

Producing African Cinema in Paris

An Interview with Andrée Daventure

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Andrée Daventure did extensive editing work in French film and television before she founded her own company, Atria. In 1953, she became an assistant film editor for a series of documentary shorts, including *La Destruction et Reconstruction de Varsovie*, a series on the Marshall Plan in 1955, a film on the United Nations, and several other educational films. By 1957, she edited features, including Louis Saslovsky's *Ier Mai* (1957) with Yves Montand, Raoul André's *Clara et les Méchants* (1958) and his *Un Homme à Vendre* in 1959. Between 1959 and 1966, she worked as the assistant editor on twenty-one feature films, including C. B. Aubert's study on interracial intimacy, *Les Laches Vivent D-Espoir* (1960), Yves Allégret's adaptation of Zola's *Germinal* (1963), and René Clément's pseudo-documentary, *Paris Brule-t-Il? [Is Paris Burning?]* (1966) which she also helped to research.

In 1967, she became a chief editor on television and film productions. Several year later, she began editing films made by African filmmakers. Daventure and the French Ministry of Foreign Relations (which helps to finance Francophone African cinema, as the Ministère de las Coopération had done before 1981) have been the two most important *European* promoters of Francophone African cinema.

It was after discussions with Senegalese filmmaker Safi Faye, the first African woman filmmaker, that I asked Andrée Daventure for an interview. Daventure offered a wealth of information about the cross-cultural problems which a white French woman encounters when editing

African cinema. She also described the production, distribution and financial relations many Francophone African filmmakers have with Atria and/or the French Ministry of Foreign Relations. These ties and problems are slightly comparable to those faced by U.S. independent video and film artists who depend on such organizations as the American Film Institute, the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts, and the U.S. Public Broadcasting Corporation.

Daventure assisted editing the following African films:

(from Mali) Alkaly Kaba's *Wallanda* (1974), Sega Coulibaly's *Le Destin* (1976) and *Kasso Den* (1979);

Souleymane Cissé's *Den Moussa* (1975), *Baara* (1978), *Finye* (1981) and *Yeelen* (which was being edited at the time of this interview);

(Cameroon) Dikongue Pipa's *Muna Moto* (1975), *Le Prix De La Liberté* (1978), *Grand Stade* (1981) and *Courte Maladie* (1984);

(Senegal) Safi Faye's *Lettre Paysanne* (1975), *Fad Jal* (1979) and *As Women See It* (a short, 1982), Ben Diogaye Beye's *Un Homme, Des Femmes* (1980);

(from Niger) Oumarou Ganda's *L'Exilé* (1980); (Burkina Faso) Sanou Kollo's *Paweogo* (1982), Gaston Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni* (1982), and Paul Zoumbara's *Jours de Lourmente* (1983);

(from Tunisia) Férid Boughedir's *Caméra d'Afrique* (1983);

(from Ivory Coast) Kitia Toure's *Comédie Exotique* (1984).

Daventure has promoted African cinema well beyond her role as editor. She has helped distribute many of these films and offers internships to some of Africa's most promising young directors. One of her interns, for example, was Burkina Faso's Idrissa Ouedraogo, who has consecutively won international acclaim for his dramatic films which visually explore urban problems. She has also been a close friend and mentor to Kitia Toure, an Ivory Coast novelist and film director.

Editing Across Cultures: Problematics and Consciousness

Mark Reid: How did you get your start in cinema?

Andrée Daventure: In 1952, I worked six months in a film lab. Then I did several internships within the traditional French film industry.

MR: But, how did you become the editor of African-directed films?

AD: One day I was thinking about Africa. I really wanted to understand what African cinema was—what it meant in Africa. I believe that people who work in film should try to understand all filmmaking styles so as to really understand cinema itself. In 1974, I looked for work with the Ministry of Cooperation [which dealt with French-African international

relations] in the African film section. I wanted to broaden my knowledge of editing in particular and of film in general.

A man asked me if I would edit a commercial for a Francophone festival. As I was editing that short, I saw some African films. On a modest little editing table, I saw Ousmane Sembene's *Borom Sarret* and found myself crying. I discovered that with all my education and exposure to film, I had not known about this important cinema. When I met with the man who had given me this editing job, I asked him to give me African films to edit. Initially my work was only fair because I recognized that films made by Africans have different film styles and pacing than the European films I had formerly edited. I knew I couldn't work in a European editing mode.

MR: Could you elaborate on this theme of cross-cultural film production and the problems which a European encounters when working on African cinema?

AD: It is very interesting to confront my own "savoir faire," which represents my personal and cultural education in France. After I have organized this perspective mentally, I listen to the African director, with whom I have a discussion each editing session.

MR: But do you understand the film's dialogue?

AD: No. That's why I pay close attention to the director, the musical soundtrack, and the characters. French editors commonly edit according to dialogue or the impact of a word, but when I edit African films, I cannot do that. So, I work according to the rhythm of the dialogue. I haven't yet been mistaken.

MR: Do you find any difference between the sense of space in the African and French films you've worked on?

AD: Sure, there's a difference. For example, I usually record eye contact. Yet in a particular African milieu, people often cannot look directly at another person.

MR: You mean that two characters are forbidden by cultural convention to exchange looks?

AD: I had not known about this taboo, but when I learned about it, a lot of my thinking and actions changed. For example, when I edited Kitia Toure's *Comédie Exotique*, I tried to convince Kitia to accept a certain scene, but he rejected it on the basis of his customs.

MR: It is important then to know the customs and to respect them by translating them into the film.

AD: But I have made errors because my culture is within me. Some things escape my sensibility when I edit African films even though I successfully edit French films without a director's guidance. I would never edit an African film without the director reviewing and discussing my job.

MR: So you and the director edit the film together?

AD: Always. It is better if the director has screened the rushes with me so we can discuss the film before the editing has been structured.

African Film Production, French Ministry of Foreign Relations, and Atriascope

MR: I would like to move from the issue of cultural aesthetics to another fundamental issue which helps to define African film—the financing and promotion of these films. What is the relation between Francophone African film production, the French Foreign Ministry, and your company, Atriascope?

AD: These are separate issues. There are the relations between Atriascope and filmmakers in general; relations between Atriascope and the French Foreign Ministry; and relations between African filmmakers and the Foreign Ministry. For example, I edited *Wend Kuuni*, which was a Burkina Faso production; this entailed a relation between Burkina Faso and Atriascope without any assistance from French governmental agencies. When I work with French governmental agencies, it is the Foreign Ministry which gives financial support while Atriascope deals with production management and film budgeting. But African filmmakers can bypass Atriascope and choose to work directly with the Foreign Ministry.

MR: I believe that Atriascope offers film production internships?

AD: We do. There's Atriascope and Atria. Atria is an association which plans and manages film budgets, disseminates publicity, markets film, and coordinates film festivals. Atriascope deals with the technical side of film production. The two activities complement each other. We try to offer editing internships, and I am glad when young African filmmakers choose to come here. We've had a Burkina Faso intern who worked on a Malian film and a Malian who worked on an Ivory Coast film. African interns are able to work on many different films at Atriascope. But this range of experience for interns is usually impossible in Africa because most African nations don't produce large enough numbers of films to allow an intern to gain post-production experience.

MR: How do African interns support themselves in Paris?

AD: Some receive scholarships and some support themselves by doing odd jobs so they can learn the filmmaking trade. I try to accept everyone regardless of whether they have a scholarship or not. This was how Kitia Toure became an intern here.

KITIA TOURE (who has just arrived): And I am continuing my internship.

AD: One day, Kitia's professor asked me to meet a student. This is how I met Kitia, who later worked on Gaston Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni*. Then, Kitia filmed and edited his own *Comédie Exotique*.

MR: Idrissa Ouedraogo told me that you are now working on his new feature *Le Choix*?¹

AD: We'll deal with just a small part of this film's production because it is being financed by the government of Burkina Faso, not the French Ministry. A part of that film's budget is directly managed by Burkina Faso. Atria receives Idrissa's rushes, screens them at the lab, and reports any technical problems. We also send him more film stock, verify that the material has been sent out, and that French technicians were paid (because any French crew members are governed by French laws).

MR: Idrissa must pay according to a French pay scale if he hires a French production crew. In addition, he must send his footage to a French lab to be developed since there are no professional laboratories in West Africa. Does Atria do the same for Souleymane Cisse?

AD: Yes, we have edited the first part of Cisse's *Yeelen* and the French technicians have been paid. His film budget was financed by the Ministry of Foreign Relations, which received permission from the Centre National de la Cinématographie.

[Translator's note: Le Centre National de La Cinématographie—National Cinematography Center—is a governmental agency that partially funds and helps to distribute many French films. Before any French governmental agency, like the Ministry of Foreign Relations, is allowed to financially back a film, the CNC must approve the budget, then a French bank will underwrite the amount that the CNC has approved. Also see *Informations*, No. 209 (May–June, 1986).]

MR: What is the Ministère de la Coopération?

AD: It was the French Ministry that dealt with French and African relations. In 1981, when the Left came to power, these relations passed to the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Now that there is a conservative government in office, African–French relations have returned to the aegis of the Ministère de la Coopération. After five years of such reshuffling, African filmmakers have not received equal status with other international filmmakers. Now, African filmmakers must deal with still another ministry, another political administration, and deal with that group's particular cultural politics.

MR: What will become of the ties between the Ministry of Foreign Relations, Atria, and young African filmmakers who wish to do internships, now that the Right has taken power?

AD: I think that beginning today, we can no longer speak of ties to the Ministry of Foreign Relations because another ministry will deal with African cinema. I haven't formulated my feelings about the future

relations between Atria and the new French leadership. But Atria will continue to exist as a center for film production. You must understand that we started as part of the Ministère de la Coopération around 1974. I began working in a government-sponsored film production section.

Later, the government disbanded this section, and we founded Atria to continue to work with African filmmakers; at that time, we were supported by our friends in the ministry. Now, we do not have the same relations, but we have continued the work begun by the original director of the Ministère de la Coopération. We have many problems and little means but we remain optimistic. I hope that we continue and our problems with the government end, because the difficulties have become a heavy burden. I think that the African filmmakers really need us and hope we continue to exist.

Panafrican Hopes and Separate Realities: Francophone West Indian and African Filmmakers

MR: Have you ever worked with Francophone West Indian [Antillian] filmmakers?

AD: No. There isn't that much production by Antillian filmmakers.

KT: Since Antillian filmmakers are considered French, their work goes under the rubric of French film production.

MR: You mean to tell me that Julius Amede Laou is considered a French filmmaker yet his work specifically speaks from a black West Indian point of view?²

KT: Julius Amede Laou is considered a French filmmaker here, as is Euzhan Palcy. Her film *Rue Case Nègrès* [*Sugar Cane Alley*] was a French production. Since she's black, she just falls into the category of black African cinema.

MR: Why doesn't the French government recognize that black West Indian and African filmmakers have similar interests and a similar colonial history? The French establish these categories without acknowledging the historical link between these black people. One group is considered a "French" nation while the other is a "former" French colony.

AD: You can't artificially make connections. If an African meets a West Indian and they decide to work together, great.

MR: Does this happen?

AD: There's little chance. In France, a French director chooses a crew. You don't say to a filmmaker, "Would you work with such and such person?" Some filmmakers wouldn't ever change their technical crew. It is not because of skin color that a filmmaker makes such a choice. It happens because of the affinities, the meetings. There's a big difference

between a Cameroonian and an Ivorian and ditto for a Burkinian. Africa is not singular, yet sometimes you can find affinities between people from different countries. Even within the same culture you may have problems finding people who share your same sensibilities.

African Women Filmmakers

MR: You have worked with several African filmmakers but Africa has few women filmmakers. Will you comment on this?

AD: I do not ask if the person is black, white, male or female. There are not that many African filmmakers. I find great pleasure in working with women, more than with men. This comes from the rapport that two women have between them. I have enjoyed working on two films with Safi Faye but we still face that problem of cultural sensibility.

MR: Here, at Atria, you have a predominantly female staff. Does this give the rapport that you have been speaking about?

AD: Many women work at Atria because France has more female editors than male editors. It's a coincidence. Many men work as production directors, camera persons, sound technicians and typesetters.

MR: Does Atriascope solely assist feature-length productions?

AD: It's been more than a year that we've worked with shorts. For example, David Diop, Jr. finished *Poete de L'Amour* here, a short film about his father, the Senegalese poet David Diop. This young filmmaker had attended a French film school, yet the school had not taught him the technical aspects of post-production. He did an internship here at Atriascope. Meanwhile Atria developed his press packet, applied for financial assistance so David could finish his film, and managed his post-production budget.

MR: What is the title of your next film, Kitia?

KT: *Des Chiens Et Des Hommes [Dogs And Men]*. I have two projects. One is a series of shorts, which is in preparation. The other project is the feature-length film, for which I have already written the script and prepared a production budget [*Les 10 Commandments de L'Enfant*, 1989].

MR: What are your last words to an audience who is interested in African cinema?

AD: It's not a last word. Africans make their own cinema. Atria is a bureau of coordination. It is not an office which makes African cinema. Atria is not responsible for African politics. Due to the international economic situation, Africa does not have a film industry. Therefore, it is other countries' and especially France's responsibility, because of our historical relationship with Africa, to support financially the development of African filmmakers.³

Notes

1. Idrissa Ouedraogo's *Le Choix* won the Prix du 7e Art, the Prix de la Ville de Ouaga, the Caméra d'Or and the Meilleure Musique (Best Music) awards at the 1987 Festival PanAfricain du Cinéma.

2. For an appreciation of the black PanAfrican sensibilities of French West Indians, see my article on West Indian filmmaker and dramatist, Julius Amede Laou, and my interview with filmmaker Willie Rameau in *Black Film Review* 3.1 (1987), 8–11, 24. Reprinted in *Cinema in Caribbean Society and Culture*, ed. Mybe Cham (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1991).

3. For a more critical analysis of the economic disparity between African filmmaking and that of the United States, Western Europe, the Soviet Union and Japan, see my interview with Mauritanian filmmaker Med Hondo: "An Interview With Med Hondo," *Jump Cut* 31 (March, 1986), pp. 48–49.