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Africa on the reel

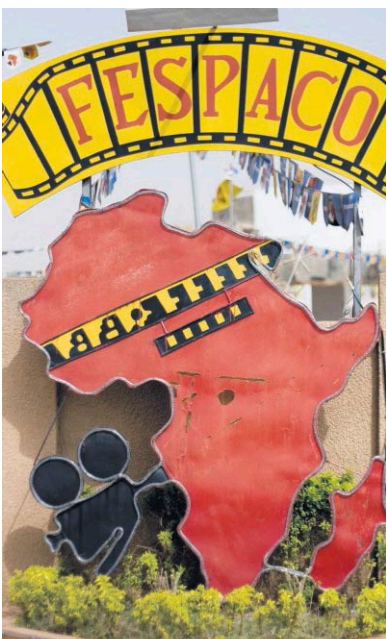
It is one of the poorest places on earth, and yet hosts the largest film festival on the African continent. Ed Stocker reports on Burkina Faso and Fespaco

“Viva le Fespaco! Viva!” the singer shouts from his float, sending a wave of distorted sound crashing out of the battered speakers. The lorry churning up orange dust as it hurtles down the city’s main thoroughfare is the warm-up to the evening’s main proceedings – the football stadium opening ceremony for Africa’s largest festival of African cinema. Hosted in Burkina Faso’s capital, Ouagadougou, every odd numbered year this tiny, landlocked West African nation gets its chance to shine. At the Stade 4 Août, musicians, dancers and acrobats entertain for nearly four hours before the fireworks finale silences the boisterous crowd. This is spectacle on a grand scale.

Yesterday, thousands of cinephiles and industry insiders descended en masse on Ouaga – battling street vendors hawking phone cards, and mobillettes vying for road space – for screenings, talks and Fespaco’s fiercely contested awards ceremony climax. Here, the Palme d’Or and Golden Bear are redundant; Africa’s directors and actors compete for the Étalon de Yennenga, a golden statue of a warrior on horseback. Yet for all the fanfare, this former French colony’s festival is still largely anonymous beyond the confines of the francophone world, and the films it showcases are virtually unknown outside art house festival circuits. Positive images of Africa, it seems, simply aren’t as newsworthy as violence and famine. “Non-African spectators seem to expect that African films will only deal with traumatic subjects,” says the festival regular Lindiwe Dovey, from London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, “and, suffering from issue fatigue, they choose to ignore them.”

The fact that Burkina hosts a pan-African film festival is remarkable: this hot, landlocked Sahelian country is one of the poorest places on earth. Nearly half the population live below the poverty line and a 2008 UN human development report ranked Burkina Faso 173rd out of 179 nations. Yet, while many African nations have turned a blind eye to cinema, Burkina has forged a pioneering path. A year after Fespaco was founded in 1969, the government took the bold decision of nationalising its cinema theatres and ploughing a percentage of ticket sales back into nurturing home talent. In 1976 the first sub-Saharan film school was set up in the capital. The 2009 edition saw films from 13 countries, spanning Algeria to Zimbabwe, competing for the coveted main prize. It also pays special homage to the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembene who died in June 2007. Affectionately known as the grandfather of West African cinema, he directed the first sub-Saharan African film, *La Noire de...* (*Black Girl of...*), in 1966 – a dark debut about an African housemaid in France and her spiral into depression and suicide – demonstrating just how young indigenous filmmaking is. Sembene is a mythical figure at Fespaco, attending every festival until 2005 and occupying room number one at the Hotel L’Indépendance – the spiritual home of the festival – where he’d field journalists’ questions from the shade beside the swimming pool.

Until independence, cinema was the tool of the coloniser and Africans were shown films designed to “educate” them about white man’s society. Films were screened in South Africa and Egypt soon after the Lumière brothers’ original Paris screenings at the turn of the century, but Egypt was the only country to steam ahead with independent production from the 1920s – often predictable romance and musicals but also groundbreaking work like Youssef Chahine’s 1958 film *Cairo Station* – that were the toast of the Arabic-speaking world. Sub-Saharan Africa had to wait until those heady first years of independence and the forays of the Sixties and Seventies tried to wrestle back an artistic milieu that had long been denied. As Africa took its first steps towards new nationhood, caught up in notions of



The FESPACO logo outside the festival’s Ouagadougou headquarters.

African socialism and flirting with Marxist ideology as the Cold War trickled down to Africa, directors were angry. Inspired by Italian neorealism, Sembene viewed cinema as an activist, educational tool – a gritty medium for denouncing colonialism and a newly emergent corrupt elite. He saw himself as a repository of African history and a direct descendant of West Africa’s traditional storytellers, the griots. “The African filmmaker is like the griot who is similar to the medieval minstrel,” he once said. “A man of learning and common sense who is the historian, the raconteur, the living memory and the conscience of his people.” Other radical directors were more abstract in style but equally denunciatory. West Africa was a hotbed of creativity and Sembene was joined by the Mauritanian Med Hondo, whose highly politicised 1969 debut, *Soleil O*, looked to forge a uniquely African style of filmmaking, and Senegal’s Djibril Diop Mambety whose 1973 film, *Touki Bouki*, was arguably Africa’s first avant-garde work.

West and North Africa quickly established themselves as the continent’s filmmaking centres. Tunisia set-up two film festivals, Carthage and the amateur-orientated Fikaf, in the Sixties and the Maghreb world produced some remarkable films from the 1970s. International recognition came in 1975 when Algeria’s Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina won the Palme d’Or at Cannes for *Chronique des Années de Braise* while Mali’s Souleymane Cissé picked up the Jury Prize in 1987 with *Yeelen*. The Eighties and Nineties, both north and south of the Sahara, saw a cooling of the militant rhetoric of the past. Films often looked to Africa’s ancient history for inspiration – a time before colonialism – in a movement labelled the “return to the source” that drew on oral narrative traditions. Of course, this grossly simplifies the range of films being made at the time: hard-hitting social realism, comedy and more abstract experimentalism. Burkina Faso came to the fore, thanks to film school graduates like Gaston Kaboré and Idrissa Ouégraogo.

Fast-forward to present day and African film seems in rude health. A crop of ambitious talent has begun to replace the original trailblazers. South Africa, long excluded due to apartheid, has invested heavily in its domestic industry since the advent of democracy in 1994 – and it’s begun to bear fruit through directors like Zola Maseko and Ramadan Suleman. Its cinema climbed to new heights in 1996 when Gavin Hood’s *Tsotsi*, the tale of a hoodlum’s path to redemption, was crowned with an Oscar. Despite its commercial aesthetic and formulaic Hollywood plotline, for millions of cinema goers worldwide, the film represented a first slice of African film. Elsewhere, African cinema has every type of player: the modernist outlook of the outspoken Cameroonian director, Jean-Pierre Bekolo; the cutting social commentary of Fanta Régina Nacro and her beautifully crafted *La Nuit de la Vérité*; the taboo-shattering



Film posters advertising the latest films at Cinema Burkina during the festival. Photos Courtesy Fespaco

For all the fanfare, this former French colony’s festival is still largely anonymous beyond the confines of the francophone world



The crowd at the Stade 4 Août waits for the opening ceremony to begin.

female sexuality and empowerment of Tunisia’s *Moufida Tlatli*. In Mauritania, meanwhile, Abderrahmane Sissako cemented his credentials in 2006 with *Bamako*, an incendiary piece of political theatre about aid to Africa, featuring a cowboy cameo from the US actor Danny Glover. The former *Lethal Weapon* star is Hollywood’s highest profile supporter of African film, leading tributes to Sembene, attending the last Fespaco and co-producing *Bamako*. But he’s not the only one. Chatting to Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, the Chadian director casually let it slip that he’s in discussions with a Hollywood film director about remaking his brilliantly observed film *Daratt*, a tale of fractious post-civil war Chadian relations that triumphed at Ven-

ice Film Festival two years ago. He admits that it’s difficult for African directors to get themselves recognised on the global market: “The fact is that you don’t have a star and so each time it’s like, ‘Yeah, but we don’t know these actors’ – it’s not Brad Pitt or George Clooney.” African cinema’s situation – both inside and outside Africa – is precarious. While Ouagadougou has a series of sparkling, air-conditioned cinemas – like Cinéma Burkina, one of the Fespaco screening venues – outside the urban centres, they’re almost non-existent. Elsewhere in Africa, civil wars and crumbling infrastructures have meant that cinema has dropped to the bottom of the to do list and, in the few theatres that are left, owners often go for kung fu or Bollywood flicks

that are cheap to screen and promise easy returns. While Morocco, South Africa and Egypt have the continent’s most buoyant industries, being able to talk about an “industry” in the majority of African countries is questionable.

Faced with a lack of opportunities, many of the newest generation of African filmmakers have chosen to go abroad to learn the craft: there are currently only two film schools in Africa, one in Ghana, the other in Egypt (Burkina Faso’s school shut in 1986). Haroun, whose TV film *Sexe, Gombo et Beurre Salé* is up for a prize this year, is typical of several talented francophone Africans who have moved to Paris and are furthering their careers by remaining there. In his case, it was the civil war that pushed him into becoming a “nomad”, but he admits that he could never go back even though he still feels emotionally attached to the country: “Let’s just say that I’m living in Paris but my address is in Chad.”

Due to a lack of funds from directors’ home nations, African films are often funded by foreign governmental organisations like France’s Fonds Sud and the European Union. Egypt’s shortlisted 2009 Fespaco entry, *Al Ghaba*, directed by Ahmed Atef – a shockingly frank portrayal of street life in the Egyptian capital – received money from France, The Netherlands and Italy for example. Reliant on aid, and often made by European-based directors, question marks hang over the authenticity of the end product, with some critics suggesting that aid produces films that pander to western ideas of “exotic” Africa. There’s often no need to make films that are “popular” either because films don’t need to make a profit and are often exclusively distributed in Africa through French cultural centres.

The Nigerian director Tchidi Chikere is fiercely against foreign aid. “I’m not free to explore what I want to do,” he explains. “I want to write a story about a child swinging on a tree. If you give me a foreign grant I’m not going to be able to write about that child – I’ll have to write about what they want.” Chikere’s comments show the chasm that has opened up between certain filmmakers in Africa. Haroun got into a heated exchange with a Nigerian director at Fespaco in 2005, claiming that francophone West African films were “art”, whereas the majority of Nigerian films were “entertainment”. He was referring to Nollywood, Nigeria’s self-sufficient straight-to-video industry and the world’s third largest producer of movies after America and India. Chikere, one of Nollywood’s leading lights, wears the clothes and talks with the swagger of someone doing well for himself. His proficiency is staggering, producing over 100 films in a nine-year career. Last year’s *Stronger Than Pain* scooped an African Movie Academy Award (Nigeria’s answer to Fespaco) and, although the image is frequently pixelated, the sound quality dubious and the camerawork shaky, it’s an entertaining village love story. Chikere says it took him two weeks to write, 12 days to shoot and two months post-production, costing around \$50,000 (Dh184,000). Economically, this model works in a country the size of Nigeria: 35mm had become too expensive and it seemed like a logical solution.

Nigerian film triumphed at Fespaco in 2007, when the director Newton Aduaka won the Etalon d’Or for *Ezra*. Yet his filmmaking style and brutal portrayal of child soldiers in Sierra Leone couldn’t be further from the Nollywood model. In reality, African cinema caters to every taste, whether serious historical re-enactment or escapist comedy. Its power to educate, provoke, amuse and entertain was clear at this year’s festival opening screening. Packed to capacity, Cinéma Burkina rang with tuts, shrieks and several rounds of applause as *Mah Saah-Sah* by Cameroonian’s Daniel Kamwa reached its romantic denouement in front of a gripped international audience. Right there, right then, African cinema was very much alive.