

# *Lutas de Mulheres no Cinema de África e do Médio Oriente*





# African Women of the Screen: an Agenda for Research

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Presented as an agenda for future research and study, this paper gives an overview of selected topics and issues that have and continue to be of relevance to African women in cinema studies.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The role of the filmmaker in knowledge production

Since the start of my work on African women in cinema in the mid-1990s, I have worked extensively in developing a methodology, theoretical framework, and historiography for pedagogy, research and scholarship towards an “African women in cinema studies”. While analysis and critiques are essential to this endeavour, fundamental to my approach is the direct engagement with women’s voices, to consider their intentions and to understand their process. I have attempted to maintain direct contact as much as possible. And through the game changing platforms of social media, I have been able to follow trends, updates and on-going activities. Though my methodological choice is based on a personal anecdote, it has been the cornerstone of my work. I have long been humbled by an experience with a filmmaker who I encountered during the start of my research, when she explained to me that she was quite capable of explicating her own work and writing about it. While we did have an interview, those words had a profound influence on my work, as it forced me to reframe her role as a filmmaker in the context of knowledge production. As Senegalese filmmaker/anthropologist Safi Faye uses her camera to listen to and learn from her interlocutors – especially their oral histories my inquiry has been informed by the voices, discourse and experiences of African women of the screen. Hence the majority of my work is based on African women makers as “primary sources” of my study and research, an approach that I find lacking in many Western analyses of African women in cinema. Additionally, my research is influenced by the tenets of the African women research organisation AAWORD/AFARD which argues that African women are the proponents of research about their lives and experiences and are better placed to perceive

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this paper have been introduced, discussed and presented in varying versions and stages of analysis in: Beti Ellerson. ‘Towards an African Women in Cinema Studies’. *Journal of African Cinemas*. 4.2. (2012): 221-228; Beti Ellerson. ‘Reflections on Cinema Criticism and African Women’. *Feminist Africa* 16 (2012): 37-52; Beti Ellerson. ‘African Women in Cinema’ An Overview’. Jyoti Mistry and Atje Schuhmann. Eds. *Gaze Regimes: Film and Feminisms in Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, (2015): 1-9; Beti Ellerson. ‘African Women of the Screen at the Digital Turn.’ Special Report. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 10 (Winter 2015–16). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078; Beti Ellerson, ‘African Women and the Documentary: Storytelling, Visualizing History, from the Personal to the Political.’ *Black Camera* 8.1 (2016); Beti Ellerson. ‘Traveling gazes: Glocal imaginaries in the transcontinental, transnational, exilic, migration and diaspora cinematic experiences of African women.’ *Black Camera* 8.2 (2017).

the situation of African women in the African context and make recommendations based on their findings.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, I have observed that discourse on African women in cinema often uses a deficit-based approach when proposing a study, research, seminar or programming, citing the absence of women, the dearth of realistic and positive representation, the lack of funding, of support, and a litany of other difficulties as the reason for doing said activity. And while all the above may exist, my interest has been to employ another epistemological approach. A strength-based perspective reposes questions that take into account the potentials and assets rather than the drawbacks. A method much like South African film school director and filmmaker Masepeke Sekhukhuni, who encourages women, intimidated by the film equipment and the overall mystification of cinema, to go inside their own lives to find parallel experiences, such as storytelling and household management and direction. Similarly, Burkinabè Fanta Regina Nacro debunked the preconceived notions and disparaging attitudes about women's technical abilities, when at the start of her foray into filmmaking she employed a crew made up predominantly of women for her first film.

Beyond all the reasons for the difficulties that exist, what motivates my research are the reasons why women continue and are passionate about their work. I am interested in knowing about their support networks and resources, their mentors and their references, their sources of empowerment, the circumstances of their successes despite the challenges. My interest as well is to trace their journey, to follow their development, and to investigate how and why they make the choices they do.

The question that I propose as point of departure is “what are the things that work?” Rather than what does not. What do they have to bring to the profession? Rather than why they cannot, for whatever reason, write, produce, make films. This strategy is much more indicative of their realities, in societies where women have always exhibited resourcefulness whatever the situation.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this methodology highlights the theory-practice-activist approach to African women's work.

## 2. African women's cinematic gaze as alternative discourse: a theory-practice-activist approach

While feminist film criticism and women cinema studies have emerged largely within the academy in the West, I observe a theory/critique-practice/activism approach among many African women makers, whose cinematic expression and filmmaking are performed concomitantly with the interest of their academic studies—in many cases advanced study, their other professional work and/or political advocacy. This interdisciplinarity is indicative of the long-standing practice of using filmmaking, the camera, as a tool to enhance, support, probe, tease out, the issues, ideas, subject matter that is directly connected to the careers and/or politics of African women makers. For example, Zimbabwean Chido Matewa's PhD thesis investigates the pioneering initiatives of the Africa Women Filmmakers Trust (AWFT), using participatory video in development in diverse regions.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Association of African Women for Research and Development/Association des femmes africaines pour la recherche sur le développement, <http://www.afard.org/en/> (last accessed 22 December 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Ellerson, Beti (2014), Keynote speech at colloquy 'Francophone African Women Filmmakers: 40 years of cinema, Paris (1972-2012). See published version: "African Women Directors: Edited version of a speech given at the colloquy 'Francophone African Women Filmmakers: 40 years of cinema, Paris (1972-2012)'. In *Celluloid Ceiling: women film directors breaking through*, eds. Gabrielle Kelly and Cheryl Robson. UK: Supernova Books, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Matewa, Chido (2016), 'Case Study of Africa Women Filmmakers Trust in Media and the Empowerment of Communities for Social Change.' A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of PhD in the Faculty of Education, 2002. <http://www.comminit.com/en/node/206592/307> (last accessed 22 December 2016).

It is evident that most women makers have particular interests that motivate the content of their films. However to highlighting the intersectional practice of film work and advanced studies and/or professional work, and more specifically how it has informed their work and their cinematic gaze, brings out the possibilities of probing a less-researched area. I use the term cinematic gaze broadly to embrace makers, cultural readers, and cultural producers/activist/advocates; all who work to ensure that images by and about African women exist, are promoted, disseminated and interpreted. African women's "alternative discourse" is rooted in these interdisciplinary practices that have been fundamental to their organising principles since the early experiences of Africa women in cinema.

Notably, Togolese filmmaker/international lawyer Anne-Laure Folly Reimann's notion of African women's voices as "alternative discourse" is an intersectional framework in which to position African women's cinematic gaze directly within their lived experiences, those of their society, and of the continent as a whole. Hence, locating the concept of an "alternative discourse" within standpoint theory offers an analysis of the practices and experiences of African women of the screen as dynamic, changing, evolving and plural. A standpoint theory of African women in cinema proposes an approach that recognises that their perspectives are shaped by their social, cultural and political experiences and histories.

Elsewhere I have introduced this "alternative discourse" conceptual framework<sup>5</sup> drawing from Folly Reimann's assertion that an African women's "perspective does not simply analyse things; they live them." Similarly, Safi Faye considers the African specificities regarding women and their experiences, rather than creating a female character for the sake of a "feminist agenda." She describes her perspective as *feminisante*,<sup>6</sup> which I loosely translate from French as "feministing", doing "feminist" work, defending the cause of women. She finds that African societies do a great deal for the advancement and empowerment of women and these issues are often explored in African films. One must search within the film narrative and consider women's experience in the context of the society.<sup>7</sup> Faye problematizes her female protagonists by presenting the opposing sides of women's experiences. She describes this schism in reference to the women in the film *Selbé* (1983): "at the heart of misery they triumph. To achieve one's independence, one must realise one's dependence." Similarly, caught within opposing sides, the eponymous Mossane lives in a space "between rebellion and effacement." On a continuum of female representation, as a discourse on the evolution of womanhood/womanness, one finds in Faye's *Mossane* (1996) the opposing forces of women's experiences.

In *Sambizanga* (1972), Sarah Maldoror situates the protagonist Maria within the political environment of the liberation movement at the time, especially women's position within it. Rather than as a super-heroine or a leader at the forefront of the liberation struggle, Maria's consciousness evolves throughout her journey and the spectator follows her long, painful, arduous passage. As Sarah Maldoror emphasises, women do not have to carry bazookas to actively participate in the struggle.<sup>8</sup> Maria's evolving consciousness, subtly revealed at the end of the film, is fundamental to the process of change.

5 Ellerson, Beti (2012), 'Towards an African Women in Cinema Studies'. *Journal of African Cinemas*. 4.2. (2012): 221-228, Beti Ellerson. 'Reflections on Cinema Criticism and African Women'. *Feminist Africa* 16 (2012): 37-52.

6 The word is used very narrowly in French, though my interpretation of Safi Faye's use of the word to Senegalese journalists for a Senegalese newspaper, was in response to their question regarding her being a feminist: «Je ne suis pas du tout féministe je suis féminisante. Je défends le cas des femmes...» *Sud Week-End - N.º 1054*, 12 octobre 1996. Rejecting the identity of feminist she describes herself alternatively as "feminisante" in the same way that many black women in the United States embraced "womanist" over the label "feminist".

7 Gendered Sensibilities and Female Representation in African Cinema. African Women in Cinema Blog, published 23 April 2009. <http://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2009/04/gendered-sensibilities-and-female.html> (last access 22 December 2016).

8 Sezirahiga, Jadot (1995), Interview with Sarah Maldoror. *Ecrans d'Afrique/African Screen* N.º 12, p. 6.

### 3. Identity, positionality and screen practices

The general practice in African cinema scholarship and discourse has been the use of an all-encompassing definition of “cinema” to include the myriad aspects of screen culture (i.e. film, television, video), which at the present is complicated even more by the diversity of screen devices on which the moving image may be captured and viewed (i.e. Internet, tablet, mobile phone). In addition, the term, filmmaker, director, cineaste, etc. has been equally fluid in designating the creator of the moving image whatever the medium. Moreover, the frequency or infrequency of film production has never been a factor in determining who is or is not considered a “filmmaker”. In other words, one who has produced only one film and whose main career is generally in another area (i.e. Thérèse Sita-Bella, Cameroon and Efua Sutherland, Ghana), merits the title in the same way that a prolific maker does. And finally, the inherent transnational nature of the cohort of early African filmmakers, who often navigated outside of their home country to study, work and live, adds an additional layer of identity to the term “African cinema”, especially as a third generation of makers may have been born or raised outside of the continent. Hence, they have a different identification with Africa than the student or filmmaker immigrants of the past. Therefore designations such as diasporic, exilic, transnational and “accented”<sup>9</sup> have been assigned to describe African filmmakers who live and work outside of the continent but who do not wholly identify their work and experiences as part of the hostland nor functioning within it, rather at the interstices of the hostland and homeland.

The purpose for outlining these specificities above is to consider the challenge of undertaking the tremendous endeavour of assignment of identity, of the geography of positionality, of the social location of privilege. In an interview I had with Nigerian-British Ngozi Onwurah in 1997 she noted that there were very different experiences between African/black women living on the continent and those who live in the West and expressed concern that there were not enough distinctions made between them. Hence in some ways she has opened a dialogue regarding the issue of privilege in the sense of positionality and social location. And as I stated elsewhere, it would be insightful to revisit that point to investigate the impact of these disparities, these differences;<sup>10</sup> especially in light of the inherited diasporic/exilic identity of a first generation born in the hostland of their parents. Similarly, German-Ghanaian Jacqueline Nsiah brings out these Western/African disparities. In a 2016 interview with me regarding her research, she stated that the main objective for a majority of Ghanaian diasporans is to return to the country on behalf of their parents in order to contribute to nation building, which their parents were unable to do. She also emphasised the other side of the diasporic migration flow: about those Ghanaians, less fortunate than the diasporan returnees who because of their professional status, are in a position of privilege to enter to work in coveted jobs, seek to leave in hopes of finding a better life in the West.<sup>11</sup>

As Hamid Naficy reminds us “westerling journeys are particularly valued, partly because they reflect... the general flow of value worldwide.”<sup>12</sup> Hence my caution regarding a disproportionate focus on African filmmakers and film production located in the West

<sup>9</sup> Naficy, Hamid (2001), *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Discussed in Beti Ellerson. ‘Traveling gazes: Glocal imaginaries in the transcontinental, transnational, exilic, migration and diaspora cinematic experiences of African women.’ *Black Camera* 8.2 (2017).

<sup>11</sup> Ghanaian-German Jacqueline Nsiah’s digital Sankofa storytelling experience and other diasporic journeys. African Women in Cinema Blog, published 26 October 2015. <http://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2015/10/ghanaian-german-jacqueline-nsiahs.html> (last accessed 22 December 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Naficy, Hamid (2001), *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton University Press.

or appropriated by Western discourse, less they hegemonize the important African-based experiences that may have fewer possibilities to be heard and showcased.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Training, formation and cinematic identity

Though a less researched topic, the training and formation experiences of African women have been fundamental to their cinematic identities that were shaped by these practices. The iconic *Afrique sur Seine* (Africa on the Seine), directed in 1955 by Paulin Soumanou Vieyra and his colleagues (Robert Caristan, Jacques Mélo Kane, Mamadou Sarr) while in film school in Paris, is a seminal work in the history of African cinema production. As colonial subjects of French West Africa, these African students migrated to France to study; and because they were not permitted to film in, at the time, French Colonial Africa, they constructed an Africa in Paris posing the question as a point of departure for the film: Is Africa in Africa, on the banks of the Seine, or in the Latin Quarter?

Revisited by the “grandchildren” of *Afrique sur Seine* more than sixty years later, the film continues to be relevant to a third generation of African filmmakers, which is indicative of the ubiquitous flow, exchange and influences inherent in the fluidity and circulation of peoples, ideas, and experiences within the global African world. And perhaps more significantly, it reveals the indelible impact on African cinematic discourse of these initial attitudes regarding identity. For her graduation film, *Une Africaine sur Seine* (An African Woman on the Seine), Senegalese Ndèye Maramé Guèye revisits *Afrique sur Seine*, posing many of the same questions about home, place, location and subjectivity explored two generations before; her concluding remarks in the film:<sup>14</sup> *Beautiful images will have to be born again in the Sahara<sup>15</sup>, envisioned by the grandchildren of [Paulin Soumanou Vieyra] from an imaginary born of the rivers of Africa, and not of the waters of the Seine<sup>16</sup>.*

And yet, as the exchange of ideas, visions, dialogue and knowledge increasingly globalizes, Ndèye Maramé Guèye’s pronouncement is perhaps more symbolic than an actual prognosis for future generations of African makers. That she utters these words in a student film made in Paris, is indicative of the earlier practice that persists in the present: of student migration to the West to study and later settle to live and work, which is often due to the lack of film training in Africa as a whole, although there are schools and institutes that are steadily emerging throughout the continent. However, most return to their home countries after their studies, making important contributions to local, regional and continental cinema cultures. Conversely, there is a generation of first-gens who were born in the host country of their immigrant parents, which they call home, or the bi-racial and/or bi-cultural women whose parents met and settled in or returned to the country of one of the parents; or in still another “journey of identity”, who acquired their global hybrid identity as “third-culture individuals” during a childhood with expatriate parents who

<sup>13</sup> Discussed in Beti Ellerson. ‘Traveling gazes: Glocal imaginaries in the transcontinental, transnational, exilic, migration and diaspora cinematic experiences of African women.’ *Black Camera* 8.2 (2017).

<sup>14</sup> An African woman on the Seine | Une Africaine sur Seine by/de Ndèye Maramé Guèye – 60 years after | 60 ans après, L’Afrique sur Seine by/de Paulin Soumanou Vieyra. African Women in Cinema Blog, published 3 November 2016. <http://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2016/03/an-african-woman-on-seine-une-africaine.html> (last accessed 22 December 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Djibril Diop Mambety had already planted the seed of change in attitude when he made the film *Touki Bouki*. He had this to say in our 1997 interview: “It is about those days when we dreamed of going abroad. We dreamed the white’s dream of making movies. It was as if we were foreigners in our own homes here in Africa. Foreigners because our “everything” was abroad. It is there that you go to succeed, to make pictures. Twenty-five years later, I realized that it was not true. I escaped from that ugly dream. I wanted my generation and all Africans to escape from that dream too. And build our country where we are not foreigners. Forget those dreams of elsewhere. Let us dream our dreams and plant our seeds here in Africa.” (See Sinemaabi: <http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=5759>, last access 22 December 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Translation from French by author.

worked in the United Nations system or other international institutions or who taught or worked as professionals in host countries—some remaining outside of Africa, and others returning to the continent.<sup>17</sup>

This push-pull between global and local has been a recurrent practice among African women of the screen. Some traveling abroad to study and settling there afterwards, while others returning to their home country. And still others, who have trained at home and are based there, travel abroad for opportunities for additional instruction and other opportunities. Conversely, some women who were born and raised in the West return to their ancestral homeland with hopes of making a contribution. Hence, there is an increasingly visible cohort of glocal women who have the geo-political means to live and work between their “two countries”.

As indicated above, France has been host country to African student migrations since Africans first entered the world of cinema as practitioners with the 1955 film *Afrique sur Seine*. Although the United States is not well known as a site for early African student migrations in filmmaking among women, there were a few women among the first generation of U. S.-trained African filmmakers in the 1970s-80s. Notably, among the students in the iconic “L. A. Rebellion” at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), a film movement of the 1970s and 80s whose objective was to legitimise African, African American and Native experiences and visual representation by confronting Eurocentric aesthetics and questioning western culture as the point of reference in film language and elements of style.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the 1990s and first two decades of the millennium witnessed a significant cohort of African alumnae from film schools across the United States. Likewise, the first wave of women of African descent studying cinema in Germany may be traced to the early 1990s, a period with an abundance of cultural and intellectual discourse around identity, representation and visibility.<sup>19</sup>

A parallel movement of women’s cinematic development was taking place on the African continent. The historic film school INAFEC, the Institut Africain d’Education Cinématographique (1976-1987), was an important training ground for many of the first generation of women in Burkinabè cinema. Perhaps even more significant is the role that Burkina Faso has played as a proponent of African cinema culture as early as 1969 with the creation of the pan African film festival, FESPACO—a woman, Burkinabè Salimata Salembéré, was among the co-founders, and FEPACI, the pan African federation of filmmakers, whose headquarters has been, for the majority of its existence, based in the capital, Ouagadougou. Hence Burkina Faso has encouraged a cinema culture, and has been in a strategic position to nourish and empower women in cinema. Similarly, Tunisia, which is home to the Carthage Film Festival created in 1966, has cultivated an important cinema culture, and has a tradition of producing a substantial number of women filmmakers. Likewise, Senegal has long been a centre of culture on the continent, hosting the First World Festival of Black Arts in 1966, during which pioneer African films were screened, including Cameroonian Thérèse Sita Bella’s 1963 film *Tam Tam à Paris*. Senegal’s illustrious list of Africans in cinema offers a background to a discussion about the rich history of Senegalese women in cinema. To highlight a few on this impressive list: Ousmane Sembene (1923-2007), the father of African cinema, Paulin Soumanou Vieyra (1925-1987), the father of African film history and criticism, Djibril Diop Mambety (1945-1998), avant-garde

<sup>17</sup> Ellerson, Beti (2017), “Traveling gazes: Glocal imaginaries in the transcontinental, transnational, exilic, migration and diaspora cinematic experiences of African women.” *Black Camera* 8.2.

<sup>18</sup> “The Story of L.A. Rebellion”. <https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/la-rebellion/story-la-rebellion> (last accessed 22 December 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Ellerson, Beti (2017), “Traveling gazes: Glocal imaginaries in the transcontinental, transnational, exilic, migration and diaspora cinematic experiences of African women.” *Black Camera* 8.2.



filmmaker, Annette Mbaye d'Erneville, veteran journalist, communications specialist, critic and writer, Safi Faye and Thérèse Mbissine Diop, pioneer actress and tapestry-maker. Annette Mbaye d'Erneville, a pioneer of Senegalese media culture, carries with aplomb the name that her son, Ousmane William Mbaye attributes to her in *Mere-bi*, ("Mother of All") a documentary that he made about her life. D'Erneville studied in Paris in the late 1940s becoming the first Senegalese to earn a professional degree in journalism. In 1990, she created RECIDAK, Rencontres cinématographiques de Dakar, an annual film festival, and was its director for many years. Later she initiated the film journal *Ciné Culture Afrique*. According to her, women as cultural producers should be empowered to express themselves, to bear witness of their time, and reflect a realistic image of Africa in their own lives. In Kenya, several of the pioneering women in cinema studied at the Kenyan Film Training Department at the Kenya Institute of Mass Communication. Wanjiku Beatrice Mukora's research on the history of cinema in Kenya discusses the important role that women have played in the formation of a Kenyan national cinema.<sup>20</sup> In Zimbabwe, the organisation WFOZ, Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe, created in 1996, has had as one of its main objectives to train more women for the film industry. The organisation continues to play a strategic part in the promotion and development of Zimbabwean women in cinema as well as regional and continent-wide collaboration and outreach. Filmmaker/writer, Tsitsi Dangaremba, a prominent member of the WFOZ, suggests that the organisation has had a key role in the development of most of filmmaking practitioners in Zimbabwe, further encouraging a study to find out to what extent. In terms of contemporary experiences, five examples may be explored from the significant output of *alumnae* at Imagine Institut in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso: the Master 2 programme in Creative Documentary at the Université Gaston Berger in Saint-Louis and the Média Centre Dakar, both in Senegal, the Newtown Film and Television School in Johannesburg, South Africa, and the exciting group of women who attended Fulbright scholar Lucy Gebre-Eghziabher's "Telling Herstory" screenwriting workshop in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2015. Taking on Dangaremba's challenge directly, I encourage advanced research and study on the role that film training and film school experience has on the cinematic gaze of individual filmmakers and the development of a cinema culture spirit among the cohort of makers. Moreover, the article as a whole has outlined an agenda for research and study of topics that I have introduced variously in presentations and articles during the past decade and have attempted on different levels to deepen and elaborate the discourse.

<sup>20</sup> Mukora, Wanjiku Beatrice (1999), Master's Thesis. McGill University. Disrupting binary divisions: representation of identity in Saikati and Battle of the sacred tree.