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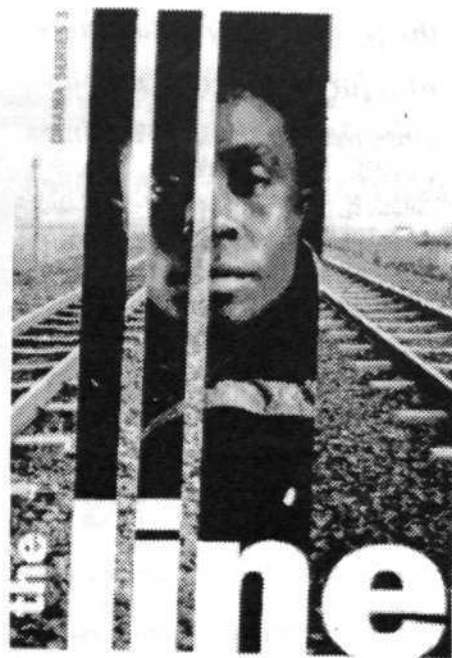
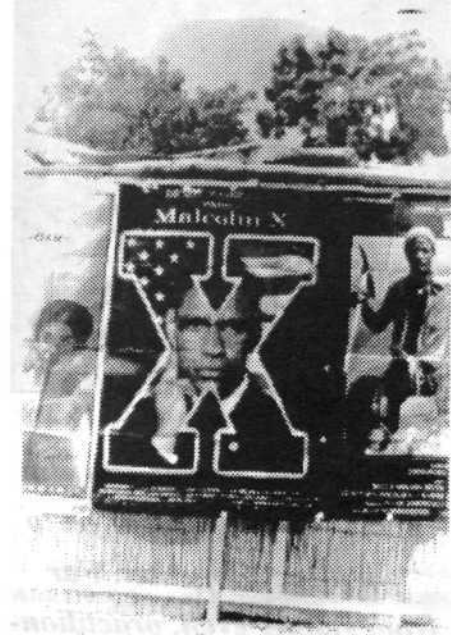


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# THE GATHERING OF A THOUSAND REELS

SOLA OLORUNYOMI

OUAGADOUGOU, February 25, 1995. It is past twilight and the sky is pitch dark and silent. Against this opaque expanse comes a meteoric explosion of infinite shooting stars in supra-rainbow coloration. The crowd of over three thousand personalities from across the continent burst into a prolonged, rapturous applause. It is the official opening of FESPACO, the Pan African Festival of Cinema and Television.



Running through March 4, the fourteenth edition of FESPACO is also marking a symbolic double with its celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the invention of the cinema. And during that century, according to Burkinabe Minister of Communication and Culture, Claude Somda, 'Africa has been mostly shown according to others' viewpoints.'

While these images shot by film pioneers may constitute a great historical inheritance, it was urgent for Africans to talk about themselves by focusing and being the focus of camera. This sort of aspiration appears to have impelled the formation of FESPACO; which is undoubtedly the greatest showcase of cinema and television in Africa today.

Thus from the plain festival where African cinema enthusiasts could enjoy watching a wide range of African films, the festival began to award prizes, introducing competitive showing and promoting of African films. These led to the creation of the film market where producers, professionals, buyers and distributors took up the centre stage.

According to FESPACO sources, the introduction of a film competition first resulted in fixing film quotas per country. Very few countries reached three productions per year or even every second year. The situation has however changed, such that a pre-selection exercise has been introduced to delimit entries of films. The organisers have in addition set up two juries, one for feature films in competition and the other for short films and documentaries.

After granting a square to film makers and building a memorial as a tribute to African cinema, this fourteenth edition undertook the

opening of the African film library which will be provided with about hundred copies of African films already acquired.

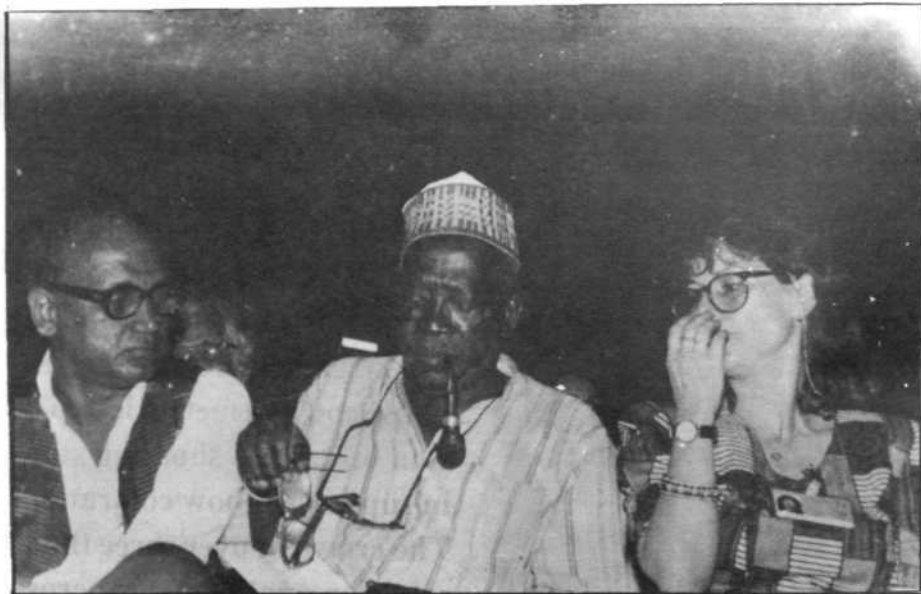
Dubbed **Cinema and History**, this year's theme appears to buttress what festival organisers agree would be the 'triple significance for Africa', of the centenary of cinema. Says Filipe Sawadogo, FESPACO Secretary General: 'It is the opportunity to consolidate the rehabilitation of our past memory and to strengthen our present in order to build a strong future'.

In the bid to actualise these lofty objectives, FESPACO secretariat has instituted the appropriate structures in the formation of FEPACI (Pan African Association of Film Makers) and MICA (The International African Film and Television Market). FEPACI is geared towards assisting a collective action by African film makers, in an environment that is generally acknowledged as hostile to celluloid promotion. MICA's objectives are equally complimentary. It seeks to promote sale, help to establish contracts and exchanges among directors, producers and distributors. During FESPACO '93 for instance, in a space of six days, MICA registered eight hundred and seventy-nine effective screenings.

FESPACO details basic regulations governing participation, competition and selection of jury in the bi-annual festival. While the event is open to all African film makers and their films, the National Organising Committee (NOC) reserves the right to accept films with a special interest to the festival.

The Committee requires all directors and producers of entry films to send documents on each title and advertise them forty-five days prior to the opening of the festival. Copies of the film must also

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Fespaco '95 Jury. At the centre is Sembene Ousmane



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have been sent thirty days before the opening date of the festival.

Any film at the festival may be shown at least four times, after which the consent of the owner must be sought for further showings.

This year's jury, in conformity with Article 13 of the General Rules Governing FESPACO, was made up of a chairman and ten other members, Sembene Ousmane, icon of African Cinema, stood in as head of jury in the edition. Even though nominated by the NOC, on proposal by the office of FESPACO Secretary General, the jury is sovereign and may decide not to give prizes, should it deem it fit. But this year it did, and abundantly too.

The overall prize, **Estalon Yennenga**, went

to Cheick Omar Cissoko's *Guimba*. Apart from this CFA5 million awards, the Malian carted off a host of other endowed prizes. The citation of the jury noted of this feature film: 'We had to encourage our European members and friends to understand this extraordinary title, which is as profound in its thematic thrust, as it is steeped in deep cultural codes and figural devices... enhancing its aesthetics.'

A 1993 production of Kora films, it narrates the story of a potentially great continent which has, however, been despoiled by a neophyte elite. The occasional 'intrusion' of the narrating griot, adorns the film with an epic ambience. In one breath, he is constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing his tale, sparing neither ruler nor ruled.

The citizens of Sitikali revolt against state tyranny as a means of redeeming their sanity and collective personhood. Even though its setting is a village, its symbolic reference to larger polities is not lost on the viewer: *Guimba* is indeed archetypal. It is a statement on the human condition, on the quest for unfettering our shackles in whatever contrasting situation we may find ourselves.

Prizes were also awarded to the best short film, the Paul Robeson Prize and the best documentary. Honours were equally given to the best actress, the **Oumarou Ganda** awarded to the first feature of a film maker and, a prize for the best actor. Other awards for the best art co-operation include: the bests in scripts, image, acoustics and music with CFA 500,000 attached to each.

But midway into the festival, opposition to its conduct arose. There were voices, essentially from the Anglophone bloc. The Nigerian delegation seemed to have taken a pivotal role in this stirring. Ghana and South Africa were two other prominent Anglophone countries present at a meeting held by this group on March 3 at the edge of the swimming pool of Hotel Independence in the Burkinabe capital.

The consensus of the delegates was that the Anglophone bloc has been marginalised. Of all the groups, the South African delegation seemed the most tentative on what next line of action to take. It preferred reporting back to its home government as a first step.

Yet, another delegate, Gadalla Gudara of Somalia, also complained of being victimised by Francophone intrigues. With the withdrawn mien of an octogenarian, this March noon day at the lobby of the hotel, he whispered to this reporter in a tone of the cheated: 'I am the first cameraman in sub-Saharan Africa, but these Francophones chose to acknowledge someone else.'

The Chairman of Nigeria Film Corporation, Breudan Shehu seemed cynical of the whole festival procedure, quipping: 'Honestly, my impression here is that it is more or less a French affair.' Asked to suggest the impulses behind this marginalisation, he responded: 'Simple. France sees itself as assisting a colony, a former colony - Burkina Faso. They fund them in order to produce the kinds of films they want to see in their own country France. No one can do this to Nigeria.' Professor Frank Ukadike, the celebrated film critic, while equally being critical of the situation was, however more cautious: 'Let us not forget that without the French, the Ministry of Co-operation and other support networks they have inspired such as ACCT, Air Afrique and Carnal France International, there would probably be no African cinema the way we know it now.'

But there are other questions that FESPACO secretariat is being urged to answer. Why is the festival not made itinerant, for instance? And how come that of the eleven times that the grand prize has been awarded, only once has it been won by an Anglophone film maker? This exception was Ghana's Kwaw Ansah's 1989 *Heritage Africa*. To the former, FESPACO's Phillippe Sawadogo has responded, 'making the festival itinerant is the sure way to kill it'. He cites Cannes and Carthage as examples of the need for the festival to be rooted in a specific venue, but the second poser still seems to linger.



While Fespaco's 'phonelitics' rages on and West Africa may still be basking in the image of its earlier incursion into the genre than other regions, say Southern Africa for instance, the latter however is making spirited efforts to carve a niche in this feast of celluloid.

The cultural boycott is over and South Africa made a bold and determined re-entry into the industry with the first ever **South African International Film Festival** in 1994, a fact tacitly alluded to recently by Anton Herber, Co-Editor, *The Weekly Mail* and *Guardian* when he said that the festival 'is a fitting celebration of our full re-entry into a global arena.' The festival is indeed swelling with its number of friends. Old foes like **Ster Kinekor** and **M-Net** joined old faithfuls like *The Weekly Mail* and *Guardian*. Running alongside the main programme, the line-up of events and special screenings in the '94 festival included short cuts, a competition of Southern African short films, the Film Resource Unit's second Johannesburg T.V. programme and video market; Late Night **Neck Nibblers**, *The Weekly Mail* and *Guardian* on-stage interviews hosted by world-renowned *Guardian* film critic Derek Malcolin and a situation comedy among others.

As a means of co-ordinating its video production, the Film Resource Unit was formed in 1986. The effort of the Unit is geared towards the use of video as an educational and recreational tool in the Southern African region.

The unit currently hosts an Annual Environmental Film Festival and, a Mobile Video Education Project (MVEP) which uses the medium of video for formal and informal

education in rural areas. The thematic thrust of the films could be as deep as its scope is varied.

A 1995 catalogue of the Film Resource Unit reveals a really diverse field of entry from music and culture, feature films and short films to cultural history, environment and development, reconstruction and children. Others cover the areas of women and gender, health and AIDS, labour and economy, and land and shelter.

On the home front, the film industry in Nigeria is yet to get its acts together. Far from getting even, practitioner are getting angry. Hubert Ogunde once bestrode the landscape, urging for excellence. But between his demise and current practice, mediocrity seems to have taken wings and soared high in the industry. Quality has even moved lower the rung from U-matics to bare VHS video recordings. Nigerian Film Corporation Chairman Breudan Shehu deplors this situation and urges film makers to avail themselves of new colour laboratory and dubbing studio in Jos, Plateau State. This effort, he believes is more rewarding than the in-fighting and backstabbing that has become a familiar practice in the industry. the Jos-based Corporation, according to Shehu, is also making efforts to reproduce extra reels for film makers in order to make their titles competitive.

Between Shehu's lofty ideas and the economic reality in Nigeria however, observers of the industry believe that an action of the magnitude of a miracle will be required to reverse the downtrend in the film industry. In the whole of 1993 for instance, the corporation could not produce a single title, due to extraneous factors. **GR**