FESPACO and Cultural Valorization

Mahir Şaul

What eventually became FESPACO started as a whiff of *cinéphilie*, occurring in advance of the struggles between the Burkinabe government and the French distribution firms or the production of local films. In 1968, a group from the French cultural center in Ouagadougou and the president of the local ciné-club met with the executives of the national TV station, officials from the information and education ministries, researchers from the local branch of the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire, and other public personalities to think about how to provide the city's population with access to the new African films. The resulting 1969 Semaine du Cinéma Africain (African Cinema Week) was modestly titled but brought together the necessary elements for a recurring festival: a supply of films from the Paris Ministry of Cooperation, the enthusiastic participation of African filmmakers, including especially Ousmane Sembène, and the promise of continuing support from the national government.[1]

In the following three years, the setting up of a national film import and theater management company and the consolidation of a periodic international African film festival went hand in hand. In 1972, the festival acquired permanent structures, included competition and a grand prize, and assumed its present name, FESPACO (Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou). The same year as the first full-length feature film of the country, *Le sang des parias* (*The Blood of the pariahs*) by Mamadou Djim Kola, FEPACI, which had been recently created, gave its support and its contacts fully in the service of the festival. To avoid competition with the established film centers of North Africa, FEPACI arranged for the FESPACO festival to take place once every other year, in odd-numbered years, so as to alternate with the festival in Carthage in Tunisia.

Over the years FESPACO became more than a showcase for African filmmakers, or a place where foreign distributors meet filmmakers and critics view recent movies. Filmmakers themselves see each others' films during the festival, become acquainted with one another personally, discover reactions to their collective work, and get fired with inspiration. The festival created a

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cinema community in sub-Saharan Africa, and a site from which cinematic influences and fashions radiated.

The enthusiasm of cinephiles, filmmakers, and government officials was not initially shared by the intended beneficiaries of the festival, the Ouagadougou population. Sembène drew a conclusion with humility: "The public saw our movies, with all their insufficiencies, and was perhaps disillusioned, because perhaps they do not conform to its wishes. But if government authorities all over Africa gave us some consideration, we may reach the point of fulfilling its expectations." Mamadou Djim Kola communicated greater frustration: "Over the course of the years our public underwent the influence of images and developed . . . a passion for cinema [but] their minds absorbed some of the most negative aspects of a certain kind of cinema . . . The public often remains indifferent to the African film, even apathetic, if it doesn't reject it outright."[2]

In anticipation of this reaction, outreach activities were organized as early as the 1969 African Cinema Week to teach the population to like African movies. Eventually audiences embraced the festival; viewers went from ten and twenty thousand in 1969 and 1970 to a hundred thousand in the late 1970s, when they were still mostly locals, and to about four hundred thousand in 1987.[3] The twenty-first edition of the festival, in 2009, had an estimated attendance of five to six hundred thousand. This reminds us that the anticommercial reputation of francophone films needs some modification. Sembène's films *Mandabi* and *Xala* (1974) were extremely popular in Senegal; Kramo Lanciné Fadiga's *Djeli* (1981) beat all box office records when it opened in Abidjan; Gaston Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni* (1982) remains an all-time hit in Burkina Faso.[4]

Despite showing a concern for increasing the size of the movies' audience, it remains true that from its beginnings FESPACO was guided by an art conception of cinema and by cultural nationalism rather than by entertainment or market value. In the words of the festival's official 1969 communiqué, "We intend to affirm the existence of an African cinema, made in Africa, by Africans, on African topics. These recent works . . . allow one to understand that cultural values are part of the African heritage just as much as traditional values."[5] These words accord with the opinions of Paulin Vieyra, namely that African cinema would contribute a critical new Sembène voice to universal art, provided European audiences could be open-minded enough to welcome diversity. Nourished by African values, African film would at the same time stimulate the growth of a new African civilization.[6]

Filmmakers and critics aspired to works of lasting value, which meant that even the release of a picture did not relieve the burden of improving it. Vieyra reports, for example, that Moustapha Alassane's *Women, Cars, Villas, Monay / F.V.V.A.: Femme, Voiture, Villa, Argent* (1972, Nigeria) won the OCORA Prize at the 1972 FESPACO, but his friends and film buffs were

dismayed by the poor soundtrack of the movie. Alassane promised them that he would use the prize money to redo the soundtrack.[7] When we consider how scarce film funding was in those years, the direction in which peer pressure was exercised in this case is very revealing. An important sum of money was given to director Alassane for his accomplishment, but his friends in the film establishment encouraged him to spend this prize money not to start a new filming project but to correct a flaw in the already finished and prized film. And this was done not because anyone thought that the extra expenditure would increase the finished film's box office prospects, but only to add value to what people thought had the potential of becoming a future African film classic. Besides the commitment to creating works for the posterity, the director was expected to represent African culture. French art influence was not the only reason for this commitment; it also grew out of the decolonization ethos, as can be appreciated in accounts given by Onookome Okome and by Birgit Meyer of Nigerian and Ghanaian intellectuals who accuse the video film industries of their nations for presenting Africa to the world in the degrading terms of superstition, crime, violence, and magic.

In the beginning, the search for a proper African aesthetic encompassed both the desire to "contribute to universal art" and an effort to reach the local audience. Vieyra opted for medium-length static shots of long duration, which research (of colonial origin) suggested would help the viewers comprehend the story.[53] Sembène held a contrasting opinion: "We looked at our films, and discussed them . . . often in our films there is too much talk and the rhythm is slow. We have to change that. Films with less talk, more rapidity, and much more explicitness are needed."[8]

Today these words will reveal a certain irony, because established critical opinion associates Sembène's films with slow pace, the reverse of what he wanted to achieve. There was some ambiguity in the value assigned to cinema itself in the larger struggle for an African high culture. Sembène, on the heels of his first great triumph with *La noire de... / Black Girl* (1966, Senegal) said in a French radio interview, "I would have preferred for us, for Africa, that there were more readers than film buffs. I consider literature a more complete art where you can really plumb a person. With cinema, in our country, things stay at a very elementary level."[9]

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Notes

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1. Patrick G. Ilboudo, *Le FESPACO, 1969–1989: Les cinéastes africains et leur oeuvres* (Ouagadougou: Editions La Mante, 1988), 114–19; Teresa Hoefert de Turégano, *African Cinema and Europe: Close-up on Burkina Faso* (Florence: European Academic Publishing, 2004), 62–65. The then military ruler of Upper Volta, Maj. Gen. Aboubakar Sangoulé Lamizana, was won over in part by the choice for the opening screening, Oumarou Ganda's Cabascabo, a film about a soldier who returns to his native Niger after fighting (as Lamizana himself had done) for France in Indochina.

2. Both quotes in Ilboudo, *FESPACO*, 116.

3. Ibid., 139.

4. Philippe Maarek, ed., *Afrique noire: Quel cinéma?* Actes du colloque Université X Nanterre, December 1981 (Paris: Association du Ciné-Club de l'Université Paris X, 1983), 69; Hoefert de Turégano, *African Cinema*, 255; Mahir Saul, "History as Cultural Redemption in Gaston Kaboré's Precolonial-Era Films," in *Black and White in Colour*, ed. V. Bickford-Smith and R. Mendelsohn (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 26–27. For other popular FESPACO films see Melissa Thackway, *Africa Shoots Back: Alternative Perspectives in Sub-Saharan Francophone African Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 11.

5. Quoted in Ilboudo, *FESPACO*, 115. 51. Paulin S. Vieyra, *Le cinéma africain des origines à 1973* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1975), 245–46.

6. Ibid., 143. OCORA (Office de Coopération Radiophonique) was created in 1955 by the French state radio and TV company (RTF) to promote radio programming in the colonies.

7. J. M. Burns describes colonial research conducted in British Africa to discover native viewing habits and help develop a simplified film language that could lead to effective educational and propaganda films, including the work of L. A. Notcutt and G. C. Latham. Burns, *Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 37–59.

8. Ousmane Sembène, "Interview with Ousmane Sembene," by Teshome H. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 115. Compare this opinion of Sembene's with the remarks of a freelance editor whom the Bureau of Cinema often hired to work on African films: "I often reproached those young people, for their cinema was a cinema of dialogue; for me cinema is ... images ... But for them it was dialogue. Even Sembène. I believe that dialogue is part of the African mentalité." Andrade-Watkins, "France's Bureau," 124.

9. Reproduced in Paulin S. Vieyra, *Sembène Ousmane, cinéaste* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1972), 188.

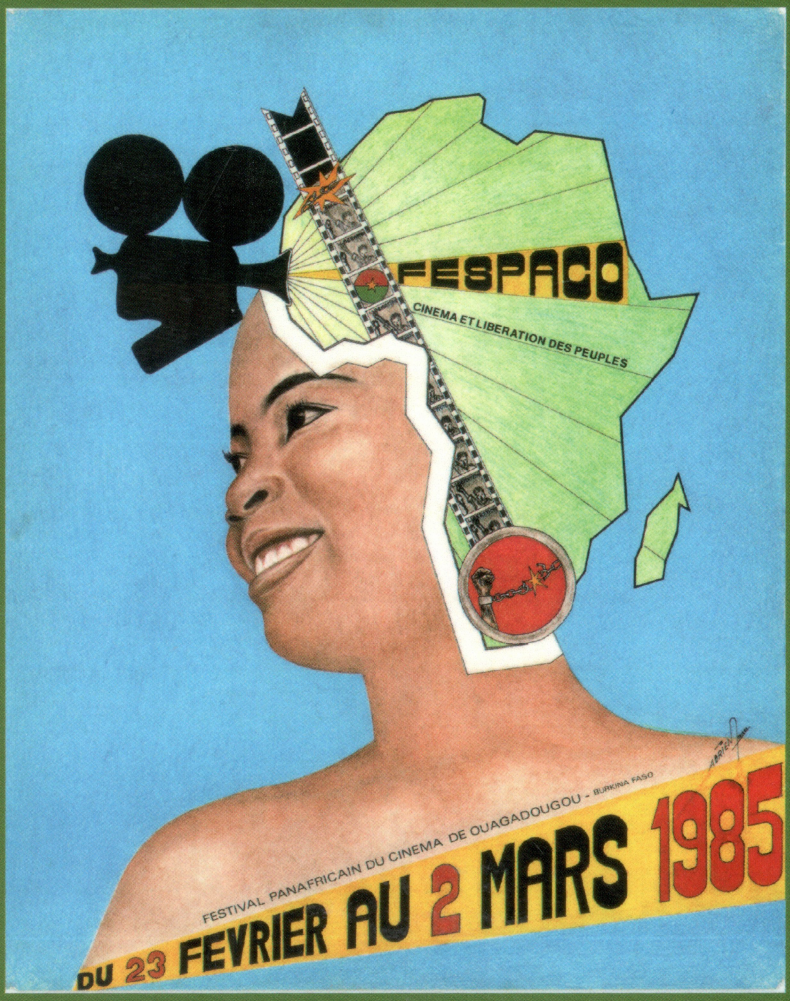
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