

Review

Women at Ouagadougou: Yaba Badoe talks to three women directors at this year's Fespaco

I have a confession to make. But first I must warn readers of delicate sensibility to read no further. I've had my cherry plucked. At a time when women of a certain age should be saying that there's nothing new under the sun, I have to confess that at long last I've lost my virginity. For the first time in my twenty-plus years as a documentary filmmaker, I've finally made it to Fespaco; and having submitted, body and soul, to an orgy of films from Africa and its diaspora, I know that I shall never be the same again.

Every two years at the end of February, just when the harmattan is coming to an end, Fespaco (La Festival Panafricain du Cinema et de la Television de Ouagadougou), Africa's foremost festival of film and television, takes place in the capital of Burkina Faso. African directors, producers, actors and writers, international financiers, distributors and journalists congregate in one of the poorest countries on the continent. They arrive in battered Burkina Air Fokker 28's; planes so old that condensation accumulates overhead, dripping on unsuspecting passengers. This year, I was one of the lucky journalists jostling with cinephiles from around the continent to catch Fespaco movies.

I was at it from eight in the morning till eleven at night, feasting on the wealth and complexity of representations of Africa, made by Africans, for an international audience. Okay, so just about all the films were funded by the European Union or French aid to Francophone countries. But these were Africa's diverse stories, touching on music, history, politics, religion and plain old-fashioned romance. There was so much to take in, it was hard to know where to begin. With twenty feature films entered in the main competition for the top award, the Golden Stallion of Yennenga, twenty short films vying for the Golden Foal of Yennenga, competitions for best television documentaries and drama series, and a festival of documentaries by young African filmmakers at the French Cultural Centre in Ouagadougou, it was hard to know where to rush off to next. Women, I decided. Focus on stories made by African women about women on the continent. There's your angle.

If only it were so simple. Fespaco's top award has never yet gone to a woman. (One wonders how a woman would feel, winning a prize with such an outrageously macho title!) This year, the 19th festival since Fespaco's beginnings in 1969, only three of the twenty features in the main competition were directed by women. (They were *Sous la clarte de la lune*, Appoline Traore, Burkina Faso; *La Nuit de la Verite*, Fanta Regina Nacro, Burkino Faso; and *Valley of the Innocent*, Branwen Okpako, Nigeria.) Yet this is far better than the pitifully few women directors who contended for Hollywood Oscars earlier this year.

Now for my second confession: I'm a documentary filmmaker based in Britain where it's fashionable to see film-making as part of an increasingly vapid industry infatuated by celebrity. No one here seems to believe any more that documentaries can shape and change lives, provoke ideas or stimulate discussion. It's fashionable to be cynical these days; nonetheless, I still love watching documentaries. So on my first full day at Fespaco I went to see *Al'Lessi, une actrice Africaine* by Rahmatou Kieta of Niger. Lovingly shot on 35mm in the dappled light of a Sahelian winter's day, the film tells the story of 55-year-old Zalika Souley, the first black African actress. When the documentary was made, Zalika was living with her four children in a two-roomed house in Niamey, without electricity and water. Yet thirty years before, she had been a famous actress, splashing out her money on cars and clothes. At the height of her fame, Zalika outraged Nigerien society by parading around in trousers. Indeed, she was spat on and insulted for what many considered provocative behaviour. *Al'Lessi*, which means "destiny", is an incredibly moving yet humorous

documentary. Beguiling in its simplicity, it uses a day in the life of a woman pioneer to recount a history of Africa's first fledgling film industry, a story which began in Niger. At the end of the film, the audience is told that Zalika is now living somewhere in Europe working as a maid. Such is an actress's destiny.

In an interview with me after the screening, Rahmatou Kieta, a director now based in Paris, revealed that the documentary had taken seven years to make. "Nobody wanted to make it," she said. But with the help of a letter from the Ministry of Culture in Burkina Faso (the government of Niger didn't help at all) she was able to find funding for a film she felt compelled to make. "It's a film that takes me back to my childhood," she explained. "My childhood and a disappearing world of symbolism", in which a jar filled with water, smashed before a man, expressed passionate love.

When I asked her if she thought it was important to tell stories about the lives of African women, Kieta made it clear that if anything, she's coming from a nationalist perspective. Her next documentary will be about democracy in Niger. In *Al'Lessi* she wanted to set the record straight that the pioneers of African cinema originated in Niger. Kieta was also keen to understand why, in her heyday, Zalika Souley behaved in such a confrontational manner. The film seems to imply that Souley's behaviour was rooted in her personality and character. It was simply the way she "was": her destiny. Recoiling at my use of the term "feminist" to describe a history of cinema anchored around the life of a once-famous actress, Kieta eventually conceded that when a woman breaks social conventions, she is punished more severely than a man is for doing the same thing.

She went on to tell me a story that illustrates her passion and commitment to her craft. Once her documentary has started screening, she refuses entry to latecomers. That afternoon, two white male Fespaco jurists arrived – late. She wouldn't let them in. Incensed, they summoned a friend, the director of the French Cultural Centre where the documentary was showing. "They're jurists. You must let them in!" Kieta was told. "But this is *my* film!" she declared, giving them details of another screening they could attend if they arrived on time. Then, laughing, Kieta leaned over to me: "They have no idea how strong African women are! They have no idea at all."

As I was waiting for *Al'Lessi* to begin, first-time documentary maker and Burkinabe activist, Rolande S. Ouedraogo, noticing that I was alone, came and sat down beside me. Ouedraogo was trying to get as many people as possible to see her documentary *La Volonte (Willpower)*. If she hadn't introduced herself, it's unlikely that it would have caught my attention. As it was, later that afternoon, we watched the film together.

La Volonte is an inspirational tale of triumph over adversity. It chronicles the life of Peter Kabore, a mechanic disabled by polio as a child, who makes and repairs motorcycles. Determined to make the most of his potential, Kabore is also a musician, sculptor and painter and believes that through tremendous willpower, he has conquered his disability.

"Did you like it?" Ouedraogo kept asking when the documentary ended to resounding applause. "Did they like it?" They did. In the Cote Doc prize for best documentary, the film got a special mention, a tremendous achievement for a first-time filmmaker.

The message of *La Volonte*, that individuals should use every ounce of willpower to fight for what they want instead of waiting for others to help them, is a lesson Ouedraogo has taken to heart. "When I'd just given birth to my twins and I was at home, I had the luck to meet a Canadian documentary-maker, Erica Pomarance. She said, 'Rolande, you must make your film. Don't end up as a housewife. You've got to take your future in hand and fight for the children you've just had.' I owe her a lot because she opened my eyes."

La Volonte was shot and edited with help from friends. Even though it focuses on the life of a disabled man, Ouedraogo believes that a documentary made by a woman is distinctive: "When a woman does something it's different, because she's aware of things that men don't see. We're more in touch with reality than men are." With such an attitude, it's hardly surprising that Ouedraogo is an active member of the National Union of Women Working in Film in Burkina Faso (UNAFIB).

Established in February 1991, UNAFIB is much more than a professional body for women film directors, actors, editors, designers and technicians. The organisation is helping to realise women's potential in Burkina Faso by using film for purposes of advocacy and consciousness-raising. With money from the European Union, they've made a documentary encouraging women to participate in politics, another denouncing the high level of forced marriages in Burkina Faso, and a film, *A Moi La Pilule*, advocating the right of women to plan their families: "In a country where there's so much ignorance, there are lots of men who don't want their wives to take the Pill. There's so much prejudice against the Pill that some women are on it secretly."

UNAFIB's aim is to demonstrate that women are a powerful political force. "We realised that if we don't organise ourselves and show people that it's important for women to control their destinies, nobody is going to do it for us," Ouedraogo explained. "It's vital that women get involved. It's crucial that we fight for our autonomy so that men can't tell us to stay in the background looking after children. Men should know that women can help the family and national development."

Among the many excellent short films competing for the Golden Foal of Yennenga this year, there was one in particular that I'm glad I saw. Zimbabwean director Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Mother's Day* was innovative and challenging. It was also brutally graphic, raising uncomfortable questions about what I would have felt had the film been made by a man.

Mother's Day is based on a southern African folk tale. Dangaremba uses song and dance to tell the story of a woman who survives being butchered and dismembered by her husband. With excellent central performances, the film was made with less than half the budget in place. "It's difficult to raise funds for anything in Zimbabwe," Dangaremba explained, "because there's a kind of embargo on Zimbabwe similar to that on Cuba."

Understandably, despite the happy outcome of the tale, the violence inherent in portraying a Zimbabwean man eating his wife has proved controversial. "My position is that it's a story," Dangaremba stressed. "*Mother's Day* shows very clearly that cannibalism is taboo in our culture. We've got to be able to use what we've got without censoring ourselves too much, otherwise we're never going to come up with anything new."

As the film's title suggests, *Mother's Day* has a thread of irony running through it. A French woman sitting next to me found it hilarious. I wasn't able to laugh at all. The film set me on edge. I found it much too disturbing to laugh at. Yet Dangaremba manages to retell an old story – that the sacrificial love of women leads to martyrdom, and that more often than not, men take advantage of it – in a refreshingly new way: "I want to see different images of women on the screen, different role models, different stories, and that's what I try to do. Then people categorise what I do as feminist, but that isn't necessarily my point of departure."

Nonetheless, Dangaremba was one of the women instrumental in establishing the International Images Film Festival for Women, which takes place in Zimbabwe every November. Inspired by a workshop of Zimbabwean women filmmakers, the Festival allows

women's themes to take centre stage: "We ask for women-centred movies from all over the world so that we have women in lead roles," Dangaremba said. "Women's stories are of importance to me because I'm a woman."

Now for a third and final confession: I'm already planning for Fespaco 2007. But before I head off to Ouagadougou again, I'll be checking out the Film Festival for Women in Harare from 4-12 November. This year's theme is Women of Passion.

Fespaco prizewinners 2005

Burkina Faso and South Africa had the most films entered for the top prize. Each country had four films in the competition.

- The Golden Stallion of Yennenga for best feature film went to Zola Maseko's *Drum* (South Africa).
- The Silver Stallion of Yennenga went to Moroccan director Hassan Benjelloun, for *La Chambre Noire* (The Black Room), one of the six North African films in the competition.
- The Bronze Stallion of Yennenga went to Burkinabe director Daniel Kollo Sanou, for his deft comedy, *Tasuma*, about an elderly Burkinabe soldier who fought for France and now awaits his pension. *Tasuma* was also voted best film by Burkinabe cinephiles in ballots after each screening.
- The Paul Robeson Award went to Lisa Gay Hamilton, for her excellent documentary on the life of African-American actress, poet, dancer and political activist Beah Richards, *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*.
- The prize for Best Cinematography went to Zeze Gamboa's *Un Hero* (Angola).
- The prize for Best Screenplay went to *La Nuit de la Verite* (Burkina Faso), written by the woman director of the film, Fanta Regina Nacro, and Marc Gautron.
- The Golden Foal prize for the best short film was awarded to Tahirou Tassere Ouedraogo's gem of a love story *L'Autre mal* (Burkina Faso).
- The Silver Foal prize for short film went to Fatamady Camara's *Be Kunko* (Guinea).
- The prize for the best TV documentary was awarded to Manthia Diawara's *Conakry Kas* (Mali/Guinea).

Yaba Badoe is a Ghanaian-British documentary filmmaker, journalist and fiction writer.