

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## AFRICAN CINEMA

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**Overview** African cinema, like all cinema, is barely more than a century old, though its development has been dramatic--passing as it does through stages of total Europe- dependence, before Independence, then of experiment with its own perspectives and voices, and into a self-consciousness, and feverishly productive presence which has joined the international community.

### The earliest stages

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century African film was in its infancy, sketches of documentaries and even an early Lumiere brothers film played off film reels. As it was, one of the world's earliest cinema centers was in Egypt. The portrayal of Africa itself, in film, was left to western film makers, for whom Africa was a land without history or culture, where pure adventure could play out. Jungle epics abounded, like Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan*;, *The African Queen* (1961); or *King Solomon's Mines* based on the much read novel of the name, published in 1885 by H. Rider Haggard. In the French colonies of West Africa, prior to independence, the indigenes were prohibited from making films altogether, although special grit plus luck enabled one good African-made film to hit the market in France at the time: *Afrique sur Seine* (1995), directed by Paulin Vieyra- -a genre film about the difficulties of being a black man in France. Anti-colonial films were essentially not permitted in the colonies, although a great French film maker, Alain Resnais, got away with an outstanding pro-African film, *Les Statues meurent aussi* (*The statues die too*), 1953, about anti- French riots in the streets of Abidjan.

### The father of African film

No single individual deserves so much fatherhood, and yet, for true artistic drive and independence Osmane Sembene (1923-2007), born in Senegal, did more than any colonial to shape and enspirit African film. He began his own film journey in 1963, using a 16 mm. camera and old film reels left over from stock given him by European friends. In that year he made *The Wagon Driver*, the first African movie produced by a black man in Africa. (Friends and family formed the acting crew.) Until his death he went forward with his novels--*God's Bits of Wood* (1960) is an African classic--and with a series of increasingly bold films, including *Ceddo* (1977) which depicts violence of hatred between Muslim and Christian communities, and *Moodale* (2004), which deals with female genital mutilation. After a committed fifty year creative career, Sembene left behind him a fiery indigenous film legacy, for an Africa which had been little more than a European backdrop a half century earlier.

### New Dimensions in African Film

If Sembene was the father of African film, a chief intellectual driver of that film was a Frenchman, Jean Rouch (1917-2004) who opened the deep inner interest of Africa as material for film. Rouch was an hydrologist who was sent on mission to Niger, where he became deeply involved in the sociology and mysterious transcendent rites of Niger's backcountry. In a series of 120 films, which we might call 'cinéma vérité,' and which skated along the borders between the micro-real and the surreal, he penetrated into the totally fresh of the African world, and opened it to filmmakers everywhere. In such work as *La Bataille sur le grand fleuve* (1950-52), or *Jaguar* (1954), he gave to African cinema a heady sense of the uniquely powerful material it was for film.

### The Publicitarian dimensions of African film

While each country in Africa--Nigeria, for instance, with many separate tribes within a country, each filming in its own language--has its own film industry, and the hand held camera has become the play ground of everyone from kids to clever intellectuals, the film industry has exploded in certain countries. Egypt has been prolific in film, since the inception of the African industry, while Tunisia, for example, has and remains noteworthy for the high level of creativity among women film makers--Safi Faye was the first African female director to gain international acclaim. Nigeria, whose film industry has won the name Nollywood--a sobriquet applied to it by a *New York Times* report in the 70's--now boasts the second largest film industry in number of films, third largest in revenue, and, often in collaboration with black actors from the Diaspora, has set entertainment (if not always art) standards which have

generated a huge native film industry. Fame, fortune, and the cult of celebrity have travelled with Nollywood to the center of Nigerian (and by extension African) self-awareness. A film like *The Wedding Party* (2016) directed by Kemi Adetiba, proved to be an all time box office success for the Nigerian film industry.

### **The Festival and Manifesto World**

From mid-twentieth century on, the international film world has proliferated film festivals, film-support organizations, and glitzy awards ceremonies. 1969 saw the foundation of the West African Film Festival, which alternates every two years with the Carthago Film Festival in Tunisia. (Such ‘reunions’ are promoting a sense of mutual understanding among the continent’s hugely diverse creative centers.) A more nearly militant group, proclaiming (in 1975, in Algiers) the *Charte du cinéaste africain*, the ‘African film maker’s charter,’ devoted itself to the esthetic/political dimensions of African film. In the thinking of this group’s manifesto, the film maker became the modern *griot*, the people’s voice commenting on the common society and its directions. By the time of this manifesto, African cinematic thinking had passed the first stages of anti-colonial hostility, and entered into the issues of inward maturing and uniqueness.

### **Film and cultural self-awareness**

Film (and television, which is spreading into the remotest villages) are key measures of African culture’s self-awareness. On a continent bedeviled by poverty and corruption, in which leisure and availability for reading are at a premium, the quick play of cinematic involvement provides respite for drama (and at times art), and quiets periodically the hectic to and fro of money making. A new generation of graduates has adopted a hands on attitude to the place of film as a way of thinking and protecting oneself.

### **Reading**

Diawara, Mathias, *Cinema: Politics and Culture*, Bloomington, 1992.

Gugler, Josef, *African Film: Reimagining a Continent*, Bloomington, 2003

Henley, Paul, *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema*, Chicago, 2016.

Mahir, Saul; Austen, Ralph, eds. *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-first Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*, Athens, 2010.

Thackway, Melissa, *Africa Shoots Back: Native Perspectives in Sub-Saharan Francophone African Film*, Bloomington, 2003.

Ukadike, Frank, *Black African Cinema*, Berkeley, 1994.

### **Discussion questions**

Why do you think the French colonial regime forbade film-making in its colonies?

Review the case of the Senegalese creator, Osmare Sembene. Do you think the instinct of the novelist or of the film maker predominates in his work? Do you know other examples of such an inner collaboration of skills?

Has cinema a unique potential to direct social and political consciousness? Africans were historically slow to write, fast to film. Why?

Does Jean Rouch work on the borders between art-film and anthropological documentary? Look at one of his works, and evaluate it.

What broad differences do you see between films shot under French, and those shot under British colonial, mandate? Do those two types of African film reflect the styles of their ‘colonial masters’?

Nollywood films are naturals on the small screen, television. What role does the even smaller screen, video, play in the development of African film?