

Reflections on Cinema Criticism and African Women

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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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