

# SCRIPTO SENSА

Literature to the rescue of African cinema



Participant in the Zili writing residency

*“ My wish is to see African filmmakers win awards around the world as we see with African literary works. ”*

## Interview with Jean-Pierre Bekolo, filmmaker and producer, founder of the Scripto Sensa programme

The great novel *Walaandé*, the art of sharing husband, by Djali Amadou Amal will soon be adapted to the screen. This production signed by Thierry Ntamack would never have been possible without the determination of the great filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bekolo with his Scripto Sensa programme, an ambitious programme of screen adaptation of African novels. In this interview, he explains why cinema should be inspired by literature, confides his vision and hopes for cinema

on the continent and details his motivations behind the scriptwriting programme launched two years ago by his production company Zili.

### **What is the aim of the Scripto Sensa project?**

We are looking for African novels that we want to see brought to the screen. It is important to have a deeper approach to screenwriting. Scripto Sensa's ambition is to bring high quality content to enhance African cinema with good stories.



*Jean-Pierre Bekolo, filmmaker and producer, founder of the Scripto Sensa programme*



### **Why did you want to capitalise on the stories of African literature?**

Most films are inspired by literature. More than 70% of the Oscar-winning films are adapted from a book. I have long wondered why African cinema does not draw more inspiration from African literature. Especially since we have great authors who have managed to reach the highest level, such as the Senegalese Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, who won the prestigious Goncourt Prize in 2021, after the Nigerian Wolé Soyinka in 1986, or the Tanzanian Abdulrazak Gurnah, who won the Booker Prize for literature. Why don't their stories end up in the cinema?

### **What are the benefits of bringing literature and film together?**

African cinema is at the opposite end of the spectrum from African literature, which has managed to make its mark internationally. Very sophisticated at the beginning, it has become a little naive, primary,

over time. It lacks ambition, nuggets and talent. We want to show that beyond entertainment, cinema can raise serious and solid issues that Africa needs to solve, without the story being boring or naïve.

### **Does literature come to the rescue of cinema?**

I think that cinema needs the intelligence brought by writers. Conversely, writers need the pragmatism of filmmakers, who manage the relationship with the public, in the sense that films sometimes make it easier to access their works.

### **How did the different stages of these two adaptation residencies unfold?**

First, we compiled a catalogue of works. Then we selected filmmakers and invited them to participate in the literary club. Following readings and presentations of the works by literature experts, each filmmaker

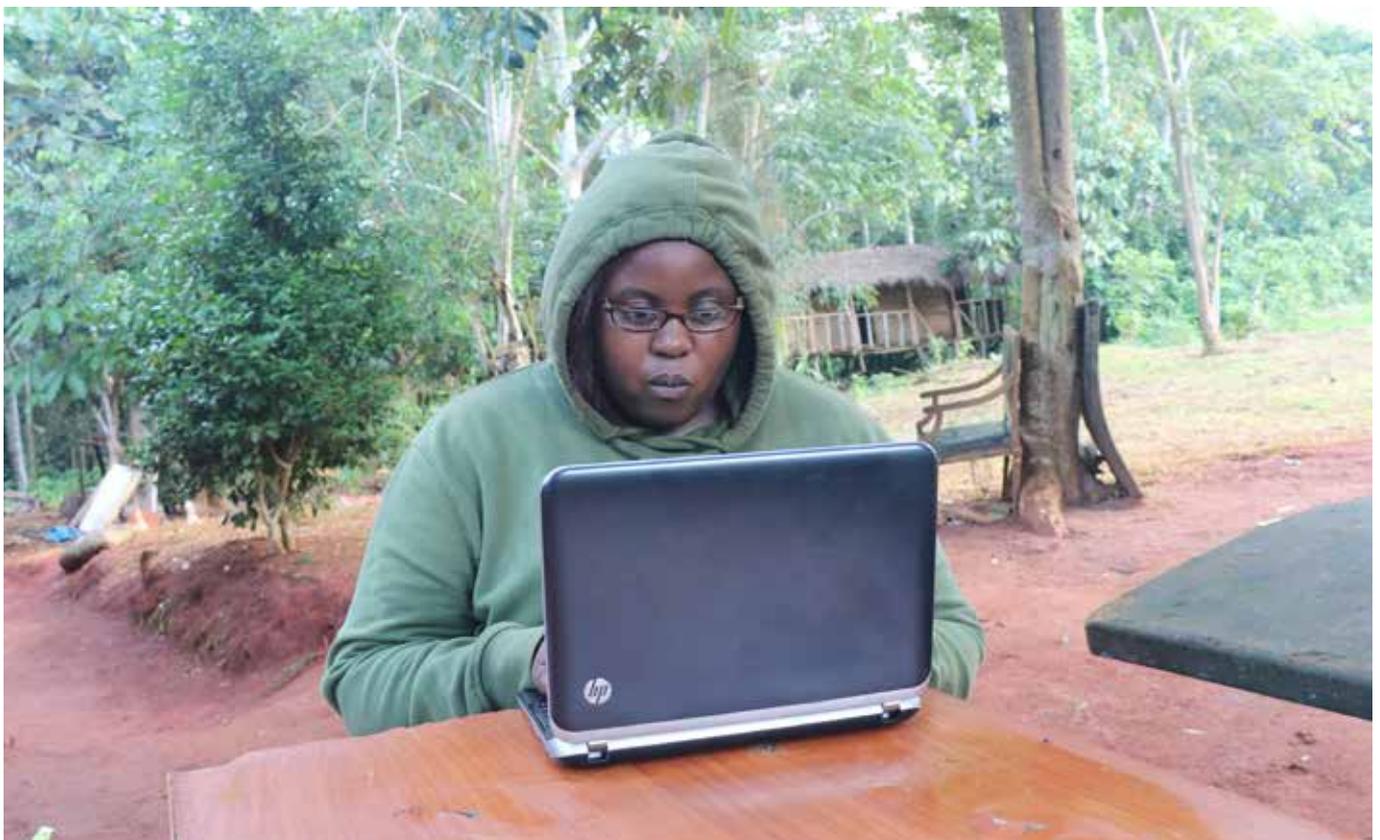
chose a work to adapt. We followed them for nine months in scriptwriting residencies led by adaptation experts from around the world.

### **What kind of mentors led these writing residencies?**

It was important for us to work with people who are active in this profession. The first edition welcomed the French François Desagnat (Zai Zai Zai, released in 2022) and Laurent Guillaume, scriptwriter of Canal Plus series with Olivier Marshall. For the 2022 edition, we welcomed American screenwriter Jeff Gross, who worked with Roman Polanski.

### **Are the participants in this residency all professional African filmmakers?**

We wanted to create a heterogeneous group in order to nourish each other, because Scripto Sensa seeks to develop a new form of writing. They are Africans with diverse profiles.



Pauline Ongongo - Participant in the Zili writing residence.



Shooting of the film Walaandé - the 4 wives of Aladji.

Some are professional directors, such as Chantal Youdom or Thierry Ntamack; others have come to live the experience of adaptation and bring another approach to their usual work. Still others are writers and literary critics who want to learn the technique of screenwriting. We also have self-taught writers whose writing is more free and daring, such as slammers, rappers or stand-up artists.

**Nine months to translate a novel into a screenplay is quite symbolic. Is this an essential step for the success of a film?**

In terms of writing, our cinema sometimes borders on illiteracy. We find excuses for it: oral tradition, poverty, disease, drought... but these miserable issues do not interest African audiences. There is an African film culture, as the Nigerian success proves. In my opinion, this is still a phenomenon. African cinema needs to develop new references outside of decos and nationalities. With good, well-crafted stories, we can win back an audience.

**Yet you say that Africans have a unique art of storytelling. One of your workshops is entitled: How to integrate action into the story you want to tell. What advice do you give to filmmakers?**

It is mainly about revealing to the participants that they are making films every day without knowing it! Augustine Moukden, president of Zili Jungle Studio, always says that there is something unique about storytelling in Africa: there is always action. Let's take the story of a person who goes hunting. The narrator will make you hear the sound of the water in a river that the character is crossing. I advise participants to use the art of storytelling as a model to develop stories in our own way.

**You consider yourself a "young old man" in the business. What experience do you want to bring to the younger filmmakers?**

It's important that they have material to embrace subjects and stories that are well crafted by writers who have a message to deliver. In my opinion, cinema is a victim of a certain youthfulness,

whereas paradoxically it requires a certain maturity. I don't think we can renew a way of thinking by over-investing in youth alone. Youth does not always have enough experience to have something to say. Take the Femis school: it is not enough to be a brilliant student to enter the script section, you need to have a certain background.

**The first film from Sripto Sensa, Walaandé: The Art of Sharing a Husband, was recently completed. How would this award-winning novel make a good film?**

This book - which has been a huge success - deals with polygamy, a fairly classic theme, but one that is renewed here through the eyes of a woman writing her very first novel in a well-paced narrative. She tells with great passion about her hometown, her experience in a polygamous household, her vision of faith and of men.

**Could stories that address discrimination against African women and girls appeal to directors from other continents?**

African cinema is a ghetto. Our dream would be for Sripto Sensa to offer their stories to filmmakers on all continents. If Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's stories are among the top sellers internationally, it proves that African stories have potential, and that they need to be "developed" with more professionalism.

**Scripto Sensa goes much further than a simple writing residency for film adaptations. Was it the ambition from the start to accompany the making of the films to the end?**

It's not about writing without producing. We have embarked on this initiative to make films.

Scripto Sensa is an activity of the production company Zili and is situated upstream of production, in a development phase that American producers call "development hell". In the film industry, the ratio for an idea to be developed and see the light of day is very low. In reality, the decision to produce a particular project is not always sufficiently analysed. That is why we wanted to support this phase.

**At the end of the two-year programme, some 40 scripts will be ready for adaptation. Will they all have a chance of being brought to the screen?**

Some projects still need to be rewritten. After this first film, we will have to look for funding so that there will be others... The next edition will evolve with the name SCRIPTO SENSa PRODUCTION to give these projects a better chance of being brought to the screen, and of doing the rounds of festivals.

**This first experience gave rise to a Club with a "writing room" for filmmakers. How does this serve to strengthen these adaptation projects?**

The Adaptations Club consists of getting filmmakers to meet regularly to discuss the film

adaptability of the novels they have read. It helps to strengthen both the skills and the project itself, through the sharing and diversity of profiles in what we have called the "Writing Room". We have experienced this with *Walaandé*, the *Art of Sharing a Husband* led by director Thierry Ntamack. A group of participants and professionals dissected the work, then the script, before discussing the limitations and strengths of the project and how to make it even more interesting. This is how soap operas are developed in the United States. It gives them an incredible strength.

**In 1992, *Quartier Mozart*, your first film, was widely acclaimed by the critics and won a prize at Cannes. What was the African film landscape like then?**

With *Quartier Mozart*, I created a break with a style of cinema that had suffered the effects of a certain "paternalism", with productions that had long been managed in Europe, and subjects that were of little interest to Africans. In short, we have gone from a "calabash cinema" to an "NGO cinema", two ironic names that define the situation of cinema on the continent quite well.

**Your films show that cinema has the capacity to transform the way we look at Africa. Is this one of the reasons why you do this job?**

Images have an incredible transformative power. The filmmaker Jean Pierre Dikongue Pipa, during one of his interventions in 2007, reminded young filmmakers that the United States has succeeded in dominating the world through cinema because images are a stronger weapon than Kalashnikovs!

**How do you see the future of the continent's cinema today and what are the challenges?**

The future of African cinema is promising, and the stakes are very high. They now go beyond the usual dream of any African filmmaker, which is to shine at Fespaco. Africa must be able to tell its stories with its own codes and formulas and present its films in the most prestigious film events. My wish is to see African filmmakers win prizes in the four corners of the world as we see with African literary works.

*Walaandé, the Art of Sharing a Husband*, by Djali Amadou Amal, directed by Thierry Ntamack, as part of the Scripto Sensa programme.

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