often a conflict between seniority and patriarchy, especially when an older woman has what it takes to provide for the man. Ray would like to believe he is merely providing sexual services for Frances; services she can no longer receive from her 'tired ass husband'. As a result, when Frances divorces, hoping for more romantic intimacy with Ray, he ends the relationship under the pretext that he does not want to get 'close and personal'. Jerry describes Ray as someone who 'shuffles women like coins'. Nonetheless, Ray discovers that 'it is better to love and lose, than never to love at all,' and he eventually tries to get Frances back. However, it is too late ; Frances doesn't want him any more. In a symbolically darkly lit scene that evokes the end of their relationship, Ray returns to ask for forgiveness and reconciliation. At one level, Frances' rejection of Ray can be interpreted as that of a woman who indeed has control over her life, just as African feminism would have it. And yet it can also be seen as an acknowledgement of the complications surrounding her relationship choice, in a Ghanaian socio-cultural milieu.

The finale of *Life and Living It* is exhilarating: Leticia and Kente commit to living a life of affection and respect, as do Karen and Ato. The film signs-off with 'women initiated kisses'. Karen and Ato kiss, and then, Leticia and Kente. In the context of Ghanaian culture, these 'women initiated kisses' can be interpreted as both a celebration of women's sexual assertiveness and the relaxation of the stranglehold of cultural surveillance that would ordinarily not allow a woman to initiate a kiss in public. The kissing couples, serenaded by the popping and toasting of champagne in honour of Kente's three year

old son, Eric, and his new family, provide the audience with a happy ending in which everyone has played a crucial role in balancing the gender struggles for better coexistence.

## Conclusion

Based on our analyses, we have argued that Frimpong-Manso challenges the *status quo* of gender relationships usually portrayed in commercial African feature films in more ways than one. First of all, she manages to slip feminist messages into a film environment that is rife with stereotypical images of women. In so doing, she makes a strong case for the possibility of communicating feminist positions in African commercial filmmaking. Secondly, through the complex, entertaining narrative she creates, she invites the audience to participate in gender-sensitive critique of ‘culturally embedded’ social practices. Such an invitation to engage critically in a collective debate is crucial to social transformation. Thirdly, *Life and Living It* explores the lives of assertive women who encourage men to give up their prejudices about women and accept gender equality. Through her creative endeavour, Frimpong-Manso proscribes certain behaviours on the part of both women and men, and in doing so teaches both genders some valuable lessons.

## Endnotes

1. The Theatre for Development is a community outreach program that uses the medium of drama/theatre to educate and motivate communities into collective action in addressing social problems and projecting values for societal development. It is offered as a specialized area of study at School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana.
2. Hajia H. Meizongo wrote and produced *Indecent Favour* (1998). She has written other stories that have been produced by other filmmakers.
3. Nana Ama Boateng wrote and produced *A Mother's Revenge* (1994).
4. Cecilia Oppon-Badu produced *Supi (The Real Woman to Woman)*, 1996).
5. Naana Mensah produced *Cry for Love* (1999).
6. Akofa Edjeani Asiedu produced *Fools in love* (2005), but she is an established actress in the Ghanaian video film industry. She also co-produced, *I Sing of a Well* (2009).
7. Veronica Quashi has *Twin Lovers* (1995), *Tears of Joy* (1996), *Come Back Lucy* (1996), *Shadows from the Past I and II* (2000), *Victim of Love* (1997), *A Stab in the Dark* (1999), *A Stab in the Dark II* (2000), *Ripples* (2000), *Ripples II* (2000), *A Call at Midnight* (2001), *No Easy Target* (2001), *The Third Night* (2002), *Rage* (2003), *Forbidden Fruit* (2004), *Remnants* (mini-series 6 episodes 2007/2008)

- and *Otilia* (2011) to her credit as a director. She, together with Samuel Nai, wrote the screenplays for *Come Back Lucy*, *A Call at Night*, *No Easy Target*, and *The Third Night*.
8. Afi Yakubu did *Bondage* (1994).
  9. Vera Mensah Bediako directed *Broken Hearts I & II* (1998), *Choice*, *Ramatu*, and *Bells for Sale*.
  10. Josephine Anim has directed *Victims* (1998) and *Victims II* (1999).
  11. Grace Omaboe directed *It's Too Late* (1995).
  12. Veronica Cudjoe produced and directed *Suzzy I* (1992) and *Suzzy II* (1993).
  13. Nana Akua Frimpomaa produced *Heated Emotions* (1998) and shared directing credits with C.C. Mills Robertson.
  14. Shirley Frimpong-Manso has written, produced and directed *Life and Living It* (2007), *Scorned* (2008), *Perfect Picture* (2009), *A Sting in a Tale* (2009), *Check Mate* (2010), *Six Hours to Christmas* (2010), and eight chapters of the *Adams Apple* films (2011-2012).
  15. *Afrakoma* was a radio program which allowed women resource persons to address everyday issues confronting women in the Ghanaian society.
  16. She mentioned this in an interview on BBC. It is available at: <<http://www.ghanacelebrities.com/2010/12/25/bbc%E2%80%99s-interview-with-shirley-frimpong-manso-was-aired-yesterday-did-you-miss-it-listen-to-it-here-now>>.
  17. She made this statement in an interview on Ghana Television posted on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhT0753DNzo&list=UUXCJqRZwwue4prL6URLdFNQ&index=6&feature=plcp> [accessed 21/02/2012].
  18. This 'liberal' feminism is in contrast to the more radical/transformational feminisms articulated by many of the contributors to this journal (*Feminist Africa*) and flagged in the journal's editorial policy. Some feminists for example, are interested in ending patriarchy and thus radically transforming gender roles.

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# Strategising to Succeed: Re(packaging) to Re(present)

Jihan El Tahri

How does one become a documentary filmmaker, especially in Africa? I am sure each one of us has her own story, but I know that getting there, at least for my generation, was rarely straightforward! Personally I took many twists and turns before I made a film that I can call mine!

It all started with my father refusing to allow me to accept a scholarship to Oxford University. For him, a single, “good”, Egyptian girl could not travel and live alone in Europe! Our traditions do not allow this. End of story. I could not really argue then, but his words unwittingly designed a whole new path for my life.

My way out of the traditional cocoon was through journalism. I stayed in Egypt, found a job with Reuters News Agency and started earning my own living. Soon enough I was on the road covering major international conflicts as a war correspondent for various international newspapers. I’m sure my father wished he had never stopped me from going to Oxford! Not only was I now travelling non-stop, but my trips were also often to the most dangerous places on the planet.

Luckily I did not go into journalism just to spite my father; I was genuinely fascinated by the politics of my continent and how it impacted on our lives. I needed to understand the state of the world I was living in and make sense of it, so journalism was certainly a good place to start. However, the limits of journalism very quickly hit me hard. As a journalist, you are required to report what you are told. There is no time to dig deeper; no time to question the implications of your daily story on the bigger picture. You often end up with just bits and pieces of the puzzle, but no means to put them together to see what the full picture looks like. Moreover, when you put these pieces of the puzzle together, it is a collection of other people’s thoughts and other people’s perspectives.

It took the first Gulf War in 1990 to shatter my world and plunge me into a deep identity crisis. There I was, a 26-year-old Egyptian, covering the hottest international story for a major magazine, *US News & World Report*. I should have been proud of my accomplishments, but I was not. I was doing my job properly and reporting what I was told by US generals and spin-doctors as to why the war was crucial to freedom for the entire world. What they said made sense and they had proof to back it: “their” proof and “their” perspective. I simply felt that all this was wrong and I had no means to analyze why it felt so wrong.

Somehow, I needed to tell a different story. I wanted to discover my voice, my perspective and my world as I see it. I needed to tell the story from our side and I needed to understand how we, as a people, as a continent, got to where we are at. Why did we end up with leaders like Saddam, Mobutu or Idi Amin? What happened to the noble cause of Independence and the struggles that were fought to achieve it? Obviously, I had no idea what exactly I was looking for and why I knew for a fact that journalism was not the route. It takes time to define one’s own questions and even more time to discern how to proceed along that path of discovery.

I could have gone back to academia, or I could have opted to just write books, but I felt that in our day and age, images had the most impact and were the most powerful and accessible tools to making my voice heard. Maybe I could even bring about change. I chose to work with documentary film and opted to delve into issues of our political history. Not exactly the most glamorous choice and, indeed, not not an area that is particularly welcoming for an African woman filmmaker!

I keep talking about perspective and voice. What do I actually mean?

Our stories, our images and our history have been mainly documented by the west. Often we see ourselves through western eyes and proceed to integrate that image as our own. Indeed, it is part of what we have become. However, we hail from an oral tradition and many of the stories that define us have not been told or documented. Does that make them less important? On the contrary, we are lucky to have a rich heritage that remains largely untapped and it is our responsibility today, now that we have the know-how, to forge our own image of ourselves and transmit it as we see fit.

Documentary is a vital tool in that process. Africa, in the consciousness of the world, has been reduced to either the beautiful images of animals that we

see on National Geographic or the image of the starving child begging with an empty bowl. How do we break that cycle of misrepresentation? I chose first to understand. To do so, I had to plunge into each story, not just through the text-books, newspaper articles and easily obtainable archive footage (most of which are written and shot by westerners), but to unearth indigenous texts, images and photos that have been largely ignored.

If one is willing to do the leg work and go the extra mile instead of choosing the easy route, each one of us would be surprised by the quantity of original material that remains untapped on the African continent. However, no one said it's easy!

I recall spending 8 months trying to convince Congolese TV to allow me into their archives; their total refusal was astonishing given that I was to pay for the time I spent there. It took these months for me to finally realize that they would not let me in because none of the archives were logged and no one knew how to start going about this task. It was easier for everyone to just send me to get the footage of the events I was researching from Belgian archives.

A deal needed to be struck to allow me access, a deal that would be beneficial for both parties. Accordingly I offered to go through the unmarked tapes on my own, and log each one of them in a manner that they would be able to use and sell in the future. In return, if there was footage that would be useful for my project, I would be allowed to use it and the rights would be ceded at a favorable rate. Those many months of work were extremely fruitful and my film *'The Tragedy of the Great Lakes'* had footage never used before. But more importantly, the story I was telling and the images illustrating it, were all from an African perspective. I told the story as I felt it and from the perspective I chose to tell it. My voice could be heard.

Obviously we cannot rely solely on local material, but the choice of using it where we can, or rather where we choose to, is an integral part of the "voice" of a documentary. Similarly, the choice of language is part of the "voice", be it deciding to use the local language or the exact opposite, using a western language to make a point direct and accessible. Making such choices and weighing them to the advantage of one's own style and flavor of storytelling is a step forward on the long road to having our voices heard. The choice of footage and language are important items of the package but how we craft our films in a coherent way to transmit what it is you need to say is the essence of

our craft. Directing and narrative structure are the backbone of what we do. A brilliant idea combined with wonderful unique local footage does not make a film. Making a film is about story-telling, so all the techniques and devices that make a film look glamorous are merely tools that allow us to proceed. How one chooses to construct a story emanates from a specific cultural background. Africa is a continent of storytellers and most of us grew up on stories told by our elders: this is how we absorbed our own culture.

It might sound ridiculous but personally, before I even start writing my shooting outline, I sit on my own and pretend I'm telling the story of my film to my children. I formulate it as a fable or a bedtime story that they can comprehend. Accordingly, I am obliged to strip my film/story to its bare bones and articulate to myself what my own punch line is. This is my way of getting clarity that allows me to construct my narrative structure with clear markers on my timeline. It is my device to protect my voice – not only about what I want to say but how I want to say it. It is a strategy that has served me well because like everyone I am swamped with Hollywood-style stories and images, so consciously breaking away from that format is my decision. My device not only helps me plot my film, but it also allows me to stand up to the clutter of people surrounding a film who think they know better what you want to say and how you should say it.

When I started as a young, African, female director in Europe the odds were stacked against me. The producer, the commissioning editor, the “experienced” cameraman assigned to me, and even the editor all believed they knew best how I should make my film. It was intimidating and I often felt confused as to who was right – perhaps they were? I did a few of these films along the way, but I do not consider them mine.

It took time for me to find my own personal device (each one of us has their own) that allowed me to say NO to the clamor of voices surrounding me. I remember clearly how I was pushed - or rather plucked up the courage - to do that! I was working on a film about Food Aid, initially titled “The Ration Trail” in 2002. The story was about a massive famine in Southern Africa that was going to kill 14 million people before the end of the year. I was to follow the route of an Aid Package from where it was originated (mainly in the US) to its destination in the affected community in Southern Africa. A simple, straightforward story that aimed to understand the process that accompanies the recurrent famines on our continent.

However, while I was doing my research in Zambia, one of the worst hit countries according to every single news bulletin for months, I stumbled on a farmer who was skeptical about this whole “famine business”. He took me by the hand and showed me his tomato field! I was shocked and could not understand why the entire world was up in arms organizing a worldwide rescue plan and yet this farmer could ignore it all and have a full crop of tomatoes. Obviously I had to dig deeper. What I found contradicted all the news reports and revealed a huge economic story that I had not planned to tackle. But I had no choice.

My producer and the commissioning editor were furious about the change in story. They insisted that the farmer was an exception and that I should just ignore this detail and go ahead with the documentary I was commissioned to make. I found the courage to say no and proposed that I return all the money they had invested and we part company. I think my uncompromising determination obliged them to sit up and listen. After weeks of showing them proof that there was a bigger story hidden behind the stereotype they wanted to perpetuate, they agreed that I change the angle. I renamed the film “The Price of Aid” and delved into the complicated power struggle between the U.S and Europe to acquire markets in Africa, to dump their surplus and maintain the standard of living for their own farmers, at the cost of destroying the agricultural system of entire nations.

From that day on, I would only work with a cameraman that saw what I saw and an editor who shared the desire to put together the story I wanted to tell. I have been working with both of them for almost 10 years now. But finding a producer and a broadcaster that share or even allow one’s vision is not easy!

The real challenge I have faced in the past two decades has been to get a broadcaster to support and commission the story I want to tell, rather than the story they want me to tell. Our stories are often regarded as “not interesting” for a western audience. Commissioning editors seek “universal” stories to maintain their audience ratings and there is little appetite for African stories that do not confirm the already existing stereotypes. Unfortunately, there are very few broadcasters/ theaters that have documentary slots. Those precious few are almost all in Europe and the U.S. This is a reality that we –African documentary filmmakers – have to live with. Hopefully one day our own national broadcasters will commission our films, but that is not the case for the moment.

The economic crisis that has been evolving over the past decade has hit our industry hard. Previously a single channel would commission the documentary you wanted to make and would finance it until it was finished. This is what happened with *'The Tragedy of the Great Lakes'*. Since then, I've had to struggle to build up a sort of co-production consortium that collectively provides enough money, to make every film. This new funding structure has its advantages and disadvantages. The obvious disadvantage is that getting enough money to produce a film could take years and convincing each commissioning editor to come on board is a challenging task. Moreover, each one of them tells you what "needs" to be in your story for "their" audience to appreciate.

I believe though that this new structure of film financing has played to our advantage and gives us more leeway to make our voices heard. Today, no one broadcaster has more than a simple percentage in your film. None of them can actually tell you what to do or how to do it. The fragmentation of funding has actually reduced the input of the commissioning editor to the power of suggestion; suggestions that of course need to be taken on board, and often, cosmetic changes do the job.

But still, in Africa, we remain almost wholly dependent on western funds. There are only a handful of broadcasters who have the money to co-produce feature documentaries that can take several years to make. The necessary development funds, production funds and post-production funds are usually tied to having acquired a broadcaster in the first place, clearly a case of is it the chicken or the egg first? Obviously there are funds that can finance your project, but without a guarantee of a broadcaster, your film can sit in your desk drawer forever, and that is not why we make films.

So how do we break that vicious cycle?

That is where the tricks of the trade come in handy. It took me many years of frustration and rewriting my proposals ten times over to finally understand the difference between a story that a commissioning editor deems "not interesting", and the same content suddenly regarded by the same commissioning editor as "universal", which in other words means interesting for a western audience. The difference is simple: packaging!

For two years I tried to convince broadcasters (whom I had worked with previously) to support or co-produce a documentary I was determined to make about African revolutions and what happened to the dreams of independence

of iconic revolutionaries like Patrice Lumumba, Amilcar Cabral and Agostinho Neto. My documentary proposal was titled '*Requiem for Revolution*'. I needed to explore and investigate how and why the dreams and struggles of those heroes willing to challenge the mammoth edifice of colonialism, finally ended up assassinated and the countries they sought to liberate plunged into a deadly spiral of civil war. The reaction I got from broadcasters was: who cares? This is a story of the 60s and hardly anyone knows these names or places in far off Africa. So my story was "not interesting" and "not universal". I begged to disagree and tried everything to convince them that it was important, to no avail. It suddenly struck me that they could not hear what I was saying. My references, my perspective and what I thought most important did not match theirs. Of course it wouldn't! I knew that I needed a device, a ruse in order to tell the exact same story, the way I want to tell it, but in a way that "they" could hear.

I went back to my drawing board and researched different angles that allow me to tell the same story. It took a while, but eventually I found an "interesting" thread with which to stitch up the elements of my story. I knew that western audiences are fascinated by Cuba. So, my angle became Cuba's role in supporting African revolutions. In less than a month, four major western broadcasters commissioned my documentary under a new title: "Cuba's African Odyssey"! The packaging was different, but the story I set out to tell was identical; the local images I wanted to use were the same and the perspective from which I chose to deal with the story remained unaltered. Indeed, stitched together with the Cuban element that I had not initially planned, it was up to me to make sure that this ruse enriched rather than took away from my story. *Cuba's African Odyssey* was released in 2006 and until today it circulates at international festivals and continues to be rerun on various TV channels all over the world. Had I not packaged it differently, this story and my "voice" regarding this episode of our history, would never have been heard. Undoubtedly, I could have made "Requiem for Revolution" exactly as I had planned it and probably it would have been selected for a couple of African film festivals here and there. However, I feel it is important, at this stage of our history, to get our stories out of the ghetto. Our work needs to be an integral part of global dialogue. To achieve this, we need to compete and be seen on all global forum.

Packaging our stories is a skill we all need to master if we are to access global forums on the same footing as northern documentary filmmakers. That

of course applies to all documentary filmmakers from the South, both male and female. But women filmmakers from the South usually face additional hurdles. Somehow we are boxed into a specific kind of film that we “can” make or can be “trusted” to make and deliver. It is perceived that women should make films about gender issues or social issues. If we look at the kind of films predominantly made by women filmmakers in Africa, it is true that we tend to perpetuate this stereotype. But, we don’t have to.

Undeniably it is more difficult as a woman to make a film in a conflict zone or delve into the political arena and lock horns with the powerful men who dominate the scene. Another trick of the trade is that every disadvantage can be turned into an advantage. Men regard the domain of local and international politics as their exclusive hunting ground. Political leaders simply do not expect women to be astute in matters of politics, and even if a handful of women are starting to emerge within the political arena, this remains the exception rather than the rule. Accordingly, powerful politicians, or men in general, have a tendency to underestimate women filmmakers when they tackle complicated political stories. All the better! It is precisely because of being constantly underestimated that I believe we’re at an advantage when we decide to explore political stories.

I recall an interview I had with Ugandan President Yowerri Museveni for “The Tragedy of the Great Lakes”. The film was about the regional alliances that ousted President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire from power in the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda. It was about a short-lived moment of hope for the continent (1996 to 1998) when countries of the region came together to change the obsolete methods of rule and create a new formula for cooperation. President Museveni answered my questions, slumped in his chair without really thinking of my questions and even less about his own answers. He was giving me the official line and leading me to exactly what he wanted me to regurgitate. For half an hour I played along as the naïve, intimidated female, thus identifying what he wanted me to believe and where he was leading me. Not once did President Museveni suspect that I had done my research properly and saw that his answers were simply a smoke screen. Once he was done, I contradicted what he was saying by providing him with proof of the opposite, with quotes from his own speeches! It was quite hilarious to see his body language shift, this time to pay attention to what I was really asking. I think he realized that he should not have underestimated the

interviewer simply because she was a woman. Only then did the real interview begin. By this time, I had the advantage of knowing where he wanted to lead me, whereas he had no idea where I was going with my story.

As a woman I do not feel I have anything to prove and so, being underestimated and sometimes treated with disdain, can be used to my advantage. Obviously these small victories seem petty, but until the political landscape attains real gender equality that is a reality women need to work with.

Ironically, I am often criticized that there are hardly ever any women in my films. It is true that in my past 5 films there has only been one woman interviewed as a direct participant in the story I was telling. I have often wondered if I should add women just as tokens and to bring their voices in my stories. I refuse to do this. There are no women in my films because the political domain that I specialise in has excluded women and reality needs to be reflected as is. However, I sincerely hope that when my children make their films, they will never be asked that question. I hope that enough women will be playing an active role in shaping our collective destiny so that interviewing them will be a real part of the story rather than a tokenistic gesture, simply to put a woman on the screen.

My real concern as an African filmmaker preoccupied with the continent's political history, is to document our history from our perspective and with our own voices. We have to look at our past as it is - the good, the bad and the ugly- in order to design our future in the manner we wish to pass down our own legacy and reality to our children and future generations.

Making a film that I know will take over my life for at least 3 years, means that the topic is something I need to be obsessed with. I must really need an answer for myself, and that line of questioning is what drives my story. How I make the film is about story telling, but the topics I choose have to originate with a thought or a query that I find important to answer and share.

When the attack on the Twin Towers happened on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, I had a multitude of commissioning editors contacting me to direct a plethora of "ideas" they thought I was well placed to make. I rejected every offer, many of them much more lucrative than what I get for the ideas I propose. I did not want to have anything to do with September 11<sup>th</sup>. It was traumatic enough being a Muslim, an Arab and an African in the west during that period. I shunned every proposition, even to speak on a panel about 9/11. However,

I could not help but realize that each and every “good idea” I was offered for a documentary on 9/11 was concerned with who did it, what they did and how these young men were brain-washed and used tools to destroy the west. Not one single 9/11 proposition cared why such a horrific attack was deemed an option for young men in their prime! I needed to know why no less than fifteen of the nineteen attackers of September 11<sup>th</sup> were from Saudi Arabia. All fifteen were young, educated, rich, handsome and with a bright future ahead of them. How and why would they reach a state of thinking that such an attack was an option for their future? I believed that the answer was somewhere in the origins of the unhealthy relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US. My film, “The House of Saud” was born out of this desire to understand that one, simple question. The film was released long after the spate of 9/11 films and was later nominated for an Emmy Award. The key for me was that I needed to tell the story to my people and my children from a space of understanding rather than a space of conflict. I am both an African and an Arab, there is no either or; I am both, and I needed to grapple with all aspects of my identity, no matter how hard that process would become.

I am often asked why I choose to make long and difficult films about complicated political issues. Even friends suggest that I should choose topics that are more visual and sexier for a wider audience. I know it would be easier to sell such films and that I would attract a wider audience. But, I don't really feel that I have an option regarding the topics I choose. However, I know that many of my colleagues are looking after these aspects of our reality already and producing colourful films that enrich our visual heritage. I have chosen to stick to my obsession with the continents' political history. I just hope that 50 years down the line any African child wanting to examine his past will hear my voice and find my work useful.

## Jihan El Tahri: Filmography

Jihan el-Tahri is an Egyptian-born, French writer, director and producer of several award-winning documentary films. Her films include:

*Behind the Rainbow* (2009). Writer/Director of 138 minute documentary about the transformation of the ANC from a liberation movement to a ruling party. For ARTE/ ITVS (PBS)/SABC / SBS/ SVT.

*Requiem for Revolution: Cuba's African Odyssey* (2007). Writer/Director of 2, 59 minute documentaries about the Cold War seen through African eyes. For ARTE/ BBC/ ITVS (PBS)

*The House of Saud* (2004). Writer/Director of 2, 59 minute documentaries about the political history of Saudi Arabia. For BBC/ ARTE/ WGBH (PBS)

*The Price of Aid* (2003). Writer/Director of 60 min. documentary about the international Food Aid system. For BBC/ ARTE

*Regard Croisé sur le Sida (Viewpoints on Aids)* (2002) . Director of two 60 min. documentaries for France Deux

*Histoire d'un suicide : Pierre Bérégovoy* (2001). Writer/Director, a 57 min. documentary for Secret d'Actualite on M6

*54 heures d'angoisse.* Co-author/ Co-director, 52 min. documentary for Secret d'Actualite on M6

*L'Afrique en Morceaux : La tragédie des grands lacs* (2000). Author/ Director, 100 min. documentary for Canal Plus

*Israel and the Arabs* (1998). Associate Producer and Writer of 6, 52 min. documentaries for BBC 2, and Co-author of accompanying book published by Penguin.

*Holidays in Hell.* Director, 52 min. documentary for Channel Four Television

## Television programs, 1990 to 1994

Director of '*Algerie : La vie malgré tout*' (40 min. documentary for Canal Plus)

Author/Director of '*Abortion in Ireland*' (26 min. France 2)

Author Director of '*The Spiral Tribe: Rave parties in UK*' (26 min. France 2)

Co-Author / producer of '*Voleurs d'Organes*' (52 min. documentary for Planete and M6)

Co-author/ Producer of '*Le Coran et la kalashnikov*' (90 min. documentary for France 3)

Producer on '*Enfance Enchaînée*' (52 min. documentary for M6)

Producer on '*Le Jour de Drapeau*' (52 min. documentary for Canal Plus)

# Representing Witches in contemporary Ghana: challenges and reflections on making the 'Witches of Gambaga'

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Ghanaian women film makers are making serious inroads to the local cultural landscape. An important and popular space has been prised open in the feature film industry by Shirley Frimpong-Manso and Leila Djansi. Shirley specialises in writing and directing high-end, glossy, Hollywood-style, women-centred feature films full of sex and sexuality which are hugely successful in Ghana. Leila – through her production company – Turning Point Pictures – also writes and directs movies. To my eyes, her films veer towards a more 'artsy', francophone aesthetic, yet nonetheless tackle pressing social issues. Her latest film *Sinking Sands*, for example, is concerned with exposing and challenging domestic violence within marriage.

My contribution, as a documentary film-maker, is somewhat different, most recently having completed *The Witches of Gambaga*. (see Ekine, this issue (p. 154) When I started researching residents at the witches camp at Gambaga in 2004 as part of a pan-African *Mapping Sexualities Programme* devised and coordinated by the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town in collaboration with the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, I did not anticipate that six years later we would still be trying to finish the film based on that research.<sup>1</sup> Nor did I anticipate that I would find myself identifying so strongly with the refrain I heard so often among the women living at the witches' camp, when I'd ask them to tell me their life stories.

'Where do I begin?' Ma Hawa – the spokeswoman of Mamprusi-speaking women at the camp - asked me. 'I don't know how to begin,' said Asana. 'When I grew up nothing eventful happened to me, until I was brought to this place,' said another woman, highlighting a central theme of almost all the 19 narratives that I collected and analysed. All the women I spent time

with at the camp, framed their disparate life stories as a series of events that climaxed in the drama that precipitated their arrival in Gambaga. Whether a woman had chosen Gambaga as a place of refuge and safety, or had been deposited and exiled there by her family, the events that brought her to the witches' camp and forced her to remain there were an important, defining feature in her life.

So, how do I begin to describe how a motley group of around 100 poor, middle-aged and elderly Mamprusi, Dagomba and Kokomba speaking women; women condemned to live as witches in a camp in the small provincial town of Gambaga 'bewitched' me to such an extent that I, and other women who care about women's rights, were determined to have their voices heard, and make a film that would support efforts to change the fate of the women of Gambaga, and thousands of others being subjected to similar appalling treatment?<sup>2</sup>

There were many hurdles that, Amina Mama, my co-producer and I had to overcome as we negotiated a new and complicated course through various institutional and interpersonal relationships, to eventually complete *The Witches of Gambaga*, so long after the initial idea was formulated and the field research completed. Even just within Gambaga this required sensitive and intimate relationships with the condemned women whose interests we wished to consider first, relationships with Gladys Lariba and Simon Ngota, community workers from the local Presbyterian Church already working with the women in the camp, local chiefs of varying dispositions, and with the women's movement organizations that we sought collaboration with in order to ensure that the film would indeed offer them a powerful tool with which to mobilize against the persecution of accused women. Beyond Gambaga, there were relationships with state and church authorities that had to be negotiated. Indeed, the first local screenings of the film, while very well received, also provoked the ire of certain political figures, one of whom threatened us with a legal suit on the basis of mere hearsay, before even viewing the film. This particular reaction placed us in ethical dilemmas, and our response had to be worked out carefully, in dialogue with our women's movement collaborators. In that instance, we made the choice to respect their wishes and sensitivities, rather than divert attention from the community of women we were primarily concerned with, in accordance with a feminist ethic which differed from professional cinematic and journalistic impulses

to resist editing on the basis of threats. In the end we agreed that costly legal battles that we could not afford financially would have introduced a counterproductive sensation that might have “boosted sales” as we were told, but for the wrong reasons.

Access, permission and funding are all production considerations without which a film can't be made. Once we had developed relationships with subjects living in conditions that would be deemed 'backward' - in this case women condemned to live as witches in Gambaga - we had to negotiate preconceptions as to what is considered an 'appropriate' representation of their lives and fates, in the context of a modern nation state that was a signatory to the international conventions on women's rights. Later on, our many attempts to find funding were often thwarted by the presumptions of Western broadcasters and funding agencies with regard to how African women - in this instance 'witches' were best depicted. The solution, as it turned out, didn't lie with Western broadcasters or funders. In the end the completion and dissemination of *The Witches of Gambaga* was only possible because we were able to draw on the support of African women activists, and friends and allies who cared enough about the violence and dispossession meted out to women accused of witchcraft in Ghana to want to change it.

I first heard about the witches' camp in Gambaga in January 1995 from a civil servant at the Ministry of Social Welfare in Tamale, the capital of the Northern region of Ghana. At the time I was working as a stringer in Ghana with the BBC World Service, making documentaries and filing stories for *Network Africa*. My remit was to find human interest features outside Accra, so in March that same year, I made my first trip to Gambaga. I intended to work quickly and finish the job in time to catch the last bus back to Tamale, the regional capital, at 4.30 that afternoon. But before I could talk to a single one of the 160 women who were then living at the witches' camp, I had to get permission from their custodian, the Chief of Gambaga, the *Gambarrana*.

To my astonishment, he firmly refused. He claimed that, even if he'd wanted to, he wasn't in a position to grant me an audience with the 'witches' in his care. Only a week before, he told me, he'd denied access to a CNN crew. He couldn't give me permission because such a decision - he claimed - was political in nature and the only person capable of taking it was the District Commissioner of East Mamprusi. And since the Commissioner was out of town for the day, I would have to wait.

In 1995 there were no mobile phones in Ghana. In fact, telecommunications in the north was negligible, making it impossible to contact Mr Kussi, the DC, to find out when he'd be back. His office couldn't give me any information and neither could his wife. So I waited anxiously with my interpreter in a local chop-bar<sup>3</sup>, not far from the Gambarrana's residence. The town of Gambaga has the bedraggled, unkempt appearance of a dusty, provincial settlement that has survived in spite of everything. The name Gambaga derives from the original poverty of the town. In Mamepe, the language of the Mamprusi majority, *gamb* means "to eat" and *mbye* means "to survive": a reminder of the harsh beginnings of the community, when its inhabitants were forced to eat millet flour without soup.

Compared to the southern part of Ghana the north has been sadly neglected by consecutive governments, while being exploited as a source of cheap labour. In the 1990's, the impact of IMF structural adjustment programmes on the region was particularly severe, such that 70% of the population, mostly small-scale farmers, were living in extreme poverty. Infant and maternal mortality rates have remained high, and health and nutrition are among the worst in Ghana.

While I bided my time at the chop bar, a middle-aged woman in yellow cloth was hustled, protesting, from the Gambarrana's residence. I looked enquiringly at my escort. "She says she's not a witch," he explained "She says she's innocent."

Still pleading, the woman in yellow was led away.

It was then that the first seed of doubt about what I was doing began to niggle. I don't believe in witchcraft, I told myself. Even if people here do, I don't. The seed mushroomed, a few hours later, when I watched the last bus to Tamale leave town. Mr Kussi returned home later that afternoon. As soon as I explained my mission in Gambaga, he gave me permission to proceed and willingly agreed to an interview. A well-built, affable man in early middle age, he acknowledged centuries of superstition with a shrug. Tradition is the voice of the people, he smiled. And since the people believed in witchcraft and found it expedient to expel witches to Gambaga, there was not much anyone could do about it. The people have spoken! In the few minutes it took to confirm the *"laissez faire"* approach of successive Ghanaian governments, dusk had fallen. Eager to assist me in any way he could, the D.C. drove me to the residence of the local Presbyterian Minister – Reverend Awindago. The Reverend worked with the 'witches' on a daily basis and knew them well.

He agreed to act as my interpreter, allowing my escort from the Ministry to go home. Then, the Reverend took me to the Gambarrana, and after he had added his consent to the Commissioner's for good measure, the chief instructed his son, Abukari, to accompany me to the witches' camp.

By now it was night. There was no electricity in Gambaga and I could scarcely see in front of me. The only light available was a kerosene lantern that Abukari held aloft. He led me behind the royal compound down a well travelled, meandering track that seemed to run through the middle of town. Any sense of direction I possessed dissipated as shapes merged into shadows, and sounds reverberated beneath an undertow of sighs. I was vaguely aware that I was passing clay and cement structures: some roofed in zinc, others thatched with grass. Behind us trailed a gaggle of giggling children. When we arrived at what seemed to be the entrance of a large compound, Abukari shooed the children away. Inside, fifteen or so women were already waiting for me. After I'd introduced myself, Abukari informed me that I was to interview three of the one hundred and sixty residents at the camp: the three oldest in their compounds, they'd lived at the camp for many years and would speak on behalf of everyone present. Fumbling to find the record button of my cassette player – for despite a few lamps blinking in the night, I could barely see – I started recording.

One after the other, I interviewed Zabia, Duah and Tia; three women of indeterminate age in threadbare clothes. I have the dimmest recollection of what they looked like. What I recall is that flickers of lamplight lengthened the shadows on their faces, distorting the mounds of their cheeks, their lips. Eyes glinted in the half-light as I asked my questions. Faces inched closer to mine. What had brought them to Gambaga? How did they survive? Their stories confused me. Zabia, a mother of three and a grandmother, spoke in a voice raw with remorse. Her older brother had accused her of witchcraft when his son died: "When I arrived here," she said, "I was full of regret for having bewitched the boy. I prayed that once the Gambarrana had accepted me and I was living here with him, my thoughts would never go back to bewitching somebody's child again."

But Duah, whose life had been scarred by physical and verbal abuse until her brother brought her to the safety of the camp, appeared to relish her disreputable past. "I accepted I was a witch," she confessed. "I wasn't tried by ordeal or anything because I knew I was a witch. So when I was brought here

I told the Gambarrana, “I chopped all those people they’re talking about. I killed all the young men and women in my neighbourhood.” Sensing bravado close to insanity in Duah, I pressed her to disclose her method for killing so many people. She simply repeated her assertion: she was a mass murderer of the highest order; a queen among witches! Titters rippled through the gathering as Duah proclaimed her infamy for the world to hear.

Only one of the three women I spoke to, Tia, refuted allegations that had been made against her. Tia believed that she’d been wrongly accused of witchcraft. The instant she voiced her innocence, Abukari shouted her down. Mistakes aren’t made in Gambaga, he insisted. The ritual never lies. The old woman backed down immediately. However, that single note of dissension struck a chord in me. Up till then I’d been asking questions with a consciousness grounded in the ostensibly ‘rational’ landscape of BBC journalism. I knew that elements of a feature were falling into place and that the long journey from Accra had been worthwhile. I was holding any reservations I felt in check, while I probed the parameters of the women’s lives. And yet, as I asked my questions and recorded their replies, I was beginning to sense something else happening. It was as if, against my will, I was being dragged into a compelling, collective narrative. In the face of combined acquiescence, Tia alone had spoken out. What ritual? I enquired. What are you talking about? Abukari intervened again. “Women are by nature witches,” he explained patiently, “while men are more likely to be thieves.” He went on to disclose that thanks to powers vested in him by his ancestors, the Gambarrana is able to determine if a woman is a witch. So when a woman accused of witchcraft is brought to him, she’s subjected to a trial by ordeal. The Gambarrana kills a chicken. If it dies face down, the woman is a witch. But if it dies, its wings facing the sky, then the woman is exonerated, her innocence accepted. Apparently, Tia’s trial by ordeal had gone against her. She’d been a resident of the witches’ camp, she told me, for over twenty-five years. The women didn’t know their ages and when they tried to quantify the number of years they’d stayed at Gambaga – twenty-five, thirty, thirty five Zabia had said – the figures they quoted were not necessarily accurate, though it was clear that each of them had spent decades at the camp.

Calm, diminutive and astute, Tia had recently been joined by a daughter who was seated beside her. Witchcraft can be passed on, supposedly, from a mother to her daughter. Men aren’t exempt from witchcraft, I learned.

Tia told me that while she'd been living in the camp, three men have been convicted of witchcraft. But none was detained for longer than three years. Within three years, they'd been able to buy their freedom, giving the Gambarrana the sheep and money necessary to leave. "Men are also witches," Tia claimed. "But they have the upper hand. They have homes to go to. But a woman has no home in our system."

Would you like more men to stay at the camp? I asked.

Tia snorted in derision. "Let the men stay by themselves," she retorted. "They should leave us alone."

The women laughed, bringing the interviews to an end. After I'd thanked everyone present, I was led down a path into a building I couldn't make out. A door was pushed ajar, I was taken inside. The kerosene lamp revealed the outline of a low, narrow bed. Thanks to Mr Kussi, this was to be my room for the night. Unable to see beyond the fading shimmer of the lantern to make out the length and breadth of the room, the state of its walls and floor, I lay down exhausted with my shoes still on.

Sleep eluded me. My mind, immersed in the day's events, refused to rest. I remembered the woman in yellow, her protests of innocence. I recalled Tia's flash of rebellion and then, a moment later, the ritual that decides a woman's future. It seemed unbelievable that in the final decade of the twentieth century the death throes of a fowl could determine innocence or guilt and lead to years of incarceration. And that this was happening in my country of origin, not far from where I was born, was horrifying.

During the course of that long, sleepless night, witches became more than objects of my curiosity. The narrative I'd sensed encroaching on me, crept into my consciousness. I was able to hold it at bay while the lantern shone. Its light dimmed gradually, and when the glow of the wick was snuffed out by night, a question sprang to mind. What if I was accused of witchcraft and a trial by ordeal performed? What if the trial went against me? In a town with no telephones, how would I get word to my family in Accra? What would I do? I couldn't get the thought out of my mind. But for an accident of birth, I too could be a witch. I could be one of them.

As soon as day broke, I fled Gambaga for Tamale and the long journey back to Accra, where I spoke to anyone who would listen - relatives, academics, friends old and young - about the impoverished, elderly women I'd encountered at Gambaga. I spoke of the camp, a place of sanctuary, a site

of punishment, and of what I'd learnt about the ritual that could destroy a woman's reputation with the tremor of a wing.

Nine years after that first visit, I returned to Gambaga, to record and analyse the life stories of women forced to live as 'witches', as a first step to making a film about them. I was invited to take part in *The Mapping Sexualities Programme* by an old friend of mine, Amina Mama, who was then Director of the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, and one of the people I had regaled with the tale of my initial experience, back in 1995. The research she invited me to pursue was part of a seminal cultural studies project, very possibly the first to be carried out in the field of sexuality by an all-African team of feminist researchers.

To my surprise, the Gambarrana, Yahaya Wuni, recalled me on my return to Gambaga, and this time, since I was working with the support of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, he didn't have a problem allowing me to talk to the women in his custody. In daylight, with all but the oldest residents out working on farms, the camp seemed mundane: an expanse of dishevelled mud huts inhabited by a few crones. I had visited the camp once in the intervening years and managed to keep in touch with what was happening thanks to the late Comfort Mensah, a development worker with the Presbyterian Church in Accra. The Reverend Awindago was no longer at Gambaga. Rumour had it that his wife believed that the 'witches' at the camp had put a spell on him that had made him turn to alcohol. The church, eventually, transferred him elsewhere.

In the end, the major issue delaying the completion of the film was money. Who has it, how much they will commit to a film, and why they give it to us. The research for the *Mapping Sexualities Programme* was funded by a Ford Foundation grant to the AGI. The Commonwealth Broadcasting Association's DFID-funded World View Media Programme - which gives grants to filmmakers working on stories about the developing world in the hope that terrestrial broadcasters in the United Kingdom will eventually commission them - contributed £10,000 to pay for the cameraman I considered best for the job - Darren Hercher - to fly to Accra from London. The money covered Darren's salary, film stock and equipment; and paid for fourteen days on location in Gambaga with transport, interpreters and fixers. The money also paid for a week's worth of editing to make the trailer, which we hoped would get the documentary commissioned by a UK broadcaster.

However, before Darren could come into Ghana with his equipment, I needed a filming permit from the government of Ghana to allow us to film at the witches' camp. The Gambarrana - Yahaya Wuni - had already given permission. This made no difference to the government of Ghana. Indeed, the civil servant dealing with my request went so far as to admonish me for even thinking of filming the camp. 'Why don't you film a dam?' he said to me. 'Why not show pictures of a dam or a bridge or brand new schools? Why do you people always have show us looking backward? If it's not *trokosi*<sup>4</sup> in the Volta Region, it's those witches up north!'

He had a point. For that civil servant, any attempt to depict unsavoury practises such as the incarceration of women for witchcraft on film would shame and embarrass the international image of Ghana and could therefore not be countenanced. The issue in question wasn't the broken lives of women forced to become witches, but the 'national interest' that would show Ghana as a modern nation state with all the accoutrements of modernity - understood by government functionaries as dams, bridges and schools. We would not have been able to get permission to document women at the camp if it hadn't been for the intercession of the former Director of the Institute of African Studies, Professor Takyiwaa Manuh, who was then serving on the same committee as a Director at the Ministry of Information. Takyiwaa had collaborated with the AGI on the original research project. We were thus granted permission on condition that the film would be used for educational purposes only in Ghana, and not shown anywhere else in the world.

All in all, nineteen women told me their stories. Azara Azindow lost her house and restaurant in 1997, when she was accused of starting a meningitis epidemic and was thrown out of her village. Awabu Tarana was tortured for days to extract a confession from her. Bintook Duut was on the run for three months, chased by her accusers before she found refuge at Gambaga. Asana was tortured by her brother, who threatened to pluck out her eyes if she didn't confess to witchcraft. Despite the extraordinarily powerful testimonies I collected, half-way through my research I still couldn't decide how to make a film that required immersion in a completely different way of looking at the world. How do you introduce an international audience to a world view that appears superstitious, without making the subjects of the film seem backward? Amina, who had initiated a number of AGI feminist research projects by this time, was insistent that the film speak most effectively to the

local socio-political context, so that it could be used by feminists working on women's rights, as well as by feminists across other African contexts – including her own country Nigeria – and other West, Central and Southern African contexts, where witchcraft accusations have been on the rise. We had to navigate that difficult terrain between our own anticipation of what local audiences could engage and work with, and what international funders and distributors might seek.

When it came to constructing a meaningful narrative, the life stories I was mulling over were complex and challenging, suggesting intense rivalries within polygamous families: rivalries between wives, between brothers and sisters, and between women within an extended family, whose daughters sometimes ended up married to the same man. I didn't know how I could frame discussions about witchcraft, until I heard Amina Wumbala's story and determined that for her sake, and all the other women who'd spoken to me, somehow or other, we *had* to make the film.

Amina was unwell the morning I interviewed her, and had returned to her hut early, after gleaning millet under the intense November sun. Shivering, she spoke to me urgently, without the usual pauses and hesitations, without any prompting on my part, as if she felt compelled to speak out. This is an edited version of what she told me:

"After my husband died, I decided to return to my father's house. My brothers accepted me, giving me a room. One day it was threatening to rain. We all ran to fetch containers to collect rain water. The next morning all the containers were full except for mine, so I asked: "Where's my water?"

My brother replied that I should ask his wife. So I asked: "Where's my water?"

We started arguing. My brother came out and said that I shouldn't insult his wife, for if I insult her, I'm insulting him as well. He said I should get out of the house. The house belongs to all of us. It's our father's house and he doesn't have the right to throw me out.

My brother struck me. That very night he died. His children claimed that I'd killed him with witchcraft, so they came after me with people from the largest houses in the village. They beat me until they thought they'd killed me....Luckily my senior son arrived and drove everyone away. But the next day the villagers carried me across the river and

dumped me on the other side, calling me a witch. I lay there for a full day and night before I felt strong enough to get up and walk to Gambaga.

Amina Wumbala's account - like those of several other women - reveals that a "witch" is often an assertive, argumentative, determined woman; a woman capable of antagonising those around her and challenging male authority. She doesn't "know her place" and thus either doesn't know or refuses to recognize when she should back down, to accord with local norms. And when her righteous anger is followed by to a calamitous event, the ultimate sanctions of communal violence followed by expulsion from her home, family and community silence her dissenting voice, and remove her from the community, thus re-inscribing the normative, patriarchal order.

Once the initial filming of 'The Witches of Gambaga' had been completed and a promotional trailer made, the next hurdle we had to negotiate was to get the documentary commissioned by a broadcaster in Britain. It turned out that no one was interested. It could have been a matter of packaging (discussed in the feature by Jihan El Tahri p. 71) I tried all my usual connections, but no one was enthusiastic, even though there was growing interest in the outrageous predicament of African children in Britain being accused of witchcraft. I know this to be the case because in July 2005, while our own project was stalled, I was invited to present a radio documentary for the BBC World Service's *African Perspective* on Child abuse and witchcraft allegations in African Churches in Britain. Three years later, in November 2008, Channel 4's *Dispatches* programme broadcast a shocking documentary, *Saving Africa's Witch Children*. This Dispatches special followed the work of an Englishman, Gary Foxcroft, who has devoted his life to helping children in some of the poorest parts of Nigeria, where evangelical religious fervour combines with a belief in witchcraft to blame children for catastrophes. Mr Foxcroft's charity, Stepping Stones Nigeria, raises funds to help Sam Itauma who, five years ago, rescued four children accused of witchcraft. He now struggles to care for over 150 accused children in a makeshift shelter and school called CRARN (Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network).

*Saving Africa's Witch Children* caused a sensation in Nigeria and Britain, provoking exactly the sort of reaction that the civil servant that I'd met at the Ministry of Information in Accra most feared: shame and embarrassment. More positively, the documentary pushed the Governor of Akwa Ibom State to adopt Nigeria's Child Rights Act, a drama that played out in front of TV cameras.

Though I haven't yet seen the film, I heartily congratulate its makers for drawing attention to the problems of child witches in Nigeria and for the plaudits they've received for their work. I'm pleased for them, even though I'm sure that one of the reasons that the documentary was given the go-ahead by a British broadcaster was because of its close resonance with the old colonial notion of the missionary saving infantilised Africans. I'm inclined to suspect that integral to the narrative of 'saving' the child witches from 'superstitious natives' was the advocacy of a *white man*. This is only supposition on my part, but I imagine that it must be reassuring to a British audience to have the comforting stereotype of the white missionary reinforced; especially when he's saving African child victims from the misguided delusions of superstitious natives. Perhaps only cruelty to animals could be more heart-rending to the average British viewer. We were forced to realise that a film about the misshapen and wizened old women that I got to know in Gambaga could not possibly compete successfully with traumatised children – inevitably more appealing to Western eyes, and thus in the television ratings wars raging in Britain. It was at this point that I too came to identify more strongly with my co-producer's initial concern – that in fact we – both African women concerned with advancing respect for women's rights in our societies – wanted to tell a different story, one grounded in our identifiable personal-historical connections to rural communities in which witchcraft is prevalent. We wanted to make a film that would speak most loudly and clearly to African audiences.

The celebrated Egyptian filmmaker Jihan El Tahri, describes how she came to be a documentary film maker. She writes:

"Our stories, our images and our history have been mainly documented by the west. Often we see ourselves through western eyes and proceed to integrate that image as our own. Indeed it is part of what we have become... it is our responsibility today – now that we have the know-how – to forge our own image of ourselves and transmit it as we see fit." (see El Tahri, this volume, p. 72)

She goes on to say: "The real challenge I have faced in the past two decades has been to get a broadcaster to support and commission the story I want to tell, rather than the story they want me to tell. Our stories are often regarded as "not interesting" for a western audience. Commissioning Editors seek "universal" stories to maintain their audience ratings and there is little appetite

for African stories that do not confirm the already existing stereotypes... This is a reality that we –African Documentary filmmakers – have to live with! Hopefully one day our own National Broadcasters will commission our films but that is not the case for the moment.” (p. 74)

Too true! Jihan tells a fascinating story about how she spent years of frustration writing documentary proposals before she understood the difference between an idea that a commissioning editor in the West – where most of the money is – would find interesting and therefore be of ‘universal’ interest. In the current context the meaning of “universal” is all about ratings. These require films that are most palatable to western audiences. The secret, Jihan suggests, is *packaging*.

So how did we package and repackage *The Witches of Gambaga*? In May 2008, we approached Chicken and Egg Pictures, a San Francisco, USA-based grant-giving organisation that supports women film makers working to address social justice and human rights issues. Amina heard about Chicken and Egg through its founder. They too turned down our application for funding. It was only thanks to a fortuitous meeting with one of the directors of Chicken and Egg at a documentary film festival in Oxford, that I discovered the reason why.

I learned that the women that I’d got to know so intimately appeared too ‘exotic’ for them. The phrase used was “too Nat Geo,” by which they implied that we had objectified them in the anthropological way of the well known USA publication *National Geographic*. This was a particularly scathing indictment for us, as it was exactly what we had sought so carefully not to do. Indeed, the objectification of African women was the very problem that had informed and motivated the entire African sexualities project in the first place! Apparently – and for whatever reason – our carefully nuanced and intimate approach to filming the women at Gambaga just hadn’t worked for the US women at Chicken and Egg.

‘Why not put *yourself* in the film? the woman I ran into suggested. The idea being that once the viewer understood that witchcraft accusations also affect ‘nice’ middle-class families such as my own in Accra, and not just poverty-stricken families up in the north, an international audience – could begin to grapple with issues raised by the so-called ‘witches’ of Gambaga.

I took the advice and relayed it to my co-producer Amina Mama, who enthusiastically embraced this suggestion– arguing that since I am after all a Ghanaian woman, this could work, especially if we also included footage of

key women activists already well known for their work, to make it clear that the disciplining of women in this manner was not just a feature of remote rural communities. By this time I was willing to do more or less anything to achieve our aim, and we both wanted to finish the film. Moreover, I felt powerfully obligated to the community at Gambaga, all those women who had shared their most intimate personal stories with me and allowed me to write about, record and film their lives, because they wanted the world to know.

At this point the then-Director of the Institute of African Studies, Professor Takyiwaa Manuh, who was also serving as the regional co-ordinator for an Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University's project, was able to give us a grant of £5,000 to do six days of follow-up filming at the witches' camp. In December 2008, we shot more footage with them, and at the same time included me in the frame as the presenter of the documentary. We also situated the witches' stories in the broader context of the women's movement in Ghana, and its on-going campaigns to expose and stop all forms of violence against women.

As the title of this paper suggests, these are preliminary reflections on some of the obstacles we had to overcome in order to complete *The Witches of Gambaga* in July 2010. These obstacles have a bearing on the complicated politics of representation in and beyond contemporary Ghana. Images still mostly reproduced and given currency by Western based broadcasters, who operate according to their priorities and agendas, not those of African feminists experimenting with the media they have dominated for so long. These issues are part of a much larger debate about who funds whom and for what reasons? However, if I were forced to draw conclusions from our experience with regard to this particular documentary, it would be that on every step of the journey towards completion, we've had to make alliances – political and personal – with individuals and organizations: the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and their workers, Simon Ngota and Gladys Lariba who work tirelessly to rehabilitate 'witches' incarcerated at the witches camp; my co-producer, Amina Mama, who invited me to take part in the Mapping Sexualities Programme because she was interested in exploring how a well-researched film project could be a more effective tool for activists than even the best of research reports, with the added advantage that it could reach further to include non-literate audiences, and positively affect the lives of the women who participated in the field. She

sustained her involvement for the duration, to co-produce the film with me, and was instrumental in putting me in touch not only with *Chicken and Egg* but also the *African Women's Development Fund* based in Accra. They contributed the final tranche of \$20,000 which paid for editing rooms, music copyright and a sound dub. A mutual friend, Zagba Oyorley, introduced me to *Forward*, an African women's NGO based in London, engaged in campaigning for women's reproductive health in northern Ghana. *Forward* contributed £5000 towards the editor's salary. Then there were the women of *Netright*, a coalition of civil society organisations and individuals working to promote gender justice in Ghana, who sponsored our application to *The African Women's Development Fund*. Another friend, Yao Graham, Coordinator of Third World Network, Africa, put me in touch with Kwasi Appenteng-Djan of the *EU's Cultural Initiative Support Programme* who gave us a grant of 6000 Ghana cedis. And there was Sally-Ann Wilson of the *Commonwealth Broadcasting Association* who started the ball rolling. A very dear friend to both of us, Wendy Hollway, donated £1000 so we could create a website for the film. Big Heart Media, a London-based production company, very kindly let us hire one of their editing suites at a reduced rate. Finally – the icing on the cake. When we approached the Ivorian singer and composer Dobet Gnahore to find out how much it would cost to use some of her music in *The Witches of Gambaga* she thought the subject matter was so important that she declined accepting a fee.

In my investigations on witchcraft in Gambaga, only one woman, the erstwhile businesswoman and trader, Asara Azindow, was prepared to discuss what she knew about witchcraft beliefs with me. All the other inmates at the camp and women in the town pleaded ignorance or were eerily reticent about discussing local witchcraft beliefs. It was as if revealing any knowledge on the subject would suggest that a woman was a practitioner, implicating her in the dark art. Men on the other hand were voluble in providing me with humorous anecdotes and vivid descriptions of their encounters with witches and witchcraft. A town elder, Alhaji Issaku, regaled me for a full hour on how, when men are witches they use their art for benign, protective purposes while women, because of their nature, always use it to execute evil deeds. It seemed heartbreaking that men are able to describe and articulate ideas about witchcraft, defining who is and is not a witch, while for the most part women are silenced by it.

At the end of our conversation, during which Alhaji Issaku told me that witches can turn themselves into animals and snakes, they can turn the souls

of their victims into rodents and insects; they have four eyes to enable them to travel by night and have a tendency to go blind, for by the time they're old, they've ruined their eyesight with too much night travel - that's why a witch can never look you straight in the eye. After he'd revealed that a witch will never confess to witchcraft and that witchcraft can never be eradicated from a woman, it can only be suppressed; he described how a cantankerous nature, bearing grudges and manifestations of male pride in a woman are all signs that a woman may be a witch. Not surprisingly, Alhaji Issaku constantly monitors the women in his household for suspicious activity. After he'd told me all these things, he mentioned in passing that if I wanted, and if I brought him a bat and a cat, he would gladly turn me into a witch.

I declined his offer.

## Endnotes

1. Excerpts of that report were published in *Feminist Africa 5* under the title *The Witches of Gambaga: What it means to be a witch in the Northern Region of Ghana* (Badoe 2003).
2. The camp at Gambaga used to be one of four refuges in the Northern Region. Research carried out by the Human Rights Commission of Ghana in 1998 showed that out of over a thousand people in these refuges, only thirteen were men. Today there are over three thousand women living in seven camps dotted across the region.
3. Local English for an eating house.
4. *Trokosi* refers to the traditional practice of young girls being indentured as servants in traditional shrines, a practice that has long been challenged by Ghanaian women's organisations.

## Yaba Badoe: Filmography

Producer *Nana Chancellor: Damirifa due*, a 55" documentary for the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, celebrating the life and funeral rites of Oyeeman Wereko-Ampem, former Chancellor of the University of Ghana and a traditional chief; Oct 2008

Director/Producer *Kuduo: The Akan Art of Brass casting*, a 35" film for the Institute of African Studies, the University of Ghana. The film investigates the ancient craft of lost wax brass casting among the Akan people of Ghana and celebrates the expression of culture and philosophy in the manufacture of gold weights and chieftaincy regalia. Dec 07

# Women and the Dynamics of Representation: Of Cooking, Cars, and Gendered Culture<sup>1</sup>

Abena P. A. Busia

## Introduction

In June of 2010 the African Women's Development Fund and the Lufodo Academy of Performing Arts (LAPA) took note of and entered into the raging and ongoing discussions about the Nollywood<sup>2</sup> film industry by organizing an African Women in Film Forum on the subject of "Women and the Dynamics of Representation". For some the existence of this industry is a reason for celebration, to others it is rather cause for anxiety. However, that such debates even rage is a sign that Nollywood has become an institution to reckon with.

Th[e] gargantuan production of video-films constitutes a social, economic and cultural phenomenon without precedent. It is culture that is not the reserve of the so-called 'cultured classes'. Aside from the music industry, there has never been any other aspect of African culture that has resonated in such a way, achieved such a high profile and above all made such a big impact on the population.<sup>3</sup>

Being an institution brings with it responsibilities. Nollywood can no longer be indulged as the "Johnny-come-lately" bad boy of movie making; recently recognized as the second largest movie-making business in the world, after Bollywood and before Hollywood. This means it produces more feature-length films (in video format)<sup>4</sup> than industries of older standing such as in England and Italy. Thus, it is an industry that can no longer be treated as a child passing through its terrible twos. At the very least it is an industry that has gained its first degree, and we expect more of college graduates than we do of those still struggling through high school.

In many ways, a part of its success can be attributed to the phenomenon of technology. Nollywood is an industry that by and large skipped the film stage, and went first to video<sup>5</sup>, then was truly liberated by going digital. As with

music making, the symbiotic relationship between technology and creativity must be acknowledged. This even affects what I can call the social relations of film-making; as, for instance, that location work predominates over studio work, and, as is common with Black independent film makers in Europe and the United States, producers and directors and actors work constantly with each other in stable communities which resemble the early Hollywood contract studio system but without either the studios or the contracts, which has proved a way of promoting and supporting each other in their careers as artists.

The issues to be addressed by the film forum on “women and the dynamics of representation” have been of concern for those of us who have been thinking about such things as “representation” for centuries. But let me begin first with the word “dynamics”, a term that suggests forces that produce change or motion. Nollywood is indeed a force: the existence of such a mass of films, now available and watched in every corner of the globe, has indeed produced change. It is the nature of that change with respect to women that we are here to deliberate on - we are concerned here with what the force of the dynamo means for those of us embodied to walk this earth as women, and at this forum we are as concerned as much about women *in* film as women *on* film. That is, the dynamics of representation ultimately have as urgent a force when thinking of women in the film industry *behind* the scenes as in the more self-evident sense of women projected *on* the screen, which is my specific concern here.

### **Representation and Context: External Images**

First, a confession, of sorts: much of my response to the issue of women in Nollywood film has been driven not simply by living outside of Africa most of my life, but more specifically by the fact that, beginning with my doctoral dissertation on “Images of Africa” in post-war popular fiction, questions of representations of Africa and of Black women have been the foundation of my career as a researcher and reader.

I have been in good company: how women are presented to audiences in various media has also been of concern for a number of women and women’s movements around the world. As human beings we all become concerned about how we are seen by others, how we are re-presented to the world, especially by others who do not count themselves as one of our number. And when we do not see ourselves reflected, or reflected as we would like, the

need for redress, to challenge the discrepancies between how we see ourselves and how we know ourselves to be seen, becomes a powerful driving force, and not just for women. It is of no small consideration, for it has led around the world to powerful social movements. As we know, centuries of being seen as “niggers”, being denigrated (which in its Latin root means literally to blacken or “niggerfy”), and being classified as social inferiors with attendant social consequences and legal restrictions—has led to revolutions from the American South to South Africa.

It is therefore an important context for this forum that it rests firmly in the arena of a very broad historical context, where issues concerning “the image of Africa” meet those concerning “the image of women”, black women in particular. In this regard, because of the former- the image of Africa- women of African descent have not always even been seen as a subset of “women” in general but somehow of a species apart from female humanity. Out there in the world the image of Africa, and the women in it or who have historically come from it, is not positive. There is no time to rehearse these images here, neither do I at this juncture wish to launch into a history of the genealogy of these images about which countless books have been written<sup>6</sup>, and numerous graduate and undergraduate courses taught by people like myself.

In ‘the West’ we are still ‘the dark continent.’ In today’s more politically correct world we speak more euphemistically of ‘underdevelopment’, ‘necessary aid’, ‘culture bound’ etc. Yet our people are still somehow spoken of as lesser, less intelligent, less capable, less...whatever! Among the list of works we could turn to regarding Black women and representation, perhaps the best iconic figure is that of the silenced Sarah Baartman, erased of name and history, body on display in life, body parts on display in death.

Yet why does this anxiety about historical images matter? Surely we tell ourselves the marketing of such images is over, or, since we have become independent, we have control of our own representation, so what does the colonial past matter? It matters for two reasons: the first is that the success of Nollywood means that what we do is avidly received in those very places that have created and marketed these negative images, and they have not gone away. The second is indeed that the major audience is ourselves, *whether at home or abroad*, (a point to which I must return), so what are we telling ourselves and the rest of the world about ourselves? Are we countering or feeding this legacy of hostile images of ourselves?

The Nollywood film industry, willingly or unwittingly, carries on its shoulders the hopes and expectations of us Africans whom it is presumed to represent. In the realm of popular culture this is what film has come to do. Perhaps the situation can be compared to the burdens placed on the shoulders of African-American writers in the middle of the twentieth century, who had to grapple with the interface between artistic freedom and social expectations. Was Richard Wright<sup>7</sup> justified in creating a monster like Bigger Thomas to prove his ideological point that desperate social circumstances beyond one's control produce desperate people, or did he merely validate the negative stereotype that all young Black men are brutes and rapists? A generation later, when Alice Walker gave us Celie in *The Color Purple*, was she showing how, no matter what the degradations, women's sisterhood and solidarity could lead to personal emancipation or was she justly accused of merely adding further fuel to the fire engulfing the besieged masculinity of Black men<sup>8</sup>.

It is not insignificant that the furor over *The Color Purple* blazed more furiously, leading to demonstrations against the actors and the picketing of the Oscars when it was turned into a successful film by Steven Spielberg in 1985.<sup>9</sup> It is not necessary to say, especially in a forum such as this, that, in terms of contemporary entertainment, film is arguably the most popular art form of narrative communication around the world today. Something that causes a spark when published in print can turn into a forest fire when presented on the screen. Controversial as the novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* was when published in 1960 by Nikos Kazantzakis, that uproar paled when compared to the fury unleashed when it was made into a film directed by Martin Scorsese and reached a much wider general audience in 1988. It can also work the other way: I am sure J.K. Rowling, the writer of the Harry Potter series of children's books, today goes to the bank quite happy that she need never write another word in life if she doesn't choose to! Nollywood faces the same agonies and choices that all the other '-woods' have faced. The point I am emphasizing is that the question of the responsibility for images is not peculiar to Nigeria or to film-makers, but is the concern of all artists; however that responsibility becomes magnified when the medium is an influential and popular one, such as is film.

If I can digress for a moment on one small point, looking at Nollywood films from the perspective of someone who has spent her life wrestling

with the question of the “image of Africa” in the Western world, I must say that, for me, one of the huge benefits of the success of this film industry, regardless of the quality of the stories being told, is finally we have a huge body of work which show what the exteriors and interiors of modern Africa look like. Most of these films are shot on location and convey the grittiness of the streets, and have made these streets familiar. There is a texture to the look of Lagos or Accra that is refreshing to see, especially after having to contend with the notion that there is no modernity in Africa, that we have no capital cities that can rival those of the West, and wouldn't know a skyscraper if it fell on us. The first time I showed a slide of Abidjan to a class of students (at a University in the middle of the U.S which will remain unnamed) they all but thought I was lying!

## Multiplier Effects

But to return to the point that I was trying to make: that of the variability and unpredictability of audience. Kazantzakis was careful not to betray the end results of the biblical account of Jesus of Nazareth- he did not in the end succumb to the temptations of the flesh. Nonetheless, there were Christians who considered the very idea of the temptation of Jesus the Christ tantamount to blasphemy. However, even when not dealing with theologically sensitive subjects, the concerns raised by images projected upon us or any individual or group we identify with, we carry with us. Thus, a forum such as this must raise acute questions regarding the impact of the production and proliferation of the images that concern us here, the images we produce and promote ourselves and send out into the world. We are concerned with film and with women in film in every aspect. How do we tell our stories? Who is to tell them? Who has access to the storytelling apparatus that film embodies? And what legacy do these images leave?

It is always a heated debate whether artists are creators or reflectors of the society that support their work. There can be no doubt that we can learn a lot about a people through what we read and see about a society. Still, sorting through the manifold impressions and emotions that art evokes can be complex in a number of ways. One film about a drug addict could be seen as an exploration of a social problem. A number of films from the same place in which drug addicts routinely appear, or are referred to, spoken about, drop in casually or are otherwise a part of the fabric of the life being portrayed,

can leave the impression that this is a society where drug addiction is endemic if not epidemic, that it is an integral part of everyday life, and the source of a massive social problem.

Thus, we also need to take account of what I call the “multiplier effect”. We must respect the integrity of every individual story, but we must also be concerned with the multiplier effect of a number of individual stories conveying similar things, which then multiply to become a collective story. When this happens, it must give us pause for thought. For example, my mother had three sons. My brothers have each of them married between 1978 and 1984; that is, they have all been married for between twenty-five and thirty years, giving our mother, cumulatively, in excess of one hundred years of being a mother-in-law, before she passed away. And in all that century, I do not remember any violent disagreements, of her calling or being called a shrew by my sisters-in-law, any necessary escapes by them to avoid her witchcraft or any attempt by her to undermine their marriages because they were unsuitable harridans who on top of everything could not even cook a decent meal! As wonderful as I know my mother to have been, I do not believe she was the only mother of sons in the whole of West Africa who appreciated the complexities of married life, appreciated that the sons had made the best choices they could and the women they married were doing the best they could to lead their lives with integrity and raise their children in unanimity and was thus prepared to leave all three couples to it! But perhaps you will all now say that is because they had at least provided her with a dozen grandchildren and therefore could be exempted from the general box of unpleasant spells that mothers-in-law cast! I think you get the point. The mother-in-law as witch and fertility police is a staple of Nollywood film we all recognize. This multiplier effect can be most instructive for good or ill. At face value this is a disturbing image to have constantly reflected out. But what does it tell us about the makeup, the concerns, of modern society?

With respect to representing contemporary African women to a larger audience, Nollywood has had, sometimes deservedly, a lot of hits. But the critiques arise out of respect for its successes; if no one watched the films it would not matter quite so much. I have been told that the largest market outside Nigeria is not Ghana, or even London, but Canada, where a large film festival<sup>10</sup> has recently been established. Wherever it is, Nollywood has put African filmmaking on the world map in spectacular ways, and with

incredible alacrity. Its products have become widespread enough to bear many discussions on the implications of its extraordinary communicative power.

Let me illustrate: reviewing a number of films in preparation for this forum<sup>11</sup> made me sub-title these remarks “Of Cooking, Cars, and Gendered Culture”. Why? Because, in everyday parlance, when we speak of “culture” with respect to the African continent, people’s minds go to Zulu spears, Ndebele beads, Igbo masquerades or Asante kente cloth, depending on which part of the continent we are focused on. However, we should recognize that the real essence of culture is not so much the things we see, but the things we take for granted; not the song and dance routines we “Third World” peoples put on for tourists to admire as proof positive we do even have culture, but the things we believe and to which we hold fast because they structure the sense of meaning in our lives, including why and when we sing and dance, regardless of audience.

Although the things mentioned above are important to their peoples, their importance does not lie primarily in the chic market value they have now come to have. Furthermore, there are other, non-marketable things, which are so ingrained in us, we scarcely notice; e.g., the different ways in which we greet each other - bowing to our elders, shaking hands from right to left, and so on. These are the deep-strata cultural things that are seldom articulated and that reflect our sense of our selves as people, and film can speak to these deep-structure needs.

Sandra Grady, in her essay “Role Models and Drama Queens: African Films and The Formation of Good Women”, makes reference to both the invocation of a mythic African past called up by such traditional modes of dress, *and* the impact of constant repetition in the watching of such films. She argues from her work amongst Somali Bantu refugees in the United States that the increased consumption of such media becomes important in the context not only of domestic consumption but human migration, because ‘they influence the social imagination and consequently shape personal and cultural identity (Appadurai)’<sup>12</sup> Her study reveals that, at least amongst this group of East Africans, the consumption of Nollywood films, which has become common cultural practice, has the impact of the inculcation of learning traditional gender roles directed in particular at young girls.

If watching films acculturates us, inculcates in us a sense of collective identity, then what was I learning when watching all those kitchens and cars? I became aware of these two striking motifs, both of them used as reflections

of our societies, one idea ancient, and the other far more contemporary. Strikingly, in these films, food remains an index of gender relations and in particular of a woman's moral standing. And I do not mean only the idea of the rural woman's sweat in her determination to grow crops to feed her children. The films also reflect what appears to be an abiding social truth that, in heterosexual relationships, whether or not a man has a "good thing going", the real value in a woman is how well she feeds you. Urban or rural, professional, unemployed, or a homemaker, no matter what, feeding remains, apparently, an index of a woman's moral worth. I have seen only one instance of which feeding a woman with the labour of his own hands (as opposed to in a chic restaurant) was indicative of a man's seriousness in a relationship. We can, and perhaps should, have a conversation about what the automatic and assumed acceptance of this means for us in the early twenty-first century. However, the point I want to make here, is anyone watching these films, en masse, will learn quite correctly that, rightly or wrongly, in West African cultures, at least into the first decade of the twenty-first century, the cooking and sharing of food remained a major index of cultural significance. As students and critics of popular culture this can be important to note.

What of the cars? These were as noticeable as the plates of badly or well-cooked food, but they seemed to have a different cultural resonance. Where the matter of food seems an almost unquestioned sign of womanhood, to be taken for granted, as it were, the cars were not an *unconscious* signifier: A woman is expected to be able to cook; what is noteworthy, to her detriment, is when she cannot. The ability is the status quo. In contrast, men are not *assumed* to have cars; so every car redounds to their worth and value on an ever-increasing scale according to the value of the car:

Both separately and together, the moving vehicle and the moving image have become perhaps the most emblematic commodities of twentieth-century modernization. Throughout the history of cinema—from colonial propaganda documentaries to Hollywood blockbusters—the habitual appearance of the automobile on screen has affirmed the ability of moving technologies to embody many of the ideologies central to modern, liberal societies: progress, speed, autonomy, mobility, displacement, and image value. However, in West Africa, where the rate of automobile ownership is one of the world's lowest and where technology is notoriously prone to breakdown, the functional car

remains a commodity that is, by and large, out of reach. Thus, the automobile in West African cinema has become a particular vexed sign of development...however, in Nigerian and Ghanaian video films the cars that had been displaced and made strange in the celluloid films return with all seriousness and fully imbued with their fetishistic valences. Like the global soap operas and *telenovelas* that have influenced them, these video films often focus on the highly commodified world of the urban upper class. Yet, while most Nollywood films are unflinching in their depiction of wealth, prosperity, and unbridled consumption as wholly desirable, they have also made the darker sides of power and success central to their narratives (Green-Simms, 2010, p. 210-11)

In film after film, where cars were associated with women *owners*, they came to represent that darker side of power. Singled out by the camera, frequently lovingly caressed by it, not as a taken-for-granted aspect of character, but as a potent symbol of a man's (frequently rising) power, so fixed a sign of potent masculinity has the car become, that in one film – *Ghana Girls I believe*<sup>13</sup> – it was also used as the index of the extent to which the men who drove them were held in regard or pampered by the sugar mamas who kept them happy. Interestingly in that film, though they acted as a sign of *her* buying power, they reflected socially to *his* glory. In this particular film, the women's access to cars was indicative of their corruption. Furthermore, by providing the men with those cars they provided them with the instruments with which those gigolos could then play them for fools by using the cars to impress and win women *other* than the ones who had purchased them. The point I am making here is that, for good or ill, these films give us clues to world views and culture of the societies which support them, whether by indicating fixed assumptions – as in the case of women and cooking- or signifying a symbol of flux and change- as with men and cars, or women with cars.<sup>14</sup>

We do have plenty of storylines which reflect our lives as they are lived; sort of. That is, we do have films depicting young people in love, and young people having sex, and the women are not necessarily required to be virgins. Yet, if we study carefully the development of the storylines, a number of issues arise. Even Nollywood's college girls find more time to pursue and seduce men using their cars as well as their bodies, than for their studies. Yes, when unmarried women own cars, it is seldom to any good end; it is a sign of women who do not know boundaries, of women who transgress.

## Tradition, Change, and Artistic Responsibilities:

This is why the plethora of “saints, whores, nags and witches”, the title given to the session for writers at the forum, raises such concern. The sessions of this forum tell the story of the complexity of the issues we face. In the films made by us, we must acknowledge we have made great strides in the images we present of ourselves in our stories. But we still have a great way to go. After the struggle waged by, e.g., African American women in Hollywood to even be allowed to represent beauty and glamour, not to speak of sexuality, we are ahead of the game, but still need to ask, to what purpose? On that side of the Atlantic they had to struggle to be regarded as a socially acceptable and respectable body beautiful. Over here, we have no problem with the concept of an African woman’s body as beautiful; our actresses are manifestly attractive and flaunt it on screen, though we do have to ask sometimes to what end this glorification of the body<sup>15</sup> especially in a context where the validation of woman’s sexuality outside of heterosexual marriage is still seen as a potential source of problems. Ultimately, we are still not permitted to be respectable and sexual at the same time.

The choice of the tongue-in-cheek title of the session for writers is unfortunately not so tongue-in-cheek. Much of the ire against the Nollywood industry has come precisely because these are the dominant images that we grapple with. I often wish, when I visit yet another office with television screens turned permanently to the “African Magic” cable television channel showing movies of wicked wives and greedy mistresses 24/7 one more time, I could issue a blanket decree banning it from the airwaves! I do not want to see anymore women actually turning into snakes before our eyes, or metamorphosing into blood suckers for the sake of gold, truly believing that that is the sole objective of life. What sort of social anxiety do such scenes reflect? In a very important critique of our ability to interpret the narrative of video productions Onookome Okome observes:

What is designated [...] as fetish is indeed symbolic fetish, the narrative of explanations that the society seeks at a crucial juncture of its cultural flux. The symbolic fetish flourishes in the industry because it is part of the psychology of a large proportion of Nigerians. Nollywood uses this fetish to explain to a bewildered population the drift and rot in contemporary Nigerian society. (Okome 36)

I confess, as an artist, I recognize that this gut reaction of wanting to switch off not to say ban some television stations borders on policing. Where do we draw the line between demanding socially responsible art and policing the artist?<sup>16</sup> And besides, can we police morality or demand, as opposed to desire, socially responsible art forms? And again, as I asked before, must our art be required to be what we consider positive? For then when does it become propaganda? Why not be content with reflecting what is, however discomforting that may be? And in all this, what commentary is being made about our contemporary life?

[E]ven when the home videos exaggerate as is their wont, hitching implausible situations to the most banal sequences, the films manage to confront us with what is true of the way we are, and the way we live, while reflecting the difficulties we have in admitting it. We live in societies groping rather haphazardly towards modernity; societies in which women and children are ritually maltreated even in the most enlightened and liberal communities; societies in which those who should bring a sense of orderliness to situations are generally backhanded out of the way by those who have the power to make changes. (Ofiemun 13)

In short, what is the purpose of our modern storytelling, for, make no mistake; filmmaking is simply the latest, or one of the latest, forms of collective storytelling. But modern storytelling faces a complex set of situations. If I may be permitted the resort to the cliché of grandmothers by the compound fireside or under the village tree, what happens when the audience is no longer a cohesive clan with shared history and antecedents and a relatively shared common set of goals, but has translated into the “global village” of both kinsmen and spies?

[Nollywood] focuses... on the social and cultural forces of the local and how they cope with the global on their own terms, Nollywood films are consumed in the homes, the video parlors, the convention grounds of Pentecostal churches, and the many unorthodox viewing venues found in poor neighborhoods. As the vernacular of the poor who live the “lottery capitalism of the millennium” Nollywood film draws its own map of social and cultural programs and narrative responsibilities. (Okome 37)

Nollywood narratives are like all human stories, whether mythic tales told by grandmothers, or proverbs and riddles, they serve the purpose of enabling, and even empowering the societies that support them, to make sense of the world around them. When they encompass the grand issues of human existence: What is the source of life? Or what the nature of the divine?—they exist in the realm of sacred myth. Yet, as we know, even good local stand-up comedians can help us comprehend the messiness and the seemingly intractable problems of human living. A Concert Party skit or a cartoon about a disgraced politician or destooled chief can be more powerful than volumes of ink spent on condemning the moral turpitude of their behavior.

And, on the subject of chiefs and village grandmothers, what indeed do we do with our past and its legacies and continuities? What do we do with those stories, those forms of living, those ways of being? And certainly, one of the issues indeed facing us as modern people is making clear to ourselves and others the fact that there is no rupture between “then” and “now”. Some years ago I used an illustration for this point, which I would like to repeat here:

A few years ago I was invited to Rochester Institute of Technology to conduct a faculty development workshop. So, whilst there, I took the opportunity of visiting the Eastman Kodak museum. I was fortunate that it was the year of the centenary of the “Brownie” camera, and amongst the many events celebrating that little camera, which was the first camera of almost everyone I know, was a glorious display of every brownie ever made, displayed in chronological order. We could all mark our age group by the camera we first knew. What was very striking was that, if you looked at only the first and the last in the series, the two cameras had nothing in common. Yet, seen on display with the dozens of intervening cameras also displayed, the differences between each were only small and incremental, at times barely perceptible, and the links between the cameras at their different stages, irrefutable. It might be fruitful to think of that vexed word tradition in that manner. With each manifestation of a “traditional” ceremony, what is produced is its own variant, dependent on its own time, space and ritual acts and immediate needs. Nothing remains static ... This is the health of ritual. [Each re-enactment] in form and performance carries the echo of that remembered form which each performance both recalls and gives the

lie to. So, [for example, to commemorate deaths that occur among exiles,] instead of sitting in open spaces outside the family home, we hire church halls, and do the things that need to be done, improvising from necessity to create something new that we dress in the language of tradition, sometimes amazing and bemusing our neighbors because of the sudden influx of people, [particular] colour, public ceremony and noise that Ghanaian funerals generate, which seem incomprehensible unless you understand the culture of mourning. The danger is the extent to which we are all capable of [genesis] amnesia, forgetting the cameras in between.<sup>17</sup>

So, how do we deal with tradition and change? How do we film those translations of traditional mores into contemporary life and modes of existence? How do we make the invisible visible? This is not a simple task, yet it is a relevant question, first because there are as many films set in our ancient, or at least pre-colonial, pasts as there are in our contemporary societies. More important, however, it is a relevant question because these references to our past, however facile and problematic they may be in some films, are evidence of a perceptive recognition of concerns about our “traditions” in our “modern” worlds. The issue may not be so much with the references to “old gods” as with a failure to take on board with integrity what those traditions *in change*, or changes in tradition, might mean.

Derek Walcott (1970) once admonished, “If the old gods were dying in the mouths of the old they died of their own volition”<sup>18</sup>. What do we do about “old gods” who are not necessarily old? Their mores, strictures and worship are still an integral part of our daily lives. In particular, how do we deal with them in the face of continuous changes, also evident in many recent films through the fundamentalisms of every kind that have swept through our world in the latter part of the twentieth century? I am a Christian myself. Yet at the same time I can not, in all honesty, help but baulk at the ways in which fundamentalist faith is presented and/or deployed, sometimes almost as a *deus-ex-machina*, suddenly appearing at the end of a complex and intricate set of plot lines to make all things right by the easy solution of sprinkling a little scripture on top, when nothing at all in Parts One, Two and Three of the film has in any way given grounds for such a possibility as acceptable.<sup>19</sup>

## The Challenge of Good Scripts and Believable Stories

If so many of our films lack a satisfying sense of an ending, it is because we are dealing here, amongst other things, also with the quality of writing, not to say, of re-writing! If I may be forgiven, I would like here to quote Steven Spielberg. A year after the Academy of Motion pictures effectively turned its back on him, by nominating *The Color Purple* for 13 Oscars and awarding it not a single one, he was given the Irving Thalberg award for his consistently high quality of motion picture production. He started his acceptance speech by talking about how he was a movie junkie, and then continued:

That the whole idea of movie magic is that interweave of powerful image and dialogue and performance and music that can never be separated, and when it's working right, can never be duplicated or ever forgotten. I've grown up—most of my life has been spent in the dark watching movies. Movies have been the literature of my life. The literature of Irving Thalberg's generation was books and plays. They read the great words of great minds. And I think in our romance with technology and our excitement at exploring all the possibilities of film and video, I think we've partially lost something that we now have to reclaim. I think it's time to renew our romance with the word. I'm as culpable as anyone in having exalted the image at the expense of the word. *But only a generation of readers will spawn a generation of writers.*<sup>20</sup> (emphasis mine)

I confess, when I heard those words, literature teacher that I am, I stood alone in my living room and cheered. That short statement reminds us of a number of things that are crucially important here: that film is a collective art form dependent on co-operation; that it is an art form dependent on technologies of great possibility; and that, in the end, it all begins with the writing.

Thus, one other question we face is this very question of language: In which language do we make our films? Again this discussion goes far beyond the concerns of the film industry. In truth, in this respect, the filmmakers have a real edge over the writers, as proportionally there are far more films made in Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Akan or Ga, than there are either books written in those languages or even films by African filmmakers made in English. This is important, because I believe it helps account for the massive popularity of film as a medium, regardless of the challenges of the democracy of its art form or the challenges faced concerning the quality and integrity of translations

and sub-titles. Undeniably there can be an expressiveness available, for actors in particular, when working in a mother tongue as opposed to a second language, (however fluent one may be in it), that can affect the body language, tone, and gesture that gives texture to performances on stage or celluloid, or in cyberspace.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, no matter the language in which we write, we must deal with the stories we tell. This forum has been occasioned by a general concern about the way in which women are presented and the stories told about them. And there seems to be a kind of social malaise that has difficulty juggling the ideal and the real. At times we seem to have difficulty actually dealing with who we are, though perhaps the films do reflect a general social inability to deal with the world in which we live when it comes to the changing roles of women in society. To illustrate with an anecdote from a class assignment: some years ago when on leave in Ghana, I taught an undergraduate class on “Rights, Ethics and the Rule of Law”. I gave an assignment to describe and discuss the power and authority structures in any small unit to which each student belonged. Most of them chose the family unit. When they handed in those assignments, in a class of 50 students, all but one of them who described the family launched into descriptions of the ideal patriarchal nuclear family where the father was the breadwinner and the mother stayed at home taking care of the children. But when I asked in the class, only ONE of them actually had a mother who stayed home full time as a housewife; all the other students had mothers in full- or part-time employment. They were surrounded, at home and at school, by women in full-time employment, but seemed to have difficulty even articulating this when it came up against some imagined sense of what a modern middle class family should look like; and this was a class in Accra, not in New Jersey. What place do women occupy in the cultural imagination? This may seem a trivial example, but it makes me wonder about the relational continuum of social attitudes that begins with women’s work being disregarded from the authority of the household and ends with their work not being factored into the statistics of national economies.

Yet we must acknowledge that there are changes being made. The question of a new future was the subject of our last panel and there are some things we ask for which should not be too hard to accommodate: that the stories reflect our lives as lived a little more – for instance that female college students be seen a little more in classes and discussion courses

and a little less in the beds of their lovers; that professional women be seen acting professionally in professional settings; that complex situations, including those involving conflict situations be presented without necessary demonization, and that the concerns with which we live be struggled with integrity.

Our lives, contemporary and historic, are food for story enough; we live through coups, countercoups and corruption. Beyond the drama of such incidents themselves, they take a toll on everyday life. Even in democratic peacetimes we pass through road blocks on our city streets on peaceful Sunday afternoons; we have to balance between snacks for our children or having their bus fare, we get sick, get well, lose our mothers, and we do all this without always being charged by circumstances to refer to demonic interferences. The place of women at the interface of tradition and modernity remains a vexed one. We are not asking for easy answers. Rather, we contend that the images we object to are a sign of easy answers in circumstances that demand a fiercer kind of truth.

The career of a filmmaker such as Tunde Kelani, whose commitment to the issue is such that he is sitting here amongst us, is evidence that it is not only women who can tackle these questions with courage. In his films women are bright, articulate, and face the dilemmas of our day, whether the legacies of ancient customs or the consequences of contemporary social forces.<sup>22</sup> Yet we must also support the growth of women in an industry which has traditionally limited their roles in front of the camera and severely restricted their roles behind it. Tough as the industry is for everyone involved in it, it is especially so for women in general, and Black women in particular, have a much tougher time gaining access to all aspects of filmmaking, from the equipment to the financing. They are also, as some here will attest to, amongst those who are the most enterprising and risk-taking in getting their work out. The central issue remains: how hard is it to create an industry which projects the complexity of the way in which we live our lives from a humane, ethical standpoint?

## Endnotes

1. This paper is based upon the opening keynote address delivered at the *African Women and Film* Forum organized to initiate its new section on popular culture by the African Women's Development Fund in Lagos Nigeria June 16-17-2010. I underscore its origins as a keynote address because the immediacy of the situation gives the necessary context for the issues I undertook to explore.
2. Nollywood is the popular expression for the West African, principally Nigerian, film industry, which has flourished since the 1980s and is, of course, mirroring Bollywood, used to designate the Indian Film industry based in Bombay, and Hollywood, based in Los Angeles CA.
3. Preface to *Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria*. Pierre Barrot (ed.), (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) p. xi.
4. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Biennial Survey for 2009. ([www.vis.unesco.org/culture/pages/cinema-data-release-2011.aspx](http://www.vis.unesco.org/culture/pages/cinema-data-release-2011.aspx)). Accessed 15 March 2011.
5. Much of the early debate concerning "Nollywood" did indeed revolve on the technologies upon which it thrived. I will not enter into that debate here and use the word 'film' loosely to cover the whole range of feature film production, in this case mostly video and digital DVDs. However, for an interesting perspective on the efficacy of changing from film to digital, see Tunde Kelani "Spielberg & I: The Digital Revolution" in Barrot (2008) ps 90-94.
6. See, in particular: Deborah Willis, *Black Venus 2010: They called Her Hottentot*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010; Michael D Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* Chapters 4 & 6 "Jezebel, Olympia, and the Sexualized Woman", and "The Language of Appropriation: Fantasies and Fallacies"; Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark; Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011
7. Richard Wright's *Native Son*. 1940. Bigger Thomas is the name of the hero of his novel, who, at the end, is executed for murdering the daughter of his white boss. Wright's social realist novel was intended to dramatize the consequences of the oppression under which Bigger lived.
8. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982)..
9. Spielberg, Stephen, dir. *The Color Purple*. 1985. Film.
10. Victor Osazuwa, CEO/Founder of Global Benefits, organized the first Nollywood Film Festival in North America, in Mississagua, Canada in May 2009.
11. The list of films that inform this paper includes, but is not limited to the following:
 

*Basorun Gaa*: Afan Productions & Remdel Optimum Communications;  
*Bitter Generation 2*: A Lucy Awoji Film, All Mark Movies,  
*Broken Soul*:  
*Campus Queen*: Dir Tunde Kelani, Mainframe Productions;  
*Evil Woman* Part 1: 2010

*Ghana Girls*: Peace Productions, Kumasi;

*Let Them Say: (Egbayi)* Parts 1 & 2 Kleem Image Pictures, Jummai Joseph Producer;

*Narrow Path*: Director Tunde Kelani;

*Thunderbolt*: (Magun) Dir Tunde Kelani, Mainframe Productions, 2000;

*White Handkerchief*: Director Tunde Kelani;

12. Sandra, Grady, 2011. 'Role Models and Drama Queens: African Films and the Formation of Good Women'. In Mary Celeste Kearney (ed.). *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*. (New York: Peter Lang) 189-202
13. Here I must make a confession. My initial "consumption" of these films was indeed in the mode of a consumer, not a researcher. Hence, I failed to make the usual preparations for citation should I need to refer back to these films. I borrowed films from a wide variety of people that included AWDF staff members, relatives and friends, and members of my mother's household, such as her driver. The list of films I watched is included in the bibliography, but unfortunately, by the time I realized I needed correct citations, I could track very few of them down again: People had lent them out to friends who had not returned them; they had been replaced on the market and were considered ephemera, ("Oh *Ghana Girls* is old now, watch this instead, the same actress") and there was insufficient documentation on the internet to confirm what I needed to know. *Ghana Girls* is a Peace Productions, Kumasi film, I have been unable to confirm the date.
14. In one interesting twist on this convention, in the film *Bitter Generation 2*, the first sign that something is amiss following the death of the wife is that her son, who, unknown to the rest of the family, has killed her, can't spark her car. Everyone else who tries, can, but he can't, which makes those around him suspicious about what is the offense he has committed against his mother's spirit.
15. On this question, see Tam Fiofori "The reel and real women of Nollywood (<http://nigeriafilms.com/news/7860/10/the-reel-and-real-women-of-nollywood.html>) on the issue of women as commodities, not only on-screen, but off-screen in the attitude early producers had towards the "marketplace" of actresses themselves
16. Tam Fiofori, in the same piece cited above which takes a broad brush to sweep into view all the issues concerning women in Nollywood, goes on to demand: "In a country that has female chief justices, deputy governors, ministers, professors, pilots and bank chief executives, where are these women featured in Nollywood as nation and home builders? Where are the model roles for mothers, sisters and loving peace-makers? For every wayward undergraduate soft-prostitute there should be a female Deputy Vice Chancellor putting right the savage male cults on campus" Though it would be hard to disagree with this as a sentiment, I am troubled by the mandatory "should".
17. "What Is Africa to Me? Knowledge Possession, Knowledge Production, and the Health of Our Bodies Politic in Africa and the Africa Diaspora" 2005 Distinguished Abiola Lecture, *African Studies Review* 49:1, April 2006, pp. 15-30.
18. Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*, 1970. p. 8.

19. On this issue I could not help but be struck by the following comment by Unoma Azuah in “The Near Nullity of Nollywood” posted on 2-28-2008 on a thread on Making African Movies: “Most often writers of Nollywood scripts bypass the complex process of problem-solving people use in real life. As a substitute for engaging their characters in applying intelligence, discernment, inner strength and tempered faith to resolve conflicts, the challenges faced by Nollywood film characters are saturated with a sensationalist depiction of voodoo practices conquered by a cartoon-like Christian force that makes all well within minutes. Routinely, this force is tritely manifested in the invocation of the supernatural: a shoddier version of the *mechanai* in Greek theatre, I’d say.” Accessed June 14 2010
20. <http://www.oscars.org> Home : Research & Preservation : Resources & Databases Academy Awards Acceptance Speech Database: Year: 1986 (59th) Academy Awards Category: Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award Winner: Steven Spielberg Presenter: Richard Dreyfuss Date & Venue: March 30, 1987; Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.
21. I speak not a word of Yoruba, but certainly find that it is the quality of the acting, the body language and expressive tone that make clear the meaning of the unknown words, the force and import of the drama can be conveyed with minimalist sub-titling,
22. His commitment in thinking through the images of women and using film as a medium to challenge and change social conventions can be easily indicated with reference to his two films *The White Handkerchief* and *The Narrow Path* made in association with AWF. These films, based on the same story about the consequences of families and societies demanding the bride be a virgin in her wedding day, revise the original tragic story of death into an empowering story of love defying convention.

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## In Conversation:

“This is us, telling our own stories.” An African Film Festival Jubilee. *Mahen Bonetti*, Executive Director and Founder of African Film Festival, Inc., with *Françoise Bouffault*

**Françoise:** This is a great year for African Film Festival, Inc. [AFF]. Already, you have celebrated the seventeenth edition of the New York African Film Festival [NYAFF], you personally were awarded a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government, and the festival is being cited as one of the ten best film festivals in New York City. We have much to discuss! But first, let us start at the beginning. What was your experience with cinema as a young girl growing up in Sierra Leone?

**Mahen:** Sierra Leone gained its independence on April 27, 1961. My mother, Nancy Hawah Margai, and my father, Doyle Sumner, were very much involved in the first campaigns and in the early political process. To this day, they remain loved and respected by the people in Sierra Leone for what they achieved and what they did for the country. They were campaigning when I was born, and then just before independence they brought us into Freetown, to the ministers’ quarters where we lived. The first school I attended was the British army school, where I had to anglicize my name to Sophia— I had actually been christened Sophia, but everyone called me Mahen at home. In that army school, they had Saturday canteens, gave private piano and ballet lessons, and showed the British newsreel and cartoons.

I never enjoyed the cartoons I saw, because of what the characters I saw represented. We watched cartoons depicting golliwogs— you know, the puppets who scream and yell and whose hair rises up, portrayed with pink lips and a black face. They represented something like natives, and they represented them not only as underdogs, but as stupid underdogs who had no weight, no sense, no depth. At the time I could not articulate why, but still I was disturbed and offended.

So that was my introduction to the moving image, but fortunately, it did not deter me from wanting to see more films— though I still have an aversion to cartoons! As I grew older, television came to Sierra Leone and we saw films from England and America.

**Françoise:** How do these experiences translate into the founding of AFF?

**Mahen:** First of all, you know that I am not a filmmaker, and that I did not study filmmaking or cinema studies. I was interested in the medium itself, as a member of the audience. Not long after the political coup in Sierra Leone in 1967, my family came to the United States in political exile. I completed my last years of high school and went on to study at Bradford College in Massachusetts. I then came to New York and began working for Newsweek. I used to go see foreign films at lunchtime, and I always craved to go see something new. I loved the opportunity cinema gave me to be somewhere else. As soon as the lights went off, I traveled to someone else's world. I was fascinated with finding the connection, the common chord we share as human beings no matter where we are. It could be a sound, it could be a reaction to something, or the way we prepare food... I could find my commonality with someone who does not look like me, does not speak my language.

By the early 1980s, the term “African American” had become the official name used for the group of Americans of African descent. At that time in New York, there were discussions everywhere about what Africa represented, what it constituted, and the notion of who was an African. Spike Lee came on the scene, and rap music emerged. At the same time, images of Africa were becoming pervasive on TV, more than ever before— but most seemed to be images of the famine in Ethiopia. I kept thinking, what can I do? I felt so helpless.

**Françoise:** Why?

**Mahen:** It seemed that people were talking about us, and seeing images of us, but that there was no African voice present in the media's discussion. What people saw was not the Africa I knew. Indeed, the famine was a reality, but there are so many layers to that reality! It was a good thing that the famine came to the attention of the public, but even that was selectively reported. I wanted to see a more balanced view of the reality. In a way, this is what sparked the feelings that led me to found AFF, though I had not yet made the connection that film was the medium where Africans could challenge stereotypes of Africa and speak for themselves, instead of having everybody dictate to them.

At that point, I was very much focused on the music scene in New York. You must remember, it was a vibrant scene, most accessible and current. The world met here, and with much more freedom than it does today. In 1987, we started a series of parties called “African 1987” nights, as a way to bring people together. They ended up being very popular, full of eclectic people and illuminating conversations. But nothing that I was doing really addressed this feeling I had about the voice of Africa. I was racking my brain, looking for something that could be a catalyst to bring forward a bigger picture of Africa to people from all walks of life.

**Françoise:** And then you went to Locarno...

**Mahen:** Yes, it really started at the Locarno International Film Festival in the summer of 1989. I went to see *Sex, Lies, and Videotapes*, and I was sitting there flipping through the catalog when I saw the heading “Thirty Years of African Cinema.” I was stunned. I did not know that so much work had been done in African cinema! It was like a lightbulb went on: I thought, this is us, telling our own stories. No one is dictating. We come from an oral tradition, and that is our strength. Storytelling is found everywhere in Africa.

In the next hour, I found out that Silvia Voser, who also produced some films by Djibril Diop Mambety, had organized the program. I called her right away, and I met her the next day. She was very amused— I think she thought I was out of my mind. I was thirty-one years old, married for a few years, undecided about my life, wondering whether I should have a baby, my family in Africa after me, a lot of things up in the air. I told her that I thought the whole program should come to New York. Her response was to tell me that she had some books I could look at. I kept talking— I said, “It is amazing, there are some African films available in New York, but only a few.” There is a hunger for this type of programming. I need to bring it. We have a black mayor, Mayor Dinkins, and I am going to write all these letters. We are going to do it for profit, so the filmmakers can make a living. My goodness, she just kept looking at me! Finally, she said, “Maybe I can make an introduction for you, but meanwhile, look at these books.”

If I had not been so naive at the time, I probably would have thought better than to try it at all. So in a way, it is the impulsive reaction I had at Locarno that brought me to our speaking today.

**Françoise:** Yes, an impulsive reaction that brought you to 2010, which has been such a great year for you and AFF. Surely no one could have foreseen this in 1989...

**Mahen:** True! Then, we had no idea what was to come. In '89, back in New York, I started calling and writing to all the people we knew. But they were suspicious, and the filmmakers were as well. I made contact with Michel Brunet, who headed the film section in the Ministère de la Coopération et du Développement in Paris. The venues I approached in New York— MoMA, Symphony Space, the Public Theater— showed a keen interest, but they warned me: we have tried, and it is almost impossible to find prints of African films with English subtitles. It is even harder to contact the filmmakers— you might not get a response until after the program is finished. Dan Talbot of New Yorker Films said that he was continuously trying to reach diverse audiences for the African film screenings, and it was certainly a challenge. He hoped I could fare better! Screenings at that time were pulling in an audience that was about eight percent people of African descent. All this registered in my mind, but I thought, okay, we are going to change all of this. They looked at me and said, good luck!

Hilary Ney, who worked with the Coen brothers, thought it was a splendid idea and agreed to come aboard. We attended seminars, and we got a number of letters of support saying it was a viable project. We applied to be registered as a nonprofit organization.

**Françoise:** What about The Film Society of Lincoln Center? They have been a major venue for all the editions of the Festival.

**Mahen:** Yes. From the beginning, everybody thought I had a refreshing idea, but that I was out of my mind— except for Richard Peña from The Film Society of Lincoln Center. He said, we are building a theater, the Walter Reade, and we are going to need programs, so this is definitely of interest to us. Let us keep talking. He must have seen something nobody else saw. He told me not to give up.

**Françoise:** And what of the European support you sought?

**Mahen:** By the time I was supposed to meet with Michel Brunet again in Paris, I was pregnant. I went with my letters of support, convinced that they would see my determination, that they would see it as feasible. The appointment was on the third of January, and on that day I was told by my husband on the phone that my mother had died in Sierra Leone. But I was determined to go to that appointment. I went, and I poured my heart out. I was very emotional: My mother had died, I had tried but failed to find a plane connection, and I was pregnant with a child my mother would never see.

That meeting was a turning point for me. I felt that things had to succeed, that I had to make it happen. I felt the sense of nationalism, of commitment my parents had felt— I thought about the leadership they projected and implemented, and I felt that it was my turn to do something. I was not so much aiming to project Africa to other people, but rather to remind Africans that we should maintain a dialogue, to remind ourselves of who we are, so that we could determine who we were for ourselves. I think that cinema creates a space for us to discuss who we are and where we come from, much like a modern-day griot would. Cinema is our story in pictures. It is supposed to spark dialogue.

**Françoise:** How were you impacted by your first trip to FESPACO [the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou] in 1993?

**Mahen:** Oh my God! It was a totally different sensibility and feeling from Locarno. In Locarno, I was an unknown, inexperienced woman making these brave declarations: I am going to do this and that, and people will come and we will get all the support we need. But when I entered the gates of FESPACO, I found that my reputation had preceded me. All eyes were on me! We had made the selections, and I was going there to meet the filmmakers and ask them, can I count on you coming to New York? But they looked at me as if to say, you don't even speak French, you don't even come from an African country that makes films, and on top of that, you are a woman. Are you a spy? Are you some guy's mistress? They were puzzled... I think they are still puzzled.

**Françoise:** You must have done something right because, as I recall, you were chosen as a member of the jury for feature films in 1997, only four years later.

**Mahen:** I know. Quite amazing, isn't it?

**Françoise:** The first edition of the New York African Film Festival was held in 1993, under the banner "Modern Days, Ancient Nights: Thirty Years of African Filmmaking." You made the front page of the New York Times' arts and leisure section with an article and a beautiful photo from the film *Yeelen* displayed on the full page. Then, you went on to program sixteen more editions! You introduce new filmmakers, new films, new trends. How do you create your programs?

**Mahen:** For me, creating the program is like telling a story. When we start, we have to find out what exists and then try to make it cohesive. We pick a general theme that amplifies some poignant historical moment or a landmark

current event that we are celebrating, and that is relevant to African people or the Diaspora. For instance this year, thanks to the New Museum, we are showcasing new directions in African cinema through experimental short films. We also make sure the whole continent is represented, from Cairo to the Cape.

It is also very important never to underestimate the intelligence of an audience. You must be able to present not just the films that you personally like, but also the films that have unique view points, provided they are well made. I rely a lot on my intuition.

**Françoise:** One of the most intriguing programs of the NYAFF was the screening of the Russian archival films. How did you come upon the idea?

**Mahen:** Russian cinema represents the art form itself. The best film schools in the world used to be Russian: think of VGIK [the Russian State Institute of Cinematography]. There is so much information that has been documented on Africa by the former colonial masters: the French, Belgians, English, Dutch, etc. But there is nothing comparable to what is in the Russian archives.

The American filmmaker Bill Greaves had documented the First World Festival of Negro Arts, a huge celebration of African art heritage, in 1966. USAID gave him a small camera and no sound technician, but he did a marvelous black-and-white film. Still, he kept telling me to find the Russian films. He said they had brought swarms of technicians, they had filmed in color, they had used equipment that is still considered state of the art today. Other people recalled similar Russian projects, and they encouraged me to find the films. In 2007, I started corresponding with Russian filmmaker Alexander Markov, who started looking at the Russian State Documentary Film & Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk, and went crazy over what he found. He said, they have things that no one else shot: for instance, the attack on Lumumba, a piece that AFF later showed.

Maintaining access to the Russian Archive is costly for me, and it requires a great deal of effort, but after two years, the people at the Archive finally trust me. It is so important to have access to those archives. They contain poetic propaganda. The British have archives as well, but their message is something along the lines of: What do the Africans do now that they have their independence? They sing and dance as usual! Long live the Queen, and long live Africa! The footage in the Russian archives, on the other hand, seems to say: We were told that Africans had no brains, but we came and we met scientists, we met writers, we met philosophers... The others called it the

Dark Continent, but we find that the people here have so much culture. The Russians filmed beautifully, and they filmed things you do not see in the other archives. The former colonial powers just wanted to record the moment, the flags going up and down. The Russians gave the background, they traveled around the country, they showed trees fluttering, people in the fields. They show parts of Africa that had never been filmed.

**Françoise:** How do you find that African filmmaking intersects with global cinema? In 2004 you presented *Al'leessi... An African Actress* by Rahmatou Keïta. It was very revealing, how Africans had appropriated cinema using local traditions and how the medium had impacted local society. Moustapha Alassane even made a parody of a western in 1966 with a wonderful African flavor.

**Mahen:** Even though much of African cinema is attributed to the French filmmaker Jean Rouch's influence (and rightfully so), this is not the whole story. People like Moustapha Alassane, Oumarou Ganda, and later Mariama Hima were using puppeteer and animation techniques even before cinema, to tell local tales.

But yes, there has been much influence by films from other regions. When Western and Indian movies became accessible, it was as though every youngster wanted to meet an Indian princess, or they wanted to become John Wayne. Maybe only one person could afford to pay to see a certain movie, so they would come back and retell the story in their own way to the other kids, who would further elaborate and rewrite the story as their own. They had imagination. So many African filmmakers dream of making a western! Look at Mambety's *Hyenas*. Remember the atmosphere, the kind of town in the desert, the train, the woman coming back to town with all the money... and then you have Moustapha's western, where he sometimes let an unwanted giraffe stray in the background...

**Françoise:** Let's talk about some of AFF's achievements. First, did you succeed in bringing larger audiences to African cinema?

**Mahen:** In many ways we did succeed in reaching out to more people, and especially in reaching an African American audience. I do not think it was the case that earlier, African Americans had no interest in screenings of African films— I think they did not feel welcome. Now, when we bring programs to parks and schools, people appreciate the fact that we respect them, that we come to present a program that will bring something to their lives, or affirm

something they believe, or make them want to probe further even if they don't agree. Many of those park programs give audiences a total experience of drum, dance, food, needle arts, double Dutch, and of course, film.

**Françoise:** Yet, the value of AFF's programming is not only in the films that it screens to audiences. You also bring established and emerging filmmakers together and provide a space for interaction and exchange. They usually say the experience is very different from what they find at FESPACO. Why is that?

**Mahen:** We bring young promising filmmakers, who sometimes have not made more than one very short film, to present alongside stars like Souleymane Cissé, Abderrahmane Sissako, and Safi Faye. Of course, the young filmmakers are in awe, but the established filmmakers also love it because they get to see what the youth are doing. In the industry meetings that we arrange, young filmmakers ask questions and established filmmakers can share their experiences in filmmaking and distribution. Everyone learns quite a bit.

It is different at FESPACO because there, the hierarchy still exists. At FESPACO, everyone tends to stay in their own clique: The younger ones sit here, the South Africans there, the big shots there. At the New York African Film Festival, groups are small, and borders are shattered between Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone filmmakers. They all see each other's films, and they have face-to-face encounters. I bring them to my home for dinners, in an intimate setting, and it breaks the ice. They have lively discussions...

**Françoise:** I remember a heated argument about Sembene's *Moolaadé* at one of these famous dinners that you reference. Some filmmakers got into a huge debate about female circumcision and women's rights, right in front of Sembene, who was quietly listening. He never intervened. He seemed to relish the fact that his film could create such a commotion, especially among young African women from different parts of the continent.

**Mahen:** Yes, we sorely miss Sembene, and this book is also a tribute to him. And like Safi Faye and others have said, he appreciated the opportunity to have discussions at the table and enjoyed the huge philosophical debates.

**Françoise:** The relationships AFF has forged and the knowledge and resources you have accumulated are critical to the organization. Although few people know it, AFF is an incredible resource center.

**Mahen:** In fact, some people actually think we should change our name, since it does not really reflect everything we do. We continually receive calls from Hollywood and from all sorts of other sources for all sorts of requests: Where

can I buy this animal footage for my film; which filmmaker is coming through town; where can I get a crew when I hit this place; where do I get costumes that depict a certain period; how can I find people who can do a voice-over in this African language; etc. We are a resource center for all things African cinema, and by extension, African culture. We facilitate all sorts of business opportunities for our community.

**Françoise:** What are you particularly proud of at this point?

**Mahen:** I am very proud of the response we get from audiences. We show that African cinema is a cinema that appeals to a wide audience, not only to film lovers and cinephiles. We have been creating a space and an atmosphere where people really can learn and express themselves, and I love to see people coming out of the films with bright faces and listening to the discussions that take place. I am also proud of the talent that keeps coming out of our continent. I keep discovering new talents, creative and resourceful young filmmakers, many of whom are women. Their work brings audiences to another level, in terms of how they think about Africa. And of course I am proud that we showcased people like Mahamat-Saleh Haroun and Abderrahmane Sissako. They were not known to US audiences when we presented their work in the United States; they were not even big within the African community. Today Abderrahmane is revered, and Haroun received the Jury Award this year at Cannes Film Festival.

**Françoise:** How do you see the Through African Eyes series fitting into the work of AFF?

**Mahen:** I feel that the festival helps cultivate an audience. It finds a space where everyone can meet and have discussions and exchanges. We have filmmakers interact with the public, and every time the Q&A sessions continue after their formal conclusions, spilling out into the lobby. There is this hunger... People cannot get enough.

We did some research into books on African film, and we found that they tend to be targeted to scholars and academics. The intellectual discourse on African film is of course needed in the sphere of academia, but we also want there to be something available for our general audience— something that addresses people in a way that is informative without being watered down. So we let filmmakers express themselves directly, through freely flowing conversations with interviewers whom they often know and trust. We also asked scholars and other experts to write complementary essays.

The book is easy to read and accessible, but it is well done. It can be and is used in all sorts of contexts: at universities, in high schools, in community libraries, in private libraries. And we were successful: libraries and universities especially bought the first edition because it is a great introduction to African cinema. That is what encouraged us to publish a second volume.

**Françoise:** Do you have any other projects in the works?

**Mahen:** For many years, we have been working with organizations and individuals in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially Brazil and Jamaica, and more recently, Cuba. We would like to create closer ties and perhaps a foundation for collaborative productions from filmmakers across these countries. We share a common commitment and passion.

And then, full circle, I want to go to Africa.\*

\* Since this interview Mahen has, in fact, gone to Africa, with AFF's first ongoing program on the continent: the Sierra Leone Cultural Conservation Program (CCP). The program was launched in March 2011 with the start of the CCP's public exhibition programs and the youth audiovisual workshop, which guides a diverse team of young artists and media makers in the documentation of Sierra Leonean culture.

## In Conversation:

Tsitsi Dangarembga, Filmmaker, Writer, Cultural Activist  
speaks to *Beti Ellerson*

*It has now been over 20 years since Tsitsi Dangarembga was catapulted to international attention with her first novel Nervous Conditions. Shortly after its publication she began work in filmmaking as a mode of communication. She has become a cultural ambassador for Africa and Zimbabwe in addition to other capacities in the area of cultural production and scholarship. Here she discusses her role and experiences as writer, filmmaker, scholar, producer, film organizer, and cultural professional.*

Beti: Tsitsi, you have had a parallel trajectory as writer and filmmaker, how did these interests take shape?

Tsitsi: Initially my idea was to develop another skill, besides prose writing, that would enable me to earn a living. At that time, in the mid 1980's, I could already see that skills in moving images narration were essential to the national agenda. Our then Minister of Finance, Bernard Chidzero, also saw a role for motion picture in development. That was good in that he incorporated film as an important medium for sending out development oriented messages (such as *Neria* – women's rights, and many HIV films such as *More Time*, *Everyone's Child* and *Yellow Card*. The down side of this was that film became identified with social messaging in the minds of the local public. We had a strange dichotomy: film was either frivolous, meaningless entertainment, or it was disseminated as didactic and developmental. The study of film theory and the way the medium speaks to the individual and shapes the individual consciousness, was still a specialist area. But I had a premonition about these matters, so I decided to study film as an adjunct to making my living. I was aware I could read up the theory on my own, but needed guidance in practical matters. So I researched schools in

filmmaking. It was one of the great blessings of my life that I was accepted at the German Film and Television Academy, Berlin, where I received excellent tuition.

**Beti:** What do you find to be similarities and differences? What relationship do you see between literature and cinema?

**Tsitsi:** At first I could not see any parallels in prose narrative and film narrative. I was surprised at how my approach to creating narrative simply did not work for film. I think the biggest difference for me was to understand the difference between who and why (prose) and what and why (film), i.e. character against action. It came to the point where I found that writing prose interfered with my learning the techniques of film narrative. But I was determined to conquer it. So I stopped writing prose. With practice and good teachers, slowly and agonisingly, I became proficient in creating for film. Now that I am able to write both fiction and screen, I am more aware of the similarities than the differences. The similarity is in what – character, plot, setting, and so forth – the traditional aspects of narrative. The difference is in how one manifests these to suit the medium.

**Beti:** Your role as film activist is apparent in your various initiatives in the area of cinema. In 1992 you created Nyerai Films, a film production company in Harare. What is its mission and what are some of the projects that it has undertaken?

**Tsitsi:** The mission of Nyerai Films is to produce and distribute compelling international-standard, moving images on issues that our societies have difficulty in engaging with. Zimbabwean society is a very secretive society. People seem to thrive on intrigue and subterfuge. This means the real problems are rarely discussed in the open with the idea of finding solutions. Our idea is to bring these issues to public attention through film. For example, one film that Nyerai Films co-produced concerns child sexual abuse. In the story in question was the abuse of a primary schoolchild by her headmaster, with the tacit consent of parents and other adults. This went on until one teacher started to question the situation. The woman who played the questioning teacher said she wanted the role because in our script we had showed that anything could be talked about, even if our societies thought the issues were ‘unspeakable’ as Toni Morrison so often describes in her writing.

So Nyerai Films’ mission is to make the unspeakable speakable. This is done by presenting difficult topics in the form of a compelling narrative,

with all the visual and narrative spectacle that makes film engaging. This is one of the key issues, I find: what is to be the source of spectacle? Because spectacle in film is what is engaging visually. No one will watch a film for long if it hasn't got any kind of visual spectacle. Sometimes the spectacle is only suggested, as in the short film about the abused girl, called *Peretera Maneta (Spell My Name)*. Of course, a child having intercourse with her headmaster is a spectacle. We don't show it. We only suggest it, but everyone fills in the act for themselves. It took me some time to distinguish between overt and covert spectacle.

**Beti:** You are a member of Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe (WFOZ). What are its goals and how do your activities and interests as a film professional coalesce with the organization?

**Tsitsi:** When Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe was formed in 1996, its general objective was to increase the participation of women in the film industry in the country. I joined the organisation in 1998, at the personal request of the then Chair, the late Petronilla Munongoro, who was a Production Manager. That will always remain one of my highlights of my time with the organization—the fact that a competent woman called on another competent woman to work together in the medium. However, I quickly saw that the organisation's goal could not be fulfilled without some sort of training or capacity building element to the programme, and most of the women who wanted to depict the things important to them in motion picture had no or little training.

Realising this, I racked my brains for a platform from which to spring activities that gave women a chance in the industry, and sought to redress the kinds of images and messaging that women were not comfortable with. This idea took the form of a festival, which offers sponsors a platform, while at the same time enables them to contribute to worthwhile projects. The festival was the woman-centred International Images Film Festival for Women, whose first edition was in 2002. The festival features films with a female protagonist in line with a festival theme that is decided on each year. As I had hoped, we were able to stage other events in addition to the main festival. These other events include outreach programmes to communities that cannot reach the festival; training seminars, which produced the above-mentioned film on child sexual abuse *Peretera Maneta (Spell My Name)*. WFOZ membership is increasing, especially amongst young women, who realise that moving images in this day of the Internet offer a career path. The enthusiasm that has

stemmed from young women, and international filmmakers who have heard about the organisation as well as some who have attended the festival and met the women of WFOZ, has led to some remarkable developments.

One of these is the quarterly newsletter, *Wild Track*. We came up with the name to incorporate the idea that women are still not in the mainstream with respect to the medium, no matter how institutions speak about the woman question. The situation of women with respect to film sounds 19th century, and from the point of view of a woman filmmaker it is. Few countries have significant percentages of women in the industry. Fewer countries still have quotas of money spent in the industry going to women according to their equivalence in the population. *Wild Track* talks about all the activities of Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe. It talks about the films members make, such as the recently released documentary by Porcia Mudavanhu, *Ungochani (Homosexuality)*. *Wild Track* presents the far-reaching successes of Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe. There are so many of these successes, besides the festival and productions like *Ungochani (Homosexuality)* and *Peretera Maneta (Spell My Name)*.

We have interns from various institutions each year vying for places in the office. Sometimes the departments of these institutions ask us to contribute to their planning. Then WFOZ members interact with the communities through our outreach screenings and subsequent discussions. Our films are invited to festivals, or members are invited to conferences. The important feedback from these events is included in the newsletter. Finally, we strive to continue our training programmes. Any news on training, whether our own seminar, or seminars by other organisations that our members or interns attend, are also included in *Wild Track*. Naturally, we also feature our current productions. *Wild Track* is a kind of barometer on the local film industry, as few events of note take place without a WOFZ member, or a person who is connected to WOFZ, being involved in some way. I always say it is hard to find, at the present moment, a film in Zimbabwe that is being shot without someone who has learnt something from periods spent at either WFOZ, or its sister organisation, Nyerai films. I do not think this is an exaggeration. It would be great for us if someone could do the research and verify.

**Beti:** International Images Film Festival for Women in Harare (IIFF) created in 2002, of which you are founder and director, is significant in its scope and vision. One important interest of the Festival is to mine visual representation,

in particular, of African women. It is exciting to see this critical engagement with the critique of the image. How was IIFF conceptualized and what are some of its goals and objectives?

**Tsitsi:** IIFF was founded in 2002, a year which saw a proliferation of beauty contests in Zimbabwe and in the southern African region. We resolved to question society's reduction of women to the object of the gaze, where the gaze is male and leads to male gratification. This time-honoured theoretical maxim is a starting point, which needed to be taken further in the Zimbabwean context, where many other possibilities of oppression beyond the male gaze existed. These ideas of the male gaze and making a narrative in film that does not rely on the male gaze are very foreign to just about the whole world. This is why it was particularly exciting when I was invited to take part in a meeting of African Women Filmmakers last year (2010), organised by the Goethe Institute in Johannesburg. As I understood it, the purpose of the meeting was to come up with some concrete and specific programmes that would contribute to the voice of women filmmakers on the African continent. This has also been the aim of Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe, although WFOZ confined itself initially to Zimbabwe and then to the region and only thereafter to the continent.

In any case, the meeting organised by the Goethe Institute was immensely stimulating to the continental and Diaspora filmmakers and film theorists who attended. The gathering formulated a manifesto that requested proper gender desks at all media outlets as well as 50% of funding for any media related exercise to be directed towards female players. This request was made to be in line with SADC quotas on women's representation in decision making, since the filmmakers were aware of how often the role of the media is ignored in decision making issues. The meeting to ratify the manifesto was duly held at IIFF 2010, with delegates from Africa and European countries. We have so far received a small grant from the Urgent Action Fund. We have put in proposals for more funds for our advocacy in this regard, amongst our other activities.

**Beti:** You did your doctoral studies in African Studies at the Humboldt University in Berlin. I am intrigued by the proposed title of your thesis, "The exotic has always already been known: changing the content of the black signifier as a means of improving reception of African films." Please talk about the research, your findings and the contributions you would like it to make to African cinema studies.

**Tsitsi:** I have not completed my doctoral thesis, but I am hoping to find the means to do so. The idea for this research was inspired by the work on gender as a signifier in film, particularly the work of Laura Mulvey. My reading of Mulvey was that biological differences correspond to systematic differences with respect to how individuals are portrayed in film stories. According to Mulvey, the man is portrayed as the dominant character, while the female has no significance in herself in film narrative, but is only represented as an object of male gratification. This immediately said to me that the female is only represented as a figment of the male imagination. I thought one could expand the categories of difference beyond sexual difference, or even gender difference, to incorporate other aspects of difference. For me, these other categories of difference mean also race. However, I think Mulvey's analysis can be extended to any other category of social difference such as class, or sexual difference, or indeed religious faith. What strikes me about Mulvey's theory is that it gives us mechanisms for analysing outcomes of certain interactions based on the degree of difference or similarity of the players. If that is unintelligible, that is precisely what I want to articulate in my research.

**Beti:** Thirty-one years after independence, twenty-three years after your novel *Nervous Conditions*, a quintessential discourse on post-colonial identity, how would you assess Zimbabwean culture today and what are your hopes for its future, especially as it relates to cinema culture.

**Tsitsi:** In my opinion, the average Zimbabwean has become more desperate in the years since independence in 1980. Desperation is never a good state to be in because then one lets oneself open to all sorts of attacks which one would not otherwise give in to. Zimbabwe has indeed opened itself wide to attacks from the international community that would never have been launched against us thirty one years ago. Zimbabweans are accused of wholesale corruption from the bottom to the top. We are accused of poor fiscal management at government level. This poor fiscal management translates into either ignorance or wholesale corruption. Zimbabwe is accused of human rights abuse. We are accused of sabotaging our own economy and of defying international protocol. The list is endless. All the accusations can be traced to a single problem. This problem is called lack of morality in global parlance. It is a lack of 'unhu' in the languages understood in Zimbabwe, or a lack of 'ubuntu' in the wider languages of our region.

So I think, yes, we in Zimbabwe have lost the knowledge in the intervening thirty years of what it means to be human, to be ‘munhu’, and have humanity, ‘unhu’. We have listened too much to propaganda that tells us about our own inhuman destructiveness. We have read too many books and seen too many films that depict us as losers in the battle of knowledge. In my opinion, Zimbabwean culture today is a culture of intimidation, fear, malice and ill won gains. I do not know of a single sector, my sector included, where rewards are given in accordance to merits, whether these rewards are given by the government or international organisations. I can only hope that the people who control Zimbabwe’s narratives and artistic output understand soon the destruction they are doing to the nation by their current practices.

### **Tsitsi Dangaremba: Filmography**

*Passport to Kill*, 1993

*Neria*, script for movie by Godwin Mawuru, 1992

*Everyone’s Child*, 1996

*The Puppeteer*, 1996

*The Elephant People*, 2000

*On the border*, 2000

*High Hopes*, 2004

*Kare Kare Zvako*, 2005

*Growing Stronger*, 2005

*Pamvura (At the water)*, 2005

*Peretera Maneta (Spell my name)*, 2006

*Hard Earth – Land rights in Zimbabwe*

*Mother’s Day*, 2006

*Nyami-Nyami & the Evil Eggs*, 2010

*I Want a Wedding Dress*

## Prizes/Awards

Commonwealth Writers Prize, 1989, *Nervous Conditions*

Winner of UNESCO Children's and Human Rights Award, 2006, *Peretera Maneta*

Winner Zanzibar International Film Festival, 2006 for her film *Peretera Maneta*

Winner Gender, Equality & Media Award, South Africa, 2006

Winner of Golden Dhow Zanzibar, 2005, *Kare Kare Zvako*

Winner of Short Film Award Cinemaaficano Milano, 2005, *Kare Kare Zvako*

Short Film Award ZIFF, 2005, *Kare Kare Zvako*

Special Jury Mention Amakula International Film Festival Kampala, Uganda, 2005,  
*Kare Kare Zvako*

Special Jury Mention, Corto in Bra Film Festival, Italy, 2005, *Kare Kare Zvako*

## In Conversation:

*Sandra Mbanefo Obiagwu*, Film Maker, Writer and Founding Executive Director of ‘Communicating Change’ discusses her work with Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, African Women’s Development Fund Communications

*Sandra Mbanefo Obiagwu is a woman of many creative talents. She is a poet, writer, film producer, director and a communications teacher. Sandra is passionate about creating documentaries and has a special interest in portraying African women’s stories and images. This conversation took place during the first ‘African Women in Film Forum’ organized by the African Women’s Development Fund and the Lufodo Academy of Performing Arts.*

**Nana:** Can you tell us about yourself and the work you do?

**Sandra:** I founded ‘Communication for Change’ thirteen years ago. The focus of my work is to tell positive stories about Africa from an African viewpoint to Africans, and the world. I’m concerned about the fact that we download a lot about ourselves yet upload very little into mainstream media, no matter which media we are talking about. I’m a film producer so I focus on documentary film. I also teach communications, and I’m a poet. I am particularly passionate about how we tell our stories and what sort of images we project about African women. Usually, there is a great deal of misrepresentation- even locally - so what we’ve tried to do is to talk about issues such as health, education, women’s empowerment, environment and other key challenges, but to do it through human interest stories that touch people in some meaningful way. I think we’ve been quite successful, our films have been broadcast in forty countries, and all over Nigeria.

We also serve as content providers to television stations in Nigeria. We have about 100 television stations and we organize fora on topical issues. So for example, when we did our three films on maternal mortality, we organized a broadcasters forum and we invited broadcasters to discuss the issues with us. We bring in experts and then at the end of that session we distribute our films.

We used to be able to do this for free, but we don't do that anymore. Now, we charge broadcasters a modest fee for our contents. It's usually a very subsidized amount but worthwhile because we have found that the partnership we have with broadcasters have grown very strong – such that some of our films have been broadcast across Nigeria and also in local languages.

About five years ago, we started looking at how to bring development issues into mainstream Nollywood cinema. We organized a conference at the Lagos Business School, which looked at how you ensure that the content of Nollywood films is actually inspiring and addressing social issues in a responsible way. One of the issues that came out of that whole discussion was the lack of support for the Nollywood industry, and the fact that these are SME's in full that have a very loose structure and are not being run in a sustainable way which means the film makers cannot get the kind of financial support they need. So we worked with the Lagos Business School and we helped to develop a curriculum that is in the SME program. So now there's a four months course not just for filmmakers but for people across the whole spectrum of the creative industry. It has been really helpful because once people go through that program they can approach banks and insurance companies so they package their ideas in a more professional way. The course also deals with all issues of running a creative business from issues of tax structure all the way through to content. Two years ago, we also did another conference that looked at intellectual property rights on how to protect your intellectual property and use it as an asset.

In terms of the kind of work I'm passionate about, it's creativity in general, and it's about drawing very close links between the different sectors of the creative community because I do believe that the only way we can strengthen our films is to invest in literature, invest in literary ventures and the training of our writers. Some of my writers are here at the Feminist Film Forum today. We found that there is poor knowledge about social issues that writers need to work on. We have also found that it helps to have people actually go through an editorial process in which even the basic information in their script is improved by working with content specialists. When we write about health we send our script to health experts, I'm not an expert on HIV and AIDS for example. In other words it's very important to consider how you link your creativity with good information on the socially relevant and responsible issues you want to cover.

**Nana:** One of the things that struck me in today's forum, (and I think this was mentioned by Prof. Busia) is that there is no need for any sort of distance between the commercially viable films and socially responsible films.

**Sandra:** Absolutely, I mean look at the film *Blood Diamond*, There have been a lot of documentaries about the illegal diamond trade but that Hollywood feature film did more to raise consciousness and inform the public about looking at the source of your jewelry than all of them. We've also decided to partner with Nollywood directors, that is how I came to work with Tunde Kelani over the last couple of years. I actually have invited him to direct some of our films, so that he brings in his art and we bring in our social responsibility side. Those have been very successful.

**Nana:** I think it's a very strong myth that socially responsible films are not commercially successful.

**Sandra:** Well, I think there are some propaganda films that are not artistic that some of the agencies have used here - the more conventional "ABC's of HIV/AIDS" is not as engaging as a popular show like "Soul City" which is also on HIV/AIDS but is based on research, it's also a very entertaining series and has high production values. I think some of the reasons why people here believe that socially responsible films may not be entertaining is because they often work with low production budgets. I don't think there is enough investment in the artistic side.

**Nana:** Where did your passion for creativity come from?

**Sandra:** I started off in school wanting to act so I was in all the plays, I went to drama school and I actually realized that I didn't have what it takes to be in front of the camera, I didn't have enough grit. I branched into education, and then into educational film, and that is really how I got into documentary film. My real love however is photography and poetry and now that I'm forty-six years old I'm trying to do more of that type of creative work. This is an important forum and I definitely share a lot of the main themes and the importance of having the main themes here but I just find that there is not enough time to do creative work, you end up being asked constantly to speak, and when you are running an organization you don't have much time to do creative work. I do direct, but I don't direct all of our projects, so right now I'm just in a transition phase where I'm trying to move away from administration and do more creative project management.

**Nana:** One of the things that struck me is that a number of people when speaking about you mentioned that even when you are not there your mark is there, and the people who you work with they do what you've trained them to do so it almost sounded like you don't need to be there to make sure the work gets done the way you will like it to be done.

**Sandra:** Sometimes I think my problem is that I am such a perfectionist, I end up focusing on the weeds, not focusing on the big picture and I'm trying to change that. Strategically how can we move the industry forward? Strategically, in a year's how much time am I going to spend on what? It is very challenging to run small organizations in Africa, specifically in Nigeria where there is no supporting infrastructure and you spend all your money on running your generator and keeping your organization going. I calculated that in the last two years I spent an average of US\$3000 a month on electricity and generator, this doesn't include other costs like salaries, so it's unbelievably expensive to run a small scale business. I have a staff strength of between 10 to 15 people depending on the type of project we are working on. The whole process of creative enterprise management is a big one and I think the problem in Nigeria is that we have a lot of creative people who are running enterprises which they shouldn't be, simply because there are no big studios that you can leave the business side to, you end up doing everything and that takes away from your creative time and I think that is an area you should be dealing with. How do you strengthen small scale enterprises in the creative sector? How do we ensure that people doing theatre, jewelry and fashion can actually continue to do that and have managers to manage the business? It's really tough; even abroad it's very tough.

**Nana:** What have you liked about today's forum?

**Sandra:** I thought it was intellectually stimulating. The two papers were excellent, I loved the first paper specifically because it was very broad and it really created a very strong foundation for the discussion. We tend to often look at ourselves in isolation. I think as Nigerians generally we are too over confident, we believe that we are it, and then you realize that there is this whole historical perspective of the misrepresentation of Africans and misrepresentation of black women, and how do you as a responsible creative person address that? So I didn't agree with some of the our speakers this afternoon who said, '*I make only what sells*', and I did agree with what one of the people from the floor said about 'creating desire'. We do have to

create the desire. It's very important, but I thought what was good was that we had different perspectives so you are not only speaking to the converted (and that is what makes it sometimes very boring when its just civil society talking about issues) - you are now talking to mainstream Nollywood people. Amaka Igwe is a mainstream big time Nollywood producer so if you can get her on your side you've won over a convert and that's very important in our whole struggle for enlightenment in our artistic endeavors.

**Nana:** Anything you would have liked to see differently in today's forum or any subsequent forums that may be held?

**Sandra:** I think it was very well organized. It's very difficult to find well-organized events in Nigeria today. I've gone to a lot of events in Nigeria and I just constantly shake my head and say they didn't give attention to detail. As a speaker in this forum, I was specifically under a lot of pressure to make sure that I had provided all the information required and there was a lot of follow-up. I guess just getting real Nollywood people in the room is really tough. I was happy to see one of the big distributors from *Alaba* who was here this afternoon. I remember when I went to *Alaba* market 5 years ago and they were saying, "*Ah Madam you have to pay us to come,*" actually we gave them the transportation fare just to get them to come and once the relationship started they realized that the programme was actually for their benefit. We also organize events, at the last conference a big Nollywood actress came and passed a paper to Tunde Kelani and said "*when are they going to announce me?*" and T.K wrote back, "*it's not about announcing, it's about learning*" and the lady left.

I think you've done a good job and the biggest challenge is to broaden the waves, broaden the ripple effect. It's a continuous discussion; it's not a one-stop thing. It is just constantly reminding ourselves of what the prize is, and then taking baby steps to get there. There are a lot of young people in the room today, many of whom I have mentored, and they are so open, they are hungry to learn and these kind of fora are very important for them to get new perspectives. Even the paper this afternoon about orature, the wealth of language, and the nuances, we rarely think about that, and how we need to translate that onto the screen because people are not reading. I struggle with my own children, my daughter just read *Things Fall Apart* and she loved it but I had to almost force her to read it. That comment from Steven Spielberg that movies are our literature is so true, and I will probably say that facebook

is the literature of this generation. So how do we ensure that the message is that we are creating, and getting onto these types of small platforms, how do we ensure that messages get onto mobile phones and catch the attention of these young people that are making decisions?

We conceptualized a whole series of films on HIV/AIDS and did some audience research, a lot of the young guys are buying antibiotics, mixing it together and drinking it and they believe that is going to protect them from all kinds of STD's. I was so shocked, we created a whole script around that and when we went back and did the post analysis, it was just amazing, and the young people were like "*Oh my God!*" 99% of people we spoke to say, we understand now that this is not the way. And we're saving lives. So how do you challenge perceptions, knowledge and attitudes about certain issues if it's not through exciting media? The power of the media is the power of stories to influence our decisions.

# Standpoint: Adventures from Our Bedrooms – Blogging about diverse erotic experiences

Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah

"It is our hope that the blog provides a safe space where African women can openly discuss a variety of sex and sexuality issues with the intention of learning from each other, having pleasurable and safer sex and encouraging continuous sex education for adults."<sup>1</sup>

'Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women' began in January 2009 with the goal of creating a safe space where African women could discuss any sexual related issues without judgement or fear. My co-blogger Abena Gyekye, and I are of the opinion that there aren't enough spaces where African women were speaking up for themselves when it came to matters of sex. As African women our sexuality appears to be always hijacked by someone else – whether its hip hop musicians presenting black women as 'strippers and hoes', or the still dominant image of African women as non-sexual, matronly 'Aunt Jemima'. We knew that our experiences didn't fit these norms and we wanted to discuss what goes on in our 'bedrooms' with other African women. Being able to have safe discussions about sex in an online forum is important because of the contradictions many of us are presented with when it comes to sex. Some of us have grown up in conservative societies that police women's sexuality, yet have been the victims of child sexual abuse. Some of us are told that homosexuality is a sin yet had relationships with women whilst we were in boarding schools and had no concept of sin. Some of us have had little or no access to comprehensive sex education, but are surrounded by images of sexualised women in magazines and on screens. How are we supposed to find our true sexual self in this contradictory sexual climate?

'Adventures' differs from other blogs that focus on sex in several key ways. 'Adventures' is sexy without being gratuitously sexual, highlights the sexual agency of African women, and encourages a sense of sisterhood and

solidarity through the sharing of sexual experiences. Women read posts and think, “*I can relate to that...*” In response to ‘On being a born again virgin and my sexual drought...’ Damidwif made the following comment:

“...the things you say mirror what’s going on in my own life and my own feelings...”<sup>2</sup>

Kinna commenting on the same post stated:

“Fantastic! The drought made it possible for you to write this. And this is important because there are so many women, married and single, who endure long periods of drought.”<sup>3</sup>

The experiences I write about are not uniquely mine, but resonate with the thousands of women who log in to [www.adventuresfrom.com](http://www.adventuresfrom.com) on a regular basis. In a busy month over 10,000 people will access ‘Adventures’, during quiet periods when the blog has not been updated regularly traffic will fall to around 6,000. Between October 2010 and May 2011, I ran a survey via Adventures to determine the gender of readers, out of 499 people that answered the poll, 55% described themselves as women, 42% described themselves as men, 0.8% described themselves as transgendered, 0.6% described themselves as intersex and 1.6% selected the category ‘other’.

Part of what makes ‘Adventures’ unique is the sense of community on the blog, and the reflection of a multiplicity of African women’s voices. Encouraging guests to contribute content to the blog has ensured that we have content penned by women (and a minority of men) from all across the continent and Diaspora. Guest contributions so far have been sent in from all across the continent including South Africa, Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Additionally, readers directly drive the content of the blog by requesting posts on subjects that they are interested in reading about, or want to hold a discussion on. One such request led to a post entitled “Sex tips for women who sleep with women or chronicles *a la* ‘share and share alike’. A reader commenting on this post stated:

Whilst I have never had a sexual experience with another female, I have certainly [sic] had dreams to that effect during which I felt very aroused. However, after waking up I felt a little embarrassed and slightly baffled as to the meaning of such a dream, as I have never had such desires [sic] in a conscious state...<sup>4</sup>

The sense that your thoughts, desires and feelings are ‘normal’ is for me one of the key strengths of ‘Adventures’. Being able to discuss dreams of sexual experiences with another woman, for example, is not a conversation that is easy to have in many traditional spaces. However, in an online space, which has the luxury of relative anonymity alongside an open-minded community of women and men, it is easier to open up about your inner ‘freak’, fears and fantasies.

Although I have always written with African women as my primary target audience, African men have claimed a space on the blog by commenting on posts, and sending in guest contributions. Indeed, one of the most popular posts on ‘Adventures’ was by a male guest contributor. ‘Guest Contributor Anthony: How to eat Pussy...From the Giver’s Perspective’ generated 79 comments from women and men – the highest number of comments any post has received on ‘Adventures’. ‘The pussy eating series’, as I like to think of it, started with me posting a picture I had my photographer friend take of a young man we saw on a beach wearing a T Shirt with the strap line “Eat Pussy”. In many of our African societies, cunilingus is still very much a taboo subject, so it was fascinating that the original post ‘Eat Pussy’ led to 3 guest contributions on the subject, two of which were from men. Anthony states:

“Let me get straight to the point, pussy eating is quite a turn on for me. There’s no feeling like the feeling you get when you realise you can give intense pleasure to your woman. To have her moan and scream as you eat her out. And when she reaches the big O, that sense of accomplishment and pride that comes with the knowledge that you’ve given her total satisfaction (and the knowledge that she’ll be coming back for more).”<sup>5</sup>

For over two and a half years now, ‘Adventures’ has been part of my life and has become part of my identity. People describe me as a ‘sex blogger’ or a ‘sexpert’. Women I have just met open up to me about their innermost sexual fears and desires. That can be a very humbling experience. A few men have asked if I would consider creating a space where men can discuss their sexual concerns – my response has usually been that I am happy for anyone to start ‘Adventures from the bedrooms of African men’. Writing ‘Adventures’ has been a sexually empowering experience for me. I have had to push myself to be true to my writing. I cannot ask women to demand equality in the bedroom if I don’t demand that of myself. I have to be open and share

details of my sexual life if I want others to do the same. Sometimes I have to push myself past remnants of fear so that I can engage openly with readers. Other times I have to hold back so I do not titillate needlessly. At all times, I have to protect the trust of people who generously share their stories and experiences with me. It is my hope that 'Adventures' continues to grow, and that it remains a safe space where African women can openly discuss sex and their diverse erotic experiences.

## Endnotes

1. Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women, <http://adventuresfrom.com/about> Accessed: 2nd October 2011
2. <http://adventuresfrom.com/2011/09/29/on-being-a-born-again-virgin-and-my-sexual-drought.html#comments>
3. Ibid
4. <http://adventuresfrom.com/2009/02/08/sex-tips-for-women-who-sleep-with-women-or-chronicles-a-la-share-and-share-alike.html>
5. <http://adventuresfrom.com/2009/09/04/guest-contributor-anthony-how-to-eat-pussy-from-the-givers-perspective.html>

Profile:  
 Black Pride Brazilian Style:  
 The *5th Encontro de Cinema Negro Brasil  
 Africa and Caribe*, Rio de Janeiro from  
 24th November – 1st December 2011

Yaba Badoe

Spending time with Zozimo Bulbul at the cafe outside the Odeon Cinema in the centre of Rio de Janeiro, is a bit like taking part in a Brazilian edition of *This is Your Life*. Friends old and new: musicians, photographers, actors, journalists, film directors and choreographers, interrupt our conversation to greet him. They tap his shoulder, embrace him, laugh, and when Zozimo draws their attention to me, I realise that the distinguished old man that I'm sitting with, is introducing me to a *Who's Who* of creative talent in Rio.

Zozimo Bulbul is a black, Brazilian actor and film director. He is also the curator and inspiration behind the *Encontro de Cinema Negro Brasil Africa & Caribe*, a meeting of black film makers from Brazil, Africa and the Caribbean. I was lucky enough to be invited to the 5th of these annual meetings, which are organised by workers and volunteers from the *Centro Afro Carioca de Cinema*. The event is as much a sharing of ideas as it is a festival that celebrates short films, features and documentaries made in Africa and its Diaspora.

On this, my first visit to Brazil, I was struck by the incredible wealth and dynamism of Rio de Janeiro. Every other building is corseted with scaffolding as the country prepares for the World Cup in 2014. Despite the frenetic building work and restoration of classical 19<sup>th</sup> century edifices, Rio feels like an enchanted city. So much so, that taking in the view from waterfront restaurants at dusk is like stepping into a gilded world of glamour. As the nightscape of high-rise buildings glitters seductively, it's easy to believe that all is well beneath the luminous veneer of this South American country that's recently overtaken the United Kingdom as the world's sixth largest economy. As every traveller knows, it's impossible to come to grips with a new country in seven days. And in a society with 200 million racially diverse inhabitants, to

attempt to make sense of what's going on beneath the surface with a mixture of school girl French and broken Spanish, is deeply perplexing.

Janaina Olivereria, a young Brazilian director and rapper, was one of a group of Brazilian women who helped me see another side of Rio. Her short film, *Virus Africana*, was screened at the festival to tumultuous applause from her friends. The film describes her infectious joy at her first visit to Africa as part of a Brazilian delegation to FESPACO in Burkino Faso earlier this year. Janaina is a member of a women's NGO founded in 2005, *Estimativa*, that works in Rio's schools and favella shanty-towns, to improve the confidence of black children. Despite the image projected to the world, Brazil is 52% black. "Race is invisible here," Janaina explained. "It's everywhere, but no one wants to talk openly about it."

The women of *Estimativa* have put race firmly on the agenda by hosting cultural events that highlight black hair politics. They host these events to generate pride in Afro-Brazilian culture, which has been largely ignored for generations. *Estimativa* believes that only by recognising and appreciating the tremendous contribution of Afro-Brazilian culture, will previously excluded communities feel validated. With their headquarters in Rio de Janeiro, *Estimativa* has branches in several regions of Brazil, which, as well as organising local film and documentary festivals, have been able to establish a presence on the internet.

After showing me excerpts of their slickly produced magazine programmes that they stream online because the internet is cheap, the sisters from *Estimativa* invited me to a runway event that they'd organised at Morro do Formiga, a favella in the hills of Rio.

"Are you happy to use public transport?" Janaina asked me.

"But of course!" I replied, half wondering if the sort of public transport she was suggesting was similar to Ghanaian tro-tros, which I haven't used in years. In fact, to get to our destination we travelled on a spanking clean, new metro system that makes the London underground and Paris metro seem antiquated. A long journey by metro, followed by a short taxi ride to the edge of the favella.

"Taxis often don't want to bring you here," Janaina warned, as we began a steep climb up a hill in a Volkswagen van. Journey's end was a community hall full of excited, yelling children. Many of them had their hair braided in brightly coloured wool. Before I arrived they'd paraded up and down the

runway displaying their new hairstyles. They started screaming and jumping as I was introduced to them as a guest of honour from “Africa.” A small girl scrambled on to the stage and gazed up at me. Overwhelmed, I managed to say a few words about how deeply honoured I was to be with them and how much I was enjoying Rio. Nina, another member of *Estimativa*, valiantly braved the screech of the microphone to translate what I said into Portuguese. The children continued screaming and jumping.

*Estimativa* is the brain child of Brazilian actress Jana Guinond. Psychologically deflated and extremely frustrated at not getting the sort of roles she wanted, Jana decided that the only way to help herself and other black women made invisible in mainstream Brazilian media, was to create an alternative. With the help of other black media professionals, graphic designers, directors, camera people and editors, *Estimativa* has so far made three magazine programmes aimed at black women. Their latest venture has received over 4,000 hits. In tandem with creating a presence for black Brazilian women on-line, *Estimativa* works with children from kindergarten to secondary school age. The organisation aims to improve self-expression by teaching school children how to make short films, at the same time as raising awareness of the beauty and versatility of black hair in its natural state. Like Zozimo Bulbul, who started making films after he grew tired of being cast perpetually as a slave, black women artists in Brazil are cementing relationships with the continent of Africa as a means of reaffirming their African identities. In doing so, they are prising open a valuable space for themselves in their country’s changing consciousness.

## Profile:

# *Beit Sha'ar* – Nomad's Home

Iman Kamel

I've been asked to write the “inside story” of making my documentary, *Beit Sha'ar* - Nomad's Home. I welcomed the idea, because I feel there's a precious lesson to be learnt from the story of making *Beit Sha'ar*, a lesson that's particularly useful nowadays when it is becoming more and more difficult to be honest to one's own voice and vision.

I remember very well when the idea of making *Beit Sha'ar* first came to me. Six years ago, in March 2004, I travelled to the Sinai desert to mourn the loss of someone I cared for deeply. I decided to go to the desert to mourn in silence. Without any guide, I walked alone for days weeping, laughing and meditating on my life. This is when I decided to make a film about Sinai, a place I've called home since I was sixteen. Sinai is a place of deserts, a place marked by bleak stones, extraordinarily beautiful skies and Bedouins, who, despite a history of antagonism with Egyptians, embraced me as a daughter. During this period of intense mourning and reflection, I would return home to my eco-lodge to find freshly baked bread with cheese and organic tomatoes waiting for me. I would listen to Bedouin men talking. Women were hidden away and, whenever I tried to sneak out to meet them, the men stopped me. It was taboo to wander into the women's area, I was told, so I realised that to getting to know Bedouin women would require great care, patience and sensitivity. At the same time I was confident that this was nonetheless possible, and that I would be able to get to know them, eventually. Years later, I've learnt that patience and sensitivity can be very hard lessons for documentary filmmakers to learn.

At night the Bedouins offered to accommodate me in one of their guest rooms, but I insisted on sleeping under the stars. In the middle of the night, I would wake up and listen to the murmurs of Bedouins watching over me.

They never let me out of their sight for a second.

I started making notes on my film at Al Karm Ecolodge, a Bedouin owned facility beautifully situated near Sheikh Awaad and Naqb el Hawa, the old pilgrims route to the monastery of St Katherine. The owner of the lodge, aptly named Gamil, the Beautiful One, is the father of seven children. He and his family befriended me, and he was one of the first Bedouin men to place trust in me, and in my film project. He was also the only one to allow me to film the women in his house.

When I returned to Germany, my camera woman and editor asked me why I hadn't taken photos of my time in Sinai. The following year I took hundreds of photos that we transformed into a trailer for *Beit Sha'ar*. We then started what was to be a prolonged journey to find funding to make the film.

To begin with, I wanted to write a fictional story based in Sinai. Then I started getting interested in the different communities who live there - Bedouins as well as foreigners who've settled in Sinai: Jews who live by the Red Sea, Arab workers from Jordan, and Sudanese workers, whose music and laughter have filtered in to the cultures of the region. I decided that what I really wanted was to make a film about this kaleidoscope of communities. It wasn't until much later that I decided to focus on Bedouin women. How this happened is a story in itself.

Just about every tourist to Sinai meets Bedouin women and girls selling beads. Selema, head of a handcraft project in St. Catherine, was key to me getting to "know" Bedouin women better. We clicked immediately. So much so, that she insisted that I visit her house and meet her mother on the very first day we met. She was determined to introduce me to Bedouin women living in remote areas, where she travelled every week for business. Consequently, it was through Selema that my love affair with Bedouin women began. I would sit with women listening to their stories. Women take care of their homes, children and livestock while their men are away in the mountains for days. Men are either in the mountains or working as labourers in neighbouring Arab countries. On occasion they're simply sitting around with other unemployed men drinking and smoking. Women's work is hard. They walk miles collecting water, and carrying gas canisters home.

Gradually, they started accepting me.

To get to Sinai you have to travel past checkpoints and through a highly militarised zone. Before I started making my film, I was once hauled off a

bus at a checkpoint and interrogated by three officers, who wanted to know what a single woman was doing alone in Sinai. I told them the truth: that I was a tourist, based overseas and since I was visiting my family, I was on vacation in Sinai. I wasn't so honest when we started filming *Beit Sha'ar* in 2008. I invented a story that I was a professor researching birds of Sinai. I even carried letters of recommendation vouching that I was researching the song of a bird called *Om Ghreira*, a small black bird with a white crown on its head. I needed a cover story because any filming in a military zone such as Sinai is strictly prohibited.

To this day I'm astonished that nobody caught us with our equipment. Moreover, we were able to bring everything back to Germany with us. We worked with a small Canon camera no bigger than my hand and my cinematographer, Ute's tripod. That's all we had. With these minimalist tools we brought our footage back home and then transformed it into a film with the help of voice over, sound, music, drama and editing. Little by little sequences of film began to emerge, like the brushstrokes of a painter working on canvas.

When I returned to Germany with the film, my long term collaborator and editor, Klaudia Begic, wasn't able to work with me because she was pregnant. I therefore worked with another editor. We worked well together but somehow the film itself wasn't working. At this point I fell ill for almost a year and couldn't work at all. When I got better, I started looking for more post production financing, my team of long-term collaborators resumed work, and we went back to the drawing board.

The most difficult part of the next phase of editing the film was to insert my own story and reflections in the documentary. This was a struggle for me and I kept asking myself how much of my own story I should tell. Was it right to do so? And if I did, how would it affect the balance of relationships with the main protagonist of the film, Selema? How could we insert my story, given the material we already had? Voice over is a powerful tool in cinema. It is also a delicate tool. It can stifle a film or create a state of reflection. I decided to seek balance. My vision for *Beit Sha'ar* was to create poetic cinema for the big screen using documentary material.

In many ways what's interesting about *Beit Sha'ar* is what we weren't able to put in: great gaps and silences about the difficulties of living in a militarised zone, the agony of individual lives caught up in the viciousness of politics,

severe drought, and other manifestations of crisis. I hope that everyone who watches the film is able to sense something more than the images and sounds emanating from the screen. At FESPACO in Ouagadougou, where we showed an English version of the film to French-speaking audiences, I introduced it by telling the audience to go on their own nomadic tour; to travel with their imaginations. Surprisingly, they did. Indeed, some people approached me after the screening and said that even though they didn't understand everything, they appreciated the film's power and mood.

Perhaps the best analogy to describe the process of making *Beit Sha'ar* is the art of writing Japanese *Haiku* – as this requires many hours of waiting and reflection. It's almost as if six years of my life has crystallised in the images of this one film. We spent hours waiting for permission to film Bedouin women, hours waiting for agreement from the women themselves, hours just being in the desert landscape. I kept on asking myself how far I should go. Should I film their faces? For instance, Selema's mother once said to me: 'My dear, I love you so much that I'd like to give you everything I have, even my soul. But as for my face, never!' I've learnt that for a Bedouin, beholding the face of a woman is like entering a sacred space. I discovered at a screening in Berlin that the audience felt great respect for the women in the film.

I remember nights on location when I would lie awake in agony. We had come so far; we'd spent years in preparation. We had Selema's permission to film and yet because filming is such a strange process for Bedouins, it felt as if, every time the camera came out, we were starting from scratch. It was a bit like going in with the tide, pushing through one minute, then slowing receding as we waited for a sign from the women that we could film them. Once, I actually found Ute, my camerawoman, weeping. I asked her what the matter was. She told me that she'd been invited to film a woman she was close to. However the woman and those with her covered their faces in black and for the first time in her life, Ute was forced to film women without seeing their eyes or their emotions. She felt it was like filming in the dark.

As a documentary filmmaker this raises deep, ethical questions. How do you maintain a respectful distance when in some cultures, like Bedouin culture, the very act of taking a picture is to break a taboo? I felt I was walking through a mine field. The audience can't see this inner struggle on screen, so I asked my composer to underscore this heightened sense of danger in the film's soundtrack.

The process of filming, then creating a film out of the filmed materials, is a long journey, which remains as mysterious to me as ever. I sometimes find myself wishing that I was a poet, sitting alone in a studio and writing. Poetry seems more of an intimate discipline than filming, and yet I feel that elements of intimacy have found their way into this film.

One morning, towards the end of editing, I woke up with a clear idea of what I'd envisaged at the start of the journey. I felt I'd come full circle and that what I'd had in mind was now a reality. It was time to let go of the film and allow it to find its place in the world.

## Review:

# *The Witches of Gambaga*

Sokari Ekine

*The Witches of Gambaga* is a disturbing documentary about a community of women condemned and exiled as witches to the village of Gambaga in northern Ghana. The film was produced by Nigerian feminist academic Amina Mama and Ghanaian filmmaker/writer, Yaba Badoe, who also directs and narrates the film. During repeated visits over a period of 5 years, Ms Badoe interviewed the women, traditional rulers and community activists in the region.

The village of Gambaga has traditionally been a sanctuary for women accused of witchcraft where they are protected by the village Chief. Many of the women are elderly and arrive after having been driven into exile by their families. Guilt is established by the arbitrary way a chicken dies following an accusation by anyone, even a young child. The bird's throat is cut and if it dies with its wings down, then the woman is a witch. In trying to understand what it means to be a witch, the film's producer and narrator, Yaba Badoe, asks the question which goes to the heart of the film, "*[what] If witchcraft traditions are so deeply entrenched, that to be born a woman is to be born under a shadow of suspicion?*" This is contrasted with men, who can also be witches but for them, the practice is used in a positive way such as to protect his house or family.

The belief that some women and men have supernatural powers has existed throughout history and across the world as a way of maintaining social control and upholding patriarchal structures. But invariably it is women who have been singled out for persecution at different points in history, usually when communities are facing a crisis or series of events which are inexplicable or unpredictable. To understand the naming of women as witches, requires close scrutiny of the factors behind, on the one hand, the rise and powers of Pentecostal churches and Muslim marabouts in Ghana and other parts of

the continent, and on the other, the use of traditional and spiritual practices for explanations around the failure of nation states to address poverty and lack of socio-economic responsibility by governments. The power of male authority, patriarchal traditions and the low status of women are central to this. It is pertinent to point out that although accusations of witchcraft can cut across class and age, it is those women who, despite being poor and uneducated, are seen as strong and independent, who are most at risk.

The 'witches' of Gambaga are protected by the paramount Chief, the Gambarrana, and there is no doubt he benefits from their presence. They pay to stay and must pay to leave, so it is in his interest to accept either a "confession" as proof of guilt or the manner of the chicken's death to ensure the practice continues. But as the film points out, good and evil is never simple and change is always possible. Community engagement by local community activists has been central to questioning the practice as well as trying to reintegrate accused women back into their villages. Even though this can be a slow process, it is preferable to a confrontational strategy led by outside people, especially westerners, descending on communities. Once the work has been consolidated at a very local level then it can be taken up by activists at a national level and moves towards intervention by the government and community leaders. *The Witches of Gambaga* shows that there is another way of addressing traditional and religious practices which hurt women and children. Women activists are beginning to speak out against the practice and the film itself has contributed to raising awareness at a national level. Changes in attitudes by local leaders can also contribute to ending the practices of accusing women of witchcraft.

The success of the film is due to Badoe's persistent visits and her personal engagement with both the women and the Gambarrana who allows her to film the "secret" ceremony which decides the guilt of the women. Her interviews are intimate and heart-breaking, showing both the vulnerability of the women as well as their agency and strength. One young mother of two is ambivalent about her exile but at the same time focused on ensuring her children are educated by raising money to send them to school. The film, thankfully, lacks the "pitying" and patronising tone often found in documentaries made by non-Africans, as the women and the audience are treated with the utmost respect. The strong feminist intervention places the women at the center and focuses only on the issue it wishes to confront

and expose, leaving all of those involved, including the audience proud and empowered.

Women and children accused of witchcraft in other parts of the world do not have a safe space in which to carry on their lives. Often they are forced to undergo degrading public acts of admission and submission or face being expelled from family and left to survive the best they can on the streets as sex workers and beggars. As awful as it may appear compared to a life on the streets with no protection, the women sentenced to a life of exile in Gambaga, separated from their families for years or even a lifetime, have still been able to create a new life and community amongst themselves. One is left feeling there is a sense of purpose if only to work towards the day they can return home.

*The Witches of Gambaga* has been shown and well received by audiences in Ghana, Burkina Faso, Brazil, South Africa, Kenya and across Europe and the United States. The film was the Winner, 2010 Black International Film Festival Best Documentary Award and won 2nd prize in the Documentary competition at Africa's largest film festival - FESPACO - in Burkina Faso.

## Review: *Notre Étrangère*

Yaba Badoe

### *The Place In-between (Notre étrangère)*

“But she’s *white*,” I blurted out as I watched Sarah Bouyain taking to the stage to introduce her film, *The Place In-between*, at FESPACO, Ouagadougou. It was the last day of February, the last day of a CODESRIA workshop on African Film and Video and belatedly, I’d arrived at the Cine Burkina to watch my first movie of the 22nd edition of the biggest Pan-African Film Festival in the world.

Despite appearances, it turns out that Sarah Bouyain is a product of a Burkinabé-French mix. With a father of Burkinabe origin and a French mother, she is the granddaughter of a mixed-race woman and cherishes her heritage from which her affinity to Burkina Faso derives. The nuances of this dual heritage infuse Bouyain’s first feature film, as much as it did her previous work: a documentary *Children of the White Man*, 2000, and a collection of short stories *Métisse façon*, 2003.

*The Place In-between* follows Amy (Dorylia Calmel), a young, mixed-raced woman. After her father’s death, Amy leaves Paris to go to Bobo in Burkina Faso, to seek out her mother, from whom she was separated at eight years old. Unbeknown to Amy, Mariam (Assita Ouédraogo), her mother, has left her home and migrated to live on the margins of Parisian society, working as a cleaner. Her boss, Ester (Nathalie Richard) wants to learn Dioula, Mariam’s maternal language. As Mariam teaches Ester, the two women become friends.

*The Place In-between* is a beautifully realised film. Brilliantly acted, it explores the theme of ‘otherness’ from multiple perspectives: Amy’s in Burkina Faso and Mariam’s in Paris. For example, Amy’s return to her mother’s town is painfully hesitant. As she walks through the streets in her western dress, the local men call out, “Hey, white lady!” She then takes to wearing a kaba, but still attracts attention and fails to blend in.

When Amy visits the home of her aunt, Acita, (Blandine Yameogo) to try and find out her disappeared mother's whereabouts, the welcome is no less muted. She learns that her mother had somehow shamed the family; and Acita is not about to discuss these matters with a foreign girl who might as well be a stranger. But Amy persists, bravely digging deeper.

*The Place In-between* contrasts Amy's journey in Burkina Faso with that of Ester and Mariam's back in France. At first it's not clear why Ester – white, middle-aged and middle class – wants to learn an African language. But as the film juxtaposes these stories of women bridging the gap between Europe and Africa, the connections become clear and ultimately heartrending.

Where the film truly excels is in its evocative treatment of 'mothering'. Amy is in search of a mother who, it seems, will never recover from having given her up. Indeed, when Mariam discovers that Ester is about to adopt a baby from Burkina Faso, her outrage ruptures their burgeoning friendship.

The multiple layers threaded in Bouyain's film are treated with camerawork that is both intimate and confident, as she depicts the very different locations: African immigrants coming together in the outskirts of Paris, the muted bourgeois elegance of Ester's home and garden, and the brightly printed clothes and dusty courtyards of Bobo. Overall, Bouyain's film creates a mood that is tender but unflinchingly honest. Occasionally spiked with a humour that the Ouagadougou audience loved, an underlying sense of sorrow pervades this film, which won the European Union Prize at FESPACO.

# Contributors

## *Editor*

**Amina Mama** is a Nigerian-British feminist activist, researcher and scholar, who has lived and worked in Nigeria, South Africa, Britain, the Netherlands and the USA. She spent 10 years establishing the University of Cape Town's African Gender Institute and is founding editor of the African journal of gender studies, *Feminist Africa*. She authored *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity* (Routledge 1995), *Women's Studies and Studies of Women in Africa* (CODESRIA, 1996), and co-edited *Engendering African Social Sciences* (CODESRIA 1997). She is currently developing a transnational activist research initiative on gender and militarism and pursuing her interest in documentary film. She currently lives in Berkeley with her two teenage children, while working at University of California, Davis as Professor and Director of Women and Gender Studies.

## *Issue Editors*

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**Salem Mekuria** is the Luella LaMer Professor of Women's Studies in the Art Department at Wellesley College. She is also an independent writer, producer, director, videographer, and a video installation artist. Her award winning

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## Contributors

French-born **Françoise Bouffault** has been employed by the United Nations in New York for most of her career. She is a writer and has also produced and directed a documentary about the Sabar dances of Senegal.

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**Tsitsi Dangarembga**, intellectual, writer, filmmaker, producer, culture critic, created the film production company, Nyerai Films based in Harare in 1992. Founder and director of the International Images Film Festival for Women, she is also a member of Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe.

**Lindiwe Dovey**, born and raised in South Africa, is an academic, film curator, fiction writer, and filmmaker. She is Senior Lecturer in African Film at SOAS, University of London, and her book *African Film and Literature* (Columbia UP, 2009) won a Choice Outstanding Academic Title. She is also Co-Director and Film Programme Director for Film Africa, London's largest festival of African cinema and culture ([www.filmafrica.org.uk](http://www.filmafrica.org.uk)).

**Sokari Ekine** is an educator and writer who has been active in social justice issues around education, race, sexuality, gender, militarization and technology for over twenty years. Sokari has been a regular contributor to Pambazuka News since 2005 and she has published both as editor and author on social media, militarization, gender and human rights. Most recently she co-edited *African Awakening: The Emerging Revolutions* and is co-editor of the forthcoming *Queer African Reader*.

**Beti Ellerson** is the founder and director of the Centre for the Study and Research of African Women in Cinema, a virtual environment which also features the influential African Women in Cinema Blog. She has published extensively and spoken widely on the topic of African women and the moving image and has taught university courses on African cinema, African women in cinema, Black women in visual culture and African visual culture. Her film documentary, *Sisters of the Screen: African Women in the Cinema*, is a seminal work on African women of the moving image. She was the 2011 laureate of the Distinguished Woman of African Cinema Award presented by Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe and a member of the main jury of the 2011 edition of the International Images Film Festival for Women held in Harare.

**Jihan el-Tahri** is an Egyptian-born French writer, director and producer of several award-winning documentary films. Her most recent films are: *Behind the Rainbow* (2009) a documentary about the transformation of the ANC from a liberation movement to a ruling party; *Requiem for Revolution: Cuba's African Odyssey* (2007) and *The House of Saud* (2004).

**Iman Kamel** was born in Cairo and has followed interdisciplinary studies in art, dance and film at the Berlin School of Arts. She has travelled extensively in southern Africa and China. Her short films include: *Noara* (1995) *Khadega* (1995), *Hologram* (2002) *Nachiket* (2004) and *The Clouds Are There* (2006). Iman founded the Initiative Film Aktiv in Berlin to work creatively on projects with young people and immigrants.

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Nana has authored a Communications Handbook for Women’s Rights Organisations, is co-author of *Creating Spaces and Amplifying Voices: The First Ten Years of the African Women’s Development Fund*, and editor of the forthcoming book, *Women Leading Africa: Conversations with Inspirational African Women*. She has also written for a number of journals locally and internationally including BUWA! Feminist Africa, and Dust magazine.