

Haile Gerima (Ethiopia)

Haile Gerima is one of the best-known African filmmakers and one of the world's most creative directors. He is also probably the most radical of African filmmakers, comparable only to Ousmane Sembene of Senegal and Med Hondo of Mauritania.

Gerima was brought up in a Christian family; his father was an orthodox priest, a teacher, a historian, and a playwright. His mother taught home economics in a vocational school. While growing up, he performed frequently as a member of the itinerant theater troupe his father directed, which staged shows across the country. He was thus exposed to his father's daring and provocative ways of directing and composing music for his plays. His mother and grandmother were great storytellers, and listening to them, he acquired mastery of the legends and tales of the Ethiopian oral tradition, which was later to become the quintessence of his cinematic narrative style. This mix of parental tutelage provided Gerima with fertile ground for training and development.

However, his initiation into cinema came when he began working part-time as a ticket boy at a local movie theater. The movies he saw were foreign films of the Tarzan melodrama type and Westerns, and he vividly recalls how he and his friends of the same age group would side with the cowboys as they massacred the Indians. This was a very important development. The young man discovered the hegemonic foreign values these movies propagate while at same time these films forced him to question his own traditions—to look down on them, as it were—but also helped him to develop a deep apprehension for aspects of both traditions.

After finishing high school, Gerima went to Addis Ababa, where he studied drama. He left Ethiopia in 1967 for Chicago, where he enrolled at the Goodman School of Drama to study acting. It was there that he experienced a deep sense of

estrangement and sociocultural alienation. The issues that made him uncomfortable included having to take classes to change his accent—if he was to become a “perfect” actor—and the problem of coping with growing racism in the United States. The only way he was able to deal with the political and social oppression facing him was by studying the writings of black militants of the 1960s and by identifying with African American communities; this, he says, helped him to regain his sanity and identity.

In search of a more tolerant atmosphere, in 1969 Gerima moved to the University of California, Los Angeles, to continue with the study of drama, only to find himself discontented with playing subservient roles. It was in 1970 that he discovered the motion picture as a powerful means of communication and expression and concluded that, unlike an actor in the theater, a filmmaker is more able to control whatever he or she does. The 1960s and early 1970s marked the pinnacle of awareness of revolutionary struggles for liberation all over the world. At UCLA, Gerima became acquainted with the works of Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, Amilcar Cabral, and Che Guevara, as well as with the emerging Third World cinema from Africa, South America, and Central America, whose structures, replete with Marxist dialectics, were channeled toward liberation. It is not surprising that in this orientation a new revolutionary thinker was emerging; Gerima's first film, *Hour Glass* (1971), made in Super-8, is audacious in its experimentation with form and content as well as the exploitation of artistic, technical, and political possibilities of the film medium. This was followed by *Child of Resistance* (1972) and *Harvest: 3,000 Years* (1974), a provocative and highly creative film shot in Ahmaric, the main Ethiopian language, at a time when the military junta was consolidating power after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie.

Other features made by Gerima include *Bush Mama* (1976) and *Wilmington 10—USA 10,000* (1979) a two-hour documentary on political prisoners in the United States. For this documentary, and partly in recognition of his other filmmaking endeavors, Gerima received two awards in 1979—the Freedom Journalist Award and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship to continue his research for future projects. He made *Ashes and Embers*, a film about a black Vietnam War veteran, in 1981, and in 1985 he made *After Winter: Sterling Brown*, a documentary that celebrates the black poet, essayist, and literary critic (the latter was funded by Howard University, where Gerima is currently a professor of film).

All of Gerima's features mentioned above, except for *Harvest: 3,000 Years*, focus on the African American experience, raising the issue of whether this filmmaker should be considered an African filmmaker or an African American filmmaker. Although both crowns could fittingly be bestowed on him, when I asked him to comment on this question of wearing two labels, his answer exemplified the typical Hailean style—he responded with a compelling and up-to-date assessment of black cinema and Diasporan connections.

Gerima's most ambitious project to date is *Sankofa*, made in 1993. This film, shot on three continents, is a compelling indictment of slavery from a Pan-Africanist perspective. In terms of innovation, marketing strategies, process of realization, and

unprecedented success, *Sankofa's* record-breaking adventure has undoubtedly changed world film history. An enterprising warrior and a longtime ardent advocate of economic self-reliance, Gerima, who might as well be the Diasporan filmmaker, now heads (with his wife, Sirikiana Aina) the Sankofa Organization in Washington, D.C., which distributes African Diaspora movies on film and video and organizes film and cultural symposia and exchanges. This organization has been able to prove that black films, if well coordinated, are capable of building a profitable movie industry that does not need the backing of Hollywood and its conglomerates to survive.

Gerima granted this interview in 1997; it took place in the tranquil basement of his Washington, D.C., home, where his editing studio is located.

I would like to use this opportunity to tell you that I appreciate everything you have done for the development of African cinema and world cinema. When I was in England studying film, my intention was to become a well-known Nigerian filmmaker, but I discovered that I could not make films because of lack of money. So I understand what you are doing and the challenges of working as an independent filmmaker. You have done something that I could not do myself. How did you become interested in cinema? Could you talk about growing up and your family influences and all the things that helped you discover this wonderful medium called cinema?

I would say I had two introductions to film. In advance I have to tell you my background. My father's playwriting and directing has influenced me since I was a child. I began to do plays at an early age in high school. But that is more of an indirect influence. What I have grown to recognize as the strongest is my father's influence as a storyteller. In terms of cinema, my experience is more that of a victim of its effective imperialist venture. Cinema came to my town as an imperialist cultural manifestation that trampled over everything local. My introduction to film was more as a subjugated African amongst others than as an active participant in any of the branches of film business. So my early introduction to cinema was overpowering. I cannot call it an influence because, although I was a colonial spectator of this culture, it never encouraged me to grow up and make my own movies. Then, Africans were not encouraged to learn how to make films, for filmmaking was considered an elitist art too sophisticated for Africans. Cinema was an alien force which, I would say, made me inactive. The more I watched films, the more I withdrew from the influence of my father and that powerful local narrative style I grew up with. I became a totally colonized fixture, a disfigured obscene zombie that you can see all over Africa, where we act and imitate movies which displace our indigenous cultural heritage. Colonialism and the alien movies I watched were not positive influences that said to me, "You can make films." It was when I got to the United States to pursue theater education, which is the initial storytelling medium that I inherited from my father, family, and community, that I accidentally stumbled into filmmaking. Even when I had the opportunity to grab the camera, I did not have a mentor, until African Americans embraced and sanctioned

me. When I made my early films, I was more like a migrant worker. I did not consider myself a legitimate filmmaker because it was not my tradition. I did not inherit that tradition as I had with the theater. Given the way film trickled into my life, if it had not been for the African American community, I would not have been encouraged to make films. If I had not been sanctioned by them, and made to believe that I too could make films, and if the audience had not responded in a very emotional way to my early work, I would not have pursued filmmaking.

After you made Harvest: 3,000 Years, your other feature films focused on the African American experience. Some people see you as an African filmmaker, Ethiopian filmmaker, African American filmmaker, or, with the release of Sankofa, a Diasporic filmmaker. Do these labels, in light of what you mentioned about your relationship with the African American community, bother you?

I am not an African American filmmaker. An African American filmmaker is of African descent born in the U.S. and has experienced an African American historical reality. I came to the U.S. a fully grown-up person from Ethiopia. It would be dishonest to delegitimize the historical experience of African Americans by claiming that label. The African American culture helped me to defy that colonial position and link up with my father's resistance tradition. This kind of encounter works for many people in different ways. If African American culture had not liberated me from my bondage to the colonial position, then Hollywood cinema, the Peace Corps, and all the American influences would have made me a grotesque imitation of America. Having come to America, I am indebted to the fact that African Americans made me respect myself and link up with my history of resistance. I think I began to appreciate the work of my father when I was embroiled in this culture trying to define who I am. African Americans embraced me and, in fact, made me be self-confident and realize that not only white people can claim the right to make movies. However, it would not be correct to call me an African American, because all I know of their heritage is what they taught me.

I am impressed to see that your Sankofa Organization, where you live and work, is situated right in the heart of the black community. Prominent black people, including intellectuals and businessmen, often live apart from black neighborhoods. I think they have a lot to learn from you.

For me, this is the struggle. When we made *Sankofa*, we were in a basement. We now own this modest building and some infrastructure. I have always dreamt of having a production company in the middle of the community. I wanted the community to be able to familiarize itself with our facilities and our work, and to be able to see from my perspective that cinema production and consumption should not be an abstract concept developed in a remote corner of some luxury hotel room. When you bring the community along with you and help them understand the struggle and the

process of film making, you bring them along to the threshold. Failure to do so means being exiled from one's community, and when you lose your community you lose a strong base. Your community will never understand you; but if you want your film to be accountable to the community, then that community has to be part of your daily struggle. This does not mean dismissing the multiracial audience which is there to round up the figures. But to always beg for funds to produce films and not cultivate the basis for your product consumption is counterproductive. Out of this concern, I also have an office in Ethiopia and have been struggling to distribute my films there for the past five years. I have been fighting the bureaucracy there, attempting to put into effect the distribution experiments I have carried out in the U.S. It is very much connected to filmmaking.

It is unfortunate that the intelligentsia is so disconnected from the community and, therefore, lacks the power to affect that community. This is very disturbing, especially in consideration of the African American or Diaspora experience, of the way plantation masters and the slave system worked. You cannot announce the liberation of black people from the plantation owner's radio station and be heard. Even if you are telling the truth, you will be a suspect in the community.

How serious is the impact of the culture of poverty in Africa and the mortgaging of the continent's economies to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund on film production, content, and style? Some critics have charged that French filmmakers do not frequent Africa anymore to make ethnographic films because that is the focus of most francophone films funded by French agencies.

The reason is that financial aid is not usually awarded fair-mindedly. With its neo-colonial ramifications for Africa, financial assistance has found ways to implant itself in the chamber of the creative womb. Very few filmmakers admit that they do not give birth to any new ideas for a movie in a vacuum. They consider the source of the money first and operate in a creative way on the dictations of those resources for their work. It is clear that long ago, the Europeans, especially the French, understood that they did not have to physically police their colonial interests. Once they created classes of people, once they shaped the intelligentsia in their educational and cultural institutions, then they were able to make the intelligentsia respond to a predetermined colonial ideology. Filmmakers postpone the films they want to make by always addressing the issue of prominence; for example, "The French gave so-and-so movie an award and so my film has to be about the same topic." It is really that African filmmakers, due to the historical circumstances of domination and subjugation, are raped and impregnated just to make a movie. In Senegal, South Africa, Burkina Faso, and Ethiopia, every incident from customs and immigration at the airport to your hotel and home, wherever we go, is material that triggers a great many film topics; but how many of us would pursue them? As long as we incorporate colonial interests, white characters or white ideas, and exotic things about Africa into our stories, we get

money to finance our movies. Even in the financing of the movie, you do not need to have white people make the judgment as to which film is to be funded. You can have ✓ a panel of neocolonized Africans that still serve the purpose of the colonizer.

I challenge the uninformed to examine the works of Med Hondo and Ousmane Sembene and compare them with the present state of affairs, where we are being bombarded with “jungle” movies. I remember a very important, well-placed Frenchman who once said to me that the first film of African cinema for him was *Visages de femmes* [Faces of women, 1985], by Désiré Ecaré, because “for the first time you people are showing us how you fuck.” That is what he said! Then I said to him, “Why are you obsessed about how we fuck?” “Because,” he said, “this is the first time African cinema is born for me.” This means that *Black Girl* [1963], *Borom Sarret* [1966], *Soleil O* [1969], and *Peasant Letter* [1974] did not exist on his map because there was no sex or nudity in them. They were all marginal until he saw us “fuck” in *Faces of Women*. I am saying it the way he said it because it dramatizes Europe’s abnormal interests and perceptions of Africa in contradistinction to our own interests.

✓ This means to me that until African filmmakers battle the idea of national cinema policy, of production, distribution, and exhibition, individual and collective efforts will continue to be stifled. It is not enough to make a movie, but also to own a movie is part of the struggle. You do not make your face for white people to own, otherwise you remain in the plantation and slavery systems, even though you appear to be free. If I make a film about my mother, my children are going to be the inheritors of that intellectual property. I would not want Europe to own it. The new breed of filmmakers has weeded out the ideological vision that the early African filmmakers injected into the practice, which was intended to be used as a springboard toward liberation cinema. All of those contributions are now ridiculed and discouraged by the Europeans, especially the French, who are hell-bent on marginalizing all the anti-colonial filmmakers of the early sixties and seventies.

What you just said about African cinema is very interesting, especially regarding the antagonistic posturings of the younger generation of African filmmakers, who seem to have forgotten that without the pioneers they would not have had any base on which to launch their careers.

They would not even have fantasized about filmmaking. The situation is pathetic, but colonialist forces encourage it. If you have noticed, people like Sembene and Med Hondo do not compromise their attack on colonialism. They always identify primitive colonialism and neocolonialism as the principal forces in the displacement of the intelligentsia itself. Even though the French, for example, used to honor these pioneer filmmakers, the filmmakers insisted on continuing the attack on colonialism and neo- ✓ colonialism. The colonizers then gave up on them and began to cultivate younger filmmakers so as to displace the pioneers and make them what I term “nonexistent.” The French can only tolerate one or maybe two anticolonial films from an African

filmmaker; if you go against this policy, you have to be punished by being made nonexistent. They transform all the young filmmakers into mercenaries to attack every aspect of your work. In so doing, they try to make the pioneer filmmakers nonexistent in the consciousness of the society. This is a technique of sophisticated colonialism. They deny moviemakers the press, refuse to show their films, and do not properly recognize them. Not that it always matters, because I do not think that Sembene gives a damn about being honored by France. I remember Sembene once saying to, I think, a French person, "France for me is a whore. She is not my mother. I fuck her like a whore." The point I am making here is that you have very intransigent anticolonial filmmakers who are also the products of history. Like Amilcar Cabral, Samora Machel, and Kwame Nkrumah on the political diagram, Sembene and Med Hondo are the political fathers of Africa's liberation movement in cinema. To overthrow the idea of Pan-Africanism, you also have to go around and overthrow Pan-Africanist visionaries and cultural activists.

The younger generation is often given grants, which, in turn, force them to be hostile. I remember in Holland there was a fight because a younger filmmaker attacked Sembene. It is not by putting down Sembene that I become a filmmaker. It is by understanding how he showed me the possibilities of filmmaking with African characters as a legitimate venture. It is sacred ground for me. It does not mean that I worship him as the perfect human filmmaker. No. I just know that he is the person who opened the tracks and closed the holes in my consciousness and made Africans speaking their own languages exist legitimately in movies. We owe the pioneers a great deal. Disrespecting the elders at this point is tragic and, for me, unacceptable. I was born in Ethiopia and grew up respecting others. It goes back to a tragic and, I would say, cannibalistic generational contradiction interjected by colonialism, which does not want to hear its history, which is a history of absolute enslavement of the continent of Africa. This is the continuing exploitation of Africa. If the younger filmmakers were smart, instead of attacking and discrediting the pioneers they would join the anticolonial filmmakers in order to exorcize the evil of colonialism and build a better society.

A lot of the anticolonial films made by Africans are not in circulation as much as some of the new films sponsored by the French. However, critics are quick to point out that although some of these new films have dealt with specific aspects of African culture, they have been assembled in ways that negate intelligence and crucial societal meanings. Africa is a continent of fifty-four or fifty-five countries with thousands of cultures. Yet these haphazardly assembled images, distributed all over, are used to study African cultures in generalized terms. Are the filmmakers not perpetuating the colonial syndrome themselves?

In the U.S., California Newsreel is not in distribution in order to advance African cinema or African culture. It is a distribution arrangement financed by the Rockefeller

Foundation to preempt the challenge of normal distribution. America and Europe have total domination over distribution in Africa. It is ironic, because in their countries we have no right to make normal films because we do not come from the Greco-Roman/Anglo cultural base of cinematic expression. The problem starts in Africa, where we do not have a distribution policy or right in our own countries. There are no legitimate institutions that take our films to be distributed tricontinently like normal films. What you have here in the United States is a false distribution arrangement whereby African films can be checked out of libraries for free and watched. To whose benefit? I do believe that African culture in film should not be made to satisfy only the exotic curiosity of the developed countries. We are not exotic fixtures. Our cultures have values. Our intellectual property has value. We need to unleash institutions to defend and restore those traditions. California Newsreel is a token organization that presents African cinema for free. Most of the filmmakers are exploited. They are not rewarded with standard distribution payment. You have to first look at it from that perspective and then go beyond and examine the types of films the organization acquires for distribution, because I think Europe and America, especially Europe, interfere in production processes. They selectively decide on the kind of movies that are to be made.

Furthermore, how then can it be said that African filmmakers are organized when the filmmakers have become attention seekers? They are not contemplating their goals, nor configuring the rights to defend our work as normal cinema. There is no reason why Americans should say to me, "I want to show your film to introduce your work to Americans." I do not want anyone to introduce my work to Americans. Africa has been introduced to America from the day we came into contact with Europe, but it was for free. All the resources I have and all the resources Africa has are free for them, and everything Europe and America offer I have to pay for. This unequal transaction in the cultural, economic, and political spheres is devastating. This is where neocolonialism will not allow us any influence on our own destiny. So California Newsreel is an exploiter of African cinema. They are welfare workers pushing to make African cinema a welfare cultural diet to be given free of charge to Americans.

Actually, you have redefined the history of cinema, especially with this question of distribution. Do you think you have proven that alternative marketing or distribution methods can be put to the black filmmaker's advantage? Do you think this will work to rectify the situation in Africa? Could this method have worked for a nonhistorical film that is not about slavery like Sankofa? Could it have received the support Sankofa has received from the black community?

If people tracked my history from early times, they would see that my interest has always been to cultivate the community and be accountable to them. I am the kind of filmmaker who says, "I do not have to politically advance your theory Mr. African president or African intelligentsia or black people, but to make the movie I want to

make. I have the right to make movies, even if it does not live up to your expectations. The fact that I am tangling with the memory of our people should not be your responsibility." When it comes to people of African descent, we do not realize, however critical the manifestation of culture is, that our survival depends on it. You do not get empowered just because you have money or real estate. You are also empowered when you are culturally restored to your human essence, when you look at the world from your own vantage point. To recall Walter Rodney, Africa has been derailed from its historical track since we came in contact with Europe. No civilization is to emanate from our deeds without restoring our derailed identity. We have to reconstruct the memory and use it as a forward movement. Even when they are bitterly critical in their representation of society, the producers of culture are still very important for the survival of generations and for the transmission of information. People of African descent from here to Africa who have money are feudal. They do not understand the implications of culture in their economic endeavors. They feel it is simply a matter of amassing money or material possessions. Likewise, we import exhibitory instruments to show Europe to our children and we raise them by having them watch *Sesame Street*, a product of an alien culture. This makes them lose our heritage. Here is an important factor of displacement, and nobody seems to care.

Having said that, if you look pragmatically at, for example, Ousmane Sembene or Ola Balogun films, they have audiences all over the Black Diaspora because, like me, Brazilians, Jamaicans, South Africans, blacks in Europe, and so forth are hungry for their images. To normalize ourselves, we want to see our own images, but distribution and institutional infrastructures are not in place to make those images of reality available. We have a major market that is unrealized by the intelligentsia, such as the African MBAs who do not understand the power of investments. African descendants all over the Diaspora need not work for Sony, Columbia Pictures, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. They can start their own companies to tap the unexplored market of black people. This is what we proved with *Sankofa*. There are Brazilians who came to take the film to Brazil. Ghanaians were equally hungry for *Sankofa*, as were African Americans. Ordinary community people in Washington, D.C., black people—not rich black people but ordinary black people—put us on the map. They enabled me to make prints and to rent a theater, and they launched me into the universal realization of black cultural need. The appetite of black people is what we discovered in our marketing experiment. This did not only start with *Sankofa*. When I started *Child of Resistance*, *Bush Mama*, *Harvest*—when you look at all my films—the predominant money source that came for them, all the way to *Ashes and Embers*, was money recuperated by and through the films. I have always wanted my films to make money to be used to make another movie. In principle, that is also why I teach; I do not want to spend the money my films make on family maintenance, even though teaching takes too much of my filmmaking time. This is to say that the seed money invested in *Sankofa* came from my other films.

How did I make my earlier films? I did gardening and washed dishes to finance

them. I have gotten several grants, but they were not decisive in the making of the movies. I always wanted to free myself from grant begging to move toward recycling personal resources. I try to make all my films have a built-in obligation to perpetrate the making of more films. With *Sankofa* we are closer to that realization.

Dependency, on the other hand, basically impacts on the artists and the common people who consume commodities manufactured outside of the community or from businesses transacted in a lopsided way. It is normal, for example, for a Pole to own an African painting, but for all African paintings to be owned by Europeans is surreal. If you look at the African American experience, all their music, their creative and intellectual property, is owned, patented, and copyrighted by white people. That is not normal. When all the music of your culture is owned by somebody else, that says you are a slave, a cotton picker, a daily laborer. But to me, what is normal is to own your own culture. Black kids are born into a mortgaged culture, and the cycle will never be broken until they realize they have to break out of dependency. But to have independence purely as an idea owned and copyrighted by European descendants perpetuates that unequal relationship in which we have found ourselves since we came into contact with Europe. It takes us back to the fifteenth century, when Europeans defined the rules of the game.

They still define the rules to this very day. Take, for example, FESPACO, which stands to be taken over by France.

FESPACO has always been a francophone affair. I spoke to President Thomas Sankara in front of Sembene and a lot of people, and complained that FESPACO, though a Pan-African concept, is too French. I called it a francophone film festival, because it fails to recognize the ideas and philosophy of Pan-Africanism. It only recognizes the linguistic configurations of the French colonial orbit. In so doing, it is a cultural manifestation in Africa by Africans slanted toward France. FESPACO would die if France did not give it money or recognize it for one day. I told Sankara when he was worrying that the Senegalese would try to move FESPACO to Dakar, that if it goes, it is because francophone domination killed it. And that, furthermore, it risks killing itself because the francophone cultural alliance with France would expedite its death.

I was on a jury once at FESPACO in 1983 with a Frenchman whose name I cannot remember, and he bragged about how he started FESPACO. The point is that even though its origin is alien, I think African filmmakers have tried and failed to control and liberate it from the francophone curse. In the process however, the neo-colonial bureaucratic sector won, and they have since succeeded in making it a mediocre imitation of Cannes in the middle of the desert. For me FESPACO has lost its purpose. As I see it, to liberate FESPACO is the most impossible task.

When was the last time you went to FESPACO?

I have not been there since 1987. I never went after Captain Sankara was assassinated.

You have criticized Hollywood and some black films for, as you put it, "defocusing our mental consciousness." You have also noted that Hollywood backs young blacks to make films that do not raise consciousness. Is this not comparable with most francophone films funded by the French, which are criticized for lack of imagination?

Oh yes. In fact, the metaphor for how I look at Africa and Europe is how we operate here in the United States. America is the place to study the workings of race, to examine how it continues to maintain its powerful position and how it manipulates the black community. In the case of young filmmakers, it is Hollywood that decides who they are. You see the same thing happening in francophone Africa, where desperate young people who never contemplated the complex nature of Africa with any sincerity are manipulated. They come out of a fantasy and fall into the hands and bosoms of colonial power structures that give them money, not because of their credentials, but for what they can do in the service of colonialism. There are, as well, local colonial situations in the United States in operation to disenfranchise militant filmmakers. They use this mechanism to sponsor desperate filmmakers and make them operate as neocolonial mercenaries. Elderly white men in Hollywood who control the industry select the new breed of filmmakers and dictate to them the content of the films they should make. In these films we find the disfiguring images of a film culture that reduces the struggle of African Americans to a caricature. It serves a purpose in the larger struggle for Hollywood, an industry that claims to be liberal, but which has a bad history in terms of race and how they represent African descendants and Native Americans. The use of desperate young filmmakers to subvert genuine struggles also serves to absolve their guilty consciences.

I am not here saying that there are no desperate white filmmakers out there, but if you look at the range of white films that are made yearly, they represent a particular pattern of filmmaking. They may not be masterpieces of expression, but they mirror a specific ideology. In black cinema, by and large, we are subjected to viewing black life as if it were the most irredeemable "hood" movie. There is no variety and there are no choices for comparison in terms of how the experiences of black people are depicted. In fact, the full spectrum of human life in black communities has never been a concern for Hollywood films. To maintain this hegemonic tradition, the older black filmmakers who make socially relevant films must be displaced through the use of young people who do not care if they are paid so long as they have the opportunity to make a film.

I am not surprised about what you just said because I talked with a young African filmmaker recently in New York City about distribution. I asked how his two films acquired by California Newsreel were doing. He said that he tried his hand at distribution, and that the difficulties he encountered made him decide that he cannot be part of the distribution mechanism. He made it clear he did not care how his films are distributed and who distributes them. I did not quite understand why he would say he does not care if his films made money or not.

This is one of the problems of African filmmakers. Our problem is that we want the limelight but do not want to confront the difficult issues. For example, I am the wrong person to be in the film distribution business, but I am stubborn also. I just do not agree with making a film like *Sankofa* and giving it to a white distributor. It does not look right in terms of the intent and content of that film. I believe African filmmakers and African communities must work together to invent and create distribution cartels. We must struggle to do it because if you do not master distribution tactics, you will kill your own film, which I have done on many occasions. But I prefer killing my own films to enslaving them just to have them shown. A lot of African filmmakers need to grow out of their exhibitionist mode, out of being fixtures at festivals. We are the bums of film festivals. Most often we look bad. Sembene once said that we are beyond airplane tickets, free hotels, and food. Our films have to mean more than food and hotel rooms. We have to have normal distribution and exposure. African filmmakers have to realize that there is a major, more concrete, prouder way of making films. We do not have to look like the bums and beggars of the town.

How many white people in Hollywood hide from black filmmakers? When their presence is announced the reaction is usually "Here they come again asking for money; hide." How many of us are raped and sexually exploited to make our movies? A lot of African filmmakers are sexually abused. That should be their story. They would tell it best, and it would say a lot about what is happening to African cinema.

As a way to rectify these aberrancies, do you have the intention of distributing some "good" African films? Why are Heritage . . . Africa and Sarraounia not distributed in the United States?

We have *Sarraounia*, but the problem with where we are is that we are trying to take more films into video distribution. We need capital, but banks are hostile toward us by and large, even though we proved with *Sankofa* the ability of our vision to turn adversity into financial success. Although a lot of filmmakers want us to take their films, we do not have the finances to produce prints and videos for distribution. We have *Sarraounia*, and since Med Hondo films are like my films in content, we need to make video transfers and manufacture jackets to put them out in distribution. We are now trying out pay television, and as a limited experiment, we aired *Sarraounia* and *Sankofa* in Baltimore. Actually, our biggest thing here in the Sankofa Organization is video distribution. With the resources from *Sankofa*, I was able to put most of my films into video. Blockbuster said they did not have the clientele for our films, so we contacted African American bookstores across the country to create our own "Blockbuster," our own distribution outlet. Always, when they say no to equal exchange, we start our own. That has been my policy. When Hollywood and the conglomerates say no to distribution, we distribute the films ourselves. Now we have a big distribution plan. We distribute through the Internet, and African American bookstores serve as outlets for our videos, and, eventually we will have films like *Sarraounia* in our