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## Review of The New York African Film Festival, Lincoln Center, May 12-17, 2022

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**The New York African Film Festival, Lincoln Center, May 12-17, 2022**

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One of my favorite things to do every year in New York is attend its African Film Festival ([the NYAFF](#)). I have written about it a couple times before in this blog [[here](#)] and my other blog [[here](#)]. The festival has always had a Pan-African spirit, so it includes black films from across the world, not only filmmakers living in Africa, but also the African Diaspora in the Caribbean, North and South America, and Europe. Often, the films are followed by 30-minutes of Q&A time with the director and/or some of the actors so that people in the audience can ask questions or just express their opinion of the film.

If you're unfamiliar with the structure of the NYAFF, there are actually three parts. The first part is the premier of mostly new films at Lincoln Center which hosts the filmmakers and includes the Q&A time and parties, etc. The second part is a focus on documentary at the Maysles Cinema in Harlem. And the third part at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) coincides with the African dance festival, and this part repeats some of the films from the previous year along with other films of interest, some old, some new. Unfortunately, I had to travel during the Maysles and BAM parts this year.

The new movies that I saw at Lincoln Center were *Freda* (directed by Gessica Génés, Haiti), *Vuta K'Kuvute/Tug of War* (directed by Amil Shivji, Tanzania), *Abderrahmane Sissako, un cinéaste a l'Opéra* (directed by Charles Castella, France), and *Ayaanle* (directed by Ahmed Farah, Somalia and Kenya). In addition to these new films, I also saw an old film made in 1982: *Jom, the Story of a People* (directed by Ababacar Samb-Makharam, Senegal.) I also attended a seminar with the Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima and another seminar about "social impact cinema" on the topic of water scarcity and climate change. In addition to the films I saw in the theater, this year, for the first time, the festival tried a hybrid format. This was something learned from the COVID pandemic lockdown. What this meant for NYAFF is that some films were streamed online instead of projected in theaters, and so, in the comfort of my own home, I watched *Juju Stories* (directed by Abba T. Makama, Michael Omonua, and C.J. Obasi, Nigeria) and *The Gravedigger's Wife* (directed by Khadar Ayderus Ahmed, Somalia and Finland.) There were many films I didn't have time to see, because, of course, I'm also a professor and it was in the middle of my school's final exam week, but you can see the Lincoln Center schedule [[here](#)].

On Thursday at Lincoln Center in Manhattan, I watched the new Haitian movie *Freda*, and after the film, its director Gessica Génés was there to talk with the audience. This was the opening night for the festival, and the theater was packed. Some special guests were dressed up for the invite-only after-party. My friend and I were a bit star struck when we discovered also sitting in the audience was the glamorous Senegalese-French actress [Aïssa Maïga](#), and we were somewhat disappointed that we weren't going to attend the after-party. (But to be honest, I'm a little shy anyways.)

This film is about a young woman named Freda and her relations with her mother, sister, and boyfriend during a time of political protest in Haiti in 2018. Some shots of the political protest will feel shockingly real to the audience, and as the director later explained to us when she was asked

about that, that's because they are -- these are not recreated dramatizations, but shots they took while they were there experiencing the protests. These political events and conversations Freda has with her fellow college students about them are only part of the context for the story. The film really centers the daily experiences of the three women as they do their best to manage their lives. Freda's sister is a light-skinned beauty who seeks to marry a wealthy man, but sadly this man turns out to be abusive. Meanwhile, Freda's boyfriend is an artist who wants her to leave Haiti with him for a better life, while her mother struggles to save face and find spiritual salvation from a history of sexual violence. Meanwhile, Freda and her sister enjoy listening to hip hop and reggae music at the local club. The film layers the various dimensions of social reality and complex issues that affect their lives in a way that is beautiful and rewarding. One thing that I appreciated is how the film does not aim to judge or moralize, but allows us to appreciate and respect the difficult decisions that the characters have to make even if those decisions turn out to have unfortunate consequences. This includes a very sensitive exploration of the sadness and dilemma of Freda's romantic, artist boyfriend. *Freda* is certainly a film to look out for, and I am confident that it will soon become available on some streaming platform.

The audience was deeply moved by this major achievement by a Haitian filmmaker, and when you attend the NYAFF, it's always the case that the audience is global, coming from all over the world. One member of the audience from a different island in the Caribbean, exclaimed, "when I watch your film, I see my country in your country." And truly, his comment epitomizes the soul of the NYAFF -- comradery across cultures and nations among people of color from all over the world. The festival is a place where universal experience is discovered and rediscovered in films about unique situations.

The next night, Friday, I saw [Tug of War](#), which is a beautifully composed, romantic historical drama set on the island of Zanzibar in the year 1954. It is adapted from the popular Swahili novel *Vuta N'Kuvute* by Adam Shafi. The film tells the love story between an African communist revolutionary named Denge, who is fighting to liberate Tanzania from British colonial rule, and an Indian-Zanzibari woman named Yasmin, who is running from an abusive marriage with an older man. Their love reinforces the development of their political consciousness. The film is expertly shot, and the cinematography of some scenes may remind one of another period-piece drama, the famous film about Hong Kong in the 1960s by Wong-kar Wai, *In the Mood for Love*. The film also aims to be rooted in Zanzibari history, and as the director explained, they did a lot of archival research to truly capture the music and imagery of the 1950s. Since the colonial archive is biased from the perspective of the white male colonizer, the director explained how they needed to deconstruct that archive to excavate the stories and sounds of that time period from the perspective of ordinary people who found joy in their music and their society even as they also organized to change their world.

On Saturday, I attended a seminar about decolonizing cinema by the famous Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima, whose important film *Sankofa* (1993) was recently [re-released on Netflix](#). For those familiar with Haile's many published interviews and statements (i.e., [see Tekletsadick Belachew's annotated bibliography of them](#)), he's been making pretty much the same argument repeatedly since the early 1980s, but for those aspiring filmmakers encountering him for the first time, I can imagine how his energetically combative and humorously sarcastic speaking style would be inspiring. What was perhaps a special and unexpected treat for me was that in his seminar he

showed us two of the first short films he made while a young film student at UCLA. These films have only recently become available because of the UCLA Film Archive's efforts to preserve, digitize, and make accessible the films of what has been dubbed the "L.A. Rebellion" -- those early black filmmakers in the 1970s who began to theorize and practice alternatives to the hegemonic Hollywood system. After this, I got some lunch and then attended a presentation of short films by the [Let's Talk about Water](#) program and representatives from the Consortium of Universities for the Advancement of Hydrologic Science ([CUAHSI](#)) who had partnered together to make films with community stakeholders in various African countries about water issues. The short films were illuminating, though two of them seemed somewhat problematic, one-sided representations of rather singular political viewpoints. After this stimulating event, I decided that instead of staying for more films, I should go home and run a few miles and take care of my own health.

Sunday, I returned to watch two films. First, [Abderrahmane Sissako, un cinéaste a l'Opéra](#) is a documentary film directed by Charles Castella about an opera being put together for the French stage by one of the most successful and respected [African filmmakers](#) (the only one to ever win an Academy award). The documentary explores Abderrahmane Sissako's creative process, the challenges of the COVID pandemic, and his teamwork with other artists such as the rock musician [Damon Albarn](#). Just a few weeks before the American premier of this movie at NYAFF, Sissako's opera [Le Vol du Boli](#) was performed in France at the Theatre du Chatelet, and there is hope that the performance might travel to other countries. The opera engages with the history of the *rapprochement* between Africa and Europe told through the metaphorical concept of the "Boli" -- the figure of a buffalo that for the Mandika ethnic group is a sacred symbol of spiritual and political power. The conversation with the audience after the film took a surprising turn. First ensued a debate about the question of translation and the use of the word "fetish" to describe the Boli. Second was one of the actors in the opera, Baba Sissoko, happened to be a real "griot" (traditional African storyteller), and whenever he was asked a question, he would answer through a poetic song. At one point, he spontaneously broke out in a moving song praising the organizer of the festival, Mahen Bonetti, who was there in the audience. The festival's capable young translator deftly translated the song line by line for the audience.

The next film was one of two Somali films at the NYAFF, and this is significant since fall-out from the Somalia's civil war in the early 1990s interrupted and hampered the development of Somali cinema. (A detailed history of Somali cinema can be found in the chapter by Daniele Comberiatti in the book [Cine-Ethiopia: The History and Politics of Film in the Horn of Africa](#).) I believe this year was the first year the NYAFF has ever featured any Somali cinema, so it's significant that it's not just one film, but two. We might hope that the organizers of the conference can find a way to have a retrospective screening of the earlier era of post-independence Somali cinema, such as the films of Abdulkadir Ahmed Said -- *The Somali Dervish* (1983) and *Sea Shell* (1992) -- as well as the film *Dan Iyo Xarrago*, by Idriss Hassan Dirie, 1973. Such a retrospective, I might imagine, could also include Somali co-productions made at the end of the colonial era such as *Horn of Africa* (Hussein Mabrouk, 1961), *Love ma yaqaan dhibaatooyinka hortaagan* (Hussein Mabrouk, 1961), and *Miyi Iyo Magaalo* (Hajji Cagakombe, 1963).

The new film [Ayaanle](#) was made by an international team of Somalis currently living in Minnesota and Kenya. It focuses on the experience of Somalis who face discrimination from corrupt police officers in Nairobi, and in doing so aims to counter the stereotype of Somalis as violent terrorists

that the toxic Hollywood cinema and western news media promotes. However, the movie's story is essentially a spy thriller and case of mistaken identity, as an aspiring young Somali actor is mistaken for a real terrorist after filming himself pretending to be one. He is recruited by the Kenyan intelligence agency to go undercover and help uncover a real terrorist network, and so the thriller plot unfolds. It is a good film, but perhaps one weakness (pointed out by a member of the audience) is that a film that aims to counter stereotypes about the violent, terrorist Somali male is in effect a film about stereotypes of the violent, terrorist Somali male. Instead, might the film have done more to follow up on the opening scenes of the movie where it showed ordinary Somali people living their lives in Nairobi. Also, even though Somali women clearly have played a powerful role in the social and political life of Nairobi, for instance, in the organized protests against ethnic discrimination (which is briefly shown in the film), the perspectives of women in the film are a bit flat. Nevertheless, the genre of the film is a suspense, action thriller, and a good story for all that.

Completely different from *Ayaanle* is the other Somali film at NYAFF, [\*The Gravedigger's Wife\*](#), which I streamed at home. This cinematically beautiful movie is about the deep love between a husband and wife on the outskirts of Djibouti. The wife Nasra is dying of a kidney infection, and ironically her husband Guled makes a living as a gravedigger. When he is informed that she can be saved by an operation that will cost \$5,000 USD, he and their son Mahad engage in a noble, though also heartbreaking, quest to raise the money. By foregrounding their love for each other and for their son, as well as Guled's friendship with his coworker, this movie (perhaps more than *Ayaanle*) also counters the stereotype of Somalis that saturates American media. There are deeply touching scenes such as when Nasra convinces her husband to sneak into a wedding party so that they can enjoy a last dance together before she dies. On the other hand, one criticism of the movie is that both the backstory of their romantic love and the improbable quest narrative to rescue her too closely follows Hollywood-style prescriptions that are heavily individualistic and exceptionalist. Although I was touched by the story of Guled, Nasra, and Mahad, I also found myself wondering about the other characters and the society in which they live. I have more to say about this movie, but that would entail an entirely separate blog post or essay, so I would love to talk about it with others. Both movies left me hopeful for the future of Somali cinema and eager for different sorts of stories.

Typically, the last day of the NYAFF at Lincoln Center is reserved for a retrospective on an older film. Often these films are not available on VHS, DVD, or streaming, so watching them at a festival such as NYAFF is the only way one can see them. For example, in previous years (before the COVID pandemic), I was able to see Ola Balogun's [\*Black Goddess\*](#) (1978) and Med Hondo's [\*Sarraounia\*](#) (1986).

This year, the film was [\*Jom, the Story of a People\*](#), directed by Ababacar Samb-Makharam of Senegal in 1982. The main character of this film is a griot, who tells stories about heroes from Senegal's history who exhibit the quality of "jom" which roughly translates as dignity, integrity, or courage. One of these historical figures is Dierri Dior Ndella, a Wolof prince who killed a French administrator in 1905 in open rebellion to colonial rule, and later, rather than submit, committed suicide. The second is Koura Thiaw, a celebrated dancer in the 1940s, who used her dance to lampoon the Senegalese bourgeoisie and express solidarity with the working classes. This segment of the film includes a wonderful scene of African dance. The context for the griot singing

songs about the past is a present where the labor union is in the midst of a strike for better wages and protection of their rights. Some members of the union are being bribed to undermine the strike, but the leader of the union, as well as a collective of women in the community, exhibit the "jom" that Dierr Dior Ndella and Koura Thiaw possessed. As one might expect of films from this time period (e.g., the films of Ousmane Sembène), this film expertly blends traditional African narrative structures with cinematic form in a way that provocatively juxtaposes past and present to make a pedagogically political statement about the future direction of Senegal.

After watching the film, I did a little research and found a good review by Mohammed Mbodji [[here](#)] that explained the historical contexts that we see in the film. I also found some discussion of it in my copy of Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike's classic book on [Black African Cinema](#). Mbodji usefully points to some of the problems of the film that may help explain why it wasn't as successful and well-known as it might have been. The problem, Mbodji argues, is that when a film cherry-picks details from history that are meant to have allegorical significance for the present, it leaves itself open to criticism that will bring up other historical information not in the film. In this case, the fact that Dierr Dior Ndella was a slave trader, and he was rebelling against the French administration because he wanted to maintain his trade in enslaved Africans. Moreover, the timing of the film was unfortunate, since the concept "jom" was then part of the campaign slogan of "jom, kersa, mun" (dignity, restraint, patience) for President Senghor, who had to resign his political position in 1980 just months before the film was released. The people of Senegal were perhaps interested in a new kind of story in 1981. Nevertheless, I felt lucky to be given the chance to see this film, as it represents a unique moment in African film history that was important for its development.

In sum, I had a wonderful time, and as always, my heart was inspired, and my brain was provoked to think.