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Journal of Film and Video, Volume 72, Numbers 1-2, Spring/Summer
2020, pp. 58-66 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press



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FESPACO—Promoting African Film Development and Scholarship

M. AFRICANUS AVEH

IF THERE IS ANY SINGLE EVENT that has significantly developed and promoted African film over the past half century, then it is the Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou (Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou), or FESPACO, based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, West Africa. The festival also has been a source of great scholarship in film studies.

Historical Development

At a meeting in Algiers in 1969, a group of African filmmakers decided to organize a “Film Week” to showcase African films produced on the continent and share creative ideas. The event was hosted in Ouagadougou, and its initial success led to the repeat of the event in the subsequent two years, with increased participation not only of filmmakers but also of attendees. This led to the formation of the Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes (Federation of Pan-African Filmmakers) with the acronym FEPACI. In 1972, the festival was instituted. It received official state support in Burkina Faso and was placed under a ministry. This marked the birth of the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou with the acronym FESPACO. For fifty years, FESPACO has

grown to become the most significant event in the promotion and development of African film through its biennial festival in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. It has become the converging point for showcasing African film as well as a congregation of the continent’s filmmakers in one place. But for this festival, little would have been known of Burkina Faso even by its neighbors in the region.

The Organizational Structure

FESPACO is organized as a body corporate headed by a chief executive and staff operating a secretariat located in Ouagadougou. It is currently headed by Ardiouma Soma.¹ The secretariat is funded with budgetary allocations from the Burkina government and donor support from international agencies. The secretariat also houses the African Film Library, established in 1989 to preserve African film heritage. The library boasts a collection of original prints of African films and a restoration center for processing films for storage. It is a major resource for African film research in the world.²

The Festival Structure

FESPACO is a biennial film and television festival on specific themes. For the 2019 edition, the theme was “Memory and Future of African Cinema.” Calls are made for full-length films to be submitted in competition for the grand prize, which takes the form of a stallion named after a royal princess warrior, Yennenga.³ Other categories in competition are short films,

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documentaries, animation, television series, and student films from African film schools. Each competitive category has its own jury that adjudicates separately. Films in competition must be made by African nationals. There is, however, a Paul Robeson Prize for films made by Africans in the diaspora. There are non-competitive special prizes awarded by juries according to certain laid-down objectives. The festival also screens a selection of non-competitive films from around the world.

The dates of the festival are fixed, beginning on the last Saturday in February and ending on the first Saturday in March in odd years. There is an opening ceremony, normally held at the sports stadium on the opening Saturday evening, with musical fanfare, dances, and gymnastic displays. The festival is symbolically opened with a giant clapperboard operated by the prime minister. The closing ceremony on the evening of the last day also normally has taken place at the sports stadium, with the juries' reports accompanied by the announcement of the winners of the awards in the various categories. Each winner is called to a podium to collect a statuette and a dummy check of the accompanying cash prize, culminating in the ultimate grand prize, which is presented by the president amid fanfare. After the awards ceremony comes a massive display of celebratory fireworks. In the past there was then a screening of the grand prize-winning film on a giant inflatable screen mounted in the middle of the soccer pitch. This has not been done for the past four or five festivals, so the closing ceremony ends with the fireworks display.

During the eight-day festival period, film screenings are held at several venues from morning till about midnight. The actual screening days are from Sunday morning to late Friday evening. There are no screenings on the Saturdays as preparations are made for the opening and closing ceremonies. Visitors arriving for the festival first visit the secretariat to get their accreditation tags and program brochures in order to plan their itinerary. At the end of the festival, the last Saturday can be used for shopping at the markets or sightseeing before attending the

evening's ceremonies. The screening venues include proper cinema theaters, conference halls equipped with projection facilities, and some premises converted for screening just for the festival duration. These venues are spread throughout the city and into the suburbs, but a cluster of venues are within walking distance of each other. Open-air venues screen only at night for obvious reasons.

A comprehensive program brochure in English and French provides technical production details of the films, synopses, and detailed screening schedules to help participants choose which movies to watch at what time. There are early-morning press screenings of the full-length films competing for the grand prize. These are sometimes followed with press conferences by the production company, with the director and some lead actors in attendance. However, each screening session is preceded by a short introduction from the filmmaker or representative if present. Clusters of short films are programmed together in slots for a screening duration of up to two hours.

Accreditation is the key to participation in the festival. Interested participants must submit a completed accreditation form with picture by a set deadline in order to be accredited. Accreditation tags allowed free entry to screening centers in the past, whereas those without tags were made to buy entry tickets if space was available. The accreditation tags serve as identification and also as security for participants because the police provide protection for festival participants from abroad. The accreditation process additionally is used to generate the festival attendance statistics and data that are compiled into a directory of various film professionals as indicated on the form.

Another noteworthy feature of the festival is *Marché International du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel Africains* (International Film and Television Market), or MICA, established in 1983 to promote the sale and distribution of African films by linking producers to television network managers. A big exhibition space is provided, and partitioned cubicles are allocated to registered film producers to showcase

their products and their companies for possible distribution deals with television networks. Equipment manufacturers and dealers also can be found there, demonstrating the latest digital technology in cameras and other production gadgets. A comprehensive brochure listing contact details for registered participants is available each year.

The festival is awash with musical concerts at multiple locations in the evenings, providing opportunities for dancing and socializing; drink vendors and food courts operate day and night, especially on the secretariat grounds; and a market square with a variety of items for sale, especially artifacts from the region, is also created at the revolutionary ground. These aspects of the festival create an atmosphere for socialization in a culturally diverse ground. It is an all-night event, making the festival period a long one, covering several days and nights without break.

Aside from the social and entertainment events, there are also creative, scholarly, and academic activities organized at multiple locations. The Federation of Pan-African Filmmakers (FEPACI) normally organizes its meeting and conference debate on the festival theme. Some issues of global appeal are also discussed, and declarations are sometimes made and a communiqué issued to propagate the stand of the federation. Since 2007, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) has organized creative and scholarly workshops and conferences on various themes during the FESPACO period. The council brings together film scholars and practitioners for several days of discussions on selected topics, usually with a keynote and plenary presentations. For 2019, CODESRIA organized a five-day institute on the theme “The Essence(s), Diversity and Economies of the (Pan)-African Arts: (Re)making and Confronting Memories and Futures.”

Challenges and Changes over the Years

There have been changes in the way FESPACO is organized within the last decade or so. These

changes have affected general participation and also filmmakers’ submission of entries. The free entry to film screenings for accredited participants has been no more the case since 2011. It was a huge embarrassment personally as well as a financial burden when my students (numbering about forty) and I were asked to pay for entry tags for screenings in 2011, though we had accreditation as usual. Since 1999, under my leadership, a group of performing arts students from the University of Ghana in Accra has been traveling by bus to Ouagadougou to participate in FESPACO as an academic field trip. FESPACO gave some of the students a rare opportunity to experience cinema. This is because cinema houses ceased to operate in Ghana as such in the early 1980s, before the students were born, and thus they have grown up watching films either on television or as discs played on home electronic devices. The Silverbird cineplexes established in the two big shopping malls in Accra in the last ten years have some elitist status, and the entry fees are out of reach for the average Ghanaian. Some of these students have not had the opportunity to be in a proper cinema theater. This accounts for the high enthusiasm for embarking on the sixteen-hour (or more, depending on delays at the border crossing) bus trip from Accra to Ouagadougou. So every festival year, application for accreditation was made by the deadline, and we arrived for the festival and picked up our tags that gained us entry to all screening events. The year 2011 was not to be. We had to pay for individual entry passes. That year we learned that some filmmakers protested vehemently when meted the same treatment.

Additionally, festival brochures were in short supply, and some advertised screenings were swapped with different films. There were some logistical challenges that hitherto had not been so. Some people attributed the challenges to changes in management at the secretariat, while others blamed cuts in funding from the Burkina government as a result of economic problems. It was also heard that there was reduced support from France and the European Union as a result of the Ivory Coast political crisis in which French

soldiers and nationals had been attacked by Ivorian rebels, with rippling effects on the Francophone zone in West Africa.

FESPACO has not been able to overcome these challenges since 2011 as it has gradually lost some of its shine. The situation has been compounded by recent political turmoil on the national front, with the civil rebellion against President Blaise Compaore's attempt to extend further his twenty-seven-year rule. The ensuing chaos of mass protests led to the destruction of the National Assembly building, with several official vehicles parked in the yard set ablaze. The rioting also extended to the nearby Hotel Independance (also known as Azalai Hotel), where it was learned the members of the National Assembly were housed while attempting to review the constitution to back the president's plan for extending his stay. This hotel used to be the festival hotel where key African filmmakers and festival participants stayed during FESPACO. Thus, to meet, say, Ousmane Sembene, Djibril Diop Mambety, or other big names in African cinema, one needed to pitch camp in this hotel's lobby.⁴ This is no longer the case. The place has lain in ruins since 2014, a pale shadow of its former glory. Since then it has been difficult to locate where notable filmmakers lodge during FESPACO because they are now scattered across the hotels in the city.

In addition to the national political upheaval that created tension and led to changes in political leadership, since 2014 terrorist attacks on the city have resulted in high numbers of casualties. Fortunately, the attacks have not happened during the festival period, but the effects on subsequent festivals have been very devastating. Attendance has dropped as a result of travel warnings issued by some countries to their citizens. There has been increased security during festivals, with people passing through metal detectors and security checks at cinema theaters and other events, resulting in long queues and delays. Armed police and military presence all over the city can be intimidating to participants not used to such situations. Ouagadougou looks more like a war zone, with heavy gun trucks either stationed at vantage

points or patrolling the streets. There are concrete crash barriers erected around selected buildings, along with stacked sandbags. There are several roadblocks, and certain places are even designated as "no walking zones." The insecurity has resulted in the opening and closing ceremonies of FESPACO no longer taking place in the sports stadium but rather transpiring at an indoor sports arena with reduced attendance. This has meant no fireworks display as characterized by previous festivals.

There was a security scare in 2015 when the Burkina government and FESPACO management debated whether to screen the controversial Mauritanian movie *Timbuktu* (2014) by Abderrahmane Sissako because of terrorists' threats against the film. The film is based on events of the infamous invasion of Timbuktu by armed extremists, and the extremists thus tagged the film "anti-Islam." In the end, the film was scheduled for a single screening amid tight security, resulting in two-hour-long security checks on people who waited in long queues to see the film. The Cine Burkina theater was jam-packed. The filmmaker was shepherded by about a dozen armed guards even inside the cinema theater during screening. This was unprecedented in the history of FESPACO.

Some of the cinema houses in Ouagadougou are no longer in operation. For example, the premises of Cine Oubri and Cine Riale are now used by market traders. These were two open-air cinema houses that screened films during FESPACO. The cinematic experience at these two theaters was very different from the experience at Cine Burkina, an indoor theater a stone's throw away. The kinds of viewers you will encounter at such venues are very different, and as such, reactions to events unfolding onscreen do not compare at all. Thus, as a film scholar, I used to watch selected films at the air-conditioned elite Cine Burkina and do the same at the open-air bench-seating Cine Oubri and undertake film audience research. The results were very interesting. Cine Nerwaya, also in Ouagadougou, was in a state of disrepair in 2017, which made viewing films there not too comfortable. However, new cinema houses

continue to be opened in Ouagadougou. Cine Guimbi opened in 2017, and Canal Olympia also has opened two new cinema theaters in Ouagadougou since 2017.

There were some significant changes to FESPACO that are worthy of note. The organizers in 2011 broke the top award into three categories: gold, silver, and bronze. It used to be only one Yennenga stallion prize for the winning full-length film. The accompanying cash prizes were also increased. These were attempts to revamp the festival to attract more film entries. Over the years, FESPACO had also accepted only 35mm celluloid film prints for films in competition, which placed a burden on filmmakers shooting in the digital mode to make film transfers at a huge cost in order to compete in the festival. This allowed Francophone films to dominate the festival because digital filmmaking has been the dominant format in Anglophone Africa. The Francophone African filmmakers were able to produce in 35mm with the support of grants from France.⁵ Though many Anglophone filmmakers made very good films in the digital format, the high cost of transferring to 35mm print prevented them from making any prominent appearances at FESPACO. Such digital-format productions were labeled by FESPACO management as “video,” were consigned to some obscure low-key screening centers, and were not accepted in competition. This explains why Anglophone African films have not featured too prominently in the top awards at FESPACO. To date only three have taken the top award: Kwaw Ansah from Ghana won with *Heritage Africa* in 1989; Zola Maseko from South Africa won with *Drum* in 2005; and Newton Aduaka of Nigeria (but based in France) won with *Ezra* in 2007. FESPACO management decided from 2015 to accept digital copies in DCP format for full-length films and to accept DVDs for short films. This has resulted in a significant increase in film submissions to the festival from across the continent. In addition, Africans in the diaspora are now allowed to compete for the awards in all categories.

Significance and Contribution to Development of African Film

FESPACO has been dubbed the “African Oscars” in comparison with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences based in North America. Though the two are not the same, they compare in the way filmmakers serve as the backbone of each event. Without the Federation of Pan-African Filmmakers, FESPACO would not have come into existence or even survived over the years. It has been the productions of the filmmakers that have supported the festival and allowed it to thrive. On the other hand, without FESPACO, there would have been no platform for African filmmakers to generally showcase their craft. Thus, FESPACO contributed immensely to the development of African film by offering it visibility. Due to the distribution bottlenecks of films, especially in Africa, films produced by African filmmakers do not get shown to Africans on the continent. The problem is compounded by the absence of cinema theaters across the continent. Ghana, for example, could boast of many cinema theaters in the capital Accra and other towns across the country up to the early 1980s. Then operations ceased due to several factors discussed elsewhere.⁶ FESPACO, therefore, has been the avenue by which some of us have been fortunate to watch films produced by African filmmakers. It also created the opportunity for me and my students over the years to meet in person some of the big names in African cinema at FEPACI conferences. Despite the challenges already discussed and the reduced shine of FESPACO, it still maintains some significance, especially in the operation of the African Film Library, already discussed, as preservation of cultural heritage.

The Durban International Film Festival (DIFF) in South Africa is another major film festival on the continent, and some have argued that it has overtaken (or will overtake) FESPACO in terms of scale of organization. That assertion to me is difficult to support, given that the two are not easily comparable due to differences in their features. DIFF (unlike FESPACO) is an annual event

established and run by the Centre for Creative Arts at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. It is also a weeklong festival with screenings at several venues across the city and spreading into the suburbs. A special unique feature is the “Wavescape,” films on surfing screened at the Durban beachfront to sporting enthusiasts especially. Unlike FESPACO, DIFF accepts entries in competition from all over the world but has special prizes for South African productions. DIFF operates the Durban FilmMart, which is very different from FESPACO’s market, MICA. The Durban FilmMart is a platform where selected film producers pitch their productions before potential financiers at a forum for serious film business. DIFF also has a Talent Campus affiliated with the Berlinale film festival where selected young filmmakers and critics across the continent are taken through master classes and workshops by established filmmakers in a kind of mentoring program. Unfortunately, there are no scholarly conferences organized as part of DIFF where academic presentations can be made, despite the fact that it is located at a university. The ability to sustain the yearly event to its fortieth anniversary in 2019 is very commendable. DIFF also has contributed greatly to the development of South African film (and for that matter, African film) through its special competitive category for local films separate from all others. It has therefore been a platform for premiering South African productions before they are distributed worldwide. I noticed the nationalistic flavor of the festival when I attended in 2012. However, similar to circumstances in Ouagadougou, there is concern about creeping insecurity in Durban, with recent reported xenophobic attacks on African nationals by South Africans. In a discussion with my students about our possible participation in the future, some of the students raised this issue as a mitigating factor against their interests in attending DIFF.

The Ideal Film Festival

Film festivals contribute immensely to the development of film in many ways. Therefore, the

inclusion of attendance at film festivals in the film studies curriculum in academic institutions should be supported. Film festivals should have features that cover the various aspects of film as a creative endeavor, a business enterprise, a cultural artifact, a social developmental tool, and an academic and scholarly event. My ideal film festival would therefore embrace all these in its organization. There are emerging industry events on the continent where filmmakers are just awarded for films entered into a competition, without any associated screening schedules. In some cases, a film that has not yet been released for public screening has been awarded. In such circumstances, people do suspect that some producers buy the awards in order to hype their films before they are released. These awards ceremonies are copying the Oscars but forget that the Academy Awards is anchored in an industry with distribution and exhibition outlets. Thus, films are released into theaters and are seen by many before the Academy votes to nominate them for the various categories and finally votes for the ultimate winners. African Movie Academy Awards, based in Nigeria, has no serious “academy” of filmmakers in Africa. It just calls for film entries, and a jury then decides the awards, and a public event is organized to present the winners with all the pomp and glamour that sponsorship can promote. In the absence of cinema theaters across the continent, Africans watch films mainly on television (either free over the air or through subscription), through Internet downloads where available, or through shared pirated copies. Thus, many of these films being awarded at these events are not seen by the majority of the people until later, when they become available on television. These awards therefore are detached from film audiences in Africa. They are just “show-off” events for people in the entertainment industry.

Film awards also should carry some prestige to boost the morale of filmmakers. An award is recognition for hard work, perseverance, and creativity. It should be respected by people both within the industry and outside of it. It

should be very competitive to be targeted by industry players. Some African filmmakers now carry their films through festival circles across the globe for a period before releasing them to theaters and other distribution and exhibition outlets. They stamp their films with all festivals they have participated in. Film awards should also carry with them some financial rewards in the form of accompanying cash prizes. This is because film production is capital-intensive, and in our parts of the world, where the industry is still struggling for support and production funds are very limited, cash prizes become a form of welcome revenue for defraying part of production expenditures. The top prize at FESPACO has a cash award of twenty million CFA (equivalent of 34,000 US dollars). The cash prize for the Best Feature at DIFF is fifty thousand Rand (equivalent of 3,500 US dollars). These amounts will cushion a filmmaker against production costs yet to be recouped.

It is very interesting hearing filmmakers discuss their concepts and production processes, including challenges that they had to overcome to get to the screen. Film discourse with or without filmmakers promotes scholarship as well as creativity. There is nothing like a “perfect art,” and it is through reviews and criticisms that art gets improved. Thus, a film event that includes a gathering of scholars, critics, and practitioners debating issues on a given theme, broadly and relating to specific films, is of high academic interest. Therefore, it is a little disappointing that the Durban International Film Festival has no scholarly session despite being anchored in an academic institution. What DIFF organizes is a film business forum where producers and financiers discuss funding opportunities and processes. Perhaps adding a two- or three-day conference on film as part of DIFF would be a plus for the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Contribution to Scholarship

I first attended FESPACO in 1997 on a fellowship under the CODESRIA African Humanities Institute Program, at the University of Ghana, Legon. I was among a group of selected African

fellows who were sponsored to participate in the festival. Apart from attending numerous film screenings and press conferences by film production companies on their films in competition, fellows also observed heated debates at FEPACI meetings on various issues. We also held our own sessions where we discussed not only the films but the organization of the festival as well. As a young lecturer then, I was struck by the rich resource that the festival provided for film studies and decided that my performing arts students who were taking courses in film, video, and television would gain some practical experience from this festival. So in 1999, I took about a dozen students, mostly in their final years, to FESPACO. The road trip was tiring but worth it. This initial success pushed me to officially apply to university authorities for approval to make FESPACO a field trip for students. In effect, I have attended the festival with students from the University of Ghana for the past twenty years, and the benefits have been great despite some challenges.

As earlier discussed, these students are not familiar with the era of cinema in Ghana in which the Ghana Film Industry Corporation operated cinema theaters across the country where both local and foreign films were screened daily. For them, cinema is watching films on television, slotting in a DVD and watching on monitors, or in recent times, watching on smartphones and tablets. The closest thing to a cinematic experience is when video projectors are used to screen DVDs in large halls. The trip to FESPACO, with special arrangements to visit the projection rooms of the cinema theaters and see films on reels being loaded onto celluloid film projectors, has been an experience of a lifetime for students. They could now relate to what they study in film history about the development of film with experiments in projecting still photographs in a way to create the illusion of motion on a screen.

Opportunities to meet up-close some big names in world cinema also have arisen. The students have met and heard some of these filmmakers speak about their productions and experiences. Photo opportunities have not

been missed. It was hysterical for some students to meet and talk to the Nobel Literature Laureate Wole Soyinka at one of the FESPACO events in 2013. Hearing these personalities speak directly is not the same as reading what they reportedly have said in textbooks and journal articles.

The students also have been made to predict which competing films are likely to win awards. Exciting debates have ensued up till the announcement of the winners on the final day and even after on the return trip, with students trying to figure out what went on in the minds of the jury in selecting winners. They have studied various strategies that filmmakers adopted to popularize their productions, including poster and banner design and parading the streets of Ouagadougou with busloads of cheering squads displaying large banners of the film in competition. The festival also has offered ample avenues for audience research, where students notice which films are sold out and which are poorly attended and also appreciated. There additionally has been the issue of the Francophone and Anglophone divide clearly displayed in films in the festival as well as among participants and the hosts. FESPACO has offered studies in curation, event programming, and management. Students' essays and theses on FESPACO over the years have been varied in topics but have demonstrated acquisition of rich knowledge.

Conclusion

There are now avenues for African filmmakers to showcase their productions outside the continent, with the emergence of several film festivals featuring categories for African films. Thus, when the challenges for FESPACO began impacting negatively on the organization of the festival, African filmmakers began to look elsewhere. Cannes, London, Berlin, Tokyo, Sydney, Toronto, Los Angeles, New York, and many other cities have film festivals that now attract African films. Though the filmmakers are getting exposure on supposed global stages, they are alienating themselves from their home au-

diences, who still do not get to see these films despite being the source of their stories.

Participation in these film festivals happening around the globe is beyond the average African in terms of cost and cumbersome processes. I can imagine the hurdles to surmount if I were to attempt to take even two of my students to any of the film festivals listed previously, especially in securing visas to travel, not to mention cost of flights. The alternative, then, is depending on media reports for studies on these festivals. But these media reports can be very subjective and misleading, especially with the rise of fake news. Firsthand experience at such events is required for scholarly discourse. There is the need, therefore, to develop more film festivals on the continent. There are some fledgling film festivals in Ghana hoping to grow over the years to the stature of FESPACO—the Black Star International Film Festival curated by Juliet Asante, the Ndiva Women's Film Festival curated by Aseye Tamakloe, and my own Legon International Film Event. With adequate support, these festivals will grow to become resources for film scholarship just as FESPACO has been for over half a century.

NOTES

1. For profiles of the current and past chief executives of FESPACO, see "Délégues Généraux Fespaco."
2. See "Presentation of the Cinematheque."
3. See Waweru.
4. Manthia Diawara has an interesting account of his experience at Hotel Indépendance in chapter 1 of his book *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics*.
5. Bakari and Cham and Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*, have all discussed this issue in detail.
6. This issue is discussed in detail in Aveh; Diawara, *African Film*; and Bakari and Cham.

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