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Idrissa Ouedraogo, The Maestro of Burkinabe Cinema

Boukary Sawadogo

Burkina Faso is internationally known as the home of the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), which was created in 1969. FESPACO was born in a context of cultural nationalism which swept through the newly independent African countries, with certain countries such as Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), Senegal, Benin, and Tanzania having nationalized their film distribution circuits in which the French companies SECMA and COMACICO had held monopolistic positions since the 1920s. Burkina Faso was the first Sub-Saharan African country to nationalize its film distribution by creating the Société Nationale Voltaïque du Cinéma (SONAVOCI) on January 5, 1970 (Bachy 11). As a result of this nationalization, a film fund, “Fonds de Développement du Cinéma Voltaïque,” was created to develop a national film industry by allocating 10 percent of SONAVOCI’s turnover (ticket sales) to the fund. This fund, according to Victor Bachy, enabled the making of the first Burkinabe feature film, *Le sang des parias* (The Blood of Pariahs, 1972) by Djim Mamadou Kola, followed by the second Burkinabe feature, *Sur le chemin de la réconciliation* (On the Road to Reconciliation, 1976) by René Bernard Yonli. The development of Burkinabe cinema is relatively young in comparison to other francophone West African countries such as Senegal (represented by Ousmane Sembène) and Niger (as seen in the works of Oumarou Ganda and Moustapha Alassane), which have been producing critically acclaimed films since the mid-1960s. Burkinabe cinema did not gain international recognition until 1980–1990, which I refer to as the golden decade of Burkinabe cinema, with Gaston Kaboré and Idrissa Ouedraogo as the two prominent figures of this era and beyond. The passing of Idrissa Ouedraogo on February 18, 2018, has left an unfillable void due to the magnitude of his contribution to Burkinabe and African cinema.

Nicknamed “Maestro” for his creative brilliance, Idrissa Ouedraogo completed his training as first of the inaugural class of the Pan African film school “Institut Africain d’Études Cinématographiques de Ouagadougou,” which opened in 1977. The cinema prodigy produced more than thirty films in his career from several different genres, beginning with *Poko* (1981),

which won the best short film prize at FESPACO, and including *Yam Dabo* (Choice, 1986), *Yaaba* (1989), *Tilai* (Law, 1991), which was awarded the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes Film Festival in 1990 and the highest prize “Étalon d’or” at FESPACO in 1991, the thriller *Samba Traoré* (1992), *Kimi & Adams* (1997), and the TV series *Kadi Jolie* (2001) and *Cent jours pour convaincre* (2017). The cinema of Burkina Faso gained international attention through Ouedraogo’s productive career and the numerous awards he won for his films.

The 1980s films by the trio Idrissa Ouedraogo, Kollo Daniel Sanou (*Paweogo* [Emigrant], 1982), and Gaston Kaboré (*Wend Kuuni* [God’s Gift], 1982 and *Zan Boko*, 1988) laid the foundation for the further development of the country’s cinema. The films by Ouedraogo and Kaboré from this time period share similarities in that they are usually set in historical village settings, with a particular focus on social exclusion. This kind of cinema is also evident in later productions such as *Delwende* (Stand up and Walk, 2005) by Pierre Yaméogo, about women wrongly accused of witchcraft. This social conscious cinema (three-pronged topics of exclusion, children, and village) is referred to by Denise Brahimi as the school of Burkina Faso (89).

With respect to the emergence of new Burkinabe talent, Idrissa Ouedraogo helped launch the directorial careers of two women filmmakers, Apolline Traoré and Aminata Diallo-Glez. He produced Traoré’s early films such as *Kounandi* (2004) and *Sous la claret de la lune* (2004). Diallo-Glez, who was the protagonist in the TV series *Kadi Jolie* (2001), is now an established producer who created the TV series *super flics* (2008) and *Trois femmes, un village* (Three Women, One Village, 2009). Concerning the emergence of TV series in the audiovisual landscape in Burkina Faso, Idrissa Ouedraogo may be regarded as one of its pioneers and primary advocates. The scarcity of funding in the post-1990s and the desire to make local productions more accessible to the public through television, the “televisual turn” as Moradewun Adejunmobi describes this development in African film distribution, led Ouedraogo to embrace the production of TV series, namely *Karim and Sala* (1991), *Kadi Jolie* (2001), *Djarabi* (2016), and *Cent jours pour convaincre* (2017).

While Idrissa Ouedraogo pragmatically embraced television genres to continue to be productive in his craft, his approach to filmmaking continued to be based on the celluloid and on his proper training as a storyteller in cinematic arts. This conception of filmmaking has not always endeared him to the younger generation of Burkinabe filmmakers, to whom the video and digital format represent a viable option in terms of means of production and accessibility for self-taught audiovisual storytellers. Nevertheless, for almost four decades, Idrissa Ouedraogo left his distinctive mark on the development and new orientations of the cinema of Burkina Faso.