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Towards an Epistemology of African Intercultural Philosophical Cinema

Abstract

This article aims to introduce a new epistemology in African Cinema by its cross-fertilization with African Intercultural Philosophy. It will do so by concentrating on the global colonial and decolonized politics of space and time, by connecting so-called African Intercultural Philosophical Cinema to the wider history of African Cinema and by providing an example of a film analysis in this field. The focus will, thereby, be on the shortlisted documentary 'Common Threads' (2018). This Zanzibar festival's committee's nominee concentrates on the nineteenth-century and current Afro-Indian textile trade, the associated oral narratives and their visual impact on the so-called Kanga and Vitenge textiles.

Key words: African Cinema, African Philosophy, Intercultural Philosophy, Epistemology.

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Introduction

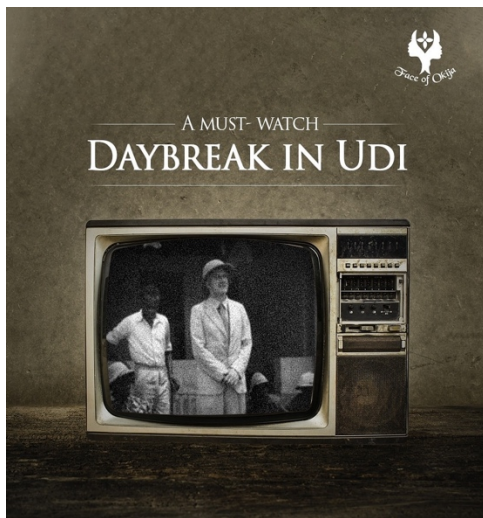
This article aims to introduce a new epistemology in African Cinema by its cross-fertilization with African Intercultural Philosophy. It will do so by connecting so-called African Intercultural Philosophical Cinema to the wider history of African Cinema, and by providing an example of a film analysis in this field. The focus will, thereby, be on the shortlisted documentary 'Common Threads' (2018). This Zanzibar festival's committee's nominee concentrates on the nineteenth-century and current Afro-Indian textile trade, the associated oral narratives and their visual impact on the so-called Kanga and Vitenge textiles.

African Cinema: a short history of trends

In 1895, the first hundred cameras from the atelier Lumière in Lyon in France were sent to Africa to build the image of African people. The medium of film thus does not derive from African soil. It was introduced in Africa by Europeans to support the white man's 'civilizing mission' by justifying European colonization (Bakupa-Kanyinda, 2009; Ukadike, 1994). Consequently, films made in Africa were meant to educate Africans by imposing Western

values on them. British film history in Africa goes back to the 1920s and started with the simple instruction films of the colonial health official William Seller. According to Seller, Africans were incapable of understanding film unless its pace would be adapted to their limited mental capacities. In the 1930s, the British biologist Huxley concluded after a film reception study that he conducted among an East African audience that these audiences were well capable of understanding complex films and did not react fundamentally different to film images from Western audiences. Nevertheless, in 1935 the two British scholars Notcutt and Latham (1937) conducted another film pace experiment in Africa known as the 'Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment' (BEKE). Their conclusions were in line with Seller's findings. Films meant for Africans should not only be slower but also be short and simple to enable Africans to grasp their meaning. These researchers' findings put Seller back on the map and in 1939 he became the head of the British Colonial Film Unit.

Since the 1940s, once the British colonial regime had adopted the position that the British colonies in Africa should eventually become independent, British colonial filmmakers in Africa began to focus on development issues as they believed that educational film meant for Africans could help them to self-reach a higher stage of development (Smyth, 1988).



An example of British colonial development-oriented film in Africa is 'Daybreak in Udi' (1949) by John Taylor. The film, which formed part of the British propaganda for their colonial regime in Nigeria, aimed to induce in the Igbo a desire for progress and the will to achieve it by their own efforts. The film makes its audience believe that the Igbo themselves longed for the British development program and that they were thankful for the education they received from the colonial officials. The film was created and screened in Africa to prepare the Igbo and other African subjects for self-government (Page, 2014). In the second half of the 1950s, the British scholar Morton Williams published a study on the reception of film in Africa that again refuted Seller's findings. The report's publication signalled the end for the Seller's school in most of British Africa but not in

Central and Southern Africa where French and British administrators continued to celebrate Seller's yet to be known as racist ideas about making films in Africa (Smyth, 1988).

After most African countries had gained independence, Africans felt the need to 'shoot back' and to criticize the representation of Africans in European colonial films shot in Africa. Filmmakers in North Africa were the first to develop African Film. This film genre is created by Africans and/or has a focus on topics predominantly chosen by Africans that they find significant (Tcheuyap, 2011) although other scholars mention that African Film arguably includes films about Africa that deal with topics chosen by non-Africans and films created by non-Africans (Murphy, 2000). African Film in its Afrocentric definition, which in the 1960s and 1970s also spread throughout sub-Saharan Africa, is rooted in so-called Third Film. This is an emancipatory type of Film, which was developed by critical filmmakers in South America and North Africa, to articulate the experiences of people in the Third World with oppression by global political and economic structures. Third Film was, in many ways, a charge against colonialism. Its purpose was to use the medium of film to create a 'liberated space' to emancipate its audiences (Tomaselli, Shepperson, & Eke, 1995).

African Filmmakers, such as the Senegalese Ousmane Sembène, the Mauritanian Mohamed Medoun (Med Hondo) and the West Indian Sara Maldoror, created a film text corpus that showed their socio-political engagement and their focus on revolutions (Harrow, 2011:218; Tomaselli et al., 1995:25-28). In Sembène's 'La Noire de' (1966), for instance, the focus is on the effects of racial exploitation under the French colonial regime. Sembène, who started as a writer, moved into film making once he realized it would enable him to reach mass audiences. He aimed to raise the consciousness of his literary subjects, who were ordinary Senegalese people, and educate them about the oppressive mechanism of colonialism. His objective was also to focus on the effects of the disruptive forces of modernity and its concomitant social change (Mortimer, 2011:26-27,64-68,84). In 1969, Hondo created the film 'Soleil O', which

focusses on the effects of racism on black people in France. It tells the story of a young black African migrant, who is a nameless accountant. This migrant symbolizes the condition of all African migrants in France, whose blackness makes them socially nameless (Pfaff, 1986). The film is a variation on the topic studied in depth by the Martinique-born philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon in his book 'Black Skin, White Mask' (1952). This writing was also the source of inspiration for an eponymous documentary (1995) directed by Isaac Julien. In Malador's film 'Sambizanga' (1972), finally, the central focus is on the Angolan struggle for liberation.

A significant trope in African films of the period 1960-1970 is the analogy. In 'La Noir de', the main character is a girl from a poor village near Dakar in Senegal, who moves to a large city in France. The film concentrates on the differences between the girl's previous life in the traditional African village where she felt happy and her disruptive life in a modern French city. Besides the focus on the social security of life in the traditional village versus the dangers of life in an alien modern city, the film also juxtaposes life in Africa versus life in Europe. Whereas in Africa, Africans are being protected by their wider social network, in Europe they live in isolation and are, therefore, easily the victim of exploitation and racism. The film shows some of the profoundly negative experiences of African migrants in Europe and uncovers the unequal power relations between the two continents. In 'Soleil O', the filmmaker stresses that postcolonial Africa is not free from the oppressive mechanisms of world politics and capitalism which harm black persons in the African diaspora. In France, the main character in this film realizes that he is not equal to the white men and that the French revolution's slogan of 'liberté, égalité, fraternité (liberty, equality and fraternity) is a myth. Being raised as a so-called *évolué* intellectual in Africa, once in Europe, the protagonist realizes that he is not white and, ironically, he finds his real face in Europe. He experiences, in other words, what it means to be black in Europe through the gaze of Europeans. These Europeans have inherited a racist history on which equally racist ideologically constructions and negative stereotypical images of non-Westerners have been founded. In Western culture and cinema, religion, culture images of Africans and Africa have been predominantly negative and stereotypical, portraying Africans as animal-like, underdeveloped beings, living in a continent mainly characterized by darkness and disease. Negative images of Africans can be found back in the writings of the Portuguese explorer, Duarte Pacheco Pereira and his African fetish worshipping dog-men, Levy-Brühl's ideas about African's primitive mind, Hegel's unself-conscious godless African children and the Christian colonial civilizing mission. Hondo's films focus, like Fanon in 'Black Skin, White Mask', on the psychological impact of these negative images on Africans and, equally like Fanon in 'The Wretched of the Earth' (1961) on the unavoidable positioning of the *évolué* as the African neo-colonial masters, who despite Africa's Independence overwhelmingly listen to the political voices of those in power in the Global North. In 'Sambizanga', a film based on the novella 'A vida Verdadeira de Domingos Xavier' (The Real Life of Domingos Xavier) by the Angolan writer José Luandino Vieira, Maldoror concentrates on the struggle against the Portuguese thereby also placing the African victim in binary opposition to the European perpetrator.

In the 1980s, the focus on African films moved to the neo-colonialism of *évolué* rulers within Africa. This period has been marked by an epistemological shift in African Film Studies. In the 1990s and 2000s, the heart of African films turned outwards again this time resulting in a global versus local paradigm. The focus of the majority of the films in this period, which is ongoing, has been on processes of globalization and their effects on the downtrodden among whom many Africans. African films have concentrated on those who are left out of the job markets, who live on the edge of society on the outskirts of towns in an in-between space as a symbolic way to express their status of not being part of the global community. An example is the Nigerian feature film *Maroko* (2016) directed by Femi Odugbemi, which tells the story of a gentrification housing project in Lagos. As a consequence, over 300,000 Nigerians are unlawfully evicted and entire families become homeless and displaced. The film tells the story of Africans on the losing end of the neoliberal market and the mechanisms of globalization. The so-called Nollywood film is based on the real forced eviction of *Maroko*'s underprivileged for the construction of luxurious flats on top of their slum dwellings in the 1990s (Müller, 2019). Another recurrent theme of African films in this period is the influence of the Chinese in Africa, who are often perceived as neo-colonial rulers on the African continent. An example is 'Elmina'

(2010) by the American filmmaker Dough Fishbone. In this film, the peace in the city of Elmina in Southern Ghana is disturbed once the paramount chief has sold the community's ancestral land to the board of a Chinese oil company. The film concentrates on real problematic issues in this part of Ghana where the life of fishermen has been disrupted by the greed of foreign oil companies. In this new phase of African films, African filmmakers in Africa are up to date as they have shifted their attention towards global issues, such as the latest Covid-19 pandemic, neoliberalism or climate change and their effects on local African communities. Nevertheless, African films have not left the analogy trope behind them and the Global North is often juxtaposed against the Global South thereby still aiming to uncover and criticize the inequality in the power relations between these two parts of the world.

Towards a new epistemology: African Intercultural Philosophical Cinema

In juxtaposing the Global South versus the Global North, African Cinema connects to a long history of racial based inequality between the two halves. Since the fifteenth century, Europeans dominated non-Westerners in slave societies that were mainly based on the free labour of Africans or people of African descent. These types of societies were the most unequal ones in world history. Most unequal ever was the slave society of Saint Domingue in the 1780s (today's Haiti) (Piketty, 2020:258-265). The American and the French revolutions wrought the critique on slavery and the slave trade. The Haiti revolution between 1791-1804 led by self-liberated slaves inspired many enslaved people in the Caribbean. These subsequent slave revolts in this region and beyond fuelled the abolitionist movements in Europe and eventually led to the ending of the slave trade and slavery (Benjamin, 2009:615-661; Oostindie, 2014). The end of the slave trade did, however not marked the end of North-South unequal labour relations. The slave trade was replaced by legitimate trade and the Industrial Revolution fed the hunger of European countries for an increase of imperial and colonial activities in Africa. Colonial societies were the second most unequal societies ever and its socio-economic structures resulted in the ongoing exploitation of oppressed non-Westerners including Africans. The inequality of wealth distribution in these societies coincided with the inequality of power along racial dividing lines (Piketty, 2020:258-265). Racial hierarchies rooted in slave – and colonial societies did not cease to exist in the postcolonial era. Inequal power relations continued to coincide with racial inequalities in the twentieth century. As the philosopher Walter D. Mignolo puts it:

'Currently, the transformation of colonial differences is entrenched in what we now call globalization in such a way that it makes sense to think in terms of global coloniality. It continues to be reproduced by global capitalism' (Mignolo, 2011:161).

What do these historical and contemporary geopolitical findings mean for the academic field of African Cinema? What is important in this field of film studies is to realize that neo-colonialism is an ongoing process that continues to determine an economically and politically unequal North-South divide. Equally important is, however, to realize that there are more ways to reflect upon these inequalities than by ongoingly using a language grounded in power inequalities based binary oppositions. These oppositions are common in old and new Negritude oriented Africans films like Pontecorvo's 'The Battle of Algiers' (1966); a film inspired by Fanon's ground-breaking book 'The Wretched of the Earth' (1961) and Mansour Sora Wade's Ndeysaan (The Price of Forgiveness, 2001) (Burgin, 2013). They can also be found in old and new Pan-African films, such as 'Love Brewed in the African Pot' (1980) and 'Heritage Africa' (1989) both by the Ghanaian filmmaker Kwa Ansah, and the majority of all Nollywood films (McCall, 2007). Both Negritude and Pan-Africanist films are rooted in counter-hegemonic discourse. The history of oral storytelling in Africa, of the traditional storytellers or griots reveals, however, that Africans are perfectly capable of telling stories to one another without reflecting on the role of Europeans in African slave and colonial societies, which puts African filmmakers on the defensive. Storytelling telling is indigenous to Africa, and by telling stories images emerge in the mind. The fact that film is a technological tool for reflection brought to Africa by foreigners does not mean that it can only be used to include a reflection on them. In her book 'A Chacun son Griot' (2004) the literary scholar Thiers-Thiam makes the point that the conventional traditional griot-narrateur among the Mande people in West Africa is in the

process of transforming into new type of collective conscience and memory keeper of oral tradition, a cinéaste-griot, by adapting to film as a medium of communication (Thiers-Thiam, 2004). The cinéaste-griot uses cinema as an extension of oral tradition and perceive it as a new medium to assure the continuation of community values for current and future generations. They are called modern griots, because they also philosophically criticise the present and re-examine the past to reconnect present generations with their history by including oral tradition into modern African life (Jørholt, 2001).

Now that African storytellers are increasingly using film and philosophy to (re)tell their own African stories based on their rich histories and oral traditions, it is high time to connect the relatively new wind in African Philosophy to the field of African Cinema, which is African Intercultural Philosophy. How can African Intercultural Philosophy enrich the field of African Cinema? Intercultural Philosophy is an orientation in Philosophy that aims to combat Eurocentrism and to include non-Western traditions in philosophical debates by effectuating philosophical dialogue. Intercultural Philosophy has its roots in Germany and was founded by the German philosophers Frantz Martin Wimmer, and Heinz Kimmerle and the Indian-born German-based philosopher Ram Adhar Mall (Kimmerle, 1997; Mall, 2000; Wimmer, 1998). These founding fathers had a strong focus on Africa alongside Asia as they understood and reacted upon Aimé Césaire's (2001 [Orig 1955]) observed historical succession between the genocides of Africans in Germany's Second Reich in Africa and of the Jews in the Third Reich in Germany as being two comparative results of the darker side of Western modernity. Their philosophical reaction was to combat Eurocentrism and the concomitant claim of superiority of the West over the rest. They also argued for the inclusion of pre-colonial philosophical traditions, such as African and Indian oral traditions, as philosophies by positioning them on an equal footing to Western philosophies (Kimmerle, 1997). The dialogical method was used to reflect upon each philosophical tradition to learn from one another and enhance understanding of one's cultures and philosophies. By connecting African Cinema to African Intercultural Philosophy, scholars in African Film Studies can widen their horizon and bring African Cinema closer to the reflections of philosophers on the interculturality of life in Africa and its diaspora in the twenty-first century.

Naturally, it is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate extensively on the field of African Intercultural Philosophy. To, nevertheless, lift a tip of the veil of an intercultural philosophical approach to African Cinema the remaining part of this article will consist of an African Intercultural Philosophical analysis of a documentary created by an Indian research team in Mumbai.



The short documentary “Common Threads” (2018) by Renu Modi and others, which was shorted listed at the Zanzibar International Film Festival, tells the story of the Indian-African trade in textiles since Antiquity. It focusses specifically on the trade in so-called *Kanga* and *Vitenge* cloth from Jetpur in the Rajkot district of Gujarat to East Africa (*Kanga* and *Vitenge*) and West Africa and West-Central Africa (*Vitenge*) since the nineteenth century. The documentary demonstrates that the trade in these textiles from India to Africa is the result of good people-to-people relations within high trust family and diasporic Asian-African networks. The documentary, which is aimed for a non-academic audience, is based on the same research that was conducted for the eponymous academic book, which came out in 2020 (Venkatachalam, Modi, & Salazar, 2020). Both the documentary and the book were created by the researchers Dr Meera Venkatachalam (anthropologist and historian), Dr Renu Modi (professor

and former Director of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Mumbai), and Johann Salazar (independent researcher in Sociology and Anthropology and photographer).

Although the researchers' approach is mainly historical and anthropological there is an underlying philosophy in both works that qualifies the documentary to be an artwork hungry for African Intercultural Philosophical Cinematic analysis. The researchers' stance is *not* to stress the superiority of the Western textiles and trade and to demonstrate how European (e.g. Portuguese, Dutch and British) trade destroyed the African-Indian textile trade and how the latter became the victims of European market protectionism. Their point of view is, on the contrary, to show how both African and Indian local initiatives developed in the period of both earlier Arabic and Western dominance of the Indian Ocean trade and how they managed to reach a different audience of African consumers for their textiles. Unlike Afrocentrists, the researchers do not centralize African agency but focus on the interconnectivity of the Asian-African trade and common initiatives. The researchers are also not Eurocentric as they do not negate the trade history of Africans and Indians, nor do they write their historical reality of empowered subjects through the eyes of either Africans or Indians, which would make them Afro – or Asian-centric. Instead, they focus on the connecting force of the Indian Ocean as a unifying stream for the transport of people, products and ideas. They refer to a writer called Sultan Somjee who in his novel 'Home between Crossings' (2016) mentions that *kanga* is a metaphor for 'the two-way flow of winds over the land and the Indian Ocean' of the 'singing of *utenzi* poetry in rhymes and rhythms made by the poets of the coast when their ears are filled with the music of the sea (Somjee, 2016:319). Their non-centralized stance and focus on Africa qualifies this documentary as African intercultural philosophically.

Besides deconstructing and then rejecting all 'centricisms', the researchers also reconstruct reality by acknowledging the effect of intercultural dialogue on the creation of cultural products. The *Kanga* and the *Vitenge* textiles breath both Asian and African ideas and are the result of their interconnectivity enabled by the Indian Ocean that harmoniously merges their contact and intercultural horizons and unites the best of both worlds. The African-Asian dialogue that is reflected in these textiles strengthens the South-South trade relations and empowers the trading subjects, which helps to overcome their common trauma in their encounter with Europe. It helps to overcome the vertical violence by past oppressors and to talk back by using textiles as a medium of expression that aesthetically visualizes their African-Indian selves. The textiles in the documentary and the book are forms of popular culture that speak to the current and the next generation of Africans in Africa and the African diaspora in Asia who have embraced them as a medium of expression of their moods and identities. With their open mindset and their listening ears, the researchers have created an intercultural philosophical cinematic space in which African and Indian voices are being heard and different perspectives on the African-Asian textile trade and textiles are highlighted without judgements nor arrogance towards Africans. Like the Nigerian philosopher Sophie Oluwole, the researchers have practiced 'epistemological modesty' in their dialogues by being accommodative listeners rather than claiming the truth of their points of view. Accommodativeness entails the acknowledgement of another person's position and the intellectual modesty to be able to 'agree to disagree' in a sphere of respect for one another's visions, Oluwole wrote (Oluwole, 1997:39-67). The documentary makers' accommodative stance proofs, alongside the previously mentioned reasons, that with 'Common Thread' they have created a cultural product that does justice to the narratives of Africans and Indians in the making of their textiles by placing them cultural-philosophically on an equal footing to those imported by Europeans. 'Common Thread' demonstrates that it is certainly possible to overcome binary oppositional language, such as Subject versus Object, Religion versus Superstition, and to encounter one another and learn from each other by conversation and dialogue. The documentary proofs that African intercultural philosophical is practicable in African Cinematics and that the field has a promising future. Because the new field of African Intercultural Philosophical Cinema enables filmmakers in Africa and its diaspora to reflect upon and visualize the social realities between traditions and modernity that they encounter in the contemporary globalized world.

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