

# Rituals of Illumination and Elective Affinity in Idrissa Ouedraogo's Cinematic Legacy

Olivier-Jean Tchouaffe

The last time I had the privilege to be in Idrissa Ouedraogo's presence was in Jean-Marie Teno's *Lieux Saints* (*Sacred Places*, 2009). The touchstone of *Sacred Places* was the creative collaboration between Teno and Ouedraogo that has now become a conduit and a fitting homage to an African cinematic giant. Moreover, *Sacred Places* becomes a vector to identify the socio-political and cultural networks that have helped shape the vast heritage of this African cinema, with the power of its communicative practices and the amplitude of its transmission that defines how ordinary Africans relate to images and the world.

Idrissa Ouedraogo and Jean-Marie Teno became famous in African cinema through their promotion of introspective indigenous artistry and by recognizing the valuable role of fiction, particularly in places where power produces nothing but simulacra and emptiness. Their works use fictions as a means of engaging politics and for playing out cultural, historical beliefs and social significance. In this manner, one can define the modern African cinematic aesthetic as a template that is attentive to indigenous intellectual history embedded within notions of *Bildung* and creative labor. This functions both as a concomitant expression of an economy of self-transformation and a transformation of reality, turning creativity into an engine of procreation. This form of creativity recognizes its social function, always honoring progress while challenging the disciplinary forms of institutional power, going beyond the limitations of ontological and epistemological forces in keeping up with new productive knowledge and material effects.

This critical force consistently sustains a sense of community surrounding key issues facing the national project. This intersubjective aesthetic practice relies on recognition and value-sharing, including the power of anticipation of unplanned objects and events that cannot always be intrinsically commodified. The added value involves the power to make sense of an assemblage of discourses involving multiple archives and potential avenues for change that go beyond simply kitsch and fetishism twisted into conformity.

This represents the reconciliation between the power of creative self-expression and on-the-ground lived experiences. Imbued with revolutionary

---

Olivier-Jean Tchouaffe is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Southwestern University.

self-conscious activities, pragmatic production, and an internal logic that dramatizes the creative process within stripped-down narratives, they become, together, signifiers of an aesthetic lived out by ordinary Africans through the theatricalization of events. It is a filmmaking practice that finds its way through the limitless power of human creativity and social practices, which are often very syncretic, through unsuspected forms of connections and the mystical cord of memory. All of this, taken together, allows the audience to experience the microcosm of the neighborhood of Saint Louis in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in new ways. In a place that seems, at first, distant if not alien, the ways we make ourselves at home despite globalization foreground issues of cultural values and social capital. The way that cinematic narratives help to theorize notions of values, how the discourses around these values are organized, and normative understandings of values create a means of gauging the possibilities of action. The management of knowledge production and innovation is tied to the crucial issues of value creation, extraction, and distribution. Issues of redistribution and the anticipation of outcomes require a redefinition of the notions of collective investment, social values, public trust, representation, and power.

In this sense, *Sacred Places* is a cinematic ritual featuring two filmmakers who reimagine and elevate what it meant to have a specific African cinematic experience. This takes place alongside a survey of artifacts harnessing the power of a strong storytelling tradition. This tradition ranges from the Djembe through the neighborhood's modern griot, mastering the science of language, to the local video club in a mosque. It is all about people and how places are defined by history and histories, particularly the role that language plays in the production of reality. In this self-contained environment, Jean-Marie Teno models the necessity of seeing this artistic production within its own aesthetic history, paying close attention to cinematic forms and notions of elective affinity. He uses mechanisms of creative labor that paint an accurate picture of underlying aesthetic principles, expressing both notions of the sacred and rituals of illumination, even in the realm of popular culture. This explains why Idrissa Ouedraogo's *Yaaba* can find a *home* even in a mosque. What is so powerful is that it allows the audience to distinguish between functionally familiar and positive rituals on the one hand and negative rituals on the other. It juxtaposes collective practices and communal social bonds with the emergence of spaces to create new forms of entitlement claims. This results in the construction of positive rituals that feature epistemic and performative authority through mastery of knowledge, codes, meanings, and practices. The beauty of gestures and the brilliance of performances create a unique cultural environment, shedding light on learning resources, teaching opportunities, and practices that open up paths to moral education and meaningful work through the values embedded in these rituals.

An economy of reality defies ideologies of conformity, regulation, and social control, particularly in the way larger historical and political themes emerge organically from these formal compositions and positive rituals. *Lieux Saints*, consequently, marks the power of African cinema to create new cultural

reality rather than merely reflecting it, which bring into focus the construction of the real and notions of point of view and interactivity.

This creative labor extends far beyond the screens to demonstrate that aesthetic. It is a form of ethical vision and an ethical life that allies both the sacred and the profane as new modes of democracy and civility, combining conventional notions of place, social location, and political perspective. It is in this sense that ethics and politics are both intertwined. With this articulation of aesthetics and ethics and the transformative power of motion pictures, this cinema must be made available to those who need it, especially for the ways these movies become a seismograph that captures the *Zeitgeist* and adds to the positivity of the world, thereby performing knowledge and wisdom we ought to know. This is a production of knowledge that strings together a chain of performances through multiple archives, histories of institutionalized categories and agreed-upon narratives of identity, embodied traditions of behaviors and practices, affective structures, and modes of representation. In sum, cinematic practices are bounded by neither time nor space but rather imbued with a capacity of anticipation that bring complexities to conventional forms of sociability and belonging, where boundaries between home and the world are constantly blurred.

*Lieux Saints* goes on to act on that intention, providing insights into new questions that emerge out of this specific media field and the keys to understand media practices reflecting local concerns in places such as Burkina Faso. This presents an uncompromising audiovisual analysis of the role that media play in facilitating an engagement with the complexities of ethics, strategic anti-essentialism, and social change, where other disciplines alone cannot in this often-neglected field. A form of cinema is created that raises issues of cultural heritage, epistemic authority, community-based belief learning, and the struggles to own that heritage. These cultural processes are taking place through non-institutionalized cultural practices and new forms of social interaction that are paving the way for a democratic public sphere.

Teno's *Lieux Saints* is a cinema that goes beyond its representational structures to expand and reformulate new cognitive mapping, social systems, and poetic and auto-poetic elements, linking cinematic reception to indigenous material production of the beliefs and practices that structure everyday life. Teno goes on to hold a mirror to these cultural forces and the way that they push for the democratization of the public and the opening up of spaces. He creates new forms of reality that synthesize the living world of images and the experience of lived reality, merging them into a single totality that challenges existing foreclosed categories within the power game of globalization.

The audience is introduced to a form of religious and profane illumination, where the figure of Idrissa Ouedraogo in *Lieux Saints*, through his own movie *Yaaba*, comes to embody a distinctive African cinematic sensibility. This sensibility invokes a shamanistic exorcist function first, foregrounding the notion that making movies is a sacred process in its own right, and second, creating new forms of rituals that help to underscore the shift from traditional to cerebral forms of ritualistic practices and social versus technological

utopias. This cinema moves away from entertainment and liminality to tackle leading ethical questions such as practices of creative labor, self-cultivation, empowerment, and liberation. Particularly, in a context where the tension between community connections, family ties, and desire for individuation reaches the breaking point, the epistemic authority becomes unstable, and educating ordinary people on the challenges they face becomes very difficult. Cinema is able to counteract reigning structures of intelligibility and the passive acceptance of dominant realities, making room for new conditions of intelligibility. Thus, this cinema pushes against the day-to-day grind of poverty, social decay, chronic anxieties, cinematic archetypes, nihilistic sacrifice, and the oppressive forces of fatalism. It does so by shining light on the hidden order beneath the seeming chaos, allowing secret meanings of life to emerge, opening up radical possibilities of a new politics of public life by exposing the secrets of domination through the democratization of the public and spaces of communicability. At the same time, new forms of politics emerge out of the interaction between rituals, aesthetic practices, and spaces of communication. This cinema becomes a ritual of possibilities, a curatorial practice managing resilient and creative forms of subjectivities, making the inhospitable habitable. Taken together, the idea of real politics means action and the possibility to start over, which is the capacity to create disruption, to find alternatives within a perpetual dystopic present. It underscores the duty to resist the forces of the present to develop capacities to find potentialities in the present situation, that is, the power to embrace the qualitative change in how time is experienced and, therefore, one's relationship to each moment.

As in most of his cinematic productions, Teno, in *Lieux Saints*, takes an immersive cinematic approach reminiscent of Benjamin's flaneur or Baudelaire's Chiffonier, a rag picker or waste picker's approach to mapping out a social history from below. He uses an iconographic grammar featuring archetypal figures of eternal Africa: the Djembe artisan, the neighborhood poet, the video club. Then, he unclutters zones of epistemic battles and grassroots' bottom-up knowledge production, highlighting the social function of the African filmmaker at the intersection of organic knowledge production and social forms on the continent. The production of subjectivity becomes an important site of power and resistance, and modes of collective epistemic production and social negotiation capture the complexities and contradictions of African society. The social condition is no longer based on subjectivities such as class and power, but rather on events and the production of values.

This meditation on African cinematic creativity in *Lieux Saints* leads to Idrissa Ouedraogo's work, particularly, *Yaaba*. *Yaaba* takes a child-eye view of humanity's ruthlessness. This viewpoint, like those of Ouedraogo and Teno's other heroes, consists simply of decoding the cold and disturbing world around them in order to better understand it and, perhaps, to better inhabit it.

Ouedraogo's cinema furthermore comes to represent ways to subvert technologies and techniques influenced from their inception by an ideology of domination. Ouedraogo pioneered the still shot, ways of framing images that are neither naturalized nor artificial. This cinematic technique

aims to contain and distill a kind of authentic experience along with the demands of narrative. Ouedraogo's *Yaaba* can be understood as social-realist film-making, but Ouedraogo can also claim to have created a distinctive texture, with agile camerawork, pretty visuals, unconventional editing, and an intense focus on character viewpoints. These viewpoints contribute to a transformation of the spectators into social actors because, in Ouedraogo's land, culture is also physical. He highlights the construction of social discourse, the power of cinematic poetry and auto-poetry, and how ways of being and technologies are enabled.

This method of processing time brings a notion of plasticity that introduces the multiplicity of the gaze and time which are often self-possessed, lush, and handsome, with long strings of tight and intimate images that become signifiers of authenticity and tactile cinema. Indeed, as with the long strings of still shots, we have embedded the gaze of the filmmaker, the gaze of the actors, and the communal gaze as a kind of call and response, whereby the community plays an off-screen chorus. The frame is a constant negotiation between the filmmaker, the viewer, and the filmed subject, all coexisting in a shared world. This aesthetic practice generates the groundwork for multi-modal democratic practices within a new unified procedure that combines decision-making and the gaze of the people to create a unified vocabulary and a performance of democracy. This new popular dynamic demonstrates a media literacy where contents and forms are co-produced to generate participatory politics and civic engagement through the imagination of new forms of selves and modes of living. Thus, this regime of contemplation ties into African forms of civility that synthesize language, the body, and totemic forces running on a social imaginary and recognition that never stands still. This epistemological standpoint is constantly negotiated and re-negotiated through an archive of ethical embodied tradition.

Additionally, an aesthetic that I defined as the "Camera-eye" represents how the visual power and mastery of the cinematic image includes a mastery over knowledge of African anthropology and sociology associated with politics. This cinematic sensibility manages to fit characters, high concept ideas, and existential questions into a still shot, resulting in the production of pure images that make sense of their own, for the ways in which each frame represents a citation.

Still-shots foreground African realities and contemplation embedded in a strong and ancient oral tradition, drenched in centuries of embodied tradition. This represents a knowledge that is predicated on the understanding of African rationalities and how the African cinematic image comes to synthesize cinematic and extra-cinematic forms. It is driven by an in-depth allegorical analysis of current modes of oppression and marginalization within ethical openness and metanoia, which is the humanizing power of cinema through African values and love. We see this in *Yaaba*, where painful memory presents an opportunity to heal.

Accordingly, the *Zeitgeist* is important to processing experiences and possibilities of transformation. In the works of Idrissa Ouedraogo, everything

is metamorphosis. The fable he presents transmutes and transforms us, demonstrating that in this African oral tradition, this kind of story was the stuff of the oracles who are now being transformed into filmmakers. It separates the invisible from the visible, the extraordinary from the ordinary, and in the process, pulls the spectators from the dullness of their everyday lives and projects them into the visionary state from which all African splendors are born. One begins to understand why Teno named his film *Lieux Saints*, or *Sacred Spaces*. Being in a movie theater is akin to being in a church, a mosque, or an African shrine. This is part of the rich ritual of illumination, and Ouedraogo tells us we should not be afraid of demons that are part of this aesthetic and spiritual exercise. Demons are often signifiers of spaces of suffering and social oppression. This notion of the demon is Ouedraogo's attempt to bring attention to the tension between images, light, and shadows, on the one hand, and poetry, artistic discourse, and social forms on the other, highlighting the interplay between reality and fantasy, loss of identity, shame and honor, colonial guilt, and fear of degeneracy. Great art often includes provocation and transgressions that shake the status quo. In this film we see a form of African avant-garde where the grandmother, Yaaba, actually demonstrates that real culture is always hated by conformists. The difference between art and moralism that the character of Bila in the movie suggests is that we should not be so quick to judge. In his hard-earned wisdom, he comes to understand that judging will only lead to being stuck in a vortex of judgment. What the character of Bila (through Ouedraogo) does is to go beyond cinematic archetypes and the representation of women in films, such as the figure of the grandma and the witch. Yaaba is a figure who gives life through her knowledge of medicine. These scenes call attention to children and regimes of representation peppered with Rousseau's idea of the nature of men being corrupted by society. Children, by nature, are imbricated in the future and have a performativity that resists the present and the status quo. This is because the worldviews of children are not yet set in stone; children are not yet conformists, which explains the children Bila and Nopoko's attraction to the outcast Yaaba. This can also signify cinema, and how real cinema is not for conformists and the status quo. In practice, this is not a didactic cinema, but a cinema that is asking the audience for answers to questions they are not asking themselves. Ouedraogo frames trans-historical and trans-generational subjectivity, molding new forms of associational autonomy and democratic public spheres. These new forms of democratic public spheres bring up questions about the production of legal regimes, political regimes, and the interactions between social values, political leadership, civil society, and lawmaking.

Furthermore, people who are afraid of the demons, such as the entire village that cast out the "witch" Sana in *Yaaba*, have simply failed their initiation. Ouedraogo discusses cinema and its functions of initiation into a world that is tough but not inhumane. In the same vein, he offers a critique of the contingencies the work of art has to face in order to create as well as the usage of that art, which by the end of the movie has transformed into



medicine, emphasizing the healing power of the movies. This is why the film can be viewed as political, since it puts the subaltern or the outcast into a position of enunciation; it uses absolute emotion embedded in new productive rituals and relationships, in addition to the eroticization of all things. These are ways to capture the real without impoverishing it or reducing it to a thing. Artistic sensibility is equated to love at first sight.

Teno links these cinematic experiences to writing through the characters of Abbo, the neighborhood public writer, and Jules Cesar, the djembe maker, to emphasize there are no hierarchies of uses between the djembe, writing, and cinema. Thus, these cultural practices that seem separated from each other are actually integrated in African cinema, demonstrating how cinema has always been a mixed medium and therefore a combination of modalities and cross-fertilized forms of re-mediation, highlighting the endless creative possibilities of African art and life, and linking both the homo Faber and the homo Ludens.

Teno goes on to interview Idrissa Ouedraogo in his office, where they discuss the material conditions and viability of African cinematic production. They recognize that Bouba cannot get rich showing bootlegged and pirated foreign B movies, yet Ouedraogo praises this small-time distributor for understanding the desire of the African audience to appreciate their own films. Yet, at the same time he understands that indigenous communicative politics cannot be understood in purely structural economic terms, and there is always a danger of exploiting ordinary people for commercial gains or political expediency. Implicitly, the conundrum exists between the capacity to exchange goods and the spread of technical knowledge as driver of economic growth and development. Moreover, the availability of cheap media commodities does not make the whole process democratic either.

In response, the central question of *Sacred Places* is about productive forms of communication and how to reconcile capitalism with communal bonds and reciprocity, as preconditions for new forms of economic practices and political justice. As such, Teno and Ouedraogo's conversation takes place amid the backdrop of FESPACO, the continent's premier film festival, and the lived experience of cinema within inadequate institutions, as one example of insufficient policy intervention in African culture. Thus, these global cinematic flows have to be analyzed within deeper histories of forms of power, production of knowledge, global capitalism and technology, and global and local entitlement claims. The knowledge of the multiplicity of historical archives and the necessity of new imaginative and creative institutions enables the viewer to understand the emerging factors created by these cinematic flows and their legacies, which are often missed by conventional academia and cultural policies. The production of new knowledge calls for new institutional experiences, mediation, social relations, and new practices to confront the idea, in forms of social action, that, in terms of industry and cultural policies, there is still much to be done. This is hardly the burden of the African filmmaker alone. The toughest narrative is the idea that cinema has yet to be seen as a viable and thriving capitalist

profit-making enterprise by many political and economic actors on the continent. This knowledge is predicated on the idea that filmmaking requires a productive ecosystem to thrive, an ecosystem that allows for the legitimation of artistic credibility and not solely market credibility, where the economy determines the dominant values and art devolves into pitches, simplified narratives, sensory overload, affects, massification, and the loss of aura. The result is an aporia fueled by a fundamental irreducibility and un-decidability that are constitutive of the void. This is the exact opposite of cultural events based on experiences, relationships, ideas, images, montage, and transmission that create new forms of discourses that open up to new modes of perception and social condition, the capacity to anticipate, and the possibility of new freedom and life experiences.

What we take from this experience is that cinema, ultimately, is about being human. Thus, the success of an African film is not simply material. It offers an initiation into a rich and powerful culture, along with an appreciation of movie genres and the elective affinities in African cinematic archives through forms of aesthetic relationality, putting together tools for reading these multiple archives as part of the same Africa's chain of imagination and continuity. That is why Idrissa Ouedraogo will be forever missed. And just as in the case of Idrissa Ouedraogo, African cinema is a best-kept secret that is only asking to be discovered.

doi:10.1017/asr.2018.70

## Against the "One Cinema System" Idrissa Ouedraogo and the Invention of Contemporary African Films

Alexie Tcheuyap

The occasion of the sudden death of Idrissa Ouedraogo is probably a good moment to review the trajectories and typologies of what is called African cinema. It is not uncommon to watch Nigerian movies on various international flights. It is no longer surprising to come across a film by Alain Gomis or Abderrahmane Sissako on Air France. That has not always been the case, and if these companies can now entertain their customers

---

**Alexie Tcheuyap** is Full Professor at the Department of French of the University of Toronto.