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Film Production in Francophone Africa 1961 to 1977: Ousmane Sembène—An Exception³³

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Introduction

The advent of independence throughout francophone Africa in 1960 ushered in an era of transition for France and her former colonies. France provided development assistance and technical expertise to former francophone African colonies through the Ministry of Cooperation, created expressly for the newly independent countries.³⁴ In cinema, financial and technical assistance was provided on two levels: The *Consortium Audiovisuel International* (CAI), the private sector arm of the Ministry of Cooperation established in 1961, produced newsreels, educational documentaries, and other special projects for the former colonies; the *Bureau du Cinéma* (Film Bureau), on the other hand, provided financial and technical assistance to African filmmakers.

The Film Bureau, from its creation in 1963 through the 1979 restructuring of the Ministry of Cooperation, provided the technical and financial assistance which made francophone Africa the most prolific center of black African cinema. Not a single feature film was made by an African prior to independence, yet by 1975 over 185 shorts and features had been produced with the technical and financial assistance of the Film Bureau. As a result, eighty percent of all black African films were being made by francophone Africans.³⁵ This perspective is broadened by Ousmane Sembène, who is widely acclaimed as the father of African cinema, and as the leading proponent of *cinéma engagé*—a militant, Marxist challenge to the African bourgeoisie, to French neo-colonialism, and to the insidious role of Islam and Christianity in African society. The juxtaposition of Sembène and his work to the larger context of French post-colonial ministerial programs for cinema in sub-Saharan francophone Africa illuminates key contradictions and ironies for African cinema during the era under consideration.

In order to gain a better understanding of this pivotal period of African cinema in general and francophone Africa in particular, we shall now turn to the operations of France's Ministry of Cooperation between 1961 and 1977.

Historical Overview of Francophone Africa 1961 to 1977

Although *de jure* independence was granted to francophone Africa, *de facto* political, economic, and cultural ties to the former French colonies remained a priority for the French government. Unlike the English, who preferred to maintain a distance between themselves and their African subjects, the French pulled their subjects into the

francophone culture. France's colonial policy of direct rule and assimilation perpetuated the idea that France and the colonies were a family, bound by the French language and culture. Through a process of education and immersion in the French culture, francophone Africans, particularly African elites and their children, were indoctrinated to view France as the mother country and the Gauls as their ancestors. For France, the emphasis on cultural assimilation was the dominant colonial policy, and it was in that context that economic and political relationships with the colonies were determined. It was a bond the French were unwilling to relinquish at the end of the colonial era.

The importance attached by France to maintaining the post-colonial cultural, economic, and political ties is evidenced by the creation of the Ministry of Cooperation in 1961 by the De Gaulle government. Through the Ministry critical financial and technical resources were provided to the former colonies, and this preserved France's dominance in the region—culturally, linguistically, and economically. The Ministry was primarily responsible for economic, cultural, and technical assistance to the former colonies in areas requiring technical specialization and expertise such as agronomy, diplomacy, and filmmaking.³⁶

Sub-Saharan francophone Africa—with Senegal at the epicenter of the activity—dominated African cinema ideologically, quantitatively, and qualitatively. Three factors account for this dominance. First, there was the creation of the CAI and the Film Bureau. Second, francophone Africa was home to major pioneers of African cinema—including the Senegalese filmmaker/historian Paulin Vieyra and Ousmane Sembène, creator of the first feature made by an African, “La noire de. . .” Lastly, it was francophone Africa which provided much of the leadership for FEPACI (*Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes*), the thirty-three country member organization of African filmmakers which was established in 1969.

Administration of the Film Bureau

Created in 1963 within the Ministry itself, the Film Bureau in turn worked with the CAI on the educational documentary series for francophone Africa. The major mission of the Bureau, however, as the largest producer of African cinema during this period, was to provide technical and financial resources to individual African filmmakers to create works of “cultural” expression.

The creation of the Bureau was actually preceded by a general cinema service within the Ministry. Lucien Patry, the creator of the *Section Technique* within what became the Film Bureau, was recruited in early 1962 to organize a cinema service that would address in some logical fashion the technical needs of the films or projects by filmmakers—African as well as French—sociologists, ethnologists, geographers, or *coopérants* of the Ministry, as they made films in the newly independent African states. Patry rapidly went about setting up a small 16mm production center, with editing tables and sound transfer equipment, the basic minimum needed to provide technical support to the work coming in. Several months later, in 1963, Patry's small technical section was set up as a separate administrative entity, the Film Bureau.³⁷

Although the organization became the largest producer of African cinema, its

actual full-time staff always remained small, increasing from five or six people at the beginning to a maximum of twelve. The key personnel involved with African cinema were the director, Debrix; Lucien Gohy, who worked at the Bureau from 1966 to 1976, first with the educational documentaries done by the CAI and the Bureau, then as Debrix's assistant; and Patry, who was in charge of the *Section Technique*. In addition to supervising the technical end of the Bureau's operations, Patry was also responsible for hiring the freelance technicians. Not all staff worked directly with African cinema; others worked on projects or tasks associated with the 16mm educational and documentary projects of the CAI which were edited at the Film Bureau.³⁸

The crux of the issue arose when the technical and financial support provided by the Bureau in exchange for France's cultural products became a liability for France's politics of cultural development. Perhaps not during the early years of the Bureau's operations but by the early 1970s, the Bureau was becoming a costly political liability. It is clear that in giving assistance to cultural expression, the Bureau did not foresee the inevitable conflicts which were going to arise from its policies. The Bureau came under increasing attack from two sides: on one side were the African filmmakers, who criticized the Bureau's non-commercial distribution of their work and also pushed for better services and greater financial and technical assistance; on the other side, the Ministry of Cooperation and some of the African governments attacked the Bureau for providing support to films which they considered critical of or detrimental to governmental authority.³⁹

It is a well-known fact that the Film Bureau provided financial and technical assistance to African filmmakers in exchange for the non-commercial rights to their films.⁴⁰ What is not so apparent are the criteria used and formulas applied in determining the financial and technical support. In the actual operations of the Bureau there were concrete checks and balances within the administrative process as well as established procedures for providing technical and financial assistance which were logical and had a bottom line accountability.

The Bureau used two major policy precautions to minimize the economic and particularly the political risk factors involved in providing technical and financial assistance. First, funds for individual projects were rarely released directly to the African filmmakers; rather the allocated amount remained within the Bureau and was applied directly to the costs of the technical services, labs, editors, and sound mixing of a project which was billed to the Bureau.⁴¹ The second major policy precaution at the Bureau was a strong preference for completed films or works in progress.

Areas of financial and technical assistance have been separated so that different perspectives could be highlighted. In actuality, however, the purchase of the non-commercial rights, the project selection, and the assistance package were integrally related. A major administrative objective (which differs from the political considerations noted earlier) was to look at the work or project in order to determine whether technically there was a reasonable possibility that it could be completed. If the assessment made was that the assistance needed was reasonable and within the means of the Bureau, a package was put together and a contract was drawn up between the Film

Bureau and the producer, who could be either the filmmaker or a third party acting on behalf of the filmmaker. The assistance package included a combination of money, materials, and services, with the Bureau emphasizing materials and services over money.

Ousmane Sembène: The Exception and the Irony

Pressure on the French government and the Ministry of Cooperation by the African filmmakers for the reasons cited above accelerated the decline of the Film Bureau. The creation in 1969 of FEPACI and aggressive lobbying efforts for more assistance to African filmmakers and access to the lucrative commercial market for their films, as well as internal ministerial criticism, forced the French to re-evaluate their policies concerning cinema in particular as well as the overall Cooperative program of the Ministry.

Filmmakers with Marxist or critical perspectives, like Ousmane Sembène, did not gain access to the financial and technical resources provided by the CAI or the Film Bureau—both creations of the Ministry of Cooperation.

Sembène and his work posed a major dilemma for Debrix and the Bureau. Debrix had actually turned away Sembène when he originally approached the Bureau for guidance in studying film. Then later, he also turned down Sembène's scenario for "La noire de. . .," the first feature to be done by an African. Ironically, therefore, the first helping hand to one of the greatest African filmmakers came not from the Bureau but from André Zwobada, a highly respected French film professional with very powerful ministerial connections.⁴²

Zwobada, someone Debrix credits with being a figure instrumental in the birth of African cinema, does not return those generous accolades to Debrix or the Bureau:

*. . . Alors qu'est ce qu'il a dit. . . il a dit une simple phrase: "Ainsi fut-il porté assistance non seulement aux films de Sembène mais encore à l'un de ses plus chauds supporters, (c'est moi le supporter) un homme dont on ignore trop qu'il a été avec Jean Rouch (ça ce n'est pas vrai, Rouch n'a rien à voir là-dedans), à la naissance du jeune cinéma négro-africain." Je n'ai assisté à aucune naissance, je n'ai rien vu.*⁴³

[. . . Well, what did he say. . . He just said a sentence: "In this way help was given not only to Sembène's films but also to one of his strongest supporters (that means me), a man who should be much better known for having been present, together with Jean Rouch (that is not true; Rouch had nothing to do with this), at the birth of black African cinema." I was not present at any birth. I did not see anything.]

Zwobada, a seasoned French film professional, who also served as the chief editor of the *Actualités Françaises*, is highly contemptuous of Debrix and the whole concept of African cinema. Referring again to the statements by Debrix in the same article, Zwobada goes on to comment that Debrix had to cite him as one of the notable

people in the birth of African cinema or the reality of the Bureau would be exposed as a travesty. This cryptic comment refers to the fact that Zwobada, in his capacity as the head of the *Actualités Françaises*, the newsreel service of the government, made it possible for Sembène to film and edit his first films, and more importantly his first feature, "La noire de. . .," which was the first feature done by an African.⁴⁴ He also arranged for post-production editing to occur at the *Actualités Françaises* facilities at Geneville.

This of course is a *cause célèbre*: it is one of the ironies of the Film Bureau that the work of one of the greatest African filmmakers was not "brought to birth" by the Bureau, although the Bureau ultimately purchased the rights for non-commercial distribution of the film throughout those countries that were members of the French community. As one of Africa's leading exponents of *cinéma engagé*, Sembène created a tremendous stir in the governments of France and Africa through his films, which were profound Marxist critiques of African bourgeois corruption and France's neo-colonialism.

Zwobada's assistance to Sembène stemmed from his high personal regard for Sembène and his talent. Zwobada was intrigued and interested enough by Sembène and his work to set a precedent, which Zwobada could do because he had the means at his disposal.⁴⁵ Moreover, he was able to convince the Ministry of Cooperation that his support was in line with the policy for "African cultural development," and that the French could take credit for this.

The contact between Sembène and Zwobada was made by Paulin Vieyra, the director of the *Actualités Sénégalaises*, the government newsreel service. Through his connections with the Ministry of Cooperation and the CAI, Vieyra was able to introduce his friend Sembène to Zwobada, and the rest was history or, as Zwobada says, a *coup de foudre*. Although Sembène's future productions were to be realized with different means through his private company, Zwobada's intervention in the early films was pivotal in launching Sembène's work.⁴⁶

Having served as a director himself, as well as an assistant to Jean Renoir, Zwobada looks askance at the Bureau, blaming it and Debrix for giving the African filmmakers false expectations. Zwobada points out many of the political, philosophical and ideological contradictions within the Bureau:

Ce que je veux dire c'est que ce brave Debrix, qui est mort, paix à son âme, pensait que le cinéma africain pourrait naître en donnant de l'argent, en arrosant d'un peu d'argent partout. C'est prendre le système dans le mauvais sens. Le vrai sens c'est de produire un film et qu'il passe dans les salles. Mais donner à tous ces gens des espoirs qui sont faux! Ce n'est pas parce que vous donnez de l'argent à quelqu'un (au contraire, je crois qu'il ne faut pas lui donner de l'argent, il faut qu'il se débrouille tout seul, qu'il se batte comme Sembène s'est battu), mais. . . Et il y avait aussi une arrière pensée colonialiste dans tout ça. C'est à dire la France, la francophonie, etc. Et quand, avec Sembène, on a fait "La noire de. . .," ils étaient furieux. Ils pensaient que c'était contre la France. J'ai dit, "Non, ce n'est pas contre la France, c'est

l'expression de gens qui ont subi la France." Maintenant, ils pensent qu'ils sont libres. Debrix m'a dit "Mais comment avez-vous pu donner de l'argent pour ça, c'est contre la France. . . ." Je lui ai dit qu'à partir du moment où l'on mélange cette question de propagande politique de la France, il n'y aura jamais de cinéma africain, ce n'est pas possible. Alors tout ça c'est bien gentil, mais. . . J'avais de l'argent aux Actualités Françaises.⁴⁷

[What I mean is that the good Debrix—who has died, may his soul rest in peace—thought that African cinema could get a start if he gave some money, if he watered the soil everywhere with a little money. That is doing things the wrong way round. The right way is to produce a film and then see that it gets into the theaters. But it is not right to awaken false hopes in all these people! You don't get any results by giving someone money (on the contrary, I believe you should not give money. The person should make it on his own, should have to fight for what he wants, as Sembène had to do) but. . . Moreover, in all this there was a hidden colonialist agenda: of France, of francophonie, and so on. When we made "Black Girl" with Sembène, they were furious. They thought the film was directed against France. I told them, "No, it's not directed against France, it expresses the feelings of people who had France imposed on them." Now they consider themselves free. Debrix said to me, "But how could you give money for such a project directed against France. . ." I replied that once this question of French political propaganda was brought in, there would never be an African cinema at all. This was all very well, but. . . I had funds available at the *Actualités Françaises*.]

Sembène continued on to become one of the first African filmmakers to establish his own production company, Domirev, through which he either produced or co-produced his other films, again preserving his autonomy. With "Mandabi" in 1968, Sembène was the first African to receive funds from the *Centre National de la Cinématographie*, which required that he work with a French co-producer, *Comptoir Français du Film*. He insisted on and established a precedent of shooting the film in both French and Wolof. "Emitai" in 1971 was a Domirev production; "Xala" in 1974 a co-production with the *Société Nationale du Cinéma* created by Senegal. It was one of four films produced between 1974 and 1976 in one of the first but short-lived efforts of African governmental support to African filmmakers. "Ceddo" was also a distinctly unique production package, realized as a co-production between Domirev, the state, and the bank.

All of Sembène's films, even in this somewhat eclectic period of financial and technical assistance, maintained a degree of integrity, boldness and autonomy which is as distinctive as the content of the films he produced.

Conclusion

The power of the Ministry of Cooperation was sharply curtailed and dramatically restructured following the political upheavals in the late 1970s. The rise of the Socialist government of François Mitterrand in 1981 resulted in a shift of emphasis of the

French state from technical and financial assistance to individual countries, to a broader focus which would work through the regional grouping of francophone African states as represented by OCAM (*Organisation Commune Africaine et Mauricienne*). The objective was to begin to provide assistance which would lead to regional self-sufficiency. The Film Bureau came under closer scrutiny by the French government and was increasingly perceived as a political liability, particularly because it provided technical and financial assistance to individual filmmakers, which at times created political problems between France and disgruntled African governments angered by the content of some of the films.

The subsequent restructuring under Mitterand effectively dismantled the power and autonomy of the Ministry of Cooperation. Rather than working through the Film Bureau, the Mitterand government shifted assistance to the CIDC (*Comité Interafricain de Distribution Cinématographique*), CIPROFILM (*Consortium Interafricain de Production de Film*) and INAFEC (*Institut Africain d'Etudes Cinématographiques*) which were established in francophone Africa to encourage regional infrastructures in distribution, production and technical film training.⁴⁸

As black African cinema moves into its third decade, the obstacles to financial and technical self-sufficiency in production, distribution and exhibition have largely remained unresolved. Efforts to establish national film structures, or regional centers for distribution, exhibition and production have not resulted in viable, stable, and profitable ventures capable of supporting an independent African cinema. Filmmakers must still piece together the financial and technical package from largely foreign sources in order to produce their films, which in many instances still remain inaccessible to African audiences, due to the continued monopoly on commercial theaters held by European companies throughout francophone Africa. This does not infer that there is no hope for an autonomous African cinema, yet it reaffirms the piecemeal, displaced, and precarious process. Ancillary—not incidental—concerns about the paucity of scholarship and criticism of African cinema, minimal support from African governments for the African film industry and its filmmakers, and lack of access to African film audiences remain endemic issues for African cinema today.⁴⁹

Yet an African cinema is emerging from within, drawing on oral traditions, on indigenous languages, and on a growing body of African literature. This is happening in spite of or perhaps because of the obstacles in production, distribution and exhibition. A significant part of the history of African cinema lies within the search for resources and how African filmmakers surmounted the obstacles and detours along the way.

The salient details of those pioneering precedents established by Ousmane Sembène in securing the financial and technical resources to produce his films underscore the concomitant ironies and dilemmas his work presented to the cinematic initiatives launched by France through the Ministry of Cooperation in sub-Saharan Africa. Sembène's pioneering vision, revolutionary both in process and product, has left an indelible imprint on the 1961 to 1977 era and on the history of African cinema.