

Med Hondo (Mauritania)

Med Hondo (whose full name is Mohamed Abid Hondo) is one of Africa's most prolific filmmakers. He is also considered a pioneer, not because of his age, but because he started his filmmaking career in the 1960s, the decade marking the birth of African cinema. He was born to a Senegalese father and a Mauritanian mother in the village of Ain Ouled Beni Mathar, in the Atar region of Mauritania. From 1954 to 1958, the young Med lived in Rabat, Morocco, where he pursued training at a hotel management school. After graduation, he emigrated to France in 1958, hoping to find a well-paying job as a chef. But in France he discovered that he and the other North African Arab and black African immigrants were not welcome and that a college diploma did not guarantee any of them jobs in their respective disciplines. To survive, Hondo worked at many menial jobs in Marseilles and in Paris, always paid less than his French counterparts. During this period, he also explored other avenues. He took drama courses and studied under the well-known French stage and screen actress Françoise Rosay. His ultimate goal was to use theater acting and stage directing to publicize black theatrical performers in France, who, according to him, had no place in mainstream French theater because of racism and discrimination.

In 1966, Hondo established his own theater group called Shango, named after the Yoruba god of thunder. The group performed in cultural centers and small theaters but fell short of achieving the goal of using this brand of alternative theater to win French audiences. This tradition would later be used to promote the works of playwrights of the Black Diaspora, including Aimé Césaire of Martinique, African American playwrights such as Imamu Baraka, and other African and South American playwrights. But to Hondo's great surprise, the French were not receptive to black-oriented alternative theater. He discovered that black theater was marginalized in the same manner

that blacks are marginalized in other sectors of the French economy. However, Hondo later found himself playing minor roles on French TV series and in such films as *Un homme de trop* (Shock troops, 1967), directed by Costa-Gavras; *A Walk with Love and Death* (1969), directed by John Huston; and *Tante Zita* (1968), directed by Robert Enrico. Having been initiated into films, Hondo was determined to acquire more skills; he worked his way up and eventually served as an assistant director on various film sets. This was how he learned to make films. Although he had no formal training in filmmaking, Hondo has distinguished himself as a creative filmmaker with an unusual talent. He has won many awards and has demonstrated through his works that he is one of the best film directors Africa and the world have produced. What he could not accomplish fully through the theater, Hondo finds in filmmaking—self-expression and the ability to say the things he wants to say in an unrestricted manner. Thus, in all his films, Hondo explores the predicament of African peoples, using a combative, innovative style coupled with theoretical conviction.

Hondo's personal experience of the subjugation and displacement faced by Arab and black African migrant workers in France has been the propelling force behind his filmic approach. His style of capturing those images is, he contends, a reflection of his anger—his reaction to the societal injustices that have rendered a group of people humiliated and helpless, injustices that he would like to see abolished. Similarly, his pointed attacks on the perpetrators of such injustices and his sharp criticism of French imperialism and African leaders have accorded him in some circles the status of a radical, a stigma that has not helped him in his efforts to distribute and exhibit his films, both in France and in Africa. In this interview, this ebullient director talks candidly about the development and underdevelopment of Africa and African cinema. He deals with issues ranging from African leaders, who, according to Hondo, refuse to understand the importance of cinema as an integral component of development, to African filmmakers, who, he says, must avoid mimicking retrogressive alien conventions. Hondo is an advocate of Pan-African structures in cinema. He rejects the conventions of commercial Western cinema and other escapist films, arguing for an African alternative film language that he sees as deriving from African culture and patterns of oral tradition. At the 1987 FESPACO, Hondo's epic film *Sarraounia* won the festival's grand prize, the *Étalon de Yennega*.

I would like to thank John Williams for his help with the first part of this interview, which was conducted during an African film series that Jim Kitses and I coordinated at San Francisco State University, April 27–30, 1990.

Most feature films made in Africa, except those made in Nigeria, that have made it to the Western film festivals are coproductions financed primarily by foreign sources. How do you perceive the problem of financing in African film production?

The financing of African cinema depends on the politics, leaders, economic and social development of each country in Africa, and reflects the contradictions of the politics

in Africa. Africa is not united or fully developed. Although African countries are now independent, foreign countries still control the international commerce and monetary systems of African countries. This situation is helped and accepted by the majority of African leaders.

Our presidents and ministers do not pay adequate attention to our culture or cinema. African leaders are apprehensive about supporting the motion picture industry because they are afraid that cinema would be used by filmmakers to manipulate political situations. Filmmakers have to deal with this fear and decide to be with or against the government. Of course, contradictions also exist among filmmakers. Africa's filmmakers do not all have the same education, will, courage, or dignity. Some African filmmakers make films just to be rich. They want to raise money to have a very good life and to be a part of the so-called bourgeoisie. The real bourgeoisie, however, do not exist in Africa. Western European countries, such as France, subsidize African films for economic and political reasons. They give money to influence filmmakers and have the postproduction of the films done in Paris. Ninety-nine percent of African films are processed in the laboratories in Paris, which helps the economy of France. In Africa, we have no economic, technical, or distribution structures. Those are the contradictions that surround the filmmaking industry and the problem that filmmakers are trying to resolve.

I always try to express in my films my vision of the world as an African and my dignity as a human being and an African. Like any other filmmaker, I have to go to France, Germany, England, or Africa to raise money. I am in the same swimming pool as other African filmmakers, but I do not allow the people providing the funds to interfere with my projects or the profound meanings in my films. Prohibiting the interference is very difficult—very, very difficult to accomplish.

I will return to the revolutionary aspects of your films, but, first, what are other problems faced by Africans trying to raise money to make their films? What kinds of ordeals do they endure?

Africa is not independent. Africa does not create what it wants and what the African people need—clothes, food, culture, and education. Everything is imposed on us from the outside and through the collaboration of some insiders—traitors who do not think about their own people. These traitors do not think about the past, present, or the future. They do not think about how to feed the peasants or how Africa could advance politically, economically, and culturally as other civilized or developed societies. This type of treachery is further demonstrated by how these African cohorts have formed the habit of siphoning billions and billions of dollars from their countries. This money was stolen from their own people and could have been used for genuine developments in Africa. These traitors do not believe in Africa. They are there just to make money. If the situation demands their forced removal from positions of power, they do not care, for they have amassed enough wealth to live comfortably in

exile with their families. The main reason why African filmmakers have to turn to foreigners to raise money is that African countries have no film funding structure, no general policy on culture, and no specific policy on cinema. There are different reactions to this situation from filmmakers. Some filmmakers treat our culture like folklore to please Westerners. They are dishonest, because they debase African cultures to satisfy the fantasies of the Westerners. These filmmakers also could be regarded as traitors. I am not casting judgment on anybody; rather, I prefer to talk about the common situation that prevails. As you know, the socioeconomic situation creates a culture, and culture by itself is dynamic. If culture is not dynamic, as Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, and others have pointed out, but is popularized, folklorizing it is also a treasonable felony that has been committed against the people.

In the 1980s, Africa witnessed its worst economic predicament as almost every African country was mortgaged to the International Monetary Fund. For instance, in 1985, the exchange rate for the Ghanaian cedis was 2.75 to one U.S. dollar, but, in 1997 rose to 1,850 cedis per dollar. Given this situation, it is almost impossible to imagine how anybody would try to make a film in Ghana. Ghana, however, actually increased its feature film production in the 1980s, mostly through coproduction and production on video. Does this mean that only coproduction will save African cinema?

For twenty years, we tried to prove that coproduction among African countries is the most important thing for African cinema. The way to save Africa's cinema is to promote coproductions among several countries and to distribute the films in several countries. This is not solely for the purpose of recuperating production costs but also to improve the education of people. As you know, many African people do not know much about their neighboring countries. For example, there is a border between Ghana and Burkina Faso. This artificial boundary makes people not to realize that at the other side of the borders are their own people. Film is an integral arm of development. Even thieves in Africa steal to raise money to go to the cinema. African filmmakers have been saying for more than twenty years that, if one produces a film in Mauritania, for example, making any profit from such a small and disorganized market is not possible. The most important thing now is to design a system of change by involving the collective, filmmaker, and government.

Sometimes our governments do not even understand where their interests lie. When a foreigner comes from outside and provides an African government with a lot of money to make films about its country, the government accepts the money not knowing the subject of the film. Too often, the subject matter insults the recipient country. But this kind of domination, as in the example you gave about Ghana, is the same in my country. The Mauritanian national currency, the ouguiya, is valueless in the international monetary market. It faces constant devaluation, dropping in value daily. How can Africa survive if it cannot create and protect its own production independently as it sees fit? It is a pity that African societies are disorganized and that African cinema is following the same path.

Foreign funding and coproduction provide for the exposure of African films in Asia, Europe, and the United States, through metropolitan cinematheques, international film festivals, or television (as in Europe). However, many African films do not make it to the international circles for exhibition because they were not coproduced by the powers who dictate which films will be shown internationally. Another problem is that there are no outside sources to help advertise the films. Do you know of significant films that are not known abroad because of this problem? And how serious is this problem in terms of repressing significant African films?

This happens in Europe, and I think in America as well. For your film to be distributed you must find some producer who will agree to invest in your film. We must see the issues in concrete terms and understand that cinema is like buying seats. You have to occupy the space available—monopolize it, for when you occupy the seats with your film, this means that those seats are not available to any other films. Also, if you do not have powerful promoters who understand the business of film, your film could very well rest forever in the closet. In general, that is the situation in Europe, the U.S., and, I think, all over the world.

I experienced the same problem with *Sarraounia*. But our efforts were also thwarted by other contradictions, too. For example, African filmmakers will often encounter dishonest people claiming to be distributors. When they come to negotiate, they say, "Give me your film for free. I will distribute it and make a lot of money for you." But the profits never materialize! The enemies in your own society are often your worst exploiters.

The first time *Soleil O* was screened in the U.S., as you know, it won a lot of prizes. New Yorker Films approached me and offered to distribute the film. At that time I knew nothing about distribution, so I went to talk to Ousmane Sembene, who said he knew Don Talbot and that he considered him an honest man. He added that whenever Mr. Talbot acquired his films, he was always paid. Since New Yorker Films distributes all of Sembene's films, I did not hesitate to sign a contract with the company, allowing it to acquire *Soleil O*. But I have not received from them one red cent, ever. They also tried to sell the film to the Canadians without my knowledge. By chance I caught them before the contract was signed, because someone I knew told me that my film was going to be shown on Canadian TV. I was shocked; no organization in Canada had been given the rights to distribute the film. Upon further inquiry, I was told that it was Don Talbot of New Yorker Films who authorized the screening of *Soleil O* in Canada. When I called him up for explanation, he told me that it was a mistake made by his secretary! That was my first experience, and it was a bad one.

Then I met Angela Davis, who named many places where the film has been shown. Larry Clark and many other people, including Spike Lee, told me they had seen *Soleil O*, commenting on how good a film it is. My response to them all was, "Thank you, but I have received no payment for these showings, not even a penny." If someone were to approach me today about putting my film on the market in the

United States via film festivals, special screenings, etc., my reply will be, "Good, but for how much?"

Most often, however, what I hear from such exhibitors is that they are operating a nonprofit organization and, therefore, have a limited budget. This is funny, because when I was making the films none of them provided Med Hondo with any funds. I depend on my salary to produce my films. And today my whole life is inundated with debts. It is a situation of poverty and misery. But I am not complaining; I am only trying to explain a situation. Nor am I asking for charity or for someone to bail me out. If someone wants to coproduce with African filmmakers, we are ready to work with them in a normal system, one in which we create the subject and have the power to make the final cut. The final cut should remain the filmmaker's decision and not the producer's. Our desire is simply to construct images that reflect our consciousness, our struggles. But we are open to coproduction, and we hope to find coproducers to work with, as well as people who are willing to distribute our films in the normal way. I am sure that for these films there is an audience. The public exists.

This claim is substantiated with my experience in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Chicago, where people filled the theaters to see my film. After the screenings the majority of them—black and white—would stay for discussion, which sometimes extended indefinitely. They wanted to speak about the images, the issues they provoke. I was amazed—people would approach me, captivated. I mean, the public exists. On some other occasions admirers have put money into my pocket or presented me with some gifts like we do in Africa. They would tell me, "Keep this. It is a token of love. How can we help? What can we do?" They were deeply touched by the film.

What film was this?

Sarraounia. The screenings of this film and my other films convinced me that the audiences exist everywhere for African films. But for me, to work with someone, the person must act in his own interests, not just to help African cinema. I do not like that word, *help*.

Because it is paternalistic?

I need people to work with, and this is different from needing help. To coproduce for each person's interest—his interest and mine—is the only way to help our people, and for that person to help with his money. But these kinds of people, though I am sure they exist, are very hard to find.

What were the funding problems and lessons you learned with Sarraounia?

It took me seven years to raise money and to shoot *Sarraounia*. I began with a contract between Niger and my production company. Together with Abdoulaye Mamani—the

author of *Sarraounia*, the novel we adapted to film—I spoke with the government representatives, and this led to the signing of a contract involving coproduction between Mauritania, Niger, and myself. When we were to begin shooting, however, we ran into many bureaucratic problems having to do with the military, politicians, and various ideologues, who stopped us from shooting the film. I was told that the authorities did not want the film shot in the country. Even today, I do not know why I was prevented from shooting the film in Niger. My lawyer, who is himself an African, tried to resolve the problem in an African way. He explained to the authorities that I had already labored many years on this film. He asked a lot of questions to find out if I had done anything that infuriated the government or the community as a whole. The answer was no. What then was the problem? We wanted to understand their points of view. Still nothing happened. I tried to meet with the former president, who is now dead, to ask him to intervene. Still nothing happened. One day, during FESPACO, I had the opportunity of being invited to the State House for a drink by the head of state, Captain Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso. I had known this charismatic man from the time when he was the secretary of state for culture. I had some drinks with him and we talked. As usual, he liked to talk. He told me that he had heard about the problems I was having with our “brothers on the other side”—referring to Niger. “Yes,” I said to him, “I have problems with them but I can’t explain them since I do not know what they are.” I was elated when he said to me, “As you know, we have no money to offer you, but you can shoot the film here in Burkina Faso.” Upon hearing that, I felt like God had descended upon me, upon Africa. So, when I left FESPACO, I went to raise the money I lost from the botched Niger partnership. The Burkinabe minister of information wrote letters to the minister of culture and foreign affairs in France, and together they tried to raise money for this film.

At one point, the Centre National du Cinéma [CNC] in France tried to stop me from making the film. They demanded that, before shooting commenced, I raise an additional one million francs to increase the film’s budget. I protested. My budget was three million francs and I told them that I did not need to add another one million francs to make the film. The authorities at the CNC insisted that I must raise the extra one million francs before I could begin. I went back to the savior who had redeemed me before, Captain Sankara, and requested immediate intervention. He did just that! A loan was hurriedly arranged through the Ministry of Finance because, in his view, this film must be made. Despite all the conflicts and problems, I shot the film. It was at this point that I realized that it is still difficult to operate effectively even in one’s own cultural backyard.

The problems did not end there! When the film was completed and ready to be released, I found a distributor in France who paid some money up front to distribute the film. In the contract we signed, it was stipulated that the film was to open in fourteen theaters. The first day of its premiere, I noticed the film was showing in only five theaters, and I began to worry. After two weeks, they threw out the film. The distributors economically censored it. I got a lawyer to look into the case, but the

film was already assassinated, practically speaking, in France. However, the film was shown in six countries in Africa with much success, and in London. But with these limited showings, I did not recover the money invested into the film. Out of my fifty million CFA debt to Burkina Faso, I paid back only ten million. I have, even today, forty million CFA left to pay for that loan. That is my experience making and distributing *Sarraounia*.

You have to understand that the French, generally speaking, hate Africans, and they do not want people to talk about colonialism and neocolonialism. They censor people who talk about the atrocities they committed, their brutality during the decades of colonization. As you know, there are very few films made by France on Vietnam, Algeria, or other African countries it colonized for the same reasons. They officially censor dissenting views. In the brochure I gave you, there is a protest statement signed by many French filmmakers and critics who agreed it was scandalous the way *Sarraounia* was censored in France. Constantin Costa-Gavras and many other influential people who signed this document did so because they believed that *Sarraounia* is an incredibly important film. They contended that it was a scandal that this film was censored, and as a protest, Bertrand led a group of sympathizers who wanted to organize a special public showing of the film to give other critics an opportunity to sign the protest note. But the CNC refused to release the film, stating that there were a lot of problems with the film which needed to be resolved before it could be released for general viewing. Even within the CNC, not every member accepted that excuse. As one of them put it, "I thought I knew my country, but the way they are handling this film is unbelievable!" This individual asked me if I had violated the rules of the CNC. I told him I had done nothing wrong.

I think that all of these disappointments are normal. They remind us about the need to focus on national and continental problems in Africa. Until we implement certain demands relevant to our development, the situation will not change. If the situation does not change, the future filmmaker in the belly of his mother is going to face similar problems. This is the African reality we face and must address.

Your films deal with important themes concerning the experiences of the Black Diaspora, but each film uses a different style to address the issues. You are relentless in your artistic endeavor, and because of your combative style, you have been called a Marxist, revolutionary filmmaker. Yet your films are partly funded through foreign sources, sometimes through the "establishment," the perpetrators of imperialism that your films attack. How do you retain your integrity without allowing your funding sources to dictate what you do?

It is consciousness. The more liberal the French people are, the more I have to be radical. Their systems continue to work against Africans, history, and humanity, and this is terrible. They have so much power and money to influence the development and underdevelopment of Africa. I do not accept the notion that any money the French

government gives to or invests in Africa is to "help" Africa. My consciousness prevents me from compromising on issues affecting Africa's interests and needs. I always say to myself, "Be careful." And in dealing with a specific individual I remind myself to ask, "Who is he? What does he want?" To keep up with trends in history, I read books, and I try to maintain my so-called dignity, and my vision of the world. If I should lose my dignity and my vision of the world, it means I am done for. Anyone with the privilege today of creating images of Africa must do so with consciousness of the meaning of those images. This consciousness guides me not only to speak the truth but also to remain part of that truth. I have never called myself a revolutionary, or a Marxist, an activist maybe, but for some people it is easier to put me in a box to marginalize me, to avoid engaging in debates with me, and to avoid seeing or accepting the reality I present.

I believe I have something to give back to African people. I am a Mauritanian, but first of all, I am an African. My ancestors, as yours, in the performance of their duty, faced danger and experienced all sorts of insults and exploitation when they fought to liberate us. I cannot betray them. I consider myself to be, along with them, part of the entire history of Africa.

Above all, I am an African. Even if I have problems in my own country, I feel at home in every African country. I know about forty-two countries in Africa and, in each of them, nobody has ever prevented me from entering or said, "You are not at home." Believe me, if that were to happen to me I would piss on the face of whoever said so. I am at home in any African country. Some film scholars have labeled my work as "cinema of exile" because I operate from France, but this does not concern me. I live seven or eight months a year in France because I have to work and feed my family. They think I am in exile? That is their problem. I am not in exile, not at all. There are many people inside Africa who are more in exile than I; they are those traitors who usurp our rights. I am not in exile and I am not a traitor. I am still an African, and I live with my memory.

On the question of style, I am always amazed when people complicate the issues of style and content. In the West, Europe in particular, there are the separate notions of content and a style. I have never understood this because, for example, if we shoot here in this little room, the style derives from the environment: how and where the camera is positioned, how the images are realized and made to convey meanings—this culminates in a style of representation. If we went and shot a film in Arizona it is possible that the desert, the landscape in general, will impact on the construction of a different style. The style is given, of course, by the content, the script, what the filmmaker wants to say, and also the concrete space where he or she is shooting. That is why, for me, the theme and content dictates the style of presentation. For me, style derives from content. For a filmmaker sitting in his home, at his desk to say, "I am going to create a new style" is absurd. That is why I try to be profoundly involved with the content, with human beings, because the most important raw material is the man, the woman, the child, all human beings. I try to be with them, to understand

them and their environments, and it is this that tells me where to position my camera and what to say with the images I capture. These are the elements that dictate my style. It is true that my films are different from one another. Even the general meanings are not the same, but they mirror the past and the present, and both can be used to project the future.

Did Hollywood offer you a couple of million dollars to make West Indies?

In 1973 or 1974, I was in New York, and some African Americans suggested that I should meet some Warner Bros. executives about *West Indies*. They told me there was a very nice man there, so I went. This man was very honest. He and his colleagues read the script in two days, and they came up with a contract. They agreed to produce the film with one million dollars and offered to assign production staff and so forth. They also suggested some changes in my script to make it "Hollywood." The changes would have affected the middle and the end of the film as well as the music. It was then that I realized they had a different version of the film than the one I proposed. I did not like the changes they suggested. I told them I respect their ideas, but that the changes they proposed did not do justice to the actual history of Africa that I was trying to reconstruct. "I need money," I told them, "but I must refuse your money, because I am not able to put your story in my film." It is not that I refused to accept Hollywood money to make *West Indies*. No. It is very specific in each case, but the point is that if I cannot impose my ideas on Hollywood executives, why should they impose theirs on me? If I want my films to retain the authenticity of history, I had to find money by myself. However, if in the future, Hollywood producers become a little bit curious and want to explore Africa from an African perspective, or they want to explore new themes, they can contact me. I will receive them with pleasure—under certain conditions, of course.

We have seen African films that have done fairly well worldwide. These films tend to depart from the didactic phase of the pioneering period. The new African film is undated with hybrid cinematic styles, incorporating comedy, satire, and African cultural motifs, all geared toward economic viability. Is African cinema losing the educational role it assigned itself? How have these changes affected the African film language? In short, where is African cinema going?

African films comprise maybe 1, 2, or 3 percent of the films that are shown in normal distribution in Europe, and this is considered exceptional. On European television, very few African films are shown. In France, for example, it is very rare to see an African film. Of course, the film which pleases Westerners is sometimes shown in theaters, but only as a means for them to assuage their consciences. They pretend to be helping African cinema, whereas, in concrete terms, all the money they spend for partial funding, including advertisement and publicity, is minuscule in comparison to the promotion budgets of their own films. Another problem is that the general French

education on Africa is mystified, which is why the people sometimes do not understand when an African presents African issues from a perspective different from known official French accounts. Prospective producers who are in the position to invest in African films were all educated in the same manner. They were born and educated into colonial mind-sets, so what do you expect? If an African filmmaker approaches such people with a script in the hope of securing funds to produce a film, the norm is to begin to assign the characters in the film with ridiculous roles. They would want the characters to smile, play, or dance—doing the Uncle Tom thing. Most of the producers are literally blind to African issues, and they put the education they had in the past between the film you propose and their colonial mind-set. Therefore, the role of cinema in Africa must be to function as an educational arm for development, for culture and history. The audience must be educated to know us as we are. If we do not know our past, how can we build our future? In the past Mozambique, Angola, and Algeria tried to build dynamic, honest, and dignified societies, but there are very few countries that realize the power with which film and audiovisual images can aid development. Africa must, therefore, unite to create its own internal products and markets.

Why have a lot of intellectuals and brilliant people left Africa? Is it because their brains can only function outside Africa? I do not think so. At home, the governments maintain repressive machineries—the police and the military that intimidate and beat up people every day for no reason and deny them fundamental human rights. Coupled with economic quagmire, this is the typical environment in which we make films. This situation is intolerable. It is the reason why we have outsiders who pretend to love Africa simply because the Africa they love is the one that exists outside of the continent. They do not want to change how they know Africa. They like how they think of Africa. The challenge is how to change their antiquated mentality.

In Europe, for example, even though African filmmakers are oppressed and live a difficult life, they are still privileged, if for no other reasons, in that they can say what our people cannot say in their respective countries. The African filmmaker is somehow an orphan because he is marginalized both outside and inside Africa. Sometimes the government is afraid of filmmakers but cannot do them any harm because of the repercussions of such an action. Can you imagine an African government jailing Ousmane Sembene or Cheick Oumar Sissoko for making films? I do not think that they want to deal with the international backlash such an action would generate. That is the kind of contradiction in which the filmmakers must resolve their political, economic, and ideological problems. This is why if the situation does not change within ten years we may not have anything left to call African cinema.

I have seen many films made by African filmmakers in the 1980s which are really insulting to the continent. I can only see those filmmakers as selling their souls but, as a filmmaker, I do not want to attack them. When you understand the situation they are living in, it is easy to understand that the lack of national policy on culture, generally, is perhaps responsible for the situations which enslave these filmmakers. But we have to know who is primarily responsible for their predicament. It is not the

filmmakers themselves, or their audiences, but a combination of all the factors enumerated above. For example, when you catch a man in the street stealing an orange or an egg from a merchant just to have something to eat, there are two ways to react. One is to beat him up and put him in jail, and the other is to understand the reason why the person stole in order to be fed. Sometimes filmmakers sell themselves just to make a film and survive, or, put it in another way, because they belong to a profession called filmmaking. We have to understand that situation. This situation must change, and not only in one or two countries, but in the whole of Africa.

That is true. Do you consider it the filmmaker's responsibility to stick to his or her own political, aesthetic, and moral convictions, even if it means less financial support for his or her films? To which would you give priority, personal convictions or funding the film, since in Africa it is often one or the other?

I do not have a general stance on that; however, I try to be practical. Sometimes you can make a film for very little money. Some films, like *Sarraounia*, need a lot of money. There is an obligation to make such historical films, because of the truth inherent in the story. But you may need people, horses, elaborate sets, for example, a recreation of a queen's palace, etc. You also have to be very careful of the content so as not to be a traitor to the history, to the story, or to yourself. I have no general advice for other filmmakers on how to make films. It is their responsibility. Each filmmaker is responsible for his own work, and people who are critics, essayists, philosophers, and teachers have to analyze more profoundly the dilemmas facing the filmmakers. We should establish cinematheques all over, so we can screen and discuss our films, scrutinize and understand the differences between people, and elaborate on and share our own memories in filmmaking and film viewing. But it is too early to start comparing filmmakers. They are at present operating in war zones because of the difficult situations in which they find themselves. Even if some of the films may not be good, we must appreciate the militant aspects of the filmmaker's endeavor. They deserve credit because to beat the odds and create African images from an African perspective to a world audience is a positive engagement. If there are too many problems, contradictions, and confusion, it becomes impossible to lead a normal life. Sometimes it is a nightmare.

The subject of images of Africa interests me greatly. As in filmmaking, African writers have addressed this topic.

Yes, but that reflects yet another problem because those essays, by prolific African geniuses, whether published in the U.S., England, Nigeria, Ghana, Mozambique, Sudan, Egypt, or Ethiopia, are not accessible to the majority of Africans because they are not translated into African languages. That also reflects the nature of our domination. When a wonderful literary treatise is written in Portuguese, Arabic, or French and is not readily accessible to our people, it is domination. With the French

language, for example, approximately 5 percent of the people in Africa speak it, and those who speak it live with it. Therefore, I would still argue that there is not as much interaction with the literary texts as there is in the use of films.

Let us consider now your own images. In my view, Sarraounia is the most ambitious African film ever made. How was it conceived? The opening sequence and the queen's palace is magnificent. How did you do it?

First and foremost, filmmaking demands a lot of work. Abdoulaye Mamani, who wrote the book I adapted for the film, is a friend of mine. I have known him as someone who is involved in the African political and social struggle. As soon as the book was published, he gave me a copy. He is what I would call a progressive individual, and has sacrificed his life for the interests of the African people. He exposed in his book the true African life, something very few Africans know about as a result of colonialism's assault on their civilizations and cultures. This book captured my attention, and I decided to set aside all other pursuits and projects to make this book into film. I began work by doing research with older people residing in Niger while Mamani continued with his writing. We talked with the inhabitants who knew the history. We spent about one and a half years just meeting with people in towns and villages all over the country, talking about Sarraounia, and also meeting the Sarraounia of today. The film made use of a small cast. There are only about ten very small houses, and one Sarraounia; the tradition has been preserved in memory as it is maintained in history. Of course, the Sarraounia of today is not a queen as in the past, because the situation has changed. However, we went and talked with her, and with the people, to obtain the vital information we needed before shooting in order to be respectful to the traditions and customs of the people. We were very concerned with historical accuracy. That kind of work takes a lot of time. I went with Mamani and Abdul, a Mauritanian friend who works with me, to the national libraries to research official reports and archival materials. We were amazed that, as far back as the nineteenth century, everything was documented in writing. After the gathering of the primary data, we left Niger and I proceeded to write the script.

Regarding the beginning of the film, I tried to blend a cloudy blue sky with a sky filled with blood. I do not think every viewer understands this symbolism. My aim was to introduce how eight French military officers used twelve hundred native Africans to kill their brothers and sisters. This is how I made the opening sequence, to reflect that bloody day. It is a strong metaphor which some people only understand from an aesthetic innovation perspective. I used extra-long and super-wide-angle shots to highlight the vast space that has been occupied and turned into a bloody atmosphere by the invading forces of France. This type of situation continues till this very day under new masters. Enemies within, our own brothers, have now occupied that space now vacated by the colonialists. Through them, it is easy for the foreign enemies to penetrate our frontiers and continue their subjugation and manipulation

of the entire population. During colonial times the enemies were inside us; in the neocolonial present they pretend to have remained outside our territories, but in fact they are strongly wired to the enemies within via electronic media. This means of domination is even faster and more devastating than the gun or the bomb for, in a twinkle of an eye, any African president could be easily contacted via the telephone and told what he and his ministers should do. And this opening sequence is meant to prepare the audience for all of the issues and connotations the film evokes.

We built the queen's palace to replicate the Sudano-Sahelian architectural design of the old Sarraouinia palace. This type of architecture still exists in Mali. Perhaps one of my motivations to replicate the queen's palace was that that Sahelian style architecture is what my grandfather used to build. The new Sarraouinia gave me a lot of information regarding how to build the palace and to which directions those holes should face, and how to shape them. I could see her accounts resurrect from memory, and memory at times can be very fresh. In Burkina Faso and other neighboring countries, the story of Sarraouinia is also well-known. But I think it is the Hausas who know more about Sarraouinia than, for example, the Senegalese, Mauritians, or Malians.

With all the necessary information at hand, we embarked on the arduous task of historical reconstruction. The cost of building the palace was about one million French francs. After the filming ended, I did not want to destroy the palace because of its similarity with the actual palaces that were built in the past. I decided that the best tribute to pay to the people was to hand over the palace to the government of Burkina Faso for posterity, for the memory of the film and for Queen Sarraouinia. The location of the palace is about twenty kilometers east of Bobo-Dioulasso.

Certain interesting things happened during the period of research and scouting for location. One day, when I was building the palace, the chief of the village came to me and asked why I had chosen this particular location at which to build the palace. I told him of our research which led us to conclude that his village was the best place to build it. It was then the chief revealed to me that a series of colonial battles were fought around there, and that the real village was situated at the very location at which we built Sarraouinia's palace. People around us were startled when he said the village had been there. I had not known the actual village existed there when I made the decision to build the palace there; we did not know we would be so accurate. Another memorable coincidence worth recalling was when I went to the north to meet with the Tuareg people. When I expressed interest in a location for our tents, the chief of the Tuaregs told me this was the actual location where two fierce battles against the French were fought, and that more than one hundred people lost their lives there. It was uplifting for me and my crew that we were at the place of real history.

Are you working now with a new "content" that would shape your next film project?

You and I cannot discuss the new project because in this country [the United States], as in Europe, some ideas are stolen. However, I can tell you that I am working with an incredible story of black people, with some major connections to African Americans. This project is a spy thriller and was written by a Frenchman, but, of course, concerns Africa. I plan to engage major superstars to make this film. All I can say at this point in time is that it is an incredible story of black people, somewhere in the world. I tried to raise money in France, and it was all but impossible as I am extremely marginalized there because of my views. I am perceived as a revolutionary African, Marxist, and communist.

The idea sounds good and it is a shame that your philosophy is sometimes misunderstood.

Having an international cast shows that I am not against the people who have previously suggested to me the importance of working together with other people. It is important to prove that such a special alliance could work harmoniously in Mali, or any other part of Africa. Furthermore, we are not against so-called white money, but we reserve the right to refuse charity, because we have our materials in our own hands. We wish to continue working with the materials at our disposal. If after all the effort there are no adequate funds or a distributor for the film, there is no problem. I believe I have presented the yardstick with which to measure the successes and failures of African films. I am not complaining to anybody. The U.S. is not my country, but I am hoping for commerce and good relations between our peoples. I believe the time has come for the people of the U.S. to know a little bit more about Africa and its people, its cinema, and the history of the entire continent. I am open to any progressive agenda. I would like outsiders to engage me in meaningful dialogue, to have a better understanding of my work and philosophy. But if they prefer not to do so, no problem. I will continue to do my best with my small force, my small strength.

Do you have any final comment that you would like to make or words of wisdom you would like to lend to the new generation of aspiring African filmmakers regarding coproduction, funding, exhibition, or distribution?

I receive a lot of letters, and I meet a lot of people who want to be filmmakers. I try to avoid them. My initial reaction is to tell them that I am not capable of such advice. I cannot advise people because I think that much of filmmaking is a myth. A lot of people think that filmmaking is a fast route to becoming rich. There are so many myths about cinema, because people do not know much about the structure of the film industry—production, distribution, and exhibition, and, more importantly, the meaning of African cinema. In this regard, I do not see myself as an educator.

I cannot give advice, but I do know that it is very difficult to be a successful filmmaker. I would like to state that any African aspiring to be a filmmaker must

understand that it means to hang in the balance with one's own life. If you are prepared to deal with that—to live with that kind of uncertainty—then proceed without hesitation. I do not like to project this kind of philosophy because each filmmaker's experience is different. In my country, Mauritania, a lot of young people come to me and say, "I want to be a filmmaker like you." I respond, "Like me? Oh, you are going to suffer. Do you want to suffer? I have no car and I do not have the luxury of going to nightclubs to dance and drink expensive wines and whiskeys. I live on old things. I have no money." Dismayed, some would retort, "What? You have no money?" "No," I would repeat, "I have no money." There is a discrepancy between my life as described in an article about me in the *New York Times*, for example, and the reality of my everyday life. But for the aspiring filmmakers, this message is difficult to digest because in their minds, Med Hondo is a rich man. I cannot tell these youngsters what to do or what not to do because, most of the time, they have made up their minds.

People like you, the academicians, are more useful to the aspiring filmmakers because you can explain better the contradictions of films, filmmaking, and film practices. It is not easy, but we have to find new words to describe the situation of African cinema. However, my suggestion is, if you want to be a filmmaker go ahead, but always remember that there is going to be a very, very difficult battle ahead. It is a nightmare. In the process of becoming a filmmaker, you are going to have your family turn against you—your government, the outsiders, the Westerners, men, women, everybody will be against you. Is it possible to survive if everybody is against you? If you can live with this, go ahead. In the end you may have a wonderful experience. That is the only advice I can offer.

Filmography

Soleil O (O sun), 1969

Les Bicots-nègres vos voisins (Arabs and niggers, your neighbors), 1973

Nous aurons toute la mort pour dormir (We'll sleep when we die), 1977

Polisario, un peuple en armes (Polisario, a people in arms), 1979

West Indies, 1979

Sarraounia, 1986

Lumière noire (Black light), 1995

Watani: Un monde sans mal (Watani: A world without evil), 1997