

Farewell my friend!

Jean-Marie Teno

Upon hearing about Idrissa's death, my first thought was the memory of the last time we met.

It was in Ouaga, a few days before FESPACO 2013. I had arrived from Niamey and was looking for a small hotel to spend a couple of nights. Idrissa recommended one near to his office. During those couple of days, we spent time talking about the past, having drinks, and laughing over some of our common stories; our experiences had not always been smooth sailing, and it was a no secret that we had had some ideological differences.

A few years earlier at another FESPACO, some other filmmakers were surprised to see us sitting and laughing together at the Splendid Hotel restaurant. Our differences never affected the respect that we had for one another when it came to talking about cinema. On several occasions when I was showing my work in the United States, I recommended Idrissa's films among the must-see films from Africa.

Nevertheless, when we started the Guild of African Filmmakers and Producers in 2001, some of the members of the board wanted to appoint Idrissa as the honorary president of the Guild to give our young association some visibility. I fought strongly against this proposal because of Idrissa's recurring statements about his place within what we call the African Cinema community. In the 90s at the peak of his fame, Idrissa repeatedly distanced himself from this community, which was so often rendered invisible, by saying he was a filmmaker, not an African filmmaker. At a time when we were struggling to bring some visibility to African cinema, why appoint someone who apparently cared so little about that struggle?

This incident occurred a few years after another serious fall-out, when some well-established filmmakers on the continent tried to convince international investors to restrict their funding of African cinema exclusively to filmmakers living on the continent. Idrissa, who had lived abroad for many years and only returned to Ouaga just a few years before, was not in a legitimate position, I believed, to protest that outrageous move. We met at the Cannes Film Festival and had an hour-long heated discussion about the proposal. We respectfully disagreed. And our disagreements never affected my respect for the talented filmmaker he was.

I first heard of Idrissa in 1983, when I went to FESPACO for the first time. We did not meet there, but in Paris in 1985 a few months after the

Jean-Marie Teno is a documentary filmmaker, and his films include *Afrique, je te plumerai*, *Le Malentendu coloniale*, and *Une feuille dans le vent*.

following edition of FESPACO. He lived in the 19th Arrondissement of Paris, and we met a few times in a local Chinese restaurant to talk about cinema and about our respective visions. It was at a time when debates were evolving around the definition of African cinema, that is, about cinema as a tool to change the continent, to help improve the lives of the people, and to challenge the way the rest of the world viewed Africa, which is still an ongoing battle today.

Introducing complexity into narratives about the continent was a motto I fully embraced. But cinema being literally constituted of image *and* sound, I refused to impose a hierarchy on these elements. For me, both image and sound were equally important. At that time, Idrissa was more geared to a visual way of telling stories, with as few words as possible. His visual cinema answered one of the language issues that was prevalent at the time in African cinema and paved the way for the metaphorical cinema that he would develop in the following years.

Our styles of documenting were very different and yet complementary, to the point that I combined two of his short films (*Les Ecuelles* and *Issa le tisserand*) and two of mine (*Fievre jaune taximan* and *Homage*) into a feature-length film essay entitled *De Ouaga à Douala en passant par Paris*.

Addressing reality in a direct and a transformative way was not something Idrissa wanted to continue. He gradually shifted toward fictional cinema, and he was a master in finding metaphors to represent local reality in its complexity. *Yam Daabo*, his first feature film, marked a decisive moment in African cinema history. Nature, spaces, and the characters seem to merge so well together, with each element underscoring the storyline. Recently I saw Robert Redford's film *The Horse Whisperer*, and I kept seeing analogies in the use of the space with Idrissa's work, making Idrissa, in my mind, one of the leading filmmakers alongside Djibril Diop Mambety and Sèmbene Ousmane, all of whom have made such a strong imprint in other world cinemas.

In the 90s, Nollywood emerged on one end of the spectrum of African cinema, with Idrissa's productions on the other. When certain scholars cynically labelled Idrissa's cinema "calabash cinema," they distracted people from the real debate about film language and the politics of cinema.

Idrissa broke free from the idea of Africans united in the collective fight for a collective dream, focusing instead on individuals, their emotions, their desires, and their needs, within the frame of a battle against the elements: drought, natural and/or man-made catastrophes. In this manner, he contributed to the fight to reclaim African humanity that had been long taken for granted. Along with filmmakers such as Cissé, he continued to address the complexity of the African experience, but the collective battle for a cinema destined to help the continent advance was clearly not his concern anymore. Idrissa's rise coincided with a political move by European investors to move away from a political African cinema, making him the perfect model to promote for future generations of filmmakers.

Idrissa leaves behind a bulk of beautiful work whose esthetic and political impact are yet to be fully appreciated. Those who take the time in the

future to study the work of the Maestro, as he was called, will most certainly bring to light the work of a talented filmmaker from the continent caught in the struggle between legitimate personal ambition and the space of representation that is allowed to creators from Africa in a global world still marked by enduring relations of coloniality.

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Homage to Idrissa Ouedraogo

Olympe Bhêly-Quenum

1991 or 1992. Sembene Ousmane telephones me, asking if I know Idrissa Ouedraogo. Without waiting for my answer, he declares: “You who are so Greek, you should see *Tilai!*”

In his habitual enigmatic manner when he was teasing, without explaining his reasons, he added: “one of your novels qualifies as a Greek tragedy in Africa, and you should know Idrissa...”

Some years later, at a film and record store in the 15th arrondissement in Paris, I found *Tilai* in DVD, along with five DVDs of Sembene’s films.

Tilai? Beauty, splendor, poignant force with the profound depths of things in Africa. Here, Idrissa plays his cards and wins the game as in a Greek tragedy! Still, I had the impression that he wouldn’t have done otherwise anywhere else in the world. Africa brings something of grandeur to this film, but at the end of the DVD I remembered two stories from the Old Testament: Reuben, incestuous while making love with Bala, the concubine of his father Jacob; and more tragic still, the sexual relations between King David and Bathsheba! “It was common practice in the great kingdoms of Africa,” Hampté Bâ told me. The sublime thing about the case of the king of the Hebrews is the creation of Psalm 51 (*Miserere*). Mozart leads us in *Davidde Penitente* (K469).

I would have liked to have known the magnificent artist that was Idrissa Ouedraogo as Sembene wished, but he left us...too young. My sincere condolences to his family. His DVDs will remain everpresent in my film library.

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