

Arts

Using African Cinema to Shift Cultural Perceptions

By Khalid Halhoul



Dr. Mahir Saul at the African Film Festival in Istanbul.

Dr. Mahir Saul has three things on his mind—continents, connections and cinema. He is a one-man tectonic plate, attempting to bind Europe, Asia, North America and Africa into one large land mass. For him, accepted geographic norms aside, it makes perfect sense. Now, he wants to shift and align public perception to see the world as he does.

In early 2012, he curated the first-ever African film series, to be held in Turkey, for the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art. Saul, a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign anthropology professor, 62, brought to the project over three decades of academic research, an entire career studying West African cultures in places like Burkina Faso, lengthy fieldwork examining Istanbul's Afro-Turk population, and a thorough knowledge of African filmography. As a native of Istanbul, a city located in both Europe and Asia, he wanted to give something back to his country.

Africa, the world's second largest continent, is a region that he holds in high esteem, resenting that it is always negatively associated with Somali pirates, disease, famine, and pot-bellied kids. Western media coverage tends to focus on pessimistic, crisis-oriented stories that equate Africa with misery—a place filled with unimaginable horrors. In Istanbul, the only interaction most citizens have with an African is when they pass by seemingly invisible street peddlers selling watches out of a suitcase. When teaching African Film and Society, for the past 15 years, he isn't surprised to hear new students describe the Hollywood film, *Blood Diamond*, as an example of African cinema.

He wants to debunk stereotypes about Africa. "It's important to show these films, by Africans, proving the vast intellectualism that exists there, beyond just ethnographical documentaries, but rather avant-garde works that enrich our knowledge," he says.

In the African film series, Saul showcased 10 movies, attempting to focus on the connectedness between African lives and the common themes that other people around the world might experience; and, to prove that rich imaginations exist beyond Western shores. He thinks that anthropology has gone in the direction of stressing cultural differences and he does not like it. "As a person, I am directly the opposite. At a basic level, we are all the same and our shared historical and family connections are very important," he says.

Faat Kine, a Senegalese film, examines the daily life of a successful business woman, a single mother who faces the challenge of raising her son and daughter, while protecting the family unit against the fathers who abandoned them. It's a universal story that could easily be understood in California or China. In the film, ***Waiting for Happiness***, villagers interact in a remote Mauritanian seacoast town, dealing with mundane tasks such as restoring a home's electricity to more weighty subjects like acceptance and migration. Someone in rural Kansas or Kazakhstan might identify with the same themes.

Filmmaking, in some African nations, was once banned by the Laval Decree, a mid-20th century French colonial law. Before the 1960s, it was feared that films could be used to denounce the French occupation and promote subversive activity. Effectively, it shut out artists from using the medium to create visual representations of how they viewed their own identity and culture. It would be like prohibiting America's greatest jazz musicians from developing their craft in the 1920s and 1930s during the Harlem Renaissance.

The Istanbul Modern Film Series is a testament to how much has been accomplished by African filmmakers in recent decades. The term avant-garde is too diminutive a description for the genre-defying film, *The Bloodiest (Les Saignantes)*. In 97 minutes, a wild thematic mixture of politics, eroticism, suspense, horror, and science fiction leaves the mind wondering what was seen on the screen. It's a cult classic that needs a worldwide cult following. And, if Hyenas wasn't an African film, it could be mistaken for something imagined by Woody Allen.

Müge Tüfenk, Istanbul Modern's Director of Film Programs, is an expert on her city's culture scene. Although she is a veteran film and arts journalist, she admits that prior to collaborating with Dr. Saul, African cinema was completely unknown to her. If this void existed in her own mind, she knew that it most certainly existed for her museum audience. She felt compelled to introduce Turkish people to an opportunity that had never been provided to them and that they had never even thought about.

"Mahir was very passionate about his ideas. He made me aware, all of a sudden, that there are many African people in Istanbul, they are part of this city, and even their native restrictions and lifestyles are similar to our own. It was worth discovering." she says.

After the success of his project, Saul hopes to take the accomplishment to other venues in North America – perhaps starting in Chicago or collaborating with other universities might be a next step. It's not within his reach, nor is it his intent, to compete with more established events like The Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou, created in 1969, or The Pan-African Film Festival in Los Angeles, established in 1992.

However, he found an isolated audience in Istanbul and he knows that there are other people and places that are yet to know the value of African cinema.

Other notable films in African cinema:

The Wind (FINYÉ)– 1982

Souleymane Cissé (Mali)

The Law (Tilai) – 1990

Idrissa Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso)

Karmen Gei – 2001

Joseph Gai Ramaka (Senegal)

Dry Season (Daratt) – 2006

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun (Chad)