African Film Festivals in Focus

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One of the more dramatic developments in contemporary African Cinema has been the advent and proliferation of film festivals featuring subjects drawn from scenes of life in that continent. As quintessentially postcolonial phenomena, like film itself, these are rooted in the metropolitan-periphery relationships that once characterized colony and mother country. In recent years influenced by trends spoken of in shorthand as “globalization” such venues and events can underscore the internal and external contradictions of Africa's art and artists.

FILM FESTIVAL CONTEXTS

The modern African Film Festival has taken several forms. It can be held in Europe or America with an African theme and increasingly a continental marker for its title. Thus, the New York Film Festival now sponsors its annual African Film Festival in New York. Other American cities that have African film festivals include Washington, DC and the Pan-African Film Festival of Los Angeles, and Canada has African Film Festivals in both Toronto and Montreal. In Europe, the postcolonial presence of African migrants, whether as guest workers or one-time students as well as the position of African film as a prestige cultural icon, has given rise to a situation in which African Film is no longer merely a subset of an international festival seeking to establish its bona fides by determining what form the cinematic canon should take, such as Cannes. African film is shown across the continent, both in international festivals and festivals specifically aimed at African subjects. Now the circuit of cinemagoers can follow the linguistic networks established by the former colonial nexus to its Third World source or “root.” Therefore, Francophone viewers, perhaps introduced to African Film at a European or American site can later fly to Dakar, Algiers, Burkina Faso or Morocco to be part of the film scene there.

The next set of festivals, therefore, is that group which are performed inside Africa itself, including the biennial Panafriacan Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) held since 1969, South Africa's Sithengi and Durban International festivals, the Festival du Film de Quartier in Dakar, the Marrakech International Film Festival, and the Zambia International Film Festival, begun in 2002. These, however, are far more diverse than might be expected from the distance of Europe, America or even Asia, for they reflect historical conditions particular to each place.

Two relatively proximate examples are the 5th Zanzibar International Film Festival of the Dhow Countries or ZIFF, and the 4th Encounters South African International Documentary Festival, which I attended in June and July 2002. In both cases one senses much of the local and global drama of the African Film Festival. While festivals like these have been useful showcases for rising generations of African cultural workers, social documentarians and performers of many genres, they also exist within a framework perennially dominated by Western markets, distributors and dependent on foreign funders. Case in point, most of the support for the Zanzibar festival came from the European Union, most notably from Scandinavia on one hand, and from North America’s Ford Foundation, on the other. This support was advertised by banners that flew visibly from the heights of the House of Wonders. In this financial sense, therefore, the African Film Festival can be seen as at least partially an extension of globalism in so far as the political economy of film continues to be dominated by Western capital. In sharper terms, it is even possible to argue that this is a manifestation of cultural imperialism. Modern Africa's film festivals still cannot easily be mounted without such external support.

DEFINING IDENTITIES

Each of these festivals immediately poses a definitional question: What exactly is it that constitutes an African Film
Festival? Indeed this query begs another, namely, what is Africa? Separated by several hundred miles, there are clear correspondences between Zanzibar and South Africa. Zanzibar, the offshore constituent of the United Republic of Tanzania, grafted ideologically and bureaucratically onto its mainland cousin since 1964, is an arena of cultural convergence for the Western Indian Ocean. Coastal Cape Town and inland Johannesburg serve as the two clearly distinct canvases for the Encounters Festival. Known by many other sentimental names, one famously being “The Tavern of the Two Seas,” Cape Town has at its westernmost edge a promontory where both the Atlantic and Indian Oceans actually meet.

The populations of Zanzibar and Cape Town have in common a degree of racial, ethnic and religious heterogeneity which considerably exceeds that of their mainland and inland counterparts. In the former case, though Tanzania boasts scores of ethnic groups (still often known as their colonial overlords tended to designate them as “tribes”) the vast majority are usually considered to be “racially” marked as “Black.” Not so with Zanzibar or Cape Town where racial and religious admixtures impart another level of complexity to each locus. In each site Islam has a prominent place, more so within Zanzibar where nearly 90% of the inhabitants profess some variant of the faith revealed by Prophet Muhammad. The largest groupings are the Kiswahili speaking so-called Afro-Shirazi, formerly known as Hadimu and Tumbatu and tied historically to the mainland; the more recent immigrants from Oman, once exerting hegemony before and during British colonial days but now the remnants of a post-revolutionary reckoning with the past; a once large cohort of Southern Arabs, many from Yemen who occupied a menial station; and a still visible but declining “Asian” group that formerly controlled commerce as pre-colonial and colonial compradors.

Muslims are also influential in Cape Town as the descendants of “Cape Malay” slaves brought from Indonesia, and Indian Muslim merchants who migrated to the land during the nineteenth century. Numerically and culturally, however, no group is more evident and influential than those of Mixed Race, the so-called “Coloured” population as they were configured during apartheid before the thorough transformation in terminology ushered into rhetorical existence by the Black Consciousness Movement piloted by Steven Biko. While that moment has passed, leaving only the younger or most politicized generations with the residuum of identification with the Black majority, the larger question of hybridity, along with connections to a wider world, extending to Indonesia and the Islamized lands brings Cape Town cineastes into conversations that on occasion intersect with those of Zanzibar.

In both situations there is a fervent thrust by important sectors of the populace to strictly delineate the boundaries within which the terms used to define Africa and African are to be deployed. Substantial segments are invested in broadening the base of identity, even subjecting it to rigorous contestation so as not to focus it narrowly as “Black” alone. At the same time inhabitants of the places within which these festivals arose are possessive and proprietary regarding the perquisites associated with the social fact of their Africapacity.

COLONIAL LEGACIES

Even so, each festival’s setting is awash in reminders of the shadows of the colonial past. In Zanzibar, the impetus for the foundation of the festival resides with an expatriate American restauranteur, Emerson Skeens, who communicated the idea to colleagues on the island in the late nineties and claims credit for helping to see it realized. Among the richest and most powerful members of the community of outsiders who have made their homes on this picturesque spice island, Skeens knows precisely how it is run by the handful of local families who call all the shots. His luxurious eateries are centrally located and pivotal to the economy. In the style of the romantic
exile, Skeens conceived of this as a vehicle through which younger Zanzibaris could become more aware of their own proud historical heritage in the face of assaults of popular music and foreign images signifying cultural imperialism.

The bulk of the monies supporting the 2002 festival came from foreign foundations and the Scandinavian countries, with additional assistance from the United Kingdom. This was evident in the banners adorning the Beit Al Ajaib, or House of Wonders, a once palatial Sultanic residence now serving as the elegant headquarters for a modest National Museum. Entrepreneur extraordinaire Skeens also wields considerable power both behind the scenes and in public view, occupying one of the positions on the board of directors and instantly visible in his colorful combinations of West African robes, pants and matching headwear. No doubt as an acknowledgment of its aetiology and heterogeneity, as a society forged in cultural and commercial intercourse by peoples from the African interior, the opposing islands and every part of the Indian Ocean, it is critical to indicate that this festival has a lengthier albeit memorable subtitle, the international festival of the dhow countries (tansha za jahazi). The dhow (Arabic daw), a sailboat with a sturdy yet flexible lateen sail remains the quintessential motif of maritime Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, Hejazi and Mediterranean civilization. Indeed this seacraft celebrates what these seafaring social formations shared in common, from the Swahili City States to Portugal’s Seaborne Empire to the Indies (les Indes, da India). The dhow and its relatives were in their own very long time, la longue durée, an emblem of an earlier globalizing urge for more than a millennium. Commodities carried on these boats were also the cement of the commerce of these regions, including dates, precious woods for building and burning to release their fragrant scents, spices, ivory—and slaves. There are thus limits to our sentimentality over these seacraft.

The world represented in the films shown in this venue then extends beyond Africa in the continental sense and is connected organically and occupationally with oceans, lakes, rivers, streams, islands and mainlands with their opposing coastlines and their trade winds. Hence, offerings on view emanate not merely from Africa but from India, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Arabuni (the Arab lands), Egypt, as far west in Africa itself as Senegal, and all that lies between and beyond, as far as Africa’s diasporas in Europe and America. But Zanzibar’s history, particularly that crimson chapter catalyzing the revolution which precipitated the preemptive Union with mainland Tanganyika in 1964, render it indecisive whether the
present definition pertaining at ZIFF shall remain definitive. That revolution was in large part about identity in the island nation, and was waged by a suppressed Afro-Arab, or as they called themselves Afro-Shirazi majority, who rose up against the tyranny of an Omani Arab ruling minority that had considered them inferior culturally and racially. Since that time the character of Zanzibari identity has been contested in ways that are not always evident to outsiders but simmers under the surface between those who see it in racial terms and others who view it in cultural and economic terms. Because the society has long been a meeting place for people from Asia as well as Africa, the identification with people and places it has designated as “dhow countries” has been a compromise position, permitting cultural factors to trump racial identification.

In the instance of “Encounters,” a different brand of globalization is on display with its own unique postcolonial cast. The festival has its fraternal (as opposed to identical) twin urban centers, Johannesburg where African labor met European finance to extract gold and diamonds and Cape Town, the oldest outpost of the settler colony that served as mirror of the Western voyages to the Americas. Here, interrogation of how one constructs and conceives Africa seems equally vital. It has a very different valence viewed from the vantage point of the Sotho-Tswana or Nguni (Zulu and Xhosa) subdivisions of a Southern Bantu-speaking family of languages used interchangeably in ways baffling to even practiced alien ears in Jo’burg, for unless one grew up in the multilingual environment of the city of gold it may seem almost impossible to achieve command over the linguistic multiplicity with which one must contend each day. Unlike classroom versions of Zulu or Xhosa or Northern Sotho (Sepedi), Southern Sotho (Sesotho) or their cousin Tswana (Setswana), Johannesburg’s code switching speech is unique to that polyglot domain and not “pure” as say the Zulu of Kwazulu Natal, where it is spoken in its most “traditional” form. Along with English and Afrikaans, these languages and the physical prominence of brown-skinned people let you know that you are in Africa of the labor reserves, as Samir Amin once characterized them, whose labor power made possible the erection of the unforgettable Johannesburg skyline.

By contrast, while African labor is unremarkable in Cape Town, the shades of hue are likelier to be the full spectrum of browns: olive tan to sepia with a median as light copper, characteristic of this “Coloured” enclave, an ethnonym directly translated from the Afrikaans kleurlinge. Here Afrikaans is spoken by Brown and White alike, albeit subtly differently, at times as distinctly as between what in North America might distinguish the many dialectical variants of “Black” English from its standard “White” mainstream variety. Not that one will not hear Sotho, Tswana, Xhosa and Zulu here, but in the environment of the Encounters Film Festival, Whites and Mixed Race persons dominate, with English and Afrikaans the principal vectors of communication, as brown-skinned Africans take part but are still primarily either spectators or participant-observers who are selling their labor there.
NEW PERFORMANCES

Zanzibar and Cape Town were created in eras of global transformation. Both have pasts in which slavery and slave trading loomed large indeed becoming a vital part of the engine of the commercial development of their political economies. At the same time each has been a site of ethnic, racial, religious, in sum, cultural contestation. This process has continued unabated into the present day. These two film festivals are part of that reckoning as the local faces the global and as the forces who exerted hegemony in the past are being challenged by those they so efficiently oppressed in order to achieve overlordship. It has often been said that culture is a class product. Even in this ostensible Post-Marxian epoch this statement continues to have more than a kernel of truth. For Zanzibaris, the civilization of Kiswahili, the language of their islands and adjacent coastlands, from the Somali Horn south as far as Mozambique has also been an Arabizing one. This is exemplified in the word that Kiswahili speakers use to designate civilization, ustaarabu, literally "Arabness." Historically to be civilized in this part of the world has implied being or living like an Arab.

For Islamized Africans that has been a double-edged sword, both a blessing and a curse. That ZIFF is positioned as a festival of the dhow countries rather than an East African Film festival reveals that the combat has not ended. While no one has the right to dictate to the peoples of Zanzibar what form their identification should take, it is noteworthy that ZIFF still has to wrestle with this possibly irreconcilable contradiction of race, place and space.

In a like manner, "Encounters," particularly in its Capetonian context has been the product of the cultural and intellectual prowess of its European-descended progenitors. But it would be doing the festival a disservice to leave it at that, as Mixed Race persons are in the ascendant here, along with their African auxiliaries who are being trained as producers, directors, actors, screen writers, sound technicians, camera people and cinematographers. Here and in Zanzibar, especially, workshops geared toward teaching movie making have been crucial. In both settings locally made films are exhibited alongside better capitalized foreign-funded features. And yet it will be a while before we are able to see whether the African sets of these festivals are more than backdrops to performances of neocolonialism.

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