



FILM TALK

LUCIA NAGIB AND ONOOKOME OKOME WITH OLA BALOGUN AT FESPACO '95, OUAGADOUGOU

Fespaco provides for critics and scholars of film the chance to meet legendary figures behind those famous films that generate interesting social and scholarly debates. While one could argue that it is not often necessary to talk with these filmmakers about their films in order to write good criticism about them, new insights are often opened when the critic finally gets around talking to them. In a very significant way therefore the critic is likely to be enriched in the process. Imagine talking to Akira Kurosawa or Glouba Rocha. Imagine talking to Jean-Luc Godard or Orson Welles. The experience, you can imagine, will be ephiphanous, if not totally overwhelming.

At Fespaco, 1995, the duo of Okome and Nagib talked with Ola Balogun. As Nagib remarked, Balogun was not particularly talkative that day. Balogun had said he was not feeling well at all. But he did give enough of his experience in filmmaking in Nigeria.

NAGIB: I saw your movies, *The Magic of Nigeria*... and you talk about moments of the democratic structure of some ancient tribes in Nigeria, especially Yoruba. What do you mean by that?

OKOME: Is that your latest film?

BALOGUN: No, it is a documentary. What I mean is that democracy has existed in Africa before the colonial intervention. It is the approach which consists of finding a consensus that is the problem. Here we are talking of government by consensus, giving everybody a say at the grassroots level. It is not only when you have had political parties that you can have democracy.

NAGIB: But... em that culture for example, women are not allowed there...eh?

BALOGUN: Women have their own organisation. You know in traditional African societies, people organise at two levels. There is the territorial level, kins, clans, sub-tribes and the tribes. But you also have the social professional level where you may have the

market women, the hunters, fishermen.

NAGIB: Are these cast organisations?

BALOGUN: No. these are age-grade organisations, you know. You have organisations that are specific to women. All depends on...

NAGIB: The question for me would be how far is the Yoruba organisation an example for the political structure in Nigeria?

BALOGUN: What I am saying is that you have to take elements of what existed in the past to make up a modern political structure. You cannot take it wholesale from the past, you need to adapt it. Now you have trade unions and all such things, so you can't just take the past as a whole uncritically. You have to put all these into perspective...

OKOME: One thing that is quite obvious in your films and those of Ladi Ladebo and to Soyinka's films, if you accept my referring to Soyinka as a filmmaker, is that these films are politically correct. They are very politically conscious. My question is, is it possible to make this kind of film popular in our political regimes of repression?

BALOGUN: I think you have to look at the structure in place in Nigeria, how films are funded and distributed and so on. A lot of people are now making films on video format because that is the easiest way to reach the audience. You will find that films in indigenous languages tend to have a more popular grassroots appeal than film in English. Theatre is the same thing. English language theatre has not been very popular.

OKOME: But the sad irony is that your films, and most of the films in English that are very politically correct in terms of situating Nigeria's political misadventure are not popularly distributed. If these films are not popular, what do you think the new Yoruba film with magic, witchcraft will do...to...the emerging Nigerian film audience?

BALOGUN: This is the question of how funding become available to the filmmaker. If filmmakers can only tie their budget to audience support, they are bound to give the

audience what it wants. Nobody wants to make a huge investment and not get something out of it at the end of the day. So that is the basic issue. Our public still likes magic and so on. May be we have to find additional sources of funding which do not make filmmakers exclusively dependent on audience participation.

OKOME: What suggestions would you prefer for sourcing this additional funding taking into consideration the erratic and unstable political situation in our country.

BALOGUN: Well, I think an example here is Ouagadougou. Supports flow in from France and from some other countries which support production here and I think there has to be a more global approach in Nigeria that will make it have access to this funding.

OKOME: Sometime around 1984, you granted an interview to Hyginus Ekwuazi. One of the things you repeated in that interview was that the Nigerian film audience is not sophisticated enough to understand your films...

BALOGUN: I do not think I put it in those terms...

OKOME: No. Not in those terms, but you said you hope that a couple of years to come this audience will grow to understand your films. Would you say the time has come, especially in this era of video filmmakers often referred to as contractor-filmmakers?

BALOGUN: There is nothing wrong about making films on the video format if it is the only avenue available, so I wouldn't dismiss people making films in the video mode, but I would say that there are different audiences in Nigeria. Films made in Yoruba, for instance, appeal to a particular audience; while films in English may have a smaller audience. The drama is that there is virtually no cinema houses now.

OKOME: This is true... is this because of the incursion of home videos and satellite?

BALOGUN: It is primarily because of the decline of a social habit. People don't go to the

cinema any more.

NAGIB: I am eager to hear something about the film you shot in Brazil and how you started the relationship.

BALOGUN: There is this producer, Jose Valladan, who brought a financier from Brazil. He wanted to do a co-production with Nigeria and this was the time I made a proposal.

NAGIB: And how come you learned Portuguese so well?

BALOGUN: Because I was forced to. None of the cast or crew at the time spoke English or French.

NAGIB: So you learnt Brazilian Portuguese?

BALOGUN: Yes.

NAGIB: And this was the time of Cinema Novo, may be late Cinema Novo. Did you have any contact with the people from Cinema Novo and the style of shooting and making films at that time?

BALOGUN: No, I worked later on with a director of photography who has been quite involved with Cinema Novo, Jose Meideros, the late Jose Meideros. I also met a couple of the Cinema Novo people. That was the only project I undertook in Brazil, so I cannot speak widely on them. I hope and look forward to long term relationship with Brazil.

NAGIB: And after this, nothing else devel-

oped?

BALOGUN: I have not had the opportunity to go back to Brazil to do another project. Maybe this is the time to think about it.

NAGIB: So you know of the Yoruba culture in Brazil?

BALOGUN: Yes, yes. I was in Bahia.

NAGIB: How did Bahia interest you?

BALOGUN: It is a very powerful linkage between Africa and the new world.

OKOME: And this link is very apparent in *Black Goddess* and *Bisi Daughter of The River*?

BALOGUN: Yes.

OKOME: I will take you back to the Nigerian Cinema. One of the complains that we have heard is that the Yoruba Cinema, so to speak, poses some kind of national question. It is said that it does not aspire towards a national cinema.

BALOGUN: I do not know. Nigeria is a pluri-ethnic, pluri-cultural society, therefore it is the coming together that makes the Nigerian entity. Bear this in mind.

OKOME: Don't you see some unevenness in the content of the films produced in Nigeria? Some critics argue that the Yoruba film could alienate; the language is Yoruba, the culture is traditional Yoruba, and indeed the whole social system is Yoruba.

BALOGUN: It is inevitable that we have to deal with each other on the basis of what our cultures are. So we cannot emasculate our individual cultures on the basis that people from other cultures would not understand.

NAGIB: From what you have seen here in FESPACO 95, what would you conclude is the main tendency of African cinema? Would you argue that it has been developing upward?

BALOGUN: I must say I have not been feeling too well, so I have not seen so many films. It won't be fair, therefore, for me to answer this question.

OKOME: One more question. Filmmakers in Nigeria are said not to be organised, and this is why representation are not properly made to government in international festivals such as this. What are the reasons for this situation?

BALOGUN: I would say it is the difficulty of organising in a large country such as Nigeria. It is difficult to have an umbrella organisation that would bring the different people together in one situation.

OKOME: But other big film cultures, for instance Brazil, and Cuba, have been able to do this...

BALOGUN: But you see the production in these countries is structured in a different way. In Nigeria, production is sporadic, a free for all. There is no cultural organisation through which things are done. **GR**

OUR FILM MAKERS MUST COME TOGETHER — Breudan Shehu

Breudan Shehu, Chairman, Nigerian Film Corporation spoke to Sola Olorunoyi and Onookome Okome during the anniversary of a century of world cinema in Ouagadougou, Burkina-Faso.

QUESTION: What prompted your decision to attend this festival and in what ways do you think Nigeria can benefit from this gathering?

ANSWER: First and foremost, I am here to make and establish contacts in order to sell the facilities we have in Nigeria. We've just set up a colour laboratory and a dubbing

studio in Jos, but unfortunately both are yet to be utilised by either our film makers or those from abroad.

The other area I am looking forward to making a contact in, is in respect of co-production and distribution, so that we can pool our resources to increase the number of African films and try to get outlets for our films. When our cinema houses are not showing video films, they are showing foreign ones. So, if we don't make efforts for external markets, we may not be able to make profit or even recoup what we have invested in our production. The third reason why I am here is to see their set-up, how they are organising

...For the whole of last year, we couldn't produce a single film. This is partly explained by the economic situation in the country and to some degree, the political crisis.

Nonetheless, we are trying to come to the aid of film makers by looking at the films they have earlier produced and by trying to reproduce additional copies for them. You won't believe that some of them have only single copies, which cannot be shown anywhere because they are so battered.